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Caren Kaplan. *Aerial Aftermaths: Wartime from Above*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017. 312 pp. \$27.95, ISBN 978-0-8223-7017-8.

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War from Above

When I was a child, it was common to hear the aphorism, “a picture is worth a thousand words.” A drawing or painting could create a mood as well as capture it. By contrast, photography was meant to be both complete and true, comprehensive and accurate. Nothing could be hidden. The camera “sees everything” and “cannot lie.” Many photographers hoped to capture through their compositions what Henri Cartier-Bresson called “the decisive moment”—an image that conveyed the essence of an event or situation. Caren Kaplan’s *Aerial Aftermaths: Wartime from Above*, is about images—made from the mid-1700s to the present—of war or occupation and their aftermath from an aerial perspective. Kaplan asks what we get when we view the world from great height.

Kaplan begins with artistic and imaginary perspectives, taking readers through the era of drawings from stationary balloons to aerial reconnaissance photographs in the World Wars and finally to satellite and drone photography. It is a fascinating history which she illustrates with well-chosen images sprinkled throughout the text. She shows that while the aerial perspective is far from new, contemporary viewers almost always find it fresh and consider the view from the heavens to be particularly revealing.

One important thread in the text is the close relation between aerial viewpoints and war. Part of Kaplan’s aim is “to demonstrate that the entanglement of ways of see-

ing from above and modes of warfare begin much earlier than the early twentieth century and that this visual culture is less monolithic and seamless than the usual account would admit” (p. 141). She does this. But she also shows how this entanglement intensified during the colonial and great power wars of the twentieth century. Kaplan highlights the how the capacity to make photographs from the air is a consequence of an already powerful and unequal relationship and is used to reinforce that dominance.

Kaplan is also interested in the subtle ways that aerial perspective alters what we see and how we see it. In this her inquiry is more open-ended. Kaplan’s exploration necessarily disturbs the view that aerial photography is more complete, true, or comprehensive than other perspectives. Through her exploration of aerial images, she suggests we get both more and less of a sense of what is going on in a place. Part of her argument is that much is concealed from that view that we miss, even as we are dazzled and made to concentrate on what is ostensibly and actually revealed by a view from the heavens. She importantly points to the general absence of human bodies in many satellite images and to the arid abstraction that these images convey and promote.

Which brings us back to the decisive moment. Kaplan’s book is a refutation of that concept. The pictures from above do not see everything and never could.

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