

THE ETHICS OF IMAGING TEXTS:
NOSTALGIA AND THE PHOTOGRAPHIC ARCHIVE
IN FOER'S *EXTREMELY LOUD AND INCREDIBLY CLOSE*

By

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The term “nostalgia,” coined in 1688 to describe a literal home sickness, has a bad reputation among trauma theorists (including Dominick LaCapra and Eric Santer). These thinkers typically read nostalgia as a sentimental manipulation of reactionary conservatism that rejects changes and progress in favor of tradition. Nostalgia, however, is more than a simple act of manipulation. Because it references both the cause and cure for psychological desire to return to the past, nostalgia can make possible a kind of grief work in which the relationship to a lost love object can be explored through the experience of the past. This realignment of the stakes involved in a nostalgic representation of the past makes possible a way of relating to the past that Emmanuel Levinas calls the “flowing of time.” This conception of time allows for multiple experiences of the present and past, and therefore manifests Levinas’s sense of ethics. This conception of ethics, rather than outlining a moral system of right and wrong, is concerned with seeing a separation between an individual and those that surround that individual that is based in responsibility.

It is this conception of nostalgia that Jonathan Safran Foer turns to in his 2005 *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. He uses a series of non-chronological and non-thematic images to express how his 8-year-old hero, Oskar Schell, deals with the death of his father in the Twin Towers. What makes dealing with his father's death particularly difficult is that Oskar does not know exactly how it happened. He knows that at some point his father went to the roof of the building and he knows that there were people who then jumped to their deaths rather than being crushed. Therefore, any understanding of his father's death is rooted in public expressions of loss collected in public archives that formed quickly after 9/11. Part of understanding how to relate to his father's death involves detangling Oskar's personal relationship to the past from this public articulation of grief. Nostalgia, especially as it is expressed through images, allows Oskar such a way to think of his father's death in these personal terms. And, in the process, Oskar redeems nostalgia if not of its pathology, at least of its simplicity.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

When Johannes Hofer coined the term “nostalgia” in 1688, it referred to a literal illness plaguing French soldiers who were dying from homesickness. For Hofer this was a geographical disease, where the home was both the cause of and the cure for illness—but by the 1870’s nostalgia’s medical pathology became ontological, including not only the desire for the homeland but also a desire to resurrect the past.¹ Implicit in this ontological move is the desire to recall not only the memory of the past but the *experience* of it, to approach the feeling evoked by that memory. And while cultural uses of nostalgia often recall the past in fondness, this longing remains, at its core, the cause of a cultural illness rooted in its desire to live in the past. But, like Hofer’s original medical prescription—in which returning home was the most effective cure—returning to the past can also be the cure for certain kinds of psychological sickness.

For its critics, nostalgia remains intellectually and psychologically suspect, as it carries with it connotations of escapism into or idealization of the distant past. Retreating in the past, for these thinkers, entails an inability to move on. As one longs for the past, one justifies behavior that is backward thinking and complacent, even politically reactionary. In *History and Memory After Auschwitz*, for example, Dominick LaCapra sees nostalgia as fuel for the Nazi reformulation of German folk identity. He believes that the German love of the homeland expresses itself as a sickness: a desire to destroy the other. LaCapra presents nostalgia as a grotesque sublime in which the homeland demands ritual acts of violence and communal cruelty to preserve what he

¹ For an interesting account of the historical progression of the term “nostalgia,” turn to Svetlana Boym’s *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books, 2001. She connects the nostalgia to the development of history and memory, especially tying it to the aesthetics of Eastern European culture and literature.

(quoting Saul Friedlander) refers to as “simplistic and self-assured historical narrations and closures” (27). Thus, for both LaCapra, nostalgia represents a simplistic—and ultimately sadistic—version of the past that facilitates dogmatic racism.²

But while one version of nostalgia may be sadistic, another version may be therapeutic, for in its desire to reproduce the experience of the past, nostalgia offers the possibility of a progressive understanding of the past rooted not in dogmatism but in an understanding of the layering of experience.³ Additionally, rather than allowing for a sentimentality that ultimately paralyzes growth, nostalgia can make possible a kind of grief work in which the relationship to a lost love object can be explored through the experience of the past. Thus, while nostalgia revives trauma by re-presenting the subject with loss, it simultaneously provides a potential cure by offering a way to conceive of the relationship between the lost object (or person) in a productive, transformative way. In its desire to recall the experience of the past, nostalgia offers its invalids at least one way to relate to the past that is rooted in an ethics. This ethics, rather than referring to a moral system of right and wrong, is less concerned with placing the subject as a moral judge within the world and more concerned with establishing a relationship with others that allows them to exist as an independent—

² Like LaCapra, Eric Santner, whose concept of the stranded object I'll turn to later in this essay, also reads nostalgia in these derogatory terms.

³ This is reminiscent of the same kind of move that Jameson makes in his defense of Benjamin's nostalgia in *Marxism and Form*. He writes, “But if nostalgia as a political motivation is most frequently associated with Fascism, there is no reason why a nostalgia conscious of itself, a lucid and remorseless dissatisfaction with the present on the grounds of some remembered plenitude, cannot furnish as adequate a revolutionary stimulus as any other: the example of Benjamin is there to prove it” (83). Jameson's nostalgia points to a political use of longing for the past, whereas the form of nostalgia I'm presenting in this text does ethical work in relation to trauma. Both readings of the term “nostalgia,” however, recognize that it can be used as a remedy to some failing, either emotional or political. (Jameson, Fredric. *Marxism and Form; Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1972.)

albeit connected—beings.⁴ In other words, it recognizes the relationship between the self and other people as “others,” unique beings that exist independent of the self. This response to trauma, one that involves the representation of a relationship to the past, provides a way to explore the relationships between someone and the traumatic past. When nostalgia is experienced in this way, it becomes as much an ethical response to the past as much as a traumatic one.

Although nostalgia shares a number of related characteristics with Freud’s dual model of the acting-out and working-through of trauma, it is distinctly different. In this potentially productive version of nostalgia, the subject neither completely triumphs over trauma—which Freud describes as mourning—but neither does it lapse into melancholy—a perpetual recycling of the event that loops the subject within trauma. The pivotal difference between nostalgia, melancholy, and mourning relies less on the specific ways in which someone reacts to trauma (in fact, those ways are often similar) and more on the centering principle of that reaction. While nostalgia and mourning/melancholy share common characteristics, they center around two different concepts: the self and the other. According to Freud’s formulation of melancholy and mourning, what is lost is not so much the love object itself but a particular sense of self. Mourning and melancholy, therefore, consider the other—or the lost other as the lost

⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, critical of the totality of ontology presented by Heidegger—in which the center of meaning derives from the self—looked not to being as the center for meaning, but the openness of the other. For Levinas, ethics precedes being, and understanding the responsibility for the other is crucial to understanding remains existence. Though Levinas himself viewed nostalgia as an egoistic desire to return to the same (see “The Trace of the Other,” trans. Al. Lingis *Tijdschrift vor Philosophie* (Sept. 1963): 605–23.), nostalgia offers a way to return to the other as other as it opens up the possibility of forming a relationship to the past.

love object—only in relation to how that other affects the self.⁵ In Freud’s melancholy, for example, the pain associated with loss primarily comes because the lost love object was an essential part of the survivor’s identity. Losing the love object, therefore, brings the realization that the self is no longer whole. Thus melancholy, as it centers on the self’s reflexive trauma, responds less to the loss of the other and more on a narcissistic recognition that the self isn’t whole without it.

Although this sense of loss is expressed differently in mourning, the focus on the self rather than on the lost object as other continues, as the subject overcomes the loss by making the lost object no longer important. Although Freud allows for the process of mourning to continue indefinitely—thereby never completely “getting over” the lost other—the relationship between the self and the other remains focused on the self, cutting short the possibility of both valuing the lost other and creating a connection to surviving others.

Unlike mourning and melancholy, however, nostalgia offers a way to deal with grief that allows the self to recognize another person as different and distinct from oneself and potentially offers a way to maintain a relationship to the lost other without being paralyzed by loss and pain. This particular arrangement between trauma, the self, and the other mediates a kind of self-centered approach to grief on one hand while on the other hand engaging with an ethical reaction to trauma that considers the relationship between the self and the other. Thus, although nostalgia resembles melancholy and mourning since it both compulsively returns to the past and attempts to

⁵ Though Heidegger and Freud are surely not intellectual bedfellows, Freud’s components of traumatic response, both mourning and melancholy, share a Heideggerian perception of the world as an extension of being (for Heidegger, expressed as *dasein*; for Freud, the ego).

move forward, its ultimate end is not the reassemblage of the self's identity but the understanding of the self's relationship to the other.

It is this nostalgic approach to grief that Oskar Schell, the hero of Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), turns to after the death of his father in the Twin Towers on September 11th. A precocious eight-year-old, Oskar is struggling to cope with his lost relationship with his father, but he doesn't know how to productively respond to that loss. Oskar's experience of coping with his father's death is particularly hard, not only because dealing with the death of a parent can be difficult, but also because he does not know exactly how his father died. He knows that at some point his father went up to the roof of the tower, but he doesn't know if his father jumped off the building or crashed down with it or even at some point tried to go down the stairs. Like many of the other families of 9/11 victims, Oskar's family has buried the father in an empty coffin because they could not locate his body. Because Oskar cannot figure out a way to relate to his father's death, he also has a hard time relating to the people around him: it is difficult for him to form relationships with friends, talk to his therapist, or understand his mother. Throughout the course of the novel Oskar tries to reconstruct the experience of the past as a way to understand his father's death and figure out how to relate to people in a way that does not diminish his memory of his father. Rather than primarily rebuilding his sense of self, Oskar's traumatic (and inherently nostalgic) response involves rebuilding his relationship to both his father's death and to the other people around him. While successfully mourning his father's death would entail severing his identification with his father, Oskar's look at the past is more drawn to figuring out his relationship with his father's death and how he can relate to others after that death.

Turning to the past as a source of relief, however, puts Oskar in a precarious position, as this past is also the *cause* of his trauma. In recreating the experience of the past, Oskar must therefore balance between a number of potential problems in such a way that he can productively turn to the past while not being trapped by it. He must first, primarily, learn to live after his loss without forgetting *what* he lost: his father. This does not involve overcoming loss per se, in that Oskar can “get over” the death of his father. But this process involves understanding his father’s death in a way that allows him to figure out his relationship both with his father and with the people around him.

