Surface Tensions:
Steampunk, Subculture, and the Ideology of Style

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Abstract:
Drawing on a variety of steampunk visual, textual, and performance sources, this article traces the contentious and highly charged debate about the ideology and aesthetics of period style that circulates within this eclectic neo-Victorian subculture. Far from simply rejecting the historical nineteenth century in favour of a fantastical version, steampunk practice is animated by the problem of if, and how, the Victorian period's social, economic, and political legacies should be signified. This discussion is nowhere more heated in the subculture's internal micro-media than in discussions of the regalia and style of empire. In drawing attention to this compelling steampunk discourse on the ethics of representation, my paper calls for a new and more situated approach to competing steampunk practices and political identifications, one that might extend and replace the holistic assessments of the subculture that have predominated so far.

Keywords: cosplay, Empire, historical referentiality, ideology, post-subcultures, steampunk, subculture, Victorian period.

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Since its explosion as a genre of techno-fetishistic, retro-Victorian science fiction in the 1980s (see Onion 2008: 140; Perschon 2010: 127),[1] steampunk has transformed into a rich and dynamic global sub-culture with burgeoning fan communities in the United States and the United Kingdom. Its hallmarks include an inventive anachronistic dress style based on reworked and retrofitted (but rarely period-authentic) Victorian fashions, an interest in DIY creativity linked to the green values of reclamation and recycling, and participation in Victorian-themed gaming, cosplay,[2] and Live Action Role Playing (LARP). Less frequently, but nonetheless passionately, steampunk has also been embraced by some as a form of counter-cultural political praxis whose goal is to undo, whether symbolically or via direct action, the legacies of Victorian capitalism, sexism, and imperialism.[3] Along with most other contemporary subcultures, it accommodates a variety of "belief systems" which "tend to be uneven and complex" (Muggleton 2000: 127),

and its participants vary widely in their motivations, ideological identifications, and levels of involvement. Indeed, as Rebecca Onion has suggested, perhaps the only definitive trait shared by most steampunks seems to be an aesthetic one, namely a common interest in the visual interface between retro-Victorian style and contemporary technology (Onion 2008: 138). This is not to characterise steampunk as yet another manifestation of a superficial postmodernism that consistently values style over substance, but rather to stipulate that the real and substantial commitments – political, historical, emotional, and aesthetic – of individual steampunks have not crystallised into collective subcultural tenets.

So far, the heroic resistance and ideological consistency, once supposed by 1970s Birmingham school sociologists to inhere in all youth subcultures, has been replaced with an emphasis on the heterogeneity and ephemerality of groups that might better be defined as "taste cultures" (Thornton 1995: 3), or "neo-tribes" (Maffesoli 1996: 76).[4] But there are nonetheless important reasons for recognising steampunk as a special case among contemporary (post-)subcultures, ones which should garner it more attention from sociologists and scholars of neo-Victorianism alike who have, until very recently, been largely oblivious to it.[5] First of all, unlike the majority of subcultures hitherto subjected to sociological exploration, steampunk constitutes neither a youth, working-class, nor music-based collectivity. Although there are bands that label themselves 'steampunk',[6] their music tends to be widely eclectic and mutually divergent, lacking the stylistic coherence of other subcultural genres such as goth, metal, or punk. Participants come from a variety of backgrounds and, while adolescents and even young children can be found at most steampunk conventions, they by no means constitute the majority demographic: as organiser John Naylor pointed out at the inaugural 2009 U.K. Steampunk Convivial, the attendee age range included children and octogenarians. This unusual and impressive breadth constitutes a point of pride and source of attraction for many steampunks, who may have started their subcultural involvement in more age-restricted scenes. A further point of distinction between steampunk and other comparable groupings lies in its slightly more complicated relationship to the traditional subcultural principles of individualism and personal liberation. Steampunk's emphasis on etiquette and good manners means that social responsibility is valued just as highly as, if not more than, unrestricted individual expression.

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Finally, and most importantly for this article, is steampunk's distinct ability to confound (and incorporate) both heroic and post-subcultural interpretations of its ideological tendencies. This is nowhere more evident, I argue, than in the polemic range of positions expressed within steampunk's thriving Anglo-American discourse community towards the historical period which it, if sometimes only fleetingly and irreverently, references: the Victorian era. The highly-charged rifts within steampunk communities as to how, and even *what* (if anything) Victorian social, political, and economic legacies should be made to mean in their aesthetic praxis, undermine recent sociological accounts of subcultures as largely fragmented and apolitical entities which show little regard for the ideological significations of their style.[7] They also challenge the homogenising propensities observable to different degrees in the emergent body of literary and cultural studies criticism on steampunk. Occupied with the necessary first task of introductory synthesis, much of the small body of humanities scholarship produced on the topic since Steffen Hantke's seminal 1999 article (on the fiction of William Gibson, Bruce Sterling, and others) has imagined steampunk as a diffuse but ontologically consistent phenomenon dedicated to one central objective, be that to assault "the responsible historicist recreation of the past" (Hantke 1999: 249), or to restore commodities to their original production contexts (Forlini 2010: 73). Each convincing in relation to specific texts and art works, these compelling arguments nonetheless smooth over and conceal important ideological divisions when projected onto steampunk practice *en masse*.

