The view from the air: the cultural geographies of flight

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Chapter Five
The View from the Air: The Cultural Geographies of Flight

Lucy Budd

Windows on the World

On a recent transatlantic flight, some 37,000 feet above the west coast of Greenland, the captain of our wide-bodied Airbus A330 took the unusual step of interrupting the in-flight movie. It was, he announced, one of the clearest days in the northern hemisphere that he had ever experienced in his flying career and he encouraged everyone to look out of the windows at the glaciers and icebergs below. A small minority of passengers (the author included) immediately jumped up, cameras in hand, and clambered over fellow travellers in an effort to see out of the window. Others casually glanced over their shoulders but, clearly unimpressed by what they saw, quickly returned to their crosswords, magazines, and hand-held game consoles. The frozen world beneath the windows evidently held little fascination for the majority of passengers aboard TCX flight 34K.

[Insert Figure 5.1 about here]

Figure 5.1 Looking down: the view from the air

Today, it seems, travel only begins once you have arrived and flying is routinely depicted as a means to an end, a tedious inconvenience (if not a downright unpleasant experience) that must be endured in order to reach exotic shores where the real business of travel can begin. Yet back in the 1920s and 1930s, when commercial passenger aviation was in its infancy, flying was considered an exciting travel adventure in its own right and the opportunity to view familiar and foreign lands from the air was considered one of the principal highlights aerial travel afforded.
In their recent overview of the geographies of air travel and mobility, Adey, Budd and Hubbard (2007) comment on the paucity of research into the social and cultural aspects of aeromobility, a term they use to describe the dominance of flying as a normal mode of international travel. Indeed, while much has been written about how different spaces of air travel are created, organized, and controlled at a variety of sites and scales (see Cwerner, Kesselring and Urry 2008; Pascoe 2001), little research has explored the socio-cultural dimensions of air travel or how “looking down” from the windows of an aeroplane led to the emergence of a new form of spatial consciousness.

Taking David Bissell’s (2009) research into the visual experiences of rail travel as a starting point, this chapter shows how hot air balloons and, later, powered heavier-than-air aircraft, facilitated new ways of seeing and visually consuming the landscape. By liberating the human eye from its usual position on earth, flying provided passengers with an elevated and detached bird’s-eye view of the landscape below and this newfound ability to survey the landscape from above revolutionized geographic imagination, cartographic practice, and forms of visual surveillance. Using written accounts of passengers’ experiences, impressions, and stories of travelling by air from the early 1920s to the present day, this chapter uncovers some alternative aspects of aeromobility that until now have remained largely hidden and unexplored.

**Getting Airborne**

While the history of heavier-than-air powered flight only dates back as far as 1903, evidence suggests that humans have been trying to conquer the air since before the middle of the third century BC, when Aristotle began to think seriously about the practicalities of flight (Launay 1967). While gravity proved an insurmountable obstacle for centuries, the idea of flight shaped the development of human civilization since ancient times, with many cultures containing mythical or quasi-religious stories of flying deities carrying people up
into the heavens. As a consequence of our apparent inability to emulate birds, flight acquired magical or supernatural properties, and some winged creatures came to assume deep religious and spiritual significance. In Greek mythology, Icarus and his father Daedalus infamously attempted to escape exile in Crete by attaching feathers to their arms with beeswax. While Daedalus eventually made it to Sicily, Icarus ignored his father’s warnings and flew too close to the sun, melting the wax that held his feathers in place and causing him to plunge to his death. Despite this warning, imitating birds remained popular with early would-be aviators who fashioned “wings” to their arms, launched themselves from high platforms or hillsides, and flapped desperately. Notwithstanding the high failure and alarming death rates of these ventures, aerial experimentation continued. In the 13th century, the English Franciscan philosopher Roger Bacon postulated that, under the right conditions, flying was theoretically possible if air could be made to support a craft in the same way that a boat floats on water, but it was not until the 16th century that Italian inventor Leonardo da Vinci attempted to realize Bacon’s vision.