Since Oskar has no personal knowledge of exactly how his father died, his only real understanding of the historical accounts of that death comes through public representations of 9/11 found in newspaper accounts, photographic images, and public memorials. Unfortunately, these narratives embodied in such accounts are public and collective in ways that limit expressions of Oskar’s individual experience of losing a father. That is, the public narrative, concerned as it is with the collective experience and memory, subsumes individual narratives. As a result, the public narrative of 9/11 limits how Oskar can consider the individuality his father’s death; his father turns into a symbol rather than a person.

As Oskar struggles to piece together his father’s death as separate from this national story, he faces another problem as well: by creating a narrative of his father’s death he risks dismissing others’ emotional experience. Although Oskar may not be consciously aware of the ethical implications of privileging one version of the past over another in this way, he certainly feels the consequence: alienation from the people around him. His relationship with his mother, for example, suffers because he cannot

understand her grief; consequently, he reads her friendship with another man as betrayal and her stoicism as uncaring disregard for his father and her husband. Therefore while dealing with his own grief, Oskar must find a way to understand his father's death without disregarding or minimizing the experience of others, a way of dealing with trauma that allows him to reinsert himself in a kind of ethical appreciation of the otherness of others—whether his father, his mother, or the people around him.

Given the photographic saturation of 9/11, it is not surprising that Oskar turns to a series of images to recreate and reevaluate his understanding and experience of the past. These images—including reproductions of Lyle Owerko's *Falling Man*, photographs of apartment buildings and rollercoasters, and Internet images of tennis players and falling cats—are both stock and news photographs surrounding 9/11 as well as photographs Oskar takes himself. He collects these images in an informal archive, which he calls *Stuff That Happened to Me*. This archive shows how he sees himself simultaneously as the passive victim of the past (*Stuff that Happened to Me*) and an active agent that can control the past, empowered through the task of editing.

Through his archive of images, Oskar begins to reformulate his relationship to both the loss of his father and the people around him by using the images his personal archive to form a relationship to the past. This move to use the photograph as a way of re-approaching the past is itself a complicated task, as the photograph both displays a past moment and proves that this moment is in the past. While resurrecting a physical image of the past, the photograph also emphasizes that past is no longer accessible in the present. Looking at a photograph then becomes an act of longing after something that is always already lost and is therefore a nostalgic act: attempting to reconstitute a

past image in the present. As Oskar turns to the photograph—whether one of a falling cat or another of the falling man—he returns to an image of that which no longer exists. This is potentially paralyzing, as it re-presents for Oskar the trauma of the past. However, Oskar’s nostalgia, instead of merely representing a recycled series of images, also offers a way for him to understand the loss of his father and form relationships with others. Thus, as Oskar inscribes the past within the present through a series of images, he is neither interested in moving past his father’s death nor continually replaying it, but going forward *with* the past. In this way, Oskar’s visual archive is as much an ethical reaction as it is a traumatic one because at the heart of Oskar’s visual archive is the attempt to establish a relationship to his father’s death and to the people around him.

Thus, Oskar’s photographic archive is not just about getting over his father’s death. It is an attempt to integrate himself in a world where he has lost his father and doing so in a way that allows him to recognize that losing someone hurts and that dealing with grief does not make that person replaceable. In doing so, Oskar focuses neither on the self nor on the other but on a kind of multifaceted layering of the past, a process of regenerative nostalgia in which the self and other are brought into a state of perpetual dialogue, simultaneously connected and separate.

(taken of people he visits throughout the novel) (53; 260–261; 98, 294). But many of the images in the novel were evidently pulled from stock photograph archives, including images of cats and tennis players (191, 64). Some of the images aren't photographs at all, including paper used to sample pens at an art supply store, reproductions of biographical cards owned by Stan Black (who temporarily accompanies Oskar), and text that begins to run so closely together that it forms a block of black (48; 158; 281–284). Although coming from a variety of sources, Oskar uses the images in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* in a similar way, piecing them together into a narrative that represents not his literal past but—more precisely—his relationship to the past. This nostalgic move to return to the past through a series of unrelated images presents Oskar with a way of understanding others and his father's death by operating within gaps between the images rather than merely through the images themselves.

Ironically, however, these images have become the epicenter of criticism of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, and critics have consistently attacked Foer's use of images in the novel, claiming that he did so in order to capitalize on 9/11. Similar to critiques of nostalgia generally, Foer's images have been condemned as reactionary, sentimental, and manipulative. For example, in his online review "Extremely Cloying & Incredibly False: Why the author of *Everything Is Illuminated* is a fraud and a hack," Harry Siegel attacks Foer's "cut-and-paste assemblage of words, pictures, blank pages." "Don't write a book culminating with a flipbook," he says, "and then complain that your words aren't taken seriously." In London's left-wing political magazine the *New Statesman*, Harry Benjamin Markovits begins his assessment of the novel by rejecting Foer's narrative style, then quickly moves to condemn the same kind of cut-and-paste

montage Siegel recoils against. Foer, Markovits, observes, “glues his narrative together with obsessive whimsy” and ends up being “relentlessly gimmicky” and “worse than ordinary” (50). These critics could—and do—turn to such moments as when an image of a crying elephant is supposed to teach the reader about the importance of communication, or when a CNN snapshot shows a ferry hitting a pier to explain why Oskar doesn’t trust public transportation (95, 241). To critics like Siegel and Markovits, maudlin images like these represent a cynical attempt to pull the heartstrings of the reader rather than an authentic attempt to critically engage the meaning of 9/11.



Figure 2-2. Crying elephant

Even John Updike—who had high praise for *Everything is Illuminated*—seems to scold Foer like a disappointed father. In his review in *The New Yorker*, Updike points to various narrative elements with disdain—including letters in the text written by both Oskar’s grandmother and grandfather, Oskar wandering the streets of New York unattended, and the grandfather’s inability to speak—but ends by specifically critiquing

Foer's use of images in specific. This newer book, Updike argues, has a "hyperactive visual surface" which "covers up a certain hollow monotony in its verbal drama," and he concludes that the novel is "thinner, overextended, [and] sentimentally watery" compared with Foer's first book (140). Like other critics, then, Updike equates Foer's visual archive in the novel to cheap pastiche, designed to manipulate the feelings of the reader. In doing so, Updike echoes the general critical consensus that the images in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* are sentimental at best and a fraudulent manipulation of emotions at worst—more a symptom of textual laziness than a creative way to engage with 9/11.

These images, however, are more important to the novel's narrative than Foer's critics typically allow. Rather than operating as mere textual shortcuts, using such images to present the past is an important tool for Oskar to deal with a number of problems. Some of these problems are somewhat common to those faced by trauma victims. Like those who have experienced trauma, he needs to figure out how to relate to the past without marginalizing or misrepresenting the death of his father. Other problems are specific to Oskar and 9/11, in that Oskar must overcome public representations and histories of 9/11 that limit his perception of the past. In the process of facing these general and specific issues, Foer uses the images to create a visual ethics, reevaluating the past by showing how Oskar relates to such images. In an online interview with Alden Mudge, Foer defends his use of images to depict the experience of 9/11, which he calls "the most visually documented event in human history." He says, "When we think of those events, we remember certain images—planes going into the buildings, people falling, the towers collapsing. That's how we experience it; that's how

we remember it.” Recalling the media-montage recycling the news footage, Foer frames post-9/11 memory within these representations, and he connects the visual to the experience. This image-saturated experience not only frames the specific trauma associated with 9/11, but as an expression of modern communication, the archive of the Internet offers immediate access to such images. In the Press Release published on Houghton Mifflin’s website, Foer relates the exhilarating yet horrifying relationship between this kind of instant visual memory and children, allowing them to instantly access to both the beautiful and ugly experience of modernity. By replicating the visual archive within the text, Foer hopes that Oskar’s use of images would allow the reader “access to a different kind of sympathy.” “That is, the photographs,” Foer says, “show not only what Oskar’s eyes might see, they show his eyes.”



Figure 2-3. Back of woman's head

This shift in representation—from showing *what* Oskar sees to representing *how* Oskar sees—attempts to communicate a kind of sympathy rooted in an ethical understanding of experience. In showing how Oskar sees, these images show how he

relates to those images, and, consequently, how he relates to the other as other. Showing the back of a woman's head, then, becomes a way of understanding how Oskar relates to that woman rather than merely that he sees her (98). This perspective of the image requires more than a mere self-reflexive understanding of the past; it also requires the reader to pay particular attention to the complex interactions between the viewer (Oskar) and the viewed (the woman). Consequently, as Foer's images represent a particular moment in the past, they often dramatize how that moment was the exchange between two people, and they offer a way to understand the ethical networks in a post-traumatic system marked by loss and pain. To the extent that the images in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* manage all these kinds of complicated tasks, they are hardly the work of weak sentimentality.

Forming a visual narrative that shows how Oskar relates to the past as an ethical reaction to a traumatic event involves reading the images together as a narrative that represents the kind of fragmentation Oskar encounters in his father's death. Reading these photographs together is part of the concept that Eric Santner describes as he discusses a closely related topic, stranded objects. A stranded object, for Santner, is a transmutation of Winnicott's transitional object, that which helps a child prepare to separate from his or her mother. While the transitional object represents a wholeness of meaning (represented by a mother), Santner distinguishes a stranded object by its existence in a fragmented reality. He contextualizes this concept within German culture in the 1980s and notes that the relationship between a fragmented reality and stranded objects can be used to explain the problematic relationship between 1980s German culture and Adolf Hitler's legacy as Führer and metaphorical father of the country.

Losing Adolf Hitler as an ideological symbol of collective German identity, Santner argues, created a cultural denial that sought to write Hitler out of the past rather than work through a German identity that based itself on the destruction of non-Germans. This process became especially difficult in what Santner calls the “postmodern landscape” of late 20th-century thought, a perspective on the world that denies totality, unity, and historical progress (7). Understanding or forming a new German identity, then, became doubly difficult, because it entails dealing not only with German complicity with the Holocaust but also with a loss of any sense of totality. The Germans had not only lost their political leader, they also had lost a cultural father, and they did so while emerging into a postmodern landscape that refused to entertain even the notion of totality.

The switch from Winnicott's transitional object (which represents wholeness) to Santner's stranded object (which embodies fragmentation) is characterized by what Santner calls the “evacuation of meaning,” a postmodern condition in which a coherent sense of the world is fragmented into disconnected pieces (26). Inhabiting a world marked by gaps, the speaking subject is “marooned in a world of ruins, fragments” (12). Because this world is a series of fragments rather than a coherent continuity, piecing together stranded objects “take[s] on a textual aspect: they demand to be read” (12). This act involves not only looking at objects individually, but through a process Santner calls “consolatory figuration,” a creative process that involves the “cutting and subsequent shaping of an organic material—its transformation, in other words, into a medium of art—[which] empower[s] the mourner to survive loss” (23). As a subject in this world of fragments and absence encounters these stranded objects, he or she

eventually realizes that these objects must be *read together* in such a way as to form new meaning. Consolatory figuration is thus best understood as a creative act of considerable significance, an act of cut-and paste collage in which creating art becomes the medium for both mourning loss and creating and recreating connections with others.



