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**Experiencing the child's perspectives in contemporary English-language literature: the coalescence of reality and fantasy as an element of experientiality**

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## Table of contents

I. Introduction: The Childhood Experience.....	3
II. The child’s perspective between reality and fantasy: an experiential approach.....	5
III. Living dolls, lifesaving bracelets, talking guns: analyzing the experiential coalescence of fantasy and reality .....	10
III.1. <i>The Daydreamer</i> : The reality of fantasy .....	11
III.2. <i>Extremely Loud &amp; Incredibly Close</i> : Post-traumatic fantasy .....	18
III.3. <i>Gun Love</i> : The developing dream .....	25
IV. Conclusion: A Return to Childhood?.....	31
Figures .....	33
Literature .....	34

## I. Introduction: The Childhood Experience

“While admittedly an artifice, the fictional representation of a child’s inner life—that peculiarly literary phenomenon—may provide a special vehicle to speak on behalf of children by reminding adult readers that very young people have multiple and multidimensional experiences, perceptions, understandings, and interpretations of the world that they themselves are not yet ready to express.”<sup>1</sup>

What does it mean to “see through the eyes of a child”? In reality, only the child itself is capable of this perspective. However, if we view the child and childhood as a social construct consisting of a wide range of images, concepts, and established, commonly familiar tropes—from a child’s naïveté and innocence to their playfulness and, most importantly to this research endeavor, their vivid imagination and fantasy—it is possible to reconstruct a fictional child, especially in the context of different art forms: visual arts, film, drama, and, of course, literature.

Thus, to “see through the eyes of a child” can refer to the act of reading a child’s perspective. Whereas 18th century literature tended to “look upon” the child from a narrative distance to literarily process then-prominent issues in childhood studies, namely from the fields of pedagogy and empirical psychology<sup>2</sup>, contemporary literature often chooses to take on the child’s subjective worldview, to communicate their thoughts, the very condition of their mind and emotional quality. In a narrative sense, these texts move so closely towards their protagonist that the child itself is or metamorphically transforms into the story’s narrator, repealing the hermetic separation between those who tell the story and those whom the story is told about.

This contemporary trend towards a literary, text-based “childhood experience” brings forth a plethora of novels from various thematic spheres: *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison (1970), the story of a poor black family and a young black girl’s struggle within a society that imposes a normatively white perception of beauty. *Room* by Emma Donoghue (2010), the story of a mother and her five-year-old son who are kept prisoners in a tiny room, a room which is the only world and reality the five-year-old narrator has ever known. *We the Animals* by Justin Torres (2011), the story of three young brothers of Puerto Rican descent who experience their parents’ social and private struggles from their immature, playful gaze upon a challenging reality. These are just a

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<sup>1</sup> Sokoloff, Naomi. “3. The Voices of Children in Literature” in: Hillel Goelman et al. (eds.): *Multiple Lenses, Multiple Images*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press 2004, 87.

<sup>2</sup> Giuriato, Davide. “Kindheit und Literatur. Zur Einleitung” in: Giuriato Davide et al. (eds.): *Kindheit und Literatur. Poetik – Konzepte – Wissen*. Freiburg i. Br./Berlin/Wien: Rombach Verlag 2018, 17.

few selected examples, but already, there is a pattern to be observed: through the subjective, personal perspective of the child, it is possible to approach highly complex issues through a socially constructed, almost universally recognizable lens: the eyes of a child.

This paper will explore the way in which contemporary English language texts (re)create a child's perspective as a phenomenological experience that bridges the metatextual gap between narrator and reader. It will do so by focusing on one specific trope of childhood that has so far received little scholarly attention despite being a prominent part of many experiential childhood perspectives, and not exclusively in literature: the coalescence of reality and fantasy, the intermingling of fact and imagination within the child's subjective perception of the world. It seems that the child is often depicted as a character who is either not yet capable of fully differentiating between what is real and what is just a figment of their imagination, or as one that willingly chooses to conflate these two levels within their respective diegesis, namely the levels of diegetic reality and fantasy.

After providing a brief overview of existing theoretical perspectives and establishing important notions and preliminary considerations, this paper will closely analyze selected passages from three programmatic, contemporary novels operating with a child's subjective, experiential perspective: *The Daydreamer* by Ian McEwan, *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* by Jonathan Safran Foer, and *Gun Love* by Jennifer Clement. The analyses will explore the ways in which these three novels narratively implement a coalescence of reality and fantasy from a child's perspective and how they make use of specific literary tools and narrative strategies to construct a childhood experience that doesn't just recount, but that *enacts* a child's mental and emotional processes—or, in the words of Naomi Sokoloff, a “special vehicle” (see footnote 1) that transports the adult reader into a performative fantasy that, at the same time, appeals to a real biographical period from every human's past.

## II. The child's perspective between reality and fantasy: an experiential approach

“[T]he child's view of the world reflects our collective memory in a way that allows us to view our historically satiated bodies of knowledge from a new perspective. It is this now-estranged view of the world which once used to be our own [...] that attracts us so exceptionally strongly.”<sup>3</sup>

Is it possible to (re)experience childhood through literature? Obviously, this is not a simple yes or no question. Rather, it refers to a broad complex of frameworks and further questions concerning the boundaries between fact and fiction: What is experientiality, and does it evoke a factual or a fictional experience? Are real and literary childhoods interchangeable or fundamentally different concepts? And is there such a thing as a “universal” or “globally recognizable” childhood? Thus, if we are to explore the experientiality of childhood through the coalescence of reality and fantasy, it is important to analyze existing theories and reflections on the literary conception of childhood and to understand the framework within which this research interest is to be pursued.

The concept of experientiality, as prominently coined by Monika Fludernik who defined it as “the quasi-mimetic evocation of real-life experience,”<sup>4</sup> may be understood as “the ways in which narrative taps into readers' familiarity with experience through the activation of ‘natural’ cognitive parameters [...], and particularly the embodiment of cognitive faculties, the understanding of intentional action, the perception of temporality, and the emotional evaluation of experience.”<sup>5</sup> Because they are closely tied to an individual's cognitive perception of the world, experiential narratives always bestride yet another boundary between fact and fiction as they may “straddle the divide between real-life experience and semiotic representation of experience.”<sup>6</sup>

As Caracciolo convincingly argues in a paper from the same year, experientiality and its efficacy and affective potential are determined by the interpreting recipient on the basis of their individual biographical background and past experiences: “[E]xperience is a complex texture created by people's biological make-up and past experiences; it has to do not just with

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<sup>3</sup> Barth, Mechthild. *Mit den Augen des Kindes: narrative Inszenierungen des kindlichen Blicks im 20. Jahrhundert*. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter 2009, 16.

Translated into English by Max Kaplan. Original German citation: “[D]ie Sicht des Kindes auf die Welt spiegelt unser kollektives Gedächtnis auf eine Weise wider, die es uns erlaubt, unsere historisch gesättigten Wissensbestände von einem neuen Blickwinkel aus zu beleuchten. Es ist der fremd gewordene Blick, der einmal der unsere war [...] der uns so ungewöhnlich stark anzieht.”

<sup>4</sup> Caracciolo, Marco. “Experientiality” in: Hühn, Peter et al. (eds.): *Handbook of Narratology (2nd edition, Vol. 1)*. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter 2014, 149.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 149.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 149.

*what* is experienced, but with the *how*, with the ways in which people respond to the world.”<sup>7</sup> A recipient’s individual background also determines the way in which they uniquely respond to or are affected by a particular course of events, and, conversely, the same course of events may evoke fundamentally different responses from different recipients based on their individual biographical backgrounds.<sup>8</sup> Thus, one can identify a literary text’s attempt to evoke a certain “real-life experience,” to “embody cognitive faculties,” but it is impossible to identify *a universal way in which* the recipient will respond to this attempt.

In the specific case of the experiential representation of childhood, we are dealing with a biographical episode of life that every human being has experienced. Although every childhood is fundamentally different and individually shaped, everyone has once been a child. As Naomi Sokoloff points out, the prominence of the experiential approach in literary depictions of childhood is a natural, almost logical choice: “The representation of consciousness, that peculiarly literary phenomenon, may help garner respect for young outlooks and for the inner, perceptual worlds of children that are ordinarily elusive and that we adults can all, at best, only imagine.”<sup>9</sup> Even if the literary childhood is always an artificial, fictional construct<sup>10</sup>, an “as if” proposition, a kind of ventriloquism,<sup>11</sup> even a projection of the adult author’s self onto a fictional child and its worldview,<sup>12</sup> and even though the concept of childhood varies across different cultures and within different historical contexts<sup>13</sup>, there must be a set of extra-diegetic, “real-life” parallels in order to, in the words of Caracciolo, “tap into readers’ familiarity with experience” (see footnote 5), possibly even across biographical and cultural differences.<sup>14</sup> In other words: instead of depicting reality, the literary conception and of an experiential childhood has to *convince* the reader of its artificial authenticity, and it can do so by establishing a narrator who “recounts [the child’s] experiences in a mediated and filtered way, providing the reader with an immediate impression of the child’s perception.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Caracciolo, Marco. “Not So Easy: Representation, Experience, Expression” in: Jannidis, Fotis et al. (eds.): *The Experientiality of Narrative. An Enactivist Approach (Narratologia Vol. 43)*. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter 2014, 30 (italics adapted from original source).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>9</sup> Sokoloff, 74.

