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> *Undoubtedly for most in the Western world at this time [ca. 1909], the first sight they had of an aeroplane was not in the sky, but projected upon a screen.*
> —Luke McKernan (2004)[1]

> *"Le cinéma, ce n'est pas je vois, c'est je vole."*
> —Paul Virilio (1984)[2]

The history of human air travel coincides with the history of cinema. A few weeks after *The Great Train Robbery* (dir. Edwin S. Porter) opened in December 1903, the Wright brothers successfully made the world's first flight. Yet, while cinema had a few decades on aviation, no one filmed the Wright brothers' breakthrough. Luke McKernan, historian of early film, thinks that the brothers' "insistence upon secrecy as they tried to sell their invention to the American military" was a major reason for the failure to record an event of such historical consequence, but as a result the lack of a film recording made it even harder for the world to believe such a feat. While it was not until 1906 that human flight was filmed, by 1908 flying films "were legion"[3] and aviation cinema really took off. Today, one-hundred-odd years after the Wright brothers radically reconfigured humans' relation to their environment, air travel has become commonplace: 826 million passengers traveled on US airlines in 2013,[4] about 2½ times the US population. Yet, even as it is more common, air travel remains a thrilling imaginative event; how else to explain the popularity of recent child-oriented aviation films like *Planes* (dir. Klay Hall, 2013) or the success of low-budget films like *Snakes on a Plane* (dir. David R. Ellis, 2006)?

In this essay, I analyze aviation cinema, offering a typology of a narrative film genre that becomes legible around a few interchangeable

structural elements: the pilot, the passenger, the aircraft, the terminal. Even with such a limited palette, because it is a genre in motion, aviation cinema is characterized by its fluidity, exchange, liminal crossings, and other reorganizations of an initial narrative state. The airplane is an ungrounded space of transformation; it is always a different plane that lands, a different passenger who disembarks. The variations in the simple calculus of pilot–passenger–aircraft–terminal result in the one hundred or so films that I locate in the genre of aviation cinema.

Aerial photographs had previously been taken from hot-air balloons,[5] but the first film taken from an airplane is something else entirely. This 1909 short film, *Wilbur Wright and His Flying Machine*, begins with scenes of the airplane being prepared while observers wait expectantly. Next it shifts to a series of low-angle panoramic shots that track the airplane in the sky and are cut with a few spectacular shots as the airplane buzzes directly towards—and then over—the low-placed camera. In the second part of the film, the camera is mounted on the left wing, and we see the plane travel shakily down a launch rail before rising serenely. Flying close to the ground, in a series of shots we see buildings, a man on a horse, farmland, and in the distance remains of Roman aqueducts (figure 1). Unlike the phantom rides of trains or the aerial photography from balloons, aviation cinema's inaugural moment juxtaposes the smooth tracking aesthetics of flight against a rough, jerky takeoff; the tranquil glide through the air is made even more miraculous by the initial bumpiness of ground travel. As we will see later, the template this documentary footage sets—bumps and shakes and jolts,

Figure 1. Roman aqueducts, framed through struts, in Wilbur Wright and His Flying Machine *(Paris: Société Générale des Cinématographes Eclipse, 1909).*

and then serenity—is reversed the moment filmmakers use flight as part of a narrative about modernity, speed, technology, or war. Afterwards, aviation cinema prefers to offer us a smooth takeoff but rough flying.

Film scholar Tom Conley continues the line of inquiry opened up once film cameras were no longer earthbound. In a discussion of *Icarian cinema*, Conley identifies a cinema that theorizes a "strategic control of perception, tied to mapping," exemplified by *Paris qui dort* (Paris, which sleeps) (a.k.a. *The Crazy Ray* and, later, *Paris Asleep*, dir. René Clair, 1923).[6] Conley focuses on the cartographic shots of Paris in that film taken atop the Eiffel Tower, and how those shots replicate aesthetically the film's narrative of a scientist who uses a ray to freeze the city. Viewed from above, Conley reads the paralyzed city, maplike, as a dystopian "projection of power and control" that cartography and cinema are susceptible to.[7] As with Icarus, whose ambition to fly higher killed him, aviation narratives often romantically portray high-flying pilots as proud demigods who are above the earthly concerns of those below. *The Right Stuff* (dir. Philip Kaufman, 1983), about a group of 1950s test pilots competing to be the first to fly in space, captures this theme best. From its opening phantom flights, *The Right Stuff*'s aerial photography imparts to viewers some of the same sense of power, particularly in the images of Earth from the first orbital flight. Omniscient, majestic, superhuman: the phantom flight offers viewers an image of themselves and their environment that is dehumanizing in its geometry, scale, and cartography. Strangely, seeing from a high perch that it looks like a map makes the world seem both larger and less significant.

Theorist of speed Paul Virilio likewise looks suspiciously at the link between cinema and aviation. He takes up the totemic figure of billionaire aviator and filmmaker Howard Hughes: "If the Hughes Aircraft Corporation magnate," Virilio writes, "before dying in a jet, chose to finance both the aeronautics industry and the film industry, it is because the one, like the other, conveyed the same cinematic illusion."[8] For Virilio and the mapmakers, this is an illusion of sameness: "the same furniture, the same newspapers, and even the same meals served simultaneously at a regular time. All this in order not to disorient the master of these sites."[9] Virilio is likely referring to stories of Hughes's eccentric, obsessive-compulsive behavior, but he is also describing the transformation of aviation once it became commercialized: the simultaneity of the experience of flight suits the commercial traveler as well as the sufferer of obsessive-compulsive disorder. In *The Aviator*, Martin Scorsese's 2004 biographical film about Hughes, the director balances Hughes's personal life with the larger political and economic struggle over the future of commercial air flight, arguing that madness is a quality that effectuates capitalism, and which capitalism

cannot restrain. That sense of mad fatality also infuses *Hell's Angels* (1930), the only one of two films Hughes directed set in the air. With *Hell's Angels*, Hughes did as much as anyone to stamp the direction of aviation cinema and its conflicted wavering between individual heroism and communal good. This theme is even more apparent in the last film he produced, *Jet Pilot* (dir. Josef von Sternberg, 1957), whose Cold War setting pits glamorous American exceptionalism against drab Soviet communism.

