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THE MACHINE ANXIETIES OF STEAMPUNK: CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHY, NEO-VICTORIAN AESTHETICS, AND FUTURISM

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THE MACHINE ANXIETIES OF STEAMPUNK: CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHY,

NEO-VICTORIAN AESTHETICS, AND FUTURISM

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Submitted to the faculty of
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July 23, 2016

This work is dedicated to my parents: Dr. Richard Brian Hicks, whose life-long exploration of the human mind and spirit helped to prepare me for my own intellectual journey, and Mafalda Brasile Hicks, artist-philosopher, who originally inspired my deep interest in aesthetics.

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ABSTRACT

Kathe Hicks Albrecht

THE MACHINE ANXIETIES OF STEAMPUNK: CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHY,
NEO-VICTORIAN AESTHETICS, AND FUTURISM

This dissertation examines the steampunk movement as a significant contemporary expression of the human condition. Although its aesthetic inspiration comes from the Victorian past, as re-tooled, re-imagined, and re-energized for the twenty-first century, steampunk's underlying interest is in a speculative view of the future and a concern for the contemporary individual's struggle to retain autonomy in a de-centered, de-territorialized world. As such the steampunk movement participates in, and contributes to, an important ongoing philosophical and aesthetic dialog.

The project examines the motivations for steampunk's visual inspiration in the Victorian. Technological and scientific advancements in that period greatly impacted societal traditions and the role of the individual within it. Economic, social, and political changes revolutionized daily life and the individual faced a new self-consciousness as she confronted, and adapted to, these significant changes. Today, similar technological advancements force new tensions between the individual and the world around her. Astounding developments in computing and artificial intelligence, and the concept of the cyborg and other hybrid beings challenge the contemporary individual's sense of self. By looking to the past, steampunk seeks to recuperate the Victorian individual's successful navigation of technological change. She does so in order to facilitate our own navigation of current waters.

The project traces the movement's modest roots as a literary sub-genre of science fiction, explores its sources in the Victorian, and describes the movement's rapid evolution to global phenomenon. Today steampunk is fully integrated into contemporary culture as an aesthetic observed in visual, decorative, and fashion arts, comic books, movies, and television. The project explores the current landscape of art and philosophy in order to position the steampunk movement within the larger scope of the contemporary scene. A triad of prevailing philosophical trends—postmodernism, transhumanism, and post-humanism, help to reveal steampunk's involvement in the contemporary philosophical and aesthetic dialog.

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Introduction

"To me [steampunk] is essentially the intersection of technology and romance."
Jake von Slatt
Steampunk designer and scholar (La Ferla)

When one meets friends at the Edison Bar in the heart of downtown Los Angeles, the twenty-first century city is quickly left behind. Our modern reality is just another skin to shed. Built out in the basement of the Higgins building, the first private power plant in Los Angeles, this hangout for the young and hip is not only a chic watering hole it is also an artful homage to steampunk. Brass and metal bar stools, exposed mechanical elements from the original industrial facility, old-fashioned light fixtures, and a Victorian aesthetic surround you. What are the visual motivations of the founders and designers of this hip bar and restaurant? Why does steampunk have such broad appeal across certain segments of contemporary society? After all, carefully designed steampunk bars have cropped up in Asia, Cape Town, South Africa, Romania and elsewhere across the globe.[1]

This dissertation, *The Machine Anxieties of Steampunk,* thoroughly explores steampunk and its development into a global phenomenon, a movement whose aesthetic is reflected in visual arts, entertainment, fashion, the decorative arts, and even built environments such as the Edison Bar. In this project we will answer the question of *what is* the steampunk movement. But we will also address the more complex question as to why the steampunk movement develops and takes hold within our global culture. For reasons that will be carefully explored in the following pages, this quietly revolutionary aesthetic and viewpoint has settled into the contemporary consciousness. The steampunk genre captures the zeitgeist of our culture as a very diverse and global cross-section of humanity role-plays

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in elaborate steampunk costume, gathers at ever-expanding festivals and conferences, and embraces the underlying *philosophy of steam*.

I will argue that the steampunk movement is a significant contemporary enterprise worthy of careful analysis in terms of historical, artistic, and political constructs. It is my contention that steampunk expresses an underlying machine anxiety, a concern for the future of humankind, and a resistance to the power structures that dominate established society. Steampunk artists are at the same time perturbed and intrigued by the future and this tension is an important expression of the individual today. As humankind faces an uncertain future as a result of potential implications of ever-advancing technologies and developments in the field of artificial intelligence, contemporary thinkers struggle to define humankind's role in that future landscape. Steampunk provides an avenue for that thinking and for that very struggle. As such the movement can be seen not only a significant contemporary viewpoint but also as representing a viable interpretation of humankind's potential role in an emerging networked community.

For the purposes of the project we will locate and examine three essential spheres of the steampunk phenomenon. We will explore steampunk as a significant contemporary aesthetic with a specific focus on how it informs the work of many visual and performance artists today. We will find that steampunk's aesthetic influence is very broad and elements appear in the visual arts and design as well as in Hollywood films, television shows, and even in popular stage productions. Cirque du Soleil, for example, selected the steampunk aesthetic as its 2015/16 theme for *Kurius: A Cabinet of Curiosities*, a riotous, retro-futuristic acrobatic and comedic romp which is currently performing at venues across the United States. The

show is replete with steampunk references and visual elements and it enjoys continued sell-out performances. We will also consider steampunk as both an intellectual and visual rejection of Modernism, as an escape from that enterprise's minimalism and self-absorbed isolationism. As writer Paul Di Filippo notes in an interview with Lisa Yaszek he views steampunk as "truly estranged from modernist takes on the world" (Yaszek 192). This rejection positions steampunk within the larger movement of postmodernism. However, we will also explore the steampunk movement in relationship to contemporary philosophical trends and will find that the steampunk movement pushes on from postmodernism to create its own philosophical path. Most importantly, we will investigate steampunk as a rigorous challenge to the anti-autonomous trends that form the common philosophical consensus of today. We will find that it forwards instead a resurgence of individualism and self-empowerment, albeit in a networked and de-centered contemporary world.

These three aspects of the steampunk movement, its aesthetics, its anti-Modernism, and its position within the current philosophical landscape will provide us with a robust understanding of the phenomenon as a retro-futuristic enterprise full of nuanced expression, both visual and intellectual in nature. It is my hope that the project will expose the underlying reasons for steampunk's nostalgic interest in the Victorian as well as to clarify the movement as an expression of the significant anxiety the contemporary individual experiences in regard to technological advances and future potentialities for humankind. Steampunk's look may be Victorian, but its appeal is based on contemporary interests and concerns. And because it addresses fundamental contemporary concerns the steampunk movement continues to expand in organic fashion and enjoys a remarkable and resilient popularity.

To best organize the project I break it down into five distinct chapters, focusing each on one important aspect of the steampunk movement. We begin in Chapter One with a look back to steampunk's modest origins as a narrow sub-genre of science-fiction and then trace its rapid and steady early expansion. I examine its root inspirations in popular literature from the earlier twentieth century, including precursors in science fiction of the 1950s and 1960s and also in the *Edisonade* adventure stories from the early twentieth century. This chapter will lay the foundation for our exploration of steampunk as a global phenomenon and significant contemporary aesthetic. We will find that some early proponents of steampunk, those first generation steampunk writers, believe the movement is no longer a new and viable literary style. However, the fact is that the movement has evolved into a broad global phenomenon over the past ten years. It has evolved from its early roots in science fiction to become a true cultural lifestyle and philosophy. Is it dead, as some early steampunk proponents might have it? No. Has it changed from its early narrow roots as a sub-genre of science-fiction? Yes. We will find that first generation steampunk writers can claim its origins but not what it has become. And they cannot contain the steampunk movement in the original box. Like yeast in bread-making, the early steampunk literary figures simply provided the starter, but the original recipe has now expanded and evolved for a full generation.

In Chapter Two I look at the connections between the Victorian period, which serves as steampunk's visual muse, and the contemporary movement itself. In so doing, significant similarities between both periods will be discovered. What are the aspects of nineteenth century thinking, writing, and visual expression that attract steampunk so strongly? How do the two periods, late nineteenth century and late twentieth century, resonate with each other

such that individuals in the latter period have a desire to craft a hybrid retro-futurism with a Victorian aesthetic? We will see that Victorian art reflects a tension between excitement for the future and fear of the fundamental changes it implied. This tension resonates with the similar tension facing humankind today. We will find that nineteenth century artists expressed that tension. For example, while Georges Seurat eagerly experimented with new optical and photographic technology in his paintings and others boldly sought new forms of expression, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood expressed anxiety about contemporary society and visually looked to the past as a perceived simpler and nobler time. In the late nineteenth century there was a pronounced interest in emulating the look of the period of *Pax Romana,* that enduring and expansive time of the Roman Empire, perceived as a period of greatness both physically as the Empire conquered lands throughout the Mediterranean and as far away as Asia and Africa, and intellectually as philosophers such as Cicero, Plotinus, and Seneca lived, wrote, and left an extensive legacy of foundational thought. In looking to this ancient time, the Victorians turned from their modern concerns in which they faced challenges of identity in light of technological advances through the invention of the steam engine. Even the dress of the Victorian period reflected an interest in Rome. Empire style gowns and sheaths were immensely popular, their sheer loose-fitting shape mimicking the dress of their Roman forebears. This nineteenth century version of retro-costuming will be repeated one hundred years later in the cosplay of the steampunk practitioner.[2] The connections, both intellectual and visual, with their Victorian counterparts are of great significance to the steampunk movement and its practitioners.

Exploring the Victorian connection will be fundamental to understanding the steampunk movement's outlook. Concerns of the Victorian period focused on issues of

capitalism, commercialism, and conflicting ideologies, pitting the individual in opposition to, or rebellion from, societal constraints and domination. I will explore parallels that can be drawn between the two historical periods: the late-nineteenth and late-twentieth centuries. By evoking a Victorian *mise-en-scene* in an allegorical manner—fragmentary and incomplete, steampunk reclaims, interprets, and supplements the historical period, re-imagining the threat of the machine, and describing either a triumph over it or assimilation with it.

In Chapter Two I will also briefly explore two European art movements of the early twentieth century, Dadaism and Futurism, both of which have some connections not only to emerging Modernism but also with the interests of the steampunk movement. Dada artists reacted against the technological horrors of World War One and expressed a social anxiety and visual fragmentation that steampunk artists develop further. Futurism, on the other hand, embraced the future and its implications of change, mechanization, speed, and technological advances. This approach resonates with the enthusiastic steampunk proponent who welcomes technology and its implications not only as a helpful tool but as an impactful feature of future enterprises. However, we will see that steampunk differs from Futurism in that steampunk is more interested in the making of technology not in the experiencing of technology (Onion 143).

In Chapter Three I turn to the subject of steampunk and contemporary visual art, exploring the work of a variety of artists and curators who express the distinctive steampunk aesthetic. I will analyze the work of visual artists Molly Friedrich, Kris Kuksi, Pierre Matter, among others. These artists will provide significant examples of steampunk visual art and help to give us a deeper understanding of the thinking behind the aesthetic. In this chapter I

will also survey the art galleries and museums in which steampunk has been given a voice and space to expand and reach out into the broader cultural community. These galleries and the curators who oversee their exhibitions are a significant factor in the public exposure of the steampunk aesthetic program. The movement's continued expansion is at least partially due to the interest and work of curators, galleries and museums.

In Chapter Four the focus will be on performance, those participatory elements that are fundamental to the steampunk effort. Today's performance art, and this includes steampunk performance, can be traced back to the *Happenings* of artist Allan Kaprow whose artistic experiments in the early 1960s flowed from an effort to merge art with life. Kaprow's innovative work creates a new type of artistic event that inspires performance today and resonates with the steampunk performer as he experiments with spontaneous and improvisational live enactments. Dr. Phineas Steel, Professor Elemental, and the musical group Steam Powered Giraffe will be featured in the chapter as representing various significant aspects of steampunk performance today.

Finally, Chapter Five turns to the relationship between steampunk and contemporary philosophy. What is it that makes Steampunk a significant contemporary aesthetic, one worthy of analysis and consideration as representative of contemporary human consciousness? The steampunk movement operates within a contemporary society that represents a significant shift in human identity. This shift links the individual Subject to an emerging and ever more complex networked community, an "Other" that includes machines, cyborgs, and other hybrid beings. I frame my argument for steampunk's creative significance with a discussion of three key trends in contemporary philosophy, postmodernism,

transhumanism, and post-humanism. However, I will keep the art itself foregrounded throughout that focused discussion. I will demonstrate that steampunk addresses contemporary machine anxiety by reclaiming the Victorian past, grounding it in the present, and proposing an alternative narrative for a technology-infused future. In so doing the steampunk movement provides contemporary humanity with an encouraging, perhaps even optimistic, view of the future, one in which humans and machines interact in new ways, not so much as subject and object, but as participants in a new type of shared experience. In focusing on postmodernism, transhumanism, and post-humanism, we will discover how steampunk problematizes each in the process of finding its own intellectual outlook to champion within the contemporary philosophical landscape. The writings of Jean-Francois Lyotard, N. Katherine Hayles, Donna Haraway, and futurists such as Raymond Kurzweil and Hans Moravec, will be explored in order to help situate steampunk within the context of contemporary tendencies. We will find that steampunk does not follow in lock-step with a particular school of thought but rather forges its own path and expresses its own outlook, taking elements from each of the three lines of thinking and discarding other features.

Contemporary theorist Jean-Francois Lyotard, for example, begins to question whether science alone describes the complete world. Although late-twentieth century technology enables us to synthesize, manipulate, repeat, and exploit information in ways that are astounding and new, Lyotard believes there is an objective truth beyond our comprehension. We find that despite twentieth century attempts to dismiss Enlightenment tenets perhaps there remains a hint of Kantian tradition in some of the more radical contemporary thinking. And it is that space which steampunk occupies, serving as a pesky challenge to those who hold onto science and technology as the new underpinning of our

existence. As Heidegger had before him, Lyotard warns us of the growing power and possible danger of technology and he frames it in terms of our freedom. He asks, in a world dominated by manufactured BITs, where is the free imagination, the reflective judgment? (Lyotard 15) Lyotard and others express the tension that often underlies the steampunk aesthetic, a pull between optimism for the future and anxiety about its ramifications. By challenging the prevailing contemporary understanding of the status of humankind, steampunk reveals a desire to reject the consensus dissolution of individual subjectivity. We will see that this rejection is fundamental to steampunk's popularity as a post-human era outlook.

Over the course of this project we will ask many questions and hope to find answers. Is steampunk merely escapism or does it successfully address contemporary anxiety? Why is steampunk grounded in Victoriana if its aim is to address today's concerns? Complicating its nostalgic reclamation of the Victorian is Steampunk's clear interest in the future: time-travel, cyborgs, and fantastic airships. Steampunk art is a retro-futuristic visualization of the machine. This hybridity reflects the post-modern fragmentation of the late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Steampunk, as a contemporary aesthetic, is a creative force that contributes to the shaping of future relationships between humans and the technological tools they develop and use, between man and the ever-more-complex machine.

Why is steampunk grounded in Victoriana if its aim is to address contemporary concerns? The appropriated Victorian past represents an age in which humankind successfully harnessed the steam engine, that period's intimidating new technology, wresting power from a potential adversary. That adversary represents the other, a counterpart

oppositional to the individual subject. For the first time in history, humanity was faced with the other as machine, and in the Victorian era that machine was the ubiquitous steam engine. In the case of the late twentieth-century period, the other is also a machine. I will argue that the individual in contemporary society struggles with an adversary similar to the Victorian individual's machine-other and that the steampunk movement addresses specific and fundamental problems facing contemporary society. Steampunk re-claims history, adapts individual subjectivity to fit the contemporary world homology, and addresses the psychological and philosophical concerns of the human being now imbedded within a world of cyborgs, networks, hybrids, and uber-technology. In our contemporary networked society, full of thinking machines and hybrid beings, the human individual must discover his place in a world perhaps no longer dominated by Man in a Kantian or Hegelian sense. The subject must consider himself as an object through the eyes of the other and that other may be machine. Does Hegel's Master-Slave dialectic still pertain if the Machine takes on the role of the Slave? We will see in the following pages that Enlightenment humanism may inform the steampunk outlook but that outlook is not simply a reclaiming of humanism.

H. G. Wells grappled with the Victorian version of this question of the role of humans in a future world in his novel, *The Time Machine*. It is a disturbing saga of a distant future when humankind is divided into two races. The Eloi, the descendants of humanity, are peaceful but weak and dissolute and lack all curiosity and motivation. They live comfortable lives of inactivity. The other group consists of Morlocks, a new species whose members are downtrodden workers imprisoned in underground tunnels and reduced to horrendous sub-human conditions, maintaining ancient machines powered by steam. This is Wells' vision of a future in which man conquers the other in an age of mechanization. It reveals concerns of

the Victorian period about the class system, with the ruling class taking advantage of the worker, burdening him more and more while at the same time enriching themselves through those very workers' continued hard labor. The results of such a relationship have ruined the social structure of humankind in *The Time Machine*. The Eloi imprison the Morlocks, who produce clothing and food for them. And the Morlocks kill and eat the Eloi when they emerge from their subterranean prison under cover of darkness. This poisonous relationship is barely tenable and serves as a cautionary tale for the Victorian citizen. Wells' work and others of the time reflect fears regarding the direction of society, in light of innovations brought about by the new and powerful steam engine. It is an age in which social structures were being threatened by the results of industrialization.

Complicating its nostalgic reclamation of the Victorian is Steampunk's parallel interest in the future. This is evidenced in its machine aesthetic. Steampunk art incorporates what might be termed a retro-futuristic visualization of the machine. That hybridity of the Victorian and the futuristic may fittingly express the new fragmented and networked subjectivity that emerges in the twenty-first century. In fact, the exploration of this hybridity in the following chapters will reveal steampunk as a new creative force that contributes to the shaping of the future human/technology relationship, man and machine who have become blended in an assimilated subjectivity.

For the purposes of this project I will explore the work of well-known contemporary thinkers. Because a foundational aspect of my research is to examine the role of technology as it developed in the twentieth century, both its opportunities and challenges, it will be important to examine the work of those who focus on that tricky issue. To clarify

technology's complicated impact, I will consider the work of Martin Heidegger who warns us of a technology addiction that can occur as the world around us becomes ever more complex and we depend more and more upon machines. The complex machine's 'enframing' can potentially control us and pull us away from the real, the truth of our existence. Heidegger tells us to take heed of that potentiality.

Contemporary philosophers such as Massumi, who focuses on the event or occurrence as the basis of humankind's existence, and Deleuze and Guattari, who describe a world that is now decentralized and non-hierarchical, also present important contemporary intellectual leanings. These viewpoints will be examined in relationship to steampunk's emergence as an independent viewpoint and aesthetic. Also fundamental to a comprehensive study of steampunk is the performance element which is featured in many of the movement's efforts. I will look at the origins of contemporary performance art in the work of Allan Kaprow and the concept of the *spectacle* as forwarded by Mikhail Bakhtin in the early twentieth century.

During the course of my research I discovered a handful of scholars who focus narrowly and specifically on steampunk and the Neo-Victorian genre. However, a brief overview of the existing literature quickly reveals that steampunk scholarship is in its nascent stages. Much of what is available are articles on steampunk in scholarly journals and other publications with few books yet on the market. The scholars whose work does provide significant insight for this project include Rachel A. Bowser, Brian Croxall, Jess Nevins, Mike Perschon, and Ann and Jeff VanderMeer. Although in some regard the lack of much literature on the subject simplified matters for this author as I first delved into the subject, I

often wished for earlier scholars to have cleared some paths and left some clues. Thankfully, there are a few insightful signposts along the way. Dedicated steampunk curators, admirers, fiction writers, and artists are beginning to write about the phenomenon and their contributions to available scholarship provide welcome and perceptive observations. Several anthologies have recently been published, although many of those are self-published—a new model that well reflects steampunk's DIY attitude and its interest in individually-crafted work. In addition, there are several dissertations that focus on specific aspects of the steampunk movement and those provided further food for thought.

Two of the existing anthologies largely consist of examples of steampunk fiction, both short stories and excerpts from longer tracts. Although those offer insight into the best of the current and past steampunk authors, it is the books' introductions that provide the most useful information for my project. Both of these anthologies were co-edited by the same husband-and-wife team of writers. In the first book, published in 2008 and simply titled *Steampunk*, Anne and Jeff VanderMeer bring together a cross-section of writers, new and old, including steampunk mainstays Michael Moorcock, James P. Blaylock, and Paul Di Filippo and newer writers Rachel E. Pollock and Ian R. Macleod, among several others. The book's introduction is written by Jess Nevins, a scholar of Victoriana and writer of steampunk fiction. Nevins' introduction is entitled "The Nineteenth Century Roots of Steampunk" and it is here that the author details his own views on the relationship between steampunk literature and the dime novel, in particular the *Edisonade* genre. That relationship between the two genres is a fascinating exploration and informs my exposition on the early inspirations for steampunk in Chapter One of this project. Although I do not agree with some

of Nevins assumptions his discussion of the roots of steampunk certainly helped me develop my own observations about that particular aspect of the subject.

The VanderMeers' second anthology was published in 2010 under the title *Steampunk II: Steampunk Reloaded*. This volume is also mainly a collection of fiction entries and includes stories by Cherie Priest, Jess Nevins, William Gibson and many others. Several scholarly chapters are also included in this anthology and their inclusion clearly illustrates the fact that scholars were now exploring the steampunk movement as a diverse and expanding phenomenon worthy of intellectual consideration. Writers Gail Carriger and Jake von Slatt both contribute interesting viewpoints on the phenomenon.

The chapter by steampunk fiction writer Carriger, for example, explores the question of "Which is Mightier, the Pen or the Parasol." Carriger dissects the steampunk fashion scene, the clothing trends that bring us lace vests, brown velvet, long dresses, and other Victorian motifs, and she makes note of steampunk fashion's accessibility to a broad range of interested individuals. The clothing works not only on rail-thin supermodels but also on those more typically endowed. It is interesting to note that Carriger's own discovery of steampunk fashion occurred well before her discovery of the literary world of steampunk, the fashion serving as an introduction to the stories. Although Carriger's thesis that these two areas of steampunk (fashion and literature) developed separately and were wholly unaware of each other is not one I agree with, her effort to pull apart the two elements to examine them separately is an important exercise. Steampunk fashion will be discussed in a later chapter and Carriger's observations will be an important part of that discussion.

Von Slatt contributes a chapter in this anthology which he titles "At the Intersection of Technology and Romance." He chronicles the historical roots of steampunk's romance with science and makes an important observation about the appeal of steampunk for many participants. According to von Slatt, steampunk proponents are individuals who had previously maintained strong interests in mechanical science, had tinkered with and dreamed up gadgets but who had never had a community with which to identify. "I've finally found a name for what I am" is a phrase, Van Slatt claims, that resonates with those creative tinkerers who finally discover steampunk as a movement full of like-minded individuals (VanderMeer *SP II* 404). This observation is an important key to steampunk's continued and expanding popularity. Steampunk reflects an interest inherent to many individuals today, those who wish to unleash technology, to use it as a creative tool, to experiment or tinker with what is possible when imagination and scientific interest are combined.

The second VanderMeer anthology also includes an introduction by Anne and Jeff VanderMeer, which provides an excellent overview of the state of the movement in 2010, and a roundtable interview on the future of steampunk that features writers, bloggers, photographers, and researchers. The interview gives a fascinating sense of the possible future for steampunk. Will the next years reveal that steampunk's "emphasis on sustainability and DIY will continue to inspire and impact how society thinks of consumption" as writer S. J. Chambers hopes (VanderMeer *SP II* 409). Or will it recharge itself by tightening back to its science fiction roots as others wish? Together, the two VanderMeer volumes thoughtfully outline the current steampunk literary landscape and provide some helpful insight into the steampunk subculture that quickly emerged from it.

A more recent anthology, *Steaming into a Victorian Future: A Steampunk Anthology,* was released in 2012 and is co-edited by steampunk scholars Julie Anne Taddeo and Cynthia J. Miller. This book is an excellent resource full of useful scholarly information. Reading the anthology in its entirety gives us an understanding of current research on the topic as each chapter is contributed by a prominent steampunk scholar. And the forward by Ken Dvorak, introduction by the co-editors Taddeo and Miller, and afterword by Jeff VanderMeer help contextualize the content nicely. Writers contributing to the anthology tackle diverse topics within the overarching subject of steampunk. Catherine Siemann writes about the steampunk social problem novel. Loosely similar to the Victorian social problem novel in which literature strives to solve or at least reveal and discuss various issues that troubled society during the Victorian times, steampunk literature focuses on social issues facing humankind today—from racism (Jeter) to corruption in government (Moorcock). Siemann draws interesting connections between the two literary periods and, although steampunk science-fiction is sometimes dismissed as a fad or temporary trend, the author feels it can be seen as a more significant effort to expose fundamental problems facing contemporary society. Although Siemann's insistence on steampunk's political and radicalizing agenda is counter to my own viewpoint, it is helpful to read her work to understand the diversity of interpretations that abound in relation to steampunk's motivations.

Co-editor Taddeo contributes a chapter entitled "Corsets of Steel: Steampunk's Re-imagining of Victorian Femininity." Her commentary illustrates my contention that steampunk is an enterprise that seeks to attain or retain power within the individual. She focuses on the corset to address this uniquely. According to Taddeo, the tightly-laced garment of the Victorian period, appropriated for the steampunk costume, represents a

feminist agenda that is far beyond the corset's obvious mission: to provide direction and constraint for the female physical form. Taddeo views the corset as empowering in its reimagined contemporary manifestation. To support this claim she notes that female steampunk participants costume themselves in corsets worn *outside* the dress as opposed to the original or traditional use of the corset as an underpinning, a foundational garment worn beneath the dress. In acknowledging this sexy and provocative look by wearing the corset as an outer garment the feminist steampunk practitioner confronts the viewer with confidence in her sexuality. And the author notes that the corset is also quite practical. It provides the female steampunk with a handy place to tuck a gun, binoculars, flask of potions, or other tools of the steampunk trade. After all, the steampunk woman is active, bright, confident, and creative, and needs a quick place to stash her tools. Just like the exposed mechanicals of the steampunk aesthetic, the corset is visually acknowledged and expresses its actual use. It is not hidden away. Steampunk reveals the function of any tool, whether mechanical gears and cogs or, as in this case, the corset. The steampunk woman exposes her provocative functional undergarments and, by so doing, mirrors the general aesthetic motivations of the steampunk movement.

Other writers who contribute chapters to the Taddeo and Miller anthology include steampunk scholars Mike Perschon and Diana M. Pho among others. Perschon writes on "Useful Troublemakers: Social Retrofuturism in the Steampunk Novels of Gail Carriger and Cherie Priest." Perschon is a scholar who specializes in steampunk literature and here he explores the Victorian concept of the New Woman and its reimagining in the steampunk work of Carriger and Priest. Writer Diana M. Pho tackles consumerism and ideology in "Objectified and Politicized: The Dynamics of Ideology and Consumerism in Steampunk

Subculture." The scholars whose work comprises *Steaming into a Victorian Future: A Steampunk Anthology*, are prominent individuals who have written and lectured extensively on the steampunk movement over the past years. The book is a helpful resource on the most recent scholarly research available.

A thorough study of steampunk must include an examination of fashion and I explore that area of the movement in Chapter One. Of particular interest to my commentary on that aspect is a fairly new monograph on steampunk fashion. *Anatomy of Steampunk: The Fashion of Victorian Futurism* is certainly worthy of note. Published in 2013, it is written by Katherine Gleason, an eclectic freelance writer, whose more than thirty books include titles for children and adults and cover such diverse topics as witchcraft, archeology, ancient Egyptian culture, and art. Gleason recently wrote a book on fashion icon Alexander McQueen. Gleason's short stories and articles have been published in journals and magazines and she has also penned articles for several major newspapers.

In this book the author takes her reader on an exploration of the world of steampunk costume. With a nod to the DIY reader Gleason includes several how-to sections: constructing (and correctly tying) a gentleman's cravat, creating a steampunk pennant from an old watch or a pair of ornate steampunk goggles from vintage goggles, making your own sleeve garters, suspenders, and cycling breeches. Interspersed throughout the book are glossy photographs of the fashion itself. Featuring the best of the commercial clothing sources and several individuals who construct clothing for their own steampunk adventures, the book is a lush compendium of the best of the current steampunk fashion world. Although *Anatomy of Steampunk: The Fashion of Victorian Futurism* has a heavy emphasis on photographic

reproductions and less of a focus on the written word, Gleason's book gives the reader carefully considered observations concerning the aesthetic as it relates to the DIY fashion scene. The book certainly informs my understanding of the fashion aspect of the steampunk aesthetic and its wide appeal to the broad public, DIY or otherwise.

Rounding out the book titles on the subject of steampunk is a fascinating one by cultural historian James H. Carrott and futurist Brian David Johnson. Both have serious bona fides in technology. Carrott has served as the global product manager for Xbox 360 hardware and Johnson is a futurist at Intel Corporation where he works to envision computing in 2020 through *future casting*. The book, *Vintage Tomorrow: A Historian and a Futurist Journey Through Steampunk Into the Future of Technology,* truly is an intellectual journey into the subculture of steampunk. It is written as a rambling conversation that begins between the two writers and spreads to a much wider exchange that includes many of the top thinkers and practitioners in the steampunk world. Kaja Foglio. Diana Pho, Mike Perschon, Jake von Slatt and many steampunk visual artists and performers offer up so many voices of the movement that it is often difficult to retain the narrative thread in the book. Despite that, *Vintage Tomorrows* is a worthy addition to the available scholarship. It allows the reader, along with the authors, to unearth unique and important perspectives as the participants talk informally and honestly about steampunk literature and the growing movement itself.

Another important contributor to existing steampunk scholarship comes from the peer-reviewed e-journal *Neo-Victorian Studies.* This journal is, according to its website, "dedicated to contemporary re-imaginings of the nineteenth century in Literature, the Arts and Humanities."[3] A special issue of the e-journal (2010) is dedicated to the theme of

steampunk. *Steampunk, Science, and (Neo) Victorian Technologies* is guest-edited by Rachel A. Bowser, Georgia Gwinnett College, and Brian Croxall, Digital Humanities Librarian and lecturer in English at Brown University. Their meaty introduction to the journal issue is an excellent examination of the steampunk movement and provides a clear preview of the issue and its content. The collection of articles present a diverse and careful set of studies that as a whole provide a sense of steampunk's broad reach. In "Steam Wars" Mike Perschon writes on the connections between Star Wars and the steampunk movement. His critique strengthens my argument that steampunk often operates as a renegade and somewhat motley crew of rebels eager to return autonomy to the creative individual. This is in similar manner to the Star Wars rebels who seek to return power to the people, not the over-reaching government. Steampunk's underlying rebellious nature echoes that of the heroes from the Star Wars movie franchise. Caroline Cason Barratt tackles today's steampunk aesthetic in "Time Machines: Steampunk in Contemporary Art" and Jason B. Jones discusses comic book elements in "Betrayed by Time: Steampunk and the Neo-Victorian in Alan Moore's *Lost Girls* and *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*." Also included in the journal issue are several reviews of new steampunk novels, a book on the adaptation of British Victorian novels to film and television, and another recent book, this one on history and cultural memory in Neo-Victorian fiction. Overall this special issue is an excellent resource for sub-topics concerning the steampunk movement.

Finally, a handful of recent dissertations address the steampunk movement in relationship to topics such as twentieth-century science-fiction, nineteenth century literature, and contemporary aesthetics. Three dissertations are of particular interest to this project. Stefania Forlini, Andrew Carl Hageman, and Michael Perschon focus directly on steampunk

whereas other theses peripherally reference the topic and as such are less relevant to my research. Because of the complexity of the steampunk topic and its continuing presence in the broad cultural arena, it is likely that more dissertations will be forthcoming as scholars delve into diverse aspects of the subject. For now Forlini, Hageman, and Perschon are our signposts.

In her dissertation entitled "Decadent Things: Literature and Science at the *Fin de Siecle*" Forlini examines Victorian Decadent literature in relationship to late twentieth century gothic, steampunk, and cyberpunk text-based works. She sees in both the nineteenth and twentieth century writings a focused interest in *the object as itself* as she notes connections between the emerging specimen-oriented scientific inquiry of the Victorian era and the prevailing cultural interest in precious or coveted objects. Her thesis is a challenge to the hitherto accepted theory that the Victorian increase in interest in the object is simply evidence of an emerging consumer culture. Forlini explores the parallels between the two periods (late nineteenth-century, late twentieth-century) in regard to the tensions between nostalgia and scientific inquiry. Although her focus is on a specific literary and artistic trend (the Decadent Movement), her examination of late nineteenth century aesthetic trends was helpful in framing my own research on the visual arts and philosophical writings of the Victorian era. Her thesis in regard to underlying aesthetic motivations is certainly intriguing and must be considered as a significant contribution to the available literature on the topic.

In his dissertation "The Hour of the Machine: A New Look at an Old Topos" Hageman traces the history of the cog or wheel as it appears from the early nineteenth century to the present in literature and in film. Hageman employs both distant and close

readings, using computer analytics to conduct searches on the terms 'cog in the wheel' and 'wheels within wheels' as they appear across the literary and film arenas. The field of data is pulled strictly from a Western databank for, as Hageman notes, in such a comprehensive study some narrowing of the data must necessarily occur. Although this type of study focuses mainly on the semantics of the terms examined, and their changing political, social, or technical usages, one chapter focuses on the relationship between cyberpunk and steampunk as a literary genre. Hageman postulates that steampunk emerges directly out of the cyberpunk subculture, another alternative movement that emerged in the 1980s. I propose that steampunk developed independently alongside cyberpunk. It is important to note that, although steampunk's early evolution was similar to that of cyberpunk, steampunk gathered momentum as a movement while cyberpunk did not expand exponentially to significantly affect the broader popular culture as a true phenomenon. In this way, steampunk's remarkable evolution differs greatly from cyberpunk's progression. A careful reading of Hageman's chapter on the steampunk/cyberpunk relationship certainly helped frame my own understanding of the two genres' histories.

The 2012 doctoral thesis "The Steampunk Aesthetic: Technofantasies in a Neo-Victorian Retrofuture" by Mike D. Perschon of the University of Alberta, Edmonton, is worthy of particular attention because he focuses on steampunk as an aesthetic program. Perschon has a narrow interpretation of steampunk as being simply an aesthetic program and in that we disagree. Although Perschon and I do both contend that steampunk as a term resists definition, it is my belief that the difficulty in nailing down exactly what steampunk means today is precisely because steampunk has become so much more than an aesthetic operation. As it leapt from its original position as literary sub-genre to the much broader

popular cultural scene today, it evolved into a complex enterprise well beyond aesthetics. Today, it is a counter-culture movement that crosses cultural and national boundaries. But Perschon feels that steampunk is truly understood as an aesthetic program, an expression of visual features with certain combined elements fundamental to the steampunk look. According to Perschon steampunk's visual expression has been adopted by various communities, individuals, and artists and is now understood as a particular aesthetic. He observes that the steampunk aesthetic always includes three basic components: neo-Victorianism, techno-fantasy, and retro-futurism. In his dissertation Perschon concentrates on these three elements and focuses his research on the steampunk aesthetic as it appears in examples from literature. Perschon's dissertation is a significant contribution to the steampunk topic, in particular as it relates to its continuing developments as a literary genre. However, his work stops short of exploring the underlying outlook of steampunk and it is into this unexplored and somewhat murky territory that my project will plunge.

This brief overview of existing steampunk scholarship and the recognition of the small number of published studies on the subject should not be taken as implying a disinterest by scholars on the topic. The fact that several anthologies exist, that monographs are being published, and that dissertations are being written makes it clear that the subject is a developing one. Steampunk's global reach and ideological connection to contemporary culture make it an exciting subject for scholarly discourse today. It is my contention that new scholarship will emerge in the next few years as steampunk is further explored as a significant and complex multi-modal contemporary enterprise. We have already the beginnings of a rich body of scholarship. It is my sincere hope that this dissertation will

provide new insights and connections that will positively contribute to the growing literature on this fascinating subject.

In the following pages we will find that steampunk art visually reclaims the Victorian past, grounds it in performance, and proposes an alternative narrative for the future. The art of the Victorian period is the steampunk playground. We will discover that steampunk is more than simply the happy meeting of art, science, and technology. And, although it is a generally optimistic enterprise, adventurous, and concerned with individual autonomy, it is also about readable technology, gadgets, gearheads, symbiotic community, and a fundamental concern regarding the continuing ability of individuals to act on free will and express rational thought.

This project seeks to reveal steampunk as a major signifier of post-human subjectivity, emerging, perhaps, in answer to the needs and concerns of the anxious late-twentieth century human. Contemporary individuals face a world taken over by the technical and artificial and steampunk provides a new approach to individual subjectivity within the contemporary networked and highly technical environment. In examining the curious situation of the contemporary individual, the questions my project will address are many. Does contemporary autonomy include a return to the heroic and a rejection of the potentially-emerging and likely threatening master-cyborg? Is seeking a traditional autonomy a feasible or futile effort? Does contemporary subjectivity take on a new form, one not so strictly opposed in binary fashion to the other? Operating as a hybrid of nostalgic Victoriana and a speculative and optimistic futurism, the steampunk viewpoint provides a utopian vision for contemporary society, but is steampunk merely escapism, a temporary antidote to the human

condition, or does it successfully address contemporary machine anxiety? If the steampunk

enterprise provides an alternative contemporary subjectivity, why is it so heavily invested in

the past, in Victoriana? These and other questions will be explored in depth in the following

pages.

Chapter One

The Origins of Steampunk: History and Early Development

Steampunk "embraces extinct technologies as a way of talking about the future"
Jeff VanderMeer and S.J.Chambers
Steampunk Bible[4]

Introduction

It is my contention that steampunk today reflects and perhaps helps define a contemporary state-of-mind, in particular in relationship to technology and its tremendous impact on us as individual human beings within a complex social structure. Although it is now positioned as a broad and multi-faceted global enterprise, steampunk's modest beginnings were as a narrow literary sub-genre of science fiction. In order to determine steampunk's position today, we must first examine and fully understand the movement's origins. Steampunk's visual inspiration comes from the Victorian period and in later chapters we will discuss that historic era specifically. But this chapter asks the question: what is steampunk? And more importantly it considers the more complex question: how did steampunk evolve from its early years as a literary sub-genre to a global enterprise that resonates with a broad swath of contemporary society today?

In the following pages I will trace the movement back to its rather simple origins in the 1980s, examine possible reasons for its emergence from within the literary genre, and then consider steampunk's proliferation over the subsequent twenty year period as it transforms into a phenomenon that influences twenty-first century aesthetics and philosophy. I will also address tensions that exist within the movement. These tensions have hardened into two camps that make various claims on steampunk, reinterpreting its past, and projecting

divergent futures for it. We will examine the fraught association that first generation steampunk practitioners have with the unwieldy and widespread enterprise it is become today. But first, how and when did the concept of steampunk emerge?

The Origins of Steampunk

Steampunk's beginnings were not revolutionary nor did those early years portend steampunk's ultimate transformation into a global operation. It is commonly agreed that the term 'steampunk' was coined by science fiction writer K.W. Jeter in a letter to *Locus Magazine* in 1987, in which he described the neo-Victorian writings of James P. Blaylock, Tim Powers, and Jeter himself, all fairly well-known science fiction writers of the 1980s (VanderMeer, *SP II* 10). Jeter writes blithely, little knowing what he sets in motion: "Personally, I think Victorian fantasies are going to be the next big thing, as long as we can come up with a fitting collective term for Powers, Blaylock and myself. Something based on the appropriate technology of that era; like 'steampunks,' perhaps…"[5] In their written response to Jeter editors at *Locus* magazine agree that the trend of Victorian science-fiction fantasy seemed to be taking hold. With that brief exchange in the popular science fiction news and information magazine the steampunk term takes hold. Jeter's new word combines the *punk* of cyberpunk, which was a popular counter-culture movement in the 1980s, with the word *steam,* in reference to the steam engine, the dominant technological advancement of the Victorian period. Although later Jeter admits that his "use of 'punk' was intended to be more facetious than foundational," a clever joke about the 'punk' label's overuse at the time, the term resonated within the science-fiction community and stuck (Taddeo and Miller 65).

Cyberpunk also emerged from the science-fiction arena. It focused on high technology in conjunction with expressing an interest in the breakdown of traditional social structures.[6] Cyberpunk fiction is typically set in the near future, not in distant fantastical worlds. Quite simply, cyberpunk combines futuristic dystopias with dangerous new technologies in the hands of the wrong characters (human or non-). Cyberpunk enjoyed some popularity in the 1980s and 1990s and had an aesthetic presence in movies such as *Blade Runner* (1982) and several popular videogames of the 1980s. *Blade Runner*, for example, is set in a dark and dystopian world run ruthlessly by über-corporations manufacturing artificial humanoids for purposes of forced heavy labor. *Blade Runner* is bleakly pessimistic and gritty, with a vision of a future world in which technology itself and the industrial complexes that manage it run amuck. The movie well represents the cyberpunk vision of a dystopic world, chaotic and strange, a world full of characters with nefarious motivations and questionable origins.

Also very cyberpunk is the game *Shadowrun*, which began as a traditional table-top board game but ultimately evolved into a global enterprise featuring multiple videogames, collectibles, meet-ups, and competitions, as any google search will reveal. To this day, *Shadowrun* remains a popular game conglomerate and its fan-base is spread across the world. *Shadowrun*'s premise of a corporate-run future coupled with a dystopian breakdown of broad swaths of society is further problematized by the re-emergence, within the game, of Native American shamanistic rituals and magic. Destabilizing clandestine operations (called *shadowruns*) are furtively run against the backdrop of this futuristic world. These potentially subversive elements either threaten--or mindlessly obey—those who run the massive corporatized superstructure. *Shadowrun* is cyberpunk through and through: dark, pessimistic,

and laden with futuristic technology. But despite these examples of cyberpunk's commercial appeal for movies and videogames its dystopian vision of a future world dominated by technology and teeming with civil unrest and broken down social structures was a movement that remained distinctly on the fringe of popular culture during the 1980s and 1990s. In that way it differs from the track that steampunk forged, a path that brought the steampunk genre to a much wider audience and gave it a lasting presence on the global stage.

The steampunk science-fiction stories of the 1980s, those that Jeter refers to in his letter to *Locus,* were much more optimistic, albeit rebellious and anti-establishment, than those narratives from the cyberpunk movement. Steampunk stories were set in a fantastical Victorian England and centered on imagined time travel, outlandish adventure often to futuristic worlds, and the rejection of traditional social norms. The stories pitted virtuous protagonists against evil-doers of varied but always nefarious ilk with those on the good side most often prevailing. As he developed the settings for his steampunk novels, Jeter turned to the writings of the nineteenth century for inspiration and a deeper understanding of the Victorian period. *London Labour and London Poor* by Henry Mayhew (1812-1887) became the main source of information for all three original steampunk writers—Jeter, Blaylock, and Powers. Mayhew was a social researcher, writer, and had been co-editor of the satirical magazine *Punch* for a number of years. His work centered on the living conditions and social ramifications of London's poor and disenfranchised. The work of other Victorian novelists also provided fodder for researching the London setting that Jeter and others imagined (Jeter, *Morlock Night*, introduction by Tim Powers).

Jeter's book *Infernal Devices* is one of the early steampunk novels. It recounts the ever more bizarre and fantastic adventures of George Dower, a hapless Victorian business owner caught up in a web of intrigue involving bizarre and imaginary creatures, mechanical clockworks, and mysterious goings-on.[7] Dower's adventures inevitably land him in trouble with the proper matrons and city officials of the unforgiving Victorian society that provides the setting for his adventures. Steeped in tradition, replete with rules and regulations, the social constrictions continually cause friction and threaten possible jail time for the errant and reluctantly adventurous protagonist. Dower's adventures stem from his father's business, which he inherits, and a questionable customer who opens up to him an elaborate sub-world of strange creatures and unfamiliar affairs. These odd beings are newts that mimic human behavior and dress yet who operate in a bizarre parallel world. As the story unfolds Dower must extricate himself in one piece from the bizarre world and its reptilian citizens.

Some science-fiction works of the time harken directly back to specific Victorian literary works. Jeter's book *Morlock Night*, published in 1979, is in fact written as an imagined sequel to Victorian writer H. G. Well's 1895 book *The Time Machine*. In *Morlock Night* Wells' creatures from the distant future travel back to the Victorian period via a time machine (another of Wells' preferred story elements) during which they completely terrorize nineteenth century London. The protagonist Edwin Hocker and his capable and empowered female compatriot Tafe must figure their way out of a disastrous situational tangle that includes Morlocks from the future, slippages in physical time between the Victorian period and the distant future, and a cast of characters both human and non-human. Events take place on the teeming streets of London, but also deep within the vast network of the sewers below,

a gritty, airless, netherworld to which many have retreated, and which may contain the key to the salvation of a threatened London.

During the 1980s these historically-situated and largely Victorian-based science-fiction novels achieved a level of popularity within the literary community. We will examine in later pages the leap that this small sub-genre then made to the broader arena, its evolution from literary niche to cultural phenomenon. But we turn now to delve further into the steampunk science-fiction genre's literary roots. Some scholars look to works from the 1950s and 1960s as the earliest precursors of the genre. Others look even further back to the early twentieth century to consider whether adventure stories geared toward the juvenile reader provide an insight into the development of modern science fiction and the Victorian narrative.

Those scholars who locate the true beginnings of steampunk in the 1950s and 1960s point to writers such as Ronald Clark in his book *Queen Victoria's Bomb* (1969) and Michael Moorcock in *The Warlord of the Air* (1971), those writers who situate their narratives in historic settings reminiscent of Victorian London. Steampunk scholar Jeff VanderMeer considers Moorcock as the "true Godfather of modern steampunk" (VanderMeer, *SP II* 9). Moorcock weaves a tale that opens in 1902 in the exotic and mysterious British colonial territories of India and the East. Katmandu, Calcutta, and other familiar real-world cities are interspersed in the narrative with imaginary ones such as Teku Benga, the capital of Kumbalari. Teku Benga is a strange and nearly-uninhabitable mountain enclave deep in the Himalayans. The spiritual city, ancient and decaying, is known as The Place Where All Gods Reside. Much as is the case with James Hilton's Shangri-La in his 1933 book *Lost*

Horizon, the ancient city is steeped in history and ritual, full of magic and mystery. Into this mystical realm steps an intrepid army captain, Oswald Bastable, who leads a hearty band of Punjabi soldiers on a minor military mission. Suddenly, a horrific earthquake separates Bastable from his troops and sends him not only tumbling through a maze of caves and passageways but also seemingly into the year 1973.

The book, set in part in Victorian times, with a plot line that involves futurism, travelling airships, and adventures through time, is certainly a steampunk prototype but it lacks the focus on the odd characters of steampunk—newts, Morlocks, and hybrid beings— and it does not create a full imaginary alternative to the Victorian physical space. *The Warlord of the Air* unfolds more along the lines of the James Hilton novel, the scientific romances of H. G. Wells, or even Johann David Wyss's adventure novel of 1812, *The Swiss Family Robinson*. It is more of a critique of the political and social issues of our own time (written in 1971 and describing 1973), achieved through the depiction of an alternate twentieth century history. However, it is that concept of *alternative histories* that does tie the book to the emerging steampunk sensibility. Alternative histories lie at the heart of the steampunk movement. In the section of the novel set in 1973 Vladimir Ilyitch, an aging Russian revolutionary who is clearly based on the historical figure of Lenin, makes a point about this concept. He states that "There are an infinite number of possible societies. In an infinite universe, all may become real sooner or later. Yet it is always up to mankind to make real what it really wishes to be real" (Moorcock 203). Moorcock's envisioned 1973 is the result of the Victorian concept of the ideal world of the future, a world of Western Imperialism and worldwide colonization. The author critiques this period in history, calling it out as a result of Imperialist tendencies of the nineteenth century. The story is a strong social

commentary and provides a cautionary note to humankind in regard to our post-colonial position.

Interestingly, *The Warlord of the Air* appears to be written from the viewpoint of the nineteenth century, despite the fact it was written in 1971. For example, *airships* are shaped like dirigibles and travel at the rate of one hundred miles per hour, an incredible speed from the viewpoint of the nineteenth century citizen, but laughable in terms of what is possible today as commercial airliners travel at six hundred miles per hour. Furthermore, the story's airships and motorcars are powered by steam--a concept that makes sense from a Victorian individual's ideas about how a future might develop but which does not make sense to us now. Moorcock has constructed a Victorian novel in the vein of H. G. Wells as if written by a contemporary of H. G. Wells. This unusual viewpoint puts it more in line with the pure scientific romance than with the steampunk genre's re- imagined yesterday as visualized through a contemporary post-human lens. As such, and despite some prototypical steampunk concerns, I would suggest that Moorcock's novel is less an early steampunk story as it is a creative and unique effort to craft a true Victorian scientific romance.

Certainly we can trace a historical thread through all the adventure novels written that incorporate fantasy elements, be they the imagined flora and fauna of the Swiss Family Robinson's island adventure or the magical transportation of the protagonist through time in *The Warlord of the Air*, or even the discovery of a mountain city that erases the effects of time on its inhabitants as is described in Hilton's famous novel. But true steampunk emerges with Blaylock, Powers, and Jeter as they create elaborate imaginings of a time-warp that brings Victorian London into the future in an alternative historical narrative, and does so in

terms of our own contemporary, post-human perspective. That perspective will be further elucidated in Chapter Five. For now we turn back the clock to an even earlier time period to discover the connection between steampunk and the 'Edisonades.'

Steampunk and the Edisonades

Some writers trace steampunk's origins further back to the beginning of the twentieth century, a period which felt the tremendous initial literary impact of writers Jules Verne (1828-1905) and H. G. Wells (1866-1946). Writer and steampunk scholar Jess Nevins sees a link between the spirit of the steampunk story-line and the "Edisonade" publications of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (VanderMeer *SP* 3-10). The Edisonades were stories distributed as cheap pulp fiction starting in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Named after inventor Thomas Edison and echoing another genre termed "Robinsonades" (named after the fictional character and seafaring adventurer Robinson Crusoe), the Edisonade emerges during a time of great interest in science and technology, the era of brilliant inventor Thomas Edison, and popular writers of scientific adventure stories, Verne and Wells (VanderMeer *SP* 3). This was a period during which tremendous strides were being made in the fields of telegraphy, factory engineering, chemistry, geology, among many others, which will be discussed in some detail in Chapter Two.

The target audience for the Edisonade adventure stories was young boys. The upbeat and action-packed narratives always involved great and highly risky adventures of epic proportion in which a young courageous inventor creates a new and heavily technological weapon or tool to beat back a powerful enemy. That enemy was often in the form of foreign invader, for example, East Indian or African roughnecks, but occasionally the enemy who

posed a perceived threat hailed from within America's borders as in the case of the Native American marauders, aka "Indians." Adventure in the Edisonades was highly optimistic and evoked the concept of Manifest Destiny, that inevitability of American settlers' westward expansion and the ultimate control of the American continent, coast to coast, by those new settlers. The stories describe a clear set of 'good guys' pitted against a darkly portrayed set of 'bad guys.' There is little gray area in the narrative: it is a 'white hats' versus 'black hats' scenario and the white hats always win.

In the early twentieth century the Edisonade literary genre split into two branches, one that targeted an adult male audience and the other that remained with the original juvenile reader. A prime example of the evolution of the juvenile branch is the Tom Swift adventure story. The Tom Swift novels were originally written by Edward Stratemeyer, but the syndicated series grew so popular and long-lived that other writers eventually penned the stories and often they were simply published under the pseudonym Victor Appleton (Heitman). The Tom Swift narratives enjoyed wide distribution between the years 1910 and 1935.

Does it make sense to look for a direct literary connection between the Edisonade adventures and steampunk science-fiction? Do the earlier narratives and subsequent Tom Swift stories actually serve as inspirations or early pre-cursors to the steampunk genre? It is true that during the twentieth century science fiction as a literary type fully developed to become the popular genre we know today. And any literary genre builds on the foundation of earlier writers. But, unlike most steampunk stories whose protagonists are often underdogs straining under the demands of a corporatized government structure, the Edisonade

adventures, whether geared toward adults or juveniles, strongly support a nationalistic sensibility and an optimistic, perhaps naïve, belief in good government. Edisonade stories proclaim the notion of Manifest Destiny, in fact fully support a belief in the virtue of the European-American conquest of the vast American west and, quite frankly, any other 'uncivilized' areas of the world. Duty, nationalism, and American supremacy form the backdrop of the Edisonade novel. This approach is the antithesis of the egalitarian, rebellious, and anti-establishment steampunk sensibility. Although Nevins points out these differences in his analysis of the Edisonade-steampunk connection, nevertheless he still considers the earlier works as the steampunk genre's roots. He sees the steampunk author as being aware of the earlier type, indeed as "reacting against" the earlier genre's tendencies (VanderMeer, *SP* 3).

