



“9/11” – Between Legibility and Visuality

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ABSTRACT:

The terrorist attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 was one of the most visually dominating events in human history. So much so that the fall of the towers was relayed live on various TV networks and millions of viewers in the US and around the world stood its witness. 9/11 instantly became a central event of the first decade of the new century that changed the US and the world, palpably. Its outcome was a set of practices, decisions and beliefs which influenced contemporary politics and governance as did other major events in the past, but the refractions produced by the 9/11 attacks continued to persist well beyond its aftermath. In its wake it produced contours that percolated social, political and cultural realms. Amidst numerous factors that were rapidly changing the world and its global public was the broadcasting sequence of the fall on live television that warranted peculiar reactions from different

spectators. The visual component of the 9/11 catastrophe became an intrinsic element of the event that instantly gained iconicity in the cultural context.

Therefore, it becomes imperative for an examination of 9/11 to create space for a visually-perceptive view of this array of occurrences that has to be probed and contended in the public imagination. The set of methods that are employed to remember, narrate and, interpret 9/11 attacks with visual perceptibility in the field of literature, particularly fiction is the primary subject of this critique. For the purpose of discussion and elaboration I will deal with Jonathan Safran Foer's novel *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005) that attempts to situate the "event" of 9/11 between written words and visual idioms of 9/11 derived from popular culture. The analysis focuses on how the visual effect of 9/11 has been represented in the novel form that prioritizes photographs and images by arranging them directly alongside written texts. Foer's ingenuity in narrating 9/11, at once seeks to represent, as well as push the limits of representation of trauma and traumatic events.

KEYWORDS:

9/11, visuality, legibility, photographs, trauma, mediation, representation, images

I

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close (2005) is an experimental novel written by Jonathan Safran Foer that takes the task of narrating and representing the immediate after effects of 9/11 attacks both in the civic and psychic realms. The central character of the story is Oskar Schell an intelligent, albeit awkward 9-year-old boy whose father gets trapped in the World Trade Centre during the terrorist attacks and dies in the process. The novel traces Oskar's journey through the five boroughs of New York City in search for the owner of a key that his father had left behind which Oskar believed will uncover some secret his father expected him to know after his death.

In the course of Oskar's journey, Foer attempts to illuminate the relationship between the visual, and the written words that is integral to the functioning of memory and representation by employing inventive narrative techniques in order to imaginatively mediate loss and grief that departs from the older conventions. Foer's persistence on the issue of visuality is ingenious, wherein he infuses images and photographs in the narrative structure of the novel alongside deliberate typesetting of the pages in such a manner that it renders the content of the pages either confusing or downright impossible to read (Foer, 269-71 & 281-84) (See Fig.1). He derives images from multiple sources like popular media that includes images published in newspapers, internet, T.V and, celluloid stills, along with images taken by the protagonist himself and some that have no apparent source or reference.