In the jet age of *Jet Pilot*, air travel has come to mean absence or, more precisely, a false presence. Virilio imagines the effect on the contemporary airport: "[I]n this city of transit, passengers await the vector of their disappearance, in this 'hall of lost voyages' that recalls quite closely the waiting rooms of the old cinemas where one waited, in the heroic epoch when the cinema was not yet *permanent*."[10] The transitory vectors that the airport lounge promises are fulfilled by the aircraft, just as the waiting rooms of old cinemas promised imminent transformation as soon as the theater doors opened (before, that is, cinema came to be everywhere). As such, aviation cinema harks back to the impermanent cinema's traffic in boundary crossings, liminalities, changes in direction. Today, unmoored from a singular theatrical viewing space, the cinema has supplanted place itself as the space from which everything originates. Virilio laments what the modern jet-age airport has done to our sense of the world. Quoting poet Rutilius Claudius Namatianus's proud exclamation about Rome, "You have made a city of what was a world!" Virilio wistfully notes in reverse that soon "Dallas Airport will accommodate more than 100,000,000 passengers per year, thus handling itself twice the population of France. This phenomenal facility will not only be the model in all its grandeur of the anti-city, but also, and above all, that of the anti-nation."[11] The transformative, world-shrinking machines of aviation and cinema thus have much in common, making small, organized cities out of vast uncultivated worlds. Virilio punningly calls the airport "nothing but a projector"[12] because it spits people out continually; the same is true of narrative cinema, which abhors any image not in motion, shuttling along characters from one scene to the next.

Let me turn to the characters in those scenes. Reading the culture of flight in *The Textual Life of Airports* (2011), Christopher Schaberg argues that

> when one looks for the airport, what one usually finds is
> empty or generic space; when one looks at the subject within
> or around the airport, one discovers flexible, indeterminate

personae who can hold many subject positions in the action
of the stories being unfolded.[13]

Between the primary actors in aviation cinema, the pilot and the passen-
ger, stands a series of liminal figures who give shape to the circumstances
of flight: the sky marshal, the stowaway, the hijacker, the air traffic con-
troller, the ground crew, the mechanic, the terminal staff, and the flight
attendant. In figure 2 are the routes of exchange, a simple flight chart
mapping the vectors possible in aviation cinema. Readers will no doubt
recognize this as a semiotic or Greimas square, a useful tool for mapping
interdependent structural relationships in narrative texts. It operates
on the theory that we understand *things* in texts because those texts also
present oppositions, contradictions, and transformations of those things.
One can use a system like this to see how characters change within one
narrative text, but I want to take a semantic approach to aviation cinema,
emphasizing how the genre as a whole formalizes relationships among
character types and pointing out which films typify these relationships
and which refute them. So, rather than propose a rigid, formal analysis of
aviation cinema, I use the semiotic square as a heuristic to map our flight.

Moving clockwise around the square, first is the pilot and then his
opposite number, the passenger, who I initially define as being opposites
along the axis of authority. Next we ask what is *not-pilot;* what figure
negates the pilot? That is easy: the hijacker. Whereas the pilot and pas-
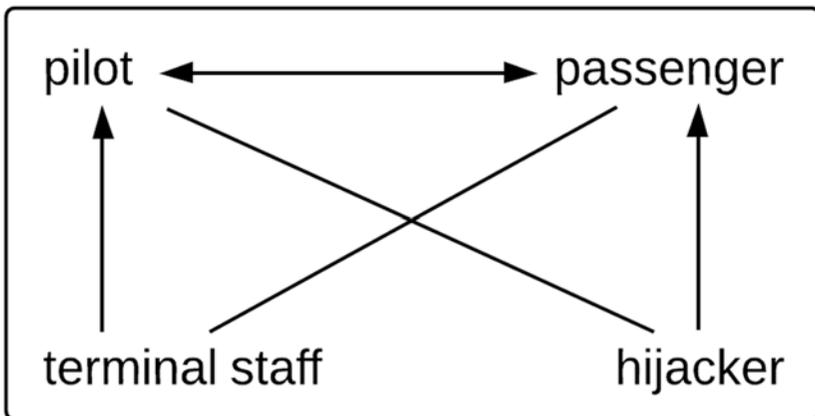senger are opposites and thus have a *contrary* relationship to each other,

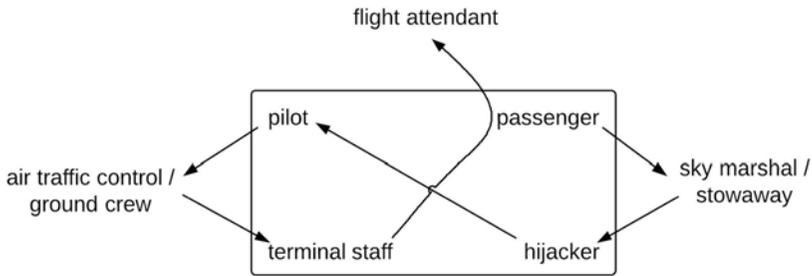*Figure 2. Aviation cinema's semiotic square (by the author).*

Figure 3. The essay's flight plan (by the author).

the hijacker and the pilot have a *contradictory* relationship. Since the pilot represents unimpeachable authority, there must only ever be one person in total control of an aircraft, and the presence of the hijacker contradicts this. Finally, what is *not-passenger;* what figure negates the passenger? In our world, it is everyone who does not fly and who remains at the terminal, meaning ticket agents, baggage handlers, the ground crew, mechanics, security personnel, late-arriving would-be passengers, taxi drivers, loved ones, and so on.

From just a simple mapping of four types of actors in aviation cinema narratives, we can begin to identify more complex, in-between relationships that generate liminal figures both blurring and shaping these boundaries. What is both pilot and passenger? A flight attendant. What is both pilot and terminal staff? An air traffic controller. Particularly because of the tightly prescribed rules of air travel, a number of such liminal figures emerge. Indeed, the more strictly these rules are imposed, the more likely is it that a liminal figure will emerge. Figure 3 is a fuller flight plan that guides the rest of the essay, indicating the movement that I will track between the four central roles, beginning with the passenger and ending with the flight attendant.

