

The Camera Captures You as You Fall: An Analysis of Carol Ann Duffy's Poem on *The Falling Soldier*

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The Camera Captures You as You Fall: An Analysis of Carol Ann Duffy's Poem on *The Falling Soldier*

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Abstract: In her poem "The Falling Soldier" Carol Ann Duffy explores Robert Capa's famous photograph of the same name. The discussion regarding the supposed staged nature of the photo serves a pivotal role in her ekphrastic poem. She departs from the standard ekphrastic three-way conversation between work, speaker and audience and includes this public discussion, and explores the nature of photography itself. Her stance that the photograph's message does not suffer even if the picture were fake leads to the conclusion that the relationship between photography and reality is far less important than some claim it is.

Keywords: Ekphrastic poetry, war photography, art and reality

The cloud of dust that rose from the impact of the soldier falling on the dry Spanish earth is nothing compared to the dust kicked up by the picture Robert Capa took of him on that September day in 1936. The photo that is now commonly known as *The Falling Soldier* depicts a Republican soldier falling backwards after having been reportedly shot to death. The picture is part of a series of pictures that figures a group of soldiers in a field as they apparently make mock manoeuvres. Robert Capa was one of the first independent war correspondents in an era that saw the emergence of war photography in the form that is known today. The 1930s were such a revolutionary time for war correspondence due to the fact that innovations in camera technology allowed photographers to take pictures faster and as they were no longer forced to use a tripod, they were freer in their movements. These innovations made pictures possible:

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that brought the war front closer to the public than ever, their gritty and graphic photographs of soldiers (men and women) in action, bombed homes and villages, maimed children, corpses and grieving survivors were something completely new for readers/viewers of the time, raising the visual expectations of the image-viewing public ever after. (Griffin, "Media Images" 10)

Thus, these images drastically altered the public's view on war.

Capa's picture, being one of the first to capture death in war at the very moment it happened, quickly gathered fame after publications in the French pictorial magazine *VU* and later in *Time Magazine*. When in 2008 the Barbican Centre hosted an exhibition in honour of this and other photos by Capa, they asked poet Carol Ann Duffy to write a poem on one of the photos. She chose to write about *The Falling Soldier* in a poem of the same name. In doing so, Duffy faced difficulties that are not present in Ekphrastic poetry on more traditional forms of visual arts, such as painting or sculpting. One of these difficulties is that "the convention that artists 'make' drawings and paintings while photographers 'take' photographs" (Sontag 37). This difference makes that photos could be considered a representation of reality rather than a work of art. In addition, Capa's photo is famous and has attracted so much attention from critics that this discourse around the photo has become fused with the picture itself. Thus, Duffy's poem invites a discussion on the relation between words and images in ekphrastic poetry when it concerns a photograph, an alleged reality that is also formed by the discourse around it. After discussing the ongoing debate on the authenticity of Capa's photograph, this article will explore Duffy's ekphrastic approach to both the photograph and this debate. Following this, the article will examine the implications Duffy's approach has on reading war photography and photography as a whole.

The legacy of *The Falling Soldier*

Before I can discuss Duffy's poem, I must address the debate that has become inseparable from the picture itself. Robert Whelan, a Capa biographer and good friend of Robert Capa's brother Cornell Capa, has been documenting the controversy. In his article "Proving that Robert Capa's 'Falling Soldier' is Authentic" and later in his book *Robert Capa at Work: This is War* (2007), Whelan attempts to recount all the doubts cast upon Capa's photo, to subsequently refute them and prove the photo's authenticity. In order to give a good picture of

the discussion surrounding the photo and because of Whelan's important position in it, a short summary of his work will be provided here.

