

Instead of introduction

I fear height. It is a mental health condition called Acrophobia. It is described in most of the medical textbooks as an “intense fear of heights that can cause significant anxiety and panic.” Because of this panic, a made-up rationale of mine constantly reiterates that “we are not designed for the heights”. As a result, I tend to stay away from every location and thought that may trigger this panic.

Due to this very superficial argument, I may imagine that there should be some other overlooked factors involved in an image of a story of human kind “choosing” to fall down from a height. This should be a factor(s) much bigger and deeper than the mere pathological descriptions of anxiety disorders. A complicated outcome of transcendental levels of anxiety that leads to only one possible corridor to the “way out”. This is crystallized in a certain moment of space and time. Photography is the one medium that governs this quality of fixing and crystalizing.

Thus, I argue that images depicting this very critical moments of human existence- like the ones here- are unconsciously leaping beyond the mere “mechanical reproduction” or acts of “documenting”, no matter what their primordial intention was.

In the ones connected to the politico-historical references and a body of paratextual materials- mainly here the “falling man” and “falling Afghans”- this might be regarded as a spirit of an epoch which is manifested through the photographic image going beyond its traditional “usage”. In this sense photography is not utilized but rather utilizes the soaring levels of an epoch to herald the destruction and maybe emergence of a new era. This does not prescribe how the epoch ought to be/ have been but rather manifests the reality of the era. This very moment could be regarded as the owl of Minerva that “spreads its wings only with the coming of the dusk.” (“Owl of Minerva”). Destruction at the dusk of new world.

In another words, this shows exactly the falling down of period- in individual cases- or an epoch- in broader cases-. All the images here are the unique moments of encounter and suspension just before the fall while they acquire varied meaning and perceptions. I will try to take a look at these varied qualities, while the common ground is defined, in the proceeding lines.

Falling down of humanity

A person is not supposed to fall down from the height. This is a frightening uncanny phenomenon in every other man's perception. Fear is related to the existential threat that a certain viewer might feel but, on the other side, the one suspended should have been felt extremely desperate to choose a grave danger over another one. This "another one" could be a matter of scrutiny as it may not be the same for a every man's falling.

The famous image of the "falling man"¹, related to one of the victims of terrorist attacks of World Trade center on 9/11, is now one of the iconic examples of such uncanny conditions. The falling man in the image taken by Richard Drew of the Associated Press is depicting a man head-down with a background of targeted tower's façade. In terms of desperation, based on the facts of attacks, the man must have taken this very path because of a fear of "objective death" surrounding him. The person is not only shocked but is tasting and observing the horror of a gradual death. In this perceived condition, the falling is not choosing between a way to survival and a way to death but by throwing is last and most precious asset-his body and existence- out he is denying an imposed way of death and embracing the other.

In addition, this certain image of the "falling man" is carefully chosen from a more than a dozen other shots, possessing a very studio-like specifications of aesthetics. This chosen-not certainly chosen by the subject- image with a certain western modern art aesthetics is adding different layers of meaning to the notion being communicated. This is still representing a highly sophisticated imagery of a civilized culture in the midst of a barbaric attack. A visual setting of the reality, in the dusk of western civilization.

This setting, as a definitive manifesto, is making it easy and rational for the consumer to take all the required measures to confront and prevent this fear and level of anxiety. One way out from this extreme is to "relocate" this existing disorder to "there" -where it is coming from- where the chaos is normalized, where death has lost its shocking features, where all the dimensions of life are wrapped in death. This relocation and bold differentiation are thus the only way to reclaim the composition of western order-like the one in falling man's photo- back.

¹ This is the branded name of the photo among mainstream US media channels.



Falling man, Richard Drew, AP.

Two red circles, two stains

Twenty years after the relocation of death- the hot ball no one ones to hold- to “there” and years after “mission was accomplished”², the last US aircraft was taking off from the Kabul Hamid Karzai Airport while a group of Afghan youth were still lingering to the plane. Later the world learned that two of these young men who managed to stay on the outer parts of the plane, fell down while the aircraft was on Kabul sky.

Here, comparatively, I seek the reason behind this “way out” in the same way. While the “objective death” approaching was the reason for the “falling man”, here it seems that no immediate objective death is involved. Here, one should think, there is an all-pervasive spirit of death involved. In such a war-ground of the world, the expectation of objective death seems to be a banal one, as there is hardly anything out of the realm of death that is making a significant change. The death is everywhere, like the low frequency sounds that are surrounding you while you don’t necessarily hear them.

I would also argue that this desperate bodies are throwing- this time- themselves in a possible virtue of life out of that contaminated air of domesticized terror, towards the promised lands of the North which was also subjectively constructed for them. In a simplified form, the subjective death is even more dreadful than an objective one, in a context where the rarity of the death still makes room for the aesthetic values of its representation. No professional photographer would capture shots of them-falling Afghans-, so he could later choose an aesthetically “correct” version of them. Because one never captures what is lived but tends to capture what is exceptional, what is rare.

