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Naam: D.G.J. Veldhuijzen

Studentnummer: 3916774

Datum en handtekening: 28-08-2017

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Faithfully Adapting a Child's Voice for the Screen

A Critical Analysis of Narrative Strategies in the Film Adaptations of Jonathan Safran Foer's

*Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* and Emma Donoghue's *Room*

MA Thesis Literature Today, Utrecht University

Name: D.G.J. Veldhuijzen

Student number: 3916774

Thesis supervisor: dr. Paul Franssen

Second reader: prof. dr. Ton Hoenselaars

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Topic Description and Research Questions

As Salman Rushdie states, “literature is the place where you can find truth” (qtd. in Lichter). Literary texts give “a level of news which is much more profound than what’s being offered in the so-called news media” (Michael 7). For this reason, the response to traumatic events is often to “call in the novelists – experts at imagining the unimaginable” (Houen 419). By producing other narratives than the news gives, novels can contribute to the understanding of traumatic happenings, which raises the question how authors should write about trauma.

Richard Gray notes that one way of writing about traumatic events “is to tell it aslant, to approach it by circuitous means, almost by stealth” (136). It can be stated that Jonathan Safran Foer in his book *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, which deals with 9/11, and Emma Donoghue in her novel *Room*, which is inspired by the Josef Fritzl case, apply this method as they both use a young narrator to tell the story. The effect is that the focus does not lie on the traumatic event itself but on the traumatic experiences of innocent victims. This approach resulted for both *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* and *Room* in winning many literary prizes and being *New York Times* bestsellers. Moreover, soon after their publication dates, the books were adapted into films. This brings the question forward how the child’s voice is transmitted to a different medium. Hence, this thesis will examine whether the narrator’s voice is faithfully adapted and, consequently, how the film adaptations convey the traumas of the protagonists.

This comparison between source texts and film adaptations links to the fidelity debate among adaptation scholars. In the past decades, there has been an inconclusive debate about the importance of fidelity with regards to adaptations. Some scholars claim that, to a certain degree, adaptations should be faithful while others, especially in the last few years, argue that looking at fidelity is unproductive. This ongoing debate raises the questions whether

adaptations should faithfully adapt significant elements of the source texts and if fidelity is a fruitless notion. These questions will both be answered in this paper as well.

Through comparing the film adaptations with their source texts, it will be illustrated that the two films adapted the voices of the young boys faithfully, answering the first question. Surprisingly, one film, the adaptation of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, failed to give the same insights as the novel did precisely because it faithfully adapted the narrator's voice. This thesis thus gives the following answer to the fidelity debate: although adaptations should not always have to be faithful, fidelity is still an interesting notion and should not be forgotten completely as it can explain the success and failure of adaptations.

### *1.2. Thesis Walkthrough*

Because there are many different theories and concepts tying into this thesis, it is necessary to outline the different steps. Firstly, an overview of adaptation studies will be given and the fidelity debate will be outlined. This will bring forward the three research questions of this thesis, namely if it is possible to faithfully adapt the narrative voice to the screen, whether adaptations should faithfully adapt essential elements of the source text, and if fidelity is indeed an unproductive concept.

Secondly, in chapter 3, the definitions of trauma and trauma literature will be explained, clarifying that trauma is nowadays seen as a wound inflicted upon the mind and that trauma literature portrays this suffering by transmitting personal experiences. The voice used in novels dealing with trauma is, as a result, one of the significant elements because it can trigger emotions and give insight into human suffering. Therefore, according to some adaptation scholars, this voice should be faithfully adapted. Whether the film adaptations faithfully adapted this significant feature will become clear in chapter 5.

Thirdly, close readings of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* and *Room* presented in chapter 4 will affirm that these novels can be considered as trauma literature. It will become clear how the voice of the young protagonists, and how they deal with trauma, is articulated in these novels. Additionally, the reception of these books is taken into account, showing that although many reviewers are not positive about the voice in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, both novels trigger emotions and give insights into traumatic experience, which is the goal of trauma literature.

Fourthly, the adaptations of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* and *Room* will be compared to the novels and the film techniques used to adapt the narrative voice will be examined in chapter 5. This analysis will affirm that the film adaptations of these novels faithfully adapt the narrator's voice, answering the first question of this thesis. The reception of these films will reveal that the adaptation of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* failed as it, according to these reviewers, did not give insight into traumatic experiences precisely because it adapted the narrator's voice faithfully. In contrast, *Room* is praised by film critics for the protagonist's voice and perspective and did succeed in giving these insights.

Lastly, it will be concluded that the comparison of the novels and film adaptations answers the final two research questions and that this thesis replies to the fidelity debate as follows. On the one hand, adaptations should not always be faithful to the source text, as the film adaptation of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* failed because it faithfully adapted the narrator's voice; on the other hand, this research shows that the notion of fidelity should still be used as it can shed light on the reception of adaptations.

## 2. Adaptation: From Novel to Film

When film adaptations were first made in the beginning of the twentieth century, many critics saw these films as “crude usurpations of literary masterpieces that threatened both literacy and the book itself” (Cartmell and Whelehan, *Screen Adaptation* 2). Virginia Woolf, for example, called people who went to the pictures the “savages of the twentieth century” (172). Nowadays, adaptations are regarded in a more positive light and an adaptation is of “*scholarly interest in its own right*” [original emphasis] (Cartmell and Whelehan, *Screen Adaptation* 14). However, before looking at the aforementioned novels and films, the concept of an adaptation should first be defined.

The most important characteristic of an adaptation is that when a work is adapted, the adaptation usually “signals a relationship with [the] informing source text or original” (Sanders 26). Contrary to appropriations, which distinctly move away from their sources, an adaptation makes it clear that a specific work was adapted, for example by using the same title. It should be noted that even though an adaptation always “implies that which is adapted” (Emig 20), an adaptation “transcends mere imitation” (Sanders 15). In other words, this connection between an adaptation and its source text does not mean that adaptations are always completely faithful to the original. The fidelity of adaptations has been subjected to considerable debate for many decades. Therefore, these fidelity debate should be further explained in order to grasp the concept of an adaptation.

### 2.1. The Fidelity Debate

In the late 1950s, one of the key texts of adaptation studies was published, namely George Bluestone’s *Novels into Film*, which is seen as “the first full-length study of literature and film” (Cartmell and Whelehan, “A Short History” 1). In this work, Bluestone argues that fidelity should not be used to analyse adaptations since these studies “tell us nothing [...], let



alone how to judge” adaptations (5). Nonetheless, adaptation studies acquired approaches “from the literary departments built on the pillars of the fidelity, canonicity and hierarchy of the source text over the derived one” (Frago 48). As a consequence, the fidelity debate emerged among adaptation scholars.

On the one hand, mainly because most of the earliest texts on adaptation were written by English literature scholars, scholars argue that adaptations should faithfully adapt the significant characteristics of the original. For example, Hala Bentley refers to the “benefits” of adaptations as they can encourage people to read the source text (143) and Charles Eidsvik calls a film adaptation “a ninety-minute free ‘ad’ circulated to millions of people” (258). These remarks imply that film adaptations should “communicate or evoke some essential features associated with the texts they are adapting” (Leitch, “Introduction” 7). These essential features are often called “the spirit of the original work” (Beja 81) or the “uniqueness of the original text” (Andrew 99). These scholars thus argue that source texts contain essential features, which should be faithfully adapted.

On the other hand, scholars remark that adaptations should be seen as, to a certain degree, independent objects. This latter view has become more dominant in the past decade. For example, German E. Vargas comments that “there is more to literary adaptation than fidelity” and film adaptations should not be seen as “imitations of literature” (98-99). Linda Hutcheon adds that in this age “the ‘success’ of an adaptation [...] can no longer be determined in relation to its proximity to any single ‘original’” (xxvi). Robert Stam agrees and concludes that “‘fidelity’ is an inadequate trope” (62). There are more scholars who affirm this view by saying that fidelity is “basic and banal” (Welsh and Lev xiv), “a rigid concept” (Sanders 9), and “fruitless” (Leitch, “Adaptation” 64). Hutcheon further argues that an adaptation should be described as a transposition of another work while, at the same time, it should be seen as a “creative *and* an interpretive act of appropriation” (Hutcheon 8).

Especially because adapting texts always “involves both (re-)interpretation and (re-)creation”, an entirely faithful adaptation is not possible and the concept of fidelity is unproductive (Hutcheon 8). As Jarrell Wright also says, “the closest a film could come to being a perfectly faithful adaptation of a novel would be for it to display the novel’s scrolling text on the screen” (177). With regards to adapting a novel for the screen, specific cinematic restrictions and conventions influence how the source text is adapted. Adapting a novel into a film is therefore called a “transposition,” meaning that a text is changed “by means of the aesthetic conventions of an entirely different generic process” (Sanders 20). In short, these scholars argue that comparing source texts and adaptations in light of fidelity is unproductive as the quality of the adaptation is not related to faithfulness and the adaptation will necessarily have to be adjusted according to the new protocol.

However, changes made in transpositions should not be ascribed to this adaptation process too hastily. Film “is a much more potent and flexible medium” than it is usually thought of in adaptation studies (Wright 178). With regards to presenting the narrative voice, many film scholars note that multiple film techniques can be used to convey this voice, which will be discussed in further detail in chapter 5. For this reason, it is interesting to focus on the child’s voice with regards to *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* and *Room* as it shows how films can faithfully adapt the narrative voice.

