The Steampunk Society: a community focused on commemoration

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"Poets see sublimity in the ocean, the mountains, the everlasting heavens; in the tragic elements of passion, madness, fate; we see sublimity in that great fly-wheel, those great walking-beams and cylinders, that crank-shaft, and those connecting rods and piston-rods, – in the magnificent totality of the great Corliss engine" (Kasson, 1976: 164).

"There is all the old stuff that comes with St Andrews, all these silly traditions that I love. Why would we still bother with them? We only hold onto them because it's fun and because we might as well keep it! As long as a tradition isn't hurting anybody, you might as well keep it because why not? New isn't always better" (Simon, 2012).

Introduction

There seems to be a "pronounced shift from the eclectic nature of the urban tribe to the more insular, rigidly defined niche ideal" (Burk, 2010: 1). This can be seen in music, film and fashion, where there is an appropriation of characteristics and ideals of old genres, which are then transformed to meet the present. At the University of St Andrews societies fair I seemed to stumble upon just that when I met Daniel, the president of the Steampunk Society. Steampunk is a subculture community phenomenon with a specific ideology, a notion that can be defined as "the way a system –a single individual to even a whole society –rationalises itself" (Knight, 2006: 619). Steampunk is "a multi-textual aesthetic which first began to form in the late 1980s [and] imagines the world as it was during the early Victorian era, when steam power still fuelled machines" (Onion, 2008: 138). This worldview can be found in literature, film, graphic novels, music and in practices of vernacular craft, all of which help shape our understanding of what it means to be a Steampunk. The term was coined in 1987 by science fiction writer K. W. Jeter in order to describe the brand of Victorian fantasy novels written by himself and his contemporaries, and has since transformed not only into a literary subgenre, but into a whole subculture. It is impossible to fully define Steampunk, since it is "recreated by every practitioner and re-imagined through every event and interaction" (Burk, 2010: 89). However, to continue this paper, a

simple definition is necessary. I have borrowed a definition from the first issue of the *Steampunk Magazine* which states that Steampunk is:

"a re-envisioning of the past with hypertechnological perceptions of the present. […] Steampunk is a non-luddite critique of technology. It rejects the ultra-hip dystopia of the cyberpunks –black rain and nihilistic posturing –while simultaneously forfeiting the 'noble savage' fantasy of the pre-technological era […] Leonardo Da Vinci is the Steampunker touchstone; a blurring of lines between engineering and art, rendering fashion and function mutually dependent. Authentic Steampunk seeks to take the levers of technology from those technocrats who drain it of both its artistic and real qualities, who turn the living monsters of technology into the simpering servants of meaningless commodity" (*Steampunk Magazine,* 2006:1:4).

I started my study of the Steampunks with the preconceived notion that they used objects and aesthetics as a means of escapism, as well as a way to differentiate themselves from the rest of St Andrews. However, after conducting my interviews I came to a different conclusion. I realised that the Steampunk Society's focus is commemorating the future that the Victorian times envisioned, rather than striving for a boundary between them and the rest of St Andrews. This view is up for interpretation due to the inevitability that my research has been influenced by my presence, the time and the location, since "the true locus of culture is the interactions of specific individuals and, on the subjective side, in the world of meanings which each one of these individuals may unconsciously abstract for himself from his participation in these interactions" (Sapir, 1961: 151). These are the reasons why I am focusing on the Steampunks in the town of St Andrews and will make no claims, except for the description of generally shared ideologies, about other Steampunk communities.

This paper will be structured in three parts. First I am going to trace through the origins, theory and ideology behind the Steampunk movement. Part two will exhibit how the Steampunk society can be deemed a community by using Cohen's framework. However, I have found a nuance in applying Cohen's theory stating that communities are established through boundaries that "are marked because communities interact in some way or another with entities from which they are or wish to be, distinguished" (Cohen, 1985: 12) as this does not seem to apply to the St Andrews Steampunks. Finally, the third section will explore the concept of 'social memory' and its presence amongst the Steampunks. Connerton's

'social memory' will be used to give an alternative explanation to the idea of boundary. I will demonstrate that the objects and clothing used by the Steampunks are not used as means for differentiation but for commemoration.

