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9/11 TragiComix: Allegories of National Trauma in Art Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers*

In the late twentieth century, the number “911” evoked associations of trauma and panic in emergency calls for help. Ronald Reagan even designated September 11th a “9-1-1 Emergency Telephone Number Day” in 1987. Exactly fourteen years later, the meaning of this number was dramatically overwritten to signify a much greater trauma: not only the surprise terrorist attacks on the architectural symbols of America’s economic and military might—the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington D.C.—but also the normalized nightmare of twenty-first century history. The “post-9/11 world” stamps itself in the daily news headlines with reports of increased violence and political turmoil worldwide, anxieties of global proportions, and the replacement of once-sacrosanct civil liberties with an unassailable regime of “security,” ostensibly to prevent further acts of terrorism. While there is far more talk of terrorism in the media than actually happens in the lives of the North Americans, the cumulative effect of all the hype continues to work on people’s minds, as if to justify the loss of freedoms that ensued from the loss of the WTC complex and the 2749 civilians on September 11th, 2001. Loss and confusion have become dominant themes in both the post-9/11 world and in cultural responses to the traumatic events that defined it.

In such times of loss and enormous cultural change, writers¹ often resort to the allegorical mode to articulate what Deborah Madsen calls “interpretative principles which make possible the comprehension of realities that cannot be apprehended literally” (4-5). The folio-sized *In the Shadow of No Towers* (Fig. 1) by Art Spiegelman (Fig. 2), author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* (1986, 1992) and witness to the collapse of the WTC North Tower on 9/11, pushes

¹ Examples will be mentioned later.

the formal boundaries of traditional allegory with his graphic novels—what he calls “comix.” The book consists of two parts, the first being ten comic strips representing the artist’s harrowing experience on 9/11 and its agonistic aftermath, the second a “Comic Supplement” cameo compilation of old newspaper broadsheet facsimiles (Fig. 3). The combination demonstrates how the surreal, image-text medium of comics perfectly reflects the topsy-turvy, nonsensical post-9/11 world by graphically literalizing the palpable absurdities forced upon public consciousness in the days, months, and years after the initial shock treatment of 9/11 became normalized. Spiegelman represents himself as the artist-hero in *No Towers*, struggling against the powerful forces spinning the 9/11 tragedy into a commercial for old authoritarianism in new clothes, garishly striped and starred in kitschy red-white-and-blue patriotic excess.

The Ground Zero of the artist’s position of resistance is the central, crystalline vision of the shimmering bones of the North Tower just prior to its collapse (Fig. 4). It is the only consistent visual theme in an otherwise dizzying array of styles and forms in the ten broadsheet strips that make up the first part of *No Towers*; what it means (or does not mean) is the book’s central mystery. Through an analysis of *No Towers*’s visual grammar of dream-logic displacement, I shall argue that the central image is something like a revelatory apophasis—a negative icon defining 9/11 as unknowable except as a personal vision of the end of the world as the artist knew it. It is the one figure whose meaning stands stalwart against everything about 9/11 that can be spun politically.

Shaken from the artist’s pre-9/11 world is what Jean-François Lyotard calls in *The Postmodern Condition* the “solace of good forms,” the “master- or meta-narratives” of the past (81), or specific mythological and historical narratives that encode the values of particular cultures. Such good forms accompanied the first European settlers of east-coast North America; the Holy Bible, for instance, furnished pretexts for the allegorical narratives born of the 1630s Winthrop Migration of English Puritans who sought to found a “city upon a hill” that would prove the beacon of a pure Christian community rising above the heathen

wilderness to be closer to God (Winthrop 216). New York City, the quintessential American metropolis, became the twentieth century's secular answer to Winthrop's call, literalizing his figure of elevation with its towering skyscrapers. When the tallest of these were levelled on 9/11, most people turned to the government-media complex for answers, some turned to religion, and yet others turned to artists and intellectuals. In the allegorical mode, each authority offered pretexts by which to understand 9/11 as historical repetition. Some in the government-media complex painted it as the new Pearl Harbour, and thus the opening shot of a new World War. Intellectuals like Noam Chomsky painted it as blowback, a CIA term for retaliatory terrorist acts against the US or its assets for its aggressive foreign policy. The satirical, darkly humorous postmodern allegorist, however, finds his pretext closer to home.

