Beneath the pavement, sunk in the earth, hollow drains lined with yellow light for ever conveyed them this way and that, and large letters upon enamel plates represented in the underworld the parks, squares, and circuses of the upper. ‘Marble Arch – Shepherd’s Bush’ – to the majority the Arch and the Bush are eternally white letters upon a blue ground. Only at one point – it may be Acton, Holloway, Kensal Rise, Caledonian Road – does the name mean shops where you buy things, and houses, in one of which, down to the right, where the pollard trees grow out of the paving stones, there is a square curtained window, and a bedroom.

(Virginia Woolf, Jacob’s Room, 1922)

The historian Eric Hobsbawm once made the startling claim that the most original work of avant-garde art produced in Britain between the wars was Harry Beck’s Tube Map (Figure 1). In a fascinating essay published in the book Imagined Londons, David L. Pike examined the basis for this polemical assertion, and concluded that ‘By simplifying the complex network of urban railway lines into a visually pleasing and easily legible map bearing little or no relation to either the experiential or the physical metropolis of London, Beck codified a particularly modernist conception of space’. In Pike’s view, the Tube Map fits into a genealogy of modernist space that originated in the mid-nineteenth century with the blue and red and yellow lines Baron Haussmann imposed upon a map of Paris. ‘Such projects undertook, in the physical space of Paris, to control the chaotic, ungraspable reality of the modern city through color-coding, straight lines, and diagonal cuts.’ Beck’s Map achieved this same goal but, in a manner symptomatic of the history of such schemes in London, through its impact upon the representational, rather than physical, space of London. The tangle of subsurface railways, Tube-railways and light railways, built at multiple times and at various levels, had been flattened out and homogenised in a totalising vision of what French sociologist Henri Lefebvre termed abstract space, that is to say, the conception of space as a coherent, homogenous whole, which can consequently be bought and exchanged in the same manner as any other commodity: ‘Abstract space is a planned and organised space, thought rather than lived, and known conceptually rather than directly experienced’. But while modernist space is typically understood to have had no place for the individual, everyday
contingency of the city dweller, the Tube Map can be seen to have perpetuated the possibility of individual reverie even as it constrained its limits – and according to Pike it is to this factor that the phenomenal popularity of the Tube Map is to be attributed. ‘While it makes the Tube into a closed system, the map also retains the possibility of such an infinite journey through an alternate London space.’vi In concluding, Pike speculates that this freedom was facilitated by the primary feature borrowed from its failed predecessors: the bright colours that remain a Victorian trace in Beck’s modernist work of art. ‘They are, after all, what attracts the eye no matter how many times one has seen it; they are what inspires the reverie that makes the tedious minutiae of each ride bearable; they are, in the end, what remains utopian about this space, just as it is the primary colors in Mondrian’s grids that make the space of his paintings mystical as well as rationalizing, and just as, conversely, it was the grayness of postwar architecture that came to epitomize the intolerability of its architectural uniformity.’vii

Figure 1. Harry Beck’s Tube Map (1933).
© TfL from the London Transport Museum collection.

Thus, in Pike’s analysis, the Tube Map owes its success to a variation on mainstream modernist practice – the conservation of an onerific pleasure in an otherwise abstract, rationally organised space. But the Tube Map is, of course, merely the best-known product of the history of modernist innovation in relation to the London Underground, opening up the possibility that the synthesis embodied by Beck’s Map might represent the culmination of a specifically London-based modernist aesthetic. In spite of the fact that the patronage of postimpressionist artists in the inter-war years by the Underground is now common knowledge, having featured in many beautiful, profusely illustrated, books published by Capital Transport, there is surprisingly little criticism on the English avant-garde’s intense interaction with the Tube-network. Richard Cork provided only a brief overview in an essay on Eduardo Paolozzi’s mosaics at Tottenham Court Road; and, though Michael Saler has produced a remarkable and comprehensive reassessment of the nature and extent of the modernist achievement in England, the focus in his work is very much on the personality of Frank Pick, the executive officer of the Underground and the man behind the company’s innovative design and publicity between the First and Second World Wars. This top-down approach tends to perpetuate the fixed ideas about modernism that Pike has shown to occlude alternative approaches to modern urban space. The specific aesthetic that persuaded artists and architects to channel their energies into the transformation of the London Underground is subsumed into that totalising vision pursued by Frank Pick, who was in any case prepared to take up any product, modernist or not, if it proved to be conducive to the unity of the Tube-network. In the present chapter I will establish what the English avant-garde hoped to achieve
in participating in the creation of Pick’s earthly paradise. I will show that their involvement in this project resulted from a commitment to refashioning the non-places of modernity on a pattern, like that of their continental counterparts, that would impose order on the modern age, but which would preserve that spirit of euphoric reverie that is missing from the schemes of Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe. In so doing I reveal common ground for future consideration of the fissiparous modernisms that occupied London at this time, facilitating the ongoing reappraisal of this collective achievement in relation to the international mainstream centred in Paris.

Mapping the Futurist City

‘I travelled by a tube train yesterday’, enthused F.T. Marinetti in the Evening News in March 1912. ‘I got what I wanted – not enjoyment, but a totally new idea of motion, of speed.’ Since the thought that the Tube might excite such a sensation seems somewhat ridiculous today, these remarks should be put in their historical context. The deep-level Tube-railways were for the most part less than six years old in 1912 and were excavated not with the tried-and-tested ‘cut-and-cover’ technique, whereby a street was uprooted, the railway put in and covered over and the street replaced (the technique used to build the Paris Metro), but with an innovative mechanical shield that forced the tunnels right through the London clay, in a vigorous manner that might have been calculated to please a Futurist. (‘I had, of course, travelled by tube [sic] in Paris’, remarked Marinetti, ‘but it was not the same sensation at all’.) In 1912, the Tube-railway was simply the last word in urban transit. Powered by the largest electrical plant in the world at Lots Road, Marinetti’s Tube-car would have rattled and swerved through narrow tunnels far below London: the same ecstatic sensation of power and speed he had taken from automobiles, imparted to the Futurist through a mechanism that constituted an entire urban environment!

In Marinetti’s view these new sensations were a reproof to the artists of England. ‘Turner once painted an engine, but it was a dead engine, just its outside appearance, not its soul, the soul of power and speed.’ They had failed to capture the spirit of the modern that Marinetti perceived in the Tube-railways and in the brilliant-hued motor-buses and in the enormous glaring posters. ‘London itself is a Futurist City!’ Marinetti declared, and the Futurist aesthetic was therefore perfectly adaptable to English conditions. Marinetti himself claimed to be preparing a picture that would show what an English Futurism might look like: ‘I have an idea which may be developed by one of our artists. But I cannot tell you any more about it yet.’ It is entirely possible that this cryptic remark referred to a painting that has since been lost, called The Non-Stop, by C.R.W. Nevinson, shown at the London Group exhibition in March 1914. Although no visual record of the work has survived, Richard Cork has
observed that contemporary reviews indicate that the piece was a literal fulfilment of Marinetti’s exhortation to the artists of England two years before in Evening News. The critic Frank Rutter recalled that the piece was ‘a circular picture of the interior of a compartment in a “Tube” in which the vibration of seated figures and strap-hangers was kaleidoscopically expressed in vivid bright colours’. According to the Westminster Gazette, The Non-Stop was a ‘mixture of streaks of light, and fragments of advertisements, and curves, and colour, with lines that suggest straphangers here and there’. According to the Westminster Gazette, The Non-Stop was a ‘mixture of streaks of light, and fragments of advertisements, and curves, and colour, with lines that suggest straphangers here and there’. And with The Non-Stop in mind, P.G. Konody in the Observer declared of Nevinson that ‘He is obsessed with the idea of speed, devotes himself to conveying by pictorial means the sensation of speed in railway trains, and other means of movement by displacing objects, making them penetrate each other, in fact, making several movements simultaneous’. Having garnered more newspaper attention than any other work at the London Group exhibition, The Non-Stop rendered the Tube a key symbol of that spirit of modernity that the English avant-garde would have to engage with if they were to take up the challenge posed by Marinetti.

