
Ferdinand, S.

DOI
10.1080/1472586X.2014.887320

Publication date
2015

Published in
Visual Studies

Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):
https://doi.org/10.1080/1472586X.2014.887320

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

UvA-DARE is a service provided by the library of the University of Amsterdam (https://dare.uva.nl)

Download date: 15 Oct 2023
Seeing from above: The aerial view in visual culture

Simon Ferdinand

Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis and Centre for Globalisation Studies

Published online: 24 Mar 2014.

To cite this article: Simon Ferdinand (2014): Seeing from above: The aerial view in visual culture, Visual Studies, DOI: 10.1080/1472586X.2014.887320

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1472586X.2014.887320

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE
Review

Seeing from above: The aerial view in visual culture
edited by Mark Dorrian and Frédéric Pousin
Reviewed by Simon Ferdinand, Amsterdam School for
Cultural Analysis and Centre for Globalisation Studies

A collection of 16 extraordinarily rich essays by
specialist authors, Seeing from Above explores the
rhetorical complexity, cultural significance and various
instrumentalities of aerial visuality as it has spread and
ramified throughout visual culture at large. Each of the
contributions, which were originally delivered in the
context of a conference and other seminars held at the
universities of Edinburgh and Paris, unpacks one figure
or moment in a long cultural history of the aerial view.

The collection ranges between its many discrete episodes
without submitting them to any one constraining
perspective, allowing each object to be thought on its
own terms. Freed from the burden of theoretical
generalisation, the readings teem with indelible detail
and beautiful figures. One flick might yield a bizarre
sketch of a tortoise flying over the bay of Venice, which
Marina Warner holds to symbolise the roving graphic
imagination of the sixteenth-century Danish polymath
Melchior Lorck who made it, or a screamingly bold
Malevich stage design, whose heights of abstraction and
transcendence Christina Lodder presents as being
infused by the ‘visual paradigm’ of aerial photography
(109). The collection also reflects the diversity of the
forms that have been used to imagine and represent the
view from above, broaching not only cartography, aerial
(including satellite) photography, the city prospect, relief
model and internet mash-up but also the unexpected
media of abstract painting, choreography, written
accounts, cinema, piled rubble and photomontage.
Although the length and exploratory scope of the essays
is sometimes rather clipped (perhaps betraying their
origins in conference proceedings), the scholarship is
constantly impressive.

Beneath these apparently deeply divergent and
sometimes eccentric topics, the selection of essays
invited and included here does suggest some guiding
ideas. For the most part, the collection examines the
aerial view in modern visual culture. Indeed, if the many
insights and analyses advanced by its 16 authors could be
concentrated into a single proposition, it might be
that posed by the editors Mark Dorrian and Frédéric
Pousin in their introduction to the book, namely that
‘[t]he aerial, with all the upheavals it engendered
and conquests it permitted, is central to the modern
imagination and, indeed, might even be claimed to be its
elephantic visual form’ (1). Although Dorrian and
Pousin subsequently move to temper this emphasis on
modernity by rightly stressing that the achievement of
human flight is but one moment in a much longer
history of picturing and imagining the aerial, half of the
case studies developed in the book turn centrally on
modern flying technologies, whilst only two historically
precede them. Several contributors do situate and reflect
on moments of modernity in aerial visuality and make
fleeting comparisons across the temporal divide. Stephen
Bann, for instance, suggests that the balloonist Nadar
crossed ‘a cognitive threshold’, developing ‘a new,
precise mode of seeing’ (86) as against traditional,
fictional imaginings of aerial visuality whose
‘connotations inevitably extended to the sphere of
religion and statecraft’ (83). Micheal Bury’s comparative
essay stages a quarrel between ancient and modern
rhetorical emphases in differing sixteenth-century
prospect prints of Rome. Overall, however, Seeing from
Above proceeds from the modernity of the aerial view,
and the volume could be placed as a set of studies that
augment important work on the dialectics of modern
technology, culture and experience – in the vein, say, of
a Stephen Kern. Potential questions regarding the
place and significance of conceptions of aerial visuality in
pre- or non-modern cultures, on the other hand, are
left largely untouched.

In other respects, the collection does much to complicate
and contravene received ideas that have come to rather
confine thinking about the aerial view. Critical writing
on the topic often moves to position visuality from
above too completely as a ‘conquering gaze’ – the
dismembered and distanced viewpoint attributed to
masculinist imperial subjects of instrumental reason,
from which urban plans might be imposed, bombs
dispensed or the steel cage of rationality projected onto
the terrain below. For representatives of this line of
thought, we might turn to de Certeau’s (1994)
elaboration of the ‘scopic drive’ towards control from
atop of the World Trade Centre, Paul Virilio’s (1989) work on the imbrication of visual and warfare technologies or even William Blake’s (1979) unforgettable Ancient of Days, in which Urzión splits the clouds to take the measure of the earth with a great compass.

This general construal of the aerial view is shown to be something of a straw man or reduction in the close readings of its material culture found in Seeing from Above. That is not to say that its authors neglect the clear connections that link the ‘zenithal gaze’ of the cartographer or pilot to state legibility, violence and control, or hold back from deflating protestations of disembodied objectivity where they find them in accounts or pictures of aerial vision. Indeed, the book has as its cover a sinister photograph taken from a Luftwaffe reconnaissance plane in 1944, which shows the aircraft’s shadow coursing over Warsaw on the eve of its final bombardment. This photograph, along with several others, is the object of a sophisticated essay by Ella Chmielewska, for whom aeronautical visibility can function as ‘both the witness and instrument of destruction’ (245). Whilst the collection thus acknowledges and extends established references to distance, mastery and reification in thinking about vision from above, it also introduces several countervailing themes and gestures. Here we might mention Oliver Lugon’s contribution, which presents the airborne photography of Swiss aviator Walter Mittelholzer as a complex practice in which tendencies towards depersonalised scientific abstraction coexisted with embodied and narrative dimensions – ‘photography as an art of the body’ (156). Similarly, co-editor Pousin demonstrates that, even in the hard case of post-war French urbanism, aerial photography cannot be reduced to an instrument of what, following James Scott (1998), we might call ‘authoritarian high modernist’ planning. Pousin shows how Ito Josue’s more humanist ‘aesthetic of familiarity’ served to position the new town of Firminy-Vert as a ‘positive counterpoint’ to the oppressive uniformity of wider modernist development (273 and 259). The cumulative result is a complicated corpus of writings that balance the imperiousness often ascribed to the aerial view with its ludic, artistic and experiential dimensions.

The editors are clear that this is not a synoptic theoretically elaborated cultural history of the aerial view. Rather, it is an ‘episodic’ corpus of material and sketching of pathways to stimulate, complicate and enrich that larger project (10). As such, the collection stands as an exciting resource, whose value should be ratified by future research.

REFERENCES


© 2014 Simon Ferdinand

http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1472586X.2014.887320