<sup>10</sup> Giuriato, 12.

<sup>11</sup> Sokoloff, 74.

<sup>12</sup> Giuriato, 14.

<sup>13</sup> Barth, 19.

<sup>14</sup> Of course, there can be no comprehensive general assessment as to which tropes and images of childhood are entirely cross-culturally and globally recognizable. Still, certain tropes (as will be shown in the following paragraph) tap into widely familiar experiences connected to childhood and its social as well as historical constellation.

<sup>15</sup> Sehlen, Silke von. *Poetiken kindlichen Erzählens. Inszenierte Kinder-Erzähler im Gegenwartsroman aus komparatistischer Perspektive*. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann 2015, 261. Translated into English by

Its literary-poetological construction therefore adheres to a set of universal tropes and recognizable images that transcend individual biographical differences. These parallels come with a number of universal tropes and topoi of childhood present across different art forms, from literature to film, painting, video games etc.

It is important to note that these common established tropes and topoi of childhood are not necessarily congruent with the real child's psychology and worldview. It is instead a set of topoi that is reconstructed by adults and projected upon a fictitious "child-template," a set of "adult estimations of what children think, know, and need"<sup>16</sup> that resonates a reimagined version of childhood commonly informed by nostalgia, external interpretation of childhood behavior, and romanticization. Everyone has once been a child, but the reconstruction of childhood in literature generally mirrors a fictionalized complex of memory and aestheticization. However, since the literary and artistic era of Romanticism, there has been a thematic shift from childhood as "the safe, non-estranged nature-bound life [and] ultimate utopia"<sup>17</sup> towards confronting the child with serious, existential conflicts and situations that attack this very semiotically established safety and utopia, especially in contemporary literature of the 21st century (as I will later demonstrate). However, the Romanticist set of childhood characteristics, namely the child's "spontaneity and fantasy, its marveling over the wonders of nature and its genuine expression of emotions"<sup>18</sup> remain a common trope across many different depictions of fictional children.

Another prominent thematic element is the child's natural naïveté and subsequent innocence: "Through their innocent gaze, the child wonderingly perceives their environment, and the child communicates this wonderment in their narrative account of the world, an account which, in its innocent directness, is capable of unveiling and exposing many different issues."<sup>19</sup> Similarly, in her attempt to systematically-typologically list dominant topoi of childhood, Silke von Sehlen describes this topos as "the child and its specific naïve perception which is glamorized as a natural human state contrary to adult culture."<sup>20</sup> However, the

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Max Kaplan. Original German citation: "Der Erzähler gibt also die Erlebnisse vermittelt und gefiltert wieder, der Leser erhält dadurch allerdings einen direkten Eindruck in das Empfinden des Kindes."

<sup>16</sup> Sokoloff, 74.

<sup>17</sup> Barth, 196. Translated into English by Max Kaplan. Original German citation: "das heile, das nicht entfremdete Natur-Leben [und die] ultimative Utopie."

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 191. Translated into English by Max Kaplan. Original German citation: "Spontaneität und Phantasie, Staunen über die Wunder der Natur und eine unverstellte Äußerung von Gefühlen"

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 141. Translated into English by Max Kaplan. Original German citation: "Der unschuldige Blick des Kindes nimmt staunend seine Umgebung wahr und das Kind vermittelt diese Verwunderung in seinen Schilderungen von der Welt, wobei gerade in dieser unschuldigen Direktheit vieles zu Tage tritt und entblößt werden kann."

<sup>20</sup> Sehlen, 39. Translated into English by Max Kaplan. Original German citation: "das Kind und seine spezifische naive Wahrnehmung werden als menschlicher Naturzustand im Gegensatz zur erwachsenen Kultur verherrlicht."

literary child cannot be characterized as “naïvely devoid of any reflection.” Instead, they reflect in a different way to the adult, a manner that oscillates between childish views originating in biographical inexperience and original, unexpected perspectives that the adult is no longer capable of formulating.

The very first paragraph of Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* is testament to these central childhood tropes in literature:

“What about a teakettle? What if the spout opened and closed when the steam came out, so it would become a mouth, and it could whistle pretty melodies, or do Shakespeare, or just crack up with me? I could invent a teakettle that reads in Dad’s voice, so I could fall asleep, or maybe a set of kettles that sings the chorus of ‘Yellow Submarine,’ which is a song by the Beatles, who I love, because entomology is one of my *raisons d’être*, which is a French expression that I know. Another good thing is that I could train my anus to talk when I farted. If I wanted to be extremely hilarious, I’d train it to say, ‘Wasn’t me!’ every time I made an incredibly bad fart. And if I ever made an incredibly bad fart in the Hall of Mirrors, which is in Versailles, which is outside of Paris, which is in France, obviously, my anus would say, ‘*Ce n’étais pas moi!*’”<sup>21</sup>

Oscar, the novel’s nine-year-old protagonist, switches between the unexpected and slightly awkward image of a teakettle, several knowledge-based impressions such as the Beatles’ *Yellow Submarine* and the Hall of Mirrors in Versailles, a childish engagement with farting and a way to subvert its social unacceptability. On the one hand, the reader perceives this worldview as typical for a child as it coincides with the literary, socially constructed complex of tropes and topoi of a literary childhood as envisioned by adults. A teakettle that reads out loud in a father’s familiar voice is a very original, creative image. Were this image constructed by an adult, one could tend to characterize this adult as exceptionally creative, non-pragmatic, and artistic. However, since Oscar is a child, this inner creativity is more easily accepted as something “natural,” as a part of the child’s being, a state of existence informed by different established tropes and topoi, one of them being “the child’s distinct fantasy [which] is perceived as an exemplary model for artistic-poetic creation.”<sup>22</sup>

There are many more such tropes and it would by far exceed this paper’s scope to list and discuss them all individually. However, another trope that has so far rarely been mentioned or analyzed and also constitutes this paper’s main interest is the way in which the literary child blends fact and fantasy, the way in which they seem only partially capable of assessing the

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<sup>21</sup> Safran Foer, Jonathan. *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*. London, New York: Penguin Books 2006, 1 (italics adapted from original source).

<sup>22</sup> Sehlen, 39. Translated into English by Max Kaplan. Original German citation: “die dem Kind eigene Phantasie [welche] als Vorbild für das künstlerisch-poetische Schaffen [gilt].”



boundary between what is real and what is not as well as the manner in which this intuitive intermingling of these two spheres forms an essential component of the literary child's semantic and semiotic approach to narration.

The earlier exemplary passage from *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* provides a good example: By anthropomorphizing the teakettle and lending it with the ability to “whistle melodies,” Oscar endows the teakettle, which in itself is a real object, with fantastical, surreal abilities. Another such fantasy is the way in which he imagines to “train his anus” to speak on its own, anthropomorphizing a part of his body and thereby achieving a comedic effect while simultaneously retaining a level of innocent seriousness as Oscar proceeds to develop this idea into a full-fledged “action plan.”

To a certain extent, this trope is grounded in reality: “Children often err in mistaking nonreality, such as fantasy, appearance, and illusion, for reality. For example, they are confused about whether dragons are real and whether someone dressed up as a ghost really is one.”<sup>23</sup> Of course, it seems almost counterintuitive to include “real-life” psychological studies despite having clearly established that the literary child and childhood are always a fictionalized construct. However, I would argue that the distinction between the real and the literary, fictional child and childhood is not hermetic. Rather, many real-life phenomena observable in children become inspirations for their fictional counterparts and inform many different tropes and topoi in their conceptualization and (experiential) reenactment.

Conversely, these same tropes and topoi can be traced back to real-life phenomena and conceived more clearly and tangibly. Thus, as Woolley and Ghossainy point out, “[i]n both popular and scientific literature, young children are consistently portrayed as being confused about a basic ontological distinction—that between reality and nonreality”<sup>24</sup> while, according to the results of their study, actually being “considerably more skeptical, and assign[ing] reality status much more sparingly, than one might expect.”<sup>25</sup> Despite speaking once more to the difference between actual, psychologically analyzed childhood and its fictional recreation from the perspective of adults, this opens up a possibility for literary depictions of childhood that can also be analyzed in the context of this paper's research interest: how does this uncertain overlapping of boundaries between the real and the imagined impact the experientiality of the literary child's perspective?

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<sup>23</sup> Woolley, Jacqueline D.; Ghossainy, Maliki E. “Revisiting the Fantasy-Reality Distinction: Children as Naïve Skeptics” in: *Child Development* Vol. 84, No. 5 (September/October 2013), 1496.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 1496.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 1497.

