**The Drowning Machine: the sea and the scooter in *Quadrophenia***

Brian Baker

As a teenage Mod, in the lee of the 1979 Mod revival, I asked my father, who was born in 1947 and therefore 17 at the height of Mod’s popularity, whether he had been a Mod or a Rocker in that period. (I knew that he’d had a motorcycle and sidecar at age 16, but had quickly traded this in for a car at 17. He also, in the odd photos I saw of him in as a young man, had something suspiciously like a quiff, but his clothes didn’t look like Rocker gear.) He said, ‘I wasn’t a Mod or a Rocker, I was in-between – a Mocker’, and not knowing that he’d stolen this from a Ringo Starr line, I took it for a nice witticism. Of course, as a young man living in suburban Essex, my Dad was far from the centres of subcultural vibrancy, though he had moved with his family from North London in the mid-1950s. In my own teenage naivety, I had presumed that he would have been one thing or the other, Mod or Rocker, and it was something of an eye-opener to realise that he had occupied a pop-cultural space somewhere in between. Yes, he’d liked the Stones, and yes, he’d watched *Ready Steady Go*, but no, he hadn’t been a Mod. He had been just an ordinary Essex teenager. That was okay: I was pretty ordinary too. It didn't stop me from asking him recurrently about *The Avengers* or *Danger Man*, though, until they were repeated on Channel 4 (as was *Ready, Steady, Go*).

Ordinary as I was, I’ve never owned a scooter. As a teenager and a student I couldn’t afford one, and now I suspect I might look a little silly riding one. (This doesn't stop many men of my generation cruising the seafronts of seaside towns on their Vespas and Lambrettas on Bank Holidays.) I remember the classifieds in the local paper advertising a Lambretta for £50 in the early 1980s, and daydreaming about buying it and ‘doing it up’, but £50 was far out of my financial reach. I would have had to wait until I was 16 to ride it, in any case. But I have always been fascinated by the designs of the Lambretta and the Vespa, the streamlined monocoque of the Vespa and the bulbous engine panels, the sleek and long-shanked Lambretta and its shark-like front mudguard. In this chapter I will concentrate on the importance of the scooter to the album and film versions of *Quadrophenia*, and to Mod culture more generally. I will read the scooter as a particularly Modern object, one which embodies particular tensions to do with masculinity and modernity, and whose streamlined shape connects the Mod to a European, mobile and stylishly clean future promised by Modernism but which would fail by the end of the 1960s, never coming into being.

**Back to Front**

In the story told by The Who’s album *Quadrophenia*, Jimmy, the young Mod, suffering from a personality disorder that Townshend dubs ‘quadrophenia’, has a kind of breakdown, and travels from his South London home to Brighton, where he has an epiphany at the sea-side. The album ends ambiguously: the listener doesn’t know whether Jimmy ends his life in the sea (one of the songs is called ‘Drowned’) or whether he simply throws off the burdens of being a Mod:

‘Why should I care

If I should cut my hair

I’ve got to move with the fashion

Or be outcast’[[1]](#footnote-1)

That it is Brighton beach upon which Jimmy has his epiphany – with its stony strand on which the opening track, ‘I Am The Sea’, falls with a roar and billowing hiss – is of course a historical sign for the listener who understands or recognises the place of the Mod in post-war British popular culture. Brighton’s is the symbolic beach upon which Mods engaged in a series of semi-theatrical fights with Rockers, who rode motorcycles (mainly British BSA and Triumph bikes) and wore leathers, were identified with 1950s rock’n’roll; Mods, who rode Vespa or Lambretta scooters and wore suits, sharp styles and American army parkas, were oriented towards Italian fashions and listened to soul, Motown, bluebeat, and r’n’b. Dick Hebdige, in his essay on the scooter in *Hiding in the Light* (1988), argues that Mod subculture was localised – mainly in London and the South-East of England – and represented a kind of resistance *as* consumption. Using data taken from a survey conducted at Margate in 1964 (one of the scenes of Mod/ Rocker confrontation), Hebdige suggests that ‘the mods tended to come from London, were from lower-middle or upper-working-class background and worked in skilled or semi-skilled trades or in the service industries. […] The rockers were more likely to do manual jobs and to live locally’.[[2]](#footnote-2) Where the Rocker, Hebdige argues, inhabited a ‘traditional’ and working-class subjectivity, the Mod (who he associates with office work rather than manual labour) was aspirational, potentially socially mobile, and oriented towards a new, Modern future: hence the name, Modernist.

