

Reengineering Modernity: Cinematic Detritus and the Steampunk Blockbuster

Robbie McAllister

(Leeds Trinity University, England, UK)

Abstract:

This article focuses on a wave of contemporary films that envision neo-Victorian pasts, presents, and futures where historical progress is reordered by the anachronistic presence of steampunk- machinery. As the inventors of steampunk fiction scavenge their worlds for the mechanical debris needed to construct their patchwork machines, the genre's films similarly restructure pop-cultural icons of modernity: reengineering textual and mechanical histories for contemporary purposes. I consider how steampunk's mainstream emergence coincides with dramatic shifts in cinema's own industrial identity and has been used to mythologise the technological fears and fetishisms of twenty-first-century progress.

Keywords: blockbuster, cinema, Hollywood, modernity, neo-Victorian, steampunk, technology.

The word steampunk was first coined in the April 1987 edition of the science-fiction magazine *Locus*. Writing to the editor, author K. W. Jeter playfully designated himself (alongside fellow writers Tim Powers and James Blaylock) as propagators of a literary trend: creators of science-fantasy fictions that utilise historically-disjointed nineteenth-century technologies and settings (Jeter 1987: 57). Yet, the term steampunk has developed far beyond its literary origins, gaining mainstream acceptance, affiliation with a variety of media, and a status as one of the most widely discussed 'new' aesthetic styles and subcultures to have emerged in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. What unites steampunk across various media is its retro-futuristic vision of Victorian life where industrial progress has careened wildly off its historical track, transformed by anachronistic machinery.¹ Through the movement's "unexpected intrusion of the modern into the historical" (van Riper 2013: 255), steampunk has developed a particularly notable presence within contemporary cinema,

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11:1 (2018)

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often reflected by a “genre-slipperiness” (Bell 2009: 5), which sees period landscapes take on science fiction conventions. I argue that this historical conflation extends to the genre’s representations of modernity’s progress. Beginning by positioning steampunk films within the contexts of period modernity, I continue by noting the many aspects of the genre’s seemingly postmodern characteristics; ultimately, however, I conclude with an exploration of steampunk cinema as an exemplar of the complexities that surround the division of civilization’s development into seemingly distinct eras.

1. Relocating Space and Time: Adventures in Modernity

Rather than wholly reiterating its Victorian referents, steampunk is a movement that is defined by its distortion of history. From steam-powered jet-packs created by fictional inventors to cloning technologies supposedly crafted by Nikola Tesla (as depicted respectively in Katsuhiro Otomo’s *Steamboy* [2004] and Christopher Nolan’s *The Prestige* [2006]), numerous films claim steampunk identities by subverting the historical accuracy of Victorian progress. The anachronistic nature of such machines and technologies act as spectacular centrepieces of their films’ action and narrative, cueing their audiences into the playful and ahistorical nature of their neo-Victorian settings. Despite the movement’s seemingly literary origins as a science fictional sub-genre, Maria Mellins and Bridgid Cherry argue that it is steampunk’s striking aesthetic characteristics that have allowed it to be “translated easily into other media such as film, television, comic books and video games”, defined by their revisionist reimagining of a “Victorian-themed – and thus often steampowered – world” (Cherry and Mellins 2012: 6). With reference to the film industry, steampunk’s rise to prominence in the last years of the twentieth century afforded major studios a method of packaging highly digitised productions through the nostalgic sensibilities common to much of genre cinema. Steampunk’s neo-Victorian visions of both period elegance and science fictional wizardry would play a major role in shaping the blockbuster aesthetic of the new millennium.

As one of the first in a wave of contemporary steampunk movies to court mainstream attention, Barry Sonnenfeld’s *Wild Wild West* (1999) exemplifies many conventions that are now typical to the genre. Distributed and financed by a major studio (Warner Bros. in this case), the film was met with lack-lustre critical response, failed to kick-start a franchise, and is now

perhaps most memorable for the irreverent way in which it married its Weird Western setting with the flourishes of neo-Victorian science fiction. Set in 1869, the villain's use of a monstrous mechanical spider-fortress is countered by the protagonists' own litany of spring-loaded gadgets, a steam train and nitro-glycerine-powered glider, transforming the frontier of nineteenth-century America into an anachronistic series of elaborate (and largely computer-generated) action sequences.

