NEW YORK CITY FICTION AS TRAUMA LITERATURE
A COMPARISON OF JONATHAN SAFRAN FOER’S EXTREMELY LOUD AND INCREDIBLY CLOSE AND JOSEPH O’NEILL’S NETHERLAND

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Collage of a man falling from the Twin Towers
Introduction


New York is anthropomorphized as a city in shock, wounded, a traumatized topography² and it is this view of the City that will form the base for this thesis’ discussion. The extract above already shows us the quality that 9/11 has rendered to New York; the attacks on the Twin Towers have confronted the world with an unreal feeling. This day - in all its awesomeness - seems indeed to have been a spectacle; an illusionist event to say the least. And it is precisely this characteristic that makes of 9/11 a perfect potential narrative. Within this context of a continuously growing number of New York City fiction, trauma literature is inextricably tied. The understanding that stories are a mode of symbolic structure that constructs identity, while trauma is the effect of that which evades structure and shatters identity, can be relocated to the ideas of both Sigmund Freud and Cathy Caruth. This conception of narrative versus trauma would imply that there is a discrepancy between the repetitive and belated temporal structure of the trauma and the linear temporal structure of the narrative.³ However, if the narrative structure of the novel crosses conventional literary boundaries – which it does in Netherland but especially in Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close - its linearity will make room for a more experimental manner of writing. Hence, a liberating, and more accessible way of structuring the narrative can lend itself to the writing of trauma.

² Ibid. 55.
Trauma remains situated within the framework of the complex dialectics of life and death (Goldberg: 2006). In addition, “trauma is constituted not only by the destructive force of a violent event but by the very act of its survival”.⁴ This is why studying traumatic happenings through literature is so fascinating; we can detect patterns of behaviour in trauma victims and analyze which stress reactions they may suffer from. Trauma literature in other words, lends itself perfectly to the portrayal of the kind of human frailty forthcoming of 9/11 in NY.

Analyzing the literary representation of the traumatic experience of 11 September 2001, will be the thematic fil rouge of this paper. The two 9/11 novels that will be used as tools and references in this thesis, are Joseph O’Neill’s *Netherland* and Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, hoping to render with this thesis their moral footprint on the new age of terror. *Netherland* deals with the life story of the Dutchman Hans van den Broek who is a husband, a father and a dedicated cricket enthusiast who moved with his family from London to New York for several years. However, when 9/11 struck, the marriage of Hans and Rachel fell apart. She moved back to England, and left Hans in the big City. *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* hands us the story of Oskar Schell, devastated by the death of his fantastic adoring father. Thomas Shell Jr. died in the collapsing Twin Towers. It is clear that both novels are permeated by trauma issues.

To commence a contemporary discussion on the nature and effect of trauma and trauma literature, some essential tenets of trauma theory will need to be explained. This introductory chapter is necessary in order to exemplify these theories subsequently in the following second chapter’s analysis of traumatic behaviour in both novels’ protagonists, Hans and Oskar. It will be interesting to see what the effects of the devastation of the City have done to the literary portrayal of its inhabitants. How their trauma is defining for their personality will be a necessary focus.

The City itself is of undeniable importance in both *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and *Netherland*, which makes it necessary to draw some differences and resemblances in how New York is portrayed and looked upon. However, this third chapter begins by concentrating on the architectural identity of the City. Looking into the matter of identity is essential to the understanding of a nation’s mentality. Therefore, a study on the variations between the American and European psyche are in order. This is especially interesting, because the two protagonists have different backgrounds, hence different mentalities, hence different ways - or modes – in dealing with trauma issues. The identity of this NY metropolis is crucial when dealing with the

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aftermath of 9/11. An overall important question that will be raised in a final and concluding chapter is whether trauma causes a gap between the real and the perceived and whether, miraculously, literature manages to achieve the same.
1. Trauma & Trauma literature

1.1 Trauma

Trauma is generally taken to mean a blow to the tissues of the body – or more frequently now, to the tissues of the mind […] Something alien breaks in on you, smashing through whatever barriers your mind has set up as a line of defense. It invades you, takes you over, becomes a dominating feature of your interior landscape – “possesses” you […]

Trauma, descending from the Greek word for wound, is a medical term implying physical injury. However, since the emergence of psychology as a separate discipline in the late 1800’s, trauma has become a psychological term. The relatively most known trauma related disorder is the Posttraumatic-Stressdisorder (PTSD) and it is the natural consequence of an abnormal circumstance or trauma. The by 1980 popular concept was introduced in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-III) of the American Psychiatric Association. This diagnosis has been applied to children as well since 1987. The fact that PTSD entered official psychiatric diagnostics in 1980, means that the courts would from then on accept that PTSD was a recognized psychiatric injury for which compensation would be recoverable by law without proof of any actual physical harm. This metaphorical shift of trauma from physical damage to psychological wounding took place at the time when the treatment of the insane was transformed by new paradigms in psychology. Namely, different groups of psychological researchers began to argue the radical case for a largely psychodynamic model of mind. These revelations took place between the 1870s and 1880s and caused grand debate about the causes and consequences of trauma up to the onset of the Great War, which reopened the terms of the debate all over again with relevant issues such as shell shock, combat stress, delayed stress syndrome and traumatic neurosis which referred to responses to both human and natural catastrophes. PTSD manifests

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7 Ibid, 34.

shell shock; shell shock refers to the mental condition of people who have been under fire in a war. The term was coined during World War I. Shell shock is in a way similar to PTSD in that it shows some comparable consequences in behavior, such as numbness, depression, excessive irritability, guilt (for having survived while others died), recurrent nightmares, flashbacks to the traumatic scene, and overreactions to sudden noises (http://www.medterms.com/script/main/art.asp?articlekey=5474)

itself after a shocking event that leaves a person with anxiety, and a sense of impotence and helplessness. When concerning children, trauma can be translated into disorganized or agitated behavior.

It is common for victims of trauma to move into a different living pattern; these people often hide into nothingness, meaning that they will literally hide underneath who they used to be. Fear and memories of the experienced event are then projected not through direct speech, but mostly through images and symbols. This is what Cathy Caruth calls *speechless terror*: “When people are exposed to trauma, that is, a frightening event outside of ordinary human experience, they experience *speechless terror*. The experience cannot be organized on a linguistic level, and this failure to arrange the memory in words and symbols leaves it to be organized on a somatosensory or *iconic* level.”9 In reference to this, Judith Herman states that “given the *iconic*, visual nature of traumatic memories, creating pictures may represent the most effective initial approach to these *indelible images*”.10 More researchers have noticed the issue of *speech terror*. While following up World War I veterans in the early 1920s, William Brown established that his shell-shocked patients were often incapable of finding an outlet in speech or in action for their powerful trauma-related emotions. Instead, the soldiers would unconsciously externalise their emotions into physical or bodily symptoms.11 This is an effect, frequently noticeable in the behavior of trauma victims. In reference to this speechlessness, Freud argues that “the *dark and dismal subject* of trauma is conceived as the ineffable horizon of representation, unknowable except as profound lack”. Jean-François Lyotard, commenting on the *unspeakable* nature of trauma as well, says: “To arrest the meanings of words once and for all, that is what Terror wants. Hence, Terror cannot be silenced by silence.” (qtd. in: Jarvis, 59.)

Within the psyche of people who have experienced any sort of trauma in their lives there is a void, a hole to be found. They consider themselves lost, and to never be the same person again. In some cases the traumatic event in itself has never been fully integrated into understanding, and therefore it can be said that the trauma victim is not really living in the present day. It has to be understood that healing from a traumatic event has to be seen as a process of overcoming the damage. Through flashbacks, dreams etcetera, people relive their experiences and need to build on them to live past it.

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10 HERMAN, J. *Trauma and recovery*, 177.
Because we are dealing with normal reactions to extreme events here, the term *stress reactions* is better suited than *symptoms*. Stress reactions include re-experience, avoidance and an increased temper.

When discussing the topic of trauma, the ideas of *loss* and *absence* are valuable terms. “Loss is often correlated with lack, for as loss is to the past, so lack is to the present and future. A lost object is one that may be felt to be lacking, although a lack need not necessarily involve a loss.” Lack nonetheless indicates a felt need or a deficiency; it refers to something that ought to be there but is missing. Absence on the other hand is a deficiency that may be regained. In this aspect, we shall see that the character of Oskar in Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* is an example of somebody who experiences the consequences of a *loss*. Due to the attacks on the Twin Towers his father is lacking, making him a lost absentee. The persona of Hans in O’Neill’s *Netherland*, on the other hand, confronts us with another reality. Hans, who during the bigger part of the novel lives apart from his wife and son, experiences an absence; his family is lacking but – and this is what makes for a relevant difference between the two protagonists - not lost.

The structure or reception of a traumatic experience is of valuable importance. The event is not yet assimilated or rendered knowledgeable at the experienced time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it. This means that at the time of occurrence, the trauma victim does not completely realise what has happened or what the effects will be of this traumatic event. The realization will only come later, when the event keeps repeating itself in the victim’s mind. “To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event”, something which will appear strongly in the analysis of J.S. Foer’s main character, Oskar. To understand trauma, we need to take into account that dealing with reality may involve a strong sense of numbness. Moreover, the immediacy of the event may take the form of belatedness and functions as the postponement of the registration of trauma. In reference to this, Henry Krystal comments that in trauma, no trace of a registration of any kind is left in the psyche but that instead a void – a hole – is found. Similarly, Dori Laub has suggested that massive psychic trauma precludes its registration; “it is a record that has yet to be made”. Thus, Caruth argues, “the traumatic symptom can not be interpreted, simply, as a distortion of reality, nor as the lending of unconscious meaning to a reality it wishes to ignore, nor as the

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repression of what once was wished".\textsuperscript{15}

The following fragment begins with Jacques Lacan’s relevant statement about the realistic time sequence of trauma. It is particularly important here as it is no doubt applicable to almost every person dealing with the emotions and the consequences of trauma. Lacan’s observation, and with that, a continuation of Laub’s observations, show us the reality of reliving an event over and over again inside your mind.

The real is that which always comes back to the same place. […] The traumatic event, although real, took place outside the parameters of “normal” reality, such as causality, sequence, place and time. The trauma is thus an event that has no beginning, no ending, no before, no during and no after. This absence of categories that define it lends it a quality of “otherness,” a salience […] Trauma survivors live not with memories of the past, but with an event that could not and did not proceed through to its completion, has no ending, attained no closure, and therefore […] continues into the present and is current in every respect. […] A process of constructing a narrative, of reconstructing a history and essentially, of re-externalizing the event – has to be set in motion.\textsuperscript{16}

In Kristiaan Versluys and Sien Uytterschout’s article “Melancholy and Mourning in Jonathan Safran Foer’s Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close”, we read that a traumatic event is often so violent and disruptive in nature that it cannot be fitted into existing referential frameworks. As a result, survivors of trauma cannot grasp the magnitude of what has happened to them. “A victim’s memory fails to register the event at the moment of its occurrence, because the extent of its violence has not yet been fully known.”\textsuperscript{17} This, for example, explains the certain modes of behavior in Oskar Schell, protagonist in Jonathan Safran Foer’s novel Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close. Trauma, in fact, has a lot to do with melancholy and mourning, as these two denotations are natural outlets of terrific events, the former entailing a mental or emotional symptom of depression or despondency whereas the latter refers to an endeavor to remember the traumatic event and fit it into a coherent whole.\textsuperscript{18} This idea of melancholy versus mourning will be substantiated in the following chapter (2. Dealing with trauma in Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close and Netherland).

