

Utopia in Gears: The Spiritual Core and Aesthetic Culture of Steampunk Style

Zheng Wenjie, School of Literature and Journalism, Sichuan University

Abstract

Steampunk is an aesthetic style based on the Western steam era, which has distinct artistic characteristics and is constantly evolving and innovating under the impetus of the times. As a subculture, steampunk explores society and history with a specific aesthetic imagination, which contains spiritual cores such as optimism, rebellion and freedom. At the same time, under the macro background of increasingly aesthetic contemporary culture, steampunk leads the design innovation and consumption fashion, feeds back the industrial heritage and urban reconstruction, promotes the collage of fragments and the integration of East and West, and demonstrates the expansion of science and technology to artistic creation. Therefore, this essay uses aesthetic theory to observe and analyze the steampunk style, explore its profound spiritual core and rich aesthetic culture, which is of great significance for a deeper understanding of its philosophical connotation and speculative spirit.

Keywords: steampunk, spiritual core, aesthetic culture, aesthetics

1. Beauty Due to Sensory Immersion: The Aesthetic Experience of Steampunk

The concept of steampunk originated from science fiction, and then gradually expanded to games, movies, comics and other fields. “Steam” represents the most developed Victorian era of steam industry, while “punk” means the rebellion against tradition and authority at the spiritual level, and the collision between them produces the unique aesthetic style of “steampunk”.

Under the emotional tone of “troubled times”, steampunk created a unique visual

system with gloomy classical tones and mysterious texture effects, and created a strange aesthetic atmosphere with complex mechanical devices, steam pipes, metal parts, robots and other classic elements, giving people a spectacular sensory immersion beyond daily experience and highlighting a unique aesthetic style and concept. At the same time, the background of steampunk style is usually full of scientific and technological sense and adventurous spirit, reflecting the unity of imagination and law, as well as mankind's exploration and reflection on social, political and cultural aspects, bringing audiences deep philosophical discourse and value recognition.

On the basis of the above, steampunk has continuously evolved and developed, and has become a cultural trend across literature, philosophy, film and television, and fine arts. At the same time, it is gradually infiltrating into the design field, providing a driving force for the aestheticization of daily life. However, steampunk has gradually become a mere shell of symbols, and its spiritual core and cultural heritage are gradually declining. At the same time, the current academic research and interpretation of steampunk mostly stays in the category of novels and movies, and rarely rises to its profound connection with philosophy and daily life. Therefore, it is very important and necessary to study the spiritual core and aesthetic culture of steampunk style, which is of great significance to deepen understanding, promote communication and promote application.

2. Beauty Due to the Brilliance of Humanity: The Spiritual Core of Steampunk

2.1 Optimism: Creating an Ideal Utopia

As a product of the combination of ancient civilization and modern technology, steampunk emphasizes the great power of technology to change life, fully embodies people's worship of technological innovation and scientific progress, which further expresses people's yearning for an idealized future and a utopian world. Hertzler, an American scholar, considers that Utopia is “the idea of carrying out social reform by relying on a certain idea or ideal itself or making it embodied in a certain social reform institution”¹It reveals that utopian socialism has become the spiritual sustenance of

1 Joyce Oramel Hertzler. *The History of Utopian Thought*. Florida: HardPress Publishing, 2012.

ordinary people, and also fully explains the close relationship between steampunk and utopia. Therefore, steampunk works usually hold an optimistic attitude of exploring the unknown and pursuing the bright, full of positive and inspiring emotions, and convey faith and hope.

2.2 Rebellious Spirit: Post-modernism in Pursuing Individuality

Steampunk opposes traditional norms and absolute authority, and pursues individual liberation and free creation, which can be regarded as a vivid practice of Nietzsche's rebel theory in the real world. On the one hand, in the steampunk world, human beings show their creativity and vitality through technology and machinery, which conforms to the concept of "will" put forward by Nietzsche and expresses the challenge and rebellion to traditional values and social norms. On the other hand, steampunk advocates retro themes and traditional culture, and is full of spiritual demands of recalling the past, which is in line with the core concept of postmodernism and reflects the resistance and criticism to modernity. This rebellious spirit has promoted the steampunk style to quickly enter the public's field of vision and blend into the cultural context, which has been widely admired and sought after.

