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**David Ashford, *London Underground: A Cultural Geography*, hardback, 188 pages, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013. ISBN: 978-1846318957; £70.**

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In *London Underground*, David Ashford takes us on a rich and often strange cultural and conceptual journey through the material and virtual spaces of and around the Tube: tunnels, trains, platforms, escalators, lifts, stairs, stations, power plants and administration buildings; novels, short stories, poems, films, posters, paintings, sketches, photographs, sculptures, graffiti and internet fiction. Ashford argues that the London tube, 'the first underground network in the world', is also perhaps 'the first example of what French ethnologist Marc Augé has termed *non-lieu*: spaces such as the motorway, supermarket and airport lounge' that must 'interpret their relation to the invisible landscapes they traverse through the media of signs, maps and verbal messages' (2). In Ashford's perspective, the 'Underground is a transitional form, linking the alienated space of production created by the Industrial Revolution to the fully virtual spaces of late capitalism that emerged following the Cold War' (2).

Ashford contends that his book offers 'the first full account of [a] spatial history of London's Underground' (4). Like David Pike's *Subterranean Cities* (2005), *London Underground* draws on Henri Lefebvre's three categories in *The Production of Space* (1947): perceived, conceived and lived space. Ashford aims to trace how the Tube emerged as an abstract, conceived space—epitomised in Harry Beck's famous 1933 Tube Map that dissolves the idiosyncrasies of the material network in Mondrianesque colour and geometry—and how Tube users turned this conceived space into lived space.

One of the most common images of the Tube is as a modern embodiment of the mythic underworld, but Ashford argues that the 'conceptual history' of the Underground stems from the nineteenth-century fears of attack, even murder, aroused by the isolated railway compartment—a place in which a fellow passenger

might kill you. These fears were exacerbated by the lack of external visual stimuli when the tube ran below the surface—nothing to see out of the window—and even, in the early days, of internal visual stimuli—no ads or maps, only one’s fellow passengers on whom or from whom to direct or avert one’s gaze. If the Tube could seem to promote circulation—a virtue in Victorian social and economic thinking—it could also increase alienation—the Tube passenger might feel like a parcel on the underground Post Office railway opened in 1863—and enhance a sense of vulnerability, social as well as personal, to invasion and subversion. This invasion might take an economic form, as in the buying up of London’s network by wealthy Americans. Such an invasion is exemplified in Theodore Dreiser’s *The Stoic*, the final novel in his trilogy about US tycoon Frank Algernon Cowperwood, published posthumously in 1947 but with its roots, Ashford argues, back in Dreiser’s 1911 visit to see the Lots Road power plant in London built by Charles Tyson Yerkes in his bid to achieve a monopoly over the London tube network. The British Empire had opened up new industrial spaces, but these were now exposed to aggressive appropriation by the USA, which would soon construct a new form of empire based on economic and cultural rather than martial and administrative dominance. In *The Stoic*, Ashford contends, Dreiser pioneered the recognition of the Tube network as the first new space of this kind of empire.

The Modernist response to the Underground was more positive than paranoid, however, seeing new aesthetic and social possibilities in the network. As Virginia Woolf put it in ‘The Mark on the Wall’ (1919): ‘Why, if one wants to compare life to anything, one must liken it to being blown through the Tube at fifty miles an hour’ (qtd 38). Avant-garde visual artists, taking advantage of the patronage of the Underground’s executive officer Frank Pick, but (Ashford stresses) not under his top-down direction, hoped to reshape one of the non-places of the modern world in ways that produced order but also opened the horn and ivory gates of dream and reverie, encouraging oneiric intensities. For example, E. McKnight Kauffer’s posters, such as *Winter Sales Are Best Reached by Underground* (1921), took Vorticism into the lower depths but also gave it a wider audience. Ashford quotes Wyndham Lewis’s observation that McKnight Kauffer ‘disappeared as it were below-ground, and the tunnels of the “Tube” became thenceforth his subterranean picture galleries’ (qtd 76).