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid. 6.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid. 5.
To be able to heal from a traumatic experience, the event needs to be integrated in one’s life. This is an equal given for every age category. Children and adults exhibit more or less the same stress reactions. However, there are some important differences in processing trauma when it comes to different ages. This is especially relevant, as the second chapter of this thesis deals with both a child (Oskar Schell in J.S. Foer) and an adult (Hans van den Broek in J. O’Neill) dealing with the extreme effect of 9/11 and its aftermath on their respective lives.

Children aged six to twelve already understand what has really happened and what the threat entails. They may even experience a posttraumatic game. Naturally, there are some barriers that children are more reluctant to come across than adults, such as a lower performance level in school or a decrease in concentration. Children this age can also become preoccupied with specific aspects of the event; thoughts about their own role concerning the traumatic situation may suddenly appear to be the most important thing in their daily life. A child may also rely on fantasy to cope with his feelings, because it is an easy escape route. Guilt and rage in fantasy appear less strong (in fantasy) than in reality. A significant similarity between children and adults is to be found in the discussion of the event with other, unfamiliar people and the change in priorities in the aftermath of the terrific event. This form of non-talking and the principle of living life day by day are both observable in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and in *Netherland*. Some currently available measures to locate symptoms of trauma are useful and psychometrically sound, but they also have a variety of limitations. For example, the Impact of Events Scale (IES) is widely used with adults following a critical incident, and eight of the items have survived norming with children. However, children exhibit a much broader spectrum of post-traumatic symptoms than those covered in the IES. The IES is also limited in that an identified trauma is required as a reference point for all questions. However, “a precipitating or predisposing event is not always recognized a priori as the source of a child's problems. Children often exhibit symptoms which may be trauma-based, but which mimic other conditions, including somatic disturbances, Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder, learning problems, anxiety, depression, oppositional behaviors, and conduct disorders”. Other scales for measuring stress reactions with children are The Trauma Symptom Checklist for Children (TSCC) and The

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18 Ibid. 216.
Children react to trauma in many of the same ways that adults do. The world may suddenly seem dangerous and unsafe. Moreover, a child may feel overwhelmed by intense emotions and not understand how to cope with these feelings. Children who experience a trauma have reactions that may include denial, fear, anger, guilt, sadness, and confusion. This also includes sleep disturbances and the making of associations with the traumatic event; repeating the event over and over in your mind and constantly relating other things to what has happened. These reactions are part of the normal recovery process.

There are two ways of handling an upsetting experience when it comes to children. Ideally, the child will go through the memories, thoughts and feelings over and over until, little by little, it is somehow mastered, and no longer disturbing, which is the first way of handling the traumatic event. However, some experiences are so upsetting and overwhelming that, instead of facing the memory, the child tries to push it away. This second strategy may provide temporary relief, but when the memory is not worked through, it keeps its disturbing power. In fact, the more the child avoids facing the memory, the more stuck he or she will be. And this can happen with many types of experiences, including loss as well as trauma.

What is striking then about the nine-year-old Oskar in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* is that he does not at all seem to avoid what has happened overall. The basis of his traumatic fears (i.e. not picking up the phone when his father called the apartment for the last time before he was swallowed in the ruins of the twin towers) he does suppress from time to time, but for the most, he tries to look for answers to make his father proud. In this, he is a mourner who goes through a process of healing and has decided he should undertake a mission on his own.

When it comes to trauma and adults, PTSD stress reactions are mostly dividable into three different categories. People who have been exposed to traumatic experiences may notice any number of symptoms in almost any combination. However, the diagnosis of PTSD means that someone has met very specific criteria. Stress reactions include *intrusive re-experiencing*, when victims of trauma feel as if the event is happening all over again. This is often also called a flashback. This reaction causes nightmares, and people in this situation might even lose touch

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**21** GREENWALD, R. 1997. “Child Trauma Article: When It’s Too Late to “Be Careful”. “
with the here and now by which they react to things in the present in the same way they did when the trauma originally occurred. Avoidance, is a second possible stress reaction. People with PTSD work hard to avoid anything that might remind them of the traumatic experience. They may try to avoid people, places, or things that are reminders, as well as numbing out emotions to avoid painful, overwhelming feelings. “Numbing of thoughts and feelings in response to trauma is known as dissociation and is a hallmark of PTSD.” According to the Sidran Institute (for Traumatic Stress Education and Advocacy), people with PTSD frequently use drugs or alcohol to avoid trauma-related feelings and memories. Arousal is seen as a third stress reaction. Very distinctive are the symptoms of psychological and physiological arousal in men and women with PTSD. Being jumpy, irritable, and easily startled or suffering from sleep disturbances such as insomnia or nightmares, are veritable symptomatic reactions of trauma. Moreover, arousal may lead to difficulties in concentration and a heightened sense of vigilance. The men and women living with the consequences of a traumatic event, might also experience panic attacks which may even lead to shortness of breath and chest pain.

Traumatic events can have profound effects not only on those who have been injured, but also on loved ones, survivors, and witnesses. “Extensive media coverage of tragedies means that the circle of witnesses has expanded to include those who were not present at the event. Large-scale tragedies such as bombing incidents and school shootings can be extremely disturbing to children, who thrive on predictability and security.”

As mentioned before, children who have been exposed to a traumatic event are afraid of many of the same things adults are afraid of: that the event will happen again; that they or their family will be hurt; or that they will be separated from family members. They may also have fears based on misconceptions of what has happened.²²

“That we can be injured, that others can be injured, that we are subject to death at the whim of another, are all reasons for both fear and grief.” This is what Judith Butler writes in the preface of Precarious Life, making an honest statement about trauma today and embodying an interesting aspect of my point of interest for this dissertation. How is it that we conceive [traumatic] pain? How do we calculate trauma and how is it expressed or voiced by the people around us? What does it mean to be hurt, and more importantly, what are the consequences of that personal damage? Pain, as Emily Dickinson wrote, “has an element of blank –‘:

It cannot recollect
When it begun – or if there were
A time when it was not –

It has no Future – but itself –

Trauma is a historical term, not something we have just found out about today. And that is what makes it so interesting; its continuity and similarity across the centuries. When looking at trauma, various historical events could have been discussed. However, the choice to look at the problématique of 9/11 only, seemed evident. This is an event lived by the entire world more than any event before, watched by more people across the world than any event before, broadcast through more mediums than any event before. 9/11 lives in all of us, deeply inserted, causing fear and panic across the world. The attacks on 9/11 have caused the highest caution for terrorism on every aspect. We cannot so much as cross the border without having to identify ourselves. Security measures for intercontinental flights post 9/11 are to be called at the least extreme, yet necessary.

What is curious about the attacks on the Twin Towers, is how they are shaped in a collective memory, but never seem to be worked through; it is as if Ground Zero is built upon a New York illusionist secret not yet ready to enter History. Butler comments that we may see this most dramatically in the suspension of any attempt to offer balanced reporting on this international conflict. An example of this secret is what Butler gives us, when she comments on the refusal by the noted intellectual Noam Chomsky to include important critiques of the US military effort within the mainstream US press.  

There is however a problem concerning the labeling of the word trauma to an event these days. This would be the problem of overgeneralization; everybody seems to be traumatized. It seems that every disappointment in life can be traumatizing. A result of this is that the meaning of the term trauma has been reduced. This is also true because the word trauma has become the most accurate way to describe the condition of the people one encounters in disturbing situations

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plus the texture of the scenes themselves. *Trauma* is used in so many different ways and is placed in so many different vocabularies that it is hard to configure a clear sociological concept of it today.
1.2 Trauma in literature

The attempt to identify a distinct *trauma novel* has been a very recent literary critical task. Anne Whitehead terms it an “emerging genre”, which suggests that we have yet to see its full extent. Exemplars of the trauma novel cluster in the late 1980s and 1990s, after the clinical elaboration of PTSD. It is often claimed that the canon of trauma fiction opens with Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), a novel concerning “the murderous legacies of slavery in America and intended to give some inner consciousness and humanity to the historical record of atrocities inflicted against African and African-American people as a consequence of institutional slavery”. (Luckhurst, 87, 90.) In our 21st century, new developments in trauma fiction are being formed: Jonathan Safran Foer’s tragic-comedies of both the Holocaust, *Everything is Illuminated* (2002) and this thesis’ specific topic 9/11, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), show every sign of becoming canonical. (Luckhurst, 87.)

Cathy Caruth writes in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, that the phenomenon of trauma has seemed to become all-inclusive, but that it has done so precisely because it brings us to the limits of our understanding. “If psychoanalysis, psychiatry, sociology, and even literature are beginning to hear each other anew in the study of trauma”, she comments, “it is because they are listening through the radical disruption and gaps of traumatic experience.”

As *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* was published in 1995, it is remarkable how this issue was already this relevant and predominant; 9/11 had not yet occurred which makes us think how in one moment on a morning in 2001, the study of trauma would breach its current boundaries of already being all-inclusive.

Trauma is a phenomenon which can affect entire communities and not only individuals. Therefore, literature is an excellent medium to look at this issue; representing characters, getting inside their minds. How do they experience certain feelings and events? In real life, you could never exactly know what somebody is feeling, or thinking. Hence, we can learn from a novel’s characters. In this aspect, we can say that trauma literature has a therapeutic function. Even more, the literature produced by a community may help that community to work through a collective trauma. Trauma literature has always been popular, because it draws attention to the essential things in life - being fear and love. These novels often try to make a difference, and we might

learn from it. Foer responds to this issue in a similar way when he says that “as if creating art out of tragedy weren’t an inherently good thing?”

However, an important difference has to be made between historiography and trauma theory. The former refers only to the hard facts of past circumstances. Trauma theory on the other hand, puts the emphasis on the different versions of trauma experience. It is a different kind of history as it explores how witnessing a trauma actually feels, what it does to a person, how it changes the course of his life. Hence, it is trauma theory that will be better suited and applicable here.

Regarding the narrative modes of trauma literature, Whitehead makes an interesting point. She argues that “if trauma is at all susceptible to narrative formulation, then it requires a literary form which departs from conventional linear sequence.” (Luckhurst, 88.) And in fact, we will see that in both *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and *Netherland*, the style of writing clearly moves away from conventional rules. Particularly the former crosses literary boundaries in that the novel conveys precisely what the protagonists hold inside their minds; the novel hints at becoming a scrapbook of their lives. The plots of trauma narratives can belatedly and magically reconfigure entire life stories. Correctly, another researcher in the field, Laurie Vickroy, states that “trauma narratives go beyond presenting trauma as a subject matter or in characterization; they also incorporate the rhythms, processes and uncertainties of trauma within the consciousness and structures of these works”. (Luckhurst, 88.)

In *Precarious Life* we read that at the time of the terrorist attack, being 2001, president Bush proposed a binary reasoning in which, obviously, two positions are possible: “either you’re with us or you’re with the terrorists”. This radical outspokenness of the former president of the United States of America included that to oppose the war meant that one somehow felt sympathy with terrorism, or that one saw the terror as justified. (Butler, 2.) “But”, says Butler, “it is surely time to allow an intellectual field to redevelop in which more responsible distinctions might be heard, histories might be recounted in their complexity, and accountability might be understood apart from the claims of vengeance.” Here, an interesting point is made, one that serves the characters of both Foer’s and O’Neills’ novels well, as they take on definite ideas on the current happenings of their post 9/11 lives and bringing forth strong, but different, ideas about how one should live through traumatic events.

