



POETRY/MUSIC INTERFACE IN "LONDON:" TOWARDS A MULTIMODAL SEMIOTIC READING

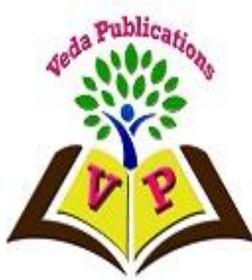
Ines Tebourski

Higher Institute of Applied Studies in Humanities, El Kef. Tunisia.

inestebourski3@gmail.com

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.54513/JOELL.2022.9112>

ABSTRACT



This paper entitled "Poetry/ Music Interface in "London:" Towards a Multimodal Semiotic Reading" aims at examining the way William Blake's London was "re- written" by being both adopted and adapted for an animated song in 2008. It seeks to show first, that the traditional readings of Blake's Works which analysed his poetry and visual art separately have failed to articulate their ontological dimensions and did not come to terms with the energetics of Blake's oeuvre that consists mainly of creating parallel universes. The paper, later, focuses on the interface between the words, the image and the rhythm in Alex Robinson's "London" (2008) which suggested a new way of understanding Blake's *London* and the world in general. The choice of the mode through which to re-introduce what was written is at the crux of the "re-writing" process and music is one of the most persuasive modes in what Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen refer to as "multimodal communication." The multimodal discourse accentuates the importance of the different modes of communication including the word, sound, image, rhythm and colour, and stresses the importance of their added meanings; hence my choice of multimodal semiotic analysis for this paper.

Keywords: *Poetry- Music- William Blake- Alex Robinson- Re-writing- Multimodal*

INTRODUCTION

William Blake is one of the most controversial artists and pioneering poets of the romantic era. His mastery of different media allowed him to present his vision of the world in an atypical way. His artistic productions are highly symbolic so much so that they transcend the poetics of words, and engage in a world where the sound, the painting and the colour help in constructing new meanings and add new significations to the already existing ones. Blake's works have impressed other poets, painters and even filmmakers and singers in the present age; these understood the value of his multimodal productions and sought to "re-write" them by adding new perspectives to his works in a way that introduces their own vision of the world. The present paper seeks to show how William Blake's *London* has been "re-written" by being imported from one genre to another, from poetry to music. The focus is on the inherent multimodal nature of the poem and the way it was reimagined/rewritten by Alex Robinson in 2008.

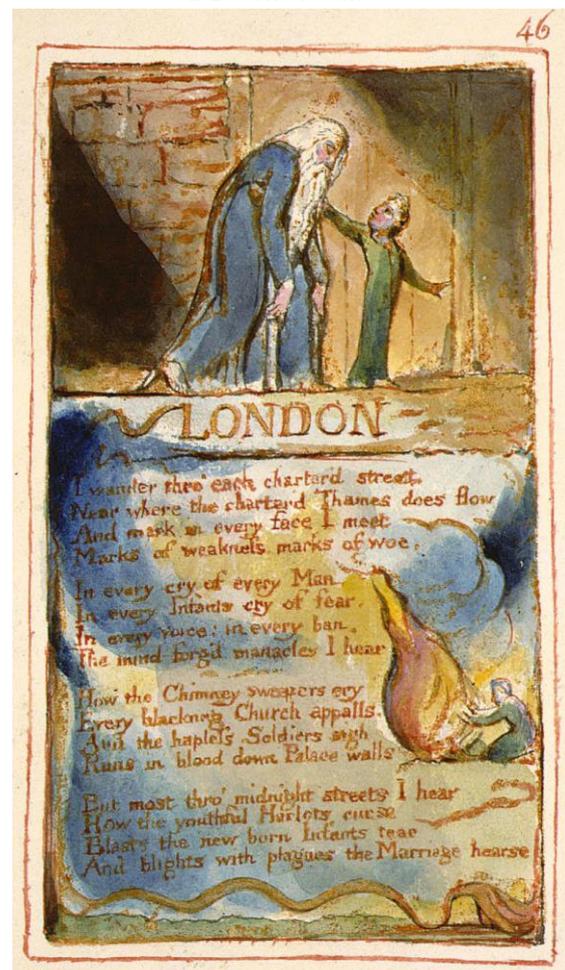
1- *London's* Multimodal World

In a world that offers its signs through different modes, an eclectic reading of these signs is the way to fathom what otherwise would be partial and unclear. Blake's *London*, which is an amalgamation of different semiotic modes, lends itself to different layers of meanings. Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen argue that multimodal products make use of "several semiotic modes in the design of a semiotic product or event, together with the particular way in which these modes are combined. They may for instance reinforce each other ('say the same thing in different ways'), fulfil complementary roles ... or be

