



FROM GOTHIC FICTION TO STEAMPUNK: GENRE, HISTORY AND TECHNOLOGY IN THE “PUNK” SUBGENRES OF SPECULATIVE FICTION

Kupalova Barno Kamilovna

Nordic International University Masters degree graduate

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-5905-5872>

e-mail: kupalovabarno@gmail.com

Abstract. This thesis examines the “punk” subgenres of speculative fiction: cyberpunk, steampunk, Teslapunk, dieselpunk, and salvagepunk. After reviewing the main lines of “punk” genre scholarship, it brings together two frameworks that have not previously been joined, E. Auger’s discursive model of popular genres and A. J. Elias’s theory of metahistorical romance and the technological sublime. Read together, they reveal a single line of development, running from cyberpunk’s concern with representation to the retrofuturist genres’ concern with the failed futures of the past. Thomas Pynchon’s *Against the Day* serves as the test case.

Key words: cyberpunk, steampunk, retrofuturism, discourse, popular genres, metahistorical romance, technological sublime, gothic fiction.

Annotatsiya. Ushbu tezisda spekulativ adabiyotning “pank” subjanrlari bo’lmish kiberpank, stimpunk, teslapunk, dizelpunk va salvejpank tahlil qilinadi. “Pank” janrlari bo’yicha ilmiy adabiyotlar sharhidan so’ng, ilgari birlashtirilmagan ikki nazariya - E. Augerning diskursiv modeli va A. J. Eliasning metatarixiy romans hamda texnologik yuksaklik nazariyasi sintez qilinadi. Pinchonning “Against the Day” romani sinov materiali sifatida xizmat qiladi.

Kalit soʻzlar: kiberpank, stimpunk, retrofuturizm, diskurs, ommabop janrlar, metatarixiy romans, texnologik yuksaklik, gotik adabiyot.

Аннотация. В тезисах анализируются «панк»-субжанры спекулятивной литературы. После обзора научной литературы впервые синтезируются дискурсивная модель жанров Э. Огера и теория метаисторического романа и технологического возвышенного Э. Дж. Элиаса.

Ключевые слова: киберпанк, стимпанк, ретрофутуризм, дискурс, популярные жанры, метаисторический романс, технологическое возвышенное.

Introduction

Over the past forty years the “punk” subgenres of speculative fiction have travelled from the margins of culture to its centre. Cyberpunk arrived in the 1980s, in the novels of William Gibson and Neal Stephenson, and it soon spawned a whole family of new genres: steampunk, set in the Victorian age; Teslapunk, drawn from the early age of electricity; dieselpunk, tied



to the Art Deco culture of the years between the world wars²⁹; and salvagepunk, a term Evan Calder Williams coined for fiction set among the ruins of the present³⁰. Today these genres turn up almost anywhere you look, in literature, film, games, and fan culture. That prompts a question. What is the inner logic of this development, and what do the genres have to say about history and technology? The thesis answers by joining two frameworks that, to our knowledge, have not been combined before: Emily Auger's discursive model of popular genres³¹ and Amy J. Elias's theory of metahistorical romance and the technological sublime³². The synthesis is where the novelty lies. Auger accounts for how the punk genres are built and Elias for how they handle time, and only in combination do they explain the line of development as a whole.

Literature review

Scholarship on the punk genres sorts into three groups. The first deals with cyberpunk and is split over its politics. One camp, made up of early critics such as D. Porush together with work on the posthuman body, treats cyberpunk as liberating, a counterculture of hackers and hybrid identities. The opposing camp, led by F. Jameson and E. C. Williams, sees it instead as the literature of late capitalism itself, a mirror of the global market rather than any protest against it³³. B. McHale keeps his distance from both and describes cyberpunk in formal terms, as a bridge between science fiction and postmodernist poetics³⁴.

The second group turns to steampunk. M. Rose argues that steampunk does not deny the reality of the past so much as explore the textual routes by which we reach it³⁵. The special issue of Neo-Victorian Studies edited by R. Bowser and B. Croxall, along with S. Forlini's work on steampunk "things", ties the genre to material culture and ethics³⁶. It has determined

²⁹ Elias, A. J. (2015). Cyberpunk, steampunk, Teslapunk, dieselpunk, salvagepunk: Metahistorical romance and/vs the technological sublime. In G. Episcopo (Ed.), *Metahistorical narratives & scientific metafiction* (pp. 201–220). Edizioni Cronopio. P. 201.

