

Architecture of the Imagination: Susanna Clarke's *Piranesi* in context

Dr Sarah Reynolds

HPEN5041

Speculative Fiction: Sci-fi, fantasy, magic
realism and other imagined worlds



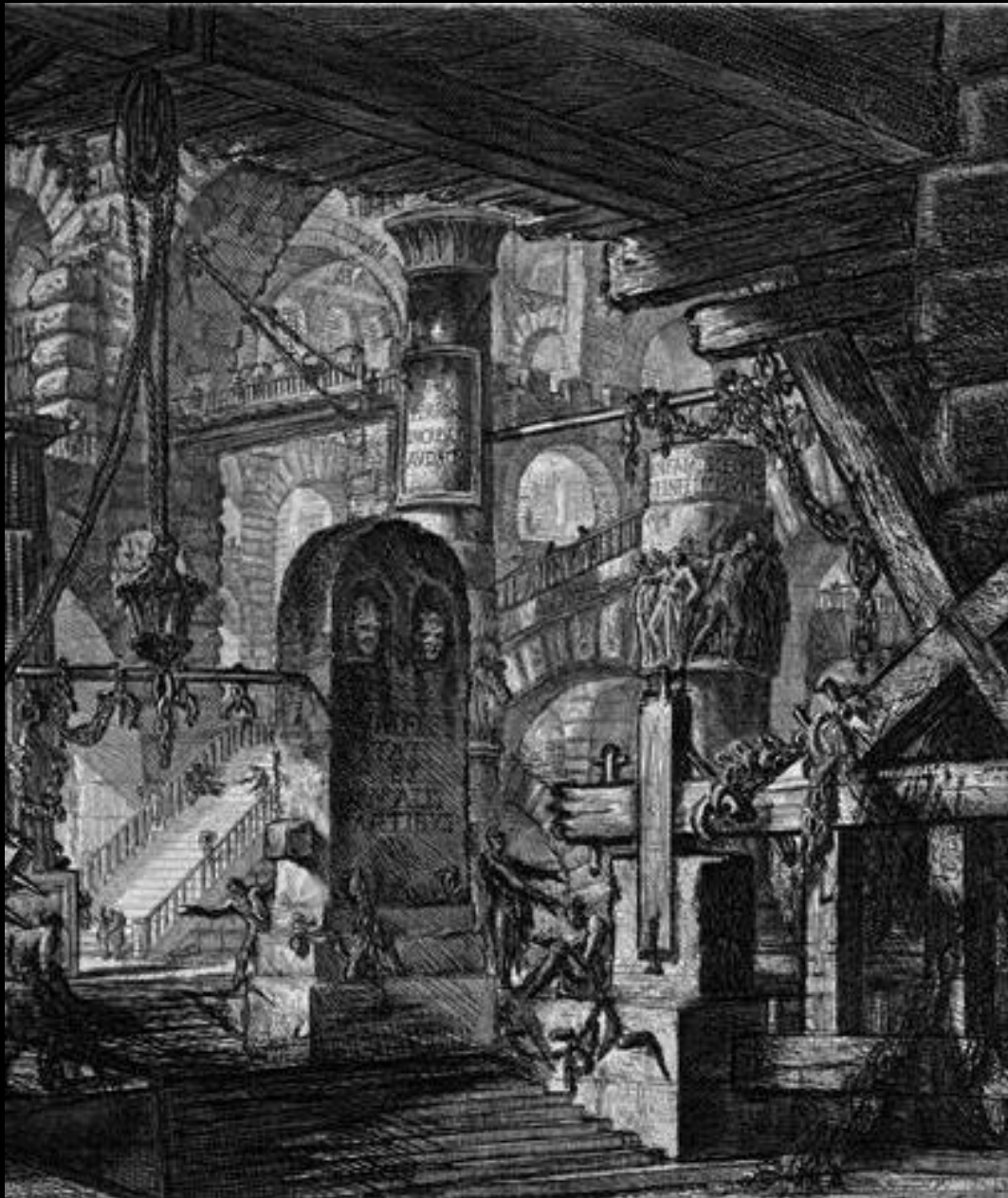


Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *The Man on the Rack*, 1761, etching
(Princeton University Art Museum)

PIRANESI: CARCERI D'INVEZIONE

PRISONS OF THE IMAGINATION

- **PIRANESI, GIOVANNI BATTISTA** (1720–1778)
- Venetian architect, engraver, and archaeologist.
- Influenced by artists and engravers such as Canaletto and Ricci, who portrayed imaginary places.
- Spent most of his life in Rome, making etchings of real Roman architectural sites for tourists.
- Went on to etch a thousand or so 'plates' depicting fantastical architecture inspired by Roman antiquity.
- Most famous for his series of etchings 'I Carceri D'Invenzoine' – Prisons of the Imagination.
- Piranesi had a profound impact on the Romantic movement.



