



**HAL**  
open science

# Celestial Apparitions: Media-machine, Broadcasting and Aerial Advertising

Ghislain Thibault

► **To cite this version:**

Ghislain Thibault. Celestial Apparitions: Media-machine, Broadcasting and Aerial Advertising. *Media Theory*, 2022, Into the Air, 5 (2), pp.100-122. hal-03815661

**HAL Id: hal-03815661**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03815661>**

Submitted on 14 Oct 2022

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution - NonCommercial - NoDerivatives 4.0 International License



---

**Celestial Apparitions:  
Media-machine, Broadcasting  
and Aerial Advertising**

**GHISLAIN THIBAUT**

Université de Montréal, CANADA

*Media Theory*  
Vol. 5 | No. 2 | 99-122  
© The Author(s) 2021  
CC-BY-NC-ND  
<http://mediatheoryjournal.org/>

**Abstract**

In the interwar period, as commercial aviation was beginning to take shape, a range of technical innovations led to the development of the field of ‘aerial advertising’. Aerial advertising took on various media forms (sonic, visual, textual) and supports (leaflets, light projections, billboard-like print advertising, smoke, audio speakers) and turned to the sky as screen, support, milieu or medium for mass communication. This essay sets out to revisit the case of aerial advertising, mobilizing some of the key lessons and themes from *Speaking into the Air*. I explore the specific symbolic and technical configurations of transportation and communication put forth by aerial advertising. Then, turning to the two foundational models of dissemination and dialogue, I address the ambiguous role of pilots as speakers/writers. Finally, I use the case of aerial advertising to explore some of the negotiations around the various meanings of broadcasting and conclude on the question of the persistence of presence.

**Keywords**

Aerial advertising, broadcasting, history of mass media, sky, social meanings of technology

It was not just a new regime of visual perception that was inaugurated with the colonization of sky, it was also a new, vertical axis of communication. Flying technologies, beginning with the balloon in the eighteenth century, helped to structure the sky as a space *through which* one could bypass terrestrial transportation routes, but also *from which* one could see and even speak from above. Meanwhile, the general curiosity associated with the sight of aerial technologies from the ground made them

peculiar objects of attention. It was in this specific configuration of technological progresses, cultural sensibilities, and theoretical assumptions about the power of persuasion of widely disseminated messages that the phenomenon of ‘aerial advertising’ developed in the first half of the twentieth century. The promoters of aerial advertising developed a wide range of techniques, turning to the sky as an untapped screen, medium, support, background or channel for mass advertising campaigns. Aerial advertising techniques were varied and cut across media forms: they included the use of the surface of balloons and blimps (manned and not) in a billboard-like manner to display brand names; the dropping of propaganda leaflets or advertising handbills from the air; printed advertisement banners towed by airplanes; skywriting and sky shouting.

For a time, aerial communication was perceived as key to the future of both advertising and commercial aviation. Its promoters in the 1930s and 1940s had great hopes about the development and efficacy of advertising messages seen in the sky. Such a vision permeated also through various imageries of the future of urban life depicting the skyscape as a space buzzing with moving machines and billboards (Taylor, 2016). Aerial advertising, it turned out, never grew into a dominant media form the way radio, television, film and magazines have. Its prevalence as an advertising technique is now mostly folkloric and its memory is rather inglorious, seen as the feat and fancy of a few aviators turned marketers. They are also rather marginal in media studies and media history scholarship. For instance, Raymond Williams, in addressing the “new media” of market control and the symbolic revaluation of goods through advertising, mentions only in passing the technique of skywriting as “frills” (1980: 419). Small space has also been given to the *Project Revere* in the history of communication studies as a research field. This large and costly research project on the efficacy of persuasion of airborne propaganda, undertaken at the University of Washington in the 1950s, is nowhere near as frequently mentioned as the Payne Foundation’s research on motion picture or the Radio Research Project—to name those two (Simpson, 1996; Pinkerton et al., 2011).

Despite its marginality (or perhaps *thanks* to its marginality), I argue that aerial advertising is a singular point of entry into better understanding the negotiations around the competing meanings, institutions, models, ideals, and technologies of ‘broadcasting’. Like many in this special issue, the essay sets out to explore these

negotiations through a conversation with John Durham Peters' *Speaking into the Air*. As was the case for most readers of *Speaking into the Air*, I am sure, I could never think of the concept of *broadcasting* the same way again after reading the book. Peters interweaves broadcasting's literal and metaphorical meanings, articulates the ramifications of those meanings for communication and modern mass media, and shows some of the alternative paths that it could have taken. Furthermore, Peters invites us to decenter the established and purified views of the notion of broadcast media.

By attending to the history of aerial advertising together with *Speaking into the Air*, this essay is articulated around some of the key lessons and themes from the book, with the goal of documenting a lesser-known case within the "broadcast paradigm" (Simonson, 2010) as it formed in the first half of the twentieth century. In the first section, I provide an overview of the convergent forces of advertising, flight technology, urbanization and mass communication in the early twentieth century in order to situate the 'field' of aerial advertising within its sociohistorical context, with an emphasis on how the attention for flying machines has been curated. Then, I address the tension between transportation and communication and explore how the milieu and infrastructures of aerial advertising were central to a rhetoric about the efficiency of its communication. Aerial advertising ultimately was reinforcing both presence and materiality as central features of mass communication. In the third section, I address the construction of the 'speaker/writer' as part of the larger apparatus of the broadcasting communication model. I return to Peters' notions of dissemination and dialogue to show a range of material and sociocultural conditions that made it impossible for pilots to be the 'sowers' we might have wanted them to be. Finally, I analyze the ways both the metaphorical and literal meanings of broadcasting have been articulated along with discourses on aerial advertising.

