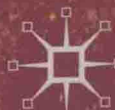


# BLAKE, MODERNITY AND POPULAR CULTURE

Edited by  
**Steve Clark and Jason Whittaker**

is a marvel. Beyond  
both, he has caught  
e to the life.

Caught me red-handed in the  
fourfold city. I am movement  
in the paint-plump brush, an  
agitation in the squeaking pen.



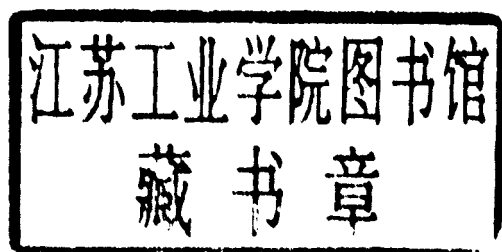
# Blake, Modernity and Popular Culture

*Edited by*

Steve Clark

*and*

Jason Whittaker



palgrave  
macmillan



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# Introduction: Blake, Modernity and Popular Culture

Steve Clark and Jason Whittaker

When William Blake died on 12 August 1827, he left behind him, in the words of his most recent biographer, G. E. Bentley, a 'fading shadow'. While Bentley notes that the number of obituary notices that appeared were 'more ... than might have been expected' (BR 465), those expectations were very low. Although Blake was a minor footnote in the established histories of British literature and art, it is not true, as Richard Holmes (2004) has remarked, that by the time of his death 'he was already a forgotten man'; indeed, plenty of nascent biographers were keen to use the deathbed scene of this obscure engraver, painter and sometime poet to establish their visions of a reinvigorated sentimental aesthetic and to serve as the foundation for their own future reputations. Allan Cunningham ventriloquised Blake thus in his 1830 *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects*: 'Why should I fear death? Nor do I fear it, I have endeavoured to live as Christ commands, and have sought to worship God truly – in my own house, when I was not seen of men' (cited in BR 654–5). The author of *Jerusalem* might have approved, although it is hard to imagine the diabolic engraver of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* being quite as complacent.

Despite the regular appearance of numerous articles on Blake's influence, particularly in *Blake: An Illustrated Quarterly*, full-length studies are few and far between. Deborah Dorfmann's informative and valuable *Blake in the Nineteenth Century* (1967) is confined, of course, to the simpler task of outlining Blake's reputation before the explosion of self-professed followers in the twentieth century. Robert Bertholf and Annette Levitt's *William Blake and the Moderns* (1982) extends the temporal reach of Blake's influence, but concentrates on a very traditional high cultural genealogy. The book that offers a wider consideration of

Blake's cultural impact is Shirley Dent and Jason Whittaker's *Radical Blake: Influence and Afterlife* (2002), which drew on and extended the emerging body of work concerned with Blake's influence on areas such as film, political philosophy and popular music as well as more conventional literary studies. A more recent and detailed study of Blake's impact on literature is Edward Larrissy's *Blake and Modern Literature* (2006).

What is perhaps so unusual about Blake is that the influence of his work is often much more visible than that of other writers and artists. All scholars devoted to a particular author wish to plead a special case for their subject, but there remains something slightly odd about Blake's incorporation into the canon, a process that began with Alexander Gilchrist's biography of the *pictor ignotus*, published in 1863 with help from the Rossettis and Swinburne, and which achieved a great leap forward with Blake's adoption by modernist poets – most notably W. B. Yeats – and important work by critics and scholars in the twentieth century such as S. Foster Damon, Northrop Frye, David Erdman and G. E. Bentley. Their labour, and that of many other critics and writers, has secured Blake's position as an artist and writer, and so elevated it that the London printmaker has, predictably enough, been subjected to a critical backlash for his religious, political and sexual views. Yet while Blake is often studied as one of the big six of Romanticism, anyone who reads his work, particularly if they move beyond the pastoral lyrics of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, cannot help but note its strangeness. Blake was by no means the first oddball to occupy a quiet recess in the pantheon: John Bunyan, Christopher Smart, even that linchpin of theories around the anxiety of influence, John Milton, read bizarrely. It is Blake, however, who is most often interpreted as the emblem of the unorthodox imagination and, as Schuchard (2006) has indicated, he was more firmly situated in the esoteric, erotic and apocalyptic counterculture of the Enlightenment than most.

