
Before Recognition: On the Aesthetics of Aftermath

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6.1 Introduction

In strictly psychoanalytic terms, trauma describes a wound to the mind, an event so overwhelming that its understanding is necessarily deferred and perhaps only belatedly apprehended through its inadvertent repetition. Radically inassimilable, trauma tests the limits of representation. For much as the temporal economy of trauma is understood to be one of deferral, so too is the temporality of its representation. In other words, if there are certain events that we may only begin to assimilate long after their occurrence, then it is only in that process of belated encounter and understanding that we might begin to represent them, to shape them into aesthetic form (Caruth, 1996).

What do we do then, with a catastrophic event in which structures of deferral have been foreclosed, in which the divide between occurrence and representation collapses into the immediacy of live television coverage and urgent calls for commemoration? Furthermore, what do we do when repetition and representation are the

defining characteristics of that catastrophic event, both in its occurrence and its transmission? Even before the relentless repetitions of televised instant replay began on September 11, 2001, repetition structured the event's very unfolding. It was only with the second plane's collision with the South Tower that the meaning of the first plane's collision with the North Tower became intelligible. With the second strike came the knowledge that what had happened to the first tower was not a freak accident but a deliberate act of terrorism. In repetition, meaning emerged. And a television audience participated in that movement from incomprehension to understanding and then witnessed it over and over again, a catastrophic event as visual spectacle, the visual field as a site of mediated yet immediate encounter.

In light of these events, a number of questions emerge: If the events of September 11th were indeed a traumatic event, how do we contemplate the question of their representation? Is their representation to be found in the media images, moving and still, through which the vast majority of spectators, even in New York, "witnessed" the events? Or is it to be found elsewhere, later, when artists and writers begin to reimagine and reconfigure those events into something that we might call art, or aesthetic representation? What constitutes that arena of representation? How and where do we begin to

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think about aesthetics in the aftermath of September 11th? How do we understand the relation between trauma and representation? Did the unrelenting stream of media images overwhelm the psychic structures of deferral, forging and forcing a set of encounters in the time and place which might otherwise be held as the psychic space of refusal and refuge, but which here was already the site of representation? Or, might we instead conclude that for all the media images, video footage, memorial activity, and architectural planning, September 11th has yet to be encountered in any strict psychological sense, and in turn, has yet to be figured? In other words, did the visual economy of the events of September 11th trump the psychic economy of trauma, offering immediacy in place of belatedness, images in place of their impotence and impossibility? Or, might we conclude that for all its re-presentation, the events of September 11th have yet to be represented?

As a means of engaging these and other questions, the essay that follows will assemble and address a body of visual work that emerged in the aftermath of the events of September 11th. Turning first to Michael Arad's memorial proposal, *Reflecting Absence*, a piece that is at once a work of art and architecture, the essay will then survey and analyze a series of works that may be generally understood to have confronted these events in cultural form: Jonathan Borofsky's sculptural installation *Walking to the Sky*, Paul Chan's video installation *1st Light*, Pia Lindman's "portraits of grief," as well as her video projects *Viewing Platform* and *Waterline*, Art Spiegelman's graphic novel, *In the Shadow of No Towers* and Jonathan Safran Foer's photographically-illustrated work of literary fiction, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. Through a close reading of each project, indebted at once to the art historical project of exegesis and interpretation and the literature on trauma, the essay pursues the possibility that each work is not so much a post-traumatic representation of September 11th, but rather a cultural site in which the very impossibility of such representation is both theorized and figured.

6.2 Art, Architecture and Aftermath

What did we see in terms of visual representation? In addition to the stream of media images, iconic and particular, that captured the event or sequence of events of September 11th, and which taken together, form the visual archive of the event, work soon emerged that sought not to re-present that archive of images, but to engage the event from a position of aftermath and retrospection. Hans-Peter Feldman's *9/12 Front Page*, 2001, for example, undertook the fundamentally archival project of collecting the front pages of newspapers from cities around the world on the day after and arranging them for installation in a grid.¹

Introducing a measure of belatedness to the insistent temporality of immediacy that characterized the representational economy of the event and its witnessing, much ensuing work typically took the form of the memorial. For example, if photographs of the missing posted around New York first served as signs of hope that the depicted might well be found, they all too quickly gave way to their funerary and memorial function, de facto shrines to those victims whose bodies were lost amidst the rubble. And such photographs, whether posted along the wall of St. Vincent's Hospital in Greenwich Village or, sometime later, printed, along with short biographies, as "Portraits of Grief" in the *New York Times*, came to function as a means of commemorating the victims of September 11th.

But if the assertion of human presence, through that memento that is the photograph, was an initial means of encountering, and countering, the individual losses of September 11th, it was not the only visual strategy in evidence. The successful proposals for the World Trade Center memorial competition, a competition announced as rubble and remains were still being cleared

¹The piece was exhibited for the first time in Okwui Enwezor's exhibition *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* at the International Center for Photography in New York in the spring of 2008.

from the site, largely avoided such claims to presence, forgoing the power and poignancy of figurative images for visual instantiations of their impossibility and inadequacy, putting forth in its place absence as aesthetic form. In the winning proposal, for example, Michael Arad demarcated the bases of Yamasaki's Twin Towers with two massive reflecting pools. Their walled edges etch onto the landscape the reconstituted architectural footprints of each lost object, the twin towers, already uncannily doubles even at the moment of their creation and construction. Negative space concretized as memorial form, Arad's proposal attempts to address loss, to express loss, through its monumentalizing of and insistence upon absence.