### **Machine-Media: Things Seen in the Sky**

In 1908, Henri Rousseau completed a series of landscapes rendering the sight of celestial machines in the skies around Paris. In *Paysage avec le dirigeable Patrie*, Rousseau painted a dirigible. Then, in *Pêcheurs à la ligne*, he introduced the airplane, an invention that was only a few years old at that time. And again in 1908, Rousseau reunited both

types of aircraft with the balloon in *Vue du pont de Sèvres*. In these scenes by Rousseau, the apparition of flying machines in the sky is not shocking or ghostly: fishermen fish, walkers stroll, life continues on uninterrupted on the ground, while sky giants drift across the sky. The sky had long been a space inaccessible to us, reserved for the apparition, real or imagined, of animals, angels, and aliens. If not downright indifference, the scenes show a surprising peaceful acculturation to flying machines that had begun to occupy the skyscape with the balloon in the late eighteenth century.

Rousseau's scenes tell only one side of the story of the cultural reception of flight technology. Balloons, blimps, and airplanes were also the subjects of sustained attention and fascination, being, as Derek McCormack calls them, "technologies of captivity" (2018). The balloon-mania of the late eighteenth century in Europe, the immense popularity of postcards with zeppelins and blimps in the first decades of the twentieth century in France and Germany, the commercial and political sensations of 'flying circuses' and 'air shows' in the United States and the UK in the early twentieth century, and the accounts of crowds gathering to cheer for passengers and crews who had made a transatlantic crossing—all of those cultural phenomena also emphasized the sustained power of attraction held by flying machines.

Historians of aviation have noted the remarkable vigor with which flight has been construed as spectacle, especially in the United States (Edgerton, 1991; Wohl, 2005). The sight of machines in the sky might have been reaffirming humans' technoscientific triumph over a wild and inaccessible space. However, the attention it was given was also the result of social and political curation through the symbolization and spectacularization of flight technology. In the specific case of the aerial shows in the first half of the twentieth century, Peter Adey (2010) argues that the aviation industry built the conditions (material and discursive) to increase the visibility of aircrafts as an explicit means of advocacy for aviation itself. Military and commercial airshows smoothed the way for the introduction of flight technology into modern life while enforcing modes of seeing and ways of being with flight technology (Rech, 2015). The display of aerial technology was one way to curate and encourage 'airminded-ness', a recurring topic in the nascent aviation industry (Holman, 2019).



**Figure 1:** Mellin's Food Advertising Blimp, 1903

The fascination for the sight of machines in the sky (albeit curated and volatile) was soon exploited for communication at a distance. In the nineteenth century, merchants and inventors made use of balloons to advertise the name of a product, the location of a store, or publicize a political statement. The high visibility of the sky, and the figure/ground contrast of something seen up there, gave it a particular appeal for communication at a distance. A race to “go up” was evident in the nineteenth-century urban centers (Taylor, 2016). The surfaces of many hot-air balloons had been adorned with colorful palettes (often in a patriotic way) and painted letters. In metropolises across the world, increasingly tall buildings were themselves crowned with billboards (also often referred to as “sky-signs”), visible from the streets. Several types of balloons were a normal sight in many cities. Dreams of light projection onto the night sky were also a frequent theme in the community of electrical inventors (Marvin, 1988; Huhtamo, 2009). The early blimps—with their large fabric sides and slow pace—were

soon turned into “flying billboards”. For instance, British aeronaut Stanley Spencer solicited the Mellin’s Food company in 1903 to use a dirigible exclusively for advertising its brand above London’s Crystal Palace (*Star*, 1903). Similar sightings were reported over London, Berlin, and Paris between the start of the century and the First World War (Figure 1).

In the interwar period, innovations in the nascent ‘field’ of aerial advertising picked up speed and momentum, especially in the United States. Blimps bearing advertisements re-entered the air space. Advertisement banners towed by planes were noticed in skylines. In the early 1920s, skywriting was introduced as a novel method using smoke-like vapor to ‘write’ short words in the sky. The dropping of commercial coupons (the peacetime equivalent of airborne propaganda leaflet campaigns) was also experimented with, and so was the phenomenon of ‘sky shouting’ that New Yorkers were the first to experience in 1927. It consisted of speakerphones installed on planes playing music and crying out the names of a brand to the unfortunate pedestrians down below.

Through these specific configurations of technologies, professional practices, social actors and theoretical assumptions about audiences and mass communication, the ‘field’ of aerial advertising took shape. What held this field together under the common label of ‘aerial advertising’ was a geospatial commitment: they operated in the sky. One central feature of aerial advertising was the explicit and literal telescoping of transportation and communication, at a time when several other communication technologies had engaged in their separation. *Speaking into the Air* addresses the prevalence of discourses on telegraphy and radio that participated to accelerate the perceived divorce of the physicality of transportation and the ethereality of communication. Turning to Cooley’s *Theory of Transportation* as a precursory view of the erosion of physical presence in communication, and to James W. Carey’s work, Peters re-examines the complex articulation of body and presence through the rise of telecommunication technologies. The case of aerial advertising provides a different point of entry into this separation of transportation and communication: it is rather a case of the persistence of physical and material presence as one of the ideal models of communication.

