

STEAMPUNK AS AN INDICATOR OF PARADIGMATIC SHIFT: NOSTALGIA FOR A TIME THAT NEVER WAS

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Introduction

The post-modern, consumer cultural worldview, known sometimes as Scientific Materialism, is in decline.¹ The accustomed ways of looking at the world (or paradigm) are running out of fuel, both literally and figuratively, and smart people are looking for other alternatives.

In the mainstream culture, fandom and cosplay (or “costume play,” dressing up as characters from films, comic books, television shows, etc., or making up one’s own character) is often considered frivolous escapism, engaged in by those unable to function in the “real world.”

I challenge this view. Rather, I believe that the increased interest in Cosplay, and more specifically, Steampunk, is indicative of something more intriguing and important.

Cosplay takes many different forms, whether it be based on replicating media-generated images (such as Trekkers, Comic Book Characters, Lord of the Rings, etc.), or those inspired by historical eras (i.e.: Rennies, the Society for Creative Anachronism, or Civil War re-creators, etc.), or self-generated identities (like at Burning Man, Rainbow Gatherings, and other festivals). Steampunk is one of the fastest growing areas of cosplay.

It has been widely predicted that Steampunk is about to break into mainstream culture.² But the growing popularity of Steampunk, and some other select subcultures, indicates something else is going on here, beneath the surface assumptions and stereotypes.

Why are so many people attracted to playing “dress up”?

¹ The Four Basal Paradigms of human development are: Animism, Polytheism, Monotheism and Scientific Materialism. Scientific Materialism arrived with the birth of the Industrial Revolution, and tends to require all issues to comply with science’s standards of evidentiary quantification and replication. Lipton and Bhaerman (2008).

² IBM Trends report, Google Analytics Data.

Early research reveals that most cosplayers are quite functional and successful by our culture's standards.³ So the "Escapist" thesis is not borne out by the data. Perhaps, instead of assuming there is a fault, and that it lies with the fans, we should question the perceived "real world" that so many intelligent, creative people want to escape. What does that say about our culture?

Steampunk, along with other subcultures such as Rennies, Burning Man, Permaculture, Neo-Tribalism, and similar "fringe" subcultures, are together what I characterize as a New Romantic Movement. I posit that this larger Romantic Movement has the potential to point the way towards humanity's next great shift in worldview, towards a more holistic balance between technology and ecology, between matter and consciousness.

I shall begin with a preliminary phenomenological account of Steampunk, briefly tracing its history, values, and forbearers. Then I shall analyze Steampunk's ethical platform and its problems, before drawing conclusions of how this new Romantic Movement appears to meet the as-yet discernable needs for a new vision of humanity.

Steampunk: A Preliminary Phenomenological Overview

"The lack of clear definition is one of the things I like about Steampunk. As well as defending Steampunk from mainstream commercialization, the lack of definition means that you can make it whatever gives you the greatest joy." – PQR, post on brassgoggles.com

What is Steampunk, exactly?

That is not such an easy question to answer. It has variously been called a literary sub-genre of eighteenth-century-inspired science fiction, a Do-It-Yourself artistic subculture, or even a socio-political anti-consumerist movement bent on re-inventing post-modern culture. In truth, it is all three and more.

Steampunk is notoriously hard to pin down, as it sort of fits under many umbrellas of fan culture, but none of them completely claim it. It is a part of fandom that has spilled out beyond,

³ Preliminary psychological studies of cosplay have shown that cosplayers are generally normal, regularly employed, functional individuals. Rosenberg and Letamendi, 2013.

inspiring fine art, novel technologies, music, and experiments in sustainable communities and lifestyles. Although Steampunk is a part of pop culture, it disdains mass-produced kitsch and hype, punkishly nipping at the hand that feeds it.

