

# The Image Is Dying

## Visualisation and Sharing in Catastrophic Times

- Royce W. Smith
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The whole problem of speaking about the end...is that you have to speak of what lies beyond the end and also, at the same time, of the impossibility of ending.

Jean Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End*(110)

<sup>1</sup> Jean Baudrillard's insights into finality demonstrate that "ends" always prompt cultures to speculate on what can or will happen after these terminations and to fear those traumatic ends, in which the impossible actually occurs, may only be the beginning of chaos. In the absence of "rational" explanations for catastrophic ends and in the whirlwind of emotional responses that are their after-effects, the search for beginnings and origins – the antitheses of Baudrillard's finality – characterises human response to tragedy. Strangely, Baudrillard's engagement with the end is linked to an articulation predicated on our ability "to speak" events into existence, to conjure and to bridle those events in terms of recognisable, linear, and logical arrangements of words. Calling this verbal ordering "the poetry of initial conditions" (Baudrillard 113) in which memory imposes a structure so that the chaotic/catastrophic may be studied and its elements may be compared, Baudrillard suggests that this poetry "fascinates" because "we no longer possess a vision of final conditions" (113). The images of contemporary catastrophes and their subsequent visualisation serve as the ultimate reminders that we, as viewers and survivors, were not there – that visualisation itself involves a necessary distance between the horrified viewer and the viewed horror.

<sup>2</sup> In the case of the September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Centre, the need to "be there," to experience vicariously a trauma as similarly as possible to those who later became its victims, perhaps explains why images of the planes first slamming into each of the towers were played and repeated *ad nauseam*. As Baudrillard suggests, "it would be interesting to know whether... effects persist in the absence of causes ... whether something can exist apart from any origin and reference" (111). The ongoing search for these causes – particularly in the case of the World Trade Centre's obliteration – has manifested itself in a persistent cycle of image production and consumption, prompting those images to serve as the visible/visual join between our own survival and the lost lives of the attacks or as surrogates for those whose death we could not witness. These images frequently allowed the West to legitimise its mourning, served as the road map by which we could (re-)explore the halcyon days prior to September 11, and provided the evidence needed for collective retribution. Ultimately, images served as the fictive embodiments of unseen victims and provided the vehicle by which mourning could be transformed from an isolated act to a shared experience.

## Visitors on the Rooftop: Visualising Origins and the Moments before Destruction

<sup>3</sup> It goes without saying that most have seen the famous photograph of the bundled-up tourist standing on the observation deck of the World Trade Centre with one of the jets ready to strike the tower shortly thereafter (see *Figure 1*). Though the photograph was deemed a macabre photo-manipulation, it reached thousands of e-mail inboxes almost two weeks following the horrific attacks and led many to ponder excitedly whether this image truly was the "last" image of a pre-September 11 world. Many openly debated why someone would fabricate such an image, yet analysts believe that its creation was a means to heal and to return to the unruffled days prior to September 11, when terrorism was thought to be a phenomenon relegated to the "elsewhere" of the Middle East. A Website devoted to the analysis of cultural rumours, *Urban Legends*, somewhat melodramatically suggested that the photograph resurrects what recovery efforts could not re-construct – a better understanding of the moments before thousands of individuals perished:

The online world is fraught with clever photo manipulations that often provoke gales of laughter in those who view them, so we speculate that whoever put together this particular bit of imaging did so purely as a lark. However, presumed lighthearted motives or not, the photo provokes sensations of horror in those who view it. It apparently captures the last fraction of a second of this man's life ... and also of the final moment of normalcy before the universe changed for all of us. In the blink of an eye, a beautiful yet ordinary fall day was transformed into flames and falling bodies, buildings collapsing inwards on themselves, and wave upon wave of terror washing over a populace wholly unprepared for a war beginning in its midst...The photo ripped away the healing distance brought by the nearly two weeks between the attacks and the appearance of this digital manipulation, leaving the sheer horror of the moment once again raw and bared to the wind. Though the picture wasn't real, the emotions it stirred up were. It is because of these emotions the photo has sped from inbox to inbox with the speed that it has. ("The Accidental Tourist")