<u>Ideology and theory</u>

"Steampunk, in some sense, stands outside of chronological periodization of modes of thought – such as 'modern', 'anti-modern', or 'postmodern' – and defies categorization within the ideologies of previous technology-based social movements"(Onion, 2008: 142). However, Steampunk does have various similarities to pre-existing theories. There are claims that the Steampunk movement appears postmodern since "it picks and chooses from previously existing styles of physical technology and ideological modes of technological engagement" (Onion, 2008: 142). Another view suggests that Steampunks are antimodernists since they seem to "resurrect an ideal of craftsmanship as an antidote to modern ills" (Lears, 1981: 61). However, "Steampunk also prizes the technological world over the natural one, visualizing landscapes covered with 'monstrous mechanical contraptions', rather than the agrarian fantasies of the anti-modern era" (Ratt, 2006: 2). This distinction can lead us to associate them to futurists who, led by F.T. Marinetti, "worshipped what they saw as the beautiful violence of the new technologies of transportation and production" (Marinetti, 1909). There is, however, a concern with calling them futurists, since they are more interested in the process of making machinery than in the consequences of the use of such technology. The category that comes closest might be the 'Modernists of the nineteenth century' because according to Berman, this strand of Modernists "understood the ways in which modern technology and social organization determined man's fate [...] Even in the middle of a wretched present, they could imagine an open future" (Berman 1982: 27). The Steampunk ideology is based on the conviction that technology has the ability to endow man with a stronger sense of his own humanity.

The elements of the Steampunk critique of modern technology are simple. Part of it is a critique of the modern material landscape because of a desire for a more natural environment but with the inclusion of sublime machinery. Margaret Ratt expresses just this in the opening pages of the *Steampunk Magazine* by stating "we look at the modern world about us, bored to tears, and say, no thank you. I'd rather have trees, birds, and monstrous mechanical contraptions than an endless sprawl that is devoid of diversity" (Ratt 2006: 1).

There is a definite rejection of the 'sameness' of modern technology. Because of the loss of originality and of personal creativity, identical MacBooks and iPods have monopolized the market. The pseudonymous Professor Calamity, a renowned Steampunk theorists writing for *Steampunk Magazine*, criticizes this phenomenon and claims that "the so-called machines of this era seek the cleanness and sleekness of thought, platonic forms unsullied by the earth from which they come […] These abstract replicated technologies ultimately seek in their purity a Nirvana of emptiness" (Calamity 2007: 25). This is solved by making these objects unique. Here is for example, a computer and a stove that have been modified by Bruce and Melanie Rosenbaum, a couple who renovated their entire home according to the Steampunk ideals. [1]

These 'Steampunked' items are considered technological objects and art pieces that provoke feelings of the sublime, "the famously mingled emotions of awe and terror" (Onion, 2008: 149). This awe is provoked intentionally because of the grandiosity of these objects and because of their intricacy.

However, like with all cultures, there is a concern with authenticity. Because of the appeal of their aesthetics and the intrigue surrounding them, many Steampunk objects and clothing have been turned into fashionable commodities. A perfect example would be a

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[1] http://www.apartmenttherapy.com/bruce-melanies-128693 (Last visited 05/05/12)

Steampunk inspired Kindle cover sold on Etsy.com[2]. This object, the embodiment of what Steampunks call sameness, is being passed off as something that fits into the Steampunk belief. This epitomizes the problems facing Steampunks, the "misinterpretation of an aesthetic movement as simple aesthetics [which] leaves the deeper relationship between human and object unexamined" (Onion, 2008).

After attempting to fully understand as much as I could about the Steampunk ideology, I aimed to prove that they were indeed their own community within the larger St Andrews community.