Steampunk expert Jeff Vandermeer is one scholar who disagrees with Nevins' argument that the steampunk novel is directly connected to the Edisonade. In fact, VanderMeer postulates that there is, necessarily, no direct link between steampunk and Edisonades because the earlier stories were decades out of print and not readily accessible to science fiction writers or anyone else for that matter (VanderMeer, *SP* 7). I agree with VanderMeer's contention that the steampunk link with the Edisonades is not a substantial one. Yes, as Nevins points out, there are several similarities between the genres: a sense of adventure and a protagonist as lone inventor who tinkers with technology to create tools that threaten the stability of the world in one way or another. But the differences are many and include very different outlooks in terms of the role of government. In the case of the Edisonades the government serves as a positive force, benign and well-meaning, whereas the government in the typical steampunk novel is often corrupt, inordinately restricting, and a

force to be overcome. Although it is too much of an intellectual stretch to imagine that direct link between steampunk and the Edisonades it can be noted that the *type* of narrative that describes both steampunk and the Edisonade—bold, adventurous, inventive, youth-oriented—is perennially popular and its appeal constitutes the basis for many much-loved adventure narratives across time, be it Edisonade, science-fiction, or steampunk.

Furthermore, Nevins appears problematically to conflate the history of science fiction as a broad genre with the narrower history of steampunk. In describing science fiction he claims that "what the twentieth century science fiction writers took were the trappings of Verne and the ideology of the Edisonades" (VanderMeer, *SP* 7). Science fiction may have evolved in a general sense from earlier adventure writing. But with no proven (or even likely) direct link it seems presumptive to imagine that the steampunk writers of the 1980s looked, even indirectly, to the Edisonade adventure stories for inspiration. Its Victorian inspiration would appear to be connected directly instead to novelists H. G. Wells, Jules Verne, in addition to writers such as Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin, Matthew Arnold, and others whose work focuses on social, political, and philosophical issues germane to the period. The work of these writers will be examined in great detail in Chapter Two.

Steampunk Expands

We see then that the Victorian setting, the inclusion of time-travel within the story-line, and the science-fictional basis of the work, combine to create what rapidly becomes known as the steampunk category of science-fiction writing. These Victorian stories were quite popular by the 1990s and by then commonly termed "steampunk." The stories were broadly accepted as a popular science fiction sub-genre, one based in nineteenth-century

industrial society and featuring machine elements such as brass cogs, gears, and pulleys, and the ubiquitous Victorian steam engine.[8]

From its early roots in science fiction, the steampunk aesthetic expanded quickly to other media during the 1990s and early 2000s, often providing the setting for comic strip narratives and motion picture scripts. Contemporary steampunk films will be analyzed in greater detail in a later chapter as part of an exploration of the reach of today's steampunk aesthetic. For the purposes of this discussion of the history of steampunk a brief overview of relevant comic books and film is warranted.

Comic strip series with a steampunk setting include *Gotham by Gaslight* by Bryan Talbot (1989, published by DC Comics), Talbot's *The Adventures of Luther Arkwright* (1990, Dark Horse Comics), *Steam Detectives* by Kia Asamiya (1998, from Shueisha, Inc, a major publishing house in Japan), and *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* by Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neill (1999, America's Best Comics). Many other comic books during the 1990s and 2000s took up the mantle of steampunk adventure. The comic book, with its tendencies to incorporate into its storylines heroics, invention, and good intentions pitted against evil influences is a perfect match for the emerging genre of steampunk and its leanings toward adventure and the triumph of the good over evil. Steampunk comic books expand the movement to its next level of popularity and exposure.

The motion picture industry is not to be left behind and incorporates steampunk elements into several new projects. The industry had already tapped H. G. Wells' fantasy stories for the movies with *Time Machine* (1960) and *Island of Doctor Moreau* (1977), among others, as well as adaptations of works by Jules Verne such as *In Search of the*

Castaways (1962) and *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* (the 1956 movie starring Kirk Douglas is one of several films based on Verne's book *The Children of Captain Grant*). Turning to Wells again, a remake of *Time Machine* was produced in 2002. In this more recent version the story is set in late nineteenth century New York City, not as in the original story in London. The storyline is a creative remix of the original 1895 Victorian romantic science narrative. But these are all movies simply based on Victorian popular novels and cannot be classified as steampunk.

However, many scientific-adventure motion pictures in the 1990s and early 2000s were not simply remixes of tales of Verne or Wells. Instead they incorporate motifs from the scientific romance of the Victorian period by imagining specifically Victorian worlds, and then create narratives with characters who utilize futuristic machines. The invented stories depend upon the ubiquitous steam engine in fantasy futuristic scenarios and they essentially describe a truly steampunk aesthetic. For example, *Wild, Wild West*, a film released in 1999, is a narrative set in the nineteenth century western United States. Much of the action takes place on a steam-powered railroad train and the entire movie is replete with bizarre mechanical devices such as flying machines and a giant mechanical spider, the ultimate weapon of the brilliant but evil Dr. Loveless. These mechanical gadgets are steampunk visual elements, futuristic yet placed in an imagined Victorian timeframe. As in steampunk novels the storyline pits the renegade protagonist against the evildoer in battle after bizarre battle, with the good ultimately prevailing over the bad. In 2003, the film *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* was released and it, too, bears the markings of the steampunk influence. Loosely based on the first volume of the comic book series by Moore and O'Neill (published in 1999), the Victorian adventure unfolds in London, Venice, and elsewhere in Europe and it

incorporates multiple references to the work of H. G. Wells, Jules Verne, Edgar Allen Poe, and Bram Stoker, among others. In fact, several historical authors and characters are brought to life in the complex narrative. Although the movie garnered little critical acclaim at the time of its release, it has become somewhat of a cult classic especially with proponents of steampunk.

During the 1990s, after the adoption of the steampunk look in many comic strips and several films, the aesthetic continues its shift from narrow science-fiction subgenre, a traditional narrative media, to a broad and multi-platform mode of cultural inquiry and intervention. This shift is described by Jeff and Anne VanderMeer in the first of their two anthologies on the subject of steampunk. The VanderMeers explain that the steampunk sub-genre, emerging in the 1980s, was quickly absorbed into the science-fiction mainstream, the Victorian setting becoming part of the fabric of the larger science-fiction world (VanderMeer, *SP II* 10). The innovative (the fresh new steampunk genre) then became normalized within the larger genre and the heated interest in steampunk as a science-fiction sub-genre temporarily cooled. In the 1990s, with steampunk finding its way into comics and movies, a fledgling cultural movement emerged from there. This broader steampunk subculture rose up, creating "a vibrant fashion, arts, maker, and DIY (do-it-yourself) community" (VanderMeer, *SP II* 10-11).

These two periods of the movement, which are separated by what the VanderMeers term "a kind of Steampunk interregnum," are quite distinct from each other, and often situate steampunk practitioners as being in one or the other of two camps which are largely defined by generation (VanderMeer, *SB* 58). As noted by Catherine Siemann in "Some Notes on the Steampunk Social Problem Novel" one camp consists of a vocal group of first-generation

steampunk science-fiction writers who largely dismiss the expansion of the term to include the broad cultural phenomenon. To them true steampunk is narrowly defined as it originally was—a science fiction sub-genre. The other camp is made up of a second generation of steampunk practitioners who vigorously engage in the contemporary popular culture movement that embraces a steampunk aesthetic (Taddeo and Miller 7).

This fracture between steampunk generations demonstrates a dilemma for the movement as it moves into the future. Should steampunk remain true to its roots in science fiction, retaining its purity, if you will, as a neo-Victorian sub-genre, a narrative-based mode of expression? Or should steampunk allow its expansion into a broader enterprise to reshape it in such a way that it becomes a multi-modal expression, far removed and largely different from its original being? This dilemma and the sometimes sharply drawn lines between the two camps only exacerbate the innate difficulty of defining steampunk. It means something different to its many proponents, depending upon their position within the movement.

Further complicating the issue is the fact that steampunk science fiction and fantasy literature continues to be written and remains quite popular today, reminding us that the early steampunk roots in fiction are still a vibrant enterprise. Changes even within that original intellectual space are inevitable. Second-generation steampunk writers such as Cherie Priest (*Boneshaker,* 2009), Gail Carriger (*Soulless,* 2009), Stephen Hunt (*From the Deep of the Dark,* 2012) and others continue in the Jeter-Blaylock-Powers Victorian tradition. New author Ishbelle Bee is one of the latest to be introduced to the public with her first novel, *The Singular and Extraordinary Tale of Mirror and Goliath*, published in 2015 by The Angry Robot, publishing house of choice for many science fiction and fantasy authors over the

years. Joel Cunningham, editor for *Barnes and Noble Reads* and their *Sci-Fi and Fantasy*

blog, calls Bee's book a "clockwork fable, a dark-edged fairytale about a young girl and her

odd companion in a very strange version of Victorian England."[9] The release date for Bee's

novel in 2015 speaks to the ongoing popularity of the steampunk genre. If the book jacket,

launched March 18, 2015, accurately reflects the content, then readers are in for a true

steampunk adventure through the streets of a richly imagined nineteenth century London.

Steampunk Today

Although the Oxford Universal Dictionary still defines steampunk as a science fiction

based in nineteenth century industrial society, the term clearly has evolved to mean much

more. However, despite the fact that an accurate and up-to-date definition remains elusive, it

is important to understand the movement in its contemporary context. The steampunk

aesthetic has clearly moved well beyond its science-fiction roots and today illustrates a

contemporary lifestyle, defines a sub-set of the cultural community, and even forwards a

particular philosophical outlook. During the course of its evolution, steampunk has drawn in

practitioners so quickly that its influence can be seen across the fabric of global popular

culture and that influence can be observed in visual, decorative, and fashion arts. Many

contemporary visual artists work exclusively in the steampunk aesthetic and we will explore

their work in a later chapter. But even in the commercial decorative arts the influence can be

seen. For example, the Sherwin-Williams paint company borrows from the steampunk genre

in their 2013 line of interior and exterior paints. Colormix 2013 describes the aesthetic:

> "Our dark side beckons; we're irresistibly drawn to its murky depths and
> shadows. The colors of Midnight Mystery are moody, the vibe is masculine and the
> aesthetic is both Victorian and futuristic. Earthy Plum Brown, absinthian Bottle
> Green, the metal gray of Outerspace, and Rustic Red evoking the houndstooth cloak
> of Sherlock Holmes — these are the intriguing shades of the Midnight Mystery

palette. 'We've embraced the intoxicating allure of our dark side. It gives us power as we navigate a choppy economy, escaping to the futuristic Victorian vibe of steampunk design that offers a theatrical feel.' This palette is a declaration of independence–a statement of luxury and purpose that pairs warmly with textured fabrics and collections of curiosities."[10]

How did that evolution to the broader culture unfold? Steampunk exploded onto the popular culture scene through festivals, performances, comic books, movies, and television, and through those means, with able assistance from social media (today's word-of-mouth), it has become fully integrated into contemporary society. In fact, the IBM Social Sentiment Index, using advanced analytics, calls steampunk a trending phenomenon for the years 2013-2015.

Also assisting with steampunk's dissemination to a broader audience is the fact that it has become a regular topic in the lineup of panels at San Diego's Comic-Con International, one of the world's largest and oldest comic book conferences, a massive meet-up that has grown to include panels on film, literature, fashion, and performance, with requisite celebrity and movie star appearances part of the lure.[11] Steampunk is also a presence at other comic book conferences throughout the United States, for example those held annually in New York and Chicago, and across the globe, from India to the United Arab Emirates, from Russia to Great Britain.

In addition to the focused comic book conventions, many festivals, symposia, and other conferences have sprung up in the last ten years that are wholly dedicated to the steampunk movement. An annual gathering near the historic Gaslamp Quarter of San Diego combines Victoriana with steampunk. Gaslight Gathering 5, touted as a "Steampunk and Victorian Convention" on their web site, was held in September 2015 and boasted several

keynote speakers and guests of honor on the program and the promise of many special events during the two day conference, such as an art salon and vendor hall.[12] For the past several years, another convention, Her Royal Majesty's Steampunk Emporium, has secured use of the historic *Queen Mary* ocean liner, which is anchored in Long Beach, California and is made available for special events such as conferences, weddings, and other large gatherings. This multi-day festival, held under the imaginary auspices of Queen Victoria herself, is an extremely popular event featuring many of the best steampunk performers. A mix of sessions, keynote speakers, special evening social events, and performances, pack the symposium schedule, and bring participants in from all over the country. Over the past few years, more steampunk conferences and festivals such as the one held on the Queen Mary have been developed to accommodate the rising popularity of steampunk.

A popular steampunk blog and social media aggregator lists thirty-nine major steampunk events for 2013. The IBM Social Sentiment Index reveals that as a trending phenomenon steampunk experienced an eleven-fold increase in social media chatter between 2009 and 2012.[13] The October 2010 New York City Comic-Con may have impacted interest in the phenomenon. That convention had greatly increased its attendance each year since its first iteration in 2006. Analyzing public interest and opinion through social media and forums such as Twitter, message boards, and blogs, the IBM press release notes that in a single year (2010) there was an increase in internet chatter on the subject of steampunk by 296%. IBM's report predicts that retail markets will increase exponentially for steampunk-themed retail products and that the trend will move steampunk from craft to mass production. The National Retail Federation Convention of 2013 termed steampunk a trending cultural

phenomenon, a cultural meme that has infiltrated all aspects of popular culture "via a series of leaps across cultural domains."[14]

In the United States, the 2015 lineup of steampunk-themed conventions is even more extensive than in earlier years and reflects the solidifying popularity of the cultural movement. The online Steampunk Guide: Fashion and Events Calendar (2015) includes nearly one hundred meetings and conferences across the world. [15] This reflects a greater than 150% increase in the number of organized steampunk opportunities from just two years before. Highlights from 2015's events lineup include the *Steamathon: Las Vegas World Steampunk Convention* (February), *Wild Wild West Steampunk Convention* in Tucson, Arizona (March), *Alaska Steamposium 2015: Arctic Expedition* (April), and *Steampunk World's Fair* (New Jersey, May). According to its website the New Jersey event is the world's largest gathering of steampunk practitioners. Continuing a sampling from the 2015 events list there is *Steamtopia* (Detroit, Michigan, June), *Steampunk Invasion* (Dallas, Texas, September), and *Emerald City Steampunk Expo* (Wichita, Kansas, November).

Although originally an American creation, steampunk has become a global cultural enterprise and the conference and festival schedule reflects that fact in 2015. That year's *Steam Garden, Episode 8: Meiji Democracy* was held in Tokyo, Japan. This eighth annual event featured performances by an artists' and performers' collective and was expected to attract an international crowd to the largest steampunk gathering in that country. Several festivals in Australia and New Zealand were also held in 2015 in addition to festivals and symposia throughout Europe. *Weekend at the Asylum VII*, scheduled to be held in Lincoln, England, in August 2015, was touted as the biggest in Europe, a spectacular weekend event

that aimed to transform the city center into a teeming Victorian spectacle, complete with a market in the Castle square that is open to the public.[16]

The steampunk aesthetic has found its way into the popular culture scene in other ways, too, for example by influencing creative minds in the contemporary fashion and design world. The steampunk visual program, with its innovative re-imagining of the Victorian aesthetic, is a rich resource for designers. According to Katherine Gleason, author of *Anatomy of Steampunk, The Fashion of Victorian Futurism*, "steampunk fashion gives a tip of the hat and a flip of the bird to the blandness of today's minimalism and mass-produced style in favor of the individual, handcrafted aesthetic" (Gleason 9). She points out that the Ralph Lauren couture fall line of 2009 is one largely influenced by steampunk. Indeed, a quick look at all of Ralph Lauren's collections since at least 2008 makes it clear that he continues to mine the steampunk aesthetic for inspiration (Carriger 400). Silk fabrics in browns, cream, and gold, long retro-length skirts and dresses, watch fobs dangling from tweed waistcoats, top hats and bowlers, brown velvet gowns cut in a Victorian style, and even vintage-looking RL Polo Sport goggle sunglasses, all are part of the Ralph Lauren steampunk aesthetic.[17]

Louis Vuitton's 2012 collection (Fall Season) is another recent case of a major design house embracing the steampunk aesthetic as the basis of its visual inspiration. The Vuitton print ads picture models riding on an old-fashioned steam-powered train in a melancholy tribute to the alienation of train travel, a direct reference to the dual aspects of romance and disruption of the Victorian railway cars. The women appear lonely and silent, gazing forward out of the window into the distance. The models are clothed in richly embroidered

dresses, steampunk inspired outfits with brass and leather elements, their handbags and luggage all retro-Victorian in style. The strange hats are almost comically punk and the model on the right even wears an exaggerated pair of steampunk goggles. The photograph is a nostalgic look at a romanticized form of travel, but a sense of anxiety, a sense of alienation emerges from the scene, too. The models stare forward like automatons, futuristic figures transported as if by time machine to a previous century. It is an image that questions our contemporary space. Can we ever separate ourselves from times that come before? Can we imagine a re-invented Victorian era from our position that is decidedly post-human? There is an expression of both cautious wonderment and vague concern that forms a palpable tension caught by the camera lens.

Figure 1: Luis Vuitton Print Ad for Fall 2012 Collection (September 2012 Vogue Magazine)

In the next chapter we will examine Victorian visual artists such as those in the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood as they rejected contemporary norms to express a romantic retrospective vision. Here, too, the Louis Vuitton designers look back to an earlier time for inspiration. Their vision is both romantic and unsettling and implies a certain anxiety and sense of alienation. In Chapter Five we will explore how this unsettled quality, the tension between romance and anxiety, hope and fear, is an underlying part of the contemporary experience and one that the steampunk philosophical outlook addresses. Here, the aesthetic expression is completely appropriated in

the Vuitton print ad as an articulation that would resonate with contemporary readers of Vogue magazine, merchandise buyers in department stores, and fashionable purchasers of the high-end couture pieces being advertised.

There is another factor that helps explain steampunk's expansion into popular culture. Many proponents of today's steampunk aesthetic are part of the burgeoning do-it-yourself (DIY) subculture, a loose-knit community of people interested in creating all kinds of everyday items themselves instead of purchasing mass-produced versions from stores. DIY proponents rebel against our dependence on store-made items and reject the contemporary consumer society that supports mass production. A technology-based subset of the DIY community is often referred to as the *maker culture* and it is this group that intersects in spirit most directly with steampunk. Dale Dougherty, founder and editor of Make Magazine, has been involved in the community from the outset. He explains, "When I started Make magazine, I recognized that makers were enthusiasts who played with technology to learn about it. A new technology presented an invitation to play, and makers regard this kind of play as highly satisfying. Makers give it a try; they take things apart; and they try to do things that even the manufacturer did not think of doing. Whether it is figuring out what you can do with a 3D printer or an autonomous drone aircraft, makers are exploring what these things can do and they are learning as well. Out of that process emerge new ideas, which may lead to real-world applications or new business ventures. Making is a source of innovation. While technology has been the spark of the Maker Movement, it has also become a social movement that includes all kinds of making and all kinds of makers" (Dougherty). It is this entrepreneurial spirit of making that resonates with the steampunk movement and provides an overlap between the two communities.

The maker movement sprang up in the early 2000s and has expanded exponentially since then. The movement forwards the notion of individual empowerment through the dual act of understanding and then creating the objects we use, whether utilitarian or decorative. The maker movement directly counters the passivity of contemporary consumer culture and focuses instead on self-reliance and rugged individualism. The movement centers on the idea of peer-led learning, collaboration, and a DIY or DIWO (do-it-with-others) approach to construction, even with technology-oriented products. The magazine *Make* spreads the word on project ideas, products, events, and news. And, beginning in 2006 in the San Francisco Bay Area, *Maker Faires* have begun to draw thousands of enthusiastic inventors and creators into the movement. With a festival-like atmosphere, the events feature workshops, vendor demonstrations, and opportunities to network with like-minded inventors, creators, and teachers. Tim Bajarin, in his 2014 *Time Magazine* article on the Maker Movement states that over 280,000 people attended Maker Faires and mini-Maker Faires worldwide in 2014 (Bajarin).

As is the case with proponents of today's well-established steampunk culture, Maker participants are tinkerers who reject the streamlined late twentieth century technological objects as dis-empowering of the average person. The layperson is often incapable of penetrating the slick exterior of the contemporary machine. He is rendered powerless. The maker movement empowers the individual just as the steampunk movement does. Both efforts re-link technology with its human creative foundation. As a distinct and contemporary movement that addresses societal issues involving humankind's relationship to the consumed object, the maker movement is worthy of its own separate study. For the purposes of this project, the maker movement serves as an apt example of a growing interest

in the larger community for a return to individualism, personal empowerment and creativity, and a purposeful rejection of the mass-produced products of a contemporary passive consumer society. Both the steampunk and the maker movement actively and specifically address these concerns.

Today the steampunk visual program and viewpoint capture the zeitgeist of contemporary culture. The movement's underlying approach to life as described in film, comic strips, and novels, and adopted by its proponents in contemporary culture, is one that forwards the notion of an active and egalitarian society, a sense of individual responsibility within that society, and the generally optimistic belief in the future of the human enterprise. Perhaps reminiscent of the optimistic outlook prevalent during the Kennedy years, those fleeting years of the early 1960s when the possibilities for good seemed endless and the threat of evil contained, today's steampunk movement is equally steeped in optimism. Steampunk incorporates a visionary sense of the way things *could be* in the future. It is that optimism that separates steampunk from cyberpunk, which has as its foundation a much more dystopian and negative outlook. Perhaps it is steampunk's optimism that helps explain its tenacity as a movement and cyberpunk's short-lived tenure on the popular culture scene.

Today, a very diverse and global cross-section of humanity is inspired to role-play in elaborate Victorian costume, gather together in ever-expanding steampunk festivals and conferences, and enthusiastically embrace the *philosophy of steam*. These participants take the steampunk program seriously and are not simply sporting costumes as one might each year on Halloween. These are carefully crafted, well thought out visual creations that make a statement about both the Victorian era and the techno-fantasy that is imagined for the future.

Many contemporary artists utilize steampunk-inspired brass machinery, gears, and cogs in their work. Fashion designers borrow the exaggerated Victorian look of leather and lace, corsets and brass trim for their seasonal lines, looking to steampunk for aesthetic inspiration. Musical artists have adopted the style by incorporating a Victorian or Tin Pan Alley highly-percussive piano sound in their work. And proponents of a do-it-yourself -lifestyle explore steampunk visual elements in their creative projects. Today steampunk is a worldwide visual program and lifestyle outlook that has permeated such diverse aspects of the arts as fashion, commercial and residential interior design, and even the entertainment industry. In the past ten years it has spread quickly across the globe, weaving itself seamlessly into the fabric of contemporary society.

The first generation steampunk writer, at the original nexus of steampunk's development, finds himself in a challenging position today. He can either acknowledge the major evolutions that steampunk has undergone and accept its expanded footprint. Or he can look at today's developments as a separate and unrelated enterprise that appropriates elements from true steampunk but does not represent it in spirit or ideology. As mentioned in earlier pages, there is a tension that exists between the generations of steampunk practitioners. Early steampunk science-fiction writers rightfully feel that they 'invented' steampunk and they object to those second generation proponents who eagerly embrace the idea of the neo-Victorian narrative and aesthetics and develop it further, either within the science-fiction genre or in other fields such as visual arts, performing arts, or film. First generation steampunk writers often declare, quite dramatically, that the genre is dead. Jess Nevins postulates that "most second generation steampunk is not true steampunk—there is little to nothing 'punk' about it….most of it is more accurately described as 'steam sci-fi…"

(VanderMeer, *SP* 10). This posturing clouds the examination of steampunk as a significant contemporary development. And my research for the purposes of this project points to steampunk as being alive and well, albeit continually evolving and growing.

Steampunk today clearly is not 'dead' but has, instead morphed into an enterprise well beyond its simple beginnings. Early steampunk developers no longer control their invention, nor has it remained neatly in the sub-genre of science-fiction. I have carefully considered these clashing views on the state of steampunk, understand the position of the early adopters, but also acknowledge that the steampunk sub-genre of science-fiction is now a global enterprise that has completely burst out of those narrow confines. Clearly Nevins supports the position of the first generation steampunk writers as he states that second generation steampunk has lost its ideology, its rebellious roots, "inevitable once a subgenre becomes established…but its loss is nonetheless to be mourned" (VanderMeer, *SP* 11). It is my contention that there is no need to mourn. Instead, we must look in wonder at what this child of science fiction has grown to become.

Steampunk's Contemporary Appeal

Why does steampunk continue to expand and broaden its influence today? Writer Ken Dvorak helps us understand the reasons underlying steampunk's appeal, the key to steampunk's popularity, when he states that by "reimagining both the past and the future, often through a neo-Victorian lens, steampunk also allows us to debate serious social, economic, political, and cultural issues relevant to our present lives" (Taddeo ix – Introduction by Ken Dvorak). The movement successfully concerns itself with issues of contemporary society such as class, politics, gender, and economics, and it provides a multi-

modal platform for addressing these issues through the exercise of examining and re-imagining the Victorian response of a century ago to similar societal issues. Steampunk is a gentle and optimistic examination of important issues that we face today. It chooses the Victorian period as an aesthetic skin because the Victorian individual also had to face fundamental changes in social, political, and economic areas of life. As is the case today, the Victorian citizen's challenges were largely based on changes wrought by the emergence of a ubiquitous and powerful technology, in their period in history it was the steam-powered engine and all its implications for society, industry, and individual autonomy. The thoughtful Victorian needed to respond directly and vigorously to this machine challenge. In the next chapter we will explore in greater detail the social, cultural, and political landscape of the Victorian era and how its upheavals and social changes resonates with the spirit of contemporary steampunk.

In exploring the steampunk movement it is important to acknowledge that steampunk is not simply an aesthetic surface, a pastiche of Victorian visual elements, a 'fun' style to champion as a weekend fashion statement. Some scholars, for example Mike Perschon, do consider steampunk as fundamentally an aesthetic, but it is my contention that is not the case. Looking at it as simply a visual program does not acknowledge the motivating outlook or philosophy of the steampunk movement, nor does such a reading help to reveal the reasons underlying steampunk's ability to resonate with the contemporary individual. One must examine the underlying outlook more closely to understand steampunk philosophy and why it so closely echoes contemporary thought.

Furthermore, steampunk does not simply imitate the Victorian style. In fact it does not express an interest in straightforward Victorian retro-fashion or nineteenth century life per se. It has no underlying wish to repeat the Victorian era. Instead it imagines an alternative history of the Victorian period as envisioned from a contemporary perspective. Mike Perschon aptly points out that "steampunk evokes a sense of the past, rather than slavishly repeating it" (Taddeo 23). In Chapter Five we will introduce key players in contemporary philosophy and theory, and consider how the steampunk movement not only echoes some of today's philosophical approaches, but how it also helps to define and shape a unique contemporary outlook. Although in that chapter we will explore possible answers as to why steampunk makes the effort to re-interpret or re-imagine the Victorian state-of-mind through its own contemporary lens, we begin that larger discussion here by asking the basic question as to why steampunk chooses the Victorian aesthetic.

Why the Victorian?

Aesthetically, steampunk reclaims the Victorian period romantically, featuring old-fashioned machine elements such as brass cogs, gears, and pulleys and Victorian costumes and performance settings (Bowser and Croxall, VanderMeer, Barrett). Steampunk practitioners embrace the idea of the visible expression of the machine, preferring the exposed brass elements of Victorian mechanics to the sleek opacity of late twentieth century technological objects (Perschon Steamwars 130). Rejecting the opacity of the contemporary technological object, such as the streamlined Apple product, which they consider anathema, the steampunk artist embraces the idea of the visibly expressed machine.

Why do they feel this way about the streamlined technical products of today? Steampunk fully rejects the modernist machine because the machine of today is accessible only to the specialist, the computer genius. Steampunk practitioners believe that current sleek and visually mysterious personal computers and electronic products dis-empower the average person, preventing that person from understanding the machine, of gaining a true appreciation of the underlying workings of the machine, even of being able to alter or hack the machine in customized ways. This philosophy is in line with the Maker or DIY community whose members seek to re-introduce production and creation to the individual by wresting it away from the corporate or industry structure. It is only the Mac Genius, for example, who can access, repair and understand the highly-mechanized Apple product. Often the layperson cannot even open up machines today, as their hard-case designs are specifically produced to be impenetrable. The steampunk artist carefully and purposefully re-links technology with its human creative foundation by rejecting the minimalist modern aesthetic and returning visually to the Victorian exposed mechanical skeleton. It forwards the notion of a machine that we can intellectually read without an advanced degree in computer sciences.

In the next chapter we will examine more closely the development of steam power and the life-changing implications that invention had on Victorian commerce, transportation, and society in general. Suffice it to say that concerns with technology's impact were at the forefront of intellectual, literary, and philosophical thought in Victorian times. In parallel fashion, during the late twentieth century, when the steampunk aesthetic developed, similar concerns regarding technology's impact on the individual within society emerged and needed to be addressed if not resolved. The environment in which steampunk developed was a period of great changes in technology, changes that particularly impacted the individual. By

the end of the twentieth century, computer technology dominated society as electronic modes of communication and information gathering became ubiquitous. No longer serving simply as stand-alone platforms for games and word-processing, the personal computer became a vibrant networked link to the outside world and a key component of communication, both active (personal messages and connections) and passive (in facilitating the influx of news and information). By exploring the Victorian response to the machine, examining it, re-imagining it, re-purposing it, the steampunk practitioner faces his own important contemporary fears and anxieties. He seeks to find solutions to allay these fears in order to forge a viable path into the future.

The decade of the 1990s not only witnessed the rise of steampunk but also the advent of the Internet for personal use. In the space of just a few years Twitter, Google, and other Internet innovations became everyday tools for the individual. As the personal computer evolved we came to depend on desktop and laptop machines to handle daily work and home life, mobile devices, such as cell phones and tablets to keep up with loved ones and the latest news, and other electronic tools, such as computer-aided televisions, for entertainment purposes and to build efficiency into our lives. Online games, Facebook, Linked-In and other new social networking media were folded into our modes of existence, becoming connections to new friends and old, professional colleagues and corporate networks.

Oftentimes we wondered if we could survive without our machines. Our sense of dependence fueled an anxiety as we questioned our ability to cope in a computer-less world. The anxiety was reinforced as the turn of the millennium approached. Fears of catastrophe in the form of digital meltdown dominated the news. Y2K, as it was termed, was considered a

viable worry and billions of dollars were spent on dealing with the following question.[18]

Would all those digital mechanisms that we depend upon so much collapse at the stroke of

midnight December 31, 1999, when dates could no longer be recognized by machines

programmed to begin a date with the number 19? Although the fears and speculation proved

groundless, this new electronic machine age had us in its grip. Would mankind soon be

overtaken by the ubiquitous all-important machines? This was the world that spawned the

steampunk movement, a world both anxious and intrigued by the power, potential and

realized, of electronic machines. Steampunk would seek a solution to our anxieties by facing

the machine head-on, refashioning our approach to its use, and reinstating our individual

autonomy as makers of the machine, all of this done while fully acknowledging the newly

networked post-human structures of the world.

Conclusion

Steampunk today is a global cultural phenomenon. It is both an aesthetic program and

a value system that directly addresses concerns of contemporary society as it relates to the

tensions and fundamental problems introduced by rapidly advancing technology. But,

although it may focus on technology and the future, steampunk directly addresses many

general concerns of contemporary society relating to issues as diverse as gender, class,

economies and politics.

The steampunk practitioner looks to the Victorian period as heroic because history

shows us that mankind survived a massive and impactful integration of mechanization into

the lives of the Victorian individual. In an effort to channel that heroism and conquer their

own technical nemeses, contemporary steampunk artists must confront their own version of

the machine. To do so, they don Victorian regalia, prepare for imagined battle using tools and methods from another century (steam power, gears, and cogs, exposed mechanics) and bring with them great eagerness and enthusiasm. This is fantasy, the blurring and romanticizing of history. However, at the same time it is a rebellion against the perceived notion that contemporary society champions the di-empowerment of the individual. Sigmund Freud might call this effort denial. But the steampunk retro-Victorian aesthetic is, in fact, a creative effort to challenge the realities of an uncertain future that the contemporary individual faces. Steampunk is not simply cosplay, nor can it be explained correctly as a visual pastiche. Instead, it is a philosophical approach to contemporary life and it supports an effort to deal with issues that confront today's society on a fundamental level. It is an outlook that some might perceive as simply nostalgic, but it is actually more forward-thinking than nostalgic. It is also cautiously optimistic about the future for humankind. Steampunk is eager to forge, albeit with a cautious trepidation, a new path into that future.

Thus we can see that steampunk addresses contemporary issues through a creative re-imagining of life in the Victorian period. Interestingly, in referencing the Victorian, steampunk challenges the traditional understanding of the Victorian period, which tends to impose "a homogenizing identity that ignores the complexities of the era and its people; the image of sexual repression and female submissiveness for example, was often more myth than reality and challenged by the Victorians themselves" (Taddeo 57). We will see in the next chapter that the Victorian outlook was in fact nuanced, complex, diverse, and importantly sought to address its own significant issues at the dawn of the Modernist century.

Chapter Two

The Victorian/Steampunk Connection:
Upheaval, Discovery, and the Birth of Modernism

"The face of history is a compass and steampunk is its wandering arrow"
Diana M. Pho
Editor, BeyondVictorian.com

Introduction

The steampunk movement explores humankind's relationship to modern technology

and develops an aesthetic and philosophical program around that investigation. The aesthetic

itself largely draws on a re-imagining of Victoriana—both its philosophy and its visual

markers, and it is that Victorian interest that we will address directly in the following pages

of this chapter. Emerging in the 1980s in the United States and, as noted in earlier pages,

quickly catching the interest of American popular culture, the steampunk enterprise is now a

global phenomenon whose influences crisscross cultures and nations. Steampunk's inventive,

positive, and adventurous outlook develops during a period in which the machine had

become a ubiquitous presence in the daily life of the mainstream human individual.

Steampunk art conveys an optimistic notion for the future of the human-machine partnership.

This is despite the fact that the late-twentieth century post-modern period is one in which

technology is seen as having the potential to dominate humanity permanently and perhaps

adversely. Within this more cautious intellectual landscape the steampunk aesthetic and its

philosophical foundations express a sense of adventure, self-motivation, and

experimentation. In fact, the steampunk gear-head's approach to life is one that embraces the

unknown future with enthusiasm. We will explore various aspects of the post-modern period

and contemporary technology in later discussion, but in terms of this chapter we will explore the Victorian period in order to fully understand its underlying and significant connections with the steampunk movement. We will find that both periods, the late nineteenth century and the late twentieth century face similar issues concerning technology and the role of the machine. As part of our examination of the earlier period and in order to frame the Victorian era suitably and to clarify steampunk's relationship to it, we will also explore the philosophy and aesthetics of Modernism as it evolves out of the Victorian period in the early twentieth century.

Why does the Victorian era appeal to contemporary steampunk culture? Why does a British era over one hundred years in the past resonate with an emerging American enterprise? What is the reason for steampunk's attraction to Victoriana? Well beyond a mere aesthetic connection, a simple visual appropriation, if you will, on the part of contemporary steampunk efforts, we will find a deep kinship between steampunk and the Victorians that speaks more broadly to their respective positions in history, in particular to each era's fraught relationship to rapidly evolving technological advances. The reaction to this fragile relationship with technology is that both the Victorian individual and the contemporary steampunk practitioner make efforts to embrace the machine by imbuing it with organic qualities, by humanizing it, in order to fully understand it and ultimately accept it. We will see that the Victorians romanticize the machine in direct oppositional response to the prevailing regularity and organization of the science that dominated intellectual and social advancements in the nineteenth century. And we will also find that it is the romanticized Victorian machine that speaks to the contemporary steampunk practitioner, who finds himself similarly mired in a world in which the ubiquitous machine infiltrates every aspect of

his life. No longer able to function without the machine, the steampunk artist looks back to another period in history in which the (then) modern machine challenges the individual's way of life. We can thus imagine that steampunk's interest in the Victorian stems first and foremost from the era's philosophical and societal viewpoints, and that the repurposing of the Victorian aesthetic is the result of a deep well of appeal.

The steampunk aesthetic borrows nearly exclusively from the Victorian. The repurposing of Victorian visual elements includes the use of features such as brass cogs, gears, and other components of the steam engine, mechanical clockworks, nineteenth century garb--corsets, lace trim, leather vests, and a persistent reference to time travel and man-machine hybrid beings, which is the stuff of Victorian scientific romance. This Victorian repurposing can be observed broadly across the spectrum of the steampunk movement—from visual arts to performance, and including amateur steampunk cos-play participation at the many popular steampunk festivals and conferences that occur annually across the world.[19] In the following pages we will explore the specific Victorian era outlooks, sensibilities, and aesthetics that inspire the steampunk artist and what are the possible underlying reasons for the contemporary movement's interest in the look of this historic period.

In order to clarify steampunk's philosophical and aesthetic position, this chapter will also introduce the concept of Modernism as it emerges intellectually from, and in chronological terms immediately after, the Victorian era. In the early years of the twentieth century the avant-garde modernist completely rejects his Victorian roots and fully embraces modernization and the hurried pace of modern life. Avant-garde artists, including Dadaists, Futurists, and other representatives of the early Modern movement, seek to entirely destroy

the aesthetics of traditional Victorian bourgeois society. Perhaps Modernism is, in a sense, the resolution of various challenges of the Victorian era. Those challenges include explosive advances in technology, fundamental changes in traditional society, and the philosophical impact of new scientific discoveries. However, we will see that the steampunk movement distances itself from Modernism's aesthetic: sleek edges, minimalism, abstraction, and rather finds itself re-aligned with the visually complex Victorian past, with its romantic roots, chaotic absorption of new technology, and its trepidation of, but attraction to, the future. The post-modern steampunk aesthetic that incorporates fragmented elements from various sources and leaves the stark Modernist effort behind is sympathetic to Victorian visual fussiness, its rich ornamentation, and its organic approach to the machine that is the Victorian citizen's new partner in daily modern life.

The Victorian Era: A Brief Overview of the Historical Period

We begin with the basic historical facts. The Victorian period corresponds to the lengthy reign of Great Britain's Queen Victoria, who was crowned Queen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain in 1837 at the young age of eighteen and who ruled for much of the nineteenth century. Her monarchy lasted nearly sixty-four years until her death in 1901 at the age of eighty-one. Although the Victorian era refers quite simply to an historic period, delineated by the reign of the Queen, scholars often note the particular outlook, philosophy, and approach to life in Victorian times and it will be these aspects to which we direct our attention.

Queen Victoria ruled during a period of great expansion for the British Empire. Britain's reach stretched from the vast continent of India to deep into China. Both Singapore

and Hong Kong were British territories during the nineteenth century. Across the Atlantic

Ocean Canada was also controlled by the British and to the south several large regions on the

continent of Africa were held by them, including Sudan, Rhodesia (now Zambia and

Zimbabwe), and South Africa. International trade dominated this global expansion with

material goods making their way across seas and land, to and from the extensive British

colonies. Although conflicts occasionally erupted, in particular in the colonies whose native

citizens periodically challenged their British oversight, this was an era of general peace and

prosperity.[20]

This expansive period was marked by great technological advances and fundamental

scientific discoveries. The nineteenth century witnessed the efficient harnessing of steam

power, the development and subsequent rapid growth of the railway system, and the

introduction of such innovations as the electric telegraph, electric light bulb, and the

standardization of time itself.[21]   Even the bicycle as we know it today was perfected during

the Victorian period, quickly becoming a useful and popular form of individual transport.

Photography, invented early in the nineteenth century, also evolved significantly

during the Victorian period and it had great impact on visual literacy. The new medium

introduced a capability that seemed magical--capturing momentary scenes from real life,

however mundane, and forever setting those memories down on paper for later enjoyment

and recollection. Photography challenged traditional ways of seeing, questioning fine art's

primacy in regard to historic documentation and representation, and delivering memory from

the hazy chasms of the mind to the tangible and the repetitious. Photography quickly became

a widely used and popular tool for the modern citizen. The photograph was used in such

diverse ways as to assist artists in creating painted portraits and to document significant

social and political events for newspapers and other official enterprises. At the same time,

amateur photography became a hobby for the well-to-do. But most significantly, in all its

uses, photography introduced the revolutionary ability to capture the immediacy of the

fleeting moment and give it a new permanence through a lasting and tangible record of that

moment in time.

These technological changes and scientific advancements helped bring economic,

social, and political changes to Europe, America, and elsewhere across the globe. Factories

fueled the economic engine with constant innovation, introducing new and better ways to

produce goods, at the same time forcing many workers into lives of hard work and long

hours. The swift growth of capitalism was not always smooth and painless. Masses of factory

workers soon began to impact society. The rise of a burgeoning middle class, in part due to

factory modernizations and mechanizations, ultimately allowed for the pursuit of leisure and

the expansion of the visual and literary arts. The factory workers helped define that new

social class. As this emerging class formed its own socio-economic category, it sometimes

found itself in an oppositional relationship with the well-established and traditional

bourgeoisie. The Victorian period birthed a new class of citizens along with all the ensuing

social and economic changes that occurred.

As one can imagine, these many and varied developments brought about profound

changes in intellectual and emotional life for "the first people to live in a culture dominated

by technology" (Sussman, Introduction). Even as modern social structures loosened the strict

encasement of individuals within particular classes, Victorians from all levels of society

continued to value hard work, order, and personal morality. And, despite the fact that established traditional social hierarchies mold the era, Victorian society recognized the worth of personal effort and its potential role in getting ahead in life, and favored those who, by dint of their own drive, moved up the social ladder and achieved both financial and social success (McKenzie 150). This attitude of self-help and entrepreneurship foreshadows the twentieth century and modernism, which is marked by the idea that the individual is free to advance in life through merit, no longer dependent upon familial rank to gain entrance to upper levels of social standing.

Thus we can see that the Victorian period is one of transition in which the socially-stratified traditional lifestyle finally gives way to the 'modern life' of freedom and social mobility. In America this transition is more smoothly achieved than in Victorian England. Although Americans were certainly equally ensconced in a shared cultural experience as supported by a strong and confident nation, the American culture was not based on monarchy or global empire as was British Victorian society. Perhaps our democratic heritage allowed us to make that transition to the modern capitalist life less traumatically. Be that as it may, for the purposes of this project we focus on Victorian England. It is this culture to which the steampunk movement turns as source of inspiration in developing its contemporary aesthetic.

The Victorian Psyche: Technology and Change

Along with a solid work ethic and general optimism for the emerging modern urban lifestyle, there is a tension that threads its way through the Victorian consciousness. And it is this anxiety that the steampunk artist fastens onto as familiar to his own contemporary worries. The Victorians express ambivalence with the gross changes to daily life they witness

and experience around them. The gritty urban streets replace familiar rural lanes. The fast

pace of modern life takes over the old leisurely pace experienced in yesteryear's villages.

There is also a new dependence upon the standardized time imposed by the railroad system.

That regularized system replaces the local time that was itself based solely on the town hall

clock and therefore varied from town to town. What emerges during this period, and is

expressed by writers and visual artists, is a longing for the simpler rural past, and an urgent

questioning of what impact the new modern urban life will ultimately have on the individual

psyche. Often expressed are "familiar Victorian woes—lack of religious certitude, political

confusion, alienation from virtue, acute self-consciousness…" (McPherson 28). It is that

tension, that concern about looming fundamental changes in daily life that shapes the

Victorian.

We will find that it is just that tension that appeals to the steampunk artist. Today the

contemporary individual reacts to the sleekly encased (and thus perceived as mysterious)

Apple product. The steampunk artist rebels against the gadget's impenetrability by opening

up the machine and making it understandable to the average person. And he does this by

harkening back to the machine of the past. The contemporary computer is Victorianized, its

on-off switch *modded* to operate with the turn of a key, making the mechanism recognizable,

revealing its basic functionality to the lay person and not just to the Apple 'genius.'[22] In the

steampunk culture, gears and bolts, and other nineteenth-century components are utilized as a

visual skin for twentieth-century electronics such as computers and cell phones.

During the nineteenth-century age of uncertainty and modernization, many Victorian

writers focus their work on exploring the changing aspects of aesthetics, society, culture, and

science. The work of visual artists also reflects these changes. Writers and visual artists express a sentimental and emotional response that looks back to the familiar and comfortable past. Picturesque rural landscapes, homages to the heroes of ancient Greece and Rome are popular subjects for Victorian artist. Coupled with this nostalgia, however, some writers and visual artists respond to the times with a curiosity regarding the future and an eagerness to explore what that future may reveal. That tension between past and future will produce in the Victorians an interest in romanticizing the machine in efforts to cope with the grip that the machine-age has on the individual. The Victorians humanize the machine, giving it comfortable and familiar organic attributes. The steampunk movement will pick up on the nostalgia and romance of the machine in its repurposing of Victorian elements during its own period of tension and its questioning of the contemporary machine-age and the future ahead.

It is in the tension and questioning, in the eager march forward coupled with the longing to step back that we will find steampunk's sense of brotherhood with the Victorians. Much like his earlier counterpart, the steampunk artist longs for the past even as he embraces the future. In the following pages we will see that the Victorians, in much the same way, look back to the pre-industrial era as one that is simple and noble, without the chaos of mechanization. This nostalgia for an earlier time speaks to concerns regarding the paradigm shifts they are experiencing in the nineteenth century and the inevitable emerging modern lifestyle. And even as they ultimately, or alternatively, embrace the machine-age, they imbue the machine with organic qualities and romanticize it in order to fold it into their life experience in a palatable and understandable manner.

The Nineteenth Century's Remarkable Developments in Science and Technology

In order to fully understand the operational tensions of the period we must explore in some detail the role of science and technology in the nineteenth century. An examination of specific changes within science, technology, mechanization, communication, and transport, and the resulting shifts in Victorian thought as it is expressed in the work of Thomas Carlyle, H. G. Wells, John Ruskin, and other leading literary and philosophical figures will further elucidate the relationship of steampunk to its earlier counterpart. The nineteenth century was a period filled with rapid advancements and this tremendous growth and development appeals to the steampunk artist. What developments are most significant during the nineteenth century and which of those are brought forward for use by the steampunk movement? Any comprehensive nineteenth- century timeline of innovation and discovery would include certain significant events in the areas of transportation, communication, and scientific research. Each of those, as outlined below, helps define the time and explain the appeal to the contemporary steampunk artist.

In terms of transportation, early steam-powered locomotives were introduced in the 1820s. By 1830 the first intercity railway in Great Britain, operating between Liverpool and Manchester Railway, was up and running. In the United States short-distance rail lines were built in the 1830s to connect to already bustling and well-established river ports and ocean harbors. Within a few decades a transcontinental railway was in place using a single gauge, connecting the two coastlines via vast tracts of open land. By extending existing routes throughout the eastern part of the continent to the new Western Railway both material goods and passengers could make their way from New York City or Chicago all the way to the city of San Francisco.

Also in the early years of the nineteenth century the steamship developed sufficiently enough to allow immense iron ships to travel across the Atlantic Ocean between the European continent and the Americas. By the early 1830s Dutch, Canadian, American, and British ships regularly plied the waters between the continents. In terms of transportation within cities, electric rail cars were introduced in the 1880s and public transportation became a staple of cities worldwide by the turn of the century. To close out a remarkable century of transportation advancement, the modern motorcar was invented in 1885 and soon became a new mode of transportation that revolutionized daily life and greatly expanded the horizons of the individual citizen, whether living in a rural or urban setting.

Parallel to these rapid developments in transportation, efforts were also underway to expand networks of communications. Building on earlier optical telegraph systems which involved using lines of sight and signals transmitted from hilltop to hilltop, the electric telegraph was developed in the mid-nineteenth century. From 1820 onward, various scientists and entrepreneurs experimented with running signals through wires with the goal of telegraphic communication. During the 1830s Americans Samuel Morse and Joseph Henry and British medical student William Cooke provided important breakthroughs nearly simultaneously. By the mid-1840s American and British telegraph lines were finally in place and functioning (Standage 32-33, 48-49). The electric telegraph expanded rapidly to become the major form of long-distance communication in the nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries. Then, in 1876 the telephone was invented by Alexander Graham Bell. An instant success, within just four years there were 30,000 telephones in use. To close out the century in the area of communication, the first radio transmission was conducted in 1895. By the time of World War One, just a few decades later, radio was a standard method of

communication on the battlefield and in most communities. In summary, nineteenth century communication went from horse-carried letter to instant written telegraph to telephone and radio within a matter of several decades. This revolutionary shift in communications dramatically impacted the life and times of every individual.

Within the various areas of scientific research, the most impactful of the Victorian century may be the work of Charles Darwin. His 1859 treatise on *The Origin of Species* was a controversial book that challenged the very roots of humankind and, with it, the tenets of Judeo-Christian thought. The work of Darwin and others revealed the unknown in nature, questioned the traditional understanding of humankind's beginnings, and foretold of a future full of more discoveries and changes. Other significant advances in science include Thomas Edison's 1879 invention of the incandescent light bulb which revolutionized daily life by expanding hours of operation for the workplace, adding functional hours for work and play in the cities, and augmenting greatly the comfort and efficient running of the domestic home. Finally, another remarkable scientific innovation closed out this century of breakthroughs. That is the discovery of radium by Marie and Pierre Curie (1898), whose work on radioactivity--a term coined by Marie Curie-- would bring the husband and wife scientific team the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1903. The Curies' research would lead to medical and scientific breakthroughs in terms of cancer treatment, research on atomic sub-atomic particles, x-ray technology, among other avenues of discovery. Overall, twentieth century thinkers built on the groundbreaking discoveries and the solid scientific foundation that Victorian-era inventors, entrepreneurs, and scientists established.

The brief timeline above highlights some of the major factors that dramatically changed every-day life for the Victorian individual and which molded a new modern outlook by the close of the century. As noted, advances in the areas of communication, transportation, and scientific research were the focus of much of this remarkable work. The shift from rural life to urban, the evolution of transportation from carriage to railroad, the abandonment of local time in favor of standardized (railroad) time, and the concomitant quickening of the pace of life from leisurely to bustling, all were chaotic shifts that created what came to be known as *modern life*. We will see that, just as certain new and innovative electronic elements and tools fundamentally impact and help define contemporary times (e.g., the personal computer, cell phone, Internet), there are key mechanical elements that help define the Victorian times. It is to the mechanical specifically that we turn next.

First among the symbols of the era are the clock and the steam-powered locomotive, two features that later will be incorporated into the steampunk aesthetic. The Victorian clock is ubiquitous and intrusive. It symbolizes the regulation and structure of the new urban life and factors into the work of authors such as Jules Verne. For example, Verne's *Around the World is Eighty Days* is a story involving a race against the clock. And it is a story replete with clock images and symbolism. In the story, the manservant Jean Passepartout, whose name translates as 'master key,' is utterly dependent on, in fact nearly addicted to, his own fairly inaccurate timepiece. Passepartout's master is also dependent upon the clock and is himself described as clockwork, automaton, and machine, so indebted to and integrated with his standardized time is he (Walter 540). The entire Verne story focuses on the absurdity of time, and the conquering of space by time as the two fellows make their way around the globe on a gentlemen's bet. Their race against the clock involves the creative use of many

modern methods of transport-from balloon to steamship to railway car. It is a race between time and space.

In a sense the regularization of time and the subsequent shift in the perception of space allowed the Victorian individual to experience time as *malleable*. In the Victorian period it is the railway system that most transforms the individual's sense of time and space. Transport via the railroad car makes time and space seem flexible, conquerable, changeable. It may even imply that both time and space exist solely as human constructs alterable through technology. And soon the global regularization of time will further support that notion.

Transportation: The Steam Engine Defines Shipping and the Overland Railway

Steampunk's use of the steam engine as its symbolic mode of mechanization is a direct appropriation from the Victorian period. Although stationary steam power was invented in the latter part of the eighteenth century for use in the textile industry and in coal mining, it was not until the early nineteenth century that the steam engine specifically configured for operating ships and locomotives was developed (McKenzie 152). During the Victorian era the expanding steamship industry was dominated by the British who designed and built ships for European and American companies. By the 1830s major routes were established for international trade, with the British largely 'at the helm' of this new industry. Bigger and faster ships were developed, new technologies such as the double-hull and the compound expansion engine improved speed and brought down costs, new companies rose to compete for both passengers and industrial cargo (McKenzie 152-159). But the overseas shipping industry was not the only one that successfully utilized the steam engine. During the

nineteenth century overland transportation developed dramatically too, and impacted both commercial industries and private lives throughout the world.

