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13 Blue Sky Thinking in a Post-Astronautic Present

> It is a strange thing how little in general people know about the sky. It is the part of creation in which nature has done more for the sake of pleasing man, more, for the sole and evident purpose of talking to him and teaching him, than in any other of her works, and it is just the part in which we least attend to her [...] we never make it a subject of thought.[1]
>
> — JOHN RUSKIN

The earthly sky is above us, beyond our reach, and yet ever present in our lives. Its blue, aerial spatiality evokes dreams, fantasies, utopian visions and alternative worlds. It is a site of imminence, that of divine presence in Renaissance painting, transformed being in Romantic poetry, and, in the twentieth century, if we turn to the great manifestos of Modernism, the sky holds the promise of the future – it is a space of forgetting and reinvention. Much has been written on these utopian imaginings, some in this collection of essays (see, for example, Chapter 11 or 12). It is not my intention to further draw out these rich histories but, rather, following in the footsteps of John Ruskin, to focus on the 'pleasing' blue depths of the sky itself, taking as read the fact that this natural space is indelibly bound up with evocations of imaginary otherness. While Ruskin wrote extensively on what we would now recognise as the sky of Romanticism, in the main the sublime painted skies of J.M.W. Turner, the sky addressed in this chapter is that of our present moment. To consider the sky of our here and now and to draw out the spatial, temporal and imaginary beyond bound up with this

1 Ruskin, J., *Modern Painters Volume I containing Parts I and II*. London: The Waverley Book Co, 1920 [1843], 218–19.

contemporary *subject of thought*, this chapter focuses on four case studies each of which features a contemporary sky. A close reading of the artist Simon Faithfull's *Escape Vehicle No. 6* (2004), with its documentary-style footage of a *real* aerial journey, is followed by a detailed discussion of the fictional dream worlds of Peter Weir's *The Truman Show* (1998), Jacques Tati's *Play Time* (1967) and, finally, Werner Herzog's *The Wild Blue Yonder* (2005). These four distinctive filmic encounters, the skies they feature and the alternative worlds they evoke, create a context in which we can *attend* to the sky itself as a subject resonant within our contemporary culture.

Escaping/Going Nowhere

On 12 April 1961 Yuri Gagarin became the first man to escape the earth's atmosphere and travel into space. His journey marks the beginning of our post-astronautic age. As Emmanuel Levinas wrote: 'For one hour, man existed beyond any horizon – everything around him was sky or, more exactly, everything was geometrical space.'[2] In order to float free beyond any horizon Gagarin, Shepherd, Tereshkova, Armstrong, and many others, including the dogs, monkeys, spiders and other terrestrial life-forms propelled into the void, all needed to breach the very *lining of the heavenly*.[3] They tore open the firmament and as they journeyed into the dark voided sky of space witnessed an earthly sky that was no longer above them, no longer beyond their reach but part of the planetary home they had left behind. To explore the impact these journeys have upon our conception of the earthly blue sky and its aerial infinite otherness, I turn

2 Levinas, E., 'Gagarin, Heidegger and Us', in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press (2005 [1963]), 233.

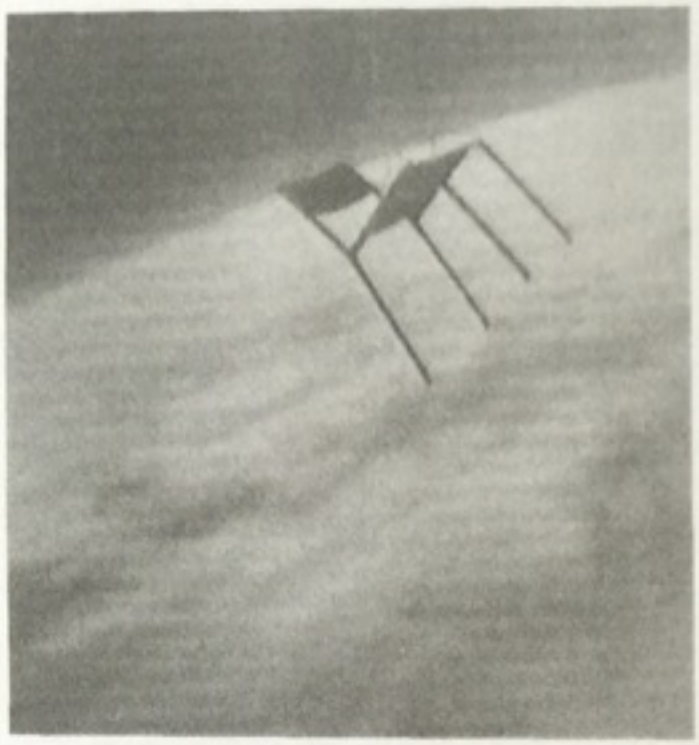
3 In his 1919 manifesto Kasimir Malevich proclaimed: 'I have conquered the lining of the heavenly, have torn it down and, making a bag, put in colour and tied it with a knot. Sail forth! The white, free chasm, infinity is before us' (Malevich 1919, 121–2). He speaks here of conquering figuration in painting but this language evokes the journeys of the cosmonauts decades later.

