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Review: Nally, Claire. *Steampunk: Gender, Subculture and the Neo-Victorian*. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), ISBN 9781350113190, 304 pages. Pbk £26.09, Hbk £81.00, ebook £20.87

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In a world where 'Victorian Values' serve as an established trope to be satirised, but are also becoming frighteningly central to conservative political logics once more, Claire Nally's *Steampunk: Gender, Subculture & the Neo-Victorian* offers a timely and welcome reflection on the possibilities and limitations of the mode. Nally imposes some much-needed structure onto this 'ambivalent and contradictory discourse' (107), problematising the idea of steampunk media and culture as 'revolutionary' while still highlighting the cultural importance of steampunk as both story and spectacle.



In a world where ‘Victorian Values’ serve as an established trope to be satirised but are also becoming frighteningly central to conservative political logics, Claire Nally’s *Steampunk: Gender, Subculture & the Neo-Victorian* offers a timely and welcome reflection on the possibilities and limitations of the mode. Much like steampunk, Nally’s book operates on multiple levels and negotiates a great many stages. The introduction does the necessary legwork of reiterating what the genre actually is (and isn’t), pointing out that steampunk often sits somewhere between two seemingly opposite poles: textual and visual, subcultural and popular, radical and conservative. Steampunk’s affinity for irony and satire plays a large role in this positioning, with ‘the potential for that irony subverting as well as reinforcing classic models of masculine and feminine, sexuality and performance’ (Nally 2019: 2). This is a problem of postmodern irony more broadly: as Claire Colebrook points out, postmodern literature ‘has been dominated by texts that express a masculinist, imperialist, racist or elitist discourse in order to present the violence of that discourse. [...] And even if one were to decide that such texts were, or ought to be, ironic, this would still allow the violent content to be displayed, enjoyed and popularised’ (2004: 157). *Steampunk* takes the corset as an indicative symbol of the genre’s approach to gender. Paraphrasing Valerie Steele’s *Fetish*, Nally notes that ‘wearers of the corset are diverse. Some associate the item with femininity, whilst others are invested in an aesthetic ideal, and still others correlate corsets with erotic pleasure and BDSM practice’ (22). These readings coexist and complicate one another.

Nally divides the moving target that is steampunk into two broad categories, ‘the story (literature, art, film, etc.) and the spectacle (subculture)’. The main focus of the book is the ‘complicated relationship’ between these modes (2). This relationship is illustrated through a series of case studies that draw alternately on academic literature about subculture, masculinity and (post)feminism, neo-Victorianism, and Victorian and colonial history. Chapter one interrogates the politics of steampunk, questioning the tendency to equate subculture with counterculture, and pointing to the ways subversion and transgression have become marketable commodities in popular culture. This chapter also analyses several of the more explicit advocates of steampunk’s radical political potential, including *The Steampunk Magazine* and punk band The Men That Will Not Be Blamed for Nothing. It raises the issue of class in steampunk—a crucial concern for the subculture. Chapters two and three examine steampunk masculinities and femininities through controversial examples in visual art and performance, specifically smut and satire by Doctor Geof and Nick Simpson, and Emilie Autumn’s burlesque performances, dealing deftly with the contradictory discourses on display in these examples. All three artists attempt to circumvent the problems of irony and representation through incongruity and inversion (rather than

subversion) of norms (85)—though, as pointed out in chapter three, incongruity can create representational issues of its own, as it is a particularly apolitical form of satire.

In the contexts of Brexit, #BlackLivesMatter protests, and a growing wave of English nationalism, British steampunks are finding it increasingly necessary to clarify their political positions, creatively. By way of example, on 11 September 2020, chap-hop personality Professor Elemental shared a photo of his new pin on Instagram, purchased from Doctor Geof. It comes mounted to a card decorated with cogs and machinery and reading 'LOVE STEAMPUNK HATE COLONIALISM'. The pin itself features a gentleman's top hat and goggles and reads 'Fuck Colonialism' (the F and U are obscured in the Professor's post). 'Cheera for making it easier to wear my pith without fear of misunderstandings in 2020', reads the accompanying text (Alborough 2020). The post received a number of affirmative comments from fellow steampunks. One reads: 'dare I even say good steampunk effectively critiques colonialism? I've always loved how your character of prof in sketches has always been such a sarcastic and mocking portrayal of an old careless, misogynistic colonizer. like you yourself said, chaphop is a parody of class'. Another, American commenter writes:

Unlike civil war re-enactors here in the states who have turned it into a religion of the myth of the lost cause, we created our own alternative universes that had the parts we like about history without so much the bad stuff. This actually encourages us to learn history warts and all to find new parts we want to keep. History was horrifying. Why we make our own fake one to better deal with and understand the real one.

