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# Boyhood Aesthetics

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## Boyhood Aesthetics · *Jonathan Holden*

BY THE TIME I was nine, I knew by heart such beautiful information as the ground speed of the North American F-86F Sabre (683 mph. at sea level), its combat radius (463 mi. with two 166.5 Imp. gal. tanks), its ferry range (1,525 mi.) and its armament (six .50 cal. machine guns). Even indoors, I could identify most commercial airliners by the tone of their engines, the most familiar being the unique and slightly gurgly song of the Douglas DC-3. The DC-4 and the DC-6, both four-engined planes, were distinguishable from the old Skytrain by the greater heft and authority of their engines, heard from greater altitude. The drone of the Lockheed Constellation was gruffer, choppiier, more rugged, closer to noise than to music. The Boeing Stratocruiser was quiet, a discreet mutter. In my highly developed system of aesthetic priorities—a hierarchy in which four-engined planes were more beautiful than two-engined, and a three-engined plane was as freakish as a three-dollar bill—the Stratocruiser was particularly handsome. For one thing, it was more manly looking than most commercial airliners. Its wings and fuselage weren't rounded like those of the Douglas DC-series. A two-story liner, it was husky but not fat. It was ideally proportioned, the aeronautical equivalent to six feet four, 250 pounds. With its thin, severe wings clipped at the ends, its bottom view was reminiscent of the legendary B-29. It was a distant, fatherly plane, of great reserve, as dignified as the narrow neckties that became faddish later in the fifties. Its value was high because it was rare. It would appear usually after supper, already at an impressive altitude, on a northwest course, the late orangish sun gilding its leading edges, making it all the more royal, more kingly. Through binoculars you could make out its red vertical stabilizer, the sumptuous red and blue markings of Northwest Airlines. To me, stranded there in the stagnant summer dusk, craning up at that magnificence still in daylight, the sun jewelling it like a brooch, it seemed as though the plane were already over Seattle and the Bering Strait was just beyond.

In my scale of values, private aircraft occupied the lowest rank and commercial the middle. The highest was restricted to warplanes, especially jets. This was in the early 1950s, when the only jets were military, and in my refined rating system, wing configuration had priority over number of engines: straight-wing lowest, swept-wing higher. Delta-

wing was off the scale, outside the sublunary sphere. Likewise, the faster a jet's ground speed, the higher its value. At around 700 mph. a plane began to blur into myth. As for the sound barrier—it was simply the limit of the literal. *Supersonic* meant *transcendental*.

One of the great misfortunes of my life, I believed, was that where we lived, near the Great Swamp in northern New Jersey, was far from any air force base. Jets were all the more beautiful for their rarity, and the instant I heard one I'd go pounding outdoors with binoculars and scour the sky. Usually the tiny moving center that I sought was too high up in the bright haze to be discerned or it was above the clouds. If it were a clear day, I'd look for the moving chalk-streak of a vapor-trail boring through the blue after the pale germ that kept outrunning it. But unless it were a big plane, a bomber, even through field glasses all you could tell was whether the jet was straight-wing or swept-back. At that height, lit with a stratospheric glow, the jets seemed to acquire a ghostly quality. Any swept-back jet might have been some new, top-secret experimental prototype on its way west to Edwards Air Force Base.

Even now, I can't wholly understand why it was so important to make positive identification. Somehow, unless a jet could be named, it remained elusive. I couldn't possess even the memory of it securely enough. When, in the rare instances that a jet would appear over our house low enough that I had a chance to recognize it, I felt so lucky that it seemed literally a form of grace. I can remember early in my airplane religion one sultry Saturday morning in spring hearing a strange and mighty drone undercut by bass poundings so deep that the house, even the earth, seemed to pulsate, and rushing outside to see the sky literally blanketed with formations of B-36's, herds of them all shoulder to shoulder laboring west, their progress immeasurably slow. The planes were high, glowing, silvery silhouettes occasionally spewing the wisp of a contrail. Finally, after what seemed half an hour, the last of these formations inched below the trees, and the morning was silent, diminished as if abandoned by its gods. Where were those great saurian planes headed? I don't know. But looking back on that morning, on those tremendous, slow (435 mph.) muscle-bound heavy bombers, I wonder if, like a herd of Brontosauri, they weren't making their last migration west toward extinction in some desert dump-site.

