

Uncanny Retrofuturism and Urban Otherness

Victorian London as Steampunk Cyber-City

Helena Esser

Abstract:

Steampunk, a retro-speculative aesthetic which re-imagines a hyper-Victorian never-was infused with technofantasy, often realises Victorian London as its creative epicentre: the city provides a nexus of accumulated urban imaginaries in which social, political, and technological paradigms converge or originate. In this article, I examine how steampunk may creatively re-route strategies of re-assessing human-machine relationships, inherited from its sister-genre cyberpunk, through a retrofitted industrial paradigm in order to examine selfhood and Otherness, alienation and hybridisation, through the metaphor of city. Through recourse to an outmoded and defamiliarizing Victorian aesthetic, steampunk translates concerns about cyber-technology back into a physical, tangible sphere, where they are productively encoded through and within urban space. My reading focuses on William Gibson and Bruce Sterling's seminal novel, *The Difference Engine* (1990) and S.M. Peters' post-millennial novel *Whitechapel Gods* (2008) and considers them in the context of urban Gothic and steampunk's maker culture.

Keywords: steampunk, urban imaginary, Victorian London, cyberpunk, *The Difference Engine*, posthumanism, urban Gothic, neo-Victorian

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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. (Clute 1991, 244)

Science fiction critic John Clute describes how Bruce Sterling and William Gibson's 1990 steampunk novel, *The Difference Engine*, transforms the imagined geography of London as enshrined in collective memory (cf. Assmann 2008), into what Umberto Eco calls a *uchronia*: imagining "what would have happened if what really did happen had happened differently" (Eco 1985, 174). In doing so Sterling and Gibson radically re-structure the once familiar urban environment into something both new and anachronistic. Clute, notably, draws attention to the physicality of urban structures, as the "literary *place*", a "virtual world that interacts in a modular fashion with the world of reference" (Westphal 2011, 101) is defamiliarised into what he terms a "heterotopic interference", a space of alternative history (ibid., 104). Gibson and Sterling's London, re-mapped and re-imagined, becomes a never-was, an Other London, a *steampunk*

London. It is a London that creatively mobilises speculation and anachronism to re-evaluate Otherness and identity in new ways through the prism of urbanity.

Anachronistic re-constructions are an intrinsic part of the steampunk mode, which Mike Perschon has defined as a tripartite aesthetic which assembles an eclectic neo-Victorian collage infused with technofantasy and retrofuturism (Perschon 2012, 12). We may now find our newly imagined “Victorian” London teeming with airships, Babbage Engines, and automata. In light of the Anglo-centric implications of the term “Victorian”, Perschon has recently revised his vocabulary from “neo-Victorian” to “hyper-Vintage” (2018, 2-3). Considering, however, Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewelyn’s seminal and field-defining definition of “neo-Victorian” 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*” (2010, 4 original emphasis), and dealing expressly with (re-)imaginings of London in the nineteenth century, I will employ the term “hyper-Victorian” instead to denote acceleration and excess.

Through its speculative, and often counterfactual collage, inspired, in the words of the Catastrophe Orchestra and Arts Collective, by the “smog-choked alleys of Victoria’s duskless empire” (2006, 5), steampunk re-creates the Victorian city as retro-speculative playground, disrupting and re-mapping the urban imaginary. “Our mental and 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” (Soja 2000, 324). As such, the steampunk city not only interrogates the city as an externalised structure which equally maps our collective, imagined ‘self’ by creating as well as harbours the ‘other’, it also examines the city’s own potential for Otherness, framing past and present as potential self and other. In this article, I want to explore how steampunk fiction may creatively harness an urban imaginary of Victorian London in order to re-evaluate identity, alterity, and hybridity

through the metaphor of city.

Steampunk, with its recombinant mode, holds the potential for a wide spectrum of storyworlds, ranging in tone from escapism and nostalgia to radical ecocriticism (cf. Siemann 2016). I will focus here on *The Difference Engine* and S.M. Peters' novel *Whitechapel Gods* (2008) and the way they re-imagine Victorian London infused by cyber-technology, seeing that, as Tom Gunning posits "discourses shap[e] how we perceive and use technology, while technologies function not simply as convenient devices, but refashion our experience of space" (Gunning 2003, 51).

