

Openness is a matter of Illumination

The relation between *postmemory* fiction-writing and spatial studies through the novel
Everything is Illuminated by Jonathan Safran Foer.

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Figure 1: Cover. *Driving*. Liev Schreiber, *Everything is Illuminated*, film still, 2005.

Figure 2. Pag. 4-5. *The characters and the car*. Liev Schreiber, *Everything is Illuminated*, film still, 2005.

Abstract:

This thesis explores the influence of space on the formation and preservation of *postmemory* through the literary novel *Everything is Illuminated* by Jonathan Safran Foer, adapted to screen by Liev Schreiber. The starting point of the research is an attempt at a better understanding of the roles of reality and fiction in the case of *Trachimbrod*, the location of the story, and Trochenbrod, the actual place that inspired the novel. A Ficto-Critical approach is used as understood by Hélène Frichot and Naomi Stead, as it gives room to an untraditional exploration of a specific narrative in order to produce a critical and personal position towards it. In combination with Marianne Hirsh's theory of *postmemory*, interpreted for this paper as a productive system: *postmemory* 'making', the story reveals a hidden agency of individual and collective memory, that interact through the spaces we inhabit.

The work of theorists of the *spatial turn* are used to study the weight and significance of space and the differentiations within the broad concept of *space*. The interactions between those spaces are acknowledged to be anchored to all individuals, who then influence that cycle of information exchange. Moreover, within the frame of the focus on trans-generational relationships so specific to this novel, the dimension of time is questioned in relation to space. By compressing and expanding the traditional conceptions of time and space, depending on the *openness* or *far-awayness* of an individual towards a memory, the growing line of history reveals either *nothing*, or *everything*. In the case of the latter, collective memory is built, starting from an individual *illumination* to see the hidden process, projecting imagined spaces into spaces of memory and therefore erasing the division between reality and fiction.

The thesis concludes that what is generally called as the perceived physical environment is argued to be: a formation of sets of points of which the time and space coordinates can be modified through fiction.

Keywords: *postmemory*, Geocriticism, Ficto-Criticism, collective memory, cultural identity, transgenerational trauma, other spaces, Ukraine, Jonathan Safran Foer.





“This was the world in which she grew and aged. They made for themselves a sanctuary from Trachimbrod, a habitat completely unlike the rest of the world. No hateful words were ever spoken, and no hands were raised. More than that, no angry words were ever spoken, and nothing was denied. But more than that, no unloving words were ever spoken and everything was held up as another small piece of proof that it can be this way, it doesn’t have to be that way; if there is no love in the world, we will make a new world, and we will give it heavy walls, and we will furnish it with soft red interiors, from the inside out, and give it a knocker that resonates like a diamond falling to a jeweller’s felt so that we should never hear it. Love me, because love doesn’t exist, and I have tried everything that does.”

- From *Everything is Illuminated: Falling in Love, 1791-1803*

The starting point of this research² is the novel *Everything is Illuminated* written by Jonathan Safran Foer in 2002, based on his own journey as a third-generation American Jew traveling to post-war Ukraine in order to find the woman that saved his grandfather from the Nazis: Augustine. He parts with only a picture of them together standing in a field of wheat.

When Jonathan, the protagonist of the story, referred to as *the Collector* or *the Hero*, arrives in Odessa, he is picked up by Alex and his Grandfather, in a small and old blue *trabant*. They are joined by Grandfather's *seeing eye bitch*, Sammy Davis Junior Junior, a self-trained guide dog. They were sent by Alex's father, head of the family company Heritage Tours. They offer guided tours to Jews looking for family history in Ukraine, and were hired by Jonathan. They drive towards *Trachimbrod*, the *shtetl*³ where his Grandfather had lived before fleeing to America.

The party of four end up finding nothing but a wooden shed where the last survivor resides. She is not Augustine, but Lista. Her role is to remain an archive for all the stories that would otherwise be lost, she says. She keeps one object for everyone that lived in *Trachimbrod*, these are valuable possessions such as wedding rings, glasses or tinsels that she dug out after the people hid them in the ground to be found by someone after the war.

The theoretical starting point for this thesis is Marianne Hirsh's concept of *postmemory*, which she initially developed in 1990 in an article on *Maus* by Art Spiegelman, a graphic novel about the echo of the Second World War. Hirsh's focus has been on the formation of memory within the generations following the victims and perpetrators of the Holocaust.

*“Postmemory describes the relationship that the “generation after” bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before, to experiences they “remember” only by means of the stories, images, and behaviours among which they grew up. These experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right. Postmemory’s connection to the past is thus actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation. To grow up with overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one’s birth or one’s consciousness, is to risk having one’s own life stories displaced, even evacuated, by our ancestors. It is to be shaped, however indirectly, by traumatic fragments of events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension. These events happened in the past, but their effects continue into the present.”*⁴

² This paper has been written for the course of Delft Lectures on Architecture History and Theory within Msc1 of the track of Architecture at the TU Delft.

³ From Cambridge Dictionary: “in the past, a small town in eastern Europe where a lot of Jewish people lived.”
<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/shtetl>

⁴ Stephen Frost, ‘Postmemory’, *American Journal of Psychoanalysis* 79, no. 2 (2019): 156-173, 2

Jonathan Safran Foer creates a conceptual scenery in which the physical and metaphysical realm mirror each other. The storytelling is layered: in the book, stories of inhabitants of *Trachimbrod* in the time Jonathan's grandfather lived there, are intertwined with the description of the journey Jonathan, Alex, Grandfather and Sammy Davis Junior Junior go through, whilst in the film, the entanglement is represented visually by the objects Jonathan collects. The way in which he captures a handful of soil from the meadow that is left of *Trachimbrod* and keeps it in a plastic bag makes explicit the idea of how layers of soil grew over the theatre of horrors that the *shtetl* became during the war and became all that *Trachimbrod* was, all that they could find. Nothing.

