

The Falling Man: The Virtualization of Violence

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00.00 Abstract

Paul Virilio has noted the lowering of the horizon line in contemporary culture as the vision machine steps into the breach scouting the skies for suspicious vectors and surveying the Earth's crust for glacial imperfections. At the same time our animal eyes turn away from the skies. We recoil at the violence of the heavens and bend our heads toward the safe glowing virtuality of the black mirror. As the millennium ticks over we are caught in an image loop defined by the vague outlines of the future. It was always a fabricated space, this technological promise, where the image of the body was defined by clean pale fabrics, glistening walls of chrome and pine amidst luminous trails of data. Always on the ground, always safe in the glass vestibule of progress. Our common shared reality is far different however, here the human form is rendered in a more vulnerable state of flux. On the mediated horizon line between the Earth and the atmosphere exists the figure of the falling man. The victim of our romance with vertiginous space and with our technological rush to colonize the air. This redrawing of the human form as an anonymous accomplice of the historical narrative is burnt into the infrastructure of the global network whose very survival is dependent on the repetition and repatriation of the image.

This paper seeks to assess the virtualization of this networked body in violent repose – in flight, in space and in descent. Images such as Richard Drew's photograph of the Falling Man on the morning of September 11 2001, of Commander Stone in Alfonso Cuarón's Gravity and Warhol's Death and Disaster series which, while fixated with death, also wears the markers of mankind's doomed quest for verticality. It is indeed as Donna Haraway has observed, a cyborg of convergent renderings, but not as she intended. Rather it is a rerouting of the body in digital form into something that does in fact return to dust – bent and contorted by the bloody mess of machine intervention. The most despairing of images, weary with the weight of Virilio's accident of technology, is almost imperceptible now behind a shroud of pixels. This magic trick, this cyber-friendly blurring of the machine's interpretation of the body is now a familiar mode of visual discourse. The glitch becomes a deliberate act of obscurification – to protect us, to shield us, to remind us of unspeakable things to push back against the glare of that ominous shimmer on the horizon.

01.01 Introduction

{{SLIDE}} The "Non-Mediated World" has become a lost country. And I think that, in some very real way, it's a country that we cannot find our way back to. The mediated world is now THE WORLD. We are that which perceives a mediated reality. I don't think it's possible to know what we've lost. We just have...I think there is a pervasive sense of loss, and a pervasive excitement at what we seem to be gaining. And they seem – those two feelings – seem to go together, in effect, to be parts of the same feeling. It's like [Fredric Jameson's](#) "postmodern divide": you have it right there. That sense of loss, and that sense of Christmas morning, at the same time.

- Interview with William Gibson from the documentary *No Maps For These Territories* (Neale, 2000).

In her 2003 text, *The Futurist Moment*, Marjorie Perloff makes the unsettling link between Robert Delaunay's 1914 chromatic painting *Homage to Blériot* (1914) and the ghostly internet images of falling victims and the circling airliners on the morning of September 11 in New York. Delaunay's work celebrated Louis Blériot's flight across the English Channel and according to Perloff was "a semi abstract colour field of overlapping and interlocking disks... into this vibrant prismatic field, he placed recognisable images of airplanes, propellers, wheels, birds, and a miniature Eiffel Tower" (Perloff, 2003). {{SLIDE}}

However, we could not have envisioned that nearly a century later a plane "carrying no arms whatsoever" could deliver the devastation as was witnessed on the morning of September 11. Perloff reminds us that like the peaceful chromatic vistas of Delaunay's work, the photographic image and the chance video documents of September 11 show little of the imminent violence we know is to follow, {{SLIDE}} instead "the sky is light blue, the horizon line a soft pink, and the plane, still in the distance, looks like a graceful bird. How, one wonders, could this small and delicate machine destroy a high and mighty tower?" (Perloff, 2003).

{{SLIDE}} Part 01 :: Dark Euphoria

At Reboot 11 in Copenhagen in 2009 science fiction author and futurist Bruce Sterling delivered a bristling keynote address in which he outlined his impressions of the coming decade, which he called *dark euphoria*. In Sterling's terms *dark euphoria* is an involuntary episode {{SLIDE}} characterised by an overwhelming sense of falling from a precarious height – through the millennia, back towards earth, catching glimpses of history and memory as they hurtle past us – indeed, through us – into the vast archive of digital objects we leave in our wake. {{SLIDE}} The dark euphoric temperament that Sterling outlines is a deeply externalising force, there is an explicit link here between the dystopian experience of an entire generation and the futurist techno-cultural narrative of a neo-liberal utopia. For, in the coming dark euphoric decade, Sterling notes,

{{SLIDE}} ... things are just falling apart, you can't believe the possibilities, it's like anything is possible, but you never realized you're going to have to dread it so much. It's like a leap into the unknown. You're falling toward earth at nine hundred kilometres an hour and then you realize there's no earth there. That's a dark euphoria feeling. It's the cultural temperament of the coming decade (Sterling, 2009).

