

1 Wrapped up in time: Introduction

»Things come wrapped up in time

Like the past in a present
They take their time

And when they're gone
They take their time with them
There's an echo of them

An echo of the time they were wrapped in
Sweet or bitter in the memory
But an echo is all, all I can reach now

An echo of you

An echo of you

An echo of you in your time.«

These lyrics are from a song by the British rock group Marillion called »Wrapped up in Time«, written by their vocalist Steve Hogarth. When listening further, the song might seem like a love song, with lyrics that many of us can probably relate to. Many would agree with the lyrics. Some things »come wrapped up in time« and »when they're gone, they take their time with them.« All that is left is an echo, a memory of a certain time, maybe spent with a partner. All the memories that remain are only an echo. A lot of truth lies in these lines, and maybe more than Steve Hogarth had acknowledged when he wrote them.

With these lyrics in mind, this guide would like to take the reader on an alternative trip to London, Britain's capital, or as some say: Britain's heart. This city

»is covered by a thick crust of poetry, urban legends, historical narratives and literary fictions, and mythologies, from Oliver Twist and Jack the Ripper to Sherlock Holmes and Peter Pan. Cities such as Paris and Venice, more recently joined by the myth-making machinery of Los Angeles's Hollywood and Mumbai's Bollywood, have a similar fictional shimmer to them, but London's long and dense history make it, more than any other city, a fiction.«¹

London seems to have a very special position in comparison with other cities. Someone once said: »Paris is not France, Berlin is not Germany, but London is Britain.« Some people would argue that, but London really seems to encompass and offer everything that defines Britain. For Groes², it is »a living metropolis, a healthy city that is laboured on constantly; it is the ultimate city of *Becoming*.«

This project started as my master thesis. I always felt drawn to Britain and especially to London; even before I was there for the first time there was a strange connection to this city, to this place that has lost nothing of its strength until today. On the contrary, it became even stronger. Since I typed the name »Jack the Ripper« into Google when I was 17 (out of the blue – where did the idea come from? Why did I have this impulse?), my fascination for the case, the area, the literature, the whole of London grew. I was an armchair detective. In theory, I dug deeper and deeper into the history and literature of London to find out more about the »genius loci« of this vast metropolis. When I was there I only scratched the surface, I never got to dive into the secrets. When I had finished my master thesis I knew what I had to do. I had to trace the steps of the authors and characters I analyzed through

1 Groes 2011: I.

2 Ibid.: 2.

the eras and areas. I had to follow the routes they had described and go to the places they had connected. I needed to see, to feel, to experience the real spots – the Ripper murder sites, the East End, the Hawksmoor churches, the pentagram tour from *From Hell* and much more. I did it and the result is here. I am still overwhelmed and I never wanted to come back afterwards. And still there is so much more to see. You can never grasp it all. There is always more.

Jack the Ripper is known as the world's first serial killer. He murdered five prostitutes in the autumn of 1888 in the area of Whitechapel in London's East End and was never caught. He left his mark on British history and the further one digs into the topic, the more connections to not only Victorian history, but also British history, and sometimes even world history, appear. There is an ongoing fascination for the case that keeps inspiring many amateur investigators called »Ripperologists.« A »Ripperologist« is »according to the program Biography: Jack the Ripper, produced by the Arts and Entertainment Network, [...] a person who is interested in the mystery of Jack the Ripper«³. It should be made clear that the fascination is not about the crimes themselves. What the murderer did was gruesome and terrible. It is the whole mystery of the case, along with the time and place it occurred. The more you try to find out about the Ripper murders, the more you see paths along the main road that lead into other interesting directions. Once you take a route, you may find it hard to not get lost on your way, as many more sideways open up from there. The interest in the case produced some fiction dealing with the Ripper. Movies, series, and books invite you to take every direction you want – be it a certain suspect or a certain area of special interest. It is all there. My first personal contact to Ripper-fiction was the movie *From Hell*, which, after knowing more about the case, can be seen as a nice introduction, but nothing more. It was soon followed by the comic and other literary works that somehow fitted into that. A special interest lay in Peter Ackroyd's *Hawksmoor*, which connects the churches of

