Views from a Plane: Surface, Place, and Image

Jeff Malpas

Anyone familiar with contemporary air travel will have a sense of the strange and various visions that the earth presents when seen from an aircraft flying above—especially when seen from the cruising altitude of a commercial passenger airliner. Occasionally some of us may have both the inclination and the opportunity to record those visions photographically. Yet it seems that only a very few are likely to be as organised and committed as is surely necessary to enable such a large and impressive collection of images as Chan-fai Cheung presents us with here. It is presumably not just a matter of having the eye for a striking and well-composed picture, nor even of having one's photographic equipment ready-to-hand in the confined space of an airline seat, but also of spending enough time in the air with access to a suitable window (preferably not one grimed, scratched, or over the aircraft's wing) at the same time as one remains constantly attentive to what passes outside and below. The range of images that appear in this book is quite astounding, and their diversity is matched by their often breathtaking beauty. Some images have a quality akin to works of abstract painting—swirls of light and colour that burn like the fires of a forge or shine like slices of opalised rock; others have the delicacy and ambiguity of Chinese landscape paintings—and some could almost be such; yet others look like the work of an obsessive realist eager to cram as much detail as possible onto the canvas so that the reality of the image, like the visions that appear in surrealist painting, becomes a source of seeming unreality.

Cheung himself talks of these images as earthscapes, and in doing so he draws on Edward S. Casey's definition of a "-scape"—whether landscape, seascape, earthscape, or any other form—as "a bounded view of some scene".[1] But Casey also treats such "views", such re-presentations, as modes of engagement with place.[2] If these are earthscapes, then they are also placescapes, and one of the questions that might be asked concerns the nature of the representational and experiential engagement with place, as well as with earth, that might be at work here.

From the outset, it is important to note that these are not mere recording of views, but precisely as views—as bounded views—they also enable a particular manner of appearing of that which is represented. In this respect, the act of photography, like any act of representation, and

precisely in virtue of its character as representation, always operates to reveal aspects of the world that might otherwise go unremarked or un-noticed. When the character of representation as representational is itself thematised, as it is in Cheung's work, then representation also becomes investigative—it becomes itself a mode of inquiry, of experimentation, of questioning, and, so too, of attending. Consequently, and inasmuch as the images that are presented here are indeed earthscapes or placescapes, so those images, those "bounded views", can be seen as together constituting a "study" of earth and place. In this respect, these images can also be said to constitute a form of "geography" or better of topography—in the sense that geography and topography themselves designate the study of earth and place.[3]

The use of "topography" to name the work that Cheung presents here is doubly significant. The Greek term topos that is embedded in topography, and that is itself often translated as "place" (and is sometimes taken almost as a synonym for "place" in English), can also mean surface. It is this sense of topos that is at work in the now more common meaning of topography as just the study of the surface of the earth. It is also a sense that is evident in Aristotle's famous definition of the term (in Physics Bk IV) as the "innermost boundary" of that which contains, and that carries over into the idea, not only of topography, but of topology as the study of surface construed mathematically or geometrically.

The etymological connection between "surface" and "place" is not accidental. Speaking more generally, one might say that place is tied to surface in two respects: first, because places are constituted as places through that which bounds them, and what bounds is a surface (perhaps best understood, in the case of places, as a horizon)[4]; and, second, because places are constituted as surface, that is, there is nothing that lies beneath the place that is more fundamental than it, and the place is itself given in and as surface. This is most evident when we reflect on the way in which places are understood through mapping. What one maps is a surface, and that surface is mapped and understood not through looking to something other than what is given in the surface itself (to anything above or below).[5] This point carries over into geometry no less than geography: a surface is understood essentially through understanding the interconnection of various points on that surface.

In the thinking of the ancient Greek thinker Xenophanes, the world of human life and action is understood as a particular sort of topos in a way that implicitly brings to the fore its character precisely as surface: as a single plane formed through the pushing downward of air against the upwards resistance of earth.[6] The realm of human existence is thus a surface created by and between two fundamental and opposing elements. In Cheung's photographs, not only do we encounter a form of photographic topography—both in the sense of an exploration of surface and an exploration of place—but also the juxtaposition of the same two elements that appear in

Xenophanes. Here earth appears, and so too, in a different way, does air. Earth is shown from the air, and also by means of air. Air is the medium, as well as the means, by which the earth is made visible as surface.