This article draws upon but moves beyond this agenda-setting first-wave criticism by presenting a number of contrasting steampunk post-subcultural positions towards the meaning and (mis)uses of historically referential style and suggesting their relevance for neo-Victorian studies. In its dynamic sartorial interrogation of Victorian motifs, steampunk is an enterprise which scholars of literary neo-Victorianism can no longer afford to ignore. Before I proceed, however, it is important to position myself more clearly in relation to the material at hand. I write not as a sociologist, but as a scholar of Victorian and neo-Victorian literature who was initially attracted to steampunk for its potential to challenge what Susan Zieger has identified as some of the more clichéd tropes of neo-Victorian criticism – the base notion that the "desire for the nineteenth-century past is an ambivalent one", for example, or that "present-day writers, readers, and

critics [act] as an undifferentiated 'we' whose Victorian desire is largely the same" (Zieger 2011: 378). How, I wondered, would current scholarly understandings of neo-Victorianism change if critics paid more attention both to mass-market steampunk fiction and to the subculture's rich micro-media – to zines, blogs, and discussion board postings, music lyrics, artist's statements, manufactured objects, and costumes? I remain committed to the urgency of this question, although I do not pretend that my negotiation of the roles of literary scholar and participant-observer (at the 2009 Lincoln Asylum convivial) was entirely smooth or wholly successful, or that I have accumulated a sufficiently representative sample size on which to base any comprehensive generalisation about the tenor and direction of the subculture across its global locations. But this has not been my goal. Instead, I have carefully selected some of what I view as the most intriguing arguments towards the ethics of historical reference expressed by steampunk's insiders and critics – by no means mutually exclusive groups. If this unorthodox approach irritates some sociologically-trained observers of subcultures, as no doubt it will, I hope it will also provide impetus: the time for an extended examination of steampunk along the lines of Sarah Thornton's ground-breaking 1995 study of rave culture or David Hodkinson's 2002 investigation of the British Goth scene seems to me long overdue, and would be welcomed by steampunk enthusiasts and scholars (again, not necessarily separate constituencies) alike.

The need for some form of reckoning with steampunk's mixed micro-political and apolitical dimensions is arguably more urgent than ever. The subculture has experienced a considerable growth in membership and visibility over the last five years (Bowser and Croxall 2010: 12), attracting new and sometimes unwelcome levels of ideological scrutiny in the process. "A social movement based on an aesthetic", observes Rebecca Onion, "seems particularly vulnerable to [...] misinterpretation" (Onion 2008: 155), and this potential is only exacerbated when the quoted aesthetic is associated with a historical period whose socio-political meanings have been so frequently appropriated and over-determined in recent years as those associated with the nineteenth century. In the wake, for example, of sustained postcolonial critiques of the aftermath of empire, of the Thatcher government's notorious appropriation of so-called 'Victorian values' to defend its reduction of the state welfare system, and the dismissal by some post-feminists of political feminism as a form of 'New Victorianism',

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invocations of the nineteenth century in British and American macro-media are rarely accepted as ideologically unaffiliated.[8] This makes it harder than ever for avowedly apolitical steampunks, who incorporate elements of reworked Victoriana into their dress purely for creative and aesthetic reasons, to avoid encountering occasional suspicions of reactionary nostalgia. In this respect, the contemporary subculture with which steampunk has most in common is not punk (from which it derives its name), but rather modern primitivism. A body modification subculture whose trademarks include multiple and unconventionally placed piercings, 'tribal'-themed tattoos, and sub-dermal implants, modern primitivism has also been accused by insiders and outsiders alike of stylistically reinforcing outdated social values and anachronistic stereotypes, in this case in relation to non-European indigenous peoples. The modern primitive response has been to insist that their practice has more to do with catharsis, ritual, and identity than the authentic recreation of any actual cultural or historical style, but it has not always proved effective in disarming criticism. As Theresa Winge points out,

> those external to the subculture – the lay person, various cultural and media commentators, and some academic researchers – are likely to be guided in their attempts at 'appearance perception' by the 'primitive' symbolism, and its associated negative connotation. (Winge 2003: 123-124)

This reception dilemma is one shared by the steampunk community.

Were steampunk a wholly post-subcultural formation with little interest in the politics of style or the possibility of symbolic subversion through dress, it is likely that these negative appraisals would pass without notice.[9] Indeed, they might even serve a validating function, providing the clumsy and hostile mass media attention that, as Sarah Thornton has argued, can bestow on subcultures a much-desired source of radical cachet and internal cohesion (Thornton 1995: 135). But this is simply not the case. Some of the most vocal and vehement critics of the potential ideological significations of steampunk come from within the subculture itself, often from its self-declaredly radical and openly anarchistic North American branches. Representatives of the latter stream, the New York City-based

Catastraphone Orchestra and Arts collective, write in the inaugural issue of the U.S.-based *SteamPunk Magazine*:

> Unfortunately, most so-called 'steampunk' is simply dressed-up, reactionary nostalgia; the stifling tea-rooms of Victorian imperialists, and faded maps of colonial hubris. [...] Authentic Steampunk [...] rejects the myopic, nostalgia-drenched politics so common among 'alternative' cultures. Ours is not the culture of Neo-Victorianism and stupefying etiquette, not remotely an escape to gentleman's clubs or classist rhetoric. It is the green fairy of delusion and passion unleashed from her bottle, stretched across the glimmering gears of rage. (Catastraphone 2007: 4-5)

The collective's vehemence here is fascinating, not least of all for the way in which it incorporates some of the rhetoric and terminology of the older mode of heroic subcultural interpretation. The passage insists on a symbolic political function for steampunk, one that it elevates to the status of authenticating *sine qua non*. 'Real' steampunk is the angry opposite of an uncanny neo-Victorianism imagined as wholly reactionary and escapist. It is certainly nothing new for subcultures to invoke some kind of 'Other' against which to define and manufacture their own authenticity, but this foil has habitually come in the form of an imagined version of the mainstream, populated by mythical Sharon-and-Tracy archetypes who shop on the High Street, listen to top 40 radio, and frequent corporate dance clubs (Thornton 1995: 99). For the Catastraphone collective, steampunk's other is not the so-called mainstream or even the contemporary, but rather another cultural form of Victoriana whose external aesthetic trappings are too close to its own for comfort.