Yet, although steampunk's presence within cinema is often described as little more than an aesthetic skin appropriated from a subculture and literary movement, the genre's proliferation within mainstream cinema is also indicative of millennial responses – both industrial and cultural – to a great number of ideological concerns surrounding the passage of modernity. As well as its aesthetic characteristics, *Wild Wild West*'s narrative highlights how steampunk's technological brand of neo-Victorianism has acted as such a popular point of reference for audiences and filmmakers at the turn of a century. Mythologising the seeming birth of a nation, *Wild Wild West* offers a technocratic reimagining of the USA's post-Civil War unification. Setting his plan into action, the villainous Dr Arliss Loveless uses his mechanical fortress to kidnap Ulysses S. Grant as he officiates at the 'golden spike' ceremony at Promontory point: an act that disrupts the joining of both the Central Pacific and Union Pacific railroads. Kidnapping the greatest scientific minds that the nineteenth century has to offer, Loveless uses his newly acquired weaponry to rain down hellfire upon the nation and segregate the country's newly unified states amongst his Confederate and European financiers. Grant's attempt to hammer in the last stake of the railroads represents not only an ongoing urbanisation and conquest of the American frontier, but also acts as figurative stitching between the states that Loveless desires to tear apart. As a steampunk Western, *Wild Wild West* represents a period of historical and technological change that celebrates contemporary American identity (and its perceived righteousness) in a way typical to the millennial blockbuster.

To see steampunk representations of neo-Victorian industry being told from a different cultural perspective, we can turn to Steven Fung's *Tai Chi Zero* (2011), a Chinese martial arts film that applies its assortment of incredible (and equally absurd) technologies to similar purpose. Rather than romanticising the arrival of the steam engine and its transcontinental

implications, *Tai Chi Zero* uses a colossal rail-laying machine as its central threat. This mechanical juggernaut is used by British colonists to eradicate a peaceful Chinese community that falls in its path, relentlessly opening up the cultural and technological borders that the indigenous population attempts to preserve. Alongside many of the genre's exemplars, both *Wild Wild West* and *Tai Chi Zero*'s interest in neo-Victorian technologies place its icons of modernity in sharp relief, using them to foreground the mechanical standardisation of time and geography established by both the expansion of rail travel and the arrival of the telegram. Many of steampunk cinema's more fantastical devices are used to literalise the "annihilation of space and time" that modern advances seem to have brought about (Harvey 2003: 47). *The Prestige*, for example, subverts its period identity by introducing a matter-replication machine that duplicates and transports its user through space, in much the same way that the eponymous time machine of H. G. Wells's invention (depicted in both 1960 and 2002 adaptations) flings its Victorian protagonist into the distant future.²

Through its aesthetic and narrative fixation on alternative depictions of nineteenth-century progress, steampunk cinema presents itself as a means to reassess and blur the boundaries that lie between present, past, and future; "it is a verb, it is a style, it is a philosophy [...]. It is an intent as much as it is the result", writes Kimberley Burk of the movement's highly anachronistic identity (Burk 2010: 7). The genre's irreverent mapping of twenty-first century advances onto an era of late-nineteenth-century industry reflects the *fin-de-siècle* concerns that are common to both. By foregrounding acts of intercontinental travel and invasion via rail, sky, and sea, the incredible airships, submarines, and ambulatory castles that populate the steampunk genre fit the needs of blockbuster spectacle, but also draw upon cultural responses to globalisation and the ongoing destabilisation of national boundaries and identities that such technologies have enabled. Writing in 1998, Linda Hutcheon observes these concerns as "commonplace", arguing that the end of the nineteenth century has become an analogue for anxieties that accompany those of the late-twentieth (Hutcheon 1998: 205) – the very same period of steampunk's development.

However, despite possessing a distinct and unmistakably neo-Victorian aesthetic, steampunk's references stretch beyond the nineteenth century. The atavistic technologies featured in Alex Proyas's *Dark City* (1998), Shane Acker's *9* (2009) and Glenn Standring's *Perfect Creature*

(2006), are used to create miasmic, timeless, (and, in these instances, post-apocalyptic) landscapes that are impossible to assign temporally to either past or present. Conflating an age of scientific advancement and rationalism into one toy box of mixed historical sources, steampunk's neo-Victorian construction 'bookends' its references from the conclusion of the Reformation and Renaissance up until the effects of post-World War II globalisation and electronic consumerism that ushered in a seemingly 'post'-modern age in the mid-twentieth century. Yet, despite drawing its symbols of industrial revolution and innovation from a vast variety of genres and time periods, steampunk nevertheless retains its recognisability. As a tendency that conflates far-reaching representations of modernity and the long-nineteenth century into its own amorphous and retro-futuristic identity, steampunk's vision of Victoriana is one without strict historical or geographical borders.

The movement's successful proliferation throughout the film industry reminds us of cinema's own role in reshaping how urban audiences experience the 'modern' world around them. It is no coincidence that the popularisation of steampunk's retro-fetishisms coincided with (and was enabled through) the medium's increasing digitisation. The rapid proliferation of steampunk within genre cinema draws attention to the extraordinary degree with which filmic technologies have informed our understanding of history and modernity itself: "the modern world almost seems to have begun with the birth of film", writes Michael Chanan, "at any rate in retrospect" (Chanan 1980: 16). With the availability of photographic technologies, historical events from the late-nineteenth century onwards are afforded a presence that is denied to previous historical periods. The digital convergence of our culture has made the presence of history more keenly felt than ever: with little of either our contemporary data or the shadows of past generations being lost to time. From celluloid to hard-drive, steampunk's proliferation within cinema has allowed a great number of intensely digitally constructed blockbusters to reminisce paradoxically for the gear and girder machinery that defined its medium's own invention. Specifically acting as memorials to cinema's heritage (and its persistence), two contemporary steampunk features – Stéphane Berla and Mathias Malzieu's *Jack and the Cuckoo-Clock Heart* (2013) and Martin Scorsese's *Hugo* (2011) – cast one of the medium's most celebrated figures, Georges Méliès, as a central character, using steampunk's patchwork aesthetic of