St Andrews Steampunks as their own community: are they creating 'boundaries'?

There are many aspects of Cohen's work and the information I acquired through my interviews that help me define the Steampunk Society as a community. When part of a community, people tend to be involved in sentimental attachments which include "kinship, friendship, neighbouring, rivalry, familiarity, jealousy, as they inform the social process of everyday life" (Cohen 1985: 13). During my interviews, one thing was apparent: there were very strong relationships within the Steampunk society. The president and creator of the society, Daniel, admitted to me that he "founded the society about two years ago now. In a small part as a way of getting to spend more time with the person who is now [his] girlfriend" (Daniel, 2012). Another member of the Steampunk society said, smiling, that "I made new friends through Steam Punk. That's my cheesy line for you" (Yuki, 2012).

Nonetheless, there is more to being in a community than establishing relationships. "Community is more than oratorical abstraction: it hinges crucially on consciousness" (Cohen, 1985: 13). Being part of a community is not only about the collective but also about the individual since "its meaning varies with its members' unique orientations to it" (Cohen, 1985: 15). During my interviews, I recognised that each member got something different out of the experience; "It's all about how you make your own things, you don't turn to all the mass produced bull-crap. You make something and when it breaks, you fix it. I really love that concept. I love the concept of also going back to a more chivalric era of the Victorian period, even though I am well aware that in reality it wasn't exactly like that. But to that you say, 'Ok, it wasn't like that, but I'm going to act like it was'" (Simon, 2012). For Simon, being

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[2] View Kindle Cover on http://www.etsy.com/listing/93723557/leather-steampunk-kindle-touch-case (Last visited 05/05/12)

a Steampunk is about being creative, but it is mainly about the way he chooses to interact with people: "The idea of being a gentleman in what you do has always been something I have attempted" (Simon, 2012). For Daniel, the founder, being a Steampunk is about living out what he has taken pleasure in reading about and about his sense of style. "The main thing about wearing Steampunk objects is defining the appearance that you want to have, the style you want to have. It's about the idea of "this is who I am, this is the slightly geeky, and slightly out of normal society person I am". It's very personalised because there are so many different appearances within Steampunk. I know people who have a Post-Victorian working class image and others who have a very aristocratic image. It's the idea that, whatever you portray, it is the fact that you are Steampunk more than anything else, and you want to be associated with the Steampunk community" (Daniel, 2012). This in fact shows that the commonality in the community doesn't have to mean absolute homogeneity. Despite recognizing important differences amongst themselves, "they also suppose themselves to be more like each other than like members of other communities"(Cohen, 1985: 21).

Here however, is where I have to make a distinction. In his work, Cohen makes the claim that "the boundary marks the beginning and end of a community" (Cohen, 1985: 12). This would imply that the Steampunks created the society to reject their surroundings, since St Andrews seems to be the antithesis to what they value. Yet, all the Steampunks I interviewed are involved in the larger St Andrews community, with Daniel being heavily involved in Union politics, Yuki being the vice president of Anime and Pokémon, and Simon who is part of WarSoc. Furthermore, Yuki was adamant that St Andrews is a very accepting place, stating that "people here stare at you a lot less. I know that where I came from[3], whenever you would wear something odd people would just give you really strange looks and would even heckle you. But here, you can walk around and nobody even looks at you twice, so it's awesome, I think it's better" (Yuki, 2012). Daniel agreed with her, saying that "walking around town in, as I've done, black lab coat, a cravat, a waistcoat and a top hat with goggles on it, no one looks at you twice. It's an accepted part of the St Andrews community because there are always some people doing slightly off the wall things. It's one

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[3] A small town 60 miles outside of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

of the few places where you can really express yourself in almost any way without someone coming up to you and going 'what on earth are you doing?'"(Daniel, 2012).