Different Engines and City Circuits

In *The Difference Engine*, cyberpunk heavyweights William Gibson and Bruce Sterling abandon the stylish, but gritty postmodern hyper-cities of the digital future for Victorian London, but also disregard both Victorian and neo-Victorian (or psychogeographical) traditions of (re-)writing London as a haunted Gothic city (cf. Mighall 1999, Wolfreys and Gibson 2000, Wolfreys 2002, or Luckhurst 2002). Considering the recourse to the industrial age, we must ask why it does not tap into the wealth of available Gothic tropes or conjure up the endlessly haunted cityscape. In order to answer this question, we must first trace how the novel re-writes the urban imaginary.

In the storyworld of the novel, Babbage's Engine is successfully built and induces a radical paradigm shift which transforms society into a meritocracy dominated by Lords Darwin, Huxley, Babbage, and Brunel. It inscribes itself into the cityscape: South Kensington teems with Scientific Palaces as urban space and alternative history are (re-)built in tandem. Control over topography here equals control over cultural memory and imaginative geographies (cf. Said 1978). Nowhere is this more clearly embodied than in the Central Statistics Bureau, an institution profiting from "a full-

blown information order, complete with massive databases on citizens, surveillance apparatus, photo IDs, credit cards, rapid international data transmission via telegraph [...]” (Clayton 2003, 110). The Statistics Bureau is a vast pyramid “squatted solidly in the governmental heart of Westminster” (Gibson and Sterling 1990, 144) and a space of socio-political resonance. 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” (ibid., 145), hints at the godlike, central power of the pharaohs and ancient, perhaps even spiritual knowledge, kept hidden and guarded there. Here, in divisions named “Quantitative Criminology”, “Deterrence Research” (ibid., 149), or “Criminal Anthropometry” (157), data is collected on “[e]veryone who’s ever applied for work, or paid taxes, or been arrested” (160). “We naturally keep a brotherly eye on the telegram-traffic, credit-records, and such” (152) says one head of division to Mallory, our focal character, with a nod to *1984*’s all-seeing Big Brother (cf. also Jagoda 2012).

The Bureau’s physical character likewise enacts its functional demands: On the outside, it is haphazardly “riddled top to bottom with thick black telegraph-lines, as though individual streams of the Empire’s information had bored through solid stone” (Gibson and Sterling 1990, 145). Inside, every space and every behaviour 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” (ibid., 156). Everything inside this space, from the “dry and static” (147) atmosphere to the clerks on wheeled boots, shooting up and down the corridors delivering decks of punch carts like data in an information circuit, seems to be an extension of the engines at the building’s core. As a windowless, dustless, highly efficient structure in which humans are dwarfed and determined by looming, awe-inspiring machinery, the Bureau reads as a gigantic processor of human information. It

is 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 and in it human interactions, from telegrams and telegraphic communication, to arrest, and employment records, act as data.

Unresolved tensions overheat this ultimately unstable processor, as the ‘Great Stink’, a historical eco-catastrophe, erupts over the city. Mallory envisions Darwin’s earthworms, “always invisibly busy underfoot, so that even great sarsen-stones slowly sank into the loam” as a distinctly Victorian allegory for the streams of data traversing the city, “churning in catastrophic frenzy, till the soil roiled and bubbled like a witches’ brew” (148). This produces a demonic energy that eventually transforms the city into a distorted, apocalyptic vision. We encounter “a canopy of yellow haze” hanging

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. (205)

The image of the “storm-fleshed” tentacle, described by Roger Luckhurst as “that limb-tongue suggestive of absolute alterity” (2017, 1054), with its somewhat Lovecraftian imagery, alerts us to the increasing Otherness of the cityscape as its designated urban functions break down. Its networks are congested by traffic, its citizens give way to animalistic frenzies of looting and riot, and the urban machine descends into “roiling chaos” (Gibson and Sterling 1990, 273). Mallory becomes overwhelmed by the city’s utter, 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. (ibid., 131)