## Selling Visibility

When the First World War ended, flight technologies returned to the civil sphere after having been enlisted into the war effort. This war had been marked by the colonization of the airspace as battlefield: airplanes and balloons were instrumentalized for combat, transport, surveillance and communication (Kaplan, 2018; Parks, 2018). When the war ended, there was an explicit need to find new functions for the airplane fleets, pilots, and crews. The interwar period became an active moment of experimentation around the potentialities of commercial aviation. Only retrospectively do we assume that the transport of passengers was the obvious future development of airplanes. Many passengers were flying for thrills, not so much to travel great distances, and the aviation industry was toying with a range of possible avenues for the development of modern flying, including airmail, aerial photography, border and harbor patrol, naval observation, forestry and agricultural surveys. Mass communication, conducted from above, was one function among others which was explored and exploited by the nascent community of commercial aviation.

The sky constituted in the minds of many a space to be exploited for its power of attraction. Haven't we gazed at the sky since immemorial times? The sky was seen as a blank and untouched canvas, a background against which unusual and moving objects stood out. An enthusiast of aerial advertising writes in 1935 in *Popular Aviation*:

People are constantly aware of advertisements, both on the ground and underground, indoors and outdoors, the only place we have failed to receive these messages from the beginning of time is in the heavens, to which our eyes are directed many times each day because of its marvelous and ever-changing beauties. So it is only natural that a message from there is clear, impressive and direct, and remembered over thousands of other messages received by our eyes and ears in the ordinary ways (Kemp, 1935).

Here, the writer notes our humanly inclination to look up at the sky, but we are also permitted to notice how he is, consciously or not, tapping into the mystical experience of receiving a message from above, as he opposes aerial advertising to the 'ordinary ways'. The *extra-ordinary* nature of communication from and within the sky might gesture towards the mystical revelation of angels bearing messages (the Greek *angelos*,



of course, means messengers). The fact that he qualifies the reception of a message “*from there*” as “clear, impressive and direct” is yet another instantiation of Socrates’ idealization of pure dialogue as non-mediated communication, a *communio* really (Peters, 1999: 37), where reciprocity is achieved not much through the technical means of being able to speak back, but through spiritual connection.

Yet we might also read this passage in earthlier (and more critical) ways. What the observer from *Popular Aviation* is also explicitly suggesting is that, down on earth, the urban spaces were already saturated with advertisements. The experience of urban life since the late nineteenth century was overladen by promotional communication: print-based ephemera (handbills, flyers, posters), visual media (billboards and sky signs), electrical signs, balloons, banners (Henkin, 1998; Taylor, 2012; R.H. Williams, 1982). A vast ecology of media objects competed for the attention of the citizen turned consumer, and in that context, the sky offered two advantages. First, it was highly visible, even from a distance; second, and perhaps more importantly, access to it was restricted to a few. The logic seemed to be that since appearances in the sky were rare, as opposed to the ubiquity and saturation of advertisements in other realms of life, then they might attract more attention. Yet access to the sky was dictated by governmental, commercial and military elites that asserted the control over the right to enter the airspace. In Innisian terms, those who held the monopoly of accessing the necessary infrastructure to reach the sky equally had the right, or at least the ability, to speak from there.

If this conjunction of great visibility and autocratic access of the sky seemed like the perfect conditions for marketers, many in the targeted ‘audiences’ down below were not so keen about the idea to have their celestial reveries taken up by advertising. The view that the sky was a sacrosanct place was shared by many and the apparition of brand names disguised as heaven-sent messages was more profanation than epiphany of them. A writer for *The New York Times* called skywriting “celestial vandalism” on the “walls of heavens” in 1923 (De Cassere); another in 1927 (Bard) was outraged by the phenomenon of “commercializing the sky”, arguing that it was “the misappropriation of a public property by private individuals for private profit”. In France, philosopher Alain, after visiting the *Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs* in Paris in 1925, was stunned that industrialist Citroën had adorned the Eiffel Tower with

electric lights forming the name Citroën. Alain writes: “The sky opens itself to the apotheosis of an aperitif or of a pharmaceutical novelty, and a large, silent writing is now covering the celestial mural” (1925, author’s translation). Comments about the vulgarity and insolence of violating the sky with visual ads in the press and elsewhere represented a shared view that the sky, unlike other earthly spaces, should be protected as commons. It must have been annoying too that the only genre of communication in the sky was promotional. The ‘social contract’ of newspaper and radio was that in return of being exposed to advertising, one would be informed or entertained. The broadcasting industry was based on the fragile equilibrium between news, education, and entertainment *along with* advertisement. Aerial advertising achieved little in providing various genres that fulfilled other social functions.

The marketing agencies and owners of aerial communication technologies, however, believed that the sight of a machine in the sky was sufficiently dazzling and wonderful (entertaining, perhaps?) that it would, by itself, draw both the public’s attention and adherence. And to be fair, the enthusiasm for flying machines had proven to be real. The answer was: could it last?



