The View from Above: The Science of Social Space by Jeanne Haffner (review)

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(Review)

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applying theoretical concepts to museum spaces would have rounded out this theme nicely. However, audiences in media and sound studies will still find much to debate and engage with in this fascinating new collection.

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The View from Above: The Science of Social Space.


Jeanne Haffner’s *The View from Above* unfolds through the expert’s view of various landscapes observed from the airplane. Like the camera obscura, the airplane permanently and profoundly changed embodied perspective. During World War I it offered experiments with new forms of intelligence and new strategies of surveillance. In France, military successes led to institutional training programs, and even the use of “air-mindedness” to promote French nationalism in primary schools. Books and linear text lost their exclusive hold on young imaginations. New generations of social scientists with expertise in the integration of aerial photography and traditional cartography emerged with the conviction that society could be better understood from below and from above.

Haffner connects archives and original texts to mark the evolution in twentieth-century France of the use of aerial photography by academic and government agent alike. She links the adoption of technologically enhanced vision to shifts in epistemology, suggesting the two occur together. Her focus is on newly formed assumptions about what can be known about social space. For example, aerial photography introduced the idea that society is embedded in patterned spatial relationships to environments that cannot be seen from the ground. Anthropologist Marcel Griaule, who worked in Cameroon after World War I, used his training in aerial photography to track spatial changes in Dogon villages over time. This gave ethnography, which is an interpretive and subjective method, a layer of objectivity and confidence when it came to conclusions about the effect of the unconscious on lived reality.

An interesting and perhaps less-known feature of this history is the interdisciplinary sensibility of the experts involved. Early applications of aerial photography to social scientific research and urban planning reveal a widely held position that both the view from above and the view from below were necessary to a full understanding of society. Aerial photography, in other words, added dimension to already existing methods of data gathering rather than overturning or challenging them. As with anthropologists today, humans were understood as having both conscious and
unconscious proclivities that work together in the shaping of social environments. Both had to be known in a full sense, so different experts had to collaborate and temper the desire for any one perspective to gain exclusive ground.

A multidimensional approach to social problem-solving appears to have extended logically from photographs that helped pin deep inequalities in the French nation to social deprivation on the ground. Much the way Griaule’s photographs of Dogon villages revealed patterns that could not be seen from the ground, photographs of French cities revealed long-term spatial stratification that could be linked to poorly understood forms of local social life. This was an invitation to know more. Presumably such discovery would yield legitimate, because scientific, spatial remedies. “Together, planners and sociologists could produce an accurate picture of the ‘infrastructure of collective life’ . . . in urban environments and develop forms of housing that would meet the needs and aspirations of local populations” (p. 93).

The interdisciplinary nature of this early work belies the traditional assumption that the aerial view, or technology alone, created a new narcissistic vision among, say, modern architects and urban planners. It was not just faith in technology that determined the belief that literal distance offered the more objective perspective. This means we cannot explain the functional separation of space and society by mid-century experts like Le Corbusier through “air-mindedness” alone. Corbusier did believe that urban residents would benefit from dense, cellular, and vertical housing that created a break from the chaos of the ground. But his two-dimensional model of humans (separated according to individual and collective) was fed as much by psychodynamic theorists as it was by the new view from above.

Haffner works to disrupt the tidy dichotomies of above and below deployed through critique. Her well-researched historical narrative certainly challenges the belief that the model of social space produced through the view from above occurred at the full expense of the view from below. It helps us respond to those who blamed the 2005 riots in Paris on the architecture. But her book doesn’t change the fact that dichotomies are good concepts with which to critique.

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