Since the Mod revival of the early 1980s, Mod has been less oriented towards the future, and more towards the past. It has also been oriented away from the South-East, where the battles between Mods and Rockers began in Clacton on the Easter Bank Holiday in 1964, then flared up in Brighton and along the South Coast on the following Whitsun weekend. The continuity of Mod revivalism with the remains of the Northern Soul circuit (centred on the North-West of England), albeit an uneasy continuum as identified by Terry Rawlings in *Mod: A Very British Phenomenon*, and the importance of the phenomenon of ‘scooterist’ rallies to the contemporary Mod scene, has lent it a more nostalgic structure of feeling, somewhat at odds with the emphases and aspirations of the original Mods.[[3]](#footnote-3) The early 1960s Modernists have their antecedents in the hip, consumption- and display-oriented young metropolitans documented in Colin MacInnes’s novels, most notably *Absolute Beginners* (1959), the geographical epicentre of which was Soho, a part of London with a distinct and Italian-influenced everyday/night life (in delicatessens, restaurants, coffee bars). This youth culture, and its extension into the Modernists/ Mods, pointed away from the Britain of austerity, rationing and work, towards hedonism, consumption and leisure. The Mods were oriented towards a future Britain of spectacle, the ‘white heat’ of technology, and one of productivity and full employment, of the road out of the metropolis towards the periphery. Except in the case of the post-war British condition of London’s centrifugal energies (dispersal of working-class populations in new towns and LCC estates) and centripetal dynamics (post-consensus acceleration of London’s economic predominance), that future did not come to pass.

In ‘The Meaning of Mod’, Dick Hebdige makes a more tentative connection between the ‘Italianate style’ of ‘working class dandies [...] known throughout the trad [jazz] world as mods and who were dedicated to clothes and lived in London’ of the 1950s, and the successor youth subculture of the early 1960s.[[4]](#footnote-4) MacInnes’s *Absolute Beginners* enumerates this style: ‘the grey pointed alligator casuals, the pink neon pair of ankle crêpe nylon-stretch, my Cambridge blue glove-fit jeans, a vertical-striped happy shirt revealing my lovely neck-charm on its chain, and the Roman-cut short-arse jacket’.[[5]](#footnote-5) While *Absolute Beginners* ranges across London, from Belgravia, where the narrator meets Suzette, to Pimlico where his parents live, it is one part of London in particular that becomes identified with the Italian style, with coffee bars, with nightlife, with youth culture: Soho. Soho had, in the middle decades of the 20th century, been associated with Bohemian life: literary culture, little magazines and periodicals, heroic drinking, and what Ian Hamilton calls ‘Sohoitis’: you will stay there always day and night and get no work done ever’.[[6]](#footnote-6) According to Dominic Sandbrook, ‘In the years before the Second World War, Soho became well-known for its swing and jazz clubs, clustered among the French and Italian restaurants and delicatessens of Frith and Dean Streets’; ‘Soho in the fifties meant cosmopolitanism, sex, and above all, coffee bars’.[[7]](#footnote-7) On the cover of the film tie-in edition of *Absolute Beginners* from 1986 (the same image was used on the cover of the film soundtrack album), Eddie O’Connell as Colin and Patsy Kensit as Suzette sit astride Colin’s silver Vespa, which is somehow suspended in the air, front wheel higher than the back. Behind is a stylized silhouette of the London skyline, as if Colin and Suzette (in a strange reprise of Speilberg’s *E.T.* (1982) or scenes from the Disney *Peter Pan* (1953)) were magically flying through the night sky of the city. The scooter here not only signifies actual mobility but a fantasy of symbolic, and very stylish escape. The streamlined side-pods of the Vespa become a kind of ‘jet-set’ fabulation, and the city itself (just as in the film adaptation, which infuses MacInnes’ novel with the colour and fantasy of the 1950s musical) is made fantastic, kaleidoscopic, spectacular. The scooter, sharp blue suit and loafers clearly anticipate and retroactively signify Mod style; Soho becomes the launching point for the scooter and the Mod imaginary.

