

May 01, 2007

## Visual representation of trauma in the modern novel

Paul Carleton Atwater  
*Northeastern University*

---

### Recommended Citation

Atwater, Paul Carleton, "Visual representation of trauma in the modern novel" (2007). *Honors Junior/Senior Projects*. Paper 36.  
<http://hdl.handle.net/2047/d10001074>

This work is available open access, hosted by Northeastern University.

“The Visual Representation of Trauma in the Modern Novel”

By Paul Carleton Atwater, English literature major

May 2007

Associate Professor Marina Leslie, Advisor

College of Arts & Sciences

Abstract:

Recently there have been a number of young authors who have challenged the basic conventions of the novel by publishing books that contain visual elements embedded within the text of the work. In Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, a novel concerning the aftermath of the 9/11/01 terrorist attacks, the events of that day are never explicitly mentioned; instead several photographs of the attacks on The World Trade Center are included within the text. Foer's first novel, *Everything is Illuminated* also includes many visual elements such as diagrams, and variations in font size. *Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* by Dave Eggers, contains an assortment of drawings and abrupt changes in layout and font size. Eggers' second book *You Shall Know our Velocity* features a number of photographs throughout the narrative.

By employing these visual elements in their novels in addition to text, these authors are taking a new and innovative approach to literature. No longer are the words the only matter of importance, the presentation they are given on the page is now just as essential to the overall work. Rather than simply serving as a means of recording the author's words, Eggers and Foer have transformed the page, and the book itself, into the work of art at hand.

I have found that by integrating the visual and the verbal into one unified storyline these authors are able to convey much more information to the reader than what is possible through text alone, simply because the reader must consider both the pictorial and narrative qualities of the content. Because these authors are dealing with issues of trauma, the visual becomes a particularly effective way of representing the limits of language in portraying trauma or documenting its effects.

The existing criticism on these authors deals with the narrative approach and culture significance of these works however there seems to be little attention paid to the visual elements they employ. By expanding their novels to include not just text but photography and drawings these works represent a major step forward in what can be done in literature. As such critical attention should be paid to properly assess this pioneering form. This is precisely what I intend to do in the following pages. Through close readings of the text I will show how the authors have used words and imagery in conjunction with each other to highlight the themes and ideas they develop throughout their books. Also I will explore the affect these visual elements have on fully analyzing and understanding a work of literature as a whole and what new steps must be employed in addition to traditional methods of literary criticism.

*The Visual Representation of Trauma in the Modern Novel*  
Carleton Atwater

Recently there have been a number of young authors who have challenged the basic conventions of the novel by publishing books that contain visual elements embedded within the text of the work. In Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, a novel concerning the aftermath of the 9/11/01 terrorist attacks, the events of that day are never explicitly mentioned; instead several photographs of the attacks on The World Trade Center are included within the text. Foer's first novel, *Everything is Illuminated* also includes many visual elements such as diagrams, and variations in font size. *Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* by Dave Eggers, contains an assortment of drawings and abrupt changes in layout and font size. Eggers' second book *You Shall Know our Velocity* features a number of photographs throughout the narrative.

By employing these visual elements in their novels in addition to text, these authors are taking a new and innovative approach to literature. No longer are the words the only matter of importance, the presentation they are given on the page is now just as essential to the overall work. Rather than simply serving as a means of recording the author's words, Eggers and Foer have transformed the page, and the book itself, into the work of art at hand.

The existing criticism on these authors deals with the narrative approach and culture significance of these works however there seems to be little attention paid to the visual elements they employ. By expanding their novels to include not just text but photography and drawings these works represent a major step forward in what can be

done in literature. As such critical attention should be paid to properly assess this pioneering form. This is precisely what I intend to do in the following pages. Through close readings of the text I will show how the authors have used words and imagery in conjunction with each other to highlight the themes and ideas they develop throughout their books. Also I will explore the affect these visual elements have on fully analyzing and understanding a work of literature as a whole and what new steps must be employed in addition to traditional methods of literary criticism.

I have found that by integrating the visual and the verbal into one unified storyline these authors are able to convey much more information to the reader than what is possible through text alone, simply because the reader must consider both the pictorial and narrative qualities of the content. By viewing a photograph or drawing the reader is able to ascertain information about the subject quickly and efficiently in ways that text alone cannot provide. This ability to manipulate not only what is on the page, but how it is presented provides the authors with an entire other realm to explore and utilize in creating their interpretation of whatever their subject matter may be. Because these authors are dealing with issues of trauma, the visual becomes a particularly effective way of representing the limits of language in portraying trauma or documenting its effects.

Foer's first and second novels concern the Holocaust and 9/11, respectively. Eggers' books concern the death of a loved one and its impact on the survivors. When the traumatic events in question are portrayed in these books it is generally through visual means, not prose, reflecting the visual nature of traumatic memory. Psychiatrist Judith Herman, describes trauma as "a series of still snapshots or a silent movie" (177). Many patients recovering from extreme trauma will resort to visual forms of expression. "At

times the patient may spontaneously switch to nonverbal methods of communication, such as drawing or painting. Given the iconic visual nature of traumatic memories, creating pictures may represent the most effective initial approach to these 'indelible images'" (177).

Indeed, visual devices can offer writers a means of presenting an issue or event that is too difficult to put in to words. In order to verbalize an experience one must come to terms with it, but by keeping it in the realm of the visual any internalization is prevented. These qualities can be used by an author to mirror the pain or conflict a character may be experiencing as a result of trauma. By only including photographs or drawings of an event it remains disjointed from the main narrative, much in the same way the experiences remain separated in the character's own memory. Many of the characters in these novels display clear symptoms of trauma and its resulting mental illness, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). These issues are explored visually by Eggers and Foer through the use of photographs, drawings and diagrams.

Trauma is the result of an inability to integrate an experience or emotion into their memory according to psychiatrists Alexander McFarland, and Bessel A. van der Kolk. "A traumatic experience confronts an individual with experiences completely different from what he or she has been able to imagine before, and this confrontation with the trauma radically shakes the individual's attitudes and beliefs"(491). Experiencing violence, destruction and death can alter one's world view in profound ways. If one is unable to process and incorporate such experiences into one's consciousness it can result in PTSD.

According to McFarland and van der Kolk sufferers of this disorder will display the following symptoms:

1. They experience persistent intrusions of memories related to the trauma.
2. They sometimes compulsively expose themselves to situations reminiscent of the trauma.
3. They actively attempt to avoid specific triggers of trauma related emotions, and experience a general numbing of responsiveness.
4. They lose the ability to modulate their physiological responses to stress in general.
5. They suffer from generalized problems with attention, destructibility and stimulus discrimination.
6. They have alterations in their psychological defense and in personal identity. (492)

Will, the protagonist of Eggers' *You Shall Know Our Velocity* claims to experience persistent memory intrusions. He describes his long-term memory as a large library staffed by a group of short mole like humanoids who bring him memory files whenever he wants to recall a particular event from his past, but following the death of his friend Jack, Will says the librarians begin bringing him files related to the death involuntarily:

“I just thought,” the librarian will say, “that you should see this.”

