The rise of a narrative and the narrative of a fall; an image comparison of Richard Drew's 'Falling Man' and Jerry Siegel's/Joe Shuster's Superman.

By Jeroen Zwaap

"We already know the identity of the man in the picture.
He is you and me."
(Richard Drew)

I cannot remember when it was for the first time, I saw Richard Drew's picture of what is now known as 'The Falling Man' nor can I remember what I was thinking or feeling when being confronted with this picture. But it has become an image that got stuck in my mind, like a splinter of which one cannot recollect the when, where, how and why it found its way in ones' body. And not unlike the body would try to push the splinter out, my mind wants to expel this image. It tries to by understanding the image, by understanding the relation it has to the world and by understanding the resonance it has with me. But by understanding more I understand less and my fascination only grows, and the splinter works its way deeper into my mind.
Although I cannot exactly remember what I felt when I saw this image for the first time, I can *imagine* what I felt. I can imagine that I saw the human vulnerability in the most intimate of moments in a human life. The grace of it. The calmness aimed head-down towards the inevitable. I must have seen the juxtaposition between the graceful fall and the horrific timeline that lead to this fall. I think I did not understand the power of photography yet (do I today?), but I must have seen how time had been suspended and created an aura, or maybe even a protective shield, of timelessness around the person. And although there are no recognizable facial features, I would've recognized myself in this person. I would have asked myself: what would I feel, what would I do? Recognizing oneself in the Other is recognizing the Other in oneself. Recognizing the vulnerability within the Other, is facing ones' own vulnerability.
Later on, in the process of getting a better understanding of this picture, I would find out that it (as did the many other photos of victims that day the Twin Towers fell) had almost been written out of history, out of time and out of our collective memory. The event almost did not happen. This person almost did not die, but also never lived. His choices and thoughts that day, his timeline almost got erased, swept under the carpet of all the more favorable narratives of that day. Destruction would not have been more complete. But I wrote 'almost'. For some reason this picture found its way back in the public eye. Something in this picture made it resistant to forgetting. Something in this picture appealed to a narrative, could get a hold on to it, get a grip. In this essay I want to explore why this picture could hold on and to which narrative it may have been -and still is- appealing.

"Ooh Superman where are you now
When everything's gone wrong somehow
The men of steel, the men of power
Are losing control by the hour."
(Genesis, *Land of Confusion*)

In the wake of 9/11 superhero comic books were the first to respond artistically to the tragic events of that day. **[1]** Marvels *Heroes* appeared in December 2001, followed by *A Moment of Silence* in February 2002. Soon after Marvel DC published also two volumes; *9/11 Artists Respond (Vol.1)* and *9/11: The World's Finest Artists Tell Stories To Remember (Vol.2)*. Responses of both DC and Marvel were accompanied with images of superheroes being shattered, broken and stunned in the face of the destruction in their homeland. Their helplessness symbolized the trauma the United States had suffered. How could it be that not even these superheroes with their supernatural strengths had not been able to prevent the attack? Reality was undeniable and had ruthlessly invaded the realm of the American Superhero.

That it was precisely Marvel and DC to be the first to respond to 9/11 in an artistical way can be explained from the origins of the comic book. The comic book, as a format of telling a story through multiple colored panels, can be seen as a typical American cultural creation, with its Golden Age lasting from the 1930s until the 1950s. **[2]** The Golden Age of Comic Books coinciding with Great Depression and World War Two was no coincidence, tapping into a cultural need of cheap entertainment. Also, the comic book being a Jewish-American invention can be seen in the light of the America of the Great Depression, where many Jewish artists and writers were unemployed because of anti-Semitic sentiments and had started to build an industry of their own as a reaction to these sentiments. **[3]** The 1930s movies and comics provided a cheap way of escaping ones sorrows, or to quote then President Roosevelt: "*When the spirit of the people is lower than at any other time during this Depression, it is a splendid thing that for just 15 cents an American can go to a movie and forget his troubles.*". Both movies and comic books provided a way to escape, but comic books provided this need for cheap escapism even better than movies. Just for 10 cents one could buy a comic book. Unlike movies a comic book could be read and re-read as much as one wanted. And in a way it was far ahead of its time; where entertainment in 21th century is easily shared and traded via the different platforms of social media, this was not the case in the first half of the 20th century. The one exception on this rule being the comic book.
In 1934 writer Jerry Siegel and artist Joe Shuster, both Jewish immigrants, created Superman, the Man of Steel, who got his debut in 1938. The launch of the self-titled series in 1939 has widely been heralded as the beginning of The Golden Age of Comic Books. Superman was a new kind of folk hero; he was the ultimate immigrant, one whose adventures did not take place in the rural frontiers of America but took the readers to the city. Or as historian of comic books Bradfort Wright put it: "*America demanded a superhero*