His vision of London is one of an eternal, a-chronic physical structure, man-made and yet also independent from, and eerily devoid of, humanity. Through Mallory, we the readers, become susceptible to the inherent Otherness of urban structures. Urban space is disassociated from its purpose and its meaning. Consequently, courts, streets, and shops become grotesque when deserted, and we are left to contemplate the newly strange cityscape as an illegible, unknowable labyrinth stretching endlessly through time and space. In his moment of cosmic dread, Mallory perceives the city as an indifferent, Other entity, and imbues it with faint notions of sentiment; it is nauseating, nasty, and uncanny. The urban environment itself, decoupled from the self, becomes alien. However, this is merely one stage in a larger process of transformation which fully realises the city's speculative potential for embodying Otherness. Soon we realise that this is but a foreboding glimpse at a larger truth hidden beyond the city, as the narrative voice begins to rise above and then merge into it in a meta-narrative moment of self-awareness:

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

This sudden dissolution of our mediative tether is performed through a movement away from the concrete structure of the street and the urban traces of wheel-tracks, into the more abstract realm of the map. This illustrates how literary urban space can make visible interconnections and inter-relations, such as the Statistics Bureau which acts as a gigantic processor, but may also provide an imaginative geography of confusion, disorientation, and potential alienation. This is most clearly articulated in the final section of the novel, called "Modus", in which, as Gibson explained in a 1991

interview, the narrative reveals itself as “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” (Fishlin, Hollinger, et. al. 1992, 10).

The city is a vast and uncanny entity whose networks resemble information circuits. It is not merely a visualisation of data flow in a cityworld transformed by burgeoning computer technology, but in fact the vehicle through which the city self-actualises into a sentient Artificial Intelligence: the entity “narratron” of Gibson’s description. The final scene, in which Ada Byron, “Enchantress of Numbers”, looks into a mirror and sees London in 1991, illustrates this:

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- (Sterling and Gibson 1990, 485)

In this vivid, hyper-real vision, city and Engine become indistinguishable, then synonymous when the narratron realizes 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” (ibid., 486). London becomes a cyber-city, putting into play Christine Boyer’s notion of the CyberCity which “turns the reality of time and place into an imaginary matrix of computer nets electronically linking together distant places around the globe and communicating multilinearly and nonsequentially

with vast assemblages of information stored as electronic codes” (Boyer 1996, 14).

This is only fitting considering that “there has been a predilection for drawing a parallel between the virtual space of computer networks and post-urban places of disorder and decay” (ibid., 14) ever since Gibson’s seminal novel *Neuromancer* (1984) conceived of cyberspace as

a consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, [...] A graphic representation of data abstracted from banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights receding... (Gibson 1984, 59)

Whereas Boyer’s *CyberCities* are real-world spaces theorised in abstract terms, Gibson and Sterling literalise the cyber-city as their fantastic Victorian London increasingly dissolves into informational patterns in a process of self-recognition. This is enacted, all through the novel, through the metaphor of city, operating as a visual analogy for space, movement, data, and patterns out of which the “Eye” finally emerges sentient:

In this City’s center, 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
! (486)

This is a vision worthy of two cyberpunk authors: City and computer become allied, then intertwined as fellow non-human entities, both human-made yet fundamentally Other. They are seemingly legible in their patterned structures and infrastructures, acting as circuits, yet are ultimately unknowable. Both the city and the

computer, the novel suggests, contain secret potentials for autonomy and define our lives in ways as yet invisible to us. But why (re-)construct an alternative genealogy of computer history set in Victorian London to enact such a cyber-city? Why shift gears towards an industrial paradigm? The answer, I want to suggest, lies in steampunk's approach to the Victorian design aesthetic and technology.

My Machine, my Comrade?

"Steampunk's key lessons are not about the past", claims Sterling in his *User's Guide to Steampunk*: "They are about the instability and obsolescence of our own times" (Sterling 2012, 12). This statement becomes particularly interesting if we consider that steampunk, a term half-jokingly coined by K.W. Jeter in reference to cyberpunk in 1987 (cf. Gross 2007), was first consciously being written as neoliberal governments re-aligned historical narratives (cf. Margaret Thatcher's infamous "Victorian Values"), and the industrial paradigm ended with the decline of the Rust Belt in the US and the closing of mines in the UK.