  The Catastraphone manifesto provides an excellent starting point for our consideration of the diverse attitudes towards the ideology of period-based style in steampunk. Notably, it does not deny popular stereotypes about the Victorian period as a dark age dominated by the various injustices of sexism and sexual repression, racism, and classism which Western modernity has subsequently sought to overthrow. On the contrary, it reifies these structures, and suggests that they can only be successfully exorcised through the fantastical flights – 'absinthine delusions' of what it imagines as

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genuine steampunk. This symbolic micro-political tactic is endorsed again
in the headnote that introduces *SteamPunk Magazine*'s web site:

> Before the age of homogenization and micro-machinery,
> before the tyrannous efficiency of internal combustion and
> the domestication of electricity, lived beautiful, monstrous
> machines. […] It was a time when art and craft were united,
> where unique wonders were invented and forgotten, and
> punks roamed the streets […]. Even if we had to make it all
> up. (*SteamPunk Magazine* n.d.)

It is admittedly hard to see what practical results might follow from these
exhortations to fight real social injustice with individual acts of imagination
and whimsy, and we might be tempted to agree with Oliver Marchart's
contention that "as long as subcultures remain on the level of 'symbolic
resistance' or 'resistance through rituals' they remain within the sphere of
micro-politics" (Marchart 2003: 97) – and hence, for Marchart, incapable of
convincing counter-hegemonic resistance. But my goal here is not to
evaluate the actual effectiveness of steampunk anti-capitalist activism, but
rather to note how its rhetorical forms might add complexity to our
understanding of the subculture. Political steampunk simultaneously
requires and de-realises a verifiable Victorian past. The objective,
empirically-verifiable forms of domination associated with the nineteenth
century are to be recognised, then dismantled through acts of fancy and
imagination that may, to the untrained eye, seem simply escapist or
whimsical. This strategy has some obvious risks, not the least of which is
the danger of erasing the historical awareness that catalysed the protest in
the first place. If highly-referential and period-based steampunk style risks
accusations of nostalgia, then overt anti-referentialism threatens to take the
'steam' out of steampunk altogether, unmooring it from any historical or
political context and sacrificing the coherence that some members of the
subculture seek from it. A challenge for today's steampunks is to manage
their image in a way that balances these imperatives, allowing them to
visually quote the Victorian period without seeming to slavishly repeat and
emulate its clichéd ideological significations.

   The examples which follow present contemporary steampunk at its
most   and   least   historically   allusive,   demonstrating   how   different

practitioners and texts attempt to achieve the referential equilibrium described above. In none of the selected cases is there an aspiration to faithful verisimilitude or period authenticity. Although one can occasionally (if rarely) encounter steampunk costumers in largely unmodified replica Victorian attire, mimetic historical reproduction is seldom if ever the business of the subculture.[10] To speak of different levels of historical reference in steampunk costuming, then, is not to distinguish between period and non-period dress, but rather to recognise the different weight of acknowledgement accorded by steampunks to nineteenth-century precedents in their clothing, whether their attire looks recognisably Victorian or not. We must be wary of assuming that blatantly anti-referential forms of steampunk – ones that minimise allusion to historical Victorian dress, manners, or beliefs – are necessarily historically disengaged or apolitical. On the contrary, some of the most ostensibly fantastical modes of steampunk creativity are in fact the ones most invested in creating a dialogue with the past. As Rachel Bowser and Brian Croxall have recently observed, surfaces have a way of turning into depths in steampunk (Bowser and Croxall 2010: 26), reminding us in the process that the ideological significations of non-period and mimetic Victoriana are far from given.

1.   Steampunk Depths: Digging the Underground

It should perhaps come as no surprise that the branch of steampunk creativity most associated with ideological critique is fiction, and in particular those works produced during the genre's first wave. This period, which Jess Nevins dates from the early 1970s to the 1990 publication of William Gibson and Bruce Sterling's *The Difference Engine*, is characterised by texts which adopt the framework of alternative history to explicitly condemn nineteenth- and twentieth-century systems of power and domination. Fantastical in plot and ontology, their socio-political targets are nonetheless unmistakeable and relatively unambiguous. A prime example is Michael Moorcock's *The War Lord of the Air* (1971), often regarded as the genre's inceptive text. Borrowing the embedded narrative structure of Wells' *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896), it traces the fate of Victorian army officer Oswald Bastable after a freak earthquake projects him forward in time to 1973, where he becomes a zeppelin pilot and ultimate communist rebel who abandons his former allegiance to the British Empire after witnessing firsthand the ravaging effects of colonisation on subject peoples.

