

A critical geopolitics of observant practice at British military airshows

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This paper demonstrates how visual cultures of militarism take shape as part of a ‘thick’ geopolitics of being-in-place. It draws on historical accounts of, and empirical observations at, British military airshows, which it interprets via the concept of ‘observant practice’. The paper argues that the imaginative and rhetorical force of military spectacle and popular militarism are tied to its markedly enclavic spatiality, i.e. to seeing and doing in-place. By taking seriously the spatial and sensory experience of British airshows, the paper extends recent work in critical geopolitics that questions the spatialised politics of experience, and brings them into dialogue with cultural geographies of tourism. It provides a brief history of the spectacular origins of aviation and of the use of airshows to the practice of statecraft, and demonstrates how airshows are an important element in the cultural phenomenon of militarisation. The paper takes forward debates around ‘the vision thing’ in critical geopolitics by illustrating why the notion of observant practice should not be dissociated from consideration of the spaces in and through which militaries become the object of visual curiosity. It expands, therefore, the potential of observant practice as a critique of popular military cultures.

Key words Britain; critical geopolitics; visual culture; observant practice; militarism; militarisation

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Introduction

Since the publication of Ó Tuathail’s (1996a) *Critical geopolitics*, debates around the visual have figured strongly in critical studies of geopolitics. Critical geopolitics’ concern with the visual is rooted in the contention that, as a tradition bound to Cartesian perspectivalism, Western geopolitics has prioritised the ocular in the theory and practice of statecraft. Along with the maps and other visual materials so central to campaigns of imperial dominance, the ways of seeing inherent to the doing and thinking of statecraft – ‘enframing, supervising, surveying, hiding, reporting and demarcating’ (Hughes 2007, 988) – become politically powerful because they are associated with ‘Occularcentrism [and] the domination of Western thought by [a] metaphoric of vision’ (Ó Tuathail 1996a, 69). As a result, critical geopolitics has questioned the primacy of the eye where classical geopolitics implies the ‘interdigitation of seeing and surveying with systems of authority’ (Ó Tuathail 1996a, 69). It notes the ‘view from nowhere’ (Haraway 1988) implied by a dispassionate Cartesian visual subject. But crucially, critical geopolitics maintains that a

political and geographical philosophy centred, practically and metaphorically, on the eye results in the sorts of visions of the world – ‘world stages’, ‘global views’ – pivotal to the practical geopolitics of empire, the state or territorial control.

Working with these assumptions, those interested in geopolitics and the visual have considered how ‘visuality [has become] a pivotal assemblage in the production of geopolitics’ (Campbell 2007, 357). For instance, focusing on post-9/11 regimes of visualisation, Amoore (2007) and Gilbert (2010) remark on contemporary cultures of surveillance and biometrics. In the realm of popular culture, others have considered film (Power and Crampton 2006), comic books (Dittmer 2010) and video games (Shaw and Warf 2009) in their capacity to instantiate the preconditions of, and for, seeing and sensing the geopolitical. Work in this vein also critiques dominant geopolitical discourse by conceptualising the Anti- (Ó Tuathail 1996b), or critical geopolitical (Dodds 1996), eye and the resultant gaze that seeks to unsettle the ways of seeing inherent to foreign policy and military conflict. Overall, as MacDonald *et al.* (2010, 2) argue, the ability of states, militaries and media elites to *render visible* realities around ‘the

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conduct of war and peace ... as well as the competition of state sovereignty' has become vital if these realities are to 'enter into the calculus of geopolitical negotiation'. As a 'tactical form of knowledge' (Ó Tuathail 1996a, 68), however, critical geopolitics seeks alternatives in that

Its visions ... are visions that seek to put vision in question; its seeing, a seeing that tries to reveal the unseen of seeing; its displays, dissident playings with practices of displaying; its insight, the insight that comes from the investigation of the infrastructure of sight. (Ó Tuathail 1996a, 72)

This paper considers a relatively unexplored avenue of work on the visual – that of *observant practice*. Confined exclusively to MacDonald's (2006 2010) work on Cold War rocketry, observant practice builds on early scholarship on visual cultures, particularly Ó Tuathail's (1996a) *Critical geopolitics*. Following Heffernan (2000) and Smith (2000), who describe the propensity for Ó Tuathail's linguistic poststructuralism to reproduce the Cartesian gaze as part of a critical geopolitical analysis, MacDonald stresses the need to

Move beyond the detached model of the Cartesian subject towards an idea of perception as more than merely the human body as a discreet and bounded seat of awareness [through an] emphasis on the embodied practice of vision. (2010, 273)

Reliant upon a 'messier, affect-orientated understanding of visuality' (MacDonald *et al.* 2010, 4; Hozic 2011), observant practice seeks to understand seeing-as-it-happens 'in more specific empirical terms' (MacDonald 2010, 272). Distinguished from the concept of 'spectacle', whereby 'the hegemonic values of an elite are foisted on an deluded mass public' (Ley and Olds 1988, 81; Daniels and Cosgrove 1993), observant practice considers how registers of seeing – 'gazing, glancing, peeking, gawking, looking away' (MacDonald 2010, 274) – might, *or might not*, leave visual subjects 'open to control and annexation by external agencies' (Crary 2000, 5). Moreover, by avoiding the imposition of 'an illusory [conceptual] unity onto a more heterogeneous field' (Crary 1989, 96), it accounts for visibility, invisibility and shades of opacity. Therefore, rather than philosophical questions of visualism-as-metaphor and the scripting of global space, inquiring into observant practice is to ask what it means to see, and how the politics of observant practices 'are put to work, to what end, and with what technical apparatus' (MacDonald *et al.* 2010, 4).

