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RE-CALIBRATING THE URBAN MATRIX

Imaginarities of Victorian London
in Steampunk Fiction

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THESIS SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Table of Contents	1
Declaration and Abstract.....	2
Introduction: Punked Pasts And Cyborg Cities	3
Chapter 1: Seminal Steampunk and the Foundations Of Hyper-Victorian London	23
Chapter 2: East End Punk: Hyper-Victorianism, Urban Gothic, and Collective Knowledge	67
Chapter 3: Hyper-City: Steampunk's Retro-Speculative Spaces.....	124
Chapter 4: Re-claiming the Retrofuture: Feminism and Gender in <i>fin de Siècle</i> and Steampunk London	181
Conclusion: An Exercise Bicycle for the Mind	245
Bibliography	256

DECLARATION AND ABSTRACT

I hereby confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own.

RE-CALIBRATING THE URBAN MATRIX: IMAGINARIES OF VICTORIAN LONDON IN STEAMPUNK FICTION ABSTRACT

Steampunk, a retro-speculative mode that infuses neo-Victorian settings with technofantasy and retrofuturism, more often than not gravitates towards Victorian London as its potent, adventurous setting. In so doing it both actualises collectively remembered imaginaries of this industrial metropolis and adds its own, anachronistic twists. What can steampunk London tell us about our relationship with the legacies of the Victorian era and the texts that transmit it to us? What are the meta-historical, meta-fictional, and speculative mechanisms that operate within steampunk's anachronistic re-imagination, and how does it re-evaluate our present-day relationships with and within the city?

This thesis endeavours to answer these questions by examining steampunk's relationship with Victorian London within an interdisciplinary framework of neo-Victorian, science fiction, urban, and media studies. It contextualises steampunk fiction of the first (1980s-90s) and second (2007-present) waves within formative Victorian discourse about the city as well as present-day cultural influences. I analyse seminal steampunk's synthesis of a Victorian imaginary inspired by Henry Mayhew's urban ethnography and 1980s cyberpunk and investigate how steampunk's anachronistic remix leverages collective memory by looking at late-Victorian urban Gothic and mythologies about the East End. I then consider how urban space is represented and mobilised as narrative texture in video games set in a Victorian steampunk London. Lastly, I examine both steampunk's conservative and radical potential in re-imagining gender by comparing steampunk's action heroines to the mobile icon of the *fin de siècle* New Woman through the lens of various feminisms, as well as considering queer genealogies in the steampunk city. In so doing, I also illustrate the evolution and potential of steampunk fiction itself.

INTRODUCTION: PUNKED PASTS AND CYBORG CITIES

It was a dark, blustery afternoon in spring, and the city of London was chasing a small mining town across the dried-out bed of the North Sea. [...] The mining town saw the danger and turned tail, but already the huge caterpillar tracks under London were starting to roll faster and faster. Soon the city was lumbering in pursuit, a moving mountain of metal which rose in seven tiers like the layers of a wedding-cake, the lower levels wreathed in engine-smoke, the villas of the rich gleaming white on the higher decks, and above it all the cross on top of St Paul's Cathedral glinting gold, two thousand feet above the ruined earth.¹

So begins *Mortal Engines*, the first instalment in Philip Reeve's 2001 children's book series *Predator Cities*, adapted into a feature film in 2018. In its post-apocalyptic world with steampunk elements, so-called Traction Cities prey on one another for resources in a concept called 'Municipal Darwinism'. This naming is our first clue towards a re-purposed 'Victorian' aesthetic. Others are the materialised stratification of social hierarchies into London's tiered cityscape, where social classes are literally stacked above one another, its movement being propelled by huge industrial engines belching soot and smoke, and the metaphoric hint towards colonialism inherent in the predatory nature of 'Municipal Darwinism'.

Mortal Engines appeared in an intermediate period between what steampunk scholarship has termed the first wave, beginning in the 1980s and extending to the early 1990s, and the second wave of steampunk, which began around 2007 and is still ongoing. It is part of an eclectic mix of media which transported a quirky, fantastic and anachronistically 'Victorian' aesthetic into the new millennium across various popular media. Fuelled by the internet, steampunk was newly synthesised into a more coherent aesthetic and sparked a cross-media subculture complete with a maker movement. Among such intermediary creations are the 1999 film *Wild Wild West*, Disney's *Treasure Planet* (2002), *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (2003), adapted from the graphic novel of the same name (1999-present), the anime *Steamboy* (2004) and *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004), or *The Golden Compass* (2004), adapted from Philip Pullman's novel trilogy which also includes steampunk elements. In fiction, steampunk elements such as gritty

industrial aesthetic or airships survived in young adult novels such as Kenneth Oppel's *Airborn* (2004) or were synthesised into experimental fiction such as Neal Stephenson's *Diamond Age* (1995), China Miéville's *Perdido Street Station* (2000), or Thomas Pynchon's *Against the Day* (2006). However, *Mortal Engines* articulates the fascination with Victorian London as a nexus for, and icon of, our imaginary of the 'Victorian-ness' which inspires steampunk. London assumes centrality in almost all steampunk expressions, be they early or more recent, even as steampunk has started to explore other cultures and settings across the world.² It is even central to a story-verse such as *Mortal Engines*, which literally decentres the city from not only its familiar shape but also its geographical and historical context.

An academic study of how, why, and where imaginaries of Victorian London figure in steampunk fiction may therefore illuminate the multiple and complex processes that operate at the heart of steampunk as an aesthetic mode. It may help us understand steampunk's allure and intrinsic potential — as well as its failures — to interrogate, re-imagine and challenge our place in the urban environment of today, a cognitive mapping of history, especially the Victorian era, and the world at large. Before we can attempt this, however, we must ask: What is steampunk?

1. WHAT IS STEAMPUNK?

As Rachel Bowser and Brian Croxall note in the introduction of their special issue of *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 'Steampunk as a genre and a paradigm resists definition' and is marked by its inherent hybridity.³ Among the numerous definitions in the relatively small, diverse academic field of steampunk studies, Mike Perschon's descriptive notion of steampunk as a tripartite, cross-media aesthetic offers a productive ideological flexibility. He understands steampunk as an aesthetic comprised to varying degrees of the three components neo-Victorianism, retrofuturism, and technofantasy, although he has later modified the first component to hyper-Victorian, and

¹ Philip Reeve, *Mortal Engines* (London: Scholastic, 2001 [2018]), p. 3-4.

² This includes the American West in Cherie Priest's *The Clockwork Century* series (2009-2014), the Belgian Congo in Nisi Shawl's *Everfair* (2016), the short story collection *The Sea Is Ours: Tales from Steampunk Southeast Asia* edited by Jaymee Goh (2015), New Orleans in P. Djèli Clark's novella *The Black God's Drums* (2018) and Egypt in his novella *The Haunting of Tram Car 015* (2019).

³ Rachel A. Bowser & Brian Croxall, 'Introduction: Industrial Evolution', *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 3:1 (2010), 1-45, p. 29.

then, in an attempt to find a less Anglo-centric term, hyper-Vintage.⁴ As I am interested in the ramifications and implications of a specifically ‘Victorian’ aesthetic rooted in and inspired by Victorian London, I use the term hyper-Victorian. Following Perschon’s ideas, I understand steampunk as a retro-speculative mode which re-purposes an anachronistically collaged hyper-Victorian aesthetic infused with technofantastical impulses in order to interrogate past and present and their relationship to one another in tandem. Steampunk creates an imaginative and often semi-ironical past-present double exposure by collapsing linear timelines as ‘the two ends of the Twentieth Century hail each other as long lost twins’.⁵ It thereby mobilises both the perceived parallels (for example technological revolution, social upheaval, or a globalised society), and extreme differences (for example the now-outdated industrial paradigm and a semi-ironic nostalgia for ‘stilted’ social codes) between the Victorian past and our present. By synthesising both at the same time, steampunk comes to resemble Donna Haraway’s cyborg, as Bowser and Croxall also note. In her *Cyborg Manifesto* (1985), Haraway theorises the cyborg as a powerful ‘ironic political myth’ which holds the potential to re-encode ‘territories of production, reproduction, and imagination’ and to elude and resist hegemonic social or cultural definitions as ‘monstrous and illegitimate’. As a hybrid that is never fully defined, the cyborg may elude and resist the persistent ‘troubling dualisms of Western thought’, such as ‘self/other, mind/body, culture/nature, male/female, [...] reality/appearance, whole/part, agent/resource, maker/made’. Steampunk also resists ontological coherence and unsettles dichotomies between fact and fiction, past, present, and future, history and speculation. Like the cyborg, it may contain ‘contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes’ and hold ‘incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true’, such as fact and counter-fact, history and retro-speculation, nostalgia and irony, past and future, and its iterations of Victorian London may well be considered to be cyborg cities.⁶ In order to explain the reasoning behind and trajectory of this

⁴ Mike Perschon, ‘The Steampunk Aesthetic: Technofantasies in a Neo-Victorian Retrofuture’, Diss. U of Alberta, 2012, ERA Education & Research Archive, p. 5.; Andrea Kirchknopf’s discussion of the terms ‘retro-’, ‘faux-’, ‘pseudo-’, or ‘post’-Victorian illustrates this ongoing debate in Victorian Studies. Andrea Kirchknopf, ‘(Re)workings of Nineteenth-Century Fiction: Definitions, Terminology, Contexts’, *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 1.1 (2008), 53-80.

⁵ Tom Gunning, ‘Re-Newing Old Technologies: Astonishment, Second Nature, and the Uncanny in Technology from the Previous Turn-of-the-Century’, in *Rethinking Media Change. The Aesthetics of Transition*, ed. by David Thorburn and Henry Jenkins (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), pp. 39-60, p. 51.

⁶ Donna Haraway, ‘A Cyborg Manifesto. Science, Technology and Socialist-feminism in the Late Twentieth Century’, in *The Cybercultures Reader*, ed. by David Bell and Barbara M Kennedy (London: Routledge, 2000,) pp.

thesis, we must therefore first consider an eclectic variety of influences and disciplines which all inform the notion of 'steampunk London', such as topographies and genealogies of genre, the neo-Victorian framework, the concept of the urban imaginary, and steampunk's counter-cultural potential.

2. CYBORGISMS: STEAMPUNK AND GENRE

The question of steampunk's relation to well-known genres is equally marked by hybridity and cyborgism. Although it often contains tropes and conventions adapted from speculative fiction, steampunk has largely eluded, if not outright defied Suvinian definitions of science fiction. When *Locus Magazine* sought to classify fiction written in a 'gonzo-historical manner' by James Blaylock, Tim Powers, and K. W. Jeter, Jeter responded: "'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 the era; like 'steampunks,' perhaps.'" ⁷ At the time, Darko Suvin's 1979 definition of science fiction as 'the *literature of cognitive estrangement*' was widely established as arbiter of genre boundaries. Suvin's notion that SF develops a 'fictional ("literary") hypothesis' with 'totalizing ("scientific") rigor' and so incorporates estrangement 'into *the formal framework* of the genre', becoming both 'underlying attitude and dominant formal device', draws on Brecht's 'Verfremdungseffekt', and Shklovsky's defamiliarization, 'both cognitive and creative'. ⁸ Through this emphasis he differentiates science fiction from fantasy, which for him includes 'ghost, horror, Gothic, weird', and which he juxtaposes with the rational, diagnostic, and actionable SF as being escapist. ⁹ Whereas Suvin has influenced writing communities, publishing, and scholarship, his notion of what constitutes 'science' and 'cognition' depends on a twentieth-century understanding of 'science' as founded on ratio and tangible evidence and evolved into neatly separated disciplines. These understandings do not necessarily apply to a nineteenth-century context, nor to speculative

291-324, p. 291.

⁷ Cory Gross, 'A History of Misapplied Technology. The History and Development of the Steampunk Genre', *Steampunk Magazine*, 2. (2007), 54-61.

⁸ Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction. On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2016 [1979]), p. 15, 18, 19, original emphasis.

⁹ Suvin, p. 21, 24.

fiction at large before the advent of the term ‘science fiction’ in 1926.¹⁰

Whereas the era from 1880 to 1926 can be considered as a precursor to the idea of ‘science fiction’, ideas of what comprised a ‘science’ or scientific field were far from rigid or established in the nineteenth century. Emerging practices of phrenology and physiognomy, for example, were notoriously influential, if debated areas of Victorian criminology. Popularised by Cesare Lombroso, their echoes can be found in late Victorian Gothic literature such as Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) or Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897), yet in hindsight they can only be considered as pseudo-sciences.¹¹ Combined with theories of evolution or cultural critique they lent plausibility to the socio-cultural Darwinism theorised by Herbert Spencer and often used in rationalising colonialism, or Max Nordau’s phantasm of cultural degeneration which we would today consider interdisciplinary. Whereas the nineteenth century recognised ‘natural philosophy’ as a field, today these disciplines have evolved into the separate fields of biology, physics, chemistry, sociology, and the humanities. Spiritualism, mesmerism, and hypnotism, too, were as much techno-scientific as they were uncanny and Gothic.¹² In the popular fiction of Edward Bulwer-Lytton, early science fiction themes such as subterranean races converged naturally with occult mysticism.¹³ Proto- and pseudosciences fluctuated between orthodoxy and heterodoxy. Science and the supernatural were closely affiliated in the Society for Psychical Research (founded in 1882), the status of hypnotism and mesmerism as both sideshow attractions and psychiatric strategy, as well as theosophy or spiritualism. Conversely, as Roger Luckhurst notes, technologies nowadays considered purely ‘scientific’, such as electricity, ‘could become the foundation of a new religious sensibility, as in Marie Corelli’s best-selling [fiction]’.¹⁴ Telephone and phonograph

¹⁰ Roger Luckhurst, *Science Fiction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), p. 15.

¹¹ Robert Mighall, *A Geography of Victorian Gothic Fiction. Mapping History’s Nightmares* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); David Clifford and others, *Repositioning Victorian Sciences: Shifting Centres in Nineteenth-century Scientific Thinking* (London: Anthem Press, 2006).

¹² Hilary Grimes, *The Late Victorian Gothic: Mental Science, the Uncanny, and Scenes of Writing* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011). Tatiana Kontou and Sarah Willburn (eds), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Nineteenth-Century Spiritualism and the Occult* (Ashgate: Farnham, 2012). Roger Luckhurst, *The Invention of Telepathy, 1870-1901* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

¹³ Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *Vril: The Power of the Coming Race* (1871); Aren Roukema, ‘Mind Wars: H.G. Wells, Edward Bulwer-Lytton and the Boundaries of Science Fiction’, unpublished paper delivered at the conference ‘War and Peace: 10th Annual Conference of the Victorian Popular Fiction Association’ (Institute for English Studies, University of London, 3-7 July 2018).

¹⁴ Luckhurst, *Science Fiction*, p. 26.

evoked disembodied or dead voices, ‘crackled with spooky echoes and unearthly noises that some interpreted as spiritual or interstellar messages’.¹⁵ Drawing rigid lines between Gothic and science fiction is to retroactively impose a logic as yet unestablished in the nineteenth century, and to evaluate steampunk with Suvin’s parameters cannot be fruitful. We see this not least in Suvin’s dismissal of Jules Verne and H. G. Wells as ‘juvenile’, ‘popular subliterate’ because both are widely lauded as godfathers of fantastic fiction and steampunk in particular.¹⁶ Perschon’s usage of technofantasy as a hybrid component relies on Istvan Csicsery-Ronay’s notion of the ‘fictional novum’, ‘a historically unprecedented and unpredicted “new thing” that intervenes in the routine course of social life and changes the trajectory of history’.¹⁷ Pioneered by Suvin, it is adapted towards steampunk by Perschon who notes that here, ‘the novum is irrational and inexplicable to the modern reader’ because it is ‘is a matter of aesthetic form, not scientific function’.¹⁸ In short, steampunk’s technofantastical nova do not have to comply with real-world physics or notions of ‘science’. Indeed, airships, automata, computers, and magic or occultism go hand in hand to evoke steampunk’s characteristic sense of anachronistic high adventure. However, ‘rather than simply use the term “magic”, steampunk continues to give the appearance of SF by rendering the magical as alchemical formulae’. Steampunk devices are powered by ‘discarded theoretical substances, such as phlogiston and aether, or entirely fictional’ and so pay homage to Victorian speculative fiction.¹⁹ To understand further why a retroactive diagnosis is hardly compatible with steampunk, we must consider the history of fantastic and science fiction. Gary K. Wolfe, in accordance with Luckhurst, notes that science fiction ‘was essentially a designated genre after 1926, the year in which Hugo Gernsback launched *Amazing Stories*’.²⁰ The magazine era, with more clearly defined and demarcated publishing strategies and readerships, had a prescriptive commercial identity, which Victorian speculative fiction lacked. Although science fiction scholars have claimed Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) as ‘the first

¹⁵ Luckhurst, *Science Fiction*, p. 26.

¹⁶ Suvin, p. 22, 35; Jeff VanderMeer and S. J. Chambers, *The Steampunk Bible* (New York: Abrams Image, 2011), p. 29-41.

¹⁷ Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction* (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), p. 5-6.

¹⁸ Perschon, thesis, p. 151.

¹⁹ Perschon, thesis, p. 161.

²⁰ Gary K. Wolfe, *Evaporating Genres: Essays on Fantastic Literature* (Middleton: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), p. 31.

real novel of science fiction', the novel is of course also a fixture in the Gothic canon, and its own conception of 'science' is that of the larger concept of 'natural philosophy'.²¹ Victor Frankenstein might be adept in his age's cutting-edge science, but he is also in search of 'the philosopher's stone and the elixir of life'.²² In addition, the creature remains one of literature's most iconic incarnations of the monstrous other and Gothic *doppelgänger*. Wolfe traces origins of 'fantasy' to German Romanticists such as 'Novalis, E. T. A. Hoffmann, and Ludwig Tieck', but let us remember that Hoffman's *Sandmann* (1816), with its alchemical experiments and the automaton Olympia, features science fictional overtones not too distinct from those of *Frankenstein*.²³ Edgar Allan Poe, often remembered for his mastery of Gothic and horror, also wrote tales about time travel, galvanism, and balloon journeys to the moon. In nineteenth-century Western literature, the Gothic regularly converges with the speculative and fantastic, often in order to negotiate the ethics of progress in a changing world. Whereas the Gothic focuses on aspects of the internal (psychological), the fantastical and speculative focuses on the external (technological).

Indeed, Gothic and science fiction are interlinked throughout the nineteenth century. Both *Frankenstein* and Stevenson's *Jekyll and Hyde* examine the morality of biological engineering, the latter in the age of Darwin's theory of evolution and Galton's eugenics.²⁴ Both also helped construct the archetype of the mad scientist, now a popular staple of steampunk, a figure who embodies not only Byronic torments of the soul but combines typically Gothic mania with scientific experiment. Stoker's *Dracula* features cutting-edge technology such a phonograph and the typewriter. Late Victorian Gothic also reacts to and is embedded in contemporary socio-scientific theories of human cultures as teleologically evolving. Notions of biological or cultural atavism and degeneration as what Freud would later term the return of the repressed was already prominent in urban Gothic classics such as *Jekyll and Hyde*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, or *Dracula*, and emerged out of popular reception of the theories of Darwin, Huxley, Spencer, or Tylor.²⁵

²¹ Brian Aldiss and David Wingrove, *Trillion Year Spree: The History of Science Fiction* (London: Gollancz, 1986), p. 51; Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus* (Oxford: Oxford Classics, 2008 [1818]), p. 22.

²² Shelley, p. 23, 24.

²³ Wolfe, p. 7.

²⁴ Sian MacArthur, *Gothic Science Fiction from 1818 to present* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

²⁵ More in this in: Mighall.

However, steampunk's recombination of Gothic and SF followed a larger tendency of 1980s and 1990s literature, where 'the edges of the genres themselves bleed into one another' for example in the fiction of Angela Carter, China Miéville, or Stephen King.²⁶ Formal genre markers, as Wolfe acknowledges, have always been 'radically unstable', which is why 'the fantastic genres contain within themselves the seeds of their own dissolution, a nascent set of postmodern rhetorical modes'.²⁷ However, what he terms instability and dissolution, I would rather re-label as flexibility and potential — both of which are exemplified by steampunk.

In light of these flexible and often historically determined demarcations of genre, I find it most useful to consider steampunk an aesthetic mode rather than a (sub)genre.²⁸ For one, steampunk is indebted to both speculative and neo-historical fiction and recombines their distinct features into a new mode. Moreover, its retro-speculative, hyper-Victorian aesthetic may be applied to narrative genres such as romance, thriller, adventure, or crime – or all at once — and it is independently legible as a world-building feature in novels or films as a culturally charged aesthetic shorthand creatively re-imagining an alternative 'Victorian' age. This shorthand, as I explore in depth in Chapter Two, is more than a decorative surface: it imports and remixes meaning and is therefore engaged in cultural work.²⁹ Steampunk may best be understood as a mode which arises from an interplay between hyper-Victorianism, retro-speculation, and technofantasy. Its array of tropes may include anachronism or ironic nostalgia, or more specific archetypes like dandies, explorers, and mad scientists, or devices such as ray guns, airships, and automata.

²⁶ Wolfe, p. 14.

²⁷ Wolfe, p. 23.

²⁸ Mike Perschon, *Steampunk FAQ. All That's Left to Know About the World of Goggles, Airships, and Time Travel* (Milwaukee: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2018), p. xiv.

²⁹ Christine Ferguson, 'Surface Tensions: Steampunk, Subculture, and the Ideology of Style', *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 4:2 (2011), 66-90.

3. NEO-VICTORIANISM

On the rare occasions when scholars of speculative and science fiction have considered steampunk, they have understood it as a by-product of cyberpunk (which I discuss in Chapter One) and largely understood it on cyberpunk's terms, which yielded little understanding³⁰. It has been more productively discussed within the frameworks of neo-Victorian scholarship, an academic field which has been growing since 2008 and so coincided with steampunk's second wave. Let us consider the parameters of neo-Victorian scholarship and so examine how and why its adoption of steampunk as a popular iteration of neo-Victorianism is so fruitful.

Early works of neo-Victorian scholarship such as Dana Shiller's 1997 article, 'The Redemptive Past in the Neo-Victorian Novel', or Christian Gutleben's influential *Nostalgic Postmodernism: The Victorian Tradition and the Contemporary British Novel* (2001) had already placed neo-historical fiction set in the nineteenth century in the context of Linda Hutcheon's concept of historiographic metafiction, 'those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages'.³¹ A coherent field emerged, however, with the founding of the *Neo-Victorian Journal*, and Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn's 2010 study *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999–2009* is usually credited with defining neo-Victorianism seminally as 'more than historical fiction set in the nineteenth century', and as fiction which must 'in some respect be *self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*'.³² Neo-Victorian fiction has since been understood as re-evaluating the conditions, traumas, and legacies of the Victorian age in light of the present moment, often with a view towards social justice, and usually accompanied by meta-fictional commentaries. Marie-Luise Kohlke, editor of *Neo-Victorian Studies*, underlines neo-Victorian fiction's 'prurient penchant for revelling in indecency and salaciousness, as well as exposing past iniquities' and concludes the following:

³⁰ For example: Csicsery-Ronay, *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction*, Luckhurst, *Science Fiction*.

³¹ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism. History, Theory, Fiction* (Routledge: New York, 1988), p. 5.

³² Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999–2009* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 4, original emphasis.

Increasingly, the [nineteenth century] is configured as a temporal convergence of multiple historical traumas still awaiting appropriate commemoration and full working-through. These include both the pervasive traumas of social ills, such as disease, crime, and sexual exploitation, and the more spectacular traumas of violent civil unrest, international conflicts, and trade wars that punctuated the nineteenth century. [...] [The] recent strategic interventions [in Iraq and Afghanistan] resonate powerfully with nineteenth-century Western histories of empire-building, atrocities of colonialism, and the clash of opposing cultures.³³

Mark Llewelyn recognises that neo-Victorianism's meta-historical re-evaluation, in its desire to foreground historically marginalised voices, sexual identities, and post-colonial perspectives, 'writes back to something in the nineteenth century', thereby re-freshing and re-vitalising it to the present.³⁴ Llewelyn also notes that such a recourse to and re-working of the past is, in itself, a parallel to Victorian culture, in which Gothic literature, Pre-Raphaelite art, Medieval re-tellings, or the Arts and Crafts movement utilised similar strategies. This is also a parallel to steampunk's own, anachronistic play.

However, steampunk and neo-Victorianism also seem connected through their emergence within a specific cultural landscape. A neo-Victorian canon includes early works such as Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), and John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), which predate steampunk's first wave, but most of the literary best-sellers which have come to form a neo-Victorian canon were published in the 1990s and early 2000s, after steampunk's first and before its second wave. This canon includes A. S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* (1990), Graham Swift's *Ever After* (1992), Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996), Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs* (1997), Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), *Affinity* (1999), and *Fingersmith* (2002), Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002), Lloyd Jones' *Mister Pip* (2006), or Ian McEwan's *On Chesil Beach* (2007).³⁵ Since then, neo-Victorianism has continuously thrived and

³³ Marie-Luise Kohlke, 'Introduction: Speculations in and on the Neo-Victorian Encounter', *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 1.1 (2008), 1-18, p. 3-4.

³⁴ Mark Llewelyn, 'What Is Neo-Victorian Studies?', *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 1.1 (2008), 164-185, p. 170-171.

³⁵ Marie-Luise Kohlke, 'Mining the neo-Victorian Vein: Prospecting for Gold, Buried Treasure, and Uncertain Metal', in *Neo-Victorian Literature and Culture: Immersions and Revisitations*, ed. by Nadine Böhm-Schnitker and Susanne Gruss (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 21-37. Jessica Cox, 'Canonization, Colonialization, and the Rise of Neo-Victorianism', *English*, 66:1 (2017), 101-123.

moved into the mainstream with film and TV adaptations such as Guy Ritchie's *Sherlock Holmes* films (2009 & 2011), *Ripper Street* (2012-2016), *Murdoch Mysteries* (2008-present), or *Penny Dreadful* (2014-2016). Its emergence has certainly provided a rich, widely accessible and readable imaginative soil in which second-wave steampunk could be rooted.

Neo-Victorian scholarship and steampunk have been closely aligned since Rebecca Onion's influential article on 'Reclaiming the Machine: An Introductory Look at Steampunk in Everyday Practice' in *Neo-Victorian Studies*' inaugural issue in 2008, and the former's investment in cultural memory work and soul-searching also echoes in steampunk's creative collapsing of timelines. However, where neo-Victorian fiction must move within historical parameters and enact a mimetic mode of realism, steampunk may disregard, re-arrange, and resist any historical narrative. As Catherine Siemann states: 'Through its combination of history and speculative fiction, steampunk is uniquely positioned to explore ideas that have their roots in our past, and to consider and critique social and technological solutions of past, present, and future alike.'³⁶

³⁶ Catherine Siemann, 'Some Notes on the Social Problem Novel', in *Steaming Into A Victorian Future*, ed. by Julie-Ann Taddeo and Cynthia J. Miller (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2013), pp. 3-21. Catherine Siemann, 'The Steampunk City in Crisis', in *Like Clockwork. Steampunk Pasts, Presents & Futures*, ed. by Rachel A. Bowser and Brian Croxall (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 2016), pp. 51-72, p. 3.

4. MENTAL MAPS: THE URBAN IMAGINARY

Neo-Victorian scholarship necessarily focuses on how neo-Victorian fiction or steampunk, respectively, re-signify the legacies of the Victorian age for better or worse, and while this is also a main concern of this thesis, we must remember that steampunk's creative retro-speculation harnesses other mechanisms than neo-Victorianism, mechanisms which, as I hope to have shown, are not easily subsumed into one field or the other. This necessitates a flexible and interdisciplinary approach. My main interest here lies in examining how steampunk re-imagines and re-purposes an imaginary of Victorian London as both a multifaceted, potent urban setting and a signifier for 'Victorian-ness'. By better understanding not only why steampunk gravitates towards Victorian London as a collective symbol and socio-economic nexus, but also how it may access and leverage our shared imaginary of it, we may illuminate the cultural processes of memory and mediation that inform our relationship with the Victorian past and the cities of the present.

'Palimpsestically, we read the past city through the overlaid present, but conversely, we also read the present city backwards through the underlying and resurfacing past', posit Kohlke and Gutleben.³⁷ In the introduction to their collection on the subject, they recognise neo-Victorian cities as 'spaces in which memory is not just continually fostered, produced, and preserved, but also contested, deconstructed, and sometimes deliberately distorted or fabricated.'³⁸ How, then, does retro-speculation enhance, disrupt, or re-route this process of memory-making in and through re-imagined urban settings? This thesis engages with neo-Victorian and urban studies, as well as scholarship about speculative fiction (especially weird fiction, cyberpunk, climate fiction, and posthumanism), fan studies, transmedia theory, and cultural memory, and occasionally architecture or art history. Such a wide, interdisciplinary approach is warranted not only by the eclectic, hybrid, cyborg nature of steampunk itself, but also by the concept of the urban imaginary, itself sourced from and used widely across a variety

³⁷ Marie-Louise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben, 'Troping the Neo-Victorian City', in *Neo-Victorian Cities. Reassessing Urban Politics and Poetics*, ed. by Marie-Louise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben (Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2015), pp. 1-42, p. 6.

³⁸ Kohlke and Gutleben, p. 11.

of disciplines, such as geography, cultural studies, or urban sociology.³⁹

Fredric Jameson grounds his notion of cognitive mapping in Louis Althusser's Lacanian definition of ideology as 'the representation of the subject's Imaginary relationship to his or her Real conditions of existence'.⁴⁰ With recourse to Kevin Lynch's *The Image of the City* (1960), in which the urban theorist suggests that we read cities through mental maps configured from their cornerstones, paths, edges, nodes, districts, and landmarks, Jameson argues the following: 'Surely this is exactly what the cognitive map is called upon to do in the narrower framework of daily life in the physical city: to enable a situational representation on the part of the individual subject to that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of society's structures as a whole.'⁴¹ In his thinking, cognitive mapping is re-adapted to serve an additional function as an ideological tool in postmodern society, as it becomes a spatial analogy for how we situate ourselves within a postmodern social system. Jameson here translates a concept from urban studies into a mechanism of (postmodern) culture, whereas another genealogy of the (urban) imaginary seems to evolve in the opposite direction. In his seminal work on *Orientalism* (1975), Edward Said transfers Benedict Anderson's notion of imagined communities to his own idea of imagined geographies, in which the collective perception of spaces — here, 'the Orient' as mystical Other within an (imagined) East/West dichotomy — is shaped by images, narratives, and discourses, the latter of which are shaped by power dynamics as theorised by Foucault.⁴² Other post-colonial thinkers such as Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, or bell hooks, alongside Foucault, also inspired the work of noted urbanist Edward Soja, whose concept of 'thirdspace' as a hybrid of the real and imagined I discuss in Chapter Three, and which is indebted to Foucauldian ideas of heterotopia.⁴³ Soja configures the urban imaginary as 'our mental and

³⁹ For example: *Urban Imaginaries. Locating the Modern City*, ed. by Alev Çınar and Thomas Bender (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007 or *The Routledge Companion to Urban Imaginaries*, ed. by Christoph Lindner and Miriam Meissner (London: Routledge, 2018).

⁴⁰ Althusser, quoted in Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism. Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 51. In Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytical theory, the imaginary forms part of a triptych of terms alongside the symbolic and the real. Developed in the mirror stage of ego formation, the imaginary is associated with identification, but also with illusion and deception.

⁴¹ Jameson, p. 51.

⁴² Outlined in Anderson's 1983 study on nationalism, imagined communities are socially constructed by the people who consider themselves part of the group.; Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Classics, 2003 [1978]).

⁴³ From the Greek, *hétēros*, 'other, another, different', combined with *topos*, 'place'. Heterotopias are parallel, sometimes virtual spaces in which relationships to other spaces or itself are suspended, disturbed, or contradictory. Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', trans. by Jay Miskowiec, in *Architecture /Mouvement/ Continuité*, October

cognitive mapping of urban reality, and the interpretive grids through which we think about, experience, evaluate, and decide to act in these places, spaces, and communities in which we live'.⁴⁴ This means urban imaginaries function not just as mental maps of real spaces, but also as spatialised metaphors for how we understand ourselves in relation to the world socially and historically, as the city itself is an expression of social relations (more in Chapter One). In line with Said, 'interpretive grids' are founded on and shaped by narrative interpretations of the city: 'The London described in Charles Dickens' novels is a city that melds imagination and reality – a kind of mental projection of the city superimposed over the real one. And we now experience London as a product of Dickens' text... by "feeling" the atmosphere of the city at certain times as somehow Dickensian'.⁴⁵ The choice of Dickens' London as example here illustrates why steampunk gravitates towards the 'smog-choked alleys of Victoria's duskless empire' and the 'opium-addicts, aesthete dandies, inventors of perpetual motion machines, mutineers, hucksters, gamblers, explorers, madmen, and bluestockings'.⁴⁶ Indeed, my objective here is to examine specifically how steampunk mines and leverages the complex matrix in which imaginaries of London and imaginaries of 'the Victorian' converge into a socio-cultural nexus and potent memory figure.

5. STRUGGLING AND RUMBLING: STEAMPUNK MAKER CULTURE

Why London specifically? From the mid-1820s to the end of the First World War, London was the largest metropolis in the world, overtaking Beijing and Constantinople which had taken this position since the fifteenth century. For the entirety of Victoria's reign (1837-1901), and most of the Long Nineteenth Century (1789-1914), London was the emblem of a modern megalopolis, thus occupying the symbolic space now given over to Tokyo, Beijing, Mumbai, or Shanghai⁴⁷. Like these mega-cities in the present, Victorian London had to respond to the challenges of rapid urban growth, social multiplicity, infrastructures of transportation and technology, or food

1984, pp. 1-9. Unpublished lecture, given 1967.

⁴⁴ Edward Soja, *Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 2000), p. 324.

⁴⁵ Paul Dobraszczyk, *Future Cities. Architecture and the Imagination* (London: Reaktion Books, 2019), p. 11.

⁴⁶ The Catastrophone Orchestra and Arts Collective, 'What then, is Steampunk? Colonizing the Past So We Can Dream The Future', *Steampunk Magazine*, 1. (2006), 4-5, p. 5.

⁴⁷ The Long Nineteenth Century, a concept coined by Eric Hobsbawm in *The Age of Revolution: Europe 1789–1848* (1962), *The Age of Capital: 1848–1875* (1975), and *The Age of Empire: 1875–1914* (1987).

supply. Its architecture reflects this. Whereas the megalopolis of the twentieth and twenty-first century is cast in steel-and-glass skyscrapers and sober pragmatism, the Victorian mega-city, as outlined in texts, images, and those remnants still present in the cityscape today, is largely characterised by the materials and aesthetics of the Industrial Revolution: brickwork, copper, cast-iron. This affords London the status of urban archive not just of itself, but mega-cities in general. The material and aesthetic dimensions of the Victorian age are central to the steampunk aesthetic and become charged with meaning as a cultural shorthand. This is most productively explained through the example of steampunk's maker culture, which has gained popularity and momentum since the collective Obtanium Works debuted their Neverwas Haul, a self-propelled, Victorian-style house on wheels at Burning Man Festival in 2006. Behind what Bruce Sterling has called a 'funereal theatre' that selectively resurrects 'the dandified gear of aristocrats, peculiar brass gear, rather stilted personal relationships, and elaborate and slightly kinky underwear' of the Victorian aesthetic lies a quest to re-capture a knowability of the technology that surrounds us and defines our lives.⁴⁸ In a much-quoted manifesto, the Catastrophphone Orchestra proclaims:

First and foremost, steampunk is a non-luddite critique of technology. [...] It revels in the concrete reality of technology instead of the over-analytical abstractness of cybernetics. [S]teampunk machines are real, breathing, coughing, struggling and rumbling parts of the world. They are not the airy intellectual fairies of algorithmic mathematics but the hulking manifestations of muscle and mind, the progeny of sweat, blood, tears and delusions. The technology of steampunk is natural; it moves, lives, ages and even dies.⁴⁹

In an attempt to 'rediscover the inherent dignity of created objects',⁵⁰ steampunks humanise and revel in technology that externalises hidden functions and can be experienced through the senses — seen, heard, and touched — in opposition to the streamlined digital black boxes that refuse users access or agency over their inner workings. Their 'hulking manifestations of muscle and mind' promise accessibility and excitement through their levers, gears, and boilers. The Victorian

⁴⁸ Bruce Sterling, 'The User's Guide to Steampunk', in *The Steampunk Bible*, ed. by Jeff VanderMeer and S.J. Chambers (New York: Abrams Image, 2011), pp. 11-12, p. 11.

⁴⁹ Catastrophphone Orchestra, p. 4.

⁵⁰ Professor Calamity, 'My Machine, My Comrade', *Steampunk Magazine*, 3:1 (2007), 24-25, p. 25.

design aesthetic here signifies a complex network of meta-historical interrelations between production, workmanship, materiality, capitalism, and identity that are identified with and located in the Victorian past. Steampunk echoes the critiques of industrial production and the mass market put forward by John Ruskin, William Morris, or Karl Marx, and employs similar strategies of reclaiming agency and dignity through manufacture. The key difference however is that the industrial design which Victorian critics rejected becomes itself the object of reverence, because the outdated industrial paradigm is now perceived as picturesque and intriguing. Ideas about agency, artistry, and accessibility that defined object-user relationships amid the Industrial Revolution are condensed into a retro-speculative aesthetic shorthand.⁵¹ (Re-)created objects become understandable, emotionally valuable, and full of (dangerous) possibility. As Rebecca Onion diagnoses: ‘Through the recovery of the everyday danger of interacting with volatile objects, steampunk practitioners desire to re-engage with the physical world, subverting the sterile and safe relationships they perceive to exist between people and objects in contemporary society’.⁵² Steampunk remains conscious that volatile technology and social evils such as child labour informed Victorian industrial production and were real dangers: James Carrott reminds us to ‘punk responsibly’ and remember that ‘steampunking is a political act.’⁵³ As a post-industrial movement however, steampunk tends to celebrate, often semi-ironically, a perceived sense of escalation and hubris associated with the Victorian age as a riotous, dirty, adventurous age of invention, romance, and exploration. As Diana Pho explains: “‘Modern science fiction tell us: ‘Oh god, don’t go build giant robots. They’ll kill us all!’ But Victorian science fiction says: Yay! Let’s go build giant robots! Oh shoot, they killed us”’⁵⁴ The Catastrophone Orchestra expresses the sentiment as follows:

The machine must be liberated from efficiency and designed by desire and dreams. The sleekness of optimal engineering is to be replaced with the necessary ornamentation of true

⁵¹ Sally-Anne Huxtable, “‘Love the Machine, Hate the Factory’: Steampunk Design and the Vision of a Victorian Future”, in *Steaming Into A Victorian Future*, ed. by Julie Anne Taddeo and Cynthia J. Miller (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2013), pp. 213-234. Ferguson, “Surface Tensions”. Also: Stefania Forlini, ‘Technology and Morality: The Stuff of Steampunk’, *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 3.1 (2010), 72-98.

⁵² Rebecca Onion, ‘Reclaiming the Machine: An Introductory Look at Steampunk in Everyday Practise’, *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 1.1 (2008), 138-163, p. 151.

⁵³ James Carrott, ‘Punking the Past. Politics of Possibility’, *Steampunk Magazine*, 1: 2006, 70-71, p. 71.

⁵⁴ James H. Carrott and Brian David Johnson, *Vintage Tomorrows* (Sebastopol: O’Reilly, 2013), p. 107.

function. Imperfection, chaos, chance and obsolescence are not to be seen as faults, but as ways of allowing spontaneous liberation from the predictability of perfection.⁵⁵

Steampunk maker culture catalyses a saturating alienation from the streamlined, digital ‘black box’ technology and design aesthetic prevalent in the present consumer culture. ‘We love what our devices do, but they’re cultural blanks’, Carrott notes. ‘They’re empty. If you drop your smartphone in the toilet, it goes from magical communication node and life repository to useless piece of glass’.⁵⁶ Alienated by the minimalist objects of the digital age, steampunks seek to redeem the fundamental Otherness of such technology, invisibly alive and uncanny, through re-encoding machines in physical forms that at least simulate kinship and accessibility through physicality.⁵⁷ Such a yearning for tangibility and knowability responds to postmodern anxieties about disembodiment, posthumanism, and a perceived lack of authenticity in the age of mass-produced commodities which remain beyond our grasps even though we depend on them. By reclaiming the creative process of making and building knowledge communities, steampunks seek to resist the consumer culture in which only a hegemony of experts may operate beneath the impermeable surfaces of digital devices.⁵⁸ Turning instead to fantastic, self-fashioned metaphors and impossible, alternative worlds, steampunks re-purpose the ‘weird and archaic’,⁵⁹ yet reassuringly physical Victorian aesthetic in order to playfully negotiate our relationship with technology, culture, and history.

6. THESIS STRUCTURE

Steampunk, in all its iterations, is a potent hybrid of ‘contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes’, such as speculation and neo-Victorianism, memory and fantastic play, soul-searching and irreverence. Its retro-speculative gaze is turned, not to the future, but on the past to which we trace our formative origins. It actualises a contemporary yearning of our digital age for authenticity, individuality, and tangibility, yet its settings, subjects, and creations are inherently

⁵⁵ Catastrophone Orchestra, p. 5.

⁵⁶ Carrott and Johnson, *Vintage Tomorrows*, p. 105.

⁵⁷ For more on steampunk’s relationship with technology, see: Ferguson or Huxtable.

⁵⁸ For more on steampunk’s DIY culture, see: Bowser and Croxall, Forlini, ‘Technology’, Huxtable.

⁵⁹ Sterling, ‘User’s Guide’, p. 13.

fantastic, impossible, and belong to an alternative, never-was past-future. An investigation of the multiple, often paradoxical processes that inform steampunk, especially in conjunction with the complex layers of imaginaries of Victorian London, warrants a flexible, interdisciplinary approach. I want to reflect this multi-layered nexus of steampunk's London through different perspectives in each of the four chapters, with Chapters One and Two focusing on *how* steampunk London may come into being through collective memory and Chapters Three and Four foregrounding *why* London may be realised as a fertile setting. Considering that steampunk's imaginaries of Victorian London both draw on and re-configure a large legacy of nineteenth-century media that influenced or became markers of such an imaginary, I will also move back and forth strategically between Victorian and present-day texts in order to illustrate how steampunk creates a dialogue with and within a collective memory of the era. By identifying perceived parallels, fascinations, divergences, or misunderstandings, we may understand more clearly how steampunk re-evaluates the Victorian era from a contemporary perspective and for new audiences. We will see not just how and why steampunk plays off of shared imaginaries of the Victorian metropolis, but also what this tells us about our relationship with the Victorian past. In order to address the multiple influences on and contexts for the steampunk metropolis, I also use different twentieth- and twenty-first century critical frameworks across all four chapters.

My first chapter examines the origins of seminal steampunk in 1980s California. I consider the impact of Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851) on the steampunk imaginary and argue that, while authors K. W. Jeter, James Blaylock, and Tim Powers semi-ironically coined the term steampunk in reference to cyberpunk, a coherent and recognisable steampunk aesthetic emerges later with *The Difference Engine* (1991), an influential novel by noted cyberpunk authors Bruce Sterling and William Gibson. My analysis situates early steampunk in the context of cyberpunk's agenda. I examine how the novel utilises the Victorian city in order to discuss the impact of cybertechnology in various ways and consider its re-use of urban space against the backdrop of Marxist urban theory, namely Henri Lefebvre's concept of the 'right to the city', and David Harvey's reading thereof.

The second chapter is concerned with how steampunk, as a postmodern and counter-fictional mode, functions in the context of collective memory, adaptation, and remix. I use London's East End as an example of how Victorian discourse in fiction, journalism, and magazine created a palimpsestic and multi-textual urban mythology aligned with Victorian social concerns.

I consider especially Gustave Doré's illustrations and Arthur Morrison's *A Child of the Jago* (1896) in conjunction with media generated around the Jack the Ripper murders. The figure of the Ripper catalysed a variety of contemporary anxieties, was immortalised through a number of narrative strategies and enshrined in collective memory through consecutive adaptations. In this urban mythology, the Gothic mode assumes a central role as a sense-making aesthetic, and I outline how Gothic 'knowledge' is transmitted through popular culture by using transmedia theory. Alongside this, I examine how Kim Newman's *Anno Dracula* (1992) mines and remixes real and fictional events and people into a newly resonant, counter-fictional collage in order to satirise British 1980s neo-liberalism, positing that counter-fictionality is a staple of steampunk. I consider in what way Newman's approach differs from the psychogeography of popular London chronicler Peter Ackroyd. Lastly, I present S. M. Peter's novel *Whitechapel Gods* (2009) as an example of post-millennial, second wave steampunk, and of how steampunk may creatively repurpose the legacy of East End mythologies in new and productive, non-Gothic ways.

In my third chapter, I consider how popular video games *Assassins' Creed: Syndicate* and *The Order 1886* (both 2015) actualise Victorian representations of London into a spatial simulation that aligns narrative progress with movement through space. Against the backdrop of Doreen Massey's theory of space as an active process of interlinking trajectories, I examine how Dickens' London and the London of Sherlock Holmes have represented London's complexity through immersive and panoptic perspectives and analyse how game spaces synthesise the two. By deviating from purely literary sources, I want to interrogate the importance and potential of space itself within the urban imaginary, even if steampunk spaces can only ever be virtual. I consider how *Assassins' Creed* implements a fantasy of agency within urban spaces and by contextualising *The Order*'s against *Blade Runner*'s (1982) emblematic hyper-city and the retro-speculative game spaces of *BioShock* (2007-2013) and *Dishonoured* (2012), I show how game spaces become legible storytelling devices in themselves, and then examine how *The Order* quite literally puts this quality into play.

Chapter four considers the ideological undercurrents informing steampunk imaginaries by discussing gender and feminist rebellion in *fin-de-siècle* London and steampunk fiction. I briefly consider the figure of the flâneur to offset how and why the New Woman's newfound mobility within the modern metropolis empowered her. However, I also want to focus on how different or successive feminist agendas shape our perception of the nineteenth century and thus briefly

discuss Ouida's fiction to challenge a monolithic feminist genealogy that enshrines the New Woman as foundation myth. Against this backdrop, I consider the progressive and paradoxically conservative agendas that inform how sexually liberated neo-Victorian and steampunk action heroines are configured and where their shortcomings lie by considering them within a framework of post-feminist and fourth-wave-feminist theory. I then provide a close reading of Gail Carriger's *Parasolverse* novels (2009-present) as a positive example of how steampunk may imagine empowered and feminine heroines. By discussing how the same series re-imagined LGBTQA+ characters through steampunk, I interrogate steampunk's potential to provide radical alternative histories.

Steampunk's retro-speculative play provides us with playfully anachronistic and unique meta-historical approaches towards a collectively remembered Victorian past. Here, we may highlight, redress, satirise, or re-experience its glories, quirks, and failures with utopian or dystopian impulses and nostalgic or radical outlooks. In the course of this thesis, we will see that, be it whimsical, nostalgic, or subversive, steampunk is always engaged in ideological work, even if unselfconsciously so. In its adventurous re-calibration of an era characterised by sexism, stark social hierarchies, and imperialism, steampunk risks becoming complicit in the re-iteration of problematic ideologies, and we will encounter instances where it (often unintentionally) does so. However, as we will also see, more often steampunk's retro-speculation playfully highlights and challenges our relationship with history and deepens our understanding of human agency, seeking to inspire us to approach the future with the same creativity. After all, as Sterling notes, 'the past is a kind of future that has already happened.'⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Sterling, 'The User's Guide', p. 12.

CHAPTER 1: SEMINAL STEAMPUNK AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF HYPER-VICTORIAN LONDON

1. INTRODUCTION: GENEALOGIES OF PUNK

In my introduction, I have only briefly touched on the origins of steampunk. This is because it is worth dedicating a chapter-length discussion to how this retro-speculative aesthetic was formed, labelled, and contextualised within its historical moment. As a term inadvertently and half-jokingly coined in 1987 by K. W. Jeter in a letter to *Locus* magazine, trying to describe fiction recently written by him, Tim Powers, and James Blaylock in a ‘gonzo-historical manner’,¹ steampunk emerged without any agenda or clearly delineated aesthetic in mind. In fact, Jeter’s suggestion was an ironic nod towards cyberpunk, which had emerged with Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner* (1982) and William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* (1984). This means that while nowadays, steampunk is productively discussed within a neo-Victorian academic framework, initially it had little connection to neo-Victorian literature, especially considering that neo-Victorianism began to flourish later in the 1990s, and mainly in Great Britain. Indeed, while a number of post-Victorian works such as films of the 1950s and 1960s may have inspired the so-called California trifecta (Powers, Blaylock, and Jeter), their choice of setting was as yet independent from larger movements or ideologies.² Why, then, did they gravitate towards a Victorian setting, and Victorian London in particular? How did they portray and re-signify it for modern audiences, and how did steampunk grow into a more coherent aesthetic?

Whereas later publications such as William Gibson and Bruce Sterling’s *The Difference Engine* (1990) attained some acclaim, most of the first-generation novels discussed here are vaguely irreverent adventure fiction that faded into obscurity. They were reanimated when steampunk, fuelled by the internet, prompted a second wave around 2007, inspiring a subculture

¹ Gross, p. 57.

² Perschon indicates the influence of Harper Goff’s design for the Nautilus in Disney’s *20,000 Leagues under the Sea* (1954), Onion suggests the Vincent Price movies *Master of the World* (1961) and *City Under the Sea* (1965), as well as George Pa’s movie versions of Wells’ stories *War of the Worlds* (1953) and *The Time Machine* (1960). See: Mike Perschon, ‘Seminal Steampunk: Proper and True’, in *Like Clockwork. Steampunk Pasts, Presents, & Futures*, eds. by Rachel A. Bowser and Brian Croxall (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 2016) pp. 153-178, p. 156. See

which sought to establish a retroactive genre history and canon of works for its counter-cultural movement. Steampunk chroniclers such as Cory Gross in his *History of Misapplied Technology* for *Steampunk Magazine*, or Jeff Vandermeer in the *Steampunk Bible*, provide steampunk genealogies for its community. Together with newly penned prefaces for the re-published works of the first wave themselves, they construct a shared origin myth beginning in 1980s California, with Michael Moorcock's proto-steampunk *Warlord of the Air* (1971) retroactively assimilated into it.³ How do these novels correlate and contribute to the formation of steampunk as a mode with unique, new, and recognisable features?

Mike Perschon has argued that the larger steampunk community, while seldom having actually engaged with these novels, occasionally cites them to construct a collective narrative in which steampunk has, from the beginning, been concerned with the 'serious', political implications of the '-punk' suffix: counter-culture, the deconstruction of historical meaning, dismantling of hegemonic structures. This is certainly not the case: neither seminal steampunk fiction nor popular contemporary works such as Gail Carriger's *Parasol Protectorate* (2009-2019), George Mann's *Newbury and Hobbes* series (2008 -present), or Mark Hodder's *Burton and Swinburne* (2010- present) novels make overt political statements.⁴ However, to dismiss these novels as escapist or trivial is to disregard the subversive potential that lies at the heart of steampunk's whimsical, speculative, and experimental play with the past. As an aesthetic which relies on destabilising received notions of history and selfhood, steampunk invites us to re-negotiate and re-signify cultural memory, the Victorian past and our present urban environment. In this, for better or worse, steampunk certainly holds political potential regardless of whether or not authors and steampunks are aware of it. From its beginnings, steampunk chooses a re-imagined Victorian London as its epicentre. The California trifecta thereby configured both a loosely defined imagined 'Victorian-ness' and steampunk itself as connected to the urban experience, probably because it epitomised the metropolis of the nineteenth century as well as acting as economic, cultural, and political nexus. Let us therefore consider the concept of 'city'.

also Onion, p. 140.

³ For example: Tim Powers for Jeter's *Morlock Night*, Jeter for his *Infernal Devices*, with an afterword by Jeff VanderMeer, and Cory Doctorow for *The Difference Engine*.

⁴ '[Academics] working in steampunk need to stop making unsupportable claims about these early works that convey the sense that they are serious, subversive works when they are primarily good entertainment.' Perschon, 'Seminal Steampunk', p. 174.

Max Weber's early theory outlined cities of Medieval Europe as commercial centres in which guilds and free labour provided autonomy from feudalistic influences.⁵ Weber discusses other factors, such as politics, security, and citizenship, but it is the economic factor which has resonated with Marxist urban theorists throughout the twentieth century, most notably Henri Lefebvre, David Harvey, Saskia Sassen, and Edward Soja. The sociologist Georg Simmel on the other hand is concerned with how the modern metropolis both impacts and articulates new, elusive subjectivities in his essay, 'Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben' (1903). Simmel observes how the metropolis frees city dwellers from the social surveillance of the community and releases them into the independence of anonymity, an essential marker of the urban identity. Together with the incessant sensory over-stimulation of light and speed, such anonymity fosters an indifferent attitude of cultivated privatism: a blasé mannerism which identifies the urban dweller as thoroughly modern.⁶ As yet the field of urban studies is interdisciplinary: dominated for a long time by social theories which assume the indivisibility of political, social, and economic forces, the field has been increasingly enriched by considerations of environmental sustainability or material infrastructure, as well as reflections on the digital city. Central to many of these considerations is Henri Lefebvre's concept of the production of space: '(Social) space is a (social) product. [...] [It] has taken on, [...] a sort of reality of its own [...]. [T]he space thus produced also serves as a tool of thought and of action; [...] in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power.'⁷

Urban space, then, is at once material and virtual, physical and imagined, but always social: through architecture or topography, it reflects concepts of meaning. This process of spatialization, a concept made popular in the wake of the spatial turn of the late 1980s, is a process informed by cultural values and social meanings, and has been connected to other social practices such as the cultivation of collective memory or Marxist ideas about the means of production. The city becomes a physical environment made and re-made by humans and encoding our 'relationship to nature, lifestyles, technologies and aesthetic values.'⁸ Complementary to this is the notion of the 'urban', literally 'of the city', a term that identifies

⁵ Max Weber, *The City* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1958).

⁶ Georg Simmel, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, ed. by K.H. Wolff (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1950 [1903]), pp. 409–26.

⁷ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), p. 26.

spaces, behaviours, and other features which are produced in and through the city. The steampunk city, however, and steampunk London in particular, is at once material in the historical structures still present, knowable mostly through textual sources, and wholly virtual and imaginary in its speculative aspects (more on this in Chapter Three). As an anachronistic, fantastic hybrid, steampunk London mediates between time-spaces, historiographies, and fantastic speculation by means of the Victorian aesthetic. Examining this Victorian aesthetic and how it is accessed, conceptualised, and playfully interrogated tells us how steampunk understands and perhaps re-defines our relationship with it, laying the groundwork for later steampunk imaginaries.

In this chapter, I examine the origins of first-wave steampunk and its approach to this re-imagined London by considering how Blaylock's, Jeter's, and Power's early steampunk novels re-adapt H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine* and Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* to rationalise and re-focus their new urban imaginaries. My focus will lie on time travel as a narrative device and the role of 'urbanity' in re-imagining a London setting. I will then consider steampunk against the backdrop of cyberpunk in order to illustrate how William Gibson and Bruce Sterling's 1990 novel *The Difference Engine* manages to synthesise steampunk into a new and coherent vision – one, I argue, that lastingly influences second-wave steampunk. In my analysis, I will examine their vision of the city in the context of Lefebvre's concept of the Right to the City.

2. THE CALIFORNIA TRIFECTA

2.1 TIME TRAVELERS AND MORLOCKS

Jeter's 1979 novel *Morlock Night*, firmly installed by steampunk discourse as 'the book that started it all',⁹ is a fantasy-infused, escapist sequel to H. G. Wells' 1895 novella *The Time Machine*, 'in plot and action, not in politics or ideology.'¹⁰ As an adventure odyssey through Victorian London in which a reincarnated King Arthur and Merlin search for Excalibur to defeat the Morlocks which have used the time machine to invade and colonise the alternative past,

⁸ David Harvey, 'The Right to the City', *New Left Review*, 53 (2008), 23-40, p. 23.

⁹ Tim Powers, 'Introduction', in *Morlock Night*, by K.W. Jeter (Oxford: Angry Robot, 2011 [1979]), p. 11.

¹⁰ Perschon, 'Seminal Steampunk', p. 161.

Morlock Night offers little in the way of subversive urban politics. Indeed, its most interesting feature is perhaps the fact that by building Wells' time machine into its premise, the novel establishes a trajectory to that key text of both Victorian and speculative fiction, letting Wells' hypothetical foray into the blank future collide and cross over with the returned gaze from such a future into the now shrouded past. The idea of travel through time seems to connect the Victorian past with the 1980s present across a gulf of the post-Victorian in the steampunk imagination. It is therefore worth considering how precisely, and with which implications, early steampunk ventures into the past.

David Wittenberg's narratological study *Time Travel: The Popular Philosophy of Narrative* (2013) considers the cultural and scientific currents that accompany this type of speculative fiction from the nineteenth century onward and provides insight into some of its motivational concerns. It is the paradigm shift brought about by a widespread acceptance of Darwinian models of evolutionary development, he claims, which 'impels a general shift toward specifically temporal models of sociopolitical extrapolation: plausible utopian futures must be directly "evolved" from actual present-day conditions.'¹¹ Utopian romances, as he terms them, develop into time travel fictions which 'link present and future realistically, and thereby [...] legitimize social prognostications'.¹² This is most clearly illustrated by Wells' account of future London in *The Time Machine* (1895). While the time traveller must constantly correct and re-adjust his anthropological deductions about the future he encounters, they are deeply rooted in an evolutionary logic he perceives as coherent, namely a logic of teleological progress and decline. In 1895, Max Nordau's *Degeneration* had been translated into English and made the term notorious as a defamation of *fin-de-siècle* culture through a logic of social Darwinism. Considering Nordau's spiteful attacks on the decadent movement, it is all the more ironic that the traveller's 'first evocation of London is a satirical biologizing of [...] 1890s Aestheticism (all those beautiful, dying, effeminate consumptives)'.¹³ Indeed, the Eloi are insipid, child-like, post-bourgeois creatures, 'dwindling in size, strength, and intellect'.¹⁴ Indolent and alienated from the

¹¹ David Wittenberg, *Time Travel. The Popular Philosophy of Narrative* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), p. 30.

¹² Wittenberg, *Time Travel*, p. 30.

¹³ Luckhurst, *Science Fiction*, p. 37.

¹⁴ H. G. Wells, 'The Time Machine', in *H.G. Wells. The Great Science Fiction* (London: Penguin Classics, 2016 [1895]), pp. 1-90, p. 49.

decaying ruins of future London, they have lost any trace of urban sophistication alongside basic technologies such as fire-making and written language. They are continually preyed on by their antithesis, the ‘ape-like’, carnivorous, underground-dwelling Morlocks, characterised as primitive monsters, Lemurs, and ‘human spiders’. (p. 45). The Morlocks are ‘strongly associated [...] with the mythic landscape of the night and the underground’, as well as the haunting echoes of technology.¹⁵ The nameless traveller associates their subterranean dwellings with ‘the Metropolitan Railway in London’¹⁶, where he hears ‘the throb and hum of machinery’ (p. 52). In fact, while the traveller may sympathise with the primitive Eloi, he shares with the abject Morlocks ‘the same mechanical bent, the same longing for meat, the same disordered nights, the same bloodlust to kill.’¹⁷ Wells’ portrait of the future remains deliberately ambiguous about our alignment with these futuristic dwellers.

Naturally, his pursuit of this Darwinist-Marxist imaginative trajectory along the lines of human evolution serves as socio-cultural critique of his late Victorian present, hinging on the mediating, commenting presence of the time traveller who can only understand the future on the terms of his present. As such, he identifies the effeminate Eloi as the heirs of ‘the Haves, pursuing pleasure and comfort and beauty,’ and the Morlocks ‘below ground [as] the Have-nots, the Workers getting continually adapted to the conditions of their labour’¹⁸ who now in turn oppress their oppressors. Wells utilises the future as an imaginative playground in which the unwritten possibilities he imagines are so firmly rooted in the present that evolution can come full circle. This is repeatedly linked to the physical, urban landscape, both present and future: ‘Even now, does not an East-End worker live in such artificial conditions as practically to be cut off from the natural surface of the earth?’ (p. 48). In addition to such speculations about the Morlocks, the traveller configures the ‘exquisite beauty of the buildings’ to exemplify ‘the last surgings of the now purposeless energy of mankind before it settled down into perfect harmony with the conditions under which it lived—the flourish of that triumph which began the last great peace’ (p. 48). Such an assessment mirrors once again the self-perception of late-Victorian decadence, seemingly evolved to such heights of civilisation that, as the traveller predicts, ‘it

¹⁵ David. L. Pike, ‘Afterimages of the Victorian City’, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 15:2 (2010), 254-267, p. 259.

¹⁶ Wells, p. 47.

¹⁷ Luckhurst, *Science Fiction*, p. 38.

¹⁸ Wells, p. 48.

takes to art and eroticism, and then come languor and decay' (p. 33).

Socially and physically, Victorian London is overlaid with its own future. Pinpointing geographical areas such as Wimbledon, Wandsworth, or Battersea, or examining future archaeologies in 'the ruins of some latter-day Kensington Museum', the traveller continues to see Victorian London underneath this future cityscape (p. 64). As Luckhurst remarks: 'The Traveller only sketches his moralistic degenerationism onto the cosmos, making the end of the world a rather local, late Victorian affair.'¹⁹ This in turn illustrates Louis Montrose's New Historicist claim about the 'historicity of texts', for example their rootedness in the socio-historical, political, and cultural contexts of their production.²⁰ It draws our attention to an important distinction: as Wells' traveller can only see and understand the future on Victorian terms, so steampunk can only re-imagine the past from a twentieth-century (later twenty-first) perspective, and although the imagined future and historical space with which both are concerned is, in a manner, 'Victorian', those ideas about what constitutes 'Victorian' must necessarily be at variance.

Wells' speculations, while certainly progressive and subversive, nevertheless hinge on popular understandings of the evolution paradigm and a fundamental Victorian notion that

explanatory models based on the interplay of forces—Darwinism, Marxist (or other) socialisms, industrial management, macroeconomics, the various, burgeoning fields of economics—could still appear potentially to belong to a single unified science, simultaneously natural, psychological, and sociological, yet wholly in accord with the postulates of evolution, which would itself be graspable as a direct extension of Newtonian mechanics.²¹

These underlying assumptions undergo change and revision throughout the twentieth century, impacting popular imagination and cultural production. Wittenberg proposes that the paradigm shift occurring after the popularisation of Einstein's theory of relativity and Heisenberg's uncertainty principle in the 1920s has a profound effect on speculative fiction, especially time

¹⁹ Luckhurst, *Science Fiction*, p. 39.

²⁰ Louis Montrose, 'Renaissance Literary Studies and the Subject of History', *Studies in Renaissance Historicism*, 16:1 (1986), 5-12, p. 8.

²¹ Wittenberg, p. 39.

travel fiction (p. 31). Relativity physics make the ‘multiplication and recombination’ of narrative and temporal lines thinkable and, in combination with Freudian or Jungian psychoanalysis, provide for ‘temporal dilation or reversal, physical access to one’s own past or future (or alternative presents), [...] “narcissistic” or “oedipal” meetings’ — ideas which, according to Wittenberg, inform much the pulp fiction of the 1930s and 1940s (p. 31). Developments in quantum mechanics in the 1950s and 1960s popularise a ‘many-worlds’ idea in which alternative worlds exist parallel to our own (p. 15). Time-travel fiction begins to speculate on ‘pivotal incidents’ and divergent realities (p.15). Wittenberg, interested foremost in narratology, does not illuminate in which way he considers time-travel fiction and alternative histories affiliated or divergent, but it is worth noting that the genre of alternate history certainly gains new momentum with publications such as Philip K. Dick’s *The Man in the High Castle* (1962). In the popular imagination, speculation is no longer a linear projection into a blank future, but may affect the present itself: ‘[T]he meaning of the individual historical event and its capacity to affect and define the broader historical record, as well as, alternatively, the capacity of the historical record to define and characterize the individual event’ are concerns which alternative histories, in accordance with Hayden White’s notion of the ‘fundamental “ambiguity of the term” history’, put into play (p. 11-12).

Like time-travel fiction, modern historiography is concerned with this uncertain relationship between event and history. Whereas Wittenberg does not elaborate further, it is worth investigating how the paradigms of New Historicism, together with Paul Ricoeur’s notion of narrative identity, inform time travel as a concept, as by inference they also inform steampunk speculations at large. White defines history as manifestly ‘a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse that purports to be a model, or icon, of past structures and processes in the interest of explaining what they were by representing them’.²² It is then, White notes, ‘emplotted in some way’ (p. 8) — a term central to Ricoeur’s hermeneutic phenomenological philosophy of *Time and Narrative* (1984-88) as the organisation of a series of events into a meaningful narrative.²³ In Ricoeur’s work, emplotment is not only integral to historiography, but

²² Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1973), p. 2.

²³ ‘[W]e may say that [plot] draws a meaningful story from a diversity of events or incidents [...] or that it transforms the events or incidents into a story. The two reciprocal relations expressed by from and into characterize the plot as mediating between events and a narrated story. [...] A story, too, must be more than just an enumeration

to his conception of identity itself, in which subjectivity emerges out of narrative: ‘To answer the question “Who?” [...] is to tell the story of a life. [...] And the identity of this who therefore itself must be a narrative identity’.²⁴ Historiography and identity are then closely intertwined because both are founded on a hermeneutic process of sense-making, namely the synthesis of historical events into a ‘plot’: ‘The plot, therefore, places us at the crossing point of temporality and narrativity.’²⁵ In such a plot, however objective, events and their significance are necessarily evaluated and accordingly arranged. Time travel, and by implication steampunk which relies on similar strategies, brings together historiographic metafiction such as neo-Victorianism and speculative fiction in a new way. History, time, and self, while intertwined and mutually constitutive, become open to experiment and play.

2.1.1 THE ANUBIS GATES

Tim Powers’ 1983 novel *The Anubis Gates* investigates time, history, and identity in such a spirit. Set in the Regency era and as such depicting a pre-Victorian nineteenth century, the novel demonstrates the flexibility of the budding genre, not yet dedicated wholly to the later Victorians alone.²⁶ Hired to accompany a group of wealthy tourists through a hole in the time stream to visit a lecture by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in 1810, then stranded there, the academic Brendan Doyle comes to realise, through a series of misadventures, that he himself is, or will always have been, the obscure Romantic poet William Ashbless of whom he has been trying to write a biography. Wittenberg identifies such meta-literary ‘narcissistic’ self-(re-)encounters, or closed-loop narratives as a common trope of time travel narratives, as they interrogate the inevitability of history and enquire into ‘the ontology of the event itself’:²⁷

of events in serial order; it must organize them into an intelligible whole [...]. In short, emplotment is the operation that draws a configuration out of a simple succession’. Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol.1. (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1984), p. 65.

²⁴ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 3. (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1988), p. 246.

²⁵ Ricoeur, ‘Narrative Time’, *Critical Inquiry*. 7:1 (1980), 169-190, p. 171.

²⁶ ‘Since *The Anubis Gates* takes place in the early nineteenth century, and because they were friends, Jeter lumped Powers in with his and Blaylock’s’ Victorian fantasies’ in his offhand remark in *Locus* that birthed the term ‘steampunk’. For this reason, regardless of how one defines it today, *The Anubis Gates* is part of how steampunk begins.’ Perschon, ‘Seminal Steampunk’, p. 170.

²⁷ Wittenberg, p. 64.

Is ‘the historical event, in and of itself, a blankly preliminary cause, an overdetermined revisionist effect, or a mere component or signifier of some even larger story or signifier? Or, [...] is the inevitability of [(here: becoming Ashbless)] the result of the somehow unalterable pastness of that event, the result of the deliberate intervention of the time traveller from out of the present [(here: the biographer)], or the result of a powerful inertia or causelike weight of history itself?’²⁸

After all, Doyle more or less seamlessly adapts into his new identity through the historical knowledge he assembled about himself in a now-distant future. This in turn creates a meta-historical double narrative, considering that he has ‘posthumously’ assembled an emplotted narrative about a life he now lives through. Moreover, as he becomes quite literally his own subject, Doyle’s journey stages, not as allegory but as part of the plot itself, what Lacan defined as the psychoanalytic session, the ‘realization of the [subject’s] history’ in a present discourse, or even ‘the restitution of the subject’s wholeness...in the guise of a restoration of the past’.²⁹ *The Anubis Gates* therefore enacts an adventure story in which the past is ultimately restored in a conservative resolution, but only after it has thoroughly shaken and examined notions of time, history, and self in a humorous, ironic manner. As such it presents a crucial link between traditional speculative fiction and the developing steampunk mode, which hinges on a playful premise of ‘What if we do not restore, but destabilise, subvert, and disassemble, the past?’

2.1.2 LORD KELVIN’S MACHINE

In his 1992 novel *Lord Kelvin’s Machine*, Blaylock’s scientist hero Langdon St.Ives, in accordance with the Victorian inventor archetype, quite literally hijacks the past to experiment on it. In the attempt to undo his wife Alice’s death at the hands of his arch enemy Dr Ignacio Narbondo, a grieving and bitter St.Ives travels along a complicated non-linear timeline in which he visits his own past and future multiple times, failing at first to alter history and repeatedly evading his alternate selves. He is ultimately transformed through an act of compassion when he cures the child Narbondo from meningitis. In doing so, he indirectly allows an archetypal villain

²⁸ Wittenberg, p. 13, my comments.

