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Air Kafka. On Flying Machines and the Anti-Heroes of Early Modern Flight

Franz Kafka's 1909 essay *Die Aeroplane in Brescia* stands out as his only published work of non-fiction, in which he recounts a day spent at one of the first modern air shows in Europe, *Il Circuito Aero Brescia* in Italy, in September of that year. As the first published German-language account of the phenomenon of powered, controlled flight, and among the first texts that Kafka ever published, this essay not only reveals some of the first news about the dawn of modern flight, but also introduces several key themes and concepts which appear in so many of Kafka's later works, such as the technological fascinations of Karl Roßmann in *Der Verschollene*, or of the Officer in *In der Strafkolonie*, and the mysticism of *Beim Bau der Chinesischen Mauer*.¹ It combines the increasing intensity of *Auf der Galerie* with the suspicion of *Die Sorge des Hausvaters* and blends this with the sarcasm of *Poseidon*. In my reading of this essay, I posit that the airfield in Brescia functions just as much as a proving ground for the pilots and their machines as it does for many of the techniques and themes that Kafka himself would later develop in his further writing. Moreover, I seek to locate Kafka's treatment of air flight in the greater context of German literature, emphasizing how Kafka's essay represents a turn from two of his literary predecessors in the German tradition, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe und Christoph Martin Wieland.

Gathered in Kafka's *Die Aeroplane in Brescia* are accounts of some of the most influential figures of early modern flight, such as Louis Blériot, who was the first to fly across the English Channel, and Glenn Curtiss, who held many world records and who ultimately won the grand prize at Brescia. These men, skilled pilots and aircraft fabricators, were some of the most influential and formative pioneers of early modern flight, yet Kafka's account of these men and their deeds seems to suggest a different interpretation. For Kafka, these men are ordinary men, presented as newspaper-reading, tinkering individuals who if anything possess an ability to suppress their fear of danger. This representation stands in stark contrast to the treatment of air flight in the late eighteenth century, where authors like Wieland and Goethe saw in man's flight an affirmation of the cornerstone of the Enlightenment: the human capacity of reason. Goethe and Wieland hailed

¹ »Kafkas Bericht *Die Aeroplane in Brescia* ist der erste über diese »Apparate« in der deutschen Literatur« (Klaus Wagenbach: *Franz Kafka. Bilder aus seinem Leben*. Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer 2002, p. 105).

the flight of man as »eine große Physische Revolution« and »[eine] Weltbewegung«, honoring the pioneers of early flight as great examples for the whole human race.² In this essay, I juxtapose Kafka's account and treatment of the Brescia Air Show with Goethe's remarks from *Maximen und Reflexionen*, and with Wieland's *Die Aeronauten*, to elucidate the differences and similarities in attitudes towards flight, progress and reason that span the 125 years between them. Finally, I turn to Bodo Plachta's 1998 »Himmel abgeschafft«: *Technischer Fortschritt und sozialer Wandel in Franz Kafkas Die Aeroplane in Brescia und in Bertolt Brechts Der Flug der Lindberghs* to take on the idea suggested in that paper's title »Himmel abgeschafft«,³ in reference to Galileo's revolutionary discovery. With my analysis, I suggest that Kafka's essay represents quite the opposite, not the conquering of the sky, but rather the opening of this new dimension of locomotion.

On 29 September 1909, Kafka's *Die Aeroplane in Brescia* appeared in the Prague newspaper *Bohemia*. The article chronicles one of the first European air shows, *Il Circuito Aero Brescia*, which had taken place three weeks earlier outside of the town of Brescia in Lombardy, Italy. This rather short article, edited down to a fifth of its original size, was the first German-language publication of the new phenomenon of mechanized flight, and one of the first to document the awkward spectacle of air shows in Europe. Aside from the historical significance of the text, *Die Aeroplane in Brescia* is Kafka's only non-fiction essay out of the some forty works published during his lifetime, and as such, it allows for a rare glimpse into his narrative style reporting on an actual historical event. Particularly relevant for this study, however, is the focus on a key technology of the twentieth century: Kafka's article deals with aviation as one of the most cutting-edge technologies of his day, a field which five years earlier had advanced enormously with the move from gliders to powered flight of controlled airplanes, and a field that in the following sixty years sent humans into space. While other types of technology play a significant role in his later works

² »Physische Revolution« from Christoph Martin Wieland: *Die Aeronauten, oder die Fortgesetzte Nachrichten von den Versuchen mit der Aerostatischen Kugel*. In: *Der Teutsche Merkur*, 1. Vierteljahr (1784), pp. 69–96 and 140–170, here p. 74. »Weltbewegung« from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: *Maximen und Reflexionen*. In: Idem: *Sämtliche Werke nach Epochen seines Schaffens. Vol. 17: Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre. Maximen und Reflexionen*. Eds. Gonthier-Louis Fink, Gerhard Baumann and Johannes John. München: Hanser 1991, pp. 717–953, here p. 790.

³ This quote comes from the character Galilei in Brecht's 1939 epic drama *Leben des Galilei*. In the second scene, Galileo makes several crucial observations with his new telescope, and shares the telescope with his friend, Sagredo. Sagredo asks: »So, wäre kein Unterscheid zwischen Mond und Erde?«, to which Galileo responds: »Gewiß. Und wir sehen es. Laß dein Auge am Rohr, Sagredo. Was du siehst, ist, daß es keinen Unterschied zwischen Himmel und Erde gibt. Heute ist der 10. Januar 1610. Die Menschheit trägt in ihr Journal ein: Himmel abgeschafft« (Bertolt Brecht: *Leben des Galilei*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp 1958, p. 20).

(such as telecommunication, transportation technologies, and mechanical reproduction), Kafka's *Die Aeroplane in Brescia* is the only text of its kind outside of his technical writings that so explicitly deals with technology in general, and aviation in particular.

Kafka's account of this historic event is a remarkable outlier in the context of the works he published during his lifetime. His narrative style varies throughout the text; at times it reads like a travel journal, reminiscent and sentimental, whereas at others it is more like live coverage from an on-the-scene reporter: factual, truncated, and extemporaneous. Most strikingly, Kafka's essay maintains a distanced and unbiased perspective on the event, despite a strong personal and professional interest. Considering the sharp attention to technical details that Kafka had developed over his initial years working in the industrial insurance business, his *Die Aeroplane in Brescia* presents readers with a number of conundrums. There is almost no technical jargon describing the airplanes or their flight, and there is very little in terms of technical detail with regard to the individual flights Kafka witnessed. Also, there is very little contextual or biographical information on the pilots themselves. Instead, Kafka's original manuscript of *Die Aeroplane in Brescia* is a composite of narratives about the experience of Brescia, of the air show, and of the phenomenon of air flight that is widely understandable and relatable, yet critical and intuitive.