Spiegelman turned not to particular events, but to a genre specific to a time and place: the first generation of Sunday newspaper colour comics hashed out on Park Row a century earlier, mere blocks from where the twin towers would later rise and fall. *No Towers* turns on the trope that, similar to the unfortunate occupants who plummeted from the WTC, these once-ephemeral characters were shaken loose from the dustbin of history on 9/11.² The sampling of Park Row originals reproduced in the second part of *No Towers*—Yellowkid, The Katzenjammer Kids, Happy Hooligan, Little Nemo in Slumberland, Krazy Kat, and others—all act as anachronistic prophecies of the towers' collapse in various figurations. For instance, in "Is this Abdullah, the Arab Chief?" Happy Hooligan (a hapless, Little Tramp-like character) is recruited by a circus manager to ride a camel in Arab blackface when the real Arab Chief calls in sick; the Chief's camel recognizes the imposture, and tosses Happy into a human tower of strong-man acrobats, knocking them down, and provoking their disproportionately violent response (Plate V).

2 This "Sky Is Falling" theme indicated by the preface's title begins with the cartoons on the front (Fig. 5) and back covers, and continues with the metaphor of falling footwear (Strips 1, Fig. 6, and 10, Fig. 7), the artist falling from the tower (Fig. 8), and in the "Upside Down World" sequence where George Bush's monstrous menagerie, already upside down, falls up, which is down to Spiegelman (7), in a variation of the ingenious old comics "The Upside-Downs of Little Lady Lovelocks and Old Man Muffaroo" reproduced on Plate III of the second part.

Besides this facetious gesture to the uncanny pre-figuration of history, Spiegelman's choices for this panoply of time-slip pretexts are appropriate for several reasons. First, the two-part structure mirrors the twin towers, as Spiegelman notes in an October 2004 MotherJones.com interview:

the book . . . divided itself into two towers—my ephemeral plates, and ephemeral plates from a hundred years earlier. To me, that's what allows there to be a kind of happy ending, the fact that there's a dialogue between past and present. . . . And it's not a kind of affectionate, easy nostalgia. It's the kind of nostalgia that has to do with the severe sense of loss that life is and that, ultimately, cities are.³

Second, resurrecting old comics characters responds to 9/11 in an idiom endemic to the location of the attack. This site-specificity is consistent with other postmodern allegories such as Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) and especially Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy* (1985-86). Third, the comics pretext is personally relevant to the artist, who, having grown up with comics, sought solace in them, as he says (10),⁴ to help deal with not only his own personal "post-traumatic stress disorder" (2), but also that of a nation in mourning. In this sense, *No Towers* recalls the personal survival narrative of both his previous comix *Maus* (an allegorical graphic novel about his parents' Holocaust survival) and previous American allegories of national trauma, such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) about the haunting legacy of slavery in a post-abolition single-mother family.

Fourth, the old comics facsimiles in the second part of *No Towers* both reveal the source of his pretext and make a palimpsest of the whole work, providing the interpretative key to the visual tropes and figurative language of the first part, much like Herman Melville does with the concluding deposition that explains the ambiguities of the first part of *Benito Cereno* (1856), an allegory of slave revolt

³ Citations to this interview (under "Spiegelman" in the Works Cited) will henceforth be indicated by "MJ."

⁴ I will cite quotations from *In the Shadow of No Towers* with strip numbers: 1-10 in the first part, and Plates I-VII in the second. The unpaginated preface is short enough that citations will omit page numbers.

brought to America's shores. The difference is one of form: rather than a linear prose narrative, Spiegelman uses the disjointed montage of pictorial micro-narrative sequences characteristic of comic strips. Comics have a special advantage over prose narrative in that they appeal to an increasingly visual, globalized culture. As Scott McCloud argues in his ingenious graphic novel *Understanding Comics* (1993, Fig. 9), from its origins in the pictographic text of the Mesopotamians, ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics, and Mayan friezes (10-15) to a world-wide, twentieth-century phenomenon, "sequential art" has become an international *lingua franca* (20). "As the twenty-first century approaches," predicts McCloud, "visual iconography may finally help us realize a form of universal communication" (58). In other words, comics offer a visually-cued solution to the world's confusion of tongues, reaching audiences who achieve pictorial literacy before textual literacy. Modifying Wilhelm Ritter's idea that music is "the last remaining universal language since the tower of Babel" (whose collapse furnishes an interesting biblical pretext for the collapse of the WTC), philosopher Walter Benjamin applies this to allegorical imagery: "With the theory that every image is only a form of writing, [Ritter] gets to the very heart of the allegorical attitude" (214). According to Spiegelman, the universal idiom of comics is "a 'mental language' that is closer to actual human thought than either words or pictures alone" (qtd. in Young 18). That comics have the power to fix meaning has been implicitly acknowledged even by the official 9/11 Commission, which endorsed a teen-friendly graphic-novel version of its 2004 report in 2006.⁵ Comics formally resonate better in the fractured, topsy-turvy, visually-dominant late-capitalist media environment, where the collapse of high and low culture is already old news.

