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Chris M. Forsyth

Keep Direction By Good Methods

Mapping Flight, Nation, and Landscape
in Chris M. Forsyth's *Keep Direction By Good Methods*

In Chris M. Forsyth's photographs, enormous cement arrows punctuate wide open spaces evocative of the American West, otherwise dotted only by the occasional fence, tuft of vegetation, or telephone wire. The arrows point out into the landscape, gesturing to the horizon, each accompanied by a set of coordinates. Shot in black and white, the collection of arrows in Forsyth's series *Keep Direction By Good Methods* represent a fraction of what remains of the American Transcontinental Lighted Airway System, erected by the U.S. Post Office Department, a means of navigating nighttime coast-to-coast flight before the advent of electronic navigation. By day, pilots would look to the arrows below, and by night, steel towers atop the arrows would signal their location in morse code to guide their flight in the dark. The series draws its title from the mnemonic device derived from the Morse code sequence: "When Undertaking Very Hard Work, Keep Directions By Good Methods."¹

I'm curious to think about the work as a document of traces that remain etched on the land—it makes visible to us the scattered fragments of a former "map," a line of communication since disconnected, a witness to modernity's rush forward and its selective memory. As a collection of sites, a system in itself, Forsyth's work can be approached as a locus in which to examine the ways these ideas of communication, traces, landscape, and empire become tangled.

The photos themselves reach across distances, bringing disparate geographical points together as they reach across the years to the past. The Airway was erected in

¹ Henry R. Lehrer, *Flying the Beam: Navigating the Early US Airmail Airways, 1917–1941* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2014), 83.

service of delivering messages while conveying a message in itself: “[...] Keep Directions By Good Methods.” The system articulated a new understanding of what distance could be conquered in a matter of hours. It outlines, as well, a breakdown in communication as it fell into disuse, now perhaps more often encountered as signs removed from the broader message.

The media studies scholar John Durham Peters has examined the Victorian intertwining of flight, photography, and communication, noting that “the experience of flight was central to the nineteenth-century conquest of distance. Both new means of transportation such as the railroad and new technologies of sensory amplification such as the camera, [and] the telegraph [...] were described as flying machines.”² For Peters, this liberation of communication from the confines of the material renders it spectral. The split between the material and the immaterial, the past and present, is found in Forsyth’s series. It is both a mapping and an unmapping of the flow of mail but also, by extension, the flow of information across the country.

The emergence of these instruments of flight and the Lighted Airway signaled, then, a restructuring of how space and temporality were considered.³ The sense that a country as large as the United States was attainable—conquerable—in the minds of its citizens is indicative of a broader project of constructing a national identity, what America (as a nation, as colonized land, as burgeoning empire) meant at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Westward expansion has a particular heft in the American cultural imaginary, evoking the mythologized frontier and manifest destiny—it is difficult to separate images of the American landscape from the colonial ideals historically projected upon it.⁴ As W.J.T. Mitchell has argued, “landscape might be seen more profitably as something like

² John Durham Peters, “Phantasms of the Living, Dialogues with the Dead,” in *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 143.

³ “The Epoch Making Night Mail Flights,” *Aviation* 15, no. 10 (September 3, 1923): 266. <https://archive.aviationweek.com/issue/19230903>.

⁴ Terre Ryan, *This Ecstatic Nation: The American Landscape and the Aesthetics of Patriotism* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014), 4.

the ‘dreamwork’ of imperialism.”⁵ Flight, and the Airway’s bridging of America not only created a network of transportation and communication, it extended this ideal of expansion to the skies.⁶

Crucially, however, Forsyth’s *Keep Direction By Good Methods* is a witness to the state of the arrows after they fell into disuse, crumbling back into the landscape. As Mitchell has noted, what we have designated as landscape is an agent in itself—the photographs see the landscape acting on that which was imposed on it.⁷ Turtle Island, the land that has been called “North America” is, of course, a space that has become constructed and continues to be constructed, altered by not only physical but ideological forces as part of the colonial, imperial project. By presenting traces of a buried past, Forsyth’s work unsettles the way modernity’s ethos of constant progress necessitates a selective process of forgetting—what “progress” has eclipsed, who and what it has been built on.⁸ While the empire of air travel now has an aura of seamless, globalized immateriality, this series succinctly reminds us of a time in which flight necessitated material scaffolding.⁹ It reminds us of the constructed nature of nation and empire, and equally, the vulnerability of its scaffolding to entropy and undoing.

⁵ W.J.T. Mitchell, “Imperial Landscape,” in *Landscape and Power*, ed. W.T.J. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 10.

⁶ Jenifer Van Vleck, *Empire of the Air: Aviation and the American Ascendancy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 5.

⁷ W.T.J. Mitchell, “Introduction,” in *Landscape and Power*, ed. W.T.J. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 2.

⁸ Elaine Gan, Anna Tsing, et al, “Introduction: Haunted Landscapes of the Anthropocene,” in *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene*, ed. Gan, Elaine, Anna Tsing, et al. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 6.

⁹ Van Vleck, *Empire of the Air*, 5.

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