The first doubts concerning Capa's photo arose when Philip Knightley, a journalist, published his book *The First Casualty: From the Crimea to Vietnam; The War Correspondent as Hero, Propagandist, and Myth Maker* (1975), which featured an interview with O.D. Gallagher who worked as a journalist in Spain during the Spanish Civil War. In his work, Knightley recounts the interview as follows:

There had been little action for several days, and Capa and others complained to the Republican officers that he could not get any pictures. Finally [...] a Republican officer told them he would detail some troops to go with Capa to some trenches nearby, and they would stage some manoeuvres for them to photograph. Capa came back at the end of the day delighted with what he had taken. When the 'moment of death' photograph was published, Gallagher says he remarked to Capa how genuine the picture looked, because it was not quite in focus. (212)

This interview cast serious doubts upon the authenticity of Capa's photo. However, when another interview with O.D. Gallagher was published in *Camera at War* (1978), Gallagher's story was changed to pertain to Nationalist soldiers, rather than to republican soldiers as he had stated before. This was cause for Whelan to dismiss Gallagher's story altogether as unreliable for the simple reason that Capa was nowhere near Hendaye (where Gallagher claims they had shared a hotel room) and the fact that the nationalist side did not allow leftist journalists in their territories; this quelled the doubts on the authenticity of Capa's photograph for a short period.

However, this does not change the fact that these falsifying practices did happen, and that Capa on occasion had taken pictures of fake battles, such as his pictures of the battle of La Granjuela. These charges of fabrication are described by Michael Griffin as "a recurrent characteristic of war photography" ("The Great War" 135). In his documentation, Whelan recognizes this and in order to prove the authenticity of Capa's photo he brings forth an eyewitness. Although he witnessed neither Capa taking the picture nor the death of the soldier, he at least witnessed the battle that took place in the same area. This witness was Mario Brotóns Jordá, who claims to have recognized the man in the photo as Federico Borrell García; Rita Grosvenor and Arnold Kemp published this discovery in an article in 1996. Brotóns' claim was that Federico died on September 5, 1936 in

battle at Cerro Muriano. He based his conclusion on archival material that gives Federico's name as the only person of that unit to die at that day. Philip Knightley's response was: "Federico could have posed for the photograph before he was killed" (qtd. in Whelan, *This is War* 12). In response to this, Whelan contacted Robert L. Franks, a homicide detective of the Memphis Police Department, who confirmed that the man on the picture was probably dead based on the lack of fall reflex in the hands, although he does notice that the man had both his feet flat on the ground and was thus standing still and not charging. For Whelan this was the final piece of the puzzle that led him back to a letter sent to him in the 1930s by Hansel Mieth, which stated that Capa and the soldiers were fooling around when they were suddenly fired upon, resulting in the death of Federico. Whelan concludes his article by saying: "May the slanderous controversy that has plagued Robert Capa's reputation for more than twenty-five years come now, at last, to an end with a verdict decisively in favor of Capa's integrity" (*This is War* 18), as for him this cast aside any remaining doubts.

Unfortunately for Whelan this was not the end of the debate, as in 2009 an article appeared in the Spanish newspaper *El Periodico* which matched the skyline in Capa's photos to a skyline not in Cerro Muriano, but near the town of Espejo nearly fifty kilometers away. In his book *Shadows of Photography* (2008), Jose Manuel Susperregui reiterates these claims and states that, as there was no fighting in that area of Spain until the end of September, the photo must have been staged. Again, this sparked numerous reactions with some damning Capa for lying and making a fool out of his audience, and with others, such as Willis E. Hartshorn who was the director of the International Center of Photography at the time, claiming the leap from citing a wrong location to declaring the photo as a fake is one "that [...] needs a lot more research and a lot more study" (qtd. in Rohteraug). Then there are also those that ask whether or not it matters if he lied? Professor Tim Kendall is one of the people asking this question. He dismisses the arguments by newspaper correspondent John Manning who said, "even if there are doubts about the authenticity of this 'classic image of war,' its functional impact surely matters more than to insist that 'facts' are 'sacred'". Instead, Kendall claims that "[i]t is an issue of ethical importance that a journalist reporting from a warzone should tell the truth. He ends his article with the powerful statement that "[t]he images are cheapened – trivialised – as a consequence." The dynamic at work here revolves around the very nature of photography. For some, like Kendall, the "mirror metaphor," (13) as Edward Epstein called it, or the belief that journalists should reflect what they see like a mirror, is critical. Similarly Frank Van Riper claims that "photographs are the

equivalent of direct quotations and therefore are sacrosanct" and that any form of fabrication is sacrilege and against all journalistic norms. For others, such as Robert Hariman and John Lucaites, the relationship between such photos and actual events becomes subordinate to the statements these photographs aim to convey.