Such straightforward application of Futurist theory to English material was untypical. In fact, the single instance in which the Tube is used as a symbol for a straightforward Futurist vision of urban modernity occurs in a story by Russian science fiction novelist Yevgeny Zamyatin, written in 1917, shortly after his sojourn in Britain. In ‘The Fisher of Men’, the Tube is the sweltering belly of an urban organism brimming over with physical vitality, wherein ‘the frenzied blood pulsed and sped more frantically along the resounding concrete tubes’. When London is subjected to aerial bombardment it is to the white-tiled catacombs of the Tube that the city’s vigorous inhabitants retreat: ‘They clung on to the footboards and then with a roar sped along the tubes, without caring where they were going and got off without caring where they were. They crowded together in the delirious underground world with its concrete sky hanging over them, its confusion of caves, staircases, suns, kiosks, vending machines.

The English avant-garde were to take up the challenge of Marinetti very much on their own terms. In fact, Nevinson’s The Non-Stop seems to have received so much press coverage only because it was already considered relatively intelligible compared with the latest work shown at the London Group exhibition by artists such as Wyndham Lewis and David Bomberg, who were moving towards the new aesthetic that was soon to be called Vorticism. Lewis believed that Futurism had its points, but as he explained to the incredulous Marinetti in a water-closet one day: ‘We’ve had machines here in England for a donkey’s years. They’re no novelty to us.’ In Lewis’s view the Futurist’s ecstasy at Tube-railways and automobiles could only appear naïve or romantic or even absurd in England, where the impressionism of speed had been memorably expressed by Mr Toad of Toad Hall some years earlier, in that decidedly un-modernist text The Wind in the Willows (1908): ‘Here to-day –
next week to-morrow! Villages skipped, towns and cities jumped – always somebody else’s horizon! O bliss! O poop-po-op! O my! O my! Marinetti’s rapturous response to the Tube is precisely a case in point. The Italian had perceived merely a new idea of motion and speed. His English counterparts would have been better informed. As previous chapters have indicated, the creation of the Tube represented a particularly traumatic event in the socio-economic history of Britain, and English artists held few illusions regarding the political significance of the Tube-network. In his mural for the Omega Workshop Scenes of Contemporary London Life (1916–17), Roger Fry depicted the Underground as the opposite of everything that Marinetti had celebrated. The mural shows a weary woman slogging up the steps of a Tube-station under the company’s roundel. Excessively large and oppressive, the scarlet circle presses down upon the woman’s hat, the angular border pushing into her face. Far from being caught up in a new idea of speed, the woman passenger is hampered by the bleak confluence of angular planes produced by wall and stair-rail. And on the blocked-up doorway in the room’s wall, Fry painted a railway bookstall, fitted out with newspapers and publicity material (including an advertisement for the Omega Workshop!), reinforcing the corporate connotations carried by the roundel, and reflecting the fact that the Tube is a heavily mediated space produced by a new global brand of consumer capitalism.

If the English avant-garde were to successfully capture the spirit of the modern world they would first have to take into account their own problematic perception of the space picked out by Marinetti as its embodiment. This struggle surfaces in a cluster of Imagist poems published shortly before the First World War, reproduced by Andrew Thacker in his book Moving Through Modernity (2003). As Thacker notes, Marinetti may have influenced the Imagists, but the latter group never quite eulogised machinery in the manner of the Futurists: ‘For Imagism transport represented a modern world redolent with anxieties as well as mechanical delights’.

F.S. Flint’s lyric ‘Tube’ was first published in The Egoist in January 1914, and presents an unspoken address to a second person who examines his or her fellow passengers in vain for a sign, for a light in their eyes. But the passengers are said to sit stolid, lulled by the roar of the train in the Tube, content with the electric light, assured, comfortable, warm: ‘this is the mass, inert; / intent on being the mass, / unalarmed, undisturbed’. The speaker’s momentary despair is momentarily alleviated by the reflection that he and his companion are a ‘spirit that moves’. The phrase possesses a Futurist flavour, and this suspicion is confirmed by the subsequent lines, in which the speaker claims that this spirit of movement is imbued with a transformative potential: ‘we leaven the mass, / and it changes; / we sweeten the mass, / or the world / would stink in the ether’. The new idea of motion and speed celebrated by the Italian is resituated in the figure of the intellectual – providing him with the means to humanise non-place. As in Dorothy Richardson’s The
Tunnel (1919), the Underground is depicted by Flint as a psychopathological space that might be rendered a habitat through something rather like Marinetti’s urban aestheticism. Thacker is, therefore, not entirely correct to say that ‘What Imagist poetry celebrated in the machinery of the Underground was not necessarily speed, but rather its ability to stage a poetic encounter which could stress fixity amid the vertiginous bustle of modernity’.xx On the contrary, Flint’s Tube is rather like Marinetti’s ‘dead engine’ – a technological space that has to be transformed into a metaphor through the moving spirit of the artist. According to the Imagist Richard Aldington, what is new in Flint’s poetry is not the objective so much as the rigour of the form through which the poet seeks to reconcile us to a forced existence in a ‘gloomy-market-prison-metropolis’ xxxi In an article published in The Egoist in May 1915, Aldington writes, ‘The escape is not to be found in chanting of abstract chimneys and racing automobiles, in ecstatic sentimentalizing over super-aeroplanes and turbines, and such-like romantic balderdash’. Instead, ‘there is an escape from artificiality and sentimentiality in poetry, and that is by rendering the moods, the emotions, the impressions of a single, sensitized personality confronted by the phenomena of modern life, and by expressing these moods accurately, in concrete, precise, racy language’.xxii And in a poem printed in that same issue, Aldington proceeded to show exactly what he meant. ‘In the Tube’ begins with the poet-protagonist stumbling into a Tube-car and surveying

A row of advertisements,
A row of windows,
Set in brown woodwork pitted with brass nails,
A row of hard faces,
Immobile,
In the swaying train,
Rush across the flickering background of fluted dingy tunnel… xxiii

These faces once again lack the spirit of movement; and this phenomenon is heightened by their juxtaposition with a material environment so dynamic it even serves to lend these apparitions the illusion of vitality. But where Flint’s passengers were merely inert, Aldington’s express their antipathy to the poet through their very fixity.

Eyes of greed, of pitiful blankness, of plethoric complacency,
Immobile,
Gaze, stare at one point,
At my eyes.

Antagonism,
Disgust,
Immediate antipathy,
Cut my brain, as a sharp dry reed
Cuts a finger.

I surprise the same thought
In the brasslike eyes:

‘What right have you to live?’