²⁹ Quoted in Wittenberg, p. 64. Lacan, *Seminar, Book I: Freud’s Papers on Technique, 1953-1954* (New York: Norton, 1998), p. 14.

to pursue his career of vivisection and murder throughout a series of novels and restores the narrative to its familiar shape. However, St.Ives also ultimately succeeds in saving Alice, which creates an alternative future, relativizes the plot about the widower St.Ives we as readers have hitherto followed, and poses a dilemma about his own, multiple selves:

He looked out into the street, where his past-time self lay invisible in the water and muck of the road. You fool, he said in his mind. I *earned* this, but I've got to give it to you, when all you would have done is botch it utterly. But even as he thought this, he knew the truth—that he wasn't the man now that he had been then. Alice didn't deserve the declined copy; what she wanted was the genuine article. And maybe he could become that article—but not by staying here. He had to go home again, to the future, in order to catch up with himself once more.³⁰

Relativity, the instability of the historical record, and speculation on alternative outcomes are built into the very fabric of Blaylock's steampunk universe. In this first phase of steampunk, revisiting the past is often a literal journey on the level of plot, or, as Wittenberg proposes in Russian formalist terminology, narrative devices such as repetitions, flash forwards or backwards, or time lapse are staged not just in the *sjuzhet* (how the plot is mediated), but the *fabula* (the story that happens).³¹ When we see St.Ives aghast at his wife's death in Seven Dials in one scene, and 'one year later' in the Peruvian Andes in the next, we understand such anomalies 'to be artifacts of plot manipulations arranged on the level of *sjuzhet*, and not characteristic of the underlying *fabula*, which is presumed to remain linear and chronological'.³² We as readers know instinctively that St.Ives did not suddenly travel forward in time at this point. However, as soon as he climbs into the time machine and finds himself transported to the day of his wife's demise, the manipulation becomes part of the *fabula* itself. As such, time travel represents early steampunk's experimental nature, but also helps rationalise alternative histories, which later become naturalised as part of steampunk's own premise. In the early 1980s,

³⁰ James P. Blaylock, *Lord Kelvin's Machine* (London: Titan Books, 2013 [1992]). p. 270.

³¹ 'Fabula is the ostensible underlying sequence of story events in a narrative, *sjuzhet* its re-formation as a specific plot, the reconstructed montage of story elements arranged by an author within a given set of generic rules or protocols.' Wittenberg, p. 6, original emphasis.

³² Wittenberg, p. 6, original emphasis.

steampunk still rehearses a variety of models to access the historiographic space of ‘Victorian fantasies’, which often includes a literal journey into the past.³³

Built into the very fabric of steampunk as a nascent literature that necessitated Jeter’s semi-ironic coinage is the assumption that it takes up an array of established speculative fiction strategies and re-applies them to the nineteenth century, an era in which, as exemplified by Wells’ novella, it emerged in the form we recognise. It simultaneously depends on the post-Victorian relativity paradigm which makes it structurally possible by infusing time and history itself with uncertainty, and projects into a pre-relativity era of imagined philosophical coherence and stability. Steampunk indulges in playful investigations of time and historiography, but can only do so by first travelling backwards, like Jeter’s Morlocks, along trajectories of history as a narrative, and then wreaking havoc there.

2.1 MAYHEW’S ‘SHABBY-SEEDY’ LONDON

Among the erroneous assumptions that are sometimes made about first-generation steampunk writers is that they convey a radical, subversive social commentary in their (re-)use of Henry Mayhew’s journalistic account, *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851, reissued with additions in 1861, 1862, 1864 and 1865). Steampunk chronicler Jess Nevins, for example, lamented in 2008 at the beginning of the second wave, that ‘most second generation steampunk is not true steampunk – there is little to nothing “punk” about it.’³⁴ Others, as Perschon notes, have criticised and contextualised such prescriptive statements, but often accepted the underlying premise that first-wave steampunk is inherently counter-cultural.³⁵ David L. Pike, for example, postulates that ‘first wave steampunk was dark and subversive in its approach to history and Victorian heritage, exhibiting a gleeful irreverence that fully merits the term’s suffix’.³⁶ While first-wave steampunk is certainly irreverent and unconventional in its re-vision, and we will see

³³ Considering that the 1980s mark the commercial success of such time travel blockbusters as Robert Zemeckis’s *Back to the Future* trilogy or several episodes of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987-1994), the general concept of a journey through time might have become popular enough a trope by then to necessitate less elaborate explanations or demonstrations in later speculations.

³⁴ Jess Nevins, ‘Introduction: the 19th-Century Roots of Steampunk’, in *Steampunk*, ed. by Ann and Jeff VanderMeer (San Francisco: Tachyon, 2008), p. 10-11.

³⁵ Perschon, ‘Seminal Steampunk’, p. 155-156.

³⁶ Pike, p. 264.

throughout this thesis that steampunk is, in and of itself, ideological irrespective of how it is deployed, but Powers', Blaylock's, and Jeter's novels are hardly 'dark and subversive'.

Such a desire to identify an intrinsic streak of innovative critique in the moment of its inception is linked to steampunk activists' self-stylisation as equally subversive on one hand, and academia's need to justify steampunk as a serious, productive subject matter for neo-Victorian studies on the other. Mayhew and his work certainly inform early steampunk in essential and tangible ways, but the effect of such intertextual reference has, perhaps, been slightly misread in an attempt to construct a coherent steampunk identity. After all, Mayhew's urban ethnography itself is embedded within its own socio-historical context.³⁷ Let us therefore consider early steampunk's approach to *London Labour* more closely.

The California trifecta have acknowledged Mayhew's influence on their 'Victorian fantasies': 'Jeter discovered this priceless source book, Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor*, and Blaylock and I made eager use of it, too', writes Powers in his 2011 preface to the re-published *Morlock Night*. In the *Steampunk Bible*, they call Mayhew's opus 'the corner stone of Victorian London research work (at least when you need some seedy low-life colour)'.³⁸ Whereas academia still debates how to signify Mayhew's near-Dickensian, picturesque descriptions of the sentimental and shabby-vivacious, the novelists writing far removed from Mayhew's own context ascribe to his work the authenticity of the journalist, and to them it becomes a 'source book' of, and key to, the gritty, hitherto undiscovered Victorian urban underbelly.³⁹ Their own creations become re-workings of elements in this text. In *Morlock Night*, for example, we meet Rich Tom, a 'sewer-hunter', a group who according to Mayhew, find among the 'pieces of iron, nails, various scraps of metal [...] shillings, sixpences, half-crowns, and occasionally half-sovereigns and sovereigns', but are also 'improvident'. With 'but ordinary prudence', the shore-men might

live well, have comfortable homes, and even be able to have sufficient to provide for themselves in their old age. Their practice, however, is directly the reverse. They no sooner

³⁷ Nevins, also: Sarah Roddy, Julie-Marie Strange and Bertrand Taithe, 'Henry Mayhew at 200 – the 'Other' Victorian Bicentenary', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 19:4 (2014), 481-496.

³⁸ VanderMeer and Chambers, *The Steampunk Bible*, p. 48.

³⁹ For example: Ole Münch. 'Henry Mayhew and the Street Traders of Victorian London — A Cultural Exchange with Material Consequences', *The London Journal*, 43:1 (2018), 53-71.

make a 'haul', as they say, than they adjourn to some low public-house in the neighbourhood, and seldom leave till empty pockets and hungry stomachs drive them forth to procure the means for a fresh debauch.⁴⁰

Yet Jeter's Rich Tom, having been converted by the journalist himself to middle-class virtues of prudence and foresight, has managed to amass a fortune.⁴¹ There is, of course, a certain ironic humour at play here. Mayhew's portraits, driven both by his own bourgeois background and empathy, depict London street folk as nomadic, independent urban cultures who share codes of meanings and behaviour which are coherent in themselves and differ from those of the working or middle class.⁴² Jeter picks up on this and adds his own, ironic twist, but Rich Tom's turn towards prudence indicates a degree of assimilation, not counter-culture.

In *The Anubis Gates*, a stranded, half-drowned Brendan Doyle is fished out of the Thames by costermongers. Mayhew outlines this community in painstaking detail over more than sixty pages, mapping out their trade routes, contrivances, their language, attitudes towards marriage, police, education, and religion, even their gambling habits, dress, and diet. In Powers' novel however, they merely convey Doyle to Billingsgate market and act as an omen that 'the advantage of all his twentieth-century knowledge' might not 'turn the scales in his favour'.⁴³ This encounter with the costermongers here functions as a gateway of Doyle's journey deeper into London's 'seedy' underworld, as it is at Billingsgate where he is introduced to the peculiar, even bizarre members of the beggars' guilds.

It is Blaylock's Langdon St. Ives series which makes most fruitful use of Mayhew's work. In *Homunculus*, we encounter Bill Kraken, a pea pod man holding 'an oval pot with a swing handle, the pot swaddled in a length of cloth' and 'a small closed basket' around his neck

⁴⁰ Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor. Vol. II.* (London: Frank Cass and Company Limited, 1967 [1862]), p. 152.

⁴¹ 'Mr. Mayhew, bless his memory, was the one who pointed out to me the folly of such rude practices, and how fast a little put by from one's findings would soon amount to a tidy sum.' K.W. Jeter, *Morlock Night* (Oxford: Angry Robot, 2011 [1979]), p. 133.

⁴² Eileen Yeo, 'Mayhew as a Social Investigator', in *The Unknown Mayhew. Selections from the Morning Chronicle 1849–50*, eds. by Eileen Yeo and E. P. Thompson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), pp. 56–109. There is also a more recent German study which discusses this at length, using Clifford Geertz' method of 'thick description' as basis: N. Bauer, et.al, 'Vom Charakter der Details. Henry Mayhews Costermonger als Proto-Subkultur', in *Die Zivilisierung der urbanen Nomaden*, ed. by R. Lindner (Berlin: LIT, 2005), pp. 63–81.

⁴³ Tim Powers, 'Introduction', p. 84.

in which he carries ‘salt, pepper, and vinegar’.⁴⁴ In this and many other descriptions, Blaylock closely echoes Mayhew’s detailed, anthropological descriptions, but it is through Kraken, this versatile ‘jack-of-all-Mayhew-trades’⁴⁵ who becomes a reliable part of St.Ives’ crew of heroes and as such a main character, that most of Mayhew’s characteristic tone of a somewhat romantic type of ethnography is re-presented.

All three novelists make conscious use of Mayhew as a source book in order to include characters and voices from the margins. Why this endeavour to portray an ‘authentic’ urban population in these adventurous Victorian fantasies? Costermongers, pea pod men and sewer-hunters appear in early steampunk rather to add that ‘seedy low-life colour’ rather than to deliver subversive social critique, and yet they are more than mere window dressing. Let us briefly consider Walter Benjamin, whose writings have long been understood essential to urban literature and the experience of the city itself. Writing about Naples in an essay for the *Frankfurter Zeitung* in 1925, he draws our attention to a communal life across private-public boundaries: ‘[T]he house is far less the refuge into which people retreat than the inexhaustible reservoir from which they flood out’.⁴⁶ Economic necessity influences their habitus and character in interesting ways: ‘Poverty has brought about a stretching of frontiers that mirrors the most radiant freedom of thought’.⁴⁷ While 1920s Naples bears little resemblance to Victorian London, we do find an echo of Mayhew’s costermongers, whose life is mostly lived out in the open urban space, and who adhere to their own customs and credos. Similarly, Benjamin’s description of Moscow, where ‘Shoe polish and writing materials, handkerchiefs, dolls’ sleighs, swings for children, ladies’ underwear, stuffed birds, clothes-hangers’ are sprawled out in the street echoes the clutter of Mayhew’s East End with its ‘plaids, hats, dressing gowns, shirts [...] in the dull brown-green of velveteen; the deep blue of a pilot jacket; the variegated figures of the shawl dressing-gown; the glossy black of the restored garments [...]’.⁴⁸ Even such cursory comparison implies an alternative, somewhat folkloric community in the city, a sort of inside-out lifestyle in defiance of traditional, respectable middle-class customs, which in Victorian England centred around separated public and private spheres. Mayhew’s urban tribes lead a life of invention and bravado

⁴⁴ James P. Blaylock, *Homunculus* (London: Titan Books, 2013 [1986]), p. 8.

⁴⁵ Perschon, ‘Seminal Steampunk’, p. 166.

⁴⁶ Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street* (London: Verso, 1997), p. 174.

⁴⁷ Benjamin, p. 175.

which a writer in the 1980s, particularly one acquainted with the philosophy of ‘punk’, might have read as the subversive bricolage of styles and behaviours Dick Hebdige identified as integral to subculture.⁴⁹

Indeed, early steampunk seems uninterested in the domestic sphere of the respectable Victorian middle class: their heroes often gallivant around with gypsies, costermongers, shady coachmen, and beggars who all live and work in the open urban street, subject to a certain vulnerability. By re-working and re-encoding Mayhew’s *London Labour*, first-wave steampunk crafts an approach to the Victorian city that is grounded in its whimsical ‘urban-ness’; Mayhew’s ‘exotic’ urban cultures, living proudly and defiantly in the metropolis as part of an obscured human infrastructure, become unusual because unexpected representatives of the Victorian city itself. They advocate especially its hidden mechanisms of trade and exchange which generate and are in turn influenced by community-specific behaviours as evidence of a secret alternative world existing within and alongside the visible, tangible world of the Victorian middle and upper class. This explains the triffecta’s proclivity for the ‘seedy’ side of Victorian London: Mayhew’s shabby-vivacious subcultures proudly inhabit an urban space of precarity, which for early steampunk writers contains unlimited possibilities for exploration and adventure.

2.2 ‘GONZO HISTORICAL’: THE URBAN WEIRD

In early steampunk, Mayhew’s picturesque urban tribes are re-imagined as part of a colourful, ‘seedy’, shabby cityscape to re-create a hyper-Victorian London that feels both authentic and unfamiliar. As such they infuse the steampunk city with a certain whimsicality that becomes part of the fabric of steampunk. Steffen Hantke refers to an ‘authorial whimsy in mixing history, fiction, and fantasy’,⁵⁰ and Christine Ferguson refers to steampunk’s ‘whimsical’ practices in her discussion of surface and style.⁵¹ Perschon, too, describes Blaylock’s steampunk as follows: ‘He looks to the past as a fun place to play, a place where aliens arriving in London are met with the hope for a smoke, a chat, and a pint of bitter, rather than the London of today, where an alien

⁴⁸ Benjamin, p. 180; Mayhew, p. 38.

⁴⁹ Dick Hebdige, *Subculture. The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 1979).

⁵⁰ Steffen Hantke, ‘Difference Engines and Other Infernal Devices: History According to Steampunk’, *Extrapolation* 40:3 (1999), 244-254, p. 248.

might be met by the military. In short, Blaylock's steampunk is a world where whimsy rules'.⁵² From early on, steampunk infuses the Victorian past, which it understands 'not as a historical given but as a textual construct open to manipulation and modification', with an 'interplay of the familiar and the alien, the sense of distortion, hyperbole, and defamiliarization which oscillates between 'ironic and relativized absurdity'⁵³ and forms of escapism.⁵⁴ Whereas 'whimsy' is sometimes used in academic discourse to identify an ultimately inconsequential quirkiness, the early steampunk novels illustrate how such a quirkiness might be read as part of what Hantke identifies as a 'post-nostalgic' stance, especially because their whimsical aspects are rooted and connected to tropes of weird fiction.⁵⁵

Weird fiction is a subgenre of speculative fiction which emerges in the nineteenth century and is associated with turn-of-the-century and early twentieth-century writers such as Arthur Machen, Ambrose Bierce, or H. P. Lovecraft.⁵⁶ It characteristically blends horror, fantasy, and science fiction into tales often saturated with a spiritual or cosmic dread. Lovecraft famously characterised the weird in his 1925 essay, 'Supernatural Horror and Literatures', as follows:

The true weird tale must have something more than secret murder, bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking chains according to rule. A certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present; and there must be a hint, expressed with a seriousness and portentousness becoming its subject, of that most terrible conception of the human brain – a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space.⁵⁷

To a certain degree, the weird might rely on notions of the uncanny.⁵⁸ However, unlike in

⁵¹ Ferguson, p. 72, 76.

⁵² Perschon, 'Seminal Steampunk', p. 167.

⁵³ Hantke, p. 248-249.

⁵⁴ Ferguson, p. 72.

⁵⁵ Hantke, p. 252.

⁵⁶ Emily Alder, *Weird Fiction and Science at the Fin de Siècle* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

⁵⁷ H. P. Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (New York: Dover, 1973), p. 15.

⁵⁸ Defined by Sigmund Freud in his essay of the same name (1919), 'uncanny' denotes a sense of the uncomfortably strange, located at an ambivalent border of the familiar and the unknown which is constantly on the verge of collapse. The German 'unheimlich' literally translates to 'un-home-ly' and has a disquieting effect of destabilising

Gothic fiction (which we will examine more closely in Chapter Two), where uncanniness arises out of repressed memories and fears and is therefore psychological and internal, weird fiction's terror is located without and saturated by a sense of foreboding (after all, the word 'weird' is derived from the Anglo-Saxon concept 'wyrd', meaning fate or destiny). It explores the cosmic indifference of a universe continually widened and transformed by scientific discovery, and revels in undermining and dislodging the anthropocentric, late-Victorian perception. Taking advantage of emerging fantastic fiction not yet encased in the more clearly defined and hierarchical boundaries of genre, weird fiction values transgressive or obscure content as what Luckhurst identifies as 'emblems of aesthetic resistance to the [middle-brow] market'.⁵⁹ Its boundaries remain deliberately slippery and 'wayward',⁶⁰ so that a certain influence on early steampunk, itself a hybrid mode, is discernible. Here, too, we find an audacious, inventive irreverence for the ontologies of the universe, an indifference for commercial good taste, and an exploration of a world constantly in flux. Perhaps this is why, in first-wave steampunk, we encounter a number of oddities, such as horror clowns and subterranean monsters in *The Anubis Gates*, East End fish people in *Infernal Devices* (1987), or alien airships and homunculi in *Homunculus*. However, just as early steampunk's gaze is turned inward on the Victorian urban past, not to outward forces or the future, so do these oddities bear little resemblance with the tentacled weird monsters which Lovecraft's Cthulu so infamously embodies.⁶¹ It would be wrong to assume that these imaginative flourishes in early steampunk are concerned with an unfathomable cosmic indifference, a hostile urbanity, or dread and uncertainty in general. On the contrary, imagined from the safe position of hindsight, they appear as part and parcel of the re-imagined urban environment itself. As Karl Bell posits: 'Beyond small, routine behaviours, the urban dweller lives in an environment in which s/he lacks personal influence, in circumstances defined by fragmented, impressionistic, and limited knowledge. Such an atmosphere is ripe for

identity. Sigmund Freud, 'The 'Uncanny'', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XVII (1917-1919): An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*, (London: Hogarth Press, 1955 [1919]), p. 217-256.

⁵⁹ Roger Luckhurst, 'The weird: a dis/orientation', *Textual Practice* 31:6 (2017), 1041-1061.

⁶⁰ Luckhurst, 'weird', p. 1049.

⁶¹ 'Perhaps this is why the signature of weird fiction and horror film is not the vampire or the zombie, those minimal allegorical displacements of the human, but the tentacle, that limb-tongue suggestive of absolute alterity.' Luckhurst, 'weird', p. 1054.

the intrusion of the urban weird'.⁶² Early steampunk's homunculi, horror clowns, and fish people characterise a Victorian city that seems, in and of itself, a curiosity. Here, the unexpected, the outrageous, and the supernatural are perfectly at home.

The Regency London in which Brendan Doyle finds himself in *The Anubis Gates*, for example, is populated by gypsies, Egyptian sorcerers, Lord Byron homunculi, and body-switching werewolves. It is also warred over, unbeknown to most, by two rivalling beggar guilds: the Dolorous Brethren, led by the grotesque clown Horrabin, who disfigures his minions into a bizarre menagerie, and the Pye Street Beggars who elaborately perform archetypes such as the 'Decayed Gentlemen', the 'Shipwrecked Mariners' or the 'Distressed Hindoos' to a middle-class public, perhaps as ironic parodies of Mayhew's urban types.⁶³ Neither Dog-Face Joe, the body-switcher werewolf, nor Horrabin's Mistakes, those failed experiments with their 'roars and growls and wails, and the wet slitherings, and the rustling of heavy, scaled limbs being shifted and the rattle of claws' impact the adventure narrative through anything more than their grotesque outer characteristics (p.436). As Bell argues, we have become familiar with the folkloric and mass cultural monsters such as werewolves and vampires through film and literature, and 'we have become comfortable thinking with and employing the mercurial, metaphorical value of such entities.'⁶⁴ Urban weird monsters, by contrast, tend to be less traditionally legible: 'The weird serves as a signal that our frameworks and our habituated ways of thinking have been rendered insufficient' (p. 9). Rather than challenge our fundamental assumptions about the universe, early steampunk's decoratively grotesque antagonists challenge our imaginary of the Victorian city. They may be absurd and whimsical, but their presence defamiliarizes and 'weirds' the urban space. What we encounter here cannot be categorised or rationalised through familiar pathways of memory, nor explained to satisfaction. 'The urban weird', notes Bell, 'reminds us that we are not masters of our cities', (p. 8) but at the same time, through destabilising 'our former ways of seeing and knowing', it 'holds the potential for liberation from accepted norms'. (p. 13). As such, the weird serves as ironic markers of the meta-historical steampunk fantasy which does not follow familiar conventions or offer knowable

⁶² Karl Bell, 'Through Purged Eyes. Folk Horror and the Affective Landscape of the Urban Weird', in *The Urban Wyrd 2: Spirits of Place*, ed. by Andy Paciorek and others (Wyrd Harvest Press, 2019), p. 4.

⁶³ Tim Powers, *The Anubis Gates* (London: Orion Books, 1983), p. 110.

⁶⁴ Bell, p. 4.

scenarios and, like the steampunk city itself, can only be explored gradually.

The whimsical and weird extend to the urban cityscape: Powers' London is overlaid at once by its own past and future. Holes in the time stream connect specific locales in and around the city, so that 1980s London is invisibly layered over 1810, which in turn reveals a passage to 1660 Southwark. Such palimpsestic moments are amplified by Doyle's own, anachronistic observations and actions, for example when he whistles the Beatles' song 'Yesterday' 'only a block, he realised, from Keats' birthplace',⁶⁵ or when he associates Horrabin's own whistles with 'the Nazi Gestapo sirens in old movies about World War Two' (p. 134). However, the palimpsestic city is also translated into a network of underground tunnels beneath St. Giles, an a-chronic underworld that houses the monstrous Mistakes as well as a 'subterranean river' complete with docks and boats (p. 187). From the outside, 'brick in every degree of size, shade, and age - and half-timbered, [...] linked to the dark bulk of other buildings at every level by flimsy bridges and ratlines, [...] pierced by windows in such an uneven pattern that they couldn't [...] reflect the arrangement of floors inside', Horrabin's 'Rat's Castle' 'had been constructed on the foundations and around the remains of a hospital built in the twelfth century' (p. 432). The whole structure suggests an eclectic, near-organic urban growth:

[T]he hospital's bell-tower still survived, but over the centuries the various owners of the site had, largely for warehousing purposes, steadily added new floors and walls around it, until now its arched Norman windows looked, instead of out across the city, into narrow rooms fronted right up against them and moored to the ancient stone; the cap of the tower was the only bit of structure still exposed to the open air, and it would have been hard to find in the rooftop wilderness of chimney pots, airshafts and wildly uneven architecture.⁶⁶

It is a haphazard conglomerate of styles and temporalities which is reflected above ground as well as below: '[A] subterranean grotto formed by the collapse [...] of twelve levels of sewers', 'floored with stones laid by the Romans in the days when Londinium was a military out-post in a hostile Celtic wilderness'.⁶⁷ In this surreal, a-historic counter-space, it is no surprise that a

⁶⁵ Powers, *Anubis Gates*, p. 193.

⁶⁶ Powers, p. 152.

⁶⁷ Powers, p. 99.

displaced Samuel Taylor Coleridge suddenly finds himself several miles below ground in a ‘dimly torchlit stairwell, whose architecture he recognized as debased provincial Roman’, and, believing himself in a vivid opium dream, pens the beginning of ‘Kubla Khan’.⁶⁸ Victorian London, in Powers’ vision, is a labyrinth of waywardly accumulated times and spaces, many of which are hidden from view and can only be discovered by (involuntary) adventurers. Similarly, George, the protagonist of Jeter’s *Infernal Devices*, discovers a hidden population of fish people living in the East End, ‘denizens of a London previously unknown’.⁶⁹ This ‘Wetwick’, a destination for slumming gentlemen with peculiar tastes, is a secret accessible only for those who know its secret codes and habits: a mysterious coin of ‘St. Monkfish’ and a seedy-looking cab driver accompany George’s foray into this alternative London.

Early steampunk novels formulate a vision of steampunk London as a city which retains an ontological peculiarity due to its unfathomable age, its physically and spatially palimpsestic character, and its vastness. It is a city grown, near organically, over centuries. Its physical structures have been modified, re-purposed, forgotten, and outlasted their inhabitants. Times and spaces co-exist simultaneously or layered over one another. With its secret or forgotten passageways and cellars, architectural features that have lost their use and meaning, and its changing populations, it is always in flux, shifting, adapting and being adapted—a space, in short, of tantalising obscurity and infinite possibilities, open to the curious, the inventive, and the adventurous.

Such a vision of Victorian London as fundamentally weird and whimsical is inextricably tied to the reception of the ‘Victorian’ in all its sweeping generalisation, and what it signifies to the authors whose ‘Victorian fantasies’ founded steampunk as a mode. The whimsy and weird function as symptoms which illustrate that steampunk takes the historical past as a retro-speculative playground in which ‘to establish and then violate and modify a set of ontological ground rules’ — among which we must count history, realism, or notions of ‘the Victorian’.⁷⁰ From early on, ‘the Victorian’, an epoch that is ‘fractured, multiple, and monstrous’, intermingles freely with whimsy and weird elements in steampunk because to the 1980s writer of speculative fiction as well as to the millennial steampunk, ‘the Victorian’ itself is no less

⁶⁸ Powers, p. 441.

⁶⁹ K. W Jeter, *Infernal Devices* (Nottingham: Angry Robot, 2011 [1987]), p. 96.

⁷⁰ Hantke, p. 248.

unfamiliar or otherworldly than the fantastical offspring of late-Victorian fiction by which it is inspired.⁷¹ In 2008, when steampunk's second wave begins to gather momentum and generate discussion, whimsicality becomes a central aspect of steampunk. In his *User's Guide to Steampunk*, Bruce Sterling addresses steampunk as a nascent maker culture whose tinkering and upcycling practises are directed against homogeneous 'big, mind-deadening companies who want to package and sell shrink-wrapped cultural product'.⁷² Such an endeavour is fruitfully encoded in Victorian aesthetics because, as Sterling postulates, 'The Industrial Revolution has grown old. So machines that Romantics considered satanic now look romantic.' Similar to Mayhew's Victorian subjects, whose circumstances were a real concern to his middle-class contemporaries, but who represent alternative urban communities with which to add some 'seedy low-life color' to the California trifecta, the socio-historical symbolics of 'the Victorian' have been adjusted to the present from which they are perceived. The aesthetics of industrial progress are reminders of an industrial paradigm long outmoded: 'The 19th-century world was crude, limited and clanky, but the 20th-century world is calamitously unsustainable'.⁷³ It is relevant that the 1980s, when the California trifecta begins its foray into steampunk, also mark the decline of the North American Rust Belt and with it the same industrial paradigm. What was once useful or decorative now becomes whimsical and weird:

Steampunk's key lessons are not about the past. They are about the instability and obsolescence of our own times. A host of objects and services that we see each day all around us are not sustainable. [...] Once they're gone, they'll seem every bit as weird and archaic as top hats, crinolines, magic lanterns, clockwork automatons, absinthe, walking-sticks and paper-scrolled player pianos.⁷⁴

Whimsicality in steampunk does not mean thoughtlessly frivolous, absurd, or nostalgic. While indeed playful, abstruse, or comical, it is often balanced with grittier aesthetics or implications, and is assimilated into the hyper-Victorian fabric itself as a form of homage. At the same time, it also becomes a defining characteristic of the 'Victorian' and the 'urban' itself as potentially

⁷¹ Hantke, p. 253.

⁷² Sterling, 'User's Guide', p. 12.

⁷³ Sterling, 'User's Guide', p. 12.

⁷⁴ Sterling, 'User's Guide', p. 13.

wayward, obscure, and resistant to both established taste and notions of historicity. Like the weird, it forces us to re-consider and re-approach the past as something we have not fully catalogued, mapped, and conquered. It shares qualities with the weird, but rather than alienating us from spaces we now no longer inhabit unchallenged, the whimsical encodes anachronistic, fantastic speculation and post-nostalgic deconstruction of history and invites us to imagine past and Victorian city alike as a space in which to explore and discover.

3. DIFFERENT ENGINES: THE 1980S

It is with Bruce Sterling and William Gibson's 1990 novel *The Difference Engine*, 'the closest text that steampunk has to a canonical novel', that the genre is synthesised into the more coherent, more radical counter-culturally potent vision which inspires the burgeoning subculture some seventeen years later.⁷⁵ Let us first consider the cultural and political currents in which it is embedded and to which it responds, as it is this recalibration by Gibson and Sterling which contributes to the formation of steampunk as an aesthetic that re-assembles a punked Victorian past to reflect on present and future.

The 1980s are defined both in the UK and the US by the politics of the New Right and the leadership of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan respectively. Both introduced an era of radical change characterised by economic liberalism and social conservatism which, through deregulation, privatisation of public services, curtailing of worker's unions' rights, and discontinuing social welfare programs gave rise to an unfettered capitalism with tangible social cost. Culturally, as Luckhurst observes, 'this transformation has been allied to the emergence of postmodernism'.⁷⁶ Marxist scholar Fredric Jameson identifies among the markers of postmodernism the simulacrum, an 'identical copy for which no original has ever existed' or pastiche as a 'parody [...] without vocation', 'the random cannibalization of all the styles of the past.'⁷⁷ Postmodernism values style over content and surface over depth, meaningful semiotic

⁷⁵ Patrick Jagoda, 'Clacking Control Societies: Steampunk, History, and the Difference Engine of Escape', *Neo-Victorian Studies* 3.1 (2010), 46-71, p. 47. John Clute, 'Vive?', in *Look at the Evidence* (London: Gollancz, 1996 [1991]), pp. 243-245, p. 234.

⁷⁶ Luckhurst, *Science Fiction*, p. 196.

⁷⁷ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 16- 17.

connections break down in post-structuralist manner, and the text ironically performs, rather than sincerely expresses. Jameson's theory is especially interesting here as he begins his work with a reference to William Gibson and a footnote in which he regrets not being able to discuss cyberpunk, which he considers to be the 'supreme *literary* expression if not of postmodernism, then of late capitalism itself'.⁷⁸ Indeed, Gibson's 1984 novel *Neuromancer* is generally credited with launching the science fiction subgenre cyberpunk, preceded only by Ridley Scott's film *Blade Runner* (1982).⁷⁹

Gibson's novel is characterised by a dense linguistic style littered with neologisms, references to and pastiches of hard-boiled detective novels by the likes of Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett, and a general atmosphere of cool defeatism so characteristic of the noir genre. Here, multi-national corporations murderously compete with one another in vast hyper-cities, Artificial Intelligences move about in the 'consensual hallucination' cyberspace, and cybertechnology saturates lives, bodies, and realities to such an extent that they can be hacked.⁸⁰ In accordance with Jameson's claim that the postmodern dissolves the boundaries between so called high culture and pop culture, fascinated by the "degraded" landscape of schlock and kitsch', *Neuromancer* glories in a sophisticated, rebellious pulp-ness, which has become a staple of the genre.⁸¹ As Gibson's speculative vision of the hyper-capitalist, info-technology-dominated future illustrates (especially to anyone who reads *Neuromancer* in the twenty-first century), the 1980s are also the decade in which cyberpunk seemed to embody the cultural significance and value science fiction had always laid claim to as Reagan recruited science fiction authors for anti-Soviet satellites.⁸² As Luckhurst illustrates, cyberpunk writers such as Gibson and Sterling turned away from the science fiction boosterism of the preceding decades, which had now become appropriated by a politics they opposed: '[C]yberpunk was formulated in the way it was precisely because of the prominence of the SF megatext in the fantasy life of the American New

⁷⁸ Jameson, p. 419, original emphasis.

⁷⁹ Gibson, who was in the process of writing *Neuromancer* left the cinema because he "was afraid the movie would be better than what [he himself] had been able to imagine". William Gibson, 'The Art of Fiction', *The Paris Review*, 2011. <<https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/6089/william-gibson-the-art-of-fiction-no-211-william-gibson>> (Accessed March 10th 2018).

⁸⁰ William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (London: Gollancz, 2016 [1984]), p. 59.

⁸¹ Jameson, p. 2.

⁸² Csicsery-Ronay, p. 200.

Right'.⁸³

Instead, cyberpunk turned towards counter-culture and the underdog. In the preface of his *Mirrorshades* anthology (1986), another cyberpunk classic, Sterling outlines the movement as an 'unholy alliance of the technical world and the world of organized dissent — the underground world of pop culture, visionary fluidity, and street-level anarchy'.⁸⁴ Console-cowboy hackers like Gibson's Henry Case, then, are inspired by 'the technical revolution reshaping our society' and the thriving urban youth cultures of the 1970s and 80s: rockers, punks, hip hop street dancers, graffiti artists, and skateboarders.⁸⁵ As we will examine more closely in Chapter Three, in cyberpunk, the mega-city embodies corporate domination and capitalist ideology, but urban space also breeds and accommodates dissenters, rebels, and subversive agents of change. Gibson and Sterling's steampunk is likewise synthesised from the playful, whimsical Victorian fantasies of the California trifecta which explored an alternative, shabby-seedy Victorian London, as well as the counter-cultural cyberpunk ideology inspired by rapid technological change and urban rebel subcultures.⁸⁶ Is *The Difference Engine*, which after all, as Cory Doctorow diagnoses twenty years later, 'invented' the post-millennial movement, then merely cyberpunk in disguise?⁸⁷ Does its neo-Victorian London with its 'violent, polluted, *laissez-faire* anarchy', as Luckhurst postulates in his short commentary on the subgenre, only work 'as a precursor of the post-industrial near-future ecological wastelands of cyberpunk'?⁸⁸ As we will see later, second-wave steampunk at once internalises the core ideas of Sterling and Gibson's vision, perhaps intuitively, and takes them in new directions. As a consequence, steampunk and cyberpunk remain both allied as well as fundamentally different. *The Difference Engine* illustrates how and why that is. It imagines that Charles Babbage's Analytical Engine has been built, caused a revolution in the 1830s in which Luddites are defeated by the Radical Industrials, and thoroughly transformed Victorian London in 1855, in which the novel is set. As Istvan Csicsery-Ronay notes:

⁸³ Luckhurst, *Science Fiction*, p. 200.

⁸⁴ Bruce Sterling, (ed.), *Mirrorshades. The Cyberpunk Anthology* (New York: Ace Books, 1986), p. xii.

⁸⁵ Sterling, *Mirrorshades*, p. xii.

⁸⁶ Sterling, *Mirrorshades*, p. xii.

⁸⁷ Cory Doctorow, 'The Difference Engine: A Generation Later', in: *The Difference Engine*, by William Gibson and Bruce Sterling, 2nd. (New York: Random House, 2011 [1991]), pp. vii-xi.

⁸⁸ Luckhurst, *Science Fiction*, p. 213.

In *The Difference Engine* a significant nexus point of the past—the moment when Babbage’s engine might have intersected with the industrial revolution in Western Europe—is reimagined in terms of a strong problem of our own age, a potential nexus point of our present’s future: the intersection of AI and the information revolution.⁸⁹

For Sterling and Gibson, who had previously chosen to write about American settings, Victorian London provided not just an alternative, punk-ish aesthetic, but a powerful perceived parallel to the present. Both Jeter and Blaylock imagine the gentleman inventor as a pre-corporate, individualist tinkerer—perhaps a romantically envisioned predecessor of the 1980s hacker, but it is *The Difference Engine* which fully realises the technological potential in its alternative history. Herbert Sussman diagnoses the Victorians as ‘the first people to live in a culture dominated by technology’ as early as 1968, and it is certainly true that by the end of the nineteenth century industry had saturated and transformed Western culture on all levels.⁹⁰ The Victorians were the first fully industrialised society and culture whose lives were affected by rapidly evolving technology such as the railway, the telegraph, mass media, electricity, or early automobiles. They were also a global society, interconnected through a world-spanning Empire whose regulation and conquest was facilitated by technological development. Not least, the era was characterised by a social upheaval in the form of first-wave feminism, for example, which is easily identifiable by a spectator who, though not immersed in, then at least surrounded by, second-wave 1980s feminism (more on this in Chapter Four).

However, for all these parallels the Victorian era seems also intriguingly far removed and unfamiliar. Having passed out of living memory and receded behind one World War which, as the ‘seminal catastrophe of the twentieth century’ (according to George F. Kennan) lastingly transformed Western societies through what might be called a ‘modernist turn’ and another which brought genocide, the atom bomb, and the Cold War, the Victorian era can seem idyllic, quaint, and picturesque to some. Sterling, after all, portrays the Victorian aesthetic as ‘the dandified gear of aristocrats, peculiar brass gadgets, rather stilted personal relationships and

⁸⁹ Csicsery-Ronay, p. 109.

⁹⁰ Herbert Sussman, *Victorians and the Machine: The Literary Response to Technology* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1968), p. vii.

elaborate and slightly kinky underwear'.⁹¹ To an American science fiction writer in the 1980s, keenly aware of the disillusioning fallout of the Vietnam war and the repercussions of the post-industrial decline of the American Rust Belt, Victorian Britain might have represented an era of perceived coherence. Together with the perceived hubris and optimism which accompanied the industrial capitalism whose end they observed, the Victorian aesthetic conveys an alluring mixture of the familiar and the strange, the seemingly historically inevitable, and the might-have-been. Its potential to comment on the present is therefore unexpectedly powerful. 'At its best', as Pike observes, 'steampunk simultaneously critiques ossified attitudes toward the past and pillages that same past for alternatives to a present-day status quo to which it is violently opposed'.⁹²

4. THE DIFFERENCE ENGINE

4.1 CLACKERS AND COMPUTERS IN THE HYPER-VICTORIAN CITY

Charles Babbage's Difference Engine never developed past a small model built in 1822 and had to be abandoned in 1842 when funding ceased. With Ada Lovelace, Lord Byron's only legitimate daughter and mathematics prodigy, his Analytical Engine evolved, through Lovelace's notes on Luigi Menabrea's report on it, from a calculator into a proto-computer. Lovelace is nowadays regarded as the first programmer and her notes as the first algorithm. Nevertheless, the engine was never successfully built until 1991 by the London Science Museum and has been regaled to the fantastic imaginations of steampunk.⁹³ Brandy Schillace argues that it was the wrong historical moment and that Britain, still in midst of the Industrial Revolution, needed other kinds of technological infrastructure first: telegraphs, steam ships, electricity.⁹⁴

In Sterling and Gibson's novel, Babbage's Engine is successfully built and induces a radical paradigm shift, creating an alternative history. Whereas the Analytical Engine is considered to be the true precursor of modern computers, the authors chose to use the Difference Engine in order to allude to the novel's status as an alternative history in which Babbage's

⁹¹ Sterling, 'User's Guide', p. 13.

⁹² Pike, p. 265.

⁹³ Sydney Padua, '2D Goggles, or The Thrilling Adventures of Lovelace and Babbage', <<http://sydneypadua.com/2dgoggles/>> (Accessed March 12th 2018).

⁹⁴ Brandy Schillace, *Clockwork Futures. The Science of Steampunk and the Reinvention of the Modern World* (New

Engine literally produces a different timeline. In contrast to the triffecta's earlier Victorian fantasies, which presented a comparatively mildly distorted past, *The Difference Engine* imagines a radically transformed never-was: the Marxist revolution is relocated to the United States, fragmented into British territories and small republics, and Japan aspires to be a 'Britain of Asia' a good twenty years early. The Duke of Wellington, misjudging the 'revolutionary tenor of the coming age of industry and science', becomes a casualty of the new age:

And the England that Wellington had known and misruled, the England of Mallory's childhood, had slid through strikes, manifestos, and demonstrations, to riots, martial law, massacres, open class-warfare, and near-total anarchy. Only the Industrial Radical Party, with their boldly rational vision of a comprehensive new order, had saved England from the abyss.⁹⁵

This paradigm shift sees a surviving Lord Byron as the Industrial Radical Prime minister and a re-structuring of society to a meritocracy. The new Lords in Parliament are Lords Darwin, Huxley, Brunel, Galton, and Babbage. Their new-found power as 'savants' is emblematic of a complex and extensive socio-political development inducing and induced by a 'full-blown information order, complete with massive databases on citizens, surveillance apparatus, photo IDs, credit cards, rapid international data transmission via telegraph, and scientific societies that serve as unofficial intelligence arms of the military'.⁹⁶

Gibson and Sterling's vision is a postmodern pastiche not only of history, but also literature. Through a characteristically dark-humoured re-writing of Benjamin Disraeli's condition-of-England novel *Sybil* (1845), they disassemble Disraeli's Young England conservative romantic ideology. *Sybil* critiques the idea of an oligarchy of the newly rich industrialists, hoping instead for a restoration of a noble aristocracy—yet Gibson and Sterling virtually dethrone the aristocracy in favour of a new, scientific elite.⁹⁷ The way in which *The Difference Engine* re-writes both history and literature has been examined by scholars such as

York: Pegasus Books, 2017), p. 130.

⁹⁵ William Gibson and Bruce Sterling, *The Difference Engine*. 2nd. (New York: Random House, 2011 [1990]). p. 175.

⁹⁶ Jay Clayton, *Charles Dickens in Cyberspace: The Afterlife of the Nineteenth Century in Postmodern Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 110.

Herbert Sussman,⁹⁸ Jay Clayton and Patrick Jagoda, who trace the intricate interconnectedness of socio-historical and techno-political transformation which inform the novel's vision of a computer revolution played out a century and a half earlier. The novel's cross-textual synthesis establishes counterfiction, which I will examine in Chapter Two, as a staple of steampunk world-building. Here, however, I want to focus on how these transformations are also played out in the cityscape.

John Clute, the science fiction author and critic, summarises the change as follows in his somewhat trenchant 1991 review:

Very soon the face of London begins to convulse into a Freemason's wetdream of the City as a monologue of temples: parks and homes are demolished to make way for entrepreneurial edifices decorated with pharaonic runes and dedicated to Progress: new thoroughfares slice through the heart of town, steam gurneys choke the roadways and poison the air; and everywhere one can hear the *sound* of the new order being born.⁹⁹

Clute's description traces the physical process that transforms the city into a space which, paradoxically, 'both *is* and *is not* a representation of nineteenth-century London'.¹⁰⁰ As such, the city materially encodes the setting as alternative history: cityscape and altered history are re-built in tandem. This juxtaposition of actuality and fiction is, of course, an intrinsic feature of steampunk as a retro-speculative aesthetic. In its playful re-arrangement of a received past, it relies on a shared knowledge about London's urban spaces (physical landmarks, topographies of meaning, architectural semiotics) in order to re-build an alternative. In doing so, *The Difference Engine* engages what Csicsery-Ronay terms our '*science fictionality* as a way of thinking about the world', of 'entertaining incongruous experiences, in which judgement is suspended'.¹⁰¹ Such an ability to comprehend the steampunk mode lets us navigate the alternative city and discern the implications of such a 'monologue of temples':

⁹⁷ Benjamin Disraeli, *Sybil; or, The Two Nations*, ed. by Thom Braun (London: Penguin, 1980 [1845]), p. 354.

⁹⁸ Herbert Sussman, 'Cyberpunk Meets Charles Babbage: The Difference Engine as Alternative Victorian History', *Victorian Studies*, 38:1 (Autumn 1994), 1-23.

⁹⁹ Clute, p. 234. Original emphasis.

¹⁰⁰ Jagoda, p. 61.

¹⁰¹ Csicsery-Ronay, p. ix, p. 3.

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. One by one they passed his window in their sober majesty of cupolas and colonnades: Physics, Economics, Chemistry... [...] Surely, in their aid to Science, the Palaces had repaid the lavish cost of their construction at least a dozen times.¹⁰²

This passage makes evident in which way the cityscape reflects the new, rational world order. In Gibson and Sterling's universe, the Great Exhibition of 1851 seems not to have taken place and as consequences, Exhibition Road in South Kensington, with the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Science Museum, and the Natural History Museum with adjacent College, built between the 1850s and 1880s, never existed. Nevertheless, the same space remains firmly associated with a 'Victorian' spirit of scientific curiosity which here leads to an intensified version of history, in which each scientific discipline is physically enshrined in, and represented by, an expensively built Palace. The 'cupolas and colonnades' hint towards a neo-classical architecture, underscoring the scientific, rational spirit of this new age, but also implying a near-religious reverence. Clute's impression of a 'monologue of temples' hints at a similar reading. This 'hyper-Kensington' embodies the Industrial Radical ideology which literally re-builds London in its own image. Another manifestation of this is the erasure of the Duke of Wellington and with him the politics of the 'decadent Tory blue-bloods' who he championed from public space.¹⁰³ The absence of physical sites of remembrance, termed by Pierre Nora as *lieux de mémoire* in which cultural memory and urban space intersect, re-shapes the collective identity.¹⁰⁴ Control is exerted through a manipulation of the urban physical space as a social text.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² Gibson and Sterling, p. 173.

¹⁰³ Gibson and Sterling, p. 173-174.

¹⁰⁴ Nora defines *lieux de mémoire* as socio-historical reference points at which collective memory is synthesised into a symbolic representation. They are cornerstones of collective identity formation.; 'At once natural and artificial, simple and ambiguous, concrete and abstract, they are lieux—places, sites, causes—in three senses—material, symbolic and functional', Pierre Nora, *The realms of memory: Rethinking the French Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 14; Jan Assmann's theory of cultural memory as a historical narrative of origin for a community. Jan Assmann, 'Cultural Memory', in *Cultural Memory Studies. An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, ed. by Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (Berlin, New York 2008), pp. 109-118.

¹⁰⁵ Henri Lefebvre, 'The Right to the City', in *Writings on Cities*, ed. by Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas (London: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 147-159, p. 148.

Such control, however, is also exerted in other ways that are manifested in and through the city. Patrick Jagoda argues that the novel puts into motion Foucault's idea of biopolitics by playing out a transition to a disciplinary society in combination with Deleuze's notion of a control society.¹⁰⁶ Whereas the disciplinary society relies on centralised institutions of power managing the human collective through accumulated knowledge about it, the control society 'is characterised by the establishment of an individual identity that is marked through "signatures" and "numbers", exerting control through the regulation of "codes" and "passwords" that determine access to information'.¹⁰⁷ Nowhere is this more clearly embodied than in the Central Statistics Bureau, an institution whose domestic surveillance is made possible by innovations such as photo IDs, databases, or telegraph transactions.

The Central Statistics Bureau, vaguely pyramidal in form and excessively Egyptianate in its ornamental detail, squatted solidly in the governmental heart of Westminster, its uppermost stories slanting to a limestone apex. For the sake of increased space, the building's lower section was swollen out-of-true, like some great stone turnip. Its walls, pierced by towering smokestacks, supported a scattered forest of spinning ventilators, their vanes annoyingly hawk-winged. The whole vast pile was riddled top to bottom with thick black telegraph-lines, as though individual streams of the Empire's information had bored through solid stone. A dense growth of wiring swooped down, from conduits and brackets, to telegraph-poles crowded thick as the rigging in a busy harbor.¹⁰⁸

Like the complex of Palaces in Kensington, a space associated with power, the Statistics Bureau is imposed into and over a space of socio-political resonance: Westminster, the seat of government. Its pseudo-Egyptian architecture, exemplified also in the 'fortress-doors, framed by lotus-topped columns and Briticized sphinxes, loom[ing] some twenty feet in height' (p. 145), hints at the godlike, central power of the pharaohs and ancient, universal, perhaps even a spiritual knowledge, kept hidden behind the intimidating gates of this 'fortress'. Here, in divisions named

¹⁰⁶ Jagoda, p. 51-52; Michel Foucault, 'The Birth of Biopolitics', in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. by Rabinow, Paul (New York: New Press, 1997), pp. 73-80. Gilles Deleuze, 'Postscript on Control Societies', in *Negotiations: 1972-1990* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), pp. 177-182.

¹⁰⁷ Jagoda, p. 52.

¹⁰⁸ Gibson and Sterling, p. 144-145.

‘Quantitative Criminology’, ‘Deterrence Research’ (p.149), or ‘Criminal Anthropometry’ (p. 157) process and store record of every British citizen: ‘Everyone who’s ever applied for work, or paid taxes, or been arrested’ (p. 160). Dr. Edward Mallory, our focal character, observes ‘men whose business it was to acquire and retail knowledge of the attitudes and influence of the public. Political men, in short, who dealt entirely in the intangible’ (p. 147). If this reads like an Orwellian delusion, that is certainly the desired inference: ‘We naturally keep a brotherly eye on the telegram-traffic, credit-records, and such’ (p. 152) confides a head of division with a nod to *1984*’s all-seeing Big Brother. The Statistics Bureau is a vast institution of domestic surveillance, monitoring citizens through every computer-technological innovation available, and embedded comfortably into a symbolic topography.

However, the Bureau’s physical character also enacts its functional demands. On the outside, it is almost haphazardly marked by ventilators and telegraph lines. Inside, every space and every act is subservient to meticulous cleanliness, as a single crumb or speck of dust might contaminate the ‘giant identical Engines, clock-like constructions of intricately interlocking brass, big as rail-cars set on end.’ (p. 156). Everything inside this space, from the ‘dry and static’ (p. 147) atmosphere to the clerks on wheeled boots, shooting up and down the corridors delivering decks of punch cards like data in an information circuit, seems to be an extension of the engines at the building’s core. As a windowless, dust-less, highly efficient structure in which humans are dwarfed and determined by machinery, the Bureau reads as a gigantic processor of human information, installed at the primal intersection of an urban infrastructure from which it collects its data. The city itself, by extension, is configured as one vast information-processing machine, in which human interactions, from telegrams and telegraphic communication to arrest or employment records, act as data.

This processor, however, proves not to be entirely stable. If we follow this line of thought, the heat wave slowly simmering beneath London throughout half of the novel and eventually erupting into the eco-catastrophe the Great Stink,¹⁰⁹ becomes a symptom of strain and overheating. The Bureau prompts in Mallory a vision of Darwin’s earthworms, ‘always invisibly busy underfoot, so that even great sarsen-stones slowly sank into the loam’, ‘churning in

¹⁰⁹ As a historical event, the Great Stink occurred in 1858, later than the novel is set. A result of refuse gathering on the Thames banks due to an inadequate sewage system, it prompted Joseph Bazalgette’s development of the London sewage system.

catastrophic frenzy, till the soil roiled and bubbled like a witches' brew' (p. 148). As a mechanistic organism traversing the soil as an allegory for the streams of data traversing the city, the earthworms' slow corrosion of the environment reads as foreboding. Their movements, accelerated beyond what is natural, produce a demonic energy that unsettle the soil. In a similar way, the Great Stink comes as a sudden eruption that transforms the city into an apocalyptic vision:

Outside the Palace, the London sky was a canopy of yellow haze. It hung above the city in gloomy grandeur, like some storm-fleshed jellied man-o-war. Its tentacles, the uprising filth of the city's smokestacks, twisted and fluted like candle-smoke in utter stillness, to splash against a lidded ceiling of glowering cloud. The invisible sun cast a drowned and watery light (p. 205).

Under this static, portentous sky, a result of accumulated ecologic irresponsibility and an omen of 'extinction' and 'chaos' (p. 271), the city ceases to function:

The streets were such a crush as only London could produce. The omnibuses and cabriolets were all taken, every intersection jammed with rattle-traps and dogcarts, with cursing drivers and panting, black-nostrilled horses. Steam-gurneys chugged sluggishly by, many towing rubber-tired freight-cars loaded with provisions. It seemed the gentry's summer exodus from London was becoming a rout (p. 206).

London's networks are congested as those who can afford to leave, others go on strike or begin to riot and to loot. Increasingly, the city resembles a broken-down machine as ash rains from the sky and a grotesquely yellow fog obscures the cityscape, making it uncertain terrain. Mallory, usually navigating the city with ease, is stranded in Whitechapel and must find his way back to Kensington through '[s]even miles of roiling chaos' (p. 273). Though he masters the task and even journeys back to the East End to quell an uprising, the city begins to become overwhelming in its sheer, unfathomable vastness:

It was a very weariness of London, of the city's sheer physicality, its nightmare endlessness, of streets, courts, crescents, terraces, and alleys, of fog-shrouded stone and soot-blackened

brick. A nausea of awnings, a nastiness of casements, an ugliness of scaffoldings lashed together with rope; a horrible prevalence of iron street lamps and granite bollards, of pawn-shops, haberdashers, and tobacconists. The city seemed to stretch about them like some pitiless abyss of geologic time (p. 131).

Mallory's is a vision of the city as an eternal, a-chronic physical structure, man-made and yet also independent from and eerily devoid of, humanity. Its material manifestations, from courts and crescents to shops, become grotesque when deserted, as urban space is disassociated from its purpose and meaning. As a labyrinth stretching endlessly through time and space, it is imbued with faint notions of sentiment; nauseating, nasty, uncanny. Perhaps Mallory is experiencing a moment of cosmic dread, in which not the universe, but the city as an entity in itself, is indifferent to its inhabitants. As such, his vision is less a moment of delirious exhaustion, but more of total clarity in which he catches a glimpse of a larger truth hidden beyond the city and even the narrative itself before it begins to disintegrate as follows:

Recede.
Reiterate.
Rise above these black patterns of wheel-tracks,
These snow-swept streets,
Into the great map of London,
Forgetting (p. 450)

Here, the narrative voice simultaneously rises above and merges into the city, ceasing its account of events in the *fabula* in a meta-narrative moment of self-awareness, followed by oblivion. The sudden dissolution of this mediative tether is performed through a movement away from the urban patterns of 'wheel-tracks' and 'streets' into the larger pattern of the abstract 'map' and can only be explained by a closer look at the ending of the novel, the last 'iteration', called 'Modus'.

Merely a post-modern assortment of letters, chronicle excerpts, and seemingly unconnected scenes, the final iteration serves as an eclectic collection of evidence about the alternative history, such as a diary entry by Lord Babbage or an account of the funeral of Prime Minister Lord Byron. In the last portion, Lady Ada Byron, the 'Queen of Engines', 'Enchantress of Numbers', delivers a lecture on the Modus Program, that mysterious set of punch cards which

connects the narrative throughout. '[T]he execution of the so-called Modus Program', she claims, 'demonstrated that any formal system must be both *incomplete* and *unable to establish its own consistency*. [...] The Modus Program initiated a series of nested loops, which, though difficult to establish, were yet more difficult to extinguish' (p.477, original emphasis), and rendered useless the Grand Napoleon, Imperial France's principal Engine. However, the speaker believes that '*self-referentiality* will someday form the bedrock of a genuinely transcendent meta-system of calculatory mathematics' in which 'such an Engine *lives*, and could indeed *prove* its own life' (p.277-278, original emphasis). Lady Byron's subject is sentience. She envisions the possibility of an Artificial Intelligence gaining consciousness through a series of nested feedback loops. Whereas Sussman and Jagoda both discuss this speech and comment on the final scene, which I want to discuss next, they neglect to consider the implications of this final, but crucial moment, which Gibson characterised as follows in a 1991 interview:

The story purports in the end to tell you that the narrative you have just read is not the narrative in the ordinary sense; rather it's a long self-iteration as this thing attempts to boot itself up, which it does in the final exclamation point. [...] But, yeah, the author of the book is the narratron; it's sitting there telling itself a novel as it studies its own origins.¹¹⁰

This certainly sheds new light on the narrative and its vision of London. The city, envisioned as an information-processing machine in which human activity is recorded as data, seems to have never 'really' existed outside the circuits of the entity re-constructing its own origin myth. The eclectic assortment of scenes and narrative strands emphasise, as Roger Whitsun deduces, 'the non-human experience of complying and processing each of *The Difference Engine*'s historical events into signal. The signals processed by the Modus, in turn, comprise [instances] [...] of micro temporal history that it registers as it gains sentience.'¹¹¹ The city, then, is intrinsically intertwined with the now conscious 'narratron' and its notion of self-hood. The final scene, in which Ada Byron looks into a mirror and sees London in 1991, illustrates this:

¹¹⁰ Daniel Fischlin, Veronica Hollinger, Andrew Taylor, William Gibson and Bruce Sterling, "'The Charisma Leak': A Conversation with William Gibson and Bruce Sterling", *Science Fiction Studies*, 19:1 (1992), 1-16, p. 10.

¹¹¹ Roger Whitsun, *Steampunk and Nineteenth-Century Digital Humanities. Literary Retrofuturisms, Media Archaeologies, Alternate Histories* (London: Routledge, 2017), p. 41.

It is 1991. It is London. Ten thousand towers, the cyclonic hum of a trillion twisting gears, all air gone earthquake-dark in a mist of oil, in the fractioned heat of intermeshing wheels. Black seamless pavements, uncounted tributary rivulets for the frantic travels of the punched-out lace of data, the ghosts of history loosed in this hot shining necropolis. Paper-thin faces billow like sails, twisting, yawning, tumbling through the empty streets, human faces that are borrowed masks, and lenses for a peering Eye. And when a given face has served its purpose, it crumbles, frail as ash, bursting into a dry foam of data, its constituent bits and motes. But new fabrics of conjecture are knitted in the City's shining cores, swift tireless spindles flinging off invisible loops in their millions, while in the hot unhuman dark, data melts and mingles, churned by gear-work to a skeletal bubbling pumice, dipped in a dreaming wax that forms a simulated flesh, perfect as thought—(p. 485)

This, then, is an image of the city worthy of two cyberpunk authors; vividly, suggestively imagined, it is not only envisioned, but understood only on the terms of information technology. The towers, while alluding to a modern skyline, more resemble the stacked columns of gears in an Analytical Engine, physical features like pavements become mere circuits for human data, and the paper-thin face-masks reflect Mallory's moment of cosmic dread from the other perspective. Here, human movement is of consequence only as the flow of information or as a tool of surveillance for the searching 'Eye'. Beneath the city, as earlier beneath the Central Statistics Bureau, data moves, merges, powered by people configured only as skeletons dipped in wax. City and Engine become indistinguishable, then synonymous when the narratron realises what it sees is '*not* London—but mirrored plazas of sheerest crystal, the avenues atomic lighting, the sky a super cooled gas, as the Eye chases its own gaze through the labyrinth, leaping quantum gaps that are causation, contingency, chance' (p.486). The city dissolves into a clearer vision of informational patterns and abstract movements, a process of self-recognition being enacted, all through the novel, through the metaphor of city, providing a visual analogy for space, movement, data, and patterns out of which the 'Eye' finally emerges sentient:

In this City's centre, a thing grows, an auto-catalytic tree, in almost-life, feeding through the roots of thought [...] up, up, toward the hidden light of vision,

Dying to be born.

[...] The Eye at last must see itself

Myself...

I see:
I see,
I see
I
! (p. 486)

4.2 RIGHT TO THE CITY? THE URBAN HABITUS

Whereas *The Difference Engine* ultimately configures the city as an information processor to which humanity loses significance and is present only as data, the novel also re-imagines the Victorian identity constituted in and through the city. In this final section, I want to examine how Gibson and Sterling re-present the urban habitus by considering the social upheaval during the Great Stink in conjunction with Marxist urban theory.

Henri Lefebvre's *The Right to the City* was published in 1968, a year in which leftist counter-cultural movements all over the world realised the urban space as a terrain of protest. In it, he claims that '*the right to the city* is like a cry and a demand' to a 'transformed and renewed *right to urban life*'.¹¹² Suggesting that the new working class consists of the urban dwellers who build and sustain the city, he argues that these have not merely a material right to what they produce, but also to more fundamentally anthropological social needs:

[T]hey include the need for security and opening, the need for certainty and adventure, that of organization of work and of play, the needs for the predictable and the unpredictable, of similarity and difference, of isolation and encounter, exchange and investments, of independence (even solitude) and communication, of immediate and long-term prospects.¹¹³

As David Harvey, noted Marxist urban geographer, outlines: '[W]hat kind of city we want cannot be divorced from the question of what kind of people we want to be'.¹¹⁴ The right to the city is, for Harvey, a collective right to shape the process of urbanisation and 'to rebuild and re-create the city as a socialist body politic in a completely different image—one that eradicates

¹¹² Lefebvre, *Right to the City*, p. 158.

¹¹³ Lefebvre, p. 147.

poverty and social inequality, and one that heals the wounds of disastrous environmental degradation'.¹¹⁵ As such it is inextricably tied to a Marxist ideology opposing capitalist systems and the logic of commodification. In his thinking, the 1848 revolutions in Europe or the Paris Commune become examples of a dispossessed population reclaiming 'their' urban space. Considering that *The Difference Engine* features societal disintegration and a 'socialist' uprising, can the novel be productively read as putting the right to the city as a concept into motion? Is its concern the nature of, and the right to, urban life?

As we have seen, the novel imagines an alternative Victorian society dedicated to the ideals of ratio and scientific progress, an ideology inscribed firmly into its urban landscape and embodied by the Industrial Radical Party. Yet as the Great Stink erupts like a cataclysm through the city, this ideology, hard-won through revolution and reform, quite literally comes under attack. In Camera Square, Chelsea, and not too far away from Kensington, Mallory finds himself in front of a shop selling an array of fantastic, steampunk 'fancy optical goods: talbotypes, magic-lanterns, phenakistoscopes, telescopes for the amateur star-gazer' to 'boy-savants' (p.241), young scientists-to-be. The place epitomises the prestige associated with a scientific career, and Mallory is lost in fond reminiscence when a 'London boy, thirteen or so' approaches on 'rubber-heeled boots', and with 'a yowling whoop', 'a pair of walking sticks doubled up under his arms.' He is followed by 'a pack of boys [...] leaping and yelping in devilish glee' (p.242) and masked against the debris in the air, bringing with him an atmosphere of unbridled energy and youthful malice. Mallory's remark, 'Far too well-dressed to be street-arabs' (p.243), hints at the notion that these boys are prospective middle-class customers of the optics seller, yet they too are caught up in their anarchic play. The gang leader, dubbed 'Panther Bill', skidding without restraint, crashes into the shop front, 'glass [...] toppling like guillotine blades', and is left unconscious or dead. Far from concerned or deterred, the others begin looting the shop 'with maddened shrieks' (p.243). The characterisation of these wild boys certainly plays with Victorian sociology which saw childhood as re-enacting the stages of teleological evolution, as the boys begin to 'revert' to a form of 'savage behaviour' in stark contrast with both their respectable clothing or their urban surroundings.

Such a reversion into mindless anarchy is not limited to children. In the East End,

¹¹⁴David Harvey, *Rebel Cities. From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* (London: Verso, 2012), p. 4.

Mallory encounters not a neighbourhood but a post-apocalyptic wasteland:

There was scarcely a window intact. Cobbles, grubbed up from side-streets, had been flung right and left like a shower of meteors. A seeming whirlwind had descended on a nearby grocery, leaving the street ankle-deep in dirty snow-drifts of flour and sugar. Mallory picked his way through battered cabbages, squashed greengages, crushed jars of syrugged peaches, and the booted footballs of whole smoked hams. Scatterings of damp flour showed a stampede of men's brogues, the small bare feet of street-urchins, the dainty trace of women's shoes, and the sweep of their skirt-hems (p.271-272).

This is hardly the image of an urban population reclaiming urban space for more sustained or responsible ways of living. Instead, we find the traces of wanton, indifferent vandalism that leaves valuable foods trampled underfoot, destroying neither out of rebellion or need, but for the sake of destruction. The novel here cynically undermines and subverts notions of a progressive, enlightened Victorian urban habitus marked by respectability and ratio. Whether in Chelsea or Whitechapel, London has become 'a locus of anarchy' (p.272) in which people are motivated by greed and pleasure alone:

These Londoners were like gas, thought Mallory, like a cloud of minute atomies. The bonds of society broken, they had simply flown apart, like the perfectly elastic gassy spheres in Boyle's Law of Physics. Most of them looked respectable enough by their dress; they were merely reckless now, stripped by Chaos to a moral vacuity. [...] They had become puppets of base impulse. Like the Cheyenne tribesmen of Wyoming, dancing in the devil's grip of drink, the goodmen of civilized London had surrendered themselves to primitive madness. [...] It was exaltation to them, a wicked freedom more perfect and desirable than they had ever known (p. 277).

These 'Victorians' become wildlings in a cathartic frenzy of base instinct. Suddenly in stark contrast with their respectable dress and disconnected from the urban space built to encode an identity of sophistication, they appear so out of place to Mallory that he likens them to 'primitive tribesmen'; their carefully constructed, 'civilized', 'Victorian' identity undermined and

¹¹⁵ Harvey, *Rebel Cities*, p. 138.

deconstructed through this portrait of, not revolution, but a mad saturnalia.

One revolution, however, is supposedly underway in the East India docks, where a number of self-proclaimed socialists, led by a ‘Captain Swing’, have seized London’s nexus of international trade. Swing’s choice of name allies him with the (real world) Luddite riots of the 1830s and therefore suggests an anti-industrialist motivation. Rioters call one another ‘comrade’ and speak of the liberation of ‘the common folk of London, the masses, the oppressed, the sweated labour, those who produce all the riches of this city’ (p. 333). They propose to seize London from urban sites inhabited by the poor and vulnerable: ‘We will fight them from the rooftops, from doorways, alleyways, sewers, and rookeries!’ (p. 335). Apart from these hints at Marxist rhetoric, however, the revolution is more a darkly ironic comedy and an excuse for a machismo action show-down than a discussion of a more productive and enfranchised collective ownership of the cityscape. The rhetoric itself falls short in an alternative timeline in which the Marxist revolution is being displaced to the ‘Manhattan Commune’. Mallory, having no concept of ‘the oppressor-class’ or ‘the means of production’, thinks himself in the presence of a lunatic. Indeed, he and his colleagues are guided through the docklands fortress by a man styling himself the ‘Marquis of Hastings’, the title a pre-Radical ‘relic’ (p. 329). This would-be aristocrat who seems, in addition, to own a black slave, is hardly an appropriate figurehead for the socialist reclamation of the city: “‘What, my man Jupiter?’ The Marquess blinked. ‘Jupiter belongs to all of us too, of course!’” (p. 337-338).

It seems that the socialist uprising serves mainly as a reflection of the course of (alternative) history, for example through semi-ironic takes on Marxist determinist historiography such as this: ‘[I]t has come to me that some dire violence has been done to the true and natural course of historical development’ (p.343). This remark, by hinting self-reflexively at the narrative’s character as alternative history, somewhat ironically calls into question whether such a ‘natural course of history’ exists at all. Perhaps this is why, ultimately, the conflict between Mallory and Swing turns to the Modus, the uprising is quenched in a bloody shoot-out and the dominant Industrial Radical order re-asserts their own right to the city. As Harvey states, the concept is, after all, an ‘empty signifier full of immanent but not transcendent possibilities. This does not mean it is irrelevant or politically impotent; everything depends on

who gets to fill the signifier with [...] meaning.’¹¹⁶

The Difference Engine, however, refuses to do just that. Its objective is not to examine the city as a nexus of capitalist relations in which the urban habitus is ultimately defined through concepts such as commodification, labour, or surplus value. On the contrary, the novel imagines a scenario in which the Luddites are thoroughly defeated, economic power is synonymous with governmental power, and Karl Marx is literally exiled out of the realm of the British Empire. Instead, the novel delights in dethroning an imagined Victorian urban identity of superiority and respectability. Taking quite seriously Hayden White’s notion of ‘historical consciousness as a specifically Western prejudice by which the presumed superiority of modern, industrial society can be retroactively substantiated’,¹¹⁷ Gibson and Sterling’s steampunk undermines such historiographies through a playfully postmodern mockery.

5. CONCLUSION: THREE STEAMPUNKS WALK INTO A BAR...

According to the *Steampunk Bible*, steampunk begins in the early 1980s in ‘a bar called O’Hara’s in Orange, California’.¹¹⁸ Whereas that is a neat origin myth, steampunk as a retro-speculative aesthetic itself constantly challenges, undermines, and literally re-writes historiographies in a playful and ironic manner, and so its synthesis into a readable mode is suitably complex.

As we have seen, Jeter’s, Blaylock’s, and Power’s ‘Victorian fantasies’, now canonised as early steampunk novels, did not necessarily share a coherent aesthetic or ideology about the genre they were inadvertently inventing. They do, however, instinctively conceive of history as represented through an emplotted narrative structure, and as such open to manipulation. Using time travel, a speculative fiction subgenre which is similarly investigating the relationship between narrative identity and historiography, as a rationalising trope, these early steampunk works journey into the Victorian past and infuse it with anachronisms. In doing so they synthesise several ‘types’ of speculative fiction both from the late Victorian era and the twentieth century: ‘Steampunk combines, in principle, every type of sf: time-travel tales, alternative histories, revolutionary and evolutionary future histories, and extraordinary voyages, all set in

¹¹⁶ Harvey, *Rebel Cities*, p. 136.

¹¹⁷ White, p. 2.

¹¹⁸ VanderMeer and Chambers, *Steampunk Bible*, p. 48.

hypermodernized pasts', notes Csicsery-Ronay.¹¹⁹ He concludes that steampunk, viewing history through a science fiction lens, is concerned with its own origins, that is the origins of science fiction with seminal writers such as Wells. As a subgenre of speculative fiction, steampunk then engages in a variance of the closed-loop, narcissistic self-encounter type of time travel.

To consider steampunk as merely an exercise in genre soul-searching would, however, be to disregard the other, playful features that inform it, as well as the Victorian impulses it catalyses, and which make it a true hybrid of numerous, seemingly incongruent cultural tendencies. All three authors were visibly influenced by Henry Mayhew's urban ethnography which they read as an 'authentic' account of a less familiar, less respectable, and more shabby-seedy Victorian London in which urban communities carve out spaces and practises for themselves like the urban counter-cultures of the 1970s and 80s. Inspired by Mayhew's vivid accounts, they fabricate a vision of Victorian London that is 'punk' not because it is openly political, but because it is intrinsically linked to the urban space in which counter-culture is performed and lived in defiance of respectable middle-class values. Uninterested in the private sphere of the home, the trifecta re-imagines their alternative cities as spaces of experiment and adventure.