Steampunk's increasing pervasiveness prompts special consideration, as it differs from much of fandom in fairly remarkable ways. Its concern for the ecology and repurposing - as well as its anti-consumerist "punk" self-sufficiency bent - separate it from common expressions of fandom, which is not to say that there are not some groups and individuals who are ecologically concerned in fandom. But generally, fandom tends to glut on mass marketed images, products, and icons. There is also much concern for community. Sexual harassment and bullying are firmly rejected, which is not always the case in many areas of fandom. These differences add weight to the suggestion that Steampunk may have the makings of a full-blown social movement beyond fandom.

In the growing Steampunk community, as in much of fandom, there is no commonly recognized authority figure or structure. Every group, whether online or local, determines their own standards and criteria, and all Steampunk communities espouse a common value of tolerance and inclusion, tending to be very supportive of the creative efforts of all, both for the novice and veteran.

Steampunk is highly individualistic, with devotees usually creating their own characters, costumes and events, and only occasionally re-creating media images. Each individual is encouraged to find and hone their own unique self-expression, utilizing existing objects and repurposing them into art. In this, there are no guidelines or requirements that must be followed; rather, exploration and experimentation is the general rule.

Some are attracted by Steampunk's lack of rules, as some fan and historical re-creation groups have very stringent hierarchies or have "Costume Nazis" who turn up their noses at those who do not meet their standards of purity. Since Steampunk is not based on an actual time period or any single work of literature or media (such as Tudor England, *The Lord of the Rings* or *Star Wars*), and has no formal structure, there are no criteria for these kinds of judgments.

Steampunk's lack of standards is seen as anarchy by some, but is experienced as unrestrained creative license by fans. It represents taking the best from both past and present, to create a better future. Underneath the surface of Steampunk, there lurks a depth of meaning and longing, with the potential to impact the larger culture in many beneficial ways.

Steampunk is definitely its own aesthetic, with its own distinctive standards of beauty and value. It is the marriage of Victorian-era focus on manners, beauty, and form with technology, given a fantastical twist of functionality and craftsmanship, with a firm grounding in community and environmental consciousness. It seeks to reconcile a modern industrial sensibility with optimism, beauty, imagination, sustainability, and even whimsy and humor, things often notably lacking from post-modern design.

The Origins of Steampunk

“Steampunk is unique in that the culture it rebels against is one of laziness, selfishness, disrespect and a low-minded resentment towards anything exceptional.”

- Michael Greenker in “Of Cogs and Culture: The Steampunk Renaissance”

Steampunk represents a nostalgia for a time that never was. The origins of Steampunk have their roots in the nineteenth century, with such authors as Jules Verne, H. G. Wells, and Mary Shelley, each of whom described fantastic technologies from a time before mass production made the contents of everyone’s home practically identical.

This type of Victorian technology-based story came back into favor in spurts and starts from the 1950s on. It became established as a subgenre only in the late 1980s with the coining of the name “Steampunk” by author K. W. Jeter. “Steam” refers to the era prior to the widespread use of the internal combustion engine and “Punk” implies a certain irreverence for the traditional, mainstream historical conventions.

Steampunk sparked into a fully-fledged, well-rounded, DIY aesthetic movement when it went to the Burning Man Festival, in Black Rock City, Nevada. There, a group of intrepid burners created a theme camp, complete with art, mutant vehicles, costumes, and living accommodations for the festival based on their favorite form of fiction. It was a perfect fit. Steampunk became infused with the ethos of the festival, including a disdain for consumerist culture, as well as a love of art, dressing up, a rugged self-reliance and, of course, radical inclusiveness.

It was at Burning Man that goggles became ubiquitous, as the Black Rock playa is untenable without serious eye protection during the frequent dust storms – not to mention how cool they look. Steampunk soon became a popular theme at other festivals, and is now spilling into mainstream consciousness.

Impact of the Internet on the Growth and Spread of Steampunk

In the past, many incipient movements have fizzled out, due to lack of exposure to the broader population, or from burnout or attrition on the part of the original founders. Not so in the case of Steampunk.

