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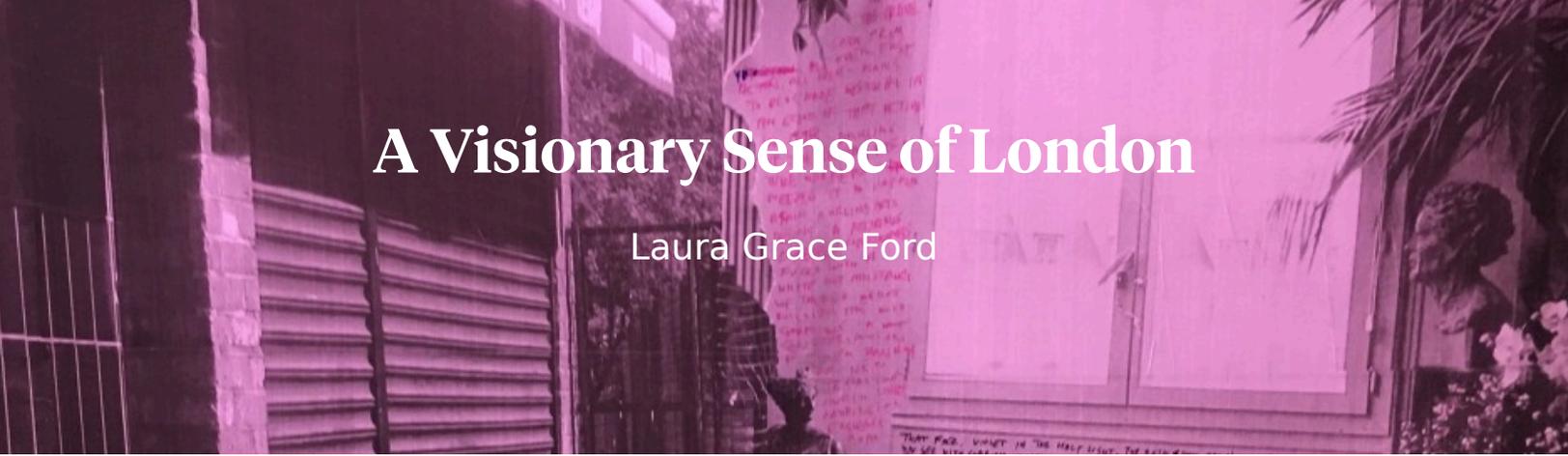
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A Visionary Sense of London, Laura Grace Ford



A Visionary Sense of London

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Authors

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Introduction

This Cover Collaboration presents the edited and illustrated transcript of a lecture given by Laura Grace Ford at Tate Britain, in conjunction with the conference William Blake and the Idea of the Artist (29 November 2019) and the exhibition William Blake (11 September 2019–2 February 2020), both also held at Tate Britain.

Chartered Streets

My intention isn't to give an exhaustive account of William Blake's life, to give biographical details, or to construct an idea of the man in a quotidian sense, but instead to think about how he cultivates a visionary sense of London by walking.

I'm going to speak as an artist, not a scholar, and I'm going to talk about London in 2019, about the city now and how Blake still resounds in it. To me Blake is a spectral force, he haunts the contemporary moment. My own work is generated by walking in London, long *dérives* that in some way channel the affective currents in the city. My work is socio-geographic—it draws on the experience of the collective, of the social, and this is something I recognise in Blake. His work isn't made in isolation; it doesn't come from a position of solipsistic withdrawal. It comes directly from working in London, living in London, and long rambling drifts to the edges of the city.

In the poem *London*, he's among people, close enough to read their faces and see what he describes as "Marks of weakness, marks of woe" (Fig. 1). This isn't a faceless multitude, an anonymous crowd. What he notices, what he feels, is individual suffering folded and multiplied.



Figure 1.

William Blake, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, Plate 39, "London" (Bentley 46), 1749, Colour printed relief etching, 18.4 × 12.1 cm. Collection of Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection B1978.43.1570. Digital image courtesy of Yale Center for British Art.

This is a deeply divided city, a city riven with injustice, where Blake hears the "cry of every Man", and the "Infants cry of fear". These cries reverberate, they are all around him, and he doesn't seek to insulate himself or block them out; instead, he interprets them, channels them, positions them within the wider context of colonisation and exploitation.