hierarchically ordered" (Gunther Kress. Theo Van Leeuwen: 20). One of the challenges faced in the semiotic analysis of *London* lies in relating the meanings communicated by the poem to that of the painting and its corresponding colours in a reading that takes into consideration the poem's multimodal nature.

Here is the poem as written and illuminated by William Blake. Two coloured images accompany the poem, one at the top and the other on the right margin.

1-1 The Poem



1-2 The Semiotics of the Image and the Colour

This poem, which belongs to Blake's *Songs of Experience* (1794), is a multimodal work where



meaning is not communicated through words, rhythm and sounds only, but also through the pictorial element too. John Bateman's "pre-attentive perception" stresses the idea that certain objects attract our attention before others (Bateman 60-61). The first striking element in the plate of *London* is the painting at the top of the poem. Here, the language of the image and the colour precedes the language of the words. Kress and Van Leeuwen stress the importance of colours in meaning making, asserting that "Just as language allows us to realize speech acts, so colour allows us to realize 'colour acts'" (Gunther Kress. Theo Van Leeuwen: 348). Hence, colour is used as an integral means of signification not a mere ornament.

When reproducing new copies of his poems, Blake -more often than not- changes the colours. As for *London*, the same colours are maintained for each re-produced copy. Although there is no colour theory that provides clear and fixed meanings of colours, the symbolic meaning of some colours cannot be negated. This part endeavours to highlight the importance of colour symbolism in understanding both painting and poem.

Placed at the top of the poem, the painting of a child reaching out to an old man with one hand and pointing to something else with the other frames our thoughts and expectations. Clothed in light colours, both the child and the old man are salient against the background of the painting. The child who "symbolizes innocence which is the state anterior to original sin and hence paradisaal state" (John Chevalier & al 189) is wearing a green garment. Semiotically, green is the colour of hope; it is also "the colour of the awakening of life" (451). The child

here may stand for life in its springtime or rebirth; he is the incarnation of hope and continuity. The old white-bearded man, who stands for "the personification of the age-old wisdom of humanity" (Cirlot 498) is dressed in blue which is a colour "symbolic of heaven". It is "the deepest colour" and "in its absolute quality, the purest" (Jean Chevalier & al 102). One may argue therefore, that the child is trying to call upon the "wisdom" of this white-bearded figure to communicate his story. This argument is supported by the way the child is depicted as the one taking the lead with his right foot on the front, guiding the "heavenly" figure to the world where he belongs: the world of the forgotten and marginalized Londoners

On the right margin of the poem, a second painting captures one's attention. The old man disappears and the child is presented as cold and homeless. Kneeling in front of fire, he seeks security and warmth in a city that denies him care and protection. The fire is coloured mainly in yellow, red, and pink. Yellow is a colour that is "hard to put out and always overflowing the limits within which one tries to confine it" (1137). Bright red, such as the one opted for in this painting, represents the "spur to action. It is the image of ardour and beauty, of all that is impulsive and generous, of youth and health and wealth and love, free and victorious" (794). Joined together in this painting, these two hot overflowing colours turn to a symbol of power. With the position of the child in front of the fire, it seems that he is not only seeking its heat, but also its power and protection. Pink is also one of the colours chosen by Blake to colour *London's* fire. It is in fact a light red hue situated between red and white. It takes its



meaning from the passion of the red and the purity of the white. This colour has direct links with the child, for it is associated with softness, innocence and kindness. It is as if the child's thoughts and feelings merged into the fire whose colours came to represent different sides of the little boy who can be seen through the strength of the yellow, the vividness of the red and the purity of the pink. By empowering the fire with strong expressive colours, Blake is endowing the little boy with its strength, for the expansive and overflowing power of this fire can deliver the message his voice cannot.

