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## **Yesterday's Tomorrows: Retrofuturist Visions of London's Alternative Pasts in Steampunk Fiction**

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**Abstract:** Steampunk is a popular, retro-speculative aesthetic which transforms a variety of multi-genre narratives, combining Victorian ideals with a post-modern zeitgeist. This article looks at how London is transformed in works such as Sterling and Gibson's *The Difference Engine* (1991), Newman's *Anno Dracula* (1992), Carriger's *Parasol Protectorate* series (2009-2012), Mann's *The Affinity Bridge* (2009) or Blaylock's *The Aylesford Skull* (2013) and how a variety of urban ideas and identities are both constructed and challenged in these texts. Indebted to Victorian literary accounts of London, these alternative visions of the metropolis re-assemble familiar settings and explore pathways that transgress the moral or structural standards of Victorian fiction and non-fiction. As a setting that generates and fuels debate, steampunk London provides a context in which socio-economic issues, disenfranchisement or postcolonial legacies can be discussed and explored in a way that goes beyond London Gothic fiction of the present.

**Keywords:** Steampunk, Victorian London, London Gothic, *The Difference Engine*

Our notion of London is comprised of a wide variety of concepts, many of which exist on different levels of time. The London of the past is charged with meaning in the historical imagination. It is influenced by literary depictions inevitably guiding our perceptions of the present, which seems familiar as a material reality. Future incarnations of London, on the other hand, are often presented as alien and bizarre. As the city encodes cultural memory, and because of the relative instability of historical reconstructions, we might be inclined to perceive London as a palimpsest of ever-emerging ideas and changing approaches. Ackroyd, for example, claims that 'London defies chronology', that its nature is atemporal, irrational, and mysterious and that it is 'so large and so wild that it contains no less than everything' (2003: 2). A

close examination of steampunk, a popular anachronistic re-imagination of the nineteenth century, suggests indeed that, in addition to visions of past, present or future, London may also contain a variety of alternative futuristic pasts: pasts, in which passenger airships crash in Hyde Park and Marxist revolutionaries occupy the Docklands.

Inspired by prominent writers of the Victorian age, such as the pioneers of science fiction, Jules Verne and H. G. Wells, influenced by others such as Dickens, Doyle, Stoker or Stevenson, and guided by the plethora of voices and images gathered by Henry Mayhew, steampunk literature emerged as a sister-genre of cyberpunk (Gross 2007: 57). Initially a semi-serious term for Dickensian retro-speculative fictions, the term 'steampunk' soon classified and inspired an entire subculture (VanderMeer and Chambers 2011: 49). Members of this movement who self-identify as steampunks create fantastical alternative universes by employing creative anachronism and an inventive re-imagination of the nineteenth century. The perspectives resulting from such rearranged visions range from naïveté or nostalgia to nihilism.

Accelerated by the internet and enjoying growing popularity since 2007, steampunk has generated a politically motivated maker-culture as well as feature films and TV series, music, cosplay and fashion—aspects which have attracted the attentions of a variety of scholars (Onion 2008; Ferguson 2011; Barber and Hale 2013; Carrott 2013; Carrott and Johnson 2013; Huxtable 2013). Academic interest in steampunk seems to ebb and flow, with major contributions in 2009/2010 and again in 2013. While much research is concerned with steampunk's counter-cultural philosophy and the material products of its cosplay subculture, more recently, attention has also been paid to steampunk's potential to discuss race, class or gender (Perschon 2013; Siemann 2013; Taddeo 2013).

### **Steampunk Aesthetic**

As a creative synthesis of Victorian and anachronistic elements, the London transformed by the steampunk aesthetic is tangible because it is familiar as a material setting, yet intriguingly strange because it is defamiliarised. Re-imagining alternative pathways instead of rewriting the present, steampunk creates artificial collisions between established notions of the Victorian age with a postmodern zeitgeist and transgresses the laws of history, physics and society. This allows for the creation of settings offering social, political or economic freedom to its inhabitants that were historically impossible or taboo, thus providing opportunities to speculate on socio-economic or cultural developments with utopian or dystopian impulses. We may explore under-represented Victorian identities or tread fictional pathways lying beyond the moral and structural demands of Victorian fiction.

Steampunk has been described as a tripartite aesthetic, 'an expression of combined components comprising the style or aesthetic popularly understood and labelled as steampunk', which can be applied to multi-genre narratives (Perschon 2012: 64). This concept of steampunk as an aesthetic, rather than a genre, permits

the flexible and inclusive discussion of a variety of objects, artefacts and stories. Envisioning murder mysteries, supernatural horror, romances, adventure stories or social problem novels through lenses of Neo-Victorianism, technofantasy and retrofuturism, the steampunk aesthetic re-imagines Victorian London as gritty or glorious, poverty-stricken or prosperous, rebellious or respectable.

