Vitruvius does steampunk

Description

Steampunk is an aesthetic movement that visualises the future as predicted during the Industrial Revolution â?¦ or as we imagine it might have been predicted. Think of flying to the moon in a space vehicle clad in steel plates and sliding windows held together by heavy bolts and rivets, and propelled by the properties of some kind of anti-gravity metal. The writings of Jules Verne (1828-1905) and H.G. Wells (1866-1946) epitomise the feel of the movement, though you need to throw in some late-modern humour and irony.

By all accounts the term â??steampunkâ?• first appeared in 1987 (see letter by KW Jeter). Steampunk also has a social message, with a nod towards recycling, slow technologies, local production, and sustainable technologies. It also imbibes some of the anti-machine rhetoric of the 19th century social critics â?? Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881), John Ruskin (1819-1900), and William Morris (1834-1896).

Steampunk has an arts and crafts feel, in its representations and rhetoric, but itâ??s obsessively positive about machines and mechanisms â?? particularly conspicuous, easy to understand, steam-driven machines.

Steampunk is romantic, or more precisely, ***technoromantic***. It plays around with utopias, and their converse, dystopias.

Of course steampunk derives its confidence as a movement, style, or fad through the entertainment business, global mass media and social media, in which consumers look out for edgy portmanteau labels, and cultural phenomena to attach them to.

An interesting article by Shannon Lee Dawdy re-badges steampunk as â??clockpunk,â?• and locates it in the company of the Surrealists, Walter Benjamin, and contemporary underground flÃ¢neurs who poke around disused factories. She writes of a â??a slowing down of social time and an understanding of cycling, recycling, and reappropriation of historic elementsâ?• (p.778) as a means of adapting to the problems and uncertainties of the current age.

So steampunk provides a kind of model. It reminds us that itâ??s ok to play around with history. Steampunk reconstructs and reconfigures the Victorian era as it sees fit, making a game of history.

Contemporary steampunk toys with Victoriana much as the

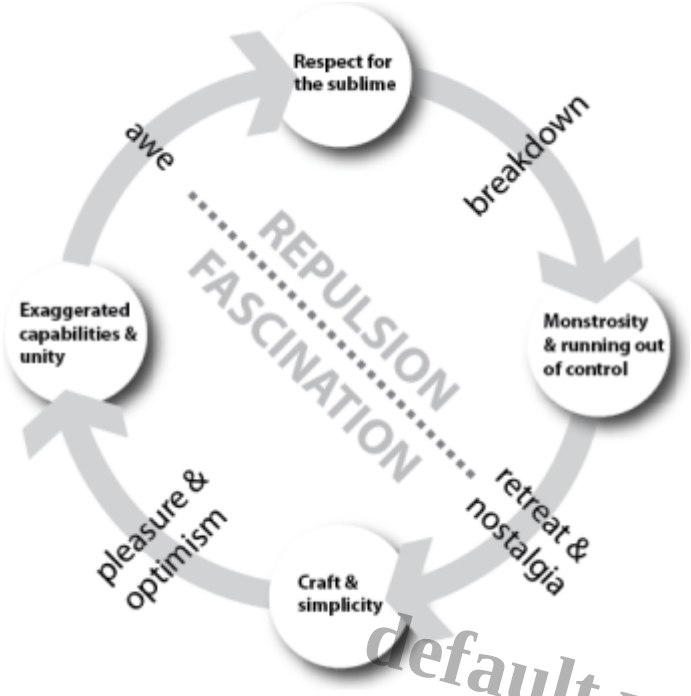
Renaissance architects reconfigured (and even â??inventedâ?•) the ancients in their own image, particularly as they appropriated the Roman architectural theorist Marcus Vitruvius Pollio (known simply as *Vitruvius*). In the same way, the Victorians recast the gothic and the classical in their own image.

Does Vitruvius have a place in the story of technological utopias? The 19th century social reformers admired the age of the Medieval guilds and master masons. Vitruvius comes at the start of the first millenium, many years before that.

Thereâ??s some steam in Vitruvius. He describes the planning and construction of buildings. Amongst them are bath houses with bronze cauldrons for heating water (p.157). He also describes clocks: â??All machinery is derived from nature, and is founded on the teaching and instruction of the revolution of the firmamentâ?• (p.284). He also describes hoists and catapults in some detail, and water clocks. All this technological paraphernalia is brought to service in technoromantic philosophy and fantasy.

