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Course Paper

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Objects as Historical Beacons in *Everything is Illuminated*

Liev Schreiber made his directorial debut in the film *Everything Is Illuminated* (2005), a movie for which he also wrote the screenplay which was adapted from the novel of the same name by Jonathan Safran Foer. The film follows Jonathan Safran Foer (a fictionalized version of the aforementioned Foer) on his journey through Ukraine to find the woman, Augustine, who saved his grandfather during World War II. Foer arms himself only with a photograph of Augustine and the name of the supposed shtetl (or Jewish village) in which she lived during the war, Trachimbrod. His journey unites him with two travel guides, Alex and his grandfather, and the three (along with the grandfather's Seeing Eye dog) find Trachimbrod, and uncover their family and personal histories in the process.

Foer is a collector of family possessions and mementos, and throughout the film, he continues to collect these mementos (for example, he collects a grasshopper upon their arrival at Trachimbrod). By the end of the film, the characters realize that these objects are not simply mementos for themselves, but are something else entirely; the objects are beacons of history. They serve as a reminder of the past, a guide for the future, and an illuminator for history forgotten; they exist not only for those in possession of them in the present time, but they exist for those who have had possession, and for all those who will have possession in the future; and,

they serve all of these purposes at once. Alex declares at the end of the film, “everything is illuminated in the light of the past” which is “always along the side of us,” which sums up this theme of the film – time and history are fluid entities which can be represented by these dynamic memento objects.

In writing their versions of this story, both Schreiber and Foer (the novelist) used their specific personal experience with this narrative to bring their versions of the story to life. Both have a Jewish ancestry, with their grandfathers living (and escaping from) shtetls in the Ukraine during WWII. Both also underwent similar journeys to the Ukraine in an attempt to discover their grandfathers’ shtetls, but neither of them was successful. However, both authors have stated that simply their involvement with this story has given them “illumination” on their past and that the experience alone was enough to remember the past and have it “be alongside” their lives (Schreiber, Foer). In this essay I will argue, therefore, that not only do the objects in the film serve as multi-dimensional personal history beacons as previously mentioned, but that the film itself serves this same function.

Jonathan Safran Foer (the novelist) made his journey to the Ukraine his second year of college, intending to write a chronicle of this journey (“Biography”). He was traveling to find the woman, Augustine, who helped his grandfather escape from Trachimbrod. However, when he sat down to write his chronicle, what was produced was his novel, *Everything is Illuminated*. He has stated, however, that he is not disappointed in his trip in the least (“Biography”). He says that he was never remotely close to finding Augustine or Trachimbrod, but he has since learned that the purpose of the trip was not to find her – that in simply looking for her, he had already found her (“Biography”). Schreiber had a similar experience in traveling to the Ukraine. However, Schreiber’s experience began and ended with the film. Upon learning of Foer’s story,

Schreiber began work on the screenplay, and made his journey to the Ukraine when scouting for filming locations (Murray). Schreiber, too, was searching for his grandfather's village, but did not succeed. Along his journey, however, Schreiber sought out a tour guide as similar to the film's Alex as he could find: someone trying desperately to emulate American culture with what little information they had on the subject (Murray). This brought him an even closer identification with the fictional narrative and he stated that the filming was "painfully real the entire time" (Murray). However, Schreiber has also found illumination and peace with his grandfather's history and he owns it all to the story (Murray). Thus, Schreiber and Foer both have an obvious personal parallel with the plot of the film. However, Foer continuously argues that this narrative is not about the plot, but rather is about the feeling and thoughts associated with the plot, so I will now expound upon these feelings and thought associations (Foer).

The music style is the first notable aspect of the film which draws attention to its cultural significance. Gypsy/folk music is playing before the film's action starts, even in the opening title sequence. The score features eight original folkloric songs as well as some written by Russian/Ukrainian bands. Schreiber has been collecting gypsy and Russian folk music since his childhood, and he used songs from his own collection for this purpose (Schreiber). Additionally, Eugene Hutz, who plays Alex, is a member of the gypsy punk band Gogol Bordello, who make an appearance in the film welcoming Jonathan to the Ukraine. The music not only sets the atmosphere for the film and its history, but it also directly connects Schreiber (and Hutz) to the film and the experience of the film.