Since then, however, steampunk has grown into a diverse subculture and active maker scene. The collective Obtanium Works driving the Neverwas Haul, a Victorian House on wheels, across Burning Man Festival and Jake von Slatt's computers, re-furnished in Victorian brass-and-gold design, are but two examples of how steampunks re-purpose an industrial (hyper-)Victorian aesthetic for their fantastic creations (cf. Bowser and Croxall 2010, Forlini 2010, Barber and Hale 2013, Danahay 2016). Behind this "funereal theatre" that selectively resurrects "the dandified gear of aristocrats, peculiar brass gear, rather stilted personal relationships, and elaborate and slightly kinky underwear" (Sterling 2012, 12), however, lies a quest to re-capture a knowability of the technology that surrounds and defines us. In a much-quoted manifesto, the Catastrophone 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. (Catastrophone Orchestra 2006, 4)

In an attempt to “rediscover the inherent dignity of created objects” (Calamity 2007, 27), steampunks humanise and revel in technology that can be experienced through the senses - seen, heard, and touched- in opposition to the streamlined digital black boxes that refuse us 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. As Rebecca Onion explains: “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” (Onion 2008, 151). “We love what our devices do, but they’re cultural blanks”, states James Carrott. “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” (Carrott 2013, 105).

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 (cf. Ferguson 2011, Huxtable 2013). 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. 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 (cf. Boswer and Croxall 2010, Forlini 2010, Huxtable 2013). Turning instead to fantastic, self-fashioned metaphors and impossible, alternative worlds, steampunks repurpose the “weird and archaic” (Sterling 2012, 13), yet reassuringly physical Victorian aesthetic in order to negotiate boundaries in human-machine relationships. As Katherine Hayles notes in her seminal study: “When information loses its body, equating humans and computers is especially easy, for the materiality in which the thinking mind is instantiated appears incidental to its essential nature” (Hayles 1999, 2). As we are “compelled daily to face the breakdown of the distinction between the mechanic/technological and the organic/biotic” (Orbaugh 2002, 436) in our use of social media, navigation systems, intelligent cars, drone technology, or simply devices such as “Alexa”, steampunk relocates the debate about self-hood, alterity, and hybridisation with the Other back into a physical realm. As such, steampunk is engaged in an unending (re-)negotiation of the fundamental Otherness of technology.

Similarly, Sterling and Gibson translate the uncanny possibilities inherent in cyber-technology back into an (imagined) re-embodied, physical city, into busy urban networks, appropriately looming architecture, and towering, sublime Difference Engines. In doing so, digital processes and possibilities become visualised in a defamiliarised, hyper-Victorian aesthetic which, in this case, relies on the urban imaginary of Victorian London as its conduit. The once familiar Victorian industrial aesthetic has become strange, if not other, in the digital age, but steampunk productively re-combines both: Here, the aesthetic of an earlier industrial paradigm becomes an evocative shorthand for the hyper-Victorian Other, and as such opens up possibilities to creatively re-examine how notions of Otherness may migrate across temporal and spatial axes through the imaginary of the steampunk city.

Urban Gothic, Marxist Body Horror, and the Cyber-City

Whitechapel Gods, too, is concerned with human identity in the (hyper-)Victorian city, especially in the face of transformative cyber-technology and capitalist production. In its fantastic re-construction of Victorian Whitechapel, the novel relies on the resonance and legacy of Victorian narratives about London, and the East End in particular. Leading us into the text is a quotation from Arthur Morrison's 1889 essay on Whitechapel for *The Palace Journal*:

A horrible black labyrinth, thick with 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. (quoted in Peters 2008, 5)