Though many maintained the pursuit of flight was a foolhardy if not sacrilegious activity, the French social philosopher and writer, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), firmly believed in the possibility of aerial travel. “At first,” he declared, “we will only skim the surface of the earth like young starlings, but soon, emboldened by practice and experience, we will spring into the air with the impetuousness of the eagle, diverting ourselves by watching the childish behaviour of the little men crawling miserably around on the earth below us” (cited in Canby 1962:9).

The 18th century proved to be an important one in the development of aerial transportation. In France, following experiments into the effects of heat on air, brothers Joseph and Etienne Montgolfier deduced that if they enclosed enough hot air inside a container they could get it to float and on 21st November 1783 the first manned ascent in a
tethered hot-air balloon was performed over the Jardins de Tuileries in central Paris. Other proving flights quickly followed and by the early 19th century hot-air ballooning had developed into a fashionable spectator sport, with well-to-do members of the aristocracy and upper classes competing for distance and height records (Kim 2004). The craze was quickly exported to England, where aviators marvelled at the new aerial perspective afforded to them. As Hartwig (1886:496) eulogized, “The discovery of the balloon has opened to man the portals of a new and wonderful world, and enabled him to enjoy scenes of beauty hidden from the gaze of all preceding generations.” In addition to providing an entertaining spectacle, the aerial viewpoint also offered a new dimension to the art of surveillance and warfare and military balloons began to be employed to help gain an advantage over ground-based enemies (see Nesbit 1997).

Yet despite some notable successes with hot-air balloons during the 18th and 19th centuries, heavier-than-air powered flight remained an elusive goal, and its scientific potential was dismissed (Gibbs-Smith 1970). In remarkably defeatist terms, the British Government declared in 1902 that “flight by machines heavier than air is unpractical and insignificant, if not utterly impossible” (cited in Blatner 2003:4). However, on the morning of 17th December 1903, on the windswept sand dunes of Kill Devil Hills, near Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, brothers Orville and Wilbur Wright, two bicycle mechanics from Dayton, Ohio, disproved such claims. Though only airborne for 12 seconds and barely flying 120 feet, Orville Wright accomplished the world’s first recorded powered heavier-than-air flight, a feat that, in his own words, marked “the first in the history of the world in which a machine carrying a man had raised by its own power into the air in full flight, had sailed forward without reduction in speed, and had finally landed at a point as high as that from which it started” (cited in Anderson 2004:2). However, despite photographic evidence of their achievement, the media were initially skeptical of their claims, and political and
scientific establishments dismissed the existence and future potential of human powered flight. Nevertheless, news of the Wright brothers’ flights spread quickly and wealthy members of the European aristocracy were soon striving to emulate their success (Walters 1979).

After the end of the First World War a number of demobbed pilots began buying up surplus aircraft and organizing themselves into airlines to begin operating on a commercial basis. However, despite the enthusiasm of a few entrepreneurs, the British Government did not see the potential for civil aviation, and civilian flying was not authorized until 1919. On the 25th of August of that year, an aircraft belonging to the British company Air Transport and Travel (AT&T) left Hounslow Aerodrome near London for Paris Le Bourget on what was the world’s first scheduled international passenger service (Davies 1964). Vigorous cross-Channel competition began in earnest later that year and, in a bid to stress aviation’s utility to the development, maintenance, and policing of the British Empire, many daring aeronautical events were staged for public consumption. In 1919, Sir Ross Smith flew from London to Australia, while Sir Alan Cobham undertook long-distance surveying and publicity flights to Africa and Asia to “draw attention to the aeroplane as a reliable and practical means of progression” (Cobham 1925:297). One of the most striking aspects of flight was the views that were afforded through the windows, with pilots and passengers alike enthusing about the practice of “looking down” from an aircraft speeding through the sky at the landscapes and cloudscapes below.

A New Visual World

It is a wonderful world which you see, not from motor-cars or trains, or from the decks of liners, but from…an aeroplane flying thousands of feet above land and sea (Olley 1934:217).
The development of hot-air balloons and, later, powered heavier-than-air flight, endowed aerial travellers with a new perspective of the planet and offered new ways of becoming and being mobile (McCormack 2009). Not only did balloons and aircraft propel people into the atmosphere, they enabled them to see the ground from a perspective hitherto enjoyed only by the Gods and the birds (Lee 1920; Mittelholzer 1925; Saint-Exupery 1939; Vidler 2000). For American journalist Lowell Thomas (1928:3), flying provided “the weird sensation that I was a spectator from another planet, astride a flying meteor, viewing the earth.” The development of regular passenger services in the 1920s enabled ever-growing numbers of ordinary people to experience the aerial view and, as aircraft only flew at a few thousand feet above the ground, experience a viewpoint that is rarely encountered today. Pilots reported that passengers were fascinated by the views that could be obtained and many spent entire journeys gazing out of the windows at the clouds and the passing of the fleeting landscape below (Olley 1934).