- In *I Carceri*, Piranesi explored the possibilities of perspective and spatial illusion.
- *The Man on the Rack* and *The Pier with Chains*, are characterised by impossible structures in large open spaces: huge pillars, buttresses, walls, and arches. In both pieces, there is a sense of cluttered and claustrophobic space, endlessly extending.
- In *I Carceri*, Piranesi never presents an entire building, nor does he ever give enough information to distinguish the complete form of the structures, as in *The Pier with Chains*.
- Piranesi betrays the rules of perspective and even hides important elements of the architecture itself when his etched lines fade into the edges of the paper.
- He was interested in creating a unique visual experience for the viewer - the drama of light and shadow would have been deeply haunting to his audience as an expression of the sublime.

Giovanni Battista Piranesi, 'The Pier with Chains' from *Carceri d'Invenzione*, 1750, etching (The Met, New York)



J. M. W. Turner. Snow Storm—Hannibal Crossing the Alps. 1812. Tate Gallery, London.



'Wanderer above the Sea of Fog' by Caspar David Friedrich, 1818.



The Sublime

- The Romantic Period emerged towards the end of the eighteenth century and peaked during the first half of the nineteenth century.
- The movement was a reaction to The Enlightenment, which prioritised science, reason and rationality. In contrast, Romanticism was concerned with emotion, imagination and the experience of nature.
- The Sublime is an aesthetic that was introduced in Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry* (1757). Rather than a simple appreciation of the beauty of nature, the Sublime is connected with experiences of awe, terror and danger. Burke saw nature as the most sublime object.
- Artists like JMW Turner and Caspar David Friedrich and Philip James De Loutherbourg captured this idea in their art.

'An Avalanche in the Alps' by Philip James De Loutherberg, 1803 (London: The Tate Gallery)



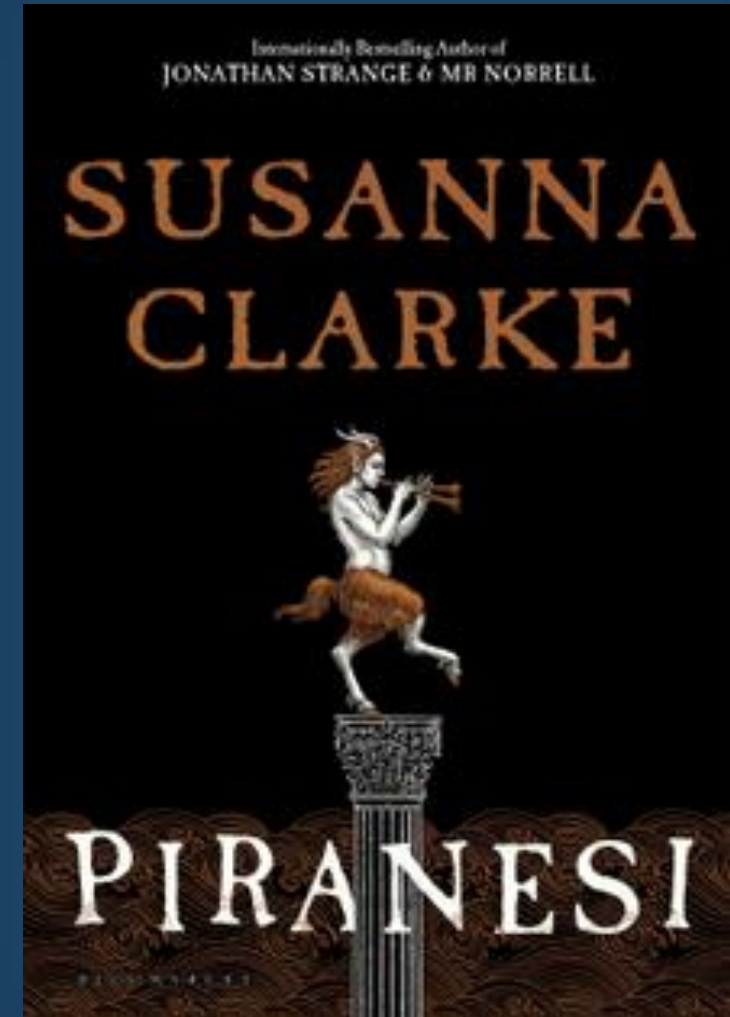
*“I need to produce great ideas,
and I believe that if I were
commissioned to design a new
universe, I would be mad
enough to undertake it.”*

