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RESEARCH

Alternate World Building: Retrofuturism and Retrophilia in Steampunk and Dieselpunk Narratives

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This essay draws on William Gibson and Bruce Sterling's steampunk and alternate history novel *The Difference Engine* (1990) and Len Deighton's dieselpunk and alternate history thriller *SS-GB* (1978) for the purpose of discussing the blurring of genres within speculative fiction and addressing retrofuturism and retrophilia within an alternate world building framework. Thus, it provides a background for the analysis of the concept of genre blending and the merging of pre-determined tropes and topics within the scope of science fiction, fantasy, adventure and mystery plots so as to characterize alternate history as a blended genre.

Keywords: Alternate history; dieselpunk; speculative fiction; steampunk; retrofuturism

This essay aims to discuss the blurring of genres within speculative fiction by means of examining how alternate history is deployed in steampunk and dieselpunk narratives. It begins by providing a background for the analysis of the concept of genre blending and the merging of pre-determined tropes and topics within the scope of science fiction, fantasy, adventure and mystery plots so as to characterize alternate history as a blended genre. It continues by focusing on *The Difference Engine* (1990) as a steampunk and alternate history novel set in a technologically developed Victorian Britain. This leads to a discussion of Len Deighton's dieselpunk and alternate history thriller *SS-GB* (first published in 1978 and produced for the BBC as a drama series in 2017), which draws on alternate history events during World War II. Finally, this essay seeks to address retrofuturism and retrophilia within an alternate world building framework.

1. Genre theory and fictional world building

The category "genre" is designed to classify literary texts and is meant to establish rules prescribed for a literary work's form, mode and content that writers are expected to follow (Cuddon 298–99). However, in spite of the conventional identification of three genres—described by Plato as lyric, epic and drama, which correspond to the modern categories of poetry, fiction[1] and drama, and by Aristotle as epic, tragedy and comedy—as the underlying basis for the standard division of genres, generic boundaries have been challenged by numerous subgenres whose distinctions are often not completely clear.

The notions of both hybridity and generic blending have grown considerably within the field of genre studies, subverting the canonical essentialist models and following Derrida's deconstructionist argument that literary texts participate rather than belong to any particular genre although he claims that "there is no genreless text" (65). On the one hand, generic hybridization can be defined as "[t]he process by which two or more genres combine to form a new genre or subgenre; or by which elements of two or more genres are combined in a single work" (Duff xiv). On the other hand, the diversity and adaptability of genre usage can be favoured against not only static and normalizing conceptions of genre but also an inadequate use of hybridity. Therefore, the concept of "generic blending" as being schematized world-constructions and cognitive schemata based on processes of meaning-production and productive imagination (Allen n.p.) can be

[1] The epic has been replaced by the novel and the short story (Klarer 3–4, 9, 140). Generic analysis benefits from considering how the conventions of the genre have changed over time (Chandler 10–11).

used against hybridity and as an alternative model for "genre mixing"— so as to reinforce the latter's political dimension[2] as well as a more reception-centred approach to genre.

As far as it is possible to ascertain, Michael Sinding was the first genre critic to employ the notion of blending to genre mixtures in 2005. Unlike hybridity, the concept of blending does not rely on an essentialist model, but describes cognitive constructions and therefore does not conceive of the input spaces as stable or pure. In Allen's words, "'blending' does not describe the status of a cultural artefact, but a cognitive process—a text, genre or culture *is* or *is not* hybrid, while 'blending' refers to something one *does*" (n.p.).

Not only "blending" but "blurring" or even "dissolution" of genre boundaries have been used in the quest for an appropriate terminology, mainly from the 1980s on, as the result of postmodern transgression of previously accepted limits, with a particular emphasis on crossing the boundaries of art and life and, consequently, fiction and non-fiction. Categories such as "genre"—and often implicitly "subgenre"—were discussed by Linda Hutcheon, for instance, who stated that "History and fiction have always been notoriously porous genres" (106) and Ansgar Nünning, who mentioned a "proliferation of hybrid genres" (282) that combined factual material and fictional narratives, such as historiographic metafiction, documentary fiction, postmodernist historical novel, uchronian fantasy, parahistorical novels and factifiction.