Figure 2-4. Falling cat

Like the Germans, Oskar has lost a father in both the physical and ideological senses of that word. And like the subjects described by Santner, Oskar attempts to use consolatory figuration to create a new relationship to both the past and present. Obviously Oskar does not face the same kind of Hitler-complex the Germans encountered during the 1980s, but like his German counterparts he does experience a traumatic loss in a fragmented world. Although Oskar can encounter 9/11 through images and headlines, these are only partial explanations of his father's death. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that in his distress Oskar turns to an assortment of images in the attempt to create a partial, gap-filled narrative of his father's death. Like nostalgia itself, then, the photographs in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*—rather than performing a purely manipulative function designed to compensate for textual failings—

actually facilitate the suturing process by which Oskar begins to create a relationship to the past in the present.

Oskar's images work particularly well as stranded objects because they replicate the kind of loss Oskar feels in relation to his father's death. Because they do not form any kind of coherent narrative, the images accurately represent how Oskar experienced his father's death. This is especially true in the case of how stock photographs work in the novel. A stock photograph—like this image of a falling cat (191)—is not supposed to indicate meaning by itself, but rather reflect the meaning found within the text. This image, for example, could illustrate any number of things: gravity, feline agility, etc. But traditionally, stock images such as this, without being situated within a text, mean nothing.⁶ Stock photographs are meant to transform themselves to fit the need of a wide variety of texts and depend on their position within the text to obtain any meaning. They *illustrate* the narrative or argument found within the text rather than *make* an argument themselves. In this way such stock photographs are marked necessarily by their absence or lack of meaning. They are expected to mean anything a situation demands of them. In that respect they are intentionally absent images. And—and this is the key point—as absent images, the stock photographs in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* reproduce, through their very presence in the text, the sense of loss that characterizes Oskar's lack of understanding of the events surrounding the death of his father.

What is true of the stock photographs in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* is similarly true of the other images in the novel as well. They, too, work within the textual

⁶ As a perfect example of this principle, this image of the cat replicates another photograph of the Falling Man, a visual comparison which I will discuss in-depth during the section on public and private archives.

narrative in ways which capitalize on some of the key features of stock photography, including a lack of original context and the way in which the images illustrate rather than develop a narrative (an aspect Foer reverses). Although they are not stock photographs *per se*, these images enact in their *content* the kind of absence that stock photographs work in by virtue of their *form*. Oskar's photograph of the back of a the woman's head, for example, centers on what is not present rather than what is, in this case, the marked lack of her face. Understanding this aesthetics of loss is central to understanding Oskar's experience of the past because it communicates both the loss of his father and Oskar's lack of narrative explaining his father's death. When Oskar uses images that summon loss to form a narrative, he creates a narrative composed of moments of loss. As these gathered images reinforce a meaning sutured together to form a visual narrative of Oskar's father's death, they begin to function like stock photographs in content, if not in form.

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that these seemingly disparate images placed throughout the novel begin to form a collage in the sense that they all fulfill the same basic function: they piece together meaning from fragments that demand to be read as a text. Seen from this perspective, Oskar's compilation of images is best understood as a creative reconstruction of the past, a narrative read out of isolated images that themselves point to loss. When Oskar puts together two images—for example, one of evolutionary man and one of a French astronaut returning from space (66, 67)—he creates a narrative out of these stock photographs as stranded objects. And in doing so, he consequently creates a way to understand the loss of his father.

Like mourning and melancholy, this task of using stranded objects to form a narrative is primarily narcissistic. It privileges the ego-centered subject and the stranded objects exist as a way for the *subject* to work-through loss without real concern for the objects themselves; the objects are there only to fill a need. Not only does Oskar use these objects to survive loss, however, these images must also simultaneously create a way to relate to the other not as a stranded *object* per se, but as an other *being*. While Oskar's photographs are like stranded objects in that they demand to read together, then, the image invites a reflection upon the relational value between the images and the viewer in a way that exceeds narcissism. The photograph of the back of Abby Black's head (discussed above in relation to Foer's visual ethics) shows how the image can both work as a stranded object and establish a relationship to the person and to the past. Oskar uses this photograph to show his relationship to Abby as well as a way to represent the loss of his father. The lack of her face shows how Oskar relates to her, but we also see her in the act of looking backwards. She thus represents for Oskar not only the process of establishing relationships between people in a fragmented understanding of the present, but also the nostalgia that compels Oskar to turn to the past. Although Santner, like LaCapra, links nostalgia to political regression and sentimental kitsch (29), nostalgia as it is revealed in these images does serious work in providing Oskar a way to come to terms with the loss of his father while conceptualizing his father, like this woman, as other. As he pieces this image together with others representing fragmented experiences and concepts to explain the past, these images form a connecting narrative to an event that Oskar did not experience firsthand and create a new narrative collage of the past. Just as his images constantly refer to the

past and things that have happened to him, they help Oskar figure out how to relate to others while piecing together the loss of his father.

As Oskar reads these photographs together to form a narrative, he participates in what Santner sees as a creative response to trauma. Oskar's creativity helps him represent his loss by connecting fragmented representations of his past experience. But it also helps him understand that past. Early on in the text, for example, Foer introduces a series of five messages recording Oskar's father's final moments that represent the necessity to read the text as stranded from meaning, requiring a creative ability to fill in the loss with interpretation. Upon arrival home from school on 9/11, Oskar finds their answering machine with messages recording his father's final moments. Oskar replaces that machine with a new one and then hides the old one in his closet, allowing only himself to listen to the messages. These last remnants of Oskar's father's messages become increasingly more frantic, with the fifth message embodying Oskar's last perception of his father: one of loss and fragmentation. Presented in the text as an image (207), this perception of Oskar's father relies on the gaps between the words to communicate not only Oskar's inability to hear his father's continuous voice, but also his inability to represent a coherent representation of his father's death. Replicating the gaps between the images that Oskar uses to form a narrative of his father's death, this message demands of Oskar a creativity, an ability to approach his father—as other—through his truancy. In other words, Oskar must read not only the words, but the spaces between them. Reading between the lines (here a literal exercise) is thus a way to understand the gaps between what Oskar knows about an event (and a person) and what needs to be imagined.

MESSAGE FIVE.

10:04 A.M. IT'S DA S DAD. HEL S DAD. KNOW IF
EAR ANY THIS I'M
HELLO? YOU HEAR ME? WE TO THE
ROOF EVERYTHING OK FINE SOON
SORRY HEAR ME MUCH
HAPPENS, REMEMBER—

Figure 2-5. Last message

As readers, we can piece together what his father tries to tell him: they went to the roof, everything is fine, he wonders if anyone can hear him. The last three words are perhaps the most enigmatic and the most important. The extent to which “much” modifies the amount that his father loves him and the plea to “remember” is followed by some vital message depends on how Oskar decides to read the silences between the words.

Oskar participates in this same methodology when presenting stock images to explain his experience. Like the individual words in this last message, Oskar’s individual photographs, when isolated from each other, have little contextual meaning. When read together as nostalgic stranded objects, however, they use the gaps between the images to highlight the loss of meaning as well formulate a creative narrative of the past. While Freud’s *fort/da* game employs transitional objects that allows the child to preemptively mourn a loss, the photograph, as a nostalgic object, help Oskar contextualize the loss after the event.

Understanding how these images work in the novel—both as an expression of a visual ethics and as a creative employment of stranded objects—helps us understand how Oskar faces the most difficult parts of dealing with his loss. In addition to losing one

of the most important people in his life, Oskar faces public archives and histories that limit his ability to understand his father's death personally. As Oskar turns to images he conveniently reproduces the fragmentation he finds in his own experience of the past, an experience that ruptures these collective ideas found in public archives and a linear history found in timelines.

CHAPTER 3 RECOVERING THE PERSONAL FROM THE PUBLIC

Because his father's death is complicated by the fact that both his father's remains and the narratives surrounding 9/11 were part of a very public trauma, one of Oskar's primary tasks is to separate his experience of the past from these collective narratives. On 9/11 the streets of New York filled with debris, mingling the remains of buildings with the remains of victims, and just as separating the remains of these victims became difficult, the grief expressed over this event became difficult to sort out individually. Although grief, of course, was felt by individuals, it quickly developed into a communal sorrow that was expressed publicly and collectively. As people both in New York and through the United States turned to news media and Internet accounts, the mass of victims and array of facts began to form a sort of public archive of the event. In the process, both artifacts of and responses to the 9/11 attacks began to be read together in a series, providing a sense of unity among the American public. As photographs of individuals appeared on Internet sites, for example, they were often placed in a long line of images designed to be looked at with others. In that context, such images no longer represented individuals, but rather became communal symbols of loss. A picture of a fireman became a public image of courage. An image of a woman fleeing became a symbol of chaos. Even the "lost persons" posters that sprung up on the streets of New York began to form a larger collection of loss. As the public began to place and read these images together, the resulting collections began to replicate cultural archives in

that they grouped photographs together to represent a historical and emotional moment.⁷

The problem, for Oskar, is that this communal response of grouping together images privileges the group over individual experience. Physically, their remains, reduced to ash, mingled together to form a group rather than distinct individuals. As part of a giant mass of rubble on the floor of New York, the resulting debris connected their deaths in ways that replicated communal photographic archives. As one of the victims whose body was never recovered, Oskar's father became part of the bigger group of *9/11 Victim*, both physically and symbolically. Although the resulting sense of collectivity afforded the public a chance to grieve together, the shift from individual grief to communal sorrow makes it difficult for Oskar to understand the very personal loss of his father. Because his father is now part of a larger, undifferentiated group (literally as well as symbolically), Oskar had a hard time understanding his father's death on individual terms—a problem made deeper by the fact that the family never recovered his body. Rather than establishing the concept of his father as an other—an important step as Oskar figures out how to relate to the people around him—this emphasis on the public version of the event undermines any kind of individuality by collecting all the narratives into one cultural archive.

⁷ See, for example, the *New York* magazine's online slideshow "Days of Terror: A Photo Gallery," in which iconic images are read together to form a visual narrative of 9/11. Its tagline is "Twenty one images we couldn't escape" shows not only how the *New York* magazine reads these images together as part of the narrative of the trauma, but also how they use them to form a collective notion of "we" (3 March 2010. <<http://nymag.com/news/articles/wtc/gallery/>>).