Giovanni Battista Piranesi

Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *The Drawbridge*, 1761, etching
(The Met, New York)

PIRANESI BY SUSANNA CLARKE

- Fantasy fiction
- Published by Bloomsbury in 2020
- Winner of the 2021 Women's Prize for Fiction
- The story of 'Piranesi', a man who lives in a place called the House, a world composed of infinite halls and vestibules lined with statues, no two of which are alike.
- To him, the House is the whole World, and a sacred place. He can't remember living anywhere else.
- He lives a humble existence almost entirely alone, believing that he is only the 15th person to have lived there – he cares for the skeletons of these long dead inhabitants as part of the daily routine of his humble existence.
- The novel is written as a series of journal entries.

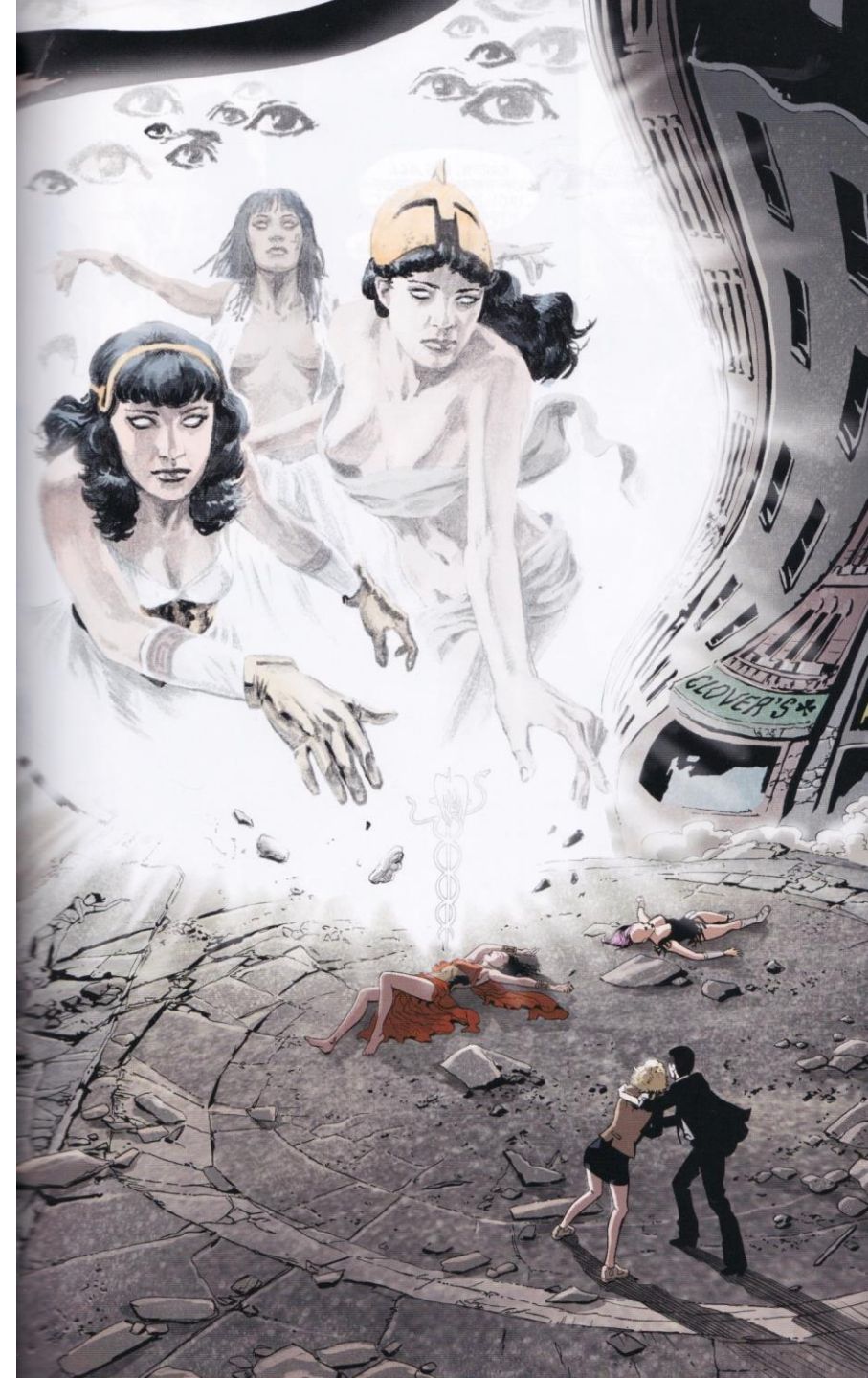


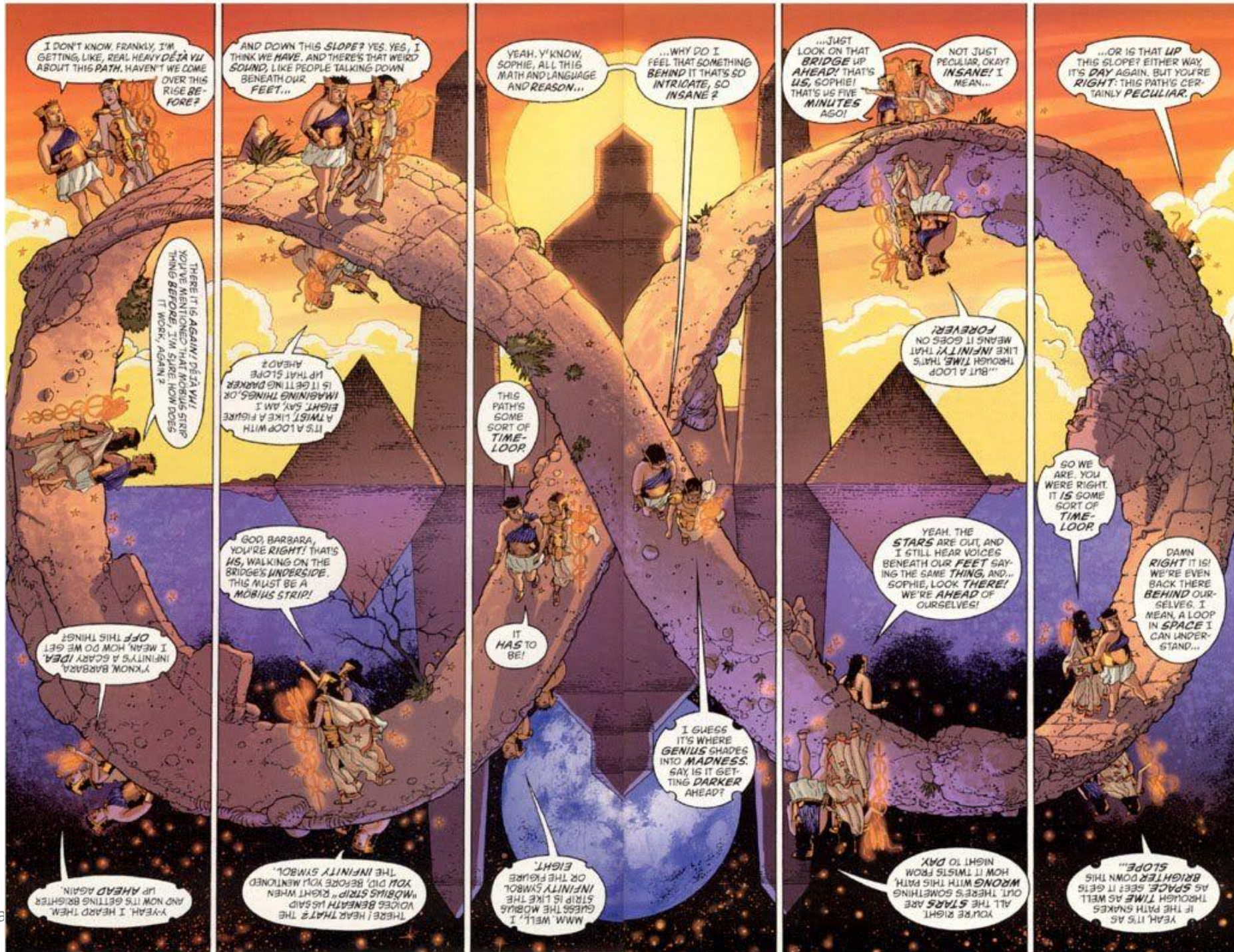


'Plate 2, Volume 3,' engraving from *Le Antichità Romane di Giambatista Piranesi*, Volume 3, Giovanni Piranesi, ca. 1750, volume bound together in Paris by Tessier, 1803-1807.