In this section, it has been clarified that some scholars argue that adaptations should faithfully adapt significant elements of source texts. Nowadays, most scholars remark that the concept of fidelity is inadequate. This raises the three research questions of this thesis: Firstly, whether it is possible to faithfully adapt the narrative voice of novels. Secondly, if fidelity is a necessity with regards to significant features and, thirdly, if the concept of fidelity is indeed unproductive. In order to answer these questions, trauma literature and the essential elements of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* and *Room* will be examined next.

### 3. Trauma and Trauma Literature

The word ‘trauma’ originates in Ancient Greek and used to refer to damage or a wound to the body. Nowadays, trauma “is understood as a wound inflicted [...] upon the mind” (Caruth 3). Most scholars agree that because trauma arises after a catastrophic event, it refers to “a state of mind where you meet the outermost borders of meaning” (Göran 373). In other words, after surviving a traumatic event, the reality of trauma victims and, consequently, the “sense of self has been shattered” (Herman 61) as they move suddenly “*from reality as an effect of representation to the real as a thing of trauma*” [original emphasis] (Foster 146). Because trauma victims experience this sense of a shattered reality, they have to adapt to a new world, i.e. the world after the traumatic happening, in order to overcome their trauma.

Trauma literature tries to portray this healing process of trauma victims. The difficulty for writers, according to Lawrence Langer, lies in the fact they have to make this process “accessible to the mind and emotions of the reader” (xxi). By doing this, trauma literature tries “to tell us of a reality or truth that is otherwise not available” (Caruth 4). In depicting a trauma victim’s struggle, these texts attempt to express personal stories and create different narratives about the traumatic happening than the news media does. In other words, novels dealing with trauma reinforce “diverse perspectives/voices from the chaos of unique experiences” (Atchison 106) and “allow readers to ‘feel into’ someone else’s experience” (Manning 33).

The importance of being able to imagine being someone else, is argued by many scholars. For example, Martha Nussbaum claims that the possibility to generate empathy is a significant ability of novels as emotions function as “intelligent parts of our ethical agency” (41). Although emotions can be unreliable, Nussbaum remarks that emotions are “necessary for the full understanding of what has taken place” (41). She gives the following example: when a loved one dies, there must be grief in order to comprehend the death. Feeling grief

sheds light on what is important as “emotions embody some of our most deeply rooted views about what has importance” (Nussbaum 42). Because trauma literature can generate emotions, these novels can help with comprehending the traumatic happenings. Novels have a significant role in this understanding because, as Rebecca Solnit argues, “we navigate” by stories (Solnit 3). Emma Hutchison and Roland Bleiker also emphasise that “emotions can be considered forms of insight and judgment” (392). The use of a child as narrator in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* and *Room* can be seen as a way to bring about these emotions as an “innocent narrator [evokes] narrative empathy” and this emotion can thus “trigger transformation deep within” (Sharma 144).

It can be questioned, however, whether trauma literature is able to actually cause lasting transformations. The difficulty is that the representation of human suffering through art risks reducing the horror of the traumatic happening. This risk is noted by Theodor Adorno when he writes the following about genocide: “when genocide becomes part of the cultural heritage in the themes of committed literature, it becomes easier to continue to play along with the culture which gave birth to murder” (189). Because literature might be showing “aesthetic beauty and provoking mimetic pleasure” (Bells and Slater 8), it might reduce the horror of the traumatic event and, as a result, does not give readers lasting insights. On the other hand, as Adorno notes, human suffering “also demands the continued existence of art” as “in art alone that suffering can still find its own voice” (188) and writers should, therefore, continue to write about trauma. For this reason, Gerd Bayer remarks that what is needed is a “counter-narrative to the dominant modes of celebrating positive historical moments and, alternatively, of amnesia and repression” (90). These counter-narratives can be given by trauma literature as the personal tragedies depicted in these novels can give insights into human suffering and can, as a consequence, make a lasting impact. When in chapter 4 the reviews of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* and *Room* are examined, it will become

evident that these reviewers indeed remark that they, for example, think differently now about 9/11 or sexual abuse.

In short, trauma can be understood as the experience of a shattered sense of reality. Trauma literature attempts to portray the struggle of trauma victims in order to bring about emotions and give the reader insights into trauma. As a result of using a child's voice, Foer and Donoghue speak to the reader's emotions and convey a specific perspective on a traumatic event, giving insight into this personal struggle as a result. Therefore, it can be concluded that the child's voice is a significant element of these novels, as it can be seen as the "uniqueness" or the "spirit" of the books (Andrew 99; Beja 81). In the next chapter, the use of this narrative form will be further analysed and, in chapter 5, the question whether the film adaptations faithfully adapted the narrative voice, as it is a significant element of the novels, will be answered.

#### 4. The Novels: A Child's Voice and Trauma

When examining trauma literature in the previous chapter, it was argued that triggering emotions and giving insights into traumatic happenings through telling personal stories is one of the most important goals of these literary texts. This chapter will argue that the voice of the protagonist in Jonathan Safran Foer and Emma Donoghue's novels is able to cause these emotions and give insight into trauma. For this reason, *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* and *Room* can be categorised as trauma literature and the narrator's voice can be seen as a significant element of these novels.

Starting with *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, the narrator's voice and his traumatic experiences in the aforementioned novels will be studied. This will make it apparent that these novels transmit trauma by concentrating on the innocent victim rather than on the traumatic event itself. The reception of each book will further be discussed, showing that the reviewers note that they were emotionally touched and that the novels give insights into traumatic experiences.

##### 4.1. Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*

Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* was published in 2005 and tells the story of a nine-year-old boy, Oskar, who lost his father in the 9/11 attacks. Before looking at Oskar's voice and traumatic experiences, it should be noted that Oskar tells most of the story, but his grandparents share their experiences of the bombing of Dresden in 1945 through multiple letters. Although these letters are interesting to study since they link traumatic events together through history, which does make it significant that these letters are left out of the film adaptation, this thesis examines the child's voice and personal experiences and, as a consequence, these letters will not be analysed.

#### 4.1.1. Voice and Perspective

This section will discuss how Oskar is being portrayed in the novel and how he tells his story. The examination of Oskar's voice and narrative will show that he is a young boy with a filtered worldview. At the end of this chapter, it will be concluded that *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* does not focus on the traumatic event itself but on the innocent victim, which is symbolised by Oskar being a child.

The fact that Oskar is a young child of only nine years old becomes immediately clear when he makes remarks such as that he “know[s] a lot about birds and bees, but [he doesn't] know very much about the birds and the bees” (Foer 192). Oskar also drinks “Juicy Juice” boxes throughout the novel (87), he is “tucked” in by his mother at night (315), and she often reads bedtime stories to him. Although Oskar symbolises this childlike innocence, he is also a figure of childlike selfishness in other passages. For instance, when Oskar has a fight with his mother, he tells her that she “should have been home” on 9/11 even though she was at work and this was “impossible” (169). This fight escalates and Oskar yells that if he “could have chosen, [he] would have chosen [her]” to have died rather than his father (169). Furthermore, Oskar has a difficult time accepting that his mother is also grieving. He, for example, thinks she does not cry and remarks that she “should have been adding to the Reservoir of Tears”, i.e. crying (52). It can be said that Oskar is “the detective, the spoiled brat, and the angel of the story all at once” (Bell 29). In other words, Oskar depicts this typical behaviour of young children and his voice brings with it a child's perspective of the world.

As all individuals do, Oskar sees the world in a particular way. He often tries to fit everything into his own, limited, reality. For instance, the first chapter of the novel is called “*What the?*” (Foer 1). This question is repeated throughout the book, demonstrating that Oskar is questioning everything, but further displaying that he has a hard time with understanding this new reality. As Arin Keeble remarks, his story “is always presented in the

terms of his limited (as a sheltered nine-year-old) point of view” and this view is, as a result, “limited to one traumatized boy” (64). Sometimes it is affirmed that Oskar has a limited perspective through actual gaps. For example, when he overhears parts of a conversation between his mother and his therapist, there are pieces of this conversation missing. Oskar hears “*expect too much too quickly*” then nothing and this is followed by merely words, such as “*you?*” and “*what*” [original emphasis] (Foer 203). Oskar’s limited worldview becomes apparent in other ways too. For instance, Oskar thinks Ron, who is a friend of his mother, never cries, but Ron corrects him and says that he cries “all the time” (315). In these moments, Oskar becomes aware of his own limited view and, consequently, the reader as well.

These examples illustrate that *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* is narrated by a nine-year-old boy and that he has a limited perspective of the world, which has consequences for how his trauma is illustrated in this novel. Because Foer’s *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* is a novel about 9/11, the child’s voice “is identified with trauma” (Versluys 98). Therefore, the next part of this chapter will demonstrate how *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* portrays Oskar’s trauma.

#### 4.1.2. Trauma and Recovery

It has become apparent that Oskar’s behaviour is typical for a young child and that he filters the world in a particular way. It will be argued next that Oskar has many symptoms trauma victims experience. Furthermore, because *Extremely Close & Incredibly Loud* articulates Oskar’s trauma and healing process, it can be said that this novel tries to give insight into the traumatic experiences of an innocent victim.

