

Annihilated Time, Smooth Surfaces, and Rough Edges in Steampunk and Schivelbusch's *The Railway Journey: A Departure Point*

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Instructive reading for every steampunk nimrod. It devours many a Gilded Age sacred cow, focusing on the psychology/aesthetics/architecture of the railroad rather than the concomitant environmental destruction. Very cerebral. ([Amazon customer review](#) of Wolfgang Schivelbusch's *The Railway Journey*)

It is difficult to imagine steampunk without the locomotive. When, in a 1987 letter to *Locus* magazine, K. W. Jeter jokingly proposed the neologism for the “Victorian fantasies [...] based on the appropriate technology of the era” that Tim Powers, James Blaylock, and he had been writing, the “steam” in the term almost certainly pointed to the steam engine (57). The steam engine is that most “appropriate technology” of the Victorian era, largely responsible for the industrialization of Europe. But when we think of the steam engine, we inevitably think of the technology that best exemplifies its use: the locomotive and the network of rails that it rode upon. The railway transformed life in the nineteenth century in countless ways: shifting locations of industry and the markets for goods; reconfiguring the landscape; and completely unsettling the experience of space and time. That sounds like a pretty good description of what steampunk does to the nineteenth century, and there is no better analysis of the cultural effect of the locomotive than Wolfgang Schivelbusch's *The Railway Journey*. While an anonymous *Amazon* reviewer believes Schivelbusch is “instructive reading for every steampunk nimrod,” there has to date been little or no discussion of this text within steampunk scholarship. Indeed, the railway itself and how it functions has largely been occluded in the study of a genre that would seem to depend so much upon it. This paper represents an initial effort to correct this trend.

I.

In our work prior to this point, we have been interested in the technologies of steampunk—both the technologies within steampunk objects and literature, and the by-gone technologies it invokes. As we noted in the special issue of *Neo-Victorian Studies* dedicated to steampunk, “the emphasis on technology within steampunk suggests that the genre’s popularity says something about our experiences of, unease with, and desires for technology in the present” (Bowser and Croxall 16). If the technology of the last two decades trends toward the invisible (e.g., Wi-Fi making wires disappear) and the inaccessible (e.g., smooth surfaces and sealed batteries of the iPhone), steampunk’s tech is markedly different: it is exposed, rough, dirty, and often monumental in size, as is the case with the traction-powered cities in Philip Reeve’s *Mortal Engines Quartet*. The heroes of steampunk narratives—whether novels, short stories, television series, films, comics, or cosplay backstories—are inevitably tinkerers who are engaged with modding and repairing the technology around them. In a sense, then, the interest in steampunk

that has been in the ascendant for the last decade can be read as an ameliorative to the “too smooth” or “too distant” of our contemporary technology (see also Onion). The appeal of the aforementioned “psychology/aesthetics/architecture” of the railway within steampunk is related to their dependence on these technologies that are, after all, exposed and visible for the tinkerer in all their roughness.

In this paper about steampunk, it strikes us as important to take a similar approach to our writing. Rather than capitulating to the smooth and flawless prose of a polished conference paper (something like the smoothness of the railway journey striking through the landscape) or to the clear and predictable throughlines of an argument (not unlike the rigorously standardized and predictable times of the railway timetable), this paper will expose the rough and unpolished nature of an argument that is in the process of becoming. We expect that this text, like the train and other steam-powered technologies, will be tinkered with by those around us—our fellow panelists and those who attend the panel. Our collaborative method of working on steampunk—as two scholars who putter about in the field and only when assisted and abetted by the other—increases the potential discomfort of such a methodology. In short, the argument is a bit bumpy in places, and we wouldn’t have it any other way.

II.

In *The Railway Journey*, Schivelbusch writes: “‘Annihilation of time and space’ was the *topos* which the early nineteenth century used to describe the new situation into which the railroad placed natural space after depriving it of its hitherto absolute powers. Motion was no longer dependent on the conditions of natural space, but on a mechanical power that created its own new spatiality” (10). Schivelbusch further details how the effect of the railway was to paradoxically and simultaneously shrink and expand one’s spatial universe via a reconfiguration of the timelines between locations—the decreased travel time between spaces both collapsed their perceived distance from each other and expanded the reach of one’s travel potential. The new temporal/spatial network, according to Schivelbusch, changes an individual’s experience of the landscape, alters her experience of time, and ushers in a new era of modernity that is attended by new modes of seeing (Schivelbusch writes about the panoramic experience of the landscape as seen via the train compartment, appearing as a long connected vista as if on a screen, and not as a space to be inhabited); new modes of leisure (as with the rise in cheap fiction produced for railway reading); and new modes of anxiety (called out most specifically by Schivelbusch in the form of “railway spine,” a complaint associated with the physical shocks and stresses incurred by railway accidents).