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27 FOER J.S. (interview Gabe Hudson).
Trauma, configured in literature, has a purpose in its own; trying to work through trauma issues is as hard as trying to render the truths of trauma in literature – in written word, on a page. Both goals seem impossible because they are so inserted within the self that they are extremely difficult to put into words, or to make understandable to the people living next to you. Caruth, in discussing Freud, offers an interesting argument here. If Freud turns to literature to describe traumatic experience, she says, it is because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing. And it is, indeed at the specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the language of literature and the psychoanalytical theory of traumatic experience precisely meet. “Literature in its very excess”, she continues, “can somehow get at trauma in a manner unavailable to theory – that it writes (speaks or even cries) trauma in excess of theory, not clear however precisely how it does so.”

In his concluding chapter to Writing History, Writing Trauma – namely, Writing (about) Trauma – Dominick LaCapra comments that trauma in fact presents a cross-disciplinary problem, for it falls within the compass of no single genre or discipline. And, how one should approach trauma in a given genre or discipline is an essentially contested question. (LaCapra, 204-205.) This statement confirms the difficulty of putting trauma into words and more specifically, of making boundaries to frame trauma into a continuum – something we have learnt is almost impossible. Just because trauma refers to all aspects of life, it is hard to limit it to one simple genre.

Positive aspects of conveying trauma through literature include a more expansive space for exploring modalities of responding to trauma (LaCapra, 185.) and a grander accessibility and empathy towards the understanding and acceptance of past events.

In Writing History, Writing Trauma, LaCapra distinguishes the act of writing trauma and writing about trauma. There is no such thing, we read, as writing trauma itself just because trauma – at times related to particular events – cannot be localized in terms of a discrete, dated experience. Trauma also indicates a shattering break or caesura in experience which has belated effects. Writing about trauma on the other hand, is an aspect of historiography and related to the reconstructing of the past as objectively as possible. (LaCapra, 186.) Moreover, trauma has a lot to do with the re-experience of the traumatic situation; it is relived constantly in the memory of the victim and incessantly present in their daily routine.

In accordance to the link between narrative and trauma, Don DeLillo suggests that there exists a *curious knot* that binds the novelist to the terrorist. “If terrorism can and must be read as a narrative”, he says, “then it is clear from 9/11 in New York that this narrative is predominantly *visual.*” Terrorism seeks to counter a society of spectacle with spectacle. Slavoy Žižek and Douglas Kellner have respectively referred to 9/11 as a *theatrical spectacle* and a *megaspectacle.*

The *visuality* in the both to be discussed novels *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (J.S. Foer) and *Netherland* (J. O’Neill) differs. Whilst the former can be termed a visual narrative, the latter cannot meet the same ends. A visual narrative in *Netherland*, rendered through the eyes of its protagonist Hans, is only really acquired in two cases. That is, when he reflects on his childhood in Holland or when he flees away from his life in New York to think about his family, distanced from him by approximately 6,000 kilometres.

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2. Dealing with trauma in Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close and Netherland

Both novels discussed in this thesis are equally sentimental. The narratives are a depiction of the minds of respectively Oskar Schell and Hans van den Broek, which implies a direct insight into these people’s lives. What makes these books interesting is their main character’s quest to see; they are always trying to gain a perspective on what is happening to them, the world and the people around them. In Foer, we read from a children’s point of view, an imagist reality that takes us further than the everyday, plain reality. The three main voices present – Oskar, Oskar’s grandmother and grandfather – relate to us their identity and consequentially show us pieces of their wounded, traumatized spirit. Oskar’s grandparents have survived the Dresden bombings of 1945 and have retreated to silence and disinvolvement for the larger part of their lives. Their contributions are relevant to the novel, however for this thesis we shall mainly follow the voice of Oskar, a native nine-year-old New Yorker with German roots.

For O’Neill’s Netherland however, we need to follow an entire different course. Told from the perspective of a man who has already left America, we are confronted with an interracial and international point of view. Hans is a native Dutchman who moved to London, New York and back. Memories of his childhood playing cricket and skating on the local ice pond function as a desire that cannot be regained.

Jonathan Safran Foer’s Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close lets us listen to the voice of Oskar Schell, a nine-year-old with a strong personality and a feel for sagesse. When his friend and father dies in the tragedy of 9/11, he starts thinking about his raisons d’être. The boy constantly lives with all sorts of questions concerning life and death and tries to gain as much knowledge of the world as he can. So, he reflects upon the fact that it is so weird how the number of dead people is increasing even though the earth stays the same size. (Foer, 3.) Oskar is the only one who, on the worst day - as he calls it – heard his father’s messages on the answering machine. Oskar was home from school just in time to hear Thomas Schell Jr.’s voice for the last time: reaching out, desperate to hear somebody on the other end of the telephone. Oskar however did not pick up, and it is here where his sense of guilt and trauma begins.

I looked at my watch. It was 10:22:21. I thought about running away and never talking to anyone again. I thought about hiding under my bed. I thought about rushing downtown to see if I could somehow rescue him myself. And then the phone rang. I looked at my watch. It was 10:22:27. I knew I could never let mom
One day, almost a year after his father’s death, little Oskar finds an envelope in his father’s closet labeled *Black* with a mystery key inside. This key functions as the novel’s leitmotif as it represents the importance of Oskar’s understanding of 9/11 – the cause for his vanished father. Oskar soon embarks upon the pursuit for the matching lock to the key he discovered but soon realizes that there are probably about 162 million locks in New York City, “which is a crevasse-load of locks.” (Foer, 41.) Every weekend, over a period of eight months, the hopeful boy sets out on his quest to visit every person called Black in the City until he eventually finds some information about his dad and the key. That this search demands a lot of the boy’s time and carries significant consequences, is clear from the following fragment.

Every time I left our apartment to go searching for the lock, I became a little lighter, because I was getting closer to Dad. But I also became a little heavier, because I was getting farther from Mom. (Foer, 52.)

When looking at the typical stress reactions linked to children as trauma victims – sleeping disturbances, mood swings, redirecting blame on yourself, fear, anger and confusion – we can surely derive some of these to the personality and the attitude of Oskar Schell. The fact that he has trouble sleeping is noticeable on uncountable times. “I woke up once in the middle of the night, and Buckminster’s paws were on my eyelids. He must have been feeling my nightmares.” (Foer, 74.) Fear and panic are accounted for when he has to walk over suspension bridges, or go into elevators. Tall buildings scare him as well. Therefore, it is not surprising that taking the underground subway does not make him feel comfortable. On yet another Saturday, looking for the lock and visiting several *Black homes* with his neighbor, Mr Black, we read: “Almost the whole ride to the Bronx was underground, which made me incredibly panicky, but once we got to the poor parts, it went aboveground, which I preferred.” (Foer, 194.) Eventhough Oskar can easily be labeled as being very mature for his age, anger and aggression in one’s daily behavior are simply part of dealing with the aftermath of trauma. The fragment below - in which we find a provocative conversation between Oskar and his therapist, Dr. Field - exemplifies this.

“Can I ask you once last question?” “Was that it?” “Do you think any good can come from your father’s death?” “Do I think any good can come from my father’s death?” “Yes. Do you think any good can come from your father’s death?” I kicked over my chair, threw his papers across the floor, and hollered, “No! Of course not, you fucking asshole!” That was what I wanted to do. Instead I just shrugged my shoulders. (Foer, 203.)
*Netherland*, is Joseph O’Neill’s attempt to make a conscientious - or careful - statement about the world. This novel hinges on one voice which strengthens this sense of carefulness. Hans van den Broek is somebody who has faded into nothingness; he is a lost man with no vast grip on his life. Moving to New York with his wife Rachel should have been a temporary, adventure-type of undertaking. “That was, in fact, the plan, conceived by my wife: to drop in on New York city for a year or three and then come back.” (O’Neill, 1.) In fact, Hans, Rachel and their son Jake live a happy and fulfilling life together in The States. But when 9/11 struck, everything changed. Hans and Rachel became even more cautious and insensitive towards one another. It is as if the terrorist attacks had made their relationship mute. Rachel senses potential danger for her and her child, decides to move back to London leaving Hans desperately alone in the big sloping city. Hans in turn uses his passion for cricket to be able to maintain a grip on himself and on the City. When meeting Chuck Ramkissoon, a Trinidadian cricket entrepreneur with hopes of building a cricket stadium in the New York City District, a voyage towards getting to know himself again has started. The striking thing here, is that Hans’ trauma is not a direct effect of the Twin Towers crashing to the ground. Rather, it is a consequence of his wife Rachel’s reaction to this shocking event. His pain and suffering is caused by a silence in their relationship, which is built on a silence caused by trauma. Hence, Hans’ traumatic experience is an indirect one.

Some of the typical stress reactions associated with trauma in adults – intrusive re-experiencing, avoidance and arousal – can also be observed in Hans’ character. However, as his trauma experience is more of an indirect one, these reactions are harder to find in his behaviour. Hans’ wife Rachel suffered when she was still living in New York; she could not deal with the pressure of feeling scared and unsafe at all times. This situation of fear and trauma on Rachel’s part caused for blazing discussions, arguments and ultimately led to a muteness in their relationship. So most likely, it is because of a breakdown in Rachel’s mind that the couple suffered a relationship crisis. And her departure with their son Jake, finally causes a traumatic reality in Hans himself. Hence, his loss is his trauma.

When Hans’ wife has set her mind on leaving him and moving back to London, there is a strong sense of confusion noticeable on Hans’ part. “Much of the subsequent days and nights was spent in an agony of emotions and options and discussions. It is truly a terrible thing when questions of love and family and home are no longer answerable.” (O’Neill, 28.) *Confusion*, can actually be observed several times in the attitude of Hans and may therefore be considered as one of the stress reactions to his traumatic loss. New York and 9/11 had in fact made his wife and son disappear. The following text fragment shows Hans as a man at a crossroads; he knows that he
has become a lost man.

[…] but I did of course ask myself what had happened, how it could be that I should find myself living in a hotel in a country where there was no one to remember me, attacking a woman who’d boomeranged in from a time I could not claim as my own. I recall, also, trying to shrug off a sharp new sadness that I’m only now able to identify without tentativeness, which is to say, the sadness produced when the mirroring world no longer offers a surface in which one may recognise one’s true likeness. (O’Neill, 151.)

Through Hans’ monthly visits to London and his surreptitious travels on Google’s satellite function - to track his family’s house, and more specifically, his son’s dormer - he undergoes something almost like an intrusive re-experience of the traumatic event. These visits function as flashbacks of the memory he has of his old life with Rachel and Jake. Also, during these brief stays in London, Hans tries to take as many photographs of his son as possible which refers to a recollection of traumatic loss through imagery. However, this flashback is continuously breached by the cool attitude between Rachel and Hans; things have not yet turned to normal. Avoidance can be detected in the numbing behavior of Hans. Cricket, is his way of avoiding the present, and this sport just makes him feel uplifted and nostalgic.
2.1 Speech [terror]

*I didn’t want to hear about death. It was all anyone talked about, even when no one was actually talking about it.* - Oskar Schell (Foer, 295.)

*There is glass between us. We cannot speak.* – Heinemann

One of the most common and recurring stress reactions of trauma is the incapacity to utter feelings and thoughts. Victims of trauma often crawl back into a shell of secureness and do not speak about the experienced event. However, it is not because people avoid mentioning their worries and preoccupations towards others, that they are not constantly thinking about the event in particular. The fear for speech, i.e. speech terror, is highly present in both the character of Oskar in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and of Hans in *Netherland.*
2.1.1 Oskar

To connect with himself and with his feelings of sorrow and nostalgia towards his Dad, Oskar often flees into uninterrupted sessions of thoughts. His reasonings are both comical and original.