Not to dwell anywhere near an air force base was to be isolated wretchedly in the boondocks, in a place without culture. It seemed as

serious a deprivation as life without one of the new television sets the Thompsons had bought. Mrs. Thompson had graciously consented to let my brother and me watch *The Howdy Doody Show* each weekday evening on their massive Admiral with its shimmering 8-inch screen. When, each night at dusk, satisfied, brimming with the shocking news of Mr. Bluster's latest plot, we'd lope home across Thompson's field, entering our silent house where Father and Mother sat expressionless in the living room frowning into *Harper's* and *The New Yorker* was like returning to the dark ages.

Everybody, or so it seemed, was blessed but me. Uncle David and Aunt Peggy, up in South Hadley, Massachusetts actually found the jet traffic from Westover Field a nuisance. When I asked my cousin Larry what kind of fighters they had up there, he remarked wryly that he didn't know, but there sure were a lot of them.

Mother's brother, Uncle Lin, and his family were even luckier. They lived no more than five miles from Wright-Patterson Field, in Ohio. One day I discovered that, in our Hammond's Atlas, the maps of the individual states showed the names and locations of air force bases: Biggs, Stewart (quite near, a possibility!), Moses Lake, Nellis, and, of course, Edwards, the equivalent in my religion to the Vatican.

I spent long, productive afternoons going over these maps state by state until I was satisfied that I'd memorized the names and locations of every air force base in America. The most unpromising and nondescript area of the country, such as Texas, could suddenly become interesting. Nearly every state had at least one shrine, its cultural center which I resolved to visit if I were ever in the area. Even lowly New Jersey had some culture—McGuire Air Force Base, a two-hour drive south, in Wrightstown, by Fort Dix. One day, during the gray lull of a spring vacation, Mother suggested brightly that we spend a day in Wrightstown "looking at the jets."

It was one of the best days of my life. Some parts of New Jersey are so glum, so blighted that all the worst elements of the landscape exhibit, like a Charles Sheeler painting of heavy industry, a somber aesthetic consistency, a grisly beauty. The view from the Pulaski Skyway over the Jersey meadows is like that: the sickly waters of the Hackensack and Passaic, rotten pilings, the tarnished innards of the chemical industry arrayed like organ pipes below—an infernal orchestra—the blackened brick faces of tenements, the bridges measuring the depths of the smoky atmosphere south—the Bayonne Bridge, the Goethals Bridge, the Ver-

razano Narrows Bridge—the hazy smiles of the bridges arching over the gray waters like arias. It is this difficult beauty which was William Carlos Williams' obsession:

There is a plume  
of fleshpale  
smoke upon the blue

sky. The silver  
rings that  
strap the yellow

brick stack at  
wide intervals shine  
in this amber

light—not  
of the sun not of  
the pale sun but

his born brother  
the declining season.

As a boy I understood this kind of beauty. It was like the dubious beauty of a maximum security facility, and air force bases had it—miles of storm fence, barbed wire, hangars, towers, search lights, the runways like superhighways running off to the horizon where vague events occurred out in the oily distance, and the silvery mirages of the jets congregated.

For about four hours, parked on the cinders of the shoulder, armed with a picnic lunch of chicken-salad sandwiches, Mother and I watched squadrons of North American F-86D Sabres maneuver. Some of them, as they lagged in low over the barracks, their engines peeping like tea kettles leaking a sooty smudge of fumes, whispered by so close that I could see all the networks of pop-rivets on the fuselage, the nub of the pilot's helmet as the huge machine sank away sighing over the fence down into the zone where I could not trespass.

In time, I was to visit other shrines. I would spend, with Father, one

sallow, hazy afternoon at the perimeter of Otis Air Force Base, in Cape Cod, until I was surfeited on the shape of the F-94C Starfire—a shape I'd religiously memorized from the three-view drawings in Green and Pollinger's *Observer's Book of Aircraft* but which, until that morning, I had never hoped to see.