I know this file, but I have no need to see it now. I didn't ask for this goddamn file.

“Yes,” she says, “but I really thought you should see this again. We felt it was important for you to pore over the file right now, replaying the episode in your mind for the next few hours” (32).

Will also mentions a general numbing of responsiveness in his psychological defenses, admitting to being incapable to sleep without the aid of alcohol as well as becoming unable to deal with loud or dramatic sounds: “My tolerance for anything loud

had diminished every year I'd lived, and now so many things gave me a jump. The steady noise at work, drills and saws I couldn't do it anymore, this noise" (33).

Nine photographs are included as part of the text of *You Shall Know Our Velocity*. They are presented as if taken by Will during the course of a trip around the world. Some of these images seem to function purely as enhancers for certain objects in a scene, like on page 16 when three cars are mentioned and then immediately depicted:

In the parking lot we watched a trio of milk-white Broncos drive by——and we all stopped momentarily. It was bad enough that they still made them in that color, but to see three at once seemed to bode ill. The girls were unimpressed, and I was not surprised. I'd given up trying to predict what would impress them. Just a few months before, we'd seen a grown man, older and babbling in what sounded like Russian, jogging down

The phrase 'milk white' to describe the vehicles immediately recalls themes related to maternal comfort and loss, something prevalent throughout Eggers' work. Additionally, the number three hints at the idea of a family unit, mother father and child. In the context of this novel it references a different unit, that of the mutual friendship between Will, Hand, and Jack. The death of Jack in a car crash immediately prior to the opening of the novel spurs the world-wind trip undertaken by Will and Hand. It becomes clear that the themes central to this work will be represented visually as well as verbally. This image of the cars is the first photograph to appear in the book and establishes the motif of such pictures embedded within the text. The importance these visual materials serve becomes much more important later in the novel when a photo is used to complete a sentence.

swerving up and down, swinging to and fro, overlapping, like a group of sixth graders riding bikes home from school. Which would imply not only free will but a sense of fun, of caprice. I mean, I want to know what this bird:



is thinking. How does he feel his flight? Does he know the difference between stasis and swooping? Birds were so much better in flight. My bird feeder, now empty in Chicago, taught me how nervous and jittery birds were when they stood and hopped and ducked their heads into the glass for their miserable little seeds. But tearing in and out of formation, there was proof of—  
And then they were gone.

(101)

With this step the visual elements employed are no longer simply enhancing or commenting on events of the novel, they are now an essential part of the narrative itself. As a result this novel must be evaluated from a new perspective. The visual and verbal elements must be considered as one cohesive whole, as opposed to two independent components. The reader must evaluate the photos and their presentation from an artistic perspective as well as a literary one. This allows Eggers the ability to manipulate not only the text, but the page itself, providing an additional layer of symbolism so that a much stronger and cohesive work may be created than is possible with words or pictures alone.

The importance of the visual imagery and its relation to the narrative is evident in the subjects depicted in the photographs and the choice of frame they are given.

The objects depicted in Will's photos range from notebooks to flocks of birds. Although humans are occasionally present, they are never the focus, and their faces are noticeably obscured. Intentionally omitting human faces is even more apparent in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, which includes several photographs of the back of people's heads instead of their faces. Oscar, the narrator of the story comments that such a photo is more truthful. I would suggest that what Oscar is hinting at is the permanence of a photo, which may be radically different than what we believe to be the truth. A photo of someone's head unmistakably indicates that particular person, but it does not provide the details of their outward appearance. This lack of detail allows for a more subjective viewing of the photo and enables someone to be reminded of the person in the photo without necessarily being forced to observe how they once looked. Memories of someone can change and alter overtime, a photograph is however permanent. The particular moment of the shutter release is preserved perfectly for eternity. To view such a photo is to come face-to-face with the past. Such an experience can evoke very strong memories which can be very difficult for someone to deal with, especially if the photo represents something that has been lost.

In *Camera Lucida* Roland Barthes comments on traumatic memories and the painful feelings that can be evoked from viewing certain photos, relating the experience of encountering a photo of his recently deceased mother and the pain of viewing what no longer exists:

I cannot transform my grief, No culture will help me out or the suffering which I experience entirely on the level of the image's finitude. The photograph is without culture, nothing in it can transform grief into mourning. The photograph is undialectical: it is denatured theater where death can not be contemplated, reflected and interiorized. The dead theater of death, the foreclosure of the tragic, excludes all purification, all catharsis. Not only is the photograph never, in essence, a memory, but it actually blocks memory, quickly becoming a counter memory (Barthes 91).

Because of their visual nature photographs are incapable of true comprehension. To describe a photo with words is to create an interpretation of it, and any interpretation is a step away from the reality the photo depicts. There is nothing they can be done to alter or change the meaning behind a photo through words or thoughts, it stands apart from human influence, as a result they can evoke the strong emotions described by Barthes

“Language is, by nature, fictional. The attempt to render language on non-fictional requires an enormous apparatus of measurements. We convoke logic, or, lacking that, swore an oath; but photograph is indifferent to all intermediaries. It does not in fact, is authentication itself . . . every photograph is a certificate of presence (87)

Of course photographs are also a form of interpretation, but they're generally considered to be a more immediate recording of reality. “Because the camera captures and preserves the reflection of light at a certain time, in a certain place, photographs are often conceived of as 'direct' material traces of the photographed people and objects”(Horstkotte 44). This quality allows photographs to provide a level of authenticity not usually possible with text alone, as photos have the potential to directly record visual stimulus.

By including photos of the events, locations and subjects discussed in the books the authors are also asserting a level of authenticity that photography alone is capable of suggests Barthes, “Painting can feign reality without having seen it. Contrary to these imitations, in photography I can never deny that the thing has been there” (76). That is not to say that the photographs are objective recordings of reality. The ability to create false or inaccurate photographs can actually obscure a story's realism, distancing a text from reality rather than resembling it, argues Silke Horskotte.

Because the photographs are framed within imaginative narrative, they cannot function as a marker of reality. Their indexicality is diminished since their referents are part of imaginative discourse and hence not real. What the photos do instead is performatively suggest reality and authenticity to the reader. This reality invoked by the showing of photographs is a literary, and therefore constructed, reality. Not “real” reality at all, but the reality effect which is not mimetic, but poetic, and therefore the exact opposite of realism (4).

This idea is closely related to the visual nature of unincorporated memories as discussed previously and also highlights that different ways that a photograph can function. There are three kinds of signs: *iconic signs* which stand in a relation of similarity to their referent; *indexical signs*, which have a relation of cause and effect; and *symbolic signs*, which stand in a purely conventional, arbitrary relation to their referents (Horskotte 2).