Whereas this colourful description steeped in Gothic rhetoric forms part of Morrison's attempt to dismantle popular stereotypes about the East End, it also epitomises the same urban Gothic vocabulary which conflated poverty, criminality, and atavistic degeneration and posited the East End as heterotopic Other within (cf. Mighall 1999, Werner 2008). Social geographer Henry Mayhew (1848) and artist Gustave Doré (1872) pioneered a discourse about the East End as *terra incognita*, in whose obscure labyrinthine alleys the civilising effects of modernity were given no foothold. They therefore remained significantly "behind the times". 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 urban Gothic mode configured the social ills – disease, crime, and poverty – as atavistic regressions in an evolving, enlightened society and city. In Mighall's seminal definition, the "Gothic in the City" becomes a "Gothic of the City": "Its terrors derive from situations peculiar to, and firmly located within, the urban experience" (1999, 30,

original emphasis).

How such imaginative geographies converged with cognitive mapping may be exemplified by Charles Booth's *Poverty Map* (1889-90), in which the notorious rookery, the Old Nichol, appeared characterised in dark blue ("Very Poor, casual. Chronic want.") and black ("Lowest class. Vicious, semi-criminal"). An imagined correlation between poverty and crime (cf. Warwick and Willis 2007, Werner 2008), likewise informed Morrison's own slum novel *A Child of the Jago* (1896), which fictionalised the Old Nichol as a lawless, predatory place which humans inhabit like vermin (cf. Wise 2008). By the end of the century, the haunting, degenerated monsters of Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), could rely on a shared urban Gothic imaginary which was further catalysed through Victorian London's most notorious spectre: Jack the Ripper, whose sexual violence both epitomised and concentrated contemporary anxieties and re-affirmed an imagined London topography. In this topography the East End was the anachronistic Other against which the cosmopolitan Victorian identity was defined (cf. Curtis 2001, Begg 2003, Warwick and Willis 2007, Werner 2008, Gary 2010). "Jack", the "Man Monster" (Chisolm n.d.). Eradicating the boundaries between human and beast, Jekyll and Hyde, the serial killer whose sudden violence might erupt from any and every seemingly respectable face in the crowd, epitomised anxieties about life in the city and became the essential urban monster.

The Gothic mode, employing aesthetic strategies such as distortion, fragmentation, or obscuring in order to summon the uncanny, the repressed, or the abject, is intrinsically linked to the negotiation of the increasingly unstable boundaries between self and other, familiar and strange, homely and hostile. Uncanny, or *unheimlich*, literally translates to un-home-ly, and as such is intrinsically connected to

identity and how we inhabit spaces (cf. Heidegger 1927, Freud 1919). *Whitechapel Gods*, as the paratext implies, taps into this rich legacy, but employs fantastic, retro-speculative impulses to re-imagine a hyper-Gothic nightmare city, closed off from the rest of London through walls. It becomes a world onto itself, dominated by the supernatural entities of Father Clock and Mama Engine. The Stack, their lair, faintly echoes *The Difference Engine's* Statistics Bureau:

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. (Peters 2008, 10-11)

This is a space of “soot-stained streets and thick air” (ibid., 12), noisy factories, fizzling gaslights, and drab public houses - all of which are stacked 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). Evidently, once-familiar urban imaginaries of Gothic London are twisted out of proportion until Whitechapel grows into 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 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 treated as impenetrable gateway into hostile territory, its citizens trapped in a sort of intra-urban exile (cf. Pike 1981, 101).

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. (Peters 2008, 53)

This vertical geography literalises social hierarchies into physical space, where the Underbelly is a dark slum which supports the towering structures above, not only economically, but literally. This layering is also evidence of a 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' (ibid., 129). The old city "had long since decayed into lumps of sodden debris" (154), and we find "[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, waiting to prey on lost wanderers. Here, urban dwellers are dwarfed and orphaned among the concrete; 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 the local gods of machinery and industry.

Again, as in *The Difference Engine*, domination by a machine-Other is literalised into urban space. However, the boundaries between organic and urban matter, that is self and city, become unstable: Peters' Whitechapel is at once disturbingly inorganic in its vast materiality of steel, bricks, and concrete, but also

seems somewhat organically grown. From the abyss' 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. This makes the cityscape difficult to navigate. It is alien, and hostile. Such imagery acts as to foreshadow the cyborgism and body horror through which Whitechapel citizens are increasingly subsumed as self-Other boundaries are complicated and eradicated in dangerous ways.