As such, their Victorian Londons are evocatively littered with anachronisms and oddities such as fish people, beggar guilds, subterranean monsters, or horror clowns. Hantke claims that steampunk 'employs strategies borrowed from science fiction but modified in deliberate violation of their inherited uses' in order to distance itself from 'crucial postmodern tenets about historiographic metafiction', as it 'neither allegorizes Victorianism specifically, nor the process of historical periodization in general'.¹²⁰ Indeed, these elements preclude any simple reading of early steampunk as either neo-Victorian metafiction or retro-science fiction, as they are borrowed not only from science fiction but also horror or fantasy. In this capacity they share affinities with late-Victorian and early twentieth-century weird fiction, although their function is tangibly different. Instead of arousing cosmic dread and challenging anthropocentric identities, the weird and whimsical elements in early steampunk distort and defamiliarize the Victorian past, foreclosing any sense of historical realism or familiar strategies of reading the past. They also configure a Victorian imaginary as inherently quaint and eccentric because the weird

¹¹⁹ Csicsery-Ronay, p. 108.

elements do not seem out of place amongst the clunky technology embedded in a genealogy of obsolescence. Not least, they also highlight steampunk London as both indebted to Victorian intertexts and not Victorian at all, perhaps allowing steampunk to be the cyborg aesthetic that ‘holds incompatible things together’.¹²¹

These features (retro-speculative time travel, alternative urbanities, whimsical play) inform Gibson and Sterling’s collaborative novel, *The Difference Engine*. Whereas earlier works are playfully postmodern, it is these authors’ experience with the deliberately counter-cultural science fiction subgenre cyberpunk which allows them to synthesise the ‘Victorian fantasies’ and a speculative interrogation of information technology motivated by resistance against the New Right’s neo-liberal politics and inspired by urban subcultures, into a coherent aesthetic vision. As a radical alternative history, their steampunk re-projects the information revolution into a Victorian past that is at once familiar and fundamentally peculiar. The novel is a ‘dialectical mesh of fantasies of the Victorians’ social, political, and cultural institutions, as both the Victorians themselves and *fin de millennium* U.S. techno-bohemians might imagine them’.¹²²

In their ironic, anarchistic re-play, the city plays a fundamental role in exemplifying the ideologies of the literally re-built timeline. Politicised ideals of science and progress are enshrined in London’s topography, erasure from public space likewise implies the erasure from collective memory. The Central Statistics Bureau not only epitomises the misuse of new technologies for domestic surveillance but configures the city itself as an information processor in which human movements and interactions become visible as data. This in turn foreshadows the novel’s final twist, in which the Difference Engine becomes sentient by recognising itself in a vision of the city as a computer. Steampunk London becomes the setting for the ‘ruminations of an anachronistic AI creating the world by writing a novel for itself’.¹²³

In its retro-speculation, the novel stages an ironic subversion of the progressive, respectable Victorian urban identity and simultaneously complicates a Marxist-urbanist reading. Like the Londoners whose civilised masks crumble into an anarchic saturnalia during the Great Stink, the socialist revolutionaries are exposed to be thieves and charlatans, neither of them

¹²⁰ Hantke, p. 253.

¹²¹ Haraway, p. 291.

¹²² Csicsery-Ronay, p. 109, original emphasis.

¹²³ Csicsery-Ronay, p. 109.

interested in a reclamation of urban space motivated by social justice. However, whereas the novel mockingly portrays the Victorian urban habitus as a performance informed by hubris, it also highlights the way in which urban space defines and is defined, by its inhabitants. Once divorced from their functions, its infrastructures become eerie and unfamiliar while the urban dwellers who do not perform their urban identity become grotesque and out of place.

Gibson and Sterling's stance towards Lefebvre's concept of the 'right to the city' is certainly cynical. However, Harvey interprets the concept as follows: 'To claim the right to the city in the sense I mean it here is to claim some kind of shaping power over the processes of urbanization, over the ways in which our cities are made and remade, and to do so in a fundamental and radical way'.¹²⁴ I want to consider the possibility that, as time travel transfers narratological strategies of temporal manipulation from the *sjuzhet* to the *fabula*, steampunk as a retro-speculative aesthetic virtually enacts the implications around the right to the city.

Evidently, steampunk's approach is not necessarily a utopian impulse. John Clute's remark that Gibson and Sterling succeeded in 'making London in 1855 worse than it was in fact' is cynical, but not without foundation.¹²⁵ However, as we have seen, all of these novels are interested in alternative visions of the Victorian city, be they as a space full of whimsical possibilities and adventure in which marginalised communities can sustain inventive counter-cultural lifestyles, or as a vast entity in itself that threatens to overwhelm and subsume its human citizens. Using Victorian London as an emblem of the proto-postmodern megalopolis and as a meta-historical locus, early steampunk playfully asks: in what way do we shape the city, and how far does the city determine us? In what kind of city do we want to live, and to what extent is that choice up to us? As such, it not only lays the foundations for the explorations of steampunk's second wave, it also acknowledges the city as one of the defining factors in shaping identity. This reciprocal relationship between environment and identity, if not identity politics, will concern us in the next chapter, where I look at how steampunk explores these questions in and through Victorian urban Gothic.

¹²⁴ Harvey, *Rebel Cities*, p. 5.

¹²⁵ Clute, 'Vive?', p. 242.

CHAPTER 2: EAST END PUNK: HYPER-VICTORIANISM, URBAN GOTHIC, AND COLLECTIVE KNOWLEDGE

1. INTRODUCTION: GOTHIC *OF* THE CITY

In early steampunk, Victorian London is imagined as an amalgam of a myriad of traces, whether they be of urban tribes traced by urban ethnologists or tangible infrastructures continually adapted for new purposes. They use a setting rife with adventure and discovery to playfully interrogate spatialization as a reciprocal process. If space is socially produced, to what extent is sociality produced in and through space? Lefebvre asks, ‘If space embodies social relationships, how and why does it do so? And what relationships are they?’.¹ What does this mean considering that neither steampunk and Victorian London exist as physical realities but as remembered spaces produced through the re-projection of collective memory? As Kohlke and Gutleben posit: ‘Palimpsestically, we read the past city through the overlaid present, but conversely, we also read the present city backwards through the underlying and resurfacing past’.² This means that in order to gain insight into how Victorian London shapes our perception of it and is in turn shaped by that perception, we must examine how exactly steampunk actualises a space and time no longer fully accessible to us, and to what purpose it does so.

In this chapter, I want to explore how steampunk interacts with Victorian London as a multi- and inter-textually mediated imaginary, considering that, ‘[i]n a sense, the neo-Victorian is *by definition* hyperreal, since it has no direct access to the Victorian real, instead relying entirely on Victorian texts and documents, that is, on *signs* of the past’.³ Once again, by intuitively recombining a wealth of such signs in the form of urban literatures, steampunk shows itself sensitive to the textuality of history. It is therefore my goal here to interrogate the hyper-Victorian aspect of its tripartite aesthetic in order to highlight innovative or creative strategies inherent in steampunk’s recombinant collage which set it apart from other neo-Victorian re-

¹ Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, p. 27.

² Kohlke and Gutleben, ‘Troping the Neo-Victorian City’, p. 11.

³ Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben, ‘The (Mis)Shapes of Neo-Victorian Gothic: Continuations, Adaptations, Transformations’, in *Neo-Victorian Gothic. Horror, Violence, and Degeneration in the Re-Imagined Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben (Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2012), pp. 1-50, p.

tellings, and also create a unique steampunk vision of London even before technofantastical aspects come into play.

In such an analysis, the urban Gothic mode takes centre stage. In the nineteenth century, early Gothic – as popularised by Ann Radcliffe, Horace Walpole, and Matthew Lewis and characterised by crumbling castles and youthful heroines – moved from its remote, feudal Catholic settings in which depraved monks embodied the sins of the past to the contemporary urban metropolis. As Joseph Crawford argues, '[t]he Gothic fiction which flourished between 1790 and 1820 bequeathed to the nineteenth century a whole new rhetorical idiom for writing about evil and violence, fear and madness, grief and death, an idiom quite distinct from that which had dominated eighteenth-century writing on these matters.'⁴ Whereas Gothic sensibilities continued to inspire the works of Romantic writers such as Lord Byron, Walter Scott, or Mary Shelley, they also began to be synthesised into narratives set in urban London. W. H. Ainsworth's Newgate novels, for example, took up an imagined vision of eighteenth-century London informed by John Gay's *Trivia* (1714), *The Beggar's Opera* (1728), the works of Henry Fielding, or William Hogarth's merry rogues, and infused them with newly re-imagined Gothic rhetoric.⁵ This style is also traceable in Charles Dickens' own influential imagery of a picturesque and squalid, 'Gothic-esque' London, which I will discuss more in Chapter Three.⁶ Other examples of the Gothic's move towards London are Thomas de Quincey's *Confessions of an Opium-Eater* (1821) and G. W. M. Reynolds's serial *The Mysteries of London* (1844-48).⁷

By the mid-to late nineteenth century, London was increasingly imagined in Gothic terms.⁸ In the obscuring foggy, gas-lit shadows of the vast, progressive, enlightened,

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⁴ Joseph Crawford, *Gothic Fiction and the Invention of Terrorism. The Politics and Aesthetics of Fear in the Age of the Reign of Terror* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 154.

⁵ Joseph Crawford, 'The Urban Turn: Gothic Cityscapes before *The Mysteries of London*', unpublished conference paper given at *The Urban Weird* organised by Open Graves, Open Minds & Supernatural Cities (University of Hertfordshire, 6-7 April, 2018).

⁶ Crawford, *Gothic Fiction*, p. 164-169.

⁷ Mighall, *Geography of Victorian Gothic Fiction*, p. 28.

⁸ I have defined my understanding of the Gothic elsewhere as follows: 'In what follows, I understand what I will call the Gothic mode to be an array of aesthetic signifiers and narrative devices (such as fog, darkness, the grotesque, the uncanny, return of the repressed) which arouse dread, doubt, unease, or disgust in the viewer or reader, and which encode a person or space as monstrous, haunted, other, atavistic, or abject. Such signifiers are often aligned with the morbid and morose, or engage us by making use of our primordial fears and survival instincts. The Gothic mode helps to negotiate a wide variety of value systems and identities as it both destabilises and reaffirms what is seen as progressive, civilised, or enlightened, even if that progress is simultaneously called into

cosmopolitan metropolis lurk haunting spectres such as the social ills disease, crime, and poverty, which are encoded in and experienced through a sensationalist language of affect. In accordance with popular post-Darwinian notions of races, cultures and societies as teleologically evolving, theories endorsed by personalities such as Herbert Spencer, Edward Tylor, or Francis Galton, the Gothic mode productively encoded contemporary anxieties about what Freud would later term the ‘return of the repressed’.⁹ Atavisms, regressions, and monstrosities, such as violence, alcoholism, crime, or prostitution continued to erupt in the modern city, which retained elements of obscurity supposedly at odds with its enlightened, transparent character. The Gothic rhetoric ‘helped articulate how certain places made people feel, the supernatural providing a useful vocabulary for otherness, the unsettled, the unseen, and the unsolid’, as Karl Bell posits. ‘They were a means of expressing the subconscious awareness that cities were not just bricks and mortar but rich psychical landscapes’.¹⁰ By the end of the century, the haunting presences from Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), or Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, aberrations mutated into monstrous degeneration, transform London into a labyrinthine, mysterious, and potentially dangerous nightmare cityscape.¹¹ The urban space itself remains seemingly fraught anachronisms. Slums and ‘rookeries were contextual anomalies, out of place in modern mercantile, industrial, and clock-time-regulated London’.¹² A multitude of feared regressions and

question. [...] Gothic relies fundamentally on the effect of ‘making strange’ in order to open such spaces for re-negotiation: it destabilises identities and challenges our knowledge of the world by evoking the uncanny, the monstrous, and the other, for example through distortion or fragmentation. Considering that it also relies on inducing dread, doubt, and disgust, the Gothic mode evaluates, if not judges what it portrays to a certain extent.’ Helena Esser, ‘What Use Our Work: Crime and Justice in Ripper Street’, *Neo-Victorian Journal*, 11:1 (2018), 141-173, p. 145-146.

⁹ Spencer configured cultures as evolving hierarchies, Tylor applied evolution to colonial contexts, and Galton’s eugenics were presented in a framework of Darwinist logic. Herbert Spencer, ‘The Principles of Sociology.’ in *The Fin de Siècle. A Reader in Cultural History c.1880-1900*, ed. by Sally Ledger and Roger Luckhurst (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000 [1876]), pp. 321-326. Edward Tylor, ‘Primitive Culture’ in *The Fin de Siècle. A Reader in Cultural History c.1880-1900*, ed. by Sally Ledger and Roger Luckhurst (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000 [1871]), pp. 317-321. Francis Galton, ‘Eugenics: Its Definition, Scope and Aims.’ in *The Fin de Siècle. A Reader in Cultural History c.1880-1900*, ed. by Sally Ledger and Roger Luckhurst (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000 [1904]), pp. 329-333.

¹⁰ Karl Bell, ‘Phantasmal Cities: The Construction and Function of Haunted Landscapes in Victorian English Cities’, in *Haunted Landscapes. Super-Nature and the Environment*, ed. by Ruth Heholt and Niamh Downing (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), pp. 95-110, p. 100.

¹¹ These discourses are also linked to discussions of criminology, degeneration, and culture, most notoriously epitomised by the works of Cesare Lombroso and Max Nordau.

¹² Mighall, p. 142.

deviations, then, lurk in the psychologically charged streets and alleyways of Victorian London, contributing to what Mighall has termed no longer a ‘Gothic in the City’ but a ‘Gothic *of* the City’: ‘Its terrors derive from situations peculiar to, and firmly located within, the urban experience’.¹³

Nowhere are these influences, tendencies, and attributes more evident and condensed than in the East End, which, to the larger public, became the epitome of the repressed and atavistic misery, depravity, and violence that seemingly haunted the enlightened present, and against which the Victorian cosmopolitan identity was defined. Discourses about Orientalism and colonialism imagined the East End, from the docklands to Limehouse, Spitalfields, Shadwell, and Whitechapel, as, if not ‘Darkest Africa’, then ‘Darkest London’, an exotic, heterotopic other within, a *terra incognita* which slumming gentlemen might explore as Sir Richard Burton, David Livingstone, or Henry Morton Stanley had explored the African continent. In 1888, then, London’s most notorious urban monster, the serial killer known as Jack the Ripper, seemingly affirmed all that was feared about the wilderness of East London; that it was dark, dismal, and dangerous, a space in which vice and violence collided. Ripper media, as we will see, contributed considerably to an enduring Gothic East End mythology, which in turn has been continually re-imagined, adapted, and re-shaped ever since.

The urban Gothic mode then is an integral, if not the prevalent agent in shaping our imagination of the Victorian city. To what degree and in which ways are steampunk stories determined by the East End’s urban mythological legacy and the popular stereotypes surrounding it? Whether consciously incorporated or perpetuated out of habit, how much ‘urban Gothic’ lingers in steampunk fiction? In short, what role does the Gothic play in the way steampunk re-imagines the Victorian city? In order to answer these questions, this chapter endeavours in its first part to identify a few of the dominant and enduring tropes which Victorian discourse at once identified in and re-inscribed into the East End, and to trace how these tropes figure into the creation of a collectively shared memory that neo-Victorian and steampunk fiction can tap into. As there is a large variety of texts to choose from, I will focus my discussion predominantly on Whitechapel and its immediate neighbours, as imagined by some of its most influential chroniclers, Gustave Doré or Arthur Morrison. Next, I want to discuss how media surrounding the Whitechapel

¹³ Mighall, p. 30, original emphasis.

murders in 1888 synthesised and perpetuated a Gothic mythology already established by these writers. We will see how the Victorian East End and Jack the Ripper emerge as mutually constitutive symbols for Gothic urbanity, crafted into a distinct set of influential aesthetic tropes. Considering the prominence and impact of the urban Gothic, it is not surprising that neo-Victorian narratives tend to reproduce a Gothic gaze and evoke the Victorian city, and the East End in particular, as a sphere of claustrophobia and isolation. As Kohlke and Gutleben note, neo-Victorianism ‘must also be understood as a *purveyor*’ and ‘takes part in the constant reactivation of the Gothic’.¹⁴ The two modes are, as the two scholars have convincingly argued, affiliated. ‘[N]eo-Victorianism is by nature quintessentially Gothic’¹⁵ because there exists a ‘generic and ontological kinship’ between both phenomena:

resurrecting the ghost(s) of the past, searching out its dark secrets and shameful mysteries, insisting obsessively on the lurid details of Victorian life, reliving the period’s nightmares and traumas. At the same time, neo-Victorianism also tries to understand the nineteenth century as the contemporary self’s uncanny *Doppelgänger*, exploring the uncertain limit between what is vanished (dead) and surviving (still living), celebrating the bygone even while lauding the demise of some of the period’s most oppressive aspects, like institutionalised slavery and legally sanctioned sexism and racism.¹⁶

Neo-Victorianism, then, at once continues debates about identity and anxiety which are symptomatic of modern subjectivity and central to the Victorian urban Gothic, and also re-positions the Victorian past as new, temporally removed and exotic Other.¹⁷ We will see this at work in the neo-Victorian texts about the East End I want to discuss in the second part of this chapter, where I examine how neo-Victorian adaptations re-present, re-inscribe, or re-imagine the East End mythology. Both Gothic and neo-Victorian fiction are concerned with haunting, trauma, and recurrence. Does steampunk re-enact these traumatic hauntings? My main focus in answering these questions is Kim Newman’s 1992 hyper-Gothic, first-wave steampunk novel *Anno Dracula*, which I shall briefly juxtapose with Peter Ackroyd’s more psychogeographical vision

¹⁴ Kohlke and Gutleben, *Neo-Victorian Gothic*, p. 3, original emphasis.

¹⁵ Kohlke and Gutleben, *Neo-Victorian Gothic*, p. 4, original emphasis.

¹⁶ Kohlke and Gutleben, *Neo-Victorian Gothic*, p. 4.

¹⁷ Kohlke and Gutleben, *Neo-Victorian Gothic*, p. 7-9.

in *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (1994) before turning to a selection of second-wave steampunk examples. These analyses will foreground the urban Gothic aspects that these works have in common, although we will see that they re-imagine them in different ways. I will conclude this chapter by discussing in which way second wave steampunk may productively re-combine and re-purpose Victorian urban Gothic mythologies to re-organise meaning.

2. DARKEST LONDON: EAST END MYTHOLOGIES

2.1 THE GOTHIC LENS

If neo-Victorian fiction is by necessity a hyperreal assemblage, as Kohlke and Gutleben suggest, we might be tempted to suppose the ‘signs of the [Victorian] past’ which inform it to signify ‘reality’ — but it is, of course, more complicated. Julian Wolfreys puts forward the notion that nineteenth-century London itself is characterised by an innate hyperreality: ‘Reality + X : this is the non-conceptual, aprogrammatic term or equation by which I want to define provisionally the London effect’, ‘which informs [Romantic and early Victorian authors’] texts beyond mere acts of representation or mimesis’.¹⁸ As Luckhurst summarises:

London becomes a sublime object that evokes awe and evades rational capture. The ‘London-effect; ‘for Wolfreys, is the sense that there is ‘always a mysterious supplement that escapes signification’. Writers since Blake and Dickens have understood that London is not a city that can be encompassed by the panoptical ambitions of novelistic realism but requires a writing that evokes ‘the ineffability and lack which is always at the heart of London’.¹⁹

Within block quotation: single quotation marks

Such a sublime, ineffable, and labyrinthine city, always at once a physical space and one of the imagination in which obscurity becomes ‘part of the very fabric of London itself’, becomes susceptible and ‘more amenable to the disorderly mode of the Gothic’.²⁰ In other words, the sublimity of the modern metropolis which, if defined in Burkean terms as ‘terror and awe’, is not

¹⁸ Julian Wolfreys, *Writing London: The Trace of the Urban Text from Blake to Dickens* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998), p. 8.

¹⁹ Roger Luckhurst, ‘The contemporary London Gothic and the limits of the ‘spectral turn’, *Textual Practice* 16:3 (2002), 527-546, p. 531, Wolfreys, *Urban Text*, p. 8, 25.

²⁰ Wolfreys, *Urban Text*, p. 21; Luckhurst, ‘Spectral Turn’, p. 531.

unlike the uncanny, can be potently expressed via the urban Gothic mode. Uncanny, or *unheimlich*, after all, literally translates to un-home-ly, and as such is intrinsically connected to identity and how we inhabit spaces.²¹ The inherent ‘Gothicness’ of modern Victorian London informs urban writing throughout the century, particularly in relation to the East End.

By the mid- to late-nineteenth century, an underlying Gothic rhetoric had been assimilated into the popular register with which urban London, and especially its social ills, were portrayed:

For Dickens, as for nineteenth-century literary culture in general, it was this Gothic rhetoric which would come to dominate almost all depictions of human evil and misery, until by the time of *Bleak House* (1853) it no longer seemed strange to describe old men as vampires, detectives as ghosts, curtains as banshees, money-lenders as changelings, or court regalia as demons, even in a novel set in almost-contemporary London and notionally lacking any supernatural content.²²

In addition, de Quincey had established the metaphor which encoded slums such as St. Giles, Seven Dials, or Whitechapel as *terrae incognitae* — exotic, a-temporal, and lawless spaces in which the civilising effects of modernity were given no foothold, and which therefore remained significantly ‘behind the times’.²³ It is then in discourse about the slum especially that Gothic imageries converge to identify it as what Mighall calls an ‘anachronistic vestige of the “errors of our forefathers”’, haunted by ‘the vengeful spirit of pathology and plunder, the nemesis of neglect’.²⁴

Social reformers such as William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, utilised this language in order to illustrate to his middle-class readers how uncomfortably close the horrors of poverty were to their doorsteps in his survey, *In Darkest England and the way Out* (1890), referencing Henry Morton Stanley’s travelogue *In Darkest Africa* (1890). As L. Perry Curtis

²¹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by Joan Stambaugh (New York: SUNY Press, 2010 [1927]).

²² Crawford, *Gothic Fiction*, p. 168-69.

²³ Mighall, p. 35-36.

²⁴ Mighall, p. 76-77. ‘The Nemesis of Neglect’ refers to a frequently reproduced Punch Cartoon from September 1888, in which the Phantom Jack the Ripper embodies social neglect and haunts darkened East End streets. John Tenniel, ‘The Nemesis of Neglect’, cartoon, in *Punch*, 29 Sept. 1888, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jack-the-Ripper-The-Nemesis-of-Neglect-Punch-London-Charivari->

notes:

Social investigators, missionaries, and reformers often imagined the East End as an urban jungle filled with danger and sin and infested with ‘savages’ or ‘beasts of prey in human shape’. The oxymoronic metaphor of the urban jungle enabled social investigators to fancy themselves as hardy adventurers entering what would today be called a ‘combat zone’, armed with nothing more than a map, a compass, and a Bible.²⁵

Indeed, Booth’s bestseller teems with analogies about savagery, sins, and disease.²⁶ Whereas Margaret Harkness’ novel *Captain Lobe: A Story of the Salvation Army* (1889) eschewed strategies of othering in favour of a more authentic portrayal designed to effect change,²⁷ her re-naming of the novel *In Darkest London* in reference to Booth contributed to rather than undermining a popular reception of the East End as *terra incognita*, not least because the diversity of the East End’s multicultural population often conjured up imageries of the outlandish, the foreign, and the exotic.²⁸ By the 1880s, the East End’s demographic was dominated by Irish Catholics, sailors from China and India, and Ashkenazim Jews fleeing pogroms in Russia,²⁹ all of which were easily assimilated into Orientalist stereotypes about ‘the East’ by the middle-class outside perspective. To what degree notions of the Gothic metropolis are intertwined with a reception of the physical urban landscape is illustrated in the work of the French artist and engraver Gustave Doré. His illustrations for *London. A Pilgrimage* (1872), produced in collaboration with Blanchard Jerrold, have become renowned for their evocative play with light and dark and have coloured future imaginations of Victorian London well into the

cartoon-poem-1888-09-29.jpg (Accessed 10 June 2018).

²⁵ L. Perry Curtis Jr, *Jack the Ripper and the London Press* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 35.

²⁶ ‘As there is a darkest Africa is there not also a darkest England? Civilisation, which can breed its own barbarians, does it not also breed its own pygmies? May we not find a parallel at our own doors, and discover within a stone’s throw of our cathedrals and palaces similar horrors to those which Stanley has found existing in the great Equatorial forest? [...] [T]he stony streets of London, if they could but speak, would tell of tragedies as awful, of ruin as complete, of ravishments as horrible, as if we were in Central Africa; only the ghastly devastation is covered, corpselike, with the artificialities and hypocrisies of modern civilisation.’ William Booth, *In Darkest England*, p. 11-13, quoted in Curtis, *Jack the Ripper*, p. 36.

²⁷ Flore Janssen, ‘Margaret Harkness: ‘In Darkest London’ - 1889’, <https://www.londonfictions.com/margaret-harkness-in-darkest-london.html#> (Accessed 10 June 2018).

²⁸ John Marriot, ‘The imaginative geography of the Whitechapel murders’, in *Jack the Ripper and the East End*, ed. by Alex Werner (London: Chatto & Windus, 2008), pp. 31-63.

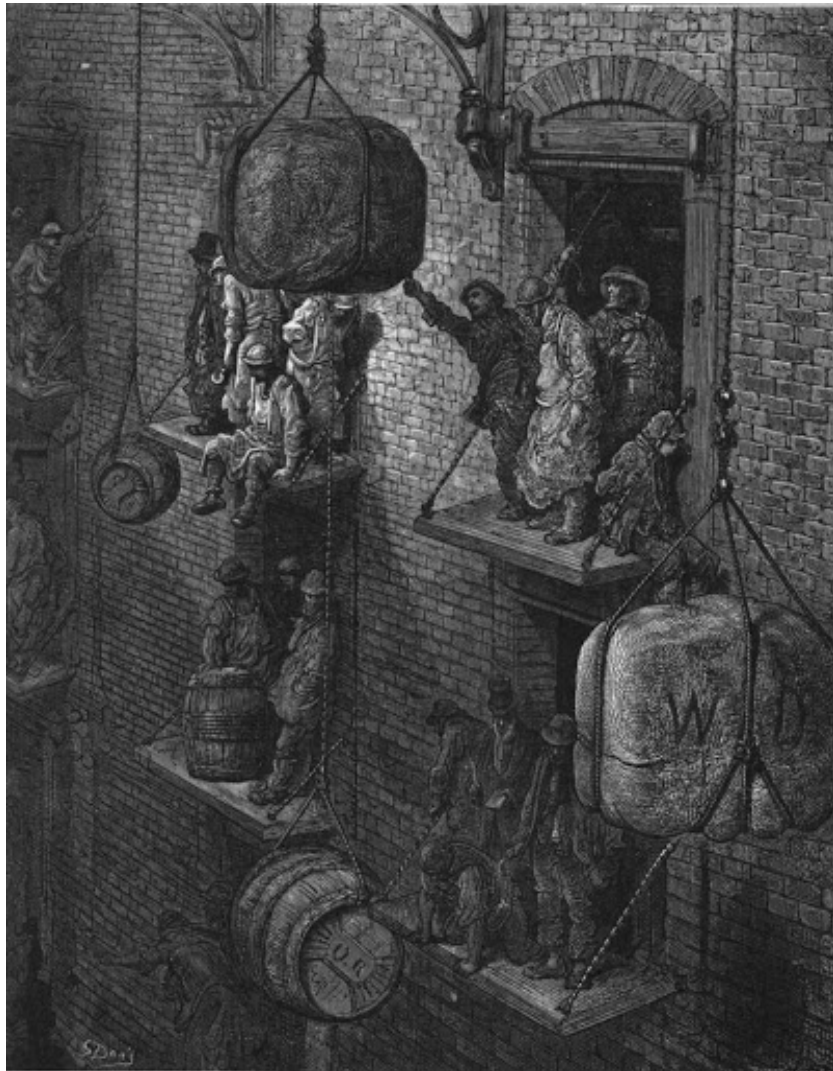
²⁹ Anne J. Kershen, ‘The immigrant community of Whitechapel at the time of the Ripper murders’, in *Jack the*

present, but it is only prudent to remember that his vision of London is necessarily embedded in a context of cultural production. For example, although Doré and Jerrold undertook field research through guided tours throughout London, many sketches were produced in retrospect from memory, not on location.³⁰ Contemporary critics accused him of exaggerating his depiction of misery, squalor, and deprivation, and Doré's work is certainly coloured by an imaginary of the mega-city. Ludgate Hill, for example, proved a popular subject for contemporary artists, with its perspective of a crowded main street full of traffic flanked by multi-storey houses and disappearing in the distance beneath a railway bridge usually afforded a place of honour in the centre in the middle ground, complete with a chugging steam train. The railway bridge especially, spanning not any natural obstacle such as a river, but merely another street, signifies the multiplicity of networks of movement, the simultaneity and tempo of the modern city. Artists such as Wilhelm Trübner (*Ludgate Hill*, 1884), John Atkinson Grimshaw (*St Paul's from Ludgate Circus*, 1885), John O'Connor (*Ludgate, Evening*, 1887), William Logsdail (*St. Paul's and Ludgate Hill*, 1887), or Jacques-Emile Blanche (*Ludgate Circus: Entrée de la City (Novembre, midi)*, 1910) were drawn to this vista of layers behind layers of buildings, staggered evocatively from foreground to background, where St. Paul's Cathedral looms loftily, rendered in soft colours to emphasise distance. Doré, too, rendered this vista as an icon exemplifying the modern metropolis in a way that perhaps the Manhattan skyline has become an iconic image in the present.³¹ However, in conjunction with later depictions of Ludgate Hill, we see to what extent Doré exaggerates the densely populated street for dramatic effect.

Ripper and the East End, ed. by Alex Werner (London: Chatto & Windus, 2008), pp. 65-97.

³⁰ David Kerr, 'Doré, (Louis Auguste) Gustave', Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-67162> (Accessed 8 June 2018).

³¹ Gustave Doré and Blanchard Jerrold, *London. A Pilgrimage* (New York: Dover Publications, 1970 [1872]). Ludgate Hill - A Block in the Street, p. 119.



1: Gustave Doré: *Warehousing in the City*

Other images, such as *Warehousing in the City*³², evoke endlessness through the absence of horizons. We see a warehouse front with neither roof nor pavement, no limitation left or right, which seems to stretch endlessly into the shadows, creating an uncanny atmosphere. This effect is maximised in *Over London - By Rail*, where a fish-eye perspective trick highlights the manner in which innumerable uniform brick houses stretch into the distance, forming a labyrinth of walls

³² Doré, p. 115.

and chimneys in which dwarfed citizens are isolated and quite literally faceless.³³ Instead of a sky, high railway bridges stretch over the houses, invoking claustrophobia and gloom. Doré's London is a sublime megalopolis whose sheer physicality acquires Gothic qualities and which is nowhere so dreary and dark as in the slums, which Jerrold's descriptions complement through their vivid descriptions of a picturesque, yet somewhat bizarre setting:

We plunge into a maze of courts and narrow streets of low houses—nearly all the doors of which are open, showing kitchen fires blazing far in the interior, and strange figures moving about. Whistles, shouts, oaths, growls, and the brazen laughter of tipsy women: sullen 'good nights' to the police escort; frequent recognition of notorious rogues by the superintendent and his men; black pools of water under our feet—only a riband of violet grey sky overhead!³⁴

In this passage alone, we find sensory staples of Gothic portrayals that later texts and films tend to take up: the juxtaposition of unusual light and dark, making strange the rowdy, promiscuous women and drunk men, the cacophonous soundscape, and the unfamiliar, oddly coloured sky all contribute to a vision of intriguing distortion. Doré's illustrations foreground evocative shadows. Here, urchins and street-dwellers in ill-fitting clothing crowd in melancholy shadows, highlighting sources of light only deepening the contrast.³⁵ This is particularly evocative in the illustration of *Opium Smoking - The Lascar's Room in 'Edwin Drood'*³⁶, where the solitary light source illuminates the Orientalised, alien face of the genderless Lascar woman: 'It was difficult to see any humanity in that face, as the enormous grey lips lapped about the rough wood pipe and drew in the poison.'³⁷ The scene relies on the notoriety of Dickens' intertext (1870) in which John Jasper finds himself in 'in the meanest and closest of small rooms', where '[t]hrough ragged window-curtain, the light of early day steals in from a miserable court'.³⁸ In this squalid and murky place in Shadwell, Jasper's visions of a romanticised, atemporal, and feudal Orient

³³ Doré, p. 121.

³⁴ Doré, p. 145.

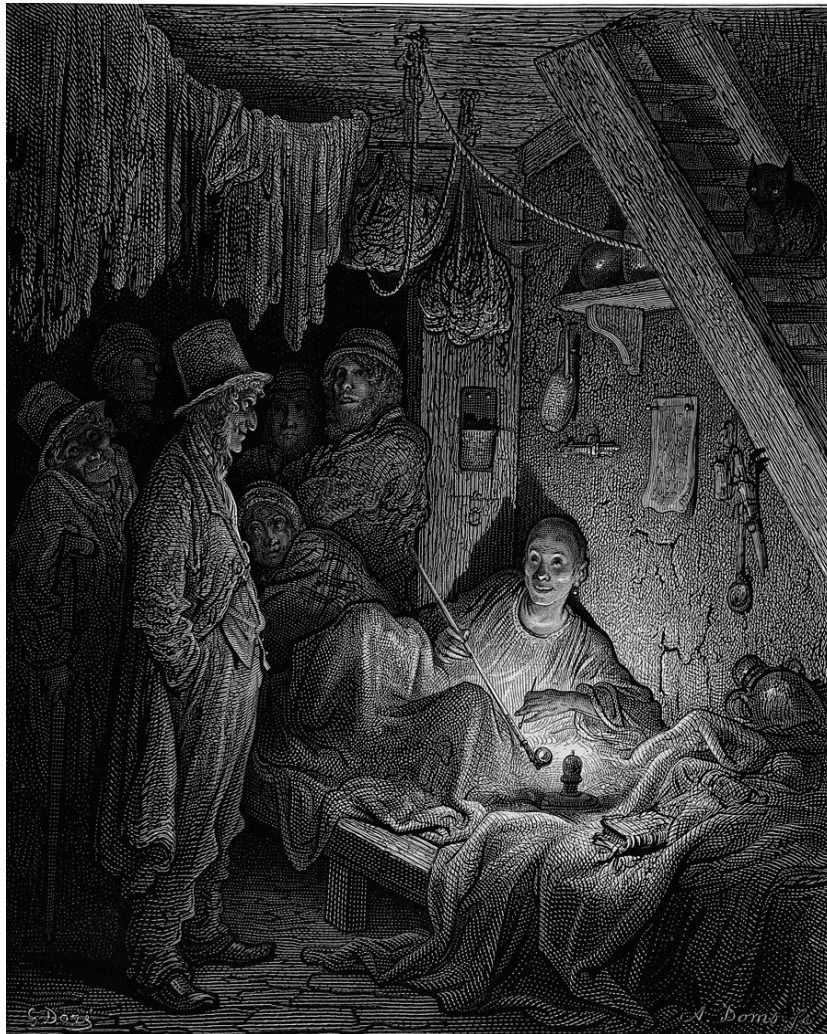
³⁵ Wentworth Street, Whitechapel, Doré, p. 125, or Bull's-Eye, p. 145.

³⁶ Doré, p. 147.

³⁷ Doré, p. 148.

³⁸ Charles Dickens, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (Cambridge: Penguin Classics, 2011 [1870]), p. 7; Mike Jay, *Emperors of Dreams: Drugs in the Nineteenth Century*, (Cambridgeshire: Dedalus, 2011).

populated by Turkish robbers and Sultans, where '[t]en thousand scimitars flash in the sunlight, and thrice ten thousand dancing-girls strew flowers', followed by 'white elephants' exemplifies the type of exotic mysticism with which middle-class Westerners imagined the East and, by proxy, the East End.³⁹



2: Gustave Doré: *Opium Smoking - The Lascar's Room in 'Edwin Drood'*

In later visions, opium-smoking is associated with the London docks and Limehouse, for example in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, or Doyle's Sherlock Holmes short story, *The Man with the Twisted Lip* (1891). From the 1890s onward, Limehouse was settled by Chinese

³⁹ Dickens, *Edwin Drood*, p. 6.

immigrants and perceived through Orientalist imaginaries about the ‘Yellow Peril’, epitomised by Fu Manchu, the ‘Chinese Moriarty’, a criminal mastermind installed by Sax Rohmer (Arthur Henry Ward) in Limehouse in his sensational detective stories (1913-1959). These novels helped transform ‘East London into a place of exotic danger, where subterranean tunnels link gambling dens and brothels, and electric buttons hidden under the linoleum are used to communicate early warnings of police raids’. ⁴⁰ Considering that Fu Manchu appears flanked by Bill Sikes and Professor Moriarty in *Anno Dracula*, it is important to note the many layers of (meta-)textuality. Whereas Newman’s hyper-fictional collage is post-modern and self-aware, many of the texts it synthesises are fraught with imagined projections, but later received as at least semi-documentary, much like Mayhew’s ethnography. Booth’s rhetoric about ‘Darkest Africa / London’, Doré’s melancholy visions of the endless metropolis, or Orientalist fantasies from Dickens to Wilde, overlaid with Edwardian sensationalism, are evidence of an East End reproduced through a lens of Gothic imagination from the outset. In addition, these visions are coloured by an imagination often influenced by other texts, such as Morton’s travelogue or de Quincey’s novel, so that the Victorian East End as mediated through cultural artefacts is inherently multi-textual and palimpsestic.

This is especially evident in Arthur Morrison’s classic slum novel, *A Child of the Jago* (1896), which Newman also re-imagines. The story of Dicky Perrot, a boy who, though clever and good-natured, is fated to a life of petty theft and poverty in London’s worst slum inspired a variety of responses. Reviewers were impressed by the brutality that characterised mob violence in Morrison’s *Jago*, a space which policemen scarcely enter for fear of being attacked, or noted the pathos with which Morrison outlined neglected, hungry children. Others, like H. D. Traill, criticised the novel’s ‘extraordinary unreality’ and called it a ‘fairyland of horror’ that ‘never did exist’: ‘Mr Morrison has simply taken all the types of London misery, foulness and rascality, and “dumped them down” on the area aforesaid... It is certainly not realism’.⁴¹ Others asserted they were acquainted with the very real types in the novel⁴² — including Father Arthur Osborne Jay

⁴⁰ Matthew Sweet, *Inventing the Victorians* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), p. 91.

⁴¹ H. D. Traill, ‘The New Realism’, *Fortnightly Review*, 67, 1897, pp. 63-73, reprinted in Arthur Morrison, *A Child of the Jago*, ed. by Peter Miles (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 175-176. pp. 175-176.

⁴² Harold Boulton, ‘A Novel of the Lowest Life’, *British Review* (9 Jan 1897), 349, reprinted in Arthur Morrison, *A Child of the Jago*, ed. by Peter Miles (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 176-177. A. Osborne Jay, ‘The New Realism: To the Editor of the Fortnightly Review’, *Fortnightly Review*, 67, 1897, pp. 314, reprinted in Arthur

himself (who inspired the figure of Father Sturt). Jay, vicar of Holy Trinity in Shoreditch, had invited Morrison to explore his parish in 1895, which included the notorious ‘Old Nichol’ slum on which the Jago is based.⁴³ The Old Nichol appeared on Charles Booth’s *Poverty Map* (1889-90) in dark blue (‘Very Poor, casual. Chronic want.’) and black (‘Lowest class. Vicious, semi-criminal’).⁴⁴ The more than thirty streets and courts housed 5,700 of the poorest Londoners, and child mortality was ‘double that of the rest of Bethnal Green’, but by the time Morrison gathered his evidence, the slum had already been cleared by the London County Council for a rebuilding scheme.⁴⁵ Visions of the Jago then depended considerably on ‘tales told to him by Father Jay, some of which, what’s more, had come to Jay at second hand.’⁴⁶ Whereas this illuminates the debate around the perceived authenticity or lack thereof in Morrison’s portrait, his ‘nightmare vision’ had a lasting influence: ‘[F]rom 1896 onwards, even within the East End, ‘Nichol’ and ‘Jago’ became interchangeable names’.⁴⁷ Jack London, in his slum narrative *The People of the Abyss* (1903), made reference to ‘the municipal dwelling erected by the London County Council on the site of the slums where lived Arthur Morrison’s “Child of the Jago”’.⁴⁸ As he omits any mention of the account’s fictionality, London’s wording suggests a fusion of reality and fiction in his perception.

The Old Nichol, then, as it materially ceased to exist, transformed into a mythologised version of itself rooted partly in fact, partly in the stories told and re-told about it. This vision, as it has moved into cultural memory, is one of a convoluted labyrinth of shabby streets and alleyways, in which people live in small rooms like vermin; ‘Here lies the Jago, a nest of rats, breeding, breeding, as only rats can; and we say it is well’.⁴⁹ The Jago’s confusing, idiosyncratic topography was based in reality:

Morrison, *A Child of the Jago*, ed. by Peter Miles (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 178-179.

⁴³ Arthur Morrison, ‘What is a Realist?’, *New Review*, 16/94 (Mar. 1894), 326-36, reprinted in Arthur Morrison, *A Child of the Jago*, ed. by Peter Miles (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 179-181, p. 168.

⁴⁴ Booth’s evaluation exemplifies in which way poverty and criminality seemed confluent and inevitably linked in the Victorian imagination. Charles Booth, *Descriptive Map of London Poverty*, 1898; Laura Vaughan, ‘Mapping the East End Labyrinth’, in *Jack the Ripper and the East End*, ed. by Alex Werner (London: Chatto & Windus, 2008), pp. 219-237.

⁴⁵ Sarah Wise, *The Blackest Streets. The Life and Death of a Victorian Slum* (London: Vintage Books, 2008). p. 8.

⁴⁶ Sarah Wise, ‘Arthur Morrison: ‘A Child of the Jago’ - 1896’, <https://www.londonfictions.com/arthur-morrison-a-child-of-the-jago.html> (Accessed 15 June 2018). See also Wise, *Blackest Streets*, p. 231.

⁴⁷ Wise, *Blackest Streets*, p. 226.

⁴⁸ Jack London, *People of the Abyss* (London: [Penguin], 1977 [1903]), p. 88-89.

⁴⁹ Morrison, *Jago*, p. 133.

By the late 1880s, there were no maps that could account for the Nichol's illegal sprouting of sheds, workshops and stables – slung up without parish surveyors' say-so in courts, yards and any remaining free space. The last Ordnance Survey had been undertaken in the early 1870s, and with no cartographers interested or motivated enough to chart this parallel world, the Nichol had certain routes through it that were known only to some of its residents.⁵⁰

Dicky Perrot, corrupted by his surroundings despite his best intentions, navigates these urban space of vice and violence with ease and familiarity, but is also caught in its dismal maze: 'The topography of the Jago induces a cunning, furtive mentality; the possessor of that mentality, in turn, learns to make use of the Jago's intricacies to evade hostile 'outsiders' in pursuit. In Morrison's book, knowledge of Jago geography is knowledge of evil'.⁵¹ We frequently see Dicky fleeing through the Jago after he has committed a theft, sometimes using its intricate alleyways to his advantage, other times being exhausted by it. As Wise concludes: 'This underlines his ambivalent relationship to the place: Dicky's worse nature knows how to exploit the streets; his better nature is confounded by them'.⁵²

Morrison's novel illustrates not only how Gothic tropes about destitution and atavism converged with the labyrinthine cityscape, but also how different narratives can shape the collective imaginary of a space. Recent transmedia scholarship pioneered by Henry Jenkins discusses such convergence of media into what Pierre Lévy has termed 'collective intelligence' in the digital age, but we can also trace how Victorian discourse slowly accumulates an intertextual, palimpsestic mythology in the same, albeit analogue, manner.⁵³ Lévy defined collective intelligence as 'a form of universally distributed intelligence, constantly enhanced, coordinated, in real time, and resulting in the effective mobilization of skills. [...] No one knows everything, everyone knows something, all knowledge resides in humanity. There is no transcendent store of knowledge and knowledge is simply the sum of what we know'.⁵⁴ In

⁵⁰ Wise, 'Child of the Jago'.

⁵¹ Wise, 'Child of the Jago'.

⁵² Wise, 'Child of the Jago'.

⁵³ Pierre Lévy, *Collective Intelligence. Mankind's Emerging World in Cyberspace* (New York: Perseus Books, 1997).

⁵⁴ Lévy, p. 13-14.

Jenkins' work, collective intelligence interacts with the two concepts media convergence and participatory culture to create knowledge communities. 'Each of us constructs our own personal mythology from bits and fragments of information extracted from the media flow and transformed into resources through which we make sense of our everyday lives'.⁵⁵

Interlinked textual representations of the Victorian East End in prose or image even by eye-witnesses such as Doré or Morrison, inevitably informed by previous narratives, contributed to a media flow which in turn created a collective knowledge shared by a predominantly middle-class demographic of Londoners. In this collective knowledge, the urban Gothic mode becomes a predominant aesthetic through which people made sense of the labyrinthine, sublime, and achronic city, readily tapping into and referencing a shared mythology. This becomes particularly evident through the events of 1888, which inevitably catalysed processes of Gothicising the East End and the production of collective knowledge.

2.2 JACK THE RIPPER AND THE GOTHIC GAZE

No event both epitomised everything that contemporary Londoners thought and feared about the East End — that it was a lawless, anachronistic, exotic other against which the cosmopolitan Victorian identity was defined — and generated an evocative local mythology that dominated perceptions of the area throughout the following centuries as the Jack the Ripper murders of 1888.⁵⁶ The degree of sexualised violence that informed the killings of destitute women in an area already heavily charged with Gothic imagery shone an unwelcome light on persistent social shortcomings of the seemingly progressive late-Victorian metropolis. Reactions to and media coverage of the events represent dominant socio-cultural facets of the contemporary zeitgeist: the outrage at poverty and squalor and cries for reform, or the hysteric, xenophobic and often anti-Semitic treatment of 'usual suspects', contemporary attitudes towards criminality, criminology and the police, the ready use of sensationalist-Gothic rhetoric in the media and the co-influence of the murders on the success of the detective novel have all been chronicled and examined in scholarship.⁵⁷ In addition, Ripper stories have been told and re-told across various media since

⁵⁵ Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture. Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), p. 3, 23, 3-4.

⁵⁶ Paul Begg, *Jack the Ripper: The Definitive History* (London, Routledge, 2003).

⁵⁷ *Jack the Ripper and the East End*, ed. by Alex Werner (London: Chatto & Windus, 2008). *Jack the Ripper*.

Frank Wedekind's drama *Die Büchse der Pandora* (1903) or Marie Belloc-Lowndes' novel *The Lodger* (1913) which imbued the killer with the famous iconography of top hat, Gladstone bag, and opera coat.⁵⁸

As such, the Ripper and his victims are inextricably anchored in a specific urban locale and all it signifies in the contemporary and later popular imagination. Although scholars are working to retrieve their biographies, the canonical victims Mary Ann Nichols (31st August, Buck's Row), Annie Chapman (8th September, Hanbury Street), Elizabeth Stride (30th September, Dutfield's Yard), Catherine Eddowes (30th September, the so-called 'double-event', Mitre Square), and Mary Jane Kelly (9th November, Miller's Court) are commonly remembered in association with the location of their murder and through frequently reproduced renderings of their mutilated bodies in the *Illustrated Police News*.⁵⁹ They have been assimilated into a geographically rooted Ripper symbolism. This also illustrates in what way media representation informed the reception of the murders: the Whitechapel murders were the first serial killings to create a media frenzy.⁶⁰ A sensational style of reporting achieved new heights shortly before the Ripper murders with W. T. Stead's New Journalism, a mixture of investigative and sensationalist reporting that focused on 'exposing' social ills and dangers.⁶¹ However, when the Ripper killings began, their crude sexual violence defied usual strategies of sense-making:

These murders remained an impenetrable mystery and an unprecedented horror, with the killer seemingly capable of striking again at any time. Not only did this narrative have an ambiguous beginning [...], and an uncertain middle [...], it also lacked a clear ending [...]. Here was a series of shocking crimes without any closure.⁶²

Media. Culture. History., ed. by Alexandra Warwick and Martin Willis (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007). Curtis, Ripper. Drew Gary, *London's Shadows. The Dark Side of the Victorian City* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010). Mara Isabel Romero Ruiz, 'Detective Fiction and Neo-Victorian Sexploitation: Violence, Morality and Rescue Work in Lee Jackson's *The Last Pleasure Garden* (2007) and *Ripper Street*'s 'I Need Light' (2012-16)', *Neo-Victorian Journal*, 9:2 (2017), pp. 41-69.

⁵⁸ Clare Smith, *Jack the Ripper in Film and Culture. Top hat, Gladstone Bag, and Fog* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016). Also: Clive Bloom 'Jack the Ripper - a legacy in pictures', in *Jack the Ripper and the East End*, ed. by Alex Werner (London: Chatto & Windus, 2008), pp. 239-267.

⁵⁹ Hallie Rubenhold, *The Five: The Untold Lives of the Women Killed by Jack the Ripper* (London: Transworld Publishers, 2019).

⁶⁰ Oldridge, p. 46. Also: Sweet, Walkowitz, Judith R., *City of Dreadful Delight* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

⁶¹ Curtis, *Ripper*, p. 79, Oldridge, p. 47.

⁶² Curtis, *Ripper*, p. 105.

Without a criminological vocabulary regarding serial killers, reporters had to resort to their own imaginations in order to create motives for a culprit who flaunted his deeds and then vanished without a trace. Newspapers such as the *Star*, with its ‘flamboyant style’ and ‘radical stance’, felt that the killer could be plausible only as an urban monster of the likes of Spring-Heeled Jack or Sweeney Todd.⁶³ Called a ‘fiend’, ‘ghoul’, ‘beast’, and a ‘vampire’, this monstrous other seemingly epitomised the depravity and violence commonly associated with the East End. Already after Nichols’ murder, the *Star* began to outline the crime in terms of Gothic fiction and the Gothic monster:

Nothing so appalling, so devilish, so inhuman — or, rather non-human — as the three Whitechapel crimes has ever happened outside the pages of Poe or De Quincey. The unravelled mystery of ‘The Whitechapel Murders’ would make a page of detective romance as ghastly as ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’. The hellish violence and malignity of the crime which we described yesterday resemble in almost every particular the two other deeds of darkness which preceded it. Rational motive there appears to be none. The murderer must be a Man Monster [...]⁶⁴

From the outset, elements of fictionality and the supernatural clung to this ‘devilish’, ‘non-human’ killer, who, as Alexandra Warwick reminds us, ‘has been a collective and collaborative invention since the moment of the murders taking place’.⁶⁵ This is especially true because Jack the Ripper is, ultimately, an absence, a blank spot into which we might project all our communally created narratives: there is no voice to refute us.

It is then no wonder that the nameless killer, who’s only identifying trademark was ruthless, visceral violence, was often referred to as ‘Mr. Hyde’.⁶⁶ The *Pall Mall Gazette*, for which Stead wrote, phrased it as follows: ‘There certainly seems to be a tolerably realistic

⁶³ Curtis, p. 113.

⁶⁴ Alex Chisholm, ‘The Star, 1st Sept 1888’, http://www.casebook.org/press_reports/star/s880901.html (Accessed 25 May 2018).

⁶⁵ Alexandra Warwick, ‘Blood and ink: narrating the Whitechapel murders’, in *Jack the Ripper. Media. Culture. History.*, ed. by Alexandra Warwick and Martin Willis (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), pp. 71-90, p. 71.

⁶⁶ *The Globe*, quoted in Curtis, p. 127.

impersonification of Mr. Hyde at large in Whitechapel. The Savage of Civilisation whom we are raising by the hundred thousand in our slums is quite as capable of bathing his hands in blood as any Sioux who ever scalped a foe'.⁶⁷ Stevenson's novella *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), which links moral degeneration to physical regress and otherness in the 'ape-like', atavistic monster Mr. Hyde, and a stage adaptation of which had opened at the Lyceum shortly before Tabram's murder, resonantly encoded Victorian anxieties in a Gothic rhetoric.⁶⁸ By linking the figures of the killer with Mr. Hyde, public discourse also linked the regressive violence outlawed by the enlightened teleological Victorian identity to the atavistic, atemporal spaces of the regressive East End, so that rhetoric about the Ripper as an exotic savage seem at once out of place in the modern city and perfectly at home in the heterotopic East End. In addition to the *Gazette*, the *Evening Standard* postulated:

The monstrous and wanton brutality by which they are distinguished is rather what we might expect from a race of savages than from even the most abandoned and most degraded classes in a civilised community. It is terrible to reflect that at the end of the nineteenth century, after all our efforts, religious, educational, and philanthropic, such revolting and sickening barbarity should still be found in the heart of this great City, and be able to lurk undetected in close contact with all that is most refined, elegant, and cultivated in human society.⁶⁹

The *Star* drew an image of the 'ghoul-like creature who stalks through the streets of London, stalking down his victim like a Pawnee Indian, is simply drunk with blood', again conflating supernatural monstrosity and racist ideas about 'savagery'.⁷⁰

When the Central News Agency received a letter on the 27th September, now notorious as the 'Dear Boss' letter in which the author self-identified as 'Jack the Ripper' for the first time, the letter was initially taken as a hoax. However, after the 'double-event' three days later, in which Eddowes' earlobe was removed as predicted, both the letter and the 'Saucy Jack postcard'

⁶⁷ Alex Chisholm, 'The Pall Mall Gazette, 8th Sept 1888', http://www.casebook.org/press_reports/pall_mall_gazette/18880908.html (Accessed 25 May 2018).

⁶⁸ Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (Oxford: Oxford Classics, 2006 [1886]), p. 23; Mighall, pp. 130-164. Marriott, p. 66.

⁶⁹ Alex Chisholm, 'The Star, 1st Sept 1888', http://www.casebook.org/press_reports/star/s880901.html (Accessed 25 May 2018).

⁷⁰ Chisholm, '8th September 1888'.

(sent after the fact) were widely reprinted in the newspapers, disseminating the killer's 'own' rhetoric to the larger public and enshrining them in cultural memory — as evidenced in Alan Moore's 1989 graphic novel named *From Hell* after the letter's signature.⁷¹ 'By the time of these letters', Clive Bloom notes, 'Jack has ceased to be a killer but has become a multiplicity of performing personas for the popular imagination'.⁷²

Although criminologist Cesare Lombroso or psychiatrist Richard von Kraft-Ebbing in his *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886) had laid out the foundations for theories about sexual violent pathology, few journalists dared broach the topic of sexual motivation.⁷³ Instead, they preferred the notion of a Gothic monster, easily linked to larger debates about public safety and social responsibility. In doing so, they crafted a notion of the serial killer as the new urban monster, 'a dweller on the limits of society and yet fully integrated into it'.⁷⁴ The psychopathic killer navigated the urban sphere in disguise, performing the assimilated urbanite and yet essentially split both in personality and morality — an imagery productively encoded in Jekyll's homicidal alter ego, Mr. Hyde. From the beginning, the killer of the Whitechapel murders was a phenomenon collectively constructed across multiple media and with close connections to popular urban Gothic fictions of the day. He also embodied collective anxieties about life in the city as an urban uncanny. In the Freudian sense, the uncanny resides on the continually collapsing border between the familiar and the repressed, the ego and the id, progress and atavism, a duality also inherent in the othering rhetoric about the East End as a locus of the atavistic, the repressed, and the id. Uncanny, the un-home-ly, is, after all, directly linked to whether or not we comfortably inhabit a space. The urban monster which the Ripper represents complicates our own place in the labyrinthine metropolis as a source of unpredictable danger.

⁷¹ Anon., "'Dear Boss' letter", http://www.casebook.org/ripper_letters/, (Accessed 25 May 2018).

⁷² Clive Bloom, 'A legacy in pictures', p. 95.

⁷³ Curtis, *Ripper*, p. 176.

⁷⁴ Clive Bloom, 'The Ripper writing: a cream of a nightmare dream', in *Jack the Ripper. Media. Culture. History.*, ed. by Alexandra Warwick and Martin Willis (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), pp. 91-109, p. 98.

2.3 DEVILS AND DETECTIVES

Considering this, it is no wonder that the Ripper gave new, accelerating impulses to the developing genre of detective fiction, most notably through Sherlock Holmes, who penetrates the urban jungle with ordering logic and finds causality in contingency.⁷⁵ As a collective symbol for ratio and order restored, the Holmesian detective usually navigates the city as an intricate labyrinth of traces with authority, negating the trauma of regressive violence with progressive deduction in opposition to the anarchic forces of crime. Jack the Ripper and Sherlock Holmes, then, are a match forged by destiny as the powerful early incarnation of that eternally popular and endlessly reproduced constellation of serial killer and urban detective. It is no wonder that subsequent Ripper fictions usually feature a detection plot or detective figure, especially considering that they represent the intersection at which ‘real’ and ‘fictional’ symbolics converge: the heavily mythologised Ripper whose identity remains forever obscure, and the canonical detective who has become such an icon that people often think he really existed.

As Darren Oldridge concludes, ‘the press launched the “Ripper industry”’, constructing a wealth of imagery around an inevitably blank centre, anchored in a network of pre-existing social discourses about collective identity.⁷⁶ From 1888 onward, popular culture has steadily added on to this construct: the Ripper has, as Gary Coville and Patrick Luciano observe, become an ‘*objet d’art*’.⁷⁷ Every victim, suspect, locale, or investigator surrounding the events of 1888 has been assembled into an interconnected ‘Ripper imaginary’ that was continuously filtered through the collective imagination through cross-media representations and adaptations from the very beginning. They have become talismanic signifiers for ‘Jack the Ripper’ who himself acts as signifier for notions such as ‘Victorian London’ or ‘the East End’, which in turn signify crime, poverty, prostitution, exoticism, and so on. Through this medially constructed web of signifiers, in which all signifiers associated with the Ripper are irretrievably bound up with one another, ‘Jack the Ripper’ and ‘The East End’ become mutually constitutive, and the actual,

⁷⁵ Martin Willis, ‘Jack the Ripper, Sherlock Holmes and the narrative of detection’, in *Jack the Ripper. Media. Culture. History.*, ed. by Alexandra Warwick and Martin Willis (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), pp. 144-158. Romero Ruiz.

⁷⁶ Oldridge, p. 54.

⁷⁷ Gary Coville and Patrick Luciano, ‘Order out of chaos’, in *Jack the Ripper. Media. Culture. History.*, ed. by Alexandra Warwick and Martin Willis (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), pp. 56-70, p. 56.

historical East End recedes from collective memory behind a communally constructed imaginary.⁷⁸

Indeed, as Clive Bloom notes, the Victorian East End has become a fantasy location delineated by an array of specific markers such as fog, brick walls, gaslight, and cobblestones: ‘The real and the tangible of history become the fractured scenario of nostalgia *for* history, a ruined memory of a landscape now reduced to its significant effects, glimpses of a lost place that never quite existed.’⁷⁹ The imagined East End re-created through a coherent, trope-laden aesthetic is a space laden with insecurities: the obscuring fog or portentously dark shadows obscure pathways and hide predators and are only deepened by the sickly gaslight, the brick walls conjure up desolation, claustrophobia, and paranoia, and ‘it is always 1888’. This is an ‘East End of the mind’, its ‘alleyways and cobbled ways an equivalent of the labyrinths of the mind, endlessly uncoiling, but endlessly confined in a circumscribed place.’⁸⁰ This virtual East End is not only socially produced, but produces society as well, considering that its inhabitants are almost always depicted as inevitably dubious drunkards, skulking sailors, lurking children, or shabby prostitutes, the atmosphere ‘hysterical, bigoted, and nasty’.⁸¹ We always recognise the Ripper from his top hat, opera cloak, or medical bag, containing at least one surgical knife. Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first century, popular culture has continually re-imagined and perpetuated these as a set of aesthetic markers charged with the traces of historical meaning which accompanied their creation as an interlinked chain of signifiers. A multitude of discourses, anxieties, and images are highly concentrated into symbols, none so iconic as ‘Jack the Ripper’. As such, these charged symbolics easily survive pop-cultural modification or post-modern re-contextualisation with the meaning attached to them still intact.

This becomes evident in Albert and Allen Hughes’ film adaptation of Alan Moore and Edie Campbell’s graphic novel *From Hell* (1989-1996/2001) which reflects back an international popular reception and which is based on Stephen Knight’s 1976 Ripper theory *The Final Solution*.⁸² I shall discuss *From Hell* here briefly as an example of neo-Victorian re-signification

⁷⁸ Werner 2008; Horace Warner, *Spitalfields Nippers* (London: Spitalfields Life, 2014). Margaret Harkness, *In Darkest London* [1889] (London: Black Apollo Press, 2003), p. 12.

⁷⁹ Bloom, ‘Legacy in Pictures’, p. 239, original emphasis.

⁸⁰ Bloom, p. 240-241.

⁸¹ Bloom, p. 249.

⁸² Max Duperray, ‘“Jack the Ripper” as Neo-Victorian Gothic Fiction: Twentieth-Century and Contemporary Sallies

of the Victorian urban Gothic through an evocative and communally legible Ripper iconography. The film replicates the graphic novel's evocative compositions dominated by gloomy, uniform brick walls and shadowy doorways which echo Doré's endless cityscapes. So do the graphically eerie chiaroscuros that accompany the construction of Whitechapel as an indifferent maze full of shadows concealing malice and misery. Jack the Ripper, here the manic royal physician Sir William Gull, towers over his final victim as shadowy outline in top hat and opera coat, replicating at once the historical crime scene photographs and a fictional iconography rooted in Lowndes' *The Lodger*. As such, the film exemplifies Bloom's familiar 'Ripper aesthetic', but it also adds new, if equally Gothic imagery: Masonic symbols and societies, portentously looming spires against an apocalyptic sky, Abberline's prophetic opium dreams, allusions to the Orientalist-imperialist, symbolised by Cleopatra's needle, accompanied by over-saturation, radically steep camera angles, and fragmentary distortion at once re-affirm Victorian London's and Gothic status, and re-calibrate it.

Whereas Whitechapel remains the locus of Gothic otherness, the whole city and all of society are portrayed as contaminated by Gothic corruption. *From Hell* deliberately implicates a complicit aristocracy as emblems of a corrupt authority in the form of Gull, who avenges the Duke of Clarence's slumming habits on the most destitute citizens, or the shallow aristocrats who gawk at Joseph Merrick, the Elephant Man, under the guise of charity, or Abberline's bigoted superiors, conspiring in their masonic secret societies. Corruption, like disease, deeply saturates this intrinsically uncanny Victorian London in which Whitechapel is but a symptom of an ever-present undercurrent of bigotry, decadence, and corruption. *From Hell* therefore re-positions its Gothic gaze: the uncanny cityscape no longer destabilises a Victorian identity of teleological progress threatened by regressive 'savagery', but instead encodes Victorian society itself as a deeply corrupt other. In accordance with Kohlke and Gutleben, the film, as neo-Victorian Gothic, 'participates in an implicit critique of the metanarratives of civilisation and progress, on which the Victorians prided themselves and for which they are still stereotypically celebrated today'.⁸³ It can do so productively in and through the Victorian metropolis because 'neo-Victorian crime and/or detective fictions, [are] quintessentially urban genres, in which cities

into a Late Victorian Case and Myth', in *Neo-Victorian Gothic. Horror, Violence, and Degeneration in the Re-Imagined Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Marie-Louise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben (Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2012), pp. 167-196.

simultaneously function as emblems of advanced civilisation, culture, and progress and of atavistic corruption that threatens their undoing'.⁸⁴

3. DRACULA, PART TWO: *ANNO DRACULA*

If *From Hell* exemplifies how Victorian urban literature and Ripper media have converged to create an aesthetically recognisable Gothic mythology which has become part of collective knowledge by being continually adapted and re-adapted throughout the twentieth century, then *Anno Dracula* serves as an early example of steampunk's creative re-organisation of such shared knowledge.

Newman's novel, which is the first in a series of sequels and off-shoots, imagines itself as a sequel to a version of Stoker's *Dracula* in which the Count triumphs over the Harkers, Van Helsing, and their friends, and marries Queen Victoria to become the new Prince Consort, spreading vampirism throughout London and the Empire.⁸⁵ Inspired by Newman's affection for horror film and all sorts of vampire incarnations, the retelling is a vast, dense intertextual collage of historical, fictional, and pop cultural traces and characters, in which all intermingle freely: Oscar Wilde is seen at Florence Stoker's dinner parties where they meet Lord Godalming, whereas Bram Stoker himself has mysteriously vanished, and Van Helsing has been executed for treason. Lord Alfred Tennyson remains poet laureate 'for dreary centuries', but Polidori's Lord Ruthven has become Prime Minister, and in Whitechapel, where a rabid Jack Seward butchers vampire prostitutes, Inspector Abberline works with DI Lestrade, Dr Jekyll, and Dr Moreau. Mycroft Holmes, Sebastian Moran, and Professor Moriarty all move about in this novel's London, but Sherlock Holmes has been exiled to a work camp for political dissent — and, as Newman confesses, because 'the great detective would have identified, trapped, and convicted the murderer before tea-time'.⁸⁶ Naturally, at the heart of this intertextual reference work lies a quest to solve the Ripper murders, although the reader knows from the first chapter that, seeing

⁸³ Kohlke and Gutleben, *Neo-Victorian Gothic*, p. 7.

⁸⁴ Kohlke and Gutleben, *Neo-Victorian Cities*, p. 20.

⁸⁵ *The Bloody Red Baron* (1995), *Dracula Cha Cha Cha* (1998), and *Johnny Alucard* (2013), which continue with the same premise, but also stories set in the same universe or assembled in the same manner, namely *Angels of Music* (2016, Paris) and *One Thousand Monsters* (2017, Japan).

that ‘Stoker had obligingly called one of Van Helsing’s disciples Jack, made him a doctor and indicated that his experiences in the novel were pretty much pushing him over the edge’, the Ripper is none other than former psychiatrist Jack Seward.⁸⁷

Other, smaller references point to the fiction of Alexandre Dumas père, Sheridan LeFanu, E. M. Forster, Count Stenbock, Frank Wedekind, or Anthony Hope, but also later intertexts such as Murnau’s *Nosferatu* (1922), the films of George Romero, or the novels of Sax Rohmer or Anne Rice. These are intertwined with appearances of historical figures as diverse as Elizabeth Bathory, William Holman Hunt, Frank Harris, Arthur Morrison, Algernon Swinburne, or John Montague Druitt, a Ripper suspect, and Catherine Eddowes, the killer’s fourth victim. This makes the novel, in Newman’s words, ‘as much a playground as a minefield’ which goes ‘beyond historical accuracy to evoke all those gaslit, fogbound London romances’.⁸⁸ Indeed, the text acts as a highly resonant hyper-Victorian collage of Victorian and post-Victorian markers, all of which have come to signify aspects of that era to the 1990s reader, even if they are re-contextualised. As such, Newman’s ‘Victorian’ setting is self-reflexively embedded in the canon of collective popular reception I have outlined, recombining Count Dracula and Jack the Ripper as collective symbols for Victorian Gothic fact and fiction.⁸⁹

3.1 COUNTERFICTIONALITY

Matt Hills has argued for ‘a fourth term-beyond factual, counterfactual, and fictional-in order to address a specific type of fictional world: a world that not only needs to be distinguished from “factuality” but also from other preceding fictions’.⁹⁰ He terms this kind of narrative ‘counterfactual’: it ‘claims no fidelity to an originating fictional world. Instead, it deliberately sets out to re-construct, modify, and merge prior, existent fictional worlds’.⁹¹ Counterfictionality relies on a reader’s familiarity with the original text or an adaptation thereof in order to re-

⁸⁶ Kim Newman, ‘Annotations’, in *Anno Dracula* (London: Titan Books, 2011 [1992]), pp. 42-442, p. 429.

⁸⁷ Kim Newman, ‘Afterword’, in *Anno Dracula* (London: Titan Books, 2011 [1992]), pp. 449-456, p. 454.

⁸⁸ Newman, Afterword, p. 453.

⁸⁹ This is rather interesting considering that both the epistolary cross-media Dracula and John Watson’s frame-narrative in the Sherlock Holmes novels are themselves, self-aware fictions.

⁹⁰ Matt Hills, ‘Counterfictions in the Work of Kim Newman: Rewriting Gothic SF as “Alternate-Stories”’, *Science Fiction Studies*, 30:3 (2003), 436-455, p. 439.

⁹¹ Hills, p. 440.

construct, subvert, or comment on said text or its context. Considering that *The Difference Engine* employs a similar approach, as do various second-wave novels, I want to argue that counterfictionality is a popular steampunk strategy to craft a hyper-Victorian aesthetic, which is one reason why I consider *Anno Dracula* a steampunk novel. Whereas neo-Victorian novels often employ counterfictionality, steampunk narratives are unconcerned with verisimilitude and thus free to re-contextualise, thereby crafting paradoxical parodies and pastiches which can act as critical meta-commentary on both past and present.⁹² Alan Moore's popular graphic novel *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (2000) also exemplifies this.⁹³

As Hills notes, 'Counterfictions, as the term suggests, involve texts self-consciously defining themselves in relation to their generic precursors'.⁹⁴ Counterfictionality depends on an audience's familiarity with at least the key tropes of the original text in order to be legible, and is therefore directly affiliated with convergence and participatory culture. The concept of communal knowledge emerging out of the media flow which I have discussed previously is rooted in Jenkins' work on fan cultures, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (1992). The work itself gleans the concept of textual poaching from Michel de Certeau, who re-defines readers as 'travellers; they move across lands belonging to someone else, like nomads poaching their way across fields they did not write, despoiling the wealth of Egypt to enjoy it themselves'.⁹⁵ Such notions of readers as poachers are, in turn, rooted in Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model of communication, Barthesian and Derridean post-structuralism, in which the meaning of a text is never fixed and authority over meaning does not reside with the author, and reader-reception theory, all of which, if combined with pop culture theory, give rise to the domain of participatory culture of which fan studies is part. To Jenkins, poaching 'captured that process of negotiating over the meaning of a text, and the terms of [fans'] relations

⁹² Not all steampunk is counterfictional, nor is all counterfiction steampunk. Consider, for example, the recently popular 'mashup' fictions in the vein of Seth Grahame-Smith's *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009); Megan de Bruin-Molé, "'Now with the Ultraviolent Zombie Mayhem!': The Neo-Victorian Novel-as-Mashup and the Limits of Postmodern Irony, in *Neo-Victorian Humour. Comic Subversions and Unlaughter in Contemporary Historical Re-Visions*, ed. by Marie-Louise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben (Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2017), pp. 249-276.

⁹³ Sebastian Domsch, 'Monsters against Empire: The Politics and Poetics of Neo-Victorian Metafiction in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*', in *Neo-Victorian Gothic. Horror, Violence, and Degeneration in the Re-Imagined Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Marie-Louise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben (Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2012), pp. 97-122.

