

## AFTER BEFORE NOW: NOTES ON *IN FREE FALL*

Gil Leung

Falling is a transition. It is a movement from one position to another. In as much as it suggests failure or ruin, to love is also to fall. It is corruption, revolution and abandonment. It implies a relationship. Hito Steyerl's *In Free Fall* charts a singular object, the Boeing 707-700 4X-JYI airplane, in this process of falling. Less the story of an object's production and eventual obsolescence, *In Free Fall* documents a life made visible through consecutive moments of destruction.

In an interview with Jacques Rivette and Jean Narboni, entitled *la destruction la parole*, or *Destruction and Language*, published in *Cahiers du Cinema* in 1969, Marguerite Duras outlined a cinematic and literary potential for revolution by way of successive forms of destruction. This resistive form of political protestation was not overt in terms of content but rather subverted its formal approaches; "Is it a political film?" - "Yes, very much so." - "Is it a political film where politics are never spoken of?" - "That is right. Never."<sup>i</sup> For Duras this politics was one of breaking with what went before. Like falling, it was not defined by the simultaneous co-existence of two positions, but by the superseding of one voice by another. Her writing and direction consistently attempted such revisions through a slippage between language form and narrative position. It becomes unclear who is speaking in whose voice; characters, like forms, become interchangeable and potent: "There is a gliding from one character to another... What either of the men says could also be said by the other."<sup>ii</sup> In this sense, each character or form has a number of possible different voices in conflict. This does not necessarily occur as a cacophony of utterance but rather destruction proceeds in time, moving from one position to another which will likewise be replaced by the next.

*In Free Fall* combines a similar shifting between formal elements in both a disjunctive montage of extracts and the re-ordering of narrative across three chapters; *After the Crash*, *Before the Crash* and *Crash*<sup>iii</sup>. Whereas the opening sequence begins with a cinematic montage of planes falling through the air and crashing, in *After the Crash* we see only the 'ghosts' of airplanes scattered in the small desert airport of Mojave, California. Between these two points, ambiguous fragments of Steyerl's interview with airport owner and ex-TWA pilot Mike Potter suggest the history of these leftover metal elements. The interview cycles between economic fall and financial gain, aluminium scrap and Hollywood plot synopsis, all illustrated by various filmic referents playing on a small portable DVD player that sits awkwardly on the desert sand. Each consecutive interview fragment and DVD clip displaces and re-writes the next in another light. Cutting from the interview, the pace moves to educational entertainment scratch video, the narration extolling the stability and longevity of aluminium as a recyclable product. Here again, the premise that form is resurrected into something new is repeated in the same opening montage of imminent destruction; the falling from formation to re-formation again and again.

This question of form is central to Steyerl's practice, not strictly in terms of structuralist filmmaking's self-reflexive identification of its apparatus, but rather addresses the politics of form as a resistive means of expression. Steyerl engages with these relations at their most specific, in a moment of dissonance or dissent, when a singular form or object poses a shifting set of contradictory historical tropes. The second part of *In Free Fall*, entitled *Before the Crash*, begins with Sergei Tretiakov's 1929 *The Biography of the Object* and introduces the lead character of Boeing's 707-700 4X-JYI airplane. The story of 4X-JYI moves from Wall Street's 1929 Crash, Howard Hughes' purchase of TWA airline, Israeli military conversion through to sale for scrap back to the US in 1978. Brought to Mojave airport, 4X-JYI is then rebadged and repaired before being blown up for the finale of the film *Speed* in 1994, the remnants sold to China for use in their flourishing DVD market. In an alternate biopic ending, another model of the same plane, 4X-JYD, is used for an Israeli military rescue operation against an Air France plane hijacked by Palestinian terrorists in Entebbe Airport in 1976. The hijack attempt is made into three different feature films<sup>iv</sup> while 4X-JYD is subsequently used as Israel's presidential plane and then as a cinema in an airforce museum in Hatzarim. In each of these re-articulations, the understanding of the object, 4X-JYI, is countered by a surplus of accounts, producing not a clearer definition, but a lack of definition. The disjunctive perspective of the green screen desert behind the narrating historian becomes obvious and the framework of his factual lecture collapses into an actor's script. What something is known to be crumbles and relocates - historian becomes actor, airplane becomes DVD.

