

Redefining Trauma Post 9/11: Freud's Talking Cure and Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*

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Abstract: In this essay, I argue that there is a valuable aspect in Freudian psychoanalysis that does not so much relate to its discourse of therapy and healing but to its specific approach to trauma. It is epitomized in its method of the talking cure, and is best explained by Freud's interpretation of dreams. Challenging contemporary trauma theory and its emphasis on the 'excesses of the Real,' I claim that Freudian psychoanalysis is concerned with the 'how' instead of the 'what': Its object of analysis is the construction of trauma in the (Lacanian) Symbolic rather than its inscription in the Real. Demonstrating that Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, one of the first novels to deal directly with the trauma of September 11, can function as a Freudian talking cure, I argue that a psychoanalytic perception of trauma can reinforce the value we attach to language and literature in the process of handling traumatic events. It is *Extremely Loud's* experimental form that exposes the complexity of trauma and engages the reader in the process of understanding traumatic experiences such as September 11. The active participation of the reader in 'connecting the dots' of the novel and the novel's temporal form can open up a space for (indirect) witnessing. *Extremely Loud*, the bestselling novel by one of the main representatives of a new generation of American fiction writers, thus serves to illustrate the value of a psychoanalytic notion of trauma for the process and problem of the representation of trauma in the Symbolic.

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, caused such shock and devastation that they have already been called the defining tragedy of our time (Versluys, "9/11" 65). As Slavoj Žižek notes in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, the terrorist attacks were immediately seen as dispelling the illusory haze of security in which many Americans had been living (16). Marita Sturken argues that the US lost their innocence at the moment of the collapse (311). Moreover, Richard Stamelman

points out that the term ‘Ground Zero,’ which originally referred to complete nuclear destruction, suggests a new starting point: a “tabula rasa” (13). These observations underline the notion that the world was radically altered by the events of September 11. The fall of the Twin Towers seems to have caused an abrupt plunge into the Real. It is this obsession with a return to reality—which I link to the Lacanian Real—that characterizes the response to the events of September 11 and provides the starting point for this essay’s analysis.

When analyzing September 11 in terms of a return to the Real, we might turn to designer Kenneth Cole’s series of advertisements bearing the slogan ‘today is not a dress rehearsal,’ launched shortly after the attacks:¹

On September 12, people who don’t speak to their parents forgot why.
Today is not a dress rehearsal.
On September 12, fewer men spent the night on the couch.
Today is not a dress rehearsal.
On September 12, families returned to the dining room table.
Today is not a dress rehearsal.

According to the *New York Times*, the images of the series express an idea of “domestic contentment” (Bellafante). From the superficial and illusory comfort of consumerism, people return to the things that bring real comfort in life: home, love, and family.² The idea that a post-September 11 world can no longer be called a ‘rehearsal’ resonates with the dominant feeling of change in the days and weeks following the attacks. Yet, while it is true that the US suddenly had to face the facts on their actual state of national security, it is both remarkable and paradoxical that a name-brand designer filled in the gap—in most literal terms, the gap that the Twin Towers had left—by promoting ‘reality’ clothes and accessories. Are ‘real’ clothes different from normal clothes? In the words of Jean Baudrillard, the US can never go back to the Real, for “reality is a principle, and it is this principle that is lost” (28). Decades ago, the apparently stable notions of reality and truth were uprooted and deconstructed by poststructuralism and commodified by mass consumerism. In the contemporary US, commodification takes place at a rapid pace: “[O]bjects become

1 For more information on Kenneth Cole’s advertisement series, cf. Stamelman 16-17; or Scott.

2 This is where I want to make a link with the literary perspective of ‘New Sincerity.’ Since the 1990s, Dave Eggers and others associated with McSweeney’s magazine and publishing house have criticized postmodern irony, cynicism, and detachment, and advocated community and engagement. They proclaimed the end of the relativism and ‘anything goes’ mentality of certain strands of postmodernism and the start of a new period of hope and sociocultural engagement. Correspondingly, Foer shows a concern with ‘traditional’ values of family, love, and home. This, together with a new faith in the redemptive power of (trauma) narrative, based on a psychoanalytic perception of trauma, can indicate an effort to move beyond the postmodern impasse and into the new post-September 11 world.

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fetishes, events myths, persons celebrities: and all three, products” (Stamelman 15). Kenneth Cole's advertisements offer an ironic realization of this process.

