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Airship Captains, Pith Helmets, & Other Assorted Brassy Bits: Steampunk Personas and Material-Semiotic Production

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Abstract: *Steampunk is an aesthetic and ideological system that revolves around the appropriation, (re)creation, and (re)design of select aspects of the documented past. Steampunk is a generic complex. It is a form of literature and thus narrative, a design aesthetic, and a mode of material production and consumption. Within this work, the author explores the relationship between materiality and textuality within steampunk and suggest that material-semiotic hybridity, that is to say the ongoing processes through which stories and objects mutually inform, delimit, or shape one another, is central to the genre's "form-shaping ideology" (Bakhtin 1984:92). In doing so, the author suggests that materiality (in other words, substance) and textuality (or concept) are neither separate, nor are they pure categorizes, but that they are, in fact, entangled and co-productive forces.*

The work of art takes its shape; the story told, the object made. Matter, both textual and material, coalesce into a single expressive whole, a mélange of words, things, actors, and actions. Anthropologist Tim Ingold argues that "students of material culture have contrived to dematerialize, or to sublimate into thought" the very objects of their focus (2011, 23). The same, of course, could be said of folkloristics. A majority of folkloristic studies of material culture employ what Ingold describes as a hylomorphic model of making. This perspective conceives of substance as the sum of matter (hyle) and form (morphe) in which "making begins with a form in mind and a formless lump of 'raw material,' and ends when form and matter are united in the complete artifact" (2012, 432). As an immaterial conceptual apparatus, form is therefore conceptualized as an active and dynamic a priori "pattern in the mind" (Glassie 1975), while substance is conceived as an inactive tabula rasa void of any

form-shaping properties (Pye 1968). The hylomorphic model of materiality produces an understanding of objects as closed and static forms which are acted upon rather than as constellations of “substances-in-becoming” (Ingold 2012, 435). Building on Ingold’s critique, I will examine the relationship between material culture and narrative practices and how they inform, delimit, and co-produce one another.

It was September 3rd, 2011, 9:00 AM, minutes before the start of the annual Dragon*Con parade. For the second day in a row, I was surrounded by works of art in motion. Convention attendees congregated in downtown Atlanta, Georgia, forming diffuse constellations around Woodruff Park. Cosplayers dressed as stormtroopers, Jedi, and Sith Lords lined up along the concave water fountain at the northern edge of the park. They polished their helmets and readied their lightsabers while enjoying conversation and coffee with their peers. A few feet away, a group of superheroes—a wash of Green Lanterns, Supermen, Spiderman, and a few of the Avengers—formed a mosaic of spandex, color, and gesture on a nearby street. They were surrounded by photographers, some in costume, others in ‘ordinary’ dress, reporters, interested local residents, and myself. As the collection of lenses pointed in their direction, the group of cosplayers assumed a recognizable pose. Their bodies froze, arms extended or crossed, muscles flared, capes adjusted.



Taking refuge from the southern morning heat in a slim shadow cast by a skyscraper on Auburn Avenue North East, a group of steampunk cosplayers, perhaps a hundred in all, were engaged in discussion. Unlike the cosplayers who were dressed as a variety of recognizable popular culture characters I had seen moments before, there were no duplicates or reiterations of particular *dramatis personae*, just a general style

distributed amongst them. No two costumes were the same. Despite this heterogeneity, there was a cohesiveness to the group, a visual rhetoric or discursive order that bound each individual costumer's creation together (Foucault 1970, 1972).

Men and women, a majority between the age of twenty-five and forty, stood along the sidewalk. They talked about their costumes and accessories, discussed construction techniques, and shared stories about their reclaimed materials. Each object had its story. Others discussed what they did during the first day of the convention and what they intended to do in the days to come. The group's clothing was a wash of neutral colors: brown, black, grey, and khaki. Bodies were accented by herringbone wool, repurposed antique hardware, leather, brass, copper, and mahogany colored faux weaponry. It was all reminiscent of a time since past coupled with nineteenth century projections of the future, most of which never came to fruition. Women donned corsets in ornate textiles and rich leathers. They had holsters, retro-futuristic weaponry, and hats with feathery plumes, some in full length Victorian dresses. The men wore vests, suits, frock coats, and leather armor, some with wool bowlers or top hats, several sported goggles, monocles, and held complex contraptions. They moved back and forth, making room for more cosplayers to join the group as they waited for the parade to begin.

As I stepped back to take a few photos of the group as a whole, a contingent of steampunks approached from the East. I headed in their direction and soon met a man who went by the name Lawrence T. Codger. During our interview, he never broke from his persona. For that moment, he was Lawrence T. Codger, a time-traveling nineteenth century British explorer. The man who called himself Codger was dressed in a light-colored khaki short sleeve shirt with an auburn smoking pipe tucked away in his shirt pocket, a pair of matching shorts and pith helmet on top of which rested a pair of brass looking goggles. His hands were sheathed in black leather gloves, his feet in austere brown leather hiking boots. Above those, he wore

a matching set of bright crimson socks held in place by black sock garters. He was a caricature of colonization in the flesh.



