

**“Nature, the Metropolis and the Apocalyptic Sublime,”**  
**Paper given at “Landscape and Eschatology,” Tate Britain,**  
**Friday 13<sup>th</sup> January 2012**

**Notes for presentation of paper at conference**

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“We talk all the time about the end of the world, but it is much easier for us to imagine the end of the world than a small change in the political system. Life on earth maybe will end, but somehow capitalism will go on.”<sup>1</sup>

— Slavoj Žižek

I would like to start this paper – which aims to think through the peculiarly intimate connection between figurations of the apocalypse and of the city – by invoking a remark by Slavoj Žižek.

In this remark, made somewhat before the current financial crisis, Žižek noted the ideological closure whereby alternatives to capitalism seem to have become unthinkable in the current political imaginary, to the extent that it’s actually easier to imagine the end of the planet than to think the end of capitalism and the transition to another – better – way of life. The contemporary obsession with doomsday scenarios to which Žižek seems to refer is most prominently visible in a barrage of blockbuster disaster films that utilize multi-million-dollar CGI effects to imagine catastrophe on the planetary scale – films such as *The Day After Tomorrow* or *2012*, or even the post-

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<sup>1</sup> Slavoj Žižek, cited by Rebecca Mea, “The Marx Brother,” Lacan dot com <http://www.lacan.com/ziny.htm> visited 01/01/12.

apocalyptic Disney animation *Wall-E*.<sup>2</sup> These works, however, might themselves be read as symptomatic of our broader political discourse, in which global environmental catastrophe is a prevalent anxiety. In such cultural products, then, it is nature that appears, as it did in the eighteenth-century discourse of the sublime, as terrible, and as marking the limit to human endeavour. However, Žižek's comments seem to suggest that such a figure of nature may well be a displacement of anxieties that are more properly attached to capitalism itself. My own paper today will set out in something of this Marxian spirit to think the longer history of the modern apocalyptic sublime in its relation to capitalist conditions.

It is the figure of the *city* in such apocalyptic fantasies that will help me start to articulate the relations between nature, the sublime and capitalism. The city, of course, functions as the central location for doomsday or catastrophe films and the images of collapsing, deserted or ruined towers and monuments are key images through which we imagine their eschatological scenarios. *The Day After Tomorrow*, and *2012*, for example, used digital effects to carefully reconstruct and then destroy America's most familiar and iconic cityscapes. In the former, Los Angeles is graphically depicted being destroyed by multiple tornados, whilst New York is hit by tsunami and ice storm. *2012* outdid this, with an even more spectacular version of the destruction of LA by earthquake – its suburbs and freeways collapsing into the ground and its towers crumbling – not to mention the consumption of Las Vegas by fire and Washington by flood.

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<sup>2</sup> it's worth noting, of course, that even the early cinema was not immune to apocalyptic fantasy. Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* would be a prime and famous example of a vision of the apocalyptic city from the silent era, but one could go as far back, for example as August Blom's *Verdens Undergang* [The End of the World] (1916).

Such a focus on the city, of course, can also be seen in John Martin's paintings and prints, which also repeatedly give us disaster visited on cities: Babylon, Nineveh, Sodom and Gomorrah, Rome, Pompeii... Martin's pictures are remarkable in the extent to which they defied the conventions that composed history painting (and its affects) around the human figure. Instead, Martin organized his works around imagined architectures, lifting them from the scale of human drama to that of the urban catastrophe.<sup>3</sup>

The apocalyptic city, however, can be found even before this, at the heart of the developing discourse of the sublime. The importance of the concept of the sublime grew through the eighteenth century. It was defined, in particular in Edmund Burke's 1757 *Philosophical Enquiry* (perhaps the first substantial and systematic modern attempt to theorize the sublime) as an alternative aesthetic category to beauty. Where beauty seemed to name the relatively straightforward pleasures of the small, pretty, harmonious and regular, the sublime named the more perverse pleasures that attracted eighteenth-century taste to the stronger emotions circulating around fear, horror, awe and terror, and the contemplation of death, power, pain and danger.<sup>4</sup> It was such attractions that drew eighteenth-century tourists, artists and cultural consumers to craggy mountains, stormy seas, melancholy ruins and graveyards, and to scenes of war, horror and violence.

