Representing Holocaust Trauma: 

*The Pawnbroker and Everything Is Illuminated*

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1. Introduction

This thesis will focus on how the experience of trauma and its effects are represented through the media of literature and film. After discussing the general nature of the concept of trauma – as well as the developments in the study of this concept – this thesis will deal more specifically with the trauma experienced by Holocaust survivors, their children and their grandchildren.

Although it has been over sixty years since the Holocaust occurred, its impact is undeniable as it continues to haunt our present-day generation. This is of course especially true for the Jewish people, which explains why so many Jewish American novels deal with the subject of the Holocaust. Alan Berger refers to Elie Wiesel to clarify this inextricable connection between Jewish American literature and the Holocaust: “[n]o Jew can be fully Jewish today, can be fully a man today, without being part of the Holocaust. All Jews are survivors. They have all been inside the whirlwind of the Holocaust, even those born afterwards, even those who heard its echoes in distant lands” (Sicher Breaking Crystal 253). In this way, Wiesel refers to the fact that not only the generation that lived during the Holocaust is influenced by these events, but also that the second and even the third generation born after their occurrence still experiences the consequences.

The second part of this thesis will discuss The Pawnbroker, a novel by Edward Lewis Wallant. He is an example of a Jewish novelist who heard such an echo of the Holocaust “in distant lands,” namely in the United States of America. Even though Wallant was not a survivor of the Shoah, he can thus be considered part of the first generation. This novel was published in 1961 and deals with the subject matter of the Holocaust. More precisely, as Alan Rosen suggests, it is “[t]he story of a Holocaust survivor unable to mourn” (77). Therefore, The Pawnbroker will be analyzed in this thesis as a representation of first generation
literature. The film adaptation of this novel – directed by Sidney Lumet – appeared in 1965, and will also be considered further on.

Finally, the last part of this thesis will be devoted to the analysis and discussion of Jonathan Safran Foer’s debut novel *Everything Is Illuminated*, which was published in 2002. Because his grandparents survived the Holocaust, Foer is undoubtedly part of the third generation. The choice of this novel as a representation of third generation trauma literature is justified by Philippe Codde’s assertion that it is “[p]erhaps the most prototypical example of a third generation literary approach to the Shoah” (“Postmemory, Afterimages” 7). The novel was adapted into film by director Liev Schreiber in 2005.

The second generation will not be elaborately discussed in this thesis, as I wish to focus on the first and the third generation instead. The second generation is still closer connected to the first generation, whereas it is more difficult for the third generation to establish a direct link to the past. I have chosen to compare the above mentioned first and third generation novels and films because of the greater distance that exists between these generations. In my opinion, this distance is precisely what makes it into an even more interesting comparison. Through this comparison, I would like to identify the most suitable medium – either literature or cinema – to represent the trauma of each generation.
2. Trauma, the Holocaust and the Jewish American Novel

2.1. Trauma

2.1.1. Defining Trauma

Before the trauma of the Holocaust – and, more specifically, its representation through the media of literature and film – can be discussed, it is necessary to attempt to define the concept of ‘trauma’. I use the verb “to attempt” since the notion of trauma has undergone significant changes in meaning throughout the years and it is therefore important to realize that its definition has never been completely fixed.

Cathy Caruth mentions that the word “trauma” is derived from the Greek language meaning “wound;” the original meaning was thus “an injury inflicted on a body” (Unclaimed Experience 3). Later on, the concept came to be used in psychiatry as well, thus changing the meaning to “a wound inflicted […] upon the mind” (3). Throughout history, such psychological trauma was not always recognized and the amount of attention given to the phenomenon changed in time.

As Ruth Leys points out, one of the first periods of interest in trauma occurred when soldiers returned traumatized from the front during World War I. Physicians then began to see that “their wounds were psychological rather than organic in nature” and they labelled the soldiers’ condition as “shell shock” (Leys 83). After some years, interest waned, but it returned when World War II arrived. Although analysts had some theories regarding the subject of war trauma, these were soon forgotten again when the wars were over. It took a new drama to remember their former conclusions, namely the Vietnam war (15). Codde confirms that only after this war, it was recognized that “the pathologies that had variously been identified as ‘war neurosis,’ ‘shell shock,’ ‘combat fatigue,’ or ‘survivor syndrome’ were really manifestations of one and the same condition that became known as ‘trauma’ or PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder)” (“Postmemory, Afterimages” 2). Still, it took a few more
years for the phenomenon to be officially recognized and only in 1980 was the existence of PTSD finally acknowledged by the American Psychiatric Association (Leys 2). Caruth defines this concept—a definition that nowadays has been widely accepted—as follows:

[T]here is a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event. ("Trauma and Experience" 4)

Leys specifies the possible forms of the response mentioned above by listing the following symptoms as immediate results of the syndrome: “flashbacks, nightmares and other reexperiences, emotional numbing, depression, guilt, autonomic arousal, explosive violence or tendency to hypervigilance” (2). The concept of trauma and its consequences will be further explained in the following discussion of trauma theory.

2.1.2. Trauma Theory

Codde points out the origins of recent trauma theory by mentioning Jacques Derrida’s ‘deconstruction’ on the one hand as an important basis, while acknowledging Freudian psychoanalysis on the other hand as an equally important source from which trauma theory derived many of its ideas. Trauma theory acquired from deconstruction the urge to look for hidden meanings and the belief that it is impossible to identify one single meaning in a text (Codde “Course”). The most important Freudian concepts that will turn up time and again in trauma theory are ‘Nachträglichkeit’ (or latency), ‘acting-out’ and ‘working-through’ (Codde “Course”). Dan Bar-On mentions that even though the latter two concepts were developed by
Freud to analyze the therapeutic process between patient and psychiatrist, the scope of these concepts was broadened over the years as to include social traumatic experiences and PTSD (96). These terms will be dealt with further on in this thesis, when the attempt to overcome trauma will be discussed.

The concept of ‘latency’ has already been hinted at in the above definition of PTSD by Caruth (“sometimes delayed”) and is crucial to the understanding of the meaning of trauma. Dominick LaCapra states that “in Freud’s widely shared view, the trauma as experience is ‘in’ the repetition of an early event in a later event – an early event for which one was not prepared to feel anxiety and a later event that somehow recalls the early one and triggers a traumatic response” (Writing History 81-82). Caruth describes this period between the early and the later event as “the period during which the effects of the experience are not apparent” (Unclaimed Experience 17). Moreover, she declares that

the central enigma revealed by Freud’s example¹, is not so much the period of forgetting that occurs after the accident, but rather the fact that the victim of the crash was never fully conscious during the accident itself […]. The experience of trauma, the fact of latency, would thus seem to consist, not in the forgetting of a reality that can hence never be fully known, but in an inherent latency within the experience itself. (17)

According to LaCapra, the reason why this trauma was not registered during the accident is because the “mode of aggression departs so far from expectations that it is unbelievable and met with incredulity and a total lack of preparedness” (History and Memory 41). Since the

¹ The example and “the crash” that Caruth is referring to is Freud’s example of a train collision from which a person may get away “apparently unharmed”, but “[i]n the course of the following weeks, however, he develops a series of grave psychical and motor symptoms, which can be ascribed only to his shock or whatever else happened at the time of the accident” (Unclaimed Experience 16)
trauma cannot be located within any existing schemes of prior knowledge, LaCapra refers to it as an “out-of-context experience” (*History in Transit* 107). The victim is caught off guard by a literally incredible event and is therefore not ready to feel the anxiety that such an event should cause. This is what Freud calls the “absence of Angstbereitschaft” (LaCapra *History and Memory* 41).

Another important psychiatrist who explored this topic was Pierre Janet. This French philosopher also studied psychoanalysis and is said to have preceded Freud in many of his ideas. According to Bessel van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart, one of Janet’s major contributions was his distinction between “habit memory,” “narrative memory” and “traumatic memory”. Especially the differentiation between the latter two would be of crucial importance to his work.

“Habit memory” refers to what happens when people almost automatically assimilate new information, while “narrative memory” requires a certain kind of effort to be able to memorize well. Van der Kolk and van der Hart describe this kind of memory as consisting of “mental constructs, which people use to make sense out of experience” (160). The more “familiar and expectable” an experience is, the more it will be remembered with ease (160). The third type of memory occurs when something unexpected or even frightening takes place. Because of the unexpected nature, it will be remembered more vividly and in extreme situations the memory may even withstand integration. Janet defines this “traumatic memory” as follows:

> Under extreme conditions, existing meaning schemes may be entirely unable to accommodate frightening experiences, which causes the memory of these experiences to be stored differently and not be available for retrieval under ordinary conditions: it becomes dissociated from conscious awareness and
voluntary control (Janet, 1889, 1919-25). When that occurs, fragments of these unintegrated experiences may later manifest recollections or behavioral reenactments […] (160).

Van der Kolk and van der Hart further add that these manifestations of traumatic memory are usually triggered by situations that remind victims of the initial traumatic experience (163). Caruth indicates that the reason why an event keeps returning through such manifestations lies in the fact that the traumatic memory cannot be transformed into a narrative memory, which means it cannot become part of a story about the past (“Recapturing” 153). She also explains why many survivors are unwilling to complete this transition: not only will they lose “the precision and the force” of a traumatic memory, they also fear the loss of “the event’s essential incomprehensibility, the force of its affront to understanding” (153-154).

According to Caruth, it is up to the listener to “not reduce them [traumatic stories] to clichés or turn them all into versions of the same story” (“Preface” VII). This moral dilemma constitutes one of the main problems of testifying and already indicates the importance of the role of the listener in this process, which will be discussed further on. However, van der Kolk and van der Hart emphasize the importance of testimony: if survivors cannot turn the trauma into a narrative memory, they might “develop difficulties in assimilating subsequent experiences as well”. They even go as far as to state that “their personality development” may come to a halt and will not be able to “expand any more by the addition or assimilation of new elements” (164). Dori Laub confirms this and points out that the longer survivors wait to tell their story, the more distorted their memory may become. He even underscores the danger of a survivor ending up with doubts about the reality of experienced events (“Truth and Testimony” 64).
Codde states that one of the major problems with trauma theory is the danger of overgeneralization. He mentions Freud’s belief that all people begin their life with a trauma, namely that of the separation from the mother. Caruth adds that in every text or movie, one can find a moment of departure that brings this original trauma to mind. By suggesting that all people are in a way trauma survivors, the gravity of undergoing an actual traumatic event may not be acknowledged. This may lead to the reduction or even the trivialization of the concept of trauma (Codde “Course”).

2.2. Trauma in Relation to the Holocaust

2.2.1. The Event Itself

The event of the Holocaust is in many ways incomparable to any other occurrence. What made it so particular, Laub believes, is that “the event produced no witnesses” (“Truth and Testimony” 65). Even though the Nazis exterminated so many possible witnesses, the question remains why most of the people who did survive failed to testify. Laub argues that “the inherently incomprehensible and deceptive psychological structure of the event precluded its own witnessing, even by its very victims” (65). He further explains this theory as follows: “when one cannot turn to a ‘you’ one cannot say ‘thou’ even to oneself. The Holocaust created in this way a world in which one could not bear witness to oneself” (“An Event Without a Witness” 82). When one cannot tell one’s own history, one can again begin to doubt its veracity; even one’s feeling of identity may dissolve (82). This “delusional ideology” that perpetrators imposed on their victims paralyzed the survivors to such an extent that few were capable of speaking up after the Holocaust (81). Survivors came out of this horrendous experience with the feeling that their own supposed “subhumanity” was real and, because of this, they wanted to keep the rest of the world from knowing this “truth” (82).
Henry Krystal affirms this annihilation of survivor’s identities and histories, and adds that their “basic trust” had also been destroyed. Other after-effects of the Holocaust that he mentions are: “their inability to re-experience and describe some of their harmful experiences, their retroactive idealization of their childhood problems of (survivor) guilt feelings […], their […] disturbances in the body image, and finally, the problems of continuing aggression […]” (77). Especially the “inability to re-experience and describe” their painful past, will be discussed later on in this thesis.

2.2.2. The First Generation

2.2.2.1. Survivors

Soon after the end of the Holocaust, victims who had managed to live through the Holocaust were given the label of ‘survivor’. When these survivors started to have children, the term ‘first generation’ appeared so as to distinguish them from the following generation. Although the term ‘first generation’ does not only indicate actual survivors of the Holocaust, it is usually used in this meaning. However, even this term is not very specific since the concept of survivorhood is also difficult to define: it does not only refer to people who survived the Nazi concentration camps, but also to people who lived in hiding or people who were on the run for years. In addition, the term ‘first generation’ also includes Jewish people who lived during the time of the Holocaust and never came into contact with it directly, but who, for example, had relatives who died during the Holocaust.

According to Krystal, survivors developed a certain “automatonlike behavior” in order to be able to survive the horrendous Holocaust-experience (81). He mentions a “‘numbing’ process by which all affective and pain responses are blocked,” as a complementary behavioural aspect which a survivor developed to endure the Holocaust (80). Dina Wardi refers to this aspect as “emotional dullness” and adds to this “concentration camp syndrome”
the following symptoms: “[s]elf-preoccupation, […] [v]arious physical and psychosomatic disturbances, […] [d]efective functioning of the superego [and] [d]amage to the bodily self-image” (18). Having survived the Holocaust, survivors often find themselves unable to trust people. To love and be happy again would not only mean a betrayal of the people they have lost, but it would also entail the risk of losing once more what one loves (23).

2.2.2.2. Overcoming Trauma: Acting-out and Working-through

After having explained what the concept of survivorhood entails, I would like to discuss how trauma affects these survivors’ further lives after the Holocaust. Laub recognizes that a particular consequence of the Holocaust is the fact that many of the survivors are not able to deal with the more tragic events in life; they rather experience them as a “second Holocaust, the ultimate victory of their cruel fate, which they have failed to turn around” (“Bearing Witness” 65). Many find themselves unable to lead normal lives after such an event, and they continue to repeat the traumatic past. Janet Burstein explains this tendency to repeat trauma as an attempt to “master by repetition what initially overwhelmed us” (26). Caruth summarizes Freud’s view on this issue by stating that the particularity of these repetitions lies in the fact that “they seem not to be initiated by the individual’s own acts but rather appear as the possession of some people by a sort of fate” (Unclaimed Experience 2).

This repetition of trauma is related to what Joseph Sandler, Christopher Dare and Alex Holder refer to as “acting-out”. This concept was first introduced by Freud in 1905 and is now used to describe “a whole range of impulsive, antisocial or dangerous actions” (“VI. Acting Out” 329). This is often seen as a “substitute for remembering”: the survivor does not remember anything of the traumatic event since it has been repressed, so he or she enacts this memory instead (329-330). Because of the vividness and preciseness of the memory that is being repeated, Caruth calls it a “waking memory” (“Recapturing” 152). She thus indicates
that in the process of acting-out, exactness of memory is being combined with an “amnesia for the past” (152). According to LaCapra, this memory may return in the shape of “nightmares, flashbacks, anxiety attacks, and other forms of intrusively repetitive behavior” (*Writing History* 89).