The paper offers an analysis of observant practice at British military airshows. Since their emergence in the early 1900s, airshows have provided the stage for a politics made aesthetic and for nationalism expressed 'through the art of the spectacular ... technological modernism and various modes of voyeurism, comfort

and spectatorship' (Adey 2010, 57). Airshows are also premier British tourist events, with the UK's annual calendar comprising over 80 shows with the larger of these, like Fairford's Royal International Air Tattoo (hereafter RIAT), attracting crowds of 130 000. Host to aerobatic displays and stirring evocations of airpower and war-time heritage, airshows, after Kong and Yeoh (1997, 216), are instances where a spectacle (the display of aircraft) 'is used to inspire positive feelings of admiration and wonder' (in the military and the military adventures of states). This admiration is 'attained through the deliberate use of ceremony; the conscious construction of pomp; the creation of occasion and circumstances for celebration' (Kong and Yeoh 1997, 216). But vitally, it is attained through 'visual effects', a 'spectating airshow-goer and a willing audience' (Adey 2010, 61). As a space and set of techniques for observation (Crary 1992), the airshow is, thus, a 'means of situating the ... citizen within the political world of the state' (MacDonald 2006, 57) and of inculcating senses of the borders, boundaries, differences and dangers integral to modern geopolitical imaginations.

The paper extends a notion of observant practice through an exploration of the spatiality of airshows, their audiencing and lived experiences of militarised places. Invoking currents in critical geopolitics that question the scale at which geopolitics is thought to operate (Hyndman 2003 2007; Sharp 2007) and the nature of popular cultural 'audiences' (Dittmer and Dodds 2008; Dittmer and Gray 2010), the paper adopts what Nicley (2009) calls a 'thick' critical geopolitics. Arguing that geopolitics has only tepidly addressed the practices forged by geopolitical discourse, Nicley (2009, 19) suggests that approaches that raise 'the geographic question of the significance of *place*' should be of concern to those seeking to understand 'the situated perspectives of multiple actors engaged in geopolitical meaning-making'. Though committed to the 'urgency of critical geopolitical research [and the disruption of] totalizing discourses underlying the perpetuation of violence' (Nicley 2009, 22), a 'thick' critical geopolitics acknowledges that

[g]eopolitical narratives do not exist on the head of a pin, but rather are meaningful only relationally through the political practices and deeper discursive formations they engender within particular place contexts.

It is a vision geared toward exploring 'the recursive relationship between the construction of geopolitical knowledge and the spatialized politics of [for example] social and cultural identity' (Nicley 2009, 19).

Though they are dazzling cultural events for the public, airshows are also a meeting point for states, militaries, arms and aerospace companies intent on

'flaunting their prowess in the skies' (Adey 2010) and brokering defence deals out of sight of industrial or political rivals and civilians. They also often happen on active military airfields, and are therefore patterned by boundaries allowing and/or blocking access for the purpose of secrecy, security and safety. Alongside catering to ardent aviation fans and enthusiasts, airshows are marked by the necessity to locate VIPs, military veterans or corporate sponsors in exclusive spectator compounds. Drawing on Edensor's (2000 2001 2002, 69) work on tourist spaces, the paper argues that by thinking of airshows as '*stages*, we can explore *where* [geopolitical] identity is dramatised, broadcast, shared and reproduced [and] how these spaces are shaped to permit particular performances'. These performances will be shown to be predominantly visual and observant, though contingent on factors that the 'environment and materiality inject into the everyday mediation of power and ideas' (Dittmer and Gray 2010, 1673). Therefore, insofar as airshows constitute an architecture of control, prescribing practices of seeing and the limits of visibility, they will also be shown to constitute a space, after Adey (2008), *from* and *with* which an everyday geopolitics is realised.

The paper is in three parts. First, it provides a history of airshows and their role in reflecting and constituting (geo)politics of nation, militarism and a culture of spatial and perceptual management. The second part offers three reflective discussions on the airshow, and via Edensor's (2000 2001 2002) work on tourist spaces, considers the airshow as a space and as a set of perceptual practices. These discussions draw on secondary accounts of airshows (those of Hurley 1998 and Berliner 2000), but also on empirical observations at a number of UK airshows, notably Waddington in 2009, Fairford's RIAT in 2010 and the Sunderland airshows between 2009 and 2014. The paper concludes by re-emphasising the 'thick' and place-bound nature of geopolitics' visual cultures, and by offering a renewed vision of observant practice, one that accounts for fractures, dissonance and countervailing.

A short history of the (geo)politics of airshows

Airshows immediately evoke scenes of aircraft in spectacular throes, choreographed formation flying or massed crowds of spectators partaking in aviation culture writ large. Airshows, however, have a long history as expressions of political ideologies and have 'reflect[ed] the huge events in world history' (Berliner 2000, 155). Being also occasions where states, militaries, arms and aerospace companies meet to exhibit their prowess and broker political and commercial partnerships, airshows also act to constitute statecraft

in many ways. This section deals with these themes in turn, and discusses the emergence of the airshow as an element in the contemporary cultural phenomenon of militarisation.

Airshows, flight and spectacular politics

Insofar as aviation was 'a very public technology' in its early years (Edgerton 1991, 13), the airshow was its natural home. The first shows, like the one held in Brescia in 1909 (Demetz 2002), involved aircrews competing and setting records for the highest, longest and fastest aeronautical feats. These attempts, however, were only ever performed under the eye of an eager public 'interested in bravura, show and spectacle' (Demetz 2002, 52): crews who failed to impress, or even to get airborne, risked being resigned to historical obscurity, such was the pace of innovation and the appetite for excellence. Later shows in the 1920s saw the British Royal Air Force (RAF) escape abolition because of its performances at the now famous Hendon pageants (Watson 2010). Therefore, for the development of the aeroplane and its associated technologies, the gaze of an attentive public was greatly important. As Berliner notes, recounting the international furore following the first Paris show in 1908, these earlier events provided an opportunity 'for the more technically inclined types to study what had been achieved [in aviation] to date, and to speculate about the potential of a hundred new ideas' (2000, 12). However, from this potential developed the more vital *rhetorical* force of flight: the superlative imagination of the airman, the ethereal promise of the aeroplane and grounds for a new geopolitical consciousness.