The novel's eponymous War Lord, Shuo Ho Ti or 'Shaw', as he also goes by, employs twentieth-century technologies to fulfil one of the ethical goals of mid-Victorian realism; that is, to invoke sympathy for the proletariat through representation. Shaw takes Bastable into a "kinema" and shows him horrifying footage of starving Chinese coolies and cholera-stricken Indian villagers being gunned down by imperial forces: "This is how your kind of power is used when others threaten it", he explains to a distraught Bastable (Moorcock 1971: 129). Convinced both by the content and verisimilitude of the images, Bastable instantly switches allegiances, only to find himself jolted back into 1903 when Shaw's deployment of an atom bomb against his enemies reverses the time-travel process. Written in the wake of the 1960s decade that witnessed a hyper-acceleration of Cold War tensions and massive waves of African decolonisation, Moorcock's dystopic science fiction novel acts as a layered allegory with multiple pay-offs for the depth reader, offering explicit commentary on the Victorian empire, the rise of communism, and the history of its own genre as a vehicle for imperialist ideology.[11] If *The War Lord of the Air* is to be regarded as the inaugural steampunk novel – and this status is by no means uncontested – it is certainly one that takes its historical referents very seriously, and even requires engagement with them on behalf of the reader.

Some critics have argued that this politically-charged referentiality – a responsiveness to "the taproot history of the period", as British science fiction writer Charlie Stross describes it (Stross 2010) – has all but disappeared from steampunk writing in the last two decades, giving way to a much more blatantly superficial aesthetic that invokes the Victorian merely as a form of window dressing. Citing and echoing China Miéville's provocative 2002 condemnation of Tolkienian fantasy for its reactionary feudalist nostalgia (Miéville 2002), Stross recently blasted Cherie Priest and other steampunk writers on his blog for what he views as their unexamined "affection for the *ancien regime*" (Stross 2010). Instead of fixating on clockwork zombies and well-heeled members of the nobility, he suggests, they might, like Moorcock before them, use the genre's fantastical license to highlight the plight of the Victorian era's underclasses, perhaps writing about "colonial peasants forced to work under the guns of the white Europeans' Zeppelins", "unwanted children (contraception is a crime) unloaded on a baby farm with a guaranteed 90% mortality rate", and "nine year olds forced to labour on steam-powered looms" (Stross 2010). Stross's

blistering critique quickly ignited steampunk discussion forums, drawing counter-attacks and some plaudits from within the subculture's diverse constituency. Priest herself stepped into the fray, mocking Stross for his needless effort of pointing out that her "fictional 19th century zombies" were neither historically accurate nor "SCIENTIFICALLY SOUND" (Priest 2010). Interestingly, however, she ignored his political objections entirely. This silence is made more intriguing by the growing ubiquity of such concerns amongst commentators on and fans of steampunk. For example, Jess Nevins, himself a prolific steampunk scholar and author of the invaluable genre sourcebook *Encyclopaedia of Fantastic Victoriana* (2005), anticipates Stross's observations in his 2008 introduction to Ann and Jeff Vandermoor's flagship short story anthology *Steampunk*. He writes:

> [M]ost second generation steampunk is not true steampunk – there is little to nothing 'punk' about it. The politics of the punk position have largely disappeared from second generation steampunk [...]. This abandonment of ideology is an evolution (or, less charitably, an emasculation) that is inevitable once a subgenre becomes established – witness how cyberpunk went from a dystopic critique of multinational capitalism to a fashion statement and literary cliché. But its loss is nonetheless to be mourned. (Nevins 2008: 10-11)

Subcultural theorists will recognise in this account an almost perfect recapitulation of the Hebdigean thesis pioneered almost thirty years earlier in *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*: a once-'authentic' and homogeneously oppositional subculture reaches critical mass, is infiltrated by the media, and abandons its political edge.[12] The fact that this model has largely been abandoned within subcultural studies has not stopped it from surviving and circulating within specific subcultures themselves. Thus, for some of the subculture's trackers, a steampunk without an explicitly ideological/heroic edge is inevitably a derivative one.

It is not only in discussions of recent steampunk fiction that we can see this kind of valorisation of explicit political intention. Indeed, as Stefania Forlini's study of the 2008 *Anachrotechnofetishism* exhibition in Seattle demonstrates, many steampunk artists have internalised a standard of

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judgement which apotheosises direct historical reference to nineteenth-century social problems over presumably more superficial period appropriations. The creative workers that Forlini examines describe their pieces as responding to a variety of Victorian and post-Victorian crises, including the ecologically-disastrous rise of a disposable waste culture, the decline of eclectic democratic amateurism, and the (supposed) estrangement of working people from technology (Forlini 2010: 77).[13] In their works and exhibition statements, Forlini argues that the *Anachrotechnofetishism* artists seek to overturn the process named in the show's title by restoring rather than concealing the production contexts of their own creations. In these specific manifestations, she concludes,

> steampunk is about learning to read all that is folded into any particular thing – that is, learning to connect the source materials to particular cultural, technical, and environmental practices, skills, histories, and economies of meaning and value. (Forlini 2010: 73)

Here, innovative steampunk visual culture is made not just compatible with but dependent upon material, historical and political contextualisation. Where it embraces anti-realism by creating a series of whimsical machines and objects that never were nor will be, it is said to do so in order to represent and imaginatively redress an all-too real past and a palpable post-Victorian social present.