Icons and indexical signs derive much of their meaning through their visual resemblance to the corresponding object they are signifying. This is true of even the most basic symbols. Signifiers which are designed to resemble their referents are referred to as

*motivated symbols*. Photographs, although always motivated, have the potential to function both iconically and indexically; a picture can represent exactly what they depict visually or may serve as a synecdoche. “A single isolated photograph can hint at a larger context which stands in a conventional relation, for instance, photographs of the selection ramp at Auschwitz, are frequently used in history books as symbolic of the Holocaust as a whole”( Horskotte 3).

The photograph’s ability to document reality may serve to authenticate the painful emotions and grieving process that each trauma victim must endure. By establishing that these traumatic events actually occurred it provides justification for the extreme actions and feelings of those involved, a means of validating the stress and trauma they have experienced. By including photographs of the many locations Will visits on his around journey around the world Eggers provides proof that the events in question actually existed, and the corresponding trauma and hardship described in the prose is accurate.

This need to document experiences photographically may apply to the authors as well as their protagonists. All of these books are heavily autobiographical. Much like the protagonist of *You Shall Know Our Velocity*, Eggers did indeed take a journey around the world, and he has confirmed in interviews that the photographs included in the book were in fact taken by him on his trip. Although they're presented as fictional photos taken by a fictional character in the book, the photographs themselves cannot be separated from reality. The subjects they depict are from real life, not the narrative of this book. The images say as much about Eggers’ experience writing the book as it does Will.

Jonathan Safran Foer is the name of both the author and the protagonist of *Everything is Illuminated*. The real Foer’s family did indeed survive the occupation of

Ukraine during WWII and he did actually take a trip to Europe to search for the remaining members of his family, just like the Jonathan Safran Foer that is the novel's lead character. Beyond that however accuracy becomes uncertain. Included in the copyright page is a note that addresses this issue: "This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination, except in the case of historical figures and events, which are used fictitiously, and, of course, the case of Jonathan Safran Foer himself." Given Foer's actual family history it would be almost impossible to determine exactly which events and figures may be considered "historical" and which cannot. Adamantly positioning the work to be fictional is curious considering the many attempts throughout the work to establish a degree of authenticity.

A similar note also appears on the copyright page of Eggers' *Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, which while technically a memoir, also struggles with the ideas of authenticity and whether the work can be considered fictional or non-fictional:

NOTE: This is a work of fiction, only in that in many cases, the author could not remember the exact words said by certain people, and exact descriptions of certain things, so had to fill in gaps as best he could. Otherwise, all characters and incidents and dialogue are real, are not products of the author's imagination . . . though on occasion the author has taken certain, very small, liberties with chronology, because that is his right as an American.

The decision to resort to visual means of asserting veracity may be the result of frustrations with the limits of text. Eggers addresses this concern during a conversation with his younger brother Toph in a passage of *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, breaking the fourth wall in the process:

“So you're reduced to complaining about it. Or worse, doing little tricks, out of frustration . . . The gimmicks, bells, whistles, diagrams. *Here is a picture of a stapler*, all that. . . You know, to be honest though, what I see is less a problem with form, all that garbage, and more a problem of conscience. You're completely paralyzed with guilt about relating all this in the first place, especially the stuff earlier on. You feel somehow obligated to do it, but you also know that Mom and Dad would *hate* it, would crucify you” (115).

By characterizing the visual elements as "gimmicks" Eggers may be dismissing the importance of them, but I would argue this passage provides strong evidence for just the contrary. Eggers' inability to deal with subjects in a purely verbal context is indicative of the trauma surrounding them. By resorting to visual means of communication Eggers is able to include subject matters that may be too difficult to talk about, again demonstrating the strong link between trauma and visual representation. These elements may also distract the reader, providing a sort of comic relief from the heavy issues such as the death of one's parents and make them easier to address.

Writing about these experiences can be difficult, but also very therapeutic, and mirrors the steps undergone by trauma victims in recovery. In both processes the victim recounts in detail the events in question in hopes of integrating them within a larger context or narrative. “In the second stage of recovery, the survivor tells the story of the trauma. This work of reconstruction actually transforms the traumatic memory, so that it can be integrated into the survivor's life story. Normal memory is like the action of telling a story, traumatic memory, by contrast is wordless and static”( Herman 174). Because of these parallels between writing and trauma therapy I would argue that the narrative itself provides another interpretation of the character's trauma. When used in conjunction with the visual material both aspects benefit and it is a stronger piece in

whole because the ideas presented in the verbal components of the book provide further evidence of the ideas present in the imagery, and vice versa.

Eggers comments on writing's therapeutic value directly in *Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* when he describes the writing of the memoir as a healing process he must undergo. During a mock audition for *The Real World*, a reality program on MTV, Eggers discusses his motivation to write about his parent's death.

“I want you to share my suffering” (382) he says, explaining that by sharing it he will dilute it. Eggers elaborates this idea of catharsis into a concept he calls 'The Lattice'

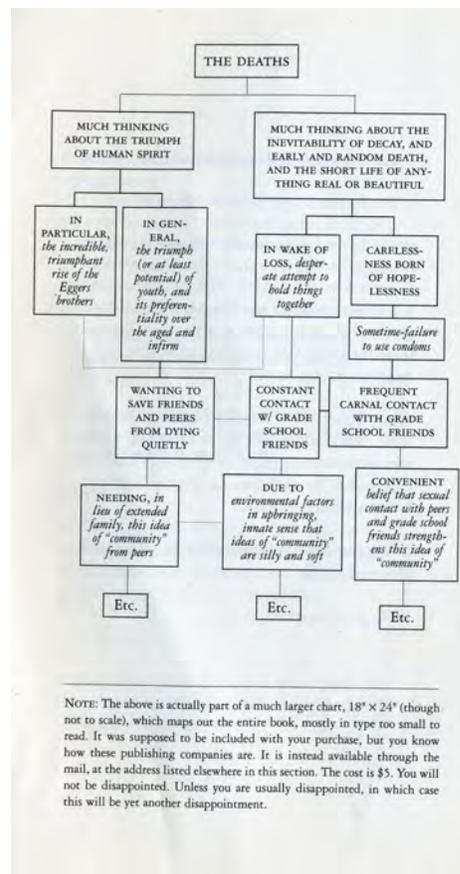
The lattice is everyone I have ever known . . . if we can bring everyone to grab a part of the other, like an arm at the socket, and if we can get everyone to hold to it, thus strengthening ... The latticework distributes weight over a wider area, in order to keep others from falling (382).

