

Twisting Dickens: Modding Childhood for the Steampunk Marketplace in Cory Doctorow's "Clockwork Fagin" (2011)

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His name was William Sansousy, a métis boy who'd come from the wild woods of Lower Canada seeking work in Muddy York, who'd found instead an implacable machine that had torn off his leg and devoured it without a second's remorse. – Cory Doctorow, "Clockwork Fagin" (2011)

Perhaps it is not good when a factory girl, who has not the whole spirit of play spun out of her for want of meadows, gambols upon bags of wool ... and is immediately seized, and punished by the merciless machine that digs its shaft into her pinafore and hoists her up, tears out her left arm at the shoulder joint, breaks her right arm and beats her on the head. – Henry Morley, "Ground in the Mill" (1854)

The title of Cory Doctorow's short story "Clockwork Fagin" (2011) artfully melds the clockwork—a mechanism much favoured by the steampunk movement—with Charles Dickens's classic tale of childhood, *Oliver Twist* (1839). Rather than the streets of London, Doctorow's tale is set in the factories of an alternate nineteenth-century Canada. Rather than abandoned child pickpockets, it takes as its subjects the children mutilated by steam-based data mills and sent to Saint Agatha's Home for the Rehabilitation of Crippled Children to be exploited by a depraved and predatory superintendent: the Dickensian Mr Grindersworth. Thus, at first glance, Doctorow's short story engages with Dickens's text only to shoulder it aside, preferring the gritty, industrial realism of Victorian factory children depicted in nineteenth-century newspaper reports like Henry Morley's influential "Ground in the Mill" (1854) to Dickens's well-loved street thieves. In choosing to focus his tale on the bodies of posthuman children whose dismembered limbs have been replaced with cold metal—resonant of the bodies broken by Victorian cotton mills—Doctorow seems to promise more than just "added steam" for Oliver's descent into the London underworld: here, childhood itself is given a steampunk "mod".

"Mod", according to the *OED*, is a shortened form of "modify", meaning to make modifications. Within the Steampunk community, the practice of "modding" speaks to its anti-capitalist and anti-materialist politics: the process by which Steampunk's DIY makers liberate production from "big, mind-deadening companies who want to package and sell shrink-wrapped cultural product" (Sterling 12). Approaching the issue of Victorian child labour directly through the "modded" children, "Clockwork Fagin" seems to threaten Dickensian sentiment with blunt, even blasphemous, punk corrective. Yet, to the eye of the Victorian scholar, this notion raises significant questions about the neo-Victorian as literary mode, and the extent to which steampunk can be read as critical engagement with the Victorian. Dickens's *Oliver Twist* is already a knowing critique in which children are commodities to be bought and sold, traded and consumed, used and discarded. The novel maps Oliver's progress from anonymous orphan, through London's criminal depths, to claim his position and identity as the privileged child of a wealthy family; but through Oliver, Dickens also explores the effects that exposure to the marketplace has on children at risk: Charley Bates, the Artful Dodger, Nancy. The first section of this article compares the children "modded" in "Clockwork Fagin" with those of *Oliver Twist* to investigate the extent to which Doctorow's depictions of the brutal effects of industrialisation on children's bodies

constitute a neo-Victorian critique of Dickens's novel. The second section focuses more closely on the story as steampunk. Cory Doctorow is a well-known writer for children and young adults, and his use of the posthuman bodies of the children within the generic strategies of Young Adult (YA) literature raises significant questions about the narrative's engagement with steampunk. I explore whether the text is actually committed to a politics of steampunk, or is merely seeking to interpellate its audience—young adult readers—by utilising the currently popular steampunk look. YA literature characteristically favours resolutions which end in reconciliation and acceptance of the *status quo* (Trites, *Disturbing the Universe* 32). Emerging theories of steampunk tend to favour anti-capitalist, anti-consumerist social change as a defining characteristic (Von Slatt 218). In "Clockwork Fagin", the story begins with the children's liberatory rebellion and culminates in their improbably happy return to the factory system that maimed them. I argue that any steampunk politics that can be read from the children's pocket revolution are not only undermined by this neat closure, but the rebellion itself was always predicated upon regime change rather than systemic reform: one Grinder is replaced by another, albeit better, Grinder. In what sense, then, is "Clockwork Fagin" steampunk at all? This question places the short story at the centre of a key debate within steampunk about what constitutes steampunk: materialist aesthetic or anti-materialist principles? And if Doctorow's posthuman children are Steampunk in style rather than substance—pulp rather than punk—where does this leave its neo-Victorian critique?

