

Heidelberg University English Department

Lecture Series: Separation, Isolation and Community in Literature

Isolation in the Gothic Labyrinth

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Annika Elstermann: Welcome to this episode of the Heidelberg University English Department's lecture series *Separation, Isolation and Community in Literature*. Today I'll be speaking with Christian Schneider, who's a lecturer at the International Studies Centre 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 isolation in the Gothic labyrinth. The Gothic is a fairly big topic that is a bit hard to pinpoint maybe. But could you give us a few aspects of what the Gothic is? What makes something Gothic?

Christian Schneider: As you said, it is hard to pinpoint. And fittingly for the Gothic, I'm going to give an ambivalent answer, maybe. There are, I think, two basic directions you could go with defining the Gothic. On the one hand, the Gothic goes back to a fairly clearly delineated genre from the end of the 18th/beginning of the 19th century: the Gothic novel, where we get the term from. And that is a series of novels written by such authors as Horace Walpole, Ann Radcliffe, Matthew Lewis, Charles Brockden Brown in the U.S., and perhaps most famously Mary Shelley with *Frankenstein*. And these novels share a large number of conventions, an almost fixed set of conventions. They're usually set in an exotic setting—at least exotic for a bourgeois British audience around that time; that means continental Europe, Italy, Spain, or Germany. They often take place in a kind of semi-medieval setting, some sort of fictionalised past. And within the setting we also have certain structures that reoccur; buildings that remind us of medieval times: castles, monasteries, but often dilapidated, ruined, and often subterranean spaces (dungeons and so on). Within these settings we often have also a conventional set of characters. Often we have an innocent heroine that is in some way threatened or chased by the Gothic villain—often an aristocrat, a nobleman, who in some way threatens, endangers the honour and even more of this heroine.

AE: A sort of damsel in distress archetype.

CS: Absolutely. That's often the dichotomy at the heart: this kind of chase between these two characters. And the threat of this Gothic villain is often tinged with the supernatural. Sometimes very obviously: sometimes we have a whole array of demons, of witches, of vampires that populate this world. And sometimes only as a kind of possibility, which in the end, however, is dispelled. Often it is just an attempt by the villain to, kind of, gaslight the heroine. But in the end, it turns out there's always a rational explanation for this...

AE: Scooby doo.

CS: Absolutely! And the style is often really sensationalist—not a lot of effort put into portraying something realistically or psychologically. It's all about effect. It's all about thrills, basically.

AE: Now, you've fixed this historically, but it's not just tied to the 18th/19th century.

CS: Exactly. There is the second answer I promised. The Gothic seems to have survived that very narrow set of novels. The effect, the view that the Gothic gives us surfaces in other genres and in other media after this time. For example, at the end of the 19th century we have these literary classics like *Dracula*, *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, or *Dorian Gray*, which take up a lot of the fears and obsessions of the Gothic but portray them in a new light. Closer to home, closer to Britain, often with a more realistic portrayal of psychological or scientific fears. We have the horror literature of the 20th century: the works of Lovecraft or Stephen King that focus on the effect, but take their cue in a lot of ways from the Gothic classics. And, as mentioned, there are also Gothic instances in other media. Nowadays, we can see the Gothic in films, in video games, in comics, in internet narratives. One example that came to mind (because I've just been re-watching those films) is the *Alien* franchise. Nominally, a sci-fi film series: taking place in space, exploring foreign planets, and all that. But if you boil it down, you have a Gothic heroine, Ellen Ripley, being chased down by a threatening figure, the Alien, through the narrow corridors of a dark setting, only it's a space ship instead of a castle.

AE: It's very exotic, though.

CS: It is extremely exotic! Much less Catholic maybe than the original Gothic settings. But you could definitely compare these and see the kind of Gothic effect in the sci-fi setting.

AE: Yeah. The spaceship in *Alien* already kind of hints at this a bit, and also the various castles you've alluded to: All of these are also not just exotic but also remote spaces. The castle— If we think of the Gothic castle, we think of the ruin on top of the hill with nothing but maybe the forest surrounding it. So could you just say a few words on the Gothic and isolation?