Following Monika Fludernik's significant influence on the establishment of experientiality as a narratological device, several theoreticians have further expanded upon the concept, especially on one of its key aspects: the relationship between narrative and both the narrator's as well as the recipient's cognitive processes—from an “emulation of conscious awareness” to the “tension and interaction between a narrative text and the past experiences of its recipients.”<sup>26</sup> However, an equally important aspect is the individual approach to experientiality within any given art form. Whereas the depicted or enacted topoi of childhood may be the same across different mediums, every art form possesses its own poetological tools and techniques by which it enacts these topoi individually. In literature, these include inner thoughts and monologues, similes and metaphors, rhetorical figures of style (i.e., anaphors, ellipses) etc., and although some techniques may overlap across different art forms (i.e., the first-person point of view which is also prevalent in film), an individual poetological complex in its entirety is always unique to its respective medium.

In the following analysis of three exemplary works that narrate from the subjective, experiential perspective of children, I will therefore highlight these techniques before the background of this paper's central point of interest: the topos of the child's uncertain distinction and subsequent coalescence between reality and fantasy and its implementation to create an experiential child perspective.

### **III. Living dolls, lifesaving bracelets, talking guns: analyzing the experiential coalescence of fantasy and reality**

“With acts of invention, through fairytales and similar stories, the child is able to escape from reality, keep it at a distance and make it manageable with the help of this creative intervention.”<sup>27</sup>

I base my choice of primary literature on several factors. First, all three texts take place in a society that is considered “contemporary” and thus represent the historical and social reality of individuals living in the first and second decade of the 21st century. Second, I choose the same approach that Silke von Sehlen took as the starting point for her dissertation and subsequent selection of literature: “[T]he story is being told by an autodiegetic narrator. This narrator-character not only recounts their childhood experiences, but their narrative-stylistic

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<sup>26</sup> Caracciolo, “Experientiality,” 151.

<sup>27</sup> Sehlen, 260–261. Translated into English by Max Kaplan. Original German citation: “In Erfindungen, durch Märchen oder ähnliche Geschichten, findet das Kind Zuflucht vor der Wirklichkeit, hält sie auf Distanz und macht sie durch diesen schöpferischen Eingriff handhabbar.”

depiction also enacts the voice of a child.”<sup>28</sup> Third, there is an overarching development between the three novels from a traditionally innocent and playful dialectic between fantasy and reality (*The Daydreamer*), to a despaired fantasizing in the context of unresolved trauma (*Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*), to a more mature teenage perception of fantasy and reality in the face of social exclusion and sudden loss (*Gun Love*).

This chapter aims to analyze an exemplary passage from each of these novels and to explore the relationship between fantasy and reality within the subjective view of the child protagonist through three central questions: What distinctive poetological devices does the text use to stage the child’s perception of reality and the act of fantasizing? How and why does the merging of real and fantastic elements take place? And how does the use of these poetological devices and the interplay between fantasy and reality make the literary child’s perspective experienceable?

### **III.1. *The Daydreamer*: The reality of fantasy**

Ian McEwan’s *The Daydreamer*<sup>29</sup> (1995) consists of short narrative episodes that follow Peter, a ten-year-old boy, who is very prone to letting his mind wander off into various fantasies and imaginings. Primarily aimed at a young audience, presumably one that shares Peter’s age, *The Daydreamer* delves into its protagonist’s subjective perception of the world which he enriches with otherworldly, supernatural scenes and sequences. Thus, *The Daydreamer*’s narrative, just as the genre of children’s literature, is “inescapably suspended between different worlds and dimensions—childhood and adulthood, the real and the magic, the human and the animal, the linguistic and the visual.”<sup>30</sup> That which Roberta Ferrari describes as the “liminal nature”<sup>31</sup> of the genre is a programmatic element to many narratives told from children’s perspectives, and *The Daydreamer* enacts the liminality between fantasy and reality in every one of its seven chapters. However, unlike *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* and *Gun Love*, *The Daydreamer* does not connect this coalescence of the fantastic and the real to any “mature” subject matter that supersedes the child’s sphere of experience or competence. Instead, it aims to capture a child’s perception of the world to primarily appeal to

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<sup>28</sup> Sehlen, 258. Translated into English by Max Kaplan. Original German citation: “[D]ie Geschichte [wird] durch einen autodiegetischen Erzähler vermittelt [...]. Diese Erzählerfigur berichtet nicht nur über Erlebnisse ihrer Kindheit, sondern die narrativ-stilistische Inszenierung stellt überdies die Stimme eines Kindes dar.” It is important to note that such a narrator may also narrate from a third-person perspective as long as their perspective is still bound to a character’s knowledge, subjective impressions, and modes of introspection.

<sup>29</sup> McEwan, Ian. *The Daydreamer*. London: Vintage Books 1995.

<sup>30</sup> Ferrari, Roberta. “Metamorphosis of a genre: The Daydreamer by Ian McEwan” in: *Imbossibilia* No. 8 (October 2014), 47–48.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

children themselves—an effort to recreate a perception of the world that a child may identify with.

My analysis will focus on the first chapter titled “The Dolls.”<sup>32</sup> In this chapter, Peter imagines his sister’s collection of dolls coming to life. The scariest of the dolls proceeds to take Peter apart, who also turns out to be a doll, and replaces its body parts with Peter’s. However, all of this turns out to be just another one of Peter’s elaborate fantasies. The chapter bridges the boundary between fantasy and reality through a process of physical metamorphosis and “invite[s] acknowledgement of ‘otherness’ and empathetic sharing of others’ points of view.”<sup>33</sup>

The chapter starts with Peter receiving his first own room after having always shared a room with his younger sister. This was decided by his parents after Peter’s sister struck her brother with the scariest, most abhorrent of her many dolls, the one Peter dubs the “Bad Doll”:

“You would know the Bad Doll at a glance. It was a pink that no human had ever been. Long ago, its left leg and right arm had been wrenched from their sockets, and from the top of its pitted skull grew one thick hank of black hair. Its makers had wanted to give it a sweet little smile, but something must have gone wrong with the mold because the Bad Doll always curled its lips in scorn, and frowned, as if trying to remember the nastiest thing in the world.”<sup>34</sup>

Ferrari describes *The Daydreamer*’s perspective-based strategy as “a frame narrative in which the heterodiegetic narrator of the prefatory chapter—the one who willingly comments on children and adults—gives way, in the following stories, to an autodiegetic narrator who disguises himself behind a third person voice, though maintaining the protagonist’s point of view throughout.”<sup>35</sup> As a third person narration tied to Peter’s subjective perception and judgment, the text uses a number of negatively charged, expressive words and images such as “wrenched,” “pitted skull,” “one thick hank of black hair,” and “curled its lips in scorn” as well as the “nastiest thing in the world.” In addition to describing the doll, this choice of words also reflects Peter’s attitude toward this utterly repulsive toy. The common trope of enacting a young child’s exuberant emotions (here: fear of the doll reflected in the text’s choice of words) and maximalist judgments (the nastiest thing in the world) is an effective tool in recreating the childhood experience. In the case of the Bad Doll, it also serves to

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<sup>32</sup> McEwan, 22–38.

<sup>33</sup> Ferrari, 52.

<sup>34</sup> McEwan, 25.

<sup>35</sup> Ferrari, 51.

establish the chapter's main antagonist who also serves as the pivotal point to Peter's subsequent fantasy.

The transition from reality to fantasy occurs fluently, with no apparent marker such as a specific choice or action that would result in Peter making the conscious decision to dream away.

“[W]ithin a realistic frame the daydreaming gives birth to a parallel world Peter enters in an abrupt though smooth, almost imperceptible way, and which significantly appears totally similar to the real one as for setting and characters. Thus, the fantastic element [...] breaks into an everyday context whose ontological horizon is consequently destabilized.”<sup>36</sup>

In accordance with this narrative strategy, Peter's reflection on his age, still entirely located within the text's diegetic reality, seamlessly passes over into the diegetic fantasy:

“When you got to ten, you began to see the whole picture, how things connected, how things worked... an overview...

Peter was so intent on trying to remember his younger self of six months before that he did not notice the figure making its way across the carpet towards him. When he did, he gave out a shout of surprise and scrambled right on to the bed, and drew his knees up. Coming towards him at an awkward but steady pace was the Bad Doll. It had taken a paintbrush from Kate's desk to use as a crutch.”<sup>37</sup>

There are two aspects to be observed within this initial moment of transition. First, the narrative briefly switches into a more distanced, almost authorial perspective, indicated by the classically authorial phrase “he did not notice.” The text implements this step outside the subjective, personal frame to mark Peter's transition towards the fantastical without disturbing the natural flow of events. At the same time, this demarcates Peter's intrinsic action of stepping outside himself to dream up a surreal situation, implying that Peter made the subconscious choice to narrate his own fantasy as if it was an actual event that is seamlessly taking place within diegetic reality.

Second, the actuality of the doll's arrival is never relativized or questioned in its plausibility. No “as if,” no self-doubt from Peter regarding the possibility of a toy coming to life, no allusions to this potentially being nothing more than a fantasy. Peter's perspective, which is a third person narrator's view upon events, navigates an in-between space separating the

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<sup>36</sup> Ferrari, 52.