This unusual-restless boarding leads to two circled dots that are hardly seen in the only haphazardly and accidentally documentation of their falling down. Although in all the images -as said in the beginning- falling is the chorus line but the conditions of representation in Afghan variation shows the importance and value of their meaning for the world “out there”. People are just dots- barely detectable- in comparison to the huge American plane. There are no skyscrapers in Kabul, so they can only fall down on the loose ceilings of Kabul slums. Torn like many other bodies scattered on the ground, with the only difference being that this time they were falling from the sky. No one is touched emotionally enough to erect a statue of “flying” afghans, in a context where bodies are the embodiments of the hunger-coated death that is busy shaping almost everything silently, like an eternally lasting wind. They are not branded as the “man” but solely as playful corps that are “diving” from the Kabul sky.

² With reference to George W. Bush’s “Mission Accomplished” televised speech on the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln, six weeks after the invasion of Iraq, in 2003.



The situation in which you need to be pointed out by a red circle to grab the viewer's attention shows your existential value in comparison to the lives that are ideally being remembered and recalled.

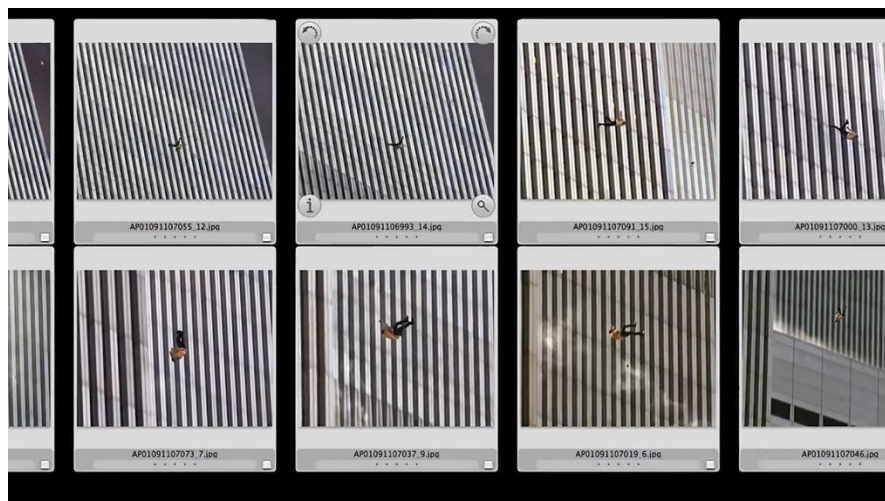
You are not a "falling man" in order to be remembered like this:

"She'd heard of him, a performance artist known as Falling Man. He'd appeared several times in the last week, unannounced, in various parts of the city, suspended from one or another structure, always upside down, wearing a suit, a tie and dress shoes. He brought it back, of course, those stark moments in the burning towers when people fell or were forced to jump. He'd been seen dangling from a balcony in a hotel atrium and police had escorted him out of a concert hall and two or three apartment buildings with terraces or accessible rooftops." (DeLillo)

Or, maybe, in this moving fashion, freezing the very moment, a second after which the smashed skull is mixed with brain tissues and half-clogged blood cells.



We watched,
disbelieving and helpless,
on that savage day.
People we love
began falling,
helpless and in disbelief. *(Both sculpture and poem by Eric Fischl)*



Other variations of Falling Man that were not chosen by the media. Screenshot from ("The Story Behind the Haunting 9/11 Photo of the Falling Man")



Another variation of Eric Fischl's statue among eight others.



They search for a sphere out of death, not necessarily to life, but to a non-death possible condition of living.

Instead of conclusion

Based on the imagery, and taking both extreme differences and similarities in common, I would like to mention the existence of a certain notion of “poverty” which is contributing to some extent to the notions of aesthetic already discussed. There is a certain gap of poverty, both in the linguistic and pictorial realms. The ones falling from the Kabul sky are at their best a commercialized-humiliation image of the “uncivilized” globe that can be easily marketed in the other parts of the world, while the figure of 9/11 is the “man” and consequently his fall is the fall of the “man”. This is defined out of the structures of rhetoric, or if you like, romanticized figurative speech.

The Western aestheticized “man” can displace and relocate the lost order by regulating other bodies “out there”, as discussed, while the other end is clearly lacking visual and linguistic qualities of the same level. The only remnant of the Afghans falling down, according to the owner of the house on which they fell down, were some smashed organs and two long-remaining stains of blood. This while the artworks of the “falling” by Carolee Schneemann in the Terminal Velocity did not receive not very positive feedbacks after its exhibition in post 9/11. Schneemann writes: ““I have had to consider the violence of initial reactions due to facing a vulnerability which counters our American mythology of invulnerability, of sustaining heroics.” (Schwarz)



Terminal Velocity by Carolee Schneemann

These chronologically far but closely related images might be considered as the intertwined moments of a failure of a failure, where the ones aimed at reconstructing and re-erecting are dropping off and demolishing constantly, trapped in a fundamentalist dogma- or as Schneemann calls it myths- of a certain “authenticity” and “originality”. Dusks coming after dusk.



Marketing



Marketing materials regarding the Afghans falling down during American forces withdrawal from the country.

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