CS: Absolutely. Again, I can kind of give a two-fold answer there. The Gothic is a kind of a slippery creature there. But spaces play an enormously important role. One of the things I've already mentioned is the effect—kind of, Gothic is all about the effect it's supposed to have on the characters as well as on the reader. And one literary scholar, Chris Baldick, said that for this "[...] Gothic effect to be attained [and I'm quoting here], a tale should combine a fearful sense of inheritance in time with a claustrophobic sense of enclosure in space [...]". So this claustrophobia is really, really important. And you mentioned that both the spaceship and the castle kind of seem to provide that, and it is interesting that this spatial isolation of the characters within the text seems to be two-fold: on the one hand, we have the constrictive places they're in. The Gothic presents us with these often subterranean chambers, dark dungeons, confusing corridors—you never know what's behind the corner. The labyrinth, while in itself is not necessarily a Gothic place, presents us with a good metaphor for that: that you are lost, that you don't know where you are, and there is some threatening presence there as well—the minotaur, so to say. And that definitely is isolating you. You are alone in this labyrinth, in these subterranean, confusing spaces. But on the other hand, the isolation is not just a constrictive isolation. There is also an isolation that you could connect to a concept that's important for the Gothic, and that's the sublime. The sublime as a literary concept is usually associated with grandeur, with incredibly, incomprehensibly large spaces. In the Romantic period, it was the feeling of being dwarfed by wonderful mountain vistas or looking at the vastness of the ocean and feeling insignificant in the face of that. And the Gothic takes that feeling and portrays it in an inherently

negative light: that you, in the face of these big, big spaces, are basically isolated, because you are nothing.

AE: I can definitely see how Lovecraft comes in here, as well.

CS: Absolutely! Lovecraft basically sees the whole universe as one sublime space, where the human doesn't amount to anything. An example here would be in *Frankenstein*, for example, a lot of the setting is, on the one hand, the Alps, so that kind of mountainside, and on the other hand, Scotland—the Hebrides, so a kind of wild, untamed nature.

AE: In *Frankenstein* you also have the framing narrative in the Arctic, which really encompasses this vastness quite well, I think. But when you have the castle and the ruins (and also the spaceship in *Alien* and so on), these aren't spaces that are made for isolation. This idea of the castle as a labyrinthine space where you can get lost on your own and so on—the corridors in the castle weren't originally constructed for somebody to get lost in on their own, but for people to populate them and presumably share some sort of community there. How important is the past here and also, kind of, this temporal isolation from what the space used to be?

CS: It is absolutely right that the castle that the Gothic usually takes place in is not a castle but it is the ruin of a castle. And I think you're absolutely right that the past, as Baldick mentioned in his definition, also is there. It's interesting that in this case it seems to be rather a connection to something else. You are not isolated. In the end, you are maybe not alone in these castle ruins. There is the presence of what came before. It might be a literal presence: it might be the undead presence of a ghost or a vampire, or it might be the presence of the Gothic villain, who represents the aristocracy—so also a kind of social construct of the past. So the presence of the past is, on the one hand, in contrast to the spatial isolation: here is something that makes you feel not alone. But it adds to the fear, because it is at the same time not something that helps you, that gives you a healthy social connection to other people; it is always this threat. The past isn't gone. There is something there that still remains, and this remaining presence is unsettling, threatening, is dangerous in some way.

AE: A lot of this, I think, is encompassed really well in Stephen King's *The Shining*, where you have this hotel that is usually filled with people, and you have these pictures of it being filled with people and the spectres of these people are all there. But then the family that populates it is really sort of lost in this ginormous space, because it's not made for three people—it's made to be inhabited by a lot of people. And then it's not just the past of the space, but it's also the past of the characters that plays a role, right? Could you say a bit on that? For example with *Frankenstein*, what role does the past play here for the characters?