Lawrence T. Codger displays his large faux weapon named "Lula Belle."

As he and two others in matching attire moved closer, I couldn't help but notice the large weapon he held in his hand. It consisted of two long pieces of polished brass colored tubing closed by a large black plug on one end and open on the other. At the open ends of the tubing, large metal-looking circular saw blades were held in place by faux-brass fixtures. Attached to the worn brass body of the weapon were two handles, black and white, constructed from a pair of salvaged table legs and a metal clasp that held in place a crimson leather belt that wrapped around the wearer's neck. I

approached Codger and asked him if he would answer a few questions.

"Yes, yes," he responded in a conspicuously nineteenth century-esque British accent.

"What got you interested in steampunk?" I asked.

"Umm, I'm not actually sure, [he paused briefly and grinned] actually. I was taking a nap and then I woke up and all of a sudden I was here [he paused once more and cleared his throat]. I was terribly drunk at the time."

I asked him to tell me a bit about his costume and his accessories. Keeping in character, he lifted his weapon and said:

Oh, this is Lula Belle. I had her customized for me. She's a recoilless grapeshot cannon. Well, I was tired of the normal shotgun, and I wanted something with a little more power so, I contacted the Lehman manufacturing company, and they produced for me a recoilless grapeshot cannon, as you can see. And I had them add a

particularly mealy weapon at the front as my companions have also, and basically, it's for slaughtering God's creatures.

"Any creature?" I asked.

"Oh, absolutely if God created it, it's there for us to destroy. That's my motto! I'm sure they'll be plenty more to come around." He laughed a bit, took hold of his pipe and placed its stem firmly in his mouth. I thanked him for his time, and we parted ways. He and his companions moved deeper into the group of steampunks, and I headed the other direction.

While other cosplayers dressed as a variety of recognizable popular culture personas within the parade had a vast repertoire of iconic postures to assume and dialogue to quote, the steampunks by and large did not. Rather than mimicking a particular character's actions or using direct quotative language from a given media text, they instead spoke to me about their character(s) and costume(s). Their characters had personalities, occupations, backstories, as did their weaponry, clothing, and accessories. Narrative explanations for each object and entire ensembles formed a complex whole of textuality and materiality. Behind each object there were stories, and behind each story, there were objects. The oral and the material were inseparable.

Between Objects and Texts

In what follows, I explore the co-productive relationship of 'objects,' those "extra-somatic" (Ingold 2012, 429) material forms of palpable matter, and 'narratives' or 'texts,' meaning non-material discursive forms like oral discourse or kinesic expression (Birdwhistell 1970). While texts do not necessarily have a physical presence, they are nonetheless inseparable from the concrete materiality in which they are conceived and deployed (Voloshinov 1986, 95-100). Take, for example, the monograph, perhaps the quintessence of textuality. It is both an object and a text. Although we may interact with it as the former, we often consider the monograph in terms of the latter, as a text situated in relation to other texts, its

author, and the context of its composition. It could then be stated that the abstract text does not so much exist as it is produced in the act of reading, writing, and reception (Barthes 1977, 146-48, Sandvoss 2007). It is therefore constantly being produced and developed. The text is not a *fait accompli*; it is an ongoing achievement.

During the process of its inscription, a given text is fabricated through both ideology and techniques for the manipulation of various physical instruments (Latour and Woolgar 1986). A hand animates a pen or pencil, a typewriter, or a computer in order to render cognition external to the creator's consciousness thus objectifying it and increasing its durability and portability as a publicly consumable artifact (Ingold 2011, 318, Marx 1990 [1867]). The text becomes material. When the text is read aloud, it is done by someone who is positioned within a discursive field of possibilities populated with both texts or ideas and material forms. The text is therefore produced simultaneously as matter and as concept. I'll explain. While the semiotic system that produces meaning in the form of language and speech is itself immaterial, the moment this system is expressed as an utterance, these semantic values are transubstantiated into air. And air, as both James Deetz (1996 [1977], 36) and Tim Ingold remind us, is a form of matter. It is "materials-in-motion" (Ingold 2011, 17). It is composed of molecules, takes up volume, and has mass and therefore is itself a substance of matter. Textuality and material substance are therefore inseparable. Even if a text is considered as a purely abstract form, figures and/or characters appearing within it are imagined to have shape, form, and texture. As they progress through a given narrative arc, they interact with a world of materials; environments filled with other personas who are likewise imagined to have shape and form. Extrapolating from this hypothetical monograph, we can see that, although we tend to think of the two forces separately, the truth of the matter is that both texts and materials are always "substances-in-becoming." They are co-present and co-constitutive modes of discourse. They produce one another

Neither texts nor objects are ever pure. Texts have material conditions and consequences, just as material forms cannot exist in absence of textuality.

Communication and human expressivity are always produced and received as hybrid discourses consisting of objects, texts, actions, and actors (Ingold 2011, Latour 1993, 2005, Law 1992, 2008). Steampunk cosplaying stands as a testament to this fact. In examining steampunk character creation as a mode of both narrative practice and material culture, I will illustrate how material-textual hybridity is a central feature of the genre's "form-shaping ideology" (Bakhtin 1984, 92). This ideology or *Weltanschauung* enables the reproduction and modulation of the generic type through the production of token material-semiotic forms. Each character/ensemble recapitulates and sustains the genre, while experimentation with form stresses the genre's aesthetic boundaries and modulates its structures of stylization.

