Helena Esser, ***Steampunk London: Neo-Victorian Urban Space and Popular Transmedia Memory***. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024, 248 pp. HB £85.00. ISBN: 9781350433908

Reviewed by **Emma Butler-Way**

Recommended citation: Butler-Way, Emma. 2025. Review of *Steampunk London: Neo-Victorian Urban Space and Popular Transmedia Memory*, *Victorian Popular Fictions*, 7.1 (Spring): 114-116. ISSN: 2632-4253 (online) DOI: https://doi.org/10.46911/TWOX2810

Helena Esser's *Steampunk London* is an important and detailed contribution to the steadily expanding oeuvre of steam- and cyberpunk studies, joining titles such as Claire Nally's *Steampunk: Gender, Subculture, and the Neo-Victorian* (Bloomsbury, 2019) and Julie Anne Taddeo and Cynthia J. Miller's *Steaming Into a Victorian Future* (Scarecrow Press, 2013) to explore the connection(s) between steampunk, present-day socio-political movements, and the Victorian past.

Throughout *Steampunk London*, Esser contextualises the rise of steampunk within the neo-liberal, conservative policies of the 1980s on both sides of the Atlantic, mapping the path from the first wave of steampunk and the "California Trifecta" of authors to the second wave, which engages more closely with a neo-Victorian imperative of re-interpretation and re-vision of the Victorian past through lenses such as psychogeography and post-feminism. Acknowledging the notoriously difficult nature of defining steampunk, Esser focuses on the (re)conceptualisation of London to "interrogate steampunk London as a transmedia phenomenon" (9) through an analysis of prose fiction, film, graphic novels, visual arts and video games. Importantly, *Steampunk London* seeks to address how "our collective, politically conscious desire to reckon with the legacies of the Victorian past may be shaped by and entangled with shared fantasies and stereotypes about the past… [and] how a shared urban imaginary is constructed, maintained, or reframed across media and across time, and how that imaginary informs collective identity politics" (6-7).

Esser draws attention to the genealogical ties the genre bears to the (late) Victorian era, its fiction, and its politics; importantly, however, Esser highlights the pervasive nature of a "perceived Victorian past", acknowledging that the Victorian past of Thatcherite politics, popular imagination, and modern fictional outputs are as much indebted to an imagined,

idealised past as they are the "actual" past (whatever that might be). This acknowledgement underpins Esser's study: *Steampunk London* is thus both a reclamation of Victorianism and an exploration of the steampunk metropolis. Connecting this fictionality to the creative and collaborative nature of steampunk, Esser posits that "steampunk's retro-speculative interventions also reflect back on us [to] reveal what and how much we think we know about the Victorian past," and highlights that, despite its radical potential, "steampunk may (often unintentionally) re-iterate fraught assumptions about both past and present, and so expose our own blind spots" and the limits of our collective imagination (11; 18).

Chapter 1 ("Difference Engines: Seminal Steampunk and the Foundations of Gonzo-Victorian London") explores the early steampunk offerings of K. W. Jeter, Tim Powers, and James Blaylock (the "California Trifecta") and the development of cyberpunk in William Gibson and Bruce Sterling's *The Difference Engine* (1990). Esser places these texts in dialogue with late-Victorian texts – H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* and Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* – and Gibson and Sterling's work within the framework offered by such urban theorists as Georg Simmel, Henri Lefebvre, and David Harvey, to offer a reading of the reimagined city as one that has been "modified, re-purposed, forgotten, and outlasted by its inhabitants" (27).

Chapter 2 ("East End Punk: neo-Victorianism, Urban Gothic, and Collective Knowledge") reiterates the idea of a "perceived" past to "interrogate the shared popular memory against which steampunk's retro-speculation functions" (51). To do so, Esser focuses primarily on Kim Newbury's *Anno Dracula* (1992) and Peter Ackroyd's *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (1994), with a supplementary focus on George Mann's *The Affinity Bridge* (2009) and S. M. Peters's *Whitechapel Gods* (2008). Esser explores, in particular, the city that we think we know – the city that is constructed through writing, from popular fiction to the legacies of the Whitechapel murders and the Ripper mythologies – and how this shared imaginary is manipulated and developed through the retro-speculative/futuristic tools of steampunk.

Chapter 3 ("Hyper-City: Steampunk's Retro-Speculative Video Game Spaces"), while building on the urban theorising of the previous chapter, moves the focus from literary representations of the steampunk metropolis to the more immersive arena of video games, and, by doing so, interrogates the role and function of space within a steampunk imaginary (100). Using Conan Doyle and Dickens's immersive literary explorations of the city, as well as Doreen Massey's theories of space and place as a framework, Esser unpacks the three-dimensional cities of *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* (2015) and *The Order: 1886* (2015) to illustrate how "game spaces may provide unique relationships with both the real cityscape and our historical imaginaries of it" (101).

Chapter 4 ("Re-claiming the retrofuture: feminism and gender in fin-de-siecle and Steampunk London") is the longest chapter in *Steampunk London*, and, in my opinion, justifiably so. Esser alludes to the highly gendered nature of urban spaces in Victorian and neo-Victorian steampunk literature throughout her work, and this final chapter draws those threads together to position gender at the very centre of its analysis. By focusing on the diverging aims of fourth-wave feminism and post-feminism in particular, Esser highlights the complexities of representation, and questions what steampunk's retro-futuristic imperative can actually achieve in light of the concerning trend of anti-feminist narrative tropes that have been quietly inherited from the Victorians, which dictate how gender can be fully, and authentically, represented in a historical – albeit retro-speculative/futuristic – setting. To undertake this analysis, Esser focuses on: George Mann's *Newbury and Hobbes* series (2008-present); Tee Morris and Pip Ballantine's *Ministry of Peculiar Occurrences* series (2011-2017); and Gail Carriger's *Parasol Protectorate* series (2009-2019).

Taken together, these chapters, along with a short Coda, explore the many faces of London through a selection of its Victorian and steampunk representations. Just as London is a palimpsestic city of almost infinite variety, steampunk is shown to be similarly multifaceted in its creative and collaborative potential and output. Esser does not assume that her reader has extensive prior knowledge of steampunk – but, importantly, that does not lead to oversimplification. The reader is guided through complex theories by a deft hand that offers contextualisation where needed; the result is a monograph that acts as both an introduction to steampunk and a highly nuanced exploration of the genre's urban imaginary and neo-Victorian imperative.