We entered the clouds, pushing up through a soft ceiling that broke away before us…now and then the earth came back to us like the base of a well through the soft tufa of the clouds…[Ultimately] the clouds thinned, grew lumpy and finally broke up, throwing no more than occasional patches of opacity beneath us, like maps of Prussian blue…We were level with the topmost peaks of the Andes, that stretched away from us, thousands of kilometres, to the equator (Morand 1932:237).

In an effort to satisfy public demand for tales of aerial voyages and adventures, as well as stimulate public interest in aeronautical activity, a number of pioneering pilots and early air travellers took to documenting and publishing their experiences of flight. Some famous aviators, including Amelia Earhart (1897-1937), Antoine du Saint-Exupery (1900-1944), Alan Cobham (1894-1973), and Anne Morrow Lindbergh (1906-2001), were particularly alert to the ways in which flying opened up a new world of sensory and aesthetic experience and wrote extensively about their aerial voyages (Cobham 1926a, 1926b, 1928;
Earhart 1928; Lindbergh 1935; Saint-Exupery 1939). Many early passengers also chose to document their impressions of this new form of aerial mobility and their writings created a new literary genre of the interwar “flying book.”

While individual writers naturally differed in their opinions and descriptions of this new mode of transportation (with pilots typically describing the technical aspects of flight while passengers often employed the evocative language and imagery of geographic exploration to convey the feelings of wonder, excitement, and fear that flying invariably generated), most agreed that the earth looked very different when seen from above (see Wohl 2005). For those not able to experience flight for themselves, aviation magazines helped popularize a particular set of aerial scenes by publishing detailed descriptions of the sights that could be seen from aircraft (Flight 1921). This new aerial perspective facilitated a mode of representation that unified the disparate elements of landscape, presenting the earth below as a totality that could easily be comprehended and ordered. In 19th century Paris, residents who were brave and wealthy enough to take a balloon flight over the metropolis, “saw the culturally disparate arrondissements…meld into one city” (London 2007:21), while in England a century later, the novelist Alan Sillitoe commented on how his experiences of flying over Nottingham revolutionized his perception of his hometown by highlighting his place within the wider city (see Daniels and Rycroft 1993).

Being airborne and floating above the earth was at once both liberating and frightening and generated a new feeling of “vertigousness” that was quite distinct from the experience of viewing the earth from other tall platforms (McCormack 2009). To their surprise, passengers discovered that feelings of dizziness or vertigo were largely absent when travelling by air. “It was curious,” remarked Mary Duchess of Bedford after one of her early flights, that “though I have not a good head” for looking down precipices…I experienced no discomfort whatever in this respect and could look over the edge of my
machine from the first” (cited in Kennedy 1983:101). Many early aeronauts, once they had plucked up the courage to look over the side, took time to reflect on the panoramas that were spread before them and the experience of viewing the earth from above. Vincent Lunardi, writing about a hot-air balloon flight over London, England, in 1784, remarked upon the fact that, in the air, “everything wears a new appearance and has a new effect” (cited in Kennedy 1983:14) and this novel aerial perspective, and the visual impressions it offered, was clearly a source of great wonder, particularly at night:

Within a few minutes of leaving the ground we were rewarded with one of the finest spectacles ever seen by the airman. London’s 150 square miles were spread westwards before our eyes as we crossed the Thames not far from Greenwich, and gazed at the vast panorama. A crescent moon was not powerful enough to dim the stars, and we seemed to be poised in the centre of a cast illuminated globe whose dark sides were frosted with silver and gold, the roof glittering with the constellations seen, at our height of 2000ft, as they never appear to the eyes of the Londoner. Below us lay the millions of lamps patterning the great city, the wide, well-lit highways, such as Oxford Street, conspicuous, and the dark band of the river bracelet [sic] by the lights of bridges (Turner 1927: 16).

