Democratising the Past to Improve the Future: An Interview with Steampunk Godfather Paul Di Filippo

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Abstract:
Critically acclaimed science fiction author Paul Di Filippo is regularly recognised as a founding figure in the neo-Victorian aesthetic movement known as steampunk. Indeed, his 1995 short story collection, *The Steampunk Trilogy*, has been credited with giving this movement its name. In the following interview Di Filippo shares his thoughts on the evolution of steampunk as an artistic phenomenon. He also considers this relatively new mode of storytelling in relation to the history of science fiction as well as Victorian literature and culture.

Keywords: alternate history, cyberpunk, Paul Di Filippo, naturalism, realism, ribofunk, science fiction, steampunk, Jules Verne, H.G. Wells.

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Paul Di Filippo is an American science fiction author and essayist whose work appears in diverse venues, including *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, *Nature*, and *The Washington Post.* Since his publishing debut in the mid-1980s, Di Filippo has written hundreds of critically acclaimed short stories, many of which are collected in *The Steampunk Trilogy* (1995), *Ribofunk* (1996), *Lost Pages* (1998), *Babylon Sisters* (2002), *Neutrino Drag* (2004), and *Harsh Oases* (2009). While best known for his short fiction, Di Filippo has also written a number of novels, including *Ciphers* (1997), *Joe's Liver* (2000), *A Mouthful of Tongues* (2002), *Spondulix* (2004), and *Cosmocopia* (with Jim Woodring, 2008), as well as graphical stories such as *Top 10: Beyond the Farthest Precinct* (2005) and *Doc Sampson* (2006).

Critics universally praise Di Filippo for cutting-edge fiction that blends disparate narrative elements in shocking – and shockingly funny – ways. This is particularly evident in his groundbreaking *Steampunk Trilogy*, where Di Filippo uses the toolkit of speculative literature to imagine an alternate high-tech nineteenth century, featuring British royalty cloned from newts and American poets who journey to the end of time and space. Immediately recognised as classic within the science fiction community, *The Steampunk Trilogy* is now considered a cornerstone of steampunk

culture in general. Di Filippo talks about his take on steampunk and its relation to other literary and cultural trends in the following interview, which was conducted by email in the winter and spring of 2009.

LISA YASZEK: Last year *New York Times* journalist Ruth La Ferla wrote an article naming you as one of the godfathers of what she calls "steampunk culture" – indeed, she even cited your *Steampunk Trilogy* as providing this culture with its name (La Ferla 2008). So what exactly is steampunk to you?

PAUL DI FILIPPO: I adore steampunk fiction. I'm not so much into the materials aspects of the genre: clothes or artefacts. But I love history, and the Victorian era in particular, so I'm happy to endorse anything that promotes interest in it. At the same time, I can't pretend to be Mr. Steampunk. In the end, the mode is simply one of the imaginative subgenres into which I choose to dip my toe from time to time.

At its best, steampunk fiction promotes understanding of the roots of our current global scene, and offers lateral insights as to how we could improve retroactively on some of the choices we made, all unknowing, in the path of technological development.[1]

LISA YASZEK: You're also closely associated with cyberpunk, a science fiction subgenre that arose in the 1980s and that explored the effects of personal computing and related information technologies on society.[2] How do you think about the relation of steampunk to cyberpunk?

PAUL DI FILIPPO: Cyberpunk defined and illustrated a methodology – most famously embodied by Bill Gibson's statement "The street finds its own uses for things" – which could be fruitfully applied to all other eras, and the fiction set therein. By removing technology from the exclusive hands of scientists and researchers and autocrats, it democratised the narratives, whether set in the future or the past.

LISA YASZEK: In the mid-1990s – about the same time cyberpunk was giving way to steampunk – you coined the phrase 'ribofunk' for another series of stories. Can you explain the significance of ribofunk in relation to steampunk and cyberpunk?

PAUL DI FILIPPO: Although some cyberpunk focused on the potential of the biological sciences, it was always more about hardware/software than 'wetware'. I wanted to move the spotlight to bioengineering and a 'soft' future, one also not quite so dour and cynical as the 'punk' suffix implied.[3] Hence my choice of 'funk' to indicate a more earthy, hearty, life-affirming tone. And I suppose my story 'Victoria' is a bit of past-looking ribofunk, dealing as it does with biological engineering of a nineteenth-century sort.[4]

LISA YASZEK: Steampunk stories are generally set in the Victorian era. What is it about this particular era of history that makes it so attractive to artists like you?

PAUL DI FILIPPO: It's the beginning of our modern era, so its relevance remains keen. But it's also the start of a highly documented culture, thanks to photography, sound recording, early movies, and institutional/ governmental record-keeping en masse. The sheer volume of researchable material encourages us to voyage there!

I imagine if, say, Dynastic Egypt offered photos and sound recordings, we'd have a 'nilepunk' genre!

LISA YASZEK: Steampunk stories are essentially alternate histories. In the science fiction community, we call any moment in history when an action or decision generates an alternate reality a 'jonbar hinge'.[5] From your perspective, what are the key jonbar hinges in Victorian history and culture that enable the creation of alternate steampunk realities?

PAUL DI FILIPPO: Some steampunk can be invisibly inserted into the canon without triggering an alternate history splitting. My three stories in *The Steampunk Trilogy* might be read as previously undiscovered histories that don't flagrantly contradict the textbook versions of events. But you're right when you claim that the most radical imaginings produce alternate timelines.

