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The Flight Attendant at your Service, a History of Air France's Managerial Policies (1946-1996)

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TEXT

- 1 To embody the prestige of Air France, the airline utilises the physical aspects of its stewardesses. First used on its flights in 1946, female cabin crews gradually became a modern effigy of the airline. In view of the exponential growth in the number of Air France flight attendants, the number of women hired began to rise in the 1960s and progressed from 31 per cent in 1958 to 66 per cent in 1970. This massive increase was coupled with the feminisation of professional practices, which is not surprising insofar as the service industry is highly gendered. Being considerate, available, and acting according to the ethic of 'taking care of' are dispositions that women learn in a differentiated way in the patriarchal order.¹ In the 1950s, the management insisted on the representative function of the hostess, whose role as

“ambassador of French taste, elegance and spirit”² was used to present the first French promotional campaign to the general public.³ This role gradually became more important. In order to face the commercial challenges posed by the highly competitive air transport environment, Air France's management invokes its “brand image” as the driving force behind its attractiveness. Thus, the study group it convened in 1972 to perfect its commercial identity announced that the feminisation of cabin service had indeed become a strategic asset:

Supported here by a particularly powerful and universal national stereotype, [the airline] has been able to find a style and acquire its own cachet that constitute the basic elements of its attraction and uniqueness. This sensuous component of Air France (style, gastronomy... smiles and elegance of the stewardesses) has contributed to a certain “feminisation” of its image, further reinforced by the systematic use of the stewardess character in the external presentation of the Company.⁴

- 2 The elaboration and diffusion of the image of the hostess throughout the second half of the twentieth century are part of this economic rationality. However, this image is not limited to this role, and it serves as a tool well beyond the commercial circuit of air tourism when the quantity of cultural outlets for representation (literature, cinema, comics, songs, etc.) are taken into consideration. The stewardess is more structurally linked to this narrative than the West was linked to modernity.⁵ This was especially true at the turn of the 1960s when – while celebrating the arrival of jet transport – the specialised press celebrated the refinement, the dynamism and the *civility* of the stewardesses who will fly on the new Caravelle type aircraft.⁶
- 3 The profession rapidly becoming standardised (at the end of the 1940s the job of the stewardess was still not well defined and consisted of a series of improvisations), and the rapid expansion of the airline market led airlines to reconsider their service protocols. In 1954, the unique status of cabin crew (PNC) gave this young professional group its own identity. It was united by a union (*Syndicat National du Personnel Navigant Commercial*, SNPNC), a pension fund, and specific technical skills codified by the Rescue and Safety Certificate (CSS) henceforth required for employment.⁷ As new aircraft

appeared, piloting and navigation technologies become more automated and safety protocols more complex. The crews, historically composed of cabin crew (captains, pilots, flight engineers and radio operators), increasingly included cabin crew. In 1954, cabin crew represented only 28 per cent of all flight personnel but, by 1970, this number had grown to 51 per cent. This evolution could be seen in the increased visibility of stewards and stewardesses. However, working conditions deteriorated at the end of the 1980s when low-cost airlines made a disruptive entry into the sector following major deregulations.⁸ The total restructuring of Air France during the 1990s resulted (in 1996) in the “PNC autrement” project. This reevaluated mobility between ground and flight jobs and introduced the “B-scale” (double salary scale).⁹ This reconfiguration of working conditions had a profound impact on the imaginary world of stewardesses, and the attraction of the profession – one that was strong for the youth of post-war generations – lost its luster. Nonetheless, certain representations still remained.

- 4 Sexy, available, glamorous, elegant, and eternally young, stewardesses have rooted a model of femininity in the collective imagination of the West. Airlines reactivate this imagination from time to time in different forms and require performances of femininity consistent with their brand image. Air France therefore insists on the idea of an elegant and discreet woman while the low-cost airline Transavia is more committed to her sexualisation.¹⁰ Also, while scientific literature has highlighted the historical links between the world of civil aviation and the cultural industries,¹¹ and Vanessa D’Hooghe analyses the resistance of Belgian stewardesses to the dynamics of objectification,¹² there is, as yet, no study detailing the managerial and economic processes behind the creation of this modern mythology.¹³ As for Gabrielle Schütz, she shows that the work of the “hostess” across a range of different industries has the effect of reaffirming heterosexual identities.¹⁴ We also think the gendered representations of the hostess is defined by the interaction between the hostess and the clientele that gendered. Consequently, passenger-consumer relations are crystallised. If we believe this to be so, there are, nevertheless, a number of questions. How are the frameworks that regulate this interaction defined? What are the determining elements in the creation of the

flight attendant's *savoir-être* that is so widely fantasised and marketed?

- 5 If Air France's managerial policy appears to be at the heart of this historical process, it is more through the successful assimilation of stewardesses into the corporate culture that the national airline can market its image. This article will focus on two thematic aspects raised by this hypothesis: the production of the hostess's soft skills inside, and outside, the institutional field. In order to understand the formation of a cultural image, one which straddles economic history, gender history and social history, we have put together a corpus of heterogeneous sources from the private funds of the Air France Museum, the union funds of the SNPNC at Roissy, the personal archives of former cabin crew members, the funds bequeathed to the French National Archives as well as a variety of cultural productions. All the while we have leant on analytical tools used in sociology and that have been developed to suit the times. We have also conducted eleven semi-structured interviews with retired Air France flight attendants lasting an average of two hours.¹⁵ The interviewees were employed between 1956 and 1982 and almost all of them had climbed at least one step up the hierarchical ladder. There are nine interviews with stewardesses and two stewards, including one collective interview (with three stewardesses and one steward) which we consider the most valuable as it enabled us to observe the particular mode of socialisation of flight crews.
- 6 Arlie Horchschild demonstrates that emotional framing is the primary architect of flight attendants' professional identities.¹⁶ By developing a detailed expressive script and monitoring its application, the employer requires its staff to transform their feelings and express specific sentiments: the stewardess's work is determined by "a mode of presence" codified and standardised by her hierarchy.¹⁷ Aviation being historically an object of prestige and luxury, this mode of presence is conditioned by the sociology of the clientele – the attention to the richest implying particular forms of the service relationship.¹⁸ The first part of this article focuses on the construction of Air France's managerial policy, and it seeks to demonstrate that expressive management is constructed in parallel with the integration of the personnel into the "corporate culture" by focusing on the company's press (such as *France-Aviation* or *Air France Revue*), the docu-

ments of the Commercial and Personnel Departments, and the social balance sheets and the union leaflets.

