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# Clockwork Corsets: Pressed Against the Past

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**Abstract:** For a feminist scholar of technology, contemporary steampunk cultures incorporate several interesting elements. They embrace playful ways of relating to technology. They contain thrifty Do-It-Yourself strategies and ethics of recycling, linking the crafting of sexually specific bodies to imaginative time-play. They involve an intermingling of technological extensions with modes of embodiment and costuming. The corset is an emblematic Victorian, industrial technology in steampunk costuming, altering bodies and affects as well as aesthetics and politics. But how far can white, Victorian, middle-class, imperialist, corseted femininity be ‘punked’, twisted, modified, or transformed? And how much do these transpositions in and through time get caught up in a machinery of repetition rather than revision? Or are there ways of thinking the old and the new differently altogether?

**Keywords:** corsets, femininity, feminist theory, steampunk cultures, temporality

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It takes an observant viewer to notice her. In the midst of an episode of the North American TV show *Castle* aptly entitled “Punked”, there is a stylish scene that takes the two leading role detectives through a private steampunk parlor on the Upper East Side in New York.<sup>1</sup> The story spins around a murder investigation involving antique weaponry, a 200-year-old bullet, and contemporary steampunk culture. The camera passes her quickly, right before the cut to the next frame. She is blonde, a waitress, wearing her hair up in a Neo-Victorian (perhaps ‘punk’) kind of way. Smoky eyes, dark lips, her hands holding a brass tray covered in tight, brown leather gloves. On top of a white, high collar blouse sits a rather exquisite hard leather underbust clockwork corset of sorts, accompanied by a clockwork bra, both adorned with leather straps and brass accents. She is there for no more than a second, and you need to freeze-frame her for the details. You need to stop time. And time is written all across her body. The hard leather in a range of browns is carved, hand painted, and laser-etched into an elaborate clockwork design, covering significant parts of her torso in the small gears and fine machinery of the inner world of clocks.<sup>2</sup>

There are many ways of defining steampunk. Retro-futurism. Creative anachronism. 19<sup>th</sup> century mechanical engineering meets Neo-Victorian punk romance (Neo-Victorian being a contemporary rendering of Victorianism). It has quite fittingly been described as an “aesthetic technological movement” (The Catastrophe Orchestra and Arts Collective NYC, 2007), centrally concerned with re-imagining a particular past – the Victorian England interlaced with the Industrial Revolution. For a feminist scholar of technology, steampunk culture incorporates several interesting elements.<sup>3</sup> It embraces playful ways of relating to technology. It contains thrifty Do-It-Yourself strategies and ethics of recycling, linking the crafting of sexually specific bodies to imaginative time-play. It involves an intermingling of technological extensions with

modes of embodiment and costuming. The corset is an emblematic component in steampunk costuming and a powerful device of transformation – altering bodies and affects as well as aesthetics and politics. A particular Victorian industrial technology, the corset makes and shapes bodies in certain ways, demanding attention to what it facilitates or makes possible, and what it blocks or limits, physically as well as symbolically.<sup>4</sup> But how far, I wonder, can white, Victorian, middle-class, imperialist, corseted femininity be ‘punked’, twisted, modified, or transformed?<sup>5</sup> And how much do these transpositions in and through time get caught up in a machinery of repetition rather than revision? Or are there ways of thinking the old and the new differently altogether?

If our feminist grand-grand mothers struggled to find ways of getting women out of their corsets, steampunk has resulted in a 21<sup>st</sup> Century move toward putting the corset back on. In this sense, the steampunk corset is a time machine. It is something that transforms bodies (and minds) along a temporal dimension that is not chronological, but rather anachronistic, a folding back on itself as a manner of embodying the present moment differently. But what does it mean, from a feminist point of view, to look back as a way of moving forward? How can these femininities be understood that are in time, even on time, and at the same time completely out of sync?

The corset is currently embraced in a range of different subcultural scenes, such as Goth, burlesque, and fetish, which offer a range of possibilities for thinking femininity in temporal terms. In her discussion of Neo-Burlesque, Debra Ferreday (2008: 51) speaks of how the burlesque community is bound by “a shared love of specific retro or vintage femininities” in a manner that challenges ‘mainstream’ femininity. Mainstream femininity is tied to a shameful erasure of irregularities and imperfections, Ferreday argues, whereas contemporary burlesque offers a parodic and loving recycling of vintage styles and a shameless DIY approach to high-maintenance femininity. In a slightly different vein, Ulrika Dahl (2013), in her analysis of 1950s vintage and queer femininity within the femme movement, focuses on particular ways of embodying historical feeling through garments and proposes intimate links between the feeling of vintage, whiteness and imperialist nostalgia. Although often discussed in terms of recycling particular aesthetics or styles, vintage is clearly as much about the tactile dimension of fabrics and feelings evoked by the past. While propelled forward by retro-futurist aesthetics, steampunk is also strikingly physical, tactile, in ways that have everything to do with how a particular past might feel when pressed firmly against the body.

