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9/11

JONATHAN SAFRAN FOER'S *EXTREMELY LOUD & INCREDIBLY CLOSE* AND ART SPIEGELMAN'S *IN THE SHADOW OF NO TOWERS*

[T]he “time” in the time of trauma . . . is not simply one moment in history during which trauma appears prevalent. The “time of trauma” or “trauma’s time” also refers to a radical change in the way we understand the relationship . . . between time and consciousness, of [trauma’s] effects not only on the present, but the past, and—most strikingly—the future.

—Aimee Pozorski, “Trauma’s Time”

In his 1895 *Project for a Scientific Psychology*, Sigmund Freud introduces the concept *Nachträglichkeit*, perhaps best translated as “afterward-ness,” to describe the specifically temporal nature of trauma.¹ Freud suggests that because consciousness cannot absorb the traumatic event in the moment of its occurrence, the time of the original event inflects all future times, thereby skewing temporal experience in general. Trauma is thus not of a moment, but instead spans an individual’s temporal continuum, constituting her past, present, and future. Commonly registering 9/11 as just such an affront to individual temporal experience, both Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* and Art Spiegelman’s *In the Shadow of No Towers* chronicle different attempts to mend the relationship between temporal experience and consciousness. To prevent the skewed time of trauma from dominating their interactions with the world, each text’s protagonist must identify new temporal forms—new ways of incorporating time into his understanding of the world—that will move him beyond 9/11’s temporally traumatic effects.

A common image from the two texts—that of a man falling from one of the World Trade Center towers before its collapse—reveals the specific

version of temporal understanding each seeks. Oskar Schell, Foer's nine-year-old narrator whose father died in the attacks, keeps a collage-like journal entitled *Stuff That Happened to Me* into which he has taped a series of photographs of the man in various stages of descent. At the novel's conclusion, Oskar removes the images from his book and re-inserts them in reverse order, so that when the pages are flipped forward, the man defies fate and flies safely into the building. Foer then includes these images as the final fifteen pages of his own work, bringing their cinematic temporality to the reader's own fingertips and making the novel performatively coextensive with Oskar's journal. Spiegelman also enlists this provocative image, depicting himself as the man jumping out of the tower. To capture the temporal experience of falling, however, he superimposes five drawings of himself, in various stages of descent, over an image of one tower. Upon landing, the Spiegelman figure becomes Happy Hooligan, a historical cartoon character. As each human figure indexes a different moment in time, Spiegelman here represents the event's temporality rather than performing it.

On one level the difference between these performative and representational portrayals of falling's temporal arc are a function of genre: Spiegelman composed his ten-page series of comix in single-page installments for the German newspaper *Die Zeit*, a format not conducive to a flipbook's mobile illusions.² Nevertheless, these disparate treatments of the falling-man image also point to the particular form of temporal experience each believes will counter 9/11's skewing of time. Because 9/11 reorients his entire existence around the moment his father died, Oskar thinks he will be healed if he can reverse time. While this reversal is clearly just so much wishful thinking, its temporal form—the flipbook's cinematic, real-time performance of motion—proves crucial to Oskar's healing process. He must relegate the event to the past by embracing time's forward progress into the future, an argument his therapist implicitly makes when he asks Oskar if he has noticed any hairs on his scrotum. If hormones, not 9/11, were causing Oskar's emotional distress, then his life would in fact be moving forward, not back. Sympathetic to Oskar's sense that his "dad died the most horrible death that anyone ever could invent," Foer's filmic portrayal of the falling man thus allows Oskar the illusion of reversing time while also insisting on a process-based, real-time solution to healing (201).

"[R]eeling on that faultline where World History and Personal History collide," this same forward motion will not remedy Spiegelman's temporal problems, which instead require the realignment of public and personal times (Introduction). While Spiegelman's personal sense of time "stands

still at the moment of trauma” (2), the government responds rapidly and aggressively with wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, a disjunction nicely captured in his suspicion that the nation’s “‘leaders’ are reading the book of Revelations” while he reads “the paranoid science fiction of Philip K. Dick” (7). Given this discrepancy between an apocalyptically committed government and the individual paralyzed by paranoia, Spiegelman looks for a version of time that unites the personal and the public, kick-starting the personal with time’s forward motion while slowing down what he sees as public time’s death-driven acceleration. In his treatment of the falling-man image, therefore, he puts himself in the place of the anonymous figure, personalizing this globally disseminated photograph and superimposing the personal on the public. Furthermore, reproducing his image five times over brings a semblance of temporal motion to the timeless isolation of his personal experience of the attacks, while the public aspect of the event pauses a moment in the solitary form of the looming tower. At least representationally, then, the temporal discrepancy between the personal and the public are brought into a tentative alignment that the accompanying narrative reinforces. For instance, Spiegelman identifies a parallel between globally published accounts of people jumping from the towers and the underreported local story of New Yorkers who have more metaphorically “landed in the street” “in the economic dislocation that has followed since that day” (6). Here he analogizes the images that he witnessed personally with the widely disseminated public images that threaten to preempt his understanding of the event and its aftermath. Finally, Spiegelman uses history to achieve this temporal alignment, as the Happy Hooligan character simultaneously embodies the final stage of Spiegelman’s fall from the tower and a hobo sitting among garbage on the city street. This historical representation thus allows Spiegelman to experience stopped personal time and moving public time simultaneously and without conflict; history here represents the only “place” where he is safe from the time of 9/11’s trauma.

