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## Prison Area, Independence Valley

Rob Kroes

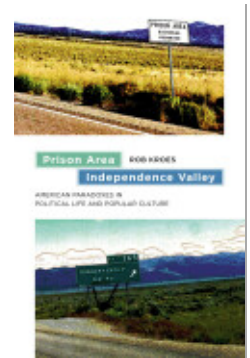
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THE ASCENT OF THE FALLING MAN:  
AN ICONIC IMAGE OF 9/11

GIVEN THE RECORD flood of images that in their diverse ways reflect the events of 9/11, there are those who doubt whether any single image is able to stand out from the others through its power to capture the essence of what happened. As one author put it two years after the event: “[T]he enormous swell of image production generated by 9/11 and conflicting ideologies precluded the possibility of any single example holding the field.”<sup>1</sup> Looking back, with the benefit of a longer perspective, it seems that a handful of images, in the minds of a larger public, have gained an iconic power that other images lack.

Why is it that some photographs have a power of epic concentration, condensing larger moments in history into one iconic image? The quest for an answer may lead us to reflect on the way the human mind stores arresting moments. Psychologists in their use of the metaphor of “flashbulb memories” suggest an analogy between pictures in the mind—photographs taken by the human eye—and the medium of photography. The power of iconic photographs derives precisely from our feeling that such photographs have done the work of memory for us. They have an impact on the human mind similar to what our eyes would have done, had we been present. They produce the equivalent of “flashbulb memories” for us, turning us into vicarious witnesses,

irrespective of distance and time. The effect critically has to do with what one student of the medium has called “the savage silence of photographs.”<sup>2</sup> They speak no words, use no rhetorical flourish, no linguistic embellishments or evasions. They are literally before language. They freeze transient motion into lasting stillness. Neither film nor television footage has this power of silence. Stopping time and motion, photography “forcibly fills up our view.”<sup>3</sup> Photographs come to us like documents from “the other side,” beyond time, beyond life. They are like testaments, last wills drawn up in the service of memory.<sup>4</sup>

The power of photography, thus conceived, is intrinsic to the medium. It does not critically depend on artistry or aesthetics, on an inner vision in the mind of the photographer seeking expression. Iconic photographs, freezing history into memory by making time stand still, have an autonomy of expressive force unconnected to authorial intent or control. This all-perceptiveness of photography, seeing things that would escape the human eye, caused Walter Benjamin to speak of the “unconscious optics” of the medium.<sup>5</sup> The afterlife of iconic photographs is most clearly the area where the photography of history blends into the history of photography. From this perspective photographs most clearly take their place as agents of history, rather than being history’s mere reflection. From the moment that photographs acquire iconic status and enter the realm of the mass circulation of images, they begin to affect history rather than merely reflecting it.

Here the closer reading of one particular photograph—*Falling Man* by Richard Drew—may suggest an approach to exploring this power of iconic images. The picture is of a man falling from one of the towers, captured at the fleeting moment when his body seemed to assume the stylized pose of an Olympic diver. As we shall see, the photograph has never been secure in its claim on iconic status. It was contested, even rejected, yet it has managed to endure in an afterlife as the inspiration for some of the finest

and most interesting creative responses to the drama and trauma of 9/11.

It is this picture, for example, that provided Don DeLillo with the title for his novel on the tragedy of 9/11. Or in fact more than just the title: the falling man is a haunting presence in the story itself. Drawing on the rich resonance of the falling man as a remembered iconic image, DeLillo, in an inspired distancing strategy, introduces *not* the person so unforgettably caught in midfall by Drew's camera but the enigmatic character of a performance artist, David Janiak, who specializes in reenacting, *not* the fall, but the photographic still; Janiak reenacts the pose of the iconic falling man, hanging upside-down above the pavement, secured to a harness. In DeLillo's words: "There was something awful about the stylized pose, body and limbs, his signature stroke. But the worst of it was the stillness itself."<sup>6</sup> Only much later in the novel is the connection between the photograph and the reenactment made explicit. Upon reading an obituary of David Janiak in the newspaper, dead at thirty-nine, apparently of natural causes, the woman protagonist of the novel does an advanced computer search and reads about a dispute over the issue of the posture Janiak assumed during the fall, the posture he maintained in his suspended state. Was this position intended, she reads, to reflect the body posture of a particular man who was photographed falling from the north tower of the World Trade Center, head-first, arms at his sides, one leg bent, a man set forever in free fall against the looming background of the column panels in the tower? "She did not read further but knew at once which photograph the account referred to. It hit her hard when she first saw it, the day after, in the newspaper. . . . Headlong, free fall, she thought, and this picture burned a hole in her mind and heart, dear God, he was a falling angel and his beauty was horrific."<sup>7</sup> Thus, almost in passing, DeLillo evokes the afterlife of a single photograph, with its iconic power to burn holes in the minds and hearts of so many.

