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Capitalist Apocalypse in the Painting of John Martin and Gordon Cheung

Abstract: Taking as its starting point Tate Britain's recent John Martin retrospective, entitled *John Martin: Apocalypse*, this paper considers the possibility that depictions of biblical apocalyptic scenes in Martin's paintings are actually metaphors for revolution (French and American). The first half of the paper investigates possible links between Martin's apocalyptic imagery, British imperial ambitions and the rise of capitalism. It also considers how Martin's plans for urban redevelopment are linked to his preoccupation with cataclysmic doom. Through iconographical readings of Martin's paintings the paper hypothesizes that themes such as the fall of great civilizations and the wrath of god are not coincidental but concerns contemporary to Martin caused by capitalist expansion. The second part of the paper goes on to investigate the possibility that our contemporary interest in the apocalypse is in fact, just as it was in Martin's time, a metaphor for militant unrest, which is manifested in theory and culture because of our inability to imagine the end of capitalism – in this context the paper turns to contemporary painter Gordon Cheung to reconsider the idea, attributed to Jameson and Žižek, that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.

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John Martin was a 19th century English Romantic artist, famous for his apocalyptic paintings. His final major work, a triptych, depicted the actual moment of the apocalypse and its aftermath. It comprised of the following three paintings: *The Last Judgement*; *The Great Day of his Wrath*; and *The Plains of Heaven*. There is established research linking John Martin's paintings to the revolutionary times he lived in (Feaver *The Art of John Martin*; Myrone *John Martin: Apocalypse*; Morden): the *American Revolution* that occurred just before he was born¹; the *French Revolution* that occurred in the first year of his life; and the *Napoleonic Wars* and subsequent revolutions that followed.

John Martin's recent retrospective at Tate Britain was the first comprehensive

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¹ John Martin's father fought and was wounded in the American Revolutionary War.

survey of his work for thirty years. This renewed interest is not surprising, as we too live in revolutionary times: for the first time in a generation British students have made meaningful protests that spilled over into civil unrest; the August riots were unprecedented². It has been argued that revolution is always global and that if you look at France from 1750-1850 and Denmark from the same period, it was Denmark that changed more. But would Denmark have changed so much if it were not for the French Revolution? In this context we cannot ignore the *Arab Spring* that preceded the British unrest: be in no doubt, we too live in revolutionary times³.

In order to establish codified concerns about capitalism, the fall of the British Empire and of the French Revolution spreading to the UK, I will analyse John Martin's Mesopotamian "Blockbuster" trilogy. The popularity of these paintings establishes that there was a prevalent appetite for such subject matter. I conjecture that Martin exploited public fear of revolution, for commercial gain, through the metaphor of biblical apocalypse.

I then explore contemporary examples of an apocalyptic aesthetic in order

to question if, just as in John Martin's painting, there is a codified fear, which is a metaphor for revolution, stemming from concerns about capitalism.

1. Codified concerns: fall of empire, revolution and industrial capitalism

1.1. The fall of Babylon

In 1930 Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald published *Babylon Revisited* in the wake of the Wall Street Crash (1929).

A tale of boom and bust, about the debts one has to pay when the party comes to an end, it is a story with particular relevance for the way we live now [...] Throughout "Babylon Revisited", Fitzgerald uses economic metaphors to underscore the idea that debts must be paid. The story reverberates with uncanny echoes – or rather, anticipations – of our own era, the way in which we trusted that living on credit could last forever. What Fitzgerald shows us is the effects that this mistake has not only on our economy, but on our characters: that money is the least of what we have to lose (Churchwell).

Fitzgerald was by no means the first to link the biblical Babylon with a contemporary decline in moral values associated with a love of money. John Martin made three "blockbuster" paintings within a decade about the fall of civilisations (referred to as the *Mesopotamian Trilogy*). The first, the *Fall of Babylon*, recounts the city from the Old Testament, which also resurfaces as an apocalyptic warning in the book of Revelation. The wickedness of Babylon is economic: it was a city that fell because of its society's love of money and therefore can be read as a warn-

2 Not even the Tottenham or Brixton riots of 1985 were quite like it in terms of how the August riots spread around London and then the country; the longevity of the riots; and the shockingly consumerist element.