The technoromantic cycle: why we love and hate technology

The technoromantic is both fascinated and repelled by technology. Hereâ??s my attempt to explain the ambiguous relationship we hold with technology â?? we late modern inheritors of 19th century Romanticism. The romantic participates in a cyclical movement of fascination and repulsion. Whatever is repulsive is also a source of sublime fascination. Hereâ??s a diagram to help.



1. Respect before the sublime

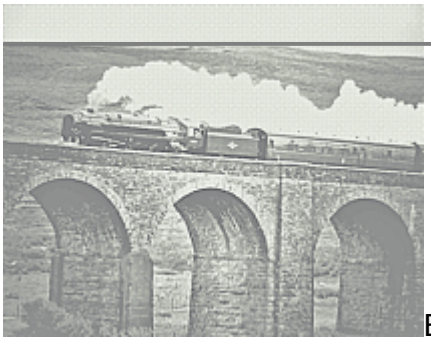
The Romantic stands before the terrors of nature, or the machine, from a safe position, and savours the boundary condition between the beautiful and the grotesque, the sacred and the profane, the mechanical and the crafted. John Ruskin, the Victorian Romantic, would stand looking at the steam train:

> **I cannot express the amazed awe, the crushed humility, with which I sometimes watch a locomotive take its breath at a railway station, and think what work there is in its bars and wheels, and what manner of men they must be who dig brown iron-stone out of the ground, and forge it into THAT!** (p.57)

Ruskin here betrays a certain humility and nascent respect for the machine of â??active steelâ?• and the triumphant labours that brought it about. But the machine is monstrous, in its scale, in what it can do, but also in its hybridity, its similarity to, and its difference from, the skeleton of a monstrous animal.

In current news-speak, the steam engine is a *Frankenstorm* of a thing. For Mary Shelley (1797-1851), Frankensteinâ??s creature is in the company of the terrors of nature, the sublime spectacle of the glaciers of the Swiss Alps. As nature offers us its inhospitable terrors we also have the dread and wonder of the mechanical contraptions by which an assembly of dead components is brought to life.

2. Monstrosity out of control



But the hybridity of the machine also threatens its functioning. In the

paranoiac imagination, and even in actuality, the parts start to work against one another and the machine runs amok. Not only is this the case as the machine breaks down, but in the way the locomotive destroys the pleasure of the journey across the countryside, transmuting the traveller into a â??living parcel.â?• The machine pollutes and desecrates the mountain air, lakes, and slopes, and the industrial machine destroys all sense of dignity in labour and turns workers into machine parts.

Our helplessness before the machine is further amplified by incomprehension. As helpless components in the machine of capitalist labour, we lack the view of the whole. Itâ??s not only the steam train that causes distress, but the reach of the railway system and its influence, the all-embracing network, the capitalist edifice, that we are helpless to comprehend and control.

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But it seems we canâ??t do without machines. Considering the

necessity of their evil, we find that the machines of preference are those that are conspicuous, comprehensible, whose qualities can be appreciated in terms of craft â?? Ruskinâ??s steam locomotive with â??Titanian hammer-strokes beating . . . glittering cylinders . . . fine ribbed rods . . . omnipotence of graspâ?• (p.57).

To escape the rampaging machine, the Romantic allows his imagination to dream up a pre-industrial existence, the time when machines were just tools, labour was not so organized, and care, skill and sacrifice were the motivations for creation, above self-interest.

The nostalgia is for craft. Craft is not entirely innocent of the machine age. For Ruskin, the worth of handcrafted stone or wood is in â??its being the work of poor, clumsy, toilsome manâ?• (p.54), as opposed to the product of the machine. Craft acquires its definition by virtue of its contrast with the machine.

So the romantic takes refuge in the simplicity of Vitruviusâ??s hoists, waterwheels, and catapults to explain the machine age. These objects are metonymic for the machine world, comprehensible, imaginable objects that stand in for something much less easily grasped, such as ubiquitous,

interconnected network systems and todayâ??s microscopic solid-state circuitry, the invisible world of modern-day technology.

4. Exaggerated capabilities and unity

As the contemporary Romantic contemplates the simple machine, pleasure and optimism turn readily into an exaggerated belief in machine capabilities. Where the machine is isolated from the complex technological and social field of which it is a part, then it indeed inspires awe. The steam locomotive has transformed the countryside, the electric light globe has illuminated the world, and the microchip has revolutionized the way we work.

