The Storytelling of Trauma:

Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Everything Is Illuminated* and *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*

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Contents

Introduction…………………………………………………………………………..3

Chapter 1: Mythology and Trauma…………………………………………………..6

Chapter 2: Metatextuality and Trauma………………………………………………16

Conclusion…………………………………………………………………………...24

Works Cited………………………………………………………………………….26

The illustration on the front page is an original photo edit in which the following two photographs have been combined:

*Allied Bombs Fall on Dresden.* Photograph. *The Real Holocaust of the World War Two – The Genocide of 15+ Million Germans.* 2015. Web. 25 June 2015.

Downing, James. *Crash 9/11.* Photograph. *Concertblast.* 2011. Web. 25 June 2015.

Introduction

In an interview with *The Guardian* in 2005, American writer Jonathan Safran Foer talked about the one experience that permanently scarred his childhood (“Something Happened”). When he was eight years old, he was victim of a destructive explosion in a chemistry class at summer camp. He says that this might explain why trauma plays such a big part in his novels (“Something Happened”). In this paper, Jonathan Safran Foer’s novels *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002) and *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005) will be analysed*.* More specifically, the paper will focus on the way in which trauma is processed in the novels, as they address different traumatic experiences. In *Everything Is Illuminated,* the emphasis is on the trauma of the Second World War. In *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, both the trauma of the Second World War and of 9/11 are of great importance.

The word *trauma* stems from Greek and etymologically refers to a physical wound to the body (“Trauma, n.”). In later usage, however, *trauma* more often indicates a wound “inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind” (Caruth 2). According to Uytterschout, a traumatic experience disturbs one’s existing frame of reference to such an extent that it is impossible to view the world in the same way as before the trauma (62). Similarly, Caruth emphasises the aspect of the “unknown,” stating that a trauma “unveils an unexpected reality” (3). This emphasises that a traumatic experience differs dramatically from any previous experience. Visvis mentions that, recently, studies of trauma have discussed whether language is capable of adequately describing such an overwhelming experience as a trauma (89). She explains that, on the one hand, storytelling can function as a “talking cure,” while, on the other hand, language seems to be significantly limited when it comes to dealing with trauma (89). In this way, trauma theory can be connected with literary theory. In Foer’s novels, this connection between trauma and literature has been made as the stories depict the traumatic experiences of the Second World War and 9/11. The thesis statement of this study is: in Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Everything Is Illuminated* and *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, storytelling is used to highlight the hardship that comes with processing a traumatic experience. Jonathan Safran Foer is a prominent American writer and his work has received much attention in the literary academic world. This thesis will provide new input in the field and will further the knowledge of Foer’s work, as the novels have not yet been analysed in this light.

The concept of storytelling in Foer’s novels will be analysed from two perspectives: that of mythology and that of metatextuality. The research method that will be used is a close reading of the novels. First of all, it is interesting to see whether Foer’s novels return to something familiar, namely the age-old tradition of telling myths, when dealing with the overwhelming traumas of the Second World War and 9/11. While mythology is hard to define, in this paper, myths are defined as stories with a clear cyclical structure that contain magical elements. In previous research, Codde has shown that Foer uses the myth of Aphrodite in *Everything Is Illuminated* and that of Philomela in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* when dealing with trauma (“Philomela”; “Transmitted”). This paper will expand upon Codde’s research and provide further evidence for the presence of these myths. What is more, the analysis will show the presence of an additional myth in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, namely that of Pygmalion.

Furthermore, previous research has analysed the use of metatextuality in Foer’s novels. A metafictional text can be defined as a text that is self-reflexive within the narrative genre, namely reflecting on its genre, on its function as narrative form and on its function as fictional presentation (Van Bork et al.). In this thesis, *metatextual elements* refer to those elements that make the reader aware of the fact that they are reading a text and that contribute to the meaning of the text by non-textual means, such as visual elements and narrative structures. Metatextuality is prominent in Foer’s novels. Indeed, Behlman calls *Everything Is Illuminated* a “self-consciously fictive narrative” (59). Moreover, Atchison notes that *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* contains many “meta-textual ruptures” that force the reader to “become more aware of the mimetic representation” (359). This paper will add to previous research by analysing the use of metatextual elements more specifically in connection with trauma. The analysis will concern the narrative structures, genres and visual effects Foer employs in the novels.

Thus, the first chapter of this paper will analyse the use of mythology in the two novels to represent trauma. The second chapter will focus on the presence of metatextuality in connection with trauma. The conclusion will provide a summary of the findings and suggest ideas for further research.