This visual archive would also manifest itself in text, for example Brian Doyle's "Kaddish L'anashim," which listed one-sentence biographies of each of the victims. Like the photographic archives, Doyle's textual memorial to the victims places them together in a public expression of both mourning and unity. (See "Kaddish L'anashim," *PBS.org.: Religion and Ethics Newsweekly*. 6 September 2002. Web. 3 March 2010. <<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week601/kaddish.html>>)

Part of Oskar's task in combining images as stranded objects, then, involves detangling the public expression of grief from his personal loss. As we have seen, he begins this process by using stock photographs—public images—to express a private history. Oskar ruptures this public trauma by relying on an aesthetic of fragments and fissures that represent the personal—rather than the public—loss of his father. He also personalizes the public archive by selecting from it images which can be rearranged into a separate narrative that depicts both his father's death and his experience in dealing with that death. Using images to represent Oskar's experience means that forming a representation of the event becomes as important as the event itself. By focusing on the process of representation as much as on either Oskar's literal experience or even his father's missing body, Oskar does more than merely construct a personal account of his father's death. He also, critically, enacts his own conflicted relationship to that account, the expression of which makes possible a partial understanding with loss. In that respect, Oskar's use of stock photographs—public images used privately—expresses his experience of his father's death.

How Oskar uses this photographic archive is replicated in his turn to another public archive: the phonebook. When Oskar finds a key in an envelope marked "Black" in his father's closet, he begins to contact each of the Blacks listed in New York's phone book in alphabetical order, hoping that the key and the key's owner will help him understand his father's death. Visiting a series of locations around New York, Oskar turns the city into a visual cartography of his father's death. Walking around the city becomes for Oskar what de Certeau calls "a space of enunciation," an exercise in which Oskar doesn't just visit a series of Blacks, but invents ethical spaces in which the key

enters Oskar into relationships with others (107).⁸ In mapping his way through the city, therefore, Oskar replicates the purpose of his book of image-memories: reinserting himself into a human network. Both his mapping out of the Blacks upon the New York landscape and his mapping out of the visual representation of the past force him to consider how he relates to the people around him. Searching for Blacks pushes him out into the city, communicating with others in a way that separates them from their public placement under the same surname. As he appropriates images from people, these images help him process his relations with those people in terms of his past.

Just as visiting the Blacks establishes their individuality from among their listings in the phonebook, Oskar also turns to the photograph to express his individual experience of the past. In the first, most extended reproduction of *Stuff That Happened To Me*, Oskar's name for his collection of images, Oskar presents fifteen, very different images. Although they are supposed to represent Oskar's personal history of sorts, the reader encounters an uncaptioned, seemingly unrelated series of images. While most of these images have tangential and brief reference in the text, they do not create a traditional narrative in that they illustrate a coherent timeline. As photographs signify between moments of lived experience, the space between these historically unrelated photographs—the collision between experiences captured in the images—allows Oskar to explore his relationship to the past.

⁸ Lisa Diedrich makes an interesting connection between this concept of wandering around the city and the creation of ideological spaces in another text which utilizes photography to represent the traumatic past, W. B. Sebald's *Vertigo*. She discusses wandering and photography in terms of resurrecting metaphorical ghosts of the past. See her essay "Gathering Evidence of Ghosts: W.G. Sebald's Practices of Witnessing." *Searching for Sebald: Photography After W.G. Sebald*. Eds. Patt, Lise; Christel Dillbohner; and Sebald, WG. Los Angeles, Calif: Institute of Cultural Inquiry, 2007. 262.

The first image in *Stuff That Happened to Me* is a wall of keys (53), referencing his trip to the locksmith in an attempt to track down the owner of the key from his father's closet. Although this image alludes to that singular, historical moment, this image also captures what it feels like for Oskar to lose his father and consequently feel overwhelmed with then forming relationships to others. As Oskar laments the almost infinite number of locks in New York City, this visual presentation of a giant wall of keys replicates Oskar's feeling of overwhelming inability to recover from losing his father and the difficulty in locating a personal experience of the past within the public event. This image of the keys, as it visually enacts the overwhelming feeling of facing a vast public, sets up the rest of Oskar's images to be a part of this discourse.



Figure 3-1. Stephen Hawking

After contextualizing Oskar's archive by this public-anxious image, Oskar follows with a photograph that presents an image of Stephen Hawking with the real Stephen Hawking blurred in the background (54). Rather than representing a historical moment in which the photograph was taken, this image of Hawking highlights the relationship between a reproduced image and its connection to experience. Because the

photograph focuses on the representation—keeping the technological *reproduction* of Stephen Hawking more in focus than the blurry *original*—this photograph highlights the kind mediation of experience through an image, a reproduction of moment. I

nterestingly, this kind of technological reproduction that Oskar’s image emphasizes resonates with the discussion inspired by Benjamin’s analysis of art’s in/ability to retain and transmute experience—what he calls “aura”—as it is technologically reproduced.

In his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Benjamin explains the relationship he sees between authenticity of experience, aura, and the trajectory of a reproduced image. He begins by establishing that even a perfect replication of an art object lacks the essential authenticity and authority of the original. This is what he calls the experience of the art object, or its aura, its “presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be” (220). An art object’s aura, therefore, depended on its singular historical and temporal existence. It exists in one place at one time. Technical reproduction, however, made it possible for the art object to be in multiple places at once and separated the art object from its material history (who it was created by, where it has traveled since, etc.). This reproduction changed the potential context(s) for art and could, as Benjamin says, “put the copy of the original into situations which would be out of reach for the original itself” (220). This ability of art to exist through its reproductions separated it from its authority as a singular, arresting art object. It was no longer the authority on its own image, as its reproductions could meet a wider audience. Not only is the art object’s authority challenged when it is reproduced, but also its connection to what Benjamin calls

“historical testimony,” or the understanding of an art object’s historical background. Benjamin says, “The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning. . . . And what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object” (221). By connecting this sense of authenticity to the historical testimony of original art, Benjamin asserts that an art object’s authenticity depends on its material history as much as the actual artistic representation. Hence, as a reproduced art object is severed from its history when it is reproduced technologically, it loses both its authenticity and its consequent access to the experience of encountering an original art object. Thus, although the potentially democratizing feature of reproduced images allows art to reach an infinite number of viewers, this reproduction also potentially obliterates the aura of the original because the reproduction does not contain the material history of the original. As the reproduction is recontextualized independently of the original, it is read separate from the experience of the original art object.

The point, of course, is that by relying on reproduced, public images to express his experience, Oskar necessarily confronts some of the dangers inherent in not only public archives but also reproduced images. Like a reproduced photograph, a public archive of 9/11 (especially photographic archives reproduced on the Internet) makes the experience available to almost everyone. People who were not in New York can look at the images as people on the street experienced them. This wider availability, however, risks diminishing the original experience—or aura—of the event because like the images that become part of an archive, these recontextualized and reproduced images become a symbolic representation of an idea rather than a personal representation of

loss. When Oskar turns to the technological mediation of Stephen Hawking to signify what has happened to him, he highlights this experience of turning to these technological reproduced images to simulate a troubled experience with the past that he feels is subsumed by a public grief. At the same time that these photographs show Oskar what he has not experienced (he has not literally experienced the moment depicted in the photograph), it also represents an emotional experience of the past. Thus while Oskar did not experience the moment the image of Stephen Hawking depicts, he does experience the same interplay between the representation and the “original.”

Using this stock image as something that happened to him allows Oskar to create a personal narrative out of a public image, so while the image is not perhaps authentic, it certainly expresses Oskar’s experience. This process harkens to Markus Zisselberger’s argument that a reproduced photograph, as it loses its material history, can retain—or at least recreate—a personal aura. While the image may lose its original history, Zisselberger argues, reproduction allows the personal(s) to enter the space of the image, acquiring a new aura that “calls upon the viewer to engage in a [personal] form of remembrance” (290). As photographic memory—a memory composed of reproduced photographs—Oskar’s collection of public images begins to use a series of non-related images not only to form a “remembrance,” but an entire narrative based off of reproductions. In this way, Oskar participates in the same kind of memory game that Benjamin examines in Proust’s *À la Recherche du temps perdu*, one mediated through memory of the past. Like Oskar, Proust searches for a past that is lost and relies on the image to assuage his homesickness. “He lay on his bed racked with homesickness,”

Benjamin writes, “homesick for the world distorted in the state of resemblance” (205). Benjamin perceives that this past, represented by images distorts reality; the act of remembering produces only a resemblance, one that fails to truly echo the truth of what has happened. For Oskar, however, the distortion created by that these non-chronological and non-related images reflect how he perceives reality; this so-called distortion ends up being more representational than the original. Hence, the image of Stephen Hawking in the monitor is in focus, while the “original” image of his face is blurred.

As Oskar takes public images and makes them personal, he reverses the technologically reproduced image’s typical trajectory moving from the personal to the collective. As contents from the representation of the collective event in the past are “distorted” by Oskar’s appropriation into his personal experience, this personal genealogy for the photographs endows these reproductions with a new, personalized aura (experience) of the past. This pattern of the distorted image fitting more closely to Oskar’s experience than a “normal” photograph continues in three images in the middle of *Stuff That Happened to Me*: an image of a falling body (59, my arrow), an image of New York without Central Park (60–61), and a close-up on the falling body (62). These images continue the distortion both metaphorically in that, like Proust, Oskar presents images that re-present the past, and literally, as the third image zooms onto a blurred image. When placed in context with each other, these three photographs also create a narrative that enacts Oskar’s loss in a personal collection of images rather than a public archive of 9/11 photographs. The second image depicts a New York missing Central

Park, a reference to a bedtime story (told to Oskar by his father the night before his death) about a fictitious Sixth Borough. In this story the borough slowly started drifting

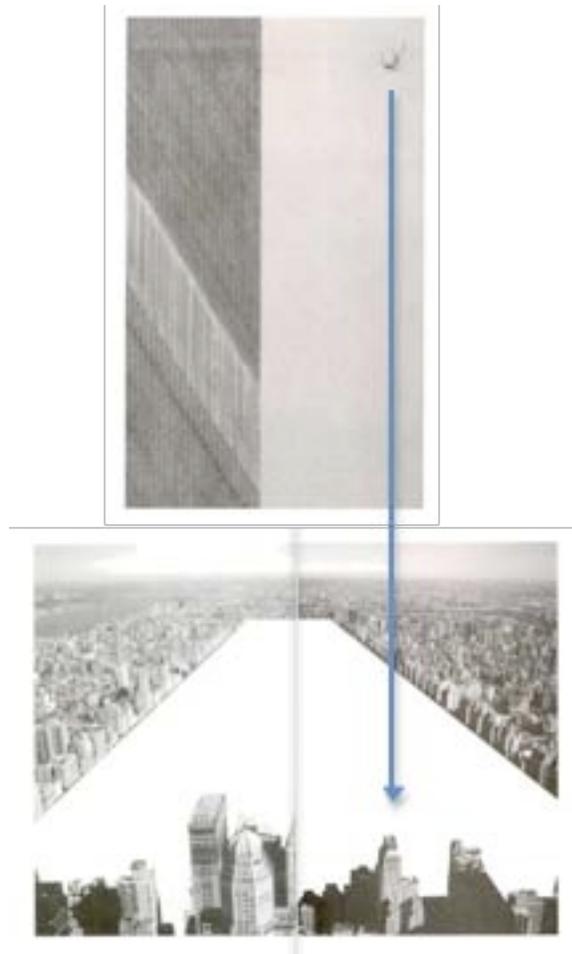


Figure 3-2. Falling man and missing Central Park

away into the ocean and Central Park, which was hypothetically at the center of this collection of neighborhoods, was relocated to Manhattan. Consequently, the Sixth Borough, which supposedly continues floating through the ocean, has a giant hole in its center. Oskar returns to this story about loss several times throughout the novel, and as the last living memory of his father, it is an appropriate narrative for his father to tell the night before his death, and an even more appropriate narrative for Oskar to constantly revisit.