As a model interpretative guide to how the old comics inform the logic of the new, the first 9/11 strip in *No Towers* copies an old comic strip called "Etymological Vaudeville," which the artist captions a "19th-century source for [the] 21st century's dominant metaphor": that of "dropping the other shoe." The sequence draws its

⁵ *The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation* by Sidney Jacobson and Ernie Colón, with a foreword by Commission chairs Thomas H. Kean and Lee H. Hamilton (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006).

profundity from its seeming simplicity. As Scott McCloud says,

cartooning is a form of amplification through simplification. . . . By stripping down an image to its essential “meaning,” an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can’t. (30)

By de-emphasizing the appearance of the physical world in favour of the idea of form, the cartoon places itself in the world of concepts. (41)

In “Allegory and Trauerspiel,” Walter Benjamin likewise says that the basic unit of “the literary and visual emblem-books of the baroque” is the allegorical picture that is “simultaneously . . . the expression of a concept and the expression of an Idea” (161-62)—that is, the literalization of a concept in a visual icon—in “a successively progressing, dramatically mobile dynamic representation” (165). “Etymological Vaudeville” literalizes the expression “dropping the other shoe” in a twelve-panel sequence;⁶ dropping one shoe creates in the reader (who identifies with the waiting characters) the anxious *desire* to hear the other drop (Fig. 10). Below this sequence, on the same strip, Spiegelman reconfigures this metaphor in the post-9/11 context, literalizing and amplifying this paranoid teleological desire into a scene of mass terror in the streets of the city, where a mob flees in panic as the other shoe, a shoe-bomb called “Jihad Brand Footware” (but looking conspicuously of Western make) drops from the sky (Fig. 11). The fatalistic implication is that history will repeat itself, once again raining terror upon the streets of New York. Though the ten 9/11 strips in *No Towers* may seem to unfold without any overarching narrative progression, in fact the last strip effects an infuriating (though revealing) closure to this “dominant metaphor.”

Before discussing this metaphor, however, it will be useful to define “closure” in comics parlance (Fig. 12). McCloud explains that the empty space between

⁶ Each narrative unit of comics involves a sequence of panels that makes a strip. Each panel contains a static image, and the syntagmatic progression of panels represents the linear passage of time.

panels is

what comics aficionados have named “the gutter,” . . . [which] plays host to much of the magic and mystery that are at the heart of comics! Here in the limbo of the gutter, human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea. . . . Closure allows us to connect these [fragmented] moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality. If visual iconography is the vocabulary of comics, closure is its grammar. . . . The reader’s deliberate, voluntary closure is comics’ primary means of simulating time and motion. (66-69)

McCloud links the concept of closure to that of Marshall McLuhan’s “cool” media forms that require the viewer’s active mental participation in order to fill in the distorting gaps between the simulacrum and the real; the gaps are essential because they generate the desire for meaningful revelation (59). As Joel Fineman likewise says in “The Structure of Allegorical Desire,” the linear unfolding of “allegory, like the dreamwork [of psychoanalysis], enacts a wish that determines its progress” (26). Spiegelman, whom McCloud canonizes as a ground-breaking innovator in the last few decades of comics,⁷ widens the gutter between this dominant metaphor’s introduction and its closure, so that the anxious desire represented by the “Waiting for That Other Shoe to Drop” panel at the bottom of Strip 1 is resolved not by a contiguous panel in sequence, but by the penultimate panel on Strip 10.

This anti-climactic panel shows not the other shoe of jihad terrorism dropping on the panicked populace in the streets of New York City, but a shower of cowboy boots (Fig. 13), marking Ground Zero’s “transform[ation] into a stage set for the Republican Presidential Convention” of 2004, turning “Tragedy . . . into Travesty” (10). Between the “Other Shoe” panel on Strip 1 and this disappointing closure, a total dream-logic displacement of identity has occurred: the terrified mob of New York has transformed into the old New York newspaper comics characters, the

7 “Art Spiegelman’s aggressively experimental work of the seventies and early eighties left no one prepared for the unassuming ‘report’ style of his landmark biography ‘Maus’” (181).

artist and his family into the paranoid mice caricatures (a typically postmodern self-referential allusion to Spiegelman's own *Maus*), and the expectation of terror from Al Qaeda into the feeling of being caught under the cowboy boot heels (standing in for stereotypical fascistic jackboot heels) of bravado Republicans invading a predominantly Democrat city. The cartoon on Spiegelman's daughter's T-shirt—that of Robert Crumb's Mr. Natural gleefully proclaiming “the whole universe is completely insane”—perfectly summarizes his attitude to the situation.

