



John Martin
Apocalypse



The abyss that abides

Julie Milne

Martin and Turner both depict the same annihilating vortex, one with flame and one with snow. Some say the world will end with fire, some in ice, but both factions in the debate agree that it will end: Rome's rule, Napoleon's, Gomorrah, the industrially warmed world that we inhabit straining at the end of their respective tethers, facing the same whirlpools of demise. This is the terror of the world's edge, is the vertigo of an accelerated culture. Out beyond the lights of every city, every town and every century, this is the abyss that abides.

Extract of text from a performance by Alan Moore comparing *Hannibal and his Army Crossing the Alps* 1812 by J.M.W. Turner, and *The Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah* 1852 by John Martin, at the Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle upon Tyne, 13 March 2010. (fig.25)

Every age has its own rendering of the apocalypse drawn from its experience of war, natural disaster or pandemic.² Despite and in some ways because of the exponential advances in science and technology, many still suspect that we are living on borrowed time awaiting the day of reckoning. In a culture dispossessed of the certainties of biblical truth yet still immersed in the horror of recent history, how are artists capturing contemporary realities and anxieties, and what connects the art of John Martin, a nineteenth-century painter of the Sublime, with the art of today?

Martin's epic vision of biblical catastrophe and the vast spectacle of nature reveals an imaginative range and depth of feeling that had a great impact on audiences in his own time and ours. Martin was both a popular artist and one of the most important advocates of Sublime visionary landscape painting in the early nineteenth century. As defined influentially by the writer and statesman Edmund Burke in his much-read *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), the Sublime transcended simple notions of natural beauty and encompassed scenes of such staggering extent, violence or mystery that they inspired contradictory responses of awe and wonder, terror and rapture. The idea of the Sublime persisted as an important feature of aesthetic discourse throughout Martin's

Detail from *The Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah* 1852 (p.116)



Fig.25
Alan Moore in performance at the Laing Art Gallery in 2010, with *The Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah* 1852

time, and into our own age. Capturing sights and experiences at the very edge of reason, and perhaps beyond rational thought, the Sublime has in fact been revived in contemporary culture. Situated at the limits of conventional thinking, the Sublime may, in a strictly Burkean sense, offer the possibility of aesthetic elevation; but it also, by being so subjective, unsettles our sense of cultural value, blurring distinctions between the trite and the esteemed, the authentic and the artificial. Far from being elevated above modern consumerism, the Sublime seems to allow for a connection with – and may even materialise – consumer experience in unusually forceful and productive ways.³

Martin's apocalyptic vision was firmly rooted in the reality of his nineteenth-century world, a world of conspicuous change. It was a period of economic, political and social transition, beset by the upheaval of revolution and war, rapid scientific developments and the Industrial Revolution. From the American War of Independence



Fig. 26
Poster for the disaster movie
2012 (dir. Roland Emmerich,
2009)



Fig. 27
Still from computer action
game *Hellgate: London*
Developed by Flagship
Studios, released 2007

(1775–82) that preceded Martin's birth, the French Revolution in 1789 that began in the first year of his life, and the long wars between Britain and France that followed (1793–1815), whose far-reaching impact on Britain's economy, social structure and political values defined his early years, Martin's age was one of upheaval and anxiety. In the twenty-first century Martin's spectacular vision of the apocalypse still has a strong resonance, with reports of ecological disaster, pandemic and terrorist threat such that the spectacle of the apocalypse has become embedded in the narrative of popular culture. Within this context Martin's impact is not only manifest through the traditions of fine art. These narratives and attendant images also saturate cinema and science fiction, as well as novels, television, video games, music, Manga comics, and Christian fundamentalist and millennialist outpourings, pervading our own cultural fragmentation. Both in his time and our own, Martin's art is relevant across a broad spectrum of cultural activities.