⁹⁴ Hills, p. 452.

⁹⁵ Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. by Stephen F. Rendall (Berkeley: University of

with producers'.⁹⁶ In short, individual readings of popular or canonical texts may be subjective and varying, and although consensus arises through discourse which both constructs and sustains knowledge communities, the text remains open for negotiation. Both these seemingly contradictory impulses ensure that subsequent adaptations of the original texts reflect the consensus through identifiability and allow for alterations and re-interpretations.

Terry Pratchett, whose fantastical satires rely equally on the reader's pre-existing cultural knowledge, called this 'white knowledge' in reference to white noise in order to identify collective knowledge we merely absorb from our post-modern surroundings and can mobilise without recourse to an original text.⁹⁷ In reading *Anno Dracula* through 'white knowledge', we may deduce instantly that Seward is the Ripper from his allusion to 'Hanbury Street - Chapman' (15), or speculate on the fate of Catherine Eddowes or Mary Jane Kelly, even though the latter is seen through the prism of the memory of Lucy Westenra. By conflating the last Ripper victim with an eroticised vampiric woman, Kelly becomes the focus of Seward's obsessive grief and misogyny, which accounts for the barbaric violence inflicted on both the historical and the fictional body. However, as this overlay of the historical and fictional women also illustrates, the novel not only catalyses a collectively shared 'white knowledge', but also capitalises on the principles of participatory culture in order to engage in what Lawrence Lessing has termed 'remix culture'. In his 2008 study, Lessing differentiates Read/Only (RO), 'a culture less practiced in performance, or amateur creativity, and more comfortable (think: couch) with simple consumption' from Read/Write (RW) culture, in which participants actively 'add to the culture they read by creating and re-creating the culture around them'.⁹⁸ Read/Write culture, which I want to suggest is a necessary framework for counterfictionality, demands the active

California Press, 1984), p. 174.

⁹⁶ Henry Jenkins, 'Textual Poachers, Twenty Years Later: A Conversation between Henry Jenkins and Suzanne Scott' in *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (London: Routledge, 2013 [1992]), pp. vii-li., p. xxi.

⁹⁷ 'If I put a reference in a book I try to pick one that a generally well-read (well-viewed, well-listened) person has a sporting chance of picking up; I call this "white knowledge," the sort of stuff that fills up your brain without you really knowing where it came from. Enough people would've read [Fritz] Lieber, say, to pick up a generalized reference to Fafhrd, etc. and even more people would have some knowledge of Tolkien—but I wouldn't rely on people having read a specific story.' Terry Pratchett, quoted in 'White Knowledge and the Cauldron of Story: The Use of Allusion in Terry Pratchett's Discworld', by William T. Abbott, (unpublished Master thesis, East Tennessee State University, 2002).

⁹⁸ Lawrence Lessig, *Remix. Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2008), p. 28.

participation of knowledge communities by engaging readers as detectives⁹⁹, providing clues that hint at an underlying network of shared knowledge and media literacy.¹⁰⁰

In re-imagining a late-Victorian East End, Newman can draw on a Gothic, virtual East End which already exists in the collective imagination, signified through a multitude of culturally disseminated, familiar collective symbols. Let us consider the case of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. Indeed, the Ripper killings might have provided inspiration for Stoker's own tale about eroticism and violence.¹⁰¹ Both the Ripper murders and *Dracula* reveal much about contemporary anxieties about sex, the first as the monstrous crusader, avenging vice,¹⁰² the second through the charged imagery of the Count lapping young women's blood which has become a staple, if not a cliché of subsequent vampire portrayals, for example in Hammer Horror films.¹⁰³ Both narratives are also linked to perceptions of race in the Victorian imagination, but they become less important in later adaptations. Considering that Ripper narratives and *Dracula* are located in cultural proximity to one another, they converge almost naturally: the unstable, lovelorn Doctor Seward who cannot overcome Lucy's death steps effortlessly into the footsteps of a nightly crusader, even more so if the women he kills recall to him that great loss. The prostitute and the vampire, with their connotations of sexual taboo, the night, bodily fluids, and female vulnerability converge equally easily.

In a similar vein, Newman mobilises a long tradition in post-Victorian pastiches and neo-Victorian thrillers in which Sherlock Holmes is sent out to catch Jack the Ripper, though of course he imports Holmesian main characters and omits the Great Detective.¹⁰⁴ From here on, as

⁹⁹ Lessig, p. 7.

¹⁰⁰ Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, pp. 175-177.

¹⁰¹ Nicholas Rance, "'Jonathan's great knife': *Dracula* meets Jack the Ripper", in *Jack the Ripper. Media. Culture. History.*, ed. by Alexandra Warwick and Martin Willis (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), pp. 124-143, pp. 124-143.

¹⁰² Rance, Christopher Frayling, 'The house that Jack built', in *Jack the Ripper. Media. Culture. History.*, ed. by Alexandra Warwick and Martin Willis (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), pp. 13-28., Robert F. Haggard, 'Jack the Ripper and the threat of outcast London', in *Jack the Ripper. Media. Culture. History.*, ed. by Alexandra Warwick and Martin Willis (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), pp. 197-214. Walkowitz.

¹⁰³ Denis Meikle, *A History of Horrors. The Rise and Fall of the House of Hammer* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2009).

¹⁰⁴ As early as 1907, a German publisher freely plagiarising Holmes imagined a meeting of both in *Wie Jack, der Aufschlitzer, gefasst wurde*. Recent examples include Carole Nelson Douglas' *Chapel Noir* (2002), Lyndsay Faye's *Dust and Shadow* (2009) or Edward B. Hanna's *The Further Adventures of Sherlock Holmes: The Whitechapel Horror* (2010). There's also been film, TV, comic and video games adaptations such as *Sherlock Holmes Versus Jack the Ripper* (2009).

the novel clearly demonstrates, it is only a small step towards importing every historical and fictional figure seemingly connected to the late-Victorian setting, its literature, or its afterlives. In this accumulation of the counterfactual collage, we find other aspects of remix culture at work. Using a humorous video as example of image-sound remix, Lessing explains:

‘The obvious point is that a remix like this can’t help but make its argument, at least in our culture, far more effectively than could words. [...] For anyone who has lived in our era, a mix of images and sounds makes its point far more powerfully than any eight- hundred- word essay in the *New York Times* could. [...] [The video] trades upon a truth we all [...] recognize as true. It doesn’t assert the truth. It shows it’.¹⁰⁵

Meaning emerges from juxtaposition and reference: remix culture depends on a communally shared media literacy which identifies and actualises the meaning with which pop cultural icons are charged, in order to collage a depth and range of associated meaning which the text itself cannot hope to produce on its own, at least not without going to great lengths. Individual symbols, such as ‘Jack the Ripper’, then function as one signifier in a chain of signifiers, as I have suggested above. ‘Whether text or beyond text,’ notes Lessing, ‘remix is collage; it comes from combining elements of RO culture; it succeeds by leveraging the meaning created by the reference to build something new’.¹⁰⁶ Steampunk, as a retro-speculative mode, even in purely textual form, layers and remixes cross media fiction (novels, illustrations, film) with texts about and from history. By eliminating hierarchies between fact and fiction, it can create new meanings. In the novel for example, the historical Goulston Street graffito, ‘The Juwes are the men that will not be blamed for nothing’, a testimony to anti-Semitic backlash in the wake of the Ripper murders,¹⁰⁷ here becomes: ‘The vampyres are not the men that will be blamed for nothing’ (205).¹⁰⁸ The re-contextualisation, aside from serving as an inside joke, contributes to building the counter-fictional world and also functions as a marker of general paranoia because it can import associations about xenophobia, anxiety, and aggressive tension which the original graffito encodes in its own context. Of course, there is also a certain ironic humour at play here,

¹⁰⁵ Lessing, p. 74.

¹⁰⁶ Lessing, p. 76.

¹⁰⁷ Gray, Kershen, Begg.

a strategy Christian Gutleben identifies as a metafictional distancing device which asserts an ‘anti-nostalgic stance’ within neo-Victorian Gothic through an ironic double discourse which both recreates and acknowledges the illusion of fiction.¹⁰⁹ Behind *Anno Dracula*’s disgruntled ‘vampyres’ lurk the real historical social frictions and anti-Semitism of a multi-cultural society strained by want and violence.

The novel teems with (often sinister) irony, be it Jack ‘the Ripper’ Seward’s daytime position as surgeon in the philanthropic institution Toynbee Hall, the fact that homosexuals implicated in the Cleveland Street Scandal (1888) are executed by being impaled on large wooden stakes, or the overall notion that a famously progressive and modern Victorian London slowly reverts to barbaric Medievalism. Such ironies are created through counterfactual juxtapositions of (fictional) appearance with the historical meaning which it can trade and activate. Considering that neo-Victorian Gothic automatically re-presents the past through the deforming prism of hindsight and scepticism, irony also creates a necessary distance which allows us to examine this re-presented past.¹¹⁰ ‘The fundamental anxiety related to human ontology is not eliminated in neo-Victorian Gothic’, Gutleben notes, ‘but it is accompanied by a concomitant debunking of anxiety’.¹¹¹ His notion of an ‘omnipresent sense of derision’ in neo-Victorian Gothic naturally corresponds to the playful whimsicality in steampunk, which tends to approach even adventure and disaster with levity and a shrug of the shoulders. Irony, in conclusion, is quite evidently an intrinsic element of counterfiction. I want to suggest that, by drawing attention to while also re-inscribing the illusion of fiction, steampunk counterfiction also highlights the textuality of history and the role which fiction plays in conjuring up a long-lost past.

In addition to conjuring up ironic resonances, counterfiction also assembles culturally charged markers in order to create a larger, underlying story-world. In Jenkins’ concept of transmedia world-making, ‘artists create compelling environments that cannot be fully explored or exhausted within a single work or a single medium. The world is bigger than the film, bigger

¹⁰⁸ Kim Newman, *Anno Dracula* (London: Titan Books, 2011 [1992]).

¹⁰⁹ Christian Gutleben, ‘“Fear is Fun and Fun is Fear”: A Reflexion on Humour in Neo-Victorian Gothic’, in *Neo-Victorian Gothic. Horror, Violence, and Degeneration in the Re-Imagined Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Marie-Louise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben (Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2012), pp. 301-326. p. 303, 310-311.

¹¹⁰ Gutleben, p. 305, 311.

¹¹¹ Gutleben, p. 315.

than even the franchise—since fan speculations and elaborations also expand the world in a variety of directions’.¹¹² Whereas Jenkins’ concept is geared towards popular franchises from *The Matrix*, *Star Wars*, or *Harry Potter* to the Marvel superhero films, Gothic East End mythologies and the Jack the Ripper aesthetic present, I suggest, a different incarnation of (cultural) transmediality. Gothic aesthetic conventions, such as the top hat, opera cape, and Gladstone bag combination, the fog and chiaroscuro, or gaslight and cobblestones serve as recurring motifs and aesthetic markers of the ‘Ripper franchise’, while also hinting at a larger story-world: Top hat and cape signifies Jack the Ripper signifies Victorian East End signifies drunkards and destitution signifies gaslight and fog, and so on. Moreover, the Ripper/East End story-world is continually adapted and expanded through films, novels, and comics, as well as expanded, questioned, and re-imagined by its ‘fans’, the Ripperologists who share and debate theories within their own knowledge community.

Anno Dracula, then, re-assembles such story-world markers from a large variety of interconnected Victorian and post-Victorian fictions, importing associated meanings alongside them even though distorting the familiar story-world through counterfiction. In his afterword, for example, Newman notes being inspired by Victorian and Edwardian invasion narratives,¹¹³ which, as Stephen Arata notes, are ‘products of geopolitical fears’.¹¹⁴ Newman’s novel actualises the overtones of reverse colonisation inherent in *Dracula* by letting the Count conquer and transform Britain in light of his vampirism.¹¹⁵ In doing so, the novel is able to create a new, counterfactual, hyper-Gothic story-world.

¹¹² Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, p. 116.

¹¹³ Newman, ‘Afterword’, p. 450.

¹¹⁴ Stephen D. Arata, ‘The Occidental Tourist: “Dracula” and the Anxiety of Reverse Colonialization’, *Victorian Studies* 33:4 (1990), 621–645, p. 623.

¹¹⁵ ‘They are also responses to cultural guilt. In the marauding, invasive Other, British culture sees its own imperial practises mirrored back in monstrous forms.’ Arata, p. 623.

3.2 *ANNO DRACULA*'S HYPER-GOTHIC STORY-WORLD

It is certainly no coincidence that London, the now corrupted centre of a vast Empire, likewise transforms into a distinctively Gothic cityscape dowsed in an ever-present fog. The 'London particular', so often a staple of the 'Ripper aesthetic', is tinged in sickly yellow, at times 'wispy, hanging like undersea fronds of yellow gauze' (86), others a thick, 'street-level sea of churning yellow that lapped at the buildings' (375), or an obscuring 'sulphur-soup' (364). In one particularly Gothic-surrealist visual image, the '[d]awn shot the fog full of blood' (105). It obscures sight for human and vampire alike (364), hinting at hidden predators (109) and blending night and day, facilitating the Ripper's work (174). As a visual metaphor, the persistent fog transforms London's cityscape into a maze characterised by precarity, uncertainty, and paranoia: the whole city becomes Bloom's 'East End of the mind'. That the fog is intrinsically connected to the Ripper, a symbol of such paranoia and precarity, becomes particularly evident when the fog begins to disperse as soon as Seward is discovered and killed (393).

The novel similarly mobilises the legacy of East End tropes when Charles Beauregard, agent of Mycroft Holmes' Diogenes Club and veteran of colonial spaces such as India, Shanghai, 'Afghanistan, Mexico, the Transvaal' (51), is tasked with venturing into Whitechapel, which is 'closer to home' (52), but still an other within. The notion of Whitechapel as urban wilderness is enhanced by the presence of vampiric runts: the disenfranchisement of its inhabitants is illustrated and amplified through the disastrous effects of Count Dracula's disseminated, diseased bloodline.¹¹⁶ Vlad Tepes and his brood are often portrayed in conjunction with imagery of reptiles and wolves, conjuring up connotation of beastliness. However, by the time his contaminated blood reaches Whitechapel, it infects and ineffectively transforms its citizens, whose lack of agency is externalised through their lack of control over their bodily shape. Kelly's friend Carrotty Nell is covered in hair, Catherine Eddowes, an alcoholic in real life, here suffers from a curious rash, and the child Lily is slowly poisoned as her confused body attempts to shape-shift: 'The animal she had tried to become was taking over, and that animal was dead' (181). It is Morrison's Old Jago, itself a fictionalised version of the Old Nichol slum, which

¹¹⁶ 'In truth, the district [Whitechapel] had been a death-trap long before the Ripper silvered his knives.' *Anno Dracula*, p. 193.

serves as epitome of 'East End' characteristics, a locus where its worst qualities reside, amplified by counter-fiction:

Red eyes glittered behind open windows. Rat-whiskered children sat on doorsteps, waiting to fight for the leavings of larger predators. [...] She was reminded of vultures. This was not England, this was a jungle. [...] Hunched, shambling creatures lurked in courtyards. Hate came off them in waves. The Jago was where the worst cases ended up, new-borns shape-shifted beyond any resemblance of humanity, criminals so vile other criminals would not tolerate their society. (281-282)

In Newman's hyper-Gothic East End, the Jago is continually evoked as an other to the other, a sphere where the East End social ills criminality, gang violence, drunkenness, and want each an extreme. The fact that Newman chooses to assimilate the fictional Jago, not the historical Old Nichol, into his meta-textual, counter-fictional collage, speaks to the notoriety and suggestive legacy of Morrison's novel. Here, the Jago puts Victorian rhetoric about atavism into play and becomes a grotesque menagerie, a literal wilderness populated by uncanny physical and moral regressions into the vermin Morrison imagined only in metaphor. However, this is also the domain of John Jago, no doubt an incarnation of Father Jay/ Father Sturt, who here becomes an anti-vampire Christian Crusader in full St. George regalia (254). We learn that the Diogenes Club manipulates the crusaders and the Ripper's image in the media to their own advantage in order to build up icons of resistance that eventually instigate an uprising against Count Dracula. Their agitation hinges on figures intrinsically linked to Whitechapel (360), where those suffering most under the new system seemingly rally.

John Jago and his disciples, clad in their medieval crusader imagery, embody another trait vital to Newman's image of counter-fictional London, namely that of a city haunted by the crude and violent past which Vlad Tepes brings with him. Ironically, it is notably not the chivalrous, aesthetic Pre-Raphaelite or Revivalist Middle Ages of Tennyson and Morris; in fact, Arthurian texts are deemed rebellious and banned as unrest stirs (310). It is a Gothic Medievalism, violent, ignorant, and feudal, one that seems jarringly out of place, yet recalls Radcliffe and Lewis: A Gothic of the Gothic, perhaps. Of course, in doing so, *Anno Dracula* takes up the resonances of xenophobia and Orientalism that characterise the Count as barbaric Eastern Other in classic Gothic fiction manner. The Count is, after all, also a Roman Catholic

(61): ‘He missed the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Age of Enlightenment, the French Revolution, the rise of the Americas, the fall of the Ottoman’ (64).¹¹⁷ Notions of the Oriental other are complemented and somewhat alleviated by the vampire Geneviève Dieudonné’s memories of the Hundred Years’ War (17, 193, 239, etc.), a European counterpart to the Transylvanian Count.

The latter’s brand of Medievalism is represented by his Carpathian Guard, Kostaki, von Klatka, Cuda, General Iorga, and the effeminate Count Vardalek, borrowed from Count Stenbock’s 1884 story ‘The Sad Story of a Vampire’: ‘According to General Iorga, this was no longer England, this was some Balkan pocket kingdom’ (260). As the ‘illegitimate children of Bismarck and Geronimo’ they embody both a picturesque militarism and savagery conjured by through the allusion to Native Americans:

They [...] all wore highly polished boots and carried heavy swords, but their uniforms were augmented with oddments scavenged through the years. Von Klatka had around his neck a golden lanyard upon which were strung withered lumps of flesh [Geneviève] understood to be human ears. Cuda’s helmet was adorned with a wolf’s skin [...]. Vardalek was the most extraordinary figure, his jacket a puffy affair of pleats and flounces [...]. His face was powdered to conceal suppurating skin. Pantomime circles of rouge covered his cheeks [...]. His hair was stiff and golden, elaborately done up in bows and curls, twin braids dangling from the nape of his neck like rats’ tails. (80)

As an anachronistic assortment of ‘barbaric’ influences, they embody the Count’s military vigour and his unenlightened cruelty. Roguish but crude, they are later effectively joined and complemented by the dashing and ruthless villain Rupert von Hentzau, out of Anthony Hope’s Ruritania novel, *The Prisoner of Zenda* (1894). Vardalek’s somewhat inelegant Rococo effeminacy meanwhile hints at his homosexuality, a trait that is dealt with in the episode about the Cleveland Street Scandal, in which every ‘invert’ and ‘nancy-boy’ (127) is executed without trial and regardless of position by being publicly impaled in the ‘well-lit, clean district’: ‘Cobblestones had been torn up and stake-holes were being rapidly dug’ (131). In addition to literally tearing into the Victorian city fabric, the gory episode demonstrates a callous

¹¹⁷ Andrew Smith, *Gothic Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007).

homophobia (despite the ironic imagery), and a blind and presumably barbaric adherence to a backwards authority, exemplified by the fact that Vardalek is found among the patrons, and has to be executed among the others (136).

Altogether, London as city and mindscape is slowly poisoned by the corroding, diseased blood of the Gothic monster Dracula: 'The whole city seemed sick' (110). Consider also this description: 'Some quarters of the city have seen a resurgence of medieval diseases. It is as if the Prince Consort were a bubbling sink-hole, disgorging filth from where he sits, grinning his wolf's grin as sickness seeps through his realm' (174). Dr. Seward as Jack the Ripper, himself traumatised by the loss of his friends, the Count's invasion, and infected from Renfield's rabid bite, is then merely a symptom of the larger corruption as a catalyst for terror and moral panic. Yet the increasingly insane killer, fuelled by obsession and misogyny, also becomes a symbol of resistance, 'an outlaw hero, a Robin Hood of the gutters' (160) who imagines himself a 'surgeon, cutting away diseased tissue' (211). The fog accompanying the Ripper's reign seems analogous to a madness which clouds this city of the mind. As the government's authoritarian grip tightens, the city dissolves into a frenzied rebellion, tearing itself up in defiance: '[T]he remains of barricades still stood, and great stretches of St James Street had been torn up, cobbles converted into missiles' (397-398). The notion of the Ripper as a symptom of a city moving towards self-devouring insanity is strengthened by the fact that neither is the killer's discovery Geneviève and Charles Beauregard's final battle, nor was it the Diogenes Club's primary objective: The Ripper, somewhat paradoxically, has been used as a symbol (encoding resistance and vengeance) to orchestrate the rebellion which lets Beauregard defeat the Count.¹¹⁸ Similarly to his historical counterpart, the counter-fictional Jack the Ripper serves as a catalyst for a complex network of societal debates, here amplified to volatility.

¹¹⁸ Amidst a grotesque setting of depravity and filth, Beauregard assists the Queen in committing suicide, thereby destroying the Count's claim to power in Britain.

3.3 THE 1980S AND 1880S

As Newman states: ‘I was trying, without being too solemn, to mix things I felt about the 1980s, when the British Government made “Victorian Values” a slogan, with the real and imagined 1880s, when blood was flowing in the fog and there was widespread social unrest’.¹¹⁹ The novel mobilises the Victorian Gothic mode as meta-critical commentary through which to critique and satirise Margaret Thatcher’s paradigmatic evocation of a return to ‘Victorian Values’,¹²⁰ a slogan which, according to Raphael Samuel, ‘turned them into a talisman for lost stabilities’.¹²¹ Elizabeth Ho notes an increase of what she terms ‘Ripperatures’, ‘fictionalised accounts of Whitechapel murders and Jack the Ripper’ alongside Thatcher’s official rewriting.¹²² Ripperature, according to Ho, challenges and resists nostalgic heritage discourses as alternative re-mappings and counter-myths to neoliberal myth-making. As Samuel suggests, Thatcher’s vision of ‘innocent stability’ constituted the Victorian past as ‘a kind of reverse image of the present, exemplifying by its strength and stability everything that we are not’. It is a highly selective and a-historical vision:

The past here occupies an allegorical rather than temporal space. It is a testimony to the decline in manners and morals, a mirror to our failings, a measure of absence. It also answers to one of the most universal myths, which has both its left-wing and right-wing variants, the notion that once upon a time things were simpler and the people were at one with themselves.¹²³

Such a complacent vision of the Victorian past, ‘gloss[es] over the dark spots of the Whitechapel murders or Britain’s imperial past’ in its ‘celebration of the national past’.¹²⁴ It not only ignores the widespread disenfranchisement of the socially marginalised or systemic colonial

¹¹⁹ Newman, ‘Afterword,’ p. 455.

¹²⁰ Louisa Hadley, *Neo-Victorian Fiction and Historical Narrative. The Victorians and Us* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

¹²¹ Raphael Samuel, ‘Mrs Thatcher’s Return to Victorian Values’, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 78, 9-29, p. 9.

¹²² Elizabeth Ho, *Neo-Victorianism and the Memory of Empire* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), p. 22, 29.

¹²³ Samuel, p.18.

¹²⁴ Ho, p. 28.

violence, but is also, as scholars note, paradoxically at odds with Thatcher's own radical neo-liberalism: 'While praising the Victorians and advocating a return to "their" values, she attacked such Victorian establishments as the public service ethic, the Universities, the Bar, the House of Lords and the Church of England, and she deregulated the City of London'.¹²⁵ Thatcher's 'Victorian Values' were a purely rhetorical symbol of selective ideals, for example that of the traditional family in a time of LGBTQ+ activism and the AIDS crisis, or radical economic liberalism in spite of miners protesting for the preservation of their livelihoods. As Samuel concludes, 'the rhetoric of Victorian Values could be seen as an example of what the post-modernists call "double coding" and sociologists "cognitive dissonance" – i.e. of words which say one thing, while meaning another and camouflaging, or concealing, a third'.¹²⁶ Her rhetoric justified policies that were by turns 'radical and reactionary, modernistic and atavistic' (p. 24). Newman exploits this ambiguity and conjures up an image of a Victorian past informed by both radical change and authoritarian impulses. Much like *From Hell*, *Anno Dracula* re-positions the imagined Victorian past as a Gothic other against which the contemporary identity might be defined.¹²⁷ Both texts, as examples of Ripperature, 'deliberately intervene [...] in celebratory misreadings of the Victorian as seen in heritage films and [...] recuperative fantasy'.¹²⁸ Ripperature, in Ho's understanding, has the 'ability to strike a delicate balance between heritage, as it is often packaged, and its potential to retain a catalog of hypocrisy, misogyny, violence, poverty, and prurience often excised from the national past'.¹²⁹

Whereas both *From Hell* and *Anno Dracula* achieve their metafictional critique through a re-presentation of the Victorian Gothic as a troubled, contaminated, power-hungry, and monstrous other, Newman's early steampunk novel is free to add new impulses and parallels through the use of counterfiction. For example, it projects neoliberal values into its already

¹²⁵ Kate Mitchell, *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction. Victorian Afterimages* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 51.

¹²⁶ Samuel, 24.

¹²⁷ '[Newman's] his counterfictions stake a claim to social/cultural progress, announcing that what was previously excluded (homosexuality) can now be reclaimed and voiced, or that what was the norm may become monstrous (imperial or commercial power).' Hills, p. 451; Also: Kathryn Bird, "'Civilised society doesn't just happen": The Animal, the Law and 'Victorian Values' in Kim Newman's *Anno Dracula*", *Neo-Victorian Journal* 7:1 (2014), 1-24; Megan de Bruin-Molé, *Gothic Remixed: Monster Mashups and Frankenfictions in 21st-Century Culture* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019).

¹²⁸ Ho, p. 28.

¹²⁹ Ho, p. 29.

Gothic past by infusing it with another layer of the barbaric, Medieval Gothic which Count Dracula embodies, both in Stoker's and in Newman's novel. The result is, among other things, a literally blood-thirsty economy in which the privileged feed on the distorted bodies of the disenfranchised urban poor, bleeding them dry. Another effect of Newman's counterfactual layering is that the 'social unrest' so prominent in the 1980s is re-imagined in social-Darwinist-imperial terms: Prime Minister Lord Ruthven assembles lists of historical figures which he marks as agitators, for example George Bernard Shaw, W. T. Stead, Annie Besant, Olive Schreiner, Lord Tennyson, and even W. S. Gilbert, for his satire *Ruddigore* (1887): 'They are to be arrested before the sun sets tomorrow.' Ruthven's politics carry overtones of fascist tyranny: this regime imprisons dissenters in the (medieval) Tower of London or deports them to Devil's Dyke, a prison camp in which Sherlock Holmes has been incarcerated. Moreover, Ruthven shows his colours here:

These are exciting nights, and we have a chance to lead the world. We are the wind from the East. We are the fury of the storm. In our wake, we will leave this country changed and tempered. Those who hesitate or stay their hands will be whisked away in the torrent. Like the Prince Consort, I intend to stand fast. Many will be destroyed utterly as the moon rises over our Empire. Mr Darwin was quite correct: only the fit shall survive. We must ensure that we are among the fittest of the fit. (294).

In addition to identifiable overtones of social Darwinism, Ruthven's vision of neoliberal restructuring also somewhat echoes Thatcher's most strident attacks on the miners from July 1984.

Anno Dracula's ironic, hyper-Gothic counterfiction distorts Thatcher's ideal into an oppressive Gothic hellscape, rabid and paranoid, and thereby becomes a satirising mirror of the present in which a large variety of cultural icons salvaged from classic Victorian Gothic fictions are engaged in a battle over Victorian London's soul. Much like Thatcher trying to reinstall her vision of an idealised and achronic past, Vlad Tepes imposes his crude, outmoded methods on the modern metropolis, thereby only amplifying its worst qualities.¹³⁰ Moral conservatism leads to violent homophobia, censorship, and deportation. The East End becomes a locus, not only of the Gothic Victorian aesthetic of collective memory, but of resistance against the de-humanised

vampiric elite. While capitalising on a communally shared East End mythology, the novel also re-imagines the East End as disruptive force, an imagined space from which to critique nostalgic visions of the Victorian past.

4. 'DEEP TOPOGRAPHIES': DAN LENO AND THE LIMEHOUSE GOLEM

One cannot discuss how contemporary neo-historical fiction engages with past London without mentioning psychogeography, a practice which combines flânerie with eclectic spiritualism and historical discovery. With its origin in 1950s Paris, psychogeography became somewhat of an intellectual fashion in the 1990s, propagated by Iain Sinclair, Stewart Home, Will Self, and Peter Ackroyd.¹³¹ I want therefore to turn my attention to Ackroyd's *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (1994), a tale of serial murder and music halls in the Victorian East End, as counter-example to the way in which steampunk counterfiction re-imagines the palimpsestic Victorian city. Ackroyd's novel, together with all his fiction and non-fiction work, remains of interest to literary scholars and has been given attention regularly.¹³² My objective here is therefore not necessarily to repeat close readings of the novel and how, in it, London is configured as multi-

¹³⁰ Mitchell, p. 51.

¹³¹ As Merlin Coverley notes, Ackroyd 'would certainly not describe himself as a psychogeographer' and lies somewhat at the outer end of the spectrum. Yet his work is frequently considered in conjunction with the practise, and his 'conservative and irrational model' exemplified by *London: A Biography* 'has been hailed as the moment when psychogeography entered the mainstream'. Merlin Coverley, *Psychogeography* (Harpending: Pocket Essentials, 2006), p. 123-124.

¹³² For example, on *Limehouse Golem* alone: Petr Chalupský, 'Crime Narratives in Peter Ackroyd's Historiographic Metafictions', *European Journal of English Studies*, 14:2 (2010), 121-131. Petr Chalupský, *A Horror and a Beauty: The World of Peter Ackroyd's London Novels* (Prague: Karolinum Press, 2017). Sidia Fiorato, 'Theatrical Role-Playing, Crime and Punishment in Peter Ackroyd's *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*', *Pólemos: Journal of Law, Literature and Culture*, 6:1 (2012), 65-81. Duperray. Also: Jean-Michel Ganteau, 'Vulnerable Visibilities: Peter Ackroyd's Monstrous Victorian Metropolis', in *Neo-Victorian Cities. Reassessing Urban Politics and Poetics*, ed. by Marie-Louise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben (Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2015), pp. 151-174. Barry Lewis, *My Words Echo Thus: Possessing the Past in Peter Ackroyd's Novels* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2007). Susana Onega, *Metafiction and Myth in the Novels of Peter Ackroyd* (Columbia: Camden House, 1999). Susana Onega, 'Family Traumas and Serial Killings in Peter Ackroyd's *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*', in *Neo-Victorian Families. Gender, Sexual and Cultural Politics*, ed. by Marie-Louise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben (Leiden: Rodopi, 2011), pp. 267-296. Patricia Pulham, 'Mapping Histories: The Golem and the Serial Killer in *White Chappell: Scarlet Tracings*, and *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*', in *Haunting and Spectrality in Neo-Victorian Fiction*, ed. by Rosario Aras and Patricia Pulham (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 157-179. Aleksjs Taube, 'London's East End in Peter Ackroyd's *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*', in *Literature and the Peripheral City*, ed. by Lieven Ameel, Jason Finch, and Markku Salmela (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 93-110. Julian Wolfreys and Jeremy Gibson, *Peter Ackroyd. The Ludic and Labyrinthine Text* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000). Julian Wolfreys, *Writing London. Materiality, Memory, Spectrality* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

temporal and a-chronic, or trace notions of numerous places in the city as defined by *genius loci*.¹³³ Instead, I aim to highlight how Ackroyd's strategies re-present London as shaped by its recurring past differs from steampunk counterfiction's relationship with the Victorian past.

The novel, set in 1880, is a post-modern array of textual fragments, such as transcripts of Elizabeth Cree's trial, the serial killer's (forged) diary, Cree's (unreliable) first person account of her past, or scenes told by a narrator positioned to comment from a post-Victorian perspective.¹³⁴ Max Duperray, Elizabeth Ho, and others have readily assimilated the tale of a violent serial killer in the 1880s East End into a canon of Ripperature, and it clearly profits from only slightly displacing an array of familiar Ripper markers to tell a similar story about the uncanny city. Like the text itself, *The Limehouse Golem* imagines Victorian London as a dense web of interlinked traces which emerge and accumulate almost haphazardly, waiting for the psychogeographer to interpret their composite meaning. In this vein, we must eventually extrapolate that Elizabeth Cree is an unreliable narrator who has forged her husband's diary to implicate him and has been the serial killer, the golem, all along.

Cree, too, finds inspiration in de Quincey's writing and religiously adheres to his essay 'On Murder Considered As one of the Fine Arts' (1827), in which he describes the Radcliffe Highway murders of 1812 with Gothic detail. Not only does Cree, failing to understand de Quincey's satirical stance, venture to re-create the violent murder of a family in the place which becomes to her 'as sacred to the memory as Tyborn or Golgotha' (22), but George Gissing, moving through the novel as character, writes his own (fictional) journalistic evaluation of the work in a textual double echo.¹³⁵ Texts, in Ackroyd's novel, function as incarnated traces of a place's *genius loci*, less as expression of individual imagination, but the articulation of innate local spirits. De Quincey's or Gissing's essay, music hall plays, or Cree's diary seem inspired by such *genius loci* and perpetuate their mysterious forces in what seem to amount to self-fulfilling prophecies in which space prescribes behaviour. In addition, as Chalupský notes: '[A]lthough Elizabeth willingly follows the vicious tradition of the area, her homicidal acts are still, according to Ackroyd, a result of the impact of the dark territorial forces which breed a monstrosity. She herself is aware of this power, noting that "[i]nfinite London would always

¹³³ Chalupský, *Beauty*, p. 46.

¹³⁴ Wolfreys and Gibson, p. 201.

¹³⁵ Peter Ackroyd, *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (London: Vintage Books, 2017 [1994]).

minister [to her] in [her] affliction''' (182).¹³⁶ Next to Cree's re-staging of the multiple murder at Radcliffe Highway, Gissing is drawn into emotional turmoil and the East End through his unhappy marriage to an alcoholic prostitute, and the miserable day-to-day of the urban poor is elevated to Cockney humour on the music hall stage, where murder and violence become the subject of farcical comedy, casually re-inscribing crime as naturalised 'East End effect'.¹³⁷ As such, the events of the novel foreshadow the Ripper killings of 1888. Theatricality, spectacle, and performance play a dominant role in Ackroyd's vision and migrate from the music hall into the cityscape through Cree.

The simulated London of the stage 'seemed to Elizabeth the most wonderful sight in the world', and a street 'she had just walked' becomes 'much more glorious and iridescent': 'This was better than any memory' (15-16). To leave this space of illusion is 'like being expelled from some wonderful garden or palace, and now all I could see were the dirty bricks of the house fronts, the muck of the narrow street, and the shadows cast by the gas lamps in the Stand. [...] [E]verything was dark, and the sky and the rooftops merged together' (48). Such inside/outside and performance/reality boundaries increasingly collapse when Cree, becoming a celebrated cross-dressing music hall performer, assumes a male disguise for exploring the city undisturbed (145). Such performativity of gender enables her to live out her murderous alter ego, but Elizabeth herself becomes fictionalised in John Cree's unfinished play *Misery Junction* which configures her as innocent and virtuous heroine Catherine Dove, and which Elizabeth herself finishes and enacts on stage. Boundaries blur when Cree almost really strangles Leno on stage (171), playing a 'mad butcher' (170). In a final incarnation of this trope, her colleague and maid Aveline is actually hanged by accident in a re-enactment of Cree's execution on the music hall stage and her celebrity colleague dons her costume: 'Here was Elizabeth Cree in another guise, just as she had been before when she played the "Older Brother" or "Little Victor's Daughter", and it was a source of joy and exhilaration that the great Dan Leno should impersonate her' (265). Naturally, Leno's catchphrase, 'Here we go again!' are the novel's and Elizabeth's final words, and they are words which emphasise recurrence and re-incarnation.

¹³⁶ Chalupský, *Beauty*, p. 84.

¹³⁷ There is no historical evidence that Marianne Helen Harrison, known as Nell, was a prostitute. Ackroyd embellishes for dramatic effect here; pp. 104-105, in which his marriage is likened to a 'melodrama from the London stage', or something 'from the pages of Emile Zola.'

Theatricality also informs Cree's murderous activities which, in her diary, become a debut on a stage (23) or 'a little piece' (157) to be discussed alongside theatre plays. A register of performing, staging, and arranging saturates her self-presentation, and is one of many instances in the novel in which textuality recurs, is doubled or lastingly influences the movements or behaviours of characters until it is impossible to tell which determines which, and everything seems enactment and performance.¹³⁸ Consider this exchange between Dan Leno and Inspector Kildare:

'This murderer, this Limehouse Golem as they call him, seems to be acting as if he were in a blood tub off the Old Kent Road. Everything is very messy and very theatrical. It is a curious thing.'

Leno reflected for a few moments on this particular vision of the crimes. 'Much of it doesn't seem real at all. [...] [T]he atmosphere surrounding [the murders], the newspaper paragraphs, the crowds of spectators - it's like being in some kind of penny gaff or theatre of variety.' (194)

As Wolfreys and Gibson note: 'Not merely the stage on which his narratives are enacted, the city of London is itself theatrical, a performative phenomenon more accurately described not as a place, but as that which takes place'.¹³⁹ City, performance, and texts are inevitably bound up with one another. Ironically, Cree once proclaims: 'I am not some mythological figure, as the newspaper reports continually suggest, or some exotic creature out of a Gothic novel; I am what I am, which is flesh and blood' (151). The text here draws attention not only to the Victorian Gothic conventions surrounding urban serial killers such as Jack the Ripper, but also to its own fictionality. Doubly ironic is the fact that *The Limehouse Golem* does after all, re-present Cree as a Gothic monster rooted in the Victorian other which the novel both conjures up and examines critically, as well as the fact that, as 'Golem', the killer is absolutely embedded in a local

¹³⁸ For example, when Eleanor Marx plays a role in Oscar Wilde's play, *Vera or. The Nihilists*, when Leno walks in the footsteps of his idol, Grimaldi, in a place described by Dickens in *The Pickwick Papers*, when Gissing reads Algernon Swinburne's essay on William Blake, when Cree picks up Gissing's novel *Workers of the Dawn* (1880), or when Gissing's essay on Babbage's engine lastingly influences H.G. Wells – who later discusses Marx's notes on the subject with Stalin.

¹³⁹ Wolfreys and Gibson, p. 170.

mythology.¹⁴⁰ Patricia Pulham discusses these interrelations of the golem myth with the East End and its Jewish population, most notably the figure of David Rodinsky.¹⁴¹ The scholar of the kabbalah vanished from his room above the synagogue in Princelet Street, Spitalfields in 1969. Rachel Lichtenstein, in her work on *Rodinsky's Room* (2000), describes finding 'hand-written notebooks revealing his knowledge of languages', 'hundreds of artefacts, thousands of scraps of small paper covered in coded messages', and 'hand-drawn maps, indications of journeys around London'.¹⁴² The scholar, in his endeavour to unearth mystical ciphers in the Bible and his interest in exploring the city, becomes implicated in a psychogeographic reading of the cityscape, in which his presence also gives plausibility to the golem figure. Ackroyd's novel features Solomon Weil, the old scholar of Hasidic lore who not only possesses a collection of manuscripts identifying him as Rodinsky's *doppelgänger*, but also ventures daily to the Reading Room of the British Museum to sit beside Gissing, Karl Marx, and John Cree, his routes across the city a trace in the web that constitutes novel and city alike. As Wolfreys and Gibson conclude: '[T]he city, like the Golem, only comes into being through the multiplicity of enunciations and inscriptions, while never remaining the thing itself'.¹⁴³

Weil's search for the hidden ciphers that determine the universe, here the city, is mirrored in Alice Stanton, the golem's third victim, who is found draped over 'the white pyramid outside the church of St. Anne, Limehouse' (118). The pyramid evokes spiritualism and occultism, but Alice is connected to the hidden codes and patterns running through Ackroyd's London not least because 'she had been gazing at the workshop where the Analytical Engine waited to begin its life' (118). We are introduced to Babbage's work through an article Gissing purports to write on it, understanding the Engine as a scientific tool in Benthamite social statistics, 'to calculate the greatest amount of need and misery in any given place, and then to predict its possible spread' (107). Within the logic of the novel, it is imperative that a model of the Analytical Engine be hidden in a workshop in Commercial Street, in the heart of the East End where the collective

¹⁴⁰ Consider Cree's account of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, which 'depicted me with a top hat and cloak in general theatrical representation of a swell or masher' – in traditional Ripper iconography – but which 'smacked too much of the Gothic' as 'cheapest melodrama' (77).

¹⁴¹ In Jewish folklore, the golem is an animated, anthropomorphic creature usually formed from clay or mud. A versatile socio-religious metaphor, the golem, as affiliated to the homunculus, has also become a popular trope in fantasy writing. Pulham, Golem.

¹⁴² Rachel Lichtenstein and Iain Sinclair, *Rodinsky's Room* (London: Granta Publications, 1999), p. 28.

¹⁴³ Wolfreys and Gibson, p. 207.

‘need and misery’ seem almost to have willed into existence this wondrous calculator, which ‘gleamed like a hallucination’ and ‘was not in its proper time and, as yet, could have no real existence upon the earth’ (110). Whereas this model never actually existed, Gissing marvels at the ‘giant form of rods and wheels and squared pieces of metal, so imposing and yet so alien an artifice that he was tempted to kneel down and worship it’¹⁴⁴. At once anachronistic and woven tightly into the hidden patterns of Victorian London, the Analytical Engine becomes symbolic of underlying ciphers and currents which predict coming ages, for instance through H. G. Wells and Karl Marx, who take inspiration from Gissing’s essay for their own forays into science fiction and communism, so the novel implies: ‘The journey of a half starved novelist to Limehouse might in that sense be said to have affected the course of human history’ (117).

Ackroyd’s London is a sublime, magical, supernaturalised entity pervaded, as Luckhurst notes, by ‘the patterns of disappearance and return that crumple linear time into repeating cycles or unpredictable arabesques’.¹⁴⁵ The city is constantly ‘taking place’, weaving and being woven through chaotic, palimpsestic texts and the intersecting walking routes of the characters in it, who in turn are compelled by residual *genius loci*. For Luckhurst, *The Limehouse Golem* exemplifies a larger 1990s trend in which texts, not unlike in Ho’s conception of Ripperature, enact a spectral modernity, that is, one intrinsically haunted by the resurfacing past. With recourse to Jean-François Lyotard, Bruno Latour, and Anthony Vidler, he outlines how ‘[a]ny proclamation of self-possessed modernity induces a haunting’ and how ‘[t]he buried Gothic fragment thus operates as the emblem of resistance to the tyranny of planned space, but this resistance is necessarily occluded and interstitial, passed on only between initiates’.¹⁴⁶ 1990s Gothic, in which the genre’s roots in the late-Victorian era become its *doppelgänger* other, so reiterates Chris Baldick’s observation that Gothic tales evoke ‘a fear of historical reversion; that is, of the nagging possibility that the despotisms, buried by the modern age, may yet prove to be undead’.¹⁴⁷ At the same time, this recourse to the past which inevitably haunts the modern

¹⁴⁴ Only a desk-sized demonstration-piece was built in 1832, and it did not feature a ‘central engine rising some fifteen feet rising toward the roof’ (111).

¹⁴⁵ Luckhurst, ‘Spectral Turn’, p. 531.

¹⁴⁶ Luckhurst, ‘Spectral Turn’, p. 532; Jean-François Lyotard, ‘About the human’, in *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991). Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. by Catherine Porter (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester, 1993). Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992).

¹⁴⁷ Chris Baldick, ‘Introduction’, in *Oxford Book of Gothic Tales* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

present can become a mode of aesthetic resistance against the commodified, neoliberal city.¹⁴⁸

This is where neo-Victorian Gothic, especially that of Ackroyd, intersects with psychogeography, which Iain Sinclair has characterised as ‘the revenge of the disenfranchised’¹⁴⁹ and a ‘necessary counter-conjuration, a protective hex against the advancing armies of orthodoxy’.¹⁵⁰ In psychogeography, also called ‘deep topography’, occult symbolism and archaeological knowledge serve as hidden codes that enable alternative re-mappings of the capitalist city, where, as Ho notes, ‘glimpses of some originary trauma and suffering can still be felt’.¹⁵¹ However, as Luckhurst notes, ‘the discourse of spectralized modernity risks investing in the compulsive repetitions of a structure of melancholic entrapment’.¹⁵² Psychogeography as part of the spectral turn may have its limits. It has recently become enough of a clichéd mode for Tom Gault to effectively satirise it in a cartoon for the *Guardian* in 2017. Here, a pigeon describes psychogeography first as ‘perambulating the liminal spaces of the submerged memory city’, then, in simplified terms as ‘mainly walking around, disapproving of gentrification’.¹⁵³

Similarly, Coverley criticises Ackroyd’s vision: ‘[His] antiquarian sense of an endlessly recycled past negates any attempt by individuals to change the fundamental nature of their environment and renders them little more than passive observers in a city that is essentially self-regulating’.¹⁵⁴ We see this in *The Limehouse Golem*, where ‘the old buried city extended as far as Limehouse with the Analytical Engine as its genius loci. [...] Perhaps Charles Babbage’s creation was the true Limehouse Golem, draining away the life and spirit of those who approached it’ (138). In the novel’s dense web of textual, spiritual, and geographical traces, individual agency seems superfluous: ‘Ultimately, Ackroyd is expressing a form of behavioural determinism in which the city does not so much shape the lives of its inhabitants but dictates

¹⁴⁸ Luckhurst, ‘Spectral Turn’, p. 534.

¹⁴⁹ Iain Sinclair, *Lights Out for the Territory: 9 Excursions in the Secret History of London* (London: Granta, 1997), p. 26.

¹⁵⁰ Iain Sinclair, *Downriver (Or, The Vessels of Wrath): A Narrative in Twelve Tales* (London: Paladin, 1991), p. 265.

¹⁵¹ Ho, p. 45.

¹⁵² Luckhurst, ‘Spectral Turn’, p. 535.

¹⁵³ Tom Gault, *Tom Gault on psychogeographers*, cartoon, *The Guardian*, 22 Sept 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/picture/2017/sep/22/tom-gault-on-psychogeographers-cartoon> (Accessed 17 June 2018).

¹⁵⁴ Coverley, p. 127.

it'.¹⁵⁵

Whereas both *Anno Dracula* and *The Limehouse Golem* are neo-Victorian Gothic fictions from the 1990s which react to neoliberalism through a re-imagination of the Ripper murders and the East End, there is a fundamental difference in their approach to textuality and history — even if both feature heavily in the (re-)construction of their mythical setting. Ackroyd conceives of London as sublime entity which stores historical traces as constantly re-incarnating energies and which inevitably always haunts itself. Newman's irreverent counterfiction, on the other hand, not only does not claim legitimacy as verisimilitude or memory but draws attention to the role textuality plays in imbuing a space with the mythology which Ackroyd presupposes to be ontological. In *The Limehouse Golem*, the innate spirit of a locale is incarnate and re-iterated through a multitude of texts, whereas *Anno Dracula* collages, retrospectively, the numerous figures and tropes through which we have collectively created an accumulated Gothic mythology in order to make sense of the East End. It is a small, but crucial difference: in one version, Gothic disenfranchisement is the externalisation of an eternal, a-chronic *genius loci*, in the other, Gothic interpretation is the attempt to make sense of the East End which results from that condition.

Luckhurst diagnoses the literature of spectral modernity as a 'discourse of lost pleasures', prompted by a '[n]ostalgia for the secret or hidden' engendered by the 'knowable and governable London': in the capitalist city, 'we have turned [...] to the private experiences of hidden routes, secret knowledges, flittering spectres, the ghosts of London past'.¹⁵⁶ Whereas this corresponds with early steampunk's vision of the Victorian city as a space of adventure and discovery (see Chapter One), it is the notion of secret knowledges which I want to emphasise here. Ackroyd's Victorian London is a dense web of traces, the totality and reach of which however reveals itself only to the perceptive reader able to follow and connect them. Neither Elizabeth Cree nor the omniscient narrator, though sensitive to it, is ever in a position to understand the full scope of the city's secret ciphers and irrational undercurrents. The text positions us as readers as psychogeographers who gain a subjective, but partial insight into the mysterious, ineffable entity that is London through continuous excavation of hidden clues. *Anno Dracula*, on the other hand, maps the Victorian city through historical and fictional cultural icons, cataloguing the many versions and layers through which we have already collectively imagined the city. It remixes its

¹⁵⁵ Coverley, p. 127.

own textual web from open-for-all sources which are part of a shared post-modern ‘white knowledge’, capitalising on mythologies established in the collective imagination and readily mobilised to read the novel’s counterfiction. *The Limehouse Golem*’s palimpsestic intertextuality imagines its collage to be both organic and ontological, and subjectively decipherable, but *Anno Dracula*’s remix is conscious and embedded in a collective reading of space.

5. SECOND WAVE STEAMPUNK

5.1. FOG AND ZOMBIES: *THE AFFINITY BRIDGE*

Let us now examine how second-wave steampunk fiction after 2007 receives and re-imagines the Victorian East End mythology as retrieved out of a collectively shared ‘white knowledge’ readily available in the digital age. Steampunks may research history and technology or network to build knowledge communities such as the DIY maker scene but the internet also gives new impulses to convergence and remix culture through a re-distribution of agency across social and national borders.¹⁵⁷ As Jenkins notes: ‘The biggest change [in consumption communities] may be the shift from individualized and personal media consumption toward consumption as a networked practice. [...] A man with one machine (a TV) is doomed to isolation [=Read Only culture], but a man with two machines (a TV and a computer) can belong to a community [=Read/Write culture]’.¹⁵⁸ This revolution in participation gives license to a wider range of Ripper re-imaginings, for example through the steampunk band The Men That Will Not Be Blamed for Nothing, named after a graffito found at the site of Catherine Eddowes’ murder. Mark Hodder’s steampunk universe features not only fantastically amplified versions of Victorian scientists, biologists, pre-Raphaelites, and decadents, but also an incarnation of the semi-folkloric urban spectre, Spring-Heeled Jack, a time-traveller who, by accidentally assassinating Queen Victoria, creates an alternative steampunk time-line.

¹⁵⁶ Luckhurst, ‘Spectral Turn’, p. 541.

¹⁵⁷ For more on connectivity, maker culture and steampunk as a subculture, see Carrot, Ferguson. Also: Suzanne Barber and Matt Hale, ‘Enacting the Never-Was: Upcycling the Past, Present, and Future in Steampunk’, in *Steaming Into a Victorian Future*, ed. by Julie Anne Taddeo and Cynthia J. Miller (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2013.), pp. 165-183.

¹⁵⁸ Jenkins, *Convergence*, p. 255-256, in reference to Marshal Sella, ‘The Remote Controllers’, <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/10/20/magazine/the-remote-controllers.html> (Accessed 19 June 2018).

George Mann's *The Affinity Bridge* (2009) features airship crashes, malfunctioning automata, and a mysterious zombie plague, and imagines Whitechapel as 'one of the seedier locales of the city, a refuge of beggars, criminals, and whores' (32).¹⁵⁹ This stereotypical description is perhaps also the most detailed one readers are afforded: We find here 'more factories, breaker's yards, and public houses' (32), that it is a 'bleak morning' (33), and that the corpse which our detectives, Sir Maurice Newbury and Veronica Hobbs, investigate, is found 'on the cobbles' and in 'surrounding fog' (33). A mysterious series of stranglings is attributed to a 'phantom, a glowing policeman' (36), and it is implied that the city-wide zombie plague manifests especially here: 'On the one hand, they're worried about the murderer; on the other, about the revenants that are walking the streets at night, hiding in the gutters like animals. Places like this, they ain't safe, ma'am. People keep themselves to themselves' (36). This impression is strengthened by the constables' assertion that corpses found here are often either moved by their families or robbed and dumped in the river. All in all, our first impression of Whitechapel is much less physical than social: the place is unfavourably defined by how people behave here. The presence of urban phantoms amplifies notions of Whitechapel as space of vice and misery in ways that are both fantastic and indebted to the Ripper mythology.

As such, it is no surprise that Newbury is attacked by zombies while examining another crime scene in the ever-present fog. Here, '[t]he confluence of three buildings and the cover of an arched alleyway had created a barrier of sorts against the thick smog. It still lay heavy in yellow wispy strands, but with the light of the three lanterns, [...] Newbury was able to ascertain the key elements of the scene' (194-195). Allusions to the 'blasted fog' and the lantern light are so liberally repeated throughout the scene that it creates a hyper-realistic, graphic chiaroscuro: in the 'thick and cloying', 'damp fog' and 'quiet darkness' (198), the sight of revenants devouring two constables in a lonely alleyway becomes cinematic, even emblematic of a familiar Ripper iconography. The text re-enacts a popular Gothic mythology of the East End as a space of misery, murder, and fog, but does not consider how and why that is the case or question the stereotype at all. The abundance of fog is an aesthetic device, not symptomatic as in *Anno Dracula*.

Despite the descriptive shortcomings, the novel remains a favourite with readers. It has

¹⁵⁹ George Mann, *The Affinity Bridge: A Newbury and Hobbes Investigation* (New York: Tor Books, 2009).

been reviewed as a ‘genuinely *fun* book’ and ‘a light, highly enjoyable read’. The Book Smugglers’ review states: ‘Mr. Mann’s turn of the century London feels pretty spot on’, and SF Reviews attests: ‘Mann has created a world rich in texture.’¹⁶⁰ Kirkus Reviews notes: ‘Seething melodrama set against a vividly imagined backdrop’, and Pop Matters agrees: ‘The book is masterfully planned and is an interesting combination of sci-fi, detective fiction, and Victorian literature’.¹⁶¹ Altogether, *The Affinity Bridge* seems to exemplify exactly what readers imagine they will find when new to steampunk and are generally satisfied and intrigued by the apparently typical steampunk setting. While of course the novel is the sum of its parts, my close reading of how Whitechapel is re-presented does not quite reveal this ‘rich texture’ and ‘vividly imagined backdrop’.

What this suggests is that Mann’s vision succeeds in leveraging the meaning attached to a collectively shared ‘white knowledge’ about the East End with little effort. Despite the scant and graphic descriptive markers, the novel can depend on reader’s collective knowledge to fill the gaps and perceive the area outlined only through a few bold strokes as a fully-fledged transmedia story-world, larger and deeper than the novel alone. *The Affinity Bridge* can create a ‘richly textured’ steampunk London simply by highlighting its own technofantastical innovations and hyper-Victorian tweaks to that story-world.

5.2 MARXIST BODY HORROR: *WHITECHAPEL GODS*

On the other end of the steampunk spectrum of re-imagining the Victorian East End lies S. M. Peters’ novel *Whitechapel Gods* (2008).¹⁶² By re-organising the urban Victorian mythology in favour of body horror and pseudo-cyberpunk, the novel creates a unique steampunk vision of the East End. Here, the eponymous district has been closed off from the rest of London through

¹⁶⁰ Anon., ‘Steampunk Week – Book Review: The Affinity Bridge by George Mann’, <https://www.thebooksmugglers.com/2010/04/steampunk-week-book-review-the-affinity-bridge-by-george-mann.html> (Accessed 19 June 2018); Thomas M. Wagner, ‘The Affinity Bridge’, http://www.sfreviews.net/mann_affinity_bridge.html (Accessed 19 June 2018).

¹⁶¹ Anon., ‘The Affinity Bridge’, <https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/george-mann/the-affinity-bridge/> [Accessed 19 June 2018]; Catherine Ramsell, ‘“The Affinity Bridge” Is an Enormously Fun Steampunk Novel’, <https://www.popmatters.com/125702-the-affinity-bridge-by-george-mann-2496193023.html> (Accessed 19 June 2018).

¹⁶² S. M. Peters, *Whitechapel Gods* (New York: Roc Books, 2008).

walls and become a world onto itself, dominated by the supernatural entities Father Clock and Mama Engine. Leading us into the text is a quotation from Arthur Morrison's 1889 essay on Whitechapel for *The Palace Journal*:

A horrible black labyrinth, think many people, reeking from end to end with the vilest exhalations; its streets, mere kennels of horrent putrefaction; its every wall, its every object, slimy with the indigenous ooze of the place; swarming with human vermin, whose trade is robbery, and whose recreation is murder; the catacombs of London darker, more tortuous, and more dangerous than those of Rome, and supersaturated with foul life. (5)¹⁶³

This strikingly colourful description is, ironically, part of Morrison's re-iteration of stereotypes about Whitechapel which he then endeavours to dismantle, showing instead a 'commercial respectability'. *Whitechapel Gods*, however, chooses to root itself in this Gothic stereotype of a dark, exotic, and dangerous maze populated by atavisms and literally oozing malice — an image, as the date tells us, directly informed by the Ripper murders. Out of this imagery grows a hyper-Gothic nightmare city: 'Bailey stood a long minute with the door open, staring out. His gaze was dawn upwards, past the rotting rooftops of the neighbourhood [...]. He felt his jaw tighten as his eyes came to rest on the top of the looming iron mountain barely visible through the blackened air: the Stack, home to the gods' (10-11). This is a space of 'soot-stained streets and thick air' (12), noisy factories, fizzling gaslights, and drab public houses, all of which are stacked, in an imaginative perversion of Doré's endless city, over one another in infinite levels: 'Oliver scanned the building lining the streets, apartments stretching the entire five storeys to the roof of the concourse. Some even went higher, tangling themselves in the braces of the next level' (14). A familiar Victorian aesthetic with Dickensian echoes as the protagonist Oliver's name also implies, is twisted out of proportion until the uncanny city of the urban Gothic becomes a boundless, overwhelming monstrosity:

Ahead, Stepneyside Tower slowly faded into life from within the clouds and the swirling ash. Its thick steel beams arched gracefully together, crossing and tangling, and at the top

¹⁶³ Arthur Morrison, 'Whitechapel. From 'The Palace Journal', April 24, 1889', https://www.casebook.org/victorian_london/whitechapel3.html?printer=true (Accessed 19 June 2018).

spilled back down in all directions, giving the tower the appearance of a huge black flower. The scattered lights of human habitation blinked between them like orphaned stars. [...] Oliver turned to look but saw only more grey sky, with the twisted shades of other towers lurking in that direction. Somewhere beyond stood the impassable wall separating Whitechapel from the rest of London, topped with electric defences and guarded by untiring Boiler Men...

Just beyond it, human soldiers of the British army stood ever ready [...]. (35)

Whitechapel becomes a literal other, physically separated from the rest of London, its borders an impenetrable gateway into hostile territory, and not just *terra incognita*, but a foreign country: 'London wasn't his city. England wasn't his home. *Maybe it could be.*' (158). This is, of course, a fantastical actualisation of an urban Victorian metaphoric East End register.

Below the endlessness of steely towers in a miasma of ash and smog, we find the Underbelly:

The floor of the Underbelly was like a giant bowl of concrete, warped and misshapen to conform to the vagaries of the tower's steel supports. He traced the three strangers between two- and three-storey tenements, inexpertly constructed of whatever spare wood and plaster could be scrounged from the city above. The place had a ruined graveyard quality about it, enhanced by the few ghostly street lanterns that Missy had always detested. (53)

This vertical geography literalises social hierarchies into physical space, with the Underbelly as a dark slum supporting the towering structures above not only economically, but literally. This layering is also evidence of a literal palimpsest, considering that all this is built on Old Whitechapel, now an empty abyss under 'the maze of beams that held up the Shadwell Underbelly and went on to support the Concourse above' (129). The old city 'had long since decayed into lumps of sodden debris' (154), and we find here '[n]othing below but a mass of near-vertical pipes slick with condensation; nothing to the sides but silent ashfall', with an occasional 'angular assortment of pipes and wires that resembled a ladder as one may have looked in an opium dream' (142). Nothing populates this abysmal counter-space but mechanical wild hounds preying on lost wanderers. This Whitechapel is a space of precarity, an endless cityscape that stretches into the horizontal, but more prominently into the vertical as a steampunk

version of Doré's *Warehousing in the City*. Here, people are dwarfed and 'orphaned' among the concrete and lost in the noxious smoke. Navigation becomes an act of resistance, as exemplified by Oliver and his rebellious allies who traverse all layers of this endless cityscape in their quest to dismantle the tyranny of local gods.

Peters' Whitechapel is at once disturbingly inorganic in its vast materiality of steel, bricks, and concrete, but also seems somewhat organically grown. From the maze of beams that grow from the ground like a forest, to the makeshift wood and plaster constructions of the Underbelly and the gracefully tangling, flower-like steel beams of the towers, there is a paradoxical imagery at work here, but it ties in with the cyborgism and body horror which characterises the novel at large. Father Clock, for example, is an entity with Orwellian powers of surveillance who represents a mechanised order whose paradigms are 'efficiency over emotion' and 'for all parts to work together according to a single Purpose' (223). His minions, the cloaks, let themselves be crafted into cyborg automata with 'brass bones and copper nerves' (233) or porcelain eyes (33): 'Their mechanisms were their thirty pieces of silver, the price of their souls' (34). In accordance with this imagery of computer automation, bodies and minds of dissenters are subsumed into the gigantic machinery of the Stack:

He hung now in a chair, arms and legs supported by thin scraps of brass, six copper tines penetrating his neck. He spasmed randomly. He drooled. He bled dark oil from his eye and ears. To his left and right, above and below, thousands more trapped souls shuffled mindlessly, their bodies jerking in the indecipherable rhythm of the Great Machine. (49-50)

From here, the rebel Aaron's mind escapes into a virtual void, a sort of cyberspace: 'Aaron flaked apart and drifted away. What remained tightened securely, then began to spin at its designated frequency. It became part of a work greater than itself, part of an infallible string of physical logic inside the perfect machine' (51).

Mama Engine, on the other hand, represents the volatile powers of energy. Her followers 'were rarely seen outside the Stack, preferring [...] to be near their goddess, working in her furnace deep inside that mountain of iron. The red glow of their own heart-furnaces leaked through burns and holes in their heavy clothes; some even had mechanical limbs, which held to no human shape' (33). We find an example of this here: 'A black cloak scuttled by, moving on all fours like a spider, emitting an audible mechanical grinding as she moved' (61). In portraying

these different instances of humans transforming into machines, *Whitechapel Gods* imaginatively puts into play Karl Marx's critique of the capitalist factory:

In handicrafts and manufacture, the workman makes use of a tool, in the factory, the machine makes use of him. There the movements of the instrument of labour proceed from him, here it is the movements of the machine that he must follow. In manufacture the workmen are parts of a living mechanism. In the factory we have a lifeless mechanism independent of the workman, who becomes its mere living appendage.¹⁶⁴

In Marx's vision, a re-organisation of human labour into a mechanised system means a reversal of power hierarchies and a shift from human dominance into servitude of the machine, equalling a loss of agency and dignity. The human worker is appropriated by the larger mechanism as interchangeable prosthesis, his ability and intellect drained away with his agency. This is literally the case in *Whitechapel Gods* where Marx's metaphorical concept is re-imagined in literal terms, and where a mysterious cancer, 'the clacks' disfigures ordinary, disenfranchised East End workers in one final iteration of the motif:

The patient writhed and struggled in the bed, fighting a pain that distorted his features into something less than human. He was a comrade named Tor Kyrre, though Bailey could barely recognise him. Spikes of iron had sprouted from his bald pate and his bare chest was riddled with gears and bulbs of all types of metals, the tips of much larger growths festering beneath the skin. As the doctor made his second cut, lateral and shallow, across the base of the rib cage, black oil welled up, slipping down Tor's flanks and staining the sheets and blankets.
(7-8)

'Clacks' patients are literally consumed by the parasitic, semi-organic mechanic growths, such as brass bubbles, iron spikes, and gears beneath the skin. This corresponds to their social status in an oppressive industrial system dominated by the gods of industrial technology and efficiency, in which the 'clacks' become a symptom of these literally de-humanizing conditions:

Below, dockworkers struggled to unload the goods descending by crane from two zeppelins

tethered to the Aldgate spire. No single class seemed as afflicted with the mechanical growths as the dockworkers. They shambled around like parodies of men, covered in gleaming iron pustules, hobbling on malformed brass legs, and picking at ropes and crates with hooked hands and fingerless steel stubs. (109)

The ‘clacks’, together with the other ways in which bodies are invaded, disfigured, dismembered, destroyed and deconstructed in this novel, become displaced external signifiers for the East Enders’ lack of agency under an industrial tyranny productively encoded in a meta-Victorian aesthetic. We have seen that this hyper-Victorian vision originates in the Ripper /East End mythology enshrined in collective memory, but *Whitechapel Gods* hardly re-iterates Gothic tropes about the eruption of atavism in the present, or psychological hauntings for the sake of repeating them. Instead, it adds other, non-Gothic Victorian impulses and technofantastical speculation and remixes them into a vision of the East End that is unfamiliar, yet can still be read through East End markers, such as industry, disenfranchisement, or factory work. The Gothic lingers not in roaming urban monsters, corrupting mania, or biological degeneration. Whitechapel citizens do not so much regress into ape-like Mr Hydes as evolve, more or less voluntarily, into un-human machine hybrids. However, traces of the Gothic cityscape linger in the uncanny maze which, while not one of paranoia and isolation, is an overwhelming, labyrinthine, and grotesque wilderness of steel and concrete. Still, whereas the novel seems to externalise Gothic Victorian tropes into new, fantastical incarnations, it is the (anachronistic), industrialised future which haunts this East End, rather than the past. Through such a temporal reversal, *Whitechapel Gods* imagines the ‘Victorian’ past as an uncanny *doppelgänger* which is just as much — and very tangibly — haunted by us as we are by it.

¹⁶⁴ Karl Marx, *Capital. A New Abridgement* (Oxford: Oxford World’s Classics, 2008 [1867]), p. 260-261.

6. CONCLUSION: “SHE’S ALIVE!”

In their short video *Here Comes the Bride* (2014), the California-based performance art troupe The League of S.T.E.A.M re-imagines a steampunk version of *Frankenstein* — or rather, *Bride of Frankenstein*, the 1935 film.¹⁶⁵ The story, in which Coyote (Glenn Freund) and Baron von Fogel (Andrew Fogel) endeavour to build a female companion for their bookish friend Albert Able (Trip Hope), is not only clearly indebted to classic film interpretations of Shelley’s original text, but also liberally peppered with allusions to other story universes, such as *Star Trek* or *Doctor Who*. Only eight minutes long, the short film manages to put humorous twists on a well-known story (‘I can’t believe I wasted my entire day getting dragged all over town, going to graveyards and stealing things...!’; 0:05:00), by relying on their audience’s media literacy and a prominent cultural ‘white knowledge’. Even without knowledge of the classic texts, audiences intuitively identify Elsa Lanchester’s iconic costume and hair-do or deduce from a combination of bulky contraptions, thunderstorm and other ‘mad scientist’ iconography what is about to transpire because they can actualise and leverage a collective pop cultural knowledge.

I have traced this development through the prism of urban Gothic and with regard to the Victorian East End in this chapter in order to demonstrate how steampunk’s hyper-Victorian collage is indebted to the Victorian city. We have seen how a number of Victorian texts, themselves intertextual and coloured by a Gothic imagination, created a palimpsestic East End, defined by a coherent register of tropes in the collective middle-class imagination. This register was further infused with Gothic imagery and catalysed a number of interlinked social debates through the Whitechapel murders of 1888, out of which emerged Jack the Ripper as icon of the Victorian East End.

First wave steampunk such as *Anno Dracula* exemplifies how steampunk’s hyper-Victorian collage may draw on a wealth of such communally created meanings and iconography to construct a new, counterfactual vision of ‘Victorian London’. On the surface, both *Anno Dracula* and Ackroyd’s *The Limehouse Golem* might be affiliated in their quest to unearth the Victorian past in order to craft counter-myths to the Thatcherite, neoliberal narrative. Both, after

¹⁶⁵ The League of S.T.E.A.M., “‘Here Comes the Bride’ - Adventures of the League of STEAM”, Video, YouTube, posted by The League of S.T.E.A.M., 24 November 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CHY1U9wxv2o>

all, realise that ‘the period’s appeal lies in its (would-be) *transcendental otherness*, alternately gothically horrid and cheerfully quaint’ and re-posit the nineteenth century as Gothic other.¹⁶⁶ However, where Ackroyd’s psychogeography asks us to unearth hidden remnants of *genius loci* and find secret codes in the seemingly predefined ‘deep topography’, Newman’s steampunk deliberately collapses history and fiction to highlight not just the textuality of history, but particularly the textuality of imagined space. As Bowser and Croxall note: ‘Through its own instability, enacted via nonlinear temporality and blended surfaces, steampunk reminds us of the instability and constructedness of our concepts of periodisation and historical distance’.¹⁶⁷ In the counterfactual text, such ‘blended surfaces’ emerge as re-imagined characters, historical figures, and popular tropes. As Newman’s Gothic satire of Thatcher’s ‘Victorian Values’ illustrates, such re-organisation of collectively transmitted signifiers may do ideological work.

In addition, we see here that remix and participation are not just a cornerstone of steampunk making,¹⁶⁸ but an intrinsic factor of the hyper-Victorian collage itself. In first- and second-wave steampunk alike, both the historical past and the fictional canon become subject to remix and re-signification, relying on a collectively shared ‘white knowledge’ which readers actualise to decode the text and its underlying story world. This is why *The Affinity Bridge*, by merely outlining the East End through a few aesthetic markers instead, can conjure up a classic Gothic setting outfitted with all that such a Gothic East End, always subconsciously catalysed through an aesthetic Ripper register, entails. However, by discussing how *Whitechapel Gods* creates an endlessly nightmarish East End labyrinth rooted in Ripper Gothic, modified through additional ‘Victorian’ markers and technofantastical speculation, I have also outlined the potential for re-imagining ‘the Victorian’ inherent in the steampunk aesthetic. By projecting a variety of ideas and categories, such as human-technology relationships, industrial capitalism, or agency and identity back and forth between past and present, steampunk may create a unique dialogue between the two: ‘Indeed, steampunk looks to the present to illuminate the past, the past to illuminate the present, the future to illuminate the past, and the past to illuminate the

(Accessed 20 June 2018).

¹⁶⁶ Kohlke and Gutleben, *Neo-Victorian Gothic*, p. 12, original emphasis.