My own deployment of the *dérive* is a move towards mapping the social, the residual emotions of the collective. The idea of mapping a city's psychic infrastructure, which is what I think Blake was doing, moves beyond the observations of the individual towards a collective reading of the terrain. Fred

Moten and Stefano Harney talk about “hapticality”, the feelings you can tune into through others. ¹ Cedric Robinson said that the dispossessed created “solvent-objects” that could erode attempts to fix the city in a colonial bind. ²

What interests me in Blake is the idea that sometimes the edge of the city folds back in and the liminal emerges in the centre. It’s in these gaps where political life emerges as a current, where excluded voices become audible and the expression of a collective unconscious can be heard (Figs. 2 and 3).



Figure 2.

Laura Grace Ford, Alpha, Isis, Eden, installation photograph, 1 February – 18 March 2017, multi-media installation made in collaboration with sound engineer Jack Latham. Digital image courtesy of Laura Grace Ford.



Figure 3.

Laura Grace Ford, *Alpha, Isis, Eden*, installation photograph, 1 February – 18 March 2017, multi-media installation made in collaboration with sound engineer Jack Latham. Digital image courtesy of Laura Grace Ford.

When Blake says “In every voice: in every ban, The mind-forg’d manacles I hear”, I think about the UK now: payday lenders, zero hours contracts, inadequate housing. The pressures we experience at work, and how we’re repeatedly told that we as individuals determine our fate; that if we’re poor, it’s our own fault for not constructing a better narrative. This idea lies at the heart of contemporary neoliberalism: it’s there in cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), in managerial dictats, in back-to-work schemes, and TV talk shows. It’s almost as if Blake foresaw this contemporary form of psychic binding.

The historian E.P. Thompson found that in an original sketch of the poem *London*, Blake used the term “german forg’d links” before changing it to “mind-forg’d manacles”. Instead of being historically specific and speaking

about the monarchy of his time—the House of Hanover—I think Blake was writing for eternity, the future, a people yet to come, and our current situation.³

The first time that I came to see the William Blake exhibition at Tate Britain, I walked from St James's Park. There was a lot of building work underway, an intensification of it around the tube station, with concrete spines, prefabricated rooms, armatures, fences. The city was under incredible pressure here, they were branding it "Buckingham Green, a new quarter for London." I think about Blake's London again, his use of the term "chartered streets" in *London* to speak about the domination of chartered companies in the late eighteenth century, the parcelling up and privatisation of the city. In Blake's London, even the river was being chartered by the East India Company. This must have horrified Blake, who revered the river as a site of spiritual significance, who always lived and worked within a mile or two of it, and who wouldn't have been able to dissociate the East India Company's activity on the Thames and their overseas colonies.

Blake was living in the time of enclosures, the process of seizing and privatising common land by acts of parliament, which intensified between 1760 and 1820, when in "village after village, common rights [were] lost".⁴ To quote E.P. Thompson, "Enclosure [...] was a plain enough case of class robbery".⁵ This intensive span maps roughly onto Blake's lifetime, and I think the phrase "chartered streets" draws a line between the enclosures and colonisation—he means he's witnessing the same process.



Figure 4.

William Blake, Jerusalem, Plate 1, Frontispiece, 1804-1820, Relief etching, 34.3 × 26.4 cm. Collection of Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection B1992.8.1(1). Digital image courtesy of Yale Center for British Art



Figure 5.

Laura Grace Ford, Untitled Collage, 2016. Digital image courtesy of Laura Grace Ford.

We see it in London now, contemporary enclosures emerging in multiple forms: Business Improvement Districts, Special Economic Zones, gated communities, and compulsory purchase orders. The desire pulsing through Blake's work, and the milieu and traditions it emerged from, is to unbind, loosen, and open up those private resources and return them to the commons. In Blake's longest illustrated book, *Jerusalem* (1804–1820), England (personified by Albion) must be reunited with the eponymous city to connect all of humanity in love, and I think this restoration of the commons is what Jerusalem represents (Figs. 4 and 5).

Sorcery and Counter-Sorcery

In London 2019, we can see that four decades of deregulated capital has wrought a systematic attack on the commons. Urban master plans are the kind of single vision renderings Blake despised, which reduce the city to measurements, net worth, securities, and investments. But the marketing of them operates in another terrain. The luxury developments rising in serried formations across the city cast a psychic net over our vision of London, and their promotional CGI images of the future are a form of libidinal engineering, late capitalist sorcery. It's obvious that neoliberalism has learned to hijack the psychic channels that Blake recognised on his walks through the city.