LaCapra also mentions Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis’ Freudian definition of acting-out: they describe it as an “action in which the subject, in the grip of his unconscious wishes and phantasies, relives these in the present with a sensation of immediacy which is heightened by his refusal to recognize their source and their repetitive character” (*History and Memory* 185-186). Van der Kolk and van der Hart emphasize a crucial aspect of this reliving – crucial to the understanding of the true nature of this phenomenon – by stating that the traumatic memory is not experienced as “a sequence but [as] a simultaneity” (177). This means that the present-day world and the world of the Holocaust past are being experienced in a parallel way in the survivor’s mind. There is no mental split between their traumatic memories and the experience of their everyday surroundings (177).

In an interview with Amos Goldberg, LaCapra mentions – aside from acting-out – another way of remembering trauma: “working through” (1). LaCapra describes the aim of working-through as the attempt “to gain critical distance on a problem, to be able to distinguish between past, present and future” (2). Burstein confirms this view by saying that the survivor, in order to achieve this critical distance, has to reconnect with the trauma. The survivor has to confront it because, if he fails to do so, the repressed trauma will continue to return (49-50). LaCapra explains what working-through trauma implies:

*Working-through means work on posttraumatic symptoms* in order to mitigate the effects of trauma by generating counterforces to compulsive repetition (or acting-out), thereby enabling a more viable articulation of affect and cognition.
or representation, as well as ethical and sociopolitical agency, in the present
and future. (*History in Transit* 119)

In comparing the concept of working-through and acting-out, LaCapra sees mourning as an example of the former, while linking the latter with melancholia (*Writing History* 28).

Although LaCapra often states that “[a]cting-out may well be necessary and unavoidable in the wake of extreme trauma” (*Representing the Holocaust* 198), Michael Levine criticizes LaCapra’s work by accusing him of seeing acting-out and working-through as two separate “stages in a process of coming to terms with the past” (12). Instead, Levine argues, these should be seen as “two moments *simultaneously* inhabiting an internally divided and doubly driven moment” (12). Even though Levine makes a good point – this simultaneity may be expressed insufficiently in LaCapra’s work – Levine’s view does not entirely contradict LaCapra’s. The fact that LaCapra’s understanding of the concept of acting-out does not differ that much from Levine’s can be seen in the following quote by LaCapra:

> I would emphasize that the relation between acting-out and working-through should not be seen in terms of a from/to relationship in which the latter is presented as the dialectical transcendence of the former. I have noted that, particularly in cases of trauma, acting-out may be necessary and perhaps never fully overcome. Indeed, it may be intimately bound up with working through problems. (*Representing the Holocaust* 205)

It seems that LaCapra does not see this distinction as black and white as Levine suggests, but instead recognizes the subtleties of the relationship between the two concepts.
Sandler, Dare and Holder refer to Otto Fenichel’s view that working-through is “an activity of the analyst rather than of both analyst and patient” (“Working Through” 618). Freud would probably not agree with this emphasis on the analyst, since he believes testimony to be a more cooperative process between analyst and patient. Saul Friedlander explains what working-through means for the historian: “the imperative of rendering as truthful an account as documents and testimonials will allow, without giving in to the temptation of closure” (261). Attempting to add closure to Holocaust stories would signify an “avoidance of what remains indeterminate, elusive and opaque” (261).

2.2.2.3. Problems of Testimony

To understand what the possible difficulties within the process of testimony might be, it is perhaps interesting to cite Lawrence Langer’s definition of testimony itself:

Testimony is a form of remembering. The faculty of memory functions in the present to recall a personal history vexed by traumas that thwart smooth-flowing chronicles. Simultaneously, however, straining against what we might call disruptive memory is an effort to reconstruct a semblance of continuity in a life that began as, and now resumes what we would consider, a normal existence. (2)

Because of the repetitive nature of trauma, survivors find it difficult to place the traumatic period within a “smooth-flowing chronicle”. This need to give the event a place in their personal history is similar to making it part of what Janet called “narrative memory”. However, Langer also states that there is a certain danger in this need. He mentions that “[i]n fashioning a consecutive chronicle survivors who record their accounts unavoidably introduce
some kind of teleology, investing the incidents with a meaning” (40). The detailed nature of their memories may give way for their need for continuity. This may even lead to the creation of a story by the survivor to deny the impact of the trauma. This is what Eric Santner refers to as “narrative fetishism”. He describes this concept as “the construction and deployment of a narrative consciously or unconsciously designed to expunge the traces of the trauma or loss that called that narrative into being in the first place” (144). Santner explains that through this strategy of refusing to mourn, these survivors pretend to be undamaged by the trauma. This typically occurs “by situating the site and origin of loss elsewhere (144).

The fact that survivors may, intentionally or unintentionally, adapt their memories to change them into a story they can live with, leads to the question of the reliability of survivors’ memories. Also, it may seem doubtful that survivors can still remember details of these events decades after their occurrence. Langer, however, states that this argument is false: there is no need to revive the memories after such a long time since they have never truly subsided. He states that the “Holocaust memory is an insomniac faculty, whose mental eyes have never slept” (XV). Moreover, Caruth maintains that the main danger lies in the fact that the “repetition of the traumatic experience in the flashback can itself be retraumatizing” (Unclaimed Experience 63). According to Levine, this may even lead to the ‘resilencing’ of the witness and thus the loss of the testimony itself (6). It would also signify a return from the position of ‘witness’ to the position of ‘survivor’, since Caruth indicates that testimony is the process by which this position of being a witness is reclaimed (Unclaimed Experience 63). Another possible hazard concerns the listener: he or she may be overwhelmed by the testimony, which could lead to a failure of testimony (Levine 6). This indicates the crucial importance of the role of the listener since the process of testimony could not be completed without him or her.
2.2.4. Role of the Listener

In discussing the role of the listener, Burstein mentions Primo Levi’s fear of “speaking and not being listened to” (37). If survivors who want to testify fail to find someone willing to listen, they could experience this as a “second abandonment by the world after the first which had taken place during the war” (37). Levine confirms the importance of the role of the listener by stating that there would be no witness “without a witness to the witness” (4). Laub agrees by claiming that the testimony to trauma includes its listener. He asserts that the hearer becomes “the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time” (“Bearing Witness” 57). In this way, the hearer becomes the Holocaust witness even before the actual survivor does (“An Event Without a Witness” 85). The listener, Levine argues, becomes a “supplementary witness” who assumes “co-responsibility for an intolerable burden” (7). Ulrich Streeck declares that the hearer must “co-act out,” which means allowing “himself to be drawn into an interactive situation by the diverse verbal and physical-gestural elements of the patient’s behaviour from which joint enactments sometimes emerge that the analyst has joined in creating” (137). In other words, an affective investment from the listener is necessary to establish a testimony. According to Laub, it is this “joint responsibility” that makes the “repossession of the act of witnessing” possible (“An Event Without a Witness” 85). However, this delicate balance between witness and listener (or secondary witness) is not an easy thing to achieve. Langer points out that the witness is aware of this and therefore asks the listener to “abandon traditional assumptions about moral conduct and the ‘privileged’ distinctions between right and wrong” (XII).

However, this involvement of the listener comes with certain dangers. LaCapra explains that the listener to trauma may undergo this experience in different ways, and he therefore distinguishes between a vicarious and a virtual way. He clearly suggests a preference for the latter one, since he describes it as imaginatively putting “oneself in the
victim’s position while respecting the difference between self and other” (History in Transit 125). In the vicarious way on the other hand, the listener becomes a “surrogate victim” which in some cases may lead to a blurring of the line between reality and imagination (125). The person who was supposed to help the survivor to testify, may thus end up doubting his or her own identity. In spite of these dangers involved in listening, LaCapra emphasizes the need for an empathic response: “desirable empathy involves not full identification but what might be termed empathic unsettlement in the face of traumatic limit events, their perpetrators, and their victims” (Writing History 102). ‘Empathic unsettlement’ requires not only the “affective involvement” of the listener, but also the recognition of the other as being more than a mere object of research. LaCapra also adds that ‘empathic unsettlement’ should not become a substitute for a “normative judgment and sociopolitical response,” but that it rather should be accompanied by it (History in Transit 135).

Shoshana Felman recognizes the importance of psychoanalysis in radically rethinking the concept of testimony. She defends this opinion by pointing to Freud’s groundbreaking recognition of the existence of an “unconscious testimony” (15). According to Felman, psychoanalysis acknowledges that “one does not have to possess or own the truth, in order to effectively bear witness to it” (15). In the beginning of the testimony and even during the testimony, the true nature of the events may still be inaccessible for the one who lived through them. Nevertheless, the testimony can be seen as a way to access that truth, thus gaining some kind of insight through the witness’s own speech (15-16). Via such statements, Felman is reconfirming the importance of the role of the listener, since the witnesses need someone to listen to their speech. Next to professional analysts, the people who are most likely to come into contact with survivor testimonies are the survivor’s children and grandchildren. Efraim Sicher points out that this so-called ‘second generation’ and ‘third generation’ have been “collectively or personally exposed to the ‘survivor’s syndrome’” (“The Burden of Memory”
24). The consequences of this exposure cannot be denied and, therefore, the particular situation in which these generations find themselves will now be discussed.

2.2.3. The Second Generation

The second generation is logically the generation that came after the first generation, and the term usually refers to children of Holocaust survivors. However, Sicher objects to this definition and argues that one should also include “adopted children, children of refugees, […] [and] the generation contemporaneous with children of survivors who may share many of their psychological, ideological, and theological concerns” (“Introduction” 7). Marita Grimwood adds that the latter group may experience “a more general sense of how the events of the Holocaust have shaped the consciousness of later generations” (3). Therefore, both Grimwood and Sicher advocate a broader view of this concept. It can be concluded that similarly to the term ‘the first generation’, the concept of ‘the second generation’ defies any attempt to arrive at a ‘fixed’ definition.

Burstein explains that, after the Holocaust, many survivors desperately wanted to move on with their lives and therefore married and had many children in a short span of time. They hoped that their children would be able to erase their horrifying past and make them happy again (28-32). Wardi indicates that some of these children were even “designated as a ‘memorial candle’ for all of the relatives who perished in the Holocaust” (6). These “memorial candles” were seen by their parents as the link between their past, present and future (6). Sicher asserts that this role was often unbearable for these “memorial candles” as many of them did not even know the history of the dead relatives they were supposed to commemorate (The Holocaust Novel 134). Burstein adds that even when these Holocaust stories did not remain untold, another possible danger can be identified: the second generation is often burdened by the recounted memories of the horrors their parents went through. These
stories frequently make the second generation feel as if their own accomplishments will always seem insufficient in comparison with those of their parents (34). Although all of this put a huge responsibility on the shoulders of the children, Sicher emphasizes that not all of them are severely burdened by their parents’ past, as many of them are perfectly capable of living a normal life (*The Holocaust Novel* 135). However, some of them are not, and they are haunted by this past for the rest of their lives.

Burstein claims that because of the destruction of their Jewish heritage, the American Jews longed “to find in European thought, and practice, and writing the norms that might validate their own culture” (31). On the one hand, the second generation thus developed a kind of nostalgia for a past they can never truly know, while at the same time feeling the huge burden of that same past. The particularity of their situation is described by Burstein as follows:

The sense of belatedness is particularly keen for American children of Jews who survived Hitler. They come “after” the destruction of European Jewry. They enter a place with no visible ruins, invisibly scarred by what happened elsewhere, earlier. But the scars are present to them, for they were born into the emotional landscape of their parents’ lives – a landscape haunted by the European past. (25)

The paradox that is central to this generation is the fact that they are traumatized by events they never really experienced. Grimwood supports this view by stating that the children of survivors grow up “with the profound sense that their parents’ experiences are inescapable and somehow their own” (8). Moreover, they are mentally prepared for extreme situations which they will never have to face. In this way, children of survivors live in “anticipation of
trauma”: their whole lives seem to function “as a repetition of their parents’ encounter with death” (11). Although the original trauma took place before they were born, LaCapra explains that an “intergenerational transmission of trauma” may occur (History in Transit 108). This secondary traumatisation may manifest itself in posttraumatic symptoms, such as “extreme anxiety, panic attacks, startle reactions, or recurrent nightmares” (114). Sicher adds that the majority of these anxieties were about “food, fears of separation, expectancy of over-fulfillment, and constant reliving of traumatic experiences” (The Holocaust Novel 133).

According to Codde, there are several reasons why the second generation can inherit the traumas of the first generation. First of all, he describes how these children are confronted with stories about their parents’ Holocaust past almost on a daily basis, which unavoidably must have some effect on them (“Postmemory, Afterimages” 5). A second reason lies in the fact that even if their parents are unable to talk about these experiences, the children still live in a “dysfunctional family”. Codde clarifies this statement by explaining that “the traumatized parents are incapable of providing their children with the reassurance and the sense of safety they are supposed to give them as parents” (5). The third reason given by Codde concerns a controversial theory which claims that the trauma of ancestors may have an influence on their offspring’s genes (5).

This traumatic memory of the second generation is what Marianne Hirsch calls “postmemory”. She describes this concept as follows: “postmemory is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection” (“Mourning

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2 Source: BBC Horizon documentary “The Ghost in Your Genes” (originally broadcasted in 2005). A short summary of this documentary is given on the BBC website:

Biology stands on the brink of a shift in the understanding of inheritance. The discovery of epigenetics – hidden influences upon the genes – could affect every aspect of our lives.

At the heart of this new field is a simple but contentious idea – that genes have a ‘memory’. That the lives of your grandparents – the air they breathed, the food they ate, even the things they saw – can directly affect you, decades later, despite your never experiencing these things yourself. And that what you do in your lifetime could in turn affect your grandchildren.

(http://www.bbc.co.uk/sn/tvradio/programmes/horizon/ghostgenes.shtml)
and Postmemory” 22). Although Hirsch emphasizes that memory and postmemory are far from identical, she does suggest that they approximate each other in their “affective force” (“The Generation” 109). Hirsch explains that this is a very peculiar form of memory because it is not obtained through actual memory, but through an “imaginative investment and creation” (“Mourning and Postmemory” 22). She adds that it “is a consequence of traumatic recall but (unlike posttraumatic stress disorder) at a generational remove” (“The Generation” 106). The second generation’s postmemories are thus even more mediated and distanced than the parents’ memories, but they do have the advantage, according to Levine, of being able to reveal some truths about the original memories precisely through this distance (17).