Eggers begs the show's casting agent, “Let me be the center of the lattice, let me be the conduit. Let me show this to millions” (382). She asks if that will heal Eggers, to which he responds with an emphatic, “Yes! Yes! Yes! Yes!” (382) A desire to create structure literally, with a lattice, or more symbolically with a social community, out of the chaos of tragedy is frequently seen in trauma recovery, as it is directly related to the process of constructing a narrative of the events so that they may be incorporated into one's memory. This need for structure in the wake of trauma is something Freud has investigated extensively, notes Stefanie Harris,

Freud defines trauma as a breach between mind and memory. The traumatic experience is that which overwhelms memory that which can never be effectively and fully integrated or inscribed in memory. As such trauma acts as an interruption of meaningfulness in that the event is never given psychic meaning through incorporation into narrative memory. This then is the breach that arises because the traumatic event is present in the mind as a present time of the present (that is, free

floating or uncathected) without being present in memory as a present time of the past (387).

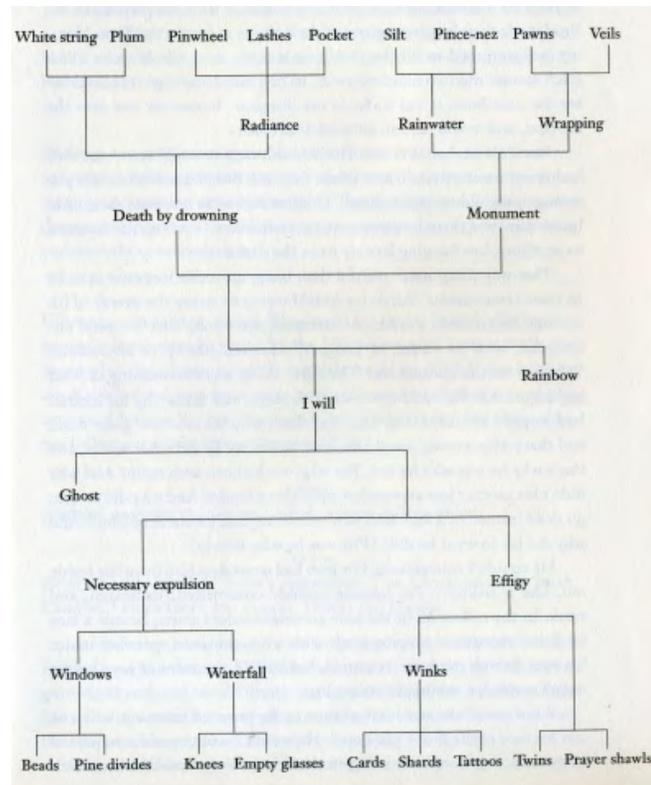
The many diagrams and charts that are included in these novels parallel this need for organization in the face of that which is senseless, namely death. *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* begins with one such chart which can be found in the preface, detailing the various themes and motifs of the book:



“The Deaths,” referring to Eggers parents, who died six weeks apart during his junior year of college and serve as the impetus for everything else that follows. Here Eggers is making explicit the connection between writing, visual material and the healing process he is seeking. It also hints at the difficulty of such attempts, noting that this

diagram is apart of a much larger chart of such issues. The excerpt we see here is incomplete. All the points eventually come down to "Etc." acknowledging that the true impact of a trauma can never be fully made sense of in something as neat and orderly as a flow chart. Although the elements of this chart help give some meaning to Eggers' trauma, sometimes the character may be so traumatized that they are unable to even reach this level. Jonathan Safran Foer includes a similar chart in his novel *Everything is Illuminated* which illustrates the mental state of a much more traumatized victim, in this case the residents of the tiny Ukrainian village of Trachimbrod. Following the German invasion of their town during WWII the citizens deal with the stress and fear in different ways. "Men set up flow charts (which were themselves memories of family trees) in an attempt to make sense of their memories" (259).

(259)



The items laid out in this chart seem to have little logical connection. Indeed, it

seems almost to be a random collection of words which are arranged to resemble a family tree visually. This nonsensical presentation mirrors the irrational and chaotic nature of trauma and is a testament to the profound state of shock the villagers are no doubt in. Although the characters in the novel may attempt to create a structure and find meaning from the disorder they are encountering, ultimately they are unable to make such a connection. The resemblance to a family tree suggests a sense of progression or cause and effect in the words presented and the memories they represent. Each word can be traced back to its origin, however obtuse the meaning may be. This frenzied interconnectedness of these experiences following the attacks is also suggested in the lines immediately preceding the chart.

Trachimbrod itself was overcome with a strange inertness. Activity was replaced with thought. Memory. Everything reminded everyone of something, which seemed winsome at first, but quickly became devitalizing. Memory beget memory beget memory... using memory to remember memory, bound in order of remembrance, struggling in vain to remember a beginning or end (258).

Here again the ability to integrate these experiences into a larger narrative seems to be at the core of the trauma the villagers are experiencing.

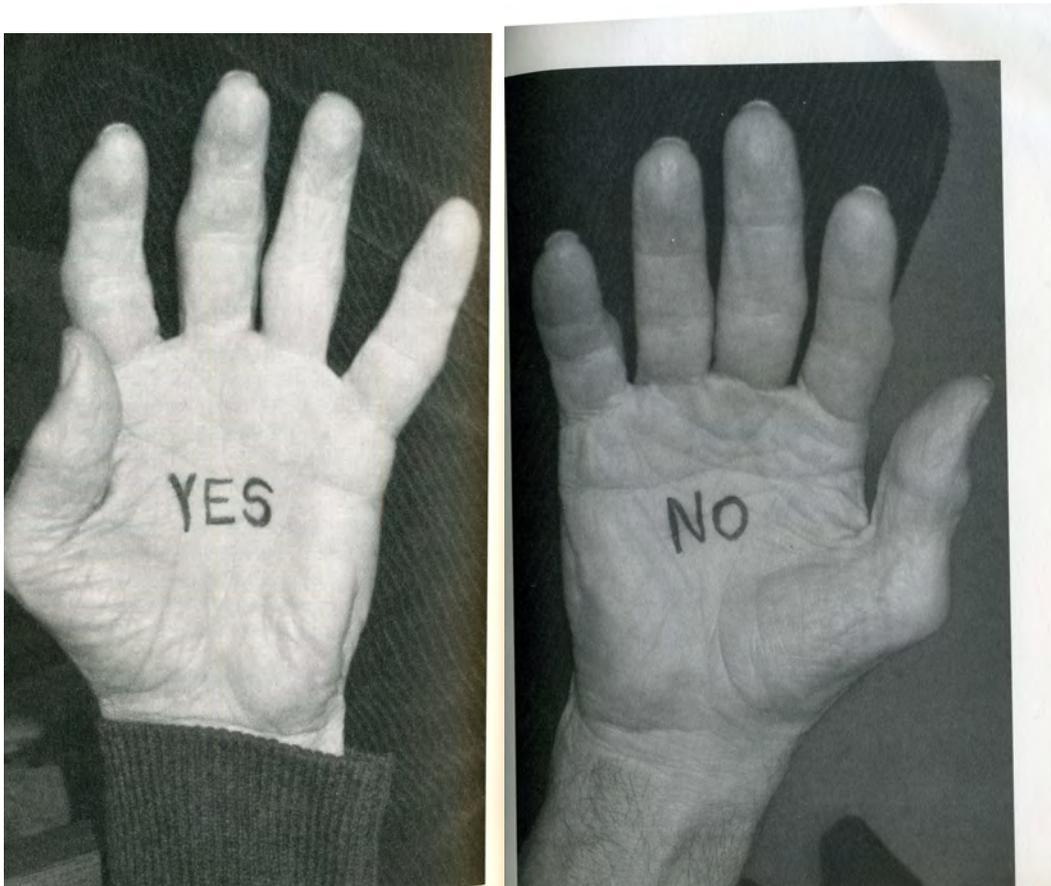
The difficulty of communicating following a traumatic experience is explored several times in Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* as well. There are multiple tragedies that the characters in this book are recovering from. Some are as recent as the events of September 11, 2001 while others are more than a generation ago, for example the firebombing of Dresden during World War II. One character, Thomas, survived the attack on the German city and then slowly lost the ability to speak. It is clear that the cause of this muteness is not due to any physical injury, but rather a psychosomatic