In addition to the technological subject matter and the mechanical focus, Kafka's narrative technique also has modernist elements. Appearing only in textual form (without pictures or captions), Kafka's essay relies on narration to both locate the air show in the countryside of Brescia, and locate the reader in the commotion and excitement of such a large, historic event. This aim is accomplished by a mixture of cinematographic and stereoscopic techniques applied to the narrative that reflect contemporary advancements at that time in mechanical reproduction (photography and cinematography). Bodo Plachta and Peter-André Alt have both written on these related visual aspects in Kafka's narrative, which both require some delineation. Plachta emphasizes Kafka's »Kameraobjektiv ähnelnde[n] Blick« (camera-like gaze), and posits that the essay »gerät ihm zu einem Experiment, indem er Perspektiven ausprobiert, die an Kameraobjektive und filmische Verfahren erinnern, welche im Jahre 1909 noch ungewöhnlich waren.«⁴ Examples of this camera-like perspective can be seen throughout the course of the eleven pages that comprise the original, unedited article, which begins with their

⁴ On Kafka's camera-like gaze cf. Bodo Plachta: »Himmel abgeschafft«. *Technischer Fortschritt und sozialer Wandel in Franz Kafkas Die Aeroplane in Brescia und Bertolt Brechts Der Flug der Lindberghs*. In: Walter Delabar and Jörg Döring (Eds.): *Bertolt Brecht*. Berlin: Wiedler 1998 (Memoria; 1), pp. 163–188, here p. 169.

arrival in »das schwarze Loch des Bahnhofs in Brescia [...], wo die Menschen schreien, als brenne der Boden«.⁵

The narrative perspective first pans laterally from scene to scene around the airfield, depicting mechanics tinkering with engines and pilots preparing for flight, moving on to the crowds of spectators mingling on the field and in the stands, and then drifting off to distant convoys of vehicles and horse-drawn wagons travelling across the vast airfield. The perspective zooms in and out of these various scenes, from close-up and detailed frames of individual hangar scenes, to wide-angle and deep shots peering into the expanse of the airfield and the sky. Kafka provides a great deal of spatial depth in his narrative, juxtaposing the vast expanses of the airfield with details of minute facial characteristics. An example of this can be seen in Kafka's description of the Montichiari airfield as a »künstliche Einöde« (artificial desert) that was so big that »alles, was sich auf ihm befindet, verlassen scheint«.⁶ The narrative perspective extends from the immediate surroundings out to the desolate expanse of the air field, focusing on the trail of dust from a car traveling out across the way. At this point Kafka even imagines the perspective from the more expensive seats in the grandstand, when he suspects that »von den teuren Tribünen, die hinter uns stehen, mag allerdings jenes Volk mit der leeren Ebene ohne Unterschied in eins zusammenfließen«.⁷

These wide angle shots are juxtaposed with close-ups of hangar scenes, where Kafka focuses on minute and specific details, such as facial characteristics and newspaper headlines. This technique can be seen when Kafka depicts Rougier as »ein kleiner Mensch mit auffallender Nase«,⁸ who runs around flailing his arms as he orders his crew back and forth around the hangar. This same attention to detail is given to the scene at Glenn Curtiss's hangar, where Curtiss sits alone in front of his hangar, his airplane barely visible behind the slightly opened curtains, as he leisurely reads a newspaper. At this point the narrative focus zooms in close enough to not only make out the actual title of the newspaper, *The Newyork Herald* [!], but also the individual articles in the paper itself. These close-up details of the newspaper articles and facial characteristics, in contrast to the earlier wide-angle focus of the massive airfield, emphasize the camera like perspective and dynamic depth of range of the narrative. In this way, both the static

⁵ Franz Kafka: *Die Aeroplane in Brescia*. In: Idem: *Drucke zu Lebzeiten. Apparatband*. Eds. Wolf Kittler, Hans-Gerd Koch and Gerhard Neumann. Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer 2002, pp. 513–521 here, p. 516.

⁶ Franz Kafka: *Die Aeroplane in Brescia*. In: Idem: *Drucke zu Lebzeiten*. Eds. Wolf Kittler, Hans-Gerd Koch and Gerhard Neumann. Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer 2002, pp. 401–412, here p. 404.

⁷ Ibidem, p. 405. In the original manuscript Kafka writes: »auf den billigen Plätzen stehen 50.000 Menschen den ganzen Tag« (Kafka: *Aeroplane. Apparatband*, p. 516).

⁸ Kafka: *Aeroplane*, p. 403.

(fixed) and dynamic (zooming) camera perspectives are combined in a uniquely literary way.

In *Kafka und der Film*, Alt deals with the concept of stereoscopic seeing, i.e. perceiving depth in visual imagery. He links Kafka's experience of viewing exotic landscape images through the »Kaiserpanorama«, an apparatus built to show stereoscopic and panoramic images, with the visual aesthetics of *Der Jäger Gracchus*. While stereoscopic imagery as visual technology was already outdated at the time of Kafka's birth, it provided a different kind of viewing experience that, according to Kafka, gave the viewer more agency in the act of perceiving visual imagery. Kafka placed great importance on »die Ruhe des Blickes«⁹ that stereoscopic viewing allowed. In contrast to the cinema, where the viewer is presented with the scope and focus of the camera, stereoscopic imagery allows the viewer the ability to focus on numerous aspects within the same frame, according to the viewer's discretion. While the Kaiserpanorama used multiple photographs of the same scene from slightly different angles to show depth, Alt argues that Kafka employed similar techniques in his writing to create more panoramic, stereographic narratives. These stereographic images in the narrative allow the reader to focus on individual aspects in the narration, such as the airfield, hangars, flights, while leaving the task of interpreting and constructing the larger context of the air show up to the reader.¹⁰

As the aircrafts' teams prepare for the first round of flights, the narrative perspective gains a new dimension, one alluded to in Kafka's introductory paragraph: »Wir schauen in die Luft, um die es sich hier ja handelt.«¹¹ Kafka's essay depicts the flights of Leblanc, Blériot, Curtiss and Rougier, and begins with the vivid imagery of Leblanc's airplane just before taxiing for takeoff.¹² After a great deal of adjustments and modifications, the plane is finally ready for flight, only held back by the four men whose uniform coats whip in the thrust of the wind from the propellers. With this imagery, the raw power of these machines becomes somehow tactile for the viewer for the first time. It is Kafka's account of Curtiss' prize winning flight, however, which best depicts this new dimension of locomotion:

⁹ Peter-André Alt: *Kafka und der Film. Über kinematographisches Erzählen*. München: Beck 2009, p. 147.