Similar to the first generation, the second generation also needs to work through the trauma in order to overcome it. Sicher argues that telling the story is a form of doing so and adds that this “ideally ends with the separation of the second generation from the dead and their connection to a real past, to a family and people in which they are a living link, transmitting a heritage to future generations” (“Introduction” 13). Burstein points out that the second generation is often capable of telling their stories through the medium of art, employing it to reach empathic listeners (48). Stephen Feinstein names “painting, sculpture, installation art, and photography” as forms of art that are frequently used by them (201). In these cases, the major concern lies inevitably with the authenticity of memory (201). Literature is another mode of art that the second generation often employs to achieve the goal of finding a listener, and this form is obviously where the interest of this thesis lies.

Bar-On emphasizes the importance of the third generation in evaluating the intergenerational transmission of trauma. He states that once the second generation is seen as parents of the third generation, they are put in an entirely different perspective than when they are only observed as children of their parents (113). This can be connected to Eva Hoffman’s concept of the “hinge generation”. She explains that this generation not only functions as the
connection between the first and the third generation, but also is the “generation in which received, transferred knowledge of events is being transmitted into history or into myth” (xv).

2.2.4. The Third Generation

‘The third generation’ obviously follows ‘the second generation’ and includes, but is not limited to, the grandchildren of Holocaust survivors. Since it has already been discussed how the definition of a survivor, and especially the definition of ‘the first generation’, is unfixed or unstable, the concept of ‘the third generation’ has to be seen in the same light. The question of how the grandparents’ traumatic experiences may have an influence on their grandchildren is still a rather unexplored subject. This has to do with the fact that the third generation has not been around for that long and so it is a fairly new area of study.

Codde suggests that while it is still credible to talk about a ‘transmission’ of trauma with regard to the second generation, the use of this term is less defendable with reference to the third generation (“Postmemory, Afterimages” 6). The experiences of the first generation have to be located on an entirely different level than those of the third generation, and they are in this sense utterly incomparable (6). However, this does not mean that the traumatic past of the grandparents has not left any imprints on their grandchildren’s lives. Although its influence was not as strong as with the second generation, the third generation does feel a strong pull towards the past. Codde observes that the major frustration of the second generation, and even more so of the third generation, originates in the “inaccessibility of a traumatic past which they can only witness in a highly mediated form (via written or visual documents) but which continues to haunt them” (“Everything is Illuminated” 1). This inaccessibility becomes even more perceptible for the third generation since even less proof and fewer survivors remain. Because of this, the third generation especially turns to the imagination “to fill in the missing pieces” (1).
Therefore, Codde believes that Hirsch’s concept of ‘postmemory’ is much more suited to describe the “emotional and intellectual project” of the third generation than that of the second generation, although Hirsch originally coined the term to describe the latter’s situation (“Postmemory, Afterimages” 6). Even though the third generation’s interest in the era of their grandparents may be excessive, Codde argues that this interest is healthy and “absolutely necessary for taking on the ethical imperative of memory and commemoration” (6). Sicher explains that their obsession with the past is healthier than that of the second generation because they are further removed from the event and thus “stand at an ironic distance from the crippling effects of trauma that may have rubbed off on the survivors’ children” (The Holocaust Novel 174). While the second generation in this way inherits trauma, Codde states that Hoffman’s concept of “transferred loss” is the inheritance of the third generation. He explains that they “imaginatively turn the absence in their lives into a feeling of loss” (“Postmemory, Afterimages” 6). Despite the fact that there was never a trauma to begin with, the third generation does inherit the loss that was caused by it. This is connected with what the French second-generation novelist Henri Raczymow calls “la mémoire trouée”, which Sicher describes as “a memory of a blank: a memory of not remembering” (The Holocaust Novel 157). Ellen Fine explains that this absence of memory “comes from the feeling of exclusion both from the experience and from knowledge about the experience” (187). This may even lead to a sense of “guilt of nonparticipation,” thus regretting that one had not lived through the Holocaust (192).

The concept of ‘working-through’ functions very differently in connection to the third generation than how it has been discussed in relation to the previous generations. The main difference lies in the fact that the distance that is normally obtained through working-through, is already partly inherent in the third generation. Bar-On states that the working-through process of their parents and grandparents have caused the liberation of the third generation
from “the experience of migration (of the first generation) and from the reaction to it (of the second generation)” (109). By investigating the aftereffects of the Holocaust in Israel and comparing these between the three generations, Bar-On was able to analyze the working-through process of the third generation. He thus recognizes five basic stages through which this process took place:

The first involved questions of knowledge, such as what happened during the Holocaust and what happened to the family during that time (if they were involved). The second stage was understanding: the ability to place the facts in a meaningful human, historical, social, or moral frame of reference. Third come emotional responses; knowledge and understanding bring up emotional responses that may differ among youngsters. […] In the fourth stage the knowledge, understanding, and emotional responses help form attitudes toward what happened, as well as lessons for the present and the future. Finally, the knowledge, understanding, emotional responses, and attitudes shape specific behavior patterns in relation to the past, present and future. (97-98)

Bar-On adds that as a consequence of this process of working-through, they were able to establish a natural full life cycle and, therefore, “introduced a whole new segment of hopefulness” into their families (109).

Although the third generation also appears unable to let go of the traumatic past, at least they seem to have found a better way of dealing with it. Precisely the process of letting go of the past might have been the tragedy here, as Codde points out that this is a “past that needs to be remembered with the kind of zeal displayed by these grandchildren” (“Postmemory, Afterimages” 6).
2.3. The Jewish American Novel

2.3.1. Definition and History

The first problem that arises when discussing the Jewish American novel is the problem of definition. Codde explains how one of the origins of this problem lies in the fact that even its most important representatives – such as Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud and Philip Roth – reject this label that is given to their literature (The Jewish American Novel 6). Some critics view every novel written by a Jew living in the United States as a Jewish American novel, while others add that the novel has to deal with Jewish subjects as well in order for it to be seen as Jewish American. Codde mentions Leslie Field’s definition of a Jewish American writer as a good way to specify this concept:

Someone who has Jewish forefathers and whose writing seems to be immersed in something called the Jewish heritage or Judaism or the special burden of Jewish history, and who is living and writing in the United States – this someone is a Jewish-American writer, whether our Bellows, Roths, and Malamuds accept the label or not. (7)

Although this is a good definition of the Jewish American writer, the danger of including too many writers is still apparent and thus it might be necessary for an analyst to add other criteria in order to attain a more controllable corpus (7).

Despite the fact that some survivors already told their stories immediately after the Holocaust, Sicher explains that few people were willing to listen to them since the shock of it could not be absorbed in the years following the event (The Holocaust Novel xiv). The world was unable or even unwilling to recognize that these atrocities had taken place. This explains why so little attention was given to Holocaust literature during the 1950’s and 1960’s (xiv).
Only in the late 1970’s and 1980’s did the “Holocaust novel” become recognized as a serious genre (xv). In spite of this recognition, Lilian Kremer observes how the end of the Jewish-American novel has already been awaited by critics since the 1970’s (“Post-Alienation” 571). They believed that the second generation would lose touch with the experiences of the former generation and that this sort of literature would by consequence simply cease to exist. However, Kremer indicates that instead of this expected demise, the following generations continued to build on the inheritance of the previous generations (571). Sicher also adds that the revival of the Holocaust novel in this period had to do with the fact that the remaining survivors began to feel the need to record their stories. Both the first and the second generation began to long to communicate their memories to the third generation (“Introduction” 5). Therefore, Kremer asserts that Jewish-American fiction is “enjoying a renaissance” (“Post-Alienation” 589). She explains this statement by describing their fiction as “a vibrant, flourishing literature, more assertive than it was in the fifties and sixties, more essentially Jewish” (589).

2.3.2. Generational Differences in Jewish-American Novels

The novels by the first generation are entirely different from those by the second generation, and neither the former nor the latter can be equated with the literature by the third generation. According to Burstein, novels written by members of the first generation can often be classified as memoirs, since these are usually centered on their own experiences (48). Sicher states that when the survivors are no longer able to testify for themselves, this task is passed on to the next generation (“The Burden of Memory” 19). Burstein further explains this by arguing that while the first generation’s main goal is testifying and finding a listener, the second generation undertakes “the work of mourning that their parents were unable to perform” (49). Next to this dissimilarity, Burstein observes that another important difference
between first and second-generation fiction lies in their choice of subject matter: while the first generation usually focuses on the period of the Holocaust, the second generation’s interest lies in its aftermath (49). Instead of claiming firsthand experience of the Holocaust, Grimwood indicates that “it is the very absence of this experience that is often an uncanny presence in their writing” (3). Sicher adds that the greatest value of literature for the second generation often lies in the fact that this medium helps them to identify with victims of the Holocaust for the very first time. In many cases, this process functions as a trigger for the “discovery of their own stories (“Introduction” 12).

As I have mentioned above, the third generation is obsessed with loss and this is of course reflected in their fiction. Codde observes that this can be observed on the level of the stories, but also in the form and the structure of the novel (“Course”). The awareness of the fact that this generation can only access the past through mediation can be seen in the novels as well since these often deal with a multiplicity of versions of the same story. The reader is thus unable to distinguish one truth, which is similar to the third generation’s quest for truth about the past. Codde argues that for the same reason, these novels often defy closure and are characterized by a radical openness. The third generation turns to their imagination to fill in the blanks about the past and therefore frequently makes use of myths and fairy tales (“Course”).
3. Analyses

3.1. The Pawnbroker

3.1.1. The Pawnbroker: a Trauma-theoretical Approach to Edward Lewis Wallant’s Novel

First of all, I would like to give a short summary of the novel. Before the war, Sol Nazerman was a professor in Poland, but he now works as a pawnbroker in the United States of America. Sol moved there after surviving the concentration camps, where he lost everyone he loved. Sol has an assistant in the pawnshop, Jesus Ortiz, who will also play an important role in the novel. Jesus not only plans the robbery that will take place at the end of the novel, but he is also the one who stops it by taking a bullet intended for Sol. Jesus’ death occurs on the anniversary of Sol’s family’s death, the day Sol has been dreading from the beginning of the novel. Another important character in the novel is Marilyn Birchfield, a social worker who tries to get Sol to join the social community again by inviting him on a picnic and a boat trip. Sol, however, continues to have flashbacks about his horrifying past which still haunts him.

This novel will be analyzed from the perspective of trauma theory, since it deals with a protagonist who has been severely traumatized in the past. Although Sol left Europe and succeeded in building a new life in America, he seems to be incapable of having emotions, which renders his new life incomplete. Kremer explains this incapability by saying that he tries “[t]o protect himself from further psychological pain” by maintaining “an emotional barrier to keep people at a safe distance” (Witness 64).

3.1.1.1. Inexperience of Trauma and Incapability of Feeling

Michael Johnson suggests reading this novel from a trauma-theoretical perspective by pointing out that “Sol is suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder” (294). Codde further explains this statement by saying that “Nazerman, like all trauma victims, does not fully
experience the traumatic event as it takes place [...], but suffers afterwards from so-called ‘abreactions,’ visual flashes that make one relive the trauma” (The Jewish American Novel 195). The horrors Sol goes through are unbelievable: he witnesses his best friend’s electrocution, he is forced to watch his wife’s prostitution and he even finds his dead baby girl pierced on a hook. The incredibility of these events causes them to become what LaCapra calls “out-of-context” experiences, which explains why Sol does not fully experience the trauma (History in Transit 107). He has no prior knowledge of how to deal with this kind of situations and therefore cannot handle them. Furthermore, Sol knows he would not have been able to do anything about it, even if he had been prepared for these events. This is made very clear when Sol is unable to help his dying son and calls out to his wife Ruth: “I am helpless, do you hear?” (38).

This double incapacity also causes him to become incapable of feeling anything: Sol is unable to feel fear, hate or sadness in situations when these emotions would be expected. Not only is he incapable of feeling the intense emotions these extreme situations should cause, Sol also becomes unable to have any normal emotion, even though the circumstances are no longer extreme. Robert Eaglestone and Barry Langford point out that this emotional incapability is most apparent in Sol’s loveless relationship with Tessie, his friend’s widow (131). This can already be seen in the description of their first sexual encounter in the novel: “[t]here was very little of passion between them and nothing of real love or tenderness, but, rather, that immensely stronger force of desperation and mutual anguish” (62). To explain Sol’s cold and almost inhuman behaviour, it is interesting again to refer to Caruth’s definition of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. She mentions a process of “numbing that may have begun during or after the experience” as one of the most common behavioural aspects of trauma survivors (“Trauma and Experience” 4). Wardi considers this to be one of the symptoms of ‘concentration camp syndrome’ and she describes it as follows: “[t]he ability to relate to other
people is considerably weakened, together with the capacity for empathy, while the avoidance
of mourning and of the internal processing of grief causes the loss of the capacity to form ties
with others” (18).

Next to being incapable of mourning his own dead, Sol cannot relate to anyone else’s
grief. When Sol goes to Tessie’s house after her father’s death, he can give her no comfort
and only tells her that she is better off, that “[t]here is nothing to cry about” (230). He leaves
Tessie to “mourn alone,” making this the part where Sol’s incapacity to relate to anyone
becomes most clear (231). His incapability to form relationships can clearly be seen in Sol’s
behaviour towards Jesus. Johnson mentions how Jesus is continually rejected “in his attempts
to create a teacher/student relationship” (297). The cruellest rejection can be seen in the
following conversation: “‘[y]ou know, you my teacher. I’m the student to you,’ Ortiz said
with a grin on his fine, dark face. ‘You are nothing to me,’ Sol said savagely” (180).
Whenever people seem to come too close, Sol immediately feels the need to push them away.
Sol’s idea of survival is made very clear in a speech to Tessie: “[d]on’t think, don’t feel. Get
through things – it is the only sense. Imagine yourself a cow in a fenced place with a million
other cows. Don’t suffer, don’t fear. Soon enough will come the ax. Meanwhile, eat and rest.
Don’t pay attention, don’t cry!” (229). Sol consciously chooses not to feel, because he is
afraid what might happen if he starts doing so. He does not cry for his dead and he tells Tessie
to do the same. Only at the very end of the novel, Sol is able to cry. He thinks this is the only
way he can survive and he wants Tessie to live in the same way.

However, Johnson points out that Sol’s apathy has larger consequences. Not only
Jesus’ envy, but more importantly Sol’s unwillingness to form a relationship with him causes
the final disaster (297). Jesus’ death could have been avoided if Sol had been able to form a
bond with him. This is a clear indication that Sol’s refusal of relationships and of feeling is
not a good way of dealing with a traumatic past. Sol realizes this in the end when he not only starts to mourn his own dead but also helps Tessie mourn.