2.3 Free Spirit: Rejection of the One-Dimensional Society

Marcuse once proposed the "one-dimensional man"² with only material desires and no soul, emphasizing the suppression and alienation of individuals by society. In steampunk's worldview, social structure and technological progress have brought about changes in lifestyle, and people forced to adapt to the new life have become passive and obedient, thus creating a one-dimensional society. Behind this kind of society is the high-handed posture of the power context from top to bottom, and the "perfect London" described in steampunk's masterpiece *Difference Extension*³ is a vivid case. Therefore, human beings in steampunk express their dissatisfaction by destroying industrial facilities, burning scientific and technological equipment, resisting government enterprises, and pursue a lifestyle with temperance, which is not bound by the

² Marcuse, Herbert. *One dimensional man*. London: Routledge, 2002.

³ William Gibson, Bruce Sterling. *The Difference Engine*. New York: Bantam Books, 1991.

indifferent one-dimensional society, and is not enslaved by the spirit of bureaucratic control.

3. Beauty Due to the Connection with Reality: The Aesthetic Culture of Steampunk

3.1 Development After Nostalgia: Steampunk Leads Design Innovation and Consumer Fashion

With the progress of economy and the development of market, people's aesthetic pursuit puts forward higher requirements for individuality. Steampunk has entered the fields of costume design, digital media visual design, interior design, sculpture and ceramic design, and has become an important link between technology and fashion.

Steampunk works show the audience an overhead world parallel to the west in the 19th century by mixing industrial elements and fantasizing about fictional elements. The Victorian era with developed industry and scientific prosperity provided many classical and nostalgic elements for steampunk works, such as steam boilers, tuxedos, hats, crutches and pocket watches, which were inherited and embodied in the design of modern culture. At the same time, the steampunk works are pioneering and innovative on the basis of nostalgia, integrating Victorian aesthetic principles with modern technology and emotion, and gradually being recognized and accepted by mainstream culture.

When steampunk becomes a symbol in popular culture, people are obsessed with dazzling visual effects and refuse to think deeply, so we should be more careful that it loses its connotation and becomes a gorgeous empty shell. Consumerism, with its strong materialization ability, branded steampunk as a trend, and also brought the threat of assimilation to steampunk. For example, in fashion design, steampunk elements have entered the fields of dresses, Lolita, role-playing, etc., which greatly caters to modern fashion aesthetics, but it has gradually been alienated into an empty cultural symbol by capital. As put forward by Frankfurt School and Cultural Studies School, this is a vulgarization of popular culture and radical culture by capitalism.⁴

4 Donna Haraway. *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge, 1991.

3.2 The Future Nurtured by the Past: Steampunk Feeding Back Industrial Heritage and Urban Reconstruction

Steampunk was born in the macro background of the first industrial revolution, and both artistic expression and core value orientation were branded with the industrial age. Therefore, the application of a subculture like steampunk to industrial heritage design is undoubtedly a vivid embodiment of the artistic style born in the industrial age to feed back industrial heritage.

The use of steampunk elements has changed people's stereotype of industry, and made the abandoned industrial heritage rejuvenate and return to the public's field of vision. For example, the Dongjiao Memory Cultural and Industrial Park in Chengdu, China, was rebuilt on the former site of the state-owned Hongguang Electronic Tube Factory, combining the site of an industrial civilization with cultural and creative industries. The preservation of elements such as steam locomotives, fighter planes and factory lathes showed a distinctive steampunk style, giving people a novel aesthetic sensory experience, further playing an important role in promoting the diversified development of art and culture, and having an important significance for stimulating urban economic development and civilized progress.

As a social microcosm and abstract reflection of the industrial age, steampunk embodies the common cultural memory of human beings and conveys timeless philosophical speculation. The steampunk style provides a lot of inspiration for urban reconstruction, and also provides an opportunity for people to examine themselves and history, and maintains the sense of belonging and identity of human beings for their own civilization. At the same time, the rise of this new aesthetic also reflects the depth and leading role of modern young people in thinking about emerging things, conveys philosophical thoughts such as sustainable development, and endows the historical memory of the city with valuable innovation and endless vitality.