London is possessed by hoardings promoting private developments (Figs. 6 and 7). These images of luxury lifestyles have become so ubiquitous that we barely notice them; champagne swilling bankers looming over scenes of

abject poverty are part of the urban fabric, internalised in the dream grammar of the city. Eerie and unsettling in their conjuring of the future, they represent something unrealized, something virtual.

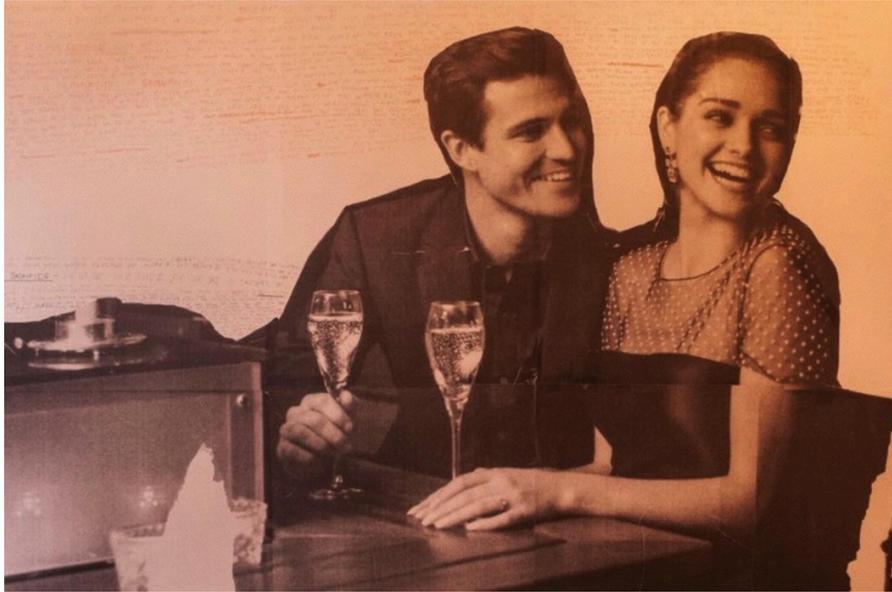


Figure 6.

Laura Grace Ford, Alpha, Isis, Eden, installation photograph, 1
February-18 March 2017, multimedia installation made in collaboration
with sound engineer, Jack Latham. Digital image courtesy of Laura Grace
Ford.

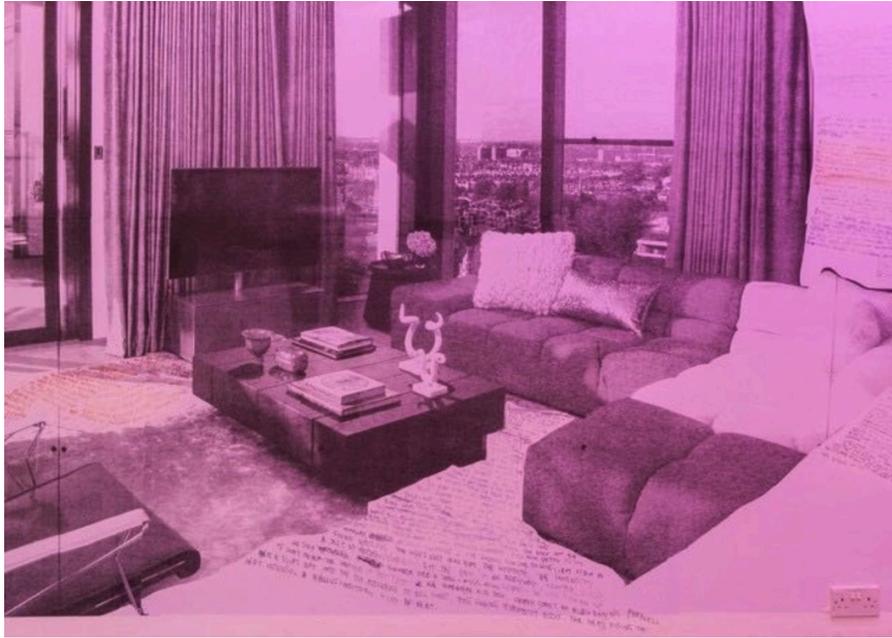


Figure 7.