<sup>37</sup> McEwan, 29–30.

narrator from the reader: the adult reader can clearly demarcate it as a fantasy whereas Peter unequivocally treats it as a reality. We as readers suppose the doll's arrival to be a fantasy, but from Peter's view, the one communicated by the narrator, the doll really comes to life, it really turns a paintbrush into a crutch, and it even causes Peter to physically react by giving out a shout of surprise and scrambling onto the bed. This results in a highly interesting development: suddenly, it is Peter's fantasy that becomes a diegetic, even empirical reality. If we are to stay within the boundaries of the text, the doll's coming to life and arriving at the edge of Peter's bed is a provable, factually occurring event whereas, for now, it is not possible to prove that this is just another one of Peter's fantasies. This blurring of the lines between fantasy and reality by "turning the tables" and framing the child's fantasy as fact and the reader's assumption as fiction is an effective tool that makes the child's perspective experienceable. To the child who has just recently turned ten, the fantasy of the doll *has become* a reality, and the subjective, autodiegetic narrator therefore treats it as such. We as readers now see the following developments unfold as actual events, as a definite reality that may or may not be a fantasy.

As the chapter progresses, more and more dolls come to life, to shout exclamations such as "What's fair is fair," and they start rushing Peter, pushing him back.

"Peter had moved down to the far end of the bed. His back was to the wall, and his arms were clasped round his knees. This really was extraordinary. Surely his mother would hear the racket downstairs and come up to tell them to be quiet."<sup>38</sup>

Another common trope of narratives from children's perspectives are a child's typical reflections and associations that every adult is familiar with, such as Peter thinking of his mother who may hear all the noise from his room and coming up to tell them to be quiet. Unlike a horde of conscious, angry dolls that rush Peter's bed, which are clearly a supernatural occurrence, Peter's awareness of his mother's presence and potential intervention is a rational, realistic expectation. The text implements this thought as a fragment of reality that Peter includes in his imagination. Paradoxically, although this may be read as a break with the boy's fantasy, it actually reinforces his earnest belief in the things that supposedly unfold before his eyes. By intermingling the fantasy of an all-out doll assault with his diegetically real mother, the narrator goes so far as to mix both diegetic levels: fantasy

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<sup>38</sup> McEwan, 32.

(the doll's imagined assault) and reality (them producing real sound that his real mother may hear).

A similar technique is used in narratives that depict the manifestations of hallucinations, visions or dreams, a kind of fantastic reality that may also be had by adults. What's more, as Oliver Mark Tearle argues, the fantasy of visions or hallucinations works alongside a very similar dichotomy to that of the child's fantasy: "It is clear that fantasy must necessarily deal with certain unrealistic elements, but that the laws of the real world, with all the disappointments and frustrations that the real world entails, must remain in place; thus it is only 'anti-realist' in a very superficial sense."<sup>39</sup> Visions and hallucinations therefore also bridge the boundaries between the real and the surreal. However, in Peter's case, his fantasy is not a dream but a daydream, an occurrence integrated into his everyday perception of life. It is not a vision that falls out of his daily routine or one that stands in stark contrast to a "normal" state of mind. Instead, Peter's fantasies are a firm part of his worldview. To him, they are just as much reality as fantasy: "[R]eality slips into dream with no solution of continuity, thus highlighting the everyday quality of daydreaming in a child's life."<sup>40</sup> And it is this lack of conscious separation that recreates a child's immanent subjective experience: the child's and, by extension, the text's incapability to clearly separate the "laws of the real world" from "certain unrealistic elements" (see footnote 39).

Further on in the scene, Peter enters into a dialogue with the Bad Doll. They discuss the fact that Peter now has his own room, and the doll asks: "And have you ever considered that someone else might want that room?"<sup>41</sup> This becomes the central point to their argument.

"'Don't you think,' [the doll] said, 'that it's time someone else had a turn in that room?'"

'That's ridiculous,' Peter started to say. 'You're only dolls...'

Nothing could have made the Bad Doll more furious.

'You've seen how we live,' it screamed. 'Sixty of us squashed into one corner of the room. You've passed us a thousand times, and you've never given it a thought. What do you care that we're piled on top of each other like bricks in a wall. You just don't see what's in front of you. Look at us! No space, no privacy, not even a bed for most of us. Now it's someone else's turn with that room.

What's fair is fair!'"<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Tearle, Oliver Mark. *Bewilderments of Vision: Hallucination and Literature, 1880-1914*. Loughborough: Loughborough University 2011, 13.

<sup>40</sup> Ferrari, 52.

<sup>41</sup> McEwan, 33.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 34.

This dialogue reveals Peter's intrinsic motivation for this elaborate fantasy. He is bothered by the thought of receiving a room of his own, an inner conflict he can only reflect with the help (or, rather, under the pressure) from an antagonist born from his fantasy. He incorporates his many encounters with the dolls sitting on his sister's shelves which mirror the issues he himself had with a shared room: "no space, no privacy, not even a bed for most of us." *The Daydreamer* demonstrates one of the central functions that the manifested fantasy has for the literary child: by fantasizing, they open up a fictional space in which to approach inner conflicts, worries, uncertainties, or issues beyond their level of experience and competence. Whereas the literary adult generally tends to approach such conflicts in a sober, factual manner founded in reality and informed by life experience, the literary child resorts to fantasies which help them circumvent a lack of experience within a familiar space, the space of fantasy in which they are in control. Thus, another aspect of the coalescence between fantasy and reality that contribute to the experientiality of a child's perspective is the child's retreat into fantasy to approach challenging or yet ungraspable issues. The dolls proceed to grab Peter and pull at his extremities, followed by Peter's metamorphosis from boy to doll, paralleled by the doll's transformation into a human boy:

"And then a strange thing happened. Peter's leg came off. It came right off. He looked down at where his leg used to be, and instead of blood there was a little coiled spring poking out through his torn trousers.

That's funny, he thought. I never would have guessed...

[...]

The arm and leg were being passed over the heads in the crowd, back towards the Bad Doll. It took the leg and slotted it on. A perfect fit. Now it was putting the arm in place. That arm could have been made specially, it fitted so well.

Odd, Peter thought. I'm sure my arm and leg would be too big."<sup>43</sup>

The dichotomy between what happens to Peter and his sober reaction to being dismembered and revealed as a doll underscores the fantastical nature of these events. Instead of entering a state of fear or shock, Peter watches his violent deconstruction and the annexation of his body parts with moderate fascination. Within the safety of his diegetic fantasy, which is narrated in the manner of a diegetic reality, this is a factually observed event that can only be unmasked as fantasy by the reader himself. By interpreting clues such as Peter's inner conflicts reflected in these events, or the dichotomy between his thoughts and what is happening, it is the adult

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<sup>43</sup> McEwan, 35–36.



reader who is well aware that he is being told something that is occurring on the level of diegetic fantasy and not in diegetic reality.<sup>44</sup>

However, towards the end of the chapter, the narrator does reveal that Peter's struggle has only been a fantasy, and they do so through an unusual shift of perspective:

“And that is how it would have ended. But just then, Kate stepped into the room.

Now, you have to try to imagine the scene from where she stood. She had come from playing with her friend, she had walked into her bedroom, and there was her brother, lying on the spare bed, playing with her dolls, *all* her dolls, and he was moving them around, and doing their voices. The only one not on the bed was the Bad Doll, which was lying on the carpet nearby.”<sup>45</sup>

The narrator chooses to leave Peter's internal, personal perspective and implement an authorial switch. This radical breach of perspective removes the reader from Peter's experiential perspective to allow for an “external view” of the boy. “Now, you have to try to imagine the scene from where she stood” is a traditionally authorial statement as it is not bound to any character's subjectivity or knowledge and instead introduces an all-knowing overview of the scene, going so far as to address the reader directly and verbalizing the reason for their choice, to “try to image the scene from where Kate stood.” The current setup of the dolls reflects the boy's made-up scene, which ended with the Bad Doll leaping off the bed to take possession of Peter's room. From an onlooker's perspective, he is simply a child engaged in innocent play. This, however, stands in stark contrast to Peter's intense imagination which the reader has just experienced so subjectively and closely. This shift is not dissimilar to waking up from a dream or being pulled out of an illusion and back into reality. By applying this shift in perspective, the text emulates the child switching from fantasy back into reality, a process which the reader physically (re)experiences through the text's narrative structure. By operating between the two intradiegetic levels of reality and fantasy, *The Daydreamer* is capable of enacting imagined scenes as if they were taking place on the level of reality, breaching the hermetic gap between the real and the imagined. This is the child's fantasy at play, the process of imagining scenarios through toys and their constellations while simultaneously using the act of play to approach inner conflicts or unresolved issues. Through a purposeful choice of perspective, expressive vocabulary, surreal metamorphic processes, and the intermingling of two intradiegetic levels of narrative, *The Daydreamer* emulates

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<sup>44</sup> A well-known example of the opposite may be found in any fantasy novel. Here, magic and fantastic creatures, both of which do not exist in the reader's reality, do factually exist in the novel's diegetic reality and are therefore not a fantasy.

<sup>45</sup> McEwan, 36–37 (italics adapted from original source).

Peter's imagination, making the reader experience his capability to remove the differentiation between what is real and what is not first-hand, thereby transferring them into the nine-year-old's immanent, vividly creative consciousness.