In bed that night I invented a special drain that would be underneath every pillow in New York, and would connect to the reservoir. Whenever people cried themselves to sleep, the tears would all go to the same place, and in the morning the weatherman could report if the water level of the Reservoir of Tears had gone up or down, and you could know if New York was in heavy boots. (Foer, 38.)

Oskar thinks about crisis and tears, but never really lets himself slip into that kind of emotions. Instead, he finds concrete ways to deal with the grief of his dead father; he goes to find answers in life. For example, he writes several letters to worldly, intelligent people such as Kofi Annan, Jacques Chirac, and to Stephen Hawking - asking to please be their protégé or to ask him what will happen if he never stops inventing. We know that Oskar does not communicate his traumatic feelings to his mother - at least not in the beginning - but instead goes to find other people to connect with. These men and women he meets are linked to his father in an absurd - but to him - significant way. Furthermore, they share the same name; the one that Oskar found inscribed on his father’s hidden envelope and that is now etched into his mind, namely Black. You can almost say that Oskar’s speech terror brings forth a quest to relocate his father forever in his heart. When he goes searching for the lock, he becomes a little lighter because he is getting closer to Dad. But he also becomes a little heavier, as he is getting farther from Mom. (Foer, 52.) After secretly listening to his father’s voice on the previously hidden answering machine at night, Oskar is again at a loss for words. Not wanting to let his emotions get the best of him, he redirects his thoughts and finds a way out. “I stared at the fake stars forever. I invented. I gave myself a bruise. I invented.” (Foer, 69.)

Fantasy is a big part of Oskar’s life. He has a wild imaginative ability. Moreover, the ideas and perceptions of this whimsical little nine-year-old are either hilarious or inventive. His traumatic experience might even have strengthened his fantastical mind whether it records positive or negative information. On the way to his father’s funeral, Oskar, his Mom and his grandmother are sharing a limousine. While both women are grieving, Oskar is trying to crack up Gerald, the driver. Grandmother however sees right through him. “You made jokes with the driver, but I could see that inside you were suffering. Making him laugh was how you suffered […] You were a wounded animal.” (Foer, 232.) The fragment below testifies of the imaginative creativity of
Oskar’s fleeing mind.

And then I thought of something, so I said it. “Actually, if limousines were extremely long, they wouldn’t need drivers. You could just get in the back seat, walk through the limousine, and then get out of the front seat, which would be where you wanted to go. […] “Now that I’m thinking about it,” I told Gerald, “they could make an incredibly long limousine that had its back seat at your mom’s VJ and its front seat at your mausoleum, and it would be as long as your life.” Gerald said, “Yeah, but if everyone lived liked that, no one would ever meet anyone, right?” I said, “So?” (Foer, 5.)

Oskar’s frustrations all collide inside his mind and enter his imagination. A cruel example of this we find in the following extract when the little boy is participating in a school play of Hamlet. He is playing the part of Yorick’s skull and mixes up the fixed characters of the play in his imagination. Oskar does not want to impersonate a dead skull, gets mad at his fellow classmate Jimmy Snyder but ultimately does not lose his temper in front of the audience. He does however, feel alone, incomprehensive, and mad at the world.

And nothing else makes any sense. DAD doesn’t make sense. MOM doesn’t make sense. The audience doesn’t make sense. The folding chairs and fog-machine fog don’t make sense. Shakespeare doesn’t make sense. The stars that I know are on the other side of the gym ceiling don’t make sense. The only thing that makes any sense right then is my smashing JIMMY SNYDER’s face. His blood. […] I keep smashing the skull against his skull, which is also RON’s skull (for letting MOM get on with life) and MOM’s skull (for getting on with life) and DAD’s skull (for dying) and GRANDMA’s skull (for embarrassing me so much) and DR. FEIN’s skull (for asking if any good could come out of DAD’s death) and the skulls of everyone else I know. (Foer, 146)

Oskar’s truth and imagination run wild and run together. He is somebody who wants to learn about his trauma and dig deeper into the questions of this world he lives in, but he is also somebody who wants to counter these truths with a vast sense of imagination. At a certain point however, fantasizing seems all too confusing and he would like it if he could, once and a while, put a stop to his brain. In the following extract, we see this fusion of truth and fantasy well.

“I want to stop inventing. If I could know how he died, exactly how he died, I wouldn’t have to invent him dying inside an elevator that was stuck between floors, which happened to some people, and I wouldn’t have to imagine him trying to crawl down the outside of the building, which I saw a video of one person doing on a Polish site, or trying to use a tablecloth as a parachute, like some of the people who were in Windows on the World actually did. There were so many different ways to die, and I just need to know which was his.” […] All I wanted was to fall asleep that night, but all I could do was invent. What about
frozen planes, which could be safe from heat-seeking missiles? What about guns with sensors in the handles that could detect if you were angry, and if you were, they wouldn’t fire, even if you were a police officer? What about skyscrapers made with moving parts, so they could rearrange themselves when they had to, and even open holes in their middles for planes to fly through? And then a thought came into my brain that wasn’t like the other thoughts. It was closer to me, and louder. I didn’t know where it came from, or what it meant, or if I loved it or hated it. It opened up like a fist, or a flower. What about digging up Dad’s empty coffin? (Foer, 257-259.)

The one person in Oskar’s immediate vicinity who does have a grip on him, is his grandmother. She is at a walkie-talkie distance away and is used to be at Oskar’s beck and call. However, there is one secret Oskar cannot manage to speak out, even to her. He was physically and mentally unable to pick up the phone when he heard his father call the apartment for the very last time. Oskar was there, standing in the middle of the room, motion- and speechless. This secret he holds with him, inside his heart, forms the basis of all his fears. And extraordinarily, when in the end Oskar finally has gathered the courage to cough up parts of this hidden truth, he does so firstly to somebody of whom he thinks it is a complete stranger, i.e. his grandfather who has only recently – after some fifty years – returned to his wife.


That secret was a whole in the middle of me that every happy thing fell into. (Foer, 71.)

Whenever Oskar does talk about 9/11, he refers to it as the worst day. He will not utter the exact date, as he considers it as a day to wear heavy boots; a lost day. The boy even gives himself bruises when he thinks he has done something unworthy, disrespectful or wrong. He hurts himself in order to be punished for not being able to pick up the phone, and for everything bad that arises from that frozen moment. In his feelings book Stuff That Happened to Me, he keeps track of his feelings and promptings. Pictures of people falling from the Twin Towers are glued in, observations about his life and his father are scribbled down and different phases of sentiment are noted and crossed out again. “I pulled my feelings book from under my pillow, flipped to the current page, and downgraded from DESPERATE to MEDIOCRE.” (Foer, 170.)
Oskar cannot stand the fact that his mother seems to go on with life like nothing happened. It annoys him that she laughs, with her new friend Ron, and never cries. They end up talking about Dad for a while and in the end, Oskar gets frustrated with her answers and says he would have chosen her instead of Dad to be gone. We see his sentiment – as indicated in the book - move from MEDIocre to OPTIMISTIC, BUT REALISTIC, from OPTIMISTIC, BUT REALISTIC to EXTREMELY DEPRESSED and from EXTREMELY DEPRESSED to INCREDIBLY ALONE.
2.1.2 Hans

Hans is at a loss for words when it comes to family issues. Eventhough his wife Rachel has made the decision to return to England with their son, he is not prepared to fight for her, to put up a struggle. He has a static personality and it does not get him further in life. It is almost as if he does not respond to life.

[...] Rachel said, ‘I’ve made up my mind. I’m taking Jake to London. I’m going to talk to Alan Watson tomorrow about a leave of absence.’ Our backs were turned to each other. I didn’t move. I said nothing. ‘I can’t see any other way,’ Rachel said. ‘It’s simply not fair to our little boy.’ Again, I didn’t speak. [...] She said, ‘It might even do us some good.’ There was another silence. I felt, above all, tired. (O’Neill, 26-27.)

Tiredness is a consequence of their traumatic relationship. As Hans seems to be a person still living in the past - reliving his childhood memories almost every day - he carries his burdens with him to his present life. The man probably does not have a healthy knowledge of what love really is, or what it entails. This has a lot to do with the bond between him and his mother, for he says that his mother, “though watchful, and though a teacher, was not one for offering express guidance, and indeed it may be thanks to her that I naturally associate love with a house fallen into silence.” (O’Neill, 118.) However, the love and emotion that Hans has for his wife is a silent yet unconditional one. And it becomes clear in time that his wife shares a same kind of love for him. “She had stayed married to me, she stated in the presence of Juliet Schwarz, because she felt a responsibility to see me through life, and the responsibility felt like a happy one.[...] I couldn’t speak. My wife’s words had overwhelmed me. She had put into words - indeed into reality - exactly how I felt.” (O’Neill, 304.) Hans van den Broek is someone who does not easily share his thoughts to someone and therefore loses his intimate touch with his wife; their communication has come to an end. They have already abandoned each other and time will be needed to mend their broken bond. “The steamboat of marriage must be fed incessantly with the coals of communication.” (O’Neill, 183.) The two extracts below indicate this problem.

One by one, for what must have been several minutes, her words came bravely puffing out into the hotel room, conveying the history and the truth of our marriage. [...] Her speech arrived at its terminus: we had lost the ability to speak to each other. The attack on New York had removed any doubt about this. (O’Neill, 35.)

Jake got out his tricycle and ran to a swing. I lifted him into the seat and set him in motion. ‘Higher,’ he
joyfully urged me. Rachel stood beside me, hands in pockets. ‘Higher,’ Jake repeated every time he swung up to my hand, and for a while his was the only voice among us. His happiness on the swing was about the relief of communication as much as anything. (O’Neill, 51.)

After Hans’ wife and son have returned to Europe, he flees from any kind of human contact. This is a very different attitude than Oskar’s in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* who literally goes searching for interaction with people. “On my own, it was as if I were hospitalised at the Chelsea Hotel. I stayed in bed for almost a week […] When I did begin to leave my room - as I had to, in order to work - I used the service elevator, a metal-clad box in which I was unlikely to meet anyone other than a muttering Panamanian maid […]” (O’Neill, 39.)

In Hans’ case we do not exactly witness the same kind of fantasy and energy as we do in Oskar - naturally, as he is a grown man. Nevertheless, Hans daydreams about the possible outcomes of his life. He is quite realistic and sees the world with an easy eye. The extract below clarifies this.

[...] every second weekend, when I travelled to London to be with my wife and son, I hoped that flying high into the atmosphere […] might also lift me above my personal haze. That is, I would conduct a retrospective of our affable intercontinental dealings and assemble the hope and theory that the foundation of my family might after all be secure and our old unity still within reach. But each time Rachel materialised at her parents’ door she wore a preemptive expression of weariness, and I understood that the haze had travelled all the way to this house in west London. (O’Neill, 48-49.)

A crucial moment in the novel occurs when Hans uses Google Earth to follow and watch his son from his PC in NY to a bedroom window in London. This demonstrates his inner closeness with his firstborn, Jake, and the urge he feels to regain the intimacy with his wife Rachel. He does not wish for solitude, and hopes for a cherishing family future.

There was no movement in my marriage, either; but, flying on Google’s satellite function, night after night I surreptitiously travelled to England. […] My son’s dormer was visible, and the blue inflated pool and the red BMW; but there was no way to see more, or deeper. I was stuck. (O’Neill, 162-163.)