While balloons offered a relatively safe and sedate mode of flight, the development of heavier-than-air powered aircraft at the beginning of the twentieth century transformed practices and experiences of aerial mobility by opening up a new world of speed and sensory experience. Whereas the balloon “as it floats gently along at medium height and speed…presents to the eye of its occupant a slow sequence of impressions, each clear, separate, and steady,” the aeroplane, “moving faster than the birds and the winds, forces the airman [sic] to adapt himself to a new way of seeing…The eye has to habituate itself to receiving visual impressions at an enormously accelerated pace” (Supf 1933:90).

Some travellers were evidently overwhelmed and unsettled by both the speed with which new impressions crowded upon their mind and the vast open spaces they
encountered. Writing about an aerial voyage around Latin America in the 1930s, Childers (1937:274) ruminated on the early effects of time-space compression, commenting that in the air “you travel so fast...that you can’t keep up emotionally, you are always behind yourself” and that “you need time between places...during which you can free yourself emotionally from one place and get ready for the next.” For other travellers, it was not the question of time but the vastness of the atmosphere that caused anxiety; “[F]rom the air you see...spaces that simply terrify you; you are literally frightened at the awful immensity of it all. It is one of the most terrifying things in the world—this immensity, this spaciousness, this seeming infinity” (Brittain 1933:155). From a height of several thousand feet, pilots and passengers could see the earth stretching away to the horizon in every direction: “The air was very clear, and from my height [8000 feet] I could see for miles; the view was rather awe-inspiring, as on both sides stretches the desert, extending on the east to the Red Sea, and on the west to the Sahara” (Samson 1931:18). Wolfgang Langewiesche (1954) was not the only commentator to remark that previously insurmountable geographical barriers could now be overflown with ease:

Your earthly winged express makes nothing of ordinary earthly barriers. They simply do not exist for those who fly; the aeroplane passes with just as great a facility and speed above the water as it does above the land and, as you glance down on it from your air saloon window, that notorious [English] Channel, terror still of sea travellers, looks, small, remote, almost insignificant (Harper 1930:174-175).

While some travellers undoubtedly found such matters unsettling, others seemed positively exhilarated by the freedom and emancipation that flight afforded. For the first time, distances that on earth would have taken weeks or months to traverse could be surveyed “with an infinitesimal movement of the eye” (de Botton 2002:41). As one shrewd American airline passenger on an early flight enthused, “You can see more of England in a
day from the saloon of an air express than you can in a year from a train or a car” (cited in Harper 1930: 163).

Just as the introduction of horse-drawn carriages, trains and cars had revolutionized the experience of travel by enabling passengers to catch fleeting glimpses of the landscape speeding past outside their vehicles, aircraft represented the latest platform from which the earth could be visually experienced and consumed. Unlike rail travel, which had been likened to sitting inside a projectile that was hurtling through the countryside (see Schivelbusch 1979), the absence of objects near at hand and the distance from the ground meant that airline passengers had little sensation of speed or movement and could “survey the country spread out below in a spirit of detachment from earthly worries” (Thomson 1927:129). As pilot Charles Samson (1931:159) remarked, though “you are hurtling along at over a hundred miles an hour, you have ample time to see and appreciate the ever-changing scenery,” for when flying, “there is nothing to distract you. No objects near at hand flash past your windows, as is the case when you are on a train. There is none of the dust or turmoil of present-day road traffic. You can sit up there, serene and watchful, studying the world below you as you have never studied it before” (Harper 1930:163).

While some thought that the ability to survey the earth from the air would make amateur geographers, cultural historians, and even archaeologists out of even the most uninformed of passengers, reading the landscape from the air evidently required education and the development of a new visual vocabulary. Even Le Corbusier, flying over the Atlas Mountains in 1935, remarked that he “did not feel attuned to the enjoyment of those spectacles from above” on account of the fact he had not yet learnt to “read” the landscape from the air (1935:24) and, to that end, air writers went to great lengths to describe what they could see through the window. For Langewiesche (1954:178), aircraft
provided a more intimate perspective of a country by enabling passengers to see not just its famous landmarks and “glamour landscapes,” but ordinary or everyday spaces far removed from major cities and tourist attractions.