While it can be questioned that September 11 prompted a return to a state of reality, it cannot be denied that it was one of the most traumatic events of our contemporary period, and it is this characterization of September 11 as a (national) trauma that forms the backbone of my analysis. For many, the collapse of the towers was so traumatic that it “defie[d] [...] any form of interpretation” (Baudrillard 13). There was a consensus to describe September 11 as an event that was “beyond words,” beyond the limits of linguistic representation (Versluys, “Art” 986). In fact, Kristiaan Versluys argues that the events of September 11 were “so traumatic that [they] shatter[ed] the symbolic resources of the individual and escape[d] the normal processes of meaning-making and cognition” (“Art” 980). Despite its public character, September 11 was to a large extent a personal trauma, which, for many, unequivocally started a new period of time.

Thus, the post-September 11 world feels different, more real. At the same time, the contemporary postmodern condition of society has resolutely destabilized this concept of reality. This discrepancy between a perceived state of reality and the awareness that this notion is a construction problematizes the articulation and representation of an event so traumatic and real as September 11. How can such an event be truthfully reflected in literature and art? How can the traumatic Real be translated into our symbolic realm of words and images? What is the value of narrative for the process of handling such a traumatic event? This essay seeks to answer these questions by a theoretical renegotiation of trauma and its representation, and offers an analysis of Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* to illustrate the theoretical proposition. The basis of my argument is the Freudian psychoanalytic theory of trauma, which is epitomized in Sigmund Freud's method of the talking cure and explained by his interpretation of dreams. To structure the essay, I discuss psychoanalytic theory prior to analyzing *Extremely Loud*. Also, in my discussion of the novel, I distinguish between its content and its form, focusing on the latter. Challenging contemporary trauma theory and its emphasis on the ‘excesses of the Real,’ I claim that Freudian psychoanalysis is concerned with the ‘how’ instead of the ‘what’: Its object of analysis is the construction of trauma in the (Lacanian) Symbolic rather than its inscription in the Real. Demonstrating that *Extremely Loud* can function as a Freudian talking cure, I argue that a psychoanalytic perception of trauma can reinforce the value we attach to language and literature in the process of handling traumatic events.

RECLAIMING FREUD: PSYCHOANALYSIS AND THE TRUTH OF TRAUMA

Contemporary trauma theory emerged in the 1990s and was largely represented by former students of Yale deconstructionist Paul de Man. He was part of the most significant group of American scholars affiliated with Derridean poststructuralist ideas during the late 1960s and early 1970s. These Yale deconstructionists emphasized the vocabulary of joy, freedom, and freeplay that had accompanied Derrida's 1966 groundbreaking lecture "Structure, Sign and Play." Their emphasis on the implosion of meaning initiated an approach to literature that resembled the existentialist outlook characteristic of the postmodern condition, which subsequently influenced the emerging group of scholars in the humanities who focused on trauma. The rise of trauma studies in the humanities was the result of a broader cultural contact with trauma: The decades-long silence on the Holocaust was broken as more and more testimonies were given, and the Vietnam War brought back to the US severely traumatized veterans. The atrocities of the Holocaust and the problems of its representation especially influenced these trauma scholars. The development of a vast field of trauma studies can also be linked to an increased interest in the role of memory in the historical and cultural debate. As Dominick LaCapra argues, memory sites are "generally sites of trauma" (qtd. in Klein 140), and memory's concern with the Other, those groups and individuals once oppressed and excluded, elevates trauma to the site of analysis.³

In publications and projects such as the Holocaust Trauma Project at Yale University, scholars like Dori Laub, Shoshana Felman, and Cathy Caruth laid the groundwork for a new theory of trauma. While psychoanalytical insights into the nature and impact of trauma influenced the work of these former students of de Man, their poststructuralist belief in the autonomous and referential structure of language caused them to focus on the 'unrepresentability' of trauma. Because of the limits of language, and its alleged inadequacy to represent reality, trauma is said to be beyond words. As Ann Kaplan argues, for these scholars, trauma has "affect only, not meaning" (34). Linguistic representation is problematic, or even impossible, because of the difficulties inherent to the system of language. The narrow focus on dissociation

3 As Andreas Huyssen points out, "memory has become a cultural obsession of monumental proportions across the globe." Our contemporary society's extremely high 'turnover' of present into past has resulted in a changed perception of time. The need to remember is sanctified in the endless construction of 'sites of remembrance.' Memory became the antidote to the hegemonic practices of traditional history and is often associated with terms such as 'personal,' 'fragment,' 'identity,' 'witnessing,' and 'testimony.' Here, the link with identity politics and the 'return of the repressed' is swiftly made, and these are the connotations that link memory to the contemporary fascination with trauma. Cf. Huyssen 26; Klein 138; or Nora.

