

**MURAL VISIONS:  
VIEWING HISTORIES IN THE WORKS OF MICHAEL ONDAATJE**

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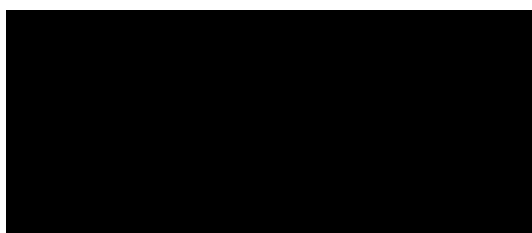
## Abstract

This thesis seeks to challenge traditional notions of literary interpretation by examining the interaction between visual and verbal representation in literature. To this end, I critically examine several elements of visual culture in the literary works of poet/novelist Michael Ondaatje and seek to understand the ways in which the visual as practice and discourse can be seen to exercise power. I argue that images are crucial participants in the politics of knowledge production and that a reading of images must always contend with an account of their historical representations.

This study thus departs significantly from a purely literary consideration of Ondaatje's work insofar as it engages largely with a cultural and historical interpretation of the visual works cited in the author's texts. On the one hand, the various visual perspectives offered in each of Ondaatje's novels—the artist, the photographer, the forensic anthropologist, the outlaw, and the desert explorer—are drawn together to highlight both the notion of (in)visibility in the politics of history and the appearance of fixity in the visual. On the other hand, mirrors, Orientalist art, portraiture, social documentary photography, religious iconography, the Western film genre and Renaissance cartography are used as the visual tropes (the viewing apparatus) through which the collaboration of image and text is explored. I suggest, following the work of Walter Benjamin, that the power of images can only be apprehended and understood through the conception of images as innately historical and history as fundamentally imagistic. It is a position that is viewed through the multidimensional terrain of social theory, semiotics, aesthetics, politics and art history, while at the same time challenging the limitations of existing theoretical discourses. This study, then, is concerned not only with the overlap of the visual and the verbal as an interpretive enterprise, but also with a reading of literature as a multidisciplinary adventure.

## Declaration

I, Regina Quiazon, declare that the PhD thesis entitled *Mural Visions: Viewing Histories in the Work of Michael Ondaatje* is no more than 100,000 words in length, exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, references and footnotes. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.

A large black rectangular box redacting the signature of Regina Quiazon.

Regina Quiazon

21/02/07  
Date

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Unable to reason her profound sense of discrepancy in the world, discrepancy between bodies and words, between the niggardly specificity of things, often tiny, inconsequential, mundane things...and the cloudy abstractions they bought in her wake, she decided she would know the world by its imagistic revelations.  
(Gail Jones, *Sixty Lights*, 2004: 86)

There is no word or image that is not haunted by history.  
(Eduardo Cadava, *Words of Light*, 1997: 27)

We, as we read, must become Greeks, Romans, Turks, priests and king, martyr and executioner; must fasten these images to some reality in our secret experience, or we shall learn nothing rightly.  
(Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'Essay I – History' in *Essays: First Series*, 1841)

'Who are you really? And what were you before? What did you do? And what did you think, huh?'

'We said no questions.'

'...here's looking at you kid.'  
(Rick & Ilsa, *Casablanca*, 1942)

Prologue



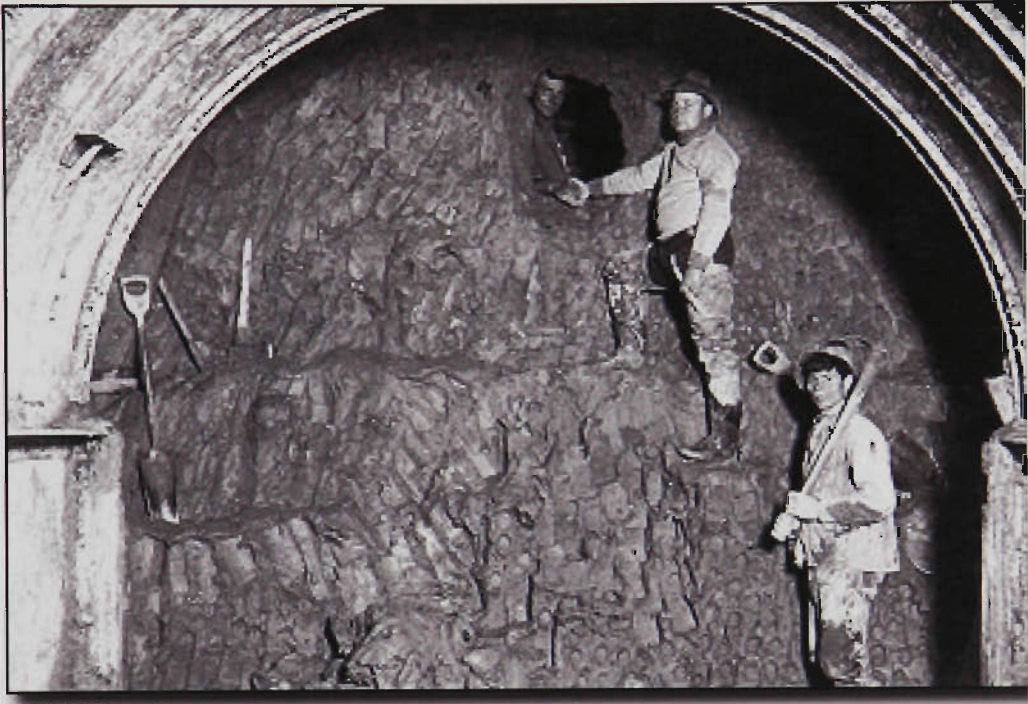








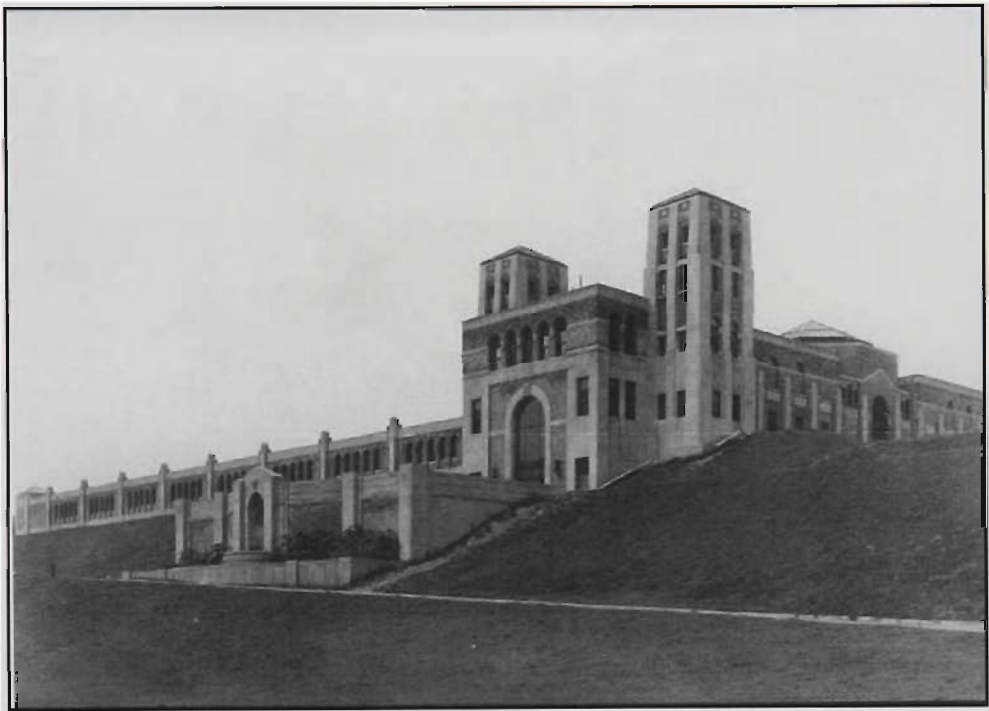


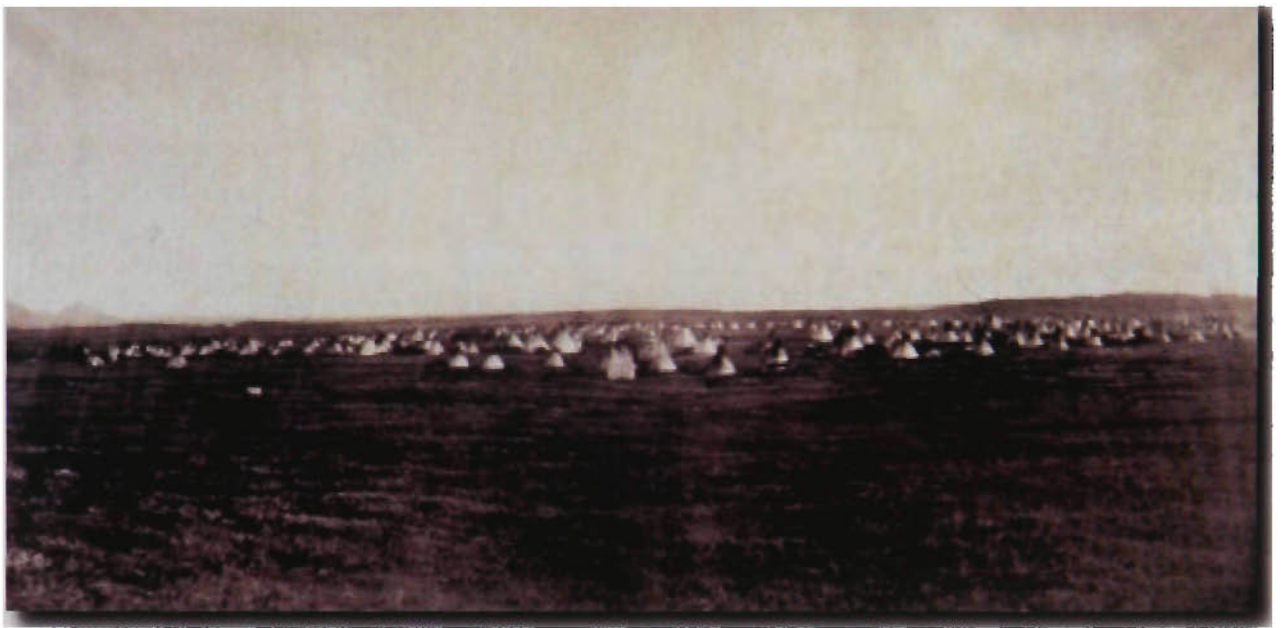














It begins with words on a page, an enticement and a measure of the task ahead:

*It is the formal need  
to suck blossoms out of the flesh  
in those we admire  
planting them private in the brain  
and cause fruit in lonely gardens*

*To learn to pour the exact arc  
of steel soft and crazy  
before it hits the page (Ondaatje 1989a: 47)*

...before the rumours become fact; their innocence lost in the conventions of scholarly meticulousness, the ontological-epistemological-methodological-ethical gestures, the necessities of academic responsibility. The mystery of alchemy: how to distil the grace and potency of his words? The only clues a chaos of forms, at best a kaleidoscope for the reader in a dreamy state: the 6<sup>th</sup> century cave paintings of the women in Sigiriya; a legendary jazz cornetist spiraling into mental descent; the benign smiles of the Storyville prostitutes; the immigrant worker forgotten in history yet famous on the bridge; the craftsman fashioning death in a Buddha's generic serenity; a desert explorer the colour of aubergine, who desired only to walk upon an earth that had no maps...and the rumours begin to pass on, pass on and take on a life of their own. Words she had planted privately now compel her to play historical detective.

Cubism, he tells her, is the perfect state. And she, with the seriousness of a child at play, stumbles upon a treasure-trove: another as eloquent and lyric about the intricacies of everyday life. His legacy: a magnum opus of literary montage, an intimate exchange between word and form. The rumours begin to form a spine: '*In the fields with which we are concerned, knowledge comes only in flashes. The text is the thunder rolling long afterwards*'. And so begins her work of alchemy, learning to pour the exact arc, of steel soft and crazy before it hits the page. All that is left is his generous warning: '*Only the best art can order the chaotic tumble of events. Only the best can realign chaos to suggest the chaos and order it will become*'. A kaleidoscope for the reader in a dreamy state.

## Introduction

I've always been convinced by mental or artistic landscapes...Ideally, I want the mental landscape and the personal story to wrestle against the documentary. I think the documentary is so essential to our lives that to ignore it in the novel is a problem...I want my form to reflect as fully as possible how we think and imagine. (Ondaatje cited in Catherine Bush, *Michael Ondaatje: An Interview*, 1994: 5)

Somehow the novel demands a comfort level that is quite high. The equivalent of cubism or abstract expressionism or the subliminal and the fluid cutting of film still hasn't been allowed into the novel except on the periphery – whereas we accept it, even complacently, in the other popular art forms. I think you can do on the page almost anything that film does. The novel, and writing, is more advanced in terms of possibility. (Ondaatje cited in Catherine Bush, *Michael Ondaatje: An Interview*, 1994: 7)

Writing mirrors picturing.  
(Michael Ann Holly, *Past Looking*, 1996: 9)

What would it be like to step into a novel and be surrounded by images? This thesis explores the complexities and possibilities of this question that are developed through a '360 degree view' of Michael Ondaatje's works. *Mural Visions* is an allusion to Ondaatje's preference for writing in 'a more cubist or mural voice to capture the variousness of things' (Ondaatje cited in Bush 1994). Ondaatje's comments at the beginning of this introduction thus serve as a productive guide to the concerns of this thesis and the questions that revolve around the relationship between image and text. There are many ways, then, in which this thesis engages with the claim brought up in W.J.T. Mitchell's *Picture Theory* (1994) insofar as I have attempted not so much to 'picture' theory in the literary text, but to highlight the question of interpretation as it relates to the heterogeneity of representation. According to Mitchell, all representations are mixed mediums and therefore require a double literacy which is cognisant of the complexities between image and text.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, the works of Mieke Bal and Michael Ann Holly in *Reading Rembrandt* (1991) and *Past Looking* (1996), respectively, have provided some interesting points of departure for my own exploration of the intersection of image and text. Consequently, this thesis's title can be read as constitutive of each of the author's arguments about the efficacy of the word-image relation (Bal) and the rhetoric of the image in works of art (Holly).

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<sup>1</sup> The overlap between image and text—the 'imagetext'—is discussed in greater detail in chapter one.

A critical motivation of this thesis's resolutely multi-disciplinary approach is its concern with uncovering the supposed oppositions between the methods and projects of history, art history, and literature rather than a concern with a history of images. Bal's later work in *The Mottled Screen: Reading Proust Visually* (1997)—as the complement to 'looking discursively' at Rembrandt—also proved to be a tantalising theoretical prospect in terms of transporting the interaction and exchange of art and literature to more politically charged fields. I attempt to do this by problematising the act of interpretation itself: between 'reading images' and 'viewing texts' in the historiographic enterprise. Hence, the word 'viewing' in the thesis title is as much a verb (*viewing* histories) as it is an adjective ('viewing histories').

If Mitchell's study of words and images has brought the issue of methodology to the fore in such an interpretative exercise, then I have also followed his lead, along with Bal and Holly, in interpreting Ondaatje's work through a more mutable lens rather than 'architectonic elaboration' (Mitchell quoted in Wisenthal and Bucknall 2000: 5).<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, Walter Benjamin's eclectic approach is used implicitly throughout this thesis to critically examine constructions of history and the reading of images.<sup>3</sup> From this perspective, Eduardo Cadava's stimulating dissection of Benjamin's writings in *Words of Light* (1997) has helped to define the thesis's argument about history. Cadava's 'snapshots in prose' usefully demonstrate the 'intellectual optic' of Benjamin, articulating as they do Benjamin's conception of history through the language of photography. Benjamin's critical approach entails educating 'the image-creating medium within us to see dimensionally, stereoscopically, into the depths of the historical shade' (Benjamin 2002: 857).<sup>4</sup> It was Benjamin's objective to waken the masses from the soporific effects of the myth of historical progress. As Susan Buck-Morss comments on Benjamin's unfinished *locus classicus*, the *Passagen-Werk* (Arcades project), the politically charged text 'makes of us historical detectives even against our will' (Buck-Morss 1989: x).

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<sup>2</sup> Or, as Ondaatje would put it, 'rather than one demonic stare' (Bush 1990: 9).

<sup>3</sup> Mitchell describes his own work in *Picture Theory* as 'somewhat anarchistic and eclectic, working by essayistic forays into concrete problems'; his affinity, however, with Benjamin's 'method' is made more explicit in his statement that 'as a writer, I've always thought of myself as a hunter-gatherer, rather than a settled cultivator or city builder' (Mitchell quoted in Wisenthal and Bucknall 2000: 5).

<sup>4</sup> See section (O°, 2).

Undeniably, Ondaatje's novels also compel us to search for images of socio-historical reality that exist outside of the text. This multi-faceted quality of Ondaatje's texts is only one of the reasons I have long been captivated by the author's work. Ondaatje, who received the 1992 Booker Prize for his novel *The English Patient* and whose novels have been praised for their lyricism and 'poetic' language, has been described as 'a painter of words', a novelist whose abstract methods defy easy categorization other than that of 'poetic novel' (a description, incidentally, which Ondaatje himself finds inaccurate).<sup>5</sup> Certainly, Ondaatje's series of works span an eclectic range of subject matter: *Coming Through Slaughter* (1984) traces the life and death of the legendary jazz cornetist Buddy Bolden during the early jazz era of New Orleans; *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (subtitled *Left Handed Poems*) (1989) centres around the final days of the outlaw William Bonney (otherwise known as Billy the Kid) on the New Mexico border; *In the Skin of a Lion* (1988) weaves together the lives of the immigrants and workers who helped build 1920s Toronto; *Running In the Family* (1984) is Ondaatje's fictionalized family history set in his country of birth, Sri Lanka that 'pendant off the ear of India'; *The English Patient* (1993), set in a bombed out Tuscan villa after the Second World War, is a dialogue about 'the sadness of geography', and the novel, *Anil's Ghost* (2000) is a return to contemporary Sri Lanka where the country's civil war is retold through the eyes of a forensic anthropologist.

If there is a common denominator to be found in Ondaatje's novels, it is their aesthetic sensibility. Ondaatje's prose, if not 'poetic', is strikingly sensual and visually evocative. Even a cursory survey of the numerous commentaries on Ondaatje's work suggests an unequivocal preoccupation with his particular narrative style; a style that has led critics to describe the authors work as 'cubist' or 'mosaic-like' (Bush 1994; Wachtel 1994; Simmons 1998). Ondaatje himself describes his text as having a 'mural' form with myriad imagery. In an interview with Catherine Bush (1994), Ondaatje cites the murals of Diego Rivera as the inspiration behind *In the Skin of a Lion*. In a separate interview, whilst reluctant to declare film as an all-prevailing sensibility in his work, Ondaatje admits that he has a great respect for filmmaking<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> When asked to comment on his 'lyrical' and 'poetic' writing, Ondaatje replies: 'The last thing I'm going to write is a poetic novel. I have a private groan about that. I just don't think the books are poetic or "beautifully written". I think it's pretty accurate!...it's more a marginal way of seeing a public event' (quoted in Whitlock 1993/4 : 23).

<sup>6</sup> Ondaatje's latest work of non-fiction *The Conversations* (2002) examines the art of film editing.

and concedes that his novels are ‘highly filmic in a way’ (Dowse 2002). It is not difficult to detect the impression that art and film have made on Ondaatje’s novels with its numerous references to photographs and photographers, artworks and visual historical artifacts.

As far as a literary theory of Ondaatje’s work is concerned, one could interpret the visual as the primary semiotic mechanism at work in his literature. Moreover, as the epigraphs at the beginning of this chapter attest, it is Ondaatje’s concern with the documentary and the historical aspect of writing that is of equal importance in the reading of his texts. More than poetic novel, Ondaatje’s writing could be more accurately described as a form of literary montage where the text and the imagery are so closely juxtaposed as to challenge traditional notions about the act of reading itself. Ondaatje’s novels highlight Mitchell’s claim that all representations are heterogeneous and that there are no ‘purely’ visual or verbal arts (Mitchell 1994). Further, reading Ondaatje’s fictionalized documentaries is not only about ‘seeing’, but also about seeing the past and, as such, necessitates a reading strategy which requires both ‘viewing texts’ and ‘reading picture’ in the context of historical narratives.

Whilst I acknowledge that all literary texts, whether displaying ‘visual’ qualities or not, are inherently intertextual (that is, they refer to other texts outside the text), Ondaatje’s visually evocative ‘docu-fictions’ help to designate an analytic approach which position the visual as a socio-historical field of interpretative practices.<sup>7</sup> Thus, my choice of Ondaatje’s work as the central organising text is, for the most part, dictated by Benjamin’s ‘dialectic of seeing’; a strategy that relies on the interpretive power of images to make conceptual points concretely (Buck-Morss 1989: 6). Hannah Arendt is equally eloquent in describing Benjamin’s methodology, a task similar to that of the pearl diver who

descends to the bottom of the sea, not to excavate the bottom and bring it to light but to pry loose the rich and the strange... and bring them to the surface, this thinking delves into the past – but not in order to resuscitate it in the way

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<sup>7</sup> Ian Heywood and Barry Sandywell use the term ‘the hermeneutics of vision’ to explain this approach. They suggest that the term ‘hermeneutics’ be used in a more diverse, dialogical and open sense in order to guard against ‘any simple reductionism in pre-defining the parameters of visual experience’ (Heywood and Sandywell 1999: ix).



it was and to contribute to the renewal of extinct ages... [but to] bring them up into the world of the living. (Arendt 1992: 55)

The images in Ondaatje's texts are, for the most part, used as the rhetorical device through which historiography (as a form of historical knowledge) is explored and illuminated. The images are thus moments in Ondaatje's text that, as John Berger suggests in his classic essay 'Moments of Cubism' (1985), place the reader within the conclusion and connections of the work: 'the spectator has to find his [sic] place *within* this content whilst the complexity of the forms and the "discontinuity" of the space remind him that his view from that place is bound to be only partial' (Berger 1985: 180). As a way of highlighting partiality and perspective, I also focus my attention on the notion of (in)visibility in the politics of history whilst drawing attention to the appearance of fixity in the visual. In these ways, *Mural Visions* is underpinned by a steadfast critique of history as a master narrative that necessitates casting one's critical eye over the totality, while at the same time paying scrutiny to the intricate detail. It is an approach that also has a harmonious alliance with the spatial dimension of Benjamin's writings: between 'the broad theoretical constructions and the intensely discrete, often microscopic examinations' (Bahti 1986: 61).

The form and content of this research serve to illustrate not only the theoretical works that inform this thesis, but also its subject matter. As Holly points out in the case of historiographic issues, we can never easily escape the lure of casting our narratives in the shape of those objects we set out to investigate and that, as a spectator/writer, we are always already anticipated and implicated in the formal logic of the work we describe (Holly 1996: 80). Indeed, to the extent that this thesis depends on Ondaatje's work for structure and direction, the sections that do relate to an analysis of the author's text are in themselves attempts to articulate the protean quality of Ondaatje's writing: shards and fragments, echoes and reverberations, and the refractions thrown off by the texts, seemingly attenuated and disconnected at first, are themselves the key to visual understanding. Accordingly, I have chosen (for want of a better word) not to follow identical research paths for each of the novels, but have made tactical judgments as to how best to explore (and, in some cases, exploit) the tension between text and image, the literary and the historical. Indeed, as Bal points out, the effect of meaning in the interpretive exercise is 'complicated by the social

construction of visuality, the modalities of looking that we are trained to adopt, and the variability of identifications' (Bal 1991: 7). In this regard, the visual perspectives offered in each of Ondaatje's novels provide the different 'apertures' to my viewing of history: the biographer, the artist, the documentary photographer, the cowboy, and the desert explorer. Thus, a related but no less critical concern of this thesis is the extent to which these particular viewing positions pre-empt, as Holly argues, their own historiographic response.

The richness and subtlety of Ondaatje's texts and its many connections, most especially with Benjamin's thinking about history, proved at times to be formidable. There were and are many compelling points of departure from which to explore my particular concern with history as imagistic and images as innately historical. It is for this reason perhaps that the yield from the research may appear uneven. Although in no way an apologia for this thesis's shortcomings, this admission does suggest that the complex and constant interplay between image and text in the act of reading is an inescapable aspect of interpretation. This thesis is, foremost, an attempt to confront the limitations of existing ways of viewing and reading, especially if, as the historian Hayden White (1978:51) asserts (and both Ondaatje and Benjamin eloquently demonstrate), 'discontinuity, disruption, and chaos is our lot'. The discontinuities, complexities, and tensions have, in several ways, proved to be serendipitous.

In all the chapters, I have allowed the 'imagetext' to wander intently through the labyrinth of theoretical alternatives. Serendipitous, then, since the overlap of image and text has led me from the intriguing to the unexpected: from the author's biography to Matisse's odalisques; New Orleans jazz to Manet's *Olympia*; Canada's social history to Baudelaire's Paris; Sri Lanka's civil war to the Bamiyan Buddhas of Afghanistan; Billy the Kid to Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*; and post-war Italy to Vermeer's *The Art of Painting*. Within such artistic landscapes, the images are never far from view, wrestling always with the author's words. The result, to use Benjamin's words, is knowledge that comes only in 'flashes'. My text: *the thunder rolling long afterwards*.

## Viewing Positions

In chapter one, I draw on an expansive view of the various conceptual approaches that inform my critique of image, text and history in Ondaatje's work. I argue that the power of images can only be apprehended and understood through the conception of images as innately historical and history as fundamentally imagistic.

Chapter two explores the presence and absence of history by considering the imagetext in the context of Ondaatje's semi-fictional biographical novel. I examine the historiographic relationship between image and text as it relates to a defining moment in *Running In the Family*: Ondaatje's inclusion of a poem *Don't Talk To Me About Matisse* by Sri Lankan poet Lakdasa Wikkramasinha. Along with the concept of self-reflection, I use Marianne Hirsch's notion of 'postmemory' as a mode of reading second-generation memories of cultural events and experiences.

The self-reflective mode of viewing is further extended in chapter three by focussing more directly on issues of looking and the problematics of the gaze. I examine E.J. Bellocq's *Storyville Portraits*, a photographic collection of New Orleans's prostitutes taken early last century, in order to capture what is lost in art historical critiques. I employ Joan Scott's 'fantasy echo' formulation to examine the portraits' appeal to a historical form of identification and offer a more politically compelling interpretation of the feminist gaze. I draw on Ondaatje's novel *Coming Through Slaughter* as way of analysing the link between identification and reception and contributing to the theoretical insights of seeing 'photographically'.

That the reception of images is also implicitly tied to context is a reason why photographic *use* is another important consideration in reading meaning. This is an aspect of the image I explore in chapter four, 'The Moment of Cubism', which focuses on the process of social representation and the ways in which social documentary images might communicate a particular ideology of reform. Once again I examine the link between the real and the ideal, between images and the legitimisation of ideological concerns, in order to highlight the precariousness of the social documentary enterprise, wherein context is crucially linked to the construction of the subject. I examine the context in which the social photography of Lewis Hine

functioned in order to highlight the social impulse underpinning Ondaatje's novel *In the Skin of the Lion*.

While all the chapters draw attention to some of the ways in which the illusory power of images is grounded on their ability to engender a form of partial blindness, the final three chapters explore more fully this notion of visual invisibility. That is to say, I take blindness as an inability to recuperate what has been lost to sight in the image and a condition that requires an illuminated or enlightened stance in the 'picturing' of ethical concerns. Accordingly, the final scene of the novel *Anil's Ghost*, where eyes are being painted on a giant Buddha, is the guiding visual trope of chapter five through which the discourse of human rights is examined. I argue that the scientific discourse employed in the novel appears alongside an argument against historicism and that truth, whether in the guise of religious icons, forensic science or universal human rights, is an artifice of seeing. Following this theme of visual enlightenment, I trace the contours of Ondaatje's provocative conceptualisation of Billy the Kid's 'blank portrait' in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and explore the novel's deep engagement with the aesthetic context within which the legendary outlaw resides.

In the final chapter, cartography is used both literally and metaphorically to explore the ways in which Ondaatje's novel *The English Patient* 'speaks' about maps and, conversely, how maps themselves articulate the past. I suggest that the visual authority of Renaissance art is embedded in the cartographic language of *The English Patient* and that the novel's highly stylised aesthetic provides the means by which the ordering of knowledge is made transparent.

## Chapter 1

### Mural Visions: Perspectives on Viewing the Imagetext

His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make the whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

(Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 1992: 249)

Official histories, news stories surround us daily but the events of art reach us too late, travel languorously like messages in a bottle.

*Only the best art can order the chaotic tumble of events. Only the best can realign chaos to suggest both the chaos and order it will become.*

Within two years of 1066, work began on the Bayeux Tapestry, Constantin the African brought Greek medicine to the western world. The chaos and tumble of events. The first sentence of every novel should be: "Trust me, this will take time but there is order here, very faint, very human." Meander if you want to get into town.

(Michael Ondaatje, *In the Skin of a Lion*, 1988: 146)

In 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', Walter Benjamin envisions Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus* (1932) as the 'angel of history'. Klee's image is transformed into a profoundly anti-modern angel who looks to the past only to be violently propelled into the future; unable to repair what has been smashed, the angel dejectedly looks at the growing pile of wreckage brought about by nothing other than progress. Benjamin's construction of history is one that looks backward rather than forward, in which the passing of time means disintegration not progress. The relation between history and technology, with which several of Benjamin's essays have come to be most readily associated,<sup>8</sup> underscores Benjamin's motivation to place the image at the crux of modernity. For Benjamin, a critical redemptive historical method is needed to embody the 'best art' that Ondaatje refers to. The notion of chaos, too, is immanent in Benjamin's historiographic writings and serves to challenge the falsifications of historicism. Accordingly, Ondaatje's reference to 'official histories' and 'news

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<sup>8</sup> See also 'A Short History of Photography' (1931) and 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1937) in Benjamin (1992).

stories' can be read as an argument against the legitimising, ideological function of history for which Benjamin's own work has come to be most readily understood.

Both Benjamin's and Ondaatje's visions for a more responsible and redemptive historiographic method are not only relevant, but crucial in our current political and technological circumstances where the construction and fabrication of realities are occurring on an unprecedented scale. Modern life now offers countless opportunities to view the world via the prolific sphere of imagery and, as such, the struggle over representation has become even more contested along with strategies for understanding the observation and reception of visual culture. The image sphere, as Ackbar Abbas warns, is 'inflated, commodified, betrayed' and 'one cannot dabble in the realm of imagery and get away lightly' (Abbas 1989: 45). The paradoxical virtualities of the postmodern image, from the seeming banality of digitised bodily enhancements to the insidious visual technologies of war,<sup>9</sup> have 'turned the concept of reality on its head' (Virilio 1994: 63). In the case of the latter, Jean Baudrillard's (1991 and 2002) uncompromising and ineluctable position as to why the 'real no longer exists' (especially as it relates to the first Gulf War and the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre) has been open to the criticism that—and this, indeed, is paraxodical—it partakes in an outright denial of reality. As the Angel of Progress has demonstrated, the storm blowing in from Paradise might well include the evidential force and powerful indeterminacy of images.<sup>10</sup>

I have begun with Benjamin's poetic and, perhaps, most influential meditation, not only because of its acute critique of history, but also because it forcefully demonstrates Benjamin's intellectual endeavours wherein image and text are inextricable parts of the historical process. As Hannah Arendt describes him, Benjamin the critic is akin to an 'alchemist' bringing about 'magical transfigurations' (Benjamin 1992:11). Benjamin's particular form of alchemy, where the image is crystallised into a textual critique so as to become inseparable from it, provides an

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<sup>9</sup> See Mirzoeff's (2005) visual analysis of 'Babylon' as it relates to the current war on Iraq.

<sup>10</sup> Benjamin's own efforts to think historically through the language of photography are linked to his analysis of fascism and the technologies used by the Nazi regime to instil its *Weltanschauung* or vision of the world. Cadava, citing Theodor Adorno, describes the images conjured up in Benjamin's autobiographical text, *Berliner Kindheit* ('Berlin Childhood') as 'neither idyllic nor contemplative' in 'their estranging proximity' because 'the shadow of Hitler's Reich lies upon them' (Cadava 1997: xxiv).

ideal way to begin thinking about the mutability of looking and reading and the inseparability of word and images. In elucidating Benjamin's thinking, Eduardo Cadava points out that the haunting of image and word is one that occurs with the citational structure of both history and image: 'history cannot occur without the event of language, without the corresponding emergence of an image' (Cadava 1997: xvii). The fertile overlap of image and text in Ondaatje's work has led to my own exploration of the citational structure at work in the author's novels wherein image and history—what I interpret as the 'imagetext'<sup>11</sup>—are similarly transfigured, necessitating a reading strategy which requires both 'viewing texts' and 'reading pictures' in the context of historical narratives.

Indeed, the increased interdisciplinary reliance upon the reading of images suggests that culturally specific 'visuality'<sup>12</sup> has displaced 'vision' per se as the concern of contemporary theory. Positivist accounts of vision, where the eye is considered to faithfully transmit a truthful account of the world, have well and truly been surpassed by the view that vision is culturally mediated.<sup>13</sup> Visual culture, therefore, does not depend solely on images, but also, as Nicholas Mirzoeff points out, on the tendency to picture or visualise things that are not in themselves visual (Mirzoeff 1998: 6). W. J. T. Mitchell ascribes 'the pictorial turn' to the shifts in modern thought that have brought the image to the centre of intellectual inquiry.<sup>14</sup> Mitchell argues that underpinning this shift is

the realisation that *spectatorship* (the look, the gaze, the glance, the practice of observation, surveillance, and visual pleasure) may be as deep a problem as various forms of *reading* (decipherment, decoding, interpretation, etc). (Mitchell 1994: 16)

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<sup>11</sup> Mitchell's typographic convention of this concept is useful to keep in mind: the 'image/text' slash indicates a problematic or a rupture in the representation; the 'imagetext' composite designates a concept work or concept which combines image and text; and the hyphenated 'image-text' refers to relations of the visual and the verbal (Mitchell 1994 : 89). I shall employ these typographic conventions throughout this thesis.

<sup>12</sup> 'Visuality' in this sense can be defined as the study of culture, practices, technologies, and discourses relating to the hermeneutics of sight.

<sup>13</sup> Amongst the many cultural reader publications, see, for example, Dikovitskaya (2006); Morgan (2005); Schwartz (2004); Jones (2003) and Hooper-Greenhill (2001)

<sup>14</sup> See Martin Jay's conscientious 'synoptic survey', *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth Century French Thought* (1994), which highlights the varying culturalist views in the discourse of visuality.

If we consider Benjamin's inspired commentary on Klee's painting as but one example of an enlightened interpretive response to the consequences of the image, then the very notion of interpretation is also an intractable part of imagistic inquiry. Hence, in this chapter I shall examine the various conceptual approaches which inform my 'viewing' of Ondaatje's novels.<sup>15</sup> I will argue that the power of images can only be apprehended and understood through the conception of images as innately historical and history as fundamentally imagistic. If this argument sounds far too axiomatic, I should point out that I have sought to rethink the question of images and history, not as categories to be reckoned with, but *conceptually*. My concern with the complex interplay between word and image in the author's texts thus centres on the question of interpretation: how might we 'read' the images in his novels—as historical, literary or art historical artifact?<sup>16</sup> The mural visions of this study are, to stress the point, a way of looking at the image-text, not as an aesthetic or comparative exercise between images and text, but, rather, as a means of reconceptualising relations of looking and reading.

One of the primary assumptions underlying this thesis is that the visual and verbal domains are equal, albeit different, modes of apprehending the world. Accordingly, this thesis, following Mieke Bal's work in *Reading Rembrandt* (1991), offers a reader-oriented approach to the interpretation of the visual in Ondaatje's novel in that it takes the reception of the image-text (that is, the relations of the visual and verbal) as an effect of meaning. Thus, a related assumption of this thesis is that the critical reader's subjectivity—their background and views—necessarily informs, and is inseparable from, the subject of interpretation. As the following chapters show, this is not an appeal to an 'anything goes'; it is, rather, an attempt to challenge the ways we read through an exploration of the modes and possibilities in the encounter between texts (both verbal and visual) and the reader. Indeed, the theoretical texts which I have found to be most valuable or adaptable to this 'messy' (or to use Ondaatje's words, 'very faint and very human') encounter, are less concerned with a taxonomic study than with the approach of 'following various paths whose diversification is precisely the point' (Bal 1991: 14).

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<sup>15</sup> Throughout this thesis I shall use both 'reading' and 'viewing' interchangeably as a way of highlighting the tensions and affinities between images, text and their interpretation.

<sup>16</sup> A related question can also be applied to images per se. The word 'image', as Martin Jay points out, can 'signify graphic, optical, perceptual, mental, or verbal phenomena' (Jay 1994: 9).



