FALLING (1)

Anna Walker

Abstract: 'The Falling Man', a photograph taken by Richard Drew on the morning of September 11th 2001 has accompanied me throughout the past 12 years. The journey of this photograph: the discourse around it and the continuing attempts to censor the imagery, has become synonymous with a personal censorship of the visual, symbolic and actual noise of the World Trade Towers falling. This paper links interrelated themes into an examination of the tension where trauma meets memory and is the first of a series of investigations balancing the auto-ethnographic with the critical, utilising personal experiences to facilitate a greater understanding of trauma and its wider cultural implications.

'Headlong, free fall […] he was a falling angel and his beauty was horrific' (Delilo, 2007: 222).

Background

On September 11th 2001, at 8.46am, Flight 11 crashed into the north face of the North Tower of the World Trade Center. The Boeing 767 ploughed through the building core between the 93rd and 99th floor and severed all of the three encased stairwells. Fox 5 News (WNYW) televised the first report of the incident at 8.48am, and from 8.51am until 10am over 200 people jumped to their deaths primarily from the North Tower - exact numbers remain unknown. Present at the scene, Richard Drew pointed his camera upwards and photographed as many of the jumpers as he could until the Towers collapsed and he was forced to run for safety.

When he revisited the photographs from that morning he found the sequence of one particular falling man. One frame highlighted for him the catastrophe of the day's events, a striking image of a figure dressed in black and white soaring downwards headfirst like a bullet, one leg bent almost casually against the other, his white shirt billowing outwards from the violence of his descent. Drew had captured the last beautiful and shocking moments before a man's death, before a body lands and disintegrates, a wingless body mid-flight, diving to its demise against the stark graphic composition of the light and dark the steel and glass of the huge tower that was to crumble, fall and disappear moments later.

The following morning on September 12th, the image was published on the front page of the 'Morning Call', page seven of the New York Times and in newspapers around the world. Its appearance caused a public outcry; quickly this image and others depicting *the falling* were removed from the public gaze, and many US papers were forced to defend themselves against the charge of exploiting a man's death. In the most photographed and videotaped day in history, the images of people jumping were the only images that were censored. The expression of outrage from America at its publication and the ensuing dialogue from many New Yorkers since, has secured this iconic image's place in the telling of the story of the collapse of the twin towers.

In 'What Do Pictures Want?' David Mitchell (2005:10) writes: 'We need to reckon with not just the meaning of images but their silence, their reticence, their wildness and nonsensical obduracy. We need to account for not just the power of images but their powerlessness, their impotence, their abjection.' So what does this picture

of *The Falling Man* want? And what was it about this image that Americans found so offensive they censored it?

Outside

The widely shared belief that words have been replaced by visual images, as the principal method of expression in contemporary culture was never more apparent than in the days during and after September 11th 2001. As Barbie Zelizer writes 'photography rose to fill the space of chaos and confusion that journalism was expected to render orderly' (2002:48).

The attack on the Towers produced a spectacle so incessantly witnessed and photographed, that almost instantaneously the world was awash with hundreds and thousands of images, digital freeze frames and video footage telling and retelling the collapse and destruction of the day. The digital imagery, viewable at the moment of taking, occupied the same time and place as the event recorded. With little delay between the event and the seeing of the picture, the images ostensibly became part of the event. The sheer volume of testimony and photographs on that day and in the months that followed directly interconnect the documentation with the disaster, documentation that both anticipated a future looking back and anchored the disaster in time, the ephemerality of which was too fleeting to grasp hold of as it was happening. With so much of the imagery of 9/11 fast flowing and horrific, the brief insertion of *The Falling Man* into the public domain managed to slow down and stop time. The image cut through the noise of the day's disturbance and provided an alternative version of 9/11, a perspective that was quickly rejected.

Does this image resist meaning that would justify its exclusion? In the documentary 'The Falling Man' (2006) the director, Henry Singer, breaks up the narrative using freeze frame photographs of the falling for dramatic effect. David Campany argues that, 'while the freeze frame may show the world at a standstill, it cannot articulate the experience of such a state. Faced with the freeze the viewer is thrown out of identification with the image and left to gaze upon its sudden impenetrability' (2008: 57). This photograph isolates the falling man from the larger landscape of disaster - it negates the fire and the smoke emblematic of that day, it reduces the magnitude of the event to a downward spiralling figure intent on meeting his end and it asks us to renegotiate the unfolding events of the disaster.