More significantly, speculative fiction—taken as narrative fiction that due to its connection to alternate history is also called virtual history, counterfactual history and allohistory—explores the impact of science and futuristic technology, either actual or imagined, which is characteristic of science fiction, blending reality and world building. Science fiction not only devises "new life-course models in its fictional universes but, by way of contrast, sheds light on conventional ones and their implicated philosophical world views, opening them up for re-consideration" (Herbe 228). In this sense, Marek Oziewicz defines speculative fiction as "a super category for all genres that deliberately depart from imitating 'consensus reality' of everyday experience" (n.p.). Science fiction, fantasy, dystopia, magic realism, alternate history and steampunk are among the genres that can be included in this category, which was initially regarded as a subgenre of science fiction but has progressed to become "a meta-generic fuzzy set supercategory" (Oziewicz n.p.) without preconceived boundaries.

In the Introduction to his seminal work, published in 1997, the Scottish historian and political commentator Niall Ferguson quotes the French writer André Maurois in regard to the potentialities of breaking the boundaries of time: "There is an infinitude of Pasts, all equally valid (…). At each and every instant of Time, however brief you suppose it, the line of events forks like the stem of a tree putting forth twin branches" (1). The historians who also construct counterfactual scenarios are thus inspired by views of "what might have been" and of the so-called "what ifs of history", as may be seen in Robert Cowley's and Andrew Roberts' works.[3]

Consequently, a taxonomy of the alternate history genre has been the object of a vivid debate, as Karen Hellekson demonstrates by starting her analysis with a quotation from Robert Silverberg's introduction to the science fiction and fantasy volume *Three Trips in Time and Space*, published in 1973: "If all things are possible, if all gates stand open, what sort of world will we have?". And she adds: "As a genre, the alternate history (…) concerns itself with plausible causal relationships, and as such, it concerns itself with narrative and time" (Hellekson, "Toward a Taxonomy" 248). Hellekson establishes as distinctive and differentiating topics in alternate histories the ability to travel back and forth in time, the parallel worlds story and uchronias. Moreover, she draws on the systematic approach favoured by the historiographer Hayden White, placing the alternate history within the larger framework of four models of history: the eschatological, genetic, entropic and teleological models (concerned, respectively, with final events or an ultimate destiny of humankind or of history; with origin or development; with disorder or randomness; or with future-oriented history). This said, Hellekson argues that, as a genre, the alternate history fundamentally concerns itself with the genesis of history and therefore with the genetic model of cause and effect (251).

For the purposes of this essay, William Joseph Collins's taxonomy of alternate histories based on the subject's position must also be taken into consideration. He presents four categories, namely, the pure uchronia, which implies an alternate history alone without allowing for any other reality; the plural uchronia, which places the alternative reality next to that of the reader's; infinite presents, which encompasses parallel worlds stories; and time-travel alteration, which has travellers moving from their present to the past in order to alter events (Collins 85–86). It should be added that Hellekson's own categories point to the moment of break rather than the subject's position. She chooses to link together alternate histories according to the

[2] The association of "genre" with ideology and power, on the one hand, and the organisation of culture and social purposes around language, on the other hand, is highlighted when compared to "register" and "style" in language research and literary theory (Lee 41–43).

[3] The latter is also the author of "Hitler's England: What if Germany had invaded Britain in May 1940?", a chapter in Ferguson's volume (281–320).

nature of the historical inquiry and not according to the nature of the story told. For instance, she points out that all alternate histories that focus on World War II should not be put together simply because they share a common event. According to her classification, the true alternate history occurs after the break and relies on the notion of cause and effect by establishing that a historical event turning out differently will, in turn, result in a number of other changes. Consequently, this is distinct from the nexus story, which occurs at the moment of the break—a crucial point in history, such as a battle or assassination, in which something happens that changes the outcome from the one we know today—and the parallel worlds story, which implies that there was no break and has a number of alternate histories that exist simultaneously and protagonists that generally can move or at least communicate between these parallel worlds (Hellekson, "Toward a Taxonomy" 251–52).

Another author, Gavriel Rosenfeld, addresses allohistorical narratives as assuming "different typological forms depending upon how their authors have viewed the present" (90). Nightmare scenarios, for example, depict the alternate past as worse than the present time, while fantasy scenarios portray the past as better than the present. The Nazis winning World War II, the South winning the Civil War and the American Revolution failing to occur are some of the most popular themes.