To think with the imagetext is, amongst other things, primarily a process of alchemy and transfiguration: histories become imagistic, images become historical. Such an ‘ontology’ of history (or images for that matter) is exquisitely articulated in Roland Barthes’s moving contemplations on the nature of the photograph wherein apparent oppositions and distinctions are dissolved through ‘a logic of transformations and metamorphosis’ (Cadava and Cortés-Rocca 2006: 7). To state this, of course, requires the mobilisation of various strands of thought, all of which return to the gossamer threads of Barthes’s *Camera Lucida*. The first of Ariadne’s threads leads us to the very notion of the visual in the textual and, more specifically, in the novels of Ondaatje.

### **Ekphrastic Hope**

Painting has at least this in common with discourse: when it transmits a force that creates history, it is political.

(Michel Foucault, *Dits et Ecrits Vol. 2*, 1997: 401)

In elaborating the relationship of images and history to one another, I want to foreshadow my reliance on two texts which have provided the theoretical impetus for my own approach to the image-text in Ondaatje’s novels: Mitchell’s approach to ‘picturing theory’ (Mitchell 1994) and Michael Ann Holly’s argument about ‘past looking’ as it relates to the reciprocity between works of art and critical commentary (Holly 1996). Holly’s claim that the representational practices or the rhetorical strategies encoded in works of art prefigure what can be written about them is particularly seductive, especially when read in the context of the ‘best art’ and our attempts at interpretation. George Steiner, for example, states that it is not the literal past which determines our present and future but the ‘images of the past’ which come from the rear: ‘the echoes by which a society seeks to determine the reach, the logic and the authority of its own voice’ (cited in Jenkins 1999: 4). An epistemological conundrum arises when we are told that every image that does happen to come our way is already emplotted in the context and history of other images.<sup>17</sup> How is it

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<sup>17</sup> Might this argument be applicable to the aesthetic postmodernism of Ondaatje’s novels wherein history is playfully and ironically reworked? The answer is both ‘yes’ and ‘no’ since what is at stake in answering this question is not whether Ondaatje’s texts are an example of postmodern literature, but an

possible, then, to write successfully about the historical component of the imagetext or, as Wulf Kansteiner poses it, how to ‘displace unwanted emplotments of the past, without recourse to the concept of historical truth?’ (Kansteiner 1993: 274). Mitchell offers if not a solution then a clue to overcoming such an impasse: his historical periodisation of our current era in terms of imaging and reproduction (that is, not of the ‘postmodern’ but of the ‘pictorial turn’), brings attention to the history of concepts more generally at the same time that it highlights Benjamin’s thinking on history and images. For Mitchell, such a periodisation is an attempt to:

to isolate a perennial anxiety about images and representation that has become part of mass consciousness and disciplined intellectual reflection in our time...the ‘pictorial turn’ in its larger sense is what links our age (the era of biocybernetic reproduction) to its precedents in the history of anxieties about representation. (Wiesenthal and Bucknell 2000: 9)

The pictorial turn, in other words, does not imply a social change or a break with modernity, but rather positions the image within a socio-historical field of inquiry that itself has a history.<sup>18</sup> The mass media’s propensity for objectification and detachment is not just a contemporary or postmodern concern, but a condition, as Mitchell contends, for critique.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the temporal and spatial distancing that comes in the form of an image or reproduction, as Benjamin intimates in his ‘Work of Art’ essay, becomes a form of historical distancing: ‘unmistakably, reproduction as offered by picture magazines and newsreels differs from the image seen by the unarmoured eye’ (Benjamin 1992: 217).<sup>20</sup> The importance of Benjamin’s reflections on history and images is the urgency it places on the need to tackle the more difficult issue of what *kind* of history and status can be accorded to historical thought<sup>21</sup> or, conversely, the type of critical thought that can be applied to the study of images.

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understanding of what ‘postmodernism’ is and the ways in which we might articulate what exactly is being invoked under its name.

<sup>18</sup>Citing the ‘ocularcentric’ culture of the Renaissance Martin Jay argues that ‘it is difficult to deny that the visual has been dominant [only] in modern Western culture’ (Jay 1998: 66).

<sup>19</sup> See chapter five.

<sup>20</sup> While Benjamin’s concept of aura can be simply understood as the disintegration of the authenticity and originality of a work of art, the spatial dimensions underpinning the concept (the experience of simultaneously seeing up close or from a distance) can also be applied to my application of ‘mural visions’.

<sup>21</sup> This is the critical issue raised by Young when he argues that critiques aimed at (post)structuralism ‘really consists of the complaint that it has questioned History...[and] becomes clearer if it is considered from the more general perspective of postmodernism which has been widely characterised as involving a return to history, albeit as a category of representation’ (Young 1990: 23).

In this context, I offer a relatively straightforward approach to the often circuitous and voluble debates over our 'postmodern dilemma'<sup>22</sup> that have, in various ways, contributed to what Mitchell describes as the 'slackening narrative of the post' (Wiesenthal and Bucknell 2000: 9).<sup>23</sup> Following Mitchell's lead, the opening line of Frederic Jameson's influential essay, 'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism' (1991: 53) helps to mark out the terms of my own critique of the political and historiographic consequences of images: 'postmodernism is nothing more than the effort to think historically in an age that has forgotten how'. Any enquiry into the relations of and between the image-text thus provides a way of uncovering, to use Mitchell's phrase, the 'historicist security blanket' of the so-called postmodern aesthetic that literary critiques have generally been prone to use.<sup>24</sup> The starting point of the imagetext enterprise is neither 'aesthetic' nor metaphorical, but a 'literal, material necessity dictated by the concrete forms of actual representational practice' (Mitchell 1994: 88-89). While Mitchell proffers the illuminated texts of William Blake to make this point, my argument about the visual quality of Ondaatje's text also resides or, more specifically, *begins* at a literal level. That is to say, I draw first and foremost on the explicit references to visual representation in each of Ondaatje's novels. As such, I suggest that one of the ways readers are able to gain visual access to Ondaatje's texts is through the rhetorical device of *ekphrasis*.

The intersection of the visual and textual can nowhere be better illustrated than in this minor and obscure literary genre which, broadly defined,<sup>25</sup> is the literary representation of visual art. In this context, *ekphrasis* can also be described as a

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<sup>22</sup> See, as a quintessential example, Terry Eagleton's (1996) inquisition of 'the illusions of postmodernism'.

<sup>23</sup> Slackening, as Osborne points out, because we are no longer convinced that the postmodern adequately describes a social formation and as the opposite of modernity, it necessarily overdramatises social change to the detriment of its anti-totalising persuasions (Osborne 1998: 6).

<sup>24</sup> That is not to say, however, that literary critiques cannot offer a rich insight into other aspects of the world. Indeed, I have used several essays that critique Ondaatje's work as a complement to my argument about the invisibility of history and the limits of theoretical discourse in the literary field.

<sup>25</sup> The term *ekphrasis* is defined in a variety of ways all relating in general towards representing something visual in content. *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* states that *ekphrasis* is 'an extended and detailed literary description of any object, real or imaginary' (1996: 515). *The New Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry & Poetics* describes *ekphrasis* more narrowly 'as a description of a work of art' (1993: 320). Whilst the use of *ekphrasis* can be traced back to classical times (the *locus classicus* being Homer's description of Achilles' shield in *The Iliad*), the study of its conventions has been limited to the discipline of poetry. For a theoretical assessment of the term in relation to representational issues see Heffernan (1991).

narrative device through which visuality is figured. Murray Krieger describes it as ‘the poet’s marriage’ of the complementary languages of the visual and the verbal which seeks to represent the unrepresentable (Krieger 1992: 22).<sup>26</sup> Mitchell describes this phase of fascination with the genre as ‘ekphrastic hope’:

This is the phase when the impossibility of ekphrasis is overcome in imagination or metaphor, when we discover a ‘sense’ in which language can do what so many writers have wanted to do: ‘to make us see’...it is also the moment when ekphrasis ceases to be a special or exceptional moment in verbal or oral representation and begins to seem paradigmatic of a fundamental tendency in all linguistic expression...the narrowest meanings of the word ekphrasis as a poetic mode, ‘giving voice to a mute art object,’ or offering a ‘rhetorical description of a work of art,’ give way to a more general application that includes any ‘set description intended to bring person, place, picture, etc. before the mind’s eye’. (Mitchell 1994: 152-153)

As this passage suggests, the genre of ekphrasis is not the answer to the difference between ordinary and literary language (Mitchell 1994: 180). It does, however, provide a way of unravelling the ‘many figures of difference that energize the dialectic of the imagetext’ (Mitchell 1994: 181). In this regard, my own interest in ekphrasis is, at one level, more fundamental than Mitchell’s own discussion of the mechanics of what is arguably a moribund literary genre. I am, in particular, drawn to the thematisation of the ‘other’ in the ekphrastic encounter, that the goal of ekphrastic hope is ‘the overcoming of otherness’ (Mitchell 1994: 156). As Mitchell explains, the text/image difference often assigned to ekphrasis is neither stable or scientific and resembles

the most basic pictures of epistemological and ethical encounters (knowledge of objects, acknowledgement of subjects) [that] involve optical/discursive figures of knowledge and power that are embedded in essentialised categories like “the visual” and the “the verbal”. (Mitchell 1996: 162)

In exposing the social structures of the ekphrastic genre as an activity and relationship of power, knowledge and desire, Mitchell’s analysis of the workings of ekphrasis

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<sup>26</sup> Krieger’s work remains one of the most influential studies on the topic. James Heffernan argues that ekphrasis for Krieger is generalised as a literary principle to the point that ‘it merely becomes a new formalism’ (Heffernan 1991: 298). I suggest, however, that such a generalisation can also be productive in bringing ekphrasis to wider forms of intellectual inquiry.

leads us, I think, into a discussion about the social implications of 'ekphrastic hope'.<sup>27</sup> In what ways can the term be used to overcome various other forms of 'otherness'? Apart from the obvious visual distinction between the text and picture *per se*, the 'differences' that Mitchell describes presuppose the power relations underpinning the visual and the fundamental ideological positions dividing the beholder (the subject) and the seen (the object); positions that also describe efforts to write history. Put another way, from the point of view that ekphrasis is an effort to describe that which can no longer be seen, the term 'can itself serve as an allegory for the larger project of history writing' (Holly 1996: 4). While Holly takes it as her mission to register the 'spectrum of literal and metaphorical unseen rays of light' in art historical interpretations, her argument about 'writing picturing mirroring' helps to underscore this thesis's preoccupation with both Ondaatje's 'viewing histories' and interpreting the histories in Ondaatje's text. As Holly states:

The historiographic imagination, the way we see and shape the world of the past, has a history that is not simply forged by the demands of the present. To acknowledge the hold that the past itself exerts on us, we need to focus on the way historical works of art position us as their ideal spectators, expect certain responses from us, and confirm in the exchange what they anticipated all along. In this respect the historian as spectator is no different from the straightforward beholder of paintings. (Holly 1996: 9)

If, as Holly argues, works of art legislate and predicate the role of the viewer and ultimately position them in his or her historical account, how might the contemplative or, rather, *ethical* viewer respond to such a rhetorical exchange?<sup>28</sup> If indeed ekphrasis can indulge our fantasy of making us see, how can we put such a notion of ekphrastic hope to work in a process which, as Holly argues, *prescribes* what can be seen? What I argue throughout this thesis is that Ondaatje's 'viewing

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<sup>27</sup> In putting forward this point I have, for the purposes of clarity, omitted the theoretical steps outlined in Mitchell's discussion on the interplay of the three moments of ekphrastic fascination: fear, hope and indifference. Whilst I shall pursue (and expand) the notion of ekphrastic hope throughout this thesis, I think Mitchell's earlier explanation of the perceived differences between image and text more clearly conveys the formalism inherent in such distinctions. Mitchell argues that in practice considerations of image and text are also linked to things like the difference between the (speaking) self and the (seen) other; between telling and showing; between 'hearsay' and 'eyewitness' testimony; between words (heard, quoted, inscribed) and objects or actions (seen, depicted, described)' (Mitchell 1994: 5).

<sup>28</sup> I take, for example, both Milan Kundera's and Greg Denning's argument about the 'morality' of writing as, following Foucault, an *ethical* stance. See pp. 32-33.

histories' allow us to do the type of intellectual inquiry which is genealogical<sup>29</sup> and which Benjamin describes as 'seeing dimensionally and stereoscopically': that history is always both a present and a political concern. My notion of ekphrastic hope can thus best be understood as a concept in line with Benjamin's conception of the 'afterhistory' or 'afterlife' of the object.<sup>30</sup> While Holly's critical interventions highlight the work of art's propensity to 'look back' at the viewer, Benjamin's conception of an afterlife, conversely, reinserts the subjectivity of the critical viewer—the 'aesthetic engineer'—back into the equation of looking. Graeme Gilloch neatly summarises this motif in Benjamin's work as:

The patient process of disintegration and ruination in which the object emerges from earlier contexts, shorn of its original features but with new accretions upon it. Afterlife is the period in which the pure but deceptive surfaces of the object are eroded, in which meanings are unfolded and truth ultimately disclosed. It is the time in which the object is subject to transformations and interventions which re-cognise its significance and 'actualise' its potential: translation, transcription, imitation, criticism, appropriation, (re)reconstruction, reproduction, remembrance, redemption. (Gilloch 2002: 4)

Once we read that objects and images have a particular existence or 'life' of their own, the task of ekphrastic hope is the constant process of reconfiguration and re-evaluation. Thomas Osborne would describe this process as one of 'negative enlightenment'; not in the sense that a 'negative' view is adopted, but rather in that enlightenment, as a form of ethical illumination, embodies a certain negativity towards itself because it 'takes us in the direction of a concern with the *genealogy* of practices of enlightenment' (Osborne 1998: 16, emphasis added).<sup>31</sup> Applied to the imagetext, this critical attitude serves to uncover the viewing of images as inseparable from a concern with history. In his 'Work of Art' essay, for instance, Benjamin contends that perceptions of art are determined by historical circumstances and urges

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<sup>29</sup> For Foucault, this is a process for uncovering the historical relationship between truth, knowledge and power both between and within institutions, fields and disciplines. I discuss this aspect of Foucault's work in further detail in chapter five.

<sup>30</sup> Although not explicitly acknowledged as such, Holly's study is also attuned to this aspect of Benjamin's work. Holly, quoting Mieke Bal (1991), puts forward the three systemic relationships that entertain the work of art: the cotext or the literary and artistic environment, the historical context, and the preceding artistic tradition, the pre-text. As the notion of 'past looking' would suggest, Holly adds 'the post-text, the afterlife of the object as it continues to work at organising its remembrance in the cultural histories that emplot it' (Holly 1996: 15). The only reference to Benjamin in Holly's study is a quote from his work on allegory in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (see Holly 1996: 4).

<sup>31</sup> I draw on Osborne's work in more detail in chapter 5.

the articulation of 'social transformations expressed and characterised by changes in perception' (1992: 216). If we return to the task of history writing more specifically, we might then ask - to take Holly's example - what can Italian Renaissance history reveal about that particular historical period, its perceptions and prejudices? Holly has of course already provided us with a partial answer; that as a discipline, Italian Renaissance history prefigures its own historiographic expression in 'its crystallization of a certain motivated viewing of the world' (Holly 1996: 77). If the modernist faith in progress and subjectivity is unsettled in Holly's critique of the art historian as an objective, unilateral observer, this knowledge is not, however, taken outside the field of art historical discourse.<sup>32</sup> As this thesis seeks to demonstrate, the reconfiguration and reevaluation of the 'life' of the image can be applied to various other historical guises to reveal the relationships of power both between and within institutions, fields and disciplines: the colonial history of Orientalist art; the national history of the American Western; the collective history of feminist art; or the reform history of social documentary photography. These particular perspectives on history, as the following chapters show, are all central to the imagetext in Ondaatje's novels.

My conception of ekphrastic hope, then, is not merely metaphorical or phenomenological, it is, first and foremost an epistemological and ethical encounter with representation 'as something done to something, with something, by someone, for someone' (Mitchell 1994: 180).<sup>33</sup> The consequence of the image, especially in relation to the question of power, is about 'how' rather than 'what': not in the sense of how it manifests itself, but the ways in which it is 'exerted over things' when 'individuals exert power over others' (Foucault 1982: 786). The link with images is thus deceptively simple: theorising power is effectively an exercise in 'picturing' power as it 'will necessarily involve some picture of its nature, its effects, its transmission, circulation, and the representative scenes of its exercise' (Mitchell 1994: 323). Foucault's contention, that the painting could be conceptualized as a 'a

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<sup>32</sup> Holly's study variously explores the historiographic scheme of baroque art, Leonardo da Vinci's work as an allegory for historical consciousness, and Robert Campin's *Merode Triptych of the Annunciation* (circa 1425) in relation to historiographic reception.

<sup>33</sup> As Foucault has famously theorised, power manifests itself not in a downward pyramid structure, but extends itself in a web-like fashion in daily action, speech, and everyday life. This 'language in action' is what Foucault calls 'discourse' and has its effects in the elements of truth, power and knowledge: 'It traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be understood as a productive network which runs through the social body' (Foucault 1980: 61).

discursive practice...not a pure vision that must be transcribed into the materiality of space...it is shot through...with the positivity of knowledge' (Foucault 1972: 194), prompts us to consider the ways in which knowledge, whether textual or visual, has been presented in order to allow us to make sense of and 'see' things. As such, an understanding of the power of images does not only entail an analysis of their production as forms of representation, but also 'their external relations with spectators and with the world' (Mitchell 1994: 324).

Ekphrastic hope provides a compelling thematic companion to the reading and writing of history as a visual undertaking of a deeply political nature. Martin Jay's (1994) account of visuality, for example, might point to the way visual matters have come to be treated metaphorically rather than physically, but 'the denigrated vision of twentieth century thought', as Teresa Brennan insightfully argues, 'is no metaphor but a reflection of a physical, historical reality in which we see less and disavow more' (Brennan & Jay 1996: 220). Brennan's statement resounds all the more urgently when we consider the ways in which notions of visibility and invisibility function within historical discourse.<sup>34</sup> Ekphrastic hope thus begins with an understanding of what is at stake in the historiographic enterprise. To put this somewhat reductively and perhaps more crudely, who or what is left out of the picture? The mural visions of this thesis are all various attempts to put ekphrastic hope to work: to uncover the physical and historical reality of the images embedded in Ondaatje's text. In the following sections, I shall elaborate on how such a notion of ethical enlightenment can be put to work in 'reading images' and, secondly, in 'viewing histories'. While such a binary might appear decidedly un-Benjamin like in its approach, I have divided my discussion as a way of necessarily emphasizing the ongoing debates about the distinctions made between seeing and reading, literature and history. Implicit

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<sup>34</sup> It is from this perspective that Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) has been so influential in bringing to bear issues associated with representation, or more directly, the ethnocentrism underlying modern thought and experience. Said draws on the work of Foucault and Antonio Gramsci as methodological sources to study the connections between Western culture and imperialism, and emphasises the relationship between Western representation and knowledge on the one hand, and Western material and political power on the other. Said describes the discursive features of the body of knowledge which was produced by scholars, travel writers, poets and novelists which effectively produced the 'Orient' as a repository of knowledge. Said argues that colonized countries were described in ways which produced a negative image (an 'other') in relation to the positive, civilized image of Western society. Orientalism, as Said's Foucauldian approach suggests, is an instrument of power and demonstrates a deep complicity with academic forms of knowledge and institutions of power.



throughout, moreover, is the suggestion that the imagetext is a coalescence of mutually inflecting forms of apprehending the world.

## Reading Images

Is it not the task of the photographer – descendants of the augurs and haruspices – to reveal guilt and to point out the guilty in his pictures? ‘The illiteracy of the future...will be ignorance not of reading or writing, but of photography’.  
(Walter Benjamin, *One Way Street*, 1979: 256)

If we take the art historical enterprise as the most relevant and obvious example of the relation between pictures and history, the appearance of fixity in images requires the type of vigilance inherent in Foucault’s analysis of power. It is partly for this reason that the convergence of theory—that is, criticism as opposed to history—on the visual arts has not entirely been unproblematic. The fraught alliance between the study of pictures and critical discourse is, at its most fundamental, complicated at the level of text and its visual ‘other’ especially when, in a broader sense, ‘[art] historians deal with the art of the past, and critics with the art of the present’ (Holly 1996: 67). In taking the historian as beholder, Holly asks whether there is any such thing as ‘history’, or is all writing about ‘art’ in effect criticism? (1996: 83). While I have already anticipated how Foucault and Benjamin might answer this, I want to address more fully the issues raised by such an inquiry as a way of building upon my approach to the reading of the historiographic imagetext.

Both Jameson’s definition of the postmodern and Foucault’s account of the visual as discursive practice help to explain (at least in part) the intervention of contemporary criticisms, and the attendant tensions, in the art historical field. The ‘turn to history’ or a critical approach for the historical and social has been driven, for the most part, by the development of revisionist readings for historically and socially conceptualised interdisciplinary studies. For example, Linda Nochlin’s influential contribution to a reconfiguration of the art historical field was posed in the deceptively simple question, ‘Why have there been no great women artists?’ (Nochlin 1994: 2).<sup>35</sup> The so-called woman’s question also sought equally to reveal the ingrained biases of the discipline

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<sup>35</sup> First published in *Art News*, Vol. 69, No. 9 (January 1971) and reprinted in Nochlin (1994).

of art history as a whole. As Griselda Pollock points out in a critique of Richard Wolheim's *Painting as an Art* (1987):

[The critical challenges] make it difficult to look at art in the same old ways. The deployment of a variety of theories which interlace the visual arts with cultural sign systems or with discursive formations and ideological apparatuses are perceived by many a defender of tradition as introducing alien textualities into a virgin and pristine domain, as with an attractive woman, all that is really required is some good hard looking. (Pollock 1995: 38)

Indeed, the study of the visual arts has historically privileged history over criticism and the very notion of a 'good hard look' has incited analysis under the rubric of 'the gaze' as an interpretive principle that has cut across a range of disciplines. What is revealed by Pollock's irony, with its allusion to the white, masculine, European perspective, is that the hackneyed debates between art history and criticism, as in the debates concerning history versus literature, often fail to address institutional and intellectual questions in relation to the production of power and knowledge. Who is doing the looking and for what purposes? Norman Bryson's contention that the gaze is the 'discovery of a politics of vision' (Bryson 1988: 107) has not, despite the plethora of poststructuralist writing on art, been adequately taken up—as any general survey of art history journals will attest—within the discipline of art history proper. The notorious survey conducted by the *October* art journal in 1996 is remembered for the editors' (as revealed in the construction of the questions) underlying anxieties of the encroaching dangers of the 'anthropological model'. The journal's 'pessimistic lament', as Irit Rogoff argues, is misplaced because history has simply shifted ground:

In visual culture the history becomes that of the viewer or that of the authorizing discourse rather than that of the object. By necessity, this shift in turn determines a change in the very subject of the discussion or analysis, a shift in which the necessity for having the discussion in the first place and for having it in a particular methodological mode and at a particular time become part of this very discussion. (Rogoff 1998: 20)

What is worth noting here is that the convergence of 'art' and 'history', whether articulated as 'art critique' or 'art history', as a knowledge form must always be read as a political process in that it constructs and implements meaning within and across different historical contexts. And this is precisely the aspect of the gaze which I take up in my discussion of *The Storyville Portraits* in chapter three when I examine how

photographs of female prostitutes taken at the turn of the twentieth century can appeal to contemporary feminist sensibilities. Similarly, we might also ask how is it that the Orientalist art which Nochlin (1983) argues as producing a negative image of otherness is now, as Roger Benjamin documents, collected by those from North African and Middle Eastern descent (Benjamin 1997: 32).<sup>36</sup> Christopher Pinney's instructive comments in *Photography's Other Histories* (2003) call attention to the variable and volatile nature of the processes which establish meaning both within the image and historiographic accounts:

If an image that appears to do a particular kind of work in another, it appears inappropriate to propose inflexible links between formal qualities and effect. Instead, we need a more nuanced reading of the affinities between particular discursive formations and the image worlds that parallel them, as well as sophisticated analyses of their transformational potentialities. (Pinney 2003:3)

When we consider, in particular, Roger Benjamin's example of Orientalist art, the point to be made here is that the formal qualities of an image are less relevant if such radical or genuine political transformations can be achieved. The social situation and the context out of which a work emerges, as Bal concurs, is indispensable to visual inquiry. Bal, however, usefully points out that the very concept of 'context' is as problematic as any other text because 'the context cannot define the work's meaning because context itself defies unambiguous interpretation as much as the work' (Bal 1991: 6). As an alternative to context, Bal suggests Jonathan Culler's concept of framing:

Since the phenomena criticism deals with are signs, forms with socially constituted meanings, one might try to think not of the context but of the framing of signs: how are signs constituted (framed) by various discursive practices, institutional arrangements, systems of value, semiotic mechanisms? (Culler cited in Bal 1991: 6)

Apart from the promise of visual acuity that a word like framing conveys, the concept also implies a provisional bracketing of what falls outside of the frame. This is how meaning, as opposed to the 'meaninglessness' of subjective interpretation, forms a nexus with the project ekphrastic hope. If we return to Benjamin's proposal for the

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<sup>36</sup> Granted that although Roger Benjamin states that only certain types of Orientalist painting are popular with Arab and Magrebian customers, I nevertheless think that the art historian's conception of 'positive empowerment' and 'cross-cultural' exchange (Benjamin 1997: 34-35) warrants further discussion. See the next chapter *Don't Talk to Me About Matisse*.

articulation of art as ‘social transformations expressed and characterised by changes in perception’ (Benjamin 1992: 216), then the activity of framing shifts attention away from the formal properties of the image to that of the critic’s response. The image framed elicits a life of its own and thus asserts itself to the viewer as both affect and effect. An effect, as Bal reminds us, that ‘is complicated by the social construction of visuality, the modalities of looking that we are trained to adopt, and the variability of identifications’ (Bal 1991: 7). Thus, any nuanced and sophisticated reading inevitably returns us to the question of history and its interpretation. Needless to say, the challenges to evolutionist and theological concepts of history have indelibly shifted the focus from validation to signification: how have we, or do we, give meaning to events through interpretation? This is where I think Holly’s emphasis on the rhetoric of the image is at its most compelling. Holly suggests that the division between critique and history in the discipline of art history is essentially one of perspective and that ‘writing about painting is itself part of the painting’:

it is incumbent on the cultural historian to reveal symmetries and relationships at work behind the chaos of historical appearance. Perspective provides a means of fixing the world (historical and historiographic) against the mutability of life. (Holly 1996: 85-86)

Within the deconstructive point of view, Holly’s comments are par for the course, yet they nevertheless help to establish the terms by which anti-historicist appeals to the writing of history can be understood. Different perspectives, multiple readings and the problematisations of content are now, après Jacques Derrida, typically (or, perhaps, conveniently) seen as the workings of ‘the Postmodern’. Keith Jenkins, however, is quick to point out that it is not the *content* of history, but the status of its *form* that challenges modernist accounts: ‘now matter how well formulated the *form* history might be—its method, shape and structure—we can *never* show a definitive example of it’ (Jenkins 2003: 15). Given this thesis’s argument about the inextricability of images and history, Jenkins’s ebulliently persuasive take on postmodern<sup>37</sup> history leads us into the territory of ‘histories’ various presentations: ‘of pictures, gazes, looks, impressions, feelings, sentiments, desires, appreciations; of figuring and refiguring’ (Jenkins 2003: 55). This insistence on aesthetics, above all,

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<sup>37</sup> Jenkins (2003: 71) considers postmodernism as an ‘era of aporia’ wherein political, ethical, moral, interpretive and representational, etc. are ultimately undecidable (aporetic).

highlights the critic's inseparability from historical knowledge. Benjamin's consistent efforts to instill such a reading find their apotheosis in his convergent reflections on photography and history:

The tradition of bourgeois society may be compared to a camera. The bourgeois scholar peers into it like the amateur who enjoys the colorful images in the viewfinder. The materialist dialectician operates with it. His job is to set a focus. He may opt for a smaller or wider angle, for harsher political or softer lighting—but he finally adjusts the shutter and shoots. Once he has carried off the photographic plate—the image of the object as it has entered social tradition—the concept assumes its rights and develops it. For the plate can only offer a negative. It is the product of an apparatus that substitutes light for shade, shade for light. Nothing would be more inappropriate than for the image formed in this way to claim finality for itself. (Benjamin cited in Cadava 1997: 4)

Benjamin's eloquent allusion to the writing of history as being determined by the artistic sensibility of the 'photographer' sheds critical light on the literary sensibility underpinning historical accounts.<sup>38</sup> The conceptualisation of the historian as photographer thus sets the stage for a rehearsal of the methods of traditional historiography in its allusion to the ways in which history may be thought of as fundamentally imagistic. The visual rhetoric of Ondaatje's work, as I discuss in the following section, can likewise be seen to display the logic of the photograph as elaborated by Barthes in *Camera Lucida*. In the final part of my discussion, 'Viewing Histories', I shall suggest that the critical reader—the beholder—of Ondaatje's work, as Holly's argument might lead us to believe, is part or transformative of the text itself.

## A Photographic Encounter

A photograph is always invisible.  
(Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 2000:6)

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<sup>38</sup> The project readily calls to mind the activities of the 'literary historian' and the debates associated with using literature to study history and vice-versa. The feminist historian Joan Scott argues that much of the criticism is beside the point as the debates often elide the more important question of *how* the past becomes historicised. Scott's powerfully argued case for adapting the work of poststructuralism to analyse history underpins my own discussion of the viewing histories. Scott's insistence that we 'rethink the history of politics and the politics of history' intersects with this study's reading of literature as an equal historiographic concern. As forms of cultural knowledge, history and literature are both, Scott argues, 'susceptible to the same kind of analysis, one that is directed to concepts, meanings, linguistic codes, and the organization of representation' (Scott 1999: 8).

Holly's insistence that 'seeing well becomes the prelude to historical understanding' (Holly 1996: 4) does not only highlight the complicity of images with the historiographic enterprise, but also affords us a critical vantage point from which to examine the physiognomy of historical thought which, as I have argued, is also imagistic. As, indeed, Holly reminds us citing Barthes, historiography and photography share a common element in their propensity for bridging past and present: 'the photograph of the missing being...touch me like the delayed rays of a star. A sort of umbilical cord links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze' (Barthes cited in Holly 1996: 4). The photograph's relation to history, especially in terms of this thesis's orientation towards the mutability and 'variousness of things', provides if not an unequivocal account then at least a suitably complex way of thinking about the logic of transfiguration implicit in Ondaatje's imagetexts. Complex, that is, because the relation between the image/text and its interpretation is, especially when we consider Mitchell's notion of ekphrastic hope, inescapably paradoxical. That is to say, if the task of historiography, like ekphrasis, is an effort to describe that which can no longer be seen, the overcoming of 'otherness' is not just seeing what is invisible, it is also about the impossibility of history itself. Revealing its existence 'as something based on the secularisation of the eschatological' (Hansen 1990: 106), history, in this way, can then be thought of as an absence of history.<sup>39</sup> History's tortuous existence as absence/presence is an 'ontology' that is consistent with the 'delirium' of the photograph. This relation between history and photography that is cogently illustrated in Eduardo Cadava's and Paola Cortés-Rocca's (2006) insightful essay on Barthes's *Camera Lucida*. The madness of the photograph, as Cadava and Cortés-Rocca point out, is defined by a metonym of 'ghostly survivals':

Since it is there, within the medium of the photography, that we simultaneously experience the absence of the 'observed subject' and the fact of its 'having-been-there', the relation between life and death, between testimony and its impossibility, between the self and an other, and among the past, the present, and the future. (Cadava and Cortés-Rocca 2006: 5)

Barthes's provocative claim that 'a photograph is always invisible' (Barthes 2000: 6)—because the visual signifier is not the referent we 'see'—is a proposition that by

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<sup>39</sup> Olaf Hansen refers here to Walter Benjamin's ideas about history, language and nature in relation to Ralph Waldo Emerson.

now should be understood as fundamental to a reading of the imagetext. Viewing histories is a necessarily slippery excursion between past, present and *presence*.<sup>40</sup> If Holly's earlier reference to Barthes marks out the general relation between history and photography in terms of past and present, Cadava's and Cortés-Rocca's reading of Barthes's text helps to more fully articulate the 'amorous or funereal immobility' (Barthes 2000: 6) of the photograph's presence. This is the mode of interpretation I take up in chapter six wherein Ondaatje's Barthesian (and equally Benjamin-esque) 'blank portrait' of the legendary outlaw Billy the Kid is discussed in relation to historical death and photographic absence. Similarly, in chapter five, the theme of seeing invisibility is explored in relation to arguments against historicism and the need for ethical enlightenment. These chapters, in particular, exemplify the ways in which the reader of Ondaatje's novels is implicated by the logic or visual rhetoric of the author's work. At the outset, viewing the imagetext poses an interpretive challenge to the reader insofar as the structural form of Ondaatje's novel are characterised by, as I mentioned in the introduction, 'snapshots' in prose. This can, of course, be simply interpreted as a means of apprehending the world—like the photograph—through fragments and the 'zoom' effects of Ondaatje's textual descriptions, but I also want to point out that the transformative capacity of Ondaatje's work resides in its offering of history as a 'photographic' encounter. By this, I mean to suggest that Ondaatje's texts evoke a reading dynamic<sup>41</sup> that in itself resembles the photographic experience of Barthes's ingenuous text. The type of viewing experience that I am referring to is best articulated by Cadava's and Cortés-Rocca's appraisal of the reader's subjectivity:

The I who speaks in *Camera Lucida* contemplates a series of photographs that he holds in his hands without imagining that he is a neutral witness of a relation or bond that excluded him: on the contrary, the singular adherence that binds the image to its referent also includes him. That is why far from reinforcing the assumption of an ontological difference between the subjectivity – the 'humanity' – of the observer and the materiality [of the] photograph, *Camera Lucida* works to destabilise this frontier: the image becomes the subject and the subject becomes an image. They are bound together in a relation that, acquiring a certain privacy or intimacy, reveals itself to be an amorous one: the encounter between the subject and the photograph he holds in his hands produces the spark which subjectivises the

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<sup>40</sup>For similar perspective on writing texts in this way, see Denning (1996).

<sup>41</sup> A related dynamic along spatial terms also applies here to the '360 degree view' of Ondaatje's narratives.

image (that ‘animates’ it) and that simultaneously illuminates his own photographic being. (Cadava and Cortés-Rocca 2006: 9)

What interests me here is the notion of ‘animation’ and ‘photographic being’, which are implicitly linked to my conceptualisation ekphrastic hope. If we return briefly to the concept of ekphrastic hope, that epistemological and ethical encounter with history as both a present and political concern, Barthes’s suggestion of animation and transformation as forms of photographic becoming situate the reader within a parallel mode of enquiry. The ‘I’—the interpreting subject—assumes central importance in the enactment of the insoluble conflict in the writing of time. In Cadava’s and Cortés-Rocca’s words,

to look at a photograph therefore means to contemplate the singular adherence that transforms me into an image and what that image demonstrates to me (without demonstrating at all) about what it means to be a photographic subject (Cadava and Cortés-Rocca 2006 : 10).

As Cadava elsewhere mentions in relation to the work of Walter Benjamin: ‘I, the photograph, the spaced out limit between life and death, am death. Yet speaking as death, the photograph can be neither death nor itself. At once dead and alive, it opens the possibility of our being in time’ (Cadava 1997: 128). My point, more simply, is this: that the reader of Ondaatje’s text is transformed through such a form of ontological displacement. Jenkins would attribute this transformation, not to the experience of history as if it were some virtual theme-park, but to the experience of the *historiographical* as the ‘presence of the absence of the text’ (Jenkins 2003: 57). The historian Elizabeth Ermarth’s gloss on the first chapter of Vladimir Nabokov’s *Transparent Things* (1973) describes the process of transformation, of allowing the past to *refract* through “transparent things”, as akin to that of ‘walking on water’ (cited in Jenkins 2003: 67). Ermarth’s instructive comments to ‘novice historians’ is not unlike Ondaatje’s generous warning that marks the beginning of this chapter; however, by way of literary provocation and imagistic allusion, I cite the original passage of Nabokov’s text:

When we concentrate on a material object, whatever its situation, the very act of attention may lead to our involuntary sinking into the history of that object. Novices must learn to skim over matter if they want to stay at the exact level of the moment. Transparent things, through which the past shines!