I would spend most of a day with Uncle Lin, on a bus tour of Wright-Patterson Field, a day climaxed by a virtual banquet of different jets parked by a hangar, a gourmet sampling which included a dark, mantis-like, twin-engined jet that I realized must be an actual Martin B-57, in its night camouflage. It had an aura of evil, like the model of the sinister, twin-boomed Northrop P-39 Black Widow all-weather night-fighter which Tony Remsen and I had made. The Black Widow! Fully assembled, with all its aerals and guns like the feelers and stingers of a fat, heavily armored, black scorpion, it literally bristled with harm.

By then, like any member of the Audubon Society, I was keeping a list of all the commercial and military planes of which I'd made "positive identification." If I'd been a few years older, I would have joined the Ground Observer Corps, a civilian volunteer organization which, like the term "Civil Defense," now sounds prehistoric: the mission of the Corps was to identify Russian bombers that had slipped through U.S. radar. I kept my list in my desk, rubber banded to the heavy wad of 200 "Friend-or-Foe" airplane cards I'd collected by buying sheets of brittle, flesh-colored bubble gum which I'd immediately discard. I had the only complete set on Pleasantville Road, the result of dogged barter.

But the list was much more valuable than the cards. True, great beauty was prefigured by the cards—the beauty of the Gloucester Javelin, a British delta-wing jet, its speed "secret" but "estimated at over 700 mph."—a vampire-shaped jet which, like the British Vickers delta-wing bombers, in sunlight was less a gothic phantasm than a silver sprite descended directly from the realm of faerie.

Early in my tenderness for planes, I'd noticed that, even going so far back as World War II, the shapes of British planes were more organic than those of American planes. Compared to the stubby, square-tipped wings of the P-51 Mustang, the wings of the Supermarine Spitfire and its cousin, the Hawker Hurricane, were curved like vowels more fully rounded, as if the very shapes of the planes had a British accent. The gray, pug-nosed P-51 with its blocky shoulders was clearly a tough-guy, a city kid. The Spitfire, with its wings like curved leaves and its canopy set jauntily far back on the fuselage like the cockpit of a baby Austin,

seemed streamlined for the sake of beauty alone, a thoroughbred. With its sand-and-spinach markings, it was pastoral, aristocratic, refined. The P-51 was a machine: the Spitfire was a gull.

In aircraft design, each country had a dialect. The most fascinating because it was so shadowy was, of course, that of the enemy. Every spring, as impatiently as the CIA, I awaited May Day, when the Russians might reveal some new jets—jets which, in the airplane books I was now collecting, were always depicted by grainy, amateurish, black-and-white snapshots taken, I knew, by our spies. MIGs! The expletive was a synonym for knee-jerk evil—Apaches bursting out of ambush, riding down out of the sun. The MIG-15 was easy to recognize: like the Sabre but with an obscenely high tail-fin. And, like the shark, like any stylized enemy, all MIGs were bleakly identical, devoid of humor. They were beautiful; but like the beauty of the Empire's stubby functional craft in *Star Wars*, theirs was of a minimalist sort. The MIG-15 resembled the faceless, wooden, suicidally obedient, brain-washed Communists who, according to Mrs. Lee, my fourth grade teacher, piloted them. Puritan, gray, crude—the stylistic equivalent to the “burp gun” I studied in such war comics as *Two-Fisted Tales*—the MIG was issued in gray carbon copies from a world where, it seemed obvious, conditions were too arid for romance.

Whereas the MIG possessed so little individuality that it didn't even have a name, our planes were human. Reciting the lineage of the Boeing bomber series, with its progressively elaborated motif—*Flying Fortress* to *Super Fortress* to *Stratojet* to *Stratofortress*—I never doubted that the men who designed these planes and named them were like me, moved by the same longings: the men at Lockheed who dreamed up the *Shooting Star*, then the *Starfire*, then the *Starfighter*; the men at Republic who dreamed first the *Thunderjet*, then the *Thunderstreak*, the *Thunderflash*, and finally the F-103 *Thunderchief*.