³⁰ Williams, E. C. (2011). *Combined and uneven apocalypse*. Zero Books.

³¹ Auger, E. E. (2001). *A theory of the development of popular genres: Discourse in gothic, detective, science, and cyberpunk fiction* [Master's thesis]. University of Victoria.

³² Elias, 2015.

³³ Jameson, F. (1991). *Postmodernism, or, the cultural logic of late capitalism*. Duke University Press; Williams, 2011.

³⁴ McHale, B. (1992). Elements of a poetics of cyberpunk. *Critique*, 33(3), 149–175.

³⁵ Rose, M. (2009). Extraordinary pasts: Steampunk as a mode of historical representation. *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, 20(3), 319–333.

³⁶ Bowser, R. A., & Croxall, B. (2010). Introduction: Industrial evolution. *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 3(1), 1–45; Forlini, S. (2010). Technology and morality: The stuff of steampunk. *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 3(1), 72–98.



critics too: Williams dismisses steampunk as “a romanticized do-over”, nostalgia for an era that never existed³⁷. No serious account of the punk genres can avoid answering that charge.

The third group is genre theory itself. L. Hutcheon’s influential idea of historiographic metafiction reads nearly all postmodern fiction as ironic play with history³⁸. Elias, working from H. White’s notion of the historical sublime, marks off a narrower tradition, the metahistorical romance, which earnestly wants a historical meaning it can no longer trust³⁹. Auger’s discursive model, for its part, is the one account that sets cyberpunk in a single developmental line with gothic, detective, and science fiction. The gap is easy to see. The structural approach of Auger and the temporal-historical approach of Elias have never been brought together, and that is the task this thesis takes on.

1. The genre family tree: from gothic to cyberpunk

Auger holds that popular genres descend from mythology and medieval romance, and that each genre foregrounds one main field of discourse: psychology, sociology, science, or aesthetics⁴⁰. Gothic fiction leads with psychology, in its plots of love and marriage, its concern with gender, its heroes and ghosts. Detective fiction leads with sociology, in a crime, a preoccupation with class, a detective and a criminal. Science fiction leads with science, in the social problems that technology creates, and in the figures of the scientist, the robot, and the alien⁴¹. Cyberpunk is the fourth stage, and its main discourse is aesthetics, the problem of representation in a world run by corporations. It does not discard the older genres but reworks their parts. The gothic castle turns into cyberspace or the altered mind, the family curse into the computer program, the gothic marriage into the union of human and machine⁴². In Gibson’s *Neuromancer* the artificial intelligences Wintermute and Neuromancer play out the old gothic plot of the search for a partner, while the human characters behave like detectives⁴³. Cyberspace becomes, in this way, a technological version of gothic inner space, a move Auger reads through Baudrillard’s simulacrum, the image that has lost its tie to reality⁴⁴.

2. From cyberpunk to retrofuturism: the two sublimes

³⁷ Williams, 2011, p. 19.

³⁸ Hutcheon, L. (1988). *A poetics of postmodernism: History, theory, fiction*. Routledge.

³⁹ Elias, 2015, pp. 202–204; White, H. (1990). *The content of the form: Narrative discourse and historical representation*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

⁴⁰ Auger, 2001, p. ii.

⁴¹ Auger, 2001, pp. 2–3.

⁴² Auger, 2001, p. 99.

⁴³ Gibson, W. (1984). *Neuromancer*. Ace Books; Auger, 2001.

⁴⁴ Baudrillard, J. (1994). *Simulacra and simulation* (S. F. Glaser, Trans.). University of Michigan Press. (Original work published 1981); as applied in Auger, 2001.



Elias adds the dimension of time. Cyberpunk set its plots in a near and familiar future, yet its real subject was the present, a present governed by global capitalism that had already drained the future of hope⁴⁵. Steampunk and its sister genres reverse the relation: what interests them is the futures of the past. Elias names this stance “retrofuturist historicism”⁴⁶. On this view the present appears as the outcome of a failure, since the old dream of progress never came true. Here too lies the reply to Williams’s charge of nostalgia. In its serious forms steampunk does not fondly recall the past; it asks why the past’s hopes collapsed, and its old, analog, legible machines stand as a quiet reproach to the closed digital networks of the present.

