

## WRITING RETROPUNK FICTION - CHARLES A CORNELL

Since the term Steampunk was coined in 1987 (the anecdotal birth year of the Steampunk genre movement in fiction), Steampunk is now a popular sub-culture with many forms of creativity and social expression.

But what is Dieselpunk, Decopunk, TeslaPunk, AtomPunk, and others? Is Cyberpunk a RetroPunk sub-genre?

As a RetroPunk author, I need to do more than just answer, "If you like science fiction, fantasy or alternative history you'll probably like *whatever*-punk." Common definitions describe these genres solely on the basis of including elements of steam- or diesel-powered technology in the story. These responses are too superficial, omitting the counter-culture influences. So where do we start in improving our definition of RetroPunk?

### THE SPECTRUM OF THE FANTASTIC

Imagine owning a machine with a dial where you could move your story in increments from Realism (0) to Surrealism (10). How would increasing the dial's settings change your story?

#### LOW Setting : ALTERNATIVE HISTORY

The protagonist's journey unfolds within a realistic contextual framework. The plot line twists real historical events to generate a different outcome. Known advances in technology are okay but there are no elements of the fantastic — no weird science, magic or supernatural beings; characters out of context with the era, etc.

EXAMPLES: In World War Two, the Allies didn't win. *Man in the High Castle* by Philip K. Dick; *Dominion* by C.J. Sansom; *The Afrika Reich* by Guy Saville.

#### MEDIUM Setting : A SINGLE FANTASTIC DISTURBANCE

An otherwise realistic world is 'disturbed' by either: (1) an extraordinary character with unique powers; (2) an extraordinary change in science; or (3) a disruptive otherworldly event

EXAMPLES: Vampires—in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* an extraordinary being stalks his victims within a realistic setting and era; Time Travelers—in HG Well's *The Time Machine*, with the help of extraordinary science, characters who have no extraordinary powers move between time periods that are still realistic; Aliens—extra terrestrials land on today's Earth. In *ET: the Extra-Terrestrial* an alien interacts with ordinary people in a realistic world; Zombies—in Max Brooks' *World War Z*, extraordinary creatures are created and terrorize an ordinary world; Dystopian & Post-Apocalyptic—in Hugh Howey's *Wool*, the human race emerges from the remnants of nuclear missile silos after a cataclysmic event (the disturbance). The world has changed but the laws of science have not. Most 'hard' Science Fiction fits this category, where realistically conceived advances in science drive the protagonist's journey. Andy Weir's *The Martian* is a well researched depiction of a possible Mars expedition.

#### HIGH Setting: MULTIPLE FANTASTIC DISTURBANCES

At this setting, extraordinary characters and/or events combine with weird science, magic or the supernatural. Heroes and villains can have super-powers. Science and technology are fanciful and defy known convention. This

setting is a ‘mash-up’ of multiple elements at the same time and this level of ‘disturbance’ is common in most science fiction, fantasy and horror. Authors are free to explore endless possibilities. The science in the fiction is usually considered by geeks to be ‘soft’.

EXAMPLES: *Star Wars* — a ‘War of the Worlds’ told as a space opera where opposing sides have futuristic weird science at their disposal; *Underworld: Evolution*— a fantasy where battles rage between vampires and werewolves; *Lord of the Rings*— a fantasy world of conflict and adventure involving strange species called elves, orcs and hobbits; The *Harry Potter*, *Star Trek* & *Matrix* series— these use combinations of fantastic elements— characters with extraordinary powers, weird science, magic— to illuminate their stories; *Blade Runner*— Cyberpunk fiction includes near-or far-future settings with politically-themed plots where an individual is pitted against unchecked scientific advances, incompetent corporate structures or corrupt government bureaucracies. NOTE: Cyberpunk and the related BioPunk are *futuristic* genres not *retrofuturistic*.

### VERY HIGH Setting: RETROFUTURISM

Retrofuturism commonly contains elements ranging from a Single to Multiple Fantastic Disturbances but are:

1) set in a bygone era viewed by the characters from the social perspective of that era

OR 2) set in the future with the social perspectives & technological elements of a bygone era

Retro-Punk genres like Steampunk and Dieselpunk have narratives, setting & mood driven by retrofuturism.

EXAMPLES: In James Blaylock’s *Homunculus*, a steam-driven Victorian airship holds secrets of alien origin. In Cherie Priest’s *Boneshaker*, a toxic subterranean world beneath Seattle teems with the undead and criminal overlords. In Bard Constantine’s *Silent Empire*, the protagonist is trapped in a future world run by a fascist dictator. In Constantine’s *The Troubleshooter* series, a fedora-wearing detective in a post-apocalyptic world chases gangsters who fly in jet-propelled Duisenbergs.

## GENERAL DEFINITION OF RETROPUNK

A good definition should include (1) RetroPunk’s roots in Retrofuturism; and (2) Terms that convey the fiction’s era-related ‘punk aesthetic,’ such as:

*The retrofuturistic themes and aesthetics reflecting the politics, society, culture and technology from the ‘whatever’-time period, expressed in creative form in order to project to others the future as those in this past era might have seen it, or to convey to others how this era’s vibe would look like in a future imaginary world.*

## WHAT IS STEAMPUNK?

The term ‘Steampunk’ originated in the late 1980s. Sci-Fi author K. W. Jeter was trying to find an accurate description of works by himself (*Morlock Night*), Tim Powers (*The Anubis Gates*), and James Blaylock (*Homunculus*). Cyberpunk authors William Gibson and Bruce Sterling brought further attention to Steampunk with the 1992 book *The Difference Engine*, set in an alternative Industrial Revolution.