The traumatic feelings in Hans direct him towards a feeling of extreme solitude. “I recall, also, trying to shrug off a sharp new sadness that I’m only now able to identify without tentativeness, which is to say, the sadness produced when the mirroring world no longer offers a surface in which one may recognise one’s true likeness.” (O’Neill, 151.) Even the idea that one’s feelings could give shape to one’s life had become an odd one to him (O’Neill, 164.) The one who is
going to try and help get Hans over his worried life, is Chuck Ramkissoon. Hans, a man who finds solace in the spiel of Jehovah’s witnesses, is noticeably lost. And it is because of Chuck that his daily life in New York becomes bearable. When alone in New York, Hans cannot figure out what it is he needs to do to move forward in life and to make the best of it. When Rachel talks to him and tells her husband that he should reimagine his life, he does not understand what she is talking about. “She said something important about the need to reimagine our lives. (What this meant, I had no idea. How do you reimagine your life?)” (O’Neill 251.) In the end however, when Hans finally reaches a turning point in his life and dares to speak out for once what he really wants and desires - which is his family and home in England - he also discovers the true and cunning nature of Mr Ramkissoon. With that, he leaves the Big Apple and heads home.
2.1.3 Melancholy and Mourning

Trauma has a lot to do with melancholy (or acting out) and mourning (or working through). The former mode of dealing with trauma implies a complete repression of all trauma-related memory and can for the bigger part be linked to the character of Hans. The latter mode entails an endeavor to remember the traumatic event and fit it into a coherent whole. Naturally, Oskar’s life in the aftermath of 9/11 is better suited to this concept.

Deduced from Tammy Clewell’s analysis of Freud’s psychoanalysis of loss, we can state that prolonging the existence of the lost object implies *Trauerarbeit* (Clewell, 2.), i.e. melancholia. Due to these studies (and numerous other studies on melancholy and mourning), melancholia may be designated as a more negative mode of traumatic memory recollection than mourning.

Oskar, living in a post-traumatic present, is fascinated by this quest to find the right Mr or Mrs Black, and to discover what the secret of the key will bring forth. He hung the key round his neck, guards over it constantly. He will not let go of this mission, because he feels he owes it to his father. When he was still alive, Thomas Schell made his son go on Reconnaissance Expeditions around the city to relocate things in life, to become wiser. This way, he tried to teach his boy grand lessons of life, or he designed the Expeditions so he would have to talk to people and communicate.

Sometimes the Reconnaissance Expeditions were extremely simple, like when he told me to bring back something from every decade in the twentieth century - I was clever and brought back a rock - and sometimes they were incredibly complicated and would go on for a couple of weeks. For the last one we ever did, which never finished, he gave me a map of Central Park. I said, “And?” And he said, “And what?” I said, “What are the clues?” He said, “who said there had to be clues?” “There are always clues.” “That doesn’t, in itself, suggest anything.” “Not a single clue?” He said, “Unless no clue is a clue.” “Is no clues a clue?” He shrugged his shoulders, like he had no idea what I was talking about. I loved that. (Foer, 8.)

We learn that Oskar and his father were really close, and that Oskar suffers from his loss. It is exactly this loss that drives him to be energetic and obsessive to solve the mystery of the key his Dad had hidden. He makes this into a final Reconnaissance tour, adding the message that until he found the lock, he didn’t love Dad enough. (Foer, 251.) In retrospect, we can conclude that Oskar is more of a mourner, because he undertakes action and chooses to work through his trauma issues. He does however, experiences moments of *melancholic weakness* in that he glorifies his time spent with his Dad, which is only natural. We recognize this sentiment in Oskar’s voice. “I
loved having a dad who was smarter than the New York Times, and I loved how my cheek could feel the hairs on his chest through his T-shirt, and how he always smelled like shaving, even at the end of the day. Being with him made my brain quiet. I didn’t have to invent a thing.” (Foer, 12.) Oskar is also reluctant to find out how exactly his father died; he needs to know and fantasizes about it. This nine-year-old moves, thinks and breathes like his father and believing that Dad is with him along the way gives great support. “Melancholic fantasies (for example, indulging in the belief that the lost loved ones watch over those who are left behind) are a necessary and welcome relief from the crushing reality that those loved ones are gone.” We may not forget that Oskar has a bigger burden to bear than Hans. Oskar’s trauma, in that he loses his father, is far more radical than Hans’ loss. Therefore it is fascinating how the little boy is far sooner capable of working through his issues than a grown man.

Hans we may call the melancholic type; he shuns attention and disappears in a life of memories, cricket and devours in superficial contacts. Hans feels like a little man caught by the big world. He also literally expresses this feeling when saying that when he was little he felt he “was just a boy on a boat in the universe”. This sentiment has not faded away during his adult years. The melancholic in Hans can also be found in the fact that he is an émigré. The practice of cricket is essential to the novel in that it stands for the little man and the outsider. In the US, cricket is not considered a national sport and it is looked down upon. The fields they need to play on are below cricket standards; the conditions of the grass are not ideal and are located on the outskirts of the city. In the voice of Chuck Ramkissoon, fanatic cricket enthusiast, we read the following convincing statement.

So it is wrong to see cricket in America as most people see it i.e. an immigrant sport. It is a bona fide American pastime and should be regarded as such. All those who have attempted to ‘introduce’ cricket to the American public have failed to understand this. Cricket is already in the American DNA. With proper promotion, marketing, government support etc awareness of the game could easily be reawakened. American kids could once again play their country’s oldest team sport! (O’Neill, 134.)

Cricket is to New York, what Hans the Dutchman is to New York: a boy on a boat in the universe. He does not really feel at home in America; his cricket friends are all Indians and other émigrés and even his temporary friend Chuck Ramkissoon is of Caribbean origin. Soon, Hans

discovers that there is an *underground world* of cricket in New York. Certain restaurants he visits air cricket matches. Hans is stunned and decides to get lost in this sport. He feels home in this - in the meantime recollecting images in his mind about his childhood on the cricket field in Den Haag. Whenever this man *talks* about his past in Holland, we read passages of the most striking poetic and dreamy kind.

As a teenager I often bicycled into the centre of The Hague, a half hour’s effort of pedalling made both more difficult and more pleasant by a girlfriend who, in accordance with local romantic tradition, sat leggily side-saddle on the rear seat and accepted this modest transportation with a stalwartness that has, I’m sure, stood her in good stead in later life. […] Later, cycling home past horse chestnut trees and dark-windowed villas, we had the city practically to ourselves: every night a scarcely believable desertedness came over The Hague, as if the night buses, roaring and blazing through the empty streets like ogres, had chased the populace indoors. Those bicycle journeys were always tough going, especially after dark, when the dynamo’s friction on the front tyre - source of a white light that spurted, faded, spurted, faded - slowed you down. (O’Neill, 110-111.)

From this fragment it is clear that Hans - and by extension also Joseph O’Neill - writes with such nostalgia about his childhood in Den Haag. We also see that Hans still regularly grasps at Dutch expressions (“I and a teammate or two would embark on a rondje.”)\(^{31}\) and conversations (such as “Dag, mevrouw van den Broek. Alles goed?” “Ja, dank je, Willem.”)\(^{32}\). At one point he even cites a Dutch nursery rhyme:

Trip a trop a troontjes  
De varkens in de boontjes,  
De koetjes in de claver,  
De paarden in de haver,  
De eendjes in de water-plas,  
De kalf in de lange gras;  
So groot mijn kleine ---- was! (O’Neill, 80.)

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\(^{31}\) O’Neill. 56.  
\(^{32}\) Ibid.
Hans feels alone, because there is no country he can really call home. He has lived in different cultures and by extension, lived different lives. This makes him an ambivalent - but altogether lost - man. He almost suffers from an identity crisis. Wanting to mend things with his wife, he first needs to realize that he needs to mend the memories of his past; work through them. Only then will he be able to live a fulfilling life.

An important perspective on melancholy and mourning is rendered amongst others by Freud who says that mourning and melancholia entail similar symptoms, including profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, [and] inhibition of all activity. He defines mourning as follows: “Whether in response to literal death or symbolic loss, mourning names an experience of grief and a process of working through during which the mourner relinquishes emotional ties to the lost object.” He also maintains that the mourner severs attachments primarily through a labor of memory. (Clewell, 2.)

Trauma must be given a place within one’s recollection in order to heal. In other words, traumatic memory must be turned into narrative memory. As memory takes place in both melancholy and mourning, it can be claimed that the healing process from trauma issues is possible through the two mentioned modes of dealing with trauma. However, memory in melancholy will appear as more obsessive and negative towards healing than in mourning, which is a stronger storage for trauma related memories. Mourning, as a mode of dealing with trauma, is described in “Mourning beyond Melancholia: Freud’s psychoanalysis of loss” as a way of hyperremembering:

The work of mourning, as Freud describes it here, entails a kind of hyperremembering, a process of obsessive recollection during which the survivor resuscitates the existence of the lost other in the space of the psyche, replacing an actual absence with an imaginary presence. This magical restoration of the lost object enables the mourner to assess the value of the relationship and comprehend what he or she has lost in losing the other. (Clewell, 2.)

33 CLEWELL, T. “Mourning beyond Melancholia: Freud’s psychoanalysis of loss.”
2.2 Hypervigilance

The end of suffering does not justify the suffering, and so there is no end to suffering. – Grandfather Schell (Foer, 33.)

Hypervigilance is a state of high sensitivity in which a traumatized person may appear to be coping with feelings of fear and anxiety towards the outer world. Moreover, hypervigilance also includes carefulness towards reaching out to people. As Oskar is more an example of the first explanation - which is more of an overall definition - Hans is more reluctant to apply to the second because he shuts his personality off, even to his wife, but does not really suffer from angst as Oskar does. Rachel however, represents this upset woman living in New York, frightened by potential new threats. In contrast, Hans’ character is too soft to even think about feeling endangered in this city.

In *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, Oskar takes chances on his way towards finding the right Mr or Mrs Black. He does however get panicky on numerous occasions. When taking showers and getting into elevators, obviously, he has an extreme difficult time. The stuff that made him panicky, like suspension bridges, germs, Arab people on the subway (even though he’s not racist - Oskar comments bravely), sewers and subway grates, bags without owners, people with moustaches, tall buildings, turbans, resulted in a feeling of complete desolation. Whilst standing on the roof of the Empire State Building, the nine-year old describes inside his head what it would be like if a plane came crashing down on them now. “I imagined the last second, when I would see the pilot’s face, who would be a terrorist. I imagined us looking each other in the eyes when the nose of the plane was one millimeter from the building. I hate you, my eyes would tell him. I hate you, his eyes would tell me.” (Foer, 244.) The situation right here, described on pages 244 through 245, seems as the outline of an apocalypse – a declaration of the end of his world as he knows it. Oskar, standing on the top of the Empire State Building and viewing the city from a binocular up high, describes how he sees the city. “When the metal lids opened, I could see things that were far away incredibly close.” (Foer, 245.) The title words of the novel - extremely and incredibly - render their meaning here and imply the magnitude of 9/11 and the way people became indescribably distant to one another. We all witnessed the attacks, saw the planes flying into the buildings, and victims shut communication off. *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* refers to the novel’s content in that it contains some extreme difficulties of
life. The traumatic issues dealt with in this narrative defy description. Extremely loud, incredibly close; words can not render the harshness of (a traumatic) reality. Furthermore, the thoughts in Oskar’s head, whether they be positive or negative are extremely loud. Incredibly close, might also suggest that he is close to the truth, closer to (the memory of) his father. “It’s that I believe that things are extremely complicated” says Oskar who, just like Hans in O’Neill’s novel, crawls into a bubble and has trouble coming out of that inner world. So says the little boy himself, “I zipped myself all the way into the sleeping bag of myself […]” (Foer, 37.) In Oskar’s head, it often gets too crowded and extremely loud when he argues with his mother, whom he feels more and more alienated to. He beats her down by saying that Dad’s spirit is gone and that she can’t be illogical about life and death questions just because he died. The ax – Oskar – “was winning.” (Foer, 169.) On his quest across New York’s five boroughs to visit every Black registered in the phone book, this little investigator steadily and invariably goes on foot and refuses to choose public transportation – “It’s an obvious target.” (Foer, 194.)