2.   Steampunk Surfaces: Suspending and Estranging the Referent

Although the highly referential model of steampunk is one that might endear it to academic audiences, particularly those accustomed to historicist interpretation, it is not necessarily one practised or even welcomed by all members of the community. Some consider the privileging of overtly referential and ostentatiously ideological forms of steampunk to be a skewed imposition, or worse, a beggaring of the scene's aesthetic potential. This reaction was one of the many provoked during a heated and compelling discussion of the subculture's representation of empire on the 'Steam-Scholars' discussion board in the spring of 2010, in which I participated.[14] John Naylor, founding member of the UK-based Victorian Steampunk Society and co-organiser of the annual Asylum Steampunk

Convivial, challenged what he perceived as the academic bad faith behind
this line of enquiry, noting that many steampunks choose their attire simply
because of its recognisable visual signature and appeal. They should no
more be accused of wanting to reinstate the Raj by wearing a Pith helmet,
he warned, than Star Wars costumers should be charged with seeking to
engage in intergalactic conquest. Speaking specifically of the attendees at
the 2009 Asylum gathering, he concluded: "It is obvious [...] that people
were deliberately not identifying with the political realities of Victorian
Imperialism but were identifying with a new Steampunk community"
(Naylor 2010). In this account, Naylor seems to echo the views of David
Muggleton and others that style in (post-) subcultures functions primarily as
a vehicle for social communion and individual improvisation, not for
ideological positioning (Muggleton 2000: 49)

      But other steampunk followers, both on the list and elsewhere,
contend that the originating context and subsequent ideological aura of
some accessories and insignia[15] – the Confederate flag, for example, or the
Swastika in the case of punk – cannot so easily be waived away even within
a subculture's own reception context. Replying to Naylor, Jess Nevins
argued:

> I don't think one is exempt from the political implications of
> one's dress simply because an outfit looks good and is
> affordable. An author can reasonably claim that his or her
> work is free of dubious intention, but what an author claims
> and what we see in the author's work are often two different
> things. I think the same thing applies to dress: the attire of
> empire is never free of meaning, even if we wish it to be.
> (Nevins 2010)

While adding that he doubted anyone in the community was sincerely pro-
empire, Nevins concluded that some steampunks seemed "too quick to
ignore the symbolism and historical meaning and context of their attire and
behaviours" (Nevins 2010). What we see in this exchange, I suggest, might
be described as a Birmingham school-style form of subcultural
interpretation going head to head with a roughly post-subculturalist one, the
debate and stakes being generated from *within* the participant scene itself
rather than emanating exclusively from the academy. The simultaneous co-

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existence of these positions within the community should act as a caution to those who seek holistic accounts of the ideology of post-punk subcultures.

It is not only on self-selecting niche forums like 'Steampunk-Scholars' that we can find this level of attention to the ideology of Victorian style. Elsewhere across the steampunk community, participants express similar anxieties about the politics of costume signification, although offering sometimes substantially different responses to the problem than those suggested by Stross. For Stross, the solution to apolitical steampunk is to make it *more* referential, to include, albeit via creative analogy and metaphor, further signposts to historically-exploited subjects like Victorian child labourers or indigenous peoples. But can one ever be sure that direct allusions to these identities within a non-realist genre will be understood as social critique rather than as exploitive trivialisation? To some steampunks, the potential consequences of such a misreading are too great to risk. What is required is another strategy entirely, one which may initially seem like a recourse to superficial escapism but is in fact the very opposite. I refer to an ethically-charged refusal of familiar historical (period) reference. In this context, anti-referentialism is embraced not to deny the realities of nineteenth-century imperial exploitation, but rather as a respectful tribute to its victims. Steampunk blogger 'OnceUpon' (Marianne Kirby) sums the case up as follows:

> The only thing that makes me feel OKAY about steampunk politically speaking is that it isn't period – otherwise, I would be freaking out even MORE about Orientalism and colonialism and slavery and subjugation […]. [T]hat stuff is all very problematic and under-addressed in steampunk as it is. If it were meant to be period, I think I'd be even more unhappy. (OnceUpon 2010)

In steampunk visual culture, she suggests, over-faithful renderings of imperial regalia are irredeemably tainted, liable to be read as tacit sanctions of, or at least expressions of tolerance for, colonial eurocentrism regardless of the intentions of individual wearers or the virtuosity of the costume construction. When it becomes impossible to manage such a set of highly-charged visual motifs in order to communicate a refusal of their traditional

ideological affiliations – if indeed it ever does – then the references themselves have to go.

Of course, ethical concerns are not the only or even most common reason why the majority of steampunks reject period authenticity in their costuming. Others are aesthetic, pragmatic, or economic. Founder of the annual SteamCon gathering in Seattle, American steampunk Diana Vick is famous for the mantra that "Steampunk needs historical accuracy like a dirigible needs a goldfish" (Vick 2010). Cited in the FAQ section of the SteamCon website, the phrase is intended to reassure would-be attendees that they need not invest copious amounts of time and money in creating a replica costume. "One can get away with some amount of historical anachronism in steampunk", she counsels, "after all it is altered history. And some of us have time machines" (Vick 2010).

