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FROM ENGLISH POETRY TO AMERICAN SONG: REMEDIATING WILLIAM BLAKE INTO THE PSYCHEDELIC MUSICAL BEAT OF THE '60S

***Keywords**: William Blake; The Doors; Allen Ginsberg; psychedelic music; remediation; counter-culture*
***Abstract**: As William Blake's work stretches beyond its textual realm and transcends the time and place of its creation, it finds a home in 1960s America's music scene, where its popular reception and transformation by artists such as Jim Morrison and Allen Ginsberg needs further investigation. The spirit of rebellion, as well as the visionary and hallucinatory character of the English bard's poetry has proven to be an endless source of inspiration for stars such as Morrison, who named his famous counter-culture band "The Doors" after a Blakean quote from* The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, referring to the opening towards the Infinite. Another notable transmedia adaptation is that of Allen Ginsberg, a self-proclaimed Blake disciple who trusted that the only way to reach true poetry was through music. Consequently, he set the Songs of Innocence and of Experience to music and released them as an album, giving them a contemporary voice and sound. This paper will present a different, less examined facet of four American psychedelic songs – The Doors' "Break on Through" and "End of the Night", as well as Allen Ginsberg's "The Sick Rose" and "Ah! Sunflower" – by using David Bolter and Richard Grusin's concept of remediation, as it appears in their work Remediation: Understanding New Media (2000). However, instead of applying remediation to the online realm, its double logic of immediacy and hypermediacy will be helpful in analysing the re-embodiment of poetry into music. If the latter is present in the musicians' mediation by their production companies, performances, album covers, textual information, as well as the imprint of the music industry that supports them, the concept of immediacy is rendered rather differently. While Jim Morrison completely integrates William Blake's lines into his song and brings the listener closer to the experience, as if personally having gone through the journey beyond the doors of perception, Allen Ginsberg erases his compositional input by maintaining he could reach Blake's intention and render the songs in the way they had been originally sung by their author.*

While it is inconceivable to ignore the multifaceted talent of William Blake as mystical poet-prophet and painter or inventive engraver and printer, his qualities as a singer or song-composer seem to have been lost in the mists of time. It is believed that, as the title suggests, Blake's famous *Songs of Innocence and of*

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Experience (1794) were indeed put to music by the poet himself, yet there are no traces of music sheets left behind. As critic Martin Nurmi claims, there is "reliable contemporary evidence that Blake actually sang the earliest versions of these poems . . . [although] the melodies have not survived." (Nurmi 36) However, this has not discouraged many musicians from imagining the lines of his poems as lyrics and attempting to breathe new life into them by means of musical renditions. This paper does not aim to identify all such Blakean influences since there would be too many to mention, nor to seek the multiple different ways in which the English poet's work has been transformed into music, for there have been notable works, among which Donald Fitch's *Blake Set to Music: A Bibliography of Musical Settings of the Poems and Prose of William Blake* (1990) dedicated to such endeavours. Instead, what I propose is a discussion not necessarily of influence, but of remediation and not of seemingly all-comprising lists of briefly mentioned names and dates, but of two specific American artists of the 1960s musical scene: Jim Morrison and Allen Ginsberg, emphasizing their artistic transfiguration of Blake's vision.

Firstly, the paper will briefly consider the bridge between psychedelic rock and the Beat Generation that legitimizes the phrase "psychedelic beat" in the title before analysing the way in which the expression "the doors of perception" from "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" (1790) and the reference to "endless night" in "Auguries of Innocence" (c.1804) are refashioned into The Doors' songs "Break on Through" and "End of the Night," both featured in their first album "The Doors" (1967). These are arguably the only instances of direct musical homage paid by the band to their guiding poet, William Blake. Secondly, the English bard's lyrical works "The Sick Rose" and "Ah! Sunflower" (1794) will be referred to in connection to Ginsberg's spiritual, musical renditions "The Sick Rose" and "Ah! Sunflower" (1969) from the artist's album "The Songs of Innocence and of Experience by William Blake, Tuned by Allen Ginsberg" recorded in 1968-1969 and released in 1970. Although the entire album is a remediation of Blake's "Songs of Innocence and of Experience" (1794), these two songs have been chosen primarily because they were the original two poems to appear to Ginsberg in his early audition of Blake and can thus establish a prophetic continuation with the English poet mystical understanding of the lines presumably heard by Ginsberg through Blake's voice and also because they are most helpful in revealing the way in which William Blake could be appropriated through psychedelic, Indian sacred music in the social context of 1960s America.