Dedicated blogs, websites, and forums keep it alive by providing outlets for sharing art, costuming, gaming, and events. Online social networking sites such as Facebook, Tumblr, Pinterest, and Imgur have contributed mightily to the extended life of Steampunk. There is also a proliferation of Steampunk-dedicated websites, such as brassgoggles.com out of the United Kingdom, the Aether Salon out of Australia, theclockworkcentury.com out of New Orleans, and even the Steampunk Illumination Society of Dallas-Fort Worth, Texas.

These Steampunk fashion, social, and tech sites hold huge interest online, with Google showing over seventeen million hits on a search for the keywords “Steampunk Community.” To add fuel to the Steampunk engines, in January 2013, IBM released a Trend Study, based on analysis of internet activity. IBM reported a large increase in social media chatter centering on Steampunk, and considered this ample evidence to predict an upcoming boom in Steampunk popularity in mainstream culture.⁴ Steampunk author and blogger, Tee Morris recently said in a live appearance that he believes Steampunk to be “just one hot property away from a major explosion into the mainstream.”

Historical Influences of Steampunk

“SteamPunk: Colonizing the past so we can dream the future” – Professor Calamity

⁴ IBM Press Release, 20 January 2013.

Steampunk traces influences from several historical movements, including (but by no means limited to) the Craftsman Movement (also known as the Arts and Crafts Movement) and the Pre-Raphaelite Movement of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as well as the Punk Movement in music and technology of the 1980s and 90s.

The Craftsman Movement was a Victorian-era backlash to the Industrial Revolution. Concerns over mechanization brought about a resurgence in “precapitalist” design in culture and society. (Obninski) Like the Craftsman Movement, Steampunk prefers skilled craftsmanship over commercial factory-made products, and the rampant consumerism it fuels. Much of Steampunk art and literature is didactic in nature, like the Pre-Raphaelites, intentionally provoking consideration and discussion of current moral issues in the guise of historical fiction and art. (Tobin, 2006)

The Craftsman and Pre-Raphaelite Movements sought to preserve and revive ancient and rural views, techniques, art forms, and technologies. The United States contributed its own version of the Romantic Movement, with the works of the American Transcendentalists, including the likes of Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Walt Whitman, all encouraging self-discovery and a simplified life in accord with nature. Many Steampunks are attempting to find their own interpretation of this impulse, such as Professor J. S. GreyShade, of Greyshade Estates, an experiment in Steampunk permaculture outside San Diego.⁵

The “Punk” aspect of Steampunk infuses a healthy dose of anti-authoritarianism, rejection of patriarchy, eschewing rigid definitions, and limitations imposed by culture. Defiantly individualistic, Punk gave rise to several expressions, ranging from music and fashion to technology, with the rise of the Cyberpunks, who took great delight in hacking, and re-arranging computers and electronics.

True to its Punk roots, Steampunk gleefully dissects the past, salvaging the useful and the beautiful, pushing metaphor into multiple dimensions and opening up new horizons of meaning, all-the-while thumbing their noses at mainstream suburban values.

The influence of each of these social and artistic movements is plainly evident in the far-flung manifestations of Steampunk – everything is there: the love of handcrafted, well-designed art integrated into daily life, the respect for self-expression, beauty and workmanship, the love of

⁵ Greyshadeestate.com.

technology, and disregard for the rules and authority figures. Steampunk pushes on to include elements of ecology and permaculture, diversity and community-building.

An Analysis of Steampunk's Philosophical Basis

Ethically, Steampunk is a combination of Subjectivism, Egoism, Cultural Relativism, and Virtue Ethics. The emphasis on self-expression and freedom to create one's own definitions are strong examples of Subjectivism, with a heaping helping of Egoism, in which one's own self-interest is the highest motivation. Cultural Relativism is evident in the radical inclusiveness, as well as the high regard placed on all forms of art. Virtue Ethics, the ancient Greek approach to morality, is seen in the striving for personal excellence and a balanced life. The Virtue Ethics, Egoism, and Subjectivism within Steampunk all embrace self-discovery and development, while rejecting the reduction of standards to the "lowest common denominator."