The first noticeable symptom of trauma is the fact that Oskar’s notion of reality has been shattered. Oskar constantly remarks that his whole world has changed. For example, he



often says that nothing makes sense since 9/11, as becomes clear when he thinks the following: “*DAD doesn’t make sense. [...] The stars that I know are on the other side of the gym ceiling don’t make sense*” (Foer 146). As was said in chapter 3, trauma victims have to rebuild their sense of self and their reality. That this is not easy is exemplified by Oskar. He has an “extremely difficult time doing certain things, like taking showers, for some reason, and getting into elevators, obviously” (36). Oskar avoids the subway as it is an “obvious target” (194) and he sometimes imagines what would have happened to him if he had in one of the towers during 9/11. He keeps thinking what he would choose, “jump or burn” (244). This question ties in with Oskar’s obsession with how his father died as his death makes no sense to him. Oskar even remarks that he feels like he is “in the middle of a huge black ocean, or in deep space” and that everything is “incredibly far away from [him]” (36). In other words, Oskar feels lost and he tries to make sense of the world after 9/11, which is typical of a trauma victim.

Oskar also shows symptoms of self-harm. When Oskar feels sad, he gives himself bruises. For instance, when he hears his mother laughing in the other room, he gives himself “a bruise” (Foer 37). He gives himself bruises when he is mad at himself too, such as when he believes he might have missed a clue his father left him and thinks that, if he was alone, he “would have turned [himself] into one big bruise” (295). Judith Herman notes that trauma victims giving themselves pain can be seen as “a pathological soothing mechanism” since it takes their mind off their emotional pain (109). In other words, Oskar, by giving himself bruises, tries to distract himself and to control his emotional well-being.

This self-mutilation is connected to one of Oskar’s biggest troubles, namely that he cannot make his “brain quiet” (Foer 12). He does not just distract himself by self-mutilation, but also by inventing things. Oskar does this mainly at night since he has trouble sleeping. He thinks that, even though “all [he]wanted was to fall asleep at night” (Foer 258), he invents.

However, instead of distracting himself, most of these inventions are connected to 9/11. For example, he invents a device that would be placed on top of an ambulance through which a message could be given to the patient's loved ones. In this way, the patient could say goodbye: "GOODBYE! I LOVE YOU!" (72). Later in the book, it is clarified that Oskar invented this because his own father did not say goodbye nor "I love you" in his last messages (207). Oskar further invents a skyscraper which can be "moved up and down" (3). Oskar remarks that this would be "extremely useful, because if you're on the ninety-fifth floor, and a plane hits below you, the building could take you to the ground" (3). Oskar's inventions clearly illuminate his struggle with overcoming his trauma. It can be said that, through these inventions, Oskar "reinvent[s] the world" and it reveals his desire "to live in a world that has remained free from trauma, in which the unthinkable has not yet happened" (Versluys 99). In short, Oskar's trouble with sleeping and his inability to stop inventing are symptoms of his trauma.

Oskar's obsession with 9/11 and his father's death takes him on a journey through the boroughs of New York, which helps him to overcome his trauma. When Oskar finds a key, which is labelled 'Black,' he sets out and visits as many people with the surname Black as possible. In the beginning, this journey brings him closer to his father, but, as Oskar remarks, he "was getting farther from [his] Mom" (Foer 52). During this journey, he often feels lost and even becomes "panicky about being away from [his] Mom" (201). However, he overcomes many of his fears, such as his fear of the subway and meeting new people. Eight months after finding the key, Oskar finds out that it did not belong to his father. Nonetheless, his journey allows him to reconnect with his mother in the end. Oskar even tells her that "it's OK if [she] fall[s] in love again" (324) and, being reunited with her, he falls "asleep" in his mother's "arms" (324). Oskar reconnecting with his mother can be seen as a sign of him overcoming his trauma as he moves on from his obsession about his father's death.

Oskar's recovery is further signalled when he starts to think of a story his father told him. The story, which can be seen as an allegory for loss, is about the Sixth Borough of New York and goes as follows: once there was a Sixth Borough in New York. This borough was floating away from the rest of New York more and more, but the residents "just didn't want to go" (Foer 220). Oskar's father tells him that "the sidewalks are covered in ice" now and everything is "frozen" (222). As Jen Brandt argues, this story reflects the "characters in the novel that have become 'frozen' in either time and/or place through grief and response to tragedy" (141). Because the citizens had to adapt to a changed reality, as trauma victims have to do too, but did not, they became stagnant. The fact that Oskar thinks of this story again near the end of the novel seems to suggest that he understands this message of having to move on. For this reason, the story of the Sixth Borough, together with Oskar's reconciliation with his mother, symbolises Oskar's recovery process.

Nevertheless, because Oskar's quest can be seen, from the perspective of the reader as well, as "a quest for meaning and insight into the trauma of 9/11" (Keeble 44), the unresolved outcome seems to fail to give insight into this traumatic event. Additionally, in the last pages of the novel, Oskar imagines the events of 9/11 as going backwards. He starts with the photographs of a man falling out of one of the towers, which are also included in the novel, and imagines him flying upwards. Oskar ends this thought process, and the book, with the following sentence: "We would have been safe" (Foer 326). This can be seen as Oskar denying what happened on 9/11 and it would, therefore, suggest that he has not recovered. However, it should be taken into account that this story is told in the past tense. Oskar's narrative thus takes place "some time *after*" he has reversed the photographs and the happenings of 9/11 [original emphasis] (Brandt 143). The fact that Oskar can turn his traumatic experiences into a narrative and that he talks about the aftermath of 9/11 clarifies that he is dealing with and moving on from his trauma. Moreover, the unresolved quest

suggests that a book about 9/11 cannot give the final word on those events and that the novel instead concentrates on the victim's recovery process.

To conclude, through using a young boy's voice, who is an innocent victim and suffers from many symptoms of trauma, such as having trouble sleeping and self-mutilation, *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* focuses on the healing process of an innocent victim. Whether this evokes emotions and give insights into this process, as is the goal of trauma literature, will become clear when the reviews of this novel are analysed.

### 4.1.3. Reception

In this section, the reception of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* will be examined in order to see whether Oskar's voice, and consequently his narrative, triggers emotions and gives insights into traumatic experiences. Both professional and amateur reviews will be used in an attempt to give the fairest illustration of the reception as, sometimes, professionals can see works differently from the general public. In order to be consistent, the earliest amateur reviews, i.e. reviews written as close to the publication date, which is April 2005, as possible, will be used as the professional reviewers published their articles in this period as well. In this way, the amateur reviews reflect the immediate reaction of the public before they are influenced by critical views. The amateur reviews will be taken from the two biggest online book platforms, namely *Goodreads* and *LibraryThing*. This analysis will be used again in the next chapter in order to see whether the film critics had the same response to the adaptation, which will reveal if the film adaptation achieved the same goal of generating understanding about traumatic experiences.

Although Salman Rushdie is quoted on the cover of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* saying that he thinks it is "ambitious, pyrotechnic, riddling, and above all ... extremely moving" (Foer), Foer's novel is criticised by many reviewers. Michiko Kakutani writes that

Oskar “comes across as an entirely synthetic creation” and thinks he is “annoying” (par. 3; par. 4). This is seen as the core problems of the book by most reviewers. Laura Miller remarks that Oskar is a “device serving the author’s purpose rather than a fully imagined human being” (par. 6) and Michel Faber remarks that Oskar triggered “violently allergic reactions” (par. 1). Likewise, amateur reviewers mention that “Foer’s grieving young narrator is a ridiculous creation” (Andy) and they thought him to be “an obnoxious” (Nicole), “not really believable” (Murraymint11), and an “unbearable brat” (Fantasma). Most reviewers, both professionals and amateurs, thus did not like Oskar’s character.

However, when the overall opinion of amateur reviewers is looked at, the novel gets a relatively high rating: 3.97 stars out of 5 on *Goodreads* and 4.1 out of 5 stars on *LibraryThing*. Moreover, multiple reviewers comment that this novel moved them, writing that Foer’s book “broke [their] heart over and over and over again” (Amy) and that this novel “opened [their] eyes and heart” (Clancy). Another amateur reviewer writes that the book is “genuinely insight, thoughtful and heart-breaking” (Niecierpek). Professional reviewers agree as, for example, Kakutani writes that there were moments “of shattering emotion” (par. 2) and John Updike praises Foer’s “excellent empathy, imagination, and good will” (par. 17). These reviews affirm that *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* did trigger emotions.

The question whether this novel gives insight into 9/11 and traumatic experiences is answered when looking at reviews such as the following: “it captures in a very deep psychic sense, all of the details from after[,] around[,] beyond that day and its aftermath” (Anna). Others remark that it “is not just about 9/11” but also about “what it means to make a new life out of the ashes of your old life” (Melissa) and that the novel is about how people, and especially children, “deal with death and loss” (Ashwini). Another amateur reviewer says that Foer “makes us think about what it means to be safe, protected, and loved” (Shliz). Additionally, professional reviewers agree with the view that, although Oskar feels unreal,

*Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* gives insights into traumatic experiences. Walter Kirn writes that the novel “evokes, at a primal cultural level, the benevolent, innocent New York that was vaporized, even as a fantasy, when the towers were toppled” (par. 6) and Kakutani remarks this book is “admirably purposeful” (par. 12). Faber writes about the insights of this novel too, saying that “people try to negotiate some sort of peace with non-negotiable tragedies” and that Foer gives this “painfully serious topic” a “whimsical spin in order to make a painfully serious point” (par. 3). These reviews affirm that *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* has given the reviewers insights into 9/11 and its aftermaths.