CS: In the case of *Frankenstein* the past is personified in the figure of the monster. Frankenstein as an ambitious youth—he's not even the doctor, as it's commonly claimed; he doesn't even finish his medical studies—creates this monster, and then is appalled by what he's done, by what he has created, and abandons it, and tries to move on, tries to become a respectable family man, basically. But the monster isn't dead. So here, the monster is the past that kind of comes back to haunt him. It's, like you said, a very personal past. In other cases, like I mentioned, the past might be this strangely medieval notion. In *Dracula*, for example, we have these thoroughly modern characters,

who try to explain everything with science, who deal with the world via technology. But it turns out that technology doesn't help you against an undead vampire—religion does. So the past plays a role there. Again, it's something that connects you to other people; it connects you to your own personal past. But it is always unsettling and—that example you gave with *The Shining* is also interesting. I think it also is something that's very unfamiliar: the past is a different country, as we know, and so something that we usually wouldn't really think about—'a hotel, yeah, that's a hotel'—, suddenly gaining this special importance by being empty and having this whole history behind it, is a place that is suddenly strange and threatening.

AE: And then you also have the personal past of—

CS: Exactly.

AE: —of Jack and his personal demons haunting him.

CS: His alcoholism, yeah.

AE: There's something with the different types of narration in the Gothic and also the topic of *Community and Isolation* which I find very interesting, and that is that in a lot of (especially, I think, the earlier) Gothic texts, this is a sort of a found narrative or what we would today call the friend-of-a-friend tale: somebody told me this story and now I am telling it to you. So you get a sort of community in the telling. But there are probably still some differences there in how this is presented. I'm thinking in particular—because you've mentioned *Dracula* now—of the way that the narrative unfolds in *Dracula* as compared to *Frankenstein*. And also, how much of an emphasis is put on the individual. Because I think that's quite different in these two novels.

CS: They share certain things. What we have in both cases is different narrators. In *Frankenstein*, we have this frame narrative of the polar explorer who meets Frankenstein, who then goes on to tell his own tale, who then talks to his creature, who tells their own tale, and so on. So we have this kind of—like a Russian doll, basically. This kind of narrative structure. And in *Dracula* on the other hand, we have these fragmented tales, like diary entries (Dr Seward, who records his diary on a phonogram); we have newspaper clippings, and so on. So it's more fragmented. It's not this circular structure that we have in *Frankenstein*. It doesn't come to a neat conclusion, basically. But what they have in common is this focus on the singular perspective. These are both fragmented narratives in the end. They're only bits and pieces, and these bits and pieces might contradict each other. Frankenstein's creature has a wholly different perspective on things than Frankenstein, obviously. And in *Dracula*, Jonathan Harker's perspective is very different from that of Dr Seward. So that is also a kind of expression of that isolation: that people are trying to grasp reality. They're trying to grasp what is going on. 'What are we confronted with?', to a certain degree. But they fail. And that is, I think, very interesting—that this fragmented nature of the narrative is something that we find in a lot of Gothic stories, in different media. It's kind of this attempt to make sense of things. But in the face of this very unfamiliar, strange, isolating world it doesn't really work out.

AE: With these stock characters as well that you've mentioned and characters in these stories in general, would you say that Gothic stories usually do have a protagonist? With the fragmented nature of the narrative as well. Or is it more distributed among a group of people?

CS: That's a good question. I think you need a character that kind of mirrors the reader or the audience to a certain degree. What we often have is— We often have protagonists that are more passive. Things happen to them; they are not— Or often, at least, in these tales, the damsel in distress, or the kind of innocent hero who is thrown into this wild and unfamiliar world, they often, at least in the beginning, are more witnesses than acting protagonists. And it's, for example, said that the most interesting character that actually gains something of a protagonist status in the early Gothic novels is the Gothic villain, who is then kind of transforming into the Byronic hero—suddenly no longer the antagonist but the protagonist, having the same kind of dark character features but in a more sympathetic and in a more active way, perhaps.

AE: Mhm. Now this is something we really don't have in *Alien*, do we?

