NOTE

"God Save the Queen, for Someone Must!":
Sebastian O and the Steampunk Aesthetic

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Abstract:
Published in 1993, *Sebastian O* was one of the first steampunk comics published. However, Grant Morrison and Steve Yeowell's contribution to the formation of steampunk, specifically their role in creating the first steampunk comic, is frequently overlooked. *Sebastian O* helped define the recognisable characteristics of neo-Victorian steampunk. By focusing on the works of Victorian decadents such as Oscar Wilde, *Sebastian O* reconsiders the Victorian literary legacy in light of contemporary social attitudes. Additionally, *Sebastian O* provides an opportunity for critical reflection on canonical works of decadence and aestheticism.

Keywords: aestheticism, comics, decadence, graphic novel, Grant Morrison, *Sebastian O*, steampunk, Oscar Wilde, Steve Yeowell

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Two years before Paul Di Filippo would popularise the term 'steampunk' by using it in the title of his *Steampunk Trilogy* (1995), writer Grant Morrison and artist Steve Yeowell collaborated on a comic series that lasted only three issues. In those three issues, the pair crafted a distinctive visual and literary style that established the template for the deluge of steampunk and neo-Victorian comics and graphic novels published during the following two decades.[1] *Sebastian O* (1993) was the first comic to reflect the salient characteristics of the steampunk movement, not only by offering detailed visual imaginings of the hybrid world of steampunk Victoriana, but also by refracting Victorian decadence through the lens of contemporary popular culture. Sadly, *Sebastian O* was a fleeting phenomenon, but the comic's influence on the shaping of the generic conventions of steampunk was significant; it is therefore curious that with the recent critical attention focused on steampunk, nothing has been written about this milestone in the genre's history. I will attempt to redress that critical neglect by highlighting the qualities of *Sebastian O* that epitomise the steampunk aesthetic.

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In his introductory essay to Ann and Jeff VanderMeer's anthology of steampunk fiction, Jess Nevins contends that the enduring allure of steampunk is its hybridity: its ability to evocatively resurrect "the surface elements of the Victorians, the trappings and the visual style" while infusing those visual elements with "commentary on contemporary issues" (Nevins 2008: 6). Similarly, David Punter suggests that graphic novels function as a "hybridizing [of] existent forms" (Punter and Byron 2007: 71). Thus, steampunk's inherent hybridity, its emphasis on grafting existing literature onto new narrative structures, makes it particularly suitable for treatment in the form of graphic novels.

Nevins argues that "steampunk's first generation culminated with [William] Gibson and [Bruce] Sterling's *Difference Engine*" (1990), which Nevins identifies as "still the finest example of the genre yet written" (Nevins 2008: 3). But Nevins's claim that steampunk climaxed with the publication of *The Difference Engine* seems curiously myopic, given the growth steampunk literature has undergone in the past two decades. After all, one of the defining characteristics of the steampunk genre is its mutability, its capacity to adapt to new literary forms. One of those new forms are those of the comic book and graphic novel with *Sebastian O* first appearing in 1993.[2] Comics and graphic novels allowed steampunk to move from a strictly literary form to a format that reflects our increasingly visually-oriented culture; if, as Nevins contends, steampunk is defined by its rebellion "against the [value] systems it portrays," these visual formats epitomise the steampunk aesthetic (Nevins 2008: 10). Not only does steampunk rebel against the Victorian era by criticising Victorian attitudes about issues such as sex and class, but steampunk comics also rebel against the dominant mode of canonical Victorian realism by elevating the role of the visual over the linguistic.

The plot of *Sebastian O* involves a complicated political conspiracy that echoes the trial of Oscar Wilde; indeed, Wilde's works and personality provide the comic's dominant motifs. The title of the first issue, 'The Yellow Book', functions as a hermeneutical clue, indicating that *Sebastian O* will rely heavily on tongue-in-cheek re-readings of Victorian decadent literature. The second issue, even more tellingly, is entitled 'Against Nature', a reference to the 1884 J.-K. Huysmans novel that plays a pivotal role in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). At the outset of the first issue, Sebastian O is convicted by a high court on charges of gross

indecency; his membership in a Uranian circle known as the Club Paradis Artificiel has ended in scandal and disgrace. He has been accused of being "mad, immoral, a sexual pervert" on the basis of his association with the Club and his authorship of a book of "unmentionable poems" entitled "Breakfast with Beelzebub" (Morrison and Yeowell 2004: 67). However, Sebastian correctly guesses that his trial was merely a sham, and he later discovers that he has been framed by the political establishment as part of a government plot involving other members of the Club. Here the authors of *Sebastian O* create an alternative history by rewriting the tragedy of Wilde; the scandal of the century becomes a political conspiracy, and its victim is redeemed as a martyr not only to hypocritical public morality but also to political corruption.