Laura Grace Ford, *Alpha, Isis, Eden*, installation photograph, 1
February–18 March 2017, multimedia installation made in collaboration
with sound engineer, Jack Latham. Digital image courtesy of Laura Grace
Ford.

These developments are often accompanied by promotional films to lure investors. Their projections corral us into a hallucinogenic zone in which we're lulled into a set of dissociative tropes, where in opiate-induced dreams we hover above buildings and drift through walls. This oneiric-delirial time evokes the idea of haunting and absence, a "decanted" and socially cleansed inner London. The halo of films and hoardings make a claim on psychic space, they define the terms of a new social imaginary.

Blake's own visions of London were a kind of counter-sorcery, a way of reconnecting with an ancient English history that opposed the eighteenth-century rationalism of his time, which to him seemed sterile, calculated, and deathly (Figs. 8 and 9). This lineage emanated from Albion and ran through the true levellers, Winstanley's Diggers, and the dissenting sects that Blake was born into; it spoke of the commons, a shared experience of joy and abundance, and a glimpse of something yet to be realized, something virtual—a post-capitalist England.



Figure 8.

Laura Grace Ford, *Savage Messiah*, no. 1 (June 2005): "Solstice Skag Bonanza", non-paginated. Digital image courtesy of Laura Grace Ford.

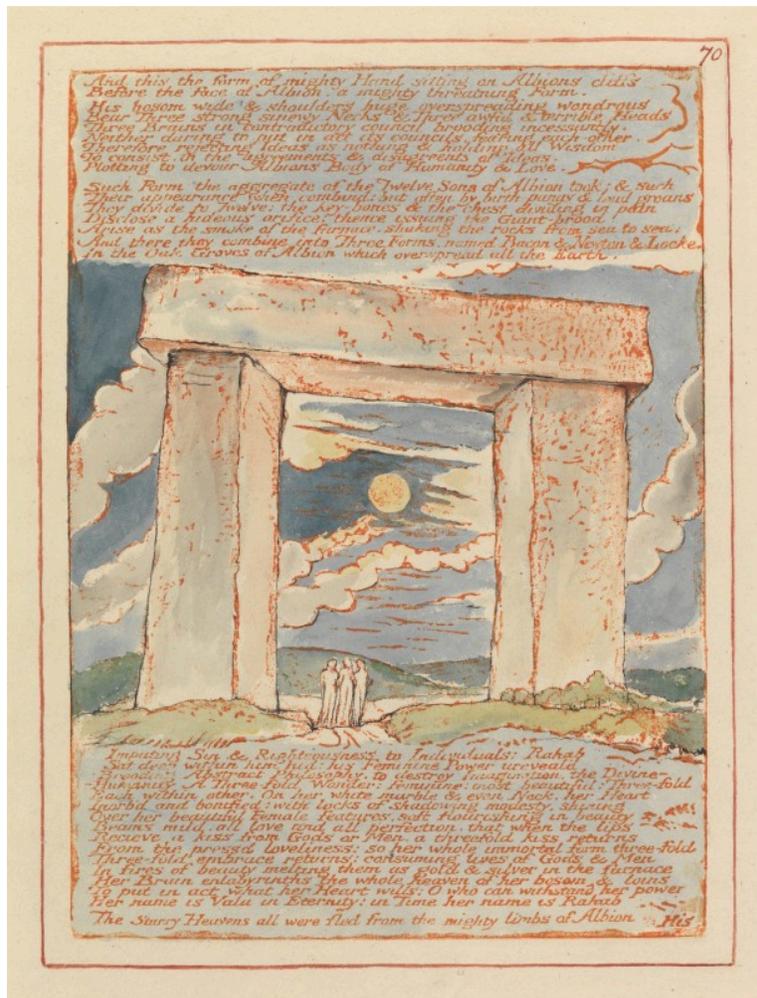


Figure 9.

William Blake, Jerusalem, Plate 70, "And this the form of mighty Hand...", 1804-1820, Relief etching, 34.3 x 26.4 cm. Collection of Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection B1992.8.1(70). Digital image courtesy of Yale Center for British Art.

I think today in London, it's not just the streets we're fighting over, but also the psychic terrain. Blake, who lived in a city of the seen and the unseen, understood both. When he says:

The Fields from Islington to Marybone,
 To Primrose Hill and Saint John's Wood,
 Were builded over with pillars of gold;
 And there Jerusalem's pillars stood.

the earthly and divine appear simultaneously. The London he inhabited was socially divided and politically febrile, it was a city of mobs, of destitution, and eruptions of violence. Blake was swept up in riots, he saw the Albion Flour Mills burn, and wore the red cap of the Jacobins, but he also saw angels in London—it was where he communed with ghosts.