CS: Not really. I think that also shows us that the Gothic isn't always— Or it doesn't always surface in its purest form. I earlier called Ellen Ripley a Gothic heroine, but that's not true. She is chased down by an alien, but she also fights back. And that is the interesting thing about *Alien*: that it takes these tropes but it changes the character; it changes the traits of the character to such a degree that, especially in the sequels, Ellen Ripley is an action hero. That is entirely non-Gothic. She actually does something. She fights back, and that's not something the Gothic can easily accommodate.

AE: Mhm. And also, we don't get really an antihero-like villain there. We get monsters that we can't quite understand.

CS: Yes! The Alien is basically the— It is alien! I mean, that's the whole purpose of the thing. It is entirely alien to us. It's not a charismatic antihero. But in its strangeness, it might still be fascinating. That's also something the later films explore to a certain degree: to what degree are the Aliens like us or we like the Aliens? So the Gothic kind of creeps back in there as little bit as well.

AE: Yeah. This is something that is quite opposed to, for instance, *Dracula*, where the character of Dracula has been—especially over the centuries—so romanticised that far more people are familiar with Dracula, I think, than with, say, Jonathan Harker. Is Mina a traditional Gothic damsel in distress?

CS: That's something that is, again, ambivalent. Mina is, on the one hand, a damsel in distress because—especially in the second half of *Dracula*—the whole plot revolves around saving her. It's kind of the impetus for the male characters to rush to Transylvania because she's in danger of being compromised; she's in danger of being tainted by Dracula's influence. But on the other hand, Mina is a very proactive character. She is a very modern woman, even though in the novel she kind of scoffs at being called a 'new woman'. She still represents conservative values, like she wants to be married and be the angel in the house, this Victorian idea. But at the same time she helps the others. She knows how to type, for example. She is a more interesting character in a lot of ways. I think sometimes even more interesting than Bram Stoker intended. The characters in the Gothic—maybe because they are essentially often just archetypes, these archetypes can be changed easily. You can take certain aspects, but you can also subvert them without having to do much work, and I think that appears in these more modern, or in these later variations of the Gothic a lot.

AE: Yeah. And also, through tying it to a past that is in ruins in a way, the Gothic has this opportunity to break traditions and to break maybe, kind of, social expectations and norms as well. Probably, we

get to see this side of Mina because the situation everybody's in is so extraordinary and is not what you would normally expect at that time and in that place and so on. How do you see the Gothic as a sort of inciting mode for these ruptures?

CS: The Gothic is based on transgression. That's again not my idea. This is quoting from another Gothic expert, Fred Botting. For him, the Gothic is all about excess, transgressing borders, and (again, I quote) he says, "[t]ransgression, like excess, is not simply or lightly undertaken in Gothic fiction, but ambivalent in its aims and effects". So the Gothic kind of deals with the past. It deals with traditions. It deals with traditional structures: that—just like the castle is ruined—these traditional convictions, these traditional social structures are also in ruins. You cannot rely on society in a Gothic tale, because there is no society. And if there are social connections, they're usually subverted in a, well, mostly horrible, terrifying way. The figure of the Gothic villain has often these, well, paternal traits. It is this kind of fear of the dark father to put it very. . .

AE: Freudian.

CS: Freudian, exactly. And the interaction between characters is not how you would expect it. I have kind of— If you want to define the quintessential Gothic act of transgression, I usually think of Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* from the end of the 18th century, where we have the titular character, Ambrosio, a monk, who sells his soul to the devil, and then kidnaps a young woman named Antonia, takes her to a subterranean charnel house, where (surrounded by bones and skulls) he rapes her. And in the end, it turns out that Antonia is his long-lost sister. So that's the ultimate transgression of all social, religious norms—against everything that is good and proper. In *The Monk*, Ambrosio is in the end punished for this but the transgression is still portrayed in a very obvious and sensationalist way.

AE: Okay, so how is he punished?

