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Visualised Incomprehensibility of Trauma in Jonathan Safran Foer’s Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close

Abstract: In the wake of massive trauma, the purpose of literature is to constantly work against a smoothing-over of the painfully disruptive character of the event. With his latest novel, Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close, Jonathan Safran Foer has ventured to represent the traumatic events of September 11 and to interlace them with those of the Allied firebombing of Dresden in 1945. Combining linguistic virtuosity with typographical and other visual elements, Foer attempts to come as close to the disruptive nature of trauma (representation) as possible, and achieves what Ulrich Baer has described as “mock[ing] the black and white simplicity of printing paper” (Baer 2002, 2). In this contribution I argue that, contrary to what certain critics have maintained, Foer’s use of visual interludes betrays no inability on his part to adequately convey his story by means of language. Instead of treating these elements as a meagre and unconvincing surrogate for language, they should be seen as complementary to the narrative. Sometimes the visualisation of trauma in Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close even goes beyond what language can convey.

1. Introduction

Collective traumas such as the Holocaust, the Dresden firebombing and the events of September 11 entail a breakdown of representative practice. September 11, for one, has been described as a sight without reference, as falling outside the bounds of language and as being out of joints with a normal world image. And yet, this inconceivable and inexpressible event has found its way into certain modes of representation, including literature. The artistic rendering of September 11 has raised questions pertaining to the legitimacy and adequacy of representing trauma. With his latest novel, Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close, Jonathan Safran Foer has ventured to represent the traumatic events of September 11 and to interlace them with those of the Allied firebombing of Dresden in 1945. Drawing on his linguistic virtuosity as well as on visual interludes, Foer endeavours to come as close to the disruptive nature of trauma (representation) as possible.

The disruptive character of trauma, in other words, is omnipresent in the narrative and at the same time it manifests itself in the formal structure of the book. The flow of language is frequently interrupted by a change in typography, the insertion of pictures or blank pages, colourful additions to the text and so on. In
fact, the cover and the following couple of pages already give the reader a foretaste of the book’s unusual visual character. This essay sets out to disprove the contention of a host of reviewers and critics who have either considered Foer’s visual intermezzos as proof of his inability to express himself adequately (Munson 2005) or have labelled them “typographic gimmicks and random photos” (Reese 2005) and “not really adding to the novel” (Greer 2005).

2. What is Trauma?

What defines a particular event as traumatic is its disruptive and anomalous nature. Exposure to this kind of events thoroughly disturbs one’s worldview. This disturbance is so utterly irreconcilable to one’s existing frame of reference that in its aftermath, one cannot observe the world in the same way as prior to the event (Kacandes 2003, 171). This rupture is similarly encompassed in the Lacanian use of the word anamorphosis. In its pre-Lacanian sense, the term was used in optics to refer to a situation in which the change in a subject’s position causes the object under scrutiny to take on a completely different form. Lacanian anamorphosis departs from the same basic principle, albeit in a more metaphorical sense. Lacan is more interested in an attitudinal rather than a spatial change of perspective (Sass 2003, 163). Both Kacandes’s disrupted worldview and Jacques Lacan’s anamorphosis imply the existence of a boundary marker. In Kacandes’s case, there is a pre-traumatic and post-traumatic world; in the Lacanian point of view, anamorphosis causes the transition from ‘Reality’ to ‘the Real’ (Sass 2003, 163). ‘Reality’ to Lacan is man’s necessary illusion that the world is a knowable object and that he has his fate in his own hands. ‘The Real’ comes to the surface when this illusion is breached. This sudden moment of insight, the moment of anamorphosis, reveals ‘real reality,’ and reverses the relations of the illusory reality. Trauma, in other words, unveils an unexpected reality for which the sufferer of the experience can never be prepared (Caruth 1996, 6).

