Whales in the Sky
Photography, Trauma, and the *Hindenburg*

There was something strange about the slow and gradual descent of the blazing ship. She came down so deliberately and settled upon the earth so quietly that spectators said afterward that they could not realize for a moment that a tragedy was taking place before their eyes.[i]

Final Proposal
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Brief Description

On May 6, 1937, the first transatlantic airship—a public dirigible called the LZ-129 *Hindenburg*—disintegrated in the dusk sky of Lakehurst, New Jersey. In only took thirty-four seconds for a web of hydrogen-infused flames to extinguish the lifeforce of this colossal zeppelin. Propelled by four diesel-powered Daimler engines and coated in a kind of metallic plastic lacquer called graphite dope, the now infamous 804-foot *Hindenburg* airship was gone in a flash. In an instant, the skies of New Jersey were ablaze in miasmically twirling fire and smoke. With the mooring mast in the foreground, newsman Sam Sherer's now infamous photograph of the *Hindenburg* eruption was one of many to memorialize the aerial devastation (see fig. 1).

Along with thirty-six dead passengers, a sooty accrual of wreckage and flaming debris, particles of rubble and sweltering aluminum joints, permanently marked the night soil of the American scene. Experienced airship-man and captain Ernst Lehman survived the crash only to perish the following morning from excessive burns. Instead of the anticipated celebration for the *Hindenburg*'s spectral oceanic success, the airship's first transatlantic voyage of the season ended in a scene of chaos, and the ship's heralded chosen landing place at Lakehurst, New Jersey, became a site of sorrow, a final spot of trauma and ruin. This marvel of German engineering, brazen icon of modernist technological ingenuity, luxury brand of gaudy travel and postal air circulation was instantaneously transformed into a nothingness. In figure two, we see a sluiced disaster sequence from the Pathe Newsreel team; final seconds of *Hindenburg* terror are here visually atomized into discreet melancholic frames of dread (see fig. 2).

Proposal

A cartographic ecohistory, *Whales in the Sky* theorizes the brief one-year lifespan of the *Hindenburg* airship as modernist symbol and synecdoche. Charting photography of the zeppelin as both archival documentary and image of catastrophic ruin, I write the demise of this German-made airship—the first public transatlantic vehicle—as *the* central media event of the pre-WWII landscape, a primal scene unfolding in real-time above and restructuring sensory perceptions.

Infamously captured in photography and on radio alike, the *Hindenburg*'s "real time" explosion was, at once too, an *a priori* living inscription and record trace. The dirigible—some monsterously ascendant mausoleum—dissolved in spectacle to become a vanished phantom of itself.

Deconstructed as a lattice production of frequencies refracted solely through sound and image, I disclose the dirigible's abrupt detonation, visual aesthetics, and media networks as affectively enfolded kin. In doing so, I reveal a matrix of anthropocentric fallibility and disrupted Western value systems: mimetic adaptations, hegemonic networks of design, streamlined architectonics, and financial circuits of capital together erupted in a flash on the evening of May 6, 1937.

In this way a transmedia reconfiguration of artifacts and aesthetics, *Whales in the Sky* narrates the *Hindenburg* blast as a dual palimpsest of visual and sonic mediations. Inside the gaseous quietude of this black velvet night, the fallacy, fantasy, and failures of techne's omniscience obviated any future eco-cosmos. Traversing an uncanny path of aesthetic configurations, the *Hindenburg*'s sojourns, myths, and failures construct this cultural tale.

Moreover, and perhaps most historically portentous (while remaining intellectually rigorous), is the author's astute literary reading of the *Hindenburg* as whale. Through my analogical discourse, *Whales in the Sky* uncovers a spectacularly imprinted cetacean residue across both the life and death of this last giant zeppelin.

Amateur picture-maker Arthur Cofod Jr.'s photographs from May 6, 1937, metaphorically illustrate for us this whale self in a dissolving terminal state (see fig. 3). Cofod's pictures of obliteration are but few of many that visually correlate the *Hindenburg* with whales. Most hauntingly apposite, however, is how these kinds of potent oceanic analogies dive much deeper than mere surface resemblances; rather, it is variously configured traces of whales that, in fact, most imbue the airship with a "full fathom five" seascape pathos and ghostly animus. *Whales in the Sky* tells this ghost story.

