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## Slaughterhouse Dresden: Literary Memory in the Works of Kurt Vonnegut and Jonathan Safran Foer – Between Satire and Kitsch

The debates about memories of, and the memorial culture surrounding, the bombing and destruction of Dresden in mid-February 1945 was, and is, an emotionally charged and strongly polarising historical, political and cultural minefield. The myths bound up with the metamorphoses of Dresden from a European »city of culture« to a German »victim city« are so strong that they allow the former »Florence on the Elbe« to become a synonym for the terrors of »total« war. Although compared to other German cities Dresden neither suffered the greatest amount of destruction to its urban infrastructure nor the greatest number of fatal casualties caused by air raids on Nazi Germany, it nevertheless has a unique position among German cities as a synonym for the »total war« that turned its allegedly »innocent« civilian population into victims. In his excellent study of the political pre-emption of the memorial and remembrance culture and the definitional authority relating to the destruction of Dresden, Australian historian Tony Joel identified five essential aspects: 1. the image of Dresden as a European city of culture established long before the Second World War; 2. the fact that, even today, the Allied motives and decision-making processes related to the Dresden bombings are still not completely explained; 3. the timing of the air raids, coming as they did near the end of the war, and the fact that the city had been generally spared attacks of this nature, allows serious questions to be raised about a military and/or strategic justification for the operation; 4. the almost terrifying effectiveness of the air raid and its consequences and 5. the dispute – still current today – as to the actual number of fatal casualties which responsible estimates put in the five-figure range<sup>1</sup> and manipulative interpretations<sup>2</sup> at six-figures<sup>3</sup>.

Till today, the anniversaries of the bombing attacks of the 13 and 14 February 1945 are used as the occasion for various political groups to assert their interpretive sovereignty over German memorial

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1 See: Matthias Gretzschel: *Als Dresden im Feuersturm versank*, Hamburg 2004, 90: »There has been no final conclusion as to the number of victims. [...] Most serious historians and Dresden city administration assume there were around 35,000 fatal casualties.«

2 Axel Rodenberger (*Der Tod von Dresden*, 1951) was the first to suggest a six-figure number, viz. 400,000 dead. Historian and Holocaust denier, David Irving clearly orientates himself on this in his book *The Destruction of Dresden* (1963). Since then the number 135,000 has been circulated in a number of questionable studies. See also: Gunnar Schubert: *Die kollektive Unschuld. Wie der Dresden-Schwindel zum nationalen Opfermythos wurde*, Hamburg 2006, 49-61.

3 Tony Joel: *The Dresden Firebombing. Memory and the Politics of Commemorating Destruction*, London/New York 2013, 6.

and remembrance culture.<sup>4</sup> The result is that Dresden has developed into a veritable »memory battleground«. <sup>5</sup> Whoever has the temerity to take part in the debate, to make a statement or undertakes even a partial analysis must count on a bruising. Now one might think that if one is concerned with the literary depiction of the destruction of Dresden, then the territory would be a little less contested. But this is by no means the case, not least because of the »air warfare and literature« debate stirred up by W. G. Sebald. Neither is the discourse about an »appropriate« literary depiction of the suffering of the German population as a result of the Allied air warfare a less dangerous minefield. In this regard the role of literature as a central medium of memorial culture, as a way of dealing with and processing national traumata but also in the way it creates and continues to perpetuate national myths, should not be underestimated.<sup>6</sup> Even if literary texts cannot hinder war and its attendant horrors, it is capable (in the best case scenario) of at least altering the perspective on past wars and thus changing their meaning<sup>7</sup>. But the literary/aesthetic debate is also stamped with the effects of the struggle for control over the definitional and interpretive sovereignty as well as the creation of a literary canon that flanks the national memorialisation discourse. And this also contributes – depending on its orientation – to the construction of a master narrative.

The present article, however, is not concerned with the depiction of the air raids in German (language) literature yet again but, rather, with two US American novels in which the destruction of Dresden plays a central role: Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five or The Children's Crusade* (1969) and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005). In US American literature and cultural studies the air-war-and-literature debate has taken on another accent – not least because of the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre on the 11 September 2001. It is now less concentrated on the bombings than their target – urban centres and their destruction. Against this background the novels of the two authors are presently considered in the context of the *Literature of Urbicide*.<sup>8</sup> In the anthropomorphism on which this is based – the notion of the city as a (human) organism that can be killed – there are hints that the destruction is directed as much against the urban space as it is against the civilian population. Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* was one of the first novels that was concerned with the consequences of the allied bombings of Nazi Germany.<sup>9</sup> An explicitly anti-war novel, it is not only

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4 See: Joel: The Dresden Firebombing, 37-39.