Laurie Vickroy summarises trauma as being a tyranny of the past, the recurrence in the present of one specific moment from that past. Trauma affects the human psyche in such a way that it prevents the formation of conventional memories. The threat to one’s (bodily and mental) safety is too overwhelming, too unthinkable (Vickroy 2002, 12; Coates et al. 2003, 3). Having been confronted with a traumatic experience, victims do not comprehend what has happened to them. And what the mind cannot grasp, it does not integrate into memory (Vickroy 2002, 12). Incomprehension followed by non-integration in the memory is part of the mind’s defence mechanism (i.e. dissociation) to ward off severe trauma. Dissociation enables a trauma victim to set apart a section of consciousness in which he can then safely tuck away abrasive memories. However, non-integration of (traumatic) memories must not be equated with complete erasure from the mind. Rather, the non-integrated particles of memory linger in the victim’s subconscious and manifest themselves belatedly in a repetitive visualisation of the event in the
form of nightmares, flashbacks, hallucinations (Caruth 1996, 11). Trauma, as Michael Rothberg puts it, is first and foremost a structure of the experience and its reception. The initial reception of something that “surprise[s] one, [takes one] unaware and [breaks] with [one’s] previous horizon of expectations,” is precisely one of incomprehensibility (Rothberg 2003, 149). Because the initial reaction to trauma is one of total incomprehensibility, cognition of that experience is only possible after a temporal delay. In other words, trauma is not known in the first instance by the victim. This deferred act of understanding, i.e. the passage of time between the traumatic event and the first manifestations of trauma symptoms, is also known as the Freudian concept of Nachträglichkeit.

A victim’s return to ‘normal’ life depends on that person’s ability and mindset to overcome dissociation. According to the French psychiatrist Pierre Janet, dissociation can be smoothed away by assembling the segregated elements of memory – le souvenir traumatique – into a larger, coherent whole, i.e. narrative memory (Janet 1980, 24). Trauma victims have to (re-)establish a frame of reference into which they can objectively and logically integrate their experiences. Inspired by Janet’s distinction between traumatic and narrative memory and the similar post-traumatic states of mind identified by Freud as melancholia and mourning, Dominick LaCapra elaborates those concepts into ‘acting out’ and ‘working through.’ Melancholics find themselves trapped in an (involuntary) endless reliving of their traumatic past, and in the meantime act that past out in the present. Their obsession with that past not only disables them to live in the present but also prevents them from working towards a liveable future. A melancholic mind does not retain any notion of tenses: Past, present and future coalesce (LaCapra 2001, 21). In many ways, melancholics (consciously or not) prevent their own convalescence. The core of their problem lies in their fidelity to trauma. In their eyes, ‘recovery’ is tantamount to an ultimate betrayal of people who did not survive the event, especially lost loved ones (LaCapra 2001, 22). Conversely, ‘working through’ implies the gradual conversion from Janet’s souvenir traumatique to narrative memory. This transition allows mourners to remember and consider what happened to them at a certain moment in the past critically, all the while knowing that they are living in the now.

3. Representing Trauma

A crucial step in the complex process of learning how to manage trauma is sharing one’s experiences with an empathic audience (LaCapra 2001, 47; 215). Whether or not it is legitimate for traumatised people to have such an audience, however, is a bone of contention among trauma theorists. The debate centres on the legitimacy and adequacy of talking about trauma. Can trauma victims legitimately express themselves about their experiences? And if so, does a recognisable frame

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1 This myriad of symptoms has been officially recognised as PTSD or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder by the American Psychiatric Association since 1980 (Leys 2000, 2).
of reference like language not automatically strip a horrific event of its inherent incomprehensibility? Taking these questions into consideration, it might be more appropriate to treat horrendous experiences like the Holocaust or – in the case of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, the Dresden firebombing and September 11 – with respectful silence. Being silent undoubtedly has its advantages. For one, it entails no risk of making manageable that which is unmanageable by putting it into words. Silence seems the only way to keep the total incomprehensibility of the traumatic event intact. This view, at least, is taken by the trauma theorist Cathy Caruth in a reaction to Dori Laub’s video taping of Holocaust survivors. During those testimonies, the survivors are encouraged by an empathic listener to narrate the horrors of their past (Leys 2000, 269). Caruth believes that any such attempt at expressing oneself, at narrating, endangers faithfulness to the truth of trauma. Trauma, after all, is an incomprehensible event, and defies all categorisation and representation. If there must be any kind of representation, Caruth calls for modes that are as unsettling as the event itself (qtd. in: Leys 2000, 269). Similarly, Walter Benn Michaels postulates that the horrors of trauma can only be expressed if language does “not [transmit] the normalizing knowledge of horror but horror itself” (qtd. in: Leys 2000, 268).

