



## Artist's Note

I'm a travelling artist, timewise and spatially. I think of my works as expressions of this journey in an unset space-time. Far from London and away from 2009, back home in Sweden during the 1980's, as a child and a teenager, I broadened my sense of reality with fantasy, science fiction and horror role-playing games. Beside more famous ones like *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Call of Cthulhu*, I played a game called *Chill*, mainly set in Victorian London, in an atmosphere of Sherlock Holmes, Jack the Ripper and Gothic mysteries. I remember images by the French 19th century artist Gustave Doré illustrating the game. They made a lasting impression. They were descriptive in a documentary way and at the same time imaginative as a saga. The idea of separating fiction from reality still puzzles me. Now a visual artist, documentary practices and the media relating to them are both themes and techniques for me. Our perception of reality seems to depend on a relationship to created media images. Interestingly, traditions in documentation are very often bound to imageries that ought to be described as fiction. At the same time they do reflect a reality. In many cases they also contribute to transforms of that reality. When I moved to London, as an artist in residence, these childhood images from Doré came back to me. Inevitably it affected my expectations as well as my experience of the city.

By the mid-nineteenth century, London had become both the nightmare and the modern metropolis of the era. It was the focus of interested observers, like Karl Marx, who gathered there eager to experience this new world of marvels, urban poverty and working class heroism. London manifested an idea of the future world, and its inhabitants, the people in it. Naturally, the city also had a great pictorial impact on arts and culture. Doré was one of its admirers. Doré's earlier works, like his illustrations for the Bible, were big successes in England, partly due to a major solo exhibition in London 1867. There he met Blanchard Jerrold, a French-English journalist and playwright, who suggested the collaborative creation of an illustrated guide, or rather a description of London. Despite his outsider perspective and lack of knowledge in social sciences, Doré loved the idea. He signed a four-year contract with the publisher Grant & Co and was paid the immense sum of £10,000 for working in London for three months of each year.

The result of Doré's and Jerrold's project, a book they called *London, A Pilgrimage* was published in 1872. It was a comprehensive panoramic portrait of the world's largest city and its inhabitants. Above all this book was a devastating realization of the contrasts between shiny wealth and dirty poverty. It depicted everyday life in the streets, festivities and fashion, trade and markets, as well as labour and the hard life among the suffering working class. Beside the often poetic and thought-provoking image-titles, in my opinion, Jerrold's writings are not as good as Doré's illustrations. The book was a commercial success. From that point of view some might look at it today as a kind of "poornography", simply a picturesque coffee-table book, a conversation piece affordable only to the rich. But in its time it was considered far from tame. Some were concerned that Doré's images focused on the common and the vulgar. Others accused him of inventing a



dark fantasy rather than copying the reality. But the work was also upsetting in a way that raised questions of what could be done for the slum dwellers of London. In that way the book can be considered an early example of social documentary; which has over time become a mainly photographic genre dealing with reality; revealing, recording and portraying human life (mainly that of the poor) in its given setting.

Although everything in *London, A Pilgrimage* is based on and presented as non-fiction, I would argue that in this work fiction and non-fiction often intersect. And I believe this fictional dimension is one of the strengths of the work and the cause of its long life, at least in my own archive of images. Beside the necessary selectiveness when simplifying a three dimensional reality and transmitting it to a two dimensional image, this creation of fiction also has to do with the process related to the chosen artistic medium. Doré's illustrations started as sketches, a technique that – used by the skilled artist – was most suitable to capture individual moments, a kind of “snapshots” of the time. He later on collected the sketches in collage-like drawings in which he reconstructed his impressions. The drawings were transformed to wood engravings, made by other craftsmen, and these block prints became the actual book-illustrations. In other words, Doré used the most contemporary and adequate technique available for reproducing reality-report-images. But in this process a slight but unavoidable shift from reality to fiction occurs. In a way it becomes both. For me, working within the documentary field, and at the same time fascinated by the intricate relationship between fiction and reality, this is an interesting state, or stage where to act.

As an artist from abroad, temporarily living in London, I was keen on working in a site specific manner. The Doré images were there in my mind, and almost unaware of it, I started a project aiming at connecting to his and Jerrold's book about London. I was fascinated by the documentary aspects of Doré's drawings, a medium that today doesn't have the same authority as film and photography when it comes to documentation. I do not say Doré's images are not photographic, because some of them are. The drawings may even be based on photographic originals, as that technique was in use by the time. I rather wonder what it is that interests me in documenting or more truly representing a reality by the not so accurate act of capturing it with a pencil on a blank sheet of paper? One reason could be the same as why depictive drawings or paintings, in relation to photographs, are probably more likely to be saved for the future. Possibly this is because they are considered more of an artwork, maybe based on the assumption that more time and effort are invested in creating them. Another reason for me to work after the images in *London, A Pilgrimage*, was the fantastical world aspects of them. My fascination for fantasy worlds, like J.R.R Tolkien's *Middle Earth* and C.S Lewis's *Narnia*, have over time developed more into an interest for these worlds references to the real, as a kind of reality blueprints. And I think the creation of fantasy worlds has some basic similarities to drawing. You make something descriptive in it self that also works as a window to a world beyond, in the imagination of the viewer.