The research question of this article is: how did Jonathan Safran Foer present the contribution of the physical environment to the preservation of collective memory in the literary novel *Everything is Illuminated*, adapted to screen by Liev Schreiber?

Reading guide

Everything is Illuminated was translated into a film in 2005 directed by Liev Schreiber, who himself is a third-generation American Jew and felt touched by the novel.⁵ In this research both novel and film will be referred to as the story, not distinguishing between the different representations, because the focus in this study lies on its agency towards collective memory of the Holocaust instead of stylistic expression. Nevertheless, it is acknowledged that the merits of the visual language of the film are to be given to Schreiber, and play an important role in the conclusions drawn in this essay. By combining the forces, they become bigger than the sum of the two, for which it can be addressed as a “phenomenon” within the artistic world, rather than just a novel and a film.

The writer Jonathan Safran Foer draws on his biographical journey, giving the protagonist his own name and profession of newborn writer. Therefore the writer is addressed as Jonathan Safran Foer and the personage as Jonathan, *the Collector* or *the Hero*, as in the novel.

There are two lines of development throughout the essay. Firstly the story of Trochenbrod, the place that served as a reference for *Trachimbrod*, is depicted, as well as the thin line between reality and fiction experienced by the inhabitants and how it influenced the perspective of their descendants. Secondly, the story of the four characters, their journey to find Augustine and how they themselves create fiction within reality. In order to answer the research question both are relevant, as they influence one another and create a back-and-forth thought process that increases the depth and criticality with which the research question can be addressed.

A Ficto-Critical approach is used for this thesis, based on the understanding stated by Hélène Frichot and Naomi Stead in *Writing Architectures: Ficto-Critical Approaches*, seeing fiction as: “more than the traditional understanding, as a productive system, a tool for creating new narratives as real as historical events”.⁵ It is my position to critically analyse how Jonathan Safran Foer presents the use of the physical environment for the preservation of memory in this particular novel, while being aware that a new narrative is born.

⁵Liev Schreiber, interview.

Setting the scene for the story

Around eighty years after his grandfather left the *shtetle*, Jonathan Safran Foer stands at the *Brod* riverbank looking over a meadow with no sign of civilization around. - “I found nothing but nothing, and in that nothing—a landscape of completely realized absence—nothing was to be found.”-, he says.⁶ He has taken some time from Princeton University, he has travelled over and through many countries and has arrived in Trochenbrod, having hopes of finding Augustine,⁷ or maybe just finding something.

Trachimbrod is a fictional name, and is based on Trochenbrod, also known as Sofiyofvka, in today's Western Ukraine. The *shtetle* of Trochenbrod arose around 1835 within the woods of Radziwill Forest in then East Poland. The Russian Czar's regime allowed the nomads to settle and avoid army duty, with the condition of them colonizing and farming the unused land. It became the only all-Jewish town known today outside of Palestine, counting around five thousand inhabitants at its peak before it “disappeared”.⁸

A hundred and thirty years after the foundation of Trochenbrod, The Soviet Union was invaded by the Nazi-German Army, who shot nearly all inhabitants, set fire to the Synagogue and demolished all that was tangible. Safran Foer longed for an encounter with his past, which was to be found in Trochenbrod, or at least this place might have set an intangible connection in motion.

In order to understand the depth of the story by Jonathan Safran Foer, referring to the story itself but also its place in modern literature (without addressing the phenomenon of Holocaust literature in much depth) I propose using the statements of those theorists that declared the *spatial turn*, in literature as well as other disciplines, during the 1980's. This sector of research focused on shedding light onto the relevance of space for narrative and the formation of our own perspective based on it.¹⁰

Michel Foucault, one of the pioneer thinkers of this intellectual movement, established in *Of Other Spaces*, the differentiation of a *utopia* and a *heterotopia*; the first being a view of the world in its ideal state, an immaculate schematic translation of a vision, and a *heterotopia* being a space which has the function of compensating for the limitations of the real place.¹¹ In this alternative space, pieces of information are placed intuitively in order to achieve a graspable logic in the narrative of life itself.

It is interesting that when trying to determine which term would correspond to Trochenbrod and *Trachimbrod*, the differentiation is not clear at all.

“heterotopias are the spaces in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time and our history occurs.”¹²

Some years later, influenced by these ideas and those of Henry Lefebvre among others,

⁶Avrom Bendavid-Val, *The heavens are empty*, (Pegasus Books, October 15, 2010), 147

⁷Jonathan Safran Foer, interview.

⁸Avrom Bendavid-Val, *The heavens are empty*, (Pegasus Books, October 15, 2010)

¹⁰Andra-Lucia Rus, “James Joyce's Dublin and Lars Saabye Christensen's Oslo. Geocritical Readings,” *Romanian Journal of English Studies* 10, no. 1 (February 2013): 271-277.