Alan Moore, graphic novelist and author of the 'Promethea' comic book series.





I DON'T KNOW. FRANKLY, I'M GETTING, LIKE, REAL HEAVY DÉJÀ VU ABOUT THIS PATH. HAVEN'T WE COME OVER THIS RISE BEFORE?

THERE IT IS AGAIN! DÉJÀ VU! YOU'VE MENTIONED THAT NOBIUS STRIP THING BEFORE, I'M SURE. HOW DOES IT WORK, AGAIN?

Y'KNOW BARBARA, INFINITY'S A SCARY IDEA. I MEAN, HOW DO WE GET OFF THIS THING?

YEAH, I HEAR THEM. UP AHEAD AGAIN.

AND DOWN THIS SLOPE? YES, YES, I THINK WE HAVE. AND THERE'S THAT WEIRD SOUND, LIKE PEOPLE TALKING DOWN BENEATH OUR FEET...

IT'S A LOOP WITH A TWIST LIKE A FIGURE EIGHT. SAY, AM I IMAGINING THINGS, OR IS IT GETTING DARKER UP THAT SLOPE AHEAD?

GOD, BARBARA, YOU'RE RIGHT! THAT'S US, WALKING ON THE BRIDGE'S UNDERSIDE. THIS MUST BE A MÖBIUS STRIP!

THERE I HEAR THAT? THE "MÖBIUS STRIP" RIGHT WHEN YOU DID BEFORE YOU MENTIONED THE INFINITY SYMBOL.

YEAH. Y'KNOW, SOPHIE, ALL THIS MATH AND LANGUAGE AND REASON...

THIS PATH'S SOME SORT OF TIME-LOOP.

IT HAS TO BE!