Arad's memorial proposal countered and inverted the almost redemptive forms of *Tribute of Light*, which on March 11, 2002, repeating the form of Yamasaki's Twin Towers in two intense, ascending beams, temporarily restored the skyline of Lower Manhattan by making visible again, even if only as spectral trace, the irredeemably absent architecture. In contradistinction, Arad's memorial is recessed in the earth, two depressed voids that continue the vector of downward motion that was the collapse of the Twin Towers, the desperate plunge that was the descent of the "falling man." A gravitational movement whose trajectory and force is echoed in the waterfalls that cascade down the surfaces of the recessed bounding walls, the perpetual cycle of water also repeats something of the logic of the video loop that first imaged, but in its repetition then supplanted or simply became our memory of the event, representation replacing anything like an experience of the real.

In formal terms, it may be said that Arad's memorial proposal reprised or echoed certain crucial aspects of Daniel Libeskind's initial architectural plan for the World Trade Center. Though now much modified, Libeskind's plan captured the imaginations of its judges and a broader public in part for the symbolism of its soaring architectural form, the 1776 foot Freedom Tower, a building conceived to condense and restore to the skyline of Lower Manhattan something of the monumental presence of the Twin

Towers, while also echoing and emblemizing all that is signified by the torch held aloft by the Statue of Liberty. Its appeal lay as well in its insistence on maintaining and foregrounding the exposed subterranean structure of the World Trade Center, the retaining wall that had held back the waters of the Hudson. Its surface marked and scarred by the traces of the site and its destruction, an architectural remainder and reminder, at once survivor and witness, Libeskind's exposed slurry wall managed also to repeat, or at least recall in its minimalist form and recessional relation to its site, something of the visual language and symbolism of Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans memorial, that monumental form whose departure from traditional figurative practices has come to define a mode of memorial architecture in the present (Abramson, 1996).

Unlike Libeskind's proposed inclusion of a literal survivor, the slurry wall, Arad's design provides not so much a trace of the lost object, or in this case, objects, namely the Twin Towers and all they represented, but rather, the illusion of their tracing. Unlike Libeskind's slurry wall, in Arad's design there is no relation, beyond the symbolic, to the lost towers. Even as Arad's walls of water take and map as their site the former footprints of the Twin Towers, demarcating as massive voids the areas from which the towers rose, the walls are not, of course, actual architectural footprints. They are, instead, something like an architectural site plan grafted belatedly onto the landscape of death and destruction. Collapsed and cleared away, the towers left no footprints, no markers, and no imprint. In the memorial landscape that is now the new World Trade Center, save the slurry wall, there is little trace of what once was. Unlike an actual footprint, an imprint or outline that bears the trace of what stood above it, of the massive buildings that once pressed their weight upon the surface of the earth, of the looming towers that once rose above the streets of Lower Manhattan, Arad's memorial footprints, his walls of water, his monumental silhouettes, are not an actual trace of what once rose above that now hallowed ground. Their imprint is only imagined, a means of belatedly marking, memorializing that which remains irredeemably lost.

Individual and collective, private and public, such explicitly memorial work established something of the aesthetic terms for visual representation in the aftermath of September 11th. Whether offering up a photograph of a missing victim or demarcating the architectural footprint of an absent skyscraper, such work insisted on asserting the material trace of that which once was, staking a claim to presence even as it acknowledged an irredeemable absence. This work did not repeat the images of destruction. This work did not show death or suffering. Instead, this work marked out spaces, photographic and topographic, that might hold the place of what was lost, that might open onto a time for memory. Of course, the temporary shrines have long-since disappeared and Arad's project, as well as the vestige of Libeskind's, has now been realized. But perhaps it is in that interval between those two moments, past and present, then and now, an interval that we might understand to be that psychic space of deferral, the very province of trauma, that we might glimpse something of what aesthetics look like in the aftermath of September 11th. And it is thus that I turn more fully to the arena of contemporary art.