The timing of the publication of the image, the environment in which it was seen, and the context in which it was placed increased the complexity of *The Falling Man* as evidence of a traumatic historical event. This image and others depicting the *jumpers* so touched a nerve in American society on that day and in the ensuing years that it triggered Draconian gestures of self-censorship throughout the corporate media. 'Where there is censorship there is desire', wrote Redfield. 'The jumpers were at the epicenter of a wider economy of ambivalence, within which frenzied representational activity coexisted with official and unofficial acts of negation' (2009:121). The unfolding events of 9/11 were largely directed through their visual representation, and the act of bearing witness was central to shaping a public response.

Photographs can only offer us evidence that is selective and incomplete, fabricating and confirming preordained myths and arrangements (Sontag,

2001:220). Soon after the catastrophe of 9/11, there was a conscientious interjection by the Bush administration to control the parameters of witnessing the disaster, and its representation in the media. A rhetorical framework quickly reverberated throughout the US media that the events that took place were 'an attack on freedom, American values and [their] way of life' (Ryan, 2004:16). Photography was used as a 'facilitator for achieving strategic political and military aims' (Zelizer, 2002:49) and the imagery published during and after the disaster 'enhanced the notion that the dialectic of violence and counter-violence began on September 11th'(Ryan, 2004:8). Within days Mayor Giuliani of New York had issued an executive order banning amateur photographs of the World Trade Center, stating that the site was a crime scene, not a tourist attraction and flyers were posted around the site: 'WARNING! NO cameras or video equipment permitted! VIOLATORS will be prosecuted and equipment seized!'

For those of us trapped inside the event, when words seemed inadequate, photographs served the purpose of making the disaster real. 'Something becomes real to those who are elsewhere, following it as 'news' by being photographed. But a catastrophe that is experienced will often seem eerily like its representation' (Sontag, 2003:19). Photographs were the evidence of the tragedy taking place around us, evidence that simultaneously flowed out into the newspapers, on to gallery walls and on to the TV screen for the rest of the world to see. *The Falling Man* became symbolic of the surreal nature of the experience, the power of which was the images' ability to still and order the chaos and reject all that was happening outside of its frame.

We are so used to looking at the horrific that we have become immune to it, yet we expect it to describe the indescribable (Sontag, 2003). So when presented with something that does not follow the prescribed formula of representing horror with all of its violence, blood, and decay we reject it. *The Falling Man* does not fall into the category of the disturbing imagery that we associate with war, with terror, with trauma. The image is outside of any logical understanding or frame of reference. It is still; a captured frozen moment of grace that poetically breaks open the horror of that day and settles quietly into the gaping hole of the absence of presence, which experiencing trauma can create. The man does not look real, for experiencing the actual events did not feel real. They were just like scenes from a movie and he was a circus acrobat somersaulting, a flying man, a photomontage.

Can we describe *The Falling Man* as beautiful? The arch of the leg, the flare of the shirt, the naked vulnerable head – exposed. This photograph blurs the boundaries – which is both exciting and unsettling. For 'society is concerned to tame the photograph, to temper the madness which keeps threatening to explode in the face of whoever looks at it' (Barthes, 1981:117). In the shameful excitement of looking there exists a desire to censor, to repress the madness, for how can we feel excited about bodies – people – leaping to their death. Unlike many photographs that describe moments of terror we know what is happening outside of the frame of this photograph, we do not need to imagine or dream up the before or after, we do not need to fill the empty space of the off-frame with our own version of events and so we allow it to close down the noise of the outside, we allow it to speak to us about the poetry and the symmetry of falling to one's death.