Achieving and inhabiting these healing forms of temporal experience entails mending the rift between time and consciousness by developing a better way to incorporate time into the process of knowing. As we have already seen in previous chapters, however, such temporalized knowledge is hard to come by because it is a knowledge of time that must also be acquired in time. In an essay appearing just months after the attacks, Don DeLillo wrestles with this complicated relationship among time, trauma, and representation: after the first plane hit the building, it gradually “became possible for us to absorb this, barely. But when the towers fell. When the rolling smoke began moving downward, floor to floor. This was so vast and terrible that it was outside imagining even as it happened. We

could not catch up with it” (39). Even as time moved the violent events forward, the human experience of them lagged behind, as DeLillo’s incomplete sentences haltingly perform. DeLillo contends that months later, “We seem pressed for time, all of us. Time is scarcer now. There is a sense of compression, plans made hurriedly, time forced and distorted” (39). While suggesting that the aesthetic can play some role in “catching up” with this time lag, DeLillo also warns against certain representational modes: “The event itself has no purchase on the mercies of analogy or simile. We have to take the shock and horror as it is” (39). Here DeLillo calls for a form of representation that does not reduce the temporal experience of the event in the way that analogy or simile might, but exactly what that form might be remains elusive.³

Initially, using images to produce and elicit forms of temporal experience might seem counterintuitive.⁴ After all, images, particularly the still photographs included in Foer’s text, represent stable and self-contained slivers of time. Functioning by analogy and simile, they tend to reduce, hypostatize, and impose meaning on a constantly moving reality better captured through cinema’s diachronic form. My readings will nevertheless suggest that Foer’s novel and Spiegelman’s comix successfully overcome this reductive aspect of images, enlisting them to portray specifically temporal forms of knowing. Advocating a contingent and fully temporalized mode of knowing as the best antidote for Oskar’s trauma, Foer privileges process over content and uses images performatively. Seeking a realignment of his personal and public times that does not require Oskar’s turn to real-time experience, Spiegelman’s images can represent a healing version of temporal experience without having to perform it. Consequently, Spiegelman imports history into his present where its union of timelessness (history as something eternal and always with us) and timeliness (history as a domain where action occurs and events transpire) provides him the safe space required to negotiate the conflict he experiences between personal and private times.

The Time of Global Terror

This difference between performance and representation also defines the debate over the timing of U.S. intelligence both before and after the 9/11 attacks. Fueled by the logic of dot connecting, the recriminations concerning who knew what when about the events of September 11 lent credence to Condoleezza Rice’s warning, just a year later, that any delay in action against Iraq only increased the likelihood that “the smoking gun

would be a mushroom cloud” (CNN). Desperate to avoid another 9/11, Rice’s rhetoric represents the Bush Administration’s search for its own new form of temporal understanding. Rather than waiting for the dots to coalesce into an intelligible representation of an attack, she implied that the United States must act in real time, if not sooner, a belief that led the Administration to embrace the immanent temporality of performance and eschew the retroactive temporality of representation.

Such temporal imperatives not only dominate the discourse of intelligence gathering but also point more broadly to a general shift from spatial to temporal logics occurring on the level of U.S. foreign policy, as the Bush Administration struggles, just like Oskar and Spiegelman, to make sense of its place in a post-9/11 world. As George Bush highlighted in a speech at the National Cathedral just three days after the attacks, the terrorist violence established time as the requisite paradigm for understanding our new global reality: “This conflict was begun on the timing and terms of others; it will end in a way and at an hour of our choosing.” While the Cold War, dominated by spatial metaphors of dominoes, walls, and curtains, sought to control territory (e.g., Berlin, Korea, Cuba, Vietnam, Central America, and even outer space), the “War on Terror” fights to control time. And from the war against Iraq to curtailing civil liberties under the Patriot Act to detaining “enemy combatants” at Guantanamo Bay without due process, preemption has defined the Bush Administration’s primary relation to time. While preemption removes us from time’s gradual unfolding—from its “due process”—it does so not by stopping time but by forcing it ahead of itself to determine the future before it has a chance to occur. Meanwhile, the terrorists use the future’s infinite open-endedness to counter U.S. preemption: they wait-out preemption (hence the phrase “sleeper cells”), wielding the specter of the unknown next attack as their strongest weapon. For both camps, and for those of us living in the shadow of this “new kind of war,” the way time unfolds and the meaning given to that unfolding affect our political interactions with the world and with each other.⁵

As Richard Posner implies in his review of *The 9/11 Commission Report*, however, preemption may evade or trump the problem of gaining knowledge in real time, but it certainly does not solve it. He concludes instead that the main lesson we should take from 9/11 is the simple truth “that it is almost impossible to take effective action to prevent something that hasn’t occurred previously” (9). Indeed, as Donald Rumsfeld’s frustrated musings about “known knowns,” “known unknowns,” and “unknown unknowns” demonstrate, the timely thinking that this post-9/11 paradigm shift demands is more complex than U.S. preemption has allowed. Known knowns belong to the past, and known unknowns are easily and legally

preempted under the international legal doctrine of imminent threat. As Posner points out, however, the future is not populated with known unknowns; rather, it explodes with unknown unknowns, as the United States, which did not know that it did not know that Iraq did not have weapons of mass destruction, learned the hard way.

But as Foer's novel suggests, it is not clear that there are any good options when it comes to unknown unknowns. Commonly trapped in the time-knowledge paradox, Oskar and the Bush Administration either can act in real-time with compromised knowledge, or they can stabilize their knowledge but risk acting too late. Instead of compromising, the government chose preemption, and Oskar chooses to obsess over the moment of his father's death. Given this parallel between Oskar's and the nation's fear of an unknown and uncontrollable future, Foer's novel proves particularly useful for examining the feasibility of any real-time pursuit of knowledge. Moreover, just as the performative logic of Foer's novel reveals the challenges attending any attempt to gain knowledge in real time, Spiegelman's representational embrace of history suggests that waiting for after-the-fact knowledge does not necessarily produce the kinds of mushroom-cloud disasters ominously foretold by Secretary Rice and might even mitigate performance's inclination to leap before looking. While Foer's text ultimately advocates a form of real-time acquisition of knowledge that would be too dangerous as foreign intelligence policy, I will argue that Spiegelman's text does in fact respond productively to preemption, identifying historical time as an alternative to the Faustian choice of acting without knowing and knowing without acting that currently plagues U.S. foreign policy decisions. Taken together, these two texts allegorize the U.S. struggle to manage its own timely traumas since 9/11.

Foer's Performative Present

Foer's novel, crowded with images, reproduced handwriting, and shifting typographical layouts, proffers metafiction as an ideal narrative form for recapturing the forward flow of real-time temporal experience. To be sure, the idea that metafiction can access real-time temporal experience seems contrary to its typical treatment as a device that distances readers from texts, creating a space between the saying and the said that for Hutcheon functions as an ironic space of political possibility but for Jameson ensures metafiction's political impotence. In fact, the idea that metafiction, so frequently conceived through spatial metaphors of distance, layers, and frames, has anything to do with time might at first seem counterintuitive.

