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When Letters Fail – Silences and Blank Spaces in Jonathan Safran Foer's Literature

Speechlessness is one of the main concerns in the works of the American author Jonathan Safran Foer. This article shows how Foer's short story *A Primer for the Punctuation of Heart Disease* (2002) supports the reading of his novels *Everything is Illuminated* (2002), *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005), and *Here I Am* (2016) when it comes to motives of speechlessness, silence, and blank spaces – in a metaphorical as well as material sense. The short story proposes a system of signs that is expected to help with the expression of what per definition cannot be put into words. With reference to poststructuralist literary theory (Derrida, Hayles, West-Pavlov, Westphal), the article demonstrates how *A Primer for the Punctuation of Heart Disease* and Foer's novels philosophically address fundamental problems of language regarding its 'mediatedness'.

Every text begins as a tiny catastrophe: an interruption of silence. Much is at stake, it follows, in the way a text begins, in precisely how it negotiates the treacherous border between silence and speech.

Matthew Gumpert, *The End of Meaning*

There are many different reasons for a conversation to stop or to pause. There are suggestive silences, pleasant silences, helpless silences, aggressive silences, awkward silences, silences used as punishment, and silences used as protection. They are defined by the absence of words, but are nonetheless charged with meaning. Since in these moments verbal communication is per se out of the picture, we have to draw on other means in order to come to an understanding of what the respective silence could signify. At least, this seems to be the assumption of the narrator of Jonathan Safran Foer's short story *A Primer for the Punctuation of Heart Disease* (2002). He proposes a system of signs that should help with the expression of what per definition cannot be put into words.

Everything is Illuminated (2002) and *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005), the first novels of Jonathan Safran Foer, were bestsellers and also have been adapted for the screen in prominent Hollywood productions.¹ With *Eating Animals* (2009), Foer published a non-fiction book, which has received much attention. In 2010 he published the art book *Tree of Code*, and finally, in 2016, his long awaited third novel *Here I Am*. Foer's novels are very accessible and although they deal with sad

¹ Liev Schreiber directed the movie *Everything is Illuminated* (2005) in which Elijah Wood played the lead. *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, directed by Stephen Daldry, was released in 2011 starring Sandra Bullock, Tom Hanks, and Thomas Horn.

and horrible topics – the Holocaust, the 9/11 terror attacks, an (imagined) earthquake that destroys Israel – they are entertaining and very cute: most of his protagonists are charmingly peculiar people, whose social phobia turns the everyday into an adventure. This cuteness bears the risk of overseeing the intelligent dramaturgy and the underlying philosophical considerations of these books.

This article seeks to point out that the little-known short story *A Primer for the Punctuation of Heart Disease* delivers an interesting key to the more extensive and prominent novels of Foer. This is the case especially when it comes to the topic of speechlessness, which constitutes – and that is the second underlying thesis of this paper – one of the main concerns of Foer's literature.² In particular, communication problems that are connected to the expression of feelings can be observed in *Everything is Illuminated*, *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* and *Here I am* – on the content level as well as regarding the typeface.



1. The Punctuation and its Function

The proposed language [...] will be a tonal language like Chinese, it will also have a hieroglyphic script [...]. This language will give one option of silence. When not talking, the user of this language can take in the silent images of the written, pictorial and symbol languages.

William S. Burroughs, *The Electronic Revolution*

A Primer for the Punctuation of Heart Disease starts from the insight that misunderstanding is unavoidable: "Familial communication always has to do with failures to communicate." (Foer 2005a: 8) The signs that the narrator of the short story describes, serve as symbols that allude to something unspoken, some inexpressible remains, which seems to be created in every conversation that revolves around feelings. Equally, they constitute "Barely Tolerable Substitutes" for the expression of emotions that are actually too big to be expressed. In the latter case, the signs should help to at least "approximate" the emotion:

² In order to stress this thesis and outline the issues that his books commonly address, I'll often speak in the following of "Foer's protagonists", referring to all of his novels. This manner of speaking is not meant to eliminate the differences and individualities of the respective narrations, which will be acknowledged and demonstrated in several close readings throughout the article.