Much of our appreciation of Blake's strangeness comes from his artistic talents: an engraver by training, a painter by inclination, not only have his illuminated manuscripts provided a more material environment for his literary vision than can be attained by most writers, but his other paintings and prints, such as the magnificent large colour print of *Newton*, have inspired generations of writers and artists. Again, this is not to imply that Blake's inspiration on artists is unique: countless illustrations of the works of Shakespeare and Milton indicate otherwise, and Blake's own illuminations of figures such as Orc and Urizen tend to block out later interpretations – the original is all too

visible, especially when reproduction technologies emerge later in the twentieth century providing cheap and easy access. Such mechanical reproductions may lack the aura of Blake's illuminated manuscripts, but the importance of these cannot be underestimated for extending the reach of his reception.

The particular danger of this special pleading for Blake is that it settles on a series of convenient antinomies that have been viewed with suspicion for at least the past three decades: alternative versus mainstream, high versus popular culture, individual versus society. One can exaggerate Blake's cultural isolation during his lifetime; obviously there was relative decline and neglect between 1806 and 1818 – what Bentley refers to as Blake's period of 'independence and obscurity' – but in the late 1780s Blake could easily be viewed as a rising talent with a profitable business that attracted the attention of London's middle class (including potential sponsorship for a grand tour in 1784 as well as a nomination for the post of royal drawing master in 1787) and, during the 1790s, as historicist scholars such as David Worrall and Jon Mee have demonstrated, Blake was strongly involved in the radical and feverish currents of metropolitan life during the French Revolution. As G. A. Rosso argues in chapter 1, 'Popular Millenarianism and Empire in Blake's Illustrations to *Night Thoughts*', the consensus that Blake withdrew from radical politics to embrace a more apolitical version of Christianity is not necessarily borne out by closer examination of texts such as *Vala: or the Four Zoas* and the genesis of that text in the illustrations to Young's *Night Thoughts*. Blake's illustrations to these, along with those for Blair's *The Grave*, demonstrate that Blake was strongly allied to popular culture at the turn of the nineteenth century, whatever we think of such texts now. What is more, in the 1820s Blake returned strongly to the cultural fold via his associations with artists such as John Linnell, Samuel Palmer and John Varley, and if his reputation was founded on anecdotes such as the apparition of visionary heads, on one level at least there was a public willing to accord a role, however limited, to this eccentric artist. In a different fashion, David Worrall's 'Blake in Theatreland: Fountain Court and its Environs' (chapter 2) demonstrates how much the activity of William and Catherine Blake could be affected by their residence in the heart of London's theatrical and radical press industries. Despite the invocation of 'Visionary forms dramatic' at the close of *Jerusalem* (98:28 E 257), the possible influence of theatre on Blake has previously been almost entirely neglected. This was a popular intersection between high culture and mass audiences, particularly through the phenomenon

of portraiture, which brought the cult of celebrity to a wider public.

The significance of that public during the eighteenth century as part of an emerging public sphere has, of course, become increasingly common in English literary and cultural studies, but in the past decade its role during Blake's lifetime has been examined much more closely by a number of critics and theorists. For John Brewer (2004), the visibility of the private lives of politicians during the 1770s constituted a proto-mass media, which in turn, during Blake's life, linked into improvements in transport and communications that allowed a national press network to flourish, bringing with it a sense of accountability to a community geographically dispersed and not personally known. Of course, this eighteenth-century public sphere was still considered primarily as part of a Hanoverian political culture which was the prerogative of an elite aristocratic culture, but an infrastructure was beginning to emerge that would, given the impetus of technological innovations throughout the nineteenth century, acquire its own momentum with unpredictable consequences. Yet we should be cautious of rushing to the conclusion that the radical culture of the 1790s was, in James Epstein's words, creating 'an autonomous and distinctly working-class or plebeian "public sphere"' (1994, 150). Rather, in terms of Foucauldian regulation and transgression, Kevin Gilmartin (1996) suggests that as the government adopted the techniques and organisation of the London Corresponding Society to promote a loyalist counter-revolutionary public sphere of greater longevity and political effectiveness, the popular press of the early nineteenth century was as much stimulated by pro-Establishment ambitions as (following E. P. Thompson) the emergence of a radicalised English working class. More recently, Ian Haywood (2004) rightly notes how the French and American Revolutions encouraged mass participation in culture as well as politics in the late eighteenth century, but also provides ample documentation of how the radical press of the 1820s mutated into the mass circulation 'yellow press' of the Victorian period, something much closer to the modern mass media. There are, then, two contradictory senses of modernity: one stemming from the Enlightenment discourse on human rights; the other based on a society constructed around mass circulation and consumerism.