### *Neo-Victorian Pastiche and Intertextuality*

Drawing on the social, cultural and technological reality of the nineteenth century, the Neo-Victorian element assembles a multitude of Victoriana, such as music, fashion or architecture, into a resonant and highly intertextual collage, evoking the era as a vivid pastiche wilfully sprinkled with anachronisms. London is conjured up as an imperial capital of wealth, taste and progress as well as a growing metropolis straining under the social impact of urban expansion. Flexible in terms of temporal boundaries, and independent of historical verisimilitude, this element of steampunk generates an endless number of unique steampunk settings out of London's legends and landmarks as representatives of ideas, traditions or moods present in the city.

Kim Newman's novel *Anno Dracula* (2011) weaves together a historical and a fictional London, literally marrying Queen Victoria to Count Dracula and transforming society through vampirism. Historical and fictional characters mingle freely: Oscar Wilde and his creation Basil Hallward converse in elevated social circles, and Lord Ruthven dreads the 'possibility that Alfred, Lord Tennyson, will hold the post of poet laureate for dreary centuries' (Newman 2011: 67, 101–102). Doyle's inept Inspector Lestrade investigates not far from Frederick Abberline, neither of them knowing that the notorious Whitechapel legend Jack the Ripper, embodying Victorian fears of chaos and decline, is by day a grief-stricken Dr Jack Seward, resident surgeon of Whitechapel's Toynbee Hall (cf. Ridenhour 2013: 20). The bodies of Nichols, Chapman, Stride, Eddowes and Kelly are then examined by another icon of London Gothic literature, Dr Henry Jekyll (Newman 2011: 56). Newman's Whitechapel and Limehouse are evoked as dark, obscure and otherworldly, an area marred by labour, disease and petty crime, with the crime syndicates of Fu Manchu and Professor Moriarty thriving underneath a cover of fog and misery (Mighall 1999: 55; Newman 2011: 90). Notions of Orientalism or 'terra incognita' contribute to condensing a distinctly Gothic impression (Mighall 1999: 35; Ridenhour 2013: 46).

Blaylock's novel *The Aylesford Skull* (2013) employs a similar technique of collage, but utilises different intertexts, referencing the works of Henry Mayhew (1967) as well as Doré and Jerrold (1872) to evoke a shabby but vibrant Spitalfields community. Its characters perceive the inhabitants of Commercial Street and surroundings as a group of unfortunate 'down-and-out-people' or comment on the place as a filthy, sorrowful part of the city that possesses an eerie consciousness, as if it were alive. Mother Laswell, a character motivated by guilt and grief, perceives the city as a living being with a 'deviant personality' (Blaylock 2013: 163). Allusions to contemporary intertexts, such as Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* and Doré's *London: A Pilgrimage*, where the East End is perceived as 'savage' and exotic,

lend the setting assembled here a gritty atmosphere of imagined authenticity (Doré and Jerrold 1872: 144).

At the other end of the spectrum, steampunk pastiches emphasise enlightenment, power politics and scientific progress, focusing on various areas of the city in order to do so. Doyle's famously silent Diogenes Club, located 'off Pall Mall' and presided over by Mycroft Holmes and associates steers, controls and protects the Empire's fate by means of investigation and espionage (Newman 2011: 46). In George Mann's vision, intellectual heroes and gentleman detectives such as Sir Maurice Newbury occupy offices at the British Museum, which represents national culture and a general mind-set of enthusiastic pragmatism (Mann 2009a: 24). Indeed, in both this steampunk universe and that of Gail Carriger's *Parasol Protectorate* series, mummy-unwrapping parties feature as a high society entertainment for the enlightened citizens of the world. In a cultural climate where the interest in scientific progress and a sense of historicity are perceived as cornerstones of civilisation, archaeology embodies the awareness of and interest in both science and history, serving as a ready example of what is perceived as the Victorian spirit of 'adventure and curiosity' (Mann 2009b: 10; Carrott and Johnson 2013: 105). Ancient curses of the Egyptians are featured in both novels as a matter of course (Carriger 2010a: 315).

Gibson and Sterling's novel *The Difference Engine* (2011), an alternative history and 'the closest text that steampunk has to a canonical novel', explores the impact of computing technology on a Victorian society and imagines a power shift from an aristocratic society to a knowledge-based hegemony of proto-hackers (Jagoda 2010: 47). The Radical Industrial Party holds the majority in Parliament, their leader and Prime Minister, an ageing Lord Byron. His daughter Ada is revered as 'the Queen of Engines, the Enchantress of Numbers', but lacks the passionate waywardness of her historical model (Gibson and Sterling 2010: 114; Clayton 2003: 112). Other archetypal residents of London moving in the foreground or background of this novel are Charles Darwin, revered for his scientific contributions, and the Duke of Wellington, a tragic Tory who tried to prevent the dawn of the computer age.