As one of most significant technological developments of the nineteenth century, railway transportation radically affected lifestyles of the Victorian individual in both city and country. Railway transport's transmogrification of society in Europe and America included shifts in social structure, changes to daily life, and the already noted standardization of time. It became much more than simply a major travel convenience for the nineteenth century individual. Nicholas Daly explains that "for the Victorians [the railroad] stood as both agent and icon of the acceleration of the pace of everyday life, annihilating an older experience of time and space, and making new demands on the sensorium of the traveler" (Daly 37). These shifting perceptions of time and space are elaborated upon by Wolfgang Schivelbusch in his book *The Railway Journey*. He describes the train as a massive projectile, a steam-powered engine propelling passengers across distances in a way that disrupts their sense of unfolding time and physical place. In a matter of hours they would arrive at a destination that previously would have taken days to reach. The passengers' physical relationship to the passing ground, their visual and tactical experience of the road, grass, dirt, smells, was removed as they were transported almost magically across vast expanses of land at high rates of speed. All that remained in their sightline were panoramas flying past the railway car windows. Removed was the familiar foreground of the world around them, the traditional perspective of the subjective. In fact, passengers were incapable of capturing a nearby view because of the breakneck pace of the train. This visual shift affects the relationship between the individual and the empirical world, resulting in the anxiety broadly discussed in the early days of the railroad (Schivelbusch chapters 3, 5).

Adding to the anxiety and the mechanization of the visual senses was the disruption of the traditional social structure within the railway car. Thrown together by circumstance, travelers experienced superficial railway car relationships with a broad range of people from all walks of life. These brief social encounters were diametrically opposed to the traditional and well-regulated intimate relationships people were accustomed to in this period and the difference produced a sense of alienation among train travelers.[23] However, although railway travel interrupted the relationship between individual and society, disturbing traditions, and severing accepted social channels, it also allowed new social possibilities to open up as the individual began to challenge his traditional role in this more modern society.

Coupled with the psychological alienation and visual disruption presented by train travel, scientists at the time discovered possible adverse health effects for both train passengers and railway workers. Studies were done on the retina stimulus that occurred as a result of viewing the rapidly moving panoramic visions outside the speeding train's windows. Would this rapid stimulus to the eye ultimately lead to damage to the retina or perhaps even result in behavioral abnormalities? In the early days of the new mode of travel the answer to such questions remained unresolved and of great concern. Another question centered on the long-term effects of the train's significant physical vibration as the wheels reverberated across the rails. Scientists felt this vibration caused major strain on the human body, especially for those commuters who used the trains often and for train personnel who rode the rails all day long. Some railway personnel devised spring boards to stand on in the engine rooms in order to eliminate the steady effect of the train's vibration.

A further impact of the new railway system was the realization that time needed to be standardized across vast areas in order to accommodate the train schedules. Up until the mid-nineteenth century local times were set in towns across the land, using church bells, town clocks, or the sun to determine the time of day. Due to the new needs of the railway system Great Britain standardized time in the 1840s using the clock in Greenwich, England, as the prime meridian. This became known as railway time due to its importance as an organizer of time for train scheduling purposes. The standardization was important both in terms of passenger train schedules and for the railway transport of commercial products for distribution (coal, lumber, factory goods). In 1859, with the construction of Big Ben, London's impressive town clock was synchronized with Greenwich's mean time. Very soon after that, in light of the rapid expansion of global trade, it became clear that synchronization of time across countries was also called for and a concerted effort was made to establish a standardized global time. In 1884, an agreement was reached between the United States government and its European counterparts concerning a new International Time, using Greenwich, England, as the Prime Meridian, against which all time would be measured. Time zones were set that corresponded to established longitudinal lines around the globe. The entire world, even today, is essentially functioning on British railway time (Freeman 46).

Communication: The Electric Telegraph, Telephone, and Typewriter

Other technological advances during the Victorian period further disturb the traditional social equilibrium of the nineteenth century citizen. Important among these is the rapid and transformational development of the telegraph, a global, instantaneous communication system. This innovation impacted daily life across the world, helped open up new robust lines of commerce, and was similarly entrepreneurial to the late twentieth

century's development of the Internet. Science and technology journalist Tom Standage analyzes the development of the telegraph, which he terms 'The Victorian Internet,' in light of the revolutionizing changes it brought to communication, the innovative aspects of its emergence and other features which are remarkably similar to the development and swift growth of the Internet and technological advances in computing experienced at the end of the twentieth century (Standage 205-211).

The similarities in communication advancements between the two periods suggest an important connection between the Victorian and the contemporary eras, with Victorian individuals and their steampunk counterparts. Essentially, both the late nineteenth- and the late twentieth-century communication surges place the individual within a society that evolves too rapidly for normal intellectual integration and adaption. Faced with such a situation, reaction *against* the changes is the first and logical natural human response. Integration only comes later after conceptual resolution occurs within the mind. As individuals, we must adapt but in order to do so we must *understand* first. Thus, rapid changes during the Victorian era create tension between what the mind can handle intellectually and what the physical embodiment must adapt to in order to integrate into and maintain the modern lifestyle. Similar intense changes in communication and developments in personal technology during the late twentieth century evoke similar tensions. Social networking media such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, and the subsequent instantaneous global distribution of information including news, entertainment, and even personal social interaction is equally as unsettling as the changes seen in the Victorian age.

However today, just as in the Victorian era, the sense of perturbation is coupled with a sense of intrigue for the future and what it holds. Consider the cell phone in our time. Its exponential expansion brings changes that remind us of the effect of the electric telegraph in the nineteenth century on communication between individuals far-flung across the globe. Today one is just as likely to see a native Kenyan in colorful tribal garb speaking into a cell phone, while standing on a high plain in the Samburu region during 'sun-setters' as we are in spotting a young professional investment banker chatting on her cell phone during happy hour in a high-rise watering hole in Manhattan. The late twentieth-century surge into such uncharted communications territory echoes the Victorian wave of radical development. And it is what helps tie the Victorian experience with the contemporary steampunk movement. The steampunk participant appreciates the tenuous yet exciting situation in which the Victorian finds himself. We will see in later chapters that this appreciation becomes a repurposing not only of aesthetic elements of the Victorian era but a re-imagining of the period itself, a steampunk rewriting of Victorian history complete with alternate endings and fanciful twists and turns. But for now we continue our effort to fully understand the impact of electric telegraphy, both socially and psychologically, on the Victorian individual.

In the Victorian era, electric telegraphy was quickly and broadly adopted, and subsequently the system was rapidly expanded to meet increasing demand. Nineteenth century telegraphy utilized the Morse code which is a series of audible dots and dashes developed by American inventor Samuel S. Morse in 1836, to send readable signals over wires stretched city to city to city. The code gave letter values to each unique set of dots and dashes and this code was learned by telegraph operators across the country as more and more people made use of the innovation. Telegraphic communication was becoming regularized.

However, the telegraph system's evolution was not without growing pains, both in the U.S. and abroad. One of the complicating factors in the United States was that the industry was privately owned, whereas in France and England from the beginning the systems were developed and maintained by state governments. As soon as businesses in the U.S. began to regularly use the new private system of communication it became clear that certain proprietary information needed to be sent secretly in order to avoid being read by outsiders— telegraphers or other prying eyes. Many companies developed sets of special codes for the distribution of this sensitive private information over the broadly accessible telegraph system. The codes were still transmitted using the Morse system. Sending messages in proprietary code was also more efficient and less costly as common phrases specific to a particular company could be coded as a short word. For example, frequently used statements such as "the train will be arriving at 7:00 PM," could be sent as one short code word plus a stated time. Various company codebooks were created to interpret the various secret ciphers and special short-hand phrases. In 1875, due to the proliferation of codebooks and confusion about the spelling of certain code words unknown to the telegraphers, the U. S. federal government stepped in and regulated the use of codes in telegraphic communication. In further developments, by 1877 money transfers were being wired regularly, with banks accepting the electronic transfers as legitimate form of business, which opened up an entirely new aspect of the industry.

By the end of the nineteenth century the bustling telegraph industry employed multitudes of young men and even more women. In fact, "to become a telegrapher was to join a vast on-line community and to seek a place among the thousands of men and women united via the worldwide web of wire that trussed up the entire planet" (Standage 144). Such

a career path provided a steady income and a certain future in an industry which was expanding quickly. By the end of the nineteenth century, in fact, some felt the telegraph might put the newspaper industry out of business by providing instant news from across the world. But the newspaper industry, aware of the challenge of this new form of communication, quickly adapted to the new technology, with newspapers sending reporters out to scenes of action and relaying back snippets of information through the wires, to be written up as full-fledged articles by other reporters stationed at newspaper headquarters. Reporting teams replaced the lone reporter. Paul Julius von Reuter, whose news agency was established before the development of the telegraph, soon took advantage of the new tool to position his company as an important news enterprise (Standage 151). New York's Associated Press also began to use the telegraph early on.[24]

The telegraph revolutionized business enterprises throughout the world, bringing important industrial information over the wire quickly and efficiently. This acceleration allowed businesses to make rapid purchasing and investment decisions during the same time the railroads were expanding globally and goods were transferred quickly. The coupling of instant communication by telegraph and the rapid and efficient distribution of goods via the railway system worked dynamically (Standage 166). In the United States the privately owned Western Union Company became a powerful enterprise whose business model was originally set up as a series of franchises throughout the country, with individual railroad companies acting as franchisees (Standage 171). By 1861 a complete transcontinental telegraph system stretched out along the new railroad system tracks, coast to coast, and over the next years the "growth of the telegraph network was, in fact, nothing short of explosive"

(Standage 57). Across great continents, beneath the oceans and seas, cable lines reached from America to Europe and beyond.

During the course of the telegraph's development between 1836 and the close of the nineteenth century, many began to see it as a revolutionary new tool that might eliminate the concept of time itself, and would certainly bring people and families together emotionally through instant communication. Some even felt that the telegraph of the future might serve as "an instrument of world peace" (Standage 103). However, although the Victorian period was one of invention, creativity, and unprecedented advancement and the telegraph was one of its most important innovations, the close of the nineteenth century witnesses the end of the era of the telegraph. "Its golden age had ended" (Standage 205). The telephone soon took its place as dominant tool of communication.

Through the inventive attention of Alexander Graham Bell, telegraphy gave rise to telephony as Bell experimented with harmonic transmissions. In 1876 he received a patent for his "Improvements in Telegraphy" and successfully transmitted his own voice via wire. By 1880, a mere four years later, 30,000 telephones were providing instant communication of the human voice (Standage 199). The telegraph had gone from invention in the early part of the century to greatest form of global communication by the end of the century, and then given way completely to a newer invention, the telephone. By 1900, although an impressive one million miles of telegraph wire crisscrossed the United States, the number of telephones in operation approached two million (Standage 204).

Another important communication device that developed into a broadly used tool during the Victorian period is the manual typewriter. In the eighteenth century there were

early efforts to patent a new machine—a printing press that 'writes' (Kittler 187). However it was not until 1867 that American publisher Christopher Latham Sholes patented the first typewriter. He licensed production to Remington and Sons, a well-known gun manufacturer (Kittler 190). Thomas Edison, who then worked as a telegrapher and wished to speed up the processing of Morse code transmissions, soon invented the *electric* typewriter, using the Sholes model, although electric typewriters did not become widely used until well into the next century. Friedrich A. Kittler notes that the important selling point for the new typewriter, first available commercially in 1874, was the speed and efficiency with which one can write on it. Unlike the five or so strokes it takes to make one letter by hand, a letter can be done on a typewriter in one stroke (Kittler 191). Add to that the fact that one uses all fingers to write on the machine, it becomes an even more amazingly fast method of writing. Revolutionizing the communications industry, the typewriter quickly became an important tool in offices around the world, employing thousands of young women as secretaries and clerks.

Victorian Thought: Philosophy, Catastrophism, and the Individual Psyche

For the Victorian writer, the machine--whether typewriter, telegraph, locomotive, or factory device, was an object of both attraction and revulsion. The ubiquitous aspect of the machine, the significant changes it wrought in communication, transportation, manufacturing, and social infrastructure, forced the individual within society to face a new self-consciousness. And many writers struggled to express the emotional response of the individual as the machine loomed larger and larger in Victorian life. These writers certainly reacted against the machine, supporting a return to the pastoral, idyllic world of yesteryear, and they expressed a palpable and nostalgic longing for a simpler time. However, Herbert

Sussman astutely concludes that "to suggest that the idea of Victorian literature as bent solely on offering emotional solace to machine-age man is incomplete in missing the antithetical desire of writers to find in the mechanized world new sources of emotional strength as well as of beauty" (Sussman 230). This dichotomy—an interest in, coupled with a fear of—the machine age is the essential struggle of the Victorian individual and the one that attracts the steampunk artist. What are the factors that make up this Victorian struggle and subsequent steampunk attraction?

The fundamental ground of *Being* is impacted during the nineteenth century beginning with significant changes to the individual's sense of time through standardization and a new dependence upon railway schedules and the accompanying speed of urbanized daily life. Due to innovations in transportation and communication, and advances in scientific research, a new sense of the *malleability* of time and space emerges. Furthermore, shifts in the perception of memory also occur, thanks in part to the seemingly magical photographic image which is now a part of mass visual culture. And there is a fresh reading of man's historical place in the universe that is a result of recent scientific research based on Darwin's work on the origins of humankind. The shock of these intellectual, physical, and emotional changes is felt viscerally by the Victorian individual. A modern approach to the body's relationship to the environment (time/space) occurs as that environment changes so dramatically. Many Victorian writers resolve the resulting ambivalence by romanticizing the machine and imbuing it with organic qualities.

As noted in earlier pages, this ambivalence of the Victorian age appeals to the late twentieth century individual of the steampunk movement who faces similarly overwhelming technological and social change. Although all eras of history manifest some changes and

developments along social and technological lines both the Victorian and the post-modern period experience exponential transformations that fundamentally challenge the status quo of the individual within society. It is that fundamental paradigmatic shifting which connects the two ages, attracting steampunk to the Victorian as a sympathetic era, an age whose aesthetic and philosophy may be repurposed by the individual today. Perhaps Victorian history can be re-imagined to assist the contemporary citizen in writing, affecting, even re-writing, her own history of technology.

Coupled with the scientific and technological turmoil in the Victorian period are parallel and related questionings concerning philosophy and religion. In the nineteenth century, philosophical inquiry begins to challenge traditional western metaphysics and religious foundations are contested at the same time. These challenges are doubtless due in part to Darwin's scientific research that brings into question the idea of creationism. Darwin's approach, viewing "life as nothing but a set of self-organizing atoms" certainly threatens the intellectual status quo (Freeman, Introduction). But it is also the work of Friedrich Nietzsche that introduces philosophical tension.

In his writings, Nietzsche boldly states that "God is dead" and he questions underlying concepts of good and evil/truth and falsehood. His work begins to problematize spiritual and intellectual certainty that had hitherto marked the Judeo-Christian foundations of Western thought. In his book *The Genealogy of Morals,* originally published in 1887, Nietzsche begins to deconstruct the foundations of Western metaphysics. In so doing, he lays the groundwork for twentieth century philosophers, those of the modern age who explore humankind's existence in fresh ways. We will see in Chapter Five the great impact Nietzsche's writing has on post-modernism and steampunk. For the purposes of this chapter

we will simply note that the influence of Nietzsche is fundamental. His groundbreaking

work may complicate the scene as late Victorian intellectuals struggle with a myriad of issues

that portend the Modern Age. And that work opens up a dialog on changing values in modern

society. In declaring that "God is Dead" Nietzsche begins a post-God and post-supra-sensory

dialog, forwarding the idea that a heavenly origin of good and evil is false. Nietzsche

contends that these concepts are indeed established constructs of humankind and not God-

given a priori imperatives.[25]

This modern avenue of thought is one that others will follow—Foucault, Derrida, and

others, forging new paths of their own. For example, Nietzsche's efforts foreshadow those of

Sigmund Freud who explores the inner workings of the human mind, revealing a rich sub-

territory in the unconscious. In 1900 Freud publishes *The Interpretation of Dreams* in which

he describes the meaning of dreams as wish-fulfillment, reveals two levels of the dream

(latent and manifest), and interprets various symbols prevalent in many individual dreams.

Freud's work focuses on the individual and his unconscious mind more than the societal

infrastructure around that individual. As such, Freud takes what might be termed a more

modernist in approach than Victorian. For Victorians, the individual is considered first and

foremost a social creature, one that is indeed defined within the social structure around him.

Individual perfection, a perceived goal of the Victorian citizen, could not occur outside these

boundaries of society. Clearly this belief sets the scene for tension as that societal

infrastructure rapidly evolves into modernity. At the close of the Victorian era, the self-in-

society gives way fully to the Modernist emphasis on the individual as knowable separately

from society. Modernism considers the individual, in a sense, as a Kantian genius, an

autonomous, free, and self-determined entity, placed in a world which is his to conquer, command, and mold.

Of importance to our discussion of Victorian sensibilities, Nietzsche forwards the notion of morality as being a remnant of religious superstructure, which is itself another human construct. To the Victorian individual, struggling with his sense of place within a changing social framework, grappling with challenges to the origin story, and adjusting to massive developments in science and technology, the idea of questioning foundational values such as morality and religion is paradigm-shifting. The dual challenge by Nietzsche philosophically (*God is dead*) and Darwin scientifically (evolutionism confronts creationism) presents the Victorians with a shifting foundation. Assumptions that support traditional ways of life fall away and a new modern age springs from that release from tradition. One can appreciate the sense of chaos and uncertainty that accompany these explorations, especially as one examines the work of Victorian writers and artists. The Modern age is one which will be discussed in greater detail in following chapters, particularly in regard to the steampunk aesthetic as a decisive reaction against it, a move away from Modernist tenets. In these pages we simply note that Victorian traditions are fully rejected by the Modernists after the turn of the nineteenth to twentieth century. The new century, in fact, will come to be known as the Modern Century.[26]

Several Victorian intellectuals focus on issues of the individual within society. For Matthew Arnold, English poet and cultural critic, culture (society) remains the key to self-perfection. His vision is democratic, anti-elitist, and he believes strongly that culture should be available to each and every citizen. Matthew Arnold, Thomas Carlyle, and John Ruskin,

although differing in many ways from each other, agree that progress of society rests on individual man's perfection or improvement as an individual within that society. They also see that, in the nineteenth century, progress is philosophically symbolized by the machine. The approach of many nineteenth century authors can be seen as utopian fantasy. The authors look at the individual as being part of an important functioning whole, with the significance of that whole (society) being emphasized as a distinct and valuable enterprise. This approach differs completely from Modernism which, as has been noted, emerges from the chaos and change of the Victorian period.

But it is the jumbled Bahktinian spectacle of life that steampunk embraces and thus it is the Victorian era that attracts contemporary steampunk and not the clean and linear world of the Modern. We will find that the post-modern period, the age of steampunk, returns, albeit often whimsically, to its pre-Modern roots in the Victorian and rejects completely Modernism's call. From his post-human historical position, the steampunk artist is part of that interest in a return to the pre-Modern as he recognizes the attractive utopian aspects of Victorian philosophy.

John Ruskin, Victorian art critic, social thinker, and artist, believes society is of the utmost primacy, that man is defined through society and that society must be exemplary in order for individual citizens to perfect themselves within it. Ruskin specifically feels that "no self can be perfect and moral in an imperfect society" (McPherson, page 68). However, Ruskin never accepts progress as he sees it unfolding in the Victorian period. His attitude is vehemently and particularly anti-progress in terms of the railway system, for example, which

he considers as representative of a mechanization that is fundamentally harmful to society. His focus, instead, is on a return to handicraft and the values of the past.

Much like the steampunk artist of today, Ruskin is a proponent of the do-it-yourself movement (DIY), albeit from the nineteenth century standpoint. Both the steampunk movement and John Ruskin and his followers believe that the physical working of craft is fundamental to our sense of well-being. In fact, Ruskin fully rejects the machine-made and considers the work of the human hand far superior to that produced by the machine. Ruskin's impact on the Arts and Crafts movement of the late nineteenth century is well documented. His writings greatly influence Victorian artist William Morris who establishes the Arts and Crafts movement as an effort that began in Great Britain but spread quickly across the globe. The Arts and Crafts movement supported the traditional and historic arts of handicraft, and which was thus an aesthetic that was very much anti-industrial in outlook. According to Herbert Sussmann, "for Ruskin the insistence on handiwork is part of a more general defense of an essentially romantic aesthetic based on the idea of a vitalistic nature against a rationalized, scientific aesthetic he saw developing with technological progress" (Sussmann 82). Ruskin fully rejects the steam-powered locomotive and all of its implications, and much of his writing focuses on a return to traditional handicraft, a rejection of mechanized society, and a related intellectual support of traditional morals and values.

Ruskin's writing and those of other Victorians who reject mass-produced goods and express a concern about a factory production process that removes the laborer or artist from the process of production certainly has parallels in the late twentieth century steampunk artist's concerns as he rejects the corporate mass-produced goods of the Modernist period.

The psychic connections between the two eras have much to do with similar conflicting

tensions between derision for, and fear of, current technology and optimism for the future

and the human individual's role in that future. The palpable tension that is set up in the

nineteenth century for the individual within a newly mechanized society can be seen in the

work of many prominent writers of the day and reflects the shifting influences and concerns

of the Victorian as modern society emerges from a traditional and much simpler past.

Underlying societal concerns about factory-produced goods during the Victorian

period is a need to acknowledge the importance of *work* itself and the writings of Thomas

Carlyle, Scottish philosopher, writer, and historian illustrate these concerns. Carlyle's

writings reveal a connection between Victorian thought and the steampunk movement as he

takes Ruskin's questioning of industrialization a step further. Carlyle worries that outward

mechanization of the physical world will lead to philosophical or intellectual mechanization,

that humankind will move away completely from the spiritual to the mechanized, even in his

thinking. This truly problematizes the machine for Carlyle who cannot resolve society's

mechanization with intellectual life (Sussmann 15). Complicating his thinking is that Carlyle

sees the inventor, the creator of the machines as heroic. Like the Kantian genius of the

previous century, the nineteenth century inventor creatively imagines the machine. The

inventor is transcendent as he envisions, through the free play of his imagination, a new

mechanical devise. The actual function of the machine and its output, the more practical and

mundane aspects of the machine, are dismissed by Carlyle as neither creative nor important.

In fact Carlyle is not interested in those who work on the machine, the builders, engineers,

and laborers (Sussmann 28). He is strictly focused on the inventor, the creative genius who

imagines a new machine and the innovative ways it might function for the betterment of humankind.

Perhaps we can understand Carlyle's fraught relationship with the machine by considering the work of Martin Heidegger. Carlyle discusses the importance of man setting himself to work which reflects the importance of *techne*, understood as the handiwork of the human hand: art, craft, or practice. But in the machine age, we can see that a Heideggerian *challenging-forth* comes into play. This challenging-forth, or en-framing, is a possibility that Heidegger warns humankind about, in particular when he discusses technology. For Heidegger, mankind must be wary of harnessing the standing reserve of the world in a way that *transforms* nature.[27] He uses the example of the modern power plant which transforms the river, turning it into a standing reserve for production, as opposed to the ancient mill with its waterwheel which simply *uses* the river's natural flow for its special purposes. This modern approach that transforms nature instead of simply using nature as she exists is what Heidegger calls challenging-forth, which is a form of revealing that is imposed through the forceful will of humankind over the standing-reserve. What can occur in the case of challenging-forth, and which is potentially detrimental to humankind, is that the technology begins to *en-frame* humans, forcing them into dependence on the machine in a way that ultimately enslaves them.

With Heidegger's terminology in mind, we can see that the ubiquitous machine of the nineteenth century challenges-forth nature in a way that transforms it fundamentally—much like the modern power plant that transforms the flowing river. The cutting of the railway lines, in which great swaths of earth are excised to accommodate the railroad tracks, is a

nineteenth century example of this challenging-forth. Mountains are moved, dynamited away, revealing earth's ancient strata, forging new paths through hitherto unpassable tracts of land, and streams are rerouted, disrupting old familiar waterways, forcing ancient rivers to discover new pathways and riverbeds. This is not simply *techne*, the simple work of man's hand. The cutting of the earth that occurs with the setting down of railway lines literally reshapes the earth, transforming her natural lines into territory groomed and molded to accommodate the new and powerful man-made machine. Revealing millennia of geologic stratification, exposing great maws of raw earth, destroying rural hillsides in the advance of technology, cutting off streams from their natural flow, all these necessary elements of railway expansion challenge nature in unprecedented ways and give pause to those who concern themselves with the future and direction of humankind.

Setting aside the railway's tremendous physical impact on the natural world, there is another aspect of this industrial progress that concerns nineteenth century writers. They wonder about the potential broad financial effects of the steady and growing shift of monetary fortunes into the new industries. What would happen to traditional financial standards, established industries, and historic and familiar symbols of wealth? There was, of course, a positive element as great wealth potential developed for those who could invest in new ventures such as the railroad system. Although on the face of it the movement of capital into transportation and communications industries was accepted by the general public, the fact of the matter is that much money was made by those who already enjoyed great wealth-- landowners whose properties were bought up by railway companies in order to lay new tracks and those individuals with existing funding sources who could invest in the new industries thereby vastly increasing their already substantial fortunes. Indeed, the stock

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markets eagerly absorbed the new railway industry and made many investors extremely wealthy as the railway system and its financial opportunities expanded. But tying new sources of great wealth to technological advancement served to further agitate the perceived tensions of the time, as it pitted the haves and have-nots against each other in new and challenging ways.

The various tensions of the Victorian age, tensions that set optimistic perspectives against pessimistic approaches, resonate in an essential manner with the steampunk practitioner. The contemporary artist of the steampunk genre rejects the ubiquitous machine—as represented symbolically by the sleek modern Apple product. By doing so, the steampunk aesthetic stakes a claim as being purposely anti-Modernist. Because of this resonance with the tensions of the Victorian age, it appears that the steampunk artist may harbor a fear of the future. However, as we explore further we see that the steampunk artist fully embraces an emerging machine-man hybridity and looks optimistically to a post-modern future. From his historical perspective, poised as he is at the end of the twentieth century and the dawn of a new millennium, the steampunk artist views the Modernist aesthetic and philosophy as somewhat *retarditaire*. Feeling thus about the Modern movement the steampunk artist re-examines pre-twentieth century perspectives and seeks out the Victorians who represent that which is *not the Modern*. The steampunk artist sees that the Victorians grapple with overwhelming technological changes similar to those in contemporary times. The earlier period's intellectual efforts to turn the machine into a romanticized, organic entity folded into a receptive new social structure, is viewed by the steampunk artist as a masterful and intriguing approach. The Victorian success in meeting the challenge of new technology while maintaining a determined yet cautious optimism for the

future is not only an instructive lesson for the contemporary steampunk movement, but an inspiration for that movement. The steampunk artist is much more sympathetic to the romantic and somewhat complicated Victorian aesthetic and philosophical outlook than he is to the visually cold and seemingly corporate Modernist vision.

Both the Victorians and the steampunk practitioners find themselves on the cusp of exciting new philosophies and scientific discoveries, and they are ready to tackle with their hands and their creative minds the challenges ahead. The nineteenth century individual embraces those changes by shaping them into systems or *epistemes* they can more easily understand. The steampunk artist does the same through inventive imagining of how machines might work in the future, the ways in which machines can partner with humans as hybrid entities, and how new technological territories may be revealed. The romantic chaos of the Victorian era, its perceived malleability in terms of intellectual possibility and the functions of time and space, appeals to the contemporary steampunk artist because it represents a successful seizing of technological opportunity for the purposes of willful and determined shaping of the future, and an inventiveness that helps open up new horizons in many fields of inquiry. The determinism, autonomous spirit, sense of individual freedom, all part of the Victorian psyche, resonates with the contemporary steampunk artist.

Adding to the tumult of the Victorian period was the prominence of two schools of thought regarding the origins of Earth as a planet and humankind's existence within its physical development. The argument involves the concept of catastrophism versus gradualism or uniformitarianism. Catastrophism became a major discussion point for the intelligentsia of the late nineteenth century. The theory centers on the notion that sweeping

changes in the earth's history are brought about by sudden calamitous events such as floods, earthquakes, and pestilence, not by a slower evolutionary process as the proponents of the alternate theory of uniformitarianism, or gradualism, believed.

The concept of catastrophism was introduced by paleontologist Georges Cuvier in the early part of the nineteenth century, but it took hold of the late Victorian psyche and, although the concept emerged before the Victorian era, it opened up an important dialog that continued throughout the nineteenth century between proponents of catastrophism and those who supported the alternate uniformitarian theory of the earth's beginnings. Ultimately, the latter theory gained the upper hand but the argument held sway through much of the century. In his work, Cuvier carefully avoids any reference to God or religion, or any implication of a potential upset of those beliefs. In discussing the earth's historical catastrophes, however, other nineteenth century theorists argue that Noah's flood and other biblical disasters support Cuvier's argument. They try to reconcile the bible with the concept of catastrophism.

But it is the fundamental concept of catastrophism that is of interest to us as we try to understand the Victorian psyche and the tensions that pull it in different directions. Catastrophism introduces fear and anxiety for the Victorian individual, who must wonder if the next climactic disaster is just around the corner, whether an imminent catastrophe is an event he will soon face. Uniformitarianism (gradualism) is less psychically traumatic. Proponents of that school of thought understand the earth's evolution or progress as a series of gradual tiny steps into the future. Moving at the pace of a glacier the earth is always, and has always been, familiar and steady as it slowly evolves at an indiscernible pace. That theory did not cause alarm as it implied a gradual change that is imperceptible to humans.

The terror of catastrophism introduces to the Victorians the possibility that future sudden change could instantly obliterate society or change it in fundamental ways that would horribly impact individuals within society. Security, certainty, and optimism are challenged by catastrophism. Interestingly, Cuvier focuses some of his lifelong research on geology and the earth's layers of stratification, and does some early work on animal anatomy, thus also broadly influencing thinking in those areas during the nineteenth century. There is a certain irony in the fact that Cuvier's geological work develops around the same time as the expansion of the railway system and his research efforts and careful studies are often illustrated by railroad cuts that reveal the historical geologic strata that interest him so deeply. Although there were advocates on both sides of this major scientific argument at the time, the tension that develops between the two schools of thought, catastrophism and gradualism, as intellectuals sought to understand the origins and place of humans within the physical world, introduced more anxious uncertainty to the Victorian psyche.

Victorian Arts and Culture

In the literary and visual arts fields, many authors and artists take up the subject of technology in diverse ways, too, reflecting the conflicting concerns of the age. The powerful and ubiquitous locomotive, modern life--gritty and urban, fanciful time-travel, the human-machine hybrid and the rise of the independent machine are among the subjects tackled by the Victorian thinkers and are also reflected in the visual and literary arts. Visual artists such as the Pre-Raphaelites admire the pre-humanist period and turn to it for inspiration. Other artists embrace scientific research as a welcome tool for visual expression. Many artists reflect the tension brought about by mechanization by turning to a memory of simpler times

for inspiration, bemoaning the Modern world that forever discontents the nineteenth century individual.

British poet Matthew Arnold (1822-1888) writes wistfully of the world we know in his short poem entitled *Dover Beach*. Perhaps penned in part during his honeymoon at Dover Beach, Arnold writes of the modern world as being of no comfort to the individual—and entreats his lover to hold together with him in an unforgiving world in which Faith has retreated like the receding waves made loud in a melancholy manner by the pebbles built up upon the shore. This lyric poem was first published in 1867 although Arnold may have worked on it over many years before its publication. It aptly reflects the tension of the age.

Other writers of the nineteenth century, including H. G. Wells and Jules Verne, use their fictional work to forward new notions of social progress. Couched in the genre of the scientific romance, Wells and Verne express a deep concern with man's potential dependence upon the machine. Wells explores this in many of his works, including his famous story of *The Time Machine*, a tale that involves a machine that travels through time and a scientist who discovers more than he perhaps cared to know about the future of humankind. Steampunk, a century later, will turn directly to both Wells and Verne for visual and intellectual inspiration as they struggle with their own contemporary technological tensions.

Visual Arts in Europe

As do their literary counterparts, Victorian visual artists explore the tension between the mechanized world of reason and science, and an organic one full of intuition and the romantic. Victorian artists either express excitement and optimism for a future of scientific

discovery and advancement, or articulate a yearning for familiar traditions, the pastoral life, and the idyllic past. An examination of the work of several artists and movements from France, Italy, and Great Britain will illustrate the conflicting tensions at play in the nineteenth century and into the early years of the twentieth century.

In France Georges Seurat and other post-Impressionist artists begin to explore aspects of science related to painting. Seurat methodically experiments with optical theories and advancements in photography to produce work that features new ways of depicting light, form, and color. Art historian and Seurat scholar Norma Broude explains how the artist enlists "the aid of modern science and its teachings to a degree unprecedented in art since the Renaissance, [setting] himself the task of perfecting a scientifically based, 'chromo-luminarist' method of capturing and

Figure 2: *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande* **Jatte by Georges Seurat (1884, oil on canvas). Art Institute of Chicago.**
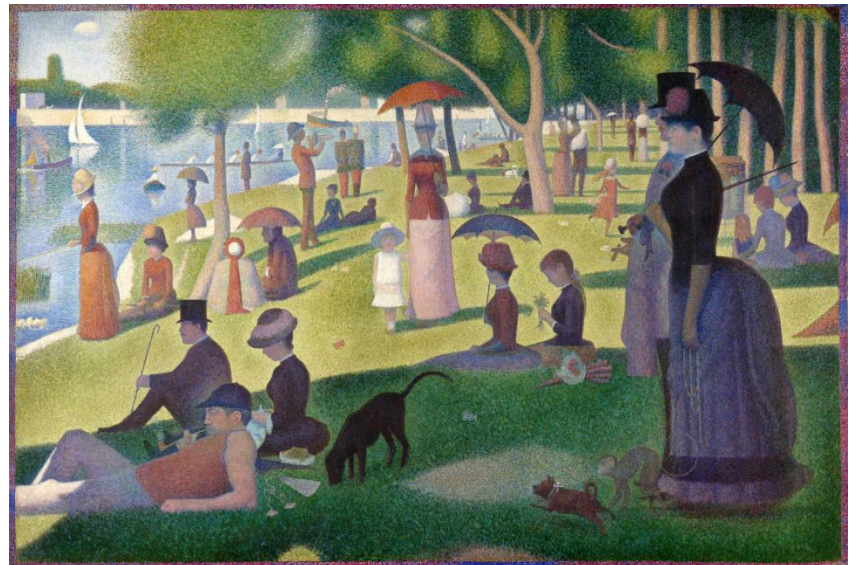
transferring to canvas nature's perfect union of light and color" (Broude Introduction). Seurat later uses the ideas of scientist and librarian Charles Henry, using empirical means to measure color and form to elicit vibrancy and luminosity that reflect the light in the real world. Seurat continues to develop this method of pointillism throughout his short but influential career.

Figure 3: Seurat's *La Grande Jatte***: detail of brushwork.**

A prime example of his work is *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* of 1884. Seurat's painting is a sea of colorful dots carefully and scientifically arranged to give the illusion of space and light. Figures lounge and stroll on a Sunday afternoon, the sun casting a yellow glow, butterflies lifting on the wind, and a series of boats visible on the distant waters. A close examination of the painting reveals the dots and conceals the figural representations. With a trick of the eye, Seurat has managed to harness optical science to create an evocative work of fine art.

Other painters in France, although they do not expand on the concept of pointillism as forwarded by Seurat, also experiment with the play of light and the effects of atmosphere on solid objects. The Impressionists are well known for their interest in expressing the ways in which light plays off three-dimensional forms. Claude Monet, in fact, does a series of painterly experiments of effects of light on the single subject of the Rouen Cathedral. Determined to capture the changing visual perception of the cathedral in various times of day, angles of sunlight, even in moonlight, Monet comes back to this subject again and again for a decade. Oftentimes it is in frustration as he struggles to express the way light would affect the perception of the solid cathedral facade. His *Rouen Cathedral—Setting Sun (Symphony in Grey and Pink)* of 1894 is an excellent example of work from this series In this work, as in others of the same subject, Monet strives to show how the play of light against a concrete object changes the perception of that object dramatically. Looming in the darkness, appearing as a light and ethereal entity in the morning, and taking on the full reflection of the

strong bright oranges of sunset, the cathedral becomes the canvas for the artist in a new and exciting way.

French artist Paul Cezanne and the Post-Impressionists continue to experiment with the visual expression of concrete forms in two dimensions, using scientific theory and current optical research. Cezanne spends his lifetime striving to describe nature's three dimensions as concrete geometric forms such as squares, triangles, and cylinders. His writings reveal that shape and line hold more significance to him than color or light, as he moves into visual territory very different from that of the Impressionists. He concentrates on geometric forms, writing that, as far as light goes, "an optical sensation is produced in our visual organs which allows us to classify the planes represented by color sensations as light, half tone or quarter tone. Light, therefore, does not exist for the painter" (Cezanne 35). An excellent example of the strongly volumetric work of Cezanne is his 1870 work entitled *The Black Marble Clock*. One can sharply sense the weight of the clock, the heavy draping of the tablecloth and the

sturdy volume of the table upon which the clock stands. Dark thick lines outline the objects, giving them further gravity. So different from the

Figure 4: *The Black Marble Clock* **by Paul Cezanne (1870, oil on canvas). Private Collection.**

work of Monet, Cezanne focuses on weight and line instead of color and light. But, like Monet, Cezanne is investigating optical effects and experimenting scientifically with canvas and paint. Cezanne's work on the simple architectonic depictions of three dimensional objects on the painted canvas ultimately leads to experiments by Paul Braque and Pablo Picasso and the development of Cubism in the early twentieth century.

Looking Backward in England: The Pre-Raphaelites and Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema

In an age in which the French were experimenting with optical advances and the depiction of light and form, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in England focused their interest instead in the romance of the pre-Renaissance. The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was established for the first time in 1848, a secret society with only seven members, including among others the artists Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Holman Hunt, and John Everett Millais. The aims of the PRG were to strive to express important ideas and to study nature assiduously. The Pre-Raphaelite artists embraced the tradition of the German Romantics. They were most interested, however, in the period before the age of scientific realism.

Although not specifically anti-mechanization in spirit, the PRB artists are concerned with the pre-humanist period as source of inspiration, a period that looks to man as *homo faber* more than *homo sapiens*. It is this aspect of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood that resonates with the steampunk artist. Both movements are immersed in the idea of man as maker, as doer, as actively in control of our being within the larger world. In other words, both the PRB and steampunk movements have a strong interest in the expression of the autonomy of the individual as master of his own destiny, a person of free will. In contemporary society, as we have discussed earlier, the steampunk artist feels he has become

too far removed from the doing, the techne, if you will, of forging his own fate through his intelligence. The PRB artists similarly reject the Victorian industrialized society as being artificial and disempowering. And, although they rejected the work of the official art academy, which generally supported works of the 'history painting' genre, the grand narrative tradition, members of the PRB did not strictly discard historical subject matter in painting.

The PRB artists reflect the same intellectual and aesthetic interest in man-as-maker that we see reflected elsewhere during the Victorian period. This interest is picked up again in the twentieth century as the same concern threads through much of the early half of the twentieth century. Hannah Arendt, in her work entitled *The Human Condition*, which was written and first published in 1958, forwards the notion that philosophy has given way to the contemplative (homer sapiens, man as thinker) far too much. Of course the contemplative thrust of Western philosophy goes all the way back to ancient Greece. Plato is perpetually in pursuit of the contemplative life, embracing the world of Ideas. He has an interest in abstraction and theory, and removes himself from the chaos of objective 'reality,' the world of things. Plato's story of the cave equates human's endeavors in the world as one of shadows and falsehood. He urges the philosopher to rise above the activity of humankind and remain in the world of ideas, elevated above the mundane and messy condition of humankind. Thus, it can be seen that this is not a new tension, this argument between humankind's place in the contemplative (ideal) world versus his place in the active and physical world.

For Arendt, Plato's approach negates the very real and fundamentally important aspect of *action* for humankind, which she divides into three realms. *Animal laborans* refers to those actions that have the ends of survival: sleeping, eating, reproducing, and by extension maintaining the family in a safe environment. This kind of action does not separate us from other animals. Arendt questions Marx, in fact, on elevating this type of work to the social—moving the work of the oikos (home) to that of the polis (public square). The work of the second realm is described by Arendt is *techne* and *poiesis,* the work that builds an artificial world around us, which makes our environment, and which separates ourselves from the other animals in the world. The artist, the architect, the engineers, all work in this second realm of the homo faber. We are in control of this element, unlike with the first type which is born of necessity and is more about the private or individual. The work of the homo faber is creative and springs from our free will. It is public, of the common place, and works toward the advancement or good of the larger community. For Arendt, the third level of action is completely free, it is political, of the community, and represents the new action, which always appears as a miracle because it differs from the established. Mankind has this ability for the *action of the new* (Arendt, Introduction by Margaret Canovan). Hannah Arendt's exploration of humankind's modes of being illustrate for us the emphasis during the Victorian period on man as maker, as *homo faber*, as that being whose work separates him from the animals and gives him a worthy task within society. The work of the Pre-Raphaelite artists reflects the Victorian interest in man as maker.

The work of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who came from a family of well-known intellectuals, represents the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood's interest. In *La Ghirlandata (Lady with a Garland)* of 1871-1874 the female figure, seen from just her waist up, dominates the

center of the canvas as she poses with a harp. The visual elements, including the central figure, the two flanking angels, and the floral garland, all appear directly at the front of the picture plane. There is no evidence of a visual vanishing point or long perspectival angle to give depth to the painting. As a result, the image seems flattened. This lack of visual depth does not reduce the realism of the representation, but it gives the painting more of a sense of symbolism than actual life. Adding to the feeling of symbolism is the fact that there is no apparent motion or duration in the painting. This is a figure at rest. In fact, there seems to be a streak of melancholy or remembrance in the quiet pose of the beautiful green-eyed woman. The two angels flanking the central figure appear to be floating in a heavenly mist. The flowers add an element of beauty, and their type (honeysuckle and roses) often connote in literature and the visual arts love and sensuous attraction. Because music is often also related to images of love, the painting can be seen as a tribute to love. This romantic painting is a restful rejection of the hubbub of mechanization and commerce. It visually evokes a period of damsels, harps, and angels, a return to the roots of humankind in the simple life of the past.

Figure 5: *La Ghirlandata (Lady with a Garland)* **by Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1871-74, oild on canvas). Guildhall Art Gallery, London.**

In discussing the work of British Academic painters of the late nineteenth century we see connections to the steampunk

artist in regard to man-as-maker and a hearkening back to earlier times. But there are also some significant ways in which they differ. British Academic painters focused fairly simply on describing a romanticized historical period. They did not, as the steampunk artist does, take on the challenge of technology. The PRB does not represent an avant-garde approach to aesthetics and there is nothing edgy about the work. The British painter is literally imagining the earlier age, romanticizing it, wistfully looking back to it nostalgically, whereas the steampunk artist takes visual reminders or symbols of the Victorian age and re-purposes them, imagining that history differently, molding the age into a new futuristic one, even imagining alternative outcomes to the Victorian age. The PRB artists were interested mainly in the accurate historic, although romantic, depiction of an earlier age. A look at British academic paintings of the nineteenth century will reveal an approach similar to that of the Pre-Raphaelites.

The artists of the British Royal Academy, with Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema as ostensible leader for the latter part of the nineteenth century, were hugely popular in turn-of-the-century society. Their paintings were sought after for purchase and were well-received at major exhibitions in London and elsewhere. Commonly depicted were highly romanticized images of the ancient Roman Empire, Medieval chivalry, and other pre-humanist genre scenes. In this way, they were similar to the Pre-Raphaelite artists, whose work also focused on such subject matter. Alma-Tadema's *A Coign of Vantage* (1895) and *Soldier of Marathon* are prime examples of the romantically inspired art popular at the time. In *Coign of Vantage* three young Roman women gaze out over the sea below. Their languid poses and rich, ornate clothing suggest a life of comfort and leisure. This is not a Rome of bloodshed and poverty, nor does it strive to be a historically accurate depiction of daily Roman life. This is a

Figure 6: *A Coign of Vantage* by Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema (1895, oil on canvas). Private Collection.

romanticized look back at a time the Victorians imagined as the noble beginnings of their own privileged heritage. Even in *Soldier of Maratho*n the warrior is portrayed not at battle but instead upon his return to the family. He is depicted relaxing safely at home with sister and mother, doubtless describing his heroic endeavors on the battlefield.

The pre-Raphaelite and academic artists of Victorian England turn from the mechanized society around them and focus on depicting times in history that they envision as heroic and triumphant: the Roman Empire, with its expansive peace and intellectual spirit, and the medieval period of castles, knights and damsels. In so doing, the artists reveal an anxiety about their current social condition and a desire, if not need, to look backward and conquer again that which is conquerable. Instead of looking into the abyss that is the unknown future. In that way, the contemporary steampunk movement and the British Victorian painters express interesting similarities. However, although both movements reject their contemporary 'modern' technologies per se, and turn instead to previous times in history which they perceive as being noble or exemplary in some manner, the steampunk artist repurposes the period as an alternative avenue to the future as it embraces the philosophy of that earlier period. Unlike the Pre-Raphaelite enterprise, which is simply an appropriation of the aesthetics and imagined lifestyle of the

Roman Empire and Middle Ages, the steampunk movement is not simply a reenactment of the Victorian. Instead, the steampunk artist repurposes the historic period creatively, selecting visual elements and narratives to fit his own artistic efforts. But he also embraces the optimistic, innately curious, and determined intellectual approach of the age. This is a deeper borrowing from the earlier time.

Looking Forward in England: Embracing Steam

Other artists in Britain investigated new methods of painting that focused on atmospherics and the play of light on objects depicted. Much like with the work of their French Impressionist contemporaries, color and light became a great experiment for many British artists. Joseph Mallard William Turner (1775-1851) enjoyed an extensive career describing atmospheric and lighting effects in his watercolor washes and paintings depicting the Houses of Parliament, bridges of London, and pastoral rural scenes. Generally known for his landscapes and seascapes, he turned in later years to the subject of modern technology. Works such as *The Fighting Temeraire* (1839), which depicts a great steam-powered ship of war, and *Rain, Steam, and Speed-the Great Western Railroad* (1844), describing a mighty locomotive moving through the landscape, attest to his interest in the powerful new steam engines.

These later works, hitherto less studied than other Turner works, show this new focus. Writing recently for the Wall Street Journal, independent curator and art critic Karen Wilken, states that "John Constable said Turner painted with 'tinted steam' " (Wilkin). With an interest in capturing the "visual effects of the era's most up-to-date technology, the steam engine," Turner turns to powerful 'new' innovations such as the steam ship and the railroad

Figure 7: *Rain, Steam, and Speed-The Great Western Railroad* by JMW Turner (1844, oil on canvas). National Gallery, London.

engine as subject matter (Wilkin). In *Rain, Steam, and Speed—the Great Western Railway* the powerful engine is given an organic quality. Like a leaping wild animal the train roars through the countryside. The murky atmosphere lends mystery to the engine, charging like a powerful force through the natural landscape that surrounds it. The painting utilizes the new optics of Impressionism at the same time as depicting the new machinery of the age. Thus it is clear that, although some artists such as those of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood express nostalgia for earlier times, others, like Turner, explore the new modern age and its powerful symbols, including the steam engine.

Photography's Impact at the Turn of the Century

Until the middle of the nineteenth century, the fine art painter was an accepted member of the bourgeoisie. He contributed to society by depicting historical scenes in oil, obtained portrait commissions from the well-to-do, and studied and taught at established art academies throughout Europe. He was a purveyor of good taste and illustrator of the good life.[28]

As the new medium of photography developed and expanded in the latter part of the nineteenth century, painters faced an identity crisis of sorts. This new medium's technical ability to depict nature exactly and efficiently threatened to wrest from painters the comfortable role fine artists had enjoyed in the past. No longer did the world need to look

exclusively to fine artists to visually document or interpret nature and the world around them. Photographers now recorded physical information more quickly, more accurately, and at less cost to the consumer. The fine art painter was forced to reflect on his changing role within the cultural community and many began to experiment gladly with photography as a tool for their own traditional medium. The Impressionists in France and elsewhere in Europe worked with atmospheric interpretations, moving away from precision and focus toward a looser visual representation of everyday scenes, finding a new sense of light and sensation. Some painters in Russia coped with the new medium by experimenting with high levels of realism, thus trying to beat photographers at their own game. In examining the introduction of photography and its impact on the painting medium, Russian writer and critic Osip Brik explains that the painter's effort to increase the levels of realism was a futile exercise as painting cannot visually compete with photography in that arena (Brik 471). But this *revolution of mechanization* served as a special catalyst in the visual arts. The introduction of photography forced painters to examine the value of their product, and pushed them to prove their case as a dominant art in light of the emergence of a new force with which to be reckoned. Photography was a willing partner in the march from the Victorian to the Modern, a transition that was realized during the first years of the twentieth century.

Post-Victorian Modernism and the Twentieth Century

As part of the analysis of the Victorian period and its influence on the contemporary steampunk movement, it is important to explore the art and philosophy of the early twentieth century, that period directly following the Victorian era and during which Modernism pointedly rejects the Victorian, replacing it with a markedly different philosophy and aesthetic. The Victorian era officially ends with the death of Queen Victoria in 1901 and

dramatic changes occur in the years following. By 1914, the trauma of World War One introduces a deep pessimism and fragile uncertainty throughout Europe and the rest of the world. And the political upheaval from the global conflict does not resolve itself after that war or bring about firm and lasting stability. In fact, continued political upheaval ultimately culminates in the outbreak of the Second World War. The art of the transitional periods—the years leading up to World War One (1901-1914) and then the period between the World Wars (1918-1939)—breaks with Victorian traditions of the past and helps forge Modernism.

By the end of the nineteenth century conflicting pressures of the time reach a breaking point of psychic tension. Religion is being challenged, more than half the population had moved from country to city, the telegraph changes communication, bringing news and information from its source instantly, the railroad magically transports people across the country so rapidly that time and space seemed to lose anchor, progress seems inevitable and traditional social structures are being threatened. Peace and prosperity in the earlier part of the century had given Victorian citizenry a determined confidence regarding the future, an optimism and curiosity buoyed by a successful and expanding industrialized government. But as the century comes to a close and despite their innate sense of confidence, Victorians view themselves as being in an age of major transition, and recognize that both the foundations of their social structures and their common understanding of scientific fact were evolving rapidly. By the end of the century modern society emerges and the traditions of the past give way completely.

During the early twentieth century artists in the Fauve movement in France begin juxtaposing pure colors, using lessons from Seurat and the pointillists and furthering a

scientific approach to color theory. The art is avant-garde, jarring, and completely untraditional. Henri Matisse, Andre Derain, and other fauves ("wild beasts") use rough, uncontrolled brushstrokes and sharp unnatural colors to describe light and form. They completely reject the muted earth tones of realism and abandon the soft light of Impressionism. Instead pure violent color becomes a mode of expression. Ultramarine is used to connote shadow, bright chartreuse to describe light.
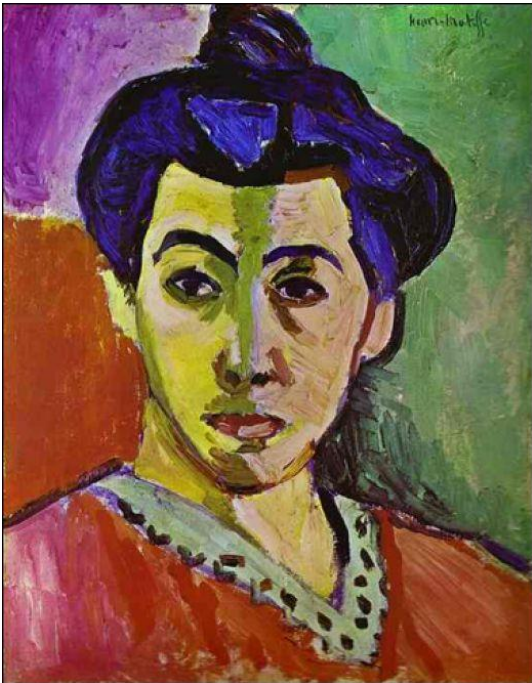
Figure 8: *The Green Stripe (Portrait of Madame Matisse)* **by Henri Matisse (1905, oil on canvas). State Art Museum, Copenhagen.**

Matisse's *The Green Stripe (Portrait of Madame Matisse)* of 1905 is perhaps the most famous work of the Fauve style. The unusual colors are jarring and the distortion of the figure is disturbing. Her expression is severe and challenging and there is a thick green strip of color that travels down the center of the canvas and the center of her face. All sense of three-dimensionality is gone, the figure appears flat and bright, and the background is utterly undefined as space, with three simple blocks of color to define the area in which the figure appears.