This story sets up a pattern of things—parks and neighborhoods—that go missing; it also explores the traces that these lost things leave behind. The story's afterlife is that it encourages Oskar to search for traces of the missing borough in the ground of Central Park. Central Park, then, becomes a representation of the loss of the missing borough, and when Oskar digs through the ground looking for clues, he attempts to piece together different objects—thumbtacks, spoons, aluminum foil—as proof that this lost borough once existed. This second image, then, presents the reader with the loss that Oskar wanders through throughout the book; this picture, as it omits Central Park, presents the space in which Oskar both seeks to find evidence of a lost borough as well as represents his last memory of his lost father. Just as the story is about a borough that goes missing, this image is about a father that has gone missing.

Searching the ground in Central Park amounts to searching for clues about the lost borough, and placing this image in between images of a falling body organizes these appropriated public images into a narrative of a lost father. The images of the falling body sandwiching the image representing the loss of the Sixth Borough are two illustrations of a photograph taken by Lyle Owerko, a New York-based photographer. This publicly circulated image gives Oskar a body to fixate his loss upon. Because Oskar uses this image as a stand-in for his father's missing body, it becomes the point of the entire narrative. The next time we encounter this image, it will be the ending flip-book that his critics so detest, finishing the novel in an exercise that challenges the boundaries between the present and the past as well as the private and public.

The first image of the falling man (pictured above) shows his trajectory toward death, and as he falls down through the page the body continues down the through

page where it disappears into the hole where Central Park would be (60-61). Just as the skyline of New York missing the iconic Twin Towers represents the loss of a group of people, the landscape missing Central Park creates a space for Oskar to consider the individuality of this single human body. The third image returns to the human body, but instead of re-presenting the first image, Oskar zooms in on the falling man (62). This image of the past, like Oskar's memory, is blurred in the attempt to focus on it. Like the distortion of the Stephen Hawking photograph, however, this blurred image is more



Figure 3-3. Close-up on falling man

representative than a more “clear” photograph would be. When discussing how film—as a specific technological reproduction—has changed the way we perceive reality, Benjamin proposes that film’s ability to slow down and zoom in on reality has restructured perception as well as the image. These functions of film—the close-up and slow motion—not only give a deeper look at reality but also restructure our perception of that reality. He continues this analysis when addressing the ability of a photograph to “enlarge” an image. “The enlargement of a snapshot,” he says, “does not simply render more precise what in any case was visible, though unclear: it reveals entirely new

structural formations of the subject” (236). Looking at an enlarged image, Benjamin is arguing, not only clarifies what we see but also revolutionizes what and how we see. The close-up on the falling man does not make the image more precise. Blowing up the pixels on the image only makes the body more blurred and less understandable. This enlargement, however, does precisely what Benjamin suggests. As Oskar isolates this detail and zooms in on it, he calls attention to its inherent ambiguity. The closer Oskar attempts to get to understanding this falling body, the less clear its lines become. It is a suitable image to follow the previous two (the larger image of the falling man and the New York landscape without Central Park) because they set up a narrative in which the man falls into the void of Central Park, and this image shows what happens after Oskar attempts to understand the body by placing it in such a narrative: it simultaneously gets more and less visible. Therefore, in this case, at least, the enlargement of the photograph makes the image *more* unclear, which is precisely what makes it so illustrative of Oskar’s perception of the past. As Oskar attempts to look more closely at the past—distorting his memory of the past—he finds it less clear.

The close-up on the image of the falling man is recalled later in the photograph of a falling cat (191). Oskar uses this image to represent two show-and-tell demonstrations: one in which Oskar shows how his cat can fall safely from a high distance and another in which he plays a tape of a survivor’s testimony of the Hiroshima bombing. The interview that Oskar plays records the testimony of a Japanese woman who found her dying daughter in a ditch after the bombing. The woman, Tomoyasu, was herself in her house when the bomb was dropped, and she describes the flash as a “flash from a camera” (187). When Oskar continues talking about the bombing after the

interview ends, another student makes fun of Oskar's previous show-and-tell in which Oskar brings in his cat, Buckminster (which Oskar calls his "pussy"). Dropping the cat from the roof, Oskar demonstrates Buckminster's ability to fall safely.

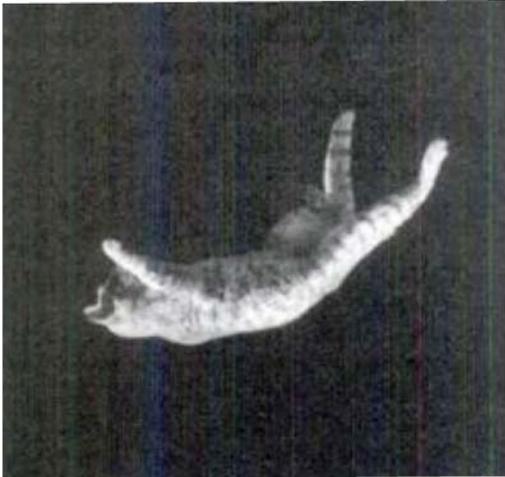


Figure 3-4. Falling cat upside down



Figure 3-5. Falling man close-up

As a stock photo, the image of the falling cat is itself perhaps unremarkable. However, its uncanny visual replication of the falling man and its narrative connection to Hiroshima enters the photograph of the cat into a discourse of falling bombs and falling men that breaks the falling man from its placement in the public narrative of 9/11. Oskar does not choose to directly represent an image of the bombing and instead uses this

image of the cat as a stand-in for the photograph Tomoyasu had imagined being taken when the bomb went off. As Oskar relates Tomoyasu's story of a daughter that goes missing, his image of the cat recalls the inverted image of the falling man, a representation of Oskar's father that has also gone missing. The visual inversion between the falling cat and the falling man replicates the juxtaposition between the two. The falling cat can correct itself. Its prolonged act of falling ensures that it will survive. The falling man, however, will not. His inverted image will crash to the ground and become part of the debris. By connecting the Hiroshima bombing to the cat and then connecting the cat to the falling man, Oskar decontextualizes the image of the falling man from the public narrative and photographic archive of 9/11. When the photograph of the falling man is in an archive of 9/11 images, its symbolic value resonates as part of a 9/11 narrative. By connecting the image of the falling man to the cat, Oskar decontextualizes the falling man from both that narrative and that archive. The photograph is no longer about terrorists attacking the Twin Towers, but about a man falling. By then connecting it to the Hiroshima bombing, Oskar further decontextualizes the photograph from the public archive of 9/11 and the politicization of its images and representations. Oskar does not connect his missing father to missing towers, but things that fall from the sky: bodies and bombs. Using this image of the falling cat and connecting it to the Hiroshima bombing, then, transforms a public narrative (of the bombing) and a public image (of the cat) into a private representation of Oskar's personal relationship with his father's death.

This process of inscribing the public image into the personal marks Oskar's reintroduction of himself in relationship to the past, not just as a way to interact with the

relics of the past through historical representations of 9/11 but also as a readjustment within the public experience that distorts, enlarges, and reproduces a public trauma in a private space. Oskar's creation of *Stuff That Happened To Me* allows him to represent the gaps and fissures of the past with artistic fragments, and thus uses this new narrative to return to the past. As Oskar wanders through the streets of New York, he wanders through both an imaged past and this series of images and uses these images to create a collage that in turn creates a new, personal history. By representing his experience with a collection of photographs—images which highlight gaps, fissures, and losses—Oskar addresses and reenacts the death of his father in a personal context. This creative process, therefore, empowers Oskar through creative ruptures of the public archive. Like his imaginative inventions such as birdseed shirts and incredibly long limousines, which Oskar creates as an imaginative way to safely interact with the world, these images as placed in this personal archive allows Oskar to establish his personal space within the public trauma.

CHAPTER 4 RUPTURING CHRONOLOGY

As we have just seen, Oskar uses the images in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* to represent his relationship to the past in ways which help him separate his father's death from the public conversation concerning 9/11. His personal approach to grief, loss, and history is thus simultaneously nostalgic and therapeutic. This kind of understanding of grief makes possible, even while feeling the pain of loss, the responsibility that Emmanuel Levinas demands of our experience with the Other. This responsibility is key to Levinas's specific definition of what it means to have an "ethical" relationship with the Other. In his introduction to a collection of Levinas's writings, Sean Hand describes Levinas's sense of ethical responsibility this way: "a mode of being and saying where I am endlessly obligated to the Other, a multiplicity in being which refuses totalization and takes form instead as fraternity and discourse, an ethical relation which forever precedes and exceeds the egoism and tyranny of ontology" (1). This ethical responsibility to the Other, in other words, demands discourse, not chronology. It asks for multiplicity, not the flattening out of the narrative. And in the pages that follow, we will discover that Oskar's images, as they begin to create personal space within a public trauma, disrupt a static representation of history in favor of a version of the past that is invested in precisely such multiplicity. The resulting network of experiences does not replace other experiences and representations of the past, but instead layers different narratives on top of each other. Oskar's narrative ultimately therefore embraces—rather than silences—alternative readings of the past and, in the process, it critiques public archives of the images of 9/11 by reimagining a version of the past that challenges streamlined representations of history.