It is worth noting the way in which this ancient conception of the place of human life and action as indeed a surface, and one formed between the infinite realms of earth and air, also seems to bring with it a strong sense of the fragility and vulnerability of that human place. One may argue, as Casey has, that compared to our own lives, place is that which perdures, which remains, that which always awaits our return.[7] Yet although there is a sense in which this is true, it is not unequivocally so. We know that places can change, sometimes irrevocably, and one might well argue that this change can be such as may even strip the real sense from a place, leaving it like a mute reminder of what once was, but is no more. Moreover, if place is understood as both shaped by human being as well as shaping of it, then place can never stand entirely apart from nor unaffected by human life and activity—and if there is a fragility that belongs to the human, as there surely is, then so it must belong to place also. Inasmuch as places are human, so places are fragile (although perhaps one might also say, that if the human perdures, it does so only, as Casey might be taken to suggest, in relation to the perduring of place). When we see the earth, understood as the place of human life, as this multivariate but unified surface stretched below, bounded by its absolute horizon, so that place may itself appear in a different light, from a different perspective, and with a sense, perhaps, of its essentially bounded, limited, and interdependent character—with a sense too, of the uncertainty and fragility of our own existence as tied to that place, to that one bounded surface.

There is, as I noted above, a great range of images that appear in Cheung's photographic topography. Yet one can nevertheless distinguish within that range between two basic types of image: those that have a degree of horizontal depth such that they can be understood as constituted in terms of a series of multiple surfaces or planes into which the view extends (these most resemble traditional forms of landscape), and those that generally lack such depth and multiplicity, instead presenting only a single, slightly oblique plane, a single, sometimes heavily textured surface.[8] In the second type of image, although air and sky are present, it is earth that dominates; in the first, sky is no less important than earth, so much so that many of these images can properly be understood as skyscapes no less than earthscapes or landscapes—and sometimes as more so. In this latter respect, Cheung's images connect with a tradition of sky-oriented photography perhaps best exemplified in the earlier part of the twentieth-century by the "equivalents" of Alfred Stieglitz, and by many others since.

These two different types of image are differently structured—they have, in addition, a different character or feel. Those images that direct themselves to the earth draw us into a relation with what is quite literally the ground of our existence, and yet they do so in a way that also renders that ground in a way unfamiliar and strange, even if it is also beautiful and fascinating. Not only does the earth appear as bounded in a way that we do not normally appreciate, but the patterns of human habitation and activity presents themselves across much larger scales and with sometimes a much greater sense of their impact and effect. Perhaps because they can be more readily encompassed by the eye, natural features—mountains, seas, rivers, plains—may appear possessed of a grandeur, a power, a sublime beauty greater than or different from anything apparent to a more earth-bound view. In contrast, rather than a sense of a new perspective on or mode of connection to that which grounds us, those images that are directed more strongly towards sky emphasise the sense of escape from ground that is embodied in the very experience of flight. Moreover, although there is wonder in the visions of earth as well as sky, the wonder of sky (the original home of wonder according to the Greeks) is surely the more immediate and often the more striking. In the experience of sky, we are taken out of and beyond ourselves, into a realm in which we are and must always remain strangers; in the experience of earth we are brought back, if uncannily, to that to which we belong, and which must always be our home. In this latter respect, however, in being brought back to earth—in being brought back from the sky even as we are in the sky—we are also brought back to what we ourselves are. As Xenophanes would remind us: "For all things are from the earth and to the earth all things come in the end."[9]

The images that Cheung presents to us here are essentially superficial, but in no trivial sense, since they are also, by this very fact, topographic. They demonstrate the intimate connection between place and surface not only as it might be understood abstractly, but also as it is given concretely in its experiential and emotional reality. Moreover, what is at work in these images is not merely an investigation of a certain form of aerial photography, or even of what might be called "earthscape photography". What is given here is also a certain mode of photographic experimentation that is as much to do with the character of the photographic as with the character of what is photographed. As might be expected of a photographer who is also a phenomenologist, what Cheung offers us is a mode of phenomenological inquiry undertaken with the camera and articulated through images rather than words. For my own part, I would add that what is also given is a mode of photographic phenomenology that shows the topographic character of the phenomenological itself. There can be no appearing that is not always an appearing in and through place, and every appearing is also an appearing, if sometimes through its withdrawal, of the place that allows appearing within it. In these photographs, then, part of what Cheung achieves is a

phenomenological revealing of place, and of earth and sky, as this is made possible, in a quite singular way, through the technology of photography and of flight.