As Fritzsche (1992, 141) argues, one cannot ignore the effect 'machine dreams' – especially those ensconced within the progressive promise of aviation – have on political expectations. Such dreams were especially lucid in Italy and Germany in the 20th century. The aeroplane, exemplar of the futurist aesthetic, was adopted by the fascist movement and built on Gabriele D'Annunzio's contribution to the poetics of flight (Wohl 2005; Demetz 2002). Similarly, between the World Wars, the aviator was the measure of social progress in Germany (Fritzsche 1992), embodying national prowess, daring and technical mastery. Here, aviation's qualities were

Deeply spiritual, as well as obviously practical, because it seemed to make possible a previously unknown freedom from earthly limits. Aviators took giant leaps that cleared physical confines, social labyrinths, and emotional prisons, notions of transcendence that myth-makers had imagined in the flight of birds since antiquity. (Fritzsche 1992, 1)

More broadly, as Wohl (1994, 257) notes,

Coming as it did on the heels of an apparently never-ending series of technological innovations, the flying machine was interpreted as confirmation that the Western peoples had

subjugated Nature to their will and intelligence. To a civilization that had recently extended its dominion throughout the world by means of imperialist expansion and annexation, it seemed natural to turn its energies and its attention to the mastery of the sky.

However, in that around the date of the first powered flight the West was racked with 'nationalist antagonisms, imperialist rivalries, and mutual suspicion and anxiety' (Wohl 1994, 258), this 'mastery of the sky' could scarcely be decoupled from the slim prospect of continued peace.

Beyond the abstract qualities of the aeroplane, aviation cultures often reflect more tangible political geographies, including those of the nation-state and its boundaries (Adey 2010). The aerial, Douglas notes, would come to stimulate 'profound shifts in Western conceptions of time and space' (2004, 364). Where European minds rapidly 'nationalised, then militarized aviation' (Wohl 1994, 89), this led to the belief that it would be 'virtually impossible to defend the national territory from an aerial attack' (Searle 2009, no pagination). In Britain, the spectre of airpower was tied to the permeability of national boundaries, and an end to the immunity offered by those 'coastal sentinels', the cliffs of Dover (Searle 2009). Indeed, the first international flight – Frenchman Louis Blériot's traversal of the English Channel – 'was [arguably] one of the most significant trips in history, making obsolete the centuries-old security of Great Britain's natural moat' (Berliner 2000, 10). In Germany, popular feeling was different, although more strident geopolitically. As Wohl notes, even before the First World War, Germans believed airpower offered an

opportunity to dominate the air because of their scientific and technological expertise, their dynamism, and their geopolitical position in the centre of the European continent. (1994, 91)

Though Britain (a presumed future aggressor) would soon wield the ability to transport troops eastward, thus adding to the danger of German 'encirclement', 'to excel in aeronautics ... was to put to rest nagging doubts about those national virtues needed to survive in a Darwinian world where the weak were doomed to fall prey to the strong' (Wohl 1994, 259).

Airshows, from the outset, allowed for the expression of such anxieties, and from as early as 1910 were used to display military aircraft (Berliner 2000). Though it would be nearly a decade before aeroplanes were used routinely as offensive weapons, the ability for aircraft to transcend earthly limits was not lost on those nations – particularly France, Britain, Germany and Italy – bound to exhibiting their latest designs in the years before the Second World War. In Britain, not least because German zeppelin attacks on London in First World War had tied 'all future aerial craft to the nation-state and its

boundaries' (Adey 2010, 56), airshows would come to 'serve as apt precursors to the *performance* of national space [albeit] built, eroded and transformed by the aeroplane' (Adey 2010, 57). Therefore, in terms of a coherent project of sovereignty and nationalism,

The show was not merely a technical exhibition. It was a way for [the state] to show its own people how it was spending some of their tax money, and the rest of the world how it was using the latest technology for defence. (Berliner 2000, 17)

But maintaining a presence at airshows was, for states, not only a PR exercise. The possibility for certain aircraft to be seen or not, or to appear opaquely in altered form, implicates the show in the business of statecraft. Curiously absent from the late 1930s Paris airshows, as Berliner (2000, 48) continues, were the 'British Spitfire, Hurricane, Wellington, Germany's Messerschmitt 109 [and] America's Flying Fortress'. In this sense,

The requirement to keep the most advanced ideas secret from rival air forces or manufacturers is understandable... Lined up against this [however] are the needs to show off one's technical prowess and advanced thinking [but] the need for secrecy does not always win out. (Berliner 2000, 69)

For instance, the Cold War saw more pointed efforts – by the USA and USSR especially – to use airshows for technological posturing. In turn, airshows became sites for espionage, with spies for Cold War rivals often leaving airshows with photographic and written accounts of enemy aircraft design.

The presence, absence and opacity of certain aircraft at contemporary airshows also reveal a political-economy: strikingly visible at larger British shows, for example, are the Jordanian, Omani and Saudi Arabian Air Forces (who feed billions into the British aerospace industry); absent are nations out of favour with the British Foreign office, or who would never secure overflight clearances through foreign airspaces to reach the UK (Hurley 1998). The airshow has, moreover, become a vital 'meeting-point between East and West [and so] between the two old Cold War blocs' (Hurley 1998, 290). Notwithstanding current antagonisms, modern airshow organisers require a keen sense of diplomacy. For instance, as Hurley's (1998) account of Fairford's RIAT details, though an invitation to Argentina's air force resulted in the melting of ice between Buenos Aires and London that year, no amount of VIP hospitality would tempt the Greeks to share the same airspace as the Turkish.

Space/spectatorship

If airshows have reflected and constituted geopolitics, this should not be dissociated from the show's spatiality and economy of experience. As Adey (2010, 61) notes, though the aeroplane and the 'dance in the sky' is

central, so too is 'the ballet of sociality on the ground', which produces 'material and affective affordances towards more optimal forms of spectatorship [and] proper forms of society' (Pearman 2004 in Adey 2010, 66). The 'projective shape of the aeroplane's spaces' (Adey 2010, 56) therefore include the space of the show itself, which is a product of tactics designed to ensure safety, security, admittance and non-admittance, and an economy of vision.