Fig. 1.2

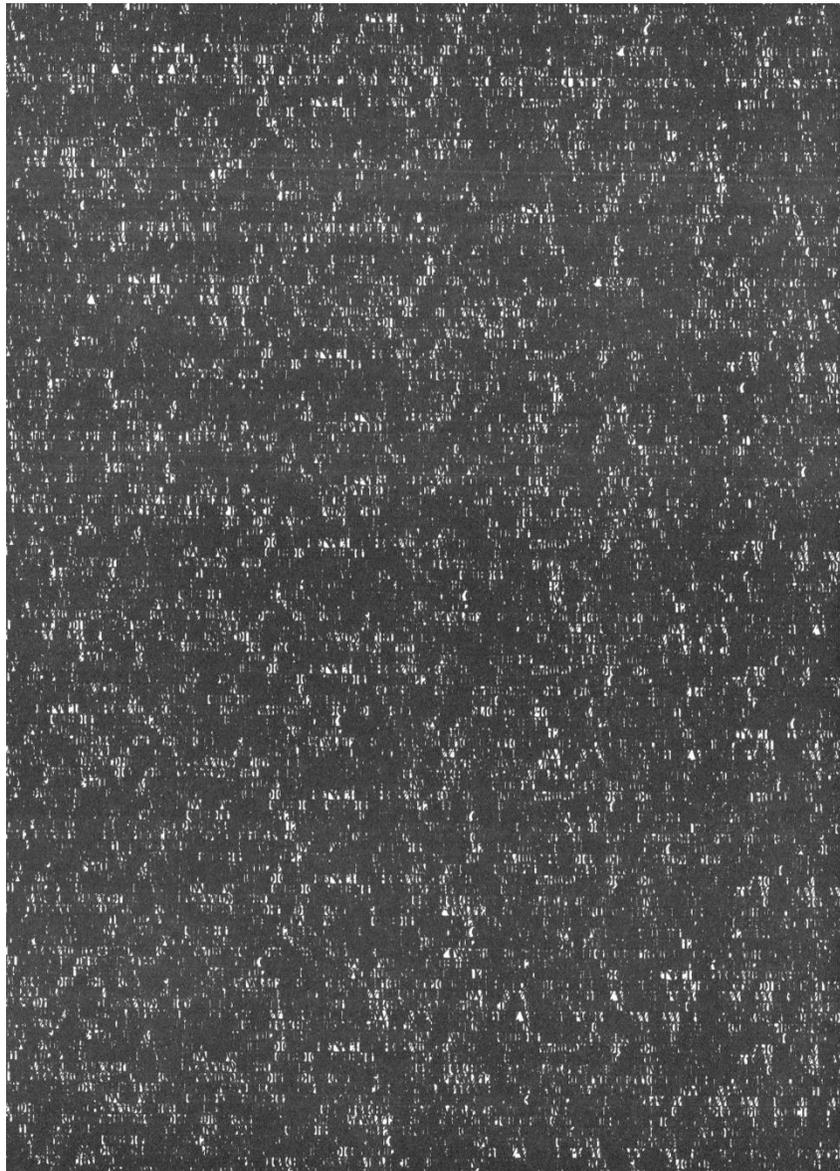


Fig. 1.3

The integration of images and written texts in the novel implemented by Foer does not intend to comprehensively elucidate the after effects of the 9/11 disaster, instead it is incorporated to limn the deceptiveness and inadequacy of representation.

The visual and legible elements have been experimented with in the novel to exhibit the gaps that exist between memory and perception of the event—the inevitable fissure between the material loss (both individual and collective) and loss of innocence and, the ways in which this rupture can be imagined and formulated.

The event of 9/11 has been mediated in the novel by creating an interplay between Oskar's persistence in resolving the secrets surrounding the key (an attempt to reconcile with his father's death) and, through the after-effect of the attacks on the entire city of New York that he observes during his expedition. Oskar's journey to overcome his individual trauma ushers him into the lives of the common people of the city who have also lost something or someone integral during the attack, or at some point of time in their lives. In this way Oskar's individual trauma is connected to the collective trauma of the city and by extension the nation.

Foer's spectral portraiture of New York City as a place bereft of working individuals who inhabited the urban space makes the city appear void after the attacks. The narrative of the novel is interspersed with desultory images of the city, like doorknobs, nondescript apartments, and bridges, some of the images that feature people in it have been intentionally obscured by using an overlapping technique of capturing the rear side of individuals in order to make them appear inconspicuous and anonymous (See Fig. 2). The novel was published shortly after the attacks that depict all its characters engrossed in lamenting the losses suffered and unable to proceed towards reconciliation and eventual recuperation. This after-effect is reflected in an alternative

plotline of the novel that traces the afterlives of Oskar's grandparents who survived the bombing and demolition of Dresden in Germany during World War II. The disconnection caused between the memory of an event and its assimilation conditioned by trauma has been conveyed through the narrative framework and subject matter of the novel.