In this evocative tale, the dynamically brief one-year lifespan of the *Hindenburg* is explored through a multiplicity of art historical lens, photographic representations, and salient cultural valences. Metaphor and poetry, literature and painting, the cultural history of early radio, and modernistt photographic discourse are contextual pillars to our story.

Relatedly central to my historically materialist 1930s analysis is a critique of nascent news reportage media and their technological links to the catastrophic nature of photography. Explorations of aesthetic representation, the de-territorializing of the public sphere and its contingent political import, and the ambivalent ontological nature of the camera (an apparatus, forensic tool, and virtual interface) weave a tapestry lattice for our *Hindenburg* intellectual interventions.

Questions related to authenticity and documentation, liveness and animation, proximity and distance, fragmentation and wholeness, preservation and destruction are some of the broader themes that emerge across my art historical analysis. I posit these queries and others thinking through Walter Benjamin's *optical unconscious* in his essay "Little History of Photography" as well as his dense theory of inlaid *historical indexes* within pictures. More generally, I also import Roland Barthes's melancholic vernacular of the *punctum* as well as the haunting concept of horroristic shock from Adriana Cavarero in her text *Horrorism.*[ii]

Chapter One
Photography and the Sky
Flights Paths, Shadow Skies

> My folks lived just outside the [P]ark. I got my camera and walked down to the beach where all the cars parked. There I stood in the road waiting for the airship to fly over the Park….Sure enough, here came the airship straight at me. From the front it looked like a huge, giant whale flying, but it wasn't. It was the [von] *Hindenburg*. I took four pictures of it. It seemed so low that I could see people inside the airship. What a beautiful airship it was.[iii]

Following a brief introductory chapter, "Photography and the Sky" (chapter 1, a tentative title) traces the *Hindenburg*'s route through an array of flightpaths. Summarily, this chapter explores the domestic flight agenda, international sojourns, and the burgeoning nationalist myth of zeppelin Germanic culture to reveal a deep pathos in the *Hindenburg*—the largest zeppelin ever built. Here, a facsimile aerial map depicts the ship's final trajectory in the sky (see fig. 1.1). This last transatlantic sojourn from Frankfurt to Lakehurst concludes the chapter; the phantom torpedo-like airship is here pictured somewhere majestically above the Atlantic on the early morning of May 6, 1937: atop rippling water yet below wisps of fog, it was as if a specter of the *Hindenburg* was already entombed in the atmosphere (see fig. 1.2). In order to orient readers with both the prowess of aerial vision and central political priorities of the German zeppelin company, I first historicize the myriad 1936–37 spring flight patterns and sketch a constellation of events—disparate social places and occurrences—interrelated singularly through the panoptic witnessing eye of the airship (see fig. 1.3). From New York skylines to Brazilian hangars and Frankfurt country roads, the stamp of the *Hindenburg*'s shadow was a ubiquitous sight.

This invert mode of visual inquiry—a sensory anachronic vision with both historical memory and phenomenological experience at hand—reveals akin interstitial gaps lodged within photography and the *Hindenburg* alike. The Berlin Olympics and American millionaire's October 1936 fall flight are two cornerstone events for the first section of the chapter (see figs. 1.4, 1.5). In recounting the millionaire's flight, the *New Haven Register* described the scene and regal view from the historic green adjacent to Yale's campus: "As it idled over this city, majestic in size and grace, the ship undoubtedly made an impression."[iv] In a disquieting historical turn of the screw, members of this exclusive flight were gifted metal ashtrays, souvenirs tailored with tiny glass iterations of the *Hindenburg* filled with oil (see fig. 1.6). Smoke and ash, fire and oil: each explosive compounds inextricably linked with some upended ethos of the LZ-129 ship. I conclude with a discussion of aerial mapping, elevated sight, and territorial overhead vision from the imaginative clouds of the American Northeast (see fig. 1.7).