5 Ibid., 234.

6 See: Eduardo Mendieta: *The Literature of Urbicide: Friedrich, Nossack, Sebald, and Vonnegut*, in: Theory and Event, Vol. 10, No. 2 (2007), online-resource, paragraph 9.

7 See: Patricia Waugh: *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, London/New York 1984, 129.

8 See e.g.: David Campbell/Stephen Graham/Daniel Bertrand Monk: *Introduction to Urbicide: The Killing of Cities*, in: Theory and Event, Vol. 10, No. 2 (2007), online-resource.

9 See: Mendieta: op.cit. paragraph 1.

one of the most widely known literary texts dealing with the air raids on Dresden,<sup>10</sup> it has, meanwhile, become regarded as one of the 100 best English language novels of the twentieth century. The novel stimulated a highly controversial discussion the year it was published – not least because of the heterogeneous writing and the satirical treatment of the highly charged subject matter. In some states of the USA Vonnegut's most influential work – which for decades now has had a fixed place internationally as a school set text – was the victim of censorship. In 1972 the eponymous film version was released and awarded the jury prize at Cannes Film Festival.

The title of the novel refers to the address (»Schlachthof fünf«)<sup>11</sup> of a prisoner of war camp located in the converted complex of the Dresden slaughterhouse in Ostragehege in Friedrichstadt.<sup>12</sup> In a cold storage cellar, deep below the surface, Vonnegut and other American<sup>13</sup> prisoners of war survived the devastating bombing attack on Dresden. He was part of the first labour gang who were forced to collect and dispose of the corpses. Vonnegut's writing can be distinguished from the German language counterparts which attempt to articulate wartime atrocities in words by the fact that he also deals with issues related to problems of representation – the inability of language to capture what has been seen and experienced – in the novel itself. In order to do that Vonnegut invents an authorial figure who, in an implicit author-as-narrator role, explains to the reader the difficulties experienced in writing the novel. It is only more than ten years afterwards – in the middle of the Vietnam War – that he is in the position of being able to work through his experiences as literature. In 1969 the author talked to students of the University of Iowa about the writing of the novel:

*»Anyway, I came home in 1945, started writing about it, and wrote about it. This thin book is about what it's like to write a book about a thing like that. I couldn't get much closer. I would head myself into my memory of it, the circuit breakers would kick out; I'd*

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10 Since 2008 NightwalkTeam Dresden offers a thematic tour: »In the footsteps of Kurt Vonnegut – Slaughterhouse No 5 Tour Dresden«; see [www.kurtvonnegut-tour.com](http://www.kurtvonnegut-tour.com).

11 Kurt Vonnegut: *Slaughterhouse Five or The Children's Crusade* [1969], New York 2007, 153.

12 A photo of the complex can be found at: Gretzschel: *Als Dresden im Feuersturm versank*, 67.

13 At the beginning of 1945 around 3.000 American prisoners of war lived in Dresden. See: Hermann Rahne: Zur Geschichte der Dresdner Garnison im Zweiten Weltkrieg 1939 bis 1945, in: *Verbrannt bis zur Unkenntlichkeit. Die Zerstörung Dresdens 1945*. Book for the exhibition at the Stadtmuseum Dresden February to June 1995, Altenburg 1994, 121-135.