The Passenger

The passenger is generally the most boring actant in aviation cinema. It is poignant for the genre, and extraordinary in the context of other genres, that aviation cinema does not try to convince the ordinary person that his or her life is more interesting than it actually is. In the obligatory scene of passengers boarding—folding coats, stowing bags, claiming armrests, settling into seats—we see individuals establishing their tiny territories,

negotiating boundaries, and arranging for their imminent future. In these scenes, we also see perfectly illustrated aviation cinema's desire to present relationships among individuals, and that these relationships are generally conflicted as passengers vie for a limited number of resources: seats, attention, oxygen. Thus, films about commercial air flight present to us, in nearly every case, a series of stock characters that leaves very few opportunities for surprise: the captain will be steely but genial; the copilot will be chatty about a hobby (sports or television); one flight attendant will be gentle and competent, the other harassed and flustered; and then there are the passengers: the fat businessman, the child (annoying, but excused), the pregnant woman, the young hippy chick or manic pixie dream girl, the uptight older lady, the drunk, the suspicious-looking foreigner, the important politician or celebrity, the black musician with large instrument. In an effort to replicate a sense of aerial cosmopolitanism, viewers are marched past an overly heterogeneous Noah's ark of stereotypes. Take, for example, *Skyjacked* (dir. John Guillermin, 1972), a lower-budget *Airport* (dir. George Seaton, 1970) that throws into close contact the pilot (Charlton Heston, suavely smoking a pipe before takeoff), a pregnant woman (who actually delivers on the flight), a black jazz musician who always buys an extra seat for his cello, a hippy chick, a deranged war vet, an important US Senator, and, at the end, a tarmac full of heavily armed Soviets! This improbable mishmash of stock characters, brought together by air travel, is the template for every other film set on an airplane.

After the satirical *Airplane!* (dirs. Jim Abrahams, David Zucker, and Jerry Zucker, 1980), the best film that comments on the improbably diverse passenger manifest is the comedy *Soul Plane* (dir. Jessy Terrero, 2004). *Soul Plane*, about a man (Kevin Hart) who starts his own black airline, both lampoons and celebrates a wide range of black stereotypes: the angry black woman TSA agent; pot-smoking rapper Snoop Dogg as pilot Captain Mack; the accented black African copilot; the Jezebel figure; the criminal hustler; the pimp; and of course the upward-striving, nouveau riche owner. In this, *Soul Plane* functions as a catalog of modern black stereotypes. In addition to its variety of passengers, *Soul Plane* comments on stereotypical black spaces: there is the 99 cent store, chicken-and-waffle restaurant, and basketball court in Malcolm X Terminal; on the plane, passengers are sorted between "first class" and "low class"; and, once in flight, characters traverse a whole fantastic world of strip clubs, casinos, hot tubs, lounges, and nightclubs—every variety of modern urban entertainment that a black could desire. The Hunkees, the one white family on board, are instantly enamored with black life and, except for the father (Tom Arnold), join right in. The father's anxiety over the threat of

blackness (in trying to emulate black culture, his son becomes a "wigger" while his daughter and wife become sexually attracted to black men) is soon replaced by a more general bewilderment: there is just too much exotic novelty for him to absorb.

Whereas most aviation cinema uses the passenger manifest to assure viewers that the skies are cosmopolitan, worldly places, *Soul Plane* is unique in that it specifically sets aside the one white family. In that film, the white family operates like another liminal figure in aviation cinema: the stowaway. The stowaway is relatively rare. An early example is *Bright Eyes* (dir. David Butler, 1934), a family drama that concludes with Shirley Temple sneaking aboard her godfather's small airplane. *Forever Young* (dir. Steve Miner, 1992) has a similar concluding scene when a young boy (Elijah Wood) sneaks aboard a World War II (WWII)-era bomber flown by time-traveling Mel Gibson. *Twelve O'Clock High* (Henry King, 1949), also about WWII bombers, has some of the ground crew stow away on bombers so as to join in the thrill of combat; despite this subordination, they are forgiven by their commanding officer. In *The Flyboys* (a.k.a. *Sky Kids*) (dir. Rocco DeVilliers, 2008), two young friends stow away on a gangster's plane but are rewarded by the benevolent gangster when they foil a bombing plot. Then there is a curious nonhuman stowaway in *The Spirit of St. Louis* (dir. Billy Wilder, 1957): Charles Lindbergh (James Stewart) is upset to find a fly has joined him on his attempt to cross the Atlantic solo. He has been fanatical about not wanting to add the slightest bit of additional weight to the plane, and yet the fly stowaway ends up playing a key role, twice saving Lindbergh from crashing. Last, the most memorable film stowaway is likely the innocent-looking but scheming old lady in *Airport* (Helen Hayes, who won the 1970 Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress for this role). She has a complex system worked out for sneaking onto planes, which she dutifully tells the airport manager once she is caught. Even having explained every step of her method, she still escapes and sneaks onto the doomed flight. Yet, when she seats herself next to a suicide bomber, the captain is glad to be able to use her in an attempt to stop him. In each these examples, the stowaway, initially an illegal figure that poses a threat to the plane, ultimately plays a valuable role in the air, rescuing cargo, passengers, and even the pilot.

This is the inverse of the undercover sky marshal, a secret legal figure who often ends up posing a threat. The sky marshal is a cousin to the hijacker; both are undercover, initially appearing as passengers like any other, and both disrupt the strict division of authority on an airplane between pilot/crew and passengers. Unlike films that feature recognizable uniformed government agents, such as the Drug Enforcement

Agency (DEA) in *Con Air* (dir. Simon West, 1997) or the FBI in *Snakes on a Plane*, the sky marshal is at first an invisible figure. Because he is undercover, his authority on the ground does not easily transfer to the sky, and, as with the hijacker, he must generally show a weapon in order to be recognized. Authorized by figures on the ground to protect the plane and its passengers, he often does the exact opposite: his weapon is taken and used by someone else, he makes other untrained passengers attempt heroism, or he is revealed to be a villain himself. Schaberg identifies this as an example of how air travel produces its own mystery: "By boarding a flight carrying a concealed weapon, federal agents *produce* the state of emergency that they claim to be protecting the flight *from*."[14] This is also true of the airport, as Schaberg points to intense airport surveillance networks as proof that the airport "had *already prepared for its own mystery to unfold*."[15] While a sky marshal program was created in the United States in the early 1960s, sky marshals have become much more popular figures since the 9/11 attacks, appearing as a comedic character in *Bridesmaids* (dir. Paul Feig, 2011) and as central characters in the thrillers *Passenger 57* (dir. Kevin Hooks, 1992) and *Flightplan* (dir. Robert Schwentke, 2005). The recent film *Non-Stop* (dir. Jaume Collet-Serra, 2014) blends these last two films, featuring a federal air marshal (Liam Neeson) who tries to stop a hijacking only to learn that he is the prime suspect.