*Falling People, Falling Man*

At the time of the attack on New York's Twin Towers many sat in front of their television screens, trying to imagine in anguish and impotence what went on in the towering inferno of the World Trade Center. Yet one response among those trapped in the buildings above the level of impact was clear for all to see. Rather than burn or choke to death people in their hundreds had opted for a death of their own choosing, delivering themselves to the pull of gravity as they jumped from windows on all four sides of the towers. Television images showed many of these individuals until the various channels covering the events stopped broadcasting them. The images were deemed too gruesome, too unmediated a confrontation with the horror of the moment. If the point here was the protection of the public, it may also have been the intention to protect the dignity of the jumpers from the unseemly, if not voyeuristic, intrusion into their utter loneliness, seconds away from death. Although the "jumpers" epitomized most starkly the horror and tragedy of the event, images of their free fall were safely tucked away from the public gaze, preventing their becoming part of a collective memory that would soon be cast in terms of the heroism and bravery of the victims and their saviors. Yet the mental shock and trauma of those who beheld the spectacle of so many people falling, and who will never forget the loud thud of bodies hitting the ground—"it was raining bodies," as one firefighter wailed in shock once he was safely back at his station<sup>8</sup>—does seem to need its own closure through sharing the memory with others.

What is it exactly about images of these individuals falling to their deaths that elicits public reticence? Is it the gulf between the jumpers' experience lasting some thirty seconds and that of a larger public, yearning perhaps to empathize yet prevented from empathy in the case of the falling people? Is it so hard to read a meaning into their fate?

The rich store of photographs and of film and television foot-

age has allowed makers of historical documentaries to return to the images of falling people and carefully to contextualize them. Ric Burns, for example, structures his documentary, *New York: The Center of the World*,<sup>9</sup> as a biblical passion, telling a story that makes it clear to the viewer that the horror of the terrorist onslaught has made for the collective redemption of New Yorkers. Good in the end emerged from evil. Burns has not shrunk for fear of being disrespectful to the dead from showing footage of people leaning out of the upper floors of the two towers, clinging to windowpanes first, then choosing a free fall to certain death. The camera pans from body after body falling down to the stunned faces of the crowd. “My God, Oh, my God,” is the continuing litany one hears. There is one voice, though, addressing the cameraman—one must assume—shouting: “You can’t take pictures of this.” That voice must have spoken on behalf of all those whose gut feeling was one of revulsion against filming this particular aspect of the horror of the World Trade Center attacks.

That feeling must have prevailed in the days following 9/11. The history of Associated Press photographer Richard Drew’s photograph testifies to this urge to suppress. Drew had trained his telephoto lens on one man and shot eight frames. Back in his office at the Associated Press, he inserted the disc from his digital camera into his laptop and recognized, instantly, what his camera had seen with its uncanny power to catch, in Benjamin’s expression, the “unconscious optics” of human perception. A moment no observer’s eye could have consciously noticed was forever frozen in a frame. In a split-second moment all the visual ingredients that went into the picture had, as if in a kaleidoscope, assumed a transient configuration that seemed to suggest a transcendent reading. Drew did not even look at any of the other pictures in the sequence. He didn’t have to. “You learn in photo editing to look for the frame,” he says. “You have to recognize it. That picture just jumped off the screen because of its verticality and symmetry.”<sup>10</sup> The next morning the photograph appeared

on page seven of the *New York Times* and in a number of other newspapers across the country. Yet, as Richard Drew remembers it, “Most newspapers refused to print it. Those who did, on the day after the World Trade Center attacks, received hundreds of letters of complaint. The photograph was denounced as cold-blooded, ghoulish and sadistic. Then it vanished.”<sup>11</sup>

Drew had photographed dying before. As a twenty-one-year-old rookie photographer on a supposedly routine assignment, he was standing behind Robert F. Kennedy when he was assassinated. He was so close that Kennedy’s blood splattered onto his jacket. He kept taking photographs, even when a distressed Ethel Kennedy tried to fend off Drew and his intrusive camera eye. Nobody at the time refused to print those photographs. They became iconic images and established Drew’s fame. What then is it about Drew’s image of the falling man that people initially found so offensive?