6.3 Art and Aftermath

One such glimpse of aesthetic possibility could be found in Jonathan Borofsky's sculptural installation *Walking to the Sky*. Organized by the Public Art Fund and temporarily installed at Rockefeller Center in September and October of 2004, the sculpture was certainly among the most monumental of artistic projects to emerge in the aftermath of September 11th, comprised as it was of a 100-foot-tall stainless steel pole, rising from the earth at a precipitous angle. Despite its daunting slope, the pole serves as a pathway for a group of figures, ranging from young children to briefcase-toting professionals, seven of whom stride up the steep incline while three more watch from its base. Of course, Borofsky had already exhibited two precursors to this piece in the 1990s—*Man Walking to the Sky* at Documenta IX in Kassel, Germany in 1992 and *Woman Walking to the Sky*

in Strasbourg, France in 1994, so it is not as if the kernel of the work was explicitly conceived for, or even necessarily alludes to the events of September 11th. Nevertheless, in its monumental re-conception and aggregation of the ascending figures for its installation at Rockefeller Center, the image of ascension was mobilized as if to counter and reverse, if not also redeem, both the loss of the towers and all those who plunged to their deaths. And it is precisely the embodiment of aspiration in the individual figures—the eager step of a girl setting off for school, the purposeful strides of a businessman and woman heading to another day of work—that gives the piece its poignancy. With each iteration of that vigorous step, these gravity-defying figures reach forward with a confidence that can only be seen as naïve, and in turn, tragic in the aftermath of the events the sculpture does not and yet, by virtue of its location, temporally and spatially, unavoidably commemorates.

If Borofsky's sculptural figures seem to strive for an unattainable place beyond their present, that no-place that we call utopia, they also reach, as sculptural figures, for a kind of universalism, each an assiduously generic version of a set of types. Emptied of the specificity of actual portraits, Borofsky's sculptural figures come to function as something closer to abstractions, each offering up the idea of individuals in place of actual individuals. As such, even if the seeds of the piece long predate the events of September 11th, Borofsky's return to the generic climbers provides him, and us, with a sculptural language with which to gesture toward, even if not directly represent the victims. Perhaps, in offering us an aesthetic environment, an aesthetic experience, that so plainly reverses the logic and images of the events of September 11th, we are made to produce for ourselves, to recall, the images that issued forth from the event. Against Borofsky's utopian vision of brightly-clad professionals ascending toward their promising futures, against Borofsky's mythic vision of eager children climbing a sculptural beanstalk, we may think of an all-too-real vision, the monochromatic palette of survivors covered head-to-toe in ash, the horrifying spectacle of bodies falling from such an

unfathomable height, the idea, if not the image, of those victims incinerated or asphyxiated in the World Trade Center. This is to say, standing before Borofsky's piece, we may call to mind, remember, something of that day, those events, indeed, those victims. But we just as well may not. We may see the piece differently for its installation in New York after September 11th. But for all the ways in which Borofsky's conception comes to mean in the aftermath of September 11th, nothing of its aesthetic project can be understood as an explicit response to that day or those events.

Something quite different is at work in a piece conceived fully in the aftermath of September 11th, Paul Chan's cycle *The 7 Lights*. Deriving its structure from the biblical story of creation and taking its aesthetic cues and philosophical inspiration from, among other sources, Pliny and Plato, Chan's cycle is comprised of six silent digital video projections and a set of drawings on blank musical scores. In its orchestration of light and shadow, stillness and movement, the cycle is by no means simply a response to the events of September 11th. Indeed, Chan's piece shares much with the work of a number of contemporary artists—Kara Walker and William Kentridge foremost among them—who, since the early 1990s, have mobilized the structure and idea of a shadow as a means of figuring obliquely moments of historical trauma that test the limits of representation. Yet, at the same time, Chan's piece *is* a response to September 11th, as its iconographic elements and narrative programs, for all their obscurity, make insistently clear.

1st Light, a piece that since 2005, has been exhibited more widely on its own than it has within the context of the entire cycle—in addition to its inclusion in the complete cycle at the New Museum's exhibition of Chan's work in the spring of 2008, *1st Light* has been installed, among other locations, at the Whitney Biennial in the spring of 2006, at the Fabric Workshop in Philadelphia in the fall of 2006, and at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, DC in the summer of 2008, as part of the exhibition *The Cinema Effect: Illusion, Reality, and the Moving Image*—and elicits inev-

itable associations with the visual experience, the visual archive, of September 11th. Suffused at the outset with warm reds and yellows, the colors of dawn, the piece gradually gives way to daylight and the emergence of silhouettes, the visual illusion, through visual occlusion, of form. If at first we see, as if through a window, the establishing shot of a wire, a telephone pole, and then a flock of birds, a number of objects soon emerge, among them eyeglasses, a cell phone, folding chairs. Following the birds in flight, these objects rise slowly from the base of the projected light-field to the top; often breaking apart as they do so. They are then joined by larger objects, though not to scale, among them, bicycles and police cars. The ascent of these objects is then interrupted by a rapidly falling body, only to be followed by more bodies, falling singly or in pairs or groups, a meteor shower of human forms. Finally, color seeps back into the scene, washes of dark blue and violet. Night falls. The apocalyptic vision gives way to darkness. And then we begin again.

