

FRANK SCHRAMM  
PLANE SPOTTING  
The Independent

by ROBIN MUIR

In about 1910 at the aerodrome at Issy-les-Moulineaux when aviation was still very young, sixteen-year-old Jacques-Henri Lartigue, whose snapshots of the early years of our century have had a liberating influence, pinned down the efforts (heroic but hopeless) made by his adorable brother Zissou to fly in a variety of home-spun kite-planes. "All my beautiful dreams", he wrote, "happened in the air. In my sleep I can fly. I fly all the time. I can't get enough of it. But once awake I'm a little boy again and miracles don't exist. Zissou does not dream. Zissou invents; he calculates and draws maps. You stand straight up in the flying machine, you run against the wind... you are lifted up in the air and you glide.. no, you soar like a seagull! Zissou is not discouraged by anything. He is determined to be airborne, to be like a balloon...up there..."

Can any thing say more of the romantic challenge of the skies, our childish fascination with flight and its mysteries and of a teenage boy's sense of the wonder of it all than this entry from his journal? And just what on earth is it that still , decades later, make our hearts stop or scan the skies at the sound of distant rumbling?

The American fashion photographer Frank Schramm, like Lartigue some eighty years before, was seized by the giddy romanticism of soaring into the heavens, though a few miles to the east across Paris from Issy-les-Moulineaux, near another airport, Charles de Gaulle. "I was in Paris to see the fashion shows. On the day of my return to New York I was having lunch with friends in Meaux, where the brie comes from, and I witnessed these incredible machines rising out of nowhere against the horizon of farmers' fields and I thought that this had to be documented". He has done it determinedly and with extraordinary skill, his pictures as graphic and precise as Lartigue's were delicate and instinctive, and made the more powerful by their sheer size sometimes printed up to 30 inches square. This month slightly smaller examples are on show at the Photographers' Gallery, London.

“Over a hundred people traveling at the same time, being catapulted into the sky from a total standstill to 500 miles per hour...” Schramm has been scanning the skies with wonder and a square format Hasselblad for nearly a decade now, his subjects silver giants weightless against the skies. He couches his childlike admiration in charming, if extravagant, terms: “As I gaze at these machines as they take off and land I wonder what may be taking place inside these massive bodies. Standing under the machines as they land makes me realize the fragility of that which exists in man and his creative inventions.” As if, one commentator noted, he had no right to admire these great metal birds simply for what they were.

He talks of “stalking airplanes for days” like a big game hunter might and, without refinements to the lenses of his camera (somehow he has a 2000mm lens), it would be like stalking game with a slingshot. His knowledge of his prey is extensive (“that flight pattern is for 13 left runway, one that can handle Concorde”) and detailed about the best hunting grounds (“At the old Pan-Am terminal, that’s now the Delta/Swissair at terminal three, I’d stand on the roof of my station wagon and avoid the wire fence... Washington National Airport is in my opinion the best place to photograph planes. There is a park very close to the airport, right next to the runway and also not far away from the Washington Monument and you really feel you are standing in the runway. I still can’t believe that it’s still legal for anyone to go there...” And his enthusiasm is infectious: “When I plan to photograph the Concorde, I call the airline to ask when it takes off. Then, for example, I can do a fashion shoot and I know that Concorde will land at 5:35 P.M.. When we have lunch the plane takes off from London and three-and-a-half hours later I’m at the airport photographing the landing... There’s a thrill I get driving out to the airports, say when it’s my wife coming back, I go two hours early to look at the people...The smell of jet fuel when you open the window as you approach J.F.K....Concorde just sends a chill through me. Its noise...I mean you just can’t describe it. You’d know it if you’d heard it. It’s like the difference between a siren in New York City and one in Paris...”

The title given to his first British exhibition, “Planespotting”, with its evocations of anoraks, rain, and stubby pencils means more to him after an encounter on a day out at Kloten, Zürich’s airport: “An English guy, nerdy I suppose, with pocketful of pens came up to me. He had a notebook taking down information about McDonnell Douglas DC-10’s - you know the engine’s on the tail - he had all the Swiss ones except number something. Had I got it? I explained that I was a *photographer* and that I did not.” And though he had taken notes when he photographs, he is quick to deny being able to tell you what might be passing overhead or one aircraft from another from anything other than the tail-end insignia- “I can spot a Swissair plane having observed them for years and I know, of course, that only international flights come out of J.F.K., so I can guess...” Flight TWA 800 is one however that he does remember: “That Paris flight was like a bus trip for us. I used to fly to Europe all the time...twelve times a year to Milan for example.” One of’ us’, the German fashion photographer Rico Puhlmann, was killed when flight TWA 800 crashed last year over the sea near Long Island.

Although it is meant to be finished, “the series is still with me,” he says, “In Switzerland recently I couldn’t let it go.” No-one has created one quite like Schramm’s and really great aeroplane photographs are rare. Margaret Bourke-White accounts for a few; there are bits and pieces by Stieglitz and Brassai (out of Paris airport again) and, more recently, Wolfgang Tillmans has photographed Concorde too. So long may Schramm’s pursuit continue. His obsessive behavior - and his patience, dedication and technical skill shows how much we’ve been missing since Lartigue and Zissou. And we can be certain that he will have more success with this show than Lartigue had with his first in the 1950’s: “Publishers and museums curators just looked at my photographs”, he said ruefully, “the way one would a toothpick during a meal.”