My list of planes I'd spotted was more than a list of shapes. It was a list of complex and elusive experiences, just as baseball statistics were, for me then, not so much a measure of performance or efficiency as an aesthetic measurement from which you could magically evoke the peculiar mystique—the character—of a star. *Batting Average: .344. Stolen Bases: 29. RBI: 63. HR: 4. Hits: 221*—these numbers were Richie Ashburn in his 1951 season for the Phillies. *Won: 19. Lost: 11. ERA: 3.30*. This is the essence of the Dodgers' Preacher Roe in 1950. Likewise, certain

shapes—the three-view silhouettes of planes—which I used to whet my imagination, were the shorthand to flashes of irrecoverable beauty.

A couple of weeks after coming home from Ohio (on a Martin 404), I untwisted the elastic band, unfolded my list and erased the B-57. You just couldn't take credit for spotting a plane on the ground. The parked, placid B-57 was like a stuffed scarlet tanager I'd seen in the Museum of Natural History, oddly listless. It was too available. The natural habitat of planes was sky: Steep, windy April skies when, in the narrow blue chasms between the fraying walls of stratocumulus, if you were lucky, you could glimpse the mica fleck of a little fighter leaping the gap, catch the lonely echo it left crumbling down the sky-canyon like shreds of shale debris. Hazy late afternoon skies, stained orange, through which you could hear the growl of a Lockheed Constellation heading west but couldn't locate it until it was almost behind Cissels' spruce trees, when the sun hit it right, and the Constellation, kindling like a tiny candelabra in the general glare, lived up to its name. Solid slate skies when sounds carried for miles, and the thin howl of a jet was like the rumor of some great trouble above the clouds. The three-view drawing of the Navy's Douglas Skyknight was my shorthand not just for the experience of seeing it. It was part and parcel of the weather, of the light, of the whole day which had been its habitat.

The day I saw two Skyknights was one of those rare days when, to escape the stifling summer heat, my parents had decided we'd go to the shore. The announcement the night before filled me with quiet determination. Never had we gone to the shore when I hadn't spotted several warplanes—blue Navy planes with white insignias. Even commercial planes like the banal DC-3 acquired new value in military dress, if only because they prefigured the possibility of tougher, faster aircraft. Although I shunned church and was pretty sure I didn't believe in God, the night before we left for the shore I was careful to pray. I asked God to make sure a few jets were around. Then, in case God wondered why I was always asking Him for things and never giving Him anything back, I quickly thanked Him for all the things I knew I should be grateful for, though I couldn't remember exactly what they were at the moment. Finally satisfied that I'd done all I could, I closed my eyes, stretched out on top of the sheets and waited for the fan to lull me to sleep.

The fifty-mile drive south to Sea Bright, in the days before turnpikes, was dull and slow and ugly. But for me it was thrilling. For one thing,



our route crossed two major railways, the B&O in Plainfield and the Pennsylvania in Metuchen. In those days, trains had for me something of the elusive beauty of planes, especially streamlined passenger trains. To behold one of these—say, the *Royal Blue* on its way to Washington—its chrome coach cars basking on the dingy, soot-blackened concrete overpass in the center of Plainfield, left me feeling as if a Queen who was both beautiful and good, from a realm which I was positive had to exist, had deigned, in her silk regalia, to light up the drabness of Plainfield with a promise of some gleaming, streamlined, frictionless future I might someday be ready for.

Farther south, if the day were clear, were glimpses of the Manhattan skyline. My brother and I had memorized the names and shapes of New York's skyscrapers, the way you memorize the names of mountain peaks in order to recognize their countenances. The Empire State Building, the Chrysler Building, the RCA Building—they were like a family standing together in midtown, king, queen and prince. As if the Empire State Building were a movie star, we both agreed that the thin view of him was handsomest. South of Perth Amboy, chugging along in our 1949 Plymouth Suburban, the Manhattan skyline was a cluster of spires so tiny and dim that, like the speck of a high jet, it was all the more tantalizing. On the rare instances when it was clear enough to see it, Stephen and I would get excited. It was as if, out of the characterless huddle of the New Jersey landscape, the faint suggestion of a beautiful and familiar face in profile had appeared on the horizon.

Then there were the bridges—gray, lacy, each with its serious expression, like people we knew out there over the choppy water of Raritan Bay—the serious bridges, old acquaintances we could visit only a few times a year. I'll never fully understand why it is that, as kids, we attach this charge of emotional energy to things. We did it with marbles. *King*, *Big Bubber*—each possessed a personality and an aesthetic ranking. But I think that, even as adults, our apprehension of beauty must always involve some sense of subjective recognition.