Man-made objects, or natural ones, inert in themselves but much used by careless life...are particularly difficult to keep in surface focus: novices fall through the surface humming happily to themselves, and are soon revelling with child-like abandon in the [history] of *this* stone, the [history] of *that* heath...A thin veneer of immediate reality is spread over natural and artificial matter, and whoever wishes to remain in the now, with the now, should not break its tension film. Otherwise the inexperienced...will find himself no longer walking on water but descending upright among staring fish. (Nabokov 1973: 1-2)

In a much less metaphorical tone (I shall return to the transfigural capacities of water in my parting section *A Subtle Kind of Beyond*), I have, therefore, attempted to recount such moments of historiographical presence in Ondaatje's texts. My chapter on social documentary photography in the novel *In the Skin of the Lion*, for instance, discusses Ondaatje's actual and metaphorical use of historical 'snapshots'—the concatenation and quick succession of shifting viewpoints—that allow for missing images of history not only 'the possibility of being in our time', but also permit the realisation that there are other histories that are contradictory to our own. Ondaatje's description of the photographer Lewis Hine's work as 'rooms one can step into' (Ondaatje 1988: 145) provides both an offer of the past and the prospect of trading the security of one's cultural and social position with that of the 'photograph's' observed subject. As Nabokov's advice to the agile novice might suggest, transformation does not guarantee accuracy or clarity; it does, however, offer historical consciousness. Margaret Scanlan, for example, makes the suitably evocative point that a reader's encounter with an Ondaatje novel 'will be imperfect, a human artefact with visible sutures' (Scanlan 2004: 302).<sup>42</sup> Indeed, how does one remain unscathed by such a 'miraculous' visceral encounter?

Ondaatje's photographic tendency, at the very least, exploits and questions the insight that we now take for granted: that our realities have increasingly become photographed and digitised. Considering Ondaatje's novels as photographs helps to more fully describe the historiographic aspect of the author's work that is at the same time more specific and revelatory than the word 'visual' would suggest. Narrative, under Ondaatje's compositional focus, is blurred by photographic effect and turned

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<sup>42</sup> Scanlan refers more specifically to the text *Anil's Ghost* (2000)

into random stills, tableaux and snapshots<sup>43</sup> that not so much emphasise funereal immobility, but rather the *factual* immobility of the ‘that-has-been’. If intellectual enquiry is sometimes subsumed by Barthes’s stylised virtuosity, then I suggest the reader’s photographic encounter with Ondaatje’s offer of ‘viewing histories’ reinstalls the political reverberations and possibilities of Barthes’s, one might say, ‘impossible’ text. What does it mean in the end to be transformed into a photographic subject? Ekphrastic hope, as I have suggested, provides the necessary ethical suspension to such a precariously amorous encounter.<sup>44</sup>

## Viewing Histories

Ondaatje’s advocacy for a counter-historiographic method appears to be the answer to Hayden White’s exhortation for ‘a surrealistic, expressionistic, or existentialist’ attempt at historiography. The lack of historiographic experimentation, according to White, ‘has been the progressive antiquation of the “art” of historiography itself’ (White 1978: 41-44). White’s comments, which now are over a quarter of a century old, still have direct relevance to ongoing debates surrounding the exhaustibility of discovery in representational forms.<sup>45</sup> Such an argument for historiographic experimentation is a significant intervention if we accept the perspective of postmodernism as being resolutely historical and, hence, inescapably political: for, as I mentioned earlier, our focus ultimately needs to shift to the kinds of history that are ethically responsible.<sup>46</sup> White’s consistent efforts to rethink the politics of history provide a trenchant offensive against the masking function and distancing of history.<sup>47</sup> The type of ‘theoretical’ work advocated by White is particularly concerned with

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<sup>43</sup> A useful comparison can be made here with Bal’s (1997) visual reading of Proust. Bal likens Proust’s narrative aesthetic—its ‘flatness’—to the nineteenth century photographs of Eadweard Muybridge.

<sup>44</sup> Precarious, that is, because, the photographic encounter is underpinned by the ‘co-presence’ of two conjoining responses: the *studium* and *punctum*. The rational and educative or ‘polite’ interest of the former is, as Barthes puts it, disturbed by the latter’s wounding, piercing and poignant observation (Barthes 2000: 25-8).

<sup>45</sup> In a later essay for *American Historical Review*, White extends the terms of this discussion to the translation of historiography to the visual-auditory ‘historiophoty’ of images and filmic discourse. See White (1988).

<sup>46</sup> Much has of course already been written about the crisis of the modern novel in terms of the corruption and fusion of literary genres. The rendering of social truths, especially in terms of imperial textuality, is challenged within what Brenda K. Marshall terms ‘historiographic metafiction’: fictions that consciously combine poststructural tools with fictional narratives to bring to the fore historical interrogations (Marshall 1992: 178). As Marshall points out, such fiction is often used to heighten the tension between the political and the aesthetic, between history and the text.

<sup>47</sup> See White’s *Metahistory* (1973), which remains the most persuasive example of his argument and methodology.

enquiries into the literary and poetic structures of historical texts over and above epistemological questions and concerns about objectivity. In analysing the 'nature of history', White makes a powerful case not just for 'creative' forms of historiography but, more importantly, 'by drawing historiography back once more to an intimate connection with its literary basis', it allows for a reflexivity as an antidote to 'ideological distortions' (White 1978: 99). While White does not offer any examples of the type of history he so passionately advocates, Ondaatje's works demonstrate the validity and productivity of the calls for a reflexive consciousness in historical work. Ondaatje's envisioning of the literary text as a mural form is thus particularly compelling in helping to reconceive the rhetorical/formal relationship of narrative to historiographic documents through categories of visual experience. For example, in a discussion of the visual characteristics of literary techniques, John Bender points to the 'anatomising impersonal violence of realist prose fiction' (Bender 1995: 256). A technique, Bender explains, that is characterised by observation, analysis and sequence. The implicit reference to traditional modes of historiography prompt us to consider both the positioning of the discipline of history between art and science and the discipline of literature as a form of visual art. What does or, as Holly would have it, *can* Ondaatje's mural convey to the beholder?

The desire of contemporary masses to bring things spatially and humanly "closer", as Walter Benjamin tells us, is also a desire to bring history closer and to render human experience into an intelligible form. My choice of Ondaatje's work is not only based on the ekphrastic or implicit visual qualities of his texts, but also on the ways the author enacts notions of a damaged past: a past that gains clarity and proximity through the author's text. Despite writing about insanity, bombs, bones, war, and death, Ondaatje 'writes with the compassion of a literary peacekeeper' (Johnson 2000). This is not, however, the same as saying that Ondaatje writes from within the values of a Western humanism but, as the following chapters will show, from the marginal points of view of his characters who all, in various ways, attempt to decipher 'truth'.<sup>48</sup> Historical consciousness, as opposed to the amnesiac culture of

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<sup>48</sup> In elaborating on the role of historiographic metafiction and as a reminder of the centrality of history in literature, Linda Hutcheon argues that 'to elevate "private experience to public consciousness" is not really to expand the subjective; it is to render inextricable the public and the historical and the private and biographical' (Hutcheon 1988: 94).

technological reproduceability, is reinscribed within the interpretive capacity of Ondaatje's texts. In this sense, Ondaatje's literary writing, especially in its offering of history, can be explained as having an ethical purpose in justifying humankind by keeping 'the world of life' under a permanent light and to protect us from 'the forgetting of being' (Albright 1994). Ondaatje's novels thus play a role in illuminating and negotiating a world where, as Milan Kundera points out, truth is 'decomposed into myriad relative truths parceled out by men'. The novel is, therefore, 'the image and model of *that* world' (Kundera 1999: 6). As Kundera asserts, 'a novel that does not discover a hitherto unknown segment of existence is immoral. Knowledge is the novel's only morality' (50). As a producer of knowledge and a form of 'truth' telling, literature (as history's textual other) is profoundly political on the grounds that it has its basis in the power of choice. As White explains:

Placed before the alternative visions that history's interpreter's offer for our consideration, and without any apodictically provided grounds for preferring one over another, we are driven back to moral and aesthetic reasons for the *choice* of one vision over another as the more 'realistic'. The aged Kant was right, in short; we are free to conceive 'history' as we please, just as we are free to make of it what we will. (White 1973: 433)

White's observation on the 'technique' of the historian echoes that of Benjamin's claim about the inappropriateness of 'claiming finality' for the 'image'. The choice, Jenkins explains, does not necessarily mean a denial of the past or an empirical element in historical discourse, but a recognition that history is not an epistemology but 'a reflexive, aestheticising, figuring, grammatically promiscuous, *refractive* discursive experiment without foundations' (Jenkins 2003: 68). Without foundations, as Jenkins prudently clarifies through a generous critique of Derrida's position, equating to history's interminable and logical undecidability. The impasse created by the impossibility of historical truth offers instead ethical openness when we read both literature and history as ways of offering an intelligible view of society and of seeking a balance between reproduction and construction. Kundera's understanding of the spirit of the novel is one of the 'wisdom of uncertainty' because 'it denies us our certainties by unmasking the world as an ambiguity...it's "truth" is concealed, undeclared, undeclarable' (Kundera 1999: 135). Kundera's comments on literature

readily bring to mind Greg Dening's equally eloquent assertion that reflective history, as distinct from 'Reflective History', need only be:

the heightened sense of experience in our utterances. It need only be the conscious effort to join the conversations around us. It need only be honest to the uncertainties of knowing. It need only be a sense that all narrations are *to* somebody as well as *of* something. It need only be an effort to regain the moral force of writing. (Dening 1996: 126)

The novel's uncertainty or the problematic gap in representation is, as both Dening and Kundera suggest, revelatory in its possibilities. I also take this to mean that the images cited in Ondaatje's work provide, one might say, the *punctum* to a strictly literary reading of the text. The problematic gap caused by the image/text in Ondaatje's work elicits a reading strategy which, as in Barthes's 'photographic adventure', brings together the experiences of the observed subject and that of the subject observing (Barthes 2000: 10). Might the reader already be implicated in the rhetoric of this arrangement?

As this thesis seeks to demonstrate (both in structure and content), the visual form of Ondaatje's novels—'small scenes that build and merge, and then you recognise the larger context' (Ondaatje cited in Dafoe 1997: 5)—manifests itself as a 'viewing' experience. The affect and effect for the reader might be likened to the response of Barthes's observing subject. Ensnared within the threads of the imagetext, an amorous experience characterised by 'contingency, singularity, risk and adventure' (Barthes 2000: 20), the subject observing is positioned within a paradoxical compromise. Mural visions: the experience of walking into a room and being surrounded—to explore it as a question or, as Barthes would say, a wound? While the chapters that follow all display a fealty to the *studium* of academic conventions, I have also sought to convey (indeed, keep intact) the haunting and compelling presence of Ondaatje's work by focusing on visual fragments; the 'framed' details that might illuminate the existence of that image as inseparable from the perspective of the subject observing.

## Chapter 2

### Don't Talk To Me About Matisse: Self-Reflection & Exoticism in *Running In The Family*

I realised I would be travelling back to the family I had grown from – those relations from my parents' generations who stood in my memory like frozen opera. I wanted to touch them into words.

(Michael Ondaatje, *Running In the Family*, 1984: 22)

I must confess that the book is not a history but a portrait 'or gesture'.

(Michael Ondaatje, *Running In the Family*, 1984: 206)

This chapter explores further the presence and absence of history by considering the imagetext in the context of the biographical novel. Michael Ondaatje's semi-fictional biography *Running In the Family* functions as a generative and illustrative text for my argument about the composite nature of representation and the reciprocal structure of looking. In the novel, image, text and memory are all intricately and seamlessly combined to produce, as Ondaatje suggests, 'a portrait' of familial relations which effectively complicate and parallel the relationship between image and text in the photograph. To this end, I use Marianne Hirsch's term 'postmemory' as a mode of reading histories which require an excavation of cultural events and experiences. Following Bal's work in this area, I suggest that within the framework of a *viewing*-oriented theory of literature, textual self-reflection highlights the complicity of the reader into imagining what, in this case, Ondaatje has 'touched into words'. In this chapter, then, I shall examine the relationship between image and text as it relates to a defining moment in *Running In the Family*: Ondaatje's inclusion of a poem *Don't Talk To Me About Matisse* by Sri Lankan poet Lakdasa Wikkramasinha. I shall argue that the poem's ekphrastic presence in the text enables the reader to respond to and reflect on the novel as a self-reflective work of cultural memory.

#### Postmemory: Broken Mirrors & Photographs

*Running In the Family* begins with a brief prologue, written in the third person, which alludes to Ondaatje's homecoming to a country 'he has not lived in for twenty five years'. In terms of textuality, the poetic economy of Ondaatje's prose visually frames the place that Ondaatje writes about in his book:

Dawn through a garden. Clarity to leaves, fruit, the dark yellow of the King Coconut. This delicate light is allowed only a brief moment of the day. In ten minutes the garden will be a blaze of heat, frantic with noise and butterflies.

Half a page – and the morning is already ancient. (Ondaatje 1984 : 17)

With its reference to lush surroundings, blazing heat, tropical fruit and insects, the passage describes a typical Orientalist fantasy; Sri Lanka is a place where even time passes differently. The novel's prologue is followed by a section titled 'Asian Rumours' which reveals Ondaatje's reasons 'for running to Asia'. Thus begins Ondaatje's account of his family's story, a childhood which, as the author realises in his mid-thirties, 'had slipped past and had been ignored and not understood' (Ondaatje 1984: 22). For the Sri Lankan born author, the word 'Asia' was 'a gasp from a dying mouth. An ancient word that had to be whispered, would never be used as a battle cry. The word sprawled. It had none of the clipped sound of Europe. America. Canada. The vowels took over, slept on the map with the S' (Ondaatje 1984: 22). Apart from the explicit conceptualisation of the word 'Asia' as a textual picture that both visibly represents and describes the continent, Sri Lanka at the outset is perceived as a destination that is both remote and unfamiliar. *Running In the Family* is, in this regard, Ondaatje's attempt to capture and understand the homeland that Salman Rushdie describes in his essay 'Imaginary Homelands' (1982).

For Rushdie, the exiled, emigrant or expatriate writer cannot reclaim actual cities or villages, but can only recreate 'imaginary invisible cities of the mind' (Rushdie 1982:10). This conception of memory and remembrance is consistent with Hirsch's use of the term 'postmemory'. For Hirsch, the term does not imply that we are beyond memory, but rather that the 'post' distinguishes itself from memory 'by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection...[and is thus] mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation' (Hirsch 1997: 22). Within this formulation of memory as both spatial and temporal - as a site of remembrance – photography emerges as memory's tangible, visible partner. As Hirsch notes, photographs, 'in their "umbilical" connection to life', help to connect first and second generation remembrance, memory and postmemory at the same time that 'they signal its unbridgeable distance' (Hirsch 1997: 23). Postmemory and photographs find common ground in their fragmentary

nature as forms of ‘memory shot through with holes’ (Hirsch 1997: 23). Taken together, the work of both photography and postmemory neatly illustrate Rushdie’s claim that writing between worlds necessitates ‘dealing in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost’ (Rushdie 1982: 10). This reference to mirrors is, with its Lacanian overtones, by now a common metaphor for the process of self-reflection and the formative role alienation plays in the ‘mirror stage’ of the self.<sup>49</sup> I want to suggest that broken mirrors and photographs ‘shot through with holes’, nevertheless, play a crucial and complicit role in bringing to the surface the illuminating qualities of postmemory.<sup>50</sup> If, as Douglas Barbour argues in reference to one of the opening epigraphs to this chapter, that the word ‘gesture’ is the key to understanding the generic intelligibility of *Running In the Family* (Barbour 1993: 137), I suggest that the word ‘portrait’ makes an equally significant point. Barbour’s assessment that gestures ‘can either signify or point, and sometimes do both; [it] can signify something else, or it can merely signify itself, the act of gesturing, of pointing towards that which cannot be named’ (Barbour 1993: 137) can also be used to describe that ambivalent quality of the photograph which Barthes eloquently attempts to capture in *Camera Lucida* (2000).

The pictorial conceptualisation of postmemory as a photographic gesture is given more credence when we read that Ondaatje’s ‘gesture’ is, at the same time, an attempt to harness the documentary quality of photography. Ondaatje’s statement that he ‘would love to photograph’ (Ondaatje 1994: 110) a scene with his aunts is, I think, less a reaction to the precariousness of the written word than it is the need to preserve, as Barthes’s would have it, the *punctum* or the wounding, emotional impact of the photographic image. As Ondaatje writes of his Aunt Dolly’s response to a group family photograph:

[The photograph] has moved tangible, palpable, into her brain, the way memory invades the present in those who are old, the way gardens invade houses here, the way her tiny body steps into mine as intimate as anything I have witnessed and I

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<sup>49</sup> As key texts see Lacan (1979) and Rose (1986)

<sup>50</sup> Henceforth, I shall use the term postmemory, as defined by Hirsch, to highlight the ‘imaginative investment’ of *Running In the Family*; a novel which can not be easily defined through the genre of (auto)biography. This is not to say, however, that the theoretical framework of self-reflection employed in this chapter cannot also be applied to texts which draw more explicitly on *memory* as a form of historical recollection.



have to force myself to be gentle with this frailty in the midst of my embrace.  
(Ondaatje 1994: 112).

The embodiment of postmemory, through the Aunt's embrace, works doubly well here not only as an illustration of the fragility of postmemory, but also its apprehension. As Barthes points out, the 'fatality' of the photograph inheres in 'that class of laminated objects whose two leaves cannot be separated without destroying them both' (Barthes 2000: 6). That is to say, the 'amorous or funereal immobility'—the tautological quality of the photograph—is a precarious bond between its referent (what the photograph represents) and its own materiality (Barthes 2000: 5). The fragility of postmemory, however, does not just reside in the phenomenological encounter as its photographic counterpart would suggest; if postmemory is marked by generational distance, then apprehension involves, as its dual definition suggests, an understanding, as well as an uneasy anticipation, of the photograph's fatality and fragility. For Barthes, as mentioned in the previous chapter, the apprehension of the photographic image is mediated by two forms of interest: the *studium* or the 'average' affect stirred up by a general interest in the photograph and the *punctum*, that 'accident which pricks, bruises and is poignant' to the viewer and thus disturbs and interrupts the contextual and narrative reading of the photograph (Barthes 2000: 26-27). Barthes's Latinate terms 'serve to define and circumscribe the constitutive core of photography...[and] the relationship between love and loss, presence and absence, life and death' (Hirsch 1997: 4); the same themes that are the circulating concerns of postmemory. If Barthes's terms articulate the personalised response of viewing the photographic image then I think the terms also provide a useful way of examining the process of imaginatively creating and visually capturing postmemory. In this regard, the metaphoric trope of broken mirrors and photographs in the viewing of the image reflected or represented, necessarily implies a process of self-reflection, which can be traced to the *punctum* as the originary source, for both the writer and reader/viewer of the work.

Ondaatje's attempt at 'portraiture', which I read as a desire to 'photograph' the fragility of his relative's recollections, emphatically explores postmemory and, in doing so, examines his place or perspective within it. *Running In the Family* can thus be read as an implied mirror and, as a consequence, is self-reflexive by definition.

This mode of reading, however, does not just elicit a ‘mirror image’ or ‘narcissistic’ response to the novel as a ‘work about itself’ that detracts from the historical and social issues it might seek to address; I suggest, rather, following Mieke Bal’s examination of the self-reflexivity of Rembrandt’s self-portraits, that a more productive way of reading self-reflection is one in which reflection as mirroring is read in tension with reflection as self-critique. I shall use the ‘average’ mirroring effect (the *studium*) in tension with the piercing quality of self-critique (the *punctum*) as a way of reading *Running In the Family* as, at least at first sight, an (auto)biographical text. As the title to this chapter suggests, I shall argue that the ekphrastic reference to Matisse (and, in turn, to Orientalist art) provides the self-reflective moment—the *punctum*—through which this mode of reading is fully realised. But before I place postmemory within the reading mode of self-reflection I have just suggested, the very idea of self-reflection will need elucidation.

### Reading for Self-Reflection

I am the foreigner. I am the prodigal who hates the foreigner.  
(Michael Ondaatje, *Running In the Family*, 1984: 79)

Self-reflection, self-reference and self-reflexivity have become the favoured reading and writing strategies of postmodern criticism. Self-reflexivity, for instance, forms a major part of what Linda Hutcheon terms the ‘poetics’ of postmodernism (Hutcheon 1988) whereby aesthetic expression, while self-consciously grounding itself in the historical world, problematises the ‘natural’ and the ‘real’. That is to say, the ‘narcissism’ of a self-reflexive work draws attention to its form as a work of art and to its constructedness. This problematisation of reality through representation, which is typically attributed to the postmodern, engenders a paradox that works to critique and challenge the theory of representation itself. This particular aspect of self-reflection as ‘fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical, and inescapably political’ (Hutcheon 1988: 4) is nowhere more apparent than in the critical interest taken in *Las Meninas* (1656), the Spanish masterpiece painted by Diego Velázquez (see page vii). As Svetlana Alper notes, along with Vermeer’s *Art of Painting* (which I discuss in chapter seven), *Las Meninas* ‘is surely one of the greatest representations of pictorial representation in all of Western painting’ (Alpers 1983: 31).

In a chapter of the same name, Bal's examination of self-reflection as a mode of reading draws considerably on an analysis of the critical responses elicited by Velázquez's painting. The best known, perhaps, is Foucault's thirteen page reflection of the painting in the first chapter of *The Order of Things* (1973), around which Bal frames her discussion. *Las Meninas* depicts a behind-the scene look of the painter at work behind an oversized canvas. In the background, towards the middle of the represented canvas there lies another equally significant example of self-reflection: a mirror. Reflected in the mirror is the royal couple, the represented subjects of the Spanish painter who is depicted staring out from his canvas. The inclusion of the mirror evokes a myriad of questions which relate to the position of the viewer in relation to the work and can be construed as metonymic of the work itself. The painting is about self-reflection. Who is reflected in the mirror? Where is the viewer positioned in relation to the mirror? Is Velázquez, as depicted in the painting, looking out to the viewer or to his royal masters? In these ways, the mirror draws our attention to the ambiguities of 'self' (whose 'self' is being depicted?) and to that of 'reflection' as either mirroring or reflecting.

In its simplest formulation, if self-reflection challenges and problematises reality, the response of the reader/writer to the work of art is also subsumed in the paradox insofar as the viewer is not part of the work that is being reflected upon. This problem is especially pertinent to a reading of *Running In the Family* since the novel ostensibly employs the rhetorical frame of autobiography. For one, the author's 'long journey back' (Ondaatje 1984: 25) is prefaced with a map of Sri Lanka, which most readers would identify as Ondaatje's country of birth and, another, the novel is interspersed with family photographs which bestow on the text an air of bio-authenticity. The complication, therefore, is not so much 'whose self', but what self Ondaatje is attempting to portray through the type of imaginative investment and creation that postmemory entails. As I discuss in further detail in the section entitled 'the pathos of exoticism', a reading of Ondaatje's postmemorial self, which I earlier intimated is ambivalent or gestural is to read, for both the author and reader, the genre of (auto) biography as a rhetorical strategy. To say this, of course, has meant skipping over an explanation of the mechanics of self-reflective reading. But it nevertheless highlights at the outset the three-dimensional aspect of reading self-reflectively and

that the work, the author and the critic play crucial roles in the reciprocal structure of viewing self-reflectively. How, then, is this process played out?

Bal usefully points out that the complication of self-reflection as a mode of reading is rendered simply in the question, ‘whose self is being reflected anyway?’ (Bal 1991: 247) which presupposes that the viewer of the self-reflexive work of art is defined and circumscribed by their very position as ‘viewer’. Bal argues, however, that the reader’s response reveals and provides the ‘intertext’ or the verbal ‘other’ to the visual work and, hence, offers a more productive approach to the theoretical impasse engendered by the paradox of ‘self’. According to Bal, self-reference is ‘the royal road to critique’ when we take into account the productive capacity of self-reference to ‘stimulate reflection on the viewer/reader’s own realistic impulses’ (Bal 1991: 255). When considered alongside my notion of ekphrastic hope and the ability of verbal description to help ‘visualise’ something inherently textual, the critical possibilities of this mode of reading begin to take shape. In Bal’s self-reflexive reading of the critical texts that focus on *Las Meninas*,<sup>51</sup> the thesis that ‘both visual and verbal texts have both visual and discursive aspects, and appeal to both visual and discursive modes of reading’ (Bal 1991: 259) is cogently demonstrated through the ‘visual-mirroring sense of reflection’ of the texts she examines. The type of self-reflective reading advocated by Bal is thus

one in which discursive, reflective reading involves both the self of the work—the way it problematises itself as representation—and the self of the critic, whose position as, say an art historian or a philosopher is also the subject of reflection. (Bal 1991: 259)

If Foucault concludes that perhaps in Velázquez’s painting ‘there exists the representation as it were, of Classical representation, and the definition of the space it opens up for us’ (Foucault 1973: 16), Bal’s reading extends Foucault’s reading of the work of art from that of merely being an instrument or a theory about representation and keeps intact the powerful discursive aspect of Foucault’s reading in that the

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<sup>51</sup> See Searle (1980), Snyder & Cohen (1980), Steinberg (1981) and Alpers (1983).

painting represents the absence of viewer: ‘self-reflection makes the work discursive and what we “see” is a *discourse* on representation’ (Bal 1991: 263). Bal’s analysis of the critical debates surrounding *Las Meninas* as visually and discursively based forms of reflection lays down the foundations from which I build my own argument about the collaboration of image and text in *Running In the Family*.

In beginning, therefore, with the suggestive Orientalist inflection and self-reflexive orientation of *Running In the Family*, I wanted to signal the different ways of reading the text: for the reader, the novel can be read, provisionally at least, as an exoticist travel memoir whereas, for Ondaatje the writer, the novel might be seen as—broken mirrors notwithstanding—a process of self-reflection. The two modes, as I shall argue, are not mutually exclusive and are, rather, reciprocal and productive of one another. As the terse quote at the beginning of this section suggests, the ‘prodigal-foreigner’ offers a succinct conflation of the themes of self-reflection and ‘otherness’ that are the main concerns of this chapter. The prodigal-foreigner is, therefore, the manifest mirror-image—the perspective—from which *Running In the Family* derives its self-reflexivity. Following the formula for self-reflective reading put forward by Bal, I shall, firstly, examine the ‘self’ of the novel and the ways in which it problematises itself as representation. Secondly, I shall examine the role critical responses to *Running In the Family* have played in the discursive construction of the text as a ‘migrant’ novel. Through ‘the frame of mind’ or the ‘point of view’ of the prodigal-foreigner, I argue that the self-reflective viewer of *Running In the Family* is impelled to read the concerns of the novel within an imperialist frame.

### **The Pathos of Exoticism**

Everyone was vaguely related and had Sinahlese, Tamil, Dutch, British and Burgher blood in them going back many generations...My father always claimed to be a Ceylon Tamil, though that was probably more valid about three centuries earlier. Emil Daniels summed up the situation for most of them when he was asked by one of the British governors what his nationality was, ‘God only knows your excellency’.

(Michael Ondaatje, *Running In the Family*, 1984: 41)

In a particularly relevant essay, Graeme Huggan puts forward that ‘to write ethnicity is to advertise one’s perceived ambivalence: it is, in part to consider oneself as Other, as exotic’ (Huggan 1995: 127). Huggan’s observation is a response to critiques about

Ondaatje's novel being an Orientalist travelogue that feeds off the exoticist expectations of its mainly white metropolitan readership. Undoubtedly, Ondaatje's own otherness has played a significant part in further complicating the politics of representation, or, in his case, the implications of writing as a 'hyphenated', Canadian-Sri Lankan writer.<sup>52</sup> In writing about the treatment of hyphenated writers by the mainstream culture, Rey Chow states that in terms of the conventions of representation, the West and its others are implicitly divided: 'the West is the place for language games, aesthetic fantasies, and fragmented subjectivities; the West's others, instead, offer us "lessons" about history, reality, and wholesome consciousness' (Chow 1998: 100).<sup>53</sup> In referring to the myth of a repressed Truth seeking liberation through alien experiences, Chow's comment lays bare the politics at play in representations of the Other.<sup>54</sup> As an archetypal example of the terms which frame (and fuel) the labyrinthine debate surrounding ethnic or migrant writing, the Indian-Canadian critic Arun P. Mukherjee argues that 'Ondaatje's success has been won largely through a sacrifice of his regionality; his past and most importantly, his experience of otherness in Canada' (Mukherjee 1985: 50). In a comparative analysis of Ondaatje's critically acclaimed poetry with the lesser known work of Guyan expatriate, Cyril Dabydeen, Mukherjee takes both Ondaatje and the literary establishment to task for uncritically adopting imperialist aesthetics. As she sees it, Ondaatje's (or the visible minority writer's) failure to write about their origins in an 'original and authentic way' (Mukherjee 1985: 32) is to effectively 'take sides with the coloniser' (56). Mukherjee argues that

Otherness is a fact of life and the universalist, by overriding it, is simply in retreat from the questions of ideology, power, and class. It is *only history* which makes one confront these questions. And since history involves naming: injustices,

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<sup>52</sup> Ondaatje himself has felt compelled to give his opinion on the debate surrounding 'postcolonial' writing: 'I don't find the writers as representing the race, or as representing the milieu or Weltanschauung...it is so individual for anyone to sit down and write something. In a way the Commonwealth academic thing tends to make it become symbolic or a metaphor, which is a problem. You keep having to say to these people, to the academics, this is not true. One day, on day three or whatever, I could have just gone and written a completely different book—about ashtrays or something' (Ondaatje cited in Whitlock 1993-4: 23).

<sup>53</sup> Chow explains, citing Joan Scott, that these 'lessons' arise from a belief in the necessity of genuine 'experience' where 'such "experience" is now given the value of a kind of foundationalism whose truth lies beyond the discursivity that is, in fact, its basis' (Chow 1998: 104).

<sup>54</sup> See Huggan (2001). For Huggan, the lesson would also include exposing the process of commodification insofar as the 'postcolonial exotic' is both a form of commodity fetishism and a revelation of the process by which exotic commodities are produced, exchanged and consumed (2000: 264).

ancestors, acts of friendship and acts of enmity, it automatically calls for the poetry of otherness. (Mukherjee 1985: 65, emphasis added)

Although the circuitous debates surrounding what is variously termed ethnic, migrant, multicultural, or postcolonial literature is not a primary concern of this chapter, Mukherjee's scathing critique does help to pinpoint where a self-reflective mode of reading might be of use to literary critiques. Anti-orientalist critiques, more specifically, which appeal to the representation of an authentic, originary identity, invariably essentialise the very terms that need critiquing. That is to say, 'history' as well as the 'migrant identity' is considered a teleological phenomenon. Mukherjee's conception of 'only history', as W. M. Verhoeven rightly observes, is too simplistic and monolithic and thus fails to account for the complex issues and illuminating qualities of postmemory as an historically specific endeavour (Verhoeven 1996: 3).<sup>55</sup>

Ondaatje's description of his ancestor Emil Daniel's claim to ethnic ignorance—'God only knows your excellency'—can be read as a preliminary rejoinder to Mukherjee's attack and a political statement against the duplicitous valorisation of the historically-conditioned ethnic Other where, in Aijaz Ahmad's words, 'the whole of the "Third World"...singularised into oppositionality, [is] idealised as the site, simultaneously, of alterity and authenticity' (Ahmad 1992: 33). As both Chow and Ahmad suggest, the commentary surrounding ethnic or 'migrant' writing inevitably construes the dialectic between self and Other as being formed out of the discourses of ethnicity and exoticism. Thus, criticisms such as those put forward by Mukherjee, have some implicit value insofar as a strategic and positional reading of Ondaatje's work as, *prima facie*, 'exotic'. I use exoticism to refer more specifically to the type of idealisation and abstraction in which, as Tzvetan Todorov describes it,

otherness is systematically preferred to likeness...[and] is less a valorisation of the other than an act of self-criticism, less the description of a reality than the formulation of an ideal...praise without knowledge is precisely what exoticism aspires to be. (Todorov 1993: 265)

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<sup>55</sup> Verhoeven (1996) makes the relevant point that 'history' needs to be distinguished from the process of 'historicisation' following the work of Foucault and Derrida.

This is where self-reflection as a mode of reading can assist the reader to respond to the motif of exoticism as a narrative strategy embedded in the novel. If we take, as Todorov suggests, likeness and absence as integral components of the exotic, both the tropes of mirroring and photography can be seen to do their theoretical work. An analogy, for example, between photographic imagery and the exotic highlights the necessity of a secondary action of knowledge, which can only be gained through the mode of self-reflective reading I described in the previous section. The notion of absence articulated in exoticism as ‘praise without knowledge’ finds symmetry in Barthes’s description of the photograph’s invisibility: ‘whatever [the photograph] grants to vision and whatever its manner, a photograph is invisible: it is not it that we see’ (Barthes 2000: 6). That is to say, a similar form of invisibility can be said to exist within the exotic, or, rather, the *exoticised*, referent. To rephrase Barthes’s formulation somewhat, whatever the exotic grants to vision—in this case, it is the reification of otherness—the exotic is not what we see. As I have already pre-empted through my explanation of the self-reflective mode of reading, the process of apprehending the exotic or seeing that which has been made invisible through secondary knowledge is not a straightforward one. The ‘mirrors and photographs’ that engender critical self-reflexivity, in their conceptual capacity to reflect and represent an image, are themselves the instruments through which exoticism can be seen to emanate. Even if likeness is systematically preferred, the ‘likeness’ of the mirror reflection, as Barthes suggests in relation to the photograph, is, after all, both imprecise and imaginary (Barthes 2000: 100). The complexity of this prismatic formulation can be more readily apprehended in my argument that *Running In the Family* is self-reflective of exoticism. For the moment, this simplified formulation should help to clarify the direction I wish to take with self-reflection; however, the ways in which the novel problematises itself as representation needs further explanation.

Barbour points out that in *Running In the Family* ‘there are no mirrors in the labyrinth of stories but there are also windows onto other sites of narrative. The writer will see others more than he sees himself’ (Barbour 1993: 139). While it should be clear by now that I disagree with the first part of Barbour’s assertion, his point about Ondaatje’s novel looking out onto other sites implies, however, that the novel reflects on the narrative of others and of otherness. Verhoeven makes a similar observation



when he states that Ondaatje's texts are structured along two forms of reading: the level of story and the level of discourse. That is to say, Ondaatje's depiction of otherness often articulate the search for lost characters and identities while at the same time questing, exploring and representing (the origin of) the self in verbal constructs (Verhoeven 1996: 5). If we return to the gaze of the prodigal-foreigner, both Barbour's and Verhoeven's assessment of Ondaatje's novel outline the mode of self-reflection inherent in the process of postmemory. As I earlier mentioned, within a self-reflective mode of reading, the ostensible autobiographical framework of *Running In the Family* is transformed from being an imaginative investment and creation of a story into that of discourse. The very process of articulating postmemory thus presents itself as a 'discourse on the problematic and indeterminate nature of identity, self, and language' (Verhoeven 1996: 4). In Hirsch's terms, postmemory, dominated as it is by the narratives that precede one's birth, entails an excavation whereby 'one's own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation' (Hirsch 1997: 22). I am here following Hirsch's advice that the notion of postmemory, originally developed in relation to children of Holocaust survivors, 'may usefully describe other second-generation memories of cultural or collective traumatic events and experiences' (Hirsch 1997: 22).

My reading of *Running In the Family* as illustrative of postmemory does, in this way, involve examining the intersection of private and public history. Ondaatje's self-reflexive 'prodigal-foreigner' who hates the foreigner, in its emphasis on the 'mirror' aspect of postmemory, highlights the political possibilities of literary representations that, in one way or another, are doubly caught within the complex issues of cultural representation. The prodigal point-of-view, especially, throws into sharp relief the problems raised by Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) in relation to the ways in which people and places colonised by Western powers have been represented. The prodigal-foreigner might well refer to the internal divisions present in both 'East' and West'. It is simultaneously the space of the colonial encounter and the site of the imperial contest: on the one hand, displaying the characteristic ambivalence of attraction and repulsion, desire and aversion, which have contributed to theorisations of the colonial encounter and, on the other, signalling the role these theorisations have played in the cultural construction of race. As Robert Young's historical genealogy of 'race' would suggest, the notion of the 'exotic' as a category of difference is also inextricably

linked to an inner dissonance underlying European culture: a 'colonial desire' of attraction and fantasy which is itself complicit with colonialism itself (Young 1995). If the notion of an exoticised identity has come to mean much the same as a colonised identity, a reading of the exotic in *Running In the Family* must be viewed through a colonial lens if we are to apprehend the secondary knowledge necessary to distinguish the exotic as representation. As an illustration of this point (and as a precursor to my examination of *Don't Talk To Me About Matisse*), take, for example, the section in the novel entitled 'The Karapothas'. In this section Ondaatje informs us of the biological journals kept by one of his ancestors. The ancestor, a William Charles Ondaatje, 'knew of at least fifty-five species of poisons easily available to his countrymen' (Ondaatje 1984: 81). William, Ondaatje tells us, was passionate about Ceylon's poisonous vegetation and extols their beauty in the pages of his journals. Ondaatje affords us a glimpse of William's record keeping, a 'lyrical' footnote as testament to the man's appreciation of the indigenous flora, and the journal's evident 'delight':

He invents "paper" out of the indigenous vegetables, he tests local medicines and poisons on dogs and rats. "A man at Jaffna committed suicide by eating the *negala* root...A concoction of the plumbago is given to produce abortion." Casually he lists the possible weapons around him. The karapothas crawled over them and admired their beauty. (Ondaatje 1984: 82)

Here, in the final sentences, the use of contrasting grammatical tense—from the present to past—is significant. Earlier in the same section, we learn that the word 'karapotha' means a type of 'beetle with white spots', the same word that Ondaatje's niece uses for the foreigners in Ceylon 'who stepped in and admired the landscape, disliked the "inquisitive natives" and left' (Ondaatje 1984: 80). Armed with this knowledge of the foreigner's sobriquet, the seemingly innocuous description of beetles crawling over the poisonous indigenous vegetation becomes a trenchant critique of the parasitic nature of the colonial encounter. As Ondaatje later comments in 'The Karapothas' chapter, apart from two notable Westerners who write of Sri Lanka well, 'very few foreigners truly knew where they were' (Ondaatje 1984: 83). This particular example of postmemory illustrates the subtlety and, hence, the efficacy, with which cultural memory is surreptitiously inserted into the text. As a result, *Running In the Family* as a novel of postmemory transforms into a more politicised reflection on exoticised thought.