If Modernism, especially in its Vorticist mode, invaded the Tube to vivid effect, ‘Metroland’, mediating between the Underground and the suburban surface, also offers creative openings. Metroland is, Ashford acknowledges, a paradox: ‘a locality, a region, a place that is defined entirely by its relation to a non-local transit system—a non-place’ (93). Or, as a Metropolitan Railway pamphlet of 1924 put it: ‘Metro-Land is a country with elastic borders which each visitor can draw for himself, as Stevenson drew his map of Treasure Island’ (qtd 93). Ashford traces the precursors of this country in Wells’s *The Time Machine* (1895) and Chesterton’s *The Man Who Was Thursday* (1908), its patronising dismissal (e.g. by Orwell) between the wars, and its later rehabilitation by Betjeman and, especially, by Julian Barnes’s debut novel *Metroland* (1980). The latter, Ashford argues, presents living in Metroland as dwelling in ‘a psychic space that facilitates flights of fancy’, not through the dream-inducing stimuli of totalising modernism in the city’s heart (as in Vorticist-style Tube posters or

in Beck's tube map itself), but by means of 'the creation of unplanned and open-ended spaces that seem to invite the creative intervention of the individual' (111).

Moving on to consider the World War II images, in the drawings of Henry Moore and the photographs of Bill Brandt, of sleeping children taking shelter from wartime bombing in the Underground, Ashford acknowledges, and to some extent corrects, the mystifying elements of the Blitz myths to which these contribute, but nonetheless applauds them as 'much more than wartime documentary', affirming that their 'haunting, radical and redemptive vision [...] must continue to resonate with our ongoing struggle to make a home in modernity' (131).

One fictional child born in a wartime Tube shelter was, as Ashford points out, the teenage narrator of Colin MacInnes's novel *Absolute Beginners* (1959) and this smoothes the interchange to Ashford's next topic—the use of the Underground as a place for what Guy Debord, the founder of the Situationists, called *détournement*—the (mis)appropriation of a space for playful activity, for instance of a musical kind. The many pop musicians who started their careers as Tube buskers (illegal until the late 1980s) include Marc Bolan and Peregrine Took of T-Rex, Steve Harley of Human Menagerie, Joe Strummer of the Clash, and Ralph McTell, Gerry Rafferty and George Michael. The Underground also provided a workspace that drew West Indian immigrants to postwar London and helped to create a more multicultural capital: indigenous workers were scarce in a time of full employment and London Transport took on 4,000 people from Barbados between 1956 and 1965 and later set up more recruitment offices in Jamaica and Trinidad. Ashford argues that Samuel Selvon's fiction, especially perhaps his 1957 story 'Working the Transport' (from *Ways of Sunlight*), anticipates the interaction between immigrant and native culture in generating new pop music, which Ashford traces back to the impact of calypso, a musical form, he contends, that played an important and as yet unacknowledged role in the genesis of British pop music and, insofar as it was related to Teddy Boy skiffle, complicates the image of the Teds as unequivocally racist.

A key form of later Underground *détournement* is graffiti. Ashford starts his account of its development with Debord's expulsion from the Situationist International of its British cell, which then teamed up with the countercultural group the Motherfuckers and the associated bulletin *Black Mask* to form 'King Mob'—the name coming from 'His Majesty King Mob', the graffiti inscribed on Newgate Prison during the 1780 Gordon Riots. The new King Mob's best-known graffiti, painted on a concrete wall between Westway and the Hammersmith and City Line and building on a Situationist International slogan, referenced the Tube as a component of an enervating repetition:

SAME THING DAY AFTER DAY – TUBE – WORK – DINNER – WORK – TUBE –  
ARMCHAIR – T.V. – SLEEP – TUBE – WORK – HOW MUCH MORE CAN YOU TAKE?  
ONE IN TEN GO MAD – ONE IN FIVE CRACKS UP. (qtd 148)

From 1977, the punk band Crass, travelling by tube, started to spray slogans on to Underground advertisements, or on monuments outside Underground stations, which they judged to convey sexist, racist, corporate, imperial and materialist messages, and promoted their own pro-anarchist attitude. This prompted a wider movement of what the political theorist Naomi Klein called 'culture jamming', altering ads to change

their messages. As Ashford observes, it is ironic that the Tube network that 'pioneered the mediated spaces of late capitalism should have seen the earliest concerted attempt to subvert them' (150). This was followed by the practice, initiated in New York, of 'tagging' graffiti with a name or symbol. In Thatcherite Britain in the later 1980s such 'tagged' graffiti took on a political edge absent in America and developed its own visual style. Although much of the inscription on London tubes was unphotographed and thus lost, Ashford offers a vivid verbal summary of it and draws a parallel with an earlier artistic invasion of the underground and with a later Situationist project:

The [London] Tube-writers' intense and conflicted perception of the urban experience is conveyed through jagged swooping arrows, in a maelstrom of clashing, hard-edged, geometrical forms. The London style bears a curious resemblance, in fact, to the aggressive abstraction practised by the Vorticists and to the famous psychogeographical maps of Paris created by Asger Jorn and Guy Debord, in which the lines of force at work in the city are marked with military-style arrows. The Tube-writers tapped that same ecstasy of being caught up in a fast-moving metropolis, and expressed it more effectively than any other previous group of artists. (154).

But the subversive potential was compromised to some extent by the Tube-writers' mirroring of late capitalist practices—the 'tag', after all, could be seen as equivalent to a logo or icon—and the authorities crushed the movement in the 1990s, reasserting their control of the Underground network, even though there have been revivals, as in the graffiti attack on Northern Line stations on Christmas Day 2006.

Despite the shrinkage of the Tube-writing movement, Ashford sees it as effecting a transformation of the Underground into a space for radical play that is also evident in a variety of fiction. He considers three works that feature the Victoria line, which is, Ashford contends, 'the one line in the entire network built to benefit poorer regions in the capital, connecting Brixton and Walthamstow to the West End' (161). There is the graphic novel *V for Vendetta* (1981–88), with text by Alan Moore and pictures by David Lloyd, in which a Tube train drenched in graffiti strikes the final blow at a British fascist government. Then there is Hanif Kureishi's screenplay for *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (1988), in which Danny (aka Victoria, after his favourite Underground line) tries to reclaim the waste land near Ladbroke Grove where his caravan stands, beneath the curve of an elevated motorway and 'skirted by a mainline railway line and a tube track' (qtd 158). The most significant contribution to this reclamatory project is made by the musicians seen performing in a Tube station at the start of the film (most of whom, Kureishi tells us, were played by actual Tube buskers). But the vibrant utopian space that starts to emerge from the waste land is crushed when a property developer takes it over, declaring his pride in 'making London a cleaner and safer place' (qtd 159). This exemplifies how the increasingly aggressive capitalist version of urban renewal was, by the late 1980s, driving out alternative bohemian and utopian visions and this would gather strength in the next decade. Relating this to the Underground, Ashford argues that in the 1990s the Jubilee Line, linking Portcullis House in Westminster to Canary Wharf via miles of former warehouses converted into luxury flats, would be built, in contrast to the Victoria Line, to benefit 'the capital's

political and financial elite', with 'often immense stations' that 'are among the most spectacular non-places produced by a resurgent capitalism' (160).

In Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988), Gibreel Farishta, in his Archangel of the Lord role, aims to redeem the London mapped in his *A to Z* but finds it too 'protean and chameleon', particularly when he is in the Tube—his Underground ordeal starts on the Victoria Line: 'he grew convinced that [London] kept changing shape as he ran around beneath it, so that the stations on the Underground changed lines and followed one another in apparently random sequence' (qtd 160). When he emerges from time to time to hail a taxi, none will stop for him, so he is 'obliged to plunge back into that hellish maze, that labyrinth without a solution, and continue his epic flight' (qtd 160). Ashford suggests, however, that *The Satanic Verses*, *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* and *V for Vendetta* are complicit with neo-liberal regeneration despite their apparent challenges to it. They 'offer romanticised fantasies of urban life' whose key target audience consists of precisely those 'highly trained professionals' represented by Sammy and Rosie and their ilk, who 'choose to live in the most impoverished parts of the city—and are therefore part of the creeping gentrification that they profess to despise'. Such fictions help to create a new aesthetic that transforms the 'urban' into 'a highly valued commodity', thus contributing to a cultural environment favourable to profit-driven schemes of urban renewal that will assume innovative colouring while reinforcing the social and economic divisions of the metropolis (161).

