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Corporeal Plasticity and Cultural Trauma: Aestheticized Corpses After 9/11

Abstract: The events surrounding the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 are well documented in digital image culture. As a traumatic event of the Internet age, the images of 9/11's aftermath (the falling bodies, the urban ruin) were quickly disseminated on a global scale. One of the images, that of Richard Drew's *Falling Man*, holds a particular place in 9/11's legacy as a cultural-traumatic memory. The photograph, depicting an unidentifiable man who falls to his death before a backdrop of the crumbling World Trade Center, has received both much criticism and acclaim for its vivid depiction of the physical horror that 9/11 brought forward. But the *Falling Man* is but one of many bodies that emphasized the precariousness of physical structures, human as well as non-human, in a post-9/11 world.

Through a discussion of the dead human body in contemporary depictions, including the various reproductions of the *Falling Man* but also others, I argue that the virtualization of the human corpse affects the way in which the corpse is encountered from an aesthetic, but also ethical perspective. The widespread accessibility that online culture engenders, I contend, places the image of the human corpse within an unprecedentedly global reach. What, I ask, does this new, web-based access to the political human corpse mean for the cultural memory that it leaves behind?

Keywords: cultural trauma; death studies; corporeality; memory studies; new media

Corporeal plasticity: an introduction

The image of the *Falling Man*, depicting an anonymous man falling headlong to his death from the World Trade Center, is often used as a visual shorthand for not just the traumatic events of 9/11, but also for the ethical boundaries of photojournalism. Indeed, Richard Drew's photograph of the falling figure became as notorious as it was acclaimed because, some critics argued, it aestheticized the horror of a forced suicide, and impinged on the privacy of a civilian living the final moment of his life. As an aesthetic image, the photograph further allows for a moment of ethical desensitization, as it can be encountered as a work of art as much as it can be regarded a document of cultural trauma. In what follows, I will be discussing the aestheticization of the *Falling*

Man in the context of post-9/11 image culture. More specifically, I will be analyzing the image through the frame of “plasticity” as Heather Warren-Crow describes it in *Girlhood and the Plastic Image*; that is, the pliability and plurality of digital images.¹ The aesthetic fixation on the *Falling Man* image as voiced in various post-9/11 appropriations is exemplary of a more complex tendency to aestheticize digital corpses, or so I will argue over the course of this paper.

Before moving to my analysis of the *Falling Man* image, I will first elaborate on Warren-Crow’s concept of “plasticity.” In her 2014 book, *Girlhood and the Plastic Image*, Warren-Crow uses the term “plasticity” to refer to the pliability of digital images, which, she argues, can also be described as “plastic images.”² She writes:

Uncomfortably binding the aesthetic (the plastic arts) to the medical (plastic surgery), the economic (plastic money) to the material (plastic polymers), “plastic” operates reciprocally to designate either a force that molds or material that is molded. The plastic image conducts itself accordingly. Images are pliable; they can be sculpted like clay and circulated like money. Digital images in particular are known for their flexibility, for their acceptance of deformation without rupture. [...] While the digital image might ask us to alter it, to upload and share it, to make it our own and then make it go viral, it also forges (and is forged by) a particular desire: the ability to make the embodied self adaptable to our needs, cross-platform compatible, and full of endless morphological potential.³

According to Warren-Crow, then, digital images resemble the texture of plastic, as they are equally malleable, flexible, and accessible. The digital is a cheap material, because it is *immaterial*, and therefore it can be used *and* reused by practically anyone, for practically any purpose. As Warren-Crow describes, the digital image is “full of endless morphological potential.” In other words, the digital image can be ascribed with new or different meanings *ad infinitum*, based on the context in which it is placed or encountered. This potential for reconfigurations of meaning, I contend, is of particular significance to digital images that emerge from a culturally traumatic context, as the digital meaning of the image (its convenient adaptability, its perceived lack of a relation to the material world) does not necessarily complement the depicted object’s meaning in the material world. An object that is deemed artistic, pleasant, or even funny in a context of digital reappropriation, may not at all be appropriate to the image’s original meaning, which may be that of great suffering. I will turn to my analysis of the *Falling Man* image to illustrate my argument.