Steampunk opposes Utilitarianism, with its claim that "the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few or the one." Steampunk is also opposed to exploitative Capitalism and thoughtless consumerism. It is not Socialist, due to its entrepreneurial insistence on self-reliance, craftsmanship, and doing-it-yourself, but it is community-focused and supportive of the young, weak and poor, as well as being a safe harbor for social outcasts and other subcultures of all stripes.

Steampunk tends to be somewhat indifferent to religion, as I have found the whole possible spectrum of belief from atheists to Crowley-Thelimites to devout Baptists at Steampunk events. Steampunk tolerates monotheistic beliefs, as its Cultural Relativist/Radical Inclusion values demand respect for all. However, there are some Christians who are opposed to Steampunk.

Steampunk's cosmology is as nebulous as everything else about it, so there is ample accommodation for a variety of beliefs, even conflicting ones. Steampunk's Victorian-inspired social forms, such as "tea duels," provide well-defined means of expressing and resolving differences in civilized/ritualized ways. Steampunk's uses of traditional virtues, such as honor, excellence, good manners, and self-sufficiency are appealing to many different types of people from all walks of life.

One thing all Steampunks do seem to agree on is that the mainstream culture's status quo is both untenable and undesirable in many aspects. Many Steampunks are consciously reducing and lowering their standard of living to within their economic means, repairing, doing-it-themselves, making, re-using, and recycling whenever feasible.

The Dark Side of Steampunk

The idealization of the Victorian era strikes some as morally problematic, as that was a time of vast inequality and suffering. Patriarchy, elitism, misogyny, child exploitation, slavery, and imperial colonization (with all the ills of racism, environmental exploitation, and injustice that came with it) were de rigeur. This has led to charges of "empire worship" and sweeping the evils of history under the carpet.

The nineteenth century was a time of great greed and lack of empathy toward the weak and poor, so well documented by the contemporary works of Charles Dickens and Mark Twain. The British exploitation of India and China, and slavery in the United States are some of the darkest examples in human history. It is not surprising that Steampunk is most popular in former British Colonies, and hardly at all with Asians and other peoples of color. (Google)

The Steampunk community is aware of this side of its heritage, and makes all the more effort to be inclusive and welcoming. Steampunk fiction is emerging that challenges the institutionalized sexism, racism, and exploitation (such as in the work of Cherie Priest), but this is still a shadow that Steampunk has yet to fully dispel.

The sexual repression of the Victorian period is another problematic area. Steampunk firmly rejects Victorian chauvinism, in favor of an inclusivity and respect for everyone, regardless of their sex, gender, race, or sexual orientation. The casual atmosphere of sexual harassment endemic to many fan events is expressly forbidden at Steampunk events. Many Steampunk events post explicitly public policies, stressing the social gentility and manners of the time, with no tolerance for racism, sexism, or discrimination of any kind.

Some hold that, despite its protestations to the contrary, Steampunk is guilty of sexual exploitation. There is an awful lot of Steampunk-inspired cheesecake and porn online, and to some, Steampunk is synonymous with steam-powered sexual deviance. Whilst it may be that some sexual exploitation exists somewhere in Steampunk, it is not consistent with Steampunk

values. Most Steampunk models stage their own photoshoots and upload photos to the internet themselves, or with the help of willing friends, and not at the command of another.

Like Burning Man Festivals, Steampunk encourages sexual experimentation and self-expression. However, at public events, manners and gentility are the norm. Many Steampunk events are family-oriented, such as the OctopodiCon, in Oklahoma, which boasted a whole program of science education for teens and children. Evening events are usually for adults.

Furthermore, in Steampunk, as in other forms of Cosplay, women tend to outnumber the men. Girls Rule in cosplay! (Grenshaw).

Some claim that this is “cherry-picking” the Victorian era – selecting only the parts you like, and ignoring the rest. Steampunk is proud of its eclecticism and its ability to choose the desirable elements of all worldviews, while discarding the harmful, limited, and ugly parts as much as possible.