At this point two notions of the sublime converge. The historical sublime, which Elias takes from White, is the violent past that only stories can reach and no story can contain. The technological sublime, described in their own ways by D. Nye and J. Tabbi, is the double feeling of wonder and helplessness before technology too intricate to grasp⁴⁷. Elias’s central claim, which this thesis stretches to cover the whole genre family, is that the retrofuturist genres marry the two sublimes: by putting dead or fantastical technologies on show, technologies that once carried hopes of progress, they hand technology back its history⁴⁸.

3. Test case: Pynchon’s “Against the Day”

Pynchon’s “Against the Day” stretches from the Chicago World’s Fair of 1893 to the First World War, which is precisely the terrain of steampunk⁴⁹. The synthesis proposed here lets the novel be read on two levels at once. On Auger’s level, it layers the discourses of the older genres: gothic elements, a detective-and-cowboy-Western plot built around the Traverse family, and the scientific theme of Tesla’s electricity and the light-splitting crystal Iceland Spar. On Elias’s level, where we follow her own reading of the book, Pynchon mixes and splinters the time-space structures of the frontier, the gothic castle, and the historical novel, and splits technology itself into a death-technology of the elites and a life-giving, analog technology of discovery⁵⁰. The two levels support each other, since the discursive layering that Auger describes is exactly what makes the temporal splitting that Elias describes possible. It should be said plainly that the section rests on Elias’s published analysis; an independent, quotation-based reading of the novel is the next step for this research.

Conclusion

⁴⁵ Elias, 2015, pp. 205–206.

⁴⁶ Elias, 2015, p. 206.

⁴⁷ Nye, D. E. (1994). American technological sublime. MIT Press; Tabbi, J. (1995). Postmodern sublime: Technology and American writing from Mailer to cyberpunk. Cornell University Press.

⁴⁸ Elias, 2015, p. 210.

⁴⁹ Pynchon, T. (2006). Against the day. Penguin Press.

⁵⁰ Elias, 2015, pp. 215–216.





Three conclusions follow. First, the punk subgenres form a single family line that begins with gothic fiction, each new genre keeping the elements of its predecessors and adding a fresh main discourse. Second, the move from cyberpunk to its successors is a shift in the direction of time, away from a closed present and toward a critical reading of the past's failed futures; this is also what answers the sharpest criticism of steampunk as empty nostalgia. Third, the union of the historical and the technological sublime is what gives these genres their cultural worth, making technology strange again and reopening the question of human freedom. The limits of the study are stated openly: it relies on two main frameworks and a single test case, and it works at the level of structures rather than page-by-page quotation. A larger study would test the synthesis against primary punk texts, from Gibson to Miéville to Priest, with direct textual evidence.

References

1. Auger, E. E. (2001). A theory of the development of popular genres: Discourse in gothic, detective, science, and cyberpunk fiction [Master's thesis]. University of Victoria.
2. Baudrillard, J. (1994). Simulacra and simulation (S. F. Glaser, Trans.). University of Michigan Press. (Original work published 1981)
3. Bowser, R. A., & Croxall, B. (2010). Introduction: Industrial evolution. *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 3(1), 1–45.
4. Elias, A. J. (2015). Cyberpunk, steampunk, Teslapunk, dieselpunk, salvagepunk: Metahistorical romance and/vs the technological sublime. In G. Episcopo (Ed.), *Metahistorical narratives & scientific metafiction* (pp. 201–220). Edizioni Cronopio.
5. Forlini, S. (2010). Technology and morality: The stuff of steampunk. *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 3(1), 72–98.
6. Gibson, W. (1984). *Neuromancer*. Ace Books.
7. Hutcheon, L. (1988). *A poetics of postmodernism: History, theory, fiction*. Routledge.
8. Jameson, F. (1991). *Postmodernism, or, the cultural logic of late capitalism*. Duke University Press.
9. McHale, B. (1992). Elements of a poetics of cyberpunk. *Critique*, 33(3), 149–175.
10. Nye, D. E. (1994). *American technological sublime*. MIT Press.
11. Pynchon, T. (2006). *Against the day*. Penguin Press.
12. Rose, M. (2009). Extraordinary pasts: Steampunk as a mode of historical representation. *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, 20(3), 319–333.
13. Tabbi, J. (1995). *Postmodern sublime: Technology and American writing from Mailer to cyberpunk*. Cornell University Press.
14. White, H. (1990). *The content of the form: Narrative discourse and historical representation*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
15. Williams, E. C. (2011). *Combined and uneven apocalypse*. Zero Books.