

# SKYWRITING AS THE LITERAL ICONOGRAPHY OF FLIGHT

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Until Kitty Hawk, the sky was strictly the locus for natural phenomena. For over a century before, occasional balloon flights had been witnessed by relatively few people. But until the twentieth century, most of humanity looking at the sky saw only sun, moon, stars, clouds, birds and perhaps an occasional cloud of locusts. That the heavens contained messages for humanity was long suspected, if only we could understand the codes. Astrology claimed the heavens encoded personal destiny, while meteorology codified variations in rings, phases and shapes of the sun, moon and clouds into predictions of weather patterns. Flights of birds and insects also were considered predictive, as international folklore documents. Different cultures, in different ways, learned to attribute meaning to the natural landscape of the sky. But as a twentieth century byproduct of the invention of controlled flight, skywriting appeared for the first time with a new kind of message in the sky. Skywriting communicated messages to its observers much more directly than meteorological indicators, in direct language that avoided the potential ambiguity of folk-systems, and in a form which demanded decipherment from all observers. In changing the way in which people looked at the sky, skywriting provided a dimension to the twentieth century's public awareness of air flight which inevitably altered public attitudes toward aircraft and the act of flying.

The rapid development of air flight, and the attendant publicity and excitement accompanying this new mode of travel, served to make the aircraft and its act of flight itself a message of sorts. The existence of successful heavier-than-air craft signalled that now human beings could fly, the ancient dream had been realized, and the performances of barnstormers and stunt flyers boldly signalled this triumph. Furthermore, aircraft in the sky meant the pace of modern life had shifted by new orders of magnitude, and each individual aircraft demonstrated this in a new field: speed and endurance records were being established, crops were being dusted, passengers were being moved, mail was being delivered and military weapons were being improved and displayed at a pace unthinkable and unrealizable in the past.

Ground observers became aware of the sounds and sights of planes. Loud aircraft could be seen against the sky, and silent craft were seen catching

the sunlight high above, or were inferred through vapor trails too regular to be clouds.

All these traces and indicators comprised the natural and inevitable consequences of the aircraft performing their functions: except for stunt flyers and record setters, pilots flew for function, not display; the existence of an audience had no bearing upon the success of the flight. When, in the 1920s, skywriting became possible and popular, the message conveyed by the act of flight changed significantly.

Skywriting as a byproduct of controlled flight provided for a number of perceptual and conceptual shifts. One could use the open sky as the location for written messages, for example. This bold yet perhaps inevitable stroke in a country which develops new print formats and media for each new development in transportation (one thinks especially of billboards, Burma Shave signs, bus and taxi advertisement placards), captured the attentions of its potential audience by the nature and form of its appearance. Since a skywriting plane often flies silently and unseen, the apparently spontaneous creation of letters in the sky attracts attention. The heights at which skywriters often work—eight to twelve thousand feet—and the size of the letters—up to a mile long—provide the message with the potential for visibility within a radius of many miles. Even if a viewer's perspective makes the words appear upside down, a strong curiosity to decipher the developing message remains.

A second perceptual shift concerned the way in which the gradual process of creation in skywriting holds and attracts the viewer's attention; a giant invisible hand writes slowly in the sky, creating the great difference between usual reading speeds and the slowness of skywriting. Not only viewer curiosity but anxiety and anticipation about the nature of the message increases.

A memorable scene in the beginning of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) involving a skywriting plane above London provides the focus for hundreds of otherwise unrelated people all around the city:

The sound of an aeroplane bored ominously into the ears of the crowd. There it was coming over the trees, letting out white smoke from behind, which curled and twisted, actually writing something! making letters in the sky! Everyone looked up.