Johnson believes that Sol’s way of living is not only a survival strategy, but also a way of punishing himself (297). He adds that the reason for this punishment is because Sol was not “able to save his family, and for his most unforgivable act, continuing to live when others did not” (297). This continual punishment can be seen in Sol’s attitude towards death. Throughout the novel, as can be seen in his speech to Tessie, Sol seems to long for death (“the ax”). However, although he has four chances to die in the novel, he keeps on living. The first chance occurs when he is pondering about death: “[w]as it terror? Of what - death? Ridiculous that he should fear that! No, he didn't - perhaps, even... He leaned over the platform edge” (155). The word “even” in this quote again suggests that he feels the opposite of fear: longing. Although it is not literally said in the novel, it is suggested that he thinks about suicide when he leans towards the edge. He seems to reject this idea, maybe because this would be the easy way out: in other words, Sol continues to live to punish himself.

His second chance to die occurs when he visits his boss Murillio. While he has a gun in his mouth, Sol wonders if death would really be the wiser solution and eventually decides against it. Although Sol continues to live, his unwillingness to do so becomes even clearer when Murillio visits him at the shop and again threatens to kill him. Sol sees the possibility of death as “the imminence of release” (260). However, death does not bring release since Murillio realizes there is no point in threatening to kill a man who does not want to live. Afterwards Sol says to himself “[s]o it isn’t death that I am afraid of, although it may yet come to me today. Then what is it that makes me tremble and ache? Why does my breast distend and threaten to burst?” (262). This is an earlier indication of the fact that his survival strategy is not working: Sol still feels the pain of his past but he chooses to ignore it. He comes even closer to dying in his last confrontation with death since a shot is actually fired.
However, Jesus sacrifices himself by taking the bullet instead of Sol, thus giving Sol the chance for a new life by giving up his own. Sanford Marovitz confirms this by pointing out that “salvation and rebirth come only through acts of martyrdom” in Wallant’s novels (180). This act suggests that Sol no longer has to suffer for his dead and that his punishment is over. Sol is finally capable of “counting his losses and forgiving himself” (279).

3.1.1.2. Basic Trust and the Value of Money

Aside from trauma survivors’ difficulties with relating to or feeling empathy for people, Krystal adds another problem: their “basic trust” has also been destroyed (77). This can already be seen in the character of Sol in the very beginning of the novel, when he is thinking about Jesus: “Sol had the vague feeling that there were certain horrors this boy would not commit. In Sol Nazerman’s eyes, this was a great deal; there were very few people to whom he attributed even that limitation of evil” (11). This indicates Sol’s distrustful nature since he apparently sees evil in almost everyone. However, this takes on a double meaning when later on in the novel Jesus, one of the only persons he partly trusts, plans a robbery against him. Nevertheless, Jesus does change his mind in the very end and even ends up saving Sol by sacrificing his own life, thus making him trustworthy again.

Furthermore, Sol’s value system has changed because of the destruction of his trust. When Jesus asks him “ain’t there nothin’ you do trust?”, Sol answers coldly “[m]oney” (115). Money also plays an important role in his relationship with Tessie: after his visits, Sol always leaves some money for Tessie and Mendel, her dying father. Codde suggests that by paying Tessie in exchange for sex, “Sol comes close to humiliating Tessie in a similar way” to “his wife’s humiliation in the concentration camp” (The Jewish American Novel 199). However, it is important to understand that this is the only way Sol still knows to deal with people; the only way he can handle human contact is via a financial transaction. Codde confirms this
view by stating that, in addition to his relationship with Tessie, Sol’s relationships with his family members as well as with his customers are also “on a purely financial basis” (*The Jewish American Novel* 198). Jesus is neither family nor a customer, but their relationship is based on money as well. Sol not only pays Jesus to work there, but the latter also tries to get more money from Sol by planning a robbery. Although Sol’s relationship with Marilyn Birchfield starts off in the same way – he gives her money for the youth center – it is the only relationship that will not revolve around money.

However, by the end of the novel, Sol is finally capable of letting someone in his life again. By asking his nephew Morton to become his new assistant, he opens up new possibilities for their relationship which are no longer entirely based on financial transactions. He is even capable of trusting someone enough to ask for his help, while at the same time admitting to his own loneliness: “[b]ut I need you to help me, I have no one” (275). The fact that Morton will take over Jesus’ role is already hinted at earlier in the novel. A close association between these two characters is clearly established through the juxtaposition of the following excerpts:

He [Morton] realized how hot he was and saw that the window was closed. He opened it and stood for a minute looking out at the invisible, heavily dripping darkness, […]. […] He lay back on his bed and lit a cigarette […]. (246)

Then he [Jesus] got up and went to the window to smoke a cigarette and watch the rain trying to wash the old filth from the streets. (246)

Morton will become Sol’s assistant after Jesus’ death and by thus describing Morton and Jesus in almost the same way, a similarity and connection between them is already suggested. However, the relationship between Sol and Morton does not entirely evolve from being
financial to emotional, as can be seen in Sol’s relationship with Tessie. Although Sol continues to deal with relationships in the same way – his relationship with Morton still partly revolves around money since Sol will pay him for his work in the pawnshop – a new level in their relationship is reached by Sol’s request for help.

3.1.3. Acting-out, Working-through and Latency

Next to emotional numbing, other symptoms of PTSD that are clearly experienced by the protagonist are his frequent flashbacks and nightmares. There are nine flashback sequences that show the reader what Sol sees while reliving his painful past. These forms of acting-out are represented to the reader through dreams or sudden daydreams, triggered by an event in the present. However, there are already some allusions to these episodes in the beginning of the novel: Sol’s nightmares are referred to as “phantoms of his sleep” and “his troubled sleep” (5). The description of a trauma survivor as being in the grip of his unconscious reliving of the past, as earlier indicated by van der Kolk and van der Hart, can be seen in the following excerpt:

Suddenly he had the sensation of being clubbed. An image was stamped behind his eyes like a bolt of pain. For an instant he moved blindly in the rosy morning, seeing a floodlit night filled with screaming. […] In a minute he hardly remembered the hellish vision and sighed at just the recollection of a brief ache […]. (5)

While walking to the pawnshop, Sol is overwhelmed by a flashback described as a “hellish vision”. The fact that it is described as happening “behind his eyes” indicates that this is not a
conscious recall. Also, the description of Sol being clubbed by something refers to the sudden nature of the flashback and suggests that it could happen to him anytime and anywhere.

Although the use of flashbacks clearly calls for a trauma-theoretical approach, some of the typical concepts of trauma theory cannot be applied to this novel. For example, Freud’s concept of ‘latency’ cannot be applied in its original meaning. LaCapra explains this concept by pointing out that the traumatic response only comes after it has been triggered by a second traumatic experience, which is reminiscent of the first one (*Writing History* 81-82). Caruth adds that in the period between these experiences, “the effects of the experience are not apparent” (*Unclaimed Experience* 17). Even though Sol has not fully experienced the first traumatic event, he does already experience its effects before the second event. He is unable to mourn or even to cry for his dead family, but at the same time, he does have nightmares and flashbacks which trouble him deeply. Caruth calls the period of latency a “period of forgetting,” but Sol has not forgotten what happened (17). Sol often tries to stay awake during the night, because he knows what his dreams may bring. The fact that he is conscious of the possibility of his horrible memories emerging in his dreams, can be seen in the following passage:

In two weeks it would be over. Nirvana would return, he thought wryly. No doubt his dreams would come less frequently; someday they might cease altogether. The capacity for dreaming was like an ulcer, an ailment common to humans. It could be cured by blandness of diet. In a few weeks he would be impregnable again. (102)

Here Sol realizes how his dreams get worse around the anniversary of his family’s death, which means that he is quite conscious of the source of his nightmares.
Even though there is no traditional period of latency, there is however a second traumatic event which reminds Sol of the first trauma: the death of his assistant Jesus Ortiz. Codde confirms this by pointing out the existence of a parallel between Jesus’ death and the death of his son David. Codde emphasizes how these events are described in a similar way: “[a]s Sol helplessly tried to hold onto his son in the cattle car to save him from suffocation, he now tries to hold on to Ortiz’s body” (The Jewish American Novel 203). In the first flashback that is fully described, his son cries out in the cattle car “I’m slipping in it, Daddy” (37; my italics). The link becomes very clear in the description of Sol’s reaction to Jesus’ death: “[h]e tried to seize him with both hands. Ortiz eluded him, slipped to the floor with a discreet little thump” (270; my italics). Only after this second traumatic experience, Sol is able to feel anything again. It is the first time in the novel that he cries, and he himself realizes that he “was crying for all his dead now, that all the dammed-up weeping had been released by the loss of one irreplaceable negro” (278). This is the final stage of Sol’s process of working-through his trauma.

Van der Kolk and van der Hart explain working-through trauma as the need for not only the integration of traumatic memories “with existing mental schemes,” but also the transformation of these memories “into narrative language” (176). Johnson applies this statement to Sol’s situation as follows:

Until he remembers the past and transforms traumatic experience into narrative memory by consciously mourning for and commemorating those he had lost, Sol is trapped within that past, as symbolized in the novel by repeated references to “the heavy wire screening” on the pawnshop windows and the “little cage” that separates Sol from his customers (6,41). (295)
However, not only references to these specific parts of the store indicate how Sol is trapped in his past. His imprisonment is also made clear in several descriptions in which the store is compared to other places in which one can be entrapped: “the darkness made the store seem like a vault”; “inside there was only the different, older heat of a closed dead place”; “the store was a peculiar and grotesque tomb” and “the store a lifeless tomb again” (224, 226, 263, 276). Nicholas Ayo confirms this view by noting the resemblance between the cage Sol works in and a jail cell (86). Ayo adds that Sol is trapped “within his own mind” and in order to free himself from the burden of his past, Sol must face and eventually work-through his trauma (87).

Although some critics believe that the working-trough of Sol’s trauma could only be seen in this final event, it has to be emphasized that this process already started earlier in the novel. Kremer acknowledges that this event cannot be seen as a source of Nazerman’s regeneration, but must be interpreted as an extension of it (Witness 75). She adds that a misinterpretation of this event could lead to an “excessive emphasis on the importance of one scene at the expense of the rest of the novel” (75). Codde argues that the beginnings of Sol’s rebirth can already be detected in the middle of the novel, when Sol agrees to have lunch with Marilyn Birchfield (The Jewish American Novel 200). Other events which indicate the change in Sol’s attitude include his willingness to go on a boat trip with Birchfield, his refusal of Murillio’s money and his unusual generosity towards his customers. Codde adds that this growing compassion for the suffering around him is symbolized in the nightmare in which different faces – among which Morton’s, Jesus Ortiz’s and Tessie’s – are projected onto the body of his dead baby girl (201). This dream thus indicates that he does have some respect or even love for these people. In this way, the novel moves gradually towards the climactic scene and is therefore, as Codde argues, more credible (200).
3.1.1.4. The role of the Listener: Marilyn Birchfield

Laub explains that “in order to continue and complete the process of survival after liberation,” the survivor has to repossess his or her “life story through giving testimony” (“An Event Without a Witness” 85). This is exactly what has kept Sol from moving on: he has not given testimony yet and is therefore stuck in the phase of acting-out. Although Sol rejects Marilyn Birchfield’s friendly intentions several times, she is the first one to whom Sol starts talking about his past. Johnson adds that because she keeps encouraging Sol to speak, Birchfield plays an important role in his rebirth (298). Sol still does not talk about his traumatic past, but instead narrates a happier episode from his youth (208-209). Even though Sol never gives a full testimony, Birchfield does seem to assume the role of listener.

However, Sol is reluctant to testify because he feels it would be impossible for Birchfield to understand what he has been through: “[t]here is a world so different in scale that its emotions bear no resemblance to yours; it has emotions so different in degree that they have become a different species!” (146). This could be seen an expression of what Levi called the survivors’ fear of testifying and “not being listened to” (Burstein 37). However, Sol’s fear seems to be unfounded since Birchfield appears to be capable of distinguishing between a vicarious and a virtual way of experiencing trauma as a listener. She seems willing to put herself in his position, but at the same time does not claim complete understanding of what happened to Sol: “I have some idea of what you’ve been through, Mr. Nazerman” (145; my italics).

Furthermore, Birchfield seems to be conscious of what Laub calls “[t]he task of the listener”: “to be unobtrusively present, throughout the testimony” (“Bearing Witness” 71). When Sol starts talking about his past, Birchfield maintains “her stillness as though she feared to puncture the delicate surface of his reminiscence” (208). She is very careful to respect and not interrupt the flow of his memories. Laub adds that the listener has to be aware of cues
given by the narrator and has to respond to these in an appropriate way (“Bearing Witness” 71). That Birchfield succeeds in doing so, becomes clear when Sol ends his monologue and puts his glasses back on “with a stern expression” (209). Birchfield picks up on this and realizes that to ask further questions would only upset Sol; therefore she cleverly starts unpacking their lunch.

The name “Birchfield” has been interpreted by critics in two different ways. Firstly, David Galloway states that a “healing association with nature” can be detected in her name (81). This is clearly the connotation that first comes to mind, since two nature-related words can be distinguished in her name: “birch” and “field”. Johnson adds that Birchfield is not only associated with nature on account of her name, but also because she takes Sol to “the natural spaces he normally avoids”: the picnic at the edge of the river and the boat trip on the river (298).

Codde suggests that a second connotation lies in the fact that Birchfield’s name alludes to the idyllic names of concentration camps, thus being a connection to Sol’s traumatic past (The Jewish American Novel 201). Johnson confirms this view by stating that her name is similar to Birkenau, since the word “Birk” means “birch” in German (298). This double interpretation of this important character’s name, as Johnsons suggests, emphasizes the difficult position Sol finds himself in: “Birchfield both offers the possibility of healing and represents an intrusive return of the unmastered past” (298). Sol believes that to choose to truly live again in the present, would not only mean the forgetting of the past, but also the betrayal of his dead family.

**3.1.1.5. Light vs. Darkness**

An important metaphor can be seen in the fact that Sol and his past are usually associated with darkness, while Birchfield and the possible salvation she represents, are
connected with light and brightness. Not only is the shop, in which Sol spends most of his
time, associated with darkness, but he himself is often described in similar terms. This
includes the description of his appearance – for example, his “dark eyes” – as well as the
portrayal of his nature: “in the part of him not apparent there was still darkness and terrifying
growth” (3, 111). The reason for Sol’s confinement in darkness is explained when he dreams
about the last picnic he had with his family, before they were taken away by soldiers: “he was
paralyzed, too, forever out of reach of the dear faces, frozen a few feet short of all he had
loved. And then it all began dimming: each face receded, the sunny afternoon turned to
eternal twilight, dusk, evening, darkness” (242). Here it is made clear that his family’s death
is the reason why Sol is stuck in this perpetual darkness.