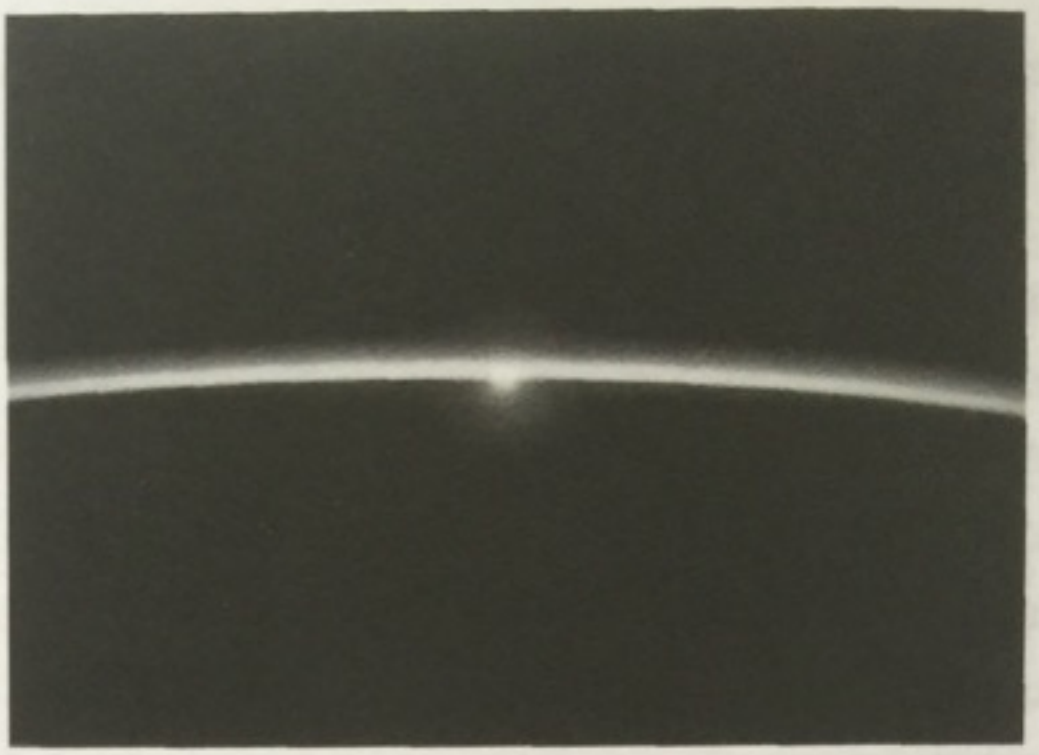
first to Simon Faithfull's documentation of a journey 'behind the sky'.[4] Following in the trajectory of Gagarin and the other cosmonauts and astronauts Faithfull's *Escape Vehicle No. 6* captured images of a radically altered sky. Like its predecessors, *No. 6* was a decidedly lo-fi mechanism consisting of an atmospheric weather balloon attached to a papier-mâché chair and, strung between the two, a direct-relay camera. I was among the audience watching as it was launched from Farnborough's disused Royal Aircraft Establishment (RAE) in the summer months of 2004. The location was apt for the RAE was a site associated with hands-on, trial-and-error inventiveness. At the turn of the century it had housed the army's main balloon factory, then in 1908, just a few years after the flight of the *Kitty Hawk*, a Texan, Colonel Cody, took to the skies making British aviation history. The local museum holds press cuttings detailing this event. It also holds cuttings of the story of a local farmer who took Cody to court for the unlawful killing of a cow. The unfortunate beast got in the way of a crash landing during one of Cody's many unsuccessful *flights*. Simon Faithfull's *Escape Vehicle No 6* evoked this turn-of-the-century rough-and-ready mechanics; a time before the computational rationale of the perfect man-machine began to make flawless ascents into the aerial beyond. For Faithfull the lo-fi nature of his *escape* was crucial: 'My desire was to make it into space, not as an astronaut inside a machine but as an everyday person ... *Escape Vehicle No. 6* was about as close as I could hope to get.'[5]