Next, follows a systematic discussion of the successful maiden voyage on March 26, 1937, over the Rhineland (see fig. 1.8). I posit that beginning in early March 1936, both the engineering

miscarriages and nationalist agenda of the airship were already fully on display. Consider that during the *Hindenburg*'s flight over the Rhine River, a panoply of Nazi propaganda and pink executive "Fuhrer" pamphlets were dropped from the sky (see fig. 1.9). In midflight and over the contentious Rhineland terrain, the *Hindenburg* here began its vitriolic program of aerial sabotage: the bombardment of violence and propagandic clamor from the troposphere was only the first act of danger rooted in the clouds.

A strange photographic *punctum*, however, complicates any clarity of narrative to this Germanic fairytale in the ether, and this Benjaminian optical rupture elucidates both the dissonance and incoherency of 1930s photography, media dissemination, and the majestic narratology of the *Hindenburg*. Here, I look closely at a single photograph (see fig. 1.10). While the massive German swastika on the *Hindenburg*'s underside appears front and center, it is the minutiae of a detail at left that bursts with historical prescience (see fig. 1.11) Notice the somber group of figures in black walking just below the torn skin of the airship. Looming above these drab men, the tattered skin of the zeppelin appears within the photograph like an angelic apparition frozen in flight: this textural rip materializes into a round anonymous head with chest reaching forward and a ghostly left arm pulled back. Call the melancholic picture an image of failure or a glitch, a tear in a rear fin or a rip in the whale's skin. Most evocatively, though, I read this torn fragment as a photographic iteration of Walter Benjamin's 1936 "angel of history": "dangerous" and in "dissolution," the ruinous image is replete with a sense of historically "bloated" saturation and "possibility" (Benjamin's words).

Notwithstanding the symbolic, the frayed back swastika wing prohibited the *Hindenburg*'s ambitious inaugural takeoff in early March 1936 (see fig. 1.12). The stark juxtaposition between the aforenoted picture and this image accentuate photography's uncanny ability to configure ulterior meaning in coeval temporal moments. Regardless of philosophical import, I suggest the palpable malfunction (from launch day-one, the lauded moment of commencement) discloses the strange oracular nature not only of the *Hindenburg* as flying machine but also, too, of photography as an unsettled medium: vertiginous poetic insight and supernatural optical knowledge instantaneously collide within a lightning flash of dissimilar revelation.

Our final segment of the chapter begins at the hangar (see fig. 1.13) in Rio de Janeiro, the sole 1937 site of successful global travel (and one of the few remaining hangar sites still intact today) for the *Hindenburg*. The chapter concludes with the vertigo stillness of May 6, 1937, as dozens of cameramen and family members, news reporters and voyeuristic onlookers congregated at the landing site of Lakehurst. Eager and anxious, many stood ready with cameras in hand and eyes

gawking at the horizon of a rainy New Jersey twilight, each waiting for the imminent spectacle of the LZ-129 *Hindenburg*'s safe landing. It never came.

Along with the *Hindenburg*'s itinerary and implicit climatic concerns—stratospheric gauges, hydrostatic equilibrium, and regulated thermodynamic pressure—an otherworldly cosmos of caste spells and necromantic vestiges also propels forward my project's first chapter. Likewise, throughout "Photography and the Sky," an array of art historical questions emerges: What was the political and archival function of photography, travel, and sightseeing in 1930's internationalism? How can the residue of material culture, a life of objects, and the strange visionary perspective of photography's otherness unveil an indexical truth about the late 1930s? And perhaps most broadly, what kind of culture looks obsessively heavenward with alert cameras pointed toward a flying machine above? These questions, other queries and the noted episodic routes of the *Hindenburg* construct the first chapter.