The air marshal always raises a problem of authority for aviation cinema. Whereas hijacking films show a replacement of authority, and war or disaster films a confirmation of authority, the air marshal is a figure whose secret presence even more directly threatens the pilot's unimpeachable command. An early version of this problem appears in *Five Came Back* (dir. John Farrow, 1930), a seminal disaster film whose thematic elements crop up in many later commercial aviation films. As will become common, *Five Came Back*'s passenger manifest brings together quite a diverse group, including a gangster's son, an eloping couple, an old couple, a glamorous woman, and anarchist Vasquez accused of murder, who is being transported by greedy guard Crimp (John Carradine). After their plane crashes in the jungle, there is an immediate struggle for power when Crimp takes exception to the pilot: "He's my prisoner; he takes orders from me. You oughta take orders from us; we paid our fares." This is a peculiarly interesting theory of the airfare contract, imagining the pilot as a service worker like a restaurant waiter rather than a figure of authority. Crimp is obsessed with money, so it is not surprising that he would see the pilots as owing him something, but others quickly disagree. By analogy to a shipwreck, the passengers decide that the pilot has legal authority, although it is not until he is given a gun to enforce it

that his authority is recognized. Ironically, by film's end, it is the anarchist who gets to make decisions. Stealing the gun, he proclaims "I'm the law now!" but, unlike Crimp, he has decided to redeem himself by remaining on the island to face certain death so that other passengers may fit in the plane's limited space. The professor who earlier had made the legal analogy to a ship's captain now reverses course, noting that although the pilot or copilot should in principle decide who stays and who goes, the reformed anarchist with gun might actually make the best decision. Authority in aviation cinema is absolute and can be possessed by only one person at a time. This idea is explored in other crash films, such as *Alive* (dir. Frank Marshall, 1993; cannibalism in the Andes), *The Grey* (dir. Joe Carnahan, 2011; wolves in Alaska), and even *Fearless* (dir. Peter Weir, 1993; an angelic plane crash survivor in San Francisco).

The Hijacker

The sky marshal occupies the space between passenger and hijacker, both narratively in that he must protect passengers from a hijacker, but also thematically in that he amplifies the problem of authority and the lurking threat of a passenger who is not what he or she seems to be. Hijackers are everywhere in the sky, including air marshal films like *Passenger 57, Flightplan, Non-Stop*, and other disaster films: *Airport, Skyjacked, The Delta Force* (dir. Menahem Golan, 1986), *Executive Decision* (dir. Stuart Baird, 1996), and *Turbulence* (dir. Robert Butler, 1997). With the exception of *Airport* (insurance policy), *Turbulence* (a madman), and *Flightplan* (money), those films drum up some kind of political motive for terrorism. But even though hijacking films make sure to offer a plausible-sounding reason to hijack a plane, the hijackers are, more often than not, colorfully fictitious baddies in accord with the demands of the action genre. In the dramatic struggle between villain and hero, hijacking a plane comes across as both a simple matter and one whose planning leaves no room for error.

   The 1960s saw a shocking increase in hijackings, particularly for the purpose of traveling to Cuba during the peak period of 1968–72: "During that period there were 326 hijacking attempts worldwide, or one every 5.6 days."[16] One of the more famous of these is the subject of *The Pursuit of D. B. Cooper* (dir. Roger Spottiswoode, 1981), about the real-life unsolved 1971 hijacker who escaped with ransom money by skydiving. After the 1970s, hijackers in aviation cinema rarely work alone and often conspire with a treacherous crew member (*Air Force One* [dir. Wolfgang Petersen,

1997], *Passenger 57*) or temporarily band together with other villains (*Con Air, Turbulence*). In this, the hijacker is like the pilot himself, who must rely on others while still commanding sole authority.

The unique exception to the conventional Hollywood hijacking plot is *United 93* (dir. Paul Greengrass, 2006), which, using a handheld, shallow camera that has become a recent hallmark of realism, dramatizes the hijacking of one of the planes used in the September 11 attacks. Unlike *United 93*, most hijacking films revel in a more fantastic approach to terrorism and airplane mechanics, which allows the protagonist to perform incredible midair heroics. For example, in one of the best of the bunch, *Air Force One*, no less a person than the president of the United States literally flies in the air as he dangles from the rear of his hijacked plane before ultimately settling into the pilot's chair to land the craft himself. 1997 was a banner year for hijacking films. Like *Air Force One, Con Air* is about a plane hijacked by a criminal mastermind following an elaborate plan. But rather than being a plane full of important political leaders, *Con Air* is full of convicted criminals of the worst kind. The film mocks the niceties of air travel, such as having the main villain ask about the in-flight movie or intone, once the plane has been hijacked, the cliché "Ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain speaking." As outrageous as *Con Air* is, *Turbulence* is even more baroque. Set on Christmas Eve, it features a similar setup as *Con Air*, with a seemingly innocent man put on a flight that is hijacked by a deranged killer. The killer creates a psychotic tableau of murdered passengers strapped into their seats before a final showdown with the flight attendant, during which the plane performs a spontaneous barrel roll. It is as though the hijacker's presence in aviation cinema violates not only the pilot's authority but also the laws of aerodynamics.