¹ Heather Warren-Crow, *Girlhood and the Plastic Image* (Lebanon, NH: Dartmouth UP, 2014), 2.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

***Falling Man* (2001)**

The responses to the *Falling Man* photograph, both in 2001 and today, exemplify the ethical tensions that may arise when a painful image is placed within the spheres of online circulation. The contested photograph, taken by photojournalist Richard Drew, depicts one of the many individuals working at the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, who were forced to jump to their deaths in order to escape the flames of the burning towers. The *Falling Man* image is by far not the only surviving image of the jumpers. In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, the notorious shock site Rotten.com, for example, ran a separate image section, titled “Swan Dive”, which was fully devoted to images of people jumping to their deaths. What, then, makes the *Falling Man* image stand out? For one, it is a highly aesthetic image. American critic Leon Wieseltier describes *Falling Man* as “composed, a stoic in the air, except for the tails of his white shirt, which hang from his trousers like snapped wings.”⁴ Journalist Tom Junod, in an article for *Esquire*, writes that the *Falling Man* looks as if “he departs from this earth like an arrow.”⁵ Whether it is appropriate to use such a poetic register as Junod and Wieseltier’s to describe the forced suicide of a human being faced with a terrorist attack may be debated. As a scholar of corporeal ethics, I am interested in how these poetic descriptions of *Falling Man* are so unapologetic in their aestheticization of the image in question. The poeticization of the *Falling Man* image essentially turns the tragedy that it depicts into something else. These poeticizations, I suggest, emphasize *Falling Man*’s plasticity in the way that Warren-Crow describes.

The aestheticization of the *Falling Man* image does not only occur in a literary context, such as Junod and Wieseltier’s poetic descriptions, and, perhaps most famously, in Don DeLillo’s eponymous novel from 2007. For the season five poster of the hit AMC series *Mad Men*, which follows a fictionalized account of life at a New York advertising agency in the 1960s, the creators opted for a tongue-in-cheek reference to the *Falling Man* photograph. The poster, which was spread widely among New York City subway stations, was subject to similarly tongue-in-cheek vandalisms, such as this reimagining of the *Falling Man* figure being upheld by a spouting whale. Though this example makes light of the *Falling Man* image, some reappropriations are far less comical in nature. In a more solemn tribute to the image, American artist Eric Fischl created the *Tumbling Woman* sculpture. A reconfiguration in the broadest sense of the word, the sculpture challenges the memory of the *Falling Man* image as that of a man falling to a violent death, to that of a nude woman gently tumbling towards a soft surface. Here, too, the meaning of the *Falling Man* image as an icon of tragedy is adapted to a more pleasant context.

How do these aesthetic reconfigurations of *Falling Man* speak to the origin of the image that they pay homage to? While the appropriations of the image recontextualized it as an object of humor, beauty, or contemplation, the *Falling Man* image is first

⁴ Leon Wieseltier, “The Fall,” *New Republic* (2002), <https://newrepublic.com/article/66449/the-fall>, acc. November 1, 2018.

⁵ Tom Junod, “The Falling Man: An Unforgettable Story,” *Esquire* 2016, <https://www.esquire.com/news-politics/a48031/the-falling-man-tom-junod/>, acc. November 1, 2018.

and foremost a traumatic image. In *About to Die: How News Images Move the Public*, Barbie Zelizer writes that the still images of the bodies jumping from the Twin Towers were considered to be even more shocking than seeing the people falling down in real time. These “porous depictions” of the about-to-be-dead, Zelizer writes, “allowed [the figures] to remain in a subjunctive space even longer than they had with the moving image. In that space, the people portrayed were not yet dead, and the depiction suggested the remote possibility that, as in one viewer’s words, it was ‘all just a bad dream.’”⁶ Zelizer moves on to quote an ABC news correspondent who witnessed the bodies falling from the towers, who commented:

The most horrible thing was the sight of people hurling themselves from the building. I was telling myself maybe they weren’t real people. They looked like little dolls.⁷

In the context of Warren-Crow’s plasticity concept, this comparison between the falling bodies and the bodies of little dolls seems particularly striking. The bodies of the fallen become toy-like, plasto-corporeal. But whereas the *Falling Man* image may be plastic in the way that Warren-Crow describes, meaning that it is pliable, adaptable, and perhaps even non-human, the corporeal reality of the *Falling Man* and other falling bodies like him is not. How then, does the affective meaning of the human corpse get separated from the materiality of the human corpse, when it is presented as an image and not a body?