The book's prevailing theme of the revelatory displacement of the expected jihadist enemy for the “enemy at home” begins on Strip 2 (Fig. 14). Under the image of Spiegelman sleeping at his desk with old comics in hand and two-dimensional cartoon cut-outs of a scimitar-wielding Osama bin Laden and cowboy six-shooter-drawing George Bush in a stand-off above him, the caption reads:

Equally terrorized by Al-Qaeda and by his own Government... our hero looks over some ancient comics pages instead of working. He dozes off and relives his ringside seat to that day's disaster yet again, trying to figure out what he actually saw....
(ellipses in original)

What he actually saw is the central enigma of the book, but there are some important implications of this controversial stand-off image worth discussing first.

One is the feeling expressed throughout *No Towers* that terrorism originates not just from the shadowy enemy outside, but from the media and from the government's domestic security policies, as Spiegelman also says in the interview conducted a month prior to the 2004 presidential election: “I have not totally succeeded in domesticating my paranoia, although right now it probably is more focused on the Bush/Cheney gang than on the Al Qaida [sic] sleeper cells” (MJ). The stand-off image is key to the understanding of Spiegelman's political position in *No Towers*: while the apparent conflict of ideologies rages above him, he finds himself unaligned, retreating instead to art. Nine days after the attacks, President Bush delivered the ultimatum that “Every nation, in every region, now has a

decision to make: Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists”⁸ (Fig. 15). Spiegelman sides with neither the elect nor the damned, dropping instead into the preterite gutter, the excluded middle where the imagination and unconsciousness prevail, and identifies both Al Qaeda and the Bush Administration as terrorist organizations. The image of the artist—as the paranoid Maus—asleep also signals entrance into the nightmare world of Spiegelman’s translated unconscious psychodrama, where dream displacement is the operative logic, and the repetition compulsion of his “reliv[ing] . . . that day’s disaster yet again” is the enduring neurosis.

The theme of repetition compulsion (especially of history) and mourning is crucial not only in *No Towers*, but in the allegorical mode in general. Sigmund Freud, a profoundly allegorical thinker, first theorized these concepts together in saying, “the mechanism of psychical *displacement*, which was first discovered by me in the construction of dreams, dominates the mental processes of obsessional neurosis” (435; emphasis in original). The melancholic is especially prone to allegorical repetition, says Benjamin: “the profound fascination of the sick man for . . . disappointed abandonment of the exhausted emblem, the rhythm of which a speculatively inclined observer could find expressively repeated in the behaviour of apes” (185). Uncannily, “Feelings of loss overwhelm one obsessive and paranoid monkey,” Spiegelman says of himself in *No Towers* (8). In the header of Strip 2 (Fig. 16), above the image of him asleep, the artist depicts himself with the iconic American eagle noose-tied to his neck, saying that he is “DOOMED! Doomed to drag this damned albatross around my neck, and compulsively retell the calamities of September 11th to anyone who’ll still listen” (2). Spiegelman portrays himself as fully conscious of his neurosis, but unable to do anything but follow its will *ad infinitum* and *ad nauseum*. Joel Fineman explains that “allegory seems by its nature to be incompletable, never fulfilling its grand design. So too, this explains the

8 White House transcript of President Bush’s “Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People, Sept. 20, 2001.” 21 March 2007 <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html>>.

formal affinity of allegory with obsessional neurosis" (45). The compelling effect of *No Towers* is that it draws together the formal affinity of allegory, obsessional neurosis, dream logic, and the language of sequential art into a seemingly disjointed (but nonetheless meaningful) array of parts.

The fragmented form of *No Towers* corresponds with both the event of 9/11 and the theme of loss and ruination throughout the book. Not only were the buildings ruined, becoming the lost love objects or phantom limbs of New York City, but so too was the artist-citizen's confidence in his own civic liberty ruined, figured in the image of the ruined eagle. "Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things," says Benjamin (178). Allegorists of the Baroque were prone to amassing "ruins, the highly significant fragment, the remnant . . . in the unremitting expectation of a miracle, [taking] the repetition of stereotypes for a process of intensification" (*ibid.*)—a process corresponding with the amplification achieved through the simplified visual icon that McCloud describes. The expected miracle is the closure of a longed-for reconstruction of the fragmented ruins into their former totality, at least psychologically. Whether this process is even possible will concern us later in the examination of the central image of the book, but it is still necessary to interrogate further how the process of visual allegorical displacement figuratively occupies a site of resistance in *No Towers*.