Ground in the Steampunk Mill: The Commodified Child from Oliver Twist to Monty Goldfarb

In nineteenth-century Britain, the young came in a variety of packages. They were presented as the embodiment of the artistic imagination and as the most profound product of creation; a source of labor and a lightning rod for labor regulation; a spiritual ideal and a biological stage in human development ... the cultish veneration of girls and boys also reflected a growing recognition that their bodies supplied the tools, labor and even goods that society's monetary aspirations demanded. (Dennisoff 2-3)

In her analysis of the Dickensian family, Catherine Waters argues that Charles Dickens's discursive formation of the fictional Victorian family replaced the irregular and varied constructions of the actual Victorian family (as revealed by census data). Dickens was at the forefront of the production of a homogenous family group that could be packaged and sold in the pages of commercial journals like Dickens's own *Household Words* (Waters 25). Dennis Dennisoff further hones this point by identifying how the commodification of the Victorian family—as a unit that could be marketed and marketed to—depended substantially on children. Dennisoff remarks that, within this new consumer economy, children were not only consumers but producers, vendors, and commodities both in terms of their representations in fiction and as human labour. Thus, nineteenth-century consumerism—"the association of human worth with purchasing power and material possessions" (Dennisoff 1)—did not develop alongside a new understanding of childhood as much as overtly through it. Children, then as now, could be targets for accessing the family as a market, formative sites at which identity was perceived as susceptible to influence, and valuable commodities within the cultural economy.

The novels of Dickens are closely associated with changing notions of family, but, as Waters comments, the novels reveal few contented family portraits. Tamara S. Wagner, in her study of the commodified orphan, notes that the sentimentalised, suffering child emerged in the

first half of the nineteenth century as a key literary figure, and that “the desire to consume the young, although conducive to sensationalization, was already intrinsic to their earlier sentimental representation” (203). Wagner finds that Dickens’s late novel, *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-5), capitalises on the commodity value of the orphan as literary object while at the same time critiquing itself through the text’s creation of orphans as tradeable commodities that can be bought, sold, counterfeited, and held “in stock” (201).

Susan Zieger, in “Dickens’s Queer Children”, further argues that Dickens was a writer who knowingly traded in commodified fictional children, and was directly concerned with the convergences between children and the marketplace. Zieger is primarily interested in the sexualisation of Dickens’s children—the production of an inherent queerness that renders them ripe for neo-Victorian appropriation in texts such as Jacob Tierney’s film *Twist* (2002), in which Oliver and Fagin’s boys are represented as sex workers. Dickens’s children are, she asserts, always already queer. The marketplace is central to this process. Dickens’s tales of iconic exploited children—Oliver, Jo, Tiny Tim or Little Nell—are economic fantasies as much as they are sexual ones: “the Child’s nominal purity is guaranteed by its exemption from the market. It is the children’s exposure to the marketplace, as labourers, paupers, thieves or commodified images, [that] opens them to sexual signification and activity” (Zieger 143). Dickens’s writings are full of queer children because of their un-childlike experience as “sexual-economic beings” (144). In *Oliver Twist*, Oliver, protected by his genealogy and natural goodness, is uncorrupted and incorruptible—qualities which ironically ensure his value in the marketplace of Victorian fiction. However, Oliver’s experiences in the workhouse and his progress through London’s underworld enables Dickens to examine Oliver’s vulnerability and the damaging effects of commodification on the more susceptible children brought, in Zieger’s phrase, “too soon to market” (144).

Oliver himself is commodified from the very beginning of his life: as an infant, he is “farmed”—sent out to a baby farm (Dickens 4). The association of children with produce is explicitly drawn with Dickens’s narrator commenting “[i]t cannot be expected that this system of farming would produce any very extraordinary or luxuriant crop” (5). At eight years old, Oliver is brought to the workhouse to “pick oakum” (10). After his in/famous demand for more food, a bill is pasted on the gate offering five pounds to anyone who will take Oliver as apprentice. It is clear that Oliver is being sold, the text stating “In other words, five pounds and Oliver Twist were offered to any man or woman who wanted an apprentice to *any* trade, business or calling” (13; emphasis added). Dickens’s phrasing makes Oliver himself subordinate to, and a condition of, the five pounds and further suggests that even the apprenticeship later offered by Fagin and Bill Sikes, who intend Oliver for theft and housebreaking, is not necessarily outside the boundaries of the economic exchange as conceived by the workhouse board. Indeed, when Gamfield the chimney sweep applies for the money (and Oliver), the awful reputation of his trade and his brutality is seen by the board as an opportunity to haggle the price down (17). Oliver is ultimately placed with Sowerby the undertaker who capitalises on the boy’s melancholy expression by using him as a small mourner (a mute) in an “ingenious speculation” (38). Thus, even before Oliver runs away to London and becomes entangled in the illegal trades of the city, he is already part of the legitimate economy of the workhouse and its associated businesses. Indeed, the opening chapters of *Oliver Twist* provide an intimate portrayal of the ways in which children were commodities of small value to be traded, haggled over, or exploited for whatever profit could be garnered.

Zieger highlights how Dickens presents Dodger, with his “airs and manners of a man” (Dickens 53; Zieger 144) and Fagin’s boys as prematurely aged, a representation reinforced by George Cruikshank’s illustration of the boys “smoking long clay pipes and drinking spirits with the air of middle aged men” (Dickens 56-7; Zieger 147-8). As Zieger comments, Dickens may be “a byword for the sentimentalization of children’s suffering and dying” but nevertheless, there is something profoundly disturbing about Fagin’s old-before-their-time street children (141). It is not only through Fagin’s boys that Dickens gestures to the spectre of the preternatural child-adult, there is also the “aged countenance” of Nina Crummlles and the children of Dotheboys Hall in *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-9). Dickens’s novels never engage directly with factory work as the source of this aging, even though Victorian reform literature from the 1830s to the 1850s consistently associates unnaturally aged children with the hard labour and adult cares of the industrial workplace.