Hebdige goes on to suggest further elements of the Mod style in ‘The Meaning of Mod’: ‘to consciously invert the values associated with smart dress’; ‘a desire to do justice to the mysterious complexity of the metropolis in his personal demeanour, to draw himself closer to the Negro whose very metabolism seemed to have grown into, and kept pace with that of the city’; and a ‘unique and subversive attitude towards the commodities he habitually consumed’.[[8]](#footnote-8) Hebdige’s understanding of Mod is of a performative obsession with style: ‘Mod was pure, unadulterated STYLE, the essence of style’, a style constructed through appropriated commodities whose codings were altered through relocation to a different context (Italian motor scooters, Italian suits, even amphetamines).[[9]](#footnote-9) In Mod, the affordable mobility of the scooter becomes an emblem of a different orientation towards post-war British life: one in which consumption, affluence (albeit mediated through the availability of easier credit for those in work) and autonomy is articulated through sub-cultural affiliation and a stylish performativity. In *Hiding in the Light*, Hebdige identifies the scooter precisely with a post-war ‘Imaginary of affluence’:

The mirrors and the chromium of the ‘classic’ Mod scooter reflected not only the group aspirations of the mods but a whole historical Imaginary, the Imaginary of affluence. The perfection of surfaces within Mod was part of the general ‘aestheticisation’ of everyday life achieved through the intervention of the Image, through the conflation of the ‘public’ and the ‘personal’, consumption and display.[[10]](#footnote-10)

*Quadrophenia* offers a critique of the idea of performative autonomy when Jimmy returns to Brighton and meets the ‘Ace Face’ (‘I don’t suppose you would remember me/ but I used to follow you back in ‘63’), who works as a Bell Boy in a Brighton hotel:

‘I got a new job

And I’m newly born

You should see me

Dressed up in my uniform [...]

Bell Boy

Gotta keep runnin’ now

Bell Boy

Keep my lip buttoned down

Bell Boy

Carry the bloody baggage out

Bell Boy

Always running at someone’s heel

You know how I feel...’[[11]](#footnote-11)

‘Bell Boy’ emphasises the deadening work, the alienating and humiliating work that lies behind (and provides for) the Mod image of leisure, display and autonomy: ‘the Dirty Jobs’ Jimmy encounter with the Bell Boy reveals the logic of the ‘Imaginary of affluence’, one that underpins Mod. As Hebdige notes, Mod’s orientation towards consumption as a form of resistance makes it all-too-easy to recuperate as a ‘lifestyle’, to fold the Mod back into sanctioned cultures of productivity and sanctioned leisure time. The beach, however, is different, a liminal space where Jimmy’s own implication in the world of work (notably, on the lp photographs, he is shown carrying bins: he is a dustman, not an aspirational clerk or executive-to-be) is dissolved, transcended. Not only is this form of Modernism a suit of clothes, but so is the subjectivity of post-war British masculinity that he finds difficult to negotiate. While the Ace Face accepts his humiliation as part of the economy of Mod-ism, Jimmy rejects it.

That the Ace Face/ Bell Boy works in a hotel by the seaside is a telling indicator of the shifting economies of leisure and mobility during the post-war period in Britain. That he works in a *hotel* is also crucial: the hotel is a locus of *other people’s* leisure time, the circuits of labour and service that structures this ‘holiday’ time becoming all too apparent. The seaside hotel, and in particular the streamlined Modernity of Art Deco landmarks such as the Midland Hotel in Morecambe or Ocean Hotel in Saltdean, along the coast from Brighton, is an emblem of a spectacular (and aspirational) representation of the British seaside masking the labour that enables it to function. (Residential and cultural buildings such as the De La Warr Pavilion in Bexhill, or Marine Court in St Leonard’s, have similar Modernist design principles.)[[12]](#footnote-12) The buildings also suggest a utopian futurity of leisure and pleasure. I would like to suggest, however, that Art Deco housing, with its *maritime* emphases on white surfaces, glass, porthole windows, polished metals, is found in towns next the sea co-exists with the ‘seaside’ but is notably different from it. The Modernism of the Midland Hotel, for example, its geometrical regularity standing out against the wash of the sea on the beach, dissolving horizon, blue or grey-brown of the Bay, is at once a spectacular resistance to the peculiarities of location and an organisation of point-of view: of the rail passengers whose first view of Morecambe when disembarking from the train would be the hotel, *and* the perspectives across the bay (away from the town) offered by the hotel’s tearoom and accommodation. If you arrive, like Jimmy or the Ace Face, on a scooter, however, you are more likely to be serving customers or subject to exclusion and the rather more disorderly pleasures of the street.

The shape of the Vespa – its streamlined and chromed body echoing the emphases of the aviation- and maritime-inflected architectural seaside Modernism – is a symbol of Mod-ism’s connection to a vision of the future that offered a radical break from the British past. Paradoxically, when the Mods travel from Soho down to Brighton, from urban centre to seaside, they are enacting a long-established dream of leisure space and time, of new configurations of mobility and class proposed by the Modernist seaside architecture of the 1930s. The lines of the scooter promise speed, mobility, Modernity, the future: a future that Jimmy can only embrace, ironically enough, by sloughing off his Mod costume and driving his Modernist scooter into the sea.