In his seminal book *The Shows of London* (1978), the literary historian Richard Altick described a teeming nineteenth-century exhibition culture that included freak shows, mechanical wonders, curiosities and fine art.⁴ In the last few years this newly visually orientated culture of spectacle and entertainment has become the subject of intensive scholarly interest. Martin's art can now be seen in the context of a commercially dynamic world of urban enterprise. There was a ready audience for such entertainments, including both the uneducated and the cultured who wanted to be entertained and instructed, desiring an imaginative escape from the confinement of the growing city. In addressing catastrophic themes, Martin readily exploited the possibilities offered by the nineteenth-century taste for spectacle seen in the dioramas, panoramas and phantasmagoria shows of the day. These popular entertainments with their manipulation of light, image and movement set within darkened halls, created a sense of awe and wonder, and Martin's artistic debt to the diorama and other illuminated forms of entertainment is evident in all aspects of his work. He gained a reputation as the 'King of the Vast':⁵ A choreographer of tumultuous catastrophe, seen in his paintings such as *Belshazzar's Feast* 1820 (no. 28) and *The Deluge* exh. 1826 (see no. 57), he presented man as an abject tiny figure overwhelmed by the forces of God and nature. This generally sensationalist treatment captured the imagination of the public, who were admitted to see his paintings in the same way that modern audiences might visit the cinema. Such popular entertainments could be seen to prefigure our own visual culture of the spectacle. Martin's work is known to have influenced directly the design of D.W. Griffiths's silent film *Intolerance* (1916; fig. 41 on p. 107) and the work of the influential stop-motion cinematographer Ray Harryhausen who, with his famous sequence of fantasy films, from *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963) to *Clash of the Titans* (1981) and *Sinbad and the Eye of the Tiger* (1977), inspired generations of filmmakers who have shaped the contemporary blockbuster, like



Fig. 28
Sun Ra, *Hiroshima* / *Stars that Shine Darkly*, Art Yard 2007
with album cover featuring
The Great Day of His Wrath

George Lucas and Peter Jackson. Harryhausen saw clear cinematic parallels in Martin's painting *The Great Day of His Wrath* c. 1851–3 (no. 100) with contemporary film: 'it resembles a frame from a movie – this time perhaps, a blockbuster disaster movie.'⁶

In his imaginative recreations of vast ancient cities, of heaven, hell and apocalyptic disaster, Martin has proved a favourite artist not only of filmmakers but of science-fiction illustrators like John Harris and Chris Pennington, as well as writers of fantastic literature such as H.P. Lovecraft. And, as the present publication is able to demonstrate in detail, Martin's art has had a worldwide reach. His influence is broad and multifaceted, and certainly an examination of his impact on popular culture alone is worthy of a separate study. The focus of this essay, however, is on some examples of specific contemporary artworks that strike a chord with Martin as both a painter of the Sublime and a popular artist prescient of the future. The works discussed here connect art history and contemporary culture in ways that challenge conventional distinctions between 'fine art' and the popular, the authentic and the artificial, the elite and the mass, and thus continue the cultural work effected by Martin's art in its original historical context.

As the home of the single most important collection of Martin's paintings, the Laing Art Gallery in Newcastle upon Tyne has been able to play an active role in connecting his art with contemporary cultural activity. Two specific events at the Gallery have enriched

the presentation of Martin's art as well as expressing his potent connectivity. Images of the apocalypse have been acutely influential for the culture of popular music, from Heavy Metal and Black Metal to Goth Rock, with the visual temperament of the image mirroring the intensity of the sound. The history of Black Metal music in particular is extreme, expressing violence not only in music and imagery but also in deed, as the influential work *Lords of Chaos* by Michael Moynihan and Didrik Söderlind (2003) recounts:

It is a legacy comprised of innumerable strands of virulent rhetoric, from Satanism to Fascism – some of it mere pomp, and some stated in deadly earnest. Pulling back the genre's dark veil reveals a few certifiable loose cannons amidst numerous poseurs; the share of cartoon characters is counterbalanced by some genuine 'demons' in human form. They all share a common desire to boldly step beyond the perimeters of acceptable society, be it in image or in deed, and plant their flags of defiance. All this is accomplished to the militant sound of Black metal itself – a roaring cacophony of mind-bending dimensions.⁷

In 2006, the BBC Power of Art series commissioned the artist Matt Stokes to explore Newcastle's treasures and heritage, and its connection with alternative aspects and social networks in the city, most notably with the New Wave of British Heavy Metal and the legacies of these groups that have continued to thrive in a new generation of bands and fans. Stokes explores musical subcultures and the way music is a means for social groups to form, shaping and having an impact on people's lives and identities. The event at the Laing, *1000 Days in Sodom: Metal Music and the Paintings of John Martin* (2006), considered the importance of the city and the region in relation to metal-music culture, and was framed by the context of John Martin and the painting *The Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah*. The title of the painting is also the title of a track by the band Venom from their album *Welcome to Hell* (1981), with the demise of the sinful so enthusiastically expressed in the opening lines: 'Unholy City a sinners delight / No one was spared out of mind, out of sight'.