*Steampunk: The retrofuturistic themes and aesthetics reflecting the politics, society, culture and technology from the Victorian & Edwardian eras (1830s to 1910s) expressed in creative form in order to project to others the future as those in this past era might have seen it, or to convey to others how this era's vibe would look like in a future imaginary world. —Charles A Cornell*

Steampunk is often referred to as 'Victorian Science Fiction' because it is inspired by the writings of Victorian era futurists like Jules Verne (*20,000 Leagues Under The Sea*) & HG Wells (*The Time Machine*). Modern technologies are re-imagined from the perspective of a Victorian era scientist or engineer. Yes, the primary power source is steam, because that's the technology the Victorians thought would forever drive their future.

*'Project the future as those in a past era might have seen it'*. Your challenge as a writer is to shed your perception bias & the influences from today's technology, politics & social norms & 'think' like someone living in that past era. Imagine yourself as a contemporary of Jules Verne, sitting as part of his writer's circle. Develop your *what-ifs* from that viewpoint. Pretend you don't know what their future actually *did* produce but what those in that era thought it *might* produce.

#### ELEMENTS OF THE STEAMPUNK AESTHETIC

Early aviation, dirigibles & submarines; Victorian mannerisms & social norms; the age of invention & exploration; the industrial aesthetics of glass & brass in an era of fine craftsmanship in optics & scientific instruments; fashions with tooled leathers, stiff collars & waistcoats; corsets, frills & lace; cities split by class divisions with ornate Victorian mansions rubbing shoulders with the grimy smoke-filled slums of the Industrial Revolution.

#### DON'T FORGET THE FANTASY & HORROR INFLUENCE!

Steampunk culture is also heavily influenced by the Victorians' love of fantasy (Lewis Carroll's *Alice In Wonderland*) as well as the writings of Mary Shelley (*Frankenstein*) and HP Lovecraft.

#### WHAT ABOUT THE 'PUNK' PART?

*Steampunk gets its 'punk' not from its dystopian view of the world or even in its gritty edge. The 'punk' in Steampunk comes from characters going against convention; declaring their individuality through their attitudes, their styles and yes, their gadgets. —Ministry of Peculiar Occurrences*

[www.MinistryofPeculiarOccurrences.com/what-is-steampunk/](http://www.MinistryofPeculiarOccurrences.com/what-is-steampunk/)

#### RECOMMENDED READING IN STEAMPUNK

*Homunculus* (1986) and others, *Tales of Langdon St. Ives* series — James P. Blaylock; *Infernal Devices* (1987) —K W Jeter; *The Difference Engine* (1991) —William Gibson & Bruce Sterling; *Boneshaker* (2009), *The Clockwork Century* series —Cherie Priest; *Leviathan* (2009), *The Leviathan Trilogy* — Scott Westerfeld; *Soulless* (2009), *Parasol Protectorate* series —Gail Carriger; *Phoenix Rising* (2011), *Ministry of Peculiar Occurrences* series — Pip Ballantine & Tee Morris

## WHAT IS DIESELPUNK?

*Dieselpunk: The retrofuturistic themes and aesthetics reflecting the politics, society, culture and technology from the 1920s to the 1950s expressed in creative form in order to project to others the future as those in this past era might have seen it, or to convey to others how this era's vibe would look like in a future imaginary world. —Charles A Cornell*

### ELEMENTS OF THE DIESELPUNK AESTHETIC

1920s – 1930s: The dehumanization of cities; massive skyscrapers; machines, bigger, stronger, more ominous; technology as ‘art’; Industrial aesthetics of chrome & steel, Bakelite and concrete; Mass production & the rise of consumerism; Art Deco, the Roaring Twenties & the Jazz Age; Prohibition, gangsters & speakeasies; the hard-boiled detective & the private eye; fedoras and trench coats.

1930s – 1950s: The rise of fascism & communism, dictators & global domination; the use of propaganda as a tool of politics & war; massive rallies, repression & revolution; secret police, jackboots & armbands; airplanes & automobiles are bigger, better, & faster; war is mechanized with Blitzkrieg & strategic bombing; ‘Rosie the Riveter’ redefines the role of women in society; the invention of radar, rockets & jet engines; the cathode-ray tube heralds the dawn of television; the Cold War begins.

### INSPIRATIONAL DIESELPUNK MOVIES

*Indiana Jones and The Raiders of the Lost Ark, The Rocketeer, Sky Captain & The World of Tomorrow, Dark City, Sin City, Captain America: The First Avenger, Richard III (Ian McKellan version), Iron Sky*

### RECOMMENDED READING IN DIESELPUNK

*The Troubleshooter (2012), Silent Empire (2013), Little White Bird (2016)—Bard Constantine; Ack-Ack Macaque (2012) —Gareth L Powell; The City Darkens (2013) —Sophia Martin; A Fistful of Nothing (2014) —Dan Glaser; DragonFly (2014) —Charles A Cornell; Storming (2015) — K M Weiland*

## WRITING RETROPUNK FICTION

Why do it? —To tap your creativity & desire to experiment. To defy standard genre formulas. To explore cross-genre combinations of science fiction, fantasy, alternative history, mystery, the paranormal, horror & romance.

How? — Read the genre, both contemporary & from the period. Become a student of history — uncover past societal trends, political themes, cultural attitudes. Research old slang, period fashions, gadgets. Reinvent technology for your fiction by discovering inventions that never succeeded & transform them so they do! Build your fictional world by blending historical research with crazy *what-ifs*. Find creativity in the chaos!

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