We also notice Blake's use of yellow and blue at both sides of the poem. It is as if the colour yellow were invading the poem from the right side and blue from the left one (though in other versions of the poem, these two colours intermesh to cover the words of the poem). Yellow which is an expansive and strong colour as afore stated, is also "the colour of eternal life" (1138). Blue too is considered as an eternal colour "centered solely upon itself," it "is not of this world, it evokes the idea of eternity, calm and lofty, superhuman" (103). Blake's choice of these two colours can be understood as his own way of immortalising his poem and allowing it to "overflow" the limits of its own words.

The poem itself is written in orange. "Lying midway between yellow and red, orange is the most actinic colour" (723). As a secondary colour, orange draws its meaning from the sum of its constituents; it encapsulates the energy of yellow, a colour symbolic of the sun, and the power of red as related to fire. Opting for orange, Blake foregrounds his poem by adding to its visibility. This is used by Blake to denote the idea that colours are not reserved to

paintings, and that they may endow the poem with meanings too. This is part of Blake's "fearful symmetry" where colours are not allowed to relegate the poem to a secondary position and where the interface between the pictorial and the poetic broadens the perspectives of understanding his works.

1-3 The Politics of the Word and the Sound

The semiotics of the colours, as studied in the previous section, stand in opposition with the semiotics of the words and their respective sounds in the poem. The first lines of the poem already communicate the idea of a shackled streets and fettered streets and river being "charter'd" under the capitalist system and deprived of freedom, hence of happiness. The choice of emotive words such as "woe" and "weakness" already sets in the gloomy, sad and desperate mood of the poem. This is more stressed by Blake's use of alliteration in words such as "the soldier's sigh" and consonance in the repetition of "s" and "w" in the line that goes "marks of weakness, marks of woe"; or else the letter "m" in "the mind-forg'd manacles I hear." This has the effect of highlighting even more the monotonous binding rhythm of the poem and accordingly that of life in London. If we add the repetition of the word "hear" to the already suggested meanings of the painting, we sense that the poem is inviting the reader to "hear" its story the way the infant in the painting preceding it invites the old man to his world. The poem is there to tell its "appalling" story and the reader is there to "hear" it.

The poem is also suggestive of the pun of the word "hear" which is a homophone of the indexical word "here." It is through this indexical element that



Blake seeks to captivate the reader's attention to the London of the eighteenth century. The "here" of the poem is a place where the king is a tyrant ruler protecting himself behind his "palace walls" and sending soldiers off to lost wars; and where the church is a ruthless religious institution that ignores the sufferings of children such as the chimneysweepers. The semantic field of words such as "weakness, woe, fear, tear, cry, sigh, blight" and their respective sharp sounds takes us into the inner world of Londoners whose feelings and related voices, bespeak pain and despair. London is now communicating with the reader, inviting him/her to "hear" the voices of those living "here."

Not only does the poet read the pain on the faces of the Londoners or hear the voice of their suffering, but he can also "hear" the voice of their "mind" manacles. The image of the "mind forg'd manacles" is at the heart of the understanding of the poem. So strong is the image, that it kills the last glimpse of hope for those Londoners. Were those manacles flung on them by exterior forces, hope would never be thwarted, but alas, the manacles are set in the mind, a chain so hard to break from outside, since it is self-set and interiorised.

Through the repetition of the word "every" (seven times) in the poem, Blake conveys that this situation does not relate to a precise category of people i.e the infant, the chimneysweepers, the soldiers or the harlots, but extends to "every Man." It is a whole cycle of contamination caused by the harlot who "blights with plague the marriage hearse." This cycle keeps on affecting the infant, the chimney sweeper, then the soldier. Thus, the whole

cycle of the poem comes full circle, and hope is lost forever.