¹⁰ Cf. *ibidem*, p. 148.: »Der panoramatische Konnex der Bilder entwickelt sich erst im Kopf des Lesers, der die Einzelteile zum Ganzen verbinden muß«. Here Alt is referring to Kafka's 1917 *Der Jäger Gracchus*, but I would like to suggest that the same principles apply to the earlier *Die Aeroplane in Brescia*.

¹¹ Kafka: *Aeroplane*, p. 401.

¹² »[...] der Motor kommt mit Lärm in Gang, als sei er ein anderer; vier Männer halten rückwärts den Apparat und inmitten der Windstille ringsumher fährt der Luftzug von der schwin- genden Schraube her in Stößen durch die Arbeitsmäntel dieser Männer« (*ibidem*, pp. 406f.).

Kaum verständigt man sich darüber, schon rauscht der Motor des Curtiss, kaum sieht man hin, schon fliegt er von uns weg, fliegt über die Ebene, die sich vor ihm vergrößert, zu den Wäldern in der Ferne, die jetzt erst aufzusteigen scheinen. Lange geht sein Flug über jene Wälder, er verschwindet, wir sehen die Wälder an, nicht ihn. Hinter Häusern, Gott weiß wo, kommt er in gleicher Höhe wie früher hervor, jagt gegen uns zu; steigt er, dann sieht man die unteren Flächen des Biplans dunkel sich neigen [...]. Er kommt um den Signalmast herum und wendet, [...] geradeaus dorthin, von wo er gekommen ist, um nur schnell wieder klein und einsam zu werden.¹³

Here the narrative takes place from a fixed position, identifying it with the spectator's perspective. As soon as one can find Curtiss amidst the fury of activity on the field and in the air, he is already flying off out of sight, over a forest and fading into the horizon. This is the point at which the narrative focus is extended its farthest, to the limit of the unaided eye. Curtiss, at this point a mere dot in the sky, then seemingly appears out of nowhere, speeds back towards the crowd, makes the turn at the signal post only to become smaller and smaller flying back into the horizon. This static or fixed perspective is emphasized by the sight of Curtiss, vanishing and reappearing, appearing smaller and larger as he flies away from and back towards the crowd. At other times, planes climb vertically into the sky and then dive directly at the audience, in stark resemblance to the iconic 1895 silent film short *L'arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat*, where cinema-goers view a train's arrival at a station from the perspective of a camera on the edge of the platform. In Kafka's brief account of Curtiss's prize-winning flight, the narrative reflects the extent to which this spectacle challenged the viewer to follow the constantly changing objects of focus.

This dynamic range of narrative focus also underscores another key distinguishing factor of Kafka's *Die Aeroplane in Brescia*. As a work of first-person, narrative non-fiction, Kafka's essay lacks the typical protagonist, such as Karl Roßman, or even the Maulwurf; rather it focuses on Kafka's perception of the historical event at large, and his impressions of the featured pilots and their flying. As narrative subjects, the airplanes and their pilots have a much greater range of mobility than the traditional Kafka protagonist.¹⁴ In stark contrast to the world of the Maulwurf in *Der Bau*, who spends nearly his entire life encapsulated in a labyrinth of underground tunnels, or in contrast to K., who despite all of his efforts never gains access to the castle in *Das Schloß*, the pilots and their machines in Kafka's *Die Aeroplane in Brescia* cover great distances in record time and achieve great feats in front of tens of thousands of onlookers. In many of Kafka's short stories,

¹³ Ibidem, p. 409.

¹⁴ On Kafka's characters cf. Peter Demetz: *Die Flugschau von Brescia. Kafka, d'Annunzio und die Männer, die vom Himmel fielen*. Translated by Andrea Marenzeller. Wien: Zsolnay 2002, p. 126.

it is society and bureaucracy that manipulate individuals, or in the case of *Die Verwandlung* and other stories, perhaps an unknown, unnamed force, but in *Die Aeroplane in Brescia* it is the pilots and their machines that work together to control and manipulate themselves.

When considered in the context of the larger German literary tradition, Kafka's *Die Aeroplane in Brescia* also signifies a distinct turn in approach to technology and its relationship with humans. Tracing the thread of aviation technology back 125 years to the Enlightenment, when Western Europeans first made progress in their experiments with balloon flight, the first human flight was heralded as one of the greatest achievements in history, and seen quite simply as the validation of the cornerstone of the Enlightenment: the capacity for human reason. For authors such as Goethe and Wieland, the first flights of the 1780s represented the opening of an entirely new dimension of locomotion which had only previously been accessible by dreamers, poets, and fictional figures. As such, the pioneers of human flight were seen as nothing less than heroes, whose curiosity, ingenuity and persistence culminated in humankind's debut in one of the few remaining uncharted realms of nature: the sky. For Goethe, the successful experiments with flight also marked a distinct shift between two epochs:

Es gibt zwei Momente der Weltgeschichte, die bald auf einander folgen, bald gleichzeitig, teils einzeln und abgesondert, teils höchst verschränkt, sich an Individuen und Völkern zeigen.

Der erste ist derjenige, in welchen sich die Einzelnen neben einander frei ausbilden; dies ist die Epoche des Werdens, des Friedens, des Nährens, der Künste, der Wissenschaften, der Gemütlichkeit, der Vernunft. Hier wirkt alles nach innen, und strebt in den besten Zeiten zu einem glücklichen, häuslichen Auferbauen; doch lös't sich dieser Zustand zuletzt in Parteisucht und Anarchie auf.

Die zweite Epoche ist die des Benutzens, des Kriegens, des Verzehrens, der Technik, des Wissens, des Verstandes. Die Wirkungen sind nach außen gerichtet; im schönsten und höchsten Sinne gewährt dieser Zeitpunkt Dauer und Genuß unter gewissen Bedingungen.¹⁵

This first moment of world history has striking similarities with the project of the Enlightenment as set out by Immanuel Kant in his influential essay *Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?*, namely »der Ausgang des Menschen aus seiner selbstverschuldeten Unmündigkeit«,¹⁶ that is, the process by which humans use their own capacities of intelligence and reason to take responsibility for themselves and their own enlightenment, i.e. »sich

¹⁵ Goethe: *Maximen und Reflexionen*, pp. 727f.

¹⁶ Immanuel Kant: *Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?* In: Erhard Bahr (Ed.): *Was ist Aufklärung? Thesen und Definitionen. Kant, Erhard, Hamann, Herder, Lessing, Mendelssohn, Riem, Schiller, Wieland*. Stuttgart: Reclam 1974 (RUB; 9714), pp. 9–17, here p. 9.

die Einzelnen neben einander frei ausbilden«. As Goethe notes, this process is directed inwards, focusing on a building and refining of the individual, and it is crucial that this moment in world history precedes the following epoch, the epoch of application, acquisition, and the consumption of knowledge, science and technology, which all have their effect on the external world. In many ways one could argue that this new phenomenon of air flight proved to be a catalyst for this epic transition from the theory-based principles of the Enlightenment to their praxis-based application, and Goethe and Wieland both seem to grant the aviation technology of their day the »Dauer and Genuß« under these specific conditions, referring to the »Weltbewegung« and »Physische Revolution« that resulted from the first successful flight in 1783.

