



The Air Show at Brescia, 1909

Peter Demetz

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An entrancing avant-garde adventure at the dawn of the modern age

In 1909, municipal authorities built an airfield in northern Italy and invited leading pilots to compete on it. The show attracted thousands of spectators--among them Giacomo Puccini and Gabriele d'Annunzio--and reporters, including, amazingly, Franz Kafka, Max Brod, and Luigi Barzini. Peter Demetz's sparkling new book tells the enchanting story of what happened in the air and on the ground before, during, and after this amazing moment.

Kafka, it turns out, was a very precise observer of both the fragile new machines and the people who flocked to see them in action. Demetz shows us the spectacle as Kafka reported it, and also its unexpectedly melodramatic preparations, amazing dirigibles, and ace pilots--the American Glenn Curtiss, the Italian Mario Calderara, and the reigning king of the skies, Louis Blériot.

But above all Demetz wants to know what flying really meant to these visionaries of the air: many political and imaginative issues were sent aloft at Brescia. With discerning affection, he elucidates Kafka's subtle ambiguities about the consequences of flight, d'Annunzio's lust for power in aviation, Puccini's enthusiasm for speedy escapes, and Curtiss's modest heroism. Illustrated with fascinating material from the show itself, this provocative work reveals a vital point where art and technology met in imagining the future.

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