This discussion is not new, as according to David Evans and Sylvia Gohl the view of photography as truthful representation has always lived alongside art forms that used photo manipulation (75). The origin of this lies perhaps, as claimed by Chris Jenks, in the fact that vision has become "conflated with cognition" (1); the notion that seeing is somehow believing. And indeed a photograph is a testament that something was there, what Roland Barthes calls "that-has-been" (77). There exists a link between a photograph and its referent, though it is not always clear what this link is exactly. As Emmanuel-Pierre Guittet and Andreja Zevnik explain, "[t]he audience of war photography is not interested in the photo per se, but always, understandably, in its referent, with its actions and states of distress, to which the person looking can relate" (199). The viewer experiences something as a result of this identification on the presumption that the scene is real and thus feels betrayed when it turns out to be staged. In this case the image is perceived as fake due to its hypertext, particularly its original title: *Loyalist militiaman at the moment of Death, Cerro Muriano, September 5, 1936*. Over the course of time the title became *The Falling Soldier*, which is exactly what is depicted, and this title makes no reference to Capa's claim that he captured the specific event of a soldier dying.

Where words worked to obfuscate the authenticity of the photo, Carol Ann Duffy uses words to create clarity. As William J.T. Mitchell explains, "[t]he ekphrastic poet typically stands in a middle position between the object described or addressed and a listening subject who [...] will be made to 'see' the object through the medium of the poet's voice" (164) – although, as the next section explains, in this case the poet will not only show the "object" but also the discussion surrounding the object.

The ekphrastic approach

When Carol Ann Duffy, Britain's poet laureate, wrote about Capa's "Falling Soldier" it was no surprise that this discussion on the authenticity of the photo returned in her poem. However, not everyone appreciated "The Falling Soldier," as her poem is called. William Logan, in his review of her works *Rapture* (2005) and *The Bees* (2009), asks: why must "the death of the falling soldier in Robert Capa's terrifying Spanish Civil War photograph be commemorated by an Irish

jig?" When Logan is referring to an Irish jig he refers to the following part of Duffy's poem:

A breakdance to amuse your mates,
give them a laugh,
a rock'n'roll mime, Elvis time,
pretending the rifle's just a guitar?
Worse by far.

Assuming Logan was referring to the meter of the poem and not the content, it is nevertheless an intriguing choice, given the fact that the dance described here is stereotypically American, but I will return to this point of national identity later in my reading of Duffy's poem. To answer his question as to why she uses an Irish jig and dances in general to describe the photo, I look at the first eight lines of her poem:

A flop back for a kip in the sun,
Dropping the gun,
Or a trip on a stone to send you
Arse over tip
With a yelp and a curse?
No; worse. The shadow you cast
As you fall
Is the start of a shallow grave.

Here the narrator starts off by asking what the soldier is doing in a mild, almost comical manner. Her suggestions that he is flopping back for a kip in the sun or tripping over a stone are ironic exaggerations of the arguments given in favour of the theory that the image is staged. Indeed these suggestions might be answers to what the soldier was doing if he was not falling to his death after being mortally wounded. Duffy gives a number of other alternatives, such as the previously mentioned "breakdance" or the "pretending the rifle's just a guitar" as well as the "slide down a hill"; all of which are fairly innocent and if taken on their own would pose no problem. However, given the fact that Capa claims the soldier was mortally wounded at the exact moment the picture was taken, the interpretation that the soldier was in fact just slipping on a rock, or fooling around with his friends rather than merely faking his own death, would have consequences for an analysis of the photograph. The distance between the truth

and the lie would be far greater as it would be more than a mere staging of death and instead a complete twisting of the actual events. By increasing the contrast between Capa's claim and possible other scenarios, the possibility of the picture being fake becomes increasingly painful, and thus the problem of truthfulness becomes increasingly poignant.