*head in again, I'd back off. This book is a process of twenty years of this sort of living with Dresden and the aftermath.»<sup>14</sup>*

The fact that Vonnegut witnessed the destruction of Dresden as a prisoner-of-war imparts a high degree of authenticity to the text. This leads to a situation where the novel is most often used as evidence of the inhumanity and brutality of the Allied attack on Dresden in spite of the fact we are dealing with a literary, i.e. fictional, depiction that nevertheless has an undeniable and convincingly authentic effect. In this context it is conveniently forgotten that the novel is an extremely complex and multi-layered piece of writing narrated, in the main, from the perspective of the US American prisoner-of-war, Billy Pilgrim, who has obviously returned to his homeland severely traumatised after his experiences in Dresden. Reading the text is not only complicated by the various narrative perspectives that run in parallel but in addition there are a mixture of literary genres ranging from an academic discourse via science fiction to satirical and grotesque passages<sup>15</sup>. In the process of co-optation of the novel by representatives of the federal German victim discourse who present Vonnegut's text as evidence of the disproportionate brutality and inappropriateness of the air raids on Dresden's civilian population, the novel is very often reduced to a single narrative line in which the attack by the Allies is depicted as barbaric. Such an act of intentionally false reading completely rejects the generally implied agreement about the nature of fiction by mistaking literature (fiction) for reality. And that is symptomatic of this context. Vonnegut takes issue with this fatal confusion of fact and fiction in a scene in the novel in which a certain Maggie White questions science fiction author Kilgour Trout about one of his readings:

*»Did that really happen?« said Maggie White. She was a dull person [...].  
»Of course it happened,« Trout told her. »If I wrote something that hadn't really happened, and I tried to sell it, I could go to jail. That's fraud!«<sup>16</sup>*

Readers who want to reduce Vonnegut's novel to an authentic eye witness account prove themselves to be – just like Maggie White – naive recipients at best, literally dull illiterates in regard to fiction and the fictional. One indication that the novel in no way seeks to be a realistic eye witness account can

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<sup>14</sup> Quoted in: Said Mentak: *A (Mis)reading of Kurt Vonnegut*, New York 2010, 135.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 202.

<sup>16</sup> Vonnegut: *Slaughterhouse-Five*, 171, emphasis in original

be found in the Baroque-sounding title: »This is a novel / somewhat in the telegraphic schizophrenic / manner of tales / of the planet Tralfamadore, / where the flying saucers / come from.«

This preamble is clearly intended to inform us that the following novel should in no case be regarded as a realistic narrative in the sense that autobiographical documentation can be. And the author-narrator quite clearly gives us to understand that highly traumatic experiences – here the Nazi atrocities, the Second World War and the associated obliteration of cities – are almost impossible to capture in a realistic style of writing: »When I got home from the Second World War twenty-three years ago, I thought it would be easy for me to write about the destruction of Dresden, since all I would have to do would be to report what I had seen.«<sup>17</sup> The novel's protagonist, from whose perspective the narrator tells the story, has been severely traumatised by the experiences as a US American soldier in the Second World War. He shows clear symptoms of a post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and it sometimes seems as if he has lost his mind in the most literal of senses<sup>18</sup> such as when he descends into other times and places – an unequivocal sign of disassociation. With its experimental, fragmented and multi-perspective style of writing and the self-referential quality of the reflections about depicting (or the impossibility of depicting) violence, Vonnegut's novel is indisputably in the category of postmodern literature.<sup>19</sup> It is, furthermore, a fact that the novel is studded with satirical – sometimes even grotesquely exaggerated – elements and passages such as the oft-repeated mantra-like interjection »So it goes«.<sup>20</sup> This is usually a laconic commentary following a description of the most horrible atrocities or humanitarian catastrophes such as »Billy had seen the greatest massacre in European history, which was the fire-bombing of Dresden. So it goes«.<sup>21</sup>

Against this background it is hardly surprising that W. G. Sebald does not lose one word over Vonnegut's novel in the Zurich lectures which he later published as *On the Natural History of Destruction* (2003). Although Sebald explicitly concentrates on the (lack of) depictions of the bombings in German language literature, he certainly should have at least made a reference to the fact that, with *Slaughterhouse 5*, Kurt Vonnegut had made what has remained the most important and best-known contribution to air warfare literature.<sup>22</sup> And as early as 1969 too. Sebald's total failure to acknowledge Vonnegut's anti-war novel may be the result of a dilemma. If Sebald had mentioned *Slaughterhouse 5* at all then

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17 Vonnegut: *Slaughterhouse-Five*, 2.

18 At one point in the novel it reads: »The doctors agreed: He was going crazy.« Vonnegut: *Slaughterhouse-Five*, 100, emphasis in original.