Projected onto the floor, the piece does not insist upon a grounding edge. Even as we come to understand its orientation, given the structuring illusion of the silhouetted telephone pole, we can just as easily walk to the top of the visual field and watch the scene in reverse, objects falling gracefully to the ground, bodies ascending. The same counter-factual logic that propels Borofsky's figures skyward operates here as well. But here the evocation is less of an alternate reality, even if it does allow us the possibility of reorienting the world and rewriting its script, than a prior reality, the fugitive images conjuring up in their visual effects something of an earlier moment of image-making and viewing. Chan's video projections, for all their digital production, invoke not only that philosophical space of Plato's cave, but also that visual space that was the theater of the magic lantern. His choreography of light and shadow, his orchestration of silhouetted objects in motion, returns us to these earlier moments of visual spectacle, of phenakistoscopes and stroboscopes, of zoetropes and praxinoscopes, when to see the image of the world was to witness something fleeting and wondrous. These pre-cinematic technologies

gave their viewers images as if they had been magically reconstituted by light and shadow alone. And Chan's cycle restores something of that visual magic to the contemporary arena of the gallery.

To see Chan's work, then, is to experience something of an art historical anachronism (Didi-Huberman, 2000). It is to be both in and out of time, at once illuminated by the glow of the digital present, yet somehow also bathed in the darkness of the pre-cinematic theater of illusion, whose origins may be found in the chamber that was the camera obscura. In witnessing Chan's work, we are situated in a temporal arena of dislocation, of return and repetition, the logic of the video loop by which the work is structured instantiating the temporal economy of historical return staged within. In other words, in experiencing Chan's work, we are situated in the temporal dimension of repetition and return, seeing images that repeat something of the visual archive of a recent past, September 11th, through a visual technology that digitally simulates the visual spectacles of an earlier epoch. In this doubled position of repetition and return, we experience something of the temporal economy of belatedness. Moreover, if Chan's work produces a kind of temporal suspension, in and out of time, it also induces a further dislocation, this time a spatial one. For to see Chan's work, is also to stand before a visual schema that embraces the notion of inversion. As in the camera obscura, in the darkened gallery, Chan's image is always, in some sense, upside down. And we cannot right it. Just as we know, with even the most rudimentary or intuitive grasp of the laws of physics, that these sorts of objects should not rise from the ground, we also know, with a certainty that is borne of ethics, that bodies should not fall from the sky.

6.4 Grief and Witness

If, in their different ways, Borofsky's *Walking to the Sky* and Chan's *The 7 Lights* stand as examples, even if by no means exemplars, of artistic responses to the traumatic events of September

11th, neither should they be called upon to bear the burden of that psychological challenge or that aesthetic and ethical responsibility. For even as each may be seen to allude to the events of September 11th, neither makes explicit claims to treating those events or that subject. As installed in the sculpture garden of the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas, Texas, where it was subsequently acquired, Borofsky's *Walking to the Sky* has far less specificity in its allusive possibilities than it did when installed in New York. If anything, we see it in relation to his other work, his sculptures of figures walking to the sky as another means of figuring the impossibility of counting to infinity. And Chan's *1st Light*, for all the potency of its iconography of falling bodies and of objects and detritus blown toward the sky, is but one element in a cycle of works that engage questions of creation and destruction in the context of epic, rather than historical time, and do so in a shifting set of institutional contexts. If there is a historical specificity in Chan's work, it is more often expressed quite directly, as it has been in his animated Iraq pieces or in his site-specific staging of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in the Ninth Ward, in New Orleans, a city that is still waiting for all the help that it deserves in the aftermath of the destruction wrought by Hurricane Katrina.

Certainly, there are works of contemporary art that more explicitly take on the events and impact of September 11th as their point of departure. The work of Pia Lindman, for example, engaged the responses that emerged in the aftermath of September 11th, making gestures of grief or the very act of witness its subject. Her ongoing *New York Times Project*, begun in 2002, collected images of mourners from the *New York Times* for one year. From these media images of mourners, were they New Yorkers in the aftermath of the attack on the World Trade Center or those grieving in the aftermath of terrorist attacks elsewhere around the world, Lindman made drawings, what could be called her own "portraits of grief." Re-enacting these poses in a set of performances from 2003 to 2005, Lindman also re-enacted them in front of a video camera, for the piece *Lakonikon*, also printing the poses as stills and tracing them in charcoal on vellum. The vellum

drawings, now at multiple removes from the photographs of mourners they took as their subject, were collected in the book *Black Square*. These pieces, which move in and between the media of performance, video, and drawing continue something of Lindman's abiding interest in the body as a kind of affective archive, a repository of gestures that contain within them the registers of emotion, even as her work seems to dislocate emotion from embodiment. In such contemporaneous work as *Fascia*, which employed a mechanical device to shape and stretch her face into expressions, or *Domo and its Double*, a piece in which she filmed herself mimicking the gestures of a robot and in a process similar to *Lakonikon*, traced the stills as drawings, Lindman emerges as a kind of anti-Greuze, physiognomy giving way to technology, the face no longer a semiotic template of feeling, but instead a manipulable and programmable machine. But it is her video projects, *Viewing Platform*, and *Waterline*, both from 2002, that inaugurate a specific concern with sites of historical trauma and its challenge to representational dynamics.