Chapter 2
Whales Up Above and Creatures all Around
Metaphor and Photography

> I wish I could describe things well, for a whale is the most beautiful animal I have ever seen. It combines the fascination of something alive, enormous, and gentle, with the functional beauties of modern machinery. A seventy-ton one was lying on the slipway like a large a very dignified duchess being got ready for the balls by beetles. To see it torn to pieces with steam winches and cranes is enough to make one a vegetarian for life.[v]

Arthur Cofod Jr.'s haunting picture, more than any other from the evening of May 6, 1937, allegorically illustrates for us the *Hindenburg*'s whale self in a terminal state of obliteration (see fig. 2.1). The fully suspended aluminum girth of the LZ-129—its white cloud spout of smoke, gushing shards of fiery detritus, and vague horizon line above shiny liquescent ground—depict some oceanic mammal momentarily buoyant. Consider, too, a photograph from the following morning: Charlie Hoff's portrayal of the zeppelin's skeleton ash ostensibly etched in sand likewise unveils the airship's metonymic whale frame and cetacean sensibility (see fig. 2.2). In death, the rubble and ruin of the *Hindenburg*'s coffin-like silhouette was a fallen giant: a beached whale's carcass was all that remained. A kind of ecological maleficence, this traceable index was a readable pattern, and the airship's profile became a symbolic facsimile seared into the earth of Lakehurst, New Jersey.

It is not only, however, as noted above, mere visual homology or mammalian photographic likeness that implores the metaphoric analogy I posit here. In fact, the entire decade of the 1930s seemed to have premonitory whales in the atmosphere. Chapter 3, "Whales Up Above and Creatures All Around," explores the uncanny semblance between the *Hindenburg* and whales; an interpolated dialogue of monsters in the sky undergirds the revolutionary epoch. Although

unconscious and a mere graphic referent, it seems even the editors of ***Life*** magazine understood a subliminal whale discourse imprinted inside the life and death of the *Hindenburg* (see fig. 2.3).

Most culturally conspicuous for our art historical survey is the contemporaneous 1937 Faber and Faber publication *Letters from Iceland,* a joint publication written by W. H. Auden and Louis MacNeice (see fig. 2.4). A book of dynamic travel writing and prosaic montage modernism, the above epithet is an excerpt from Auden in one of his short essayistic pieces: flensing of whales, an investigative expedition to Iceland, and the aesthetics of the arctic sublime are a few of the themes that indelibly connect the literary production *Letters from Iceland* to the lifeline of the *Hindenburg.*

The beginning of the tumultuous 1930s, nevertheless, is the anchor to this chapter as we contextualize Rockwell Kent's 1931 *Moby Dick* etchings (see fig. 2.5). As we will see, the aesthetic rebirth of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* in the 1930s was practical and prophetic, and this literary renaissance was synchronously kindred with Auden and MacNeice's sojourn to the glacial island of Iceland. The collection of Rockwell Kent prints helps to propel our story of the *Hindenburg* and photography into this related artistic realm of encounter. Uncovering Kent's print, we find a proximately optical, uncanny analog in AP photographer Murray Becker's May 6, 1937, *Hindenburg* photo—the ship, like the whale, each burst beyond the edges of any surface limits (see fig. 2.6). A kind of hydrogen was breathing in respective steam and flame alike. As it turns out, this kind of rapturous sea mammalian gesture was an all-too-familiar sight for the 1930s audience.

Not coincidentally, in the same year of Hindenburg-ian tragedy, 1937, taxidermist Percy Stammwitz and his son Stuart began construction of a life-sized blue whale model for the Natural History Museum in London (see fig. 2.7). The first of its kind, its finished wooden frame was covered with steel mesh and wire to be displayed alongside a 4.5-ton actual skeleton of a 25-meter whale. Indeed then, it makes some kind of sick, distinctly human sense that more than half the oceans blue whales were killed in the violent decade of the 1930s. Here we will import the callous opinions of Roy Chapman Andrews in his book *Whale Hunting with Gun and Camera* (reprinted in 1931). Violence and whaling, industry and mass media transformation were ubiquitous in 1930 consciousness.