3 David Graeber argued this at *Radical Publishing: What Are We Struggling For?* At conference at the ICA, London organised by Federico Campagna (2011).

ing about capitalism. It is also seen as a warning for a city (or cities, or societies) of the future, as the headquarters of *the Beast*. By John Martin's time, London was regularly being referred to as the New Babylon (Feaver *The Art of John Martin* 44) and there was a concern that a decline in British moral values would lead to the fall of the British Empire.

Martin's time saw the transformation to Industrial Capitalism, under Hume and Smiths' guiding theories, cause serious social unrest. After victory in the Napoleonic Wars came a poor economic state of affairs: famine; high unemployment; and boom and bust in the textiles industry, all of which was set against a period of Regency excess.

As I intend to argue that John Martin was influenced by the harshness of industrial capitalism and the revolutionary times he lived in, it is worth noting some of the examples of that occurred in his lifetime:

When Martin was ten years old the *Combination Act* banned the formation of trade unions; ten years after Martin moved to London he would have witnessed the *Spa Field Riots* – noteworthy because one of the two main targets for the Spenceans was the Bank of England and because some ten thousand people attended their meetings; three years later, when Martin was thirty, the Peterloo Massacre occurred and, although the demands of the protestors were for parliamentary reform, the demands were fuelled by the aforementioned economic conditions exacerbated by the unpopular Corn Laws. Peterloo caused the gov-

ernment to take the threat of revolution seriously and the so-called *Gagging Acts* (clamping down on "seditious meetings" and "treason") were introduced the following year – although this did more to cause the *Cato Street Conspiracy* (which aimed to implement a French style revolution starting with the assassination of the cabinet) than it did to quell the revolutionary fever; by 1824, when Martin was thirty-five, he had lost all his savings as his bank failed; from 1830-32 there were the *Reform Bill Riots* that ushered in a series of reforms starting with the *First Reform Act* (1832), the *Factory Act*, the *Education Act* (both 1833) and *Poor Law Reform* (1833). But in 1834 the *Tolpuddle Martyrs* were deported to Australia simply for swearing an oath to protect their wages. Around the same time Martin was struggling with cheap prints infringing his copyright; from 1838-48 the Chartists, who become the first mass working class movement for political reform, were active; also in 1848, 'the year of revolutions'⁴ Karl Marx published the *Communist Manifesto* (he had met Engels in Paris, 1844) and from 1845-6 there was the Irish Potato Famine.

Such political and economic events must have had an impact on John Martin for whom Babylon was surely also a con-

4 Louis Philippe deposed in France, nationalist revolutions in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Denmark, Schleswig-Holstein, Poland, Wallachia, Hungary, Brazil, and in Italy with Mazzini and Garibaldi's stirring of republican ideals – the Risorgimento (see Morden 115)

temporary subject: biblical cities like Babylon and Nineveh had just been re-discovered and were beginning to be excavated for the first time. While news of Claudius James Rich's discoveries had reached Martin before he started making his Mesopotamian series, the Babylonian excavations of A.H. Laynard did not reach Britain until the 1840s, leaving Martin to base his imagery on historical texts⁵ and to fill in the gaps with his imagination.⁶

Martin made two versions of *The Fall of Babylon*. The first was an oil painting (1819). The second was a much smaller (and much better, in my opinion) mezzotint (1831). The mezzotint is darker, the storm more chaotic and ferocious, the architecture more exotic, the battle closer and more terrible. By the time he made the mezzotint version, John Martin was dedicating much of his time on plans for the embankment of the Thames. Therefore we can view the mezzotint version, with its embankment, as his vision for a future London, riverside walks and all. Of course, it also serves as a warning for the possible collapse of *New Babylon*.

5 We know he read Herodotus for example.

6 Furthermore, there was an increased public appetite for such works, as the revolution in France had made the usual *Grand Tour of Europe* by the British aristocracy, and well-to-do middle classes, somewhat difficult. Instead the *Grand Tour* had been increasingly focusing on the Middle East. It was also around this time that great treasures such as the *Eglin Marbles* and a sculpted head of *Ramses II* were brought to Britain.