To further highlight this contrast, the narrator uses the other possibility, that the soldier was indeed photographed at the moment of death, and gradually increases its dramatic impact. To indicate that she is indeed contrasting the two options, the narrator uses the comparative words "no; worse.", "Worse by far" and "Much worse" to link one view to the other. The speaker's first suggestion of what the other side of the coin might be is that "The shadow you cast / as you fall / is the start of a shallow grave," indicating that the soldier is in fact falling to his death, and probably to his grave, as there would have been no time to drag him to the nearest cemetery. The next time the soldier's death is mentioned, the soldier does not only lose his life, as the speaker says "The shadow you shed as you shed / as you fall / is your soul, your soul," taking the soldier's predicament slightly further into the extreme. The final time, at the ending of the poem, the speaker mentions the soldier's death and claims that "the shadow you throw / as you fall / is the shadow of death," and by doing so it is almost as if the soldier himself has become the personification of death through being depicted in his moment of death.

Other than to highlight the contrast between the two claims, there might be another reason the poem switches back and forth between the moments of pretending to die and actual dying. This alternation could also be seen as a reflection of the public opinion of the picture, which switched dramatically back and forth over the years. In connection to this, the structure of the poem seems to expand and contract in a reflection of the esteem attached to the picture. The poem continually reaches its slimmest point at the line that is both physically (at least horizontally) and thematically at the centre of the poem, namely "as you fall." This line returns three times in the poem, each time marking a distinction between the playful fake falling and the gruesome fall to an early grave. The fact that the poem consistently returns to the line "as you fall" as a sort of middle ground or resting point between the two camps could be read as the one thing that both camps can agree on, that the soldier in the photo is in fact falling, regardless of the reason for his fall. The poem can then be read as an attempt to balance the opinions of both sides on the one thing they can agree on.

The narrator herself, despite my earlier observations, seems to belong firmly in the camp of those who believe Capa and claim that the picture is real,

and that the soldier in the picture is in fact dead or dying. We could see this in the way she consistently refutes claims that the fall is merely a trip or a move to entertain his mates, instead referring to graves and death. But while this observation might initially seem to hold truth, a closer investigation reveals that the speaker never directly speaks about the death of the soldier, but only about the shadow he casts and what this shadow might signify. We might interpret this as a simple artistic choice without much significance and end up at the same conclusion, that the narrator views the photo as being genuine.

If this is the case, however, then why does the narrator refer to "the grieving widow and mothers and daughters and sons" when according to Whelan "Borrell was unmarried" (71)? Similarly, why does the narrator say "they wrap you up in a flag, though, / and blow a tune on a bugle before they lower you / into the hole" when this would not have been the case if the soldier had indeed died. Even if there had been time after the fighting to bury the dead, the shortage of material along with the vast number of dead and ever increasing intensity of fighting mean that a burial with full military honours would have been out of the question. In fact, this scene with its wrapping of flags and blowing of bugles is reminiscent of the American tradition of military funerals much more so than of a Spanish republican burial. Combining this with the idiosyncratic reference to Elvis, who would have been two at the time, and rock and roll, which *would have* been unknown to the Spanish soldier, I am left with the idea that perhaps this poem is *speaking about* more than just the death of a Spanish republican soldier.

In this poem the death of the republican soldier can then be read as symbolic for the deaths of others, including American soldiers of a different era. The poem seems to refer to the cultural impact of the photo, in particular in American society. Additionally it could be that the speaker sees the photo as what W.J.T. Mitchell would call a "pictorial text" (107). In other words, the photo is not just a visual depiction of reality, but a story in and of itself - in this case a universal story of death. The narrator seems to follow Guittet and Zevnik's suggestion that "[a] photo, if conceived through a prism of imagination, can give life to spaces that would otherwise remain unexplored or hidden" (193). The photograph then moves towards the direction of the visual arts.