For example, because the majority of military airshows are located in the 'stimulating atmosphere of an historic airfield' (Berliner 2000, 63), they necessitate the strict separation of the space of display from spaces of spectatorship (CAA 2015). The allowing or barring of access to certain parts of the airfield has broader relevance however, and maps onto the division of space between, particularly, public and private. Speaking of the modern Paris show, Berliner suggests that it is

Both a marketplace for the ... aviation industry, and one of the world's greatest air shows for the public ... For the aviation industry, it [is] a trade show, peopled by industry leaders and government officials who [spend] their time examining their rivals' wares and talking business. For the aviation enthusiast, it [is] one of the year's premier air shows, the place to see more of what was new, both on the ground and in the air. (2000, 68)

But the status of some airshows as marketplace *and* tourist spectacle often exists at odds. As Berliner continues, 'typically the show [is] open to the public only on the weekends; it [is] otherwise ... limited to trade visitors, or businessmen and women' (2000, 111). In this sense, corporate shows like Paris and Farnborough are events where the state and aviation industry might be seen, *not seen* in certain ways or circumstances, or remain opaque. At least for the showgoing public, the ability to see or not, or to not see too clearly is directly linked to military and economic imperatives.

Technofetishism in place: toward an ethnography of observant practice

A final important theme, one inseparable from the history and geography of the airshow is, after Stahl (2010), 'technofetishism'. Airshows, both past and present, provide the context for 'gullible machine romances' (Fritzche 1992, 141), and are conducive to

A matrix of consumer desire, military fetish and an ultimate reliance on force [which] not only feed[s] a taste for the tools and toys of war but the desire to see [these tools and toys] engaged in action. (Toh 2009, no pagination)

But airshows, vitally, tie technofetishism to ways of seeing, consumption and other recreational practices. In doing so they imply a series of methodological issues, and where they express contemporary geopolitical imaginaries of war, indicate questions of importance to scholars beyond critical geopolitics.

The technofetishistic nature of airshows is evident, first, in the sense of *distance* and *dislocation* between seer and seen, sight and site. For example, after attending Brescia in 1909, noted visitor Franz Kafka found the airfield 'large, featureless, [and] dusty' (Wohl 1994, 112), and very different to racecourses, tennis courts or car racetracks. Being confined to the cheaper, standing sections of the aerodrome, Kafka also realised that 'viewed from the expensive, tall grandstand which loomed behind him, the crowd of which he was a part must appear to melt imperceptibly in to [an] 'empty plain'' (Wohl 1994, 112). Though the aeroplane and other inventions like radio had, Wohl continues, 'brought people closer together physically, [it also] had the effect of increasing their moral distance and diminishing their mutual sympathy' (2005, 213).

But a lack of understanding between people brought closer by the aerial points to something more fundamental. Namely, a fetishised gaze on the tools of warfare increases the moral distance between seer, seen and target. In doing so, aerial spectacle perhaps becomes synonymous with the 'ethical thinning' readily associated with verticalised digital imaginaries (Graham and Hewitt 2012). In witnessing the theatre of airpower, one has to be constantly reminded therefore of the distinction between reality and spectacle (Virilio 1989). Recounting Albert Speer's experience of an air raid in Berlin in 1943, Virilio (in Huhtamo 2010, 210) demonstrates that military and technological fanaticism renders 'the reality of death and destruction ... into dark fantasy', a distorted manifestation of the technological sublime. Here, the spectator's

position is aloof, safe and distanced; very different from that of the panicking subject under [German] Stuka attack. The distanced position of the observer enhances the media-like quality of the 'spectacle'. Anonymous tragedies and struggles have been reduced to a special effects extravaganza. (Huhtamo 2010, 341)

Speer's dark fantasy, and the confounding of difference between a 'real' and 'spectacular' of military power, are expressed in modern takes on technofetishism. Like techno-nationalism in the early 20th century, the ultimate lesson of popular technofetishism in the present is that 'those with the best tools/toys of war win' (Toh 2009, no pagination). According to Stahl (2010), it also positions weapons as the hi-tech fix to moral barbarism, and promotes myths of precise, humane, righteous and bloodless war. These are dreams, Stahl continues, 'equal to the somnambulant spectator' (2010, 28). Yet, despite the dreamlike aspects of spectacular militarism, it has clear implications. Fetishism of this sort is often used 'to mask a startling level of political and cultural ignorance amongst military and political elites about the distant places and people against which the [West] throws itself into war' (Graham 2011,

177). Grounding this logic at the Fort Worth Alliance airshow, Lewis argues that this ‘military theme park’

exists to purge the real: the real experience of US soldiers, the real demands of the insurgents they are trained to kill, the real bodies of the civilians piling up in Iraq and Afghanistan. (2010, 22)

Not least because they increasingly host Unmanned Aerial Vehicle demonstrations, airshows can also be associated with what Stahl (2014) calls the ‘cultural optics’ of the unmanned war: a visual culture that includes not only the view-from-above, but the ‘discursive [and, we might add, material and sensate] atmosphere through which the drone flies’ (Stahl 2014, 672).

In that popular culture and militarism are becoming increasingly interdependent, airshows also tie technofetishism to practices of consumption. They are commoditised events in which militarised objects (toys, models, memorabilia), and bearing witness to military power, ‘become talismans of consumer desire’ (Toh 2009, no pagination). Like gunshows, airshows are ‘cultural markets which sell not only things, but also ideas and values’ (Burbick 2006, 657). However, insofar as they raise military objects and experiences to the level of ‘commodities’, masking the violence of military worlds amidst the urgency of consumption, understanding the *means by which* consumption happens at the airshow is imperative.

The following account, accordingly, draws in part on ethnographic observations at a number of Britain’s airshows, particularly those at Waddington, Fairford and Sunderland. While reflecting broader calls for a political geography sensitive to everyday human experience (Megan 2006), ‘ethnography’ in this case is rooted in more specific terms vis-à-vis militarisation. As Lutz has suggested,

while battle has beckoned as the central place of war for many observers, it [is] more important to see the crisis of [global militarisation] in the mundane, the everyday. (1999, 617–18)

Indeed, as more recent studies of military promotional events (including airshows) has demonstrated, ‘the praxis of [ethnographic] fieldwork is necessary to gain any solid understanding of the sinews that connect individual actors [showgoers] to larger trends [such as militarisation]’ (Allen 2009, no pagination).