1.2. Belshazzar's Feast

The second painting in the trilogy, *Belshazzar's Feast*, also dealt with the fall of Babylon and was a great commercial success. The painting was exhibited at the *British Institution* in 1821, winning a prize of 200 guineas. By public demand, the exhibition was extended for three weeks and five thousand people paid a shilling a head to see it.

Compared to other painters of the same subject,⁷ Martin's compositions are withdrawn, distant, and focus on the bigger picture – not close-ups of individuals. In this way Martin emphasises the social over the individual. Martin's Mesopotamian series coincided with a period of Regency excess that had led society to fear divine retribution. Martin reflected the social and economic malaise that followed the Napoleonic Wars. Socialists and Christians were united against moral guilt in their belief that social reform was the only way to avoid apocalyptic punishment from God. It was after Martin's Mesopotamian trilogy, and the coronation of William IV, that a flurry of social-political reforms came into law. In addition to those listed above child labour was restricted and slavery was abolished (in nearly all of the British Empire).

Martin popularised themes of overpopulation, pollution and empires rotten to the core, both because he feared for the British Empire and because his paying public came to expect it of him. By 1815

7 See Rembrandt's version of *Belshazzar's Feast* for example.

London's rapid expansion had led to the lifting of the ban on discharging household waste into the sewers (and therefore into the Thames). Martin saw London's sewage crisis as directly linked to the fall of empire:

Is it not probably that a too ignorant waste of manure has caused the richest and most fertile countries such as Egypt, Assyria, the Holy Land, the south of Italy &c to become barren as they are now? (Martin in Feaver *The Art of John Martin* 71)

Social justice was obviously important to John Martin as he stopped working as a full time artist and increasingly spent his time working on projects of urban improvement to benefit society. Examples include: water supply, sewage systems, a circular railway and the embankment of the Thames.

1.3. The fall of Nineveh

The subject of the last painting in the trilogy, *The Fall of Nineveh* (1828), serves as a warning against greed and debauchery and can therefore be read as a metaphor for the industrial and colonial greed at the time it was painted. Nineveh was besieged for three years before the invaders breached the walls only to find drunken soldiers and that the King, Sardanapalus, had consigned himself, his harem and all his worldly treasures to a funeral pyre (Morden 31; Feaver *The Art of John Martin* 99). On the other side of the channel Delacroix, more famous for his paintings of the French Revolution, also depicted the fall of Nineveh in his 1829 work *Death of Sardanapalus*. Today such

paintings might make us think of bankers' bonuses or MP's expenses scandals but with the Napoleonic Empire coming to its end in 1815 at Waterloo, the *July Revolution* (1830) just around the corner and the *Third French Revolution* (1848) in the not too distant future, John Martin's audience would have made connections not just to the fall of the Napoleonic Empire and the potential fall of the British Empire but also to the threat of revolution at home.

The main concerns for imperial collapse stemmed from a perceived fall in moral standards, corruption and inequality. The collapse of Empire, invasion by the French or a revolution from within, were all potential scenarios for the end of the world, as it was known.

2. Contemporary codified fears:

John Martin's legacy in contemporary painting

Gordon Cheung is the best example of a contemporary painter directly influenced by John Martin, capitalist crisis and apocalypse in equal measures. Cheung's paintings are instantly recognisable as they are painted in iridescent, toxic, psychedelic, neon colours onto copies of the *Financial Times*. Cheung started using FT stock listings in his paintings at the same time that he became interested in the digital and communications revolution that, at the time, we were (and still are) going through. It was at this time terms such as *cyberspace*, *the global village*, and *the information superhighway*, were becoming commonly used. In this context we can think

of the stock listings as a metaphor for the virtual world that we live in, literally: banking and financial trading underpin and form the backdrop to Cheung's worlds.