In order to illustrate the relationship between objects and texts in expressive performance, I will do two things. First, I will analyze the metadiscursive practices (Bauman and Briggs 1990, Briggs 1993) involved within a single event, a discussion panel entitled "The Steampunk Persona and Airship Crew Spectacular" (henceforth SPAC). Within this metadiscourse, both objects and texts are discussed as co-productive elements within the fabrication of an original steampunk persona. I will attend to the means by which steampunk personas are entextualized (Briggs and Bauman 1992), given material form, and how they are strategically placed in relation to other preexisting and co-present forms. Second, I will look at how the metadiscursive practices outlined within the panel are enacted within performance by various steampunk cosplayers within the Dragon*Con parade itself.

Although the SPAC panel took place on September 2nd at 7:00 PM, fifteen hours before the annual Dragon*Con parade would begin the following day, my intention is not to create a chronological report but instead a nonlinear exposition that shifts to and fro in time and action. The panel will therefore act as an analytic pedal point of sorts. Convention panels are structured like academic conference sessions and likewise encourage discourse and exchange among participants about a particular topic. I will examine the metadiscourse about costuming and character

creation within the panel, only to repeatedly adjourn from these events and fast-forward to the parade when this metadiscourse was set in motion. I do this to entwine rather than divorce cultural logic from practice and textuality from materiality.

Dragon*Con, Cosplay, and Steampunk

Cosplay is a portmanteau that unites the words “costume” and “play.” It denotes the act of donning a costume, accessories, and adopting alternate gesture and speech repertoires in order to generate a relationship with a body of source texts and a set of material forms. Cosplaying is a social event, an interaction of people, narratives, and material objects occurring most frequently at popular culture and fan conventions or “cons,” as they are often called. Dragon*Con is, by far, one of



the largest of such events in North America. The annual multi-genre pop culture convention is hosted in a number of hotels in Atlanta, Georgia and regularly attracts over 40,000 attendees. A majority of those in attendance appear in costume during the four-day event. After registering and claiming their laminated access badge, congoers are provided nonstop entertainment. There are costume contests, a marketplace featuring hundreds of rare and unique items, programmed discussions, forums, and how-to workshops and, the Dragon*Con parade, a massive procession of cosplayers, each sorted by genre. Anime/manga, Star Wars, Star Trek, steampunks, horror, popular British television media and more are represented by waves of individuals in costume marching down Peachtree Avenue.

Steampunk is a sub-genre of a larger aesthetic framework known as alternate history, which is itself a sub-genre of science fiction literature and art. The alternate history genre is about exploring history as it never happened (Ferguson 1999, Rose 2009, VanderMeer 2011). It consciously diverges from historical master narrative (Lyotard 1979) as a means to explore how the contours of time, history, and culture(s), both past and present, might have been alternatively formed had certain historical events gone differently. First emerging as a literary genre in the 1980s and 1990s, steampunk developed as a divergent re-stylization of its postmodern forerunner, cyberpunk. Like much of science-fiction literature, cyberpunk was and continues to be a largely futuristic undertaking. Steampunk, on the other hand, looked backwards in time. Taking the scientific romances of Jules Verne and H.G. Wells and the inventors and historical figures of the 19th century as their inspiration, steampunk authors and artisans blended the technology and aesthetic of the industrial revolution with that of their own contemporary world.

As a generic form, steampunk is an aesthetic and ideological system that revolves around the (re)creation and (re)design of select aspects of the past. Those artifacts and mentifacts perceived vis-à-vis the present as obsolescent, passé, or anachronistic are salvaged and repurposed. Steampunk costumers, artisans, craftspersons, and authors therefore produce material and semiotic wholes by curating, maintaining, modifying, and assembling various components into novel material-semiotic forms. Pieces of old texts, a character, a theme, etc., become the raw materials from which new stories are fabricated, just as old vacuum tubes, gears, and cogs are recombined into new objects.

Steampunk cosplayers fabricate a persona by placing their character's text in relation to others. For instance, in order to situate their character in time and space, a cosplayer might discursively associate their persona with various historical events. S/he could be a post-American Civil War freedom fighter in an alternate historical timeline or an ironic caricature of Western colonial power as was Lawrence T. Codger. These chronotopic coordinates within a historical master

narrative serve as a referential substructure upon which a basic character type is grafted and further developed (Bakhtin 1981). Likewise, a cosplayer might insert their character within a piece of historical or contemporary fiction, either by minimally altering the source text by assigning their character a minor role within the plot or dramatically re-structuring the narrative in such a way that their persona becomes a central figure within the text.