¹⁶⁷ Bowser and Croxall, ‘Introduction’, p. 30.

¹⁶⁸ For more, see: Forlini, ‘Technology’.

future'.¹⁶⁹ Whereas our historical perspective inevitably colours our perception of the past, steampunk is free to let this mutual re-projection play out in new, creative, and externalised ways.

Continual intertextual adaptation, for example through the Victorian urban Gothic and the Ripper aesthetic, create an interlinked network of signifiers in the collective knowledge of the late-Victorian age, in which 'East End', 'urban Gothic', and 'Jack the Ripper' become cyphers signifying one another along with underlying social debates about crime, sexuality, social responsibility, progress, and so on. Through post-modern adaptation, this network undergoes slight re-signification in the collective mind and may accumulate new meanings but remains largely intact. As *Anno Dracula* so creatively enacts, history and fiction are closely entangled within the Victorian city in this network of signifiers. In steampunk, hyper-Victorian collage becomes an aesthetic shorthand for any number of these underlying, interconnected signifier networks gathered from the collectively shared knowledge of East End mythology, creating new meanings through juxtaposition and reference — and expressing something new.

Having discussed how steampunk imports, actualises, and remixes meaning concerning the Victorian city, let us now consider more closely how these new meanings may be expressed in and through urban space itself. In the next chapter, I examine how steampunk retro-speculation may mobilise the production of space to create virtual narrative environments accessible to a wide audience.

¹⁶⁹ Bowser and Croxall, p. 5.

CHAPTER 3: HYPER-CITY: STEAMPUNK'S RETRO-SPECULATIVE SPACES

1. INTRODUCTION: OF OTHER SPACES

In Italo Calvino's much-referenced 1972 novel *Invisible Cities*, a fictionalised Marco Polo remarks the following:

‘With cities, it is as with dreams: everything imaginable can be dreamed, but even the most unexpected dream is a rebus that conceals a desire or, its reverse, a fear. Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears, even if the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules are absurd, their perspectives deceitful, and everything conceals something else.’¹

The steampunk Londons discussed in the previous chapter on the counterfactual remixes of Gothic East End mythologies certainly illustrate Calvino's point: steampunk's collapsing of timelines creates a mode in and through which the desires and fears associated with a metropolis like London may be manifested in new and interesting, meta-fictional ways. Additionally, in linking the physical, seemingly fixed city to the subjective imaginary of dreams and alerting us to the sometimes irrational or palimpsestic coding of urban space, this excerpt also reminds us of Lefebvre's notion of spaces as socially produced. The steampunk city imaginary then acts as a heterotopic counter-site in the Foucaultian sense, ‘a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted’.² While I have explored this in previous chapters, let us now consider this aspect of dreaming. As retro-speculative heterotopias, steampunk cities represent and reflect on ‘real’ space (in this case, our imaginaries of the Victorian city) and ‘create a space of illusion that exposes every real space [...] as still more illusory’, but how does the evocation of space shape the steampunk metropolis as a reflection on cognitive mapping and the production of real world spaces when it cannot actually reproduce their most vital component,

¹ Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, translated by William Weaver (London: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1972), p. 44.

² Michel Foucault, ‘Of Other Spaces’, p. 3.

space itself?³

This is of course a conundrum equally central to any Victorian, neo-Victorian, or indeed speculative text, and so we must first consider how we may conceive of ‘space’ and its representation through and relationship with fiction. Urbanist Edward Soja’s concept of thirdspace is ‘a purposefully tentative and flexible term that attempts to capture what is actually a constantly shifting and changing milieu of ideas, events, appearances, and meanings’.⁴ Influenced by Lefebvre, Foucault, and Homi Bhabha among others, Soja defines thirdspace as ‘a radically different way of looking at, interpreting and acting to change the embracing spatiality of human life’.⁵ In his trialectics of space, firstspace is the concrete and material dimension of space, perceived, epistemological and empirically mappable.⁶ Secondspace exemplifies how space is conceived, imagined, interpreted and represented, for example in art and fiction. This, then, is the aspect of spatiality which helps create a cumulative palimpsest of interpretations and imagery, and so informs cognitive mapping and the construction of urban imaginaries, especially of Victorian London, and which is most central to this thesis. Thirdspace, finally, expresses the social dimension, encompassing both first- and secondspace and yet containing more than the sum of its parts. Radically open, thirdspace aims to express lived space in its simultaneities and complexities. ‘*Everything* comes together in Thirdspace: subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, the repetitive and the differential, structure and agency, mind and body, consciousness and the unconscious, the disciplined and the transdisciplinary, everyday life and unending history’.⁷

I begin this chapter by considering how prominent Victorian ‘London writers’ have represented and accounted for firstspace, that is the physicality of urban space in their writing, which constitutes secondspace representations that lastingly shaped our collective imaginary of the Victorian metropolis. By reading Charles Dickens and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle through Doreen Massey’s notion of space as a process, I investigate the role of space in creating and maintaining the shared imaginary from which steampunk then extrapolates to add its own,

³ Foucault, p. 8.

⁴ Edward Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-And-Imagined Places* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1996), p. 2.

⁵ Soja, *Thirdspace*, p. 29.

⁶ Soja, *Thirdspace*, p. 10.

⁷ Soja, *Thirdspace*, p. 56-57, original emphasis.

fantastical vision.

However, where Victorian writers had firstspace to complement their writings, parts of which are still present in modern London, steampunk's anachronistic re-calibrations are by definition based on the lack of a physical counterpart. Reader-response theory, in line with Gadamer's hermeneutics (the cyclical and continuous re-interpretation of text on the basis of new and cumulative understanding) and Iser's phenomenological approach (the supplementation of the text's incomplete outline through the reader's own experience and imagination) suggests that the reader's image of a fantastical city garnered from text will always remain amenable to the individual's imagination to a certain degree.⁸ This means that steampunk's more fantastical spaces remain somewhat relative, but visual representations may eliminate some of that relativity because they supply fewer gaps.⁹ In fact, the virtual spaces of video games may provide the closest approximation of a 'real' steampunk space because they can simulate most of its qualities.¹⁰

Space in video games, according to Espen Aarseth, is their 'defining element', as they 'celebrate and explore spatial representation as a central motif and *raison d'être*'.¹¹ As three-dimensional visual constructs, they 'offload' the 'cognitive overhead' of imagining space from text alone 'into the machine' so that 'gamers can focus on the flow of the game while learning the background mechanics through immersion and experimentation'.¹² Indeed, one unique quality of game spaces which text cannot supply is that we may move through and interact with virtual spaces through a digital avatar as our proxy. In addition, as neo-Victorian constructs sourced from collective memory, game spaces must be considered an example of hyper-reality in

⁸ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 1960. Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader*, 1972.

⁹ See Iser.

¹⁰ The question whether and if so, how video games are fictional is an ongoing debate in game studies, which I cannot here discuss in detail. I agree with those who consider video games to be fictional because they 'are comprised of depictions of events, people, and places with an imagined existence, and [...] we as appreciators engage with these depictions by deploying our imagination.' All games discussed in this chapter are also emplotted in that they organise a series of events, here game sequences, into a meaningful narrative enacted through our avatar. Grant Tavinor, 'Fiction', in *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies*, ed. by Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 343-441, p. 436.

¹¹ Espen Aarseth, 'Allegories of Space. The Question of Spatiality in Computer Games', in *Space Time Play. Computer Games, Architecture, and Urbanism: the Next Level*, ed. by Friedrich von Borries, Steffen P. Walz, and Matthias Böttger (Berlin: Birkhäuser Verlag, 2007), pp. 44-47, p. 44.

¹² George Carstoea, 'Uchronias, Alternate Histories, and Counterfactuals', in *The Routledge Companion to Imaginary Worlds*, ed. by Mark J. P. Wolf (New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 184-191, p. 189.

line with Baudrillard's simulacrum,¹³ which Soja defines as 'a perfect copy of an original that may never have existed' and the 'cumulative replacement of the real with its simulated representations or images'.¹⁴ This means that neo-Victorian and steampunk game spaces are both based on and contain within them a palimpsestic multitude of such secondspace representations: 'Today's video-gaming universe often draws on a Victorian novelistic *imaginaire* and the extrapolated cities which nineteenth-century print culture produced'.¹⁵

For example, in *Assassin's Creed: Unity* (2014), the virtual Notre Dame of revolutionary Paris was recreated with the help of 'more than 150 maps of the city', photographs, and historians' advice¹⁶ and considered so accurate that, when the cathedral was damaged by fire in April 2019, Ubisoft both suggested its research be used in the reconstruction, and offered a free version of the game in which players could explore the building as they had hitherto known it and might no longer be able to experience it. Game spaces then provide interesting relationships with both the real cityscape and our historical imaginaries of it, and although they are finitely coded and ultimately self-contained, they contain such aspects of third space as subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, structure and agency, mind and body, everyday life and history.

After all, Soja also links thirdspace to the Aleph as imagined by Jorge Luis Borges, 'the place "where all places are"'.¹⁷ The Aleph, 'an allegory on the infinite complexities of space and time' and an 'all-inclusive simultaneity [that] opens up endless worlds to explore, and, at the same time, presents daunting challenges',¹⁸ has been associated with virtual space. It is no wonder then, that William Gibson's *Sprawl* trilogy¹⁹ at times refers to cyberspace itself, the

¹³ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. by Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Philip Beitchman (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 1983).

¹⁴ Soja, *Postmetropolis*.

¹⁵ Estelle Murail and Sara Thornton, 'Dickensian Counter-Mapping, Overlaying, and Troping: Producing the Virtual City', in *Dickens and the Virtual City: Urban Perception and the Production of Social Space*, ed. by Estelle Murail and Sara Thornton (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 3-34, p. 5.

¹⁶ Andrew Webster, 'Building a better Paris in Assassin's Creed Unity. Historical accuracy meets game design', *The Verge*, 17 April 2019, originally published 31 October 2014, <https://www.theverge.com/2014/10/31/7132587/assassins-creed-unity-paris> (Accessed 15 February 2020).

¹⁷ Soja, *Thirdspace*, p. 54.

¹⁸ Soja, *Thirdspace*, p. 56-57.

¹⁹ *Neuromancer* (1982), *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (1986), *Count Zero* (1988).

‘consensual hallucination [...] a graphic representation of data’,²⁰ as the aleph. Soja himself notes that *Neuromancer*’s conception of cyberspace as ‘[l]ines of light ranged in the non-space of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding...’²¹ is ‘intrinsically spatial in [its] rhetoric and referencing’, as well as ‘peculiarly urban’.²² This tells us that urban space is affiliated in interesting ways with the virtual space of game worlds, and that video games provide another instance in which steampunk may circle back to its cyberpunk roots in unexpected ways.

In this chapter, I want to move from thinking about the cultural processes which work at the heart of the steampunk aesthetic itself towards investigating how and to what end it may be mobilised. I examine how *Assassins Creed: Syndicate* (2015) synthesises a Victorian London imaginary into an interactive and comprehensive, easily navigated virtual game space using video game theory, and consider what kind of new and exciting urban experience its simulated London strives to offer its players by relating its gameplay to the philosophy of parkour. Against that backdrop, I examine *The Order 1886* (2015) as a game that productively ‘punks’ the cityscape through cyberpunk impulses into a legible urban texture. In recursing to seminal cyberpunk and the iconic aesthetics of *Blade Runner* (1982) and its hyper-city and investigating how retro-speculative aesthetics configure the game worlds of *BioShock* (2007 & 2010), *BioShock: Infinite* (2013), and *Dishonored* (2012) as legible textures, I provide a groundwork for considering how urban space may act as a storytelling device in itself in the steampunk London of *The Order 1886*.

²⁰ Gibson, *Neuromancer*, p. 59

²¹ Gibson, *Neuromancer*, p. 59.

²² Soja, *Postmetropolis*, p. 336.

2. VICTORIAN LONDON: IMMERSIVE AND PANOPTIC TRAJECTORIES

Charles Dickens and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle both created widely formative imaginaries of Victorian London that successfully evoked its complex spatiality. Let us at first consider this passage from *Nicholas Nickleby*:

They rattled on through the noisy, bustling, crowded streets of London, now displaying long double rows of brightly-burning lamps, dotted here and there with the chemists' glaring lights, and illuminated besides with the brilliant flood that streamed from the windows of the shops, where sparkling jewellery, silks and velvets of the richest colours, the most inviting delicacies, and most sumptuous articles of luxurious ornament, succeeded each other in rich and glittering profusion. Streams of people apparently without end poured on and on, jostling each other in the crowd and hurrying forward, scarcely seeming to notice the riches that surrounded them on every side; while vehicles of all shapes and makes, mingled up together in one moving mass, like running water, lent their ceaseless roar to swell the noise and tumult.²³

London here is experienced in transit and produced through a succession of sensory impressions and indeed a network of interlinking movements. As such, it exemplifies Doreen Massey's concept of space as more than the sphere 'of a discrete multiplicity of inert things' and rather one that 'presents us with a heterogeneity of practices and processes': 'This is space as the sphere of dynamic simultaneity, constantly disconnected by new arrivals, constantly waiting to be determined (and therefore always undetermined) by the construction of new relations. It is always being made and always therefore, in a sense, unfinished (except that 'finishing' is not on the agenda)'.²⁴ Considering space a 'product of a multitude of histories whose resonances are still there', histories buried as well as still being made, she argues that to travel through space is to 'participate in its continuing production'.²⁵ We see this in Dickens' evocation of ceaseless, intersecting movements which, though transitory, create the experience of the metropolis as one

²³ Charles Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby* ed. by Michael Slater (London: Penguin, 1986 [1838-39]), p. 488-89.

²⁴ Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: SAGE Publications, 2005), p. 107, original emphasis.

²⁵ Massey, p. 118.

of intersecting trajectories. Here, the temporal dimension converges with space as something more than the material surface: journeying through the city like Dickens' characters, or indeed the avatar in a video game, means to actively create space as one of a 'bundle of trajectories': 'Arriving at a new place means joining up with, somehow linking into, the collection of interwoven stories of which that place is made'.²⁶

In this immersive passage, material space recedes behind the social and commercial relationships which constitute the urban space and into which our focal characters, in Massey's terms, now link and join up through their own journey. She illustrates this with recourse to a passage which Massey mistakenly attributes to Raymond Williams, in which the author, from the window of a moving train, catches a glimpse of

a woman in her pinny bending over to clear the back drain with a stick. For the passenger on the train she will forever be doing this. She is held in that instant, almost immobilised [...], trapped in the timeless instant. Thinking space as the sphere of a multiplicity of trajectories, imagining a train journey (for example) as speeding across on-going stories, means bringing the woman in the pinny to life, acknowledging her as an ongoing life.²⁷

Similarly, the characters' journey becomes one of countless intersecting trajectories which constitute the Victorian city of that moment: 'Picking up the threads' of these interwoven relationships, stories, and journeys here means 'weaving them into a more or less coherent feeling of being "here", "now"'. (p. 119) While this passage illustrates how Dickens' immersive approach conjures up 'a city in production, rising and crumbling as it goes',²⁸ his work is also often attuned to the way in which his 'Dickensian London' was vanishing as he was writing it.²⁹ At the end of *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-41), we find the following passage:

²⁶ Massey, p. 119.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 119. The original passage can be found in George Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), Penguin edition from 1989, p. 15.

²⁸ Murail and Thornton, 'Counter-Mapping', p. 5.

²⁹ The idea of the 'Dickensian' is a vision of London tinted with the quaint and shabby, the eccentric and even grotesque, the sentimental and the dismal, a vision of crooked angles and clutter. In his writing, places are often imbued with a certain personality: Houses stare, windows frown, and doorways leer, and the 'meagre' or 'doleful' houses seem almost like living, somewhat strange creatures. This Dickensian mode harmonises well with Mayhew's urban ethnography which I have discussed in Chapter One, especially his cataloguing of the shabby and genteel.

[Kit] sometimes took [his children] to the place where [Nell] had lived; but new improvements had altered it so much, it was not like the same. The old house had been long ago pulled down, and a fine broad road was in its place. At first he would draw with his stick a square upon the ground to show them where it used to stand. But soon he became uncertain of the spot, and could only say it was thereabouts, he thought, and that these alterations were confusing. Such are the changes which a few years bring about, and so do things pass away, like a tale that is told!³⁰

Here, Kit's mental map of the city becomes outdated and his urban imaginary troubled in his memory as the city changes. Throughout the 1840s to 1870s, London transformed into the modern imperial capital whose structures have become essential cornerstones of a shared London imaginary, among them Kew Gardens, Kensington Museum complex and colleges, Albert Memorial and Royal Albert Hall, Westminster Palace, Trafalgar Square's Nelson monument, Liberty department store, the British Museum, Victoria, Paddington, and Charing Cross railway stations, St Pancras Hotel, Tower Bridge, and Bazalgette's embankment and sewer system. Railways, sewers, telegraphs, and the Underground, first built in 1863, also created connectivity and contributed to a large-scale modernisation. As Lynda Nead notes however, London's modernity 'seemed to obey the spatial logic of the maze rather than that of the grid or *étoile*, and its characteristic experience was of disorientation, as opposed to purposeful movement'.³¹ Unlike Haussmann's Paris, London remained labyrinthine and multi-layered. City planners turned to the panoptic view of the map, which 'made the modern city legible and comprehensible' but 'could never capture or contain the rapid growth of and changes in London'.³² A 'map of a geography', notes Massey, 'is no more than geography — or that space — than a painting of a pipe is a pipe'.³³ Maps 'position the observer, themselves unobserved, outside and above the object of the gaze' and give the impression that space is 'a surface — that it is a sphere of completed horizontality'.³⁴ Whereas Victorian London was routinely mapped through a panoptic view representing physical or social relationships such as the Ordnance Survey of 1851, John Snow's

³⁰ Dickens Charles, *The Old Curiosity Shop* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 2001 [1840]), p. 544.

³¹ Lynda Nead, *Victorian Babylon. People, Streets and Images in Nineteenth-Century London* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 4, original emphasis.

³² Nead, p. 13.

³³ Massey, p. 106.

cholera map (1854) or Charles Booth's *Life and Labour of the People of London* (1889- 1893), 'the 'logic of the cartographer', as Nead argues, 'cannot contain the city of memory and imagination'.³⁵

In addition, London's sewers, underground railways, rail track overpasses, or telegraph lines expanded vertically into structures and levels not easily accommodated in the one-dimensional surface of the map. *Dombey and Son* (1848) captures a moment of upheaval and chaos during the city's transformation into a modern capital when describing the building of a railway:

The first shock of a great earthquake had, just at that period, rent the whole neighbourhood to its centre. Traces of its course were visible on every side. Houses were knocked down; streets broken through and stopped; deep pits and trenches dug in the ground; enormous heaps of earth and clay thrown up; buildings that were undermined and shaking, propped by great beams of wood. Here, a chaos of carts, overthrown and jumbled together, lay topsy-turvy at the bottom of a steep unnatural hill; there, confused treasures of iron soaked and rusted in something that had accidentally become a pond. Everywhere were bridges that led nowhere; thoroughfares that were wholly impassable; Babel towers of chimneys, wanting half their height; temporary wooden houses and enclosures, in the most unlikely situations; carcasses of ragged tenements, and fragments of unfinished walls and arches, and piles of scaffolding, and wildernesses of bricks, and giant forms of cranes, and tripods straddling above nothing. There were a hundred thousand shapes and substances of incompleteness, wildly mingled out of their places, upside down, burrowing in the earth, aspiring in the air, mouldering in the water, and unintelligible as any dream.³⁶

We find here an overwhelming multiplicity of levels, layers, and open ends. Houses vanish or become unstable, high and low become relative, and structures like bridges and thoroughfares are disrupted or displaced. Like the chimneys, they create a vision of both endlessness and fragmentation and conjure up a confusion of horizontal and vertical structures intertwined, without beginning or end, much like Gustave Doré's Piranesi-esque endlessness of London.

³⁴ Massey, p. 107.

³⁵ Nead, p. 26.

³⁶ Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son* (London: Penguin, 1970 [1848]), p. 120-21.

Decoupled from purpose and flow, the cityscape becomes estranged as a ‘wilderness of bricks’ and ‘ragged carcasses’ and alive through active verbs such as ‘mingle’ or ‘burrow’, and so reminds us of *The Difference Engine*’s ‘nightmare endlessness of streets’, its ‘nausea of awnings’ and ‘ugliness of scaffoldings’.³⁷

Yet, in 1887 there appears a character for whom London is a city of totality and certainty that can be read, understood, and securely navigated by the rational mind. Sherlock Holmes, the collective symbol of ordering logic presides in *fin-de-siècle* London, ‘and it is with the London of those years that he has always been regarded as synonymous’.³⁸ This is not least because Holmes’ knowledge of the late-Victorian city is unparalleled. When a mystery client has a cab transport Holmes, Watson, and Miss Morstan from the Lyceum theatre on the Strand to a secret location, Watson professes that ‘soon, what with our pace, the fog, and my own limited knowledge of London, I lost my bearings and knew nothing save that we seemed to be going a very long way.’ Holmes ‘was never at fault, however, and he muttered the names as the cab rattled through squares and in and out by tortuous bystreets’.³⁹ Holmes’ knowledge of London is complete and unfailing. In *The Red-Headed League* (1891), he notes that ‘It is a hobby of mine to have an exact knowledge of London’.⁴⁰ However, his own address at 221B in the real Baker Street is fictional. In Holmes’ London, the real and imaginary converge into a mythic iconography of the modern metropolis. Doyle’s use of street atlases and Post Office directories allowed him to map out trajectories across London which evoke the city’s complexity through real pathways.⁴¹ Indeed, we are never in doubt that London, ‘that great cesspool into which all the loungers and idlers of the Empire are irresistibly drained’, is *the* modern metropolis of the age, a capital of finance and trade, and a national and imperial nexus.⁴²

Cannadine notes that Holmes stories are ‘often focused on the interlinked worlds of monarchy and government, aristocracy and plutocracy, financiers and rentiers, diplomats and

³⁷ Gibson and Sterling, p. 131.

³⁸ David Cannadine, ‘A case of [Mistaken?] Identity’, in *Sherlock Holmes: The Man Who Never Lived and Will Never Die*, ed. by Alex Werner (London: Penguin Random House, 2014), pp. 13-55, p. 16.

³⁹ Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, ‘The Sign of Four’, in *The Penguin Complete Sherlock Holmes* (London: Penguin, 2009 [1887]), pp. 15-87, p. 99.

⁴⁰ Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, ‘The Red-Headed League’, in *The Penguin Complete Sherlock Holmes* (London: Penguin, 2009 [1892]), pp. 176-189, p. 185.

⁴¹ Cannadine, p. 17-18.

⁴² Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, ‘A Study in Scarlet’, in *The Penguin Complete Sherlock Holmes* (London: Penguin,

military men, that were spreading across much of the city itself'.⁴³ The crimes which prompt the story are often domestic, conspiratorial, or professional, such as fraud, embezzlement, or forgery. Quite often, they are not legally crimes, but rather deceptions, scandals, oddities, and mysteries. Whereas this characterises Holmes' London as one of the middle and upper classes, it also underlines that the detective is less concerned with mundane criminality, but rather, as he puts it, with 'those whimsical incidents which will happen when you have four million human beings jostling each other within the space of a few square miles. Amid the action and reaction of so dense a swarm of humanity, every possible combination of events may be expected to take place'.⁴⁴ Here, the modern metropolis is configured as a multiplicity of intersecting trajectories, physical journeys as much as narratives, which give rise to an incalculable variety of small eccentricities and puzzles. This is illustrated in 'The Blue Carbuncle' (1892), where a chance encounter between a commissionaire, a man with a Christmas goose, and a 'knot of roughs' on the corner of Tottenham Court Road and Goodge Street ends with the commissionaire in possession of a stolen gem hidden in the goose's crop.⁴⁵ Not only is this an example of three independent trajectories randomly intersecting in urban space, but Holmes' own, backwards tracking of the goose through a detailed knowledge of London's trade networks, leading him to Covent Garden, also exemplifies how his mastery of metropolis and modern life alike hinges on his understanding of networks, crosscurrents, and trajectories. The stories, and with them the London imaginary, arise less out of immersive observations (as in Dickens) but rather than the pathways traced by Holmes and Watson's journeys on foot, in a hansom cab, or via train, linking into the network of stories and connections that constitute the city, and which remain centred on 221B Baker Street. At the beginning of 'The Resident Patient' (1894), Watson remarks: 'He loved to lie in the very centre of five million people, with his filaments stretching out and running through them, responsive to every little rumour or suspicion of unsolved crime.'⁴⁶ By using the image of the 'filament', which may be organic as well as electric, Doyle conjures up an idea of Holmes plugged into the city as Chase in *Neuromancer* plugs into cyberspace (and I have

2009 [1887]), pp. 15-87, p. 15.

⁴³ Cannadine, p. 37.

⁴⁴ Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, 'The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle', in *The Penguin Complete Sherlock Holmes* (London: Penguin, 2009 [1892]), pp. 224-256, p. 245.

⁴⁵ 'The Blue Carbuncle', p. 245.

⁴⁶ Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, 'The Resident Patient', in *The Penguin Complete Sherlock Holmes* (London: Penguin,

already remarked on the similar configurations of city space and cyberspace). In this image, Holmes is indeed linked into the very infrastructure of London, which pertains not just to railways, streets, and telegraph lines, but the individual trajectories drawn across the city by the people who inhabit it.

This London with which Holmes is so synonymous in the collective imagination is firmly located in a Victorian context. Even though Doyle wrote Holmesian adventures until the later 1920s, the stories are all set in and identified with the London of the 1880s and 1890s. Throughout the Edwardian period, London ‘underwent a new and unprecedented phase of expansion and transformation’.⁴⁷ Millbank, the Aldwych, Whitehall, or Regent Street were reconstructed in ‘Edwardian Baroque’, luxury hotels were built, and the cityscape altered significantly through electricity and motorcars. As Cannadine outlines, ‘it has been suggestively argued that it would have been impossible for Holmes to have operated in such a different urban environment [...], which was why Conan Doyle retired his detective in 1903’.⁴⁸

Holmes is both intuitively immersed in the networks of the metropolis and remains above them as observer in a distanced position. Here, the immersed and the panoptic view interact, not least because Holmes’ journeys have been traced by the author with the help of a map. Where Dickens’ London relies on an immersive perspective to create a memorable, complex and layered, if sometimes temporary, urban texture, Conan Doyle’s *fin de siècle* London is attuned to and linked more directly into the myriad of interlinked trajectories of the city through a combination of both approaches to create a complex mental map of London. As such, Holmes’ effortless mastery of the complex modern city creates a satisfying and reassuring urban *habitus*: Nonchalantly aloof and yet equipped with a detailed and useful knowledge of the city, Holmes exhibits many of the characteristics Simmel’s seminal 1903 essay would identify as ‘modern’ and ‘urban’.

Let us now consider how video games such as *Assassins’ Creed: Syndicate* (2015) tap into the imaginaries created by Dickens and Doyle, how they re-combine immersive and panoptic perspectives, and how they actualise Victorian London as a vast networked of interlinking stories that a hero figure like Holmes or our avatar may interpret and traverse with

2009 [1894]), pp. 422-434, p. 423.

⁴⁷ Cannadine, p. 46.

⁴⁸ Cannadine, p. 47-48.

agency.

3. GAME SPACE IN ASSASSINS CREED: SYNDICATE



Figure 3: Concept Art for *Assassins' Creed: Syndicate*

As one of the most popular and widely-played blockbuster video games in the last decade, *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* poses an opportunity to investigate how video games may bring to life a widely shared imaginary of Victorian London as a simulated space, because it actualises a combine panoptic and immersive view into an interactive experience. Considering that our London imaginary relies on the many iconic Victorian structures and buildings previously outlined, the game could not have been set before the nineteenth century and attracted as many international players or provided as easily navigable a setting. In examining how *Syndicate* provides an interactive experience of exploration and adventure, let us first consider its Victorian imaginary in conjunction with video game and spatial theory.

The ninth game in the *AC* franchise, *Syndicate* continues the frame narrative in which two rival orders, the Templars and the Assassins, wage a secret war for dominance throughout history by trying to gain control of magical artefacts. This provides a narrative and logical

framework for the time travel and meta-stages of the gameplay which however are unimportant for my purpose here. Far more compelling is the game's 1868 London. Here, the player, through the twin assassins Evie and Jacob Frye, attempts to dismantle the corrupting empire of the magnate Crawford Starrick, who embodies Victorian evils such as colonialism and exploitative industrial capitalism, and who controls London's networks of trade, transport, and production, through his street gang, 'the Blighters' (easily recognisable through red jackets). To go against Starrick is to take on 'the city itself', if not the world at large, so the game tells us: 'Whosoever controls London, controls the world.'⁴⁹ In taking on Starrick's city, we as players must assassinate his associates, free working children from dismal factories, re-conquer city territory with our own, green-attired street gang, 'the Rogues', or solve puzzles and complete assignments set by a neo-Victorian collage of historical persons such as Alexander Graham Bell, Charles Dickens, Charles Darwin, Florence Nightingale, or Karl Marx, or hunt urban monsters Spring-Heeled Jack and Jack the Ripper. On a narrative and spatial level, the game configures Victorian London as a nexus of interlinked networks of power, movement, and production, as well as ongoing stories and journeys. Through our interaction, we link into these and so participate in the construction of this hyper-real imaginary space. As common in the *AC* franchise, our own journey involves unusual and exciting movements, such as sabotaging factories, sneaking across rooftops, into tunnels, and through secret laboratories and asylums, chasing thieving street urchins, hijacking and racing horse-drawn carriages, zip-lining across Westminster Palace, or finding artefacts hidden on top of St Paul's Cathedral, the Tower of London, or inside Buckingham Palace.

Of course, in positioning our avatars as outlaws with the good intention to set right historical wrongs, the game offers us a neo-Victorian narrative which broadly simplifies complex socio-economic and political realities of the real nineteenth century.⁵⁰ In line with the game's

⁴⁹ Ubisoft, *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* (2015), dir. by Marc-Alexis Côté, Scott Phillips, and Wesley Pincombe, PlayStation 4, Ubisoft. I use a recorded walkthrough of the game for citation purposes: MrBlockzGaming, *Assassin's Creed Syndicate FULL Walkthrough No Commentary Gameplay Part 1 Longplay (PC)*. Video, YouTube, 14 January 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4lWnPg6ve88> (Accessed 15 February 2020), 00:03:50.

⁵⁰ Holly Nielsen, 'Reductive, superficial, beautiful – a historian's view of Assassin's Creed: Syndicate', *The Guardian*, 9 December 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2015/dec/09/assassins-creed-syndicate-historian-ubisoft> (Accessed 15 February 2020).

indulgence in ‘genre conventions, such as the swashbuckling adventure’,⁵¹ in which the complexities of the real world may momentarily cohere into clear choices, its neo-Victorian perspective pits us against a ‘repressive patriarchal regime’ which is ‘convenient as it is morally and politically unambiguous’.⁵² We must however also remember that *Syndicate*’s game space ‘is always serving the primary purpose of gameplay’ for a mainstream audience⁵³. While as a simulacrum of a city of historical memory, it ‘no longer needs to be rational, because it no longer measures itself against either an ideal or negative instance’,⁵⁴ *Assassin’s Creed* strives to synthesise a realist, believable representation with players’ expectations and functional gameplay and relied on meticulous research and historical consultants, for example historian Judith Flanders.⁵⁵ It so brings a ‘verisimilitudinous approach to the table, faithfully recreating cities and regions of the past’ and a ‘filmic reality effect’.⁵⁶

Such an effect is also produced by closely referencing Victorian visual art in creating the seven playable zones Westminster, the Strand, City of London, Whitechapel, Southwark, Lambeth, and the Thames, which are extensively and intricately constructed game spaces with individual aesthetic identities that can be viewed at different times of the day and in different weather conditions. John Crowther’s *Panoramic View from the Top of the Monument* (ca.1890) is an example of how contemporary artists combined a panoptic gaze with ‘the unfolding vista of the pedestrian at ground level’.⁵⁷ Other Victorian representations of London, such as the vistas from Ludgate Hill discussed in Chapter Two, John O’Connor’s 1884 painting *From Pentonville Road Looking West: Evening*, or the paintings of John Atkinson Grimshaw which inspired the concept of *Syndicate* likewise create multi-layered vistas through a strategically placed vanishing point and urban layers which pale as they recede into the background.⁵⁸ O’Connor’s painting captures the grandeur of the imperial city as ‘the Gothic spires of St Pancras railway station rise

⁵¹ Péter Kristóf Makai, ‘Video Games as Objects and Vehicles of Nostalgia’ *Humanities*, 7, 123 (2018), 1-14, p. 3.

⁵² Eckart Voigts-Virchow, ‘In-yer-Victorian-face: A Subcultural Hermeneutics of Neo-Victorianism’, *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory*, 20 (2009), 108-125, p. 122.

⁵³ Aarseth, p. 47.

⁵⁴ Baudrillard, p. 7.

⁵⁵ Webster, n.p.; Flanders has written *The Victorian House* (2003) and *The Victorian City* (2012.), among others.

⁵⁶ Makai, p. 3, p. 11.

⁵⁷ Pat Hardy, ‘The Art of Sherlock Holmes’, in *Sherlock Holmes: The Man Who Never Lived and Will Never Die*, ed. by Alex Werner (London: Penguin Random House, 2014), pp. 135-157, p. 135.

⁵⁸ Paul Davies, *The Art of Assassin’s Creed: Syndicate*. (London: Titan Books, 2015), p. 92.

above the humdrum banality of street life', but also accommodates ephemera of industry, transport, and business through the omnibuses, passers-by, and advertisements in the middle ground, and so uses the combined panoptic and immersive view to create 'opposing emotional registers'.⁵⁹ *Syndicate* recreates these influences in its concept art and gameplay through adept use of light, mood, and contrasting colours in building deep, evocative and layered vistas (over which, not seldom, St Paul's Cathedral presides) accompanied by audio cues and music which bring the three-dimensional paintings to life. Like Dickens' descriptions, it frequently foregrounds urban industrial textures such as bridges, underpasses, boat riggings, or lantern posts, chooses far away vanishing points to emphasise scale and dynamic, or foregrounds trains and railways, 'essential motifs of the modern city, indicating technological prowess, speed of communication and the fragmentary nature of society'.⁶⁰ In so doing, the game fuses scale and detail into a virtual model of London that can be experienced both on street level and from above, is indebted to secondspace Victoriana, and is fully mapped out, contains no blind spots and therefore seemingly portrays urban complexity as complete totality.

As Aarseth notes: 'As spatial practice, computer games are both representations of space (given their formal systems of relations) and representational spaces (given their symbolic imagery with a primarily aesthetic purpose)'.⁶¹ Like previous games, *Syndicate*'s London offers meticulously and accurately recreated landmarks in their proper place and scale (such as Westminster Palace, Trafalgar Square, the Monument, or Buckingham Palace), but takes the liberty to rescale lesser known, surrounding architecture in order to accommodate the free-roaming movement required for the gameplay, so that our avatar may climb and zip-line across buildings or drive carriages through the streets.⁶² 'The aim,' says art director Mohamed Gambouz, is 'to convey a believable setting, a believable city. And sometimes we even go for the perception people have, even if it's not 100 percent accurate.'⁶³ This means the game space occasionally compromises in favour of a widely shared imaginary that may not be historically accurate, for example through 'filler architecture' that substitutes present-day structures for imagined Victorian predecessors. These are characterised by distinct aesthetic identities in each

⁵⁹ Hardy, p. 156.

⁶⁰ Hardy, p. 155.

⁶¹ Aarseth, p. 44.

⁶² Webster, n.p.

borough, meaning that the Strand is palatial, colourful, and ornamented, whereas Whitechapel contains derelict half-timbered houses, and Southwark is the domain of industrial factories and smoking chimneys. *Syndicate*'s Victorian game world is a hyper-real simulacrum in which architecture and places act as cyphers for a collectively shared idea of 'Victorian-ness' and so shares qualities with steampunk at a fundamental mechanical level. Although its evocative hyper-real collage also utilises an aesthetic shorthand to leverage aspects of the 'real' Victorian city and era, the simulation itself serves a primarily functional purpose: 'Computer games are allegories of space: they pretend to portray space in ever more realistic ways but rely on their deviation from reality in order to make the illusion playable.'⁶⁴

Through our journey through simulated spaces, we interact with it and create narratives: 'The moving perspective projection defines a film-like, interactive, space- and time-based narration, which enables the combination of commonly used reality-based design attributes and plot structures.'⁶⁵ In addition, as Mark J. P. Wolf suggests, they invite 'audience participation in the form of speculation and fantasy' through 'conceptual immersion; the occupying of the audience's full attention and imagination, often with more detail than can be held in mind all at once'.⁶⁶ Accordingly in *Syndicate*, we must 'remember a wealth of details about the game's imaginary world in order to put together its backstory and solve puzzles',⁶⁷ which are not only embedded in a larger narrative, but an interactive cityscape which extends beyond our immediate vision. As we are tasked with locating stolen explosives hidden in St Pancras, for example, we must navigate the complex space, dodge, fight, and escape rival gang members, find an escape route, utilise tools, infrastructures, and people within the space, all the while being aware of how this operation pertains to the larger narrative and the city 'beyond'. As Wolf notes:

Worlds offering a high degree of saturation are usually too big to be experienced completely in a single sitting or session. The amount of detail and information must be great enough to

⁶³ Webster, n.p.

⁶⁴ Aarseth, p. 47.

⁶⁵ Ulrich Götz, 'Load and Support. Architectural Realism in Video Games', in *Space Time Play. Computer Games, Architecture, and Urbanism: the Next Level*, ed. by Friedrich von Borries, Steffen P. Walz, and Matthias Böttger (Berlin: Birkhäuser Verlag, 2007), pp. 134-137, p. 135.

⁶⁶ Mark J.P. Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* (London: Routledge, 2014), p. 29.

⁶⁷ Wolf, p. 69.

overwhelm the audience, imitating the vast amount of Primary World information which cannot be mastered or held in mind all at once. This overflow, beyond the point of saturation, is necessary if the world is to be kept alive in the imagination. If the world is too small, the audience may feel that they know all there is to know, and consider the world exhausted, feeling there is nothing more to be obtained from it. A world with an overflow beyond saturation, however, can never be held in the mind in its entirety; something will always be left out. What remains in the audience's mind then, is always changing, as lower levels of detail are forgotten and later re-experienced and re-imagined when they are encountered again.⁶⁸

The city, then, is an environment pre-designed to simulate such a sensory overflow through its textures, vistas, possible pathways, its neo-Victorian collage, and technofantastical gadgets, to evoke the virtual city as a realistic simulation which requires our transmedia competencies and cognitive mapping, compelling us to participate actively in navigating the simulated city and the narratives that play out in it.

⁶⁸ Wolf, p. 70.

3. 1 HISTORY IS YOUR PLAYGROUND: THE ASSASSIN FANTASY



4: Concept Art for *Assassins' Creed: Syndicate* by Jean-Francois Duval

The *Assassin's Creed* franchise's success certainly lies in its providing a unique and adventurous approach to the past as a playground to be conquered: 'Video games are particularly successful when they combine a break with particular limitations of reality in some areas with a retention of reality in others, inviting both comparison with real life and with the spectacular'.⁶⁹ Evie and Jacob Frye, our twin avatars, offer the assassin as a fantasy of adventurous urban mastery: throughout the game, we infiltrate factories, laboratories, asylums, prisons, haunted houses, and royal balls, pursue street urchins, hypnotists, and urban legends, engage in gang fights, steal carriages, trains, and Gatling guns, assassinate rival snipers from rooftops, and find hidden objects and passages before defeating Starrick in what is called a 'final boss battle' and receiving a knighthood from the Queen. Clearly, the game draws on the physical prowess and swashbuckling of the (characteristically Victorian) adventure genre in which disguises, deception, infiltration, investigation, chases, fights, and rescue missions evoke excitement and heroism in an exotic setting that provides hidden dangers and clues, as well as opportunities for

⁶⁹ Götz, p. 135.

exploration and intervention.⁷⁰ By adopting such a wide range of plots, objectives, and narrative conventions, *Syndicate* presents its Victorian London as a multiplicity of ongoing and intersecting narratives, in which, as in the London of Sherlock Holmes, all manners and combinations of events become possible. Like the great detective, we may link into these and so participate interactively in the construction of this hyper-real imaginary.

Moreover, like Holmes, the assassin is a figure set up to enact mastery of the city: where the detective's rational mind pervades the interlinked networks of urban life through extensive knowledge, the assassin masters the environment through physical prowess, secret knowledge, and access to forbidden routes. Moving outside the law and ethical demands that constrain others, the assassin is unencumbered by and independent from the social, economic and legal networks of urban space, and moves even outside the laws of physics, climbing facades, traversing rooftops, jumping on and off trains, carriages, and omnibuses, and being, even when immersed in a crowd, hidden and anonymous. In fact, the anonymity feature is a crucial element of the gameplay which, much like the x-ray-esque 'eagle vision' which highlights allies and foes in different colours and even through urban structures, enables us to navigate the city confidently and on multiple levels. Other features, such as the small hexagon which indicates the direction of and distance to our next objective, the small topographic schema which provides a map with which to our relation to objects and people, similarly use panoptic schematics to enhance and facilitate navigation through the city. Together with Evie and Jacob's skill set and weapons, these features enable us to, as the game itself puts it, 'conquer' the city through their movements and actions.

By re-creating Victorian London as a historical playground to be roamed, explored, and appropriated through our movements, the game assimilates the politics of parkour, created by Sebastian Foucan and David Belle in the 1980s Parisian suburbs. An 'extreme and subversive engagement' with the urban landscape and 'radical inhabitation' which 'makes use of the built environment in original and engaging ways that rely on a deeply reciprocal relationship with' it, seeking to challenge and redefine our 'experience of embodiment and presence',⁷¹ parkour

⁷⁰ Makai, p. 11. Consider *The Three Musketeers* (1844), R.L. Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1882), Anthony Hope's *The Prisoner of Zenda* (1894) and Emma Orczy's *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (1905), as well as the fiction of Rider Haggard and G.A. Henty.

⁷¹ Maria Daskalaki, Alexandra Starab and Miguel Imasa, 'The 'Parkour Organisation': inhabitation of corporate spaces', *Culture and Organization*, 14:1 (2008), 49–64, p. 51.

endeavours to re-imbue urban spaces with a sense of agency and purpose through a ‘dialogical relationship between the built environment and [the traceur’s] bodies and thus, challenge their subject positions’.⁷² Traceurs (literally someone who draws a line or path) or free runners climb, jump or somersault over, across, and against urban structures, traversing urban space in ways not pre-designed architecturally or culturally. They effectively adapt Massey’s notion of the trajectory as actively creating space into ways of forming a personal, embodied, and rebellious relationship with urban space, designed to generate ‘the feeling of having a stake in a particular environment, even though one cannot claim legal ownership over it’.⁷³ Like our avatar in *Syndicate*, free runners re-claim urban space from its pre-designed functions and regulations through a ‘socially symbolic act, a form of resistance to cityscapes that alienate, restrict and subjugate’⁷⁴ and to ‘question the ideological parameters and disciplining structures of the socially produced, power-saturated and environmentally pathological city space’.⁷⁵ Through this, they ‘create a parallel city’⁷⁶, ‘of movement and free play within and against the city of obstacles and inhibitions’.⁷⁷ It is telling both that Ubisoft promoted the game through a real-life montage of traceurs in costume,⁷⁸ and that the behind-the-scenes video reveals the many locations and instances where London’s regulations curtailed the endeavour.⁷⁹ However, in the game world at least, we may freely engage with a virtual Victorian London in ways not open to us in either the historical or the contemporary city, and feel a sense of resistance and ownership and of ‘having a stake in a particular environment, even though one cannot claim legal ownership over it’.⁸⁰

If not in the real world, in *Syndicate*, we may walk around and into Westminster Palace undetected and unimpeded by security protocols, or climb the building and discover its detailed,

⁷² Lieven Ameel and Sirpa Tani, ‘Parkour: creating loose spaces? *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 94 :1 (2012) 17–30, p. 18.

⁷³ Ameel and Tani, p.18.

⁷⁴ Daskalai et al, p. 57.

⁷⁵ Michael Atkinson, ‘Parkour, anarcho-environmentalism, and poiesis’, *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 33: 2 (2009), 169–194, p. 175.

⁷⁶ Ameel and Tani, p. 18.

⁷⁷ Paula Geyh, ‘Urban free flow: a poetics of parkour’, *M/C Journal. A Journal of Media and Culture* 9: 3 (2006), n.p.

⁷⁸ devinsupertramp, *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate Meets Parkour in Real Life!* Video, YouTube, posted by Devin Graham, 7 July 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HFRscoOkkb8> (Accessed 15 February 2020).

⁷⁹ TEAMSUPERTRAMP, *Behind The Scenes - Assassin’s Creed Syndicate Meets Parkour in Real Life*, Video, YouTube, posted by Devin Graham, 6 July 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c2dlOR4CdR4> (Accessed 15 February 2020).

ornamental architecture up close and in spaces so high up they cannot be seen from below. Perching on its highest point, we may unlock access to the borough's embedded sequences and puzzles while gaining a comprehensive, panoptic overview over our surroundings and enacting a key feature of the *AC* franchise: the Leap of Faith. When the player reaches certain high points in the game space, the game slows and the 'camera' provides us with a 360° panoramic shot of the surroundings accompanied by a reverential, emotive musical score that suggests this is a near-spiritual experience in which a special relationship with the environment is formed. The player then launches Evie or Jacob off this point in a free fall, with outstretched arms conveys a feeling of dedication, power, and self-confidence.⁸¹ The pose, according to Felix Marlo Flor of the Ubisoft creative team, enacts the credo that 'video games must feel for the player as if everything is under his control' (p. 183).

As such, it is a steampunk video game which re-presents Victorian London as a heterotopic space of play and exploration, in which 'history is your playground'. *Syndicate* re-scales and simplifies Victorian socio-economic and political networks as it does its city in order to offer a functional, playable experience. It invites players to form a unique relationship with a neo-Victorian London driven by their agency and allows them to discover city and era in tandem as an interactive adventure. Virtual game spaces 'can represent the past as it was, or as it never was, but they can also represent how players wish to remember it, revisiting or revising the past to make players yearn for it, and they can offer players the possibility of not only *being* there but of *doing* things there – of *playing the past*.'⁸² This embodied experience may foster new relationships with that past as mediated through urban space because by placing the player in midst of both space and narrative and configuring the latter as the direct outcome of a player's actions, 'games allow players to better understand the notion of agency in human history and to root out a deterministic image of the past.'⁸³ Through its spatialising of agency, power, and the alternative pathways of history into Victorian London, *Syndicate* puts the fundamentals of steampunk itself into play.

⁸⁰ Ameel and Tani, p. 18.

⁸¹ Davies, p. 183.

⁸² Zach Whalen and Laurie N. Taylor, *Playing the Past: History and Nostalgia in Video Games* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2008), p. 27.

⁸³ Konrad Wojnowski, 'Simulational Realism - Playing as Trying to Remember', *Art History & Criticism*, 14: 1 (2018), 86-98, p. 95.

4. HERE BE LYCANS: STEAMPUNK LONDON IN *THE ORDER 1886*

Unlike *Syndicate* with its double frame narrative and loosely intersecting sequences of missions, *The Order 1886* (2015), a third-person action-adventure game developed by Ready at Dawn, is more stringently story-driven. It features one linear narrative and gameplay sequences which transition seamlessly into cinematic or cut scenes. While its impressive production value and cinematic aesthetic have been lauded, players also criticised the lack of free roaming and exploration. Nonetheless, I posit that the game, with its detailed cityscape, grounded period setting and style, steampunk impulses, and narrative twists, fully explores the possibilities of a heterotopic steampunk London, and that its re-calibrated urban environment is crucial in assessing and experiencing the potential of steampunk itself.

The game's premise is that king Arthur's Order of Knights has over centuries fought a genetically divergent 'half-breed' race of shape shifters, their lives prolonged by the healing Blackwater elixir derived from the Holy Grail. We encounter this Order in the era of the Industrial Revolution, in a 'Neo-Victorian' London 'braced with the scaffolding of a coming modernity', in which mankind seems to have achieved dominance over the darker forces of nature (here, lycans and, later, vampires) through the mastery of emergent technologies: electricity, railways, airships, experimental new weapons, wireless communication.⁸⁴ However, in midst of this new age, a rebellious uprising originating in that epicentre of disenfranchisement, Whitechapel, is rising up against the United India Company, a fictionalised extension of the East India Company.

The Order here synthesises popular markers of the Victorian era such as Medievalism, Gothic monstrosity, social unrest, and colonialism and projects them into a steampunked London, perceived and mobilised as a socio-historical nexus and potent memory figure in which the real and the fictional intertwine and which can support and accommodate an unending variety of narratives.⁸⁵ Much like *Syndicate*, *The Order* recognises Victorian London as 'truly the centre of the world in the late 1800s', but unlike the former, it realises the city's potency as widely legible memory figure to construct an 'alternate history — a recognisable London, slightly ahead

⁸⁴ Kirk Ellis and Ru Weerasuriya, *The Blackwater Archives. The Art of The Order: 1886* (San Francisco: Bluecanvas, Inc. 2015), p. 6.

of its time' (p. 133). *The Blackwater Archives* (2015), an art book companion to the game, illustrates the developers' commitment to 'historical authenticity' in creating an alternative setting in order to 'heighten the game experience' and so facilitate immersion in an 'alternative yet still recognisable Victorian reality' (p. 6, p. 8). 'This,' claims Kirk Ellis, 'is the kind of universe video games can manufacture better than any other medium, even cinema' (p. 8). Here, character designs, gadgetry, weapons, and clothing, or the urban environment itself become legible objects, such as the pieces of armour incorporated into the knights' uniforms which hint at the Order's long history and a specific cultural context. Through its objects and textures, as well as its cityscape, the game provides strong visual storytelling that is not supplemented by any frame narrative.

Indeed, the game begins *in medias res* with a flash forward into the later part of the story, but we have no way of knowing this yet. We emerge into the perspective of Grayson, or Sir Galahad, a Knight of the Order being tortured and held in a dungeon. Without additional schematics or x-ray modes and nothing to guide us but the environment and the dialogues, we gain knowledge of the setting and the gameplay little by little as Galahad breaks out. While it gives no narrative context, the sequence promises an action-focused, immersive perspective in which we must actively interpret setting and plot elements which are both familiar and steampunked. This is also exemplified by the sudden emergence onto a roof of Westminster Palace which acts as a surprising twist, yet provides a lot of context all at once. The sequence acts as both functional introduction to the gameplay and tonal promise. This game seeks to provide a ground-level experience of urban space, even if that is disorienting. Its steampunked space is produced quite literally through our journey through it without extraneous clues or additional perspectives. In so doing, it foregrounds a hermeneutic reading of virtual space against our collective memory of Victorian London, but also provides new and unfamiliar markers for us to discover.

Accordingly, when we next start the game at its narrative beginning and look out over Galahad's shoulder out onto a steampunked Mayfair and London cityscape, we encounter a multitude of towering spires stretching into the distance, neo-Gothic skyscrapers rising up to and

⁸⁵ *Blackwater Archives*, p. 133.

above the iconic dome of St Paul's Cathedral, and zeppelins floating in the sky.⁸⁶ This London, whose creators grounded its aesthetic in a research trip in which architectures, surfaces, and textures were systematically catalogued, is clearly marked by steampunk impulses.⁸⁷ Evocatively conceived as 'Victorian Blade Runner', its steampunk London overlays the Victorian imaginary with a new, cyberpunk aesthetic and so creates interesting connections to its sister genre (p. 139). But what characterises this 'Blade Runner aesthetic' and how does it re-configure the city? Let us consider the cyberpunk urban aesthetic and its implications.

4. 1 CYBERPUNK, 2019: HYPER-CITIES, URBAN FUTURES

'My first city', says William Gibson, 'was Conan Doyle's London [...], a vast, cozy, populous mechanism, a comforting clockwork'.⁸⁸ To deem *fin de siècle* London 'cozy' and 'comforting' in its 'assumed orderliness and safety' is certainly the privilege of hindsight, but it is interesting that Gibson should locate his earliest understanding of cities as 'vast, multilayered engines' in the Victorian metropolis, considering that his work would launch the cyberpunk genre and lastingly influence our collective imaginary of urban futures and hyper-cities.⁸⁹ Long after Dickens, Doyle, and Doré, Gibson considers Victorian London as the original metropolis. Once, H. G. Wells's *When the Sleeper Wakes* (1898-1899) had envisioned London as the mega-city of the future, but after the First World War, this imaginary shifted towards 1920s New York City, then the world's most populous metropolitan area.⁹⁰ Conan Doyle himself had in 1914 remarked on the city's scale and 'big future', and in 1927, Fritz Lang's seminal film *Metropolis*, with its towering modernistic hyper-city seemingly anticipating the art deco skyscrapers of Manhattan (the Chrysler Building (1930), Empire State Building (1931), and Rockefeller Center (1939)), came to encapsulate and dominate both utopian and dystopian visions of the future

⁸⁶ SHN Survival Horror Network, *The Order: 1886 Full HD PS4 Longplay [1080p/60fps] Walkthrough Gameplay Lets Play No Commentary*. Video, YouTube, posted 23 February 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WI_dnwhn9s0&t=1451s (Accessed 15 February 2020), 00:12:14. Ready At Dawn, *The Order 1886* (2015), developed by Ru Weerasuriya, PlayStation 4, Sony Computer Entertainment.

⁸⁷ *Blackwater Archives*, p. 133.

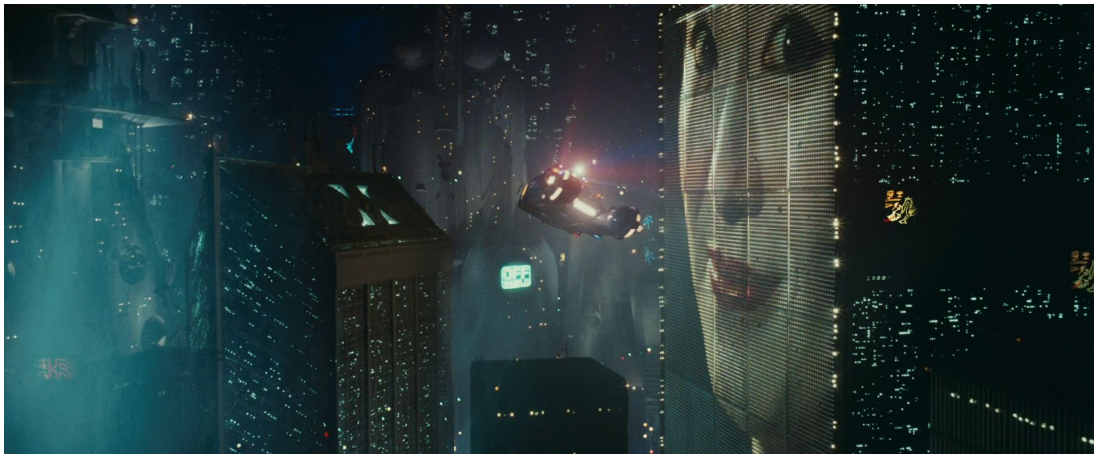
⁸⁸ William Gibson, 'Life in the Meta City', *Scientific American*, posted September 2011, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/life-in-a-meta-city/?redirect=1> (Accessed 7th March 2020).

⁸⁹ *Scientific American*, n. p.

⁹⁰ Dobrasczyk, p. 106.

megalopolis.⁹¹ It is with the advent of cyberpunk, most notably through *Neuromancer* (1984) and Ridley Scott's classic film *Blade Runner* (1982), that this imaginary was lastingly transformed for the computer age, and to the point that Gibson, in a 2003 novel, simply used 'Blade Runnered' as a verb.⁹² As Stephen Rowley notes:

Blade Runner demands studying because it has become so entrenched as the definitive screen depiction of the nightmare future city. Its imagery has become the standard visual iconography for the science fiction metropolis: super-tall buildings; poorly-lit streets and alleys; smog; rain; heavy industry belching fire into the sky; neon advertisements; overcrowding; ethnically diverse (that is, non-white) crowds; eclectic punk-inspired costumes and hairstyles; retrofitted buildings of varying architectural styles; scavenged props, and so on.⁹³



5: Screenshot from *Blade Runner* (1984)

Since its release, scholars such as Harvey, Jameson, Soja, or Massey have used the film as a reference point in their work on postmodern urbanisms,⁹⁴ and thereby enshrined *Blade Runner*'s

⁹¹ Cannadine, p. 51.

⁹² William Gibson, *Pattern Recognition* (London: Penguin Random House, 2003), p. 146; Will Brooker, 'Introduction: 2019 Vision', in *The Blade Runner Experience. The Legacy of a Science Fiction Classic*, ed. by Will Brooker (London & New York: Wallflower Press, 2005), pp. 13-24, p. 13.

⁹³ Stephen Rowley, 'False LA: Blade Runner and the Nightmare City' in *The Blade Runner Experience. The Legacy of a Science Fiction Classic*, ed. by Will Brooker (London & New York: Wallflower Press, 2005), pp. 203-212, p. 250.

⁹⁴ Brooker, p. 160.

2019 Los Angeles as the defining urban imaginary of the future megalopolis. The film actualises New York's modernist aesthetics in Los Angeles's urban sprawl, and, like cyberpunk at large, fuses markers of the noir genre with science fiction impulses and 1980s consumerism. Our first vision of future L.A. is a horizon-less vastness of light and belching chimneys, hinting at a limitless sprawl and immediately foreclosing the usually ordering perspective of the panoptic view. The camera pans across the pyramidal Tyrell Corporation and delves into a realm of bottomless verticality serving as canvas for huge, digital advertisements, the image of a geisha promoting Coca Cola conflating Orientalism and consumerism among this labyrinth of towering skyscrapers.⁹⁵ As Martin Dodge and Rob Kitchin describe:

In the urban cores, space is at a premium, the cityscape is corporate, highly centralised and extremely dense both structurally and in terms of population. The value of space forces development both upwards and underground, to produce a vertical spectrum of stylised, mirrored, postmodern architecture — a riot of glass and steel.⁹⁶

Below what Dobraszczyk has described as 'containers of capitalist flow and elitism' characterised by 'hermetic isolation' and a 'visual dominance' that affects all citizens, is a densely populated underbelly defined by a heterogeneous amalgam of neon lights, traffic, street vendors, and small businesses, a retro-futuristic, cluttered, and anarchistic counterpoint to the sleekness above.⁹⁷ The city is stratified into extremes, a multi-layered matrix polarised between the rich and wealthy, located in the lofty, neo-modernist spires, and the anarchic sprawl at street level, where the disenfranchised must reclaim any space not yet appropriated and carve out alternative forms of urban life.⁹⁸ Far away from the monolithic, isolated towers whose sleek design bleeds into the smog-filled sky and where we may locate a pervasive sense of doom, we find the retro-fitted, exposed underpinnings of the city (cables, ventilation units), 'the odd mechanical devices needed to keep human life palatable, counterpoints to a smoothly-operating

⁹⁵ Dobraszczyk notes how, when skyscrapers were first introduced, they were likened in the public imagination to the buildings of ancient civilisations, for example Egypt, Mesopotamia; p. 110. Notably, Tyrell Corp is a pyramid, and *The Difference Engine* also configures the Statistics Bureau as one.; Timothy Yu, 'Oriental Cities, Postmodern Futures: "Naked Lunch, Blade Runner", and "Neuromancer"', MELUS, 33:4 (2008), 45-71.

⁹⁶ Martin Dodge and Rob Kitchin, *Mapping Cyberspace* (London: Routledge, 2017), p. 195.

⁹⁷ Dobraszczyk, p. 106-107.

⁹⁸ Paul M. Sammon, *Future Noir: The Making of Blade Runner* (New York: HarperCollins, 2017 [1996]).

exterior.’⁹⁹ No sleek modernism here, but, in set designer Syd Meade’s own words, ‘a curious accumulation of detail, a heuristic growth of odds and ends’¹⁰⁰ grounded in a materialistic aesthetic that functions as a heterotopic other to the city above: ‘The postmodern aesthetic of *Blade Runner* is the result of recycling, fusion of levels, discontinuous signifiers, explosion of boundaries, and erosion.’¹⁰¹ Through its visual density, *Blade Runner* finds an effective shorthand for an urban future characterised by a depletion of resources and living space, where overcrowding, social fragmentation, and environmental catastrophe converge into a largely dysfunctional city, constantly on the verge of collapse.¹⁰² As such, it re-configures the vision of Lang’s *Metropolis* for the neoliberal 1980s.

⁹⁹ Aaron Barlow, ‘Reel Toads and Imaginary Cities: Philip K. Dick, *Blade Runner*, and the Contemporary Science Fiction Movie’, in *The Blade Runner Experience. The Legacy of a Science Fiction Classic*, ed. by Will Brooker (London & New York: Wallflower Press, 2005), pp. 63-82, p. 68.

¹⁰⁰ Sammon, p. 89.

¹⁰¹ Giuliana Bruno, ‘Ramble City: Postmodernism and “Blade Runner”’, *October*, 41 (1987) pp. 61-74, p. 6.

¹⁰² Rowley, p. 252.



6: Screenshots from *Blade Runner* (1984)

Blade Runner's L.A. is an oblique vastness of urban space endlessly stretching into both the horizontal and the vertical, no longer legible. Its cityscape contextualises characters' choices and movements among an alienating, almost delirious chaos where even flying police cars in their lofty isolation may not attain a panoptic view and remain immersed in a horizon-less megacity.¹⁰³ In *Neuromancer*, in typical cyberpunk manner, global corporations like Tyrell Corp in *Blade Runner*, take the place of nations, their ruthless capitalism exiling the disenfranchised into a life of 'hustling' on the fringes of the city. Tokyo's Chiba City, where Case lives an outlaw life, is 'like a deranged experiment in social Darwinism' and configured through metaphors of material technology, clutter, and waste (p. 8). The opening line conjures up a sense of synthetics: 'The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel' (p. 3). In both

stories, we find postmodern heterogeneity and an uneasy composite of cultures and styles, extreme stratification into a dominating vertical and boundless horizontal axis, and a world in which incessant over-production and urbanisation have overwhelmed and destroyed nature. Cyberpunk's overpowering cityscapes dictate flow and movement in disorienting, constricting, and dominating ways, and only the invisible flows of data in the 'bodiless exultation of cyberspace' seem to provide a liberating experience of free roaming — not unlike game spaces today (p. 6).

Blade Runner's L.A. is extrapolated from contemporary concerns, and inspired by real urban metropolises (New York City's skyline, L.A.'s urban sprawl, the neon signage of Tokyo, the density and texture of Hong Kong's Kowloon Walled City)¹⁰⁴ It remains a simulacrum, 'a hyperreal looking for an unattainable reality (a history)' which, in the real 2019, has yet to manifest in the West even though cities like Beijing or Shanghai have been likened to *Blade Runner's* L.A..¹⁰⁵

However, as recent cyberpunk blockbusters show, the film's visual language is not only as potent as ever, but moving into mainstream culture, as what were once markers of a niche genre have become widely legible in the internet age.¹⁰⁶ *Blade Runner 2049*, the long-awaited sequel to the classic, *Ghost in the Shell*, a Hollywood adaptation of Mamoru Oshii's seminal anime (1995), and the Netflix series *Altered Carbon*, adapted from Richard Morgan's novel (2002) all premiered in 2017, and are notably indebted to the imagery of the cyberpunk city. *Ghost in the Shell's* Japanese New Port City had, in the anime version, been modelled on Hong Kong and its counterpart was filmed there. It reads as an augmented, stylish hyper-city of towering skyscrapers and oversized advertisements, now hologram projections in neon colours, of inter-level highways, canals, and a bright, composite night life at street level. *Altered Carbon*

¹⁰³ Barlow, p. 67.

¹⁰⁴ Kowloon Walled City (1956-1993) was a notoriously densely populated and largely self-governed settlement in Hong Kong, housing between 35,000 and 50,000 people on a 6,4 acre site; Dobraszcyk p. 175.; Ian Lambot, 'Self-Build and Change: Kowloon Walled City, Hong Kong', *Architectural Design*, 87:5 (2017), 122-129. Ian Lambot and Greg Girard, *City of Darkness: Life in Kowloon Walled City* (Pewsey: Watermark Publications, 1993); Takayuki Tatsumi, 'Transpacific Cyberpunk: Transgeneric Interactions between Prose, Cinema, and Manga', *Arts*, 7:9 (2018), n.p..

¹⁰⁵ Barlow, p. 68; Dobraszcyk reflects on how, in 2013, an image of an advertisement projected onto the smog-shrouded facade of a skyscraper in Beijing prompted international readings and marketing of the city as real life *Blade Runner*; Dobraszcyk, p. 7, Barlow, p. 68, Graham, p. 395.

¹⁰⁶ *Blade Runner* failed at the box office, but a later Director's Cut version gathered a fan following.

re-presents San Francisco as Bay City, an urban jungle of towering spires connected by highways and bridges, petering out in the sky above until only the ultra-rich are left in lofty solitude quite literally above the clouds, while those on the margins live in graffiti-lined containers on the Golden Gate Bridge. These adaptations all reproduce a now-classic aesthetic of the cyberpunk city. *Blade Runner 2049*, directed by Denis Villeneuve and set 30 years later, is rooted in its predecessor's visual language, but also extrapolates from it and so is the only recent production to re-think and develop the cyberpunk aesthetic for the present. It imagines the cyberpunk city walled in against floods and complemented by radioactive deserts, extensive junkyards, and empty wastelands: 'Mother Nature is dead, having lost the war against Capitalism'.¹⁰⁷ Here, the mega-city is characterised not just by clutter, density, and disorientation, but also by its colonising and exploiting of spaces outside the city in service to it, and by prominent markers of climate catastrophe.

We see here how cyberpunk hyper-cities extrapolate from and express real urban and social tensions through a dream-like, futuristic imagery. As Stephen Graham posits, 'they offer future allegories to act as a lens to look "back" at the contemporary, highlighting the political and ideological tensions within contemporary life'.¹⁰⁸ As such, they act as imagined heterotopias, counter-spaces to the present in which its concerns are translated into an allegorical shorthand of hyperbole and spatial exaggeration. Urban space itself becomes cyberpunk's primary vehicle of defamiliarization, reflection, and critique as the hyper-city becomes a distorted doppelgänger to the present.

Where *Assassins Creed: Syndicate* offers up the modern Victorian metropolis for play and exploration, the cyberpunk city refuses to yield to the ordering logic of either the detective figure, like Sherlock Holmes, or the fantasy of the free runner or assassin. We may draw our own trajectories through this hyper-city, but we cannot gain a deeper understanding of it. We may, through our journeys, link into the complex matrix of ongoing networks of traffic, trade, or data flows, but the cyberpunk city remains a simulacrum without history and often forecloses meaningful understandings of what we are linking into. However, cyberpunk's visual language acts as a potent narrative environment legible to a wide audience and its mechanism may

¹⁰⁷ Tanya Lapointe and Denis Villeneuve, *The Art and Soul of Blade Runner 2049* (London: Titan Books, 2017), p. 45.

¹⁰⁸ Stephen Graham, 'Vertical Noir' *City*, 20:3 (2016), 389-406, p. 395.

therefore be employed in constructing other speculative and retro-speculative scenarios, not least in video games.

4.2 TEXTURE AS STORYTELLING

I have argued that *The Order*'s steampunk London must be read and interpreted in the absence of any other frame narrative. Before we examine how the game implements a cyberpunk visual shorthand in steampunking the city, let us consider how retro-speculation can shape narrative environments and how fantastic game spaces without firstspace counterparts may become storytelling devices in and of themselves. As Henry Jenkins notes:

[E]nvironmental storytelling creates the preconditions for an immersive narrative experience in up to four different ways: spatial stories can evoke preexisting narrative associations; they can provide a staging ground on which narrative events are enacted; they may embed narrative information within their mises-en-scène; or they provide resources for emergent narratives.¹⁰⁹

Let us consider Rapture, the underwater city of *BioShock* (2007) and *BioShock 2* (2010), the floating city of Columbia from *BioShock Infinite* (2013), and Dunwall from *Dishonored* (2012) as examples of retro-speculative narrative environments that perform important functions as game spaces.

¹⁰⁹ Henry Jenkins, 'Narrative Spaces', in *Space Time Play. Computer Games, Architecture, and Urbanism: the Next Level*, ed. by Friedrich von Borries, Steffen P. Walz, and Matthias Böttger (Berlin: Birkhäuser Verlag, 2007) pp. 56-60, p. 57.



7: Concept Art for *BioShock*

BioShock's Rapture is a city is envisioned as a 1940s business tycoon's underwater utopia for scientists and leaders of industry, out of reach of the controlling arms of government. The player approaches Rapture as an outsider and 'fills in the background narrative through exploration, through observation, and by listening to abandoned audio journals scattered throughout Rapture' — that is, by engaging with its environment.¹¹⁰ Rapture's urban space is characterised by art deco sky scrapers, neon light, chrome, and glass, a 'cohesive look and feel' echoing the optimism of 1930s New York City through invocation of its prominent landmarks (the Empire State Building, the Chrysler Building, and the Rockefeller Center) (p. 190). However, as we, as players, journey through Rapture, we discover the behind the city's self-fashioned aesthetics of grandeur and innovation, its utopian project has failed, and that hedonism and social irresponsibility have caused a civil war. Paradoxically, its half-abandoned dystopia is also supported through its aesthetic, namely by alluding to the social, political, and economic failures of the 1920s and 1930s. As Carstocea notes, the game's lighting references Hollywood noir stylistics, which in turn are rooted in German Expressionist films such as Lang's *Metropolis* with its towering city and portrait of the 'impact of industrialized, urban modernity on the multitudes who are left behind in a competitive, capital-driven, and machine-driven environment' (p. 190).

¹¹⁰ Carstocea, p. 190.

However, what he seems to overlook is that Rapture's skyscrapers, doused in a moody underwater turquoise pierced with neon lights, are also remarkably reminiscent of *Blade Runner*'s cyberpunk atmosphere, especially as a hyper-city collapsed under its own extreme social stratification. The game therefore references a variety of legible aesthetics, ranging from art deco to cyberpunk, to invoke a retro-futuristic setting and narrative through the use of texture: 'Rapture is therefore not just a world, it's an argument, drawing inspiration from a long tradition of progressive ideological parables and allegories' to portray an explorable game space in which a 'once-gleaming metropolis' descends into chaos because it has 'attempted to elide the responsibilities of building a cohesive social structure that tempers the more violent trends of unchecked development' (p. 190).