**Figure 2:** Goodyear Blimp, Chicago World Fair, 1933.

From a media studies perspective, the gamble of the aerial advertising promoters meant that the medium of aerial advertising was the prime carrier of meaning and attention, *not what was said or written*. Aerial advertising was positioned as experience—the witnessing of humans taming the sky with their wonderful flying machines—“brought to you by [...]” more so than the godly apparition of a message.

Consider the rhetoric used by the *New England Airship Corporation*. Created in 1930, the small Massachusetts company sought to pursue advertising campaigns using an airship that its owner had bought from Goodyear. The blimp manufacturer had famously been using a blimp to advertise its brand, showcasing both the product and manufacturer (Figure 2). The founder of the *New England Airship Corporation* saw the Goodyear blimp as a sound business opportunity and hoped to secure lucrative contracts with corporations dreaming of having their names up in the firmament. The NC-18A ship was delivered by Goodyear-Zeppelin in May 1930, and the company signed a first client, Enna Jettick Shoes. The blimp’s gondola afforded a few passengers and the idea was also to take civilians for a short trip up in the air, while its large side displayed a brand name to everyone down below.

The sales pitch that the owner of the *New England Airship Corporation* made to various large corporations (among others Ford, Campbell, Kodak, Heinz) in the 1930s clearly situate the blimp itself, a “unique advertising medium”, as the focal point of the marketing strategy. “Please reflect a moment and visualize this airship”, each letter began, “making frequent stops in selected locations where the citizenry have never before had an opportunity to observe a lighter-than-air ship” (New England Airship Corporation, 1936). The logic here was that the sight of aircrafts was going to perpetually attract attention.

Nothing could be more uncertain: the more commercial aviation grew, the more everyone became accustomed to seeing aircrafts of all kinds. Thus, habituation to celestial apparitions was aerial advertising’s greatest menace. A 1936 commentator for the *Aviation Magazine* joked in the story of a banner-towing pilot who resorted to using a siren to make his presence known: “Who would have thought that I’d live to see the day when an airplane would need a horn to attract attention?” (Osborne, 1936). Arguably, banalization is the fate of most ‘new’ technology and media. As Tom Gunning noted on the experience of novelty as it has been shaped by modern

discourses and institutions, “astonishment is inherently an unstable and temporary experience. One finds it difficult to be continually astonished by the same thing” (2013: 41). The banal usually supersedes the sublime and it also usually impacts support more so than content. After the amazement of *seeing* a television set for the first time, we end up just *watching* what’s on the air. What was there to watch with aerial advertising after the sight of aircrafts was no longer sublime? The CEO of the *New England Airship Corporation* somehow knew this. In an undated sales pitch close to wishful thinking, he writes: “Even the youngsters are getting used to aeroplanes and hardly glance at the sky when one passes, but the most *blasé* is all ears and eyes when the giant Blimp, ENNA JETTICK comes cruising down from the sky”.

Putting the spotlight on the social meaning of its communication infrastructure, the promoters of aerial advertising were equally exposed to the changing moods about the technologies supporting the dissemination of messages. Habituation was one such attitude that quietly but surely permeated the reception of flight technology, but fear and dislike were also part of the lot. Unlike radio and television sets, aircraft performed functions other than communication, and their symbolic meanings changed accordingly. Blimps had been used to bomb London during the First World War; who in this city would cheer up at the sight of one bearing the logo of a cereal brand? Parisians were in a similar mood at the beginning of the interwar period. In 1919, an advertisement firm used airplanes to drop coupons all over the city. A newspaper wrote: “Sometimes the sound of an engine disturbs the tranquility of the sky, silent once again, and the Parisians look up, stunned for a minute and wondering if the times when the humming of the Berthas have returned [...] They ask themselves what business aircrafts have to do at the zenith of Paris in peacetime” (*Le journal des débats politiques*, 1919: 1, author’s translation). In the United States, the blimp’s cultural appreciation also atrophied all through the interwar period: not only was the Zeppelin becoming a symbol of foreign technological progress (Syon, 2007), but the *Hindenburg* accident on May 6, 1937 sealed its fate as a deadly, dangerous machine.

One of the last business pitches in the archive *New England Airship Corporation* is dated May 5, 1937, the day before the accident. The letter was addressed to Weetabix and, if the archives are complete, received no reply. On May 6, the CEO began to cut

newspaper clippings about the *Hindenburg*, the lethal blow to his “unique advertising medium”.

## Speaking from the Air

The institutions adopting the logic of the broadcasting model end up creating, technically and culturally, the illusion that there is one single ‘orator’ whose strong and salient voice is heard by vast audiences. However, broadcasting enlists a vast number of social actors whose participation to the various aspects of transmission are rendered invisible and anonymous. The same way as we zoom out of a news anchor’s desk to discover an industrious team of cameramen and camerawomen, set designers, assistant producers and script supervisors, any broadcasting operation is a large collective of social actors. The question then becomes: in a broadcasting model, *who* speaks?

While it is assumed that it is the ‘client’ in advertising, that is the entity speaking, the case of aerial advertising, and especially that of skywriting, offers an intriguing reconfiguration of these many roles. Skywriting was introduced in the 1920s by British pilot John C. Savage, who devised a method of releasing chemicals in the wake of the airplane, leaving a trail of smoke-like vapor (although previous experiments with smoke and airplanes had been performed before, see Burnett, 2015). Letters could be drawn in the sky by activating the device and through careful movements of the plane. They would slowly appear as the skywriter executed his stunt and remained visible for a few minutes. Savage patented the receptacle located at the rear of the aircraft that contained the undisclosed mix of chemicals and trained pilots in this novel method of ‘writing’. In 1923, he secured a contract with Lucky Strike cigarettes in the United States and, that year, skywriting was described as the “advertising sensation”.