As Tom Junod describes the photograph in a piece for *Esquire* magazine, it differs from *all* other photographs of people falling from the Twin Towers. All the other images show people who appear to be struggling against horrific discrepancies of scale. They are made puny by the backdrop of the towers, which loom like colossi, and then by the event itself. They flail, twist, and turn, their shoes fly off. There is no semblance of control. The man in Drew’s iconic picture, by contrast, is perfectly vertical, head down, seemingly poised and in full control of his posture. The image shows him in perfect 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 Tower. Junod goes on to say, movingly and perceptively: “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.”<sup>12</sup> The man does not appear in-

timidated by gravity's lethal force, rather seems to defy it. His arms are by his side. His left leg is bent at the knee, almost casually. He offers the ultimate image of grace in the face of death. Yet only seconds before or after, like the others who had jumped, he had flailed, twisted, and turned. No human eye could have caught this moment of transcendence and stillness, a moment frozen forever. The power of this one image, so richly suggestive of redemptory readings, is quintessentially photographic.

To those who are willing to set aside their sense of disrespectful intrusion, this detached reading of the photograph suggests all the elements that make for an iconic photograph. In its suggestion of grandeur and grace, in its intertextual evocation of Jasper Johns's many variations on the theme of the American flag, in the "savage silence" of a man stopped in mid-fall forever, it would appear to offer, in epic concentration, an emblem of grandeur and humility that would far transcend the sound and fury of 9/11. It would seem to make it the perfect American icon for Americans at a time of national sorrow.

But there are those who may never summon such Olympian detachment nor see the redemptive power of the picture of the falling man, leaving the picture to speak for itself. There have been attempts at establishing the identity of the man in the photograph.<sup>13</sup> Different trails led to potential relatives and may give us a clue to the diverse ways in which people interpret the act of jumping to a death of one's own choosing. One trail led to a Catholic immigrant family from Latin America, the Hernandezes, another to a woman from Connecticut. The Hernandez family, when confronted with the photograph, refused to accept that the photograph might show their husband and father, who had been a restaurant worker at the top floor of the World Trade Center. As they saw it, he would never have jumped. They looked at the decision to jump as a betrayal of love, an unconscionable suicide that went against everything their Catholic faith taught them. The woman in Connecticut had lost two sons in the terrorist attack, both working on the equity desk of an investment firm



in the Twin Towers. From a Protestant background, she looked at the decision to jump as a loss of hope—as an absence that we, the living, now have to live with. She chose to live with it, not by angrily rejecting the picture, but by confronting it, by trying to know—by making an act of private witness. Yet a third trail led to the family of an African American preacher from Mount Vernon, New York. The man in the picture may have been Jonathan Briley, the preacher's son. The strong Baptist worldview of the family seems to have inspired them to see the falling man in a different light. As his sister Gwendolyn ruminated, "I never thought of the falling man as Jonathan, I thought of him as a man that just took his life in his hands for just a second. Did that person have so much faith that he knew that God would catch him or was he afraid to experience the end up there? I hope we're not trying to figure out who he is and more to figure out who we are through watching it."<sup>14</sup> These are words that perfectly capture the redemptive reading of Drew's iconic photograph. They suggest more strongly than I have done that the lasting suspension of the falling man may be seen as an act of God, rather than a quirk of photography.