The ruination of the bald eagle, once inveterate symbol of America's freedom, to a kept bird and harbinger of disaster tied to the artist's chest, illuminates the allegorical process of palimpsestic layering of pretextual allusions. The imagery ostensibly alludes to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner," but also suggests the shifting signifier "A" branded on Hester Prynne's breast in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), an allegory of early-American scapegoating. The eagle-albatross, with its novelty Uncle Sam top-hat, is reduced to a jingoistic parrot, squawking Bush Administration sound-bite propaganda: "go out and shop!" and "Be afraid!" (2). The symbol, which once meant one thing, now accrues a multiplicity of pernicious meanings.

The key for interpreting this is located in the same position at the top of Strip

4, where we see that the eagle has been hijacked not by Arabs but by vice president Dick Cheney and his little cowboy sidekick, president George W. Bush. Cheney slits the eagle's throat with a box cutter, which the suicide hijackers allegedly used for mid-flight crowd control, according to the *The 9/11 Commission Report* (Kean et al. 8-9). This evisceration of the eagle's voice box portrays the allegorical process of emptying out the meaning-content of a once-stable symbol and infilling it with a new, strictly determined political meaning.⁹ In a televised address to the nation on 11 September 2001 (Fig. 17), President Bush claimed that America was attacked by "evil-doers" because it is "a beacon of freedom" (a perfunctory invocation of Winthrop's rhetoric), to say nothing of its history of foreign-policy offences in Central Asia, which occasioned Osama bin Laden's August 1996 declaration of war against the United States (Strasser 427). The American eagle now affirms the consolation of consumerism, fear, and blame of the Arab other, squawking "why do they hate us? why???" and modelling the political ignorance necessary for preserving national self-righteousness. Recast into a propagandistic parrot, the eagle becomes a floating signifier, meaning anything its politician handlers want it to mean in the media management of 9/11's aftermath.

However, once eviscerated, the eagle can also be used as a site of resistance, as it is used here to illustrate the *process* of government-media manipulation of news and history. From this perspective, media itself is the terrorizing agent, relaying the fear-mongering propaganda of the government through stock images of Jihadist boogeymen. "The spectacle of terrorism forces the terrorism of spectacle upon us," says Jean Baudrillard in his 2002 book *The Spirit of Terrorism*. With his own obsessive-compulsive addiction to news, Spiegelman represents himself drilling a hole in his skull with a jackhammer amidst a flutter of newspapers (8). Just below this panel, a cartoon Osama bin Laden pops into the room at the mention of President Bush on the radio, as if the two ideological personifications exist only

9 Such conversions of symbols abound in politics and propaganda, especially of the fascistic variety. For example, the National Socialists emptied the swastika of all its traditional meaning in making it the official Nazi logo in 1920. Hence the swastika is today a symbol of political evil rather than spiritual harmony.

as an antagonistic dyad. Baudrillard describes how the post-9/11 government-media complex “focus[es] the conflict in order to create the delusion of a visible confrontation and a solution based upon force” (11). Part of that delusion is that good will prevail, even though good and evil “are at once both irreducible to each other and inextricably related” (13). Yet the government-media complex was quick to cast 9/11 typologically in the mould of WWII (when good supposedly triumphed over evil), calling it a “new Pearl Harbour”¹⁰ and thus packaging it as a pretext for the interminable “War on Terror” that conflates contemporary unaligned or transnational terrorist groups with attackable hostile regimes of the week, and these (“Axis of Evil”) with WWII’s Axis powers. Hitler is now bin Laden, now the Taliban, now Saddam Hussein, Ahmadinejad, and so on. “Forget Osama, Says Bush—but Look Out Saddam,” reads an Associated Press headline among those collected on the rear inside cover of *No Towers*. This sequence of deferrals from one enemy to another, one war to another, without timelines or end, corresponds with the dream-logic displacement that characterizes Mr. Natural’s “completely insane” universe.

Spiegelman illustrates the logic at work here at a late stage in *No Towers*, in the “Weapons of Mass Displacement” panel of Strip 9 (Fig. 18), which, as late allegory tends to do, draws attention to the interpretative program of the book. The artist is here a ranting armchair spectator to such metonymic displacements as Al Qaeda for Iraq and Cheney’s unethical wartime largesse to Halliburton (unpunished) for Martha Stewart (punished). Such displacement explains the transposition of old comics characters into modern iconography throughout *No Towers*, but especially the sequence on Strip 5, where Spiegelman recasts the old Katzenjammer Kids Hans and Fritz as the deadly “Tower Twins” (Fig. 19). Here, Uncle Sam assists the destruction of the Tower Twins, and then displaces his act of retribution toward a hive of hornets (implicitly Afghanistan). In another act of displacement, he turns