Assuming that it *is* legitimate for a trauma victim to share his or her experiences, takes us one step closer to the dilemma of artistic (i.e. literary) appropriation of traumatic events. Much debate has surrounded the question of who is allowed to write about trauma and who is not. Lawrence Langer (1991) and Kali Tal (1996) assume that primary witness accounts are the only acceptable form of trauma testimony. Even in the case of survivor memoirs, Langer objects to the medium of writing because it “still abides […] by certain literary conventions: chronology, description, characterisation, dialogue, and above all, perhaps, the invention of a narrative voice” (Langer 1991, 41). The latter in particular is a thorn in Langer’s flesh. The purpose of a narrative voice, he argues, is to force inherently chaotic and disorderly sequences of memory into a coherent paradigm. Since traumatic memories resist regular continuity of time, chronological narration and other ‘normal’ modes of representation are inadequate means for expression (Langer 1991, 15-6). Although Kali Tal similarly expresses her preference for actual survivor accounts as opposed to fictional testimonies by secondary witnesses (children of survivors, etc.), she does not necessarily object to writing. Fearing hidden agendas, Tal is legitimately intolerant of the wrongful appropriation of trauma by nonsurvivors (especially the institutional forces) (Tal 1996, 7).

Although writing about (personal) trauma herself, Sandra Gilbert acknowledges that what she calls ‘writing wrong’ is a problematic issue for reasons very much akin to Kali Tal’s. Most importantly, ‘writing wrong’ encompasses “a performative act that can never be truly performed” (Gilbert 2002, 261). That is to say, writing about traumatic events and sharing experiences with others will never

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2 Sandra M. Gilbert has lost her husband due to medical malpractice. Although not without its drawbacks, writing for her is an attempt to right the terrible wrong that was done to her and her family.
make them undone. Even more problematic to the concept of ‘writing wrong’ is the element of imagination. According to Gilbert, survivors of trauma are left behind with so many questions that all they can (try to) do is filling the gaps of a story they have only partly been told. Survivors writing about their experiences are in fact imagining what happened to their loved ones without actually knowing, and so, strictly speaking, ‘writing wrong’ can be called lying (Gilbert 2002, 262). Ultimately, ‘writing wrong’ is attempting to tell the story of storylessness, a story of irreparable loss and insurmountable grief (Gilbert 2002, 266).

Likewise recognising and appreciating the pitfalls of representing trauma, Dominick LaCapra is significantly less adamant about representing trauma than Langer and Tal. In Writing History, Writing Trauma (2001), LaCapra observes the fundamental distinction between writing about trauma and writing trauma. The former can roughly be equated with collective historiography and must be understood as an objective reconstruction of trauma as a phenomenon that has (re-)occurred at distinct moments in history. As part of an individual’s efforts to deal with his/her trauma, the latter focuses on “giving voice” to that individual’s (traumatic) history (LaCapra 2001, 186). Since trauma is defined as a radical break with previous references of which the symptoms make themselves known belatedly, LaCapra counts “writing trauma” as one of those potentially recurring symptoms. Gradually, writing trauma allows a victim to come to terms with the traumatic past and thus forms an elementary component of the healing process. In literary terms, writing trauma can “achieve articulation in different combinations and hybridized forms” (LaCapra 2001, 186).

Whereas trauma theorists and/or victims might have objections to “managing” trauma through representation, modern media harbour no such qualms. In fact, broad media coverage is how most people are confronted and familiarised with events like those on September 11 – designated by E. Ann Kaplan as the epitome of mediatized limit events (Kaplan 2005, 2). The collision of the second plane with the South Tower and its subsequent collapse in particular were witnessed in real-time around the globe. As an inhabitant of New York, Kaplan’s personal reaction to 9/11 was to go out into the streets and take pictures of the spontaneously sprouting make-shift memorials. On her wanderings, she experienced something very similar to Lacanian anamorphosis: Taking pictures for her was “an attempt to make ‘real’ what [she] could barely comprehend” (Kaplan 2005, 2). In Kaplan’s eyes, “9/11 produced a new subjectivity” by literally erasing the World Trade Center from her daily visual landscape (Kaplan 2005, 4). The uncanny spectacularity of the attack itself – the planes hurling into the buildings, the implosion of the Towers and the molten, distorted skeletons on Ground Zero – in combination with the collages of posters of missing people and artwork (the most remarkable of which being Art Spiegelman’s haunting image of the Twin Towers on the cover of The New Yorker) have made for a uniquely visual and visualised traumatic event. This unique visuality of 9/11 mirrors the way in which trauma – primarily a psychic disorder, after all – often externalises itself by...
leaving imprints of an otherwise physically untraceable disorder on the victim’s body (Kaplan 2005, 13).