¹¹Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (Spring, 1986): 22-27

¹²Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (Spring, 1986): 22-27, 3

Edward Soja wrote *Thirdspace*.¹³ In this book the new concept of *Thirdspace* is presented, defined as: “an alternative postmodern geography of political choice and radical openness attuned to making practical sense of the contemporary world”, which correlates with Foucault’s definition of the *heterotopia*. Soja explained that in the basis of the concept lies the dialectical process of *thirthing-as-othering*, in which an external option can be explored, outside of a traditional logic. It is drawn on Lefebvre’s appointment of the problematic binary in our understanding of the space we inhabit, for which the introduction of a third possibility would offer criticality through openness.¹⁴

Soja uses the words of Lefebvre: *Thirdspace* is a “possibilities machine”.¹⁵ It lies in between *Firstspace* (the “physical”, perceived space), and *Secondspace* (one constructed by symbolism and mental representations). He bases his division on Lefebvre’s *trialects of spatiality*,¹⁶ consisting of *Spacial Practice (Firstspace)*, *Representations of Space (Secondspace)* and *Spaces of Representation (Thirdspace)*, concluding that every spatial thought is always real and imaginary simultaneously, being located in different spaces at the same time.

“It overlays physical space, making symbolic use of objects and ‘tends towards’ more or less coherent systems of non-verbal symbols and signs”.¹⁷

A slightly different view is that of French essayist Bertrand Westphal, who introduced the idea of *Geocriticism*, with which the real geographical place that serves as a reference, can be separated from the space that is created through fiction writing. It differs from the previous theories because there is not an element of *othering* (following Soja’s interpretation); however also here a new dimension can be denoted, it emanates from the binary directly instead of needing an initial distancing from it, therefore having a different relationship to the dual system.¹⁸

Westphal defines referentially as: “the relation between reality and fiction, between the spaces of the world and the spaces of the text.” From his perspective, the geographic placement of a text plays such a role in the shaping of it that it offers much more information, whether it is hard or soft data, than if it were analysed on its own. It seems that the theory of Geocriticism uses a similar logic to Ficto-Criticism, both firmly arguing for, if not an interdisciplinary approach, one that combines different genres within one discipline. These theories almost tend towards finding new space between the spaces we have already conquered, and interestingly enough this exploration is done by uncovering, opening up, or making transparent structures that have been there for longer than the discovering of the logic, instead of exploring outside these lines.

It could also be interpreted as: illuminating.

¹³Edward Soja, *Thirdspace* (Blackwell Publishers, 1996)

¹⁴Edward Soja, *Thirdspace* (Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 60-61

¹⁵Edward Soja, *Thirdspace* (Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 81

¹⁶First seen in *The Production of Space*

Henry Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (English translation: Blackwell Publishers, 1991)

¹⁷Edward Soja, *Thirdspace* (Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 68

¹⁸Andra-Lucia Rus, “James Joyce’s Dublin and Lars Saabye Christensen’s Oslo. Geocritical Readings,” *Romanian Journal of English Studies* 10, no. 1 (February 2013): 269-275, 270

Becoming the story

In the following chapter, the human condition is observed within the space they inhabit and how those factors interact. In *Poetics of Space*, French philosopher and writer Gaston Bachelard expressed the relevance of studying the individual in order to understand the space around them. He developed the notion of *Topoanalysis*, which he describes as: “the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives. In the theatre of the past that is constituted by memory, the state setting maintains the characters in their dominant roles.”¹⁹

By observing the individual in the space they inhabit, a separation between the internal and exterior space occurs. Edward Soja writes about the matter of *the divided being*, which is defined as: “the powerful separation between the thing subject and the grounding object”,²⁰ which would come as a side effect of *othering*.

“Entering into relations [...] is not possible without distancing, without the ability to which allows us to assume a point of view of the world. But in this ability is also a will to relate, a necessary impulsion to overcome detachment, as the only means whereby we can confirm our existence in the world, can overcome meaninglessness and establish identity.”²¹

Based on this premise by Soja, it is interesting to study whether those interpersonal relations could transcend the different spaces one can inhabit, moving along the axis of both time and space. Building on Hirsch’s understanding, an argument is made for the agency of one’s individual experience in the formation of a certain narrative within *postmemory*. To do so, in the following chapter, the characters of the story serve instrumentally to explore the different expressions of trans-generational ties. This is understood as the manner in which each individual reacts to what is handed down to them and how they pass it on to their surrounding space, consequently leading to the transformation of that space.

2.1 Being Collector

Jonathan is, in the film, first presented at his grandmother's deathbed, retrieving the prosthetic denture of her night stand and storing it in a zip bag, proceeding to hang it in the midst of his wall-size collection of objects, photographs and other written documentation belonging to his ancestors. Jonathan sees beauty in those objects, because they channel the story he wants to be close to. In the novel, he works on writing the history of *Trachimbrod*, following the storyline of his great-great-great grandmother.

“The preservation and transfer of memory is the most critical mission that children and grandchildren of survivors must undertake so as to ensure meaningful and authentic Holocaust remembrance in future generations”.²²

As the third-generation carries the trauma of their ancestors, they live in the present, although facing the past. Despite desiring a connection to one’s cultural heritage,²³ they cannot identify themselves with that narrative of the past generations because they have not lived it themselves. Therefore that cultural identity is extracted from the time and place in which it initially happened and abstracted in order to be appropriated by the third-generation. By this time, the individual has made it their own, therefore having created a new narrative, based on a reality that

¹⁹Gaston Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (France: Presses Universitaires de France, 1964), 8

²⁰Based on Henry Lefebvre’s work in *The production of Space*, 1974

²¹Edward Soja, *Thirdspace* (Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 133

²²Excerpt from a speech by Menachem Rosensaft, the general counsel of the World Jewish Congress, seen in: Andra-Lucia Rus, “James Joyce’s Dublin and Lars Saabye Christensen’s Oslo. Geocritical Readings,” *Romanian Journal of English Studies* 10, no. 1 (February 2013): 271-277.