- 7 However, we cannot reduce the image of the flight attendant to a managerial production. In the specific case of Air France, we defend the idea that the *savoir-être* of the stewardesses is not entirely attributable to their primary socialisation, nor to the expressive work carried out within the framework of the service, but is nourished in part by the “crew spirit” which punctuates the rotation times, and on which the general public willingly – and rightly – attaches the imaginary “sea, sex and sun”.¹⁹ The second part explores the avenues opened up by Aurélie Jeantet concerning the expressive work that is not supervised by the company, but which remains at its disposal.²⁰ We propose to renew the analysis of Gérard Dubey and Renaud Martin²¹ (extended by Sophie Poirot-Delpech),²² on the life of long-haul sailors by opening up a new body of research.

1. From the presentable body to the representable body

- 8 From a Bourdieusian perspective, the body functions as a language through which actions speak louder than words. Transforming one's “social physiognomy”,²³ i.e., the body that one offers for others to see involves using a whole set of material and symbolic investments through bodybuilding or make-up, and learning of character traits whose culturally adequate expression puts certain parts of the body in motion. In our case, the flight attendants are selected for their *presentability* but must be trained in the *representability* of Air France so as to incorporate its commercial identity. This semantic shift allows us to identify precisely where the action of the management is located. Indeed, the commodification of the image of the hostesses results from this capacity to invest in pre-selected body images. In view of the economic situation, the *Compagnie Nationale* develops managerial tools to perfect its expressive management system.

1. 1. The origin of the profession: between improvisation and codification

- 9 Service on board aircraft is a relatively old phenomenon. As early as 1921 we find signs of a “passenger attendant” on a flight.²⁴ When various companies merged to form Air France in 1933, a small number of barmen helped flight engineers who, in turn, sometimes tried their hand at service. This on-board staff was made up of former employees of shipping or railway companies as well as stewards trained in the hotel business. Even though other airlines employed stewardesses, Air France justified the fact that it only used men because of the unstable nature of employing women due to maternity.²⁵ The Paris-London route, on which the first barmen worked, quickly became an icon of European air transport. The luxurious clientele of the *Golden Ray* received a service that was similar to being served in a restaurant. In fact, “the idea of treating the passenger as a patient suffering from anxiety [on the model of the American nurse] displeased the French, who retorted with a national specialty: good food”.²⁶ Comforting passengers on flights punctuated by incidents (turbulence, high temperatures on the tarmac, cold temperatures at altitude in an unpressurised cabin, air sickness, etc.) thanks to the hotel know-how of on-board personnel prefigured the initial function of future cabin crew.
- 10 After the war, the optimism of reconstruction that enlivened Western upper classes spared by the policies of supply, and by the large-scale social conflicts, was reflected in the consumption of various luxury goods.²⁷ The airline industry – one modernised thanks to the technological progress made possible by four years of military research – benefited from this vibrancy. Air France hired its first “flying girls” to confirm the revival of civil aviation which was safer and more attractive. The Air France Hotel Division was selective employing only 14 hostesses out of 350 applications received.²⁸ The first set of staff were highly publicised through press articles (*Le Figaro*, 1946), films for the general public (*Aux Yeux du souvenir*, 1948), literature (Alix Unienville, 1949), and they came from backgrounds such as air convoy workers (IPSAS) trained in flying and nursing techniques by the Red Cross and the army or, less frequently, nurses or ambulance

drivers.²⁹ The specificity of this pool of employees responded to the security imperative which, as Jérémie Legroux analyses, is at the origin of the commercial function of hostesses: being required to reassure people by their presence.³⁰ The company expected the participants to be totally available, to have a certain morality, a strong heart, personality and distinction, and female cabin crew were selected according to strict criteria: white (unofficially), measure between 155-165 cm (5'1-5'5), weigh between 45-55 kg (100-120 lbs.), and not to measure more than 70 cm (27.5 in.) around the waist. Possessing the right aesthetics did not extend as far as having bent legs (sic) or dental imperfections.³¹ For successful candidates training took place at the Château de Maligny in the Yonne region, and under the supervision of Bertrand d'Astorg, a Vichy poet who was used to training executives.³² Between lessons in aeronautical culture, gymnastics, child care and general culture,³³ the first generations of hostesses were trained, above all, in worldliness. The aim was to model them on the image of femininity displayed in the leaflets distributed on board:³⁴ Parisian, elegant, fresh, with impeccable body posture and a good sense of dress.

11 In 1948, Air France completed its revitalisation by achieving financial equilibrium, and a law passed 16 June 1948 gave it more commercial autonomy.³⁵ That same year, stewards and stewardesses formed a professional category called the *Personnel Complémentaire de Bord* (PCB) performing two distinct professions: stewardesses came from the Parisian bourgeois classes and were trained for the most part at the IPSA (*Infirmières Pilotes, Secouristes de l'Air*) and they had obtained a higher level of education than the stewards. In the absence of a purser stewardesses were more senior than stewards,³⁶ and for this reason they enjoyed a salary that was 5 to 14 per cent higher all while remaining on the same rung of the hierarchical career ladder. Of the 321 PCBs that made up the crew on 1 January 1952, stewardesses represented only 25 per cent of them.³⁷ All the while, their career possibilities remained limited. Retirement at 40 and contractual celibacy – effective until 1963 – were enough to shorten life as a stewardess, a job ultimately perceived as a transient adventure or a gateway towards married life.