BioShock Infinite also uses its retro-futuristic game space as a narrative environment and extended argument. Its floating city in the sky, Columbia, is characterised by 'extreme architectural pastiche', accumulating a 'veritable cornucopia of late nineteenth-century buildings to create a 'deliberately nostalgic feel'.¹¹¹ With ornate airships floating around it, Columbia is a (deceptively utopian) steampunk vision of 'the memory of America that people think existed but never quite did', and as such another (fantastic) simulacrum of a city of memory (p. 83). The formation of an alternative society in the clouds also mirrors the cyberpunk trope in which an elite removes itself beyond the reach of the society below. Again the urban texture, with its memorials, propagandist posters, and palatial architecture, is mobilised as a storytelling device which here conveys an ideological statement, and one which the player's exploration increasingly calls into question. Beneath Columbia's bucolic, utopian aesthetic, the player soon discovers a city saturated by xenophobic nationalism and white supremacy 'modelled on the segregationist past of the United States', and which is nonetheless dependent on the exploitation of a non-white labour force.¹¹² Here, too, the steampunk game world becomes an argument about and comment on (American) history and identity, whose aspects and contradictions the player may explore as we move through the game narrative. Its retro-speculative setting attains meaning through leveraging a specific aesthetic collage, which here is literalised into the fantastic, retro-

¹¹¹ Dobraszczyk, p. 83.

¹¹² Rick Elmore, "'The bindings are there as a safeguard": Sovereignty and Political Decisions in *BioShock Infinite*', in *BioShock and Philosophy: Irrational Game, Rational Book*, ed. by Luke Cuddy (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2015) pp. 97-105, p. 100-101.

speculative city as game space itself.

Whereas the underwater and floating cities also allow the player to explore the city's verticality and layers in unusual ways, *Dishonoured* creates its city of Dunwall as a claustrophobic, domineering, and plague-ridden space in which our avatar, royal bodyguard CorvoAttano, is framed for murder and becomes a vengeful assassin. The city is explicitly modelled on nineteenth-century London as a 'world city' with 'a historic past' familiar to European and American audiences, in which different eras could become aesthetically mixed, and inspired by Doré's illustrations, John Atkinson Grimshaw's paintings, and contemporary photographs of the 'London particular'.¹¹³ Dunwall is then infused with aesthetics of Victorian London, such as obscuring fog, textures of brick and metal, or urban canyons, but markers of control and regulation from today's metropolis also inspired a sense of oppression: barbed wire, gated control zones, guard cabins, spiked iron chains, bells, CCTV, door blockers, and signage were assimilated as mechanisms of regulation. (00:13:42). Where *Syndicate* strives to create a cityscape in which the player may circumvent such mechanisms which, as we have seen from the fan video, are ever-present in present day London,¹¹⁴ *Dishonoured* incorporates them and finds itself 'clearly inspired by our urban experience in London': 'Everything looks under control'.¹¹⁵ In combination with the stark perspectives, vertical re-scaling, expressionistic light, and a conceptual design that favours a murky blue night with isolated sources of light, Dunwall may also be considered a 'Blade Runnered' city, not least because these visual impulses are designed to create a dystopian atmosphere. Again, the game space is tailored towards the demands of the narrative. Its urban texture is legible as an oppressive environment in which the assassin, as outsider, is not given the freedom to master the city, but must evade rabid plague victims, mechanistically enforced police, and a city-wide conspiracy.

Let us again consider Jenkins' claim that 'environmental storytelling creates the preconditions for an immersive narrative experience' by making use of our collective knowledge and 'narrative associations'. In retro-speculative game spaces, architecture may act as genre marker and engage our transmedia competencies (*BioShock*'s Rapture), or the game space may

¹¹³ GDC, *World of Dishonoured: Raising Dunwall*, Video, YouTube, posted 22 February 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LOQDbSvpFtY> (Accessed 15 February 2020).

¹¹⁴ devinsupertramp.

¹¹⁵ GDC, 00:14:19.

enable (*Syndicate*) or foreclose (*Dishonoured*) specific actions and movements. Their urban textures yield important clues about the game narrative and serve to either reinforce or subvert the ideology presented through urban designs. As such, they not only become vital storytelling devices, but also arguments in and of themselves.

4.3 BLADE RUNNERING THE VICTORIAN CITY



8: Concept Art for *The Order 1886*

The Order's synthesis of the *Blade Runner* aesthetic serves a similar purpose: A layered skyline, hues of black, blue, and grey, neon advertisements, rain and smog which the electric lights barely penetrate, all complement a vertically expanded Victorian London populated by heavy Gothic-brutalist skyscrapers, 'mooring towers and lighthouses', and urban canyons, 'inspired by the height and scale of *Blade Runner*' and meant to import the aesthetic's 'dark tones, crowded streets, and oppressive atmosphere'.¹¹⁶ By re-infusing the Victorian metropolis with the well-established visual cypher of 'the *Blade Runner* city', here expressed through scale, verticality, and atmosphere, *The Order* both recognises and re-imagines London as the original hyper-city.

The aesthetic suggests, in a way that resonates powerfully with established Victorian and neo-Victorian imaginaries, that this is a city whose architectural stratification mirrors the gap between wealth and poverty, that below its confident grandeur hide not only the clumsy physical urban trappings such as wires, constructions sites, and elevated train tracks, or the barrels, papers, advertisements, and signage we encounter everywhere, but also a shabby underbelly — here, the East End. The cyberpunk visual language re-encodes and highlights what is already true or imagined about the Victorian city, while also hinting at an alternative history we may explore as players of the game.

Considering that the urban environment serves as an integral storytelling device and replaces a frame narrative, and that the gameplay is immersive and linear, not episodic and flexible as in *Syndicate*, I want to provide a close reading of several important settings in this game and examine how they relate to the narrative that unfolds as we journey through them.

¹¹⁶ *Blackwater Archives*, p. 139.

4.3.1 MAYFAIR



9: Concept Art for *The Order 1886* by Ethan Ayer

At first, we follow and navigate Galahad through Mayfair, marked by wealth and progress, moving from shortcuts through back alleys and side streets into a palatial Regent Street flanked by an elevated train track. A rich texture of advertisements and signage, and railway bridges visible in the distance create a sense of multiple layers. This is a vision of the real, rapid urban development in the 1860s magnified to cyberpunk proportions. Here, we meet fellow knights Igraine and the Marquis de Lafayette to combat escaped ‘Bedlamites’ and chase lycans, not as outlaw assassins, but with the authority of the enforcing agent. This also allows us to explore the urban environment through hidden routes and unconventional pathways or to enter forbidden and dangerous zones alongside the mundane urban settings.

We return to Westminster Palace, housing the medieval splendour of the Order of Knights including the famous round table and hiding in its cellars a steampunk laboratory in which Nikola Tesla builds gadgets we may use and explore in the game’s version of James Bond’s visits to ‘Q’. The space exemplifies how the game fundamentally re-designs iconic or formative places in the Victorian city to reflect and support the narrative and its backstory. Here, Galahad’s mentor Mallory comes into conflict with the Order’s highest authority over whether or

not to answer a rebellion in the East End when the organisation's purpose is fighting lycans, but Mallory obtains a tentative permission from Alastair d'Argyll to investigate in Whitechapel. So far, the game is configured as an interactive playground in which the steampunk aesthetic comes to life, featuring a familiar neo-Victorian counter-factual and counter-fictional collage in which Charles Darwin's expeditions are funded by the United India Company and Arthur Conan Doyle is a police commissioner. This impression of swashbuckling adventure with dashes of espionage and the supernatural continues in our first visit to Whitechapel.

4.3.2 'THE EPICENTRE OF OUR RECENT CONUNDRUMS'¹¹⁷: WHITECHAPEL

Like *Anno Dracula* or *Whitechapel Gods*, *The Order* configures the East End as its 'cauldron of resistance' where the margins of society are evocatively concentrated. This 'breeding ground for rebellion', gloomy, ramshackle and decrepit, is 'inspired by many celebrated authors of the time, most importantly Charles Dickens' and his 'almost palpable' descriptions.¹¹⁸ As such, it mobilises familiar Victorian and neo-Victorian Gothic stereotypes as a resonant backdrop for gameplay specific to the area. We engage with multilevel spaces for combat in which the 'shoddy renovation' and 'rundown state of buildings' become obstacles to engage with or provide new pathways, for example through a labyrinth of rooms, alleyways, narrow staircases, warehouses, courtyards, and so on (p. 194). Unlike in *Syndicate*, the absence of navigational interfaces and x-ray vision simulates an experience of urban guerrilla warfare in which the player must fight a rebel ambush, find cover, or eliminate snipers, thereby providing an immersive experience of 'conquering' city space at ground level. Here, the game space enables a specific experience, whereas the London Hospital, a visual amalgam of historical and fictional influences assembled to maximum Gothic effect, is designed to provide clues about the mission through objects we must read and interpret (p. 200). Its clues propel the narrative forward by hinting at a planned rebel attack on a United India Company airship.

¹¹⁷ SHN Survival Horror Network, Longplay, 00:36:06.

¹¹⁸ *Blackwater Archives*, p. 191, 192.

4.3.3. AIRSHIP



10: Screenshot of *The Order 1886*

In the next, quintessentially steampunk game sequence, we board and hijack a United India Company airship, the ‘Agamemnon’, floating high above London to prevent a rebel attack on Lord Hastings, the Company’s chairman and Lord of the Exchequer in parliament.¹¹⁹ Initially, this episode conjures up the heroic bravado of adventure and special agents through an intrinsically steampunk setting, adding another level to the city as well as providing an experience unique to the game. Having dropped onto the ship’s hull in mid-air and climbed inside, the knights must commandeer the ship by evading the Company’s mercenary guards, gaining control of the cockpit, reconnoitring, identifying, and eliminating rebel impostors. However, with the detonation of a bomb and some new information, the sequence turns from a heroic rescue into disaster when we must evacuate the airship before it crashes into and sets on fire the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park. The shift in tone is effectively translated into the disorienting, burning airship wreck and ruined palace, re-shaping the cityscape and the narrative ahead in tandem. The wreck itself is configured as a game space through which Galahad must navigate and engage with, only to find his mentor dead in the debris. Here, failure and catastrophe are not merely try-and-fail cycles to be played through and mastered but part of the narrative itself, differentiating the game from *Syndicate*.

¹¹⁹ In reference to the last ship built by the historical East India Company in 1855 before its discontinuation in 1876 adds a specific resonance to the steampunk airship, hinting at a colonial context.

4.3.4 WESTMINSTER BRIDGE



11: Concept Art for *The Order 1886* by Nestor Carpintero

Back in Westminster Palace, after Mallory's funeral and Lafayette's succession to his post, Galahad's desperado temperament shipwrecks against the rigid authoritarianism of the Order, revealing frictions in the seemingly flawless surface. Before conflict can erupt, however, Galahad is called to fight a rebel ambush on Lord Hastings on Westminster Bridge, and the narrative escalates into a new direction. The bridge, which we have not seen before, turns out to be a war zone riddled with multiple guard houses and fences, gates and sandbag stacks, providing the game space for a shootout situation. The heavily controlled and regulated spaces around the Palace of Westminster today are amplified into a space the player might know as spacious and usually teeming with tourists, vendors, and traffic. Here, however, empty omnibuses and overturned carriages have turned into debris of past struggles, and hint at an alternative backstory of this steampunk-ed Westminster characterised by civil war. This remains unexplained and fragmentarily glimpsed through the environment, but we may interpret the heavy fortifications so close to the heart of London's political power as a sign of both dominance and anxiety. This impression is enhanced by Galahad's requesting help from a sentinel airship that hints more powerfully at domestic surveillance either prompted by the rebellion or as a feature of a police state. The urban texture here acts as a clue and warning we must actively

interpret and illustrates how our narrative journey through the game may link into ongoing spatial narratives embedded in the urban texture. The bridge also acts as a symbolic space of transience for Galahad, who chooses to disobey orders and pursue the rebels on a private vendetta to avenge Mallory's death. We now leave the designated, official path of the Order knight for a more uncertain one.

4.3.5 WHITECHAPEL, AGAIN

In the East End, a space configured as rebellious counter-space in keeping with neo-Victorian 'Ripperature' tropes (for example in *Anno Dracula*), Galahad meets the rebel leader, the historic Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi who had become a key figure and subsequent symbol of resistance against the British Raj during the Indian Mutiny in 1857. Through steampunk's counter-fiction and access to the Blackwater elixir, Lakshmibai has now literally travelled from the margins of Empire to its centre to challenge it with a guerrilla campaign against the Company. Her presence creates a post-colonial counterpoint to the powerful United India Company and also gives voice and agency to the marginal, colonial subject on equal terms.

Lakshmibai suggests the Order has 'been betrayed' by its 'masters.' Galahad responds: 'The Order of Knights calls no one master — not even the Queen.'¹²⁰ To him and to us, Order and Company are affiliated, but independent both from one another and the government. Lakshmibai, however, alludes to secrets 'kept even from the Order', calls the knights 'an Empire of bootlickers grovelling at the feet of the mighty United India Company', and claims that 'Your honourable corporation spreads the very scourge you have so valiantly sworn to fight' and that 'We both fight the same evil.'¹²¹ By suggesting that the Company is implicated in aiding the spread of the monstrous 'half-breeds' which it is the Order's purpose to combat, and claiming her rebellion shares the Order's interests, Lakshmibai destabilises the clear boundaries which up to now have seemingly defined the narrative. Together with Galahad's going astray, this scene marks another turning point in the game's overarching narrative, designed to shift our perspective. Her words also configure the Company, with its private army of guards and secretive interests on India, as the steampunk version of the ruthless global corporations which

¹²⁰ Longplay, 2:56:55.

¹²¹ Longplay, 2:57:00, 2:57:24.

operate in cyberpunk narratives. Again, the game mobilises parallels between the socio-economic and global nexus of Victorian London and the cyberpunk aesthetic in resonant ways.

4.3.6 THE UNITED INDIA COMPANY



12: Concept Art for *The Order 1886* by Erin McKown

In approaching the Company's Blackwell Yards in the docklands through unfinished underground tunnels and by evading mercenaries, we now move through the city as outlaws, more like in *Syndicate*. While this does not influence the gameplay itself but rather the obstacles and tasks we encounter, it is an opportunity for interesting urban spaces and textures, such as the rawness of construction sites, which, somewhat reminiscent of Dickens' description and as the 'scaffolding of a coming modernity', offer intriguing counterpoints to a now so sleek and functional present-day city.

Other levels and textures offered by this industrial setting are its stairs, balconies, ladders, machinery, cranes, and ships. The developers consciously conceived the space as 'a chance to reach for a different aesthetic' by portraying the empty complexes at dawn illuminated in soft warm tones and mirrored atmospherically in the Thames, thus giving this sequence a specific

identity through its texture.¹²² Like *Syndicate*, *The Order* also foregrounds an aesthetic experience of Victorian London as a defining feature.

The shipyards themselves are a recreation of a real place built by the East India Company in the seventeenth century and configured as an industrial complex at the heart of the Empire's colonial and economic networks (p. 231). Against the backdrop of silhouettes of cranes, smokestacks, and steam-powered ships in the layered background, larger trajectories of travel, power politics, and trade implicitly converge here into a resonant place in Victorian London's topography. This is also exemplified by the ship in the dry dock which becomes part of the journey, the narrative, and the investigation. As a vehicle of immense size only glimpsed partially, the ship is a parallel of the Company's airship, and while it provides an opportunity to 'stage combat on different decks on the ship' it is also designed 'to show the scale of the project' in order to 'impress the players with the influence and power wielded by the United India Company on both London and the rest of the world' (pp. 241 & 244). As such, the ship becomes an important signifier of the Company's 'global dominance', reminding us of the economic and political power wielded by and concentrated in Victorian London (p. 244). It so becomes a resonant prelude to Galahad's subsequent discoveries, which lastingly transform our understanding of the Company's influence and intentions.

In a warehouse large enough to also reflect on the Company's global reach, we discover a large number of wooden crates containing sleeping vampires and soil (a nod towards Stoker's *Dracula*) that are about to be shipped to 'the New Americas'. This discovery, proving that the Company is exporting monstrous creatures into its colonies and elsewhere, encodes its colonial affairs and economic interests metaphorically: as in *Anno Dracula*, the vampire may be read as a creature whose predation on others is physical as well as economic and political, especially considering that it is Lakshmibai, as a subject marginalised through race and gender, who leads the resistance against the endeavour. Stating that 'The Company could not succeed without powerful friends in the government', she also hints at networks of power whose blindness or corruption facilitate what is here clearly framed as a sinister undertaking, and sets Order and Company, believed to be allies, at odds. In this turn of events, which more closely interrogates the infrastructures supporting the Empire concentrated in and through London (in a way that

¹²² *Blackwater Archives*, p. 231.

Syndicate does not), the setting plays a crucial role as an external manifestation of such relationships.

After setting the warehouse on fire, Galahad seeks the help of Alastair, the Knight Commander and an affiliate of Lord Hastings, who understands that exposing the Company would ‘strike at the very heart of the Empire’.¹²³ The player is now involved in a conspiracy narrative that challenges the dominant ideologies and status quo of the Victorian apparatus. While its features are defamiliarized and steampunked through anachronism and supernatural metaphors, those also render the points of conflict more visible, readable, and, by fictionalising and isolating them to a degree from the larger networks of real history and its complex ideologies, also make them approachable within the adventure narrative. This is poignantly illustrated by the sequence in which Galahad, with Alastair’s help, infiltrates the United India House, the Company’s headquarters in Mayfair, to search for more evidence. Here are yet other gameplay opportunities such as sneaking around, climbing across rooftops, zip-lining into courtyards and navigating labyrinthine gardens, coming perhaps closest to what *Syndicate* offers. However, what is more interesting here is that the Company’s palatial compound, located in a prestigious borough of London’s social topography and designed in a neo-classical style, enshrines a power that no longer seems grand, but treacherous and corrupt. This impression is heightened by the atmosphere: we approach the compound on a hazy, blue-tinted night, its garden and features illuminated by isolated, yellow lights. As such, the setting is characterised by the same uncertainty and obscurity that the narrative’s unanswered questions also induce, and its decidedly gloomy, rainy, and noir-influenced aesthetic certainly recalls the *Blade Runner* aesthetic. It now becomes clear that the dystopian impulses of the Victorian *Blade Runner* city also complement, if not outright foreshadow, the cynical plot twists of the game narrative. In addition, they undermine our reading of the cityscape much in the same way as they do in *BioShock* or *Dishonoured*. As with the dominant cultural narrative within the game about goodness and order against rebellion (supernatural, social, and post-colonial), the urban environment can no longer be read at face value but must be questioned and literally interrogated.

This we undertake as Galahad, roaming and searching the spacious, equally palatial

¹²³ Longplay, 3:48:50.

interiors, which feature Tipu's Tiger, an eighteenth-century music box in the shape of a tiger devouring an East India Company soldier. The automaton, now on display at the Victoria and Albert Museum, symbolises the complex and violent history of British colonialism in India and provides a connection to Lakshmibai's presence, but as a trophy now owned by the Company, it also turns its subversive potential into a harmless, exotic spectacle.¹²⁴ The House, designed to reflect the economic and political power of the conglomerate, then acts as a potent narrative environment, and yields important clues. Documents which the player inspects through Galahad illustrate the Company's power networks across the Empire.

In a surprising but inevitable twist, we find out that Lord Hastings is not only a vampire himself, but the notorious Whitechapel killer Jack the Ripper¹²⁵ (who has appeared two years earlier than in real history). Through this synthesis of Gothic tropes, Victorian stereotypes, and popular conspiracy theories, namely that the Ripper turns out to be a slumming aristocrat, the game again invokes the vampire's bloodlust as a metaphor for social and economic exploitation, powerfully spatialised between a hypocritical and greedy aristocracy and the disenfranchised East End. In Lakshmibai's words, Whitechapel has, quite literally, 'become the country's feeding ground'.¹²⁶ The game here follows neo-Victorian 'Ripperature' like *From Hell* and *Anno Dracula* where the Ripper's violence becomes synonymous with colonial violence and a moral corruption which spreads from the centre to the margin, challenging heritage-based imaginaries of the Victorian era as cozy, quaint, or wholesome.¹²⁷ Lord Hastings, as chairman of the United India Company, a powerful politician, Jack the Ripper, and a vampire, synthesises and epitomises a moral, social, and political corruption that seemingly saturates the Victorian world at its very centre and operates from a position of power. Through this (albeit sensational) turn of events, *The Order's* steampunk London, which initially seemed like an adventure playground, is re-posited as a corrupted Gothic other much as it is in those narratives.

In line with this, Galahad is betrayed by his fellow knight Alastair, who transforms into a lycan and frames him as a rebel assassin, leading to his arrest, trial, and sentencing, and the

¹²⁴ Marie-Luise Kohlke 'Tipoo's Tiger on the Loose: Neo-Victorian Witness-Bearing and the Trauma of the Indian Mutiny', in *Neo-Victorian Tropes of Trauma: The Politics of Bearing After-Witness to Nineteenth-Century Suffering*, ed. by Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben (Amsterdam: Brill Rodopi 2010) pp. 367-398.

¹²⁵ Longplay, 4:22:40.

¹²⁶ Longplay, 3:33:06.

¹²⁷ For more on neo-Victorian Gothic and the Ripper, see Ho, Mitchell, Flint, Kohlke.

incarceration under Westminster Palace which we have already seen in the game's initial flash forward. This non-linear framework has, from the beginning, foreshadowed these escalating twists and so has the cityscape itself through its over-powering vastness, towering spires, and pervasive, bleak atmosphere which stood in contrast with the architectural grandeur and variety in the city centre. The narrative environment's intrinsic tension between Victorian aesthetics and neo-Gothic cyberpunk reflects how the game narrative itself moves from the special agent's adventure towards a more dystopian conspiracy plot in which the seemingly clear boundaries and choices of that adventure narrative have been questioned, subverted, and made ambiguous in line with cyberpunk's genre conventions. By now, Galahad's status is inverted together with his assumptions about the events that have unfolded so far. Rescued by Nikola Tesla (who has been in league with the rebels all along) and Lakshmibai, Galahad undergoes a metaphorical rebirth as Grayson, no longer a knight, but an outlaw.

4.3.7 'I HAVE SEEN THINGS...': THE FINAL CONFRONTATION

As outlaw, Grayson, attempting to rescue Tesla whose cover has been compromised, moves through the actual underground, that 'dark and invisible' heterotopic counter-space where 'revolutionary ideas' may 'ferment, undisturbed by above-world convention'.¹²⁸ In the laboratory under the Palace, symbolic of how the Order's identity has been undermined and is threatened with collapse, Grayson prepares to fight Alastair as the 'final boss'.

However, victory, when achieved by the player, is rendered profoundly ambivalent by Alastair's defensive claim that 'we fight only for our right to live'.¹²⁹ The lycans have hitherto been presented as monstrous Others in a popular Gothic tradition, but Alastair himself has been characterised by loyalty, duty, and integrity, contradicting this impression. He goes on, wearily, stating that 'My kind are no more evil than yours.'¹³⁰ Asked for his motives in aiding Hastings, he answers: 'I have lived too long not to know this day would come. [...] I have seen things I am condemned to remember. Civilisations born and destroyed by humanity's incessant greed. The

¹²⁸ Dobraszczyk, p. 141, 159.

¹²⁹ Longplay, 5:01:30.

¹³⁰ Longplay, 5:06:20.

pride of men slaughtering each other in the name of their so-called God...'¹³¹ This speech echoes Roy Batty's 'Tears in rain' monologue in *Blade Runner*, delivered as a death soliloquy: 'I've seen things you people wouldn't believe. Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. I watched C-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhäuser Gate. All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain. Time to die.'¹³²

Batty's status as replicant has, in the world of the film, denied him claims to humanity, yet his final act is saving Deckard from falling to his death and his final words attest not only to the scope and depth of his short existence, but his capacity for memory and emotion, his awareness of his own transience. The speech humanises him and Alastair's words have a similar effect. As in cyberpunk's postmodern challenge to self-other or human-technology boundaries, those between human and 'half-breed', outlaw and traitor, here seem to blur as the lycans are humanised through Alastair. This blurring of boundaries however re-positions the Order of Knights' centuries-long feud with them as quite doubtful, hinting that the feud has been about power, not self-protection. The confession literalises the metaphoric qualities of the monster as discursive Other in opposition of the status quo because it reveals the monster to be merely another group disenfranchised and persecuted by the dominant order.

Nevertheless, even though the Lord Chancellor confirms that he has always known of Alastair's lycan nature, a concession whose implications 'would shake the Order to its very foundations', order must (literally) be kept, 'lest all you hold dear perish'.¹³³ As Grayson is sacrificed to the integrity of the organisation and excised in disgrace, we may ask ourselves whether such a hypocritical, exploitative status quo is really worth preserving: whom does it protect? The game narrative has allied us to the marginalised rebels, suggested that the monstrous other is also human, and, echoing *The Difference Engine*'s dystopian impulses embedded in the urban setting, shown us a cityscape marked by civil war and governed by surveillance, regulation, and paranoia. The Order of Knights is now implicated in the larger networks supporting the accumulation of wealth and power through exploitation of the marginalised.

¹³¹ Longplay, 5:05:35-5:05:45.

¹³² *Blade Runner*, Final Cut, dir. by Ridley Scott, DVD (Los Angeles: Warner Brothers Entertainments, 2007 [1984]), 1:42:17-1:43:10.

¹³³ Longplay, 5:07:30- 5:08:05.

Still, Alastair's final words to Grayson are words of reconciliation: 'There shall come a day when all our burdens shall end, brother. Maybe then we'll know true peace.'¹³⁴ While his words suggest that neither peace nor truth actually exist in the world of the game, once again infusing it with ambiguity, this might also be read as an appeal to us, the players in the present, to interrogate meta-narratives about history and its representatives.

4.3.8 EPILOGUE: THE OUTLAW



13: Screenshot of *The Order 1886*

The game ends with Grayson delivering the *coup de grâce* as an ambivalent, even pyrrhic victory, but the narrative supplies an epilogue as counterpoint to the beginning. Delivering an inverted parallel shot of Grayson looking over the city, this time across the river over to Westminster, in classic lone vigilante manner before an apocalyptic, starkly lit cityscape, the scene suggests that this steampunk London has become a nightmare city. Over the communicator, Tesla tells us martial law has been declared, and that he, Lakshmibai, and Grayson should leave the city. Grayson, surveying a London fallen into a chaos of its own making, waging war on those who resist it, and unable to face its own truths, ambiguously

¹³⁴ Longplay, 5:08:55.

answers he will ‘join them shortly’ and that he is ‘Galahad no more’.¹³⁵ The two panoramic shots are the only two instances in the game where Grayson attains a semi-panoptic view of London, and as such serve as potent visual parallels of our relationship with the urban environment.. In the beginning we saw a sunny blue sky over a multi-layered London, palatial, aesthetically pleasing and inviting. Now, the city’s complexity is reduced to stark, surreal contrasts, its partly illuminated urban canyons eerie and Gothic, a pandemonium whose shadows hide secrets and monsters. The initial impression of mastery and confidence is subverted by the truths we have learned, and while Grayson’s upright pose still implies confidence and purpose, the city under martial law is one of chaos and corruption.

Where in *Syndicate*, the player takes over London piece by piece, and moves from margin to centre in a clandestine but triumphal conquest of a monolithic, corrupt enemy, *The Order* enacts a movement in the opposite direction. Much as in cyberpunk, here, too, we are left with a profound sense of disillusion and ambivalence, having, in our journey through the steampunk city also enacted a less visible journey from ignorance to understanding and from the centre to the margin. Having started in a position of agency in an adventure narrative much like *Syndicate*, we have not steadily moved towards success, but instead been made to ally with marginalised rebel identities in a conspiracy plot set amidst a civil war. In keeping with the game’s lack of navigational clues or panoptic context, we, like Grayson, have experienced a transformation at ground level by exploring the steampunk game space and interrogating its surfaces, and we only see the bigger picture at the end, when it is too late. As such, the game space complements the narrative at every turn, externalising its larger themes, and paralleling the narrative itself as storytelling device and an argument. The heterotopic counter-space of the steampunk game here takes us on a journey spatialised into an alternative city and so invites us to explore, examine and question not only the status quo presented in the game, but our own memories and assumptions about the Victorian imaginary regarding its networks of power across London and the Empire.

Through twists and turns in the narrative, the game challenges boundaries and collectively shared imaginaries of Victorian London and makes us constantly re-evaluate them through a sort of meta-historical hermeneutic circle. Unlike *Syndicate*, which provides a fantasy

¹³⁵ Longplay, 5:14:15.

of unlimited play and mastery, *The Order* lures us in with adventure tropes and then makes us confront a labyrinthine, sometimes disorienting steampunk setting full of blind spots and false promises. It literally re-locates us to Whitechapel which, in keeping with neo-Victorian Gothic and ‘Ripperature’, has come to encode resistance against dominant meta-narratives, especially those concerning monstrous Others and disenfranchisement (Chapter Two). As such, the game literalises steampunk’s thought experiment of playfully re-evaluating the Victorian past into an immersive and interactive spatial simulation. By remixing a Victorian imaginary of memory with futuristic cyphers of cyberpunk, the game creates a heterotopic setting no longer a fixed memory enshrined in the past, but, like space itself, constantly being made and re-made in dialogue with the present. In moving through this steampunk London, we must repeatedly re-consider this neo-Victorian city through a received memory of the Victorian past and the added retro-speculative impulses, and so actively read and re-read the narrative environment, and in doing so, we interactively shape a new and different narrative.

5. CONCLUSION: THE HERMENEUTIC OF STEAMPUNK

Marco Polo, in Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*, describes Zaira, the city of memory so evocatively that the passage is worth quoting at length:

In vain, great-hearted Kublai, shall I attempt to describe Zaira, city of high bastions. I could tell you how many steps make up the streets rising like stairways, and the degree of the arcades’ curves, and what kind of zinc scales cover the roofs; but I already know this would be the same as telling you nothing. The city does not consist of this, but of relationships between the measurements of its space and the events of its past: the height of a lamppost and the distance from the ground of a hanged usurper’s swaying feet; the line strung from the lamppost to the railing opposite and the festoons that decorate the course of the queen’s nuptial procession; the height of that railing and the leap of the adulterer who climbed over it at dawn; the tilt of a guttering and a cat’s progress along it as he slips into the same window; the firing range of a gunboat which has suddenly appeared beyond the cape and the bomb that destroys the guttering; the rips in the fish net and the three old men seated on the dock mending nets and telling each other for the hundredth time the Story of the gun-boat of the usurper, who some say was the queen’s illegitimate son, abandoned in his swaddling clothes

there on the dock. As this wave from memories flows in, the city soaks it up like a sponge and expands.

A description of Zaira as it is today should contain all Zaira's past. The city, however, does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand, written in the corners of the streets, the gratings of the windows, the banisters of the steps, the antennae of the lightning rods, the poles of the Bags, every segment marked in turn with scratches, indentations, scrolls.¹³⁶

Much of Polo's argument reflects what we have discovered in this chapter, namely that meticulous mapping cannot capture what a city truly is, especially Victorian London as a global metropolis which underwent significant changes throughout the nineteenth century. More than that, as Dickens attests through his alertness to the limits of mapping and his immersive portrayals of the multi-layered metropolis, the city arises out of a combination of urban space or firstspace ('the measurements of its space') and the ongoing, accumulating, and interlinking narratives which play out in it ('the events of its past'): 'the height of that railing and the leap of the adulterer who climbed over it at dawn'. Both Calvino and Dickens enact Massey's theory of space as 'dynamic simultaneity' and the product of a multitude of lingering histories, and so illustrate how Soja's concepts of firstspace and secondspace converge into a thirdspace that contains both but also much more. Conan Doyle's immortal detective Sherlock Holmes realises Massey's notion of intersecting trajectories and ongoing narratives through his connectedness to the multitude of intersecting processes across London. His complete knowledge of social, economic, and political networks and the geography of London enable him to penetrate the chaos of the metropolis with ordering logic even if, and especially when, any and all possible combinations of events occur. Holmes has become emblematic of the Victorian city he so thoroughly understands, but he is also constituted by it and the way London's own history is 'written in the corners of the streets' during that age.

Video games such as *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* mobilise and actualise this complex conjunction of the measurements of space and the history written into it by translating such transmitted Victorian imaginaries as fiction and visual art into a virtual simulacrum. Using steampunk strategies of hyper-Victorian collage in the creation of its three-dimensional model

and retro-speculative tropes in the narrative that accompanies it, *Syndicate* provides a simulation of a collectively imagined but also re-configured memory city with which we, as players, may engage through participation. It re-imagines Victorian London as a historical playground in which we roam freely as assassin-outlaws and underdog heroes, setting right the wrongs of past as exemplified in the evil industrial magnate Starrick. This of course reveals a simplified and even patronising approach to the socio-economic complexities of that past in favour of an alternative, empowering urban experience in which clear choices can be made and lead to triumph. As Eckart Voigts outlines:

It is convenient that the stereotyped Victorian characters are locked away safely in the past. The advantage of a historical hermeneutics of cultures are clear: it is less painful to attack, and easier to understand, the patriarchal orthodoxies of the Victorians than it is to achieve understanding for or to pass judgement on existing contemporary moral fundamentalisms. In reverse, supporting the plight of Victorian subcultures pitted against the repressive patriarchal regime of Victorianism is convenient as it is morally and politically unambiguous. The distant Victorian mainstream becomes a hetero-stereotype—the moral target of pre-liberation Western culture—and Victorian subcultures may reinforce the auto-stereotype—what it must have been like for us (i.e., sexually liberated, open-minded Westerners) to live furtively under the regime of Victorian repression.¹³⁷

Whereas Voigts is here considering the portrayal of homosexuality in neo-Victorian novels, his argument applies to the neo-Victorian tendency to re-position the nineteenth century as a Gothic or even a ‘neo-Oriental other’,¹³⁸ and so also to *Syndicate*’s simplistic conceptualisation of its antagonist. The premise of dismantling the city-wide empire of a corrupt and criminal industrial magnate as outlaw-heroes lends itself to an international, mainstream blockbuster game because the setting may enact the Victorian imaginary in a way that enables an interactive experience of triumph over and liberation from repressive patriarchal and industrial orthodoxies. This narrative is effectively enhanced by and translated into our mastery of the cityscape by proxy, an

¹³⁶ Calvino, p. 10-11.

¹³⁷ Eckart Voigts-Virchow, ‘Hermeneutics’, p. 113.

¹³⁸ Marie-Luise Kohlke, ‘Sexsation and the Neo-Victorian Novel: Orientalising the Nineteenth Century in Contemporary Fiction’, in *Negotiating Sexual Idioms: Image, Text, Performance*, ed. by Marie-Luise Kohlke and

experience we cannot attain outside the virtual space because both the Victorian past and the present-day city are equally inaccessible to us in such a way.

As such, the Victorian city is re-positioned as a space where the complexities of the present are suspended and, within a game space teeming with real, identifiable dangers, we may literally leap into action. The game, like steampunk at large, here mobilises the conventions of the swashbuckling adventure genre as coined in the nineteenth century: Dumas' *The Musketeers* (1848) is set in a romantic past where duty and derring-do go hand in hand, R. L. Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1882) transports us to the Golden Age of piracy, Anthony Hope's *Prisoner of Zenda* (1894) invented quaint and picturesque Ruritania, and Emma Orczy's *Scarlet Pimpernel* (1905) revels in the dangers of the French Revolution. Similarly, writers like Rider Haggard, G. A. Henty, or Rudyard Kipling relied on exotic, colonial settings to provide the same conditions. In steampunk, the Victorian age itself becomes that exciting, exotic, and romantic past whose perceived failures may be easily identified, critiqued, and even remedied in a morally and politically unambiguous way. To this end, *Syndicate* may fruitfully mobilise a widely shared Victorian imaginary and set it up as a historical playground to be conquered.

The Order 1886, while following the same neo-Victorian formula of re-positing the Victorian status quo as a corrupt antagonist, renders such a triumph over the traumas of the past more difficult, not least because Grayson, for all his adventures in a visually interesting urban setting, fails to achieve larger systemic changes and ends up as an outlaw with insight into the truth, but little agency. Wrongs of the past, here identified as capitalist exploitation of a working class that is literally fed on by the elite, and colonialist greed, are intertwined and, although embodied by the United India Company, also saturate government and the Order, corrupting them. The game enacts a more complex understanding that these wrongs, which still have tangible repercussions in the present, cannot easily be recognised, defeated, or set right, and so performs the widely-shared steampunk credo that 'history has sharp edges': 'The fact is that steampunk's romance with the past can be dangerous. It's altogether too easy to become an unwitting accomplice in the crimes of the past.'¹³⁹ For our proxy Grayson (formerly Galahad), this is literally the case, and after we discover that the Order has been complicit in a violent and repressive exploitation of its own citizens in Whitechapel as well as its colonial margins, our

Luisa Orza (Amsterdam: Brill Rodopi, 2008), pp. 53-79.

only agency lies in choosing to ally ourselves with those outlawed, marginalised, and rebellious. Where *Syndicate* offers us the outlaw assassin as a fantasy of freedom and mastery, here it eventually exiles Grayson from a city set up to disintegrate under martial law. Gothic monsters, while initially othered, are humanised and our assumptions called into question. This is not a neo-Victorian past that we may master, but instead one whose dominant narratives must be interrogated, challenged, and sometimes even subverted. The game thereby enacts what James Carrott here flippantly outlines in his appeal to *Steampunk Magazine* readers to ‘punk responsibly’:

You just can’t dig into the nineteenth century without butting up against empire in one form or another. Imperialism is some seriously dangerous shit. Not just ‘back then’ but right the hell now. Handle with care. It ain’t enough to say ‘we want to keep the good and toss the bad’. History doesn’t work that way. You can’t strain the East India Company out of your cup of tea.¹⁴⁰

Unlike in *Syndicate*, where we often remain separate from and above city and past alike, surgically removing whoever stands in the way of the larger meta-narrative we aim to construct, in *The Order* we remain immersed at ground level, and the disorientation of that perspective also enacts how difficult it is to ‘achieve understanding for or to pass judgement on’ the complexities of the Victorian past, even if the United India Company’s corrupting influence is evident and tangible in narrative and cityscape alike. Indeed, the game literalises its themes into a steampunk London re-shaped by dystopian impulses and effectively mobilises a cyberpunk visual shorthand as codified by *Blade Runner*. Towering structures, steep urban canyons, vanishing horizons, and brutalist neo-Gothic skyscrapers leverage a sense of social stratification, stark capitalism, and defeatism to create a labyrinthine hyper-city that defies mastery, both physically and historically. Like Rapture or Columbia in *BioShock* and Dunwall in *Dishonoured*, the retro-speculative aesthetic configures an urban narrative environment that is both legible because it imports genre markers, and unfamiliar because it adds its own retro-speculative twists. Hyper-stratification and a grisly fog may create an atmosphere of menace and claustrophobia in *Dishonoured*’s Dunwall,

¹³⁹ Carrott and Johnson, *Vintage Tomorrows*, p. 189.

¹⁴⁰ Carrott, ‘Punking the Past’, p. 71.

whereas Rapture's underwater metropolis full of art deco skyscrapers hints at hubris and grandeur which hides vile degeneration and failure. *BioShock: Infinite*'s floating city Columbia in turn uses a nostalgic, turn-of-the-century aesthetic to create a steampunk utopia which, we discover as we move through game and narrative, is deeply corrupted by xenophobia. In these fantastical heterotopias, history, cityscape, technology, and society may be 'punked' and so re-evaluated through our interaction with and interrogation of the virtual game space.

In the same vein, *The Order*'s London literalises steampunk's dialogue with the past into a cityscape in which the legacies of the past are remixed with speculations about the future. Our engagement with the narrative environment undermines and exposes the ideologies presented through its urban textures: neither grandeur and power, nor the ramshackle chaos of the East End can ultimately be taken at face value, as the second half of the game narrative subverts all we have seemingly established in the first. While the game uses sensational archetypes and a largely simple narrative to speak to a wide, international audience, it also moves from a self-confident, playful action-adventure-espionage into a more dystopian conspiracy laced with Gothic tropes and cyberpunk markers which encode boundaries as unstable and victories as ambivalent, inviting us to re-think our initial assumptions about the game and its steampunk London.

Game spaces literalise the steampunk aesthetic and the narratives imagined within it into a virtual simulation in which narratives, hermeneutic understanding, and the nature of steampunk itself are produced and enacted through movement in space. They provide a heterotopic lens through which to form new and exciting relationships with urban space and in so doing playfully re-evaluate our relationships with real space and real history — not because they imagine possible alternatives, but because they challenge and subvert the ways in which we perceive or remember them. Like steampunk itself, video games may, as Konrad Wojnowski notes, 'allow players to better understand the notion of agency in human history and to root out a deterministic image of the past.'¹⁴¹ Both *Syndicate*, in re-creating a familiar and legible Victorian London as historical playground, and *The Order*, in infusing it with cyberpunk impulses, identify and mobilise Victorian London as the original hyper-city, with all the utopian and dystopian effects that entails.

In this chapter, we have explored how steampunk's retro-speculative spaces may re-

¹⁴¹ Konrad Wojnowski, 'Simulational Realism - Playing as Trying to Remember', *Art History & Criticism*, 14: 1

imagine Victorian London in ways that offer adventure, excitement, and escapism, but may also at times critique the social, political, and economic failures of the past through a present-day lens. The fact that games such as *The Order* also import the urban aesthetics of steampunk's sister-genre cyberpunk illustrates how it understands past and future as correlatives that interact with the present. Let us now examine more closely how steampunk may re-negotiate socio-culturally evolved parameters central to our lives, and what it may tell us about our own, present-day ideologies.

CHAPTER 4: RE-CLAIMING THE RETROFUTURE: FEMINISM AND GENDER IN *FIN DE SIÈCLE* AND STEAMPUNK LONDON

1. INTRODUCTION: THE MODERN FLÂNEUSE

Steampunk spaces provide a theatre in and through which our collective memory of the Victorian age may be re-iterated in increasingly stereotypic ways, or else interrogated, playfully challenged, or even re-imagined with new impulses. By re-routing present-day topics and concerns not just through a perceived Victorian past but also a retro-speculative lens, steampunk may make visible the ideological, social and cultural undercurrents that continue to inform our present in new ways and contribute to ongoing debates. I want to interrogate this potential more closely by looking at the perception and re-presentation of gender and femininity in popular second-wave steampunk fiction.

In his examination of steampunk's 'Useful Troublemakers', Mike Perschon concludes that the female protagonists of Cherie Priest's and Gail Carriger's novels are 'amplified expressions of subtler ideas' about the Victorian New Woman: 'The steampunk New Woman, however, is not the New Woman as she was imagined in the nineteenth century, or even re-imagined by neo-Victorian writers in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: she has far more agency than those women and is given the option to have her proverbial cake and eat it too'.¹ However, Claire Nally, in her most recent study on *Gender, Subculture, and the Neo-Victorian* (2019), claims that Carriger's heroine in particular, merely enacts a post-feminism 'which seeks to articulate choice and lifestyle as part of an emancipating agenda, whilst at the same time paradoxically presenting some very conservative visions of what it is to be a woman', and does 'very little to challenge the status quo'.² Already, scholarly assessments of the same texts reveal a complex and evolving understanding of gender and femininity. What is at stake in the perceived 'success' of feminist liberation? How might the New Woman or post-feminist theory

¹ Mike Perschon, 'Useful Troublemakers: Social Retrofuturism in the Steampunk Novels of Gail Carriger and Cherie Priest', in *Steaming Into a Victorian Future*, ed. by Julie-Ann Taddeo and Cynthia J. Miller (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2013), pp. 21-41, p.35, p. 36.

² Claire Nally, *Steampunk. Gender, Subculture, & the Neo-Victorian* (London: Bloomsbury 2019), p. 217, p. 227.

figure in steampunk's ability to articulate gender in progressive, meaningful, and challenging ways? What does the way in which we re-imagine Victorian gender say about the ideological undercurrents that underlie this endeavour in the present? And, of course: what role does London play, both as a real setting and an urban imaginary, in such articulations and interrogations of gender?

Let us first unravel steampunk's entangled imaginaries of the past, its legacies, and our present — each with its own complex agendas — in order to understand how it re-evaluates and perhaps challenges them: or else, how and why it fails to do so. I want to begin with that emblem of modernity and the modern urban experience: Baudelaire's flâneur. Whereas Edgar Allen Poe's *Man in the Crowd* (1840) had already lost himself as idling observer in the bustle of London, it is usually with Baudelaire's *Painter of Modern Life* (1863) that both the seminal idea of 'modernity' and the flâneur are identified:

The crowd is his element, as the air is that of birds and water of fishes. His passion and his profession are to become one flesh with the crowd. For the perfect flâneur, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world—impartial natures which the tongue can but clumsily define. The spectator is a prince who everywhere rejoices in his incognito. The lover of life makes the whole world his family, just like the lover of the fair sex who builds up his family from all the beautiful women that he has ever found, or that are or are not—to be found; or the lover of pictures who lives in a magical society of dreams painted on canvas. Thus the lover of universal life enters into the crowd as though it were an immense reservoir of electrical energy. Or we might liken him to a mirror as vast as the crowd itself; or to a kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness, responding to each one of its movements and reproducing the multiplicity of life and the flickering grace of all the elements of life.³

³ Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life*, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1964 [1863]). *The Flâneur*, ed. by Keith Tester (London: Routledge 1994). Shields, Rob, 'Fancy footwork: Walter Benjamin's notes on *flânerie*', in *The Flâneur*, ed. by Keith Tester (London: Routledge 1994), pp. 43-60. Martina Lauster, 'Walter Benjamin's Myth of the Flâneur', *MLR*, 102:1 (2007), 139-156. Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: a Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. by Harry Zohn (London: Verso Books, 1997).

Modernity, a concept with whose coinage Baudelaire is credited, is born in Haussmann's Paris with its boulevards, electric lights, and department stores. It is the exhilarating experience of the fleetingness, the anonymity, and the increasing pace of the metropolis. A phenomenon closely tied to the urban experience of large cities, modernity is most prominently connected to nineteenth-century Paris, London, and Berlin, where it inspired new explorations of literary or artistic expression in its time. The flâneur figure, however, was crystallised into a literary concept by Walter Benjamin much later in 1930s Berlin and Paris, when the new century demanded its own re-conceptualisation of modernity as modernism. Against the background of Simmel's 1903 conceptualisation of the urban habitus, the flâneur became 'the individual sovereign of the order of things who, as the poet or as the artist, is able to transform faces and things so that for him they have only that meaning which he attributes to them. He therefore treats the objects of the city with a somewhat detached attitude.'⁴ For him, 'metropolitan spaces are the landscape of art and existence [...] driven out of the private and into the public by his own search for meaning'⁵, observing the transitoriness of modern life as connoisseur and detached consumer of spectacle. Part voyeur, part detective, he is concerned with traces in the urban crowd, his '[c]riminological sagacity coupled with the pleasant nonchalance'.⁶

As a leisurely observer and artistic consciousness blending seamlessly into the crowd, fantasising idly or passionately about amorous encounters with strangers like Baudelaire's speaker in 'A une Passante', the flâneur is a gendered figure. Baudelaire's poem portrays modernity as a chance encounter with an unknown woman in the anonymous crowd and therefore locates it firmly in an urban setting. Though they exchange no more than a brief look, the speaker has a short but intense experience of love, perhaps infatuation, before she is swept away by the currents of the city. The poem is most often read as encapsulating, not just the experience of modernity as one of fleetingness, acceleration, and simultaneity, but also that of the flâneur as a man of the crowd who observes, experiences, and participates in this new urban, and therefore modern life. However, the poem also reveals the gender-related biases that have informed the construction of the flâneur figure, considering that the woman is also in, and

⁴ Keith Tester, 'Introduction', in *The Flâneur*, ed. by Keith Tester (London: Routledge 1994), pp. 1-21, p. 6.

⁵ Tester, p. 2.

⁶ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. by Kevin McLaughlin and Howard Eiland (New York: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 41.

presumably of, the crowd: if what the speaker describes is true, is she not meeting him on equal terms? Is she not also moving through the urban sphere, and, as the ‘glance’ through which the speaker ‘was suddenly reborn’ indicates, actively perceiving her environment? She might have been a flâneuse, but she is also visibly consumed through a male gaze.⁷ The woman is outlined in flashes of physical, sensual attributes such as the glittering hand, the flouncing skirt, the graceful leg, and the eyes from which he drinks (thereby metaphorically consuming her), and yet we must assume that he fantasises about a sexual encounter because ‘the pleasure that kills’ alludes to the ‘petit mort’, even though her being in mourning casts doubt on whether the same thing is on her mind. The urban experience of modernity, as outlined by Baudelaire in 1860s Paris, is inevitably gendered.

The question of whether a flâneuse, a female flâneur exists, is a question intrinsically connected to receptions of Victorian gendered space, in which public/ private is equated with male/ female. Janet Wolff, in her essay ‘The Invisible Flâneuse: Women and the Literature of Modernity’ (1985), highlights conjunctions between the gendered constructions of space and dominant definitions of modernity, and posits that anonymity, freedom, and the fleeting impersonal encounters that fascinated Baudelaire were out of bounds for women: ‘She could not adopt the non-existent role of a flâneuse. Women could not stroll alone in the city.’⁸ Curiously, she draws this conclusion from a passage in which George Sand recounts her venture into the crowd in cross-dressed disguise. While Sand cannot reconcile a performance of femininity with flânerie, in this successful venture she both is and is not a woman of the crowd, and so certainly ambiguous. Nonetheless, Wolff concludes: ‘There is no question of inventing the *flâneuse*: the essential point is that such a character was rendered impossible by the gendered divisions of the nineteenth century.’⁹ Griselda Pollock, who notes in *Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity* (1988) that respectable women had no access to the public, gendered spaces which inspired impressionist artists and decadent poets, namely the street, the bar, the café, or the cabaret, similarly argues in *Vision and Difference* (1988): ‘There is no female equivalent to the

⁷ Laura Mulvey, ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, *Screen*, 16:3 (1975), 6–18.

⁸ Janet Wolff, ‘The Invisible Flâneuse: Women and the Literature of Modernity’, *Theory, Culture, & Society*, 2:3 (1985), 37–46, p. 41.

⁹ Wolff, p. 45, original emphasis.

quintessentially masculine figure, the *flâneur*: there is not and could not be a female *flâneuse*.¹⁰

As Teresa Gómez Reus and Aránzazu Usandizaga note, ‘spatial confinement is one of the more obvious ways in which the life and destiny of women have been circumscribed: the socially imposed role in the private as opposed to the public sphere, in the home rather than in the street, inside rather than in the world outside.’¹¹ Deborah Epstein Nord outlines how the female urban Rambler was associated with the figure of the Fallen Woman in Victorian culture: ‘Just as there was no wholly adequate social or economic structure for the independent existence of the genteel single woman, so there was no wholly respectable context for her appearance in the city landscape.’¹² Deborah Parsons acknowledges that the ‘opportunities and activities of flânerie were predominantly the privileges of the man of means, and it was hence implicit that the “artist of modern life” was necessarily the bourgeois male.’¹³ However, she also aims to ‘undercut the myth that the urban artist-observer is necessarily male and that the woman in the city is a labelled object of his gaze’¹⁴ by considering alternative ways to experience the city and form an artistic or sensory relationship with it. Indeed, to seek the *flâneuse* solely on the terms of Baudelaire’s *flâneur* reveals a monolithic understanding of urban space: Lynda Nead in *Victorian Babylon* (2000) suggests that a more sophisticated approach should begin ‘with a formulation of a more complex understanding of the public sphere than has been evident in previous studies of the metropolis. Rather than seeing public life as a monolithic entity, it is possible to conceive a variety of ways of accessing the public world and a number of different public arenas in which women could be involved.’¹⁵

The *flâneur* as quintessential urban figure throws into relief debates about gender and public space because the genealogy of women’s emancipation is premised on their increasing participation in public, and therefore urban, and modern life. As Wendy Parkins suggests: ‘Like

¹⁰ Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Feminism, Femininity and Histories of Art* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 71.

¹¹ Teresa Gómez Reus and Aránzazu Usandizaga, ‘Introduction’, in *Inside Out: Women negotiating, subverting, appropriating public and private space*, ed. by Teresa Gómez Reus and Aránzazu Usandizaga (Amsterdam: Rodopi 2008), pp. 19-33, p. 19.

¹² Deborah Epstein Nord, *Walking the Victorian Streets: Women, Representation, and the City* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 82.

¹³ Deborah L. Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City and Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 4.

¹⁴ Parsons, p. 42.

¹⁵ Nead, *Victorian Babylon*, p. 70.

modernity, mobility— with its connotations of escape, liberation, and adventure— has also been gendered masculine, not least through its differentiation from the home environment. It is perhaps surprising, then, that romanticising mobility has been such a temptation for feminists in late modernity as for Baudelairean *flâneurs*.¹⁶ However, a *flâneur* figure evaluated solely on the terms of Baudelaire's male-defined experience may hardly reflect women's relationship with the metropolis in accurate or interesting ways. Instead, we must measure with different parameters: 'To suggest that there couldn't be a female *flâneur* is to limit the ways in which women have interacted with the city to the way *men* have interacted with the city. We can talk about social mores and restrictions, but we cannot rule out the fact that women were there: we must try to understand what walking the city meant to them. Perhaps the answer is not to attempt to make a woman fit a male concept, but to redefine the concept itself.'¹⁷

Wolff later acknowledges the potential inherent in refocusing on the 'blurring of boundaries, the negotiation of spaces and the contradictory and open-ended nature of urban social practices', of exploring 'the liminal space, the ambiguous situation, the unexpected moments of access [...], porosity, plasticity, thresholds, permeability, fluidity'.¹⁸ For example, in this anthology, Cathleen J. Hamann examines philanthropy as a useful form of female urban mobility which gave women access to otherwise precarious urban spaces and granted them authority in contemporary social debates. Anna Despotopoulou, using Jürgen Habermas' work on public and private spaces, suggests that the drawing room could be considered a place of public visibility for women, and Anne-Marie Evans illustrates how Lily Bart, protagonist of Edith Wharton's *House of Mirth* (1905), consciously and productively reconfigures her body as public space and spectacle in New York society. Valerie Fehlbaum posits Eliza Lynn Linton, Ella Hepworth Dixon and George Paston as precursors of Mrs Dalloway, the modernist *flâneuse*, and Melinda Harvey identifies public locations which assume relevance in the heroine's quest for creative autonomy in Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage* (1915). All of these chapters productively re-examine women's relationships with urban space and suggest that the ways in

¹⁶ Wendy Parkins, *Mobility and Modernity in Women's Novels, 1850s-1930s: Women Moving Dangerously* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 11.

¹⁷ Lauren Elkin, *Flâneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice and London* (London: Chatto Windus 2016), p. 11.

¹⁸ Janet Wolff, 'Foreword', in *Inside Out: Women negotiating, subverting, appropriating public and private space*, ed. by Teresa Gómez Reus and Aránzazu Usandizaga (Amsterdam: Rodopi 2008), pp. 15-18, p. 19.

which they navigated and made use of public/private boundaries provides important insights into matters of gender and agency.

Against this backdrop, I want to focus on the New Woman as an alternative to the restrictive idea of the *flâneuse*. Not only did the New Woman, an equally complex ideal, arise out of and figure prominently in the discourse of the 1880s to 1910s, but mobility, independence, and agency also played a large part in her conceptualisation. Unlike the *flâneur*, the New Woman availed herself of modern technologies, such as the bicycle or the omnibus to chart a self-determined course through the metropolis, which makes her a valuable and productive alternative to the *flâneur* and companion figure to the steampunk heroine. It is my goal in this chapter to measure the steampunk heroine, configured as progressive and independent, against the Victorian New Woman, and in doing so examine how steampunk feeds into the continuing history of feminism, both as an extension of and as a reflection on its history, and its several phases. I will look at conceptions of the Victorian New Woman and briefly consider the politics and fiction of Ouida as a challenge to a streamlined genealogy of feminist evolution and consider how feminist reception of Victorian femininity is informed by the politics of the historical vantage point from which they are perceived. Then I turn to neo-Victorian and second-wave steampunk fiction and their portrayals of the ostensibly emancipated heroine in the context of post-feminist theory. Ultimately, I want to analyse how and why steampunk may sometimes fall back into sexist tropes or patronising portrayals of the ‘oppressed’ past versus the ‘liberated’ present. Based on this understanding, I want to explore how steampunk may help formulate alternative, valuable feminine and feminist agendas in the face of Victorian legacies and post-feminist theory, and how steampunk may craft alternative queer genealogies through its social retrofuturism. This I will do through an extensive close reading of Gail Carriger’s ‘Parasolverse’ series (2009-2019).

2. THE *FIN DE SIÈCLE*

2.1 THE NEW WOMAN AND THE CITY

The New Woman figure has been continuously present in Victorian studies since the 1980s canon revision and, configured through a distinct iconography, has survived into a collectively shared cultural memory and so found her way into neo-Victorian media. Before we can consider neo-Victorian portrayals of feminism and post-feminism however, we must outline what the New Woman signified in her own age. Whereas in the popular imagination (both then and now), the New Woman may be identified by clear signifiers such as the bicycle, she is of course a composite, complex ideal distilled from a multitude of media and debates, from earnest argument and satiric mockery, from novels and images. In this she shares qualities with the flâneur.

Like feminism throughout the twentieth and twenty-first century, *fin-de-siècle* feminism was far from a monolithic, absolute movement in pursuit of a clearly mapped-out, teleological ‘progress’. Still, the 1890s New Woman came to epitomise Victorian feminism as a collective symbol for women seeking autonomy in a male-dominated society, mainly through problematising marriage as an institution of violence and oppression and by demanding education, careers, sexual freedom, dress reforms, and the right to vote. While the term itself was coined by Ouida (the pseudonym of writer Marie Louise de la Ramée), ironically in a polemic response to an article on ‘New Aspects of the Woman Question’ by Sarah Grand in 1894, and subsequently became a constant presence in literature and public debate, the epithet merely gave shape to ongoing debates about ‘the Woman Question’, which had been discussed in the writing of, for example, Henry James, Thomas Hardy, Henrik Ibsen, Mona Caird, or Olive Schreiner since the 1880s.¹⁹ Embedded in a longer history of women challenging ‘their subordinate social and political position’,²⁰ as well as other movements, from socialism, the peace movement, or animal rights to aestheticism and decadence, the New Woman of the *fin-de-siècle* was widely perceived as radical and transgressive: ‘They walked without chaperones, carried their own

¹⁹ Marianne Berger Woods, *The New Woman in Print and Pictures: an Annotated Bibliography* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2009). Lena Wanggren, *Gender, Technology and the New Woman* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), p. 13-20.

²⁰ Angelique Richardson and Chris Willis, ‘Introduction’, in *The New Woman in Fiction and Fact: Fin-de-Siècle Feminisms*, ed. by Angelique Richardson and Chris Willis (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), pp. 1-38, p. 1.

latchkeys, bicycled, and the more daring ones smoked cigarettes, cut their hair, or wore divided skirts and plain costume in accordance with the principles of rational dress'.²¹ Talia Schaffer here demonstrates that the New Woman was to a large extent an imaginative nexus of behaviours and debates, a collective symbol mutable to 'whatever goal the writer has channelled it towards,' while inspired by and distilled from a wide variety of real working women, novelists, campaigners, and bicyclists into an ideal figure.²² Albeit, as Sally Ledger puts it, 'semi-fictional', the New Woman as 'discursive phenomenon' is also 'just as "real" and historically significant as what she *actually* was.'²³ This is particularly true with regard to reception and widely shared Victorian imaginaries; much like the Gothic tropes in Chapter Two, the New Woman may be read as an array of signifiers, in which 'certain technologies come to work as "freedom machines", as visual emblems connected to the New Woman and signifying female emancipation'.²⁴

This emancipation is to a large extent enacted in and expressed through space. Let us therefore begin by considering the most prominent of New Women attributes, the bicycle. As Sarah Wintle summarises, 'in different ways the freedom, physical independence and sense of personal control offered literally and symbolically by [the bicycle] was, when seized by women, a kind of trespass on traditionally masculine territory, as, among other things, the obvious anxiety about female dress [...] bears witness.'²⁵ This is not least evident from the New Woman's status as a popular subject of caricatures from the anti-feminist camp, depictions which

²¹ Talia Schaffer, 'Nothing but Foolscap and Ink: Inventing the New Woman', in *The New Woman in Fiction and Fact: Fin-de-Siècle Feminisms*, ed. by Angelique Richardson and Chris Willis (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), pp. 39-52, p. 39; Sally Ledger, *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997). Ann Heilman, *New Woman Fiction: Women Writing First-Wave Feminism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000). *A New Woman Reader*, ed. by Carolyn Christensen Nelson (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2001). Ann Heilman, *New Woman Strategies: Mona Caird, Olive Schreiner, Sarah Grand* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004). Marion Shaw and Lyssa Randolph, *New Woman Writers* (Tavistock: Northcote House Publishers Ltd, 2007). *The History of British Women's Writing, 1880-1920*, ed. by Holly A. Laird (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016). Lyn Pykett, *The "improper" Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing* (London: Routledge, 1992). Gail Cunningham, *The New Woman and the Victorian Novel* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1978). Linda Dowling, 'The Decadent and the New Woman in the 1890's', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 33:4 (1979), 434-453. *Victorian Women Writers and the Woman Question*, ed. by Nicola Diane Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

²² Schaffer, 'Foolscap and Ink', p. 45.

²³ Ledger, *The New Woman*, p. 3.

²⁴ Wanggren, p. 3.

²⁵ Sarah Wintle, 'Horses, Bikes, and Automobiles: The New Woman on the Move', in *The New Woman in Fiction and Fact: Fin-de-Siècle Feminisms*, ed. by Angelique Richardson and Chris Willis (London: Palgrave Macmillan,

ridicule her ambitions and question her femininity as an ‘unsexed, terrifying, violent Amazon’.²⁶ Such cartoons, often published in *Punch* magazine, seemed imaginative and outrageous to their audience but in retrospect, they can seem almost steampunk-ish: speculative, yet not wholly implausible. ‘Sartorial oddities’, note Richardson and Willis, ‘were a celebrated target for cartoonists: the eccentrically dressed minority were used to (mis)represent and undermine the various demands of *fin-de-siècle* feminisms.’²⁷ This pertains to bicycles in particular. Initially seen as a strange contraption that prompted women to adopt outlandish and unfeminine dress, the bicycle developed into an icon of athletic womanhood and feminism, not least because the bicyclist, newly mobile and autonomous, destabilised Victorian perceptions of gendered spheres. ‘By 1897’, concludes Lena Wånggren, ‘women’s rights and the bicycle were firmly bound together in the popular imagination.’²⁸

Whereas *Punch*’s cartoon lampooned the New Woman and her pantaloons as fundamentally ridiculous, New Woman heroines such as H. G. Wells’ Jessie in *The Wheels of Chance* (1896) or Grant Allen’s Lois Cayley were presented as attractive, courageous, and formidable. Here, the spirited, proactive New Woman bicyclist was celebrated and marketed through fiction as an exciting ideal of optimistic progress and adventure. Alongside the bicycle, infrastructures such as the railway, the omnibus, and the underground offered women the opportunity to participate in ‘the wide, freely visitable world a world that normally men were entitled to and which was often identified with the fluidity and flux of the modern pace of living’.²⁹ By accessing public transport, women participated in modernity as well as exercising agency in choosing their destinations. Travelling alone across the metropolis, they created their own urban space through their individual trajectories which linked into larger transport networks and allowed them to witness the transient urban life. As a consequence, ‘omnibuses and underground trains were tools not only to discuss modernity, but also to destabilise gender in the metropolis.’³⁰ Moreover, these modes of transportations could become a way for women to lose

2001), pp. 66-78, p. 66-67.

²⁶ Schaffer, ‘Foolscap and Ink’, p. 35.

²⁷ Richardson and Willis, p. 22.

²⁸ Wånggren, p. 62.

²⁹ Anna Despotopoulou, *Women and the Railway, 1850-1915* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), p. 3.

³⁰ Ana Parejo Vadillo, *Women Poets and Urban Aestheticism: Passengers of Modernity* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 37.

themselves in the crowd of passengers, and to become observers: ‘The passenger is a nomad in the modern metropolis, and in her journeys she records life as it passes by’ (p. 70). In her study of women writers of the *fin-de-siècle* and urban aestheticism, Ana Parejo Vadillo illustrates how writers Amy Levy, Alice Meynell, Graham R. Tomson (Rosamund Marriott Watson), or Michael Field (Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper) derived subjective enjoyment from the cityscape as artist-poets, like Levy recording the busy ebb and flow of London with ‘*jouissance* and satisfaction’: ‘Amy Levy’s aesthetic of the omnibus was both an instrument of modernity with which to rethink the position of the fin-de-siècle woman poet in an urban milieu, and a tool with which to create a new aesthetic theory based upon the cinematic character of urban transport’ (p. 76 & 196). Meynell meanwhile, in her 1897 articles for the *Pall Mall Gazette*, observed the urban sphere from a position of ‘intellectual and aesthetic detachment’, her writing a ‘reverie’, and the ‘representation of her panoramic impressions of the city’ (p. 196 & 116). In this way, the city became a powerful conduit for women’s changing sense of self. As Lisa Hager posits, ‘women writers understood urban space in terms of women’s mobility within that space both above and underground. These writers understood mobility, in turn, not only in terms of physical freedom, but also as a way to understand themselves, reconceiving their subjectivity’.³¹

Women moved across the city spaces for much of the late nineteenth century; promenading on Hyde Park’s Rotten Row, populating the theatres, and restaurants of the West End, visiting art galleries and gardens, and exploring the newly created department stores such as Liberty’s and John Lewis.³² They enjoyed the freedom of open space amid anonymity and life and sought artistic inspiration for their writing in the crowded urban sphere, as illustrated in Ella Hepworth Dixon’s 1894 novel *The Story of a Modern Woman*:

Sunshine brightened the huge gilt letters over the newspaper offices; the crowded, brightly coloured omnibuses, the hansoms laden with portmanteaux on their way to Waterloo Station, the flaxen hair and beflowered hats of the little actresses hurrying along to rehearsal. An ever-moving procession of people poured like a torrent up and down the street; journalists, country folk, office boys, actors, betting men, loafers – all the curious shifting world of the

³¹ Lisa Hager, ‘British Women Writers, Technology, and the Sciences, 1880–1920’ in *The History of British Women’s Writing, 1880-1920*, ed. by Holly A. Laird (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 59-71, p. 60.

³² Ledger, p. 155, also: Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight*, p. 6.

Strand was jogging elbows on the pavement.’³³

In the protagonist’s perception, the city appears as a tableau of spectacle, simultaneity, and intersecting networks of travel and commerce. We see here the multitude of ongoing trajectories that we have encountered with Dickens and Doyle in the last chapter, so that Hepworth Dixon’s portrait of the city aligns her with prominent writers of Victorian London and, through emphasis on colour and sensory impressions, creates a flâneur-esque impression that anticipates later female city writers such as Virginia Woolf.

Dixon also draws attention to the role fashion might play in facilitating the passenger’s progress: ‘I told Worth when I was in Paris that I always went on the tops of omnibuses, and he designed me this little frock on purpose.’³⁴ With her fashionable ‘little frock’ designed by a famous Parisian couturier explicitly for urban travel, Dixon’s protagonist fashions herself into a modern urban flâneuse. In an era where women’s dresses were integral not merely to their communication of social status, but their purpose of activity (walking dress, visiting dress, evening dress) and range of movement (riding dress, bicycling costume, athletic wear), self-fashioning becomes an important factor in tailoring one’s urban identity and exerting agency over the self, both for the Victorian New Woman and the steampunk heroines we will encounter later.

George Paston (Emily Morse Symonds)’s 1898 novel *A Writer of Books* can also be seen as anticipating Woolf’s urban reflections, as its protagonist displays ‘enjoyment of the freedom of the city and partakes of its various pleasures, even more intrepid than Elizabeth Dalloway twenty-five years later.’³⁵ This is evident from the following passage:

Often, as she passed through the crowded streets, she felt tempted to slip between two lovers and listen to their whispered words, to follow the tired looking shop girls and chattering factory hands as they hurried home from their work, to eavesdrop at the doors of sinister-

³³ Ella Hepworth Dixon, *The Story of a Modern Woman*, ed. by Steve Farmer (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2004 [1894]), p. 106.

³⁴ Dixon, p. 76.

³⁵ Valerie Fehlbauer, ‘Paving the Way for Mrs Dalloway: The Street-walking Women of Eliza Lynn Linton, Ella Hepworth Dixon and George Paston’, in *Inside Out: Women negotiating, subverting, appropriating public and private space*, ed. by Teresa Gómez Reus and Aránzazu Usandizaga (Amsterdam: Rodopi 2008), pp. 149-166, p. 162.

looking houses in narrow back streets, or to strike up an acquaintance with the sandwich-men and flowers-sellers who lined the Strand.³⁶

Here, women become observers and chroniclers of distinctly urban phenomena, exploring the vast city and its hidden goings-on from out of the anonymous crowd. Modern London becomes the potent setting for aesthetic contemplation and self-discovery. In a similar vein, suffragists stepped into open public spaces and suited it to their purpose of campaigning. Certainly their marches, rallies, and exhibitions have become firmly associated with urban spaces such as Hyde Park, where they gathered, or Oxford Street, where they protested. An icon of feminist activism, the suffragist is also characterised by her choice of dress, skilfully employed to project her values of sensibility and purity, femininity and modernity across public space.³⁷ Suffragists employed their visibility as women in the city to support their demand for a voice in politics, as well as utilising public space in order to visualise their demands in a tangible manner through sashes, flags, and banners in their signature colours. Lynne Walker outlines how suffragists also employed architecture to project their values and blurred private/public boundaries by using their private homes for meetings, and furthered their cause through effective neighbourly networking:

Living and working in central London was a one of the strategies of suffrage politics. The apparatus of white middle-class British women – the well-ordered home; the ‘good’ address at the heart of London and of empire; the round of formal introductions, social calls, and duties; as well as a sense of neighborly connection for those who lived nearby – supplied a private, social matrix for public, political action.³⁸

The New Woman was, among other things, an urban traveller. She availed herself of the technologies of the day and suited them to her purpose so much so that the bicycle has become a signifier intrinsically linked with her as a symbol of independence and mobility. Through her appropriation of urban space by traversing it without chaperones and at her own speed, by using

³⁶ George Paston (Emily Morse Symonds), *A Writer of Books*, ed. by Margaret D. Stetz and Anita Miller (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 1998 [1898]), p. 37.