Chapter 1: Mythology and Trauma

While the telling of myths was originally an oral tradition, myths were eventually written down, becoming accessible for many following generations (Morford, Lenardon, and Sham 15). Indeed, Greek mythology, for example, has served as a source of inspiration for many writers. Both of Foer’s novels deal with trauma, and mythology plays an important role in the processing of trauma in both novels. In *Everything Is Illuminated,* the character Jonathan Safran Foer (from now on referred to as Jonathan) writes a myth himself, in which the myth of Aphrodite is reflected, to cope with his third-generation trauma. In *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, mythology is not used to help the characters process trauma, but the use of mythology in the novel emphasises the devastating consequences of trauma. This novel rewrites both the myth of Philomela and the myth of Pygmalion, and the diversions from the original myths further highlight the struggle of dealing with trauma.

First of all, in *Everything Is Illuminated,* mythology is used to cope with third-generation trauma. Considering the Second World War took place 70 years ago, the number of people who have witnessed the war first-hand, who can be called members of the *first generation*, is decreasing. Hirsch puts forward the notion of “postmemory” to describe the effects that trauma has on a third generation, grandchildren of the first generation (107). She emphasises that while the first generation’s memory of a trauma is mediated by recall, the third generation’s is mediated by “imaginative investment, projection and creation” (107), because the first-hand experience from the first generation is less easily accessible to them. Indeed, Behlman states that more distance is created in case of the Holocaust experience because of “the loss of many tangible linkages to the past” (61). As the novel is set in the early twenty-first century, the same distinction between first and third generation can be made in the novel. The characters Jonathan and Alex can be considered members of the third generation, suffering from third-generation trauma, as their grandparents have experienced the Second World War.

Jonathan’s third-generation trauma is visible in his obsession with his grandfather’s war experiences, which he knows barely anything about. He clearly cannot deal with the absence of information about his grandfather’s history and goes on a quest to Ukraine for more information. He sets out to find a woman called Augustine, who he thinks has saved his grandfather from the Nazis. His only lead is a photograph, with Augustine in it, that his grandmother has given to him without any further explanation. It is clear that Jonathan does not want to confront his grandmother with the past: “We couldn’t ask her [Jonathan’s grandmother] anything about it. [. . .] She held on to the photograph for fifty years. If she had wanted to tell us anything about it, she would have” (61). Jonathan’s search ultimately fails. While an unknown history about Alex’s grandfather is revealed, Jonathan does not find the woman in the photograph and does not learn anything about his origins. The resulting struggle with the absence of information is characteristic of third-generation trauma and is connected to mythology in the novel. Instead of writing down his family history based on facts, Jonathan bases his writing on fantasy. Describing this, Alex says: “The less we saw, the more he wrote” (115). Thus, Hirsch’s notion of using imagination and creation to cope with trauma is present in *Everything Is Illuminated*. In fact, to cope with his third-generation trauma, Jonathan creates a mythological story that replaces his unknown family history: the myth of Trachimbrod. This myth is interwoven with the other narrative lines: the novel alternates chapters of Alex’s narrative with Jonathan’s myth.

The story of Trachimbrod is characteristic of a mythological story, considering it contains a clear cyclical structure and magical elements. From the start of the Trachimbrod story, it is clear that it is not a factual account of history as references are made to the uncertainty of facts. For instance, the first sentence reads: “when Trachim B’s double-axle wagon *either did or did not* pin him against the bottom of the Brod river” (8 emphasis mine). As Codde points out, Foer writes the imagined history of his ancestors in a “cyclical mythological pattern” (“Transmitted” 66). The story’s cyclical structure is evident in the titles of the first and final chapter: both are called “The Beginning of the World Often Comes” (8, 267). In addition to Codde’s analysis, it should be noted that the dates “1942-1791” are added to the title of the final chapter, clearly hinting at the ring composition of the story of Trachimbrod. Indeed, the story begins in 1791 with a baby being born from a river and ends in 1942 with, again, a baby being born in a river. Moreover, Hunter indicates that the Trachimbrod myth is “permeated by the fantastic” (14). She claims that magical elements are characteristic of myths and points out many magical elements in the story (15). The Trachimbrod story starts with an event that Hunter calls “apparently magical” (15), namely the birth of a baby from a river. Hunter indicates that also the concept of love is depicted as magical in the Trachimbrod story: love is described as “a magical force that produces sparks of light” (17). Indeed, love produces a glow that is visible from space (Foer 95). Thus, Jonathan’s story can be considered a myth because of the clear presence of a cyclical pattern and many magical elements that are common in myths.