10 *The Washington Post* published an op-ed piece called “Destroy the Network” by former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger the night of 11 September 2001. “The government should be charged with a systematic response that, one hopes, will end the way that the attack on Pearl Harbor ended—with the destruction of the system that is responsible for it,” says Kissinger. The *Post* also quotes Bush writing “The Pearl Harbor of the 21st century took place today” in his diary before going to bed that night (27 January 2002).

his extermination spree on the “Iraknid,” a spider with a Saddam Hussein head. Meanwhile the hornets (real terrorists) come back with a vengeance, attacking the helpless, ruined Twins (now the people of New York) wearing *memento mori* death masks. “Tower Twins” effectively allegorizes the concept of blowback, which most intellectuals, following Chomsky, accepted as a plausible explanation for the attack, “despite the thin evidence,” as Chomsky admits (139).

The “Weapons of Mass Displacement” sequence also depicts the displaced response to the problem of toxic air quality near Ground Zero, wrongfully declared safe by the EPA and City of New York authorities, who then hypocritically banned smoking in bars. The chain-smoking artist takes this as an attack on his civil liberties and again becomes Maus in the image of his chain-smoking father (Fig. 20). WWII is again a pretext here, but this time as a site of resistance in the rhetoric of Spiegelman’s provocative comparison of post-9/11 America with pre-WWII Germany. In the preface to *No Towers*, he claims that “the toxic cloud . . . left [him] reeling on that faultline where World History and Personal History collide—the intersection my parents, Auschwitz survivors, had warned me about when they taught me to always keep my bags packed.” According to the displacement logic of the artist’s paranoid psychodrama, his own repetition compulsion becomes analogous to the repetition of major world history.

The theme of historical repetition properly begins on the inside cover of *No Towers* with a facsimile of the *New York World* cover from 11 September, 1901. Interestingly, exactly one hundred years prior to the attacks on the WTC and Pentagon, America was reeling from an attack on another national power symbol, President William McKinley (also a major architect of American imperial expansion), shot by anarchist Leon Frank Czolgosz five days earlier; McKinley would die three days later. What makes this typological exposition even more interesting is that, then as now, media used conspiracy theories to steer the vengeful ire of the public toward ideological enemies. In 2001, it was Al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden (along with the Arab world generally, as seen in the spate of Islamophobic violence that followed 9/11); in 1901, it was anarchism and Emma Goldman, who

was half the typological basis for George Orwell's Emmanuel Goldstein scapegoat figure in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). The facsimile *New York World* article goes into great detail chasing a possible link between Goldman and Czolgosz, which later proved to be spurious. These front-page details all become marginal, however. Central to the page, and obscuring the photo of McKinley's doctor discussing his condition, is the circular porthole or portal that shoots the reader forward 100 years to the central image of *No Towers*: the red-glowing, yellow-shimmering bones of the tower just prior to its collapse.

The transcendent, quasi-mystical image of the glowing under-structure is the only consistent visual theme on each strip. Stylistically, its digitally rendered impressionist pointillism stands apart from anything else in the book (Fig. 21). But it depicts what Spiegelman claims he "actually saw": a "pivotal image . . . that didn't get photographed or videotaped into public memory but still remains burned into the inside of my eyelids several years later— . . . the image of the looming North Tower's glowing bones just before it vaporized" (preface). He adds in the 2004 interview, "the 110-story glowing bones of the tower kind of evanesced into the surrounding air and glowed" (MJ). Aside from his phrase "vision of disintegration" in the preface and the word "shimmy" in Strip 4, Spiegelman is elusive about the nature of this glowing effect. Though he offers in the preface some technical details about how he achieved its effect with his computer after failed attempts to paint it, he refuses to divulge any explanatory key to its meaning in words. The comics facsimiles in the second part of *No Towers* provide no explanatory key, either. As McCloud says of the gutter effect, the gap in plain and obvious meaning here draws the reader toward a mystery and the pursuit of the closure of revelation. If not photographed or videotaped, what was this, if not the artist's unverifiable hallucination? Is there any clue in the public record?

Corroboration for Spiegelman's imagery comes from the wealth of eye-witness anecdotal evidence documented by the World Trade Center Task Force, initiated by Commissioner Thomas Von Essen of the Fire Department of New York (FDNY), and conducted over the two months following the catastrophe. According to the

New York Times article that announced the release of the nearly-12,000 pages of eye-witness testimony of 503 first responders—fire fighters, police, and emergency medical services (EMS) technicians¹¹—Essen “wanted to preserve those accounts before they became reshaped by a collective memory.” The struggle against the mainstream media torrent reshaping the artist’s *personal* memory is central to *No Towers*, motivating Spiegelman’s attempts to anchor his testimony around the image of the glowing bones of the tower.