While other advertising techniques tend to conceal the technicians, writers, creative minds, marketing agents, stenographers, typists, illustrators and others as the collective ‘authors’ of an advertisement message, skywriting pilots were at center stage of the advertising technique. As is the case with other aerial advertising media, the meaningfulness of the skywriting message positively relied on its process of production: the *writing* in the sky. Culturally and politically, skywriting was a part of the spectacularization of flying techniques (many of which, dangerous, were displayed in aerial shows and ‘flying circuses’) and of the heroization of the pilot in political and

popular culture. It is telling that when skywriting raised concerns in the UK in the 1920s, Savage put forth the argument before the House of Commons Committee on Skywriting that it kept the military pilots in training (British House of Commons, 1932).



Figure 3: Pepsi-Cola Company, print advertisement, c. 1940.

Emphasis in the popular press addressing skywriting was on the ‘writing’ more so than on what was said (and what was said, indeed, was usually no more than a brand name or a short sentence). The industry may have chosen otherwise. Skywriting could have been performed with an aura of mystery and magic, keeping both the plane and pilot at bay to offer the illusion of spontaneous apparitions in the sky: heaven-sent, cloud-like, messages. On the contrary, skywriting was promoted as a flying stunt and as a public event. For instance, the *Skywriting Corporation of America* (the leading skywriting company in the United States) did everything it could to provide as many details as possible regarding its performance. Like the *New England Airship Company*, it was foremost advertising its novel advertising technique. For most skywriting events in the 1940s, the stage was put up in advance: the skywriting was planned and announced in

other media days before, along with the message to be written, the name of the pilot and details about the aircraft to be used (Figure 3).

Press kits along with canvases of interviews and the photograph of the pilots were distributed to local news outlets. The writing in the sky was constructed as a spectacular event, with the pilot at its center. The skywriting pilots were constantly put in the role of ‘writers’. The press used every possible pun, wordplay, metaphor, and poetic formulation about writing and writers alike, speaking of the skilled “aerial penman” and “sky scribblers” able to perform “the art of heavenly chirography”, the “handwriting on the sky”, the “celestial posters” with a “pencil of smoke on the walls of heaven”. While pilots were already imbued with the reputation of popular heroes for their dedication and courage in defending their country, praised for their technical prowess, agility, and general composure, their role as ‘writers’, however, was more complex.

Like that of any typist, the labor of skywriting pilots was rationalized, controlled, and expected to be performed within set parameters. Pilots were tasked, and paid, to write someone else’s precise words. In this communication scheme, then, skywriting pilots are nothing but the ventriloquist through which someone else is speaking, with the suppressed possibility of writing for themselves. Yet unlike ghost writers and teams of marketers whose authorship is invisibilized, the skywriting pilots performed their writing gestures in public manner. They were also expected to embrace the heroic personae of the pilot. The press kits from Pepsi Cola in the 1940s, for instance, encouraged local newspapers and radio to provide full coverage of the arrival of the skywriting pilot in a local airport and to conduct interviews with him.

The ‘calligraphy’ of the pilot was the weak link within a system bound for standardized precision: clients paid for their slogans, company names, or sentences to be legible. With such a difficult medium as smoke, which is ephemeral and inconsistent, the skywriting pilot needed to ensure legibility. Their job turned out to be mechanical and repetitive. Like factory workers, skywriters in the 1940s performed the same routine hundreds of times. A *Young America* magazine article from 1938 warns the young, hopeful skywriter about what the work is really like: “it’s a dull and taxing job for which few fliers are qualified [...] the skywriter flies according to a chart, doing timed turns without frills” (*Young America*, 1938). The skywriting pilot was expected to behave like

a typing machine to perform uniform, clear and legible writing. Legibility was even key in one policy decision. Faced with outrage from the Hollywood studios that saw skywriting over Los Angeles as a problem for outdoor shooting, the California Aeronautics Commission denied a request from the city of Los Angeles to ban skywriting in 1948, arguing that “neatly executed signs in the sky are no more a desecration of nature than a roadside billboard” (Eaton Manufacturers, 1949, my emphasis).