In the midst of Burke's attempts to enumerate the causes and effects of the sublime we find a striking image. Burke wonders what would happen in the case of the

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<sup>3</sup> See Martin Myrone, ed. *John Martin: Apocalypse* (London: Tate Publishing, 2011), 101.

<sup>4</sup> Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful and Other Pre-revolutionary Writings* (London: Penguin, 1998).

destruction “by a conflagration or an earthquake” of London – already a massive and rapidly growing conurbation, by far the largest and wealthiest in Europe, and (with a population of around three quarters of a million) already at the scale of the metropolis rather than the mere city. Burke recognizes that this would not only be apprehended as horrific, but would also, in its very horror, become a supreme aesthetic spectacle: “what numbers from all parts would crowd to behold the ruins, and amongst [these] many who would have been content never to have seen London in its glory!”<sup>5</sup>

What, then are we to make of this reiterated connection between the city and the catastrophic sublime?

The most simple answer would be to propose that the city stands as a shorthand for a complex of ideas – culture, civilization, technology, the human itself – that are set in binary opposition to nature. Where the sublime, especially as described by Kant,<sup>6</sup> is produced in the experience of a mighty nature inimical to human purpose and wellbeing, we would expect the city to provide a particularly strong image of all that such a contra-purposive nature threatens to destroy. Such an explanation, though clearly accurate as far as it goes, is not quite satisfying. After all, the very binary opposition here between nature and civilization is itself hardly neutral; it is a construction profoundly inflected by practices of capitalist socio-cultural organization and their narratives of progress and technological mastery.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Burke, *Enquiry*, “On the Effects of Tragedy,” Part 1 §15.

<sup>6</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), 128-159.

<sup>7</sup> For just how specific the notion of the natural sublime may be, see for example Marjorie Hope Nicolson’s exposition of the startling fact that there is no evidence whatsoever of the sublime experience we have of mountainous landscapes, and which forms the backbone of Romantic poetry and modern tourism alike, until the late seventeenth century. Nicolson, *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of*

My own account here, then, will turn in a different direction – one more in line with the spirit of the Žižek quote with which I started today. This, after all, suggested that the apprehension of sublimely terrible and counterpurposive nature, certainly as it re-emerges in contemporary culture in ecological anxieties, is in fact a displacement of something more properly identified as the image of the sublimely terrible, dynamic, unimaginable and destructive forces of capital itself. My argument, then, is that there is a link between the figure of the city as a *scene* of apocalypse and a thematic in Western culture where the capitalist city *is* in fact – in and of itself – an apocalyptic event. Such a theme of “city *as* apocalypse,” furthermore, is motivated precisely by the sense that the city is an objective correlate of the destructive, dynamic, but immaterial and otherwise unrepresentable forces of capital itself.

For my money, one of the most haunting eighteenth-century eschatological visions of capitalism is Alexander Pope’s mock-epic poem, the *Dunciad*. Pope’s poem, written in the aftermath of the South-Sea bubble, is primarily a satire on the state of literature. However, more than a series of random attacks on the many figures with whom Pope fell out, the poem launches an assault, from the standpoint of Neoclassical order, on the developing commercialization and professionalization of cultural production, which was increasingly being organized as a commodified industry rather than a noble pastime for the cultural elite. Such a commercialisation was, of course, centred in the literary scene of London, and Pope’s poem takes us on a scatological romp through the fallen cultural landscape of the city – from St Bartholomew’s Fair, whose “Smithfield Muses” preside over the piece, through Bedlam hospital, to the heart of

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*the Aesthetics of the Infinite*, Weyerhaeuser Environmental Classics (Seattle & London: University of Washington Press, 1997).