The approach to airshows in this case involved partaking in a range of practices usually adopted by showgoers – watching displays, taking walking tours of the airfield, visiting stalls and hangar exhibitions, and occasional conversations with military recruiters. It involved, as much as was possible, ‘becoming the phenomenon’ (Laurier 2003, 134) of a typical visitor. Alongside photographic documentation, a field notebook was kept that allowed for reflections on the

reactions of showgoers toward air displays and, broadly, normative engagements with space and spectacle. It is in this context that the paper offers an analysis of the airshow as an element in the cultural phenomenon of militarisation. It does this by privileging an understanding of the *means by which* militarisation is negotiated by showgoers in place and as part of observant practices.

Geopolitics and observant practice at British military airshows

British military airshows are in many ways a legitimisation of the nation state, are designed as a celebration of military strength and reproduce imaginaries of the world as backdrop to threat, host to difference and stage to war. A day at the airshow is organised around a schedule of aircraft flypasts, acrobatics displays and special events like mock bombing runs. A standard programme will include displays by a number of key aircraft from national air forces, demonstrations of relics like the Cold War Avro Vulcan bomber, and from corporate teams like the Breitling wing-walkers. Performances include (depending on the type of aircraft) mid-air aerobatics, formation-flying, specialist manoeuvres and high-speed, near-supersonic flypasts. Following Adey, the airshow is overwhelmingly a ‘precursor to the performance of *national* space’ (2010, 57). Written into the sky itself, for example, are the red-white-blue smoke trails of the British RAF, the orange of the Dutch F-16 and white-red of the Patrouille Suisse. Static aircraft on the tarmac are identified, first and foremost, by their national insignia, livery or by nation-specific type-modifications. And as part of any display, one is always told by the show’s loudspeaker audio announcer – who provides a running commentary during and between demonstrations – the nationality of body and machine.

If airshows allow nationalism and national identity to ‘condense and coalesce’ (Adey 2010, 70), this is also the case for dominant political categories and violent imaginative geo-graphs. Demonstrations often follow a distinct narrative reflecting military conflicts and combat alliances: members of the RAF’s Red Arrows are routinely introduced by the announcer as having ‘just been drawn from front-line service’ and as being ‘proud to fly alongside their coalition allies’. RIAT 2010 saw the Hawker Beechcraft perform a ‘Khe Sanh’ landing (a rapid-descent, short-runway landing designed to stave off enemy small-arms fire). Mastered initially in Vietnam by the Americans, the crowd was told via the airfield-wide speaker system, ‘the Khe Sanh was used in Bosnia and Kosovo by the RAF, and is being used to great effect currently in Afghanistan and Iraq’. The announcer also interprets the moral legitimacy of modern campaigns: with the ominous spectacle of America’s B-52 Superfortress Bomber, we’re told that

'many of us [military personnel] have been privileged to witness the contrails [of the B-52] flying high over Afghanistan delivering welcome payloads on the enemy'.

That these conflicts have human consequences is pushed deep into the background by the overwhelming focus at the show on technology (cf. Luke 2004). Bound intimately to technology however, in all of these cases, is nostalgia, and a tendency toward historical narrative and re-enactment. A key fixture at contemporary shows, for example, is the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight, usually comprising a Lancaster bomber, Spitfire and Hurricane. This particular spectacle serves to remind spectators how the Second World War evidences something eternal about British identity and its place in the world, and is always greeted with a respectful, solemn watchfulness. Thematized events are also common. An example of this was seen at RIAT 1998, which played host to the 'Berlin airlift'. Bankrolled by aerospace manufacturer Cobham to the 'tune of five-figures', this fete 're-[enacted]' ... the extraordinary round-the-clock shuttle that saw aircraft touching down in Berlin every 90 seconds [during the winter of 1948–9] (Hurley 1998, 65). Performed in front of the veterans' VIP enclosure, the 'airlift' was to remain faithful to history. Squadrons of the much vaunted DC-3 'Dakota' aircraft used in the original lifts carried

Gangs of volunteers dressed in rough serge [who, upon each 90-second landing, would] empty the aircraft of coal, flour, medicines, salt – the bare necessities that kept millions of Berliners a calorie or two this side of starvation. (Hurley 1998, 66)

In a variation on the aestheticised-Cold-War-imaginary theme, RIAT would be designed, 14 years later in 2012, around a 'Vulcan Cold War Zone' (airshows.org 2013). The Vulcan – carrier of Britain's airborne nuclear deterrent during the Cold War, and party to a cultish following by air enthusiasts – sat pride of place here alongside a replica of its former payload, the 'Blue Steel' nuclear missile. Aircraft displays at these events are accompanied by the perfunctory audio commentary that reminds the audience that the sight of a Spitfire should be evocative of the Battle of Britain, or an F4 Phantom of the 'Cold War Spirit'.

Economies of vision: enraptured gazing and the enclave

Following their heavy use of historicism, airshows are events that 'tend to follow the same format year upon year, inscribing history onto space' (Edensor 2002, 73). But the nostalgic imaginaries celebrated at airshows are also intimately connected to *the means by which* they are expressed in space as part of visual practices. As Edensor continues:

Situated in the relationship between tourist and site, performances [like watching an air display] map out individual and group identities, and allude to wider imagined geographies which the stage [the airfield] is part of and may even symbolize. (2000, 326)

Therefore, there is a marked connection between the space of the airshow, what can be seen at airshows, and how the seen becomes visible. If there could be said to be a geopolitics of the airshow's visual culture, it would rely on a synergy of these three phenomena. This synergy is engineered in a number of important ways.