condition. He slowly loses the ability to use individual words. Tellingly, the first word he loses is *Anna*, the name of his wife who perished in the firebombing. A strong connection is made here between language and memory. In order to think about an idea, person or place one must use the corresponding words, without them it is impossible. Every time one uses a word in their speech or thoughts they are reinterpreting them. This may be too difficult for someone like Thomas to do, following the intense trauma he has endured. In order to shield Thomas from the painful memories related to this trauma his subconscious has prevented him from even using the name of his lost wife, for even thinking about her is too much to bear. Thomas comments on how painful thinking has become for him,

It wasn't the bombs in the burning buildings, it was me, my thinking, the cancer of never letting go, is ignorance bliss, I don't know, but it's so painful to think, and tell me, what did thinking ever do for me, to what great place did thinking ever bring me? I think and think and think, I thought myself out of happiness one million times, but never once into it (17).

Eventually Thomas loses the ability to say anything, becoming entirely mute. To compensate for this he has the words "YES" and "NO" tattooed on the palm of each of his hands, showing them to people he must interact with. Once again language has been separated from text. Verbal communication becomes too difficult following trauma, and the victims rely on written text, a more indirect medium, to communicate. Thomas's condition parallels the trauma represented on a much larger scale as the narrative of the book itself. Photographs of what must be Thomas's hands are included in the book, adding a visual element to this progression of loss in communicative ability. As discussed previously photographs and other visual material function differently than prose and language. By including photographs of Thomas's hands Foer is representing his inability to communicate verbally in a purely nonverbal manner. This highlights the

breakdown in communication experienced by Thomas. His hands, much like the photographs on the page are disjointed from traditional discourse. By using his hands to communicate, he separates himself from normal modes of communication much like the photographs are separate from the rest of the narrative. This parallelism strengthens the themes of the traumatic experiences in the inability to communicate such tragedies in verbal means.



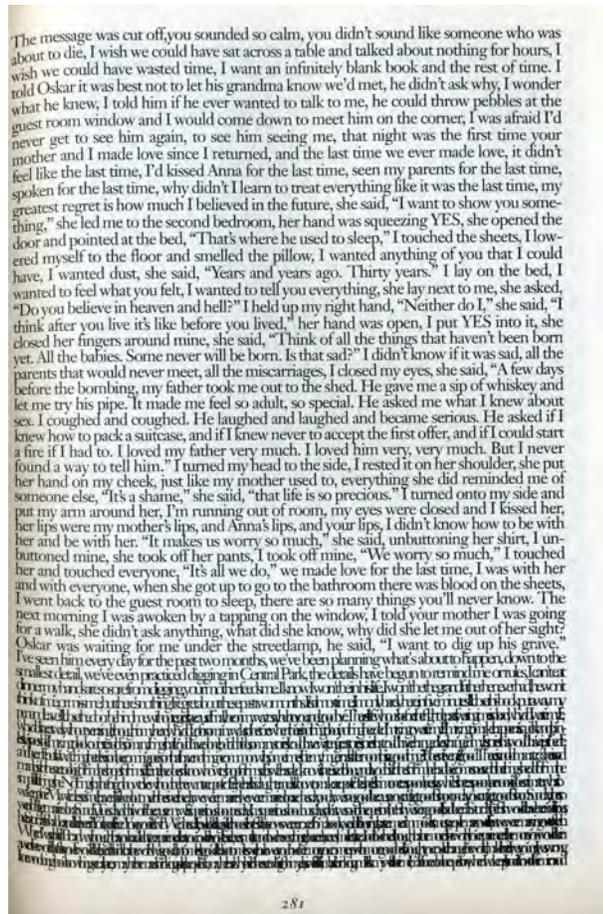
(260-261)

In *Everything is Illuminated* Foer expands on these ideas by creating visual elements related to trauma out of the text itself. The *Book of Antecedents* is an almanac kept by the Trachimbrod village elders. “Begun as a record of major events: battles and treaties, famines, seismic occurrences, the beginnings and ends of political regimes. But it



By repeating this text over and over Foer is demonstrating how the villagers are unable to acknowledge the tragedies that they have befallen. Instead of proceeding with the almanac as usual they slow down the progression of events in until the moment immediately before the attacks, at which point instead of moving forward they become stuck, locked into the tragedy and unable to go anywhere else in their documentation. The trauma becomes a black hole from which there are unable to move past.

Foer also uses variations in the presentation of text to represent this cyclical and chaotic nature of trauma in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. Instead of simply repeating text in this instance Foer allows the lines of the page to slowly blur over each other as the speaker comes to the point of tragedy in their narrative.

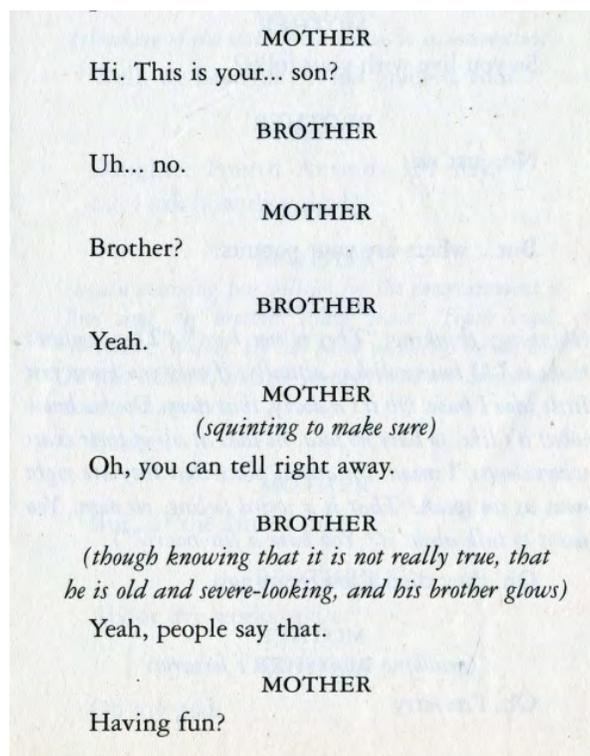


This section continues on for several more pages which eventually become nothing more than a solid black form from the complete overlapping of the lines of text. In this case the trauma represented in the words have literally become a black void, representing the incomprehensible nature of trauma.