³⁷ Anna Sparham, *Soldiers and Suffragettes: The Photography of Christina Broom* (London: Philip Wilson Publishers, 2015).

³⁸ Lynne Walker, ‘Locating the Global/Rethinking the Local: Suffrage Politics, Architecture, and Space’, *Women’s*

its infrastructures and public spaces for her personal pleasure and political agendas, the New Woman created a female alternative geography of interlinking trajectories across the city, which included not just private drawing rooms, but parks, streets, department stores, and omnibuses. In so doing she did not just participate in the urban modernity outlined by Baudelaire, but actively shaped it.

2.1 FEMMES GALANTES: A CASE STUDY OF OUIDA

The New Woman, a complex icon of ‘the Woman Question’, has become the defining cypher of feminist progress at the *fin de siècle*, but although this multifaceted, collectively constructed figure catalysed women’s struggle for independence, careers, or sexual emancipation, these struggles may also have been explored and expressed outside the New Woman iconography. I suggest that Ouida, whose long career spanned from the 1860s to the turn of the century, may throw into relief how reception history has streamlined the feminist meta-narrative.

Ouida’s immensely popular novels were renowned for portrayals of excess, adultery, betrayal, and abuse which defied Victorian conventions of morality and poetic justice.³⁹ Marie Corelli criticised ‘the system of morals set forth in her books’.⁴⁰ Other critics deemed that ‘the general influence of her novels is unhealthy’ or professed she was ‘Nordau’s “degenerate” incarnate’, that ‘Preachers have cried out against the immorality of “Ouida”, and mammas have forbidden their daughters to read her, and gentlemen of the world have pretended to shudder at her cynicism.’⁴¹ Her polemic response to Sarah Grand has been read as ‘antifeminist’ by second-wave canon revisionists, which rendered her ‘invisible in today’s canon’.⁴² Yet, as Pamela Gilbert also notes, many of Ouida’s characters anticipate the New Woman⁴³ and as Schaffer

Studies Quarterly, 34:1/2 (2006), 174-196, p. 182.

³⁹ Andrew King, ‘Ouida 1839-1901: Quantities, Aesthetics, Politics’, in *Ouida and Victorian Popular Culture*, ed. by Jane Jordan and Andrew King (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 13-37.

⁴⁰ Marie Corelli, ‘A Word about ‘Ouida’’, *Belgravia* 71, March 1890, repr. in Ouida, *Moths*, ed. by Natalie Schroeder (Peterborough: Broadview Press) p. 567.

⁴¹ Ella, ‘Ouida’, *The Victoria Magazine* 28, March 1877, repr. in Ouida, *Moths*, ed. by Natalie Schroeder (Peterborough: Broadview Press) p. 565. Willa Cather, ‘The Passing Show’, *The Courier*, 23 November 1895, repr. in Ouida, *Moths*, ed. by Natalie Schroeder (Peterborough: Broadview Press), p. 573.

⁴² Pamela Gilbert, ‘Ouida and the other New Woman’, in *Victorian Women Writers and the Woman Question*, ed. by Nicola Diane Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 170-188, p. 170; Ledger.

⁴³ Gilbert, p. 170.

observes: ‘Ouida’s own life follows a New Woman pattern: as an unmarried woman who supported herself through writing, who initiated relationships with men outside of marriage, and who stubbornly followed her own rules for fashion and etiquette in spite of social norms, she might even have been a role model.’⁴⁴ Indeed, she persuasively argues that Ouida’s essay in fact utilises an exaggerated imaginary of the New Woman to construct her own activism, for example against animal cruelty, as temperate and reasonable, thereby justifying it.

Moreover, Ouida’s fiction doubtlessly has important contributions to make in imagining independent and liberated women. From Cigarette, the boyish vivandière of *Under Two Flags* (1867) who traverses Algiers at all times, heights, and speeds, and also rides into battle, to the ‘Femme Galantes’ Lady Dolly (*Moths*, 1880), Madame Mila (*In a Winter City*, 1876) or Mouse (*The Messarenes*, 1897), fashionable, hedonistic adulteresses to whom cosmopolitan Europe is a marketplace and spectacle, to be traversed and exploited at leisure, Ouida writes characters we have been taught do not exist in Victorian literature.⁴⁵ Her ‘Femme Galante’ ‘neither forfeits her place nor leaves her lord; who has studied adultery as one of the fine arts and made it one of the domestic virtues; who takes her wearied lover to her friends’ houses as she takes her muff or her dog; [...] who challenges the world to find a flaw in her.’⁴⁶ Others, like the wealthy Lady Hilda find it ‘very pleasant to be mistress of herself—to do absolutely as she chose—[...] to go to bed in Paris and wake up in St. Petersburg if the fancy took her’.⁴⁷ These female characters are not as virtuous as they seem, but are assertive, sexually active, and cheerfully oblivious that they should deserve anything less than a happy ending. While Ouida often employs them as critical satire, she also suggests they might exist and grants them autonomy and power over their social environment, and they never end up as Fallen Women. This will become especially pertinent when we look at neo-Victorian adaptations later in this chapter.

Ouida’s female characters are diverse and complex, and defy the binary categories often expected from Victorian literature. She discusses female artistry and autonomy in *Ariadne* (1877), paints her *Princess Napraxine* (1884) as a cold, asexual, and yet powerful figure, or,

⁴⁴ Schaffer, ‘Foolscap and Ink’, p. 47.

⁴⁵ ‘Lady Dolly is equally at home frequenting the gaming tables in Monte Carlo or attending morning services in London in order to maintain the social visibility crucial to her continued social acceptance.’, Wendy Parkins, *Mobility and Modernity in Women’s Novels, 1850s-1930s: Women Moving Dangerously* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 50.

⁴⁶ Ouida, *In a Winter City*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1892), p. 82.

much in keeping with New Woman fiction, vocally criticises the institution of marriage as something that sells young women as objects and sanctifies abuse.⁴⁸ She does so most impressively in *Moths* (1880): ‘There is excessive rhetoric of brutality, of bestiality, and of unspecified male vices, which suggest indeed vices that could not be uttered... perhaps including vices such as marital rape, denied a name under British law’.⁴⁹ Indeed the novel, which vied for readers with Zola’s *Nana* (1880), was perceived to ‘out-Zola Zola’ in scandalous ways because it portrayed Zola-esque realism and vice in the fashionable drawing rooms of the upper classes.⁵⁰ As such, her fiction is absolutely concerned with the matters which informed the New Woman movement and debate, especially those of personal freedom. Andrew King explains Ouida’s individualism and challenges her exclusion from the canon:⁵¹

Ouida was of a decidedly libertarian persuasion. Her opposition to feminism and to the ‘New Woman’ stemmed from that very commitment to freedom. Her argument was that the ‘New Woman’ placed women in greater chains than ever. Such claims must irritate those who prefer the formation of a coherent genealogy of foremothers dedicated to the formal integration of women into the state and public life. But we must ask ourselves why we are irritated. [...] Are we the unconscious slaves of history reproducing the views of the modernists [...]?:⁵²

King here draws attention to the agendas which inform feminist scholarship and to the biases which have contributed to Ouida’s work being largely ignored in Victorian scholarship. We must consider how and why Ouida’s work challenges our conception of the New Woman or throws

⁴⁷ *In a Winter City*, p. 144.

⁴⁸ Talia Schaffer, *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture in Late-Victorian England* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000).

⁴⁹ Jane Jordan, ‘Ouida: The Enigma of a Literary Identity’, *The Princeton University Library Chronicle*, 57:1 (1995), 75-105, p. 96.

⁵⁰ Jane Jordan, “‘Romans Français Écrits En Anglais’: Ouida, the Sensation Novel and *Fin-De-Siècle* Literary Censorship”, in *Rediscovering Victorian Women Sensation Writers*, ed. by Anne-Marie Beller and Tara MacDonald (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 102-118. Also: Lisa Hager, ‘Embodying Agency: Ouida’s Sensational Shaping of the British New Woman’ in *Rediscovering Victorian Women Sensation Writers*, ed. by Anne-Marie Beller and Tara MacDonald (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 90-101.

⁵¹ Andrew King, ‘The Sympathetic Individualist: Ouida’s Late Work and Politics’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 39:2 (2011), 563-579.

⁵² Andrew King, ‘Introduction’ in Ouida, *The Messarenes*, ed. by Andrew King (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2011), pp. vii-xx, p. 2.

into relief feminist meta-narratives of steady progress. Second-wave feminism failed to account for Ouida's audacious heroines in a feminist canon of Victorian literature because her apparent rejection of New Woman politics and her individualist heroines defied the parameters for 'feminism' that governed the second and third wave. This is why we must next discuss how such parameters inform our readings of neo-Victorian 'feminist' fiction.

3. POST-FEMINISM, STEAMPUNK HEROINES, AND THE ACTION GIRL

The New Woman has come to encapsulate what has retroactively been identified as first-wave feminism, with the second wave following in the 1960s- 1980s. This wave, which entails academia's canon revision as well as coinciding with the advent of neo-Victorian literature, drew attention to and foregrounded resistance against systemic oppression of women in patriarchal Western society and history.⁵³ A third wave (1990s-early 2000s) was informed by the post-colonial feminism of Gayatri Spivak and Chandra Mohanty, by Judith Butler's work on gender performativity, or Donna Haraway's cyborg manifesto, as well as by queer theory at large, but it is also an era in which feminist ideals were appropriated and marketed back to the young women who could take feminist achievements of the previous wave for granted by a neoliberal media and global market. Characterised by a backlash against the perceived brash manliness of the 1980s superwoman and a rebellious as well as commercialised re-claiming of traditional femininity through Girl Power, a movement which redefined women's rights and equality 'in terms of a liberal individualist politics that centres around lifestyle choices and personal consumer pleasures',⁵⁴ this complicated 'double entanglement' of anti-feminist and feminist ideas⁵⁵ is often theorised as 'post-feminism'.⁵⁶ This term may in turn denote a 'free market

⁵³ Seminal contributions made by Elaine Showalter, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Adrienne Rich, Julia Kristeva, bell hooks, Audrey Lorde, or Margaret Atwood, and Ursula K. Le Guin.

⁵⁴ Stéphanie Genz, *Postfemininities in Popular Culture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 2.

⁵⁵ Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture, and Social Change* (London: SAGE Publications, 2009).

⁵⁶ 'In the British and American media, 'postfeminism' has been used from the late 1980s onwards to refer to a supposed obsolescence of feminism, pitting the stereotype of the older, serious, sour-faced second-wave feminist against the fun-loving, pole-dancing, carefree younger postfeminist who grew up listening to the 'girl power' band Spice Girls.' Antonija Primorac, *Neo-Victorianism on Screen: Postfeminism and Contemporary Adaptations of Victorian Women* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 98; Antonija Primorac, 'The Naked Truth: The Postfeminist Afterlives of Irene Adler', *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 6:2 (213), 89-113.

feminism' which sells an illusion of feminist progress via fashion and cosmetics,⁵⁷ a 'sense of intellectual fatigue and exhaustion as we seem to have run out of steam', the idea that 'suggests that the project of feminism has ended, either because it has been completed or because it has failed and is no longer valid',⁵⁸ or a treacherous 'kind of substitute for feminism'.⁵⁹ As Antonija Primorac notes, 'empowerment and choice have been appropriated by the neo-liberal media that seeks to inspire women (especially young women) to perceive their agency as that of active, self-monitoring, heterosexually desiring consumers who are now encouraged to choose traditional gender roles'.⁶⁰

These complexities in the feminist project also affect neo-Victorian media and second-wave steampunk. Here, authors seek to re-articulate received notions about the Victorian woman as a symbol of femininity under patriarchal control through post-feminist strategies and create steampunk role models of empowerment that both highlight and overcome the limitations placed on their historical ancestors. In neo-Victorian post-feminism, a nostalgia for femininity and clear gender roles converges in complex ways with the desire to construct a teleological genealogy of steady female liberation and empowerment, giving rise to paradoxical relationships with femininity itself.⁶¹ As Genz notes: 'Femininity in particular has been hampered by negative associations of female oppression and inferiority that stubbornly cling to its descriptions and expressions.'⁶² Under the post-feminist lens, expressions of female agency and empowerment have become pluralistic and contradictory because they are entangled with the idea of lifestyle choices, and this ideology is in conflict with second-wave ideals which reject the 'traditional'. Femininity often becomes a casualty of this rejection and on the surface level, frills, flounces, or full skirts remain stereotyped markers of docile subservience, naivety, innocence, or bubbly superficiality. However, as Genz outlines, the 'central tenet of Girl Power is that femininity is powerful and empowering, endowing the female subject with the agency to create herself and

⁵⁷ Imelda Whelehan, *Modern Feminist Thought: From the Second Wave to 'Post-Feminism'*, (New York: New York University Press, 1995).

⁵⁸ Genz, p. 2, 20.

⁵⁹ McRobbie, p. 1.

⁶⁰ Primorac, *Postfeminism*, p. 5; Rosalind Gill, 'Postfeminist media culture: Elements of a sensibility', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10:2 (2007), 147-166.

⁶¹ 'Screen texts offer the pleasures of a nostalgic return to an era of perceived gender certainties for a generation of viewers who take feminism's achievements for granted and who do not have a memory of its struggle', Primorac, *Postfeminism*, p. 17.

negotiate the possibilities of her gender role' (p. 94). Femininity provides creative and flexible ways to re-fashion female identities and re-appropriate 'traditional' expressions of gender into a feminist discourse (p. 94). A post-millennial femininity allows for 'multiple layers of signification and female identification that go beyond the dualities of subject and object, perpetrator and victim, power and powerlessness' and is therefore worth investigating (p. 7).

In steampunk, the complex desires to portray empowered women while also enjoying a Victorian aesthetic received as elaborate, beautiful, whimsical, or romantic, may be solved by the fact that steampunk is in a position to craft anachronistic, independent heroines in the never-was space of the steampunk city. Here, the retrofuturistic element allows for counter-factual, anachronistic heroines who combine the best of past and present — for example through the figure of the New Woman.⁶³ However, steampunk's endeavours to do so are equally entangled in post-feminist ideas, conflicting notions of femininity, or the sexist tropes of mainstream culture, and therefore often fail to enact narratives of real empowerment. Moreover, they reveal our present's own agenda in approaching and re-imagining the Victorian age and, against the backdrop of 'real' history, reveal the blind spots of our collective memory. In addition, the question of failure or success in articulating feminist ideals in a steampunk space also hinges on our sometimes-conflicting understandings of feminism and femininity, the latter of which is still so often read as conformity with patriarchal ideals by scholars instead of something that can be reclaimed and enjoyed by women for its own sake or even in defiance of the status quo. In the following, I shall briefly summarise recent analyses of post-feminist neo-Victorian media before I turn to Claire Nally's reading of steampunk and gender, which forms the backdrop for my own close readings of George Mann's *Newbury and Hobbs* series and Tee Morris and Pip Ballantine's *Ministry of Peculiar Occurrences* series.

⁶² Genz, p. 4.

⁶³ Perschon, 'Useful Troublemakers'.

3.1 NEO-VICTORIAN POST-FEMINISM

Popular films and TV series are perhaps the most widely consumed form of neo-Victorianism and may illustrate both how mainstream media conflates post-feminist ideas with a latent sexism, and how we collectively imagine Victorian femininity. Primorac's astute reading of Irene Adler's representations considers the *Sherlock Holmes* films directed by Guy Ritchie (2009 & 2011) and BBC's *Sherlock*, notably the episode *A Scandal in Belgravia* (2012). Her analysis

demonstrates how Irene Adler's on-screen afterlives reflect the contemporary postfeminist media's use of the naked, sexualised, female body as the source of women's power and agency. [...] The spectacle of the naked or overtly sexualised body, coded as a liberation of the repressed Victorian heroine, is identified as a distraction from a significant diminishment of Adler's agency.⁶⁴

In her reading, Primorac reminds us that Doyle's Adler is an independent and cosmopolitan woman (an opera singer), who not only outsmarts the Greatest Detective, but eludes him and lives her life happily and undetermined by him or anyone else. In recent and popular re-tellings, however, 'the elision of female agency takes place through a paradoxical representation of Adler as supposedly strong and in control because of her overt sexuality and reliance on using her body as a weapon. Such use of a woman's body and sexuality – as a means of 'empowerment' – belongs squarely to the postfeminist discourse present in popular culture and media, especially since the 1990s' (p. 98). While in theory, the reclamation of women's bodies under post-feminist sex positivity may seem empowering, it cannot be such if the narrative simultaneously curtails her movements and agency, scrutinises her through a male gaze, or punishes her for her alleged transgression of boundaries. In both Ritchie's *Sherlock Holmes* and BBC's *Sherlock*, Adler uses her body and sexuality to manipulate the titular hero as part of a criminal and romantic cat-and-mouse game. Moreover, Ritchie's narrative lets Holmes arrest Adler at the end of the first film and kills her in the second, where her employer Professor Moriarty disposes of her for falling in love with Holmes. As Primorac concludes, 'Adler in Ritchie's films fails to be more than a

⁶⁴ Primorac, *Postfeminism*, p. 14.

saucy, sexy criminal. Her agency, heavily reliant on her use of sexuality and her own body, is, in the end, safely neutralised by the cold-blooded criminal mastermind Moriarty who turns out to be her employer' (p. 99). In the BBC version, the bisexual dominatrix is ultimately 'reduced to a crouching damsel in distress, miraculously saved from death by Holmes himself' (p. 104).

Adler is at once 'empowered' in a way that services the male gaze and marketed as a post-feminist ideal of choice, and at the same time robbed of the freedom and power she possessed in the original text. This process of 'updating' Victorian texts [...] through the – now almost routine – 'sexing up' of the proverbially prudish Victorians' highlights how present-day conceptions of 'feminism', especially as consumerist choice, can become entangled with our perception of the Victorian age in paradoxical ways (p. 90). The persistent and erroneous stereotype of the inherently prudish and sexually repressed Victorians seems to afford us, who like to imagine ourselves as sexually emancipated people and empowered women, the opportunity to liberate and rescue them in our retrospective imaginary. But really, 'the "updating" of Adler as a dominatrix and a sexual woman gives her only the temporary power of the female body as fetish and a very 'Victorian' narrative destiny. As soon as she "over-reaches" her limits of agency as a sexualised body, Adler promptly falls/fails, is humiliated and punished' (p. 42-43). It is this trope of punishing the transgressive or Fallen Woman which constitutes an especially persistent echo of Victorian conventions, and one that neo-Victorian and steampunk narratives, as well as popular culture at large, often reproduce, as we will see in the following.

3.2 MINA HARKER: NEW WOMAN?

Claire Nally, in her study on steampunk and gender, posits Mina Harker from Alan Moore's and Kevin O'Neill's graphic novel series *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (1999-present) as an empowered female character. She cites Harker's leadership, education, and independence as markers of the New Woman, as well as the fact that she smokes and is called 'a smelly little lesbian' by Moriarty, because she troubles and threatens conventional gender relations.⁶⁵ These markers seem indeed designed to characterise Harker as transgressive, but already she is defined by a man's (rather ugly) utterances which also re-iterate the more misogynistic stereotypes which

were levelled at the New Woman in her own time. Nally also points to Harker's aggressive seduction of an elderly, seemingly emasculated version of Rider Haggard's imperial masculinist hero, Allan Quatermain, as evidence for her re-negotiation of gender relations: 'She then proceeds to undress in front of the bewildered older man [...] whilst he feebly protests [...] and in a graphic representation of their sexual encounter, Mina climbs on top of the aged Quatermain [...]' (p. 200-201). This seems hardly more than a crude reversal of gendered power relations, and its implication that getting consent is beneath whoever is the empowered party is highly problematic. Harker's 'empowerment' is derived purely from the appropriation of male-coded behaviours of dominance — if not 'toxic masculinity' — and thereby only plays into stereotypes of the New Woman as a perversion.

While I agree with Nally that Harker's struggles with patriarchal structures, especially in trying to lead the team of heroes, 'represent the ways in which women are silenced or otherwise devalued' (p. 204). I consider what she diagnoses as an attempt to 'address the toxic masculinity which we might more obviously associate with twenty-first century discourses around rape culture' as highly ambivalent and potentially flawed (p. 203). As Nally convincingly shows, Harker, whose assertiveness and independence threaten masculine identities, is continually under threat from such toxic masculinity, but the detailed, graphic, and 'highly sexualized' depiction of a patriarchal revenge fantasy in the form of a psychological rape by the Invisible Man also re-iterate and perpetuate a voyeuristic male gaze that makes the reader complicit, and uses trauma to undermine Harker's perceived defiance of patriarchy (p. 203). In fact, she is introduced to the narrative in a situation where she is threatened with rape and saved by Quatermain, so her alleged empowerment as a New Woman is very much in question throughout the narrative.

The fact that Nally considers Harker to demonstrate that the 'value of steampunk narrative [...] is that women's agency is written back into the history, albeit fantastically and retrospectively', while I find her a troubling example of how such attempts are nonetheless often thwarted by a pervasive sexism, illustrates how different conceptions of 'feminism' may come into conflict with one another (p. 203). Nally's post-feminist lens approves of how Harker draws attention to the ways in which women, especially progressive ones, are under threat by toxic masculinity and rape culture, while my fourth-wave feminist lens foregrounds how that

⁶⁵ Nally, p. 200.

endeavour is compromised by the graphic novel's perpetuation of sexist tropes and its casual attitude towards sexual violence. Moreover, Harker's alleged empowerment is just as much centred around her sexuality, curtailed by the male gaze, and under threat from the patriarchy, as that of neo-Victorian Irene Adler.

3.3 FAUX ACTION GIRLS: VERONICA HOBBS AND ELIZA BRAUN

Let us now look more closely at two steampunk heroines who enact a flawed post-feminism. Miss Veronica Hobbes, assistant and partner-in-crime to be of Sir Maurice Newbury, the gentleman detective in Mann's Newbury & Hobbes series, is introduced as 'pretty: brunette, in her early twenties, with a dainty but full figure, and dressed in a white blouse, grey jacket, and matching skirt.'⁶⁶ Whereas the sensible blouse and skirt combination are meant to indicate a capable and forthright New Woman type, this first impression fails to communicate any characteristics not related to her (sexualised) body: she is seen through a male gaze.

We are repeatedly assured that Miss Hobbes 'can look after herself' (33), has a sharp mind, makes astute observations, and is generally practical. Newbury is regularly 'impressed', however, which indirectly suggests that he supposes other Victorian women to be frivolous, feminine, and largely useless. In line with Mann's reliance of superficial but familiar tropes, Veronica is never characterised in more depth. We infer from her manner of speech that she is a rational person and intrigued by mystery, which makes her an appropriate sounding board for the detective hero, but she is supposedly a secret agent in her own right. In the second novel, *The Osiris Ritual* (2009), Veronica investigates a series of disappearances of women from a theatre in Soho, alone and 'expressly against the wishes of Sir Maurice' (164). We are assured that 'she was also an agent of Her Majesty Queen Victoria, and that she was quite capable of managing a case of her own. She was fully aware of the risks and saw nothing unduly dangerous about her choosing to tackle Alfonso on her own. If he proved difficult, she had the wherewithal to incapacitate him and call for the police' (164-165). This remains pure theory: although she does indeed demonstrate her skill in a sword duel with the suspect, Veronica is nonetheless outwitted by a trapdoor, ironically going the same way as the other kidnap victims in Alfonso's

disappearing act. Captured by a mad scientist archetype, the woman ‘who can take care of herself’ has to be rescued by Newbury.

This episode both suggests that the city remains a space of danger for ‘New Women’—even steampunk ones — and undermines Veronica’s claims to capability and autonomy by repositioning her as an ingenue and reduced to a Damsel in Distress. This clichéd staple of Western popular storytelling has been classified this as a trope in itself, called ‘Distress Ball’, by the online wiki TvTropes, a repository of fan criticism:⁶⁷ ‘If any female character, in a burst of anger or enthusiasm, decides to go off and accomplish something on her own without the hero, she will fail miserably and again have to be rescued.’⁶⁸ Popular fan criticism, fuelled by social media, routinely interrogates performances of gender and its place in popular narratives, and considering how deeply embedded steampunk is in the knowledge communities that pop culture creates (see Chapter Two), we must take into account how ‘white knowledge’ about narrative tropes must inevitably inform the steampunk heroine. This is evident not least in the action-adventure heroine, the default heroine in many steampunk fictions and often an example of allegedly empowered female characters falling short. ‘The action heroine’s conflicting identifications involve a continuous play between passivity and activity, vulnerability and strength, feminism and femininity, individualism and communality’, writes Genz: ‘[She] is either portrayed as a semi-tough pretender to male power who is ultimately too feminine to be as effectual as her male counterpart; or depicted as a de-feminized male impersonator, reinforcing the link between masculinity and toughness.’⁶⁹ In many ways, the action heroine ‘epitomizes the multiple subject and agency positions that become available to women in a twenty-first-century context’ as a character who is supposedly an empowered woman, confidently exerting agency by participating in action-oriented plots (p. 153). She ‘adopts a number of characteristics and attitudes that have been deemed masculine or male and she challenges the essentialist dichotomy that denies women recourse to action and strength as means to empowerment’ (p. 152). As such, however, she also runs the risk of becoming a token character in what is usually still a male-

⁶⁶ Mann, *Affinity Bridge*, p. 26.

⁶⁷ Founded in 2004, TvTropes is a popular wiki that catalogues storytelling tropes across a variety of media, from television and film to literature, comics, video games, music, and advertising.

⁶⁸ Anon., ‘Distress Ball’, *TvTropes*, n.d., <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/DistressBall> (Accessed 28th April 2020).

⁶⁹ Genz, p. 153-154.

dominated narrative. Tokenism constitutes an ‘alluring fantasy of transcendence and power’ while it simultaneously ‘works to secure the status quo as it glorifies the exception’ (p. 152).

In fan criticism, this type is known as the ‘Strong Female Character’. Sophia McDougall’s column echoes Genz when she explains:

Part of the patronising promise of the Strong Female Character is that she’s anomalous. ‘Don’t worry!’ that puff piece or interview is saying when it boasts the hero’s love interest is an SFC. ‘Of course, normal women are weak and boring and can’t do anything worthwhile. But this one is different. She is strong! See, she roundhouses people in the face.’⁷⁰

Like Mina Harker above, the Strong Female Character is ‘empowered’ mainly through her imitation of male-coded behaviour, and often shown being at variance with traditionally feminine characters or behaviours. Customarily, the action heroine is presented as remedial evidence of women’s emancipation, designed as post-feminist proof that feminist goals have been achieved and feminism is obsolete. As Genz posits, she is an ‘intrinsically ambiguous persona who walks a tightrope to achieve an almost impossible balance’ (p. 152). Thus, the success of an action heroine’s ‘empowerment’ hinges not on her physical strength or her ability to keep up with male characters, but rather on whether or not she may exert agency within the plot, and whether or not she is defined by a male gaze. Veronica Hobbes, on the terms of TvTropes, is only a ‘Faux Action Girl’, who is ‘supposed to be The Hero (or, one of the heroes), but never gets to actually do anything heroic. She has a well-grounded reputation as a strong fighter in her field, but always fails miserably in the line of battle’.⁷¹ We will see why this matters through a closer look at Tee Morris and Pip Ballantine’s popular series of novels, *The Ministry of Peculiar Occurrences* (2011-2017), which succeeds in presenting us with a wide variety of female characters, thereby foregoing tokenism, but which still becomes tangled up in contradictory representations which undermine its project of empowerment.

We are introduced to agent Eliza Braun, one half of the protagonist duo Books and Braun, through a cinematic trope:

⁷⁰ Sophia MacDougall, ‘I Hate Strong Female Characters’, *New Statesman*, 15th August 2015, <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2013/08/-hate-strong-female-characters> (Accessed 26th April 2020).

⁷¹ Anon., ‘Faux Action Girl’, *TvTropes*, n.d., <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/FauxActionGirl> (Accessed 28th April 2020).

A lady emerged from the smoke and debris—though her improper fashions indicated that she was unworthy of the title. She was wearing pinstripe breeches tucked neatly into boots that stopped just above the knee. More disturbing than the fact that this ‘lady’ was wearing trousers were the sticks of dynamite strapped around her thighs. The boots also had several sheaths for knives. The bodice she was wearing was a black leather device, which not only served to lift the petite woman’s bosom up but also provided a secure surface for the baldric she wore across it. All this was accented with an impressive, fur coat that flowed around her like a cape.⁷²

Her visually coded emergence from the clearing smoke immediately identifies Eliza with popular action narratives in film and TV, which is strengthened by her male-coded attire. Identified from the first moment as an Action Girl, a ‘female badass’,⁷³ Eliza is vulnerable to the conflicting stereotypical descriptions that characterise the type. A vision of literally weaponised sexuality, she simultaneously manages to scandalise and titillate the supposedly modest, gentlemanly focal character, agent Books. The latter, in keeping with steampunk’s ironic fascination with ‘Victorian’ social conventions, is suitably shaken by Eliza not performing traditional femininity, even while she is saving his life. Through setting itself up with a gendered reversal of the Damsel in Distress trope, the novel promises an ‘unconventional’, that is independent, daring, and forthright heroine who is at odds with everything we (and Books) have been made to expect from a Victorian woman. The *Ministry of Peculiar Occurrences* series here styles itself as a steampunk adventure in the vein of the 1960s television series *The Avengers*, and by inserting an action-spy heroine into a Victorian setting, purports to play with our expectation through subversion, humour, and irony.

This largely succeeds. Eliza is vocal, impulsive, stubborn, and fierce where Books is temperate, timid, and practical. Both are characterised through attributes usually associated with the opposite gender, especially in a Victorian context. In an added post-colonial dimension, many of Eliza’s transgressive behaviours which continue to unsettle Books in humorous ways

⁷² Pip Ballantine and Tee Morris, *Phoenix Rising: A Ministry of Peculiar Occurrences Novel*, (New York: Harper Voyager, 2011), p. 2.

⁷³ Anon., ‘Action Girl’, *TvTropes*, n.d., <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/ActionGirl> (Accessed 28th April 2020).

are ascribed to the fact that she is from New Zealand. Eliza, with her penchant for eclectic cross-dressing in trousers, belts, and other masculine items, embodies steampunk subculture's approach to style. Her initial ensemble of pinstripe breeches, bodice, and knee-high boots is certainly more at home at a steampunk convention or photo-shoot than in any Victorian or neo-Victorian context. However, Eliza also dresses in traditionally feminine gowns for social occasions. This implies she evaluates clothing on the basis of practicality and purpose, and freely tailors her gender performance through fashion to the urban spaces through which she travels: in the realm of performing gender and femininity through fashion, Eliza certainly exerts agency. She does this also by securely and freely navigating the East End docklands, where the Ministry is located. She enjoys 'legwork' in Whitechapel, as it

was very familiar. She and Harry had spent a great deal of time down here as many Peculiar Occurrences happened in the cramped houses and narrow alleyways in this part of London. This was the corner of the City, forgotten and ignored by the upper classes, full of rabble-rousers, Fabians, cut-throats, and Dollymops. It was dirty, dangerous, and dank.' (151)

Whereas the passage portrays some familiar stereotypes about Whitechapel, it also attests Eliza a sort of alternative urban knowledge. Like Sherlock Holmes, she is familiar with its networks and idiosyncrasies, especially those shabby-genteel urban tribes which characterised the London of steampunk's first wave. As a detective walking a beat and listening in to conversations in the pub, she displays a combination of idleness, observation, and purpose which reminds us of the flâneur. Eliza also engages with her 'targets' in disguise or adopts specific feminine roles in order to gather her information, and self-fashions according to her purpose. In addition to her wandering on foot, Eliza also (literally) harnesses urban infrastructures, for example in a chase scene around Charing Cross. In accordance with her fiery temperament, she borrows a cab to pursue a suspect, becoming considerably more than an observant passenger (124-130). She similarly transgresses into masculine territory in the second novel, when we see her riding a 'lococycle' (stolen from another female character, a seductive villainess), which we can infer from its 'two wheels [...] like a bicycle', its 'valves, pistons and flyways', and the 'narrow tray [...] that flickered with blue flame', 'something the devil himself might have invented' (195)

looks like a modern motorcycle.⁷⁴ As an upgraded, energetic and volatile bicycle, certainly not intended for ‘genteel pursuits’, the device becomes a sexually charged symbol of unstoppable mobility, especially when ridden by a woman in trousers, astride.. A male focal character perceives the villainess Sophia del Morte (who owned the lococycle before Eliza) as follows: ‘She looked terrifying and arousing, clad in men’s attire, atop a hissing, chugging machine’ (196).

It is certainly telling that this sexualised machine is given to the enticing assassin with a penchant for luxuries, both feminine and transgressive, and cast in the role of the alluring *femme fatale*. It is equally telling that Eliza later uses it for high speed pursuits and launching herself at an airship. Both Eliza and Sophia, who by no small coincidence resemble one another in appearance, are presented as Action Girls. Sophia scales the Natural History Museum in order to steal a valuable artefact, demonstrating her mobility across vertical as well as horizontal axes and enacting a fantasy of freedom and agency much like the player in *Assassins Creed* (see Chapter Three). As a criminal, she transgresses boundaries at every turn, but both she and Eliza freely traverse the city in ways only a steampunk heroine might. It is certainly no coincidence either that both Sophia and Eliza are outlined as sexual and sexually empowered women, one the sultry, cosmopolitan *femme fatale* with multiple lovers, the other an outgoing, flirtatious ‘Colonial Pepperpot’ with a somewhat predictable romantic weakness for the male hero.⁷⁵

It is here that Eliza’s (self-)stylisation as an empowered Action Girl becomes complicated, because the novel dismantles her performance by revealing a much more traditional love life designed to tone down her sexual independence so that she may be romantically available for the hero. Such a desire to make independent or transgressive women more vulnerable and therefore palatable for male consumption is present in our wider popular culture, as Irene Adler’s neo-Victorian afterlives show. Moreover, this desire to rein in the Fallen Woman, and which in Victorian literature mostly means a tragic death, is here enacted through victimisation, violation, or humiliation, usually in gendered ways: Adler crouches before male aggressors, Harker is threatened with rape, Hobbes becomes a Damsel in Distress. In keeping

⁷⁴ Pip Ballantine and Tee Morris, *The Janus Affair: A Ministry of Peculiar Occurrences Novel*, (New York: Harper Voyager, 2012). While the motorcycle, in its earliest version, was invented as early as 1885, we can assume that this machine is a techno-fantastical anachronism.

⁷⁵ *Phoenix Rising*, p. 57.

with this unfortunate trope, Eliza is subjected to explicit and gendered abuse in *Phoenix Rising*, while the male hero is given a leisurely tour of the mad scientist's underground lair. The fact that this is not her first time in a dungeon, as she had 'spent some nightmarish weeks in the Kaiser's cells' (348) or that she banters, provokes, and insults her assailant do not negate this. The following passages show this:

Using the short chain between the cuffs as a makeshift leash he tugged her over to the wall to take advantage of a 'convenient' hook overhead. When he hoisted her by the cuffs with his free arm onto the hook, she felt her arms and sides stretch. Eliza would be forced to stand on tiptoes to take the tension off her shoulders. [...]

His tongue was lapping up the blood and on reaching the small wound he sucked slightly. With him so close to her, Eliza could feel his erection pressing against her. With a delighted gasp, he pulled away from her arm, grabbed Eliza's hair, and tugged hard. Her surprised wince was enough for Devane to shove his tongue into her mouth. [...] His moans were sickening, even more sickening than the feel of his hand cupping her breast through the muslin of her undergarments, his forefinger and thumb teasing her nipple. That was the mistake she was hoping for.' (350-352)

While Eliza soon overpowers her assailant without outside help, we must ask ourselves why we are given such explicit descriptions before she does. Like Mina Harker's symbolic rape, this seems too much like a punishment for her transgressive sexuality, as it explicitly targets her sexually. And while she frees herself from this gendered victimisation, it is not long before Books must rescue her after all when the trigger-happy heroine is knocked out and it falls to the Archivist, who we suddenly find out is a master marksman, to carry her to safety (363-370). While Eliza is certainly empowered in some areas, she also frequently lapses back into Faux Action Girl territory. She is re-imagined 'as feisty, sexually and physically active, a heroine with her own agenda, reluctant to be tied down by the rules of propriety – yet, ultimately, a heroine whose agency is re-inscribed within a patriarchal system of power-play.'⁷⁶ It is then not surprising that the assassin Sophia del Morte, like Adler in Ritchie's film, also turns out to be working for a more powerful, male criminal mastermind. Fan criticism is also aware of this last-

⁷⁶ Primorac, *Postfeminism*, p. 99.

minute cop-out in popular media:

Nowadays the princesses all know kung fu, and yet they're still the same princesses. They're still love interests, still the one girl in a team of five boys, and they're all kind of the same. They march on screen, punch someone to show how they don't take no shit, throw around a couple of one-liners or forcibly kiss someone because getting consent is for wimps, and then with ladylike discretion they back out of the narrative's way.⁷⁷

3.4 IN HINDSIGHT: NEO-VICTORIAN GENDER

On one hand, we find the desire of neo-Victorian media to 'sex up' and 'liberate' Victorian women, stereotypically imagined as 'repressed both in terms of gender and sexuality',⁷⁸ and on the other persistent narrative tropes that monitor those same women through a male gaze, curtail their agency, or punish their transgression of gender boundaries. It seems that the Victorian woman, imagined in retrospect, provides a potent symbol onto which present-day desires and fears around femininity and gender are projected. '[R]ebellious women', notes Eckart Voigts, 'repressed in their political as well as in their sexual expression, seem to be locked in a perennial battle with the Victorian patriarchy'.⁷⁹ As he suggests in his analysis of steampunk performer Emilie Autumn, the Victorian imaginary, envisioned with an appalled fascination, may throw such rebellions into greater relief: 'Victorian subcultures are rewarding because they are clearly defined by normative discourses and lend contrastive poignancy to portrayals of transgression.'⁸⁰ The Victorian woman, imagined as repressed and unhappy, becomes the Other against which contemporary feminism and post-feminism may define themselves. This sometimes requires a backdrop of almost comically exaggerated stereotypes, so that the liberated and rebellious heroine with which the post-feminist reader is invited to identify, may appear all the more emancipated. We see this in *Phoenix Rising*'s portrait of a secret society who plot to build an

⁷⁷ McDougall, n.p.

⁷⁸ Primorac, *Postfeminism*, p. 106.

⁷⁹ Eckart Voigts, "'Victoriana's Secret': Emilie Autumn's Burlesque Performance of Subcultural Neo-Victorianism', *Neo-Victorian Studies* 6:2 (2013), 15–39, p. 15.

⁸⁰ Voigts-Virchow, 'Hermeneutics', p. 20.

automated robot workforce secretly sourced with organic material from working-class victims. Their hyper-capitalism, which literally feeds off East End workers, is complemented by their hyper-patriarchal stand, made visible through their upper-class wives being portrayed in turn as traumatised abuse victims and an ‘erotic display’ for the male gaze as well as a sort of harem (277).

This however means that the repressed Victorian woman becomes an object of almost Gothic fascination. ‘We extract politically incorrect pleasure from what now appears comic, perverse, or ethically unimaginable as a focus of desire’, diagnoses Kohlke. ‘We enjoy neo-Victorian fiction in part to feel debased or outraged, to revel in degradation, reading for defilement. By projecting illicit and unmentionable desires onto the past, we conveniently reassert our own supposedly enlightened stance towards sexuality and social progress.’⁸¹ Heilmann and Llewelyn, too, underline the ‘nostalgic fetishization of the taboo, the secret and forbidden in a world of sexual over-exposure, a disingenuous belief in the radical nature of a society no longer under the shadow of what Michel Foucault conceptualised as the “repressive hypothesis”’.⁸² Much as Victorian Gothic has become neo-Victorianism’s new Other, Victorian gender becomes, as Kohlke has astutely observed, ‘the new Orientalism, a significant mode of imagining sexuality in our hedonistic, consumerist, sex-surfeited age’.⁸³

But such a nostalgic fetish of a time from which we have allegedly evolved, if repeated throughout popular culture on a large scale, becomes entangled with and obscures the gender politics at work in our present. As Primorac concludes:

Rather than exhibiting an unequivocally liberating potential, these neo-Victorian exposés of Victorian sexual hypocrisy and gendered oppression lose their impact in the sheer repetition of these tropes. When looked at cumulatively, this ‘sexsation’ turns into a dominant, prescriptive narrative that clouds the ideologically suspect undercurrents at work.⁸⁴

I have outlined why that is the case at the beginning of this chapter, and I have also illustrated

⁸¹ Marie-Luise Kohlke, ‘Sexsation’, p. 346.

⁸² Heilmann and Llewellyn, p. 107; Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 1978.

⁸³ Kohlke, ‘Sexsation’, p. 67.

⁸⁴ Primorac, *Postfeminism*, p. 93.

how contested and complex the New Woman as collectively imagined figure was. Whereas, as we have seen in the example of Ouida, the New Woman encapsulated a certain strand of feminist ideology that was not without alternatives, it is easy to see why steampunk gravitates towards this figure in order to re-imagine emancipated, feminist heroines through a neo-Victorian aesthetic shorthand. Steampunk, as retro-speculative mode, realises its fascination with the transformative potential inherent in historical currents and events through play, distortion, and anachronism, and may therefore re-imagine bold Action Girls as heroines. However, as we have seen, that endeavour might be hampered by relapses into sexist tropes, or as in the case of *The Janus Affair*'s portrait of the suffragist movement, use action and adventure tropes in ways that accidentally undermine the New Woman's revolutionary potential.

Here, New Zealand's suffragist leader, involuntary cyborg, and personal friend to Eliza, Kate Sheppard and her delegation have come to London following their success in winning women the vote at home and to inspire the movement in Britain.⁸⁵ The novel takes up women's mobility when we encounter Lena, a suffragist on her way back from Edinburgh, on the hypersteam-train (a steampunk amplification). Notably, the chapter is titled as 'Wherein the Perils of Train Travel Are Made Plain' (1). Lena is followed by an unspecified evil and even seeks to evade it by hiding on the roof of the carriage (3-5) — a stunt we associate with action movies rather than a Victorian setting. The young woman cannot escape her predicament and, upon locating Eliza in another compartment, vanishes in a mysterious electric ball of light.

In London, we witness a number of suffragists take up the public space of Hyde Park's Speaker's Corner, visible and active, yet unable to fully evade a few opinionated 'cads' (22) whose presence is meant to illustrate (patriarchal) opposition. They soon retaliate, not with their morally superior arguments but with a 'monstrosity of a rifle': 'The air around the rifle's barrel-bell distorted and wavered until brilliant pearly rings of heat and power burst from it' (25). By cooking a goose with this steampunk device, the suffragists apparently announce their strength and resolution, but it remains an ambivalent gesture of male-coded violence — perhaps a nod towards the later militant activism of the more radical Women's Social and Political Union, or simply an attempt to amplify the 'coolness factor' that often governs steampunk

⁸⁵ New Zealand granted women the vote in 1893. The novel is set in 1896.

logic.⁸⁶ In a similar vein, the novel also equips the suffragists with an all-female group of bodyguards versed in the art of bartitsu, using steampunk retro-speculation and counter-fact to amplify and highlight how the suffragist movement, at least in Britain, was caught up in a spiral of escalating and often gendered violence against the activists and in general on both sides.⁸⁷ These are good examples of steampunk's meta-Victorian shorthand.

However, it is the fact that suffragists like Lena become the victims of the mysterious electric beaming kidnapping device and are targeted in specifically public places such as Hyde Park, or a podium discussion, which risks re-affirming the idea that public places are precarious for women and those who transgress are likely to be victimised. The kidnappers turn out to be women themselves: a pair of Indian twins posing as suffragists are revealed to be fundamentalist radicals who project their colonial psychosis of displacement onto the rising menace of the women's movement: "“My country does not believe in this movement, and yet this cheek—this effrontery— is tolerated! [...] You see how the sickness has spread, even in my own home country where women begin to gather. They watch. They plan. And they will rise. One day, they all will”" (371). Through her reactionary diatribe the antagonist draws attention to feminist networks across the Empire. Her assertion that one day, 'they will all rise up' locates the beginning of a global, teleological meta-narrative of feminist activism and liberation in the late Victorian age — and specifically, in London. It is the public sphere of urban London which, in her view, becomes the stage on which first-wave feminism, and with it the foundation to later feminisms, is enacted, and which therefore becomes her target. Urban networks are here shown to play a significant role in steampunk's imaginary of feminist genealogies, and while their rebelliousness places the suffragists in danger especially in the public spaces in which that rebellion is enacted, it also becomes the conduit for it.

⁸⁶ 'The limit of the Willing Suspension of Disbelief for a given element is directly proportional to its awesomeness.' Anon., 'The Rule of Cool', *TvTropes*, n.d., <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/RuleOfCool> (Accessed 20th July 2020).

⁸⁷ An eclectic martial art and self-defence method comprised of elements of boxing, jujitsu, cane fighting, and French kickboxing, developed in 1898 by Edward William Barton-Wright and made famous through Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories.

4. RECLAIMING THE RETROFUTURE: ALEXIA TARABOTTI

Gail Carriger's supernatural romance, the Parasol Protectorate series was initially derided for not being 'steampunk enough' because it prioritised social comedy over technological speculation.⁸⁸ As we see with Claire Nally's reading of the series as running 'counter to more radical literature within the subculture', Carriger's frivolous and whimsy fiction can still be misunderstood as reinforcing 'conservative' romance tropes such as 'heteronormativity' or as misusing the 'wealth of post-feminist choice [...] to make some very conventional decisions'.⁸⁹ Nally's disapproval of Alexia Tarabotti, Carriger's heroine's 'so-called choices'⁹⁰ is evident from her quoting Rosalind Gill on post-feminist romance:

What is interesting, however, is the way in which they seem compelled to use their empowered postfeminist position to make choices that would be regarded by many feminists as problematic, located as they are in the normative notions of femininity. They choose, for example, white weddings, downsizing, giving up work or taking their husband's name on marriage.'⁹¹

Again the ideals of second-wave feminism come into conflict with 'notions of femininity'. I have already argued that the parameters of post-feminist criticism, which here deride pluralistic lifestyle choices for which previous generations have fought as somehow 'wrong' and 'not feminist enough', can overlook problematic sexist tropes such as the Faux Action Girl, and while Nally's diagnosis of conservatism may hold true for several steampunk romances, I posit that Carriger's fiction enacts a positive and inclusive steampunk vision in accordance with the ideals of fourth-wave feminism.⁹²

Fourth wave feminism (2008- present) is informed by a politics of intersectionality and

⁸⁸ The umbrella term for Carriger's fictional steampunk universe, in which several of her series are set: The 'Parasol Protectorate' (*Soulless*, 2009, *Changeless*, 2010, *Blameless*, 2010, *Heartless*, 2011 and *Timeless* 2012.) Another cycle begins with Alexia's daughter Prudence: The 'Custard Protocol' series (*Prudence* 2015, *Imprudence* 2016, *Competence* 2018, *Reticence*, 2019). Also a few tie-in novellas (*Romancing the Inventor*, 2016, and *Romancing the Werewolf*, 2017); Perschon, *Steampunk FAQ*, p. 158.

⁸⁹ Nally, p. 217, 135, 227.

⁹⁰ Nally, p. 227.

⁹¹ Rosalind Gill, *Gender and the Media*, (Malden: Polity Press, 2007), p. 269.

⁹² For example, her reading of Kate MacAllister's *Steamed*.

inclusion across race and class boundaries and relies on the high speed connectivity of social media to initiate a grassroots activism: ‘The internet has created a culture in which sexism or misogyny can be “called out” and challenged’, diagnosed Elasaïd Munro in 2013, when the term and movement gathered new momentum.⁹³ Social media ‘facilitated the creation of a global community of feminists who use the internet both for discussion and activism’.⁹⁴ Accordingly, fourth-wave feminism is embedded into the workings of convergence culture, ‘the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences’.⁹⁵ This both accounts for its plurality in the wake of post-feminism’s complex legacies and indicates how fourth-wave feminism may interact with pop culture and fan criticism.

It has added its own foci in addition to continuing third-wave projects about intersectionality with civil rights and queer activism, such as discussing workplace and street harassment, equal pay, body shaming, and rape culture,⁹⁶ resulting in hashtag campaigns such as #YesAllWomen (2014) or #MeToo (2017).⁹⁷ In fact, fourth-wave feminism has widely become known as the ‘MeToo era’, discussing how patriarchal power structures still influence and threaten women in the very spaces that previous feminist waves have fought to access. The movement has brought to light how these power structures have secretly re-captured the sexualised agency of female workers and appropriated it into systems of gate-keeping and exploitation. The fact that MeToo was catalysed and made visible through and within the

⁹³ Elasaïd Munro, ‘Feminism: A Fourth Wave?’, *Political Insight*, September 2013, 22-25, p. 23; Tegan Zimmerman, ‘#Intersectionality: The Fourth Wave Feminist Twitter Community’, *Atlantis*, 38:1 (2017), 54-70. Also: Jennifer Baumgardner, ‘Is There a Fourth Wave? Does It Matter?’, *Feminist*, 2011, <https://www.feminist.com/resources/artsspeech/genwom/baumgardner2011.html> (Accessed 26th April 2020); Henry Jenkins, Sangita Shresthova, Liana Gamber-Thompson, Neta Kligler-Vilenchik, and Arely Zimmerman, *By Any Media Necessary: The New Youth Activism* (New York: NYU Press, 2016).

⁹⁴ Munro, p. 23.

⁹⁵ Henry Jenkins, ‘Welcome to Convergence Culture’, *Confessions of an Aca-Fan*, 19th June 2006, http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2006/06/welcome_to_convergence_culture.html (Accessed 28th April 2020).

⁹⁶ Kira Cochrane, *All the Rebel Women: The rise of the fourth wave of feminism*, ebook, (London: Guardian Shorts, 2013). Prudence Chamberlain, *The Feminist Fourth Wave: Affective Temporality*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

⁹⁷ As Munro notes, fourth wave has generated its own language which lends itself to character limits and hashtagging: ‘The realisation that women are not a homogenous group has brought with it a set of new terminologies that attempt to ensure that those who hold a given identity are not spoken for, or carelessly pigeonholed. For newcomers, the vocabulary can be dizzying, from ‘cis’ (a neologism referring to those individuals whose gender and sexual identities map cleanly on to one another) to ‘WoC’ (‘women of colour’) and ‘TERF’ (‘trans-exclusionary radical feminists’). Munro, p. 25.

entertainment industry also highlights how mass media and popular culture are entangled in the dissemination of male-dominated cultural narratives, both behind the scenes and within the narratives themselves. We have seen this quite clearly on the examples of Irene Adler, Mina Harker, and Veronica Hobbes. Alexia Tarabotti is a different case.

4.1 IN THE LIBRARY, WITH THE HAIR PIN

We first meet Alexia, a spinster, having strayed into the library at a society ball in search for refreshments, ‘only to happen on an unexpected vampire’.⁹⁸ What might have been a clichéd Gothic scene between a ‘darkly shimmering’ vampire and a lady in a ‘low necked ball gown’ (1) is immediately recast in a Wodehousian tone. Alexia is a preternatural, which means her touch can negate supernatural abilities and she is more concerned with the vampire’s bad manners than the threat to her life: “I say!” said Alexia to the vampire. “We have not even been introduced!” (1). The damsel-and-vampire cliché is further subverted when Alexia ‘issued the vampire a very dour look’ and shoves him into a tray of treacle tart (‘Miss Tarabotti was most distressed by this. She was particularly fond of treacle tart’).

It is important to note that, unlike Veronica or Eliza, Alexia is not introduced through the male gaze of another focal character, but as an autonomous woman who not merely appears, but acts and reacts. In accordance with the chapter title, ‘In Which Parasols Prove Useful’ she wields her accessory, which was ‘terribly tasteless for her to be carrying at an evening ball’ and ‘whacked the vampire right on top of the head’: “‘Manners!’ instructed Miss Tarabotti’ (3). Undaunted and pragmatic, Alexia displays an unexpected set of personal priorities (for example, manners over physical safety) and re-purposes a traditionally feminine, ‘frilly’ (3) accessory which we might assume to be quite useless into a useful weapon. Later in the novel, Alexia’s friend Ivy will claim that she has ‘parasoled’ a man (42), thereby, as Montz notes, ‘turning this seemingly useful feminine article into an active verb, and a violent one at that’.⁹⁹ Similarly, Alexia re-purposes a wooden hairpin into a ‘hair *stake*’ (4, original emphasis), and kills the vampire with the wooden tip of her parasol. The scene subverts the familiar constellation of male

⁹⁸ Gail Carriger, *Soulless* (London: Orbit Books, 2009).

⁹⁹ Amy Montz, “‘In Which Parasols Prove Useful’: Neo-Victorian Rewriting of Victorian Materiality”, *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 4:1 (2011), 100-118, p. 108.

Victorian vampire and young woman into one where the latter retains power and agency, not despite her femininity but because of it.

Moreover, Alexia ingenuously uses gendered behaviours to her advantage, even particularly feminine stereotypes about female delicacy, for example to evade the awkwardness of being questioned: ‘With a resigned shrug, she screamed and collapsed into a faint. She stayed resolutely fainted, despite the liberal application of smelling salts, which made her eyes water most tremendously, a cramp in the back of one knee, and the fact that her new ball gown was getting most awfully wrinkled’ (6-7). Given this ironic play with gender conventions and the connotations of Victorian femininity, it is unsurprising that the parasol becomes an icon for Alexia and the series at large. In the second novel, she is gifted one that is quite literally weaponised, as it is outfitted with hidden compartments, poisonous darts, and silver and wooden tips to ward off supernatural attacks. This characterises Alexia, as Montz concludes, as a ‘damsel, saving *herself* from distress.’¹⁰⁰

Alexia is set up as active, decisive, and self-reliant, both defying ‘normative notions of femininity’ and re-purposing feminine behaviours and accoutrements in her own interest. Carriger’s series simultaneously celebrates the Victorian aesthetic in a semi-nostalgic way and semi-ironically pokes fun at it through a light and witty narrative tone that channels Jane Austen’s social comedy, Oscar Wilde’s absurd paradoxes, P. G. Wodehouse’s satire, and screwball comedy into a re-calibrated neo-Victorian collage. This becomes evident when she kills the vampire in self-defence: ‘Alexia’s books called this end of the vampire life cycle *dissanimation*. Alexia, who thought the action astoundingly similar to a soufflé going flat, decided to call it the Grand Collapse’ (6). The irony and parody always inherent in the steampunk mode is here foregrounded into a whimsical, but witty comedic style which at first seems to be at odds with the radical potential of steampunk, but which has caused Carriger’s work to become ‘easily one of the (if not the) most successful steampunk series ever published.’¹⁰¹ Furthermore, this mode is designed to interrogate and re-present Victorian

¹⁰⁰ Montz, p. 108.

¹⁰¹ ‘It won several awards, and within a year was being developed into a manga version for Yen Press that was released in 2011. The Parasol Protectorate series is easily one of the (if not the) most successful steampunk series ever published. Carriger dominates steampunk lists on Goodreads, which is ironic given that early criticism Carriger received had determined that her books weren’t ‘steampunk enough’ due to the lack of focus on technology. Looking at steampunk lists today; it seems that the whimsical paranormal steampunk adventure Carriger pioneered

imaginaries in clever ways, because it thrives on the humour, irony, and parody that operate in steampunk at a fundamental level.

4.2 POKING FUN WITH PARASOLS: HUMOUR AND GENDER

‘Neo-Victorianism’, as Kohlke and Gutleben note, ‘relies in fairly equal measure on a vacillating sense of homage and irreverence, praise and condemnation, fascination and disgust’, and catalyses how ‘[p]ostmodernity’s love-hate relationship with the nineteenth century throws up both comic convergences and incongruities between “then” and “now”, “Them”, and “Us”’.¹⁰² As we have seen in Chapter Two, ironic humour functions as a metafictional distancing device, and as something that is ‘doubly double: both temporally and ideologically’, neo-Victorian humour and steampunk especially play with our expectations, here regarding conventions of gender and genre.¹⁰³ In doing so, however, steampunk both re-activates persistent stereotypes about ‘the Victorians’ and then subverts, destabilises, or undermines them.¹⁰⁴ The audience ‘must subscribe to and be aware of the ironizing gestures’¹⁰⁵ at work for it to function, and hindsight can create a (false) sense of superiority: ‘Meanwhile the humorist poking fun at society’s institutions and leaders, exposing their faults and failings to ridicule, reveals superior clear-sightedness — a refusal to be gulled by appearances, reputation, propaganda, and spectacle. The extradiegetic audience participates in this superiority through its preparedness to be amused.’¹⁰⁶ This is especially important with regard to Victorian gender, which already often provides an other against which we define our seemingly enlightened moment.

In her study, Nally provides an astute analysis of how steampunk artists Doctor Geof and Nick Simpson parody and lampoon the masculine ideals of late-nineteenth-century new

is where the genre thrives best.’ Perschon, *FAQ*, p. 164.

¹⁰² Marie-Luise Kohlke, and Christian Gutleben, ‘What’s So Funny about the Nineteenth Century?’, in *Neo-Victorian Humour: Comic Subversions and Unlaughter in Contemporary Historical Re-Visions*, ed. by Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben (Amsterdam: Brill Rodopi, 2017), p. 1.

¹⁰³ Gutleben, ‘Fear is Fun’ p. 303, 310-311, Kohlke and Gutleben, ‘What’s So Funny?’, p. 3.

¹⁰⁴ ‘Moreover, by re-presenting period terminology, outmoded attitudes, and questionable ideological discourses in order to comically deconstruct them, neo-Victorian humour becomes implicated - even if only ironically - in their reproduction, inadvertently giving them new life and keeping them in cultural circulation.’ Kohlke and Gutleben, p. 2.

¹⁰⁵ Nally, p. 84-85.

¹⁰⁶ Kohlke and Gutleben, ‘Fear is Fun’, p. 12.

imperialism through ‘bathos, incongruous humour, carnivalesque excess and irony’, and I argue that the same forces are at work in Carriger’s work — if not more so.¹⁰⁷ These steampunk masculinities, expertly parodied through absurd confections with the trivial (in form of a Tea Referendum or a rocking horse, for example) as they are, seem content with identifying markers of toxic (Victorian) masculinity with a jovial self-irony that indirectly proclaims, ‘Look how far we have come!’ While they may reflect ‘on ways in which our contemporary moment can rethink these stereotypes’, they also seem to lack the vocabulary to really do so.¹⁰⁸

Carriger’s ‘Parasolverse’, on the other hand, succeeds in its steampunk comedy by lovingly exaggerating Victorian fashions and manners, which, as part of Sterling’s ‘weird and archaic’, seem fascinating and absurd in themselves, and by conflating genre tropes (especially urban fantasy) with the Victorian aesthetic. In this steampunk world, werewolves, vampires, and ghosts have been assimilated into British society, and so high necklines are made fashionable by vampires wanting to hide neck bites, and werewolf soldiers explain Britain’s colonial power. What is more, the series avoids setting up a monolithic ‘Victorian femininity’, against which only the heroine stands out, by presenting us with a variety of different female characters. Alexia, pragmatic and intelligent because ‘preternatural’ and therefore ‘soulless’, has a ‘bluestocking’ curiosity and is unconventional in that she is buxom and half Italian, which is widely assumed to be an unfashionable disadvantage.¹⁰⁹ Alexia’s aberrations are framed within the Victorian aesthetic — she does not depend on ‘liberating’ anachronisms in order to be a modern heroine, but can be so within the logic of the hyper-Victorian intertextual collage. In keeping with this, many of her personal freedoms and eccentricities are justified by her being either a spinster or, later on, an eccentric aristocrat. Alexia has been put ‘on the shelf at fifteen’ (32)), but does not mind this: ‘Not that she had never actually coveted the burden of a husband, but it would have been nice to know she could get one if she ever changed her mind’ (32). As a spinster, she also enjoys her ‘ever-increasing degree of freedom’ (30). Her mother in fact thinks of her as ‘revoltingly independent’ (31). Such independence is also expressed in her mobility as

¹⁰⁷ Nally, p. 130.

¹⁰⁸ Nally, p. 130.

¹⁰⁹ ‘She would have coloured gracefully with embarrassment had she not possessed the complexion of one of those “heathen Italians”, as her mother said, who never coloured, gracefully or otherwise. (Convincing her mother that Christianity had, to all intents and purposes, originated with the Italians, thus making them the exact opposite of heathen, was a waste of time and breath.)’ Carriger, *Soulless*, p. 11.

it enables her to walk freely and unaccompanied through the genteel, but public urban space of Hyde Park, years before the advent of the bicycle: ‘Under ordinary circumstances, walks in Hyde Park were the kind of thing a young lady of good breeding was not supposed to do without her mama and possibly an elderly female relation or two in attendance. Miss Tarabotti felt such rules did not entirely apply to her, as she was a spinster’ (31-32). Alexia’s independence as spinster, wife, outcast, or mother, is always expressed through her ability to travel on foot, via carriage, train, or dirigible.

On her walks in Hyde Park, Alexia is accompanied by her best friend Ivy Hisselpenny, who unfortunately is ‘only-just-pretty, only-just-wealthy, and possessed of a terrible propensity for wearing extremely silly hats’ (33). Ivy, with her tendency towards a more frivolous (if not embarrassingly outrageous) femininity, throws into relief Alexia’s eccentricities as a foil. Delivering feminine responses deemed appropriate such as “‘It is simply not the done thing”” (36), and “‘It’s simply too outrageous”” (37), or simply ‘blushing furiously’ (174), she both acts as a yardstick of conventional Victorian femininity and a caricature thereof - as indicated by her bad taste in garish hats, which is a running gag throughout the series. Ivy also acts as a guide for performing femininity to Alexia, who on multiple counts asks herself ‘*What would Ivy say?*’ (66, original emphasis) when wishing to do something considered particularly feminine such as flirting with a man. This again draws our attention to gender performance as a set of coded behaviours which, to some degree, are open for play, manipulation, and subversion.

Other female characters in the series include Evelyn and Felicity, Alexia’s self-absorbed step-sisters who ‘specialize [...] in being both inconvenient and asinine’ (24) and as ‘pale insipid blondes with wide blue eyes and small rosebud mouths’ (27) represent a fashionable ideal of femininity, but Felicity also becomes a spy for Countess Nadasdy, a cunning vampire queen looking like a baroque shepherdess. There is also Sidheag Maccon, a sullen Scotswoman and first female leader of a werewolf clan. In the adjacent Young Adult series about a ‘Finishing’ School that trains socialites to become assassins, set a generation earlier, the girls’ characters range from clever, cunning, or vain to timid, to upbeat or grouchy. In the ‘Custard Protocol’ series focused on Alexia’s daughter Prudence, we find the titular character a wild, enthusiastic tomboy complemented by a soft, but pragmatic best friend (Ivy’s daughter Primrose), a sultry and courageous shape-shifter, a morose mechanic, a soft-spoken trans-woman, and a smart and caring female doctor. Female characters in this series often play with archetypes and clichés but

are also employed to explore femininity and femaleness as a multifaceted spectrum.

4.3 FASHION VS THE STEAMPUNK HEROINE

In a steampunk universe so engaged with femininity and performance, self-fashioning symbolises the heroine's exerting of agency over herself and her environment. Alexia implicitly understands that fashion is a legible system identifying her within a social context as a respectable woman of wealth and taste, which grants her powers and liberties:¹¹⁰

She sat awaiting [the gentleman's] arrival calmly in the front parlour, wearing a forest green carriage dress with gold filigree buttons down the front, an elegant new broad-brimmed straw hat, and a cagey expression. The family surmised her imminent departure from the hat and gloves, but they had no idea who might be calling to take her out. Aside from Ivy Hisselpenny, Alexia did not entertain callers often, and everyone knew the Hisselpennys only owned one carriage, and it was not of sufficient quality to merit gold filigree buttons. The Loontwills were left to assume that Alexia was awaiting a *man*. (135, original emphasis)

Here, Alexia's choice of dress is not only tailored towards her purpose of a carriage-ride, but also the company and her intentions towards him. It is therefore embedded in concerns of mobility within both a social and an urban sphere.

When Alexia's detecting uncovers a secret society of scientists performing illegal experiments on supernaturals, her attire becomes useful when she breaks a mirror and 'wrapped a sharp shard of glass carefully in a handkerchief and tucked it down the front of her bodice, between dress and corset, for safekeeping' (264). Her garments here help her protect herself. It is certainly interesting that the corset should be instrumental in this venture, considering that, in neo-Victorian media and the popular imagination, the corset has 'become the accepted visual

¹¹⁰ Christine Bayles Kortsch, *Dress Culture in Late Victorian Women's Fiction: Literacy, Textiles, and Activism*, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009). Margaret Stetz, 'Looking at Victorian Fashion: Not a Laughing Matter', in *Neo-Victorian Humour: Comic Subversions and Unlaughter in Contemporary Historical Re-Visions*, ed. by Marie-Louise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben, (Amsterdam: Brill Rodopi, 2017), pp. 145-169. Dru Pagliossotti, "'People keep giving me rings, but I think a small death ray might be more practical': Women and Mad Science in Steampunk Comics", in *Neo-Victorian Humour: Comic Subversions and Unlaughter in Contemporary Historical*

shorthand for the notion of the literally and metaphorically repressed Victorian woman' and thus created 'unquestioned visual stereotypes and assumptions that reinforce rather than question or dispel the received notions about the period.'¹¹¹ While some cite it as evidence that steampunk enacts a 'false feminism or is in essence anti-feminist and 'retrosexual' instead of an accessory in steampunk self-fashioning, I agree with Julie Anne Taddeo's claim that the corset lets women 'safely and triumphantly play with and transgress boundaries', and I would add, provide opportunities to reclaim femininity on their own terms.¹¹² We must not let our symbolic reading obscure the fact that it is primarily a functional undergarment and remember that as Montz argues, Victorian women 'existed within a fashion system; that is, they lived within it, functioning and fashioning their lives while, through, and in spite of wearing corsets, gloves, crinolines, and veils'.¹¹³ Carriger's text is alert to this.

The Parasolverse also explores 'the way fashions must change to accommodate new technologies of travel, particularly the dirigible', here the 'very real practicality of wearing Victorian dress in the air'.¹¹⁴ In the second novel, *Changeless*, Alexia's status as Lady Maccon means her attire merits description in the society papers:

Lady Maccon boarded the Giffard Long-Distance Airship, Standard Passenger Class Transport Mode, accompanied by an unusually large entourage. [...] The party was outfitted with the latest in air-travel goggles, earmuffs, and several other fashionable mechanical accessories designed to facilitate the most pleasant of dirigible experiences. [...] The lady herself wore a floating dress of the latest design, with tape-down skirt straps, weighted hem, a bustle of alternating ruffles of teal and black designed to flutter becomingly in the aether breezes, and a tightly fitted bodice. There were teal-velvet-trimmed goggles about her neck and a matching top hat with an appropriately modest veil and drop-down teal velvet earmuffs tied securely to her head. More than a few ladies walking through Hyde Park that afternoon

Re-Visions, ed. by Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben, (Amsterdam: Brill Rodopi, 2017), pp. 213-146.

¹¹¹ Primorac, *Postfeminism*, p. 15.

¹¹² Mary Anne Taylor, 'Liberation and a Corset: Examining False Feminism in Steampunk', in *Clockwork Rhetoric: The Language and Style of Steampunk*, ed. by Barry Brummett, (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2014), pp. 38-60. Martin Danahay, 'Steampunk and the Performance of Gender and Sexuality', *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 9:1 (2016), 123-150, p. 127; Julie Anne Taddeo, 'Corsets of Steel: Steampunk's Reimagining of Victorian Femininity', in *Steaming Into a Victorian Future*, ed. by Julie-Ann Taddeo and Cynthia J. Miller (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2013), pp. 43-65.

¹¹³ Montz, p. 116, original emphasis.

stopped to wonder as to the maker of her dress [...] ¹¹⁵

The retro-speculative impulses of Carriger's Parasolverse are re-integrated into a hyper-Victorian aesthetic that, although whimsical, privileges a logic of feminine performance. Instead of resorting to masculine trousers or a forerunner to the New Woman's bicycling outfit, her steampunk setting merely adapts the existent repertoire: skirt hems are weighted to preserve modesty, bustles designed to accentuate the feminine form, and goggles trimmed with velvet. Like the railway, the airship represents the cosmopolitanism and speed of modernity and to adapt women's fashion accordingly is to facilitate their participation in that modernity on their own terms. Alexia is even saved from falling to her death when her reinforced metal hem is caught in the docking mechanism of the airship (173).

Carriger acknowledges fashion as an integral factor in performing femininity and functioning in society, undermining persistent stereotypes of Victorian fashions as instruments of restriction or repression. As Montz reminds us: 'Monumental events in women's history such as the Married Women's Property Act (1882), the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts (1886) and most especially the universal vote for women in England (1928), were fought for by women who wore – quite fashionably, in fact – the very trappings so shunned by contemporary Steampunk writers.'¹¹⁶ The Parasolverse pays homage to this feminist genealogy by portraying Alexia as a woman who repeatedly saves herself from distress sometimes despite and sometimes because of her corset and bustle.

¹¹⁴ Montz, p. 111.

¹¹⁵ Gail Carriger, *Changeless* (London: Orbit Books, 2010), p. 144-145.

¹¹⁶ Montz, p. 109.

4.4 TAKING ADVANTAGE: COURTSHIP AND SEXUALITY

Alexia is portrayed as a woman of fortitude and pragmatism, an Action Girl who does not compromise her femininity to achieve agency or independence. Given how entangled post-feminist steampunk depictions can become with conflicting ideologies about female sexuality by ‘sexing up’ the Victorian heroine through a male gaze, curtailing her agency, and lapsing back into Victorian tropes about Fallen Women, it is especially interesting to consider Alexia as a Romance heroine. Sexuality can constitute both the means by which the contemporary heroine might assert her perceived liberations and the factor which entraps her in narratives of patriarchal power play.