### **III.2. *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*: Post-traumatic fantasy**

Jonathan Safran Foer's second novel *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*<sup>46</sup> (2006) is often categorized as a prominent representative of North American trauma literature, a genre which "depicts a survivor's personal struggle in responding to and representing the mass atrocities suffered through the threats to individual, cultural and inhuman eradication."<sup>47</sup> With regard to experientiality being a highly affective narrative strategy, this type of literature bears particular affective potential: "Narratives crafted from life experience, or fictionalized from real historical traumas, have the capacity to affect others. As empathetic readers, we come to the act of reading from an ethical stance respecting the actual historical event, the site of the writer, and the world of the text."<sup>48</sup>

*Extremely Loud* tells the story of a young boy named Oskar Schell. After losing his beloved father to the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York, Oskar struggles to cope with his father's death, an inner conflict resulting from a highly traumatic event and stroke of fate that is told from the subjective, experiential perspective of a nine-year-old boy. Although the novel also features other perspectives, such as a letter from Oskar's grandfather to his son, Oskar's perspective clearly develops into the novel's central plot and main focal point as it both starts out the novel and represents the diegetic present in which the text's narrative develops. An overarching theme is one of Oskar's recurring escapist tendencies: in order to regain control over his traumatized sentiments and emotions, Oskar invents fantastical, surreal objects: a teakettle that speaks in his father's voice, for example (as analyzed in chapter I). He "invents fantastic devices—skyscrapers with movable parts, a portable pocket that holds people, a birdseed shirt that attracts birds to help people fly—intended to reduce all unfamiliar eventualities to an identified and controllable form. [...] Oskar compulsively invents whenever he feels insecure. He desires to make reality pliable so that it corresponds to his wishes."<sup>49</sup> Hoping to "distract himself from his father's death at a surface level but also to

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<sup>46</sup> From this point forward, I will abbreviate the title as *Extremely Loud*.

<sup>47</sup> Atchison, S. Todd. "Why I am writing from where you are not": Absence and presence in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*" in: *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* Vol. 46, No. 3–4 (July/September 2010), 360.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 366.

<sup>49</sup> Haider, Nishat. "Child/hood and 9/11 trauma. A study of Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*" in: Kumar, Kamayani; Multani, Angelie (eds.). *Childhood Traumas. Narratives and Representations*. London: Routledge India 2019, 201.

grab a hold of controllable situations through the act of creation,”<sup>50</sup> Oskar engages in an escapist strategy not dissimilar to Peter in *The Daydreamer*: by reverting to fantasy and coming up with made-up ingenious inventions, Oskar reasserts control over his emotions. He envisions objects that provide him with the competence to prevent disaster and no longer fall prey to his inner devastation. Or, in the Words of Nishat Haider, he “invents fantastic devices [...] intended to reduce all unfamiliar eventualities to an identified and controllable form. [...] Oskar compulsively invents whenever he feels insecure. He desires to make reality pliable so that it corresponds to his wishes.”<sup>51</sup>

“I stayed up pretty late designing jewelry that night. I designed a Nature Hike Anklet, which leaves a trail of bright yellow dye when you walk, so in case you get lost, you can find your way back.”<sup>52</sup>

Oskar’s imaginary inventions bring together realistic elements with a certain creative artificiality. Oskar designs a bracelet which physically exists within the novel’s diegetic reality (and he does so more than once, he even creates a business card for himself which describes him as a “jewelry designer” and “jewelry fabricator”<sup>53</sup> [Fig. 1]), but he also endows it with a fantastic ability, namely to leave a trail of bright yellow dye to keep its owner from getting lost in nature. The bracelet is not actually capable of leaving such a trail, and Oskar, who is exceptionally intelligent and knowledgeable for his age, knows that. However, his fantasy is a way of *enacting control*, a way of pretending that Oskar is capable of creating a lifesaving object that keeps people from meeting a horrible fate—a make-believe device that reflects his innermost urge to have control over disaster, to keep it from ever happening again. As a child, Oskar is not capable of such self-conscious reflection, but the adult reader is capable of interpreting Oskar’s fantasy and link it to his psychological state. At the same time, however, the reader is not actively encouraged to do so. Instead, they experience Oskar’s immanent fantasy at play, marked by just how self-evidently Oskar declares his anklet to possess its supernatural ability. It’s not a bracelet that looks as if it might have such an ability. *It does.*

However, Oskar also comes up with entirely hypothetical inventions. His so-called “Reservoir of Tears” serves two simultaneous functions, the prevention of disaster as well as the revelation of most intimate human emotions:

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<sup>50</sup> Haider, 200.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 201.

<sup>52</sup> Safran Foer, 106.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 99.

“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. And when something *really* terrible happened—like a nuclear bomb, or at least a biological weapons attack—an extremely loud siren would go off, telling everyone to get to Central Park to put sandbags around the reservoir.”<sup>54</sup>

One of the most prominent features of Oskar’s inventions is their hyperrealist, rational design. Oskar has a way of planning out his contraption that makes it almost sound like a plausible, real-life blueprint. He thinks through the way in which people’s tears are collected in one unified reservoir, how it is used to measure a city’s collective mental state, and how it may prevent catastrophes on a massive scale. Oskar’s designing principle thus reflects his approach to dealing with his inner trauma: based on his intense curiosity and broad general knowledge, he attempts to assert control through factual knowledge. However, since Oskar is still a child, the only sphere in which he can create meaningful devices is either the level of diegetic reality intermingled with fantastic elements (the anklet that leaves traces) or his own intrapersonal, hypothetical fantasy (the Reservoir of Tears). Only when they are constructed plausibly and rationally can Oskar’s fantastical creations achieve the desire effect, which is an illusion of control that adheres to his high standards of functionality and plausibility. In contrast to *The Daydreamer*, the narrator in *Extremely Close* formulates his thoughts directly from the first-person perspective. Thus, the reader is made to experience Oskar’s immanent, unmediated imagination. There is no room for switches in perspective, for observations from outside the protagonist’s perception, his scope of knowledge, or his subjective experience. By excluding the possibility for any kind of narrative distance between narrator and reader, the latter is made to experience Oskar’s inventive fantasies as they are being formulated in his mind. The text thus manages to make the reader “not only view the events in the narrative through the lens of a child, [...] but also through the innate characteristics of a child,”<sup>55</sup> which, in this case, is inventive fantasizing on the basis of mechanisms plausible in reality or the endowment of real objects such as a homemade anklet with supernatural abilities. The experientiality of these passages lies in their unmediated immanence as well as in Oskar’s enacted attempt to rationally plan out fantastical devices.

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<sup>54</sup> Safran Foer, 38 (italics adapted from original source).

<sup>55</sup> Haider, 202.

However, as much as he tries to subjugate his inner trauma with anything within his childish grasp, Oskar is incapable of effectively containing his emotions and process the loss of his father. A scene that illustrates this failure by not only interweaving fantasy and reality but by also alternating between the textual forms of prose and drama takes place during a performance of Hamlet in which Oskar plays the part of Yorick's skull.

Oskar introduces this passage by precisely lining out the thoughts that went through his head on stage, formulating the central question to his subsequent violent fantasy:

"I felt, that night, on that stage, under that skull, incredibly close to everything in the universe, but also extremely alone. I wondered, for the first time in my life, if life was worth all the work it took to live. What *exactly* made it worth it? What's so horrible about being dead forever, and not feeling anything, and not even dreaming? What's so great about feeling and dreaming?"<sup>56</sup>

Oskar formulates a number of depressive thoughts. These thoughts set the scene and prepare the reader for the escalation that's about to ensue. Fittingly, Oskar plays the part of a skull, the remains of a dead person, that comes back to life—which, quite fittingly, also only takes place within Hamlet's imagination. Oskar's part mirrors his inner turmoil, it may even function as its catalyzer. The play is thus established as an enacted fantasy within Oskar's diegetic reality. However, the narrative proceeds with a radical shift that upends these two dimensions, blurring the lines between diegetic fantasy and reality.

"Maybe it was because of everything that had happened in those twelve weeks. Or maybe it was because I felt so close and alone that night. I just couldn't be dead any longer.

ME. Alas, poor Hamlet. [*I take JIMMY SNYDER's face into my hand*]; I knew him, Horatio.

JIMMY SNYDER. But Yorick... you're only... a skull.

ME. So what? I don't care. Screw you.

JIMMY SNYDER. [*whispers*] This is not in the play. [*He looks for help from MRS. RIGLEY, who is in the front row, flipping through the script. She draws circles in the air with her right hand, which is the universal sign for 'improvise.'*]"<sup>57</sup>

In contrast to *The Daydreamer*, this transition from reality to fantasy is all but seamless. As it later turns out, Oskar does only fantasize about going off-script. The moment at which Oskar

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<sup>56</sup> Safran Foer, 145 (italics adapted from original source).