²³Amy Hungerford, “How Jonathan Safran Foer made love,” *American Literary History* 25, no. 3 (Fall 2013): 607-624, 612

does not fit the time and place components of the reality they are located in at the present. This notion is developed by Stefan Ionescu Ambrosie, who wrote an essay drawing on Marianne Hirsh's concept of *postmemory*, focusing in *postmemory*-writing and analysing the ethicality of it when done through the genre of fiction.²⁴

*"The process of adapting an historical event like the Holocaust implies a second-hand re-imagining in most of these cases, a perspective which is crucial in shaping the very structure of the work in question."*²⁵

Although ethicality of *postmemory*-fiction-writing is not in question in this paper, Ambrosie's perspective clearly visualizes two points argued for in this thesis: the cyclical motion of *postmemory* 'making', and the agency of the so called second-hand re-imagining. If the focus is turned to the word 'shaping' in this definition, the placement of the formation of memory in a literal place where interaction can happen, seems more legitimate than when only following Hirsh's starting definition, which she herself argues to be in constant development.²⁶ Edward Soja makes a similar statement in his book *Thirdspace*, when he encourages the reader to develop their own understanding of the concept of *Thirdspace*, also much in the same line as the logic behind Ficto-Criticism. He does not offer a closed definition of the concept because he claims that he has just given a word to a thought process that is necessary to be acknowledged and offers a tool to critically view the *First-* and *Secondspace*, stressing that this relations are continuously redeveloped therefore should not be fixed terms.²⁷

It could be argued that a specific narrative is coded with a structure formed by a parallel development, inhabited on the one hand by hard data and on the other hand a productive system, which seems still quite mysterious, although it has something to do with the agency of the individuals involved.



Figure 3. Jonathan's collection of memories. Liev Schreiber, *Everything is Illuminated*, film still, 2005.

²⁴Stefan Ionescu Ambrosie, "Tattered Photograph," *[Inter]sections* 21, (2018): 104-118

²⁵Stefan Ionescu Ambrosie, "Tattered Photograph," *[Inter]sections* 21, (2018): 104-118, 104

²⁶"Postmemory", Postmemory. net, accessed April 2023, <https://postmemory.net/>

²⁷Edward Soja, *Thirdspace* (Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 9

2.2 Being Vessel

The Ukrainian Alex experiences a rather unique form of character development. The space Alex inhabits in the story is most clearly of all the characters constructed of both imagination and realism.

There is a confrontation of cultures between Alex and Jonathan, in which Jonathan reacts in a somewhat underwhelming way, when Alex projects this conflict to us as if he was a mirror. It may be because Jonathan expects the differentiation, however Alex is suddenly presented with an unknown living thing in the back of his Grandfather's car, that unexpectedly shares a history with him and yet has lived his life in a seemingly different world.

Alex obsesses over North-American culture, from a perspective of admiration and an underlying desire to escape from the place he comes from. He has the ambition of one day traveling there, expecting to seamlessly fit in, even more so than at home. He wants to get to know Jonathan because he is an American for him, whilst Jonathan views Alex as one of the people from Ukraine, the land he has always been disconnected from.

Language is one of the most relevant elements constituting Alex's personage. His English is limited, his communication therefore becomes creative, however not merely practical and process oriented.

*"I observed that the Hero had small rivers descending from his face, and I wanted to put my hands on his face, to be architecture for him".*²⁸

His use of words is so literal and also associative, that images and concepts seem to obtain a new layer of meaning. In order to understand this process I turned to Taeke de Jong's *Kleine Methodologie voor Ontwerpend Onderzoek*. In this book from 1992 he collects the words that are commonly used in the interaction between different parties taking part in a design process and makes an attempt at giving the most basic and essential definition of it, in order for the varying actors, with differing backgrounds, to start the conversation from a common point.

*"16. Reduction is attaining equality in differences in terms of our thinking. The application or recognition of equality in difference reduces for example the difference in the impressions that the six senses give us, although we read these impressions as 'equal' (for example on the basis of equality of place and time), Piaget (1940) calls this reduction concept."*²⁹

De Jong finds new meaning by creating something from nothing. Starting from words that have long existed and are taken for granted, the professor finds a tool to facilitate communication, a new dictionary. Not only does he revalue the words themselves by critically analysing them, he makes the reader find value in the words he has carefully selected as if making an archive of his favorites.

The way in which Alex organizes his thoughts and desires to form a personal view on the real world is by constructing a personality. The caricatured portrayal in the film sheds light on the non-hermetic envelope he has built around himself, through which his *smallness* and *far-awayness* leak, as well as influences keep coming in.

²⁸Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything is Illuminated* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2002)

²⁹Taeke de Jong, *Kleine Methodologie voor Ontwerpend Onderzoek* (Amsterdam: Boom, 1992), 16

³⁰Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), 20

“for there is a general desire to be endlessly remembered and endlessly repeatable”³⁰

Brazilian philosopher Vilém Flusser sees a “programmed magic” in technical images such as drawings, photographs and film. This magic is able to construct collective memory because in its language it seeks a common ground, and abstraction that can be projected into different spaces.³¹ From this perspective towards the arts and literature, the individual comes forward as a receiver of collective memory, aside being an actor in constructing it as well.