After all, if metafiction calls our attention to the written-ness, and thus to the artificiality, of the book we hold in our hands, then it would seem to rupture readers from rather than enmesh them in time's measured passage. Foer's novel, however, smartly engages metafiction's strong performative impulse: a desire for the book within the book to be the actual book that we hold in our hands. In these cases the goal is not a rupture from the text, but an isomorphism between a text's internal and external worlds. Oskar's scrapbook, *Stuff That Happened to Me*, provides an apt example. At one point, he narrates from his bed, "I pulled *Stuff That Happened to Me* from the space between the bed and the wall, and I flipped through it for a while, wishing that I would finally fall asleep." The ensuing fifteen pages contain images from his book, after which he resumes his narrative: "I got out of bed and went to the closet where I kept the phone" (52–68). In this metafictional moment, the book in our hands becomes Oskar's *Stuff That Happened to Me*. Moreover, given Oskar's need to reacquaint himself with time's forward passage, it is a moment in which the real-time temporalities inside and outside the text are coextensive. Our hands become Oskar's hands and move together accordingly.

Of course, these coextensive pages are embedded in the narrative of another book, the novel named *Extremely Loud & Incredible Close*, but that does not necessarily mitigate the metafictional performance. Instead, because Oskar narrates *Extremely Loud & Incredible Close* in the first person, the entire novel reads like a book that he wrote himself. This sense is heightened by the presence of pictures and other reproduced texts, which he ostensibly includes as examples or proof of the events detailed in his first-person narration. For example, he tells of an encounter in an art supply store with a female employee by narrating, "She showed me a pad of paper that was next to the display," and on the following pages we see the pieces of paper covered in different scripts written in different colors (44–49). Later, Oskar tells us about dropping his cat from the roof of the school "to show how cats reach terminal velocity by making themselves into little parachutes," and on the following page we see the cat (190–91). Importantly, these pages are not from *Stuff That Happened to Me*. They are part of Oskar's narration of *Extremely Loud & Incredible Close*, and they performatively transform the book we hold in our hands into the book that Oskar wrote.

In addition to his own narrative, this book that he wrote includes three other texts: the first is *Stuff That Happened to Me*; the second includes pages from his grandfather's journals, which appear in chapters titled "Why I'm Not Where You Are"; and the third includes letters from his grandmother, which appear in chapters titled "My Feelings." Each text has

its own unique style and spacing, reproducing the format and layout of the “original” pages, a verisimilitude intended, once again, to metafictionally transform the book in our hands into the texts internal to the book. In effect, the novel functions on two metafictional levels. First, when we read from *Stuff That Happened to Me*, the grandpa’s journals, and the grandma’s letters, we seem to be reading from those actual texts. Second, the inclusion of those texts in *Extremely Loud & Incredible Close* also enhances the metafictional effect of *Extremely Loud & Incredible Close* itself, turning it into a book ostensibly authored by Oskar. In a sense, the novel has five authors. Jonathan Foer, the author of *Extremely Loud & Incredible Close*, wrote his book so that it appears to have been authored by Oskar Schell. In writing his book, also apparently titled *Extremely Loud & Incredible Close*, Oskar has included texts from other authors: first, *Stuff That Happened to Me*, also authored by Oskar Schell; second, “Why I’m Not Where You Are,” authored by Oskar’s grandfather; and third, “My Feelings,” authored by his grandmother. In all of these instances the isomorphism between the text in our hands and the text in the book brings a forward-moving, real-time temporality to the worlds outside and inside the novel, and this is precisely the version of temporal experience that Oskar requires if he is to overcome the trauma of his father’s death.

The plot of the novel, however, highlights Oskar’s obsession with a different version of time: the instant. Specifically, it chronicles Oskar’s need to know what was happening at the instant of his father’s death. Consequently, rather than recapturing his sense of time’s forward motion, Oskar searches for a secure and absolute knowledge of the past. The reason, perhaps, is that his trauma does not stem simply from his father’s death, but from the horror of not knowing that his father was about to die. Oskar recounts his experience of being sent home from school on the morning of 9/11: “I opened the apartment door, put down my bag, and took off my shoes, like everything was wonderful, because I didn’t know that in reality everything was actually horrible, because how could I?” (68). It is this radically unknown unknown that traumatizes Oskar and fuels his desire to fill the hole in his knowledge of the event. Tracing his attempt to gain symbolic understanding, the novel’s plot follows Oskar’s search for the lock that matches a key he finds in his father’s closet after 9/11. The key is in an envelope with the word “Black” written on it. Believing that “the lock was between [him] and [his] Dad,” Oskar methodically visits every “Black” listed in the phone book, interrogating each about the key (52).

A quaint story, but the novel also suggests that this symbolic reunion with his father is impossible. Using DeLillo’s language, we might say that the symbol is not strong enough to carry the weight of the event: symbolic

language cannot find an adequate substitute for the event that will make its meaning and significance clear, even if that symbol is a present absence like a lock. For the key to unlock the lock would be for Oskar to inhabit the moment of his father's death, to understand the logic of that traumatic instant. Although the traumas that require healing are "extremely loud," he can only come "incredibly close" to the event, as he is when he visualizes himself in a building hit by a plane: "I imagined the last second, when I would see the pilot's face, who would be a terrorist. I imagined us looking each other in the eyes when the nose of the plane was one millimeter from the building" (244). Indeed, when Oskar finally meets the man who owns the matching lock, Oskar declines to open it.

The key-lock plot clearly indicates the nature of Oskar's response to 9/11 and its aftermath: the more he knows about the event, the more secure he will feel in his post-9/11 world. After calculating that he could visit each of the 216 Blacks listed in the phone book in three years, for example, Oskar reveals, "I couldn't survive three years without knowing," and he decides that canceling his weekend French lessons will allow him to "know everything" in just one and a half years (51). Related to this epistemophilia, Oskar invents fantastic devices—skyscrapers with movable parts, a portable pocket that holds people, a birdseed shirt that attracts birds to help people fly—intended to reduce all unknown contingencies to a known and manageable form. Like the symbolic search for the lock, these inventions preempt future death, but they also preclude him from living his life, as Oskar's observation that he compulsively invents whenever he feels insecure indicates (234).