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 145 (all formatting adapted from original source).

begins to imagine how this unexpected, unscripted confrontation would have to turn out to satisfy his angered, depressed self, the text switches genres: from prose to drama.<sup>58</sup>

A very interesting choice, given that the form of the theater script normally demarcates a staged fantasy, something physically occurring in reality but semiotically taking place in an imagined, diegetic space. Here, however, although the formal transition demarcates the start of Oskar's fantasy (even though the reader only finds out that this is a fantasy at the very end of the passage), the scene in itself constitutes a radical *break* with the fantasy that is the play: Oskar steps outside of his role, he stops following the script and instead launches a verbal attack against Jimmy Snyder. Jimmy then turns to his teacher in the first row who is part of the audience and thus stands outside the play's diegesis, incorporating her into the script and thus radically dissolving the fourth wall. In an almost paradoxical twist, Oskar's personal fantasy turns into a break with the play's fantasy as he augments it with his real emotions and opens up the play's hermetically separated narrative with his "improvisation." Nevertheless, the text's physical transformation into a theater script signals an uncertainty regarding this passage's plausibility. As Nathalia Aghoro argues with regard to the entire novel, "such media diversity in one novel proves that even if a novelist may write in seclusion—as Benjamin suggests—the work is nevertheless able to go beyond the scope of allegedly fundamental genre boundaries."<sup>59</sup> By extension, this surpassing of genre boundaries simultaneously invokes a surpassing of diegetic boundaries. Here, it is the transition from reality into fantasy via the transition from prose to drama. As a result of this sudden formal change, the reader may ask themselves whether they are reading an actual occurrence or a piece of Oskar's imagination, and with the subsequent revelation that this was in fact "just" a fantasy, the text returns to its regular prosaic form. Still, due to the text's immanent first-person perspective, such a reveal becomes a requirement as the reader, thoroughly immersed within Oskar's perspective to the point that they see, feel, and imagine what he sees, feels, and imagines, cannot clearly differentiate between what is diegetically real and what isn't. Whereas *The Daydreamer* chose a third person perspective to allow for a "step back" and a view upon Peter from a distance, *Extremely Loud* relies on cues from within Oskar's mind, a circumstance that increases the risk (or: potential) for such paradoxical, confusing narrative

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<sup>58</sup> Metatextuality is a major element of *Extremely Loud*'s narrative strategy which blends prose with pages from scrapbooks, letters, and photographs, most famously a series of photos at the very end of the book which illustrate the fall of the so-called "Falling Man," a man who jumped from one of the Twin Towers on 9/11, in the style of a flip book.

<sup>59</sup> Aghoro, Natalie. *Sounding the Novel. Voice in Twenty-First Century American Fiction*. Heidelberg: Winter 2018, 212.

twists as a result of his unreliability while also allowing for a closer phenomenological tie between reader and narrator and a more stringent, unabated experientiality.

Ultimately, Oskar's fantasy escalates towards a surprisingly explicit imagination of violence.

JIMMY SNYDER. I never prank-called any retards.

ME. You were adopted.

JIMMY SNYDER. [*Searches audience for his parents*]

ME. And nobody loves you.

JIMMY SNYDER. [*His eyes fill with tears*]

ME. And you have amyotrophic lateral sclerosis.

JIMMY SNYDER. Huh?

ME. On behalf of the dead... [*I pull the skull of my head. Even though it's made of papier-mâché it's really hard. I smash it against JIMMY SNYDER's head, and I smash it again. He falls to the ground, because he is unconscious, and I can't believe how strong I actually am. I smash his head again with all my force and blood starts to come out of his nose and ears. But I still don't feel sympathy for him. I want him to bleed, because he deserves it. And nothing else makes any sense.*

DAD doesn't make sense. [...] *The only thing that makes any sense right then is my smashing JIMMY SNYDER's face. His blood. I knock a bunch of his teeth into his mouth, and I think they go down his throat. There is blood everywhere, covering everything. I keep smashing the skull against his skull which is also RON's skull (for letting MOM get on with life) [...] and the skulls of everyone else I know. THE AUDIENCE is applauding, all of them, because I am making so much sense. They are giving me a standing ovation as I hit him again and again. I hear them call*

THE AUDIENCE: Thank you! Thank you, Oskar! We love you so much! We'll protect you!

It would have been great."<sup>60</sup>

By breaking the fantasy of the play, Oskar is able to violently vent his frustration and helplessness. As with his inventions, he pictures his attack on Jimmy Snyder in a very realistic, detailed fashion, even going so far as to imagine how he “knock[s] a bunch of his teeth into his mouth” and repeatedly invoking large amounts of blood. The text implements the repetition of sentences and concepts as a narrative device: “I smash it against JIMMY SNYDER's head, and I smash it again. [...] I smash his head again with all my force and blood starts to come out of his nose and ears.” This repetition serves numerous functions. It intensifies the emotional emphasis with which the described action is performed. It textually enacts Oskar's intrinsic frustration, overload, and anger. At the same time, it performs the act

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<sup>60</sup> Safran Foer, 146–147 (all formatting adapted from original source). The two omissions are long lists of (1) things that don't make sense anymore (i.e., his mother, his father, but also Shakespeare and the gym ceiling) and (2) people whose skull Oskar imagines to smash in and for what specific reason, reasons that either negatively impact Oskar's life (i.e., his father's death) or make it hard for him to process his trauma (i.e., his mother's new boyfriend Ron who, from Oskar's perspective, helps her get on with life while he is left to struggle).

of smashing itself, an act that consists of Oskar's repetitive, mindless beating down upon his victim. Similarly to onomatopoeic words that both visually and auditorily reproduce their referenced sound, the act itself is reflected in the text's construction.

The recurring invocation of blood speaks to Oskar's sudden eagerness for relief through violence, but also for the fact that such a large amount of blood comes as an unexpected, shocking development: "His blood." "There is blood everywhere, covering everything." Satisfaction versus helplessness, reflected in arbitrary repetitions of blood and its extensive amounts.

Finally, the text interweaves these repetitions with Oskar's subjective, personal thoughts: "I can't believe how strong I actually am." "I want him to bleed, because he deserves it." "And nothing else makes any sense." In addition to Oskar's long lists of things that don't make sense anymore and people whose skull he wants to smash in (which also make use of a similar pattern of repetition), these personal thoughts highlight the very reason for Oskar's fantasy: him feeling helpless, him expressing his helplessness in taking total, violent control, and him only being able to exert that control in a fictional, made-up space. By formulating a child's thoughts in a direct fashion with no distancing, explanatory narration, the text is capable of putting Oskar's mind into words, even performing the intensity of his thoughts and emotion through the use of repetition, excessive listing of people that influence his emotional and mental state, and naturalistic imaginary violence that oscillates between a gory assumption of control and disbelief at the sight of Oskar's own destructive potential. Through the use of these text-specific tools, *Extremely Loud* creates a text-based experience of Oskar's inner state during an internalized outburst.

With the sentence "It would have been great," Oskar definitively reveals that this entire bloody tour de force was only a product of his imagination. Accordingly, it marks the end of the text's temporary transformation into a theater script as it returns to its original prosaic form. In the context of her study that focusses specifically on Oskar's relation to silence and sound, Natalie Aghoro proposes the interesting argument that "[t]he expression ['I just couldn't be dead any longer'] reveals Oskar's silence as a reluctant speechlessness, an inability to communicate with others directly. Oskar's inability to voice his thoughts and feelings results from the traumatic experience he ties to the death of his father[.]"<sup>61</sup> Indeed, Oskar's outwardly silence stands at conflict with his inner, "silent" speech which only we as readers experience from his highly subjective first-person perspective. Only within the safety of his thoughts can his knowledgeable, imaginative self come to full fruition, a circumstance

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<sup>61</sup> Aghoro, 194.



which can only be approached through an experiential first-person perspective if the text is to explore Oskar's internal struggle with trauma through fantasy and imagination as his only fully controllable coping mechanism. As Oskar bridges and subsequently blurs the boundaries between diegetic reality and fantasy, he enters a realm in which he is in control, in which an unresolved psychological issue becomes graspable. The reader may have more life experience, they may feel the metatextual need to intervene, to take on the role of a "mentor" who knows more than the child and explain the futility of their fantasy-based approach. However, instead of encouraging such a hierarchically separating "call for action," the text recreates Oskar's inner experience and imagination to enable an experiential insight. All that can be done is to step into Oskar's immanent worldview and mind, the outside and the inside, to *become him* in an almost metamorphous process and experience the effects of trauma from a distantly familiar perspective: that of a nine-year-old boy.

### III.3. *Gun Love*: The developing dream

A review of Jennifer Clement's *Gun Love*<sup>62</sup> (2018) in *Kirkus Reviews* observed that "Pearl's story takes place in a world both strange and familiar, in the fairy tale of her mother's imagination and in an America pockmarked by gun violence and poverty."<sup>63</sup> The novel tells the story of fourteen-year-old Pearl who, together with her mother, lives in a parked car at the edge of a trailer park in Florida. After her mother's death at the hands of a shooter, she is transferred to a foster family. There, Pearl is found by her former trailer park neighbor Corazón who takes her with her across the border into Mexico, along with a large amount of illegal firearms. The book's cover text promises a story "told from the perspective of a sharp-eyed teenager" that "exposes America's love affair with firearms and its painful consequences."<sup>64</sup> However, I would argue that *Gun Love* is rather the story of a girl's life at the edge of society in an interspace between a life of abject poverty and gun violence and the fading comfort of creativity and fantasy.