In his 1784 *Die Aeronauten oder Fortgesetzte Nachrichten von den Versuchen mit der Aerostatischen Kugel*, which appeared in his journal *Teutscher Merkur*, Wieland sympathizes with the accounts of eyewitnesses who observed the first flight of a hydrogen-filled aerostatic globe, noting that one need not be a first-hand observer to understand the gravity of this achievement:

In einer Art von Luft-Fahrzeug, dessen blosse Möglichkeit behaupten zu hören, nur sechs Monate zuvor jeden großen und kleinen Naturforscher lächeln gemacht hätte [...] zwey neue Prometheen, die das Vertrauen zu der Richtigkeit ihrer Beobachtungen und Combinationen, bey einer Unternehmung wor jeder in den Geheimnissen der Natur Uneingeweyhten die Sinne vergehen, nicht einmal denken läßt daß sie ihr Leben dabey wagen, mit der Geschwindigkeit einer von Winde getriebenen Wolke hoch in den Lüften daherschweben zu sehen – ein so großes, so wunderbares, so schauerliches, so einziges Schauspiel, muß in seiner ersten Neuheit, da es alle Springfedern der Imagination und des Herzens zugleich spielen macht, und alle Arten von Leidenschaften, die das Gefühl des Erhabenen in der Seele entzünden kann, in eine einzige nie zuvor gekannte Empfindung zusammenschmilzt, einen Grad von Entzücken hervorbringen, der nur durch das Wonnegefühl desjenigen übertroffen werden konnte, der den Muth hatte einen solchen Versuch zu machen, nachdem er die Talente und Kenntnisse gehabt hatte, die Mittel dazu zu erfinden.¹⁷

Here Wieland stresses the conundrum that early aviation technology was met with, namely the aspiration to develop into a science without the necessary recognition and support of the scientific community. The early aeronautical engineers were not just met with skepticism, but rather disbelief, and moreover dismissal, with their experiments being disregarded by the »Naturforscher« of the scientific community. Disbelief and difficulty notwithstanding, Wieland remarks that it was their trust in the correctness of

¹⁷ Christoph Martin Wieland: *Die Aeronauten oder Fortgesetzte Nachrichten von den Versuchen mit der Aerostatischen Kugel*. In: *Der Teutsche Merkur*. 1. Vierteljahr (1784), pp. 69–96 and 140–170, here pp. 141f.

their observations and their calculations that elevated these men to mythical status as Promethean figures, in reference to the Titan figure of Greek mythology who stole fire from the gods and gave it to humans. Much like Goethe's Prometheus, these aeronauts challenged the scientific gods of their day, and they too were forced to face the consequences of their actions, taking into account the ever-present danger of injury and death that is inherent in aviation. Wieland's response, however, also reveals the depth of the confidence that this entails – regardless of their trust in their own invention and its intended purpose, these men relinquished their own fate to the wind and sky (»daß sie ihr Leben dabey wagen, mit der Geschwindigkeit einer von Winde getriebenen Wolke hoch in den Lüften daherschwimmen zu sehen«). For Wieland and for Goethe there is much more to this emerging phenomenon of air flight than the technical and scientific innovation and progress – it is really the human element that makes this amazing yet uncanny »einziges Schauspiel« even possible at all. It is the synthesis of all of the passions ignited by the feeling of the sublime in the human soul that culminates in an entirely new »Empfindung«, a new sensation only made possible by experiencing this once inaccessible realm of nature. This itself, Wieland notes, is only possible if one has the courage to attempt such a feat as flight, after he or she developed the talent and knowledge to invent the tools necessary to make the dream a reality.¹⁸

Wieland, however, was initially sceptical towards the French and their experiments with flight, as is clear from the title of his 1783 *Teutscher Merkur* article *Die Aeropetomanie, oder Die Neuesten Schritte der Franzosen zur Kunst zu fliegen*, an article that mixes a great deal of historical and technical information with a healthy dose of satire. The allusion to »Aeropetomanie« links the experiments with hot air balloons with a hot air of a different kind, and this light-hearted play on words is characteristic of Wieland's first and rather dismissive account of French Aeronauts and their early experiments with aerostatic balloons.¹⁹ *Die Aeronauten oder Fortgesetzte Nachrichten von den Versuchen mit der Aerostatischen Kugel* appeared in the following issue of *Teutscher Merkur* in 1784, only three months after his *Die Aeropetomanie* article, but, and most importantly, it appeared immediately following the first successful hydrogen balloon flight in Paris in December of 1783.

While the earlier *Die Aeropetomanie* is more satirical and critical in its account of the French's first forays into flight in the late eighteenth century, *Die Aeronauten* is much more philosophical and scientific, as demonstrated

¹⁸ The idea of courage also resonates in Kant's Enlightenment slogan: »Sapere Aude! Habe Mut, dich deines eigenen Verstandes zu bedienen!« (Kant: *Was ist Aufklärung*, p. 9).

¹⁹ Cf. Christoph Martin Wieland: *Die Aeropetomanie, oder Die Neuesten Schritte der Franzosen zur Kunst zu fliegen*. In: *Der Teutsche Merkur*. 4. Vierteljahr (1783), pp. 69–96.

in the shift from »Aeropetomanie« to »Versuchen mit der Aerostatischen Kugel«, i.e. from foolery to practicality. Wieland reports of the great advancements in aviation in the three months since his last article, beginning with the first manned flight of a hydrogen-filled hot air balloon, carried out by Prof. Jacques Charles in Paris on 1 December 1783. The hydrogen balloon ascended to a height of nearly 3000 feet above the thousands of spectators at the Jardin des Tuileries in Paris and traveled some 15 miles to Nesles-la-Vallée.²⁰ Wieland's account of this epic and historic event introduces the opening of this new dimension of locomotion:

Herr Charles, der sich in seinem Aerostatischen Wagen über 1500 Klafter hoch in die Luft erhob, und nach einer zweystündigen Luftreise, neun Stunden weit von dem Orte wo er eingestiegen war, sich wieder herabließ – ist ein sehr ernsthafter Gegenstand für das ganze Menschengeschlecht. Und da dieser Erfolg nicht das Werk eines geglükten Zufalls, sondern scharfsinnig beobachteter, combinierter, und genau berechneter Natur-Würkungen war: so kann man wohl ohne Vergrößerung behaupten, daß der Menschliche Verstand seit Jahrtausenden nichts erfunden und zu Stande gebracht habe, das von dieser Erfindung nicht verdunkelt würde. [...] Die Wunder, die uns der um so viel erleichterte Fortschritt von einer Entdeckung zur andern erwarten heißt, sind eben so unabsehbar, als die Vortheile die sich davon über die künftigen Jahrhunderte ausbreiten werden; und vielleicht steht die Epoche dieser Erfindung mit einer großen Physischen Revolution, wozu die Natur immer nähere Anstalten zu machen scheint, in einer jetzt noch unbestimmbaren Beziehung, welche sie unsern Nachkommen unendlich wichtig machen wird.²¹

While Wieland had previously made light of the difficulties and problems of the early aeronauts, in his 1784 *Die Aeronauten* it is clear that he does in fact appreciate the importance and gravity of the first successful manned balloon flight. Wieland lauds Prof. Charles as an object worthy of praise by the entire human race, and attributes the success of his team not to coincidence, but to the unshakable trust in the faculties of human reason. Wieland sees these rapid advancements in flight as the most significant achievement that the human mind had ever brought to fruition in millennia, the catalyst of a great ›physische Revolution‹.

The same optimism and sense of fulfillment can be seen in Goethe's reflections on the invention of the hot air balloon. Much like Wieland's ›physische Revolution‹, Goethe's idea of ›Weltbewegung‹ speaks both to the great importance of flight for the human race, and it also addresses the growing sense of awareness of the new phenomenon of flight. In his *Maximen und Reflexionen* he writes:

²⁰ Cf. Wieland: *Die Aeronauten*, pp. 143–145.

²¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 73f.

Wer die Entdeckung der Luftballone mit erlebt hat wird ein Zeugnis geben, welche Weltbewegung daraus entstand, welcher Anteil die Luftschiffer begleitete, welche Sehnsucht in so viel tausend Gemütern hervordrang an solchen längst vorausgesetzten, vorausgesagten, immer geglaubten und immer ungläublichen, gefährvollen Wanderungen zum Teil zu nehmen; wie frisch und umständlich jeder einzelne glückliche Versuch die Zeitung füllte, zu Tagesheften und Kupfern Anlaß gab; welchen zarten Anteil man an den unglücklichen Opfern solcher Versuche genommen.²²

In many ways, this ›Weltbewegung‹ could be thought of as the turn between the »zwei Momente der Weltgeschichte«,²³ the linkage between the epoch of the Enlightenment and that of the modern age. It is as if the aspirations and beliefs of the Enlightenment were being fulfilled with the fruition of human flight, and the developments of this new phenomenon were followed closely by all. It should be noted that Goethe here refers not to a singular, specific event; rather, he emphasizes the entire discovery, a process spanning from invention and fabrication to experimentation and finally resulting in the success of flight. This success, for Goethe, was a shared success, but one which could not be fully appreciated or understood by those who had not experienced the discovery of air flight themselves. Goethe's reference to ›Weltbewegung‹ and Wieland's idea of the ›physische Revolution‹ both seem to subscribe to the same sense of optimism with respect to the technological advancements in aviation in their day. They also draw a great sense of validation of the core tenets of the Enlightenment: recognition of and trust in the capacities of human reason.

Not surprisingly, Kafka's treatment of the pioneers of air flight of his day represents a distinct turn from the overwhelmingly enthusiastic yet cautious optimism of the late Enlightenment. While there are still definite elements of enthusiasm and optimism embedded throughout the essay, Kafka's treatment of this historical event in early modern aviation also presents readers with a mix of skepticism and satire which suggests difficulty in negotiating the discursive turn from Enlightenment theory to modern praxis. Written at the height of the Wright Brothers' international acclaim, and around the time of Louis Blériot's first flight across the English Channel, Kafka's *Die Aeroplane in Brescia* actually demystifies these pioneers of early modern flight, portraying them as normal people, who, together with their teams, accomplish manageable tasks in a relatively unspectacular manner. Granted, there had been numerous major achievements in aviation in the 125 years between the first successful flights of air balloons of the 1780s and the powered, controlled flight of the early 1900s, but it was really the work of these early pioneers that turned air flight from a burgeoning sci-

²² Goethe: *Maximen und Reflexionen*, p. 790.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 727.

ence to the paradigm-changing technology that it became in the twentieth century. Yet Kafka does not place Glenn Curtiss, who ultimately won the grand prize at Brescia, or Louis Blériot on a pedestal, in the way that Wieland does with Prof. Charles. Following the thread of German literature's first engagement with aviation in the late 1780s, one might expect to find the same validation of the enlightenment principles of the human capacity for reason revisited in a literary account of the Brescian Air Show, particularly in the context of the growing international awareness and enthusiasm for flight. Yet for Kafka, it seems that this battle between the human capacity of reason and the unforgiving gods of the sky never takes place on the Montichiari airfield. These men and their teams of mechanics are for Kafka, just that: ordinary men. They languidly read the newspaper, or patiently oversee their teams' preparations for flight; tuning their aircrafts, the pilots exude a quiet confidence that commands the respect and attention of their teams and the tens of thousands of spectators alike. In this way these pioneers of early modern flight are portrayed more like anti-heroes than as objects worthy of praise by the entire human race. On the contrary, they are presented as everyday people who are more lauded for their ability to suppress their fear of invisible dangers rather than their technical and practical capabilities and their confidence in the correctness of their observations and their measurements.

Just as the airfield in Brescia functioned as a proving ground for these aviation pioneers, Kafka's *Die Aeroplane in Brescia* also functions as a literary proving ground for many literary devices, narrative techniques, and themes that are characteristic of his later and more well-known writing. In an attempt to write about an event for which the public had almost no frame of reference, Kafka frequently turns to metaphor to make the unknown more relatable at key times during the narration. For example, Kafka relates the odd spectacle of the large airplane hangars with their curtains drawn to the stages of traveling theater troupes:

Wir kommen an den Hangars vorüber, die mit ihren zusammengezogenen Vorhängen dastehen, wie geschlossene Bühnen wandernder Komödianten. Auf ihren Giebfeldern stehn die Namen der Aviatiker, deren Apparate sie verbergen, darüber die Trikolore ihrer Heimat.²⁴

This theater metaphor also has relevance for the later pre-flight activity outside of the hangars, as well as the individual pilots' flights, which are all performative in nature, and which are viewed by tens of thousands in a paying audience. In fact, the scenic descriptions that take place in front of the hangars resemble dramatic interactions; however, there is no dialogue. Instead, meaning and context are drawn from visual cues and body language.

²⁴ Kafka: *Aeroplane*, p. 403.