The speaker in the poem started his journey in London as a Flaneur wandering the streets of London; Visiting "every" street and hearing "every" voice; but it seems that he could only come across the "chartered" streets and only hear the voices of pain, cry and cursing. Even the marriage which is the only positive word in the poem is twined with death. It is as if the speaker were a tortured spirit wandering the street of London and hearing just voices akin to his own. The London he describes is not that of a prosperous kingdom where the king is caring and protective, nor that of a thriving religious system where the priest preaches for the poor, the forgotten and the weak, not even a society safe and promising enough for infants and women to live in. It is instead the city of the rotten political, religious and social system, where the cry of infants replaces their laughter and curses are uttered instead of words of wisdom. The journey in the streets of London turns to a nightmare where both the mind and body are "shackled" and escape is not an option.

1-4 Juxtaposition of the Pictorial and the Poetic

The juxtaposition of the pictorial and the poetic in the works of Literature already paves the way for multiple readings. Finding the link between what Langer terms as the "discursive" and the "non-discursive" is of paramount importance for the understanding of *London*. Despite the fact that "Visual forms—lines, colors, proportions, etc.—are just as capable of articulation, i.e., of complex combination, as words" (Langer 75), a deep understanding of the "non-discursive" needs the support of the "discursive" for "wordless symbolism,



which is non-discursive and untranslatable, does not allow of definitions within its own system, and cannot directly convey generalities. The meanings given through language are successively understood, and gathered into a whole by the process called discourse; the meanings of all other symbolic elements that compose a larger, articulate symbol are understood only through the meaning of the whole, through their relations within the total structure" (78). Hence, the whole "discourse" has to be scrutinized before one can argue for a full understanding of a multimodal text. The connection between the "discursive" and the "non-discursive" in *London* is, however, not easily perceptible. The only link that may work as a uniting element between the painting and the poem is the child. In fact, that child may represent the infants, the chimneysweepers, the newborn infants and even the soldier evoked in the poem. With the child endowed with a guidance role, we are led to think that the voice urging the reader to "hear" what is happening "here," is in fact, his voice. Thus, the child turns to a unifying figure that allows the connection between the visual, the auditory and the written narrative of the poem. The pictorial takes on an introductory role, with the poem keeping its own secrets for a later stage. It is only later that we are led to the conclusion that *London* is not a story "about" the child but the story "of" the child and that is the very moment when the poetic and the pictorial converge to play complimentary roles.

By choosing a child and an old man as the main figures of the painting, Blake built what Raymond Williams calls a "structure of feeling." People are emotionally weak in front of children and old men

and by choosing these two figures, Blake arouses both our interest and affect. The affect here exceeds what feelings dictate; it transcends the corporeal to a lofty world where spiritual, social, religious and political issues meet and communicate. Hence, both the poem and the painting become a part of a whole "structure of meanings" built around different modes and understood when and only when we grasp the meanings hidden behind their interconnectedness. Blake turns *London* into an "icon" of the wrecked, gloomy, bleak and doomed city through the poem. This is the very idea foregrounded in Alex Robinson's rewriting/ reimagining of Blake's poem.

2- From Writing to Re-writing:

Writing is never a pure process as whatever we write encapsulates, in a way or another, other texts within. "Almost every word and phrase we use we have heard or seen before. Our originality and craft as writers come from how we put those words together in new ways to fit our specific situation, needs, and purposes" (Charles Bazerman: 83). Bazerman also stresses the fact that "we create our texts out of the sea of former texts that surround us, the sea of language we live in" (83). Both Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere support the idea that "all rewritings, whatever their intention, reflect a certain ideology and a poetics and as such manipulate literature to function in a given society in a given way. Rewriting is manipulation undertaken in the service of power and in its positive aspect, can help in the evolution of literature and a society" (Lefevere Preface). Therefore, every writing is part and partial of a rewriting process that chooses well its "cover" to keep creating works that empower the "re-writer's" own vision of the world. The "original"



texts are thus taken a step forward (sometimes by concealing, other times by foregrounding parts of them) to bring about a new (but never original) view of society and the world. Robinson's rewriting of *London* did by no means conceal the original text. On the contrary, he reimagined the poem in a way that kept its major features, giving his animated song a palimpsestuous nature to borrow Gérard Genette's term. This song turns to a "hypertext" (animated audiovisual) grafted on a "hypotext" (the poem).

In the audio-visual animated song¹ Robinson chose to foreground some features of the poem but deviated from the original text at many levels.