When looking at the reviews, both from professionals and amateurs, it is revealed that mainly the character of Oskar has raised much criticism. However, even though reviewers thought him to be irritating and inauthentic, *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* still managed to trigger emotions and to give insight into traumatic experiences. After this analysis, it can be concluded that both because and despite of Oskar’s voice, Foer’s novel achieves this aim of trauma literature. Whether this is also true for *Room* will become clear in the next section in which this novel will be analysed.

#### 4.2. Emma Donoghue’s *Room*

Emma Donoghue’s *Room* was inspired by the Josef Fritzl case. This case of Josef Fritzl, who had imprisoned and sexually abused his daughter for 24 years, came to light in 2008. The book was published in 2010 and is narrated in the first person by Jack. He tells about his and his mother’s life in ‘Room,’ a garden shed where they are held captive, and about their life after their escape. Firstly, it will be shown that *Room* focuses on an innocent victim as Jack tells the story. The analysis of how he deals with trauma will clarify how this novel portrays traumatic happenings. This will make it clear that *Room*, similar to *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, emphasises the innocent victim rather than the traumatic event itself.

#### 4.2.1. Voice and Perspective

As was said previously, *Room* is told by Jack, a five-year-old boy. The novel tells the story of Jack before and after he finds out that the world is much larger than Room, which shatters his sense of reality. Through analysing Jack's voice, it will become clear that he is a young boy and has a childlike view of the world, and that he is, as the innocent victim, the focal point of *Room*.

Jack's young age becomes immediately apparent when looking at the first sentence of the book, which reads as follows: "Today I'm five" (Donoghue 3). The fact that Jack is very young is further demonstrated by how he talks. For example, instead of saying that his mother does not like talking about their captor, Jack says that "she doesn't like saying about him" (4) and in another passage Jack remarks that a mouse is "the wonderfulest thing" (39). At times, he comes across even younger as his mother still breastfeeds him. Moreover, Jack watches *Dora the Explorer* and plays with his toys, such as a remote control car and a snake made out of egg shells. On the other hand, Jack does not just exemplify this side of young children, as was the case in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* as well. Jack can also be angry and self-centred, such as when Jack shouts at his mother for scaring away a mouse. Furthermore, Jack gets angry when his mother tells him they do not have birthday candles and when Jack wants a dog, he does not believe his mother when she tells him that "a dog would drive [them] nuts" (48) and he starts to scream and cry. Hence, Jack's behaviour, similar to Oskar's, can be seen as the typical behaviour of a young child and these examples all show that *Room* clearly conveys that Jack is a young boy.

As a consequence of Jack's age, he has a limited perspective of the world. Because of this perspective, it is not instantly evident that Jack and his mother are imprisoned in a garden shed. Jack sees Room as "a haven" (Sharma 144) and he happily talks about his life. However, sometimes parts of his mother's life shine through. For example, when Jack says to

her that she was “all sad till [he] happened in [her] tummy” (Donoghue 3) and the reader is given an idea of how small Room is because Jack and his mother measure it and say it is “eleven feet going both ways” (24). As a result of this double view, i.e. the childlike world and the truth about Room, hints are given about what their captor does when visiting Jack’s mother. For example, Jack tells that he counts the creaks “till [their captor] makes that gaspy sound and stops” (46). Because the reader understands more than Jack, his limited perspective is revealed. Moreover, because Jack does not dwell on the horrible things that have been and are taken place, mainly because he does not understand them, the story is not about the details of these traumatic events, but about Jack as the innocent victim.

In short, it has been clarified that *Room* is narrated by a young boy who is the innocent victim of his captor sexually abusing his mother. Moreover, it was discussed that because Jack is young, he has a limited worldview and does not understand everything that is going on. As a result, the reader knows more than Jack does about what is really taking place. Because Jack does not think about these happenings, this novel focuses on the innocent victim. In order to confirm that *Room* emphasises Jack’s experiences and healing process, Jack’s trauma and his recovery will be discussed next.

#### **4.2.2. Trauma and Recovery**

In the previous section it was argued that *Room* is told by a young boy and, consequently, the story is filtered through his eyes. It will be illustrated that Jack has symptoms trauma victims often have and that he can, eventually, recover from his trauma. This will make it clear that *Room* concentrates on Jack’s trauma and recovery process rather than on the traumatic event itself.

The first symptom of trauma Jack has is his incapability to understand reality. His world is shattered after his mother tells him the truth as Jack has been raised thinking that



there was nothing outside of Room. He has a hard time comprehending this new world, which is demonstrated by the fact that Jack keeps asking questions, such as whether “the stores and forests zoom around in Outer Space” (Donoghue 74) and he keeps shaking his head and saying “nah” when his mother tells him about the world (104). Trauma victims, as was said in chapter 3, move “*from reality as an effect of representation to the real as a thing of trauma*” [original emphasis] (Foster 146). Jack has trouble with this process as he does not understand the real world. At first, he wants to stay in his old world as long as possible and does not want to escape from Room. When his mother asks him if he wants to escape, he answers “not really” and he tries to convince her that “Room’s not small” (140). Eventually, he does start to believe her and when he experiences the outside world for himself, he tries to adapt although he does have trouble with adjusting to this new reality. For instance, near the end of the novel, Jack remarks that he is “always confused” and asks his mother if she wishes that they had not escaped (392). It thus takes some time before Jack fully understands this new world and this feeling of being confused and experiencing a shattered reality are symptoms of his trauma.

Jack has other symptoms of trauma besides his sense of a shattered reality. Like Oskar in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, Jack has trouble sleeping, has nightmares, and often “wake[s] up crying” (Donoghue 284). Jack also wets the bed and gets panicky when he is doing new things. Moreover, Jack has trouble adjusting to the world physically. He “keeps banging into things” because of his limited spatial perception (226). Furthermore, Jack finds it difficult to interact with other people than his mother and he is afraid of many things as well, such as the wetness of rain and particular sounds as they keep making him “jump” (240). These examples all clarify that Jack has many symptoms of trauma victims other than a shattered sense of reality, such as panic attacks and having trouble sleeping.

Like Oskar, Jack wants to live in a world that has remained free from trauma. He, therefore, keeps saying that he wants to go back and he often thinks of Room, wondering

whether “Rug misses [them]” (Donoghue 241). Moreover, when Jack makes a wish he says that “what [he]’d like best is to be in Room” (310). However, when Jack has been in Room again at the end of the book, he sees how small it really is and thinks it is “like a crater, a hole” (401). Before he leaves, Jack says goodbye to all the things in Room and he is able to let go of his idealised version of Room. At this moment in the novel, Jack has also experienced many new things, such as playing with other children, climbing stairs, and talking to strangers. For a long time, Jack wants to go back to his old world, but at the end of the novel he is able to see how limited that world really is and he is starting to adjust to his new reality and thus to overcome his trauma, which is symbolised by him saying goodbye to Room on the last page of the novel.

This section has argued that Jack represents the innocent victim of traumatic events. Because Jack narrates the story, the focus lies on the victim and his healing process. Whether Jack’s story triggers emotions and gives insight into traumatic experiences, will be discussed in the next part of this chapter in which the reviews of *Room* are examined.

### 4.2.3. Reception

This section will demonstrate the reaction of both professional and amateur reviewers to *Room*. As was the case with *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, the amateur reviews are collected from *Goodreads* and *LibraryThing*. Furthermore, the reviews will be as close to the publishing date as possible, which is August 2010, since around this time the professional critics published their reviews as well.

When looking at the reviews, it is illuminated that most reviewers praise *Room* for Jack’s voice. Aimee Bender, for example, writes that “Jack’s voice is one of the pure triumphs of the novel” (1) and because of Jack, David Evans calls *Room* a “unique novel” (par. 5). The same praise can be seen on *Goodreads* and *LibraryThing*. Many reviewers write

that they “love the way Jack sees the world” (Kirkpatrick) and that Jack’s “view of the world is unique and unforgettable” (Bookwormygirl). Another reviewer remarked that “Jack’s voice stayed with [her] for hours after [she] finished reading each night” (Linda-irvine). These reviews affirm that Jack’s voice is widely praised by both professional and amateur reviewers and, unsurprisingly, the book gets the high rating of a 4.03 stars out of 5 on *Goodreads* and a 4.05 out of 5 stars on *LibraryThing*.

As a result of Jack’s voice, many reviewers write that they were emotionally moved. For instance, amateur reviewers remark that this novel is “heartbreaking” (Brooks) and “astonishingly tender” (Ali). Another reviewer notes the same as he writes that it is “an emotionally-charged, high-impact book” (Aarti). The professional reviewers agree and say that this is a “bittersweet” (Evans par. 5), “powerful” and “truly memorably” (Bender 1), and “harrowing” book (Gibbs par. 1). These reviews show that *Room* thus moved many reviewers.