'It is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow and pierces me,' Barthes writes. 'A photograph's punctum is that accident which pricks

me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me).' 'It is what I add to the photograph and what is nonetheless already there.' 'It is acute yet muffled, it cries out in silence. Odd contradiction: a floating flash.' (Barthes, 1981:27,53) This rupture carries with it a vision of the future, it flashes up at a moment of danger, moves the viewer forward perhaps to a place the viewer does not want to go. The punctum of *The Falling Man* calls us to regard our pain as well as the pain of others; it wounds and justifies the wounding, connects perception and cognition and goes beyond representation. It constitutes a force and intensity beyond its frame or even the intended perception of the photographer. This is both its weakness and its strength, for when an image directs us to a place we have no desire to go and yet we find ourselves there, perhaps we have no choice but to reject.

It is the photograph that brings us close to the experience of suffering. In 'The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence' Susie Linfield writes about photographs offering an immediate, viscerally emotional connection to the world. Photographs 'illuminate the unbridgeable chasm that separates ordinary life from extraordinary experiences […]. In this sense, photographs teach us about our failure – our *necessary* failure – to comprehend the human' (Linfield, 2010: xv). In her reasoning we don't turn to photographs to understand the cruel motives for genocide or the dilemma of global capitalism, we look to photographs for other things – 'for a glimpse of what cruelty, or strangeness, or beauty, or agony, or love […] looks like'. We look to photographs to uncover our reactions to otherness and to others (Sontag, 2010: 22). Is it that we experience too much suffering from *The Falling Man*, or that we do not learn enough? This photograph is not of a man in distress, it does not evoke repulsion, horror or shock, in fact quite the opposite. The term pornography is often used in relation to photographs of war and of terror to conveniently explain the exhaustion of empathy but for Linfield the word 'explains' without actually explaining the shattering of the body's dignity' (Dean, 2004; Linfield, 2010:41). This man's body in flight is not without dignity and the capturing of it in motion seconds before erasure is to truly bear witness to a flashing moment of his life on his journey to death and we cannot look away. Should not look away.

Photographs can't explain the way the world works. Photographs present us with 'scenes of catastrophe but can do nothing to explain their histories or causes' (Sontag, 2003:19). In justification of *The Falling Man*, Richard Drew was not offering us a story with a coherent or even discernible beginning, middle or an end. Despite his experience as a war journalist he was probably as incredulous to what was unfolding before his eyes in New York on September 11th, as was the rest of the world. He was not aiming to reveal the inner dynamics of an historic event, not consciously anyway. He was using his camera to separate him from what was unfolding. Forced to contend with the limits of technology, the motion of the towers, the distance from the subject he was photographing and the closure of the shutter, Drew would have been protected from actually seeing the horror of *The Falling Man* in his downward dive. The images on his computer screen were evidence of what *he* had just witnessed, making believable what he knew had taken place but what had been obscured by the camera lens. Drew's photograph slows things down, halts the descent - 10 seconds to fall, his photograph momentarily stops the onslaught of death, stops the noise which on one hand is blissful, on the other a reminder of one's ineffectiveness, one's actual inability to shift or bend time, one's absolute powerlessness to stop the falling.

Inside Trauma

Photographs 'present us, to each other, and ourselves as bodily creatures. Photographs reveal how the human body is the original site of reality' (Linfield, 2010:39). 'Where is your Rupture?' Warhol asked (1960). *The Falling Man* disrupts me and in so doing points me inwards. A lone falling man frozen in flight seconds before death, against a backdrop of perfect symmetry, his figure is the fixed point of reference, and I am forced to contend with my own body in response. This body that I inhabit is my primary truth, my inexorable fate. I glance down and I am reminded of my own falling and my own desire to reject the falling, I am this man, this body crashing to its demise, to the inevitable day of death. This photograph shows me how easily we are reduced to the *merely* physical, how easily one's body can be 'maimed, starved, splintered, beaten, torn and crushed' (Linfield, 2010:39). This photograph presents us with the physical cruelty of life and our vulnerability to it. This image with its lack of brokenness, its lack of blood, war and terror does more than shatter our sense of what it means to be human it describes how small we are, how impotent, how futile our efforts. It describes the very essence of helplessness against a background of such sheer industrialization and capitalism that we are powerless to stop its evolution even if we wanted to. This is the very thing Walter Benjamin anticipated in the advent of the Industrial Revolution, the 'shocking' arrival of modernity with all of its imperialism, consumerism and fascism, and with it the ever pervading threat of trauma. We all know what happens next, that within seconds this man's body will be annihilated and that the towers will follow, that this is the very thing America feared more than anything else, its powerlessness to stop its own falling. Experiencing trauma is an experience of loss so deep the vital spark of living is extinguished - through loss of safety, of sanctuary, of dignity, of a belief in human kindness. It breeds a desperate, perhaps futile attempt to order the chaos, which is at times no longer redeemable.