The connections between Schivelbusch’s analysis and the steampunk mode probably emerge for most enthusiasts as they read. Steampunk is certainly a genre, in its literary and material manifestations, that bends and revises space and time. We have, in fact, considered its ideas and tropes within the frameworks of temporal and spatial paradigms in our previous collaborations. In *Neo-Victorian Studies*, we wrote about steampunk’s resonance with the nineteenth-century geologic revolution instantiated by Charles Lyell, whose notions of uniformitarianism insisted on connecting throughlines between the earth’s vast history of epochs. Similarly steampunk emphasizes connections and continuations, finding the physical

compatibilities between the aesthetic signifiers of the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries, combining them to create steampunk objects, and the thematic and ideological connections between Victorian and futuristic cities, the features of which combine to form the setting of many steampunk novels. Elsewhere, we've considered more spatial paradigms, comparing Darwin's observations about the structural homologies that exist among species and connecting his nineteenth-century insights to the physical overlaps that populate the steampunk universe. These include the literal cross-breeds of Scott Westerfeld's *Leviathan*, engineered creatures whose structural features are combined to create new organisms (the eponymous Leviathan, a biological airship fabricated from whale and sundry other DNA strings, being the clearest example), and the modded objects of steampunk material culture, on which the imagined "inside" mechanical parts of an object are relocated to its "outside" surface, breaking down that spatial dichotomy and reconfiguring its relationships.

Steampunk is engaged, in other words, in the project of reconfiguring—and at times erasing—space and time within its fictional worlds and in the signification of its objects, and Schivelbusch's analysis of the nineteenth-century railway allows us a way in to combining those temporal and spatial revisions. The temporal and spatial distance between the twenty-first and nineteenth centuries—their objects, their cities, and their citizens—becomes vanishingly small at the annual Gaslight Gathering in San Diego. Those temporal and spatial distances may seem well-nigh annihilated to the residents of Oamaru, New Zealand, a small tourist town which has refashioned itself as the world's steampunk HQ.

Part of the appeal of Schivelbusch's analysis is its yoking of paradoxes connected to the railway. He positions the railway as both connective and destructive, as the phrase "annihilation of time and space," deployed within the context of a transportation technology would indicate. Schivelbusch additionally writes about the power of the railway to destroy "in-between space"—the small towns and locations that fill the landscape between urban centers, which would have been stopping points and throughways for those traveling via carriage, but which are sped around by those on trains, reduced to part of the panorama from the compartment's window:

...on the one hand, the railway opens up new spaces that were not as easily accessible before; on the other, it does so by destroying space, namely the space between points. That in-between space, or travel space, which it was possible to savor while using the slow, work-intensive eotechnical form of transport, disappears on the railroad. The railroad knows only points of departure and destination. (Schivelbusch 37-38)

One can, and indeed some have, leveled the same type of complaint at steampunk. It is surely a genre that aims for connection, the indicators of which we've briefly alluded to here. But it is often accused of flattening the differences between its twenty-first-century concept and its oft-romanticized nineteenth-century touchstones. Tom Easton describes steampunk as "a bit of a prettified cheat, for all that steampunk imagery is polished brass and wood and sexy leather, when anything to do with real steampower was marked by grease and soot [...]. Steampunk is retro. It's static and antiprogressive" (15-16). Writing in a special issue of *Locus* devoted to the genre, Michael Moorcock sees its becoming increasingly "escapist nostalgia" (34). Jess Nevins has written that even when steampunk evidences awareness about the atrocities inherent in its imperialist evocations, it "rarely offers a solution to the problems it decries" (9). Does the genre,

then, destroy the in-between centuries connecting the nineteenth to the twenty-first, thereby destroying the struggle for advancement and equality? In focusing on the connections between the periods, does steampunk flatten their differences, inevitably portraying a preternaturally progressive 19th century and/or a wistfully old-fashioned twenty-first-century society?