Both pieces take the World Trade Center as their subject, but fully from a position of aftermath and belated witness. *Viewing Platform* depicts the viewing stand erected before the cavernous pit of ruins at the site of the World Trade Center. Created from sixty minutes of footage shot from a fixed perspective, cut into one-minute transparent segments and layered into a video loop, the resulting piece is an evanescent palimpsest of spectral figures, ghostly witnesses looking onto a scene of aftermath. Its companion piece, *Waterline*, puts that camera in motion, suspended on a fishing pole and bobbing through the waters of the Hudson. Against the fixed stare of the mounted camera, which records the actions of the belated witnesses, here the camera is the witness, its literally fluid movements capturing everything from the waves in the Hudson and the traffic on the West Side Highway to the skyline of Lower Manhattan, now missing its most defining architecture. Fixed or felicitous, the camera in Lindman's work depicts the site of the World Trade Center, but already at a remove, both spatial and temporal. If one piece captures the

belated act of witnessing, only to erase that very act from the record, transforming spectator into apparitional blur, the other renders vision itself unstable, dislocated from the structuring armature of a tripod or a body and given over to tides and currents.

Perhaps what is most crucial about Lindman's World Trade Center pieces in relation to the questions posed here is that at the same time that they approach their subject, they move away from it. They do so not only in structural terms, building in to their realization a degree of temporal and topographic remove. They do so in historical terms, shifting their gaze from the landscape and geography of Lower Manhattan toward a topography of destruction that predates the events of September 11th. For after making these pieces, Lindman traveled east, first to Berlin and then to Warsaw, where she reprised some of the visual strategies of these site-specific pieces as she took on the legacy of fascism and the Second World War. And it is that extension, that historical opening onto earlier moments of catastrophe that makes her work so significant, not only in the site-specific contexts of its creation, but in the context of aesthetics in the aftermath of atrocity. To represent the events and aftermath of September 11th is less to enter into a new aesthetic era than to return to an aesthetic arena that precedes that moment in 2001, whether we understand art after Auschwitz to follow from a moment of aesthetic rupture or not. It is to understand that aesthetics have already been shaped by catastrophes that may be said to both demand and defy representation. Artists work as much in the aftermath of that aesthetic legacy, as they do in the aftermath of the particular events they may choose to engage (Saltzman, 1999).

6.5 Images in Spite of All: The Graphic Novel

All that said, rather than continue to discuss works of contemporary art, I want to turn in conclusion to two books, Art Spiegelman's, 2004 *In the Shadow of No Towers* and Jonathan Safran Foer's, 2006 *Extremely Loud and Incredibly*

Close, both of which help to further a discussion of questions of aesthetics, and aesthetic representation, in the aftermath of the traumatic events of September 11th. What distinguishes these two literary works from all those that emerged in the aftermath of September 11, as, for example, Don DeLillo's 2007 *Falling Man* and Joseph O'Neill's 2008 *Netherland*, is that while each takes the form of the book, and involves textual narratives, each is also, to varying degrees, composed of and concerned with images. Perhaps most significant about these works, at least in terms of the discussion underway here, is that even as each strives to represent something of the events and legacy of September 11th, whether in word or image, each also engages the aesthetic challenge, if not impossibility, of taking on such a subject. In the end, each work is as much the offering up of a set of ethical questions in textual form as it is the putting forth of a set of aesthetic responses, be they visual or literary.

Art Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers*, which narrates, among other things, the experience of eyewitness to the events of September 11th in Lower Manhattan, may be said to have taken shape in their immediate aftermath, even if the book did not appear until 2004. Its cover, an Ad Reinhardt-inspired black-on-black image of the towers, repeats, as its ground, the image Spiegelman created for the cover of the post-September 11th issue of *The New Yorker*, published just 6 days after the attack. The book's contents emerged in the weeks and months that followed. With an open invitation from Michael Naumann, the editor and publisher of *Die Zeit*, Spiegelman was given the opportunity to create a set of ten large-scale broadsheet pages, a template for his signature "comix," a form and a forum in which to work through his experience of the events and their aftermath. The book gathers and reproduces as sequential narrative the color broadsheets. It also reproduces a set of historic cartoons, selected by Spiegelman and reflecting his own research into his medium during the days and months that followed September 11th, that present something of a history of newspaper comics and illustrate the degree to which newspaper comics could to be seen to have engaged

historic events. The book is introduced by a preface by Spiegelman that explains the book's conception and realization.

As the title, and title image, of Spiegelman's book make clear, the shadow, that quintessential index of bodily presence and proximity, of physical continuity and contiguity, is here a means of expressing an irredeemable absence and irrevocable break. Already an utterly immaterial form, the semblance of a sign that is nothing more than a disturbance in the visual field, an occlusion of light, the shadow, for Spiegelman, is a shadow in the absence of a body, which is to say, a shadow that is only ideational, that is, in other words, fully spectral. For, of course, there is no shadow without the towers. And there are, of course, after the events of the morning of September 11, 2001, no towers. That said, even as Spiegelman's shadow fully gives way to its essential non-essence, even as it is de-materialized into the void that it always already was, it also emerges a symbolic form, a metaphoric means of conjuring the experience of living and working in Lower Manhattan in the aftermath of witnessing the collapse of the Twin Towers, of seeing that spectacle both as an eyewitness and as a viewer of media images. For even if there is no longer an actual shadow, even if the towers leave no material, visible trace, for Spiegelman, the events of September 11th cast an enormous shadow. His book is a means of addressing, if not re-dressing, that shadow, that is at once a void and an ideational presence, that shadow that is the space of aftermath.