These textual patterns of composition even extend into the stylization of a cosplayer's sartorial ensemble. Material forms not only arise from and corroborate texts but also engender them. For instance, let's suppose a cosplayer begins the forming of their persona around a rather basic character archetype, a soldier. This type would then serve as the central reference point within the textual field in which this soldier is constructed (Foucault 1970). Let's also assume that within this character's backstory, it is understood that he or she is a heavy weapons specialist. As such, as the cosplayer begins constructing his or her costume, pre-configurations within the text would likely require that the costume would include large weapons.

That is, the material forms substantiate the text. Costumes and accessories do not, however, function only as the denotatum of a character's narrative. This process works in the reverse order as well. A cosplayer might construct their persona based upon a particular set of objects or they might already have a developed persona, which is then significantly transformed by the accession of a new prop or an entire ensemble. Prefacing the process in the abstract, I now turn to the SPAC event and the metadiscursive practices associated with the process of entextualization and materialization.



Rodney Pace waits for the start of the 2011 Dragon*Con parade, wearing a leather mask made by artisan Tom Banwell.

Entextualizing Persona

It was 7:00 PM Friday, September 2nd. I stood in the lobby of the Westin Peachtree Plaza hotel in a queue with around eighty costumed individuals waiting to enter the next panel. The doors to the conference room across the hall opened

outward in our direction. Out poured a wave of steampunks who turned left and headed out into the humid Atlantan heat. The procession of people standing outside the conference space, nearly all of them dressed in some form of alternate history attire, marched out of the lobby, past the out-turned doors, and into the brown and beige conference space. At the front of the room was a long, narrow table covered with a white linen sheet. Four microphones rested on top of it. Five costumed individuals trickled in and took a seat behind the table. Jeni Hellum sat on the far left. She wore a dingy and tattered white nurse's outfit reminiscent of those used in the 19th century, though with a higher hemline. She had a short cape with red trimming draped across her shoulders and a large brass colored bracer with three long needles attached to it on her left arm. To her left sat Ace Talkingwolf dressed in a white long sleeve shirt, a green silk vest, a black cravat, and a wide brimmed leather hat. Brett Ritter was next to Talkingwolf. He too sported a white shirt but with brown arm bands above each of his elbows and a brown woolen waistcoat. Emilie Bush sat to the left of Ritter. Her ensemble consisted of a white shirt with large light grey stripes, a brown leather vest, and a leather aviator's cap with a pair of goggles. Finally, there was Tony Ballard-Smoot in a white shirt, a two-toned brown vest with military buttons, and a pair of leather and brass bracers.

Jeni Hellum poses for a photo during the 2011 Dragon*Con parade. Her costume is part of a costuming line/media production by Atlanta based production and design company Penny Dreadful Productions.



After a brief introduction to the participants, the panelists grabbed their respective microphone and immediately began discussing character and persona creation, its merits, and its impact on material form.

Emilie Bush: These [backstories] make a difference in how you look in your persona and how you act. Do you shoot first and ask questions later? These are the types of questions, as you're building your persona, you're going to ask ...

Tony Ballard-Smoot: Before we even get into that, shouldn't we be asking 'do I need a persona?' I mean, some people in here might even be asking, 'Okay, why would I want to have a persona?' It's because the persona can help you define how your outfit is going to go, or how your character is going to play out, or how [that] dynamic around other people is going to play out. I'm an airship captain, so I have a crew.

When I'm around my crew, I yell orders. I make things go along, but then when it comes to my dress, I dress in a way that people could look at me and tell that, 'okay, he's the person that's running the show. He's got the guns, he's got the outfit. He looks awesome. He's obviously the person that is in charge,' and if you come up and you look like an engineer or ... a ragamuffin or whatever, then it's obviously going to be a different dynamic. One of the good things about steampunk is you can come up with your own characters ... the persona helps you bring your own character to life. It helps you give it shape and form.

While crafting their characters, steampunk cosplayers progress through an entextualization trajectory, from type to persona to a material form that corroborates and informs both the text and type. There is, of course, a considerable level of variation in this progression. Some steampunk cosplayers wear costumes

but do not create backstories; others have backstories but build them around a completed ensemble (from object to type to text). I will limit my focus to the course of entextualization—from type to text to object—because it is one of the primary *modus operandi* chosen by individuals who are deeply invested within the steampunk cosplaying community and the aesthetic as a form of role-playing and storytelling.

Following Ballard-Smoot's comments, Brett Ritter took up the conversation, suggesting that the audience participate in a few Mad Libs in order to generate a hypothetical character. They began with the creation of a hypothetical airship and its objective and then populated that figurative vessel with various types of crew members. Each character had his or her own role to play in maintaining the narrative world being constructed around this ship. Ritter pulled his microphone close and responded to Ballard-Smoot's comments.

Ritter: Let's build on that real quick. Let's get some quick basics in here. First, I need a noun... [he paused, the audience remained silent]. This is where you start shouting.

Audience: [Various audience members screamed frantically] Raptor!

Ritter: . . . and I need an adjective.

Audience: Dirty! [someone yelled].