who could resolve the tensions of individuals in an increasingly urban, consumer driven, and anonymous mass society." (2001)
Opposed to later times where Superman fights incredible powerful and fantastic supervillains, in the early days he took down the real villains of the Great Depression; bosses who exploited their workers, fraudulent stockbrokers and corrupt politicians. No longer were comic books just a way to escape the sorrows of a new modernity, American culture of the common man wanted, if not *needed*, to see someone triumph; a New Deal Hero.

From 'How would Superman end the War'

When the 1930s shifted into the 1940s also the role of the Superhero shifted as well. The geopolitical situation was that of a looming World War. And although there was nothing Jewish to the characters (and maybe one could even say they were contrasting the anti-Semitic stereotype), their mostly Jewish creators would occasionally slip in a nod to their cultural background. For example, even before America got involved in World War Two and sentiments were still mostly of American isolationism, one could see Captain America and Superman already whooping Nazi-Asses. This showed the view of the creators on the dangers of Hitler's Germany, the role they wanted America to play in the world and their understanding of the power of comic books. They wanted the American public to get involved. **[3]** With this, the role of the Superhero altered from the triumphing New Deal Hero into the personification of a national identity. To quote Bradford Wright again: "*The common man of the Depression era was now America itself, a repository of virtue and morality charged with extending justice and freedom to the oppressed in Europe and Asia*." After the attack on Pearl Harbor and America's Declaration of War the comic book became a powerful – yet uncommissioned and bottom-up- propaganda tool. To illustrate the influence of the comic books; when the war started about 15 million copies a month were being sold. Two years later 25 million copies were sold and by 1947 the numbers rose to a stunning 60 million copies a month. **[4]** The combination of the triumphing hero as symbol for the virtue of the moral superior nation made comic books in my opinion a key asset in the creation of the modern-day narratives of American exceptionalism and victory culture. It was these two narratives that were brought down to their knees on the 11th of September 2001. I am therefor convinced that if we want to gain a better understanding of why Richard Drews 'Falling Man' found the opposition it got and at the same time was able to survive censorship, we have to dive deeper into the cultural influence of comic book superheroes by using image comparison as a tool.

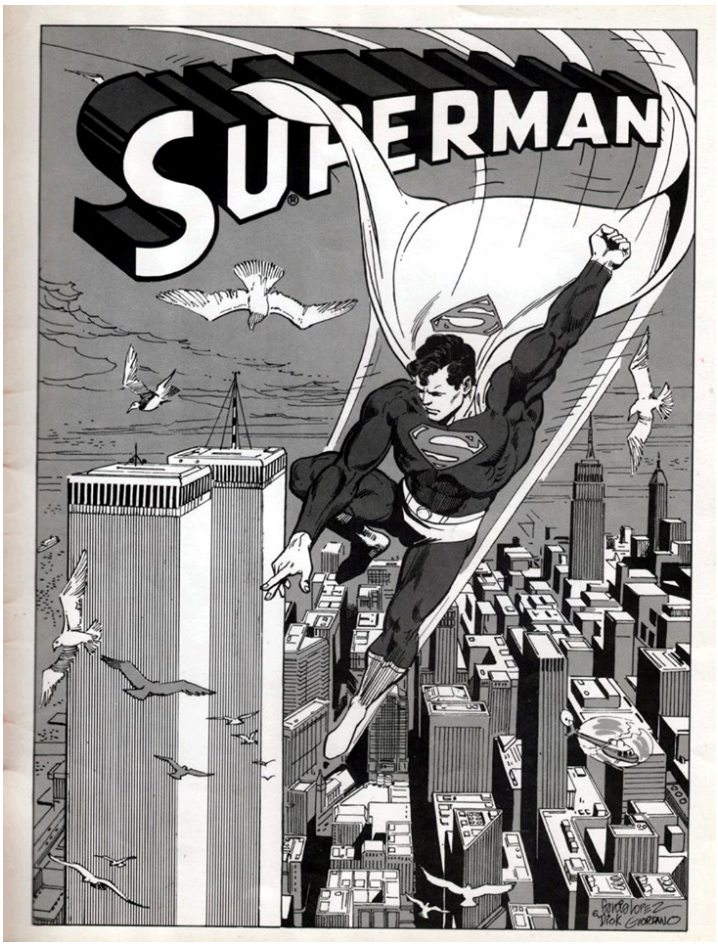
"To catch death actually happening and embalm it for all times is something only cameras can do […]"
(Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others)*

Time 100 Photo "The most influential photos of all time": The Falling Man.