It was on the second attempt that *No. 6* successfully cleared the ground. Its rise was rapid, vanishing from sight in a matter of minutes. The launch was watched by a small group of spectators, but as the balloon grew smaller our attention turned to the direct-relay footage shown live on a large screen in a nearby hangar. As we watched we witnessed the dizzying ascent. The camera looked back down to earth and captured the landscape receding at high speed. In a commentary on this filmic documentation Philip Hoare writes, 'time has stopped still; distance becomes abstract [...] Reality is continually reframed and re-composed. An island falls away to a fragment

4 Simon Faithfull in an email to the author, 2011.

5 Ibid.





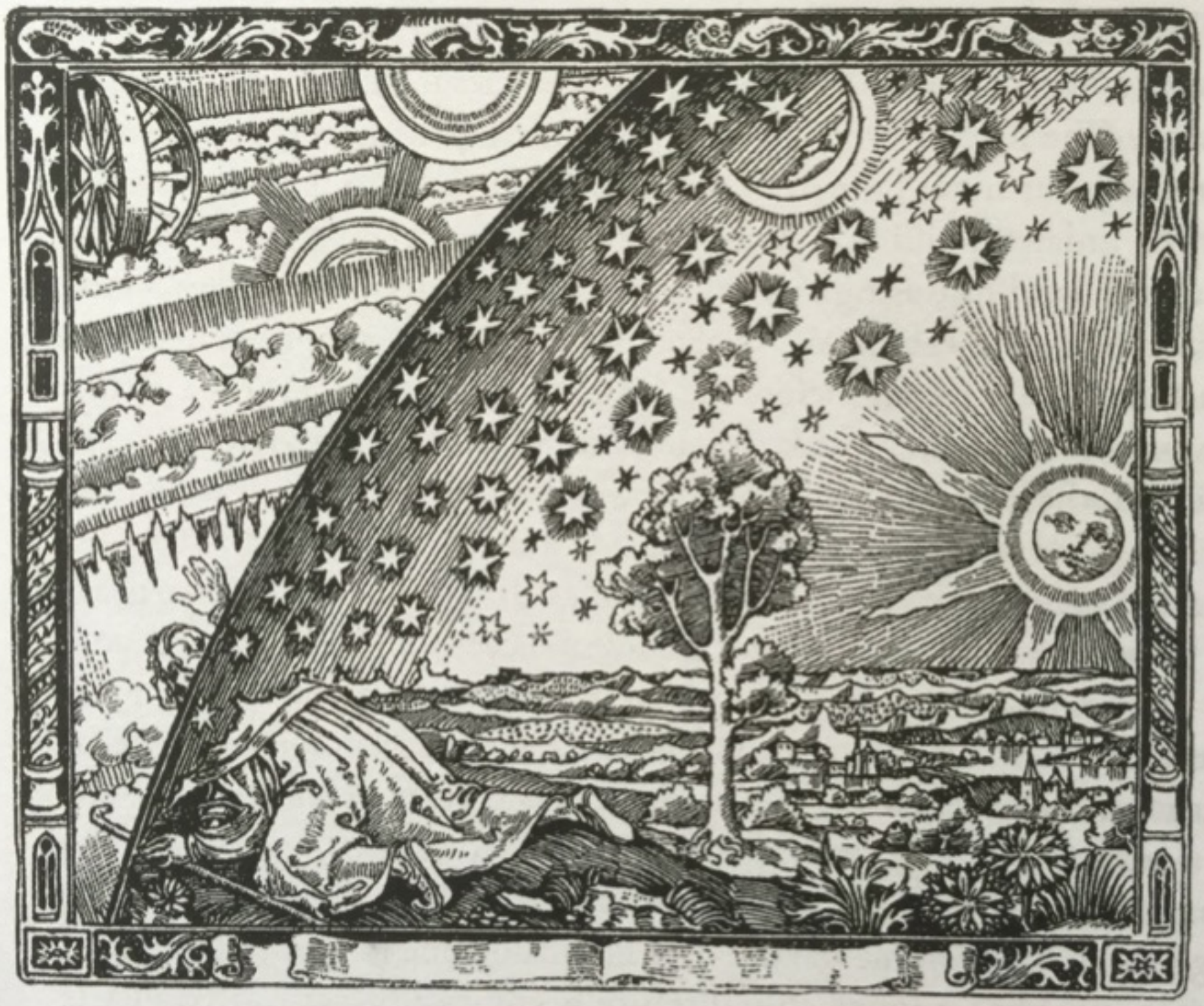


Figure 1 (top left): Still from Simon Faithfull's 'Escape Vehicle No. 6' (2004).
Figure 2 (top right): The sky from the International Space Station (Credit: NASA).
Figure 3 (bottom): Wood engraving from *The Atmosphere* by Camille Flammarion (1888 edition).

of chald'.[6] After much r*eframing* and *recomposing*, after much tumbling and swinging, the curvature of the earth and the sky became apparent, a beautiful bowing of the horizon line. At a height of about 30 km,[7] the point at which 'the sky ends and space begins',[8] the image on the screen appeared to drop away to blackness showing only half the data captured by the ascending camera (see Figure 1). What were we seeing? Was this static interference from the edge of the earth's atmosphere? No, this WAS the edge. We were looking at an image that showed both the blueing atmosphere of earth and the black of Outer Space. Fifty minutes after its release from a field somewhere in Hampshire *No. 6* had arrived at this threshold and relayed images of its encounter back to a spellbound audience. The artist writes:

> [...] what I hadn't anticipated was how thin the atmosphere is – how near the border with Space actually is. 30 km high seemed like an enormous height to achieve but suddenly it was shown in another light. On the scale of the planet 30 km is nothing – a thin wispy blue line of gasses in which we spend our entire lives and believe that it's the universe.[9]

He adds, perhaps with a twinge of regret, 'if it was possible to walk into Space it would not be a long journey – you would only need a pack-lunch and a bottle of water.'[10]

We have long understood that the blue sky is a perceptual phenomenon, light splitting as it travels through the air, and that the earth's atmosphere is anything but infinite. Yet it is in these journeys upwards that the fragility of our sky and its aerial depth are fully revealed. We witness its ending, the point where the sky is replaced by the velvet black vacuum of what lies beyond. Yuri Gagarin saw this edge. He described the fact that:

6 Hoare, P. (2009), '30 KM'. In *Going Nowhere: Simon Faithfull*. Film and Video Umbrella, 2009.

7 '30 KM' (2002) is the title of Simon Faithfull's first filmic output of his Escape Vehicle series.

8 Faithfull in an email to the author, 2011.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

> The view of the horizon is strange and very beautiful. You can see the impressive transition from the bright surface of the earth to the completely black sky in which you can see the stars. The range of transition is a thin one, like a film or narrow belt girdling the globe. It is a soft light blue colour and the entire transition from blue to black is smooth and beautiful.[11]

This was his first-hand experience of breaching the sky. Following Gagarin, German astronaut Ulf Merbold described a sense of terror at the sudden awareness of the fragility of the earth's atmosphere: 'For the first time in my life I saw the horizon as a curved line. It was accentuated by a thin seam of dark blue light. Obviously this was not the ocean of air I had been told it was so many times in my life. I was terrified by its fragile appearance.'[12]

Watching documentation of journeys across the threshold of the world what hits us all is the realisation that the sky is a fragile threshold. It is no longer the ocean of air in which, and of which we dreamed. It is a phenomenon that can vanish in the blink of a virtual eye moving at high speed away from the planet. But what are the consequences? What happens when the infinite blue of our aerial dreams is ruptured, replaced by a thin seam of colour, a terrifyingly fragile defence against the hungry vacuum of the Universe?

As an artist, Simon Faithfull seems drawn to spaces that speak of the changing nature of our conception of a beyond. He writes of his aim:

> to connect and collapse space and to understand how the far and mysterious relate to the everyday and mundane. Beyond the ice, beneath the water and behind the sky – all of these are realms that we have no place being. But all these places loom large in our imaginations and I have attempted to connect our everyday lives with these mythical and other-worldly destinations.[13]

His work often takes the form of journeys, whether a walk through an empty snow-covered landscape, *Going Nowhere* (1995), or likewise, a walk

11 This is a much cited quote sourced in this instance from 'Looking back at Earth', <http://www.spacequotations.com/earth.html>.