**Two Faces of the scooter**

In the BBC documentary on *Quadrophenia*, *Can You See The Real Me?* (2012), it is revealed that because of problems with Ramport Studios (then still under construction while the album was being recorded) and different technical specifications for quadrophonic sound systems, there was only ever stereo mix of *Quadrophenia*. Townshend’s plans to tour the album with quadrophonic sound systems were abandoned due to lack of time and preparation (he had seen and heard Pink Floyd using quadrophonic live sound prior to recording the album), and when the quadrophonic system was used at Ramport, it was so loud that it produced the same decibels as the supersonic airliner Concorde on take-off, rupturing eardrums and making people’s noses bleed. The overall symbolic structure of the 4 faces, 4 band members and 4 sides of music was then reduced to stereo, to two channels. The album itself plays with binaries as well as the ‘quad’ symbolism (as in the song ‘Doctor Jimmy’), and is also found in the dual scooters used in the film of *Quadrophenia*. Where, in the booklet of the album, Jimmy rides a Vespa GS, which he crashes before taking the train to Brighton, in the film Jimmy (Phil Daniels) owns a Lambretta. The GS is owned by the Ace Face, a scooter that Jimmy steals and rides to the cliffs before launching it into the air (though very differently from Colin in the film poster of *Absolute Beginners*). This ending differs markedly from the near-drowning experienced at the end of the album booklet’s narrative. In publicity stills and posters for the film, Jimmy usually rides the Vespa; he also does so in the shot in the gatefold of the film soundtrack double-album of *Quadrophenia*. Curiously, although the Ace Face’s GS is very similar to the one featured in the original 1973 album photography, in the film publicity Jimmy is more usually presented riding a scooter that *is not his own.* He is even alienated from his own machine. (The Lambretta is ‘killed’ when it slides under a lorry on a suburban street; the GS is ‘killed’ when it is accelerated off the cliff-top.) In this section I will analyse more closely the presentation of the scooter in both film and album booklet to explore the shifting significations of the scooter across the *Quadrophenia* texts.

The presentation of the Vespa *and* the Lambretta in the film of *Quadrophenia* indicates the film’s greater connection to the historical and cultural circumstances surrounding Jimmy’s life as a Mod. The album, in contrast, tends to play as a traversal of a largely interior landscape (where Brighton beach is as symbolic and internal as it is ‘real’). In the third section I will concentrate on the representation of Jimmy’s Vespa GS on the album cover, as a symbol of his own psychological armature and dissolution, but here I would like to quickly note the importance of the two makes of scooter. As both Hebdige and Terry Rawlings note, the Vespa was both imported from Italy (the GS) and built by the Douglas company in the UK (the somewhat derided Sportique); while the GS was the more coveted machine, Douglas concentrated on marketing the Sportique for economic reasons. By comparison, all Lambrettas were imported from the Innocenti factory in Italy. Rather than diverting resources into production in the UK, Lambretta instead developed a much stronger network of dealers and servicing centres and ‘could concentrate on importing and marketing Lambretta’s entire range of bikes, with brilliant and enthusiastic promotion campaigns that were effective, stylised and above all, successful’.[[13]](#footnote-13) Both Rawlings and Paul ‘Smiler’ Anderson in *Mods: The New Religion* (2013) feature interviews with Mods who identify their hierarchy of scooters, from desirable to derided; these interviews also reveal their effect on the young men’s social and sexual capital. Roland Kelly, in *Mods: The New Religion*, is quoted as saying ‘In 1964 I got my chrome [Lambretta] TV200 from London. Now, that scooter cost the earth but it was worth it because when you went to the village halls and you had a scooter you were the top dog. Blokes didn't want to pick a fight with you; they wanted to ask questions about your scooter. All the girls fancied you; it was like, “Cor, who’s that?’”.[[14]](#footnote-14) Ken Browne, interviewed in *Mod: A Very British Phenomenon,* says about talking to ‘a girl in a club’ that ‘You’d have to say you had a GS or a GT200, because they knew they were the ones to have. Boy, if you said it was an LD150 or whatever, you had no chance. There were scooters that were totally passé, like the LD and the Sportique, you just didn't want one of those’.[[15]](#footnote-15) While the scooter, with the crazes for modification (and thereby individuation) such as chroming, mirrors and headlights, offered a sense of mobility and freedom, it also adhered to the strict codings of the Mod social hierarchies. While in some senses gendered as female – Rawlings notes ‘the bike’s sleek lines and bosom-like curves (on the Vespa, anyway) also gave the bike an almost feminine quality’,[[16]](#footnote-16) and Hebdige notes the scooter’s ‘androgynous qualities (“feminine” and sleek but also able to climb mountains, cross continents…)’– the scooter also became identified with the production of successful masculine heterosexuality, the ability to ‘pull’ a young woman.[[17]](#footnote-17)