What is more, within the Trachimbrod story, Jonathan reiterates the myth of the Greek goddess Aphrodite (Codde, “Transmitted” 65). He uses Aphrodite’s myth to fill in the blanks of his family history. Indeed, Hunter indicates that myths are often used as “substitute narratives” that help deal with “an unknowable past” (3). In his Trachimbrod myth, Jonathan imagines Brod as his “great-great-great-great-great-grandmother” (16). This character Brod is Aphrodite’s counterpart. While Codde does not further examine the similarities between Aphrodite and Brod (66), it is interesting to point out a few. Like Aphrodite, Brod is born from water. Moreover, Brod’s birth is accompanied by the death of her father Trachim, just as Aphrodite’s birth is accompanied by the death of her father Uranus. Aphrodite is the goddess of beauty, love and marriage and reflects “the idealization of womanhood in all her femininity” (Morford, Lenardon, and Sham 186-187). Similarly, Brod is overtly connected to love: “Love itself became the object of her [Brod’s] love” (80). Love is even literally personified in Brod: “She loved herself in love, she loved loving love, *as love loves loving*” (80 emphasis mine). For Jonathan, the myth of Aphrodite is appropriate in particular because Aphrodite is origin of a new lineage: the lineage of Trojan hero Aeneas. Drawing the parallel with Brod, Jonathan imagines the fictional character Brod as the missing origin of his own lineage. Indeed, throughout the Trachimbrod story, Jonathan constantly reminds readers of the fact that they are reading about his ancestors: he mentions his “great-great-great-great-great-great-grandfather” Yankel (42), his “great-great-great-great-great-grandfather” (94) and there are many other references to ancestry.

The theme of third-generation trauma is further explored withinthe Trachimbrod myth. Jonathan uses his ancestor Brod to explain some parts of his own identity that, due to third-generation trauma, he does not know the origin of. For example, in Alex’s narrative, it becomes clear that Jonathan is a vegetarian. He cannot give Alex a good explanation for this, but he merely says: “It’s just the way I am” (65). He later creates an explanation in the Trachimbrod myth by writing how Brod, as a child, very consciously chooses not to eat meat. She says to Yankel, her stepfather: “Don’t you think it’s strange, Yankel, how we eat them [animals],” and later on: “I won’t eat them, at least not until it doesn’t seem strange to me” (77). Furthermore, Jonathan lets his love for writing originate from Brod. He imagines her having a journal, that she, just like him, “must have kept [. . .] with her at all times” (80). What is more, Jonathan even explains his relationship between him and his grandmother by creating a parallel in Yankel and Brod: “In reality she [Brod] hardly knew him [Yankel]. And he hardly knew her. They knew intimately the aspects of themselves in the other, but never the other. [. . .] They were strangers, like my grandmother and me” (82). Moreover, Jonathan imagines an explanation for his family name Safran, as he writes how Brod names his great-great-great-great-great-grandfather Safran: “So Brod named him Safran [. . .] (And it was this Safran for whom my grandfather [. . .] was named.)” (136). Another parallel can be drawn between Jonathan and Brod. Like Jonathan, Brod has no family history and her family history is filled up, just like Jonathan’s, with stories: “Yankel made up a story about her [Brod’s] mother’s early death [. . .] and answered the many questions that arose in the way that he felt would cause her the least pain” (48). Thus, by creating a mythical story, Jonathan not only fills up the blanks of his family history, but also creates explanations for parts of his own identity through his imagined ancestors.

In Foer’s *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close,* mythology emphasises the hardship that comes with dealing with trauma. First of all, the myth of Philomela in the novel shows the damaging effect of a traumatic experience on the ability to express oneself. Codde calls this myth “one of the earliest literary renditions of a traumatized mind” (“Philomela”246). Ovid’s version of Philomela’s myth tells the story of Philomela visiting her sister Procne, wife of the Thracian king Tereus. Tereus violates Philomela, cuts out her tongue and locks her up in a stone building in a forest. As she is unable to talk to anyone about what happened to her, she makes a piece of embroidery that tells the story of her crime (Morford, Lenardon, and Sham 591). The myth goes as follows: “Her mouth, dumb, could not tell of the crime. Yet sorrow is inventive, and cunning is an ally in distress. Skilfully she hung the threads from the barbarian loom and interwove purple scenes with the white threads, telling of the crime” (591). She sends the embroidery to her sister, who understands from the embroidery what has happened and rescues her sister from the hands of her husband. The myth symbolises how hard it can be to talk about a traumatic experience, as Philomela is literally silenced afterwards. Indeed, Codde states that the myth of Philomela “is a beautiful though horrible allegory of one’s inability to testify about traumatic events” (246). Philomela eventually replaces verbal communication with communication through a different medium, in her case art: embroidery.

The theme of communicating a traumatic experience through a different medium than speech is omnipresent in Foer’s *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close.* However, the novel diverts from the original myth*.* Philomela’s myth shows that, when it is impossible to speak about a traumatic experience, communication via a different medium can help to bring the same message across. Philomela uses embroidery to explain what happened to her sister and her sister immediately understands her. While the characters in Foer’s novel use a different medium than speech when they have become muted due to trauma as well, the result is miscommunication rather than immediate understanding. Codde states that this “suggests a bleaker view on Foer’s part than in Ovid’s tale about the feasibility of successfully bearing witness to loss” (247). Indeed, by diverting from the original myth in this crucial aspect, the novel emphasises the extreme hardship that comes with communicating after a traumatic experience.