Cheung often references Romantic painting from Martin's time. Examples include *The Wreck of Hope* in which he appropriated both the title and the sea of ice from the Friedrich painting of the same name or *Deluge*, which appropriates Gericault's *Raft of the Medusa* (while the title perhaps nods to Martin's *The Deluge*).

In 2007 Cheung was commissioned by the Laing Gallery (Newcastle) to make a series of paintings based on John Martin's mezzotint series of Milton's *Paradise Lost*:

For me Paradise Lost is a metaphor of how we entered the twenty first century in one apocalyptic wave after another with the dot-com bubble bursting, the millennium bug, destruction of the Twin Towers, and our increasingly urgent relationship to nature... (Cheung in Waters)

Julie Milne, in her essay for the *John Martin: Apocalypse* exhibition catalogue, expands:

The vision of the world as Paradise Lost is a virtual computer-generated environment alien to nature and shaped by human greed, violence and convenience...The apocalypse as described in Gordon Cheung's paintings is a computer-generated technological pop culture, with the global stock market as the new God. Cheung's multimedia collage paintings [...] present the pervasive power of the stock market, which underpins, and potentially threatens all our lives (Milne 56).

Cheung's references to the apocalypse can be direct, as in his 2009 solo exhibition entitled *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*. This exhibition featured literal depictions of the horsemen galloping over stock listings.

Every few years Cheung also paints the world's *Top Ten Billionaires* (one version appeared in the Four Horsemen show) thus directly linking capital to 21st century apocalypse – a connection made much easier by the financial crisis of 2008.

Cheung is by no means the only contemporary painter to inherit Martin's apocalyptic aesthetic. Nigel Cooke's desolate landscapes and cityscapes have more than a little of the post-apocalyptic about them, and are described by Milne as having the dreamlike desolation of Martin's *The Last Man* (Milne 59). Are Cooke's rubbish dumps and urban decay or waste in general a contemporary abyss? Dirk Skreber paints scenes of catastrophe, or moments preceding catastrophe, such as impending train crashes (1999-2000), floods (2001-3), car crashes (2002) or the Columbine High School building (1999). Ben Grasso paints exploding houses, reminiscent of imagery from nuclear test sites and Ricky Allman made a series of paintings of a machine, seemingly made to liquidise the world called the *Apocalyzer* (2006).

3. John Martin's legacy in popular culture

John Martin was not trained as an artist but as a commercial carriage and ceramic painter. His large-scale dramatic touring paintings, that had such

widespread popular appeal, brought him criticism for being something of a showman, competing with the *Eidophusikon*,⁸ *Panoramas*,⁹ *Dioramas*¹⁰ and *Phantasmagorical Magic Lantern shows*¹¹ of his day. It is therefore reasonable that we should look to contemporary popular culture for his aesthetic legacy. We do not need to look far: computer games, such as *Hellgate: London*, are clearly influenced by Martin's aesthetic.

8 The *Eidophusikon* was an artwork, created by 18th century English painter Philip James de Loutherbourg (1740-1812). It opened in Leicester Square in February 1781. It was described by the media of his day as "Moving Pictures, representing Phenomena of Nature". The *Eidophusikon* can be considered an early form of cinema; mirrors and pulleys achieved its effect.

9 The first *Panorama* was exhibited by the British painter Robert Barker, in the Rotunda at Leicester Square in 1793. It comprised of a rotunda with a viewing platform upon which the paying public would view 360° painted vistas, usually cityscapes.

10 Daguerre's *Diorama* incorporated stage scenery into the Panorama and was first shown in Paris before coming to Regent's Park, London the following year, in 1823. Portable versions followed as well as a *Diorama* on Oxford Street (now Marks and Spencer).

11 The *Phantasmagoria* was a type of magic lantern show incorporating projections of ghosts and skeleton to scare the audience. Invented in France, it was popular in Britain during the 19th Century. Magic lanterns back projected light on a transparent screen with double slides to add movement and were one of the precursors to animation and cinema.