Fig. 2.1



Fig. 2.2

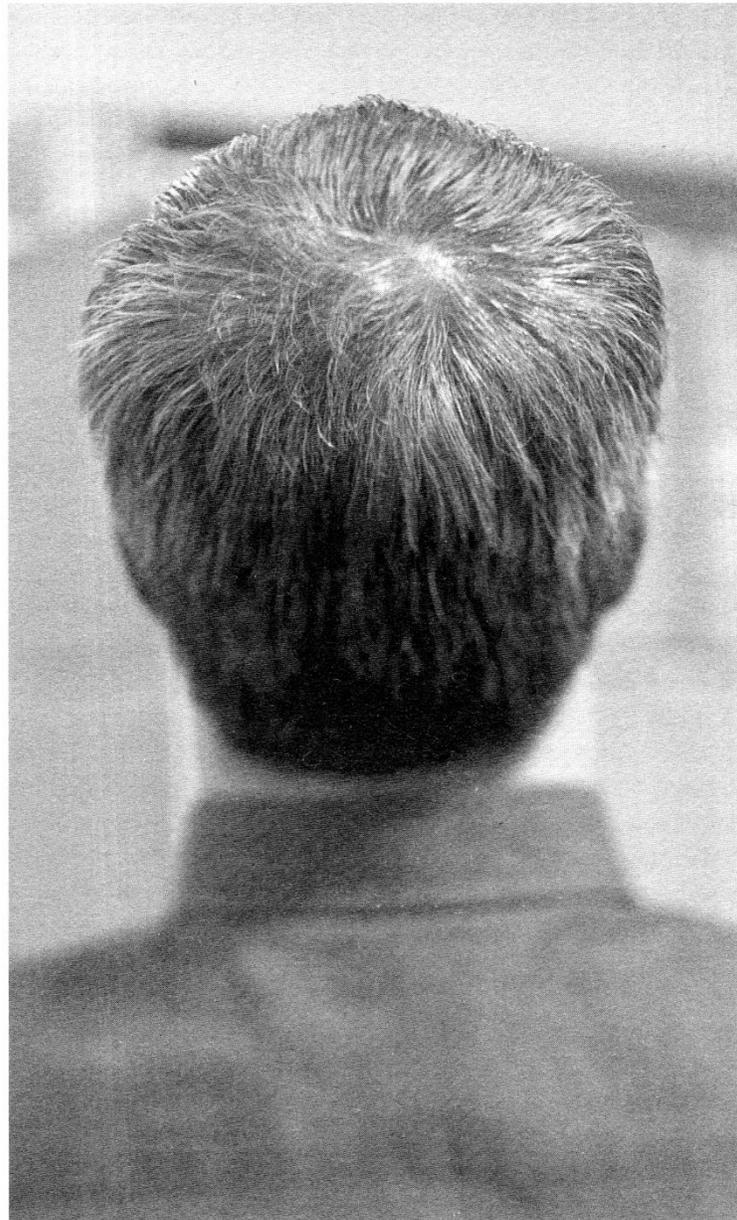


Fig. 2.3

The narrative of the novel becomes convoluted due to Foer's attempt to puncture the trope of "unsayability" engendered due to traumatic instances, by ensuring that whatever needs be expressed has been definitely articulated in the novel. He includes creative images, illustrations and, photos in the text to configure the

insulations, rifts and disconnections highlighted by the montage technique – facilitating an interrogation not merely of the word-image relationship but also their use in lamenting and recuperating from the interference of trauma.

The novel reinstates the limit of verbal representation and insists on the process of mediation that highlights the actual failures of the written words that neither incorporates the disaster in its entirety, nor represents trauma. The text is engaged in a double bind of establishing a polemic relationship between legibility and visibility, that is—images and words, where words closely resemble images and, at the same time a specific implementation of visuals in the text entails a fresh perspective in examining the novel. The array of images and visuals used requires the readers to meticulously form a connection between them in order to understand the narrative construction of the novel that shifts our focus to its materiality and demands an embodied reading.

The novel requires unraveling of the connotative meaning of the images in order to determine their individual implications and the role each plays in forming a network of significations in which the visuals directly engage with the written text. Foer's images are devoid of obvious referents that complicate their existence in the text and often destabilize the narrative. In many instances, the novel simulates a scrapbook with its ambiguous arrangement of visuals and delineation of texts that eludes meaning making.