Despite her participation in the visualisation of (the aftermath of) 9/11, Kaplan does not commit herself to its appropriateness without reserve. She justifiably questions whether the endless mediatisation of 9/11 has not stripped the event of some of its raw horridness by reducing it to a series of “manageable” images (Kaplan 2005, 17). And yet, these legitimate objections notwithstanding, Kaplan draws attention to the importance of “translating” trauma via art. Since trauma is a wound that can never be fully healed, art (literature) must not be understood as a road to closure. What art can do, is soothe the pain of the never-closing wound of trauma through a process of working through (Kaplan 2005, 19). Testifying to his taking refuge in literature in the wake of September 11, Ulrich Baer similarly records that doing so helped him in his process of working through because literature “confront[ed] reality without promising wholeness or denying absence, shock and loss” (Baer 2002, 5).

4. Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close

Foer introduces the characters of his novel by means of three interwoven narratives. Oskar and his grandparents alternately take the floor in what soon becomes a predictable pattern. By having his characters use distinctive narrative voices, Foer clearly indicates that he has created three very different personae. Oskar Schell, Foer’s nine-year-old protagonist, has lost his father in the attacks on September 11. A year after the “Worst Day” (Foer 2005, 11 passim), Oskar is a hyperactive and hypervigilant boy on the lookout for all kinds of lurking dangers. Doing all he can to avoid public transportation, elevators, bridges and skyscrapers, and armed with his grandfather’s camera, the boy crosses the five boroughs of New York City in search for the matching lock to a key he has found among his father’s belongings. Finding that lock, he thinks, will somehow help him understand his father’s death. Mementoes of Oskar’s wanderings (people he encounters, objects he finds, etc.) are recorded in a scrapbook entitled “Stuff That Happened To Me.” Actual reproductions of photographs in that scrapbook alternate with the narrative and contribute to the extraordinary visual quality of the novel.

Oskar’s paternal grandparents, both (literally and figuratively) marked for life by having lost their respective families in the Allied air raids on Dresden in 1945, are retraumatised by the loss of their son in the attacks on the World Trade Center. The narratives of Grandpa and Grandma are both in letter form. Thomas addresses his letters to the child he never knew (the one he lost when his pregnant girlfriend died in Dresden as well as the child he abandoned, i.e. Oskar’s father). Grandma’s letters are addressed to Oskar himself. Their distinctive narrative style is clearly mirrored in the book’s formal composition. Grandfather Schell, who suffers from aphasia and necessarily resorts to writing and sign language to express himself, cannot find enough empty pages onto which to spill his feelings, dilemmas, experiences, and musings. Even in writing, though,
he can never fully convey the horrors of his past. Both paper shortage and failure of language physically manifest themselves e.g. in pages with the lines merging until the text is beyond the point of recognition. Grandma Schell’s life story, which she feverishly composes on an old typewriter, amounts to nothing but empty pages. She ‘fills’ hundreds of pages by simply pressing the space bar. A number of blank pages are included in the novel, reflecting the (emotional) emptiness of Grandma’s life.