Dropping dead down the aeroplane soared straight up, curved in a loop, raced, sank, rose, and whatever it did,

wherever it went, out fluttered behind it a thick ruffled bar of white smoke which curled and wreathed upon the sky in letters. But what letters? A C was it? an E, then an L? Only for a moment did they lie still; then they moved and melted and were rubbed out in the sky, and the aeroplane shot further away and again, in a fresh space of sky, began writing an K, an E, a Y perhaps?<sup>1</sup>

Woolf provides the response of a number of different people who look at and try to decipher the message; the most interesting response is that of Septimus Warren Smith:

So, thought Septimus, looking up, they are signalling to me. Not indeed in actual words; that is, he could not read the language yet; but it was plain enough, this beauty, this exquisite beauty, and tears filled his eyes as he looked at the smoke words languishing and melting in the sky and bestowing upon him in their inexhaustible charity and laughing goodness one shape after another of unimaginable beauty and signalling their intention to provide him, for nothing, for ever, for looking merely, with beauty, more beauty! Tears ran down his cheeks. (p. 31)

Septimus' response indicates possible insanity, but his reaction to skywriting contains the key to the enormous potential power of skywriting for even sophisticated audiences of today.

Speculating upon the abstract shapes of clouds, and eventually finding shapes of animals and faces within the shifting form, plays a familiar role in everyone's childhood. Psychologists would explain how we were projecting upon the ambiguous field of cloud shapes and shadows. Only the child's magical thinking would allow the actual existence of the animals and beasts whose shapes were momentarily discerned in the sky. However, when clouds spontaneously appear and unambiguously form into recognizable letters and familiar words, a magical response may not be so inappropriate after all. The reordering of clouds into specific messages must rank fairly high as a divine sign. When Septimus concludes that a greater intelligence is at work above him, he merely responds appropriately to the information of his senses: divine intervention does enter into the meteorological affairs of our planet. Other viewers lose their wonder by classifying the event as "skywriting," but even acknowledgment of the plane and pilot should not blind us to the peculiar characteristics of this unique mode of written communication.

Of course skywritten messages are subject to distortions uncommon in conventional written formats. Wind and the gradual breakdown of the letters severely limit the length of time during which the skywriting will have sufficient coherence to be perceived as a message. Thus, each viewer becomes involved in the process of creation, fulfillment and destruction; the message exists only when it can be

read, and sometimes never exists in its entirety at all. Spectators, observing this entire cycle, may justifiably feel special pleasure in being present throughout this unique, nonrecoverable and nonrepeatable event. Frequently the first letters of a message are fading beyond recognition even before the final letters have been formed; when this happens the entire message exists only in the individual memory of the viewer. In very real ways, skywritten messages require alert and involved viewers for their very existence as messages: a situation quite unlike that of billboards or other public media. A billboard, once created, successfully transfers its message to any potential reader at any time; skywriting must involve each potential observer during the few minutes of its existence. Each observer necessarily creates the skywritten message by first noticing, then anticipating, next deciphering and finally remembering each letter and word until a total message is perceived, remembered and reconstructed.

The viewer's curiosity about the message creates anticipation of each forming letter, and curiosity about the total message imprints each letter in the viewer's imagination long after distorted beyond recognition by the wind. In a most unusual act of cooperation with the advertiser, viewers of skywriting will do everything in their power to maintain the integrity of messages, in comparison with their normal screening and rejection of similar messages in ordinary circumstances.

Is all this attention merely curiosity? Aesthetic appeal may exist as well. Seeing the gradual distortion of these letter clouds, and the reversion of unnatural skywritten messages into wispy cloud-forms, restores the expected skyscape. However, the extent to which viewers mentally retain and remember the meanings of the dissolving letters suggests a conscious struggle against the inevitable reversion of all meanings into chaos and deconstruction, contrary to the way that drivers greet the removal of billboards from scenic roads with no mourning for the missing messages. But since destruction of skywritten messages is inevitable, our focus upon the transitory message which exists only as a passing stage for each cloud form suggests the powerful forces of curiosity and coherence for contemporary readers of these sky-texts.