automata and cog-works to reinvent the distinctive mechanical innovations for which he was known.³ Both films celebrate filmic technologies old and new, drawing associations with many of cinema's most iconic representations of modernity and steampunk's own sense of spectacle. *Hugo*, for example, directly draws on photographic memories of both the 1895 Montparnasse derailment and the Lumière Brothers' *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* (1895) to restate the popular recollection of audiences recoiling in terror at an industrial juggernaut heading headlong into their path. Utilising new advances in 3D technologies, *Hugo* reflects both steampunk and cinema's shared role in presenting the wonders and horrors of industrialisation. As a "fabulous apparatus [that] magically traverses time and space [...] as all steampunk fantasies should do" (Tibbetts 2013: 139), filmic technologies take on the properties of a window through which the audience can be transported (or perhaps invaded) by mechanical spectacle: an apt fit for both a medium and genre that are rooted in their relationship to modern progress.

2. Gears and Girders as Postmodern Fantasy

To discuss how steampunk cinema orders (and disorders) representations of Victorian and contemporary progress, the qualities of modernity's passage and potential abandonment – in addition to its birth – must simultaneously be considered. Just as Charles Baudelaire described modernity as being "transitory", "fugitive", and "contingent" (Baudelaire 2004: 40), steampunk's historical and technological referents can be used to consider the hugely contended status of modernity's 'end' and 'post'-modernity's beginnings. Typifying many concerns of postmodern entertainment, steampunk cinema belongs to a filmmaking tradition where historical validation and empirical certainty are restructured through an ironic, reiterative, and parodic nature. Through the effects-laden theatrics of Simon Wells's *The Time Machine* (2002), Frank Coraci's *Around the World in 80 Days* (2004), Guy Ritchie's *Sherlock Holmes* (2009) and Paul McGuigan's *Victor Frankenstein* (2015), the steampunk genre has defined its twenty-first-century identity primarily through the reconstruction of many hallmarks of Victorian fiction. These productions act as direct descendants of 'post-classical' traditions within cinema themselves, drawn through the self-reflectivity of the action-adventure films, B-features and serials that have dominated New-Hollywood practices up until the present day. The

exemplars of steampunk cinema are highly adaptive texts that build upon multiple layers of intermedia and intertextual relations. Whether through the likes of Holmes, Frankenstein, Fogg, or Van Helsing, steampunk's adapted literary heroes find themselves recast as action-adventurers that draw upon and engage with their own performers' identities. For example, both Jackie Chan and Steve Coogan's star presence dramatically alters the narrative of *Around the World in 80 Days* through an emphasis on martial arts and both actors' comedic personae. Chan's role as the valet Passepartout draws on the audience's understanding of this mimicry, as the character is reinvented as a Chinese imposter named Lau Xing pretending to be a Frenchman for his own ends. Whether through *Tai Chi Zero's* quite literal signposting of celebrity cameos, or the broader parodical sensibilities that give *Sherlock Holmes* and its sequel an air of pastiche, the steampunk genre does little to mask its construction, recasting its fictional histories as alternatives, falsities, and often explicit lies. As texts that flout historical credibility through their anachronistic tendencies, they might (most alarmingly) be considered as definitive examples of Fredric Jameson's warnings of a postmodern perpetuation of – what he termed – “the enfeeblement of historicity in our own time” (Jameson 1990: 130).

However, rather than deriding steampunk's ahistorical representations of the Victorians and their associations, it may be more useful to consider how the genre's postmodern attributes actively encourage us to rise to the challenge of engagement with a past that often seems as amorphous as it does contentious. Steampunk's millennial development can be positioned in synchronicity with a range of Hollywood productions that present destabilised views of historical truth and certainty that are informed by technological insecurities.⁴ To consider these ideas in relation to steampunk's own brand of neo-Victorianism, I turn to Terry Gilliam's film *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus* (2009). Gilliam's patchwork animations and live-action fantasies act as the perfect showcase for steampunk's own anachronistic pleasures. From the time-travel escapades of *Time Bandits* (1981) to the ontological disorientation of *Brazil* (1985), his auteured identity is marked by texts that treat both past and present visions of modernity as unstable constructs. Acting as an extension of Gilliam's more direct contributions to the steampunk genre (as producer of the animated short *1884: Yesterday's Future*, currently in production, and director of *The Brothers Grimm* [2005]), *The Imaginarium of Doctor*

Parnassus engages explicitly with a vision of modernity that is defined by its ironic and satirical reconstruction of Victorian pageantry.