Sebastian O himself is the quintessential ephebian, a cross between the androgynous heartthrobs of the early nineties, such as Leonardo DiCaprio, and Wilde's paramour Lord Alfred Douglas. He is tall, slim, and blonde, and sports the popular nineties 'bowl' haircut. At the same time, Sebastian is patterned on the Victorian dandy. He eschews the sober black frock coat in favour of pale pastel blue and chartreuse green. Intriguingly, Sebastian always wears a yellow rose in his buttonhole. Perhaps a green carnation would have been too obvious a reference to Wilde's inner circle. But the yellow rose is stamped in the defining colour of the decadent movement, recalling both the *Yellow Book* and Wilde's own 'Symphony in Yellow' (1889).

The last decades have seen a resurgence of interest in Wilde, and the appearance of *Sebastian O* coincided with the birth of New Queer Cinema, which was committed to "echoing and reiterating the responsibilities of resuscitating history" (De Angelis 2004: 49). Two of the most successful independent films in the genre, *Wilde* (1997, dir. Gilbert) and *Velvet Goldmine* (1998, dir. Haynes), focus on revisiting and re-evaluating the legacy of Oscar Wilde. *Velvet Goldmine* identifies Wilde as the inspiration behind the 1970s glam rock movement, and *Wilde* offers a sympathetic portrait of Oscar Wilde as a martyr for what would eventually become the gay rights movement. Both films identify Wilde as a formative influence within contemporary gay culture. It is not at all surprising that *Sebastian O* was published at the same moment historically. Indeed, Michaela Sakamoto argues that steampunk "retains the traditions of romanticism and addresses contemporary social issues" (Sakamoto 2009: 124). Other neo-Victorian

genres have grappled with the legacy of Wilde – for example, Peter Ackroyd's metafictional *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* (1983) and Gyles Brandreth's Oscar Wilde Mysteries series (2007-2010), which reinvents Wilde in the guise of a detective, the defender rather than victim of 'justice'. But *Sebastian O* is bolder and more socially aware: Grant and Yeowell use steampunk's capacity to revise and "resuscitate history" in order to create the first queer steampunk superhero, Sebastian O, who dodges bullets and jumps speeding trains, fights evil and intolerance, all the while spouting arch witticisms and relishing nips of laudanum at the end of his exhausting day.

Following his conviction for gross indecency, Sebastian O is imprisoned but subsequently escapes. Once he is on the lam, Sebastian O's first social call is to the Abbé, a former member of the Club Paradis Artificiel and a convicted (and perhaps not entirely reformed) pederast. The Abbé lives as a recluse in a country house surrounded by artificial gardens composed entirely of mechanical flowers; he retains a small army of boys in loincloths to wind the clockwork flowers daily. The Abbé and his garden fulfil the decadent quest for total artificiality by replacing nature with technology.

As Valerie Steele and Jennifer Park explain, steampunk is "an aesthetic technical movement with anarchic undertones, linking Punk's aggressive do-it-yourself ethic with an evocation […] of absinth addicts [and] dandies" (Steele and Park 2008: 76). In its rewriting and reimaging the Victorian era, steampunk draws heavily on the literature of Victorian decadence and aestheticism. The Abbé asserts that nature is merely "dreadful rot and decay and procreation"; his mechanical garden "is much more tidy" (Morrison and Yeowell 2004: 43). The deeper implication is that the Abbé's exemption from the cycle of heteronormative procreation is more efficient than, and therefore preferable to, the prevalent sexual orthodoxy.