III.

We might, in fact, at this conference that revolves around technologies of mobilities, position steampunk itself as a transportation device. Certainly, yes, a person could make a version of this claim with any work of art. Art transports us, it connects us, it moves us to new ideas and new awareness. But steampunk art instantiates this metaphor a bit more directly. In the context of this conference on nineteenth-century studies, we will assert that steampunk does the work of most period art, in that it transports us to the nineteenth century. In an additional turn of the screw, however, steampunk brings the nineteenth century to us, shuttling nineteenth-century conventions of dress and speech and even literary form into contemporary novels. Steampunk conventions and gatherings are an occasion for literal travel, at which many enthusiasts perform a different identity upon arriving. It is this phenomenon that has us so often citing less-than-conventional names in our scholarly work (e.g. Ay-leen the Peacemaker, Jha, and Professor Elemental). Steampunk is a network, and information and relationships circulate within it.

Steampunk's transportation devices can also be, of course, the transportation technologies featured in its literary texts. Because of steampunk's tendency to feature both historically distant and futuristic technologies, transportation devices in steampunk novels can be quite varied. Characters move about on trains, of course, but also in dirigibles, on horseback, on boats and in spaceships. Often, specialized transportation technologies are central to the premises of steampunk novels. Westerfeld's *Leviathan* trilogy, for example, revolves in large part around the aforementioned fabricated whale airship which is the home for the protagonists—both Darwinists and Clankers—throughout the three novels. We are introduced to the protagonist, Deryn, by way of her desire to fly airships, her grief over her father who died in a ballooning accident, and her audacity in piloting a Huxley, the flying jellyfish-like fabricated creature often used to navigate short distances, into a storm in an effort to perform “boyhood” as accurately as possible. Much of the advances in genetic engineering in Westerfeld's world are, it would seem, oriented at creating transport devices. Similarly, new transportation technologies feature in Stephenson's *The Diamond Age*, where the more elite characters ride chevalines, nano-engineered horse-cyborgs, and the police walk around in pedomotives, stilt-like leg extenders that increase one's stride.

These, and many more, are examples of the tendency of the genre to punk existing technologies. Some of steampunk's travel technologies, however, reinvent the very idea of travel. In Philip Reeves's *Mortal Engines*, for example, entire cities mobilize into huge predatory cities, consuming each other and offering residents some hope against a crisis driven by scarce natural resources. Individuals don't travel, but are also never *not* traveling as their cities move on huge tank treads across the post-apocalyptic wasteland or on skates and runners in the frozen north. In *Howl's Moving Castle* (novel by Diana Jones, film by Studio Ghibli), the eponymous structure moves in a traditional sense—it has creaky mechanical legs that operate

to change the castle's location—but it also offer a version of transport from inside the castle. The door inside the castle is really a portal, opening to four different locations that Howl can choose with a dial. As Schivelbusch's analysis of the effects of new nineteenth-century transportation technology makes us think of steampunk, its tropes and its impact, Howl's transportation portal seems to capture its ethos as well. While the exterior of the castle utilizes a traditional mobility, lumbering over the landscape to new locations, the inside erases the in-between space, reducing one's travel to departure and destination points. Steampunk moves us to these new land- and time-scapes, ones that are quite evidently connected to recognizable places and times and contexts, but without bothering with much of the connective thread. Here are the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries, together, at once, their distances and differences collapsed into the brass objects of the setting.

IV.

Schivelbusch spends a chapter considering the problems created by the compartment during train travel. During the mid-nineteenth century, there was a minor hysteria about the risk that first-class passengers faced in being murdered by those sharing their private compartments. The 1860 Poinot murder in France and the 1864 Briggs murder in England sparked these fears, which led to a number of different tactics—peepholes, alarm wires, more open compartments—that hoped to alleviate some of the perils of being left alone with a stranger. A much less sensational but even more widespread problem was the problem of what to do when facing a stranger for the duration of a journey. Where “travel in [a horse-drawn] coach was characterized not only by the travelers' intensive relationship to the world outside [...] but also by their lively communication with each other,” travel by train left people without an explicit need for conversation since they might not make the entire journey with one another (Schivelbusch 74, see also 68). What's more, the jolts and landscape that occasioned conversation no longer existed in the smooth travel of the train, the speed of which reduced the landscape to a panoramic, homogenized blur. One solution for this problem was the tendency of train passengers to read: “Fixing one's eyes on a book or a newspaper, one is able to avoid the stare of the person sitting across the aisle” (Schivelbusch 75). The result was the growth of booksellers and lending libraries within railway stations across England and France. (Naturally, stories of railway murders became popular reading for those on the trains.)