The Pilot

The pilot in aviation cinema follows two overlapping paths: the military and the commercial. The first pilots in cinema were war heroes, and the first picture to win an Academy Award for Best Picture, *Wings* (dir. William A. Wellman, 1927), exemplifies the kind of jingoistic ideological narrative that characterizes aviation war films during the first half of the century. Two young rivals from varied backgrounds join the Air Service, where they learn to become pilots and friends. The film balances the pragmatic and the romantic aspects of war with scenes of routine military training, thrilling aerial dogfights, and comedic misunderstanding. As such, it works contradictorily to encourage young men to join the fight

by warning them of the absolute and certain danger that faces them in the air. *Hell's Angels*, Howard Hughes's masterpiece, covers much of the same thematic ground as *Wings* —fatalism, masculine rivalry, self-sacrifice for the larger good, the debauch before the final mission, a captured enemy plane—but with a sense of majesty and grandeur that shows war as sublimely terrifying. In particular are the scenes where German soldiers leap to their deaths from a zeppelin in order to lighten its load and improve its chances of escaping, the repeated close-ups of pilots' agonized faces as they are shot down in dogfights, and the final sequence where one brother shoots another in the back to prevent him from telling important information to their captors.

That sense of heroic fatalism is even stronger in another film from 1930, *The Dawn Patrol* (dir. Howard Hawks; closely remade by Edmund Goulding in 1938 with Errol Flynn), about a WWI squadron of French pilots whose commander is forced to send them up on dangerous suicide missions. After pilots are shot down, they are simply replaced by young recruits who have little chance of survival. Richard Barthelmess plays a dashing, experienced flyer who after a reckless but successful mission is promoted into an even worse role: having to order the new men to their death. For all its darkness, *The Dawn Patrol* still traffics the ideal of the *knight in the sky:* chivalrous warriors who remain emotionless in the face of death. In one scene, a German pilot shoots down one of the men, Scott. It is then revealed that the German has been captured and that Scott is still alive. When they all meet at the base, rather than fight they get drunk, sing songs, and act like friends. The foreword to the film poetically defines the mold of these aviators: "pitifully young, inexperienced, bewildered—but gloriously reckless with patriotism." Although the context has greatly changed, the sky-knight trope is still very much present in later films like *The Blue Max* (dir. John Guillermin, 1992), *Castle in the Sky* (dir. Hayao Miyazaki, 1986), *Porco Rosso* (dir. Hayao Miyazaki, 1992), *The Rocketeer* (dir. Joe Johnston, 1991), *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow* (dir. Kerry Conran, 2004), *Les Chevaliers du ciel* (a.k.a. *Sky Fighters*) (Gérard Pirès, 2005), and *The Red Baron* (dir. Nikolai Müllerschön, 2008), all of which present swashbuckling pilots in dramatic aerial confrontations that require singular skill and derring-do. Another one, *Flyboys* (dir. Tony Bill, 2006), which retreads nearly every WWI fighter film since *Dawn Patrol*, simply has one character state the theme dumbly: "We're kind of like flying knights, don't you think?" (figure 4).

Iron Eagle (dir. Sidney J. Furie, 1986) and its Vietnam-era update *Flight of the Intruder* (dir. John Milius, 1991) both pursue the fantasy of

Figure 4. **(a)** *Sky knights in* Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow *(dir. Kerry Conran, 2004) and* **(b)** Porco Rosso *(meaning "crimson pig"; dir. Hayao Miyazaki, 1992). Courtesy of PhotoFest.*

pilots who commandeer jets to make an unauthorized flight for a higher moral purpose, and both require one of the two rogue jet pilots to die sacrificially in order for the other to complete his mission. Whereas WWI films of the 1930s featured individual pilots fighting like independent contractors but having to learn to integrate into a system, these films fantasize what an individual can do if he himself simply takes over

the system. The most famous of this type of film, *Top Gun* (dir. Tony Scott, 1986), keeps its fighter pilot just on the right side of the law but still follows the same pattern by requiring the death of a partner in order to help the central character develop.

Setting aside these militaristic, adolescent fantasies, it is much more common to see contemporary war films emphasize a necessary camaraderie between fighters. *Memphis Belle* (dir. Michael Caton-Jones, 1990), based on the real WWII B-17 (Boeing Flying Fortress bomber) that was the first to complete twenty-five bombing missions, is full of this interrelationship: the exchange of lucky charms between crew members, the outlining of small but critical flight routines, the collaboration in flight, the frantic communication during combat, and an ensemble cast that keeps one role from standing out above others. Likewise, *Thirty Seconds over Tokyo* (dir. Mervyn LeRoy, 1944) makes a special point of showing the cooperation and respect between the Army and Navy that was needed to do the then impossible: launch bombers from an aircraft carrier. Two contemporary films that focus on individually piloted aircraft rather than bomber crews nonetheless also develop a similar sense of fellowship. *Red Tails* (dir. Anthony Hemingway, 2012), fictionalizing the struggle of the Tuskegee Airmen to fly more advanced combat missions during WWII, rather simplistically presents racial segregation as a shared obstacle for the pilots to overcome but still earnestly argues for collaboration as an important feature of that war. *Pearl Harbor* (dir. Michael Bay, 2001), whose last act replicates *Thirty Seconds over Tokyo*, aims for an even more kaleidoscopic vision of war. A grandiose epic, the film begins with two future pilots' formative childhood experience accidentally starting and flying an airplane. Again, unlike films such as *Top Gun* that promoted the maverick's near-mystic expertise in flying, WWI and WWII films like *Pearl Harbor* invoke a sense of fate and accident that separates the living from the dead and that leads to a much more fraternal attitude between pilots. This idea is most explicit in the supernatural fantasies *A Guy Named Joe* (dir. Victor Fleming, 1943) and its remake *Always* (dir. Steven Spielberg, 1989), both of which see dead pilots return as angelic guardians for their predecessors.