CS: He is in prison and he then asks the devil basically to take him out of prison. And the devil says, 'yes, I'll do that; that's part of our deal—but you never specified that you wanted to be taken out of prison *alive*', and basically throws him down a ravine. And it is described in a very grim subversion of the tale of Genesis that it takes seven days for him to, kind of, die, his body decomposing. And that's the end of the novel. We first get the, kind of, good ending for the good characters, but the focus in the end is on this very grim and very dark ending, and that's— Again, it's against all rules of taste and of a good narrative, basically.

AE: Interesting, though, that the transgression is— The extreme transgression is punished in such an extreme way. That sort of implies a balance that is restored in a way and a status quo that is still upheld. This still counts as a taboo, and a bad thing, and something that has to be removed from this society entirely, which—I mean, also in *Frankenstein*, you could say that the result of the transgression (being the creature) and also the transgressor (being Frankenstein himself) get removed from society by dying. In *Dracula*, it's a bit more ambivalent, isn't it?

CS: Well, Dracula is also killed. While there are some kind of hints that he is not entirely dead, because, well, he is undead, it also has basically a happy ending.

AE: But all of the characters, all of the other characters, are also in a way transgressing at various points in the novel.

CS: Yeah. And I think that's the thing. Transgression is so focused on in Gothic tales (transgression of these existing norms) that even if you have a kind of re-establishment of the status quo in the end, there's always an uneasiness connected to it. There's always the fear of 'oh, what if this happens again?' Because the existing stability has been so thoroughly turned upside down that the doubt basically lingers. You cannot come out of *Dracula* and be like, 'oh, yeah, everything is okay'. Because you realise, 'oh, vampires exist', and that's changed your whole world view and that cannot just be reversed, basically.

AE: Is there also potential there, because—I mean, if we take, for example, a very traditional detective story: you have a criminal, who commits a crime, who transgresses the rules of society, then you have a detective; you have the police; they solve the crime; the criminal gets punished, and everything is alright again, and the status quo is restored. This is very conservative, in a way, in that always reverts back to the established state of everything and established hierarchies and so on. And you could say that this rupture and this shaking up of established structures also has a potential for a positive change in society. Is that something that is true for the Gothic as well?

CS: I would say definitely. Traditionally, of course, the Gothic is more focused on the unsettling quality of such transgression in a fearful way. You need stability: society wants stability; you personally want stability. You need these connections with other people, with society in general, to be stable. And if these existing stable connections are destroyed, turned upside down, either by some strange outside force or—even more so in later Gothic manifestations—by yourself maybe, because you yourself have a transgressive nature, then that is portrayed usually as something that's not good. But yeah, the Gothic definitely has also, I think, a liberating aspect. The term, for example, at the end of the 19th century, was also used in political discourse. It's incredibly interesting that it was used both for conservatives (because, like, Gothic, medieval, existing things) and for radicals, for progressives (because it's wild and it's untamed). And it was at the same time also used both positively and negatively. Negatively makes sense, but positively, because the Gothic seems to represent something true, something that shakes up things. A kind of primeval power, you might say. And in the 20th and 21st century, the Gothic definitely has kind of focussed more on this liberating power—that, for example, emotions don't have to be suppressed. Identities that don't fit in the existing norms of society—especially, for example, when it comes to queer identities—can be liberated. This kind of 'reclaiming of the monster', for example—especially in *Frankenstein*: this creature that is shunned by society. But in a queer reading you can kind of take that back and say, well, this is a creature of it's own making, and it's kind of liberating itself from how society and how its evil creator have designed it or see it. And that is interesting because the Gothic (even in its original form) kind of allows that easily, because it's so ambivalent. It doesn't always give us a clear answer, even if there is this re-establishment of existing norms, even if there is this clear judgement, 'oh, the evil, the monster, the villain'. Because it is so focused on existing things being subverted it always allows us to have another reading as well. That's also true for, I think, humour. The Gothic is ridiculous in its clichés, in its sensationalist nature. That has been the case from the very beginning. Jane Austen wrote *Northanger Abbey* as a parody of the Gothic, because the Gothic was so incredibly easy to be parodied. And that is kind of a liberation as well: the liberation of laughter that can be subversive as well but goes in an entirely different direction.