All these steampunk visions are composed of wildly different, but also innately familiar Neo-Victorian elements that help establish a semi-familiar London. This is possible because of the reader's pre-existing notions of the city and the players within it, so that an intertextual resonance can be achieved and then challenged. This often playful collage of types and places not only draws our attention to how much our perception is guided by the written word, thereby calling into question what we think we know about London, but in doing so it also augments the layers of meaning connected with spaces such as Whitechapel, Bloomsbury or Westminster.

### *Technofantasy*

Technofantasy, steampunk's second element, is the application of anachronistic, utopian, or even supernatural technology to the Neo-Victorian collage: it utilises the Victorians' faith in progress and their esteem for invention and artisanship and

populates steampunk universes with fantastical and impossible devices. Thriving in the progressive environment of the metropolis, these explorations and inventions operate independently from the laws of real-life physics, instead powered by substances such as aether and other hypothetical fuel sources (Perschon 2012: 151). The focus lies on these contraptions' aesthetic value, which is in accordance with the Arts and Crafts movement and also an integral part of the subculture's maker scene: instead of impersonal superficiality and impermeable, smooth surfaces, steampunk inventions offer accessibility, uniqueness, emotional value and vulnerability (cf. Onion 2008: 145; Carrott and Johnson 2013: 110; Huxtable 2013: 218). In literature as in real life, 'Steampunk seeks [...] to rediscover the inherent dignity of created objects' (Calamity 2007: 25).

This fascination with visionary technology and decorative design transforms the city in various ways, many of which involve zeppelins. Airships are certainly steampunk's favourite contraption, and so it is no wonder that in George Mann's novel *The Affinity Bridge* (2009a), the protagonist Sir Newbury's first investigation is that of an airship crash in Hyde Park. In Carriger's humorous and whimsical supernatural romance *Soulless* (2009), this new mode of travel generates a whole set of practical fashions, repurposing female dress and fusing form and functionality (cf. Montz 2011: 111). Weighted hems and 'tape-down' straps ensure that decency may never be put at risk by a wayward gust of wind, but the 'floating dress' is additionally fitted with a bustle 'designed to flutter becomingly in the aether breeze' (Carriger 2010a: 144). London is reimagined counterfactually as a capital of fashion and taste that invents and promotes a set of anachronistic accessories.

Alexia Tarabotti, the forthright heroine of Carriger's *Parasol Protectorate* series is equipped with a certain indispensable item: a parasol with a fashionable lace and ruffle trim which emits a 'magnetic disruption field' or shoots poison darts (Carriger 2010a: 97). These hidden gadgets render the item an object of female agency because they make self-defence easier and autonomy possible. Numerous inventions facilitate or complicate the modern steampunk heroine's journey, such as homicidal clockwork ladybugs and ornithopters, elevators and gadgets known as aethographic transmitters (Carriger 2010b: 38; Carriger 2010a: 87, 120). On one occasion, a gigantic, steam-powered, fire-spitting octopus, 'the octomaton', demolishes large parts of Belgravia, Westminster and Mayfair (Carriger 2011: 266). Mann's universe features devices such as electric walking canes and steam-driven carriages as well as a variety of contraptions designed by Dr Fabian to prolong artificially the life of Queen Victoria (Mann 2009a: 31, 108, 210). While the means of propulsion of these contraptions are typically Victorian—hydraulic hinges, clockworks, electricity or steam engines—the devices themselves are seemingly self-evidently capable of thoroughly un-Victorian movements and actions.

Steampunk inventions do not necessarily have to be utterly impossible, fantastical or bizarre. Some novels such as Gibson and Sterling's *Difference Engine* (2011) re-imagine the impact of actual historical inventions of the age: Charles Babbage's proto-computers, the Difference and Analytical Engine, prompt a technological and social revolution in an alternative London of the 1830s. With the help of punch cards, coding and calculating, as well as engine-directed printing,

become a possibility, as do photo IDs, data transmission via telegraph or a credit card system (Gibson and Sterling 2011: 152). In addition, the 'kinotrope', a fictional device similar to the Difference Engine, transforms numbers into coloured pixel-like components of a proto-screen image, its pioneer operator being John Keats. The novel does, however, introduce dystopian tones with the Central Statistics Bureau located at the heart of Westminster. Filled with countless enormous Engines, the Bureau collects and stores a considerable amount of data about Londoners, and in so doing facilitates a form of domestic surveillance (Gibson and Sterling 2011: 152).

*The Difference Engine* imagines a much more meritocratic society, elevating scientific and industrial leaders such as Charles Darwin to peers and national heroes. The term 'savant' is respectfully applied to scientists at large, and various scientific fields prosper so considerably that a number of scientific disciplines are given their own palaces in South Kensington: 'Cromwell Road, Thurloe Place, Brompton Road—in their vast rebuilding schemes, the Government had reserved these sections of Kensington and Brompton to a vast concourse of Museums and Royal Society Palaces [...]: Physics, Economics, Chemistry...' (Gibson and Sterling 2011: 173). Here the factual merges with the counterfactual. Next to Greek and Latin, the education of Prince 'Alfie', setting examples and standards for a nation, features the study of statistics, anthropometry (i.e. phrenology) and eugenics: all are typically Victorian 'sciences', yet pursued with an anachronistic amount of zeal (Gibson and Sterling 2011: 421).