II

Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close is an experiment in stretching the boundaries of fiction in order to make it a capable device for representing loss and tragedy along with mediating trauma. The interplay between the visual and written narrative display the structural arrangement of the novel where both become integral for the reader's understanding of the text. In many ways, Foer through the novel wants to acquaint the contemporary readers with alternative modes of representing disaster and mediating trauma. He intends to do so by deploying and remediating the newer forms of popular and digital visual media within the written text in such a way that their integration enables the process of premediation, thereby, enabling the readers to imaginatively assimilate future disasters and traumas and access the already composed reality of the event.

Foer substantiates his purpose for infusing the text with visual and legible maneuvers during an interview with the *Village Voice*, in the following words, "to speak about what happened on September 11 requires a visual language. My singular motivation was to create the most powerful book I could" (Foer). Does his statement indicate that the property of immediacy exhibited by the images retain certain power

which gives it an advantage over written words and if that is the case, what are the likely implications of the statement made by Foer? Or does it indicate that the representative maneuvers of a text cannot stand alone and as a writer in the age of terror one should not only be susceptible to written texts but also to dominant visual idioms in vogue? Or it signifies the fact that certain issues cannot be elucidated merely by words and requires mediation of other forms of representation to rearticulate the real event? In what follows, I will analyze the methods used by Jonathan Safran Foer to include visual in the written text, emphasizing on the ways in which both the mediums are concatenated in order to represent 9/11.

The novel juxtaposes two historical events to which trauma remains intrinsic is suggestive of individual and communal losses. The parallel does not seek to compare or equate the two disasters, instead the comparison indicates that for Foer and his contemporaries the 9/11 attacks on the US generated awe, confusion and illogicality that was tantamount to the Dresden bombings in Germany during World War II, regardless of dissimilar conditions and body counts. The disintegration of conventional representative techniques in literature made Foer adopt visual techniques of representation that would not only question the authority of written words as accepted representational norm but, also interrogate the function of images in recounting a traumatic event. Foer does not opine that visuals are a more appropriate tool for retaining memories, instead by continuously interspersing the text with images and vice-versa he seems to highlight the inadequacy of representative techniques available

to us for explicating trauma and hints at the hybrid methods that can be employed to articulate the unintelligibility of trauma. Hence, *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* provides the readers a chance of becoming spectators, to witness visuals that remained unavailable immediately after the attacks by mediating the relationship of images with trauma and lamentation.

Photographs play a crucial role in Foer's novel in the mediation of trauma, since most of the visual media orchestrated in the text are photographic, some derived from print archives and others issued by the author himself. The intermingling of textual and visual matter mediated by photographs is crucial for determining the meaning of the text. The photograph's relationship that is bound with memory and forgetting caused by a perpetual movement towards death has been extensively theorized¹. Lately critics have emphasized that there exists a fundamental analogy between the elements of photographs and trauma that correspond to the phenomenal crisis experienced by memory during catastrophes. Ulrich Baer extends Freud's assumption that there exists a connection between the mechanics of a camera and functioning of the unconscious, making the later a repository of memories "until they are developed, like prints from black and white negatives, into consciously accessible recollections" (Baer, 8)². Baer is of

¹ For an elaborate discussion refer to Susan Sontag's *On Photography*. New York: RosettaBooks LLC, 2005 and Walter Benjamin's *Illuminations* Translated by Harry Zohn. Ed. Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken Books, 1969.

² Although mechanically produced photographs from pin-hole camera or generic Kodak camera have become outmoded with the advent of digital photography that produces instantly processed pictures of high quality and resolution of any object within a matter of seconds.

the opinion that like trauma even the elements of photographs are belatedly realized or developed and its capturing of event sometimes remain unprocessed just like trauma's interruption of normal functioning of memory that commits an event to memory thereby facilitating forgetting (Baer, 9). Baer asserts that there exists a kinship between photographs and trauma by emphasizing that "they both make crisis not of truth but of reference" (Baer, 181). He creates a parallel between the intricate functioning of photographs and memory as being systematically identical to Freud's idea of—belatedness—that is, few events and occurrences are fully realized and understood only in recollection (Baer, 181).