On affect and abjection

This question is central to the notion of contemporary image circulations, which are so dependent on new media outlets and virtual platforms, and therefore inherently estrange the material from the immaterial. After the dawn of the Web 2.0 era, in particular, the human corpse has become an active online presence. No longer solely an image for others to circulate and ogle, as evident from the aforementioned Rotten.com example, it became possible for dead bodies to literally haunt the virtual world. The murky boundaries of ownership that surround personal profiles on Facebook, Twitter, and other social media platforms can make it complicated to delete the pages of the dead, which means that the online avatars of the deceased sometimes continue to interact with the algorithm of the platform in question. These “Internet ghosts”, Candi K. Cann writes, “created the notion of a virtual ghost that lingered around the Internet, acting on behalf of the deceased”, for example, through the suggestion of a “like” or “friend” to other users.⁸ While social media platforms and their

⁶ Barbie Zelizer, *About to Die: How News Images Move the Public* (Oxford, UK: Oxford UP, 2010), 48.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Candi K. Cann, “Tweeting Death, Posting Photos, and Pinning Memorials: Remembering the Dead in Bits and Pieces,” in *Digital Death: Mortality and Beyond in the Online Age*, ed. Christopher M. Moreman and A. David Lewis (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2014), 113.

corresponding legal regulations are increasingly becoming more adept to the ethical challenges that these Internet ghosts pose, the virtualized human body often roams the realm of the living for longer than the deceased's material remains.

Returning to the notion of plasticity and cultural trauma, this lingering of instable presences or “hauntings” is also relevant. Key events in cultural history invariably alter the way that its images are produced and perceived, and 9/11 is no exception. In her article on soft-body technologies, Warren-Crow additionally argues that the events of 9/11 have altered the Western understanding of images and structures. She writes:

Formal instability has particularized meaning in America's post-9/11 'metamorphic technosphere', haunted as it is by thoughts of melting steel and images of buildings collapsing, recovering and collapsing again. [...] Indeed, 9/11 and its aftermath have challenged the promise of endless transformation offered by expanded animation. The freedom to make, unmake, and remake architectural form has been replaced by the burden of metamorphosis and formal instability.⁹

Perhaps it is this new understanding of the body as a site of unending metamorphosis that allows for the guilt-free repurposing of the *Falling Man*'s image-body in spite of its traumatic connotations. But that does not mean that these images are *detached* from their corporeal reality. Rather, I would argue that these images' corporeal reality is *abjected*, in Kristeva's meaning of the term.

In her seminal *Powers of Horror* text, Kristeva writes that “[t]he abject is the violence of mourning for an ‘object’ that has always already been lost”, that it is “a resurrection that has gone through death”, and that it is “an alchemy that transforms death drive into a start of life, of new significance.”¹⁰ If the corporeal reality is abjected from the image in the way that Kristeva describes, the image that arises from this abjection is imbued with a new significance. Perhaps this abjection is not necessarily a dehumanization of the depicted body in question, but rather, an affective *repurposing* of that same body. In this sense, the repurposings of the *Falling Man* image that I discuss here are not unethical interpretations of a culturally traumatic moment, but rather, a new way of looking at trauma, that allows the cultural audience affected by that same trauma to reclaim a sense of agency and control that was felt to be lost by the weight of the traumatic event. In the context of 9/11, a traumatic event that happened after the dot.com bubble, when online sharing and rapid image circulation had already become normalized in Western media culture, this interaction between images, identities, and agencies seems particularly significant. After all, 9/11 is often referred to as the “most photographed and videotaped day in the history of the world.”¹¹

⁹ Heather Warren-Crow, “Soft Body Dynamics after 9/11,” *Animation* 2, 13 (2009): 136.