3.3 Harmony in Conflict: Steampunk Promotes Fragment Collage and East-West Integration

Under the macro background of the international spread of aesthetic culture,

steampunk gradually broke through the limitation of time and space, and combined with oriental myths, legends, magic and other national characteristics to build a fantasy world that integrates Eastern and Western ideologies and philosophical thoughts.⁵

On the one hand, the addition of oriental philosophy has opened up a new road for the development of steampunk, and catered to the unique aesthetic needs of modern audiences with decentralized fragment collage. For example, in the animation collection *Love, Death and Robots*, there is a clever combination of China's classical elements and Western aesthetic elements, which presents a heterogeneous world parallel to the Victorian era and different from the real space, vividly showing the background of colonial aggression and cultural collision, with retro and science fiction coexisting, nostalgia and imagination coexisting.

On the other hand, steampunk's mechanical aesthetics and China's classical aesthetics collide with new design elements and styles, giving people a refreshing aesthetic experience. When steampunk's attitude of foreign culture entered the mainstream aesthetics in China, it was combined with traditional visual elements such as calligraphy, embroidery, totem and facial makeup in China. The story of the East once again resounds with touching echoes in the world. But at the same time, while accepting the concept of steampunk aesthetics, we should also take root in the national characteristics, attach importance to the accumulation of cultural history, refuse to be monopolized and assimilated by Western aesthetic culture, and not allow classical aesthetics and traditional culture to disappear.

Conclusion

In a word, steampunk, as an aesthetic style with speculative spirit, embodies a profound spiritual core and builds a unique aesthetic culture. ⁶On the one hand, optimistic, rebellious and free thinking makes steampunk's works have a reflective humanistic color, which makes it glow with humanistic brilliance and beauty, and lays a solid foundation for steampunk to show its concern for culture. On the other hand, steampunk keeps pace with the times, constantly absorbs new ideas and adds new

5 Jean Baudrillard. *Simulacra And Simulation*. Michigan: University Of Michigan Press, 1994.

6 MEER A V, MEER J V. *Steampunk*. San Francisco: Tachyon Publications, 2008.

elements, and shines brilliantly in many aspects such as consumption fashion, heritage reconstruction and cultural integration.

Steampunk is an aesthetic phenomenon born in a specific historical period. The focus on the contradiction between man and science and technology determines that it has the characteristics of the times. It is inevitably absorbed by the vulgarization of capital and faces the risk of becoming a short-term carnival. Therefore, we can't turn a blind eye to the deconstruction and alienation of aesthetics, as NamJune Paik said: "Only paying attention to science and technology will lead to war, so we need strong humanistic backing to keep us modest." Only by correctly guiding the development of steampunk with profound humanistic background can we build the last line of defense against alienation.

What is commendable is that the aesthetic culture of not fade away, the spiritual core of steampunk, has not been dissolved, but has been constantly adapted to the development of the times, and many variants have been derived, encouraging people to face the scientific and technological changes and the changes of the times more humanely and helping people to better think about the way of survival and evolution. Whether in the past or in the future, whether in the West or the East, everyone can get different gains from steampunk and learn different speculations, which responds to the contemporary free and pluralistic artistic temperament and is of great significance to the interpretation of aesthetic phenomena and the progress of human civilization.

References

- [1] Joyce Oramel Hertzler. *The History of Utopian Thought*. Florida: HardPress Publishing, 2012.
- [2] Marcuse, Herbert. *One Dimensional Man*. London: Routledge, 2002.
- [3] William Gibson, Bruce Sterling. *The Difference Engine*. New York: Bantam Books, 1991.
- [4] Donna Haraway. *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge, 1991.
- [5] Jean Baudrillard. *Simulacra And Simulation*. Michigan: University Of Michigan Press, 1994.

[6] MEER A V, MEER J V. *Steampunk*. San Francisco: Tachyon Publications, 2008.