As well as an Imagist, Aldington was a signatory of the Vorticist Manifesto published in the journal *BLAST* in June 1914, and his poem could be interpreted as a polemical illustration of the variation in the Futurist and Vorticist response to the mediated spaces of the modern world. The opposition between the inert passengers content to be carried by the mechanical means of conveyance laid on by their market-prison-metropolis, and the moving spirit of the artist, which refashions modern life in concrete, precise and racy language, occurs in the following passage by Ezra Pound, where he contrasts those who think of man ‘as the TOY of circumstance, as the plastic substance RECEIVING impressions’ with people like himself who ‘think of him as DIRECTING a certain fluid force against circumstance, as CONCEIVING instead of merely observing and reflecting’. As Rod Mengham has demonstrated, this is in fact the fundamental difference between Futurism and Vorticism: ‘an antithesis that might help to differentiate between two very different artistic enthusiasms for the machine, the one accompanied by a zest for adrenalin, the other by a respect for order; between the Futurist embrace of sheer dynamism and what we might now think of as the kinematic priorities of Vorticism.

Rather than feeling awe for the new idea of motion and speed embodied by the Tube, the Vorticists followed Flint in situating the moving spirit of the modern world within the artist: ‘In a Vorticist Universe we don’t get excited at what we have invented’, Lewis, the ringleader of the Great English Vortex, declared in *BLAST*; ‘If we did it would look as though it had been a fluke.’ Thus, in Lewis’s highly experimental play *Enemy of the Stars*, the spirit of movement in the Tube is a symbol for the creativity possessed by the artist. The play is set just south of the Arctic Circle, where the characters Arghol and Hanp live together in a hut at the bottom of a pit. Arghol is the artist: he has fled from the city to the wilderness, and now dwells in abject poverty and is beaten regularly by Hanp, who stands for the hateful mass of humanity that both envies and hates the artist. The Tube is referred to in the stage arrangements: ‘A GUST, SUCH AS IS MET IN THE CORRIDORS OF THE TUBE, MAKES THEIR CLOTHES SHIVER OR FLAP, AND BLARES UP THEIR VOICES’. In addition to reinforcing the bleakness of the locality, this reference to the unseen forces at work in the Tube serves to evoke Arghol’s ‘underworld of energy and rebellious muscles’, which ultimately initiates the action of the play. And the Tube was to serve again in Lewis’s work as the locus for the violent but potentially redemptive force of the modern artist in a sketch published in *The Egoist* in March 1916 that depicts a young soldier in the Tube:

This young man was strung to a proud discipline. He was a youthful favourite of Death’s something like a sparring partner. He had the equivalent of chewing-gum, too, in the cynical glitter of his face, and his lazy posing.
Lewis compares the ‘profound and sinister business’ of the soldier to the ‘functional existence’ of the woman, and concludes that our vigorous world would ‘certainly maul the Constellation of Hercules if that misguided organisation should come in our direction’. Given the polemical stance taken by BLAST 2 against the German Empire, it seems likely that this militant constellation is a symbol for the Kaiser, and the playful, aggressive, disciplined force of the soldier (problematic in the notorious short story ‘Cantleman’s Spring-Mate’) is here a straightforward paradigm for the Vorticist.

But the clearest expression of the Vorticist response to the forces at work in the new urban spaces exemplified by the Tube is to be found in Lewis’s short-story collection The Wild Body (1927), in an essay called ‘The Meaning of the Wild Body’. Seeking to explain his theory of the comic, Lewis remembers how, one day in the Underground, as the train was moving out of the station, ‘I and those around me saw a fat but active man run along, and deftly project himself between the sliding doors, which he pushed to behind him’. Although there was nothing especially funny about his face or general appearance, ‘his running, neat, deliberate, but clumsy embarkation, combined with the coolness of his eye, had a ludicrous effect, to which several of us responded’. According to Lewis it was the eye that was the key to the absurdity of the effect:

It seemed to say, as he propelled his sack of potatoes – that is himself – along the platform, and as he successfully landed the sack in the carriage: – ‘I’ve not much “power”, I may just manage it: – yes just!’ Then in response to our gazing eyes, ‘Yes, that’s me! That was not so bad, was it? When you run a line of potatoes like ME, you get the knack of them: but they take a bit of moving.’ This incident perfectly illustrates Lewis’s view that the root of the comic is to be found in detachment. The new idea of motion that Marinetti experienced in the Tube was less marvellous than the fact that sacks of potatoes like ourselves should move of our own will at all. The Tube can only reinforce our sense of ourselves as fundamentally material objects: and this can result either in the slavish response of Marinetti and Aldington’s passengers, or in the liberating detachment of the fat man who has not made the mistake of identifying ‘himself with his machine’. The modern urban space of the Underground therefore possessed, in Lewis’s view, the potential for profound human comedy: where Aldington’s precise language had tried to neutralise a threat, the polished sides of the Great English Vortex would instead celebrate its comic mastery of the material world.

We hunt machines, they are our favourite game.
We invent them and then hunt them down.
The result was a highly cartographic art – one has only to flick through the journal *BLAST* to see that this reordering of the forces at work in the space of the modern world increasingly came to resemble the two-dimensional format of the map or schematic plan. The process is incomplete in the first issue, where the image that best illustrates this tendency is Lewis’s ‘Plan of War’, but by July 1915 ‘The Island of Laputa’ and ‘Atlantic City’ by H. Sanders, ‘Hyde Park’ by Frederick Etchells, ‘Design for “Red Duet”’ by Lewis and ‘Rotterdam’ by Edward Wadsworth (that is, every image of a modern landscape featured in the second issue) can be seen to evoke the form of the map or diagram. In this respect, the Vorticist aesthetic rather recalls the urban redevelopment projects of the modernist mainstream, which, it will be remembered, set out ‘to control the chaotic, ungraspable reality of the modern city through color-coding, straight lines, and diagonal cuts’. In fact, the momentous introduction of Le Corbusier’s architectural theories to the English-speaking world might have been a consequence of its perceived resemblance to the Vorticist aesthetic. The English translation of Le Corbusier’s *Vers Une Architecture* and *Urbanisme* were both undertaken by the Vorticist Frederick Etchells, who believed that the main thesis of the book translated as *The City of Tomorrow and Its Planning* (1929) ‘is that such a vast and complicated machine as the modern great city can only be made adequately to function on the basis of a strict order’. Le Corbusier had denied that his theories indulged the mere fancy of some neurotic passion for speed, noting that speed is now a brutal necessity and that Western cities must reorganise these mechanical forces on an orderly rational plan, like that for a ‘City of Three Million Inhabitants’. ‘This is no dangerous futurism, a sort of literary dynamite flung violently at the spectator’, Le Corbusier explained. ‘It is a spectacle organized by an Architecture which uses plastic resources for the modulation of forms seen in light’. It must have seemed that Le Corbusier was fulfilling in the field of town planning what the Vorticists had hoped to achieve in graphic art. Etchells’ eagerness to resituate Le Corbusier’s thought within the framework of the English discourse of the London Underground is signalled by his curious decision to change the word ‘metro’ to ‘tube’ throughout and to reproduce a full-page sectional image of the rebuilt Piccadilly Circus Tube Station in his introduction, as an illustration of the menace posed by mechanised forces lacking in organisation.

