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[Review of: M. Dorrian, F. Pousin (2013) Seeing from above: the aerial view in visual culture]

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DOI

[10.1080/1472586X.2014.887320](https://doi.org/10.1080/1472586X.2014.887320)

Publication date

2015

Published in

Visual Studies

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Ferdinand, S. (2015). [Review of: M. Dorrian, F. Pousin (2013) Seeing from above: the aerial view in visual culture]. *Visual Studies*, 30(1), 112-113.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1472586X.2014.887320>

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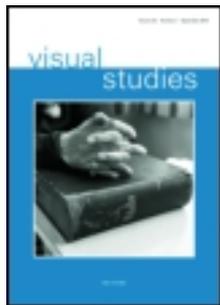
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On: 26 March 2014, At: 19:39

Publisher: Routledge

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Visual Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rvst20>

Seeing from above: The aerial view in visual culture

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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](https://doi.org/10.1080/1472586X.2014.887320)

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

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Review

Seeing from above: The aerial view in visual culture

edited by Mark Dorrian and Frédéric Pousin

London: I.B. Tauris, 2013, 336 pages

ISBN: 978-1-78076-461-0 (paperback) Price: £16.99

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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 emblematic 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 disembodied 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 Josué'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.

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