William Blake's LONDON as a Surveillance Poem

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Published online: 20 Dec 2014.

To cite this article: Pramod K. Nayar (2014) William Blake's LONDON as a Surveillance Poem, The Explicator, 72:4, 328-332, DOI: 10.1080/00144940.2014.963494

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00144940.2014.963494

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William Blake’s LONDON as a Surveillance Poem

Keywords: William Blake, London, surveillance, urban spaces, vulnerability

William Blake’s famous “London,” in Songs of Innocence and of Experience (1794), might very well be a poem critiquing surveillance. Surveillance, as David Lyon defines it, is “a routine and focused attention to personal details for the purposes of influence, management, care, and control” (“Airport Screening” 402). It is directly connected, as Lyon argues in a previous work, to social sorting (“Surveillance as Social Sorting”). I propose that the poem’s thematic of surveillance works at two levels. At the first level we see observation and data gathering accompanied by a social sorting of the people who might be denied the right to the city for their subversive or illegitimate activity. The second level builds on London’s organization of space to demonstrate a cartography of vulnerability that intersects with, and is perhaps the product of, its chartered space. The urban decay of London is, as the poem suggests, the effect of this surveillance.

In a critique of the privatization of the “right to the city”—represented in the poem by “charter’d streets” and the “charter’d Thames”—Don Mitchell defines the antihomeless campaigns in the twentieth-century United States as the demonization of homelessness that makes their ongoing murder, death by exposure or lack of medical care appear to be the result of their homelessness rather than the result of faulty housing, mental health, drug and employment policies. (197)

Such campaigns would first identify the people—vagrants, prostitutes, homeless, the mentally ill—who could then legitimately be taken off the
streets, while ignoring the institutions responsible for reducing them to the level of vagrancy and destitution. This identification requires the classification of particular acts as deviant or subversive, and therefore their perpetrators as troublemakers. I propose that antecedents to the privatization of the city and the regulation of usage of the public space might be detected in Blake’s poem where surveillance is a process of identification. In the course of this surveillance three types of people whose acts are inventoried by the surveiller are identified. These might then, eventually, become the objects of apprehension or arrest.

The poem opens with an account of urban space that has been transformed into controlled territory: chartered streets and the chartered river. While “charter’d” gestures at contractual and commercial licencing for trade, it also is indicative of control, order, and organization of people in an age obsessed with the “policing” of the metropolis (Patrick Colquhon’s Treatise on the Police of the Metropolis appeared in 1797, three years after Blake’s poem) and the sorting, documentation, and organization of “[the] poor, the indigent, orphan children, asylums, workhouses, industry schools, poor laws, early factory workers, vagrants, ex-soldiers, dockyard laborers, chimney sweepers, spinners, and weavers” (Makdisi 100). These chartered streets witness constant patrolling to monitor the activities of people (a) who ought not to be there (such as vagrants) or (b) who, although legitimate users of the space, might be indulging in subversive and illegitimate usage of that space.

Blake’s poem seems to refer to the acts that “organized” the use of public spaces. Initiated as early as the 1590s and codified in the 1690s Settlement Acts (the framework from these acts remained in place until the 1830s when the new Poor Laws were instituted), the laws determined the category of poor people that could “roam” the streets. The impotent poor were allowed to beg for food within their own parish after obtaining permission; and discharged soldiers and mariners were allowed to beg if they had passes, although there was a general ban on begging. The wandering poor or vagrants were to be apprehended, according to the 1662 Settlement Act, and a reward of two shillings granted for their apprehension (Eccles 3). The 1714 Vagrancy Act allowed loiterers, those able-bodied who refused to work, those who begged, jugglers, minstrels, and collectors (for hospitals and other places) to be apprehended and penalized by local justices. This act remained in force well into the next century (Eccles 4), with the law allowing whipping or imprisonment for vagrancy (Eccles 174). In 1786, just a few years before Blake’s poem, there were calls for the creation
of a “county police” system. Such commentators as William Paley, Martin Madan, and William Mainwaring called for greater surveillance of “dissolute and abandoned wretches of both sexes” (Mainwaring, cited in Bailey 15). This seems to be precisely the task of the surveiller in Blake’s poem. He wanders the street collecting data about the activities of various people, perhaps as a preliminary to offering information about these “unwanted” users of the space to authorities in exchange for a reward.

The poem is narrated from the point of view of the surveiller. This is not the panopticon, top-down surveillance of the Benthamite variety. Rather it is sousveillance, or surveillance at the level of the ground and the street (the term sousveillance was coined by Steve Mann to describe surveillance by lower classes, cited in Huey, Walby, and Doyle [150], but is now used to indicate the ubiquitous, ground-level, and participatory surveillance systems of the city). The observer—whether police officer, figure of authority, or passerby is unclear—is in the opening stanza monitoring visual markers of activity in the chartered streets: “mark in every face.” This is very systematically done geographically, by sweeping “every street.” Surveillance here involves both seeing and listening to the street and therefore, after the visual dominant of the first stanza, in stanza two the surveiller “hears” cries. Thus the surveillance is both visual and aural in its modalities.