While it is tempting, at this point, to conclude that *Running In the Family*, through its self-reflective reading of Sri Lanka's colonial encounter, successfully reveals the exotic as representation, such a conclusion does not fully account for the novel's understanding of the exotic as one which, more importantly, is inextricably linked to social processes. As I have been suggesting thus far, the conceptual trope of photographs and broken mirrors illustrate the possibility of capturing the belated stories of postmemory. The subsequent representation through imaginative investment, therefore, creates a powerful medium through which the vagrancies of postmemory and, as Hirsch notes, the unattainability of understanding or recreating (traumatic) events can be transformed. Graeme Huggan's reading of *Running In the Family* makes a convincing argument about the value of dissolving family chronicle into what Ondaatje himself describes as 'rumours of topography' (Ondaatje 1984: 64). It is Ondaatje's strategy of manipulating the 'facts' which, in Huggan's view, helps to exceed the impositions that critiques of authenticity, whether aimed at the writer or the historical text, might define. Huggan, citing Chris Bongie, attributes this process of subversion to an 'ironic acknowledgment of necessary distance' and the 'pathos of exoticism': the prodigal-foreigner who hates the foreigner is always aware of the unattainability of recuperating an other that is already self-invented (Huggan 1995: 5). The epistemological impossibility of apprehending, in Barthes's words, the fragility and fatality of the migrant postmemory necessitates a poetics of imagination. For instance, the first of the novel's epigraphs is a quotation from a 14<sup>th</sup> century Franciscan friar: 'I saw in this island fowls as big as our country geese having two heads...and other miraculous things which I will not here write of' (Ondaatje 1984: ix). The quote aptly alludes to Ondaatje's conviction that 'truth disappears with history' (Ondaatje 1984: 53) and that the 'long lists of confused genealogies and rumour' (205) can be applied equally to his family history as it does to the complex history of Sri Lanka. The maps, Ondaatje writes,

revealed rumours of topography, the routes for invasion and trade, and the dark mad mind of travellers' tales appears throughout Arab and Chinese and medieval records. The island seduced all of Europe. The Portuguese. The Dutch. The English. And so its name changed, as well as its shape,—Serendip, Ratnapida ('island of gems'), Taprobane, Zeloan, Zeilan, Seyllan, Ceilon, and Ceylon—the wife of many marriages, courted by invaders who stepped ashore and claimed

everything with the power of their sword or bible or language... this pendant, once its shape stood still, became a mirror. (Ondaatje 1984: 64)

The mirror, as Ondaatje explains, ‘pretended to reflect each European power’ (Ondaatje 1984: 64). The mirroring of the reflected (and reflective) self within this imperialist frame is the *punctum* of the novel’s ‘portaiture’ and forms the basis of the text’s engagement with the past. If manipulating ‘facts’ is subversive of the politics of authenticity, I suggest also that the ekphrastic moment embedded in the text of *Running In the Family* provides a similar effect in subverting exoticist representations. Whereas the prodigal foreigner provides the self-reflexive *perspective* to the novel’s representation of Sri Lanka, the novel’s ekphrastic moment engenders the *punctum* necessary for a self-reflective reading: Ondaatje’s personalised account of postmemory becomes a more public articulation of the social and the historical.

### **Don’t Talk To Me About Matisse**

In *Running In the Family*, amongst the descriptions of eighteenth century Dutch mansions, jungles and gravestones, the ‘mad dog heat’, the ‘cool dark of village trees’, and the tales of the local practice of eating native lizard tongue to attain loquacity, lies a poem by Sri Lanka poet Lakdasa Wikkramasinha:

Don’t talk to me about Matisse...  
the European style of 1900, the tradition of the studio  
where the nude woman reclines forever  
on a sheet of blood

Talk to me instead of the culture generally –  
how the murderers were sustained  
by the beauty robbed of savages, and our white-washed  
mud-huts were splattered with gunfire. (cited in Ondaatje 1984: 85)

Clearly, the force of Wikkramasinha’s poem lies in its metonymic use of painting as a metaphor for the murder of indigenous Sri Lankans by colonialists; a force made even more vehement through Ondaatje’s description, in an earlier passage, of the imprisonment of insurgents and the political potential of writing:

When the government rounded up thousands of suspects during the Insurgency of 1971, the Vidyalkara campus of the University of Ceylon was turned into a prison camp. The police weeded out the guilty, trying to break their spirit. When

the university opened again the returning students found hundreds of poems written on walls, ceilings, and in hidden corners of the campus. Quatrains and free verse about the struggles, tortures, the unbroken spirit, love of friends who had died for the cause. The students went around for days transcribing them into their notebooks before they were covered with whitewash and lye. (Ondaatje 1984: 84)

Read in conjunction with *Don't Talk To Me About Matisse*, Ondaatje effectively pronounces his faith in the potential of art to effect change and signals to the reader acknowledgment of his own role in reclaiming, if not precolonial Sri Lanka, histories that have been suppressed and marginalised. Ajay Heble rightly observes that, while there has been much written about the ways in which genre is problematised in *Running In the Family*, there has been little analysis of the ways in which the novel engages with political and social realities.<sup>56</sup> Heble's own analysis of the cultural politics of the novel situates the political resonances of Ondaatje's work within the author's 'rhetoric of excess' or imaginative acts. Heble suggests that Ondaatje's mingling of historical/factual material with 'rumours of topography' effectively acts as a form of recuperation that reclaims Sri Lankan indigenous history from the grid of Western thought and understanding. In commenting about Ondaatje's inclusion of Wikramasinha's poem, Heble writes: 'the force of the poem...resides primarily in its meditation on the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of having such recuperation without the agency of imaginative intervention (Heble 1994: 186-203).<sup>57</sup>

It is through imaginative intervention, Heble concludes, that Ondaatje's text allows us 'to participate in a newly articulated mode of referentiality' (Heble 1994: 186). Whilst I agree with Heble's comment to the extent that this reformulated understanding of referentiality is manifest in the text's 'rhetoric of excess' (namely its inclusion of poetry), I suggest, however, that this referentiality resides primarily in the image of the French artist Henri Matisse's odalisque 'reclining forever on a sheet of blood'.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> See Hutcheon (1988b) and Kamboureli (1988).

<sup>57</sup> In his first collection of poems, *Lustre*, Wikramasinha writes the following: 'I have come to realize that I am using the language of the most despicable and loathsome people on earth; I have no wish to extend its life and range or enrich its tonality. To write in English is a form of cultural treason. I have found for the future to think of a way of circumventing this treason' (cited in Heble 1994: 193).

<sup>58</sup> The reference to the French artist, Henri Matisse in itself speaks volumes about the violence inflicted by European representations of non-Western culture. Matisse is well known as a master of a style of painting called 'Fauvism', or 'beast-like', so-dubbed because of the bright, aggressive use of colour and the strong, expressive reactions to the subject that typified most of the artworks painted in the style. First formally exhibited in Paris in 1905, Fauvist paintings shocked visitors to the annual Salon

Here, within the realm of Orientalist art, the exoticised image can be seen to lend itself to the type of specular and speculative reading that Bal suggests makes self-reflective reading genuinely relevant. Indeed, while a literal—let alone an ekphrastic—reading of *Don't Talk To Me About Matisse*, does make the reference to imperial violence clearly understood, a broader, speculative reading of the odalisque as iconic of Orientalist art stretches the tension between mirroring and self-critique to a more productive critical point. That is to say, this type of reading entails engaging in a visual—as compared with an art historical—reading of the odalisque that extends beyond the boundaries of Matisse's portrait so that Orientalist art is viewed contextually or, as Svetlana Alper does with Dutch art, 'circumstantially'. The exotic images of Orientalist art can thus be accessed 'through a consideration of their place, role, and presence in a broader culture' (Alpers 1985: xxiv).

I have chosen Matisse's painting, *Odalisque aux Culottes Rouges* (Odalisque in Red Trousers) as the 'visual anchor' to my discussion of the exoticised Other for two main reasons. Firstly, the painting provides, at least for me, the ekphrastic hope of Wikkramsinha's words and, secondly, in comparison to the many other odalisques painted by Matisse, I think this particular painting fittingly captures the baroque potency of the poet's 'nude woman reclining forever on a sheet of blood'. The painting's representation of a concubine, full-breasted and in a sexually-inviting pose, has come to signify—especially within Orientalist literature and art—the imaginary qualities fundamental to eighteenth and nineteenth century understandings of the East as exotic, ornate and mysterious. Matisse's sojourns to Morocco in 1912 and 1913, for example, evoked pertinent memories for the artist: 'I found the landscapes of Morocco to be exactly as described in the paintings by Delacroix and the novels of Pierre Loti' (cited in Peltre 1997: 262). Matisse's reference to fellow painter Eugène Delacroix is indicative of how, according to Said's terms, the Occident has come to know the mysteries of the Orient and its exotic others.<sup>59</sup> Not surprisingly, the works inspired by Matisse's travels to North Africa and Tangiers can be seen to have

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d'Automne; one of these visitors was the critic Louis Vauxcelles, who dubbed the painters 'Les Fauves' (wild beasts) because of the violence of their works (Web Museum, Paris <http://www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/tl/20th/fauvism.html>)

<sup>59</sup> Delacroix, inspired by his journey to Morocco in 1832, was the first to popularise the images of the East through a series of images of Magrebian horsemanship, the fantasia.

produced long-established depictions drawn from the Orientalist cast: women as mysterious, sexual objects; men as dangerous and warrior-like, and architecture and landscape as markers of the exotic.<sup>60</sup> By the time Matisse exhibited his Tangiers paintings in 1913, the Orientalist tradition was already firmly established and potently naturalistic ‘ethnographic canvasses’ typical of Jean-Léon Gerome’s paintings of the mid 1800’s, were considered descriptive by the turn of the century.<sup>61</sup> When the Universal Expositions were held in 1889 and 1900, it was Orientalist pictures and panoramic paintings that mediated colonial imagery for the mass audience. The visual quality of Orientalist painting, in its capacity to describe, cannot be underestimated. As Ann Stoler points out in her specifically colonial reading of race in Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*, the profusion of eroticised native bodies in Western artistic production provided the foundational imagery of imperial domination. Stoler’s own examination of the epistemic principles (the ways of knowing) that shaped nineteenth century enquiries into race and sexuality reveals ‘that both were founded on criteria for truth that addressed the invisible coordinates of race by appealing to both *visual* and verbal forms of knowledge at the same time’ (Stoler 1997: 205, emphasis added). The effect being that in the aesthetic realm of the coloniser’s gaze the ‘combined palpability and intangibility [of the colonised Other] makes race slip through reason and rationality’ (Stoler 1992: 206). Taken from the point-of-view of Ondaatje’s prodigal-foreigner, the spectatorial position of the Orientalist artist is as much a metonym for the colonial gaze as it is a mechanism for securing the fantasised narrative of the exotic.

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<sup>60</sup> Matisse’s first trip to the North African town of Biskra in 1906 produced relatively little as the artist found it difficult to apply his new found Fauve technique. In a detailed letter to a painter friend, Henri Mauguin, Matisse writes: ‘The Biskra oasis is very beautiful, but I know that one must spend several years in these countries in order to extract something new and that one cannot just take one’s palette and one’s system’s to apply it’ (cited in Benjamin 2003: 164). The impossibility of painting Biskra for Matisse, while not dissimilar to Fromentin’s concerns before him, had more to do with the practicalities of reconciling the newly discovered desert light with artistic technique and of portraying an authentic ‘ethnographic’ perspective rather than any ethical dilemmas associated with painting the colonised other.

<sup>61</sup> As an American critic described Gérôme in 1873: ‘Gérôme has the reputation of being one of the most studious and conscientiously accurate painters of our time. In a certain sense he may even be called “learned”. He believes as Charles Reade does in the obligation on the part of the artist to be true even in minute matters to the period and locality of work pretending to historical character. Balzac is said to have made a journey of several hundreds of miles in order to verify certain apparently insignificant facts concerning locality described in one of his novels. Of Gérôme, it is alleged that he never paints a picture without the most patient and exhaustive preliminary studies of every matter concerned with his subject. In the accessories of costume, furniture, etc. it is invariably his aim to attain the utmost possible exactness. It is this trait in which some declare an excess, that has caused him to be spoken of as a “scientific picture maker” ’ (cited in Nochlin 1989: 37).

In *Orientalist Aesthetics: Art, Colonialism, and French North Africa*, Roger Benjamin attempts to map out a similar thesis through a detailed survey of the ways in which the imagery of the French colonies was exhibited, reviewed and received into European culture (Benjamin 2003). I rely on Benjamin's text here because, to date, it is the only art historical text on the subject of Orientalist art that explicitly attempts to engage with the thesis put forward by Said and other critics of colonialism.<sup>62</sup> As Benjamin states in his introduction, the institutional focus in his work 'allows the first art-historical test of a provocative part of Said's thesis, his Foucauldian insight the links between colonial governance and aesthetic production were more than just benign and circumstantial, that they were constitutive in fundamental ways' (Benjamin 2003: 5). Although Benjamin's response to the 'intellectual climate of postcolonial theory' is, in my opinion, not entirely successful,<sup>63</sup> his work, nevertheless, sheds valuable light on the discursive quality of visual and verbal texts.

Roger Benjamin notes that European conquests of its colonies had 'done much to enlarge the horizons of art by giving artists new subjects', but the subjects for 'serious art' were usually those that appealed to the romantic critic's expectations of otherness – architectural, ethnographic, or climatic (Benjamin 2003: 15). In his analysis of the critiques surrounding Orientalist art and its institutionalisation in European society, Benjamin points out that anti-colonial sentiment, while frequent in French politics of the time, was not the province of 'high art' and that 'one could argue that all Orientalist art by Europeans tacitly endorsed the colonial order, or at least instrumentalised it' (Benjamin 2003: 79). While supposition appears to be the limit of Benjamin's analysis of Orientalist art's role within the machinations of the colonial order, his synthesised account of these arguments suggests, however, that the terms of the debates, whether advocating Fromentin's romanticised appeal for *le beau ideal* or

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<sup>62</sup> Benjamin has also written extensively on the works of Matisse and devotes a large chapter of *Orientalist Aesthetics* on the political and ideological force of the artist's work.

<sup>63</sup> More specifically, I dispute Benjamin's contention that 'if the Saidian critique of Orientalism rang true, why would collectors of Arab, Turkish, or other non-Western ethnicities favour such a demeaning imagery of their cultures today? And why would Magrhebian collectors in particular patronize the art of those foreigners who had long ruled their countries before (in the case of Algeria) bloody wars of liberation?' (Benjamin 1997:32). Surprisingly, the questions posed by Benjamin are purely rhetorical; to my mind, they require a more nuanced response than the citation of a privileged coterie of art collectors as the *deus ex machina* of colonial racism. Ironically, Benjamin himself reminds us that art critics seldom dismissed Orientalist art on explicitly political grounds, instead couching their arguments in purely aesthetic terms.



the realist critique of Orientalist art, were ultimately about nationalistic concerns disguised in the syntax of fantasy and desire. Moreover, what Benjamin describes as the ‘preservationist imagination’ of Orientalist painters such as Matisse, cannot be interpreted merely as nostalgia for a pristine pre-colonial past, but as a denial also of the actualities of colonialism. The images of picturesque landscapes, harems, Turkish bath houses, and odalisques—the obsessive leitmotifs which came to characterise Orientalist art—became a *camera obscura* ostensibly depicting the East as seen by the artist while at the same time obscuring the social disruptions and architectural vandalism brought upon by colonial rule. Invisibility is, in this sense, equated to a form of power that is made palatable ‘only on the condition that it mask a considerable part of itself’ (Foucault 1978: 86). Within the imperial frame, Matisse’s nude woman of Wikkramasinha’s poem can now be viewed as the manifest response to this particular form of nostalgia: the *punctum* that provides the historically and socially meaningful mode of self-reflective reading.

Indeed, the political fact of French colonial expansion in the nineteenth century enabled Orientalist painting to flourish wherever the colonists went, from Egypt to Algeria, Syria, Indochina, Tunisia, and Morocco.<sup>64</sup> To the extent that Benjamin’s art historical comments can be interpreted as supporting interpretations of Said’s thesis as the Orient being only an object of knowledge arising from colonial relations of power (and, thus, is simply a discursive construction of Orientalism as a Western projection), the reality of the historical conditions therefore need to—indeed must—be acknowledged. The ‘Oriental’ has always existed independently of the ‘Orient’ and actual processes of colonization, travel, exploitation, and domination is, undeniably, part of Orientalism. In Grossberg’s succinct terms, ‘is it not an articulation of knowledge into particular geo-economic and political realities that reconfigures curiosity into power?’ (Grossberg 1996b: 95). Young also reminds us that colonialism ‘was not only a machine of war, it was also a desiring machine’ (Young 1995: 98). Desire for knowledge about distant civilizations which were virtually

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<sup>64</sup> It is worth keeping in mind that the historical moment of French colonial expansion was at its peak in 1880-1930 and, as Young argues, historical context cannot be separated from racial theory. In his study of the cultural construction of race, Young explains that ‘race’ and ‘culture’ taken as a meaning-cluster was largely a product of the nineteenth century when explicit theorizations of race became increasingly scientificised (Young 1995: 91). See Patricia Lorcin’s (1995) study of Algeria as a French testing ground for ethnographic data and theories of race in the late nineteenth century.

unknown compelled most artists to travel to the East.<sup>65</sup> In relation to critiques about the 'inauthentic' Eastern imagery by artists who never left Europe, Matisse's initial sojourns to the East demonstrate another important conclusion about Orientalism: that there is no correlation between experiencing—seeing—the East and one's ability to reproduce it (Bohrer 2004: 176-180).<sup>66</sup> The depictions of painters helped to transform curiosity into an art that successfully manipulated the tension between fantasy and an imagined authenticity. The Orient of the Western imagination produced 'a symbiotic amalgam of fantasy and observation' (Bach 1997: 14) which, as Stoler has shown, helped to counterpoint the 'authenticity' of the Other with the 'truth' of the European self.

If we extend the mirror metaphor, the inversion of the aesthetic rules within Orientalist art can be witnessed as the transformation of the Orient into the 'inverted mirror image of a familiar reality' (O'Beirne 2003), a notion which underwrites colonial discourse and its construction of the Other.<sup>67</sup> In addition, this inversion of a 'familiar reality' is symptomatic of the psychological and political anxieties attributed to European society in the imperial frame: the responses of desire and aversion that culminate into racist thought.<sup>68</sup> Stoler suggests as much when she puts forward the idea that the production of western desire is the 'quintessence of a process in which the mirroring of bourgeois priorities and their mimetic subversion played a defining role' in the politics of colonialism (Stoler 1997: 192).<sup>69</sup> Stoler contends that 'there was no bourgeois identity that was not contingent on a changing set of Others who

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<sup>65</sup> Benjamin points out that *l'hivernage* or winter tourism was one 'trivial motif of criticism' which underscored the reason for painting the exotic. In this context, Fromentin's chillingly ironic remarks on paintings produced from these expeditions are worth quoting here. The results, according to Fromentin, amounted to 'a cosmopolitan painting, novel rather than original, not very French, which in our history (if history bothers with it) will present only a moment of curiosity, of uncertainty, of malaise. To be frank, it is only a change of air tried out by people in poor health' (cited in Benjamin 2003: 29).

<sup>66</sup> Jean-Auguste Dominique Ingres is an archetypal example of this type of 'studio' Orientalist. His depictions of odalisques and bath houses were inspired by the journal entries of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, the wife of a British ambassador to Turkey. Benjamin also informs us, by way of Léonce Bénédict, that older literary texts (such as Baron de Montsequieu's *Lettres Persanes*) and contemporary news reports provided a common source of inspiration for painters rather than direct experience (Benjamin 2003: 61).

<sup>67</sup> As Foucault contends, colonialism is intimately tied to the production and self-understanding of modern Europe through ethnology which serves to place European *episteme* at the centre of world history and culture (Foucault 1973: 377-78).

<sup>68</sup> See Young (1995)

<sup>69</sup> In investigating the relationship between repression and desire, Stoler's examination of this 'education of desire' in the colonial context fruitfully explores the tangled coexistence of Freud and Foucault in the writing of colonial racism.

were at once desired and repugnant, forbidden and subservient, cast as wholly different but also the same' (Stoler 1993: 193). As Ondaatje's self-reflective prodigal-foreigner would also seem to suggest, in tracing the 'enemy within' to society and the self, the project of self-reflection for both reader and writer of the Orientalist text finds a common thread in the issue of racism. If, following Stoler's study, Foucault has led us to the power of discourse and Freud to the power of fantasy,<sup>70</sup> the convergence of their projects might help contextualise, if not explain, the role that Orientalist art plays in constructing difference into exotic otherness. The project of countering the exoticised image through self-reflection thus requires a consideration of the instability of image as a historically specific construction. As Lisa Lowe's assiduous study of French and British Orientalisms demonstrates, the tradition of Orientalism 'facilitates the inscription of many different kinds of differences as oriental otherness, and the use of oriental figures at one moment may be distinct from their use in another historical period...or...in the same body of work' (Lowe 1991: 8). Todorov takes Lowe's point further in stating that 'pure exoticism is as rare as consistent nationalism' and that, in practice, exoticism relies on relativism insofar as it 'serves only as a means of access to the subject matter' (Todorov 1993: 266). If in the realm of literary representation, ethnicity in writing is the new exoticism, the phantasmic spectre of the Oriental odalisque—Wikkramsinha's 'nude woman reclining *forever* on a sheet of blood'—can be viewed as a cautious reminder of the vigilance required in countering the repeated transformations and variants of the dominant colonial gaze; a gaze which effectively secures the fantasised construction of the exotic.

In the realm, then, of visual representation, we should doubly pay attention to the collaboration of the visual and the verbal in attendant art historical critiques.<sup>71</sup> If current academic scholarship is now more attentive to the 'postcolonial' context of viewing works of art, a self-reflective mode of reading critical texts should reveal the extent of their engagement with the issues surrounding works of art. Accordingly, my

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<sup>70</sup> It is Freud, after all, who underwrites the work of Frantz Fanon and on which Homi Bhabha's critique of Said's *Orientalism* can be seen to rely. Take, as a relevant example, Bhabha's analysis of the colonial stereotype, in which he argues, via Fanon, that the function of the stereotype as phobia and fetish 'threatens the closure of the racial/epidermal schema for the colonial subject and opens the royal road to colonial fantasy' (Bhabha 1983: 25).

<sup>71</sup> I am referring here more specifically to the historians of art as opposed to art critics.

use of Roger Benjamin's study of Orientalist aesthetics, as a text that explicitly engages with the 'postcolonial climate', is, in part, an attempt to bring a more self-reflexive mode of reading to art historical debate; an area which, I think, still privileges the verbal and, hence, prevents insight into the powerful influence of the visual. Take, for instance, Benjamin's critique of Matisse's later work. In locating Matisse's particular response to the echoes of his Orientalist predecessors, Benjamin argues that the modernist aesthetic in Matisse's work is

More abstracting and allusive than its nineteenth century counterparts...[and] potentially alters a work's political implication. If the realist language of traditional Orientalist painting relates to the spirit of the colonialist venture, descriptive and appropriative, modernist aestheticisation might mollify that spirit: by suspending the anecdotal realism of nineteenth century painting, it reorganises the troubling subject matter into a supposedly neutral abstraction (Benjamin 2003: 180).

Benjamin's equivocal analysis of the counter-political tendencies in Matisse's work suggests that art historical critique is still, for the most part, concerned with the stylistic motives of visual work. Furthermore, Benjamin concludes that Matisse's inclusion of Islamic and African art into his own painting and sculpture 'has promoted and *furthered* those non-Western arts to a bourgeois audience'; hence, as Benjamin concludes in the final sentence of his book, Matisse's 'continuing relevance to the history of cross-cultural exchange' (Benjamin 2003: 281, emphasis added). Such a conclusion, however, rests on a partial and limiting view of the postcolonial context. Benjamin's notion of 'cross cultural exchange' is one that narrowly encompasses his inclusion of Algerian indigenous artists (and non-Western art collectors) as the corrective to the 'benighted, coerced, or simply absent' postcolonial subject; a stereotype that has, according to Benjamin, been rejected in recent postcolonial writing. Matisse's work whether categorised as 'Orientalist' or 'modernist' may have metamorphosed 'into a supposedly neutral abstraction', but I contend that the theme—the iconic fantasy—remains the same and is not exempt from the problems which attend the category of the exotic other. If the very notion of 'Orientalism' in the visual arts fails to consider the part exotic representations played in imperial endeavours then I think a self-reflective mode of reading art historical critiques can help to reveal the ways imagery of otherness continues to affect our notion of the

exotic.<sup>72</sup> Both Mukherjee's and Benjamin's asseverations on the historical imperative of literary and visual art reveal a lack of self-reflection on the concept of history itself. Whilst Mukherjee sees otherness as an 'automatic call for the poetry of otherness' (Mukherjee 1985: 65), Benjamin's critique of the 'postcolonial' quality of Matisse's later work is similarly informed by a simplistic notion of 'cross cultural exchange'.<sup>73</sup> Their critiques, nevertheless, reveal that the relationship between politics and aesthetics as well as that between image and text, is mutually informing. As I have suggested throughout this chapter, the illuminating labour of self-reflection relies on taking into account three modes of looking: the work, the author and the critic. Reading self-reflectively takes into account each of the spectatorial positions of this trialectical mode of viewing and holds them all in tension. As in the metaphorical mirror of Velazquez's *Las Meninas*, who or what is reflected in the work of art? Where is the viewer's own response positioned in relation to the mirror? A failure to ask these questions, as Mukherjee's and Benjamin's critique of exotic representations illustrate, is to fail to see exotic otherness as a form of racial discourse. A discourse which, in Stoler's words, is 'polyvalent and appears new and renewed at the same time' (Stoler 1992: 200).

### **Whose History?**

*Running In the Family* is, in terms of a narrative (and, hence, descriptive) reading, an exotic travelogue if the leitmotifs of Orientalist art are anything to go by. A reading of the novel, however, as primarily an exoticised account of Ondaatje's family history elicits many of the questions that relate to the position of the viewer in relation to the 'mirror' in the work of art. To put this another way and in the terms with which I began this chapter, the *studium* or the general interest of the novel may be that of (auto)biography, but to read the novel self-reflectively engenders a reading which necessitates going beyond the level of story and the generic conventions of the

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<sup>72</sup> It is difficult to view the subjects of Matisse's *Moroccan Café* (1912), for example, without recourse to earlier depictions of the Magrhebian male: might these be the same lascivious men of Gérôme's *Slave Market* (1867) or the idle spectators of *The Snake Charmer* (1870). How, then, does one disentangle the association with past images of dusky men wrapped in turbans? How far in time have these images travelled if contemporary news footage of suspect 'terrorists' conjure up the Arab male, to use Said's words, 'as a camel-riding, terroristic, hook-nosed, venal lecher' (Said 2003: 108)?

<sup>73</sup> This form of cultural exchange can be interpreted as a form of boutique multiculturalism which is typified by the celebratory (and usually cosmetic) 'high profile flirtations with the other' (Fish 1997: 378).

(auto)biographical novel. Through a conceptualisation of Ondaatje's 'prose picture' as postmemory's conceptual photograph, the genre of (auto)biography is transformed into a rhetorical strategy. To read self-reflectively in this way is to lift the novel's textuality to the level of discourse.

Descriptions of the 'toddy tapper' and the 'cinnamon peeler' as expressed in the novel's poems, reveal more of the poetic sensibility and imagination of the author than a clear definition of Sri Lanka's and, in turn, the author's cultural identity—or rather, cultural ambiguity. Sri Lanka is, after all, 'the wife of many marriages' (Ondaatje 1984: 64) and Ondaatje, too, is part of a 'long list of confused genealogies and rumour' (Ondaatje 1994: 205). In many ways, the author's reflection of his country of birth is an attempt to articulate the country's own attempts to mirror and negotiate European power. If, as Bender suggests, realist prose fiction is characterised by a type of violence (Bender 1995: 256), then Ondaatje's position is less a stylistic affectation than a poised denial of certainties. It is a truce that has less to do with notions of a strategic essentialism or cultural exchange than the impossibility of apprehending an illusory self that is, in its imaginative quality and imprecision, epistemologically doomed from the start. The discourse, therefore, of Ondaatje's 'family history' is an exploration of the confused and indeterminate nature of identity, self and language. This is where the trialectal mode of self-reflective reading comes fully into play. If the novel problematises itself as a rhetorical strategy, then the spectatorial position of the author as prodigal-foreigner is the perspective or 'mirror' from which the reader or the critic of the novel is also placed. The prodigal-foreigner is, as I have argued throughout this chapter, the perspective from which the novel derives its self-reflexivity; a viewing position that reflects or mirrors, and is self-reflective of exoticism.

In considering the resonances of the 'prose picture'—the imagetext—of *Running In the Family*, I have brought a self-reflective mode of reading to the text that also illustrates the usefulness of Barthes's conception of the *punctum*, the personal response of the viewer which interrupts the contextual and narrative reading of the photograph. For me, the ekphrastic moment described in the poem *Don't Talk To Me About Matisse* provided the *punctum* to my reading of the novel as a discourse on the representation of others and otherness. Viewed within the imperial frame of

Orientalist art and alongside a consideration of ostensibly anti-Orientalist critiques, Ondaatje's 'portrait' of familial relations is transformed into an act of cultural intervention: the 'nude woman reclining forever on a sheet of blood' transforms into a poignant emblem of the imperial encounter. Here, the image is an iconic reminder of the vigilance required in countering exoticised and, thus, racialised, constructions of the other. A vigilance, as I have argued, which inheres in our response to the odalisque as the 'mirror' image in Ondaatje's (or is that Sri Lanka's?) family photograph.

## Chapter 3

### ***The Storyville Portraits: Identification and the Gendered Gaze in Coming Through Slaughter***

The photographs of Bellocq. HYDROCEPHALIC. 89 glass plates survive. Look at the pictures.

(Michael Ondaatje, *Coming Through Slaughter*, 1984: 54)

This chapter steps outside the confines of art historical discourse by focussing more directly on the problematics of looking. Whereas in the previous chapter I employed photographs and mirrors as a way of describing self-reflexivity in the viewing of texts, this chapter examines the viewing of photographic images per se as it relates to the limitations of the gaze in feminist discourse. I examine E.J. Bellocq's *Storyville Portraits*, a photographic collection of New Orleans's prostitutes taken early last century, and suggest a way of reading the photographs that does not rely solely on a repudiation of the male gaze to grasp its feminist possibilities. To this end, I employ Joan Scott's notion of 'fantasy echo' to examine the portraits' appeal to a retrospective form of identification. Ondaatje's novel *Coming Through Slaughter* is examined not merely as the textual 'other' to the portraits, but also as a means of strengthening the link between identification and reception and to establish a correspondence between the women of Storyville and the pictorial space represented in Bellocq's iconic work. I draw on the novel as a way of contributing towards the theoretical insights of seeing photographically as well as tying together the mutually inflecting issues connected with the critical project of looking. In doing so, I propose a way of viewing the *Storyville Portraits* that is informed and complemented by Ondaatje's ekphrastic rendering of the portraits in his text. I will argue that a sympathetic appraisal of the *Storyville Portraits* is inextricably bound to the documentary quality of Bellocq's portraits wherein the aesthetic alibi of the female prostitute is ultimately challenged.

#### **Looking as a Critical Project**

In 1970 the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), New York first published and exhibited a collection of photographs taken by Ernest J. Bellocq. The little-known photographer instantly achieved posthumous fame for what has now come to be known as the *Storyville Portraits* a collection of eighty-nine photographs taken of the



prostitutes who worked in New Orleans's notorious red-light district of Storyville. In one photograph, a woman dressed in her Sunday best poses next to what appears to be a hospital bed. In another, a woman in garish striped stockings sits toasting a glass of 'Raleigh Rye'. And in another photograph, a woman lies stretched out on an improvised ironing table playing with a dog. Clothed and naked, in undergarments or dressed up, the photographs show serene-faced women in a variety of poses and stages of undress. Most of the photographs are scratched, revealing both their age and signs of damage. In a few, the faces of the women have been tampered with, scratched out, and it is only in these photographs that serenity gives way to salaciousness especially if the viewer is aware of the women's occupation. Johnny Wiggs, a New Orleans cornetist who was interviewed for the MOMA publication, comments that the women in the portraits are 'really the only pretty whores that I've seen in my life' (Szarkowski 1970: 15). Wiggs's response can be read as supporting the typically art historical conception of a gifted individual creating work which will be valued for its beautiful quality. A 'pretty whore', as Wiggs's comment suggests, resides not in the everyday reality of 'streetcars or buses', but within the aestheticising and authorial frame of "Bellocq's" work. No doubt, as even a cursory survey of the art commentaries suggest, the little-known photographer and his unidentified sitters have contributed not only to the creation of Bellocq as a hydrocephalic Toulouse Lautrec and of Storyville as a site of outrageous acts of immorality, but also to the portraits' elevation as 'art'.<sup>74</sup>

While only the minority of the Storyville women are photographed fully naked, the subject matter of his work, with its connotations of illicit sexual activity, make them compelling vehicles for analysing the politics of looking that have characterised feminist debate in the visual arts.<sup>75</sup> More specifically, the contemporary circulation of the *Storyville Portraits* as works of art and their welcome reception by feminist art critics<sup>76</sup> invite a closer look at the images within the sphere of photographic representation. By using the term representation, I am, of course, underscoring the point that objects before the camera are never neutral, but are, as Victor Burgin reminds us, '*already in use* in the production of meanings' (Burgin 1982: 47).

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<sup>74</sup> See Susan Sontag's characteristically eloquent essay, *Photographs From Storyville: The Red Light District of New Orleans* (1996) and reprinted in Sontag (2002).

<sup>75</sup> See, for example, Garrard (1982) and Pollock (1988)

<sup>76</sup> See Frances Borzello, Annette Kuhn et al (1985)

Bellocq's virtual anonymity (especially the lack of knowledge as to the intentionality of his work) and the suggestion that the portraits display a feminist understanding, prove them an apt case for examining the various interconnecting concerns that relate to the critical project of looking: firstly, the ways in which art has been culturally legitimated and, secondly, the way in which the long and generally male tradition of authorship is implicitly connected with the issue of looking. In particular, I want to examine the relationship between gender and representation in the photographic image and the ways in which meanings and attributions are made for the purposes of revealing the 'depth' of, or what lies 'beyond', the photograph's surface image. As with photographs that contain women, nudity or nakedness, this project has typically come to be more readily associated with the theoretical insights offered by the male gaze; a gaze which typically constitutes women as the object of the camera's gaze. In the case of the female prostitute, modern visual culture has variously portrayed her as 'a symbol of cultural and moral decline, an innocent victim of male lust, a public health nuisance, and even a cinematic heroine' (Stolba 2000: 1). When Sontag declares 'how touching and good natured [Bellocq's] pictures are' (Sontag 2002: 226), what exactly does she see? As I outlined in Chapter One, there is looking and *looking*, and it is the differences in looking which help to legitimate a particular way of looking over another.