Set in the twenty-first century, Doctor Parnassus' eponymous 'imaginarium' is a travelling theatre that is nevertheless unquestionably tethered to the past: a mechanical construction of steampunk bric-a-brac that is able to create literal nostalgic dreamscapes for its patrons to explore. Although the components of this 'theatre' are decidedly antiquated in nature – a product of physical cogs, pistons, and pulleys – the landscapes that it conjures are far more phantasmal and reflective of postmodern inauthenticity: wildly unstable collages of fragmented dreams, desires, fears, and memories. For Gilliam's own audience, they are constructed from computer-generated imagery, and for Parnassus' patrons, they act as nebulous manifestations of their amoral fantasies. Rather than positioned as 'original' or 'authentic' experiences, these performances are framed through a stage that resembles a Victorian toy theatre. Whether recognised as digital constructions or products of the nineteenth-century card-craft that Parnassus' theatre emulates, these imagined pasts are presented as highly unstable environments. For example, the dramatic threat in the final act sees the imaginarium's visions collapse and tear apart, as blue-screen backdrops similarly fragment and shatter into nothingness.

Steampunk's penchant for aesthetics that seem temporally boundless and detached from historical credibility reacts to – and propagates – cinema's own dissemination of historical nostalgias that are digital composites: subsisting on allusion, revival, and hybridity. Populist steampunk blockbusters such as Steven Sommers's *Van Helsing* (2004), Kerry Conran's *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow* (2004), and Steven Norrington's *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (2003) are not just direct adaptations of literary sources, but audiovisual composites that stitch together a litany of cultural referents drawn from a number of years and various media. Drawing explicitly upon the imaginations of authors such as Mary Shelley and Bram Stoker, for example, *Van Helsing* makes little attempt to directly rework a single narrative; instead, the film blends together characters from a wide variety of Victorian fictions, as well as the numerous adaptations that have underscored the film industry's own history throughout the twentieth century. In both the steampunk and postmodern imaginations, there are seemingly no 'new' texts, only those that have been constructed from the remnants of history. The genre's particular brand of

science fiction also offers a unique opportunity to consider Jameson's claims that postmodern retro-futurism articulates our "incapacity to imagine the future": the result of a seemingly "impoverished" imagination that underlines an insistent need to turn to the past – only able to reiterate, never create (Jameson 1982: 153).

With regard to another of the genre's key texts, Ann Heilmann describes *The Prestige's* fantastically anachronistic matter-replicator (and neo-Victorianism in general) as "an apt metaphor for film [...] which plays with our desire to rediscover and possess the 'original' and 'authentic' by offering us a hall of mirrors full of copy" (Heilmann 2009: 25). This reading is an appropriate fit for many of the alternative histories posited within the steampunk genre, literalised in *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus's* depiction of postmodern culture's seemingly inauthentic qualities. The steampunk design of Parnassus's anachronistic theatre stands utterly opposed to the corporate world of shopping centres and skyscrapers that surrounds it. Focused upon the value of the hand-worn and tangible craftsmanship of atavistic objects, the film's steampunk aesthetic acts as a rejection of a culture that is increasingly defined by disposable consumerism. As an immortal, Parnassus has witnessed society come to tire of the imaginarium's wonders, and frequently lambasts the creatively degenerative qualities of individuals who are no longer capable of invention or imagination. Drawing direct parallels between Parnassus's theatrics and Gilliam's own production methods, the film depicts a young boy who aimlessly wanders into the imaginarium, using his portable videogame console to 'zap' down and destroy the incredible anachronisms that surround him. A new wave of technological sensationalism is embraced: one that stands in stark opposition to the historical wonders and atavistic theatrics amongst which Parnassus (and Gilliam) are positioned.

Yet, whilst steampunk films undoubtedly fetishise more corporeal technologies and filmmaking practices, they simultaneously celebrate the ephemeral CGI sequences that are used to bring them to life. It is not a nostalgia for modernity's authenticity that the contemporary steampunk blockbuster depends upon, but a joy in playing, making, and 'punking' Victorian artefacts into new forms. The genre's 'cannibalising' of nineteenth-century history glories in a renewed sense of activity, creating digitised spectacles that bask in – rather than condemn – nostalgia's misremembered status. Parnassus's constructions bring his audiences

delight, Murdoch's fictional past acts as the foundation of his future, and action-adventures such as *Around the World in 80 Days* promote their fantastically impossible technologies as sensational attractions. By considering how steampunk's focus lies upon revisiting and reimagining a period of Victorian industrial upheaval, it may seem convincing that the movement acts as a means to 'sorting through' and fetishising the remnants of late modernity from the perspective of postmodern thinking.