The obsessive recording demonstrated in *Everything Is Illuminated* also functions as an attempt to create structure out of meaningless actions. As the violence and chaos of war quickly envelopes their life the villagers' faith and culture are severely tested. Sacred temples centuries old are burned to the ground, revered elders and respected leaders are murdered in the public square and even the Torah, their holy scripture, is destroyed. Everything the residents once held dear to them has been shattered and as a result they begin to cling to the only source of security and stability left: The mundane, the routine. Everyday chores and tasks that were once so forgettable and dismissable now become all that the townspeople can rely on. Through documenting all of these activities they are elevating them to the status once reserved for major social and political milestones, giving themselves a sense of order in the face of an increasingly violent and senseless reality.

Foer has emphasized these ideas visually. The reader is not expected to read every line of the repeated text. Instead the words take on a more iconic quality. By simply glancing at the page one is quickly able to understand the level of obsession that the village people possess. Foer has carefully manipulated language, a verbal element, to create a non-verbal device, demonstrating the distinct separation that exists between written text and language itself.

Eggers also experiments with the use of text to create visual elements. One of most striking examples of this occurs on page 99 when Eggers abruptly changes the layout of the text to that of a play script. This scene takes place during a PTA meeting for his younger brother. Many of the other parents and students are surprised by the older Eggers' presence at such an event as most of the adults there are twice his age. As a result he must endure countless conversations with curious parents to explain their situation:



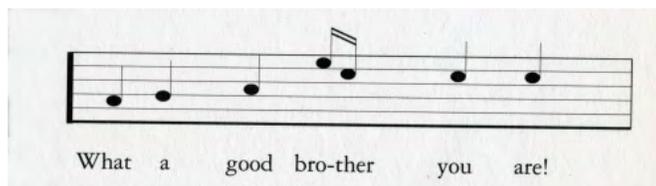
(99)

By formatting the scene in this manner Eggers is able to highlight how repetitive and artificial he feels the experience to be. Much like an oft performed play this conversation is routine for Eggers, something he has done countless times in the past, and no doubt believes he will continue to do in the future. There is no actual connection or meaning between these two characters, it is a scene that simply plays out. The characters are given the generic names of "Mother" and "Brother" rather than any kind of specific or

unique name. Anyone could be reading these lines Eggers suggests. All that's required is that "we find our places and read the script" (99).

In this section Eggers interjects quite a bit of description in the space usually reserved for stage directions, going so far as to include an unrelated anecdote regarding haircuts. The awkward layout that results enhances how uncomfortable he feels in such a social situation. Indeed, immediately preceding this passage Eggers comments on his outsider status at these events, "Heads turn. This is our first open house and people are not sure what to make of us . . . as orphans, we are celebrities. We are foreign exchange people"(96). He feels he is put on a pedestal no doubt, or perhaps a stage.

Eggers takes the unorthodox formatting in this scene even further by including a musical staff on page 103.



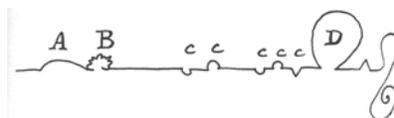
Here Eggers is demonstrating how this particular phrase is repeated to him so often that it has become just a melody to him, a series of sounds which no longer hold any significance. He considers this in the stage directions immediately following the staff: "What does that [phrase] mean? He is often told this. At soccer games, at school fund-raisers, at the beach, at the baseball card shows, at the pet store. Sometimes the person telling him this knows their full biography and sometimes she or he does not. Brother doesn't understand the line, both what it means and when it became a stand sort of expression"(103).

Even if one is not able to read musical notation, the musical qualities of the sentence is conveyed to the reader effectively and efficiently. This is accomplished through the use of purely visual means. Only by observing the text exactly as it appears on the page are we able to fully grasp the intended effect of the lines.

The reader is able to infer all of this information immediately upon encountering the change in layout, which first distinguishes the section as separate from the main narrative. The conventions of script formatting are common knowledge and would be recognized by most readers, establishing an entirely different set of expectations and themes apart from the standard prose that composes the bulk of the book. All of these changes in formatting enhance the themes of artificiality, boredom and repetition and does so visually.

The careful attention given by Eggers and Foer to both the physical and visual potential of the page is innovative, but it is not without precedence. For many centuries illuminated manuscripts, which included decorative letters and drawings in addition to text, were the dominant form of literature. It was only with the advent of the modern printing press that the text of a novel became the sole area of concern for the reader. This is a rule that mainly applies to the realm of prose; in the world of poetry shape poems or concrete poems, which take on deliberate physical shapes on the printed page, have existed for many years, and continue to be written today. There are numerous writers since the rise of the modern novel who have experimented with combining these different elements, for as W. J. T. Mitchell comments, “The tendency of artist to breach the supposed boundaries between temporal and spatial arts is not a marginal or exceptional practice, but a fundamental impulse in both the theory and practice of the arts, one which

is not confined to any particular genre of period”(98). The mixing of the visual and the verbal can be seen since the very beginning of the modern novel. *Tristram Shandy* by Lawrence Stern, first published in 1760 contains numerous visual elements central to the narrative, including a line drawing meant to represent the plot through volume five:



(571)

In the twentieth century the number of writers experimenting with visual materials increased dramatically. Kurt Vonnegut included over 100 different line drawings in his 1973 novel *Breakfast of Champions*. In the years immediately preceding Eggers and Foer W.G. Sebald, a German author published numerous books which incorporated photographs, although they were never use that as a part of the narrative, rather simply commenting on the story. He is also someone Eggers has cited as a main influence in choosing to include photographs in his work.

There are of course many other contemporary areas of literature that involve visual elements. Graphic novels and comic books are another highly visual type of literature. In many ways comics are just the opposite of a prose novel, because it is the visual material that is essential in such a work, the text of a comic book is the supplementary material; there are many comics that use no words at all. Comics theorist Scott McCloud has defined the medium of comics as "Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce and in static response in the viewer" (9). He does not mention anything explicitly about text.

Another key difference between comics and prose is the use of space on the page, notes McCloud.