An example of this can be seen in Kafka's description of the activity in front of Blériot's hangar, when his airplane, the one thought to have crossed the English Channel, first appears.²⁵ Blériot is depicted as leaning coolly against the wing of his plane, while his mechanics laboriously attempt to start the engine. Turning the prop results in sporadic sputters of the motor, which sound like »[der] Atemzug eines starken Mannes im Schläfe«. ²⁶ This metaphor gives the audience an idea of the anticipation; with every start attempt the plane could be ready for flight. But despite the plane appearing so small, this metaphor also implies that a sleeping giant is about to be woke.

This same approach is used when Kafka further describes the plane's motor as a stubborn school boy, who resists the help of his fellow classmates, and who always struggles to do what everyone else knows he is capable of doing.²⁷ This scene shows the dramatic qualities given to the narration that depict the relationship between the mechanics, the pilot, and the airplane in a very specific and interdependent context. Kafka also handles this rather technical scene with a more social and psychological emphasis, relating the motor and the mechanics' difficulties to that of a student/peer relationship. Using the verb »einsagen« Kafka emphasizes these psychosocial contexts by relating it to a classroom, where a group of students tries to encourage their fellow classmate by telling him or her what to say or do. In this case, both the mechanics and the audience all try to will the motor into starting, but the motor, like the schoolboy, does not seem cooperative. The emphasis on the motor continuously failing at the same point links this scene of technical difficulty to a social and psychological setting by use of the schoolboy metaphor. Kafka's use of this psycho-social metaphor makes this new technical material more relatable and ultimately understandable by grounding it in the familiar experience of a stubborn school child.²⁸ While this metaphor is in many ways an inversion of the Enlightenment reception of air flight, it interestingly also supports Wieland's claim about the rapid growth of technological advancement. By relating a cutting edge airplane engine to a regular schoolboy, Kafka shows the extent to which these technological innovations were becoming more relatable. Kafka also found a way to link aviation and writing in metaphor, arguably combining his interests in technology and writing. This can be seen in his description of Rou-

²⁵ Kafka also emphasizes perspective here, as he remarks on a group of French visitors saying »Wie klein!« upon first seeing Blériot's plane (ibidem, p. 405).

²⁶ Ibidem.

²⁷ »Aber der Motor ist unbarmherzig, wie ein Schüler, dem man immer hilft, die ganze Klasse sagt ihm ein, nein, er kann es nicht, immer wieder bleibt er stecken, immer wieder bei der gleichen Stelle bleibt er stecken, versagt« (ibidem, p. 406).

²⁸ Using drama and the theater as an entry into the Aerodrome also locates the reader within a certain tradition of social and psychological interaction which emphasizes the human element within this technical showcase.

gier in flight: »Rougier sitzt an seinen Hebeln wie ein Herr an einem Schreibtisch, zu dem man hinter seinem Rücken auf einer kleinen Leiter kommen kann.«²⁹ But this image of a man sitting at a desk whilst flying around in the air also presents the reader with a very alienating feeling of watching an uncanny, or unnatural event.³⁰ *Verfremdung*, or alienation, is a technique that Kafka uses many times throughout this essay in order to relate the peculiarity and uniqueness of this spectacle, while representing it to readers without the aid of direct visual representation. From the initial remarks about »das schwarze Loch des Bahnhofs in Brescia«³¹ to the »verdächtig[e] Holzhäuser«³² in front of the Aerodrome, Kafka stresses the uncanny, surreal, and the alien in the airshow even at the outset of his essay. Noting that »Ordnung und Unglücksfälle schienen gleich unmöglich«,³³ Kafka sets a high tension early on that creates an atmosphere of suspicion and suspense.

Perhaps the best example of this kind of *Verfremdungseffekt* can be seen in Kafka's treatment of the Montichiari airfield. Set in the rolling Italian countryside, this airfield was a strange and new type of facility. In fact, it is not so much what is located on this airfield, but rather the absence of almost any familiarity that makes it such an alienating location. Kafka writes:

Eine künstliche Einöde ist hier eingerichtet worden in einem fast tropischen Lande, und der Hochadel Italiens, glänzende Damen aus Paris und alle andern Tausende Augen hier beisammen, um viele Stunden mit schmalen Augen in diese sonnige Einöde zu schauen. Nichts ist auf diesem Platz, was sonst auf Sportfeldern Abwechslung bringt. Es fehlen die hübschen Hürden der Pferderennen, die weißen Zeichnungen der Tennisplätze, der frische Rasen der Fußballspiele, das steinerne Auf und Ab der Automobil- und Radrennbahnen. Nur zwei oder dreimal während des Nachmittags trabt ein Zug färbiger Reiterei quer über die Ebene. [...] Und damit nichts im Anblick dieser Ebene störe, fehlt auch jede Musik, nur das Pfeifen der Massen auf den billigen Plätzen sucht die Bedürfnisse des Ohres und der Ungeduld zu erfüllen.³⁴

Kafka attempts to relate the airfield and activity of aviation in general to a number of common and popular sports, such as horse racing, tennis, soccer, as well as automobile and bicycle racing. All of these sports take place within a specific space that has key features, such as the hurdles in horse jumping, or the boundary lines in tennis and soccer – the airfield, however, lacks any familiar system or borders. As such, Kafka describes it as an arti-

²⁹ Kafka: *Aeroplane*, p. 411.

³⁰ Here it is also worth noting that Kafka turns the image of the pilot (Rougier) from an object worthy of praise by the entire human race to a docile bureaucrat.

³¹ Kafka: *Aeroplane. Apparatband*, p. 516.

³² Kafka: *Aeroplane*, p. 409.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 401.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 404f.

ficial desert, as a »künstliche Einöde«, a place which was intentionally left bare and open to ensure the safety of the pilots when taking off and landing. For Kafka, however, the hustle and bustle of the event and the large hangars and suspicious buildings are juxtaposed with the overwhelming vacuity of the airfield. This stresses the alienating effect of thousands in attendance in front of an empty airfield, one which is so large that it dwarfs everything in its foreground.³⁵

Some scholars see Kafka's use of the *Verfremdungseffekt* as more than a literary technique, arguing that Kafka's emphasis of the alienating and dehumanizing effects of technology are meant to undermine the optimism traditionally associated with technology. Bodo Plachta's »Himmel abgeschafft« focuses on a quote from the character Galileo Galilei in Brecht's 1939 *Leben des Galilei*. The dictum »Himmel abgeschafft« stems from Galileo's discovery that the heavens did not move around a stationary earth, but rather that the earth itself revolved around the sun. Brecht's Galileo triumphantly claims: »Heute ist der 10. Januar 1610. Die Menschheit trägt in ihr Journal ein: Himmel abgeschafft.«³⁶ Here »Himmel«, understood as heaven is »abgeschafft«, or abolished, by the faculties of human reason. This is strikingly similar to the Enlightenment reception of aviation discussed with Goethe and Wieland, which depicted humans as victors in a battle against nature, i.e. human's conquering of the skies. Drawing on continuities between Brecht and Kafka's aviation texts, Plachta argues that Kafka builds societal critiques into his treatment of aviation in order to question the ideological character of blind trust in the optimism of technological advancement.³⁷