Thus, even as he structures his project around that void and asserts it as an irredeemable absence, he also fills that space left by the event and its aftermath with a story, a story that is at once memoir, meditation, and political critique. He fills that space with images, among them the repeated evocation of an image that was neither photographed nor filmed on that morning but that, as Spiegelman writes in the preface to his work, "remains burned onto the inside of my eyelids several years later... the image of the looming north tower's glowing bones just before it vaporized" (Spiegelman, 2004, n.p). Against the archive of images that we have all seen,

Spiegelman introduces, as an image that he cannot quite capture but that he comes to depict, grainy and pixilated, over and over again, an image that conveys, in its very etiolation and evanescence, the asymptotic task of representing the traumatic. It is and is not what Spiegelman saw, what Spiegelman remembers. And even if he were able to reproduce the image that is seared into his visual memory, it would never fully represent his experience of witness, let alone the experience of witness of those who did not survive (Agamben, 1999).

What emerges in the broadsheets is a depiction of Spiegelman's growing awareness that, with the events of September 11th, he had entered into the historical time of trauma. As he remarks in the preface, *In the Shadow of No Towers* was written from "that fault-line where World History and Personal History collide" (Spiegelman, 2004, n.p.). If, with the events of September 11, Spiegelman steps into that grey zone of witnessing in which we both see and fail to see the catastrophe unfolding before us, standing on a fault-line that opens onto an abyss, Spiegelman also straddles that generational fault-line that both connects him to and divides him from his parents' generation, victims and survivors of the Holocaust whose story forms the kernel of his earlier project, the graphic novel *Maus*. It would seem, one fault-line opens into or onto another. As Spiegelman writes in the third installment of broadsheets, the author appearing in an inset of small black-and-white frames that reprise his visual style and his persona as mouse, in *Maus*: "I remember my father trying to describe what the smoke in Auschwitz smelled like.... The closest he got was telling me it was "indescribable"... That's exactly what the air in Lower Manhattan smelled like after Sept. 11" (Spiegelman, 2004, p. 3). Here, his experience of trying to describe something about New York in the aftermath of September 11 brings Artie closer to his father trying to describe the smoke in Auschwitz. And yet, it by no means equips him with the representational tools to describe that which cannot be put into language, even as it sets the two in relation. The equivalency he establishes turns on a description of an experience

that remains "indescribable." And what does it mean to compare the indescribable?

Kaleidoscopic in its fracturing of both stylistic and narrative content—Spiegelman mobilizes a history of cartoon styles and characters that are both his own and those of his predecessors in the genre, the broadsheets move in and out of historical time, into what, as I have already suggested in the case of Paul Chan's work, may well be the space of traumatic time. In Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers*, we have stepped into the chasm that is the fault-line that cleaves traumatic experience from that of the everyday. In the juxtapositions that define the visual structure of *In the Shadow of No Towers*, it would seem that traumatic time defies historical time. Even as Spiegelman narrates and depicts something of the situation in the present, it is interrupted and inflected by the past. Quotations of visual styles and characters, both his own and those of other cartoonists, animate the broadsheets. If September 11th names the event that structures and motivates the story that is told, in word and image, it also names the event, the traumatic experience, that undoes the telling of the story, that unmoors the characters from their historical location, that opens the fault-line into and out of which a set of representations both emerge and return.

6.6 Images in Spite of All II: The (Illustrated) Novel

Such unmooring is central to Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, a novel, conceived in word and image, that is perhaps the fullest aesthetic response to the traumatic events of September 11th yet to emerge, partly for its attention to the very problems trauma poses to memory, and, in turn, to works of memorial and acts of representation. Punctuated, if not in any strict sense illustrated, by images throughout, Safran Foer's novel closes with 29 pages of images, grainy black-and-white photographs, a sequence of images that reverse the very real trajectory of the falling man, even if this counter-factual reversal is also a means of

acknowledging, once and for all, the horrible truth of that day; namely, destruction, death, and national vulnerability. Narrated by the precocious, imaginative, grief-stricken 9-year-old New Yorker, Oskar Schell, whose father was killed in the World Trade Center, and interspersed, at regular intervals, by the voices of two others—Oskar’s absent grandfather, writing letters to Oskar’s father that he never receives, and Oskar’s doting grandmother, writing words to Oskar that he never sees, the novel is also interspersed with images, images that form the entirety of another book, whose existence and relevance will only belatedly be revealed, namely, Oskar’s own creation, a scrapbook of images entitled *Stuff That Happened to Me*.