The visual iconography of this descriptor has a strong resonance in the present-future narrative of the new millennium's first two decades: from Richard Drew's 9/11 photograph to the roto-scoped silhouette of Don Draper falling to the streets of Madison Avenue. Elsewhere this temperament is captured in the paralysis of the moment *before* the leap into the unknown – a state of *pre-fall* in which the anxiety of the inevitable takes hold. {{SLIDE}} It is the very moment when we see the edge for the first time like a weightless dream in which we can do nothing but be drawn ever closer to the abyss as the vision machine renders the most sumptuous and tantalising of vistas.

A personal darkness lives here too. In a surprisingly downbeat sequence of Hollywood millennial films in which personal gothic tragedies – of the body and the geography of personal space – catch us waiting, voyeuristically, for the accident. We know we are witnessing the fall and we anticipate the crush that is sure to follow. {{SLIDE}} [American Beauty](#) (Mendes, 2000), [Ice Storm](#) (Lee, 1997), [Donnie Darko](#) (Kelly, 2001) and [Virgin Suicides](#) (Coppola, 1999) {{SLIDE}} are emblematic of the pre-millennial neo-gothic turn of middle America. Here we bear witness to an internal monologue played out in mostly dark largely monotone domestic spaces. Similarly the small screen character studies of this period {{SLIDE}} – [The Sopranos](#) (Chase, 1999) and [Six Feet Under](#) (Ball, 2001) and later {{SLIDE}} [Dexter](#) (Cuesta, 2006), [Mad Men](#) (Weiner, 2007) and even [Breaking Bad](#) (Gilligan, 2008) – cast a similarly uncomfortable fine grain lens over their central protagonists in which the internal space becomes absent, damaged unrecognisable. In these narratives a particular type of western exceptionalism is replaced with a very personal darkness. In almost every case a lead character's personal anxiety is eclipsed by their despair for the socio-political structure within which they operate. Think {{SLIDE}} Tony Soprano's frequent laments in Dr Melfi's office on everything from the nostalgic masculinity of John Wayne, to migrating birds to the vagaries of the internet, {{SLIDE}} Dexter Morgan's strict adherence to the code and his weakness to the needs of his "dark passenger", {{SLIDE}} Walter White's layers of deceit and economies of scale and of course the endless fall of {{SLIDE}} Don Draper whose mascaraed as the oracle for American industry unravels somewhere near to the edge of where day meets night.

Paul Virilio notes this duality as a very contemporary paradox, something he calls 'teleobjectivity'. {{SLIDE}} In this state of disenchantment with the real and the alternate rise of machine-attention: "our eyes are thus not shut by the cathode screen alone; more than anything else we now no longer seek to see, to look around us, not even in front of us, but

exclusively beyond the horizon of objective appearances.” (Virilio, 2007, p. 6) What follows is a very gothic notion of the urge to look away – to internalise the anxiety of the real – to endure “without going there to see. To perceive without really being there” (Virilio & Lotringer, 2005, p. 8).

{{SLIDE}} Part 02 :: The Fall

The harrowing notion of falling – down into the steel concrete mesh of the city, down into the grinding cogs of a broken paradigm – is the recognition of this perverse reorganisation of the contemporary vision stream. Most spectacularly perhaps in the often repeated motif of the plummet back towards the Earth – or the remnants thereof – back to nature, into the arms of its virtual dreamscape. {{SLIDE}} These episodes are darkly euphoric and most explicitly rendered in the steady stream of return to Earth films that have so dominated the box office in recent years, from *WALL-E* to *Avatar* to *Gravity*.

In fact Alfonso Cuarón’s *Gravity* is both origin parable and futurist manifesto intertwined – a film of much darkness and exquisitely composed moments of terror *and* euphoria. In this vision stream the Earth is never far from view. {{SLIDE}} Its powerful call permeates everything. In these ninety minutes of computer simulation the image of the Earth is returned to its 1960s counterculture grandeur, its meaning and significance momentarily restored. Indeed there is a yearning in all of these narratives that we, by way of the Earth’s salvation, are eternally reborn. A classic science fiction trope: the return to the farm, to toil in the green fields in the sunlight amidst a Neo-Agrarian Utopia of things. The body of the Earth now free from industry and the scourge of conflict is delivered by journey’s end a cleansed, pure and fertile place - a state of solidity that is far removed from its current rendering as virtual digital object. {{SLIDE}}