This is certainly borne out in the film of *Quadrophenia*. Jimmy owns a middling scooter, a Lambretta LI150, not an embarrassing LD nor a top-of-the-line TV200. When he stops on the street to talk to Steph (Lesley Ash), the girl he is infatuated with (and keen to take away from her boyfriend), he sits neatly astride the LI. It’s a respectable emblem of sexual and social capital, but it certainly does not have the spectacular power of the GS160 that he sees the Ace Face riding in Brighton. His act of stealing the GS is, in a sense, the culmination of Mod aspiration: sitting astride the GS, he has ceased to be a ‘Number’ and has become a ‘Face’, at the top of the Mod masculine hierarchy. While many of the publicity shots and posters from the film picture Jimmy riding the GS, the *mise-en-scène* of the film often portrays the Mods riding *en masse*, from Jimmy pulling up in front of the ranks of scooters in front of the club at the beginning of the film, to the shots of the group riding down to Brighton. In fact, several scenes in the film demonstrate the vulnerability associated with being separated from the group of riders: then, you become prey to gangs of rockers on their British motorcycles. *Quadrophenia* interrogates the tensions between individuation and difference in Mod subculture (not wanting to be part of the ‘mass’ or conforming to conventional desires and behaviours) while also exhibiting anxieties surrounding that individuation (loss of ties to family, isolation, psychological breakdown). While the film emphasises the group, the album more generally portrays Jimmy alone.

In stark contrast to the *mise-en-scène* of the film, when Jimmy is depicted with his scooter in the photographs in the album booklet, he is isolated. In three photographs, down a street heading away from Battersea power station, sitting alone as a group of Mod kids talk on a street corner, or kneeling beside the scooter as The Who emerge from the Hammersmith Odeon, his distance from others is emphasised. In the fourth, he sits with his back to a wall, the damaged fairing and lights of the ‘smashed-up’ scooter visible at it rests on the pavement in front of him. Far from a symbol of belonging, or of affluence and mobility, the scooter in The Who’s *Quadrophenia* signifies alienation, isolation and psychological damage. As I will explain in the final section, the image on the back cover of the album provides a crucial index of Jimmy’s emotional, psychological and spiritual trajectory.

**The Drowning Machine**

On the front cover of The Who’s *Quadrophenia* (1973), the scooter has four faces. Jimmy sits on his Vespa GS, facing away from the camera, his parka almost a shroud. His face is hidden. The four faces presented to the viewer are those of the band, from the top: Townshend, Moon, Entwistle, Daltrey. The faces are reflected in four mirrors that, in Mod fashion, extend from a chrome frame attached to the fairing of the Vespa. These faces, of course, reflect Townshend’s plan for the musical structure of *Quadrophenia*: that the ‘quadrophenic’ motif reflected Jimmy’s fragmentation, the sonic production in quadrophonic sound, and that key songs and leitmotifs would correspond to each of the members of the band: ‘Is it me?’ for Entwistle, ‘Helpless Dancer’ for Daltrey, ‘Bell Boy’ for Moon, and ‘Love Reign O’er Me’ for Townshend himself. Although Jimmy appears to look into the scooter’s mirrors and see four reflections, with the absence of his own face completing a geometric alignment (one becomes four), if you study the photograph closely, you can just make another reflection in the chromed side-pod of the Vespa. Is this the photographer? Is this the viewer? The front cover of *Quadrophenia*, staged by Graham Hughes (from an idea credited to Daltrey) isolates Jimmy, unlike Ethan Russell’s photobook inside the album, where Jimmy is purposefully placed in a South London milieu. The front cover of the album is a moment of *reflection*, but one which is outside the diegesis: the black and white image, with a background which suggests a tarpaulin, is foggy, miasmic, perhaps internal. With a ‘Who’ symbol on the back of the parka, this is an emblematic shot, working with a series of equivalences: ‘Who’= Jimmy = four faces = parka = scooter. The image on the back cover, Jimmy’s GS half-submerged in the sea, seems to be ‘real’ but is equally symbolic and extra-diegetic, for Jimmy’s narration has it that he crashes the scooter in the ‘pissing rain’ and gets the 5.15 train to Brighton. (The film, of course, solves this by Jimmy’s theft of the Ace Face’s Vespa, while Jimmy himself has a Lambretta.) The fate of the scooter is inextricably linked with Jimmy’s own; the scooter both reflects him and his own splitting.