There are three human “bodies” that are being surveilled in the poem. All three, curiously, are members of the lower strata of society: a chimney sweeper, a discharged and perhaps disabled soldier (who could beg only if he had a pass), and a harlot. If surveillance is directed at social sorting, then clearly Blake’s poem shows the monitoring of the London poor. What the surveiller documents is the (subversive and illegitimate) activities of these three members of London society that tarnish, literally, the symbols of power and social reproduction. These symbols in the poem are the architectural and infrastructural features of the city. Blake uses three narratives to demonstrate the defacing of these features: the cries of the sweeper and the soldier, and the curse of the harlot. These narratives embody a sensory mix involving, as the surveiller notes, both visual taint and an aural dimension. The multiple connotations of the word hear that Roy Neil Graves identifies in the poem might therefore be read as the actions of the homeless being noted by the surveiller: Do their moans and wails disturb the peace of the chartered streets?

The chimney sweeper’s cries stains church walls, blackening them. The soldier’s cries darken palace walls. The harlot’s curse stains a marriage procession’s carriage. In the first case, the symbol of light and emancipation,
the church, has been blackened. In the second, the palace walls standing for authority and care are stained. In the third, the carriage of the newly married couple, symbolizing continuity and familial/social reproduction, is stained. (I retain the routine sense of “carriage” as a vehicle here, although critics such as Walter Minot have drawn attention to the possibility that Blake was referring to the candle-bearer during rituals.) These narratives function, I suggest, as graffiti, inscribing a new meaning over the earlier symbols.

The poem’s sousveillance theme works at isolating specific instances of subversive behavior in the organized and ordered space of the city. From the “every face,” “every man,” “every cry,” and “every voice” in the opening sections, suggestive of a mass of people, the poem narrows down the surveillance to particular people or individuals. But even here surveillance as social sorting does not seek identity but identification of types and not individuals. The subjects of surveillance in the poem are types: “the chimney sweeper,” “the soldier,” and “the harlot.”

Interestingly, the speaker-surveiller says he hears “most” the cry of the harlot, suggesting either a high frequency of harlots’ curses in the city or perhaps his own increased awareness of one harlot’s wails. The gendered nature of this surveillance should not escape us. While vagrancy and the unemployed of the first two stanzas are threats to the social order of the chartered streets, the speaker’s intensified attention is reserved for the harlot. The speaker’s attention is directed at the harlot’s protests against the hypocrisy of social and familial reproduction and her epidemiological undermining of biosocial reproduction through the passing on of diseases, encouraging infant deaths and the birth of illegitimate children. Among the three targets of surveillance, the harlot is the only one in the poem who moves from the verbal enunciations of threats, anger, or anxiety to an actual biomedical and material manifestation of these in the form of dangerous diseases and unwanted, burdensome children. In the cases of the chimney sweeper and the soldier, their cries serve as metaphoric taints and infections.

The poem’s inconclusive ending, as I see it, does not tell us what happens with the protest narratives of the three human subjects. What are the consequences of the surveillance and data gathering the speaker performs? What actions are visited upon the chimney sweeper, the soldier, and the harlot? Are they apprehended, whipped, or imprisoned? Are they issued passes giving them the right to beg in the city?

If Blake establishes the contexts for surveillance and its possible effects of social sorting at the first level, the poem also demonstrates, at its second level, how this surveillance organizes the city in terms of vulnerability. The chartered streets and the river are not really public spaces in which everybody
feels safe. The streets are spaces of discontent. But more than this, the spaces in the poem are mapped in terms of its suffering inhabitants, what I am calling London’s cartography of vulnerability. Every street has every voice and every face expressing unhappiness and despair. The streets are peopled by vulnerable bodies—bodies “marked” carefully by the speaker-surveiller, as argued before—given to despair and suffering in what is surely a somatization of space.

Next, the speaker-surveiller examines the architectural and infrastructural components of the city in terms of the bodies associated with these. The church has the chimney sweeper and the palace walls the soldier. The street at night, with the wedding carriage traveling along it, is associated with the (perhaps homeless, since she appears to be in the streets even at midnight) harlot. Thus we can think of the streets, palace, and church as associated with conditions of homelessness, sickness, and disability, not with authority, freedom of movement, salvation, or pleasure. Urban space, as Blake represents it, might be very well mapped in terms of the vulnerable bodies haunting it.

The poem thus thematizes urban space as the space of surveillance resulting in social sorting and as the space of vulnerability of the very bodies being surveilled and sorted. There is no charter or bill of rights for the poor.

Works Cited