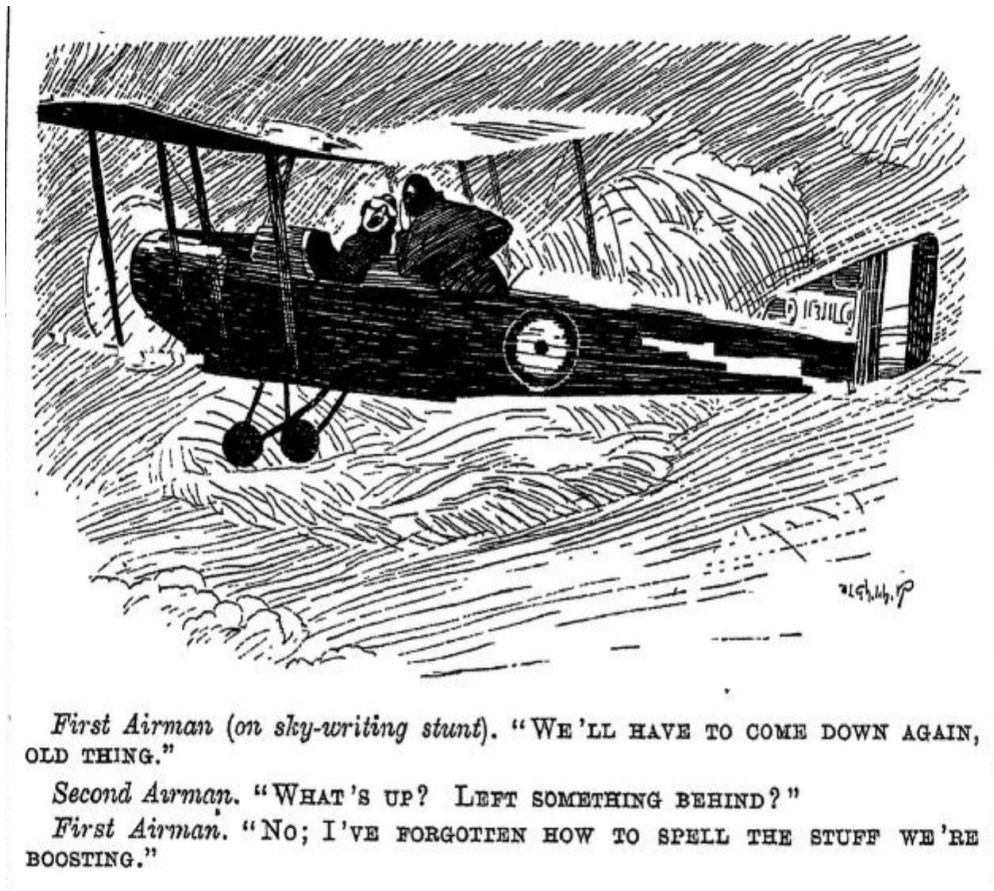


Figure 4: Punch Magazine, September 6, 1922.

A central trope around the skywriting phenomenon and the community of pilots was misspelling. Plenty of anecdotes and stories circulated in the popular press about skywriting pilots who had made grammatical errors, typos, or produced an unintended play on words. A *Life Magazine* article on skywriting reported, for instance, that “one of the most embarrassing errors in skywriting history was made over New York City by a pilot assigned to write Air Show. He forgot the H, and the words which he left floating over a puzzled metropolis were: Air Sow” (*Life Magazine*, 1940). The



importance of the theme of typos reinforces the imperative of legibility and standardization of sky-*writing*.

In a *Punch Magazine* cartoon from 1922, which was also kept in the archive of the *Skywriting Corporation of America*, the pilot announces he has to come down because he has “forgotten how to spell the stuff [they were] boosting” (Figure 4).

These anecdotes are told with a fair degree of humor and lightmindedness, as if these errors or misspellings could be forgiven, in a ‘*boys will be boys*’ manner. They are telling of the gendered expectations around the aptitudes and skills required for flying, on the one hand, and spelling, on the other. The source of mockery was rarely the pilot’s flying skills, emphasis was rather on his lack of spelling skills. Even the canvas interview conducted with pilots under contract with the *Skywriting Corporation of America* in the 1940s included the question “Have you ever misspelled Pepsi-Cola?” which many pilots answered in a playful way (“Not yet, give me time”, answered one). As a ‘pilot’, then, the skywriter occupies a highly masculinized role but as a ‘typist’, a highly feminized profession, he is not expected to perform as flawlessly. Legibility was key to flying aptitudes; spelling was key to writing.

The jokes around misspellings, promoted from within the community itself, might have served to avoid positioning the heroic pilot into the role of a typist, a female profession. Most typists were women, whether it was stenographers, typewriters, telegraph operators. Their work in transcribing other’s words, said or written, had to be irreproachable. Lisa Gitelman has shown in the case of telegraphy how the establishment of “automatic telegraphy” (a system with perforated strips of paper) caused a shift in the affection of tasks to women. Because the automatic telegraphic system involved repetitive, simple and mechanical tasks, its operation could be given to “low paid girls instead of [to] more highly paid male ‘first class operators’” (Gitelman, 1999: 191). Perhaps the emphasis by skywriters on the range of the technical skills they developed in order to maneuver the plane was there to resolve, discursively, the tension around the gender biases of mechanical labor.

## **The Parody of the Sower**

There is more, however, to be said of the 1937 anecdote about the “air sow” in *Life Magazine*. What a great slip of tongue, indeed, to explore the interplay between the

---

literal and metaphorical meanings of “broadcasting” in the early twentieth century. “Broadcasting,” Peters writes, “was a complex social accomplishment” and did not, at first, refer to any “organized social practice” (1999: 34, 207). He recalls how the term designated a specific technique in agriculture (the random scattering of seeds) and came to be, in the nineteenth century, a synonym of “scattered” (207). He also argues that broadcasting evokes the conception of communication as dissemination found in the Christian parable of the sower: “In the synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke [...] the Word is scattered uniformly, addressed to no one in particular, and open in its destiny” (Peters, 1999: 35). In the twentieth century, the concept of broadcasting was attached to radio once its communication model was stabilized into the centralized sociotechnical system we now know (207).