Peaches Henry notes that Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s “The Cry of the Children” takes up the repeated description of children as prematurely aged in Richard Hengist Horne’s 1842 *Report of the Royal Commission on Children’s Employment in Mines and Factories* (545). In Barrett Browning’s poem, the children are exposed to iron wheels “Grinding life down from its mark” (98) and as a direct result “their looks are sad to see./ For the man’s hoary anguish draws and presses/ Down the cheek of infancy” (26-28). Such children also appear in Henry Mayhew’s *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851-2). Kate Flint notes that Charles Dickens’s *Hard Times* (1854) originally included a girl who had her arm torn off by a machine, with a footnote directing readers to Morley’s “Ground in the Mill”, but this detail was not included in the print edition (106).

There is, therefore, both historical and literary merit to Doctorow’s decision to make his Oliver a victim of the industrial system, and have his journey occur directly under the shadow of the factory. Indeed, the presence of the factory—and the spectre of industrial accident—in Doctorow’s text seems so appropriate to a Victorian orphan’s descent from the workhouse to the streets that it draws attention to the silences of the original text. Flint argues the exclusion of the factory girl from *Hard Times* demonstrates that Dickens was not only aware of the awful dismemberment of factory children but that, in excluding the incident from the print edition, the writer was obeying his governing literary ethos that “fiction should entertain as well as instruct” (107) combined with a desire not to provoke the powerful mill owners. Read against *Oliver Twist*, Doctorow’s shockingly mutilated factory children invite comparison with Dickens’s sentimentalised urchins and open up space for similar allegations about Dickens’s suppression of the harsh facts of life surrounding his well-loved child characters and his reluctance to confront such problems in *Oliver Twist*.

Modding Children: Critique of Dickens or Dickensian Critique?

“Clockwork Fagin” is narrated by Sian O’Leary, a seventeen-year-old disabled inmate of Saint Aggie’s, and charts the arrival of newly disabled boy, Monty Goldfarb, to the Home, and their growing friendship and alliance. Mr Grindersworth (Grinder) is the superintendent of Saint Aggie’s; his name immediately suggests one of the unique and memorable characters created by Dickens, and perhaps most particularly Thomas Gradgrind from *Hard Times*. As well as adding Dickensian flavour to the tale, the repetition of the term “Grinder” as both name and occupation (Mr Grindersworth is the Grinder of Saint Aggie’s) invokes the horrific conditions under which child are ground up by the machines in the Victorian cotton and neo-Victorian data mills.

Savagely beaten by Grinder, Monty murders him and inspires the children to use the technological skills learned in the data mills to construct a clockwork automaton to conceal the death and to finance a new life. This pocket revolution is initially successful but when William Sansousy is murdered, police attention threatens to reveal the ruse and Monty scripts for the Grinder-automaton an elaborate suicide performance which hides both Monty's crime and the children's new autonomy. Finally, recollecting that it is his eighteenth birthday, Sian convinces the Sisters of Saint Aggie's to give him the position of Grinder, and Monty sets up Goldfarb and Associates: a new workshop sourcing workers directly from the rehabilitated children of Saint Aggie's.

The most obvious nexus between the story and *Oliver Twist* is the title's reference to Fagin. There are clear narrative connections between Grinder and Fagin as the stories' colourful antagonists. Grinder is the "Clockwork Fagin" of the title, in the sense that he directs a band of ragged children (beggars rather than thieves); and he is made into an automaton after his death—becoming literally a clockwork version of Fagin. His Eastern European-sounding name, Zophar Grindersworth, his solicitous manner, and use of endearments, such as "my darling" (Doctorow 58) and "my lovely" (Doctorow 60), are suggestive of Dickens's Jewish Fagin. Yet, Monty Goldfarb is also a distinctively Jewish name, and Monty's weapon of choice—a bread knife—echoes Fagin's own (Dickens 59; Doctorow 59-60). When Monty pushes the corpse of Grinder aside to occupy his seat Monty becomes Grinder (Doctorow 65). An old Jewish man is replaced by a young Jewish man: it is not ethnicity or religion that makes the incumbent essentially villainous. In representing Monty, the children's liberator, as Jewish, Doctorow extends the earlier work of Will Eisner's graphic novel, *Fagin the Jew* (2003), which offers a sympathetic reading of Fagin by providing a historical context for the lives of Ashkenazi Jews living in poverty in Victorian London. While Eisner's Fagin is still a thief, although Sikes (the gentile) is the greater rogue, Doctorow goes much further in offering the reader a Jewish Oliver and an explicitly heroic role for a Jewish character in his revisioning.