Crossing Victoria Street, I see police everywhere closing roads, Parliament Square beyond, their fluorescent lines jamming the exits. There's a week of protests by Extinction Rebellion, and Blake echoes through it; his visionary consciousness, his heightened sensitivity, was deployed in the war against injustice and the violation of the earth through exploitation and greed. The protestors are catching up with Blake now, gradually shedding vestiges of liberalism as their exposure to the apparatus of the state increases. Blake's call to overcome the walls and fences, the chartered streets, is being adopted by greater numbers; if we want to avert climate catastrophe, it's the only option.

Blake was vehemently against the Enlightenment concept of the individual, the stable unitary subject. He rejected the idea that humans are autonomous and bound individuals who exist above nature; this was not how he saw the world. Instead, he saw forces, energy flows, light, he saw immanence and connectedness ([Figs. 10](#) and [11](#)). This worldview upsets the neoliberal privileging of the sovereign individual by calling upon the collective to free ourselves. The self in Blake's work is present not as a monolithic, insoluble I, but as a vessel channelling signals. His work is a contribution to and enunciation of the collective, and speaks to what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari called a people "yet to come"—in our counter-national anthem, it is WE who can build Jerusalem, not I. ⁶



Figure 10.
 Laura Grace Ford, *Untitled Collage*, 2016. Digital image courtesy of Laura Grace Ford.

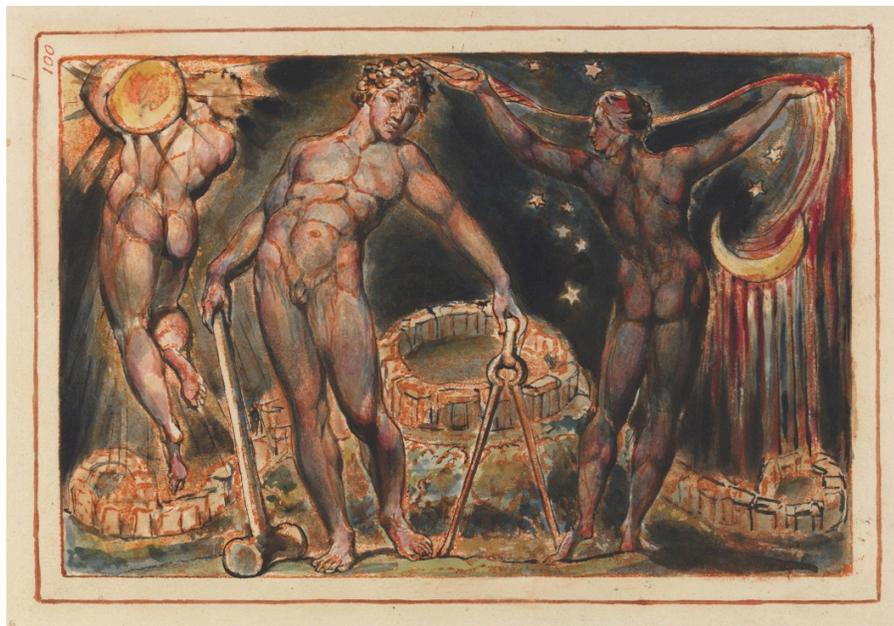


Figure 11.
 William Blake, *Jerusalem*, Plate 97, "Awake! Awake Jerusalem...", 1804-1820, Relief etching, 34.3 × 26.4 cm. Collection of Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection B1992.8.1(97). Digital image courtesy of Yale Center for British Art.

The Extinction Rebellion protests also carry traces of the London I came across in the early 1990s—threads unspooling from Reclaim the Streets actions against environmental degradation, Spiral Tribe parties under the

strobe of Canary Wharf, and also convoy culture, the protests and festivals at Stonehenge. I connected with these counter-cultural scenes and protest movements—that's how I mapped London. The free party scene opened up radically different perceptions of the city and temporary occupations forged a reconfiguration of architecture, a new way of negotiating the terrain. I recognise the same forces in Blake, he haunts these movements, these visions of a decolonised city without gated communities or private property and locked down riverside developments.