But having remarked on this shared emphasis on mapping, one should note that the effect the Vorticists hoped to achieve was rather different to that which Le Corbusier sought with his City of Three Million Inhabitants. For, if the Vorticists rejected the Futurism of Marinetti, they were equally unsatisfied with the lifeless formalism that they believed characterised the Cubism which inspired Le Corbusier: ‘Picasso’s structures are not ENERGETIC ones, in the sense that they are very static dwelling houses’, wrote Lewis. ‘They are inappropriate in the construction of a man, where however rigid the form may be, there should be at least the suggestions of life and displacement that you get in a machine.’
As Andrzej Gasiorek observes (in an essay that contrasts Lewis’s views on the role modernist architecture should play in regenerating society with Le Corbusier’s), if Lewis argues in favour of reordering and regulating life, he also fears that the process of rationalisation may have dystopian consequences, and speculates that society ‘might become as mechanical as a tremendous insect world, all our awakened reason entirely disappeared’, and we might be ‘overpowered by our creation’. In contrast, as Paul Edwards notes, the typical Vorticist design was not directly transferable to architecture: ‘To be true to the two-dimensional multivalency of the pictures, the architecture would need its own form of three-dimensional multivalency, preserving the pictures’ suggestion of multiplying life’s possibilities instead of imposing on the user of the building a univalent experience’. According to Edwards, where the International Style was solemn, uniform and closed, a Lewisian architecture would have been zestful, pluralistic and open, ‘would have as its aim to increase gusto and belief in life, to use our inventions to enjoy all the possibilities of organic life experienced by other species without being reduced to animal or mechanical functionalism’. In calling for the forces that constitute the modern metropolis to be reorganised in line with the brash, colourful, open-ended forms developed by the Vorticists, in BLAST and The Caliph’s Design (1921), Lewis’s primary objective was to enhance the oneiric urban pleasures celebrated by Marinetti, which would turn out to have no place in the functional International Style.

‘Sets for a Movie about Babylon’

Lewis believed the Vorticist movement should aim for nothing short of a physical reordering of the visible part of the modern world. ‘A man might be unacquainted with the very existence of a certain movement in art, and yet his life would be modified directly if the street he walked down took a certain shape, at the dictates of an architect under the spell of that movement, whatever it were’, he noted in 1922 in his journal The Tyro. ‘To take a small example, the posters on the hoardings and in the tubes to-day would not be quite what they are … if painters and draughtsmen in their studios had not done paintings … of a certain type, during the last ten years.’ In Lewis’s opinion this programme of renewal would do well to begin with the reinvention of commercial art, particularly the commercial art that appeared in the Tube: ‘if Tube Posters, Magazine Covers, Advertisement and Commercial Art generally, were ABSTRACT, in the sense that our paintings at present are, they would be far less harmful to the EYE, and thence to the minds, of the Public’. Lewis had intuitively understood that our day-to-day experience of modernity is heavily mediated by corporate images and text, and believed that, in imposing their orderly aesthetic upon the medium of the advertisement, the Vorticists could move very far very quickly towards the production of a space conducive to cultural revolution.
Of course, the reordering of the Tube would possess a particular symbolic resonance for the Vorticists – as it would constitute a final victory over the vision of the Futurist city in the very space that Marinetti had declared to be a paradigm of the modern world. By the time Lewis published *The Caliph’s Design*, the Tube’s status as such in the discourse of the English avant-garde had been confirmed time and time again by those writers who wished to express their own view on the proper relationship that should exist between the space of modernity and the art of the moderns. Perhaps the most notable instance occurs in T.S. Eliot’s famous review of *Sacre du Printemps*, published in *The Dial* in 1921. Eliot was careful to include the ‘roar of the underground railway’ among the ‘barbaric cries of modern life’ that Igor Stravinsky had related to the rhythm of the steppes and transformed into music. Since this emphasis on ‘interpenetration and metamorphosis’ has been interpreted as an important preliminary to the mythic method of *The Waste Land*, it is interesting to note that in praising this reorganisation of modern barbarity into a formally ordered composition, Eliot is merely echoing a central element in the Vorticist aesthetic.\(^{xlvi}\)

In fact, the symbolic resonance of the Tube for self-consciously modern writers and artists was such a commonplace that it was even subjected to satire in Aldous Huxley’s *Crome Yellow* (1921). In this novel, the monstrous intellectual Mr Scogan explains that he prefers the modern style of painting because he likes to see pictures from which nature has been completely banished – exclusively the product of the human mind – and this is why he always chooses to travel by Tube.

For, travelling by bus, one can’t avoid seeing, even in London, a few stray works of God – the sky, for example, an occasional tree, the flowers in the window-boxes. But travel by Tube and you see nothing but the works of man – iron riveted into geometrical forms, straight lines of concrete, patterned expanses of tiles. All is human and the product of friendly and comprehensible minds. All philosophies and all religions – what are they but spiritual Tubes bored through the universe! Through these narrow tunnels, where all is recognizably human, one travels comfortable and secure, contriving to forget that all round and below and above them stretches the blind mass of earth, endless and unexplored. Yes, give me the Tube and Cubismus every time…\(^{xlviii}\)

However, it must have appeared far from probable that the Vorticists would in fact have the chance to make over this richly resonant space in line with their aesthetic. Frank Pick, the publicity manager for the Underground Group, had certainly achieved something of a reputation for innovative design. Pick had commissioned the radical sans serif typeface and the roundel for the station signs (which subsequently became one of the earliest corporate logos) from typographer Edward Johnston. He had ventured into the hitherto disreputable poster industry, commissioning posters from E. McKnight Kauffer and F. Gregory Brown. But Pick’s interest in modern art had hitherto extended no further than the Impressionists.
Moreover, the vast bulk of the pictorial material he had commissioned prior to the end of the First World War was in exactly that sentimental style of poster art (by Frank Brangwyn and his ilk) that Lewis had attacked in *BLAST* and *The Caliph’s Design*: ‘the sugary couple on the walls of the Tube, that utter their melancholy joke and lure you to the saloons of the Hackney Furnishing Company’. xlix

But set aside for one moment the style in which such early posters were produced, and one can see much the same preoccupation with movement, modernity and mapping that had so preoccupied the avant-garde. The emphasis upon movement and modernity is particularly evident in two posters by Charles Sharland: *Light, Power and Speed* (1910) depicts new trains brought into use following the electrification of the system in 1905, while *Paddington New Station* (1913) presents a sectional image of the first moving staircase in Britain, introduced at Earl’s Court Station in 1911.1 Furthermore, a need, like that of the Vorticists, to refashion the spaces of urban modernity emerges in a series of posters that includes the famous image by John Hassall in which an elderly couple ask their way of a policeman who silently jerks a thumb to a map of the system on the wall of a Tube-station.1i As Michael T. Saler shows, Pick believed London was a terrifying sprawl, and sought to promote a public image of the Tube-network as an integrated entity, in order to achieve in microcosm that organic unity he had failed to find in urban modernity.1ii

Pick’s objectives thus had much in common with those of the Vorticist aesthetic. Perhaps Pick realised this when he saw an image by Nevinson on a poster to advertise that artist’s exhibition of war paintings in the Tube in 1918. In this image Nevinson’s fluid Futurism had hardened into the angular energy that is such a marked characteristic of Vorticist art. The arresting impact of this poster is reflected in the prominent reference to the artist in Walter Bayes’ painting of exhausted Londoners sheltering from aerial bombardment in the station at Elephant and Castle called *The Underworld* (1918).1iii However this may be, soon after the appearance of this poster Pick began to commission posters from E. McKnight Kauffer that reflected that artist’s intense involvement in the Vorticist movement.