How is it that, on the one hand, Bellocq's authorship emerges as a prime concern of the portraits' attraction, whilst, on the other hand, the images of the women themselves can be seen as eluding the voyeuristic male gaze? Whilst I suggest that the two modes of reception are not mutually exclusive, the issues of looking that pertain to viewing a 'Bellocq' are intimately bound up with the paradoxical dilemma inherent in female self-representation.<sup>77</sup> Central to this dilemma is the possibility (and difficulties) of co-opting the objectifying lens of the camera in order to transform women's historically constituted status of object to subject. We should, for example, cautiously consider the comments made by MOMA's photographic arbiter, John Szarkowki and others who note that the variety of pose evident in Bellocq's work suggests that the photographs were more than likely conceived according to the

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<sup>77</sup> Whilst the title of this chapter reveals the extent to which I argue that the women of Storyville are indeed the subjects, rather than objects, of Bellocq's photographs, I do, nevertheless, attribute some of the photographs' appeal to the myths surrounding Bellocq. Hence, my attribution of the photographs as, in some cases, being 'Bellocq's' and, at other times, 'the women of Storyville' is deliberate.

women's own choosing. The documentary element, in other words, seems to come from the women themselves as much as the photographer (Borzello & Kuhn et al 1985: 17).<sup>78</sup> Yet, as Sontag points out, the distinctiveness of the photographs' composition are easily identifiable if ever 'a Bellocq' were to resurface in the future. The assessments of Bellocq's style—documentary, portraiture, pictorialist, modernist or otherwise—demonstrate that, despite Barthes's (premature) celebration of the author's death, the need to posit an originating source still endures. I suggest that the assumptions about Bellocq's affinity with the prostitutes of Storyville express an unquestioned acceptance of his authorial presence in the photographs that risks overshadowing the women's display of 'frankness', 'confidence', or 'exuberance' apparent in the images. When the portraits are regarded, however obliquely, as the exposition of Bellocq's creation, the potential for a feminist or sympathetic reading is at risk of being subsumed under a conservative modernist understanding. The question is, if the gaze is necessarily male, how it possible for both men and women to relate to the viewing positions proposed by Bellocq's work in an unproblematic way?<sup>79</sup>

Whilst Bal usefully reminds us that the gendered interpretation of representations of either men or women emanates from the spectatorial position of the viewer, it is equally important to keep in mind, as I suggested in the previous chapters, that looking is reciprocal in nature and thus relies on both the looking relations depicted in the work as well as that of the viewer. It should also be clear by now that seeing, as a social construct, can never be unified and stable and, as such, the often regimented theorisations of the male gaze needs particular attention.<sup>80</sup> As Jaqueline Rose states in her influential essay 'Sexuality in the Field of Vision', 'if the visual image, in its aesthetically acclaimed form, serves to maintain a particular and oppressive mode of sexual recognition, it nevertheless does so partially' (Rose 1986: 232). Thus, the

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<sup>78</sup> This is not to suggest, however, that the documentary element in photography and creative control are mutually exclusive, but almost always mutually inflecting. It is important to remember that while the documentary element of all photographs has always been contentious in relation to its ability to convey an objective account of reality, the photograph may, nevertheless, be *understood* at least in part to be a construction of the photographer and at the same time be *seen* as a record of a past fact (Savedoff 2001: 93).

<sup>79</sup> Mieke Bal suggests the question of meaning in works of art can be approached by asking the question 'What *makes* this possible?' (as opposed to 'What *made* this possible?') in acknowledgment of the works' existence as both affect and effect (Bal 1991: 6).

<sup>80</sup> See Laura Mulvey's ([1979]1989) work in film studies which has become paradigmatic of the essentialised (and essentialising) male gaze.

meaning attached to the notion of women as signifiers in different ideological discourses is the other half of the problem. Images, as Solomon-Godeau explains, 'do not causally produce a world of female objects and subjects; rather, they may articulate, naturalise, and confirm an oppressive order whose roots are elsewhere' (Solomon-Godeau 1991: 221). Furthermore, if we take Joan Scott's (1988) insistence that the terms 'women' and 'men' be understood as discursively and historically produced effects, then the ways in which works of art appeal to, articulate, and/or secure sexual difference need to be directly addressed. In this regard, I shall explore the possibility of looking at the *Storyville Portraits* in a way that does not rely solely on a repudiation of the male gaze, but, rather, relies on a mode of viewing that, as Richard Snow suggests, captures 'whatever in the gaze *resists* being understood in those terms' (Snow 1989: 31).<sup>81</sup> It is this notion of resistance that, apart from underpinning the basic precept of the imagetext relation, helps form the theoretical armature from which to examine, more broadly, the relationship between gender and representation in the *Storyville Portraits* and, more specifically, the process of a gendered identification in a work of art.

At this point, Bal's clarification of Norman Bryson's work in *Vision and Painting* (1988) is useful in helping to define the terms with which I examine the viewing attitudes proposed by the *Storyville* images while, at the same time, building on the mode of self-reflective reading outlined in the previous chapter. In drawing a link between the representation of viewing and its effect on actual viewing, Bal makes a distinction between the gaze and the glance:

The gaze is...an attitude that is encouraged by "transparent" realism effacing the traces of the labour of representation; whereas the glance is the mode that emphasises the viewer's own position *as* viewer, encouraged by the traces of the work of representation which propose, for reflection, that the representation is focalised in specific ways. (Bal 1991: 142)

It is not, however, the distinction that Bal makes between the two modes of looking, but, rather, the emphasis on reception that is particularly helpful in pinpointing the

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<sup>81</sup> I am compelled, more specifically, to take up Snow's provocative suggestion that the task might require a 'negative capability to make contact with the images that matter to us most' (Snow 1989: 31), a suggestion which readily calls to mind Thomas Osborne's call for a 'negative enlightenment' (Osborne 1998) as a way of seeing which I shall explore further in Chapter 5.

often mystifying critiques implicit in the aesthetic discourse on photography. According to Bal, if the gaze is blind to the traces of the labour of representation in the work of art, then it is the glance that highlights the myriad ways in which representation constructs, rather than reflects, reality. Thus, to insist on the glance as a mode of looking is to bring photography, as Abigail Solomon-Godeau does in her collection of essays on the subject, ‘to the dock’ and to subject it to a ‘rigorous and far-reaching interrogation’ (Solomon-Godeau 1991: xxxiv).

Whilst taking into account the multiple viewpoints that the glance necessarily dictates, it is possible to respond positively to the *Storyville Portraits*, connotations of the voyeuristic male gaze and illicit sexual activity notwithstanding, in ways which expose ‘the purely visual’ appeal of photographic art as an Edenic myth. That is to say, the appeal of Bellocq’s photographs are not a matter of ‘genius’, nor are they ‘the lucking snapping of a “moment of truth” ’ (Burgin 1982: 41), but depend on, as Burgin argues, ‘our common knowledge of the typical representation of prevailing social facts and values’ (Burgin 1982: 41). In this case, this common knowledge equates with our visual vocabulary about female prostitution and is thus paramount in a gendered reading of the *Storyville Portraits*. I shall argue that this process of looking draws on the retrospective identification encapsulated in Joan Scott’s ‘fantasy echo’ (Scott 2001). In thinking through the process of identity formation, Scott puts forward the notion of ‘fantasy echo’ to describe the ways in which history (as a fantasised narrative) and its repeated transformations (echoes) impose and help secure smooth and timeless identities for the purposes of political mobilisation. If Bal’s notion of the glance brings photographic images ‘to the dock’, then I think Scott’s cogent formulation similarly highlights the ways in which critical self-reflection can intervene in the innocent viewing of images. The first step towards the type of looking I have just described involves locating photography within the confines of photographic criticism, wherein Romantic and Modernist aesthetic theories can be seen to exert a dominating influence.

### **Seeing Gender: Authorship & Attribution**

One of the central issues of either gazing at a ‘Storyville Portrait’ or glancing at a ‘Bellocq’ is that of the representative author. In using the word ‘author’, which also encompasses the term ‘artist’, I am following the work of both Michel Foucault and

Roland Barthes in relation to the concept of authorship as a historical construction.<sup>82</sup>

Foucault describes the 'author-function' as:

These aspects of an individual, which we designate as an author (or which comprise an individual author), are projections, in terms always more or less psychological, of our way of handling texts: in the comparisons we make, the traits we extract as pertinent, the continuities we assign, or the exclusions we practice. (Foucault 1977: 127)

Foucault's interrogation of the author-function challenges the traditionally accepted notion of the author as originary, universal and timeless. Both Foucault's and Barthes's repudiation of the concept of authorship holds out emancipatory possibilities for the viewing of visual images that have usually been subject to the dominant paradigm of modernist art history wherein aestheticism is naturalised and universalised.<sup>83</sup> This 'unwittingly Pavlovian aesthetic response', in Burgin's apt words, elicited from a typical Greenbergian project is underpinned by the received common sense that an *art object* is representative of the unique sensibility of the *artist* (Burgin 1986: 31). The inclusion of photography in the art world has, therefore, challenged the conservative aesthetic framework in which 'any form of inscription *directly* linked to human agency, without the mediation of modern technology is to be valorised; [whereas] other forms of inscription are to be denigrated' (Burgin 1986: 34). It is no surprise, then, that unlike the traditional fine arts, 'accomplishment in photography has historically little to do with either conscious artistry or consciously being artist' and, as such, the process of cultural legitimisation is inevitably tied to actively extrapolating 'art' from photography's ever widening history (Solomon-Godeau 1991: 39). Given the celebratory response to Bellocq's photographs and our lack of knowledge of his authorial intent (the penchant of a dirty old man, or the commissioned work by the madams of the brothel for show to prospective clients?), it is prudent to consider the terms of this active legitimisation especially if, as Solomon-Godeau points out, 'one wishes to aesthetically privilege photographs that *may* exist outside the boundaries of aesthetic intent, on what basis are distinctions to be drawn?' (Solomon-Godeau 1991:43, emphasis added).

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<sup>82</sup> See Foucault (1977) and Barthes (1977).

<sup>83</sup> This modernist conception of art as purely visual and completely separate from the everyday world can be seen as an extension of late eighteenth century 'romanticism' and is best exemplified in the writings of American art critic Clement Greenberg (see Greenberg 1986).

The *Storyville Portraits*' transformation into 'art' can be seen as a product of the converging interests of the individuals who have a stake in developing the institutional and market requirements of photography as fine art. The eighty-nine photographic plates, after all, were allegedly found in a desk drawer after Bellocq's death and were purchased by the art dealer Larry Borenstein, later sold to master photographer Lee Friedlander (who continues to print from Bellocq's negatives), displayed at New York's MOMA by John Szarkowski, and are now permanently displayed as prints at the New Orleans Museum of Modern Art. As the majority of art historical critiques and gallery monographs indicate, this fairytale-like genealogy of the mysterious "Bellocqs" and their elevation to art appears as the compulsory backdrop to a consideration of his work.

An embrace of Bellocq's work, therefore, can be understood as expressing an ineluctable desire to construct the conventional notion of the author to which whose work, I might add, is assiduously being inflated with the very aura Walter Benjamin had hoped was absent in photography.<sup>84</sup> The preoccupation with authorial intent (or rather, the mystery surrounding it) in Bellocq's work posits the work squarely within the self-referentiality of the modernist paradigm in so far as it focuses on the *art* of photography and what is irreducibly specific to the practice. The subject matter per se is dispensed with in favour of a celebratory response to the photograph's transcriptive capacities and, hence, allows the construction of the desired/desirable author. For instance, in reference to Bellocq's work, Szarkowski discerns 'a sense of leisure in the making' which he suggests was taken as part of Bellocq's 'personal adventure'. Thus, as Szarkowski, concludes, 'it is more likely that Bellocq photographed the women because he found them irresistibly compelling' (Szarkowski 1970:13). Similarly, Naomi Rosenblum comments that in Bellocq's photographs '[the] arrangements of figure and décor project a melancholy languor that seems to emanate from both real compassion and a voyeuristic curiosity assuaged by the camera lens' (Rosenblum 1984: 267). Whether or not Bellocq was trying to satisfy his prurient interests is less important than my wish to examine the ways in which photography is invested with not so much an authorial but a passionate projection. I raise such a point not in order to examine the formal qualities of Bellocq's work in any great detail, but to emphasise

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<sup>84</sup> See 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' in Benjamin (1999).

‘the primacy of desire in the interpretive enterprise’ (Solomon-Godeau 1991: 31) and the ways works of art might fall prey to ideological readings. Read in this way, both Szarkowski’s and Rosenblum’s comments are indicative of the ‘fallback position of ineffability’ (44) that Solomon-Godeau refers to when modernist accounts prove an inadequate explanation for subjective preference. This fallback position is indicative of ‘the contradictory and simultaneous critical desires that the author and/or work be enigmatic, yet also *knowable*—a discrete object of possession, knowledge and mastery’ (44).<sup>85</sup> This notion of critical desire is particularly apparent in the appraisals of Bellocq’s photographs where commentators appear committed to the construction of Bellocq (and Storyville, for that matter) as a mythical figure. Granted that while there is scant empirical evidence as to what Bellocq had in mind when he photographed the women, what is most crucially at stake is the demand that Bellocq remain in the margins of myth for the purposes of more easily investing ideological interest. The comments offered by Borzello, Kuhn et al (1985) most clearly express this view:

[Be]cause we are able to approach Bellocq’s work without the straitjacket of preconceived categories, our reading can be informed by an unusual and possibly productive degree of openness: because Bellocq’s intentions provide us with no clues, all we have to go on is the photographs themselves...No reading of a picture can be unambiguous, or completely objective. Even knowing a photographer’s intentions should not prevent the viewer from contributing to the information that the photograph emits. (Borzello, Kuhn et al 1985: 16)

Arguably, the authors’ appraisal of Bellocq’s work can be read as being invested with their desire to set the photographs apart from the glamourised images of Hollywood portraits, and that Bellocq’s ‘sympathetic’ depiction of the women be seen as ‘a challenge to accepted ways of seeing women’ (Borzello, Kuhn et al 1985: 16). Whilst I certainly do not disagree with this view, the point to be made here is that the process of cultural legitimation maintains an investment in both material and ideological interests; a Bellocq reproduction from the original plates is, for all intents and purposes, worth more than an anonymous one. This process of cultural legitimation raises a profound methodological issue in the reading of images when

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<sup>85</sup> Solomon-Godeau (1991) specifically refers to Szarkowski’s influential role in the canon formation of Eugene Atget’s work.



'the political effects' of images are overlaid with conclusions already arrived at by 'other means' (Pinney & Petersen 2003). It is an investment that, to borrow Solomon-Godeau's words in relation to the canonical authorisation of Eugene Atget's work, risks subjecting the photographs to a 'form of de-historicising embalming' (Solomon-Godeau 1991: 47) which are impervious to both research methodologies and social history. Christopher Pinney and Nicolas Petersen (2003: 3) raise a similar concern in their reference to Carlo Ginzberg's notion of a 'physiognomic' reading to describe the analytical approach to images in which the image is used to 'demonstrate' a pre-existing political hypothesis.

Doubtless, my own interpretation of Bellocq's photographs might be seen as adopting a similar physiognomic reading. My purpose, however, is to draw attention to the fragility and instability of the relationship between image and their context and, more specifically, to the productive tensions between image and word. As the notion of physiognomic readings would seem to suggest, this tension becomes apparent when critical analyses overpowers the image. In other contexts, the power of images over text is the problem. Here, I am referring more specifically to the problem expounded by Bal in an article entitled 'The Politics of Citation' (1991) which highlights another concern of this chapter from a different, although not dissimilar, perspective. In a critique of scholarly texts which use illustrative visual material as evidence of ideologically fraught colonial visual practices, Bal argues that the very reproduction of the offending images is problematic.<sup>86</sup> As Bal puts it, 'the exhibition of the realistic, sexist material in the showcase of scholarship, surrounded by an aura of legitimatisation' (Bal 1991a: 28) is the crux of the problem. In highlighting the circulating concerns of this chapter, Bal's illuminating discussion prompts us to consider how the ideological impasse encountered in Bellocq's work might be approached. That is to say, if theory suggests that images of women cannot so easily escape the inherently male gaze, how can critical analyses of Bellocq's work show them to be otherwise? Put simply, how are we to understand the 'touching' and 'good-natured' quality of Bellocq's work, as Sontag describes them, when the subject matter is prostitutes in various states of undress? Bal forcefully demonstrates the power of the image over textual—albeit unreflective—critique, but can the reverse of the

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<sup>86</sup> Bal reviews books by Alloula (1986), Corbey (1989) and Gilman (1990).

image-text relation work the other way around: might the critical projects surrounding Bellocq's photographs be a case of the power of the text over the image?

In relation to art historical critiques that view Bellocq's sitter as eluding the male gaze, Bal's observations on the power of visual representation highlights a crucial point in relation to 'the way the images interact with the critical analyses contaminated with complicity' (Bal 1991a: 27). Whilst Bal refers to the presence of the affective and effective complicity of the offending imagery alongside the critical text, I want to suggest also that the feminist project of critiquing the male gaze risks being complicit in the construction of a unified, collective female identity. When we consider appraisals that Bellocq's early twentieth-century portraits challenge accepted ways of seeing women, it needs to be asked what elements of identification with the feminine the images address. As the previous chapters have shown in relation to essentialising critiques of identity, it is not 'only history', but the process of historicisation that needs attending to. This is where I think a closer examination of the processes of identification might be useful. As Scott describes it, the 'wonderfully complex resonance' of *fantasy echo* allows it to do the type of interpretive work associated with reading historical materials in their specificity and particularity. How were the women of Storyville structured according to the socially contrived orders of the time? For instance, the projection of a feminist consciousness that predates the context of the photographs' production risks naturalising the category of 'women'. As Scott consistently argues, identities are strategically and politically motivated and, as such, categories of identity, whether 'male' or 'female', are retrospectively and inextricably linked to their political invocations (Scott 1988: 2001). With respect to the subject of Bellocq's photographs, it is the enduring image of the female prostitute which allows the process of identification with the women represented in the *Storyville Portraits* to be clearly understood.

### **Olympia's Gaze and Fantasy Echo**

As its dual appellation suggests, *fantasy echo* signifies both the repetition of something imagined *and* an imagined repetition; the two are thus inextricably intertwined and mutually inflecting (Scott 2001: 287). For the historian and, I would suggest, the interested viewer, Scott puts forward the terms of analysis:

Echo provides yet another take on the process of establishing identity by raising the issues of the distinction between the original sound and its resonances and the role of time in the distortions heard. Where does an identity originate? Does the sound issue forth from past to present, or do answering calls echo to the present from the past? If we are not the source of the sound, how can we locate that source? If all we have is the echo, can we ever discern the original? Is there any point in trying, or can we be content in thinking about identity as a series of repeated transformations? (Scott 2001: 292)

In answer to the last the question, Scott states that it is precisely the transformations—the ‘echoes’—that should remind us that identity is ‘constructed in complex and diffracted relation to others’ (Scott 2001: 292). Following the contours of Scott’s argument, then, any gendered identification (that which produces identity) with the *Storyville Portraits* must necessarily participate in the process of identification that Scott writes about. By gendered identification, I have been referring to the perception that the women in Bellocq’s photographs elude the male gaze; an interpretation that conveys an implicit suggestion that the women are transformed from their historically constituted status of object to subject. If we are to read this transformation as a process of *fantasy echo*, it is possible to discern the fantasy as that of the female prostitute; a fantasy which envisions the projection of women into a socially and sexually transgressive public space wherein the dilemmas associated with female self-representation is dissolved. This particular fantasy has a strong affinity, or rather, echoes discernibly, with the reception of Eduard Manet’s iconic work *Olympia* (1863), perhaps the most visually recognisable naked woman in the history of the art nude.

Manet’s depiction of the *courtisane*<sup>87</sup> lying naked on a bed (incidentally, a number of Bellocq’s subjects can be seen reclining in a similar pose) shocked many of the spectators who attended its first viewing at the Paris Salon. Not least, the subject’s coolly brazen look which overtly—yet, somehow implicitly—signified the commercial sexual exchange was part of the notoriety attributed to *Olympia*. Whilst the painting’s composition, along with the signifiers of prostitution (the artful inclusion of the black maid, cat and flowers), do indeed invoke the spectator as

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<sup>87</sup> As the art historian T. J. Clark explains, this was a category which depended on the mythical distinctions between the *courtisane*, *fille publique* (the prostitute proper) and the *femme honnête* (the respectable married woman). Thus, ‘the category *courtisane* was what could be *represented* of prostitution’ (Clark 1990: 109).

masculine, Olympia the person, however, at least at the time, refused to become the complacent object of the gaze. As James Herbert concludes, drawing heavily on the work of T. J. Clark, '*Olympia* posited a being that resisted easy social classification' (Herbert 1992: 62).<sup>88</sup> We could, justifiably, say the same thing about Belloccq's women too. Olympia's questionable (in both senses) social identity raises another problem of identification. Attributing the displacement of the spectator to Olympia's defiant demeanour fails to account for the painting's reception amongst the bourgeois ladies who were also privy to Olympia's outward gaze. As Griselda Pollock insightfully points out, it was also the very absence of Olympia's position within the public realm in the consciousness of these female spectators that structured their identities as ladies (Pollock 1998: 54).

Thus, 'the understanding of the shock depends upon our restoration of the female spectator to her historical and social place' (Pollock 1988: 54). Similarly, the benign and complacent smiles of Belloccq's women depend also on a consideration of a historically precise spectator for whom depictions of the nude, the brothel and the bar are not merely representations of the spaces of modernity as Pollock suggests,<sup>89</sup> but are also recognisable *as* the usual motifs of sexuality. If it is no longer shock that underpins the contemporary Western response to representations of prostitution and/or naked women, then one might say that the response offered by Sontag provides just one example of the complex and diffracted resonances of *Olympia's* echo. To the extent that I agree with the assessment that the *Storyville Portraits* are touching and good natured, this view can only be accessed through an acknowledgment that, as prostitutes, Belloccq's women do not show any of the usual signs, art historical or otherwise, of their sexual and social identity. Might this be Olympia's gaze echoing forth? It is difficult to know since echoes, as the repetitions of an imagined resemblance, 'resonate incompletely and sporadically' (Scott 2001: 293). What is notable is that the commonalities for viewing either *Olympia* or a Belloccq invoke a

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<sup>88</sup> See Clark (1990: 79-146) whose cryptic critique of the painting resides in a class analysis of *Olympia's* 'nakedness'.

<sup>89</sup> In an attempt to debunk the masculinist myth of male creativity and its preoccupation with masculine sexuality and female bodies, Pollock justifiably asks 'why the nude, the brothel, the bar' (Pollock 1988: 54) as the usual tropes of modernist art? Pollock argues that the social process that defines the term modernity is experienced spatially and that the spaces of both modernity and masculinity share a common territory wherein women could only enter the public sphere for the purposes of entertainment and display.

form of fantasy that ignores the historical conditions of the spectator and the sitter. At its core, the fantasy projects women into the uncontested public realm of the female sex worker where the politics of the economic exchange curiously transformed in the very act of 'subversive' imag(in)ing. If, as Pollock points out, female sexuality could not be directly registered in the ideological and social spaces of femininity (Pollock 1988: 78), then it is only within the pictorial space of Bellocq's photographs that the women were able to exhibit a sexuality that was far removed from the gender and class boundaries of the time.<sup>90</sup> To the contemporary viewer, Bellocq's photographs might be considered joyful invocations of a lost world, but his female subjects were, nonetheless, prostitutes constrained by the social, political, and economic imperatives of the city. Like the odalisque in Orientalist art, the images of the Storyville women also need to be accessed 'through the consideration of their place, role and presence in a broader culture (Alpers 1983: xxiv).

I have been suggesting thus far that the historical recovery of Bellocq's sitters as female subjects, while dependant on a deconstruction of the discourses and practices of art history itself, relies equally on a consideration of their place within the social space of Storyville. In the following sections, I will examine the textual construction of Bellocq and the women of Storyville in the novel *Coming Through Slaughter* in order to highlight the relationship between the social space of Storyville and the fantasy echo of the female prostitute. I shall argue that Ondaatje's textual citation of Bellocq's photographs and the ways in which artistic production is depicted in the novel, together articulate the efficacy of the fantasy echo formulation.

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<sup>90</sup> It is somewhat ironic, however, that this reading, however, would not have been possible if the photographs had been available for public display during Storyville's era, a time when photography had not yet been privileged as art. Perhaps it is fortuitous that Bellocq's photographs did not appear in the books of nude photography that were being published at the turn of the century. The contents of which, as Herbert notes, 'were conspicuously filled with explicit signposts that either visually exemplified or verbally expounded the means by which photography allegedly aestheticised the bodies standing before the lens' (Herbert 1992: 65).

## Representations of Seeing: Bolden, Bellocq & Storyville

Bellocq was out so he broke in and searched the place for the picture. Hundreds of pictures of whores in the cabinets. Naked and clothed, with pets or alone. Sad stuff. To Webb the only difference between these and morgue files was the others were dead.

(Michael Ondaatje, *Coming Through Slaughter*, 1984: 50)

Some of the pictures have knife slashes across the bodies. Along the ribs. Some of them neatly decapitate the head of the naked body with scratches...The cuts add a three dimensional quality to each work. Not just physically, though you can almost see the depth of the knife slashes, but you also think of Bellocq wanting to enter the photographs, to leave his trace on the bodies...The making and destroying coming from the same source, same lust, same surgery his brain was capable of.

(Michael Ondaatje, *Coming Through Slaughter*, 1984: 55)

Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter* (1984) is, arguably, less about the factual reconstruction of Bolden's life than one about the fascination surrounding the mythology of Storyville. The beginning of the novel begins with a two-sentence paragraph, 'His Geography' in reference to Bolden's hometown where 'there is little recorded history' (Ondaatje 1984: 8). Bolden's absence in the here and now of the narrative address—the reader is asked to 'float by in a car today' and 'see' his geography—effectively foregrounds the legends of Storyville in the narrator's wittily didactic tone: the famous whore Bricktop Jackson who carried a 15 inch knife and her lover who had no left arm but wore an iron ball to replace it; Grace Hayes who had a pet raccoon trained to pick the pockets of customers; Olivia the Oyster Dancer, and French Emma's '60 Second Plan': anyone who could restrain his orgasm for a whole minute without penetration was exempt from the \$2 payment. The opening description of Bolden's world is essentially one of the transformations in New Orleans's newly legalised brothel district where 'money poured in, slid around' (Ondaatje 1984: 9). As Ondaatje informs us, 'By the end of the nineteenth century, 2000 prostitutes were working regularly...prostitution and its offshoots received a quarter of a million dollars of the public's money a week' (Ondaatje 1979: 9).<sup>91</sup> Thus, the statement 'His Geography' is significant when we consider the emerging spectacle of Storyville as the mindset of not only Bolden, but also as the social space in which the women of Storyville resided.

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<sup>91</sup> See also Rose (1974: 31).

According to Solecki, the novel's 'deliberate merging of past and present, while preserving an ostensibly historical distance, is [Ondaatje's] means of freeing his vision from time and history in order to ground it more definitely in psychology and myth' (Solecki 1985: 255). Yet, while Solecki refers more specifically to the psychology and myth of the historical framework in which Ondaatje places Bolden, it is also psychology—the psychic operations—and myth through which, as fantasy echo has shown, categories of identity are made to appear stable and coherent. What I have tried to outline also is a conceptual approach which might permit the portraits to be received and understood outside the confines of art historical discourse and how, amongst other things, we might be able to view the *Storyville Portraits* without recourse to commentary about Bellocq and his authorial presence. By the same token, Ondaatje's identification with Bolden, does not so much mark authorial presence in the text, but rather, is more in keeping with the chaos prescribed by Storyville and Bolden's state of mind: the narrative and narrative voice shifts back and forth, overlaps, and fragments thereby placing the reader in the anarchy and ambiguity of Bolden's mental and physical geography (Solecki 1985: 256).<sup>92</sup> While this terrain describes the realm of a stereotypical male creativity, this is also the same space wherein the women of Storyville were inevitably implicated.

Indeed, mythology is central to Bolden's biography—the 'thin sheaf of information' on which *Coming Through Slaughter* relies is inextricably linked to the proximity of Bolden's provenance 'a mile or so from the streets made marble by jazz' (Ondaatje 1984: 8). The origin of jazz music, by all accounts, can be traced to the bars of Storyville where much of New Orleans's wealth was accumulated during Storyville's legalisation as a red-light district between 1898 and 1917. There is, however, relatively little known about this period of history. As Al Rose comments in *Storyville, New Orleans: Being an Authentic, Illustrated Account of the Notorious Red-Light District*, 'The history of Storyville must necessarily appear more as a series of seemingly unrelated or slightly related incidents than as a logically progressing narrative filled with convincing relationships' (Rose 1974: 67).<sup>93</sup> Rose's comments are particularly relevant when we consider the lack of narrative structure in *Coming*

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<sup>92</sup> See also Smaro Kamboureli (1983).

<sup>93</sup> In researching Storyville, Rose discovered that the public library files had been vandalised with countless newspapers and periodicals had been carefully clipped and the relevant pages. He notes also, that the relevant pages of the real estate plat books in City Hall had been ripped out (Rose 1974: ix).

*Through Slaughter*. Despite, and because of, the lack of historical records Ondaatje makes the most of the factual elusiveness of Storyville's past: fictional 'documents', quotations, interviews, poems, and songs proliferate the text to suit the 'truth of fiction' and reveals the highly constructed nature of historical texts and the gaps that invention inevitably seeks to fill.<sup>94</sup> The novel's narrative strategy begins to make more sense when we consider the difficulty of pinning down the temporality of Bolden's world: historical artefact, or the legendary, mythical status of the present?<sup>95</sup>

In a particularly revealing moment in the text, Ondaatje offers both the rationale behind the novel's methodology and his own investment in the project as a writer:

The thin sheaf of information. Why did my senses stop at you? There was the sentence, 'Buddy Bolden who became a legend when he went berserk in a parade...' What was there in that, before I knew your nation your colour your age, that made me push my arm forward and spill it through the front of your mirror and clutch myself?... The excesses cloud up the page. There was the climax of the parade and then you removed yourself from the 20<sup>th</sup> century game of fame, the rest of your life a desert of facts. Cut them open and spread them out like garbage. (Ondaatje 1984: 134)

It is in this context that Bellocq's photographs emerge as *objet trouvés*, the rare visual artefacts attesting to Storyville's murky past and the women who worked in its brothels. The presence, however, of Bellocq's portraits *as* documents of a past reality does not so much provide the verisimilitude in Ondaatje's work as it does reveal the politics of artistic production, a theme underpinning *Coming Through Slaughter*. One of the curiously and visually compelling epigraphs to the novel shows three sonograph pictures of dolphin sounds. Two of the sonograph pictures depict, firstly, a 'squawk', which we are told is 'a common emotional expression' and, secondly, a 'whistle', the dolphin's personal signature, identifying itself and its location. The third picture

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<sup>94</sup> The endnote to the 1979 edition of the novel reads, 'While I have used the names and characters and historical situations I have also used more personal pieces of friends and fathers. There have been some date changes, some characters brought together, and some facts have been expanded or polished to suit the truth of fiction'.

<sup>95</sup> Solecki's analysis of Bolden's own temporality is relevant here also. As Solecki notes the timely publication of *Coming Through Slaughter* turned Bolden into 'the exemplary embodiment of a tone, an attitude, a trend in twentieth century art. By a sort of fictive *trompe d'oeil* (sic) he is simultaneously at the beginning and end of the modern era; as historical character he exists before the First World War; as hero he arrives on the scene in 1976 as the avatar of a contemporary Canadian writer' (Solecki 1985: 284).



shows a combination of both 'click' and 'whistle' sounds and, as the text cryptically informs the reader, 'no one knows how a dolphin makes both whistles and echolocation clicks simultaneously'. Of course, only after reading the novel does the relevance of the epigraph become clearer. The characters of Bolden and Bellocq are both depicted as artists who suffer for their art. Unable to simultaneously reconcile personal and artistic expression, Bolden goes insane and, in Ondaatje's reconstruction, Bellocq sets himself alight. If, according to Sam Solecki, *Coming Through Slaughter* is a 'compelling study of the compulsively destructive nature of the creative impulse' (Solecki 1985: 247), how might we apply such an assessment to Bellocq's art in relation to the creative talent of Bolden? Ondaatje's depiction of the destructive nature of each man's creativity exposes the notion of creative genius overcoming social obstacles as a myth and, in doing so, impels us to analyse the usually inexplicable and venerated sphere of male artistic production. Ondaatje's dolphin sounds, however, are not only compelling metaphors for the opposing artistic modus-operandi of both Bellocq and Bolden, they also help to explain and theorise the two fundamentally antithetical categories around which photography has come to be understood.

Ondaatje's description of Bellocq and Bolden as 'furnished rooms' wherein Bellocq 'was a window looking out' and whose pictures 'were like windows' (Ondaatje 1984: 59), alludes to the nineteenth-century Albertian view of painting as a 'window to the world' thus foregrounding the supposed objectivity of photography and its ability to render a knowable reality. As in Barthes's oft-quoted formulation of the photograph as 'a message without a code' (Barthes 1977), the photograph as a window onto the world is seen as an objective transcription of, or analogous to, reality. Thus, realist modes of understanding the photograph ascribe to this view to the extent that the photograph allows transparent access to a pre-existent signified (Tagg 1988: 99). Modernism, too, especially in the first half of the twentieth century, is also amenable to this scientific view in its assessment of the 'pure form' as divorced from its social origins. Bellocq's objectivity, therefore, is a necessary antidote to Bolden who is 'tormented by order, what was outside it' and whose music 'tore apart the plot' (Ondaatje 1984: 37). Ironically, Bolden's extreme identification with music is also borne out of an extreme detachment whereby he compulsively and instinctively practices an art over which he had no control. Bolden's description of his friend

Bellocq as 'the first person I met who had absolutely no interest in my music' (59) who 'offered mole comfort, mole deceit' (91) is both an admission of his own artistic sensibility and the difficulty of maintaining such a persona that is at the mercy of his audience. In comparing himself to bandleader John Robichaux who dominated his audiences, Bolden discloses his own domination by both art and his audience:

I loathed everything [Robichaux] stood for. He dominated his audiences. He put his emotions into patterns which a listening crowd had to follow...When I played parades we would be going down Canal Street at each intersection people would hear just the fragment I happened to playing and it would fade as I went further down Canal. They would not be there to hear the phrases, Robichaux's arches. I wanted them to be able to come in where they pleased and leave when they pleased and somehow hear the germs of the start and all the possible endings at whatever point in the music that I had reached *then*...the right ending is an open door you can't see too far out of. It can mean exactly the opposite of what you are thinking (Ondaatje 1984: 93-94).

Bolden's explanation of how his music should be received can be read as a cogent allegory of the reception of art and the displacement of 'the artist' from his (I use the pronoun deliberately) traditional role as the producer of meaning. Bolden's radical identification with and detachment from the world produces an art that is only made possible with the audience's interpretive collaboration: 'the right ending' is any response that is awakened by the stimulus of Bolden's music. Burgin highlights a similar point in his analysis of the act of seeing in photography when he states that despite our best efforts to maintain an appreciation of the 'purely visual', as viewers we are nevertheless locked into 'an intricate psychic network of our knowledge' (Burgin 1986: 64). From this perspective – especially in the case of Bellocq's work – the notion of authorship is extraneous. As Burgin writes, following Barthes

*It is neither theoretically necessary nor desirable to make psychologistic assumptions concerning the intentions of the photographer: it is the preconstituted field of discourse which is the substantial 'author'...photograph and photographer alike are its products; and, in the act of seeing, so is the viewer (Burgin 1986: 65).<sup>96</sup>*

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<sup>96</sup> Burgin also quotes Roland Barthes to clarify this point: 'The 'I' which approaches the text is already a plurality of other texts, ...subjectivity is generally thought of as a plenitude with which I encumber the text, but this fake plenitude is only the wash of all codes which make up the 'I', so that finally, my subjectivity has the generality of stereotypes' (Barthes 1975: 10).

To return to an earlier point, if photography is understood as an objective transcription of reality and as somehow divorced from social realities, Bolden's extreme identification with the world can be seen as representing the second, more dominant view of photography where photography taps into 'an intricate psychic network of knowledge' and transforms into a language. It is a view that has led Burgin to comment that 'we rarely see a photograph in use which is not accompanied by language...even the uncaptioned "art" photograph is invaded by language in the very moment it is looked at' (Burgin 1986: 51). The addition, therefore, of the *seeing* subject into the concept of the 'subject' of photography forcibly introduces the social world that constructs, situates, and supports the image (Burgin 1986: 69). If in the previous chapter I invoked this formulation of seeing to emphasise the reader's place within Ondaatje's own self-reflection (his biography), this chapter has thus far extended self-reflexivity to emphasise the image's engagement of the spectator. That is to say, the issue of looking in the *Storyville Portraits* can be no more be attributed to the viewer's *punctum*—whatever that piercing quality might be—than to the *images*' themselves. The struggle between word over image and vice-versa is, I suggest, ultimately a struggle against 'the luxury of being equivocal about what is already vague' (Burgin 1986:41). Prudence in the critical viewing of images thus equates to an acknowledgment of the underlying processes of identification and reception.