The other type of pilot one finds in aviation is the commercial pilot. One of the earliest films about commercial aviation is *Night Flight* (dir. Clarence Brown, 1933), based on Antoine de Saint Exupéry's experiences as an airmail pilot during the transitional phase of commercial films where, like wartime flight, commercial flight is risky but worth the sacrifice. In *Night Flight*, an unsentimental businessman pushes his pilots to fly in adverse weather and during the dangerous night in an effort

to establish night flying as a regular practice. A poetic foreword sets the stakes for us: "Only a few short years ago fragile craft roared through the unfathomed dark, racing blindly toward death and finding it. But such is human courage, that disaster proved only a challenge." In this, *Night Flight* shares a theme with *The Dawn Patrol:* that aviation is more than one person and that the incremental progress of flight is worth the loss of lives. In *Night Flight*, we had been eagerly following Clark Gable's heroic efforts to navigate through the stormy night, paralleled with scenes of his wife (Helen Hayes) nervously waiting at home. But when the pilot is drowned after running out of fuel, we get hardly any expected bitterness but instead the concluding homily that justifies the pilot's death: "And such is human courage that men died so others might live, and so, at last, man's empire might reach triumphant to the sky." Just as with war, in the march of commercial aviation, there is little pause for the lives of pioneering pilots.

Many other postwar aviation films take up the problem of reintegrating wartime pilots into society. *Zero Hour!* (dir. Hall Bartlett, 1957), the source text mocked in *Airplane!*, crystallizes the crisis of the war veteran, along with his eventual redemption. Not unlike *The High and the Mighty* (dir. William A. Wellman, 1954), where a formerly great pilot is called upon in a time of crisis, in *Zero Hour!* the pilot must fly an aircraft that is very unfamiliar to him, while also battling traumatic memories of his wartime flying—for example, when he momentarily confuses the target lines of the runway with that of a bombing run. A much more banal version is shown in *Strategic Air Command* (dir. Anthony Mann, 1955), where a former pilot must sacrifice his burgeoning baseball career when he is recalled to the military. As boring as the film's domestic scenes are, they help to normalize postwar, noncombat military flight. As the jet age takes off, films about test pilots especially recycle that wartime theme of risking life for progress. For example, *Chain Lightning* (dir. Stuart Heisler, 1950) dramatizes one pilot's (Humphrey Bogart) stateside return as a double loss: having to leave behind both his love interest and his plane. Deciding what to do, he mulls over his options: "barnstorming, piece work for some broken down freight line," or what he ends up choosing—running a flight school. But he is able to escape these miserable options when he is asked to become a test pilot for an experimental jet aircraft. As with films about early aviation history, the pilot does more than just fly—he also helps engineer the necessary flight suit and aircraft modifications and devises a flight plan that will suitably impress the government.

It speaks to the persistence of wartime images of the valorous, heroic pilot in aviation cinema that it is not until 2012 that we get a film that

focuses exclusively on the commercial pilot. While in some respects a film about addiction in an aviation setting, *Flight* (dir. Robert Zemeckis, 2012) in other respects is unique in aviation cinema. Zemeckis, who had earlier filmed a plane crash in *Cast Away* (2000), ups the ante in *Flight* with an even more breathtaking crash-landing set piece that involves the plane momentarily flying upside down. *Flight*'s antihero (Denzel Washington), a former Navy pilot, from a crop-dusting family, who now flies commercial planes, is a terrible person. A self-destructive alcoholic, he is able to miraculously crash land the aircraft and save many lives despite being drunk. The film thus balances a celebration of the pilot's instinctual flying expertise with a criticism of his personal life. Even though the commercial pilot redeems himself at the end, the portrait is not very flattering.

The Ground Crew

Flight's focus on the crash-scene investigation draws attention to our next set of liminal figures: the ground crew and mechanics who work on building, repairing, or maintaining aircraft. In particular, the pilot and the mechanic share a special relationship. Nearly all of the war films discussed have at the least a brief scene acknowledging the importance of the mechanic to the pilot's success and often the suggestion that the pilot is wholly dependent on the mechanic's skill in maintaining the airplane or optimizing it for particular flying situations. Indeed, in *Wings*, when a pilot is kicked out of the force, he quickly reenlists as a mechanic so as to still help his former colleagues. Even in films about commercial aviation, with pilots changing from flying fighters to shuttling passengers, this dynamic is often reproduced. In *The High and the Mighty*, John Wayne's character Whistlin' Dan is introduced to audiences by a mechanic, who shares with a coworker memories of the pilot's former glory days. Even more assertive is George Kennedy's mechanic character Patroni in *Airport* (being the only actor to appear in all four sequels, Kennedy is especially associated with the series). Patroni plays an important role in the narrative when he must move a snowbound airliner in order clear a crucial runway. At first, he attempts to do so simply by instructing a pilot on how to operate the Boeing 707, but this fails when the pilot questions the mechanic's judgment. With time running out, Patroni eventually usurps control of the plane himself and miraculously frees it (one onlooker exclaims, "The instruction book said that was impossible!"), demonstrating that, even though he is not a pilot, he still has a very intimate understanding of the plane.

The mechanic's limbo—personally responsible to the pilot but in service to the fickle aircraft—requires him to be clairvoyant, spotting engine trouble or envisioning particular flight maneuvers long before the pilot takes off. In this, he is matched by his counterpart in the air traffic control tower. Virilio makes a comparison to the automobile driver, whose

> driver's seat is a *seat of prevision*, a control tower of the future of the trajectory. Inversely, the control tower of the airfield is, for the air traffic controller, the driver's seat of the airlines. Whatever the apparent movement of landscapes in the windshield may be or the real movement of airplanes on the radar screen, what counts for the controller of the trip is the anticipation, the prior knowledge.[17]

For Virilio, the air traffic controller usurps the pilot's role in controlling the vector of flight. What counts instead is foresight, enabled by a distancing divorced from the experience of flight. We see transitional versions of this idea in films where pilots exert their authority even on the ground, giving commands to other pilots or walking a nonexpert flyer through a landing situation—for example, the loopy version of this in *Zero Hour!* where Sterling Hayden is called in to help land the aircraft, although his instructions are not followed.