I am falling over and over again and with me every other being and object falls; we are falling together towards some aspect of the other. *The Falling Man* is my undoing, my corporeal annihilation. I am losing myself; and my separation my boundaries the very skin that I rely on to cover and hold me is collapsing as I try unsuccessfully to prevent the approaching ground that rises up to meet and crush me. I realize I cannot fly, I cannot pull up and pull out of this downward spiral and I'm faced with the inevitability of my demise. *The Falling Man* reminds me I am both the trauma body and a witness to the trauma body. He confronts me and I am forced to contend with his flight but not for survival, this is his flight of death and I was a witness to it, am a witness to it in the repeated viewing of the photograph. He did not jump to kill himself, he did not jump to survive; he leapt towards death. And there he remains, a self in flight, hovering above death, anonymous and un-mourned, symbolic of the trapped melancholy that prevents closure; he is the blocking of meaning, the frozen libidinal hold-frozen in isolation.

There is the traumatized body that kicks into a response and there is the body that kicks into a response when faced with something traumatic. They are different bodies. The body I talk about here is the latter. When the body kicks into traumatic response it activates mammalian defence action systems in which the brain's limbic system sets the HPA *(Hypothalamic – pituitary-adrenal)* axis in motion,

releasing hormones to ready itself for defensive action. The hypothalamus activates the sympathetic branch (SNS) of the autonomic nervous system (ANS) provoking it into a state of heightened arousal. Epinephrine and norepinephrine are released, respiration and heart rate quicken, the skin pales, the blood flows away from the surface to the muscles, and the body prepares for fight, flight, freeze or submission (collapse). The reptilian part of the brain *speaks* to ensure survival of the species, conscious choice is no longer an option - behaviour and movement become instinctual. All of our defensive strategies are programmed into this primitive and highly effective part of the brain and when *faced* with survival issues the higher processing brain areas become less activated, our behaviour becomes regressive we hook into our evolutionary heritage of dealing with threat. Our endocrine system, our nervous system, our muscles reach back and pull on thousands of years of survival and drive the body into an automated response.

These were the bodies that were faced with the terrible choice of dying in the inferno or leaping to their deaths. These were the bodies that reacted to what was happening. This man's landing, his complete destruction is beyond comprehension but even more so is any attempt to understand the choice that he was faced with before he jumped, or fell. I am forced into abstraction to try and understand. And it is at this point that photographs can function to mediate the incomprehensible, Drew's photograph breaks through what is visually acceptable, linking up separate historical periods through both a shared aesthetic (Mauro, 2011) and a shared abstraction of trauma. In 'The Photographic Message' Barthes (1977) acknowledges that traumatic experience can bring about a 'suspension of language' and a 'blocking of meaning' which photographic representation can distance, sublimate and pacify. **'**Trauma theory becomes important at this impasse. It helps us grasp how a particular photographic image can show a scene that becomes meaningful only in and as its representation' (Baer, 2005:12).
The power of the image is not just the image itself it is what it has come to represent in what happened before and what came after and ironically in its censorship. The United States prides itself on triumph, on victory, on overcoming the odds. In the face of 9/11 America sought some form of heroic triumph to offset the horror. And that's where the Fire Fighters came in - to procure redemption from such tragedy, otherwise it was impossible to bear. The Fire Fighters became the heroic story that Americans told themselves. As Tom Junod succinctly says in the documentary *The Falling Man*, this image and the reality of the jumpers themselves just didn't fit that narrative. It's very hard to frame them as triumphant. They were seen by America as victims and to some even as cowards, a reductionist view that failed to address the complexities of their situation; for *the falling* were faced with a horrific dilemma, the choice between dying in the inferno, or leaping to their deaths.