There are several other important points of connection between the texts. Doctorow's story is set in the town of Muddy York. When Dickens's text first appeared in *Bentley's Miscellany* in 1837, Oliver was born in Mudfog. When Grinder beats Monty until "the good side of his face was a pulpy mess, and his one eye was near swollen shut"(56) and locks him into "the hole" (56), this is suggestive of Oliver's experience with the Sowerbys. After Oliver is beaten and locked into the dust-cellar, Mr Bumble says, "The only thing that can be done now, that I know of, is to leave him in the cellar for a day or so, till he's a little starved down ..." (Dickens 47). Similarly, Grinder's purpose in beating the children is to "tenderise" them: Sian comments "I'd seen big boys and rough girls come to Saint Aggie's as hard as boots, and they come out of Grinder's hole so good doggy that they practically licked his boots for him" (Doctorow 58). Fagin similarly refers to his boys as "Clever dogs!" (Dickens 59). Far from being rendered subservient, Oliver stands up to his abusers and when Bumble asks him "Ain't you afraid of it, sir? Ain't you a-trembling while I speak, sir?" (Dickens 46), he remains defiant. Throughout this incident, Oliver is referred to as attempting to murder Noah Claypole and the Sowerbys: indeed, the words murder/ murderer/ murderous are repeated ten times within four pages of text. Monty also defies Grinder's beating, taunting him and improvising an insulting song in the hole. While Oliver's murderous intent is without foundation, Doctorow takes the effects of a brutal environment seriously and Monty kills Grinder on his release from the hole.

However, there is a significant distinction to be drawn in the nature of the critique of the commodified child offered by “Clockwork Fagin” and *Oliver Twist*. Doctorow’s text presents highly visual, even shocking, descriptions of the children as futuristic melds of flesh and metal. The children appear in the text fully “modded” with a disturbing range of metal prostheses: Monty has a steel left leg (54) and only half a face (60); Sian has a hook for a hand (61); Monty’s assistant in working the automaton is “little legless Dora” (69); and all the children of Saint Aggie’s are similarly disabled. The “modded” children function well within the text as ambulatory metaphors for the evils of the factory system, yet I would argue that Doctorow’s children—for all their visual impact—are less damaged, and less profoundly disturbing than the preternaturally aged child-adult found in the nineteenth century texts. Doctorow makes it clear that underneath their awful exteriors these are still children, whereas in the Victorian writings, it is warped childhood that is the greater tragedy.

During the course of Doctorow’s narrative, the children’s “modding” takes on further significance: the children become posthuman, although the implications of this metamorphosis remain undeveloped. Katherine Hayles’s influential book, *How We Became Posthuman* (1999), still provides an effective definition:

[T]he posthuman view configures human being so that it can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines. In the posthuman, there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organicism, robot teleology and human goals. (3)

Meat, in Doctorow’s tale, defines the human condition. New children are “new meat” (55, 78); Monty refers to the dead Grinder as “spoiled meat” (61, 66); Grinder’s body and head hit the floor with a “meaty thump” (65) and “meaty sound” (77). When Monty arrives at Saint Aggie’s, he is “tenderized” by Grinder’s belt with the emphasis placed in the beating on his physical body—skin, scars, blood. When Sian recalls his own time in the hole, he feels it in his stomach and his “stones” (58). Before being tossed into the hole, Monty repudiates the weakness of his body, spitting a tooth on the rug with a grin. On emerging from the hole, emphasis is resituated on Monty’s metal prosthesis: “first a click of his steel foot, then a dragging from his remaining leg” (59). Monty comes out of the hole empowered, able to act without scruple or remorse, free to plunge a bread knife into Grinder’s chest. Indeed, Monty emerges, I would suggest, as unambiguously posthuman: “a hybrid of machine and organism” (Haraway 117).

After Monty, Sian is the next child to become posthuman. On witnessing Grinder’s death, Sian bites the inside of his cheek, tasting blood (60). When Monty first approaches, Sian says “I was so discombobulated that I held out my abbreviated right arm to him, hook and cutlery basket and all” (60). Monty takes the hook in his hand and shakes it, relocating attention from Sian’s organic body (the blood in his mouth) to his metal body (his hook), mapping his conversion from human to posthuman. In contrast, William Sansousy cannot make the transition to posthuman. Unable to bear separation from his family, he chooses to try to return to his home and is found murdered and stripped of his prosthesis—returned to the purely organic.

The posthuman children of Saint Aggie’s are situated within the text between the ineffectual organic humans, at one end, and the inadequate clockwork automaton at the other. After his death, Grinder’s spoiled meat represents not only his corrupt humanity, but is a material condition—he will literally spoil. This problem is solved by tanning the skin of his head and taxidermy. Distinct from Grinder as meat, but no less organic, the Sisters are described as

“having all the cleverness of a turnip” (66) and Sian remembers being pulled up from the hole “like a carrot” (57). Conceived of purely as organic bodies, the Sisters and Sian are inert vegetables powerless to understand or alter the conditions of life in Saint Aggie’s, whereas those descriptions that focus on meat denote either its corruptibility or vulnerability. At the other end of the continuum, the clockwork Grinder has a limited functionality. With a great deal of effort, he is able to simulate the human enough to convince the disinterested and turnip-like sisters, but not to convince the more astute police.

This change in the children of Saint Aggie’s from human meat to posthuman hybrids is reflected by the changes to the Home itself. Just as the children are upgraded with the newest prosthetics, so Saint Aggie’s is upgraded by melding the dilapidated Home with a shiny new supercomputer. Monty plans to massively expand what can be done with the automaton by hijacking computing power. Sian—who now defines himself not as a crippled child but as computerman and “seventeen-year-old brass jacker” (74)—leads a team of children to illegally re-route computing power from the local switch house. At the end of this enterprise, “Saint Aggie’s boasted sixty-four shining brass bits, the very height of modernity and engineering” (75). The space of Saint Aggie’s itself not only metaphorically reproduces the changes within the children’s bodies but also metonymically reinforces the children’s role as parts of a new machine. What I am suggesting is not the imposition of a posthuman interpretation on the text, but rather that the short story itself already contains a strong posthuman subtext.