First, observant practice is a product of the strict management of space. This has much to do with security and safety, and is experienced by the showgoer as an architecture of boundedness and restriction. If having driven to an airshow like Waddington, for example, one's car might be selected for spot-check searches by military police before it is directed to a pre-designated space on the airfield. Movement across the parts of the airfield open to visitors is restricted, with the UK Civil Aviation Authority's (CAA 2015) display guidelines affording movement only behind the crowd line and display line. Lanes of pedestrian traffic are bordered by rows of static aircraft displays, exhibits by the likes of Lockheed Martin, BAE Systems, Boeing and QinetiQ, and by military recruiting stalls. In this sense, the airshow is clearly an example of a touristic 'stage' (Edensor 2001, 63) – a space that legitimates formal apparatus of sovereign and economic power while being continually 'produced ... regulated, represented and maintained' (63).

Importantly, along with safety and security, airshows are also divided along lines of status, privilege and according to the possibility of visual perception. Speaking of the cost of entrance to the RIAT, Hurley recalls that after:

Buy[ing] your £19.50 ticket in advance or your £24 on the gate, and the moment you enter the show you're faced with a tempting choice of 'enhanced spectator opportunities': The Friends of the Royal International Air Tattoo Grandstand; the Public Grandstand; The Park and View enclosure; the Photo Bus. (1998, 16)

On purchasing a ticket to Waddington, one is also met with a set of options including the normal categories of age and concession, but also for various private spaces including the 'Spitfire Grandstand', the 'Bomber Harris Chalet' and 'Douglas Bader' enclosure.¹ At the 2013 show, for £1650, one might have booked a group of 'clients' into the 'Lord Trenchard Pavilion' inclusive of 'access to a VIP route' across the airfield, parking, a central location with 'fully lined and carpeted marquee with viewing windows', three-course lunch, chauffeur car service and option to arrive and depart by helicopter (Waddingtonairshow 2013).²

A 'triumph of greed over geography' (Hurley 1998, 259), airshows are thus an amalgam of profitable spectator enclosures, many of which are sponsored by aerospace and arms companies. This points first to the privileging of perspective: the position of private enclosures directly on the crowd line means organisers prioritise (and monopolise) proximity to the spectacle and visual perception above all. Spectators with standard tickets are confined to the (visually less advantageous) pedestrianised parts of the airfield, or to the 'perspective and comfort' (Adey 2010) of their cars. But perhaps more importantly, differential access points to the 'enclavic' nature of the airshow. Tourist enclaves, Edensor (2000) argues, are a product of large national and international corporations and state organisations, and involve a range of 'disciplinary measures' including the policing of their inhabitants and the boundaries that demarcate who may or may not be admitted. Indicative of the social exclusivity endemic to modern airshows, enclavic spaces also entrain 'common-sense understandings about what kinds of activities should take place within them' (Edensor 2002, 63). The 'how to' of tourism at the show, therefore, includes a range of normativities around how to dress, communicate and share experiences, 'modes of looking' (Edensor 2001, 72), 'what to photograph, [and] how to gaze' (Edensor 2000, 328). The spatiality of the airshow is, along with the possibility to perceive and be observant, therefore made in and through the 'proper forms of society' it implies.

Perceiving and being observant – a second important facet of the management of airshows – happens amid an ensemble of corporate and retail presences. It is experienced, overwhelmingly, as an imperative to *see*. This is clearly observable where seeing is done by photographic means or for the purpose of acquisition. To witness an air display at a modern airshow is to see not only an aerial spectacular, but innumerable recording devices (cameras, phones) held aloft, the crowd having been informed by the announcer in which direction to look in the sky for the 'best photo opportunity'. With a particularly coveted aerial spectacle like the Red Arrows, as Hurley's account describes,

The flood of humanity along the static line comes to a halt. Fathers crouch beside sons, pointing upwards. Mothers shield their eyes against the sun. For twenty-five wonderful minutes, we all watch the longest firework in the world and at the end of it all there's a spontaneous round of applause. A hundred thousand people can't be wrong. The Reds really are the best in the world. (1998, 316)

This sort of 'enraptured' gazing (MacDonald 2006), considered a natural consequence of a spectacle by Hurley, is prescribed in part by the 'synergy between the regulatory procedures of [the show] ... and the retail strategies of ... corporate outlets' (Edensor 2000, 329). Retailers at larger shows are dominated by those

selling photographic equipment and DVDs of past airshow events. Mobile video-feeds are beamed to jumbotron screens set across the airfield and provide the content for next year's DVDs. For £5, visitors to RIAT are able to purchase an 'Aircraft checklist' that corresponds to a series of cones set near to static aircraft (Figure 1); the objective here is to see and tick off as many aircraft as possible throughout the weekend. Airshows, after Ley and Olds (1988), thus resemble 'total environments' of consumption.

In summary, airshows entail

The performance of expected and 'appropriate' actions [like not being in particular, off-limit spaces], and the enactment of duties (things which *must* be seen, photographs which *have to be* taken, souvenirs and postcards which *need* to be acquired, the *imperatives* to sample a range of cultures and commodities). (Edensor 2000, 334)

But the prioritisation of seeing and vision means airshows require

not only presence and participation ... [but] constant observation, representation and replication through the technologies of digital, phone and video cameras. Being there, and looking is not enough. The participant observer captures the spectacle on camera and video film and at the



Figure 1 'Does Dad know what this is? Get a RIAT Aircraft checklist' (Fairford RIAT 2010)

Source: Author

same time is captured [photographically], by other participants. (Wharton 2007, 158)

In this sense, contrary to Hurley's account, there is 'nothing "obvious" about sight itself of the processes which [render] particular object[s] into a subject for visual experience' (MacDonald 2006, 68). The ability for the state, corporations and show organisers to include or exclude things from the field of vision and to prescribe the means by which the seen becomes visible is a vital problematic. Enclavic tourist spaces, therefore, should arguably 'omit infinite other ways of looking and understanding' (Edensor 2001, 73), with the adulation following a display like the Red Arrows being twinned to the supposed 'visceral truth' (MacDonald 2006) of seeing. However, by exploring other instances of seeing, we can begin to challenge this relatively uncompromising notion and reveal observant practice to be a more fractured, incomplete and potentially dissonant phenomenon.