Finally, Oskar also stabilizes his relationship to his world with his photographs. Like his search for the lock and his obsessive inventing, however, the photographs can only symbolically return him to the moment of trauma, deploying a retroactive temporality at odds with the forward-moving temporality of metafictional performance. I describe the temporality of the symbol as retroactive because symbols always point back to whatever they symbolize; for a symbol to work, we have to already know and understand the thing preceding it, the thing being symbolized. To use Donald Rumsfeld's language, symbols can illuminate known unknowns, but they tell us nothing about unknown unknowns because symbolic logic always requires some form of prior knowledge. Oskar thus finds symbols quite helpful because they point back to the moment he wants to understand, but they never point back far enough because the event he seeks to know is, in fact, an unknown unknown. The text thus evinces a tension between the forward-moving temporality of its performative mode and the backward-moving temporality of its symbolic mode. This tension is

most apparent in the photographs themselves. Although they do function performatively in the ways discussed above, all of the interpolated pictures also have a symbolic register that exceeds their ostensibly documentary function. This is why Oskar photographs the back of Abby Black's head. If he were truly just accumulating "stuff that happened to him," we would see her putting her hand in front of her face as she did when Oskar tried to take her picture. Instead, Oskar tells us, "I thought of a different picture I could take, which would be more truthful, anyway" (99).

Suffering the traumas of a different horror, Oskar's grandfather stopped speaking shortly after living through the Dresden fire bombings, and he keeps a daybook in which he writes messages to people along with unsent letters to his son, Oskar's father, explaining "Why I'm Not Where You Are." Like Oskar, the grandfather also takes photos, but his are purely documentary. After the war he began to photograph everything he owned, right down to the doorknobs in his apartment, and these pictures are inserted into his journal. While Oskar's pictures aim at a deeper truth, the grandfather's pictures have no meaning beyond the objects they represent. They are, in effect, ontological substitutes—proof of existence for a hypothetical insurance adjuster of the future. Like Oskar's photos, these also enhance the performativity of the grandfather's chapters, which reproduce the visual appearance of the daybook's pages so that some pages have only a few words on them while others have dense text flush to the margins.

Both of these photographic styles—Oskar's, which aims at symbolic depth, and the grandfather's, which aims at encyclopedic breadth—unsuccessfully attempt to heal their respective traumas. Just as Oskar's symbolic search for the lock cannot replace his father's violent absence, and just as his inventions come at the expense of his mental and emotional stability in the present, so too do these photographs run from rather embrace the contingencies of temporal experience that define the original trauma. The Dresden bombings and 9/11 were so sublimely horrific because they were unknown unknowns, and no amount of inventing, symbolizing, or accruing can possess that central emptiness. Indeed, the novel argues that these characters should be trying to live, not trying to know, which is why they exhibit true knowledge only when they are not thinking. For example, describing his first sexual encounter with his first love, Anna, Oskar's grandfather relates, "[W]ithout any experience I knew what to do . . . as if the information had been coiled within me like a spring, everything that was happening had happened before and would happen again" (127). Similarly, the grandmother evinces needs that exceed her logical knowledge of them: "What does it mean to need a child? One morning I awoke and understood the hole in the middle of me. . . . I couldn't explain it. The

need came before explanations” (177). Tellingly, Oskar experiences such knowledge just once during his search, while standing outside the door of the Black who owns the lock that matches his key: “I didn’t believe in being able to know what’s going to happen before it happens, but for some reason I knew I had to get inside her apartment” (91).

But if these images prevent Oskar and his grandfather from achieving the kind of intuitive knowledge just described, do they function similarly for the novel’s readers? Or, to ask the question that David Palumbo-Liu poses for all acts of imaginative creation post-9/11: do they reclaim the future and incorporate time in a way that addresses 9/11’s temporal traumas, or do they become “manic,” succumbing to the imagination’s “self-generating frenzy, unchecked by the otherness of the external world” (“Preemption” 158)? Almost unanimously, book reviewers have judged Foer’s inventiveness as pathological and compulsive as Oskar’s:

The avant-garde tool kit, developed way back when to disassemble established attitudes and cut through rusty sentiments, has now become the best means, it seems, for restoring them and propping them up. No traditional story could put forward the tritenesses that Foer reshuffles, folds, cuts into strips, seals in seven separate envelopes and then, astonishingly, makes whole, causing the audience to ooh and aah over notions that used to make it groan. (Kirn 2)

Perhaps. But if we give Foer the benefit of the doubt for just a moment, we might see that there is something productively odd about this slew of formal techniques: they all grasp after the performative without ever fully achieving it; they are quasi-performative. For example, when meeting with Abby, Oskar leaves his business card, which Foer reproduces in the text, performing the event for his readers. And yet the reproduced card is just a square with text in it; some words are italicized and some are capitalized, but the font on the card is identical to the novel’s and in no way looks like a business card. The same problem arises with the grandfather’s daybook which performatively recreates the spatial layout of each page but retains the novel’s font. This may seem like quibbling, but other pages in the novel do achieve a more consistent performativity: those containing different handwriting styles printed in various colors purport to be, as much as possible, the actual papers Oskar finds at the art supply store (47–49). In other words, these fully performative pages require that we ask why other such moments do not measure up or adhere to the same logic.