Marianne Hirsch reinforces the structural similarity that exists between photographs and trauma in terms of their delayed manifestation by affirming that the disaster of 9/11 and the trauma it caused could not have been judiciously captured by any other visual media except photography. The idea that photography captures not objects but time is in tandem with the phenomenal changes effected by the disaster of 9/11 which makes reclamation impossible:

"To photograph, we might say, is to look in a different way—to look without understanding. Understanding is deferred until we see the developed image. This deferral is as inherent to photography as it is to trauma, enabling photography to help us understand the traumatic events of September" (Hirsch, 2).

The importance that photography retains in terms of trauma is resisted by the development of pixels that overshadow the eventual change occurring in photographs and their relation to assimilation and coming to terms with loss and disaster. Hence, the implementation of photography becomes apparent in Foer's novel as a tool to reconcile with loss and suffering as the readers learn to interpret visuals without the influence of newspapers and other print media.

There were various reasons for the predominance of photography in collectively understanding and lamenting 9/11 in the public realm. The captured temporality of photographs not only helped the beholders to assimilate but also acquaint themselves with the disaster of 9/11, retrospectively. Photography became an event in itself suggests Peter Lucas, as "everything about 9/11 was worth photographing" (Lucas, Para 20). Since photography not only calmed the emotional turmoil caused by the events of 9/11 but also provided an interpretive framework to understand it. Photography became the most popular activity around New York City after 9/11 as everyone strived to capture the changes and destructions caused by the attacks despite the warnings given by the authorities to not do so.

Photography was the only way for the citizens of New York to mediate and maintain a critical distance from the disaster of 9/11 in order to conform to the material and psychic damage that they underwent on that fateful day. Barbara K Gimblett argues that, "to be close to the disaster and yet to insulate from it meant that we too knew it from photographs rather than from direct experience of ruin" (Gimblett, 12).

According to her many felt that their lives had “turned into museum itself” (Gimblett, 15) and capturing the moments made it possible to understand the ramification of the terrorist attacks so that “the reality of the catastrophe sink in” (Gimblett, 19). Therefore, photographs became a tool at the hand of the citizens with the help of which they retained and measured the influence of the event upon their psyche along with coping up with the visuals of disaster in a more private realm devoid of media interference.

The pictures of missing persons around the city of New York was the central image of visual disaster (Lucas, Para 2). Photographs soon took the form of a poster, installed all over the city most of them assembled in specific locations that became mourning sites for the loss of numerous lives. Lucas suggests that photographs posted by family members of the missing person for help were instantly transformed into memorial sites. According to him “to see something in person and move beyond the televised coverage that was quickly shifting from the spectacular inferno footage to analysis and debates” (Lucas, Para 8) made the citizens of New York to turn the assembly points into sacred congregational sites. Foer is also aware of the complications evoked by the pictures of missing persons. During a conflict between Oskar’s mother and grandmother, that took place on 9/11 after the collapse of the buildings, grandma the narrator of the chapter says: “Your mom closed the windows but we can still smell the smoke. She asked me if I thought we should make posters” (Foer, 229). On one hand Oskar’s mother appears to be neurotic and makes several calls to different rescue departments concerning her husband; Oskar’s grandmother on the other hand seems to

be disturbingly calm and composed. They start fighting over the picture chosen for the poster:

“She used the picture from your vacation. From only two weeks before. It was you and your father. When I saw it I told her she shouldn’t use a picture that had your face in it. She said she wasn’t going to use the whole picture. Only your father’s face. I told her, still, [sic] it isn’t a good idea” (Foer, 229).

The exchange between the two reflects the confusion experienced by the victim’s family members. The peculiar logic involved in the formation of posters for the missing person is suggestive of the sense of awe and vulnerability experienced by victim’s family members.

Lucas argues that photographs turned posters “slipped outside of the dominant aesthetic code which dominates media representation” (Lucas. Para 18) owing to their simple and unsophisticated style that provided an “improvisational and vernacular counterpoint” to others images circulating around the event. The hastiness with which photos of the missing or dead persons that were converted into posters and installed around the city, points toward the unmediated relationship that the spectators had with the catastrophe. Grandmother’s reaction against reducing his son’s identity into an image goes against the dominant practice of circulating missing person pictures as currencies of disaster. Grandmother resentfully enumerates things carried by Oskar’s mother when she was leaving home to install the posters around the city “the paper, the

stapler, the staples, the tape. It makes me sick. Physical things. Forty years of loving someone becomes staples and tape” (Foer, 229-230). The sense of loss and despair felt by family members is accentuated when objects substitute the missing person’s memory, particularly with a memory device.