With the rise of commercial aviation, the air traffic controller becomes an authoritative figure in his own right. An antagonistic relationship between two air traffic controllers is the focus of *Pushing Tin* (dir. Mike Newell, 1999), the rare film to treat air traffic control as more than just a minor detail of aviation. Nick (John Cusack) and Russell (Billy Bob Thornton) are rival controllers; both are excellent at their job, but Cusack is a chatty, insecure type whereas Thornton is serene and unperturbed. The scenes in the control room balance high stress with comedy; as in wartime films, the group of traffic controllers responds to the imminent possibility of disaster with irreverence (and, when not working, lots of alcohol). Even as *Pushing Tin* limns air traffic controllers as a distinct type of person, it does so by putting Nick and Russell into other aviation roles—namely, the pilot, the passenger, and the hijacker. During one scene, Russell is directing the plane that Nick is flying on; when the plane encounters severe turbulence, Nick is convinced that Russell, not the pilots, is "controlling the plane." In a near hijacking, his belief leads him to bum-rush the flight attendants in order to attempt to alert the captain. Later, a bomb threat at the control building results in another kind of hijacking; when the building is evacuated, Nick and Russell must remain behind to clear

the remaining air traffic. Last, Nick attempts to reunite with his estranged wife by contacting her when she is on an airplane; he tells the pilot that he will let the plane land only if she agrees to a date with him. These three sequences repeat the key theme that, in modern commercial aviation, the air traffic controllers are the ones who really do work and that the pilots are merely guiding the "tin" that controllers push around.

The Flight Attendant

No doubt the service worker most associated with air travel is the flight attendant. The flight attendant in movies is typically a woman serving as an absorption device, soaking up pressure and complaints from passengers, serving as the "everywoman" who must subordinate her true feelings—someone not much better than us but just better placed. Consider Halle Berry's flight attendant character in *Executive Decision*, who must help foil a hijacking. But this mostly means sitting and waiting to help the hidden government operative. She joins him in the cockpit but only to read him instructions for landing the plane. Essentially just a puppet, she even has to correct him later when he confuses her name: "It's Jean. You called me Jan on the plane. My name is Jean." An earlier version of this plot, *Julie* (dir. Andrew L. Stone, 1956), stars Doris Day as a stewardess running from a murderous, psychotic ex-husband; he pursues her onto an airplane and shoots the pilots, forcing her to land the plane herself. As frightened as she is, her involvement is reduced to a simple set of pull-up/push-down maneuvers, since the precision radar at the airfield allows air traffic control to do most of the work. A similar low-level disdain for flight attendants is often modeled in aviation cinema narratives but almost always so that that attitude can be refuted. In *Turbulence*, an FBI agent incredulously remarks after the heroine miraculously manages to maneuver the airliner, "How the fuck could she turn it around? She's only a stewardess for God's sake!" An air traffic controller's quick and sure response to him is "She's a flight attendant." Likewise, in *Passenger 57*, a line of dialogue had the flight attendant correct Wesley Snipes when he called her a "stewardess." No, it is "flight attendant," she protests, pointing to a new professionalization of the industry that claims more responsibility for the job than simply serving as a sky waitress.

The flight attendant appeared in aviation cinema almost at the same time as she appeared on airplanes. *Air Hostess* (dir. Albert S. Rogell, 1933), one of the earliest, is a melodrama set around an airfield, with a woman, who was orphaned as a girl (her father was a wartime flyer), falling for

a stunt pilot. The film mainly capitalizes on the spectacle of flight, and so the woman's occupation as an "air hostess" is not developed in depth. Indeed, scholar Kathleen Barry argues that since "aviation inspired excitement and romance during [the] hard times" of the Great Depression, the air hostess initially served the very purpose of bringing "an air of reassuring femininity to the rough-and-ready world of flying."[18] *Air Hostess* exemplifies how from the beginning women service workers "have been expected not only to perform gender on the job but to perform gender *as* the job."[19] For instance, in *Catch Me If You Can* (dir. Steven Spielberg, 2002), a con man in the 1960s (Leonardo DiCaprio) easily makes his way through a heavily guarded airport terminal by surrounding himself with flight attendants; the entire sequence emphasizes their chic sexiness and underscores the gender-performing role flight attendants were meant to play at the time. *Boeing (707) Boeing (707)* (dir. John Rich, 1965), a sex farce filmed during the time *Catch Me If You Can* was set, has the same attitude towards women from its opening credits, which show images of the three actresses who play flight attendants, their names, and their bust–waist–hip measurements (as a joke, Thelma Ritter, 63 at the time, was listed as "?–?–?") (figure 5).

The sexual politics of the flight attendant are made even clearer in three complementary films that focus on the flight attendant exclusively: *Air Hostess* (*Kong zhong xiao jie*) (dir. Wen Yi, 1959), *Come Fly with Me* (dir. Henry Levin, 1963), and *View from the Top* (dir. Bruno Barreto, 2003).

Figure 5. The air stewardesses performing "gender as job" in Boeing (707) Boeing (707) *(dir. John Rich, 1965). Screenshot courtesy of the author; © Hal Wallis Productions.*

All three films revolve around a trio of flight attendants whose work experience conflicts with their romantic lives. *Air Hostess*, a Hong Kong production, is about three women who yearn to become flight attendants, which would represent a major accomplishment, given the limited career paths for women. After the three complete a rigorous training program that winnows the large number of applicants, they get to travel to a number of exotic Southeast Asian locales such as Singapore, Bangkok, and Taipei. *Come Fly with Me* also follows three women with domestic problems, making a tourist's advertisement for postwar consumer culture: passengers eat caviar and lobster and drink champagne, the women wear glamorous dresses and dance in Viennese restaurants, and a couple goes jet skiing.

View from the Top* attempts a more contemporary pseudofeminist landing; becoming an international flight attendant is a way for the main character Donna (Gwyneth Paltrow) to escape her humble beginnings and be like her idol Sally Weston, the "World's Most Famous Flight Attendant." Improbably, the film solves her problem by having Donna settle for domestic flights so she can stay near her love interest but then reveals that she has actually become the pilot (with sexy tousled blond hair and hip aviator shades). Last, *I'm So Excited!* (dir. Pedro Almodóvar, 2013) takes the exact opposite approach from *View from the Top*'s mocking attitude towards flight attendants. Set mostly in the business class section of a plane that is unable to land, it exaggerates the flight attendants (and all the characters) to the point of absurdity, having them celebrate a wild orgy of sex, drugs, and drinking in the face of disaster. The three flight attendants here are gay men, and they infuse every scene with camp, such as their choreographed dance to the eponymous Pointer Sisters' song. As much as anything else, *I'm So Excited!* is about how its attendants do not just perform gender while working, but that their work is a gender performance.