AE: Yeah. A slightly more contemporary example of that would be the whole subset of characters and tropes in Terry Pratchett's novels: the *Überwald* characters. Do you have—because we've talked about examples from the 18th to the 20th century so far—do you have an example from the 21st century, especially since you just mentioned the changes, and shifts, and differences, and so on in more recent years?

CS: One of the most interesting things to look at is, perhaps, that figure of the vampire. Because that is a Gothic stereotype from way back but has resurfaced in many forms. We mentioned that Dracula has been romanticised, so he has kind of changed. And if we look at the 21st century, we have, for example, on the one hand, the *Twilight* books, which take the figure of the vampire but basically seem to get rid of almost everything Gothic about it. The vampire loses the threat. The vampire becomes this wholly romantic and wholesome figure. So there is definitely a change that the unnaturalness of the vampire is celebrated rather than feared. And another example that I can think of is *What We Do in the Shadows*. It's a mockumentary film and TV show that basically takes these vampire stereotypes and imagines how it would be if vampires lived in a flatshare in our times. And that is interesting because it's a parody: it makes fun of the vampire stereotypes, but it is also very anti-Gothic because in the end this kind of celebrates human connections. These vampires kind of find out that they need to connect to each other. They need to connect to other people in order to exist in modern times. So, it's very much an anti-Gothic message there. Isolation doesn't work out. You can brood however long you want in your lonely castle on the hill, that doesn't work anymore and that doesn't get you anywhere.

AE: You could also say that they're not villains.

CS: Well, they're not villains, but the show also focuses on the atrocities they commit. It's played for humour, yes, but they kill people all the time. So, again, ambivalent.

AE: Yeah, I mean, it's very interesting. Generally, I think, the way that we approach what is a transgression that can be forgiven and under what circumstances and so on—with the whole way of anti-heroes being the focal characters, not being the villains, but being the actual anti-heroes. You just said that it's anti-Gothic or that it's not Gothic because the isolation doesn't work out. Traditionally in the Gothic, do you also see aspects of community represented or is it all about isolation?

CS: It's not all about isolation, but the sense of community is usually there to be destroyed. Organisations, for example, (most obviously in the original Gothic the Catholic church) are shown to be corrupt, are shown to be evil, are shown to have a horrible effect on the individual. The same is true for, as mentioned, this very natural (or seemingly natural) community, the family. Family structures are usually subverted. The motive of incest occurs again and again. That this is something unnatural that is somehow inherent to the family structure.

AE: Yeah, I mean at the very worst, kind of, you have that and at the very best you have a family that just isn't really any use to anybody.

CS: More or less, yes.

AE: In *Frankenstein*, for instance, the family is a sort of liability.

CS: Indeed, yeah. And even love and romance: either you have this kind of forbidden romance, this kind of dark passion that drives the Gothic villain to endanger the innocence of the Gothic heroine.

AE: An obsession, rather than...

CS: Exactly.

AE: ... romance, yeah.

CS: And on the other hand, you have this fear of losing your loved one. Like you said, it's a liability almost. And if you have a romance between two characters at the beginning of a Gothic novel, you already know, 'okay, one of them is going to die—or at least be endangered'. The Gothic is in the end always about fear. It is always about that reaction to transgression. And this reaction—or this Gothic effect often is connected to isolation, to this feeling of being alone, of being overwhelmed by external powers. And any sense of community doesn't help that. Any sense of community is then turned around as well. And that is the meaning of isolation there: that even (or especially) as part of a large societal structure (be it a religion, a family, an organisation)—that doesn't help you. In the end, you die alone—to be very bleak there.

AE: There's something about creating a community or creating something, at any rate, in the Gothic as well: if you think, for instance, of *Frankenstein*, the creature wants Frankenstein to create a wife for him to have a family. In *Dracula*, what the vampires do is basically make more of them. And also in *Alien*, there is this theme of, sort of, procreation—what about that then?