In *Time Binds*, Elizabeth Freeman (2010) writes about what she terms ‘temporal drag’ as an intriguing embodied enactment of anachronism. In feminist accounts of contemporary femininities, discussions of gender as scripted performance along the lines of Judith Butler’s (1990) theory of gender and/as drag are still strikingly influential. Freeman argues that the temporality of Butler’s gender drag is an orientation towards the future, emphasizing the possibility of repeating the script with a difference as that which has the most subversive potential. Even if there is fairly limited room for displacements of bodily mattering and meaning in Butler’s regulatory machinery of heterosexuality, drag is a site of political possibility. Freeman orients her argument differently, and rather than thinking futurity and novelty as that which holds a promise, she explores the overload of historical signification in drag as something that crosses through time. To her, *Gender Trouble* neglects citational practices that gesture to the past in ways that suggest the occurrence of lives lived otherwise than in the present moment. Freeman’s temporal, queer drag rather proposes a “counter-genealogical practice of archiving culture’s throwaway objects, including the outmoded masculinities and femininities from which usable pasts may be extracted.” (xxiii). Freeman’s sensitivity to queer temporality manages to revamp queer histories that have been disowned, or rejected, as “differences in ‘feeling’” (89), drawing attention to the tangible, physical, tactile dimensions of temporal play.

With steampunk, there is a heightened sensibility for technologies in general, and a making explicit of an intimate relation between femininity, embodiment and technology in particular. The clockwork corset in the introduction to this text spotlights the technological nature of corsets (and bodies), revealing the mechanics of femininity, fashion and clockmaking. The corset made visible both accentuates and demystifies the technologies of femininity. As a rift in time, the corset on the outside ‘punks’ Victoriana quite concretely in blending futurist elements of sorts with the materials and craftsmanship of the past. Then again, if read backwards with Freeman’s temporal drag, the criticality of the steampunk corset may not only be spelled out along the lines of futurity as that which makes a difference to ‘retro’ (as a future-oriented way of thinking performativity would). There could also be important ways in which outdated femininities insist, or press upon the present that are easily overlooked if deemed restraining already from the beginning.<sup>6</sup> As much as steampunk femininities speak about a past in relation to which they imaginatively take shape, this drag backward through time may also put a “necessary pressure on the present tense” (Freeman, 2010: 64) in ways that highlight questions of femininity, power, and privilege in the present.

In a panel discussion at *Steamcon 2012* about feminist possibilities in steampunk, one of the audience members said, “The corset is no longer binding”.<sup>7</sup> While it is true that the corset is no longer compulsory, it is still a matter of being bound. Perhaps not as tightly – certainly there is a “difference in feeling” – but wearing one is still about restraint in ways both enabling and disabling. While producing a distinct silhouette, or aesthetics, the machinery of corsetry in steampunk also appears to generate a desire for history as it were, pressed up against the body. Steampunk is not merely about the visual pleasure of technologies on display. It is also about a longing for history felt throughout the body, as boning and wires shape and transform the present. To embody history in steampunk is not so much a matter of accuracy (this is not historical re-enactment), as it is one of playful re-imagination and of creating a particular feel in the present. The corset is a device of transformation through time in so far as it provides a feeling of femininity out of sync, through a syncopated interplay between bodies and temporal orders. Then again, this reading begs the question, what does it mean to be pressed against the history of white, bourgeois femininity? For whom would this be a pleasurable experience? And how would it feel to be out of sync with such a history in terms of race or class?

*Castle’s* steampunk girl does not figure outside of the register of white, middle-class femininity, but she might embody a different kind of marginality. The episode “Punked” received praise from within the steampunk community for being one of the first well researched, carefully crafted steampunk episodes of a mainstream TV show (Falksen, 2010). And yet, the focus of the scene is clearly on other types of steampunk technologies (most notably a penny-farthing with exhaust pipes) in a manner that downplays or makes peripheral the technologies of femininity, such as the corset. In fact, the distinction between ‘makers’ (i.e. those involved in the making of steampunk technologies) and ‘costumers’ in steampunk appears to indicate that the crafting of a corset is not a matter of making steampunk technology. But this is to miss the point of corsetry as technological and time-travelling devices that in a concrete, embodied manner evoke Victorian engineering and 19th Century industrial technologies.

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<sup>1</sup> *Castle*, Season 3, episode 4, aired on ABC October 11, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> The corset is crafted by Brute Force Studios (“Purveyors of quality Victorian corsetry, Steampunk fashion, and props for all occasions”). See <http://www.bruteforceleather.com/>. Accessed November 6, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> This chapter is part of the larger research project *Clockwork, Corsets, and Brass: The Politics and Dreams of Steampunk Cultures*, financed by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond (RJ), Sweden.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the specificity of Victorian and steampunk corsetry read through a Deleuzian lens of feminist affect theory, see Sundén, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> As cultural historian James Carrott argued at *Steamcon 2012*, ‘steam’ needs to be ‘punked’, or else it is simply Victorian. To punk – as a verb – is a critical tool in that it provides ways of hacking the past, a matter of re-imagining or re-using with a twist (cf. Carrott & Johnson, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> I gesture at a similar argument in Sundén, 2013.

<sup>7</sup> *Steamcon* in Seattle, WA, is since 2009 a yearly event and one of the largest regional steampunk conventions in the US.