Alexia’s relationship with Lord Connall Maccon, Earl of Woolsey, head of the Bureau of Unnatural Registry, Alpha werewolf, Scottish, scruffy, large, and loud, is governed by typical romance tropes around an attractive, rude, Byronic hero. Connall’s masculinity is quite literally encoded in wildness and violence because he is a werewolf, and thus quite literally a beast for Alexia to tame with her preternatural touch. However, I would disagree with Nally’s diagnosis that Connall perpetuates common, rightfully problematic tropes that invoke dominance and allusions of rape because here, too, Carriger plays with the trope.¹¹⁷ For one, Connall’s untamed beastliness is played for laughs because his dishevelled appearance is at variance with the expected behaviour of a gentleman. He is physically attracted to Alexia, but also recognises that she has “‘got a jot more backbone than most females this century’” (22-23) and, acknowledging her intelligence and competence, ‘refused to be suckered into becoming sympathetic’ (16). By not patronising Alexia merely because she is female, he shows respect, but this may be conveniently misunderstood within Victorian etiquette so that Alexia and Lord Maccon spend the better part of the novel deliberately at odds. However both parties see eye to eye, sometimes almost literally, even when at variance: ‘Lord Maccon stood, slightly panicked, and said exactly the wrong thing. “I forbid you to go!” [...] Miss Tarabotti stood as well, instantaneously angry, her chest heaving in agitation. “You have no right!”’ (67) Alexia is never intimidated and Connall specifically admires and courts her as an ‘Alpha Female’: “‘He has been perceiving you

¹¹⁷ Nally, p. 232-233.

as he would an Alpha female werewolf.” (177).

Thus, while Connall initiates the romance by kissing her — ‘in the middle of a public street’ (112), a gendered urban space – Alexia’s exploration of her own sexuality is in the narrative’s focus. She often takes charge, is in fact invited to “‘stake a claim, indicate pursuit, or assert possession. Preferably all three” (117). This she does when proclaiming “‘I am going to take advantage of you” (164) and later even suggesting Lord Maccon become her ‘Mistress’ (206) in a comic subversion of the usual, gendered roles. These she also defies by not equating sex with love, and not relying on Connall marrying her in affecting or restoring her status and self-worth: “‘[I]f you are not interested in me as anything more than a [...] momentary plaything, you might at least have told me outright afterward. [...] I deserve *some* respect” (155, original emphasis). Alexia’s mother, however, is scandalised and attempts to pressure her into marrying Lord Maccon, and ironically it is Alexia who tries to ‘do the honourable thing’ by releasing him while he genuinely appreciates her as a potential partner on equal terms and pictures ‘waking up next to her, seeing her across the dining table, discussing science and politics, having her advice on points of pack controversy and BUR difficulties’ (213).

Alexia evidently defies an image of Victorian women as passive and chaste, but her female sexuality does not compromise her as a steampunk heroine or implicate her in a contradictory display of false empowerment. She does not use it to project her alleged liberation, yet in refusing to accept that her honour needs restoring or to marry without love, while simultaneously exploring her sensuality, she is actually liberated. We see this contrast to Eliza Brown or Veronica Hobbs most prominently during the novel’s (somewhat literally) climactic showdown. During full moon, Alexia find herself in a cell with the transformed Alpha and must now maintain physical contact with Connall at all times to keep him human with her preternatural touch. Such intimate contact with the naked man is a reversal of the male gaze which emphasises female nudity and dependence, and also in contrast to the events of *The Janus Affair*, where Eliza Brown is at the mercy of a male captor. Instead, Alexia and Connall join forces to solve the novel’s mystery. She retains control by playfully pinching him, provoking ‘an expression of wounded dignity on the face of such an enormous and highly dangerous man’ (286), ‘deciding’ that ‘there was something excruciatingly erotic about being fully dressed with a large naked man pressed against her from head to foot’ (288) and then ‘seiz[ing] the moment’ (288). It is here that the two resolve their tensions and profess their love before teaming up to overpower the

scientists. Instead of being separated and treated in problematically gendered ways like in *The Janus Affair*, the male and female hero are brought closer together and operate on consent and consensus. Alexia is never victimised in gendered ways or punished for her sexual appetite or agency – on the contrary, she is rewarded with a marriage to a man who genuinely appreciates her and a position as an agent of the Crown, recruited by Queen Victoria herself (335-340).

Throughout Carriger's series, sexuality, like femininity, is treated as something that women may explore and enjoy on their own terms, a process which becomes part of a coming of age. It is not solely the domain of the unconventionally forward and assertive heroine, as we see with Ivy: 'Miss Hisselpenny found most of the [erotic] books in Alexia's father's library shameful to read. She covered her ears and hummed whenever Miss Tarabotti even mentioned her papa, but she never hummed so loudly she could not hear what was said. But now that her friend possessed firsthand experience, she was simply too curious to be embarrassed.' (121) Ivy's curiosity is portrayed as different, but no less valid than Alexia's, and in the 'Custard Protocol' series, we witness both Prudence and Primrose (as well as Primrose's twin brother Percy) go through a similar but individually attuned process in which their own agency and comfort is foregrounded. Carriger uses the romance genre to deliver female-centric fantasies, and, considering previous, post-feminist portrayals in this chapter, does so in perhaps radical ways.

4.5 DIRIGIBLES AND OCTOPI: MOBILITY AND AGENCY

Alexia's independence is often externalised through her independent travel across London or Europe at large, which in the 1860s in which the series is set, constitutes her as a precursor of the New Woman. Her access to urban spheres is, however, linked to her status as spinster, wife, mother, or – briefly — Fallen Woman. During the third novel, *Blameless*, Connall falsely accuses Alexia of unfaithfulness and she is disgraced, but hardly seems to mind. The paradoxical punishment which befalls her post-feminist colleagues fails to manifest. Having just escaped an assassination attempt via mechanical ladybugs, she hides out in a public tea shop on Cavendish

Square in Marylebone, ‘a popular watering hole among ladies of quality’¹¹⁸ (41) and causes a stir: ‘One or two matrons, accompanied by impressionable young daughters, stood and left in a rustle of offended dignity’ (42). With her status altered from peeress to disgraced woman, Alexia is out of place in this semi-public urban space which serves as a stage for feminine respectability, yet she refuses to conform to expectations. When Lady Blingchester purports to shame her, suggesting she “‘might have done [her family] a favour by casting yourself into the Thames’” — a stereotypical destiny for the Fallen Woman — Alexia merely replies: “‘I can swim, Lady Blingchester, Rather well, actually.’” (57) Again, Alexia’s sense of self is independent from social conventions, and she continues to move about the city as she pleases and in fact uses social conventions to obscure her more political goals in comedic ways: ‘It went against her nature to be seen fleeing London because she was thought adulterous, but it was better than having the real reason known to the general public. Just imagine what the gossipmongers would say if they knew vampires were intent on assassinating her—so embarrassing’ (76-77).

Throughout the series, Alexia remains firmly in control of where she goes and why, detained neither by public opinion nor her advancing pregnancy in the fourth novel *Heartless*, which sees her track a suspect to a warehouse in an unfashionable neighbourhood (264), set fire to it (271), then traverse the city in a small dirigible (275), disrupt an evening ball in Mayfair to which she is unwelcome although she has been invited (285), and pursue a gigantic mechanical octopus across London (304).¹¹⁹ Even when she goes into labour inside the octopus, Alexia refuses to be defined by her gendered body: “‘Oh, that’s not important. That can wait’” (350).

During the series, Alexia goes through several ‘stages’ of (Victorian) womanhood — spinster, wife, Fallen Woman, expecting mother, mother - without being wholly defined by any of them. Nally’s accusation that Alexia uses her ‘so-called choices’ to opt for ‘some very conservative visions of what it means to be a woman’ seems curious considering that none of these choices actually change what Alexia does or where she goes.¹²⁰ While she navigates surely through and within a Victorian social system like any historical woman would have, she also readily bends or breaks the rules where they impede her, and is in fact at no point curtailed in her agency, re-presented through a male gaze, or punished for her sexuality. Out of the neo-Victorian

¹¹⁸ Gail Carriger, *Changeless* (London: Orbit Books, 2010).

¹¹⁹ Gail Carriger, *Heartless* (London: Orbit Books, 2011).

¹²⁰ Nally, p. 218.

and steampunk heroines we have discussed in this chapter, Alexia alone is imagined and realised fully on her own terms, not re-appropriated into a patriarchal narrative logic.

Alexia certainly anticipates the New Women in some ways, and creates her own, individual vision of female empowerment in others. Alexia does not travel by bicycle or omnibus, reject marriage, or campaign for suffrage, but she utilises carriages, mechanical octopi, and dirigibles to go where she wants to, demands equality in her marriage as an Alpha Female, investigates supernatural cases as an agent of the Crown, and exerts agency over her journey and her sexuality with success. Her daughter Prudence, who later becomes the captain of her own airship, self-evidently considers ‘herself a New Woman, [and] thus she did not think it odd to travel alone in public hire’.¹²¹ No doubt she is modelling herself on her mother, but we can see why Perschon considers Alexia an ‘amped-up New Woman’ as a steampunk incarnation of agency and feminist optimism within a Victorian aesthetic, while at the same time, Nally’s post-feminist lens cannot accommodate Alexia’s actions within the catalogue of feminist achievements that has been constructed between the New Woman as collective symbol and second-wave feminism.

However, I argue that Alexia puts into play the ideals of fourth-wave feminism and the popular fan criticism with which it cross-pollinates, and that in so doing, she may be linked back to Ouida’s Victorian characters. Sophia McDougall’s critique of the Strong Female Character as one who only achieves a deceptive equality with male characters by appropriating male-coded behaviours such as trouser-wearing, aggression, physical strength, dominance, and so on, demands of female characters: ‘I want her to be free to express herself/ I want her to have meaningful, emotional relationships with other women/ I want her to be weak sometimes/ I want her to be strong in a way that isn’t about physical dominance or power/ I want her to cry if she feels like crying/ I want her to ask for help/ I want her to be who she is.’¹²²

Fan criticism of the fourth wave focuses less on the validity of lifestyle choices, but demands that women be written three-dimensionally, represent female experience as a full

¹²¹ Gail Carriger, *Imprudence: Book Two of The Custard Protocol* (London: Orbit Books, 2016), p. 61.

¹²² McDougall, also echoed here: ‘Screw writing ‘strong’ women. Write interesting women. Write well-rounded women. Write complicated women. Write a woman who kicks a**, write a woman who cowers in a corner. Write a woman who’s desperate for a husband. Write a woman who doesn’t need a man. Write women who cry, women who rant, women who are shy, women who don’t take no sh*t, women who need validation and women who don’t care what anybody thinks.’ Quoted in Lauren Cooke, ‘How We’re Written’, *Huffington Post*, 25 April 2014,

spectrum, and be allowed to be feminine and strong at the same time. This criticism, interlinking with fourth-wave discussions about body shaming, sex-positivity, rape culture, and other prominent concerns of the MeToo era, foregrounds representation and agency within the narrative frame, and independence from patriarchal narrative logic in the form of re-assimilating a 'Fallen Woman' character through punishment or a male gaze. Alexia Tarabotti is an example of how fourth-wave feminist ideas may be realised within a steampunk setting, and that such ideas, can build on and supplement the parameters set up by previous feminist genealogies in creative ways. Ironically, Carriger's *Parasolverse* here echoes Ouida's liberal individualist agenda, which ran alongside but was alternative to the ideals of the New Woman. Fourth-wave feminist steampunk may provide ways in which to re-think and re-claim femininity and agency in the present, while also showing ways in which we may re-evaluate Victorian feminism itself.

5. AN ARTISTIC DESIRE FOR PERFECT REPRESENTATION: QUEERNESS AND STEAMPUNK

Discussions about steampunk and gender often centre around feminist concerns, but the aesthetic presents unique opportunities to interrogate gender and sexuality as a full spectrum, even though it is sometimes read as a mode which re-inscribes 'traditional' gender binaries through what appears like a gendered fashion aesthetic. To read today's steampunk as 'retro-sexist', however, risks re-inscribing these heteronormative gender binaries which the aesthetic's creative play is geared towards challenging. After all, steampunk cosplay de-centres and re-assembles meaning through remix and juxtaposition, as Molly Westerman argues: '[M]any people use steampunk to play with those categories. In many steampunk texts, objects, and garments, masculinity and femininity are more like design elements than like absolutes of nature—which makes gender more fluid and far less moralizing than the nostalgic style might initially suggest.'¹²³ Here, men may don corsets and women may choose not to, which is illustrated by Lisa Hager: '[M]any steampunk women have a longstanding love affair with corsets, but, equally important here are

https://www.huffingtonpost.com/lauren-cooke/how-were-written_b_4834218.html (Accessed 28th April 2020).

¹²³ Molly Westerman, 'How Steampunk Screws with Victorian Gender Norms', *bitchmedia*, 15 January 2014, <https://www.bitchmedia.org/post/how-steampunk-screws-with-victorian-gender-norms> (Accessed 28th April 2020).

the women who crossplay masculine personae, like myself, and the many men who have similar fondnesses for corsets and wear them exquisitely well.’¹²⁴ Moreover, through its play with gender binaries, steampunk may accommodate a full spectrum that includes LGBTQA+ identities. I want here to examine how this may be done in productive ways by considering queerness in Carriger’s Parasolverse.

5.1 HETERONORMATIVITY AND VICTORIAN GENDER DISCOURSE: ALEXIA, LORD AKELDAMA, AND MADAME LEFOUX

In her recent study, Nally posits that Alexia’s marriage to Connall Maccon constitutes ‘recourse to a traditional narrative of heterosexual marriage’, and that the portrayal of homosexual characters Lord Akeldama and Madame Lefoux is ultimately governed by ‘the pressures of heteronormativity’.¹²⁵ Considering that Carriger’s universe is one of few steampunk works of fiction to actually feature queer characters, these claims must be investigated.

To begin with, Alexia’s marriage to Lord Maccon may give the impression of heterosexuality, especially in the first novel, but as soon as Alexia meets Genevieve Lefoux in *Changeless*, the cross-dressing inventor, we discover that she is actually coded as bisexual (and thus her marriage is not, in fact, heteronormative): ‘Alexia thought, without envy, that this was quite probably the most beautiful female she had ever seen.’ (79). When Madame Lefoux ‘reached up and stroked the back of her hand down the side of Alexia’s face’, she ‘wondered why the French were so much more physically affectionate than the English’ and does not ‘respond to the touch, although it made her face feel hot even in the cold aether wind’ (153-154). Alexia frequently reacts to Genevieve’s flirtations as she reacts to Connall’s, and Carriger has confirmed that in her Parasolverse, ‘preternaturals are all pan, or at least bisexual’, even though ‘in Victorian times with her upbringing she doesn’t have the language or understanding’.¹²⁶ About Alexia’s bisexuality, Carriger notes: ‘I think that there is always a small part of her half in

¹²⁴ Lisa Hager, ‘Queer Cogs: Steampunk, Gender Identity, and Sexuality’, *Tor.com*, 4 October 2012, <https://www.tor.com/2012/10/04/steampunk-gender-sexuality/> (Accessed 28th April 2020).

¹²⁵ Nally, p. 241, 235.

¹²⁶ Gail Carriger, ‘Researching Fluidity & Representing it in Fiction’, *Gail Carriger*, 24 May 2019, <https://gailcarriger.com/2019/05/24/researching-gender-fluidity-representing-it-in-fiction-the-5th-gender-by-gail->

love with Madame Lefoux but she could never understand that's what it was, so she never acknowledges it.'¹²⁷

It is this lack of vocabulary about non-normative sexualities that makes steampunk's tension with the Victorian era from which it synthesises itself so productive. Discourses around male homosexuality in the late Victorian age were largely centred on 'sodomy' as a criminal offence and famously catalysed through the Wilde trials in 1895. It is not surprising, then, that Lord Akeldama, a rogue vampire, is an amped-up emblem of the dandy-aesthete, himself a composite figure that synthesised Victorian debates around aestheticism, artisanship, gender, and 'degeneration', and who encapsulates many of steampunk's inherent ideals.¹²⁸ Akeldama is an ageless, flamboyant vampire who 'might look and act like a supercilious buffoon of the highest order, but he had one of the sharpest minds in the whole of London.' (*Soulless*, 47). With his long blonde hair, 'queued back in a manner stylish hundreds of years ago'(51), 'ethereal face' and his proclivity to 'speak predominantly in italics' (46) particularly where the words 'darling' or 'daffodil' are concerned, he performs effeminacy and revels in the outrageous. His attire is eccentric: 'His coat was of exquisite plum-coloured velvet paired with a satin waistcoat of sea-foam green and mauve plaid. His britches were of a perfectly coordinated lavender [...]' (*Soulless*, 220). Or: 'He was wearing the most remarkable suit of tails and britches she had ever seen, candy striped satin in cream and wine. This he had paired with a pink waistcoat of watered silk, pink hose, and pink top hat' (*Heartless*, 320). His cartoon-ish and somewhat anachronistic style always hints at the late Baroque: "'I am afraid I never quite left that particular era. It was *such* a glorious time to be alive, when men finally and *truly* got to wear sparkly things, and there was lace and velvet everywhere.'" (*Soulless*, 225, original emphasis). However, there are also echoes of Oscar Wilde's aesthetic style, for example in the well-known series of photographs by Napoleon Sarony.¹²⁹ Nally notes that Lord Akeldama's proclivity for 'yellow, orange, gold, pink,

carriger-custard-protocol-san-andreas-shifters-tinkered-stars-behind-the-magic/ (Accessed 28th April 2020).

¹²⁷ Gail Carriger, 'Is Alexia Bisexual?', *Reader Q&A*, 2016, <https://www.goodreads.com/questions/647353-is-alexia-bisexual-i-ve-wondered-about> (Accessed 28th April 2020).

¹²⁸ More on dandyism and steampunk in: Stefania Forlini, 'The Aesthete, the Dandy, and the Steampunk; or, Things as They Are Now', in *Like Clockwork. Steampunk Pasts, Presents & Futures*, ed. by Rachel A. Bowser and Brian Croxall (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 2016), pp. 97-126.

¹²⁹ Napoleon Sarony, 'Oscar Wilde 1882', *MetMuseum.org*, n.d., <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/283247> (Accessed 23 April 2020).

and lemon' echoes Wilde's ideals of 'joyous colour' for the Dress Reform movement.¹³⁰

Matt Cook, in his study of *London and the Culture of Homosexuality*, outlines how sexologists such as Kraft-Ebing attested homosexuals' vanity and a liking for fine fashions and luxury, 'characteristics [...] closely associated with the sophistry and luxury of a particular fashionable urban set, and more specifically to prevailing stereotypes of the decadent or dandy'.¹³¹ Lord Akeldama certainly embodies these stereotypes, but not without irony.¹³² By reminding us that laces and velvets were once integral to performing masculinity in previous centuries, he undermines purely binary ideas of gender, and his interior decorations hint at how thoroughly he enjoys his decadent tastes: 'The carpets were [...] flower-ridden images of shepherds seducing shepherdesses under intense blue skies. [...] Lord Akeldama's ceiling depicted cheeky-looking cherubs up to nefarious activities' (*Soulless*, 224).

Like Wilde, Akeldama cultivates a flamboyant, witty, and eccentric persona with a personal, anachronistic style and a penchant for extravagant interior design, but he is also an intelligent and strategic thinker, and the young dandies who act as his 'drones' constitute a fashionable spy network that spans across London; they are 'all dressed to the nines—all dandified gentry of the kind welcome at any gathering and noticed at once. Alexia reasoned no man of Lord Akeldama's household would ever be less than perfectly fashionable, entirely presentable, and patently invisible as a result' (228). And: 'The *Morning Post* would pay half its weekly income for the kind of information he seemed to have access to at any time of night' (*Soulless*, 47). Through his networks of fashionable gay men acting as spies at social events across London, Akeldama quite literally mobilises what Cook has outlined as a hidden urban scene in Victorian London: '[The homosexual] was repeatedly linked to a social scene based around the theatres, parks, streets, and bars and restaurants of major European cities, and was shown to have a particular personal investment in urban life.'¹³³ Cook's study maps out London's hidden infrastructures of male homosexuality. Beyond the Cleveland Street scandal, which suggested the existence of such networks to the public in 1889, gay men re-purposed well-

¹³⁰ Nally, p. 237.

¹³¹ Matt Cook, *London and the Culture of Homosexuality 1885-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 84. Richard Freiherr von Kraft-Ebing, author of *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886), one of the first texts on sexual pathology, especially homosexuality, sadism, and masochism.

¹³² Talia Schaffer 'Fashioning Aestheticism by Aestheticizing Fashion: Wilde, Beerbohm, and Male Aesthete's Sartorial Codes', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 28:1 (2000), 39-54.

known public places such as Hyde Park or Oxford and Regent Street as cruising grounds, met in luxurious and cosmopolitan hotels such as the Ritz or the Savoy, at the Alhambra or St James theatre, private clubs in Cleveland Street, or public urinals, for example near Berkeley Square, Piccadilly Circus, in Woodstock Street close to Oxford Circus, or Danbury Place off of Wardour Street in Soho. Urban figures such as telegraph boys were implicated in homosexual networks, as were soldiers through ‘Mrs Truman’s tobacconist shop’, from where liaisons could be initiated, and the Victoria Hotel and Anderton’s appeared in blackmail scandals.¹³⁴ We must imagine that Lord Akeldama’s network of dandy spies exists in a similar way, namely as an alternative and yet very public mapping of London. As such, Lord Akeldama and his gay dandies do not exist on the margins of, but are fully integrated into London’s social infrastructures, much like their historical counterparts. In fact, Lord Akeldama’s address in 31 Russell Square is ‘that very location [...] where Wilde spent his final night in London on 19 May 1897 before his exile to France’.¹³⁵

Lord Akeldama encapsulates, catalyses and re-presents a popular Victorian reception of male homosexuality as embroiled in the decadence movement and with allegations of effeminacy, evident in Max Nordau’s polemic *Degeneration* whose publication in English in 1895 influenced the Wilde trials, and Havelock Ellis’ 1897 theory on *Sexual Inversion*. This notion of the homosexual as an ‘invert’ prevailed well into the twentieth century, complemented somewhat by German sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld’s theory of homosexuals as a ‘third sex’. Lesbian women however remained sparsely theorised, as Sally Ledger observes: ‘[T]hose women who wanted to write about lesbian love only had the vocabulary made available to them by late Victorian sexologists and a handful of naturalist and decadent writers.’¹³⁶ Radclyffe Hall’s now-classic *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), intent on sparking a public debate about lesbian love, exemplifies this, as it only had recourse to Ellis’ concept of ‘sexual inversion’: ‘On the one hand’, Ledger deliberates, the novel ‘did at least make lesbian love visible; but, on the other hand it reinforced the sexologists’ pathologisation and morbidification of lesbian

¹³³ Cook, p. 83.

¹³⁴ Cook.

¹³⁵ Nally, p. 236.

¹³⁶ Ledger, p. 142.

sexuality.’¹³⁷ The novel’s reception history somewhat illuminates queer history across the twentieth century because, as Heather Love notes, it has ‘repeatedly come into conflict with contemporary understandings of the meaning and shape of gay identity’ because its bleak depiction of lesbian love is ‘out of step with the discourse of gay pride.’¹³⁸

Genevieve Lefoux, a French inventor and Carriger’s steampunk response to these historical currents, must consequently be read in this context. Genevieve is introduced as ‘the most beautiful female’, and wearing her ‘hair cut unfashionably short, like a man’s’ (*Changeless*, 79):

[T]he woman was also dressed head to shiny boots in perfect and impeccable style—for a man. Jacket, pants, and waistcoat were all to the height of fashion. A top hat perched upon that scandalously short hair, and her burgundy cravat was tied into a silken waterfall. Still, there was no pretence at hiding her femininity. Her voice, when she spoke, was low and melodic, but definitely that of a woman’ (80).

Nally identifies this cross-dressing inventor as a figure who ‘has assumed a masculine role in all areas of her life’, ‘very much a stereotypical lesbian’, and an example of post-feminist attempts to represent queer identity that end up ‘one-dimensional, homophobic or employed in order to naturalise heterosexuality’, because her ‘*difference* to other women [...] essentially leaves heterosexuality untouched as the status quo’.¹³⁹ While this reading may tie in with ‘invert’ theories, Genevieve’s femininity is not negated by her cross-dressing as we see in the excerpt above. Instead, her attire enacts steampunk’s play with gender performativity through Victorian fashion, and the fact that she is always elegant, charming, attractive, and confident also undermines negative stereotypes about ‘butch’ lesbians.

Genevieve’s relationship with urban spaces is not embedded in an alternative geography, but she does use and re-purpose urban spaces in typically steampunk ways: She owns a notoriously fashionable hat shop, ‘Chapeau de Poupe’, on Regent Street. Underneath this public

¹³⁷ Ledger, p. 144.

¹³⁸ Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), p.100- 101; ‘During the 1970s, the novel was attacked primarily for its equation of lesbianism with masculine identification; in the years of the “woman-loving-woman,” it was anathema with its mannish heroine, its derogation of femininity, and its glorification of normative heterosexuality.’ p. 100.

front (connected to femininity and self-fashioning) is a hidden laboratory, in which she builds Alexia's weaponised parasol, or weaponised mechanic octopus, with which she destroys half of Mayfair in search for her kidnapped son. The 'octomaton', one of the more outrageous steampunk forms of transport, might illustrate Madame Lefoux's willingness to transgress boundaries in order to preserve her personal integrity and her family, translated into the physical urban sphere.

While I would call Lord Akeldama and Madame Lefoux playful, nuanced, and semi-ironic homages to the gender discourse of the *fin de siècle*, Nally asserts that 'commonly vaunted tropes about male sexuality' and the 'masculinized woman' makes the 'characters bear the burden of visual markers of homosexuality, as markers of difference, with the result that heterosexual sexuality is ultimately invisible and rendered the norm'.¹⁴⁰ In concluding that they serve to render queer identities legible against a conventional, heteronormative status quo, however, Nally ironically overlooks the many other, less visibly coded queer identities in Carriger's series, beginning with Alexia's bisexuality. Not only is Carriger's Parasolverse one of few to include queer characters at all (and not just in order to undermine Thatcherite ideals through urban Gothic, as shown in Chapter Two), but we find them positively everywhere. There are Lefoux's lover Angelique, an angelic blond lesbian, Lord Maccon's beta Professor Lyall, the unassuming, straight-passing professor-type later revealed to be bisexual, 'Biffy' a gay man evolving from Lord Akeldama's favourite drone to werewolf alpha, other drones (named characters include the Viscount Trizdale and Emmet Wilberforce Bootbottle-Fipps (Boots)), and the deceased, but notorious, bisexual Alessandro Tarrabotti, Alexia's father. In the 'Custard Protocol' series centred on Alexia's daughter Prudence, we find in Primrose and Madame Sekhmet two feminine lesbian women, in Rodrigo a libertine who 'under modern terminology [...] would likely identify as pan', and in Anitra a feminine-passing trans-woman understood by other characters as 'aravani', or 'hijra', an Indian concept for a 'third gender'.¹⁴¹ Similar to how diverse female characters provide a spectrum of feminine representation, this variety of queer characters relieves Akeldama and Lefoux of representing types and undermines the stereotypes to which they pay homage by adding nuance and individuality. This spectrum of queer identities

¹³⁹ Nally, p. 234.

¹⁴⁰ Nally, p. 240.

¹⁴¹ Carriger, 'Researching Gender Fluidity', n. p.

less legible within a Victorian gender discourse about ‘invert’ lesbians and effeminate dandies challenges rather than re-iterates them and quietly undercuts a heteronormative status quo in different ways. Carriger further challenges the heteronormative conventions of the romance genre itself through the publication of her two tie-in novellas that focus, respectively, on Lefoux’s lesbian romance (*Romancing the Inventor*, 2016), and Lyall and Biffy’s gay romance (*Romancing the Werewolf*, 2017).

5.2 QUEER REPRESENTATION AND STEAMPUNK

Carriger’s *Parasolverse* is an example of how steampunk may utilise the hyper-Victorian aesthetic in combination with social retrofuturism in order to craft alternative gender genealogies in which LGBTQA+ identities are represented in positive ways. Such a desire echoes powerfully with the endeavours of queer decadents at the *fin de siècle* itself, as decadence scholar Joseph Bristow outlines.¹⁴² In addition to conceptualising male homosexuality as the New Hellenism modelled on Ancient Greece, Bristow shows how Oscar Wilde, Vernon Lee, and Michael Field (Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper) mobilised the decadent mode and its ability to articulate and represent androgyny as ambiguous sexuality to create a ‘defiant homoerotic aesthetic’ and how this ‘inspired late-Victorian writers to consider how they might modify, rework, and even imagine anew sexual modernity.’¹⁴³ This is perhaps most clearly illustrated in Wilde’s story, ‘The Portrait of Mr. W. H.’ (1889), in which three men become entangled in a quest to prove that the mysterious addressee of Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*, Mr W. H., was an ‘effeminate’ young actor, so much so that one of them, Cyril Graham, forges a portrait and later commits suicide.¹⁴⁴ Like the Willie Hughes of the portrait, Graham is also coded as an ‘effeminate’, ‘splendid creature’ to whom Mr Erskine is ‘absurdly devoted’.¹⁴⁵ As Bristow argues, Wilde’s outline of a quest to ‘realise one’s own personality on some imaginative plane out of reach of the trammelling

¹⁴² Joseph Bristow, ‘Decadent Historicism’, *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 3.1 (2020), 1–27.

¹⁴³ Bristow, p. 8, 4.

¹⁴⁴ Oscar Wilde, ‘The Portrait of Mr W. H.’, in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde: Stories, Plays, Poems, & Essays*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), pp. 1150–1202, p. 1151.

¹⁴⁵ Wilde, p. 1153, 1152.

accidents and limitations of real life' and portrait of historical fiction-making as 'an artistic desire for perfect representation'¹⁴⁶ constitutes a historicist impulse to unearth genderqueer people in history, even if that 'entails faking and appropriating history in the face of contravening empirical facts'.¹⁴⁷ Graham's forgery and the fact that Wilde actually commissioned his own portrait of Mr W.H. (sadly now lost) from illustrator Charles Ricketts show that such a desire to see queer identities mirrored in history and so legitimised was strong enough that queer histories had to be invented where they could not be recovered: 'This historicist impulse to recover the queer past, even though it may well involve acts of preposterous distortion, defines one of most potent aspects of literary decadence.'¹⁴⁸ This is an intriguing parallel to the steampunk mode.

However, Bristow also outlines that the ambiguous, genderqueer characters unearthed and re-imagined in Wilde's, Lee's, or Field's fiction were often figures associated with pain, doom, punishment, and death, and that their histories invoked a queer experience of loneliness and tragedy, because, as Wilde's own example so powerfully illustrates, such a narrative echoed the late Victorian queer experience.¹⁴⁹ Whereas the queer historicism constitutes an interesting trajectory between *fin de siècle* subculture and the present-day, we have seen through the example of Hall's *Well of Loneliness* that these narratives of queerness as painful and isolating no longer correspond with contemporary LGBTQA+ identities' desire to be represented in positive ways. In fact, queer fan criticism has in recent years actively campaigned against a prevalent narrative trope called 'Bury Your Gays',¹⁵⁰ in which especially lesbian and bisexual women often die or go insane. Fans argue that LGBTQA+ characters being defined by plot arcs that invariably end in misery and death normalise a meta-narrative of queerness as inherently doomed, which runs counter to the ideals of pride culture.¹⁵¹ Not least, this trope echoes the

¹⁴⁶ Wilde, p. 1150.

¹⁴⁷ Bristow, p. 10

¹⁴⁸ Bristow, p. 10.

¹⁴⁹ Bristow, p. 5.

¹⁵⁰ 'The Bury Your Gays trope in media, including all its variants, is a homophobic cliché. It is the presentation of deaths of LGBT characters where these characters are nominally able to be viewed as more expendable than their heteronormative counterparts.' Anon., 'Bury Your Gays', *TvTropes*, n.d., <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/BuryYourGays> (Accessed 28th April 2020), n. p..

¹⁵¹ Eve Ng and Julie Levin Russo, 'Envisioning Queer Female Fandom', *Transformative Works and Cultures* 24 (2017), n. p. Elizabeth Bridges, 'A Genealogy of Queerbaiting: Legal Codes, Production Codes, "Bury Your Gays", and "The 100 Mess"', *Journal of Fandom Studies*, 6:2 (2018), 115-132.

paradoxically Victorian poetic justice that kills off the ‘Fallen Woman’ in many post-feminist media. Both instances constitute a bizarre survival of Victorian narrative conventions in which transgressions on gender norms are punished.

Against this background, it is especially important to note that none of Carriger’s characters, queer or not, are punished in such a way. Whereas queer couples in the Parasolverse experience the usual trials and tribulations, they all find love and happy endings eventually. Their survival does not depend on them ‘passing’ as heterosexual — like Alexia in her femininity, they conform or rebel on their own terms. The series therefore shows how steampunk may provide a space in which gender genealogies may be re-traced backwards into a formative past, explored with regard to how that past reflects our identities and their histories back at us, but also how such genealogies may be re-projected and re-evaluated on the terms of the present. Queer histories of the closet, hiding, persecution, and suffering in secret can be re-cast into an anachronistic fantasy in which happy endings are feasible and the ideals of pride culture are synthesised into an alternative genealogy. So, like Wilde, steampunk may realise ‘an artistic desire for perfect representation’.¹⁵²

This may most fruitfully be illustrated by Prudence’s wedding to Madame Lefoux’s son Quesnel, where

Madame Lefoux caused a stir by dancing openly with Miss Imogene. Until Lord Falmouth [‘Biffy’] ostentatiously led his beta [Lyll] out onto the floor. Then Lady Kingair joined them, a monumentally uncomfortable but militant-looking Aggie Phinkerlinkton on her arms. When Lord Akeldama, a twinkle in his eyes, offered his arm to Percy [Primrose’s twin brother], Percy only sighed and joined them. [...] There was sure to be a scandal in the papers — ladies dancing with ladies was one thing, but *gentlemen* dancing with *gentlemen*? At a wedding? That was beyond even the supernatural set. But Rue (who was happily dancing with Tasherit [Madame Sekhmet]) seemed pleased with this probable outcome. Quesnel was amiable enough not to care about social standing. He swirled around with one of Lord Akeldama’s more impressively dressed drones. (67)

In this scene, queer characters openly dance with one another, but heterosexual characters also

¹⁵² Wilde, p. 1150.

dance with partners of the same gender, so that heteronormative conventions are playfully dissolved into an open display of solidarity and acceptance¹⁵³. What is more, when Lord Akeldama suggests that “Progress never did come cheap to high society, sweetling”, and Primrose wonders “how dancing can change the course of civilisation”, Prudence comments: “Give it a chance” (68). This exchange suggests that by making this non-normative dancing fashionable, heteronormative gender binaries may in the long run be destabilised and so afford a degree of visibility and normalisation to queer identities. As playful and light as this scene is, it also exemplifies the imaginative power inherent in steampunk’s fantastic alternative genealogies.

6. CONCLUSION: RECLAIMING GENDER THROUGH STEAMPUNK

Let us conclude this chapter on genealogies and reception histories with our own. Thirty years after *Les Fleurs du Mal* and the conceptualisation of modernity as intrinsically tied to the experience of the modern metropolis, coupled with what would later be realised as the flâneur figure, the New Woman emerges in London as a collective symbol of female emancipation. A cross-media phenomenon and composite ideal, she is both quintessentially female (although her femininity is debated heavily), and quintessentially urban, and she provides a legible iconography emblematic of the ongoing debates that inform her. The bicycle comes to symbolise her independence and her mobility alongside the practical and much derided bicycling costume which accompanies it. The suffragist, likewise, is enshrined in the public imagination in her white dress and purple, white, and green sash, campaigning in public spaces such as Hyde Park or Oxford Street. Female journalists, writers, and artists encroach on urban space, carving their own trajectories through the city by walking or taking the omnibus, and reflect on it in an urban aestheticism, so becoming visible participants in the phenomenon of modernity. As Steve Pile suggests, ‘What makes the city a city is not only the skyscrapers or the shops or the communication networks, but also that people in such places are forced to *behave* in *urban* ways.’¹⁵⁴ In so doing, the New Woman also actively participates in the making of urban space as an ‘ongoing product of interconnections’, ‘a heterogeneity of practises and *processes*’, ‘the

¹⁵³ Gail Carriger, *Reticence: The Custard Protocol: Book Four* (London: Orbit Books, 2019).

¹⁵⁴ Steve Pile, *Real Cities: Modernity, Space and the Phantasmagorias of City Life* (London: SAGE Publications, 2005), p. 1, original emphasis.

sphere of dynamic simultaneity', 'always being made'.¹⁵⁵ The urban sphere of late Victorian London is not only the stage on which women's agency and independence are enacted physically and performatively, but indeed the very space that legitimises this empowerment.

We have seen in the example of Ouida, who objected to the New Woman as a political figure but herself discussed New Woman politics in her writing, for example on marital rape, or imagined cheerful adulteresses escaping the narrative logic of the 'Fallen Woman' trope, that feminist agendas inform how we receive the legacy of the past. Whereas Ouida's best-selling fiction was often concerned with female autonomy and sexual liberation, her dismissal of New Woman politics meant that second-wave feminist scholars struggled to assimilate her into a feminist canon, because that canon championed New Woman ideals of participation in public life, rejection of marriage as an institution, or dress reform. Consequently, the New Woman has become a cornerstone in an imagined feminist teleological genealogy of steady emancipation, not least because as a collective ideal, she provides a legible iconography, but that iconography has also eclipsed more complex and nuanced debates of the *fin de siècle* such as Ouida's alternative approaches.

Still, it is evident why neo-Victorian or steampunk fiction gravitates towards the New Woman as an ideal with which modern audiences are invited to identify. However, while neo-Victorian heroines may be presented to us as empowered because they self-fashion independently or access urban space in exciting ways — riding motorbikes, investigating shady magicians, or scaling the Natural History Museum — the complex legacy of post-feminism and the persistence of certain sexist tropes in media also trouble and challenge their alleged empowerment. Neo-Victorian heroines such as Irene Adler or Mina Harker and steampunk Action Girls like Veronica Hobbes or Eliza Braun are conceived as feminist ideals whose sexual liberation emancipates them and sets them apart from the conventional Victorian women who are imagined to be 'stuffy' and 'repressed', and who draw attention to and ideally also overcome the latent sexism imagined to pervade the Victorian age. However, we have seen that such alleged empowerment is undermined by the persistence of sexist tropes, such as the fact that sexual empowerment is so often mediated and therefore sabotaged by a male gaze which objectifies women for its own pleasure, or the paradoxically 'Victorian' poetic justice that punishes

¹⁵⁵ Massey, p. 107.

women's transgression on gender norms through that very sexuality which allegedly liberates them, and often does so in violent and gendered ways.

The corset perhaps encapsulates how present-day feminism can depend on a Victorian Other against which we may define ourselves as liberated, when in reality it is part of a material history that is much more complex, and female body images today are no less subject to the aesthetic pressures we perceive to be at work in the Victorian age. On the contrary, as Margaret Stetz observes, not only is the same scrutiny not applied to male dress, but to invite present-day audiences to identify against rather than with their Victorian counterparts means to ignore how Victorian fashion acted as a marker of respectability which allowed women — including the bicycling New Woman and the suffragist — to access socio-political arenas of activity and activism.¹⁵⁶ In our feminist critique of Victorian legacies and neo-Victorian portrayals, we must be sensitive to the ideological undercurrents which inform our readings and inform our readings.

Moreover, post-feminist critique, informed by second-wave ideals, may sometimes lack the vocabulary to account for these perplexing legacies. Fourth-wave feminism, especially in connection with fan criticism and its re-evaluation of the politics underlying representation in mainstream media, may provide ways in which we can articulate what feminism must still strive to achieve, irrespective of whether or not women chose non-traditional pathways or make post-feminist lifestyle choices. This has become increasingly important since 2016, widely called the MeToo era, where we are faced with how patriarchal power structures in politics, the work place, the entertainment industry and popular media itself have re-appropriated feminist achievements into a system where women may imagine themselves to be empowered because they have achieved what second wavers fought for while still being silenced, curtailed, exploited, and objectified on a large and systematic scale. These developments cannot be productively understood within the parameters of post-feminist lifestyle choices. They are part of a much wider, patriarchal cultural logic that still governs Western societies, and for which fourth wave feminism must find ways to account, because it has become very clear that it impacts women's lives in important ways regardless of how traditional or radical they chose to be in their femaleness. One way activism has attempted to do so is through social media campaigns, international Women's Marches or the public cleansing of Hollywood's entertainment industry

¹⁵⁶ Stetz, 'Not A Laughing Matter'.

of sexual harassers, as well as the wide adoption of ‘pussy hats’ and the reclamation of phrases like ‘nasty woman’ or ‘nevertheless, she persisted’ from misogynistic discourse suggests that femininity is becoming newly politicised in fourth wave activism.

Alexia Tarabotti, heroine of Gail Carriger’s *Parasolverse*, defies a patriarchal cultural logic, instead reclaiming her femininity by enjoying it on her own terms. On first glance, Carriger’s supernatural romance might look frivolous, whimsical, and possibly conservative, but as my reading has shown it portrays a multifaceted spectrum of complex, independent female characters through a lens of semi-nostalgic, semi-ironic Wodehousian humour. Alexia performs femininity and womanhood however and whenever it suits her and subverts conventions where they do not, for example through comical fainting or weaponizing her parasol. Thus the steampunk humour derives from how characters react to and live within the ‘weird and archaic’ Victorian world in a way reminiscent of screwball comedy, and it is not levelled at who they are or what they represent.

Alexia sees eye to eye with her romantic partner as an Alpha female, expresses and explores her sexual desires without becoming a Fallen Woman or being punished for it, and moves freely across London, England and Europe at large regardless of her status. She cleverly utilises Victorian fashions to access public spaces as a respectable woman, but also makes active use of her weaponised parasol to save herself from distress, and in so doing shows how female characters may be empowered in ways that do not shun or negate femininity, but rather re-imagine and reclaim it. As such, Alexia echoes New Woman ideals but also those alternatives imagined by Ouida. She enacts ideals now integral to fourth wave feminism and popular fan criticism where other steampunk novels fail to do so. In addition to the examples discussed in this chapter, that is *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, the *Newbury and Hobbes* series and the *Ministry of Peculiar Occurrences* series, all of which have their merits but fail to imagine female empowerment in meaningful ways, this includes James Blaylock’s *St. Ives* series in which women are largely angelic wives or people to be rescued. *The Difference Engine*, although radical in many ways, still configures Ada Byron, revered Queen of Engines, within a thoughtlessly replicated and misogynist Angel/Whore binary, just as it does Sybil Gerard.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁷ ‘The story follows the violent plot form of the technothriller, a genre that relegates women to sexual appendages of the hero or to threatened objects of technological stalkers and government conspiracies. The women in *The Difference Engine* play one or both roles but do little else.’ Clayton, *Charles Dickens in Cyberspace*, p. 111.

Mark Hodder's alternative universe in his *Burton and Swinburne* series (2010-2015) is quite literally born out of the erasure of its most iconic female presence, Queen Victoria, who is killed in an early assassination attempt, thus giving way to 'Albertian London'. Lavie Tidhar's Milady in the *Bookman* series (2010-2012), a brash and cynical Black woman, is still victimised and crippled by a male villain before emerging as a newly powerful, but fractured cyborg. We do however also find interesting and empowered female characters in steampunk fiction, for example in Philip Reeve's *Mortal Engines* series (2001-2006), Cherie Priest's *Clockwork Century* series (2009-2014), Nisi Shawl's *Everfair* (2016), or P. Djéli Clark's *The Black God's Drums* (2018), for example.¹⁵⁸ Priest stated that writing women back into history, even anachronistically, is important to her because it means saying 'We were here and we were doing things' and challenges 'our ideas about who we *were*.'¹⁵⁹

This is equally true and important for LGBTQA+ identities wishing to see themselves reflected and so legitimised in history, a desire they share with their Victorian counterparts, but who reject tragic narratives of isolation and pain because they find it projects a problematic message incongruous with the ideals of pride culture. Here, too, steampunk may use its hyper-Victorian retro-speculation to collapse timelines and teleologies and deconstruct simplistic binaries between 'then' and 'now', 'Them' and 'Us', replacing outdated gender discourses, now considered harmful, with a positive genealogy of queerness that also challenges heteronormativity in creative and playful ways. This fantastic fiction-making, albeit non-mimetic and anachronistic, echoes the desire of queer aestheticists to 'realise one's own personality on some imaginative plane out of reach of the trammelling accidents and limitations of real life', and may provide an imagined reconciliation with queer histories of the closet.

Steampunk, I argue, is at its most productive and potentially radical when it uses its hyper-Victorian aesthetic to challenge the teleological genealogies we have constructed around such ideas as gender, instead of reinforcing binaries between past and present, male and female, liberation and repression, and so on. Unlike some neo-Victorian fiction, where sexuality may become 'the battlefield between the supposedly radical Victorian subcultures (e.g., nymphomaniacs, cross-dressers, pornographers, lesbians) and the normative anti-sexual

¹⁵⁸ These are not set in Victorian London, however, but, respectively in a post-apocalyptic future, across the United States, the Belgian Congo, and New Orleans.

¹⁵⁹ Carrott and Johnson, *Vintage Tomorrows*, p. 82.

discourses of the Victorian bourgeoisie', Carriger's steampunk envisions a retrofuturist setting in which women and non-heterosexual characters alike interrogate and undermine such readings by simply living independently and on their own terms.¹⁶⁰ Carriger's example shows how steampunk may become a vehicle for 'an artistic desire for perfect representation'¹⁶¹ that re-evaluates Victorian legacies in new, playful, and productive ways which are becoming increasingly relevant in the discourse around gender and feminism. In addition, steampunk may, consciously or not, re-vitalise discourses of the Victorian age itself that have become obscured by canon formations and reception history. In such a way, steampunk may include or make visible ideas, developments, people, and perspectives which we value today or consider common knowledge but cannot reliably identify in the (Victorian) past because the vocabulary we use has only evolved in recent decades. Anywhere else, we run the risk of a retroactive diagnosis when we evaluate the past with newer vocabularies of the present, but in steampunk, both contemporary contexts and present-day perspectives may be playfully juxtaposed and so generate creative tension, holding, in Haraway's terms, 'incompatible things together, because both or all are necessary and true' for us.¹⁶² By layering, contrasting, and remixing past and present, steampunk can include both and so, in James Carrott's approximation of a Wildean paradox, become 'more true because it's not'.¹⁶³

¹⁶⁰ Voigts, 'Victoriana's Secret', p. 21.

¹⁶¹ Wilde, p. 1150.

¹⁶² Haraway, p. 291.

¹⁶³ Tedx Talks, *Vintage Tomorrows: James H. Carrott at TEDxSonomaCounty*, Video, YouTube, posted by Tedx Talks, 19 June 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MT9WWyAFHpE>, 8:05-8:10 (Accessed 28th April 2020).

CONCLUSION: AN EXERCISE BICYCLE FOR THE MIND

In this thesis, I have asked how steampunk re-purposes imaginaries of Victorian London, that is the mental maps through which we, as individuals or collectively, (re-)position ourselves in relation to real, social, and historical spaces. That question effectively contains three further / subsidiary questions, namely: through which meta-fictional and meta-historical mechanisms may steampunk leverage and remix these imaginaries, what does this tell us about our Victorian imaginaries, and to what end and with what effect does steampunk re-imagine them?

In my endeavour to explore these questions, I have with deliberation approached my subject in an interdisciplinary way geared towards accounting for the many intersecting influences that operate in steampunk and its imaginaries of London especially: Victorian and neo-Victorian studies, science fiction and cyberpunk, urban studies, media studies, feminism(s), time travel, Gothic and psychogeography, and even video game studies. Steampunk, as an aesthetic and practice that is both as manifold as its creators and still open, alive, and in process, is not a subject that lends itself to neat final conclusions. Instead of attempting one I shall briefly summarise my findings and in so doing ponder some final, open-ended questions.

In my first chapter, I have explored steampunk's beginnings. How and why does it start, what ideas infuse its first iterations, and how is it synthesised into a resonant aesthetic mode? Many find it surprising that steampunk, so clearly Victorian-inspired, begins in 1980s California with three science fiction writers, and we have seen that Jeter's, Blaylock's, and Powers' first-wave novels do not share as many aesthetic or thematic features with one another or with later steampunk as one might expect. Nevertheless, those 'gonzo-historical' experiments set in a shabby Victorian London teeming with weird and picturesque urban subcultures were poignant and novel enough to necessitate the label which, although coined half-jokingly, would inspire and encapsulate an entire subculture of its own. All three authors referenced and re-imagined Henry Mayhew's urban sociology as an authentic portrayal of underground London and utilised time travel devices inspired by H. G. Wells' *Time Traveller* to make their thought experiments accessible. Inspired by the 'shabby-seedy' urban tribes who, in Mayhew's portrayal, live outside the sphere of the respectable middle-class home, the California trifecta instilled in steampunk a proclivity for underdogs, outlaws, and oddities which in their imagination complemented a certain quaint weirdness inherent in the Victorian aesthetic itself. Bruce Sterling, co-writer of the

seminal steampunk novel *The Difference Engine*, indeed considers the Victorian aesthetic to be ‘weird and archaic’, a constant reminder of the obsolescence of technologies, here the industrial paradigm.

Steampunk comes into existence at a pivotal moment in cultural and political history and is lastingly informed by it. With the failure of the Rust Belt in the US and the collapse of the mining industry in the UK, the 1980s hail the end of, but also the immediate and continuous fascination with the industrial paradigm, as well as marking the beginning of the computer age. Both Reagan’s and Thatcher’s neoliberal politics lastingly influence the counter-cultures that inform steampunk. I have explored how neo-Victorian Gothic relates to Thatcher’s ‘Victorian Values’ in Chapter Two, but in the first instance it is cyberpunk, US science fiction’s answer to the New Right, that shapes the steampunk of Gibson and Sterling. In their postmodern, cyberpunk-infused vision of Victorian London, the city is re-shaped through its alternative history and transformed into one giant computer on which ecological disaster acts like a virus and which gains sentience in a final twist. Through their radical re-configuration, the authors ironically explore Lefebvre’s notion of the Right to the City and expose how urban space is socially produced.

Seminal steampunk marks and is a product of a pivotal shift in the cultural history of our relationship with the Victorian past and our future, and it has struck me, in the course of this thesis, how often the steampunk mode circles back to its roots in unexpected ways. An obvious connection is steampunk’s somewhat neo-Ruskinite veneration of not Victorian handicrafts, but the tactile, volatile industrial aesthetic, which inspires its maker culture. Another is its instinct for postmodern pastiche and remix. However, in the course of the 2010s, the heyday of steampunk’s second wave, the long-term consequences of neoliberalism and the digital age have shaped our world in tangible and often troubling ways, for example through surveillance scandals or election manipulation. In the UK, a new wave of conservatives have re-written their own Victorian imaginaries to further pro-Brexit policies hinging on British exceptionalism, and online media have become complicit in spreading radical ideologies.¹ What cyberpunk had once considered thought experiments, namely the erosion of boundaries between individuals and technologies, has largely become reality as we increasingly depend on digital technologies and even AIs in our

¹ For example, Brexiter Jacob Rees-Mogg published a widely criticised monograph on *The Victorians: Twelve*

daily lives. Cyberpunk's once-niche speculation has long become widely legible to a mainstream audience, as recent popular films, series, and video games illustrate. Alongside a new wave of cyberpunk, we also see a nostalgia for the 1980s in pop culture: Netflix hit *Stranger Things* (2016-present), Stephen King film adaptations (such as *It* 2017, *It Chapter Two* 2019, *Pet Sematary* 2019, *Doctor Sleep* 2020), or the blockbuster adaptation of *Ready Player One* (2018) based on the 2011 novel all re-present that era with an implicit nostalgia about guiltless consumerism and the innocence of childhood, while also soul-searching the beginnings of the computer age. Much like steampunk, these narratives explore a technological paradigm and its socio-cultural context, only that steampunk resurrects and re-encodes an industrial aesthetic to examine the same thing, namely our relationship with the technologies that define our lives. Of course, digital technologies have, perhaps ironically, rendered steampunk's second wave possible in the first place through its dissemination, the sharing of resources and DIY tutorials, digital magazines, or even video games.

What is more, transmedia literacy and a shared knowledge of popular culture are the necessary preconditions for the steampunk aesthetic, as I have explored in Chapter Two. Here, I have traced how steampunk's anachronistic and fantastic re-workings, especially with regard to counterfiction, work in relation to collective memory, how its remix of history and fiction in tandem differentiates it from other neo-Victorian forms, and which potential that unlocks. We have seen how Kim Newman's *Anno Dracula* chronicles, leverages, and remixes Victorian Gothic myth-making about the East End and the Ripper murders, both relying on and playing with the palimpsestic nature of a widely shared cultural knowledge regarding London in order to comment on and subvert Thatcherite neoliberal re-writings of 'Victorian Values' through irony. While the novel shares this Gothic undermining of 1980s leitmotifs with other neo-Victorian fiction, for example Peter Ackroyd's psychogeographical *The Limehouse Golem*, it does not configure London as a continuous re-incarnation of innate *genius locii* whose hidden routes and secret knowledges may only ever be glimpsed partially by the urban explorer. Instead, *Anno Dracula*, as an example of steampunk counter-fiction, is alert to the cultural processes of myth-making and draws attention to it through its collapsing of timelines and history-fiction boundaries, as well as its re-imagination of a coherent register of Victorian Gothic tropes. Other

Titans who Forged Britain in 2019.

steampunk fictions may tap into a shared knowledge and transmedia literacy to evoke a Victorian aesthetic that is in fact only outlined through specific, but resonant signifiers, or in turn take the Victorian Gothic in a new direction by infusing it with an industrial cyberpunk aesthetic that re-encodes the realities of the Victorian East End into an evocative body horror and cyborgisms.

Against this backdrop, steampunk may illustrate how our collective transmedia literacy evolves. In the era of memes, considered to be an amusing cultural item (such as an image, video, or gesture) which is spread online via social media and often in some way humorously comments on and remixes widely familiar genres, moments of culture or history, or texts, we have come to read through layered and complex pastiches quickly and effortlessly. Steampunk is certainly part of that development, considering that first wave novels had to employ the time travel narrative to guide readers, whereas second wave steampunk relies on readers' ability to decode its anachronistic, cross-genre worlds from context. Perhaps steampunk has also paved the way for, or at least anticipated, new relationships with past and memory in popular culture. A remarkable number of very recent films and series are characterised by anachronistic narrative strategies mostly expressed through aesthetics and humorous juxtaposition. While Giorgos Lanthimos' 2019 film *The Favourite* and Hulu's *The Great* (2020) look at the eighteenth century, others concentrate on the nineteenth century: Apple TV's series *Dickinson* (2019), Autumn de Wilde's colourful *Emma* (2020), and Armando Iannucci's *The Personal History of David Copperfield* (2020) all project our zeitgeist into the Victorian past in quirky, playful ways and so deliberately and often ironically draw attention to the historical distance while simultaneously rendering the past more approachable to wider audiences. Whereas of course neo-Victorian texts are always infused with our present perspective, these newer adaptations seem to deliberately eschew the attempt of a 'faithful' recreation of the past in favour of an approach that is as thoughtful as it is irreverent. As such, they mark a departure from the heritage-focused films of the Merchant Ivory variety, leveraging anachronistic remix strategies that steampunk has over the years rehearsed. They notably also echo the more whimsical, Wodehousian humour which characterises Carriger's steampunk, and tend to centre on the stories and perspectives of women, which suggests that these narratives move past an imagined mimetic re-iteration of the past and use whimsical and ironic meta-historical markers to say new, possibly radical things about our relationship with the (Victorian) past.

Having established the inner workings of steampunk that inform its re-calibration of

Victorian London imaginaries, I have turned towards the role of urban space itself in Chapter Three. By considering video games as a virtual manifestation of steampunk London, I have examined how urban space or the simulation thereof is produced through embodied journeys that act as narrative and physical trajectories which interlink into the ongoing networks of London. Prominent Victorian writers such as Dickens and Doyle have represented London as a mega-city by drawing attention to the myriad intersecting trajectories which converge in its multi-level space, and contemporary visual art has combined panoptic and immersive perspectives to reflect its grandeur and complexity. Both *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* and *The Order 1886* draw on these strategies to construct their game spaces while also implementing their own particular narratives that may be expressed in and through them. In so doing they reveal different approaches to the Victorian past and its legacy. Whereas *Syndicate* adopts a patronising stance to construct a frame narrative in which the player may triumphantly liberate the city from its 'Victorian' evils and in so doing freely but anonymously roam the city as an outlaw hero with access to hidden moves and spectacular movements, *The Order's* cyberpunk-infused cityscape foreshadows a more dystopian narrative. Mobilising a resonant visual shorthand inspired by *Blade Runner's* hyper-city, the game configures its urban spaces and textures as storytelling devices which the player must actively interpret in lieu of a frame narrative. With its towering spires and bleak urban canyons, its social stratification, clutter and anarchic rebellion, the game re-positions Victorian London as the original hyper-city and transforms its cityscape into a retro-speculative argument. Through its disorienting, immersive urban experience as well as narrative twists that escalate towards catastrophe, the game shows itself mindful of how 'history has sharp edges', and how engaging with a Victorian aesthetic as codified by London, the economic and political nexus, necessitates thinking about the legacies of Imperialism in some way. The game literalises steampunk's potential for irreverent play, but also counter-cultural re-evaluation into a spatialised journey that playfully enacts the hermeneutics of retro-speculation.

Both *Syndicate's* offering up of Victorian London as an interactive historical playground to be mastered and explored, and *The Order's* encoding of Victorian failings and trauma into supernatural tropes of monstrosity illustrate how much steampunk re-presents Victorian London as a space of adventure. It is striking that, while more popular forms exist, the corpus of neo-Victorian fiction that continues to be discussed in academia is often characterised by decidedly literary, sometimes postmodern strategies, as well as social dynamics and realism. Steampunk,

by contrast, gravitates towards action-driven plot archetypes such as mystery, detective, or espionage stories, often recombined with adventure and romance. We have seen in Chapter One how first wave steampunk re-imagined Victorian London and its underground weirdness as a space of play, exploration, and excitement, and I have remarked in Chapter Three how steampunk narratives re-iterate the conventions of the adventure genre as shaped in the nineteenth century, especially the choice of a past or otherwise exotic setting in which real dangers necessitate actionable, morally unambiguous choices. Considering that neo-Victorian fiction at large also often configures the past as a sphere that can be evaluated and judged more easily from hindsight and thus often re-presents it as a Gothic other, it is not surprising that neo-Victorianism and adventure tropes converge in resonant ways. Among the Victorian era and its now-antiquated, seemingly elaborate social conventions, the complexities of our own present may be suspended or at least defamiliarized, and so momentarily cohere into clearer choices. Moreover, steampunk's retro-speculative interventions into an era of large technological, political and social change also actualise its historical processes as exciting thought experiments about the route not taken. Lastly, an important consideration of steampunk's romance with adventure may be the fact that it makes a Victorian setting, albeit not a mimetic one, accessible for the wider audiences of popular and mainstream media. Victorian fiction and its literary neo-Victorian counterpart can be daunting or uninteresting for some because they may require additional historical knowledge or cultural skills to be fully understood. Steampunk on the other hand comes with its own learning curve as a speculative mode, which means that, while previous knowledge may enhance the reading, audiences generally have equal chances to understand the universe, and in addition may be drawn in by the excitement.

It has become clear that in our re-projections into the Victorian past, be they through neo-Victorianism or steampunk, our own identity politics which inevitably inform such projections, may also be equally made more visible through that perspective. In Chapter Four, I have examined what steampunk may reveal about our own agendas and stakes in re-imagining the Victorian past and considered its pitfalls as well as its potentials by looking at feminisms, canonicity, and gender in popular media. We have seen how feminist agendas of different waves inform how we read and re-present the past and which meta-historical narratives about *fin de siècle* feminism have been reinforced and which obscured by second-wave feminist scholarship. The New Woman of the *fin de siècle* became a powerful symbol for challenging gender

boundaries. Her independence and transgressive potential have been potently encoded in her movement within and across the city, so that the bicycle has become an important signifier of her emancipation enacted in and through the urban sphere. Whereas the New Woman as a collective ideal has come to encode feminist liberation in a Victorian setting because its aims mirrored the agendas of the era in which they were received, 1980s feminism also tended to dismiss alternative arguments because it could not assimilate them into its genealogy. Neo-Victorian portrayals, while often understanding themselves as liberating allegedly repressed Victorian women from a stifling patriarchy, can (somewhat ironically) fall back into sexist tropes about Fallen Women because, in their desire to present sexual liberation as post-feminist self-actualisation, they are tangled up in a latent patriarchal cultural logic that persists in present-day popular culture. Consequently, Sherlock Holmes' antagonist Irene Adler acts with more agency in her original 1890s text than in recent adaptations, and second-wave steampunk, too, can follow narratives in which its heroines, presented as audacious, liberated, and 'strong', are paradoxically also punished for the sexual transgressions that allegedly free them. Many aspects of this development may be understood through a third-wave post-feminist framework, but as we have seen, post-feminist meta-narratives can fail to account for the ways in which the fourth wave of the MeToo era re-imagines and re-interrogates gender roles, particularly with regard to femininity. As a retro-speculative aesthetic, steampunk has the tools to re-present liberated Victorian women with agency and has done so most successfully when, paradoxically, it has shed the more masculinist tropes of the action-adventure genre and ceased to regard femininity in itself as a weakness or disadvantage, thereby actually circling back to its hyper-Victorian setting in resonant ways.

In addition to articulating feminism in new ways, steampunk also has the capacity to re-evaluate genealogies of LGBTQA+ identities in a formative era but without replicating the painful legal, social, or medical conditions that shaped their existence. In the age of MeToo and 'woke' culture, there is a desire to see media represent previously marginalised voices and identities in stories not defined by tragedy and frustration, in line with the philosophy of pride. However, to do so in a historical setting can be difficult: To foreground oppressive systems and invisibility in neo-Victorian queer narratives (like the novels of Sarah Waters) can complicate such a positive representation, as well as portrayals of intersectionality and solidarity. To simply write aspirational fantasies back into history, on the other hand, risks trivialising those networks

of power and discourse whose legacy we must still confront and erasing the struggles of those who brought about change. In contrast steampunk, because it is clearly marked as counterfactual and fantastic, may construct alternative genealogies about diverse stories in a historical setting without obscuring the real history behind it. In so doing it may help supply legitimisation and representation for marginalised identities in playful ways, as well as interrogate gender and its performance on a larger scale.

Steampunk may, like other forms of neo-Victorian or popular media, unintentionally perpetuate conservative tropes or sexist stereotypes and its alleged subversion may turn out to merely reflect the patriarchal narrative logic of mainstream popular culture, but there is also a radical potential inherent in its collapsing of timelines. As we have seen with Carriger's *Parasolverse*, that radical potential may best be expressed in new, creative forms and those may be misunderstood or misread by those who measure it against the more familiar meta-narratives. Ironically, this is what was the fate of popular Victorian writer Ouida in her challenge to the New Woman as collective symbol, but recent film-making in the wake of MeToo is also displaying similar tendencies. In line with fourth-wave feminism's exposure of how working, self-determined, and allegedly fully emancipated women are still disadvantaged in a patriarchal workplace and culture, mainstream feminist films such as Patty Jenkins' *Wonder Woman* (2017), Greta Gerwig's *Lady Bird* (2018) and *Little Women* (2019), Olivia Wilde's *Booksmart* (2019), Autumn de Wilde's *Emma* (2020), or Cathy Yan's *Birds of Prey: The Emancipation of Harley Quinn* (2020) all explore alternative narrative modes and gender tropes that seek to eschew a male gaze or patriarchal logic. These films exemplify how popular media, across genres, may represent gender through new understandings of femininity and agency, as well as feminist role models, and they are attuned to the fact that this depends not just on the narrative content, but the strategies through which that is mediated. As a retro-speculative mode with the freedom of play and no designs on feigning a mimetic approach to the past, steampunk has the potential to play a part in this exploration and reclaim the Victorian past and gender in new ways for the twenty-first century.

In its exploration of both 'old' and 'new' ways of mediating and understanding our relationship with a formative past, steampunk frequently gravitates towards Victorian London as the setting which concentrates, encodes, and sustains major social, economic, political, and historical narratives. That cities, and metropolises like London have been and still are the theatre

in and through which we collectively negotiate our identities as spatialised and interconnected imaginaries of our social, economic, and historical relationships, has become more evident than ever in 2020. As the global Covid-19 pandemic has enforced social distancing and suspended urban flows dictated by economic needs, work, education, and leisure, cities across the world have been deserted, their spaces decoupled from their intended use. In London's busy metropolis, this has been especially felt as the city may never have been this empty and quiet in its long history. Ironically, images of a deserted Regent Street, Trafalgar Square, or Covent Garden as shared by the London Instagram account not only feel suddenly like a recording of a video game like *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate*, but also recall the 'sheer physicality' and 'nightmare endlessness', the 'nausea of awnings' and 'pitiless abyss of geologic time' of *The Difference Engine*'s emptied-out steampunk London, at once tranquil and eerie.

Recent events also echo how Gibson and Sterling's steampunk London enacts Lefebvre's Right to the City, both in re-shaping the collective identity through narratives enshrined in urban spaces and as a theatre for protest and rebellion (even though theirs is marked by irony). Following the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests that have erupted in the US in June 2020, cities across the US and even the world have become literal battlefields in which national identities and discourses of power are negotiated through physical presences and altercations in public space. In Washington, DC, the public works department painted a street-wide mural onto 16th Street near the White House, claiming a socially symbolic urban space as their platform and inscribing their demands into it. Mayor Muriel Bowser subsequently renamed the location 'Black Lives Matter Plaza'. Similar murals have appeared in San Francisco, Berkeley, New York, Buffalo, and many other cities, among them Seattle, where protesters have temporarily occupied and declared the Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone spanning approximately six city blocks and a park, following the Seattle Police Department's vacating of the East Precinct. Local communities' demands include rent control, the reversal of gentrification, the de-funding of police, and funding of community health. These events are potent examples of people enacting their Right to the City and demanding agency in shaping the places where they live, as well as challenging the collective meta-narratives about power and participation that urban spaces signify.

This is also powerfully illustrated by what media are currently calling the 'statue wars'. Across the US, protesters have over-written, defaced, or removed memorials to Confederate

soldiers and politicians who fought against the abolition of slavery, thereby manifesting their protest against systemic racism in a physical challenge to, and re-writing of, the urban sphere that enshrines a racist history. The ‘statue wars’ erupted in Britain when, on 7th June 2020, protesters in solidarity with BLM toppled the statue of 17th-century merchant and slave trader Edward Colston and sunk it in the harbour, leaving instead their placards and posters at the site. The statue, installed in 1895 in the context of Victorian New Imperialist anxiety, so symbolises how collective memory is shaped by *lieux de memoire*, and how, much like when the Duke of Wellington’s memorials are removed in *The Difference Engine*, such places in turn shape historical meta-narratives and collective identities.

Naturally, as BLM activism has sparked a debate about Britain’s colonial past, this discussion is also enacted in London. BLM rallies were held in Hyde Park, a public space long associated with political debate through Speaker’s Corner or the suffragettes’ campaigns, and Mayor Sadiq Khan ordered the removal of a statue to Robert Milligan, a merchant and slave-trader, which stood in front of the London Docklands Museum. In Parliament Square, Winston Churchill’s statue has been boarded up to prevent vandalism, and recently, far-right protesters resorted to violence in seeking to protect the statue and the symbolic value they attribute to it in shaping a ‘British’ identity. Here too, the debate about collective identities, discourses of power and belonging, and the legacy of a formative past are literally being carried out within and through the cityscape.

Recent events across the world illustrate how cities shape our identities, how our cognitive mapping as individuals or collectives may relate to physical space, and that London still assumes a central position in these processes. As the oldest and largest industrial metropolis, London remains a potent nexus of global social, economic, and political histories. Its historic spaces especially become a theatre in and through which we encode, negotiate, challenge, and may re-think our collective history and our human identity across past, present, and future. In this process, the nineteenth century assumes a central position as a formative era whose urban aesthetics, social challenges, and technological progress have been evocatively chronicled through contemporary media and kept alive within the collective imagination through neo-Victorian (re-)adaptations. Victorian London thus continues to sustain and provide a resonant imaginary in and through which these relationships play out. It is no wonder, then, that steampunk often gravitates towards this setting, but even London’s interconnected variety can

only represent a specific section of the global nineteenth century. While this section is probably the largest and most potent in comparison with other settings owing to the palimpsestic archive about it available to us, London represents a specifically Anglo-centric idea of the nineteenth century, as the name ‘Victorian’ alone suggests. With the steampunk mode established and readable for a wide audience, steampunk may move on and apply its retro-speculation to other settings and explore their historically and culturally specific potentials in re-negotiating our relationship with the past.²

Steampunk offers a unique approach to this re-negotiation because it opens up fantastical anachronistic opportunities for challenge, subversion, and play through its collapsing of timelines. By mobilising the textuality of history and creating counterfiction and infusing it with retro-speculation, it creatively intervenes in a deterministic logic of history where everything is framed as inevitable and so makes room for alternative ideas to play out. Whereas these may turn out to be whimsical or radical, steampunk’s re-imagination of a Victorian past reveals the ideologies and agendas inherent in our approach, but also playfully helps us to explore history, identity, and meta-narratives with a curious and flexible ‘what if’ mentality with regard to past, present, and future. In so doing it may train us to perceive our present as equally mutable and open to play as well as to lasting change. After all, as Terry Pratchett reminds us: ‘Fantasy is an exercise bicycle for the mind. It might not take you anywhere, but it tones up the muscles that can’.³

²For example the American West in Cherie Priest’s *The Clockwork Century* series (2009-2014), the Belgian Congo in Nisi Shawl’s *Everfair* (2016), the short story collection *The Sea Is Ours: Tales from Steampunk Southeast Asia* edited by Jaymee Goh (2015), New Orleans in P. Djèli Clark’s novella *The Black God’s Drums* (2018) and Egypt in his novella *The Haunting of Tram Car 015* (2019).

³Terry Pratchett, quoted in Paul Kidby, *Terry Pratchett’s Discworld Imaginarium* (London: Gollancz, 2017), p. 9.

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