Noise

A one-ton beam dropped from a height of 1312ft will fall for 9-seconds and hit the ground at around 200-miles an hour. It will expend a noise, vibration and heat twice the energy of a stick of dynamite. How long does a body take to fall? What noise does it make when it hits the ground? In the nights that followed 9/11 these were the questions I asked, wanting to know whether the falling people died before they hit the ground or died on impact, whether they saw the ground looming up towards them or closed their eyes. Their stories flowed through New York in the days after

the towers fell. Most of the *falling* jumped alone, although eyewitnesses talked of a couple that had held hands as they fell. One woman was reported, in a final act of modesty to hold down her skirt. Yet others tried to make parachutes out of curtains or tablecloths, only to have them wrenched from their grip by the force of their descent. The fall took about ten seconds at 125pmh varying according to the body position, those that fell headfirst as if in a dive, fell at 200mph.

When they hit the pavement below, their bodies were not so much broken as decimated. Unofficial estimates put the number of jumpers at around 200, but it is impossible to say because their bodies were indistinguishable from any others after the collapse of the Towers. The official account is that nearly all of the 2,753 victims in the Twin Towers attack officially died from 'blunt impact' injuries. The first *jumper* is recorded plunging from the North Tower's 149th window of the 93rd floor on the north face of the building at 8.51am, just over 3-minutes after it was hit by the first hijacked plane. At times the fallers were separated by an interval of just a second. At one point 9 people fell in 6-seconds from 5 adjacent windows, at another, 13 people fell in 2-minutes. The last *jumper* fell just as the North Tower collapsed 102 minutes after the building had been hit.

A witness watching from the South Tower's 78th floor as people started to fall from 'the hole' the aircraft had ripped in the North Tower told reporters that it looked like the falling were disorientated and blinded by smoke, they would just walk to the edge and fall out. Another witness watched with stunned colleagues unable to comprehend the falling as human. For those down below, the bodies landed with sickening, and explosive thuds. A fire fighter reported she felt like she was intruding on a sacrament as the bodies fell. 'They were choosing to die and I was watching them and shouldn't have been. So me and another guy turned away and looked at a wall and we could still hear them hit' (Schulman, 2011). Richard Drew reports losing sight of them through his camera lens only to hear them fall like a sack of cement moments later. His camera separated him from what he saw, but there was no separation from the sounds.

Conclusion

'That which does not fit within the established structures of thinking and feeling is very likely to be excluded from remembrance' (Zarecka, 2009:121). *The Falling Man* and the others who jumped or fell from the Twin Towers created a huge dilemma, that of 'innocent victim' (*falling),* verses 'bad victim' (*jumpers)*. 'Dying so spectacularly, so calmly, *The Falling Man* awkwardly echoed the journey of his killers' (Adi Drori-Avraham, 2006:295). It was only by turning away from the image that one could avoid confronting this predicament. Our ability to mourn lies in our capacity to acknowledge loss, in which we uncover something about ourselves and reveal our connection to others. We can mourn the 'good victim', imperfections are overlooked and forgotten, but accepting ones fate or even choosing the way of dying upsets the parameters of being a 'good victim', embracing death blurs the boundaries between good and evil and so victim and terrorist. In censoring the image of *The Falling Man* an aspect of mourning 9/11 was denied and he became symbolic of an unresolvable paradox, a trapped melancholia, a figure frozen in time, never quite reaching his death.

Living inside the event as it unfolded makes it impossible for me not to write from within that place. Unraveling the conflicting layers of significance within the iconography of *The Falling Man* has allowed the opportunity to revisit the past and find a language to render understandable, that which defied understanding. Re-examining from a distance and finding a language of expression opens up new possibilities for interpretation whilst preserving the narrative of loss. 'The wound of the mind — the breach in the mind's experience of time, self and the world — is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that […] is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known' (Caruth, 1996:4). This would perhaps explain the censorship in US media, it would explain the distance of time required for revisiting the images of the jumpers in an attempt to re-imagine, or redefine the past.