19 See: Mentak: *A (Mis)reading of Kurt Vonnegut*, 155f.

20 The interjection is to be found over 100 times throughout the novel.

21 Vonnegut: *Slaughterhouse-Five*, 101.

22 See: the anonymous review to the American edition of W. G. Sebald's essays with the title, *On the Natural History of Destruction* (2003). In: Complete Review; [www.complete-review.com/reviews/sebaldwg/luftlit.htm](http://www.complete-review.com/reviews/sebaldwg/luftlit.htm) (accessed: 18 Dec. 2014).

he would have had to admit that the novel did not conform to his notion of the ideal air warfare novel in any way. Sebald, who criticised the dearth of literary texts that had found »the right dimensions for description of the German catastrophe«<sup>23</sup>, was more than clear about his notion of what constituted the ideal air warfare novel: it should be? »concrete and documentary in character«,<sup>24</sup> not offer a »purely aesthetic reconstruction«.<sup>25</sup> At the same time it should extend »the borders of what language can convey«.<sup>26</sup> Following Sebald's theory, these are expectations of autobiographically motivated, psychologically comprehensible, sensitive depictions of the terrors of the bombings and the civilian suffering from a German point of view while at the same time there is a general renunciation of any aestheticisation in the treatment. In short, it is the perspective of the perpetrators themselves. Now Vonnegut's description comes not from the perspective of the *German* people as perpetrators but from that of a US American prisoner of war who experiences the bombing of Dresden from *two perspectives*: as a *victim of the attack* and as *one of the perpetrators*<sup>27</sup> i.e. the Allied armed forces that razed Dresden. It may be that an unequivocal positioning of the novel within the memorial and remembrance cult around the destruction of Dresden is actually impossible thanks in no small way to the double role of the author. When, after twenty-three years, Vonnegut was finally able to begin with his novel project he found that almost no-one in his USA homeland knew about the destruction of Dresden even though it had been a »howling success«.<sup>28</sup> His request to the Air Force for access to the military documents about the bombing mission were rejected on the grounds that they were still »top secret«.<sup>29</sup> That forced Vonnegut to rely on other sources. In 1964 – the zenith of US American military involvement in the Vietnam War – the American edition of David Irving's *The Destruction of Dresden* was published. It is significant that Vonnegut only quotes from the forewords to the accounts by US American and British representatives of the Air Forces. In them the attempt is made to justify the bombing of German cities – also by reference to Coventry and Buchenwald – but, on the other hand, to apologise for the large numbers of casualties among the civilian population too. However, the forewords from the military also contribute to the further perpetuation of a number of the myths about the destruction of Dresden which – like Irving's contested writings – are still influential today. This is particularly the case with regard to the numbers of fatal casualties in Dresden which Irving sets at 135,000. And it is on this questionable basis that a gro-

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23 W. G. Sebald: *On the Natural History of Destruction* [2003], Modern Library Edition, 2004, 81.

24 Sebald: op. cit. 58.

25 Ibid. 93.

26 Ibid. 30.

27 See: Mendieta: op. cit. paragraph 1.

28 Vonnegut: *Slaughterhouse-Five*, 191.

29 Ibid. 11.

tesque comparison is drawn between it and the number of victims after the atom bomb was dropped on Hiroshima where *only* 71,379 people were killed<sup>30</sup> and the perverse conclusion arrived at that the bombing of Dresden was »much worse [. . .] than Hiroshima«. <sup>31</sup> The image of »Dresden as a German Hiroshima«<sup>32</sup> did, in fact, develop during the Cold War to such an extent that it became a characteristic and highly resistant element of memorial discourse in both parts of Germany.

Despite acknowledging devastating effects of the Allied air raid tactics of »strategic« or »moral bombing« and the merciless depictions of the devastated city with all its rubble and corpses, Vonnegut maintains a distance to his subject that refutes emotional identification with what is described in the greatest possible detail. To that extent the author makes a radical break with what one would expect from »air warfare literature« in a Seebaldian sense. On the one hand this is achieved by sarcastic commentary and satirical passages, while on the other there are references to the atrocities that were systematically carried out during the Nazi régime against innocent and defenceless fellow citizens. Vonnegut pushes the representation of Dresden as a city of culture as well as the depictions of Nazi atrocities and the bombing of Dresden into something close to a fairytale using satirical and grotesque undertones. This induces a certain estrangement which has the effect of distancing us from the events he describes. For the US American prisoners of war who arrive in Dresden, this »Florence on the Elbe« appears to be a fairytale city:

*»[...] the doorways framed the loveliest city that most of the Americans had ever seen. The skyline was intricate and voluptuous and enchanted and absurd. It looked like a Sunday school picture of Heaven to Billy Pilgrim.«<sup>33</sup>*

Dresden, was »light opera«<sup>34</sup> – in the middle of the Second World War. If the famous skyline of Dresden had survived the war it might well have been in competition with Schloss Neuschwanstein<sup>35</sup> as the ideal candidate for a miniature edition for Disneyland which was opened in 1955. The author's direct

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**30** See: Vonnegut: *Slaughterhouse-Five*, 188.

**31** Vonnegut: op. cit. 191.

**32** See: Joel: *The Dresden Firebombing*, 73.

**33** Loc. cit. 148.

**34** Loc. cit. 150.

**35** It acted as the model for Sleeping Beauty's castle.

references to operettas and fairytales in connection with Dresden's silhouette exposes the potential kitsch factor and thus prevents any descent into emotional memory kitsch.

Even if *Slaughterhouse-Five* has been repeatedly mentioned in connection with the air-warfare-literature discourse and is one of the few novels that are concerned with the Dresden bombings, it must be clearly stated that although it is quite possible that the destruction of Dresden provided the grounds for its writing, it actually only takes up a fraction of the whole narrative. The focus on uricide literature falls short in this respect too.

With *Slaughterhouse-Five* Vonnegut wrote an anti-war novel<sup>36</sup> in which the technological possibilities of mass extermination through war that had been developed since the First World War are pilloried: »[...] every day my Government gives me a count of corpses created by military science in Vietnam. So it goes.«<sup>37</sup> In the process the author refers to the strategic destruction of Dresden, dropping the atom bomb on Hiroshima and the Vietnam War as exemplary. In the novel itself the author's antiwar stance is repeatedly brought into question and confronted with the theory that war is an anthropological constant equivalent to a natural catastrophe: »Why not write an anti-*glacier* book instead?«<sup>38</sup>

The theory of the naturalness of war is, it is true, very present in the novel, pushing to the foreground in part because of the prayer-wheel-like repetition of »So it goes«. But Vonnegut would hardly have published the novel if he had been of the opinion that war was a force of nature, that it was in the nature of humankind to inflict the greatest possible number of atrocities on each other and that nothing could be done about it. One might raise the objection that the anti-war impetus that characterises the novel runs the danger of de-historicisation and de-contextualisation – especially in regard to the destruction of Dresden. The connection in Vonnegut's novel between the Nazi atrocities and the bombing and destruction is, in fact, a balancing act, especially considering that the bombing of Dresden is described as »the greatest massacre in European history.«<sup>39</sup> This, however, is seeing it from Billy Pilgrim's perspective and not that of the author/narrator. References to the Holocaust only occur in a few places in the novel. This is probably due to the perspective and state of knowledge of the protagonists at the time that Dresden was destroyed.<sup>40</sup> Auschwitz was liberated by the Red Army only a few days before the Dresden raids – on the 27 January 1945 – and it was not till later that the Allies documented in detail the pre-

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36 Ibid. 3: »Is it an anti-war book?« / »Yes,« I said. »I guess.«

37 Ibid. 210.

38 Ibid. 8.

39 Ibid. 101.

40 The narrator explicitly draws attention to the fact that US and British prisoners of war could not have known that the soap and candles that were provided for them by the Germans were made from the fat and bones of people murdered in the extermination camps. See: Vonnegut: *Slaughterhouse-Five*, 96.



vailing conditions and the extent of the Nazi extermination machinery. Nevertheless, Vonnegut does succeed in linking the Holocaust with the firestorm created in the wake of the bombings on a semantic level which still rejects<sup>41</sup> – even if it is very subtle – any suggestion of equating or offsetting Holocaust victims against those killed in the bomb attack because that would suggest a causal connection between the systematic annihilation of innocent people in Nazi extermination camps and the acceptance of civilian victims by the air raids on Dresden. In July 1998 Vonnegut once again clearly formulated his stance in a conversation with Volker Hage:

*»[...] Auschwitz is a gaping wound in all of us – it makes a mockery of humankind. [...] I have always been accused of setting them both on a par – which was never my intention. In February 1995, the 50th anniversary of the Dresden bombings, came around a number of stations asking me if there was anything I would like to say. I said not one word. For me the date lay too close to the 50th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz and the other camps.«<sup>42</sup>*

While Vonnegut makes use of the not particularly original imagery of fire to make the connection, he nevertheless understands how to produce a special feeling of horror under this cloak of apparent banality. In Vonnegut's novel the victims of the Nazi extermination camps are represented by candles and soap which »were made from the fat of rendered Jews and Gypsies and fairies<sup>43</sup> and communists, and other enemies of the State.«<sup>44</sup> The British and American prisoners of war who are supplied with exactly these candles and bars of soap while in their prison in the cellar of the former Dresden slaughterhouse, apparently know nothing of these origins. It is only later that the author/narrator establishes that the candles that lit their way to their prison were made »from the fat of human beings who were butchered by the brothers and fathers of those schoolgirls who were boiled.«<sup>45</sup> They too, the corpses of the schoolgirls (standing for all civilian victims of the Dresden bombings) have now melted like candles. In keeping with this imagery, the narrator compares the »corpse mines« in Dresden with »wax muse-

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41 In keeping with revisionist or rightwing populism a special and revolting term was invented for the destruction of Dresden – »bombing holocaust«. See: Joel: *The Dresden Firebombing*, 244.

42 Volker Hage: Von allen Luftwaffen bombardiert. Gespräch mit Kurt Vonnegut, in: *Zeugen der Zerstörung. Die Literaten und der Luftkrieg*, Frankfurt a.M. 2003, 281-286, at 286.

43 *Slaughterhouse-Five* was one of the first novels to acknowledge the fact that homosexuals were among the victims of the Holocaust.

44 Vonnegut: *Slaughterhouse-Five*, 96.

45 Ibid. 116.

ums«. <sup>46</sup> In this context the candle becomes a haunting image since it also stands for remembrance or the memory of a person who has died – in the context of Christian symbolism too.

Thirty-six years later the young US American author Jonathan Safran Foer undertook the attempt to transpose Vonnegut's project of an anti-war novel <sup>47</sup> into the twenty-first century <sup>48</sup> and to link it to the experiences of the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre on the 11 September 2001.

The nine-year-old protagonist of the novel *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005), Oskar Schell, lost his father in the attack on the World Trade Centre. The severely traumatised boy sets off to find the last traces of his father and the people that his father met just before he died. In order to be able to comprehend his own pain and suffering, the nine-year-old looks for comparable experiences by searching the internet for eye-witness accounts of similar catastrophes or attacks. It is only gradually that the reader finds out that the Schell family is connected to a further traumatic experience: the bomb attack on Dresden. Oskar's grandfather, Thomas Schell senior, survives the attack on Dresden but loses his pregnant wife, Anna, to the flames. After the war the grandfather marries Anna's sister, (the experience of survival and loss of a loved one providing a common bond) and they emigrate to New York. However, Thomas Schell never gets over the loss of Anna and leaves his now pregnant wife. Decades later, after the death of his son in the World Trade Centre, the still severely traumatised grandfather surfaces once again in New York. We learn almost nothing about the German background of the Schell family, their situation in Dresden before the air raids or their position in – or in relation to – the Third Reich.

Foer's *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* – exactly like his first novel, *Everything Is Illuminated* – became an instant international bestseller, was voted the best book of the year 2005 in the USA and awarded countless prizes. The novel is among the most popular »post 9/11 fiction« and was filmed in 2012 with Tom Hanks, Sandra Bullock and John Goodman in the main roles. Literary critics did not praise Foer's second book quite as euphorically as his first but were predominantly positive nonetheless. Only a few authors criticised the sentimental tendencies and the emotional pathos in the text. <sup>49</sup> John Updike stated that the novel was »sentimentally watery«. <sup>50</sup> And it was quite in keeping with this

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid. 214.

<sup>47</sup> There are numerous direct references to Vonnegut's novel, see: Magali Cornier Michael: An Anti-War Novel for the Twenty-First Century: Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* Rewrites Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, in: Nancy A. Barta-Smith/Danette DiMarco (eds.): *Inhabited by Stories: Critical Essays on Tales Retold*, Newcastle 2012, 14-31, at 26.