Window Seats

The prospect of journeying beyond national frontiers and flying over foreign countries was particularly seductive and many early air writers commented on the strange appearance of different countries from the air. While England resembled a patchwork or a jigsaw puzzle of hedgerows, fields, and lanes, the different system of cultivation on the French side was very marked from the air. There was an “absence of hedges, cattle, and the little round ponds which are such a conspicuous feature in English aerial travel” (cited in Kennedy 1983:103) and the “twisting lanes commonly found in England” were replaced by “straight, military, popular-lined roads” (Brittain 1933:71). The ability to see places from above enabled passengers to gain a sense of proportion and appreciate the relationships between human settlement and topography. Unlike the view from a railway carriage, which was often obstructed by cuttings, tunnels, trees, or buildings alongside the track, aircraft offered a much broader horizon and some travellers considered flying eminently preferable to conventional surface forms of transport as a consequence:

Flying is so much faster, and there are so many more and so much wider opportunities of really seeing and appreciating the countries and places across which one passes…When one travels on land or even by water, it is rare to get a full and comprehensive view of any place…Approach a strange city from the air and, unless it be as vast a place as London, it is seen at once complete in its natural setting in all its native beauty or its man-made ugliness. Then later…its details can be studied from the ground with a proper sense of the place each fills in the general scheme (Sassoon 1929: 47).

While the majority of passengers embraced this new “God-like” view and commented that altitude lent an aesthetically pleasing appearance to even the most
mundane of landscapes (Finch 1938; Olley 1934), Holt Thomas, writing in 1920, remarked that, “with an aeroplane you are moving generally too fast, and too high, to feel that indolent yet observant pleasure which is one of the joys of a motor-tour through beautiful country” and concluded that:

aeroplane flying is rather a dull business. You are removed entirely from the life and incident of earth-bound folk. The traffic and distractions of a main roadway, the ever-changing vista, are absent when you fly in an aeroplane. You just go up and up until the land below becomes like a huge flat map; and then you whirl on, the map-like stretch of earth slowly changing beneath you, and nothing around you but empty air...The ordinary countryside, when seen from an aeroplane, is just like the coloured chalk-board; and...the general colour scheme is rather drab and neutral. The beautiful spots you cannot see properly...[for] height seems to roll the country flat. You cannot tell the valley from the hillside; and those beautiful slopes which charm the eye when you view them from terra firma might just as well not exist at all when your vantage point is several thousand feet aloft. These facts...conspire to make a journey by air, when once the first novelty has worn off, a matter of business expediency rather than a “joy-ride” (Holt Thomas 1920:89-90).

However, such views were by no means universal and passengers commented on how even apparently mundane places, when viewed from above, took on a fresh appearance. As early as 1929, Sir Phillip Sassoon (1929:47) had declared his belief that “For sheer sightseeing nothing could rival flying,” while aviation journalist Harry Harper enthused that “though the delights of aerial travel are many...there is assuredly none greater than to sit comfortably at the window of an air express and, from one’s unique position thousands of feet aloft, watch the passage below you of an ever-changing panorama of land and sea” (Harper 1930:163).

As the popularity of air travel as a mode of transportation grew and the network of air services expanded during the 1920s and 1930s, so too did passengers’ desires to see some of the great sights of continental Europe, including the Grand Palace in Brussels, the
Cathedrals of Abbeville, Beauvais and Cologne, and the Eiffel Tower, from the air. In an effort to satisfy growing public demand for flightseeing trips, as well as to help popularize passenger aviation, Britain’s Imperial Airways began operating a series of afternoon Tea Flights over London in the mid-1930s. In exchange for two guineas, passengers were flown over the capital’s major landmarks, including Buckingham Palace, Trafalgar Square, and London Bridge, while a uniformed steward served afternoon tea and pointed out places of interest through the window. Here, the point of travel was not to get from A to B but about the aerial views that could be obtained from the air. Similar trips were operated over points of interest in other countries. In the United States, for example, short flightseeing trips or aerial joyrides were frequently performed over major cities, while in Africa dedicated aerial safaris or “Game Flights” enabled tourists to track and view dangerous animals including lion, rhino, hippopotamus, and elephant, from the relative safety of the air. On long-distance flights too, the visual scene provided a welcome distraction from the monotony of long distance travel and pilots often deviated from their intended route or flew at a lower altitude to give passengers the best possible view and shared advice with their colleagues on the best way to approach particular landmarks from the air (Olley 1934; Samson 1931).