Nonetheless, by blending Victorian history with contemporary advances and adapting so exhaustively from an ongoing history of genre fiction, steampunk encourages us to consider how much (or, indeed, how little) the 'modern' (or even postmodern) experience can be termed as a singularly linear affair. As Sally-Anne Huxtable notes with specific reference to steampunk, "tinkering with history is not a new thing. For centuries people have imagined or reimagined the past in order to re-form the present and shape the future" (Huxtable 2013: 228). Just as the Victorians used past Greek and Roman civilisations to reflect upon their own Empire, the out-of-time nature of steampunk's incredible machines offers correlations between our own millennial society and that of the nineteenth century. Whether through the sorts of wonder encapsulated by incredible flying machines, or the horrors inflicted by weapons that are capable of obliterating entire nations in a single blast (both of which are common to the genre), steampunk's mapping of modern advances onto historical settings reminds us that the concerns that define our contemporary identities possess vast histories that are ubiquitous to the human condition.⁵ Before concluding this article, I will contend that steampunk's presentation of the Victorians as users of incredible technologies does far more than memorialise a more 'pure' and 'authentic' age that can be hermetically segregated from our own era. Instead, I will consider how the genre draws comparisons between millennial advances and those that shaped the nineteenth century, signalling a direct continuation of a modern project that is far from being 'post'.

3. Industrial Renascence: A Return to Modernity

As a genre that seems utterly atavistic in nature, steampunk's mechanical and technological constructs are nevertheless more than acts of pure reiteration and memorialisation. Like its machines, steampunk texts may have been salvaged from the recycled refuse of previous generations, but are

brought together in unusual combinations to form new constructions. To demonstrate how steampunk's cultural prominence reflects the continued impact of modernity, one can turn to steampunk's dominant icon in popular culture: not the steam-engine, but clockwork. The gears and cogs that order the steampunk aesthetic are not only a means of reimagining bygone histories, but also act as representations of processes of mechanical standardisation that have continued well into the twenty-first century. Steampunk's cyborgs, for example, offer the movement numerous opportunities to depict human individuals who have had body parts replaced by technologies that are imitative of the mechanical workings of time pieces. Guillermo del Toro's *Hellboy* (2004), *Jack and the Cuckoo-Clock Heart*, *Steamboy*, and Ron Clements and John Musker's *Treasure Planet* (2002) are all genre texts that feature characters who have had their identities integrated with clockwork technologies through bodily transformation.

The physicality with which steampunk presents its clockwork gadgets is indicative of Mary Ann Doane's argument that "at the turn of the century time became palpable [...] felt – as a weight" (Doane 2009: 77). Extrapolated into the colossal gears of the genre's monstrous machines, steampunk's gigantic time-pieces reflect the literal threat of society's mechanisation and the individual's place within it. A number of the genre's final confrontations take place in threateningly mechanised settings: for example, in Guillermo del Toro's *Hellboy II: The Golden Army* (2008), the protagonist rides and rolls amongst enormous cogs as he duels his enemy, while *Wild Wild West*'s James West similarly marks his heroic last stand within the belly of a mechanical leviathan. Such sequences echo a number of archetypal memories of cinematic modernity; the iconic status of films such as Fred C. Newmeyer and Sam Taylor's *Safety Last!* (1923), Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), and Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936) reminds us of the continued role that film has played in mythologising the pressures of modernity through narratives that see characters become entwined or enveloped within clockwork constructions. At first glance, these sorts of pop-cultural reflections on modernity's metronomic control over an individual's life seem overwhelming oppressive. As Ben Singer writes, "observers in the decades around the turn of the century were fixated on the idea that modernity had brought about a radical increase in nervous stimulation and bodily peril" (Singer 1995: 74). However, despite

foregrounding the threat of modernity (nearly all of the dangers in steampunk narratives are represented by mad-scientists and rampant technologies), the genre overwhelmingly offers a romanticised view of the interconnected relationship between man and machine in an urbanising world. The smoke-bellowing chimneys and oil-caked gears associated with both steampunk and modernity may be hazardous, but they offer seeming tangibility and authenticity in comparison to the ephemeral uncertainty of postmodern digitisation. Rebecca Onion argues that such fetishisms act as the hallmark of the wider steampunk movement, suggesting that “a desire to regain a human connection with the machine world underlies the work of steampunk practitioners [who] seek to restore coherence to a perceived ‘lost’ mechanical world” (Onion 2008: 138).

Steampunk films’ idolisation of modernity’s icons can be observed through the wealth of characters that are empowered rather than dehumanised via their positions amongst the gears of colossal clocks that act as their homes. In Brad Silberling’s *Lemony Snicket’s A Series of Unfortunate Events* (2004), the world’s mixed historical setting is envisioned by a writer (Snicket himself) who sits within an enormous clock, its face affording the window through which the author can observe the world beneath him. The grinding of the gears and ticking of the clock’s hands act as a metronomic accompaniment for the clacking of the keys on the writer’s similarly atavistic typewriter. Another immense timepiece acts as a cradle for the eponymous child-hero in *Hugo*. As with Snicket, Hugo resides within an enormous clock that also acts as an analogue for the mechanical processes of the narrative’s construction. Hugo’s setting allows him an opportunity to take stock of the Parisian metropolis that lies beneath: a postcard of modern romanticism that is further fetishised when he states that “I’d imagine the whole world was one big machine [...] if the entire world was one big machine, I couldn’t be an extra part. I had to be here for some reason” (Scorsese 2011: 1:20:09-1:20:20). Hugo takes pride in his role within the whirring components of societal technologies and expresses his own virtue via an ability to fix its components and keep its gears in motion.