Schivelbusch's attention to what passengers do while traveling by railway begs a similar question for characters within steampunk: how do they occupy themselves while traveling? It turns out that steampunk is not that different from other narratives in that it often annihilates the time and space that characters spend on travel. When the characters of Westerfeld's *Leviathan* fly the eponymous airbeast from England to the snows of Switzerland, the narrative looks the other way. It does much the same while they move from Switzerland to the Ottoman Empire (it happens in the interregnum between the first and second volumes) and when they go from Turkey to Russia (between the second and third volumes) and from Russia across the Pacific to the coast of California. Distance and time is similarly erased in *Mortal Engines* as London moves toward the cities of the Anti-Traction League and in *The Difference Engine* where Edward Mallory tends to appear in the narrative just disembarking from his transportation rather

than spending any appreciable time in transit. More attention is paid to travel in Miéville's *Iron Council*, since the titular entity is a perpetual train which is constant, aimless motion.

One could argue that in all of these novels, the characters are always already traveling. That *everything* that happens in the novel happens while underway from one location to another. In this case, steampunk offers a different form of escape from the perils of the compartment than reading: with adventure. Rather than having to find something to occupy themselves while staring at travel companions for the duration of the ocean, intrigues and romances, betrayals and beasties fill the gaps and provide distractions from the realities of time and space that although shrunk are still not annihilated *in toto*. Characters in steampunk are abetted in this, to great extent, by the fact that their transportation devices tend to either be fashioned for a single individual—as is the case of the chevalines and pedomotives in *The Diamond Age* or the monowheel that Ray Steam uses in *Steamboy*—or massive—such as the cities of *Mortal Engines* and the beasties and walkers of *Leviathan*. Piloting something solo not only prohibits the need for uncomfortable conversation but emphasizes the independence and agency of the traveler. City-sized vehicles, on the other hand, obviate the need to sit quietly and stare at one's neighbor.

When faced with the peril of accounting for travel, something that one would expect would be represented fairly in steampunk since the train and steam engine are those most “appropriate technologies” of the nineteenth century, one finds that inside a steampunk narrative, adventures fill the time of travel while outside, in the actual nineteenth century, a novel (often of adventure) filled that same time. Steampunk, in other words, performs what stories in the nineteenth century could only metaphorically do for their readers. What more might we learn if we consider what characters within steampunk read, apart from the near certainty that they almost never read?

V.

We began this paper by alluding to the potential rough spots in our argument. These moments, we suggested, would function similarly to the mechanisms that so often play a significant thematic role within steampunk. While perhaps dirty and ungainly, they would simultaneously expose inner workings, allowing someone with the tinkering instinct to find the bits that work as well as those that don't, and reshape them for her own purposes. Steampunk (and by extension our paper) would eschew the too-smooth logic of our contemporary world.

What should a steampunk nimrod make, then, of the fact that Schivelbusch's book exposes the railway in the nineteenth century not as a utilitarian, open-source, hackable mode of mobility but rather as a mode of transportation that was experienced as thoroughly modern and smooth? The annihilation of time and space that characterized the railway was accomplished specifically *through* the characteristics of steam power: “regularity, uniformity, unlimited duration and acceleration” (9). This regular motion depended on the radical transformation of the landscape, with railway cuts and abutments designed to keep the “rail-way [...] perfectly level and smooth,” as Thomas Gray writes in 1822 (qtd. in Schivelbusch 11). This smoothness, others conjectured in 1825, would ameliorate the difficulties of travel faced by the “sensitive or nervous man”:

It is reasonable to conclude, that the nervous man will ere long, take his place in a carriage, drawn or impelled by a Locomotive Engine, with more unconcern and with far better assurance of safety, than he now disposes of himself in one drawn by four horses of unequal powers and speed [...]. Surely an inanimate power, that can be started, stopped, and guided at pleasure by the finger or foot of man, must promise greater personal security to the traveller [...]. (qtd. in Schivelbusch 14)