I aim to present a different, less examined facet of the four songs mentioned above by using David Bolter and Richard Grusin's concept of remediation, as it appears in their work *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (2000). However, instead of applying remediation to the online realm, its double logic of immediacy and hypermediacy will be helpful in analysing the re-embodiment of poetry into music. It is these concepts that will help me bring insight into the manner in which these musical renditions have taken on William Blake's themes and lines in order to give them a visionary, psychedelic voice.

The mid and late 1960s musical scene saw the rise of countercultural rock rebels, welcomed by the jazzy, bebop Beat Generation, particularly Allen Ginsberg, "like a young prophet . . . with the power to reach a mass audience" (Warner 1), for

they would continue the Beats' spirit of rebellion, as well as their interest in freedom of speech and sexual identity, bringing them into the realm of music. Among the struggle for civil rights and sexual liberation, among the hippies and the flower children advocating peace and love or the more politically involved protesters against the Vietnam war in America, the bond between poetry and music became tighter: "as rock moved closer to poetry, so would literature move closer to rock" (Warner 13). The lyrics no longer conformed to traditional pop love themes, but tackled perceptions of life, reality and equality and just as their literary predecessors had turned to drugs to expand their consciousness and kindle their creativity, the erupting rock generation would continue this tradition, observing William Blake's dictum that "The road of excess leads to a place of wisdom" (Blake, "The Marriage" 10) and creating a new musical genre: psychedelic rock. It was filled with eastern influences, "including instruments such as the sitar, the gamelan and the didgeridoo, which all produce tones that are considered to be conductive to meditating." (DeRogatis 18) Originating in San Francesco, the city of the Beats and of the first hippies (Haight-Ashbury district), music bands such as Jefferson Airplane, The Grateful Dead or Big Brother and the Holding Company (Janis Joplin), as well as the Los Angeles psychedelic representatives: The Doors became a mouthpiece of a society who indulged in the recreational use of LSD (acid), marijuana, mescaline or peyote in order to gain personal enlightenment. The combination "LSD and music created a kind of alchemy." (O'Brien "Sounds")

In order to speak of The Doors and their remediation of Blake, it is important to know that, according to David Bolter and Richard Grusin, remediation occurs when the content has been borrowed, but the medium has not been appropriated." (44) The word "content" is far from being a rigid one and it can mean in the case of poetry-song remediation, not merely the words of the poems taken as such, but also the themes and ideas that they generate and that may be borrowed from one composer to another as well. Let us start with the latter. Through the choice of their band name, The Doors recognize their allegiance to William Blake, whether directly – if it is taken from the poet's work "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" – or indirectly, if inspired by Aldoux Huxley's novel The Doors of Perception (1954), which in turn refers to Blake's use of the same phrase, employing it in the context of the use of mescaline. The English bard had used it to describe his illuminated method of printing that was meant to have a cathartic effect on the world, as he associated the apocalyptic vision of the whole world burning down and being stripped to its essence of infinity and holiness, with the method in which his acids etch away the surface of the plate, leaving behind only lines in relief that are spiritually pure and true.

> The whole creation will be consumed and appear infinite and holy whereas it now appears finite & corrupt. . . .[by] melting apparent surfaces away, and displaying the infinite which was hid. If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern. (Blake, "The Marriage" 14)

The mission to make people realize that the truth is beyond what is considered physically perceivable and to help free their power of imagination by

cleansing their apprehension of the world was transferred to Jim Morrison, along with the name of his band. He famously stressed in various interviews a phrase which was even used for concert posters: "There are things known and things unknown and in between are The Doors" ("Doors 1965"), borrowing from both Huxley and Blake in order to highlight his intended role as intermediary between darkness and light, between limitation and infinity.