Critics say this makes the movement hypocritical and inconsistent. But Steampunk proponents would insist that they are not interested in re-creating the past – rather, they wish to transcend time and culture into a new creation.

Steampunk as Indicator of Paradigmatic Shift: The New Romantic Movement

“The growth and development of the 21st Century’s cultural character will be strongly influenced by the Steampunk movement, as will its deeper philosophical character. Perhaps we will return to a more formal sense of etiquette as a social norm. Perhaps our day-to-day interaction will regain a sense of honor and respect that it has lately been lacking. Perhaps we will find solutions to our climate and energy problems in a reconsideration of mechanical power. Steam certainly doesn’t imply coal, of course — in fact, a solar water heater is Steampunk design in its essence. Just make it look nice enough to keep on your roof for all the world to see.”

-Michael Greenker

As noted previously, Cosplay of all stripes can be taken as a symptom of cultural disaffection. Assuming the appearance of a favored superheroine or anime character provides

greater satisfaction than the daily grind of “mundane” life. The ordinary world is not sufficiently fulfilling the needs of those drawn to fandom and to Steampunk.

This broad dissatisfaction of workers, which has been reported to be as high as nearly two-thirds of all employees, does not bode well for the continuance of the current regime. (Schwartz and Porath, 2014) There are many other indicators that our culture is in crisis – to enumerate them all is beyond the scope of this paper.

To list but a few: We are all working harder for less buying power. In the United States, we have lowering standards of living, loss of social mobility, loss of individual pride in work, poisons in our food (GMOs, pesticides, low water quality, the overuse of antibiotics, etc), growing wealth disparity, environmental degradation, the collapse of the traditional family and social structures, the highest percentage in the world of our population in prison. The list goes on and on.⁶ No wonder intelligent and creative people are looking elsewhere for their means of self-expression and satisfaction.

While cosplay offers a much-needed pressure valve, Steampunk has the potential to go further, affecting not just the pop culture, but also inspiring a new orientation to the world. By drawing on the knowledge and values of a by-gone era, combined with current technological and sociological understandings, Steampunk offers the vision of a possible future filled with beauty and new technologies, as opposed to the bleak post-apocalyptic vision often found in science fiction.

Steampunks, along with Rennies, Goths, Geeks, Burning Man, Permaculture and other such groups, comprise a re-orientation towards a more personalized and more meaningful approach. As such, they represent a larger Romantic Movement away from corporatocracy.

Looking Back to Create the Future

Cultures in crisis often look to previous eras for inspiration. There are multiple instances when cultures in crises would draw inspiration and a sense of direction from our ancestors.

⁶ Marx (1978) spoke at length about the separation of labor from product of labor. And in a recent Forbes report, sixty-five percent of United States employees report they are dissatisfied with work.

During the Middle Ages, especially in England and France, Courtly Love and the Matter of Britain were popularized in the royal courts of Eleanor of Aquitaine and her daughter Marie of Champagne, in the wake of the Crusades and the cultural shock of first contact with Arabic culture. King Arthur, Camelot, and the Knights of the Round Table – a brief, legendary time of high civilization shortly after the fall of Rome - inspired the troubadours, authors, and artists.

The Renaissance was born from the chaos of the dissolving feudal paradigm of the Middle Ages after the Black Death. Europe again gained inspiration from rediscovered ideals and techniques from the classical cultures of Athens and Rome. The Italian Renaissance sparked a new vision of humanity and our place within the cosmos by drawing on the wisdom, values, and creative expressions of the past. The humanistic Renaissance set the stage for our current Scientific Materialist society that is now in decline.

Scientific Materialism holds that physical matter, as described by the techniques and methods of science, is the final arbiter of what is real or valuable. As a Scientific Materialist society, non-quantifiable things such as art and beauty are not acknowledged or as highly valued as in past eras. Economics and statistics become dominant in many sectors, as they are more easily tracked and counted than intangibles like happiness and self-discovery.

Scientific Materialism focuses on industrial and technological progress, resulting in a huge population increase due to advances in medicine and food production. This furthers the belief that science is the best solution to all problems of human life. If your head aches, take a pill. If you get sick, the doctors will spare no insurance-covered test and treatment to get you back up on your feet and back to work.