The effects of trauma are not only manifest in the behaviour of Oskar and his grandparents, they also find bodily expression. Whenever he is disappointed (with himself or with others), Oskar bruises himself. Grandfather Schell cannot talk, but it is not unreasonable to assume that he has inflicted this condition on himself for fear of betraying the memory of his lost loved one, Anna. Out of necessity, Thomas Schell has the words “yes” and “no” tattooed on the palms of his hands, and, combined with a crude, self-developed sign language, takes part in daily conversation. Contrary to her husband, Grandma Schell has a drive to communicate which is especially revealed in her desire to attain native-like mastery of the English language. However, her adoption of a foreign language\(^3\) and consequent abandonment of her native language indicates a certain loss of self (Caruth 1996, 49), a loss of control over herself. She does at several points in the novel reveal her inclination to hurt herself, a tendency twice climaxing in suicidal deliberations (Foer 2005, 82; 104). All things considered, the three characters in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* seem to have one or several of their senses tampered with. With his (rather mild form of) self-chastisement, Oskar constantly attempts to push back his (physical) pain threshold. The pain of bruising himself, however, can never be in the same league as the pain of losing and missing his father. Grandfather Schell’s disability conditions his communication to a combination of sign language and writing, a form of conversing heavily reliant on sight. At the same time, he uses touch to delineate the contours of objects, people, etc. He wants to explore and is often reduced to (literally) groping his way through life. Suffering from bad eyesight, Grandma Schell similarly compensates her handicap by resorting to close physical contact (Foer 2005, 4).

5. **Visual Incomprehensibility of Trauma in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close***

In the introduction to his anthology of 9/11 short stories,\(^4\) *110 Stories: New York Writes After September 11* (2002), Ulrich Baer defines the role and purpose of literature in the wake of massive, collective trauma as amounting to “explor[ing] the possibilities of language in the face of gaping loss, and register[ing] that words

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\(^3\) As Caruth (1996, 49) pointed out in her analysis of the film *Hiroshima mon amour*, English is the language of forgetting. This applies to Grandpa and Grandma Schell, too. Upon marrying, Thomas makes up the rule that forbids any future use of their native language, German. Grandma takes this to heart and obsessively commits herself to adopting English as her (near-)native language.

\(^4\) *110 Stories* was the first collection of stories to record the literary responses to September 11 (Baer 2002, 1).
might be all that’s left for the task of finding meaning in – and beyond – the silent, howling void” (Baer 2002, 1). An indispensable characteristic of post-traumatic literature, Baer asserts, is to constantly work against a smoothing-over of the painfully disruptive character of the event. Authors willing to tackle trauma literature must not be averse to the incorporation of ‘shocking’ and painful points of view in their works.

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close conforms perfectly to what Baer describes as the task of literature in the aftermath of a catastrophic limit event. The composition of his novel quite literally “mocks the black and white simplicity of printing paper” (Baer 2002, 2), and seriously founders any reader’s expectation of a smooth, straightforward narrative. Like the (physical as well as mental) trauma scars on each of the three characters, the (fluency of the) narrative is ‘scarred’ with visual effects. Thus the incomprehensibility of trauma with which all three characters grapple not only finds textual expression, but is all the more reinforced on a metatextual level. A case in point is the particularly striking difference between the hand depicted on the cover of the book and the photographs of Thomas Schell’s hands (Foer 2005, 260-1). The hand on the cover is crowded with information: It contains all the usual elements one expects from a cover, like the title of the book and the name of the author. In addition, extra nuggets of information are crammed onto the silhouette of the hand, more precisely the fact that Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close is a novel and that Foer’s previous book Everything is Illuminated is an international bestseller. This plenitude of particulars is highly contrastive to the information that is (literally) inscribed on the hands of Thomas Schell. The meaning of Thomas’s life, it seems, can be broken down to a mere “yes” or “no” and a few gestures. The rest (i.e. language) is inadequate and necessarily omitted.

Keys & Locks

Don DeLillo eloquently captures the concept of incomprehensibility of trauma in his article about the immediate aftermath of September 11, “In the Ruins of the Future”: “We could not catch up to it. But it was real” (DeLillo 2001, 39). This image of falling behind pinpoints a feeling of impotence prominent in Oskar Schell, especially as far as his search for the lock is concerned:

Then I did some research on the Internet about the locks of New York, and I found out a lot of useful information. […] More than 9 million people live in New York […] and I figured that if you include everything […] there are probably 18 locks for every person in New York City, which would mean about 162 million locks. […] I timed myself and it took me 3 seconds to open a lock. […] So even if all I did was open locks, I’d still be falling behind by .333 locks every second. (Foer 2005, 40-1)

5 The edition that is being referred to here is the 2005 Houghton Mifflin edition.
More force is added to this image of falling behind by a score of pictures of locks, doors and keys. One particular picture of rows upon rows of uncut keys in a locksmith’s shop especially visualises Oskar’s self-admitted cluelessness: “I stayed there for a bit, trying to catch up with my brain” (Foer 2005, 46). This multitude of keys is a first instance of the visualised incomprehensibility of trauma in Foer’s novel. The keys symbolise the myriad of thoughts going through the boy’s head when trying to find an answer to what happened to his father and why. Oskar’s quest does not turn out entirely as he thought it would. Although he finds the lock to his key, it does not provide the revelation he had hoped for.