These examples illustrate the numerous possibilities imaginable around technofantasy. Steampunk's most distinctive feature provides an opportunity to discuss our relationship to technology, imagining retrofuturist inventions and their impact in hopeful or fatalist, visionary or practical tones (cf. Bix 2013; Carrot and Johnson 2013). This may attempt to re-create a sense of enthusiasm that is widely perceived as having been lost during the twentieth century in a bout of nostalgia, populating London with mad inventors or accelerating traffic with futuristic inventions. Whether doing that or incorporating anachronistic echoes of consumerism of the internet age, steampunk locates scientific progress firmly in London.

### *Retrofuturism*

The third and perhaps most interesting component of the steampunk aesthetic is retrofuturism, the element allowing for the intense examination, discussion and critique of a large variety of issues, from environmental or technological concerns to socio-cultural or postcolonial matters.

Unlike its inspirational 'grandfathers', Verne and Wells, or science fiction as a whole, steampunk does not speculate about possible futures, but alternative pasts. Its focus is not on an accurate re-creation of the past, but on how '*the present* imagines the past seeing the future' (Perschon 2012: 10). Anachronisms have a reputation of being a sign of poor quality in historical novels—not so in steampunk stories. Here, they are a feature with specific purpose because steampunk's fantastic escapades are inherently and ultimately concerned with the present. Its aim is not reconstruction

and imitation, but seizing an 'opportunity to rewrite the past, not in the naive hope that it can be changed, but rather that retrofuturist speculations can affect the present and the future' (Perschon 2012: 11).

By consciously applying a twenty-first century set of morals, values and attitudes to the nineteenth-century mind-set and intentionally creating collisions between them, authors and readers may explore moral or social territories that have been obscured or rendered taboo in contemporary texts about London. Similarly, this backward gaze makes a creative reclamation of lost ground thinkable. The retrofuturist view allows for protagonists who are socially and historically disadvantaged, based on their race, gender or sexuality, to be placed in the focus of these narratives, so that the moral and structural conventions of Victorian fictions may be transgressed.

A case in point is Gail Carriger's heroine Alexia Tarabotti, who is forthright instead of passive and ingenious instead of delicate. She enjoys walks through Hyde Park and dirigible flights over Mayfair, combats automata, has romantic encounters in back alleys, and regularly visits Buckingham Palace to advise the Queen on supernatural politics. Enjoying scientific debate as well as following her 'bluestocking tendencies', she is resourceful, rational and pragmatic, blunt, ironic and intelligent—all of which are features defying Victorian notions of femininity (Perschon 2013: 36). Yet Alexia never once questions her own femininity and might well be an advocate of fourth-wave feminism. Projected into a time when the 'Angel in the House' ideal prescribed moral superiority, chastity and motherhood, Alexia defies gender stereotypes where they do not suit her personality by enjoying intellectual discussion as well as her sexual awakening. She does not seek to compensate for her femininity because it never occurs to her that femininity might be a disadvantage. In fact, she readily exploits gender stereotypes to evade unwanted attention: 'With a resigned shrug, she screamed and collapsed into a faint' (Carriger 2009: 6).

Instead of defining herself against the male 'other', she freely chooses from a toolbox of diverse characteristics that constitute femaleness independently. Contrary to many of her literary predecessors, she does not depend on her romantic interest to restore her respectability or validate her sense of self through marriage. As a retrofuturist heroine, she can transgress the borders of social norms without sacrificing her personal happiness, leaving the Victorian Mary/Magdalen dichotomy behind. Stretching, challenging or plainly ignoring the boundaries of gender roles as Alexia does can best be done in a setting like London, where the impossible is not only imaginable but feasible.

Alexia's friend Lord Akeldama, centuries old and an avowed aesthete, is an openly gay vampire, dandy and diplomat, privy to London's innermost political secrets. A first rate eccentric and cunning intellectual, he is naturally at home among the capital's fashionable and frivolous crowd and inhabits a sphere of sophistication, ever-accelerating fashion cycles—and espionage. Not only is Lord Akeldama a member of an elite class firmly located at the top of London's affluent circles, but he also occupies a unique position within the spectrum of gender construction in this universe, transcending the strictly defined male/female boundaries. He combines the sharp, sober intellect associated with masculinity with the grace, manners, sartorial

sophistication and artfully dramatic attitude characterised as female. In addition, Akeldama's 'drones', a group of young, male and very well-dressed theatre-goers, most of them as queer as their leader, compose an intelligence network covering much of London. Being part of the artistic and intellectual gatherings around theatre and opera or indulging in the more notorious forms of entertainment in and around Soho, these dandies are associated with those parts of the city providing sensual and aesthetic pleasure (Carriger 2009: 219). As a result, Akeldama is usually very well informed about London's social and political scene. While the association with aestheticism, a movement concerned with the isolated beauty of the moment, fits the ageless vampire's aloofness, it also suggests that Akeldama belongs to the circle of London's homosexual community. They, in turn navigate through an entirely differently mapped London, with different meanings attached to a number of locations (Cook 2003: 96).