On a first impression we see a person (a man?) with dark pants and a creamy white overall against a background of vertical lines, the head pointing towards the bottom, his feet to the upside. Is he falling? The control the man seems to have over his body does not convey a misfortune or an accident. His heavy dark shoes are weightless. Is he flying? Is he floating? The composition of this photo is almost perfect. The man in the center of the photo, he is on the dividing line where the background transcends from left to right into lighter shades. The man has his knees bent slightly, his arms to the sides of his body, his glance towards the direction he seems to be heading: down. The pose is calm and resigned, his glance almost daring. Nothing indicates a panicking man, a man in distress. This is what I call the Superman pose. "Everything is under control. I am only falling."
And we are falling with him, floating next to him, but we keep our distance. He looks small, his outlines are vague, we cannot see the color of his skin, nor can we look him in the face and the eyes to see what is going on there. The grainy vertical lines behind him are shimmering. The structure of glass and metal -the darker half on the left is the North Tower I know now; the other half (the South Tower) is in the full light of a sunny day- is aligning and in complete accordance with the man. It conveys the transition of that day and the transitional state the man is in. There is no horizon, but its absence is only emphasizing its existence. "It's only a matter of time", the vertical lines of the structure seem to say. A matter of time. The man with the creamy white blouse and heavy shoes floats in the middle of the frame. Time is suspended. This suspension of time forms a protective shield around him. It protects him from falling swiftly out of frame, to what is a certain death. This is what Susan Sontag meant when she wrote that "*catching death from happening and embalming it for all times is something that only cameras can do*". The photograph as a last witness acknowledges the man's existence for the last time. I think of Superman again, and the comics I read as a small child. The fluttering of the man's blouse looks even somewhat of that of an angelic cape.

The photo is a part of series of many photos of falling (or jumping) people, shot by AP photographer Richard Drew in front of the Twin Towers in New York on a day that is now known for its code: 911. Of all these pictures this one stood out. Richard Drew in an interview with Time: "That picture just jumped off the screen because of its verticality and symmetry. It just had that look."
The next day the photo ran in many newspapers. Although 9-11 being the most video- and photographed event in history, it was one of the few photos of victims dying that run that day. The image provoked such a strong reaction of the readers that even until the day of today many newspapers published this picture once and never again. Angry phone calls and letters were directed to the editors, accusing them of the desecration, exploitation, pornography and stripping a man of his last dignity. It led to an unprecedented self-censorship and -at least for a few years- this now iconic photo would vanish from the public eye. Or in the words of writer Tom Junod: "*In the most photographed and videotaped day in the history of the world, the images of people jumping were the only images that became, by consensus, taboo- the only images from which Americans were proud to avert their eyes."* **[5]** In his essay 'Flying Man and Falling Man: Remembering and Forgetting 9/11' Graley Herren explains that it was not only what the photograph depicted, but also how it had been depicted that made it so disturbing and obscene for many people: *"[…]but that it does so in such an aesthetically pleasing way […] raising concerns that Drew's real agenda may have been less to bear witness than to win himself a Pulitzer Prize*". But at the same time, Herren argues, ethical standards applied here are relative and contingent. He is referring to the discrepancy between the reception of Drew's photo and the much-praised images of rescuers and helpers that day, bringing the photograph of the salvage of Father Mychal Judge's body into remembrance as a sort of hagiography. "*Why? Presumably because the image in this case bears witness to American heroism and noble sacrifice. […] Drew's crime was not so much framing and disseminating the perfect shot as it was aiding and abetting the enemy by allowing his camera to be turned against his own people*." **[6]** This mechanism of self-censorship cannot only be seen as a reflex of the American traditional media but also and foremost of the American public, which wasn't ready to see itself depictured as a victim. The Falling Man image might have slipped into the archives of history and would've soon be forgotten if it wasn't for the rise of a relatively young and unchartered medium at that time: the Internet. **[7]** Although a young medium it already had the same combination of uncensored lawlessness and unrelenting unforgetfulness of the contemporary internet. The Falling Man, among other (gorier) photographs kept on circulating on various platforms, until the time was right to resurface again in more contemplational contexts with the novels 'Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close' by Jonathan Safran (2005) and 'Falling Man' by Don Delillo (2007), as well as the documentary 'Falling Man 9/11' by writer Tom Junod in 2006. What these had in common was the search for identity, fictional or true. Half a decennium after the attacks on the WTC the first steps in creating a new or counternarrative -or restoring an old one as the rise of Trump (off all people) might suggest- were taken. And in this contextual meaning the image of The Falling Man resonated with those who were questioning themselves. Questions like: who are we? How could this happen to us? Why did it happen to us? What is our role in the world?