12 The role of a “stewardess” was defined as an extension into the professional sphere of the role performed in the domestic sphere and

clearly indicates a gendered difference in work roles. According to the 1948 PCB manual,³⁸ the stewardess was responsible for “looking after the comfort of the passengers in particular”, assisting the steward in the hotel service and taking care of administrative functions – such as customs forms – if there was no purser on board. The stewards, on the other hand, were “responsible for the restaurant service and all consumption” as well as the maintenance and cleanliness of the cabin and its annexes. This separation of roles was also apparent in work spaces: the stewardess was more concerned with taking care of duties in the cabin and maintaining contact with the passengers while the steward prepared orders and took charge of services in the galley. On the other hand, both were subject to a succinct codification of how they should carry themselves. This applied to self-presentation, the wearing of uniform, attitude, and the expression of emotion. Presented in the form of drawings, the manual showed what type of behaviour should be used and which should not, i.e., being haughty, suspicious, or “acting like a star”. Interaction with the passenger required a certain technicality which the manual clearly details. Cabin crew could not sit on the armrest, they had to look at the customer while talking to him or her and could not bend over. Indeed, they had to always remember that the customer could not draw away from close contact.

- 13 In spite of these recommendations, guidelines were, however, badly defined. Alix Unienville depicts the job more as a succession of improvisations (impromptu stopovers, technical failures, and confrontations with passengers reluctant to accept the authority of a woman, for example).³⁹ If service interaction had already been codified at the beginning of the 1950s, there was nothing relating to emotional work. The management gave a rather cursory reading of how feelings should be used, and they were perceived as the natural continuation of the work of welcoming and caring that the hostesses were learning.

1. 2. The institutionalisation of a professional group

- 14 In 1953-1954, two structural elements changed the shape of cabin work: the strategic development of onboard services and the interna-

tionalisation of competition. The decree n°53-956 of 30 September 1953 put an end to state subsidies for Air France, and the *Compagnie Nationale* entered into direct competition with other airlines as it no longer benefited from the indemnities fixed by the Convention of 20 September 1946.⁴⁰ The Chairman of the Board of Directors, Max Hymans, declared that the decisive issue was no longer the technical nature of the fleet, but rather its commercial identity.⁴¹ The expansion of tertiary organisations shifted the criteria for measuring productivity, and the airlines measured their efficiency using the 'customer satisfaction' index. At the end of the 1950s, the company magazine *France-Aviation* insisted particularly on the protagonist role of cabin crew in this renewal of the commercial operation explaining that "the smile of the stewardess is part of the selling features".⁴²

15 Between 1953 and 1959, the network grew by 25 per cent (from 250,000 km to 310,000 km flown), while its operating capacity nearly doubled from 225 million tonne-kilometres in 1953 to 440 million in 1959. Air France therefore pursued a policy of increasing air traffic particularly on international routes. The company explicitly shifted its efforts to long-haul routes,⁴³ a move reflected in the promotion of the national flag bearers of gastronomy, wine, and haute couture. This was done to attract foreign customers – essentially from the United States – and to satisfy a mainly Parisian clientele sensitive to the mythic images of France. Effectively, 64 per cent of all passengers departing from Orly in 1958 were Parisian compared to 4 per cent from rural areas.⁴⁴ Onboard service had to be the standard bearer as pilot André Lesieur pointed out on the occasion of the opening of a New York-Mexico route in 1958. For him, it was a matter of "winning the battle for the reputation of our country [thanks to] the hidden secrets of our cuisine, the charm of our hostesses and the professionalism of our stewards".⁴⁵

16 This strategy coincided with an increase in the number of cabin crew. Air France took on 790 cabin crew between 1952 and 1962 with hostesses representing 25 per cent of the workforce in 1952 and 40 per cent in 1962 respectively.⁴⁶ These figures indicate the use of a seasonal female workforce (i.e., personnel whose first flights were not made as permanent staff). Appearing in 1957, the use of this status very quickly became a strategy of personnel management as it was

used during training courses for cabin crew. Here, they would be offered a trial period in the summer without guarantees of permanent employment.⁴⁷ The position of instructor was also created for the occasion and allowing the evaluation of trainees it announced an increased control of the service activity. The SNPNC (the cabin crew union) denounced this move as it believed it supported the vision of the management to employ an adjustable and renewable cabin crew, strongly impacting stewardesses whose career prospects were limited by contractual celibacy.⁴⁸

- 17 Solange Catry, an icon of the first generation of hostesses, testifies that at the turn of the jet engine “the profession gained in solidity and organisation what it might have lost in poetic evanescence”.⁴⁹ These words echo the institutionalisation of service and management standards highlighted in the 1954 PNC manual. In particular, they emphasise “the permanent concern for the passenger”. As more proof, eight pages explaining the service protocols were added to the six pages setting out the rules of behaviour and presentation. The latter concerned stewardesses more than stewards as staff were instructed to preserve their “freshness” with the help of a “quick regrooming, fresh makeup, and the application of a fresh coat of nail varnish” before waking passengers after a night’s sleep.⁵⁰ More widely, the whole service was meticulously detailed, and more than twenty pages dedicated to the serving of meals. At breakfast, for example, the stewardess distributed the trays while the steward remained in the galley and tidied up the work surface. If the spaces and work rhythms complied with gender norms, no distinction was made concerning emotional work the company mentions when it writes that:

the friendliness of the staff must be natural. Those who have to make an effort to do so will be able to give the illusion of perfection for a certain time, but when fatigue sets in their efforts slacken and their true nature will take over and cause incidents.