Thus, the posthuman is a powerful narrative strategy for shifting power from the industrial factory system to the children and, potentially, for wreaking revenge and affecting radical social transformation. Yet, I would argue that Doctorow actively disavows the children’s posthuman promise, undermining this interpretation by inscribing the children within a binary discourse of ability and disability rather than a posthuman one. In opposition to the way in which the narrative marks out the success of the children’s transition to the posthuman, the rhetoric used by Monty never describes the children as better than human, characterising them instead in terms of disability. If Sian is the text’s extradiegetic narrator, Monty’s intradiegetic narration explicitly informs Sian’s narrative and guides the children’s perceptions of their subjectivity. Central to Monty’s manifesto is the notion “I am as good a man as I was ere I lost my limb, and I say that you are, too” (64). At the end of the short story, the rationale on which the new factory operates is “if anyone is bothered by the appearance of a factory filled with the halt, the lame, the blind, and the crippled, they are thankfully outnumbered by those who are delighted by the quality of the work and the good value in his schedule of pricing” (91). In short, the market compensates the client for workers who are widely perceived as less than fully human—the market is a mechanism that corrects for prejudice and inadequacy. Further highlighting the link to disability is the children’s lauding of Monty as “Founder of the feast” (75), a phrase that echoes Bob Cratchitt in Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol* (1843) and its association in the popular imagination with the disabled Tiny Tim. In this way, the underlying subtext of posthuman ability is subsumed by the narrative shift back into the factory which rewrites the children in relation to economic market processes.

It is through the children’s posthuman bodies that “Clockwork Fagin” holds out to the reader the promise of punk corrective, only to undermine and disavow it at the end, deflecting the narrative into a socially conservative resolution. It’s not difficult to understand Doctorow’s motivation for this in a story clearly intended for a Young Adult audience, yet by endorsing rather than rejecting the market forces which control the factory, Doctorow compromises the

story's neo-Victorian critique presumably to make it safe for the child reader. This raises an important question about whether it is fair to judge Doctorow's text as critique or whether it should be judged purely on its entertainment value—which is considerable. There are, however, two issues which complicate the argument for letting “Clockwork Fagin” escape judgement. The first is the way in which the text sets itself up to be read as Steampunk literature, and the generic responsibilities that does or does not entail: a concern I will examine more closely in the second part of this article. The second issue—and possibly the more pressing from the perspective of Victorian scholarship—is that in derailing the story's Steampunk/neo-Victorian corrective, Doctorow reproduces the same textual compromises that he implicitly criticises Dickens for: choosing non-threatening entertainment value over instruction and avoiding condemnation of a system of repressive industrial capitalism that values children only as commodities.

Cogs in the Machine: Questioning Doctorow's Steampunk Cred

But it was indeed a golden time, that time when I was but a boy at Saint Aggie's among the boys and girls, a cog in a machine that Monty built of us ... (Doctorow 91)

If, as I have suggested above, Doctorow's ending ultimately endorses social stability over radical social change, this raises the question whether the text's claims to be steampunk are also compromised. Doctorow's modded children certainly look the part, but what role does steampunk politics play in determining what constitutes a steampunk text?

“Clockwork Fagin” was first published in *Steampunk! An Anthology of Fantastically Rich and Strange Stories* (2011), “the first major Steampunk anthology for young adults” (back cover). In the Introduction, editors Kelly Link and Gavin Grant highlight the importance of steampunk's aesthetic, inviting the reader into a world populated by “gaslit alleys, intrepid urchins, Steam-powered machines and technologies that never were. Those are the basic accoutrements that no self-respecting Steampunk anthology could be without” (viii-ix). This definition of steampunk extends into an online world in which “We've spent hours wandering through the online galleries on Etsy and Flickr, marvelling at the clockwork insects, corsets, art, hats, gloves, canes, modded computers and even a Steampunk horse (*want*)” (ix). The reader is encouraged to interpret steampunk through a consumer ethos: steampunk's key generic strategies are regarded as “accoutrements”; Etsy is an e-commerce website for marketing vintage or handmade items; and, while the objects described are more likely to have been made or modded using DIY principles, it is consumer desire that surrounds the steampunk commodities: “(*want*)”. What then is missing from the introduction to the *Steampunk!* collection is any sense of a politics informing either steampunk or the stories collected in the book. The informal tone of the Introduction, and its internet references, are certainly an attempt to engage with an implied young adult reader: but is this steampunk?