In terms corroborating Spiegelman’s imagery, several officials looking in the direction of the collapsing North Tower reported seeing flashes inside the structure immediately prior to collapse. Captain Karin Deshore of the 46th EMS Battalion, for instance, reported an “orange and red flash” “around the middle,” then “all around the building on both sides as far as I could see. These popping sounds and the explosions were getting bigger, going both up and down and then all around the building” (15). The Assistant Commissioner of the FDNY Bureau of Communications Stephen Gregory also reported seeing a series of “low-level flashes”—a “flash flash flash” on the lower levels before the building came down, “like when they demolish a building” (14). In total, 118 (23%) of the 503 documented eye-witnesses described the collapse in terms of explosive detonations and incendiary flashes, versus 10 (2%) in terms of a non-explosive collapse (MacQueen 56). The perception of explosions and speculation leading to the demolition hypothesis of the towers’ collapse has spawned a rash of independent investigations by physicists and structural engineers that, along with stereotypical conspiracy theorists, contribute to the so-called 9/11 Truth Movement. Alternative-cause theories are relevant to Spiegelman’s *No Towers* because they illuminate how he positions himself antagonistically *against* them in his bid to break out of the

11 The City of New York refused FOI requests to release the testimony till litigation by the *New York Times* and victims’ families organizations forced it to make them available. “The city also initially refused access to the records to investigators from both the 9/11 Commission and the National Institute of Standards and Technology, but relented when legal action was threatened.” The documents have been downloadable since 12 August 2005, according to the *New York Times* press release of that day (Dwyer).

obsessional neurosis.

In the preface, Spiegelman admits to having given himself over to the seduction of “conspiracy theories about my government’s complicity in what had happened that would have done a Frenchman proud.”¹² He dramatizes this in the “Marital Blitz” sequence of Strip 8, in which the artist, displaced in the form of the old comics “Bringing Up Father” character, obsesses over conspiracy-theory websites in late-night internet adventures. An original “Bringing Up Father” is reproduced on Plate VII, showing the paranoid Father visiting the Leaning Tower of Pisa in Italy; bothered by the angle at which the tower tilts, and plagued by nightmares of it toppling and crushing him, he takes matters into his own hands and constructs scaffolding to prevent it from falling, allowing him to sleep soundly at last. This happy closure ends *No Towers*, suggesting the future possibility of therapeutic success and healthy emotional adjustment rather than interminable neurosis. Conspiracy theories, however, offer no consolation at all. As Spiegelman explains in the preface,

Only when I heard paranoid Arab Americans blaming it all on the Jews¹³ did I reel myself back in, deciding it wasn’t essential to know precisely how much my “leaders” knew about the hijackings in advance—it was sufficient that they immediately instrumentalized the attack for their own agenda.

In the years since 9/11, the apparent conflict between the US and Al Qaeda (with its evasive, ghost-like leader) has effectively shifted to a domestic struggle for interpretation of 9/11’s hidden causes. But neither the official 9/11 narrative nor alternatives are enough to seduce the artist here. They all become propaganda

12 This is likely a reference to Thierry Meyssan’s *9/11: The Big Lie and Pentagate* (both London: Carnot, 2002), originally *L’Effroyable imposture* and *Le Pentagate* (both Paris: Les Editions Carnot, 2002).

13 This refers to a popular urban/internet myth that circulated shortly after 9/11, alleging that all Jews working in the towers were tipped off to the attacks and stayed home on 9/11. A cursory perusal of the list of victims’ names quickly disproves this.

that promise satisfying closures to the lingering mysteries of 9/11, but never deliver smoking-gun proof. What the artist is left with is only what he knows he saw that day, however enigmatic.

Because of enormous gaps in the evidence needed to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt who perpetrated the terrorist attacks and how, various organizations and individuals—from the government to grassroots organizations (beginning with victims' families groups such as the Jersey Girls)—have been filling the lacuna with totalizing explanations based on conspiracy theories imagining complex, shadowy networks. For Spiegelman, it makes little difference whether 9/11 was the result of a conspiracy of Muslim extremists, as reported by the CIA and FBI (and conveyed uncritically by compliant mainstream media), or one perpetrated by military, CIA, and administration insiders, as paranoiacs contend via alternative media. In lieu of credulity in the grand meta-narratives that formerly provided a sense of coherence to history comes a desperate rhetoric seeking to restore a sense of coherence, forensically reading ruins and fragmentary clues, and projecting a kind of closure that brings about a revelation positively affirming narrative forms cast in the good-versus-evil mould. As Karen Espiritu argues, the non-linearity of *No Towers* “disrupt[s] the very concept of establishing a particular narrative; and in this way . . . [the graphic novel] resists or even unlearns the very fixity of narratives, of the memory and recollection of trauma itself” (183; her emphasis). What Spiegelman’s disjointed micro-narratives and central, enigmatic image affirm—by denial—is the inadequacy of *all* totalizing explanations concerning 9/11.