¹⁰ Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York, NY: Columbia UP, 1982), 24.

¹¹ Junod, “The Falling Man: An Unforgettable Story.”

In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed describes how

[i]n the mediation of the events of September 11, the images seem saturated or even ‘full’ of affect. The images are repeated, and the repetition seems binding. The signs of the collapse of the buildings, and of bodies falling from the sky, are an invasion of bodies, spaces, homes and worlds. The images that appeared on television screens of the event as it unfolded, and which were repeated after the event, were images of trauma. [...] The repetition of the images of trauma suggests a need to replay that which has yet to be assimilated in the individual or collective psyche.¹²

Painful as the images of 9/11 victims may be, Ahmed suggests that the repetition of the images helps to lodge the event in collective cultural memory, binding the images to a particular affect associated with the event. Linking this to Warren-Crow, the endless repetition of the *Falling Man* image, or its various repurposings, indeed suggests “a promise of endless transformation.” Perhaps the morphological potential of the *Falling Man* image, of the figure symbolizing the corporeal horror of the 9/11 jumpers, creates a subconscious possibility of recovery, one in which the Twin Towers did not collapse, and one in which the *Falling Man* did not have to fall.

On dehumanization and ethics

Perhaps the ‘wishful thinking’ that this line of thinking puts forward is heart-breakingly naïve. On the other hand, it would be silly to assume that a viewer is keen to dehumanize a dead body by the sheer virtue of its potential virtuality. Similarly, it would be unfair to place all responsibility for a particular ethical response with the individual viewer, and the individual viewer exclusively. Ethical frameworks are not constituted by subjective experiences alone, of course, but also by communities, genres, and cultures. In *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*, Vivian Sobchack investigates the viewer-object interactions that take place when the human body is encountered on-screen. In a chapter titled “Inscribing Ethical Space” Sobchack zooms in on the visual encounters with on-screen deaths, particularly in the context of fictional film versus documentary film. She writes that the difference between these two genres, one being fictional and one being “lived”, lies in the pre-emptive ethical judgment that each genre produces. “When death is represented as real”, she writes, “a visual taboo has been violated, and the representation must find various ways to justify the violation.”¹³ She continues:

¹² Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion: Second Edition* (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh UP, 2014), 95.

¹³ Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2004), 242.

Fiction film, then, only plays with – and as – visual taboo, not only containing death in a range of formal and ritual simulations but also often boldly viewing it with unethical and prurient interest, as if, thus simulated, it really ‘doesn’t count’. The fiction film audience generally responds in kind. That is, however ‘grossed out’ by death’s excessive particulars, viewers tend to be less ethically squeamish about looking at fictional death and also less stringent in their judgment of the nature of the film’s curiosity about and gaze on the violence and mortification that transforms the lived-body subject into the objective matter of a corpse.¹⁴

Applying Sobchack’s argument to the various new media appropriations of the *Falling Man* image, the act of virtualizing the human corpse seems akin to its fictionalization in the way that Sobchack describes above. The virtual reproduction of a corpse may be perceived as just that, a *reproduction*, that has no bearing on flesh that feels and lives in the material world. Like the ‘anonymous violence’ that Amy M. Green puts forward in her discussion of fictional horror films, a violence for which the viewer “sees only the net results without knowing the victim”, the virtualization of the corpse anonymizes it as a human object.¹⁵ In turn, this virtualization allows for the anonymization of the viewer as an entity that holds a material kinship to the body depicted. The violence here is thus that the virtualization of the human corpse does not only render it unrecognizable as a human material, but also that it stages the corpse as something that never had a lived, human reality by default.

Being an anonymous, unrecognizable human being, the *Falling Man* is detached from its corporeal personhood and is reduced to a status of image. In this sense, the *Falling Man* is an example of what cultural scholar Esther Peeren refers to as a metaphorical *specter*: an “empty, ghostly shell” that is conveniently available to be “treated as society’s detritus, to be avoided, exploited and abjected.”¹⁶ The spectered corpse, then, becomes an image for the ethically alienated spectator to gawk at, and to perhaps even parse as a form of visual entertainment.