 The 'severed web' is a Barely Tolerable Substitute, whose meaning approximates 'I love you,' and which can be used in place of 'I love you.' Other Barely Tolerable Substitutes include, but are not limited to:

→|←, which approximates 'I love you.'
 ♪□, which approximates 'I love you.'
 ♪, which approximates 'I love you.'
 ✕→, which approximates 'I love you.'

Fig. 1: Barely Tolerable Substitutes (Foer 2005a: 7)

The "Barely Tolerable Substitutes" should relieve the sign-users from the burden of speaking out loud the unbearable phrase "I love you". The signs' functionality is, furthermore, to give meaning to silences or to give hints to their accurate interpretation. The very first sign the narrator – who remains without a name throughout the story – introduces is □, the "silence mark", which "signifies an absence of language" (ibid.: 1): a painful kind of silence that is caused mostly by the incapability to express one's feelings. In contrast, there is ■, the "willed silence mark", which "signifies an intentional silence" and is a strategy to protect oneself and withdraw from the conversation – it is "the conversational equivalent of building a wall over which you can't climb, through which you can't see" (ibid.).

In opposition to these "silence marks", there is ??, the "insistent question mark" that "denotes one family member's refusal to yield to a willed silence" (ibid.: 2). Due to the fact that these signs are created for the purpose of expressing something that cannot be simply translated into words, the narrator has to paraphrase them and show their usage by applying them in little case studies. He explains about twenty such signs throughout the story and tries them out in more and more long and complex dialogues. In this way, the reader learns not only about the sign system but also about this family. The "primer" is of course more than a pragmatic, linguistic manual; it is an eccentric family portrait. The usage of the "insistent question mark" is demonstrated in a dialogue between the narrator and his mother:

 The "insistent question mark" denotes one family member's refusal to yield to a willed silence, as in this conversation with my mother:

"Are you dating at all?"
 □
 "But you're seeing people, I'm sure. Right?"
 □
 "I don't get it. Are you ashamed of the girl? Are you ashamed of me?"
 ■
 "??"

Fig. 2. The "insistent question mark" (Foer 2005a: 2)

Another sign he introduces to signify silent moments in conversations is \sim , the "pedal point". It "signifies a thought that dissolves into a suggestive silence" and is one of the rare signs that has a positive connotation: "the thought it follows is neither incomplete nor interrupted but an outstretched hand." (ibid.: 4) The narrator mostly uses the "pedal point" in conversations with his brother, since "he is the one most capable of telling me what he needs to tell me without having to say it" (ibid.). Again, the aim of the punctuation is to manage with as few spoken words as possible. In this respect, we should consider one more sign: the "unxclamation point", depicted by a reversed exclamation point. "As it visually suggests, the 'unxclamation point' is the opposite of an exclamation point; it indicates a whisper." (ibid.: 2) This sign can come in pairs:


 Theoretically, the 'extraunxclamation points' would be used to denote twice an unxclamation point, but in practice any whisper that quiet would not be heard. I take comfort in believing that at least some of the silences in my life were really extraunxclamations.

Fig. 3. The "unxclamation point" (Foer 2005a: 3)

The narrator hopes that some of the silences he has experienced have been in effect filled with really, really quiet whispers and thus have not been moments of actual speechlessness, but the application of "extraunxclamation points". This hope foregrounds the paradoxical nature of the proposed sign system. Being punctuation, these signs do not have verbal equivalents; they constitute a supplement to written language only. Other than their description suggests, the signs therefore cannot sup-

port the immediate conversation, but, at most, can help to understand the conversation retrospectively.³ What does the narrator actually mean, when he states that "silence mark" is "used" (ibid.: 1) or when he claims to "inflict willed silences" (ibid.: 2) upon his mother? How can he hope to understand by means of these signs if he has been speechless in certain situations or if he has at least whispered something very quietly?