MMM, WELL, I GUESS THE MÖBIUS STRIP IS LIKE THE INFINITY SYMBOL OR THE FIGURE EIGHT.

...WHY DO I FEEL THAT SOMETHING BEHIND IT THAT'S SO INTRIGATE, SO INSANE?

I GUESS IT'S WHERE GENIUS SHADES INTO MADNESS. SAY, IS IT GETTING DARKER AHEAD?

...JUST LOOK ON THAT BRIDGE UP AHEAD! THAT'S US, SOPHIE! THAT'S US FIVE MINUTES AGO!

...BUT A LOOP THROUGH TIME, THAT'S LIKE INFINITY! THAT MEANS IT GOES ON FOREVER!

YEAH. THE STARS ARE OUT AND I STILL HEAR VOICES BENEATH OUR FEET SAYING THE SAME THING, AND... SOPHIE, LOOK THERE! WE'RE AHEAD OF OURSELVES!

YOU'RE RIGHT. ALL THE STARS ARE OUT THERE'S SOMETHING WRONG WITH THIS PATH. HOW IT TWISTS FROM NIGHT TO DAY.

NOT JUST PECULIAR, OKAY? INSANE! I MEAN...

...OR IS THAT UP THIS SLOPE? EITHER WAY, IT'S DAY AGAIN. BUT YOU'RE RIGHT: THIS PATH'S CERTAINLY PECULIAR.

SO WE ARE. YOU WERE RIGHT. IT IS SOME SORT OF TIME-LOOP.

DAMN RIGHT IT IS! WE'RE EVEN BACK THERE BEHIND OURSELVES. I MEAN, A LOOP IN SPACE I CAN UNDERSTAND...

IF THE PATH SNAKES THROUGH TIME AS WELL AS SPACE, SEE? IT GETS BRIGHTER DOWN THIS SLOPE...