In this section I am going to read this connection between Jimmy and the scooter through the work of Klaus Theweleit, whose *Male Fantasies* (2 vols, 1989) is a key work with regard to theorising masculinities and in particular the armoured masculine subject. The imagery that Theweleit analyses, taken from the writings of proto-Fascist *Freikorps* militiamen in the period following the First World War, opens up the symbolic register of *Quadrophenia* in an illuminating way, and in particular the relation between the sea – the flood, flux – and the scooter, which I will read here as Jimmy’s armoured self, reflected also in Jimmy’s ‘wartime coat’ which protects him from the ‘wind and sleet’. I will suggest that the chromed, streamlined shape of the Vespa itself signifies the imperatives towards speed and violence that Futurism brings to the surface in Modernism, and that Jimmy’s ‘Mod’ subjectivity inherits the deeply anxious and troubled masculinity that is imperfectly armoured by the psychological and symbolic armour.

The very means by which *Quadrophenia* presents Jimmy’s fragmentation seem confused. From the ‘Four Faces’ (the name of one of the songs left off the original album release of *Quadrophenia* but subsequently released on the film soundtrack album), we have the image of binary splitting in ‘Doctor Jimmy’, with its Hyde-like Mr Jim produced by drinking gin; to the statement of unitary subjectivity in ‘I’m One’ (which, in the lyrics of the chorus, alternates between ‘I’m one’ and ‘you’ll all see I’m the one’, a rather different conception); to what seems to be a voice from the void, from dissolution, who can only recognise a fleeting embodiment or subjectivity: ‘Is it me, for a moment?’ Of course, there is no ‘real me’, no authentic Jimmy to be uncovered. This confusion about Jimmy’s identity is reinforced in the resolution of the film, with its opening/closing shots of the scooter going over the cliff and Jimmy walking away from the edge. The sense that there *is* no ‘Jimmy’ presupposes the need to construct him, to engage a psychic apparatus through which to produce and defend some kind of subjectivity in the face of a terminal fragmentation or dissolution.

This armour is theorised by Theweleit as being produced by social and cultural conditions that can be traced back much further than that of wartime Germany; the deep roots of the production of the armoured male subject are coterminous with the rise of an industrial and bureaucratic modernity. Theweleit, drawing upon Deleuze and Guattari, proposes an anti-Oedipal reading of masculinity, though he does accept the basic Freudian structure of the ‘drives’. Indeed, Theweleit argues that:

A psychic type whose basic structure was more or less ‘psychotic’ may have been the norm in Germany (at the very time that Freud was writing), and that this type was far more ‘normal’ and more common than Oedipus, for example. Oedipus seems likely to have been a highly unusual specimen: a fictional non-fascist citizen modelled on Freud himself.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Theweleit proposes that there are numerous parallels between the ‘soldier males’ he draws upon and the ‘average man’: the soldier is merely an extension of the tendencies of the more general condition of masculinity. He further suggests:

Since the ‘ego’ of these men cannot form from the inside out […] they must acquire an enveloping ‘ego’ from the outside. [This is] a result of coercion; it is forced upon them by the pain they experience in the onslaught of external agencies. The punishments of parents, teachers, masters, the punishment hierarchies of young boys and the military, remind them constantly of the existence of their periphery (showing them their boundaries), until they ‘grow’ a functioning and controlling body armour, and a body capable of seamless fusion into larger formations with armorlike properties. [T]he armour of these men may be seen as constituting their ego.[[19]](#footnote-19)

This armour is particularly used in defence against the threat of dissolution, typed (in Fascist writings) as the ‘red flood’. The ‘most urgent task’ of the armoured masculine subject ‘is to pursue, to dam in, and to subdue any force that threatens to transform him back into the horribly disorganised jumble of flesh, hair, skin, bones, intestines, and feelings that calls itself human – the human being of old’.[[20]](#footnote-20) The flood is, of course, gendered; flow, flux, the ‘morass’, is feminine, that which must be defended against: feminization, dissolution. At the same time, Theweleit suggests, the armour produces a desire to ‘explode’ out of its confines in a violent moment of ecstasy.