Romanticism favours unities over individuation. Itâ??s a simple step to invoke the machine as a means of uniting disparate parts: the railways unite the world, electric current brings life to dead matter. Today, the Internet augurs unlimited knowledge, freedom, democracy or a universal mind meld. The enthusiasm for cyberspace, artificial intelligence, artificial life, and frictionless digital commerce continue the trend attributing technology to the creation of a global unity. The technoromantic thinks that the computer might bring about the unity of all things, of nature and artifice, human and machine, production and consumption.

If we (as technoromantics) believe it, this extreme optimism returns us to (**1**) our sublime stance before the machine. So we go round the loop again: (**2**) anxiety over the downfall of the machine and those in its path, and to (**3**) a nostalgia for craft, the idealized reconstruction of the machine as craft object, and the machine as the engine of an unsettled (**4**) unity. The cycle continues.

Pop culture

This cycle of fascination and repulsion is how the machine appears in romantic fiction and film. Itâ??s also standard fare in those other objects of mass consumption, computerized adventure games: Lara Croft before the lethal, spinning blades of an item of archaic military hardware, the exquisite mechanics of the telescopes, elevators, spinning domes, and swing bridges of the Myst games, the unlikely Victorian contraptions of steampunk. Like so much modern fantasy, people quest for unity (the mind melding among the Borgs in *Star Trek*, the Force in *Star Wars*, the Tree of Souls in the *Avatar* film) â?? the myth of a technologically mediated unity that is ultimately frustrated.

Itâ??s a shame to spoil a good story, one that goes on and on, and is nothing if not entertaining. Thereâ??s an exit point from the cycle of techno-fascination and techno-

repulsion. Contrary to the technoromantic world view, the machine is not in isolation. The locomotive is a part of a technological *system*, implicating social values, norms, systems of design and management. The artist-critic is not alone before the machine, but is a participant in a social and cultural milieu, with a history. Romanticism is partly to blame for this cycle of techno-fascination and repulsion. From the time of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and Edmund Burke (1729-1797), the concept of the sublime assumes the existence of the individual, selectively isolated from the social sphere. But the individual, and the precipice at which she stands â?? and the machine â?? are contingent and temporary reference points on the larger canvas, which is grasped through the shifting play of language and sociability.

Iâ??ve adapted this argument from my book: Coyne, Richard. 2005. *Cornucopia Limited: Design and Dissent on the Internet*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press. pp.61-65.

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- Also see Manifestos and madness, Heidegger on technology, Architectural remainder and Meditation on a blunt instrument.
- Also see the Introduction to the Apocalypse Guide in Steampunk Magazine

Notes

- The technoromantic cycle looks a little like the hermeneutical circle of understanding as outlined by Hans-Georg Gadamer. Itâ??s a play between the familiar and the unfamiliar, the homely and the alien, that which instinctively fascinates, and that which repels. But itâ??s no good going around and around without changing your initial position. Thatâ??s the famous â??vicious circle,â?• about which much has been written. See Circles and how to get out of them, and Snodgrass, Adrian, and Richard Coyne. 2006. *Interpretation in Architecture: Design as a Way of Thinking*. London: Routledge.
- Some steampunk films and tv shows: *Wild Wild West* (1999), *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (2003), *Master of the World* (1961), *Hugo* (2011), *Dr Who: The Next Doctor* (2008).
- Some of our studentsâ?? steampunk digital animations: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wDEemdC0uZk
- *Vapor communitas* is Latin (the language of Vitruvius) for â??the steam community.â?• According to the OED, a *punk* (vernacular) is a person of no account, a hoodlum or a male prostitute. Whatâ??s â??punkâ?• in Latin? Perhaps itâ??s â??plebs sordida,â?• meaning â??dirty people,â?

• or â??the great unwashedâ?• (Tacitus). *Vapor* is steam, vapour or moisture, and in Vitruvius seems to be something that seeps out of the ground, rather than a source of power. The Latin text of Vitruvius is at http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/vitruvius.html. Latin buffs have been known to search for words in the text and then run sentences through Googleâ??s Latin translator to pass away the hours.

Category

1. Techno-utopias

Tags

1. machine
2. Romanticism
3. steampunk
4. Vitruvius

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