

## INTRODUCTION

# Accounts of Palestine from Above

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This special *Jerusalem Quarterly* issue<sup>1</sup> explores how the technology of mapping and imaging has been used to depict the Palestinian landscape from various elevations for a variety of uses: mapping, surveillance, art, planning, and other areas. Contributions tackle issues that vary from image representation of Palestine and its geography to the notion of what is of interest and disinterest in the eye of the colonial power versus what is not represented or captured and why. In this issue contributors examine uses of aerial photography to document railways, military installations, airports, roads, and other infrastructure; unpack urban planning paradigms through images; and scrutinize the issue of transformation of the landscape, and its natural/human causes. Several essays focus on technologies of surveillance and intelligence that have been developed historically to map and collect sensitive visual material that will eventually ensure ground control.

This introductory text explores historical and contemporary accounts offering interpretations on the meaning of gazing from the sky on the landscape of the “Little Continent” – the term used by German ethnographers in reference to Palestine – and the technology used to achieve the purpose of this type of exposure. These accounts serve as a prologue to conversations among several authors and artists on how to decipher the ideological layers behind aerial photography and mapping of Palestine since the last century up to today.

### 1

In her book *Close Up at a Distance: Mapping, Technology & Politics*,<sup>2</sup> Laura Kurgan refers to very distinctive images captured by NASA that have changed the global perception of earth – the *Blue*

*Marble*, 7 December 1972. The image is somehow disconcerting, due to its abstraction onto a flat circular map. It is a very provocative image that depicts our planet Earth in universal harmony without any traces of borders, nationalism, poverty, famines, tyranny, wars, religion, conflicts or technology. This image played a significant role in elevating the notion of planetary unity and the rise of universalism in issues of humanity and the environment.

The same image was reproduced again via photos taken by NASA's Terra satellite in 2002; however, this time it was a little different, the image being composed of several photographs knitted together from the satellite's quarterly observations, at a spatial resolution of 1 square kilometer per pixel. NASA made a subsequent release in 2005, referring to this series of images as *Blue Marble Next Generation*.<sup>3</sup>

In 2012, there were again two more images, of the Western and Eastern Hemisphere, called *Blue Marble 2012*, assembled from data collected by the Visible/Infrared Imager Radiometer Suite (VIIRS) on the Suomi NPP satellite taken through six orbits over a period of eight hours.



*Blue Marble*, a photograph of Earth taken on 7 December 1972, by the crew of the Apollo 17 spacecraft en route to the moon at a distance of about 29,000 kilometers; Africa, Antarctica, and the Arabian Peninsula are visible. Photo courtesy of NASA.

The 2012 *Blue Marble* images are no longer simple one-shot photographs taken by an astronaut in space, but a synthesis of massive quantities of remotely sensed data collected by satellite sensors. The difference between the generations of Blue Marbles sums up a shift in paradigm in the classical way of thinking about images, what they represent, the data and information they reveal, and the ways we interpret them. The 2012 versions of *Blue Marble*, which are somehow similar to the more sophisticated version one can now experience from Google Earth, present us with images that humans are unable to see with their own eyes, due to its full three-dimensional structure. It is made of layers of data collected and assembled over time and adjoined around a wireframe sphere to produce a rotatable model of Earth at a resolution of at least half a kilometer per pixel. As time goes by these images evolve into a more complex database, where historical data is inserted, and new data uploaded into the model.



*Blue Marble* composite images generated by NASA in 2002. NASA created these two images to exhibit high-resolution global composites of Moderate Resolution Imaging Spectroradiometer (MODIS) data. Photo courtesy of NASA.

The shift in the technology of image making since 1972 raises a series of fundamental questions about the interrelation between physical space and its representation, virtual space and its realization. The accessibility to vast amounts of satellite data compiled in the form of a diminutive three-dimensional Earth can be done by anyone from a mobile phone. Applications such as Google Earth allow users to rotate Earth with a finger, a simulation of divine power against all laws of physics. From some websites dedicated to vegetation analysis, or monitoring mining operations, 30-centimeter-high resolution images can be obtained instantly in the blink of an eye.