Dark City makes similar use of its steampunk symbolism, depicting what Tim Blackmore defines as a “world machine” as the centre of its metropolitan landscape: “a huge clock, hidden behind a classical Greek mask” (Blackmore 2004: 27). Despite being used by the villains to control and subordinate their captive human populace, this immense timepiece

nevertheless becomes used for heroic purpose. When absorbing the machine's ability to reform and reorganise the city's skyline, the film's protagonist becomes the living embodiment of post-human modernity: an ascension as clockwork messiah that sees his arms mirror both a crucifix and clock-hands. The steampunk hero's propensity to absorb (and seize control of) machines reflects both cinema and modernity's propensity to consider time as an entity that can be managed, standardised and potentially reordered. Unlike comparative fantasy texts where heroes may emerge from humble rural origins, steampunk adventurers almost unilaterally occupy sprawling cities and industrial landscapes. Rendered through the trappings of modernity – smog-laden skies and factory-lined streets – the genre finds itself at the heart of what Neil Gerlach and Sheryl Hamilton argue is a millennial tendency of “rethinking the metropolis in both popular culture and social theory [...] reconsidering urban squalor as a site of productivity as well as oppression” (Gerlach and Hamilton 2004: 115). As depicted within texts such as *Steamboy*, *Dark City*, and *Perfect Creature*, steampunk's cities are depicted as places of terrible class segregation, yet are arenas of wonder and beauty nevertheless. The opulence of the imperial airships and skyscraper-fortresses may be the dwelling of antagonists, but the value of their magnificence is without question. The same might be said of the cities' lower levels, where cobbled streets and subterranean tunnels are defined by refuse, cacophonous noise, and ceaseless movement, but still harbour intense fascination.

As an early example of the developing genre, Marc Caro and Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *The City of Lost Children* (1995) encompasses many of steampunk's metropolitan visions of urban modernity. Life on the streets is hard and ruthless, yet is also a hive of sensation that houses the oppressed, freakish and orphaned. Like the plot of the similarly titled *Dark City*, *The City of Lost Children*'s narrative focuses on a frightening (pseudo-Gothic) metropolis that blends together numerous historical aesthetics into a single conflated representation of city life. Its youthful protagonists have been discarded and forgotten by the adults who occupy positions of power and authority, and whilst their lives may lack the cleanliness of a pastoral nostalgia, their playfulness and industriousness sees the concrete jungle become a beloved playground nevertheless. It is a darkly romanticised view of urban life that is common to the wider steampunk genre, founded in the dichotomies typical of neo-Victorian modernity, where responses of both

wonder and horror find themselves entwined. Such an interest in emphasising the moral complexity of modernity mirrors Charles Baudelaire's own interest in discussing the sublime nature of urban existence: "the life of our city is rich in poetic and marvellous subjects", he wrote in 1845; "we are enveloped and steeped as though in an atmosphere of the marvellous" (Baudelaire 1982: 18). The metropolitan namesakes of *Dark City* and *The City of Lost Children* may be fictitious constructions, but it is appropriate that steampunk so often finds itself set within Paris, a location that Svetlana Boym notes has frequently been defined as "a capital of ambivalent modernity that embraces the impurities of modern life" (Boym 2001: 23). As a geographical centrepiece in steampunk films such as *Hugo*, Christophe Gans's *Brotherhood of the Wolf* (2001), Paul W. S. Anderson's *The Three Musketeers* (2011), Luc Besson's *The Extraordinary Adventures of Adèle Blanc-Sec* (2010), *Jack and the Cuckoo-Clock Heart*, *Around the World in 80 Days*, Guy Ritchie's *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows* (2011), and *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, Paris (and especially the Eiffel Tower) has become a significant icon through which modern life is channelled and ultimately celebrated by the genre.⁶

Ironically, given its appeal to the craft-orientated politics of anti-modernism, steampunk romanticises modernity even in its most apocalyptic forms. *City of Lost Children*, *Perfect Creature*, *Dark City*, Gil Kenan's *City of Ember* (2008), and *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus* all use their steampunk characteristics to depict urban environments as wastelands: devoid of natural foliage or light, littered instead with the refuse of materialistic production and scrap-metal. Yet, one of the most intriguing projects of the genre is to find value within this vision of junk-yard modernity, where the city's detritus provides the materials required for steampunk 'making'. This sense of design is particularly prominent in many of the films aforementioned, but also within *9*, an animated feature set in a post-apocalyptic city that is populated entirely by clockwork automatons. On the surface, the film's narrative seems thoroughly anti-modern in nature, as its protagonists deride the violence of humanity's technological warfare and greed. As in both *Dark City* and *City of Ember*, the heroes' journey culminates in a rekindled relationship with nature that leads to modernity's redemption and 'cleansing' with water and natural light. However, *9*'s steampunk identity complicates this seeming divide between natural purity and modern refuse. As mechanical creatures themselves, the puppet-like