It's Blake's capacity to radically reimagine the city that I think is so necessary, so urgent. His writing resonates most strongly in the sites where we're radicalised in effervescences of collective joy. You can sense the force of Blake's work in experiences of psychedelic intensity. My own perception of London was affected and intensified through my experience of rave—which felt like tapping into that same counter-history, a subterranean current. The cultural theorist Mark Fisher, in an essay called "Baroque Sunbursts", talks about rave culture within the context of the compulsory individualism of neoliberalism, and the crushing of collectivity. He says:

Rave's ecstatic festivals revived the use of time and land which the bourgeoisie had forbidden and sought to bury. Yet, for all that it recalled those older festive rhythms, rave was evidently not some archaic revival. It was a spectre of post-capitalism more than of pre-capitalism.⁷

And I think that's important, that tapping into historical currents is not some form of re-enactment or exercise in nostalgia, but a sense of the melting of linear time, moving into the expanse of what Blake recognised as a collective history (Fig. 12). Mark Fisher goes on to say:

the "energy flash" of rave, now seems like a memory bleeding through from a mind that is not ours. In fact, the memories come from ourselves as we once were: a group consciousness that waits in the virtual future not only in the actual past. So it is perhaps better to see the other possibilities that these baroque sunbursts illuminate not as some distant Utopia, but as a carnival that is achingly proximate, a spectre haunting even the most miserably de-socialised spaces.⁸

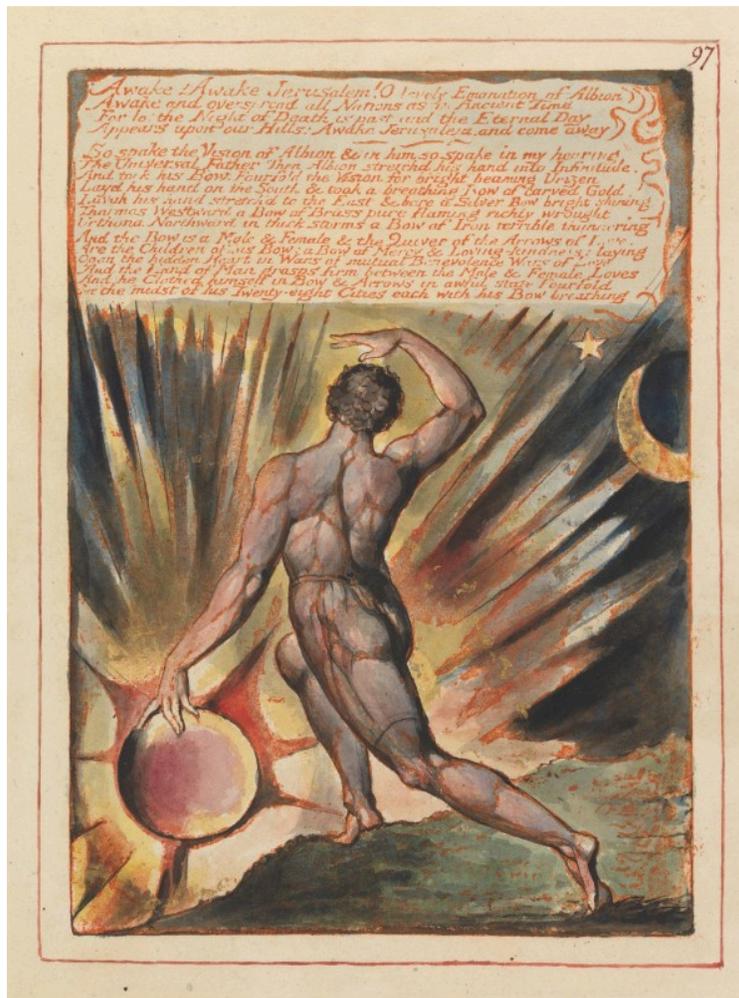


Figure 12.

William Blake, Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion, Bentley Copy E, 1804–1820, Relief etching, 26.4 × 34.3 cm. Collection of Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection B1992.8.1(100). Digital image courtesy of Yale Center for British Art.

To experience freedom and liberation, no matter how temporarily, is to have one's expectations raised. Emancipatory moments haunt us; they persist as indelible marks, and despite efforts to naturalise the dominant order through the processes of recuperation and repression, these marks are never fully erased. Like a palimpsest with layers of text written and overwritten, there are moments when previous inscriptions are grasped with vivid clarity.