Alex needs to transform during the story in order to become a vessel of the trauma that has been encoded in his existence. It seems that the journey to *Trachimbrod* is for him a blind path towards *enlightenment* by the light from the past. In contrast to Jonathan, who seeks to translate his own family history in order to find logic in the world, Alex finds himself turning towards the past, at the end of the story, and admiring the light it sheds on his identity, knowing that it is going to be perpetuated in the future.

From a Ficto-Critical approach, the idea could be extrapolated that this phenomenon is a translation of how the third-generation has the desire to convert their given trans-generational trauma into something beautiful that is comprehensible to them. It may be that having meaning is the same as being beautiful. This idea is supported by Amy Hungerford, who reviewed the novel, and mentioned how Jonathan Safran Foer’s aesthetic attention when writing, is a kind of *love* towards the topic. She highlights the innovative quality of this aesthetic and how it is so appealing it sold itself.³² It could be argued that the *postmemory* ‘making’ written about in the chapter above, is a product of *love*, deriving from one’s involvement in a narrative, how direct or indirect it may be, as the standard understanding of far and close seems to be discarded in this logic. One can be close to a memory while being removed from the time and space coordinates of the historical event that generated it. If Flusser is believed, this *love* can also be interpreted as being mainly focused on one’s own role of subject within a narrative, which would act as the motive behind *postmemory* ‘making’.



Figure 4. Alex picking up Jonathan from the station. Liev Schreiber, *Everything is Illuminated*, film still, 2005.

³¹ Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), 20

³² Amy Hungerford, “How Jonathan Safran Foer made love,” *American Literary History* 25, no. 3 (Fall 2013): 607-624, 610

2.3 Being subject / Grandfather

Grandfather lost his wife a few years prior to the events that transgress in the story, and now lives with his son and his family. He assures he is blind, and Sammy Davis Junior Junior is his guide, although it is clear from the beginning he is not really blind but merely acting so, in order to be left alone. It is not until the end of the story that the truth emancipates from under a thick layer of shame, anger and silence, that Grandfather appears to have been a villager from around *Trachimbrod* himself, who survived the mass shooting. Through various flash backs and almost no words, the reader or viewer are presented with this shocking, however healing, fact. Nevertheless Alex seems to discover it himself by observing how his grandfather moves through the spaces they encounter on their journey. When they start the return home, Grandfather stays in *Trachimbrod* by putting an end to his life in the hotel bathroom, and is found by Alex, who sees his eyes are now open, looking up, with an unknown tranquillity on his expression.

In *Postmodern Geographies*, Edward Soja synthesized Lefebvre's *double illusion* notion, with which he fuses the 'physical and mental' space, by renaming it as *mytopia* versus *hypermetropia*. The first one is defined as: near-sightedness, only seeing what is right in front of you, and the second as: looking so far into the future that what is close to oneself is blurred.³³ This binary is useful to understand Grandfather's "blindness".

As it is already been discovered in the chapter above that closeness to a narrative is entirely subjective, it is interesting to see how it also functions the other way around.

Grandfather impersonates the first-generation, the victims of the traumatic history of the Jewish community during the Second World War. His journey through the second line of development of history mentioned in the first chapter, seems to transgress contrary to that of his Grandson. At the start of the story he is as far away from *Trachimbrod* as he could possibly position himself, slowly coming back until in the final chapter, stopping by physically ending his life there. The path he follows to get there is the literal road to *Trachimbrod*, and this physical line is inextricably linked to his cognitive memory.

Furthermore, the troubled agency of the first-generation's subconscious is also symbolically seen in a scene from the car when *the Hero* mentions the fact that the musician Sammy Davis Junior, name giver to Grandfather's dog, was a Jew. Grandfather and Alex burst in laughter from disbelief: that could not be possible. Jonathan remains confused as to why this notion could evoke such hilarity. This could be interpreted as a curious early signalization of the truth of their common identities that lies so far behind them they cannot grasp it. Grandfather has chosen to forget and Alex is therefore conditioned not to know. Jonathan Safran Foer gives us an argument for Westphal's notion of Geocriticism: Grandfather had to drive to *Trachimbrod* to be illuminated by his past, and Sammy Davis Junior Junior always formed a hidden link between the characters, later to be uncovered.

³³Rick Allen, "What Space Makes of Us: Thirdspace, Identity Politics, and Multiculturalism" Presented at *The Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association* (March, 1997) 7



Figure 5. *Sammy Davis Junior Junior* guarding a sleeping *Grandfather*. Liev Schreiber, *Everything is Illuminated*, film still, 2005.

2.4 Being guide / Sammy Davis Junior Junior

In *Everything is Illuminated* the communication does not occur only through narrative; Jonathan Safran Foer makes use of objects to guide the characters and the readers/viewers through the story. Jonathan is portrayed from the start as a collector of memories of his family history. Although the connection can be drawn to the tradition present in Jewish culture to desire a connection to the identity of one's ancestors,³⁴ Jonathan's customs are experienced as unique and obsessive. Nevertheless, the delicate manner in which he handles the seemingly mundane objects is endearing and profound. By collecting these items he gives them meaning, in other words, he lets them exist in a different dimension, for him.