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and the “discourse of the unrepresentable” (Berger qtd. in Klein 137) resulted in an idealization and near sanctification of trauma. As Kerwin L. Klein argues, contemporary trauma theory

represents itself as an engagement with postmodernism and appeals to the ineffable—the excess, the unsayable, the blank darkness, the sublime, or some other Absolute whose mysteries can be grasped only by those initiatives armed by the secret code. (137)

It is this concern with the ‘excesses of the Real’ and the ‘Real of trauma’ characterizing this approach to trauma that should be underlined because it forms an antithesis to the Freudian psychoanalytic approach to trauma.

For Freud, the most important characteristic of trauma is its *nachträglichkeit*: the belated experience. This is closely related to the way trauma is registered, or, in fact, not registered (Lacan, *Language* 207). Because a traumatic experience is so unforeseen, and its impact so threatening and harmful, the experience is temporarily ignored by a person’s consciousness. In this sense, trauma is an experience that is not experienced and therefore lost. It is effectively the loss of a loss, or: the absence of loss. This means that the trauma itself cannot be known and only reveals itself in a (compulsive) repetition of the event in dreams and thought, and through a reoccurrence of fragments of the event (screen memories). Whereas Freud was conscious of the problems of such a negative inscription for traumatic recovery, his method of the talking cure stresses the importance of verbalization. The talking cure is the most significant aspect of Freudian psychoanalysis. It has been emphasized to such an extent that psychoanalysis itself is now generally considered to be a method of treatment in which a patient verbalizes thoughts, fantasies, and dreams—often through free association—whereupon the therapist seeks to expose the unconscious conflicts that lie at the root of the symptoms. In this respect, psychoanalysis is the talking cure (Lacan, *Language* 235).

The Lacanian concepts of the Real and the Symbolic can help to explain Freud’s understanding of trauma. Jacques Lacan’s Real is the prelinguistic stage which can never be completely grasped. When we, in childhood, go through the mirror stage, we enter the Symbolic, which is the realm in which we live: “language and the imaginary or the iconic, that within the ‘network of signifiers’” (Lacan qtd. in Olivier 32). This entry into the Symbolic creates a permanent state of lack, a desire for the Real, which Lacan describes as “l’objet petit a” (Storey 79). Situating trauma in the realm of the Real, Lacan describes our experience of a traumatic event as a ‘missed encounter.’ To explain this, he refers to Aristotle’s concepts of the ‘tuché’ and the ‘automaton’ (qtd. in Olivier 36). The automaton denotes the realm of the Symbolic; tuché describes the

realm of the Real. Encounters with this always-elusive Real occur throughout one's life, and this is what Lacan calls the missed encounter:

The function of the tuché, of the real as encounter—the encounter insofar as it may be missed, insofar as it is essentially the missed encounter—first presented itself in the history of psychoanalysis in a form that was in itself already enough to arouse attention, that of trauma. (qtd. in Olivier 36)

Thus, for Lacan, trauma's main characteristic is the impossible encounter with the Real in which it is constituted. We can never completely reach or represent this traumatic Real. Nevertheless, this existence of a Real as an ontological state of being 'outside,' or prior to our system of signification, does not give Lacan reason to conclude that trauma is beyond words. As he argues, "nature as Nature is always an articulation of culture: the Real exists, but always as a reality constituted (that is, brought into being) by culture—the Symbolic" (Storey 79). Drawing an analogy between (human) nature and trauma, it can be concluded that trauma exists in the Real, but only because, and after, this has been established in the Symbolic. In other words, "the world of words [...] creates the world of things" (Lacan, *Four* 72). This realization that the Real only exists in the Symbolic demonstrates that the essence of psychoanalytic treatment, the talking cure, signifies the moment or place where trauma is constituted.

That trauma only comes into being in its symbolic construction is best explained by an analysis of the aspect of psychoanalytic theory Freud is most known for: dream analysis. According to Freud, dreams offer the 'royal road' to the unconscious (356). In this sense, they are an integral part of the talking cure. Yet Freud points out that dreams do not simply reflect the unconscious. Instead, the "latent content" of a dream is transformed by a process of "dream-work" into the "manifest content," which is the dream as it is remembered (46). The latent content here is the unconscious, which does not expose itself for analysis. It would seem natural to assume that the dream's latent content needs to be reached for an effective treatment, since this would bring to light unconscious struggles and wishes, but this is not what Freud's method seeks to do. He focuses on the dream-work, or, in other words, on the process of the production of the dream. In fact, Terry Eagleton argues that for Freud, the "'essence' of the dream is not the raw materials or 'latent content,' but the dream-work itself: it is this 'practice' which is the object of analysis" (156). Freud neither strives to reach the Real of trauma, as he realizes it can only be known in its belated form, nor does he consider this traumatic Real to lie beyond reach in a prelinguistic realm, because the 'essence' of the dream—and the 'essence' of the unconscious—is the way in which it is produced, as his method of dream analysis points out. In other words, Freudian psychoanalysis is

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concerned with the 'how' instead of the 'what': Its object of analysis is the construction of trauma in the Symbolic rather than its inscription in the Real.

