

Airplanes and Apprehension: Nature-Society Hybrids in Planetary Perspective

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Abstract

This photo essay considers the question of what it means to see the world from above. Taking airplanes as my point of departure, I discuss the ways in which flying can both galvanize and dismantle binary conceptions of nature and society. I compare the humanist version of reality inside airplane cabins with the external world, as seen by passengers through plane windows. Viewed from the sky, the boundaries of urban landscapes appear porous, highlighting the fact that cities are embedded within a wider planetary context. Nature-society hybrids are visible from above, and yet require a particular form of attention to be recognized. Human symbolism inside the cabin's social world distracts and disenchants passengers' environmental perceptions. However, by looking out the window, we are reminded of the fact that we are all entangled within a wondrous network of life on earth. Though associated with power, class, and economics, perhaps airplane travel can foster a change in how we apprehend the planet, and our place within it.

What does it mean to see the world from above? Astronauts have described “the overview effect,” a notable change in apprehension that occurs when one looks upon the planet from space. This photo-essay comprises a series of photographs taken from airplane windows. Through the series, I reflect on the politics of seeing urban landscapes from above, and the potential impacts it can have on people’s environmental perceptions.

Airplanes provide an intriguing technological lens for grappling with the ever-pressing question of what it means to be human in our current Anthropocene. Planes at once situate us in a wider planetary context, while simultaneously reifying the common humanistic dualism between nature and society that often populates western imaginaries. Inside the cabin, culture structures the order of reality. Flight attendants pace the central aisle, offering snacks and cocktails to their hungry guests. Passengers often take little time to embrace their surroundings before tuning in to feature-length films, displayed on the backs of the seats in front of them. Those who prefer less visual stimulation resort to books, or drift to sleep while listening to music. Passengers sit in chairs, as though they are seated in a movie theatre, classroom, office, or even at a dinner table when they utilize the drop-down table-tops to eat their meals. All the while, they must obey the seatbelt and non-smoking symbols above their heads, which govern their behavior.

But this humanist version of life inside the cabin is illusionary. It distracts passengers from the amazing fact that they are actually flying 30,000 feet in the air, at 550 miles per hour! Through airplane travel, humans—terrestrial, flightless animals—are able to dwell, however temporarily, in the clouds. This is a spectacular feat.

And yet, most adult passengers do not meaningfully attend to this reality. Distracted by pretzels, pilot announcements, and Steve Martin movies, mature passengers generally pay little heed to the world that exists outside of their airplane, save for a glance while taking-off and landing. Young passengers, by contrast, often peer wondrously through the looking glass and out into the world. I believe that through socialization and institutionalization, adults learn to filter out the more-than-human world that exists all around them (see Tsing 2013 27-42). Airplane cabins are metaphors for human society: they are construed from within as separate from nature, when in reality they are not.

The fact that passengers are flying should be a truth of which they do not easily tire. And yet, most do. Here, I present a photo-essay that attempts to recapture the feeling of enchantment that I believe should accompany airplane travel. The photographs illustrate the sense of wonder that can go hand-in-hand with flying above the clouds. I believe that seeing the world from above is a powerful process that can change how we conceive of our place on the planet. From thousands of feet in the air, cities appear to be intricately patterned grids,

intersected by rivers, and interspersed with trees and greenery. They are intermingled with wider ecologies, forming nature-society hybrids that become clearly visible from above (see Swyngedouw 105-121). Cities are embedded in the planet, highlighting the fact that humanism, an ideology that attaches central importance to human culture, must be broadened (see Tsing 2010 191-203). In truth, our micro-level human realities are nested within a wider nature, and we are all caught up within interwoven networks of life on earth (Tsing 2015; Van Dooren 2014a). From the viewpoint of an airplane window, I believe that we can begin to re-realize the vast interconnectedness of this natural reality by coming to view human society in planetary perspective. Perhaps by conceptualizing the world from above, we can begin to re-enchant our relationships with the planet that sustains us, and in the process, cultivate new forms of ecological attentiveness (see Ghosh; Van Dooren 2014b; Van Dooren, Kirksey, and Munster 1-23).



Fig. 1. Sunset over Chicago, Illinois. Photo credit: Justin Raycraft.



Fig. 2. Lakes of Wisconsin from the sky. Photo credit: Justin Raycraft.



Fig. 3. Desert landscapes of New Mexico. Photo credit: Justin Raycraft.



Fig. 4. Hybrid landscapes of Santa Fe, New Mexico. Photo credit: Justin Raycraft.



Fig. 5. Seeing Dallas, Texas. Photo credit: Justin Raycraft.



Fig. 6. Agricultural landscapes of Beauharnois, Quebec. Photo credit: Justin Raycraft.



Fig. 7. Lake Ontario from above the clouds. Photo credit: Justin Raycraft.



Fig. 8. Mexico City, a “modern metropolis.” Photo credit: Justin Raycraft.



Fig. 9. Montreal through the clouds. Photo credit: Justin Raycraft.

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About the author

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