It is precisely the thoroughly modern nature of this mode of transportation—the ability to start or stop a massive vehicle with merely “the finger or foot of man”—that imbues the train with an ability to comfort those for whom travel by horse-drawn carriage was too rough. To an extent, one might imagine that controlling the vehicle with one’s digits would add up to the sort of control and hacking that steam-powered devices metonymically represent within steampunk. But even in 1825, before the railway was widespread as a method of transport, there would have been no illusion that a person riding in the train could really halt its forward trajectory. The nervous man, it turns out, is made less nervous not only by the smoothness of the journey and the fact that the journey can be halted, but also because he is so completely disconnected from his travel.¹ He can imagine, thanks to the smoothness of the way, that he can “relax in the railway carriage” and “sit in it without moving a muscle, without ‘exertion’ or any ‘other passions’” (Schivelbusch 14). Travel by rail, wrote Michael Alexander Lips in 1833, is “so imperceptible, smooth, and comfortable, that it is not only possible to *read* but even to *write* in it with the greatest ease” (qtd. in Schivelbusch 65, original emphasis).

Surely this is a different sense of the steam engine, that “appropriate technology” of the Victorian era, than steampunk tropes like to invoke. Part of the fun for a twenty-first-century audience of a film like *Howl’s Moving Castle* or a novel like *Railsea* is the emphasis of the mechanics of motion, of the very physical way in which the characters can take control of the machinery, of how very likely it is that these big, moving machines will break down and how they (and by extension, we) will be called on to make them run again. Steampunk plays on the nostalgia we have for this technology that is somehow *more real*. How strange, then, to read writers in the nineteenth century who are encountering the train and becoming nostalgic for past modes of transport. Thomas De Quincey, for example, wrote the following in 1849: “Seated in the old mail-coach, we needed no evidence out of ourselves to indicate the velocity....The vital experience of the glad animal sensibilities made doubts impossible on the question of our speed; we heard our speed, we saw it, we felt it as a thrilled; and this seed was not the product of blind insensate agencies, that had no sympathy to give [...]” (qtd. in Schivelbusch 11). The animals that previously provided the propulsion, another “anonymous polemic from the year 1839” makes clear, were somehow the key to making the transportation experience more real (Schivelbusch 12):

When we are traveling by stage-coach at the rate of eight or ten miles an hour, we can understand the nature of the force which sets the vehicle in motion: we understand in a general way the nature of animal power [...]. But, when proceeding on a journey by the rail-road, we are seldom allowed to get a sight of the wondrous power which draws us so

¹ Later in his study, Schivelbusch points out that “The fear of derailment was in fact a feeling of impotence due to one’s being confined in a fast-moving piece of machinery without being able to influence it in the least” (78).

rapidly along. The scene is altogether changed, there are no animals yoked to the car, to excite our pity by their apparently short, but really severe labour [...]. (qtd. in Schivelbusch 12)

Steampunk today plays on our nostalgia for the railroad, for all it signifies for a world in which technology could be developed, built, and repaired by hobbyists and tinkerers. But those who lived in the world steampunk riffs on and who wore their spats and cravats as they traveled by rail were, it turns out, themselves nostalgic for a previous mode of transportation that wasn't quite as smooth and easy. Discovering this forgotten history of how real Victorians experienced the phenomenology of railway mobility really *is* "instructive reading for every steampunk nimrod." It begs us to consider how our current use of steampunk to rough-up our present moment of sealed and edgeless technology depends on a different tactic of smoothing over. We know, without even having to say it, that steampunk plays too fast and too loose with the nineteenth century: ignoring imperialism, glossing over gender, hiding hierarchies of class. Discussing such elisions is the stuff that the critiques of Charles Stross, Jaymee Goh (aka Jha), Michael Perschon, and Diana Pho (aka Ay-leen the Peacemaker), to name just a few, are made of.

We know steampunk's rough surfaces are in part reflexive, mirroring our nostalgia and fetishization of authenticity back to us. But steampunk has some punk to fall back on, has some inclination for undoing its own sutures and connections. The tinkering impulse and DIY instinct that undergirds the steampunk ethos points, in the end, to the individual reader or enthusiast, and asks what she will make of the rough spots and the buffed out complications. While Schivelbusch speculated that the smoothness of the railway journey might make the shock of the accident that much more intense (see 15), we speculate that the tinkering in steampunk makes the buffed-over scuff-marks that much easier to find.

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