<sup>4</sup> While the photograph does help the viewer recall the times before our fears of terrorism, war, and death were realised, this image does not episodically capture "the last fraction of a second" in a

man's life, nor does it give credibility to the "blink-of-an-eye" shifts between beautiful and battered worlds. The photographic analysis provided by *Urban Legends* serves as a retrospective means of condensing the space of time in which we must imagine the inevitable suffering of unseen individuals. Yet, the video of the towers, from the initial impacts to their collapse, measured approximately 102 minutes – a massive space of time in which victims surely contemplated escape, the inevitability of escape, the possibility of their death, and, ultimately, the impossibility of their survival ("Remains of a Day" 58). Post-traumatic visualising serves as the basis for constructing the extended horror as instantaneous, a projection that reflects how we *hoped* the situation might be for those who experienced it, rather than an accurate representation of the lengthy period of time between the beginning and end of the attacks.

<sup>5</sup> The photograph of the "accidental tourist" does not subscribe to the usual tenets of photography that suggest the image we see is, to quote W.J.T. Mitchell, "a purely objective transcript of reality" (Mitchell 281). Rather, this image invites a Burginian "inva[sion] by language in the very moment it is looked at: in memory, in association, [where] snatches of words and images continually intermingle and exchange one for the other" (Burgin 51). One sees the tourist in the photograph as a smiling innocent, posing at the wrong place and at the wrong time. Through that ascription, viewers may justify their anger and melancholy as this singular, visible body (about to be harmed) stands in for countless, unseen others awaiting the same fate. Its discrepancies with the actual opening hours of the WTC observation deck and the positioning of the aircraft largely ignored, the "accidental tourist" photo-manipulation was visualised by countless individuals and forwarded to a plethora of in-boxes because September 11 realities could not be shared intimately on that day, because the death of aircraft passengers, WTC workers, and rescue personnel was an inevitable outcome that could not be visualised as even remotely "actual" or explainable.

<sup>6</sup> Computer-based art and design have shown us that approximations to reality often result in its overall conflation. Accordingly, our desperate hope that we have seen glimpses of the moments before tragedy is ultimately dismantled by an acknowledgement of the illogical or impossible elements that go against the basic rules of visualisation. The "accidental tourist" is a phenomenon that not only epitomises Baudrillard's search for origins in the wake of catastrophic effects, but underscores a collective need to visualise bodies as once-living rather than presently and inevitably dead.

## Faces in the Smoke: Visualising the Unseen

<sup>7</sup> Although such photo-manipulations were rampant in the days and weeks following the attack, many people constructed their own realities in the untouched images that the media streamed to them. The World Trade Centre disaster seemed to implore photography, in particular, to resurrect both the unseen, unremembered moments prior to the airliners' slamming into the building and to perform two distinct roles as the towers burned: to reaffirm the public's perception of the attack as an act of evil and to catalyse a sense of hope that those who perished were touched by God or ushered peacefully to their deaths. Within hours of the attacks, photographic stills captured what many thought to be the image of Satan – complete with horns, face, eyes, nose, and mouth – within the plumes of smoke billowing from one of the towers (see *Figure 2* and its detail in *Figure 3*). The Associated Press, whose footage was most frequently used to reference this visual phenomenon, quickly dismissed the speculation; as Vin Alabiso, an executive photo editor for AP, observed:

AP has a very strict policy which prohibits the alteration of the content of a photo in any way...The smoke in this photo combined with light and shadow has created an image which readers have seen in different ways. ("Angel or Devil?")