Quantum Time in Another London

I walk through Strutton Ground, a pocket of an older, working-class London, a different kind of temporality, which is becoming gentrified but still with some vestige of another London. I used to work around here fifteen years ago, in a

Salvation Army hostel on Westminster Bridge Road. I ran art classes for homeless people and it wasn't an easy job, sometimes there would be fifty or sixty men crushed into the church hall, for warmth and shelter mostly, and the sweet tea and digestives. I remember their drawings and some haunt me still, images of London which ranged from the cartoonish to the cosmic, from labelled mythologies to mental maps. It was my first job as an outreach worker for Westminster Council, a way in through a class that no one else wanted. I feel Blake's presence in these neglected, overlooked sites of the city, with those huddled on the pavements, whose abject suffering is so ubiquitous it's barely commented on.

Then Page Street, I cut through the estates, a mossy path under cherry branches, winter flowering jasmine, a kettle whistling through an open window. These are the unofficial routes through the city, the writing in the margins of official text, moments of epiphany unsung and undocumented.

Then Millbank and the Thames. On the opposite side MI5, the ziggurats of St George's Wharf, and luxury towers around Vauxhall. This is London in the grip of finance capital and the logic of surveillance, which was being implemented in Blake's own time. But the river is a threshold site, where time behaves differently. The regimentation of clock time has no relevance, the tidal river is governed by moon phases. And there, for me, in that tidal sequence, the encounter with Blake is the most lucid. I think about *Auguries of Innocence*, when he says:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour

This strikes me as the essence of Blake's vision, like the eye of the heart in Sufism, Spinoza's single substance, or when Hermes Trismegistus recognised that all things are interwoven, and said the words recorded on the Emerald Tablet: "In truth, certainly and without doubt, whatever is below is like that which is above. And whatever is above is like that which is below, to accomplish the miracles of the one thing." Blake follows when he says 'All deities reside in the human breast' and that "every thing that lives is Holy".

9

Place can be a site of resistance to neoliberalism, and I want to return to the lines where Blake describes Jerusalem manifest in London and names particular places: Marylebone, Primrose Hill, St Johns Wood. This privileging of certain places strikes me as a deployment of the counter-sorcery I mentioned before; one more tactic still relevant today.

If you think about contemporary London, how areas are rebranded, how places are “re-made” under the rubric of urban regeneration, then perhaps we need to re-examine how Blake understood place. It’s important to remember Blake’s years as a boy, making engravings in Westminster Abbey, somewhere he absorbs the aura of the sacred. He develops a deep understanding of Gothic art, and recognises its forms, the living line, as if the stone is animated, moving and flowing, and his sense of a mystical geography must come partly from this experience. A paragraph from Peter Ackroyd’s book *Blake* vividly evokes the intensity of this experience:

Images of arches and ogres and canopies reappear through his subsequent art, springing directly from his time among the ancient monuments of the church, but there is also a more fugitive and elusive atmosphere that he recreates in much of his later work. He experienced the coolness and seclusion of “masses of stone in ordered forms” in the nave and the ambulatories, he knew the many rooms of intricate workmanship, the great doors, the narrow passages that seem to lead into the interior darkness of some labyrinth. It was an image of a stone world which Blake was to resurrect in his prophetic verse, at once forbidding, austere and inspiring. His art and poetry are filled with the images of steep steps and ancient doorways, of cloisters and arches and crypts that suggest dissolution and decay but which are also often seen as harbingers of a spiritual world still lying upon the surface of the earth. ¹⁰

The way time behaves in a sacred place like Westminster Abbey is to do with the eternal. Blake works with this kind of time to map the city, panning slowly across vistas, opening long lines of sight. The visions become eternal, cosmic. But London persists, and the visions contain names, with architectural details that we can recognise in his drawings. This mystical-spatial approach allows contours and edges to emerge, delineations of imaginary spaces, the other worlds we might begin to realize.

[mul]The idea of being able to stand in a churchyard in Marylebone and emerge in Primrose Hill is a conversation about quantum time. It’s a move between states or positions, which is different to travelling time, and is a break in the sense that Will Alexander or Fred Moten might talk about it. It also has something to do with the shape-shifting and time-travelling of Detroit Techno. Blake’s idea of the energy field, portal, or star gate is a device I use in my own work to describe the melting of geographical and temporal boundaries and the proximity of other social fields, other worlds

(Fig. 13). In a sense, it operates like Simondon's privileged points, or Benjamin's dialectical image, or Mark Fisher's baroque sunbursts—a moment where past and future can be grasped simultaneously.