To make evident that Birchfield represents the other end of the spectrum, she is
described in terms of light: “he beheld Marilyn Birchfield like a substantial vision of
cleanliness. […] He was astounded by her smile and her brightness” (137; my italics). During
their picnic, she is again portrayed as “remarkably fresh and clean-looking” (140). By this
choice of words, Wallant already indicates that Birchfield will symbolize to Sol the possibility
of renewal.

Moreover, the light and darkness metaphor can also be seen in the many references to
Sol’s vision. There are many references in the novel to Sol’s blindness – again an indication
of him living his life in darkness – for example: “he moved blindly” and “the light blinded
him” (5, 154). In the first example, Sol is blinded because of a flashback. This refers to the
fact that Sol is unable to truly see his past trauma: he almost never consciously thinks about
his family; the trauma is only remembered through involuntary flashbacks. In the second
example, it is the light that blinds him, thus recalling the possibility of healing.

The beginning of Sol’s blindness can be seen in the fourth flashback, when he
remembers his wife’s forced prostitution. Ruth recognizes him and she awards him “the tears
of forgiveness” (169). Sol, however, could not handle her award and “took the infinitely meaner triumph of blindness” (169). In the sixth flashback, it is shown how Sol punishes himself for not being able to look at his wife and share her pain. While having to pile up corpses in a concentration camp, Sol finds a pair of glasses and forces himself to see the horrible scene clearly: “It was the very least he could do” (198). The glasses he finds there, are described as “round” and “old-fashioned” (198). Already on the very first page of the novel, his “strangely old-fashioned glasses” that he wears in the present time are mentioned (3). After the flashback in which he finds them, the glasses are described several times in similar terms, thus indicating that Sol is still wearing the same glasses he found in the concentration camp: “round, old-fashioned spectacles” and “round, archaic spectacles” (245, 268).

Although Leonard Leff argues that these glasses are Sol’s “shield against past ‘spectacles’ like the Holocaust and his weapon against present ‘spectacles’ like Mount Vernon (and Harlem) culture,” I believe that his glasses do not protect him from the past, but instead function as another instrument of Sol’s self-imposed punishment (354). By wearing a dead person’s glasses that do not even fit him – they “cut into the flesh of his nose” (259) – he continues to commemorate what he has lost.

Sol is thus described at the same time as being blind, as well as having “a cleared vision” (198). I would like to argue that his enhanced vision has to do with his refusal to forget a single detail of his family’s past, while he is at the same time afraid of remembering too clearly what happened to them in the concentration camps. When he takes off his glasses at the picnic with Birchfield, he does so “to blind himself to the present,” thus forgetting the reality of his present life which is inevitably scarred by his earlier life (209). Blindness is something for which Sol envies the dead, for not having to witness the scenes he was forced
to witness (197). Furthermore, the blindness also refers to how his horrible past keeps him from seeing possibilities in the present: he is left incapable of seeing good in other people.

Towards the end of the novel, Sol starts having problems with his sight. His vision seems to be zoomed in so close that Sol is incapable of distinguishing customers’ features, leaving him “blinded by the magnified surface of human skin” (213). The proximity of skin indicates how Sol is moving closer towards joining the human community again. However, the fact that he is blinded by it also indicates Sol’s confusion. At the very end of the novel, Sol is no longer blinded by the past but instead by his own weeping (278). This blindness differs completely from the previous examples of blindness because it is now caused by actual emotions. Sol’s final tears suggest that he ceases to hold on to the past and instead starts mourning, a process which he has to go through in order for him to truly live again in the present.

3.1.2. The Pawnbroker: a Trauma-theoretical Approach to Sidney Lumet’s Film

3.1.2.1. Adaptation to Film

Soon after the novel came out, it was adapted into a film by director Sidney Lumet. The film’s production already began in 1962, but it was not until 1965 that it was released (Hirsch, *Afterimage* 85). When creating a film adaptation, it is unavoidable that some changes have to be made. A good example of one of these changes can be seen in the representation of Sol. Johnson explains how Sol – instead of being described as entrapped in the past – is now visually imprisoned:

[T]he camera is repeatedly placed so that we see Sol through the numerous wire screens and bars that divide up the space of the pawnshop, or, when we see him in close-ups, Sol is often lit so that a cross-hatch pattern of shadows
from the screens falls over his face and shoulders as a visual reminder of the physical and psychological cages that contain him. (295)

This is an example of the kind of changes that are necessary because of the difference in medium. However, Lumet made some changes that were not caused by this change in medium as well. Frank Cunningham defends Lumet’s choice by referring to André Bazin’s view on film adaptation: “a successful adaptation should be related to the original, yet independent, a new work of art” (39). Therefore, Lumet made changes in order to achieve this goal of turning the film into a separate work of art. The clearest departure from the text can be seen in the character of Sol’s boss: Lumet changed the Sicilian American character named Murillio into the African American character named Rodriguez. Pamela Grace mentions that this change in ethnicity occurred because the director “wanted to avoid the condescending cliché of all-good black characters depicted as helpless victims” (190). Furthermore, another change in ethnicity is made by changing the black Jesus Ortiz into a Puerto Rican. Rosen explains this by pointing out that this change not only “activates issues of language that were not present in the novel”, but also intensifies “ethnic tension” (83).

The most important part that differs from the original novel is the ending. Lumet changes the meaning of the scene by departing from the novel in three different ways. First of all, at the end of the novel, Sol makes a call to Morton and looks for “the immaculate face of Marilyn Birchfield” (273). Leff points out that the film differs from the novel in this aspect, since Sol “reaches out to no one – neither his nephew nor Marilyn Birchfield” (359). Therefore, his readiness to join the human community again is made less clear in the film since he is still not letting anyone in his life. A second difference can be seen in Jesus’ death scene: Jesus is not slipping away from Sol in a similar way as his son did, but is instead standing at the opposite side from Sol’s cage when the shot is fired. Although there are some
similarities between their deaths – they are both lying on the ground, surrounded by people – it is still made less obvious in the film that Jesus’ death is the second traumatic event that recalls the first trauma. The third crucial difference can be seen in the fact that Sol does not only cry at the end of the film, but also earlier on, during a discussion with Rodriguez (1h13’12”). In the novel, Sol is incapable of crying until the very end. The fact that his crying – for the very first time in years – only occurs in the ending, is very important because it indicates his preparedness for mourning. However, Sol cries twice in the film, thus rendering his final tears less meaningful than in the novel.

Galloway claims that because of this, the film misses the resolution that Sol had arrived at in the novel to take “the pain of it, if not happily, like a martyr, at least willingly, like an heir” (279). Galloway therefore concludes that “[t]he film version of the novel entirely misses the resonance of this final moment” (88). Although Johnson agrees that the novel and the film lead to considerably different conclusions, he does oppose the idea that the film misses the novel’s resolution. Instead, he argues that the distinct conclusions exemplify the trauma survivor’s dilemma and explains this as follows:

The differing conclusions of the film and book illustrate two methods for addressing this paradox – telling a story that must be told, and foregrounding the impossibility of conveying the horror of the Holocaust. Taken separately, novel and film tell half of the story. Taken together, the two versions of *The Pawnbroker* lead us to a more nuanced understanding of the dilemmas, difficulties, and paradoxes inherent in any attempt to represent the Holocaust. (303)

In this way, the novel and film are complementary in representing the survivor’s difficult relationship with testimony.
3.1.2.2. Value of Money

Even though the concept of money is already important in the novel, it becomes even more so in the film because it will lead to a crucial misunderstanding. Rosen explains Sol’s obsession with money by stating that his “emphasis on the value of money must be read against the loss of what was the standard of value” (89). Sol has lost everything that had value for him in the past and he is therefore only capable of trusting something that remains constantly valuable, something that cannot die. This emphasis on money plays an important role in the film, since it indirectly sets in motion the process of Sol’s rebirth. When Sol tells Jesus that money is “what life is all about” (59’12”), Jesus interprets this without placing this statement in the context of Sol’s loss of value. Jesus therefore decides to plan the robbery that will take place in the climactic scene. However, Jesus dies at the end because he finally realizes that money is not everything and, because of his sacrifice, Sol starts to realize the same thing.

3.1.2.3. Acting-out and Working-through

As in the novel, there are also nine flashbacks in the film through which Sol acts out his horrible past. Grace describes Sol’s flashbacks as “involuntary memories that are triggered by images and sounds in his environment” and are shown through “sudden, intrusive cuts” (191). Hirsch describes how this posttraumatic flashback, as opposed to the classical flashback, transmits to the viewer a series of experiences that are “analogous to a series of characteristics of psychological trauma” (Afterimage 98). A first characteristic can be seen in the fact that the traumatic flashback not only surprises the viewer because of its painful content, but also on account of the “formal disturbance of the time jump” (98). Secondly, an image of the present is graphically matched with an image of the past, thus demonstrating how flashbacks are triggered through association (98). This becomes very clear in the scene in
which prostitute Mabel tells Sol to look at her naked body, thus graphically matching Sol’s triggered memories of his wife’s forced prostitution. Finally, the viewer will also experience a temporal disorientation that is similar to that of the trauma victim. Hirsch mentions that this disorientation is obtained through “[t]he replacement of the classical transitional markers, like dissolves, by simple cuts; the extreme brevity of flashback shots; and the lack of redundancy and contextualization of the flashback content” (98-99). It can thus be concluded that the viewer’s experience of disturbance is not only reached through the content, but, perhaps more importantly, through the form of the flashback (99).

Codde points out that the concept of working-through is represented more truthfully in the film adaptation, since working-through “means only a mastery of the posttraumatic pathological effects” (“Postmemory, Afterimages” 4). The novel, however, fails to portray it in this manner, as it is suggested that Sol resolves his trauma through mourning. In this way, Wallant gives in to the temptation of closure, which Lumet resisted by showing “the pawnbroker stuck in acting-out” (4-5). Here it is again interesting to consider Johnson’s conclusions on this subject matter. The opposition between the full closure of Sol’s trauma in the novel and his continuation of acting-out in the film can also be connected to the trauma survivor’s dilemma, seeing them as two opposite sides of the spectrum. It can thus be concluded that acting-out is the situation the survivor starts from, while a certain level of closure is what he or she should strive for. However, the survivor should be aware of the fact that a full closure can never be attainable since this would dangerously border on the forgetting of the trauma.

3.1.2.4. Blindness vs. Seeing

The emphasis on the importance of vision is still apparent in the film, but is slightly less conspicuous than in the novel. This of course has to do with the fact that although the
novel is written in the third person, most of the novel is focalized through Sol, thus making it easier to suggest his blindness. In the film, there is only one moment when the viewer gets Sol’s point of view, namely when George Smith comes in for the second time (55’25”). George’s face comes very close to the camera and this episode can therefore be seen as Lumet’s adaptation of the part in the novel when Sol is blinded by human skin. Sol is no longer visually separated from his clients by the wire screening, which is almost always the case in the rest of the film. As in the novel, this not only indicates that Sol is coming closer to joining the social community again, but it also points to his confusion and doubts about wanting to do so. His confusion was already heightened by the events that occurred just before George’s visit: first, Sol gets in an argument with Birchfield when she tries to point out that their situations are quite similar. Afterwards, Sol arrives at the shop just in time to see Savarese change the calendar date; which he had forbidden Jesus to do. This visual change in date indicates that the dreaded anniversary of his family’s death is getting closer. However, there are also other times when the viewer sees through Sol’s eyes, although these episodes usually do not last very long: his flashbacks. Joshua Hirsch mentions that Sol is thus blinded “by vision,” unable to see the present because, instead, he visualizes the past (107). The use of these flashbacks will be discussed further on.

A second important reference to Sol’s vision can be seen in the attention given by Lumet to Sol’s glasses. Leff summarizes the use of them in the film as follows:

He [Sol] has two pairs, one modern with black rims (the "movie-producer kind") and the other round with wire rims, like those Wallant describes. He keeps the latter at the pawnshop and uses the others elsewhere, until the scene with Mabel. Then, during the last third of the picture, he wears only the older
pair, the spectacles that augur the looming and long-suppressed confrontation with the memory of the Holocaust. (366)

It seems as if Sol consciously chooses to wear the old glasses when dealing with customers. This is particularly clear in the scene when Sol has just been beaten up by Savarese and a customer comes in: Sol slowly puts his glasses back on before performing his pawnbroker duties (1h32'29''). Even though the film has left out the flashback in which it is told where Sol got his glasses, it is clear that the old glasses are connected to his past. For example, in the seconds before the scene with George Smith, Sol is shown desperately holding on to his glasses, symbolizing how he is holding on to the past (55'15'').

However, one should also note the emphasis on another sense, one that is less present in the novel, namely hearing. Rosen confirms the importance of hearing, or rather not hearing, by pointing out how the film makes the scenes that represent the memory of trauma inarticulate (78). This pattern is already established in the beginning of the film when Sol’s memory of the last picnic with his family is shown. Although the German language is heard in the flashback to his wife’s prostitution, Rosen argues that the memory still remains inarticulate since it is shown without subtitles or translation and thus continues to be incomprehensible (96). In the final flashback, “memory will claim English and emerge as articulate” (97). When the memory finally becomes articulate, it is claimed in a different language than Sol’s mother tongue. He cannot use his native language, German, because it is also the langue of the people who persecuted him (96).

At the end of the first flashback, Sol’s wife Ruth calls out to him, still without producing a sound. This mute scream at the beginning of the film is echoed by Sol’s scream at the end of the film, when he witnesses Jesus’ death. Annette Insdorf argues that Sol’s mute scream can be interpreted as a “helpless reaction to continued anti-Semitism” and can even be
seen as “the emblem of the Holocaust survivor, the witness of a horror so devastating that it cannot be told” (31). Johnson confirms this by adding that “[w]hereas the novel emphasizes the necessity of integration […] , the film seeks to convey a sense of the impossibility of articulating the truth of Holocaust experience” (303). In light of this, Sol’s silent scream may thus be interpreted as a representation of the unspeakability and the incredibility that such a horrifying event causes.

3.1.2.5. Christian Symbolism

Although there are already some Christian references in the novel, it is only in the film that their symbolic value is fully explored. First of all, the most obvious reference to Christ can be seen in the character of Jesus. The most obvious connection – apart from the name – lies in the fact that they both die in a sacrificial way. However, Kremer opposes the Christological interpretation because she believes it not only denies the complex ambiguity of Jesus’ character, but also “of the relationship between him and Sol” (Witness 75). She states that, at best, Jesus Ortiz can be described as “a complex ‘sinner-saint,’ a man whose single heroic act on Nazerman’s behalf was consistently preceded by prejudice, deceit, and a conspiratorial crime at Nazerman’s expense” (76).