"We dared to hope we had invented something that would bring lasting peace to the earth.
But we were wrong."
(Orville Wright)



Superman Soaring over the Twin Towers (Famous First Edition C-61, 1976) by Jose Luis Garcia-Lopez & Dick Giordano

These existential questions bring me to the comparison image, because in my opinion it might give us some clues to why the Falling Man image may have been resonating in that early post 911 context. I choose this black and white drawing of Superman by Jose Luis Garcia-Lopez & Dick Giordano with the title 'Superman Soaring of the Twin Towers' from 1976. I could have chosen many images of Superman because of his iconic cultural status, but I choose specifically this image because it also brings Superman in the setting of the Twin Towers just after they had been built in 1973 and briefly became the two highest buildings in the world.
In this image we see Superman in full flight above the (once) typical New York skyline with the Twin Towers just behind Superman and a bit further in the background the Empire State Building. While accompanied by seagulls and a helicopter Superman seems to descend from the sky in his archetypical posture, with one leg bent at the knee. His stare is focused on something happening beneath him, which is for us, the viewer, out of frame. That his left arm is pointing with his index and middle finger, has almost something of a biblical gesture. He holds his right arm up high like a torch, resembling that other New York iconic monument: The Statue of Liberty.
New York City in the 1970's was the real-life embodiment of Superman's Metropolis (which got his name from Fritz Lang's cult classic 'Metropolis'). The gradual economic and social decay that set in in the 1960's was now on full display; high crime rates, social disorders and police corruption, next to a serious fiscal crisis that brought New York on the brink of bankruptcy. When in 1960 the World Trade

Center project was conceived by the Rockefeller family, its intention was already to stimulate Lower Manhattan's economy. The design was to symbolize and solidify the United States' global position in international trade. It was meant to be the worlds' tallest building facing Europe "to capture world attention". When the WTC was opened it marked the beginning of economic regeneration of New York City. Specifically, the Twin Towers acclaimed fame and notification as the soul of New York, embodying (economic) power, prosperit and cosmopolitan freedom. **[9]** Or to quote the architect Minoru Yamasaki: "*World trade means world peace [..] The World Trade Center should, because of its importance become a representation of man's belief in humanity, his need for individual dignity, his beliefs in the cooperation of men, and through cooperation, his ability to find greatness*." **[8]** But more than that, the structure embodied the American spirit. It was a monument for America's view on the world and constituted its economical, geopolitical and moral superiority in the world. But the grandeur of the Twin Towers was also in dissonance with the social surroundings of 1970's New York which saw murders, rape and police corruption on the rise. **[9]** It is in that context we must look at Superman's role in the image. His roots being that of the champion of the common man, who fought against (social) injustice, the presence of Superman in New York brings the fiction in to realm of reality and compares the city to the turbulent dynamics of Superman's Metropolis. In the DC Universe Metropolis stands as symbol for optimism and progress and with that Superman as its protector. The powers of Superman evolved over time from just being super strong to the godlike powers he has nowadays (Superman's real name 'Kal-El' is close to Hebrew signs for 'God's Word). This evolution cannot be seen separately from the shift in the symbolic role Superman plays in American culture. From the champion of the common man and the super immigrant his role gradually shifted to the personification of American virtues and moral superiority. And similarities can be drawn between how Superman took on his role as protector of Metropolis and the moral based foreign policy of the United States, as 'policemen and -women of the world' and the right to act on that without a check of power. Based on the symbolic meanings I am convinced that the image of Giordano and Garcia-Lopez is -willingly or unwillingly- an actual close representation of how the United States perceived themselves and their role in the world at that time. Until 9-11 2001 that is.

Now having a better understanding of both images standing alone, connecting these two in how they compare and contrast, it can provide us an insight in the question why the photograph of The Falling Man initially found the backlash it got but later on resonated in the search for a new counternarrative. I will do this by comparing three elements of the images: time, location and subject.