For Adorno, writing in *Music and Language: A Fragment* in 1956, to foreground form as 'what' was always to question "what goes beyond form" or what it is not. Consequently forms "specific necessity, the immanent

logic, evaporates: it becomes a mere game in which everything could literally be something else.”<sup>v</sup> Taking the story of 4X-JYI in point, an object's life is less obligated to a task or value but its spatial and temporal movement. The fact that one thing or form can have had many contradictory uses relegates the task of definition to one of negation. Put like this, “formation is essentially deformation”<sup>vi</sup>. As Steyerl reads “Matter loves... Matter lives... Matter loves on.... Matter continues to exist in different forms.” Here the slippage between *lieben* (loves) and *leben* (lives), is more than word play, it proposes that the identification of a thing lies in its relationship with other things. This does not just reflect upon 4X-JYI as the object in question; *In Free Fall* itself shifts from fictional to documentary footage, from acting to interview, animation to outtake, image to words. Similarly for Duras, her use of both the novel and cinema as modes of expression were progressively interchangeable: “*Destroy* seemed to be a potential work, that might just have well been thrown away, or filmed, or played on stage, or read, a potential work that was made real by the use to which it was put.”<sup>vii</sup> The relation here between form and content is less “what/'how” but follows Tretiakov's notion of “material-purpose-form/thing” in which content does not have primacy over form<sup>viii</sup>. As Tretiakov stated, content is realised in the deterioration of form<sup>ix</sup>. If, as Duras claimed, there could be a possibility for a revolutionary politics of form, it would be in that destructive moment when form resists determination.

The third chapter, *Crash*, signals such a point of destruction, the fall from one position to another, one fall to the next. In interview with Steyerl, cameraman Kevan Jenson describes how the shooting of the footage in the desert paralleled his own experience with the real estate downturn and financial crash of the markets in 2009. This narrative is paralleled by a discussion on the effect of digital distribution on the motion picture industry. Jenson's profession is in animation, specifically superimposing footage onto television sets in films in order to yield greater veracity to their narrative. Inverting this, *Crash* presents a surplus of these consensual forms of veracity, screen within screen within screen, to the point where, like Mike Potter's experience of 4X-JYI's explosion in the Mojave desert, it becomes unclear as to the reality of the situation. Out of this surplus of form, it is the now of presentation, not representation, that is experienced through each thing's own contrary articulations, it is a plane, it is a DVD, this is a historian, this an actor, this is a pilot. Like the paintings we see being made by Jenson in the final sequence, and Duras' characters, these things speak in each other's voices.

Ending on the point of its own production, *In Free Fall* interrogates the relation between form and content. It describes an object as subject to a relationship, and vice versa – a thing realised in the capacity to love, to fall, to be destroyed. Such forms of document operate at the abstracting turn between consensual and dissensual action. This does not mean they are political, it means they can be. To fall is a reflective movement that stands between one point and another - a freedom bound to restriction is still freedom for a time.

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i Duras, Marguerite. 'Destruction and Language'. Interview with Rivette, Jacques and Narboni, Jean in *Destroy, She Said* (New York, Grove Press, 1970), p.108.

ii Ibid., p.96.

iii *After the Crash* was shown previously in Steyerl's solo show at Neuer Berliner Kunstverein (NBK) in 2009.

iv *Raid on Entebbe* (USA, Irvin Kershner, 1976), *Victory at Entebbe* (USA, Marvin J. Chomsky, 1976) and *Mivtsa Yonatan* (USA, Menahem Golan, 1977). Notably also, *Operation Thunderbolt: Entebbe* (USA, Eyal Sher, 2000) and *Cohen on the Bridge: Rescue at Entebbe* (Israel, USA, France, UK, Andrew Wainrib, 2009)

v Adorno, Theodor. 'Music and Language: A Fragment', *Quasi Una Fantasia, Essays on Modern Music*. Trans., Livingstone, Rodney (London and New York, Verso, 1998), p.6.

vi “The key position of the subject in cognition is experience, not form; what for Kant is formation is essentially deformation. The exertion of cognition is predominantly the destruction of its usual exertion, of it using violence against the object. Knowledge of the object is brought closer by the act of the subject rending the veil it weaves about the object. It can do this only when, passive, without anxiety, it entrusts itself to its own experience”. Adorno, Theodor. 'On Subject and Object'. In *Critical models: Interventions and Catchwords*. Trans., Pickford, Henry W. (New York, Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 254

vii Duras, Marguerite. 'Destruction and Language'. Interview with Rivette, Jacques and Narboni, Jean in *Destroy, She Said* (New York, Grove Press, 1970), p.94.

viii Tretiakov, Segei. 'We Raise the Alarm'. In *Art in Theory, 1900 – 1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. Eds. Harrison, Charles and Wood, Paul (Oxford and Malden, Blackwell Publishers, 1992), p.461.

ix Ibid., p.461.