Science denies the existence of an afterlife or deity, since neither can be proven empirically. Although individuals may have their own religious beliefs, there is no single dominant religion in our culture, such as existed in Europe during the Middle Ages. Without a religious consensus, Materialism steps in as the lowest common denominator, and fills the void as the cultural belief system. For the last 150 years, Science has been put to materialistic uses in the service of consumerism and market forces.

Like many others before, Steampunks look to history for inspiration to cope with current cultural crises. Steampunk philosophy has been characterized as “post-nihilistic,” in that it refuses to adhere to the dystopian vision of the future found in most currently popular science

fiction (such as *the Hunger Games*), while still acknowledging the disintegration of traditional values amidst the post-modern chaos of worlds falling apart⁷ (Cross).

Steampunk is unrepentantly optimistic, drawing meaning from the challenge presented by a world poised between capitalist totalitarianism and total anarchy. Steampunk assumes that life has meaning and purpose (functionally, whether that faith is theistic or not is not important) thereby avoiding much of the angst of other groups.

For many Steampunks, the Victorian era represents a technological time before our culture committed to an oil-based technology. Before Edison and Ford cornered the market and cast the mold for all future industrialists. It was a time when it seemed that anything was possible, and the lack of rules and regulating bodies promised unlimited experimentation and discovery.

The actual, historical Victorian era was the triumph of Scientific Materialism, with Charles Darwin revolutionizing society's view of humanity and its origins. It is also during this same period that Friedrich Nietzsche famously declared "God is Dead," for we no longer place the demands and practices of religion in the center of our culture.⁸ Business, science and economics have taken the roles traditionally performed by religion, rendering God redundant and unnecessary except as an emotional crutch in the view of many. During this time, Freud plumbed the depths of the human psyche, discovering the secrets of the unconscious mind (which were later used to devastating ends by his nephew, Edward Bernays).

Everything Old is New Again

Two keen observers of the human condition, from very different points of view are the ethno-botanist and counter-cultural icon, the late Terence McKenna, and cutting edge geneticist and founder of the emerging field of epigenetics, Bruce Lipton. Both have predicted that the Scientific Materialist Paradigm will shift towards a resurgence of what is sometimes called the Animist or Archaic paradigm, in which all matter is seen as containing an aspect of consciousness, and therefore due proper respect. Some may recognize this as the worldview reportedly held by Native American and other aboriginal cultures, prior to Christianization.

This new, as-yet unnamed paradigm would combine our current love of technology with a love of and connection to nature. Instead of the Scientific Materialist view that nature must be dominated, tamed, and exploited by Man, Steampunk looks to cooperate with nature without resort to harmful artificial means whenever possible. This green/re-use/re-purpose ethos is highly practical in a world of diminishing resources. The emphasis on hand-made refutes the rampant consumer culture.

The Animistic worldview is also marked by tribalism and an emphasis on the good of the community in perpetuity, not just focused on short-term profits, like the Scientific Materialist view we know so well. Steampunk shares an affinity with shamanism and neo-tribalism through its creative self-expression and radical inclusion policy. There is room for all beliefs under Steampunk's parasol, where self-exploration and self-knowledge are considered unalloyed Goods.

As a new Romantic Movement, Steampunk attempts to avoid the dead ends and pitfalls of our post-modern, post-fact culture, instead seeks the path not taken – the path of honest workmanship, beauty in technology, creativity, sustainability, and inclusion. Steampunk is finding a wide appeal, because of both its inclusiveness and its elusiveness. Steampunk defies classifications and labels, allowing unique expressions over stereotypes, while still remaining faithful to its core values. Steampunk has strong appeal to a world weary of everyday mediocrity, pragmatic ugliness, and bad manners, and as such revives the Romantic paradigm for a new era, pointing the way to a more optimistic and imaginative future.