It is the psychoanalytic talking cure that undermines the need to lay bare the truth of trauma in its 'real' form since it "brings the truth of trauma to the scene of analysis the only way it is able: *it repeats it as an experience in the presence*" (Belau, par. 19). In essence, nothing is lost in trauma because the lost origin never existed. Consequently, it can be concluded that trauma functions solely in the Symbolic. As Linda Belau argues, "while trauma itself may be proper to the real, the failure of its inscription is registered in the symbolic. Because of this, the real of trauma can be said to be inherently symbolic" (par. 32). Reminiscent of Lacan's *l'objet petit a*, the cause of human desire for a prelinguistic state of being—the desire for the prelinguistic state in which trauma is inscribed—will also prove to be an illusion.

In response to the postmodern focus on language as a 'prison house' or 'endless labyrinth,' and echoing Freud's argument that the dream-work is the essence of the dream, Belau points out that it is "*only through language that there can be an unspeakable*" (par. 20). Obviously, it is difficult to deny that trauma is an exceptional experience. One only has to be reminded of the debate on 'historicizing' the Holocaust.⁴ Yet there is a certain idealism in contemporary trauma theory's conception of trauma as ultimately inaccessible for it ascribes a 'knowledge' to victims and survivors of trauma and reduces acts of witnessing to incomplete (or failed) acts of empathy. Contemporary trauma theory misinterprets the psychoanalytic notion that trauma posits a loss, a missing piece. This loss is interpreted not as a hole or void, but as a prohibited content (Belau, pars. 25-36). In the end, this is what creates a deadlock for the process of working through, and (indirectly) witnessing, traumatic experiences.

A Freudian psychoanalytic approach to trauma does not undermine the complexity and severity of the experience, yet resists the notion that the trauma is ultimately unrepresentable and thereby provides the foundation for a working through of trauma, and a platform for (public) sharing, empathy, and debate. Extending the scope of the

4 The immense trauma of the Holocaust, its scale and intensity, posed direct problems for its historicization. The event was considered to be 'outside of history' as historicization requires contextualization, and therefore risks 'normalization' of such a traumatic event. In Germany, the dispute culminated in the 1986-88 *historikerstreit*, in which Ernst Nolte and Jürgen Habermas debated the 'uniqueness' or 'comparability' of the Holocaust. In the broadest terms, as LaCapra argues, the debate focused on the need for critical self-reflection in historiography. Similarly, Theodor W. Adorno's criticism on literary, visual, and other artistic 'representations' of the Holocaust problematized the event's integration into our collective cultural system of signification. His claims that "writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (34) and that "commodification equals forgetting" (qtd. in Huyssen 31), though often misinterpreted, have become powerful statements in the study of contemporary literature. Cf. Adorno 34; or LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust*.

Freudian conception of dreams and trauma to the realm of literature and art, it becomes clear that these expressive practices should not be analyzed as mere reflections of a reality, but as forms of producing a reality. This is exactly where the value lies for trauma narratives such as *Extremely Loud*, and for literature in the broadest sense.

***EXTREMELY LOUD* AS A FREUDIAN TALKING CURE**

The direct aftermath of September 11, 2001, saw a “crisis for fiction and writing” as the traumatic nature of the events, and their scale and proximity, disillusioned every author attempting to describe what had happened (Houen 421). *Extremely Loud* was one of the first novels to deal directly with the trauma of September 11 and would become the most widely read on the subject. Demonstrating that *Extremely Loud* can function as a Freudian talking cure, I want to focus on the novel’s unconventional form, in a formalist belief that a novel’s complete ‘content’ is equally determined by form and content.⁵ It is the novel’s form that effectively exposes the complexity of trauma and engages the reader in the process of understanding traumatic experiences such as September 11. In addition, as the phased meaning-making process is so explicitly dependent on the forward movement of time, mourning seems to be preferred over melancholia as the best way to deal with trauma. Evoking the photographs’ bodily affect, yet firmly placing the images and other formal experiments within a narrative framework, *Extremely Loud* does not resolve the traumas or offer the notion of closure, but seeks to “wrench trauma out of the realm of the inarticulate and nudge it towards expression” (Versluys, “Art” 995). In doing so, *Extremely Loud* functions as a Freudian talking cure, and, as such, can aid in the process of dealing with the trauma of September 11.