<sup>8</sup> Although Alabiso's comments defended the authenticity of the photographs, they also suggested the ways in which visual representation and perception could be affected by catastrophic circumstances. While many observers openly questioned whether the photographs had been "doctored," others all too willingly invested these images with ethereal qualities by asking if the "face" they saw was that of Satan – a question mirroring their belief that such an act of terrorism was clear evidence of evil masterminding. If, as Mitchell has theorised, photographs function through a dialogical exchange of connotative and denotative messages, the photographs of the burning towers instead bombarded viewers with largely connotative messages – in other words, nothing that could precisely link specific bodies to the catastrophe. The visualising of Satan's face happens not because Satan actually dwells within the plumes of smoke, but because the photograph resists Mitchell's dialogue with the melancholic eye. The photograph refuses to "speak" for the individuals we know are suffering behind the layers of smoke, so our own eye constructs what the photograph will not reveal: the "face" of a reality we wish to be represented as deplorably and unquestionably evil.

<sup>9</sup> Barthes has observed that such "variation in readings is not ... anarchic, [but] depends on the different types of knowledge ... invested in the image..." (Barthes 46). In traumatic situations, one might amend this analysis to state that these various readings occur because of *gaps* in this knowledge and because visualisation transforms into an act based on knowledge that we wish we had, that we wish we could share with victims and fellow mourners. These visualisations highlight a desperate need to bridge the viewer's experience of survival and their concomitant knowledge of others' deaths and to link the "safe" visualisation of the catastrophic with the utter submission to catastrophe likely felt by those who died. Explaining the faces in the smoke as "natural indentations" as Alabiso did may be the technical and emotionally neutral means of cataloguing these images; however, the spotting of faces in photographic stills is a mechanism of visualisation that humanises a tragedy in which physical bodies (their death, their mutilation) cannot be seen. Other people who saw photographic stills from other angles and degrees of proximity were quick to highlight the presence of angels in the smoke, as captured by WABC from a perspective entirely different from that in *Figure 2* (instead, see *Figure 3*). In either scenario, photography allows the visual personification of redemptive or evil influences, as well as the ability to visualise the tragedy not just as the isolated destruction of

an architectural marvel, but as a crime against humanity with cosmic importance.

## Sharing the Fall: Desperation and the Photographing of Falling Bodies

<sup>10</sup> Perhaps what became even more troubling than the imagistic conjuring of human forms within the smoke was the photographing of bodies falling from the upper floors of the North Tower (see *Figure 5*). Though newspapers (re-)published photographs of the debris and hysteria of the attacks and television networks (re-)broadcast video sequences of the planes' crashing into the towers and their collapse, the pictures of people jumping from the building were rarely circulated by the media. Dennis Cauchon and Martha T. Moore characterised these consequences of the terrorist attacks as "the most sensitive aspect of the Sept. 11 tragedy ... [that] shocked the nation" (Cauchon and Moore). A delicate balance certainly existed between the media's desire to associate faces with the feelings of desperation we know those who died must have experienced and a now-numb general public who ascribed to the photographs an unequivocal "too-muchness." To read about those who jumped to escape smoke and flames reveals a horrific and frightfully swift narrative of panic:

For those who jumped, the fall lasted 10 seconds. They struck the ground at just less than 150 miles per hour – not fast enough to cause unconsciousness while falling, but fast enough to ensure instant death on impact. People jumped from all four sides of the north tower. They jumped alone, in pairs and in groups. (Cauchon and Moore)

<sup>11</sup> The text contextualises these leaps to death in terms that are understandable to survivors who read the story and later discover these descriptions can never approximate the trauma of "being there": Why did they jump? How fast were they travelling? Did they feel anything when their bodies hit the ground? Were they conscious during their jump? Did they die alone? These questions and their answers put into motion the very moment that the photograph of the jumping man has frozen. Words act as extensions of the physical boundaries of the photograph and underscore the horror of that image, from the description of the conditions that prompted the jump to the pondering of the death that was its consequence. If, as Jonathan Crary's analysis of photographic viewing might intimate, visualisation prompts both an "autonomy of vision" and a "standardisation and regulation of the observer" (Crary 150), the photograph of a man plummeting to his death fashions the viewer's eye as autonomous and alive because the image he/she views is the undeniable representation of a now-deceased Other. Yet, as seen in the often-hysterical responses to the threats of terrorism in the days following September 11, this "Other" embodies the very possibility of our own demise. Suddenly, the man we see in mid-air becomes the visualised "Every(wo)man" whose photographic representation also represents *our* unacknowledged vulnerabilities. Thus, trauma is shared through a poignant visual negotiation of dying: the certainty of the photographed man's death juxtaposed with the newly realised or conjured threat of the viewer's own death.