Mod masculinity, with its suits, parkas and scooters, I would argue, inherits the psychological structures of the armoured male, and if not Fascist, then perhaps a Modernist subjectivity that embraces the idea of the machine, the future, and in particular a form of masculine immaculateness that is bound up with separation and isolation.[[21]](#footnote-21) Richard Weight, in *Mod: A Very British Style* (2013), writes that ‘Mods fetishized technology that accelerated physical mobility’ and somewhat unconsciously opens up the terms of my debate in the short section about scooters, when he writes that

The scooter’s cleanliness augmented its appeal. Because the engines of Vespas and Lambrettas were covered, it was easier for machine and rider to stay spotless. Mods no more wanted oil on their jackets than wind in their hair and to protect smart suits and dresses from the weather and scooter dirt they made use of the parka.[[22]](#footnote-22)

The relation between technology, mobility, and cleanliness is illuminating. As quoted on the back cover of the *Quadrophenia* soundtrack album, Pete Meaden defined ‘Mod-ism’ as ‘clean living under difficult circumstances’; Weight quotes Giacomo Balla’s ‘Futurist Manifesto of Men’s Clothing’ which declares ‘WE MUST DESTROY ALL PASSEIST CLOTHES and everything about them which is colourless, funereal, decadent, boring and unhygenic’.[[23]](#footnote-23) The idea of cleanliness, indeed of ‘spotlessness’ or immaculacy, is surely part of this psychic armouring against dirt, against the morass, against the flood. If the flood is feminine, then Meaden’s suggestion that ‘[we were] not too heavily into chicks […] because chicks you got to remember are emotional distressful situations for a man’ takes on a rather different cast. Meaden continues: ‘we were totally free because your sex drives, your libido […] was turned right down low by Drynamil’.[[24]](#footnote-24) Here, even ‘leapers’ become part of the defensive apparatus, one which is explicitly proposed as ‘freedom’.

The Vespa, with its streamlined chrome pods, its armature of bars and mirrors, is the emblem of Jimmy’s armoured self, a masculinity produced by the disciplinary structures of work and domestic life that he struggles against, but which at the same time protects him from a dissolution that is longed-for. The shot on the back cover of *Quadrophenia*, with the scooter half-drowned in the sea, signifies a breach in that psychic armour. Jimmy’s journey back to the sea can be thought of as an enactment of a desire to rupture his armoured subjectivity, to ‘drown’ and dissolve the unsustainable fragmentation in a ‘oneness’ that is without boundaries altogether, rather than the joining up of components in the Mod crowd that signifies further conformity and struggle. Theweleit, writing about water and the ocean, declares: ‘We use that substance, that ‘pure mother’, to cleanse ourselves of the dirt of the world, the dirt of our beds, of love, of women – the dirt that we are ourselves’.[[25]](#footnote-25) Jimmy, of course, has himself been involved with the ‘dirty jobs’, spending a few days as a dustman; immersing himself in the sea will cleanse him of everything.

Total dissolution, death by drowning, is implied in the shot where Jimmy is fully submerged under the water. This, of course, is not the last shot. Jimmy makes it to ‘The Rock’, and the final shots in the booklet show him walking alone the shore, like the scooter, half-in and half-out of the water. I would argue that in these images *Quadrophenia*, the album, rejects the narrative of maturation that seems encoded in the beginning/ending of the film, while at the same time rejecting suicide as a means by which to transcend the disabling tensions produced by the psychic armour and the need to rupture it, to ‘explode’ out of it (in the violence shown in the album where Jimmy and others overturn a Mark II Jaguar). Instead, Jimmy maroons himself on another beach, walking the tideline, *between* the sea and the sand rather than *by* it. The imagery of the rock, phallically protruding from the sea but deeply invaginated, echoes this concept of the beach not only as ‘the place where a man can feel/ He’s the only soul in the world that’s real’, but also one where the constructions of gender are themselves in flux.

The drowning machine is therefore the Vespa GS and, in a sense, Jimmy himself. Jimmy is machinic not only in the sense of an armoured body that can be conjoined with other masculine components in the Mod crowd (again, to-be-wished-for and feared as another conforming mass), but also in a Deleuze/Guattarian sense, extending from Theweleit: Jimmy’s drowning machine is a desiring machine, a body-without-organs, a point of flux *between* and prior to subjectivity: ‘desire and its object are one and the same thing: a machine, as a machine of a machine’, in the way that ‘the beach is kissed by the sea’.[[26]](#footnote-26) Ultimately, the drowning machine is not just a thing, not the Vespa nor Jimmy, but a productive process of which they are both emblems. Jimmy desires to be ‘one’, not a unitary subject but one *with* the world, to dissolve the boundaries of the masculine subject entirely.