A clue might come when we notice that some of the pages in the grandfather’s daybook performatively deliver the precise message he wrote at

that moment, as when a question to a passerby, “Excuse me, do you know what time it is?” interrupts a letter to his son (111–13). At other times, however, the pages recording these single-line snippets of conversation are part of the letter to his son, included as representations of something that he had previously written in the daybook. For example, an early letter explains the daybook’s function: “I would take the book to bed with me and read through the pages of my life.” (18). The next nine pages after the colon then exemplify what he would read: “I want two rolls”; “Help”; or “Ha ha ha!” (19–27). After representing enough examples, the letter finally continues, only to be interrupted by a photo of a doorknob, a performative rather than an exemplary image. The grandfather’s daybook thus reveals that the text’s overall performativity breaks down because sometimes it claims actually *to be* the thing that we are reading about (e.g., the colored handwriting or Oskar’s *Stuff That Happened to Me*), while at other times it seems content merely *to represent* that thing (e.g., the cards, letters, and elements of the grandfather’s letters). This same equivocation between representing and being marks the difference between Oskar’s and his grandfather’s photographs. In Oskar’s symbolic aesthetic, the pictured object refers us to something “more truthful,” and yet these same photos, intended to be deeply symbolic and representational, are also performative when they appear in *Stuff That Happened to Me*. In the grandfather’s documentary aesthetic, the photos function as ontological substitutes for the pictured objects, and yet in a book about a boy searching for a lock, the photos of doorknobs and locks are deeply symbolic. Therefore, both in the novel’s photographs and in its overall performativity, there is an equivocation: sometimes a thing is what it is, and at other times it represents something other than itself. Lacking an internal and consistent logic, this undecidability has given reviewers good cause to chastise Foer. And yet I would like to entertain the possibility that such undecidability might just be the point.

After all, this is the very lesson that Oskar’s father impresses upon him when they play “Reconnaissance Expedition,” a game in which Oskar’s father gives him clues and instructions to decode and perform. During one game, Oskar gleans that Central Park holds the clue that will help him solve his mission, but after digging up various objects in the park, he struggles to determine which are clues (i.e., representations) and which are just things. Oskar then wonders if perhaps this undecidability is itself a clue, a notion that is reinforced when plotting the found objects on a map of Central Park leads him to realize that he “could connect the dots to make . . . almost anything [he] wanted” (10). Oskar complains to his father, “But if you don’t tell me anything, how can I ever be right?” “How could you ever be wrong?” his father replies (9).

Indeed, readers could make almost anything they wanted out of the “avant-garde toolkit” Foer empties into his novel. But what might first appear as crude and sloppy writing instead proves to be Foer’s finest performance of them all: the novel performs the irresolvable equivocation between performance and representation since that equivocation governs the entire process of reading the novel. In other words, the novel performs the inherent contradictions of performance; it is a metafictional account of the tensions implicit in metafiction. The quasi-performances internal to the text are always compromised in some way by the retroactive temporality of the symbolic mode. However, these compromises do not prevent Foer from insisting on the value of gaining knowledge in real time and charging head-first into those unknown unknowns, which is exactly the form of knowledge acquisition that the novel’s meta-performance—its performance of the equivocation between performance and representation—demands of its readers. If the static performativity of the grandfather’s photos, aiming merely to be the things they represent, produces known knowns, while the symbolic logic of Oskar’s photos, aiming at a truth beyond the things they represent, points backward to known unknowns, then the contingent logic required to apprehend the conflicted relationship between the two brings us fully into the temporal challenges of post-9/11 unknown unknowns. The meta-performance thus achieves the version of temporal experience—a forward-moving real time—that the novel’s internal quasi-performances do not. When we know either what we know or what we do not know, our knowledge is stable and removed from the flow of time. Because unknown unknowns are unknown precisely because of the future’s radical contingency, however, if we embrace the formal incoherence of Foer’s novel and allow that we do not know what we do not know about the aim and function of his “avant-garde toolkit,” then readerly knowledge becomes temporalized.

Of course, Oskar’s own journey also proves to be a contingent search for unknown unknowns, but he does not realize it, perhaps because realizing it would make it no longer so. Instead, Oskar characterizes his search as a quest for a known unknown, as he does when he complains, “I don’t know a single thing that I didn’t know six months ago. And actually I have negative knowledge because I skipped all of those French classes with Marcel” (255). Knowing what he does not know implies that he knows what will solve his problems but currently lacks that thing. But Oskar does not find the thing that he thinks he lost: his connection to his father. Instead, Oskar gains a different kind of knowledge, a different kind of connection—to New York City, to his mother, and to his grandparents—that he did not even know he was missing. At the novel’s conclusion we finally learn that

Oskar's father bought a vase from an estate sale and never even knew the key was hidden inside (unknown unknown #1); and the man who sold him the vase, Mr. Black, only learned after the fact that the vase held the key to *his* now-deceased father's safe-deposit box (unknown unknown #2). Although Oskar does not reconnect to his father, his search allows Mr. Black to connect to his, yet another unknown unknown articulated through Oskar's speculation that Mr. Black's posters searching for the man who bought the vase (i.e., Oskar's dad) may have hung next to the posters Oskar's mother hung searching for her husband after 9/11 (299).

Finally, in addition to the text's internally conflicted performativity, the reciprocal interaction among the novel's interlocking chapters also channels readers into their own contingent search for knowledge. Although Oskar's, the grandfather's, and the grandmother's chapters recount different events, one chapter's story frequently intersects with and appears in the other chapters, making the reading experience an analeptic and proleptic whirl. Early in Oskar's narrative, for example, he describes his grandmother writing a message to him on the window of her apartment across the street, but in one of the grandfather's chapters appearing much later in the novel, we learn that the message was actually for him, the grandfather. In effect, when we read Oskar's account of this scene, we do not know what we do not know, which is that the grandfather has just returned to town and is trying to move back into the apartment. Like two posters unwittingly searching for the same person, there are always relevant events transpiring concurrently to the events being narrated, but they remain unknown unknowns to readers until we go through the *process* of reading. (The same is again true of Oskar's own quest, as he does not learn until the novel's conclusion that his mother knew all about his escapades and even phoned ahead to the Blacks whom Oskar assumed he was visiting unannounced.) Readers are perpetually recontextualizing their knowledge of the text while the general unreliability of each of the three narrators ensures that they never land on a stable or true understanding of the narrated events. This in turn intimately links the reading experience to time's passing and ensures that our knowledge of the text is only ever associative and contingent, produced from the juxtaposition of the three chapter types which refuse to be reduced to a coherently unified story. Foer thus asks his readers to focus on processes of understanding rather than on the specifics of novelistic content. Of course, as Walter Kirn notes in his review, Oskar could have learned that "searching" is more valuable than "finding" if he had simply gone to the docks and talked to Jonathan Livingston Seagull. However, Kirn's caustic criticism of Foer's maudlin message not only ignores its provocative formal enactment, but also fails to recognize how

deeply such apparently pithy problems have vexed our nation ever since 9/11 forced us to think in time.