Oskar’s treasure hunt is fuelled by an underlying drive typical of trauma victims’ behaviour, i.e. doing detective work (Kacandes 2003, 171). Finding the matching lock to his key is a symbolic search and points to the child’s inner need to ‘unlock’ the trauma he is experiencing. The importance of this symbolism of locking and unlocking is reflected in the numerous pictures of doorknobs and locks6 with which the novel is dotted. Adding to the importance of this imagery of locks is the fact that it is the first thing the reader comes across upon opening the book. Finding access to or ‘unlocking’ his trauma proves extremely difficult for Oskar. A testimony to this difficulty is the image showing a close-up picture of a door with an escutcheon but without a keyhole. This obviously inaccessible door is a salient visual feature of the mind-boggling experiences with which trauma victims struggle.

Thwarted Communication

The characters in Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close are confronted with quite a few instances of thwarted communication, leaving them in the dark all too often. Adding to the visualised complexity of trauma and its artistic representation, Foer denies his readers the luxury of an omniscient narrator. Whenever fragments of conversation become unintelligible for one of the characters, they are also made incomprehensible for the reader by means of typography. At one point, for example, Oskar eavesdrops on his mother’s conversation with their psychiatrist Dr. Fein. Because he is justifiably suspicious of Dr. Fein (the man is distressingly incompetent), Oskar is out to understand every word. The fact that he cannot, is typologically reflected in a highly fragmented rendition of that dialogue (Foer 2005, 203-6). Although both the reader and Oskar can make out the gist of the conversation – Dr. Fein wants to persuade Mrs. Schell to have her son hospitalised – the finer points, possible nuances, etc. are lost. The already disrupted account of this private conversation is in turn interrupted by a picture of a man falling from one of the WTC towers. The picture occurring where it does can be interpreted as echoing Oskar’s feelings of helplessness in facing his father’s death and giving meaning to that event. Moreover, the picture of the falling man is not a

6 For examples of these pictures see Foer 2005, 29; 53; 115; 134; 198; 212; 265; 303.
one-time occurrence. It recurs throughout the book and can analogously be attributed different meanings.

At a later point in the novel, the narrative suddenly becomes encoded. The excerpt in question (Foer 2005, 269-71) concerns Thomas Schell calling his wife upon his return to New York after hearing of their son’s demise. Since Thomas cannot (or will not) speak, he translates what he wants to say into a series of numbers. The telephone conversation is thus enciphered by means of the keypad of a pay phone:

“Hello?” I knew it was her […], I pressed “4, 3, 5, 5, 6,” she said, “Hello?” I asked, “4, 7, 4, 8, 7, 3, 2, 5, 5, 9, 6, 8?” She said, “Hello?” I told her, “4, 3, 5, 7!” “Listen,” she said, “I don’t know what’s wrong with your phone, but all I hear is beeps. Why don’t you hang up and try again.” Try again? I was trying to try again, that’s what I was doing! I knew no good would come of it, but […] I told her everything: why I’d left, where I’d gone, how I’d found out about your death, why I’d come back, and what I needed to do with the time I had left. I told her because I wanted her to believe me and understand, and because I thought I owed it to her, and to myself, and to you, or was it just more selfishness? I broke my life down into letters, for love I pressed “5, 6, 8, 3,” for death “3, 3, 2, 8, 4, […]” (Foer 2005, 269)

Clearly, Thomas means to bare his soul to his wife but finds that he cannot do so using conventional methods of conversation. Instead, he tells her everything by means of the phone’s keypad. The act of communication is thwarted because hearing only meaningless bleeps, Mrs. Schell cannot make any sense of the message. As is the case with the eavesdropped conversation, the message is not only unintelligible to the character but apart from the words “love” and “death,” the content is also a total mystery to the reader.\(^7\) The numerical text continues for two pages and a half without any hint at what is being said. No omniscient narrator intervenes to elucidate. The code is evidence of Thomas’s overpowering inability to put his feelings into comprehensible communication and point toward the immense weight of (the incomprehensibility of) his trauma.