Alternate history has become one of the most fertile fields of historical inquiry, often mixing science fiction, fantasy, adventure and mystery plots. Few alternate histories appeared until the 1960s when science fiction became a widely accepted genre and helped boost the popularity of its allohistorical offshoot, that is to say, speculative fiction, although the first acknowledged allohistorical novel was called *Napoléon et la conquête du monde 1812 à* 1832, written by Louis-Napoléon Geoffroy-Château and published in 1836 (Csicsery-Ronay Jr. 104). Obviously, the rise of postmodernism, "with its blurring of the boundaries between fact and fiction, its privileging of 'other' or alternate voices, and its playfully ironic reconfiguring of established historical verities, has encouraged the rise of alternate history" (Rosenfeld 92). Given that fictional engagement does not rely on history but on "modes of knowing the past" (de Groot 3), historical fictions eventually deploy epistemological and ontological models.[4]

In sum, alternate history is considered to be a subgenre within science fiction because the understanding of the latter is intimately concerned with a sense of history and its possibilities, as Darko Suvin notes, but it can also take the form of a traditional novel or a work of fantasy (Suvin 72–74; Schneider-Mayerson 65). In spite of its ability to inspire uchronias and time-travel alterations, the goal of this genre is to create plausible universes and alternate timelines. Due to an emphasis on subjectivity in historiography, postmodernism has exerted a deep influence on the growth of the alternate history. According to Schneider-Mayerson,

> The alternate history is undoubtedly a genre, but unlike the romance novel, the western or the thriller, the various forms the contemporary alternate history assumes defy easy categorization. Alternate histories have been written as spy thrillers and fictional autobiographies, mysteries and historical novels. (71)

The plausibility of the alternate timeline is crucial to most alternate historians, for whom alternate histories "are not so much *what-if* but *almost-was*" (Schneider-Mayerson 71).

2. Case studies: steampunk and dieselpunk narratives

Steampunk and dieselpunk narratives can be chosen as examples not only of retrofuturism and retrophilia but also of genre blending because it is possible to find similarities in style and subject matter that bring them close both to each other and to speculative fiction, blurring fictional and non-fictional viewpoints.

Although steampunk is usually regarded either as a subgenre of science fiction or a technofantasy that focuses on the science of the Victorian Age (Csicsery-Ronay 108; Perschon 12; Roland 104), other terms have been coined for several offshoots or sub-subgenres that added "punk" as a "modifier to call out interesting subgenres", such as dieselpunk (Buckell vii). Among others, those that stand out are stitchpunk, clock-punk, Teslapunk, bio-punk, atompunk, nano-punk and, paving the way for all of them, cyberpunk, a term coined by the American science fiction author Bruce Bethke in his 1980 short story of the same name that inspired a subgenre of science fiction set in the future and focused on high tech society (Ottens, "Genre Theory" n.p.).

The term steampunk, however, was coined by K. W. Jeter, an American SciFi author responsible for sequels to *Blade Runner* and novels set in the *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* universes, who back in 1987 wrote: "I think Victorian fantasies are going to be the next big thing, as long as we can come up with a fitting collective term

[4] For a discussion of historical fiction and ethics, see de Groot (30–37).

(…) like 'Steampunk,' perhaps" (VanderMeer 48). Therefore, Jeter's *Morlock Night* (1979), a sequel to Wells' *The Time Machine* (1895), together with Tim Powers' *The Anubis Gates* (1983) and James Blaylock's *Lord Kelvin's Machine* (1992) began being associated to the term. Both in fiction and the movement it spawned, steampunk incorporates neo-Victorian features and is simultaneously retro- and forward-looking in nature.

Very often, retrophilia as an attraction to past times is not limited to looking backwards in a nostalgic manner and rejecting any sort of progress, change or moving forward. On the contrary, it can convey a retrofuturistic fascination with how the past envisioned the future, that is to say, how the future has been viewed in the past. Actually, the popular culture of the 1960s transfigured nostalgia into retro and anonymous graffiti in the early 1970s claimed that "The future is not what it used to be" (Guffey 152). As far as steampunk is concerned, not only does it evoke a sense of adventure and discovery, but it also embraces divergent and extinct technologies as a way of talking about the future (VanderMeer 9). Moreover, it draws on a postmodern zeitgeist and inspires either utopian or dystopian impulses (Esser 19). *The Steampunk Bible* presents an equation to describe it: "STEAMPUNK = Mad Scientist Inventor [invention (steam × airship or metal man/baroque stylings) × (pseudo) Victorian setting] + progressive or reactionary politics × adventure plot" (VanderMeer 9).