One of these critiques focuses on the effects of alienating and the »entindividualisierenden«, or dehumanizing effects of technology. This is particularly relevant for Kafka's *Die Aeroplane in Brescia*, since alienation and its dehumanizing effects are such key elements in this early text. Moreover, Kafka himself touches on this very idea of the »entindividualisierenden« effects of the air show in his essay. After the group decides to leave the air show, it isn't until they are outside of the Aerodrome, and gain some distance from it that they realize the effect that this spectacle had had on them. Kafka writes: »Wir bekommen glücklich einen Wagen, der Kutscher hockt sich vor uns nieder (einen Kutschbock gibt es nicht), und endlich wieder selbstständige Existenzen geworden fahren wir los.«³⁸ In a scene that could easily have played out in *Das Schloss*, it isn't until Kafka and the Brod brothers actually step on the coachman for a lift into the carriage, that they

³⁵ »Es ist so groß, daß alles, was sich auf ihm befindet, verlassen scheint« (ibidem, p. 404).

³⁶ Brecht: *Galilei*, p. 20.

³⁷ Cf. Plachta: »Himmel abgeschafft«, p. 165.

³⁸ Kafka: *Aeroplane*, p. 411.

become again »selbständige Existenzen«, which would be something along the lines of independent entities, or individuals. Clearly the alienating effects of the crowds, the airfield, and the flights had a captivating impact on the group, so much so that they had temporarily lost their own self awareness, and became part of the spectacle.

Plachta locates the dehumanizing elements of technology in Kafka's essay in the realization of the ever-increasing rift between humans and their technological advancements. This argument is valid in the sense that most of the public had never seen airplanes before this event; it also resonates with Goethe's comments about the exponentially increasing advances in technology in *Maximen und Reflexionen*. But this argument only takes into account one aspect of the relationship between humans and technology. Kafka's *Die Aeroplane in Brescia* also emphasizes the close relationship between humans and machines, and the extent to which they work together in order to achieve success. At the moment Blériot takes off, Kafka remarks how he looks as if he is part of the flying machine: »Eine lange Pause und Blériot ist in der Luft, man sieht seinen geraden Oberkörper über den Flügeln, seine Beine stecken tief als Teil der Maschinerie.«³⁹ Emphasizing the alienating spectacle of Blériot in flight, the man who flew across the English Channel, Kafka goes on to write:

Was geschieht denn? Hier oben ist 20 M. über der Erde ein Mensch in einem Holzgestell verfangen und wehrt sich gegen eine freiwillig übernommene unsichtbare Gefahr. Wir aber stehn unten ganz zurückgedrängt und wesenlos und sehen diesem Menschen zu.⁴⁰

Here, Blériot again is depicted as being caught up in the machine, »verfangen«, while the spectators stand below on the ground taken back, and »wesenlos«, bodiless, completely captivated by the sight of the man in the machine. This depiction shows the distance between the general public and cutting edge aviation technology at the time, but moreover it shows the ever increasing integration between humans and machines specifically, and society and technology in general.

By emphasizing the increasingly integrated yet exponentially alienating aspects of technology in society, Kafka's 1909 essay introduces a theme that recurs throughout the duration of his literary tenure.⁴¹ The larger context of this relationship is the focus in the short story *Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer* (1931), where Kafka depicts a society that bases their sur-

³⁹ Ibidem, p. 408.

⁴⁰ Ibidem, pp. 408f.

⁴¹ This can be seen clearly in his short stories *In der Strafkolonie* (1914), where humans and technology have the closest and most problematic relationship, as well as in *Der Bau* (1931), where the mole-protagonist's self-made burrow, an architectonic system, becomes a defining element of the identity.

vival on the building of a massive wall of defense against an invading force. The focus of this text, however, is not on the architectural product of the Great Wall, but rather on the way in which its building technologies were applied. Kafka's Great Wall is built using a partial-completion system where individual teams construct only disparate sections of the wall. This leaves not only gaping holes in the wall's defensive structure, but it also points to larger problems of the construction process. These central questions concern the teams' ignorance of the greater scope of the project (how and when the disparate sections were to be completed), and even the make-up of the army of engineers itself (how decisions were made and by whom). Kafka's focus on the construction technique seems to imply a critique of bureaucratic systems that goes to the very core of the wall – its blueprints. The wall's plans are said to have been developed in the leadership's chambers, an undisclosed and mysterious location where the totality of all human thoughts, wishes, goals, and fulfilments are illuminated by a mystic light which shines through a window. Kafka's use of a metaphor of a mystic light, here shown shining on the Great Wall's blueprints, links a highly technical document with a divine influence, re-introducing a question of heavenly influence on technological capabilities.

This introduction of mysticism into *Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer* provides a foundation for this society's unshakable belief in technology as a means of survival (building defense), and surprisingly, this same thread of mysticism can also be seen in the earlier 1909 essay *Die Aeroplane in Brescia*. In Kafka's first account of an actual flight in his airplane essay, he uses the metaphor of divine light, which I argue represents this same element of mysticism explicitly expressed in *Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer*, albeit here in a more indirect way. As he describes Blériot's first flight in a plane thought to be the same as from the historic channel-crossing, Kafka writes: »Die Sonne hat sich geneigt und unter dem Baldachin der Tribünen durch beleuchtet sie die schwebenden Flügel.«⁴² In this passage, the grandstand itself functions much as the window frame in *Beim Bau*; later in the afternoon the sun is at just the right angle to shine through and fill the landscape with rich twilight tones. Again, it is in the presence of this spectacle that the audience stood »ganz zurückgedrängt und wesenlos«, almost as in reverence to an epiphany that was revealed before them. Kafka even uses the same metaphor of sunlight in his account of Glenn Curtiss's prize-winning flight. As Curtiss flies off into the horizon and turns back towards the crowd, his plane basks in sunlight, made more noticeable by the pitching and rolling of the aircraft, and its glistening reflection in the wings: »steigt er, dann sieht man die unteren Flächen des Biplans dunkel sich nei-

⁴² Kafka: *Aeroplane*, p. 408.