<sup>12</sup> In terms of humanness, those who witnessed these falls firsthand recall the ways in which the falling people became objectified – their fall seemingly robbing them of any visible sense of humanity. Eric Thompson, an employee on the seventy-seventh floor of the South Tower, shared an instantaneous moment with one of the victims:

Thompson looked the man in the face. He saw his tie flapping in the wind. He watched the man's body strike the pavement below. "There was no human resemblance whatsoever," Thompson says. (Cauchon and Moore)

<sup>13</sup> Obviously, the *in-situ* experience of viewing these individuals hopelessly jumping to their deaths served as the prompt to run away, to escape, but the photograph acts as the frozen-in-time re-visitation and sharing of – a turning back toward – this scenario. The act of viewing the photographs reinstates the humanness that the panic of the moment seemingly removed; yet, the disparity between the photograph's foreground (the jumping man) and its background (the building's façade) remains its greatest disconcerting element. Unlike those photographic portraits that script behaviours and capture us in our most presentable states of being, this photograph reveals the unwilling subject – he who has not consented to share his state of being with the camera. Though W.J.T. Mitchell suggests that "[p]hotographs...seem necessarily incomplete in their imposition of a frame that can never include everything that was there to be...taken" (Mitchell 289), the eye in times of catastrophe shifts between its desire to maintain the frame (that does not visually engage the inferno from which the man jumped or the concrete upon which he died) and its inability to do so. This photograph, as Mitchell might assert, "speaks" because visualisation allows its total frame of reference to extend beyond its physical boundaries and, as evidenced by post-September 11 phobias and our responses to horrific images, to affect the very means by which catastrophe is imagined and visualised.

<sup>14</sup> Technically speaking, the negotiated balance between foreground and background in the photograph is lost: the desperation of the falling man juxtaposed with a seemingly impossible background that should not have been there. Lost, too, is the viewer's ability to "connect" visually with – literally, to share – that experience, to see oneself within the contexts of that particular visual representation. This inability to see the viewing self in the photograph is an ironic moment of experiential possibility that lingers still in the Western world's fears surrounding terrorism: when the supposedly impossible act is finally visualised, territorialised, and rendered as possible.

## Dead Art: The Destructions and Resurrections of Works by Rodin

<sup>15</sup> In many ways, the photographing of those experiences so divorced from our own contributed to intense discussions of perspective in visualisation: the viewer's witnessing of trauma by means of

a camera and photographer that captured the image from a "safe" distance. However, the recovery of artwork that actually suffered damage as a result of the World Trade Centre collapse prompted many art historians and theorists to ponder the possibilities of art's death and to contemplate the fate of art that is physically victimised. In an anticipatory vein, J.M. Bernstein suggests that "art ends as it becomes progressively further distanced from truth and moral goodness, as it loses its capacity to speak the truth about our most fundamental categorical engagements..." (Bernstein 5). If Bernstein's theory is applied to those works damaged at the World Trade Centre site, the sculptures of Rodin, so famously photographed in the weeks of excavation that followed September 11, could be categorised as "dead" – distanced from the "truth" of human form that Rodin cast, even further from the moral goodness and the striving toward global peace that the Cantor Fitzgerald collection aimed to embrace. While many art critics believed that the destroyed works should not be displayed again, many (including Fritz Koenig, who designed *The Sphere*, which was damaged in the terrorist attacks) believe that such "dead art" deserves, even requires, resuscitation (see *Figure 6*). Much like the American flags that survived the infernos at the World Trade Centre and Pentagon site, these lost and re-discovered artworks have served as rallying points to accomplish both the sharing of trauma and an artistically inspired foundation for the re-development of the lower Manhattan site.