Those objects have such a strong presence that they come across as having an aura of their own. Just as Robin Evans, British architect and historian, mentions how Daniel Libeskind's drawing lines in *Chamber Works* have such a determination of position and expression themselves that they are read as having human abilities,³⁵ the movie by Schreiber has its own visual code that lays focus on the animation of inorganic as well as the personification of the non-human.

I argue that this "coming alive" is the evidence of the hidden agency of the space of memory on the space of real-time action.

*"Touch, taste, sight, smell, hearing...memory. While Gentiles experience and process the world through the traditional senses, and use memory only as a second-order means of interpreting events, for Jews memory is no less primary than the prick of a pin, or its silver glimmer, or the taste of the blood it pulls from the finger. The Jew is pricked by a pin and remembers other pins. It is only by tracing the pinprick back to other pinpricks...that the Jew is able to know why it hurts."*³⁵

An example of this phenomenon is Grandfather's *seeing eye bitch*. She is his companion and joins them in the heritage tours car during the journey to *Trachimbrod*. It is my interpretation that the character of the dog is a metaphor for the troubled and changing interconnections between Grandfather, Alex and Jonathan, and guides them towards *illumination*.

In an early scene, Alex and Jonathan approach some land workers to ask for directions and are made fun of because of their untraditional, non-Ukrainian appearances. Alex is further humiliated in front of them when Sammy Davis Junior Junior stays looking aggressively at the workers while Alex and Jonathan walk away. She does not listen to the calling of Alex to follow them, frustrating him. When the dog finally listens and runs back, Alex gives her a slap on the face to which Jonathan witnesses in awe. Grandfather is then seen running frantically towards Alex and punching him to the ground, yelling never to touch her again. When the beating is done Alex gets up brushing off the dirt from his pristine track suit, they get in the car and the event is never spoken about. My interpretation is that the dog symbolizes the distance between the two generations, that cannot communicate properly, with Jonathan on the side seeing it all unravel without taking part.

Another perspective is Jonathan's relationship to the dog. Aside from the fact that *the Hero* is afraid of dogs, Sammy Davis Junior Junior acts defiant towards him at first. During the whole journey they share the back seat of the *trabant*, rendering Jonathan physically uncomfortable despite mentioning his phobia to the Ukrainians.

³⁴Amy Hungerford, "How Jonathan Safran Foer made love," *American Literary History* 25, no. 3 (Fall 2013): 607-624, 612

³⁵Robin Evans, "In Front of Lines That Leave Nothing Behind," *AA Files* 6 (May 1984): 483-489, 483

³⁶Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything is Illuminated* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2002), 198

As the story develops, it is the dog that seeks closeness to Jonathan, surprising Alex and subtly planting the idea that *the Hero* is worth getting to know better.



Figure 6. Jonathan is afraid of dogs. Liev Schreiber, *Everything is Illuminated*, film still, 2005.

Finding Nothing

Shannon Margaret Seiferth, English graduate from the University of Michigan, classifies *Everything is Illuminated* as a fictionalized story.³⁷ It is true that Jonathan Safran Foer imagined the end of the story after he did not find what he was looking for on his own trip to Trochenbrod. Nevertheless, an argument could be made for the “realism” of Safran’s story.

For philosopher Nelson Goodman, in terms of images, fidelity is not a condition for realism as well as information yield is no test of realism. The realism of an image is the product of the relation between its system of representation and the standard system of representation. When writing about the denotation of pictures in *Languages of Art*, he theorizes on the relation between identity and representation. He states that representation is inherently abstraction and moves the image further away from authenticity. A reproduction of an image that is able to confuse us into reading it as real is therefore staged.³⁸ This concept of *staging* makes a clear distinction between reality and fiction, in which fiction is not tied to reality and no interaction exist between them but the endless reproduction of one original identity, which is the only real one.

Although it was not intended as being present in literature, this *staging* Goodman denotes, could be interpreted as having agency of its own, once introduced in literature, when compared to the hallucination Flusser writes about.

“Human beings forget they created the images in order to orientate themselves in the world. Since they are no longer able to decode them, their lives have become a function of their own images: imagination has turned into hallucination”³⁹

Fiction lets the narrative come alive. This logic can be brought to the physical environment which has been the focus of the research, by comparing it to how Edward Soja’s *Firstspace* is a product of human imagination (*Secondspace*), which is then again influenced by what one sees and experiences in the *Firstspace*. There seems to exist a process of immediate feedback based on the projection of ideas onto the physical realm and being mirrored back, encoded with new information. If this back and forth movement continues for a period of time, one could argue that the line between imaginary and realism fades. This immediate feedback which Flusser calls an “endlessly repeatable movement”⁴⁰, needs to take place in a mental space that has immediate influence on history, and its opening goes both ways. By systematically collecting relics from his ancestors, *the Collector* is presented by Safran Foer and Schreiber as meticulously reconstructing a network of memories that were initially not intended to lead anywhere but were picked up by Jonathan as if he were a fishing net, and are thereby put in relation to the objects that carry them. His room is an archive which permeates through all the corners of the house, as it exists in there in its material form but also through him as a complete narrative. With this collecting process post-history is made through spatiality.