Shortly before noon, while the sand was still cool, I glanced up from a wet deviled egg which was like an eyeball I was trying to keep sand out of as I separated it from its waxed paper. My sixth sense for jets had picked up, over the wash of a sadly listless surf, the indolent whistle jets make as they coast. And there they were, two chunky Skyknights maybe a thousand feet up, out over the water, in no hurry, sauntering north toward Sandy Hook. There was no question what they were. And as the

twin specks grew finally indistinguishable from the grains of light and haze to the north somewhere over New York Bay, and I gave the south a cursory surveillance to make sure no more miracles were about to fly out of it, I felt as though a couple of movie stars, Roy Rogers and Gene Autry, had come past and only I had noticed them. I knew that all the hours I spent daydreaming about planes and drawing them had paid off, that it was my devotion, my faith which had enabled the two stalwart Skyknights to manifest themselves out of the hot dreariness of summer vacation.

Beauty—our subjective sense of it, our conviction that we're beholding it—involves, as I've already hinted, a "feeling" which is similar but not identical to the feeling we experience when we recognize something familiar—a face, a car, a landscape. Like a three-year-old lost in a crowded supermarket, who picks out his mother's face, we discover that we have "memorized" the unique character—the singular gestalt—of some part of our experience. But the three-year-old's feeling upon glimpsing "Mommy"—a flood of relief and, perhaps, rage at her for disappearing—isn't aesthetic. For an experience to be aesthetic, it must involve some degree of abstraction. In order that something seem beautiful, we must discover in it some sense of its typicality; for recognition of the beautiful involves a paradox of feelings: a sense of its singularity and typicality both. To me, as a boy, the beauty of the Douglas Skyknight—of the three-view drawing or the actual plane in the air—combined both feelings. Like any familiar face, the Skyknight possessed a unique shape. To identify this shape—to name it—was to attribute to it typicality.

The subtler the set of cues by which we "recognize" something, and the greater the degree of abstraction involved when we match these cues to some abstract pattern, the more "aesthetic" our "feeling" is. The lost three-year-old who finds his mother senses her familiarity but not her typicality. This imbalance between uniqueness and typicality defines the lower limit of the range of aesthetic experience. The upper limit is exceeded by people who too readily reduce a potentially aesthetic experience into an abstraction, who ignore its uniqueness, its quality, and dwell entirely on its typicality. The notion that Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" is a poem "about the Freudian death-wish" is an upper-limit violation. Within these limits lies the range of experience which I'll call "aesthetic" and which I would describe thus: the subjective sense of beauty is an intimation of the

elusive character of experience. We all know that gray suspense of a cold, late-November afternoon, when snow is imminent. Our intimation, "It's going to snow," is aesthetic. When William Stafford writes, "a land that/began to tense itself all day for deliberate snow," we know what he means. And we know exactly what Richard Hugo means in "Duwamish" when he writes, "Gray/cold like the river. Cold like 4 P.M./on Sunday."

There is another aspect to aesthetic experience which perhaps should go without saying. Aesthetic experience is restricted to experience in which we find value. This excludes, by definition, those domains of experience which we associate with shame. It also excludes experience too easily available. For me, as a boy, the deepest aesthetic contemplation entailed trying to summon from a three-view drawing the way the shabby sunlight brushed and slid off the wing-tip tanks of the Starfires as, buoyant in the heat-shimmer, they'd bank way out over the scrub and macadam flats of Otis. It meant trying to describe in my mind's eye the pure trajectories they traced as curve after curve dissolved in the drab afternoon like caresses which never last quite long enough to grasp. It was to squint through field glasses at a tiny, pale arrowhead plunging through a snowy brow of cumulus, working against time to try to match the moment against pages of shapes, to find its name.