McKnight Kauffer came to England in 1914 and found work with the Underground Group through the commercial artist John Hassall, producing posters that depict rural landscapes near London in a style that combines elements from Van Gogh, Fauvism and Art Nouveau. McKnight Kauffer’s engagement with the Vorticist movement first became evident in 1917, following the creation of a striking image called *Flight* (subsequently converted into the poster that launched the *Daily Herald* in March 1919). The first version of this image is in the form of a woodcut, a vehicle favoured by several Vorticist artists, such as Edward Wadsworth and David Bomberg, and the final version perfectly exemplifies the incorporation of the Futurist impressionism of speed into a formal geometric pattern that serves to amplify the sensation of movement.1iv
In that same spring McKnight Kauffer became secretary to the London Group and produced posters for their exhibitions and for commercial clients that reflected his increasing fascination with Vorticism, such as *Winter Sale at Derry & Toms* and *Vigil the Pure Silk* for Walkers Brothers, and was instrumental in encouraging Wyndham Lewis to resurrect the English Vortex as X Group in 1920. According to Mark Haworth-Booth, the X Group exhibition was ‘the last flourish of Vorticism’, but while the failure of the X Group certainly marks the end of the Great English Vortex as an organisation, it also heralded the period in which the peculiar aesthetic developed by the Vorticists enjoyed its greatest popularity. In fact, some of the most brilliant, and by far and away the most influential, plastic art in the style came in the years following the fall of the X Group, as Pick permitted former Vorticists to realise their ambitions for the reordering of the metropolis through the patronage of the Underground Group. Not least among these belated works of art were the striking posters wherein McKnight Kauffer found an outlet for his interest in the Vorticist aesthetic. As Lewis later remarked, McKnight Kauffer ‘disappeared as it were belowground, and the tunnels of the “Tube” became thenceforth his subterranean picture galleries’.

McKnight Kauffer’s *Winter Sales Are Best Reached Underground* (1921) was the first produced for Pick in the Vorticist style, and was described by Roger Fry as a ‘fascinating silhouette of dark forms to begin with, and out of these forms gradually disengage themselves hints of the flutter of mackintoshes blown by a gusty wind, of the straining forms pushing diagonally across the driving rain’. According to Fry, this poster marked a move towards abstract form: ‘the familiar shapes of such a scene are taken as the bricks to build up a most intriguing pattern’. McKnight Kauffer’s Vorticist aesthetic soon manifested itself again in a series to promote various museums commissioned by the Underground Group between 1922 and 1923. Angular patterns convey the inorganic growth of crystal in the poster for the London Museum of Practical Geology and recall images produced by Lewis shortly before the First World War. And as Haworth-Booth observes, the spectacular stylised flames that evoke the Great Fire of London in the poster *London History at the London Museum* are almost certainly derived from Edward Wadsworth’s woodcut *Black Country, Blast Furnace* (1918). But the final poster with the title *Winter Sales Are Best Reached by Underground* (1924) (Figure 2) is by far the most successful application of the Vorticist aesthetic to the commercial medium of poster art. Inessentials are stripped from bold blocks of colour held in a tense network of forces. Two female shapes barely sheltered by umbrellas – swept about like the folds of their coats – move between bars of rain that are slanted to strike them; are sustained by curves of brown and red that move the eye on to what seems a Tube-station. In *Winter Sales* McKnight Kauffer perfectly captures the spirit of movement embodied by the metropolis in a colourful two-dimensional plan, thereby enhancing, through the change
posters effected in the representational space through which the passenger moved, the element of reverie in travel Underground.

Figure 2. Poster art by E. McKnight Kauffer: Winter Sales Are Best Reached by Underground (1924).
© TFL from the London Transport Museum collection.

Inevitably, these experiments provoked a ferocious backlash from reactionaries. Following the appearance of the first Winter Sales poster, the advertising manager at Pear’s, took McKnight Kauffer to task in an attack that seems to have extended to the artist’s earlier work. ‘Impossible ducks, futurist trees, vermilion grass, and such like absurdities may appeal to what, as I have no wish to be offensive, I will call the “higher thought”, but believe me, Sir, those people who live their lives in the ordinary, conventional way, as do the bulk of the general public, need nothing more subtle in a poster than a straightforward appeal to their sense of pleasure, duty, or whatever it be’. The hostility rumbled on throughout McKnight Kauffer’s Vorticist period, culminating in the coinage of the term ‘McKnightmare’ in a trade journal in 1924. This constant criticism may have provoked McKnight Kauffer’s retreat into a tamer style. Though it is impossible to tell whether this retreat took place at Pick’s instigation or on the artist’s own initiative, it is certainly the case that some years were to pass before he again produced posters in as strident a modernist style as that employed in Winter Sales.

Fortunately, the advertising manager at Pear’s was correct in at least one respect. McKnight Kauffer’s Vorticist period had indeed proven very popular with the ‘higher thought’. The wry tone in which Evelyn Waugh’s Charles Ryder confesses to hanging McKnight Kauffer posters on his college wall in Brideshead Revisited (1945) may even suggest that, in the early 1920s, McKnight Kauffer possessed something like the highly paradoxical combination of mass popularity and countercultural cool status currently enjoyed by the street artist Banksy. And this support may well have encouraged McKnight Kauffer to work back towards a modernist style in the posters he produced for the Underground Group from the late 1920s – a style more rigorously oriented to the medium than his early efforts, but which retained that peculiar fusion of mapping and movement that had characterised the Vorticist aesthetic. The most perfect example in this new style is Power – The Nerve Centre of London’s Underground (1931). In this poster, text and image are integrated into a design wherein a rudimentary representation of the power-station that generated electricity for the network is shown superimposed upon what seems a swirling
dynamo about the corporate logo, from which lashes out, sinuous and sinewy, a black- and blue-veined forearm and a fist that strikes a bolt of jagged energy at the word ‘Underground’.

The triumph of the Vorticist aesthetic in the Tube opened the medium of the poster to other members of the avant-garde in England. Clive Gardiner, C.R.W. Nevinson, Edward Bawden, Eric Ravilious and Edward Wadsworth, and leading figures with an international profile, such as Man Ray, Zero (Hans Schleger) and Lazslo Moholy-Nagy, were all commissioned to produce posters for the London Underground. And soon other corporations, such as Cunard and Shell-Mex, began to emulate the Underground Group’s success, commissioning innovative poster art from McKnight Kauffer throughout the 1930s. Through McKnight Kauffer’s Tube-posters, Vorticism achieved an immeasurable impact on the field of commercial art, and on the mediated spaces that are such an important component in the non-places of the modern world more generally. Without the example of McKnight Kauffer, Beck’s Tube Map, with its bright colours and orderly abstraction, would have been unthinkable, and such schematic maps have, of course, become an integral element in the non-place.