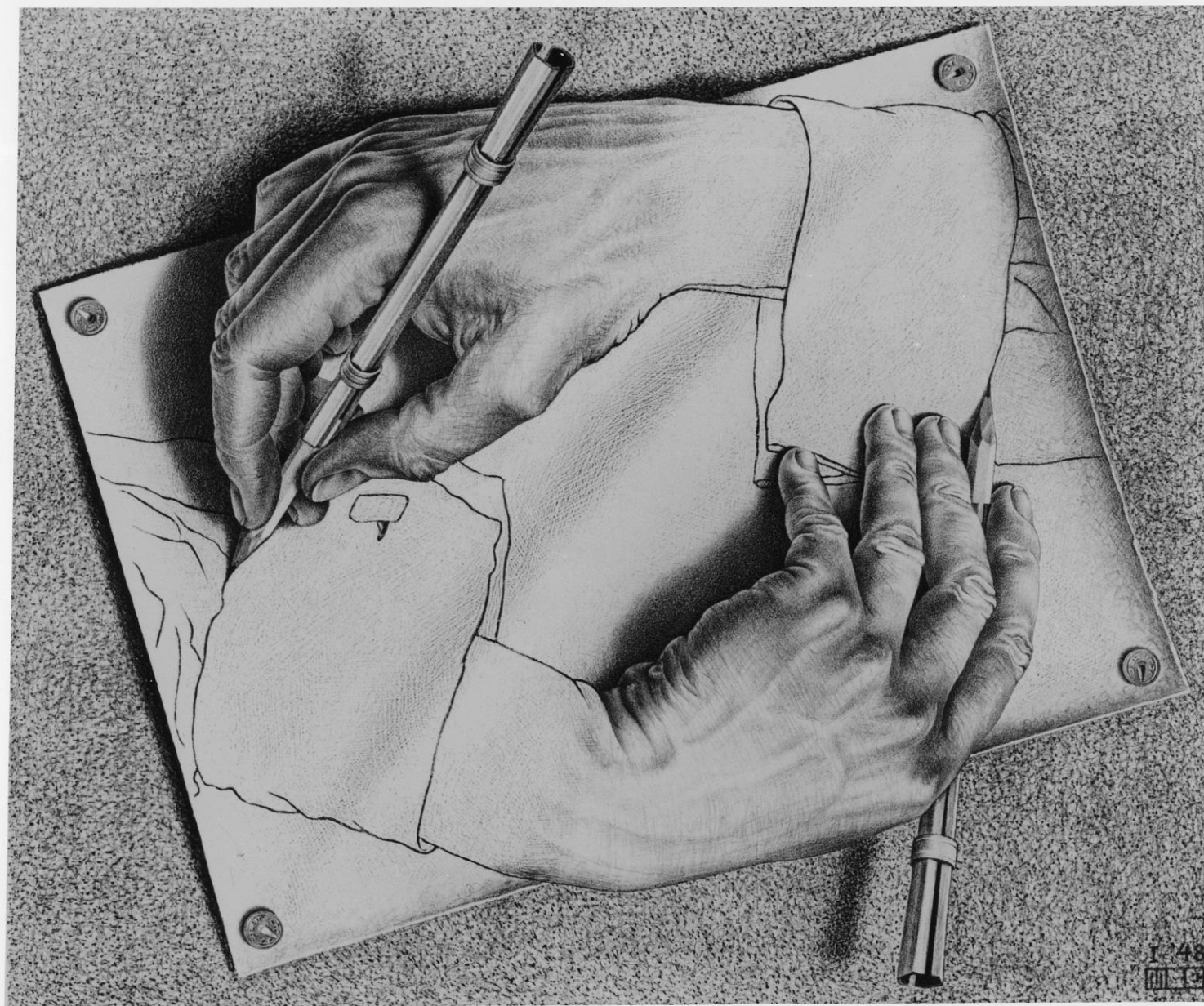
PART 2:

Textual Analysis:

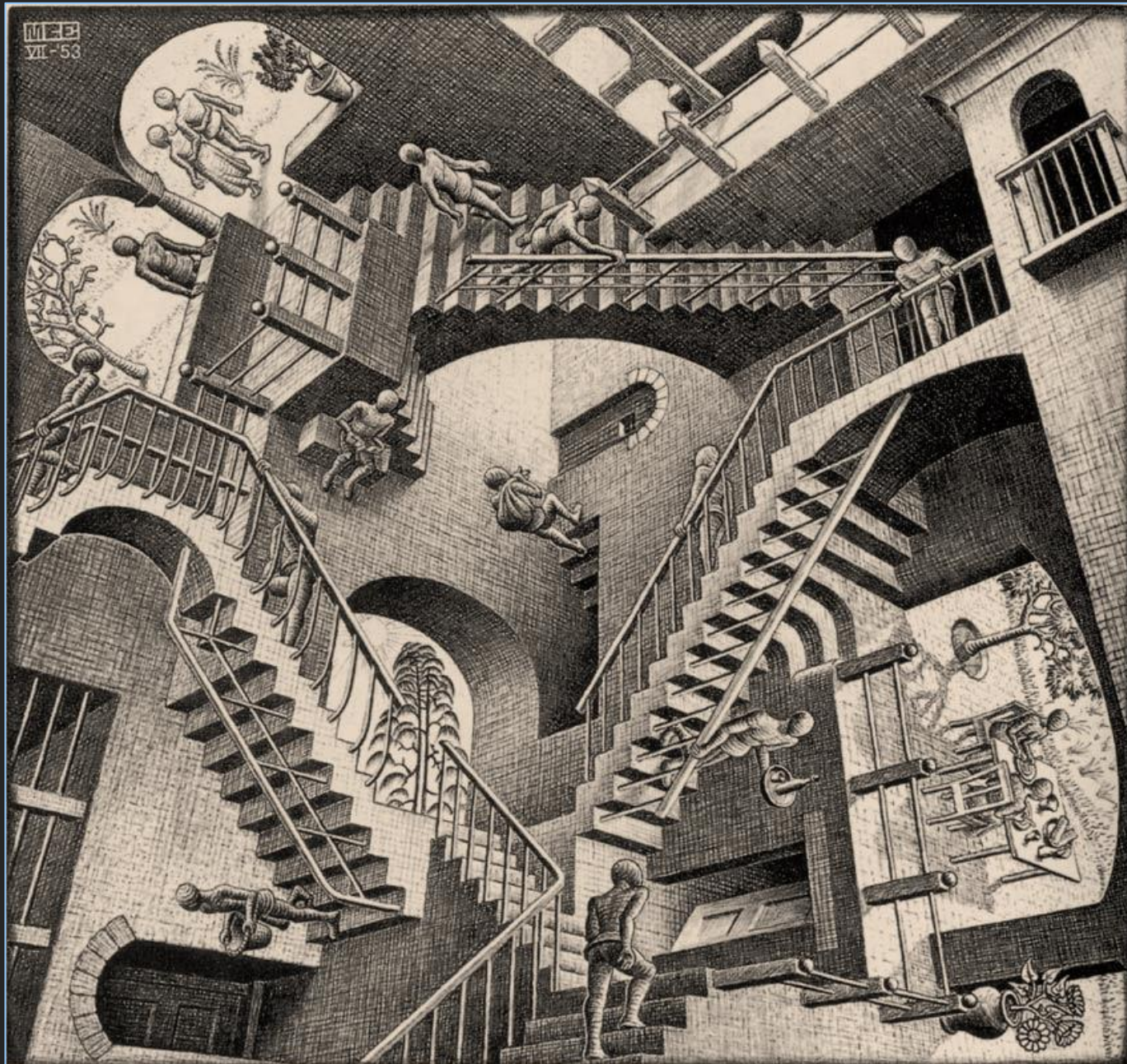
- How would you characterise the worldbuilding in this extract?
- How does Clarke interweave exposition / clues with the description of the place?
- How does Clarke's work intersect with some of the philosophical aesthetics we've looked at this morning?
- Compare and contrast Borges' short story 'The House of Asterion' with the extract from *Piranesi*. What can we learn from their intertextuality?

Creative Writing Exercise:

Use one of the prompts in this Powerpoint – or elsewhere – to write about a character who is trapped in a strange place.



Drawing Hands is a lithograph by the Dutch artist M. C. Escher first printed in January 1948.



Ascending and Descending is a lithograph print by the Dutch artist M. C. Escher first printed in March 1960.



M.C. Escher N° 49/50 IV

Waterfall (Dutch: *Waterval*) is a lithograph by the Dutch artist M. C. Escher, first printed in October 1961. It shows a perpetual motion machine where water from the base of a waterfall appears to run downhill along the water path before reaching the top of the waterfall.