Overpowering emotions are also the core of the first meeting between Thomas and his grandson Oskar. Not knowing that he is facing his grandfather, Oskar confides in the man. He tells his grandfather about his search for the lock and how he hopes it will bring him closer to his father. The boy even lets this stranger in on his deepest secret: On September 11, Oskar’s father, being trapped in the restaurant on top of the North Tower, made several calls to reassure his wife and son that he was OK. Oskar, who was let out of school early, was home just in time for the last call but he did not take it. Instead, he listened to the message as it was being recorded on the answering machine. Afterwards, Oskar hid the phone with his father’s messages on it and bought exactly the same machine to replace the one he hid. Unable to articulate this utterly traumatic experience, the boy keeps his father’s calls secret from his mother and grandmother. However, he does give expression to his father’s messages in the form of jewellery, hereby

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\(^7\) That is to say, unless the reader should embark on the highly time-consuming task of breaking the code.
literally putting into practice Kaplan’s notion of translating trauma into art (Kaplan 2005, 19):

As for the bracelet Mom wore to the funeral, what I did was I converted Dad’s last voice message into Morse code, and I used sky-blue beads for silence, maroon beads for breaks between letters, violet beads for breaks between words, and long and short pieces of string between the beads for long and short beeps, which are actually called blips, I think, or something. [...] I made her other Morse code jewelry with Dad’s messages – a necklace, an anklet, some dangly earrings, a tiara – but the bracelet was definitely the most beautiful, probably because it was the last, which made it the most precious. (Foer 2005, 35-6)

Judging from their ingenuity, it is clear that no one except Oskar (and the reader) is meant to discover the hidden meaning of these encoded pieces of jewellery. At the same time, though, presenting his mother with these profoundly symbolical gifts testifies of the boy’s pangs of conscience for keeping the actual messages hidden. One cannot help but feel that Oskar almost wishes for someone to crack his code and in so doing, unburden him of his terrible secret.

As the meeting – which is being narrated by Thomas – between grandfather and grandson progresses, the spacing between the lines becomes smaller and smaller (starting on p. 278) until the letters eventually merge and become indecipherable. Pages 281 to 284 are nothing but black rectangles of printer’s ink. The element of incomprehensibility emphasises the inaccessibility of Grandpa’s trauma, and together with the example of the encoded monologue it can be seen as an attempt on Foer’s part to involve the reader as an active participant in the unravelling of trauma. The blackness also represents Thomas Schell’s psychological suffering as a trauma victim. That suffering clearly shaped his past and still has a grip on his life in the present. The critic Sam Munson (2005, 83-4) rather scathingly adopts a similar explanation for Foer’s visual ‘trick.’ He accuses Foer of making things easy for himself by resorting to typography to avoid using language to convey his message. Munson, however, completely misses the point. As is characteristic of trauma victims, Thomas Schell cannot talk about his experiences and to compensate for his aphasia, he writes daybooks. By not talking, he circumvents the threat of fitting something into a frame of reference for which none exists. Writing instead of talking seems a good enough compromise until that, too, becomes an inadequate means of expression. As writing fails, visual elements provide an adequate replacement for that which has to remain unsaid or unwritten.

In stark contrast with the near-total blackness of the pages reflecting Thomas’s daybook is the inclusion of a number of blank pages (Foer 2005, 121-3). As the novel progresses, it becomes apparent that Thomas is not the only one to record his experiences. At the encouragement of her husband, Mrs. Schell starts writing, too. Thomas realises too late that there is no ribbon in the typewriter and that his wife’s life story amounts to nothing but a stack of empty pages. The inclusion of actual pristine pages in the novel’s composition mirror Grandma’s unavailing writing efforts. The plot thickens when Grandma reveals that it was her intention to produce nothing but empty pages. She admits as much in her letters to Oskar: “I went to the guest room and pretended to write. I hit the space bar again and
again. My life story was spaces” (Foer 2005, 176). Grandma’s confession uncovers the underlying reasoning that language is not only an inadequate vehicle for transmitting traumatic experiences, but that it is illegitimate to try altogether.