The Falling Man has become the iconic representative not only of the *jumpers* but also of all the victims that were killed on that day, symbolic of the unimaginable, the un-nameable – or more precisely the attempted naming, in its brief presence in the American press and TV on September 12th 2001, and then its rejection. The image disrupted the framework from which the event of September 11th was narrated. The lack of perspective throws the viewer out of understanding and therefore out of connection to the scale of the terror and catastrophe. This man hurtles to his death, outside of the rest of the tragedy, unimpeded by the destruction that surrounded him, intact against a background of perfect geometry. His anonymity connects all the anonymous deaths of war and terror, his falling bridges historical moments in time. In witnessing the falling man we are forced to witness ourselves. Rejecting the image symbolizes a collapse of witnessing, 'a crisis of truth, an historical enigma betrayed by trauma' (Caruth,1995:6). Censorship in this instance became a simplistic response to a complex situation, a measure of control upon a set of circumstances that were out of control. America did not want the watching world to witness its own falling, did not want to appear weak or vulnerable to the rest of the world, so it censored. For *The Falling,* this symbolized a double negation: both unidentified and erased from the public gaze.

References

Drori-Avraham, Adi (2006) 'September 11th and the Mourning After: Media Narrating Grief', in *Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 20/3: Routledge, 289-297.

Baer, Ulrich (2005) *Spectral Evidence The Photography of Trauma*. MIT Press: Massachusetts.

Barthes, Roland (1977) *The Photographic Message*. Hill and Wang: New York, 15-31.

Barthes, Roland (1981) *Camera Lucida*. Hill and Wang: New York.

Benjamin, Walter (1999) *Illuminations*. Pimlico: London.

Campany, David (2008) *Photography and Cinema*. Reaktion Books Ltd: London.

Caruth, Cathy (1996) *Unclaimed Experience, Trauma, Narrative, and History*. John Hopkins University Press: Baltimore & London.

Caruth, Cathy (1995) *Trauma, Explorations in Memory*. John Hopkins University Press: Baltimore and London.

Dean, Carolyn J (2004) *The Fragility of Empathy after the Holocaust*. Cornell University Press: Ithaca, New York, cited by Linfield, Susie (2010) in *The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence*: University of Chicago Press: Chicago and London, 41.

Delilo, Don (2007) *The Falling Man*. Scribner: New York.

Linfield, Susie (2010) *The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago and London.

Mauro, Aaron: (2011) 'The Languishing of The Falling Man: Don Delillo and Jonathan Safran Foer's Photographic History of 9/11', in MFS 57/3. John Hopkins University Press: Baltimore and London.

McArdle-Schulman, Maureen: (2011) Eye Witness Report -fire fighter quoted by Smith, David James (2011): Daily Nation on-line.

Redfield, Marc (2009) *The Rhetoric of Terror Reflections on 9/11 and the War on Terror*. Fordham University Press: New York.

Ryan, David (2004) 'Framing September 11: Rhetorical Device And Photographic Opinion', in *European Journal Of American Culture* 23/1, 5-20.

Scarry, Elaine (1985) 'The Body in Pain – The Making and Unmaking of the World': Oxford University Press: Oxford.

Singer, Henry (2006) (Director) Documentary: *The Falling Man*. Channel 4.

Sontag, Susan (1973) *On Photography*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux: New York.

Sontag, Susan (2001) *Where The Stress Falls*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux: New York.

Sontag, Susan (2003) *Regarding The Pain of Others*. Penguin Books: London.

Warhol, Andy (1960) Painting title: 'Where is your Rupture?'

Zarecka, Irwin (2009) *Frames of Remembrance; The Dynamics of Collective Memory*. Transaction Publishers: New Brunswick, New Jersey.

Zelizer, Barbie (2002) 'Journalism After September 11': Edited by Barbie Zelizer and Stuart Allan: Routledge: New York, 48-68.

Biography

Anna Walker is an artist and a writer who has exhibited her work internationally. She was awarded an MA in Fine Art from Southampton University, and a certificate in Psychotherapy from CBPC Cambridge and is now doing PhD research in Arts and Media at Plymouth University. Her work explores the place where trauma and

memory meet, the tension between the desire to forget and the necessity of remembering. Through text, photography and digital media, her research is an endeavor to find a communicable language of sensation and affect with which to register something of the experience or understanding of traumatic memory.