Everything is Illuminated can be then placed within this *tangible-intangible space*. In an interview,⁴¹ Jonathan Safran Foer states how there are two methods of describing events or subjects. He explains them by repositioning a glass of water across the table. The first method would say something close to: “the water has been moved by my hand in its cylindrical container”, and the second being something resembling: “the water vibrates and feels cold on my hand and reminds me

³⁷Shannon Margaret Seiferth, “More Premium than Life: Expressing the Inexpressible in Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Everything is Illuminated*” (Thesis, University of Michigan, 2012), 6

³⁸Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 4-5

³⁹Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), 10

⁴⁰Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), 20

⁴¹Jonathan Safran Foer, interview

of when I saw the sea at the beach”. Both are indeed accurate, however the second one opens up the possibility of making associations to other atmospheres, for it functions as a gate towards other spaces, without it being fiction.

When Hans Belting mentions how pictures exist, but images happen,⁴² I believe it refers to this void in between the binary of realism and imaginary that actively channels information onto our collective memory and also extracts from it to the present, close to how Alex is a vessel of the trauma of the Holocaust in the present. It could be questioned if memory is not truly reality just in another time. Safran makes them coexist at the same moment, which allows questions regarding our agency in position ourselves: Who are we then at this moment? Is it different from who we were before? And, which one would we want to be?

In *Of Other Spaces*, Foucault called the twentieth century the “epoch of simultaneity”, in which a structuralist approach to history arose that does not negate time as understood before, but reconfigures it.

*“the effort to establish, between elements that could have been connected on a temporal axis, an ensemble of relations that makes them appear as juxtaposed, set off against one another, implicated by each other- that makes them appear, in short, as a sort of configuration.”*⁴³

As the Diaspora has dispersed the Jewish community around the world, and former homes have been wiped out, there is often no place to return to for them. Trochenbrod has become: the stories of Trochenbrod.⁴⁴ With narratives becoming the medium of existence for this village, it gains a state of timelessness, as if it still exists, but in a way we cannot experience how we would experience walls, streets, doors or handshakes. All that is of the physical realm in Trochenbrod today is a mass grave and two monuments to the perished. Bendavid-Val narrates his visit to the site helped by an elderly resident of the village Yaromel, close to Trochenbrod, and how the black marble piece located where the former Synagogue was, erected in 1992 by Israelis and an American born in Trochenbrod, felt as if it was a lost relative. When there is nothing else to be found, how could that one object not translate as the most important piece of history? This way it becomes an anchor for the formulation of a *postmemory* that can, from the present time, still reconfigure history through the use of the physical world, despite being abstracted into a metaphysical space for it to be able to do its working.



Figures 6-7. Christian Herrmann, *A return to Trochenbrod* (2015).

⁴²Hans Belting, *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body* (New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 2014), x

⁴³Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (Spring, 1986): 22-27, 22

⁴⁴Jonathan Safran Foer, “Preface” in *The heavens are empty*, by Avrom Bendavid-Val, (Pegasus Books, October, 2010)

Finding Everything

They are close to Trochenbrod when Grandfather tells Alex: -"Go ask there"- . He approaches the weathered wooden shed through a sunflower field that seems to swallow him. An elderly woman lives there and Alex shows her the picture of Jonathan's Grandfather and Augustine, asking her if she knows them. She is hesitant, but seems to subtly react with endearment. Sammy Davis Junior Junior stays in the car while the other three enter the house, which is stacked to the brim with old boxes. She seems to recognize *the Hero* (who in the film is portrayed as holding an exact resemblance to his Grandfather) and Lista hands him a box with the label *dust* written on it, which holds just a few personal items, all of a brownish, decomposing colour. It holds nothing, except everything there was to be found.

Kevin Lynch developed the theory of *cognitive maps* in his book from 1960, *The Image of the City*. He states that the human brain constructs a mental representation of the physical space that is the city in order to navigate through it. These cognitive maps are made through a process in which certain physical elements are prioritized: *landmark, node, edge, path, district*.⁴⁵ These categories help understand the meaning of the different elements we experience with our bodies and their weight in our everyday rituals. In this way those *cognitive maps* are unique to every person.

Writer Avrom Bendavid - Val, also descendant of Trochenbrod has thoroughly researched the origins of the village through the few documents he could find in old archives nearby the location.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, the material content of those lines and dots on a piece of paper, insufficient in sketching a clear representation of the village, can only have meaning by survivor testimonies. By relating physical objects that were found to those narrations, he reconstructs the existence of Trochenbrod in his book *The heavens are empty*. What we now know of Trochenbrod is, although true, also constructed.

In an interview, Jonathan Safran Foer, gives the answers that historical accuracy could be replaced with imaginative accuracy, and questions what one's responsibility towards historical truth is.⁴⁷ Literary reviewer Brooke Allen critiques that this controversial position is probably due to Safran's distance from the actual events, who was born thirty years after the Holocaust.⁴⁸

I argue this distance is as mental as it is physical, and exist in time and space because it has been constructed for generations in this way, fuelled by a *love* for the mundane ritual of family ties and a desire to become *the Hero* of one's story by carrying that code and propelling it into the future, through *postmemory* 'making'.

Although Ukraine is already the *other space* for *the Collector*, Lista's house is the most clear representation of this alternative space in the story. In that house, the experience of life passing by was not real, expressed by how she asks: - "Is the war over?", as they leave. Nevertheless the passage of time is the sole reason for her to keep all those objects, for the house to exist as it is, visible in how Alex later expresses that she remained there "to be found by *the Collector*", together with all those objects. As a last goodbye Lista approaches *the Hero* and she says to him - "I have been waiting for you for so long"-.