- 18 On a quest for this amiability, the management increased the number of means it deployed. For example, a “kindness contest” was organised between 1 July and 31 December 1965 at the end of which the winners (10 per cent of the statutory cabin crew) received a prize.⁵¹ On a more structural level, annual commercial training courses were made compulsory in 1962, and this followed the challenging launch of

the jet aircraft where customer surveys showed an increase in dissatisfaction.⁵² Like the training courses, the refresher courses were given by cabin crew managers with long experience of a particular flight sector. Unlike training courses, however, they sought “to raise cabin crew morale, strengthen their fighting spirit, improve their performance, awaken their professional conscience and thereby raise the level of service by giving it a human aspect”.⁵³ The courses lasted one week for flight attendants and two weeks for cabin crew, and during these courses senior management conducted a series of interviews with the participants to address, amongst others, the notion of “permanence of attitude”. After questions on more technical aspects such as how to meet the passenger’s needs or how to keep them happy outside meal times, staff were then questioned on their level of “emotional availability”. This was at a time when talks involving the SNPNC were at their most tense and when it was fighting against new flight protocols on jet aircraft (rotation times, flight schedules, etc.).⁵⁴

- 19 In terms of the professionalisation of this group, the availability of cabin crew was relative to two areas: the availability to the customer, which could be translated as *attentiveness*; and availability to the organisation, a notion that can be interpreted as *manageability*. If, as Arlie Hochschild states, service work in the cabin is characterised by providing attentiveness in addition to the service itself, then it is in the company’s interest to ensure that the emotion expressed is as authentic as possible, that the clientele is left with an impression of spontaneity, and that the task of showing that one is caring is aided by the use of positive effects such as self-giving, commitment, and dedication. Indeed, “having the appearance of loving one’s work is thus increasingly part of the work itself.”⁵⁵ It therefore became important for the management how it should gauge this “love for the job” as the criteria for this “love” become clearer. Thus, the demand for emotional availability of the personnel was translated by reinforcing the means by which company policy was assimilated, a policy that was intended to guarantee the sincerity and the quality of the emotional commitment used during service.

1. 3. The Professionalisation of “emotional” work and improvement of the identification frameworks

20 The 1970s saw a deterioration in the economic situation of air transport which was vulnerable, and which offered little diversified service. The effects of the 1968 crisis “were more serious than the crisis itself”,⁵⁶ and the introduction of “Jumbo Jets” (such as the Boeing 747 in January 1970), the dynamism of flying by charter (using four-engine aircraft, and the updating of prices through the “excursion fares” introduced by Alitalia in 1969) were factors that disrupted the economic health of Air France. In addition, the 1973 oil crisis resulted in its worst financial results ever recorded with a deficit of over 540 million French francs.

21 It was in this deleterious context that the sales department tried to modernise its brand image once more. In July 1974, a group of experts published a long report describing Air France's perceived commercial image and the target image it should aim for (by combining various market studies carried out over two years that were delegated to specialised companies). Far from attaining the authenticity it sought, customers raised concerns relating to false grandeur, false cuisine, and a false hostess-passenger relationship. The aim being to remedy this by focusing on on-board service, the fundamentals of the report established a direct causal link between advertising and management policies:

Air France's image cannot be fully guaranteed unless the company's staff – an essential part of support and relay – become its own agents or active militants. The success of Air France's image depends to a large extent on the support of its staff and on the action that will be taken to ensure that the staff identify with it.⁵⁷

22 Following a three-month conflict punctuated by six well-attended strikes at the end of January 1970 concerning the issuance of the Safety Rescue Certificate,⁵⁸ the relationship between cabin crew and management had deteriorated drastically. No compromise could be reached on the definition of the role, one that was torn, historically,

between providing safety and selling. Stating that a “clear state of crisis” existed, the study group prescribed a transformation of the leadership style towards less authoritarian, more participative and communicative practices. Several references contained in this document prove that the appeasement of the social climate at the turn of the 1970s was a determining factor in Air France's business policy.

23 If the documents available to instructors are to be taken at face value, personnel management made the criteria for employment more complex. Indeed, when evaluating candidates, the management used a veritable grid detailing “characterological” elements such as vitality, dynamism, assertiveness, or social behaviour.⁵⁹ Each main category is broken down into several sub-categories: “cooperative spirit”, for example, explains what management means by “social conduct”. These subcategories were, themselves, classified along a spectrum from A to E establishing behavioral extremes. Based on the observation of candidates in the mockup of an airplane, evaluators attempted to determine which behavioral typologies were the most appropriate. By observing the candidates in motion, evaluators attempted to determine which “social physiognomies” best expressed the spirit of Air France. In the words of Bourdieu, from their first view of the candidates, the evaluators established whether their presentability could be transformed into representability at the cost of a lesser effort. Hiring cabin crew whose emotional structure was in line with the company's established mode of presence also made it possible to limit the risks of insubordination. Indeed, emotional management can be understood by the following: shaping the emotional complexions of each person in the direction defined by the company, without arousing too much resistance.⁶⁰ By doing this, Air France used strategies widely used in the corporate world whose aim is to win over levels of management and to promote an upstream and correct assimilation of the ethical and affective language dispensed by the company.⁶¹

24 Once the crisis of the 1970s had been relatively absorbed, Air France hired massively. The number of cabin crew increased from 3,520 in 1978 to 6,947 in 1992. The management rate (all levels combined) remained stable at around 24 per cent, but it became more diversified. The position of Principal Cabin Crew Chief (PCC), created in 1985, had the effect of making the competition to reach the first level of the hierarchal ladder harder. In 1978, 22 per cent of cabin crew chiefs

were managers, while this percentage dropped to 15 per cent by 1992. These figures show a strengthening of the selection process and the expansion of management training programmes that were the concrete results of recommendations to renew the company's image. During this period, there was also an increase in the number of women in direct management positions (the percentage of female cabin managers rose from 39 per cent to 51 per cent) even though the organisation of the profession remained structurally unequal.

- 25 In a 1976 directive aimed at improving the quality of service, management explicitly called for an improvement to the role of pursers responsible for the "onboard atmosphere",⁶² and closely monitored compliance with the rules of presentation as Marianne attests:

There were controls. You had instructors who came on board. They would look to see if you were up to standard. That is to say that you didn't have anything that would shock people such as jewelry that was too flashy or a hairstyle that wasn't right. You couldn't have a bun or hair touching the collar of the blouse.