gen, sinkt er, dann glänzen die oberen Flächen in der Sonne.«⁴³ When considered in the context of some of his later works, such as *Beim Bau*, the use of sunlight as a metaphor for a mystical experience reintroduces a religious element that runs counter to the triumphant claim »Himmel abgeschafft«. In this way, Kafka's *Die Aeroplane* reintroduces an element of divine influence into the relationship between humans and technology. Much in the same way that the Chinese wall plans were drawn in a process that synthesized human and heavenly influences, the explicit repetition of these cutting-edge flying machines basking in sunlight might also be seen as an allusion to a divine influence, something which was previously thought to have been overthrown by the kinds of Prometheus-figures praised by Wieland and Goethe. Kafka's airplane essay represents not the triumphant quote of Brecht's Galilei, »Himmel abgeschafft«, i.e. not a doing away with the sky, or a conquering of the heavens, but more so, it heralds the opening up of a new dimension of locomotion. In this sense, Kafka's Galileo might proclaim instead: Himmel aufgemacht! This idea of ›aufmachen‹ (to open up), in contrast to ›abschaffen‹ (to do away with, abolish) realizes not only the opening of this new dimension of locomotion and its implications for society. It also alludes to the mysticism inherent in the relationship between humans and technology in the essay, as symbolized by the glistening sunlight on the airplane's wings.

In the final sentence of *Die Aeroplane in Brescia*, Kafka leaves his readers with a prophetic remark about the next big hurdle in aviation, which also resonates with this idea of the opening up of the skies. Once in the carriage departing the airfield at twilight, Kafka and his friends turn around in their seats to watch Rougier through the window climb ever higher in the air during an experimental flight.⁴⁴ As the carriage makes its way out into the countryside, »dreht sich [der Weg] und Rougier scheint so hoch, daß man glaubt, seine Lage könne bald nur nach den Sternen bestimmt werden, die sich gleich auf dem Himmel zeigen werden, der sich schon dunkel verfärbt.«⁴⁵ While this passage corresponds to the focus on different perspectives in this essay, Kafka also makes a great leap here in locating the pilot and machine not in relation to the ground, but to other heavenly bodies. In other words, instead of defining their location with respect to the earth or altitude from the ground, Kafka suggests that soon we will have to find the

⁴³ Ibidem, p. 409. The sun symbolism here is preceded by an earlier passage that describes the sun set low in the evening sky, which shines through the grandstands to illuminate Blériot's plane. »Nun aber kommt der Apparat, mit dem Blériot den Kanal überflogen hat; keiner hat es gesagt, alle wissen es. [...] Die Sonne hat sich geneigt und unter dem Baldachin der Tribünen durch beleuchtet sie die schwebenden Flügel« (ibidem, p. 408).

⁴⁴ »Man weiß ja, dieser Flug ist nur ein Experiment, da es schon gegen 7 Uhr geht, wird er nicht mehr offiziell registriert« (ibidem, p. 411).

⁴⁵ Ibidem, p. 412.

aviators in the stars. In a much different way than the seafarers had used stars to navigate, Kafka, already in this 1909 aviation essay, alludes to spaceflight by speculating that aviators will soon be amongst the stars themselves, making the shift from ›Aeronaut‹ to ›Kosmonaut‹.⁴⁶ The sight of Rougier climbing vertically into the sky seems to have the same captivating effect experienced by the group while still at the airfield, for the friends cannot take their eyes off of Rougier: »Wir hören nicht auf, uns umzudrehen; gerade steigt noch Rougier, mit uns aber geht es endgültig tiefer in die Campagna«.⁴⁷ Playing with the perspectives here, Kafka constructs a very dynamic image of the carriage's gradual descent from the countryside towards the city (›tiefer in die Campagna«), set against the background of Rougier's continuous vertical climb (›gerade steigt«). This represents not only the ever increasing distance between humans and technology, which in this case are travelling away from one another, but it also emphasizes the extent to which the skies had been opened up, by making Rougier seem much higher than he actually was.⁴⁸

Kafka's 1909 *Die Aeroplane in Brescia* is a fascinating text that stands out from his fiction works for a number of reasons, but as argued here in this essay, it also introduces a number of literary themes and concepts that become key characteristics later in his more well known novel fragments and short fiction. It establishes technology as a theme and literary subject in Kafka's writing, one that is returned to in so many of his works, such as in the novel fragments *Der Verschollene*, *Das Schloß*, and the prose works of *Poseidon*, *Die Sorge des Hausvaters*, and especially *In der Strafkolonie*. It also introduces many narrative and literary techniques, such as shifting perspectives and metaphor, as well as the *Verfremdungseffekt*, that go on to become defining characteristics of his writing style. In dealing with modern aviation, Kafka's essay underscores the sociological and psychological implications of the relationship between humans and technology, and shows the extent to which technology can alienate and divide, but also, importantly, how it can unite. This phenomenon can be seen not only in the 50,000 international spectators in attendance at the Brescia air show, and the global community of aviators, but also in the great paradigm shifts that

⁴⁶ There is a long tradition in German Literature of using stars as poetic representations for God, most notably perhaps with Andreas Gryphius' Baroque sonnet *An die Sternen*. Particularly relevant for Kafka's essay is the conclusion to the poem: »Herolden diser Zeit/ wenn wird es doch geschehen/ | Daß ich/ der euer nicht allhir vergessen kan/ | Euch/ derer Libe mir steckt Hertz und Geister an | Von andern Sorgen frey werd unter mir besehen?« (Andreas Gryphius: *An die Sternen*. In: Ulrich Maché and Volker Meid (Eds.): *Gedichte des Barock*. Stuttgart: Reclam (RUB; 9975), p. 117.) Here the lyrical self asks when it will be able to view the stars not from below, as a mortal, but rather from above, or amongst the stars in heaven.

⁴⁷ Kafka: *Aeroplane*, p. 412.

⁴⁸ Cf. Demetz: *Die Flugschau in Brescia*, p. 102: Rougier set a new world record in altitude at the Brescia airshow, reaching a height of 198.5 meters, or about 650 feet.

air flight, mass air travel, and later space flight would bring about over the course of the following decades. *Die Aeroplane* also represents a marked turn in German literature's treatment of aviation technology, and technology's relationship to society at large, contributing to the modernist characteristics of the text. By reintroducing the question of mysticism into the relationship between society and technology, Kafka subverts more than a century of European literary tradition by treating the pioneers of early modern flight as anti-heroes. While negative in connotation, the term anti-heroes is not meant to be pejorative, for Kafka does not discredit or devalue the accomplishments and abilities of the Brescian aviators. Rather, he locates them in the context of their twentieth-century socio-historical background, illuminating them with divine influence, and depicting them as new and modern, everyday people. In its treatment of early modern aviation, *Die Aeroplane in Brescia* importantly challenges readers to consider the ways in which we perceive technology and its relationship with society, by focusing on the social, psychological, and ethical implications of a modern and increasingly technological society.

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