Ann and Jeff Vandermeer describe steampunk as “dark pseudo-Victorian fun” (ix). Jay Strongman views steampunk as emerging out of a literary genre which features:

Foggy streets bustling with horse-drawn hansom cabs, men dressed in frock coats and top hats, women in bustles and corsets; but it also juxtaposes those images with a world of Steam-powered robots and airships, of analogue computers, of time travellers and of parallel universes. It's about recapturing the wonder and excitement of the fin de siècle world of H. G. Wells and the *Voyages Extraordinaires* of Jules Verne, but also about acknowledging the grime, soot, squalor and chaos of the ‘dark satanic mills’ of the Industrial Revolution. (7)

Having originated as a mode of neo-Victorian fiction, steampunk has expanded recently into what Jeff Vandermeer claims is an international subculture (11), or sub-cultural movement. The ubiquity of steampunk—in film, graphic novels, fashion, music and art—has disturbed many steampunk authors who see themselves as having developed it, and who feel, as Jess Nevins comments, that this second generation have jettisoned the essential ideological components of the genre for “a style and a pose, even an affectation” (8).

Steampunk writer Dru Pagliassotti argues that there are two essential elements to steampunk: the gaslight aesthetic and the punk element. The gaslight aesthetic involves what Bruce Sterling identifies as a dark pageantry that relates loosely to the Victorian period or a neo-Victorian perception of it: the “dandified gear of aristocrats, peculiar brass goggles, rather stilted personal relationships, and elaborate and slightly kinky underwear” (14). The punk suffix relates to the anarchic politics of punk and provides an ideological critique of the sexual, racial, and class politics underlying Victorian society and which, to some extent, also underlie twenty-first century culture. Nevins similarly identifies steampunk with a rejection of the “instability and obsolescence” (8) of our own time. For Pagliassotti, steampunk without the ideological critique is nothing more than “Steampulp”.

Steampunk’s aim is to produce aestheticised commodities associated with the Victorian (a highly malleable term within the community), but the increased popularity of steampunk has created a tension at its centre between those interested in the look and those committed to a politics of steampunk. At the extremes are what Bruce Sterling calls young people engaging in identity formation, wanting to “dress up in a cool, weird way that baffle the straights” (12); and a steampunk DIY community committed to an anti-capitalist and anti-consumer ideology. Jake Von Slatt declares in his “Steampunk Manifesto” that:

Steampunks eschew the consumerism of popular culture. They purposely pare their lives down, choosing to own a few very fine things rather than closets of mass-produced goods ... Steampunks want to buy something once and then pass it on to our children. Even better, we want to make something once, something that we will use every day for the rest of our lives. Something that will remind us each time we use it that we have skill and ability. Something that no one else in the world has. (218)

As mainstream culture overtakes and absorbs steampunk, it creates a parallel economy that has “gone beyond DIY” (Vandermeer 146) embracing the commercial-marketing practices steampunk’s anarchists and rebels seek to subvert. Thus, steampunk has been taken up or taken over by professional fashion designers (Vandermeer 132-156), “blockbuster” movies like *Sherlock Holmes* (2009), and commercial publishers who market steampunk fiction and art books in ornate, simulated-Victorian covers. Von Slatt’s own call to arms is itself compromised by its circulation through a mass-produced and marketed book aimed at cashed-up popular culture consumers.

The modded children of Doctorow’s “Clockwork Fagin” play out many of the unresolved tensions inherent in steampunk. In particular, the question of what makes steampunk, steampunk? If the editors of *Steampunk!* seem to be actively encouraging the reader to interpret the anthology as steampulp, inviting him/her to try on a series of adventurous identities that come complete with cool gadgets, “Clockwork Fagin” itself does not fit entirely comfortably within this framework. The narrative at first does seem to engage with steampunk’s call to rebellion against mainstream disposable culture. The modded children are commodities sold by their parents to the data mills, only to be discarded as broken machinery and replaced when they are maimed. By shifting the purpose of the mills from cotton to

information-processing, Doctorow not only injects a note of futurism into his alternate past, but makes it clear that the product turned out in the mills is broken children. In highlighting the fate of children rendered valueless when maimed by the machines, Doctorow's text lends itself to an anti-consumerist DIY interpretation with the children representing the easy obsolescence of the factory system.

Further, Monty's rebellion initially embraces the principles of anti-authoritarianism and non-conformity that conventionally lie at the heart of punk ideologies. When Monty murders Grinder, he is lauded as a revolutionary leader, his manifesto is "to end oppression wherever we find it, to be liberators of the downtrodden and the meek" (64). More than that, Monty's revolution raises questions about the distribution of wealth, as Sian notes, "Monty made you ask yourself, 'Why isn't this all mine? Why shouldn't I just take it'" (original emphasis 62). All of which suggest a clear challenge to the prevailing structure of industrial society in Muddy York.

Nevertheless, the conclusion of the story performs a reversal which grants the children a soft landing back into society. After the rebellion, they willingly return to the factory, choosing to re-enter the marketplace. This heralds a fundamental shift in the politics of the text which transitions from revolution to recuperation. In this way, "Clockwork Fagin" straddles the divide between steampunk and steampulp, raising the spectre of DIY anti-consumerism, only to withdraw back into mainstream capitalism, just as it enacts a posthuman metamorphosis only to retreat into the rhetoric of disability.