I bought the original 1872 edition of *London, A Pilgrimage* in a second-hand bookshop. And I got so inspired by the images that I decided to give it a try myself; to make a new portrait, but of contemporary London – in drawings. The development of the project became much of a pilgrimage of its own, or even more so, a detective work in the absurd tradition of American writer Paul Auster. I studied maps, read guidebooks and searched the internet for milieus connected to Doré's images. Some of them still existed, other didn't. Emblematic buildings seemed unchangeable, while other areas, like the Docklands, have gone through massive changes. This made me think about urban gentrification, the process of rebuilding and rebranding poorer areas to make way for more profitable middle class residents. I thought of how this processes often transform bad reputations into something cool or of historic value. And how once industrial structures often become picturesque monument memorabilia and landmarks. Like the London ship-docks that today mainly act as water mirrors reflecting the Canary Wharf skyscrapers, and how the now defunct cranes in the area all of a sudden are looked upon as public sculptures. With these thoughts on my mind, I walked around London with a sketchbook, a camera and the old book, in search of the views of Doré and Jerrold. I became a wanderer in geography as well as in history.



Gustave Doré: *Billingsgate - Landing the Fish*

Later on in my studio, I put my impressions of the places together in a series of drawings with the same titles and sizes as the plates in *London, A Pilgrimage*. In this way, my images became some sort of imaginary diptychs and homage to them. But there the relationship ends. Through this process of transformation and manipulation I drew out new and possible narratives. *Amenities of the road* was no longer a horse drawn cab but a taxi. *Evans* was not anymore a night house and supper room but a store for plus size women clothing. The mythological figure from Doré's frontispiece *Father Thames* has transformed into a public artwork; a relief from 1988 by Stephen Duncan entitled *Father Thames*.

In many ways I think of my project mainly as an attempt to create a new imagery for a London saga. But I have no storyline, nor clear motives. The combination of high and low in the material presents the motifs on an equal level, and the amount of images creates a multitude of possible readings, of alternative routes, allowing the viewer to take an active role in piecing the parts together. Providing a broad material has become a way for me of inviting reflection, an act that involves the viewer. In some aspects it reminds me of a play of Luigi Pirandello: *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, which is about a theatre and the arrival of six strange people that reveal themselves as unfinished characters in search of an author to end their story. This in turn raises questions of role-play and of memory, the roles that we are given or those we grow into. The well-known merges with the informal and the personal, creating a play between moments of description and a larger more associative web.

What finally brings me back to the Victorian fantasy and it's impact, is the fact that Doré's images are perhaps the most used role model for Victorian city settings in television-adaptations of for example the novels of Charles Dickens. That raises new questions about the power of imagery and how it affects today's image of London, of how times past seems to be so much part of our present. Why is it that history is continually inscribed into contemporary culture, which is at the same time desperate to be modern, and why is it so often being constructed and reconstructed as a tool for defining national and individual identity, as well as society as a whole? It seems like the Victorian era and London are inseparable in the same way that Sweden and the Modernism are. For example I'm thinking of how this is so closely bound to tourism and the economy generated by it. Furthermore, this probably also influences the development of the city, like restoration ethics and city planning. You could ask: What has Victorian London and its perpetuators, like Doré and Jerrold, have to do with the city of today? From my point of view, as a guest in this city, the Victorian era still colours and sometimes even overshadows my actual experience of living here. And I can imagine that I am not alone, that this is, maybe due to all the period costume dramas, still the dominant image of the city abroad. To get into that image, surrender to it, question it or revolt against it, was I suspect, one of the underlying driving forces of my project.

Adding the finishing touches of the material, I can't really see myself as a nostalgic, nor a critic. I am mainly interested in the world I live in, including its attachments to the past. As a person I want to relate to and document what I'm part of. After all, I'm a tourist in London and an amateur when it comes to its topics, more interested in observing than explaining. I just try to translate what I see, from one format to another, creating a second hand experience that primarily aims at establishing a visual world, and at promoting the objects of discussion in it to a more common discursive level and a less academic one. As Jerrold puts it in the introduction of *London, A Pilgrimage*: "We are wanderers; not, I repeat, historians."

Martin Karlsson, London, August 2009



Gustave Doré: *A Whitechapel Coffee House*