The denial of dialogue (or the “suspension of reciprocity” (Peters, 1999: 53)) that is now solidly attached to mass media was not ineluctable. Along with Peters, several media historians have shown how radio was at first technically configured as a bidirectional medium, and the centralized model it became was largely, although not exclusively, the result of sociopolitical contingencies (Douglas, 2004; Sterne, 2003). But even as radio grew into a model that favored dissemination over dialogue, Peters encourages us to reconsider the possibilities of dissemination as an ethical, even “salutary” (1999: 59) configuration of human communication. To speak from the *bēma*, from the slope of a mountain or from the top of a tower, does not always result in the imposition of one’s stronger voice and higher position upon those down below; it is also a place from which it is possible to teach, tell stories, elevate discourse, and perhaps even touch hearts and souls.

Aerial communication—and aerial advertising in particular—embodies one of the most literal, and possibly one of the worst versions of broadcasting, if we read it from Peters’ invitation to rehabilitate dissemination. Aerial advertising is a textbook illustration of what Simonson calls the paradigm of broadcasting: “communication emanating from a more or less centralized source, reaching vast and geographically scattered audiences, and tied to what the sociologist Louis Wirth in 1948 referred to as ‘giant enterprises, dependent upon and designed to reach a mass audience’” (Simonson, 2010: 1). Aerial advertising is restricted to a few institutions having technical and political access to the sky; it uses the sky above densely populated area

as a space of communication; and it is tied to techniques of persuasion by large corporations. We could add to these central features of the dominant view of broadcasting the association between broadcasting and spectacle, between broadcasting and military techniques, the construction of the masses as stupefied and malleable, the race for attention, the impossibility of response on the part of audiences, the physical distance between speakers and hearers, the anonymity of audiences. All those features are deployed in the barest of ways with aerial advertising.



Figure 5: GoodYear, *Aerial Age Weekly*, 15 July 1918, p. 854

When the field of aerial advertising emerged in the 1920s, neologisms with the term “casting” were common to speak of its innovation. Early observers of skywriting called the technique “smoke *casting*”. The same term was used for sky shouting: a reporter from the *New York Times* described the experiment as an “aerial *cast*” (*The New York Times*, 1927). With aerial advertising, the metaphor and literal meanings of broadcasting are as close as they can be. Consider leaflets operations, during which planes are scattering pieces of paper. The pilot, the air ‘sower’, distributes in all directions and without clear paths a massive number of leaflets (Figure. 5).

Visually, as we look at this advertisement by Goodyear depicting a propaganda leaflet campaign, the relation to agricultural broadcasting is striking: messages dropped down from above in the hope that they will meet fertile ground. The promise of mass advertising is founded not so much on the realization that it will reach everyone, but that by addressing as many as possible, a small number might be receptive. “The practice of the sower is wasteful,” writes Peters (1999: 55). In the case of aerial advertising, it is also blind, since the location of the speaker/writer in the sky creates such distance that he or she cannot see if there is an audience on the ground, if anyone is even paying attention. Of course, those paying for mass advertisement are lured into thinking otherwise. Discussing the flyers being dumped out of chutes installed on a blimp, the writer of a piece in a 1921 edition of the *Judicious Advertising Magazine* writes: “Handbills will be distributed from the new craft by colored paper parachutes about a 1/2 foot in diameter which will descend gracefully to the crowd of onlookers, thus getting 100 per cent efficiency in distribution” (Kennedy, 1921).

## Conclusion

*Speaking into the Air* is full of apparitions, from the spectral lingering of the dead on tapes and paper, to the appearance of God, angels, and spirits through mediums, and again on to the vibratory manifestations of radio signals. In many ways, it is a book about presence, and how *intermediaries*—human and not—are shaping and reconfiguring our presence to each other in time and space.

Recording and transmission, as Peters noted in “Phantasm of the Living, Dialogues with the Dead”, were the central media functions of a cluster of new technologies (1999: 137). The technologies of telegraphy, telephony and radio altered the modalities of presence in space. They were “space binding” (Peters, 1999: 139) and precipitated an etherealized view of communication, one that was increasingly disembodied and imponderable. Meanwhile, the inscription media of photography and phonography were altering the modern experience of time, materializing the presence of others, including the dead. The reception and experience of those new media forms reactivated the tensions, illustrated by Peters with *Phaedrus*, between actual and mediated presence, mutuality and reciprocity, the desires of bodily contacts and the dreams of spiritual ones.

Emerging precisely in the same decades, in the early twentieth century, and in similar geographical contexts, aerial advertising offered a competing configuration of communicating bodies in time and space. Aerial advertising techniques favored an ideal communication that involved the actual presence, in time and space, of interlocutors. Yet the new distance afforded by flight technology made dialogue and reciprocity almost impossible, despite such presence. In comparison to hearing voices from miles away through a box, or seeing the faces of loved ones on paper, or the ability to capture sounds on wax cylinders and see bones through flesh, weren't aerial billboards kind of banal? Aerial advertising better remediates the town crier or highway billboard more than any of the modern *telecommunication* media and other instruments of perception. It highlights the persistence and stubbornness of a rather impoverished view of dissemination as a position where speech is imposed onto others. It was precisely this version of dissemination that *Speaking into the Air* was inviting us, collectively, to revisit and overcome. Aerial advertising forces us to see the fragility of dissemination as a possible constructive and ethical form of communication.