Moreover, Oskar often reflects on death, he is aware of the possibility and the reality of how fast one’s life can be over. How it is weird, he thinks, how the number of dead people is increasing even though the earth stays the same size. Furthermore, he asks his Mom not to bury him, because “As you know”, he says, “I’m extremely brave, but I can’t spend eternity in a small underground place. I just can’t.” When his mother asks him why they should talk about this now, Oskar replies that he could very well die tomorrow, as his father also did not know he was going to die on the worst day.

When Mom tucked me in that night, she could tell that something was on my mind, and asked if I wanted to talk. I did, but not to her, so I said, “No offense, but no.” “Are you sure?” “Très fatigué,” I said, waving my hand. (Foer, 168.)

Here we see that Oskar dismisses his mother to a certain extent; he is too focused on making his father proud - fulfilling one of his so called Reconnaissance search parties. Oskar is careful to whom he exposes himself – which makes him a vigilant person. Strangely, he builds a relationship - though an ephemeral one - with almost every Black living in New York City. He visits these people’s homes on his search for the matching lock to his father’s key. Every Saturday he gets to know more and more Blacks when he sets out to discover the truths about his and his father’s life. Oskar wants people to have known his father and builds up a real conversation with them in order to get a hint at who they are. The most powerful and effective
(and linguistically ironic, affective) bond is the one he establishes with his upstairs neighbor. This man guides the boy across town whilst enjoying the attention himself. Their relationship is reciprocal, meaning that they both benefit from their frequentations; they open up to the world some more. It is significant how Oskar chooses helpers in his life that are one by one a bit dysfunctional and traumatized themselves. The men he meets share a same past and present; these friends carry some sort of trauma, whether it be the wonderful and spectacular Mr Hawking - known cosmologist and scientist suffering from a progressive neurological illness and bound to a wheelchair and a computer voice to communicate - or grandfather Schell who lost the love of his life and turned to utter silence for the bigger part of his life, or his upstairs neighbor who never - before Oskar that is - had left his apartment since the death of his wife. A beautiful scene we find when Oskar’s traumatized self manages to open the present world to the ears of an other human being. This neighbor, Mr Black, carries hearing aids but has switched them off for the past years. Oskar does not comprehend why the man would rather live in silence and starts asking him questions about not wanting to hear things and suggests if he should turn them back on for him.

“Do it slowly!” he said, almost like he was begging me. “It’s been a long, long time!” I went back around to his front so he could see my lips, and I promised him I would be as gentle as I could. Then I went back behind him and turned the dials extremely slowly, a few millimeters at a time. […] We looked at each other. Then, out of nowhere, a flock of birds flew by the window, extremely fast and incredibly close. […] Mr Black grabbed at his ears and made a bunch of weird sounds. He started crying - not out of happiness, I could tell, but not out of sadness, either. “Are you OK?” I whispered. The sound of my voice made him cry more, and he nodded his head yes. I asked him if he wanted me to make some more noise. He nodded yes, which shook more tears down his cheeks. […] He was walking around the room, sticking his ears up to everything that made any noise, including very quiet things, like pipes. I wanted to stay there watching him hear the world, but it was getting late […] (Foer, 167-168.)

From this passage we can clearly derive the aspect of trauma literature. The little boy and the old man have been through a lot in their past – why else would Mr Black shut off the noise of the present world - but enjoy helping each other get out of that inner circle; “I wanted to stay there watching him hear the world.” Later, Oskar asks Mr Black if he would be willing to tag along on his quest for the missing lock. Mr Black accepts. Though, a nuance has to be made in that Oskar does not just choose anybody to accompany him. Rather, he takes his time to inspect who exactly he is dealing with. He is careful whom to trust, because after all, the last person he trusted the most is the one he has lost, i.e. his father.
The boy, so we have learnt, is extremely visual. Everything that crosses his mind, even if only for a fraction of a second, is turned into a clear image. His feelings book is loaded with pictures of dead people, locks, things that remind him of Dad and so on. Consequently, when the notorious neighbor Mr Black takes Oskar to Staten Island, and the Empire State Building, he needs to be incredibly careful and vigilant of the boy’s emotions, because it all might become too much for him.

[...] Mr Black had to convince me to get on the Staten Island Ferry. In addition to the fact that it was an obvious potential target, there had also been a ferry accident pretty recently, and in Stuff That Happened to Me I had pictures of people who had lost their arms and legs. Also, I don’t like bodies of water. Or boats, particularly. (Foer, 240.)

When it comes to hypervigilance in Hans’ case in Netherland, we see an entire different set of situations. Hans does not find new contacts as Oskar does, but instead, they find him. For example, when on a certain night a man dressed as an angel - which may also be seen as a thematic reference to the apocalypse i.e. a revelation of the end of the world - knocks on his hotel room door. Mehmet Taspinar, Turkish and from Istanbul, comes looking for his cat. Together they go looking on the roof but do not find it. Since then, Hans develops a certain appreciation for the strange fellow, and regularly meets up with him at the hotel lobby for drinks. They share a friendly bond but cannot call each other friends. And in fact, Hans does not really make any good friends while in The States. Chuck Ramkissoon, for example, also just happens to be somebody he shares his time with and who makes NY life feasible, no more and no less. “It doesn’t take long to tell Rachel about the good times: how Chuck and I met in remarkable circumstances, how we stayed in touch, how we came to collaborate in heat and grass and fantasy.” (O’Neill, 315.) Hans is diffident, builds a wall around his personality when people around him do include him in their lives. Oskar on the other hand represents the opposite: he is a brave and determined youngster who meets new people by choice and communicates with them.

Hans really has no fear for any future attacks. Obviously, he fears more for his relationship than he does for another 9/11. It is his wife Rachel who needs to convince him of the dangers living in the most renowned city of the world. This topic has often been the starting point of blazing discussions, concerning their marriage and Jake. Rachel is panicky in the same way that Oskar is. “She had fears of her own, in particular the feeling in her bones that Times Square, where the offices of her law firm were situated, would be the site of the next attack.” (O’Neill,
24.) Further on, she says to him during a conversation on the phone that she has definitely decided not to return to the United States, at least not before the end of the Bush administration or any successor administration similarly intent on a military and economic domination of the world. It is only in *Netherland* that we receive such razor sharp comments about the current political doings. The character of Rachel talks about an “ideologically diseased” country, and about a great power that has “drifted into wrongdoing” and that her conscience permitted no other conclusion than to keep her son as far away possible from a country that has no moral or legal authority to wage a war. She argues, with a strong yet justified tone that the bad character of the enemy does not make the war good. (O’Neill, 125-128.) The curious thing here is that Rachel already lives on the other side of the globe and still manages to put more thought into this problematic reality of America than Hans does, who at the time of these conversations is still an inhabitant of the country.

This *hypervigilance* - or watchfulness – has a lot to do with the character of Hans which directs us to the title of the novel, *Netherland*. The core of his closed personality lies in the Netherlands. He is “that boy in a boat in the universe”. Even then, when growing up in Den Haag, cricket was part of his daily life. Europe molded him into the man that he is at the end of the narrative; guarded yet determined.
3. NYC protagonist?

The poetry of New York is old and violent as the world; it is the poetry that has Always been. Its strength, like that of all other existing poetry, lies in the most gelatinous and paradoxical aspects of the delirious flesh of its own reality. - Salvador Dalí

The protagonist role of New York in both Foer and O’Neill, is undeniable. This city renders meaning to their protagonists Oskar and Hans; they identify themselves with the city. This identification with a town, a city, or a country is an automatic feeling we have as humans. The streets we walk on, the parks we sit in, the buildings that draw our horizon are characteristic of a certain mentality; of a particular collective identity formed within our hearts and minds. That is why it is important to indicate the importance of New York to Oskar and Hans, who are inhabitants of this city. First off, it is necessary to indicate that in recent years, the link between nationalism and architecture has become increasingly interesting to the public. Especially in these latest years on terror, cityscapes have become relevant research issues. Identification, as will become clear from 3.1.1 The American psyche – The European psyche, happens differently in every country. Furthermore, identification is also possible through imagery, something that will appear as a strong and necessary step in dealing with traumatic issues.
3.1 New York and architectural identification

Skyscrapers are as much an essential part of America’s identity as the Coke bottle, baseball and the Marlboro cowboy. – Sudjie, 1996

To understand the combination of New York architecture and identity, we need to look at its history and more specifically, at the history of what makes New York’s skyline so distinctive: its skyscrapers. The development of the skyscraper in late nineteenth-century America is generally acknowledged as being not only connected with the growth of nationalism but also the search for a national (American) architectural style and a distinctive American identity. These buildings have become metaphors of Modernity. (King, 11-12.) Therefore, it is logic that when the Twin Towers were hit, the American collective identity took a similar blow.

“For long, nations, cities and religions – and within these larger categories, corporations, individuals and followers – have made use of spectacular architecture, and especially high rise towers, not only as signifiers of economic, political and cultural power, but also of national, corporate and both individual as well as collective identities.” This is what we read in Anthony D. King’s Spaces of Global Cultures. He comments on the importance of architecture in constituting and representing not only the city, but also the nation35, which is ultimately important. King goes on to say that the urban public or private building is already a signifier of some organization or ideology which, when invaded, blown up or burnt down, takes on an additional level of signification (King, 5.), something which is especially relevant in the context of 9/11.

Walter Benjamin makes a striking observation about the capacity of certain dramatic events to act like a flash bulb and imprint particular architectural environments on the photosensitive plate of our minds. “It is as though buildings sink into the recesses of our consciousness”, he says, “as a form of background landscape - almost unnoticeable because of their very familiarity - unless some events happen there that leaves them indelibly imprinted on our minds, such as a tragic accident or a death in the family.”36 It is true that the Twin Towers have been a conspicuous part of the New York skyline and yet, have at the same time remained somewhat anonymous.37 “Today”, says Neil Leach, “the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center have been suddenly

37 Ibid.
etched into the minds of the World. They have taken on a different status, and lost any anonymity that they may once have possessed.” He comments that through their very destruction, they have become recognizable and identifiable objects, symbols of the dangers of terrorism. Interestingly, Leach argues that this destruction has had a radical impact on the American psyche, and that it is against the backdrop of the now absent Twin Towers that a new sense of American national identity - a collective sense of identity - seems to have been forged.38

In *Urban Space and Cityscapes*, Christoph Lindner says that the decades around the turn of the millennium have witnessed a growing number of terrorist explosions in buildings and public spaces in cities throughout the world, including Barcelona, Moscow, Nairobi, New York, Tel Aviv, Washington, DC etcetera. And while this sort of violent politicization of urban space is by no means a development unique to the present age of globalization, it has arguably acquired a new, heightened significance in the aftermath of 9/11. “Never before”, Lindner comments, “have cityscapes and cityspaces occupied such a prominent and symbolically charged place in political, critical, and cultural debate.”39 The relationship between violence and the city has since 2001 become extremely important. The architectural redevelopment of Ground Zero – coined as the “ruins of the future” by Don DeLillo - is a cityspace directed at the same time as a sign of brutality and of a collective identity rebirth.