Steampunk was popularized with the publication of *The Difference Engine* in 1990. Since then, as a subgenre, it has flourished and become the most well-known of the cyberpunk variants. It is hybrid as it can incorporate elements from the genres of fantasy, horror, historical fiction and, obviously, alternate history. According to VanderMeer, Gibson and Sterling's *The Difference Engine* rejects nostalgia and fits into the steampunk canon as a form of "historical Cyberpunk" (63). This dark techno-fiction about power and control is set in 1855—only four years after the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations, with London affected by "The Great Stink" caused by the putrid Thames (Gibson and Sterling 176)—in a dystopian alternate reality in which Charles Babbage successfully built a mechanical protocomputer, thus starting the Information Age along with the Industrial Revolution. The novel features machines "whirring somewhere, spinning out history" and above all "a never-closing, all-embracing Eye" (Gibson and Sterling 10, 362).[5] Therefore, it transfers technology into the past, using anachronistic gadgets and retrofuturistic inventions as people in the 19th century might have envisioned them: "[t]he Modus technique of *self-referentiality* will someday form the bedrock of a genuinely transcendant meta-system of calculatory mathematics. (…) but their practical exfoliation awaits an engine of vast capacity, one capable of iterations of untold sophistication and complexity" (Gibson and Sterling 376).

Added to the questions of what would have happened if the Victorian Age had been affected by the computer age and what might have happened if Babbage, "the Newton of our modern age" (Gibson and Sterling 25), had been successful in developing a functional computer in the 1850s is the issue of what might have been the future of empire-building, and of the expanding British Empire in particular—already "the greatest Empire in history" (Gibson and Sterling 362) — had it been fueled not only by the Industrial Revolution and scientific/technological achievement but also by the steam-driven Babbage engines.[6] In this regard, Ridley Scott described the book as "A visionary steam-powered heavy metal fantasy".[7]

Another perspective is favoured by Hellekson, who argues that *The Difference Engine* illustrates a forward-looking, future-oriented teleological model of history ("Toward a Taxonomy" 250). In fact, the clockwork Engine created an intelligence that our reality has not been able to reach. Gibson and Sterling fast-forwarded the novel to 1991 to a London with "all air gone earthquake-dark in a mist of oil, in the frictioned heat of intermeshing wheels" (382). Not only did they write an anticipated retrospection of the nineteenth century as the clockwork machines in the book are not too different from our computer-based technology, but also constructed "a metafictional metahistory, a *meta-alternative history*" (Csicsery-Ronay 109).[8]

Due to the extensive research carried out by Gibson and Sterling, their collaborative novel remains an accurate portrait of the Victorian Age though there is much of our own machine-age world and information age in their text. In fact, Paul Alkon notes that the novel is about our own time as much as it is a fantasy about a time that will never be.[9] These mixed feelings of optimism and scepticism are conveyed in the text: "As thinking beings, we may envision the universe, though we have no finite way to sum it up" (Gibson and Sterling 377).

If steam led the way to progress in the 19th century, diesel and atomic power characterised the twentieth century. In 1962, Philip K. Dick published *The Man in the High Castle*, perhaps the best known of all alternate

[5] See also Jagoda 52–54.
[6] See also Esser 25.
[7] Review at the beginning of the book (Gibson and Sterling n.p.).
[8] See also Hellekson, *Alternate History* 85.
[9] Paul Alkon, *Science Fiction Before 1900*, qtd. in Hellekson, *Alternate History* 83.

histories, describing a world in which the Axis powers won World War II. In 1995, the American historian and conservative politician Newt Gingrich—who was also Speaker of the House of Representatives—co-authored with the Professor of History William R. Forstchen a novel entitled *1945*. The plot is set in an alternate universe in which not only does the Third Reich control all of Europe except for Britain, but Nazi Germany does not become involved in war with the United States, although both countries settle into a cold war. The novel follows a divergent timeline in which Germany and Italy did not declare war on the United States on 11 December, 1941, as actually happened, only three days after the American declaration of war against the Japanese empire in the aftermath of the attack on Pearl Harbor. However, at the end of the novel, the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill calls for American intervention because Rommel has invaded Scotland. According to Schneider-Mayerson, "1995 can be considered the birth year of the alternate history novel as a genre" (63), although it must be added that the English writer and journalist Robert Harris had published *Fatherland*, an alternate history detective novel, in 1992.