In the three sections of this chapter, I have attempted to draw together different threads: legacies of Modernism, the significance of the scooter in Mod culture, masculinity and the splitting of the subject. The three sections, rather than a more appropriate four, suggest that one of the elements is missing, Pete’s carefully worked-out quadrangulated structure undermined. The 4-as-1, 1-as-4 band symbology of *Quadrophenia* was disintegrating even as The Who recorded it in 1973. Between the album and the film of *Quadrophenia*, the group recorded two more studio albums, but Keith Moon, struggling with alcohol addiction, became less and less reliable as drummer, and Daltrey and Entwistle considered replacing him during the recording of the 1978 album *Who Are You*. In September 1978, Moon, in increasingly poor health, tried to go sober with the use of clomathiazole, a sedative used to alleviate the symptoms of withdrawal. On 7 September, he took an overdose in his London flat, and died. *Quadrophenia* was made into a film that Moon, the Bell Boy, would never see: it was released just over a year after his death. If this chapter contains three sections rather than four, it is then necessarily so if it remains true to the project, to its complete incompletion, with Jimmy left on the beach. The last image of the album *Quadrophenia* is the back cover, the GS Vespa half-submerged in the sea. Ultimately, perhaps, the drowning machine, the four-faced scooter threatened by dissolution, was not only Jimmy but The Who itself.

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1. The Who, ‘Cut My Hair’, *Quadrophenia* (Track Records, 1973). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Dick Hebdige, *Hiding in the Light* (London: Routledge, 1988), 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Terry Rawlings, *Mod: A Very British Phenomenon* (London: Omnibus, 2000), 201. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Dick Hebdige, ‘The Meaning of Mod’, in *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-war Britain*, ed. Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (London: Routledge, 2006), 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Colin MacInnes, *Absolute Beginners* (1959) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ian Hamilton, ‘Sohoitis’, *Granta* 65 (1999): 297. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Dominic Sandbrook, *Never Had It So Good: A History of Britain from Suez to the Beatles* (London: Abacus, 2000), 139, 141. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Hebdige, ‘The Meaning of Mod’, 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid., 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Hebdige, *Hiding in the Light*, 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The Who, ‘Bell Boy’, *Quadrophenia*. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For an overview of this kind of architecture, see Fred Gray, ‘1930s Architecture and the Cult of the Sun’, *Modernism on Sea: Art and Culture at the British Seaside*, eds. Lara Feigel and Alexandra Harris (Oxford: Peter Lang), 159-176. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Terry Rawlings, *Mod: A Very British Phenomenon*, 142. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Paul ‘Smiler’ Anderson, *Mods: The New Religion, The Style and Music of the 1960s Mods* (London: Omnibus, 2013), 103. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Rawlings, *Mod: A Very British Phenomenon*, 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid., 142. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Hebdige, *Hiding in the Light*, 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies II: Male Bodies: Psychoanalysing the White Terror*,trans. Stephen Conway, Erica Carter and Chris Turner (London: Polity, 1989), 213. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid., 164. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid., 160. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. While I am here suggesting the continuity of some aspects of Modernism with the Fascist imaginary (particularly in terms of Futurism), I would be concerned not to collapse all Modernist artistic and cultural practices into Fascism. Indeed, some Modernist avant-gardes (such as Berlin Dada) were explicitly anti-Fascist. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Richard Weight, *Mod: A Very British Style* (London: Bodley Head, 2013), 65, 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid., 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid., 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies I: women, floods, bodies, history*, trans. Stephen Conway, Erica Carter and Chris Turner (London: Polity, 1989), 422. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedpius: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Athlone Press, 1983), 26. In *Anti-Oedipus*, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari propose the ‘body-without-organs’ as a figure for their metaphysics of flux and becoming. This ‘BwO’ counters a Freudian narrative of a closed ‘organic’ subjectivity in suggesting the priority of desire which *flows through* bodies: ‘Desire constantly couples continuous flows and partial objects that are by nature fragmentary and fragmented [and] causes the current to flow’ (5). Connection and ‘coupling’, rather than Oedipal conflicts or the ‘lack’ of the phallus are the structuring of human (and other) life. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)