38 Ibid, 76.
3.1.1 The American psyche - The European psyche

A link between identity and trauma is necessary here because of the protagonists’ background culture. It is obvious that people from one mentality will differ in reaction (to trauma) than others. As Hans’ personality and identity has taken its form by a European mentality, then subtle differences will normally be distinguishable from somebody growing up with an American mentality, like Oskar.

Identity should not be conceived as static, but as dynamic. Consequently, no form of identity is ever complete nor totally stable. Identity must also be conceived as an integrated symbolic structure with time dimensions (past, present, future) because an identity is not created overnight. In this context, it is interesting to look at the social aspects of identity, which originate in different forms of association. Thus, a person’s identity is not only formed by his own character and beliefs, but also by his surroundings; his native identity is built up from every single inhabitant. Therefore we can safely say that an American and a European identity will differ significantly. Oskar and Hans, will differ significantly. Your nation is your home. However, this is what ultimately creates a core problem for Hans as he is not of one nation, but part of three (Holland, The United Kingdom and The United States). When living in America, we might say that he is part of a cosmopolitan - more superficial - identity, which differs from a national one.

In Kai Erikson’s essay “Notes on Trauma and Community” we learn that now and then, the tissues of community can be damaged in much the same way as the tissues of mind and body. “Traumatic wounds inflicted on individuals”, he comments, “can combine to create a mood, an ethos – a group culture, almost – that is different from (and more than) the sum of the private wounds that make it up.” Trauma, that is, has a social dimension. This is extremely important, especially after having analyzed the characters and the lives of both Oskar and Hans. It is as if their individual trauma has become a collective trauma (; by involving so many people in their search for recovery) and vice versa.

When speaking about social identities, and particularly about national identities, these identities are often qualified as imagined (fabricated and fictive), but real. This means that the individual as

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social actor can redefine him/herself. (Jacobs-Maier, 4.) And it is exactly this redefinition or reimagination of the self, that awaits Hans in order to feel complete again.

The outcome of a collective identity is a we. Characteristics of this we-identity go back to the past and share a common future. Moreover, these characteristics are to a large part symbolic, but they are sustained by a multiplicity of daily practices and habits, such as the weather report, national journals etcetera. (Jacobs-Maier, 4.) The following fragment, taken from “European identity: construct, fact and fiction”, explains how we should see ethnicity as a way of defining our national identity.

The constitution of a national identity presupposes a certain kind of ethnification. According to Jenkins (1997) almost all authors agree with such a formulation as long as the ethnicity is not supposed to be a natural one but a fabricated one. It can therefore also be called a fictive ethnicity. (Jacobs-Maier, 5)

Interestingly, Michael Jay Friedman states in “American Identity: Ideas, Not Ethnicity” that since the United States was founded in the 18th century, Americans have defined themselves not by their racial, religious, and ethnic identity but by their common values and belief in individual freedom. Being an American means to uphold values of independence, responsibility and freedom. In reference to this, “American Identities: Searching for the Elusive American Identity” adds the radical comment that perhaps American identity is formed through the combination of foreign cultures and the mixture of European values. This would mean that America has no basic identity of its own, but instead is built upon an already collective identity of other cultures. The article proposes an other interesting point, quoted in the fragment below.

The American identity cannot be described, because it is always changing. It is not based upon what makes Americans different from the rest of the world. The American identity is based upon the understanding that all Americans have to face their problems together. This is why the American identity is stronger in times of need, such as war or depression. The American identity is, on its most fundamental and unchanging level, the understanding that all Americans are equally American.

44 Ibid.
This prefigured American mentality can easily be spotted in Oskar’s demeanor. He faces his problems together with the people he meets. And it does not matter if the Blacks are old, young, beautiful, weird, Hispanic etcetera. Because, these people have their own stories, their own history and to Oskar, they are all the same. His process of visiting the Blacks’ residences functions as a process of healing his trauma issues. In this aspect, the narrative of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* is written perfectly. The storyline synchronizes with his *mourning mission*.

In the words of Paul Valéry we read about what it means to be part of the European tradition and culture:

> I call European those peoples who over the course of their history have let themselves be shaped by three major influences, those symbolized by Rome, Jerusalem, and Athens. From Rome comes the empire, with the organized power of a state, law and political institutions, and citizenship. From Jerusalem, or rather from Christianity, Europeans inherited subjective morality, self examination, and universal justice. Finally, Athens gave Europe the love of knowledge and of rational argumentation, the ideal of harmony, and the idea of humans as the measure of all things. Valéry concluded that whoever claimed this threefold heritage could justly be considered as European.\

Rougement then states that “human beings have managed to examine attentively the world that surrounds them and have made it the object of analysis and scientific knowledge”. (Todorov: 2008.) This examination is in fact applicable to both protagonists; the one and the other tries to see the world, with every surrounding detail included. Todorov continues by saying that tolerance and individual autonomy are European achievements, and that one of the characteristics of European tradition is precisely the use of critical thinking. “All values can be subjected to examination.” (Todorov: 2008.) This is why Hans floats around so long with the *question* of memory and what it, i.e. the collection of his memories, means to him. We see in Hans a true European; somebody who scans things in his mind before acting on them. He is more of a critical thinker than Oskar is.

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http://muse.jhu.edu/search/results?search_id=1144086955&action=reload.
3.1.2 Identification through imagery

In Guerin and Hallas’ *The image and the witness* we read that the compulsion to bear witness to 11 September in and through images has become ever-present in this first decade of the new millennium. The 11 September attacks are a prime example of a traumatic historical event that was and continues to be witnessed through the image in all its many forms. “The repeated return within televisual representation of the event to the video footage of the planes’ initial impact and the collapse of the World Trade Center”, Guerin and Hallas continue, “embodied a form of traumatic repetition-compulsion as the medium struggled to master and make sense of the event.”

The term 9/11 can even be considered as an image itself; a historical caesura implying the notion that the world was no longer the same after 11 September 2001. Marianne Hirsch correctly points out that “a widespread impulse to produce images such as occurred in this case, is a means to bear witness to the event. However, our contemporary understanding of the image holds a paradox: it potentially offers invaluable knowledge of the event and, at the same time, it fails to do justice to the human magnitude of the traumatic event.”

This implies that a photo of a man jumping off a skyscraper, offers us the knowledge that such things actually happened. However, it is not honorable to frame this particular man nor this horrific day and display it in such a magnified and mediatised manner, as occurred with 9/11. The fragment below, in which Brian Jarvis cites Davis, emphasizes the impact of imagery in trauma.

Trauma occurs when something happens that shatters the ego and its defences. An event persists as an image that awakens other images buried in the psyche, images bound to repressed memories that bring with their return an anxiety that threatens psychic dissolution. (Lindner – Jarvis, 55.)

Moreover, Jarvis comments on the repetitive nature of trauma imagery when he says that “the traumatic wounding that left the New York horizon haunted by phantom limbs was replayed in news reports, documentaries, films, video walls at globally broadcast concerts, photographs (cfr. Fig. 1), paintings, graphic novels, street art, and kitsch memorabilia.” Further, Jarvis makes an important and interesting statement. “The imagistic iteration in this cultural fall-out from the collapsing towers – the maelstrom of city images and images of images – might be symptomatic

46 GUERIN, F. HALLAS, R. 2007. the image and the witness, trauma, memory and visual culture. Wallflower Press.
5.
47 Ibid. 6.
of a collective repetition compulsion.” (Lindner-Jarvis, 55.) This *collective repetition compulsion* has become a contemporary truth; we put forth everything we know through some kind of image. This is what we can see Oskar doing as well; inside his mind, but more specifically in his feelings book *Stuff that Happened to Me*. It is striking how he keeps on thinking about a man jumping out of one of the Twin Towers, falling to a certain death (cfr. Fig. 2). Sigmund Freud’s response to this kind of repetitive behavior is characteristic of this little boy. According to Freud, “neurotic repetition is driven by the subject’s desire to become the agent rather than victim of a devastating experience”. Furthermore, according to psychoanalysis, the trauma victim simply repeats an event rather than remembering it as something that happened in the past. (Lindner-Jarvis, 56.) And this brings us back to the *acteur* quality of Oskar; he literally goes looking for answers and for improvement in his life whereas Hans lets almost everything pass him by in slow motion. Character-wise, we are dealing with a chaser *in* the city when talking about Oskar, and with a dreamer *of* the city when it comes to the Dutchman.
3.2 NYC protagonist in Foer and O’Neill

*Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and *Netherland* are both received as 9/11 novels, yet the function and presence of New York City and the damage that has been done to it since 2001 is more significantly present in the former than in the latter, where New York has more of a backdrop function. It is important to look at the impact of the city on everyday people; to look at differences in age and race. For example, there will be variations in experiencing the city if you are a native New Yorker or if you just recently became a local.

We can say that in Foer’s novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, the city is constantly present; it is in the reader’s face so to say. Oskar breathes the city; everything he does in the aftermath of his father’s death is looking for answers in the Big Apple. His Reconnaissance Expeditions - and to extension also the expeditions to find the lock matching to the key he had found - clearly testify this. What is present in this novel is a love-driven dynamism represented by New York.\(^4^8\) Kristiaan Versluys makes an interesting point in his *Out of the Blue* when he says that “the variety of the city itself produces epic momentum and psychic uplift”. As readers, we receive a lot of information about New York; it is as if Oskar guides us through it, showing us the magnitude of the Empire State Building, the mystery of Central Park etcetera. Even though he is missing his father incredibly, this boy manages to attach a quality of enthusiasm to New York; it is his field of discovery.

In O’Neill’s *Netherland* we experience the city in a totally different light – it being the perspective of a man who does not live there any more. Here, as much as in Foer’s novel, New York is protagonist, but in entire different ways. We can almost say that through Oskar, NY has a positive connotational association whilst Hans van den Broek presents us with a negative one. Already on the first page is the city conceived to be fleeting, as Hans announces to his colleague that he and his wife are only intending to “drop in on New York City for a year or three and then come back”. (O’Neill, 1.)

Aside from the positive-negative association Oskar and Hans respectively have with the city, there is also a mental presence-absence noticeable. The observable difference in the novel is that Oskar explores New York City on foot; he discovers the city and is an actual inhabitant living his life. Hans on the other hand can not really be called an actual inhabitant; he lives in the Chelsea

Hotel and mostly crosses the area of New York by car. Hans is just driving through the city, chauffeuring Chuck Ramkissoon around in his 1996 Cadillac, and not really living his life in America. He is a passenger in life - a passive player - whilst Oskar is clearly an acteur.

Hans is a man who appreciates the beauty and the opportunities that this rich city has to offer, but as mentioned before, he remains a passive player. Comments such as “the lighted peak of the Empire State Building loomed ashen and sublime” confirm his admiration. Striking is the manner in which Hans always seems to compare the life in New York to the European life, whether it be about the weather or the condition of the cricket fields etcetera. “My New York confusion”, as Hans calls it, adds up to the dreamlike world he is living in. It seems to the reader as if Hans was only capable of enjoying life in England – and even more so in the Netherlands. When in the end he has finally returned to his family in Europe, he proudly labels London as his matter-of-fact city. (O’Neill, 301.)

“Sometimes to walk in shaded parts of Manhattan”, he says, “is to be inserted into a Magritte: the street is night while the sky is day”. America is his gleaming adopted country, the place where he had been unhappy for the first time in his life. New York abets desire in every rare form, Hans admits, yet he can not find solace without his family there. What is meant by this is that he is in awe for New York, yet the City does not really give him anything good in return. Memories of his past surely contrast with the no-memories of his present. “[…] my thoughts went from the ice on the Hudson, which struck me as a kind of filth, to the pure canal ice of The Hague. […] As I sat half listening to Chuck, what struck me most strongly about these remembered glacial shenanigans […] was their peculiar Dutchness. I was gripped by a rare homesickness. There, by the Hudson, I had what I can only describe as a flashback.” (O’Neill, 98-99.)