The reader is left in the dark with this paradox. The most obvious approach would probably be to read these signs as emoticons, glyphs that have become a major component of text-based computer and mobile phone communication. Similar to emoticons, the *Punctuation of Heart Disease* adds "a paralinguistic component to a message" (Derks / Bos / von Grumbkow 2007: 843). It enables the reader to better estimate the intonation of the quoted phrases and thus, to interpret the subsequent silence more accurately. However, from a more theoretical perspective, I am critical of this equation. While emoticons embody collective and generally readable "social cues" (ibid.) like a smile or a wink, the signs of the punctuation stand rather for feelings that have neither a conventional nor any bodily expression. Also, this "primer" is the only text in which the reader ever encounters these signs. Other than in the dialogues that should illustrate their usage, they are not applied anywhere else.

This leads to the conclusion that these signs are not used to establish a convention, but rather to act upon the real world in an immediate way.⁴ Unlike emoticons, they do not seek to make the conversation proliferate, but rather to end it by means of an immediate expression of the feelings they convey. The practice of these signs seems to follow the idea that only in non-conventional communication – and thus with the help of a non-arbitrarily functioning language – can meaning be transferred in an unambiguous way and thus be unmistakable. A language that is not based on convention, but effects a direct, immediate understanding is of course a mythic-magical idea (cf. Eco 1995). This reading allows an understanding of the proposed punctuation as a reflection on and a demonstration of a fundamental philosophical problem of language, instead of considering it merely as an additional sign system. Therefore, this article will not apply the signs to the dialogues in Foer's novels – although this would in many cases make perfect sense – but carve out the topics

3 For further considerations on the nature of this punctuation as well as on this paradoxical usage cf. Grillmayr (2017).

4 I have argued this more extensively (cf. ibid.).

and motifs that become apparent in reading his novels with the specific sensibility that *A Primer for the Punctuation of Heart Disease* mediates.

2. Feeling Too Much – A Recurrent Motif

The family is the cradle of the world's misinformation. There must be something in family life that generates factual error. Over-closeness, the noise and heat of being. Perhaps something even deeper, like the need to survive.
Don DeLillo, *White Noise*

As the quoted dialogues of *A Primer for the Punctuation of Heart Disease* show, this visual support to the spoken word seems to be necessary in situations in which strong emotions literally leave the protagonists speechless. This is the reason why the "primer" is named after one concrete and great source of fear in this family: "we have forty-one heart attacks between us, and counting." (Foer 2005a: 1) Furthermore, the narrator explains that "silence mark" is used mostly in conversations with his grandmother "about her life in Europe during the war" (ibid.). In the course of the short story, it comes to the fore that it is the incurable disease of loved ones, as well as the Holocaust, that is always on the horizon and turns the members of this ordinary Jewish European family into scared, thin-skinned, and oversensitive people.

In Foer's novels, most of the time, silence equals speechlessness. It is the product of an incapability of expression and thus a painful experience. It is not only a temporal state of awkwardness, but stays with the protagonists and is the symptom as well as a strategy of psychological repression and denial. "Silence can be as irrepressible as laughter. And it can accumulate, like weightless snowflakes. It can collapse a ceiling." (Foer 2016: 317) Not only the "willed silence mark" builds walls, but also the unintentional "silence mark" comes in pairs, stacks up and creates a barrier not only between the conversing persons but also between them and what they want to express.

In this short story we thus find, highly compressed, the main issues that Foer's books commonly address. What counts for the family portrayed in *A Primer for the Punctuation of Heart Disease*, counts for basically all of his protagonists: They are extremely sensitive people, who are constantly overwhelmed by their emotions; they are always busy coping with strong embarrassment, a general and often vague fear of loss, but also unbearably strong positive feelings for other people; they experience love as maddening, unhealthily intense emotion: "it was too much love for

happiness" (ibid.: 378). Their feeling-too-much manifests itself in their inability to find a "safe distance" to their environments: "Everything was either too close or too far." (Foer 2002: 130) They have to actively shield themselves from the outside: "I spent my life learning to feel less." (Foer 2005b: 180) "I am feeling everything", says the nine-year old Oskar in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, after having lost his father in the terror attacks of 9/11, "my insides don't match with my out-sides" (ibid.: 201).