protagonists of 9 are scavengers, builders, and engineers for whom modernity's wreckage acts as a treasure trove of discarded parts. Scrap-yard ingenuity affords worth and value to objects that might otherwise be cast away by the 'disposable' nature of postmodernity. The aesthetic appeal of steampunk cinema is exacerbated by its 'cobbled together' production design, where sets become sprawling warrens constructed from forgotten objects. Industrial expansion and scientific innovation may have led to disaster in 9, yet the resulting wasteland is bountiful, and affords numerous opportunities for the mechanical protagonists to continue production and bring about the world's salvation.⁷

The same could be said of Graham Annable and Anthony Stacchi's *Boxtrolls* (2014), another steampunk film that depicts non-human beings who create a subterranean wonderland of neo-Victorian garbage. Set at an indeterminate point in the nineteenth century, the steampunk genre's cacophonous set-design is suitably paired with the film's stop-motion construction to depict the habitat of the trolls and the Dickensian vagabond that they adopt. Appropriately, this refuse is used to create a home that features a makeshift clockwork edifice stood at its centre. Similarly, the aptly named Baudelaire children in *Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events* also act as exemplars of steampunk *bricolage*. Positioned within an alternative history of late-modern referents, the young siblings' origins are also defined through their interaction with a world reduced to rubble. One of the film's first scenes depicts them picking through the ash of their family home, yet the macabre tragedy of their lives is tempered by their skill in reorganising the surrounding detritus into objects that will prove essential for their survival. The technological ingenuity of Violet Baudelaire, wearing a costume that is heavily reminiscent of a Victorian mourning dress, is foregrounded by the film's narrator: "In a world of abandoned items and disregarded materials, Violet knew there was always something" (Silberling 2004: 02:40-02:47).

Steampunk cinema's veneration of *bricolage* is indebted to the maker culture that helped to foster its proliferation, and also the manner with which the film industry itself adapts and restructures the styles and texts that make up its history. Compiling numerous periods of modern development into neo-Victorian spaces that defy geographical and temporal logic, the steampunk genre delineates our notion of past and present through both nostalgic and ironic perspectives, making it increasingly difficult to

categorise modern ‘progress’ by temporal boundaries. As Jean-François Lyotard states, “neither modernity nor so-called postmodernity can be identified and defined as clearly circumscribed historical entities” (Lyotard 1991: 25). To consider how steampunk reflects upon a more cumulative representation of modernity (and indeed, postmodernity), I will conclude this article by querying how the genre affords perspectives of history that are set apart from the expected traditions of linear timekeeping.

4. Conclusions: Steampunk and Off-Modernism

Steampunk’s ongoing engagement with modernity relies on a dichotomy that is fundamental to the identities of both the genre and movement: the instability with which the present immediately passes, and the past is made re-present. Steampunk’s retro-futuristic qualities demand that it constructs its texts from this detritus: a reflection of twenty-first-century anxieties cast through the industrial smog of a previous era. I have considered steampunk from two distinct perspectives, the first being a postmodern commodification of history, and the second, a means of reclaiming the vestiges of modernity. Yet, the worlds depicted in steampunk films might best be defined as parallel, or alternative modernities: worlds that engage with past, present, and future as simultaneous events. As David Pike asserts, the continued ability of the genre’s neo-Victorian cityscapes to frame contemporary thought “levelled a reproach at the modernist narrative of progress and gave the lie to postmodernist claims for the end of history” (Pike 2016: 8). Reminding us that the only means of excavating the present is to play active operations on the data and detritus that the past has left us with, steampunk’s representations of delineated history recall T. S. Eliot’s statement that:

The historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. (Eliot 1919: 55)

Eliot's poetic statement rings true of both steampunk and film's paradoxical relationship to the past that is carried not only as a burden or facsimile, but as a tool with which futures are forged. As counter-culture and blockbuster, steampunk acts as a testament to this, as the Victorian era is modified and utilised for contemporary purpose. The genre's pop-cultural mythologisation of historical 'accumulation' might also be considered a means to readdress visions of modernity observed by Walter Benjamin when referring to Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus* (1920). Benjamin's description of modernity – as “a catastrophe which piles wreckage upon wreckage” rather than “a chain of events” (Benjamin 1969: 257) – may not tout optimism, but is powerful and thought-provoking nevertheless. His statement also aids an understanding of how film's own relationship to modernity might best be evaluated: as an industrial art form that mechanically preserves and produces much of the cultural data that we use to make sense of our pasts. It is my assertion that steampunk's seemingly low-cultural theatrics belie the significance of its relationship to the technology of film itself.