Extremely Loud is set in New York City in the direct aftermath of September 11 and tells the story of Oskar, a young boy traumatized by the death of his father in the

5 In order to establish the functioning of the novel in terms of traumatic recovery via textual representation it is important to distinguish between the novel’s content (plot and character development) and the novel’s experimental form. Obviously, a division between form and content is only possible in theory. In practice, these concepts are inseparable. Moreover, because they have been used, evaluated, and reevaluated throughout the history of literary theory and criticism, it is impossible to apply these terms without pointing out their complexity. For these reasons, it has to be admitted that the concepts ‘form’ and ‘content’ are not perfect. Yet such a distinction is useful for an analysis of *Extremely Loud* as a trauma narrative, as its form gives a particular dimension to the novel that cannot be found in an analysis of the novel’s plot and characters.

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collapse of the Twin Towers. When hiding in his father's closet, Oskar finds a key with the word 'Black' on it and sets out on a quest through New York City to find the owner. Gradually, Oskar's story merges with that of his grandparents: Both Grandma and Thomas Sr. are survivors of the allied bombing of Dresden in February 1945 and suffer severely as a consequence. Grandma and Thomas Sr. had known each other in Dresden, through Anna, Grandma's sister and Thomas Sr.'s first love, who was pregnant when she lost her life in the bombing. Years later, Grandma and Thomas Sr. meet again in a Broadway bakery and decide to marry as "an acceptable compromise" (84). They set up certain rules, create 'Something' and 'Nothing' places in their apartment and never talk about the past. Yet, when Grandma breaks the first rule of their marriage by becoming pregnant with Oskar's dad, Thomas Sr. abandons Grandma and leaves for Dresden. There he writes daily letters to his son in which he completely lays bare his personal life and history. These letters function as separate chapters in the novel, all named 'Why I'm Not Where You Are' and followed by the date they were written. All letters remain unsent, except for the one that describes the bombing of Dresden. Thomas Sr. returns to New York after the death of his son, and Grandma allows him to live in the guest room, explaining to Oskar that she has a renter. At a certain moment, Thomas Sr. leaves for the airport, and, afraid to lose him once again, Grandma follows him. Here she writes a number of letters to Oskar, which appear as independent chapters in the novel, all bearing the heading 'My Feelings.'

Thus, the novel consists of three narrative strands: Oskar's quest, Thomas Sr.'s letters and notebook entries, and Grandma's letters. In the novel, we can find multiple pictures, blank and illegible pages, in-text corrections in red ink, name and index cards, and full-color pages from an art-supply store. Often, the formal and typographical experiments are linked to one of the narrative strands: Grandma's chapters, for example, are characterized by short sentences and more than usual spacing, whereas Thomas Sr.'s letters soon become illegible by a lack of spacing. Oskar's chapters are most lively and colorful, as they incorporate the most pictures and full-color ink.

***EXTREMELY LOUD'S* CONTENT: A MELANCHOLIC RESPONSE TO TRAUMA**

When analyzing *Extremely Loud*, it is useful to distinguish between the Freudian concepts of 'mourning' (or working through) and 'melancholia' (or acting out). The difference between mourning and melancholia is that the latter prevents one from moving on because it forces a psychological fixation on the (traumatic) past. Mourning suggests the process of moving on, literally working through the memory of the

traumatic experience. Initially, the novel seems to be symptomatic of a melancholic response to trauma. Indeed, as Mitchum Huehls points out, “almost unanimously, book reviewers have pronounced Foer’s inventiveness as pathological and compulsive as Oskar’s” (50). All the characters in the novel seem to suffer from melancholia: Thomas Sr. lost the ability to speak after his wife died in the Dresden bombings, Grandma desperately tries to live but suffers from feelings of guilt and a general emotional detachment, Oskar wants to give meaning to the death of his father but finds it hard to feel secure in a post-September 11 world. This causes him to invent risk-free elevators and taxis, bruise himself, play his tambourine in unfamiliar neighborhoods, and “[zip] up the sleeping bag of [him]self” (Foer 6). Problems with the communication of trauma can be found throughout the novel: in Thomas Sr.’s notebook and his tattooed hands, in Grandma’s ribbonless typewriter, in the ‘Something’ and ‘Nothing’ places in their apartment, and in the bracelet Oskar makes for his mother, which is a translation of his father’s last message into Morse code. All these elements demonstrate that the characters cannot articulate their traumas or express themselves in the symbolic realm. In fact, often there is only a bodily manifestation of trauma. For example, it is only when Grandma sees that she is bleeding through her shirt that she realizes that her son has died: “That was when I knew that I knew” (224).

