



Early Popular Visual Culture

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Aeroscotics: media of the Bird's-Eye View

by Patrick Ellis, Oakland, CA, University of California Press, 2021, 192 pp.
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BOOK REVIEW

Aeroscopics: media of the Bird's-Eye View, by Patrick Ellis, Oakland, CA, University of California Press, 2021, 192 pp. £27.00 (paperback), ISBN 9780520355491

The early history of the bird's-eye is the focus of Patrick Ellis' *Aeroscopics: Media of the Bird's Eye-View*, a lively exploration of the media of aerial vision. Ellis' emphasis is firmly on reception, the period experience of spectating publics and their bi-directional relationship with the entertainments that excited and fed off their curiosity and delight. His focus on reception is complementary yet opposite to the media archaeology espoused by Kittler; and allows for a more complex and interpretive narrative of media in its formative phases. This volume is a worthy companion to the survey volumes of early visual media (Oettermann 1997; Huhtamo 2013). Ellis limits his scope to aerial spectatorship in Europe and North America across a period roughly constant with Hobsbawm's long nineteenth century (1775–1914). This timeframe roughly opens with the ludic absorption of hot-air-balloonists in novel views of the earth's surface and closes as the first world war finds new uses for heavier-than-air flight.

Ellis' centring of the reception of *aeroscopic media* has two implications. Firstly, it permits the exploration of formation of social practices of spectatorship. Secondly and consequently, it liberates aerial spectatorship and its emergent media and platforms (the panorama and the camera obscura for example) from teleology; within scholarship the weaponizing of the aerial view as an authoritarian instrument of domination and surveillance. Instead, Ellis traces the interface between the aerial view and cartography, a productive comparison of widely available and popular horizons of spatial representation.

Chapter One, *The Panoramic Altitude* launches this formative discussion of the bird's-eye view. Ellis claims that the immersive visual apparatuses of the panorama and the camera obscura trained their audiences in the apprehension of detail within a whole, in a practice of spectatorship attentive to scale. He argues that seeing their surroundings in miniature prompts an ability of citizens to visualise themselves in the city (48). This investment in the visual is formative in the fascination of the aerial view.

Chapter Two introduces the *panstereorama*, a period neologism for large-scale models of cities, typically Paris, London, Rome, that toured as popular entertainments in the early eighteenth century. Ellis identifies the 'stereo' inserted in pan/orama as an index of the materiality and objecthood of the models, foregrounding the displacement of the optical illusion of the panorama by the scalar illusion of the model. In a linkage with spectatorial practice of the balloonist, visitors to *panstereoramas* could use small mounted telescopes to see the model in detail, like Ellis' focus on the inhabitation of the publics experience of aerial view media as a domain of embodied, scopic choices is made clear.

Such opportunities for spectatorial agency could not be without downsides however, and Chapter Three, *Vertigo Effects*, duly surveys the 'media pathologies' incurred by these new scopic opportunities. Ellis traces the health concerns attributed to railway travel as a moving platform for spectatorship and the intrinsic visual kinesis of cinema; inducing ailments that prefigured those arising from ballooning and heavier-than-air flight. The association between the aerial view and intoxication is interestingly drawn; this is a history of aviation as an embodied practice of aerial spectatorship.

Chapter Four explores the emblematic *Aeroscope* observation ride, debuting at the Pan-American World Fair in San Francisco in 1915. An engineering marvel featuring a viewing platform attached to a crane-like arm, the ride lifted 120 spectators 265 feet aloft along a rising, helical trajectory to offer views across the city and bay. Ellis sifts the public tokens and documentation of this entertainment, and interestingly falls short. He frames this ride as a test case of the limits of popular spectatorship; the scopic experience of this observation platform was so unlike those encountered before, it pushed through the boundaries of the acceptable in aerial visibility. ‘The whole contrivance revolves; the sensation of the passengers [is] described much like that of ascending and enormous “spiral stairway” that has a constantly narrowing diameter as the top is approached’, according to the magazine *Popular Mechanics*; As Ellis comments; this ‘aeroscope did not offer a clarifying perspective, . . . but a hermeneutic challenge’ (101).

The *aeroscopic* is brought back to earth in Chapter Five, a consideration of the upturned gaze as aviation began to spread its wings across the west. Aircraft were a surprise sight in the sky, ‘like a bolt from the blue’ in the words of a period writer (119). For this short period, the sky is repurposed as a screen – waiting to be populated by aircraft . . . and formalised as entertainment in the airshow and aviation spectacular. Ellis reminds us that over the *longue durée*, the term *medium* was associated with the *air*. The Montgolfiers’ first ascent in a hot-air balloon in 1783 was accompanied with fireworks; flight has always been presented as a spectacle and entertainment (121).

Aeroscopic: Media of the Bird’s-Eye View is an elegantly written, deftly structured and important contribution to visual studies. The aerial perspective on our surroundings was of widespread and lively public interest for a century before the first world war as Ellis’ research and discussion make clear. If it is indeed the case that a disenchantment with aerial vision as an instrument of power projection set in with the advent of war – Ellis recovers the original excitement of this visibility in its enactment of absorption and curiosity. In a contemporary moment as *aeroscopic* moving images of conflict landscapes are widely shared on social media platforms, this book is timely and relevant.

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