This feeling-too-much is displayed by their way of communicating; they express themselves in a very careful and well thought out manner and seem always to struggle to find the right words and expressions, anxious to avoid painful misunderstandings. As already mentioned, it is a catastrophe that evokes their paralyzing over-emotionality. Against this background, the punctuation can also be seen as a strategy to free the language from ballast of the past. The signs create new ways of producing meaning and thus shall relieve the old language from, e.g., ideological contamination that necessarily happens over history.⁵ The more subtle and detailed meaning, which the signs mediate, should help to decontaminate the spoken words to a certain extent.

This leads to the conclusion that the fundamental problem the protagonists have with language is that it either carries too much meaning or too little. Either the words are contaminated – charged with past, unwanted meaning – or they are deficient and constitute mere approximations to what they should express. The analysis of *A Primer for the Punctuation of Heart Disease* brings these two aspects, which all of Foer's novels share, to the fore. As has been argued, these signs should create an immediacy that words, whether spoken or written, cannot produce. Even if they are symbols and thus based on convention, the description of the narrator suggests that

5 In *Everything is Illuminated* there is a passage where lovers create cut-up-messages from newspapers. Here it becomes clear what is meant by the contamination of language. The protagonists have to cope with the fact that in times of war, each and every word, also the most usual one, is affected by war: "The 'M' was taken from the army that would take his mother's life: GERMAN FRONT ADVANCES ON SOVIET BORDER; the 'eet' from their approaching warships: NAZI FLEET DEFEATS FRENCH AT LESACS; the "me" from the peninsula they were blue-eyeing: GERMANS SURROUND CRIMEA; the 'und' from too little, too late: AMERICAN WAR FUNDS REACH ENGLAND; the 'er' from the dog of dogs: HITLER RENDERS NON-AGGRESSION PACT INOPERATIVE . . . and so on, and so on, each note a collage of love that could never be, and war that could." (Foer 2002: 233) This has been argued more extensively in Grillmayr (2017).

the proposed signs can, somehow, express feelings more directly than verbal paraphrasing.⁶

A paramount example of this diagnosis is the story of Thomas Schell, one of the main protagonists in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*. Having lost his ability to speak during the Second World War, he communicates only through writing. He writes phrases in notebooks in order to show them to people he wants to address. When there is no paper at hand, he writes on his skin: "I wear only short sleeves, even when it's cold, because my arms are books, too." (Foer 2005b: 132) Moreover, he has tattooed "Yes" and "No" on his palms. His speechlessness is not only highly symbolic for his traumatic history, but also brings the material aspect of language to the fore.⁷ Communicating only through writing occupies a lot of space: "I went through hundreds of books, thousands of them, they were all over the apartment, I used them as doorstops and paperweights." (ibid.: 28) Paradoxically, the mute Thomas Schell lives among his words in the most literal sense. As his conversations always leave a written trace, the aforementioned problem of contamination can be well observed here. If the last page of his respective "daybook" is filled with text, Thomas Schell has to recycle the phrases which he has used over the day. Consequently, absurd palimpsests can occur – as in this conversation with Ms. Schmidt, who asks him to marry her:

I flipped back and pointed at, "Ha ha ha!" She flipped forward and pointed at, "Please marry me". I flipped back and pointed at, "I'm sorry, this is the smallest I've got". She flipped forward and pointed at, "Please marry me". I flipped back and pointed at, "I'm not sure, but it's late". She flipped forward and pointed at, "Please marry me", and this time put her finger on "Please", as if to hold down the page and end the conversation, or as if she were trying to push through the word and into what she really wanted to say. (ibid.: 33)

