

Aerial Life: Spaces, Mobilities, Affects

Peter Adey

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Reviewed by Christopher Schaberg, Loyola University New Orleans

Peter Adey's *Aerial Life: Spaces, Mobilities, Affects* begins with a telling, if somewhat enigmatic dedication: the book is "For us." Who exactly is this bold collective for whom the book is written? It would seem to be those of us who produce, inherit, occupy, or otherwise affect 'aerial life'—something that we come to learn means quite a bit more than simply aircraft pilots and passengers. In fact, by the end of the book it becomes clear that Adey's concern really is for humanity at large, as aerial life is seen to insinuate itself into innumerable matters and sensations of everyday existence beyond cockpits, control towers, and terminals.

Far from a comprehensive survey of aircraft developments or historical air campaigns, *Aerial Life* selects a handful of case studies and then juxtaposes them in just the right ways to show readers how oddly flight has been used over the past century and up to the present. Adey states in his introduction that it is "the contradiction of aerial life that this book is interested in"¹—to wit, how life in the air can never be treated apart from lives on the ground, which realization promptly deflates and complicates any high-minded ideals of the sky. Adey admits that "the scope and limits of such a study could be absolutely enormous."² This admission opens the way for the author's incisive and selective choices of anecdotes, reports, and drills that exemplify the problems of 'aerial life'.

The book is astonishingly well researched and the leaps across seemingly disparate subjects are always surprising, well-timed, and deftly achieved. For instance, Adey compares early aerial photography and forestry surveying practices with contemporary security protocols at airports. As the earlier "aerial view revealed a reality that demanded improvement and development," so too Adey finds that "contemporary biometrics at the airport border enact a closer gaze of the body as a territory to be captured and managed."³ In both cases, we find ourselves

¹ Adey, Peter. *Aerial Life: Spaces, Mobilities, Affects*. West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, 9.

² Ibid., 13.

³ Ibid., 87, 93.

dealing with ways of viewing—and indeed *creating*—populations that then exist to be known, controlled, or eliminated...all under the banner of airborne progress.

Early on in the book Adey openly acknowledges his debt to Foucault, and his careful research and keen sense of historical quirks certainly do justice to Foucauldian analysis, while extending it in innovative directions. In other words, this book is no stale transposition of a well-trod critical line onto a new topic, but rather is an example of the practical urgency of theory: it exposes increasingly profuse subjects (air travel and military flight) as far weirder than we ever imagined, performing what Ian Bogost might applaud as ‘alien phenomenology’.

On this note, throughout the book there is a tinge of what this reader is tempted to see as a very admirable and useful example of ‘object-oriented ontology’. Again and again, Adey locates bizarre things that become charged matters around flight. For instance, one section examines the “strategic object” of *morale* in the early 1940s as embodied by (or stripped from) the Royal Air Force and British civilians; Adey illuminates how morale was “a very slippery object to pin down and articulate.”⁴ Later in the book, *panic* becomes another strange object in the realm of aerial life. And the objects hardly stop with human emotions—all sorts of things must be considered to really appreciate (not to mention *critique*) the oddities of flight. Adey’s inquiry probes deeper than the sky and past the airport fences to include such things as “food, trees, flora, fauna [...] mackintoshes, gum boots and galoshes, along with sand and water, a pick-axe and a shovel.”⁵ As Adey later explains, “a prosthesis of protection emerges in which people and everyday objects shelter one another from above.”⁶ As hinted at in the book’s subtitle, Adey is also working from the basis of ‘affect theory’, which he likewise puts to use in fresh and trenchant ways. The chapters and sections work diligently to successfully prove how “the *affect* of the airplane has been the projection of feelings into the air, often a reflection of the aerial subject’s concerns and fears.”⁷

One of the most fascinating parts of this book is its subtle weaving of *environmental awareness* into the study of flight. This is an interest of my own, too, and I was elated to see Adey discuss briefly an essay by the nature writer Barry Lopez toward the beginning of the book. *Aerial Life* slyly dismantles any simple nature/culture divide by revealing “the aeroplane’s production of environments, not necessarily *the* environment but the *environments* it imagines, effects, and reaches

⁴ Ibid., 153, 160.

⁵ Ibid., 167, 198.

⁶ Ibid., 205.

⁷ Ibid., 81.

through.”⁸ This making multiple of ‘environment’ is a key move in undoing monolithic misconceptions of Nature—a specter perhaps more key to our understanding of human travel than we have realized up to this point. In another curious environmental turn, Adey’s discussion of aerial forestry survey alongside “pre-enrollment of passengers within biometric frequent flyer programmes”⁹ cannot help but echo Crèvecoeur’s 1782 observation that “men are like plants.” As *Aerial Life* goes on to highlight various overlaps of ecology and human flight, another line from Crèvecoeur comes to mind, which seems to underscore Adey’s points throughout the book: “The difficulty consists in the manner of viewing so extensive a scene” (in *Letters from an American Farmer*). The closer we look at flight and its myriad affects, the more we realize we’ve never really left the ground. For my own work on the culture of flight, this is in part what inspires me to focus on what Adey calls “the hard materialities of the airport terminal.”¹⁰

Working with a robust archive of military documents, reportage, and cultural ephemera, Adey demonstrates how “the aerial body and what it does have become open books to be scrutinized and read.”¹¹ *Aerial Life* takes this textual cue seriously, and tells story after story that accumulate into a defamiliarized narrative of flight: this is no heroic tale of the Wright brothers, nor of occasional eccentrics like Howard Hughes or Steven Slater. Instead, Adey’s ‘onto-tales’ (to borrow a phrase from Jane Bennett) add up to show the vast and interpenetrating machinations that undermine any simple humanistic paeans to flight. This book is an absolute must read for scholars, students, and general readers interested in mobility studies, surveillance, militarism, human geography, 20th-century history, and/or the future of air travel.

Christopher Schaberg is an assistant professor in the English Department and Environment Program at Loyola University New Orleans, where he teaches courses on contemporary literature, theory, environments, and culture. His book *The Textual Life of Airports: Reading the Culture of Flight* was published by Continuum in 2012.

⁸ Ibid., 149.

⁹ Ibid., 98.

¹⁰ Ibid., 56.

¹¹ Ibid., 124.