

Repaing the Street of Crocodiles

The Jewish-Polish writer and artist Bruno Schulz (1892–1942) lived and worked in Drohobycz, a city that Poland repatriated in 1919, the Soviet Union annexed in 1939, and the Germans occupied in 1941.1 This setting was crucial to Schulz's development in the Polish avant-garde, although his highbrow prose found few readers during his lifetime. Printing presses in the 1930s often omitted his finely-incised illustrations that coupled a child's fascination with the hermetic adult world together with a raunchy eroticism.2 His talent as an artist attracted the Viennese SS officer Felix Landau, who arranged for Schulz's protection in return for slave labor, which included the painting of fairytale scenes from the Brothers Grimm on the nursery walls of the apartment Landau had confiscated. In the fall of 1942, when Landau killed a Jew under the protection of another Gestapo officer Karl Günther, the latter retaliated by putting a bullet in Schulz's head in broad daylight and delivering a line arguably more famous than any Schulz ever wrote: “You killed my Jew. I killed yours.”3

After his murder, Schulz's work nearly disappeared from the cultural landscape. Russian was the language of choice for the reprinting of prewar literature, and his nonlinear Polish prose, driven by language rather than plot, was out of step with the Soviet embrace of policies of Socialist Realism. After Khrushchev’s de-Stalinization movement in the mid-1950s, Schulz’s work began to reemerge in Eastern Europe, but it was not until the 1960s that English-language readers first became acquainted with his collection of memoir fairytales, The Street of Crocodiles (originally Cinnamon Shops, 1934).4 Since then, more than one generation of artists, writers, animators, and theater directors have endowed Schulz with cult status, and his influence is perceptible in the art of R. B. Kitaj, the writing of David Grossman, Cynthia Ozick, and Philip Roth, the filmmaking of the Quay Brothers, and the performances of the Théâtre de Complicité and the Double Edge Theatre.5 Scholars have addressed this posthumous attention to Schulz's work elsewhere, but two recent projects by American writer Jonathan Safran Foer and German filmmaker Benjamin Geissler stand apart from this earlier attention to Schulz's life and work. Rather than seeking to place Schulz in his own cultural context or offer new interpretations of his literary and artistic vision, Foer and Geissler take a more self-reflexive approach. They strategically convert Schulz’s art and literature into different mediums in ways that interrogate how our own media age produces, preserves, and presents the cultural texts of the Holocaust.6

Foer takes the book as his subject. Using a die-cut process, Foer shapes a new text by literally cutting the vast majority of Schulz's text and leaving only those words on the page that he needs for his own spare story. The act of deletion, which Foer uses in ways that

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1 For sources that discuss the reception of Schulz in Poland, Germany, France, and America, see the bibliography in Russell E. Brown, “Bruno Schulz Bibliography,” The Polish Review 39 no. 2 (1994): 231–253.
3 Quoted in Jonathan Safran Foer, Tree of Codes (London: Visual Editions, 2010), 138 [afterword].
pare Schulz’s memoir down to a portrait of the last day of life, connects Tree of Codes to Holocaust memory on many levels. Schulz’s tale concerns the mental deterioration of the father, Jakub, as seen through the idealized eyes of his sensitive son Józef. Foer’s book explores the last day of an abstract life, which necessarily tasks the reader to recall the death story of Schulz. Foer strips Schulz’s verbose prose down to a tight 3,000 words in a process he calls “erasure,” a term the artist Larry Rivers also employed in his 1970s experiments to rework family portraits in ways that suggested the loss of memory connected with trauma. When framing his book-making methods, Foer analogizes Tree of Codes to the notes Jews have stuck into the crevices of the one remaining wall of the Jerusalem Temple, which form a sort of “magical, unbound book” that records the loss of a grand narrative in the face of destruction. Foer describes Tree of Codes as “exhumed” out of The Street of Crocodiles, a grotesque term that bonds his project to death and memory.

In Foer’s hands, the editing tool of deletion becomes a robust tool for new possibilities: Schulz’s dense strings of child-like hyperbole are put into the service of allegory; Schulz’s hypnagogic psychological twists are universalized; and Schulz’s loaded descriptive language is picked off with shocking symbolic effect. Schulz mythologizes the process of the father’s psychic undoing with a novelist’s prerogative to follow the vicissitudes of language down multiple tracks, whereas Foer treats the day before death with the minimalist strokes of a poet. A literary analysis of these elegiac transmutations would undoubtedly yield fascinating intertextual readings. Yet, however semioticians may read Schulz’s lingering presence in Foer’s story, storytelling is not the primary draw of Tree of Codes. Rather, Foer’s flamboyant redressing of a medium on the brink of extinction—the bound paperback—serves as the primary signification between Foer and Schulz.

Foer’s book is an object whose material features dictate our experience of it, and which provokes an investigation of the medium (fig. 1). If Schulz’s dense modernist text is intellectually demanding, Foer’s book is materially demanding. The book is lighter than one might initially expect of a volume of its size and readers typically pick up the book with disproportionate force. Because of the removal of paper mass, the book can be substantially squeezed in the middle. After opening its cover and revealing the excerpted words and punctuations floating over gaps and open spaces, readers turn the pages almost too gingerly. When numerous pages are looked at together, the sense is of a densely packed object, but when a page is separated from the body of the book—which is necessary to read the story—only a few words appear per page and the effect is quite different. The book’s 134 single-sided die-cut pages form a body of punctuated bits of paper, milky white skin, and dark orifices. Reading Foer’s string of quotations requires ignoring hundreds of small paper windows, and if the immediate sheet of paper is not held apart from the rest of the book, words from subsequent pages are randomly revealed and distract the reader with words that in no way comment on or enhance the page at hand. The result of Foer’s erasure, and the printing process that delivers his erasure to our hands, is the opposite of hypertext, which props up text with digitized blurbs and points the reader to intertextual parallels and supplementary material. The visual and tactile manipulation of the pages and cut-outs subordinates the task of mental decoding that reading requires during the physical act of turning pages.

Because Foer did not technically “write” the words on the page, but rather removed words from another text, his publisher Visual Editions has analogized the process to carving sculpture. The specific nature of die cutting highlights the limitations of the technique. In his search for the right words and phrases, Foer must often flex the rules of grammar and punctuation. At the same time, the process does not have the same flexibility as montage. Where Schulz’s nonlinear narrative refuses to abide by historic chronology, Foer’s die-cut process is confined to the chronological succession of Schulz’s original text. The industrial die-cut process gives Foer little control of when words from subsequent pages make an appearance; they peek through

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7 Foer, Tree of Codes, 139 [afterword].
8 Ibid., 137, 139 [afterword].