Most reviewers also remark that their understanding of human suffering was broadened. For example, one reviewer notes that “your mind is forced to confront those issues, [kidnapping and rape], it tries so hard to avoid” (Aarti) and someone else writes that the book “reveals so much about the human condition” (Wilsonknot). Additionally, a reviewer writes the following on *Goodreads*: “this is one of those rare books that make me want to tell people what I’ve just read, because somehow they shift the way I feel as a person” (Ali). Another reviewer says that this novel gives “a thoughtful look at what defines us as people” (Byrnes). Furthermore, the professional reviewers agree with these comments. Nicola Barr writes that this story “is more than a victim-and-survivor-story: it works as a study of child development, shows the power of language and storytelling, and is a kind of sustained poem in praise of motherhood and parental love” (par. 6) and Bender adds that *Room* “presents an utterly unique way to talk about love, all the while giving us a fresh, expansive eye on the world in which we live” (2). Ron Charles concludes his review with the warning to

be prepared “to have your own world expanded” (par. 9). In short, many reviewers, besides being emotionally touched, wrote that this novel gave insights into different topics, ranging from trauma to motherhood.

The analysis of the reviews of *Room* confirms that both professional and amateur reviewers praise Jack’s voice. The novel, as a result, triggered emotions and gave particular insights. In short, *Room* achieved the goal of trauma literature to evoke emotions and give insight into, among other topics, trauma.

In this chapter it was demonstrated that *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* and *Room*, as a result of the young narrators, focus on the innocent victims. Because of the narrators’ voices, these books evoke “narrative empathy” (Sharma 144) and can be categorised as trauma literature as they both give insights into traumatic experiences. Because the voices of Oskar and Jack achieve this goal of trauma literature, and can thus be seen as a significant feature of these novels, chapter 5 will examine if the film adaptations faithfully translate their voices to the screen.

## 5. The Film Adaptations of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* and *Room*

In the previous chapter, it was argued that Foer's *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* and Donoghue's *Room* can be seen as trauma literature as they both give insights into traumatic experiences. However, because the stories are narrated in the first person by children, it may be difficult to adapt these books into films. Nonetheless, in 2011 the film adaptation of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* was released and in 2015 *Room*'s adaptation premiered. This chapter will analyse if the voices of Oskar and Jack are adapted faithfully and whether the films transmit the same story as the novels do, i.e. the story of an innocent victim and his traumatic experiences. As in chapter 4, this chapter will take the reception of the film adaptations into account in order to see whether the films triggered emotions and gave insights as well.

First, a short overview of multiple film techniques will be given which will demonstrate that it is theoretically possible to adapt the narrator's voice to the screen. Next, the film adaptations of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* and *Room* will be studied, revealing that they both give a faithful portrayal of the narrator's voice and traumatic experiences. Nevertheless, reviewers criticise *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* precisely because Oskar is faithfully adapted. *Room*, on the other hand, is praised for Jack's voice and the film triggers emotions and gives insights into trauma. Therefore, because both film adaptations are faithful with regards to the narrative voice but to a different degree of success, fidelity should not be a necessity with regards to significant elements of source texts. However, this does not mean that this thesis agrees with the other side of the fidelity debate, i.e. that fidelity is an irrelevant concept, as fidelity can explain the differences in reception and, for this reason, it is still a useful concept.

### 5.1. *Film Techniques*

Because adapting a novel for the screen is a transposition, i.e. a text that is changed “by means of the aesthetic conventions of an entirely different generic process” (Sanders 20), these different processes and techniques should be taken into account when analysing film adaptations. The differences between mediums, especially with regards to the narrator’s voice, have been stressed by scholars who argue that films are secondary to literary works as there is not a filmic replacement for linguistic signs. However, Brian McFarlane argues that scholars should “examine and codify the narrative strategies of literature on screen” (qtd. in Cartmell and Whelehan, *Screen Adaptation* 11). The most obvious narrative strategy is the voice-over, but there are more, less obvious techniques as Luke Gibbons remarks:

Through editing and camera movements, set design, pictorial composition, lighting, color-coding, costume, and other techniques, the visual architecture of a film may ventriloquize apparently absent voices, the image functioning as an echo-chamber of inner speech. (177)

As Pier Paolo Pasolini also writes in his essay “The Cinema of Poetry”, the “linguistic and grammatical domain of the filmmaker is constituted by images,” but film can still “embody” the narrator’s voice (544). It will be argued that, through the use of these different techniques, such as costume, editing, and camera angles, these two film adaptations are able to faithfully adapt the voice of the narrator.

### 5.2. *The Film Adaptation of Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*

The film adaptation of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, directed by Stephen Daldry, premiered in 2011. In order to see whether this film adaptation has faithfully adapted the voice of the young protagonist, Oskar’s voice and perspective will first be analysed. The depiction of Oskar’s trauma and his recovery process will be examined too. This analysis will

show that, through using different film techniques, such as close-ups, montage, costume, and lighting, Daldry's *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* transmits Oskar's voice and his traumatic experiences faithfully. The reception of this film will be taken into account, demonstrating that because Oskar's voice and character have been adapted faithfully, the film was not well-received. This outcome will be compared to the film adaptation of *Room*, which will answer the question if film adaptations should faithfully adapt significant features of the source texts and whether fidelity is still a useful concept.

### 5.2.1. Voice and Perspective

In the first part of chapter 4, it became apparent that Oskar is a nine-year-old child, who is, among other things, both innocent and selfish, and that his perspective is limited. In the film, Oskar's character is a young child with a limited perspective as well. Although the actor who played Oskar was fourteen years old when shooting this film, he looks, talks, and acts like a nine-year-old boy. On the one hand, he is an innocent child, drinking juice packs, similar to the Juicy Juice boxes Oskar drinks in the novel, is tucked in by his mother, and plays with all sorts of toys; on the other hand, as was the case in the novel too, he is self-centred. Oskar, for instance, has the same fight with his mother as in the novel during which he yells that she should have been home, waiting for him, and she tells him that she "can't make the impossible possible" (*Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*), which is a direct quote from the book. Oskar also tells her, like in the novel, that he "wished it had been" her in the building (*Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*). Oskar being a young, nine-year-old boy is thus clearly demonstrated in this film adaptation, which uses examples and direct quotes from the novel.

Daldry often switches to Oskar's perspective in order to communicate that Oskar narrates the story. In the novel, Oskar's limited perspective is illustrated through, for example, gaps in conversations he overhears. In the film something similar happens when Oskar looks

through his binoculars, the audience sees what he sees and the black outline of the binoculars is visible. In this scene, Oskar sees his grandparents arguing, but, like Oskar, the audience does not hear what they are saying. Moreover, in these scenes camera jitters can be seen. These jitters are the result of the camera being held in hand in order to “simulate real, lived experience” (Lewis 99). Oskar’s perspective is further made clear through the use of certain camera angles. These angles show what is happening as Oskar sees it. For example, when Oskar is sitting on his wardrobe, the camera shows his father sitting on the floor from a high angle and when Oskar hides underneath his bed, the audience only sees the feet of his mother and grandmother. In short, the film *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* uses these point of view shots or, as it is often called, “subjective camera” (Lewis 99), to make it apparent that Oskar is telling the story.

However, the audience does not see the entire film adaptation from Oskar’s perspective. The film also uses long shots, i.e. shots focusing on “more than one person” (Kydd 120). Although almost every shot includes Oskar, there is one scene in which he is not present, namely when Oskar’s mother is still at work and she gets a phone call from her husband, which is shown to the audience. Nevertheless, because Oskar is the focal point of most scenes and shots, this one scene does not take this emphasis away.

The fact that Oskar is the narrator of this story is also made clear in this film adaptation through the use of voice-overs. The film begins with a voice-over of Oskar and throughout the film his voice is used in voice-overs in order to tell his story. That is to say, what the audience sees is the story the voice-over tells them. For example, the voice-over says “to which I said” and then the voice of Oskar, as the character in the film, continues speaking (*Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*). At another point in the film, the voice-over gives clues about who the renter is when Oskar, as the voice-over, says that “he shrugged the way dad did” and the audience sees the grandfather shrugging (*Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*).



This shrugging is often mentioned in the book, where Oskar, his father, and his grandfather “shrugged” in the same way (Foer 302). Oskar, as the character in the film, also turns into the narrator when he tells his grandfather about the last messages of his father. Oskar’s voice becomes the voice-over in this scene as the film shows flashbacks. Oskar’s voice is thus kept as the narrator’s voice in the film adaptation.

Another technique that is used in this film adaptation in order to convey that Oskar is the focal point of this story are close-ups. Oskar’s face, hands, feet, and neck are often the centre of attention in the film. In other words, instead of using many wide shots, showing the surroundings, it is stressed what Oskar feels and thinks. Because of the extensive use of close-ups, the importance of Oskar’s character is being emphasised and, as a consequence, the audience’s attention keeps being drawn to Oskar.

In short, Daldry’s *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* adapts Oskar’s voice and perspective faithfully. Through using different film techniques, such as camera angles and voice-overs, his voice is conveyed to the audience. In this way, the focus lies on Oskar as is the case in the novel too. In the next section it will be argued that Oskar’s trauma and healing process are translated faithfully to the screen as well.