- 26 The know-how of cabin crew was developed mainly through the localised action of a management that selected, controlled, and sometimes rewarded, as demonstrated by the bonus of 100 French francs given to Jean-Pierre – then a cabin attendant – who was thanked by the hierarchy "for his dynamism, his friendliness and his cheerful demeanour" while a flight was delayed on a stopover in Toronto in January 1980.⁶³
- 27 Professionalism – and the promise of a successful career – was the result of the mix between the emotional work that the cabin crew carried out in during service and their level of assimilation into the company. During an internship in 1988, a glossary was provided to managers detailing "the four objectives of the assessment of cabin crew candidates for integration"⁶⁴ – i.e., the proposal of an employment contract: the "brand image objective" aimed to make sure that trainees knew how to make the most of their body shape within the guidelines of the protocols on clothing; the "quality objective" measured whether cabin crew knew how to sell confidence in Air France by inspiring passengers with a sense of security; and the "communication objective" highlighted the sociability and availability of the per-

sonnel. The instructor had to check whether the trainee knew how to personalise relations with each passenger, to serve each passenger, whether he or she knew how to be tolerant and caring, whether he or she showed ease, kindness, generosity and open-mindedness when dealing with others. And, above all, whether he or she knew how to mark the uniqueness of each relationship by meeting specific needs. Finally, the “efficiency objective” made sure that the cabin crew was able to produce these reactions as methodically as possible by fitting into the company organisation. Employees had to be dynamic, mobile, attentive, know how to participate and collaborate, and constantly look to create team spirit.

- 28 Josiane Pinto writes that “the so-called feminine professions are professions that establish ‘femininity’ as a professional quality”.⁶⁵ In this respect, it is easy to understand how the requirements of the management weighed more heavily on stewardesses than on stewards. Effectively, by making the image of the stewardess the focus of its commercial policy from the 1960s onwards, Air France announced that service on board was a female profession. Consequently, it trained its stewardesses to perform a feminine role that could not be transposed, as it stood, on to their male counterparts but which, nevertheless, had a powerful effect on them if we are to believe the development of the image of the “gay steward”.⁶⁶ Additionally, more the cabin crew’s “expressive machine”⁶⁷ is inclined to slow down (more passengers leads to more stress and fatigue and deteriorates the quality of relational work) more the identification with the company must be powerful. In other words, the intensity of the emotional work used was translated into a feeling of belonging to Air France whose good health was used to justify an increasing workload. However, it appeared that the institutional field could not produce this effect on its own, especially when the underlying social dialogue was conflictual, and the working conditions were deteriorating from a structural point of view. Flight attendants had the specificity of having an idyllic working environment that was often the object of fantasy because it was a reproduction of a modern and bourgeois way of life. We can suppose that through this an attachment to the employer was created, as well as the belief that the physical and emotional effort made was rewarded by access to the dream life of a pilot. Agnes testifies to the attractiveness of the latter when recalling the doubts, stress and

fatigue that often made cabin crew consider whether they should carry on in the profession:

[I] asked him if he liked his job, if he was tired of it. At that moment, the steward took the bottle of champagne that was in the cart, he poured some on his hands and said, “do you know many jobs where you can wash your hands with champagne”?

2. The dream life of a crew member: another facet of the emotional work

29 What represented the glory days of aviation seems to be being constantly updated. For Denise, Camille, Charline or Agnès, the notion corresponds to the expansion of the Air France fleet between 1945 and 1960 when cabin crew really lived a life of adventure in the company of illustrious and remarkable passengers. However, in his autobiographical account of 1949, Alix d'Unienville wrote, melancholically, that the *legendary days* of aviation were already over. The airplane, “a big summer fly that tirelessly vibrates where it stands”,⁶⁸ had lost its pre-war splendor. This systematic deferral to the past announced the importance of Air France's heroised narrative. The company maintained a glorified image of itself by mobilising the myths and legends of civil aviation which lasted until the 1970s and which were inseparable from the pilots who embodied them – the pioneers of Aéropostale to the “Lords of the Atlantic” of the 1950s. Employment at Air France was partly motivated by these myths.

30 Amongst the crews themselves, “veteran” employees played a fundamental role in the integration of new arrivals. They updated the collective memory through stories and jokes and accompanied the youngest crew members to legendary places linked to life on board (*La Piola*, Buenos Aires, or Montchat Island, Djibouti). Sophie Poirot-Delpech even speaks of “pilgrimage sites” where a visit ritualised the integration of the crew members' collective.⁶⁹ This life, nomadic without being really so,⁷⁰ was already the subject of studies that are too many to mention. On the other hand, this second part seeks to understand how these collectives were maintained in the face of the

material degradation of the situation in which they were historically formed. Exoticism, the unforeseen, or adventure come from a lexical field that ideally defines the life of a crew member.⁷¹ However, the latter comes up against the increasing homogenisation of settings, encounters, and the management of the unknown by socially elaborate frameworks.

- 31 One might be tempted to say that it is, therefore, the density of emotional life that is central to professional relationships that organises and consolidates the identity of cabin crews. In several respects, access to this social network with its very specific temporalities⁷² requires emotional work which, on the one hand, is largely opposed to the mode of presence shaped by the company in the context of the service. On the other hand, it is fundamentally complementary to it. This refers to the distinction made by Arlie Hochschild between *emotional work* and *emotional labour* – one being emotional labour performed in everyday and intimate life, and the other placed under the aegis of production relationships. Aurélie Jeantet believes that the two spaces are not compartmentalised and that “emotional labour not expected by the employer [may be] indispensable to the performance of work”.⁷³ This seems to be confirmed in our field of study.
- 32 Agnès reports that she had to unofficially take an evening dress and a bathing suit in her luggage on long-haul rotations because – even without a uniform – the stewardesses could be asked to perform the role of ambassador to France as shown by a visit to the crew of the helicopter cruiser, *La Jeanne d’Arc*:

I remember a stopover in Karachi where the head of the stopover told us that the ship *Jeanne d’Arc* was currently in port and that the pasha, the commander of the *Jeanne d’Arc*, wanted to invite all the crew in the evening at 7. Very well [...] We couldn’t refuse, it was part of the mission.

2. 1. Learning to crew, a specific and autonomous socialisation

- 33 It should firstly be pointed out that the team spirit that unites the members of the cabin crew is partly formalised by the management.