Ritter: The Dirty Raptor, we now have a ship. Some of you might be thinking, well that's a terrible name, that's not at all what I want . . . Even if you don't like the name, you now know more than you did before when you were trying to come up with the idea, but for us, we've got the Dirty Raptor, and we're going to come up with two crew members, does that sound alright? Just to get some contrast there, so what does the Dirty Raptor do? Is this a pirate ship, is this a cargo ship, passenger, mining . . .?

[Audience members shouted a number of answers].

Ritter: Smuggler wins . . . So we've got that basic idea, and we're going to build up from there. Now we've got a ship. The ship needs two crewmembers . . . The roles the crewmen can play can be very interesting, and they don't even have to be roles on the ship. For example, my character is a time traveler. I'm usually the passenger. It just so happens that airships constantly end up being the most reliable form of travel so I'm usually on one in the different, alternate timelines.



Cody Gannon (Left) and John Gannon (Right) wait for the start of the 2011 DragonCon Parade. Both are wearing leather armor and accessories crafted by Ian Finch-Field.

As the figurative ship took its shape so did the characters associated with it. For numerous steampunk cosplayers at Dragon*Con and similar conventions, the idea of the ship, the crew, a setting or timeline, or any other textual epicenter, which begets other personas within this narrative framework, is a crucial intertextual center of

gravity (Sandvoss 2007, 23). In essence, a textual event horizon informs all subsequent expressive compositions and actions that follow the establishment of that referential landmark within the textual field. As individual cosplayers create their characters and situate their objects/texts in relation to one another, they must choose to create personas and costumes that are synchronous with the generic traction of the other textual features that already populate the discursive field in order to maintain a level of coherence between various crew members, their ship, and the world within which they are positioned. This might mean situating one's character within a particular space or time (whether historical or in an alternate timeline) or in accordance with a larger overarching narrative matrix.

I met Tomas Quin, the leader of a steampunk group in Huntsville, Alabama, just before the Dragon*Con parade began. He wore a large brimmed leather hat and a set of matching leather gloves, boots, and a utility belt cinched around his waist. His dark navy shirt, adorned with pewter buttons and a brown leather harness, stretched over each of his shoulders, under his arms, and onto his back where it held a leather quiver of bright green arrows in place. Quin, his crew, the Airship Avenger, and their backstories all attest to the metadiscursivity seen within the SPAC panel. Each character within their narratively constructed "taleworld" (Young 1987:211) was generated through a network of referential points of confluence between characters, materials, and actions within the Dragon*Con parade itself. I introduced myself and asked him to tell me a bit about his crew and his costume.

We're about fourteen members strong right now . . . We just create costumes, create backstories, and work with stuff like that. My crew's backstory is from an alternate past set in the 1880s where the confederacy was taken over by the Knights of the Golden Circle. [They] extended the slave holding empire into Mexico. We are a group fighting against that . . . We are kind of rebel freedom fighters.

"What got you into steampunk cosplaying?" I asked.

I had been into Jules Verne and H.G. Wells and all the pulp heroes from the 1910s [and] 1920s growing up, and I tried to get into other costuming, comic book[s], *Firefly*, and everything was too rigid. I had seen some steampunk stuff that was very high Victorian, very aristocratic. I didn't really care for it. I got here and saw some more of the rebel looking stuff and I was like 'Okay, that I can do.' So now I just paint a Nerf gun, make a cool looking weapon, come up with a neat backstory that makes sense and go for it.

I asked him to compare steampunk costuming with other forms of cosplay that represented particular popular culture characters. He explained the he felt that steampunk gave him more freedom to incorporate his own style into his cosplaying than he would have if he were to dress like a specific character like Batman or some other superhero.

There's lots of interpretations of Batman; he's been around for seventy-five years. You can always get your own interpretations, but Captain Tomas Quin was built from the ground up . . . all these guys built from the ground up what they wanted. I mean some people find that it's actually helpful, if you're coming from a gaming type aspect, to start with a character sheet and make a character. We don't have any rules for it or anything like that, but it's a good framework. It lets you branch out.

Quin's costume was built around a stock character type: the rebel freedom fighter (reminiscent of Robin Hood from English folklore and its subsequent iterations and adaptations in popular culture texts). That type was then fleshed out and made distinctive from other similar character archetypes. Within this process, Quin's individual character backstory was interwoven into the *Airship Avenger's* metanarrative. By placing his character in relation to this larger narrative structure,

Quin's persona was crafted in such a way that it would interface with his crew's textual field, creating discursive texture and complexity within the larger matrix narrative. Within each stage of this process, the placement of new figures within this textual field established the boundaries, the rules, and the grammar for what the Airship Avenger's crew members could become. In a sense, each discursive "move" made within the textual field delimited but also stimulated the expressive potentiality of all subsequent additions made within that field. An individual character therefore must "make sense," as Quin described it, within a given narrative framework. What's more, the discursively constructed framework must also be synchronous with the steampunk genre.



Tomas Quin discusses his character backstory, costume, and accessories before the 2011 Dragon*Con parade begins.