In order to facilitate the recognition of landscape features that were deemed interesting or culturally significant, Britain’s Imperial Airways began publishing route companions to their international services in the mid 1920s. These “aerial guidebooks,” which included the 30-page Through Africa by the Empire Flying Boat typically contained a map of the air route together with photographs and written explanations of the history, form, and function of key sights that could be observed during the journey (see overleaf an extract of the Imperial Airways’ guide to the Cairo-Cape Town Air Route, 1934-35).
Cairo and the Pyramids

From Cairo you fly due south and follow closely the Valley of the Nile. You may see beneath you to the west the Giza pyramids, the largest of which (Cheops) is over 500 feet in height; then further south the ancient step pyramid of Sakara, built some 5000 years ago by King Zoser…

Upon reading the commentary at the appropriate point in the journey, the passenger was expected to look out of the window, see the place to which the text referred and understand what it was they were seeing. Encouraging passengers to search for key sites/sights in this way helped mitigate against boredom on long-distance flights and the individual landscape features themselves acted as important markers of geographical and temporal position, helping passengers to situate themselves in space and chart their progress through time towards their destination (see Bissell 2009 for a detailed discussion of “windowgazing” from railway carriages and Edensor and Holloway 2008 on the visualization of particular sights during a coach tour).

The popularity of these guides among passengers encouraged other airlines to follow Imperial’s lead and, by the mid-1930’s, passengers on KLM’s prestigious Amsterdam-Batavia service were presented with a 100-page route companion Wings Across Continents (Rusman 1935). Such guides were “well illustrated and described the attractions of the route in considerable detail. There were maps of the towns chosen for overnight stops and the text was obviously intended to interest intelligent, educated people” (Hudson and Pettifer 1979:70).

This new practice of looking down, informed in no small part by the airline’s carefully scripted cartographic, pictorial, and written commentaries about the physical and cultural landscape below, helped reinforce notions of cultural superiority, with Europe’s “modern” aerodromes, “outstandingly geometrical” fortifications, and “magnificent” palaces juxtaposed against Africa’s “vast” swamps, her “dark” jungles, “ancient” tombs,
“stampeding game,” and “parched” plains. The pleasure passengers derived from viewing the earth from the air was also intimately connected to feelings of power, as looking down from an aircraft window emphasized both the literal elevation and the (perceived) superiority of passengers over those they overflew. “The view from a decent altitude,” declared Ernest Gann in the mid-1930s, “only contributes to an undeniable yet strangely pleasant sense of being somewhat superior to the rest of mankind” (Gann 1976:103). The “rest of mankind” in this context surely being everyone who could not (for whatever reason) access air travel.

In the context of Britain’s colonial project, the “view from above” was a prized asset that enabled high-ranking military officials and administrators to survey the land and peoples under their command and suppress revolts against imperial authority (Samson 1931). Moreover, the human eye, liberated from its usual viewpoint on earth, could, for the first time, comprehend and order land and societies that had appeared too complex from the ground, which led to an intensification of colonialism, economic globalization, and forms of cultural dependence. The British Government, in particular, framed flying as an educational and cultural experience that promoted spiritual well-being and provided intellectual stimulation. “Air travel,” declared Sir Philip Sassoon in the mid-1920s, “is the most enjoyable way of seeing the world. That we can see the Pyramids, Palestine, the Nile, the Jordan, the Tigris, and walk the streets of Baghdad in one day is one of the wonders of our civilization that modern speed in travel has brought us…on an Imperial air route not an hour passes which does not bring something new or strange, beautiful or intriguing to our notice” (cited in Salt 1930:220-221). Such experiences of “strange” foreign lands, with their exotic people, sights, and customs, helped alter British perceptions of “Self” and “Other,” making the sky an arena of unusual spectacle and exotic encounter, as well as mobility.
To enable passengers to take full advantage of their elevation, Imperial Airways installed promenade decks in their long-haul Empire flying boats and provided binoculars to encourage passengers to look out of the window at the landscape below (see Lovegrove 2000). Significantly, however, a number of countries disliked the idea that geopolitically sensitive military or naval installations could be seen and photographed from the air, and they threatened to revoke over-flying rights unless passengers’ cameras were confiscated and pilots adhered to predefined routes. On KLM’s Jakarta-Amsterdam flights in the mid 1930s, for example, all cameras were impounded at Singapore and only returned upon arrival at Amsterdam’s Schiphol airport (Hudson and Pettifer 1979).