Seeing, not seeing and more

Though observant practice at the airshow might seem a coherent and determining phenomenon, this is not to say *visibility* is its only characteristic. Observant practice at the airshow relies on, and is patterned by, shades of opacity and invisibility speaking to a

Central paradox in the military strategy of the modern state ... that [the military] must be transparent in order to be an effective deterrent yet it must be sufficiently opaque to retain its competitive military capacity. (MacDonald 2006, 67)

Simply, airshows allow for monumental, spectacular visibility *while at the same time* the opacity required by defence apparatus and industry. This modality overlaps into micro-practices of control that allow and block access, route movement and direct the gaze. But the determining characteristics of observant practice are often confounded where the airshow is engaged with on individual terms, and because shows are prone to human error and mechanical failures. Normative observant practices are therefore not only adopted, but often adapted, ignored or resisted. The result is that seeing differently or *not seeing at all* is an integral part of the visual culture of the airshow and of popular aviation culture more generally.

Depending on their format, for example, airshows are events at which there are long periods where there is nothing to see at all. Particularly at local, council-funded events like the Sunderland airshow, which doesn't attract the coveted aircraft present at RIAT or Waddington, the schedule often includes long gaps where the sky remains empty. These moments are passed in quiet, almost anxious expectation – a watchful politics as much about *sight* as '*foresight* and the anticipation of the event' (Amoore 2007, 145). Show-

goers can be seen in these instances squinting, scanning the sky, hands drawn over brows shielding their eyes from the sun. One cannot often guess (and is sometimes not told) where in the sky the approaching aircraft will appear, especially at sea-front events like Sunderland which have a 180° field of view. Yet, in an attempt to make the unforeseen foreseeable (Amoore 2007), these moments are often accompanied by an audio commentary detailing the preparations being made in the approaching (as yet invisible) aircraft: the RAF's Falcons parachute display team, still 'ten minutes out', are 'checking and rechecking their gear'; two minutes out, still out of sight, they're 'lining up at the para-doors of the C-130 Hercules'. Appearing from behind a cloud, the falling bodies of the Falcons gradually come into view as the massed gaze of the crowd eventually finds its target.

A further and important mode of observant practice is *expert* visualities: ways of seeing that express an intimate knowledge of aircraft and aviation culture. Admiring the static display of a Lancaster Bomber at the Waddington show in 2009, for example (Figure 2), was a group of aviation enthusiasts practising an intimate, anatomical and deconstructive mode of looking. Such a coveted spectacle (this is one of only two airworthy examples of the Lancaster in existence) prompted a range of questions not asked by the majority of showgoers: which parts of the airframe are original, which have been replaced or refabricated? Which example has this aircraft been painted to represent? (currently it displays the markings of the 'Phantom of the Rhur'). This sort of looking pertains to the culture of the fan: a figure with a high investment of cultural and emotional capital in aviation, and for whom observant practice is an expression of knowledgeability and expertise as much as it is enchantment.

However, enthusiasm for aviation and for certain aircraft often means that the airshow schedule, despite it being designed to 'enrapture', is often ignored. In 2009 the newly-restored XH588 Avro Vulcan returned as part of an eight-season operability window (XH588, the only airworthy Vulcan, is due to retire permanently in 2015). For a limited time only, therefore, UK airshows have hosted a potent symbol of Cold War history, and a spectacle much celebrated by aviation enthusiasts. On appearing at the Sunderland airshow in 2009, the Vulcan duly attracted hundreds of spectators who filled the beach between Roker and Seaburn. Immediately as the display finished, however, the beach and seafront cleared and many showgoers departed. The remaining programme of aircraft (Tucanos, Wing-Walkers, a Dutch F-16) was not, it seemed, exceptional enough to warrant continued attention. Thus, where the imperative of observant practice is met with the standards inherent to communities of fandom (Dittmer and Dodds 2008), which in this case entail fetishising



Figure 2 Lancaster (Waddington 2009)

Source: Author

one sight and disregarding others, any sense of a coherent 'spectacle' is fractured as it implies practices that seem oppositional to hegemonic intent (Dittmer and Gray 2010).

Not seeing at the airshow, however, is not simply about the absence of sight. Rather, it is also about *not just* seeing, and about 'visuality as ... indivisible from a wider bodily sensorium' (MacDonald *et al.* 2010, 6). The visual is the predominant sense through which the state's legitimacy is secured, and is afforded an inherent credibility not found in the tactile or aural senses (Amoore 2007; Jay 2002). Nevertheless, sound and sense are pivotal to the experience of the airshow. Alongside the ubiquitous loudspeaker announcer, whose voice accompanies the displays and the gaps between them, stirring accompaniment often follows particularly evocative aircraft: the Lancaster is set to Coates' 'Dam Buster's March'; the Royal Navy's Black Cats Lynx Helicopters to Arne's 'Rule, Britannia!'; and the Vulcan to Holst's 'Mars, the Bringer of War'. Airshows also involve a visceral sense-making including, like with the airport balcony, 'felt encounters with aircraft sounds, smells and heat' (Adey 2008, 44). Existing outside the boundaries of the airfield, the desire for dramatic multi-sensory encounters lead some showgoers beyond the confines of airbases to the closest point of the perimeter fence to the 'glide-slope', or landing-end of the runway threshold. Here, visitors gather to watch informal (and free) displays of arrivals and departures and in the process are bathed in the heat and force of innumerable jet engines.

Conclusion

British military airshows are reflective and constitutive of nation, of the imaginative geographies of borders, boundaries, difference and danger, and are an important aspect in the geopolitics of contemporary militarism. Through focusing on observant practices, the paper demonstrates that military airshows are geopolitical not just because of their rhetorical and imaginative dimensions, but because they are occasions to see *with* and *from* (Adey 2010). The visual culture of airshows is experienced through observant practices that are place-based. But when acted out in place, these practices are nevertheless prone to fractures and inconsistency. In concluding, there are three points of discussion that outline the contribution of this argument to geographical understanding.