Another example of queer Victorians made visible by steampunk's retrofuturist element is Madame Lefoux, a cross-dressing, lesbian French inventor, whose attire is elegantly masculine, but without ever masking her femininity. Her avant-garde hat shop in Regent Street, a most fashionable address, hides an underground laboratory where she pursues a career as an inventor and craftswoman. While her scientific interest, knowledge, zeal and skill are attributes typically associated with the popular 'mad scientist' type, this is cleverly inverted by her open and engaging character as well as by her sexuality.

A different example is the much grittier, earlier vision of Gibson and Sterling's novel, *The Difference Engine* (2011), which discusses issues of class society and imperialism. Frequent allusions to mudlarks, 'street-arabs' or Egyptian fashion elements paint a vision mindful of the complexities and downsides of colonial wealth, but also create an exotic notion of cosmopolitan London (Gibson and Sterling 2011: 129, 144). While the main characters, the established scientist Mallory and the secret agent Oliphant, who themselves thrive on the Empire's affluence, never once question these colonial presences, they are very much aware of them. In this vision of class struggle amplified by computer technology, the Docklands, the economic centre of the East End and the Empire, emerge as the stronghold of a budding socialist revolution. During the Great Stink of 1858, an uprising is being staged in the fog-ridden West India Docks, its working-class participants finding themselves on the losing side of a class struggle that has only just been re-negotiated.

Steampunk thus focuses the backward gaze on a period of time formative for the present in terms of social or political ideas. It is also free to re-configure ideas of urbanity. Making use of London's distinct social topography as well as the tension between physical proximity and social distance particular to the city as a setting, it may indulge in retro-speculative case studies centred around social inequality and imperial wealth, making visible disenfranchised Victorian identities or challenge the evolution of gender stereotypes.

## Steampunk's London Settings

Steampunk's multi-genre narratives are not limited to London as a setting, to Europe or even earth. Places such as North America, Japan or Mars may become the theatre of retrofuturist speculations (Priest 2012; Kristoff 2013; Broadmore 2009). However, London remains the most popular and perhaps most fertile archetypal steampunk setting. This is no doubt because many texts of the period helped shape our idea of the London of the nineteenth century, as they themselves referred to London as a setting. Newman's *Anno Dracula* (2011) alludes to Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Dickens's *Oliver Twist*, Doyle's Sherlock Holmes tales, such as 'A Study in Scarlet', 'The Greek Interpreter' or 'The Empty House', as well as to Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. In fact, the author acknowledges in an endnote that a 'fair chunk of the descriptions in this chapter is lifted outright from Stevenson' (Newman 2011: 437). On other occasions, Stoker's *Dracula*, which provides many of the main characters for this novel, is quoted exactly—and then rewritten (cf. Stoker 1994: 328; Newman 2011: 139). While *The Difference Engine* re-imagines Disraeli's *Sybil*, Blaylock's *Aylesford Skull* (2013) is clearly indebted to the lively journalistic accounts of Henry Mayhew. These intertextual references, which are typically steampunk, challenge our notions of Victorian London as a more or less tangible setting, but they also toy with our readings of the London Gothic mode.

In the nineteenth century, London's rapid growth in the wake of the industrialisation posed new challenges to its inhabitants. The increasingly less governable urban space could be perceived as a threat by the Victorians who tried to establish an identity of progressive cosmopolitanism. The evolving city and its new and overwhelming sensations demanded new ways of discussing these particular fears. Events such as the Great Exhibition of 1851 and its contemporary perception show that the Victorians perceived London as a multicultural cosmopolis, the centre of a vast, peaceful and affluent Empire (Agathocleous 2011: 30). A demonstration of cutting-edge technologies, international free trade and the moral and scientific 'superiority' of England as a nation, the Exhibition seemed to embody all the Victorians wished themselves to be: enlightened, progressive, virtuous, cosmopolitan. The Crystal Palace demonstrated with its sheer size that such an event could only take place in London, the very heart of this ambitious Empire. Not far from the places which embodied the Victorians' hopes, however, were those which represented their worst nightmares, constantly reminding them of the downsides and shortcomings of urban growth. The East End was, in the middle-class mental map of London, established as a place of poverty, uncontrollable criminality, eerie exoticisms and strange immigrants. Tropes of traditional Gothic literature increasingly found their way into urban literature (Ridenhour 2013: 8). Instead of characters such as 'corrupt' Catholics or settings such as wild, timeless moors and crumbling ruins, London Gothic evoked dread and fear as well as negotiated Victorian identity through visions of deviance and degeneration. It thereby responded to existing anxieties—not least because these uncontrollable factors erupted, in reality as well as in literature, in the London of the present, a place that was supposed to be forward-thinking and transparent. In novels like Dickens' *Oliver Twist*, criminals and outcasts were associated with precise locales such as Whitechapel, a dark and dreary labyrinth, a