More visions drawn from Martin's apocalyptic imagery converged in an interpretative performance in 2010, when two significant figures in contemporary culture and two major artists from the nineteenth century were brought together at the Laing Art Gallery. The graphic novelist Alan Moore performed a new text, and the musician and founder of Drone doom band Sunn O))) Stephen O'Malley created a new ambient soundscape, both responding to the energy of two paintings, Martin's *The Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah* 1852 (no. 116) and Turner's *Hannibal and his Army Crossing the Alps* exh. 1812 (fig. 29). The piece, entitled *Simultaneous Conjugation of Four Spirits in a Room: 2010*, is, connected space, time and art, the past woven uncannily within the present, with the reverberating theme of the 'annihilating vortex' and 'the abyss that abides' creating an experience that could be described as transcendental or Sublime. *Simultaneous Conjugation of Four Spirits in a Room* begs the question as to whether a multimedia event is in its

absorbing effects a more effective expression of the Sublime than two-dimensional art, at least the latter as it is presented in the conventional gallery setting of the modern museum. Simon Morley in his essay 'Staring into the Contemporary Abyss' sees painting as inadequate in representing the Sublime experience for the twenty-first century:

it is certainly proving harder and harder for painting, the traditional vessel for evoking visual sublimity, to elicit such effects. But the eclipsing of the sublime in painting is part of the logic of the sublime experience itself. For what once may have seemed sublime quickly becomes its opposite – the beautiful. Or, as the American critic Harold Rosenberg once wrote, it is the destiny of all art to eventually become craft.⁸

He goes on to cite the work of James Turrell, Olafur Eliasson and others, as giving a truer expression of the contemporary Sublime, the experience being within the here and now and removed from the connection to a higher being. Does painting thus no longer have a role as an exponent of the Sublime?

There are a number of painters whose creation of extravagant spectacle based on and yet subverting the Sublime have a strong connection with the art of John Martin.⁹ Glenn Brown appropriates images both by historical artists and those still living, ranging from Rembrandt to Howard Hodgkin, Frank Auerbach and, indeed, John Martin himself. Brown's paintings, meticulously smooth in surface, create an illusion of expressive painterly gesture. He has stated that 'it's impossible to make a painting that is not borrowed – even the images in your dreams refer to reality'.¹⁰ Brown borrows the titles for his paintings from 1980s popular music bands like The Fall, The Smiths and Joy Division: 'Whilst painting I listen to all sorts of music. It is inevitable that I hear a piece and think "I want that attitude in my painting."¹¹ Brown's penchant for fantastic spectacle can be seen in a group of works based on popular science-fiction book covers by the well-known illustrators Chris Foss and Tony Roberts, whose technically brilliant art is habitually derided or at best overlooked by the elite art establishment quite as much as John Martin's paintings were in the nineteenth century. Painted on a huge scale Brown's reworking of such imagery achieves an emphatically material sense of sublimity. Along with these monumental space-scapes, this penchant is given full expression in the appropriation of a work by John Martin. In the reworking of *The Great Day of His Wrath* c.1851–3 (no.100), a vision of the end of the world, *The Tragic Conversion of Salvador Dali (after John Martin)* 1998 presents a weirdly adjusted version of the original image (fig.30). Suffering humanity has been expunged from the destruction, and the fallen city has been replaced by glowing but as yet untouched futuristic architecture. Is this a vision of a world unaffected by the power of nature, godless and reliant on the false promise of science as our saviour?

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, whose unifying element is the *Financial Times*, present the pervasive power of the stock market which underpins, and potentially threatens, all our lives.

In the paintings the stocklistings from the Financial Times are used as a metaphor for the modern space that surrounds us all the time; an invisible datascape that saturates and influences all of us on a global scale. If you think of what is omnipresent, omniscient and omnipotent, you could think of the stock market in the same way as some people think of God. I wanted to converge these ideas and somehow convey the megalithic structure in which we all exist. It is for me a contemporary space.¹²

Like Brown, Cheung appropriates imagery from a range of sources, which he refashions and revises, depicting epic artificial landscapes containing imagery from science fiction and nineteenth-century painting. His works are painted in synthetic lurid colours and have been described as 'cheaply sublime, like computer-generated fractal Romanticism',¹³ with the brashness and the immediacy of an advertisement, but with the literal and metaphorical texture of a painting. In 2007, as a commission for the Laing Art Gallery, Cheung produced twenty-four paintings based on John Martin's series of mezzotint engravings of Milton's *Paradise Lost* (figs.31, 32). He refers to this theme as encapsulating the twenty-first-century apocalypse:

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... Paradise Lost was like a symbolic vessel in which to reflect all those interests.¹⁴

This vision of the world as *Paradise Lost* is a virtual computer-generated environment alien to nature and shaped by human greed, violence and convenience.