The publication of Kent's illustrated *Moby Dick* edition introduced readers throughout the decade not only to Melville's white whale—legend of creaturely sensibilities, the sought-after fetishized whale of disaffection, and a subliminal timbre of racialized cognizance—but simultaneously, too, proliferated the Ahabian American myth of obsessive exploration, megalomaniacal power, and deadly thresholds of industrial capital (see fig. 2.8). The *Hindenburg* story

read through Melville and the whale have much to teach us about historical devastation and social obliteration in U.S. ecology studies.[vi] Finally, the Third Reich's fascination with Norse myth and Hitler's substantial economic investment in the whaling industry of the late 1930s—a clandestine military base and the development of a whale station in Iceland (1937–38), the contrived nest of Germanic culture (as Auden tells it)—are implicit historical concerns of this chapter (see fig. 2.9). The work concludes with George Orwell's *Inside the Whale* (1940) and its relationship to *Journey to a War,* W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood's 1938 publication.

Author Information

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Readership, Market

I can imagine a distinct group of readers—cross-generational English speakers with complex American backgrounds, a demographic of educated and historically attentive thinkers—who would excitedly engage with my work. While most will be scholars, general readers, too, continue to have distinct memories associated with the *Hindenburg*'s crash. Both its photographs and radio broadcast cast melancholic spells of memory and technology, trauma and flight that live on today. In addition to the captivating images that help construct the history project, the poetics of my prose and ability to creatively (and convincingly) weave unexpected narratives together form a provocative text that will engage nonscholars. In my view, *Whales in the Sky: Photography, Trauma, and the* Hindenburg ought to represent a new kind of literary and artistic project of history-making: a collision of visual data, a mood of solemn yet persuasive writing, and the elegiac details of history dovetail to create this original kind of writerly language.

Read as scholarship, the book is a critical intervention into an array of niche disciplinary fields—cultural studies and art history, global history and media studies. Simultaneously, it is my hope that the complex scope of the text may influence new genres of transdisciplinary study, future avenues of scholarly investigation, and novel discursive modes of inquiry such as trauma/memory studies and transnational visual history.

Comparable Books

David Lubin, *Shooting Kennedy* (University of California Press, 2003)

Alexander Nemerov, *Acting in the Night* (University of California Press, 2010)

Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (Vintage Press, 1996)

Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories* (University of California Press, 1997)

Michael Anne Holly, *The Melancholy Art* (Princeton University Press, 2013)

Alison Syme, *A Touch of Blossom* (Penn State Press, 2010)

Maria Loh, *Still Lives* (Princeton University Press, 2015)

William Schaefer, *Shadow Modernism* (Duke University Press, 2017)

Jinah Kim, *Postcolonial Grief* (Duke University Press, 2019)

W. G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* (New Directions Press, 1995)

David Lubin's *Shooting Kennedy* (University of California Press, 2003) remains one of the most important studies of visual culture on the 1960s. Photography and memory, collective trauma and representation are themes similarly salient for my own work. In effect, Lubin's project reveals the residual impact of images: depictions and pictures and history create a kaleidoscopic mise en abyme in *Shooting Kennedy.* My work on photography and the *Hindenburg* from a generation before JFK's death, likewise, approaches similar topics through kindred modes of inquiry. For Lubin, metaphor and culture, reportage and memory are presented with clear historical analysis and legible visual language—it is my hope *Whales in the Sky* will eventually occupy a similar place in the canonical texts of cultural history, American studies, and trauma studies.

Alexander Nemerov's *Acting in the Night* (University of California Press, 2010) offers the most apt example of art historical poetic writing. *Acting in the Night* emerges from a performance of Macbeth on a single day in 1863; a single aesthetic event provides the general framework for my book *Whales in the 1930s Sky.* Similar to Nemerov's *Wartime Kiss* (Princeton Press, 2012), my writing of history also traces the mysterious and often unknowable discoveries of the past, and its convergence with myriad works of art.

Landscape and Memory (Vintage Press, 1996) from esteemed art historian Simon Schama remains one of the most remarkable works of cultural history. Similar in scope to the great literary artist W. G. Sebald, the personalized language of Schama reveals an imaginative experience of the past and time lost.