Rather than acting as an exclusively modern or postmodern movement, steampunk cinema engages with industrial histories through both romantic sincerity and knowing irony in equal measure. The “oscillation between a typically modern commitment and a markedly postmodern detachment” that has been associated with “metamodernism” (Vermeulen and van der Akker 2015: 309) affords a useful challenge to received notions of modernity's passage; it is amongst these debates that I believe an examination of steampunk becomes most valuable. Boym's definition of 'off-modernism' affords an equally useful method of considering steampunk's particularly delineated representations of history. Writing that off-modernism emphasises an exploration of “side shadows and back alleys rather than the straight road of progress” (Boym 2001: xvii), Boym's term signposts the complexity with which the steampunk genre imagines modern realms that are defined by the coalescence of pasts, presents, and futures.

As a final example of the genre's significance to these debates, we can turn to Brad Bird's *Tomorrowland* (2015), a production that depends upon a retro-futuristic depiction of modernity that is neither past nor present, but alternative and 'othered'. Set within a twenty-first century teetering on the brink of countless ecological and social disasters,

Tomorrowland asks its audience to remember the science fictional visions of a bygone age to regain a sense of control over the future. Suggesting that late-twentieth and early-twenty-first-century civilisations have forgotten how to look forwards, the film embodies Jameson's fears of a society incapable of originality. As the characters set forth on their quest to 'relearn' how to engage with the future in a way that only our predecessors seemed able to do, they travel to Paris – the capital of modernity itself – and enter an apartment hidden within the Eiffel Tower: a location that was once used to entertain the scientific elite. It is here that the film supposes that the tower's 'real' purpose was to act as a launching station for a nineteenth-century rocket-ship created by Thomas Edison, Nikola Tesla, Gustave Eiffel, and Jules Verne. Definitively steampunk in design, this neo-Victorian spaceship and its controls are archaic, but nevertheless offer the only means of transportation into a world of tomorrow that is overlain upon our own. Steampunk becomes the language of the 'lost' project of modernity and an essential aesthetic for a conglomerate industry (in this case, Walt Disney Pictures adapting their own theme-park attractions) attempting to package its own mechanical history into an ideology of awe and wonder. For it is cinema, as a steampunk technology, that acts as *Tommorrowland's* analogy for the nineteenth-century Parisian rocket-ship. For Disney, the price of the future (and past) is that of an admission ticket to its fairground ride extravaganza.

As a medium that is becoming increasingly digitised, steampunk's emergence has both cultural and corporate value that goes beyond its visual sensationalism. The rising availability of digital production methods, alongside increasingly intertextual modes of media consumption have afforded twenty-first-century audiences unprecedented access to the cultural data accrued by history. Much like the Victorian telegraph itself, the immediacy of these technologies (of which cinema is one) increasingly erodes the boundaries that lie between past and present. Like steampunk's simultaneously technophilic and technophobic responses to industrial spectacle, modernity's intrinsic method of keeping the past present is both empowering to contemporary users and viewers and a potentially imposing force: tantamount to an overwhelming wave of historical referents. Steampunk's anachronistic jumble of historical machinery reflects both the pleasures and fears that can be derived from reconciling the 'presence' of

Victorian modernity, and also the technological means with which it is archived and organised.

Notes

1. Steampunk does not draw exclusively from representations of Victorian progress to create its fantastical settings. As Mike Perschon writes, “steampunk is less concerned with recreating the past than an idea of the past, a nostalgic romanticism of what the Victorian era represents, rather than how it actually was” (Perschon 2010: 142). This interest in historical displacement has resulted in the creation of a genre that often draws from a much wider range of periods than might first be assumed.
2. The dissemination of steampunk throughout a number of cultural perspectives (examples I consider here include France, the USA, China and Japan, among others) exemplifies the important role that global representations of Victoriana have played in a number of national film industries.
3. It is worth remembering that, as well as pioneering a great number of cinematic special effects through the manipulation of cinematography, production design and editing, Méliès’s experience as a skilled toymaker, costume designer and illusionist allowed him to experiment with all manner of devices, from magic lanterns to automata and marionettes.
4. Christopher Nolan noted *Dark City* as inspiration for 2010’s *Inception*, discussing a wave of turn-of-the-millennium films that were “based in the principles that the world around you might not be real” (Nolan qtd. in Boucher 2010: n.p.).
5. David Baron asserts that contemporary concerns about technology’s ‘inauthentic’ status can be traced through all of human history: from Plato’s assertion that written texts were shadows of their linguistic counterpart to Henry David Thoreau’s defamation of the speed of the telegraph (Baron 2009: x-xi).
6. See David Harvey’s *Paris, Capital of Modernity* (2003) and also accounts of the fierce contention that surrounded the erection of the Eiffel Tower, perceived as “a temple to modernizing technocracy”, according to Agnes Rocamora (Rocamora 2009: 155).
7. The title of Sally-Anne Huxtable’s 2013 article, ‘Love the Machine, Hate the Factory’ perfectly encapsulates the simultaneous romanticism and rejection of technological progress that is embedded in steampunk practices: dedicated to the empowerment of do-it-yourself design and personal methods of production.

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