Like John Keats’s “negative capability” that accepts “uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (1351), or like the *via negativa* theological allegories of Philo,¹⁴ Spiegelman’s *In the Shadow of No Towers* ultimately affirms a secular apophysis¹⁵ concerning the mystery of “what he actually

14 Fineman observes, “it is significant that Philo, who was the first to employ an extensively allegorical mode of scriptural criticism, was also the first to introduce the terms of negative theology into theological discourse” (29).

15 Apophysis, *n.* “knowledge of God obtained by way of negation” (*OED*).

saw.” The extravagant, incendiary image of the internally glowing tower stands as an aporia advanced against all the cognitive dissonance of false claims to revelatory closure of the 9/11 case. It is a visual iteration of rhetorical *occupatio*, a species of preterition where one “emphasizes something by pointedly seeming to pass over it” (Lanham 68). The vision of the glowing bones of the tower, as a “*memento mori*” (10), assumes a quasi-mystical character as an icon that nonetheless denies the possibility of truth or even of symbolic closure. Had Spiegelman represented the motion of collapse rather than the static, pre-collapse image, he would have invited all manner of interpretations about the fall of American capitalist hubris. Baudrillard, for instance, interprets the collapse as globalization committing suicide, falling under its own monolithic weight.¹⁶ But Spiegelman offers instead a static image of glowing bones that collapses the spiritual-anagogical level of traditional allegory to the individual-literal level.¹⁷ If the glowing tower “means” anything, it is that the truth is elusive, and that the artist has to fortify by exaggeration what he thinks he saw in order to resist the forces that incessantly seek to impose stable political meaning on that memory. He thus obsesses endlessly over the mysterious memory, making a defence mechanism of its aporia.

As static and stalwart as the glowing-bones icon is through most of the *No Towers*, the forces of spin begin to destabilize and obscure it. On Strip 4, the artist describes how, “His memories swirl and events fade, but he still sees that glowing tower when he closes his eyes.” By Strip 5, however, the image grows progressively more distorted: wavering, fading, and increasingly superimposed with the terrified face of one of the Katzenjammer Tower Twins. “I’ve gotta shut my eyes and *concentrate* to still see the glowing bones of those towers,” he insists.

16 “The symbolic collapse of a whole system came about by an unpredictable complicity, as though the towers, collapsing on their own, by committing suicide, had joined in to round off the event. In a sense, the entire system, by its internal fragility, lent the initial action a helping hand. The more concentrated the system becomes globally, ultimately forming one single network, the more it becomes vulnerable at a single point” (8).

17 Medieval allegory divides into four levels of biblical exegesis: literal, typological, tropological (or moral), and anagogical (or spiritual). Modern, secular allegorists usually limit themselves to the first two or three.

“Comics can be maddeningly vague about what it shows us,” says Scott McCloud. “By showing little or nothing of a given scene—and offering only clues to the reader—the artist can trigger any number of images in the reader’s imagination” (86). The imagination is increasingly challenged by the last strip, where Spiegelman sums up the allegorical significance of the image of the burning tower as it relates to that day: “September 11, 2001,” he says, “was a *memento mori*, an end to Civilization As We Knew It. By 2003, Genuine Awe has been reduced to the mere ‘Shock and Awe’ of jingoistic strutting” (10). *In the Shadow of No Towers* itself becomes a *memento mori* for changing times, as it concludes with a three-panel sequence of the glowing tower progressively collapsing into obscurity, fading to black amnesiac oblivion. The *via negativa* ethos of the book, crystallized in the icon of the glowing tower, is finally displaced from quasi-mystical brilliance to dark absence. “On 9/11/01 time stopped,” reads the caption at the top of the last strip. Having arrested the moment of collapse in the timeless frequency of obsessional neurosis, the end of *No Towers* marks the resumption of the linear passage of time. Whether this marks the progress of recovery bought at the expense of an excruciating experience for both author and reader, or a descent into a deeper nightmare, remains a mystery to which comics of the past provide only a faint prophecy of genuine closure.

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