The above example captures one snapshot of steampunk's complex politics as a subculture, a philosophy, and an industry. Even from this brief example, we can see it has many moving parts: heritage and alternate history, activism, parody, discussions of classism, sexism, and racism, but also an element of entertainment, publicity, and branding (both Doctor Geof and Professor Elemental earn their living making steampunk satire). Tangentially this example also raises questions about Doctor Geof's other work, including 'more innocuous' versions of war propaganda, and of projects like the 'First Tea Company' (Nally 2019: 89) that render recruitment childlike. These projects are clearly ironic, but since they make light of rather than condemn, in a sense their humour still serves to obscure the horrors of jingoism they are poking fun at. To return to the latter comment on Professor Elemental's post: what is the difference between war reenactors and a pretend steampunk army? Both provide a context in which war is depoliticised and rebranded for entertainment, and while there should certainly be space for play in our understanding of and engagement with the past, there

is also a growing need for creators to be explicit about the limits and consequences of this play—hence the outright condemnation of colonialism in this more recent Doctor Geof piece.

Chapters four and five move from the ‘spectacle’ to the ‘story’ of steampunk, expanding on the discussion of the themes introduced in the first half of the book by looking at ‘adventure’ graphic novels and the steampunk romance. Here, Nally problematises uncritical readings of steampunk’s revolutionary potential, highlighting how these texts often represent or advocate traditional values, and emphasising their potential to ‘hold an uncomfortable mirror up to some of our own racial and sexual prejudices’ (208). Steampunk occupies a familiar place in popular media, one that is able to play with and deconstruct various ideas about gender and sex, but always within the ever-normative and increasingly pervasive systems of mainstream culture.

As Nally points out, steampunk is a surprisingly understudied topic. Given its potential to illustrate how subculture, popular culture, and counterculture interact and overlap, then, this book is firstly important simply for existing. While a growing body of academic literature does exist, there have been ‘few book-length studies of the form, and even less engagement with how gender and sexuality interact with steampunk’ (Nally 2019: 3). Much of what exists in this area has been from the perspective of neo-Victorian studies, which tends to be more invested in literary or middlebrow, rather than popular or comic, resurrections of the nineteenth century. *Steampunk* is a helpful reference for teaching and research in multiple humanities disciplines and it also engages with and advances debates in gender studies, adaptation, neo-Victorianism, and the study of (post-)subculture and counterculture. Nally’s analysis rarely assumes specialist knowledge of any of these fields—her writing is clear and direct, carefully explaining context and limitations, and suggesting further reading and research into specific areas the book is not able to cover. The release of a paperback edition in early 2021 will hopefully also ensure that this work is accessible to a broad range of scholars and enthusiasts.

Writing about steampunk is in many ways an impossible task, and there are things that Nally’s book leaves out or sets aside. *Steampunk*’s main focus is on the UK steampunk scene, though it includes several examples from the US and elsewhere. In the light of the more recent BLM discussions and protests in the UK, which this book precedes, *Steampunk* could also be more explicit about race. Anti-colonialism and intersectionality are important undercurrents throughout the book, but the whiteness of steampunk is a distinct (if related) issue, and the way whiteness is performed in relation to gender doubly so. A chapter on drag, androgyny and/or gender-queering in steampunk might have also been useful, though this omission is understandable given that these concepts

are picked up throughout, and the entire book is in many ways a deconstruction of the gender binaries and stereotypes it addresses. In *Steampunk*, absences are framed as a plea for further research—Nally warns readers from the beginning that this will not be a comprehensive study. Instead, it takes certain ‘key aspects from literature and various forms of media (film, music, art, popular culture) in order to provide a foundation for the critical study of steampunk’ (3). In adopting this approach, *Steampunk: Gender, Subculture & the Neo-Victorian* is very successful. Nally imposes some much-needed structure onto this ‘ambivalent and contradictory discourse’ (107), problematising the idea of steampunk media and culture as ‘revolutionary’ while still highlighting the cultural importance of steampunk as both story and spectacle.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

References

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