This painting and other Fauve works demonstrate a complete rejection of traditional painting techniques. It is a new century and historic references are totally abandoned. The Fauves are the harbinger of avant-garde Modernism.

The Fauves offer a challenge to the viewer. The scientific investigation of Seurat and the atmospheric paintings of the Impressionists may have questioned the Victorian status quo and the traditional modes of representation. But the Fauves represent the Modern, with no link to the past. Fauvism rejects the traditional as the Modern artist turns from tradition and leads us to Duchamp and his Ready-mades and later to abstraction. A century later the steampunk artist also rejects the normative, the accepted traditions. The avant-garde artist of the early twentieth century creates Modernism, a fresh approach to art that acknowledges new changes in society, politics, culture, and science. The steampunk artist also rejects the normative but, ironically, as we shall see in later chapters, that normative is Modernism itself, the long-standing twentieth century movement which had been forged by the most forward-thinking of the late Victorian period.

Around the same time that the Fauves are experimenting with color the Italian Futurists express utter exhilaration with the future, with science and technology and whatever they might bring to the twentieth century world. The Futurists are a group of visual and literary artists who establish themselves in Milan, Italy in 1909 as a reaction against the complacent bourgeois culture they see all around them. Poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876-1944) founded the movement which had its hey-day in the first few decades of the century, although Marinetti continued to espouse Futurism until the end of his life. With the Futurists, the Victorian symbol of the powerful railroad steam engine, a symbol that alternately garnered enthusiasm and trepidation, is given new life as powerful symbol of the Modern. Just a decade or so after the fraught Victorian angst about the machine, the Futurists elevate the mechanized speeding motorcar, an object perpetually in glorious motion and fully embraced by the artists, to the status of glorified Modernist symbol.

Members of the Futurist movement refuse to look backward to traditional roots. They are anti-nostalgic and lean, in fact, to anarchism (Taylor 109). According to art historian and museum director Joshua C. Taylor, "the Italian Futurists were fighting the estrangement from the world, the lonely isolation of the individual that was not only the inheritance of the artist but a common threat to modern man" (Taylor 11). The Futurists, instead of choosing to reject the modern and settle within the confines of historic tradition decide, instead, to embrace the speed and mechanization of the new century. Theirs is an optimistic movement of the avant-garde. The Futurists are intrigued by a new sense of speed, and they detect a new relationship with time and space as a result of mechanization. They fully reject the traditional, focusing instead on the world of the future and the ubiquitous speeding motorcar. Their *Manifesto of Futurism* (1909) enumerates their positive approach to modern-day speed and the newness of the mechanical world. Any anxiety they might have experienced is tempered by a sense of intrigue and curiosity about what the future might hold. Marinetti states "We stand on the promontory of the centuries! .....Why should we look back when what we want is to break down the mysterious doors of the Impossible? Time and Space died yesterday. We already live in the absolute because we have created eternal, omnipresent speed" (Marinetti 148). The casting-off of tradition, begun by the Victorians who managed to stay within the framework of established sensibilities, now turns to complete abandonment of tradition in face of the implications of a new modern world. The twentieth-century avant-garde artist, the emerging Modernist, is born out of this rejection of all that represents tradition or status quo. After World War One the Dada movement will emerge to further challenge the bourgeoisie. Dada is the ultimate iconoclastic approach to art that paves the way to Modernism.

Futurist and painter Giacomo Balla tries to capture that fascinating sense of modern speed and motion in his 1912 *Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash*. In this painting the artist depicts both time and space on the two-dimensional canvas. The dog, the leash, and the fashionable woman walking the dog, are visible in a close-cropped view. Each figure is only partially visible. This technique of showing just a glimpse of a figure gives the sense of a photographic snapshot or moving target, a nod to the new medium that is making such an impact at the time. But this is only

Figure 9: *Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash* **by Giacomo Balla (1912, oil on canvas). Albright-Knox Gallery, New York.**

partially what enables the viewer to appreciate the vision of the brisk walk. The figures are also shown as a series of depictions overlapping each other, giving the impression of a blur of movement. We read the multiple images of the swinging leash as fast motion. The series of repeats of each leg of the dog and the flowing skirts of the woman also give the impression of motion.

Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash resembles the chronophotographic work developed in the 1880s by early photographer Etienne-Jules Marey. He invented a special chronophotographic gun which enabled him to shoot stages of movement in a single photographic plate, giving his work a sense of both moving space and duration. Balla experiments here with new perceptions influenced by the emerging medium of photography

and its early innovators. He grapples with a changing sense of time and space, and he expresses an interest in abandoning traditional modes of painting completely.

Umberto Boccioni, another member of the small band of self-professed Futurist artists, focuses on depicting speed both in his sculptural and painted works. *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* (1913) explores the sense of movement and speed in a powerful striding human figure. Cast in bronze, there is a fleetness and dynamism that defies the very material from which it is constructed.

In their work and their philosophy Boccioni, Balla, Marinetti and the other Futurists enthusiastically embrace what they see as mankind's power over the machine. For the Futurists and other European artists, it was optimism that would later falter in the aftermath of World War One.

World War One tempered the overall optimism of the pre-war years and this change was sensed by members of Modernist movements such as Futurism, which earlier had happily embraced mechanization and change. The War brought geo-political upheaval and that impact was felt worldwide. Technology itself became a child of war, with military airplanes, machine guns, aerial photography, and mustard gas added to the arsenal of traditional warfare. All these new tools fundamentally changed the way wars are fought as machines became the instrument of destruction. The technology of war fueled anxiety in the early years of the twentieth century as aptly reflected in the writings of Carl Junger and Ernst Sloterdijk. In *Total Mobilization* Junger writes of modern warfare that it is no longer about

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the "well aimed shot" since aerial bombing raids, for example, are non-discriminatory and kill everyone—civilian, child, animal, and soldier (128). He sees war now as a terrifying intoxication of the masses, driven by mechanization and supported by the combined efforts of industry and army. In *Terror From the Air* Sloterdijk describes the introduction of mustard gas by the Germans as a move from classical warfare to terrorism. Mustard gas attacks not the enemy but the enemy's environment, escalating war from simple combat to widespread destruction. Even Heidegger's work, *The Question Concerning Technology,* as discussed earlier, expresses concern with modern technology and its potential negative impact on humankind. Heidegger sees modern technology as a potential menace, an "attempt to enclose all beings in a particular claim—utter availability and sheer manipulability" (Heidegger 309). Technology, as it challenges-forth the hidden aspects of the world, can threaten the free will of the individual who becomes delusional in thinking he controls nature through technology when, in actuality, he is totally addicted to technology. Technology controls him.

The Rise of Kitsch

In discussing the visual arts of the Victorian era and art as it then turns away from the Victorian to the avant-garde and Modernism, we must touch on the mass-produced art of the period and the concept of *kitsch art*. This art emerges, according to Clement Greenberg, during the time that mechanization, urbanization, and values-questioning all occur in the late nineteenth century (Greenberg 543). Because of its emergence during the late Victorian and early Modernist period, kitsch is part of the fabric of the Victorian and thus involved at least tangentially in the relationship between steampunk and the Victorian, in particular as steampunk is juxtaposed against the Modern.

We turn to Greenberg for clarification of the idea of kitsch, a word borrowed from the German language and currently defined in the Merriam Webster Online Dictionary as "1.something that appeals to popular or low-brow taste and is often of poor quality and, 2.a tacky or low-brow quality or condition." According to Greenberg, the rise of kitsch was the result of several factors including industrialization and mass mechanization, a new and fairly universal literacy, and a mass exodus of the peasant population to cities. As the peasants who move to the city shrug off the country customs they leave behind, they embrace city culture discovered in magazines such as the *Saturday Evening Post*, dime novels, and movie matinees. The illiterate peasants had previously had no relationship with high art. But when they settle in the cities, become factory workers, and form the proletariat class, they learn to write and they hunger for their own culture. They pressure "society to provide them with a kind of culture fit for their own consumption….a new commodity was devised" (Greenberg 543). Mass-produced art thus emerges during the twentieth century as a counter-balance to the high art of Modernism. It is economically priced and easily attainable art for the new masses.

Kitsch represents a cheap imitation of true culture presented to the populace, an art that is mechanically produced and formulaic, a watered down version of the mature culture from which materials are mined. The new urban citizen, far removed from his rural familial roots, looks around him for his own cultural products and mass-produced kitsch art answers the call. Kitsch includes the art of new commercial enterprises and academic art in addition to the art that appeals to the individual in popular culture. Comic books, pulp fiction and magazines, Hollywood movies, factory produced goods, even popular theatre, and other products of a mechanized society are identified by Greenberg as within the scope of kitsch.

He positions kitsch as antithetical to fine art or avant-garde art of the period. In fact, he defines it as the *rearguard* of art in the early twentieth century. Unlike avant-garde art, kitsch art is openly sentimental and melodramatic, cheap and thus marketable to the new proletariat class. The result is that kitsch gives the urban citizen a sense of being connected to fine art while at the same time it is the antithesis of fine art.

What is it about kitsch art that is relevant to the steampunk project? Kitsch represents the loss of the original in a modern technologically oriented world of mass production and steampunk represents a rebellion against that loss. So the movement can be seen as not only rejecting the Modernist minimalism of commercial products but also challenging the notion of kitsch art that is created through mass production. Kitsch, poorly constructed and produced in great quantities broadens the gap between the art of the people and what is termed fine art. Modernism provides the intellectual space for fine art, which is then defined outside the parameters of mass-produced popular art, allowing fine art to flourish as that which is not kitsch. Modernist art is 'art for art's sake.' Steampunk art rejects Modernism but also rejects any mass-produced object that alienates the creator (artist) from the process of creation (production of the work). Steampunk is thus neither Modern nor kitsch.

In our examination of kitsch and Modernism we will see how Walter Benjamin embraces the mass produced object as a new social (political) art. He sees kitsch as liberating the object from its cult of the aura, that sense of uniqueness within a moment. During this same period movements such as Dadaism help fine art pull away from kitsch and mass production to find its own aesthetic space.

Dada and the Trauma of World War One

We have seen that the steampunk movement specifically repurposes the look of the Victorian period and that it resonates with many aspects of nineteenth century thought. However, it is important to also position Modern art as it develops at the close of the Victorian era. The Dada movement, with its iconoclastic philosophy, and rejection of tradition, serves as a harbinger of Modern art. As such, Dada lends insight into how modern life, with its exciting technologies, was finally accepted. The rough transition to Modernism occurred during the lengthy period of the World Wars, a period when the specter of machine warfare was felt by all, either through news footage or personal experience on the battlefield. World War I introduced new and terrifying aspects of modern life which remain with us today. We have learned to live with war machines, airplanes that strafe enemy territory, bombs that drop from above, broadly-distributed news clips from warzones, but for the individual experiencing this trauma during World War I it was a terrifying new vision and a sad welcome to modern life.

In a later chapter we will discover how the steampunk movement reacts against Modernism for many and varied reasons. Modernism, which emerges in the twentieth century as antithetical to nineteenth century Victorian culture, rejects the chaos and uncertainty of the earlier period. Modernism forwards the notion of 'art for art's sake.' It is a movement that believes art is complex and enigmatic, readable only to an elite few that includes critically acclaimed artists and prominent art critics. The Modern artist can be seen as a Kantian genius. The artists ensconce themselves in well-feathered studio nests, the art critic becomes the intellectual interpreter of the word of the artist, and the average art viewer is left to ponder the meaning of abstraction, of toilets re-purposed as art, of the sleek minimalism of a painting consisting of one single color carefully and smoothly applied to the

canvas. Modernism is an intellectually closed circle and the movement holds sway for much of the twentieth century.

Steampunk can be seen as a reactionary movement away from Modernism in much the same way that Dadaism tears apart the Victorian aesthetic of the generation before. Dada expresses the horror of war by breaking down the bourgeois traditions and trappings that Dadaists felt had produced the war. Dada rejects the Victorian academic and sentimental art of the past and introduces a new and edgy aesthetic. The iconoclastic avant-garde approach of Dada is a rebellion against the Victorian and it paves the way for Modernism and abstraction. In much the same way, the steampunk aesthetic and philosophy can be seen as a rebellion against the modern as it paves the way to the fragmentation and chaos of post-modernism. We look to Walter Benjamin for a discussion of the state of the world between the wars, the time of Dada's prominence and Modernism's birth.

Between the World Wars: The Triumph of Modernism and Mass-Production

The period between the World Wars was an age of mass mechanization, political upheaval, and modernization. During this volatile period which ultimately resulted in the outbreak of global conflict and World War Two, Benjamin, a dedicated Marxist of German-Jewish heritage, wrote about the state of art. Benjamin believes that art in the modern machine age completely loses its unique aura (Benjamin 521). He examines the art object's unique quality, that characteristic he sees as the fundamental factor of authenticity in traditional (historical) works of art. Authenticity refers to the fact that the work is produced at a specific and unique time and place, within a particular cultural tradition, imbuing it with a singularity as an expression of its time and place by the hand of the artist himself. According

to Benjamin the uniqueness (aura) of a work of art "is inseparable from its being imbedded in the fabric of tradition" (Benjamin 522). Benjamin explains that this uniqueness comes from the concept of cult which was based historically on the magical in ancient times, the religious up until the Renaissance, and after that on secular beauty. These three types of artistic expression are lost in the modern age of mechanical reproduction. The art object is no longer created by an individual, nor is it unique, as it is mass produced for the multitudes.

Interestingly, Benjamin does not see this loss of aura as a negative occurrence. In fact he envisions this loss of the art object's aura as allowing for the emergence of a new socially aware art with political tendencies in support of the teachings of Karl Marx. Benjamin describes fresh possibilities for art to become more accessible to the masses, reflecting the political and social life of the broad community. As such, this art would surpass the elitist art of previous centuries, those arts that were, according to Benjamin, based on outdated rituals of magic or religion or secular beauty (Benjamin 522). The art of the Victorian period, for example, the art of the emerging bourgeoisie, embraces the concept of secular beauty. Benjamin champions instead the new machine-made art, stating, "mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual….but the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice—politics" (Benjamin 522). Benjamin calls for art to become political and to champion an agenda for the new modern age.

Benjamin specifically cites the Dadaists, active between the wars as part of the Avant-Garde movement, as representative of the crisis of traditional arts. He describes the

Dadaists' chaotic and iconoclastic art, noting that the Dadaists "intended and achieved…a relentless destruction of the aura of their creations" (Benjamin 524). They attach buttons and tickets to their works. They degrade the material and develop "word salads" filled with obscenities and nonsensical phrases to incorporate into their Dadaist works. As Benjamin states, "The work of art of the Dadaists became an instrument of ballistics. It hit the spectator like a bullet, it happened to him…" (Benjamin 525). This new art, with bombastic and confrontational Dadaism at its vanguard, moves away from the established cultural traditions and the cult of beauty, separates from any social function, and denies any distinctions of subject matter. It rejects the power of the object by actively destroying its integrity, daring it to retain any semblance of tradition, forcing it to confront the viewer in uncomfortable ways, and otherwise dismissing interest in its commodification. Dadaist art is not contemplative nor

Figure 11: *Bourgeois Wedding Couple (Quarrel)* **by Hannah Hoch (1919, photomontage, collage).**

is it concerned with its art market value. One only need examine Hannah Hoch's *Bourgeois Wedding Couple (Quarrel)* of 1919 to see how far from tradition the Dadaists find themselves. The image is a photomontage of disparate and somewhat disturbing images: a female figure made up of multiple image fragments strung together—bare upper legs, stockings and shoes, a distressed head of a female child stuck on its neck incongruously. The broad background is neutral, a simple beige color, perhaps even the background color

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of the material used for the work. There is no singular perspective or setting. Under the figure appears two large letters O and P. Arranged in montage fashion around the figure and letters are mechanical drawings of meat grinders and other machine objects. Another partial figure, this one male, is found in the lower right quadrant of the work. The question is what does this mean? There is no clear narrative and no sense of space. The work is a complete break from artistic traditions of the past.

Hoch's collage represents the crisis of the art object and introduces a new fresh art that is dependent in no way upon the past. This crisis of the art object, according to Benjamin, occurs at the same time as the rise of socialism, and ultimately results in the emergence of a new *theology of art*. Modernism thus emerges, with the artist seen as heroic, and fine art intellectually impenetrable except by those critics in the inner circle. Fine art separates completely from kitsch and mass-produced art in order to survive. But both kitsch and mass produced art find a new place in the arena, too. And the steampunk movement will later challenge the Modernist approach and help relegate it to a finite and specific time and place (the twentieth century) as another historical spot along the unfolding path of artistic expression.

Conclusion

It is clear that the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were periods fraught with change and an emerging sense of the Modern. People, in general, gave up the simple rural life and moved to bustling cities full of factories and work that necessitated a gritty fast-paced daily life. The simple traditions of the countryside gave way to a complex and sometimes terrifying new way of life. As we have discovered in the preceding pages the

appeal of the Victorian period for the steampunk artist today goes well beyond mere aesthetic factors. The philosophy, tensions, and concerns of the earlier period speak to the steampunk artist as he grapples with modern technology and its impact on human life. Although distanced from each other by a century, the steampunk artist sees in the Victorian individual strength and determination that he much admires. The grit and resolve of the nineteenth century citizen who finds himself in unknown technological and scientific territory provides a model for the contemporary citizen who rebels against the unknown future he faces.

The steampunk artist rejects the generic blandness of the modernist aesthetic, which dominated so much of the twentieth century. But more importantly, he challenges the contemporary citizen to resolutely face an unknown future full of quickly evolving technology and groundbreaking scientific advances. He does this by looking back to the Victorian period, one in which a new powerful force, the steam engine, was confronted and conquered. Visually, the steampunk artist relishes the complexity, even the fussiness, of the Victorian aesthetic, and he develops an aesthetic around the symbols of that earlier time. Embracing rich details such as brass, leather, and glass, his work displays exposed mechanisms such as gears, cogs, and piping that describe the imagined workings of the machine of the future. In the next chapter we will explore the vibrant and varied work of contemporary steampunk visual artists, recognizing and understanding more deeply the reasons behind their re-purposing of the aesthetics of the Victorian period.

Chapter 3: The Steampunk Aesthetic in Contemporary Visual Art

"Art…is an expression of this imaginative life…
freed from the binding necessities of our actual existence."
Roger Fry, *An Essay on Aesthetics*

Introduction

In earlier chapters we explored steampunk as a democratic and diverse sub-culture, inclusive and creative. We examined the emergence of steampunk from the science-fiction genre and made note of its connection with the Maker movement, a contemporary sub-culture that embraces homemade craft, encourages collaborative projects, focuses in particular on technology, and considers the hand of the artist as paramount to the creative effort. We also found that steampunk supports an optimistic view of technology's potential and that it often includes fanciful steam-powered machine elements in its aesthetic. Although steampunk takes a positive position on the future it also challenges it by visualizing creative possibilities for that future. Finally, Steampunk always expresses a Victorian aesthetic, re-tooled, re-imagined, and re-energized for the twenty-first century.

In this chapter we will learn that the art of steampunk reflects the inclusive approach of the broader steampunk movement, adopts a community approach to its craft, and eagerly explores the visual possibilities of future technologies. Every individual is invited into the world of steampunk art, no matter that person's educational background, previous experience with artistic expression, or connection with the gallery scene. In that regard steampunk art is uniquely egalitarian and non-judgmental. Steampunk artists reflect the Maker community's methodology as they scour the environment for everyday "found" objects and transform the discarded into new mechanical wonders, from timepieces crafted out of old watch parts, leather, and grommets to fantastical weaponry created from piping, metalwork scraps, and

brass gears. The steampunk artist is best understood through his creative reuse of the mundane and the transformation of found scraps into re-imagined and often newly functional objects full of neo-Victorian flair, and it is the artist, the Maker, who is at the heart of the steampunk experience. As Rebecca Onion states, "no matter how much it has spread through more traditionally literary/textual representations, steampunk culture is perhaps most defined by the object-based work of its fans" (Onion139). And that work, the artistic expression of the steampunk outlook, always relates to the possibilities of future technologies while remaining grounded in a neo-Victorian visual program. With a vision of a steam-powered airship, gear-driven mechanical womb, or bio-mechanical submarine that is part animal part manmade construction, steampunk art re-imagines the Victorian as it nods to the future.

In the following pages we will examine the creative output of artists who work in diverse areas of the steampunk aesthetic, whether in collage, mixed media, painting, sculpture, or costume design. We will find that these artists often push the envelope of what defines art. Instead of limiting themselves to the traditional art object—static and fixed in time and place—steampunk artists often perform in real time, mix visual with sound art, and construct elaborate alternative personal identities imbued with steampunk attributes. Their use of the steampunk aesthetic goes beyond tradition as they create steam-themed props, costumes, personalities, and environments. Many steampunk personas exist largely online on web-sites, in Youtube videos, and as discussed on blogs. But these personas may also appear as live performers at steampunk festivals, comic-book conferences, and art exhibitions. Additionally, many steampunk artists work together in collectives, essentially forming loosely-knit communities of steampunk-inspired individuals. These groups may perform together at festivals or simply appear together as a unit at various steampunk events. In

Chapter Four we will focus specifically on steampunk performance art and the entertainment industry. That chapter will investigate musical performance and improvisation in addition to the steampunk aesthetic as incorporated into movie and television production. This chapter's focus is on the visual arts.

Before we examine specific works of steampunk visual art we must contextualize the movement in terms of the broader trajectory of contemporary art. How is contemporary art expressed? What are its goals and objectives? How does it fit in as a step along the path of the history of art? And most importantly, we will ask how—or if—the contemporary art world accommodates the steampunk aesthetic and find out whether that aesthetic has penetrated the gallery and museum scenes. If it has been accepted into the current art arena and has found its way into commercial and educational art enterprises then the steampunk genre can be viewed as a legitimate contemporary art movement, one that may influence later generations of artists, and one that will ultimately establish its place in the long history of art. But first we must analyze contemporary aesthetics, a visual language that is an unlikely successor to twentieth century Modernism.

Contemporary Art: Roots in Modernism

As discussed in earlier pages, much of twentieth century aesthetics was dominated by Modernism. This major movement rejected history and tradition and sought instead to discover a pure new vision for artistic expression. American art historian and renowned critic Clement Greenberg was hugely influential in forwarding the concept of Modernism in the United States and supporting particular artists he felt exemplified Modernism's purity. Jackson Pollock, Morris Louis, and Kenneth Noland were among the artists championed by

Greenberg. According to Greenberg, Modern Art represented a significant shift away from traditional painting. As he described it, Modernism was *self-defining*. In other words, unlike previous art movements which sought to conceal art in illusion, essentially presenting three-dimensional historical or genre scenes on the two-dimensional canvas, "Modernism used art to call attention to art" (Greenberg 775). By accepting the actuality of the two-dimensional surface, the square frame, the paint material, and the tool of the brush, Modern artists rejected their traditional role as imitators of three-dimensional reality by way of two-dimensional illusion. Instead they embraced what physically defines painting: the stretched canvas and the flat painted surface. New explorations of painting's pure form ultimately led the artist to abstraction, a unique product of twentieth century Modernism. Abstract works such as Jackson's famous drip paintings, Helen Frankenthaler's color field paintings, Mark Rothko's experiments with simple pure blocks of color, were the logical extension of the rejection of traditional illusionistic painting. Non-objective, without subject, lacking the illusion of depth or sense of realism, Modernism rose to prominence as the high art of the twentieth century.

Largely as a result of abstraction and the casting-aside of realism and tradition, Modernist painting was not easily understood by the average viewer. To many the art simply appeared to be squiggly lines, large color blocks, or roughly applied paint, all without clear underlying meaning. The art's worthiness, as it turned out, needed to be interpreted and validated by the art critic. As a result, the field of art criticism rapidly became a significant factor in the twentieth century art world. Critics such as Greenberg and Michael Fried rose to prominence as they wrote about the elusive new Modernist art. Because of its impenetrability to the layperson and need for interpretation by an intellectual few, Modern art was seen as

elitist. Modern artists were viewed as geniuses, with critics serving as important guides to the expanding art scene, now centered not in Europe, as it had been before World War Two, but in the United States, and specifically in New York City. In fact, the twentieth century is often called the American Century and this is certainly in part due to this shift of the art world's center from Europe to Manhattan. By mid-twentieth century Modern Art, centered in New York City, dominated the art world, its markets and its galleries.

In the late twentieth century visual artists and architects began to reject the simple and rigid forms of Modernism, along with its constricting set of rules that demanded purity and abstraction. In visual arts and elsewhere in Western culture the emerging aesthetic quickly came to be known as *Postmodernism*, an appropriate term for a new movement that countered so directly the Modern aesthetic. Different from Modernism, whose anathema for historical reference was one of its primary features, the new postmodern artist enthusiastically explored historical periods for aesthetic inspiration. The looser, less rigid approach of postmodernism echoed the emerging post-structuralism of later twentieth century philosophy. As contemporary theorist Richard Hertz notes, "in short, rather than exclusivity, purity, and removal from societal and cultural concerns, the emphasis is [now] on inclusivity, impurity, and direct involvement with the content of contemporary experience" (Hertz, xii). We will see that the mix of history, plurality, and democratic tendencies provide the ideal intellectual soil for steampunk's development.

The artists of the new postmodern movement championed a less restrictive and more socially diverse aesthetic approach. Their expansive and inclusive aesthetic readily embraced aspects of popular culture and often made reference to historical artistic precedence. Such

cultural and historical references had been scorned by the elitist Modern artist. But the postmodernist considered every perspective as worthy and each voice as valid. A new polyphonic chorus of artistic expression emerged from this fresh outlook. As younger artists discovered new paths that carried them away from the highly structured Modernist aesthetic, the twentieth century's dominant aesthetic form was challenged in fundamental ways. Modernism soon became simply another historical aesthetic movement to which the contemporary artist could turn for artistic vision, but only if so inspired.

Visual art today has largely discarded historical traditions such as representation and illusion and the neat categorization of *fine art* into painting and sculpture has also been abandoned. The break with the past (abandonment of realism) is a commonly-understood tenet of post-World War II Modernist art. The disconnection with the past led to the acceptance of the flat canvas (abandonment of three-dimensional illusion) and ultimately to complete abstraction. In 1948 Barnett Newman described how the Americans have no need for outmoded props. "We are freeing ourselves from the impediment of memory, association, nostalgia, legend, myth, or what have you that have been the devices of Western European painting. [Our work] can be understood by anyone who will look at it without the nostalgic glasses of history" (Newman 582). Once twentieth-century Modernist painters challenged the rectangular two-dimensional canvas as a vehicle for artistic expression, art expanded both physically and theoretically. Artists turned to *conceptual art* in the 1970s, a movement in which the idea (concept) and the planning of a work were considered more important than the physical object itself or the process of producing it. At that point the Modernist aesthetic championed both conceptual art and non-narrative abstraction.

However, by the 1980s postmodernism as a visual vernacular dominates. In Chapter Five we will examine steampunk's relationship to postmodern philosophy and the fragmentation or dissolution of the subject as forwarded by Fredric Jameson and others. In this chapter the focus is on postmodern art and aesthetics. A new fragmentation of the image accompanies the postmodern rejection of the Modernist artist as autonomous and genius. Jameson, in his discussion of Postmodernism describes the fragmentation of the subject and the new layers of commodified elements from popular culture that form this new art (Jameson 14). Catchy popular culture symbols are introduced into fine art beginning in the 1960s and 1970s by artists such as Andy Warhol, whose Brillo boxes, manipulated photographs of Marilyn Monroe, and appropriation of gory newspaper headlines and images, shift art's focus dramatically, fragmenting and decentering it in a new way. Historical references such as classical pediments and columns begin to resurface in the architecture of Michael Graves, Frank Gehry and others.

Shock value becomes another way to transform art and it is sometimes used as the measure of value—with art at its most shocking seen as edgy, contemporary, and worthy. Two such works come to mind: the 1987 photograph entitled *Immersion (Piss Christ)* by American artist Andre Serrano and the 1996 *Holy Virgin Mary* by British artist Chris Ofili. The work of both artists shocks the viewing audience. That shock often leads to controversy and adverse publicity. Serrano's photograph is of a small plastic crucifix which has been fully immersed in the artist's own urine, the photo shot from close range. Although the crucifix appears to be encased in amber, or shot with a yellow filter, when viewers discover that the holy image has been treated in the manner it had, the work becomes embroiled in controversy. Because the artist had been awarded funding from the National Endowment for

the Arts many questioned the use of federal funds for such offensive art. Chris Ofili's work is a painting of a black Madonna. Although that image may challenge the traditional concept of the Virgin Mary it is the background of the painting that introduces shock value. Interspersed with close-up images of female genitalia cut out from pornography magazines are carefully pasted pieces of dried elephant dung. It is shocking, indeed. The *Sensation* show featured the Ofili work in a 1997-2000 exhibition that visited London, Berlin, and New York. In New York the work evoked much controversy, with then mayor Rudolph Giuliani declaring the work "sick stuff" and threatening to withdraw city funding from the Brooklyn Museum where the *Sensation* show was being held.[29] Despite the fact that it is a shocking and controversial work, Ofili's *Holy Virgin Mary* sold at auction in 2015 for $4.6 million dollars.[30]

Other postmodern art evolves into performance as it does in the case of artist Kate Gilmore whose video vignettes intrigue us endlessly. In a series of visual performances, Gilmore *acts out* her message, which is taken from culture in terms of a phrase from a popular song or commonplace saying. She uses her body directly, as an instrument of her art. In *My Love is an Anchor* the artist sits on the floor in front of the viewer (she either performs her works live or videotapes them earlier and provides the video as the art piece) with her foot caught in a pail of hardened cement, a heart painted on the wall behind her. Gilmore ferociously attacks the burdensome cemented pail with a hammer, attempting to release herself from the 'love' that has anchored her, trapped her and made her incapable of functioning in the world. To regain her autonomy as an independent and fully-functioning being she must chip away at the cement, straining to finally free her leg from the heavy pail that drags her down. This vignette is the physical manifestation of an oh-so-familiar

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scenario—being trapped in a toxic relationship that binds us in an unhealthy state of existence. Similarly, in *Baby, Belong to Me*, Gilmore speaks to women trapped in relationships by dominating husbands or boyfriends, again, in unhealthy relationships. In this piece there is a palpable sense of aloneness and vulnerability. In the video a woman's foot is shown bound by a rope that seems to dangle the woman's body in the air. In the background we hear the plaintive lyrics of the 1980 song from the musical film *Fame*: "Oh, baby, be strong for me, Baby, belong to me, Help me through, Help me need you." At a certain point in the video, the woman attempts to free herself, with a desperate hand rising into the film frame, grabbing futilely at the rope, falling back out of the frame, appearing again. It is all in vain as the foot remains entangled, pulled tautly by the rope strung noose-like from above. It is a scene with great emotional impact, a vignette that captures the woman's terrible straits in just a few lyrical words and a simple image.

Two contemporary artists whose work challenges tradition in a completely different way—through scale and innovative materials, are Christo and Jeanne-Claude. These artistic partners transform existing built structures, landmasses, and natural vistas to re-direct the viewers understanding of such entities visually and physically. Their work is always of a massive scale. For example, in 1983, the two artists dressed up several islands in miles of bright pink fabric in *Surrounded Islands* on Biscayne Bay, Florida. The colorful fabric visually harmonized with the warm colors of the sun and sky of South Florida. They wrap buildings and monuments as if they were gigantic packages as they did in *Wrapped Reichstag* (1995). The massive civic building in Berlin was covered for two weeks in a silvery fabric that hid the building's details and yet revealed the basic structure. The fabric covering gave a quality of airiness to the otherwise heavy presence of the historical and very

traditionally designed governmental building. According to the artists' website (christojeanneclaude.net) the two partners wish to engage the whole environment, whether urban or rural, to impact the way we see the world around us. Although the installations are all temporary the vision remains in our minds as we revisit the sites later on. Furthermore, Christo and Jeanne-Claude keep careful documentation of the projects through extensive photography and planning materials such as drawings, sketches, contracts, and

Figure 12: *Surrounded Islands* **by Christo and Jeanne-Claude (1983, pink fabric installed on existing islands in Biscayne Bay, Florida).**

correspondence. So there is always a visual record of the extravagant installations. Christo and Jeanne-Claude join other contemporary artists to imagine art as physically manifested in exciting new media, installed in unusual spaces and places, and expressed in a new performative and ephemeral manner.

With a completely different aesthetic approach some postmodern artists take the lead from mid-twentieth century Modernist artist Jackson Pollock and his *process*—or *drip*—paintings and

attack the canvas, challenging it as a two-dimensional medium. Paint is dropped, thrown, slopped onto the surface of the work. Cast-off found objects are *collaged* onto the otherwise

Figure 13: *Trade (Gifts for Trading with White People)* **by Jaune Quick-to-See Smith (1992, oil on canvas with collaged objects). Chrysler Museum of Art, Virginia.**

flat canvas, building it up as an environment that challenges our reading of the work as two-dimensional. Jaune Quick-To-See Smith does just that in her masterpiece *Trade* (*Gifts for Trading with White People*) of 1992. The massive 5' by 14'2" canvas forms the backdrop for a mixed media socio-political message about the plight of the native tribes in America. The original injustices wrought by European settlers are visually symbolized in *Trade*. Oil paint is dripped and slathered in feverish strokes, the dripping red pigment referencing the spent blood of the natives as they fought powerful invading European forces. The outline of a canoe seems to glide through the abstracted colors of earth, sun, and dense foliage. Strung along a loose line of rope just above the vibrant canvas are various trinkets—cheap beaded necklaces, other 'Indian' toys such as tomahawks, and ball caps from sports teams that have appropriated tribal names (Redskins, Braves, and Chiefs). With these items the artist suggests the tribes could trade back the land taken from them, just as the white settlers had traded a

Figure 14: Andy Warhol, standing in front of his Brillo installation.

handful of pretty trinkets and coins for vast swaths of open land when they wrested America away from the native peoples a few centuries ago. Strongly political, Smith created this work during the year of the celebration (as she sees it by white Americans) of the 500 years since Christopher Columbus' 'discovery' of the Americas.

In the visual arts, the polyphonic chorus found in an ever more complex world becomes a primary concern for postmodern expression. Andy

Warhol is often considered the first of the truly postmodern artists. In pursuit of artistic expression he elevates stacks of everyday Brillo cleaning product boxes to the level of fine art, adapts widely known photographic portraits of celebrities for use in his lithographs, and otherwise readily embraces aspects of commercial and popular culture. Diverse voices, references to popular culture icons, and an approach to high art that acknowledges its marketability, facilitates Warhol's efforts to democratize art in ways never sought by Modernism. Warhol himself was a brash self-marketer, always aware of new ways to promote his 'brand' of art. The frank acknowledgement of the art market, and the eager embrace of that process, is another way in which postmodern artists differ from their earlier Modern counterparts.

Judy Chicago and other women artists of the 1960's and beyond give voice to a new feminist viewpoint, one that seeks acknowledgment and validation for the work of women and offers a challenge to patriarchal Western society. Chicago's *Dinner Party*, an early rejection of Modern simplicity, was created between 1974 and 1979 and speaks to feminist interests. The installation is a celebration of significant women often overlooked in the canon of history. Brought together in a symbolic banquet, the women— some mythical some historic—are described through individual place settings representing their contributions. A Heritage Floor provides the backdrop and lists

Figure 15: *Dinner Party* **by Judy Chicago (1974-1979, mixed media installation). Brooklyn Museum, New York.**

hundreds of other female contributors whose work depended on the foundation laid by those women at the table. The *Dinner Party* opens up an avenue of feminist expression in the visual arts that continues to be tapped today.

Other artists focus on different important issues facing society. South African artist Willie Bester addresses the crisis of apartheid in his elaborate 'paintings' enhanced with found objects such as barbed wire, tin, and dirt. His *Homage to Steve Bilko* of 1993 is a case in point. This work's raw imagery attests to the violence and tragedy that confronted the anti-apartheid movement, in particular the horrifying fate of activist Steve Bilko who was murdered by South African officials during a routine ambulance transport. American artist Keith Haring elevates graffiti and street tagging to the level of fine art. Tumbling masses of Haring's colorful stick figures, loopy and bright, form oversized murals that turn the concept of gritty urban graffiti into a celebration of spontaneity and appealing color. Other artists focus on issues of personal concern to them, but that are also reflected in the larger society. They explore issues of homelessness, sexuality, environmentalism, and political suppression.

Like Jaune Quick-To-See Smith, many contemporary artists consider their work as a platform for political, sexual, cultural, or personal agendas. Feminism, race issues, sexuality are all concerns with which the contemporary artist grapples and which reflect the growing diversity and inclusion of contemporary art. All expression is relevant, all agendas welcomed. The medium expands as video, still photography, multi-media, environmental art, in addition to performance and collage, become part of the art world. Contemporary art's inclusivity provides an easy access point for the steampunk aesthetic. Egalitarian and experimental, steampunk artists embrace the postmodern efforts of contemporary art.

Although not as politically charged as some or so driven by personal agenda, as Smith and others, steampunk artists adopt mixed media and collage as they build up work from found objects such as gears and brass trim, trinkets from the past, re-imagined and configured for the present. They take the lessons of contemporary art and its inventive use of appropriated visual elements as they forward their own interpretation of an imagined future and a re-imagined past.

Architect Frank Gehry (b. 1929) is one of the towering figures of the postmodernist approach in terms of the built environment. His designs, including the Guggenheim Museum at Bilbao, Spain (opened 1997), and the Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles (opened 2003), pushed Gehry onto the international stage and at the forefront of the loosely deconstructed postmodern architectural aesthetic. Gehry's works are created out of materials never before used in built structures: titanium, corrugated metal, chain link. His designs question convention not only through the use of new materials but also in their visual and structural complexity. The viewer is visually confused by a Gehry building. There appears to be no façade. Where is the front door? The windows are not placed at right angles to the ground-line. Our preconceived notions of a building become irrelevant in a Gehry building. We have

Figure 16: Exterior detail of the Guggenheim Museum by Frank Gehry

no frame of reference and we must, therefore, approach the building physically and intellectually with a fresh outlook. In the Guggenheim, for example, the materials and design give the building an impression of a billowing sail or a bird in flight rather than a conventional, symmetrical, hierarchically laid out building one can approach with confidence about its integrity and visual space. Gehry breaks down or *deconstructs* the conventions of building, casting aside tradition, and then builds back up a design created out of his imagination and visual sense. Like the post-structuralist philosophers who challenge the edifice of Western Metaphysics and language, Gehry does not take traditional form as *prima facie* but instead creates from the ground up according to his own personal inspirations. In fact, Gehry often begins his design phase by crumpling up paper, cutting forms from cardboard, and building his ideas from these deconstructed and disparate elements.

Gehry's approach echoes the de-territorialization that French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari refer to in their groundbreaking book *A Thousand Plateaus*. That book addresses the general breakdown of the structures of humankind, hitherto understood by philosophers (for example and most recently by French Structuralists such as Claude Levi-Strauss) as innate 'givens' but conceived by Deleuze and Guattari as completely and deliberately manmade and thus not actually a permanent foundation. The fragmented façade of society is reconstituted in the postmodern period as an organically evolving movement based solely on new experience and ever-unfolding occurrences. As an architect, Gehry deconstructs a building's 'givens,' and starts afresh, allowing the design to rise from organic forms without traditional limits. He de-territorializes the structure, then constructs anew. Gehry's buildings thus take on a rhizomatic form, having arrived at that shape through an organic non-hierarchical evolution. The building flows with little regard to origin, order, or

direction. Traditional architecture from the Greeks through Modernism, on the other hand, takes its shape from accepted forms: façade, entryway, the rectilinear overall structural shape, which are all placed together in hierarchical schemata that Deleuze and Guattari would call arboreal, citing the relationship between tree trunk and branch and leaf as hierarchical. The leaf does not stand independently but is instead in a dependent relationship, like child to parent, with the trunk. We will see in Chapter Five how the de-territorialization of Deleuze and Guattari resonates with the steampunk movement as that movement solidifies its position in the contemporary intellectual landscape.

Contemporary Art: Steampunk and Postmodernism

By the end of the twentieth century, this non-traditional, greatly expanded *postmodern* art (*after* Modern art), driven by popular culture, has become an attention-grabbing global, diverse, and sometimes agenda-driven expression of contemporary life. Steampunk art finds its place within this postmodern atmosphere and flourishes. The flat canvas is abandoned and the steampunk artist introduces the gear and the cog, the three-dimensional mechanical device. Multi-media, new media, and site-specific sculpture take over center stage. Steampunk artists combine abandoned antique fragments and street detritus into their work. Postmodern artists utilize outdoor landscapes, rural and urban, as context for artistic expression. Steampunk artists form bands of roving performers and use the world around them as an expanded canvas. Postmodern artists creatively incorporate historical references in their work. Unlike the Modernists who rejected such reference in their efforts to move beyond tradition, these artists are willing to trawl the past for visual elements that please them. This is particularly the case in postmodern architecture where classical references are used almost whimsically in building design. Steampunk artists do the same,

turning to the Victorian for inspiration, fragmenting it, re-purposing it, and making historical reference an intrinsic part of the genre. Steampunk art is a postmodernist expression and well represents the contemporary period and its aesthetic concerns.

Contemporary artists, experimental, open-minded, and with a newly expanded artistic framework from which to work, eagerly explore the steampunk aesthetic for both intellectual and visual inspiration. The contemporary artist does not recoil from the Victorian elements that are fundamental to the steampunk aesthetic and instead fully accepts its quirky mix of old and new. Postmodern artists looking to the past for inspiration resonate with the Victorian overlay of the steampunk look. Steampunk echoes the contemporary artist's interest in built-up collage, video and new media, the creative re-use of found objects, and the injection of popular culture symbols into new works. The steampunk aesthetic harmonizes and enhances the contemporary art scene, becoming a valid avenue of expression for today's artist.

However, the relationship between postmodernism and steampunk is quite nuanced and steampunk rejects certain basic elements of the postmodern outlook. As such, it does not simply reflect postmodernism. There is a fundamental philosophical difference between postmodernism and steampunk's vision and, although the steampunk artist operates easily within the larger sphere of postmodern art, that difference must be addressed. As with other examples of contemporary art, the steampunk aesthetic is egalitarian and embraces society's diversity, repurposing historical elements within a postmodern fragmentation. But along with its appreciation of the Victorian past steampunk champions an optimistic outlook and it is in that optimism that steampunk differs from the broader postmodern enterprise.

Postmodernism offers a jaded worldview, a sense of late capitalism devolved into commodified fetishism, according to Jameson and other writers on the postmodern state. Cultural fetishism dissolves the high modern individual into a fragmented and mindless consumer who responds to superficial images, mere simulacrums of the real. The real is lost to vapid and ubiquitous postmodern images: flashes of advertising, television snippets, popular culture magazines, photographic images that surround us in our daily lives. Jameson, Jean-Francois Lyotard, and others forward a notion of disintegration, loss, fragmentation, and the dissolution of the subjective.

These pessimistic and dystopian elements of postmodernism are rejected by the steampunk practitioner who conceives of the individual, autonomous and powerful, as situated within a positive, engaging community. Although the steampunk aesthetic emerges in the midst of the disintegration of differences between the mediums of painting and sculpture, after Modernism's breakdown of tradition gives way to postmodern art's multiplicity and experimentation, steampunk lacks the negative tenor of postmodernism. In a later chapter the complexity of contemporary philosophy will be examined in greater detail in relationship to the steampunk aesthetic, but it is certainly clear that the tragic elements of the postmodern, the fetishism of late capitalism, are cast aside by the steampunk artist. The optimism of steampunk is not shared with Jameson and other postmodernists.

Perhaps steampunk can be seen as an antidote to the postmodern state's perceived rampant consumerism. Steampunk, in fact, transforms the broader sphere of postmodern art by turning away from consumerism, embracing homemade craft, and developing a positive outlook within the context of the postmodern world. Postmodernism, an enabling precursor,

allows steampunk to champion a positive, re-energized, enterprise that returns autonomy to the individual. With lessons learned from postmodernism—diversity, community, pluralism, and the deconstruction of the High Modern individual silo—steampunk crafts a space for the individual within a diverse society. A new and digitally networked contemporary community is created that embraces the individual subject within it.

As we explore the steampunk aesthetic and the artists involved we will see that some contemporary artists work solely in the steampunk motif while others experiment with the aesthetic as just one of many styles to explore. It is also important to note that, although one seeks to distinguish between the work of steampunk 'fans' and the work of the fine artist, it is often difficult to do so. In fact, blurring the lines between fine art and craft is another way that steampunk and the postmodern approach challenge traditional thinking about art. With the Maker culture booming and the steampunk aesthetic manifested in a broad swath of popular culture, the lines between fine art and craft fade. The avid fan certainly impacts the steampunk experience and therefore the evolving steampunk aesthetic. Fans are active participants and they are often very talented. For the purposes of this project's exploration of the steampunk aesthetic the artists we profile include those whose creative work has made its way from the fan festivals into galleries and exhibitions. They are artists whose names are often repeated in articles and books on the subject of steampunk and who are helping to shape the aesthetic as it evolves. These exhibition and recognition factors allow us distinguish the dedicated artist from the enthusiastic fan.

The Art Market: Gallery and Auction Houses Today

Before we leave the discussion of the contemporary art scene to focus specifically on the work of steampunk artists, we must make quick note of the state of the gallery and auction house system today. It is clear that the breakdown of familiar artistic traditions and the abandonment of the static art object has not destroyed the historic capitalist art system—the art galleries and the auction houses that are motivated by profit and commerce in addition to the promotion of works of art and the artists who create them. Today the art market is thriving as it completely adapts to non-conventional contemporary art. Recent auction successes at Christie's 2015 sales in New York reflect this trend. Highest value pieces today are not the Old Masters of yesteryear but instead are the best examples of twentieth century Modernism ($81.9M for Mark Rothko's *No. 10*), Post-Modernism ($56.2M for Andy Warhol's *Colored Mona Lisa*), and think-outside-the-box contemporary art from the likes of artists Jeff Koons (in 2013 Christie's sold his *Balloon Dog (Orange)* for $58M) and others. Today, famous contemporary artists bring big money to the market, dominating major auction house sales at both Christie's and Sotheby's.[31] And the client base is now global, which brings even more money to the table. Although steampunk has not yet broken into the high-end auction house system, it is likely only a matter of years until that case changes.

We turn now to explore the work of several contemporary artists who embrace the retro-futuristic and neo-Victorian aesthetic that is steampunk. As part of that exploration we will look at how these artists are sustained through significant and focused steampunk exhibitions at museums and galleries. The curators who champion the steampunk aesthetic are also an important element in the evolution of the movement and we will explore the involvement of two who help disseminate the steampunk aesthetic through the curation of specific shows. Curating steampunk brings it to the broader gallery-going public and

reinforces the aesthetic as a noteworthy art movement. But we begin in the following pages with the artists themselves.

Contemporary Steampunk Artists

There are three fundamental elements that define steampunk art. First, the work must include broad Victorian visual references such as top hats, long dresses, leather, lace, or brass fixtures. Secondly, steampunk art will always creatively incorporate late nineteenth-century mechanizations. Steam-powered gadgets, mechanics such as gears and cogs, are visually described as exposed mechanical elements. Finally, the work must allude to the intriguing technological possibilities of the future. References to cyborgs and time travel are common prospects for a steampunk future. Beyond those three core features the aesthetic is open to personal expression, creativity, and experimentation. To demonstrate the diversity and creativity of the aesthetic we will focus on a handful of artists. Although many analyses might frame illustrative examples chronologically, I have instead loosely arranged the artists and their works thematically. Because the steampunk aesthetic is still quite new, with most work created between 2005 and the present, a concise chronological arrangement is not hugely significant. Instead we will look at three themes that clearly distinguish steampunk from other areas of contemporary art. They are neo-Victorian clockworks and functional designs, cyborgs and hybrid beings, and futuristic mechanical fantasy. Within each of these themes we will find that the basic underlying features of the steampunk aesthetic are always addressed: the neo-Victorian, exposed mechanical elements, and a visual expression of the possibilities of the future. Steampunk clockwork and functional designs will be demonstrated by the work of Eric Freitas and Art Donovan. Examples of cyborgs and hybrid beings are exemplified by the work of Molly Friedrich, Doktor A, and Pierre Matter.

Futuristic fantasy is illustrated through the work of Christopher Kuksi and artists such as Christopher Canole.

Clockworks and Functional Art

After receiving his BFA in graphic design and illustration from the College for Creative Studies, American artist Eric Freitas became intrigued by the traditional craft of clock making. He immersed himself in books on the subject and began to experiment with old clocks, retrofitting them in a steampunk aesthetic (Donovan 59). His first work took a full year to complete and he has been producing functional and aesthetically pleasing clockworks ever since, each more intricate and complex than the last. In Freitas' work the design takes precedence over the mechanical with the workings carefully adapted to reflect the visual inspiration. His clocks are bizarre and organic, fully functional, and unique. They are crafted carefully and painstakingly. According to Freitas, "In the world of steampunk, things are handmade, personal, and possess an eccentric quality that could only exist in the absence of mass production" (Wieland). Freitas' own work certainly reflects steampunk eccentricity and a sense of fine craftsmanship.

Figure 17: *Mechanical Number 6* **by Eric Freitas (2009, bronze, found objects, clockwork).**

Mechanical No. 6 is a Freitas work that was included in the 2009-2010 Steampunk art exhibition held at the Oxford Museum of History and Science. The piece is made of hand-machined brass shapes that artfully frame an old-fashioned looking clock whose gears are visible behind the clock face. As noted earlier, the exposed gears are a key component of the steampunk aesthetic.

Also visually exposed is the wind-up chain, which is over ten feet in length and made up of over 1,000 intricately hand-cut links. Irregular shapes of hand-cut metal form a lacy overlay, a fine tracery, to the work's underlying time-telling function. The brass is aged and distressed, but the clock is fully functional. *Mechanical No. 6* appears to be an antique mechanical object created in an imagined neo-Victorian future and the viewer is intrigued. What is the clock's origin? What are the dragon-like metal forms visible above the clock face? Other works by Freitas bear the same mysterious quality. They may have rice paper wings protruding from the clock face or repurposed lenses from an old jeweler's loupe magnifying sections of the mechanical foundation. In many of the clocks a single number is spelled out in delicately cut brass. The 'three' that precariously extends from the side of the *Quartz 6* clock is visually balanced with heavier but smaller elements that extend from the opposite side. Despite their unique elements each clock clearly expresses the steampunk aesthetic. They appear as reclaimed Victorian objects with an emphasis on exposed mechanics, but they are not merely imitations of the Victorian past. Nor are they representative of the modern present. Instead, because we do not recognize them fully as either from the past or the present, we read them as possible hints of an imagined future. Eric Freitas has captured the spirit of steampunk—the visual reference to a reclaimed past, present and imagined future in his art.

Artist, designer, and curator Art Donovan has a well-established interior design and custom lighting practice. He is drawn to the steampunk aesthetic as inspiration for his art pieces, most of which are functional objects for the home. Donovan's lengthy career in the design field included work as the senior designer for Apple Design Corporation in New York City and as the Art Director at Wells, Rich, Greene Advertising Company, in its heyday one

of the top fifteen advertising agencies in the United States.[32] In 1990 Donovan and his wife, interior designer Leslie Tarbell Donovan, opened their own company, Donovan Design, which specializes in custom lighting systems, interior design, and home staging. According to their website, Donovan Design clients include Tiffany and Co, New York, the University of Baltimore Library, many prominent architectural firms, hotel and resort properties, and individual clients across the globe.[33]

In a 2008 newspaper interview, Donovan explains how he originally came to the Steampunk aesthetic. He "discovered Steampunk purely by accident on the internet….when I was researching design styles. After seeing so much mid-century modern design on the net, I was stunned when I came across such a unique style that so boldly incorporated Victorian and 'techno-centric' influences. Seeing that the creators and fans of Steampunk were equally divided among men and women, young and older alike, I realized that the genre had a surprisingly broad appeal. That is what really lit the fuse for me

Figure 18: *"The Ferry Man" Reading and Research Lamp* **by Art Donovan.**

creatively" (Casey). Since his fortuitous discovery of the aesthetic Donovan has focused much of his design work and curatorial interest on the steampunk genre.