Cyborg Flight

For an ending that projects into the future: the collapse of the square, when the pilot, passenger, hijacker, and aircraft all combine, smoothing the surface of flight, enlarging the machine of travel and fully integrating the human into aviation. *Firefox* (dir. Clint Eastwood, 1982) made an early foray into this cyborg future. When the Soviets develop an advanced jet aircraft, a former Vietnam vet and prisoner of war is recruited to steal it. What is special about this plane is that it uses a

Figure 6. The "computer at the wheel" in Stealth *(dir. Rob Cohen, 2005), with "a brain like a quantum sponge." Screenshot courtesy of the author; © Columbia Pictures.*

"thought-control weapon system" whereby the "pilot's actual brain emissions are translated into a central computer through sensors in his helmet." Luckily, he is bilingual, since he must think in Russian in order to operate the plane. A more recent approach, *Stealth* (dir. Rob Cohen, 2005), does away with the pilot entirely, featuring a futuristic "unmanned combat aerial vehicle" that has "a brain like a quantum sponge" (figure 6). At first a dystopian film along the lines of *2001* (dir. Stanley Kubrick, 1968), in its second half *Stealth* valorizes the relationship between man and machine. A third futuristic narrative, *The Sky Crawlers* (dir. Mamoru Oshii, 2008), recalls *The Dawn Patrol* while portraying a world of continual war fought between "contractor warfare companies." A squadron of child fighter pilots, Kildren, turns out to be clones regenerated with the same skill sets after their predecessors die. This neatly solves one problem of human warfare while introducing a whole other set of ethical problems.

In 1983, the year after *Firefox*'s release, Jean Baudrillard's essay "The Ecstasy of Communication" prophesied these kinds of narratives by describing a radical new cultural shift towards "private telematics," where "each person sees himself at the controls of a hypothetical machine, isolated in a position of perfect and remote sovereignty, at an infinite distance from his universe of origin."[20] Rather than portray rugged individuals in control of powerful machines, as in the earliest sky-knight films, now the interface between pilot and airplane has changed so that the human pilot—like the wings, engines, and seats—is simply a component of aviation. As Baudrillard puts it, the subject has become transformed: the pilot is only "a computer at the wheel, not a drunken demiurge of power."[21]

Yet, passengers on commercial airlines also already occupy their own little private cockpits, with individual lights, controls, a call button, requests, demands, grumbles, television screens, headphones, media, armrests, and trays (and that is just a description of coach). The logical extension of this mode of flight is made manifest in an animated film like *Planes*, where anthropomorphic aircraft compete in a flying competition. Vapid in its unrelenting march through a broad palette of possible human emotions (success, failure, fear, courage, love, sadness, pride, sacrifice), *Planes* (as with most anthropomorphic narratives) strenuously argues for what it means to be human. Yet, in doing so, *Planes* performs the exact kind of private telematics described by Baudrillard. Even as the lowly crop-duster protagonist is reshaped into a better version of himself, the conventionality of the plot devices shows how he has inescapably internalized the idea of being but a "computer at the wheel."

General Jimmy Doolittle, the WWII pilot whose bombing run against Japan was dramatized in *Thirty Seconds over Tokyo* and *Pearl Harbor*, had earlier made his name by developing and proving the possibility of instrument flight in 1929, where pilots fly *blind*, not requiring any view of the actual world outside of the cockpit, but instead staring only at its virtual representation: their altimeters, artificial horizons, and airspeed indicators. In doing so, he returns us thematically to that first-ever, still unseen flight the Wright Brothers made. Today, whether through historical war films or futuristic cyborg fantasies, aviation cinema demands a similarly curious relationship to vision: the banal excitement of flight compels us to look, and yet what we see is either only a patchwork grasp of pure speed or a studio-set kaleidoscope of character. A genre in rapid motion, aviation cinema is characterized by its fluidity, exchange, liminal crossings, and other reorganizations, as the primary transaction of flight between pilot and passenger is navigated by a series of shifting liminal figures: the sky marshal, the stowaway, the hijacker, the air traffic controller, the ground crew, the mechanic, the terminal staff, and the flight attendant.

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NOTES

1. Luke McKernan, "Taking to the Air: Early Film and Early Flight," trans. Luke McKernan, from the exhibition catalog *Die Kunst zu Fliegen in Film und Fotografie* [The art of flying in film and photography] (Düsseldorf, Germany: NRW [North Rhine-Westphalia] Forum Kultur und Wirtschaft, 2004), accessed 1 November 2014, http://lukemckernan.com/wp-content/uploads/takingtotheair.pdf.

2. "Cinema is not I see, it is I fly" (Paul Virilio, "Le cinéma, ce n'est pas je vois, c'est je vole," *Cahiers du Cinéma*, no. 357 [1984]: 30–33).

3. McKernan, "Taking to the Air," 4.

4. US Department of Transportation's Bureau of Transportation Statistics, "Press Release BTS 13–14," 19 March 2014, accessed 1 November 2014, www.rita.dot.gov/bts/press_releases/bts013_14.

5. Notable examples were the Lumière Brothers in 1898 and Thomas Edison's film company in 1900.

6. Tom Conley, *Cartographic Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 21.

7. Ibid., 39.

8. Paul Virilio, *Negative Horizon: An Essay in Dromoscopy*, trans. Michael Degener (London: Continuum, 2005), 98.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid., 92.

13. Christopher Schaberg, *The Textual Life of Airports: Reading the Culture of Flight* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2011), 40.

14. Ibid., 39.

15. Ibid., 51.

16. Between 1958 and 1969, 77% of hijackings "either originated in Cuba or were efforts to divert planes to Cuba" (Robert T. Holden, "The Contagiousness of Aircraft Hijacking," *American Journal of Sociology* 91, no. 4 [1986]: 874–904, quotations on 880, 874).

17. Virilio, *Negative Horizon*, 111.

18. Kathleen Barry, *Femininity in Flight: A History of Flight Attendants*, Radical Perspectives (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 11.

19. Ibid., 7.

20. Jean Baudrillard, "The Ecstasy of Communication," trans. John Johnston, in *The Anti-aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (New York: New Press, 1998), 145–54, quotation on 147.

21. Ibid., 146.