First, the paper marks a continued engagement with the connections between critical geopolitics and militarism. Critical geopolitics has always been concerned with how 'contexts are used to justify violence' (Dalby 2010, 281), and the social and political consequences of the preparation for and use of military force (Dalby 1996). However, a focus on 'rationalisations of military power and ... practices of mapping that legitimize military action' (Dalby 2010, 282) 'at the large scale' (2010, 280) are now complemented by research at more intimate scales. In pursuing the latter focus, this paper approached militarism with a view to revealing 'the character of militarism itself in any given place' (Stavrianakis and Selby 2013, 15). More broadly, the paper

demonstrates that military airshows should be of direct interest to a wider range of critical scholars interested in the visual, material and sensate character of militarism and militarisation. In that efforts to understand cultural occasions of this sort might reveal militarism as 'lived and reproduced through a panoply of embodied practices, movements, resonances and regimes of sensation' (McSorley 2015, 108), they might be aligned with the aspirations of 'critical military studies' (Basham *et al.* 2015; Rech *et al.* 2015), for example.

Second, it is in this context that the paper has brought critical geopolitics and visual culture into dialogue with the cultural geographies of tourism. Via Edensor's (2000 2001 2002) work on tourist stages, performances and enclaves, this has revealed that question of the character of militarism at airshows is one of geography and observant practice. Allowing or blocking access to certain parts of the airfield, the stratification of spectatorship and a particular culture of consumption dictates, largely, the possibility to perceive and be observant. Observant practice at the airshow, at least normatively, is about *seeing* above all, enraptured gazing, and acquisition. Therefore – particularly considering the heritage of the airshow – the observer in question

Is the field on which vision in history can be said to materialize, to become itself visible. Vision and its effects are always inseparable from the possibilities of an observing subject who is both the historical product of *and* the site of certain practices, techniques, institutions, and procedures [and *spaces*] of subjectification. (Crary 1992, 5)

For critical geopolitics therefore, the geographies of tourism point to a host of other sites and occasions in which the geopolitical is manifest as observant practices. It also indicates the potential for further dialogue between critical geopolitics and the sub-disciplines of human geography – perhaps particularly social geography.

However, third, a critical geopolitics of visual culture at airshows also reveals the fractured, incomplete phenomena of observant practice. In consciously avoiding the terminology associated with 'spectacle', the paper adopted a more compromising concept – observant practice – where seeing is 'situated in the relationship between tourist and site' (Edensor 2000, 362), reliant on skill, interpretation and vestiges of agency. This concept also leaves room for an encounter with modes of seeing not determined by the event, such as those that happen when there is *nothing* to see, or where what is seen is ignored after having been deemed not worthy of attention. Speaking of the tourist enclave, Edensor argues that one should not unproblematically assume 'the organisation of ... space always determines [s] the kinds of performances which occur' (2002, 70). To this we might also add observant practice itself,

which cannot fully determine the kind of seeing the airshow compels. Therefore, rather than being 'annexed' (Crary 2000) by external agents whose aim it is to enforce behaviour and opinion, showgoers are exposed to cultures of persuasion rooted in a complex history, one contingent on their being *placed*. Where 'expressions of general occularcentrism ... are best examined in their material specificity' (Ó Tuathail 1996a, 71), a critique of geopolitics and visual culture should involve a more direct, ethnographically inclined understanding of where observant practices come to matter. It should, following MacDonald *et al.*, involve thinking 'critically and creatively about what visuality means, how it is put to work, to what end and with what technical apparatus' (2010, 6). Such projects must also ask, crucially, 'how visibility (and sometimes invisibility) is achieved' (MacDonald *et al.* 2010, 4).

Observant practice at the airshow, thus, happens amid competing powers and prerogatives. These include sovereign power, but also the visual economies of popular aviation culture that, perhaps counter-intuitively, also foreground the conditions for *not* seeing. Airshows are events at which human error and technical failures are common: demonstrations are cancelled due to bad weather; aircraft crash, often with loss of life; appearances of particularly coveted aircraft (like, in 2014, the new F-35 stealth fighter due to debut at RIAT) are cancelled due to malfunction. Added to this, the sovereign sense of the visual, because it is indivisible from the other faculties, undeniably happens at the 'nexus between bodies, senses and states' (MacDonald *et al.* 2010, 17). Thus, observant practice at the airshow is a contested and contestable phenomenon prone to fracture, incompleteness, to resistance and broader sense-making.

With MacDonald *et al.*'s (2006) call to ask after the achievement of visibility *and* invisibility, popular aviation cultures highlight the potential for a critical geopolitics of observant practice. Alongside being open to contestation, observant practice might also form the basis of a resistant politics of seeing whereby invisibilities are rendered visible, or adulterated and opaque visions made clearer. As with Paglen's (2007 2011) work on the geographies of military intelligence and the secret state, those elements of global aviation that have historically been rendered invisible *can* be made visible, often by appropriating the sorts of enraptured and acquisitive gazing prompted by the airshow. A possibility, therefore, is for observant practice to invoke a countervisuality: a 'right to look' 'by which one tries to make sense of the unreality of visuality's authority ... whilst at the same time offering a real alternative' (Mirzoeff 2011, 5). Identifying where observant practices come to matter, therefore, should also encompass instances of resistances to dominant ways of seeing. But such an expanded concept can only happen as part of an immediate and 'thick' critical geopolitics, for it

is only in place and with the observant subject that seeing might happen otherwise.

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Notes

- 1 Sir Arthur 'Bomber' Harris was Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief of RAF Bomber Command between 1942 and 1945. A controversial figure, Harris was the architect of the saturation bombing of German cities toward the end of the Second World War. Sir Douglas Bader was a Second World War fighter ace who, despite losing both legs in a crash during aerobatics practice in 1931, went on to become an RAF Group Captain.
- 2 Lord Sir Hugh Trenchard was commander of the British Royal Flying Corps during the First World War, and played a key role in the establishment of the RAF. He was promoted to Marshal of the RAF in 1927, and continued as Chief of Air Staff until his retirement in 1930.

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