William Blake’s Influence on Popular Culture: A Work in Progress
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Background

While many have been influenced by the work of William Blake, others have contemplated how he came to imagine and create his artwork. Most academics have come to the conclusion that Blake was insane or had an organically dysfunctional brain. Regardless, Blake’s work came to be revered by a number of writers, artists, and other figures of popular culture even though it was noted that, “Blake’s perception...can only be explained as or approximated by a chemically altered state” (Glauser 164). The purpose of this research is not to try to explore the possible causes of Blake’s condition, but rather the connection and bearing it has on others. In many cases, the reason well-known figures tap into the writings of Blake is to explain their own unusual mental state and to try to compare their experiences to those of Blake, to the benefit of their audience.

Beginning in the middle of the Twentieth Century, both newly created hallucinogenic drugs and natural hallucinogenic substances were being ingested and researched by scientists for spiritual, medicinal, and psychological reasons. LSD, mescaline or peyote, and psilocybin (commonly known as mushrooms) were three drugs being widely consumed. While under the influence of the drugs (or shortly thereafter), writers, scientists, and philosophers would record their discoveries in an attempt to accurately describe the effects of the drugs. Many used the words of Blake to help describe these experiences.

Abstract

William Blake is a well-known name in Romantic, British, and poetic literature. His works include The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, Songs of Innocence and Experience, The Four Zoas, Milton, as well as many illustrations. The effect of this gifted man’s work is that so many would follow in his footsteps and be inspired by his legacy, from later writers and artists of the Romantic period, to those of contemporary culture. This research will focus upon the more recent time and show the ways other artists were influenced by his work. The endeavor shall be to trace Blake’s presence in popular culture at various points over the past 60 years and to judge the degree of his impact.

Research Methodology

In order to grasp William Blake’s influence, it is imperative that I read and research not only his body of work, but also the collection of pieces that drew directly on this work. The most logical step to accomplishing this is to address each of Blake’s works individually, and research each specifically, to find connections with popular culture outlets. The obvious place to begin this task is the library, where it is possible to sectionize by subject most instances where popular culture mirrored Blake. Additionally, background research will be required to more fully understand both the Blake era, and the era that most of those who were influenced by him wrote, so that a better understanding of each instance can be explored and connections between the two can be drawn.

Works Yet To Be Consulted

Allen Ginsberg’s poems
Thomas Harris’s Red Dragon, and the two movies based on it: Manhunter and Red Dragon
Aldous Huxley’s The Doors of Perception
Jim Jarmusch’s movie: Dead Man
Lyrics of the Doors, Bob Dylan, Van Morrison, and U2
Todd McFarlane’s comic: Spawn
Alan Moore’s graphic novels: V for Vendetta, From Hell, Constantine and Watchmen
Salman Rushdie’s The Satanic Verses
Huston Smith’s Cleansing the Door of Perception

Literature Review

Two of the more popular literary descriptions of drug-induced hallucinations that are connected to William Blake’s writing are Aldous Huxley’s The Doors of Perception and Huston Smith’s Cleansing the Door of Perception (both of which draw their titles from Blake’s The Marriage of Heaven and Hell).

Aldous Huxley is reminded of Blake after his use of mescaline. Huxley considered Blake to be “someone who, unlike himself, possessed an uncanny visionary power, a state of mind that Huxley can acquire temporarily by taking mescaline,” so in order for Huxley to fully understand his then altered world he had to consider the permanence of Blake’s altered condition (Glauser 170). Although Huxley was helping Humphrey Osmond, a psychiatrist, research “the connections between hallucinogens and schizophrenia,” it is clear that Huxley wanted to experience a different type of perception (Glauser 173). If Blake suggests that, “states only exist and states only are to be cultivated or restrained,” as Denis Saurat theorizes, then Huxley is merely altering his state to see as Blake does (Saurat 25). Alas, Huxley only becomes temporarily like Blake, as Blake’s brain is permanently altered and Huxley’s isn’t.

Alternately, Huston Smith equates his use of psilocybin with a religious experience. Psilocybin shows Smith a glimpse of “another Reality that puts this one in the shade,” which is a different view of perception than those expressed by Huxley. Smith viewed perception as a perspective of the essence of the tangible world, while Huxley viewed perception as those physical attributes that define the physical world from person to person (Glauser 176). Smith, therefore, is truly a spiritual man who changes himself, not the world around him, as Huxley does. If “Blake’s art has often been taken as evidence of madness precisely because he represented the spiritual world,” then Smith’s account of his own experience with psilocybin bears the same insanity (Lincoln 46). It can be considered, then, that Blake’s own possible psychosis had a direct influence on Smith’s experience.

Works Cited