If the novel’s central protagonist, Oskar Schell, is something of a repetition and reimagining of another literary Oskar, namely, Oscar Matzerath, the traumatized child at the center of Günther Grass’s post-Holocaust novel, *The Tin Drum* (1959), with the distinction that the tambourine, not the tin drum, is the instrument of Safran Foer’s self-proclaimed “percussionist,” the novel’s form bears more relation to Grass’s émigré compatriot, W.G. Sebald, whose hybrid use of fact and fiction, word and image in such works as *The Emigrants*, 1992, and *Austerlitz*, 2001, allowed him to engage with particular acuity the historical legacy of the Holocaust. Oskar’s story is propelled by his efforts to come to terms with the traumatic event of his father’s death on September 11th, a project largely displaced into his quest to solve what he understands to be a mystery, the ownership and function of a key, stashed in a vase in Oskar’s father’s closet. But that paternal death, and the larger context of its occurrence, is not the only trauma structuring the novel. It is a novel limned by trauma. Two generations ago, the man and woman who would become Oskar’s paternal grandparents survived the bombings of Dresden. Their postwar reunion in New York both creates and in some ways destroys the family into which Oskar is born, a family that was already destroyed, even before it had begun. For the man once loved the woman’s beloved only sister, killed in the war while carrying their unborn child. Oskar’s grandparents are

thus linked, and ultimately separated, by their shared, yet utterly individual losses. That Oskar loses his father in the collapse of the World Trade Tower, is, then, already something of a repetition, yet another chapter in a familial history structured by devastating losses, losses that began in the fire-bombings of Dresden but that were compounded by the emotional consequences of living, or, in some sense, not living, in the aftermath of trauma.

The novel is particularly attentive to the spaces of memory that trauma both demands and defies. At the very outset of the novel, a novel that moves back and forth in time, both within the present and the past, just as we are getting to know something of Oskar’s emotional and imaginative life, he proposes the following:

So what about skyscrapers for dead people that were built down? They could be underneath the skyscrapers for living people that are built up. You could bury people 100 floors down, and a whole dead world could be underneath the living one. Sometimes I think it would be weird if there were a skyscraper that moved up and down while its elevator stayed in place. So if you wanted to go to the 95th floor, you’d just press the 95 button and the 95th floor would come to you. Also, that could be extremely useful, because if you’re on the 95th floor, and a plane hits below you, the building could take you to the ground, and everyone could be safe, even if you left your birdseed shirt at home that day. (Foer, 2006, p. 3)

As Oskar, who has only just witnessed the burial of his father’s empty coffin, imagines both a proper place of burial and a proper, if preposterous, plan for urban security: he moves back and forth between the unreal fact of his father’s death and the bizarre logic of his symbolic burial, all the while imagining a world, a set of architectural spaces, and safety garments, in which such deaths would be impossible. An attempt less to assimilate than to counter the utterly inassimilable fact of his father’s death and absent body, Oskar echoes the fiction of closure in which he is forced to participate at his father’s funeral by proposing a set of fictions of his own, retractable towers and birdseed shirts, imaginative inventions to foreclose the loss he cannot yet bear to make his own.

The struggle to live in the aftermath of loss permeates the novel, even when we encounter its

secondary characters. One is Mr. Black, who will serve as a surrogate grandfather for Oskar, until he unwittingly encounters his own, the mysterious “renter,” who, in the aftermath of September 11th, takes up residence in his grandmother’s guestroom, and transforms his bed into a sculptural monument to his deceased wife. As he explains to Oskar, he has hammered a nail into the bed frame every morning since she died. There are now 8629 nails; Mr. Black has been a widower for nearly 25 years. The bed is a magnetic force-field of grief, a monument to a marriage that ended all too soon.

With an eye to the kinds of material traces that would seem to bear witness to a life, but, in the end, do not—the repeated signature of Oskar’s father, testing pens, in an art supply store on 93rd Street, is revealed, 225 pages later, to be the signature of his supposedly absent grandfather—Safran Foer produces a novel that is filled with images and evocations of the impossible spaces, the absent places, where memory of loss can and cannot take place, where lives can and cannot be lived, where traumatic events can and cannot be represented. That Oskar’s grandparents, whose lives in exile are structured by the silences and absences of presumed muteness and blindness, construct a mode of living in which their apartment is increasingly filled with “nothing places,” spaces in which they can cease to exist for each other, even before one will literally leave the other while she is pregnant with the son he will then never see, is but one narrative space of impossibility. There is also the achingly sad fact of the empty novel of the grandmother’s life, written with a typewriter with no ribbon, 2000 blank pages testifying not to the historical narrative of the life lived, but to the emotional economy of the present, in which blindness is put forth as one more “nothing place” of safety, even if it is a self-destructive fiction. While Oskar’s mute grandfather is consumed with guilt that he has given his blind wife a typewriter with no ribbon, and in turn pretends to read words that do not exist, his wife, by no means as blind as she pretends to be, goes into the guest room in which she types and pretends to write, hitting the space bar again and again and again, refusing to

transform her life into narrative form, offering only blankness. As she writes, to Oskar, in a letter that he never sees, but that expresses both her knowledge of the fiction and futility of her autobiographical project and the ways in which irredeemable losses have ruptured her biography with the fissures that describe a psychic topography of trauma, “My life story was spaces” (Foer, 2006, p. 176).