Foer’s inclusion of photography in the text is suggestive of the major role photographs played in disseminating and assimilating the events of 9/11. The need felt by the public to recreate their own visuals of the event in order to avoid getting consumed in the hypervisuality and hypermediality orchestrated by popular media around a single image of the fall is crucial in understanding how Foer’s novel operates as a counter to the dominant literary discourses that attempted to mediate images of disaster and trauma solely through written words. The indeterminacy surrounding still images instead of puncturing the text’s narrative ushers it into the realm of analysis and argument where Foer forces the readers to actively participate in the process of reading.

Foer employs deferment to underline the split that exists between event and its representation. He incorporates visuals from different media in such a way that the readers are coerced into rethinking the existing link between different features of an image, namely, their ability to register and process it belatedly. There are several images of falling or suspended objects incorporated in the novel, for instance, the falling of a cat towards the ground, birds flying towards the sky, a rollercoaster ride coming down the hill, and the most distinct among all, the iconic image of the falling man who jumped

from the WORLD TRADE CENTRE (See Fig.3). The objects present in each image signify deferment of temporality and are caught in motion.

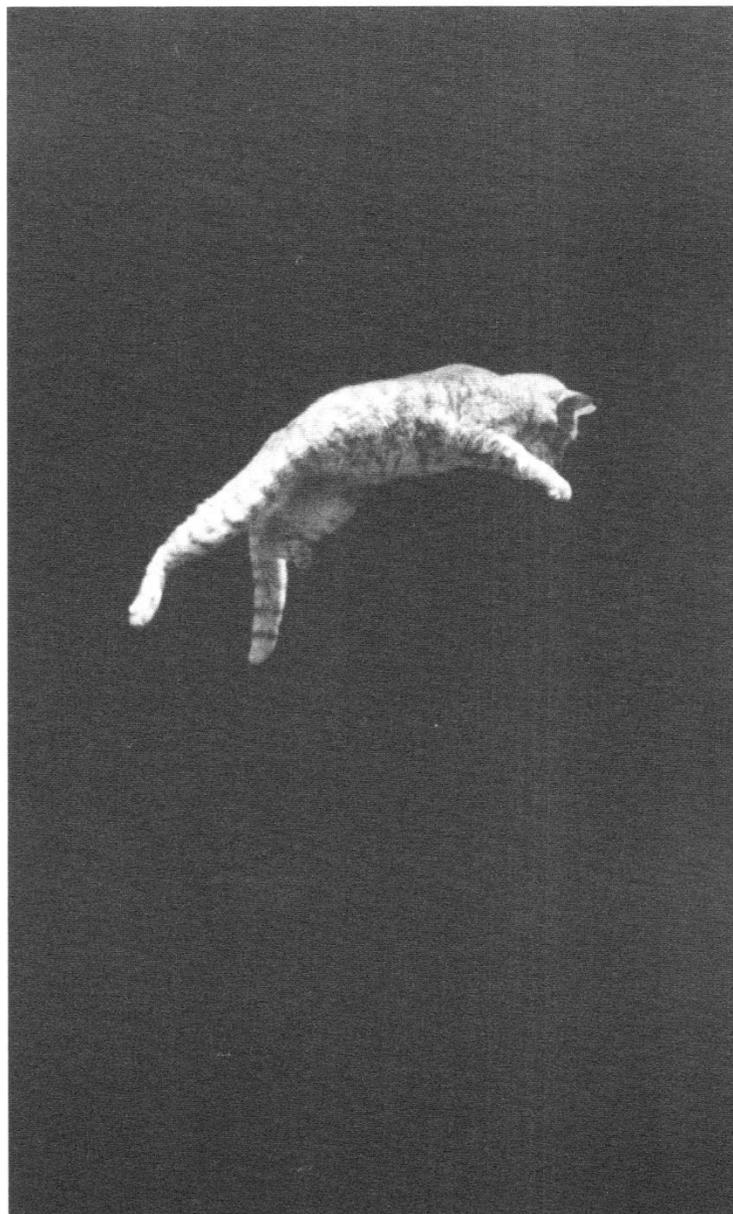


Fig. 3.1