12 Ibid.

13 Faithfull in an email to the author, 2011.

along the bottom of the Adriatic Sea, *Going Nowhere 2* (2011). In the case of *Escape Vehicle No. 6*, if he could walk 'behind the sky' he would. He writes of his journeys, 'I think I have attempted to test the limits of that world and report back from its extremities'.[14] One theme that informs his work is the elusive nature of the other-worldly quality of these destinations, in each instance the sense of arrival is melded with a sense of that something is missing. Stephen Bode observes this writing that the artist's works are 'little leaps into what remains of the Great Unknown (or towards those marginal, borderline spaces that are all-too-frequently overlooked).'[15] He argues that each journey is 'characterised by a lingering exposure to the initial bracing shock and the subsequent numbing presence of an experience of nothingness.'[16] This sense of going nowhere, or rather arriving nowhere (arriving in a space that Levinas describes as some kind of absolute space, homogeneous and geometric) is inherent in *Escape Vehicle No. 6*'s journey. Evidently the liminal space at the edge of the earth is indeed a kind of nowhere, but the 'experience of a nothingness' that Bode identifies is also informed by the way Faithfull chooses to document this journey behind the sky; his refusal of the high-budget epic-scale narrative of a journey to a magical elsewhere so often associated with documentation of the Space Programme.

Despite his aesthetic choices, his refusal of an epic or heroic narrative, Simon Faithfull rejects the idea that his works is dystopian. He concedes:

> There is a melancholic aspect to my work and a poetic savouring of the taste of failure but, no, I don't think I am attempting to present dystopias. If anything I see the work as being imbued with a childish enthusiasm and a willingness to attempt impossible things – to transcend limits even if the quest is hopeless or seems hopeless.[17]

Faithfull describes the journey of *Escape Vehicle No. 6* as a 'suicide mission'; even if the balloon makes it through the great divide, it will burst

14 Ibid.

15 Bode, P. (2009). 'Introduction: Going Nowhere'. In *Going Nowhere: Simon Faithfull*. Film and Video Umbrella, 2009.

16 Ibid.

17 Faithfull in an email to the author, 2011.

and whatever remains of its structure will fall back down to earth (rumour has it that *No. 6* was found battered and minus one leg somewhere near the A3 road southwest of London). While in the air, floating before our eyes, the battered chair strategically undermines any sense of heroism and epic scale: as we contemplate the dizzying view of the edge of the earth's atmosphere, the comedic dance of the incongruous chair prevents any aggrandisement of the already awe-inspiring view. Watching it being tossed about in the foreground of Faithfull's Space Age landscape we are never able to lose a sense of the human scale. The mundane chair links the beyond with the everyday, and melded with the documentary-style footage leaves us with a sense that what we are witnessing is 'real'. *Escape Vehicle No. 6* produced a psychogeography of travelling behind the sky. While I had been aware of the thin seem of blue light that appeared in photographs such as those taken from the International Space Station (see Figure 2), it was only upon witnessing *No. 6*'s rough-edged psychogeography that it dawned upon me that the thin blue glimmer was not only an aspect of the disembodied theatre of Outer Space but that this seam of light was connected with the sky itself. This blue/black threshold was a new sky, or rather an attribute of the earthly sky revealed anew. What the astronauts and cosmonauts, what the dogs, cats and spiders in their escape vehicles experienced was the sky as threshold, a sky made visible at the point where the infinite or indefinite expanse of the black void of Outer Space lies skin to skin with the limit-space of our planetary home. This threshold sky speaks of finitude and edge. As such it marks not only the collapse of a space bound up with an imaginary of infinite blue air, but it also marks the emergence of a renewed albeit changed aerial imaginary. This threshold between the void and the full is no longer a sky of spectacular distanced azure, one Gaston Bachelard associates with 'the limit of the imaginary';[18] it is instead a breathless fragile edge and, as such, evokes an imaginary of limit.

18 In his account, Air and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Movement (1943), Gaston Bachelard writes; 'blue air and its dreamer form perhaps an even more perfect parallelism: less than a dream, less than smoke [...] the union of half dream and a half blue is thus formed at the limit of the imaginary' (Bachelard 1943, 168).