6 As will be examined more thoroughly later in this article, this fact is interesting from the point of view of poststructuralist literary theory. Jacques Derrida prominently accused the western "logocentric" worldview of "phonocentrism", a preference for the spoken word over writing that roots in the false conviction that speech is closer to the world than the written word (cf. Derrida 1976: 11–12). However, the *Punctuation of Heart Disease* tries to reestablish a (utopian) unity of word and world that cannot be accomplished in speaking, but only in the writing process – in this sense the proposed signs can be compared to the magic-mystical reading of the hieroglyphs as well as the hermeneutic tradition of the Kabbalists (cf. Grillmayr 2017).

7 In a more detailed analysis of this symbolism, the motif of writing on the body would have to play a particular role. As Michel de Certeau noted in his considerations on "The Scriptural Economy", "the law constantly writes itself on bodies": "A whole tradition tells the story: the skin of the servant is the parchment on which the master's hand writes." (de Certeau 1988: 140) In this context, the reader is of course at once reminded of the horrid practice of tattooing identification numbers on the left arms of the inmates of the Nazi concentration camp Auschwitz.

Furthermore, this way of conversing once again takes into question the mediation aspect of language. In functional everyday dialogs, Thomas Schell's way of communicating normally works, because his daybook-phrases then constitute a one-to-one transcription of what he would have said verbally. Other situations reduce his manner of expression to sheer absurdity: "if something made me want to laugh, I'd write 'Ha ha ha!' and instead of singing in the shower I would write out the lyrics of my favorite songs, the ink would turn the water blue or red or green, and the music would run down my legs." (ibid.: 18) We consider laughing and singing as bodily practices and needs. The translation into written language robs these moments of all immediacy and thus makes explicit the aforesaid problem of language creating a distance between the speakers/writers and the world. Once again, we can recognize the wish for a non-verbal, immediate expression, which of course is a utopian idea of language.⁸

3. The Speechlessness of a Blank Space – The Novels' Type Face

Thomas Schell's speechlessness also manifests itself on another level, which is significant for the analysis of Foer's work: the type face. Undeniably, *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* fits the description of Bertrand Westphal, who states that the "postmodern novel is, like poetry, about 'space'" (Westphal 2011: 21). He speaks in this regard, of "an aesthetic that mobilizes the blank spaces between the paragraphs and operates on the real, material space of the page" (ibid.). This argument is embedded in a discourse that is commonly referred to as Spatial Turn – the foregrounding of spatial aspects in the analysis of social and cultural practices as well as in art forms, sometimes considered as a paradigm shift.⁹ In *The practice of everyday life*, a central reference in the Spatial Turn discourse, Michel de Certeau distinguished between 'space' and 'place' and prominently defined space as "a practiced place" (de Certeau 1988: 117). He describes this definition with reference to literature:

Thus the street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into a space by walkers. In the same way, an act of reading is the space produced by the practice of a particular place: a written text, i.e., a place constituted by a system of signs. (ibid.)

⁸ Naturally, this idea is not only present in social-political utopias, but is also highly relevant in the religious and mystical realm. As I have shown, it is valid to consider this wish for immediate expression in respect to the Jewish hermeneutic tradition that has had a strong influence on Foer's writing (cf. Grillmayr 2017). This is explicitly addressed in Foer's most recent novel *Here I Am*: "Judaism has a special relationship with words. Giving a word to a thing is to give it life. [...] It is perhaps the most powerful of all Jewish ideas: expression is generative" (Foer 2016: 350).

⁹ For a useful definition and overview, cf. Arias / Warf (2009).