Read collectively, Vick's and Kirby's comments indicate the ideological flexibility of steampunk anti-mimeticism, which may signal nothing more than a form of liberating expedience – individuals might not look conventionally or recognisably 'Victorian' because they cannot access or identify the requisite accessories – or, alternatively, a critique and rejection of particular Victorian identities that it refuses to represent. The task for steampunks in the latter position is to find a way of communicating this dissent-in-absence without being taken for escapists who have no concern for the history of the period that they visually reference. Native American steampunk Monique Poirier provides an excellent model for this kind of intervention in a guest contribution to *Beyond Victoriana*, a ground-breaking postcolonial steampunk blog created by Diana M. Pho and dedicated to exploring "steampunk outside of a Western-dominant, Eurocentric framework" (Pho 2010). Poirier, one of a growing number of steampunks of non-European descent uneasy with the subculture's sartorial representations of empire, decided in 2010 to create a new visual persona that fused her ethnic and steampunk identities without deferring to nineteenth-century visual stereotypes of American indigenous peoples.[16] Any straightforward adoption of traditional dress, she points out, especially when worn in front of the predominantly non-Native American audiences who attend steampunk conventions, might have simply reinforced the exoticism she was trying to thwart. She explains:

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> Making a deliberate choice to construct my Steampunk attire
> around Native attire often involves deciding between which
> pieces are appropriate and which will be recognized by a
> wide audience as being Native. It means working with and
> against images of what Indians look like – and it becomes
> extra difficult when I have to work against the fact that
> Native Americans are already assumed in the popular
> consciousness to be anachronistic. Am I subverting
> Victoriana-centric Steampunk with my Native attire, or am I
> just reinforcing the stereotype that Native folks all dress like
> it's 1899 all the time because that's when they stopped
> existing? (Poirier 2010)

As Poirier makes clear, the stakes of performative anachronism will always
be unequal for different constituencies within a period-based subculture;
groups already perceived as, and subsequently marginalised for, being
outside of modernity may not find the evocation of past styles to be an
automatically empowering experience. But this representational challenge
need not be dissuasive. Her compelling and deft solution was to devise a
retro-futurist Native American Air Marshall persona, one that eschews
buckskin and copious feathers to instead imagine what American
indigenous people might look like now if they had successfully used their
own traditional technologies to oust European colonisers in the nineteenth
century.[17] In this splendid instance of *détournement*, Poirier rejects
verisimilitude in favour of a postcolonial aesthetic, creating a space for
Native American culture in steampunk because of its techno-sophistication
rather than its perceived anti-modern temporality.

It is a sign of the resulting costume's innovation that its meanings
and motivations have not always proved easily legible to the mixed
steampunk audiences Poirier has encountered while wearing it. "It's pretty
grating", she admits ruefully,

> to be at a convention and have someone comment 'If you're
> trying to look like a Native American, you should
> incorporate more feathers,' because I do not understand
> where that question comes from. How do you know that an

Indian is an Indian if they're not in the Hollywood Dress Code for Indians? (Poirier 2010)

This question points to a particularly exciting potential in steampunk visual culture: the ability, not just to quote, celebrate, rework, or send up Victorian dress styles, but also to challenge our most basic assumptions about how such identities are knowable. Beyond the admirable goal of promoting inclusion within their community – one that virtually all steampunks share[18] – subculturalists can also use their visual and material practices to ask fundamental questions about the Victorian referents regularly spoofed and commemorated in the popular mass media. What *does* a Native American, whether a nineteenth, twenty-first, or for that matter, twenty-third century one, 'look like'? What, for that matter, does an Anglo-British Victorian? How do we know? Steffen Hantke has stated that the primary concern of steampunk fiction is ontology rather than epistemology (Hantke 1999: 248), but it seems to me that the same cannot be said of its visual and material subcultures. It is precisely on questions of epistemology, on how we establish, frame, and fix the period visual tropes rendered up for appropriation, that some of the most intriguing forms of steampunk subcultural practice are based.

3.   Conclusion: For Future Reference

This analysis has demonstrated that the dramatically different interpellations of the Victorian past in steampunk practice – as pure aesthetic surface or as determinative historical context – can accommodate a diversity of polemic ideological positions. As such, the subculture complicates rather than evidences Fredric Jameson's well-known diagnosis of postmodern cultural production as a primarily superficial and depthless phenomenon (Jameson 2003: 9). The various invocations of Victoriana that take place in Anglo-American steampunk can neither be deemed historically superficial in their entirety nor, for that matter, neutral, reduced to the status of Jameson's notion of blank parody (Jameson 1991: 17). Were either of these the case, the vociferous and often highly intransigent debates about the politics of representation that this article has traced simply would not exist. Our examination has also given us reason to challenge David Muggleton's suggestion that the presence of ideological contradiction within contemporary subcultures has been over-stated, and perhaps even created,

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by "outsiders" who are incapable of recognising their internal coherence (Muggleton 2000: 127). The presence, intensity and, I would add, fruitfulness of oppositional debate within steampunk micro-media about the relevance of political identification and historical memory is no mere academic projection. On the contrary, it constitutes an increasingly central part of the community's subcultural identity.