One of Donovan's recent works illustrates the steampunk spirit so prevalent in his lighting designs. For the functional yet fanciful piece entitled *"The Ferryman" Reading and Research Lamp* the artist looked to a Victorian source as inspiration. The vision for the

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design stems from Donovan's observation that the fictional character Captain Nemo from Jules Verne's 1869 novel *Twenty-thousand Leagues Under the Sea* may be in need of proper lighting with which to peruse the books in his voluminous library on the submarine Nautilus. Donovan explains. "Among [Captain Nemo's] extensive collection of rare Persian manuscripts, antique navigational charts, and volumes of ancient Greek and Roman literature, Nemo also possessed rare specimens of the natural world that predated Sir Charles Darwin. What the good Captain didn't possess was a proper reading lamp." [34] *"The Ferryman" Reading and Research Lamp* is proposed to serve as Nemo's perfect lamp.

The Ferryman stands 32" high and is constructed of solid brass and mahogany, giving it a Victorian flair. Its complex mechanical components are fully adjustable, visible, moveable, and the lighting elements include two bulbs: one high-intensity incandescent and the other ultra-violet LED. The combined light source produces an 'accurate' reading of the object or book being examined. There is a sheet magnifier 8 ½" x 11" that adjusts for closer observation of books supported by the adjustable book rest. The back side of the piece includes an 'assistant researcher's' lamp and hand-held magnifier for close work. This functional design is unique, signed and dated by the artist in 2010. The work represents the steampunk interest in functionality combined with a Victorian spirit and it includes the three main components of the steampunk aesthetic. First, the rich brass and fine wood elements reflect an interest in the Victorian. The accompanying fantasy narrative that the piece was designed for a fictional Victorian submarine captain adds a unique and intriguing element to this one-of-a-kind piece. Secondly, the work includes exposed mechanical elements and has an emphasis on functionality. The lamps, book rest, and magnifier seem a perfect addition to any contemporary library. Finally, the work is imbued with a sense of the future, with LED

lighting and a complexity of design that we imagine will be useful and desirable in an imagined future, a future that we hope is as malleable as a fantasy past.

The work of Freitas and Donovan represent steampunk functional design. There are many others whose work reflects the overarching interest in functionality within the aesthetic and steampunk functional art continues to thrive in the highly competitive and fast-changing commercial arena. However, we turn now to the subject of the cyborg, the second of three broad steampunk themes in contemporary visual art.

Cyborgs and Hybrid Beings

Cyborgs and hybrid beings often inhabit the visual world of steampunk and several artists, prominent among them Molly Friedrich, Doktor A, and Pierre Matter, focus on exploring these fantasy *mashups* of human and machine. Friedrich's work, *Mechanical Womb with Clockwork Fetus*, was featured in the Oxford Museum's Steampunk exhibition of 2009-2010 and explores the imagined possibilities of childbirth in a future world. Doktor A's quirky hybrid beings, small toy-like machines with human elements, are quite popular steampunk creatures sold to a world-wide market of interested collectors. In his original bronzes and also print works, Pierre Matter also explores the potential for hybridity of animal and machine. His beautifully crafted hybrid beings merge the natural structure of the animal with mechanical enhancements. The work of Friedrich, Doktor A, and Matter demonstrates steampunk's interest in machine/man connections, the hybridity that contemporary citizens imagine will be in our future. The works still also harken back to Victorian concerns with the future so references to steam-power, mechanics, and brass gadgetry are part of the artistic expression. The three basic components of the steampunk aesthetic are quite evident.

We begin with American artist Molly Friedrich. She attended the Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design, and the Minneapolis College of Art and Design and works in a variety of media, using materials such as brass, wood, glass, and plastic. Analyzing her *Mechanical Womb with Clockwork Fetus*, we see that the work is a mixed media concoction, a fantastical representation of a mechanical steampunk fetus within a mechanical womb. *Mechanical Womb* is made of brass, nickel, steel, copper, acrylic, rubber, plastic, and glass. The mechanical steampunk elements are all there: brass exposed joints, hard surfaces, and metal fastenings. They are executed with Victorian flair, rich and ornate with a straightforward mechanical foundation. And the fetus, visible within the womb, even wears a pair of tiny goggles, a nod to the Victorian scientist of the past. Viewers are invited to investigate the intricate details of the work more closely with microscopes cantilevered out from the center of the womb on swiveling mechanical arms. Thus, the viewer becomes active participant in the scientific examination of this hybrid creature. Friedrich's work is a visual wonder from an imagined Victorian past blended with a concept straight from the imagined future.

The clockwork fetus is clearly a *post-human era* baby, perhaps it is part human, but perhaps it is all cyborg. The mechanical being represents a proposed future in which hybrid creatures are part of the community. The baby's inner

Figure 19: *Mechanical Womb with Clockwork Fetus* **by Molly Friedrich (brass, nickel, steel, copper, acrylic, rubber, plastic, glass).**

workings are exposed in true steampunk fashion and serve as an attempt to make the baby intellectually readable to the viewer. The art object certainly addresses the concerns of contemporary society, an era when even the natural process of pregnancy and birth can be assisted artificially. This piece asks the viewer, what will tomorrow bring to the human condition? The mechanical baby is both disturbing to the viewer who imagines a world that could create such a hybrid being and at the same time it is also exciting to him. We look with sympathy and even tenderness at the little creature, already outfitted with his goggles and poised to make his way in this unsettling new world. The baby's mere presence is an encouragement, a vision of birth and regeneration, an invitation to accept her as part of a familiar continuum of the world we know and generations that unfold through time. If wombs and babies still exist, if we can visualize tiny creatures—albeit hybrid beings—who must learn, as we did, to negotiate the world around them, then there is hope. Although the contemporary citizen is challenged by the changing world around her and she sometimes even questions her own autonomy, she can *imagine* that the world of the future will still include babies and birth and new generations. This optimism in the face of a quickly evolving existence, this imagining of a rosy future, is a key element in the steampunk aesthetic and in its intellectual underpinnings.

The artist's intent may align directly with a similar excitement and enthusiasm that Italian Futurism championed in the early part of the twentieth century. Futurism, as described in earlier pages, was a short-lived art movement full of enthusiasm for technology and for what the future might hold. Futurism, however, lasted in true form only from 1909 until the outbreak of World War One, which broke up its band of members. In fact many of them served as soldiers in the war effort. The horrors of war, brought home from the battlefield in

newsreel footage, newspaper coverage, and through the stories of the returning wounded and deeply traumatized fighters, brought an abrupt end to Futurism's brash confidence and eager enthusiasm. But during its brief heyday Futurism heartily embraced modern weaponry (machine guns, air power, trains used efficiently for modern troop movement) and looked excitedly ahead to the future and a world that easily adapted to the possibilities of mechanization. Members of the Futurist movement expressed optimism in terms of human survival and that optimism is picked up a century later by the steampunk movement in which energy and enthusiasm for the future is expressed throughout its aesthetic program.

In discussing her art, Friedrich explains, "The whole world is changing fast, and large facets of our lives are going to have to adjust to it, but it need not be a tragedy at all. Call me steampunk, tinkerer, villain, artist, mad scientist, misguided; but most of all, call me a survivor, for I am already planning to be a part of the new world that will be forged fresh upon the old" (Forlini 80). Friedrich embraces her post-human position in an uncertain world, challenging the viewer to share her enthusiasm, despite the disconcerting ramifications of the mechanical baby she creates. Her enthusiasm reminds us of the Italian Futurists' determined and optimistic manifesto, written a century earlier, and which eagerly cheered the velocity and mystery of the new world. Friedrich's *Mechanical Womb with Clockwork Fetus* is a true steampunk masterpiece. It looks back to the Victorian aesthetically while focusing on exposed mechanical elements. And, at the same time, it challenges us to consider the future, imagined as a bright *new world forged fresh upon the old.*

The work of Bruce Whistlecraft, AKA "Doktor A" also explores the concept and implications of the hybrid being. Doktor A's work is featured on the artist's web site

mechtorians.com. This British artist first worked in the commercial toy business as a designer and developer before turning his own studio into an industrial toy store of sorts. The *mechtorian* toys he creates are purportedly characters that inhabit an imagined neo-Victorian world the artist refers to as *Retropolis*. One surmises that the invented word *mechtorian* combines *mechanical* with *Victorian,* an apt term for the beings that Doktor A creates. The mechtorians are recreations of robots that operate

Figure 20: *Rollo O Ver* by Doktor "A" (2011, mixed media).

as members of an imagined Victorian society, functioning in traditional roles such as scientist or banker. In Doktor A's world there are no humans, just these human-like machines that reflect all elements of community. Each hand-crafted mechtorian is an original art piece that is created and sold by Doktor A on his website or through various art gallery exhibitions. According to his website the works are collected by individuals across the world. These collectors eagerly await the introduction of upcoming production runs.

A 2015 work entitled *Rollo O Ver* is a mustachioed character that incorporates a human-like body with machine parts. It is half humanoid, with familiar head, body, arms, legs, eyes, nose, mustache, and even a jaunty top hat. The remainder of the figure is clearly a machine. Rollo's hands and feet are mechanical gears which are set into a large, wide wheel. Rollo seems perpetually trapped within the wheel as it becomes his form of transportation. In fact, the imagined life-narrative for the character is that Rollo is a sportsman who holds the world record for downhill descent. Made of acrylic, epoxy resin, steel, lead, rubber, paper,

and found objects, the figure is small, just 9" x 9" x 5" in dimension. *Rollo O Ver* was recently exhibited at a show curated by Chet Zar at the Copro Gallery in Santa Monica, California (January-February 2015) and the item is listed as 'sold' on the gallery's website.[35] *Rollo O Ver* and other works by Doktor A express the artist's interest in mechanical beings of the future. As do other steampunk works, *Rollo O Ver* and the *mechtorians* of *Retropolis* represent the imagined possibilities of a futuristic world inhabited by cyborgs. At the same time the works visually harken back to the Victorian period stylistically and with an imagined nineteenth century narrative. The exposed mechanics are a big focus of Doktor A's characters and Rollo O Ver's gears for his hands and feet are an excellent example of this feature.

The French artist Pierre Matter (b. 1964) also focuses on hybrid beings in his artistic practice. Matter is an intriguing contemporary artist whose work speaks to the future more than to the past while at the same time expressing an interest in hybridity, the man-machine. Matter works in bronze and other metals, often repurposing discarded bits and pieces for his work. In an interview for an exhibition in Las Vegas in 2013, Matter explains, "I'm a kind of salvager. I feel like a child in a heap of sand, but instead of sand, there's a lot of recycling and scrap, full of magnificent objects. Often, the sculpture[s] which emerge from these scraps of metal speak to us of who we are and how our future might be."[36] Matter's exhibition schedule is impressive. In 2013, his work was shown at the AFA Gallery in New York City in an exhibition entitled, *Pierre Matter—Essential Being.* The show featured Matter's bronze sculptures and new graphics. He continues to be represented by AFA today. Matter's work has recently been featured at the Galerie CLARUS in Orleans, France, and at the Opera Gallery in Hong Kong.

Much of Matter's work contains steampunk elements and a machine aesthetic. Post-human animal forms such as horses, bulls, and sea creatures are augmented by the artist with machine parts and metal components. The sculpture entitled *A Love of Rhino* (bronze, 63 x 47 x 15") depicts a massive rhinoceros whose body is merged with stainless steel, revealing the rippling musculature as overlapping metal plates held fast through an elaborate system of rivets. The rhino is both futuristic and fantastical, his raw animal power still highly evident, but in fact made more dynamic with the added visual weight of the hard-edged mechanical elements. Matter is able to convince the viewer that the being still functions as an animal, the naturalistic muscles are well represented, but the muscles are fiercely augmented with the power of mechanized steel.

Another recent bronze piece presents a shark whose graceful forward motion appears natural and powerful. Looking closely at the work, we see, however, that this creature of the imaginary sea is half Russian nuclear submarine. Matter also experiments with expressing human/machine hybridity. In *Zen*, a mechanical baby, human in form, sleeps peacefully while nestled against a cold metal frame that seems to envelop it tenderly and carefully. *Diane* is a bust of a bare-breasted woman. Her torso opens to expose the mechanical gears and cogs that apparently make this sensuous being 'tick.' The disturbing figure consists of both soft human flesh and hard-edged machine components. Matter's figures are combinations that represent a possible future hybridity, which must entail an acceptance of the machine being as co-inhabitant of the planet. In Chapter Five we will explore the connections between the steampunk movement and the theories of post-humanist Donna Haraway who eagerly forwards the notion of hybridity as the certain future of humankind.

In an interview in online art and fashion periodical Vestal Magazine in 2012 Matter reveals the influences on his work. Salvador Dali and other Surrealist artists were important early influences on his work, as was the European comic strip *TinTin*, which he read avidly as a child. Surrealist painter, sculptor, and set designer, Hans Rudolf Giger (b. 1940), was also influential.[37] Matter also resonates with the work of Chilean-French filmmaker and actor Alejandro Jodorosky (b 1929), and American filmmaker David Lynch (b. 1946). As an artist Matter is interested in what will happen in the future, but he is grounded in the real, the present, and the human condition that is in need of improvement. "I still feel more and more outraged by the world, by human beings who so often act without thinking, by war, hunger, technologies used to worsen the world, and so on" (Tate). Matter's vision is of a future in which technology is used for the good, a world in which men, animals, and machines find harmony, and a time when our existence is based on peace and not conflict. The steampunk aesthetic and philosophical outlook allows him to explore those possibilities. Although he expresses pessimism in regard to the current state of the world, Matter's focus is on the future. He challenges us to look to the future with optimism. Matter's nod to the Victorian can be seen in the exposed mechanics—gears and cogs—of works such as *Diane* and *Zen*, and in his curiosity about the future of science and technology. This curiosity parallels the

Figure 21: *Diane* **by Pierre Matter (bronze, wood).**

Victorian period's similar eagerness to understand and explore technology and science's potential power. And the exposed Neo-Victorian mechanizations coupled with his focus on the future of technology tie Matter and the steampunk movement together.

Futuristic Fantasy

The visual expression of an optimistic and fantastical future is a significant theme for steampunk art. Although some artists emphasize Victorian features in their work others focus on visualizing the future. Kris Kuksi is an artist who imagines a fantastic future within the steampunk aesthetic and his work will serve to illustrate that important aspect of the aesthetic. Influential writer and steampunk scholar Mike Perschon makes note of the significance of the Star Wars movie franchise for those steampunk artists whose emphasis is on future fantasy and Kuksi serves to illustrate the Star Wars/steampunk connection. Although that connection may be indirect in the art of Kuksi, it is nonetheless of interest as we explore ways that steampunk interfaces with popular culture themes. Other artists such as Christopher Canole create fantasy steampunk characters that are a direct nod to the Star Wars narrative.

Although a painter by training, Kuksi is a builder who is currently focused on creating elaborate sculptural pieces using the steampunk aesthetic. He gathers popular culture bits and pieces for his work, such as dolls, furniture parts, and other elements, and constructs from them his imaginative and unique pieces. His *Caravan Assault Apparatus* of 2009 (mixed media, dimensions: 28 x 20 x 39") was exhibited in the Oxford Museum Steampunk exhibition in 2009-2010. Kuksi's piece is a tremendous mix of disparate visual details that together form a massive transport "vehicle" of futuristic style. Radio towers, propellers,

scaffolding, gears, even tiny figures on motorcycles and small wheeled contraptions are collaged onto the foundational structure of the work, a torpedo-like object atop its own wheeled base. The result is a formidable three-wheeled object that gives the impression at the same time of solidity and fantasy. The whimsical contraption is top heavy and unwieldy, but at the same time it gives the sense of purpose and gravity. Perhaps it is the warrior perched atop the front of the vehicle with an odd and menacing cyborg-like beast behind him. Look more closely to see that many more soldiers fan out in every direction and at every level of the vehicle, facing out in defense of their territory.

Figure 22: *Caravan Assault Apparatus* by Chris Kuksi (2009, mixed media).

Perschon writes about how today's steampunk aesthetic is being used to modify and re-explore Star Wars characters (Perschon 129). The Star Wars motif is a perfect intellectual fit for steampunk. The Republic's heroes reflect the underlying interest of steampunk philosophy--that of individual man or small collective against unknown and destructive machine forces of great power. In the case of Star Wars, the powerful enemy is the Imperial Force, as exemplified by the planet-destroying ship, the Death Star. In the case of steampunk, the scenario is that of man against the dominant force of modern technology, ubiquitous and powerful. Kuksi's *Caravan Assault Apparatus* seems to aptly reflect such a rebellious scenario. It very much resembles the rag-tag vehicles of the

movie's rebels of the Republic. For example, Star Wars' Tantive IV, also known as the Rebel Blockade Runner, and the Republic Cruiser (Radiant VII), are both rebel ships that come to mind as possible inspirations for Kuksi's *Caravan Assault Apparatus*. Furthermore, the rebellion of the Republic, a heroic uprising against the Imperial power structure is a perpetually homemade or patched-together enterprise, and in that way it also resonates with the DIY philosophy of steampunk. It reminds us of the steampunk interest in *homo faber* (man as maker), in building new forms from found objects by using his imagination and intellectual prowess.

Kuksi's work connects nostalgia for past mechanizations—the bulky contraption powered at least in part by Victorian-era stagecoach—and an interest in futuristic Star Wars motifs. The three main components of steampunk art are visible here. The Victorian elements of the elaborate stagecoach, exposed mechanics represented by the scaffolding, gears, cranks, and pulleys, and a futuristic sensibility evident in the cyborg creatures, looming communication towers, and the flying machine itself, make this an excellent example of the aesthetic. The blurring of timelines within one object is typical of the steampunk aesthetic, and speaks to its interest both in the future (optimism) and nostalgia for the past (machine anxiety). Thus it echoes the philosophies of both the British Pre-Raphaelites of a century ago, who looked to earlier periods nostalgically as a defensive retreat from a perceived problematic future, and the Italian Futurists of the early twentieth century, who eagerly embraced the future and all the new mechanizations that future might hold.

Artist Christopher Canole works occasionally in the Steampunk aesthetic although his unique career has spanned the fields of physics, photojournalism, movie set construction, and

the fine arts. He received his MFA from California Institute of the Arts in 1973 and spent the next several years designing sets for Hollywood movies. For the original 1978 *Superman* movie Canole designed the exterior of the set of what is known as the "Fortress of Solitude." Continuing on his eclectic career path Canole is currently writing a screenplay and creating portrait drawings and sketches *au plein air*. His steampunk work, however, is the focus of our interest in the artist. That work combines his love of the Star Wars film series, his skills in movie prop design and construction, and his interest in the steampunk aesthetic.

In honor of the recent film *Star Wars Episode VII*, which opened in movie theatres December 18, 2015, Canole created an elaborate steampunk-infused Star Wars Darth Vader costume and developed an imagined persona known as Dude Vader to go with the gear. Wearing the costume the artist is transformed into what is essentially a steampunk version of the evil character from the Star Wars franchise. A gold headdress replaces the black one of the traditional Vader character. The gold appears to be Victorian brass and is covered in true steampunk style with over a hundred visible grommets. The attached facemask is comprised

of steampunk goggles and a complex breathing apparatus that is created with Victorian attention to detail. A breast plate with gears, propellers, and dials is worn below the headpiece. An impressive mechanical arm is replete with exposed gears, elaborate piping, instrumentational dials, and what appears

Figure 23: "Dude Vader" by Christopher Canole (2015).

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to be an old-fashioned but futuristic rocket launcher. The futuristic fantasy aspect of the work is further enhanced by reclaiming the character itself from the Star Wars franchise whose storyline takes place in the distant future. Dude Vader and the artist who created him have been featured in local San Diego area newspapers. In fact, Dude Vader and his band of fellow Star Wars steampunk performers won the Costume Designers Guild award for "Best Cosplay Costume Group" at the San Diego Comic-con International Conference in 2015.[38] Star Wars, a futuristic fantasy with undertones of rebellious individual autonomy, is one that continues to inspire the work of certain steampunk artists.

There are many other artists who work within the genre of steampunk, discovering the expressive freedom and creative possibilities that the aesthetic affords. Steampunk art continues to draw in new artists and there is no evidence that the trend is slowing down or coming to a close. At this point in the project, however, we turn to another aspect of steampunk art, that of exhibition curation. Why are we interested in the work of steampunk curators? Important steampunk gallery and museum shows help bring the aesthetic to an ever-broadening public and also serve to shape the aesthetic as it evolves. In the following pages we will focus on two curators who champion the steampunk genre and manage exhibitions on the subject worldwide. Both of these curators are also steampunk artists and this fact gives their curatorial work a special personal motivation and perhaps an even deeper commitment to the movement.

Curating Steampunk: Museums and Galleries

In a previous chapter we examined the rapid expansion of steampunk events over the past decade and included an overview of steampunk exhibitions in museums and galleries.

Here we will look more closely at several specific gallery exhibitions and the curators who organized them. These particular exhibitions are significant in several ways. The first of the major museum shows had a high impact on steampunk's exposure to a broad cultural audience in 2009-2010. A later exhibition brought the aesthetic to Asia where steampunk had developed an early following but is now established as a museum-worthy aesthetic. Both of these shows were curated by American artist Art Donovan whose own artistic work was examined in earlier pages. We will also look at several exhibitions that continue to bring the aesthetic to an audience across the United States and Europe, helping the movement to evolve and further establish itself within the broader contemporary art spectrum. These exhibits, curated by artist Bruce Rosenbaum, will give us a sense of where the aesthetic stands today. But first we turn to the two shows curated by Art Donovan. We will examine the exhibitions in some detail as they provide a look at both the early manifestation of steampunk exhibition (the Oxford, England show) and its more recent iteration as a greatly expanded global enterprise that has evolved to define a significant niche in the art world today (the Seoul, South Korea show).

In 2008 Art Donovan organized and curated a local art show at the Hamptons Antique Gallery in Bridgehampton, New York. The show focused specifically on steampunk art. In an online press piece for the exhibition Donovan described steampunk as having "become so wildly popular on the Internet that it has spawned an actual philosophy and life-style among its fans. The genre has its literary roots in 1990s sci-fi novels but now boasts a worldwide (albeit, small) group of passionate artists who have connected with one another to give the genre an actual physical form" (Casey). Donovan himself had only recently discovered the steampunk aesthetic and was instantly intrigued, incorporating the look in his own artwork.

For the Hamptons show Donovan selected twelve artists to represent the new genre. His own work was included as one of the twelve. Many of the artists Donovan selected would later become influential in the evolution of the steampunk aesthetic and movement. Artists Jake Van Slatt, Richard "Doc" Nagy (aka "Datamancer"), Jos De Vink, Eric Frietas, I-Wei Huang ("Crab-Fu") and others were featured in the Hamptons show and would soon after become familiar names on the steampunk exhibition circuit. The 2008 show was an introduction to the general public for many of the artists. The show included fanciful clockworks, modern gadgets such as laptop computers retooled in a retro-Victorian style, and other works that utilized the steampunk visual program. The exhibition was well-received locally and it served as a catalyst for Donovan's later curatorial work.

Just a year after his first foray into steampunk curation, Donovan organized a much more ambitious show in Great Britain. The October 2009 to February 2010 "Steampunk" exhibition was held at the Oxford University Museum of History and Technology, in Oxford, England. This important show built upon the Hampton show and, importantly, brought the steampunk movement to the public's attention in Great Britain. It was also the first major museum exhibition in any location that was dedicated solely to the art of steampunk. A color catalog entitled *The Art of Steampunk* was produced for the show. Eighteen artists from around the world were selected for inclusion and they represent a diversity of styles and media. From retooled gadgets to costumes to jewelry to sculpture, the show gathered together a comprehensive representation of steampunk art. Although the artists' work is diverse each artist expresses a definite steampunk aesthetic.

The Oxford exhibition was a fortuitous melding of the past and the present. The museum has a collection of historic scientific instruments in its permanent collection. These are original Victorian and Edwardian machines that help tell the story of the advancements of science in the nineteenth century. One of the museum's missions, as described by director Jim Bennett, is to make these historic objects more intellectually accessible to the visitor. This is a challenging task as many of the objects need to be studied carefully and understood for their function within their historical context. As Bennett explains in the pages of the steampunk exhibition catalog machines from one hundred years ago cannot easily be understood in terms of contemporary science as often the culture and knowledge base of the past is also not understood by the average museum-goer (Donovan 18). According to Bennett, no effort on the part of the museum staff has been as successful to the mission of making the works in their permanent collection intellectually accessible as has been introducing rooms full of steampunk art to their viewers. The audience easily engages with the objects of the steampunk exhibition. The whimsical contraptions, ornate and creative costumes and jewelry, and functional objects such as clocks and laptop computers modified (*modded*) to express the steampunk visual program are eagerly embraced by the museum-goers. Fantastical, contemporary, often whimsical, these pieces intrigue and delight. The visitors then roam the galleries that house the permanent collection and approach those objects with newly-opened eyes. They can appreciate the vintage machines as inspiration for the contemporary steampunk aesthetic. Bennett expresses his enthusiasm for the show, stating that the steampunk objects invest the visitors with a new interest in the Victorian scientific objects, the backbone of the museum's collection. The show was a huge success

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both in terms of forwarding the mission of the museum itself and also of presenting the appealing art of steampunk to a new and receptive audience.

In 2014 Donovan helped bring steampunk to Asia by serving as the special exhibition curator for the show, "Steampunk. The Art of Victorian Futurism," which was held in Seoul, South Korea at the Hangaram Design Museum in the Seoul Arts Center IDA arts complex. According to Art Donovan's website and publicity surrounding the show's opening, it was the first steampunk museum exhibition to be held in Asia.[39] The show was extensive and included 130 works by thirty artists from around the world. Donovan co-curated the show, supervised its installation, wrote the majority of material and description labeling, and gave a keynote address during the opening week. One entire gallery space was dedicated to Donovan's innovative lighting pieces and his sketches for various steampunk projects. Other works included painting, sculpture, graphic design, jewelry, and digital art. Even fashion pieces and full-sized and operational motorized vehicles were part of the ambitious exhibition. Stephane Halleux, Kris Kuksi, Sam Van Olffen, Jos De Vink, and many other steampunk art luminaries were represented with pieces in the show. Their introduction to the public in Asia brought the steampunk aesthetic to an entirely new audience and broadened its outreach globally. Clearly, Art Donovan can be seen as an influential agent in this process and his curatorial work continues to impact the aesthetic as it evolves and expands.

Steampunk curator Bruce Rosenbaum's efforts on behalf of the movement have also been influential and far-reaching. Rosenbaum is an artist, collector, and curator who well-represents the diverse talents of the steampunk practitioner. In 2007 Rosenbaum and his wife and business partner, Melanie, opened a home renovation company in Sharon, Massachusetts

called ModVic (Modern Victorian). The company originally specialized in the renovation of Victorian homes in the area. However today, the company is very much oriented to the steampunk aesthetic and it produces and sells functional steampunk pieces constructed of found objects, antiques, and discards. Rosenbaum's company works on commissions for television productions, museums, and individuals. They produce about one hundred pieces each year, with a range in price from several thousand to $250,000 each. The original home renovation business has become a true steampunk enterprise and Rosenbaum's home studio serves as a showcase for his innovative designs.

Rosenbaum was profiled in the *Wall Street Journal* on February 20, 2014. In "The Man Who Makes Steampunk," author Megan Buerger notes that Rosenbaum had been making functional objects out of discarded found items for some time so when he discovered the steampunk movement it was a natural fit for the tinkerer. In the article Rosenbaum makes an important observation as he explains that steampunk, "in its purest form [is] history, plus art, plus technology…But function is key. Real steampunk art includes purposeful mechanics, not just random doodads. It has to perform" (Buerger). Rosenbaum's found objects come from auctions, flea markets, or other local venues. Those items are incorporated aesthetically into the functional modern pieces ModVic produces. In authentic steampunk fashion, Rosenbaum supports the like-minded craftsperson community and often turns to local artists for opportunities to collaborate. His own home is a result of these collaborations. The stained glass elements were created by a local glassmaker and some of the detailed cabinetry in the house was constructed by another local craftsman. Most areas of the house are full of Rosenbaum creations also.

Rosenbaum has curated several steampunk exhibitions and continues to do so. One of his most important opportunities came in 2014 when he was asked to work on a major city-wide series of events for the city of Springfield, Massachusetts, called *Steampunk Springfield: Re-Imagining an Industrial City*. The exhibitions guest-curated by Rosenbaum were displayed in several locations around the city and showcased the work of both local community members and carefully selected steampunk artists. At the George Walter Vincent Smith Art Museum visitors viewed twelve works created by Rosenbaum and other artists. The show was entitled *Humachines: Authors and Inventors Who Changed the World Now Turned into the Machines They Imagined to Change the World Again*. The show's premise was intriguing. For example, the Victorian author Jules Verne was re-imagined as the Nautilus submarine from his novels, H. G. Wells returned as the Time Machine, and Mary Shelley was imagined as the High Voltage machine that created Frankenstein. Another exhibition in the city-wide series was called *Brassy Bridal: Steampunk Wedding*. In that show various artists and community members contributed gowns, jewelry, and other swank and retro wedding accoutrements to outfit a fantasy steampunk wedding celebration. In *50 Firsts*, artists re-imagined the inventions that Springfield, Massachusetts contributed though history. The city's actual, and remarkable, list of firsts includes the first armory in the United States, the first American-made rifle (the Springfield rifle), the first 'horseless' car, the invention of vulcanized rubber, the first American motorcycle company (Indian), and even the first American English dictionary. For the show, many of these objects were re-invented by various steampunk artists as either three-dimensional or two-dimensional works. The visual mix of the real historical object and a re-imagined fantasy piece is a repeating theme for steampunk in general and the specific focus of this exhibit. The Springfield steampunk

project was a huge success, providing visitors with a deeper understanding of the colorful history of the city's industry and also allowing them to re-imagine that history in a creative manner. Similar to the Oxford exhibition's successful introduction of the public to historical objects in their permanent collection, the Springfield show helped focus the audience on real and significant contributions the city made to industrial and commercial innovation during the previous century.

Rosenbaum also curated the exhibition *Steampunk: Form and Function: An Exhibition of Invention, Innovation and Gadgetry*, held at the Charles River Museum of Industry and Innovation in Waltham, Massachusetts, *Nemo's Steampunk Art and Invention Gallery* at Patriot Place in Foxboro, MA, and *Mobilis and Mobili: An Exhibition of Steampunk Art and Appliance* for the cable channel TLC (as part of the television program called "NY Ink"). And Rosenbaum continues to be a presence at steampunk conferences and festivals. At the Waltham, Massachusetts, Watch City Steampunk Festival in 2015 Rosenbaum was a featured speaker whose topic was "Steampunk Creative Problem Solving: How the Past Influences the Presence and Inspires the Future." Rosenbaum's significant contributions to the dissemination of the steampunk aesthetic and way of life stem from his unique perspective as fan, artist, tinkerer, and careful curator. As Wired Magazine noted, Rosenbaum truly serves as the "Steampunk evangelist" (Hart).

Conclusion

We have seen that, by the end of the twentieth century, Modernism gives way to postmodernism. The new aesthetic approach rejects Modernism's purity and formalism. Postmodernism, instead, explores historical aesthetics, embraces diversity, and opens up art

to new innovative media such as performance and environmental art. Shock value, political agendas, and social concerns are all part of postmodernism's pluralistic aesthetic. Postmodernism's fragmentation, diversity, and egalitarianism provide a rich environment for artists within which they can develop their own creative voices. The steampunk artist finds his niche within this welcoming system. But, although he embraces the diversity of postmodernism, he rejects its pessimistic stance. Steampunk art is optimistic and upbeat. We will delve further into steampunk's divergence with postmodernism's rather cynical outlook in Chapter Five.

Steampunk art looks to the Victorian past for visual inspiration, incorporating nineteenth century elements—rich brass and wood, ornate details, an old-fashioned decorative style, into new works. But the steampunk artist also focuses on the mechanical, utilizing exposed elements such as gears and cogs, pulleys, scaffolding and clockworks. Oftentimes these elements are functional, although sometimes they are purely decorative. This mechanical focus with exposed elements is also fundamental to the aesthetic. Finally, steampunk art always includes a nod to the future, a consideration of imagined possibilities, often eccentric and always creative. These three elements are intrinsic to steampunk visual art.

Below the visual surface, the steampunk artist challenges us to consider our future in light of fast-changing technological developments. In the next chapters we will see how a perceived sense of loss of individual autonomy as a result of these advancements is foundational to the appeal and drive of the steampunk movement. By repurposing the anxiety of the similarly- challenged Victorian past, the steampunk artist encourages us to face and

survive our own technological trials. As avid tinkerer and creative thinker the steampunk practitioner allegorically re-harnesses the mighty steam engine as he imagines and recreates the triumph of the Victorians. This re-enactment of past survival is viewed, however, from the steampunk artist's post-human position in the historical continuum, a position that must acknowledge realistically the growing possibility of the cyborg's emergence as a sentient being. Steampunk is thus a logical if somewhat eccentric response to psychological anxiety regarding the machine-other, providing a positive fantasy response to those concerned about man's perceived diminished role in a cyborg-filled future. The temporary safe-haven of steampunk visual art is a call-to-arms against the threat to humankind by the cyborg. It is a response to our own machine invasion, and a challenge to contemporary humans to rise to the immense task at hand in order to survive as autonomous beings. In the following chapter we take a look at performance art's particular association with the steampunk movement. And in Chapter Five we will delve deeper to examine contemporary philosophy in order to establish the significance of the steampunk movement in today's society.

Chapter Four
Performing Steampunk

"Immediacy is the realization of the potentialities of the past
and is the storehouse of the potentialities of the future."
Brian Massumi

Introduction

Steampunk visual art reflects the generally innovative and eclectic approach of other

postmodern art and the aesthetic successfully fits into the larger effort of contemporary

artistic expression. But how do the performance aspects of the steampunk movement relate to

the broader contemporary picture? Steampunk is largely performative in nature and it is this

important aspect of the aesthetic that will be the focus of this chapter.

Steampunk is a movement that celebrates life. While optimistic about the future, it

also expresses a romantic nostalgia for the past. We find the aesthetic in the spectacle of

performance and in the expression of a rich mix of voices—the polyphonic chorus of

humanity. Steampunk festivals and conferences are filled with inventive steampunk

characters participating in session panels, providing musical entertainment, appearing as

loose-knit affinity groups, and even posing in steampunk tableaux for the benefit of

photographers and eager fans. We will explore steampunk performance through the work of

specific individuals and groups, those artists whose musical or improvisational oeuvre

utilizes the retro-futuristic aesthetic. As part of that exploration we will address performance

art's roots as a basic component of human nature, as spectacle or carnival, in addition to its

connections with the "Happenings" of the 1950s and 1960s art scene.

It was steampunk's performative elements that helped transform the genre from the specialized science-fiction of its origins to the broad cultural phenomenon it is today. More importantly, these aspects help clarify steampunk's philosophical outlook and its underlying value to contemporary society. Because the aesthetic has a dual interest in Victoriana and futuristic fantasy, one might assume that the steampunk artist is solely concerned with the past and the future, and that his interest is thus in maintaining a philosophical escape from the present. Considered in this manner one imagines the steampunk practitioner distancing himself in contemplative retreat. But, contrary to such expectations, there is good reason to view steampunk's performative enterprise as fully grounded in the present, as it embraces the immediate through the relationship established between performer and audience. It is involved and engaged within the community, far from being a contemplative and removed enterprise.

In the following pages the work of specific steampunk performance artists, Internet personalities, and musicians will be considered through several lenses. But first we will examine the early roots of performance art in the groundbreaking work of Allan Kaprow in the 1950s and 1960s, whose creative performances had as their lofty goal the merging of art and life. We will see how the steampunk enterprise may find inspiration in Kaprow's work and perhaps even finally achieve the earlier artist's goal, that merging of art and life, in its own contemporary performance efforts. To further inform our analysis, we will draw on more current performance theories by turning to the work of theatre arts and performance studies scholar Bruce McConachie and also to English professor Brian Boyd, whose important work on the origins of storytelling will help clarify the foundational aspects of performance in the human experience. We will consider the theories of Russian literary critic

and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin whose exploration of the *dialogic* in literature, along with the concept of *life as spectacle*, reflects the approach of the performance-oriented steampunk community. We will discover that Bakhtin's emphasis on the *act of living* as a valued aspect of our individual identities resonates with the steampunk outlook. Individual lives are not isolated experiences but unfold within community and an individual's being-ness is realized in how we are perceived and received by those around us.

What is performance and why is it of such importance to the human experience? And what is steampunk's particular attraction to the performative? Brian Boyd, in his analysis of performance, describes the evolutionary foundation of artistic expression as performance within community. Performance is a social occurrence that takes place between performer(s) and audience members. And the roots of performance date back to the earliest socialization of humankind (Boyd 73). That performance, from its early beginnings to the present day, is the articulation of the individual mind as expressed to the gathered community. McConachie notes that humans distinguish themselves from other higher animals in the act of play, that it is distinctly human nature to invent communal activities, intentionally perform these activities, repeat them regularly, generate a sense of joy from it, and set aside regular time for it. "Teaching, learning, and repeating an activity together…is the basis of all human activities" and play is part of that repetitive learned behavior (McConachie 9). Furthermore, Boyd, too, "relates patterning to the creation and reception of all art" (McConachie 12). Boyd sees art as 'a kind of cognitive *play*, the set of activities designed to engage human *attention* through their own appeal to our preference for inferentially rich and therefore *patterned* information" (Boyd 85). Play helps us learn, teaches us to exist within communities, and even trains us for survival. It clearly defines us as uniquely human. One can note this fact

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directly through observation of the behaviors of a young child as she learns, repeats, and enacts lessons of life in the act of play.

Performance is perhaps one of the earliest forms of human play. It is intentional, eagerly participated in, full of repetitive patterns, and certainly a form of learning or communication. Because the mind is always embodied, manifested within a physical entity set in time and place, performance can be seen as the mind's expression through the employment of the physical body. The mind, complex and carrying memories of the past, lives (embodied) in the present, and also projects ideas about the future. Performance is likewise complex as it is the expression of an embodied mind that contains past, present, and future. The artist's ideas, the workings of his mind, reach the audience as a group, but also speak to each individual within the group experiencing the performance. We receive the performer's act both as an individual and also as a component of a gathered group of individuals. The artist's act can be seen as an example of the powerful root of artistic expression. Steampunk performance demonstrates a desire to embrace the powerful roots of artistic expression, fundamental and communal, as it weaves a story about an imagined past, is embodied in the present, and projects an optimistic vision of the greatly anticipated future.

Steampunk's Manifestation of Performance: The Costume and the Message

Steampunk performance improvises the past through costuming. The artist dons visual elements gleaned from Victorian fashion—lace, leather, watches on gold fobs, top hats and vests, and role-plays events from that period allegorically. The ritual of performance plays out across imagined time. The audience responds to performance as we empathize with the characters and the action unfolding. The audience is never unaware of the fantastical

basis of the event unfolding. The performance is not historically accurate nor is it a complete vision of the Victorian world. It is selected, confiscated, fragmented, and then imbued with a sense of the steampunk artist's idea of the imagined future, a period that he envisions as including time-travel and thinking machines—cyborgs that assist humans or exist alongside us autonomously. Steampunk performance is, of course, grounded in the present as it is typically performed live for an audience today. As such, it recuperates the origins of performance, that articulation of the mind of the individual within the context of a gathered community of fellow beings.

What is the steampunk performer's intent? What is he expressing through his performance? Through his use and display of scientific machinery replete with visible brass cogs and iron gears, with old-fashioned but hardy goggles and other vintage equipment, the contemporary steampunk performer connects to both the Victorian period and his own envisioned future through imagination and fantasy, blurring the line between past, present, and future. Reclaimed are the anxieties of a past age concerned with the new and dominating steam-powered machine. Reclaimed also is the determination to meet technological challenges head-on and with great individual effort. Performed in a period (the present) that grapples with its own concerns about technology's power and impact, the steampunk artist imagines a future in which the individual, much like his Victorian counterpart, meets technology's challenge by defining his terms of existence and harnessing the new tools for his use. In this way, the steampunk artist weaves a story about our capabilities and the possibility of prospering in the future even as that story dares us to push past our technological anxieties.

By re-visiting the Victorian period through imaginative play in a conflation of present and past, the performer enacts our concerns in regard to forging a successful path forward in an era of perplexing technological advancement. Although this enactment shares some similar components with shamanism, another role-playing enterprise fundamental to the human experience, steampunk performance is significantly separate and distinct from it. A shaman is a culturally assigned spiritual leader for the community and this is certainly not the case in regard to the steampunk artist. And the shaman often depends upon hallucinogens to achieve a higher level of consciousness as she channels particular spirits from beyond the physical world. The steampunk artist is not dependent upon mind-altering drugs and generally does not attempt to arouse spirits from the past. Nor does the steampunk artist forward the notion of a particular religious underpinning in the human experience, as the shaman does for her community. Like the shaman, however, the steampunk artist does seek to facilitate the participating audience member's effort to grapple with fundamental issues of immediate and significant concern. And it addresses concerns that are central to the community as a whole. Although the steampunk artist does not reach out to particular spirits for guidance nor forward a religious infrastructure, its role as facilitator bears some similarities to the shamanism of ancient cultures.

Avid tinkerers and creative thinkers, steampunk performers, as mentioned in earlier pages, resonate with the stories of Victorian novelists such as H. G. Wells, whose futuristic narratives imagine a strange and technologically advanced world. In his work, Wells' vision of the present (the Victorian era) is melded with a vision of the imagined future. The steampunk artist adds to that creative mix its own present period as it layers the Victorian past with the contemporary present and with new ideas about the future. Wells' imagined

future is outdated to the contemporary individual and it becomes fodder for the steampunk artist's sense of nostalgia. Wells' characters invent fantastic contraptions pieced together— with gears, brass, and iron, in their formal Victorian drawing rooms, contraptions that are supposedly capable of moving swiftly through time and space unconnected to the rules of science and society. The old-fashioned Victorian future is retro-futuristic for contemporary steampunk. But the imagined spatial/temporal dissociation of the Victorian time-machine fits neatly into steampunk interests of reclaiming the Victorian to express ideas about our own future as we grapple with challenges presented by twenty-first century technology. Victorian scientific romances thus become the setting for steampunk performance in which the romanticized beginnings of modern science is re-enacted. Steampunk performance artists re-harness the steam engine, imagining and recreating the triumph of the Victorians. In a sense, steampunk re-invigorates the Victorian steam-powered revolution for clues to its own digital revolution.

Viewed from a post-human position in the historical continuum, the steampunk artist's efforts acknowledge the growing possibility of cyborg beings as future community members, in addition to accepting, in general terms, the assimilation of advanced electronic machinery.[40] The cyborg, and not the steam engine, is the focus of our contemporary challenge, and the steampunk aesthetic represents a response to the psychological anxiety in confronting the contemporary machine-other.[41] That response is generally upbeat and encouraging as we have noted in the case of Friedrich's *Mechanical Baby*. At the same time, however, the steampunk attitude is cautionary, as we will find in the wary outlook of Internet personality Dr. Steel and others. Thus, steampunk positions itself as somewhere between

utopian optimism and dystopian worry, as it explores positive possibilities while considering potential negative outcomes and working through ways we might manage them smartly.

Steampunk provides an alternative vision for the new human/machine relationship that assures those anxious about humanity's perceived diminished role in the future that humans will indeed have a significant place in future communities. Steampunk artists visualize the autonomous human individual harnessing the tools of technology and working alongside helpful and participatory cyborgs. The hybrid beings are seen either as equals or as lesser beings that humans would co-opt as controlled workers. Whether it is a cooperative but slimy cyborg 'slug' in a Moorcock novel or a sweet-voiced 'machine' from the performing group *Steam Powered Giraffe*, steampunk hybrids are viewed as willing partners in the future world. Although villains and evil geniuses factor into steampunk performance and represent the negative forces of a potential machine invasion, good most often wins out against evil and steampunk performances generally exude an optimistic spirit. As we have noted in earlier pages, for example, the cyborg figures that Doktor A creates are well-meaning members of an imagined society. They happily compete in athletic events, run the banks, and manage various enterprises. Mechtropolis, Doktor A's imagined cyborg city, is a positive, smoothly running community, providing an optimistic vision of the future.

By aesthetically blurring temporal lines between past and future, and armed with an optimistic outlook, the steampunk artist re-establishes a strong working connection between Man and his mechanical creation. Steampunk claims that we must not fear the machine but instead train it, understand it, and learn to work with it in order to maintain our own valid presence in the world of the future. We will see how the Victorian *mise-en-scene* of

performance pieces such as Steam Powered Giraffe's *Honeybee* video grounds the audience in an allegorical present in which we share space with a "machine" from the past century as embodied in the living performer, even as we imagine the world of the future. We begin our exploration of contemporary steampunk performance art by first examining mid-twentieth century performance, the immediate roots of—or inspiration for, steampunk performance. Allan Kaprow provides the creative impetus for work during that earlier time.

Kaprow and Happenings: the Roots of Contemporary Performance Art

Contemporary performance art is indebted to Kaprow and other innovative artists of the 1950s, who developed an early form of interactive art that heavily influenced later performance art. Peggy Phelan, Professor of Drama and English at Stanford University, notes that Kaprow is among several artists whose work was influential in the development of today's performance (Phelan 3). And Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, in *Art in Theory, 1900-2000: An Anthology of Ideas*, call Kaprow a "leading figure in the production of Happenings, principally amongst the New York avant-garde" (Harrison/Wood 717).

Early in his career, Kaprow studied with the experimental artist John Cage, whose exploration of the role of chance and random events in his musical performances certainly influenced the work of the younger artist. For Cage, random markings on a scorebook page, the nervous coughs and chair scraping of audience members, other chance occurrences, were elements of sounds incorporated into his various musical performances. Taking lessons from Cage, Kaprow became interested in fully integrating Art and Life through the creative use of space, time, and chance in the performance setting.

As part of his experimentation with new modes of artistic expression, Kaprow rejected the traditional separation of the art object from the real world, in the cloistering of art in silent museum environments. In fact he viewed the evolution of art of the 1950s as a revolution that generated a crisis, "render(ing) the customary gallery situation obsolete" (Harrison/Wood 718). Instead, Kaprow would move art out of the museum, merge it with life through loosely orchestrated staged events that incorporated randomness and chance. He sought a slippage of the real as we know it, as a new reality would be formed between performer and audience. To forward these artistic notions, Kaprow staged and performed works that involved both the performer and the audience in *an activity*. He called these events *Happenings*, a term he coined in 1957, which was later popularized and used in the 1960s to refer to any free-spirited gathering of hippies and young people. Kaprow's Happenings were creative pieces that blurred the lines between audience and artist, the real and the performed. Steampunk performers would build on Kaprow's innovations a few decades later as they enacted their retro-futuristic improvisations at festivals and conferences throughout the world.

Kaprow's best-known Happenings took place in New York City between 1959 and 1962 (Goldberg 83). These interactive performances were usually loosely scripted, although occasionally the performance was completely spontaneous. Happenings had no preset order of events, there was no hierarchy between performer and audience, and the action was generally geared to elicit a reaction of some kind from the onlookers. That reaction would form a kinetic action within the Happening, with what unfolded depending largely on the element of *chance*. In one Happening, for example, audience members were given several index cards which had been randomly shuffled by the artist beforehand. On each of those

cards would be listed a simple task—sweep the floor, sit on a chair, or paint a picture, and the audience member was expected to perform that task until a bell rang, which signaled the participant to move into the next gallery and on to another task. Thus the audience members were recruited as performers and they formed, along with the artists, an invented environment, a "reality" separate from the normal lived world. In *18 Happenings in 6 Parts*, originally performed at the Reuben Gallery in New York City over a series of six evenings in 1959, the audience participated through such banal tasks as painting an action painting or squeezing oranges, as they rotated between three gallery spaces, moving through time and space. The scheduled intermissions were lengthy, at least of the same duration as the actual performance. The audience thus questions the authenticity of the intermission. Is it a break from the performance or simply another section of that performance? In his description of an important 2008 recreation of Kaprow's *18 Happenings*, Michael Ned Holte notes that the lengthy intermission "suggest[s] a rhythmic dissolve from art into life and back again" (Phelan 43). The experience of the Happening is far removed conceptually from the experience of the passive spectator in the traditional theatre or even the contemplative activity enjoyed by the art museum visitor. It was a fresh new concept for artistic expression.

Kaprow's audiences took part directly in the unfolding of the work and the audience's response to the activity was a significant contribution to the performance's success. For Kaprow the Happening opened up a vibrant new form of art experience. He envisioned the future of Happenings as de-centralized, non-hierarchical, and occurring in the streets across the globe, spontaneous and expressive, with no divide between performer and spectator.[42] Interestingly, although global street performance was not achieved by Kaprow during his lifetime, a few decades later the steampunk movement develops globally, is intellectually de-

centralized, contains a strong element of spontaneity, and realizes a shrinking divide between audience and artist. In that sense the steampunk practitioner may have achieved Kaprow's artistic goals.

Kaprow's exploration of performance, deconstruction of the traditional divide between artist and audience, and his efforts to dissolve the boundaries between art and life, opened up a new avenue for performance that has been expanded upon by artists ever since. Many artists in the 1960s were directly influenced by Kaprow, working with him, attending his events, and further developing the craft by creating their own performance pieces. Prominent artists such as Carolee Schneemann, Yvonne Rainer, and Marina Abramovic, all built on the creative efforts of Kaprow. In later pages we will explore Abramovic's work in terms of the contemporary art scene, but in the 1960s these artists formed the first wave of performers developing out of the Kaprow/Cage performative experiments.

Carolee Schneemann created performance pieces using her own nude body as a significant component. In *Eye Body* (1963) she poses her nude body, covered with grease and chalk, within a built environment of fragmented mirrors, motorized umbrellas, and other incongruous elements. Her *Meat Joy* (1964) was also conceived as a performance piece, this one featuring several partially clothed men and women dancing and cavorting, making liberal use of wet paint, sausages, and other props. An erotic Dionysian romp, *Meat Joy* was originally performed in Paris and later recorded on film as a more permanent version of the work.

Performance was adopted by many other artists in the 1960s and 1970s. The Fluxus movement was developed by Lithuanian-born artist George Maciunas, and fully established by 1962.

Participants included European and American artists who built on the work of John Cage, using chance operations to influence their largely performative pieces. Fluxus was considered an anti-art movement, a neo-Dada expression, much influenced by Marcel Duchamp and his Readymades. Yoko Ono, Nam June Paik, and Joseph Beuys, were among the prominent artists involved in Fluxus events. The Fluxus movement reflects a period of expansion and experimentation for performance art, explorations that built on the innovative advances by Kaprow and Cage.

The field of performance studies, too, has evolved since, and in part because of, Kaprow's *Happenings* in the late 1950s and John Cage's experiments in performance and music. Today's scholarship recognizes our changing understanding of the theater audience's experience and the relationship between audience and performer. In his important work, theater historian Bruce McConachie analyzes performance and the differences between the traditional view of spectatorship and our contemporary understanding of the theater-going experience.

Traditional theater performance is based on the idea that a *suspension of disbelief* occurs during the event. The audience member suspends the knowledge of his being in a theatre and completely accepts, temporarily believes the actor as embodying the portrayed character for the duration of the play. In this model, the theater-goer becomes fully immersed in the performed piece *as reality.* He is in a kind of cognitive suspension that allows him, for the period of the performance, to believe he is watching unfolding real events. The concept of suspension of disbelief in theater performance was one forwarded by English poet and influential literary critic Samuel Taylor Coleridge in the nineteenth century and it is one we have accepted for over a century (McConachie 52). However, McConachie and other contemporary scholars challenge this as a concept that does not apply to all forms of

performance. They do not believe that suspended disbelief is always at work in the contemporary theater audience.

McConachie believes, in fact, that it is not necessary to convince the audience that the actor *is* the character. Instead, we experience the performance through *conceptual integration*, an activity of cognition that allows us to move back and forth between actor and character. The spectator does not experience a complete suspension and therefore never completely loses the sense of the actor as the actor *playing* the character. The spectator has a more cognitively blended experience and "can move among at least three modes of attention while listening [to a performance]" (McConachie 53). The audience conceptually integrates actor and character during the performance through several mechanisms. First, we recognize that a character is being performed by an actor because that actor may come out of character (*break character*) momentarily by making an aside comment to the audience or gesturing directly to the audience outside of the play's action. Furthermore, this recognition of the actor/character distinction can be achieved simply through the actor's familiarity to the audience through other performances. In other words, the audience intellectually understands the stage as filled with characters and also with (known) actors acting. Accepting the blending of actor and character, the audience member is actively involved in the role-playing unfolding as the actor is embodied as the character. One might simply focus on the words themselves, how the actor is portraying the scene, or the drama of the actual story that is being played out between the characters, but the experience is a blending of all of these aspects of spectatorship. Finally, the audience member brings his own memories and emotions to the play, which animates him and engages him emotionally and uniquely. This layer of emotional participation provides another way of engaging in the spectating

experience. Contemporary performance is thus not tied to the traditions of theater that strove to achieve an illusion of another world, the world of the imagined narrative and character actions within the storyline. Just as pre-modern traditional art sought to provide a window to another world through the illusion of three dimensions, traditional theater sought to provide a window to an imagined world through the illusion acted out on a three-dimensional stage. Just as modern art abandons illusion, modern theater also moves beyond it.