3 Smithkey III.

17th century architect Nicholas Hawksmoor to certain London crimes, and toys with overlaying histories and the idea that certain spots in London influence their surroundings and its population. Watching series like *Whitechapel* or *Ripper Street* further developed this concept. And when finally one reads the comic *From Hell* one cannot help but basically fall for this concept of London time and space. Especially when one considers how well researched the comic is and how neatly its author Alan Moore combines history and theory. From then on it seemed as if in all of these works one could find the same formula. I should also introduce William Blake shortly at this point for his name is connected closely to London, its history and the works that we analyze. William Blake lived from 1757 to 1827 and was an artist, a poet and a visionary. During his lifetime he was not widely recognized, but his reputation grew and (thanks to some of the authors we read in this book) he became an important figure and reference in British culture. Blake was a radical and a genius. He was spiritual, yet he hated organized religion, and believed that all humans are equal. He closely collaborated with his wife Catherine and was seen as madman by some of his contemporaries. His famous works include *The Tyger*, *Glad Day* and most importantly the poem that was turned into the song *Jerusalem* and became an alternative national anthem for Great Britain. Peter Ackroyd even goes as far as calling Blake the »most powerful and significant philosopher or thinker in the course of English history.«⁴ In the same interview, when asked about his perception of time, Ackroyd replies: »That's what it's all about. Time, the echoic effects of time, the continuities of time, the feeling that time is behind most of our motion.«⁵ He gives his point of view on the relation between places and time and so introduces the core of this book, the basis for all we will read and see on our tours: »In my opinion, people are affected by location. I have a phrase: territorial imperative by means by which a street, an alley, a house and the inhabitants thereof are deeply

4 *Five Minutes With: Peter Ackroyd*: 1:35.

5 *Ibid.*: 1:50.

infected by the nature of the terrain and by the history of the terrain beneath their feet»⁶. And what is so fascinating about London and its history for Ackroyd? He explains: »Its power, its majesty, its darkness, its shadows.«⁷

Certain places in London seem to inhabit some kind of spirit that give them power, that make them influence the behaviour of their citizens. They almost seem to have their own time; they stand outside linear time structures. There are a number of terms for it, »urban spatiality« is a recurring term and »spatialisation of time« is mentioned. Peter Ackroyd calls it »topographical imperative«. The concept of the echo is used sometimes, and now the song by Marillion makes sense again. Certain places in London – or the city as whole? – are »wrapped up in time.« It feels »like the past in a present.« And when these places are gone, »they take their time with them.« But there is still »an echo of them, an echo of the time they were wrapped in.« And this phenomenon, this »wrapping«, this echo, this thing, is what I am trying to get to the ground to. It is going to be a »spirit of London-tour«. I will lead you through literature and take you in the »A Tour«-chapters to real sites and explain the history. We will go by the terms »genius loci« and »spirit of place«. »Genius loci« goes back to the time of the Romans when it referred to the patrons of places, but when it is used now it means that some places seem to be inhabited by a spirit that gives them power and energy. Lee Vernon in his 1899 work *Genius loci* calls it »a divinity, certainly, great or small as the case may be, and deserving of some silent worship« (5). For him, it is »a spiritual reality« that »can never be personified« and we can feel it only »in some individual moment or feature of the landscape. [...] The genius of places lurks there; or, more strictly, *he is it*« (6).

One thing that is important to remember and keep in mind is that symbols only work in context. They depend on your own interpretation and on your own »story«. You read places like the streets of Lon-

6 *Five Minutes With: Peter Ackroyd*: 2:24.

7 *Ibid.*: 2:55.

don in the way that they fit your personal story. This is why something like the genius loci works, this is why certain places ›speak‹ to their inhabitants and influence them.