On this level, *Extremely Loud* is predominantly concerned with issues of trauma and representation, and makes explicit the difficulties the characters face in trying to communicate their traumatic experiences. The novel also provides insight into the symptoms of trauma and underlines its (inevitable) bodily manifestation. It investigates the multiple and serious complications of a representation of trauma within the Symbolic and exposes the limitations of language in this process. In doing so, it does not undermine trauma’s severity or complexity and thereby safeguards its integrity in dealing with these issues. Nevertheless, this constitutes only part of the novel’s functioning as a trauma narrative. Its form contributes to this on a more abstract level.

EXTREMELY LOUD’S FORM: READING AS PRODUCTION

Already in the first chapter, Oskar narrates how he used to play a game with his father called “Reconnaissance Expedition” (8). This particular segment of the novel can be used as a tool to understand how the novel functions as a whole, and how to interpret the interplay between form and content. For Oskar’s last expedition, his father gave him a map of Central Park without providing any further clues. Oskar desperately tries to give meaning to the things he finds, but is kept in the dark: “The more I found, the

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less I understood" (10). When connecting the dots on the map of Central Park that mark the places where he dug up something, he points out, "I could connect them to make almost anything I wanted, which meant I wasn't getting closer to anything" (10). The random structure of the dots resembles the ostensible arbitrariness of the structure of the novel as a whole. Indeed, Huehls points out that there seems to be no logic behind the different functions of each of the formal experiments:

Sometimes it claims actually *to be* the thing that we are reading about (e.g. the colored handwriting or Oskar's book) while at other times it seems merely content *to represent* that thing (e.g. the cards, letters, and elements of Grandfather's letters) [...] Lacking an internal and consistent logic, this undecidability has given reviewers good cause to chastise Foer. And yet, I would like to entertain the possibility that such undecidability might be the point. (50)

To understand the functioning of *Extremely Loud* as a trauma narrative, we should focus on Huehls's observation that the "undecidability might be the point." This also becomes clear in the novel itself: When Oskar has dug up several things in Central Park, he wonders which of them represent clues and which are just things. He is desperate to know how to know when he is right. In reply, his father says: "Another way of looking at it would be, how could you ever be wrong?" (9). In this way, there is neither a right nor wrong interpretation of the things Oskar dug up. Furthermore, this implies that the dots on the Central Park map, and the novel itself, do not have a fixed interpretation or meaning. Thus, the undecidability itself is the clue, which tells us how we should read the novel and how we should engage with its content. On the whole, the process of 'connecting the dots' of the novel's structure requires active reader participation. To make sense of the novel, the reader needs to take part in the meaning-making process and directly engage with the novel's unconventional form.

The result of this active reader participation is that he or she can better understand the complexity of trauma and the problematic 'translation' of a trauma such as September 11 into the realm of words and images. This can open up a space for (secondary) witnessing which can facilitate the working through of personal traumas. As Steven Atchison points out in his preface, "Foer [...] uses concepts of co-creating, by inviting the reader to fill in the gaps or participate in the formation of the text, as a means to amplify a moral awareness of handling difficult representations." Drawing attention to the problematic representation of trauma, the novel's form prompts self-reflection on the issue of handling trauma. Since the focus is on the process of understanding, a reader can put his or her story next to the characters' stories, and reflect on the possible results and worth of certain responses to trauma. Thus, while the novel's content already exposes much of the complexity of trauma, its form

further draws the reader into it as it shifts the focus from the plot to the processes of meaning-making and understanding.

In addition to active reader participation, the incorporation of formal techniques creates a specific temporal form, which can be linked to the notion of time passing and the process of mourning traumatic experiences. The meaning or function of the images, blank pages, name cards, etc. only becomes known through the process of reading. This means that the meaning and relevance of certain images is only understood when read within the novel's narrative framework. This not only relates to the images and other formal experiments, but also to the novel's disjointed structure, which makes sure that the reader constantly has to renegotiate his or her knowledge, and "never lands on a stable or true understanding" (Huehls 50). For example, Oskar can narrate a certain event in the novel's first chapter that will be described later, from a different viewpoint, in one of Thomas Sr.'s chapters. This phased process of understanding implies that we should adopt a certain method of handling trauma. A novel that embraces and emphasizes the movement of time in the process of understanding (the novel's plot or trauma) seems to suggest that the most effective way to handle trauma is by mourning. As mentioned before, mourning can be said to represent the (forward) movement of time, while melancholia represents time that stands still (at the moment of trauma's impact). These considerations should also be taken into account when analyzing the novel's ending: While the reversed order of the images in the flip-book (326-41), which shows a man falling back (upward) into one of the Twin Towers, suggests that some sort of closure has been reached through the reversal of time, it is only by means of its "cinematic, real-time performance of motion" (Huehls 50) that the flip-book can function. In short, it is only through time's forward movement that the images can be reversed.