the literary industry in Grub Street, to the court, to Drury Lane Theatre, Lord Mayoral processions on the Thames, Guildhall, and even the river Fleet, that had become by Pope's day an open sewer, and in which the writers in his poem have a competition to see how low they can sink. For Pope, the commodification of culture that this landscape produces spells the death of the *ancien regime* order for which the Neoclassical stood, and in fact plunges us into a form of de-differentiated chaos. Pope names this "Dulness" – and elsewhere "bathos" – but it also fits precisely with the modern conception of entropy: a cultural version of the heat death of the Universe. The effects of capitalism, then, are more than just bad poetry: they constitute the end of meaning and value, all distinction of kind reduced to the equivalences of exchange; a moral, intellectual, metaphysical – and perhaps even physical – collapse on the cosmic scale, just as we have in Hogarth's Pope-inspired riff on the end of the world, *The Bathos*. Pope ends his poem:

Nor human spark is left, nor glimpse divine!  
Lo! thy dread empire, Chaos! is restored;  
Light dies before thy uncreating word:  
Thy hand, great Anarch! lets the curtain fall;  
And universal darkness buries all.<sup>8</sup>

A somewhat different – perhaps even clearer – figuration of the logic of the apocalyptic capitalist city can be found in Bruegel's famous Tower of Babel, painted around 1563, at a moment of massive innovation and growth of Dutch capitalist enterprise. (This is an image, of course, that, with the wink and nod of intertextuality, also peeks out at us from Martin's various Babylonian fantasies.) Bruegel's painting

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<sup>8</sup> Alexander Pope, "The Dunciad," in *Poetry and Prose of Alexander Pope*, ed. Aubrey Williams, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), 4.652-6.

lays bare the logic that capitalist accumulation – oriented to the limitless – shares with the sublime. The tower spirals ever outwards in a centrifugal compositional movement to encompass and annihilate the landscape in which it is situated, its pastoral green relegated to the distant horizon, giving way in the foreground to an earth blackened and blasted by the little mines and furnaces which surround the tower and supply it with the materials of its manufacture. It also swallows up a vast army of labouring figures, in procession up its ramparts towards its unfinished and unfinishable turret. Bruegel's tower visits an apocalypse on both its environment, and its population. It is, ironically, a ruin even in its own construction, and in many ways already offers a blueprint of the apocalyptic city in modern culture.

It's notable, then, that Georgian and Victorian commentators on London often take up the language of the sublime to describe the city. Over Martin's lifetime, its population exploded from around a million to over two and a half million, leaving observers grappling with its huge scale, chaotic, exponential expansion (fuelled of course by cut-throat capitalist competition and speculation) and unthinkable contrasts between magnificent wealth and unspeakable poverty, disease and despair. Thus, for example, the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writers gathered in Roy Porter's social history of London repeatedly find themselves shifting between emotions of wonder and terror in situations of cognitive or imaginative breakdown, and drawing on sublime metaphors of the unbounded, the oceanic and the infernal, or of the crushing power of a "vortex" or "maelstrom." the city was, in itself, as a consumer of lives, something deeply akin to a natural disaster.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Roy Porter, *London: A Social History* (London: Penguin, 2000), see esp. 115-124, 248-252, 339-346



What is remarkable, though, given the language through which London is described, is that the word *sublime* itself was so rarely used to refer to it. This, it seems to me, is because it offered an engulfing experience that denied the kind of distance Burke and others diagnosed as necessary to transmute horror into aesthetic pleasure.