However, Jesus is not the only one who becomes associated with Christ-like elements. It is precisely Jesus who twice in the novel imagines Sol as being crucified, thus linking Sol to Christ. Although this imagined crucifixion is not shown in the film, there is instead another clear reference that connects Sol with Christ: Sol presses his hand down on the pawn ticket spike after Jesus’ death. Although, as Leff mentions, many critics have interpreted this as Sol adopting the stigma of the cross, Grace argues otherwise (374). Grace also opposes this religious interpretation and instead suggests that the most important is “the simple fact that Nazerman has punished himself for his insensitivity to others; he has forced himself to feel
physical pain, which shatters his psychic numbness” (195). Insdorf confirms this by pointing out that physical pain is the only way that enables Sol to feel (31). I would like to draw attention to the fact that Sol already had Jesus’ blood on his hands before he pierced his own hand. By adding his own blood to his already bloody hands, he thus establishes a final connection between them. Compared to the novel, this scene invites another parallel: Sol witnessed his dead baby girl pierced on a hook. Although her death is not revealed in the film, Codde agrees that this “new impalement scene” is clearly reminiscent of his daughter’s and can thus be seen as another link to the novel (“Postmemory, Afterimages” 5).

3.1.3. Comparing the Representation of Trauma in Wallant’s Novel with Lumet’s Film

As already mentioned earlier on in this thesis, van der Kolk and van der Hart emphasize that survivors do not experience trauma as a sequence, but instead as a simultaneity (177). The fact that there is no mental split between survivors’ experience of the present and the memories of their traumatic past clearly finds a better representation in the film. In contrast, there is a clear break between the past and the present in the novel because of the italicization of the nightmare scenes and their visual isolation from the text. Codde argues that these typographical signals prepare the reader for the imminent horror and, as a result, “the reader is never really taken off guard by the traumatic content” (“Postmemory, Afterimages” 2). This form thus fails to convey the abruptness and invasiveness that are characteristic of a traumatic flashback (2). Galloway confirms this by pointing out that Lumet’s technique of using flash cuts to represent memory is “far more organic, structurally and dramatically more compelling, than Wallant’s somewhat stilted, italicized dream sequences” (79). Codde adds that Lumet’s insertion of splintered shots overwhelmed the audience as much as they paralyzed Sol (“Postmemory, Afterimages” 3). The unsettlement
and temporal disorientation experienced by trauma survivors is partly transferred to the viewers, thus confirming Hirsch’s description of a traumatic flashback (3).

It can be concluded, as Codde argues, that although “Wallant’s novel provides a brilliant psychological analysis of its traumatized protagonist […], its rather conventional form fails to convey the concomitant sensations to the reader” (2). He adds that this failure is not due to an incapability on Wallant’s part, but instead is caused by his medium: traumatic experiences are iconic in nature and can thus be better represented visually. The different mediums and their effectiveness to represent trauma will be discussed later in this thesis.

3.2. Everything Is Illuminated

3.2.1. Everything Is Illuminated: a Trauma-theoretical Approach to Jonathan Safran Foer’s Novel

In Jonathan Safran Foer’s debut novel, one of the main characters – also called Jonathan Safran Foer – travels to the Ukraine to search for his grandfather’s past. Jonathan’s aim is to find the woman who supposedly saved his grandfather during the war. The only proof he has of her existence, is a picture with the following note on the back: “[t]his is me with Augustine, February 21, 1943” (60). Jonathan is accompanied on his search by his translator Alex Perchov, Alex’s grandfather – also called Alex – and a dog named Sammy Davis Jr. Jr.. After the journey, both Jonathan and Alex write a novel, and their chapters form the contents of this book. Jonathan writes a fictional story about the history of Trachimbrod – supposedly Jonathan’s grandfather’s birth village – while Alex writes about their recent search for Augustine and present-day Trachimbrod. The two narrators exchange these chapters and Alex even reviews those of Jonathan by sending him letters, which are also included in the novel. It is made clear that Jonathan also sends letters to Alex, although these are not included in the novel. Jonathan’s voice is thus omitted and is only visible through
comments that Alex makes on Jonathan’s preceding remarks. Only at the end of the novel, a third voice is introduced: Alex’s grandfather writes a letter as well. However, in order for the letter to be understandable to Jonathan, it had to be translated by Alex. Even though this letter is thus written by the grandfather, it is still mediated by Alex.

Although both the first and the third generation are represented in this novel, it is especially the form of the novel that invites a trauma-theoretical reading. The form is quite particular since the different stories are not told chronologically, and they intersect each other. Robert Kohn observes that this postmodern form, and in fact postmodernism in general, is “the ideal venue for Foer’s coming to terms with the Holocaust” (245). Furthermore, Francisco Collado-Rodriguez points out that precisely these departures “from a linear narration of events and confusing time spans are two of the most characteristic marks of trauma narratives” (63). Collado-Rodriguez adds that this experimental arrangement works on readers’ emotions and stimulates “an ethical reading of [the] […] literary work” (56).

3.2.1.1. The Third Generation and Postmemory

Wardi mentions how the second generation often feels the desire to search for their families’ roots (214-215). She states that they attempt “to find the missing links in the family chain” and adds that this journey to the past, “whether it occurs in reality or only in the imagination,” might help them to “consolidate and integrate their identity” (237). Although Foer is part of the third generation – his grandparents survived the Holocaust – he clearly felt the same desire since he also travelled back to Europe. As his search in real life failed, he decided to write a novel about it, thus experiencing the journey both in reality and in his imagination. Burstein confirms that this longing for the past is often realized through the medium of literature, and further indicates that many of these writers “reconstruct the European home before the Nazis came” (51). This is precisely what the fictional Jonathan
Safran Foer – and thus also the real Jonathan Safran Foer – is doing: he is writing a fictional history of his family and of Trachimbrod.

As already mentioned, Hirsch’s concept of postmemory is even more suitable to describe the third generation’s situation than that of the second generation (Codde “Postmemory, Afterimages” 6). That Foer is aware of how trauma can be inherited, can be seen in the following description of children’s reaction to the accidental bombing of Trachimbrod:

But children had it worst of all, for although it would seem that they had fewer memories to haunt them, they still had the itch of memory as strong as the elders of the shtetl. Their strings were not even their own, but tied around them by parents and grandparents – strings not fastened to anything, but hanging loosely from the darkness. (260; my italics)

While the “strings” point to the burdens they inherited from their parents and grandparents, the “itch of memory” refers to how the following generations after the traumatic event only have “a memory of not remembering” (Sicher The Holocaust Novel 157).

Hoffman’s concept of “transferred loss” can be detected in this novel as well. Codde explains this notion as a transformation of absence into loss, which is exactly what occurs in Yankel’s life: to please Brod, he makes up a story about how he had the perfect marriage and how his wife died in childbirth. After a while, Yankel starts to believe his own stories:

It was inevitable: Yankel fell in love with his never-wife. He would wake from sleep to miss the weight that never depressed the bed next to him, remember in earnest the weight of gestures she never made, long for the un-weight of her
un-arm slung over his too real chest, making his widower’s remembrances that much more convincing and his pain that much more real. He felt that he had lost her. He had lost her. At night he would reread the letters that she had never written him. (48-49)

Yankel is thus missing something he never really had in the first place, thus turning the absence of his real wife into the tragic loss of his “never-wife”.

However, Yankel does not inherit this loss from any ancestors – as is the case with the third generation – but instead he himself chooses loss over absence. It is in this absence that Yankel’s trauma lies: his real wife abandoned him for another man and only left him the following note: “I had to do it for myself” (45). He tried to lose the note, but it kept turning up again: “it was always there. […] He couldn’t for the life of him lose the note. It kept returning to him. It stayed with him, like a part of him, like a birthmark, like a limb, it was on him, in him, him, his hymn: I had to do it for myself.” (45). This is similar to how trauma survivors attempt to “lose” the past by trying to forget about the trauma. However, this attempt – as well as Yankel’s – is futile since the past will keep returning in the form of flashbacks, nightmares and other posttraumatic symptoms. Although Yankel will not become a Holocaust survivor, as he lives about 150 years earlier, he is in this way also a trauma survivor.

3.2.1.2. The First Generation and Problems of Testimony

Although both the real and the fictional Jonathan Safran Foer are part of the third generation, several stories about the first generation can be detected in the novel as well. There are three important characters in this novel who represent the first generation: Jonathan’s grandfather, the old woman supposedly called Lista, and Alex’s grandfather.
The story about Jonathan’s grandfather Safran is what sets the entire story in motion: he was a Holocaust survivor who died a few weeks after his arrival in the United States and therefore Jonathan – not knowing the truth about how his grandfather survived the war – begins his search for answers. He tries to reconstruct his grandfather’s life, basing this reconstruction on a journal and a few pictures. Although it is never literally stated, the scarcity of sources already indicates that the story is mainly invented. While Lista and Alex’s grandfather are finally able to testify about their trauma – about which they remained silent for almost sixty years – Safran never had the chance to do so. In this way, Jonathan feels the need to testify in his grandfather’s stead.

However, Codde argues that Foer not only is aware of the difficulties that may arise in the process of testimony, but he even starts thematizing these problems (“Course”). This can be seen most clearly in the beginning of the novel, when Trachim supposedly drowns in the river and Brod is born. Nobody in the shtetl knows what precisely happened, and yet everyone is testifying: “almost all of the shtetl’s three hundred-odd citizens had gathered to debate that about which they knew nothing. The less a citizen knew, the more adamantly he or she argued” (12). Furthermore, one of the main dangers of testimony lies in the fact that survivors tend to turn their memories into a story, and this is exactly what can be seen in Sofiowka’s account of the accident: “I witnessed it all [...] and if that’s not exactly the truth, then [...] and if that doesn’t seem quite correct, then what happened was [...] Trachum died in the Night of the Longest Night. No, wait. No, wait. He died from being an artist” (9). Sofiowka is creating the story while he is telling it, thus indicating the unreliable nature of his testimony.

Next to the characters in the account of the history of Trachimbrod, Foer also uses the narrator of this story, Jonathan, to foreground the story’s fictionality. Not only does Jonathan start his narrative by pointing out that the accident “did or did not” happen, he even wonders if Sofiowka is “someone to trust for a story,” thus indicating that his sources may not be
trustworthy (8, 15). Jonathan even says “I’m sure” while he is in fact not sure of anything, thus foregrounding his own invention (166). Codde comments that in such moments, the hand of the novelist can be seen at work (“Course”).

Another unreliable narrator can be found in the character of Alex. Lee Behlman points out that “[t]he accuracy of Alex's novelistic account of Jonathan's visit and their search for the town and the woman is put into serious question in several of Alex's letters” (59). In these letters, there are thus several indications that Alex’s retelling of their journey is partly fictional as well: he calls the dog “a distinguished character” and talks about how he modifies several scenes (55). Alex even literally points to the fictional nature of his account through the questions he asks Alex: “[my other inventions were also first rate, yes? and “[w]e are being very nomadic with the truth, yes?” (142, 145).

He also points to the fictional nature of Jonathan’s story by suggesting that Brod should be permitted “to be happy” and that Jonathan’s grandfather should be allowed to “be in love with the Gypsy girl” (143, 240). Alex also begs Jonathan to change Alex’s grandfather’s story: “[y]ou could alter it, Jonathan. For him, not for me” (145). Since they are making up the story anyway, Alex wants to change the story for the better. Alex does not understand Jonathan’s refusal to do so, as he wishes “for an escape from an uncomfortable reality” through fiction (Behlman 61).

Behlman notes how Foer uses these unreliable narrators to foreground “the impossibility of any unmediated, wholly accurate access” (59). According to Codde, Foer puts the reader in the same position as the third generation: by “presenting layers of different, often contradictory and mutually exclusive accounts of the past,” the reader also struggles “(as with postmemory) to reconstruct or imagine what happened in the novel’s fictional past” (Everything Is Illuminated 3-4). Foer thus forces the reader to set out on a similar journey as Jonathan and Alex: a quest to find the truth about the past. However, it is made clear by the
end of the novel that the truth can never be known, thus transferring the frustration caused by “the inaccessibility of a traumatic past” onto the reader (1).

3.2.1.3. Jonathan’s Quest and the Revelation of Two Traumatic Testimonies

Jonathan sets out to find the woman who supposedly saved his grandfather during the war and who is supposedly named Augustine. Jonathan, Alex and Alex’s grandfather do encounter a mysterious old woman living alone in a house near Trachimbrod. However, it is not certain that she is in fact Augustine as contrasting descriptions of this character are given in Alex’s account. On the one hand, Alex says he is convinced that the woman is Augustine: “[i]t was her eyes that let me understand that she was, without a query, the Augustine from the picture” (148). At the same time, however, Alex confesses to not having found Augustine: “I must eat a slice of humble pie for not finding Augustine” (23). Although the old woman tells them that her name is Lista, Alex explains how they “continued to think of [her] as Augustine, even though [they] […] knew that she was not Augustine,” because that was what they needed to believe (181).

However, a connection to another character in the novel can be detected as well, namely the character of Lista P. in Jonathan’s story: a young widow and the second woman Safran sleeps with. Next to the fact that they share the same first name, another argument for this interpretation can be detected in the following episode: “I know that his grandfather escaped because I saw him once, maybe a year later, maybe two. […] We talked about Shakespeare, I remember, a play we had both read. They had them in Yiddish, you know, and he once gave me one of them to read” (190). The significance of this becomes clear when this part of Alex’s novel is compared to an excerpt from Jonathan’s novel:
[Safran] gave Lista the book that he still had with him from his house – *Hamlet*, with a purple spine – that he had taken from the shelf to have something to hold.

*For keeps?* she asked.

*You’ll give it back to me one day.* (238)

These fragments clearly suggest that the old Lista in Alex’s story is the young Lista in Jonathan’s story. However, all of this is just speculation since we are still dealing with Jonathan’s imagination. Therefore, Codde concludes, the identity of the old woman simply cannot be known (“Course”).

Furthermore, Codde argues that Lista is clearly a trauma survivor who is stuck in the past (“Course”). She feels guilty for surviving when her whole family did not. Therefore, she holds on to everything that is left of Trachimbrod: boxes filled with items ranging from pictures to pillowcases. Even though Alex asks Lista directly, she denies knowing anyone in Jonathan’s picture at first. She only admits to knowing Trachimbrod after Alex asks her if anyone in the picture ever witnessed her. In this way,Lista literally denies having witnessed anything, thus also refusing her role as a witness. In this scene, Alex shows himself to be a good listener, as he knows that what Lista needs is for someone to ask her particular question:

“Have you ever witnessed anyone in the photograph?”

“No,” she said, but in her no I was certain that I could hear, Please persevere. *Inquire me again*. So I did.

[…]*“Have you ever witnessed anyone in the photograph” I inquired, and I felt cruel, I felt like an awful person, but I was certain that I was performing the right thing.*
“No,” she said, “I have not. They all look like strangers.”

I periled everything.

“Has anyone in this photograph ever witnessed you?”

Another tear descended.

“I have been waiting for you for so long.”

I pointed to the car. “We are searching for Trachimbrod.”