Having come to this conclusion, I have to ask myself who or what the poem is really about, who is being addressed by the narrator of the poem? My initial thought would be that the poem is addressing the subject of the photograph and that the poem is a form of ekphrastic poetry in which the poem interacts with the subject of a piece of art. I would argue that this is correct, the poem does seem to address the soldier especially in the last three lines, which

read: "The camera, though, / has caught you forever and captured forever / your last breath." But at the same time the poem addresses something more. Having already seen that this poem alludes to the discussion surrounding the picture itself, as well as to a more iconic role of the photo, it would not seem unreasonable that the poem addresses the picture itself as a physical object as well. The shadow that is constantly referred to and that is "cast," "shed" and "thrown" extends beyond the actual shadow we can see in the picture and continues out of the frame; the shadow thrown also refers to the shadow left behind by the picture itself. As such, the shadow refers to the legacy of the picture as a cultural phenomenon, to the impact it made on the world as one of the first examples of war photography as we know it today. Similarly, Sharon Sliwinski argues, "photographic meaning is thought to depend upon the circulation and context in which the image is viewed" (308). In other words, the meaning of a photograph is inherently connected to the way it travels through society, and to the "shadow" it casts.

Following this train of thought, the narrator's repeated assertions that the shadow cast is one of death and destruction and not one of joy or laughter would then refer to the picture itself as well. The assertion here being that even if the picture was staged and the soldier was fooling around with his mates for the camera, the picture itself and the impact it leaves on the viewer will never be one of frivolity. In contrast to Tim Kendall's statement that "the images are cheapened – trivialised – as a consequence," the poem keeps repeating that the shadow cast by the picture, both in terms of the symbolism of the picture and in the impact it has on its viewers, will be one of death. In fact, the poem claims that "the shadow you throw / as you fall / is the shadow of death," which can be understood to imply that looking at the photo has become synonymous with looking at death. If we go back to the question asked earlier within the debate surrounding Capa's photo: "does it matter if Capa lied?" then for Duffy, or at least the narrator of her poem, the answer seems to be no. When she says "The camera, though, / has caught you forever and captured forever / your last breath" the repetition of the word forever focuses our attention on it and highlights it as important within the closing lines. "Forever" in this case would simply mean forever, no matter what other evidence comes to light, the impact of the photo will always be one of a dying man breathing his last breath. The speaker's position can be summed up with a quote by Guittet and Zevnik:

Photography works as an imaginary quilting point or a common reference, which creates our collective imaginary of heroism, cruelty and suffering. It does not hold truth or absolute knowledge, it can never pass a test of authenticity, but that does not detract from it as evidence of something taking place; it is an index on which we can draw, it is a testimony to the event and to the photographer's intention. (194)

Regardless of what the actual story behind *The Falling Soldier* is, Duffy's poem illustrates the power that resides in the photograph as a cultural icon that transcends doubts about its authenticity.

In light of Elizabeth Loizeaux' theory on ekphrastic poetry and the interactional relationship in which the "poet speaks, the audience listens, and the work of art means" (109), this poem seems to be an uncommon one in the sense that it is more than an interaction between speaker, work of art and reader/viewer, as it also purposely and visibly includes the discussion surrounding the picture, and by doing so includes numerous other critics and scholars. Thus, Duffy's poem is not part of an interactional triangle, but rather of an interactional web with dozens of strands. While interaction through this web is not entirely unique, what is particularly unusual about this discussion is that it tries to answer a question that is not often asked in other fields of art: whether the scene it depicts is real or fake. Susan Sontag explains this issue as follows: "A painting or drawing is judged a fake when it turns out not to be by the artist to whom it had been attributed. A photograph—or a filmed document available on television or the internet—is judged a fake when it turns out to be deceiving the viewer about the scene it purports to depict" (38). In other words, there is a perceived bond of trust between the photo and the viewer that can be violated. This is important for journalists in particular, as their authority rests primarily on their claims of minimal distortion, and of direct representation, as discussed by Barbie Zelizer (128).