The Falling Man

A picture of a man jumping from one of the burning WTC towers recurs throughout the novel (see Foer 2005, 59; 62; 205; and the flipbook at the end of the novel), most notably in reversed sequence at the end. If one flips the pages, the man in the picture falls into the sky instead of into the abyss below. Oskar downloaded this picture from the internet. Suffering from an overactive imagination described by Gilbert (2002, 262), he wants to believe that the man in the picture is his father, so that he can stop inventing more horrible ways in which his father might have died:

“There’s one body that could be him. It’s dressed like he was, and when I magnify it […], sometimes I can see glasses. Or I think I can. But I know I probably can’t. It’s just me wanting it to be him.”

“You want him to have jumped?”

“I want to stop inventing. If I could know how he died, exactly how he died, I wouldn’t have to invent him dying inside an elevator that was stuck between floors […] and I wouldn’t have to imagine him trying to crawl down the outside of the building […] or trying to use a tablecloth as a parachute […]. There are so many different ways to die, and I just need to know which was his.” (Foer 2005, 257)

Oskar is obviously plagued by symptoms of PTSD. Apart from having unspecified nightmares, he keeps reliving the “Worst Day,” and invents things that might have prevented his father from dying. Not having been able to bury his father’s body and not exactly knowing how the man died forces Oskar’s imagination into overdrive, imagining the most horrible ways to die. Leaving the flipbook at the end of the novel aside, the arbitrary recurrence of the falling man symbolises Oskar’s uncontrollable flashes of imagination, visualising his father’s death.

In contrast to the falling man, who faced a certain death jumping from the WTC, Oskar’s scrapbook also contains a picture of a cat in free fall (Foer 2005, 191). The picture is an illustration of an experiment Oskar conducted at school. To prove that cats reach *terminal velocity* when falling by turning themselves into little parachutes, he dropped his pet cat Buckminster from the roof. According to Oskar, cats also have a better chance of surviving a fall from the twentieth floor than from the eighth because it takes them eight floors to realise what is going on and to relax and correct themselves (Foer 2005, 190). The rather odd subject of Oskar’s experiment of course serves to highlight the difference between cats and men, who stand absolutely no chance whatsoever whether they fall from the eighth or the twentieth floor. This is where the man falling in reverse becomes significant. In his desire to undo time, Oskar rips the pages with the sequence of the falling man out of his scrapbook to glue them together again in reverse order:

When I flipped through them, it looked like the man was floating up through the sky. And if I’d had more pictures, he would’ve flown through a window, back into the building, and the smoke would’ve poured into the hole that the plane was about to
come out of. Dad would've left his messages backward, until the machine was empty, and the plane would've flown backward away from him, all the way to Boston. He would've taken the elevator to the street and pressed the button for the top floor. He would've walked backward to the subway, and the subway would've gone backward, back to our stop. Dad would've [...] walked home backward [...]. He would've gotten back into bed [...]. Then he would've gotten up again at the end of the night before the worst day. [...] We would have been safe. (Foer 2005, 325-6)

6. Conclusion

There is more to the concept of trauma in Jonathan Safran Foer’s novel Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close than initially meets the eye. Whereas Foer’s incorporation of typographical and other visual elements have elicited mixed feelings, to say the least, the novel still proves to be an adequate attempt to portray trauma in literature. The storylines of Oskar Schell and his paternal grandparents reflect trauma on the level of content. When language falls short, several visual interludes (such as the inclusion of pictures and changes in typography) represent the nature of trauma on the metatextual level. Those visual interruptions illustrate two specific characteristics of trauma, namely incomprehensibility and the question of legitimacy and adequacy. Contrary to what certain critics have maintained, Foer’s use of visual interludes does not testify to his shrinking back from conveying the experiences of his protagonists by means of language. The formal aspects do not replace language in any way. Rather, they complement the narrative most of the time, as is the case with e.g. the pictures of the falling man. Sometimes the visualisation of trauma in Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close even goes beyond what language can convey.

Works Cited


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