“Oh,” she said, and she released a river of tears. “You are here. I am it.” (118; my italics)

Alex is thus aware of the subtle cues given by Lista and responds in an appropriate way, which is how Laub describes the task of the listener (“Bearing Witness” 71). The fact that Alex is a better listener than Jonathan becomes clear when, halfway through Lista’s testimony, Jonathan cannot handle hearing the rest of the story and tells Alex to stop translating. This is again demonstrated when Jonathan talks about how his grandmother used to shout out Yiddish words, of which he did not know the meaning. Jonathan never asked his grandmother about their meaning, but Alex suggests that “[p]erhaps she needed [him] […] to ask, because if [he] […] didn’t ask, she could not tell [him] […]” (159). Again, Alex displays a great ability to function as an empathic listener: he is able to virtually put himself into the speaker’s position and anticipate what he or she might need from the listener.

Although the “river of tears” seems to indicate Lista’s willingness to testify, it will become clear during her testimony that she is in fact not ready to do so since she is still incapable of telling her own story. She describes what happened to her parents and her two sisters, but avoids telling how she survived. At one point, the grandfather asks her how she was able to escape, but Lista avoids the question by answering “[m]y sister, I told you, was not dead” (187). This could be seen as an indication that her sister’s story is actually her own
story, which she is thus telling indirectly. Codde also acknowledges this possibility by pointing out that her sister was supposedly the one who lost her baby, but it is Lista who still believes she has a baby girl. Additionally, she describes how her sister collected everything that remained of Trachimbrod and brought them to a nearby house. This is exactly the place where the narrators discover her: in a house full of boxes filled with remnants of Trachimbrod, located close to where the shtetl used to be. Lista may have adapted her memories into a story she can live with: she cannot admit that it was she herself who went through those awful events, and thus she pretends that it happened to someone else. Again, these indications of Lista’s possible identity emerge, but no final answers are given. Therefore, one can thus never be sure of her true identity.

Since her testimony was not complete, the process of working-through has still not begun for Lista. This is made particularly clear at the end of this chapter, when Lista says “‘I must go in and care for my baby […]. ‘It is missing me’” (193). In this scene, it is made painfully clear that Lista is stuck in the phase of acting-out; still believing that her baby is alive.

However, another hidden history is revealed in the process of this quest. Alex’s grandfather – who seemed to be anti-Semitic at first – confesses to having betrayed his Jewish friend Herschel during the war. To protect his family, he was forced to point out Herschel as a Jew to the Nazis. This betrayal led to Herschel’s death and that is why Alex’s grandfather – unable to face his forced crime – moved to Odessa. As Menachem Feuer points out, an extra dimension can be seen in this story when Alex’s grandfather’s confession is compared to an earlier scene in which Lista talks about someone called Herschel:

“Here is Herschel,” she said, holding a photograph up to the light of the window. “We will go,” Grandfather said. “Tell him we are leaving.” “Do not
go,” she said. “Shut up,” he told her, and even if she was not Augustine, he still should not have uttered this to her. “I am sorry,” I told her, “please continue.”

“He lived in Kolki, which was a shtetl near to Trachimbrod. Herschel and Eli were best friends, and Eli had to shoot Herschel, because if he did not, they would shoot him.” “Shut up,” he said again, and this time he also punched the table. But she did not shut up. “Eli did not want to, but he did it.” “You are lying about it all.” (152)

Feuer states that “if the grandfather killed Herschel, and Augustine tells them that Eli killed Herschel, then the grandfather is Eli; he is Jewish” (45). Another hint towards this interpretation can be seen in the grandfather’s reaction to the name Herschel: immediately after Lista utters it, he not only becomes very rude towards her, but also wants to leave the house immediately. In Alex’s grandfather’s final letter, there is another indication that he may in fact be Eli: “I said his name, Alex, which has also been my name for forty years” (275). The grandfather is of course much older than forty years and this example thus indicates that he must have changed his name once.

Alex’s grandfather’s testimony is described in a chapter from Alex’s novel, and is written as a stream of consciousness in which punctuation is avoided. Collado-Rodriguez explains the choice of this approach as follows: “[t]he use of experimental techniques in trauma fiction frequently suggests or symbolizes the victim’s – not the perpetrator’s – posttraumatic condition, especially when she or he becomes the narrator” (63). In this confession, the name Eli can be seen again: “he went to the next man in line and that was me who is a Jew he asked and I felt Herschel’s hand again and I know that his hand was saying pleaseplease Eli please I do not want to die […] do something Eli dosomething” (250-251; my italics). Here it is even shown how Herschel twice calls Alex’s grandfather Eli. Furthermore,
because of the lack of punctuation, part of this sentence can be read as “that was me who is a
Jew”, thus again pointing towards Alex’s grandfather’s Jewishness. Although this is not a
grammatically correct sentence, it does seem as something Alex – the narrator of this part –
would say since his English is often incorrect.

Another argument for this interpretation can be found in the following excerpt from
Alex’s grandfather’s confession:

>t]he truth is that I also pointed at Herschel and I also said he is a Jew and I will
tell you that you also pointed at Herschel and you also said he is a Jew and more
than that Grandfather also pointed at me and said he is a Jew and you also
pointed at him and said he is a Jew and your grandmother and Little Igor and we
all pointed at each other so what is it he should have done
he would have been a fool to do anything else but is it forgivable what he did […]
(252)

Here Alex seems to want to convince Jonathan that all of them would have acted in a similar
way as his grandfather did. He needs Jonathan to realize this in order to obtain forgiveness.
However, Alex does not seem to understand the full implications of what is happening. If this
is a conversation that really takes place between them, then Alex’s grandfather literally calls
Alex a Jew, thus pointing to his unknown heritage. Feuer adds that in this scene, it also seems
as if Jonathan picks up on the grandfather’s being Jewish (46). If Jonathan is the “you” that
Alex is referring to, then it is he who points at the grandfather and calls him a Jew. However,
Feuer explains that because this conversation has no setting, it is not clear if Jonathan is
actually there. He adds that this entire passage may even be imaginary (46).
Furthermore, if the grandfather is in fact Jewish, the anti-Semitism he displays at the beginning of the novel can not only be seen as a way of covering up the fact that he is a Jew, but also, as Codde suggests, as a form of self-hatred for what he did to Herschel ("Course"). Feuer adds that the grandfather’s Jewishness would also complicate “the conflict of different heritages that this novel is hinged upon, as it is a Jew who killed his Jewish brother, not a Ukrainian” (46).

However, there are also several instances in which Alex’s grandfather literally states that he is not Jewish: “[i]t was different then. Jews, not Jews”; “Just because I was not a Jew, it does not mean that it did not happen to me”; “I will tell you that if I were a Jew I would also not move forward” (244, 246, 249). Although these statements are probably part of the grandfather’s pose as an anti-Semite, it still means that the reader is once more confronted with contradictory accounts of a character’s identity.

This confusion of identities can also be seen when Alex writes to Jonathan, “I am your grandmother and you are Grandfather, and that I am Alex and you are you, and that I am you and you are me” (214). Although this seems to be another attempt on Alex’s part to convince Jonathan that they are all in fact quite similar, thus trying to obtain Jonathan’s forgiveness, it also adds to the overall confusion of characters. Codde adds that when Brod talks about her Safran at the end of the novel, we cannot know if she means her own husband or Jonathan’s grandfather, her lineage that still is to come ("Course"). Another example of this confusion of identities can be seen in the characters of Brod and Augustine. Although they are separated from each other through time, some connections between them are established. First of all, Brod “acquired […] [Yankel’s] uneven walk,” while Augustine’s walk as well is described as being “very unusual” (81, 146). When Yankel dies, Brod finds a note in his hand that says “[e]verything for Brod” (97). This phrase is repeated when Alex says to Lista, the woman they then consider to be Augustine, “everything is for you” (150). The possible confusion of
these characters is already hinted at by Alex when he suggests to Jonathan that “perhaps Brod could be Augustine” (143). All of this is meant to confuse the readers, again pointing to the unknowability of the past.

3.2.1.4. Failure of Language and Name Confusion

According to Mihai Mîndra, “the attempts to organize and explain the past” are not only undermined imaginatively – for example by the previously discussed confusion of identities – but also linguistically (51). Codde points out that the third generation uses alternative forms of language to represent their inaccessible past (“Course”). Although the stream of consciousness episode of the grandfather is a great example of an alternative linguistic form, the clearest example in this novel can be found in the way Foer represents the bombing of Trachimbrod: instead of using words to describe what happens in the shtetl, Foer fills the pages with only dots. Codde explains that, by leaving out the traumatic event, Foer “typographically recreates within his own writing the void, the absence he discovered at the Trachimbrod site” (Everything Is Illuminated 2). In this way, Foer is also trying to freeze time so that the people of Trachimbrod would have the chance to escape, thus suggesting that history can be changed through fiction. In the end, however, this turns out to be an illusion since none of the histories – not even that of Alex’s grandfather, which is the change Alex begs for – have been altered for the better (Codde “Course”).

Burstein explains that the importance the second and third generation writers give to the concept of language, is related to the fact that “[t]he stories they tell in English of their parents’ [and grandparents’] past was lived in […] other languages” (42). She thus argues that although they write in English, “the ghosts of other languages” are always present in the background of their work (42). In this novel, the opposition between the English language and the language of the first generation – here Ukrainian – is made very clear through the
juxtaposition of two characters: Jonathan and Alex. Alex speaks the language Jonathan would have spoken if not for the Holocaust. Alex thus seems to be more closely connected to Jonathan’s heritage than Jonathan himself. The contrast between them is even more emphasized by Alex’s faulty English. Additionally, many Ukrainian people were hostile toward the Jews during and before the war. In this way, the past of their grandparents causes a clash between them, especially when it turns out that Alex’s grandfather even betrayed a Jew. On the other hand, if Alex is also really a Jew, then this would mean they are even more closely related than they seem to realize.

The importance of language can also be seen in the attention that is given in the novel to the naming of people and objects. For instance, there are several names that keep returning throughout the novel. Not only are there three characters named “Alex” – Alex himself, his father, and his grandfather – but also the name “Safran” keeps returning: it is the first name of Jonathan’s grandfather and Jonathan’s middle name. It also turns up in Jonathan’s mythical account of Trachimbrod: next to being Yankel’s real name, “Safran” is also the name the Kolker adopts. The fact that one of the protagonists has the same name as the author of the novel, also contributes to this confusion of the reader. Even the name of the character that causes the search, is unsure: “[a]nd how do you know that her name is Augustine?” “I guess I don’t, really” (60). These confusions again force the reader to face the inaccessibility of the truth about the past.

3.2.1.5. Myth and Magical Realism

Behlman explains how the loss of “direct access to the experience of the Holocaust and its effects,” has caused young American writers to turn to “the use of fantasy, folklore, and magical-realist devices” (56). Codde confirms this by stating that these writers have to turn to their imagination “to fill in the missing pieces” (Everything Is Illuminated 1). Collado-
Rodriguez points out that Foer uses this strategy in Jonathan’s account of Trachimbrod. This is contrasted by a more conventional literary approach, which can be seen in Alex’s novel (55).

Behlman cites the following examples of magical-realism: “a baby mysteriously born from a river, a synagogue that moves on wheels, and at one point, a sighting of the shtetl by a future astronaut on the Moon” (59). Codde explains this mysterious birth of Brod by pointing out the similarities between her life and the myth of Aphrodite: they both are born from the ocean, both are astonishing beauties, and each of them starts an entirely new family lineage. Foer is thus clinging to myth to explain his own and the fictional Jonathan’s history (“Course”). At the end of Jonathan’s novel, it is told how Safran’s baby is not only born in the river Brod, but also dies there because of the umbilical cord that pulls him or her down with the drowning mother. Foer seems to be compensating for this baby’s death by giving the other babies in this story extra – almost supernatural – abilities. For example, if Safran’s baby would have had teeth – as Safran supposedly had – then maybe the baby could have bitten through his or her own umbilical cord. Similarly, if the baby would not have had an umbilical cord – as Brod supposedly had not – then he or she would also have survived. By creating this mythological story, Foer seems to create a second chance for this baby to survive. In this way, it is again suggested that fiction can change history, but in the end this hope turns out to be in vain since the baby ultimately cannot be saved. Collado-Rodriguez explains Foer’s goal in creating this mythical and magical-realist narrative is “to not only overcome a lack of an historical referent, but also to cope emotionally with the Nazis’ massacre of Jews”(57). He explains that myth and fantasy help not only the readers but also Alex “to come to a better understanding of unsayable traumatic events” (57).
3.2.1.6. Ending and Title

At the end of the novel, Alex’s grandfather’s letter confronts the reader one last time with the question of what is fiction and what is reality in this novel. There is an excerpt from his letter which was already written word for word earlier on in the novel, namely in Jonathan’s notebook. Alex reads this notebook while they are searching for Augustine, and Alex is the one who mentions the fragment from the notebook in his own novel. Codde suggests that because of this, the reader is forced to question his or her epistemological framework again. He points out that the suicide note could have been written by Jonathan – since it was his journal – but, at the same time, Alex could also have included it in his novel afterwards (“Course”). Feuer explains this final “catch” by stating that “the repetition of […] [this passage] is a postmodern literary device: it indicates the presence of the author, as well as the fictionality of this letter and the suicide” (44). Even at the end of the novel, extra complications are added to the narrative. In this way, the novel avoids closure and leaves the reader with many questions.

The title of this novel seems to suggest that everything will be “illuminated” by the end of the story. This is, however, not the case since even the term itself acquires several meanings in the course of this novel. According to Collado-Rodriguez, Alex often uses the verb “to illuminate” instead of the verbs “to clarify” or “to make clear” (62). However, the term is also used in different contexts in Jonathan’s mythical narrative. In describing the first encounter between Brod and the Kolker, the word “illuminated” is used time and again: “[a] wink of lightning illuminated the Kolker at the window (97, but also 133, 135-136, 140, 205). The term is also used in chapter titles from Alex’s novel, but reaches its climactic position, according to Collado-Rodriguez, in Alex’s grandfather’s stream of consciousness testimony (63): “to see the black spark when the first match was lit by a youngman […] it illuminated those who were not in the synagogue those who were not going to die” (251; my italics).
Collado-Rodriguez argues that the use of the term “illuminated” here offers “an ironic contrast with repetitive passages in Jonathan’s magical-realist account of the encounter between the matriarch Brod and her would-be husband” (63). The fragmentary way in which Alex’s grandfather’s testimony is given, stands thus in contrast with the “neat and chronologically ordered” description of Brod’s marriage (63).