Despite these restrictions, the promenade deck was reportedly very popular with passengers as it enabled them to stretch their legs, talk to fellow travellers, and (weather permitting) admire the unfolding aerial panorama through the large windows (Cassidy 1996). One stewardess recalled, “People would gather on the promenade deck as we flew over Africa to watch the animals below…We cruised at about seven hundred feet…and the clear air above the desert meant you had a wonderful view” (cited in Quinn 2003:82 and 85). Then, as now, the opportunity to see game was highly prized, and the Empire Air Route to South Africa was considered an exciting aerial safari. Far from being considered “dead time” between departure and arrival, the flight itself was full of incident and spectacle.

Just beneath us the veld seems alive…One spies ostriches, foxes, hyenas, and innumerable small animals…Scarcely a minute passes without game appearing on one side or the other. “Rhinos!” shouts a voice suddenly…There are three of the monsters charging through the bush…herds of giraffe are everywhere (cited in Olley 1934:214).

For many passengers, flying represented more than just a modern mode of transport; it was an exciting visceral experience that enabled them to view vast swathes of
the earth without requiring them to submit to the dangers of overland travel. Aircraft enabled passengers to enjoy a view that was of the crowd but not among the crowd, connected yet suitably distanced from the dangers, contamination, and unpleasantness of the ground below (cf. Urry 2000).

I never weary of looking at the Pyramids from the air, and I always think that no one can really appreciate the grandeur of the old-time scenic effect unless this view-point is experienced. From the air you are able to blank out the objects of modern civilisation, and gaze on the old structures unspoiled by a modern foreground; in addition you are not disturbed by the constant horde of posturing guides, camelmen, donkey boys [sic] and other touts who at times are a perfect menace (Samson 1931:7-8).

The airplane not only enabled passengers to see places of interest from an entirely new perspective, but the unique aerial panorama also offered the potential of discovering ancient sites that were entirely unknown to western archaeologists (Deuel 1969; Thomson 1927). Thanks to the aeroplane, “vast stretches of country never yet mapped are yielding up their secrets, while other parts of the globe about which we thought we knew everything are being rediscovered.” (Brittain 1933:237). From the air, the “once throbbing provincial frontiers of the Roman Empire” emerge from under the sand and “sprawling cities…of Asiatic potentates file before the aerial viewer in neat battalions of endless walls, broad avenues, temples, palaces, and blocks of houses” (Deuel 1969:252). Today, there are few (if any) regions of the world that have not been viewed or extensively photographed from the air, but for the aerial traveller of the 1920s and 1930s, aviation offered an enticing glimpse into unknown foreign lands and civilizations.

**Aerial Views in the Jet Age**

Immediately after the Second World War, “progressive experts,” including geographers, hoped that increased flying experience “would reorder ordinary people’s perceptions of the world and their place in it” (Daniels and Rycroft 1993:401). By the late 1950s,
technological innovations in propulsion, material science, and avionics, enabled aircraft to fly further, faster, longer, and higher than ever before. This combination of increased velocity and altitude transformed air travel in ways that would have been unimaginable to the inter war traveller. The introduction of new jet-powered aircraft, including the Comet, the Caravelle, and the Boeing 707, together with changes in commercial enterprise and the regulatory environment, meant that a journey by air was no longer a once-in-a-lifetime event limited to the very rich. Post-war peace and increasing economic prosperity created an environment in which more people could afford to fly and, as a result, air travel became a relatively commonplace activity for a growing segment of western society.