When we look to cinema his legacy is even more common. Martin's work is widely recognised as directly influencing the design of D.W. Griffiths' silent film *Intolerance* (1916) as well as Ray Harryhausen's *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963), *Sinbad and the Eye of the Tiger* (1977) and *Clash of the Titans* (1981) and more recently the work of George Lukas and Peter Jackson (Milne 54-55). Fans will recognise Martin's aesthetic in a whole host of apocalypse films. There are far too many to list here but *2012* is one of many examples, and an example of his legacy in CGI. What we presume to be CGI is often, in fact, hand painted. This process goes back to the early days of cinema and is adapted from the set design of theatre. "Matte painters" paint on sheets of glass which actors are filmed in front of before the CGI is added much later on. Compare the images used for the film poster for *2012* to Martin's ruined cities or compare other images from the film itself to *The Fall of Babylon*. If John Martin were alive today, he might well have worked as a matte painter or concept artist for computer games.

4. Conclusion

John Martin's links to revolution and industrial capitalism are well documented (Feaver *The Art of John Martin*; Morden; Myrone *John Martin: Apocalypse*). It is clear that during Martin's lifetime there was a fear of the fall of the British Empire (the Napoleonic Empire fell, after a mere ten years). This fear was fuelled by French revolutionary fever spread-

ing across the channel; fear that other colonies would follow the model of the American Revolution; and fear that the moral decay caused by industrialisation and a love of money would invoke divine retribution.

While Gordon Cheung's references to capitalist excess are clear, what is perhaps less obvious is the link between his paintings and revolution. I have tried to argue that the link between the industrial revolution in John Martin's lifetime and de-industrialisation and the communications revolution in Cheung's is not coincidental. Both are manifestations of concerns about capitalism and the end of the world, at least as it is known.

John Martin's public turned out to be correct in their fear of the end of the world. Both Martin and his contemporary Turner painted themes of societal change, reform and destruction.¹² Industrialisation ushered in a period of capitalism, bloody warfare, and the normalisation of debt and it was such changes that brought about the end of the world, as it was known.

Almost exactly 100 years before John Martin was born the English suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of the French at Beachy Head. Shortly after,

in 1694, the establishment of the Bank of England allowed private individuals to loan the state money, most of which was invested in the navy. The creation of a national debt, and the act of Union in 1707 signalled the beginning of building Britain as a global, colonial power. A period of unprecedented military expansion followed. By the Battle of Waterloo (when Martin was 26 years old) British national debt had reached a staggering 200% of GDP. Colonial expansion, made possible by industrialisation, banking and capitalism, provided the backdrop to Britain's wars with America and France.

It is easy to see why industrial and colonial greed were causes of alarm to Martin's contemporaries. His audiences would have recognised such concerns in his "Mesopotamian Trilogy", in fact, Martin was criticised for exploiting a public appetite for such subject matter, for playing on their fears.

Just as the interest in the apocalypse during Martin's time was a metaphor for revolution and the birth of industrial capitalism, I believe that our renewed interest in the apocalypse, as evidenced in contemporary cinema, computer games and art, is a metaphor for the information and communications revolution described in Gordon Cheung's paintings. In turn, this is a concern that the world, as we know it, is about to change as we de-industrialise, globalise and pass through late capitalism.

The well-known phrase, that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism, attributed to Žižek

¹² Turner also turned to the bible with works like *The Destruction of Sodom* and *The Tenth Plague*. He also referenced a non-biblical apocalypse in *The Decline of the Carthaginian Empire*. Nevertheless no artist, not even Turner, painted such vividly descriptive fallen cities as Martin.

and Jameson, points to concerns about our inability to imagine political alternatives to free market capitalism. A system based on debt and perpetual growth, in a world of increasing populations and depleting resources, is simply unsustainable. Despite overwhelming scientific evidence, we are unable to grasp the gravity of climate crisis: the ultimate product of our consumer culture. These are issues that I believe we are avoiding and instead

are manifested and codified in apocalyptic imagery of mass culture and in art.

For me, a more important question is: how art can engage with capitalist crisis? Can painting, for example, still play an effective role, as Picasso's *Guernica* did in the 1930s? Or has the proliferation of mass media apocalyptic images desensitised us? If this is the case then perhaps it explains the recent rise in more radical forms of art, such as art activism.

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