CS: Well, in *Frankenstein*, the monster itself is a creation that Frankenstein is appalled by. And he shudders at the thought of the female companion and the monster together, kind of, creating this new race of monsters. In *Dracula*, the act of creating a vampire is something unnatural, is something that is horrible—especially the turning of Lucy, because that seems to kind focus on this very misogynist view of a woman that doesn't need a man to kind of exist,—

AE: Shock!

CS: —and in Victorian times that's the most horrible thought imaginable, so she has to be killed and punished. And in *Alien*, obviously the birth cycle there involves aliens bursting out of people's chests and killing them in gruesome ways. So, you're absolutely right, creation, birth also plays a role. It's not just death, and doom, and gloom. But again, it's the subversion of the usual thought we have of birth, of creating something new, something that's natural, something that's organically harmonious. Birth and creation are seen as unnatural—or if it is natural, a nature that doesn't care for human thought, that doesn't care for human values. It's unthinking nature. Again, you can think of H. P. Lovecraft and his kind of tentacled monsters that represent nature, represent the universe but...

AE: Older and more ancient than anything we can imagine.

CS: Yes. So the Gothic seems—I mean, I keep on harping about it being ambivalent and about being a subversion, but that's maybe attractiveness of the Gothic. If you see it as this kind of dark mirror of existing values, of existing structures, of existing narratives as well. It's almost this devil's advocate position of asking: what if it doesn't work? What if this thing we think is good is bad? And that's a very destructive impetus. But, as we mentioned, from this destruction of existing things, of existing

patterns, you can also get a sense of liberation—if the existing pattern itself has been imprisoning you, if it has been restrictive, if it doesn't allow for new things to be created, then that creation can be seen as something positive. But it is—sorry to use it again—ambivalent.

AE: And, I mean, also this question of isolation is ambivalent, I think. Because the traditional structures, the traditional social structures aren't present or aren't really points where you connect. This idea of procreating is more kind of a spreading corruption than this wholesome traditional idea of a nuclear family, where you have children and parents and so on. But at the same time, the Gothic also creates communities in some sense. In *Frankenstein*, the character who tells the frame narrative, Robert Walton, he says that he feels so connected to Victor Frankenstein, and, I mean, granted, then it doesn't really last. But still, he was isolated for a really long time and was complaining in the letters to his sister about this (that he's been feeling this isolation), and then now here's a character that he feels a sort of kinship to. And also in *Dracula*, these characters come together to rescue Mina, for instance. And you have a sort of community there, which is based on defeating the Gothic evil. And also in *Alien*, you do get a bunch of different characters.

CS: That all die in the end, but... Right.

AE: Yeah, but for a while there you have a bit of a connection. So you also have the ambivalence in that way that it's not just one isolated person against another isolated person, but you can have communities and sort of familial structures as well, which aren't the traditional ones.

CS: That is true. You can have a sort of 'found family', instead of the traditional family. That again is a question of focus then. This found family can, like in the *Alien* films, lead to them being killed off and just lead into more fear and heartbreak.

AE: Reinforcing the sense of isolation then, yeah.

CS: Yeah. But I think you're right: isolation isn't the answer to being confronted with the Gothic world. It's an effect. But whether you kind of embrace that isolation and become like the Byronic hero, brooding in your ruin, or whether you try to, kind of, look for other connections (not traditional ones but connections that kind of help you in that way) that—I absolutely agree—that can be found in the Gothic. That brings me to the maybe latest example of a Gothic text that I can think of. Just last year, Susanna Clarke, who is perhaps best known for *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*, published a new novel called *Piranesi*. And *Piranesi* is named after an Italian artist who is often connected to the Gothic. He drew these—how he called them—'dungeons of imagination', these incredibly detailed and also impossible catacombs with lots of staircases, labyrinths, and so on. And in this novel, we have a world that is basically constructed like a quintessential Gothic space. A labyrinth of columns, of tombs, of overwhelming constructions, basically. So there is a lot of the Gothic in there. But in the end, we also—without spoiling too much—we kind of get a happy end that is based on the fact that the main character—he finds someone to have a connection with. And he doesn't react with despair, with fear, or with cynicism. He reacts to the darker circumstances of this world with an almost childlike innocence. And I think that is very interesting as well: that that's way to deal with the Gothic, to kind of accept that it is the way it is, to kind of accept that things are strange, things are threatening and unfamiliar in some way; but to accept it as a view of the world and not let that destroy your personality, your ability to connect with others, and your belief that there is some sort of

meaning in this world.