The rapidly expanding network of long-haul, high-altitude jet-powered air services reduced travel times, lessened some of the dangers associated with early flight, and facilitated new ways of seeing the earth. In order to help passengers understand and interpret the view from several miles aloft, a number of travellers’ companion guides to these new high-altitude air routes were published (see, for example, Fosburgh 1954; Dicun 2003). British Overseas Airways Corporation, under the direction of their Chief Photographic Officer, produced a pictorial record of a selection of air routes served by Comet jetliners to help educate their passengers about the landscape below. “The Comet,” it was reported, “gives us a new view of the world we live in”, one which enables the air traveller to “survey the country more broadly and deeply than is possible in any other way” and see “patterns that cannot be perceived by the crawlers over the earth’s surface” (Hensser 1953:31). Such patterns were immediately evident to philosopher Alain de Botton (2002:41), who commented that altitude “lends order and logic to the landscape…roads curve to avoid hills, rivers trace paths to lakes, pylons lead from power stations to towns, streets that from earth seemed laid out without thought emerge as well-planned grids.”
While *Comet Highway* and related publications painted evocative pictures of the experience of jet flight, Boorstin (1987:94 cited in Larsen 2001:85) lamented the fact that jet aircraft fly “too high to observe landmark or seamark” which results in “nothing to see at all...[because] the airplane robbed me of the landscape.” Indeed, as the eye of the observer was drawn ever further away from the land it observed, aerial skylines of space replaced terrestrial landscapes of place. For Concorde passengers, cruising at an altitude of 50,000ft and higher, the curvature of the Earth was far more apparent than the topography of the terrain several miles below (Leney and Burney 1990).

In response to the belief that the visual experience of flying and seeing the earth from the air was being impoverished by the introduction of high-capacity jet aircraft in which only a minority of travellers had access to a window, a number of patents were filed during the 1960s and 1970s for dedicated sightseeing aircraft. These machines were designed with glass floors, panoramic observation domes, and/or huge windows to offer unrestricted views of the ground below. However, such innovations never enjoyed widespread use as conventional fixed-wing aircraft, helicopters, balloons, and airships proved capable (and cheaper) alternatives. While commercial airlines realised that they could never replicate the visual experience offered by these ‘once in a lifetime’ flightseeing excursions on normal revenue services, a number of carriers have nevertheless incorporated exterior-view cameras and moving digital map displays into their in-flight entertainment systems to offer passengers a tantalising glimpse of the world below (see Alamdari 1999).

**Conclusion**

As aircraft technology developed during the 20th century, new modes of visual perception emerged that not only transformed spatial consciousness, cartographic practice, and the conduct of modern warfare, but created distinctly new experiences of becoming and being
mobile. For William Siddall (1987), such developments were responsible for progressively diminishing the experience of travel. Certainly, new technological innovations have meant flying has become easier and safer to the point where it could be argued that it provides little by way of substance or pleasure. Such sentiments were expressed by Marshall McLuhan in 1964 when he declared that the jet-age airline passenger “will begin to travel only after he [sic lands” (1964:95).

While the visual experience of seeing the earth from above is often considered to be an axiomatic part of modern air travel, this chapter has shown how the sensual or embodied experiences of aeromobility are profoundly shaped by the cultural frames that inform it. Whereas in the 1930s many people wanted to fly simply to experience the views that could be obtained, and airlines operated special sightseeing flights and encouraged passengers to look out of the window, modern discourses of commercial aviation portray flying as a boring and uncomfortable “dead time” between departure and arrival, with nothing to see or do. Indeed, if the reaction of the passengers aboard TCX34K to the announcement about the wonderful views that could be obtained through the windows is in any way representative of the aeromobile population at large, it would appear that, for many, the “flights of fancy” offered by in-flight entertainment systems, personal music devices, and portable gaming consoles are more interesting than the materiality of a flight itself. This is not to say that the visual experience of flying represents an unimportant dimension of a journey for some (see Dicum 2003), but to emphasize that the sensual and embodied experience of flying is, to a significant and hitherto unappreciated degree, deeply defined by dominant cultural discourses of what it means to become and be mobile.
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