Thus, besides the focus on space as a motif in literature, theorists in that tradition have drawn attention to the spatial-material conditions of literature, which in their argumentation is foregrounded by new literary strategies of writing:

Space remains unthought within traditional meta-literature because it is the invisible framework which makes literature possible in the first place. [...] To take a banal example, the space of the white page, the background against which writing becomes readable, is something we ignore, but which enables the very act of literary communication. [...] What would be the words on the page without the printer's ink of which they are made, or the spaces between them? Such aspects of writing go unnoticed until we are confronted with a manuscript written with a quill pen, or a concrete poem which actively works with the space between the words as part of its material. (West-Pavlov 2009: 119)

The typeface of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* keeps reminding the reader of the physical presence of the text in her/his hands. Also, as will be shown in this section, the physical text is closely linked to the content of the narrative. According to de Certeau, we could state that here the literary *space* has a tight connection to the *place* of the text. This can, once again, be demonstrated by reading the story of Thomas Schell. In the already mentioned "daybooks", Thomas Schell only writes one sentence per page, almost as if the phrases risk contaminating each other, creating misunderstandings. Thus, the pages on which we read the story of Thomas Schell are often almost completely white. This is contrasted with the letter he writes after his first encounter with his grandchild Oskar. Here the language flows over. The letters are set more and more tightly, until they become an undecipherable black mass (cf. Foer 2005b: 279–284). On that account, we have to conclude that the blank spaces not only signify silences, but they give a face to the more specific speechlessness of the protagonists, which is a result of their fundamental language issue.

Striking also are the blank spaces on the pages about Oskar's grandmother, Ms. Schmidt. As in the case of Thomas Schell, her story is told through letters that she wrote, but never sent.¹⁰ These chapters are entitled "My feelings" and stand out also for their only loosely covered pages. In most cases, every sentence constitutes a separate paragraph. If several phrases come together at all, they are separated by gaps. These blank spaces are hesitations of a very shy and introverted person and, of course, also suggestive silences – after having read *A Primer for the Punctuation of Heart Disease*, the reader can imagine "pedal points" behind almost every one of

10 Ms. Schmidt's letters are addressed to Oskar. Thomas Schell's letters are addressed to their common son, who died in the 9/11 attacks and who Thomas Schell never met, because he left before the son's birth.

Ms. Schmidt's phrases. They are thus invitations to take the time to listen more closely. It is a way of pondering words as well as a way of sealing off the sentences from each other in order to attribute a richer and more subtle meaning to the words. Her letters thus read like poems:

When I was a girl, my life was music that was always getting louder. Everything moved me. A dog following a stranger. That made me feel so much. A calendar that showed the wrong month. I could have cried over it. I did. Where the smoke from a chimney ended. How an overturned bottle rested at the edge of a table. I spent my life learning to feel less. Every day I felt less. Is that growing old? Or is it something worse? You cannot protect yourself from sadness without protecting yourself from happiness. (ibid.: 180)

In this last, conclusive phrase, we encounter once again the problem of immediacy or the problem of gaining a "safe distance" to the world. Ms. Schmidt has to learn to "feel less" in order to live more light-heartedly, but this avoidance of feeling-too-much means at the same time dismissing strong happy sentiments. As expressed by their peculiar usage of language, the protagonists are either too close or too far in respect to the surroundings that affect them.

Furthermore, the white spots on the book pages, on which Thomas Schell's and Ms. Schmidt's story is told, can be linked to their quirky practice of dividing their apartment into "Something Places" and "Nothing Places". The latter are defined as areas "in which one could be assured of complete privacy, we agreed that we never would look at the marked-off zones, that they would be nonexistent territories in the apartment in which one could temporarily cease to exist" (ibid.: 110). Intended to allow them a temporary, healthy break from themselves and their marital conflicts, the "Nothing Places" grow and grow and in the end absorb all "Something Places". "There came a point [...] when our apartment was more Nothing than Something, [...]. We got worse." (ibid. 110–111)

