

PYULON

PASTORAL

SIMONIS  
REVERENDISS

It's more than 140 years since the British public first had electricity in their homes, and almost a century since the National Grid was launched. From the late 1920s onwards the infrastructure of the UK's vast National Grid network, and more especially the transmission tower, or pylon, was a new and unfamiliar presence in the landscape. It was also a divisive presence. For the modernist architect Sir John Leslie Martin, the "line of electric pylons," along with the motorcar and the aeroplane, was representative of a "new aesthetic" that had at last "abandoned the accidental for the exact and [...] replaced the ornamental by the constructional."<sup>1</sup>

Likewise, the sculptor Barbara Hepworth drew inspiration from the sight of "pylons in lovely juxtaposition with springy turf and trees of every stature" seen from the window of an electric train.<sup>2</sup> For others – including Rudyard Kipling, John Maynard Keynes and John Galsworthy, co-signatories of a letter to the editor of *The Times* – the erection of "steel masts" carrying "high-tension wires" over the Sussex Downs amounted to nothing less than "the permanent disfigurement of a familiar feature of the English landscape."<sup>3</sup>

The great steel pylons that had been ordered for the National Grid conformed to a design originally proposed by an American firm, Milliken Brothers, and were adopted subject to modifications proposed by the anti-modernist architect Reginald Blomfield. For Blomfield the British pylon fit into the tradition of a particular kind of classicism. Initially borrowed from Greek by French Egyptologists as a term for the gateway towers of Egyptian temples, the word pylon (which simply means "gate") reflected both their appearance, and the idea that they would provide a 'gateway' to a reliable electricity supply for the UK.

Today, new battlegrounds are arising around the logistics of electrification, not least the planned expansions of the national grid infrastructure to enable the connection and transmission of clean energy. To achieve the target of decarbonising Britain's power network by 2035 the National Grid estimates that, over the next seven years, five times as many transmission lines – via overhead pylons or (a more expensive option) underground cables – will need to be built than in the past three decades combined.<sup>4</sup> Pylons therefore look set to be an even bigger part of our industrial furniture, requiring an environmentalist perspective that promotes building and in many cases across some of the country's most picturesque landscapes.

*Pylon Pastoral* is a journey following the forty-eight electric pylons along a 14km route from Shoreham Power Station, a gas-fired station located on the South Coast of England, through the landscape of the Sussex Downs to the Bolney National Grid Substation (an important strategic asset in the UK energy system). The work's title makes reference to the poem by the conservative poet Edward Meyerstein (1889-1952) who describes the pylon as "That carrier of life-imperilling light, That skeleton to mar the lovely sight".

(1) J.L. Martin et al. *Circle: International Survey of Constructive Art* (London: Faber & Faber, 1937): 215-16.

(2) Herbert Read, ed. *Unit 1: The Modern Movement in English Architecture, Painting and Sculpture* (London: Cassell, 1934): 19.

(3) "Cables over the Sussex Downs," *The Times*, 3 October 1929: 15

(4) <https://politico.eu/article/the-politics-of-pylons-the-u-k-s-next-big-net-zero-battle/>

## The Pylons

The secret of these hills was stone, and cottages  
Of that stone made,  
And crumbling roads  
That turned on sudden hidden villages

Now over these small hills, they have built the concrete  
That trails black wire  
Pylons, those pillars  
Bare like nude giant girls that have no secret.

The valley with its gilt and evening look  
And the green chestnut  
Of customary root,  
Are mocked dry like the parched bed of a brook.

But far above and far as sight endures  
Like whips of anger  
With lightning's danger  
There runs the quick perspective of the future.

This dwarfs our emerald country by its trek  
So tall with prophecy  
Dreaming of cities  
Where often clouds shall lean their swan-white neck.