First of all, Oskar suffers from losing his father in 9/11. Oskar’s trauma seems to be magnified by the missed calls and the voicemail messages left by his dad. When Oskar came home from school on 9/11, his father, trapped in one of the Twin Towers, had left several voicemail messages on the answering machine. Oskar has kept these voicemail messages, his father’s last words, hidden from his mother. He says: “I couldn’t tell her about what happened with the phone. That secret was a hole in the middle of me that every happy thing fell into” (71). Thus, Philomela’s inability to talk about her traumatic experience to her sister is mirrored by the fact that Oskar is unable to talk to his mother about these voicemails. Codde points out that Oskar makes a bracelet that is the equivalent of Philomela’s embroidery (247). Unable to tell his mother about his father’s voicemails, Oskar tries to communicate with her about it using Morse code: “what I did was I converted Dad’s last voice message into Morse code” and he goes on explaining how he converted the Morse code in beads for the bracelet (Foer 35). However, while Philomela’s sister “decodes” the message Philomela encrypted in the piece of embroidery, Oskar’s mother does not decode the Morse code in the bracelet. After Oskar realises this, he once more seems to want to communicate about it through speech with his mother, but fails: “Mom?” “Yes?” “Nothing” (36).

Similarly, Oskar’s grandfather Thomas is muted by a traumatic experience, namely the Dresden bombing. During the bombing, he lost Anna, the love of his life. The novel shows how he gradually loses the ability to speak: word by word, he eventually becomes completely mute. His muteness is evidently a result of his traumatic experience, as the first word he loses is “Anna” (Codde 247). This quite literally shows that he is unable to talk about his traumatic experience. Just like Philomela, Thomas uses a different medium than speech to communicate with the people around him. He tattoos the words *yes* and *no* on his hands. Moreover, he uses notebooks, which he calls “daybooks” (28), to write down what he wants to express but can no longer say: “I started carrying blank books [. . .] around, which I would fill with all the things I couldn’t say” (17-18). Because of his muteness, when Thomas calls Oskar’s grandmother to restore contact, he can only bring his message across by tapping the numbers corresponding to the letters of the words he wants to say into the phone. Thomas writes: “I broke my life down into letters, for love I pressed ‘5, 6, 8, 3’” (269). Codde indicates that he thus creates “another coded message” (247), another version of Philomela’s embroidery. The tattoos on Thomas’s hands, his daybooks and the coded message on the phone clearly show Philomela’s theme of communicating through a different medium when the medium of speech is no longer available due to a traumatic experience.

Similar to what happened with Oskar’s bracelet, Thomas’s improvised way of communicating does not bring his message across. Codde mentions that Oskar’s grandmother does not understand his grandfather when he types his message in bleeps on the phone (247). Expanding on Codde’s analysis, it is interesting to note that also Thomas’s daybooks turn out to be an insufficient means to convey his muted words. Thomas only has a limited number of pages to fill each day, namely one daybook of pages, and often fills up his daybooks before the end of the day. Thus, he is forced to use old pages to communicate, not quite bringing the message across that he wants to: “[T]he best I could do was flip back through the daybook and find the most fitting page to recycle, if someone asked me, ‘How are you feeling?’ it might be that my best response was to point at, ‘The regular, please’” (28). Again, Foer’s novel diverts from the original myth as the alternative means of communication results in miscommunication rather than in mutual understanding, thereby emphasising the inexpressibility of trauma.

 An additional myth can be identified in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, namely that of Pygmalion. The myth of Pygmalion is used to show the inability to accept the devastating consequences of trauma. Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* tell the story of Pygmalion who sculpts a statue of a woman and falls in love with it (Morford, Lenardon, and Sham 188). Eventually, Aphrodite, goddess of love, makes the statue come to life. This myth is reflected in the story of Oskar’s grandparents. Like Pygmalion, Thomas likes to make sculptures. In fact, in a letter he writes to Oskar’s grandmother, he states: “I want to be a sculptor, and I want to marry your sister. Those are my only dreams. I could write more, but that is all that matters” (80). This shows how his dream of being a sculptor and his dream of being with Anna are connected: the two combined make for his deepest wish. After the bombing of Dresden, Thomas does not sculpt any more. Just like his dream of spending his life with Anna has vanished after the bombing, his dream of being a sculptor seems to have disappeared. It is only when he is reunited with Oskar’s grandmother, Anna’s sister, that he takes up sculpting again and has her pose for him. However, Oskar’s grandmother then realises that he is not sculpting her, but that “[h]e was sculpting Anna” (83). The myth of Pygmalion takes centre stage in Foer’s novel when it becomes clear that Thomas does not merely want to sculpt Anna, but that he wants to bring her back to life by sculpting her. Indeed, Oskar’s grandmother writes: “He was trying to remake the girl he knew seven years before” (83). The similarities with the myth of Pygmalion are clear: just like Pygmalion wants his statue to come to life, Thomas sculpts Anna hoping to bring her back.