McKnight Kauffer’s success also paved the way for the reordering of the physical space of the metropolis in line with the Vorticist aesthetic – as Pick sought to apply the modernist principles McKnight Kauffer exemplified in poster art to the architectural composition of the city itself. The most highly publicised instance of this process was the fateful decision to commission sculpture from Jacob Epstein, for the Underground Group’s headquarters building at 55 Broadway, in 1928. Epstein had been a leading member of the Vorticist movement. As Cork has noted, the sculptor had in fact been instrumental in persuading Ezra Pound that a new initiative in modern British art was worth supporting: ‘So far as I am concerned’, Pound wrote, ‘Jacob Epstein was the first person who came talking about “form, not the form of anything”’.

Epstein’s sculptures for the Underground Group were to achieve an international exposure unlike that previously accorded to any other work of modernist art produced in Britain. As Henry Moore later observed, ‘he took the brickbats, he took the insults, he faced the howls of derision … and as far as sculpture in this century is concerned, he took them first’. The unveiling of Night on 24 May and Day on 1 July 1929 provoked a barrage of philistinism and xenophobia that was immediate and ferocious. The Daily Telegraph, for instance, described Night as ‘a great coarse object in debased Indo-Chinese style, representing a creature half-Buddha, half mummy, bearing on its knees a corpse-like child of enormous proportions’, and this report was reprinted in newspapers as far away as Melbourne in Australia and Christchurch in New Zealand. The sculpture Day was too extreme even for Pick. ‘I have only seen pictures of it, and in these I must say it looks awful’, Pick confessed in the Evening Standard; ‘But you cannot get the right perspective by taking it by itself. It must
be judged in relation to the whole building, and then I think people will not find fault with it. The architect Charles Holden himself believed in secret that Epstein had failed to take ‘full cognizance of the capabilities of the block to serve for a figure in the round which was my intention’, asserting that this resulted in ‘the round-shouldered effect to preserve the necessary attachment to the background’ and that this ‘was obviously a miscalculation on Epstein’s part and perhaps a mistake on my part not to have given him more explicit instructions, but it is alive and vigorous like much Mediaeval sculpture and that is what I most value’. Fortunately, both Pick and Holden were prepared to defend Day and Night in public whatever their private misgivings; the former even threatened to resign if the company directors chose to cut the figures off the building. And the controversy had ultimately served to bring Epstein’s work for the Underground Group to the attention of millions: when a failed attempt to ‘bomb’ Day and Night with tar and feathers took place in October 1929 this non-event achieved news coverage around the world.

Figure 3. Jacob Epstein’s sculpture on 55 Broadway, Day (1929). © Tfl from the London Transport Museum collection.

Epstein’s two monumental works closely echo the stepped form of 55 Broadway. Each group features a seated figure whose legs suggest the pillars on either side of the door beneath and the first tier of the building, behind which loom the high-rise blocks set back from the street. The seated woman in Night is a mother figure, remote and sombre, who supports the head of a male figure lying in her lap, over whom she passes a huge and powerful hand. The seated man in Day (Figure 3) is a father figure with a flat fierce face that stare implacably out, who shelters – and seems about to raise – a male child, its head improbably but expressively twisted to face the father, its crotch pushing controversially out at the street, as though rising with the father’s massive hands. Contrary to what Holden believed, each sculpture is responsive to the possibilities presented by its environment. Day is flattened towards the front to take full advantage of the noon sun: the figures stand apart from the façade, the effect of their mass amplified by the light, the outline unbroken by shadow. The rounded back serves to emphasise the volume, the latent power of the father figure, when the sculpture is viewed from an angle. Combined with the child’s recessive chest, and the forward thrust of the father’s arms, the sculpture seems to have swollen open to the sun, as though the father figure’s back were some tremendously thick, stony husk. Night is also very well suited to its situation: positioned on the north side, banished from sunlight, the sculpture is stained now with streaks from moisture and is tarnished with patches of moss and lichen that lend the piece a fitting atmosphere of human neglect and inhuman vitality. To have ‘stuck’ any group on 55 Broadway that paid no regard to Holden’s design would have
produced ‘a very restless effect’, Epstein explained to the *Manchester Guardian*. Epstein’s sculptures therefore interpret the purpose of the headquarters building for the Underground Group – and what they show are elemental, godlike figures that rouse and lay to rest. Epstein revealed that he had first considered representing the traffic moving in and out of stations, and his final work clearly conveys the powerful, pervasive and parental control the Underground Group had assumed in the life of the capital.

The sculptures of the Four Winds by Eric Gill, Eric Aumonier and Henry Moore, high above *Day* and *Night*, serve to reinforce this message. Facing the four points of the compass, the figures emphasise the totalising cathedral-like element in the headquarters building, which, with its cruciform plan, immediately opposite Westminster Abbey, is at once in continuity and in conflict with that embodiment of English history. Though Holden later claimed that the cruciform plan was purely functional, permitting the pedestrian to cut across the site, the monumentality was surely a factor – as Sir William Holford observed – or why the masonry cladding when he might have chosen to highlight his functional steel-frame with glass curtain-walls? With the headquarters building, Holden re-enacted the cultural *tour de force* effected by the English cathedral, but through an architecture of horizontal bands and small vertical setbacks that evoked the Babylonian ziggurat or the bristling energy of the New York skyline: the *Evening News*, for instance, thought 55 Broadway ‘perhaps the nearest approach to a skyscraper in London’. Similarly, while Holden commissioned avant-garde sculptors who would celebrate the Tube’s modernity, power and speed, he insisted that Epstein carve directly onto the building, after the practice in the Middle Ages. Thus, 55 Broadway is the culmination of an astonishing, London-based variation on the modernist aesthetic. The cathedral skyscraper embossed with the four winds, with day and night, expresses a harmonious totality, a mastery of time and space, even as it evokes the Futurist city praised by Marinetti and the atavistic urban fantasy Lewis had wanted to capture in his plans for a city that would have looked like ‘sets for a movie about Babylon’.

In fact, Holden had come as close as conceivably possible to realising Lewis’s ambition to transform the architectural space of modernity in a style congruent with the Vorticist aesthetic. Holden had worked with Epstein when the two collaborated on the building for the British Medical Association: he would therefore have been aware of his associate’s involvement with the Vorticist movement and must have read its pronouncements on the future of architecture with interest. However that may be, it is clear that Holden evolved a singular architectural style that is rather more closely related to the spirit of McKnight Kauffer’s poster art, for instance, than to the constructions of the Bauhaus (Figure 4). Though his stations on the Morden extension are in the International Style previously little known in England, they possess a historical and topographical resonance absent from the universalist designs of the European mainstream. The folding screens that bear the corporate
logo are framed by façades built not in concrete but in Portland stone, the building material with the most historic associations with London. And the station buildings on the extensions to Cockfosters and Uxbridge follow a similar procedure. These functional box-like structures, with their enormous square windows, might have been created by Le Corbusier had they not been constructed in the beautiful brick common to southern England. This humane modern architecture is probably inspired by the fusion of German Bauhaus and American Organic Architecture practised by the Dutch modernist Willem Dudok, but other elements in these stations remain hard to explain. Holden’s supposedly functional station architecture is invested with the historically resonant and the futuristically fantastical. Medieval stained glass, wheels with leaf springs, narrow, fin-like towers, a spire like an electrical tesla coil, and the figure of an archer like a car’s hood ornament by Eric Aumonier – each emphasises the magic of the machine-age metropolis, in a manner that evokes a specifically Vorticist aesthetic.

Figure 4. Charles Holden’s Tube-station at Arnos Grove (1932).
© TfL from the London Transport Museum collection.