Sophie Poirot-Delpech emphasises that the “little miracle” of flying – the sincere and immediate cohesion of a group whose members did not know each other – is a necessity for onboard safety imperatives. Since safety was more important than commercial training, the company had to define its protocol. In 1951, Air France created the position of *chef de cabine* (cabin manager) a pivotal link between the cockpit and the cabin, and someone responsible for crew briefings. In 1985, the creation of the position of *Chef de cabine principale* (CCP), or Head Cabin Manager, continued this formalisation of the “crew spirit”. Camille describes this position using a sports metaphor: “the crew was a football team, the CCP its coach”.⁷⁴ In a document distributed to the *Personnel Navigant Technique* (PNT) listing the concepts necessary for performing the job well, we find the idea of “crew synergy” which becomes effective when each person respects and performs his or her function (the captain, for example, must embody the personality consistent with the leadership attributed to him or her by the crew).⁷⁵ Over the entire period studied, the management codified and formalised the expressions of authority linked to rank in the service space. Other elements such as “crew drinks” (that took place outside work but that were also supervised by the company) optimised this “crew synergy”. These were ritualised moments of sociability intended to preserve the group identity and improve team cohesion: “Even if you don’t drink, even if you drink water, who cares (...) Perhaps, I’ll get to know your first name and how you react in case of a crash”.⁷⁶ Whenever possible, Air France provided the hotels where its cabin crew slept, and which had rooms specifically designed for these informal meetings.

- 34 The feeling of friendship, and the feeling of “being part of a big family” was not natural. It was constructed around specific instances that codify the “techniques of the body”.⁷⁷ Sometimes these instances were supervised by the company, sometimes not. The gestures, the looks, the mood, and the tone of the exchanges were expressions of common feelings whose meaning only validated members of the group could identify. This “relationship with oneself” was the result of emotional work internalised by the cabin crew, but not independent of the company. In short, the crew existed through a collective and affective construction in which it was necessary to actively participate by producing emotions that correctly fitted into the group’s emo-

tional script. The latter was largely based the feelings one experiences when on holiday that regulate how the body acts and is used. The paradisiacal setting offered by the life of a long-haul flight attendant is acquired at the cost of each person's adherence to an image of happiness whose elements are clearly determined, unavoidable and consensual. The "optimism and good energy" found in Valérie Nadame's autobiographical account (a cabin crew member who joined Air France in 1984) seem to be emotional springs in constant tension.⁷⁸ Joy, exuberance, alcohol, laughter, the sun, the beach, and sex are expressions of an unofficial, unsupervised emotional work, but they are necessary for the professional carrying out of the Head Cabin Manager's job. The data from our interviews is reminiscent in several respects of Pierre Talec's 1985 book based on his experiences with *Club Med*.⁷⁹ The author examines how this organisation succeeded in creating a feeling of real joy using ploys that simulate euphoria, systematise the eroticisation of bodies and ritualise the consumption practices of the "sea, sex and sun" package. These are three elements that can be found in the accounts given of life onboard. Marie-Louise worked as entertainments monitor at *Club Med* before joining Air France as a hostess in 1977.⁸⁰ She tells how she was able to make the most of life on-board, that it very closely resembled a nightlife and party scene and was a vector through which she was able to meet her husband. Another example of this porosity between the airline world and the party world is that of Isolde Chrétien, an iconic Air France stewardess who went back to the Parisian party scene by taking over the Piano Bar on the Rue Saint Anne.⁸¹ A part of airline life is, therefore, characterised by an attitude where "everyone is visibly preoccupied with playing their role as a holidaymaker 'having a blast'".⁸² Crew members who did not act out this role were not considered in a good light. Indeed, a cabin crew member excluded from leisure activities would be led to question his own professional qualities. When Philippe – recently promoted to Head Cabin Manager- was not invited to tourist outings because of a misunderstanding on the composition of crew, he was strongly affected:

It had been 4 months since I gave up smoking and I was on standby in Madagascar [...]. I arrived at the hotel, and the captain, the copilot, the two Cabin Managers, etc. were all there. When I went down to

breakfast in the morning, however, I saw nobody. I wondered if I was the only person staying at the hotel. Everybody had left on an excursion to see the lemurs without contacting me. As a new Cabin Manager, I wondered if I had been a fool on the flight. I spent six days alone in room 747 [laughs]. But this made me think "Should I buy a pack of cigarettes or what?" You become demoralised.⁸³

- 35 The emotional investment in crew life is all the more powerful because of the intensity with which relationships are built and "Old timers often warn beginners of the danger of confusing the crew life with life itself."⁸⁴ The attraction for the unexpected – that is, the emotional disposition towards the unexpected and the encounter – creates the conditions for an evanescent, strong and ephemeral sociability. The folding seats of the galley are often compared to a confessional or a shrink's bench, as Charline reminds us:

People let loose a lot more easily. I heard stories, and I was told things, that you would never tell someone you know. Never! It was a feeling of "it doesn't matter anyway".⁸⁵

- 36 It is because the crew members are subject to the hazards of programming (one rarely flies with someone again unless one asks for it) that they can afford such a relational investment. The conditions are thus gathered to fully experience friendly, romantic, or sexual encounters. The question of fidelity is central to the relationship of cabin crew to family life, and they are difficult to reconcile in many cases. The "double life" so frequently described is not classic adultery and the emotional split between "life in the skies" and "everyday life" is such that some find it difficult to fall back into "life on the ground". Agnes was so moved by her account that she cried:

In the broadest sense of the word, Air France was my family. It was something extremely strong. Two or three years after [my departure in 1997], I went to the Air France offices because I wanted to see people I knew. I ran into two former fellow cabin crew chiefs who were talking. I was hurt when they said to me, "Oh! What are you doing here?" I replied, "This is my home". It hurt me deeply that there had asked "what are you doing here", and said "You shouldn't be here anymore", because I truly felt that [hammering out the last words] at Air France I was at home!⁸⁶

37 This testimony is important because it implies the existence of a link between the happiness codified by crew life and belonging to Air France. However, the emotional work carried out during stopovers was not formalised by the management: excursions to see the lemurs of Madagascar, shopping in New York, or visiting Machu Pichu, were not organised by the company. In the end, though, the company reaps the benefits. If the high level of endogamy within the aircrew community (which involves feelings of love) is not down to Air France, the company is still the source of this phenomenon which it promotes through the “marriages or children” sections in its staff magazines.