The photographs in the flip-book at the end of the novel are just some of the photographs included in *Extremely Loud*. Foer's decision to incorporate these images in his September 11 trauma narrative seems natural considering that the events were so highly visualized. In fact, one of the most important characteristics of our contemporary time period would be its visual and mediated nature, so, in that sense, *Extremely Loud* is a clear product of its time. As Marianne Hirsch argues, photographs can be considered as a "contemporary form of witnessing or even mourning" (71). Interestingly, she uses the word 'mourning' here, which indicates that the images can help in the process of dealing with September 11. Generally, photographs are considered to be counterproductive for traumatic recovery as they freeze time. Their inherent temporal form conflicts with the desired effect of the novel's form. Roland Barthes points out that a photograph is always something "that-has-been" and therefore insists on retrospection, allowing a "return of the dead" each time it is

looked at (9).⁶ This reinforces the link with the pretraumatic past and with the trauma itself. In this sense, photographs can increase melancholia, and their 'platitude,' the little that can actually be seen in the photograph, can abate the emotional reaction to a traumatic experience. As a consequence, looking at photographs can serve as a coping strategy and prevent an effective process of mourning.

However, as Hirsch's statement indicates, it would be wrong to say that the images simply convey a melancholic response to trauma. Photographs have three distinct constructive effects for the process of handling trauma. First of all, when a photograph is taken, it is not yet known what exactly will be in it. This becomes clear when the photograph is developed or looked at on the camera's digital screen.⁷ However short this moment may be, there is a deferred moment of understanding in the act of photographing that resembles the reaction to a traumatic experience. As mentioned before, trauma is not cognitively registered at the moment of impact and therefore only known in its belated form. According to Hirsch, this time lapse, shared by both trauma and photography, can "enable photography to help us understand the traumatic events of September 11" (72). In both cases, a certain amount of time is needed for the processes of meaning-making to start. Secondly, the 'platitude' of photographs does not exclusively flatten emotions. On the contrary, photographs can pierce through layers of protection and emotional distance because of their distinctly bodily affect. As Hirsch explains, "images do more than represent scenes and experiences of the past: they can communicate an emotional or bodily experience to us by evoking our own emotional and bodily memories" (82). Barthes calls this the photograph's 'punctum': It is the "element [that] shoots out [...] like an arrow, and pierces me" (26-27). It is because of this 'wound' or 'prick' that a photograph is more than a representation, since this is what makes a material connection between the photograph's object and the spectator. A victim of trauma can consequently be helped by a photograph: The punctum can evoke certain scenes that were lost in the incomplete registration of the event. In other words, it can provide access to the blind field of the victim's memory. Finally, while the fragmentary nature of a photograph determines its 'platitude,' it also triggers questions on what is missing, on what has not been caught within the frame. In this sense, a photograph is always more than what can be seen within the frame, and indirectly demands further engagement with the

6 Barthes notes that the photograph's referent is always present, yet always already in a deferred state: "It has been here, and yet immediately separated; it has been absolutely, irrefutably present, and yet already deferred" (76-77).

7 It would be interesting to analyze whether the radically reduced amount of time between the act of photographing and the, now digital, presence of the picture has altered the perception of the 'time lapse' between the two moments; unfortunately, this does not fit within the scope of this article.

captured scene. This, together with the time lapse and a photograph's bodily affect, can aid in the process of handling trauma.

Yet it would be ineffective, or even harmful, to seek to evoke photographed scenes without putting them into their proper context. What is needed is the incorporation of these scenes into a narrative framework. Referring to the photographs she took on September 11, Hirsch points out that they all required explanation when she shared them with friends later on (71). Similarly, in *Extremely Loud*, the significance of most formal elements only becomes known when they are placed in the broader narrative framework. The meaning and relevance of the photographs also only become clear when one reads the adjacent pages. For example, the photographs in Oskar's book 'Stuff That Happened To Me' seem to offer a random collection of images, yet, when put into their proper context (Oskar's story), it becomes apparent that they relate to Oskar's quest through New York to find the lock. Thus, it is the combination of the bodily affect and the need for a narrative framework that demonstrates the effectiveness of photographs within trauma narrative.