This bond is both a strength and a weakness for photos, as it allows the photo to draw the viewer into a scene that is experienced as being real, but when doubt is placed upon the realness of the scene, the photo is not dismissed but rather branded as an almost criminal attempt at fraud. Real photos are able to evoke emotions because we perceive them as real, or as Griffin puts it: "the emphasis on war photography's emotional impact is closely tied to a presumption of photography's verisimilitude and objectivity, and therefore its ability to convey a direct and authentic sense of real events to the viewer"

("Media Images" 9). In the case of *The Falling Soldier* it was this authenticity which made it great; it is a part of a mode of war photography of which Caroline Brothers claims: "the possibility of dying that is their subtext, for their subjects as much as the photographer, means they make urgent claims on our attention, allowing us both to feel a sense of our own mortality and to hold that sense at bay" (xi) and thus it is the perceived sense of threat that intrigues. When the integrity and authenticity of *The Falling Soldier* was called into question, some claimed these emotional effects were dispelled and the breach of the bond of confidence resulted in a large outrage and a discussion that will probably never reach a satisfactory conclusion.

There are scholars who agree with Duffy's narrator that such a discussion is ultimately fruitless and beside the point. Martin Lefebvre, for instance, claims that "[r]estricting photographs to their indexical status is just as unproductive as restricting verbal language to the status of symbol without considering the various semiotic functions of words in, say, a proposition" (221). In other words, when you focus only on a photograph's ability to depict reality, then you miss most of its meaning. Similarly Georges Didi-Huberman claims that questions of authenticity and truth are the wrong questions to ask (194), and Guittet and Zevnik claim they are "ultimately redundant as authenticity was never something photography claimed to be" (200). Their reasoning is not only that there is much more to photography than the representation of reality but also that photography cannot be the mirror that some people want it to be since it still involves human agency. Jeff Share explains this concept in detail in his essay for the Center for Media Literacy:

Every step a photographer makes in taking a picture involves subjective choices, from the camera angle (looking up, looking down, eye level) to the framing (what to include and what to leave out) to the moment of exposure (when to shoot and when to wait). A photograph is always a decontextualized representation of reality recorded by a human being who makes conscious and even unconscious choices based on his or her cultural upbringing, experiences and biases.

While I by no means aim to claim that lying about the death of the soldier is the same as framing your photograph in a certain way, it shows that any claims to photography's direct link to reality are unfounded.

Conclusion

Whether or not Capa's photograph is real or fake is a question that will probably never be answered, since all participants and witnesses have passed away and most documents have been lost to time or were never made in the first place. As this article has shown, this means that the on-going discussion will probably forever be a part of the legacy of the photo and that all discussions on the picture itself will inevitably include a reference to this controversy. Duffy's poem is no different, as it mimics the switching of public opinion from real to fake and back in its structure. The question that will inevitably be asked after the discussion on authenticity reaches an impasse is: does it matter if it is real or not? In this discussion there will also always be two sides, namely one side which includes Tim Kendall as well as Susan Sontag who claims that "The point of 'The Death of a Republican Soldier' is that it is a real moment, captured fortuitously; it loses all value should the falling soldier turn out to have been performing for Capa's camera" (44), and another side, which includes John Manning and Michael Griffin, that claims that the picture has become an icon regardless of its historical specificity and particularities of "time place and origin" (18). Duffy's poem, too, cannot help but ask this question. In its answer it joins the second group who claim that the image has become iconic regardless of whether it is real or fake. Furthermore, throughout the poem the narrator illustrates how this question of authenticity is relatively unimportant when it comes to understanding and interacting with the photograph. This poem can thus be seen as Duffy, or perhaps more accurately her narrator, taking the stance that photography is not that different from other visual arts in that its connection to reality is a marginal matter. For her it is the story it tells, and not the truth, that really matters. Regardless of what the soldiers were actually doing at the time of the picture, "the camera, though, / has caught you forever and captured forever / your last breath."

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