Spiegelman's Represented History

If Foer's novel posits a performatively cinematic real time as the ideal temporal mode for knowing and healing 9/11's timely traumas, it also reveals that adopting this mode comes with great risks: formal incoherence, an unknown and thus potentially dangerous future, and an equivocal relation to the world and its objects. These are precisely the risks that the Bush Administration has refused to take, choosing instead to manage risk with a policy of preemption that is coherent, known, and unequivocal. But does the relationship between time and knowledge offer only these two all-or-nothing options? Art Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers* suggests not, and it does so by establishing a unique relationship to history that Spiegelman uses to withstand the government's aggressively preemptive logic.

In some respects, Spiegelman's temporal experience of the 9/11 attacks is remarkably similar to Oskar's. Just as his father's death prevents Oskar from moving on with his life, Spiegelman's personal experience of time's passage stopped on 9/11. And just as Oskar compulsively invents, Spiegelman, depicting himself with a bald eagle hanging around his neck, observes that more than five months after the attacks, he must "compulsively retell the calamities of September 11th to anyone who'll still listen." On the other hand, with some loving nudges from his mother and his therapist, Oskar remains free to reanimate his temporal experience at his own pace, while Spiegelman's imbrication in the public sphere causes him to feel that the U.S. government is forcing time's reanimation on him. Consequently, a public counter-discourse heckles his compulsive retelling: the bald eagle hanging around his neck represents not just the weight of the trauma grinding his personal sense of time to a halt, but also the government's insistence that the nation move forward in time as it squawks, "Everything's changed!" and "Go out and shop!" (2).

Spiegelman portrays his paralyzed experience of time as both an anxious waiting and an obsessive fixation on the events of 9/11. In a strip on the text's first page, he depicts his sense of suspended time as a case of "waiting for the next shoe to drop." In this sequence a man noisily takes off a shoe after a night of drinking. Alarmed at the calamity the first shoe causes, he silently places the second shoe on the floor and drifts off to sleep while his downstairs neighbors anxiously wait for the other shoe to drop

(1). Similarly representing his inability to think beyond the morning of the attacks, the next page reveals a “Missing” poster for Spiegelman’s brain, claiming that it was “last seen in Lower Manhattan, mid-September 2001” (2). Later in the text, his fixation on the moment of trauma turns into paranoia and a general obsession with the news. Noting that “he totally *lost* it way back then, after 9/11,” we see Spiegelman surfing the Internet until two in the morning, looking for information about the attacks, only to go to bed and watch CNN’s coverage of various 9/11 conspiracy theories (8).

Of course, the fact that Spiegelman’s sense of time effectively stopped on 9/11 does not mean that the world followed suit: “Amazing how time flies when it stands still,” he observes on a page marking the first anniversary of the attacks (4). Aggrieved by the violence that conspicuously marks the “flying time” of world events, however, Spiegelman refuses to fly along because he fears his government as much as he does the terrorists. For instance, the “other shoe” drops twice over, once as “Jihad brand footwear” falling from the sky onto the frightened masses below (1), and later as a rain of cowboy boots that coincides with the 2004 Republican presidential convention held in New York City (10). That the other shoe belongs to both the terrorists and the Republicans nicely captures Spiegelman’s sense that the Bush Administration hijacked the hijackings for its own purposes, leaving him “equally terrorized by Al-Qaeda and by his own government.” To convey this dual terror, Spiegelman draws himself sleeping at his drawing board while to his left a terrorist suspends a bloody knife above his neck, and to his right George W. Bush holds a gun to his head. While Spiegelman sleepily inhabits his frozen personal time, reliving “his ringside seat to that day’s disaster yet again,” his waking entrance into the public sphere will clearly be a violent one, as it was for a young woman he overheard at a Tribeca party (2). The woman was mugged the previous night while walking home, an event she sees as a positive development since it indicates that “things are finally getting back to normal” (9).

Shortly after the attacks, Spiegelman initially believed that reentering time’s forward flow would be peaceful rather than violent, that “Ground Zero” would become “Year Zero,” and that a “globe” rather than “provincial American flags” would “sprout out of the embers” of the destruction (Introduction and 7). But such hopes were dashed the moment the administration acted before it knew what it was doing, simultaneously preempting global goodwill and Spiegelman’s personal healing process. Before preemption, Spiegelman thought that his comix would entail “sorting through [his] grief and putting it into boxes,” and he intended to represent very personal aspects of 9/11 and its aftermath: seeing the tower before it fell, driving to retrieve his son from school, and forbidding his daughter

to wear red, white, and blue, as school officials requested days after the events of September 11. But as “the world hustled forward” and “the government began to . . . hurtle America into a colonialist adventure in Iraq,” he was confronted with “[n]ew traumas [that] began competing with still-fresh wounds and the nature of [his] project began to mutate” (Introduction). Consequently, in the fourth installment of the series, a sequence of snapshot-like frames neatly contain the personal story of retrieving his daughter from school after the attacks, but flying above and outside these boxes, George Bush and Dick Cheney straddle a large bald eagle as Bush yells, “Let’s roll!” and Cheney slices the eagle’s neck with a box cutter (4). Finally, preemption’s tendency to accelerate time—to precipitate an event sooner than it would otherwise occur—also threatens to make his comix obsolete before they are even published. Noting the labor-intensive process of creating comix, he quips that “one has to assume that one will live forever to make them” (Introduction). Convinced that he might not live to see next week, however, “forever” is precisely the kind of time that he does not have. Hence, the representational burden of Spiegelman’s text: how can he slow down his experience of public time and reanimate his personal time when those two times are so mutually antagonistic?

The text’s final pages do indicate that he achieves a semblance of reconciliation between these competing temporalities. On a page dated more than one and a half years after the attacks, Spiegelman writes, “Time passes. He can think about himself in the first person again, but deep inside the towers still burn” (8). Also, on the text’s final page, Spiegelman notes that “even anxious New Yorkers eventually run out of adrenaline and— . . . you go back to thinking that you *might* live forever after all” (10). Finally, in the last frames of the book, a glowing image of the towers that serves as the “pivotal image” of Spiegelman’s personal 9/11 experience and appears on every page, fades nearly to black beneath the claim that the towers “seem to get smaller every day . . .” (10). Of course, these successes are highly qualified: he uses the third person to assert his ability to think about himself in the first person; the towers still burn inside; he only “might” live forever; and the glowing tower fades nearly to black, but not all the way.