2. 2. The “dream life” as a vector of identification with the company

38 France's national airline offers the material conditions necessary for this unique and privileged sociability. If the cabin crew can afford to go on safari in Tanzania between flights, it is because the company pays for the accommodation and food. That's why Charline says she loves Djibouti: “We went out to the Montchat and Mascali islands, and we were paid for it!”⁸⁷ She also met her first husband, a captain, during one of these idyllic outings. The socialisation of the crew was organised along lines that were characteristic of the bourgeoisie and that included playing certain sports (tennis, windsurfing, or golf). *France Aviation* often devoted a few lines to such and such a sports event sponsored by Air France, and they reported on the *Première voile Air France* windsurfing competition organised on 19 August 1979 in the Arcachon basin.⁸⁸ Marianne loved playing tennis with other passengers at the Meridien Hotel in Pointe-à-Pitre during extended stopovers. She also left her windsurfing board bought in Miami where it was as the hotel organised its transport and safekeeping.

39 Historically, Air France has accommodated its crews in high-class hotels. When Charline flew to New York for her first season in 1972, she was satisfied with a hotel that was quiet far from Times Square, but which the rest of the cabin crew “found rotten” because they were used to a certain luxury.⁸⁹ According to Agnès, as they represented France abroad, they were expected to maintain a certain standard of living “hence the high standard of the hotels we stayed in were al-

ways the best, and always four stars".⁹⁰ From 1971 onwards, Air France launched gigantic real estate projects: the Méri­dien Hotel in Paris, a four-star establishment, has more than 1,000 rooms, making it the largest hotel in Europe.⁹¹ Air France's hotel subsidiary (Hotel France International) operated more than 40 hotels worldwide and represented 8 per cent of the group's economic activity in 1980. The Company immediately granted its agents and their families substantial discounts for stays at the hotel when rooms were not occupied. These discounts amounted to between 25 and 50 per cent depending on the season.⁹² In 1981, Air France extended these privileges to retired staff.⁹³ The company's social policy attempts to include the families of its employees as much as possible, and this is reflected in a rather dynamic works committee that organises ski and beach holiday camps, for example.

40 For young crew members who are generally without a family to support at the beginning of the careers, and who enjoy and let others enjoy life, luxurious stopovers is part of a rite of passage that initiates them into an exclusive life in which they share the tastes and customs of high society. It was not uncommon for cabin crew to meet celebrities in the cabin between the 1950s and 1980s: Camille flew with French actor, Gerard Depardieu; Marie accompanied Khrushchev on his tour of France in April 1960; and Agnes served several ministers. The cabin crew got so close to the world of the upper class that they become almost accomplices that were capable of judging its members individually. Camille says of Gerard Depardieu that he was "a big badger",⁹⁴ Marie of Khrushchev that he was a "clown",⁹⁵ and Jacky Nacal speaks of a prime minister who was "bloated with pride for himself".⁹⁶ Most of the published accounts of flight attendants accentuate the idea of a profession that – without actually being part of it broke the glass ceiling – since cabin crew would always be just employees.

41 For this reason, Jacky Nacal relies so much on the anecdotes she, herself, defines as peripheral to the job of stewardess that, paradoxically, form a central part of her autobiography. Indeed, she describes at length her ambivalent friendship with a great Hollywood actress in the 1970s-1980s (believed to be Jane Fonda), or nonchalantly returns to her meeting with Jacques Dutronc and Francis Girod. This encounter led to her being an extra in the 1978 film *L'État Sauvage*.⁹⁷

Later watching the movie, she identified with the actress Marie Christine Barrault who fascinated her as she had “the same beautiful blonde hair” on the screen. This is a significant statement: by rubbing shoulders with political and social elites, even in a servile relationship, cabin crews were engaged in a kind of mimicry that is instrumental in creating the affects mentioned above.

42 Josiane Pinto's study of secretaries and their relations with their employers shows that through “diffuse familiarisation with the world of work” these secretaries acquire a social recognition that is otherwise inaccessible to them. In the case where the secretaries have a positive attitude towards their employer, they are familiar with his daily life. They can then refine a judgment of the person who embodies the function (the employer “is praised for his ‘manners’”), which ensures them an emotional proximity to the social world of the boss. This servile relationship can only be understood by “reference to the material and symbolic benefits obtained”,⁹⁸ because by analysing the family and marital networks of secretaries, Josiane Pinto shows that for a not insignificant fringe of executive secretaries, bosses occupy a higher social position than the husband and father.⁹⁹ To draw a parallel, Air France is an institution that guarantees a triple benefit to its hostesses: increases in economic capital (salary), social capital (matrimonial strategies, networking) and cultural capital (access to an elitist use of the world).

43 This seems verifiable only for cabin crew employed between 1945 and 1980. The restructuring of the airline industry in the 1990s through the “Plan Blanc”¹⁰⁰ permanently devalued the profession and reorganised salary strategies. The gap between the “new generations” is often pointed out by former cabin crew.¹⁰¹ The “ancients” criticise mainly two points: young people's loss of interest of in discovering the countries in which they stop; their lack of professionalism towards passengers. On the one hand, the crew life that Air France maintained throughout the period studied is gradually breaking down, giving way to the MacDonalds-hotel-Skype model which, according to Charline, translates into “a homogenisation and a lack of openness to others and to the world”.¹⁰² In other words, new employees are not trying to maximise their cultural capital. On the other hand, the lack of professionalism marks a devaluation of the passenger and references the fact that “the plane has become a means of

transport, full stop”, and no longer a social privilege.¹⁰³ The ethos of solicitude that marked the profession is shifting towards a service ethos that is much less rewarding on a symbolic level. The clientele is becoming a mass, unlike the composition of privileged individuals that was at the heart of the company's commercial strategy.