As Quin explained, the Airship Avenger's story was set within the 1880s, and each of the members of the crew were freedom fighters who counteracted the activities of the Knights of the Golden Circle (KGC). In order to maintain coherence

between individual character backstories and the pretextual structures of the larger group masternarrative, each persona had to be (1) authored within that temporality and (2) take part in or exist in relation to the group's freedom fighting activities. These textual constructs were also situated firmly within the steampunk genre. They created a divergence from the historical record, taking an actual secret society active within the mid-nineteenth century and re-imagining it. All of these textual features were then materially substantiated in Quin's late nineteenth century adornment. What's more, his choice of "rebel" rather than high Victorian costume, trick arrows, etc. allowed him to work his own personal style into the genre.

Quin's costume and narrative illustrate a moment of entextualization wherein the personality traits of a given *dramatis personae* begin to take shape (Propp 1968). Once determined, these attributes are rendered as a physical form through the selection, creation, and assemblage of a costume and accessories. As Quin explained, this process is very similar to character creation in analog and/or electronic role-playing games. Within this process, a general character type serves as a relatively "empty" though recognizable generic armature upon which further narrative complexities are posited and subsequently modulated. This framework informs and/or warrants a particular set of accessories, gestures, or verbal stylings that a given character is materially defined by. Like a role-playing gamer, a steampunk cosplayer understands that these character templates are prefigured constructs that will partially define the essential characteristics of a given character type. In selecting these "stock" types, a steampunk cosplayer also adopts their pretextual qualities, which are then modified and further textually and material developed (Maryns and Blommaert 2002; Howard and Lipinoga 2010). In all of these acts of entextualization, cosplayers hope to construct characters that are, first and foremost, complicated, interesting, and dynamic.

Material-Textual Substantiation

Although they are built from widely recognizable character archetypes—the hero, the captain, the pirate, etc. — each cosplayer will modify these pre-existing forms (Propp 1968). Originality and creativity are highly valued within the steampunk community. The process of character entextualization and ensemble formation is no exception, as we can see within the SPAC panel to which we now return. After establishing the Dirty Raptor as the central figure within their textual field, Ballard-Smoot, Ritter, Bush and Talkingwolf described a number of their favorite character types and their individual backstories. Ballard-Smoot began, saying:

I know on my ship one of the most interesting people is called Tailor Maid, and she is the ship seamstress . . . She has a bandolier full of needles and threads . . . and these giant scissors that she carries with her. The scissors come apart into battle shears when we have to, you know, go and do some dirty work.

Bush: I have Kingston, the ship's cook. He works in the galley. He once was a doctor, but he got caught with those experiments and had to leave the country so now he lives on the airship, and he's the cook, and he's a very, very good cook.

Ritter: When you're on a ship with four, five, six people, you get bored and usually you're not going to have someone who's completely dedicated to entertainment. Much like the tailor, they're going to have to do work on the ship otherwise. Adding the concept of an entertainer to whatever . . . you have, it expresses itself in many ways. You have sort of a bard character . . . [who], all of a sudden, gets very dramatic. Everything they describe is earth shattering. 'MY, this bread

pudding is perhaps the best I have ever had' and you can add a lot to your interactions . . .

Once they had described a number of their favorite character types and the personas they had cultivated from these types, the panelist turned their attention back to the crew of the Dirty Raptor. Ritter asked the audience for some suggestions as to what kind of individuals the Dirty Raptor might have within their crew. The audience burst into a cacophony of nouns. I overheard captain, engineer, medic, chemist, and pirate, though others escaped me.

After settling two character types, a chemist and a medic, the panelists and the audience considered a number of hypothetical backstories for each of them. This process of entextualization immediately lead to the consideration of each character's material form and style, their costumes, their accessories, their speech styles, and so on. Within this metadiscourse on performance, form, and style, Ballard-Smoot made a joke about the ubiquitous nature of goggles within the steampunk genre, ironically suggesting that everyone should have them. In doing so, he both mobilized and commented upon a stereotype of steampunk costuming and art (anything + goggles = steampunk). Talkingwolf responded suggesting that a costume or an accessory should correspond with a character's backstory. If an object does not corroborate a given character's backstory, then it should be narratively incorporated into the textual/material ensemble. If not, it might appear extraneous. Talkingwolf and Ballard-Smoot's exchange, though brief, allows us to better understand object/text relationships within steampunk cosplaying. After listening to the audience's suggestions, Ritter returned to the Dirty Raptor's crew.

Ritter: [The] chemist is very genre focused, so let's take that one.

Talkingwolf: Lot of props . . .

Ritter: When you start talking about a role, now you start talking about props. When someone sees you...

Ritter: ... They [meaning other con-goers] should be able to tell [who you are], and it shouldn't be 'Oh, they have a big red cross on them; they must be the ship medic.' There should be a lot more to it than that. The chemist, [there are] great things you can do with a chemist or engineers. [There] are burn marks. You'll have goggles. Show that they helped! Even just putting on some black smudge marks all around your face with this nice white line around your eyes can do wonders for having people look at you and go, 'That is an interesting person.'

Ballard-Smoot: I was about to say, doesn't everybody here have goggles? [he said jokingly as he laughed].

Talkingwolf: I [he paused] do [again, he paused] not.