Any simplistic view of popular culture that posits implicit resistance to elite culture is, of course, to be viewed sceptically: from their inception, mass popular media were compromised. The term 'popular' may be regarded as a median (between high and mass culture) or even

palimpsestic term. At the negative extreme, it links to critiques of mass culture in British, American and continental traditions as intrinsically debasing – a term preserved, though reversed, in the postmodern celebration of the dispersal of the aura of the artwork and residual elitist pretensions. Mass culture is both the culture of the masses (hence anti-elitist, democratic, oppositional) and culture presupposing techniques of mass production (hence ideological, manipulative, alienating). It is rarely used before the late nineteenth century, with the development of the yellow press and advertising, but a case can be made for expanding the category to include almanacs, chapbooks, ballad-sheets, handbills – crossovers on the boundaries of literacy. In such a context, proto-mass culture seems to presuppose an antithesis with elite culture but that itself is difficult to sustain in the context of the 1790s, where a text such as Volney's *Ruins of Empire* achieved wide dissemination. By the late nineteenth century, another industrial revolution based on the inclusion of a greater percentage of society in consumer culture, as well as new techniques and inventions, underlay the invention of the modern mass media, bringing with it widespread literacy that inspired fear and loathing as well as utopian aspirations founded on democratic inclusion (Brantlinger, 1998). Early accounts of such developments, notably those of Walter Benjamin, alternated between these extremes, for if the easy equation of popular culture and opposition is suspect, so too are those models of mass culture that view it as imposed from above, and therefore a form of false consciousness. Who, for example, originates mass culture? How can leaders be exempted from its processes of formation? How can one account for the turbulence and resistance that characterise nineteenth-century working-class history? Therefore an emphasis on cracks, fissures, competing sites of appropriation becomes attractive in discussion on the reception and mass dissemination of a figure such as Blake.

Blake criticism has tended to speak of dissenting, antinomian or a variety of questionable synonyms assumed to presuppose radical tendencies (such as enthusiasm) rather than in terms of popular or mass culture in contradistinction to elite formations. It should be noted, to borrow Raymond Williams' terms, that mass culture is often technologically innovative and so emergent, whereas practices and representations deemed working-class may often be categorised as residual in so far as they merge with a sentimental ideal of folk sensibility, as preserving traditions unable to manifest themselves in the mainstream public sphere. This is where the slippage occurs between a potentially loyalist popular culture and one seen as necessarily oppositional. One could

very easily see the connection between tavern culture and the London Corresponding Society in the 1790s, but it is hard to see how practices such as bull-baiting and cockfighting, equally constitutive of the plebeian public sphere, were radical. However, the more plausible origins of a modern British mass media in the Regency press, particularly during the Queen Caroline affair, indicate its future volatile relations with both oppositional causes and elite formations (both for the opposition and the elite establishment): much of the radical press that had emerged from the 1790s onwards metamorphosed into more general muckraking, gradually becoming the yellow press of the early Victorian era, more concerned with the scandals surrounding mistresses and divorce proceedings than with ideological conflicts. The ready trade in such titles also indicated the materialisation of a recognisable consumer society, the defining features of which – crowds, commodities, urbanism and new technologies of reproduction – became established between the 1820s and 1855, when Gautier referred to this experience as *la modernité*, a phrase used more famously by Charles Baudelaire in his *Le Peintre de la vie moderne*. The concept of the Modern pre-dates the Romantic in the Ancient versus Modern debates of the late seventeenth century (which were redefined as classic versus Romantic in the later nineteenth century). Modernism emerges as a reaction to the Romanticism of the nineteenth century, but modernity comes first as a recognition of the contemporary as irrevocably different, leading to those familiar traits that Charles Taylor (1992) calls the ‘epiphanies of modernism’: the growing importance of the individual, the dominance of instrumental reason and ultimate control of our disciplined bodies by the state.

The relation of modernity to modernism is itself vexed. The latter movement includes both celebration of the machine and new technologies (Futurism, Vorticism) and an oppositional strand stemming from Romantic critiques of industrialisation (Eliot, Lawrence). Blake is both eminently compatible with its genealogy in French Symbolism (Symons, after all, writes books on *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* [1899] and on *William Blake* [1907]) and immediately vulnerable to its critiques of Romanticism as, following T. E. Hulme’s gibe, ‘spilt religion’. The antithesis between modernity and modernism, as well as between high modernism and popular culture, may be seen as retrospective constructs: these manifestations are much more porous than proponents or detractors of its subsequent academic canonisation have acknowledged.