Mythology and religion encompass multiple examples that depict the power of looking from high altitudes over certain geographies for purposes of supremacy and control. These examples unpack several virtues of power gained from having the advantage of looking from the sky over an expanse of landscape. The morals that are found in these fables establish a surprisingly sensible foundation from reading the historical and contemporary gaze on Earth and the landscape from high altitudes.

One renowned biblical story that underlines the test of temptation for territorial possession and self-inauguration to a throne is the story of Jesus and Satan on the Mount of Temptation. After failing attempts to lure Christ to turn stones into bread and throw himself down from a high pinnacle in Jerusalem, Satan's final maneuver was teleporting Jesus to the Mount of Temptation in Jericho and showing him all the kingdoms westward toward the Mediterranean coast and eastward across the Dead Sea and the fertile Jordan Valley.



James Tissot (French, 1836–1902), *Jésus tenté dans le désert* (Jesus Tempted in the Wilderness), 1886–1894, opaque watercolor over graphite on gray wove paper, Image: 8 7/8 x 13 5/16 in. (22.5 x 33.8 cm). Photo courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum; online at ([brooklynmuseum.org](http://brooklynmuseum.org)) [tinyurl.com/vzzb5pz](https://tinyurl.com/vzzb5pz) (accessed 16 March 2020).

Satan tempted Jesus by offering him all the wealth of these kingdoms seen from the summit of the mountain, if Jesus would only bow down and worship him. Jesus resisted the temptation of the lush green and fertile Jordan valley amidst its barren landscape, where Herod chose to build his lavish palace, followed later by another extravagant palace for the Umayyad caliph Hisham ibn Abd al-Malik, and where the Roman general Marcus Antonius had given

Cleopatra the rich balsam and date groves of Jericho as a token of their love. That exact position from the top of the mountain where the eye can register the expanse of the landscape – not normally experienced from lower altitudes and from daily life inside a human settlement – incites a temptation to rule and conquer. Jesus resisted this temptation although provoked by his human nature of greed and possession.

Whether from sixteenth-century hot air balloons, or by means of satellite remote sensing, there is a long technological history of installing eyes in the sky for spying, mapping, and sustaining reign and control over a vast landscape which cannot be sighted from the ground.

### 3

It is not only the visceral feeling of a temptation to reign and possess that can strike one when gazing over the landscape from above, but also the invisibility of details and every day human processes which become concealed from the eye. The same exact feeling that renders man-made divisions and borders obsolete can be read in Raja Shehadeh's book *A Rift in Time* when he described his feelings upon looking at the Jordan Rift valley from the top of Mount Arbel.

The hill on which my wife, Penny, and I were standing on that clear, crisp day at the end of 1996 is called Mount Arbel. It is one of the highest points on the plateau of Galilee. Below me I could see all too clearly the new geography of the land stretching out before me [. . . ] From this precipitous cliff in what might be described as a wide trough surrounded by high hills, I could observe the beautiful sweep of the Great Rift Valley encompassing Lake Tiberias and stretching beyond it northwards into Lebanon. In the distance was Mount Hermon, which in Arabic is called Jabal al-Sheikh because of the resemblance between its snowcapped top and the white turban worn by sheikhs (headmen).

This was a good spot from which to get a sense of the flow of the Rift Valley, which extends from the Taurus Mountains in southern Turkey to Mozambique in East Africa. Viewing this relatively small stretch, one could still observe how the valley's basin contains lakes and rivers surrounded on both sides by higher ground, creating what in some areas resembles rock walls [. . . ] The surrounding land is full of volcanic rocks and solidified lava in the form of basalt. Not far from where the Arab village of Hittin once stood there is evidence of faulting responsible for the dramatic split between the rock hill on which I was standing and the one just north of it, between which lies Wadi al-Hamam.<sup>4</sup>



Yri Raysper, *View from Mount Arbel*. 2013. Online at ([ccsearch.creativecommons.org](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)) [tinyurl.com/t9jwnb3](https://tinyurl.com/t9jwnb3) (accessed 19 March 2020).