The impulse to name something is the impulse to "collect" it in the sense of incorporating it into a familiar context, usually that of a list. This list may be of minerals, stuffed birds or artists' canvasses. It may be simply a list of words, a vocabulary. But the instinct to "collect," in the figurative sense that I use it here, is also aesthetic. In listing the planes I'd glimpsed, I was trying to collect a special type of experience. What I was after was not a literal collection of planes. Had my parents bought me for Christmas a surplus F-80 Shooting Star and trucked it into the backyard, it would, like the B-57 that I erased from my list, have been far less valuable to me than the apparition of those twin Skyknights over Sea Bright. Literal collection didn't satisfy me. That was the lazy and ultimately unexciting alternative to art.

The theme of collection as a perversion of the aesthetic impulse is a familiar one in literature. Probably the most famous poem on the theme is Browning's "My Last Duchess." In the most explicit way, that poem presents the notion that art, epitomized by the painting which the Duke has commissioned of his wife before murdering her, is the best

available means to possess (to the limited extent that it is possible) the most elusive beauty. At the same time, the poem demonstrates in the crudest way that to *literally* own and possess something beautiful, you have to kill it.

The theme of collection as evil abounds in fiction, too. For example, both Gilbert Osmond of Henry James' *Portrait of a Lady* and Edward Casaubon of *Middlemarch* are collectors whose mania for collection is life-destroying. Osmond, who collects art-objects, has transformed his daughter, Pansy, into a sad, perfectly-mannered doll. Once Isabel Archer is in his possession, through marriage, he loses interest in her. The scholar, Casaubon, who possesses, also through marriage, the young, beautiful and serious Dorothea Brooke, maintains her as a peripheral ornament to his life while he busies himself with his life's work, which is, appropriately enough, to compile a "Key to all mythologies." Probably the most gruelling treatment of this theme in prose fiction is John Fowles' *The Collector*, in which a psychopathic young man, by means of chloroform, kidnaps a beautiful, young art student and attempts to keep her as one keeps a pet or a live butterfly in a glass case. In all of these works, we see that to treat the beautiful as part of a tangible collection is to deny its life. Indeed, to freeze movement is to deny the nature of life itself, as illustrated beautifully by the following poem by Albert Goldbarth:

### The Origin of Porno

*1878: the Muybridge equine series*

Studying the horse, we understand  
how hard-core followed the invention  
of photography. There's a dark compelling  
muscle framed by the flanks. There's

a question, an academic question, of at  
which point in a leap the female breast  
is highest? In the early stopwatched studies,  
light slopes down the breasts like a scree. There's

a question of time, there's a sepia  
exactitude. The powder erupts:

in the foreground—two lovers/ a basket/ red wine.  
In the back, a clocked thoroughbred sudses.

*Is there ever a moment when all four feet  
leave the ground? And so we invent pornography.*

It wasn't until the late sixties, when I was living in San Francisco, that I was finally granted my boyhood dream—proximity to a military air base. Our flat, situated near Twin Peaks, faced east directly at Alameda Naval Air Station ten miles across the bay. Late afternoons were best for observing Alameda, when the light would be at my back, and the white buildings assumed a frozen brilliance as they stared blindly at the sun, a hillside of white rubble, and the hard, blue strip of the East Bay looked as if you could step across it.

Through field glasses, you could see the day's training flights straggling in, slow insects floating diagonally down across the powder blue profile of the hills where, as the sun set, a picture window twenty miles away might echo the sun so that even without the field glasses it was as if in the mountains behind Oakland there had lodged a reddish-white star. Most of the jets were Douglas Skyhawks—they resembled bats more than hawks—and McDonnell Phantoms, mean-looking attack planes with wasp-like bodies and stubby, meat-cleaver wings, all business. Sometimes during the day a Phantom would curve back across the bay and over the rooftops, maybe a thousand feet up. It had a characteristic sound, like heavy canvas being ripped. Commercial jets merely roar: military jets fume, snarl.

Once, for a couple of weeks, a carrier like a long gray cloud—the only reminder that there was a war going on—existed out in that silent blue shimmer. On the deck were lined up copies of a snub-nosed jet I couldn't quite identify. They might have been Chance-Vought Corsairs. It no longer mattered very much. Planes, by then, were little more than emblems. No longer was it some elusive shape in the clouds but the larger character of my experience—a dim countenance which, though singular, I think may typify the unlikely ways that a boy in America must follow to satisfy the human tropism to beauty—that I wanted to name.