The fact that the latter achievement occurs through the creation of images—through representation—ought to reinforce the idea, already present in Casey's work, that the representation of place gives rise to no "mere" representation.[10] In representing place, whether in landscape art, landscape photography, or by any other means, place is itself re-presented, allowed to come forth, revealed—albeit in ways that also, necessarily, conceal. The fact that such revealing occurs through representation need not imply any lack of genuine engagement with the places represented. Much Australian Aboriginal art also consists in a form of representation of place, and like the images presented here, many Aboriginal artworks can be understood as presenting the viewer with a single surface. In its focus on surface, coupled with its use of colour and geometric patterning, Aboriginal art can be compared to forms of western abstractionist painting— as perhaps some of Cheung's images can also be so compared. Yet Aboriginal art is not just about pattern, colour or abstraction. Instead it is based in a fundamental embededness in and engagement with place, with earth, with what Australian Aboriginal people call country. Indeed, Aboriginal artworks, which often have something of the character of an aerial view—a mapping from above—typically articulate and represent forms of tribal and totemic knowledge that is written into the land in a way that also makes the land, as it also makes those who live in relation to the land, and who thereby belong to it. Consequently, in the Aboriginal case, the representation of place, even its representation in terms of what might be called an "aerial view", does not indicate separation or detachment, but quite the opposite, and this is not something restricted to the Aboriginal case alone. In general, the representation of place only arises out of the prior engagement with place that it also expresses, and it is thus that representational forms offer an important way by which place and the connection to place can be opened up.

Breathtaking and beautiful though they are, the images that Cheung presents here can also be said to be almost part of our ordinary experience, since air travel, and the view of the earth that it affords, is such a commonplace feature of life across so much of the contemporary world. At one time, the visions that Cheung offers us here would only have been available to the explorer or the adventurer, willing to undergo extreme hardships and face enormous dangers, or else to the poet and the mystic, able to rise to new heights through creative or spiritual power—Dante being perhaps the supreme example of the latter, guided into the heavens by a celestial muse and gazing down at the earth like a "little threshing floor" beneath (in Paradiso, Canto XXII). Nowadays no such celestial assistance is needed, nor must any excessive hardship be faced. Instead visions not unlike Dante's are directly available from the relatively comfortable and mundane environment of an airline seat,

perhaps with a glass of wine at hand, some lunch on the way, and the latest movie available on the in-flight video. Such is the strangeness of place, and of our own place, here, now, in the world to which we belong.

Notes

[1] Edward S. Casey, "Mapping the Earth in Works of Art", in Bruce V. Foltz and Robert Frodeman, eds., *Rethinking Nature: Essays in Environmental Philosophy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), p. 264.

[2] See Casey's comments in *Re-Presenting Place: Landscape Painting and Maps* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), esp. pp. 271–272.

[3] It is a sense that I have appropriated into my work in which I refer to a mode of philosophical topography that is concerned with the drawing out of place in its philosophical nature and significance—see for instance *Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[4] The connection between "place" and "bound" is something explored at length in my own work, often in connection with Heidegger's thinking, see especially my *Heidegger and the Thinking of Place* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2012), but it is also an important theme in Casey, as is evident in his "The Edge(s) of Landscape: A Study in Liminology", in Malpas, ed., *The Place of Landscape* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011), pp. 91– 109.

[5] See Malpas, *Place and Experience*, pp. 40–41.

[6] "The upper limit of the earth is seen here at our feet, pushing up against the air, but that below goes on without limit", Fragment 28, in James H. Lesher, *Xenophanes of Colophon: Fragments, a Text and Translation with a Commentary* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992). For more on Xenophanes's cosmological thinking see Alexander P. D. Mourelatos, "La Terre et les étoiles dans la cosmologie de Xénophane", in André Laks and Claire Louguet, eds., *Qu'est-ce que la Philosophie Présocratique? Cahiers de Philologie* 20 (Villeneuve d'Ascq: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2002), pp. 332ff.

[7] This is an issue Casey raises against my own account of place in "J. E. Malpas's *Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography* (Cambridge University Press, 1999) Converging and Diverging in/on Place", *Philosophy and Geography* 4 (2001): 225–230.

[8] It is notable that only almost none of these images gives any real strong sense of multiple planes comprising a downwards view, for instance, as might arise if one photographed through cloud to the ground beneath (there are a handful of images that show landscape through light scatterings of cloud, but even here the sense of multiple planes is not strongly present). Of course, since all these photographs were taken from a position inside the aircraft, looking outwards and to the side, so almost all are to a greater or lesser extent oblique to the angle of the earth below (the exception would be photographs taken as the aircraft banked, but this is hard to detect from the photographs themselves, at least when viewed normally, and most do indeed seem to have some degree of obliqueness).

[9] Fragment 27, in *Xenophanes of Colophon*.

[10] See especially Casey, *Representing Place: Landscape Painting and Maps* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); see also Malpas, "Place and the Problem of Landscape", in Malpas, ed., *The Place of Landscape*, pp. 3–26.