Shehadeh's perception of the geography from maps and images was transformed into a different manifest of relations from above. The rift and its features were suddenly animated from merely lines on a map into a geographical continuity expanding in front of his eyes. No more lines that demarcate borders, and no more dots intoning locations of villages and cities. A sense of universalism emerges beyond borders and nationalism, parallel to the *Blue Marble* image of 1972.

#### 4

The Orient Flight of the *Graf Zeppelin* to Egypt via Palestine in 1929 is a journey that portrays two different yet complementary gazes on the biblical landscape from above.<sup>5</sup> On the one hand, the Jewish Zionist guests viewed the "Promised Land" with a biblical imagination that asserts the Zionist claim and the ongoing *aliyah* (immigration) to Palestine. On the other hand, the German evangelical guests were overwhelmed with Oriental curiosity and romanticization of Palestine in a mission to connect the biblical and historical past of the land with the landscape today.

On 20 March 1929, the German consul in Jerusalem received a letter from the British Mandate permitting the *Graf Zeppelin* arriving from Berlin to fly over Palestine. The letter underlined that landing was absolutely forbidden except in cases of emergency.



*Zeppelin over Tower of David*, 11 April 1931. G. Eric and Edith Matson Photograph Collection, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C. Online at ([loc.gov](https://www.loc.gov)) [tinyurl.com/v4o8nco](https://tinyurl.com/v4o8nco) (accessed 10 March 2020).

On board the German airship LZ-127 *Graf Zeppelin* in 1929 – the airship flew over Jerusalem twice, the Orient Flight on 26 March 1929 and the Egypt Flight on 11 April 1931 – were 41 crew members and 28 visitors. Among them were: Dr. Wolfgang von Weisl, one of the founders of the Revisionist movement and a leader in the Zionist struggle for establishing a Jewish state; the president of Württemberg, Dr. Eugen Bolz; Theodor von Gerard the former German Minister of Transport; Count Ferdinand von Zeppelin's daughter Countess Bradenstein; Mrs. Tony Zander, member of the Reichstag; Erich Koebiz, minister of justice in the government of the Reich; Paul Loebe, Chairman of the Reichstag; Albert Pflueger, president of the parliament of Württemberg; Dr. Herman Badet, high official in the Prussian Interior Ministry; members of Parliament, Wilhelm Kayel and Joseph Jose; Lady Drummond

Hey, representative of the Hearst newspaper conglomerate; senior members from the Prussian Ministry of Commerce, Ministry of Finance, and Ministry of Economy; and a representative of the German Navy.

In the gondola, guests were ushered to their rooms. The small guest rooms of the first-class luxury liner were elegantly furnished. The topnotch chef presented his dinner menu for ham cooked in Burgundy wine with mixed vegetables followed by various cheeses and butter, while the guests gathered in the dining area wearing camel wool blankets embroidered with the Zeppelin logo, and raised their beer and wine glasses to the commencement of the journey to the Holy Land and exotic Orient. To some guests, especially Dr. Wolfgang von Weisl, the flight to Jerusalem was an inspection of the “Promised Land” from the sky and an imagination of Palestine as Jewish national home.

On Tuesday 26 March 1929 at 4 o'clock the *Graf Zeppelin* reached Haifa bay at the speed of 130 mph. After 40 hours of flight the *Zeppelin's* guests were surprised by a jubilant welcome from the ground arranged by the residents of the German Colony<sup>6</sup> who had gathered since noon at the foot of Mount Carmel. From above, the guests waved back at the crowds who greeted the *Zeppelin* with flags and ribbons. The ship hovered in circles over the sign “Willkommen” made of white painted wooden planks, then departed south along the shoreline, flying above the Crusader fortress of Atlit, then over the Palestinian village of Qisarya and the ancient ruins of the Caesarea imperial Roman fortress. The *Zeppelin* continued over the newly planted areas of eucalyptuses in the settlement of Hadera and around the settlement of Zichron-Yacob, then continued to the newly built settlements of Netanya and Herzliya. From afar before them rose from the sand Tel Aviv, the crown jewel of the Zionist dream, bustling with crowds celebrating the advent of the *Zeppelin*. Many were Arab tourists from Egypt and Syria, and other guests from the cities of Nablus, Jenin, and Jerusalem. Wherever the droning sound of the *Zeppelin's* engines was heard, cars in the streets stopped, and people cheered by clapping their hands and waving their hats. The streets were crowded with people. Some automobiles had a mission of escorting the hovering *Zeppelin* over Tel Aviv where the engines were stopped and muted. Three big bags of confetti were emptied from the gondola to cheer the celebrating crowds below.