Similar to the myth of Philomela, the myth of Pygmalion in the novel diverts from the original. While in the original myth Aphrodite can bring Pygmalion’s sculpture to life, Thomas cannot bring Anna back to life through sculpture in the novel. Thus, instead of trying to make Anna come alive from clay, Thomas starts sculpting Oskar’s grandmother’s *body*, which is most similar to Anna’s. He tries to recreate Anna by positioning Oskar’s grandmother the right way. Oskar’s grandmother writes: “The positioning took longer and longer. He touched more of me. He moved me around more. He spent ten full minutes bending and unbending my knee. He closed and unclosed my hands” (84). Indeed, Oskar’s grandmother realises: “The *positioning* was the sculpting. He was sculpting *me*. He was trying to make me so he could fall in love with me” (84 emphasis mine). Thus, the myth of Pygmalion is used in the novel to symbolise the inability to accept that loss and the tendency to recreate what is lost. The novel’s diversion from the myth creates a darker picture than the myth. Where in mythology it is possible to bring a sculpture to life, in reality Anna is lost forever. Thomas’s sculpting of Oskar’s grandmother’s body shows movingly that he is unable to deal with this reality.

 In conclusion, mythology plays an important part in both *Everything Is Illuminated* and *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* in connection with trauma*.* In *Everything Is Illuminated,* Jonathan uses mythology to deal with his third-generation trauma. The Trachimbrod myth replaces his absent family history, mirroring the myth of Aphrodite, and provides an explanation for some of his own characteristics. Thus, the gaps left in Jonathan’s family history and in his own identity are filled up with mythology. In *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, both the myth of Philomela and the myth of Pygmalion are present*.* The myth of Philomela depicts the inability to talk about a traumatic experience and the myth of Pygmalion emphasises the struggle of accepting loss. The diversions from the original myths highlight the immense struggle that comes with trauma. The happy endings shown in the myths – Philomela’s piece of embroidery is understood and Pygmalion’s sculpture comes to life – simply do not apply to the traumatised worlds in Foer’s novels. All in all, while mythology helps Jonathan deal with his third-generation trauma in *Everything Is Illuminated*, it is impossible to incorporate mythology fully in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, which emphasises the hardship that comes with trauma.

Chapter 2: Metatextuality and Trauma

The previous chapter shows that Foer uses mythology throughout both *Everything Is Illuminated* and *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* to deal with traumatic experiences. This chapter will take a metatextual perspective and will analyse in what way the metatextual elements of narrative structure, genre and visual effects are connected to trauma in the novels. Caruth suggests that sufferers of a traumatic experience usually write in a narrative structure that does not show events linearly and contains confusing timespans (4-5). Similarly, Langer indicates that chronological narration and other “normal” modes of representation of trauma are inadequate means for expressing traumas (15-6). This reflects the fact that the initial reaction to trauma is one of total incomprehensibility (Uytterschout 63). First of all, this chapter will show that the complex narrative constructions and juxtapositions of genre in both novels make a linear reading impossible, similar to a traumatic narrative. Thereafter, the chapter will focus on the metatextual element of visual effects. In both novels, these effects give the reader a sense of chaos, of incomprehensibility, that is characteristic of trauma.

Both novels have complex narrative structures that make for an achronological timeline, preventing a linear reading of the novels. *Everything Is Illuminated* has two narrators, Alex and Jonathan, and three narrative lines: Alex’s account of what happened when Jonathan visited Ukraine, Jonathan’s previously discussed mythological story about Trachimbrod and Alex’s letters to Jonathan. While each narrative line in itself is chronological, the novel creates an achronological timeline as it alternates between Alex’s account, Jonathan’s myth and Alex’s letters. Similarly, *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* contains three narrative lines: Oskar’s narrative, Oskar’s grandmother’s letter to Oskar, and Oskar’s grandfather’s letter to his unborn child. Just as the narratives in *Everything Is Illuminated*, the narrative lines in this novel are chronologically mixed up. The multiplicity of narratives in both novels makes for a disrupted or non-linear storyline because of the discontinuities in the chronology. In this way, the metatextual element of narrative structure transfers feelings of chaos and incomprehensibility that are characteristic of trauma to the reader.