The approaches towards historical referentiality and political remediation diverge not only across the spectrum of Anglo-American steampunk, but also within the works of specific performers and artists. London-based steampunk band The Men That Will Not Be Blamed for Nothing offer an excellent example of this kind of fascinating internal dialectic. At first glance, they seem to epitomise the apolitical tendencies that Sarah Thornton has associated with contemporary taste-based club cultures. The band's name and that of their record label (Leather Apron) clearly reference the 1888 Whitechapel Jack the Ripper serial murders,[19] but seemingly more in the spirit of levying the case's subcultural capital and providing a ghoulish, comic *frisson* to fans than for the purpose of commenting on the economic and social conditions that continue to make impoverished women vulnerable to sexual violence. The title of their first record, *Now That's What I Call Steampunk!* (2010), is similarly tongue-in-cheek, sending up the famous greatest-hits compilation series *Now That's What I Call Music!* (1983-present) distributed by the international four-label syndicate of Polygram, EMI, Sony, and Virgin. The Men's album is positioned in this respect as everything that the top 40 collection is not; where the major labels aim to market music that is widely accessible and hence lucrative, the band released a limited edition of the album that included a single-track, wax-cylinder recording, playable only on phonograph. In the true spirit of steampunk DIY, and as functioning period phonographs are not readily or cheaply available on the electronics market today, purchasers were provided with instructions on how they could build their own at minimal cost. If, as Sarah Thornton has argued, the value of subcultural capital is dependent on its restriction to those 'in the know' and its sometimes physical inaccessibility to the wider consuming public (Thornton 1995: 161), it would be hard to imagine a better example of such tendencies than this. Deliberate anachronism provides an incomparable means of limiting and controlling public access to a unique aesthetic.

Nonetheless, given the conventional recording methods used on the rest of the album, and The Men's subsequent appearance on a BBC 1 technology show to demonstrate their phonographic recording technique, it would be seriously misguided to accuse them of wanting to thwart the mainstream media and wider audiences. It would be equally naïve to view their admittedly ambivalent references to the Whitechapel murders as proof of a lack of ideological engagement with the nineteenth-century past. On the contrary, although the songs on *Now That's What I Call Steampunk!* range widely in tone and source, several perform explicit critiques of the social and political heritage arising from Victorian era. The most devastating of these, the hardcore 'Blood Red', makes ironic allusion to the traditional pink used on colonial-era maps to designate British territory.[20] Its lyrics present Victorian empire as a starkly rapacious, dehumanising, and violently racist endeavour whose horrors can best be represented through the aggressive chord progressions and shouted vocal style of thrash metal.[21] These sentiments are exemplified with particular force in the song's third verse:

> Ignorant bullies
> our arrogant birthright
> for glory and Empire
> to trample the Globe [...]
> [W]e'll drain it
> for profit
> abandon it
> exhausted [...] enslaving
> deporting / abusing
> exploiting
> for glory and Empire
> we trample the Globe. (The Men 2010)

The tenor and intensity here is worlds away from the kitschy humour and comic hyperbole applied to other Victorian touchstones elsewhere on the album (cf. 'Etiquette', 'Victorian Grindcore', and 'A Traditional Victorian Gentleman's Boasting Song'). The existence of this dynamic ideological range across a single output should sound a cautionary note to both steampunk practitioners and academic observers who seek to corral the

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subculture within either an exclusively taste-based or politically oppositional interpretation.

This caveat, rather than impeding sub-cultural and literary investigations of steampunk, should animate those same inquiries. If the subculture is not to be approached as an ideologically monolithic or disinvested enterprise, then we might examine specifically situated steampunk practices in relation both to each other and to more widely-known manifestations of realist neo-Victorianism, such as the heritage film and the historical novel. We might also begin to rethink some of our assumptions about how ideological critique and historiographic reflection is or might be incorporated into subcultural aesthetics. In doing so, we can deepen our understanding of the inter-relational aspects of steampunk practice, while recognising in its visual and material cultures the same complexity and polemic charge long associated with more recognised and high cultural forms of neo-Victorian creativity.

Notes

1. Although this dating of steampunk's origins is conventional, it is not uncontroversial. At the 2009 Steampunk Asylum Convivial in Lincoln, steampunk author Robert Rankin explained that he had been dressing in his characteristically eclectic Victorian style, one only recently labelled 'steampunk', since the 1960s, well before the birth of the literary genre in Michael Moorcock's *The War Lord of the Air* (1971). The trajectory of origin between steampunk as a literary genre and as a subculture remains, I suggest, more complex than we have hitherto realised, and is worthy of further investigation.
2. Derived from Japanese subcultural practice, this term refers to the act of dressing up, performing and attending fan gatherings in costumes based on characters from anime, video games, comic books, and fiction. In the case of

steampunk, cosplayers typically invent their own eclectic personas, often by quoting a series of popular archetypes, rather than simply imitating a trademarked figure (see Diana Vick's – aka Artvixn's – 'Dressing Steampunk: How to Get Started' 2011).

3. For examples of this strand of Steampunk activism, see the writings of Professor Calamity and the Catastraphone Orchestra, and Margaret Killjoy and Colin Foran's *A Steampunk's Guide to the Apocalypse* (2007). Calamity was arrested in 2009 for tweeting police positions during the G20 summit in Pittsburgh. Charges were later dropped.

4. Examples of the post-subcultural challenge to the Birmingham-school sociology epitomised in Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979) include Thornton (1995), Gelder (1997), and Muggleton and Weinzerl (2003).

5. Until the 2008 publication of Rebecca Onion's article on steampunk subculture, the (few) academic publications on the topic concerned themselves primarily with steampunk as a literary genre rather than a lived practice. The 2010 special issue on Steampunk that appeared in this journal, guest-edited by Rachel Bowser and Brian Croxall, inaugurates a new attention to steampunk's material and subcultural dimensions which will hopefully bear more fruit.

6. Self-declared steampunk bands include The Men That Will Not Be Blamed For Nothing, Vernian Process, Abney Park, Doctor Steel, and Sunday Driver.