'maze of mean and dirty streets' (Dickens 1994: 168; Mighall 1999: 63; Ridenhour 2013: 31). Understood as primitive, uncivilised and 'antithetical to modern (hegemonic) interests or values', evidence for and depictions of deviance intensified Victorian fears of regression to savagery, fostered amidst impermeable and socially isolated rookeries, which were perceived as anomalies in 'mercantile, industrialised, clock-time-regulated London' (Mighall 1999: 140, 142). Embodied in figures such as Mr Hyde, Dorian Gray or Count Dracula, violence and monstrosity were closely linked to one another. As atavisms, physical or psychological degeneration threatened the teleological idea of steady evolution. This debate on civilisation versus savagery and evolution versus regression intensified when the Ripper murders of 1888 seemed to demonstrate all that was feared about Whitechapel: ungovernable lawlessness and irrational savagery (cf. Gray 2013). The gruesome events seemed to prove that the East End was indeed the festering wound in an otherwise healthy Victorian London, the degenerate, but crucial 'Other' against which the Victorian identity was defined.

In his analysis of contemporary London Gothic fiction of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, Roger Luckhurst suggests the persistent fascination with a Gothic London indicates our yearning for a re-mystified cityscape, that 'the advent of a knowable and governable London' encouraged a 'discourse of lost pleasures' (2002: 541). He argues that today 'any idea of a metropolitan public sphere' is etiolated enough to prompt writers such as Alan Moore, Neil Gaiman or Iain Sinclair to search for hidden meanings in the city, to explore narratives centred around 'the private experience of hidden routes, secret knowledges, flittering spectres, the ghosts of London past' (Luckhurst 2002: 541). This return to Victorian Gothic texts is consequently motivated by a sense of nostalgia. And indeed, Richard Mayhew, the protagonist of Gaiman's novel *Neverwhere* (2002), explores the fantastical underworld of London Below and finally returns to a mundane London of the present, drawing the following conclusion: 'But if this is all there is, then I don't want to be sane' (Gaiman 2002: 371). Contemporary London Gothic conjures up the stony and mystery-laden wilderness of the nineteenth century to satisfy a desire for a re-mystified urban environment, discussing orientation versus exploration maybe for the sake of escapism. If it does, it can do so only because our perspective is different: the very real concerns of Victorian identity being negotiated via London Gothic literature do not seem to apply to the present anymore. But perhaps some of them leave an echo.

While steampunk, which consciously combines Victorian settings with futuristic technology and twenty-first century values and morals, is ultimately concerned with the present, it assumes that many cultural conventions which affect the present were shaped by or in the metropolis of the nineteenth century. Much like contemporary London Gothic, steampunk is indebted to canonical Victorian texts, but instead of predictable echoes, instead of Gothic for Gothic's sake so to speak, it may explore a variety of issues and identities linked to London as an urban setting. This is possible because it is an aesthetic rather than a genre and may transform a variety of different texts.

The characters of Blaylock's *Aylesford Skull* (2013) experience the streets of Whitechapel mirroring and reflecting back their own psychological state: Finn, a former circus artist and street urchin, navigates with ease through Spitalfield's 'narrow

streets [...] populated with thieves and prostitutes', the 'reek and turmoil', accepting the brutal dog fights as crude form of entertainment for the 'down-and-out people' (Blaylock 2013: 163-164). He thinks nothing of conversing with the petty criminals of Angel Alley, such as the elderly woman operating a pickpocket ring, and he is aware that organised crime may provide a measure of protection in this 'rough' neighbourhood as it does for *Oliver Twist* (Blaylock 2013: 168). Mother Laswell, on the other hand, finds her own guilt and misery echoed by the filthy, broken windows 'stopped with rags or paper', the 'reek of garbage and human filth and general decay' and the 'weight of thousands of dull, sorrowful, hopeless minds pressing in upon her' (Blaylock 2013: 185-186). Paranoia and distress awaken Wentworth Street, 'narrow and crowded, and with a deviant personality', and she senses 'hunger and illness, avarice, too, and a grasping, roiling evil in the dark spirit of the place' (Blaylock 2013: 185-186). Here, the East End preys on the insecure and favours the adept, drawing attention to the way in which attitude, previous knowledge and mind-set influence our perception of urban space, especially one so complex, yet heavily charged with meaning as the East End.