At the same time, it might be unfair to attack this process of ethical alienation as a characteristic of new media practices alone. Indeed, popular Western imagery, including *Falling Man* and similarly canonical about-to-die images, stems from a long tradition of death-centered spectacle. The graphic insinuation of the crucifix, an image so present in everyday Western culture, is an obvious example of this. The iconic depiction of Christ on the cross is at once a glorification of martyrdom as a veneration of the human body in a state of suffering. Yet the image of Christ’s crucifixion can be found in public churches, community centers, religious schools, and are presented as gifts to young Catholic children that have completed their first communion. From a

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Amy M. Green, “The French Horror Film Martyrs and the Destruction, Defilement, and Neutering of the Female Form,” *Journal of Popular Film & Television* 39, 1 (2011): 22.

¹⁶ Esther Peeren, *The Spectral Metaphor* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 17.

young age onwards, and for many centuries now, Western children have been taught that the dying human body, mediated through the shape of Christ, belongs to everyone – and that it has the potential to be beautiful.

Similarly, the human corpse has also been aestheticized historically in a non-biblical context. The Pre-Raphaelite art movement of the nineteenth century, for example, mythologized the dying human body (particularly the female human body) by depicting folkloric figures such as Shakespeare's Ophelia and Tennyson's Lady of Shalott on the brink of their respective deaths, but in an ornate and sometimes outright lavish fashion. What examples such as the aesthetic subjects of Pre-Raphaelite art make clear, then, is that an interest in the human corpse's potential to be rendered beautiful is not exclusive to the era of digital images. What is more, they also demonstrate that the censoring of images (take, for example, Princess Diana's post-car crash corpse, or indeed the aestheticized magazine cover presentation of the *Falling Man* image) does ultimately not keep viewers from *desiring* access to these images.

Aestheticizing corpses: a conclusion

Ironically, the platforms that are most popular for disseminating images of death (the aforementioned Facebook and Twitter) are the ones that are commended for their lively activity. Though Warren-Crow does not address the depiction of death in her analysis per sé, she does point to “the ideology of ‘aliveness’ [that is found] in certain valorizations of new media.”¹⁷ For the purpose of this research, I find it striking that, at the same time that the dead body proliferates in online visual media, the day-to-day tendency to share ‘life’ online also flourishes. At the same pace that dying bodies and human corpses are witnessed, shared, and appropriated online, vital activities related to food, sex, and relaxation are also increasingly moved to a digital space. Therefore, I wish to emphasize that the human corpse is not virtualized in a vacuum. Similarly to how the online world is not the first context in which the human corpse is virtualized, as my prior discussion of photography and painting illustrates, the online world also does not virtualize human death, exclusively. Though this may seem like an obvious statement to make, considering the high-level pervasiveness of online media in contemporary existence, I still wish to iterate that the human corpse is not a stand-alone object in either pre- or post-digital discourse.

The cultural depiction of the human corpse, be it in an aesthetic, affective, or ethical context, has been amply discussed by theorists ranging from Philippe Ariés and Roland Barthes to Elisabeth Bronfen and Susan Sontag. Their discussions of the dead in visual culture continue to be extremely valuable, which is also evident from their presence in contemporary theories on the depicted death, such as those posited by voices such as those of Cann, Sobchack, Warren-Crow, and Zelizer. However, there exists a gap between the historical tendency to transpose the human corpse to a virtual

¹⁷ Warren-Crow, “Soft Body Dynamics after 9/11,” 139.

context (be it painting, photograph, or otherwise) and the present-day, post-digital, post-9/11 desire to witness, reproduce, and alter the falling, dying, or dead body in a virtual context. It is this gap in the theory of contemporary image production in the wake of culturally traumatic events, I believe, to which the act of corporeal archiving (both as concept and practice) may play a vital role: as a visual container, as a souvenir of past humanity, and as a testimony for the historical body.

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