The juxtaposition of genre, another metatextual element, has a similar effect in the novels. Abrams and Harpham indicate that the genre of a text can establish expectations for the reader that “alter the way that a reader will interpret and respond to a particular work” (150). The reader cannot establish such a pattern of expectation for either of Foer’s novels, because they contain multiple genres. In *Everything Is Illuminated,* the genre of myth in Jonathan’s narrative is contrasted with the realist genre in Alex’s letters and in his account of what happens. In *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close,* the epistolary genre of Oskar’s grandparents’ narratives is juxtaposed with Oskar’s real-life account of what happens when searching for the lock. Similar to the achronological timeline in the novels, this switching between genres creates a sense of chaos for the reader and prevents a linear reading of the novels.

Furthermore, the metatextual element of visual effects creates a sense of chaos in the novels too. Collado-Rodriguez states that in fiction about traumatic experiences, experimental techniques, such as visual effects, often symbolise the posttraumatic condition (63). Jonathan’s myth in *Everything Is Illuminated*, created specifically to deal with third-generation trauma, contains many experimental techniques. Indeed, Propst states that Jonathan’s myth “accommodates multiple genres, definitions of real and imagined words, and chronology that moves forward and backward” (46). More specifically, the myth experiments with visual effects, which can be connected to Jonathan’s trauma.

An example of a visual effect in Jonathan’s myth is the structure of a family tree that he spreads over a whole page (259). The family tree is a “flow chart” created by the villagers of Trachimbrod to “make sense of their memories” (259). Instead of containing names of family members, the flow chart contains memories such as “[d]eath by drowning” and “[w]hite string” that represent events previously described in the myth (259). This visual effect of the flow chart is connected to and emphasises Jonathan’s third-generation trauma. As previously mentioned, Jonathan uses the myth to fill up the gaps in his family history. However, he will never be able to create a family tree based on memories, such as the flow chart in his myth, because it is precisely those memories and that factual information about his family history that Jonathan does not have access to.

Another instance of a visual effect in Jonathan’s myth that is based on typography can be found in the Book of Antecedents. In this book, the inhabitants of Trachimbrod write down all that has happened in their town. When they have written down everything up until the present time, the writers of the book “report its reporting” (196). Almost two pages of Jonathan’s myth are filled with the words “*We are writing… We are writing…*” repeated again and again (212-3). This creates a strong visual effect that, again, points at Jonathan’s struggle with the absence of information about his family history. Jonathan’s failed search for Augustine has left him with no factual information to write down, with no events that could be written down in his family history book. His personal family Book of Antecedents would be empty. Nevertheless, Jonathan feels the need to write. Where the inhabitants of Trachimbrod write down the fact that they are writing, Jonathan writes his myth. Thus, this visual effect emphasises the need to write, even when there is nothing factual to write about because of an absence in family history.

When Jonathan’s myth reaches its climax with the narration of the bombing of the shtetl, another typographical effect occurs. Foer does not present the scene, but instead “substitutes its description by a series of dots stretching over two pages” (Codde, “Keeping” 678). The first sentence after these two dotted pages begins with: “After the bombing was over” (272). Thus, Jonathan avoids linguistically representing the traumatic experience by replacing it with a visual effect. Codde states that the typography here suggests the trauma’s inexpressibility in language (678). Thus, this visual effect is connected to Jonathan’s trauma as well. More specifically, it visualises the inability to write about a traumatic experience.

Alex’s narrative seems to refrain from these experimental techniques at first sight. However, when Alex’s grandfather’s traumatic experience is unveiled in the story, visual effects become part of Alex’s narrative too. Indeed, Collado-Rodriguez states that “it is only when Alex’s grandfather decides to talk about trauma that experimentation becomes a feature in the young Ukrainian’s account” (63). It can be suggested this is due to Alex’s third-generation trauma. Just as Jonathan, Alex suffers from third-generation trauma through his grandfather. During their journey in Ukraine, Jonathan and Alex uncover the story of what happened to Alex’s grandfather in the war. As it turns out, to save his own family, Alex’s grandfather was forced to betray his best friend Herschel to the Nazis by literally pointing him out as a Jew. As a result, Alex’s grandfather is plagued by a feeling of guilt and he thinks of himself as Herschel’s murderer, saying “I murdered him,” even though the Nazis killed Herschel (228).

Because of his third-generation trauma, Alex feels vicarious guilt for his grandfather’s betrayal of his best friend Herschel and this is shown in the visual effects. Throughout Alex’s account of what happens in Ukraine, Alex keeps interrupting the narrative, asking Jonathan to alter the story in favour of his grandfather. He wants to omit or change the part of the story in which his grandfather admits to the betrayal of his friend. The interruptions directed at Jonathan are put in brackets, a visual effect in typography. Alex starts with subtle requests to leave certain parts out of the story. As the story approaches Alex’s grandfather’s confession of what happened in the war, the number of interruptions increases and Alex even directly asks Jonathan to alter the story: “(You could alter it, Jonathan. For him, not for me. Your novel is now verging on the war. It is possible.)” (145). In one of his letters to Jonathan, Alex asks: “I beseech you to forgive us, and to make us better than we are. Make us good” (145). This shows the influence of third-generation trauma. Alex is intertwined with his grandfather’s trauma to such an extent that he feels he has to be forgiven himself. In the chapter that includes Alex’s grandfather’s confession, more and more is written in brackets (244). In fact, Alex’s grandfather’s confession is entirely written in brackets (247-252). This symbolises Alex’s struggle to admit what happened. Feuer states that Alex writes this part of his narrative in brackets because “this part is too hard for him to write” (34). Alex puts the most crucial and, for him, painfully truthful words in brackets. Hence, he uses the metatextual element of typography attempting to hide his grandfather’s betrayal, for which he feels vicarious guilt.