Visionary Consciousness

Blake's works are psycho-topographies and fugitive temporalities. They feel contemporary, and fit into current philosophical discussions around entanglement and quantum mechanics, seen in the work of people like Karen Barad. There's a renewed interest in Spinoza and Lucretius, and Blake fits into that as well; it allows us to occupy multiple zones simultaneously.

In the article "Quantum Entanglements and Hauntological Relations of Inheritance", Barad speaks of a ghostly sense of dis/continuity where, "There is no overarching sense of temporality, of continuity in place. Each scene diffracts various temporalities within and across the field of spacetime mattering. Scenes never rest, but are reconfigured within, dispersed across, and threaded through one another." ¹¹ For me, she could be writing on Blake.

Years ago, I found a book in a charity shop, a self-published pamphlet of sacred sites. I had always been transfixed by Blake's drawing of a churchyard in Marylebone, a garden encircling an energy field. We'd searched the neighbourhood before but it had evaded us, slipped out of sight in a skein of scaffolding and railings. Now, it appeared as a hallucination in the pamphlet, the conjuration of something numinous and unworldly from the mottled pages of that book. St Marylebone. A Corinthian portico with eight columns and gilded caryatids around the steeple. It showed a cobbled path and an overarching plane tree in the centre. I felt a euphoric surge, a giddy sensation like clary sage or psilocybin, a trembling beneath my feet, the sensation of standing on uneven flagstones. Those dreams I sometimes have, tectonic plates shifting. I remember someone describing the same dreams to me years ago.

And that brings me to where I want to finish, by thinking about walking as an experience of sensory derangement (Figs. 14, 15, and 16). A teeming metropolis like London can certainly produce this experience. This idea of sharpening our perception, or moving into a higher register in order to cultivate a collective visionary sense, seems pertinent in 2019 when London ripples beneath a veil of weed smoke, alcohol, and SSRIs. There is a desire for collective lucidity and joy in place of atomised intoxication, where drugs are a means of privately managing pressure. Everyone is haunted by that desire, and recognises that the offer of citalopram, supermarket wine, CBT is more often about blocking life than living it.



Figure 13.

Laura Grace Ford, Pylon, 2019. Digital image courtesy of Laura Grace Ford.



Figure 14.

Laura Grace Ford, Server Farms Pines, 2019. Digital image courtesy of Laura Grace Ford.



Figure 15.

Laura Grace Ford, Barking, 2019. Digital image courtesy of Laura Grace Ford.

We see sensory derangement and the cultivation of a visionary consciousness in Thomas De Quincey's London, where the city becomes a labyrinth constructed from his opium-fuelled wanderings. For Walter Benjamin, hashish allows a radical reordering of the city. We also see it in Surrealism, the Negritude movement, and the poetry of Aimé Césaire. Blake's intoxication seems to come from a similar place, but instead of using drugs to tune in, walking the city seems to be the precursor, perhaps even the prerequisite, for many of these visions and encounters with the divine.

The currents Blake tuned into are live, spectral but live. He shows us glimpses of a higher level of consciousness, and tactics we might need to call forth an absent collective subject to occupy those new social imaginaries, those alternative worlds aching proximate to ours.

Footnotes

- ¹ Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013), 105-107. Available at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/lkcsb_research/5025.
- ² Cedric J. Robinson, *The Terms of Order: Political Science and the Myth of Leadership* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 5.
- ³ E.P. Thompson, *Witness Against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 183.
- ⁴ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1963), 198.
- ⁵ Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 218.
- ⁶ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. B. Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).
- ⁷ Mark Fisher, "Baroque Sunbursts", in Nav Haq (ed.), *Rave: Rave and its Influences on Art and Culture* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2016), 45.

- 8 Fisher, "Baroque Sunbursts", 45.
- 9 These quotations are from Plates 11 and 27, respectively, in William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790-1793).
- 10 Peter Ackroyd, *Blake* (London: Vintage Books, 1999), 45.
- 11 Karen Barad, "Quantum Entanglements and Hauntological Relations of Inheritance: Dis/continuities, SpaceTime Enfoldings, and Justice-to-Come", *Derrida Today* 3, no. 2 (November 2010): 240-268.

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