The band's first single "Break on Through (To The Other Side)" (1967) insisted on the importance of going beyond what is immediate to our senses and breaking the gate of passage towards another dimension: "She get(s high)/ She get(s high)/ She get(s high)/ She get(s high) . . . The gate is straight/ Deep and wide/ Break on through to the other side." (The Doors Lyrics) As the lyrics imply through a psychedelic chanting of encouragement to get high, their composer believes that this state of illumination could be achieved by means of drugs. This mention is a key characteristic of psychedelic music, the lyrics of which often referred to the use of drugs. Because Morrison seemed to lack the divine calling that Blake so clearly possessed and displayed, his mysticism had to be chemically induced. While William Blake's acids physically eroded the copper plates he worked with, while metaphorically bringing our true infinite nature to the surface, Jim Morrison's acid destroyed his body, while simultaneously making his mind more receptive towards an enhanced perception of reality. It should be stressed that the musician's breakthrough was not a religious endeavour, but perhaps a magical one, more closely related to the shamanic tradition. Morrison's fascination with the figure of the shaman whom he believed to be "a man who would intoxicate himself. . . . And, he would put himself into a trance . . . [and] go on a mental travel." ("Tribulations") can be revealing. Since it is known that the trance-induced visions and altered states of consciousness were often brought about by the chanting, or monotonous rhythmical repetition of the same words, perhaps Morrison's adamant restatement "She get(s high)" is meant to stimulate a similar effect on the listeners and on himself. Hence, in the process of remediation, while the content is borrowed from Blake – the doors of perception are clearly outlined, and so is the necessity to open them towards the realization of innate, infinite imagination – both the means (spiritual mysticism, as opposed to drug induced hallucinations and shamanic-like trances) and the medium (from eighteenth century British text to twentieth century psychedelic American music) differ.

From thematic to literal remediation, the fast-paced song discussed above is now followed by a more mellow blues-rock, for "'psychedelic rock' encompassed a variety of styles and musical influences, including folk rock, blues, 'hard rock', Latin music and Indian classic music" ("The Counterculture") in the shape of "End of the Night", from The Doors' eponymous debut album released in 1967 that, according to the lead singer, was meant to break what Blake perceived to be the mind-forged manacles of society. "Industry calls such borrowing 'repurposing': to take a 'property' from one medium and re-use it in another. With reuse comes a necessary redefinition" (Bolter and Grusin 45); therefore Blake's couplet from "Auguries of Innocence": "Some are born to sweet delight/ Some are born to endless night" (Blake 30) is reused and remediated in 'The Doors' song, so as to keep the aim, but overwrite the means of reaching mystical hypersensitivity. Hence, elements

such as the importance of faith and the lack of doubt are replaced with aspects that were not there in Blake's poetry, but were relevant for contemporary American society, such as the hallucinatory importance of psychoactive drugs.

This emphasis is achieved by means of the instruments and vocal used. From the beginning of the song, the band creates a dream-like atmosphere with the slide guitar imitating the sitar with "unrythmic pluckings of diatonic notes . . . and the keyboard provid[ing] the humming support of a tambura" ("The End") and the fluid organ sounds. The use of these instruments to recreate the sound of more exotic ones not only replicates the sound of Indian Raga – the main influence of psychedelic music at the time – but is also meant to facilitate the listener's disconnectedness from reality and his entering into the realm of a hallucinogenic trip by recreating that experience. In this case, drugs and alcohol are devoid of their social stigma and are turned into valuable instruments for reaching a nirvana-like state of consciousness. Moreover, the tonality of Morrison's voice, the elongation of the words and the use of quiet chanting of the title song to the point where the words dissolve into the background offer the illusion of the loss of control in a journey, or rather trip of the mind towards a new dawn, beyond the doors of perception of ordinary people that would bring about a clearer vision of reality. Furthermore, there is a mutual dependence of immediacy and hypermediacy that is mandatory for the process of remediation. The concept of immediacy promises an experience without mediation that can be "promoted by involving the viewer more intimately in the image," (Bolter and Grusin 28) or in this case the listener in the song. This effect is not only rendered by the direct involvement of the listener in the drug-induced journey discussed above, but also by the integration of Blake's words without acknowledging their author, erasing the traces of remediation and offering an illusory feeling of authenticity.

> Realms of bliss, realms of light/Some are born to sweet delight/Some are born to sweet delight/Some are born to the endless night/End of the night, end of the night. (The Doors Lyrics)

> Every morn and every night/ Some are born to sweet delight./Some are born to sweet delight,/Some are born to endless night./We are lead to believe a lie/When we see not through the eye-/Which was born in a night to perish in a night,/When the soul slept in beams of light. (Blake, "Auguries of Innocence" 30-31)

The end of the night can be understood in both cases as the end of ignorance and limitation, and the beginning of infinite perception. While the senses are imprisoned by their own physicality, the soul should be free, or in Morrison's words: "Blake said that the body was the soul's prison unless the five senses are fully developed and open. He considered the senses the 'windows of the soul.'" ("Tribulations") Hence, one should look through the eye, instead of with the eye in order to enjoy the blissful realm of light at the "End of the Night." In order to achieve this, The Doors' frontman necessarily replaces the effects of faith with those of drug use, rendering Blake's words musically with an infusion of psychedelic significance that offers the impression of immediacy.