Understanding how Oskar uses nostalgia and images to do this kind of philosophical and ethical heavy lifting first requires understanding the various ways in which images work, not only within the novel itself but also within the larger discourse of photographic representations of 9/11 as a historical event. For although the aftermath of 9/11 ultimately precipitated wars in both Afghanistan and Iraq, the precursor to those military conflicts was the struggle for representation of 9/11—a struggle in which the sounds and images of the attacks became both a site and stake of cultural battle. After recording the aftermath of the collision of the first flight into the South Tower, news cameras were well positioned to film the second attack on the North Tower. As the tragedy unfolded, news organizations quickly recycled a montage of telephone messages, cell phone photos, amateur video clips, and news camera footage. Images caught by private citizens also hit the Internet, as people texted and emailed videos and pictures of the attacks, often during the attacks themselves. As a consequence, the initial first-hand recorded accounts of 9/11 were represented through a cluster of recycled images: planes crashing into towers, smoke billowing out of the cityscape, a reporter ducking behind a car. As news organizations, Internet websites, and ultimately politicians began to organize these images into the kind of informal public archives discussed above, they began to form an informal collective and national narrative. Though many of the images in the archives were stills or video loops with very short duration, the archives as a whole were typically organized around the basis of an emerging chronological narrative that began to form an instantaneous historical interpretation of the attacks. These sounds and images, that is to say, were typically attached to timelines that created a sense of unity and causality not inherent in the

images themselves: such timelines listed when the terrorists left their homes in the morning, when the planes deviated from their courses, when the towers were hit and then fell, and so forth. This archival collection of the sounds and images of 9/11 thus became an act of historical interpretation as well as a process of collection—an interpretation which attempted to transform the shifting chaos of a million disconnected images into the national memory of history. Almost a decade later, these representations and chronologies continue to mediate and process the history and meaning of 9/11.

Each subsequent attempt to archive the images of 9/11 or to represent the apparent meaning of such images through correspondent art have neither been created nor received equally. The alternate disgust with some photographs and the almost maniacal patriotism inspired by others continue to map out how individuals and groups conceive of 9/11 as a historical event. Thus, while some exhibitions such as *Here Is New York*—which displayed and sold 9/11 photographs produced by amateurs and professionals—received a fair amount of praise, other representations did not. In September of 2002, for example, Eric Fischl's bronze statue, *Tumbling Woman*, created in honor of those who fell from the Twin Towers, debuted at the Rockefeller Center in New York City. One week later, it was removed.⁹ Just as the events of 9/11 had distinct

⁹ For an excellent discussion of the public representation of 9/11 turn to Randal Van Schpen's article which discusses Fischl's bronze statue in relation to Young's concept of the anti-memorial "Falling/failing 9/11: Eric Fischl's Tumbling Woman debacle." *Aurora, The Journal of the History of Art* 9 (2008): 116+. *Academic OneFile*. Web. 19 Feb. 2010.

Van Schepen's analysis of the anti-memorial response to 9/11 is especially important to the present discussion because of the ways in which Oskar employs similar moves in his use of photography as stranded/nostalgic object. The photograph signifies Oskar's desire to memorialize his father's death and his weary distrust of that memorialization. While Oskar feels the need to memorialize, in some way, his father's death to signify its importance, he also fears that such memorialization of his father would allow him to forget his father rather than create an enduring connection with him.

political and military consequences, so, too, do subsequent representations of 9/11—*how* the event is represented and *by whom* it is being represented—have continuing significant social and cultural consequences. Such representations dictate not only how the nation can conceptualize 9/11 but also what images can be used to form appropriate historical representations. At the heart of the debates over which artistic representations should be accepted or rejected is a continuing concern over how we as a nation will collectively remember the events of 9/11. In other words, these forms of representation became also the form of cultural memory. Which images were accepted became, in turn, how (and what) we remembered.

The relevant point, of course, is that as soon as Oskar turns to photographs to re-create a tolerable understanding of the death of his father, he inadvertently challenges this kind of cultural rhetoric that approves some versions of 9/11 and excludes others. Like his efforts to create a personal space within a public event, Oskar's attempt to disrupt the standard chronology and meanings of 9/11 dodges the kind of one-dimensional, static reading of the past promoted by culturally approved photographic archives. In using photographs to overcome this static reading of the past, Oskar rethinks the images' relations to their historical contexts, both the initial public contexts for such images (similar to the discussion of the material history of the image, above) and the personal context into which Oskar then puts them. The good news is that as Oskar recontextualizes the photographs in this way, he creates a partial version of the

While a memorial proper signifies acknowledgement or acceptance as a gateway to overcoming trauma, anti-memorials speak to the absentness of that past in the present. In this way, the absence isn't replaced—and therefore filled—by representation, an act that relieves the responsibility to acknowledge that absence. The posters for Thomas Schell that continuously go unanswered, in this way, anti-memorialize the father's death. They testify to the absence of his father and the silence of his death. They are not memorials, in that they replace his father, but anti-memorials in that they signify his absence.

kind of discursive narrative Hand envisions as the answer to Levinas's demand for an ethical history. The bad news is that to critics and theorists like Susan Sontag, the initial process of photographic decontextualization is extremely problematic in-and-of itself.

The problem with decontextualizing a photograph, Sontag observes, is that removing an image from its historical moment constitutes a bad-faith falsification of the past. In *On Photography*, where she adamantly argues this conclusion, she is specifically concerned with how images of war get recaptioned to illustrate different circumstances and positions than existed in their original contexts. Taken out of context, Sontag fears that the subsequent reproductions of the image violate its integrity in the sense that the original social intent of the photograph "drains away" as the context is lost (106). "Because each photograph is only a fragment," Sontag argues, "its moral and emotional weight depends on where it is inserted [within a text]," concluding that "the presence and proliferation of all photographs contributes to the erosion of the very notion of meaning, to that parceling out of the truth into relative truths" (105–106). To Sontag, then, context evidently means everything, and if a photograph is parceled out—as she says—to other causes, it loses its potency. Under the terms of this perspective every re-presentation of an image is by definition its mis-representation. Sontag concludes that, rather, a photograph must be allowed to speak within the truth of its original historical context rather than being recontextualized by subsequent narratives, which would force it to illustrate a different, and necessarily false, meaning.¹⁰

¹⁰ As a way out of this photographic falsification, Sontag prescribes a strict adherence to captions in order to recuperate the original social context. Using the argument that Benjamin makes in "Author as Producer," Sontag quotes Benjamin that these captions "rescue [the photograph] from the ravages of modishness and confer upon it a revolutionary use value" (107). Carrying the value of the textual supplement to the image even further, Sontag concludes that "In fact, words do speak louder than pictures. [...] The caption is the missing voice, and it is expected to speak for truth" (108). These captions,

From Sontag's perspective, then, Oskar's use of the image of the falling man becomes an extremely problematic piggy-back onto a historically charged image. Although Foer, to a certain extent, avoids this problem by using an illustration of a photograph, he still uses a highly politicized image: a suicidal response to a suicide bomber. Foer then uses this image of another person's death to represent Oskar's father. Recontextualizing the image in this way, to represent someone other than the one pictured, appropriates a moment of death without addressing the "real" story behind the original photograph (who the man actually is, when he began to fall, who took the picture, etc). This appropriation of meaning has to be the epitome of what Sontag feared: using an image without deference to its original historical context.

Levinas, however, to a certain extent absolves Foer of Sontag's anticipated criticism. Although like Sontag, Levinas is suspicious of how photographs represent the past, his concerns are in many respects the polar opposite. Whereas Sontag fears that reproductions of photographs would obscure the historical moment in which they were produced, Levinas fears that photographs are *too good* at communicating an historical moment. He worries that as photographs come to represent the past, an image will flatten out the otherwise complicated and layered dynamics of a moment. In *Otherwise*

as they speak for truth, limit the kind of aestheticization that Sontag fears robs photographs of their transformative potency. While she acknowledges Benjamin's desire to use the caption to turn the author into a producer, her fear of the aesthetics that drains an image of its revolutionary value contradicts Benjamin's assertion within the same essay Sontag references, that the right politics will have the right aesthetics. No doubt with the artistic propaganda of the National Socialists in mind, Benjamin stresses that "the politically correct tendency includes a literary tendency" (221). This is because form, the literary tendency, provides more than structural support for its content; it manufactures the relationship between content and the author/reader. Rather than being a passive ingredient that submits to its content, form is an active ingredient that determines meaning. Both form and content, therefore, need to consider the social conditions and the "living social context" (222). Benjamin, like Sontag, asserts that the caption must keep photographs politically situated, but he does not reject the aesthetics of the image in favor of historical context. Rather, he argues that the historical context must be *matched* by its aesthetics.

Than Being, Levinas discusses ethics and being in terms of what he calls *the said* and *the saying*, two alternative ways of relating to history. He concludes that photographs that articulate a static sense of time (which he calls the *said* of history) undermine the attempt to maintain an ethical relationship with the past. The danger in representing the past through an image is that it risks reducing a dynamic understanding of past experience to a singular, static image. Unlike Sontag, Levinas sees this move to force the photograph to illustrate the “truth” of a particular historical moment as a *de facto* rejection of his grounding assumption, that the truest aspects of lived experiences are always located within the gaps between images. Assuming that one can accurately depict all the complexities of a moment in time in one image, therefore, chances reducing different experiences to a one-dimensional perspective.

From Levinas's perspective, then, the biggest risk in reading Oskar's images simply as a reworking of 9/11 as a historical event is that the resulting photographic representation would not offer Oskar—and us—an alternative ethical relationship to the past and present, but simply a refiguring of time that fails to consider multiple experiences in that past. As a representation of Oskar's relationship to the past, the image would potentially limit the relationship between the present and pasts if it rejects a larger discourse of experience. If Oskar's photographic archive were simply a *rewriting* of 9/11, it would fall victim to a static past. Thus, while Sontag would fear that using images such as the falling man would ignore the photograph's original context, Levinas would fear that using such an iconic image would limit the way we could see that image because of the historical (and fixed) narrative within which it is traditionally placed.

