



Ruskin and Steampunk: Recovering Radicalism

Ruskin Seminar, Summer 2019

How do the ideas of John Ruskin anticipate and intersect with Steampunk subcultures? Defined by Jeff Vandermeer as ‘a grafting of Victorian aesthetic and punk rock attitude onto various forms of science-fiction culture’, Steampunk is more often associated with the literary legacies of H.G. Wells, Jules Verne and Edgar Allan Poe. Yet this idiosyncratic contemporary mode of narrative, art, dress and music also has deep affinities with Ruskin’s critique of the ethics and aesthetics of consumer culture.

Ruskin’s alternative vision to industrial capitalism is one of liberating creativity. It is both utopian and rooted in the everyday, and it anticipates the rich complexity of Steampunk. This seminar series, organised with Prof Catherine Spooner and Dr Andrew Tate (Department of English Literature & Creative Writing, Lancaster University) will explore ways in which Ruskin and Steampunk share a radicalism that has been forgotten and, on occasion, made safe and easy to consume. In Ruskin, it seeks an inspiration for the radical ‘DIY’ practices of the artists and makers of contemporary Steampunk, and thus a critical voice that is still of vital relevance today. In Steampunk, it seeks an heir to a nineteenth-century intellectual tradition, ut also a diverse range of critical voices that can speak back to and critique that tradition, opening it up to new directions.

Ruskin and Steampunk: Recovering Radicalism places its two subjects in conversation, allowing points of synergy and tension to emerge, illuminating both in the process. Addressing themes such as political commitment, embodiment and the environment, it draws on Ruskin’s spirit of social and imaginative transformation in order to envisage radical alternative futures.

Schedule

9 May 2019, 16.15–18.00

Martin Danahay (Brock University, Canada)
‘Art and Politics: Arts, Crafts and Steampunk’

16 May 2019, 16.15–18.00

Catherine Spooner and Andrew Tate (Lancaster University)
‘Ruskin vs. Steampunk’

30 May 2019, 16.15–18.00

Claire Nally (University of Northumbria)
‘Gender and Radicalism in The Steampunk Magazine’

13 June 2019, 16.15–18.00

Elizabeth Ho (University of Hong Kong)
‘Ruskin’s Afterlives: Steampunk in Asia’

All events will take place at The Ruskin, Lancaster University, LA1 4YB

For more information, please contact us on 01524 593587 or the-ruskin@lancaster.ac.uk

Image: John Ruskin, ‘Archivolt in the Duomo of Murano’, *Stones of Venice* (1851–53), II, op. 58.



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Art and Politics: Arts, Crafts and Steampunk

9 May 2019, 16.15–18.00 at The Ruskin, Lancaster University, LA1 4YB

Martin Danahay, Professor of English, Brock University, Canada

What is the connection between art and politics in a movement like Arts and Crafts and a contemporary subculture like Steampunk? Some practitioners in both the Arts and Crafts movement and Steampunk have claimed that a return to earlier forms of small-scale production would lead to social change, but in both instances it is not clear how a commitment to hand-crafted objects results in a radical restructuring of the economy. The Arts and Crafts movement believed essential values were lost due to industrialisation in the nineteenth century, likewise Steampunk reacts against the digital transformation of production in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Arts and Crafts, influenced by John Ruskin, idealized the Medieval craftsman as a model while Steampunk draws on the Victorian Era as a repository of lost values. They share a commitment to handicraft and the use of the past to critique their contemporary societies, but ultimately highlight the challenge of turning an aesthetic into a political movement.

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Ruskin vs. Steampunk

16 May 2019, 16.15–18.00 at The Ruskin, Lancaster University, LA1 4YB

Catherine Spooner, Professor of Literature and Culture, and Andrew Tate, Reader in Literature, Religion and Aesthetics, Lancaster University, UK

Steampunk subculture is in some respects the antithesis of everything Ruskin stood for, and yet it owes a deep and surprising debt to his writing. In this seminar, we will introduce the affinities, creative tensions and discontinuities between Ruskin's worldview and the Steampunk aesthetic, defined by Jeff Vandermeer as 'a grafting of Victorian aesthetic and punk rock attitude onto various forms of science-fiction culture'. We will also explore the ways in which Ruskin and Steampunk share a radicalism that has been forgotten and, on occasion, made safe and easy to consume. Addressing themes such as political commitment, embodiment and the environment, the seminar draws on Ruskin's spirit of social and imaginative transformation in order to envisage radical alternative futures.

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'Gender and Radicalism in *The Steampunk Magazine*'

30 May 2019, 16.15–18.00 at The Ruskin, Lancaster University, LA1 4YB

Claire Nally, Senior Lecturer, Northumbria University, UK

The Steampunk Magazine was first published in 2007 and remains one of the best examples of politically radical Steampunk practice. It was closely aligned with anarchist politics, and more specifically, anarcho-feminism. It lasted for nine issues, and delivered interviews with many Steampunk writers, musicians and bands, as well as publishing original fiction and poetry on Steampunk themes. A large part of the publication was comprised of non-fiction articles, including descriptions of the subculture, lifestyle advice, and hints and tips for makers and DIY practitioners. Spearheaded by Margaret Killjoy (a transwoman with anarchist sympathies), the magazine's DIY and alternative credentials also put it squarely in the zine tradition. The focus of this talk explores *The Steampunk Magazine* and its alignment with iconoclastic politics through figures like Miriam Roček – otherwise known as Steampunk Emma Goldman. Through such writers and their content, the magazine clearly situates itself against an uncritical nostalgia which replicates the Victorian age without any political critique. In addressing articles from the magazine which offer a feminist perspective, it is possible to recover a version of Steampunk which is diametrically opposed to conventional ideas of gender and sexuality.

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Ruskin's Afterlives: Steampunk in Asia

13 June 2019, 16.15–18.00 at The Ruskin, Lancaster University, LA1 4YB

Elizabeth Ho, Assistant Professor, Hong Kong University, HKSAR

This talk focuses on the development of Steampunk in Asia across a variety of examples from Jackie Chan's *Around the World in Eighty Days* (2004) to the martial arts epic, *Tai Chi Zero* (2012); from the Indonesian shadow puppets in *The Mysterious Geographic Explorations of Jasper Morello* (2005) to *The SEA is Ours* (2015), an anthology of Steampunk short stories from Southeast Asia. Attuned to postcolonial ethics, Steampunk in Asia offers an opportunity to imaginatively work through issues such as techno-orientalism, the region's ambivalence towards the importation of Western technology in the nineteenth century, and new geo-political configurations of power in the present. Steampunk's DIY aesthetics are also creatively deployed to address the dynamics of race, immigration and diaspora thus revising and sometimes deliberately misreading Ruskin's emphasis on craftsmanship and the conditions of labour. Steampunk in an Asian context, I argue, aims to recover the stories of those who are perceived to be technologically under-developed and therefore judged as 'less' because they are shut out of the teleological thrust of history. At stake in Steampunk's improvisational approach to technology in the present is the negotiation of alternate pasts for alternate, de-imperialised futures.

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