Schreiber, and American audiences, also identify with the film in the main character, Jonathan Safran Foer. Foer is an American tourist in the Ukraine, unaccustomed to Ukrainian traditions, and not understood by locals. Foer's alienation is shown in his interaction with Alex

and his grandfather as well as with other Ukrainians the three encounter on their trip. His vegetarianism is unheard of, Alex sees the use of valets in America as completely unnecessary, Alex doesn't understand how to use politically correct terms such as "African American," and when Foer tries to ask a local construction worker for directions, Alex yells at him because now the workers will think he is just a "stupid American" as well. The basic goal of the road trip classifies Foer as a tourist as he travels in a car meant to give tours to tourists, and his idiosyncrasies and differences from locals further classify him as such. Foer does seek as close to an authentic experience as possible in finding a long-undiscovered village. Foer is alienated from local culture, but he is not the traditional tourist in the modern or post-modern sense. He falls more into the category of the modern tourist, however, because he seeks to "observe undiscovered paradises" (Klauber). Schreiber can also be classified in this manner, as well as anyone else who seeks to find a forgotten shtetl. Schreiber specifically states that he was reminded of his American status when visiting and filming in Ukraine because of his obvious differences with locals (Murray). This adds to his personal experience in identifying with the Foer of the film and therefore, enhances his ability to assign these personal experiences to the film making it more of a historical beacon.

Along with Foer's classification as a tourist is Alex's complete misunderstanding of Foer and the American way of life. Along with not understanding valets, Alex continually uses outdated or incorrect American English. He asks if Foer has "reposed" instead of slept, he asks if there are "negro" accountants in America (as his dream is to be an American accountant), he asks if a vegetarian can still eat sausage, etc. Not only does Alex misunderstand Jonathan, he also is "not so premium" with the English language. This is representative of "the distance between what we want to say and what we're able to say," as described by Foer about the novel

(Foer). Since Alex is the one articulating and writing the novel for the audience in the film, what does this say about the information conveyed in this novel? Is all information able to be correctly and convincingly conveyed directly by the film? Obviously the answer is no, and all of the information regarding this narrative is not able to be conveyed up front, especially by Alex. This information needs to be uncovered in the film, as the title suggests. This information needs to be uncovered, for the characters, in the journey, and for the audience it must be uncovered by some personal identification with the film.

The most noticeable “hidden” information in the film is the grandfather’s blindness; he says that he is blind, but is most obviously not as he drives Alex and Jonathan around Ukraine. From the introduction of his character, therefore, he is not what he appears to be. This is ironic since Alex is telling the story from the point of view of having already lived it, but this simply reinforces the fluidity of time and history which is inherent to the film and to the meaning of the memento objects in the film. The aspect of the grandfather’s life which is hidden is his Jewish history in WWII; he lived in Trachimbrod, but somehow survived the massacre by the Nazis, then escaped to Ukraine and adopted an anti-Semitic attitude to mask his “previous life.” However, as the film discovers, one cannot outrun one’s past, it stays with you your entire life, and then it stays with others in your family. This realization correlates directly with Schreiber, who recalls that his grandfather never talked about his life before he immigrated to the United States, and Schreiber was only able to recover this information after his death.

This fluidity or duality of time is described by Goodman as the idea that there is both someone standing in the present reaching back into the past, as well as something beginning in the past which works its way up to the present. This structure is present in *Everything is Illuminated* in several ways: Foer and the grandfather are both reaching back in time to

remember the past, Augustine is reaching forward from the past by leaving her wedding ring buried in a jar on the river bank, and the narrative structure itself begins in the past, as Alex is writing the story from a time in the future after the narrative of the film is complete. The film is also separated into five chapters which chronicle the journey, and this differentiates between time periods in the story being told by Alex. The flashbacks which are dispersed in these chapters also help differentiate between time periods and aid the audience in the illumination. These flashbacks are shown visually by a white light taking up the screen, after which the flashback begins in a sepia-toned landscape. This image directly correlates to Alex's statement at the end of the film that "everything is illuminated in the light of the past," which draws us closer to the conclusion in Trachimbrod that objects of the past attract their owners' descendants like beacons.