Moreover, when Alex narrates the confession, another visual effect using typography occurs. As Collado-Rodriguez indicates, “his testimony is reproduced as a stream-of-consciousness narrative, a chain of sentences without any punctuation” (63). The absence of punctuation clearly points at Alex’s struggle with his grandfather’s trauma as it suggests that Alex cannot bear to spend more time writing the confession than necessary. Indeed, the third-generation trauma is more present than ever. Just as the boundaries between the sentences and words blur because of the absence of punctuation and spaces, so the boundaries between Alex and his grandfather’s identities fade. Alex confuses himself with his grandfather: “I also pointedatHerschel and I also said heisaJew” (252). Thus, the absence of punctuation is connected to Alex’s third-generation trauma as it demonstrates Alex’s guilt for his grandfather’s deeds during the war.

Similarly*,* visual effects are a prominent feature in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close.* Uytterschout points out that Foer incorporates visual interludes in the novel to reflect the disruptive nature of trauma (61). He states that 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” (61). He suggests that, in this way, the “the incomprehensibility of trauma,” with which all three characters are trying to cope, is reinforced on a “metatextual level” (68). Likewise, Atchison states that these instances of “meta-textual representation amplifies the inability to communicate” (359). Indeed, as *Everything Is Illuminated,* *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* contains many visual effects, such as typography, and these contribute to the previously mentioned feeling of chaos in the novel.The visual interruptions of the narrative make the narrative nonlinear and less comprehensible.

A clear example of a visual effect is to be found in Thomas’s narrative. While writing the letter to his son, Thomas runs out of blank pages to write on. The distance between the lines becomes smaller and smaller until, eventually, he writes over the previously written words. Two pages of indecipherable sentences follow, filling the page with black ink (282-3). This visualises that Thomas can never fully explain what happened to him in the past: he can never fully convey his traumatic experience. Indeed, Uytterschout states that the readers’ inability to decypher Thomas’s words emphasises the inaccessibility of Thomas’s trauma. What is more, he states that Foer tries to “involve the reader as an active participant in the unravelling of trauma” by making the text incomprehensible (71). The reader has to participate actively in the reading of the text to making sense of what is written.

Typography is used once more to visualise incomprehensibility when Oskar visits the psychiatrist Dr. Fein. When Oskar listens in on a conversation between his mother and Dr. Fein, he can only hear parts of the conversation. This is visually mirrored in the narrative: the reader gets to read only fragments of the conversation and the rest of the page is left blank (203-6). Uytterschout argues that this shows that Foer denies the reader the position of an omniscient narrator (69). Indeed, instead of letting the reader in on what is said, the reader is put in the same position as Oskar. Both reader and Oskar are trying to make sense of the incomprehensible conversation. Again, the reader has to become actively involved in the story.

In addition to the typography, the pictures that pop up throughout the novel create a visual effect. The pictures are included in the novel because Oskar has collected them for his scrapbook. The novel itself is, in fact, Oskar’s scrapbook called “Stuff That Happened to Me” (42). The reader is presented with “Oskar’s collection of photographs, recording of narratives, gathering of letters from Grandfather and Grandmother” (Atchison 360). Apart from showing Oskar’s journey in search of the lock, the pictures also depict Oskar’s trauma. This is mostly evident in the picture of the falling man. This picture occurs several times throughout the novel. Uytterschout states that Oskar, who does not know exactly how his father died in 9/11, *wants* to believe the falling man in the picture is his father “so that he can stop inventing more horrible ways in which his father might have died” (72). Thus, just as Jonathan fills up the gaps in his third-generation trauma with a myth, Oskar fills up the gaps of the trauma of losing his father with a picture. Moreover, just as Alex wants to in *Everything Is Illuminated,* Oskar tries to change the course of history. Uytterschout states that Oskar desires to “undo time” when he reverses the order of pictures of the falling (72). The novel ends with a visual effect: when flipping through the last pages, the man seems to float back up to the building. Thus, the visual effect of the pictures of the falling man portrays the difficulty of accepting a traumatic experience.