Roberta Seelinger Trites identifies the paradoxical narrative arc of rebellion followed by reconciliation as characteristic of YA writers' explorations of the power relationships that govern adolescence (*Disturbing the Universe* 34). According to Trites, the chief characteristic separating Young Adult and Children's Literature is the negotiation of social power in YA writing (*Disturbing the Universe* 3). Within YA texts, adolescent protagonists struggle with social institutions, often school or government, following a narrative trajectory from (over) regulation through rebellion to social acceptance. Trites notes "much of the genre is thus dedicated to depicting how potentially out-of-control adolescents can learn to exist within institutional structures" (*Disturbing the Universe* 7). This transition from rebellion to reconciliation creates a paradox in the YA genre which Trites identifies as "rebellious to conform" (34). In this way, adolescent rebellion is canvassed—indeed, Trites notes adolescents are themselves metaphors for change and reform (*Adolescent Reform Novel* xiv)—but this rebellion is contained, and its adolescent instigators reassimilated. An important part of this process is the adolescent protagonist's movement toward maturity and adulthood which results in the protagonist's willing withdrawal from adolescent subject positions for "the greater good" (Trites *Disturbing the Universe* 83). In "Clockwork Fagin", Sian and Monty follow this path, moving from dependence to anti-social self-determination, and finally to socially-acceptable self-determination: from child-victims to mature adults willing to shoulder the responsibilities of guiding the children of Saint Aggie's into a benevolent new factory regime.

To my mind, Doctorow sacrifices a great deal to maintain the short story's YA narrative framework. One of the key casualties is the story's critique of child factory labour. Freed from Grinder's tyranny, Doctorow's children quickly revert to a natural, carefree state suffering no lasting harm from their experiences: their horrific mutilations seem to melt away. As Sian comments:

... now we were free to laze around the house all day or work at our own fancies, painting or reading or just playing like the cherished children of rich families who didn't need to send their young ones to the city to work for the family fortune. (76)

In contrast, there can be no easy rehabilitation for the children of Dickens's streets: Artful Dodger is sent to prison unrepentant for stealing a snuffbox, and Charley Bates "struggled hard and suffered much" to reform himself (414). In this way, the damage done to the children by their exposure to the marketplace in Doctorow's short story is more physical, more visually shocking, but also less fundamentally disturbing than in the Victorian original.

Another casualty is arguably the story's claim to be steampunk. While the children of Saint Aggie's are able to regain their natural state, their life of freedom and autonomy is short lived. After the rebellion, Monty promises the children a utopian idyll in which "we [will] lead a life of leisure, fun and invention, such as befits children of our mental stature and good character" (67). As the children become bored with their "life of Riley" (76), they choose to expand their work on the automaton into an income stream so that they can purchase better food and state-of-the-art prosthetics. The possible tensions between a "life of leisure" and life as a technology worker are silently elided in the juxtaposition between "fun and invention". At the end of the narrative, Monty's factory draws its workers directly from the children of Saint Aggie's. The child-machines are re-purposed, re-fitted with state-of-the-art prosthetics, and returned to the factory. The distinction between the children as workers and as machinery is always blurred by the text—Sian thinks of himself as a cog in Monty's machine—and, in the same way, the children seamlessly metamorphose from being workers and cogs in the factory, to the liberated Saint Aggie's, and finally to Goldfarb and Associates.

If the children of Saint Aggie's, seemingly willingly, advance from the Home into Monty's reformed factory, this happy ending leaves the reader wondering what, if anything, has changed in the society of Muddy York. The revolution at Saint Aggie's is a small and silent one: the Sisters never suspect the true nature of Grinder's condition, Muddy York's authorities do not know that their computing power has been stolen by the children, and the children successfully conceal from the police the fact the automaton has ever existed.

Most disturbingly, Monty and Sian, figuratively and literally, replace Grinder. Sian is promoted to the position of Grinder at the end of the story. Grinder, like Fagin, had his own "merry old gentleman" routine for the Sisters who run Saint Aggie's and other authority figures. He is also a skilled psychological manipulator, transforming his charges by incarceration in the hole (58). When Monty usurps Grinder's position in the Home, he takes on the both the literal and figurative role of puppet-master. In this sense, Monty is as much the "Clockwork Fagin" of the text as Grinder himself. Monty's masterminding of the scheme shows him as similarly adept at psychological manipulation of the Sisters and the police. The problematic implications of this doubling of Monty, Sian, and Grinder are either diffused or simply overlooked. Sian and Monty remain sympathetic protagonists at whose hearts is the goal of doing good for the children of Saint Aggie's—there are no sinister agendas here. Nevertheless, at the end of the story when Sian takes over Saint Aggie's and Monty sets up his own factory, there are worrying undertones. Sian notes that "we have any number of apprentice computermen and computerwomen turning up on our doorsteps. So long as the machineries of industry grind on, the supply will be inexhaustible" (91). Not only are Sian and Monty seemingly untroubled by the continuation of the industrial practices that produce the maimed children for Saint Aggie's and Monty's shop, from which they benefit, but the notion that Monty and Sian are now Grinders is only emphasised by the repetition of:

“machineries of industry *grind on*” (emphasis added, 91). Sian’s narrative also silently elides any dangers that being returned to the marketplace may contain for its child workers—it is never made clear if or why Monty’s new workshop should be a safer environment than the one which mutilated them in the first instance. It’s difficult not to question how this resolution is not a re-commodification of the children as parts of the industrial process, and how conformity can be justified when the environment to which the children are returned is so brutally damaging.