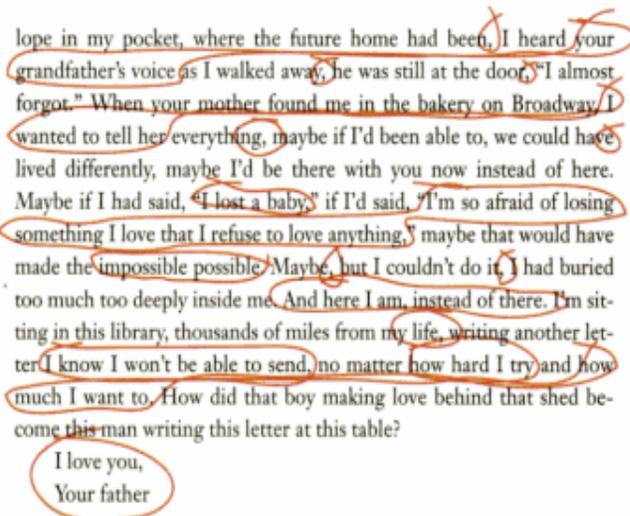
The danger is that if photographic images are used as evidence in a contextualized—and fixed—moment in the past, they risk confining the past to what can be expressed. As a counter to this static conception of history, Levinas proposes a more “responsible” way to think about the past, through what he calls *the saying*. The saying is an acknowledgement that there is always more to the story than what can ever be presented. “This saying, in the form of responsibility for another,” Levinas says, “is bound to an irrecuperable, unrepresentable past, temporalizing according to a time with separate epochs, in a diachrony” (47). In one sense, then, *the saying* of history is antithetical to representation at all; it is precisely the feelings and experiences that cannot be expressed. It is the being that happens between moments captured in images. In order to ethically relate to the past, then, Levinas argues that we must find a way to approach history that speaks for this multiplicity.

In using layered and nostalgic decontextualization of various photographs and images, Oskar accesses this multiplicity which presents simultaneous experiences of the past. Nostalgia offers Oskar a way to disrupt fixed notions of the past through recontextualized images while establishing a relationship to—rather than a colonizing replacement of—visual representations of 9/11. Since the images in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* express Oskar's perception of the past rather than the past *per se*, those images are not determined by a chronology of *what* happened *when*, but by an understanding of *how* things happened to Oskar. This is at least a partial defense against Sontag's critique, because Oskar is not interested in recontextualizing his images as an alternative history (one that replaces the original history of the photograph), but rather in using the image to explain his experience in the past. Oskar's

non-historical photographic series presents a non-chronological narrative that expresses his unique perception of the past, a narrative that avoids representing past events as part of an indisputable timeline. Instead, Oskar forms a network of the past that approximates what Levinas calls the “flowing” of time (34). “To speak of time in terms of flowing,” Levinas observes, “is to speak of time in terms of time and not in terms of temporal events. . . . The temporal modification is not an event, nor action, nor the effect of a cause. It is the verb to be” (34). This distinction between the “flowing” of time and thinking of history in terms of “temporal events,” for Levinas, is that the flowing of time is best represented within the continuation of a verb rather than within the fixated positioning of a noun. As a noun, the past is understood to be a concrete and complete object, one that can be represented in sequence, chronologically. As a verb, however, the flowing of time is seen as rupturing the boundaries of the past. Instead of the past being an objective timeline, the past would then be an open and dynamic dialogue. This perception of time, for Levinas, engenders an ethical relationship to a flexible history rather than a static relationship to a history which is fixed—and therefore untouchable—in the past. In effect, it presents the past as something to which one can *relate* rather than merely *refer*.

When Oskar presents his images—whether the image of the falling cat or of Stephen Hawking or even of the falling man—he does not present them as evidence that his version of 9/11 is somehow more appropriate or more valid than the versions experienced by others. Rather, the images mark a moment of creative rupture that opens up the chronology of a public event so that Oskar can express his relationship to

the past. In this way, the images operate not as evidence of the pastness of an event, but as a way to layer multiple experiences of the past together.



lope in my pocket, where the future home had been, I heard your grandfather's voice as I walked away, he was still at the door, "I almost forgot." When your mother found me in the bakery on Broadway, I wanted to tell her everything, maybe if I'd been able to, we could have lived differently, maybe I'd be there with you now instead of here. Maybe if I had said, "I lost a baby," if I'd said, "I'm so afraid of losing something I love that I refuse to love anything," maybe that would have made the impossible possible. Maybe, but I couldn't do it, I had buried too much too deeply inside me. And here I am, instead of there. I'm sitting in this library, thousands of miles from my life, writing another letter I know I won't be able to send, no matter how hard I try and how much I want to. How did that boy making love behind that shed become this man writing this letter at this table?

I love you,
Your father

Figure 4-1. Last page of grandfather's letter

One important example of how images convey the “flowing of time” that layers history can be found in a series of red editing marks,¹¹ made not by Oskar but by his father, Thomas. This image is especially interesting because it operates both as text and as an image because it presents both text and red circles. These editing marks come in a letter written to Oskar’s father by his grandfather, who is also named Thomas. Oskar’s grandfather, upon hearing that his wife was pregnant with Oskar’s father, had left New York, his wife, and their unborn child. Over the years, even after Thomas has died in the World Trade Center, Oskar’s grandfather writes a series of letters to his son explaining why he was not there. Although as readers we read several of these letters—

¹¹ Levinas speaks of this process, coincidentally, in terms of the red reddening (38–41). For him, this is not a tautological redundancy, but the attempt to reinsert the verb into the act of language. This movement approaches the concept of time through a more dialogic, rather than monologic, understanding of experience. Expressed visually in Thomas's red editing marks, Levinas's metaphorical process becomes quite literal.

all titled “Why I’m Not Where You Are” ((16, 108, 208, 262)—with a different date for each, we understand that these letters were never read by its intended audience: Oskar’s father. That is, all except one. This exception, dated 4/12/78, contains red editing marks that are especially useful for understanding how the letter works out a relationship with the past, both as the grandfather uses the past to explain his behavior and as Thomas edits that explanation.

In the letter, Oskar’s grandfather recounts his life in Dresden before World War Two. At that time he was in love not with the woman he later married (Oskar’s grandmother), but with her older sister, Anna. The grandfather weaves this explanation of his interpersonal relationship together with his own traumatic experience: the bombing of Dresden during World War Two. Not only does Thomas lose his entire family in the bombing, but he also loses Anna, whom he had just learned is pregnant. He recounts the traumatic experience of trying to find Anna amidst a horrific scene of explosions and melting skin and animals from the zoo running wild on the streets. Oskar’s grandfather hopes that this description of the Dresden bombing will help explain—and perhaps justify—why he left his new family years later. “I’m so afraid of losing something I love,” concludes Oskar’s grandfather, “that I refuse to love anything” (216). His historical loss, the grandfather argues, has become a barrier from establishing subsequent relationships.

Not only does this letter attempt to explain the grandfather’s past, but its presence in the novel also shows how his son responds to that explanation. Because his response to the letter is the only unmediated presence of Oskar’s father in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, we meet Thomas, Jr., most directly through his nostalgia, the

textual traces of his desire to critique and edit the past. These editing marks highlight nostalgia's desire to mediate the present by reconfiguring the past and serve as a visual metaphor of how images are used in Oskar's archive. The editing marks exist as a trace of Oskar's father, and demonstrate Thomas Jr.'s desire to edit the only interaction he has had with *his* father, just as do the images Oskar collects as part of his personal archive. Thus, in an act of multi-generational interpretation of history, both a father and his son edit images of the past in an attempt to reestablish a relationship with that past that compensates for the loss of a father.

Initially Thomas, Jr., edits his father's letter in much the same way he would edit the *New York Times*: he searches the letter for errors. At first, Thomas's redactions draw attention to factual and grammatical mistakes: he circles misplaced commas and incorrect names. Over the course of the letter, however, Thomas moves into an ideological critique of his father's perception of the past and how that past justifies his father's actions. As he edits this explanation, Thomas shows how he understands—or doesn't understand—his father. His fundamental critique, then, is not of the historical past, but of his *relationship* to his father.

When Thomas, Jr., circles "I'm so afraid of losing something I love that I refuse to love anything," for example, he circles what he takes to be his father's error: that he could prevent loss by not having anything to lose. By circling this phrase, Thomas refuses to adhere to its logic. A couple of sentences later, Thomas circles as error his father's claim that he is writing a letter that "I know I won't be able to send" despite "how hard I try" and "how much I want to" (216). The grandfather's statement is of course false because he *was* able to send the letter—Thomas is, after all, editing it. Thomas's

critiques, however, extend beyond this factual inconsistency. By circling “how hard I try” and “how much I want to,” Thomas appears to suggest that his father neither tries to nor wants to correct his actions. If he did want and try to, Thomas seems to be saying, he *would* have.

In addition to critiquing his father’s logic, Thomas’s redactions also show how he reads their relationship with each other through this historical moment. Earlier, as the grandfather explains how he shot an ape during the bombing chaos, Thomas circles the phrase, “in its eyes I saw some form of understanding” (213). By challenging this phrase, Thomas reflects how he sees his father, much the same way he does when he challenges his father’s logic about loss and relationships. The grandfather reads understanding into the ape’s eyes, just as he hopes this letter will bring understanding to his son. Thomas, however, disputes the ape’s ability to grasp his killer’s justification, and therefore expresses how Thomas cannot understand his father’s actions. By drawing attention to these lines, Thomas shows how he, like the ape, does not understand. For Thomas, Jr., then, the horrors of Dresden will never adequately explain or justify his father’s desertion of his family. The last phrase that Thomas circles—“I love you, / Your father”—is the ultimate critique that Thomas makes of his father’s historical justification for leaving his wife and child. Thomas challenges not only what his father says, but also questions his father’s ability to love something he has left and defies his father’s right to even call himself a father.

As Thomas circles his father’s words, the past flows, as it were, through the interaction between a father’s past and a son’s relationship to that past. An essential component to this image, however, is that Thomas does not supplant his father’s

history. While questioning the traumatic and historical justification for his father's absence, Thomas's editing marks layer—rather than replace—the past presented by his father. As he critiques his father's history (not through words, but through an imaged text), Thomas allows the versions of the experience to relate to one another rather than supersede each other.

Thomas's desire to edit the past via the imaging of his father's letter continues in Oskar's project to compile and manipulate images. Oskar, too, faces an absent father. Like Thomas's red editing marks on his father's letter, the selection of images we have looked at in the previous sections edits the past through Oskar's experience of loss. By choosing images to represent *Stuff That Happened to [Him]*, Oskar recreates his experiences of the past in a way that allows for other experiences to coexist with his own.¹² This less absolute version of time and history morphs a chronology into a discourse in which versions of the past can not only relate to other versions of the past, but can also relate to experiences in the present.