Viewers seek out coherence, patiently waiting out the skywriter's slow, unnatural inscription upon the sky. Skywriting defies natural processes, first by mimicking cloud formations, then by inducing viewers to prefer the moment of recognizable form over the minutes of more cloud-like wispieness. Perhaps Septimus Warren Smith's sense that some

greater power signals to him still remains in the compulsion we maintain about deciphering and seeing through to completion each message. The orderly processes of our culture, specializing in marketing the resources of nature and manufacturing needs extending far beyond natural demands, may be most clearly seen in this curious phenomenon of skywriting. We willingly, voluntarily and irresistibly participate in the transformation of the formless sky into a giant message board, and maintain the messages in our minds even as their letters lose coherence, fade and shift into pure form, like the clouds they mock.

The essential attraction of skywriting exists in a constant tension between language as form and language as received meaning. The game for viewers involves anticipating forms as the skywriting plane creates letters, identifying words as letters gather in the sky and imagining messages as words are added to each other; then, as natural forces destroy the formal properties of the letters, the process changes from anticipatory to recollective, with the added challenge of observing increasingly distorted letters while attempting to mentally preserve their integrity as meaningful language signals. There is a bit of magic involved—just as the original appearance of symbol and order in the free form sky signals defiance of conventional rules of order, so does the viewer defy chaos by retaining the intended messages long after their shapes have lost their ability to signify meaning.

In all these ways skywriting represents the antithesis of conventional written formats whose visual form of language functions as the more or less lucid pointer to the essential encapsulated meanings. Conventional communications are most efficient as the texts are most transparent. But, in skywriting, the signalled meaning stands as a temporary phase during the production of a transitory message.

The viewer's struggle to preserve order from chaos parallels the act of flight which made possible the very potential of skywriting. Aircraft struggle for order and existence in the precarious equilibrium of flight, with gravity constantly threatening their defiant movements; viewers of skywriting, maintaining conceptual order through deliberate acts of concentration and recollection, must recognize the precariousness of this unique display.

The appearance of skywriting alters viewer perception of and reflection about the aircraft involved just as it changes response to conventional language. Jet trails, the more common traces of flight, imply movement oblivious of, and only accidentally observed by, viewers on the ground. Skywriting calls attention to itself and to its purpose of communicating with its viewers; the aircraft

involved, rather than serving as a container for travelers, exists only for the purpose of inscribing a momentary but nonetheless visible trace upon the sky. The skywriting aircraft flies not to travel or transport people or objects but flies only to call attention to its flight—a pure motive—and having gathered attention to itself, then uses its flight to direct attention to a paid commercial message—a motive perhaps less pure.

Commercial corruption notwithstanding, skywriting as an act serves as the most dramatic signifier of controlled flight. While its literal meaning may remain tentative, precarious and transitory, its very existence focuses attention upon the aircraft as its creator, the pilot as its scribe, and the plane as its stylus, with the slowly unfolding drama literally writing large what all viewers recognize as forms they can only write small. Skywriting makes visible the movements and potentials of controlled flight in a dramatic way which the straight lines of jet trails can never match. The skywriter flies to demonstrate precision and control, accepting the difficulties of creating language against a backdrop of natural signifiers and performing only for observers upon the ground. The action is pure, although the message usually is base. The activity of skywriting itself and the magic of its trace upon the sky is remembered, long past the recollection of the fading text.

From formlessness we seek form, and when form takes the shape of meaning, we seize these few moments in this continuum of signification to commemorate the occasion. For ultimately skywriting represents a public ritual uniting all observers in a shared occasion of creation and appreciation. Members of a single culture all agree to find and affirm order even though the message is trivial, the occasion transitory and the location inappropriate, violating the open sky. As members of the twentieth century all recognize the medium as the message of controlled flight, a pure act celebrating freedom from the ground and control over the air. All viewers of skywriting witness the creation, but the transient sky-text has only the force of its literal meaning. The fact of flight, collectively appreciated in recollected memory, lies behind our fascination with writing in the sky.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (New York: Random House, 1925), p. 29. Subsequent references from this novel will be noted in the text.

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