Since "without contraries is no progression," (Blake, "The Marriage" 9) the idea of hypermediacy that "acknowledges multiple acts of representation and makes

them visible" (Bolter and Grusin 33-4) is also present in the process of remediation. Accordingly, a listener of 'The Doors' "Break on Through (To the Other Side)" and "End of the Night" would be presented with a cover-picture of the band, with texts giving information on the songs, the band and the production or the possible experience of going to a concert and observing a show that is both auditory and visual.

Another example of Blake's poetry remediated in the late 1960s is Allen Ginsberg's album "Songs of Innocence and of Experience by William Blake, tuned by Allen Ginsberg" performed by Ginsberg singing and playing the harmonium alongside his partner Peter Orlovsky (vocals) and various other musicians among whom: Cyril Caster (trumpet, guitar and horn), Janet Zeitz (flute), Jon Sholle (drums), Bob Dorough (organ, piano, harpsichord) and Don Cherry (finger cymbals, bass trombone, beaded gourd). This was Ginsberg's first official musical release that would be followed by other albums in which the Beat poet sings his own poems, culminating with his 1994 "Holy Soul Jelly Roll", a four volume best-of collection that includes some of Blake's poems as well. For Ginsberg, it was the friendship with Bob Dylan (whom he perceived to be a musical instructor) that had made him believe that "the line between poetry and music was fading" (Stephenson 52) and that he and Dylan were both poet-musicians. This led to the decision of blending the two media by animating half of the poems of the volume Songs of Innocence and of Experience written by his literary and spiritual guru, William Blake, with musical accompaniment. It appears that Ginsberg attempted to mould the vocals and instruments to match the apparent content of the poems, with the Songs of Innocence being evidently more cheerful and making use of the flute (representing perhaps the piper's pipe), whereas the Songs of Experience introduce the use of the drums, giving them a more dramatic effect.

The 1948 drug-generated auditory hallucination of Blake's reciting "The Sick Rose" and "Ah! Sunflower" to him in the privacy of his Harlem apartment, profoundly influenced Ginsberg's early career and gave him a new perspective on his calling as a poet. Because his was "a mind prepared to see what Blake saw," (Glausser 171) the Beat musician became convinced of a strong, direct prophetic connection with his literary and spiritual guru that presumably allowed him to channel the original melodies of his poems by carefully studying the purpose he saw in the rhythm, the vowels and individual intention of each syllable.

> Some rhythms means something . . . and also the vowel sounds . . . as Pound talks about [them] – and that's led me onto an examination of Blake, and then the possibility of putting them to music. . . . I begin to get more sensitive to the fact that each syllable in a Blake poem is intentional and therefore has to be pronounced intentionally, as it was meant. (qtd. in Carter 142)

The idea of immediacy is rendered by "a transparent interface . . . that erases itself, so that the user would no longer be aware of confronting a medium, but instead would stand in an immediate relationship to the contents of the medium." (Bolter and Grusin 23-4) By minimalizing his interference in the process of remediation, Ginsberg tried to offer the impression of a direct Blakean experience. Yet, despite the American artist's overt intention of putting forth the most natural

rhythm that represented Blake's own musical rendition based on Ginsberg "being conscious or aware of the meaning, intention, or the significance of each syllable," (qtd. in Carter 144) he inevitably instilled Eastern influences into them.

The year he spent in India, interacting with Buddhist monks taught Ginsberg how to mantra chant so that, at the 1968 Chicago Democratic Convention, when disturbed by anti-Vietnam war protests, he applied this method by first chanting Blake poems and then chanting Om for eight hours on end in Lincoln Park, accompanied by hundreds of people with the aim to stop police violence and calm the civil unrest: "I was in a state of shock and began dealing with it by setting William Blake's 'Songs of Innocence and of Experience' to music" ("Allen Ginsberg: Holy"). There was only one step from sacred mantra to sacred, psychedelic, Blakean folk music that would allow Ginsberg to re-embody the poems by melting together his interest in Eastern spirituality and his social activism – for he knew the counterculture would respond to both.