McConachie's point that the spectator's experience "has nothing to do with skepticism and faith," a *suspension of disbelief*, is a worthy consideration as we examine contemporary steampunk performance (McConachie 53). Perhaps the postmodern fragmentation of the perceived world today has dissolved our ability to truly suspend disbelief, or at least our desire to do so. Instead, art and theater today stress the interactive transaction between actor/character and audience member, creator and viewer. We may feel social emotions as we watch a performance (for example, embarrassment, sympathy, indignation) or even primary emotions such as fear or panic as we immerse ourselves in the characters and the story. But we do not lose sight of it being a performance. Instead, performer and audience participate in a shared storyline that is characteristic of human cognition.

Performance Art Today

Today's performance art acts on this expanded sense of theater. It incorporates elements of time, space, the performer's presence (body), and a demonstration of a relationship between the performer and the audience. Performance art can take place in front of a live audience, although today's pieces are often recorded earlier and played back through

video media. This is particularly common with performance art pieces viewed in galleries.[43] The performance can be scripted and well-planned or unscripted and spontaneous. The art is seen as an activity between artist and viewer that takes place as duration of time and space.

Marina Abramovic's recent performance piece *The Artist is Present* powerfully demonstrates that relationship. At the 2010 Museum of Modern Art, New York, installation the artist was seated at a small square table. Across from her was an empty chair. For eight hours each day the artist would sit, silent and static, eyes closed, as an audience member approached the scene and sat down in the opposite chair. The artist would then open her eyes and gaze into the visitor's eyes. The audience member completed the piece as artist and audience were caught in the intimate moment of an intent exchange of gaze. That brief moment was repeated every few minutes throughout the duration of the installation—eight hours a day over a period of several weeks, as lines of visitors patiently waited their turn at the table. On opening night a surprise visit to the installation by the artist's ex-husband and fellow performance artist Ulay added a bittersweet moment. When Abramovic opened her eyes and gazed at her former partner, so many years after their many collaborations and lengthy marriage had ended, tears welled up in the artist's eyes and emotional exchanges were made through their facial expressions. With a small tilt of his head, in just a brief nod and smile, Ulay clearly acknowledged Abramovic as artist, former lover, and world-wide phenomenon. The artist reached across the table and they took each other's hands. The audience burst into applause, releasing the palpable tension in the room, as they shared the intimate moment with them. Ulay then stood up and the artist put her head down to wait for the next visitor. She can be seen wiping away tears as she mentally prepares for the next person's gaze. Abramovic's performance demonstrates how far the medium has evolved

from the earlier efforts of Kaprow. But the chance operations and the relationship he sought

between the audience and artist, the role that each plays as the work is created by the artist

and received by the audience to complete it, is realized beautifully in work we see today.

Having established a basic understanding of performance art and spectatorship today,

we turn to the writings of critic and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin for further insight.

Bakhtin's work explores the nature of life as an *unfinalizable* project. He sees the carnival, or

performed spectacle, as reflective of the act of being. The carnival demonstrates key concepts

such as the polyphony of voices, open-endedness of life, and the importance of the dialogic.

According to Bakhtin, the carnival form, as adopted by literature, becomes "a powerful

means for comprehending life in art" (Bakhtin 157). Although Bakhtin's analysis focuses on

the written word, specifically the work of Dostoevsky and Rabelais, it serves to inform our

view of today's performance art and the carnival features adopted by the steampunk genre.

Bakhtin and the Carnival

Mikhail Bakhtin is an important Russian literary figure of the twentieth century. His

theories embrace the idea of dialogism, a term he coined to describe the dialog between the

Self and Other which he feels forms the basis of *Being*. Very different from the Western

metaphysical understanding of being, which is binary in nature and forms an either/or

dialectic, Bakhtin forwards the notion of the *dialogic* of both/and. In fact, Bakhtin believes

that the concept of the Self cannot be separated from the Other and is a "function of the

social" (Clark and Holquist 206). Bakhtin explains that "in order to be me I need the other"

(Clark and Holquist 79). Dialog, the basis of the Self/Other relationship, is not seen by

Bakhtin as an abstraction nor as a closed function. Instead, it is embodied as an *utterance*

from a unique and personal viewpoint. It is language—the Bakhtinian utterance, that links

the subject, the *consciousness*, one to another. Because his approach gives a primary role to

the Other as enmeshed with, not oppositional to, the Self, Bakhtin bridges the gap between

Self and Community. As Clark and Holquist note, Bakhtin falls between Western

humanism's emphasis on the *I* and the deconstructionist valorization of *no one* (Clark and

Holquist 12).

With this emphasis on the open-ended, the unplanned, the performed relationship

between Self and Other, it is no wonder that Bakhtin does not support a single truth or any

overarching canon (Clark and Holquist 2). Instead, he embraces the diverse, unique, and

even eccentric, within society, and sees an important place in life for ritual based on laughter,

theatricality, and what he terms the *carnivalesque*. Bakhtin explains that the carnival is "a

pageant without footlights and without a division into performers and spectators. In carnival

everyone is an active participant, everyone communes in the carnival act" (Bakhtin 122). In

other words, the carnival is *lived* more than *performed*. The world as Bakhtin envisions it is

an ongoing, ever-evolving spectacle in which the polyphony of unique voices can be heard

and a sense of *the now* prevails. It should be noted that although Bakhtin embraces the

collective elements of community (the spectacle, the carnival) he is adamant about its need to

retain the dialogic, and he strongly rejects monologic collectivism (Clark and Holquist 348).

The spectacle must come from the unique voices of each individual, joined together to form

true polyphonic dialogism. Every individual is significant and is constantly in the process of

becoming. Life for Bakhtin is not a finished project.

Bakhtin's view on art parallels his philosophical vision. He does not believe in fetishizing the physical work of art, removing it from its social and historical context, and placing it in the quiet confines of the museum gallery. Interestingly, Kaprow also felt that the art object needed to be rescued from the silent and static museum environment. Nor does Bakhtin believe in giving too much importance to the individual psyche of artist or audience and thus ignoring the material facts, the physical presence, of a work. Bakhtin envisions art as *an event* between doer and viewer, an exchange, a dynamic communication. This also reflects Kaprow's vision as he creates the Happenings. In terms of art's effectiveness, Bakhtin believes in the importance of the *relationship* between the artist and the receiver. True art is not a deed, not an object created and finished, but *something that continues to be* in its relationship to its reception. Art as an event or transaction reveals it as a performance, both *created* and *received*. And it is conceptually unified through three elements: the creator, perceiver, and the physical artwork itself.

Today's art, distributed worldwide through many networks of communication, gathers inspiration from the pluralistic society in which it is embedded. Art reflects a dynamic communication that Bakhtin valorized in the past. Steampunk art is no exception. It forms a dialog reminiscent of the carnival described in Bakhtin's analysis of nineteenth literature. Today, global and instantaneous communication allows art to speak to a universal audience gathered in carnival fashion by means of polyphonic, at times cacophonous, electronic networks. Events and information along these digital networks unfold simultaneously. They overlap, confuse, and are always in the state of becoming. Polyphonic voices from across the world communicate in a free and social manner, welcome the outsider, allow for the expressive interests of the individual artist, and provide a continually

evolving message. The spectacle that Bakhtin reveals as having seeped into literature has now emerged in the chaos and polyphony of our digital networks and contemporary art. The steampunk movement, utilizing the contemporary global stage, is performative, improvisational, open-ended, and spectacular, a Bakhtinian carnival of life.

Importantly, Bakhtin analyzes the work of nineteenth century Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky. In examining Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov,* Bakhtin explores the rich characters and the various unfolding plotlines in terms of the carnivalesque. The action of multiple characters is staged simultaneously, their development counter-posed to be revealed at the same time, not in a long sequence of time. As Bakhtin notes, Dostoevsky has a "stubborn urge to see everything as coexisting, to perceive and show all things side by side and simultaneous, as if they existed in space and not in time" (Bakhtin 28). He gives examples of paired characters that appear together almost as two parts of the same personality: Ivan and the Devil, Ivan and Serdyakov (Bakhtin 28). This technique of pairing reveals the world as multi-centered and not narrowly subjective. Furthermore, Bakhtin notes that Dostoevsky also understands the voices from the past and the *voice-ideas* of the future, bringing them together into a dialog in the present. This merging of voices—multiple, autonomous, subjective—into a space that is past, present, and future, parallels the efforts of steampunk artists as they weave stories—multiple, autonomous, subjective—into tales in the present, of the past and of the future. In steampunk as in Dostoevsky, there is no author's voice, no monologue, just the polyphony of individuals and their unique voices as they relate to each other.

As in Bakhtin's interpretation of Dostoevsky, steampunk performance is not as much about character-types as it is about unique personalities and unique voices. It is the carnival unfolding before us, never finalized, always a continuing human project. In the following pages we will explore specific examples of both individual performers and those who perform as groups. Whether in groups or as individuals these performers champion the steampunk approach to community as non-hierarchical and welcoming as they reflect a reclaimed, then re-constructed, Victorian aesthetic.

Steampunk Performance Groups: Improvisation and More

Steampunk artists generally perform as specific personas from a fantasy world and there is always an action-oriented element to the presentation. The characters are generally crafted as creative inventors or adventurers with backstory occupations fairly easily identified and often quite eccentric. The artist could be LARPing as an explorer, decked out with compasses, heavy boots, and a mechanical telescope as part of his costume.[44] Or she may be a scientist, replete with glass vials, butterfly nets, and leather pouches filled with mysterious potions. Steampunk photographers carry Victorian-era cameras and evidence of their professional interests. In general, steampunk props usually include an element of the anachronistic or fantastic. An eerie potion that enables time travel, a futuristic machine that detects ghosts and spirits, keys to an airship that travels across continents. The future is always a part of the steampunk accoutrement. The scientist may be a 'ghostbuster,' the explorer may 'arrive' in a steam-powered aircraft.

Although the physical paraphernalia symbolizes larger issues at play with steampunk: machine anxiety, conflicted views of the future, and an interest in looking to the past as a

heroic era representing stability and strength, its manifestation as a performance piece connects to the *spectacle* as described by Bakhtin. Performance pieces reveal a complex world of autonomous subjects, multi-centered, and unfolding. The steampunk story is about an *idea* more than about a specific *hero*. It is a Bakhtinian unfolding of a complex action-packed story whose elements occur simultaneously in space, not time. The effect, as in the novels of Dostoevsky, is of a whirlwind. Today's steampunk spectator finds himself swept up in the whirlwind, experiencing an atmosphere more than a clear and concise narrative. Similarly to Dostoevsky's novels, much in the steampunk spectacle is incomplete, unresolved. How does the airship fly? Why do steampunk heroes and heroines appear to us in the twenty-first century? There are no concrete answers to these questions, but that is not of import to the performance. The Victorian elements, the romanticizing of history, are folded into the complex layers of the spectacle. The Victorian underpinnings may be an effort to challenge future possibilities, but the reception of the aesthetic is just one aspect of the multi-layered spectacle. Although as a philosophical approach to contemporary life steampunk deals with issues of anxiety that confront today's society, the performance is a non-contemplative effort to suspend that anxiety through the mixing of past, present, and future as a simultaneously unfolding Bakhtinian carnival.

There are several steampunk performance groups who clearly demonstrate the carnivalesque in their work. The *League of Steam* features the antics of a handful of Victorian characters. The League's work can be viewed in online video adventures. The entertaining ten-minute videos are released regularly and available through subscription. *Airship Isabella*, often highlighted on panels at steampunk conferences, consists of a crew of diverse cast members. *Airship Isabella*'s backstory is that it is a time-travelling craft

operating on steam generators with the help of a mysterious potion called Aether. The ship and its crew are available for hire. They willingly travel across dimensions of time and space, taking care of any job they are hired to do. Members of *Airship Isabella* together create video performances through the development of characters and descriptions of the worlds they encounter in time-travels. Performance groups such as *League of Steam* and *Airship Isabella* appeal to an audience eager to imagine these worlds as a fantasy escape, an alternate universe holding infinite possibilities. Although reminiscent of the established tradition of Italy's Commedia dell'Arte, steampunk performance differs in fundamental ways. Unlike steampunk performance, Commedia characters are based on fixed personas (for example, stock characters such as Pantalone), the performers are masked, and the action takes place on a temporary stage. Commedia actors form well known traveling troupes that perform for the broad public. Similarities include the improvisational aspect of both steampunk and the Commedia. In addition, both often take place alongside an external event, in the case of steampunk, a festival or conference, in the case of the Commedia, the Carnival before Lent. The *Happening* of the performance transports audience and artist by forging a relationship between them in an imagined world. Through its invention of a fantasy present, each performance is a Bakhtinian spectacle of unfinished life, of constant *becoming*.

Figure 25: Acrojou Wheelhouse in action.

Acrojou is a prime example of contemporary performance. Although this troupe of performers, who mix circus elements with storytelling in their acrobatic acts, does not always perform in the steampunk aesthetic, their Wheel

House group regularly performs in the steampunk genre. Acrojou was founded in 2006 by artist-performers Jeni Barnard and Barney White. The troupe is based in Great Britain. The artists incorporate a piece of equipment called the Wheel into their performances. This entertainment prop, invented and patented in Germany in 1925, is not widely used outside of Germany.

The Acrojou Wheel House group has been touring for eight years to much acclaim, performing at festivals, public and charity events, and private parties. The equipment is sturdy, about 7 feet in diameter and made up of two large steel or aluminum wheels held together by a grid of horizontal crossbars, giving it a three-dimensional effect. The wheel is large enough to hold one or two people within its framework. Acrojou decorates the wheel with Steampunk

Figure 26: Detail of Acrojou Wheelhouse steampunk elements.

elements such as old-fashioned photographs, dusty Victorian era fabrics, and exposed gears and clockworks. The two performers are dressed in rag-tag Victorian era clothing. They contort themselves within the framework of the wheel, pop out from above the wheel frame, or take to the ground ahead or behind it, all while conveying seamlessly a story that intrigues the audience, as described in a recent fan tweet, "Take a house, make it into a wheel, add two performers and a love story."[45] The wheel turns in a large open space as the street or city square becomes the stage, serving to pull the gathered audience into the performance. The

performers must move through the space in the wheel or with it rolling behind them. The audience is mesmerized by the drama of the two people rolling through the streets. The idea of the round enclosed environment has a futuristic feel. The mere idea of nomads wandering through the city in a wheel house, forging a life in the enclosed space is fantastical and futuristic. The performers appear almost as strange hybrids, machine-like in their mechanized rolling home. We imagine our own lives on the crowded planet being condensed further and further into a tight whirling space. The love story unfolds in and around the wheel until the final scene in which the two lovers join hands and stroll down the street with the wheel following close behind. The Steampunk elements are all there: Victorian imagery, mechanical focus, and a hint at the fantastically futuristic, all performed within a community

of onlookers, participating through their very proximity to the performers, the uncertainty of the unfolding drama, and the unfinished ending of the unique street scene.

Figure 26: Steam Powered Giraffe

Steam Powered Giraffe (SPG) is a striking mix of steampunk features. It is a musical group with a harmonic sound both futuristically eerie and yet containing melancholic notes that harken to the Victorian past. SPG consists of brothers Christopher and David Bennett, and their colleague Jon Sprague, all based in the San Diego, California area. The ostensible story of SPG is that they are musical automatons created by Col. P. A. Walters in 1896. The automatons perform live at events such as Comic-con and other festivals. More than purely musical, SPG incorporates mime, sight gags, and a comical banter that is both entertaining and thoughtful. These are very talented performance artists, with an outstanding musical harmony and a unique robotic mime style.

An example of their work is *Steam Powered Giraffe Like Bobby Darin*, a parody of the song "Mac the Knife." The SPG version, with song and skit, is humorous, contains numerous pop culture references, and has a high entertainment value. The piece is a regular part of their street performance repertoire. In true Bakhtinian fashion *SPG Like Bobby Darin* contains a sense of the spectacle, of simultaneous plotlines unfolding and unique voices being heard. Any sense of time recedes as characters and audience become involved in the performance action and interactive dialog. Each performance is unique as a hybrid reality is created.

In the SPG video *Honeybee*, the harmonics are polished, the costumes and make-up add to the elegance of the lyrics, and the choreography of robotic dance moves is brilliant. The *Honeybee* video is shot at the shoreline, not in front of an audience. A distant and panoramic view of the coast frames the singers who stand on a performance stage formed by a flat rock near the sea. The lyrics are eerie and evocative. *Honeybee* is a beautiful ballad, gentle and sweet.

Other performance pieces, such as *Brass Goggles* are much more anxious, with lyrics that ask "What is real? What is life?" Those lyrics clearly evoke the machine trauma that is so much a part of the steampunk

Figure 27: Steam Powered Giraffe performing *Honeybee*.

philosophy. In all of their performances SPG suspends the anxiety by grounding the audience in an imagined present in which we share space with a "machine"

from the past century as embodied in the living performer. Particular elements reinforce the sense of timelessness, for example, in the *Honeybee* video the non-temporal sense is augmented by the stage placed at the edge of the eternal sea, with endless waves as backdrop. The video pulls us emotionally into the ballad's story despite the fact that it is a robot's love story. "You didn't have to look my way, your eyes still haunt me to this day, but you did. Yes you did. You didn't have to say my name, Ignite my circuits and start a flame, but you did. Oh, Turpentine, erase me whole, (cause I) don't want to live my life alone…" The reference to 'circuits' reminds us that the love-struck being is a machine. The calling out for turpentine supports that reminder but also refers us back to the nineteenth century when turpentine was a common additive to gin and can thus be seen as referencing an old-fashioned alcoholic memory-eraser. Despite these reminders of the machine, the viewer is drawn into the drama of the performer's difficulty in moving forward from a past love. The closing lyrics describe the machine's final acknowledgement: "Set me free my Honeybee, Honeybee….Hello Goodbye, Twas nice to know you, How I find myself without you….Now you have to go."[46] Victorian both in visual aesthetic and in lyrical references to the nineteenth century, with an emphasis on the mechanical in terms of the performance group's backstory, and exuding an eerie sense of the future as machines mourn their lost loves, *Steam Powered Giraffe* exemplifies today's performed steampunk art in an evocative and harmonic manner.

The Individual Performers: Manifestos, Personas, and Big Backstories

We have examined the work of several steampunk performance groups and now turn to those artists who perform as individuals. Like the performance groups, these individual artists express perceived human anxieties in the post-human age: a sense of the possible loss

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of autonomy, the fear of domination by cyborgs, and a rejection of intellectually inaccessible modern-day technological tools. Most often these artists perform as hybrid characters from the imagined past, loosely Victorian in effect with a futuristic twist. In each of the performers we will see the manifestation of the three fundamental elements drawn together to form the steampunk aesthetic: a loosely interpreted Victorian visual program, a focus on mechanical features, and a nod to the fantastical future.

These steampunk characters operate as three-dimensional *avatars*. According to Merriam-Webster the term avatar originally referred to the "human or animal form of a Hindu god on earth" (Merriam-Webster). However, in the world of computer technology it has come to mean an icon or small picture of a figure that stands in for a character in a computer game or on the Internet, such as the online manifestation of a person's participation in a game. For example, in the virtual world of *Second Life* the avatars represent all the citizens of the online towns and neighborhoods that are developed within the program. These avatars interact with each other (socialize), buy virtual properties, decorate their homes, marry, have children. Linden Lab, which created and manages Second Life, does not consider the enterprise a game as there is no conflict or goals embedded in the experience.[47] Today the term avatar can also refer to the human embodiment of a character from a computer game or, more broadly, the personification of a concept, philosophy, or style found in comic books and online games. Many comic-book and gaming fans dress as avatars to attend conferences and festivals as characters from Anime (Japanese computer and graphic arts animation) to steampunk to Star Wars. It has become commonplace to see three-dimensional avatars, from a diverse array of source inspiration, strutting around in character at such conventions. The steampunk artist is one among many.

Steampunk avatars that perform may do so in front of a live audience at conventions or meet-ups. Or the audience could experience a performance asynchronously through online videos or blogs. Often, as in the case of *Steam Powered Giraffe*, the avatars are imagined to be hybrid beings, machines with human characteristics. Others are imagined as humans living in a fantastical retro-future. Whether proposed as human or cyborg, the steampunk avatars are an incarnation of an attitude, principle, or way of life. The avatars move freely in the real world through performance. They travel, not virtually as do two-dimensional avatars in *Second Life*, but imaginatively in the known world, through performance pieces that combine Victorian and futuristic sensibilities. Steampunk performance is not about real time, but about the *imagined now*. The Victorian trappings and futuristic machine props of the steampunk three-dimensional avatar create some visual confusion. The avatar heroically interacts with machine adversaries, travels through imaginary time, and performs good deeds that benefit the community. The steampunk experience thus becomes a three-dimensional (real world) Bakhtinian spectacle incorporating both fantasy and reality. Although the steampunk avatars are based on fantasy, they move among us as physical beings at festivals, conferences, and other meet-ups. The living avatars blur the lines between reality and fantasy (the virtual). By mixing the virtual and the real through performance within the framework of the real, steampunk ties together the past, the imagined future, and the present.

Two artists who perform as steampunk three dimensional avatars are Dr. Phineas Waldolf Steel and Professor Elemental. Each enjoys a worldwide fan-base and an impressive web presence, and manages a full calendar of live performances. Dr. Steel's performances are based on a backstory that includes a pessimistic outlook regarding the state of society in the machine age, a bleak future that must be overcome. Professor Elemental, on the other

hand, represents a more playful and positive outlook, but one that decidedly focuses more on the British past than the unknown future.

"Dr. Phineas Waldolf Steel" is an American musician and Internet personality from Los Angeles. Dr. Steel's true identity remains uncertain. Internet chatter, including a Youtube video, claims that Dr. Steel is likely the Southern California artist, Rion Vernon, and many blog sites support this theory. According to the revealing Youtube video, Vernon closely resembles Dr. Steel, has a similar tattoo, and lives in close proximity to the address for the post office box that Dr. Steel uses for mail correspondence. [48]

Figure 28: "Dr. Phineas Waldolf Steel"

The story line (backstory) is that Dr. Steel, who dresses either in lab coat or Steampunk clothing, is a mad scientist bent on conquering the world with the ultimate goal of becoming the Emperor of the World. Originally Steel had been a toymaker who, when he was fired from his job for constructing toys with buzz saws for arms, he set the factory building ablaze and destroyed the company. From that dramatic point on, Dr. Steel was his own boss. During his performance heyday Dr. Steel developed a manifesto replete with his concerns about the future, conducted many interviews with various publications such as *Steampunk Magazine*, *Aether Emporium*, *UC Riverside Highlander News*, among others, and

developed a short-lived Internet television show. Even several years after Dr. Steel's

retirement in 2011 there remains an ongoing interest in discovering his true identity.

From the online community of Dr. Steel fans the artist created the Army of Toy

Soldiers, an "army" of supporters, both women ("nurses" and "scouts") and men ("soldiers").

The Army continues to grow, despite Dr. Steel's retirement. Today, the soldiers are re-

organized in an association entitled Toy Soldiers Unite (TSU), with an active web presence:

organizational web site, chat rooms, forums, opportunities to join a regiment or create one,

and with virtual and real events scheduled throughout the year. Although Dr. Steel is no

longer at the helm of the organization, the solders carry forth his original mission of "making

the world a better place, having fun, and accepting the craziness of it all."[49] Interested

participants can create uniforms using the basic parameters of the official colors, network

with other members of the association, and otherwise utilize the organization's opportunities

to whatever extent it suits them.

Dr. Steel's approach to the post-human condition is pessimistic and full of warnings

about the possibility of humankind being taken over by the machines. This foreboding

reminds us of Martin Heidegger's key concern with modern technology.[50] Heidegger warns

us of the potential dangers of technology as it begins to *enframe* humankind, controlling us

and keeping us away from the real. In other words, technology has the potential to master us.

Heidegger sees technology as a threatening mode of *bringing forth*, which is a human

activity, more than a means to an end. He cautions that today much of the world around us

has become a *standing reserve*, matter available to Man to be used for his own purpose. This

standing reserve includes airplanes, computers, and other technology in addition to elements

of nature, such as rivers, fields, and trees. The modern relationship of Man to the world is thus one of a *challenging revealing* as he seizes and requisitions nature, damming the river to harness its power, drilling for oil, extracting earth's resources, and creating new technologies for use as tools to further advance society. Heidegger views this as potentially problematic. Co-dependence on technology (addiction) takes Man away from the *presence of Being,* denuding him under the rule of technology. He is no longer free. Importantly, Heidegger sees art as an action or expression that harmoniously reveals (un-conceals) truth. Dr. Steel's worries about becoming submissive to the machine, losing power over his environment, and being controlled by technology reflect philosophical issues concerning technology that are presciently raised by Heidegger earlier in the twentieth century. Reflecting Heidegger's questioning of technology's potential power, steampunk art aesthetically acknowledges technology while striving to express its own concerns with technology's potential challenges to our autonomy and our relationship with truth and *being in the world* (Heidegger's *dasein*).

As mentioned in earlier pages, twentieth century thinkers such as Junger and Sloterdijk also write about the potential adverse effects of modern technology in the modern machine age. Sloterdijk discusses the turning point of our existence in the twentieth century as the day in 1915 that the Germans unleashed chlorine gas into the battlefield arena. From that moment on the world became more dangerous, more tenuously held together, as mass weaponry destroyed not only the bodies of the soldiers but the entire environment around them. Modern technology in the hands of humans had unleashed a monster. In similar fashion, Junger's description of the individual human being subsumed through technology to become a cog in the all-powerful war machine seems to be reflected in the warnings of Dr. Steel, who states that "as more and more technology is developed to work for us, we

ironically become more and more dependent on its functionality, putting us in the submissive position."[51] Dr. Steel is convinced we will let that happen through our laziness. Although Heidegger states that modern technology is indeed a threat but one that we can answer to with caution, Dr. Steel, like Junger, senses the world as full of despair, war, hunger, and fear. The tension between turning away from technology and trying to harness it reflects the tension of the steampunk practitioner as he looks to the future with trepidation and to the past for reassurance. The writings of Heidegger, Junger, and Sloterdijk serve as fair warning for the contemporary citizen. And these concerns are restated by Dr. Steel in the philosophy of his imagined persona, a steampunk optimism very much counter-balanced by trepidation for potential future disaster.

Professor Elemental (real name Paul Alborough), another prominent steampunk artist-as-avatar, is part of the Chappist movement in Great Britain.[52] The Chappists are young men of contemporary British society who favor dapper dressing in tweeds that harken back to the upper-class Victorian social set. Chappists wear expensive shoes, smoke cigars and pipes, and drink fine wines and spirits. Because of their interest in Victorian regalia and a gentlemanly lifestyle, the British Chappists have a natural affinity with the steampunk aesthetic. In fact, the Chappist movement has been described as the British response to the American phenomenon of steampunk. The Chap Hop movement is a further mix, a British hybridization merging the Chappist aesthetic with American Hip Hop music.

Professor Elemental creates Chap Hop music as a Victorian Rapper with a comic repartee. His first big hit was entitled *Cup of Brown Joy* and it became an instant Internet sensation on Youtube. A comedic ode to the joys of tea-drinking, *Cup of Brown Joy* is rap music without the guns and violent imagery often associated with the genre. In the video, Elemental cavorts across the broad lawns of a British country manor, dressed in pith helmet and khaki safari gear. The photography is laced with

sepia-toned shots, reminiscent of silent movie footage and Victorian daguerreotypes. The music track upon which Elemental's voice is laid is a charming and simple jazz piano melody featuring a percussive beat softened by the use of brushes and snare. The witty lyrics are simple and profess his addiction to a good cup of tea: "When times are hard and life is rough, You can stick the kettle on and find me a cup…You can say I'm mad for tea…" In another video the *I'm British* song lyrics forward a British way of life: "We are ever so nice to our

Figure 29: "Professor Elemental"

pets, And we know not to work too hard, We're inventive, accepting, eccentric, And yes, I suppose we're perhaps a bit bizarre…" Elemental acknowledges the uniqueness of the British outlook and embraces the customs and mores of the cultural system into which he is born. He sings about an imagined future in his *Brave New World* video: "Welcome to the future, all you forward-thinking socialites, Delightful world of steam so bright…A rocket-powered cycle takes you skyward and you're soaring, 'Til you fall towards a lovely picnic

made of future food, Steam-powered sandwiches, using speaking fruits….The future runs like clockwork and you'll never need to stress…"[53] For Dr. Elemental being nice, doing what's right, taking his tea in the comfort of his home (his castle), and embracing the possibilities of an imagined future are the focus of his generally positive, often tongue-in-cheek, and always entertaining videos.

Since Elemental's first hit in 2008, he has gone on to create other rap albums and songs such as *Father of Invention* (album) and *I'm British* and *Fighting Trousers*. The latter is a musical challenge to Mr. B., The Gentleman Rhymer, another British rapper embroiled in a staged feud with Professor Elemental. Most recently, Professor Elemental created a web series, *The Chronicles of Professor Elemental*, which premiered in December 2012.[54] Like his steampunk counterparts, Professor Elemental performs regularly in front of a live audience. He is a sought after emcee who often headlines events such as the Steampunk World's Fair. Professor Elemental has been prominently featured at many steampunk events in the United States over the past several years and continues to enjoy a wide following on YouTube. His current (2015) performance schedule is impressive as he closes the year with Christmas events in England such as The Yule Ball, December 12, and the "It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Steampunk!" show scheduled for December 20, 2015.

Unlike Dr. Steel, Professor Elemental's message is positive and much more grounded in the past than in an imagined future. The two performance artists represent, in a sense, the wide range of characters that make up the steampunk performance genre. Steel speaks to the fears of the individual in a post-human society, machine anxiety and a perceived loss of autonomy. Professor Elemental looks back in time to the Victorian period, emulating the

gentlemanly lifestyle of the British countryside. Both characters operate in a multi-faceted world with layers from the past overlapping references to the future. The performances are unresolved, ongoing, without the closure of traditional Western narrative. They are, instead, celebrations of evolving being-ness, a continuing dialog with the audience at hand. Within the framework of the carnivalesque, both characters, though imagined differently, express issues of the contemporary citizen—trepidation for the future, nostalgia for the past, all underlined with a cautious enthusiasm for what lies ahead. Because they speak to the contemporary human condition these steampunk performers appeal to a broad (global) post-human era audience.

Steampunk Music

The steampunk genre appeals to many independent musicians interested in exploring musical elements that may differ from broader trends in popular music. Steampunk music generally remains outside the mainstream of the music industry. Furthermore, the music of steampunk is sometimes difficult to identify as there are plenty of mediocre hard rock bands that embrace the steampunk aesthetic as a new gimmick, one that might help them gain access to the sales-driven music market. Because of its appeal across the arts, the steampunk style can be seen as a pathway to popularity and success. These dime-a-dozen bands are easy to spot with their hard but non-distinctive sounds, tough-guy riffs, and a toss off of lyrics touting airships and goggles.[55]   They've simply borrowed the style, layering it over mediocre rock-and-roll in order to cultivate a wider following. There are, however, a few musicians who truly embrace the steampunk aesthetic and integrate it fully into their sound, evoking an old-fashioned ballad style, utilizing Victorian musical elements such as the honky-tonk

piano, the plaintive chord, and generating a sound that one might properly term steampunk. We will look at one example of these steampunk musicians.

British musician Paul Roland has enjoyed a lengthy and relatively successful career in the rock music industry. His music has recently been discovered by the steampunk community, bringing about a revival of interest in his career. Roland's life-long fascination with Victorian and Edwardian style comes across in his music and his work fits nicely into the steampunk aesthetic. In fact his first major soundtrack, entitled *Werewolves of London* (1980), told in ballad form the story of a Victorian era werewolf who roamed the seamy streets of London searching for his victims. *Werewolf of London*, the album that included the Werewolves soundtrack was recorded when Roland was nineteen years old—and years before the steampunk term was coined by K. W. Jeter. But the album represents an interest in a re-imagined Victorian sensibility that foretells of later steampunk. Roland and his music were subsequently adopted by the steampunk community as evocative of that later movement's aesthetic.

Roland reveals in an interview in 2012 that he considers himself fundamentally a storyteller who happens to tell his stories through musical compositions. He discusses the steampunk connection to his music with interviewer Joshua Pfeiffer, who is himself a steampunk musician. Pfeiffer states that, "As for Paul Roland, if anyone deserves credit for spearheading steampunk music, it is him. He was one of the inspirations I had in starting my project. He was writing songs about the first attempt at manned flight, and an Edwardian air-ship raid in the mid-80's long before almost anyone else…." (Roland). Roland's songs evoke the scientific romances of the Victorian period, in particular the stories of H. G. Wells and

Jules Verne. Regarding his life-long interest in the nineteenth century Roland adds, "I have been living alone in this Edwardian dreamscape for so long and wondered if anyone shared my obsession with airships, eccentric inventors and gentlemen of leisure" (Roland). The steampunk movement delivers that sense of community and certainly provides an appreciative audience for Roland's music.

Roland's imaginary dreamscape reflects a storytelling style that in literature can be traced back to Dostoevsky as analyzed by Mikhail Bakhtin. Life is a never-ending and unfinished project, with plotlines unfolding independent of time and diverse characters evolving at their own pace. In Roland's imaginary dreamscape, the space of his songs is irrespective of duration, and the simple slippage in his lyrics from past to present to an imagined future reflects the multi-layered spectacle of Bakhtin. It did not take long for the steampunk community to discover Paul Roland's steampunk sound and they've embraced him as representative of their interest in past, present, and future merged on the stage. As such, Roland serves as a prime example of the steampunk sound.

Conclusion

We have seen that performance art is at the heart of the steampunk movement. Artists today build on the foundation of Alan Kaprow and other earlier artists to create pop-up environments that engage the audience in new ways within a storyline that is nostalgic for the Victorian past while at the same time engaging us in imagining the future that lies ahead. Whether in the circus-like acrobatics of street performers *Acrojou*, the romantic stories of the *Steam Powered Giraffe* balladeers, or the tense warnings of Dr. Steel, the steampunk philosophy is revealed in a complex, never-ending, always-evolving carnival that speaks

directly to the current global citizen about issues of fundamental concern. An imagined

vision of the future is a part of any steampunk performance, be it in music, movies, live

performance or an Internet video piece. A mix unfolds of Heidegger's three states of being,

or *ecstases*. In the case of steampunk, however, time (Heidegger's unifier of past, present,

future) is suspended as a simultaneous unfolding. The familiar past (having-been) is melded

with the imagined future (not-yet) in the lived present (making-present), allowing the

individual viewer to be temporarily suspended outside the ever-changing present. The lines

between past, present, and future, are blurred. As Steam Powered Giraffe asks "What is real?

What is life?" Steampunk performance addresses the anxiety produced by imagining such a

shift as we approach the unknown future. In the following pages we will explore in greater

depth contemporary philosophy in order to fully understand how the steampunk movement

taps into the zeitgeist of today's global citizen and offers us a significant opportunity for

expression.

Chapter 5: Steampunk and Contemporary Philosophy

> "It is the computer that has put the 'post' in postmodernity.
> No other technology so dominates discussion….or so shapes
> the image of the future by its promise and its threat."
> Andrew Feenberg
> *Alternative Modernity*

> "Life isn't about finding yourself. Life is about creating yourself."
> *Author unknown*

Introduction

Art and aesthetics are significant participants in the ongoing philosophical dialog about the human condition, the relationship between us as individuals and the world around us. Art does not always simply reflect or express prevailing trends in philosophy but instead helps shape the way forward along new avenues of thought. In this chapter we will discover that steampunk is an eager contributor to the philosophical conversation and that it strives to inform and affect contemporary thought. Steampunk practitioners are not philosophers per se. They do not write extensively and critically about the contemporary human condition nor do they directly engage with the work of philosophers of today or across the historical spectrum. However, in their art and lifestyle the steampunk artist does express a concern for the state of humankind and the well-being of the individual of today. As such, the steampunk movement both reflects and perhaps helps shape the way in which we think of ourselves as beings in the current complex networked world.

In this chapter we will explore the question of whether the steampunk movement challenges or embraces particular contemporary philosophies. To answer that question we

will explore a triad of prevailing philosophical threads—postmodernism, transhumanism and post-humanism—that influence aesthetics and culture today. These philosophies prepare the intellectual landscape upon which steampunk matures as a multi-modal global phenomenon. Understanding these three trends will allow us to situate steampunk within that topography. Does steampunk champion a particular line of established contemporary philosophy, marching in lock-step, and neatly reflecting that line of thinking? We will find in the following pages that this is not the case. Instead, steampunk acts autonomously and forges an independent path, rejecting some aspects of current thinking and accepting others along the way. This chapter's exploration will enable us to determine the position and role of the steampunk movement in the contemporary world.

Steampunk challenges and ultimately disrupts the perceived dispersion of individual subjectivity that is commonly theorized today. Instead, it champions a fresh notion that we as individuals may live in a fragmented world without being fragmented ourselves. As such we do not simply reflect the de-centered world around us but instead are situated within it, imbued with self-determination. And because of our free will we impact and shape not only the world around us but also the future for humankind that lies ahead of us. In forwarding this position, steampunk challenges the notion of dissolved subjectivity, the fragmentation that postmodernism suggests. It also counters transhumanism's disregard of identity lines that separate the human from the artificial and the human from the animal. It insists rather on retaining individual human identity within a world of possible other beings such as cyborgs and hybrid entities. Finally, steampunk challenges the post-human rejection of the individual subject as primary coinage of the world realm. This significant effort to counter prevailing trends and return autonomy and self-determination to the individual is foundational to the

steampunk movement and aptly illustrates its position within the sphere of contemporary thought. Steampunk provides an alternative space, a heterotopia, in the face of the prevailing contemporary notion of a new schema in which the de-centered individual, anti-autonomous and ungrounded, precariously mirrors the de-centered world around him.

Philosophically, the steampunk practitioner acts as an autonomous individual. She is creative, generally upbeat, and self-confident. As a maker, the steampunk artist is focused on *techne*, the work of her hand, and she is eager to contribute that work to her community. And because the steampunk artist's work is the practical representation of her agency, it is emblematic of her philosophical concerns. However, steampunk's effort to retrieve autonomy from its dissolution within the external socio-political world and allow individual self-determination does not mean the movement simply rejects all of contemporary philosophy. It rather covertly critiques current and prevailing versions of autonomous individuality. It observes the trends of contemporary thought and then carefully chooses which aspects to accept and which to disavow. Acting in that manner, steampunk actively creates and follows its own vision of the world and of the self within it.

We will discover the steampunk community's specific position in relationship to postmodernism, trans-humanism, and post-humanism. It accepts postmodern visual fragmentation—collage, popular culture snippets, and historical references, and its social diversity—its acknowledgment of all viewpoints and voices. But steampunk denies postmodernism's dystopic tendencies, its generally pessimistic attitude toward culture and the state of humankind. In a similar manner, the following pages will reveal that steampunk resonates with trans-human possibilities (including the cyborg) while at the same time it

expresses caution in regard to the machine and its potential to threaten the human individual's autonomy. Steampunk also acknowledges post-humanism's de-territorializing of the world even while denying the de-centering of the individual within it.

Furthermore, although steampunk depends, as does postmodernism, upon appropriated images, pop culture, and spectacle to realize its particular visual aesthetic, it does not participate in the superficial attitude that marks what postmodernists wearily refer to as late capitalist commodification. Instead, the steampunk movement is "associated with a utopian optimism about human potential" (Dawdy 767). It is self-confident and even eager. We will observe that steampunk's philosophical relationship to trans-humanism may be a closer fit. Like the trans-humanist, the steampunk practitioner sees the machine as a tool of great possibility. And steampunk's focus on self-assurance and autonomy reminds us of trans-humanism's continuation of traditional humanism. But we will discover that even that relationship is nuanced. And, although steampunk artists readily recognize the post-humanist embrace of a de-territorialized society, which is marked by a lack of hierarchy or centralization, the steampunk movement stops short of championing the dissolved subjectivity that Donna Haraway and other post-humanists insist upon.

We have observed in earlier chapters that the steampunk movement develops organically and with no set or centralized rules. It is performative, with a complex visual program that looks to the Victorian period for aesthetic inspiration. Just as steampunk visually pulls elements from the past, mixes them with an optimistic vision of the future, and embraces the present through craft, community, and performance, so does it blend together contemporary philosophical elements which it fashions into its own unique and optimistic

approach to life. That approach steadfastly retains individual autonomy. Steampunk's plasticity, its adaptive position, recognizes contemporary philosophical notions, acknowledges the existence of the ubiquitous machine, and proceeds independently out of a largely humanist perspective. Its effort to imagine and demonstrate visually, albeit whimsically, time travel and magical inventiveness (time-space dissolving potions, imagined creatures) reflects a desire to explore and confront matters of concern for the contemporary citizen, those concerns that cluster around an alternate tension and enthusiasm for today's technological advances. Through its aesthetic program and its approach to life the steampunk movement symbolically returns subjective power, or autonomy, to the individual, while harnessing the mechanical for a bright future ahead for humanity as a whole.

To best contextualize steampunk within the larger scope of contemporary thought, we will consider the work of Nick Bostrom, Michel Foucault, Donna Haraway, N. Katherine Hayles, and Jean-Francois Lyotard. We will examine intriguing theories proposed by futurists Ray Kurzweil and Hans Moravec that help clarify steampunk's role as contemporary cultural signifier. We will consider the roots of the machine angst that shapes contemporary thought. This angst is significant to steampunk's broad appeal and activates its interest in the Victorian period, an earlier era steeped in apprehension about steam-powered machines. As noted in an earlier chapter, the Victorian preoccupations anticipate similar concerns with digital technology in the late twentieth-century.

By exploring the work of philosophers and critical thinkers who position themselves within three major schools of contemporary thought—postmodernism, transhumanism, and post-humanism—a well-defined picture of the intellectual landscape will emerge. However,

in order to situate the steampunk movement within this triad of contemporary philosophies, we must first examine the historical roots of contemporary thought. A brief overview of the major trends in twentieth century philosophy as it relates to our project will lay the groundwork for a deeper examination of contemporary philosophy's links to the steampunk movement.

The Roots of Contemporary Philosophy

Contemporary philosophy essentially questions the nature of individual subjectivity and, by so doing, opens up lines of thinking which steampunk will rigorously challenge. But the contemporary perspective evolves out of an earlier tradition in which the supremacy of the subject was foundational. By tracing the threads of philosophical theory and the concomitant evolution of accounts of subjectivity, we will establish a sense of steampunk's contemporary significance, as it tries to recuperate individual subjectivity from its absorption into a fragmented and de-centered contemporary world. We begin with Kant and Hegel who, for the purposes of this argument, will illustrate the philosophical foundation of Enlightenment thought.

For both Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1831), Man is placed in a privileged position in the world, and an individual's act of free will through rational thinking represents his significant contribution to society-at-large. According to Kant, our minds define and describe the world that we are able to experience as intelligible. Thus, we do not so much mirror the world as employ our mental faculties to construct a perception of it that is intelligible to us, and as such, is useful to us. However, Hegel moves our constructive role in producing what we perceive from the processing agency of universal

mental faculties to that of historically and culturally mediated *moments* in humankind's advancement toward self-consciousness and self-understanding. Furthermore, as highlighted in Alexandre Kojeve's influential exposition, Hegel describes how man (as subject) sees himself through the eyes of the other (another human individual) as an *object of the other*. This act necessitates his understanding of the other *as subject*. This negation of self as object and acknowledgment of the other *as subject* forms the basis of the Hegelian system and sets in motion the mutual fight for recognition between subject and other, a fight-to-the-death for freedom, which underlies the trajectory of human history. The master-slave dialectic that occurs creates an imbalance that neither gives the slave his autonomy nor gives the master recognition *from his peers*. According to Hegel, it is society that provides the framework within which the mutual recognition between subject and object can occur in a stable fashion and social harmony can be maintained. The world is shaped by Man's quest for recognition and thus that world reflects the individual's inner freedom. The individual recognizes himself, at the end of history's progress, as the world subjectified and the world is seen as the individual subject objectified. Inner freedom through self-expression is envisioned as being identical to obedience to the laws of a rational society (those laws representing the objective realization of the subjective spirit). Importantly, Hegel envisions both subject and world as stable and valid entities. Those assumptions of stability and the binary relationship formed between self and other (self/world) will be challenged and deconstructed by a host of thinkers in the twentieth century, whose legacies contemporary philosophers such as Brian Massumi have sought to radicalize and extend. This radicalization then opens up a perception of destabilization in relation to both the contemporary individual and the world. It is this notion

of destabilization that will be countered by the steampunk movement. But we are getting ahead of ourselves.

Expanding upon Kant and Hegel's explorations on subjectivity, while rejecting as delusive their understanding of autonomy and free will, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) explains that Man behaves within the structure of a perceived 'good' wholly in relationship to society and his fellow man, reflective neither of neither divine instruction nor of universal rational or ethical human nature. In fact, he dedicates a book, *Genealogy of Morals*, to demonstrating that the concepts of right and wrong, the very foundations of thought and behavior, are neither God-given nor derived from abstract universal reason, but instead are human-driven, rooted in non-moral celebrations of physical strength, the right to rule by the *winners*, or in the desire for revenge by those conquered or otherwise subjugated.

In regard to individual subjectivity within the world, Nietzsche writes about how people are motivated, whether they know it, acknowledge it, or not, by what he terms the *will to power*. He imagines this will, unique to humankind, as an energy-infusing drive to dominate and flourish, which may be expressed in petty aggression, but may also be sublimated into self-mastery, and manifested in high intellectual and artistic achievement. Will to power also involves a drive for self-recognition, and so a consciousness of self *in relationship to the other*. Although Nietzsche's notion of will to power in some respects builds on Hegel's earlier work, Nietzsche also challenges Hegel's association of the subject with consciousness and rational will, thus questioning the nature of the subject's primacy and previously perceived givens such as morality and faith. Nietzsche's problematized subject operates within a social structure that curbs his masked drives. The self-divided subject

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struggles with suppressed tendencies kept in check by society and, as such, the autonomous individual's sheer existence is challenged. Driven by forces it cannot or will not recognize, always at war with social constraints to some degree, it presents a model of selfhood that challenges the very existence of autonomous individuals. Nietzsche's work begins a shift away from privileged individual subjectivity as philosophy's starting place, which will ultimately lead to the late twentieth century and its postmodern visions of psychic and social fragmentation. And it is postmodernism's disavowing of the individual's primacy that steampunk will eventually challenge.

Both Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) articulate accounts of individual subjectivity that concord with Nietzsche's in questioning the primacy, and so the autonomous freedom, of the individual. In Marx's case, the perceived relationship between subject and society is impacted through the emancipation of the proletariat, and the new society *as a whole* becomes the key power in the world. Hegel's individual, prone to become alienated from the strictures of society, is subsumed by Marx into the new entity of the masses. And the autonomous individual continues its march to purported dissolution. That individual's motivations remain both mechanized and mystified by and through society. According to Marx, unconscious drives toward securing material wellbeing via class domination generate self-mystifying ideologies. For example, in the name of imaginary abstract views such as property rights the suppression of the rights of the workers is legitimated in order to keep factory profits undiminished.

The writing of Marx influences the work of Freud, who focuses on the study of the individual psyche within the framework of that person's unique social environment. Freud's

work problematizes desire, what he terms the pleasure principle, and which he treats as the underlying and often repressed motivation of humankind. His theories contend that the individual cannot be fully autonomous due to the fact that these major motivations are generally felt to be socially unacceptable and therefore must be buried deep in the individual's subconscious mind.

Freud's work marks the dawn of the twentieth century and a new recognition of the constructed social environment. Repressed subjects cannot be fully autonomous individuals, but instead act (or do not act) on hidden motivations. For all three thinkers, Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud, real motivations are either unacknowledged or unconscious. Goals of power, as in the case of Nietzsche, class domination, according to Marx, or libidinal gratification, for Freud, compel the individual to invest in (delusive) notions of autonomy and rational individuality because such delusive notions justify social practices and self-interpretations that facilitate the pursuit of subterranean, unacknowledged, but determinative desires. Paradoxically, as anti-Hegel as all this appears, it recuperates the Hegelian notion that the dynamics shaping the mind and structuring the world mirror one another, for they are the same processes. Thus, the mind creates the world it inhabits, although its self-understanding hinges not upon recognition of that isomorphism but rather upon a mystification of the connection. In the late twentieth century technology's advanced networks of information (eg, the Internet, social media) will play a part in facilitating this mirroring by helping to break down the world as we experience it into de-territorialized spaces, no longer recognizable as traditional political, social, or even economic spheres. The resulting perceived transformation of the individual into a cog in the massive machine of the world ultimately leads to steampunk's intellectual rebellion. The steampunk movement urges the contemporary

individual to wrest back her autonomy. And we will see that, in order to regain that autonomy, the individual's goal is to exercise power over technology and to insist that such technology remains a formidable tool for her use and not a controlling mechanism.

Even as the Nietzsche/Marx/Freud line of thought unfolds, an alternative thread develops called Structuralism, as pioneered by the work of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913). This second line also helps inform the intellectual terrain upon which steampunk is built. Structuralism envisions all human activity as a myriad of constructed elements, each related to the other and mediated by language, with the resulting complex system of manmade structure giving meaning to the world. Saussure places an emphasis on society as foundational, as being the basis of humankind's meaningful existence through a shared language. Building upon Kant's argument that humans render the world intelligible by processing what they encounter in terms of abstract categories, structuralism views the categories as fitting together in configurations whose systemic ordering and coherence creates grids for ordering intelligibility, much as the rules of syntax provide a "structure" for words to be organized into sentences. Saussure argues that every natural language is such a structured system of signs signifying referents. The word (signifier) "cat" arbitrarily (albeit culturally understood) means the animal-we-know-as-cat (the signified) and is also related to the *referent*, which is the underlying or abstract thought of cat. Any word is intelligible because of its difference from all the other words in its system. To speak intelligibly at all is to be inside a structure or system of language.

In the twentieth century, philosophers, psychoanalysts, and anthropologists such as Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, and Claude Levi-Strauss, develop

Saussure's line of thinking and, by the mid-twentieth century, philosophy is largely dominated by structuralism. Such explorations envision the subject as serving as metaphorical mirror of the larger societal structure. In a sense, the individual subject merges with the world around him. To clarify, since intelligible action within the system (world) depends upon, consciously or not, following the rules of the system, the individual subject is perceived of not as separate from and acting upon his or her world, but rather as embedded within, and indeed simply as a possibility of, that organizing structure. This act of merging and the resulting individual subjective ambiguity is what steampunk will challenge as oppositional to its own creative line of thinking.

Anthropologist and ethnologist Levi-Strauss, a leading proponent of structuralism in the mid-twentieth century, writes on kinship, primitive culture, and patterns of behavior and thought which he sees as representing shared elements of the pan-human experience. The individual subject lives according to 'givens,' a system of ancient and foundational norms of behavior, social relationships, and even origin stories. Levi-Strauss traces underlying structures of thought and behavior in myths as they appear throughout the world, from primitive cultures to the roots of Western European stories. During the 1950s Levi-Strauss' books on sociology and ethnology were eagerly translated into many languages as people across the world studied his ideas on the roots of mythological stories, intrigued by the idea that an underlying structure of human experience could be revealed through our shared legends and origin stories.

At the same time, Michel Foucault (1926-1984) focused on structural systems as articulated by institutions associated with European modernity. He sought to demonstrate that

patterns of human behavior were imposed by the apparatus of the state, whether in areas of institutional discipline and punishment or in the societal evolution of the fields of scientific research and practice. Indeed, he described the institutionalized normalization of knowledge, codified by professionalized discourse, as instantiating particular forms of disciplinary language. For example, a medical doctor may think that he is expressing himself in a medical journal, but he is actually enacting the form of subjectivity that the protocols of medical journal discourse demands and regulates. The individual's contributions to such discourse are embedded in the constructed system or episteme of understanding.