Codde concludes that the novel’s title is in fact “acutely ironic, as very few elements of Jonathan’s past are truly illuminated” (*Everything Is Illuminated* 4). None of the “ontological and epistemological doubt” is resolved, and therefore, the reader is “continually invited or forced to participate in the third generation’s historical reconstructive activity” (“Postmemory, Afterimages” 9). Although the reader can never have access to the truth in this novel, he or she is at least “illuminated” about what the quest of the third generation entails.

### 3.2.2. *Everything Is Illuminated*: a Trauma-theoretical Approach to Liev Schreiber’s Film

In 2005, Foer’s novel was turned into a film by Liev Schreiber. The film script, however, is completely simplified through the exclusion of Jonathan’s mythological narrative. Only two minor references to this mythological part can be detected in the film. First of all, Augustine’s necklace pendant seems to be an amber coloured stone with a cricket stuck in it. This is very similar to how Yankel’s ring is described in the novel: “[t]he prehistoric ant in Yankel’s ring, which had lain motionless in the honey-colored amber since long before Noah hammered the first plank” (13). The second reference to Jonathan’s novel can be seen in the inclusion of the river Brod in the film, which they do not encounter in the present-day search for Trachimbrod in the novel. Before they arrive at the river in the film, Jonathan already dreams about it: he imagines small plastic bags – similar to the one he uses to collect things – streaming down the river and hears voices whispering (55’06”). The fact that things turn up in the river is reminiscent of two events in Jonathan’s mythical narrative. Firstly, it is what
happens when Trachim’s wagon goes into the river Brod: “[i]t [the river]’s turning up the most unusual things! Chana laughed, splashing at the mass that grew like a garden around her” (8). The second time the river turns up things in the novel, can be seen in the description of the destruction of Trachimbrod. People try to save themselves from the bombing by staying in the water of the Brod, but almost everyone drowns and their bodies start to turn up in the river: “the bodies began to rise one at a time until I couldn’t be seen through all of the bodies” (273). Except for these small indications that remember the mythological narrative, the film only focuses on the search for Augustine, and is therefore only based on Alex’s novel in the book.

At the end of the film, it is also suggested that Alex and Jonathan start corresponding by letter. The epistolary narrative level is thus hinted at, but also does not receive very much attention. Codde indicates that because of these omissions, the film “reduces Foer’s dizzying construct of temporal layering, ethical ambiguity, multiple voices and equivocal historical events to a univocal narrative seemingly bent on facile closure” (*Everything Is Illuminated* 4).

### 3.2.2.1. The Story of Alex’s Grandfather

Perhaps the most important change that is made by Schreiber, can be seen in Alex’s grandfather’s story. Instead of betraying his best friend Herschel and possibly being a self-hating Jew, the character of Alex’s grandfather is simply turned into a Jewish victim. Schreiber turns Alex’s grandfather into a character named Baruch, a very minor character from Jonathan’s novel that is only mentioned once by Lista as an inhabitant of Trachimbrod. This is first suggested in the film when Alex’s grandfather asks the woman about her name, and she responds by taking out a photograph of a man and saying “[t]his is Baruch in front of the library” (1h07’11”). Then the woman tells almost the exact same story as Lista tells in the novel (151). Alex’s grandfather reacts to the mentioning of the name Baruch by staring at
Augustine for a while, and then telling Alex and Jonathan to leave them alone. Any doubts concerning the grandfather’s Jewish identity are resolved through two flashback sequences (50’46” and 1h17’54”). In these scenes, it is shown how a younger version of the grandfather – wearing the Star of David – mysteriously survives an execution by a Nazi firing squad. When Alex’s grandfather’s full name is shown on his gravestone at the end of the film, it becomes clear that he is in fact the man Augustine talks about: Alexander Baruch Perchov (1h36’48”).

Although the grandfather never testifies in the film – the viewers only learn more about his past via flashbacks – his family does seem to know about his Jewish identity in the end since the Star of David is engraved on his gravestone and his name is also written in Hebrew. Furthermore, the other male family members are wearing kippahs, and they have even chosen to bury the grandfather next to the Trachimbod memorial stone. All of this indicates that the family has not only discovered the truth about the past, but also that they have accepted their Jewish heritage. Not only Alex’s family, but also Jonathan seems to realize the truth about Alex’s grandfather’s Jewish identity since he symbolically gives him a bag of sand from the riverbank of the Brod. In this way, he acknowledges the grandfather’s personal connection to the history of Trachimbrod. It can thus be concluded that, by making sure the truth about the grandfather’s past is clear, Schreiber aims for a closed ending.

However, part of the story does not make sense anymore because of these changes. In the novel, it is suggested that Alex’s grandfather’s suicide is caused by his feelings of survival guilt, and by Jonathan’s inability to forgive him for what happened to Herschel. In the film, on the other hand, no motive is given for his suicide. Alex only states: “[i]t is possible I will never know why Grandfather did this to himself” (1h33’45”). In doing so, not even an attempt is made to explain his grandfather’s reasons for ending his life.
3.2.2.2. The Story of Augustine

The story about Augustine is completely changed as well. In contrast to the film, her identity is never revealed in the novel. In the film, Augustine was married to Safran and was pregnant with his baby. In this way, the character of Augustine is here equated with the character of Zosha in the novel. Codde states that, again, Schreiber’s changes do not make any sense: if Safran was in America searching for a house for his family when the Nazis came, then how could Augustine have saved him ("Course")? Jonathan is supposedly searching for the woman who saved his grandfather, so if Augustine did not save him, Jonathan’s whole search is rendered unnecessary.

The confusion about the old woman’s identity is also omitted, as she explains that she is in fact Augustine’s sister. She even shows pictures of her sister and herself, thus emphasizing the fact that she is not Augustine. It is also made clear what happened to Augustine through the woman’s testimony: here Augustine is the pregnant sister who was shot in her belly. However, in contrast to the novel, she apparently did not survive. Augustine’s sister is the only one who really testifies in this film, since Alex’s grandfather’s past is only shown through flashbacks and not through an actual testimony. No one really asks her to testify; instead she starts telling her story as a reply to Alex’s statement: “[y]ou were lucky to survive” (1h13’57”). The camera then zooms in on her face, so as to emphasize her emotions while telling the story. However, the typical features of a trauma testimony are not included since the story is neither fragmented nor does she distance herself from the traumatic memory as she recognizes that it was her own father who would not spit (1h15’21”).

Because of all Schreiber’s alterations, all of the layering of the novel is gone. The only moment in which this layering and confusion is visible in the film, is when Jonathan arrives in the airport and recognizes several people who are working there as people he encountered along the road in the Ukraine (1h35’01”).
3.2.2.3. The Story of Alex and Jonathan

The relationship between Alex and Jonathan is obviously different in the film since there is no reason why they cannot be friends. In the novel, the fact that Alex’s grandfather betrayed a Jew causes tensions between Alex and Jonathan, and ultimately leads to Jonathan’s refusal to forgive Alex’s grandfather for the past. At the end of the film, however, a certain understanding is established between them. Jonathan acknowledges Alex’s Jewishness by giving him his grandfather’s Star of David necklace. In this way, their mutual background seems to encourage their friendship relation, whereas, in the novel, their past will ultimately get in the way of it.

3.2.2.4. Title

Codde argues that another conspicuous change from the novel can be seen in the fact that “the movie does live up to its title, as everything is indeed illuminated in the end” (“Postmemory, Afterimages” 9). In this way, the title of the film is no longer ironic – as it was in the novel – since Jonathan supposedly does find out the truth about his grandfather’s past and about Augustine’s identity. Alex even literally quotes the title to explain how they encountered the truth about the past on their search: “I have reflected many times upon our rigid search. It has shown me that everything is illuminated in the light of the past” (1h32’43”; my italics).

3.2.3. Comparing the Representation of Trauma in Foer’s Novel with Schreiber’s Film

Codde acknowledges the fact that it would have been impossible to include all the complexities of Foer’s novel in the film, “due to time restrictions” but also because of “commercial considerations, as Hollywood tends to prefer happy endings and closure” (“Postmemory, Afterimages” 9). However, Codde adds that the changes that occurred in the
film “might be indicative […] of the limits – inherent in the cinematic medium – to the
representation of postmemory” (9). One of these limitations can be seen in the fact that film
cannot convey the notions of unreliable narrators, mythical realism or the failure of language
in the same way a novel can. An example of an unreliable narrator in the novel can be seen in
the character of Alex: he not only lies about his frequent visits to nightclubs, but also about
his height. These little lies are in fact much more difficult to represent in film than in the
novel. For instance, the physical appearance of the actor playing Alex is already revealed to
the viewer in the beginning of the film, which makes it impossible for Alex to pretend to be
taller than he actually is. Because there is no hint of unreliability on Alex’s part in the film,
there is also no reason for the viewer to doubt what he is saying. Consequently, the film loses
a large part of its confusion and layering. Therefore, Codde argues, the film no longer engages
the viewer in a postmemorial search since postmemory is “concerned with distance, layering,
inaccessibility, the linguistic problems involved in translation (of language and of
experiences), and the transmission of unreliable documents” (9). However, the difficulties in
translation and the confusion caused by it, can be seen more clearly in the film. While in the
novel only the idea of translation is transmitted through the repetition, in the same language,
of what is said – for example: “‘[n]o one is afraid of dogs,’ he said. ‘Grandfather informs me
that no one is afraid of dogs’” – Alex’s family does speak Ukrainian in the film. In this way,
the viewer is put in the position of the third generation since this language would also be
incomprehensible to them. However, even though the issue of translation is presented more
strongly in the film, the fact that the novel is better equipped to represent a postmemorial
search cannot be denied.

Codde concludes that these limitations of the cinematic medium are connected to the
fact that the memories of first generation survivors are more iconic, whereas the third
generational concept of postmemory is “no longer visual in nature” (9). Codde realizes that
this conclusion is still tentative because of “the scarcity of movies on third generation Holocaust trauma” (10). Nevertheless, his conclusions can definitely be applied to this film since the artistic project in the film entirely differs from that in the novel. In the film, the viewer is clearly not placed in the same position as the third generation – as was the case with the readers of the novel – since their search ends with actual answers to their questions. The idea of having to search for a past that can never be known and therefore having to reconstruct it through imagination – which is precisely what the search of the third generation entails – is entirely omitted in the film.
4. Conclusion

Although the previously discussed novels and films all deal with the trauma of the Holocaust, each adopts a different approach to this concept. In both novels, the trauma of the first generation is distinctly present. In *Everything Is Illuminated*, this trauma is revealed by the testimony of two first generation characters, namely Lista and Alex’s grandfather. In the film however, the story of Trachimbrod and Jonathan’s grandfather is omitted, therefore clearly concentrating more on the third generation’s search for the past. Not only is Alex’s grandfather’s testimony excluded, but his ambiguous position as a self-hating Jew is also simplified due to the elimination of his guilt over the betrayal of Herschel. Even though Lista does testify in the film, her testimony is not a conventional first generation testimony since its typical features are absent. Whereas first generation trauma is thus almost excluded from Schreiber’s film adaptation, this trauma is actually more clearly present in the film version than in the novel version of *The Pawnbroker*. The emphasis on first generation trauma in the novel as well as in the film can be explained by the fact that the protagonist is part of the first generation, whereas the protagonists in *Everything Is Illuminated* are part of the third generation. Therefore, the typical trauma-theoretical concepts of latency, acting-out and working-through are more strongly present in *The Pawnbroker*.

However, the representation of this first generation trauma seems to be more artificial in Wallant’s novel than in Lumet’s film version. Wallant’s flashback sequences are clearly separated from the rest of the text, thus openly announcing that the isolated scenes do not take place in the present time of the novel. Because of this visual separation, the reader is never really taken by surprise, and therefore does not experience the shock a traumatic memory should convey. This representation of a traumatic flashback thus lacks the unexpectedness and the intrusiveness that normally characterizes such a reliving of the past. In the film, on the other hand, the traumatic nature of Sol’s flashbacks are represented in a more suitable way.
While witnessing Sol’s flashbacks, the viewers experience a discomfort that is similar to Sol’s unsettlement caused by his own flashbacks. Therefore, it can be concluded that in the case of this story, film is a more appropriate medium than literature to transmit the nature of the protagonist’s trauma.

In contrast to *The Pawnbroker*, Foer’s novel mainly focuses on third generation trauma. Although two first generational testimonies are included in this novel, the artistic aim of this novel is to represent the third generation’s quest for the past. The fact that the third generation has no direct access to this past is symbolized in the novel by the combination of different story lines, unreliable narrators and contradictory “truths”. In this way, the reader is put in the same position as the third generation since both are trying to reconstruct the truth about the past. Furthermore, the third generation as well as the readers are confronted with the fact that an “ultimate” truth will never be reached. However, in the film version of *Everything Is Illuminated*, the temporal layering and mediation is replaced by a more teleological version of the story. In this version, Schreiber’s choice of a closed ending is utterly irreconcilable with the quest of the third generation, which precisely defies any form of closure. It can thus be concluded that – in contrast with *The Pawnbroker* – literature is the most suitable medium to represent the third generational trauma in this story.

Codde explains the suitability of film to represent first generation trauma by pointing out “the *iconic* nature of traumatic experiences” (“Postmemory, Afterimages” 4). It is precisely the non-iconic form of literature that precludes the transmission of the overwhelming nature of first generation trauma to the reader. Another feature of this trauma was already mentioned earlier on in this thesis, namely that the reliving of a traumatic memory can be described as a simultaneity, and not as a sequence (Van der Kolk and Van der Hart 177). Although this simultaneity is difficult to obtain in both mediums, the film version comes close to achieving it through the use of flash cuts. These flashes transfer the
suddenness and unexpectedness of traumatic memories in a way that can never be possible through the medium of literature. Codde believes these conclusions are supported by the fact that in Foer’s second novel *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005), the iconic nature of first generation trauma – in this case, “the *primary* trauma of 9/11” – is emphasized through the introduction of pictures into the narrative (“Postmemory, Afterimages” 10).

In contrast, film is not the most suitable medium to represent the trauma of the third generation since their trauma is no longer visual in nature (10). This loss of visual traumatic memories can be explained by the fact that the third generation did not have any actual memories of the trauma to begin with, only memories of memories. In the novel, however, the reader engages in the third generation’s postmemorial search for an inaccessible past. While this search is represented through contradictory accounts and temporal layering, it is much more difficult to achieve this idea of inaccessibility through the cinematic medium. This difficulty has to do with the fact that it is not always possible to visually represent all of the postmemorial concepts. Furthermore, the viewer of a film has less time to turn to his or her imagination to fill in the blanks than a reader has while reading a novel. The scope of the medium of film thus seems to be too limited to represent the concept of postmemory.

Consequently, it can be concluded that the medium of film is more appropriate to represent the trauma of the first generation, while the third generation’s search for truth is much better represented through the medium of literature. This suitability is thus connected to the fact that first generation trauma is more iconic in nature, whereas the third generation has lost this visual connection to the past.
5. Bibliography