2-1 The Semiotics of the Colours

The first step towards a multimodal semiotic analysis of this song starts by highlighting the role of colours in communicating the mood of the song. Despite the fact that colours are read as signs bespeaking different meanings each time they are put in a different context, some colours turn to signs with determined symbolism. While Blake uses light colours in his *London* to communicate a gloomy message about this city, Robinson opts for black and white and makes thus, a symbiosis between form and content to foreground the bleak atmosphere of his "London." Black is considered as the "antithesis of white, its equal in terms of absolute colour [...] it is most often seen in its cold and negative aspect" (John Chevalier & al: 92). Black and white mean the absence of colour and accordingly, the absence of hope and happiness, it may even mean the absence of life. Thus, opting for black and white in this

animated film hinges at the extremities of a world that offers nothing but void and emptiness. These two colours add nothing but a feeling of sadness and loss; they offer no hope both to the city and to the people residing it.

Though black and white are the main colours, we notice the presence of red and yellow too. Red is "regarded universally as the basic symbol of the life-principle" (792) and yellow is a colour that is "hard to put out and always overflowing the limits within which one tries to confine it" (1137). Both colours come in the form of short and quick flashes in this video. The fact that they appear and disappear quickly is telling of their inability of long-term existence. They may in fact be likened to someone who is dying, someone trying to fight for life but his/her heartbeats fail him. The city inhabited by these colours is presented as soulless and suffocating. The other instance where red appears is when someone tries to express his refusal of the system by crossing out the CCTV camera with red spray-paint. Such an act denotes that even if voices cannot be heard in the chaotic life of this city, anger and resistance may be expressed through other acts, hence the "marks" of anger and refusal on "the



palace walls."

The red colour, here, stands for anger and resistance. The act this man is performing speaks for the will of the silenced to make their actions convey what their voice cannot say. Robinson's Londoners

¹ The song is available at www.alexrobinson85.blogspot.com



are resisting the surveillance cameras and hence the whole political system which controls all their actions and depicts every move they make.

2-2 Semiotics of the Landscape and the Image:



The landscape of the poem rises to iconographic representations of a frighteningly bleak city: the city of London. There are, for instance, many markers showing that the city in question is the twenty-first century London. They are namely the yellow line reminiscent of the “mind the gap” words symbolic of London tube or underground, the Big Ben, the CCTV cameras and the Westminster Palace. The place is depicted as gloomy, desperate, deserted, with only the dark fumes filling the air and blocking light and hope. Even the reconstructions in progress, are adding nothing but a suffocating landscape causing hopeless feelings and with helicopters roaming, the

already unbearable atmosphere of the city is taken to its extremities.

Alex Robinson's “London” does not foreground the same issues foregrounded in Blake's in that no reference to the chimneysweepers' agony or the carelessness of the church towards them is evoked. There is no allusion to the soldiers who are sent to their death by the cruel kings who are shielded behind their “palace walls.” Instead, the landscape/image does not invoke Blake's *London* the way it invokes a postmodern metropolitan London. It is very much like George Orwell's dystopian city where everything is dysfunctional, except for technology (helicopters, cameras, factories...). A postmodern city where hope is lost, freedom is not promised, and technology is bringing threat, loss and chaos. In fact, through the reoccurrence of the CCTV cameras all along the video, one is reminded every single moment that “Big Brother Is Watching You.” Robinson joins the “Orwellian” and the “Blakean”



through the foregrounding of surveillance cameras which are emblematic of a society that controls and shackles people's freedom, telling them that they can by no means have a life of their own and that privacy is no longer allowed.



He is shown as holding in his hands an access ticket, for “adult service,” which features a picture showing part of a woman’s body and a number written in red. Even the idea of seeking “adult service” as grafted on the ticket, does not seem to offer any future happiness to this man. This may stand as a proof that nothing can relieve the postmodern man’s feeling of depression, alienation and hopelessness. In fact, the allusion to “adult service” has a direct relation with Blake’s “harlot,” a practice that was alarmingly present in Blake’s London and Robinson opted to foreground it in a move to link the past with the present. Women in the twenty-first century still suffer the same use and abuse despite society’s “progress.” The same stereotypes of women as “bodies,” or worse, as a commodity that are bought and sold persist.