It's hard to pick the most crucial jonbar hinges. Major battles could have gone different ways, producing different imperial hegemonies. Brilliant scientists could have made certain discoveries earlier or later. Assassinations or accidents could have claimed key persons. Aliens could have landed in Victoria's lap! The many-worlds interpretation of the

multiverse offers hinges at every waking moment, so it's up to the writer to pick the most salient ones for his or her story purposes.

LISA YASZEK: Now that we've talked a bit about steampunk in terms of Victorian history, let's talk about it in terms of Victorian literature. Science fiction historians in particular often trace the roots of modern science fiction back to Victorian authors including Jules Verne and H.G. Wells. How do you perceive the relationship between steampunk and Victorian science fiction?

PAUL DI FILIPPO: At its best, steampunk should honour those early creators by trying to channel their points of view. Adopting a Victorian perspective on the world will produce homages that are truly estranged from modernist takes on the world. Of course, there has to be a layer of twenty-first-century vision to such texts, or you'd just be reproducing antiques.

Curiously enough, it seems to me that just as the famed Victorian writer and craftsperson William Morris produced archetypically Victorian artefacts by channelling the medieval mindset, so we too can produce authentic postmodern works by channelling the Victorians!

LISA YASZEK: Steampunk also has an interesting relationship to those modes of realist fiction that first developed in the Victorian era. Can you talk a bit about how you perceive that? (I'm particularly interested in how these two types of literature represent history and/or engage scientific ideals, but please feel free to answer this question from whatever angle interests you most.)

PAUL DI FILIPPO: Naturalism in the Dickens/Thackery/Gissing/Zola manner was of course also born during this era, and its power for hosting great stories and creating memorable characters remains unequalled. So despite all the wacky weirdness available in steampunk, there needs to be a parallel anchor strain of mimesis. And as you imply, close observation and transcription of the phenomenological world is the basis of science, and some of that stringent accuracy should be employed in steampunk SF.

LISA YASZEK: Finally, science fiction authors like yourself have been exploring steampunk worlds for decades now, but mainstream popular (and,

I would add, mainstream academic) interest in steampunk is a much more recent phenomenon. Why do you think we're seeing this sudden explosion of interest in high-tech Victoriana?

PAUL DI FILIPPO: Well, there's always the factor of academia lagging somewhat behind the curve of pop culture early adopters! And the need to stake out fresh territory for papers! But aside from such teasing, I think that a couple of factors are involved. First, the steampunk fan culture and the literature itself reached a certain critical mass of creativity that inspired increased media coverage and awareness. Then, entering the twenty-first century naturally caused us to ponder a similar transition from nineteenth to twentieth century, and its relevance. Finally, the various global crises we have been experiencing have us asking if the grand experiment and way of life begun by the Victorians is doomed by its very nature to failure, or if it can be somehow improved, modified and rescued for future use.

Notes

1. Science fiction authors have incorporated steampunk elements into their writing for at least half a century, but scholars generally agree that this subgenre coalesced in the 1980s around K.W. Jeter's *Morlock Night* (1979), Tim Power's *The Anubis Gates* (1983), and James Blaylock's *Homunculus* (1986). In the 1990s, steampunk attracted widespread attention amongst science fiction fans with the publication of William Gibson and Bruce Sterling's *The Difference Engine* (1990) and Di Filippo's *The Steampunk Trilogy* (1995) and came to the attention of the general public with Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neill's *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* comic book series (1999). Today, readers can learn more about both historic and contemporary trends in this mode of storytelling from anthologies such as Nick Geevers' *Extraordinary Engines: The Definitive Steampunk Anthology* (2008) and Ann and Jeff VanderMeer's *Steampunk* (2008).
2. Often lauded as the premiere literature of transnational capitalism, cyberpunk is a stylish mode of near-future storytelling that explores the effects of computer and bionic technologies on individuals and entire societies in an information-saturated global culture. The term "cyberpunk" was coined by science fiction author Bruce Bethke in his 1983 story of the same name and immediately taken up by editor Gardner Dozois to describe much of the fiction he was publishing in *Isaac Asimov's SF Magazine* at that time. First

generation cyberpunk fiction includes William Gibson's celebrated 1984 novel *Neuromancer* and Bruce Sterling's 1986 *Mirrorshades* anthology. While early cyberpunk stories often explore how humans (and intelligent machines) might transcend the conditions of their existence as tools of a transnational capitalist economy, second generation cyberpunk novels – including Pat Cadigan's 1991 *Synners*, Neal Stephenson's 1992 *Snow Crash*, and Melissa Scott's 1994 *Trouble and Her Friends* – examine how people (and machines), who recognise the value of raced and gendered bodies within the abstract world of computation, might exchange the old dream of transcendence for the new one of material engagement, thereby transforming bad corporate futures into new and more egalitarian ones.

3. The term 'ribofunk' is unique to Di Filippo and is synonymous with what other members of the science fiction community often call 'biopunk'.
4. 'Victoria' is set in an alternate Victorian England where the young scientist Cosmo Cowperthwaite creates a docile but sexually ravenous copy of Queen Victoria by manipulating newt endocrines. When the real Queen Victoria suddenly disappears, Cowperthwaite's creation is chosen to stand in for her, while the scientist frantically searches for the real monarch and the queen's staff members frantically attempt to satisfy newt-Victoria's lusty appetites.
5. The concept of the jonbar hinge derives from SF author Jack Williamson's 1938 novella *The Legion of Time*, which explores how the actions of one person might determine the course of human history. Here, history diverges when a young man named John Barr does – or does not – pick up an object from the ground. In one timeline, Barr becomes an important scientist whose research transforms Earth into a utopia; in another one, Barr dies penniless and his research is carried out by less ethical individuals, whose actions ultimately destroy humanity.

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