The synergies between height, flight and the machine rendered vision are all intrinsically linked to the gothic high-tech re-ordering of perspective through the prism of machine vision. Instead of playing witness to the fall, we are now experiencing it firsthand. {{SLIDE}} The ubiquitous POV shot familiar to PC gaming community since *Wolfenstein* (1992), *Doom* (1993) and *Quake* (1996) first established the form in the mid-1990s is only now realising the full immersive potential: {{SLIDE}} think the recent *The Amazing Spiderman* reboot from 2012, in which we assume the POV of Spiderman rather than simply watching him dive and weave, {{SLIDE}} think the GoPro acrobatics of parkour athletes, {{SLIDE}} think the *Mirror’s*

Edge. These digitally constructed forms are what can only be described as an extreme fetishization of the act of falling. All include giddy POV shots as their primary visual trick, all are enacted at speed, and all while looking down not up. {{SLIDE}}

While Bruce Sterling described an approaching dark euphoria and our passage through it as a “leap into the unknown” this does not necessarily represent a resolution but rather the consummate act – a mediated process – the process of falling. It’s a type of *endlessness*, a state that Slavoj Žižek refers to as the dystopian horror of an unending “utopia” of things (Mossop, 2011). This is the metaphorical buffer to the trauma of the violent body: the thrill of the fall, the titillating view from up on high, one’s weight and form equal only to the velocity at which we hurtle through space and time albeit without the fulfilment of self-annihilation. Instead the end would appear to be happening to someone else, somewhere else – the fall is virtual – like Dr Stone in Alfonso Cuarón’s *Gravity* it is a safe cultural fantasy. {{SLIDE}}

In the twenty teens the catastrophes of the past are resurrected in a host of global media products. {{SLIDE}} The post-apocalyptic landscape of [Crysis 3](#) (Crytek Frankfurt & Crytek UK, 2013) is certainly designed on the shredded steel weave of the Twin Towers. {{SLIDE}} The billowing flames and plumes of smoke that were produced in the moments after the attack are reproduced in architecture in Korea {{SLIDE}} and their fall and the panic on the streets below is reproduced in the *Man of Steel*. {{SLIDE}} Symbolic iconography is certainly on display in the promotional material for [The Dark Knight Rises](#) (Nolan, 2012).

The act of the collapse, the falling building, the crumbling edifice and the crumbling mind are all present in this litany of assaults on the cityscape, yet it is in Edouard Salier’s short film [Flesh](#) (Salier, 2005), an animated rendition of New York set on the morning of 9/11, that brings the body and the architecture of verticality most violently together. {{SLIDE}}

Here the sunny chrome vista, the Twin Towers still glisten in the distance, yet the surfaces of the buildings are draped in pornographic imagery; mostly women with other women. The imagery is framed provocatively, the camera moves voyeuristically across the gleaming surfaces, the colour values are bumped up to accentuate the fleshy tones, the lipstick, the lurid tongues and the vital extremities. {{SLIDE}} The colour palette of Salier’s piece seems to echo eyewitness accounts of September 11 who speak of red, blood red, and bright flashes of orange:

{{SLIDE}} All of a sudden...BOOM! There was a huge explosion. I never saw anything so red in my life. It was red like blood, like anger. It felt like it was coming through me, it was so powerful. I had just been sitting where it hit. (Manis, 2011)

As the camera surveys the damage we hear the engines of a helicopter – we are in the helicopter – the camera tilts and shakes drifting in and out of focus, red splinters and diamond sparkles everywhere. A layering of voices swell from below: shell-shocked news commentators, the screams of panicked onlookers, all the while the women continue to gyrate, caressing their perfect flesh, pouting, sucking, licking and sinking into the grid as the towers collapse. {{SLIDE}} Meanwhile Lady Liberty watches the tawdry scene from a safe distance as the planes exact their fanaticism on American eroticism. *Flesh* is a blunt confronting critique of the offices of power, the broadcast image loop and the female body as a site of violent exploitation.

{{SLIDE}} Part 03 :: The Simulation

Slavoj Žižek, in his essay *Desert of the Real* written in the aftermath of 9/11, observed that America and the West is willing into reality the fatalistic fantasy of an extended totalising state of destruction. September 11, it would seem, is the wire-mesh template upon which all future textures will be rendered:

{{SLIDE}} What happens at the end of this process of visualization, however, is that we begin to experience 'real reality' itself as a virtual entity. For the great majority of the public, the WTC explosions were events on the TV screen, and when we watched the oft-repeated shot of the frightened people running towards the camera ahead of the giant cloud of dust from the collapsing tower, was not the framing of the shot itself reminiscent of spectacular shots in catastrophe movies, a special effect which outdid all others, since – as Jeremy Bentham knew – reality is the best appearance of itself?