Another deviation from Blake’s *London* is that while the speaker in Blake’s could see “marks of weakness and marks woe” on the faces of the Londoners, the people who animate Robinson’s song are featureless. The only one in the video depicted as humanly with distinguished features is the one who takes us with him in his life journey in the city of London. A man depicted as tired, sad, lonely and hopeless takes the train in a journey that ends with him in a city of demons where shadows roam the city aimlessly. His journey offers no promise, no comfort and no happiness; it just adds to his loss and alienation.

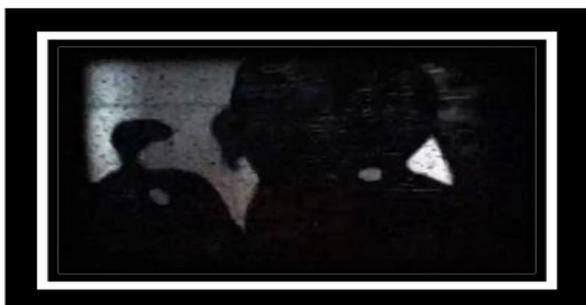


The only difference is that this practice became institutionised and turned to a service offered to “adults.” These institutions turned women to mere numbers on tickets where their bodies are the focus of the male gaze.



2-3 Semiotics of Rhythm:

The regular rhythm of the song (one weak beat followed by a strong one) simulates the rhythm of the poem which is written in iambic pentameter (an





unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one). In fact, the same rhythm applies also to the lights of the CCTV that fade away and come back stronger, the quick and short appearance of red and yellow lights and the regular moves of the dancers. Robinson opted for a regular rhythm and a slow tempo in his song to further stress the monotonous rhythm of life in London. The lack of change in the rhythm added to the slow progress of music highlight feelings of depression and sadness. The effect can be seen through the life of the protagonist: too dull to promise any excitement or hope.

2-4 Foregrounding and Deviation

Robinson foregrounded his own vision of the postmodern London. He linked Blake's eighteenth-century London to "his" London in a creative interface of the poetic and the musical. He made some deviations from Blake's London by using different colours and framing the social and political issues according to his own vision. Therefore, his deviation from the original text is his own way of presenting his own vision of London. What Robinson respected most is the inherent multimodal aspect of Blake's London where meaning is by no means conveyed through a single medium of representation. According to Baldry and Thibault, "multimodal texts integrate selections from different semiotic resources to their principles of organisation... These resources are not simply juxtaposed as separate modes of meaning making but are combined and integrated to form a complex whole which cannot be reduced to, or explained in terms of the mere sum of its separate parts" (Anthony Baldry. Paul J Thibault: 18). To really understand the song, we need to take into

consideration the way words are uttered and the way meanings are conveyed by way of image, colours, rhythm, sound, gestures and their arrangement in relation to space.

CONCLUSION

Blake was an artist ahead of his time. He knew how to intermesh different modes of expression in a way that transcends the barriers between the poetic and the pictorial. The fact that he was deeply engaged in formulating a critique of his world, paved the way for future generations to explore other dimensions of expressing their vision of the world, and Alex Robinson is no exception. Robinson's reimagining/rewriting of Blake's *London* foregrounded different aspects of it and linked the past to the present by foregrounding the social and political issues of his own time. Because every rewriting is a new way of presenting what has already been written, Robinson made some "deviations" from the original text that his "hypertext" took us straight to the heart of the twenty first century London where all the constructions and technological progress offer no promise of a better future. The result is a song that seeks to lay bare the truth about the postmodern man: a lost, alienated soul living in a city that shouts silently: "Our humanity is withering away."

WORKS CITED

- David Bindman. *William Blake: The Complete Illuminated Books*. United Kingdom: Thames and Hudson, 2000.
- Genette, Gérard. *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*. University of Nebraska Press. Trans: Newman, Channa. Doubinsky, Claude, 1997.
- Kress, Gunther and Theo Van Leeuwen. *Multimodal Discourse: The Modes and Media of Contemporary Communication*. London: Arnold, 2001.