In a novel of “nothing places” and empty spaces, there is also, given the grandfather’s post-war muteness, a conversational arena structured as much by silence as by speech. The grandfather’s muteness compromises the ability of the couple to communicate from the very moment they meet. Gestures, signs, and the written word replace the reciprocity of speech. That the grandmother’s sight is failing certainly complicates the visual dimension of their communication. When communication depends on the visual, sight is required. And when, years after their separation, Oskar’s grandfather returns to New York to grieve with his wife for their lost son and telephones from the airport, a futile conversation ensues, the grandfather treating the keypad of the payphone as if it were a mechanism for text messages and the grandmother hearing only electronic beeps. Standing in the airport, despite his wife’s obvious inability to understand his call, Oskar’s grandfather persists in typing his words, for hours, producing a cryptic two and a half page text of all that has happened since he last saw his wife, from the motivation for his departure to the reason for his return, a string of numbers, a stream of noise.

A phone call that is received but fails to communicate, that cannot be heard because it has never been spoken, the grandfather’s call repeats something of the set of phone calls that structure the novel, the calls that Oskar’s father places to the apartment in the minutes before his death that are never answered. The first five attempts at communication, at contact, are recorded on their answering machine, at 8:52, 9:12, 9:31, 9:46, and 10:04 am. Oskar plays back these calls upon entering his apartment, sent home from school once the city begins to understand what has happened. The final call comes in once Oskar has listened to the others, at 10:22 am. Oskar sees

that it is his father's caller ID. But he does not pick up. He only listens. And then, in an act that he imagines will protect his mother, who, unbeknownst to Oskar, has spoken to her husband on her cell phone, Oskar runs out to Radio Shack to buy an identical phone, onto which he copies their recorded greeting and then stashes the old phone, with the record of his father's final calls, in his closet. It is at Radio Shack that Oskar sees, on a television, that one of the towers had fallen. Over the course of the novel, Oskar will listen to these recordings, save the final call. But it is only in the presence of his grandfather, that sympathetic stranger, that he will play all of the messages, even the last one, a broken set of words attempting to make contact with his son as his fate becomes clear.

Oskar's unwitting encounter with his grandfather, and all that ensues, is recounted in a final letter the grandfather writes to his deceased son that completes the collection of letters, from grandfather to father, that have been stored, unsent, in a suitcase that the grandfather brings back from Dresden, his second emigration from that city, and that will be buried, by Oskar and the grandfather, in a final escapade, in the empty paternal/filial coffin. Printed in an increasingly dense type, line atop line, word atop word, the grandfather's final unread letter is literally unreadable. Unlike the cryptogram of telephone keypad numbers that we might well attempt to decode, the grandfather's final epistle concludes in three pages of such dense typography that it is indecipherable. Like a painting by Glenn Ligon, the words devolve from clarity to obscurity, words interred upon the very surface of their inscription, instantiating and anticipating their final burial, their literal encryption.

That the novel ends, to return to the set of images with which I began my discussion of Safran Foer, with an illusion of ascension, is by no means the utopian gesture it could well be in other hands. It was the work of Oskar, whose collection of images punctuates the novel, an attempt to tell (himself) a different story, to hold at bay the grim reality of his father's death. Oskar's picture book, much like Oskar's journey through the city, in search of the owner of the

mysterious key, is an attempt to create a space in which to contain, if not contend with, the traumatic event of his father's death, perhaps even in a desperate jump from the towers. Much like the spaces and non-spaces, the unconventional memorial gestures that structure the novel, Oskar's book, Oskar's imagistic story, is a place in which the work of memory might take place, even if it is held at bay. Taken together, the multiple narratives, epistolary, autobiographical, and more conventionally novelistic, produce something of a memorial landscape, a narrative environment that offers up an aesthetic topography of remembrance, but also, importantly, of forgetting.

Were a novel to stand as a work of memorial, or, more to the point, as set of propositions, or a proposal, for what representation might look like in the aftermath of the traumatic events of September 11th, indeed, simply in the aftermath of trauma, Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* is certainly a good candidate. All too aware, as its title suggests, of its proximity to the event whose consequences it takes as its subject, Safran Foer nevertheless pursues the limits and limitations of aesthetic forms. And in so doing, Safran Foer's hybrid novel emerges as a site of aesthetic possibility. Set against the architectural and memorial plans for the World Trade Center, juxtaposed with the visual work that took September 11th as their subject, if only at times obliquely, Safran Foer's novel is a work not just of literary and historical imagination, but of visual imagination. Catalyzed by events that, in the simultaneity of their media capture and transmission, collapsed the very distinction between trauma and its representation, Safran Foer's novel provides a narrative context, an emotional framework, a space, indeed, of deferral, in which to begin to make sense of those events in narrative and visual form, even as they continue to defy and test the limits of our understanding. As such, Safran Foer's work stands as emblematic of the relation between trauma and representation, his richly imagined and vividly illustrated novel, functioning as a vexed but vital site of encounter. Indeed, his work, like each of the work's discussed here, is ultimately yet one more asymptotic

approach to a set of traumatic experiences that remain stubbornly, necessarily, just beyond the reach of representation, even as they continue to demand voice and form. So it is that we tarry with trauma in cultural terms.

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