

Dexter Palmer on writing *The Dream of Perpetual Motion*

I began writing the work that eventually became *The Dream of Perpetual Motion* in 1996. Basically, it was a means of procrastination, since it allowed me to write something instead of the papers for the courses I was taking in graduate school. Fittingly, the book that inspired it was one that was sitting in the library stacks next to some other forgotten book that I should have been reading as research for a paper (which was to have been on H. G. Wells' novel *Tono-Bungay*). That book was called *Futuredays*, and it contained a reproduction of illustrations for a series of cigarette cards drawn by the artist Jean-Marc Côté in 1900 that purported to show what life would be like in the year 2000.

What was interesting to me from my perspective, just on the edge of the millennium that these images claimed to predict with tongue in cheek, wasn't so much the renderings of alternate forms of transportation that took up most of the collection, but the manner in which some things that apparently seemed fantastic to Côté came off as mundane to me, such as the idea of receiving the news through an audio recording. (On the other hand, there were other instances where Côté wildly missed the mark, even if he was making a joke—for example, an image that depicts a group of people warming themselves at a fireplace that holds not a pile of burning logs, but what appears to be a large chunk of radium).

Côté's reverent portrayal of now-mundane communication methods seemed to me to relate to some of the academic work I was interested in, work that concerned the place where meaning sits between a text and its reader--that is, whether an author imbues a text with a meaning during the composition process that it is the reader's job to unearth, or whether a text created by an author is essentially inert and only acquires meaning when a reader looks upon it, or whether the truth is something in the middle. Moreover, I was interested in whether the answer to that question changed depending on whether the text was mechanically reproduced (a printed pamphlet instead of a handwritten letter, for example) or, as is increasingly the case in our world, the text was initially authored by a computer (as every list of Google search results arguably is).

Writing this novel allowed me the pleasure of storytelling while also letting me figure out what these ideas had to do with each other. Initially I'd intended its setting to be that of the fanciful world predicted by these cards, but as the novel progressed I was influenced by other works—silent science-fiction films such as *Metropolis* and *Woman in the Moon*; psychiatric manuals from the 1850s; black-and-white Disney cartoons; music videos directed by Mark Romanek. Eventually, the book also began to involve other related concepts that my mind was on, until it began to coalesce into a coherent whole through the process of revision and deletion. Two full top-to-bottom rewrites (the first draft was entirely handwritten) got it into a shape that was good enough for me to be willing to show it to someone else; then began the process of submission to agents and editors that eventually led to its publication.

Most of the initial composition of this novel happened before steampunk became the trend it is now. When I first came across the concept of steampunk, it was as an oddball

outgrowth of what was then the far more popular genre of cyberpunk, and its definition was very narrow—I think I’ve read exactly one novel that fits that original earlier definition, *The Difference Engine* by William Gibson and Bruce Sterling. But in the meantime the term has come to encompass not just science-fiction stories set in a meticulously re-imagined Victorian era—retro-futuristic works that aren’t remotely Victorian (such as the film *Brazil*) are now considered steampunk, while works of science fiction that were actually written during the Victorian period (such as the novels of Jules Verne) have also been retroactively grandfathered in.

And so though this work wouldn’t have been considered steampunk back when I was writing it, it seems to be steampunk now. To me, this speaks less to the dilution of what steampunk is defined as—after all, the newest words are the ones most apt to change their meanings over time—than to the continuing blurring of the boundaries between all genres and categories of literature. My favorite books tend to be those that pull from a number of different genres, or that aren’t interested in ultimately meaningless distinctions between high and low culture. So, in short, I’ve written the kind of novel I like to read, in the hope that others will enjoy it as well.