

This week's readings present an interesting way of experiencing London in a particular time frame--and experiencing the urban through different perspectives, whether it is through sounds or a man newly recovered from an illness.

William Blake's *London*, for starters, takes us on a walk of London, through the sounds from different people, ranging from infants to soldiers to sex workers. The poem indeed depicts a very depressing walk through London, where the authorities of the church have made everyone crying and cursing. At the very end of the poem, the verse "blights with plagues the Marriage hearse" even combines love and death in one vehicle, seemingly to suggest that there is no hope. Written at the end of the 18th century, when the Industrial Revolution was at the full pace in England, the poem seems to suggest that urban life is oppressive, not mentioning any sight of the convenience brought by industrialization.

In addition, I found Poe's short piece "The Man of the Crowd" quite captivating. An anonymous man observes the crowded London in a cafe that is not named. The anonymous man goes about categorizing each person in the cafe and is intrigued by a man that he cannot identify. He then follows this mysterious man but winds up thinking that "he is the man of the crowd." In a sense, I think the man that the narrator chases is the narrator's double. They are both anonymous and mysterious--unable to tell what they do for a living. Through the description of the suspicious man, we can sense bizarreness and loneliness from living in a metropolis like London. There is no sense of affection in the fiction, just jobs and crowds, and people losing a sense of purpose.

Last but not least, Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* is definitely similar to the pandemic that is happening around the world. Although Defoe's work is considered fictional, it was interesting to see that what takes place in the Great Plague in London in the 1600s share many similarities with the pandemic today. Cities are divided into sections no longer for administrative purposes but according to the number of people infected with the plague. Once the locus of urban activities, public spaces are now deadly quiet, becoming a site of logistics and commute formed by workers providing essential services. This makes me think about the redefinition of the public and the private under COVID-19. When Italy was the epicenter of the pandemic, the state issued stay-at-home orders that forbade its residents from leaving their houses except for a few occasions. As a result, the balcony became a public space where people in the neighborhood organized "concerts" while still being able to obey stay-at-home orders. In a sense, the pandemic has made designers and planners rethink the function and circulation of urban space. I am not sure if Defoe describes the streets after the plague ends since I have not read through the whole book. But I remember at the end of *The Plague*, Camus describes the scene of celebration as the plague ends and every survivor in the city comes to the central square to cheer for their victory and freedom. It seems that the function of the public has not been altered. It would be interesting to see what would happen after the pandemic ends and how it would influence the definition of the public and the private.

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