However, what comprehensively validated my newly found intuition that boundary was not applicable in this case, was when my question regarding whether there was a desire for differentiation was met by this response: "Yeah, there are some people who are completely different to what we believe in but we don't look outside and say 'these people aren't Steampunks'. We look outside and say 'we are Steampunks'. There is no hard boundary; we don't define ourselves as 'not them' it's very much more about defining ourselves as ourselves. It's about finding your own identity" (Daniel, 2012).

I believe that this sufficiently proves that there is no conclusive link between the St Andrews Steampunk community and a desire for a categorical boundary between them and the rest. However, it seems like 'Social Memory', the idea that our present is based on past events and objects that have kept the same meaning through time, is a constitutive part of the existence of this specific community.

<u>'Social Memory': a commemoration of the past to create an ideal present</u>

"Social memory is both broad and narrow; it is situated within the local, cultural, and historical contingencies of the multiple ways in which people interact with and deploy their past" (Roddick&Hastorf 2009: 16).

Connerton concentrates on the idea that the world "is an organized body of expectations based on recollection" (Connerton 1989: 6), and how the memory of groups is conveyed and sustained. There is a large emphasis put on social memory in Connerton's work because of his belief that we are constantly being influenced by the past, and that "the absolutely new is inconceivable" (Connerton 1989: 6). As previously mentioned, Steampunks desire the present that was envisioned in the Victorian Era, with sublime technology at the centre of society. In the St Andrews Steampunk Society, we find forms of commemoration in the various ways the members dress and in the way they choose to behave, which Connerton would call recollection in the social activity of "bodily practices" (Connerton 1989: 7). Social memory is also invoked through "commemorative ceremonies" (Connerton 1989: 7), such as the Steampunk Ball and crafting workshops such as "a couple of top hat workshops where [they] made things out of felt" (Simon, 2012).

Halbwachs and Connerton both agree that it is thanks to the material spaces that surround us in our present that we are able to remember the past. The objects that we are surrounded by everyday provide us with "an image of permanence and stability" (Connerton 1989: 37). Because social spaces of the group are relatively stable, with the Steampunk ideology being relatively established, we are given the illusion "of not changing and of rediscovering the past in the present" (Connerton 1989: 37). This sensation also stems from the simple fact of having an Ideology and honouring it since "ideologies may be idiosyncratic, impractical or even delusional, but they still share the characteristics of coherence and temporal stability" (Knight, 2006: 619). Halbwachs shows "how different social segments, each with a different past, will have different memories attached to the different mental landmarks characteristic of the group in question" (Connerton 1989: 37). These mental landmarks can include practices, monuments and specific objects. Through these landmarks, the Steampunks are able to fulfil their desire for an ideal present. By dressing and behaving a certain way, Simon is able to be a 'gentleman' and to appreciate things for their quality and not for their large quantity since, according to him, "you try to be polite, you don't act in the way that everyone expects you to act. If you're going to drink you don't drink cheap, you drink expensive, things that taste nice, not something that is just going to get you drunk" (Simon 2012).

For the Steampunks, the objects and clothes used are not simply for aesthetics or used as a means to convey a message, but as a way to keep the memory of what the Victorian era had envisioned for our future alive.

Concluding words

"I was brought up to stay in community, help others and not judge anyone. I rather like that; I wish we could go back to that. Community is rather dissolved in the modern world" (Simon, 2012). Being a Steampunk in St Andrews isn't about dismissing those who don't have the same ideology. It is simply about following something they believe in and about slowly changing their surroundings to keep an ideal alive. This is why, despite initially thinking that they were creating boundaries, I had to change my thesis to do my part, to keep that ideology alive and portray them as they see themselves. Unfortunately, the future of the St Andrews Steampunk Society is uncertain. With many students graduating, the core committee is dissolving. However, I do believe that whether it is in the form of an official

society or not, there will always a Steampunk community in St Andrews, as long as there are Steampunks who will live their lives according to their ideals and commemorating the past they want to remember.

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