Bearing in mind these paradigms, Len Deighton's *SS-GB*, first published in 1978, can be considered a retro sci-fi thriller and dieselpunk narrative. The author himself mentions that it fitted into "what was then called an 'alternative world' book" (Deighton v), written like a conventional murder mystery with a story told from the centre of power and a Scotland Yard detective as hero. In fact, *SS-GB* builds an alternate history—with a political component—that includes a noir style storyline in which diesel fuel and nuclear power replace steam power. The term "dieselpunk" is reported to have been coined in 2001 by game designer Lewis Pollak, who envisaged it as "the darker, dirtier side of steampunk" (Ottens, "The darker, dirtier side" n.p.). Dieselpunk draws not on the hiss of steam nor on the Victorian and Edwardian aesthetics and cosplay but on the grease of fuel-powered machinery and the Art Deco movement, marrying rectilinear lines to aerodynamic shapes and questioning the impact of technology on the human psyche (Buckell vii–viii).

Although many dieselpunk narratives are focused on war in general and the interwar period in particular, most dieselpunk literature is World War II-related and is set upon events that led up to it or followed it. In other words, the novels cover the period between the 1920s and the 1950s, beginning around the time of the First World War or the Roaring Twenties and culminating in the Second World War or early Cold War years (Amyett Jr. n.p.).

During World War II the possibility of England being invaded was real. Deighton's plot is set in November 1941 in an occupied Southern England after the Luftwaffe's victory over the RAF in the Battle of Britain—which marked the end of World War II in Europe—and with Germany having succeeded in avoiding war with the Soviet Union. Among many details about daily life in London under Nazi rule, the reader is told there are rumours that Churchill has been executed. In fact, he has been replaced by a puppet Prime Minister, King George VI is being held a prisoner in the Tower of London, the Queen and Princesses have fled to Australia, Jews have been sent to "the notorious concentration camp at Wenlock Edge" (Deighton 265), swastika banners adorn the bombed-out ruins of Buckingham Palace and the SS is in charge of Scotland Yard.

The main character in *SS-GB* is Detective Superintendent Douglas Archer, "the Sherlock Holmes of the nineteen-forties" (Deighton 213), who investigates a murder case with an espionage twist based on finding the missing atomic bomb documents that were in the possession of the victim, a nuclear physicist. Archer reluctantly works for the SS, first reporting to General Fritz Kellerman and then to Colonel Oskar Huth, who takes orders directly from Reichsfürer Heinrich Himmler. Almost forty years after its publication, the book was adapted to a five-episode BBC television series—released in 2017—that presents a slightly happier ending than the novel (Deighton 374–77; Kadelbach, disc 2, 54:56–55:40). The visual component, however, emphasises a dark, frightening, dystopian atmosphere.

Genre blending is very visible in this alternate history narrative that brings together speculative fiction and several elements characteristic of suspense/crime/detective stories and espionage novels since what seemed to be a simple murder investigation leads to the Resistance's plans to release the King and send him by airplane to the United States. In my opinion, this illustrates punk's disruptive action against the established order. Moreover, what makes it truly dieselpunk is not only its drawing on diesel engines and the atomic potential, but also the noir ambience ("Noir is Dieselpunk" n.p.).

3. Final remarks

For a long time now, alternate worlds have stirred the human imagination and have played a central role in various literary (sub)genres, in particular science fiction, utopia/dystopia and fantasy to name but a few. In recent years, alternate histories have become very popular, both in literature and film probably because they connect the present to the past and to the future. Moreover, they question the consequences of historical, social and even personal choices.

Not only does alternate history—inspired either by the forward-looking, future-oriented teleological model of history or the genetic model of cause and effect—contribute to genre blending and is worth addressing as it is increasingly popular, it also reinforces our historical knowledge and makes us realize that we are subverting reality inasmuch as we are discussing the possibilities of how we construct reality. We may wonder why we build alternate worlds; and the most obvious answer would be that it is part of human nature to envisage alternate realities. This attitude is not driven by a nostalgic retrophilia alone or an intentional escapism from the present times. In fact, most authors point out that alternate world building serves as a constructive critical view of the present.

Ultimately, alternate history causes the reader of the novel not only to question "what could have been if" but to (re)examine contemporary premises and paradigms of the struggle for power according to subjects and moments of break. Paul Ricoeur[10] notes that texts that anticipate the future may be regarded as "anticipated retrospections" because narratives can be anywhere in time the writer desires. Therefore, iteration—being a repeating process to generate a sequence of outcomes—begins with an event in the future looking back at the past.

As is well known, science fiction has always prized world building. Free to imagine alternate realities and alternate histories, it looks backwards and forwards to imagine entirely new universe concepts. In my opinion, so does the alternate retrofuturistic world building illustrated by steampunk and dieselpunk narratives.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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