Now, before we start our journey some final words: It almost seems, as if the Ripper murders are at the centre of the aforementioned echo. And one also quickly finds out that they could only have happened then and there, in London at that time, to achieve the status they have today. In fiction, many authors have used it, and sometimes they have tried to define London's ›spirit of place‹. Two of the most important supporters of this theory are the »contemporary writers Peter Ackroyd and Iain Sinclair«⁸. But also many fiction writers like Ben Aaronovitch or Alan Moore toyed with it, and even a TV series like *Whitechapel* plays with London's spirit of place. It seems we are to discover a vast universe of works that tries to understand the city and its ›behaviour‹. The writers all try to approach this phenomenon somehow, but it is hard as nobody can really name what London's genius loci really is. One can try to approach this phenomenon through theory, since there are many space-and-place-theories and time-and-space-theories. But they remain theories. The energy of this city seems improvable, ungraspable. The only way that we can come closer to it is through fiction. The fictitious treatment of the ›spirit of place‹ began, somewhat unsurprisingly, in the Victorian period, when

»London was the most heavily populated city in the world, and one whose physical and psychological limits seemed all but impossible to demarcate. The fluid nature of the English capital alarmed some and excited others, prompting great debate about how literature and art might cope with the profound challenges of such an environment. Much recent scholarship has concentrated on ›reading‹ London, that is to say, on applying contemporary critical theory to a canon of literary works which seem to foreshadow the metropolitan developments and concerns of our own time. The results have been valuable and stimu-

8 Phillips 2003.

lating, but such studies have often underestimated the extent to which contemporary theory is anticipated by insights of a previous century. [...] How could any literary or artistic work hope to do justice to the vastness of London, with its hordes of people, its noise, its fogs, its insatiable consumption of the surrounding countryside?»⁹

Indeed, how could they? We will try to dig deep into London fiction and deep into London's history to get a glimpse of the city's genius loci. We will go through some London-based fiction to see how it is represented and will have a look at the historical background to find out the main character traits of London and its genius loci. The works I chose (some of them already mentioned above) could be described as ›canonical‹, and some would argue that I could have used some works outside of this certain canon to get a wider frame and not get trapped in a certain corner. Or get lost on certain side paths without acknowledging the other ways. We will see how far we can go until there is a dead end.

Now, about the literature-chapters: We will start our journey through time (not so much through space, since we stay in London) in Whitechapel, where the TV series of the same name is set. From there on we will travel along the churches of architect Nicholas Hawksmoor and the works of Peter Ackroyd and Iain Sinclair. Then we will make a short stop, walk along *Ripper Street*, dive into the *Rivers of London* and end up in *Neverwhere*. And from there on we will only have one final halt: *From Hell*. At the end of each chapter, I will not only point out the work's most important motifs, but also refer to some theories concerning space and place, because the ›spirit of place‹ is, as the name suggests, a matter of space and place theory. After *From Hell*, we will try to make sense of our findings in two ways: »Diana« and »Apollo«. These chapter names will make more sense once we have arrived there. And after that, we will conclude, how, why, and if London's ›spirit of place‹ can be caught and if it can be defined.

9 Freeman 2007: v.

In between, there will always be tour guides through London. After *Whitechapel*, there is the Ripper-related tour through the same area. After the chapters about Peter Ackroyd and Iain Sinclair, I will take you to Nicholas Hawkmoor's churches. There will be a tour from the North (Highgate or Hampstead, depends on where you want to start) to the British Museum, a tour through the West End and one through The City. The chapter about the comic *From Hell* will be followed by a tour through London that follows the tour of Sir William Gull and John Netley in chapter four of the comic. And one last tour leads you from Baker Street (alternatively from Leinster Gardens) to William Blake's Lambeth.

It is a bit of an alternative take on London's history. Let us now dive into the city, of which Dr Watson writes: »that great cesspool into which all the loungers and idlers of the Empire are irresistibly drained.«¹⁰ I am sorry for spoilers, but some are inevitable for our analyses. So, prepare for a journey into the past. First halt: The East End. Whitechapel. But, wait, the first stop, before we are heading east, is the theory. Think of it as a visit to the British Library.

¹⁰ Doyle 2014: 4.