### 5.2.2. Trauma and Recovery

The fact that Oskar’s voice and perspective are portrayed faithfully in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* raises the question whether his trauma is too. That this is indeed the case is affirmed in the first scene of the film. The audience sees a man falling in slow-motion. This man recalls to mind the photos included in the novel of the falling man from the World Trade Center and thus alludes to Oskar’s obsession with his father’s death. After seeing the falling man, this scene transitions to the next one with cutting the film into bars. Behind these bars, a close-up of Oskar’s face is visible (see figure 1 in the appendix). This seems to suggest that

Oskar is imprisoned by his own trauma, which is signalled at in the book as well by the story of the frozen people in the Sixth Borough of New York. The lighting comes from one side, enhancing the contrasts of Oskar's face, which "intensifies the dramatic nature of the scene" (Kydd 177). Additionally, Oskar is wearing a pyjama with sharks on it. This is a reference to Oskar saying in the novel that he always has "to do something, like sharks, who die if they don't swim" (Foer 87) and his costume thus demonstrates Oskar's difficulty with keeping his "brain quiet" (12). Moreover, in a voice-over, he tells the audience about his inventions. Oskar, among other things, talks about skyscrapers, which he invents in the novel as well, "that are built down" to be able to bury the dead (*Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*). In short, the first scenes point to Oskar's trauma and this is done in a similar way to how it is conveyed in the book.

Another scene presents Oskar's trauma mainly through editing techniques. In the novel, Oskar sums up all the things he is afraid of, such as "germs, airplanes, fireworks, Arab people" (Foer 36). In the film this passage is directly quoted through the use of a voice-over and his fears are shown in a "dynamic montage" (Dancyger 225), which articulates Oskar's panic. When Oskar, through a voice-over, talks about a particular fear, one quick shot is shown which corresponds to that fear. The shots follow each other up faster and faster, demonstrating Oskar's feeling of panic. Furthermore, loud noises are heard, such as aeroplanes, jackhammers of construction workers, brakes of cars, screaming children, and close-ups of, for example, teeth, phones, tunnels, and ambulances, are used in order to simulate panic and chaos as the audience is overwhelmed with these sounds and images. The same technique can be seen when Oskar is afraid to cross a bridge as bridges, which he says in the novel as well, make him "panicky" (*Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*). Close-ups of the bridge are used to demonstrate how big it is and to stress that the bridge moves. The noises of the bridge are intensified and close-ups of Oskar's scared face express his fear.

These dynamic montages emphasise Oskar's fear and his traumatic experiences when doing certain things, such as walking down a street or crossing bridges. In other words, the film adaptation illuminates that, similar to the novel, Oskar is traumatised.

In order to highlight that Oskar often thinks of 9/11 and his father's death, the film makes it apparent what happens inside Oskar's head. For example, when Oskar has a hard time making sense of things after 9/11, as he has in the novel as well, and he has locked himself up in the bathroom as a result, the audience hears and sees what Oskar hears and sees. For instance, his mother is talking to him, but she has a muffled voice because Oskar has put his hands over his ears and when he looks at the window, the light turns into a man who is falling. In addition to this image, close-ups of Oskar's eyes and covered up ears are used to shed light on the fact that the audience is inside his mind. Similar to the novel, the audience thus sometimes enters Oskar's mind when watching *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*.

Oskar's traumatic symptoms, such as self-mutilation and having trouble sleeping, are adapted to the screen as well. The audience sees Oskar giving himself a bruise on multiple occasions and the number of bruises on his body is shown. Oskar's difficulty with falling asleep is portrayed by him lying awake in his bed, wandering through his room and apartment, and talking to his grandmother at night. For this reason, it can be said that these characteristics of trauma victims, and Oskar's traumatic experiences in general, are faithfully translated to the screen.

However, although most parts of Oskar's healing process have stayed the same, his recovery has changed at certain points. Oskar's quest to find the lock of the key, as in the book, helps him with overcoming his trauma, but in the film he learns different things than he learns in the novel. In the book he rides a roller coaster for the first time, and even sits "in the front car" (Foer 147), learns to hold a baby, and visits the observation deck of the Empire State Building. In the film he learns other things, such as how to ride a horse and to control a

backhoe. Nonetheless, the fact that this quest helps him to recover from his trauma has stayed the same. In the film, many people Oskar meets have their own scene and the scenes follow each other up quickly, demonstrating how many different individuals Oskar has visited. Moreover, in one of the last scenes of the film, Oskar talks to his mother about meeting all these people and they can finally reconnect with each other in sharing these memories as they also drifted apart in the film. As in the book, Oskar tells her that it is “okay if [she] fall[s] in love again” (*Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*) and although Ron does not appear in the film adaptation, this affirms that Oskar is recovering from the loss of his father. Oskar’s quest and him reconnecting with his mother thus exemplify Oskar’s recovery process.

Moreover, as in the novel, Oskar’s recovery is not just made evident through his quest, but also through the story of the Sixth Borough of New York. Through the use of voice-overs, Oskar tells this story on multiple occasions in the film and it is emphasised that it symbolises his recovery as, at the end, Oskar remarks that like the Sixth Borough his “dad is never coming back” and that he now knows he can live “without him” (*Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*). It can be said, therefore, that, similar to the novel, Oskar’s quest, him reconnecting with his mother, and the story of the Sixth Borough represent his recovery process.

This chapter has demonstrated that Daldry’s *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* adapts the novel faithfully, i.e. only with regards to the voice and traumatic experiences of Oskar as the adaptation does not include, for example, the experiences of Oskar’s grandparents. Through the use of film techniques, such as close-ups, lighting, and montages, the film is able to faithfully adapt Oskar’s voice and experiences. In order to see how this film adaptation was received, reviews will now be taken into consideration, which will reveal that fidelity is not always the best choice for film-makers.

### 5.2.3. Reception

In chapter 4, the analysis of the novel's reception clarified that most reviewers are critical of Oskar's character but still remark that they were emotionally touched and gathered insights from Foer's *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*. In order to see if this is also the case for the film adaptation, reviews of professionals and amateurs are analysed, dating as close to December 2011 as possible. The two biggest online film platforms, *IMDb* and *Rotten Tomatoes*, will be used in order to examine amateur reviews.

When looking at these reviews, it is immediately apparent that especially Oskar's voice and character are heavily criticised. For example, David Denby writes that "onscreen [...] the sound of a hyper-articulate boy talking semi-nonsense becomes very hard to take" (par. 3). Robbie Collin agrees and writes that "Oskar may have been a charming narrator in Foer's intentionally rambling novel, [...] on screen he's an almighty nuisance" (par. 5). Reviewers on *Rotten Tomatoes*, where the film is rated badly at 46% out of 100%, note the same thing in saying that Oskar is "truly unlikeable" (Kurtis) and "annoying" (Kristin). Similarly, on *IMDb*, where the film is given a better rating, 6.9 stars out of 10, reviewers remark that Oskar is "pretty irritating" (Yns01) and calling him "the biggest problem" of the film (Casamartinez01). This makes it clear that most reviewers do not appreciate Oskar as was also the case with the novel where reviewers called him obnoxious" (Nicole) and an "unbearable brat" (Fantasma).<sup>1</sup>

Although many reviewers do not like Oskar, some amateur reviewers mention that they were emotionally touched by the film. For example, one reviewer writes that he "could simply not stop wiping tear after tear off her face" (J-maimon). However, others call this

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<sup>1</sup> Surprisingly, the reviewers of both the film and the novel do not see the fact that Oskar might be autistic, which is often remarked upon in scholarly articles, as an explanation for why it is difficult to sympathise with him. Instead, they write, for example, that Oskar might have Asperger's syndrome, "although his highly-strung, garrulous nature might more plausibly be put down to him being chronically overindulged by his sainted dad" (Collin par. 3).

adaptation a “tedious” (Kristin), “manipulative” and “overly-sentimental” film (Yns01).

Moreover, the professional film critics do not mention being moved by this film adaptation. It thus seems that the film did not trigger emotions in most reviewers.

Contrary to the emotional trigger of this film, a consensus about whether this film gives insights does seem to exist: both professional and amateur reviewers note that this adaptation does not give these insights. Denby writes that “we find ourselves thinking not of grief but of entitled kids” (par 3.). Likewise, Philip French says that the film is “hollow” and “its revelations [...] factitious” (par. 10) and Collin adds that “the only thing we learn about mass tragedy and personal bereavement is that nothing of worth can be said about either in a film as clangorous, smothering and comprehensively misjudged as this one” (par. 6). Mike McCahill remarks that the film only gives “sketches” of “raw grief” but does not give real insights (par. 4). The amateur reviewers agree with these views and note that it is a “hollow tearjerker” (Melendez) and that the film was “pointless” (Narges).

To conclude, although Daldry’s film adaptation of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* faithfully adapted Oskar’s voice and traumatic experiences, the film is not well-received by these reviewers. It seems that precisely because Daldry was faithful to his voice, people do not appreciate the film. The biggest critique is that Oskar is irritating and, for this reason, the attention of the audience was drawn to Oskar’s annoying behaviour rather than to, for example, his healing process. In spite of the fact that some reviewers were emotionally moved, this film failed to give insights into traumatic experiences as a result. *Room* will be analysed next in order to be able to answer the question whether film adaptations can and should faithfully convey the narrator’s voice of source texts and if fidelity is a helpful concept to use in adaptation studies.

### 5.3. *The Film Adaptation of Room*

*Room* premiered in 2015, was directed by Lenny Abrahamson and Emma Donoghue wrote the screenplay herself. In order to answer the questions stated in the introduction, the film adaptation of *Room* will be examined in this section. Firstly, the question whether the film faithfully transmits Jack's voice will be studied. Secondly, the depiction of Jack's trauma will be researched. It will become apparent that, as was the case with *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, *Room* faithfully adapts these aspects of the novel. However, the differences between these two adaptations will come to light when the reception of *Room* is taken into account. Contrary to *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, *Room* is praised for Jack's story and is thus both faithful and successful.