In a space Lista and Jonathan were always in, everything was to be found that was needed

⁴⁵Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (The MIT Press, 1960)

⁴⁶Avrom Bendavid-Val, *The heavens are empty*, (Pegasus Books, October, 2010)

⁴⁷ ⁴⁸Amy Hungerford, "How Jonathan Safran Foer made love", *American Literary History* 25, no. 3 (Fall 2013): 608

to prove their own existence and give them a purpose to keep existing. The almost ghostlike and subdued appearance of Lista and her house, that seems to be falling apart of old age despite being the only thing that is keeping Trochenbrod with one foot in the physical realm, might be Liev Schreiber's way of finding a common ground between the existence and non-existence of time in Safran Foer's novel. Everything seems to exist at once.



Figure 8. *Lista recognizing Jonathan (or his grandfather)*. Liev Schreiber, *Everything is Illuminated*, film still, 2005.



Figure 9. *Lista's house*. Liev Schreiber, *Everything is Illuminated*, film still, 2005.

Conclusion

This concluding chapter lays down the final connection between the theories stated in this paper in order to answer the research question: how did Jonatha Safran Foer present the contribution of the physical environment to the preservation of collective memory in the literary novel *Everything is Illuminated*, adapted to screen by Live Schreiber?

The paper intends to position the phenomenon of *postmemory*, understood as a productive system, in space. Not as a manner of creating a partition between the cognitive temporal and spatial realms and that of the body, not by *othering* the narratives native of imagined or historical spaces in relation to one's own position, however by highlighting the permeable character of the building of history in relation to its own agency. This motion of adding onto an existing archive of narratives takes place following the rules of an environment in which time and space are not static, for which it is endlessly repeatable and can be closer or more distant to one's self. This does not entail the interaction is constantly in motion, on the contrary, it demands the act of setting it in motion, since as a pin in the machine, one holds the agency to disrupt the transgression of a normative set of rules that determines the manner in which collective memory progresses in time.

If it were to be viewed as walking down a clearly delineated path to a certain destination and then deciding to blindly take a deviation from it, an in real-time 'making' of a new space could be observed. That set of points that form it, are then permanently present, as time does move in a growing direction, just as Safran's story is materialized sitting on many bookshelves, as well as present in the form of millions of coded reproductions on the internet and in the memory of those who have read it.

The agency of objects in the transportation of narrative has been stressed in this essay, to test the argument that those narratives are encoded with a specific time and space component which are linked. It could be said that *Firstspace* and *Secondspace* are present at the same time and space coordinates and work together in order to create *Thirdspace*. The book in the hand of the reader is the portal object for the narrative Jonathan Safran Foer made by overriding a specific set of points in the line of history, that of the historical events transgressed in Trochimbrod as well as his own journey to the *shtetle*, with a fictionalized set of memories with the same time and space components. The story that follows from that action, which could also be named interaction, as the overriding information could not exist without the layer below, can be accessed and interacted with instantaneously. This instant memory making is thus enabled by Safran's efforts to carefully montage reality. No only the story of *Everything is Illuminated* but the story in relation to the "making" of it, have been used as a tool to theorize on the premise of this paper.

The position taken in this conclusion is that the physical environment works as an archive of memory, in which all individuals act as collectors. The phenomenon of *palimpsest*⁴⁹ that is the building history is understood as being produced by cognitive recollection of events that have themselves been once imagined based on a collected set of memories of past events before being carried out. And through certain disruptive gestures moved by the position one takes towards those memories, the course is adjusted.

At some point Alex became aware of the line that existed between his own mind and body and that of all the individuals forming the Jewish culture, which he called: being *Illuminated by the*

⁴⁹ "A parchment or other writing-material written upon twice, the original writing having been erased or rubbed out to make place for the second; a manuscript in which a later writing is written over an effaced earlier writing."

- Definition by Oxford English Dictionary, as seen in:

Sarah Dillon, "Reinscribing De Quincey's palimpsest: the significance of the palimpsest in contemporary literary and cultural studies," *Textual Practice* 19, no. 3 (2005): 243-263, 244

light of the past. That state of *enlightenment* set in motion his agency to carry a memory by re-imagining it.

What is generally called as the perceived physical environment is argued to be: a formation of sets of points of which the time and space coordinates can be modified through fiction.

Reflection

In a further study I would want to acknowledge the social dimension of spatial studies mentioned by theorists studied in this essay, such as Michel Foucault and Henry Lefebvre, as well as the interpretations of Karl Marx. Although at first I did not believe it would add to the arguments I wanted to pose as well as supposing too much research, viewing the physical environment as an archive of narratives in which we all act as collectors, left me wondering if there is a role of the ‘curator’ as well, holding a different type of agency. This notion inspires to question whether the *Thirdspace* can be truly seen as disjointed from the hierarchical relations that shape the *First-* and *Secondspace*.

It has been gratifying to research this novel and film, personal favourites of mine, in the framework of spatial studies and *postmemory* writing. I have wondered many times what the relevance of this essay is and whether it is entirely ethical to make concluding statements on subjects with such unpacked complexity, of which, naturally, I have only uncovered little. Despite this permanent insecurity, I am positive about students like myself being given the space to develop a position towards research in general and feeling that we have agency in adding to the discourse of our own, most specific interests. I would like to end this essay with a quote by Nelson Goodman that I have repeated in my head time and again, whenever in doubt about that agency:

“Realism is a matter of habit.”⁵⁰

⁵⁰Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 38



Figure 10. *Listening to Lista, in a room full of memories in boxes.* Liev Schreiber, *Everything is Illuminated*, film still, 2005.

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