The final instalment of *Sebastian O* features a plot twist that epitomises the steampunk sensibility: in a climactic confrontation with his archenemy, Sebastian O discovers that Queen Victoria herself has been assassinated and replaced by a mechanical replica, whose image can be broadcast on the ubiquitous handheld audio-visual devices found throughout the series. Queen Victoria, one of history's most recognisable icons, has been usurped by a machine. Paradoxically, however, the Queen was

instantly recognisable in the first place because her image had been mechanically mass-produced. Thus, Queen Victoria is always already a replica, a pictorial representation mass-produced by Victorian technology.[3] However, Morrison and Yeowell place Queen Victoria at a double-remove from reality by imposing an additional layer of mechanical reproduction between the person and her simulacrum. According to Jean Baudrillard's notion of the hyperreal, simulacra become real in their own right once they have become impossible to distinguish from reality (Baudrillard 1995: 113). In *Sebastian O*, the broadcast image of Victoria is accepted as an authentic representation of Queen Victoria; thus the simulacrum becomes impossible to distinguish from the real Victoria herself, therefore making it irrelevant that a machine has taken her place. This represents the triumph of the decadent vision; the artificial has completely replaced the natural, to the point where the two are no longer distinguishable from each other. However, the storyline ends precisely at this point, and the implications for steampunk and Sebastian O remain unclear. Will Sebastian O, the arch-decadent, swear fealty to a mechanical monarch? Or will he epitomise the 'punk' in steampunk by rebelling against the establishment, however natural or unnatural that establishment may be?

Steffen Hantke contends that steampunk relies on its ability to communicate a sense of the real "by means of specific historical detail…and by the introduction of fantastic technologies that might not have existed a hundred years ago" (Hantke 1999: 247). He additionally argues that "steampunk is primarily concerned with foregrounding the fictionality of its narrative universe" (Hantke 1999: 247). Hantke observes that steampunk's success as a literary form relies to some degree on its ability to incorporate actual historical figures or incidents into a contemporary narrative framework. Thus, one could argue that the historical personages or literary characters appearing in steampunk form a hermeneutic chain, an intertexuality that links one work to another. For example, Di Filippo's *Steampunk Trilogy* also features a disappearing Queen Victoria; in Di Filippo's case, the Queen is replaced with an amphibian creature. Similarly, *Sebastian O*'s emphasis on the period of the 1890s and its homage to Victorian decadence are echoed in Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neill's *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, the first volume of which was published in 1999. The members of the League include Mina Harker and Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde, both of whom are drawn directly from the pages of

late-period Victorian Gothic fiction. Additionally, the 2003 film adaptation of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* featured Wilde's character Dorian Gray, another indication that the ensemble of motifs assembled in *Sebastian O* served as a template for further revisions and adaptations in the steampunk genre.

In the years following the publication of *Sebastian O*, a gradual shift occurred in Victorian Studies. Increasingly, scholarly work analysing Victorian literature has concerned itself with the way in which present-day writers craft alternative visions of the Victorian era. As Julie Sanders notes in her critical essay on Victorian adaptations, one of the reasons contemporary literature returns again and again to the scene of the nineteenth century "for characters, plotlines, generic conventions, and narrative idiom and style" is because the Victorian era itself was animated by a spirit of hybridity, a "lively interaction and cross-fertilization between the high and low arts" (Sanders 1996: 121). Here Sanders specifically refers to modernity's penchant for drawing from the middle period of the Victorian era. However, her general observation that the dualism of Victorian art makes the period a particularly fertile source for contemporary adaptations is equally pertinent in considerations of *Sebastian O* and other steampunk works that resurrect and reconfigure the 1890s. Indeed, this spirit of Victorian dualism is readily apparent in the steampunk idiom, which combines the 'high' literature of the nineteenth century with the popular literature of the twentieth and twenty-first.

Sebastian O occupies a unique space in the history of steampunk and epitomises the genre's inherent duality. The work engages with canonical literature of the Victorian era, refashioning and reimagining aestheticism and decadence; simultaneously, as a comic, *Sebastian O* posits itself as popular reading with broad appeal. Emblazoned across the back cover of the collected series is the tagline "God save the Queen … for somebody must!" (original ellipses). This tagline conveniently encapsulates the essence of the steampunk aesthetic, which in part is about the blending of historical details and contemporary trends.

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Notes

1. Editors' note: Throughout this issue of *Neo-Victorian Studies*, we have advised our contributors to use the term 'comics' when referring to objects that were originally published episodically, and 'graphic novel' when referring to something that was originally published as a whole. This distinction may not accurately represent how a reader encounters the text at present; for example, while *Sebastian O* was originally released in three issues, most readers will now read it in its bound, graphic novel form. Yet we find the distinction useful because it preserves an indication of their original form of distribution. Our thanks to Jason Jones in helping us articulate this distinction.
2. Though the three issues of *Sebastian O* were republished collectively as a single graphic novel in 2004, they were originally released in 1993 as separate monthly instalments.
3. Walter Benjamin contends that mass-produced art is without aura and therefore without authenticity. See Benjamin's 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'.

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