In prose in particular, space is not terribly important. If you have a novel that runs to three hundred pages, and you decide to reprint it at a smaller trim size or at a bigger font size, that text is going to reflow however it wants, and it's still the same book. It doesn't matter. There's no reflow in comics, though. Space is vitally important, whether you're two thirds down the page or you're in a big panel at the top of the page or a little panel at the bottom of the page. That all matters. That affects the reading experience. (Chute 83)

Like comics the works of Eggers and Foer take full advantage of the page itself as a visual medium, but they're certainly not comics. The images included in their works are not sequential in the same manner which panels of a comic strip are. Their novels represent a startling new hybrid of the visual and the verbal forms, of prose and of comics. It is temporal as well as visual. All of these authors draw attention to the distinction between language, written text and visual art which has been examined closely by many scholars over the years.

Literature generally functions temporally, a sequence of specific words, phrases and sentences. In contrast visual art functions spatially; it derives its meaning contextually, from the placement of various elements in the visual plane. Mitchell summarizes this concept in his book *Iconology*, "Reading occurs in time; The signs which are read are uttered or inscribed in a temporal sequence; and the events represented or narrated occur in time. . . Visual art consists of forms displayed in space; these forms represent bodies and their relationships in space; and the perception of both medium and message is instantaneous, taking no appreciable time" (98).

Because of its spatial and contextual nature Nelson Goodman has characterized visual art as an "analog system," describing it as "syntactically and semantically undifferentiated"(Mitchell, 160). The key feature of analog systems is that they derive meaning in a relative way, through the relation of different elements to each other in the context of the work as a whole, and as a result there are an infinite number of variations that are possible. Goodman compares such a system to that of an ungraduated thermometer. Without distinct markings on the side, there is no way to precisely determine the temperature. The slightest change creates a new measurement; hence there are an infinite number of variations and possibilities, it would be impossible to mark each one individually. Literature of course possesses an infinite potential as well. How it achieves that potential, is radically different from the visual arts and it is one of the key qualities that separate the two media.

Whereas visual art is based on the spatial arrangement of various elements, literature functions through the order in which its elements appear over time. This temporal function is described by Mitchell as "syntactic differentiation,"(68) or as Goodman characterizes it, a "digital system"(Mitchell 72). Goodman is not referring to the use of 1s and 0s, but rather a system of specialized, unmotivated symbols arranged in a discontinuous, but precise order. To properly describe how a digital system is discontinuous Goodman compares it to a graduated or electronic thermometer. In such a device there is a precise number of markings or units that distinguish one degree from the next. If the level of mercury falls in between two markings it is simply rounded off. The precise measurement does not matter, only what it falls the closest to. In this way it is discontinuous because gaps are a necessary but meaningless point along the scale.

Written language is in many ways a digital system. The character of the alphabet is a precise discrete shape, slight variations do not matter, as long as it falls between the two distinctions. Mitchell comments on how the variety of fonts, sizes and styles of handwriting and text that may be used in a particular language demonstrate this quality.

An “a” and a “d” might be written to look almost indistinguishable, but the working of the system depends upon the possibility of their differentiation, regardless of the vagaries of writing. The system also depends upon their transferability from one context to another, so that all inscriptions of “a,” regardless of how they are written, count as the same letter. There are also a finite number of characters in the system, and the gaps between them are empty; there are no intermediate characters between “a” and “d” that have any function in the system, whereas a dense system provides for the introduction of an infinite number of meaningful new marks into the symbol (68).

The work of Eggers and Foer can be described as both a digital system and an analog system. They represent a new genre of literature that is a hybrid of visual media such as painting or comics and verbal ones such as prose. Their work combines aspects of both of these art forms, belongs exclusively to neither tradition. When evaluating their work I've had to consider both literary and artistic criteria.

The visual material in these novels has been used to address issues related to trauma. The disjointed nature of traumatic memory is simulated for the reader by separating the story into two different elements- that which is visual, and that which is verbal much in the same way traumatic memories are separated in the character's mind from normal memory.

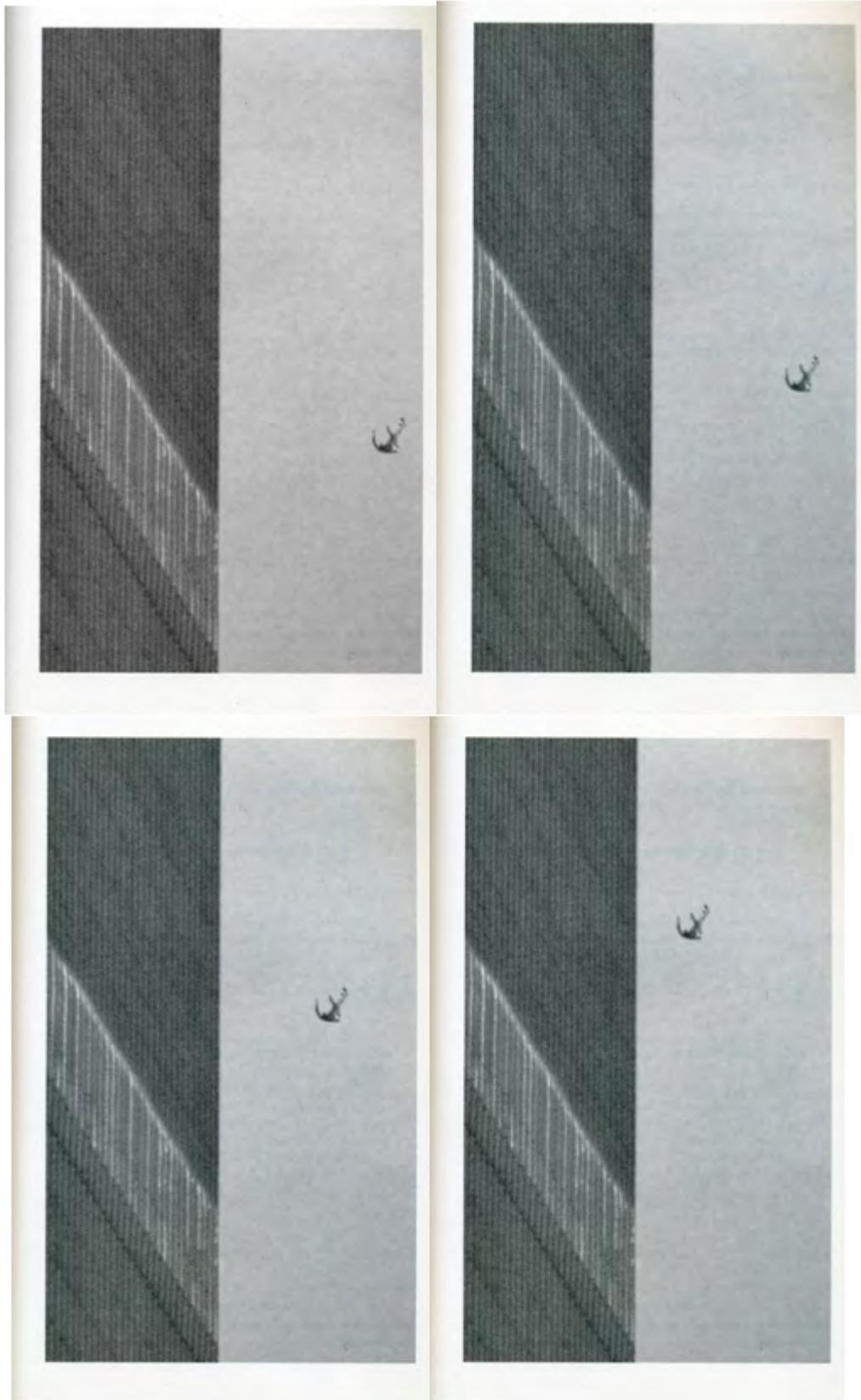
The visual elements employed in these books are something that I feel may be applied in a variety of other methods. An example of this is hinted at in the last few pages