The most famous—and, its critics would argue, most *infamous*—example of the kind of nostalgic re-presentation of public images that challenge historical chronology is of course the flip-book with which the novel ends. This visual series—referenced throughout the text by the individual images and close-ups on the body—embodies Oskar's nostalgic enterprise because he reverses the image so that the body appears to go backwards in time. This attempt to push back into the past is Oskar's ultimate and

¹² That ability is recreated in Foer's larger text, within the grandfather's series of letters and even sections written by Oskar's grandmother. The particular dynamic between the grandfather's and grandmother's accounts are especially interesting because they often reflect on the same historical moment with different perspectives, such as when they reunited at a bakery in New York.

final attempt to understand his father's death in such a way that allows him to interact with the people around him.

Key to understanding this moment of presenting the past as separate from the kind of compulsive repetition part of melancholy is understanding its recontextualization throughout Oskar's archival project. Just before these closing images, Oskar and the Renter staying with his grandmother (who is in actuality Oskar's presumably absent grandfather) dig up his father's empty grave. When Oskar opens the coffin, he faces what he enacts in his photographic archive: death, loss, emptiness. Although he has prepared for this final confrontation with the coffin's emptiness through his reproductions of images and loss which he collects throughout the novel, facing this final symbol of loss is still difficult. Oskar relates that, even though he knew he knew his father's body would not be in the grave, he was still "surprised by how incredibly empty it was." "I felt," he says, "like I was looking into the dictionary definition of emptiness" (321). At this moment, Oskar faces the concrete loss of his father in much the same way he had earlier faced that same loss in the abstract, through his images. It is interesting, then, how Oskar chooses to fill the space of his father's missing body. The Renter fills the coffin with two suitcases' worth of letters he had written to his son, years of explanations to "Why I'm Not Where You Are." The space of Oskar's father's missing body is thus filled with explanations of another patriarchal absence. The coffin ultimately is filled with a cross-generational exploration of missing fathers. Although Oskar reflects that he did not then realize who the Renter was nor what the letters were, this intersection between Oskar and his missing father as well as the grandfather and a missing son manifests a

layered illumination of the past not as a stagnant sense of history, but as an implicit and potential discourse.

After Oskar returns home from burying his grandfather's written-but-never-sent letters in his father's buried-but-never-filled grave, he approaches his mother, not as an extension of his own grief but as a subject grieving on her own. After reconstructing his loss in a narrative separate from the public archives and histories of 9/11 generally, he can begin to understand how he can relate to his mother. After telling Oskar that she spoke with his father just before he died, his mother carries him to his bed. Oskar sees this moment as being "extremely complicated" but at the same time "incredibly simple" (324). Although the entire bulk of the novel—including all of Oskar's nostalgic reconfigurations of images and narratives of loss and journeys through New York to visit countless people—does not come close to adequately explaining how Oskar can now understand his mother, he is still somehow able to finally understand their relationship. "In my only life, she was my mom," he says, "and I was her son" (324). Just as Oskar describes this moment as both complicated and simple, this statement reveals in its simplest form the kind of multiplicitous relationship that Levinas demands of our interaction with others. Although he speaks only in terms of "mom" and "son," this statement recognizes the reciprocal responsibility that the relationship entails. This mutual fraternity—to use Hand's term—can now exist even as Oskar continues to suffer for the loss of his father.

This recognition of the relationship between Oskar and his mother is the contextualization for his act of reversing the images of the falling man. This final presentation of Oskar's images, therefore, does not just center on his own grief. It is

also an act of interpretation in which he explores the relationship between the past and his own grief as well as the grief of his mother.

I reversed the order, so that the last one was first, and the first was last. When I flipped through them, it looked like the man was floating up through the sky. And if I'd had more pictures, he would've flown through a window, back into the building, and the smoke would've poured into the hole that the plane was about to come out of. . . . He would have told me the story of the Sixth Borough, from the voice in the can at the end to the beginning, from 'I love you' to 'Once upon a time. . .' *We would have been safe.* (325–326, my italics)

To end with this past conditional—as the last text before the closing images—is to capture the entirety of Oskar's nostalgic project: to set a condition on the past and to interpret it through his relationship to his father. As the stand-in for his father's missing body—which in itself is only an imaginary representation of his father—the body falls upwards. By working with this photographic series that replicates and represents the experience of loss, Oskar can acknowledge that while *they would have been safe*, they are not. This manifests a nostalgia that is—as Frederic Jameson calls it—"conscious of itself."¹³ While Oskar reverses his images and pushes back into the past, he recognizes the crucial difference between *what would have been* and *what is*. Even though this difference is still marked by pain and loss, in these final moments he uses this reproduction of the past to sort through his relationship with his mother. His final ability to face see the gap between this past and his present allows Oskar to understand his father's death, even if it is still painful, without alienating himself from his mother.

This final reversal of the falling man images—the flip-book derided by so many critics—is thus a fitting end to *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*. It is more than a mere repetition of Oskar's loss that puts the body back at the moment of trauma and risks

¹³ See footnote 2, page 2.

being caught in a continuous recycling of the past. This presentation of images does not replicate a montage that places Oskar back at a moment of reenactment. Rather, it is an editing point at which Oskar begins to take control over his relationship to the past. Oskar does not reverse motion and chronology merely to replay a public trauma but to record onto this public memory his own personal position within that trauma. In the process, he begins to understand not only how he relates to the past—which is still painful—but how he can understand others. And that understanding includes, but is not limited to, viewing the images made iconic by 9/11 not as a repetitive—and therefore melancholic—manifestation of how one deals with trauma, but as a sustained attempt to re-imagine a visual ethics, a way of relating to the past.

Viewed from this perspective, the series of stock photographs, imaged-texts, and close-ups in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* are perhaps best understood as a form of creative and visual therapy, one which avoids forcing the images into a chronological history and instead focuses on the gaps and ruptures existing both within and between particular images. The resulting narrative that emerges—one that acknowledges the flowing of time that exceeds representation—reproduces the death of Oskar's father, but does it does so within a private understanding of how that loss is a part of Oskar's own experience. Throughout the novel, Oskar typically uses images not just to recreate the death of his father, but also to develop and express a quite specific relationship to a re-presented past which is only accessible by way of Oskar's arrangement of various images available in the present.

As Oskar re-historicizes public photographs as part of his personal narrative, he approaches the photographs not as evidence of a privileged and static past but as a

way of processing his individual relationship of that past. This allows Oskar—and us with him—to participate in a conversation with the past instead of a one-sided historical monologue. This is an important move for Oskar, not only because it continues his project of turning a public history into a personal narrative, but also because it helps him understand how he can relate both to his father and to the people around him.

As a result, while it may seem somewhat presumptuous to reverse most of the critical reception of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, after seeing how the images throughout the novel do an incredible amount of psychological, historical, and ethical work, that is exactly what I am inclined to do. The images are indisputably an integral part of the novel, not in the sense that they attempt to illustrate the text but in the sense that they repair Oskar's relationship to the past—and consequently his relationship with people around him. Quite the task for an element of the novel which is supposed to be, according to Updike, a mere “hyperactive visual surface” (140).

Perhaps part of the reason critics reject Foer's images is because they are caught up in the same issue Oskar is actively fighting against. In grouping the novel within the category *9/11 Representations*, such critics perhaps misinterpret *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* as a text that is meant to give the public a definitive way to collectively work through or act out a public event. And do it together. Within this context, using public images to express a public articulation of grief would be rather uninspiring. If we treat Oskar's father as little more than a convenient metaphorical national symbol (which is precisely the kind of interpretation that makes it so difficult for Oskar to understand his father's death), then conflating his body with that of the falling man becomes nothing more than using one generic one symbol to stand in for another. If the

text is interpreted as primarily a manifestation of melancholy, the images become simply isolated images that recall—but do not productively incorporate—experiences of loss. Even if the narrative is interpreted as being about a boy transitioning from melancholy to mourning, if our reading stops there, it becomes just another novel about another death. Except worse, because it would be riding on the coattails of a national trauma. And no amount of visual rhetoric could compensate for it.

However, understanding that Oskar approaches the past in such a way as to establish an ethical—in Levinas's sense of the word—relationship with the past translates this kind of public experience into an intensely personal narrative. The images Oskar collects become a way of rupturing his father's death out of the *said* of history, that which produces a static and chronological timeline. After Oskar's images rupture this version of the past, we begin to see how the images function as stranded objects, and we begin to understand how the ensuing narrative pieced together via the images scattered throughout the novel operates in the kind of free-flowing *saying* that allows Oskar to understand his father's death as part of a dialogue. Oskar's father is not ultimately a symbol, at least not to Oskar. He is a father, who Oskar has lost, and that hurts. But the answer is not to root out the idea of his father or make him no longer important to Oskar. Rather, using images lets Oskar remember his father through a narrative that lets him represent and understand rather than work-through and forget.

Although his father's death is the cause of Oskar's pain, as Oskar begins to understand that death as part of the *saying* of history, looking at the past becomes the cure for Oskar's pain as well as an encouragement to turn to people around him. In the end, Oskar's return to the past, even as it manifests a sickness, helps him to navigate

many of the problems inherently associated with trauma. In turn, as he uses a desire to return to a past in order to reconnect to his father (through his narrative) and his mother, Oskar perhaps redeems nostalgia from its reactionary status.

This is not to say that nostalgia remains an innocent longing for the past. While in some cultural texts returning to and learning from the past is portrayed as a virtue (just ask the fictional Kevin Arnold from *The Wonder Years*, whose voice-over narration leads television viewers through the lessons from a childhood in the 1960's), in other cultural texts nostalgia is not only a sickness and vice but also a disturbing look into how history can be manipulated in uncomfortable ways. Although they work within different genres, for example, dystopic films such as Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) and mid-grade horror films like Jim Gillespie's *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (1997) both capitalize on the same fear: that the past will come back with a violent vengeance. Films that return to representations of historical wars, such as Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), Werner Herzog's *Rescue Dawn* (2007), or even the Kathryn Bigelow's recent *Hurt Locker* (2008), return nostalgia to Hofer's original context: soldiers who are dying from their desire to return home. Thus, while in such cases Oskar's nostalgia has at least the potential to become its own cure, in other cases the manifestations and consequences of nostalgia are often more sickness and less remedy.

Despite its varied motivations, however, nostalgia's obsession with resurrecting the past continues, not only in texts and films but also in fashion and style. Harry Connick Jr. channels Frank Sinatra, and the Obamas recall JFK's Camelot in both the political style of President Obama and in the cut and fit of his wife's inaugural ball gown.

Given that these manifestations of nostalgia are not only attempts to cure but also invocations of illness, one has to wonder what we are, in the end, sick from. In this respect, nostalgia far exceeds the one-dimensional sentimentality or the pejorative recidivism in which it is traditionally read. In some respects, however, this return to its pathological past is nostalgia's most fitting trajectory. It is, after over three hundred years, finally returning home.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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