<sup>48</sup> See: Michael: *An Anti-War Novel for the Twenty-First Century*.

<sup>49</sup> See: Laura Miller: Terror Comes to Tiny Town: Jonathan Safran Foer channels the horror of 9/11 through the eyes of a child, in: *New York Magazine*; <http://nymag.com/nymetro/arts/books/reviews/11574> (accessed: 18 Dec. 2014).

<sup>50</sup> John Updike: *Mixed Messages: Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, in: *The New Yorker*, March 14 (2005); <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2005/03/14/mixed-messages> (accessed: 18 Dec. 2014).

that *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* was advertised on the internet pages of the online book dealers as »Jonathan Safran Foer's heartrending New York novel.«

Whereas Vonnegut succeeds in maintaining a (precarious) balance between the depiction of historical content and the tendency to de-historicise or equate Nazi perpetrators who became victims of the air war and victims of the Holocaust by employing satire and grotesque, in his novel Foer drifts into almost complete arbitrariness and catastrophe kitsch. Where Vonnegut creates a distance to his subject matter by rejecting the psychological characterisation<sup>51</sup> that would facilitate emotional identification, in his text Foer underlines the factor of emotional binding which, despite the fragmentary style, is written throughout in a conventional and realistic narrative style.<sup>52</sup> By choosing a child protagonist who lost his father in the 9 September 2001 attacks on the World Trade Centre, Foer reinforces the psychological identification and empathy factors: »[...] my dad died the most horrible death that anyone ever could invent«<sup>53</sup> (Oskar Schell).

And where Vonnegut's novel possibly stands out because, while he does make use of the Holocaust as a point of reference – even if only in a subliminal way – he refrains from setting it in a direct line with the wartime atrocities of Dresden, Hiroshima and Vietnam, in Foer's case the aspect of the extermination of Jews and other »*Volksfeinden* [enemies of the people]« in the Third Reich completely disappears and the destruction of cities such as Dresden and Hiroshima in a war context is directly equated with the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre in New York.

The one-sided concentration on the uricide aspect – though one might well ask whether the term uricide can properly be applied to the destruction of just two (though symbolically important) New York buildings – increases the tendency to de-contextualise with an attendant de-historicisation of events to which the novel makes reference. This not only leads to, inter alia, the interchangeability of the events at a phenomenological level, but also to changes in their literary and aesthetic representation: what the events have in common is the aspect of conflagration in which people become living torches whose bodies eventually melt into unidentifiable masses<sup>54</sup> irrespective of how this was caused – by incendiary bombs, atom bomb or attack by kerosene-laden aircraft. In this form of depiction a highly questionable *aestheticisation* of (humanly caused) catastrophes takes place and, at the same time, the events are *naturalised*. Where there is a description like »the bombs kept falling, purple, orange and

51 In the novel itself the relevant statement is: »There are almost no characters in this story, and almost no dramatic confrontations, because most of the people in it are so sick and the listless playthings of enormous forces. One of the main effects of war, after all, is that people are discouraged from being characters.« Vonnegut: *Slaughterhouse-Five*, 164.

52 See: Rachel Sykes: A Failure of Imagination? Problems in 'Post-9/11' Fiction, in: Robert Fanuzzi/Michael Wolfe (eds.): *Recovering 9/11 in New York*, Newcastle upon Tyne 2014, 248-262, at 249.

53 Jonathan Safran Foer: *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* [2005], Boston/New York 2006, 201.

54 See: Michael: *An Anti-War Novel for the Twenty-First Century*, 15.

white<sup>55</sup> one is transported back into Ernst Jünger's *In Stahlgewittern* [Storm of Steel] (1920ff.) with its notorious aestheticisation of the events during the First World War as one of »nature's spectacles«. In Foer's novel the omission of active subjects means that the events of war and terrorist attacks are also equated with quasi natural catastrophes: »the bombs were like a waterfall«<sup>56</sup>, »[a] ball of fire rolled out of the building and up«<sup>57</sup>.