of *Incredibly Loud and Extremely Close*. Several full-page photos are included in succession of a man falling from a building in reverse. When these pages are flipped through in rapid succession a flip book is created and a rudimentary animation of the man following an upwards towards the building is produced. This sequence extends the visual imagery in Foer's novel to another realm. Much like the other photographs in the book they are spatial, but they are now also temporal and discontinuous, much like the prose of the book. It is the slight gaps and deviations from photograph to photograph that create the illusion of animation in the mind of the reader, much like film. It can also be considered an approximation to the medium of comics as they are sequential images occurring in succession that create a narrative. As the rest of the images in this book do, this section is used in conjunction with prose in a manner that allows for much more information to be conveyed to the reader than if they functioned independently.

Much like the *Book of Antecedents* and other areas of Foer's books this particular section is an embedded false document, designed to appear like an excerpt from an actual manuscript from within the narrative. Oscar, the book's narrator, describes the fragment,

"I found the pictures of the falling body... I ripped pages out of the book. 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 had more pictures, he would have flown through the window back into the building and the smoke would have poured into the whole the plane was about to come out of" (325).

Oscar imagines this backwards narrative would continue until the man, whom he speculates may be his father, who perished on 9/11, would return home from work where Oscar is waiting for him and finally "We would have been safe" (326).



This passage illustrates the strong desire of Oscar and many trauma victims to undo the tragedy that has befallen them, to flip the page backwards and remain in the moments before the trauma occurred, because they aren't able to move beyond this moment. The flip book also highlights this idea. Trauma is once again represented through visual means, by reversing the order of the images Oscar is also reversing the moments in his mind, resting comfortably before the events happen instead of acknowledging them. Oscar has clearly not come to terms with his trauma, as he is unable to move beyond the point of tragedy. Oscar's actions of physically ripping out pages of a book and rearranging the order represents a deliberate choice to manipulate and alter the material and the events they represent into a different form than what has been presented by its creator. It provides further evidence for Oscar's inability to properly acknowledge the events in question. He prefers to create his own interpretation of the events rather than what has been presented to him. Foer may also be suggesting with this that the temporality of the text in the novel itself is not permanent, inviting the reader to perhaps manipulate the pages themselves to create their own interpretations.

Photographs are used numerous times in these novels however this instance is unique in its function. Because it is necessary for the reader to manipulate the pages themselves by flipping them rapidly in order for the animation to be produced this book has entered another sphere, one where the reader is an active participant in the creation of the work of art. It is not until one physically manipulates the pages that it becomes something more than a series of photos. This section demonstrates an additional potential of the printed book, by utilizing not just the pictorial and spatial qualities of one page in the book, but several pages together, as well as their temporal qualities, opened

something I feel we'll see much more of in the future.

The recent surge in such literature may be due to the increasingly multimedia world we live in. The image has become completely ubiquitous in our daily lives. We encountered everywhere, from paper advertisements, to the internet. Full color video is a standard feature on cellular telephones. We have become accustomed to most media containing both verbal and visual elements, it is only logical that literature should follow. literature that contains mix media may more accurately reflect the society we live in then text alone can accomplish. Also, the technology that allows for full color photos to be printed alongside text efficiently and economically has only emerged fairly recently. And we may be only now capable to mass produce works of art of this hybrid nature.

It would seem as though Eggers wishes to downplay the importance of these deviations from traditional formatting and visual material. The following text can be found on the copyright page of *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, directly below the note regarding authenticity:

The author wishes to reserve the right to use spaces like this, and to work within them, for no other reason than it entertains him and a small coterie of readers. It does not mean that anything ironic is happening. It does not mean that someone is being *pomo* or *meta* or *cute*. It simply means that someone is writing in small type, in a space usually devoted to copyright information, because doing so is fun. It has no far-reaching implications for the art nor does it say anything of importance about the author or his contemporaries or his predecessors, or successors In general, not everything that is new is trendy; not everything that is different is gimmicky; not everything that is truthful must fall within well-known formal parameters. The goal is to have fun and push forward, no? Let us do that.

I would argue that this passage in fact strongly asserts the significance of Eggers'

work. He seems to be pleading for his unconventional presentation to be taken seriously, and urging others to continue to explore the potentials of literature. The very fact that he has written in this space usually reserved for copyright information is testament itself to Eggers' strong desire to find new and innovative ways to create literature. Authors such as he, Foer and others are reevaluating the conventions of the novel and taking full advantage of the possibilities that the book and the page itself offers. This can be seen in their unusual use of the copyright page as well as the photographs, diagrams and drawings they include in their text. I would speculate that it is only a matter of time before many other authors begin to experiment with the full potential of the printed page to enhance a narrative, both from a verbal perspective or a visual perspective.

## Bibliography

- Barthes, Roland. Camera Lucida. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980.
- Bessel A. van der Kolk and Alexander C. McFarland. "The Black Hole of Trauma." Literary Theory: An Anthology. Ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004. 487-505.
- Chute, Hillary. "Scott McCloud" The Believer. April 2007. 80-86
- Eggers, Dave. A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius. New York: Vintage, 2001.
- Eggers, Dave. You Shall Know Our Velocity. New York: Vintage, 2003.
- Foer, Jonathan Safran. Everything is Illuminated. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002.
- Foer, Jonathan Safran. Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005.
- Harris, Stefanie. "The Return of the Dead: Memory and Photography in W.G. Sebald's *Die Ausgewanderten*." The German Quarterly 74.4 (Fall 2001): 379-390.
- Horstkotte, Silke. "Pictorial and Verbal Discourse in W. G. Sebald's *Exiles*." Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies. #2 (2006): 33-51
- McCloud, Scott. Understanding Comics. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993.
- Mitchell, W.J.T. Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986.
- Sterne, Laurence. The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1978.
- Vonnegut, Kurt. Breakfast of Champions. New York: Delacorte Press, 1973.