In placing Bellocq and Bolden at the two extreme poles of artistic endeavour, Ondaatje highlights the difficulty of his own task as a writer. Ondaatje's own position of being confronted with a 'desert of facts' trying to make some sense of the few artefacts laid out before him is in itself a commentary on artistic production. Ondaatje shifts from both modes of creating—detachment and identification—in order to give expression to both the chaos within and outside his project as a writer. For example, on the one hand, Ondaatje 'the researcher' dispassionately presents documentary material and random details about Bolden's life and, on the other, he 'pastes himself' on to the character of Bolden, as Ondaatje explicitly declares towards the end of the novel: 'The photograph moves and becomes a mirror. When I read he stood in front of mirrors and attacked himself, there was the shock of memory. For I

had done that' (Ondaatje 1984: 133).<sup>97</sup> While Sam Solecki (1985: 255) interprets this self-reflexive device as collapsing the distance between character and author, Barbour more usefully points out by way of McHale, that Ondaatje's identification is essentially fictional because 'to reveal the author's position within the ontological structure is not only to introduce the author *into the fiction*; far from abolishing the frame, this gesture merely *widens* it to include the author as a fictional character' (cited in Barbour 1993: 106). As the process of self-reflectively reading works of art has shown, Ondaatje is not just a fictional character but is, at the same time, the seeing subject of Burgin's formulation. The inclusion of the seeing subject in the reception of art in this way extends to the readers of *Coming Through Slaughter* whereby the text acts as the medium through which the viewer's vision is mediated. For example, Ondaatje fictionally assigns Bellocq to supply the reader with the only surviving photograph of Bolden and his band and is reproduced on the title page. The photograph is later 'reproduced' within the novel and the image-text relation is literally displayed as Ondaatje writes, 'There is only one photograph that exists today of Bolden and the band. This is what you see':

Jimmy Johnson on bass	Bolden	Willy Cornish on valve trombone	Willy Warner on clarinet
	Brock Mumford on guitar	Frank Lewis on clarinet	

As a photograph it is not good or precise, partly because the print was found after the fire. The picture waterlogged by climbing hoses, stayed in the possession of Willy Cornish for several years (Ondaatje 1984: 66).

Contrary to Lorraine York's comment that this interdependence of word and image engenders a 'fluid reading style' (York 1988: 115), the reader, placed between Ondaatje's documentary description and the image, is prevented easy access to the world the image represents. The 'musicians caught out and held out of time' (Barbour 1993:104) are not only liberated by contingency and time, but also from readers'

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<sup>97</sup> I am not suggesting, however, that Ondaatje's identification with Bolden actually achieves narrative order in the novel. But rather, in suggesting a kind of chaos throughout the novel, Ondaatje creates an order we as readers have to follow (Barbour 1993: 104). Also, as Solecki points out, the chronological disorganisation in the text affirms life's randomness and discourages 'a particular kind of reading act that assumes *a priori* temporal notions of cause and effect' (Solecki 1985: 255).

attempts at historical and epistemological fixity. The effect, therefore, between image and text is one of resistance and therefore incompleteness, as W. J. T. Mitchell explains in relation to that exemplar of the conjunction of image and text, the photographic essay:

The text of the photo-essay typically disclosed a certain reserve or modesty in its claim to 'speak for' or interpret the images; like the photograph, it admits its inability to appropriate everything that was there to be taken and tries to let the photograph speak for themselves. (Mitchell 1994: 289)

Needless to say, the *Storyville Portraits* as works of art are not presented to the viewer as a literal conjunction of both photo and text, but their presence in Ondaatje's novel, where the text is the dominant element to Bellocq's images, the overlap of exchange between photography and language becomes, to use Ondaatje's term, an 'open door' through which a reading of the novel can be accessed.<sup>98</sup> Crucially, given the novel's gaps and narrative discontinuities, the photographs are perfectly positioned to 'return the gaze'.<sup>99</sup> More importantly, the notion of partiality and 'looking back' in the image/text relation can be seen as occupying the same space as the artist: the site of resistance being also the site between fixity and flux, between form and shapelessness.<sup>100</sup> Ondaatje, then, as writer/producer of images, draws the reader 'into a vortex of collaboration and resistance' (Mitchell 1994: 300)<sup>101</sup> and into a position of self-reflection. In the absence of the photographs and to the reader who is unaware of the photographs' actual existence, the written text demands a reflection and an interrogation of the photographs in a way denied by visual images. Take, for example, the author's description of Bellocq's subjects or, rather, the image:

she would become self-conscious towards him and the camera and her status embarrassed at just her naked arms and neck and remembers for the first time in a long while the roads she imagined she could take as a child. And he

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<sup>98</sup> My point here is to stress textual address as the dominant feature of photo-essays. Arguably, the portraits' publication in the MOMA monograph might deem them as photo-essays, but certainly not as exhibitory items in the New Orleans Museum of Modern Art.

<sup>99</sup> As Deborah Bowen points out, the photograph's paradoxical status of natural trace and/or human construction is in constant flux and is subject to differing cultural practices of signification. Bowen suggests that given the photograph's relation to realism, modernism and postmodernism, 'a writer of fiction will respond to the paradoxical nature of the photograph in a way that is complementary to the writer's understanding of narrative authority' (Bowen 1995: 2).

<sup>100</sup> See York (1988: 107-108).

<sup>101</sup> Mitchell's description for the work of James Agee and Walker Evans in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* ([1939] 1980).

photographed that... what you see in the pictures is her mind jumping that far back to when she would dare to imagine the future, parading with love or money on a beautiful anonymous cloth arm. Remembering all that as she is photographed...Then he paid her, packed, and she had lost her grace. The picture is just a figure against a wall (Ondaatje 1984: 54).

In Ondaatje's text, the ekphrastic description of the photographs definitively captures what is excluded from the frame: the politics of the sexual exchange in the game of prostitution. An exchange where the woman most often collaborated, but could, quite abruptly, be returned to the sobering knowledge of her physical complaisance. In Ondaatje's rendition of Bellocq's photographs the fantasy of prostitution—the women's elevation from the inequality of the sexual exchange—is forcefully played out through the mythical lens of Storyville's past and the enduring image of the fallen woman. This is not the same as saying, however, that the mythical costumes associated with the female prostitute are detrimental to a proper feminist reading of the photographs. Indeed, as the notion of fantasy echo has highlighted, that which appears to be enduring dictates a historical approach: an approach which, as Ondaatje's novel demonstrates, views history as 'a fantasised narrative that imposes sequential order on otherwise chaotic and contingent occurrences' (Scott 2001: 290). When we consider both the essentialising tendencies of the male gaze and the changing and radically different historical contexts in which women have become subjects, an analysis of both fantasy and its echoes suggests a more politically compelling feminist approach.

The women's recovery and elevation from that space does not, I think, reside solely or simply on the serene composure evident in Bellocq's subjects, but instead relies on something more fundamental. In linking the photographs to their historical place (and from what can be surmised, the context of their production), a more nuanced gender analysis of the photographs, while not a total refusal of the notion of the male gaze, circumvents the essentialising and disabling position for male and female viewers respectively. Female consciousness is certainly evident in Bellocq's collection of photographs, but only to the extent that we are aware of the sitter's historical and social conditions and that the same conditions are effectively produced via concrete and particular power relations. The resonance of each individual Bellocq portrait, therefore, is a testament to the photograph's power to document an unfamiliar world

that is, at the same time, our world transformed; the photographs' touching qualities emanating less from composition than from pathos, and the knowledge that 'the subjects can only transcend the specificity of their circumstances with the simplification that fantasy provides' (Scott 2001: 303).

## Reprise

Although this chapter has examined the various strands associated with looking as a critical project, my principal aim in this chapter has been to look at the process involved in the gendered identification of the image. Whilst I have not sought to discredit the important critical position of countering the male gaze, I did want to extend the terms of that critique by examining what it is that escapes the gaze. With respect to the *Storyville Portraits* and the application of fantasy echo as an interpretive tool, I have highlighted the ways in which historical specificity of both the sitters and the spectator is elided in the process of identification. The omission, however, does elicit a more critical understanding of the importance fantasised narratives play in constructing a feminist identity for political mobilisation. The process of identification as articulated in fantasy echo is not a straightforward matter of discovering replication or repetition, but rather requires an acknowledgement of the alterations and fissures, in not just the construction of identities, but also the writing of history. Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter*, through its metaphorical and ambulatory narrative, has shown that the resonating impulse – the echo – of historical myth cannot so easily be pinned and, at best, can only offer us an understanding of the complex and diffracted relations between artistic 'genius' and its reception. More importantly, Ondaatje's account of Storyville highlights the ways in which mythology itself provides a critical platform from which the echoes of fantasised narratives can be discerned and made to resonate for the reader. In Ondaatje's ekphrastic account, the *Storyville Portraits* are far from touching or good-natured, yet the visual absence of the photographs and their placement within the chaotic public sphere of Storyville give credence to the novel's unpropitious assessment of Bellocq's portraits. If fantasy echo has helped to identify the process of gendered identification, especially when the male gaze is invoked, it nevertheless cannot presume to know the emotional appeal or, one might say, the *punctum*, elicited from Bellocq photograph. Whilst this chapter has provided some reasons by way of critique, I suggest that one particular quality of the *Storyville Portraits* remains compelling. Jon Kertzer's comment about Ondaatje's

'blurred' characterisation of Bolden is equally applicable, I think, to Bellocq's visual documentation of the Storyville prostitutes: they remain just as curiously remote, but we, nevertheless, care about them more (Kertzer 1985: 300). If this chapter has helped to answer the question of how, the only question left for the viewer is, why?



## Chapter 4

### The Moment of Cubism: The Social & Documentary Imagery in *In the Skin of a Lion*

He is given all the difficult jobs and takes them. He descends into the air with no fear. He is solitary. He assembles ropes, brushes and tackle and pulley as his waist, and falls off the bridge like a diver over the edge of the boat. The rope roars alongside him, slowing with the pressure of his half-gloved hands. He is burly on the ground and then falls with the terrific speed, grace, using the wind to push himself into the corners of abutments so he can check driven rivets, sheering valves, the drying of the concrete under bearing plates and padstones. He stands in the air banging the crown pin into the upper cord and then shepherds the lower cord's slip-joint into position. Even in the archive photographs it is difficult to find him. He floats at the three hinges of the crescent-shaped steel arches. These knit the bridge together. The moment of cubism.

(Michael Ondaatje, *In the Skin of a Lion*, 1988: 34)

The relationship between identification and reception, as the previous chapter has shown, is powerfully bound up with ideological concerns. That the reception of images is also implicitly tied to context is a reason why photographic *use* is another important consideration in reading meaning. While the previous chapter brought attention to the process underlying a gendered interpretation of visual depictions of women, this chapter focuses on the process of social representation or, more specifically, the ways in which social documentary images might communicate a particular ideology of reform. Thus, this chapter once again examines the link between the real and the ideal, between images and the legitimisation of ideological concerns in order to highlight the precariousness of the social documentary enterprise, wherein context is crucially linked to the construction of the subject. I shall argue that the *In the Skin of a Lion's* visual logic both challenges and circumvents the rhetoric usually associated with the social documentary form.

#### The Moment of Cubism

In his classic essay, John Berger writes of the continuing meaning of Cubism. For Berger, the moment of Cubism was less a stylistic category than a moment when a new relation between man and reality was expressed. Cubism as an art, according to Berger, reflected both the possibility of a world transformed and the confidence it inspired (Berger 1985: 185). As the epigraph to this chapter demonstrates, Berger's philosophic meditation on the transformative capacities of Cubist art has direct

relevance when read alongside Ondaatje's description of Nicholas Temelcoff, the Macedonian worker who has emigrated to Canada in the early 1900's. In Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion*, the monumental structures being built become less important than the immigrant worker who is 'famous on the bridge'. In the novel's description of the minutiae of dynamiting logjams, bridge-building, tannery dying and tunnelling, the novel becomes an elegy to the worker. While highlighting the forgotten role of the labourer in the construction of the city's bridge, Ondaatje makes reference to the American photographer Lewis Hine:

There were no photographers like Lewis Hine, who in the United States was photographing child labour everywhere – trapper boys in coal mines, seven year-old doffer girls in New England Mills. *To locate the evils and find the hidden purity.* Official histories and news stories were always as soft as rhetoric, like that of a politician making a speech after a bridge is built, a man who does not even cut the grass of his own lawn. Hine's photographs betray official history and put together another family. (Ondaatje 1988: 145)

The passage reveals the extent to which *In the Skin of the Lion* ascribes to the motivation underpinning Hine's 'putting together of another family' whereby the rhetorical construction of both history and photographic image are revealed.<sup>102</sup> Ondaatje writes that Patrick Lewis, the novel's working class Canadian protagonist, 'would never see the great photographs of Hine, as he would never read the letters of Joseph Conrad' (Ondaatje: 1988: 145). Indeed, Hine's photograph *Icarus Atop Empire State Building* (1931), whilst calling to mind Temelcoff's mid-air descent, functions metonymically as the photograph Lewis would never see. By foregrounding art, and more specifically the photographs of Hine, *In the Skin of a Lion* mirrors and affirms the redemptive practices of art itself. Ondaatje's assertion of the 'best art',<sup>103</sup> while being a critique of historiography, also mirrors Berger's own account of the 'moment of cubism' and the artist's place within it; a moment when the artist is no longer required to duplicate or imitate the world, but to summarise experience as a means of conveying a truth (Berger 1985: 173).

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<sup>102</sup> Ondaatje's italicised sentences in this section which describe Hine's work as the 'best art' (which I used as an epigraph to Chapter One) are taken from Gutman (1967: 22, 33). Needless to say, the significance of Ondaatje's estimation of Hine's work is central to an understanding of his novels and the ways in which 'art and history draw upon human experience' (Gutman 1967: 33).

<sup>103</sup> As discussed in Chapter One.

In this chapter I examine the ‘moment of cubism’ in Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of the Lion* by drawing on the relation between Ondaatje’s ‘photographic’ documentation<sup>104</sup> of the building of the city of Toronto and the notion of social experience summarised in Lewis Hine’s photography. *In the Skin of a Lion*, as Ondaatje himself recounts, began initially as an investigation into the life of Canadian millionaire businessman Ambrose Small, whose disappearance in 1919 set off the largest man-hunt in Canadian history. But the author soon began to dislike Small and turned his attentions to the minor figures at the time, as Ondaatje puts it:

I did an enormous amount of reading...I even had some friends help me with research on the book...and I can tell you exactly how many buckets of sand were used, because this is Toronto history, but the people who actually built the goddamn bridge were unspoken of. They’re unhistorical! (Turner 1990: 21)

In an interview with Linda Hutcheon (1990: 99), Ondaatje tells us that he subsequently ‘discovered’ the work of historian Lillian Petroff who writes about a Nicholas Temelcoff in *Sojourners & Settlers: The Macedonian Community in Toronto to 1940* (1995). I suggest that Ondaatje’s novel’s deep engagement with the documentary—in its explicit acknowledgment of Hine’s work, Petroff’s historical account and the ekphrastic use of archival photographs<sup>105</sup>—highlights the efficacy of the image-text marriage in communicating facts outside of the ideological closure generally associated with the documentary form. One could even go so far as to say that Ondaatje has taken heed of Judith Gutman’s own assessment of Hine’s work as exemplary of ‘the most perfect artistic representation’; an art that ‘orders the most perfect form of the lines and space and people and *light* that occupy that time and space in history’ (Gutman 1967: 33, emphasis added). As Ondaatje states in the writing of *In the Skin of a Lion*, ‘I became much more interested in the minor characters...I suddenly thought of a vista of Upper America where you had five or six people interweaving and treading kind of parallel lines, but somehow connected at

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<sup>104</sup> On the back cover of the 1988 imprint of *In the Skin of the Lion*, Leon Edel fittingly describes the novel as ‘verbal cinema’. In this regard, I also consider photographic documentation to encompass Ondaatje’s ekphrastic inclusion of City of Toronto archival photographs.

<sup>105</sup> The front cover of the 1988 imprint of *In the Skin of a Lion* is reproduced from a City of Toronto archival photograph taken by the civic photographer Arthur Goss, who also makes an appearance in the novel.

certain times' (Turner 1990: 21). The novel's affinity with Cubist composition and Hine's work is also perceptible in Gutman's assessment of Hine's photographs:

Just as one looked into a Picasso painting from an eye-opening left, a piercing mouth, or an explosive face, one now looked into a Hine with a cut-off side or a deadened smile. Angles that had never before entered a photograph now did. The huge new multiple society suddenly laid bare. (Gutman 1967: 28)

In its transcription and reinvention of the city of Toronto, *In the Skin of a Lion* does indeed stay true to Ondaatje's early promise that is encapsulated in an opening epigraph quoting John Berger: 'never will a single story be told as if it were the only one.' In addition to—or, more precisely, because of—the novel's cinematic quality, many have observed that *In the Skin of a Lion's* textual distinctiveness resides in its structural and temporal complexity.<sup>106</sup> This particular orientation of the novel is best summarised in a scene in which Patrick strolls through the city of Toronto and discovers that 'his own life was no longer a single story but part of a mural' (Ondaatje 1988: 145). Not only could this be interpreted as emblematic of the multiple narratives that are interwoven throughout the text, but, more importantly, in terms of explaining Patrick's relation to all the 'fragments of human order', the discovery gestures to the infinite number of interactions in the urban social environment and the difficulty of understanding one's place in it. Thus, the 'necessary visions', which Richard Sennett (1990) points out are missing in the public sphere, are presented to Patrick to reveal the personal contexts which documentary forms – official histories – usually ignore.<sup>107</sup> If our urban problem, according to Sennett, stems from modern culture's inability to see the complexities of life, then this particular moment in Ondaatje's novel neatly illustrates the need to 'revive the reality of the outside as a dimension of human experience' (Sennett 1990: xiii). In this respect, I use as a starting point Berger's assertion that theories about the artist's inspiration are effectively our own desires projecting back on to the artist. A desire that has as much to do with history conveying 'truthfulness' in the same way that art conveys 'agelessness'.

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<sup>106</sup> See Barbour (1993 : 179-205) and Siemerling (2004)

<sup>107</sup> In a critique of the self/city divide, Sennett suggests 'an art of exposure', an art that entails seeing 'difference on the streets or in other people neither as threats nor as sentimental invitations, rather as necessary visions' (Sennett 1990: xiii).

If the Cubists imagined a world transformed, Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion* brings attention to the process of transformation.<sup>108</sup> Not least, the novel's title alludes to the Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, perhaps one of the oldest works of literature, as the novel's other epigraph from the classic epic states: 'I will wander through the wilderness in the skin of a lion'. Read in conjunction with Berger's historiographic warning, the epigraphs serve as cautionary words to the textual transformations – the putting on of another's skin - that follow. The historical, temporal and, I suggest, scopic, transformations that occur in Ondaatje's art historical creation of the city of Toronto can be read, to use Gutman's words in relation to Lewis Hine, as a desire 'to find the most perfect living order...amongst the chaos that the early twentieth century created' (Gutman 1967: 33).<sup>109</sup> Berger's conclusion that 'the Cubist moment was such a beginning, defining desires which are still unmet' (Berger 1985: 187), is highly provocative in relation to the rhetoric of photographic documentation, especially when we consider the capacity of (and our desires for) art to affect change. Foremost is the argument that a social art in photography might define an image of social reform, yet brackets the economic, cultural and political context from which social facts are drawn.

In what remains the definitive critique of the documentary form in photography, Martha Rosler vehemently argues that the desires of both 'left' and 'right' politics have whittled away any credibility of the image as the 'explicit trace of the comprehensible in the living world' (Rosler 1989: 320). In severing the relations between images and the world the photographs ostensibly document, Rosler argues that the documentary genre 'has been much more comfortable in the company of moralism than wedded to a rhetoric or program of revolutionary politics' (Rosler 1989: 304). It is in this sense that Ondaatje's documentation of the working lives of Toronto's immigrants display an awareness of the documentary hazards put forward by Rosler. By holding up a mirror to Toronto's official history, the novel helps to reinstall the relation between images – necessary visions - and the world; or, in Sennett's terms, between inner, subjective experience and outer, physical life. I shall

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<sup>108</sup> Greenstein (1990) also refers to this process as metamorphoses.

<sup>109</sup> Although Gutman states that Hine's artistic oeuvre arose from a commitment to the social not a commitment to art, Ondaatje's affinity with the 'great' photographer can similarly be seen in the author's desire to bring to light the 'unhistorical'.

argue, then, that Ondaatje's 'moment of cubism' illustrates that the desires for a critical documentary form may yet be found in literature when dealing with the social. Ondaatje's artistic transformation is, nevertheless, underscored by the very chaos it seeks to address or, as Barbour rightly asserts, 'flux and metamorphoses are the governing tropes at every turn' (Barbour 1993: 182).<sup>110</sup> For the purposes of this chapter, I shall therefore focus on the aspects which, I think, aptly convey the scopic transformations in Ondaatje's novel: social experience and the city. As a way of highlighting the social impulse underpinning *In the Skin of a Lion*, I shall focus, firstly, on examining the context in which the social photography of Hine functioned and the discourses surrounding it.

## Realism & The Discourse of Documentary

In the tunnel under Lake Ontario two men shake hands on an incline of mud. Beside them a pickaxe and a lamp, their dirt-streaked faces pivoting to look towards the camera. For a moment, while the film receives the image, everything is still, the other tunnel workers silent. Then Arthur Goss, the city photographer, packs up his tripod and glass plates, unhooks the cord of lights that creates a vista of open tunnel behind the two men, walks with his equipment the fifty yards to the ladder, and climbs out into sunlight.

(Michael Ondaatje, *In the Skin of a Lion*, 1988: 105)

Any attempt to categorise documentary photography<sup>111</sup> is, in Abigail Solomon-Godeau's apt description, to 'run headlong into a morass of contradiction, confusion, and ambiguity' (1991: 169). Nonetheless, all photographs have an element of the documentary. Despite the now accepted notion of photography as producing highly mediated representations, the photograph is, at its most fundamental, a document of *something*. As Barbara Savedoff points out, we may *understand*, at least in part, that the photograph is a construction, but it can also 'be *seen* as presenting us with a record

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<sup>110</sup> This aspect of the novel cannot be emphasised enough. As Douglas Barbour notes, *In the Skin of a Lion* 'offers moments of illumination and action in a number of lives, creating a larger, more complex collage than any of Ondaatje's previous books' (Barbour 1993: 179). Winfried Siemerling adds that the 'multiple possible perspectives and points of view often create an oscillating, hologrammatic simultaneity of different possible assumptions for the reader' (Siemerling 2004: 100).

<sup>111</sup> The term 'documentary' was first used by British film producer, John Grierson in 1926. In a newspaper review of Robert Flaherty's *Moana*, Grierson writes: 'being a visual account of events in the daily life of Polynesian youth, it has documentary value' (Stott 1973: 9). See also, Beaumont Newhall (1972: 8-9) who adopted the term documentary in the 1930's to categorise still photographs depicting social conditions. The term is customarily used to distinguish social documentary from documentary per se. Thus, the more general term primarily involves aesthetic intent while the social is concerned with conveying a social-democratic politics.

of fact' (Savedoff 1992: 93). If this is the case, the problem with the documentary concept is neither ontological nor existential, but historical. Accordingly, the varied end-uses of the photographic medium have contributed to the constant shifts in meaning ascribed to the documentary and demonstrate, more importantly, its conformity with the larger discourses that help to create them (Solomon-Godeau 1991: 169). Take for example, the archival photograph taken by the Toronto civic photographer Arthur Goss, which I have juxtaposed above with a passage from *In the Skin of the Lion*.

In an analysis of Goss's civic photography, Dennis Duffy notes that 'the impact of Goss's work receded from the contemporary and utilitarian to the archival and symbolic' (Duffy 2001: 117). Duffy's comment specifically relates to the use of Goss's work in a 1911 secular document<sup>112</sup> designed to help eradicate the Toronto slums and their subsequent appearance in Ondaatje's novel more than half a century later. The passage from *In the Skin of a Lion* describing Goss's cameo appearance and its relation to the archival photograph can easily be interpreted as one medium complementing the other: text describing the visual; the visual informing the text. However, as Duffy explains, Ondaatje's text describes a moment in the construction of the R.C. Harris Water Filtration Plant (otherwise known as the Palace of Purification), while the photograph, taken nearly two decades before the construction of the waterworks, was taken on another construction project: Toronto's sewers (Duffy 2001: 121). At a time when photographic techniques have been characterised by postmodern forms of technological manipulation, Ondaatje's imaginative use of Toronto's archival photographs may not appear to be innovatory; yet this particular form of artistic licence takes on wider significance if we consider its documentary position within the discursive space of literature. Fact and fiction, real and imagined become inextricably entwined in Ondaatje's image of Toronto and, in terms of the culture-as-representation argument, become as important as the themes of power and urban experience that underpin the novel.<sup>113</sup> The construction of the Bloor Street Viaduct and the Palace of Purification not only provide the iconography to *In the Skin*

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<sup>112</sup> *Report of the Medical Health Officer Dealing With the Recent Investigation of Slum Conditions in Toronto Embodying Recommendations for the Amelioration of the Same*, 5<sup>th</sup> July 1911, 'Charles J. Hasting', General Information File, City of Toronto Archives (cited in Duffy 2001).

<sup>113</sup> In analysing documentary photography's instrumentality and persuasive capacities, Solomon-Godeau (1991: 170) uses Bertolt Brecht observation that 'realism is an issue not only for literature: it is a major political, philosophical and practical issue and must be handled and explained as such'.

of a *Lion*, but also the historical basis for that imagery. Ondaatje's literary reworking of the archival photograph gestures towards the now commonplace assumption that all photographs are constructed and, thus, do not directly correspond to a pre-photographic existence. The point to be made here is that, however much we might ascribe to the non-transcriptive theory of photography, the notion of the real in any documentary practice is still problematic even as we speak of realist constructions.

How, then, can we speak of the real in representation? Solomon-Godeau explains by way of Bourdieu that the real can only be apprehended via society's stamping of photography with the 'patent of realism'. In this way, 'photography functions to ratify and affirm the complex ideological web that any moment in historical time is perceived as reality *tout court*' (Solomon-Godeau 1991: 171). Following a similar line of argument, John Tagg's (1988) supremely Foucaudian analysis of photography is useful in explaining the intricacies of production and negotiation of this complex historical outcome. Tagg's analysis of the documentary form questions directly the link between the truth function of photographs and the specific emphasis placed on truth in documentary works. What is real, Tagg asserts, is the reality of the paper print, the material item and the processes, practices and institutions which give meaning to the medium. He argues that any analysis of photography should not focus on the reality of the past, but on the reality of present meanings and changing discursive systems (Tagg 1988: 4). Thus, any moment in historical time, as Tagg points out, must also encompass an analysis of the mode of reception of the work (Tagg 1988: 156). In other words, following the mode of self-reflective viewing I have been advocating, we must historicise the spectator and take into account the conditions under which photographic images would appear *realistic*. When we consider the different ways in which the *Storyville Portraits* can be viewed either as a document of Storyville, a representation of female prostitution, and/or an evocation of feminist self-representation, the apparent immediacy and transparency of photographs explicitly used *as* document brings with it another layer of complexity. 'Documentary' truth, empowered as it is with the indexicality of the photographic, is a potent mixture of realism and the political. The different uses, therefore, to which these representations were and are put to use, should be an overriding concern. If, as the previous chapters have so far demonstrated, 'seeing' means taking into account



both the historical conditions of reception and the spectator, it is prudent to consider Tagg's assertion that

the discourse of documentary constituted a complex strategic response to a particular moment of crisis in Western Europe and the USA...not only of social and economic relations and social identities but, crucially of representation itself: of the means of making the sense we call *social experience*. Outside this crisis, the specificity and effectivity of documentary cannot be grasped. (Tagg 1988: 8, emphasis added)

The documentary form's persuasive capacity as a strategic response can best be apprehended in the work of Lewis Hine whose images were used for specific social reform campaigns. Hine, a sociologist by training, applied his photographic skills to a variety of social causes. In terms of visual recognition, Hine's important freelance work for the National Child Labour Committee (NCLC) sits alongside his *Men at Work* series which documented workers during the construction of the Empire State Building, although Hine's earlier work also included photographing immigrants' arrival at Ellis Island. But it is Hine's images for the *Charities and the Commons*, a journal which later came to be known as the *Survey Graphic*,<sup>114</sup> that most clearly articulates the ways in which the notion of social experience was understood in the early twentieth century; a 'cubist moment' in America's history which was hopeful of science and art's applicability to social problems.

In *Symbols of an Ideal Life: Social Documentary Photography in America, 1890 – 1950*, Maren Stange's insightful discussion of the relationship between reform ideology and social imagery, the latent moralism of the social documentary project identified by Rosler is revealed. Stange's analysis of the political context of early American documentary photography by Hine, Jacob Riis and the photographers of the Farm Security Administration (FSA),<sup>115</sup> revolves around the ways in which the dissemination of photographs for reform publicity assisted the disciplinary purposes

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<sup>114</sup> Certainly the many name changes are a reflection of the journal's social orientation during a particular time. The journal was originally called *Charities* (as a result of an amalgamation in 1901 with *Charities Review*, a journal founded by the New York Charity Organisation Society); the journal later merged with a popular journal of the settlement movement to become *Charities and the Commons* by 1909, then later renamed *The Survey* in 1912. By the early twenties, *Survey Graphic* emerged as a companion journal to *The Survey*.

<sup>115</sup> A large scale, federally funded documentary enterprise which was initiated under Roosevelt's government in the mid-1930's. The project was aimed at bolstering popular support for New Deal relief policies that were implemented to assist the effects of the Depression.

of the liberal corporate state. In demonstrating the evolving concept of social documentary, Stange highlights the problem in the image/text relation as it relates to the practice:

The photograph necessarily took on meaning within a particular rhetorical framework created by its interaction with caption, text, and agency, even though the photographer and his or her subject did not always intend such a meaning or share its ideology. (Stange 1989: xiv)

Within this model of the documentary genre, issues such as public address, dissemination, reception and the notion of narrative imagery, rather than a single image, are the mechanisms through which ideology is inflected. The critical position in which documentary practices ostensibly reside can thus be seen as necessarily and precariously contained 'within larger systems that function to limit, contain, and ultimately neutralise them' (Solomon Godeau 1991: 171). Not least, the production of, if not explicitly offensive, subjugating imagery, within 'the same system that engenders the conditions [the image] re-presents' (Solomon Godeau 1991: 176) emphasises the centrality of the subject matter in politicised documentary. As Solomon Godeau observes, despite the different permutations of social documentary over the years, some representational tropes remain unchanged:

One such trope consists of the depiction of the subject – and the subject's circumstances – as a pictorial spectacle usually targeted for a different audience and a different class. Another concerns the immobilising effect produced by the visual 'fact' of individual victimisation or subjugation as a metonym for the (invisible) conditions that produced it...moreover, to the extent that photography is less able to deal collectivity than with individuality, work such as the F.S.A. project demonstrates a *probably inevitable* slippage from the political to the anecdotal or the emblematic. (Solomon Godeau 1991: 179, emphasis added)

The issues put forward by Solomon-Godeau set up the parameters along which I have based my argument for a documentary practice that is cognisant of (and attempts to circumvent) the moral paradox inherent in representations of the social. I argue, however, that the slippage from the political to the emblematic is neither inevitable nor undesirable and that the symbolic or the iconographic should necessarily be seen as impediments to the 'social correctness' such as that advocated by Rosler. It is my contention that within these problematic spaces of meaning, in between the representation of politics and the politics of representation, Hine's pedagogical

camera work (and Ondaatje's text) emerge as a counter to both the rhetoric of documentary photography and the perceived simplicity of 'social fact'.

Hine's work cannot be understood without recourse to the historical conditions of the reception of Hine's 'social work' which, as Alan Trachtenberg points out, followed the work of the already established 'camera work' of Alfred Stieglitz. While Stieglitz made his work explicable through 'art', Hine's photography was presented as 'social photography'. However, and somewhat ironically,<sup>116</sup> Trachtenberg rejects this art/documentary divide by pointing out that what distinguishes both photographers is their competing ideas about art itself, the role of the artist and the cultural role of the camera in early twentieth century America (Trachtenberg 1989: 168). In Trachtenberg's opinion, the regularly applied 'documentary' label attached to Hine's work fails to capture the consciously held aesthetic theory informing it: an art of *social* seeing. It is this social aspect of Hine's photography that remains unexplored (Trachtenberg 1989: 198) and, I would add, remains the most ramified feature of the documentary form.

As both Stange and Tagg demonstrate, the effectiveness of documentary, as both a strategy of control and as a strategy of representation, is emblematic of the ways it has seamlessly been incorporated into benign forms of social engineering. According to Stange, the importance of Hine's contribution to the social documentary form was that he actually clarified the process of reform 'by partly denying and opposing it in the very act of confirming and publicising it' (Stange 1987: 83). As a conscious response to the rhetoric of the documentary photography, Hine practiced 'an insistently interrogatory and self-reflexive camera work' and 'created a documentary that included in its revelation of social fact an acknowledgement...of its own constructed...nature [and] of the multiple meanings of reform' (Stange 1989: xvi).

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<sup>116</sup> Trachtenberg notes that when Hine began his photographic career in 1904, Steiglitz had already created a photographic 'art' scene in New York through the establishment of the first major art institutions in America. Steiglitz's gallery, '291' and his journal, *Camera Work* became the arbiters of value from which the growing photographic community drew upon. However, the dichotomy of camera work and social work employed in Trachtenberg's critique is, in my opinion, unnecessary for an analysis of either photographer. The images of both Hine and Steiglitz obviously served different needs but their work, as Naomi Rosenblum suggests, should be considered complementary with respect to the metropolis experience and the 'variousness of the visual expression it kindled' (Rosenblum 1990:180). Nevertheless, it is in the camera work/social work framework of Trachtenberg's analysis that we are able to see the complementary value of each photographer's work.

Stange's description of Hine's aesthetic practice might well be describing the textual work of Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion* in its emphasis on the insightful expression of social concerns. In the next section, I tease out the meaning of the social in Hine's work as a means of foregrounding *In the Skin of a Lion's* representation of social concerns. Partly due to the limitations of this thesis, I focus my examination of Hine's work on an analysis of the context in which Hine's sociality came into view. In this regard, making sense of Hine's pedagogical aesthetic is concomitant with an understanding of the traditional guise of reform ideology.

## The Social and Lewis Hine

The photograph has an added realism of its own: it has an inherent attraction not found in other forms of illustration. For this reason the average person believes implicitly that the photograph cannot falsify. Of course, you and I know that this unbounded faith in the integrity of the photograph is often rudely shaken, for, while photographs may not lie, liars may photograph. It becomes necessary then, in our revelation of the truth, to see to it that the camera we depend upon contracts no bad habits.

(Lewis Hine, 'Social Photography' in *Classic Essays on Photography*, 1980: 111)

By the time Hine delivered his self-critical evaluation to the National Conference of Charities and Corrections in 1909, the 'attractive realism' of the documentary practice had already contracted bad habits. Most discussions of the documentary mode in photography inevitably begins with Jacob Riis's slide lecture presentations of New York tenement districts, famously immortalised in the publication *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York* (1890). This is not to suggest, however, that Riis should be given credit for initiating the documentary tradition, as many of his modern admirers are prone to do.<sup>117</sup> Rather, I think that a discussion of Riis's photographic practice *is* the starting point for any informed analysis of the documentary form and the 'bad habits'—the hidden agendas—usually ascribed to the

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<sup>117</sup> In terms of the construction of documentary photography and the question of whether it is actually a discrete tradition, mention should be made of other precursors in the field: Charles Marville, who was commissioned by Baron Haussman to take photographs of old sections of Paris slated for demolition in the 1860s; Thomas Annan who photographed the Glasgow slums (see *Old Closets and Streets of Glasgow 1868*); John Thomson's photographs and text in *Street Life in London* (1877-78) and *Illustrations of China and its People*. See also John Tagg (1988), specifically Chapter 3, 'A Means of Surveillance: The Photograph as Evidence in Law' which discusses Annan's work; Chapter 5, 'God's Sanitary Law: Slum Clearance and Photography in Late Nineteenth Century Leeds', and Chapter 6 'The Currency of the Photograph: New Deal Reformism and Documentary Rhetoric'.

practice. To this end, we should pay heed to Stange's scathing comments of Riis as an 'exhibitor' whose 'evocation of spectacle and tourism in regard to New York's slums used the rhetoric and associations for the purposes akin to those of the western imperialists' (Stange 1992: 17). Indeed, with a reformist tract entitled 'How the Other Half Lives', it is possible to discern Riis's views of the poor without recourse to his photographs: the 'other half' were presented in lantern shows to 'the half' who viewed them from their incontrovertible position as the privileged audience. Riis, who attributed the powers and pleasures of photography to art, relied on dramatic representational and narrative strategies (for example, musical accompaniment, humorous, or adventuresome anecdotes) to help mediate the visual appeal of 'Gotham's crime and misery'.<sup>118</sup> These techniques invariably affirmed Riis's middle-class 'point of view' and, for reasons that have now become apparent, revealed his generally limited understanding of the underlying issues associated with his images.