7. See, for example, David Muggleton's *Inside Subculture: The Postmodern Meaning of Style*, which suggests that "perhaps subcultures are just another form of de-politicized play in the postmodern pleasuredome, where emphasis is placed on the surface qualities of the spectacle at the expense of underlying ideologies" (Muggleton 2003: 49). Other accounts of the largely apolitical nature of some, or even all, modern subcultures include Hodkinson (2002) and Marchart (2003).

8. For more on these specific ideological appropriations of the Victorian era, see Simon Joyce's *The Victorians in the Rearview Mirror* (2007), Cora Kaplan's *Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticism* (2007), and Imelda Whelehan's 'The New Angels in the House? Feminists as New Victorians' (2009).

9. I base my characterisation of post-subcultural identity here on that of David Muggleton and Rupert Weinzerl. While not denying that post-subcultures can have some (micro-)political dimensions, they conclude "the potential for style itself to resist appears largely lost, with any 'intrinsically' subversive quality to subcultures exposed as an illusion" (Muggleton & Weinzerl 2003: 4-5).

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10. For examples of the varied levels of deference to period authenticity in steampunk costuming, readers should consult the open access images from the 2009 Steampunk Asylum Flickr website, located at: http://www.flickr.com/photos/35843458@N08/sets/72157622244473161/.

11. Adam Roberts has proposed that the relationship between early science fiction and pro-imperialist sentiment was an intrinsic and symbiotic one: "we can argue that science fiction as a distinctive genre comes to cultural prominence in the Age of Empires precisely because it is a necessary part of the official ideology of empire-forming that difference needs to flattened, or even eradicated. SF, in other words, figures as the expression of the subconscious aspect of this official ideology" (Roberts 2006: 49).

12. Nevin's assessment is, admittedly, somewhat undone by its placement. The collected stories that follow in the VanderMeers' anthology testify abundantly to the continued presence of political critique and dystopic anti-romanticism in contemporary steampunk writing. Ted Chiang's 'Seventy-Two Letters' (2000) is particularly notable here. Set in a fiercely class-stratified Victorian future in which Kabbalah has replaced computing as the primary information technology, it follows the efforts of radical nomenclator Robert Stratton to create an automatous engine that will liberate the poor from mindless, back-breaking work. At the same time, he must fend off the manoeuvres of a menacing scientific elite, who seek to use his inventions to eugenically restrict the breeding of the underclass. The question that arises after reading the story is not *if* it retains first-generation steampunk's political edge, but rather how it would be possible to read Chiang's second-generation story in any other way.

13. I use the term 'supposed' here as this anti-alienation argument has always struck me as the weakest and most dubious aspect of steampunk techno-philosophy. It is unclear to me why a historical population with significantly lower literacy rates than today's should be nonetheless presumed to have had a greater understanding of new technologies; nor, for that matter, am I persuaded that the demonstrable proximity to technology experienced by many members of the Victorian proletariat – in the shape of factory labour, often started in childhood – can accurately or ethically be described as empowering. Given the frequency with which Apple products and iPods are targeted in steampunk political writing, it seems to me that the real techno-alienation which many steampunks – accurately or inaccurately – lament owes more to the 1980s than the end of Victoria's reign.

14. 'Steam-scholars' is an on-line discussion group formed by Lisa Hager (University of Wisconsin-Waukesha) in 2010. To follow the original archived

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discussion, readers should first subscribe to Google-groups and then search http://groups.google.com/group/steam-scholars/topics.

15. For a discussion of the differential political stakes of particular steampunk accessories and styles, see Jaymee Goh's blog post 'Steampunk Abstractions: The Inevitability of Imperialism' (2010) and its subsequent responses.

16. See also 'Shimmies and Sprockets: Analyzing the Use of Belly Dance in Steampunk', 'The Semantics of Words and the Antics of Fashion: Addressing "Victorientalism"', and 'Native Steampunk with Michael RedTurtle: A Personal Essay', all on the *Beyond Victoriana* website, see http://beyondvictoriana.com/.

17. Photos of this costume accompany Poirier's article on the *Beyond Victoriana* site. See http://beyondvictoriana.com/2010/11/21/beyond-victoriana-50-overcoming-the-noble-savage-and-the-sexy-squaw-native-steampunk-monique-poirier/.

18. A good example of the subculture's inclusionist and egalitarian mandate can be found in the promotional documents for the annual UK Steampunk Convivial run by the Victorian Steampunk Society (VSS). On the 'Just What Is Steampunk?' page, attached to group's main website, they write: "Steampunks try to take some of the very best parts of the past and make them part of a bright future. We value good manners and polite conduct and try to encourage this by setting an example for others [...]. Whilst things are set in a pseudo-historical world which harks back to our Victorian heritage we do not promote any of the inequalities of the past. Indeed, ours is deliberately an all-inclusive community. You will find steampunks of all ages, genders, and ethnic backgrounds. We also come from all walks of life from students to academics and from comedians to solicitors" (Tinker 2011).

19. Leather Apron was the name of an early suspect in the Ripper investigation, and the band's name reproduces the mysterious message discovered on a wall in nearby Goulston on the same night that Jack the Ripper victim Catherine Eddowes was found murdered.

20. And perhaps also to the 1990 Slayer song of the same name, released on the *Seasons of the Abyss* album.

21. Full lyrics can be found on the notes section of the band's Facebook page: http://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=281418145383.

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