This fantastical functionalism found full expression in the rebuilt Piccadilly Circus. Though entirely practical, facilitating passenger flow by opening out cramped passages into a single circular space, Holden’s subsurface interchange still fires the imagination. The futuristic ambulatory is plated in Travertine marble, the building material synonymous with Rome; over the escalators a map of the world, painted by Stephen Bone, highlighted the territories controlled by the British Empire; and a clock on a wall showed the time in metropolitan centres throughout the world. The New York Times declared that the renovated space had been ‘utterly transformed by modern architecture and modern art into a scene that would make a perfect setting for the finale, or indeed, the opening chorus of an opera’. With this triumphant reordering of an architectural space at the heart of the metropolis, in a form that combined functional and fantastical, Holden had, in fact, fulfilled the final objective in the Vorticist manifesto:

WE WHISPER IN YOUR EAR A GREAT SECRET.
LONDON IS NOT A PROVINCIAL TOWN.
We will allow Wonder Zoos. But we do not want the GLOOMY VICTORIAN CIRCUS in Piccadilly Circus.
IT IS PICCADILLY’S CIRCUS!

The Art of Being Ruled
By the mid-1930s the English avant-garde had transformed the London Underground into Europe’s pre-eminent modernist space, avoiding the pitfalls that awaited the grand plans of Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe, at a time when these, for the most part, remained on the drawing board. The brightly coloured but rational map, the fanciful but forceful commercial art, the playful but functional architecture: according to any criteria, the Vorticist project in the Tube must be considered a success that put the achievement of the Parisian Purists into the shade. According to any criterion, that is, other than that of the movement itself. The Vorticists had really believed that the revolution of material reality would bring about a cultural revolution, transforming the way in which the public perceived and interacted with the modern world. As Lewis himself later acknowledged, in this they had not been correct. ‘Though one Kauffer does not make an Underground summer, poster art is somewhat more alive than it was, and a few shop-fronts, here and there, give a “modern” flavour’, he remarked, in an influential review of the Vorticist achievement in Britain: ‘We are the first men of a Future that has not materialized. We belong to a “great age” that has not “come off”. We moved too quickly for the world. We set too sharp a pace. And, more and more exhausted by War, Slump, and Revolution, the world has fallen back.’

In the essay ‘Plain Homebuilder: Where Is Your Vorticist?’ (1934), Lewis speculates that the reason for this failure might be that, though they had tried hard to preserve the element of utopian reverie that found no place in the International Style, Vorticist art had still lacked sufficient sensual appeal, resulting in interiors ‘obviously designed for a particularly puritanic athlete of robotic tastes, with an itch for the rigours of the anchorite, and a sentimental passion for metal as opposed to wood’. But, as Andrzej Gasiorek has convincingly argued, the real fault is surely that, in spite of its sane and humane aesthetic, Vorticism ultimately shared Le Corbusier’s conception of the modern city as a problem, envisaging ‘a scenario in which design (order) was pitted against the everyday (formlessness) on which it sought to bestow meaning’. For all its attention to the contingency of the passenger, the transformation of the London Underground was still a totalising plan imposed on the capital by a central authority – a design caliph – which in rationalising only served to reinforce the nascent spaces of consumer capitalism. Henri Lefebvre’s critique of the International Bauhaus can therefore equally be applied to the Vorticist movement: ‘The curious thing is that this “programmatic” stance was looked upon at the time as both rational and revolutionary, although in reality it was tailor-made for the state – whether of the state-capitalist or the state-socialist variety’. Lewis later confessed that, at the time he wrote The Caliph’s Design, he had not appreciated the extent to which the ‘hideous foolishness of our buildings, our statues, our interiors’ was matched by the ‘hideous foolishness’ of our social and economic life: ‘nor how impossible it is, until that core of bottomless foolishness is altered for the better, to acquire the kind of gay intellectual shell that I wished’. In creating a bright, new and enchanting capital, the
Vorticists had produced the blueprint for a Babylon that was more functional than if had it been functionalist. They had perpetuated the spaces of the market-prison-metropolis. They had formulated the art of being ruled.

This might explain why the English avant-garde persisted in depicting the Tube as a symbol for an as yet unredeemed modern world. In W.H. Auden’s ‘Letter to Lord Byron’ (1937), it is ‘The bowler hat who strap-hangs in the Tube / And kicks the tyrant only in his dreams, / Trading on pathos, dreading all extremes’. In Aldous Huxley’s Point Counter Point (1928), a naïve young member of the intelligentsia called Walter Bidlake is shown to approve the nationalisation of the mines, but is unable to stomach sitting next to an elderly man who spits on the floor of the Tube and smokes a pipe that stinks: ‘Walter looked away; he wished that he could personally like the oppressed and personally hate the rich oppressors’. And as Hugh Kenner pointed out in The Mechanic Muse, it is the Tube that T.S. Eliot turns into a metaphor for descent to the Underworld in Four Quartets – drawing upon his own experience travelling from South Kensington to Russell Square everyday well into his mid-forties: ‘To change from the one line to the other he had to “descend lower,” as he puts it in Burnt Norton. One way down was by spiral stairs, on which you turned and turned the narrow gyre in half-darkness.’ Or he could take the lift, an abstention from movement, while the world moved, ‘in appetency on its metalled ways’. In the Underground, Eliot had found a space of alienation that could provide him with a modern objective correlate for the mystical ‘way of negation’:

Or as, when an underground train, in the tube, stops too long between stations And the conversation rises and slowly fades into silence And you see behind every face the mental emptiness deepen Leaving only the growing terror of nothing to think about ... I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting. Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought: So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.

Katabasis into this unredeemed modern space is staged again and again in texts such as Louis MacNeice’s Autumn Journal (1939), Louis-Ferdinand Céline’s Guignol’s Band (1945) and George Orwell’s Keep the Aspidistra Flying (1936). The following passage from Jean Rhys’s nightmarish novel Good Morning, Midnight (1939) perfectly illustrates the impasse in which members of the English avant-garde found themselves – trapped by a space that a modernist aesthetic had helped to shape.
I am in the passage of a tube station in London. Many people are in front of me; many people are behind me. Everywhere there are placards printed in red letters: This Way to the Exhibition, This Way to the Exhibition. But I don’t want the way to the exhibition – I want the way out. There are passages to the right and passages to the left, but no exit sign. Everywhere the fingers point and the placards read: This Way to the Exhibition…. I touch the shoulder of the man walking in front of me. I say: ‘I want the way out’.\textsuperscript{LXXXVII}

But by far the most striking of these descents into the Underground as Underworld takes place in Virginia Woolf’s \textit{The Waves} (1931), when Jinny enters the renovated interchange at Piccadilly Circus. Since the revisionist postcolonial reading performed by Jane Marcus, this remarkable novel has been read as a subversive narrative about culture-making, which exposes the false premises that underpin fascism at home and imperialism abroad.\textsuperscript{LXXXVIII} Having uncovered modernist involvement in this space of descent, I can take Marcus’s interpretation one step further. In comparing the great avenues that meet beneath Eros to sanded paths of victory driven through jungle, Jinny is implicating the modernist reorganisation of the Tube in the imperial project.\textsuperscript{LXXXIX} The crowds moving through the ambulatory are characterised as a ‘triumph of life’ that even the committed consumerist Jinny cannot but feel terrifying, if only for an instant: ‘I admit, for one moment the soundless flight of upright bodies down the moving stairs like the pinioned and terrible descent of some army of the dead downwards and the churning of the great engines remorselessly forwarding us, all of us, onwards, made me cower and run for cover’.\textsuperscript{XC} This is the perception of the Tube expressed in the oil painting \textit{Underground} by Gladys Hynes, in which the bowler-hatted and blank-faced commuters are mere appendages to the Machine.\textsuperscript{XCI} It would seem that many modernists in England shared Lewis’s belief that the Vorticist project in the London Underground had consolidated rather than revolutionised the non-places of the modern world, sustaining the nineteenth-century imperium and paving the way for our twenty-first-century economic emporium.

