

THE AERIAL FIELD*

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Since the 1970s academic geography has steadily distanced itself from the land. Embraced instead are styles of inquiry ostensibly more theoretical, whether these thrilling fancies are fashioned in conjunction with economics, statistics, numeracy, or sociology. In addition, significant new forms of remote sensing, automatic and earth distanced, now routinely include vertical aerial photography and, above all, satellite imagery. These twin strands, one technical, the other theoretical, have led some geographers to turn away from, even to disdain, information gathered in the field as unrelentingly slow and the absorber of too much researcher effort.

For many, the statistical and mathematical treatment of visible phenomena contained in remotely sensed or geographic information systems data excuses them from leaving their desks for the long expeditions and painstaking efforts involved in covering ground in the field. Admittedly, a more direct, if still attenuated, contact with the earth is maintained by specialists whose work is set in a principally sociological or ethnographic interpretation of geographical reality, though by and large this is because they need to achieve a relationship with residents of a place, people who are then documented through surveys or other such surrogate measurements.

Of late, a fresh epistemological current has returned humanistic geographers into direct contact with the field through their preoccupation with understanding and experiencing landscapes. But this geography of perception gives greatest importance to contact with the environment in which we all live—literally, favoring the local and the sensual. This leaves relatively little room for a distanced and assessing look at someplace less than intimately known.

A limited group of investigators, however, finds the comprehension of space the basis, the essence, of geography. For these stalwarts, study of a territory necessarily involves direct observation of the land, and they prize any means that yields information about spatial organization, particularly the classic device of aerial photographs and the newer tool of satellite images. This enthusiasm for an aerial perspective is valuable when the study at hand involves understanding spaces and their organization. Between the short-range view, bracketed, in effect, by the shade of a mushroom, and that vast setting of the remotely sensed image, surely there exists—or should exist—an intermediate scale.

Photographs taken from a light airplane provide such an intermediate viewpoint, a perspective sometimes referred to as “oblique.” Yes, oblique photography from a small plane cannot produce absolutely vertical documents that can then be subjected to those rigorous principles of mensuration favored by the dedicated re-

* Translated from the Spanish by Paul F. Starrs.

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