It is certainly possible to write off some of the unsatisfying political implications of the story’s conclusion as a result of the (potentially irreconcilable) difficulties of developing a new genre of Young Adult steampunk. It is even possible—if one embraces identity formation as an acceptable characteristic of steampunk—to define steampunk in a way that includes “Clockwork Fagin”; although there is a stronger case for its inclusion in Pagliassotti’s category of steampulp. But however effectively Doctorow’s modded children capture the aesthetic, inclusion of the text as steampunk nevertheless threatens to collapse the genre because not only does it step back from the kinds of anti-materialist and anti-consumer messages favoured by the original authors of Steampunk, but it actually ends up endorsing a capitalist entrepreneurialism which strikes at the heart of steampunk politics.

Nevertheless, as problematic as these issues render the text, the concerns “Clockwork Fagin” raise are difficulties more for the theory of Young Adult and steampunk literature—and for their anxious critics—than for the text itself which seems entirely untroubled by any inconsistency: neither Sian nor Monty seem to suffer the slightest qualms. Indeed, it is in the irreverent, blasphemous attitude that the text approaches steampunk and its Victorian origins, and particularly the figure of Charles Dickens, that the short story’s strongest claim to steampunk lies. The puppet-master as puppet structure set up in “Clockwork Fagin” not only cleverly reverses the knowing adult/ingenuous child dynamic of *Oliver Twist*, it also constructs a model for thinking through the adolescent-parent relationship between neo-Victorian and Victorian texts, and between Doctorow and Dickens. In one sense, “Clockwork Fagin” is simply a mechanised appropriation of *Oliver Twist* that recognises and represents its own slightly clunky operation with self-reflexive humour. At quite another level, Doctorow himself is the puppet-master winding up a clockwork Dickens, an overtly sacrilegious appropriation not only of the work but the body of *the* great Victorian author. At the climax of “Clockwork Fagin”, Sian brings the constable to witness the Grinder-automaton enact his suicide on the Prince Edward viaduct. This scene re-enacts the episode in *Oliver Twist* where Nancy meets Rose and Brownlow on the bridge watched by Noah Claypole, but it also alludes to a well-known description of Dickens himself. Sian takes great care in preparing his role, practicing his line and facial expression 50 times before a mirror, and Monty provides some particularly melodramatic business for Grinder who paces “back and forth, tugging his hair, shaking his head like a maddened man, and then, abruptly, he’d turn and fling himself bodily off the platform” (87). Mamie Dickens famously captured her father’s eccentric composition practices, writing:

he suddenly jumped from his chair and rushed to a mirror which hung near, and in which I could see the reflection of some extraordinary facial contortions which he was making. He returned rapidly to his desk, wrote furiously for a few moments, and then went again to the mirror. The facial pantomime was resumed, and then turning toward, but evidently not seeing, me, he began talking rapidly in a low voice. Ceasing this soon, however, he returned once more to his desk, where he remained silently writing until luncheon time. (48)

Grinder's final performance on his own platform before the eyes of the constable can thus be read through Dickens's theatricality and talent for impersonating his characters with Doctorow/Monty as behind-the-scenes puppeteer. Interpreting the scene in this light adds new meaning to Doctorow's amusing descriptions of the early failures of the mechanised Grinder:

... he lifted a hand as if greeting, and his mouth stretched into a rictus that might have passed for a grin, and then, very carefully, Grinder punched himself in the face so hard that his head came free from his neck and rolled across the floor with a meaty sound. (77)

Indeed, part of the enjoyment of "Clockwork Fagin" for young adult and Victorianist alike may lie in its unapologetically sacrilegious treatment of Grinder as parental substitute, and Dickens as Victorian sacred cow.

In conclusion, "Clockwork Fagin" is a text that can be read as a neo-Victorian critique of *Oliver Twist*, as adolescent steampunk, or as cynical steampulp marketing, but which fits none of these categories unproblematically. By relocating the children of Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* to the factories of Morley's "Ground in the Mill", and focussing on their modded bodies, Doctorow offers a graphic reinterpretation of the dangers of life that left Victorian children maimed, on the streets, and made them vulnerable to predators such as Fagin and Grinder. Yet, the generic conventions of YA which govern the ending of the story rob its neo-Victorian critique of much of its force, and lead it to reproduce many of the limitations with which it seems to accuse Dickens. Similarly, as steampunk, the way in which the brutal reality of the Victorian factory system combines with the instability and easy obsolescence of twenty-first century mass-market consumer culture in the early part of the short story seems effective, but the narrative's final reclamation and containment of teenage rebellion (a force with which, it must be said, Dickens never contended), ultimately forecloses any real change from occurring in the text. More than that, the story's shift at the end of the story from the industrial system as dark satanic mills to entrepreneurial opportunity, strikes at the very heart of the politics of Steampunk, and puts Doctorow's text at the centre of this contentious debate within steampunk. In spite of all this, "Clockwork Fagin" works both as neo-Victorian critique and steampunk as a direct result of its carelessly irreverent attitude to both Dickens—the puppet to Doctorow's puppet-master—and defiance of the formal rules anxiously being constructed about steampunk by an older generation of writers.

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