In short, *Extremely Loud's* complex form exposes the complexity of trauma, and directs the reader's attention to the processes of understanding rather than to the novel's plot. Because the reader continuously participates in the construction of the story, by filling in the gaps and 'connecting the dots,' his or her involvement in the trauma narrative is enhanced, which can open up a space for (indirect) witnessing on the part of the reader. The formal experiments, the novel's disjointed structure, and the incorporation of photographs and other images furthermore underline the importance of a narrative framework for complete understanding. This consequently influences the novel's temporal form, as the meaning-making process is dependent on the movement of time. Valuing the importance of narrative, and preferring the process of mourning over melancholia, *Extremely Loud* seeks to create and confront the trauma of September 11 in the Symbolic, as Freud's talking cure does.

CONCLUSION: SETTING DOWN THE FIRST MARK

Psychoanalysis is often associated with a particular process—and the vocabulary that accompanies it—that runs from personal suffering, via working through, to closure, redemption, and healing. In the aftermath of September 11, the general response in the US has often been labeled in this way. Kaplan points out that the US media were criticized for solely relating to the events through a "therapy-lens" (16). Susan Sontag argues that "[p]olitics [...] has been replaced by psychotherapy." Certainly, these observations are true, and in novels such as *Extremely Loud* the focus is exclusively on

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the personal. In this respect, Pankaj Mishra is right to point out that, in *Extremely Loud*, September 11 could have just as well been “a natural disaster, like the tsunami.” Yet what this article has demonstrated is that there is a valuable aspect in Freudian psychoanalysis that does not so much relate to its discourse of therapy and healing but to its specific approach to trauma, which is epitomized in its method of the talking cure and best explained by Freud's interpretation of dreams.

Extremely Loud can be read as a Freudian talking cure as it makes explicit the processes of meaning-making and understanding. Clearly, the reader is seen as a producer of the text, and the main concern is the reader's process of constructing and experiencing the text. The novel's form negotiates the involvement of the reader in the creation of the story. It draws attention to its ‘constructedness’ by emphasizing absence and difference. This novel does not offer the illusory comfort of a coherent reflection—or representation—of reality. Rather, by exposing the (processes of) production of the narrative, it stresses the problematic representation of trauma at the same time as it values this communicative practice. In doing so, it lays bare the complexity of trauma and its representation, invites readers to indirectly witness the characters' traumas, and helps them to reflect on their own.

When analyzing *Extremely Loud* as a Freudian talking cure, it becomes clear that, instead of offering the reader a story of trauma and healing, it exposes trauma in all its complexity by means of narrativization. It is not despite language that trauma is exposed, but because of language. While language is the main obstacle on the road to recovery for contemporary trauma theory, because it blocks the path to the Real or ‘truth’ of trauma, for Freudian psychoanalysis, language is the solution to trauma. Of course, contemporary trauma theory does not consider the linguistic representation of trauma to be irrelevant or useless. On the contrary, trauma narratives and testimonies are much valued. Yet there is one important difference: the value of language and symbolic representation in and of itself. For trauma theory, literature is to be valued because it is the closest one can get to the Real of trauma. For psychoanalysis, language and literature is valued because it is the place where trauma is constituted and can be exposed.

In a broader perspective, I have pointed out that the post-September 11 world feels different and more real. Nevertheless, since the field of research on the characteristics of this period is still in its infancy, it is difficult to determine the exact levels of change and continuity. In this article, I have attempted to demonstrate that a psychoanalytic perception of trauma can strengthen the importance of trauma narratives for the process of handling traumatic events. When we conceive of trauma narratives such as Foer's in this light, we can move beyond the excesses of postmodern

“serene linguistic nihilism” (Eagleton 160) toward a more practical and real-life interpretation of the value of language and literature.

The return to traditional values and the renewed hope in the redemptive power of literature has been labeled as sentimentalist in the same way psychoanalysis has been criticized for its vocabulary of trauma and healing. Yet these connotations offer a single side of the coin and conceal a valuable aspect of psychoanalysis and trauma narratives such as *Extremely Loud*. For what to do when all truths, meaning, and value have been erased? In response to the crucial question posed by Nicole Krauss, “*Once you’ve given up everything, [...] don’t you have to set down the first mark?*” (112), I want to answer in the affirmative. Likewise, after decades of postmodern relativism and deconstruction, *Extremely Loud* starts the post-September 11 period in its own, new way: It is direct and loud, but also sensitive and hopeful.

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