John Russell's digital fantasy-scapes present an overwrought virtual world of pristine plasticity and, conversely, visceral bloodlessness. Monumental in scale, *Ocean Pose* 2007 presents a spectacle of four digital prints; backlit like stained-glass windows, they are heavenly yet also hellish. *Ocean Pose (Gray)* presents an image of a white unicorn entwined in red octopus tentacles. The image has a baroque energy and yet is disconcerting and nightmarish, with the sickly sweetness of My Little Pony turned bad. In *Ocean Pose (Red)* a glamorous yellow sports car dominates the scene, with a naked but patterned psychedelic figure sinuously bending towards a flaming red sky. With their combination of the hyperbole of advertising with the monumentality of history painting, these works are overwhelming. Does a plastic otherworld of over-abundance and over-emphasis shaped by the fantasy constructions of a consumer culture await us in the future? Or is it already here?

Russell's *Untitled (Abstraction of Labour Time/Eternal Recurrence/Monad)* 2009 presents a science-fiction otherworldly fantasy; red sinuous

Fig.29
J.M.W. Turner (1775–1851)
Snow Storm: Hannibal and his Army Crossing the Alps
exh. 1812
Oil on canvas 146 × 237.5 cm
Tate. Accepted by the nation as part of the Turner Bequest 1856



Fig.30
Glenn Brown (b.1966)
The Tragic Conversion of Salvador Dali (after John Martin) 1998
Oil on canvas 222 × 323 cm
Courtesy Gagolian Gallery, London



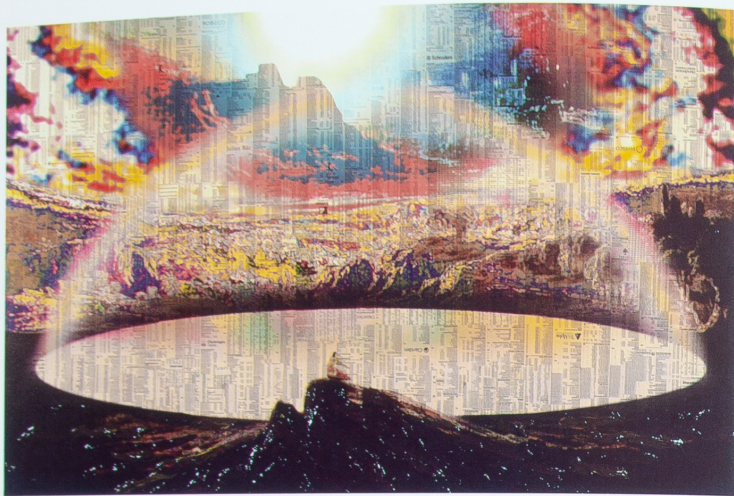


Fig. 31
Gordon Cheung (b.1975)
Rivers of Bliss 2007
Stock listings, ink, acrylic,
gel and spray on canvas
76 x 122cm
Commission for the Laing
Art Gallery, Tyne & Wear
Archives and Museums

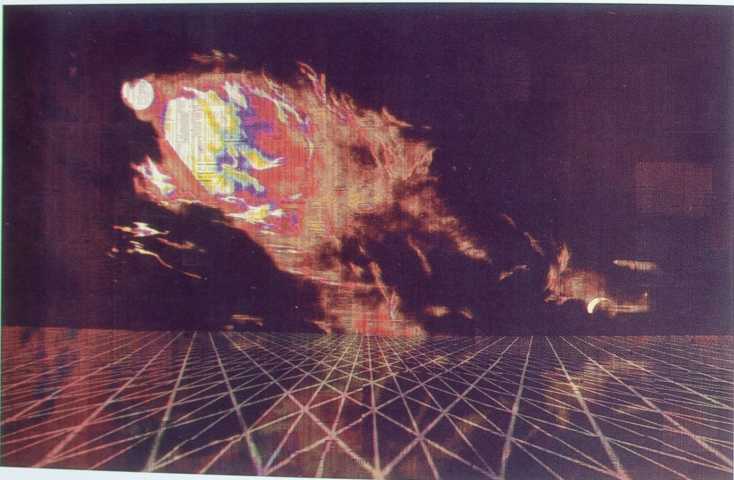


Fig. 32
Gordon Cheung
The Creation of Light 2007
Stock listings, ink, acrylic,
gel and spray on canvas
76 x 122cm
Commission for the Laing
Art Gallery, Tyne & Wear
Archives and Museums

chaos is suspended over a gateway of heavenly light surrounded and surveyed by stinging insects, a virtual fantasy of heaven and hell conjoined. In Russell's short animated film *Vermillion Vortex* (2010), a graphic-novel style narrative of madness and despair unfolds. The prosaic and mundane life of a caravan manufacturer turned mad by demonic possession is underpinned by a red apocalypse, dominated by a multitudinous crucifixion and described with the shaky technical effects of early science-fiction films and television. In Iain M. Banks's science-fiction novel *Surface Detail* (2010), he explores the depressing idea of a future virtual hell that disembodied minds could inhabit, a hell that is so horrific it has a terrible, Sublime beauty.