This concentration on the purely phenomenological level serves to create arbitrary linkages or the equalisation of differing catastrophes on the basis of the characteristics they have in common: the widespread death by fire of great numbers of people following an enemy attack of an urban centre. This lines up Foer and his novel as part of the general boom in remembrance (memoir) literature which consciously attempts to profit from an atmosphere of catastrophe. The genre follows the principle of arbitrariness: the crucial thing is that it deals with the experience of extreme violence or catastrophic events. The issue of cause – whether it derives from a natural catastrophe, ecological disaster or another, intentionally caused form of destruction of life and living space – becomes an entirely background consideration. Forms of literary depiction of this nature which first and foremost seem to be concerned with exploiting the spectacular aspects of catastrophes by creating images that have a superficial emotional effect and are simultaneously touching and poignant, avoid all forms of logic and thus any sober analysis. The result of this literary strategy is the de-historicisation and de-contextualisation of catastrophe scenarios of all kinds by what might be termed a reverse-engineered thought process – from effect to cause. Applied to the bombing of Dresden this skewed logic means that: »[...] because it proved extraordinarily destructive the Dresden raid is divorced from the rest of the strategic area-bombing offensive and portrayed as if it were planned and executed as some exceptionally malevolent attack.«<sup>58</sup>

If literature – as has been suggested above – not only plays a central role in the interpretation of particular historical events but also with regard to the continued inscription or deconstruction of certain myths that have collected round them, then one must accept the proposition that literary texts which tend to decontextualise and de-historicise are most likely to contribute to confirming traditional myths and ways of seeing – as Foer's novel does. While it certainly counts as a piece of so-called »post-9/11 fiction«,<sup>59</sup> and taking into account the fact that the Dresden bombings only play a minor role here, Foer's few relevant passages concerning the destruction of Dresden nevertheless reproduce numerous myths. The myth of the »city of innocents« is one such example, as are the bombing of a city which up till

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55 Foer: *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, 213.

56 Ibid. 212.

57 Ibid. 225.

58 Joel: *The Dresden Firebombing*, 78.

59 See: Sykes: *A Failure of Imagination? Problems in 'Post-9/11'-Fiction*.

then had been spared (a theory which, in the light of present day knowledge is completely untenable), survivors of the firestorm being 'hunted' and shot at from the air by fighter planes and »fairytales«<sup>60</sup> of predatory animals roaming the bombed streets which had to be tracked down and killed.

Just like Foer's choice of a nine-year-old as a protagonist, the zoo episode<sup>61</sup> is apt to effect a superficial emotionalisation as well as evoke readers' sympathy. In contrast to Vonnegut, Foer is not concerned with maintaining distance to his subject matter but consciously relies on an emotionalisation strategy that counts on an identification with the suffering itself instead. And thus the depiction of suffering, detached from context and history, becomes something approximating catastrophe pornography.<sup>62</sup> Its well-intentioned form when combined with the gestus of an anti-war novel results in kitsch in which »strong affective reactions [are evoked] in passages which hardly justify them«, while in others there is a lack »of affect in respect of what is serious«.<sup>63</sup>

Foer's novel poses almost no questions and leaves everything in the domain of vagueness so it remains unclear as to whether the grandfather of the child protagonist who survived the Dresden bombings was a Nazi or not. Neither National Socialism nor the Holocaust are mentioned in the novel. In the final analysis it is also perfidious to draw associative parallels between the bombing of Dresden and the 11 September terror attacks. This subliminally implicates that the novel is taking sides with those who called the military attack on Dresden »wicked terrorist attacks« (and, as an immediate consequence, as a »war crime«) and went on to call the Allied Air Forces »Anglo-American air-gangsters«.<sup>64</sup> This list includes the Nazi Ministry of Propaganda, Holocaust denier David Irving and representatives of a revisionist memorial culture.

Translated by Tim Sharp

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**60** Referring to various questionable accounts by so-called eye witnesses, Gunnar Schubert talks of »lies« and a »Great Dresden Swindle«. See also Schubert: *Die kollektive Unschuld*, e.g. 20.

**61** See also Schubert: op.cit., 20-28.

**62** Kurt Vonnegut concurs, stating that there is »something pornographic« about »looking at these things that one shouldn't really be seeing: wounds, death«. Conversation with Volker Hage, in: *Zeugen der Zerstörung*, op. cit. 284.

**63** Adorno: *Was bedeutet: Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit?* 556.

**64** See: Joel: *The Dresden Firebombing*, 67f.