#### 5.3.1. Voice and Perspective

As we saw in chapter 4, *Room* is narrated by a five-year-old boy named Jack, as he says himself in the first sentence. This is also the first thing his character says in the film and he talks in the same, at times grammatically incorrect, way as in the book. Although the actor playing Jack was nine years old when shooting *Room*, as a consequence of how Jack talks and acts, he seems to be the young, five-year-old boy. As in the novel, he plays with his snake made out of egg shells and his remote controlled car, watches *Dora the Explorer*, and his mother still breastfeeds him (although this does not happen as often as in the book). The fact that Jack is a young child further becomes clear through scenes in which Jack gets angry at his mother because there are not any birthday candles, his mother scared away a mouse, and he cannot have a dog. All these examples are passages, and often direct quotes are used, from the novel, affirming that Jack is presented faithfully as a young boy.

The use of specific camera angles is one of the film techniques Abrahamson uses to make it clear that Jack is the narrator of the story. In the beginning of the film, the camera

does not show how small Room is, even though the set was, as it is in the novel, eleven feet by eleven feet. The size of Room is concealed as the camera does not show corners and wide shots are avoided. If the film moves from one place in Room to another, the editor cuts to that scene instead of moving the camera around. Moreover, Room is often seen from a low angle looking upwards, i.e. as Jack sees it, and uses a “soft background focus” (Culloty 296). In this way, Jack’s perspective of Room is depicted as he does not think Room is small because it is “a haven” for him (Sharma 144). Only at the end of the film, when Jack sees Room for the last time, Room is shown in a wide shot and it is presented how small it really is. Hence, Abrahamson demonstrates how Jack experiences Room, conveying that this story is told by Jack.

One of the consequences of presenting Jack’s view of Room is that the audience does not know immediately what is going on in Room, which was also the case in the novel. In the opening scene, the audience hears breathing and later it is revealed that this is Jack’s mother and her captor. After this scene, some shots of Room are shown, the audience hears Jack’s mother say “go back to sleep” (*Room*) and the camera zooms in on Jack, falling asleep. After this shot, the skylight in Room is shown while a voice-over of Jack’s voice tells the audience that his mother “cried and cried and watched TV all day” before he was born (*Room*), which is a direct quote from the novel and hints at what is really happening in Room. The film adaptation, therefore, conveys the same double view as the novel does, i.e. a view that articulates Jack’s world and through which parts of his mother’s experiences shine through.

Moreover, at certain moments, the camera shows only what Jack sees. For example, when Jack is peeking through the wardrobe shutters at his mother and their captor, the audience sees them through these panels. As was said before, the camera often uses low angles, showing what Jack sees. Most of the time, there are camera jitters, which mimic “real, lived experience” (Lewis 99). Additionally, when Jack pretends he is dead and is wrapped up



in a rug in order to escape, the audience hears only his breath and the shots alternate between close-ups of Jack's face and of what he is seeing. These latter shots show blurry trees because Jack's spatial perception has not been developed naturally in Room. Furthermore, when Jack is in hospital, the audience cannot see what is outside of the windows because it is too light for Jack. In this part of the film, Jack is scared and often hides behind his mother. These shots show Jack's point of view, e.g. part of the view is blocked by his mother's body or hair. The adaptation continues to include shots of Jack's perspective throughout the film. For instance, near the end of the film, when Jack is looking through a white curtain, this whiteness of the curtain and the vague outlines of people are shown to the audience. In short, Abrahamson's film adaptation of *Room* often illustrates what Jack is seeing and, as a result, it is demonstrated that this is his story as it is shown from his perspective.

However, there are two scenes which show Jack's mother while Jack is not really present. In one scene, the audience sees her lying in bed while her captor is sleeping next to her. In this scene, Jack is not there as he is sleeping in the wardrobe with the doors shut. Moreover, when Jack's mother tries to think of a plan to escape, the audience sees her sitting at the kitchen table while Jack is asleep. Although the film shows these shots, this does not often happen and, therefore, it can be said that Jack is the narrator and the focal point of this film.

In addition to these techniques, Abrahamson's film adaptation, as *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* did as well, uses many voice-overs in order to convey that Jack tells the story. In most voice-overs, Jack talks about his worldview and how this changes throughout the film. He goes through the same development as in the book: first, he tells about Room and what is outside of Room (outer space), but later in the film his worldview changes and he talks about all the things he has discovered, such as streets, ice skating, and hamburgers. In

this way, the voice-overs articulate that this film is about Jack and that he is the narrator of this story.

In short, because of the use of certain film techniques, such as voice-overs and camera angles, it is made clear that this is Jack's story. The film has thus faithfully adapted Jack's voice and perspective. In order to see whether the same is true with regards to his traumatic experience and recovery, these scenes of the film will now be examined.

### 5.3.2. Trauma and Recovery

It has become evident that Jack's voice and perspective have been faithfully adapted to the screen. In this section it will be argued that the same is true for his traumatic experiences and healing process. In the novel, one of the ways through which Jack's trauma is demonstrated is through the fact that he finds it difficult to adjust to this new reality. Because Jack needs to adapt to this new world, he finds everything scary at first. This is also conveyed in the film through, for example, the use of loud sounds. As in the novel, certain sounds make him "jump" (Donoghue 240). In the film adaptation, this is shown when the telephone rings, and sounds of doors, rain, footsteps, and the clicking of a pen are all heard very loudly. Jack's panicked breath is heard alongside these noises, exemplifying that he is scared. As in the novel, Jack wants to go back to Room, which he tells his mother a couple of times, because he feels safe there and, contrary to what his mother believes, "Room's not stinky" (*Room*), which is a direct quote from the book as well. Because Jack feels panicky, he has wet the bed and he has a hard time doing certain things, such as going up the stairs, as was the case in the novel. Jack's sense of a shattered reality and his difficulty with adapting to this new world is thus portrayed faithfully in Abrahamson's film adaptation.

With regards to Jack's recovery, the film adaptation mainly uses montages combined with voice-overs. For example, when Jack has left Room, the voice-over tells the audience

what he already has experienced after a couple of days: “I have seen pancakes, and stairs, and birds, and windows” (*Room*). However, because he is still not completely used to this new world, the montage shows him in the hospital and when he eventually goes outside, the film focuses on the tallness of the trees, illustrating both Jack’s fear and amazement. Near the end of the film, Jack has healed much more and a montage shows him talking to the neighbours and playing with toys. Nonetheless, because Jack has not fully recovered yet, it is made clear that he thinks back to Room through showing a shot of the skylight in Room together with a shot of him and his mother in Room. Hence, Jack is not fully recovered yet and still idealises Room, as he does in the novel as well. At the end of the film, Jack has recovered much more when he starts talking about what he has learned, e.g. about streets, cities, and countries, and Jack’s voice-over says that he will now live in the world “forever and ever” (*Room*). In the meantime, a montage is shown of Jack watering a plant, ice skating, and eating hamburgers with his mother as they promised to try everything at least once, which happens in the novel too. After this scene, Jack and his mother say goodbye to Room, which is identical to the last scene in the book, and the audience sees from Jack’s perspective how small Room really is. These montages and voice-overs reveal Jack’s healing process and it becomes clear that he can finally appreciate the world and see Room for what it really is, which is identical to the novel in which Jack also says goodbye to Room and starts to adjust to his new reality.

Abrahamson’s film adaptation of *Room* transmits Jack’s trauma and healing process faithfully. As in the novel, Jack has a difficult time adapting to the world, which is made evident in this film. Furthermore, the adaptation presents Jack’s recovery process similar to how the novel describes it. As a result, the focus does not lie on the traumatic event itself but on the victim’s traumatic experiences and recovery process. The reception of this film adaptation of *Room* will be discussed next, showing that most reviewers praise this film because of Jack’s voice and story.

### 5.3.3. Reception

When the reception of Donoghue's *Room* was examined, it became apparent that most reviewers were positive about Jack's voice and that they gained insight into traumatic experiences. The reviews of the film will now be analysed in order to see if this is true for the adaptation as well. The reviews will be as close to the publication date, which is September 2015, as possible and professional as well as amateur reviews, which are taken from *IMDb* and *Rotten Tomatoes*, are used in order to gain insight into the reception of *Room*.

Most reviewers praise Abrahamson's film adaptation for Jack's voice and perspective. Manohla Dargis writes that the film "has managed the difficult task of externalizing the inner life" of Jack (par. 5). Sophie Gilbert agrees and remarks that it is "hard to think of a movie adaptation of a book that feels truer and more loyal to its source than *Room*" (par. 1). She adds that "the audience empathizes with Jack and feels his agony at losing what he interprets as a safe and familiar environment" (Gilbert par. 6). Amateur reviewers agree as their reviews say that "Jack's point of view and narration really creates this insanely intimate sense and gives the audience a little bit of the claustrophobia these two characters have experienced for years" (Robert) and that "the entire film is seen through the eyes of this child, and it's genius" (Ziemniak). When looking at these reviews, it can be concluded that Abrahamson's film adaptation depicts Jack's voice and perspective successfully.