The Time

The Superman image has been created in 1976. The 1970's were a decade that is portrayed by many historians as a 'pivot of change' in the world history. In this decennium we saw many developments on a social, social-economic and geopolitical level, ending with the crux year 1979. It's the decade where individualism came to rise ("The Me-Decade and the Third Great Awakening" by Tom Wolf in 1976). Neoliberalism started to take over from the post-World War dominant Keynesian economics. In China the death of Mao Zedong marked the beginning of market liberalization. In the Middle East significant changes of regimes and coalitions took place that would have their impact onto the day of today. The Russian-Afghan War in 1979 heralded the downfall of the Soviet Union in the 1980's. The Falling Man photograph was shot on September the 11th 2001 which can be seen as the end of a decade that is characterized by post-Cold War economic growth, the rise of new communication technologies and globalization. But also an increasing tension between ideologies that led to ethnical conflicts and terrorism as a way to resist Western dominance. 911 was the tentative culmination of those tensions.

In a way we can say that the time period in which the Superman drawing was made led to terrorist attacks on 911. Both images represent the beginning and the end of that timeline.

The Location
In both images the location is New York City, with the Twin Towers as prominent signifiers. But their symbolic meanings contrast. In the Superman image we see New York as Superman's Metropolis, a place standing for progress and optimism. The Twin Towers in the Superman image solidifies the self-image of the United States at that time; the dominant Superpower, the Leader and Protector of the Free World, a center of peace and prosperity. In the Falling Man photo the meaning of Twin Towers is opposite to that in the Superman image. We see the Twin Towers as an abstract background just after two airplanes flew into them, making them into a place of terror, a human trap with just a one-way exit. We know that not long after the photo the Twin Towers and everyone and everything within would crumble and turn into dust and ashes. It signifies the end of the presumption that the United States are invulnerable, and it is a starting point for reflection on its exceptionalism and with that its role in the world.

The subject
In the Falling Man photo the subject is a man of whom we know we see his last moments alive. We see him plunge to his death, but at the same time his place in the frame and his body posture is of such an aesthetic that it oozes control and resignation. If we would turn the photo upside down, we could even imagine he was flying. And although his identity is until the day of today uncertain, we know who he is. As Richard Drew put it himself: "*We already know the identity of the man in the picture. He is you and me.*" The man is an American Everyman, he stands for all who died that day and that could've been anyone being on wrong place on the wrong time. The innocents who suffer in a destructive war they have little say over or in. But now he is not Japanese, German or Vietnamese; he is American and on home soil. In the Superman image we see another kind of Everyman; he has superpowers, yes, but he just happens to have them. Clark Kent is the true expression of the character. In him we see all the virtues imbued where the American people stand for. Honesty, justice, sense of duty, wisdom, loyalty, toughness, strength and leadership. He is the most American of all superheroes. He is the Empowered Everyman. Acclaimed Scottish comic writer Grant Morisson would write about Superman: "*I was beginning to understand something that gave me power over my fears. Before it was a Bomb, the Bomb was an Idea. Superman, however, was a Faster, Stronger, Better Idea."* **[10]** Both Everymans are each other opposites, but at the same time so similar. We can see the Superman in the Falling Man and the Falling Man in Superman. And maybe it was the Superman in every American that fell that day, conveyed in the Falling Man picture.

The reason that The Falling Man got the backlash it got when published on September 12th 2001 was not because it stripped away the humanity of a man that day. The picture did not primarily evoke disgust, anger, outrage or fear; in all its grace and beauty it evoked foremost empathy. It showed what it meant to be human and vulnerable, to have lost control, and having to choose between ways of dying. It brought war at the doorsteps of every American. And war was not how 'they show it in the pictures'. This was not the narrative that Americans were prepared for. Empathy makes you look in the mirror and reflect on yourself, even if that is inconvenient. This picture made America look into the mirror and avert its eyes, because it showed an inconvenient truth. But one cannot avert his eyes forever. Half a decade after 911 the first cautious attempts to reflect were being made. With those who were prepared to question themselves and America the picture of the Fallen Man resonated. The calmness, stillness and resignation of the Falling Man embodied the fall of a Superman, it gave those who questioned themselves a medium to communicate their questions through. Reflections on why this happened, who America is and what its role in the world is. Questions that in my opinion echo until the day of today and may give us insight in the struggle of contemporary America.

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[6] Herren, Graley; *Flying Man and Falling Man: Remembering and Forgetting 9/11* (2014)
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