Look how they show off clothes here even underground in a perpetual radiance. They will not let the earth even lie wormy and sodden. There are gauzes and silks illumined in glass cases and underclothes trimmed with a million close stitches of fine embroidery. Crimson, green, violet, they are dyed all colours. Think how they organize, roll out, smooth, dip in dyes, and drive tunnels blasting through the rock. Lifts rise and fall; trains stop, trains start as regularly as the waves of the sea. This is what has my adhesion. I am a native of this world, I follow its banners.\textsuperscript{XCI}

Far from being beaten by the extraordinary impasse brought about by the Vorticist transformation of the London Underground, Lewis was among the first to move beyond the centralising impulse behind \textit{The Caliph’s Design} in order to call for a revolt against the strictures of the modernist spaces produced by the Vortex: ‘You should not be afraid of desecrating these spotless and puritanic planes and prudish cubes; and it is up to you, after all,
to refuse to be made into a sedate athletic doll – into an exhibit, like a show-piece for a
lecturer'. \(\text{xiii}\) In this startling passage from 'Plain Homebuilder: Where Is Your Vorticist?',
Lewis sets out the practice of *détournement*, the playful misuse of functional space, nearly
thirty years before it received attention in the theory of Michel de Certeau, Guy Debord,
Raoul Vaneigem and Henri Lefebvre. \(\text{xiv}\) As Gasiorek observes in relation to this passage,
Lewis is encouraging the consumer to resist the control of the architect and designer by
showing disrespect for their pristine blueprints: ‘The habitable is now associated (whisper it)
with the disorder of the everyday, which refuses the cold sublime of Mies, the technocratic
purism of Le Corbusier, and the authoritarian fantasy of Lewis’s own caliph’. \(\text{xv}\) In insisting
on the everyday as the site of the unplanned and open-ended creativity of the consumer,
Lewis had initiated a new phase in the struggle to make a home of the modern world.

**Those Things That Go To Make Up What We Call ‘Life’**

From the invasion of the station platforms in the Blitz depicted by Henry Moore and Bill
Brandt, to the station busking celebrated by Eduardo Paolozzi, to the graffiti art memorialised
by novelist John Healy – every subsequent desecration of the ordered space of the network
has found champions among writers and artists in the modernist tradition. Even Metroland, an
environment formerly reviled by the English intelligentsia, found champions who recognised
it, at last, as a significant triumph of the individual over the non-places of the modern world.
But in the final section of this chapter I would like to draw attention to a modernist
masterpiece produced in the inter-war period that already seems to exhibit the shift in
perspective prescribed by Lewis.

Anthony Asquith’s *Underground* (1928) is an innovative motion picture that shares
the Vorticist preoccupation with the reordering of urban impressions of speed into a
rigorously stylised aesthetic. But this little-known piece is also a celebration of cinema’s long
love affair with urban transport. The long opening shot, in which a point of light opens up in
the darkness like the iris of a camera to reveal a Tube-station rushing to fill the screen, echoes
the Lumières’ short of a train arriving and (swiftly followed by a shot in which elevator steps
slide up over the screen like a film reel) serves to impress forcibly upon the viewer the
intimate bond that exists between the motion picture and the railroad. As Lynne Kirby notes,
‘As a machine of vision and an instrument for conquering space and time, the train is a
mechanical double for the cinema and for the transport of the spectator into fiction, fantasy,
and dream. It is a metaphor in the Greek sense of the word: movement, the conveyance of
meaning.’ \(\text{xv}\) Kirby speculates that directors were quick to seize on the train for the ‘sense in
which the railway journey provides a contained space and time, a special “nowhere” outside
the sphere of normal rules and codes of conduct’. \(\text{xvii}\) And this observation seems particularly
suggestive, given the formative role the Tube has played in the development of the non-lieu. In associating the camera with the train, the elevator with the film reel, Asquith implied that the modern medium of the motion picture can best represent and make meaningful a non-place that more traditional art forms had failed to comprehend. Shots that recall the primitive short films of sensation and spectacle are incorporated into a piece with the haunting symbolism of Expressionist cinema. Importing a lighting specialist from Germany, and choosing a lead actress ‘with the face of a Modigliani’, Asquith produced what is perhaps Britain’s single important contribution to modernist cinema in the silent period.xcviii

But what sets the film apart from other modernist representations of the Underground by English writers and artists in the inter-war period is the unprecedented interest evinced in the everyday lives of the people who use the space: ‘The “Underground” of the Great Metropolis of the British Empire, with its teeming multitudes of “all sorts and conditions of men,” contributes its share of light and shade, romance and tragedy and all those things that go to make up what we call “life”’. It is for this reason, the opening title card explains, that the Underground is the setting for a ‘story of ordinary work-a-day people’. The sensational shot that opens the movie is thus followed with an intimate sequence set in a packed Tube-car that attempts to convey something of the subtle interactions that take place between passengers while they travel to work.

There is too little space for a full account of Asquith’s extraordinary motion picture. But the scene in which Bill and Nell fall in love (following the shot of the elevator steps rising like a film reel) merits special mention: walking in opposite directions, the wrong way up parallel elevators, half-way along the shaft, Bill and Nell appear to be holding back time as they flirt over the barrier as well as gloriously abusing the most functional of spaces in a Tube-station. Later, as they stand next to one another apart from the crowd, innovative lighting reveals the passion seething beneath their humdrum conversation. The camera pans back to show us what they would like to be doing – when they part, Bill and Nell leave their titanic shadows locked in a fierce kiss.

And the finale is of particular interest. At this crucial moment in the film, Asquith once again chose to mount the camera on a mechanism for movement (in this instance, a lift), thereby transforming the transport system into an optical instrument for observing the capital that serves to heighten rather than marginalise our imaginative and emotional engagement with the space; and thereby realising that experience of the city that the Vorticists had sought to capture and refine in their art. In this, his first solo project, Asquith had proven that film might achieve that end for which more traditional media such as painting had struggled so hard: Underground testifies to the unprecedented power of an effortlessly kinematic art.xcix


viii Evening News, 4 March 1912.

ix The earliest tube-railway was created at least five years later than the first true automobile.


xi Westminster Gazette, 6 March 1914, p. 5.

xii Observer, 8 March 1914, p. 7.


xx Thacker, p. 86.


xxiv *Ibid*.


xlvii Lewis, *BLAST 2*, p. 47.
lxxii Ibid., p. 161.
xvii Lewis, ‘Plain Homebuilder: Where is Your Vorticist?’, p. 285
xviii Lefebvre, pp. 167–168.
xix Gasiorek, p. 145.
xviii Ibid., p. 242.
xxviii Mengham, p. 40.