These responses may suggest a more general clue to the widely varied ways in which Americans and others have coped with images of people jumping to their deaths from the Twin Towers. I know of no research data to confirm the following speculation. Yet, on the Internet, long lists can be found of statements by individuals, paying homage to whoever they think the jumper may have been, Norberto Hernandez or Jonathan Briley.<sup>15</sup> The attempts at identifying the lone jumper in Drew's picture may serve many people to cope with the enormity of so many unidentified, anonymous persons choosing to jump and fall to their deaths. It may help them to sympathize and extend the redemptive quality in Drew's image to all these single desperate acts. A more general issue to be raised here, though, is that the effort at identifying the falling man misses the point of the picture's iconicity. (In the case of the Napalm Girl in Nick Ut's iconic Vietnam photograph,

the fact that her identity is now known has not detracted from the power of the image.) Drew's Falling Man will live on, I am sure, as the photographic equivalent of the Unknown Soldier, as a photographic *lieu de mémoire* inviting reflections on the history of 9/11 and its meanings.

The likelihood of the image definitely attaining such full iconic status, of its finding its place in the continued quest for the meaning of 9/11, may be confirmed by the history of its afterlife. It has already inspired creative work by other artists. Don DeLillo took his creative cue from this specific photograph, not from the generalized imagery of jumpers. (It is easy to miss this point and not pay due respect to individual photographs. For example, Jonathan Safran Foer's 9/11 novel, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, for its final flip-through pages uses a photograph by Lyle Owerko, *not* as is often stated, Drew's image.)<sup>16</sup>

Struggling to come up with the proper language, the proper metaphors, for understanding what the collapse of the Twin Towers may have signified, those reflecting on the meaning of Ground Zero may well come to construct their narratives around the central metaphor of the fall, in all its rich, intertextual resonance. In a perceptive essay, Devin Zuber, like Walter Benjamin's Paris flaneur transposed to New York, reflects on the changed reading of one of the largest and most unknown public sculptures in lower Manhattan, several blocks north of the World Trade Center, Roy Shifrin's *Icarus*. The sculpture depicts Icarus at the very end of the Greek legend. The torso is headless and wingless, tilted at such an angle as to suggest not Icarus's winged ascension, his hubris before the fall, but the fall itself. The sculpture was positioned in such a way that the form was perfectly juxtaposed against the looming bulk of the Trade Center towers. At night one had the perspective of the statue falling down the dark space between the two towers. Only now can the sculpture assume its full mythological power as an emblem of human hubris "before the fall."<sup>17</sup>

If the statue can be seen to prefigure 9/11, Art Spiegelman, in

his *In the Shadow of No Towers*, after the fact creatively reconfigures the imagery and meaning of falling from the sky.<sup>18</sup> Once again using the medium of the comic book, or graphic novel, that he had used before in *Maus* as a distancing ploy to describe the formation of his “postmemory” of the Holocaust,<sup>19</sup> Spiegelman now tries to control the traumatic impact of the events of 9/11. Plate #6 of *In the Shadow of No Towers* shows on the left-hand side a full-length image of the tower in the last moments before its collapse. A man is seen jumping from it, preferring the freedom of the sky above death by fire, fantasizing, as the text has it, about “a graceful Olympic dive as his last living act.” The author then adds these amazing words: he is “haunted now by the images he didn’t witness.” What turned him into a secondary witness of 9/11, what formed his postmemory of the events, were not stories told to him as in the case of *Maus* but may well have been Drew’s image of what truly was a graceful Olympic dive.<sup>20</sup> Thus, in his own creative way, Spiegelman too illustrates the way in which a person’s repertoire of memories may have been formed while undergoing the force of Drew’s iconic photograph.

In conclusion, let me emphasize that what is important, is not the making of a final selection of just one, ultimate iconic representation of 9/11 in a single image. There are those to whose minds 9/11 as a day of infamy will bring remembered images of towers ablaze, of people running for safety, of two monuments of the New York skyline collapsing. They are all, in their own right, images of 9/11 as spectacle, leaving the spectator in the role of impotent, outside observer. My focus has been on those harrowing pictures of victims, of people jumping from the towers toward a death of their own choosing. They are pictures that make for painful empathy with their fate. And this is why they will continue to resonate in the public memory. Within that body of photographs of falling people, my point has been to account for the impact that one image in particular, Drew’s “Falling Man,” has had on so many viewers. My purpose has been to account for the fascination of that one image, in a struggle to

find words to describe that impact. To that end I looked at how others—the photographer himself, Tom Junod, Don DeLillo, Art Spiegelman—have translated their fascination into language that may help us account for the way this image continues to haunt us.