Father Clock, for example, is an entity with Orwellian powers of surveillance that 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).

We find here a curious inversion of the de-embodied, de-coupled mind-body relationship of Gibson's *Neuromancer*, in which hacker-cowboys float through the immaterial "city lights, receding...", or merge and migrate into cyberspace entirely,

their bodies configured simply and uselessly as “data made flesh” (Gibson 1984, 19). Gibson’s novel puts into play Hayles’ contention that “a defining characteristic of the present cultural moment is the belief that information can circulate unchanged among different material substrates” (Hayles 1999, 1). It also suggests that “information as a (disembodied) entity” is presupposed to be able to “flow between carbon-based organic components and silicon-based electronic components to make silicon and protein operate as a single system” (ibid., 2). *Whitechapel Gods*, meanwhile, draws particular attention to the body which is here violently invaded and transformed. By making visible rather than erasing the boundaries between the self, enshrined in organic matter, and the Other, here a cyber-technology incarnated in industrial forms, the novel foregrounds incongruity and pain in its vision of (enforced) hybridity.

We see this represented in Mama Engine, too, who 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” (Peters 2008, 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” (ibid., 61). Surrendering even their human form, Mama Engine’s disciples transform themselves into something alien and Other, becoming what Hayles identifies as the posthuman subject: “an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction” (Hayles 1999, 3). Rather than a “material-informational entity”, however, the subjects are empowered cyborg figures which, in line with Donna Haraway’s theories, may elude and resist the persistent “troubling dualisms” of Western thought, such as ‘self/other, mind/body, culture/nature, male/female’

(Haraway 2000, 313). *Whitechapel Gods*' subjects are subsumed, their cyborgism denoting not resistance, but loss of self.

In portraying these instances of violent hybridisation with recourse to a Victorian industrial paradigm, *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. (Marx 1867, 261)

In Marx's vision, a re-organisation of human labour into a mechanised system equals the disenfranchisement of the worker as he is appropriated by the larger mechanism as interchangeable prosthesis, his ability, dignity, and intellect drained away with his agency. This is quite literally the case in *Whitechapel Gods*, where Marx's metaphorical concept is re-imagined in literal terms, not least through "the clacks", a mysterious cancer which disfigures ordinary East End workers:

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. (Peters 2008, 7-8)

"Clacks" patients are quite literally consumed by the parasitic, semi-organic mechanic growths. As involuntary cyborgs, these hybrid selves enact Haraway's claim that "bodies are maps of power and identity" (Haraway 2000, 315). As she notes, the cyborg figure holds the potential to re-encode "territories of production, reproduction,

and imagination” (ibid., 292). Considering that both notions are conceptualised in spatial terms, using “map’ and “territory” to visualise power relations, it is no wonder that conditions of capitalist exploitations is linked to space. The “clacks” and its induced cyborgism become symptoms of the disenfranchisement of the East End worker:

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. (Peters 2008, 109)

Here, cyborgism, in its painfully imagined physicality as bodies are invaded, disfigured, dismembered, destroyed and deconstructed, plays out Marx’s notion of “*Entfremdung*” or alienation. It becomes a displaced external signifier for the literally de-humanizing conditions of capitalism, enacted through a hyper-Victorian, retro-speculative steampunk mode which, once again, sees cityscape and cyber-tech complicit in their potentially threatening Otherness. The steampunk cyber-city becomes not merely the setting, but the agent of uncanny transformations.