In later works Foucault extends the notion of a specialized professional language calling into being the kind of subjectivity appropriate for it. He posits the view that entire historical eras are characterized by their peculiar structuring of knowledge and so subjectivity. He then comes to think of "language" (including material practices) as ordering words in a certain way (and ordering the body in a certain way), generating an *experience* of subjectivity. For example, his book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* traces the roots of manmade criminal enforcement systems. Foucault describes these systems as having been developed for the promotion of social norms and accepted behaviors in individuals within society. However, they often lead to brutal suppression through the incarceration of criminals who do not follow those accepted norms and instead exhibit aberrant or anti-social behavior. The state-imposed rules and subsequent punishment for misbehavior are codified and followed rigorously to maintain control of society. Likewise, Foucault's *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* traces the history of humankind's imposition of more general social, aesthetic, and political structural systems on the world. In Foucault's work, the system of the world becomes primary, suppressing the individual fundamentally,

robbing him of any autonomy or free will that might remain within him. In fact, intuitions of inner subjective depth come to be viewed as an effect of the modes of discourse we are unwittingly coerced into using. The first volume of Foucault's "History of Sexuality" elaborates such claims.

Further pushing the individual into dissolution, post-Structuralism of the 1960s to 1980s posits that the notion that the pan-human experience and *a priori* givens that accompany thinking in such terms is false. Instead, post-Structuralism champions the idea that human nature itself is a fully-constructed enterprise with no underlying trans-historical, trans-cultural, non-linguistically mediated foundation. Jacques Derrida challenges the dominant Structuralism discourse and *deconstructs* Western phenomenology, breaking down accepted conventions and many basic assumptions in regard to humanity. Derrida envisions existence as a de-centered structure in which binary relationships (e.g., male/female, presence/absence) are formulated through language (extending Saussure's work on language) and thus built upon false scaffolding. Donna Haraway and many post-humanists will develop this concept further as we will see in a later section of this chapter. In a world that is de-centered the 'Other' is no longer seen as a marginal being merely in opposition to the subjective center (the binary of subject/object), but rather as a being (subject) set in her own construction, albeit also a fictitious one. The deconstruction of social edifices problematizes human autonomy and subjectivity by creating unease within the system.

The post-Structuralist approach becomes politicized when the construction and unraveling of systems come to be viewed as propelled by unconscious, unacknowledged, or mystified drives for power, wealth, and desire, reaching back to Nietzsche and running through Foucault. Social relations are now dis-embedded from any foundational abstract or

givens. And the individual is dis-embedded, too. This state of affairs, which is attributed both to subjectivity and to the world that humans encounter, comes to be seen not as constraining, but as liberating. According to Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995) and Felix Guattari (1930-1992), as postulated in their book *A Thousand Plateaus*, the world exists as a freely unfolding *rhizomatic* (non-hierarchical) enterprise and is not based on *arborial* (hierarchical or ordered) relationships at all. Reality is thus conceived of as a fluid network of objects, occurrences, circumstances, all without underlying meaning and all without systematic relationships. Principal systems, including language, are therefore dissolved along with the fixity of the subject. Deleuze and Guattari "de-territorialize" the structures of the world, forwarding the notion that development and advancements occur organically and spontaneously, not in a methodical progress toward order and methodical complexity. De-territorialization thus refers in general to the de-contextualization of concepts, which frees them up for expansion and change outside the original context, but more specifically de-territorialization refers to the dissipated human subjectivity that occurs in contemporary capitalism. In other words, Deleuze and Guattari's original concept concerned labor forces disengaged from their context, their means of production, but the word became broadened to reference any de-contextualized enterprise, entity, or force.

Echoing this de-centering theory, Brian Massumi focuses on the idea of the *event* (occurrence, unfolding) as the fundamental basis of existence as opposed to a subject/object relationship as existential foundation. In Massumi's world the subject is not even presupposed in a sphere that consists simply of experiences. Each singular activity occurs within the world activity in a kind of "dual immediacies of process" (Massumi 3). To explain his theory Massumi describes what he terms *synchresis* as the "lift-off of the experiential

effect," the bringing together of factors that result in an event or *concresence* of factors in proximity" (Massumi 148). Such contemporary thinking not only challenges notions of individual subjectivity by denying it outright but it also re-defines the world around us as fluid, ever-changing, and this becomes the basis of existence for whatever is in it.

The rebellious steampunk movement, in its recuperation of autonomous individuality, contests the unraveling of the subject as seen in the writings from Hegel to Massumi. But it does not go so far as to challenge the perceived chaos and de-centering of surrounding systems. Steampunk importantly speaks to the contemporary thinking of Deleuze, Guattari, and Massumi in the movement's valorization of non-hierarchical diversity, its de-centeredness, and its interest in performance (eg, Massumi's "events") and occurrence. In that way, steampunk can be seen as an extension of contemporary thinking. Steampunk performance occurs as an *unfolding* or occurrence that resembles Massumi's *event*. Furthermore, performative acts echo the artist Kaprow's earlier interest in un-centered spontaneity, in the merging of art and life.

By both critiquing contemporary thought and extending it, the steampunk movement acts independently as it shapes its own path, its own viewpoint. But it decidedly disavows the subsuming of individual subjectivity within the world as expressed by the propensity of contemporary thinkers. Those thinkers extol the dissolution of individual subjectivity, view that dissolution as unproblematic and treat aspirations to autonomous agency as effects of outmoded and repressive ideology. Steampunk, however, steadfastly attests to its faith in the value and possibility of the notion of individual autonomy despite that concept running counter to much of contemporary thinking.

Steampunk thus offers a new alternative to the conundrum in which the contemporary individual finds himself. The movement aspires to forge an approach that completely accommodates free imagination within the contemporary landscape. Steampunk's insistence on self-realization, on the primacy of individual free will, and on the freedom secured by autonomy certainly sets it at odds with the consensus common to much current academic philosophy, in which individual free will is subsumed by, or co-opted as part of, a dynamic of world-being. But does the steampunk artist simply forward a notion of traditional subjectivity that echoes a Platonic and Kantian autonomy, albeit without divine transcendence? In fact, we will see in the following pages that the movement offers instead a new sense of the individual, autonomous but existing in a world acknowledged as fragmented, networked, and de-centered. Thus it is not simply an extension of Western humanism. Although the steampunk individual functions as a component of this new world homology she does so while retaining, against prevailing philosophical trends, her individual autonomy. Which, if any, current philosophical approach most resonates with the steampunk movement? Is a particular philosophical flag being flown? A close examination of each of the aforementioned three prevailing trends of contemporary thought will allow us to understand the structure of the steampunk movement in relationship to the broader contemporary landscape.

Postmodernism and Steampunk: Aesthetics and Philosophy

The first of the three contemporary trends, postmodernism, denotes both a philosophic and an aesthetic tendency that coalesced in the 1980s. Its manifestation in the visual arts is of significance for the steampunk aesthetic and has been discussed extensively in an earlier chapter. However, the underlying postmodern philosophical thought is equally

important to our project if we are to discover the broader interests (beyond the aesthetic) of the steampunk movement. It is best to separate the aesthetic from the philosophic when considering the steampunk movement's response to it. However, both are important aspects and key to a complete understanding of steampunk.

French philosopher and literary theorist Jean-Francois Lyotard (1924-1998) coined the term postmodernism in his 1979 book entitled *The Postmodern Condition*, a work in which he rejected what he characterized as the Modernist tendencies to meta-narratives and the fixed binaries (such as the subject/object divide) that meta-narratives imply. In his later years Lyotard became an important voice for the post-humanist school of thought, and we will discuss that work in a later section of this chapter. During the 1970s, however, he helped define postmodernism as both an aesthetic program and an intellectual line of thinking.

According to Lyotard, all grand narratives created by mankind (including those involving the arc of history, national histories, theology, art and aesthetics, the Enlightenment) are false constructions. Instead, the world he envisions is multi-faceted or fragmented, consisting of a never-ending series of micro-narratives, experiences, and events. The lived experience of the individual within the world is only one of innumerable micro-narratives and that experience is not determined or organized by an overarching grand-narrative. Furthermore, Lyotard denies philosophical approaches that include the concept of *universals*. Even Marx and Freud are rejected by Lyotard as being too accommodating to an underlying theological structure.

Lyotard's analysis of the world after Modernism first helped to define postmodern aesthetics, which most saliently appears as a *visual* fragmentation of the historical narrative.

The postmodern aesthetic is inclusionary in regard to subject matter and point of view, and embraces popular culture signifiers, historical and otherwise, as relevant to artistic expression. The grand visual narrative is left behind as a salmagundi of narrative references replaces the single overarching visual storyline.

All of postmodernism's aesthetic features are in stark contrast to Modernism's features. Modernism had shaped the look of the twentieth century and given us the dominant aesthetic known as *mid-century modern*, from which postmodernism springs. Modernism's sleek and streamlined look was the predominant visual aesthetic in the 1950s. Recently the setting, clothing, and props in the television show *Mad Men* expertly re-examined that midcentury modern sharp-edged and ornament-free minimalist vernacular. By the 1980s, the new postmodernist aesthetic energized the art world, providing it with a completely new visual vocabulary. And, although the postmodern rejection of Modernism's minimalist look was at first an aesthetic one, we will see in the following paragraphs that the visually expressed diversity and the embrace of the polyphonic facilitate a contemporary dissolution of the boundaries between subject and object as it validates, even privileges, the alternative viewpoint of the other. Postmodernism's philosophical undercurrents mirror its fragmented visual program.

Some scholars see postmodernism as predominantly a simple rejection of Modernism, in other words as an amalgam of reactions against previously accepted tenets. I argue that, more than simply the *next aesthetic step* after Modernism, postmodernism functions as a contemporary philosophical tendency that is highly critical of individual subjectivity. Furthermore, we will see that postmodernism paves the way to transhumanism and post-

humanism by questioning the supremacy of such autonomy, which it associates with narrow ethnocentric, gendered, and rationalist viewpoints. Fragmented and anti-metaphysical in both its aesthetic program and its philosophic one, postmodernism provides the contemporary citizen with a first look at a de-centered and non-hierarchical world. It certainly does reject the aesthetic canons of Modernism. But the roots of its anti-metaphysical trend are deep and can be traced back to the work of philosophers such as Nietzsche and others, who begin to question Enlightenment assumptions regarding individual autonomy and humankind's role in the world (Audi 725).

But does steampunk fit neatly into a postmodernist philosophical scenario? The relationship between postmodernism and steampunk is complex. On the one hand, steampunk accepts the aesthetic aspects of postmodernism—the visual fragmentation, layered historical references, simultaneous but multiple viewpoints. On the other, steampunk vigorously pushes back against postmodernism's philosophical tendency to devalue individual autonomy. Steampunk's insistence on the actuality, validity, and value of some form of autonomous subjectivity, the championing of rationality and individual freedom, among other Enlightenment legacies, places it outside the scope of postmodern thought. Steampunk's response to the postmodern critique of individualism is to resist this effort and, instead, to push forward the notion of individual autonomy, albeit as experienced within a diverse and de-centralized cultural and material world.

Philosophically, postmodernism, in its quest to recognize all viewpoints, challenges the established system of Western metaphysics, a system that sets up what literary theoretician and historian Edward Said calls 'structures of attitude and reference' that define

the world solely through Western eyes. The resulting biased viewpoint may be, and often is, constructed, maintained, and cultivated through political, literary, and cultural reinforcement (Said, CAI introduction). For example, Said writes extensively on what he terms *Orientalism*, the interpretation of an entire culture (Middle and Far Eastern) by the so-called dominant Western culture. According to Said, such a skewed vision of another culture does not produce an accurate fact-based description of that culture, but rather a romanticized, idealized, or imagined interpretation from the perspective of someone self-purported to be of a superior society. This kind of viewpoint disempowers any society that is not within the dominant culture, placing that society in a subordinate position to the prevailing culture and its notions. Said's work shows us, of course, only part of the complex picture of the East-West divide. His focus is not on religion, nor specifically on the current political conflict. And the original book, published in 1978, dates to just before the Islamic revolution and the escalation of intense conflict between Palestinians and Israelis (Said 334). The book, however, continues to serve as part of a dialog between east and west, has been translated into many languages across the globe, and has been an ongoing source of both criticism and praise by scholars throughout the world. It is an important expression about multiculturalism, a challenge to dominant narratives, and a thoughtful exposition of the constructed cultural layers pulled back to reveal their false and human-driven scaffolding beneath.

Historically, Western philosophy pitted in similar dominant/subordinate binary relationship other areas of the human experience. Examples of such juxtaposed relationships are the dominant male with the subordinated female, life over death, and presence over absence. The Modernist visual arts aesthetic of the mid-twentieth century fit neatly into this prevailing Western philosophy, too, as the clearly dominant art of the period. Modernism

provided a privileged counterpoint to the marginalized 'other' of 'primitive' or 'native' arts. An important point to clarify is that, although the Modernist stance vociferously touted a fresh start, free from historical reference, it was very much a Western movement. Furthermore, it is one which freely appropriated material artifacts from other cultures to express its own (dominant) viewpoint. This was not a new Modernist invention as artists had often turned to other cultures for visual inspiration. For example, the Post-Impressionists of nineteenth-century Paris pored over Japanese prints and paintings that came onto the market during that period, adopting the flattened visual plane, blocks of simple color, and geometric patterning intrinsic to Japanese art. And Picasso was inspired by the African masks that he collected throughout his lifetime. But despite historical precedent, Modernism pointedly retains its well-defined western center, with other artistic efforts considered outside or secondary to it. The 'primitive' or 'other' visual vocabulary was simply admired, appropriated, and then set against the backdrop of Western culture. For example, the sleek Cycladic figurines of an ancient Greek civilization, found off the coast of Greece and scooped up eagerly by mid-century Modern interior designers, were simply placed into American interiors as reflecting a design sense of clean line and simple shape. The appropriation had less to do with the figurines' own cultural significance than with the works' ability to reflect the dominant cultural aesthetic. This is not to say that artists had no appreciation of the ancient cultures themselves but that the appropriation was generally more about the expression of the dominant culture than the celebration of the culture of the Greek islands.

In contrast to Modernism's approach, postmodern art appropriates images from many cultures, familiar or unknown, craft or fine art, and these images are given (ideally or in

aspiration at least) equal status, as they are fragmented, and strung together as a visual representation. Postmodern artist Andy Warhol, for example, gathered, and then cut into fragments, photographs of famous personalities (e.g., Marilyn Monroe, Elizabeth Taylor), which he interlaced with newspaper clippings and various other detritus from popular culture. He then reproduced the resulting collages as large-scale lithographs. Other artists began to experiment with fragmentation and to utilize popular culture signifiers. Soon a very diverse postmodern artistic expression replaced the grand history paintings of the Western art historical past. In like manner, the steampunk artist eagerly fragments his vision of the world, pulling apart the grand narrative of the Victorian period and selecting choice elements from that culture with which to work. Steam-powered flying machines, retro-fitted computers and cell phones, all meld the look of Victoriana with an imagined future. It is a fragmented mix of Victoriana and important post-human signifiers such as cyborgs and techno-gadgetry.

But steampunk borrows from postmodernism's aesthetic program even as it rejects its dystopian philosophic tendencies. In Jim and Tori Mullan's *Teal Turned Head Bird on Binoculars*, for example, postmodern historical references and visual fragmentation are clearly evident. The vintage pair of binoculars provides the reference to Victoriana. The fragmented bits of yardstick, mechanical gears, even buttons, are collaged together and clearly echo postmodernism's visual program. But

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Figure 30: *Teal Turned Head Bird on Binoculars* **by Jim and Tori Mullan**

the bird is bright and cheery, its perky head turned expectantly, its vivid colors (blues, oranges, greens, yellows) a testament to sunny days. Thus, steampunk, even as it embraces postmodern diversity, visual fragmentation, decorative elements and sense of surface, the privileging of cultural/historical reference, so does it problematize postmodernism, by standing against the culturally-dominant debunking of individualism, challenging its focus on the negative aspects of the commodification of late capitalism. The bird is a visual example of the steampunk individual, as it stands firmly on its own, its cheerful demeanor implying confidence and optimism. And previously discussed projects by artists such as Datamancer involve new technology, such as laptops and cellphones, repurposed into steampunk visual expressions, demonstrating an underlying interest in, and concern for, objects from our current culture. Steampunk accepts the stuff of society rather than critiques it, thus challenging the common (and more skeptical) consensus. We will see that this renegade element of staunch individualism and optimism can be found in transhumanism, a competing school of thought with which steampunk perhaps may be better aligned.

Transhumanism: A Contemporary Approach to Humanism

Unlike postmodernism, transhumanism evolves more directly and harmoniously from humanism and rationality and, as such, shares a natural philosophical affinity with steampunk, a movement that champions freedom and individual autonomy. Furthermore, the transhumanist movement, which emerged in the 1980s in California, is heavily influenced by science fiction. This is another connection with steampunk, for its roots are in the same literary genre. Transhumanism embraces the notion of expanding and perfecting human existence through the technologically mediated extension of life and improvement of physical health. Rather than fearing technology, the movement considers it as an important

tool to augment human capabilities and prolong life past current norms. Dismissing earlier

limits to human capability, the transhumanist looks to the future and its possibilities with

enthusiasm. Swedish philosopher Nick Bostrom defines transhumanism as "the intellectual

and cultural movement that affirms the possibility and desirability of fundamentally

improving the human condition through applied reason, especially by developing and making

widely available technologies to eliminate aging and to greatly enhance human intellectual,

physical, and psychological capacities" (Bostrom 4). This attitude toward technology, seeing

it predominantly as a tool for our use, continues the human-centric tradition of Enlightenment

thought. Man controls the world around him, including those physical objects he constructs

through the creativity of his rational mind. Although modern technology may continue to

evolve and advance, the transhumanist adheres to established notions of autonomy and

individual subjectivity. In that regard, the transhumanist position fundamentally differs from

postmodernism's de-centering of individual subjectivity and its rejection of the über-

autonomous Modernist approach. Perhaps steampunk finds a philosophical home in

transhumanism.

Transhumanism has many critics, among them political economist Francis Fukuyama,

who argues that hybridity, the mix of human nature with artificial enhancements or

addendums, threatens our very nature. In one particularly public exchange that takes place in

the journal *Foreign Policy*, transhumanist Bostrom counters Fukuyama's arguments in an

article entitled "Transhumanism the World's Most Dangerous Idea?" which was published in

2004. The article was in response to an earlier piece in *Foreign Policy* (September/October

2003) in which Fukuyama and several other prominent policy intellectuals were each asked

his/her opinion on what current concept or idea would be the most harmful to humankind if

embraced in full. Fukuyama's response was transhumanism, an idea he described as a "strange liberation movement" bent on "free[ing] the human race from its biological constraints" (Bostrom FP). Because Fukuyama believes that it is our innate human nature that distinguishes us from other species and endows us with freedom, political and otherwise, he is concerned with scientific advances that could threaten our uniqueness even as those advances extend our life expectancies (Fukuyama 217). He points out that if humans become able to control their biological destiny through technological advancements and enhancements, then the "notion of 'shared humanity' is lost, because we will have mixed human genes with those of so many other species that we no longer have a clear idea of what a human being is" (Fukuyama 218). What are the ethical implications of such scenarios? And how would such an extension impact the approach we take to our time on the planet? Fukuyama warns us of the potential dangers of biotechnological advancements, sensing that we must protect our freedom against its possible impact and potential paradigmatic shift of the sense of ourselves as humans.

Despite Fukuyama's warnings, which echo similar warnings made by Heidegger a half century earlier in which he raised concerns about the dehumanizing effects of technology, transhumanism has become a worldwide enterprise, invoking discourse in high academic circles and also in broader cultural arenas. Fukuyama, with his concerns about the essence of humanity being destroyed in the process of the transhumanist augmentation of human capabilities through technology, is an important voice in the ongoing dialog. Certainly the conversation between Fukuyama and Bostrom raises significant concerns of the broad public, policy makers, and those in academic circles. Scientific advancements and their associated thorny ethical issues, possible political and public policy ramifications of such

developments, and even social concerns, are all wrapped up in the transhumanist efforts in the area of life-extension.

Hans Moravec exemplifies the transhumanist approach. With a career spent in robotics development and research, and a focus on technological aspects of artificial intelligence, Moravec is also the author of several books on the future of technology. In *Mind Children* he explores the future of the robot from simple device to complex thinking machine. Moravec champions advanced robotics, artificial intelligence, and other innovations in technology as positive developments for humankind and the future. He states that "living organisms are clearly machines when viewed at the molecular level" and nanotechnology can tweak the human machine to provide greater health and life extension (Moravec 72). In fact, nanotechnology already provides helpful assistance in the medical and scientific fields. Moravec describes the development of robot technology and imagines the future robot and its relationship to humankind. "As the machinery grows in flexibility and initiative, this association between humans and machines will be more properly described as a partnership. In time, the relationship will become much more intimate, a symbiosis where the boundary between the 'natural' and the 'artificial' partner is no longer evident" (Moravec 75). Moravec's work focuses on how these super-intelligent robots will interface with human beings, how that partnership between man and machine will unfold, evolve, and expand.

Notwithstanding his innovative thinking about future potentialities for humankind and our partnership with super-intelligent robots, Moravec cautions us about our role as humans in a future that includes machines potentially as intelligent, or more intelligent, as ourselves. Moravec seeks to retain the notion of individual human subjectivity by

acknowledging that humans, too, will (must) evolve alongside the rapidly-advancing machine technology in order to maintain an impactful position in the world. As he states, "intelligent machines, however benevolent, threaten our existence because they are alternative inhabitants of our ecological niche" (Moravec 100). Moravec is confident that the day will come when machines can outsmart the humans and we must manage that possibility carefully if humans are to remain significant participants in the world of the future.

Moravec's approach resonates with the steampunk movement's notion of the autonomous individual. Transhumanists such as Moravec and steampunk practitioners in general consider the individual as self-conscious controller of his or her individual destiny. Moravec foresees humans developing robotics and using those new technical tools to improve their own existence, whether it is traditionally embodied or assimilated into a new bionic hybrid human/machine form. Forward-thinking, confident, adventurous, Moravec and the steampunkers challenge us as individuals to push ahead in developing technologies while retaining the goal of maintaining and supporting our individual free will in order to continue to be impactful in the complex world of the future. In fact, Moravec notes that it is in human nature to progress, to continually advance and improve, as a culture. For both the transhumanist and the steampunk proponent there is adventure and great possibility in the future ahead. The positive elements dominate the equation when they imagine the future and human endeavors therein.

Futurist Ray Kurzweil adds his voice to the contemporary conversation about the future and the role of technology within it. Kurzweil sounds a warning call for humankind even as he acknowledges the benefits and inevitability of advancements of technology at the

hands of human innovators. In fact, he resonates with transhumanism's interest in embracing technology as a tool for advancement. But Kurzweil is not completely optimistic about the future and the changing role of humanity. His cautionary warning concerns the concept of *technological singularity*, that inevitable and impending point in time when advances in genetics, nanotechnology, and robotics will come together to produce a superhuman intelligence. This unsettling prediction echoes steampunk's fluctuating and somewhat ambiguous enthusiasm for the future and its possibilities, that tension that the steampunk movement recognizes even as it endorses advancements in technology.

Technological singularity is an idea first proposed by mathematician John von Neumann in 1958 and elaborated by science fiction writer and mathematician Vernor Vinge in a 1993 essay (Vinge). According to Kurzweil, at the time of the technological singularity all traditional models and suppositions would have to be abandoned and our ability to predict beyond that time would be impossible. It will be a world that we cannot imagine. The consequences of explosive advancement will be difficult to control, understand, measure, weigh, and impact. The world as we know it, as we shape it, will move beyond our control if those advancements move at too fast a pace for the human mind to intellectually absorb and adapt. Kurzweil first wrote about these ideas in his *The Age of Intelligent Machines* (1990) and *The Age of Spiritual Machines* (1999), but it is not until 2005 in his book *The Singularity is Near* that he brings into focus the idea's full and extensive implications.

Kurzweil describes the psychological issues we face today: coping with the effects of the post-mechanization of weaponry, having an awareness of technologically advanced terrorism, and dealing with our concerns regarding the dominance of, and dependence on,

television, computers, and other electronics used in daily life. Against this tense and uncertain societal backdrop he imagines a world in which humankind has the ability to generate an artificial being that can surpass our own capabilities, both intellectually and physically. In so doing, Kurzweil problematizes the ultimate feasibility of the transhumanist approach. Although still a proponent of that approach, Kurzweil sounds a warning bell in regard to the transhumanism program. Different from a Marxian scenario that imagines a world in which developments in social and political arenas determine a future that supersedes the present Kurzweil predicts a shift that occurs separate from the realm of human politics. Rather, an outside force, technology, will drive the paradigm shift. And, for Kurzweil it is not a question of imagining this circumstance. He predicts it as an inevitable occurrence. The future, led by technological advancements, is yet to be determined and is in effect unknowable to humankind.

The singularity will fundamentally shift human existence. We cannot truly comprehend life as it further unfolds as it will be a complete paradigm shift. It is a point at which the world order would change dramatically and in ways we, as humans, cannot currently perceive. This tension about the future which is evident in Kurzweil's work and centers on both hope and fear, resonates with the steampunk movement, for it alternately expresses optimism about the future and corresponding faith in the individual subject's ability to shape the world around him, and a tempered wariness about dangerous potentialities. This is counter to postmodernism's disinterest in autonomy as a desirable goal.

Kurzweil believes we must acknowledge the inevitable singular event in order to successfully navigate beyond it and survive into the future beyond. He makes clear that he

and others such as Von Neumann and Vinge recognize technology not simply as a rapidly improving tool for the use of humankind but also as a potential game-changer for the world as we know it. However, armed with the fore-knowledge of the technological singularity, it is possible for humanity to meet such a seismic shift successfully. Kurzweil believes that we as humans "do indeed have the ability to understand, to model, and to extend our own intelligence. This is one aspect of the uniqueness of our species: our intelligence is just sufficiently above the critical threshold necessary for us to scale our own ability to unrestricted heights of creative power" (Kurzweil 4). It is up to the human species to recognize that fundamental changes will come with the future, to grapple with the changes that are inevitable, and to evolve with them in order to survive as a species. It is a challenge to contemporary society to recognize impactful shifts ahead of us and to work to maintain our own autonomous existence within the evolving world.

Clearly the Kurzweilian anxiety echoes the more anxious and questioning tendencies of steampunk—the uncertainty of where real begins and virtual ends, the question of what man's place will be in a future that includes artificial intelligence, and an acknowledgement that exponential technological advancements could suddenly burst forward in ways not comprehensible to our current consciousness. We must continually buttress our own autonomy against the growing tide of technology that can threaten its primacy.

It is on that effort that steampunk focuses by expressing a stalwart individualism in its art, a determined optimism in the face of unknown and potentially game-changing technological advances, including the threat of the cyborg. One must look only to artist Tom Banwell and his leather and cast aluminum steampunk masks to note such expressions. For

his *Underground Explorer* (2009) Banwell has

constructed a mask that appears solid and sturdy. The

mask has a backpack tank created to release in

emergency what the artist terms 'septoxygen,' a

concentrated form of oxygen that will allow extended

periods of underground exploration. Banwell imagines a

future world full of danger and the unknown. But his

Figure 31: *Underground Explorer* **by Tom Banwell (2009).**

hearty explorer is equipped to survive whatever

elements he may encounter.

As part of his extensive theory about the singularity Kurzweil describes the ever-more

rapid evolution of humankind. He explains how the human individual has difficulty

envisioning the future because that individual perceives time and history as linear when it is

actually unfolding exponentially. Each individual exists in life for a certain number of

decades. And our individual sense of time is fundamentally understood in relationship to our

own lived experience. Kurzweil believes that our misperception about the future, our

inability to see forward accurately, stems from our experiencing, and therefore visualizing,

only a small part of the path of humankind's development and advancement. We simply see

only the short-term portion of the path and that appears as strictly linear. For Kurzweil, it is

important that we understand the unfolding of history as occurring in an exponential manner.

In different periods of human history, which Kurzweil calls epochs, developments

occur over extended periods of time. However, if one examines the long view of history one

can see that evolution, whether technological, social, even biological, in fact explodes

exponentially at key points in time. Kurzweil believes that the rapid technological advancement, a technological revolution of sorts, which occurred in the twentieth century, is actually part of an exponential growth spurt that explodes out of the previous century's slower evolutionary developments. If we understand modern history as part of an exponentially-advancing period, we realize that we will likely experience even more rapidly expanding technology in the twenty-first century. Using Kurzweil's permutations, the same degree of change that we saw over the entire twentieth century will occur in a period of just twenty years during the first decade of the twenty-first century (Kurzweil 11). And the following decade would be an exponential increase from there. Stated in a different way, the twenty-first century will realize the equivalent of potentially thousands of years of change *in twentieth-century terms*. Exponential growth begins the curve slowly then explodes at a certain point to double and triple rapidly as it moves through time. The changes that will occur over the next few decades will catapult the human, and that individual's experience, into territory we today cannot comprehend. Technology's recent changes and advancements (e.g., social media, the Internet in general, advances in medical technology that allow for routine hip and knee replacements, heart transplants) are just the beginning. By 2030 Kurzweil contends that our brains and bodies will be augmented by *nanobots* operating within our bloodstream, monitoring and maintaining our health and physical well-being and enhancing our mental capabilities (Kurzweil 300). Such advances will change the manner in which we live, extending our lives, enhancing our experience due to better physical health and general well-being.

Despite the possible scenario of better health and longer life, Kurzweil's theory can perhaps explain contemporary anxiety. Fast-moving advances in technology do not pause for

humans to mentally catch up. We cannot fully integrate our own thinking with current systems before they quickly advance and change again, leaving us in a vulnerable position of re-learning. Anxious of being left behind we may feel we are being whisked through time as a result. We are functional and rational individuals in a world that no longer reflects us, that no longer runs on our time. Although it can be said that every generation may have a similar sense of the world's quickening pace, the contemporary individual, I contend, faces a unique circumstance due to the exponential developments in the technology fields. We must constantly adapt to the ever-changing world homology.

Steampunk performance provides some relief from this anxious feeling, allowing us a temporary suspension from our exponentially unfolding journey. The performance places us in the immediate as we relax in a conflated reality. Sharing physical space with performers such as Airship Isabella, whose wardrobe and sound are reassuringly familiar, harkening back a century to the Victorian era, we have a sense of past, present, and future melded smoothly together in a warm blur of music and entertainment. The *real* world tumbles past us as we enjoy a brief interlude of calm. Furthermore, the temporary suspension allows us to re-connect with our own individual thinking selves, familiar, rational, autonomous. In so doing, steampunk, through performance, aids us in retaining our sense of self against the backdrop of an unfamiliar world.

Transhumanist thought, in general, builds optimism through providing reassurance of continued individual autonomy in a highly technological age. As such, transhumanism shares steampunk's enthusiasm and its focus on the individual. At the same time Kurzweil warns of a potentially game-changing singularity. And it is Kurzweil who echoes

steampunk's fears which so often underlie its optimism—that tension expressed even as the steampunk movement enthusiastically embraces technology and confidently champions autonomy and individual freedom. The steampunk movement, carving a place for itself in the contemporary landscape, freely acknowledges the anxiety of the twenty-first century even as it retains a compelling optimism and confidence. Elements of transhumanism are adopted as steampunk seeks to harness technology in order to enhance and extend our lives. But Kurzweil's note of caution is taken to heart also, as steampunk expresses a note of trepidation in regard to future possibilities.

Post-humanism: The Cyborg and the Steampunk Machine-Man

Post-humanism's connections with the steampunk movement are equally complicated. As we have noted in the preceding pages, steampunk affirmatively embraces a non-hierarchical, fragmented present, as does postmodernism, but valorizes the possibility of autonomous individualism of transhumanism. At the same time it rejects postmodern cynicism and questions some transhumanist lines of thinking. What does it take from post-humanism? We will see that, as it does with postmodernism and transhumanism, steampunk accepts some of the tenets of post-humanism while rejecting others. For example, steampunk resonates with post-humanism's acceptance of the cyborg as fellow member of society. Newts with human attributes and cyborg beings exist side by side with humans in the steampunk world. However, we shall see that steampunk disrupts post-humanism's dissolution of subjectivity by insisting on an underlying autonomy of the individual. The steampunk tenet of individual autonomy remains central to the enterprise and it is that individualism that challenges post-humanism.

Post-humanism emerged in the late twentieth century as a philosophical rejection of humanism and Western metaphysical traditions. Unlike transhumanism, which seeks to recuperate Enlightenment notions of rational free will and autonomy, post-humanism radicalizes the postmodern critique of individualist autonomy. Post-humanism's connection to the development of cybernetics certainly gives it an affinity to the steampunk movement, but we must examine closely whether its radical dissolution of human subjectivity ultimately supports or challenges the ideas forwarded by steampunk.

Post-humanism imagines the contemporary individual as a new kind of being, consisting not only of human parts, but potentially also silicon and other machine parts, owing to advances in technology and science. Unlike transhumanists Moravec and Kurzweil, however, whose approaches retain the human individual's autonomous subjectivity as understood historically, post-humanism moves into new territory. It champions a merging of man and machine and challenges the perceived differences between species (human/animal) and between humans and machines. For the post-humanist, the human becomes part machine—and with advances in artificial intelligence perhaps the machine becomes part human. An examination of the work of theorists Donna Haraway and N. Katherine Hayles will help clarify the post-humanist perspective and its relationship with the steampunk movement.

Feminist theorist and biologist Donna Haraway addresses contemporary subjectivity and the problems of identity. She does so by examining the underlying framework of our rapidly advancing society. As part of her work on contemporary societal issues, Haraway is one of the first to explore the cyborg *as social entity*, one of us, a viable part of community

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today. As such she pushes the transhumanist stance one step further and questions whether humanity any longer enjoys the unique status of dominance over the other (animal, hybrid, or machine). For Haraway that dominance is invalidated. And this new outlook is a core feature of the post-humanist position.

The cyborg, a hybrid creature consisting of organic parts (human or animal) and machine elements, is a result of today's tremendous advances in computer technology and artificial intelligence (AI). A combined word consisting of cybernetic and organism, the term was coined in 1960 by Manfred Clynes and Nathan S. Kline (Clynes and Kline). Cyborg originally referred to a hypothetical or fictional being that performed beyond human capabilities due to augmentation with mechanical parts. But Haraway appropriates the term. She begins her discussion with the consideration that human beings in the twenty-first century are examples of true cyborgs. With today's medical science providing artificial hips and knees, pacemakers for faulty hearts, and other advancements, we are all, in fact, *becoming* cyborgs, our bodies augmented with machine parts. Although we are thus already part way along the path to Haraway's future world, she envisions hybridity as expanding and redefining beings in ever more impactful ways. Human-machine hybrids, the recognition of dissolving lines between human and animal beings, and other mixes of identities will be part of Haraway's future world. According to Haraway, we must accept man-machine entities as a viable part of the mix of working entities on the planet. Embracing such sentient androids or other hybrid beings ethically, providing them with rights and privileges in accordance with existing human rights, sharing identities with them, are part of the overall vision of Haraway.

In championing her theories about the post-human world, Haraway sluffs off the skin of Renaissance Humanism, critically questions its validity and challenges its concept of free will, human rationality, and the primacy of the autonomous individual. She does so from the specific viewpoint of a socialist-feminist biologist. In her work she wishes to disrupt traditional feminism, which she sees as linked to "devastating assumptions of master narratives deeply indebted to racism and colonialism," and instead proposes the possibility of what she calls cyborg feminism (Haraway, *SCW* 1). This new feminism is non-gendered, accepting of partial identities, with boundaries between species "thoroughly breached" (Haraway, *SCW* 151). Like other post-humanists, Haraway's approach challenges individual subjectivity and the free-thinking artist-genius of the Renaissance or of twentieth-century Modernism. Instead, she and others focus on a world that is envisioned as a newly forged community, constructed as a society of hybrid entities, beings with partial identities, and affinities shared across species. For that imagined world Haraway develops a 'cyborg manifesto' in which she details the existence of the cyborg in a world it shares with human beings. She conceives of a future world in which "people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints" (Haraway *SCW* 154). The post-human world for Haraway is a world of affinities more than of individual identities. Humanism's individual autonomy is left behind in the new world of shared identities.

Like Haraway, the steampunk proponent accepts the cyborg as part of her community even as she accepts the de-centered world around her. But the steampunk movement operates in a very different manner from the perspective of post-humanism. The steampunk artist does not forsake his individual autonomy for a new affinity. He instead challenges post-

humanism's concept of partial identity by refusing to give up control of his own destiny as an individual with free will. The steampunk approach does not accept post-humanism's dissolution of subjective identity. The steampunk practitioner may acknowledge the concept of future associations with hybrid beings. But he reacts to that concept in regard to his own identity only on his own terms. His identity remains intact and does not become partial or dissolved. In remaining true to individual identity, the steampunk movement forges a more traditional path to the future, retaining his autonomy and the exercise of free will, while at the same time accepting the cyborg as viable entity within the world. Steampunk preserves this stance as the movement "puts an emphasis on the value of humanity, an individual humanity in an age of mechanization, development, progress, mass production, mass consumption, and dizzying technological innovation" (Carrot and Johnson 359). Expressing such interest in the individual identity, the steampunk movement reflects the transhumanist school of thought much more closely than it does the theories of post-humanism.

Haraway, trained as a biologist with a specialization in primate research, has a unique perspective that enables her to theorize in both the worlds of biology and philosophy, and to make connections between those worlds. She not only endorses the scientific possibility of contemporary humankind as consisting of non-human parts or attributes, she also spurns humanist binaries that have traditionally held sway. Male-female, nature-culture, fiction-reality, science-society are fully rejected by Haraway as falsely perpetrated (Haraway, *SCW* 150). She challenges science itself because she believes it is another constructed truth filled with biases and agendas, having emerged from the Enlightenment, a period she views in a negative light as part of the now rejected colonial structure (Haraway, *HR* 48). Haraway wipes the slate clean of all that has come before, dismissing "the ripped-open belly of the

monster called history," and builds her own world of the future that breaks down biological

borders (as understood by science) between animal species even as she brings along the

cyborg as fellow citizen of the new world (Haraway, *HR* 49). This future, with cyborg,

human, and animal merged harmoniously together as new beings is one that Haraway

envisions as "post-gender world" (Haraway, *HR* 9).

Haraway's rejection of *epistemes* of knowledge, such as traditional science, echoes

her equally vehement insistence on the dissolution of individual subjective identity which she

sees as figuration that is modernist and decidedly male (Haraway, *HR* 47). Although she

seeks feminist figures of humanity in a future world, Haraway insists that those figures must

be non-gendered. As such, the cyborg figures prominently in this new and emerging

existence. The cyborg helps Haraway postulate a future world without gender. Imagine the

non-gendered cyborg. It is neither reverent nor innocent, has no Oedipal longings or need for

salvation (Haraway, *SCW* 150). In Haraway's world, the cyborg, having no memory of the

origin story—no cosmic history—operates independently alongside humans and animals.

Furthermore, with technological advancements continually paving the way to further

developments, the cyborg will function generations beyond the machine of the past even as it

does not partake in false patriarchal premises.

This hybrid world is an emerging ontology and, according to Haraway, an antidote to

the Western world as we know it, which she describes as a false premise that is "racist, male-

dominated capitalism; the tradition of progress; the tradition of the appropriation of nature as

resource for the productions of culture; the tradition of the reproduction of the self from the

reflection of the other" (Haraway, *SCW* 150). Haraway critiques what she sees as a fabricated

and harmful patriarchal web that has been carefully woven over all of Western society since the time of Plato. Her radical thinking challenges Western thought and moves us into new territory. The very identity of the human individual is questioned by her introduction of the idea of valid affinities between species (man and animal) and even the possibility of the melding of man and machine. Haraway's writings question traditional humanist thinking and, in particular, her focus on gender introduces fundamental issues of identity in the post-human world.

Haraway's work on subjectivity and the human/machine relationship illustrates one contemporary take on the perceived shift away from a human-centric cosmos. However, the steampunk movement questions this shift as forwarded by post-humanists such as Haraway. The movement recognizes the contemporary world of hybrids, humans, and other beings, but at the same time it retains the sense of autonomy for the human individual within that system. Recognizing that the world may be one that is de-centered, made up of experience and events, perhaps not even flowing toward order and complexity the steampunk artist stakes a position for the independently operating individual. For that individual, it is perhaps less about *finding* oneself within the chaotic landscape of the world as it is in *creating* oneself within the context of such a world. More than simply reclaiming and repurposing the traditional autonomous individual, the steampunk movement expresses the need to reimagine that individual within the contemporary world of hybrids, humans, and other beings. In so doing, it does not dissolve identities into affinities as do the post-humanists, nor does it accept the *world of affinities* that Haraway proposes. Instead, it re-invigorates the autonomy, the identity, of the individual, as a separate entity operating with distinct and rational free will.

This is a nuanced position. Even as the steampunk aesthetic is steeped in historical reference, the underlying outlook embraces a new world that accommodates hybrid beings while at the same time maintaining individual subjectivity. The mechanical baby created by artist Molly Friedrich expresses this duality (see Figure 19, page 145). The machine-human fetus prepares for her entrance to the new world in a familiar organic manner, in utero, but she does so as a hybrid being with mechanical parts. The humanness of the 'child' is retained and is quite apparent as it incubates within the mechanical womb. This retained concept of the birth counters Hawaway's abandonment of humanity's uniqueness in that author's philosophical insistence on breached boundaries between man/animal and man/machine. Friedrich's work is an examination of our human roots through the acknowledgment of the familiar as still viable. This, even as the artist welcomes the notion of the mechanical baby. Friedrich recognizes and expresses a rapidly changing world and yet is still enthusiastic about the implications it introduces. The generally optimistic steampunk artist eagerly explores the space between animal and human, man and machine. Visually merging the human and the machine, as does Friedrich, the *idea of hybridity* is expressed. The organic process of human birth is augmented by the mechanical aspects of the fetus, visually implying the merging of two systems of being: the human, the mechanical.

The networked and fragmented individual that Haraway envisions may in part describe the steampunk artist's expression. But the artist stops short of Haraway's stance. She also forwards the notion that the individual is fully in control of the world around him and has not lost his identity, even as he accepts and adapts to the hybrid creatures in it. Friedrich visually expresses this through the continuum of the birth cycle, there in full view, still evident even as mechanical parts augment the human entity that will emerge through the

birthing process. The steampunk artist expresses how her individual autonomy is retained and, in fact, re-invigorated in future scenarios.

N. Katherine Hayles, in her book *How We Became Post-Human,* considers the cyborg as among us already and makes a similar point to that of Haraway. "Cyborgs actually exist. About 10 percent of the current U.S. population are estimated to be cyborgs in the technical sense, including people with electronic pacemakers, artificial joints, drug-implant systems, implanted corneal lenses, and artificial skin" (115). Furthermore, Hayles considers how our individual human identity is evolving into what she refers to as a *terminal identity* in which the computer keyboard, attached to a networked system, is melded into an extension of our individual selves. For Hayles the keyboard does not simply represent a tool for human individuals but something that evolves into an extension of our identity. Where are we without our computers, after all? In such a world, dominated by the accoutrement of a highly technological existence, do we remain autonomous subjects or are we now merely a part of a new "we," elements of a new and organic rhizomatic networked community?

Hayles explains in the beginning of her book that "this shift from the human to the posthuman…both evokes terror and excites pleasure" (4). The terror has much to do with the mere idea that a 'post' human era is upon us and that implies that some being-ness other than humanity may not only be part of the world around us, but that humans may no longer dominate in such a new world (Hayles 283). The steampunk artist, who tempers his optimism with a cautious trepidation, tacitly acknowledges the terror which Hayles identifies. For example, the steampunk performance character Dr. Steel warns us with great concern that humanity as we know it may be taken over in the future by machines if we are not vigilant.

Others arm themselves with 'aether' guns, time machines, and airships, all to defend against non-human invaders who threaten our very existence. But that terror, according to Hayles, alternates with ecstatic pleasure in the post-human's contemplation of this new networked man/machine world. In fact, she states "for some people including [the author], the posthuman evokes the exhilarating prospect of getting out of some of the old boxes and opening up new ways of thinking about what being human means" (Hayles 285). In fact, Hayles envisions a shift from the traditional concept of presence/absence and a move to a new outlook that focuses on pattern/randomness. Order and disorder become the distinguishing features of what might exist in the world. And randomness becomes the landscape upon which order can emerge. This concept reflects the methodologies of patterning's importance to information technology, even as technology becomes an ever-increasing factor in our lives. But it also implies a lack of an origin story that is part of the presence/absence dichotomy with which we are more familiar.

Although other contemporary thinkers such as Hans Moravec may feel that the "age of the human is drawing to a close," Hayles notes that machines do not carry evolutionary biology within their systems and that the very fact of our physical embodiment as human creatures gives us a continuing edge over any machine (Hayles 284). According to Hayles, our biological embodiment, with its evolutionary and adaptive processes, puts us in a different category of being than any entity that is built through artificial means and, thus, a full takeover by cyborgs/androids seems unlikely to her. She states further that "the body is a congealed metaphor, a physical structure whose constraints and possibilities have been formed by an evolutionary history that intelligent machines do not share" (Hayles 284). Interestingly, Hayles' interpretation can be seen as a challenge to Haraway and that author's

contention that lines between man and machine are surmountable. Hayles senses that Haraway has made some contestable assumptions about the unique position of humanity in her analysis of identities and affinities.

Returning to Hayles' observations regarding the counter thrusts of terror and excitement that confront the post-human individual, she argues that terror about future possibilities in a machine/man world is a less prominent feature in humankind's general attitude than is the sense of thrill associated with those potentialities. And she challenges many contemporary writers such as Moravec along those lines. Hayles wishes to "put back into the picture the flesh that continues to be erased in contemporary discussions about cybernetic subjects (Hayles 5). Instead of dissolving humankind in such discussion, she sees post-humanism as "embrac[ing] the possibilities of information technologies without being seduced by fantasies of unlimited power and disembodied immortality, that recognizes and celebrates finitude as a condition of human being, and that understands human life is embedded in a material world of great complexity, one on which we depend for our continued survival" (Hayles 5). Hayles' general concept of the post-human environment echoes the tempered caution of the steampunk movement. That movement, too, understands humankind's evolving, and perhaps even precarious, position even as it retains a measured optimism in regard to the future. Hayles believes that the new world, with its ever more complicated information systems, will still depend upon human attention, organization, and insight, all of which will become scarce and thus even more valued in the future. Hayles' outlook, her acceptance of a machine/man world as part of a *stable* future, resonates with the outlook of steampunk artists who embrace the future, whatever it may bring. Steampunk comic-book artist (co-creator of *Girl Genius*) Philip Foglio explains the steampunk approach.

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"Steampunk takes a more optimistic view of technology. It's more concerned with things that people can imagine as opposed to why we can't do something" (Carrott and Johnson 96). Hayles' philosophical approach supports the steampunk outlook. Her theory that humans will retain our primary role in the world due to our biological distinctiveness even as we develop ever more advanced machines supports steampunk's optimism and its view of the human spirit as central to future enterprises.

Jean-Francois Lyotard also ponders questions of concern to the post-humanist and he tackles the issue of the future of human embodiment. Like Haraway and Hayles, Lyotard acknowledges that humans today may co-exist with cyborgs and other hybrid beings created in part through artificial intelligence. However, Lyotard also concerns himself with the question of whether the human mind as we know it can exist outside of the human body. We might consider this question as outside the realm of current philosophical thinking and perhaps beyond the scope of the steampunk movement's concerns. However, Lyotard believes it may be an imperative consideration in regard to the future of humankind in light of cataclysmic events that could occur in the future. In a sense, Lyotard is trying to predict past the singularity, which Kurzweil would contend is impossible. At any rate, Lyotard's concern is with the prospect (according to him, the scientific certainty) of the sun's death. With the death of the sun all matter in the solar system--the basis of human existence-- disappears. It will be the death of our world unless a solution can be found that separates the mind from the body.[56] Lyotard's writings illustrate the tension associated with contemporary philosophy in regard to the human response to rapid advances in technology. Lyotard postulates with ominous warning that we must find a new hardware (body) to contain the software (mind). And he questions whether artificial intelligence, *the inhuman*, can ever be

brought to the level of the human mind. The *thinking machine* of today is nowhere near the *representing machine* we will need for the future, according to Lyotard. How can a machine be brought to a human level of thinking? How can that even be possible given the fact that humans do not think in binary fashion like machines, simply crunching data, but with a field of thought, much like our field of vision? Lyotard introduces important issues but does not provide the answers that Haraway does with her affinities and human relationships with the cyborg, or Hayles does with her belief that the human mind will continue to be impactful as innovator, as mind and hand that moves technology forward.

The steampunk artist addresses the same tensions that the post-humanists grapple with, reacts against them, and then challenges them. Steampunk avatars are often an imagined successful melding of machine and human, or machines fashioned by humans. *Steam Powered Giraffe*, a popular performance group, consists of characters that are envisioned as man-made Victorian era machines. As the steampunk philosopher-artist grapples with the fundamental question of how we can possibly deal with the self/world relations under new post-human world conditions and, importantly, humankind's intersection with the machine, he imagines and invents possible solutions to the issues at hand. Such creative inventions do not preclude or limit actual outcomes as much as introduce possibilities. In a sense, *thinking outside the box* by imagining potentialities provides a way to deal with humankind's supposed inability to predict the future as Kurzweil's technological singularity approaches. The steampunk practitioner boldly believes that future concerns will continue to be met with human ingenuity, using whatever technology is at his disposal at the time. And the acceptance of the ultimate extinction of the human community is thus no more

disconcerting than the prospect of, and acquiescence to, our own individual personal mortality.

Cyborgs and Artificial Intelligence Today

Philosophy today necessarily considers society's heavy dependence on digital technology and asks how technological advancements and our dependence upon that technology may impact human subjectivity. Questions focus on the emergence of the thinking machine, that autonomous cyborg which is the result of the human development of artificial intelligence. Scholars and technologists disagree as to whether machines can ever surpass the intelligence and flexible thinking of humans and the discussion continues online, in print publications, at conferences such as the Conference on Artificial Intelligence (AAAI in Phoenix, Arizona) and the International Symposium on Intelligent Computing Systems (Mexico, 2016).[57] The possibilities introduced by AI certainly challenge traditional thinking. Exciting new work on facial recognition software at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD), suggests that machines today can recognize not only facial expressions but also the underlying emotions beneath the surface of the face. According to Marian Bartlett, lead scientist for the UCSD AI project, with the new facial recognition software called *Emotient* machines can now determine, by aggregating data and generating set algorithms, whether an expression reflects 'fake' or 'true' emotion (Andrade). Further advancements, using visual keys, the spoken voice, and other elements, will certainly continue to increase AI capabilities. In fact, AI expert Stuart Russell (from the University of California Berkeley Electrical Engineering and Computer Sciences Department) urges caution. In a recent online interview Russell noted that "the fact that AI methods are progressing much faster than expected makes the question of the long-term outcome more urgent….It will be necessary to

develop an entirely new discipline of research in order to ensure that increasingly powerful AI systems remain completely under human control…there is a lot of work to do."[58] Such scenarios as humans being overtaken by swarms of androids are no longer just the stuff of science fiction. The cyborg necessarily is a critical factor that humanity must contend with in the future. Very different from the migration patterns of groups of human beings which may present varying degrees of difficulty and/or periods of adjustment for both the settled and emerging constituencies, the cyborg represents the introduction of a new sentient form of being into the existing human environment, cultural and experiential. The concern of the post-humanists and the expressed tension in the steampunk movement are valid issues and worthy of consideration as humankind moves forward into the future alongside machines that are more and more complex and capable.

The Steampunk Response

The steampunk movement does not carefully reflect or fully support postmodernist, transhumanist or post-humanist thought. Instead, it takes specific factors from each of these three prevailing philosophical approaches even as it pushes back with each. As noted in earlier pages, the steampunk enterprise is not fundamentally a philosophical one as much as it is a movement that contains sensibilities that reflect or deny lines of philosophic enquiry. Furthermore, there are many diverse individuals who make up the steampunk community, which itself can be seen as a layered and multi-faceted enterprise of loosely associated sub-communities. But it is also clear that steampunk as a whole and especially as we look specifically to the artists among the community, molds its own independent outlook and, as such, the enterprise may help illustrate and even shape contemporary trends of thought. Thus, art and philosophy are not developing hand-in- hand, art as simply mirroring the

philosophical trend. Instead the aesthetic discourse of steampunk anticipates, rejects, and acts independently of philosophical discourse. In so doing it rejects the anti-autonomous tendencies of philosophy today and sets its own autonomous course. It does not simply partake in contemporary common consensus, but rather challenges it.