The droning effect of organ in "The Sick Rose" (a key feature of Eastern sounds), the dreamy acoustic guitar, Ginsberg's increasingly vibrating voice and elongation of the vowels as well as the repetition of the poem three times within the same song are a reminder in performance and purpose of mantras such as Om and their high spiritual power. In this sense, the song provided an escape from the sickening, "invisible worm that flies in the night" (Blake, "The Sick Rose" 270) that was violence in 1968 America into a holy space of calmness and spiritual healing. The content that is borrowed from the English bard by "setting Blake's words, syllable by syllable [to music] according to vocal tones appropriate to their meaning" (Bamberger, "Allen Ginsberg's Music") is repurposed and redirected towards America's involvement in the Vietnam War. As Allen Ginsberg declared in an interview, the goal was to find "what we can do to solve the Viet Nam war, to present different ideas for making the society more sacred" (qtd. in Carter 207). The trance and feeling of ecstasy were aided by the use of drugs that helped prepare the way for an alternation of consciousness meant to be transferred from singer to audience. However, as opposed to Jim Morrison whose doors of perception were not necessarily spiritual, Ginsberg preserved William Blake's divine foundation, albeit redirecting its character towards a Buddhist perspective. Since "hypermediacy multiplies the signs of mediation" (Bolter and Grusin 34), it should be noted that the musical product discussed is the collaboration of various vocal and instrumental musicians that not only remediate bodily the words of William Blake, but are themselves remediated by MGM records, public appearances and the marking events of their generation.

The experimentation of sound in "Ah! Sunflower" can be said to adhere to what Michael Hicks considers to be the three core features of psychedelic music: "In order to understand what makes music stylistically 'psychedelic', one should consider three fundamental effects of LSD: dechronicization, depersonalization and dynamization." (Hicks 63) The untrained and unsynchronized voices of Ginsberg and Orlovsky sound like an incantation and they purposefully create a time-delay effect similar to an echo that achieves dechronicization by allowing the listener "to move outside of conventional perceptions of time." (Hicks 63) In addition, the continuous single note of the harmonium and electric bass, as well as the droning

effect produced in the song offers a hypnotic musical atmosphere – which was exactly how Ginsberg described this poem when talking about what had caused his Harlem audition of Blake – that creates the effect of dynamization by dissolving experience and making it seem liquid. This was very popular in psychedelic music for it recreated a hallucinatory state that slowed down experience, introducing a feeling of peacefulness and relaxation in which body and mind were depersonalized in an effort to experience a different side of reality. The subsequent reaction to the psychedelic beat of the '60s was one of acceptance and tolerance that the (sun) flower children of the hippy generation embraced as being an antidote to the atrocities of warfare. Ginsberg's remediation of Blake into music was based on the poet being "a great radiant source of awareness" (qtd. in Carter 58) who had the power of leading the countercultural youth to the realization that they were the embodiments of sunflowers "Seeking after that sweet golden clime/Where the traveller's journey is done" (Blake, "Ah! Sunflower" 273)

To conclude, Blake's words and concepts are given a musical voice in order to reverberate in the psychedelic era of LSD. The aim was to reach a state of mysticism, higher awareness of reality or expansion of consciousness with the aid of either lyrics that encouraged the use of psychoactive drugs or Indian-inspired music meant to reproduce these experiences. In the cases of both The Doors and Allen Ginsberg, the remediation of Blake's poetry is possible by means of what Bolter and Grusin call immediacy and hypermediacy. If the latter is present in the musicians' mediation by their production companies or even live performances, their album covers and textual information on the band, as well as the imprint of the music industry that supports them, the concept of immediacy is rendered rather differently. While Jim Morrison completely integrates William Blake's lines into his song and brings the listener closer to the experience as if personally having gone through the journey beyond the doors of perception, Allen Ginsberg erases his compositional input by maintaining he could reach Blake's intention and render the songs the way they were originally sung by their author. The psychedelic rock style of The Doors' debut album allowed the band to repurpose Blake's "doors of perception" by keeping the theme of breaking through to a fourth dimension, yet giving it a chemical inclination and bringing it closer to magical shamanic trances than to divine enlightenment. In addition, the dream-like loss of control necessary for the journey towards the end of the night is rendered musically by both the instruments' imitation of Indian raga and Morrison's voice modulations that bring the listener into a hallucinogenic world. The psychedelic beat offered by Allen Ginsberg's musical recreation of Blake's Songs, particularly "The Sick Rose" and "Ah! Sunflower" kept the poems' sacred core, yet redirected it towards the East, making use of tonalities similar to Indian mantra chanting in order to calm the violent behaviour of contemporary Americans and emphasise the need to turn people's heads towards the sun, like sunflowers, albeit with the help of drugs and of musically induced hypnotic states of illumination.

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