The blankness here signifies an emptiness and complete loneliness. It expresses the trauma of World War II that Thomas Schell and Ms. Schmidt suffer beyond recovery. The connection between the typeface of the pages and the motif of the "Nothing Spaces" is elucidated by the description of Ms. Schmidt's project to write her memoirs. Thomas Schell encourages her to do so: "I heard from behind the door the sounds of creation, the letters pressing into the paper, the pages being pulled from the machine, everything being, for once, better than it was and as good as it could be, everything full of meaning." (ibid. 119–120) After a long time, she hands

him two thousand empty pages. He remembers that there is no ribbon in the writing machine and thinks that she didn't see that she was producing only white pages, because she is almost blind. "I realized your mother couldn't see the emptiness, she couldn't see anything." (ibid. 124) In the book, this fact is not only narrated, but shown. Thomas Schell says, "but this was all I saw" (ibid. 120), and three white pages follow.

Later, the reader learns Ms. Schmidt's perspective: "I went to the guest room and pretended to write. I hit the space bar again and again and again." (ibid. 176) At first sight, this can be interpreted as an act of revenge against her husband. However, the letters we get to read in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, which represent her actual memoirs, are also full of gaps and blank spaces. She says of herself: "My life story was spaces." (ibid.) The thousands of white pages she gives to Thomas Schell are thus not only an instrument to hurt him but also the materialized emptiness she feels regarding their life.

4. Withoutspacesnocoherentsentencewouldexist – Concluding and Conciliatory Remarks

We always return to literature and the mimetic arts in our explanations because, somewhere between reality and fiction, the one and the others know how to bring out the hidden potentialities of space-time without reducing them to stasis.

Bertrand Westphal, Geocriticism

No letters, no pictures. The reader is confronted with the whiteness of the page that she/he normally tends to ignore. Not even the *Punctuation of Heart Disease* could make out the signification of this vast and painful silence of Ms. Schmidt. Nonetheless, in general, the blank spaces and the silent moments in Foer's literature can also be read in a positive and productive way, in that the "space of the white page [...] enables the very act of literary communication" (West-Pavlov 2011: 119). Russel West-Pavlov elaborates on this statement as follows: "Space, like silence, is feared. Yet space and silence make sense, meaning, possible. Withoutspacesnocoherentsentencewouldexist." (ibid.: 16) This declaration is not as banal as it might appear at first sight. One of the most famous and productive concepts in postmodern literary theory partly depends on exactly this insight: Jacques Derrida's *différance*. The philosopher defines the "fundamental property of writing [...] as *spacing*: diastem and time becoming space" (Derrida 2001: 272f.). It is the (structural) difference between letters, words, and sounds that makes meaning possible. Derrida's

différance makes this movement of language visible and describes it as temporal as well as spatial. He introduces the neologism *espacement* (spacing) in order

to underline the active participation of spaces in the production of meaning [...]. Far from being a neutral void in which objects are placed and events happen, it becomes a medium with its own consistency and its own agency. (West-Pavlov 2011: 16–17)

As Derrida writes: "Originary writing, if there is one, must produce the space and the materiality of the sheet itself." (Derrida 2001: 263)¹¹ *Différance* implies the rejection of the idea of a privileged center or origin of meaning.¹² Hence, no word or expression is closer or farther from truth, reality, and presence – categories that lose importance in the poststructuralist theory.

In respect to this theoretical background, another underlying principle that is at work in all of Foer's books can be identified: "With writing, we have second chances." (Foer 2002: 144) As has been argued, the arbitrariness of language is portrayed as curse: in this famous gap between *les mots et les choses* there is constantly misunderstanding and the words are contaminated with uninvited past meaning. However, exactly this arbitrariness of language – and its principle based on the play of *différance* – also provides the freedom to rewrite history. Writing is considered here as a creational process that bears the opportunity of "building the world anew" (Foer 2005b: 119–120). This is highlighted by the *Punctuation of Heart Disease* which points to the fact that the meaning of words and expressions, even of the most basic daily phrases, can never be understood completely; even the simplest conversation can never be interpreted exhaustively. The blank spaces stand for the insurmountable distance that words put between us and the world, but at the same time they constitute space for something to happen. Foer's protagonists experience language as a *sliding block puzzle*; it is annoying that there is always an empty spot, but without this empty spot the puzzle pieces could not move at all and could never be brought into a meaningful order. In this sense, blank spaces and speechlessness also prove to be necessary, if not healing.