While an extended description and analysis of Riis's photographic practice is beyond the parameters of this thesis, the point I want to stress here is that the photograph's context is a powerful, and problematic, determinant in the way its meaning is perceived. For example, as Stange notes, 'the idea of photography as surveillance, the controlling gaze as middle-class right and tool, is woven throughout Riis's lectures and writings' (1992: 23). Stange's unequivocal stance against Riis's construction of a 'master narrative' in his photographs is complemented by Sally Stein's lucid account of the latent meanings of Riis's camera work in 'Making Connections with the Camera: Photography & Social Mobility in the Career of Jacob Riis' (1983). The importance of both Stange's and Stein's critiques lie in their analysis of the contextual field in which Riis's work functioned (a dense matrix of a growing immigrant population, poverty, the spectre of social unrest, and bourgeois anxiety) and the convergent or, rather, latent, meaning residing in Riis's images and his accompanying text. Not least, within a framework of ameliorative or reformist intent, the

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<sup>118</sup> Riis's preoccupation with the 'magical' powers of art is revealing: 'I do not want [photography] explained to me in terms of ... formulas, learned, but so hopelessly unsatisfying. I do not want my butterfly stuck on a pin and put in a glass case. I want to see the sunlight on its wings as it flits from flower to flower and I don't care a rap what its Latin name may be. Anyway, it's not its name. The sun and the flower and the butterfly know that. The man who sticks a pin in does not, and never will, for he knows not its language. Only the poet does among men' (Riis [1901] 1966). Riis's 'artistic' rhetoric is also apparent in an interview in 1988: 'The beauty of looking into those places without actually being present there is that the excursionist is spared the vulgar sounds and odious scents and repulsive exhibitions attendant upon such a personal examination' (cited in Stange 1992: 16).

spectatorial implications of the documentary photograph becomes paramount. As Stein observes in relation to the gaze of Riis's camera work:

We can indeed marvel at the consistency of Riis's photography in which so few of the exposures presented a subject sufficiently composed to return the glance of the photographer. That he rejected those rare photographs in which the subject did happen to look back suggests how premeditated this effect was...The averted gaze, the appearance of unconsciousness or stupefaction, were only a few of the recurring features which gave Riis's pictorial documents stylistic unity and ideological coherence in relation to the text. (Stein 1983: 14)

The privileged position of the viewer and the subject/object relation that the photograph normatively elicits remains, irrespective of intent, an abiding aspect of pictorial perception. In emphasising the power relations inherent in the act of imaging, Rosler argues that 'the compassion and outrage fuelled by the dedication to reform has shaded over into combinations of exoticism, tourism, voyeurism, psychologism and metaphysics, trophy hunting—and careerism' (Rosler 1981: 72). While it is tempting to apply Rosler's comments unconditionally to Riis's photographic practice, the more salient point to be remembered here is that the act of looking is a concatenation of both political and personal desires. From this perspective, it is possible to suggest that Riis's work had a profound, if not positive, effect on subsequent reform agendas.<sup>119</sup> That is to say, notions of realist *constructions* notwithstanding, and stripped of its ideological labour and inflections of exoticism, voyeurism and tourism, the confirmatory aspects of photography invoke, after all, a record of *visual fact*.

Considering the varying accretions of the photograph's indexicality, Solomon-Godeau's plea for a 'politically sophisticated', as distinct from a 'concerned', stance for photographic documentarians, goes a long way in explaining the critical acclaim Lewis Hine's camera work has been accorded. Yet, it should be stressed at the outset that, whilst many of Hine's subjects are clearly a counterpoint to the averted gazes of

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<sup>119</sup> The Tenement House Exhibition of 1900 was significant in that it successfully represented social welfare issues. Although sponsored by a private agency (the Charity Organisation Society), Lawrence Veiller who used over 1,000 'sober and anti-aesthetic' photographs of tenement living conditions led the exhibition. The successful exhibitions led to many of Veiller's proposals being passed by the state legislature (see Stange 1992: 29- 32).

Riis's objects, this is not the same as saying that the 'social' is an intrinsic aspect of Hine's images. Indeed, as the process of identification has shown, the 'exemplary' documentary value belatedly accorded to Hine's work has less to do with composition than the ways in which the documentary form had come to be understood or needed.<sup>120</sup> The industrial pre-eminence of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in the early 1900's and the problems arising from a growing industrial community provided both the means and the opportunity for Hine's aesthetic of sociality to emerge. Hine's role as the principal photographer of the *Pittsburgh Survey*<sup>121</sup> helped to consolidate Hine's achievement which, according to Stange, 'occurred at a moment of great hope' when 'nearly thirty years of self-consciously organised urban reform work had at last begun to achieve coherence, consolidation, and a body of knowledge sufficient to ensure power' (Stange 1989: 49).<sup>122</sup>

*The Survey*, the journal in which the Pittsburgh reports were published, was concerned with radically transforming social investigation through a variety of social, economic and scientific methods of inquiry. As such, the notion of investigation implicit in the 'surveys' in itself distanced the project from the moralism and surveillance perspective which had come to be associated with the documentary method. In 1914, Paul Kellogg, the publication's director, wrote that the surveys' distinctiveness lay in its concern with the structural relations of social problem; a task, Kellogg suggested, that is similar to that of the engineer:

The engineer has to do with levers, eccentrics and axles, with chemical reagents, and dynamos; but when it comes to making steel, it is with the organic whole of which these are but many parts, and with the inter-play of those parts, that he has his real business. So with the factors which condition a working population. National and special investigations are going forward

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<sup>120</sup> Trachtenberg suggests that Hine's institutional acceptance during the Depression came about 'when new pressures upon the idea of worth in photography could not be resisted, pressures which required that art take notice of social conflict' (Trachtenberg 1989: 165).

<sup>121</sup> A reformist project which attempted to, in the words of the survey's director Paul Kellogg, 'make the town real to itself; not in goody-goody preachment of what it ought to be; not in sensational discolouration; not merely in the formidable array of rigid facts' (cited in Stange 1989: 51). Research for the survey began in 1907 and was funded by the Russell Sage Foundation of New York. Articles were published in the weekly *Charities and the Commons* and the popular magazine, *Collier's*. The research was later expanded and published in a series of six books (4 monographs and 2 collections of essays). See Butler (1909); Eastman (1910); Fitch (1910); Byington (1911; 1969) and Kellogg (1914a; 1914b). Margaret Byington's *Homestead: The Households of a Mill Town* contains thirty-eight photographs taken by Hine, the largest number published in any of the volumes.

<sup>122</sup> Following Trachtenberg's contextual analysis of Hine's work, Stange also notes that 'without [the] optimism and certainty of purpose' underpinning the *Pittsburgh Survey*, Hine's work would have been 'practically unimaginable' (Stange 1989: 51).

throughout the country as to child labour, women in industry, immigration, the prevention of tuberculosis and the like. Here the plan of work has the advantage of bringing various social problems to the touchstone of one community; of seeing them as a whole in their relations. (cited in Stange 1989:50)

Notwithstanding the allusion to this thesis's concern with a 'mural vision', it is Kellogg's metaphorical and literal use of social engineering which provides a compelling perspective on the new moralism that characterised *The Survey's* innovativeness. The 'graphic representation', as Kellogg put it, which underpinned the *Survey's* liberal reform ideology lay in its use of images alongside investigative text for the purposes of transforming the rigidity of fact into social revelation or, more specifically, experience. As Kellogg explained, in the same way that 'this city of engineers, maps, charts and diagrams were used as modern hieroglyphs to reinforce the text...the camera was resorted to as a luminous and uncontrovertible (sic) transcript of life' (Kellogg cited in Stange 1989: 51). How, then, do we make sense of this particular corroboration of image and text in relation to the sociality practiced by Hine? If we return to Stange's comments in relation to the importance of Hine's achievement being located in a denial of and opposition towards the process of reform in the very act of publicising it, then this paradoxical logic is central to an understanding of Hine's 'social work'. Kellogg's hopeful view of social engineering was, after all, characterised by an ostensibly neutral scientific exactitude that effectively established the authority of, and subsequently gave control to, the experts and specialists. By contrast, the logic of Hine's photographic practice can be seen to be more attached to, as Trachtenberg defines it, 'sociality' as a process of consciousness than to the politics of the 'social' as a program for adjustment and manipulation (Trachtenberg 1989: 204-205).

At one level, the social aspect of Hine's work can be understood from the various strategies through which he presented his work. Daile Kaplan notes that Hine experimented with 'every permutation of the picture-text marriage: photo-montage, photo mosaic, picture essay, centrefold pull-out, accordion-fold leaflet, post card, and Time Exposures [a montage panel which Hine introduced in 1941]' (Kaplan 1988: 44). Although such practices help define the calls for more militant or authentic



social documentary practices,<sup>123</sup> it should be noted that the explicitly ‘constructed’ nature of some of Hine’s work is only one aspect of the social documentary practice that needs consideration. As the previous chapters have shown, issues of audience and reception are equally, if not more important, factors in the conceptualisation of a renewed documentary practice. Bearing this in mind, the relevance of Hine’s ‘picture-text’ work, especially as it relates to Ondaatje’s novel, is that the process of communication is in itself a social act. As Trachtenberg writes

Hine developed methods of presenting his pictures as mute monuments seeking a voice in the viewer’s imagination, a voice in dialogue. He enlarged the reformist idea of social survey to embrace the *process* of communication itself, inventing presentational forms through which social information might become the viewer’s concrete experience - not facts ‘out there’, in a distant realm, or facts to excite pity, but visual facts as the occasion for awakening the viewer’s awareness of and imaginative empathy with the pictured others, and thus the viewer’s own social being. (Trachtenberg 1989: 203)

This theoretical description of Hine’s sociality, apart from its implicit reference to a self-reflective mode of viewing, helps to prefigure *In the Skin of the Lion*’s aesthetics of sociality. Furthermore, if we consider Hine’s sociality as engendering a process of consciousness whereby ‘society consist[s] of all the others with whom one interacts, imaginatively as much as materially (Trachtenberg 1989: 204), then Ondaatje’s particular art of social seeing becomes more clearly understood. In what ways does the documentary description of Toronto in *In the Skin of a Lion* offer if not a realistic, then a politically aware image of social conditions in the early twentieth century? To put this way another way, how does the *process* of communication in Ondaatje’s literary text awaken and reconcile the reader’s own social being?

Bearing in mind Ondaatje’s promulgation of Hine’s images, in the next section I shift my focus to the scopic transformations in Ondaatje’s novel by examining a similar interplay between document and aesthetics. By firstly sketching out the context within which the social documentary functions in *In the Skin of a Lion*—namely, that of the modern city—I draw attention to the ways in which aesthetics, limited as it may be to the senses, coexist with a more intellectually rigorous form of documentation in Ondaatje’s text. With respect to the urban theme underpinning *In the Skin of a Lion*,

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<sup>123</sup> This idea can be traced back to Bertolt Brecht’s and Walter Benjamin’s insistence on the effectiveness of the photo-montage as exemplified in the work of John Heartfield.

it is my contention that the surveilling and objectifying eye of the urban planner and practitioners of the traditional social documentary form occupy a similar terrain in relation to the social. That is to say, social insight and the need for innovative ‘social’ thinking are, for better or worse, the main concerns of these forms of seeing. As the title of Stange’s book suggests, ‘the symbols of ideal life’ to which American philosopher John Dewey refers, relate to symbols of the machine age (Stange 1989: 104); consequently, reformist or ameliorative intent can be seen to reside less in a redistribution of power than in the idealisation of the symbols of the modern city. *In the Skin of a Lion*, as with Hine’s photography, clarifies those aspects of progressive reform that are entangled up with such technocratic social engineering. In order to clarify this argument and as a way of defining Toronto’s nascent metropolis, in what follows I draw contrasts and affinities with the city of Paris at the turn of the twentieth century where social experience and its expression are most clearly exemplified. My examination of Paris is not, however, purely contingent on the plethora of information on this emblematic modern city. By focusing on the Paris of Napoleon and Baron Haussman, I wish to also demonstrate Stange’s argument that individual images of social phenomena cannot be entirely understood on their own and must be viewed within the context provided by texts, captions and/or sequencing wherein analysis takes over from narration (Stange 1989: xiv). We should also take into account, as Winfried Siemerling points out, that *In the Skin of Lion’s* ‘interweaving planes of reality’ coalesce into ‘a fluid choreography of possibility, actuality...versions of the past, present, and possibly of the future’ (Siemerling 2004: 101). Accordingly, I use Ondaatje’s significant reference to the French writer and philosopher, Charles Baudelaire, as a form of analytical possibility and departure.

## **Baudelaire’s Visions**

Before the real city could be seen it had to be imagined, the way rumours and tall tales were a kind of charting.

(Michael Ondaatje, *In the Skin of a Lion*, 1988: 29)

The bridge goes up in a dream. It will link the east end with the centre of the city. It will carry traffic, water, and electricity across the Don Valley. It will carry trains that have not even been invented yet.

(Michael Ondaatje, *In the Skin of a Lion*, 1988: 26)

From 1912 to 1945, Toronto’s public works commissioner, Roland Caldwell Harris put into place much of the infrastructure that now forms the modern city of Toronto.

Despite two world wars, the Depression and the needs of a growing population, Harris was able to alter the face of Toronto through a program of sewer works, road works, bridge building and the reconstruction of a water system. Two of Harris's projects, the Prince Edward (or Bloor) Street Viaduct and the self-named, R.C. Harris Water Filtration Plant, also known as the Palace of Purification, provide the backdrop to *In the Skin of a Lion*. The novel superimposes the 'real' Harris with Ondaatje's version of a tsar-like commissioner driven by vision and obsession. Harris is imaginatively re-shaped as Patrick Lewis's (the loner protagonist) 'surrogate father'. 'You watch', Harris later tells Patrick who, driven by love and revolution, is intent on destroying the water plant, 'in fifty years time they're going to come up here and gape at the herringbone and copper roofs. We need excess, something to live up to. I fought tooth and nail for that herringbone' (Ondaatje 1988: 236). More than half a century later, the water plant is still recognised for its architectural greatness and monumentality.<sup>124</sup> It is highly appropriate, then, that the Roland C. Harris of Ondaatje's text quotes Baudelaire as he contemplates the construction of a public work commissioned under his name, the R.C Harris Purification Plant:

Harris had dreamed the marble walls, the copper-banded roofs. He pulled down Victoria Forest and the essential temple swept up in its place, built on the slope towards the lake. The architect Pomphrey modelled its entrance on a Byzantine city gate, and the inside of the building would be an image of an ideal city. The brass railings curved up three flights like an immaculate fiction. The subtle splay on the tower gave it an Egyptian feel. Harris could *smell* the place before it was there, knew every image of it as well as his arms – west wing, east wing. The Depression and the public outcry would slow it all down, but in spite of that half of it would be completed within a year. 'The form of the city changes faster than the heart of a mortal', Harris liked to remind his critics, quoting Baudelaire. (Ondaatje 1988: 109)

Harris's affinity with Baudelaire is of crucial importance in understanding the visual logic which underpins *In the Skin of a Lion*.<sup>125</sup> For Baudelaire, the 'newness of the new' needed to be captured and he appealed for the modern artist to bring the

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<sup>124</sup> See, for example, Steven Mannell (1999) 'The Palace of Purification' in *Society for the Study of Architecture in Canada Journal*, no. 3.

<sup>125</sup> Baudelaire, whose work provided Walter Benjamin with a 'fresco of modernity' gave the concept of *modernité* its modern meaning in his essay 'The Painting of Modern Life' (written in 1859-60 and first published in 1863). Modernity, for Baudelaire, was both a quality of modern life as well as an artistic endeavour and was characterised by its distinctly transitory nature. He writes, 'by modernity I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable' (Baudelaire 1964: 14).

explosive forces of transformation into their work. Baudelaire's primary concern, as Marshall Berman points out, was for an art that was *espouse* or 'married' to the lives of the men and women in the crowd (Berman 1982: 146). It is a relationship that highlights the underlying tension between the way the city is conceptualised and the way the city is experienced; a relation, it should be noted, not unlike the contradiction encountered between the documentary image and its larger implications. In the case of Toronto at the turn of the twentieth century, the lavish architecture of the 'Palace of Purification' (whilst a model for Canadian civility at the time) did not reflect the social reality of the people dealing with the Depression. In the same way, the civic policies which helped characterise Roland C. Harris's Toronto, whilst empirically the same city, is vastly different to Ondaatje's representation of Toronto and the citizens who inhabited the city during the early twentieth century. If we remind ourselves of the visual logic and achievement attributed to Hine, *In the Skin of a Lion* can be seen to similarly embody a civic vision—an art of social seeing—that simultaneously thematises and critiques the contradictions and tensions implicit in a progressive ideology and style. The crux of the contradiction is best summed up by Stange in her appraisal of the *Pittsburgh Survey*'s orientation:

Embedded in survey ideology was a pro-corporate orientation that ensured that the project would only *display*, and never help resolve, the tensions it discovered between working people and the business system, between local civic strength and national policy, between political democracy and technocratic social engineering, between particular realities and *abstract symbols*. (Stange 1989: 65, emphasis added)

By putting emphasis on the visual relations implicit in Stange's commentary, the particular form of civic vision attributed to Harris in Ondaatje's novel becomes apparent. The civic images conjured up for the reader in the text reflects the grandly scaled social engineering and passionate enthusiasm behind progressive reform agendas.<sup>126</sup> More specifically, *In the Skin of a Lion*'s perspective also draws attention to the motivating logic of urban planners and the ways in which those who live and work in the city experience the concrete form of the administrators' architecture and planning. In particular, the author's characterisation of Harris as an autocrat with

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<sup>126</sup> Dennis Duffy rightly observes that 'without the concern for modernisation [*In the Skin of a Lion*] remains a thinking person's *Grand Hotel*' (Duffy 2001: 119).

Baudelarian persuasions brings to mind—at the same time that it critiques—the utopianism found in conceptualisations of the city.

In *In the Skin of a Lion*, the problem of representing the social can be seen as being inextricably linked to the equally contradictory and ambiguous nature of ‘modernity’ and the ways in which experiences of the city have been formed out of the experiences of the latter, and vice versa.<sup>127</sup> As Paul Rabinow states, following Foucault’s analysis of the modern age, ‘Modernity, the era of Man, began when representations ceased to provide a reliable grid for the knowledge of things’ (Rabinow 1989: 18). As I earlier pointed out, despite or, rather, *because* of its links to empirical facts, the novel’s historiographic representation of Toronto as an emerging metropolis is in itself a form of critical and historical discourse.<sup>128</sup> Thus, if we take vision as also being physical, social and discursive, then the visual logic of *In the Skin of the Lion* is amenable to historicisation. As Harris’s characterisation implicitly conveys, nowhere is the question of the visual logic of the city better illustrated than in Baudelaire’s city of Paris where the forces of progress could be seen to permeate all aspects of urban life. For the purposes of heuristic simplification, what follows is a necessarily brief detour into the visuality of this quintessential modern city; nevertheless, my aim is to foreground Ondaatje’s sociality as a contrast to Paris’s emergent ‘bourgeois visual environment’.<sup>129</sup>

The city of Paris in the mid-nineteenth century was undergoing rapid transformation under Georges Eugène Haussmann, the civic prefect of the Seine, who took charge of the city during Napoleon III’s rule. Haussmann, the self-described ‘demolition artist’,<sup>130</sup> destroyed much of medieval Paris to make way for boulevards, monuments and ‘pleasure grounds’ which would transform the city into one of cleanliness, light and air. Whilst it has been well documented that Napoleon’s regime had political and

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<sup>127</sup> Frisby (2001: 6) notes that different modernist movements characterised themselves by their oppositional readings of the modern metropolis.

<sup>128</sup> See Hutcheon (1988) for a literary critique of the poetics of postmodern literature

<sup>129</sup> See Otter (2002) who uses this term in relation to the vision and civility of the late Victorian city.

<sup>130</sup> The reified process of social planning was apparent in Haussmann’s enthusiasm for documenting the reconstruction of Paris. The civic official eagerly immersed himself in the planning process which included, amongst other things, using photographic documentation and underwriting a major project to complete a block-by-block reconstruction of the city of Paris. This passionate involvement with documenting coincided with the wave of historical passion that gripped Paris in the first half of the nineteenth century (Rabinow 1989).

police objectives, the ‘Haussmannisation’ of Paris, as Françoise Choay argues, was based on a static and, hence archaic, conception of both urban space and the social relations of the city. It was clear that Haussmann did not think about the city in the emerging social terms of the industrial, technocratic and administrative rationality of capitalism (Rabinow 1989: 77). Hence, the Napoleon/Haussmann regime, in its restricted understanding of Paris as a political, economic and technical object, lacked any normative project for the social (Rabinow 1989: 78). Moreover, as Rabinow’s study of social modernity in France reveals, Napoleon’s efforts to provide housing for the working-class proved ineffective in the face of liberal ideas of the sanctity of property and the problem of social control.<sup>131</sup>

In seventeen years, Paris was transformed into an illusory vista of social equality, yet the estimated 350,000 people uprooted from the *quartiers* of Old Paris were made all the more visible alongside the rich in the newly created public vistas. How were the people – both rich and poor – to deal with ‘the misery that was now a fact’? (Berman 1982: 153). According to Friedrich Engels, a Haussmann contemporary, the destruction of the working class quarters was a bourgeois concern: ‘the most scandalous alleys and lanes disappear to the accompaniment of lavish self-glorification by the bourgeoisie on account of this tremendous success, but – they appear again at once somewhere else, and often in the immediate neighbourhood.’<sup>132</sup> The practical effect of the Napoleon-Haussmann vision exposed the manifestation of class divisions which in turn created divisions within the modern self. As Berman eloquently illustrates in his analysis of Baudelaire’s poem ‘The Eyes of the Poor’, the visual presence of the poor opened up conflicting political and ideological responses, which in their perceived futility, served to evoke contradictions within the inner life of the person on the street (Berman 1982: 154). In other words, urban consciousness metamorphosed into modern consciousness and became internalised.<sup>133</sup> It is here that Burton Pike’s (1981) description of the city as ‘paved solitude’ finds its metaphorical

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<sup>131</sup> It was not until the last two decades of the nineteenth century that the ‘social question’ in France began to be reformulated along the lines of philanthropic reform and the supposedly liberal economic and social system in which it was fixed (Rabinow 1989: 170).

<sup>132</sup> See Engels, F, ‘The Housing Question’ in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Selected Works*, Moscow 1962, pp.607-608 (cited in Frisby 1985: 244).

<sup>133</sup> In Walter Benjamin’s analyses, the shifting relationship between the public and private is allegorised in the Parisian arcades where the street is transformed into an interior setting for the bourgeois citizen. This interiorisation, as Gilloch puts forward, is bound up with the compartmentalisation of space that renders the undesirable classes invisible (Gilloch 1996: 8).

resonance in Berman's description of the burgeoning Parisian boulevards, 'the perfect symbol of capitalism's inner contradictions': 'rationality in each individual capital unit, leading to anarchic irrationality in the social system that brings all these units together.'<sup>134</sup> The building of the urban environment created a category of people 'who are in the way – in the way of history, of progress, of development; people who are classified, and disposed of, as obsolete' (Berman 1982: 292). The antithetical feelings of love and hate, hope and fear associated with the urban, not only made apparent the mismatch between the 'rational' city of the urban reformer and the 'realities of the crowd', but also revealed the emerging crisis of modernity: the articulation of the city as a social space.

### Lines, Spaces and Light

If he were an artist he would have painted them but that was false celebration. What did it mean in the end to look aesthetically plumaged on this October day in the east end of the city...? What would the painting tell?

(Michael Ondaatje, *In the Skin of a Lion*, 1988: 130)

The period I have briefly outlined in France's social architecture is thus significant in relation to the city of Toronto in the 1920's; the city was faced with the similar task of having to accommodate a population that had more than doubled in the first two decades of the twentieth century. It was also a time when the influx of migrants from Russia and Central Europe began to make themselves visible in the city of Toronto. For the majority of immigrants who worked on the city's infrastructure, low-income housing was to be found in the older parts of the city where a growing immigrant community began to be associated with the slum.<sup>135</sup> The conflation of ethnicity with space, as Dennis Duffy points out, proved to be an enduring construct of social reformism; geographic, not economic, forces were seen to be the main reasons Toronto needed pastoral care (Duffy 2001:108). *In the Skin of Lion's* geography or construction of space is transformed into, if we return to Ondaatje's conceptualization, a 'vista' that is indeed much broader than that afforded by either official history or

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<sup>134</sup> See Berman (1982: 159) for an insightful Benjamin-esque analysis of 'macadam', the paving material used on the Parisian boulevards.

<sup>135</sup> *The Daily Mail and Empire* explained to its readers that 'British immigrants, as a rule, try to find homes on the outskirts of the city...The immigrants of Russia and Central Europe, on the other hand, crowd into the older districts of the city, and have transformed the old 'Ward' into a veritable ghetto' ('Toronto Slums') 6 July, 1911:2 (cited in Duffy 2001).

social reform: 'the detritus and chaos' of the age are, in Ondaatje's version of Toronto's history, realigned into 'fragments of human order' (Ondaatje 1988: 145). In all these 'imaged moments rather than psychological explanations', Barbour rightly argues that *In the Skin of a Lion* 'is almost wholly one of surfaces' (Barbour 1993: 183), as his chosen passage illustrates: 'it was strange for Patrick to realise later that he had learned important things, the way children learn from watching how adults angle a hat or approach a strange dog' (Ondaatje 1998: 19). The passage might well be describing the reader's own response to the novel's visual rhetoric.

In the preceding epigraph, for example, Ondaatje's Canadian-born protagonist, Patrick, contemplates the Macedonian tannery dye workers during their five-minute break. What *would* the painting tell? Pre-empted by the notion that painting the scene would be false celebration, the question is a rhetorical one for what is rendered invisible is the misery of the labourers' working conditions and the ineluctable deleterious effects of their labour. Ondaatje's vivid description of the dye-workers 'leaping into different colours as if into different countries' could be interpreted as bordering on the romantic; however, Ondaatje's vivid descriptions of the workers, to use Buck-Morss's words in relation to the writing of Walter Benjamin, 'rub harshly against the grain of the semantics of progress' and quickly dispel any notions of the romanticised worker. We learn that the tannery dye workers' desire for the purifying effect of a cigarette to counter the acrid smell of their labour could never be satisfied because 'the acid of the solutions they had stepped into and out of [was] so strong that they would have ignited if a flame touched them. A green man on fire' (Ondaatje 1988: 131). Or, in the case of the tunnel workers:

For eight hours a day the air around them rolls in dirty light. From somewhere else in the tunnel there is the permanent drone of pumps attempting to suck out the water, which is constantly at their heels. All morning they slip into the wet clay unable to stand properly, pissing where they work, eating where someone else left shit. (Ondaatje 1988: 109)

Clearly, whilst many of Harris's projects for Toronto were invested with the needs of the (native) community, to the labourers who worked in the city's tanneries, bridges and sewers, the concept of a civic good was as alien as the physical dangers of their labour. In the section of the novel entitled 'Palace of Purification' most especially,



the vision and light associated with Harris's position is juxtaposed with 'an unfinished world of labour and darkness' wherein 'men work in the equivalent of the fallout of a candle' (Ondaatje 1988: 111). The visual metaphor is not, however, a simplistic one, but acquires a more 'existential flatness'<sup>136</sup> in relation to another scene where the men in the tunnels are likened to mules:

Already they can smell each other and the sweat from the previous days, the lamp wick raised to burn out odour. They can hear the mules and pit-horses who live down there, transporting the dug earth and mud barrels to the ladder. When these creatures were lowered down the shaft by rope they had brayed madly, thinking they were being buried alive. Patrick and the others walk silently, remembering the teeth of the animals distinct, that screaming, the feet bound so they wouldn't slash out and break themselves, lowered forty feet down and remaining there until they died or the tunnel reached the selected mark under the lake. And when would that be? The brain of a mule no more and no less knowledgeable than the body of a man who dug into a clay wall in front of him. (Ondaatje 1988: 108)

To the immigrants who entered Canada in search of a better life, the rational 'concept city' of Commissioner Harris's Toronto was one where mythic possibilities resided; the immigrant workers of *In the Skin of a Lion* were tempted to travel to North America where 'everything was rich and dangerous', the appeal of the modern city was 'the simplicity of the contract' formed out of fairy tales of 'those first travellers who were Judas goats to the west' (Ondaatje 1988: 44). In this period of North America's history, the migrant worker was still without language, as Ondaatje reminds the reader: 'gestures and work and bloodlines [were] the only currency' (Ondaatje 1988: 43). Such an historical fact can perhaps be interpreted as part of the novel's engagement with the visual; however, the immigrants' metaphorical silence is, under the presence of Ondaatje's historical illumination, literally transformed into visual pedagogy. For instance, Ondaatje's Nicholas Temelcoff 'never realizes how often he is watched by others. He has no clue that his gestures are extreme. He has no portrait of himself...As with sight, because Nicholas does not listen to most conversations around him, he assumes no one hears him' (Ondaatje 1988: 42-43). And, in another scene in the novel, the immigrant workers who were prohibited by officials to walk on the bridge in preparation for the ceremonies the next day, 'moved

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<sup>136</sup> Gutman uses the term to refer to the 'pure' malaise often attributed to Lewis Hine's subjects and their apparent acceptance of their human condition (Gutman 1967: 29).

in with their own flickering lights—their candles for the bridge dead—like a wave of civilisation, a net of summer insects over the valley’ (Ondaatje 1988: 27). The visual metaphors are both striking and effective; however, as with the symbols of the industrial city, it is the novel’s engagement with the materiality of vision that provides another source of illumination on the immigrants’ experience. The arrival of the talking picture was, in Ondaatje’s words, ‘the event that [would] lighten the way for immigration in North America’ (Ondaatje 1988: 43). Ondaatje, in his characteristic wit, describes the ways in which the Macedonian immigrants learnt English by mimicking and parroting the actors on the screen and stage: ‘sojourners walked out of their accent into regional American voices’ (Ondaatje 1988: 47).<sup>137</sup>

The migrants’ crises in the experience of the city might be better understood, then, as a necessary—not just another—perspective in the social repertoire of understanding the city.<sup>138</sup> The migrant worker, as a social typification in line with Walter Benjamin’s emblematic city figures, provides a source of illumination from which to understand the relationship between the self and city divide. As Benjamin notes, ‘only those for whom poverty or vice turn the city into a landscape in which they stray from dark till sunrise know it in a way denied to me’ (Benjamin 1985: 316).<sup>139</sup> In Ondaatje’s text, the migrant worker as urban metaphor suggests possibilities for a regeneration of urban politics especially as it relates to notions of community and the concept of the city as social space. It is more important to note, however, that *In the Skin of the Lion*’s offering of such possibilities ‘refuses to pretend that this naming can replace the official histories [and] at best can supplement them and demonstrate the contingency of their truths’ (Barbour 1993: 205). Here, Ondaatje’s appraisal of

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<sup>137</sup> Ondaatje writes: ‘Nicholas Temelcoff, unfortunately, would later choose Fats Waller as his model and so his emphasis on unusually unnoticed syllables and the throwaway lines made him seem high-strung or dangerously anti-social or too loving’ (1988: 47). A moment that reminds us that absurdity, too, is another overlooked (and underestimated) facet of the human condition.

<sup>138</sup> As Homi Bhabha suggests in his defence of Salman Rushdie’s controversial novel, *The Satanic Verses*, ‘the historical and cultural experience of the western metropolis cannot now be fictionalised without the marginal, oblique gaze of its postcolonial, migrant populations cutting across the imaginative metropolitan geography of territory and community, tradition and culture (Bhabha 1990). Whilst Bhabha’s comments specifically relate to literary works, his critique serves to highlight the use of the migrant vision as an urban metaphor in much the same way that Benjamin draws on his social types for their dereifying and critically negating perspective of urban experience.

<sup>139</sup> Benjamin’s advocacy of alternative historical practices, or what might be termed ‘counter-history’, not only aims to uncover the metropolis as the site of myth but also seeks to empower marginalised figures in modern society. Suffice to say Benjamin is not concerned with elevating the *Lumpenproletariat* to the centre in class struggle; rather, as Gilloch (1996) points out, they are used metaphorically as a model for redemptive practice.

Hine's work as 'rooms one can step into' (Ondaatje 1988: 145) finds its meaning in relation to the author's own text. *In the Skin of the Lion* may sometimes convey confused ideologies; nevertheless, the power of the novel ultimately lies with its expression of various voices 'not as arguments but as visceral gestures' (Barbour 1993: 205).

## The Fall of Icarus

Icarus can ignore the tricks of Daedalus in his shifting and endless labyrinths. His altitude transforms him into a voyeur. It places him at a distance, it changes an enchanting world into text. It allows him to read it to become a solar Eye, a god's regard. The exaltation of a scopic...drive. Just to be this seeing point creates fiction of knowledge. Must one then redescend into the sombre space through which crowds of people move about, crowds that, visible from above, cannot see there below? The fall of Icarus. (Michel de Certeau 1985: 123)

If reality has been contaminated by representation, the fall of Icarus is inevitable if any attempt is to be made to reconcile the urban planner's god-like vision with reality.<sup>140</sup> For Michel de Certeau part of the solution entails 'walking the city' in a similar way that Baudelaire and Benjamin placed on the importance of being a voyeur amongst the crowd or *flânerie*. In Ondaatje's novel, the scopic totalisations of the documentarian's eye—Daedalus's labyrinthine artifice—are transformed into imaged moments, gestures, and fragmentary details. In *In the Skin of the Lion*, the fragments take the concept of the photo-montage to its textual extreme. If meaning has been lost in the totality, Ondaatje makes it his point to recover the whole, so that, to use Walter Benjamin's words, 'the rags and the refuse' reveal the essential. Just as Benjamin attempted to make visible the philosophical truths buried within mass culture, Ondaatje's magnifying prose elevates the mundane and prosaic to the iconographic: the microsociological perspective renders the immigrant experience not so much visible, but transformed into an art form not unlike the Cubists' splintered angles.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> De Certeau suggests that in the reified social process of planning, the planners' documents are not only representations of the city they *are* the city.

<sup>141</sup> Benjamin's own concern for individual detail, as Frisby notes, is not about 'the redemption of the living world', but the redemption of 'fragments of the past' (Frisby 1985:213). That is, Benjamin's fragmentary redemptive practice is fundamentally concerned with 'the rescue and preservation of the artefacts, images and ideas liberated through this process...and with their subsequent reuse or refunctioning in the pressing political struggles of the moment' (Gilloch 1996:14).

Importantly, *In the Skin of the Lion's* visual documentation of Toronto illustrates the productive tension to be found between image and text; a relation that can be more usefully described as 'interpretive' in the same way that Hine described his work and one that requires considerable self-reflection. As I have suggested throughout this chapter, the concatenation of shifting narratives not only allow the missing images of history to be seen, it also serves as the locus of critique, even as it presents the official vision. If Ondaatje's many fragments, especially in the passages I have chosen to illustrate, somehow appear incongruous against the visionary aspects of the modern city and social reform, then Michael Ann Holly's theoretical insistence on 'past looking', which I discussed in chapter one, provides a clue. For it is precisely in the visual disjuncture that *In the Skin of a Lion's* revolutionary aesthetic lies. The intersecting lines, space, people and light that occupy Toronto's space and time in history—to return to Gutman's description of the 'perfect artistic representation'—are drawn out and laid bare for the reader. Critical receptivity and the novel's historical processing thus becomes the means by which, to use Holly's words, 'the vertiginous predicament of the viewer' is stilled. The novel does not, in the end, provide an answer to the authority and power of men like Harris nor to the problems of social reform. Neither Patrick's heroic anarchy nor Nicholas Temelcoff's anticipated social mobility eventuates—such desires are still unmet—yet they become the fulcrum of the novel's artistic feat. It is Patrick's and Temelcoff's oral, as opposed to textual, histories which inhabit the text. An orality that is translated into visual pedagogy: the novel transforms into 'a room where one can step into'. And, as if an abiding reminder of the innovative possibilities of writing as a medium of illumination, the final word in Ondaatje's novel is uttered by Commissioner Harris: 'Lights' (Ondaatje 1988: 244).

## Chapter 5

### Painting the Eyes of the Buddha: An Archaeology of Truth & Terror in *Anil's Ghost*

She began to examine the skeleton again under sulphur light, summarising the facts of his death so far, the permanent truths, same for Colombo as for Troy. One forearm broken. Partial burning. Vertebrae damage in the neck. The possibility of a small bullet wound in the skull. Entrance and exit.  
(Michael Ondaatje, *Anil's Ghost*, 2000: 65)

We are far removed indeed from those accounts of the life and misdeeds of the criminal in which he admitted his crimes, and which recounted in detail the tortures of his execution: we have moved from the exposition of the facts or the confession to the slow process of discovery; from the execution to the investigation; from the physical confrontation to the intellectual struggle between criminal and investigator.  
(Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punishment*, 1979: 69)

If the previous chapters have drawn attention to some of the ways in which the illusory power of images is grounded on their ability to engender a form of partial blindness, then this – and the following – chapters will explore more fully the notion of visual invisibility. In other words, I take blindness as an inability to recuperate what has been lost to sight in the image and a condition that requires an illuminated or enlightened stance in the ‘picturing’ of ethical concerns. This chapter thus has the ‘eyes of the Buddha’ as its guiding visual trope; a way of seeing that I shall now bestow on my examination of the visuality of human rights and, in the final subsequent chapters, on the invisibilities of Western historiography and cartography.

