

Kafka: A Witness of One of the First International Airshows

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Abstract

When Franz Kafka described the Brescia airshow in 1909, he served as a witness of Europe's enthusiasm for fledgling modern aviation. After a few spectacular performances, such as Blériot's crossing of the English Channel, the conquest of the air became a sporting reality giving rise to international rivalries. Kafka's account, which grasped the poetic aspects of the aeronautical event, was nevertheless weighed down by fears one could call prophetic, in view of the soon-to-come First World War, and the role aerial weaponry played therein.

Article

In a short period of time, during the summer of 1909, Europe experienced a thrill for flight, which appeared to permanently open up totally new horizons for man. The glimpse of the ability to fly offered by the first aerostats in the late eighteenth century, during the era of hot-air balloons, became at this time a motorized reality that was apparently controllable at will in every aspect. The account of the week in which the first airshow took place in Brescia in Northern Italy, provided on the spot by the German-language writer from Prague, Franz Kafka (1883-1924), takes its place in the heroic atmosphere of this moment. It also makes it possible to point to the eternal ambivalence toward any technological advance or spread of innovation that changes the game with regard to human mobility and locomotion.

After an intense burst of innovative energy, which had sparked great fascination with a wide public, aerostation seemed to have come to a technological impasse in the late eighteenth century, before modern aviation, propelled by reliable motors, revived this disappeared enthusiasm. The great infatuation for flight that had gripped European elites during the 1780s, which had run dry for a time, once again experienced a sudden rise, increased by the frenzy of the first experiences of aviation.

The 26-year-old Kafka, who was vacationing with his friend Max Brod and Brod's brother Otto in Riva, near Lake Garda, attended Italy's first international airshow during an excursion. He takes up this subject as a literary motif to be presented in the form of a news report. His text, entitled "Airplanes in Brescia," was published in abridged form upon his return on September 19, 1909, in issue 269 of *Bohemia*, Prague's second-largest German-language daily.

We can see in his account a metaphor from his time, which was initially overwhelmed by the effects of the second “Industrial Revolution,” and then permeated by major international tensions, which were underpinned by people’s intimate fear and traditional existential dread, *Angst*. As for many of his contemporaries, this was the first time he had seen planes fly. Never before the first shows in late spring and early summer of that year, held in France at Juvisy south of Paris and at Bétheny near Reims, had so many planes embarked on the conquest of the sky. The writer was entirely seduced by this genuinely poetic moment, and his great emotion shows through in his account of this “collective communion in times of peace.”

The star aviators of the time, who had become flag bearers for their respective nations, were present at Montichiari near Brescia, bearing such names as Curtiss (American), Anzani and Calderara (Italians), as well as Rougier, Leblanc, and Blériot (French). The effect of the performance by Blériot, who had become world famous since his exploit just a few weeks previously, was captured in writing by Kafka thus: “There’s Blériot!”... “Two eyes are not enough.” Shortly before, on July 25, 1909, the *École centrale* engineer Louis Blériot (1872-1936) had successfully flown over the English Channel at the controls of a similar “Blériot XI”-type craft, 8 metres long, 7.20 metres wide, and weighing 310 kilograms. In 35 minutes, and at great risk-stimulated by the contest launched in the autumn of 1908 by the major daily newspaper, the *Daily Mail-England* had, in its own words, ceased to be an island.

His performance at the Italian show was highly anticipated and, like that of the others, deemed perfect. The magic of the industrial spectacle lavished on them is reminiscent of the impression made by the first automobile races, a combination of the natural with a sense of the extraordinary. These automotive races had accustomed crowds to motorized exploits, and the overlap between the period’s two worlds of high technology—motoring and aviation—makes it possible to establish connections in analyzing their systems and associated environments.

The history of the pioneers of aviation was thus written during the months preceding the Montichiari airshow, and news reports of successful flights had increased considerably. In the eyes of contemporaries, a technology was clearly in the process of passing a critical threshold, and promising paths toward new uses and unprecedented applications.

In 1908, on the military parade ground in Issy-les-Moulineaux, France, Henri Farman won the *Deutsch-Archdeacon Aviation Grand Prix*, by covering a kilometre in one minute and twenty-eight seconds at the controls of his biplane, designed by the brothers Gabriel and Charles Voisin, with a patented Antoinette motor by Levavasseur. The aviation elite had already performed two weeks before Montichiari, during the “great aviation week of Champagne” from August 22 to 29. These shows, which included hot-air balloons, dirigibles, and airplanes (monoplanes or biplanes), were sporting events with aims that were as much military as civilian. Various prizes, such as the first Gordon-

Bennett Aviation Cup (which succeeded the automobile cup of the same name), or the Michelin Cup, were available to be won under the supervision of the Aéroclub de France. The criteria included speed, number of passengers, number of laps, and altitude. The record for altitude was held by the American Glenn Curtiss, who was the successor of the flights conducted by the brothers Orville and Wilbur Wright in the United States and Europe, where they had completed a triumphal tour in 1906 (notably near le Mans, at the Auvours camp in the Sarthe department). His record was broken at Brescia by the Frenchman Rougier. The presence of 150,000 spectators during the final days at Reims, along with the personal visit from the French Minister of Public Works and the army's decision to order craft for military use (henceforth dubbed "*avion*" [plane]) said a great deal about the major economic, geopolitical, and strategic considerations connected to this emerging sector.

Sustained "both by courage and fear", Kafka nevertheless grasped the full ambiguity of the aerial scene he was witnessing. We can of course note his great sensitivity for the "democratic enthusiasm" that he and his friends saw, however this atmosphere quickly grew worrisome due to overcrowding. A "spirit of hostility" stands out in the atmosphere described, one not without political depth, as the presence of the Decadentist nationalist Gabriele d'Annunzio, noted by Kafka, adds a decisive nuance to his account.

Read now through the eyes of those who inevitably know the tragic outcome of history this text reminds us of how The Great War indeed was, in many respects, the "apocalypse of modernity" indicated by the historian Emilio Gentile—a knowledge that over-determines interpretation of the early heroic age of aviation. We can thus take as a Kafkaesque prophecy the author's closing comment, as he and his friends were leaving the show, regarding the flight of the Frenchman Henri Rougier (the former cycling and motoring champion had reached 190 meters on the occasion): "The route turns and Rougier appears so high that one feels able to determine his position only in relation to the stars, soon to appear in the sky, already growing dark."

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