- Slavoj Žižek, in his essay *Desert of the Real*, September 15 2001 (Zizek, 2001)

The Falling Man however, *did* make impact. We live the velocity of his exit approach endlessly and yet we never bear witness to the pulverising end. Instead the climax is left to our darker imaginings – a gothic high-tech moment deeply felt but never seen. There is no digital reconstruction here not like the simulations that were to follow. The billboard advertising for the fifth season of [Mad Men](#) (Weiner, 2007-2012) is as close as we get it

references directly – and most controversially – Richard Drew’s photograph. Not as event but as simulation. **SLIDE** This a visual motif with a long pop-cultural history from Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* (Hitchcock, 1958) to Kubrick’s *2001* (Kubrick, 1968) to Spielberg’s *A.I.* (Spielberg, 2001) and everything in between. However, it is this moment, captured by Richard Drew, witnessed by only a few yet broadcast to the world in the *New York Times* on September 12. An image that was subsequently retracted by besieged editors and then airbrushed from history, returning only as a shadow. It was as if this one image frame was too much to bear. After the tears of the broadcasters and the horrified portraits of the ashen pedestrians and the image loop of two planes smashing into skyscrapers and the crescendo of their fall – amidst all of this, somehow one image was too much and labelled “distasteful, exploitative and voyeuristic” (Singer, 2006). **SLIDE** The image of the falling man became the articulation of the loss of life that the dramatic video footage of the attack and the collapse of the towers could never communicate. And yet the duality of the event – Flight 11, September 11, the Twin Towers – was also explicit in the image itself. As Tom Junod wrote in *Esquire* magazine in 2003:

The man in the picture, by contrast, is perfectly vertical, and so is in accord with the lines of the buildings behind him. He splits them, bisects them: Everything to the left of him in the picture is the North Tower; everything to the right, the South. Though oblivious to the geometric balance he has achieved, he is the essential element in the creation of a new flag, a banner composed entirely of steel bars shining in the sun. Some people who look at the picture see stoicism, willpower, a portrait of resignation; others see something else - something discordant and therefore terrible: freedom (Junod, 2009).

SLIDE It should be noted at this point that the producer’s of the first reboot of *Spider-Man* in 2002 (Raimi, 2002) who airbrushed away the Twin Towers a second time by pulling the early release trailer in the days after 9/11. Several months later Steven Spielberg was pressured by Warner Brothers and the web trolls to remove the Twin Towers from the DVD release of his film *A.I. Artificial Intelligence*. **SLIDE** Fortunately this is a view that Spielberg for all his conservative qualities did not subscribe to.

The disaster reel is fixated with the possibilities of the end times in which dramatic angles, vertiginous space and visions of flight, aided by the machine and traumatised by the technological accident produce a frightening narrative viewed helplessly from above *and* below. Paul Virilio has noted that the trauma of the technological accident is often hidden within the mediated spectacle of the accident itself:

{{SLIDE}} Overexposure is the live broadcast; it is real-time replacing the past, present and future. A society that heedlessly privileges the present necessarily privileges the accident... So somewhere the end of the future and the end of the past, in our societies of immediacy, of ubiquity, of instantaneity, are necessarily the advent of the accident (Virilio & Lotringer, 2005, p. 109).

Warhol knew this in 1962 when he replayed to the world what we did not want to see – the crushing end of a fall from eighty-six stories in the sky by Evelyn McHale who had jumped from the observation deck of the Empire State building. The end of her story lay in the cold steel embrace of a car roof in Warhol’s multi-panel image, *Suicide (Fallen Body)* (Warhol, 1962) {{SLIDE}}.¹ For art critic Jonathon Jones, Warhol’s obsession with violent death in his *Death and Disaster* series of works depicts “the spirit of our age” for Warhol saw “the sky above New York full of falling bodies”, he painted this into being in his startlingly prophetic work, *Suicide (Silver Jumping Man)* (Warhol, 1963) and he reproduced it again and again with his reproduction of the Evelyn McHale image (Jones, 2007). The “prophet of our crisis” knew how to normalise the spectacular and make the pedestrian seem otherworldly. He saw the end of history in the fabrication of fame and of the industry of art. He also saw that death was losing out to the endlessness of the mediated glare. As Baudrillard would observe many years later:

{{SLIDE}} We have lost history and have also, as a result, lost the end of history. We are labouring under the illusion of the end, under the posthumous illusion of the end. And this is serious, for the end signifies that something has really taken place. Whereas we, at the height of reality – and with information at its peak – no longer know whether anything has taken place or not (Baudrillard, 1997, p. 450).

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¹ Warhol’s multi-panel reproduction was a photograph by Time photographer Robert Wiles a few minutes after her death in 1947, some 15 years prior.

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