Similarly, *Anno Dracula* toys with these perceptions, layering the established notions of criminality and deviance with additional transgressive behaviour in the shape of bloodsucking. It amplifies brutality and aggravates well-established fears of the primitive through the domineering presence of a barbaric Count Dracula, who on one occasion attempts to 'cleanses' London of sodomites by ordering a raid in a certain male brothel in Cleveland Street and having all perpetrators impaled on stakes (Newman 2011: 132). In the East End, Dr Seward's frantic vendetta as Jack the Ripper is directed against vampire prostitutes, threatening the newly established and still fragile social order. Although vampirism is the key to advancement, and social hierarchies are being transformed as a consequence, the Victorian fears regarding chaos and regression still apply. By intensifying these anxieties and letting them play out, the novel portrays a hyper-Victorian worst-case scenario, with notions of progress and enlightenment suffocated by bloodlust and blind ambition. Newman's novel is included in Luckhurst's analysis, along some of the texts understood by him as Contemporary London Gothic, such as the works of Moorcock or Miéville. These have also been incorporated into the steampunk canon, so that we might interpret Newman's vision as a form of nostalgia (VanderMeer and Chambers 2011). With regard to its darkly humorous and strangely entertaining pastiche, however, I would suggest that we might also read Newman's novel as a somewhat black-humoured satire on imperial identity and the fragility of a seemingly superior London society.

The instability of social coherence is certainly also a subject in *The Difference Engine*, where domestic surveillance and the celebration of scientific progress are contrasted with the rapid decline of London into chaos in the wake of the Great Stink. Near Chelsea Park, Edward Mallory encounters a number of young boys, one of them skidding provocatively close by on rubber-wheeled boots. The shops here offer 'fancy optical goods' and technofantastical devices, such as 'talbotypes, magic-lanterns, phenakistoscopes, telescopes for the amateur star-gazer' or 'toy microscopes for the boy-savant', characterising the setting as one of enlightened education and rational thinking (Gibson and Sterling 2011: 241). However, the place is isolated by fog, and it

is given an otherworldly character in which the laws of reality or society do not apply. The teenage boy appears as a 'queer, half-crouching ghostly figure' and his comrades, although 'too well-dressed to be street-arabs' exhibit gang behaviour, calling their leader 'Panther Bill' and remaining deaf to Mallory's calls to order (Gibson and Sterling 2011: 243). When he collides with a shop window, breaking it and being left stunned or dead, the boys transform into amoral vultures: 'With maddened shrieks, the pack scrambled for the broken store-front and began grabbing every display-item in sight: telescope, tripods, chemical glassware' (Gibson and Sterling 2011: 243). Despite the atmosphere of civilised learning associated with the setting, an ordinary London street, the crowd's predatory instincts, greed and disorder surface at the earliest possible chance. This calls Victorian notions of rationality and superiority into question and can be seen as a foreboding of the socialist uprising discussed later in the novel. Among other things, *The Difference Engine* examines the relationship of control and disorder in urban space, challenging governmental power embodied by the Central Statistics Bureau with threats of escalation, thereby presenting social order as fragile and raising doubt about the notion of civilisation and cosmopolitanism.

Steampunk narratives are thus free to use Victorian texts about identity and catapult their realities into alternative futures in order to discuss the social contract, satirise imperial attitudes or outline utopian counter-realities. This often involves either a dark or a light-hearted sort of humour, depending on the strategy and focus of each individual text. In Carriger's *Parasol Protectorate* series, the traditional Gothic monsters who once threatened civilised society with depravity and transgression are now well-mannered and polite members of daylight society. Werewolves serve in Queen Victoria's military and secure the Empire's success and stability instead of threatening it. Vampires dictate the nation's fashion taste, dressing young women instead of undressing them. Rather than being outcasts, the supernatural set are well respected, holding power 'with the same civilised means as everyone else: money, social standing, and politics' (Carriger 2009: 38). As members of the aristocracy as well as supernatural investigators, shape-shifting werewolves can move in elevated social circles as well as through unsavoury back alleys to pursue their goals, moving through a London of their own. Vampires, on the other hand, are organised in hives and as such closely associated with a specific place, here Westminster. This means that both species have definitive ties to and places in London's social topography, which in turn permits them to play a part in Victorian society. In short, Victorian monsters may well be steampunk protagonists. Instead of haunting London with repressed fears of the 'uncivilised' and marginalised, they can be embraced with tolerant inclusiveness. It appears both tempting and plausible to read these steampunk supernaturals as analogies for under-represented or obscured Victorian identities. In this optimistic vision, diversity and tolerance are the key features of the Neo-Victorian civilised self-image and, incidentally, of the Empire's political success.