## Archival Material

National Air and Space Museum, Sky Writing Corporation of America Fonds,  
Chantilly, Virginia: United States.

New England Airship Corporation Fonds, in Luftschiffbau Zeppelin GmbH Archives,  
Friedrichshafen: Germany

## References

- Adey, P. (2010) *Aerial Life: Spaces, Mobilities, Affects*. Malden and Oxford: John Wiley & Sons.
- Alain, É.-A.C. (1925) *Propos sur le bonheur*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Bard, A.S. (1927) 'Commercializing the Sky', *The New York Times*, August 28.
- Burnett, G.D. (2015) 'Notes Toward a History of Skywriting', *Cabinet* 60: 23-32.
- De Casserres, B. (1923) 'Ads that are Writ in Air', *The New York Times*, June 17.
- Douglas, S.J. (2004) *Listening In: Radio and The American Imagination*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

- 
- Eaton Manufacturing Company (1949) *A Chronicle to the Aviation Industry in America 1947–1948*. Cleveland, Ohio: Eaton Manufacturing Company.
- Edgerton, D. (1991) *England and the Aeroplane: An Essay on a Militant and Technological Nation*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Gitelman, L. (1999) *Scripts, Grooves, and Writing Machines: Representing Technology in the Edison Era*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Gunning, T. (2003) ‘Re-Newing Old Technologies: Astonishment, Second Nature and the Uncanny in Technology from the Previous Turn-of-the-Century’, in: D. Thorburn and H. Jenkins, eds., *Rethinking Media Change: The Aesthetics of Transition*. Cambridge: MIT Press, pp.39-60.
- Henkin, D. (1998) *City Reading Written Words and Public Spaces in Antebellum New York*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Holman, B. (2019) ‘The Militarisation of Aerial Theatre: Air Displays and Airmindedness in Britain and Australia between the World Wars’, *Contemporary British History* 33(4): 483-506.
- House of Commons, Great Britain (1932) *Report from the Select Committee on Skywriting*, London.
- Huhtamo, E. (2009) ‘The Sky is (not) the Limit: Envisioning the Ultimate Public Media Display’, *Journal of Visual Culture* 8(3): 329-348.
- Kaplan, C. (2018) *Aerial Aftermaths: Wartime from Above*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Kemp, F.E. (1935) ‘Aerial Advertising Stunts’, *Popular Aviation*, (October): 229.
- Kennedy, W.P. (1921) ‘Commercial Aviation and Aerial Advertising’, *Judicious Advertising 1920* (September): 15-19.
- Le journal des débats politiques* (1919) ‘Les papillons’, *Le journal des débats politiques*, October 3.
- LIFE Magazine* (1940) ‘Speaking of Pictures...Skywriters Ply Their Trade High in Summer Heavens’, *LIFE Magazine*, August 19.
- Marvin, C. (1988) *When Old Technologies Were New*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- McCormack, D.P. (2018) *Atmospheric Things: On the Allure of Elemental Envelopment*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- New England Airship Corporation Fonds, in Luftschiffbau Zeppelin GmbH Archiv, Friedrichshafen: Germany.

- Osborne, R.R. (1936) 'Side Slips', *Aviation*, (December).
- Parks, L. (2018) *Rethinking Media Coverage: Vertical Mediation and the War on Terror*. London: Routledge.
- Peters, J.D. (1999) *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Pinkerton, A., Young, S. & Dodds, K. (2011) 'Postcards from Heaven: Critical Geographies of the Cold War Military–Industrial–Academic Complex', *Antipode* 43(3): 820-844.
- Rech, M. (2015) 'A Critical Geopolitics of Observant Practice at British Military Airshows', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 40: 536-548.
- Savage, J.C. (1922) 'Aerial Craft'. US Patent 142,6413. Filed 1920-12-21, patented 1922-08-22.
- Simonson, P. (2010) *Refiguring Mass Communication: A History*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press.
- Simpson, C. (1996) *Science of Coercion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Star* (1903) 'Ways of Airship', *Star*, December 31.
- Sterne, J. (2003) *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction*. Durham, London: Duke University Press.
- de Syon, G. (2007) *Zeppelin!: Germany and the Airship, 1900–1939*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Taylor, J. (2016) 'Written in the Skies: Advertising, Technology, and Modernity in Britain since 1885', *Journal of British Studies* 55(4): 750-780.
- The New York Times* (1927) 'Voice from the Sky Resounds over City', *The New York Times*, September 18.
- Williams, R. (1980) *Problems in Materialism and Culture*. London: Verso.
- Williams, R.H. (1982). *Dream Worlds: Mass Consumption in Late Nineteenth-century France*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Wohl, R. (2005) *The Spectacle of Flight: Aviation and the Western Imagination, 1920–1950*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Young America* (1938) 'Skywriting Demands Skillful Pilots', *Young America*, May 27.

**Ghislain Thibault** is an Associate professor in the Department of Communication at the Université de Montréal and is the co-director of the Artefact Lab. His work in media studies has appeared in journals such as *Early Popular Visual Culture*, the *Canadian*

*Journal of Film Studies, Theory, Culture & Society*, and *VIEW*. His current research project, 'Look Up! A Media History of Aerial Communication,' investigates the cultural and material histories of aerial advertising media.

**Email:** [gislain.thibault@umontreal.ca](mailto:gislain.thibault@umontreal.ca)