Modernism, following on from the biographical potboilers of the nineteenth century, lays the foundations for the reception of Blake in

the twentieth century, but there has been a proliferation of Blakes since the Second World War which could, rather loosely, be termed postmodern. (Blake has an afterlife outside the academy, but is often cited as attracting the most specialist and pedantic of criticism as part of the nebulous but persistent Blake industry.) Blake was seized upon by Nelson Hilton and others as an example of a poststructuralist writer whose complex prophetic works deconstructed any sure ideological meaning, but postmodern appropriations of Blake tend to appear across a wide cultural spectrum, for example in a tendency to playfulness and a debunking of monolithic aesthetic values in the work of Chris Ofili and other artists of the BritArt trends during the 1990s. It is paradoxical that a writer and artist so determined to control every aspect of his work (a product of the 'egotistical sublime' every bit as Romantic and individualistic as that which Keats detected in Wordsworth) should lend himself to such varied assimilation. The Blakean style is immediately recognisable as a brand name – or even a logo for a certain intimation of visionary (or pseudo-visionary) poetics – and one that thus has a peculiar relationship with the logic of late capitalism.

Ironically, the emergence of a Blakean 'brand' may be oddly closer to the spirit of Blake's enterprise than many writers drawing on literary affinities, even where these are deeply felt, as in the case of Rossetti, Swinburne, Yeats, Ginsberg or Lawrence. For writers working after the Second World War, Angela Carter or Salman Rushdie among them, the problem for this postmodern Blake is that they wish to use him as a playful, iconoclastic figure of subversion, yet he must also remain a writer who retains sufficient individuality and authority to repay more traditional forms of homage. In terms of his reception, Blake can be thought of as a self-constituting and individualistic Romantic imagination or as a composite product of intersecting discourses. The first would support traditional, primarily literary, theories of influence, transmission and reception; the second a depsychologised model of circulation, proliferation, competing attempts at appropriation. The two are by no means mutually exclusive: Blake's texts, both literary and pictorial, cannot be segregated from narratives, indeed mythologies, of the life generated almost from the day of his death, itself a complex and ambiguous tableau of genius neglected and faith redeemed.

The recuperation of Blake did not begin with Alexander Gilchrist's *Life of William Blake, 'Pictor Ignotus'* (published by Macmillan in 1863 and reprinted in two volumes in 1880), but it did see the beginnings of a Blake industry which was to mythologise as well as popularise the engraver's life. Gilchrist's biography, completed by his wife, Anne, who



was also to prove influential in developing a public taste for the works of Walt Whitman, was aided to press by Dante Gabriel Rossetti and his brother, William Michael, the Pre-Raphaelite painter having been given a great deal of additional material by another Blake collector, John Clarke Strange. Algernon Charles Swinburne was to publish his own appreciation of Blake five years later, and these works did much to revive interest in Blake in the second half of the nineteenth century. As Colin Trodd observes in chapter 3, 'Emanations and Negations of Blake in Victorian Art Criticism', the critical practices of Swinburne and the Rossettis were used in part to transport 'private' designs into 'public' ideas. Yet even before the 'discovery' of Blake's paintings at the Burlington Fine Art Club in 1876, Blake was increasingly being considered by the public – one that, ironically, considering his role in the twentieth century as arch-dissenter, focused on his commercial publication. Shirley Dent's "'Esoteric Blakists" and the "Weak Brethren": How Blake Lovers Kept the Popular out' (chapter 4) offers a polemic complement to Trodd's essay, arguing that the assiduous promotion of Blake's works by an initiated brotherhood of aesthetes ultimately served to confirm their superior sensitivity and refinement.

The late nineteenth century was an important period of transition for Blake, a time when he finally became popular. Yet, although this is often seen as a result of changing public taste, the reasons for this transition are much more embedded in the cultural logic of late Victorian society. Blake did not necessarily wish to be obscure during his lifetime, indeed he initially conceived his illuminated books as a commercial scheme, but the intense laboriousness of creating his almost medieval manuscripts – most gloriously evident in copy E of *Jerusalem*, the only coloured version of Blake's final epic, painted by hand – precluded a wide market. Technological limitations rather than ideological eccentricity converted Blake's public ideas into private ideas, and indeed for half a century after his death the artist was most widely recognised in precisely those commercial works that had successfully engaged with the technical constraints of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century book publishing, the illustrations to Edward Young's *Night Thoughts* and Robert Blair's *The Grave*.

The conditions of modernity of the late Victorian period enabled the popularity of Blake's other, more peculiarly visionary work. The explosion of mass media in the 1880s required new technologies of reproduction to enable capitalist consumerism of new texts: the growth of lithographic and eventually photographic reproduction techniques are the basis of Blake's reputation in the twentieth century – and, ironi-