It is safe to say that New York to the character of Oskar has the opposite function. Oskar is so attracted to New York and celebrates its diversity – though not only for the fact that this city holds the answers of getting closer to Dad. Oskar also reaches a redemptive value during his search for the lock, which is at the same time also a search for every single Black located across the five boroughs that make up New York. This is what Kristiaan Versluys says about this: “While Oskar crisscrosses the city and visits places he has never been before, there is a redemptive value in that his life touches those of other New Yorkers.” (Versluys, 114.) A further read of Out of the Blue confronts us with an example of the positive role that New York City fills

49 i.e. […] in New York selfhood’s hill always seemed to lie ahead and to promise a glimpse of further, higher peaks […] it involved wistfulness. (O’Neill, 236.)
for Oskar. And from this following fragment we may also deduce the fact that this nine-year-old tends to represent more of a mourner’s type than a melancholic one.

Thus Oskar’s travels over the five boroughs of New York are redemptive. They signify, if not a resacralization of the territory, at least its reoccupation, after it has been usurped by the 9/11 terrorists. In the upbeat spirit of his dead father, Oskar’s exploration of his native ground is an act of reconquest and reaffirmation: firsthand proof that the terrorists have failed to break the city’s stride. (Versluys, 115.)

As mentioned before, Hans van den Broek is a lost man in America. But instead of turning his negativity into positivity, he remains aloof. Because his cricket friends - Hans’ predominating occupation and environment - are all immigrants (Indians, mostly, Caribbean…) he does not really integrate himself in the City. He is wounded, just like New York City is.
Conclusion

In order to compare both 9/11 novels – *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and *Netherland* – some argumentation on trauma related issues and analyses of both protagonists was needed. In reference to the more relevant tenets of trauma - such as speech terror and angst, belatedness and repetitiveness, and the image-based and visual aspect – we can certainly conclude that Hans and Oskar differ significantly as characters.

Friedrich Nietzsche said that, “everything we have words for is dead in our hearts”, i.e. the things we value the most, and the things that are profoundly nested in our hearts and minds, can not find a worthy outlet in speech.50 Extremely loud and incredibly close issues to us, defy description. Both Oskar and Hans have difficulties in uttering their deepest thoughts, fears and feelings. We have seen this in the way that Oskar resorts to fantasy and imagery (cfr. his feelings book *Stuff that Happened to Me*), something Hans is less likely to do. Mr van den Broek, however, finds solace in wishful thinking. Regarding the actual *talking* about their trauma – or in Hans’ case, traumatic loss – we see noticeable similarities. Nor Oskar nor Hans are afraid to communicate with new people. However, they will not uncover their deepest secret or desire, not even to their loved ones. Hans for example, is too feeble to speak up and fight for his wife; he does not even make a strong attempt to make her stay or to join her in London. It is only in the end that they have managed to speak this out, when they sense that every bad feeling inside them seems to be healing.

The concept of repetitiveness has been made clear by showing how Oskar keeps saying that he wants to know how his father died exactly; he keeps on searching for the truth and so, he is confronted with 9/11 – the worst day – every single moment. His feelings book is a good example as well, as it shows us how the little boy keeps everything related to the attacks: his feelings towards life now, newspaper clippings, pictures of other tragic incidents such as the ferry that sunk etcetera. The repetition of trauma in Hans is less obvious; he suffers from an absence in a more paramount way, but does not show that to the public. Hans does not expose himself to the world as Oskar does, which makes him less vulnerable yet tormented; a predominant feeling of sorrow, pain and angst, is what Hans deals with every day when living alone in New York.

A visual narrative, we can conclude, is more obviously present in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* because of the repetitive insertions of pictures, drawings, encounters and thoughts in the book. The writing style is much more experimental in Foer, which naturally gives the novel an

50 (Taken from a slide from Prof. P. Codde’s course on Trauma)
even greater sense of imagery and understanding. However, this visuality is also present in O’Neill, we just need to dig deeper. There is more a sense of hidden and subtle symbolism here. The fact that cricket forms such a dominant role in the novel should lead us directly to the knowledge that Hans is a truly loyal European, someone who misses home in Holland – the title says enough - and can get lost in precious memories of the past. Eventhough these memories are not always good, he cherishes them nonetheless – as he cherishes and understands his mother in the end - and drags us along in his rememberings. As a reader, these flashbacks of his youth are an easy way of getting incorporated in the story.

To what extent the devastation of the City has influenced them, is a question which is only answerable if we know the ending of plot and narrative of both novels. Oskar concludes his final *Reconnaissance Expedition* by finding the right Mr Black, William Black. He learns that the key in fact belongs to William Black’s dead father, and not to his own father, which gives him heavy boots. The two stay and listen to each other’s story; the story of how Mr Black and Mr Schell Jr. briefly met, of how the key accidently was handed to Mr Shell, and how Oskar had been looking passionately for the lock as William had been looking for the key. Because both of them suffered from a comparable loss, and because Oskar has finally reached a true answer to his quest, he dares to tell William Black his deepest secret of not being able to pick up the phone when his Dad – trapped inside the Tower – called out to him “Are you there? Are you there? Are you there?” This is the time when Oskar reaches redemption:

I asked him, “Do you forgive me?”
“Do I forgive you?”
“Yeah.”
“For not being able to pick up?”
“For not being able to tell anyone.”
He said, “I do.”
I took the string off my neck and put it [the key] around his neck.
(Foer, 302.)

In conclusion to the case of Oskar we can say that the damage of 11 September 2001 had filled this nine-year-old with too many questions to bear with. This day has influenced him in a way which made him obsessive about finding truths, about finding the lock. His quest was an obsessive one, but it let him stay a little closer to Dad. All the people he met on his way towards finding the right Mr Black assisted him in becoming brave, and understanding the consequence.
of trauma; he needs to let go. And, judging from this last fragment, he will be capable of doing so.

By the end of *Netherland*, Rachel, Hans and Jake are reunited. He succeeded in winning her back and now they intend to see each other through life. We as readers are witnesses of the fact that he has regained his joy and willpower. As he says himself in the extract below, “Time had healed my wounds”. This fragment takes place when the couple is spending a holiday together with their son in India.

The truth [...] was that Hans van den Broek drinking gin in the Western Ghats was not the same man as the New York Hans van den Broek. On an autumn morning a few months previously, I’d woken up with a whistle at my lips and a sense that I was … fine. The stock advice of the columnists in the women’s magazines had been vindicated: time had healed my wounds. A gloss: time spent in London, my matter-of-fact city. (O’Neill, 301.)

Deduced from this knowledge, we can safely say that Hans has healed immensely from his regained contact with his wife. It is the foresight of moving back to London – and thus of leaving New York, which entailed almost only negative associations – that makes of him a changed man. In fact, it was because he was witness of some of Chuck’s nauseating practices that Hans decided to move back to Europe. He had hit rock bottom, and underwent “a swerve in orientation - as though I’d been affected by the abrupt consensus of movement that redirects flocking birds. I decided to move back to London”. Hans, in the end, is awake. He has moved from feeling dispensable to feeling needed and finally understands what it means to reimagine your life. He stands ready, at a new beginning, as sharp as new pencils standing at attention in a Caran d’Ache box. (O’Neill, 339.) A relevant nuance to the character of Hans van den Broek in relation to trauma is that, throughout the book, the thing that concerns him a lot is the meaning of memory – what we’re supposed to do with specific recollections, and what bearing they have on the life that we then should lead. (O’Neill, *P.S. Ideas, interviews & features ...*, 4.) This proves the questioning nature of this man; it confirms his will to move on, even at times when he does not yet feel ready. Hans has a profoundness in his character, a quality which after reading *Netherland* and reflecting on it, gives him instant likeability.

It is remarkable how Oskar’s positive glow leads him, through fail and error, to his *destiny* and how Hans’ negativity leads him to a point of repulsion and realisation after which he regains the strength to get after what he never ever stopped wanting: his family. They both stopped living in the aftermath of 9/11 and started following *fresh tracks* all over again.
Comparing both novels included seeing New York and trauma in entire different ways. Foer has attempted – and succeeded! – to represent trauma in a sappy way. The eccentric and enlightened attitude Foer gives to his youngest character is inspiring. Oskar Schell will rest in every reader’s mind as this fortunate unfortunate little boy, magically proficient in lighting up smiles to the world, even though he might find himself in heavy boots. NY is bright and exciting, wounded yet surefooted. In contrast, O’Neill attaches to his characters an inserted feeling of being too numb to break out and shout, but offers them the time and opportunity in a realistic manner to make up for their wrongdoings. This is what makes the read so enticing. Both Jonathan Safran Foer and Joseph O’Neill have shown that the plots of trauma narratives can belatedly and magically reconfigure entire life stories.

The issue of collective, i.e. national identity being linked to trauma in a way, has served itself important in this context, as we have seen that Hans and Oskar - as two different people from two different cultures – react to 9/11 and its aftermath in various ways. Todorov argues in “European Identity” that in European tradition, diversity takes precedence over unity. (Todorov: 2008) Precisely here lies the difference; Oskar relates to his own trauma with the help of others. This American boy is on a quest towards finding the lock and Mr Black but he is also on a quest to heal himself from pain, and he does not have to go about it alone; he is united with every single New Yorker. Hans on the other hand, takes up the battle to heal from his traumatic loss as well, but he does this more on his own than by reaching out to other people. He is a European individual.

Trauma can be seen as causing a gap between the real and the perceived. This is true when we define the real as the actual truth of a situation, as what is out there in the open world, and the perceived as a person’s instinct and feeling towards that same situation. Trauma, simplistically said, makes a person live in an illusionary bubble for an amount of time. And a person suffering from a traumatic experience will rely on his instincts to make up his own truth and his own life which is why the real does not equalize the perceived, hence causes a gap. Literature creates the same thing – a same gap – due to its possibility to imagine alternating lives and truths. Literature gives the reader an opportunity to switch between worlds and truths, between the real and the perceived and to reach personal disclosure.
Annex

Fig. 1  Ground Zero (2001-2010)

PHOTOGRAPH BY TED S. WARREN/POOL/AP

I grabbed the flashlight from my backpack and aimed it at the book. […] The whole world was in there. Finally, I found the pictures of the falling body. Was it Dad? Maybe. Whoever it was, it was somebody. I ripped the pages out of the book. I reversed the other, so the last one was first, and the first was last. When I flipped through them, it looked like the man was floating up through the sky. And if I’d had more pictures, he would’ve flown through a window, back into the building, and the smoke would’ve poured into the hole that the plane was about to come out of. Dad would’ve left his messages backward, until the machine was empty, and the plane would’ve flown backward away from him, all the way to Boston. […] Then he would’ve gotten up again at the end of the night before the worst day. He would’ve walked backward to my room, whistling “I Am the Walrus” backward. He would’ve gotten into bed with me. We would’ve looked at the stars on my ceiling, which would’ve pulled back their light from our eyes. I’d have said “Nothing” backward. He’d have said “Yeah buddy?” backward. I’d have said “Dad?” backward, which would have sounded the same as “Dad” forward. He would have told me the story of the Sixth Borough, from the voice in the can at the end to the beginning, from “I love you” to “Once upon a time…” We would have been safe. (Foer, 325-326.)
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