<sup>16</sup> In the case of Rodin's *The Thinker*, which was recovered at the site and later presumed stolen, the statue's discovery alongside aircraft parts and twisted steel girders served as a unique and rare survival story, almost as the surrogate representative body for those human bodies that were never found, never seen. Dan Barry and William K. Rashbaum recall that in the days following the sculpture's disappearance, "investigators have been at Fresh Kills [landfill] and at ground zero in recent weeks, flashing a photograph of 'The Thinker' and asking, in effect: Have you seen this symbol of humanity" (Barry and Rashbaum)? Given such symbolic weight, sculpture most certainly took on superhuman proportions. Yet, in the days that followed the discovery of artwork that survived the attacks, only passing references were made to those figurative paintings and drawings by Picasso, Hockney, Lichtenstein, and Miró that were lost – perhaps because their subject matter or manner of artistic representation did not (or could not) reflect a "true" infliction of damage and pain the way a three-dimensional, human-like sculpture could. Viewers visualised not only the possibility of their own cultural undoing by seeing damaged Rodins, but also the embodiment of unseen victims' bodies that could not be recovered. In a rousing speech about September 11 as an attack upon the humanities and the production of culture, Bruce Cole stated that "the loss of artifacts and art, no matter how priceless and precious, is dwarfed by the loss of life" (Cole). Nevertheless, the visualisation of maimed, disfigured art was the lens through which many individuals understood the immensity of that loss of life and the finality of their loved ones' disappearances.

<sup>17</sup> What the destruction and damaging of artwork on September 11 created was an atmosphere in which art, traditionally conjured as the studied and inanimate subject, transformed from a *determined* to a *determining* influence, a re-working of Paul Smith's theory in which "the 'subject' ... is determined – the object of determinant forces; whereas 'the individual' is assumed to be determining" (Smith xxxiv). Damaged sculptures gave representative form to the thousands of victims we, as a visualising public, knew were inside the towers, but their survival spoke to larger artistic issues: the impossibility of art's end and the foiling of its death. Baudrillard's notion of the "impossibility of ending" demonstrates that the destruction of art (in the capitalistic sense that is contingent on its undamaged condition and its prescribed worth and "value") does not equate to the destruction of meaning as such, but that the new and re-negotiated meanings deployed by injured art frighteningly implicate us – *viewers* who once assigned meaning becoming the *subjects* who long to be assigned *something, anything*, be it solace, closure, or retribution. Importantly, the latest plans for the re-vitalised World Trade Centre site indicate that the damaged Rodin and Koenig sculptures will semiotically mediate the significations established when the original World Trade Centre was a vital nexus of activity in lower Manhattan, the shock and pain experienced when the towers collapsed and individuals were searching for meaning in art's destruction and survival, and the hope many have invested in the new buildings and their role in the maintenance and recovery of memory.

## A Concluding Thought

<sup>18</sup> Digital manipulation, photography, and the re-contextualisation of artistic "masterpieces" from their hermetic placement in the gallery to their brutal dumping in a landfill have served as the humanistic prompts that actively determined the ways in which culture grappled with and shared unimaginable horror. Images have transformed in purpose from static re(-)presentations of reality to active, changing conduits by which pasts can be remembered, by which the intangibility of death can be given substance, by which unshared moments can be more intimately considered. Oddly, visualisation has performed simultaneously two disparate functions: separating the living from the dead through a panoply of re-affirming visual experiences and permitting the re-visitation of those times, events, and people that the human eye could not see itself. Ultimately, what the manipulations, misinterpretations, and destructions of art show us is that the conveyance of meaning between individuals, whether dead or alive, whether seen or unseen, is the image's most pressing and difficult charge.

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