Even if this article focuses on the three novels and the short story *A Primer for the Punctuation of Heart Disease*, an analysis of the blank spaces and silences in

11 Derrida comes to this conclusion in his analysis of Sigmund Freud's description of the unconsciousness, or the dream, as structured like a language: "The dreamer invents his own grammar". (Derrida 2001: 262) In this chapter ("Freud and the Scene of Writing") he also makes the connection to the idea of an originary language and the hieroglyphic code.

12 "To say that *différance* is originary is simultaneously to erase the myth of a present origin. [...] It is a non-origin which is originary" (Derrida 2001: 255).

Foer's books would lack a crucial example without the consideration of *Tree of Codes* (Foer 2010). This art book can be read as a material metaphor for what has just been stated. To create it, Foer reduced the text of Bruno Schulz's short story collection *The Street of Crocodiles* (1934), thus producing a new and completely different narrative.¹³ However, in this case, the reader does not encounter white pages or blank spaces, but actual holes. The erased sentences are die-cut out of the pages, confronting the reader with an art book that is delicate to handle and gives no indications as to how it should be read. A linear reading – page per page – is possible, but through the holes the words of the next and the previous page are showing. Bruno Schulz was a Galician Jewish artist who was killed in the Holocaust. He is highly important to Foer – for his style of writing as well as for his tragic history (cf. Foer 2008: vii–x). As N. Katherine Hayles points out in her analysis of the book, "Foer's erasures can be seen as aimed at mourning the loss of Jewish cultural heritage in the Holocaust and recovering it in a new sense through creative interpretation" (Hayles 2013: 227). Here, the reader is ascribed a very active role. Of course, in any text she/he is the one to fill the blank spaces, '*die Leerstellen*', but here, as in all non-linear text forms, this fact is augmented and becomes visible.¹⁴

This article has examined how the short story *A Primer for the Punctuation of Heart Disease* supports the reading of Foer's novels *Everything is Illuminated*, *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, and *Here I Am* in terms of motives of speechlessness and silence or to blank spaces – in a metaphorical as well as material sense. It could be observed, on the one hand, that in Foer's literature most moments of silence are in fact caused by the speechlessness of the protagonists and are thus an unpleasant or even painful experience. In conclusion, it can be stated that, on the other hand, the *Punctuation* also implies the positive and empowering aspect of blank spaces that has been discussed in the last part of this paper. At the end of Foer's predominantly sad, thoughtful short story, we find the encouragement of a productive rewriting of one's destiny. The sign ←, standing for "backup", indicates a second chance regarding misinterpretation: "in our best, least depressing moments,

13 "Schulz's translated text contains 37,483 words, Foer's 3,815, so about nine out of every ten words have been eliminated." (Hayles 2013: 227) "Foer's manipulation goes beyond erasing words: he extends it to morphemes and phonemes, creating the zoom effect in another way by focusing attention on the molecular dimension of language" (ibid.: 229f.).

14 '*Leerstelle*' (the blank) is a central notion of reader-response criticism and has been coined by Wolfgang Iser in *The Act of reading* (1978).

we *try* to understand what we have failed to understand. A 'backup' is used: we start again at the beginning, we replay what was missed and make an effort to hear what was meant instead of what was said." (Foer 2005a: 8) And even if not all silences were "extraunxlamations" – quiet whispers instead of speechlessness – there is, at least in writing, also a second chance to express oneself, as suggested by the sign {}: the "should-have brackets", standing for "words that were not spoken but should have been" (ibid.). The narrator of *A Primer for the Punctuation of Heart Disease* finally imagines all the "should-have versions" of his family's conversations and sews "them together into a new life, leaving out everything that actually happened and was said" (ibid.).

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