In this regard, Wordsworth's biographical account of his formation as a poet of sublime nature in the *Prelude* is instructive. Book VII recounts his arrival in London as a young man, having just finished his studies at Cambridge. Wordsworth describes the city in the terms we have just discussed, terms that closely follow the rhetoric of the sublime: it is an "endless stream of men and moving things!" evoking "wonder" and "awe."<sup>10</sup> The impression of the magnificence and splendour of the city is mixed, however, with a sense of overload and bewilderment: It is a "monstrous ant-hill on the plain / Of a too busy world."<sup>11</sup> As Wordsworth's description unfolds, the negative aspects of this experience come to the fore, and the pleasures of the city increasingly appear as hollow. Its overload is "deafening" and "dazzling," offering "blank confusion" rather than any form of sublime transcendence.<sup>12</sup> Clearly borrowing on Pope, Wordsworth finds the "true epitome / Of what the mighty City is herself"<sup>13</sup> in a scene of Bartholomew Fair, where London appears as destructive and entropic – "A work completed to our hands, that lays / If any spectacle on earth can do / The whole creative powers of man asleep."<sup>14</sup> London, as a marketplace, follows the same tendency noted by Pope, in its reduction of the particularities of use-value to the

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<sup>10</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Prelude: The Four Texts (1798, 1799, 1805, 1850)*, [1850 version], Rev. Ed. (London: Penguin, 1995), 7.151-3.

<sup>11</sup> *Prelude*, 7.149

<sup>12</sup> *Prelude* 7.155, 7.157. 7.722.

<sup>13</sup> *Prelude* 7.722-3.

<sup>14</sup> *Prelude* 7.679-81

homogeneity of exchange value, destroying in the process the very possibility of identity and meaning. He writes of:

thousands upon thousands of her sons,  
Living amid the same perpetual whirl  
Of trivial objects, melted and reduced  
To one identity, by differences  
That have no law, no meaning, and no end.<sup>15</sup>

What we have here, of course, is no literal apocalypse, but certainly, as with Pope and Breugel, a figure of the city as running by a principle of annihilation, a principle which, in the spirit of the Žižek quote with which I started this paper, I don't hesitate to identify as that of capital itself, the same principle of perpetual destruction which Marx famously identifies in the *Communist Manifesto*, where "all that is solid melts into air."<sup>16</sup>

It is in the face of this terrible experience that Wordsworth, at the end of this book of the *Prelude* decides to take flight into the solitudinous sublime of nature. But the logic of Wordsworth's narrative is that the terrible forces of the city create the originary scene of anxiety that the Romantic sublime merely displaces and projects onto the

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<sup>15</sup> *Prelude* 7.724-8.

<sup>16</sup> Marx, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," [1848]Marx/Engels Selected Works, vol 1 (Moscow: Progress, 1969), (available online at: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/index.htm> visited 01/01/12). The larger passage from which this famous phrase is drawn runs: "Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind."

safer and more manageable natural realm. In such a sublime, nature, though by then fundamentally pacified by industry, takes on precisely the characteristics of destructive, counter-purposive capitalism and its unsettling urban forms.

The case of Wordsworth, of course, is taken here as indicative of larger trends in Romanticism. I am arguing that the quest in Romantic art for meaning, identity and solitude in nature's sublimity involves – whether implicitly or explicitly – a flight from an urban scene in which the imaginary of the sublime is initially formed.

This observation, I think, has some implications for understanding the contemporary images – whether in cinema or political discourse – of global-scale catastrophe. These are underpinned, of course, by very real environmental threats. However, these nonetheless find their expression in a fantasy scene of nature's revenge on a technologically sophisticated humanity that belongs fundamentally to the Romantic sublime. In such, I have been arguing, we already find a projection of capitalism's most disturbing characteristics onto the natural world, and at the heart of this already seems to be the same logic of disavowal that animates the political failure about which Žižek complains in the quote with which I started this paper.

I hope that today, in exploring the relations between the city as a *scene* of apocalyptic fantasies over the three centuries of the discourse of the sublime, and the way that apocalyptic fantasies structure an experience of the modern capitalist city itself, is to help reconnect our awareness of the danger of natural catastrophe with the experience of the socio-economic conditions that produce such possibilities. On this basis, we could develop an “eschatology” – a thinking of endings – that shifts from a disabling

fixation on the end of the world, to thinking through an ending of a world order that we would really be better off without.