One of the navigating officers of the ship, a man named Lehman, described the arrival to Jerusalem in his diary:

Onward we flew toward Jerusalem. Unfortunately, we were a few hours too late. Even while we were approaching, the full moon rose red as blood and threw its magical light over the city. We could do nothing but make a few turns over the holy place and thus extend our greetings. From below we must have looked like a fiery chariot.<sup>7</sup>





Hugo Eckener and Zeppelin designer Ludwig Dürr aboard LZ-126, 1924. Online at (airships.net) [tinyurl.com/uyowqzr](https://tinyurl.com/uyowqzr) (accessed 10 March 2020).

With a special assortment of wines, dinner was served while guests awaited sunset as they hovered toward Jerusalem. Drinking a special wine for the occasion, the guests slowly watched in reverence the first light cast over the historic areas. The largest mail drop in the history of the *Zeppelin* took place over Jerusalem; the guests observed the parachute-fall of four mail sacks as the whirring sound of the *Zeppelin*'s engines was heard in the neighborhoods of Jerusalem.

In his memoirs Captain Hugo Eckener wrote about turning the aircraft towards the Dead Sea:

The Dead Sea is nearly 1,300 feet below sea level. We were tempted by the possibility of flying our Zeppelin in significantly lower height than sea level. Jerusalem lay at an altitude of 2,600 feet, and within fifteen minutes we were over the tip of the plateau from which there is a steep drop to the Rift Valley where in its bottom lay the Dead Sea. It was night, and the rising full moon with its pale light barely illumine, the great lake extended in semi-darkness, mysterious like the underworld. Slowly we sank lower, carefully groping the way lower and lower until we were flying a few hundred feet above the water. We looked up at the peaks towering above us as if from a basement. It was a strange feeling to be on a boat that normally soars high above the sea, and now flies a thousand feet below it. We opened a few bottles of Rhine wine, and celebrated the event . . . .<sup>8</sup>

After 81 hours and 5,000 miles the Zeppelin returned to Friedrichshafen. The Orient Flight and especially the experience of the Holy Land from above was engraved dearly in the memories of the guests.

5

The First World War had a very powerful resonance in the British and Australian imagination. Many artists served in the war; some of them fought alongside their fellow soldiers and others served as non-combatants, documenting and portraying their experience of war. The British through the Ministry of Information as well as the Australian Imperial War Museum had officially employed war artists who shaped, through their paintings and drawings, the visual narration of the war and the representation of the geographies where it took place for generations to come. Such artists were commissioned mostly by liberal politicians who encouraged them to draw what they wanted and to represent and to record what they saw.<sup>9</sup> There was very little censorship or overall control of what the war artists painted. The heritage of paintings and drawings done by these artists serving during the war in Palestine along with their memoirs, letters, and books depict not only their national patriotic views of the war but were also framed by the Anglo-Israelism beliefs and the divine right given to the British to cleanse the land from its Ottoman assailants.



Sydney William Carline, *The Destruction of the Turkish Transport in the Gorge of the Wadi Fara, Palestine*, 1919, oil on canvas, H 33.8 x W 41.7. Photo courtesy of Imperial War Museums. Online at ([iwm.org.uk](http://iwm.org.uk)) [tinyurl.com/kg6u2gl](http://tinyurl.com/kg6u2gl) (accessed 16 March 2020).

Both brothers were sent by the Royal Flying Corps (RAF) to Palestine and Syria to record through their artwork evidence for the role played by RAF and Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) squadrons in the destruction of the Ottoman forces during Allenby's Sinai and Palestine campaign September–October 1918. After the Carlines were recalled in November 1919, Sydney held an exhibition in London in 1920 of over 300 works from Italy and the Middle East.