AE: That is a question we also keep coming back to in this lecture series of authenticity and kind of finding your own authentic self.

CS: Yeah.

AE: I wanted to ask you something, because I know that you've done some work on graphic novels and comic books in that vein, as well. So how is isolation, this Gothic isolation, represented there also visually? Are there any kind of particulars to the genre?

CS: With graphic novels the interesting thing is—it is a visual medium obviously. At the same time it is a sequential medium that portrays images in a series. And one of the more interesting things about that is a kind of tension between the ongoing narrative on the one hand—so you read one panel after the other; you read one page after the other, and usually within the panels, within the pages, you follow one figure, whether it's Batman or whether it is another character—but at the same time, you're also always looking at the whole page. The construction of the page is in itself a kind of meta-structure. And there are comics that kind of use that tension in an interesting way. One example I'm thinking of is *Watchmen*, written by Alan Moore and illustrated by Dave Gibbons. *Watchmen* is a superhero comic—but a superhero comic that kind of is Gothic in a lot of ways, because it looks at the subversion of the superhero narrative. It portrays a world in which even superheroes are helpless, where horrible things happen also to them. And in *Watchmen* you have this isolation in an interesting way, because while you follow the superheroes on their adventures the panel structure is always the same. It's always a very, very clear grid on the page. But you read through these stories and kind of realise that the meta-structure, the repetition of certain panels in a certain way, is more important, is more prevalent than what is happening in the single narrative. Then you realise that that is almost a kind of structural metaphor—that the superheroes, who seem to have these incredible powers, they're still imprisoned within this very rigid panel structure. And that is reflected in the narrative as well, because the superheroes, despite their powers, cannot change the fate of the world. That is, I think, a very good illustration of how graphic narratives can portray the individual in relation to this structural world around them.

AE: Yeah, that's really fascinating. I mean, a different and slightly more on the nose example (you just mentioned *Batman* as well) is this—I think the most immediate image people might have in their minds is this figure hunched over on some kind of skyscraper on the Gotham skyline, in the rain, alone, waiting, kind of, for the signal to appear in the sky.

CS: Absolutely. But, I mean, again, if you turn this around, if you make it colourful and optimistic, then it's not Batman hunched on some roof, it's Superman flying through the sky, similarly sublime, similarly isolated (because no one is like Superman), but it's a positive image. So again, it's how you read it. It's the effect you intend for it to have. Obviously, the topic of isolation in our times is very prevalent. This is the reason why you're having this topic as part of the lecture series—

AE: So would you say we live in a Gothic right now?

CS: Again, I think you could see it like that. A pandemic is definitely something that could be construed as very Gothic: to have a fearful effect that is kind of destroying existing structures, existing

securities in some way. You could definitely see the circumstance of our times at the moment as something Gothic. However, as the Gothic contains its own antidote, you might say, you could also focus on these aspects that you mentioned: this kind of looking for other connections, focusing on a kind of found family to work against that. You're not going to change the circumstances. You alone cannot change that you have to stay in lockdown, that you have to, kind of, endure the way things are at the moment. But you can at least kind of bolster yourself against that without having to stay in total isolation.

AE: Yeah. Thank you so much for taking the time to do this!

CS: Thank you for giving me the chance to ramble on about my favourite topic!

AE: And thank you all very much for listening. Next week I'll be speaking with Carolyn Burlingame-Goff about hybrid characters in *Star Trek*.