To highlight the importance of fantasy and imagination in relation to its protagonist, Pearl as the novel's first-person narrator mentions how her mother's imagination even brought forth her name—an intimate interrelation between fantasy and reality from the very first day of her life and forever on:

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<sup>62</sup> Clement, Jennifer. *Gun Love*. London: Hogarth 2018.

<sup>63</sup> "Clement, Jennifer: GUN LOVE," in: *Kirkus Reviews*, 1 Feb. 2018. *Gale Academic OneFile*, [link.gale.com/apps/doc/A525461508/AONE?u=fub&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=1b20387e](https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A525461508/AONE?u=fub&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=1b20387e). Accessed 21 Feb. 2023.

<sup>64</sup> Clement, cover text.

“My mother named me Pearl because, she said, You were so white. You came from a place that is far away from any normal birthplace like a hospital or clinic.”<sup>65</sup>

As mentioned in *Kirkus Reviews* (see footnote 63), it is true that many fantastical, imaginative observations are made by Pearl’s mother Margot.

“My mother could see inside a person and see broken glass. She could see splinters inside their bodies and the bottles filled with tears. I can see broken windows, my mother said. In a person’s body I can see the bathtub’s dirt ring and cigarette burns in the carpet. I can see all the little white Bayer aspirins.”<sup>66</sup>

Margot’s imaginative metaphor, like many others, echoes a distinct empathy for others, but also a subtle darkness, a pessimism reflected in her choice of somber imagery such as splinters, dirt rings, cigarette burns, and aspirins. Due to the intimate relationship between Margot and Pearl, this analysis of Margot’s fantasy is essential as it constitutes a central impression upon Pearl’s own worldview, something that she will later reproduce herself. The way in which her mother’s fantasies shape her perception of the world is put into words by Pearl herself:

“Since my mother translated the world for me, I understood everyone was walking around with secrets and broken bones and hurtful words that could not be washed away with soap.”<sup>67</sup>

Comparing her mother’s imagination to an act of translation, Pearl establishes her understanding of the role of fantasy in her life: to her, fantasy is a language-based process, a form of communication and translation. By depicting the act of imagination as an interplay between mother and daughter, *Gun Love* enacts Pearl’s subjective fantasy as a communicative, performative act between the child<sup>68</sup> and the adult, an act that Pearl will carry forth even after her mother’s sudden and tragic death. Thus, unlike *The Daydreamer* and *Extremely Loud*, *Gun Love* explores the child’s experiential imagination not exclusively as a private, internalized process, but also as a bilateral interplay between child and adult:

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<sup>65</sup> Clement, 13.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>68</sup> Although Pearl is already fourteen years old and therefore a teenager, her worldview is still similar to that of a younger child.

“We [my mother and I] liked to go on pretend road trips. I played that we were really driving somewhere. My mother always went along with my game. I was the driver. The seat would be pushed forward but my legs were still too short to reach the pedals. I steered the wheel, turning it in my hands, and pretended to drive. My mother would sit next to me on the passenger side. She’d check her lipstick in the rearview mirror, put on her sunglasses and turn on the radio. My mother made sure the car battery worked and, over the years, we bought new ones. This was the only maintenance she did on the car. We’d put on our seat belts. Okay, let’s go on a road trip, my mother would say. Leave skid marks. Go over the speed limit. Drive fast. Let’s get a ticket. Where do you want to go? I’d ask. On our pretend drives my mother talked about her life. I’d pretend to turn the wheel and she’d talk about St Augustine, where she grew up.”

Through a game of fantasy, mother and daughter enact their relationship. Through the mother’s imperative commands (“Leave skid marks. Go over the speed limit. Drive fast. Let’s get a ticket”), she almost turns their imaginary road trip into a race. Given that their car hasn’t moved in years and is in no shape to be driven anywhere, the stark contrast between their fantasy and what is realistically possible highlights the dissent of their existential situation: there is no place for them to go, not physically, not legally or socially. They are bound to their camping ground where they are thoroughly disassociated from society save for their few “neighbors,” and the only place where the two of them may move freely lies within the sphere of their make-pretend game.

Interestingly, despite being told from her first-person perspective, Pearl describes the fantasy in a very distant manner. Whereas Peter and Oskar experience their fantasies as something that physically manifests before them and is barely distinct from their diegetic reality, Pearl clearly demarcates their game as an imagination: “We liked to go on pretend road trips. I played that we were really driving somewhere. My mother always went along with my game. [...] I steered the wheel, turning it in my hands, and pretended to drive.” However, the further the scene progresses, the less Pearl alludes to the non-reality of their trip, especially because the subsequent actions are not fantasies but real occurrences, such as her mother checking her lipstick in the rearview mirror, putting her sunglasses on, or switching the car battery. Although these actions happen within the performative context of a pretend road trip, they are part of Pearl’s and Margot’s diegetic reality, and Pearl as a more distant, more mature narrator does not obfuscate the boundary between the two levels.

Nevertheless, Pearl still alludes to her young age by incorporating the still child-like properties of her body (“The seat would be pushed forward but my legs were still too short to reach the pedals.”), but also by the things she *doesn’t* say: there is no irony, no relativization

of their fantasy as “just a game.” Pearl doesn’t hide the fact that they only pretend, but she still describes their endeavor as a serious, real experience.

One may argue that *Gun Love* is a novel told from the perspective of an adult Pearl looking back on her childhood, which would explain her distanced style of narration. However, later in the novel, Pearl does decrease that distance, moving closer towards her own subjective experience as she, similarly to Peter and Oskar, mixes her perception of reality with fantastical elements and detailed dreams, especially in the context of serious conflict as Pearl comes into contact with the novel’s eponymous antagonist, an inanimate but murderously destructive force: firearms.

In *Gun Love*, firearms are both an object of culturally ingrained fascination and traumatic destruction. Many people own them, a new pastor wants to introduce them to the inhabitants of the camping ground, they stand at the center of a family’s illegal arms deals and ultimately lead to Margot’s sudden death, the novel’s major midpoint caesura. Thus, Pearl is heavily affected by the presence and impact of firearms before and after her mother’s death. Pearl processes her relation to firearms in two distinct dream sequences. Interestingly, both are described as semi-dreams, as dreams neither taking place in a fully asleep nor a fully awake state of mind: a “half-awake dream”<sup>69</sup> and a “daydream.”<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, the structure and imagery of these in-between sequences imply an interconnectedness, even reflecting Pearl’s internal development, while depicting firearms as an abstract, surreal set of objects that infiltrate Pearl’s imagination:

“The guns told me about a seven-year-old girl and twenty-two-year-old man shot in a drive-by shooting, two teenage boys fired at by cops, a two-year-old boy shot in a gang-related shootout in a park, twenty schoolchildren killed on a school bus, a mother dead in a supermarket, two women shot to death in a parking lot, twenty teenagers gunned down at the movies, a ten-year-old girl shot at a library, five college students slain at a football game, nine people shot at a church prayer meeting, a mother and daughter shot in a car, four nuns gunned down at a bus stop, eight eight-year-old girls shot at a ballet class, two policemen shot in their car, and a nine-year-old girl shot in a playground and shot again and again, bullets breaking trees to shreds, ninety holes in the sky from a machine gun, gunshots in a rainstorm killing raindrops, twenty bullets for the moon, words broken by gunfire, words pierced by bullets to the alphabet became a b c l r s t x z, lovers fallen, tears and bullets on the floor, my dearest, my-one-and-only, my little one, one-of-a-kind, we are all one-of-a-kind, and all lonely and all afraid and all looking for love bullets everywhere.”<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Clement, 98.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 229.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 98–99.

This sequence evolves from a list of unspecific but highly realistic, horrifying incidents of gun violence towards a sequence of abstract imagery that reflect Pearl's emotions and subjective perceptions in relation to guns and their destructive potential—an evolution from objectively factual to subjectively imaginative, marked by a sudden “again and again” that breaks with the monotonous listing of news-like events. However, at the very start of the entire dream sequence stands a common literary strategy often seen in connection with dreams, hallucinations, and acts of imagination: the anthropomorphization of an inanimate object, the firearms. The guns tell Pearl of the incidents in which they themselves were involved, an anthropomorphization that turns an inanimate antagonist into a personalized, self-conscious threat. As a result, from the now-established perspective of the guns, it may almost seem as if the guns are bragging about their prominent involvement in an extensive array of horrifying crimes. Furthermore, this personalization factors out the real perpetrator of gun crimes: the human shooter. Whereas the victims are present, their human murderer isn't. As they enter Pearl's dream, the reader experiences her relation to firearms as a personalized antagonism, a fear of its devastatingly murderous potential that evolves into a more abstract, almost surrealist illustration of bullets and their impact upon a set of fantastical elements: bullets that kill raindrops, pierce the alphabet, and a morbid conflation of bullets with love and tears, two images that are closely related to a set of tender, intimate emotions. This surreal sequence hints at an inner conflict: Pearl's strong desire for love and affection versus the destructive nature of bullets, objects that tear apart instead of bringing together. By depicting Pearl's dream as mechanism by which she processes her subconscious worries, desires, and impressions, also because it makes them more accessible or graspable to her as a young girl with an imaginative, fantasy-informed worldview (similarly to both Peter and Oskar), the reader is provided with an experiential insight into Pearl's consciousness, the very images and structures that populate her mind at sleep. Thus, the incorporation of dreams as unmediated sequences of images that indirectly reflect a child's inner conflicts and worries may also be considered a literary text's tool towards an experiential childhood perspective. If we now compare this scene to another dream sequence concerning Pearl's conflict with firearms, a sequence at the very end of the novel (it's actually the novel's very last, concluding passage) and after her mother's death at the hands of a shooter, Pearl's development is now reflected in the way in which this dream sequence has evolved in comparison to its predecessor:

“I lay among the guns and knew I lay among the deaths that had been and the deaths that were coming. The sunlight and speed [of the car] made me sleepy and I eased into the cradle-bag that

held my body. In my daydream I lay among skeletons, as gun parts were long femurs and ribs and short ulnas and ribs like the images in X-rays, X-rays of pieces of broken bodies broken, and I smelled gunpowder and maybe I smelled rust and blood and blood and rust. And the souls of animals and the souls of people were all around me and I heard a song of praise. Applause. I heard *Pearl, Pearl, Pearl* in congratulation.”<sup>72</sup>

In comparison to Pearl’s previous dream, the deadly effects of firearms now become palpable, manifesting themselves as a horrid collage of human remains and blood. In her dream, Pearl evokes the metaphor of gun parts as human bones. However, within the diegetic fantasy of her dream, this metaphor, which draws an obvious comparison alluding to a firearm’s ability to kill, becomes a real sight. Pearl compares these bones to ones she saw on X-ray images, an object she lends from her previous experience in reality, and further solidifies the relationship between guns and death through an olfactory element: the smell of gunpowder, rust, and blood. Her dream (and the novel as a whole) is then concluded by souls praising Pearl for reasons that remain unknown. Thus, *Gun Love* ends with Pearl being praised by the souls of dead humans and animals, the victims of the firearms that haunt her in her dreams—a generalized, strongly metaphorical summary of Pearl’s impressions and experiences with firearms that she is left with as Corazón takes her across the border and into Mexico. Interestingly, before she falls asleep and into her dream, Pearl does “lay among the guns” as the car is packed with unregistered firearms that are being smuggled into Mexico. Her dream therefore is grounded in her reality, almost a seamless transition from physically being surrounded by guns to being enclosed by guns as bones and skeletons in her dream. Similarly to Peter’s daydream in *The Daydreamer* or Oskar’s homemade jewelry in *Extremely Loud*, Pearl transfers diegetically real objects into her diegetic fantasy, her dream, where she adapts them to the respective, fantastical context. In Pearl’s case, this context is the trauma of her mother’s death (and death by firearms in general) and the involvement of firearms, a context she processes through a strongly metaphorical conflation of the two. This dream sequence also implements various repetitions: “broken bodies broken,” “rust and blood and blood and rust.” Almost making it sound monotonous or, at least, prominently accentuated, these repetitions experientially evoke a stronger image of brokenness as well as a stronger, more permeating smell. Pearl as narrator uses these repetitions to phenomenologically “enhance” the strength of these sensations as she herself experiences those sensations very strongly.

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<sup>72</sup> Clement, 229 (italics adapted from original source).

The development in comparison to Pearl's first dream is evident: the long listing of deaths has been replaced by an entirely metaphorical image. Whereas the metaphors in the first scene were abstract and, at times, almost poetically distant ("bullets for the moon," "words pierced by bullets to the alphabet became a b c l r s t x z"), they are now linked to specific images of death and blood ("X-rays of pieces of broken bodies broken," "rust and blood and blood and rust"). Through the imagery within her dream, the reader experiences Pearl's development; or, more specifically: the development of her relation towards firearms and the impression left upon her perception of the world following her mother's death. *Gun Love* creates an experiential teenage perspective that evokes Pearl's personal development through the semantic development of her semi-dreams' fantastical, surreal imagery. By bringing together real objects such as firearms, raindrops, the alphabet, or bones to form a surreal collage and thus bridging the boundary between fantasy and reality, the reader experiences a young girl's inner development and, consequently, mirrors the emotional resonance of those experiences phenomenologically in a bilateral convergence between narrator and reader.

#### **IV. Conclusion: A Return to Childhood?**

The coalescence of reality and fantasy within the subjective experience of the literary child and its textual (re)construction enables an experiential dialogue between the literary child and the phenomenologically involved reader: whereas the child retreats into fantasy to approach inner conflicts, issues, or circumstances which often-times lie beyond their grasp and experience, the reader is introduced to a child's innermost mental processes simulated in the form of a literary, fictional text. Through various narratological tools such as repetitions, changing forms and types of text, narrative distance, a choreographed interplay and switching between the levels of diegetic reality and diegetic fantasy, and the literal incorporation of a child's immanent thoughts and impressions, among others, the text recreates the child's worldview that does not transparently differentiate between the real and the imaginary. The trope of the coalescence between fantasy and reality, which an adult writer projects upon a hypothetical child, builds a phenomenological bridge between this hypothetical child's and the reader's perception, inviting the reader to physically and immanently "see through the eyes of a child," an experience which is transferred by way of tools unique to the art form of literature.

Consequently, it is possible to create an experiential child's perspective in literature by enacting a child's fantasy and imagination and purposefully blurring the boundary

between reality and fantasy. All three novels analyzed above have made use of this trope across various themes and in different ways.

Being a period of life that every human being once experienced, the subjective, experiential child's perspective appeals to a reader's past experiences while simultaneously drawing on cultural imaginaries of childhood as a set of established tropes. It can therefore be argued that the very framework within which a lasting fascination with the child's worldview is based is one that oscillates between reality and fantasy. At the same time a phenomenological "return to childhood" as well as an adult reinterpretation of what it must mean and how it must feel to be a child, the experientiality of a child's perspective in contemporary literature often aims to approach complex issues such as trauma or social inequality through the perception and impressions of a child. Not only does this open up a new perspective which is yet incapable of viewing these issues from an informed, rational position, but it also relies on its great potential for identification with a young, innocent protagonist worthy of protection.

Thus, the child's "multiple and multidimensional experiences, perceptions, understandings, and interpretations of the world that they themselves are not yet ready to express" (see footnote 1) find a highly effective if abstract form of expression within the literary child's imagination, a mindful retreat that intermingles the factual and the fantastic. And it is this immersive mind which the reader may gain phenomenological access to.

It is impossible to physically return to childhood, even through literature. Still, literature's fascination with the child is as vibrant and multifaceted as ever, and maybe it is through a pair of little eyes that we may understand an increasingly complex world more profoundly, clearly, and affectingly.



## Figures

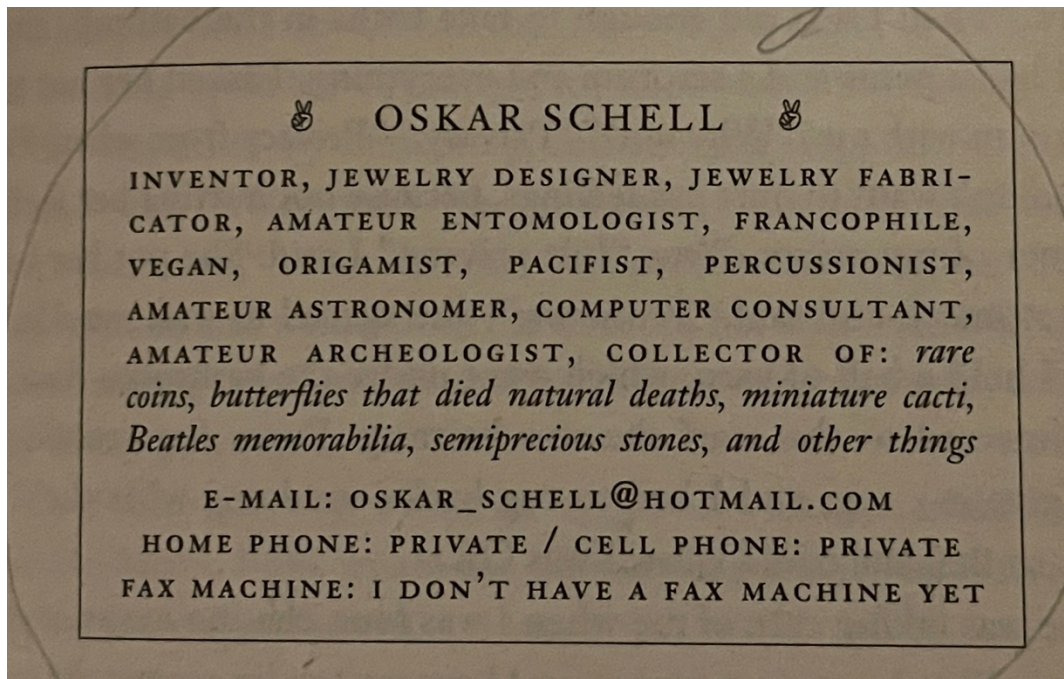


Fig. 1.: Oskar Schell's self-made business card, as printed on page 99.

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