Recalibrating the Urban Matrix

As steampunk novels, *The Difference Engine* and *Whitechapel Gods* de- and re-construct a Victorian urban imaginary. This choice of setting is more than a purely aesthetic choice. As we have seen, Victorian London holds the potential to re-encode debates about urban life and our dependence on uncanny technologies in new and creative ways. These also differ from traditional neo-Victorian retellings. Neo-Victorian fiction, such as Alan Moore’s graphic novel *From Hell* (1989) and its film adaptation (2001), or Peter Ackroyd’s novel *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*

(1994) tends to reposition the Victorian city and its failures as our own historical Other (cf. Ho 2012, Kohlke and Gutleben 2015). As Kohlke and Gutleben have argued, “[N]eo-Victorianism is by nature quintessentially Gothic” (2012, 4) 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. (ibid., 4)

Neo-Victorian urban Gothic then often re-iterates Chris Baldick’s much-quoted observation that Gothic tales classically 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” (Baldick 1992, n.p.). Ackroyd’s psychogeographical mode in particular strives to excavate an urban archaeology of hidden routes and haunting spectres, positing the city as sublime and intrinsically uncanny multi-temporal palimpsest shaped by *genius loci*, thereby contributing to a discourse of a modern condition always haunted by the resurfacing past (cf. Vidler 1992, Wolfreys 1998, Gibson and Wolfreys 2000, Wolfreys 2002, Luckhurst 2002). Through such psychogeographical readings, the Other is no longer that which inhabits specific intra-urban exiles, but is enshrined in and embodied through the historical urban structure itself. However, as Luckhurst notes, “the discourse of spectralized modernity risks investing in the compulsive repetitions of a structure of melancholic entrapment” (Luckhurst 2002, 535).

Steampunk, with its tendency towards historical vandalism, I want to argue,

provides an alternative to such an approach. It mobilises a re-imagined hyper-Victorian past as a resonant, retro-speculative shorthand in which to encode, in this case, debates about self-hood, Otherness, agency, and cyborgism. Rather than obsessively re-enact hauntings by a Gothic other in the Victorian as well as neo-Victorian metropolis, both of which imply metanarratives of teleological progress, however thwarted. Steampunk collapses linear temporalities altogether as “the two ends of the Twentieth Century hail each other as long lost twins” (Gunning 2003, 51). With its anachronistic eclecticism, it re-constructs a fantastic Victorian London through which to explore the origins of the present we inhabit, and call into questions paradigmatic ideas about technology, progress, and identity. Steampunk, even in its more escapist incarnations, may do so by challenging the historical evolution of such ideas at a point in time when they are perceived as both formative for our present, yet still “new” and flexible enough to become the subject of speculation and play. Re-imagining now-outdated “crude, limited and clanky” technologies reminds us, in Sterling’s thinking, that “the 20th-century world is calamitously unsustainable” (Sterling 2012, 12). It also alerts us to “the prophetic nature of new technologies, their address to a previously unimagined future”, as Gunning theorises: “Every new technology has a utopian dimension that imagines a future radically transformed by the implications of the device or practice. The sinking of technology into a reified second nature indicates the relative failure of this transformation, its’ fitting back into the established grooves of power and exploitation” (Gunning 2003, 56).

Steampunk, then, with its retrofuturistic projection, its destabilisation of familiar metanarratives about progress, technology, or self, addresses such relative failures by consciously provoking tensions between the legacies of the past and the struggles of the present through an imaginative double exposure. If, as neo-Victorian scholarship suggests, the Victorian past acts as our *doppelgänger*, our uncanny Other,

then steampunk creates a hybrid of the two. Through its juxtaposition and remix of temporalities and possibilities, steampunk constantly re-negotiates boundaries. The steampunk aesthetic itself becomes, in a sense, Haraway's cyborg, containing "contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes" and holding 'incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true' (Haraway 2000, 291).

In Gibson and Sterling's, as well as Peters' novel, a fantastic hyper-Victorian London is re-imagined in order to make visible and tangible our own cyborgism through the metaphor of city. Both novels creatively put into play Henri Levebvre's notion of the Right to the City as interpreted by David Harvey: "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" (Harvey 2012, 5). Both novels radically reshape the city, albeit with dystopian impulses rather than as progressive alternative visions, and remain alert to the fundamental Otherness of both city and cyber-tech. The novels discuss and actualise the urban environment and technology as human-made structures, potentially knowable, yet also retaining elements of autonomy and illegibility. Both, however, remain integral and necessary Others through which we navigate our own identities. As Harvey posits: "[W]hat kind of city we want cannot be divorced from the question of what kind of people we want to be" (Harvey 2012, 4).

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