In his final chapter, Ashford turns to psychogeography, a word coined by the Lettrists (the precursors of the Situationists), and developed in relation to London by Iain Sinclair and Peter Ackroyd early in the 1990s. One key component of psychogeography is its emphasis on the marginal and usually overlooked aspects of places, which can be invested with private and/or occult meanings that resist the rational, economic drives of urban change and become uncanny, haunted, ghost-peopled. The Underground network figures strongly in such an approach, especially with its closed, phantom stations, and, appropriately in light of the German word for uncanny, 'unheimlich', (literally, 'unhomely'), homelessness is the passport to the uncanny undercity. In the fantasy TV series *Neverwhere* (1996), scripted by novelist Neil Gaiman, and shot in real sub-London settings like the ghost tube station at Down Street and the former Post Office railway, the protagonist Richard Mayhew, who has become a homeless non-person, encounters the 'bubbles of old time' that have fallen and collected under London. In the film *Creep* (2004), Franka Potente flees from a pursuing mutant through uncanny subterranean London spaces. In Tobias Hill's novel *Underground* (1999), the central character, a Polish immigrant called Ariel Casimir, has a job in the London Underground because he likes its controlled environment but finds menace there in the shape of a serial killer who pushes white-haired young women on to the live rail and who leads Ariel into a confrontation with his own past. In China Miéville's novel *King Rat* (1998), the hero, Saul, is hunted by an Enemy, a preternatural piper of Hamelin whose flute-playing can turn Tube trains into weapons; Saul ends the novel living in an abandoned Underground station.

Conrad Williams's novel *London Revenant* (2004) portrays Adam Buckley, who cannot fully recall even his immediate past, who is haunted by traces whose source he cannot track down, who increasingly comes to feel the key to his situation lies in the

Underground and its lost stations: '[t]here were thirty or forty of these limbo stations beneath the city. Lonely platforms, dead staircases, gutted lift shafts' (qtd 176). As in Hill's novel, *London Revenant* features a serial killer, who turns out to be a descendant of a worker who died in a horrific accident while excavating the first Underground railway in 1887. The killer is 'a link, the connective tissue between topside and Underground. He was London made flesh, a cipher between the living and the dead' (qtd 177), and Adam will engage in combat with him.

Geoff Ryman's internet novel *253* (1998; available at <http://www.ryman-novel.com/>) has a precise spatial and temporal location and a strict format: its setting is a Bakerloo line Underground train on 11 January 1995 on the seven-and-a-half minute journey from Embankment to Elephant and Castle. Its numbered characters total 253 and each is allotted one page of 253 words. Ashford links this with Michel de Certeau's description of the railway car as an instance and image of a rational utopia: '[a] bubble of panoptic and classifying power, a module of imprisonment that makes possible the production of an order, a closed an[d] autonomous insularity' (qtd 179). But, Ashford argues, Ryman shows how 'humanity resurfaces' within this grid as 'a *revenant*, beyond the panopticon's comprehension or control' (180). Ashford summarises the effect of reading Ryman's internet novel thus: '[it] is like watching a brilliant escape artist emerge, without apparent effort, from 253 seemingly inescapable cages' (180).

Ashford finally returns to Augé, quoting his observation that '[e]xcept for a few cultural details and a few technological adjustments, every society has its subway and imposes on each and every individual itineraries in which the person uniquely experiences how he or she relates to others' (qtd 181). The 'salient fact', Ashford affirms, 'is neither alienation nor its negation but the negotiation each of us constructs every day—the construction of the sense of the individual life from the limited number of routes possible in the mediated spaces of the modern world' (181). But he wonders finally whether this is enough, whether we should 'explore the ways in which this space remains open to forms of tactical reinvention that might have a *material impact* upon our "market-prison-metropolis", to begin to imagine how we might *inhabit* rather than *haunt* the Machine' (181, Ashford's italics).

*London Underground* is enjoyable to read and reread, and indispensable for anyone studying the capital. It could be improved: the opening explanations of Augé's concept of the '*non-lieu*' (crucial to the book's analysis) and of Lefebvre's notions of space, are rather cursory, as if Ashford were keen to get on to his examples and assumed some prior knowledge on the reader's part; there is no developed conclusion, even of an open-ended kind, that seeks to draw together the multiple lines the book has pursued; a bibliography is lacking; and the index, consisting mainly of proper names and some locations, is of limited use—key concepts and texts should also be supplied. But the originality, interest and stimulus of the book remains: Ashford in the Tube is as enlivening, in his way, as Zazie in the Metro.

### **To Cite this Article**

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