These steampunk visions with their outrageously counterfactual elements profit from what may be called the 'only in London-effect'. The potential of steampunk to reflect and comment on the evolution of established ideas of ethnocentrism, patriarchy or imperialism and then re-negotiate them with regard to the present is, however, a potential rather than a given, and authors make use of the opportunities

that come with steampunk to a varying degree. James H. Carrott is aware of this when he reminds the readers of *Steampunk Magazine* that 'punking the past is a political act' (2013: 71). With special regard to steampunk's growing popularity, it becomes clear that not all stories are self-reflexive and critical. Sometimes all they have to offer is a somewhat naïve nostalgia. Mann's popular, but not very critical *Affinity Bridge* (2009a) nevertheless successfully conjures up a Victorian London with all notions of enlightenment, confidence and optimism as well as degeneration and disease. In the East End, a 'Revenant plague' turns people into zombies and intensifies pre-existing associations of the place with disease, danger and superstition. Although the setting is painted with a broad brush and the scenery is quite literally swallowed up in fog—a word which appears no fewer than seventeen times on seven pages—Whitechapel is effectively conjured up as an atmospheric background for sinister murders, dread and misery. The setting is charged with apprehension and suspense, even if there is not much description. This can only be effective if the text can build on an existing and powerful set of associations connected with the East End. It exists as a ready-made in the reader's mind. Luckhurst observes that the labyrinthine, fragmentary character of London's geography lends plausibility to narratives that would appear out of place in Paris, especially after remodelled by Haussmann (2002: 538). And indeed, the particular urban modernity provided by these broad streets would have failed to provide a setting charged with paranoia, insecurity or isolation simply because it drastically reduced labyrinthine structures in the built environment. Although texts were being produced about Imperial Berlin, it was not nearly as familiar to the inhabitants of the newly formed Germany as London was to provincial British readers. This is due to the nature of the Holy Roman Empire before 1870, but also because many Britons knew a great deal about London from travel literature or their own visits. The world's first railroad network as well as London's Parliamentary season ensured a steady flow of visitors from all over the country. In America, on the other hand, metropolitan centres did not yet influence the lives of Americans or capture their imaginations in a comparable way. Cherie Priest's American steampunk visions, for example, are concerned with the Frontier or the Civil War rather than life in the city. Just the mention of East London, however, evokes in the reader's mind a powerful imagery, borrowed from a variety of circumstances and sources—some of them, no doubt, the canonical texts of the nineteenth century.

## **Conclusion**

It is difficult, if not impossible, to sum up what steampunk does to London as a setting or how London affects steampunk because the focus of each narrative as well as the possible outcome of each retro-speculative train of thought may be fundamentally different to the next. London may feature as a familiar or fantastic setting, an eerie urban wilderness or a prosperous capital of enlightened thought: a theatre stage for science, high society and imperial politics, populated by heroes or hedonists, villains or vigilantes, dandies or detectives. The tone adopted may be playful or serious, optimistic or pessimistic. This is because steampunk is an aesthetic rather than a genre. The aesthetic can be applied to a variety of narratives with diverse outcomes depending on the genre it transforms. However, steampunk creates

its own system of conventions that permit us to trace, examine and challenge a large variety of received ideas.

In Victorian London, progress collided with what was perceived as savagery, scientific endeavour stood opposed to mysterious exoticism, and literature as well as historical events fuelled an on-going debate concerning the direction in which civilisation would evolve. Britain, and inevitably London with it, saw itself occupying a leading position in these developments. The evolving London of the Victorian age posed new and often frightening challenges to its inhabitants, issues that all expanding cities would face in the course of the twentieth century. This is why London is a stimulating and plausible setting for retrofuturist speculations. Steampunk provides a new way of negotiating present-day issues through the past by imagining a concrete, yet elusive historical London and infusing it with notions of the present and beyond: a complex city where the future has already happened.

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Keywords: Steampunk, Victorian London, London Gothic, The Difference Engine. Our notion of London is comprised of a wide variety of concepts, many of which exist on different levels of time. A close examination of steampunk, a popular anachronistic re-imagination of the nineteenth century, suggests indeed that, in addition to visions of past, present or future, London may also contain a variety of alternative futuristic pasts: pasts, in which passenger airships crash in Hyde Park and Marxist revolutionaries occupy the Docklands. Download Citation on ResearchGate | *Crafting Yesterday's Tomorrows: Retro-Futurism, Steampunk, and the Problem of Making in the Twenty-First Century* | This article highlights a growing confusion between two recent movements: retro-futurism and steampunk. While these each involve visual representations of the past and future, they can be distinguished by their modes of production. Both avant-garde and popular approaches to...  
*Crafting Yesterday's Tomorrows: Retro-Futurism, Steampunk, and the Problem of Making in the Twenty-First Century*. Article in *The Journal of Modern Craft* 7(3) - November 2014 with 83 Reads. The steampunk concept ala Victorian science fiction is commonly regarded as a form or branch of retro-futurism (Guffey, 2014).