Published first in 1995, the book continues to be important for scholarship, historians, and general readers alike.

In a related historical mode of cultural intervention, Marita Sturken's *Tangled Memories* (University of California Press, 1997) is an aesthetic study of monumentation and collective memory. Her project helps position Browne's photography in a larger discourse of cultural history and studies of communal trauma.

Michael Anne Holly's *The Melancholy Art* (Princeton University Press, 2013) is a monumental text. Situating melancholia as the discipline companion to art history, the work is radically innovative and empathetically attune. For Holly, original works of art corporeally connect art historical thinking and intellectual work. My own approach to the past, materiality, and art objects left behind operates within a kindred lattice of historical principles.

Alison Syme's *A Touch of Blossom* (Penn State Press, 2010) is a beautiful project. Syme's work explores the art of John Singer Sargent, revealing how a strangely interrelated cosmos of botany and literature, visual culture and sexuality are some of the essential "cross-fertilizing" terms at play his paintings. Brilliantly illustrated and keenly researched, I hope my work will become a part of this kind of growing transdisciplinary discourse.

Shadow Modernism (Duke University Press, 2017)*,* William Schaefer's transnational study of photography, Shanghai, and print culture is an invigorating intellectual sojourn across geographies and media. Schaefer's attention to the philosophical tension of 1930s images, scrutiny of textual captions, and visual research into professional and amateur picture-making alike are topics akin to my own project. In *Shadow Modernism,* we see the intertextual nature of fracture and failure, replication and montage as kindred concerns of media, politics, and aesthetics.

Postcolonial Grief (Duke University Press, 2019), Jinah Kim's text is an astute example of comparative literary scholarship and trans-historical research. Rooted in the complex national histories of trauma and representation, her text tells an often-untold story about memory, war, and commemoration in the Pacific. Kim's willingness to interrogate US empire and simultaneously evoke disparate theoretical sources confer her work with momentous political intervention and compelling scholarly narrative. My own art historical explorations similarly draw from myriad philosophical sources to form a broader

historical imagination and visual landscape; further, Kim's intentional import of thick linguistic vernacular, in her case the term "grief," is a likewise central priority in my own scholarship.

Finally, Sebald's writing is a sensuous meditation on the past. Perhaps more than any other, *The Rings of Saturn* (New Directions Press, 1995) is the quixotic journey of longing and historical discovery par excellence.

Other recent UC titles also include:
The Night Albums: Visibility and the Ephemeral Photograph
Aeroscopics: Media of the Bird's Eye View
Parallel Modernism: Koga Harue and Avant-Garde Art in Modern Japan
Out of Earshot: Sound, Technology, and Power in American Art, 1860-1900

Although in many ways there are relatively few monograph-length projects directly comparable to my own work, recent interdisciplinary trends—art history, media studies, trauma/memory studies—suggest that a pictorial and phenomenological approach to research, writing, and history are growing trends in scholarship.

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[i] *New York Times*, May 7, 1937.
[ii] Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol.2 *(1927–1934)* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999); Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981); Adriana Cavarero, *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).
[iii] Al Miller outside of Hammonasette Park, quoted in Harold G. Dick, *Golden Age of the Great Passenger Airships: Graf Zeppelin and Hindenburg* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian, 1992).
[iv] Walt Sivigny, "The Hindenburg's 'Millionaires' Flight' Amazed Connecticut Residents," *Connecticut Magazine*, September 17, 2018, https://www.connecticutmag.com/history/the-*hindenburg*s-millionaires-flight-amazed-connecticut-residents/article_35eddb80-b6c1-11e8-a651-1fb9a29e9200.html.
[v] W. H. Auden, *Letters from Iceland* (Faber and Faber, 1937), 149.
[vi] Pablo Picasso's artist book Ovid's *Metamorphosis* exhibited at MOMA (1930–31) also makes an appearance—it's creaturely drawing and otherworldly myths a further texture to our conversation of phantom monsters.