Hellum: Alright show of hands, who's got goggles? [several members of the audience raised their hands into the air as the audience and a few of the panelists laughed].

Talkingwolf: Well, I use welding glasses at times. I have to point out that goggles, a lot of people think, 'Oh you're steampunk; you got to have goggles.' That is not true. As I said, I don't wear them. I wear a monocle, just the one eye coverage, it usually serves some purpose, some kind of a navigational thing. A captain would have something to aid his navigation so that carries a lot of that. The other type is dark-lensed glasses that I wear and that is, again, because of the electricity, lightening, blinding light. I don't need goggles. I'm not out in the weather; that's what a crew is for.

As we can see from Talkingwolf's response, for many steampunk cosplayers, material forms need to be textually substantiated. If his character was going to wear

goggles, then those goggles needed to be supported by his character's actions, occupation, and backstory. This material/textual consonance that Talkingwolf described was also present within the entextualization of the Dirty Raptor's second character, the medic. Emilie Bush described the use of historical and contemporary depictions of medics as sources from which the medic could be modeled. These models were then modulated into a more developed textual form. She explained:

[In] thinking medical things, you can also look at historical pictures of what . . . a doctor looked like in the wild, wild, west or a Victorian doctor. You know, there's this great side flap button, white coat, you know, you can go with some tropes of the profession and just play them up to the nine.

In addition to a tattered white medical lab coat, the panelists and the audience discussed a number of items and accessories that would complement the medic's text. This included things like faux-syringes, gauze, prop saws, and medicine vials filled with various colorful liquids. In the case of the latter item, Hellum mentioned that she had had good luck employing bath gels and decorative liquid soaps to that effect because they were colorful and stable liquids suitable for costuming purposes. Ballard-Smoot went one step further suggesting that Gatorade would not only look the part but that it could be contained in medicine bottles, cracked open, and consumed as part of a character's performance. With this prop alone, one could feasibly further develop the 'medic' character type in a number of directions. S/he could be a tragic addict, a self-medicating professional, a medical scientist engaging in unethical self-experimentation in the name of biotechnological progress, etc. From that brightly colored vile filled with Gatorade came a range of narratological and performative possibilities.

After discussing the medic's potential costume and accessories, the panelists decided that it would be fitting for the medic to have an accent of some sort, which prompted them to briefly consider speech styles within the creation of a persona.

Ritter took charge of the discussion, saying that “if you’re to have an accent for your character, try to make sure that it is consistent. It doesn’t have to be realistic, as long as it’s consistent.” His fellow panelists nodded in agreement, as Jeni Hellum pulled her microphone close and began speaking in a thick, stereotypical German accent. “Embrace it, love it [meaning an accent], stroke it longingly into the we-e-e-e hours of zee night.” The audience laughed, and a few of its members were brought before their peers to perform a sampling of accents, an activity, though short, that proved to enrich any potential character’s backstory.

With their accessories, costumes, gestures, and speech styles assembled, two of the Dirty Raptor’s possible characters were developed beyond the archetypes from which they derived. The hypothetical characters, though fully formed, were not complete. Their texts and material ensembles have the potential to be dynamically reshaped and reformed through time and space if they were placed in relation to other texts and material constructs (Joseph-Witham 1996). The Dirty Raptor and its crew, however, were to have no life beyond the SPAC panel. They had served their demonstrative purposes for the panelists and audience. I now push forward in time, from the SPAC panel back to the Dragon*Con parade, to trace how these metadiscourses are enacted within actual practice and to illustrate how an individual steampunk cosplayer manages to situate his character within a semantic field in relation to other object/texts.

Character, Intertextuality, and Citationality

As I shifted within the wash of bodies, taking notes, interviews, and photos, I met a Major John Shaw. As I talked with Shaw, it seemed as if every physical item within his ensemble was backed by a world-building text, and each text by an object. He was wearing a red and black British military costume with gold embellishments, a khaki pith helmet, black slacks with a red stripe down the length of his leg, and a large brass looking backpack with a respirator attached to it by a black hose. The mask hung just beneath the man’s face, held in place by a neck strap. A steampunk

cosplayer to the man's right looked at me and said, "He's going to Mars . . . this is a Mars expedition."

"The British Punitive Expedition following the War of the Worlds," the man specified.

"What's your name," I asked, as I pointed my audio recorder in his direction.

"Major General Sir John Shaw."

"Where are you from?"

The Major replied in his American accent, "Well Britain, of course."

I asked the Major if he could tell me a bit about his character's backstory and history.

Major Shaw: I was the commander at Rorke's Drift in 1879. That's where I won my first Victoria Cross. I won the second Victoria Cross during the invasion ... [referring to the invasion of Earth by Martians in H.G. Wells' novel War of the Worlds ([1989] 2011)]."

Author: How many do you have?

Major Shaw: Three [The Major flashed a tight-lipped smile in his response].

Author: What was the third one for?

Major Shaw: Actions on Mars. I was working with Marconi [Guglielmo Marconi] on military applications of his wireless radio waves during the invasion and discovered that our mobile radio transmitter, wireless transmitter, was capable of interfering with the command structures to the Martian tripods, causing a number of them to fail.