As we have seen in previous pages, contemporary philosophers address significant and specific issues confronting humankind today. Lyotard imagines dire scenarios—new containers for human brains. Others focus on emerging aspects of digital communication and its impact on us as a species, for example, whether the constant presence of digital media will influence the way the human brain functions. Haraway considers the affinities that emerge between species in contrast to the separate and oppositional species identities of the past. And she even questions whether the individual in such a data-dominated society is now controlled in some way by the state (Haraway, *SCW* 154). She is continually wary of a dominant society becoming domineering.-Writers today see the world as largely de-centered and chaotic and certainly no longer dominated by the Western viewpoint as revealed by Said's frank scrutiny of the false premises of dominant societies' grand narratives. Contemporary artists, echoing current philosophical thought, abandon meta-narratives, and concern themselves instead with individualized viewpoints and the de-centeredness of the world. The steampunk artist operates within this framework, forging new paths of possibilities and choices, but it always seeks to retain the individual's autonomy, placing her at the center of her own destiny.

Philosophically, the steampunk movement acknowledges the world's hybridity. It adapts to the contemporary understanding of the world, in particular in regard to advances in

technology and the potential roles of the technical and artificial in the future. The steampunk

movement even accepts the possibility of a technical singularity. That acknowledgment gives

the steampunk movement proponents pause from their general state of optimism. Dr. Steel,

for example, warns us of the potential takeover of the machine even as he embraces

technology for his own uses. However, although the stark paradigm shift that Kurzweil

outlines may trouble the contemporary citizen, and Kurzweil himself is wary of what the

future might hold, the steampunk movement takes a much more uplifting approach than do

many in the post-human period. How is this achieved? It is by steampunk's insistence on

wresting control from technology and reinserting individual subjectivity. Although taking a

nod from Haraway in recognizing the cyborg, and acknowledging the game-changing

elements that Kurzweil warns of, the steampunk movement holds onto a foundation of

autonomy and certitude that gives the individual confidence and strength. The world around

us may be changing but, as steampunk artists such as Molly Friedrich note, it is a world we

are ready for and welcome. In fact, it is one we can participate in as individuals with free will

and autonomy.

This is the steampunk artist's dilemma. He wishes to position himself as an individual

within a contemporary setting that tends no longer to recognize the individual subject as

separate from, or independent of, the chaotic and de-centered world around him. Swedish

scholar Karl Palmas theorizes about the contemporary world's perceived dissolved

subjectivity. He sees society today as a complex network of brains. The people within the

network are no longer recognized as individuals, but instead as part of a system of minds or

pattern of behavior (Palmas 2). The individual subject is dissolved into the *activity pattern* of

the masses (where you shop, what you buy, where you go, how you live), which is carefully

tracked and recorded through technological means. Palmas refers to the dispersed individual as part of a network of *mental contagion*, using a term he credits to nineteenth century French lawyer and sociologist Gabriel Tarde (Palmas 4). "There is no 'social environment' within which individuals are immersed. The only thing that exists is a multitude of minds, interconnected through speech and other communications technologies. This makes them susceptible to mental contagion, which in turn generates social order. The structure does not explain anything; it is the structure itself that has to be explained" (Palmas 4). Steampunk represents the response of the individual who refuses to participate in this contextualized, dispersed subjectivity, this mental contagion. He rebels against being perceived as merely a cog in the wheel of the world enterprise.

The contemporary all-seeing eye, that tracker of human behaviors that Palmas describes is far beyond Michel Foucault's *panopticon* which is, after all, merely another individual in the governmental system, one who watches and records the individual and forces him into correct behavior as determined by the State (Palmas 1). Today, according to Palmas, the all-seeing eye is a network of brains, a vast grid of observation that is achieved through advanced and complex technology. Unknown to us as individuals, this grid tends the human flock and makes certain no entity (individual) strays. Steampunk provides an avenue that allows for straying, that retains the individual action within the networked contemporary world that Palmas describes. The steampunk artist is a renegade within a fearful system of operations as he adapts to the new environment even while refusing to become just another small component of the network of beings. We have noted in an earlier chapter the synchronicity between the Star Wars film franchise and the attitude and approach of the steampunk movement. Like the motley band of rebels in Star Wars, the steampunkers resist

the ubiquitous and all-seeing *Imperial Forces*.[59] They refuse to play the game by the rules if the rules necessitate an anti-autonomous existence.

How does the steampunk proponent operate instead? The steampunk artist focuses on his craft and his relationships with others around him, turning to familiar community for support and companionship. The expression of the creative impulse in the individual subject tempers his very real anxiety about man's perceived diminished role in the future, about the potential of the individual being swallowed up as a mere component of the larger world enterprise. Steampunk is a performative disruption of the prevailing but dystopic vision of the world that mirrors (and perhaps replaces) individual subjectivity. The steampunk solution flourishes today for the very reason that it allows for individual expression and self-determination while recognizing the realities of a heavily technological society, a networked system of an ever-evolving world. In fact, steampunk lifts up a challenging call to retain the individual in an ever more networked society. It is a reaction to the mental contagion of Palmas' networked brain, the threat to humankind by Haraway's cyborg, the purported dissolution of subjectivity as forwarded by Massumi, Deleuze, and Guattari. Steampunk is a request made directly to the individual to stand for herself in an environment that is ever more communitarian and certainly less interested in that individual's autonomous existence.

By turning to steampunk, the contemporary individual seeks a return to the primacy of the individual within a rapidly evolving and technologically advanced society. This response to our own machine invasion is expressed by looking back in history to the Victorians. As occurred in the case of those citizens of the late nineteenth-century, societal structures are dissolving around the individual today. Accepted social constraints and rules in

the Victorian period were challenged by its greatest thinkers and today writers also question

accepted norms. As in the Victorian period, it is the machine that challenges us as individuals

and as a society today. But it is not the steam engine that threatens. It is the cyborg and it is

the very notion of human hybridity. But steampunk is confident. It is optimistic. And it

counters post-humanists who warn that humans may succumb to the rule of the cyborg.

Steampunk may reject the cyborg as master, but it accepts him as fellow traveler in this new

networked world- experience. The steampunk artist experiments with ways in which he can

express this autonomy. He envisions an environment in which mechanics are readable by the

individual and a world in which there is room for heroic action.

Steampunk artist Brian Poor of California explores the relationship between humans

and the human-made machine. Poor believes we are biologically wired to "respond to other

creatures" even if those creatures are entities created by us through technology, and his work

reflects an interest in using technology "to breathe life into [his] creations" (Strongman 164). In so

Figure 32: *Deer Head Chingadera* **by Brian Poor (2010).**

doing, Poor underlines the human individual's ability to create according to his own will. Such a creation is Poor's *Deer Head Chingadera* (2010).   The work combines animatronics with metals and deer antlers, the animatronics allowing the head to move and the eyes to react to motion. A tiny wireless camera is installed within the work to transmit images. By creating

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this mechanized creature, the artist expresses the steampunk view that the human individual is empowered through his technological prowess and his creative handiwork.

It might seem that the resolute steampunk individual who gazes somewhat nostalgically to the Victorian past would reject the notion of hybridity of species yet that is not the case. Hybrid creatures regularly populate the fantasy worlds of steampunk literature In various examples, human-sized newts, dressed elegantly in nineteenth century garb roam London streets alongside humans. Their slithering gait and unusual facial figures give them away upon approach but otherwise they fit into the backdrop of the bustling city. Their existence is troubled by the difficulty of living in a predominantly human-run world.

Like the newts in other stories, Morlocks (as appropriated from the fictional species invented by H. G. Wells for his novel *The Time Machine*) also appear in steampunk literature. Figuring prominently in K. W. Jeter's *Morlock Night* (1979), the Morlocks largely resemble humans, but reveal their true identity as they emerge from the sewers of London where they make their home, and are thrust into the light of day. The Morlocks react in extremis to the bright sunlight and their overly-sensitive eyes must be protected by strange blue sunglasses. Without the glasses the Morlock screams in agony from the piercing rays of the sun and must quickly take cover of darkness. Perhaps creatures such as the Morlock and other hybrid beings represent or mirror the contemporary human individual's effort to exist, survive, and even thrive in an unsupportive, de-constructed, and chaotic world. The hybrid's struggle expresses the difficult position of the rational human individual in the world homology of today. Of course, the future world accepts these hybrid creatures and folds them into the human story. But the cyborg, the hybrid creature, newt or Morlock, plays a role in

expressing the human story. Both demonstrate a frustration with individualism in the larger world narrative.

Conclusion

Steampunk artists and writers may embrace aspects of the new world order. But even as subjective identity dissolves, the binaries are rejected, and the subject/other relationship is re-defined, we discover more than a mere glimmer of the autonomous individual within the steampunk effort. Autonomy, which is abandoned completely by Haraway, is intrinsic to the steampunk outlook. Steampunk artists imagine promising scenarios for the future, wondering about the implications of the cyborg's inclusion in society, optimistically considering options, taking into account possible Kurzweilian paradigm shifts, and exploring Haraway's machine-human relationships. But, this is always done from the perspective of the active and autonomous individual, the human embedded in the world scenario. Although others like Palmas may envision the future as a networked *mental contagion*, the steampunk proponent begs to differ and places the human (or sometimes human-machine) as individual protagonist. Thus steampunk, although challenging the elitist constrictions of Modernity, wishes to forge a path in opposition to the many contemporary philosophical assumptions that emerged after Modernism. And the contemporary citizen's interest in that unique path of autonomy may be wherein steampunk's popularity lies.

Because steampunk emerges in the late twentieth century, its approach is necessarily from a contemporary perspective as its practitioners and other individuals grapple with problems in society today. Today's individual subject must consider himself as an Object through the eyes of the other—whether it is Man or Machine. That individual must find his

place in a world perhaps no longer dominated by Man in a Kantian or Hegelian sense. Does Hegel's Master-Slave dialectic still pertain if the Machine takes on the role of the Slave? Today the world enterprise is de-centered, chaotic, and evolving organically with no clear central locus. Thus, the human individual is perceived as no longer at the heart of the world enterprise. Instead, his existence is contextualized within a mass of constructed aspects of the world around him. Furthermore, the human being is seen as just one of many natural species, one who may not enjoy any inherent right to impact or control the natural world, no higher ethics or knowledge that places him hierarchically above nature. This is a fundamental change from the Kantian and Hegelian understanding of mankind's dominant role in the world, the traditional approach of Western metaphysics. This new situational objectivity is very much opposed to the universal objectivity of previous forms of philosophy, in which the individual was the nexus of *Being*, with the world swirling around him. Also gone are the universal truths postulated by Plato, the categories proposed by Kant. It is in this world that the steampunk practitioner finds itself struggling for self-identification.

We look to the work of artists Richard Nagy and Ian Crichton as exemplifying steampunk motivations. In Nagy's *Datamancer Steampunk Laptop* and Crichton's *Impedimentia* they create "Victorianized" versions of contemporary technological tools—a laptop computer and a cell phone. Each device's appearance, the new visual skin, is a dramatic refiguring—ornate, visually complex, with a richness that comes directly from the Victorian aesthetic. Leather accents, a

Figure 33: *Datamancer Steampunk Laptop* **by Richard Nagy (aka "Datamancer").**

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shiny brass framework, a finely finished wood box-like housing with raised claw feet for the laptop, turn these high-tech contemporary tools into vintage contraptions from an imagined Victorian past. The aesthetic is anachronistic on the surface level, but it speaks to the artist's interest in posing a deeper 'what if' scenario to the viewer, an alternative history. What if the computer had been invented in the nineteenth century? During that period there had been attempts by bright and innovative thinkers such as Charles Babbage to mechanize elements of counting to speed up the calculating process for accountants. But it would not be until the twentieth century that ideas like Babbage's take hold in a broader manner. By mixing historical eras (a twenty-first century computer in a nineteenth-century case) the steampunk artist is questioning the path of history and imagining an alternative one. Steampunk reminds us that nothing is foreclosed to us, the future remains ahead of us, and lessons can be learned from the past. It is our individual inventiveness, enthusiasm, and self-motivation that propel us to forge our destinies. To do so we must insist on our free will and individual autonomy, even as the world-existence threatens our subjectivity.

Does the revealing of the machine represent an interest in exposing an ideology that entraps humanity in a contemporary *episteme* à la Foucault and others? Is it a response to the frank warnings of Heidegger about technology's challenging-reserve and its potential to overtake humanity and remove the individual from freedom and truth (Heidegger 14)? If the entire world becomes a standing-reserve of powerful modern technology, where does that leave the individual human being? It is in this precarious space that steampunk operates. However, although scientific and technological advances challenge the dominant role of humankind today, the steampunk movement rejects the idea that technology can or will control human life. Like Hayles and others whose work explores the delicate nuances

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between the cyborg being and the post-human (human) individual, the steampunk movement recognizes fundamental differences between man and machine at the same time as acknowledging the inevitability of their co-existence in the future. Steampunk seeks to resolve the challenges associated with a potential shift in power from human to machine. In that regard it is a rebellion of sorts against the prevailing lines of thought that are quick to relegate the human individual to a more minor role in a future alongside intelligent machines. However, the steampunk movement is not so much a rebellion against contemporary mechanization, or even against digital media in all its ubiquitous and powerful manifestations such as hybrid man-machine beings. It is, instead, a rebellion against the disempowering of the human individual within this new world context, the subversion of the individual within society. Thus we see that steampunk represents not only a turning away from the visual aesthetic of Modernism but also an intellectual refutation of the machine as dominant, mysterious, and in control. The steampunk artist as contemporary individual retains control of technology and the world around him. He is re-empowered within society through the notion of subjectivity. Individuation is paramount as is the rejection of an overarching contemporary system of operation, an apparatus of control. The steampunk community thus consists of individuals banded together in like-mindedness, but not in collective thinking, and not in a centralized manner.

Despite the steampunk movement's cautious response to a perceived threat against humanity, it remains an optimistic enterprise. And that is one of its fundamental features. Steampunk proponents eagerly look to the future and possible developments therein. By evoking a Victorian *mise-en-scene*, steampunk turns to an era in which man was similarly threatened by dominance of the machine, and yet emerged triumphant. Although the threat of

the machine of the early twentieth century was different, and focused on issues of capitalism, commercialism, and conflicting ideologies, it still pitted the individual in opposition to, or rebellion from, societal constraints and domination. By re-enacting and re-imagining that rebellion, steampunk empowers the contemporary individual, albeit through fantasy and psychological means.

As we have seen in the preceding pages, the late twentieth century is an era of rapidly advancing technologies in the field of artificial intelligence and computer sciences. It is also an era of new philosophical approaches and even shifting aesthetics. In the face of such shifts the contemporary citizen experiences an understandable trepidation, a *machine anxiety* that can escalate to fear. Are we, as a species, still 'in control' of our destiny, of the world around us? No longer able to depend upon the abstract and universal foundations of the past (e.g., God, morality, and other accepted 'meanings' of life), the individual of today stands at a crossroads. Part of the complexity of the contemporary post-human position may be seen in the idea of the cyborg, the machine-man, the artificially created hybrid being. How does the individual fit into a society that consists of both men and machines? The understanding of the relationship between subject and other must be completely re-aligned under these circumstances. A man-made monster, the cyborg presents itself as a potential danger, as the machine-powered artificial man that can threaten the supremacy of the human. The steampunk movement emerges in answer to the needs and concerns of the anxious late-twentieth century individual who is facing a cyborg future. In a world overtaken by the technical and artificial, steampunk rebels against the master-cyborg and rehabilitates the notion of subjectivity and individual autonomy.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

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> "Steampunk is large. It contains multitudes."
> James H. Carrot
> *Vintage Tomorrows*

Introduction

The steampunk movement aptly represents the intellectual shift from the centrifugal forces of twentieth-century Modernism to the centripetal tendencies of contemporary postmodernism. It involves a de-centered aesthetic with fundamental ties to the loose-knit Maker movement and the DIY community. Although the movement may now capture the zeitgeist of contemporary culture in its broadest sense, we have seen that it has modest roots and grew out of a narrow sub-genre of science-fiction focused on Victorian era settings and characters. The steampunk movement has permeated many aspects of popular culture and today it is a global phenomenon that continues to evolve and broaden its modes of expression.

Although experienced from a contemporary perspective, the steampunk aesthetic and its underlying approach nonetheless presents a nostalgia concerning technology. It carefully unpacks the modern sleek machine, exposing its elements, de-constructing its mysteries, and resisting its supposed impenetrability. Also of great concern to the steampunk practitioner are the creative and unique contributions of the autonomous individual of today. Steampunk speaks to the Everyman as it focuses on the hand-made object and the readable machine. Steampunk art presents to the viewer a bricolage of elements, pieced together to express the contemporary human condition. The movement is inclusive and optimistic and, as such, appeals to a broad swath of the general public.

Steampunk aesthetically evokes a look that harkens back to the Victorian. Today, many contemporary artists adopt the visual program and utilize steampunk-inspired brass machinery and exposed gears in their work. Fashion designers borrow the exaggerated neo-Victorian style, the music industry has adopted the vintage honky-tonk sound, and DIY enthusiasts explore old-fashioned machine elements in their projects. However, the broad adoption of the steampunk aesthetic has as much to do with contemporary philosophical yearnings as with the visual program itself. We have seen that the work of steampunk artists Molly Friedrich, Kris Kuksi, and others create art that is Victorian in aesthetic but contains important post-human era signifiers—mechanical fetuses, steam-powered flying machines, and up-to-the-minute computers retro-fitted to be powered on with the turn of an old-fashioned brass key. What appeals to a broad spectrum of the contemporary community is not only the visually pleasing aesthetic but also steampunk's insistence on our power as individuals, our worth to society, and the significance of our creative contributions. More than simply a throwback to Enlightenment humanism, however, we have seen that steampunk incorporates current developments in regard to subjectivity and it looks to postmodernism, trans-humanism, and post-human lines of thought for insight.

We have seen in the preceding pages that the psychological and philosophical connections between the steampunk movement and its Victorian aesthetic sources are many. In the late nineteenth century many artists looked back in time for inspiration to the period of *Pax Romana,* that enduring and expansive time of the Roman Empire, perceived by the Victorians as a period of greatness both physically as the Empire conquered lands throughout the Mediterranean, and intellectually as philosophers such as Cicero, Plotinus, and Seneca lived, wrote, and left an extensive legacy of foundational thought. The Victorians turned

from their modern concerns in which they faced challenges of identity in light of technological advances. They sought the intellectual solace of what they perceived as a simpler era. At the same time, we find that some Victorians welcomed the possibilities of scientific and technical advances and eagerly embraced the future. Thus the Victorian period was an era of conflicted sensibilities—both cautious optimism and fearful trepidation. Tendencies toward forward-looking enthusiasm and nostalgic yearnings were counter-positioned in society.

Today, the individual struggles with similar issues. Eagerly engaged with technological innovation on the one hand, the contemporary individual also wonders with some concern what the role of the ever-improving machine ultimately will be. Will the human individual finally lose his autonomy to it? The modern individual must now consider himself through the eyes of the other, whether man or machine. Even the eye of the ubiquitous camera manifests as machine-other. Man perhaps no longer dominates his world and a sense of anxiety emerges, along with a concomitant desire to return to earlier times in history. Thus, steampunk nostalgically reclaims the Victorian period as it grapples with contemporary issues concerning the state of humankind. Like his Victorian counterpart one hundred years ago, the steampunk artist looks to the past to seek answers for the future.

Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia might best describe the hybrid space that steampunk occupies. According to Foucault heterotopias "perform the task of creating a space of illusion that reveals how all of real space is more illusory, all the locations within which life is fragmented" (Foucault OSH 6). Steampunk's space is one of illusion in the face of a fragmented reality. Foucault's space of otherness, layered in meaning, is often imposed

by a dominant society as a means of marginalizing those segments of society that do not fit into the accepted norms. Prisons are an example of such a heterotopia. However, these spaces can also provide a compensation for our disordered world, offering an alternative real space "as perfect, meticulous, and well-arranged as ours is disordered, ill-conceived, and in a sketchy state" (Foucault OSH 6). Fairs, festivals, museums, and libraries are all heterotopias, as are prisons, psychiatric wards, and homes for the elderly. The steampunk artist provides a *felicitous* heterotopia, expressing an optimistic alternative history, a speculative but positive one, providing an illusory space of calm. But in creating this space, steampunk also recuperates individual autonomy and challenges consensus thinking as it counters postmodernism and neoliberal critique.

Beyond the Movement: Threads of Steampunk in Contemporary Art

Steampunk is woven into the cultural fabric of the contemporary world and, as such, its significance cannot be overlooked. Steampunk's aesthetic discourse, one that challenges the anti-autonomous tendencies of much of contemporary philosophy, attracts artists, thinkers, and doers across the cultural spectrum. These are not individuals who adhere to the steampunk movement per se, nor have they necessarily even heard about it. But their work clearly reflects the tendencies that the steampunk movement is tapping into as it problematizes current intellectual trends. In television programming, the feature film industry, and a broad array of the visual arts the threads of steampunk are evident. For the purposes of this chapter I have selected two striking examples of contemporary expression, one from the visual arts field and the other from the film industry. These two examples represent the influence of the steampunk movement as they each incorporate fundamental steampunk visual elements (a Victorian or vintage aesthetic and exposed mechanical

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elements) at the same time as expressing an underlying steampunk philosophy of optimism and individual autonomy. The first example is the visual art of contemporary artist Renee Stout. Her work strongly echoes the steampunk aesthetic and captures much of steampunk's underlying intellectual concerns. The second example is a full length feature film produced in Hollywood for a broad general audience. *The Box Trolls* (released in 2014), illustrates steampunk's ongoing legacy as it incorporates the movement's visual ques as well as its philosophical outlook of optimism, expressing the ultimate triumph of good over evil. Although example after example can be found across the cultural spectrum, these two works will serve as excellent examples of steampunk's continuing influence in the arts. We begin with the work of respected artist Renee Stout.

Renee Stout: Reclaiming the Past and Conjuring a Personal Vision

Stout's work explores the complexity of life and the black experience, the magical elements found in community, and the healing spirit of humankind. An exercise of self-examination, her impressive artistic effort is an exploration of life in all its absurdities. Although Stout would certainly not profess to a direct association with the steampunk movement, we detect in her work a similar expression of underlying concerns facing the contemporary individual. Certainly, several aesthetic elements of steampunk can be located in her work. And, as in steampunk, Stout's work appears to ask how we can discover our autonomous selves in a complex contemporary world. She looks for the magical, the powerful, and the individual spirit that operates outside the bounds of the technological. She finds in our murky past our autonomous roots, and her art reclaims and expresses that dredged up individual power.

Stout's work was recently featured in a solo exhibition entitled *Tales of a Conjure Woman*. The exhibition originated at the Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art at the College of Charleston, Charleston, South Carolina, and traveled to three other venues including the American University Museum in Washington, DC. As we examine a few particular pieces from the exhibition we will discover that Stout's work resonates with the steampunk aesthetic and illustrates the powerful message the steampunk effort introduces to a broad audience in contemporary art.

In *Rootworker's Worktable* (2011), Stout arranges in jumbled abandon a myriad of small vintage objects which are set up on top of an old bureau. The bureau's working surface has been carved out and replaced with glass, strung with electric wire, and eerily lit from below. A sense of the ethereal, the 'beyond' emanates from the dresser, the bottles and mysterious objects imbued with visual power. Look more closely and you see that on the front face of the bureau is an ancient television screen. Aha, this 'bureau' is actually an old hi-fi, the television no longer working, but the visible dials and mechanical elements reminding us of the simple wonder of past technologies. Several of the components that make up the television controls are a hodge-podge of odd instrument dials added by the artist. In true steampunk fashion Stout has even fastened an old wristwatch face to the front of the bureau. The overall aesthetic is of yesteryear with a retro-futuristic twist—the past as

repurposed, recaptured, and reimagined. There is a patina to Stout's work that reminds us of steampunk ornateness, its rich vintage aesthetic. Unrelated components join together in a powerful alternative-history vignette. Her work certainly has a DIY quality, with Stout gathering disparate elements from the past to express a contemporary concern about future possibilities and our place within that imagined future.

Figure 35: *The Root Dispenser* by Renee Stout (2013, mixed media).

Stout creates some of the works in the exhibition from scratch, fashioning pieces that *look* vintage but are conjured up completely by her hand and imagination. *The Root Dispenser* (2013), for example, has an uncanny likeness to a real vintage vending machine. Isn't this a reworked old candy machine that now purportedly dispenses love potions and healing tonics? The artist explains, however, that the entire piece is original work, the metal painstakingly aged —down to the details of carefully indicated worn areas around the coin receiver. It is just where years of wear, so many thumbs and forefingers depositing coins, would be on a real vintage vending machine. This from-scratch approach may be counter to steampunk, in which the focus is on the found and not on the creation of an original. But the aesthetic effect is strictly steampunk.

Stout's jumbled vintage elements join together in order to visually and intellectually challenge us as we face an unknown future and yearn to reclaim part of our past. In Stout's

work, the magical elements, also reminiscent of the steampunk effort, are African-American in origin. Her potions are not *ethers* that facilitate time-travel, but healing potions, love potions, and other medicinal magical concoctions reminiscent of those from the early African-American experience in the American South. Nevertheless, both the steampunk and Stout potions represent the extra powers of certain enlightened individuals within an imagined community. The power of the individual is emphasized in both Stout's work and the steampunk movement's efforts.

Also as we have also seen in the work of many steampunk artists, Stout develops two avatars, alter-egos that represent characters from the African-American experience. The artist explains that the first character she invented, early in her artistic career, is Madam Ching who represented "in hindsight….the projection of the woman I hoped to become."[60] Ching was a wise spiritual advisor and her presence in Stout's early work allowed the artist to express herself in ways which her shyness did not allow (Stout 13). Eventually Ching was left behind. "One day the realization hit me that Madam Ching was no longer separate from me: I had become her, because, at that point, I had resolved many of the issues I had faced in that early phase of my life, and had grown into the woman I needed to be to move forward" (Stout 15). It is Fatima Mayfield, her second avatar, who figures prominently in *The Conjure Woman* exhibition. Fatima is a fortune-teller and healer who utilizes Hoodoo materials and rituals as tools in her healing role.[61] Her position in Stout's work is to reveal the world in all its spiritual and physical richness through her magic, wisdom, and ability to advise and assist people around her. Sterling Rochambeau, Pretty Poison, and others, are peripheral characters that also populate the imaginary world of Fatima and are referenced frequently in individual works in the exhibition. Stout, as Fatima, conjures outside of time and place, bringing us

from the concrete present back in time to a period in the black urban story in which women held sway in the community as healers, soothsayers, and magicians. A felicitous heterotopia is revealed to us. The artist uncovers a spiritual foundation beneath the mundane physical world. Her work is neither ironic nor completely nostalgic. Instead, it seeks to illuminate an historic period in the African- American past and to recoup aspects that are not yet fully understood or explained. Stout's work reflects a similar challenge to steampunk efforts and that is to look to the past in order to understand and possibly change and affect the future. These philosophic and artistic efforts are both creative and liberating for the thoughtful contemporary individual.

Stout's work demonstrates how aspects of some contemporary art share a commonality with the steampunk movement. Like their steampunk counterparts, these contemporary artists seek answers from the past, describe alternative histories, create artistic work by gathering and displaying vintage objects, focus on the hand-made, and invent avatars to guide us in our journey to a re-invigorated past. The maker culture is alive and well in contemporary art and it reflects a need for the individual to create his place, his space, in the world. Stout's *The Conjure Woman* exhibition and, for example, steampunk artist Ian Chrichton in his *Impedimentia* series, speak the same language as they seek to understand our individual roles in what is seen as a complex and sometimes disconcerting future. Both express an underlying tension between advancing technologies and individual autonomy.

Steampunk in the Film and Television Industries: *The Box Trolls*

Once steampunk evolved from its science-fiction roots, it quickly became integrated into the movie and television industries. As mentioned in earlier pages, several recent movies

utilize elements of the steampunk aesthetic. These include *Wild Wild West* (1999), *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (2003), *Sherlock Holmes* (2010), *Hugo* (2011), *Three Musketeers* (2011), and *The Box Trolls* (2014), among others. We will look briefly at two of these films and then explore *The Box Trolls* in greater detail as it is an exquisite example of the steampunk aesthetic and philosophical outlook.

The movie *Wild Wild West* is the 1999 adaptation of a popular television series of the same name (1965-1969).[62] The TV series was set in the late nineteenth-century American West. The popular series involved fantastic gadgetry, futuristic technology, and a Victorian aesthetic. The movie adaptation is also replete with scenes of steam powered mechanical contraptions, inventions, and gadgets. Much of the action in the film takes place in true steampunk fashion on a railway train. Ulysses S. Grant is the U. S. president and the heroes of the story (eccentric geniuses) must fight off the bad guys who are also mad scientists. The movie helped popularize the Victorian aesthetic and further solidified steampunk as an emerging aesthetic with a significant place in the larger cultural community.

The film *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (2003) was based on a comic book series by Alan Moore, a British writer who has developed several popular comic books series such as *Watchmen* and *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*. Moore is considered an important steampunk writer. The movie is a story about Victorian-era superheroes. The action takes place in 1899, with a plot that unfolds across the globe, in Africa, Europe, and the United States. In true steampunk manner, the movie blurs the lines of reality and fantasy. In fact, this movie about international intrigue layers various well-known fantasies into the plot line, with characters from other literary works interwoven throughout. For example,

Professor James Moriarty, Sherlock Holmes' nemesis, appears as an evil-doer. This layering of reality and fantasy—in this case the "real" action of the movie being overlaid with the introduction of literary characters from completely different stories—reminds us of contemporary theatre production. The audience is not asked to suspend disbelief and immerse themselves completely in the "real" story line. Instead they are invited to imagine various levels of fantasy interlaced with the plot line. The result is an ever-unfolding carnival of action and diverse events taking place across the globe.

However, the movie's convoluted story line and confused character motivations may have been its downfall as the movie was widely panned by critics and the public at the time of its release. 'Good guys' such as "M" (a literary character from Ian Fleming's James Bond series) and Dorian Gray (from Oscar Wilde's philosophical novel) turn out to be 'bad guys,' their motivations switched up in the script for no obvious reason. An African myth about the death of protagonist Allan Quatermain (a heroic figure pulled from a popular Victorian novel series by H. Rider Haggard) provides a whimsical and arbitrary denouement that implies rather ambiguously that the character may come back to life (in a movie sequel perhaps?). Despite its problematic plot twists, its lack of support from the film critics, and its poor showing at the box office, *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* is an excellent example of the steampunk aesthetic and has evolved into somewhat of a cult classic.

The Box Trolls, a skillfully-rendered animated feature film released in 2014, is purely steampunk in effect. Adapted from a book for young readers written by British novelist and illustrator Alan Snow, the film was developed by stop motion animation studio Laika Entertainment LLC. It enjoyed immense popularity upon its release and has been distributed

worldwide. The story is set in an imagined Victorian-like time and place, the events

unfolding in a town of gabled 'gingerbread' houses and winding cobblestone streets lit by

vintage gas-lamps. Horse-drawn carriages transport women in long skirts and men in top hats

and dapper Victorian-era suits. The credits for the film are created in sepia tones, with gears

and cogs featured prominently. The storyline involves the evil Mr. Snatch, out to obtain

through nefarious means the coveted white hat of the gentlemen of the city, and his diabolical

efforts to eradicate the subterranean community of trolls that Snatch claims steal and eat

small children. The reality is that, just as proper steampunk artists might, the trolls simply

collect and piece together found objects, discards from the streets above, in order to create

their own creative and functional living environment in the subterranean system below. The

protagonists in the film are a boy who has been raised by the trolls and a girl who happens to

be the daughter of the mayor of the town. In an action-packed unfolding, much is revealed,

twists are turned, heroes are made, and evil-doers caught.

Beneath the surface of the steampunk aesthetic, the movie abounds with deeper

steampunk motivations and ideas. The strict social norms are challenged by the girl

protagonist who insists that the way of life to which the town is accustomed, with strictly

enforced curfews and a rabid fear of the trolls who emerge at nightfall, should be questioned.

Her curiosity rejects the constraints of society. She seeks individual autonomy in facing the

great unknown. This reminds us of the conflicted Victorian era and those who were curious

and eager to face the unknown but exciting future. As we've discovered in earlier pages (see

Chapter 2), the changes brought about by the powerful steam engine had impacted society in

such a way that norms were dissolved and new social systems emerged. In the movie, the

fundamental goal of the evil-doers is the construction of a powerful steam-powered machine,

a weapon that will take over the town. This is a Victorian-era disaster in the making, pulled straight from the concerns of the period. The machine in the film is being constructed by hand by captured and enslaved trolls.

Throughout the film, an enlightened dialog unfolds between the two hitmen for Snatch. They argue in Socratic fashion whether good will triumph over evil, whether they themselves are acting in the role of the good (they think they are) or of evil (by the end of the film they come to the realization that they must change their ways). Philosophic discussion of free will and the conflict between good and evil reminds us that the steampunk movement is not only about a visual program but also about how human individuals can survive as such in a machine-oriented future society. The audience wonders if the hit men will see the evil of their ways and whether the machine will be successfully deployed as a tool by evil Mr. Snatch.

In true steampunk fashion the plot twists and the good guys—a motley band consisting of the box trolls, the boy, and the girl work together to solve the big problem. How do they do it? The save-the-day moment in the film is when individual autonomy is literally returned to the trolls. This is a steampunk scenario indeed. Under dire circumstance, the boy desperately convinces the box trolls to take charge of their destinies and rebel against the machine elements and the evil Mr. Snatch. At the last possible second, the trolls realize they in fact can control their future and they take necessary action. They had been trapped in the boxes, a false identity, perhaps a reference to the hybridity that lurks around the corner in the future with cyborgs and machine identities. They release themselves from their false identity through their own individual actions as they work for the good of all. And in the process of

self-discovery, the trolls save the thankful community from the evil domination of Mr.

Snatch and his powerful and destructive machine. A wonderful example of a steampunk film,

The Box Trolls was not advertised specifically as such, but its popularity and clear parallels

with the steampunk movement as we have come to understand it demonstrates the

significance of steampunk contemporary philosophy and its aesthetic legacy.

Steampunk into the (Speculative) Future

Andrew Feenberg aptly notes that "it is the computer that has put the 'post' in

postmodernity. No other technology so dominates discussion of the changes our society is

undergoing today. No other technology so shapes the image of the future by its promise and

its threat" (Feenberg 123). But in the post-human era of today, individuals look for

something more from technology than it has given us so far. Steampunk asks that technology

be integrated into our lives fully, but in a way that allows the individual to maintain his own

autonomous relationship to the world around him. It is not about domination over the

machine but about handling it, using it as an object of Heidegger's standing-reserve, as a tool

or enhancement to improve society and the human condition. Steampunk looks for a

relationship between humans and the machines we use. In order to do so, it rejects the opaque

'modern' Apple product in favor of the exposed cogs and gears of the mechanical.

Furthermore, steampunk challenges the borders between the virtual and the real.

Confronting contemporary anxiety, the steampunk performer visually and conceptually

captures the three Heideggerian ecstases—past, present, and future. This is achieved through

performance that employs Bakhtinian dialogism as the performer simultaneously represents

past, present, and future voices. This polyphony allows both the performer and the spectator

to tarry in a state of temporal suspension, of perpetual becoming, in a felicitous heterotopia. By reclaiming allegorically the perceived beginnings of modern technology, steampunk artists imagine the possibilities of a *different* future, one that integrates technology with humankind in a more effective, reasonable, and accessible way. "They are not simply trying to recover a lost culture, they are trying to imagine an alternative future that might emerge if we could only reboot history, if people in the past had made different choices, if people today had different values" (Carrot and Johnson xv).

Steampunk's interest in the intersection of time and space is fundamental to the movement and the Victorian aesthetic and intellectual concerns are the perfect basis from which the steampunk movement imagines alternative histories. The Victorian spatial/temporal dissociation as found in writers of the era resonates with the steampunk philosophy and Victorian scientific romances become the settings of steampunk performance in which the romanticized beginnings of modern science is re-enacted, re-imagined, re-configured as alternate possibilities. Steampunk proponents re-harness the mighty steam engine as they imagine and recreate the triumph of the Victorians. The successful control of new and powerful technology is viewed from the steampunk artist's post-human position in the historical continuum, a position that must acknowledge realistically the growing possibility of the cyborg's emergence as a being. Just as the Victorians successfully harnessed the steam engine and adapted to the awesome new technology and all its immense implications so can we in the twenty-first century harness powerful new technology currently expanding our world, and yes, that even includes the cyborg.

As we have seen in the preceding pages, steampunk is so much more than a nostalgic look back to an aesthetic from the past. Armed with the accoutrement of the Victorian era, this appropriation is not meant to be historically accurate nor does it provide a complete vision of the true Victorian world. The steampunk artist faces a re-imagined anxiety and excitement of a past age in order to express his own contemporary challenges. In so doing, he conveys confidence in meeting any challenge set before him.

Furthermore, we have seen that steampunk is participatory and democratic. And it is about the act of *play*. Like social media enterprises such as Twitter and Facebook, the steampunk movement is a decentralized network of participants from all walks of life. There is no hierarchy, no governing body, and there are no rules. The only mobilizing feature is an interest by all participants in some aspect of the phenomenon: science fiction, thinking about the future and its possibilities, looking at the Victorian period as inspiration in clothing and decoration. Steampunk, in its enthusiasm and optimism, welcomes all into its inclusive world and that is part of its broad attraction. It has no political agenda beyond championing individual freedom and autonomy. It is thus not ideological in nature nor is it narrow in its approach. Although it may appear at first to be stuck in the past while fixated on the future, steampunk is fully grounded in the present. It asks us to reassess human consciousness, to imagine humans existing alongside the cyborg, to picture beings that might be part machine and part flesh, and to consider a new and evolving autonomy for the individual as he is situated in a networked and highly diverse world. Dealing with fundamental issues that confront us today, steampunk mixes the familiar past with the imagined future in the lived present.

The steampunk aesthetic is expressed quite uniquely. It is always hand-crafted, with an accent on *techne*, the work of the artist's hand, the idea behind the object as created by an individual artist. It is Do-It-Yourself, a natural overlap with the burgeoning Maker Movement. Steampunk expression visually merges the past in the requisite Victorian elements with the present as performed and as connected with the live audience, and with the future as imagined, sometimes whimsically, but always expressing creative possibilities. Imagination, performativity, and community are intrinsic to steampunk art. The steampunk practitioner looks to the Victorian period as heroic because history shows us that mankind survived a massive and impactful integration of mechanization into their lives. In an effort to channel that heroism in order to conquer his own technical nemeses, the contemporary steampunk artist must confront his own version of the machine.

Clearly steampunk is no simple cosplay or pastiche. It is a philosophical approach to contemporary life, an effort to deal with issues that confront today's society on a fundamental level. Like the Victorian period one hundred years earlier, the late twentieth century experienced game-changing technological advancements that force tensions between the individual and society. Science fiction writers, futurologists, contemporary artists, and philosophers propose that the individual now must rely on context to understand his place in the cosmos. Humankind, as just one of many species, holds no inherent right, ethical foundation, or particular knowledge to control the material world. Philosophically, human subjectivity is called into question and the relationship between subject and other must be completely re-assessed. The cyborg introduces the possibility that man may no longer control his own destiny as the subject learns to become the *object of the cyborg's gaze*.

Steampunk art addresses anxieties associated with such an uncertain future. Steampunk artists grapple with fundamental philosophical issues by establishing themselves firmly in the present as performers, while visually harkening back to earlier times. Reaching out to live audiences, the performers ground themselves in the present as a steampunk community that is made up of both the audience and performers. Through steampunk performance we feel temporarily released from the sense of catapulting wildly through time. The performance places us in the immediate, allowing us to relax in a conflated reality of past, present, and future.

The cyborg threat to humankind's primacy is not fully resolved by steampunk. It remains an ever-present question. The future holds what the future holds and it is, as Kurzweil notes, unpredictable and likely paradigm-shifting. Humankind cannot undo all that we have learned over the centuries about science, astronomy, and technology. Instead, this contemporary world must move forward and integrate advanced technology, including man-machine components, into our understanding and experience of the world around us.

The steampunk philosophy and aesthetic offers us a thoughtful model on how to proceed. It describes an optimistic and empowering path to the future and one that we might best take forward. Scholar and teacher George Smith provides some insight on this topic in his discussion of technology and the artist/philosopher. He considers our contemporary addiction to technology and warns his readers that addiction can take us away from *true being*. Can Art save us from a technology addiction, as Smith argues? Is steampunk a significant contributor to that art that may steer humankind along a path of enlightenment? The maker tarries on the lowest rung in the hierarchical and aristocratic social ladder that

Plato forwards for his ideal republic, but Smith grants him more status, seeking to give the artist a seat at the intellectual table. Smith champions a horizontal social space, no longer the vertical hierarchy of Plato. This is a similarly egalitarian approach to the steampunk movement and Smith states that "all humans are endowed with speech and are therefore equal and ipso facto must be heard" (Smith 149). Art as the path to freedom emerges from the writings of Kant and Hegel and Heidegger and Nietzsche. As Smith notes, "in one way or another, all of these thinkers looked to art for the possibility of freedom" (Smith 133). Steampunk recognizes the importance of hearing each voice and extends the invitation to all to be involved, to create, in order to shape our future. If we understand the world as a network of constructions, a de-territorialized and de-centered enterprise created and maintained by humankind, we can understand the steampunk interest in constructing a future for the human community that both accepts the de-centering and insists on individual autonomy and free will.

   And then there is the romance of steampunk. It is, after all, about play and the expression of the imaginative life. Steampunk certainly reveals an alternative imaginary existence. It is likely that critic Roger Fry, who describes "art as the expression of the imaginative life" (Fry 79), would agree that the steampunk aesthetic reveals "more or less what mankind feels to be the completest

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expression of its own nature" (Fry 77). Steampunk is certainly caught up in the conveyance of a playfully imagined world. The 2016 catalog of popular upscale furniture and home goods company Restoration Hardware features a whimsical bar cabinet that is straight out of the now familiar steampunk aesthetic. Although it does not advertise the bar as such, it has all the requisite elements: exposed mechanical components, a rustic handcrafted look, visible bolts and fasteners and an overall vintage sensibility. As if reclaimed from the past, we wonder if it might in fact be a Victorian time machine. And it is the perfect purveyor of transformative potions for guests who might alight in our living rooms. Whimsical, perhaps, creative and unique, certainly, a piece that makes us cheer for the hand-made that today so aptly and importantly expresses the individual human spirit.

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Notes

[1] The Truth Café in Cape Town and the Joken Bistro in Cluj-Napoca, Romania are just two examples of the best of steampunk bar design.

[2] Cosplay is a contemporary term that combines the words costume and play. Cosplay refers to those individuals who like to dress up as a favorite comic book hero, or character from video games or contemporary story.

[3] http://www.neovictorianstudies.com/

[4] According to its website (steampunkbible.com), Steampunk Bible is "an illustrated guide to the world of Imaginary Airships, Corsets and Goggles, Mad Scientists, and Strange Literature."

[5] *Locus Magazine,* April 1987 issue in "Locus Letters" section.

[6] The term was coined by American writer Bruce Bethke, whose 1983 short story titled "Cyberpunk" brought the new word to the world's attention.

[7] Clockworks are mechanisms that operate with springs and gearwheels in order to drive mechanical devices such as clocks or toys. The first large city clockworks date back many centuries, with the mechanical astronomical clock in the town square in Prague, Czech Republic, for example, dating to 1410.

[8] The attributes of the steampunk aesthetic are discussed by Rachel A. Bowser and Brian Croxall in Neo-Victorian Studies Special Issue 3:1 (2010) in "Introduction: Industrial Evolution;" by Ann and Jeff VanderMeer in *Steampunk II*; and by Caroline Cason Barrett in "Time Machines: Steampunk in Contemporary Art."

[9] Barnes and Noble website: http://www.barnesandnoble.com/blog/sci-fi-fantasy/exclusive-cover-reveal-the-singular-extraordinary-tale-of-mirror-goliath-by-ishbelle-bee/. March 18, 2015. Web. April 3, 2015.

[10] https://www.sherwin-williams.com/architects-specifiers-designers/inspiration/color-forecast/2013-color-forecast/. Web. March, 2014.

[11] Comic-Con San Diego recently celebrated its 40th year. Originally a small gathering of comic-book enthusiasts it is now the largest convention that meets in San Diego annually. Over 120,000 fans, professionals, artists, vendors, journalists, and others gather to learn the latest news and information on comics, gaming, TV, movies, and popular culture. The 2015 Comic-Con International lists a "Star Wars Goes Steampunk" panel. The affiliation between the Star Wars movie franchise and steampunk will be discussed in a later chapter.

[12] http://gaslightgathering.org/ 3/26/15

[13] Information on the IBM "Birth of a Trend" project was announced at National Retail Federation Convention January 2013.

[14] National Retail Federation Convention, January 2013.

[15] http://steampunkguide.blogspot.com/p/events-calender-2015.html

[16] http://www.visitlincoln.com/whats-on/steampunk-festival-2015

[17] http://www.style.com/fashion-shows/spring-2009-ready-to-wear/ralph-lauren

[18] According to Stanley Bing in his February 7, 2000 article in Fortune Magazine nearly half a trillion dollars was spent by businesses and governments. AT and T alone spent $500 million in preparation for the non-event.

[19] The term *cos-play* refers to participants who dress up as comic book heroes such as Batman or Wonder Woman or other favorite online gaming characters. Cos-play is seen

broadly at venues such as Comic-Con, an annual international comic-book and media convention in San Diego, Her Royal Majesty's Steamship Symposium in Long Beach, CA, and other festivals throughout the world.

[20] Some conflicts in British territories occurred during this time, including the Boer Wars in South Africa and the Indian Mutiny of 1857. The Crimean War of 1853-1856 was largely a conflict between religious factions in France and Russia, but the British became involved militarily in 1854. In 1914, World War One would end—dramatically and globally--the relative peace of the Victorian period.

[21] The rapidly expanding railway system gave rise to the need for standardization of time to accommodate set schedules for rail travel and product distribution.

[22] *Modding* is the shortened and widely used nickname for the term modification. The term originated with the popular after-sale modification of video games and other electronic software by technically savvy end-users. The do-it-yourself (DIY) interest of the steampunk movement often encompasses modding of electronics not only at the aesthetic level but also in the object's functionality.

[23] Drama and murder in isolated train compartments also became a very real issue. Several train murders went unsolved. The isolated compartments did not allow escape for the unlucky victims, and there was no way to obtain emergency assistance on route to the train's destination. Later in the nineteenth century, this safety concern was alleviated by running interior corridors throughout the train for railroad personnel to use.

[24] According to their website (www.ap.org/company/history/ap-history) the AP began in 1846 when five newspapers in the New York City area banded together to pool news information from the Mexican-American War, using several methods of communication including the telegraph and the pony express routes.

[25] According to Nietzsche the concept of good/evil was originally created by the aristocratic class to value their own deeds. The concepts were enforced, accepted, became habit, and the origins forgotten. Religion's appropriation of the terms helped to bury the origins ever more deeply. Foucault will further this concept of human construction in his work on *epistemes*.

[26] Although it is not clear who coined the term *The Modern Century,* that term is commonly used to refer to the twentieth century as it is largely comprised of Modernism movement.

[27] Heidegger's standing reserve refers to the availability of the world for ordering by humankind. The world (nature and its abundant resources) stand ready for humankind to order and assemble.

[28] In their role as illustrators of the good life, eighteenth and nineteenth century painters would often visually describe the perils of the profligate lifestyle. William Holman Hunt's *The Awakening Conscience* and William Hogarth's *Marriage a la Mode* series are excellent examples of works that serve as moral lessons.

[29] BBC News, September 1999.

[30] *Bloomberg Business,* June 15, 2015.

[31] These auction prices were gleaned from the websites for Christie's (www.christies.com) and Sotheby's (www.sothebys.com), accessed on 9/21/2015.

[32] http://adage.com/article/adage-encyclopedia/wells-rich-greene/98934/

[33] https://donovandesign.artspan.com/

[34] Donovan website: http://www.scribd.com/doc/30369725/The-Ferryman-Reading-Research-Lamp 11/4/15

[35] Copro Gallery began in 1992 with a focus on museum-quality installations that exhibit the work of emerging artists. Principals Greg Escalante and Gary Pressman oversee the gallery at 2525 Michigan Avenue, Santa Monica, CA. The gallery website can be found at www.coprogallery.com.

[36] http://frenchculture.org/visual-and-performing-arts/events/cool-bronze-sculptures-pierre-matter

[37] Giger worked on the set design for the award-winning film *Alien*. He studied architecture and industrial design, but later turned to the canvas. His work *Necronom* is an airbrushed canvas full of surreal nightmarish images, combinations of "biomechanical" humans and machines. Giger has also designed furniture and interiors.

[38] As reported in the La Jolla Light on October 23, 2014.

[39] Donovandesign.artspan.com

[40] Some prehistoric and Neolithic figurines were depicted as part animal and part human. However, those figures, also prevalent in ancient Greek sculpture, represented gods or spirits of the spiritual world beyond. Unlike these historical spirit beings, the contemporary cyborg figure is seen as a literal threat to the world as we know it.

[41] A simple aesthetic that grapples with contemporary issues may not alter the brain fundamentally. However, Boyd notes that neural plasticity is part of the learning as the brain adapts to its experiences. Neural spaces are filled and modified to accommodate new information.

[42] Kaprow moved to California in 1966 and began to refer to his works as Activities. These events took place in large areas with great numbers of people engaged in tasks from the mundane to the absurd.

[43] The work of Kate Gilmore (eg, *Blood From a Stone*) is a prime example of contemporary video-taped performance art.

[44] LARPing refers to live action role-playing. The term came out of the gaming community to denote those gamers who not only play the game but role-play the various characters from the game, dressing up and performing as the fictional persona.

[45] Tweeted 9/26/15 by Andy Allcock (@andyaphotos) on https://twitter.com/acrojou, accessed 12/7/15.

[46] Honeybee lyrics are from song-lyrics website genius.com, accessed 12/6/15.

[47] Linden Lab, a company based in San Francisco, created Second Life in 2003. The website for the game and links to the company can be found at www.secondlife.com. According to the Second Life Wikipedia entry by 2013 there were over a million people active in the virtual Second Life world.

[48] Youtube video *Dr. Steel's Real Name*, originally uploaded by Bubba Jabroon September 24, 2009, accessed for research purposes March 2013.

[49] From the TSU website, http://www.toysoldiersunite.com/faq/, accessed 11/20/15.

[50] Heidegger's *The Question Concerning Technology* reveals his overarching concerns with modern technology. The essay's concepts were originally developed in lectures presented between 1949 and 1953 and then published in 1955 in the book *Vortrage und Aufsatze*.

[51] From *Paranoia: The Conspiracy Reader*, issue 38, Spring 2005. Accessed March 2013.

[52] More information on the Chappist movement can be found at thechapmagazine.co.uk.

[53] Dr. Elemental's lyrics are from song-lyric website genius.com, accessed on 12/6/15.

[54] In a January 4, 2013 interview with Luke McKinney of *Man Cave Daily*, an online news and entertainment blog, Professor Elemental describes the Chronicle's debut as "burst(ing) onto YouTube like an exploding cake."

[55] A prime example of appropriated steampunk aesthetic form is the band, *The Men Who Would Not Be Blamed for Nothing*. Their Youtube video of the song "Goggles" demonstrates how the steampunk trope can be used by a musical group to give their work a contemporary or popular appeal. (2/17/13)

[56] Lyotard's concerns are similar to those of Victorian theorist William Thomson, First Baron Kelvin, who wrote about the *heat death* of the universe, what he felt would be an inevitable and impending occurrence due to the closed system of the solar system. Generating heat would eventually 'use up' all energy and essentially suffocate humankind out of existence. Such postulation did not take into account various aspects of physics (the universe is not a closed system, for example) which were not yet understood during Kelvin's lifetime.

[57] The Elsevier list of upcoming global events lists 76 conferences on artificial intelligence taking place over the next year (2016). The web site was accessed on 1/8/16 for the purposes of gauging ongoing global interest in the subject. http://www.globaleventslist.elsevier.com/events/#/filterYears=2016&disciplineIds=47&specialtyIds=184&sortBy=recency&page=8

[58] From "Rise of the Machines: Keep an Eye on AI, Say Experts," AFP (Agence France-Press, a global news agency), March 12, 2016. Accessed 3/13/16 at https://in.news.yahoo.com/rise-machines-keep-eye-ai-142626820.html

[59] For those few people on the planet not familiar with the Star Wars story, the Imperial Forces are the evil-doers of the narrative, the massive governmental entity that suppresses and represses independent activity among the masses of the universe (including hybrid, human, animal, and machine beings).

[60] As explained on the wall text accompanying the *Conjure Woman* exhibition.

[61] Hoodoo is an African-American folk magic that mixes African and Europe/American spiritual and religious elements. The small authentic "Hoodoo" case included in the exhibition is from the Charleston African-American Folk Magic Museum, originally found in the basement of a home in the South.

[62] Two made-for-TV movies based on the popular television series were also created and broadcast in 1979 and in 1980.