The new aerial aesthetics depicted by the brothers focuses on representing aerial vistas as virgin landscapes stripped from any indication of local culture. Like an eagle leaping onto its prey, the paintings glorify RAF and RAAF as the protectors of the sacred landscape cleansing “the Ottoman infestations” in an attempt to erase and replace their culture with that of its true owners.

## 6

Historically, Palestine from above has always been a place to gaze back at the holy landscape out of different ideological necessities and positions.<sup>10</sup> The written, photographic, and illustrated material that has been extensively produced on Palestine from above serves as a rich resource that reviles the hegemonic intentions of those who possess the power and technology to gaze from the sky. From parables that assert the sudden blood rush that occurs when prophets and heroes gaze on the landscape from above, tempting them to dominate the geography at sight, to the moment of watching Earth from the moon for the first time, raises fundamental questions about the environment and deterritorialization. The holiness of the Palestinian landscape has been a curse to those who live on it, as they are seen as an affliction to its sacredness or as part of the exotic Orient which lies under the colonial deposal. However, the technology of the skies continues its mission of reconnaissance and data collection from above for purposes of surveillance and control.



“The Heron TP drone is an [Israeli] assault vehicle. Its speed is 370 kph at an altitude of 7,400 km and it can stay aloft for 70 hours at a height of 14 km.” Debkafile, 15 August 2015, online at (debka.com) tinyurl.com/wh6jgqa (accessed 10 March 2020).

Palestine from the sky is historically part of a straightforward colonial war of subjugation and control, which must be waged through cutting-edge photography, cartography, remote sensing and surveillance, hand-in-hand with operations of armies on the ground. However, in contemporary times, it has become a complex technology of security vis-à-vis prevention. Israeli aviation technology deploys remote sensing, aerial surveying, and compressed geographical data into surveillance datasets which significantly increase the ability of Israel to monitor and quantify data about the Palestinian population. With the support of computer-aided algorithms, feature recognition, and remote audio surveillance, juxtaposed with layers of on-ground meta data from the health, social, and educational sectors, as well as social media, the Israeli government accumulates hybrid complex datasets that aim at analyzing and predicting patterns of behavior within the population for purposes of their security apparatus and biopolitics.

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#### Endnotes

- 1 The two issues of *JQ* 81 and *JQ* 82 under the title “Palestine from Above” will also serve as an introduction to an exhibition under the same title to be held at A. M. Qattan Foundation in August 2020, Ramallah.
- 2 Laura Kurgan, *Close Up at a Distance: Mapping, Technology & Politics*, (New York: Zone Books, 2013).
- 3 The land surface data were acquired from June through September of 2001. The clouds were acquired on two separate days: 29 July 2001, for the Northern Hemisphere and 16 November 2001 for the Southern Hemisphere. The images were rendered in Electric Image and composited in Adobe Photoshop in late January 2002.
- 4 Raja Shehadeh, *A Rift in Time – Travels with My Ottoman Uncle* (New York: OR Books, 2011), 31.
- 5 The text is based on two main references: Dieter Leder, *Wenn es doch Tag gewesen wäre!* (Meersburg: Topo-Verlag, 2007) and Fred F. Blau and Cyril Deighton, *The Orient Flight of LZ 127 Graf Zeppelin* (Chesterfield: Germany Philatelic Society, 1980).
- 6 The German Colony was established in Haifa in 1868 by the German Templars. It was the first of several colonies established by the group in the Holy Land. Others were founded in Sarona near Jaffa, Galilee, and Jerusalem.
- 7 Hugo Eckener, *My Zeppelins* (New York: Putnam Press, 1959).
- 8 Eckener, *My Zeppelins*.
- 9 John Fairley, *Horses of the Great War: The Story in Art* (Barnsley, UK: Pen & Sword Books, 2015).
- 10 W. J. T. Mitchell, “Holy Landscape: Israel, Palestine, and the American Wilderness,” *Critical Inquiry* 26, no. 2 (Winter 2000): 193–233.