When we got Mr. Tesla [Nikola Tesla] and Mr. Edison [Thomas Edison] and Mr. Westinghouse [George Westinghouse] to join us in creating a weapon grade transmitter in use in the invasion of the Punitive expedition, we were able to destroy all of their tripods.

Author: Damn tripods. [I joked, taking part in the Major's narrative].

Major Shaw: Damn tripods [he paused and smiled], that's right [he laughed].

The Major John Shaw, a retired nuclear engineer, created his character and costume, beginning first with a character type, fleshing out that typology into a complex narrative, thus transforming an unspecified character "class" into a persona. He wasn't just any soldier; he was a member of the British Armed Force circa the late 19th century. He had a long and complicated history and a personality to match it. These textual formations were augmented and supplemented by the production of his costume ensemble, which synchronized with both his narrative and the historical conditions (both actual and counterfactual) particular to the temporality he had chosen to insert his character. The Major began to describe his costume and its components, starting with their materiality and construction as objects, then discussing their textual orientation within his character's backstory and the discursive universe within which they were situated.

I [went] to a local costuming shop that does some of the local theater productions and they made the jacket. I made the backpack.

Author: What did you make the backpack out of?

Major Shaw: Pine one by twos, PVC pipe, spray painted, garden valves for the hose. This other one [he reached down and grabbed at his face mask] has my hydration pack in it so [he paused to took a drink from a hidden straw within the mask] . . . so, as I sit here and sweat out my hydration I can actually refill. And you think about it, that is something that you would want to have as part of your survival kit on Mars.

The Major's costume and his narrative were both crafted with care and an attention to detail, from his period accurate costume to his functional hydration

pack. His backstory was a densely intertextual construction which situated his character/ensemble in relation to multiple “temporal streams” and referents (Shukla 2011, 150, Bowser and Croxall 2010, 4). In total, his persona’s narrative evoked three primary temporalities First, his story recounted and replayed events commemorated within the past, what Richard Bauman would call the “narrated event” into the “narrative event,” the situation of narrative discourse within the present (1988, 2-6). The story and the costume are made to work together as joint signifiers, through which to situate the Major’s character within a timeframe sometime after 1879.

Both the Major’s costume, a replica of a uniform worn by members of the Corps of Royal Engineers within the British Armed Forces, and his narrative, in which he referred to his character as “the commander at Rorke’s Drift in 1879,” connected his character to the historical past. Moreover, Shaw punctuated his account with cameos of many of the greatest inventors and scientific minds of the 19th century, Nikola Tesla, Thomas Edison, Guglielmo Marconi, and George Westinghouse, each serving as orienting landmarks within the textual field he had constructed for his persona. The first two are widely known historical figures, but the later two references are a bit more esoteric. In this case, Shaw’s reference to Guglielmo Marconi and George Westinghouse serve, as Margret Rose explained in “Extraordinary Pasts: Steampunk as a Mode of Historical Representation,” as virtual “easter eggs” or hidden messages encoded within a given text (2009, 324). This referential content encoded within Shaw’s performance, just as within easter eggs encoded in digital media texts, functions as an in-joke of sorts. Only those who are “in-the-know” are able to decipher the “multilaminated” message for its fullest complexity (Hutcheon 2006, 6).

By including this encoded knowledge within the discourse that he surrounded his costume and character with, Major Shaw had posited his character within a point in space-time, supporting his character’s existence by anchoring it into the historical record through ingenious citationality and allusion. Employing

both textual and physical matter, Shaw interwove his character into historical grand narrative, his own authored counterfactual reality, and within the confines of steampunk's generic stylizing structures.

Conclusion

After a great deal of discussion about objects, stories, and performance, the SPAC panelists and their audience had formed a rough outline of a possible world, a history that might have been. Within it, there was a ship, and within the ship, a crew. Having imagined the motivations, personalities, and backstories as well as the physical attributes of their original characters, the panelists began the process of rendering those texts into a material reality. These objects would, in turn, influence and reshape the texts from which they originated. These complex and co-productive material-semiotic relationships were also evident in Lawrence T. Codger, Captain Tomas Quin, and Major John Shaw's character backstories, costumes, accessories, and performances.

Material-semiotic constitution is a crucial component of the steampunk genre's form-shaping ideology. Having examined the often overlooked symbiotic relationship between substance and text, I believe that steampunk cosplayers, artists, and authors can remind folklorists that while we might partition textual form and material substance from one another, these two expressive media are not only completely entangled they produce one another. There are no objects without stories. The potential and conventional use of a material is produced by its history and



its accumulation of stories about how that material has been, cannot be, or might be used. The discourse of material order produces and delimits the conditions of possibility for substance. These limits of material possibility are always being repaired, maintained, and transformed. The same is true of material form. Material artifacts, bodies, and the physical environment do not simply exist or function as referential content. They give rise to discourse and formed matter is itself a kind of ongoing discourse. This entanglement of expressive media, where text, object, and action meet—the material-semiotic—is of immense importance to understanding how individuals and communities produce, maintain, and modulate meaning through expressive forms and practices.

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