What is more, it is important to look at the influence of the genre of the scrapbook. Atchison stresses that a scrapbook gets its meaning from the context given to it by its creator (361). The readers of the novel, of Oskar’s scrapbook, are outsiders and need an explanation “to comprehend the meaning of the mementos” from the scrapbook (Atchison 361). However, Oskar fails to provide this explanation. Like the previously mentioned visual effects, this also forces the reader to become actively engaged in the story. Atchison argues that the readers “start to reconstruct and make connections as they progress through the meta-textual narrative” (361). The reader takes on Oskar’s perspective in trying to make sense of what seems incomprehensible.

It is interesting to note why the reader has to become an active participant in the story. When reading the novel, the reader witnesses a testimony of a traumatic experience and thereby becomes what Atchison calls a “secondary witness” (366). Atchison states that the reader has an “ethical responsibility to be fully present” when being a secondary witness (366). This idea is also present in the novel when Oskar confesses to William Black about the voice mail messages. Oskar asks Black for a physical confirmation of his presence before he can continue to tell him about the voicemail messages. When Black is sitting next to Oskar, passively listening to the story, Oskar asks: “Could you please put your hand on me so I can finish the rest?” (301). Likewise, the metatextual elements in the novels, namely the multiplicity of narratives and the visual effects, force the reader to become an active reader: to be a present witness of the trauma narrative.

All in all, the metatextual elements in both novels create a feeling of incomprehensibility for the reader that is characteristic of trauma. In both novels, the multiplicity of narratives result in interrupted timelines that make a linear reading of the text impossible. Moreover, both novels use visual effects to demonstrate the struggle with presenting trauma. Typographical anomalies occur in both novels and are connected to the traumatic experiences that the novels deal with. These visuals also tend to make the narrative less comprehensible for the reader and force the reader to become an active participant in the text. Just as the characters suffering from trauma struggle with what happened and try to make sense of the traumatic experience, the reader struggles while reading the novels because of the metatextual elements that make for a nonlinear reading. This turns the reader into an active secondary witness of trauma, which carries an ethical importance*.*

Conclusion

This paper has shown how the use of mythology in *Everything Is Illuminated* differs from that in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*. In *Everything Is Illuminated,* Jonathan writes a myth himself and uses the myth of Aphrodite as inspiration. Mythology provides a means for Jonathan to fill up the blanks of his family history: the Trachimbrod myth substitutes his family history and, using the myth of Aphrodite, Jonathan clearly wants to demonstrate that Brod is his origin. Thus, mythology helps him to cope with his third-generation trauma. In *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, mythology is present in the rewritings of existing myths. The storyline does not adhere to the original storyline of the myths and exactly these diversions from the original myth emphasise the hardship that comes with processing trauma. The novel rewrites the myth of Philomela and clearly shows the theme of finding a way to communicate about trauma when one is unable to talk about it. While the original myth has a happy ending, as Philomela’s alternative means of communication results in understanding, in Foer’s novel alternative means of communication result in misunderstanding. This emphasises the struggle to communicate about a traumatic experience. The myth of Pygmalion has been incorporated yet slightly altered, too. While the statue in the myth of Pygmalion turns to life, the novel shows the harsh reality of the characters’ traumatised world in which sculptures do not come to life. Thus, the myth is used to portray the struggle of moving on after loss.

Moreover, the way in which metatextual elements represent the trauma in the novels has been analysed. Contrary to the different uses of mythology, the metatextual elements have a similar effect in both novels. The multiplicity of narrative lines and the visual effects, such as typographical anomalies and pictures, create a sense of incomprehensibility for the reader that is characteristic of trauma. These metatextual elements make a linear reading of the text impossible and force the reader to become an active participant when reading the text. This stresses that the readers of the novel have the ethical responsibility to be present while witnessing this narrative of trauma.

All in all, two clearly distinct ways in which storytelling is used to represent trauma have been analysed. Mythology is used to help coping with trauma and, on the other hand, to highlight how the characters struggle with their traumatic experience. The metatextual elements contribute to this second aspect, as they stress the incomprehensibility that trauma creates. Indeed, metatextuality creates a feeling of chaos for the readers that those traumatized usually experience. Thus, in *Everything Is Illuminated* and *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close,* storytelling is used to draw attention to the traumas in the story, making the readers aware of the immense impact traumatic experiences have.

Further research could explore the way in which other aspects of storytelling are connected to trauma in Foer’s novels, considering the concept of storytelling is not limited to mythology and metatextuality. For example, it would be interesting to analyse the use of intertextuality, as references to Shakespeare’s plays occur in both novels. What is more, several short stories within the novels, such as the fable of the Whisps of Ardisht in *Everything Is Illuminated* and the story of the Sixth Borough in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close,* have not yet been analysed in connection with trauma either. Moreover, a more detailed analysis of the pictures used in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* could possibly provide further evidence for the connection between visual effects and trauma in the novel.

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