So how has Spiegelman achieved these qualified successes in the midst of an onslaught of public and political events that threaten permanently to preempt his personal experience of time, leaving it stagnant and frozen at the “moment of trauma”? In her insightful reading of *Maus*, Erin McGlothlin argues that its meta-artistic moments—when Spiegelman draws himself struggling to draw *Maus*—represent a temporal domain where he retreats to work out the vexed relation between his present and his father’s past. McGlothlin identifies three interlocking stories in *Maus*,

each with its own temporality: the past Holocaust; the present father-son relationship; and the meta-artistic story about *Maus's* production, occurring in what McGlothlin via Spiegelman dubs the “super-present.”⁶ This “super-present” allows Spiegelman to “reflect on his project” from a safe “narrative time in which nothing exactly happens, but in which the complexities and contradictions that relate to the other narrative levels are exposed” (186).

In the Shadow, which also recounts a family trauma and tells three stories (Spiegelman's personal 9/11 experience, the global politics surrounding the event and its aftermath, and the production of the text itself), also cultivates a safe temporal space from which Spiegelman can reconcile the conflict between personal and public time. However, unlike in *Maus* where each story has its own place in time, here all three stories occur simultaneously in the present. In *Maus II*, Spiegelman famously draws himself at his drawing board surrounded by a pile of dead bodies that are clearly intended to represent Holocaust victims (41). While gruesome and haunting, the past from which these bodies come does not immediately threaten Spiegelman in the superpresent. When he appears at his drawing board in his 9/11 text, however, the terrorist's sword and Bush's handgun reveal that the meta-artistic level is no longer safe. In *Maus*, where his father “bleeds history,” the trauma lies in the past, and he representationally escapes into the superpresent; in his 9/11 work, where the traumatic event is unavoidably present, history becomes a time to escape to, rather than a trauma to run from.

Because Spiegelman does not need the coextensive relationship between time and knowledge that Oskar requires, his text never aims to *perform* its temporality as Foer's does. Instead Spiegelman incorporates historical cartoon characters into his own work to represent a safe temporality in which personal and public times are reconciled. Importing the past into the present to draw the present as history, he historicizes the present. Crucial to the success of his project, however, such historicization does not figure the present as the past of a future yet to come; instead, the historical cartoon characters make the present past before the future ever has a chance to make it so, a necessary strategy given that the future has been tainted by government preemption. In a brief introduction to the cartoons included in the appendix, Spiegelman explains why he turned to old cartoon characters to render his present as past:

The only cultural artifacts that could get past my defenses to flood my eyes and brain with something other than images of burning towers were old comic strips; vital, unpretentious ephemera from the optimistic dawn of

the 20th century. That they were made with so much skill and verve but never intended to last past the day they appeared in the newspaper gave them poignancy; they were just right for an end-of-the-world moment.

To the extent that they belong to their day of publication which is also the day of their extinction, these cartoons are timely and mortal, but to the extent that they are “ghosts” that continue to “haunt” Spiegelman, they are timeless and eternal (8). In effect, they offer a temporality in which the timely and the timeless are not at odds with each other; their poignancy derives from their unstable ephemerality, not from any attempt to impose meaning by simile or analogy, as a photographic image might. As history, they are alive and animated but also immune to the anxious fear of the next shoe’s dropping.

Literally encasing the temporal traumas of Spiegelman’s present, the text’s title page and the appendix also present historical materials that point to history’s eternal timelessness. The title page reproduces a newspaper from September 11, 1901, five days after President McKinley was shot and three days before he died, with headlines attesting to history’s eternal return: “President’s Wound Reopened” and “Emma Goldman in Jail Charged with Conspiracy.” The historical repetitions are clear: the wounding of the president and 9/11’s wounding of the nation; using the shooting to imprison anarchists indiscriminately and using 9/11 to curtail civil liberties. The comics in the appendix reveal similar parallels: “The War Scare in Hogan’s Alley” depicts a group of rag-tag children recruited to fight England; a comic from 1902 portrays two German children, Hans and Fritz, the Katzenjammer Kids, who trick two innocent American boys into planting a bomb under their grandpa while he recites the Declaration of Independence; a “Little Nemo in Slumberland” cartoon shows giant children strolling around Lower Manhattan, knocking over buildings roughly where the World Trade Center would later stand; and a “Bringing Up Father” strip from 1921 shows “father” traveling in Pisa where he interferes with Italy’s infrastructure by propping up the Leaning Tower with some wooden scaffolding.

Accompanying the eternal timelessness born of history’s self-repetitions, Spiegelman accesses history’s timeliness when he replaces the characters in his story (usually himself) with characters from old comics. Occurring most frequently in scenes of intense emotional distress, he asks them to live through events in his life that he, stuck and fixated on the moment of trauma, does not have the time to experience. For example, before Spiegelman and his wife see the tower, they appear as ordinary Manhattanites, but in the next frame, after seeing the tower burning, they

are transformed into the Katzenjammer Kids, renamed the “Tower Twins” (2). After retrieving their daughter, they reappear human, but in depicting the feeling that the Iraq invasion made their lives more dangerous, Spiegelman again draws himself and his wife as the twins. In addition, when representing the emotional tension that 9/11 brought to their marriage, Spiegelman portrays his wife and himself as characters from “Bringing Up Father” (8), and he appears as Happy Hooligan after his fall from the tower (6) and while participating in a sham interview for Tom Brokaw’s tribute to 9/11 (10). While Spiegelman’s mind remains lost in the suspended timelessness of his post-9/11 world, these historical cartoon characters intervene to embody and animate his experiences. Paradoxically, if he drew himself living through these events, he could not draw the events, because the individual living through the events is entirely unmoored from the very temporality required to represent the sequence of events in the first place. Coming out of the past, the historical characters provide the experiential temporality required to get through the event sequences. When combined with the timelessness of history’s repetitions, these historical comics offer Spiegelman a safe temporality from which to approach the timely trauma of his immediate present.