Objections & Responses

Steampunk as a movement is nothing more than Escapist Fantasy/Shallow Aesthetic or worse, a sign of emotional-psychological problems.

Response: Although there is some “hiding” in Steampunk, there is a strong element that seeks to address the “Malaises of Modernity” (Taylor, and Weber in Taylor, 1991) through the creation of a new basis for community not based on accident of birth, location or religious belief. Internet is crucial in permitting formation of these groups..

But as Krishnamurti famously said, “Being well-adjusted to a profoundly sick society is no measure of mental health.” Conversely, refusing to adjust to the standards of a profoundly

sick society is instead an indicator of mental health. Psychologists Letamendi and Rosenberg's survey study of cosplay did not reveal underlying emotional-psychological dysfunction or issues. (Grenshaw) Although this study was not focused on Steampunks specifically, casual observation suggests that same motivations/states of mental health apply.

Steampunk is an exercise in Self-indulgent Egoism.

Response: Yes, there is Egoism (acting in one's own self-interest) in Steampunk, but where is there its absence in any social group or movement? Capitalism is founded on the premise that disparate individuals acting in their own self-interest will harmonize and balance one another out to create a free market of sufficient choices to satisfy the needs of all. Corporate "Crony" Capitalism tends towards totalitarianism, as we are currently seeing develop in Western nations. Steampunk rejects this form of creeping fascism, and seeks a return to true entrepreneurialism, community service and pride in craftsmanship, as these are seen to be in the individual's self-interest. Like the Founding Fathers of USA, Steampunks are bound together by shared value of individual responsibility and potential, but with way cooler tech.

Steampunk is just another fad.

Response: Steampunk has been declared dead many times, but has stubbornly refused to go away. So far, Steampunk has shown surprising staying power, as interest continues to grow. (IBM 2013 Trends Forecast, Google Trends). The potential of Steampunk is only beginning to be explored and mined.

Many of the earliest people drawn to Steampunk have experienced burn-out and sworn off Steampunk, only to find themselves returning after a hiatus, because the values, community and lifestyle are more appealing than the alternatives.

But, of course, only the future will show if this prediction is accurate.

4.) These philosophical underpinnings of Steampunk are not indicative of the average person attracted to the corsets, goggles, and gears.

Response: Most Steampunk devotees are very cognizant of the philosophical and ethical questions of our time, and are attracted precisely because of Steampunk's values and views. However, if the movement goes mainstream, as has been predicted, then, yes, a lot of people will

no doubt jump on the bandwagon, without considering the deeper implications. But that will not negate the impact of the values of radical inclusiveness, creative self-expression and self-sufficiency. And over time, those values could become the norm, rather than being “fringy.”

If Steampunk does go mainstream, then it will be taken over by consumer culture, negating its original values and intentions.

Response: The greatest challenge for Steampunk going forward is to avoid becoming co-opted by the very forces it most seeks to reject. The mass marketing of Steampunk continues apace, with Steampunk-inspired fashions and accessories already turning up in Walmart and Target, and predictions of more on the way (IBM Trends report).

Some of the more hard-core adherents of the movement feel it has become trivialized by the “just glue on some gears and wear goggles” approach to Steampunk. They see the mass production of Steampunk-inspired items to be antithetical to the Maker mentality, even if it does allow for greater inclusiveness and diversity. (Greystone Estate’s “The Divided Heart of Agrarian Steampunk”)

If Steampunk can preserve its Do-It-Yourself, creative, re-cycle/re-purpose, and community values, without selling out to the materialist forces that oppose it, then it seems possible that Steampunk could provide the ethical grounding, motivation, and innovation required to bolster our society from collapse under the weight of diminishing resources and growing income disparity. However, if Steampunk (and by extension, the New Romantic Movement) is subverted by market forces, the future trajectory of western culture does not look promising.

Only through a new infusion of inspiration and vision will we find the answers to transcend the many problems and dilemmas we face in the early twenty-first century. Steampunk and other New Romantic groups offer the possibility of a new social vision between anarchy and tyranny, in our post-democratic era.

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