It seems as if the film adaptation of *Room*, as a result of Jack's voice and story, successfully triggers emotions as Dargis comments that "*Room* can weigh on your heart like a stone" (par. 6). Likewise, Peter Bradshaw writes that "you make a real emotional engagement" and that *Room* is a "disturbing and absorbing film" (par. 9). Amateur reviewers have the same opinion and comment that it is "a very moving film" (Gabriel) and that there "are some scenes that are so heartwarming that it will be difficult not to find yourself

becoming emotionally involved” (Ed-Shullivan). These reviews suggest that most reviewers were emotionally moved by Abrahamson’s film adaptation

In addition to triggering emotions, the film adaptation also gives insights into traumatic experience. For instance, Mark Kermode says that it gives insight into “everyday experiences of women and children who rise above domestic abuse” (par. 5). Dargis remarks that the film adaptation gives insight into this trauma because “it summons the terrors suffered by real victims” (par. 6). Amateur reviewers agree and write that it gives insights into “isolation, fear, hopelessness” and “the family bond” (Ed-Shullivan). Another reviewer remarks that this film “shows us the best and worst of the human condition” (Kati) and one reviewer even felt that “everyone who left the theater left a better person for what they witnessed” because of these insights (Mattharger). These reviews make it clear that most reviewers thus gained insights, among other things, into the experiences of trauma victims.

However, some reviewers write that the film does not make the same impact as the novel, saying that the “factor [...] what made Donoghue’s novel a pleasure,” i.e. Jack’s voice and perspective, can become “cloying, largely thanks to a superfluous voiceover,” on screen (Smith par. 5). Tim Robey adds that the film adaptation “lacks the flooding emotional force Donoghue gave it on the page” (par. 3). Nonetheless, because most reviewers comment that the film moved them and broadened their understanding of traumatic experiences, it can be said that these reviews confirm that the film adaptation of *Room* achieved the same goal as the novel did in triggering emotions and giving insights into traumatic happenings.

Even though some reviewers prefer the novel, it can be concluded that *Room* is a faithful and successful adaptation. For this reason, the first question is already answered: both films are able to faithfully portray the protagonist’s voice. The fact that *Room* was a success is further illustrated by its ratings as on *IMDb* the film is given an 8,2 and on *Rotten Tomatoes* the film gets a very high rating, namely 94% out of a 100. This success stands in contrast with

*Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* as this adaptation was criticised for the protagonist's voice. Precisely because *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* was faithful to the novel, it failed to give the same insights as the book does. When looking at these differences in reception, the second question of this thesis can be answered, namely adaptations should not always have to be faithful with regards to significant elements of source texts as this was the reason for the failure of the film adaptation of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*. As a result of the comparison made between the novels and the film adaptations, this thesis can answer the final question as well.

As was said before, many scholars argue that the fidelity approach is unproductive. Linda Hutcheon, for example, remarks that it is not relevant to look at fidelity as it cannot determine "the 'success' of an adaptation" (xxvi). Surprisingly, the contrastive analysis used in this thesis clarifies that the concept of fidelity is still relevant in adaptation studies. Fidelity can indeed not guarantee the success of adaptations, but it can explain the success and failure of the studied film adaptations. Because Stephen Daldry's adaptation faithfully adapted Oskar's voice, this film is heavily criticised and did not give the same insights as the novel did. It can be said that this is an example of trying to stay too close to the novel, "without realising what the consequences of such fidelity are" (Cartmell and Whelehan, *Screen Adaptation* 82), as the novel already received criticism about Oskar. In contrast, Lenny Abrahamson's *Room* is successful and praised for the faithful adaptation of Jack's voice and perspective. Hence, fidelity can explain the success or failure of adaptations, which demonstrates that it is still a relevant concept.

## 6. Conclusion

After a traumatic event, people often have the “need to share and ‘translate’” the traumatic impact (Kaplan 1). For this reason, many novelists feel that writing about trauma, such as about 9/11, is “unavoidable” (Michael 1). A similar view was outlined in the introduction, which further showed that this theory triggered three questions: the initial question was whether the film adaptations of two popular novels, namely *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* and *Room*, were able to faithfully transmit the young narrator’s voices and give the same insights into trauma as the books do. Because this thesis examines faithfulness, two other questions were raised, which were connected to the fidelity debate.

These fidelity debate were further explained in chapter 2. This section showed the two sides of these debates: some adaptation scholars argue that adaptations should faithfully adapt significant elements of the source texts while other scholars argue that fidelity is an inadequate concept. Hence, this chapter raised the questions whether adaptations should be faithful with regards to essential features of source texts and if the notion of fidelity is unproductive when examining adaptations.

The fact that the narrator’s voice in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* and *Room* is a significant feature of these novels came to light in chapter 3. This chapter made it clear that trauma literature can give insights into traumatic experiences as it conveys personal narratives and evokes emotions. The voices of the young protagonists in the novels can, therefore, be seen as a tool to trigger emotions and give insights into traumatic experiences, making it an essential element of these source texts.

After examining Foer’s *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* and Donoghue’s *Room* in chapter 4, it became evident that the voice was indeed of great importance. Moreover, it was argued that, as a consequence of the young narrators, these books focus on the traumatic experiences and healing process of the innocent victim rather than on the traumatic event

itself. Additionally, it was shown that even though *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* was criticised with regards to Oskar, this novel and *Room* were both well received and, as trauma literature tries to do, gave insights into traumatic experiences.

When, in chapter 5, the two film adaptations were analysed, it became clear that they are both faithful to the source texts, answering the first question of this thesis. However, after examining the reviews, it became evident that the film adaptation of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* did not manage to give insights into trauma precisely because it faithfully adapted the protagonist's voice. In contrast, the adaptation of *Room* faithfully adapted the narrator's voice and the reviewers remarked that this film did trigger emotions and give insights. As a result, the two remaining questions could be answered in this chapter: because of the failure of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, adaptations should not have to faithfully adapt significant elements of source texts; moreover, fidelity is still a relevant concept as it can explain the differences in the reception of these adaptations.

Further research should be done in order to fully comprehend the connection between fidelity and reception as this thesis looked at only two novels and film adaptations.

Furthermore, when the reviews were taken into account, it became apparent that most reviewers who had read the book were much more critical of the film adaptation than reviewers who saw the film as a stand-alone, which suggests that audiences expect some degree of fidelity. Adaptation scholars usually do not examine these expectations of fidelity closely when they are not studying classics or other highly popular books. Cartmell and Whelehan, for instance, remark that fidelity is "one of the dullest of strands of adaptation criticism" but that "at times it is at the heart of an adaptation event, such as the first three Harry Potter films" (*Screen Adaptation*, 21). However, this thesis showed that this link between source text and adaptation seems to be stronger than scholars assume with regards to



adaptations of books other than the classics and thus illustrates that fidelity plays an important role in the audiences' experience of an adaptation.

To conclude, this thesis complicates the fidelity debate as it answers in the negative to both sides of this debate. On the one hand, adaptations need not always be faithful to the source text while, on the other hand, fidelity helps to explain the reception of adaptations. Therefore, fidelity should not be the only methodological approach, but this notion should not be forgotten altogether.

## Appendix

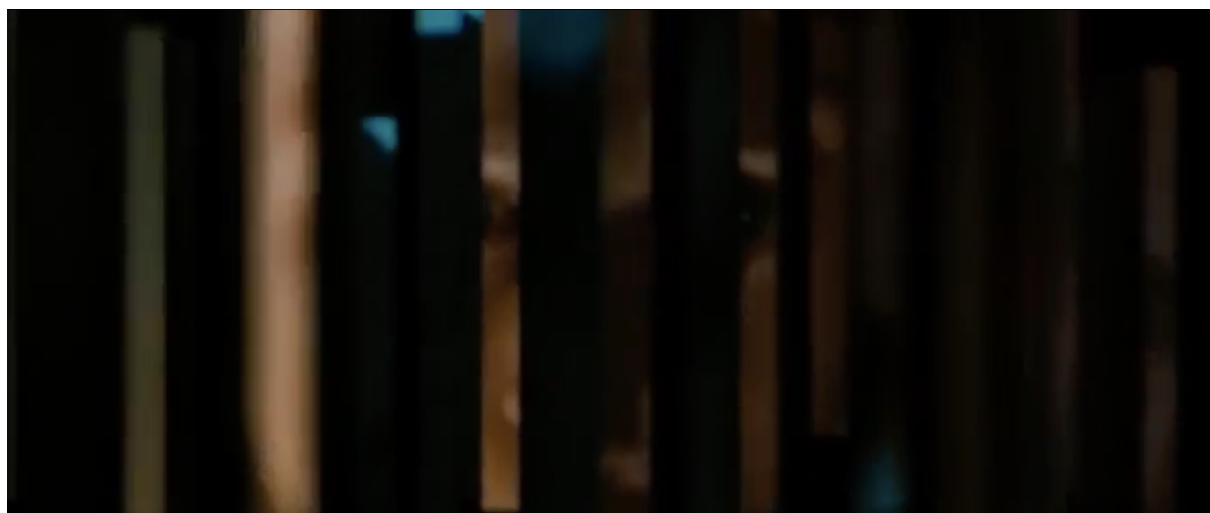


Figure 1. Screenshot of the film adaptation of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (00:01:18).

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