Fig. 3.2

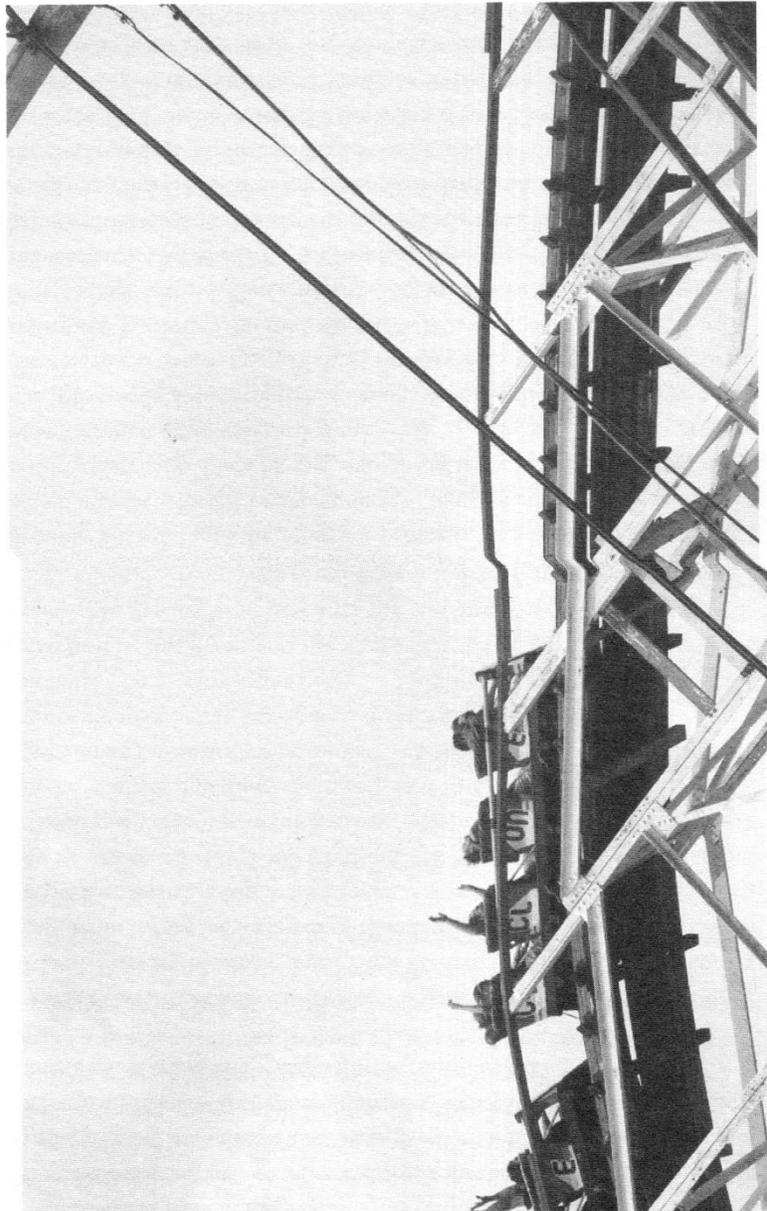


Fig. 3.3

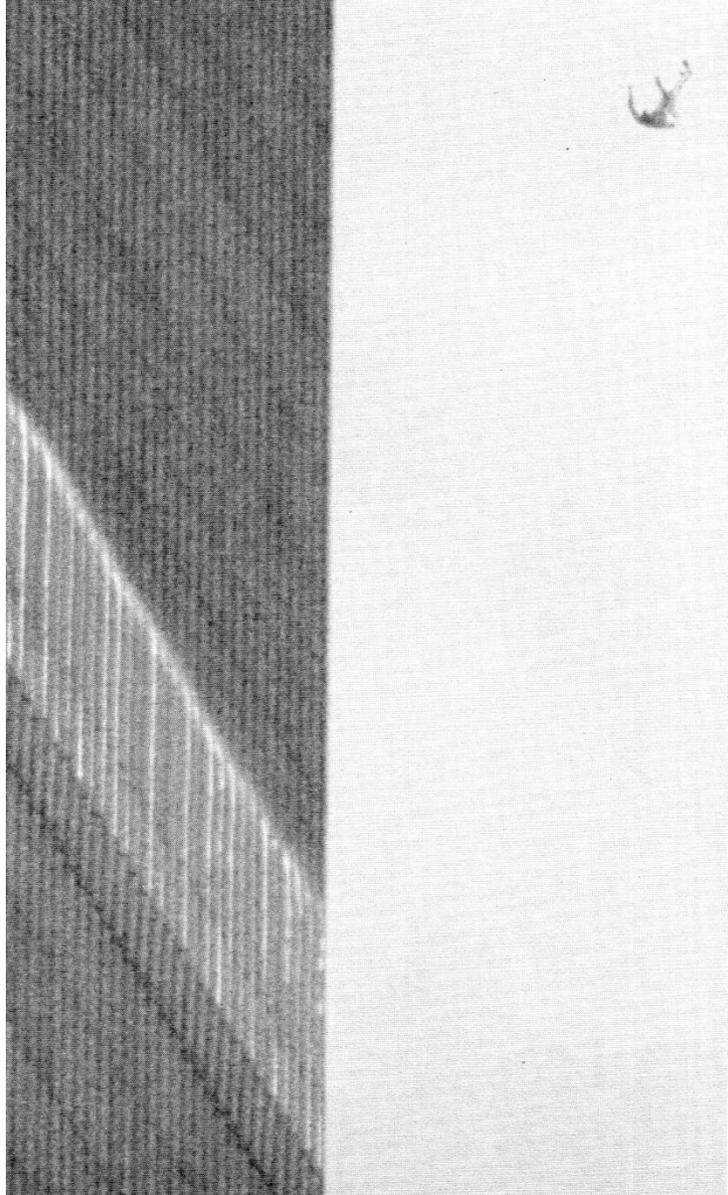


Fig. 3.4

Moreover, the images produce interruption in the act of reading when interspersed within the text. The monochromatic nature of the integrated images printed in full and placed alongside the text, imminently obstruct the sequential flow of

the novel. These set of images in which objects are caught in motion, symbolically exhibit the important role visual typography plays during the act of reading. Furthermore, the absence of description or associative meaning from the photographs that might clarify their origin and relation with the narrative as being more than mere annotation is blurred in the novel leaving the readers to autonomously make meaning after processing the visual and textual simultaneously. Even the arrangement of the visuals in the novel destabilizes the linearity of the narrative progression. The image of the falling man installed at the end of the novel in the form of a flipbook is central to this understanding of the text.

Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close follows an ambiguous pattern of placing the images that seek to reflect the fragmented and random nature of textual narratives registered during moments of trauma, but these fragmented narratives instead of just being gimmicks employed by writers have a deeper meaning in context of the larger theme of the novel, similarly even the scattered and random arrangement of the images have a distinct relationship to the central image used to construct the narrative framework of the novel. The photographs portraying objects caught in motion act as a supplement to the unrepresentable and ultimately interact with the image of falling man that lingers throughout the novel. These unrepresentable moments signified by the suspended images along with other visual maneuvers employed by Foer creates a tension between the visual and the textual that highlight the elemental motifs of forgetting and lamentation at work in the novel. Similar to the pages suffused with

digits or alphabets printed so closely together that the pages appear blotted, these photographs interrupt the process of reading.

Foer aims at creating a distinct impression on the minds of the readers beyond the realistic appeal of the event by reiterating the themes of memory, temporality and lamentation involved in remembering 9/11 have been categorically problematized in the text with the assistance of visual mediation. Hence, images pack the novel in such a way that it creates an indelible impression on the readers who are able to move away from the immediacy of the event played out by stock newspaper and electronic media images towards a self-reflexive future by placing the textual and visual adjacently or fortifying a cluster of images thematically in the novel. Foer makes his readers imaginatively supple like Oskar by retaining certain information that will enable them to envision the event of 9/11 and its implications from a new and changed perspective.

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