Finally, we can see this union of the timeless and the temporal in Spiegelman’s manipulation of the flexible format of his single-page comix. On each of the ten pages, multiframe strip sequences recounting diachronic events overlie single-frame drawings that depict different timeless states of being. For example, a drawing of several people with their heads in the sand, an advertisement for the “Ostrich Party,” depicts the general condition of political consciousness in the United States (5); a single-frame, fire-and-brimstone image depicts the “inner demons” roiling a homeless woman (6); a drawing of interlocking red hawks and blue doves, flanked by a skeleton and the grim reaper, represents a potentially violent divide in the U.S. electorate (7); and a disturbing portrayal of Spiegelman jack-hammering into his own skull intrudes into a boxed strip sequence in which he diagnoses his own paranoia and neurotic depression (8). Each of these single-frame representations establishes the general underlying condition of the more fully temporalized events transpiring in the surrounding strip sequences. A few pages take this union of the timeless and the temporal a step further, presenting a full-page background image—the long shadow of the Twin Towers (2), an enlarged image of the Tower Twins (4), and fire engulfing the towers (10)—that subtends the animated events represented on each page. Representing the qualified healing captured in Spiegelman’s observation that “most New Yorkers seem to have picked up the rhythms of daily life . . . but right under the surface, we’re all still just a bunch of

stunned pigeons,” Spiegelman’s use of historical cartoons, along with his formal layering of different temporalities, effectively unite the timeless and the temporal in a historical vision that facilitates his realignment of personal and public times. (8).

Having completed the final installment of *In the Shadow*, Spiegelman observes in the Introduction that ideas once deemed too extreme to print in mainstream media outlets—such as the notion that George Bush has hurt the United States more than the terrorists have—began gaining more popular currency. Once the world comes around to his point of view, Spiegelman realizes that he was ahead of his time rather than behind it, and his sense of disconnection and alienation begins to fade. Although his tone suggests a certain amount of personal satisfaction about this turn of events, he also strikes a facetious note, suggesting that such anticipatory modes of knowledge, regardless of who deploys them, are not wholly desirable. After all, Spiegelman would have presumably been happier if his apocalyptic vision of the Bush Administration were incorrect. Better instead to avoid preemption’s hurtling temporality by turning to history, a turn that politicians and the public at large made in 2006 when the debate surrounding the war in Iraq became historicized: thinking about Iraq in the context of Vietnam helped clarify arguments about an exit strategy, and the partitioning of Yugoslavia informed discussions about pursuing a similar course in Iraq, productively illuminating potential problems—such as the differences among the ethnic, religious, and political differences dividing Iraq—that were never considered in the original plans for Iraq’s invasion and reconstruction. Like Spiegelman’s text, these discussions deploy history to mitigate the forward march of what many fear is a war without end. But Spiegelman’s work also reveals that we need not wait for preemption before countering it with historical time. Not only can the past disarm preemption, but it also offers its own solution to the time-knowledge paradox, as it suggests that we need not immediately succumb to the lose-lose choice between acting without knowing and knowing without acting. Instead, like Spiegelman in his moment of trauma, we can look to the past for the histories that best personify us—moving forward by moving back—and make our present both more alive and less out of control than it would otherwise be.

Reading this conclusion back onto Foer’s novel, I would suggest that the two texts might not pursue such disparate temporal modes after all. In the nascent relationship that he forges with his grandfather, Oskar recognizes a form of historical repetition—in his case, between Dresden and 9/11—that echoes Spiegelman’s own recourse to history. In the absence of his father, Oskar’s grandfather becomes, quite literally, the past that provides the his-

tory best able to reanimate him in the present, a past that certainly makes Oskar's present both more alive and less out of control than it would otherwise be. Rather than contending that the quasi-performances internal to Foer's novel compromise real-time temporal experience while only the meta-performance external to the novel uncompromisingly achieves it, the temporal logic of Spiegelman's work demonstrates that allowing a little retroactive temporality to compromise real-time performativity should not be viewed as a failure, or even as a compromise. Instead, it appears symptomatic of a world in which leaving oneself open to a radically contingent future could lead to certain death. Forced to live with precisely this fear, Oskar and his grandfather, much like Spiegelman, will always compromise their performances for knowledge; they will always hedge their bets to protect themselves from the threat of unknown unknowns.

And to the extent that Foer's real-time model—clearly more in line with Morson's thoughts on reading than with Attridge's—is not conducive to rereading, the same lesson applies to performative metafiction itself. As I am proving by writing this sentence, interpretation, knowledge, and representation's symbolic mode always intrude on the radically aleatory contingencies of performance. To reiterate one of *Qualified Hope's* main arguments, it is too easy to see compromised performances as failures and uncompromised ones as successes. Instead, if we admit that there are no uncompromised performances, that the lure of real time is just a pipe dream that distracts us from identifying more complicated temporal (and literary) forms that might productively avoid the time-knowledge paradox, then we are free to make somewhat more interesting arguments. For example, the lessons of Spiegelman's work suggest that the apparent contradiction between performance and representation that Foer's novel reveals at the heart of metafiction need not be contradictory at all. Instead, if we conceive the performative and representational modes simultaneously, then Foer's novel reveals not the conflicted limits of metafiction, but rather its potential, and these apparent contradictions instead provide forms of temporal experience that assuage rather than exacerbate trauma. In demonstrating that metafiction is always simultaneously performative and representational, always a performance and a representation of that performance, Foer's novel produces an aesthetic doubleness that creates a temporal experience that moves simultaneously forward like a performance and backward like a symbolic representation referring to something prior. Best of all, at least for the temporal traumas described in Foer's novel, this doubleness amounts to a formal enactment of Oskar's own complicated impulse to both return and never return to the moment of trauma. Metafiction provides an aesthetic form and thus a temporal experience

that nonparadoxically accommodates his simultaneous desire to remember (through the symbolic) and forget (through the performative). Finally, this simultaneity offers a new way to read the novel's concluding image in which quickly flipping the final fifteen pages forward cinematically returns the falling man safely to the building from which he jumped. Frequently read as a juvenile stunt symptomatic of Foer's (and Oskar's) naive wish to turn back time, we should instead see it as a perfect example of how the simultaneity of performance and representation yields a temporal model that moves forward by moving back in a noncontradictory way.