Jonathan is first and foremost a collector who collects mementos at every step of the journey because he is afraid he will forget the journey and the information that he discovers along the way. Jonathan's collection consists of objects which relate to his family members. Before he arrives at Trachimbrod and realizes these objects true significance, he has a dream in which all of his collected items are lost down a river as he looks helplessly on at all of his lost memories. At Trachimbrod, however, we meet Augustine's sister, Lista, who has struck up a collection of her own – a collection of all the buried items which Trachimbroders buried because they thought they would be killed by Nazis. Lista lines her house with shoeboxes filled with these objects, but gives one box in particular, labeled "In Case," to Jonathan as he leaves. It is labeled this way because Augustine buried her wedding ring in a jar just "in case," but Lista never understood what the "in case" meant until the three travelers came. It means, she says, not only in case someone should come searching, but it means that the jar does not exist for the

searchers; rather, the searchers exist for the jar. The jar itself becomes an object which time cannot touch – it exists both from Augustine and for Augustine. The three searchers come because Augustine buried the jar. In this way, the jar is a beacon to Jonathan, calling him to learn about his grandfather's history, remember it, and feel it alongside him in his life.

This also forces Alex's grandfather to remember and relive his past, as the boxes containing objects from this past surround him. As he leaves, Lista asks if the war is over and he smiles saying "it is, it is over," which is perhaps the biggest indication of his next action – suicide. He has been trying to forget his past for so long, but finally living this experience in Trachimbrod and being amongst these objects which serve as such strong transmitters of the past and present confronts him with the truth: the war is over and there is no need to continue hiding from the past. With the film's declaration about the wedding ring jar and the grandfather's realization, the connection of the film itself as a beacon becomes clear: the film has made a personal connection with Schreiber because of his experience in making the film, including his journey trying to find his grandfather's shtetl. (The original novel has the same effect on its author). The film serves the same purpose as the wedding ring in the jar in that it serves as a reminder of the past and also connects Schreiber to his personal experience with this past – his journey in making the film.

However, Schreiber (and Jonathan Safran Foer – the novelist) never finds the shtetl or any more information on his grandfather while searching in Ukraine. If the purpose of the film as a historical beacon is to remember and carry Schreiber's grandfather's history with him for the rest of his life, then how can the film contribute to this history if Schreiber's journey did not yield any new information? The answer is that it contributes to the history two-fold: because Foer argues that one's relationship with the story does not rely on plot, but as the experience and

feelings toward that plot, and because the beacon itself serves only as a reminder, as with (the character) Jonathan's mementos (Foer). Jonathan's collected items (dirt, a grasshopper, a potato) are not meaningful in and of themselves. As with Augustine's jar, they are significant because he chooses to collect them. One does not need to find anything on a quest, but only needs to look because by looking, you have found.

Schreiber and Foer's relationship with the narrative cement the importance of the film itself as being characterized as one of these historical beacons. Schreiber and Foer both had grandfathers who lived in now-forgotten shtetls in Ukraine and both attempted to make journeys to try to find these shtetls. Although both failed, this does not make the significance of the film any less. The film is a historical beacon and transmitter which is both calling from and to the past; it also reminds Schreiber of his grandfather's journey and of his own journey in making the film itself. Objects like this are present throughout the film, culminating in the most important – the jar with Augustine's wedding ring. This wedding ring serves as the thing which called Foer to go to Trachimbrod in the first place, because of its fluidity through time and history. In helping to illuminate the past for Foer, it also helps to illuminate the present in light of the past for Alex's grandfather, resulting in his suicide because his fight is over. The dualities of all of these objects as beacons reinforce the idea of the film as an experience rather than a straightforward plot, which in turn (circularly) reinforces the dualities. Though Schreiber and Foer have been shown to specifically benefit from the film as a personal history beacon, the film could potentially offer this to any audience member who experiences the film as fully as they have. However, the closing commentary on the film and Alex's grandfather give special preference to Schreiber and Foer as receivers for the film as a personal history transmitter, as they are attempting to remember and commemorate their grandfathers through this film (Baron).



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