Conclusion

44 The myth of the flight attendant is a commercial and managerial product. Producing a quality service favours the return of a regular clientele that is able to judge the service received by comparing it to other airlines. Emotional labour finds a market value in the service economy, and since it functions as a commodity whose demand fluctuates according to competition,¹⁰⁴ management trains its staff to maintain feelings of concern. The feminisation of crews thus responds to the sophistication of service on-board where emotional availability becomes a key value. As proof of the success of this commercial operation initiated in the 1950s, the imagery linked to aviation progressively shifted towards the figure of the stewardess and reaffirmed the structuring hold of the gender system on the professional world and on the representations linked to it. Resistance to this exposure of stewardesses' bodies is codified in union struggles where demands are structured around the duality inherent in the profession, oscillating since its creation between the imperative of security and the commercial function.

45 As in all service professions, cabin crew engage their emotional complexions strongly. Unlike many service jobs, flight attendants, as ambassadors of the “French spirit” must systematically perform the role of the French woman whether they are on board the aircraft or during “non-public” rotation times. Working on board wears out the staff physically and psychologically. Air France therefore offers time to relax by creating the material conditions essential for a *Club Med* type of stopover. The formalisation of onboard service is accompanied by the formalisation of socialisation methods outside of actual working hours, and these are necessary to preserve the professional identity of cabin crew. By demonstrating that the success of the professional body is conditioned by the use of the private body, the work of Thibaut Menoux and Camille Noûs invites us to consider the continu-

ity – rather than the rupture – in the relationship of the hostesses to their body between the different temporalities that punctuate the life of a crew member. The heuristic use of Kantorowicz's model allows them to insist on the particularity of the body at work – not the same as the personal body – while underlining the extent to which one re-configures the relationship with the other.¹⁰⁵ If cabin crew consider the collective time of the stopover as a breathing space or a time of relaxation, it is nevertheless necessary to mobilise certain techniques of the body which will be useful in the exercise of the service. Following the codes and practices of the 'Jet Set' that are central to their sociability allows them to acquire the codes necessary to make interaction with customers authentic and spontaneous, the very thing that Air France requires of its cabin crew. What topic of conversation should be favoured? What cultural references should be given? Which restaurant in Rio de Janeiro should be recommended? How should one speak? How does one keep quiet? When is the right time to laugh? How close should I get? This knowledge and these uses of the body are not part of the traditional framework. However, these are all postures and attitudes that produce relationships of affinity or incompatibility with the passengers and, consequently, with the expectations of the professional body. By experiencing the "dream life" that is attributed to the richest people – and which begins in the imagination of the Jet Set from the 1960s onwards – cabin crew diffract, through their mode of presence, the optimism that animates the bourgeois classes. In short, cabin crews must "radiate" the passengers. The female flight attendant, because of the privileged place she occupies in the company's strategy, is a sort of embodiment of the promises of Western modernity. In this, she must aim at producing positive emotions in the passengers, such as desire, comfort or singularity.

46 As Air France management has stated on several occasions, the success of this operation depends on the level of involvement of the stewardesses. However, supervising, guiding or even monitoring their professional practices is not enough, given the requirements of representativeness that weigh on them. Knowing how to be a "French woman" by definition implies a continuous work of identification in the same way a gender identity is created. Being a woman or a man is imposed as a mode of presence that shall not suffer discontinuities,

and social fields of learning inform the way of being in all circumstances (collective or solitary times, suffering or joy, permanence, or rupture). Air France is able, thanks to efforts to select and train its staff, to summon and mobilise an evolving image of national femininity, which Charline describes as follows: “A natural chic, not too prim, not stuffy, something a little natural but chic, simple but chic. Elegant”. But she also tells us that:

[Sylvie Jolie] says that as a woman we represent France:
As a woman? But what do you represent?
I represented France, Air France, French haute couture...
Did you represent a French femininity?
Oh yes, of course!
How would you describe a French woman?
Like a stewardess of the time [Laughs]!

- 47 On the other hand, this statement confirms that gender identity is subverted to professional identity, that the personal body merges into the body at work. To be at the origin of such powerful identity affects, the French national airline has been able to diversify its managerial methods investing in non-institutional fields and integrating its corporate culture into a set of attractive values that are historically gathered under the aegis of modernity and luxury.

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ABSTRACTS

English

This article examines the social history of Air France flight attendants through the lens of gender studies. It attempts to account for the materiality of the flight attendant myth through the historical study of their employer's managerial policies. By progressively feminising its crew, the French national airline seeks to feminise its brand image. This implies an increasing action on the emotional work of female cabin workers at different levels. The first lever of action is the elaboration of service protocols (which put bodies and affects on stage), the selection of personnel and their continuous training. The second, more insidious, lever acts in the spaces outside the actual work, such as rotation times, where crews experience a modern and pleasant life thanks to the material framework defined by their company. Finally, the last lever is Air France's ability to assimilate its staff into the company culture. Identifying with the company's business project allows the hostesses involved to produce emotions appropriate to the air service. The successful performance of solicitude and emotional availability are at the origin of the mythology that envelops the flight attendants.

Français

Cet article travaille l'histoire sociale du personnel navigant commercial d'Air France au prisme des études de genre. Il tente de rendre compte de la matérialité du mythe des hôtesses de l'air à travers l'étude historique des politiques managériales de leur employeur. En féminisant progressivement son équipage, la compagnie nationale française cherche à féminiser son image de marque. Cela implique une action croissante sur le travail émotionnel des travailleuses en cabine à différents niveaux. Le premier levier d'action se traduit par l'élaboration de protocoles de service (qui mettent en scène les corps et les affects), par la sélection du personnel et par sa formation continue. Le deuxième levier, plus insidieux, agit dans les espaces hors du travail effectif, à l'instar des temps de rotation, où les équipages expérimentent une vie moderne et agréable grâce au cadre matériel défini par leur compagnie. Enfin, le dernier levier joue sur la capacité d'Air France à assimiler son personnel à la culture d'entreprise. S'identifier au projet commercial de la compagnie permet aux hôtesses impliquées de produire des émotions adéquates au service aérien. La performance réussie de la sollicitude et de la disponibilité émotionnelle sont à l'origine de la mythologie qui enveloppe les hôtesses de l'air.

INDEX

Mots-clés

travail émotionnel, hôtesse de l'air, Air France, histoire sociale, histoire du genre, modernité, aviation, service

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