The paintings of Nigel Cooke depict a world that is not plastic, nor virtual, nor indeed 'cheaply sublime'. Working on a monumental scale, his paintings connect to the grand traditions of landscape painting but without reference to the biblical apocalypse. On first inspection, his work seemingly celebrates the Sublime power of awe-inspiring vistas, and we are drawn into epic space. On examining the paintings more closely, however, we see that Cooke's landscapes are drab and gloomy, full of dilapidated buildings, graffiti and the detritus of decline, and do not depict landscape so much as urban decay. Cooke presents a nature that has been despoiled, his paintings a hybrid of the natural and the man-made detritus of the modern world. In this world, nature is a rubbish dump. Devoid of the energy of the tumultuous catastrophe, his paintings have the pervasive, dream-like desolation of Martin's *The Last Man* (no. 87).¹⁵ His works are sometimes peopled, albeit by strange cartoon-like creatures: a smoking brain in *Brain Party* 2004; bearded tramp-like figures in the *New Accused Art Club* 2007; and a skull-like apparition emerging from virulent vegetation, along with little human heads, in *Silva Morosa* 2003. Like Brown, he both exhibits exquisite craftsmanship in the art of painting and clearly enjoys subverting the established traditional genres of painting in general and landscape painting in particular. The cartoon figures undercut the gloom of the works with a knowing jokiness and a black humour: is a giant brain smoking a cigarette a comment on a dead landscape or the wreckage of a narcotic-inflicted society?

Mania, induced by narcotics or otherwise, is apparent in Cooke's new work. In *In Da Club – Rapture* and *In Da Club – Volume One*, both 2010, he pushes the figure centre-stage. The bearded characters appear to be taking part in a manic rave, attempting some kind of transcendental cosmic experience. In these works man is removed from his environment and is centred on himself, pursuing some kind of internalised experience. In *Chef on Dung Mountain* 2010 the sense of urban decay returns, the Sublime cliché of the extensive mountainscape reduced to a hill of waste. The empathetic human device of the heroic rückenfigur¹⁶ is replaced by a chef seated and slumped facing forward, his beard swept across his face by the wind. Is this the contemporary abyss, to become engulfed by a spectacle of waste?

In Paul Hobson's essay 'Hacking into the Present' (2009) he describes how Gordon Cheung gives 'panoramic expression'¹⁷ to the concept of the spectacular as proposed by Guy Debord in his seminal book *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967). A critique of contemporary consumer culture, Debord's book is prescient in its description of the immersive power of the image. In a highly developed capitalist society, Debord argues, real life has been commodified to such a degree that it has been subsumed by appearance and a series of spectacles. He speaks of issues of social alienation, mass media and, before the term 'globalisation' was in use, cultural homogenisation. Hobson brings the concept forward to the present day, showing how Cheung has used the devices of Romanticism to evoke spiritual or religious feelings. Along with Cheung, each artist uses and yet subverts the strategies of Romanticism, in the creation of a sublime experience without the affirmation of religion.

Emerging in nascent form in Martin's time, the culture of the spectacle is ever-more powerful in the twenty-first century, with the technological proficiency that can create a material world as a replacement for God and religion. To quote Debord:

The spectacle is the material reconstruction of the religious illusion. Spectacular technology has not dispersed the religious mists into which human beings had projected their own alienated powers, it has merely brought those mists down to earth, to the point that even the most mundane aspects of life have become impenetrable and unbreathable. The illusory paradise that represented a total denial of earthly life is no longer projected into the heavens, it is embedded in earthly life itself. The spectacle is the technological version of the exiling of human powers.¹⁸

These exiled powers, so potently expressed in the work of Brown, Russell, Cheung and Cooke, present the spectacle of a plastic reality, authentic experience embedded and translated through layers of commoditisation and consumerism. Underpinning this experience remains the anxiety of entropy, disintegration and ultimately destruction, rooted deep within our psyche and still shaped by the 'religious mists'. Martin presented an apocalypse for and of his time, but with the foresight and imaginative depth to make visible other worlds previously inconceivable. These images made more than a hundred years ago still have the power to inspire the artists and audiences of today, his vision resonant within the anxiety of our ultimate demise.