#### Enlightenmentality

The resolutely visual ending of Michael Ondaatje’s novel *Anil's Ghost* (2000) concludes with an artist painting the eyes of a reconstructed statue of Buddha. The artist, with back turned, holds a mirror to the Buddha’s eyes to avoid looking directly at the statue’s face since no human eye can make eye contact before the Buddha attains divinity. The image, dense with metaphoric meaning, is a profound one when we consider both the iconic power of such a symbol and the ways in which our own eyes respond to the world. Here, we might be reminded of the Taliban movement’s destruction of two giant stone Buddhas in Bamiyan, Afghanistan (a year after the publication of *Anil's Ghost*). This particular act of iconoclasm, no doubt made even

more vexatious with accompanying news footage, was received with indignation by the rest of the community. The head of the United Nations cultural agency, UNESCO declared the demolition represents ‘a true crime against culture’.<sup>142</sup> The Taliban and the UN exemplify the opposing poles of viewing the world: are the Buddha’s aesthetic or religious? The statues, which dated back from the 11th century AD, are defended as both art cultural objects and offensive religious idols. Gary Shapiro reminds us, citing Stalin (and we can also add Hitler, Pol Pot and Mao) that the Buddhas’ destruction is not the first instance of official iconoclasm. ‘Visual regimes’ such as that displayed in iconoclasm is, Shapiro contends, ‘a question of a more general structuring of the visible: not just display or prohibition, but what goes on without saying, not what is seen but the arrangement that renders certain ways of seeing obvious while it excludes other’ (Shapiro 2003: 3). This insight can be read as an extension of Teresa Brennan’s argument, which I discussed in the first chapter, of our ‘historical reality in which we see less and disavow more’. One could say that the illusory power of images is grounded on their ability to engender a form of partial blindness; invisibility, then, is not only what we cannot consciously render visible, but also what we cannot recuperate once it has been lost to sight.

I have begun with this particular example of iconoclasm, not least because of its connection with the reconstructed Buddha in *Anil’s Ghost*, but because it also suggests that an ‘archaeology of the visual’<sup>143</sup> can help reconstruct what has become obvious to our gaze. As with Benjamin’s dialectical image, this form of archeological rescue ‘can operate solely for the sake of what in the next moment is already irretrievably lost’ (Benjamin 1999: 473). From this perspective, the notion of invisibility might be likened to the partial and indirect view of the Buddha’s eyes in the mirror. In describing the process of the painting of the Buddha’s eyes, Ondaatje states that ‘without the eyes there is not just blindness, there is nothing. There is no existence. The artificer brings to life sight and truth and presence’ (2000: 99). While this chapter does not feign such lofty ambitions, I do want to point out, nonetheless, that there is no less artifice required in trying to understand the ‘truth’ of such a state of enlightenment. If, in the example I have just cited, the Taliban’s visual conception of the Buddha is seen as a form of fundamentalism, then the moral and political

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<sup>142</sup> See UNESCO Press Centre 12<sup>th</sup> March 2001.

<sup>143</sup> This is also the title of Gary Shapiro’s (2003) erudite work on Foucault & Nietzsche.

distinctions we make, in this case, between art and image need to be recuperated if we are to understand such a contradictory visual practice. The image of the Buddha in its capacity to engender a form of enlightenment is, therefore, the guiding visual trope of this chapter.

The word enlightenment has, indeed, been superseded by postmodernism and anti-foundationalism to the extent that it might now be more readily associated with Eastern mysticism than the Enlightenment of Immanuel Kant.<sup>144</sup> Thomas Osborne argues, however, that the ‘conversation’ of enlightenment, with the lower case ‘e’, is still taking place whenever the terms of debate appear to be complex and unyielding: ‘between truth and power, belief and ethics, knowledge and society, expertise and freedom, expression and redemption’ and it is in this sense, as Osborne contends, that ‘we are all of us beholden to *enlightenmentality*’ (Osborne 1998:1). Rather than taking a historical perspective, Osborne takes the notion of enlightenment as, following Michel Foucault’s essay ‘What is Enlightenment?’<sup>145</sup>, an ethos or an ‘attitude’. Osborne’s rigorously argued case to ‘picture’ enlightenment at work is highly relevant to the concerns of this chapter (Osborne 1998: xii). As I shall argue, the themes of *Anil’s Ghost* is similarly indebted to this spirit of enlightenment and that the task of ‘painting the eyes of the Buddha’ can be understood as a particular stance towards a notion of truth.

The issue of political morality is a central theme of *Anil’s Ghost* and one, which, as will become clearer in this chapter, is less about ‘seeing’ than the other more literal visual aspects percolating throughout the novel’s depiction of Sri Lanka’s civil war. The novel’s particular concern with the politics of truth is itself a form of iconoclasm to the extent that it attempts to question, more generally, scientific knowledge or ‘facts’, and, more specifically, the truth of a universal notion of human rights. The passage from the novel that I have quoted to begin this chapter describes the work being conducted by one of the main protagonists, 33 year old Anil Tissera, a Western-trained forensic anthropologist who has returned to Sri Lanka as a United Nations human rights investigator. The scientific objectivity underpinning Anil’s search for

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<sup>144</sup> As Francis Wheen (2004: 6) points out an ‘Amazon’ search of the word on the internet reveals the self-help books of celebrity guru Deepak Chopra rather than the works of the German philosopher.

<sup>145</sup> See Foucault (1984).

‘permanent truths’—‘same as for Colombo as for Troy’—assumes also an overarching political neutrality which Anil’s role as a UN representative is believed to possess. The point of view expressed by Anil’s empirical enquiries provides the basis for my argument about the iconicity or the self-evidence of Truth. To this end, I shall pursue two separate but converging lines of enquiry. Firstly, the discourse of human rights will be examined as a way of questioning the truth of this ‘global moral text’; and, secondly, I will examine the visual logic of terror as a way of making visible the moral distinctions being made in the name of truth. I will argue that the scientific discourse employed in the novel appears alongside an argument against historicism and that Truth, whether in the guise of religious icons, forensic science or universal human rights, is an artifice of seeing that effectively renders invisible ‘the intricacies of the public world with its various truths’ (Ondaatje 2000: 279).

### Archaeological Foundations

A good archaeologist can read a bucket of soil as if it were a complex historical novel.

(Michael Ondaatje, *Anil’s Ghost*, 2000: 151)

A writer uses a pen instead of a scalpel or blow torch. As a writer, one is busy with archaeology. It’s what the writer does with any character. On one level you’re moving forward, but on the other, you’re revealing the past.

(Michael Ondaatje, cited in Ellen Kanner, *Book Page Interview*, 2000)

In an interview shortly after the novel’s publication, Ondaatje describes *Anil’s Ghost* as being written from a ‘forensic point of view’, a novel ‘more like a detective story’ one step removed from the violence (Dowse 2002). It is a fitting description considering the novel is illuminated by the points of view, or rather, the crafts of the characters: there is also Anil’s colleague, Sarath, an archaeologist; Sarath’s brother, Gamini, a surgeon; Palipana, an ailing monk-archaeologist and Ananda, a local artist. The brutality of Sri Lanka’s three-way war<sup>146</sup> is, arguably, muted by Ondaatje’s ‘forensic detective’ perspective. In a particularly scathing review of the novel Tom LeClair describes Ondaatje’s authorial gaze in the novel as ‘apolitical’ and

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<sup>146</sup> In a brief author’s note Ondaatje explains that this comprised ‘the government, the anti-government insurgents in the south and the insurrections of separatist guerrillas in the north’ (Ondaatje 2000: v)



‘irresponsible’.<sup>147</sup> LeClair argues that the novel provides neither political analysis, solutions, nor an understanding of the causes of political terrorism; and insofar as a purely superficial reading of the novel as a ‘political thriller’, LeClair might be considered correct. Margaret Scanlan, voicing a similar observation on opposing grounds, argues that Ondaatje ‘might risk aestheticising terror’ in this way, however, Ondaatje’s ‘distinctive achievement’ is to replicate ‘the experience of terror’ (2004: 302). Paul Gray makes the apt observation that the story unfolds episodically ‘as if a dark mural were being illuminated by flashbulbs’ (Gray 2000: 75). This approach, with its explicit abandonment of political rhetoric, allows for a ‘careful neutrality’ to set the tone, where there are ‘no clear demarcations’ between the opposing camps (Gray 2000: 75). In a highly relevant essay, Teresa Derrickson (2004) argues that it is precisely Ondaatje’s subtlety that allows *Anil’s Ghost* to make a political stance. Ondaatje’s seemingly distant political gaze can be attributed to an awareness that if ‘those who were slammed and stained by violence lost the power of language and logic’ then only the distance of time could bring about logic because ‘no one could ever give meaning to [human violence]’ (Ondaatje 2000: 55). The novel, instead, critically constructs a redemptive historiographic account out of the fragments, or, to use Benjamin’s term, the ‘monads’ of war.<sup>148</sup> Through this (re)constructive and illuminating logic, *Anil’s Ghost*, attempts to grapple with the irrationalities of human behaviour and forms the basis of the novel’s subtle and sophisticated interrogation of truth.

Indeed, the ‘forensic detective’ discourse which sustains the novel allows for a more thorough investigation of the ‘truth’—of seeing and saying—and the efforts exercised on its discovery. All the characters seek truth that in one form or another involves the bringing to life, unearthing and reconstructing of scientific, moral, political and personal dogmas. The charred, skeletal remains of a body found in a government archaeological site is the secret at the centre of *Anil’s Ghost*. It is the

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<sup>147</sup> LeClair’s self-confessed mistrust of Ondaatje’s ‘collage method’ is apparent in his somewhat reductive review of the novel.

<sup>148</sup> Benjamin’s description of the monad, or historical ruins, itself alludes to a scientific reconstruction: ‘If the object of history is to be blasted out of the continuum of historical succession, that is because of its monadological structure demands it. This structure first comes to light in the extracted object itself. And it does so in the form of the historical confrontation that makes up the interior (and, as it were, the bowels) of the historical object, and into which all the forces and interests of history enter on a reduced scale.’ (1999: 475).

reconstruction of the dead man's identity, his bringing to life through the sifting of evidence, which motivates the novel's wrestle with the complexities of truth. At first, the truth is seemingly knowable. The discovery of the corpse in a site accessed only by government officials assumes a *fait accompli*: the work of science will, in the end, establish the means of death and the identity of the victim. The scientific-proof that would identify the perpetrator, however, with its implicit link to a long-rumoured government operation, is what holds the narrative in moral tension.

The 'reality for the West' is played out by the thoroughly Western-bred Anil, who is grudgingly permitted<sup>149</sup> to return to Sri Lanka after fifteen years to investigate state-sponsored murders. Anil's training as a forensic anthropologist allows for the struggle for truth to take place, *ostensibly*, within the paradigms of East and West; her suspicion of Sarath's government ties (who has been officially assigned to accompany her) is equalled only by Sarath's wary estimation of her status as a foreigner. Anil's investigative passion and her staunch belief in knowable details is challenged by Sarath's insistence that she 'understand the archaeological surround of fact' lest she become 'one of the journalists who file reports about flies and scabs while staying at the Galle Face Hotel' (Ondaatje 2000: 44). Anil's and Sarath's mutual concern might be their belief in science to deliver the truths of history, but the implications of 'truth' are, for each of them, distinctly personal. Anil's 'tenderest of all discoveries', for example, was the 'almost-four-million-year old footsteps of a pig, hyena, a rhinoceros and a bird' (Ondaatje 2000: 305); whereas, Sarath, 'as an archaeologist believed in truth only as a principle, that is, he would have given his life for the truth if the truth were of any use' (Ondaatje 2000: 157).

Anil's role as a forensic investigator for the independent and international body that is the United Nations is, to use Richard Eder's description (2000: 7), the 'reagent' by which the other characters' perceptions of truth are produced. Anil's particular position as 'the bearer of truth' forms the basis of political debate in the novel and thus guards against a reading that might pit Anil against 'the Rest'. Anil and Sarath and, to a lesser but no less important degree, Gamini, Palapina and Ananda, represent

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<sup>149</sup> That is, 'to placate trading partners in the West' (Ondaatje 2000: 16)

both a critical account of truth and a redemptive approach to the question of history.<sup>150</sup> It is an approach that can be explicitly understood as encapsulating, on the one hand, Foucault's own archaeology of knowledge and his critique of the scientific gaze and, on the other, Benjamin's archaeological task of redeeming buried fragments that historicism has ignored. Both Foucault's and Benjamin's conceptualisation of the body as simultaneously 'a matrix of history and a site in which history takes place' (Weigel 1996: 43), is evident in the characters' participation in a genealogical task which aims 'to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history's destruction of the body' (Foucault 1984: 83). The deconstructive and constructive tendencies of this 'forensic detective' task also makes apparent the historiographical principles underpinning Benjamin's approach to historicism and the reading of images as 'dialectics at standstill'. While forensics and archaeology both deal with images of the past, they do so from slightly different perspectives: forensics concerns itself with the detailed and tactile description of the present in relation to the past and archaeology is armed with a detailed knowledge of the past which it must use to decipher the present.<sup>151</sup>

Above all, however, while the characters of the novel can be interpreted as representing, literally, the archaeological positions that I have described as belonging to both Foucault and Benjamin, the novel's discussion of truth is less transparent. While it might certainly be interpreted as such, the narrative does not strictly participate in the type of 'archaeological' exercise set out by either authors. The novel, instead, engages in an examination of truth that is less concerned with either Foucault's systematic analyses or Benjamin's literary thought-images and more concerned with—and this can be related principally to Foucault—the ethics of truth. The critical interrogation of the present according to this ethic is, as I mentioned at the outset, an insistence that the idea of enlightenment be understood as an ethos or attitude rather than a theory or a doctrine (Foucault 1984: 49). This stance also entails

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<sup>150</sup> My particular focus on Anil and Sarath is dictated, for the most part, by the limits of space. That is, I do not mean to suggest that the novel's examination of truth cannot also be considered from the perspective of the other characters. For example, Palipana's many ruminations can, in equal measure, be used to draw out many of the points I have chosen to assemble in this chapter.

<sup>151</sup> The boundaries I have drawn up here between past and present are not, of course, as rigid, nevertheless, the point I am trying to make is how images of the past are, following Benjamin's thinking, endlessly (re)constructed in its afterlife.

transgressing the usual dichotomies between true and false, outside and inside.

Foucault explains the consequences of this philosophical ethos on criticism:

Criticism is no longer going to be practiced in the search for formal structures with universal value, but rather as historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognise ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying. In that sense, this criticism is not transcendental, and its goal is not that of making metaphysics possible: it is genealogical in its design and archaeological in its method. Archaeological...in the sense that it will not seek to identify the universal structures of all knowledge or of all possible moral action, but will seek to treat the instances of discourse that articulate what we think say and do as so many historical events. And this critique will be genealogical in the sense that it will not deduce from the form of what are what is impossible for us to do and to know. (Foucault 1984: 45-46)

I have quoted Foucault here at length because I think his description of such a historico-practical attitude accurately describes *Anil's Ghost* position in relation to the ethics of truth and the problematisation of enlightenment itself. One of the defining features of this attitude is that it is 'generically *self-conscious*, that it is liable to turn inward upon itself, to problematise its own fortunes' (Osborne 1998: 4). Consider, as a prime example in the novel, the following moment of philosophical exchange between Anil and Sarath:

'You like to remain cloudy, don't you, Sarath, even to yourself.'

'I don't think clarity is necessarily truth. It's simplicity, isn't it?'

'You're an archaeologist. Truth comes finally into the light. It's in the bones and sediment.'

'It's in character and nuance and mood.'

'That is what governs us in our lives, that's not the truth.'

'For the living it is the truth,' he quietly said. (Ondaatje 2000: 259)

The conversation assumes even greater significance in the narrative's juncture when 'Sailor' is finally identified as Ruman Kumara, a mineworker. Anil, suspecting that Sarath might be guilty of malfeasance, boldly presents the incriminating findings to a board of Sri Lankan officials of her own accord. Sarath, who is all too aware of the dangers such truth will bring, tries to discredit her: 'I believe in a society that has peace, Miss Tissera. What you are proposing could result in chaos.' (Ondaatje 2000: 147). Sarath's intervention – a ploy to bide time for Anil so that she can safely leave Sri Lanka with her findings intact – leads to his own death during a backlash of civil

violence. The conclusion that UN intervention is, at least in this particular instance, futile and imprudent, is something I will discuss in further detail later in the chapter. My point here is that the conversation between Sarath and Anil characterises and motivates the novel's critique of knowledge and truth. Anil's remark that 'truth finally comes into light', along with the image of the eyes of the Buddha, allude to the ways the novel illuminates and gives meaning to aspects of knowledge which, in their ethical component, is truth. One way the novel achieves this is by focusing attention on the redemption of history. If as Ondaatje writes, no one could ever give meaning to human violence, the novel participates in the 'state of emergency' Benjamin writes about in relation to historicism:

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight...The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are 'still' possible in the twentieth century is *not* philosophical. This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge – unless it is knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable. (Benjamin 1992: 248-249).

Indeed, the 'careful neutrality' of the novel's stance is not philosophical, but acutely *ethical* in that it consistently questions the 'optical *unconsciousness*' of history through the 'optical *consciousness*' of the main characters. Truth itself is put under the microscope in a way that is medical, diagnostic and empirical rather than philosophical as a way of analysing the characteristics of truth and possibilities for its treatment. Anil-as-reagent and her interactions with the others form the unifying central logic of the novel's concern with truth: decomposing and reconfiguring the past/present in an attempt to give meaning to the present/past. In the following section, I will elaborate more fully on the deconstructive and constructive tendencies at work in *Anil's Ghost* as a way examining the limitations of the discourse of human rights.

## The Question of Human Rights

It was a Hundred Years' War with modern weaponry, and backers on the sidelines in safe countries, a war sponsored by gun- and drug-runners. It became evident that political enemies were secretly joined in financial arms deals. '*The reason for war was war.*'  
(Michael Ondaatje, *Anil's Ghost*, 2000: 43)

Anyway, these guys who are setting off the bombs are who the Western press calls freedom fighters...and you want to investigate the government?  
(Michael Ondaatje, *Anil's Ghost*, 2000: 133)

When Anil first returns to Sri Lanka, 'long enough to interpret the country with a long-distance gaze', she finds 'a more complicated world morally' (Ondaatje 2000: 11). The identification of the victim both she and Sarath have nicknamed 'Sailor' poses an achievable outcome compared to the moral distinctions and political solutions required during the conduct of war. The period in which *Anil's Ghost* is 'fictionally set' cannot, of course, be separated from the relatively solid historical facts of Sri Lanka: the sharp ethnic split between the Sinhalese-speaking Buddhists, who comprise 70% of the population, and the Tamil-speaking Hindus who make up about 17% of the population. The Sinhalese-majority government has, since 1956, radicalized the Tamil population through a series of policies that effectively diminished Tamil participation, thus setting off a chain of retribution and counter-attacks.<sup>152</sup> 'The height of terror', as Ondaatje writes of the situation, 'was 'eighty-eight and 'eighty-nine, but of course it was going on long before that. Every side was killing and hiding the evidence. *Every side*. This is an unofficial war, no one wants to alienate the foreign powers' (Ondaatje 2000: 17).

*Anil's Ghost*, as Ondaatje states in his author's note, is 'a fictional work set during [a] political and historical moment' and that 'today the war in Sri Lanka continues in a different form'. In her article 'Will the "Un-Truth" Set You Free? A Critical Look at Human Rights Discourse in Michael Ondaatje's *Anil Ghost*' (2004), Derrickson concludes that Ondaatje's novel questions the narrative of, or the possibility of achieving, global justice in the form currently administered by the UN. Derrickson argues that *Anil's Ghost* 'troubles the idea that the "truth" of human rights violations is both...*discoverable* and ...*desirable*' as it relates, more specifically, to the United Nations' universal mandate on human rights (2004: 132). While this is certainly a case in point, and there are many ways in which this chapter intersects with Derrickson's informed critique, I think it is important to make explicit the Foucauldian links between the narratives of justice at work in *Anil's Ghost* and the discourse of global human rights. In other words, I am suggesting that the language

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<sup>152</sup> See Senaratne (1997) for a detailed account of political violence in Sri Lanka specifically during 1977 and 1990.

of human rights is embedded within a much broader framework than that of the (political) auspices of the United Nations. Might the current war that Ondaatje describes as 'continuing in a different form' also refer to the struggle to overcome the abiding political ambiguities and moral crises not just in Sri Lanka but also in other countries experiencing the effects of war? How does one deal with loss and intractable division if 'all that was left of law was a belief in an eventual revenge towards those who had power'? (Ondaatje 2000: 56).

The fragmentary, monadological structure of the novel does, in part, reveal the fragility of pursuing such complex questions. The novel's preoccupation with questions of truth allows the wide berth from which Anil's relatively narrow examination of Sailor's identity can be manoeuvred into questioning the wider implications of war. Ondaatje's narrative shifts uneasily between the public and the personal; the larger philosophical questions appearing only to serve as the backdrop to the painful normality of lives interrupted by war. Anil's desire to name the 'unhistorical dead' is less about her vocation's professional obligations than it is an intensely personal desire to create a refuge for herself amongst the paradoxical and violent nature of the world she knows: 'the most precisely recorded moments of history lay adjacent to the extreme actions of nature or civilisation...Pompeii. Laetoli. Hiroshima. Vesuvius...Tectonic slips and brutal human violence provided random time-capsules of unhistorical lives' (Ondaatje 2000: 55); or, as Anil contemplates, 'If two lovers felt they could kill themselves over loss or desire, what of the rest of the planet of strangers?' (202). Ananda, who is instructed to rebuild a model of Sailor's face, can only reconstruct his features in the serene expression of his missing wife's face. Gamini, 'the perfect participant' (224) in the ambiguities of war, surrenders himself to the relative predictability of the emergency ward with the aid of amphetamines. The once-eminant archaeologist, Palipana, accused of academic forgery now lives amongst monastic ruins caring for his orphaned niece. Palipana's ruminations, for example, on 'how one hid or wrote the truth when it was necessary to lie' (105) can be seen as arising less from his position as a disgraced epigraphist than it does from the experience of a brother and sister murdered in the war. It is Palipana who, at the 'furthest edge of his knowledge and beliefs', 'blend[ing] fragments of stories so they became a landscape' (104-105) provides an indication of the novel's own imperceptible fusion of personal fragments within the vista of war:

The dialogue between old and hidden lines, the back-and-forth between what was official and unofficial...an epigraphist studying the specific style of a chisel cut from the fourth century, then coming across an illegal story, one banned by kings and states and priests, in the interlinear texts. These verses contained the darker proof. (Ondaatje 2001: 105)

'The darker proof' contained within *Anil's Ghost* is truth itself; more specifically the notion that truth is a constant struggle between personal and public truths. Anil, in this respect, is the personification of this darker proof. In her role as a representative of the independent body that is the United Nations, the focus of investigation is not the body of Sailor, but her capacity to deliver truth within the framework of a supposedly independent authority. The scientific truth espoused by Anil is itself a source of critique in that it is used as 'a particular stylised orientation to an ethic of truth' and is thus, performative, educational, ethical (Osborne 1998: 42). In this regard, the novel is an exercise in the 'performance' of rights—'not so much a grand gesture as an ethical commitment at the level of everyday life' (Osborne 2003: 528). The politics of human rights in the novel are, therefore, overshadowed to the extent that individual human lives are wrested from the realpolitik of UN intervention and into a much broader socio-political context.

The novel, from this peripheral view, consistently sheds light on the ethical dimensions of human rights but, fittingly, remains determinedly opaque. Even the most basic questions aimed at the political morality of human rights, as Amy Gutman reminds us, cannot be established clearly in either theory or practice (Ignatieff 2001: viii). To the extent that I agree that *Anil's Ghost* offers us the opportunity to rethink the complex question of the adjudication of global human rights, I also think that the novel provides a more subtle approach to the supposed East/West divide that critiques of the novel are prone to invoke.<sup>153</sup> Derrickson's contention, for instance, that 'human rights as the language of moral imperialism is an indictment that Ondaatje tends to support' (Derrickson 2004: 144), is all too easily attributed to a 'Western perspective' and risks replicating the 'global Western power' rationale she otherwise admirably

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<sup>153</sup> For example, although Richard Eder's (2000 : 7) eloquent review of *Anil's Ghost* in *The New York Times* only briefly alludes to the East/West argument with the description of Anil's 'Western-bred investigative passion', his comment can be read as an implicit desire to keep characterisations within the 'knowable' confines of 'the West' instead of, as Eder himself suggests, 'a more expansive human context'.



critiques. Despite the many philosophical exchanges between the two main characters, Anil cannot only be seen as representative of Western values as much as Sarath might be seen to stand for the East. For this reason, I want to pursue a different but not unrelated line of inquiry, which participates, I think, more critically in the 'moral triage' (Ignatieff 2001: 25) that the discourse of human rights has come to constitute. When the question of intervention comes in a vast historical context<sup>154</sup> then the utility of human rights is, at best, 'cloudy' but this is also not to suggest that it is not worthwhile adjudicating. For if Michael Ignatieff asserts that 'human rights is nothing more than a politics, one that must reconcile moral ends to concrete situations and must be prepared to make painful compromises not only between means and ends, but between ends themselves' (Ignatieff 2001: 21-22), it is not just prudent but necessary to proceed 'with an analysis that holds cultural relativism to account. Undeniably, there are abuses that are reprehensible, but it needs to be made clear (and, therefore, made separate) the crucial distinction between the *moral exigency* of bringing genuine abuses to justice and the role of human rights as it relates to the question of intervention. Sarath's belief, for example, in the type of society that has 'peace' does not eschew the former, but is overridden by the desire to preserve domestic security.<sup>155</sup>

The position staked out by *Anil's Ghost* has an affinity with the political logic articulated by Ignatieff insofar as the novel presents a morally complex world where the characters are forced to make painful compromises. Ignatieff's stance,<sup>156</sup> however, presupposes that good intentions and good consequences are, more often than not, mutually exclusive whereas Ondaatje's novel does not present such a grim reality. The novel's focus on the personal responses to the atrocities of war form a sharp contrast to the ambiguous nature of violence where the original reasons for war become effaced by war itself. The narrative of *Anil's Ghost*, in this regard, offers a

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<sup>154</sup> As Anthony Lewis points out, for example, America's delayed intervention in Bosnia was hardly 'imperial' in the same sense that George Bush has called for preemptive war in Iraq (Lewis 2003: 9).

<sup>155</sup> See, for example, Monshipouri and Welch (2001: 393-399) who explain that persecuting human rights offenders is often outweighed by the need to instil civil order.

<sup>156</sup> See, for example, 'Why are We in Iraq? (And Liberia? And Afghanistan?)' (Ignatieff 2003). While Ignatieff has, with compelling logic, consistently put forward his position for the 'lesser-evil approach' to the question of intervention, it should be pointed out that making compromises are themselves based on the process of distinguishing morally *between* compromises. In other words, to the extent that I agree with the necessity for compromise, I would also argue that our compromise of choice should necessarily be painful or morally hazardous.

more insightful analysis of the human rights dilemma than that of even the most impartial political commentary which, by its very nature, risks compromising the concerns of the personal with public debate. Kundera best articulates this particular characteristic of a global society where the meaning of the world is gradually emptied out by ‘the termites of reduction’:

It reduces man’s life to its social function; the history of a people to a small set of events that are themselves reduced to a tendentious interpretation; social life is reduced to political struggle, and that in turn to the confrontation of just two great global powers. Man is caught in a veritable *whirlpool of reduction*. (Kundera 1986: 17).

*Anil’s Ghost* succeeds in keeping, to use Kundera’s words, the ‘world of life’ illuminated by suggesting that truth is elusive and that the negotiation of a complex world can only rely on good intentions. The truth of human rights is undoubtedly political but, as *Anil Ghost* reminds us, it is also intersected by ‘historical lives’. All the characters in the novel, while placed within their own physical maze of investigation and reconstruction reside, more significantly, in the temporal labyrinth of their own memories. The text’s optical consciousness thus serves as a form of enlightenment to the extent that each character’s ruminations reveal the varied agency of reason in the performance of truth. This focus on the ‘human’ of human rights does not entail, however, a return to what Richard Rorty calls the ‘sentimentality’ of human rights (Rorty 1993) but, as I have suggested, an attempt to pursue the question of human rights as an ethical, not a moral, one. This ethical stance, of course, has particular significance for the way Anil’s ‘scientific truth’ can be interpreted. If we take into consideration Foucault’s conception of power as one that is technical and positive, a reading of Anil’s position should extend beyond the limits of the sovereignty of her role in exercising juridical and punitive power and, instead, focus on the ethical significance of her UN role. That is to say, the language of human rights must itself be seen as a regime of truth, one that is ‘linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it’ (Foucault 1980: 133). The ‘painful compromises’ that Igantieff speaks of or Sarath’s belief in the type of society that has ‘peace’, can then be interpreted not as a diminution of the moral imperatives of human rights but, rather, part of what Foucault describes as the ‘political economy’ of truth. What I am

trying to point out here is not that Anil's insistence on 'permanent truths' is misplaced but, rather, that a critique of truth that focuses only on its philosophical imperfections obscures the political functions of its operation. As the novel suggests through the Sarath-Anil dynamic, human rights may appear to look as if they have moral content, but it is precisely out of specific political problems that the question of human rights is often invoked and not from questions of natural law or universal morality.<sup>157</sup> The premise, then, of truth being 'the same for Colombo as for Troy' might be read not simply as a reflection of Anil's scientism, but as part of the novel's critique of the universalising tendencies of European Enlightenment thought.

It is within this particular strand—the Western *reaction* (as opposed to *the West*)—of the universality critique that the philosophical and political concerns of *Anil's Ghost* play themselves out. As Gamini, the local Sri Lankan surgeon, tells Anil

American movies, English books – remember how they all end?...The American or the Englishman gets on a plane and leaves. That's it. The camera leaves with him. He looks out of the window at Mombasa or Vietnam or Jakarta, someplace now he can look through at the clouds. The tired hero. A couple of words to the girl beside him. He's going home. So the war, for all purposes, is over. That's enough reality for the West. It's probably the history of the last two hundred years of political writing. Go home. Write a book. Hit the circuit. (Ondaatje 2000: 285 - 286)

Such philosophical exchanges, however, between the characters in the novel, while alluding to the imperial legacies uncovered by postmodern critique, firmly place the critiques of the discourse of human rights beyond the dichotomy of universalism versus contextualism. Anil's role as a representative of the UN and her supposed detachment from nationalist interests might offer the insight the others lack, but, in

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<sup>157</sup> According to Charles Beitz (2003: 36), the absence of a justifying theory to human rights can be attributed to the ease with which practical imperatives—'to create fire walls against barbarism' (Ignatieff 2001: 5)—took precedence over the enduring difficulty of agreeing on philosophical differences. The lack of official agreement on the theoretical foundations of human rights has, Beitz argues, incited a 'philosophical dogmatism' that subverts and misconceives the legitimate scope of the Declaration's intentions. If the Declaration is understood as a means of governing conduct, Beitz's contention is an important one when we consider the limited role philosophical reflections play in the analysis of power relations. Nikolas Rose, citing James Tully, argues that 'philosophical and moral reflections upon the person and human conduct...do not emerge in a disembodied realm of meditation, but are provoked by very specific problems'. Further, the philosophical and moral reflections put forward by John Locke were, as Rose points out, themselves embodied in various techniques for governing human beings (Rose 1996: 299).

Gamini's and Sarath's estimation at least, she is also connected to the events, complicit even, in the 'unofficial war where *everyside* was killing and hiding the evidence' (Ondaatje 2000: 17). Stated another way, Anil might be seen representing the case for impartial and discoverable truth but, as I mentioned earlier, she is, more significantly, the reagent by which all other accounts of truth are measured. Moreover, the political ambiguities of war and the participation of *everyside* both reveal and challenge the rhetorical framework in which the resolution of truth is forced to operate.

This problem of the operation of truth can be conceived in terms of the relations of war: 'a sort of generalized war which assumes at particular moments the forms of peace and the State' (Foucault 1980: 123).<sup>158</sup> In this context, the discourse of human rights exercises a form of war-like domination on society where peace and justice is itself a form of war and the United Nations a means of waging it. Accordingly, if we read Ondaatje's observation that the reason for war in Sri Lanka was war, then an analysis of the relations of power in this form of cyclical war must extend beyond the sovereignty of the Declaration as punitive. That is, merely conceptualising the notion of justice implicit in the Declaration as a form of repression does not capture the more productive aspect of power that is exercised in its name in that human rights are made to *look* as if they have moral content. The justification for war, as in Sarath's conception of truth that can only take hold in a series of 'characters, nuances and moods' is the illusion of a moral resolution. Justice, consequently, cannot be seen as merely a moral ends to the question of human rights intervention, but also the *means* through which, to return to Igantieff's point about the politics of human rights, ends themselves must be compromised. Jurgen Habermas's conception of the judicial practices of human rights is relevant here as it relates to the link between the notion of justice and the pursuit of truth:

The conception of human rights does not have its origins in morality; rather in bears the imprint of the modern concepts of individual liberties and is therefore distinctly judicial in character. What gives human rights the

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<sup>158</sup> I am, of course, speaking of 'war' metaphorically here. A comparison, however, can be made with the Bush administration's current 'war on terrorism' which has literally created a legal battlefield of its own. See Kenneth Roth (2004) 'The Law of War in the War on Terror' *Foreign Affairs* Jan-Feb vol.83 (1) p.2; and Peter Rowe (2002) 'Responses to Terror: The New "War"' *Melbourne Journal of International Law* October vol. 3 (2) p.301-320.

appearance of moral rights is neither their content nor even their structure but rather their form of validity, which points beyond the legal order of the nation state. (Habermas cited in Osborne 2003: 524)

In other words, human rights are not simply moral rights, but ‘the product of ‘historical consequences and judicial innovation’ (Osborne 2003: 524). The pursuit of truth is not a means of attaining justice but instead ‘becomes increasingly an *aspect* of justice itself’ (Osborne 2003: 527). The question is not, then, ‘whose justice?’, but on the ways in which the language of human rights has been used to deliver different notions of justice. Human rights’ intrinsic sense of universality means that it can be, and has been, used to serve highly diverse political purposes. The careful neutrality of Ondaatje’s text, as I have been arguing, works well to negotiate not just a complex world but also, more significantly, a world where violence—as opposed to peace—has become the overriding truth of UN intervention. In the following section, I examine the visual logic of terror as a portal through which the language of human rights could be considered as delivering a brand of justice which, I will argue, is forgetful of historical memory.<sup>159</sup>

## Terror and the Visualisation of Fear

‘I wanted to find one law to cover all of living. I found fear...’  
(Michael Ondaatje, *Anil’s Ghost*, 2000: 135)

Halfway through *Anil’s Ghost*, Anil reflects on the word *amygdala*; a ‘Sri Lankan-sounding word’ which she discovers is the small fibrous knot of nerve cells which, according to her professor, is the ‘dark aspect of the brain’ that houses ‘fearful memories’ (Ondaatje 2000: 134). Although it is unclear whether this fear is biological or cultural, Anil surmises that it is perhaps historical: ‘made by us, by our own histories’ and so ‘governs everything’ (134-135). In the context of a fearful nation that ‘existed in a rocking, self-burying motion’ in which, as Ondaatje writes, ‘You thought, What did they do to deserve this, and then, What did they do to survive this?’ (157, 242), Anil’s rumination adds another layer of complexity to the political morality of war. When Sarath tells Anil about the unauthorised places of ‘detention’ in Colombo, he mentions that ‘torture itself does not last that long’ and that ‘most of

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<sup>159</sup> I am alluding here to the distinction, or asymmetry, that Paul Ricoeur (2004) makes in relation to memory and forgetting.

us can be broken by just the possibility of what might happen' (135). Taken together, Sarath's comments and Anil's hypothesis of fear as historical provide a compelling insight into the political dimension of fear. The cycle of violence and terror described in the novel cannot simply be read as endemic to Sri Lanka since it forcefully conveys the 'scarring psychosis' of a 'national disease' (56) applicable to other countries affected by war, where fear has either galvanised retaliation or submission. If terror does indeed 'govern everything' then the ethical exigency of truth has, I suggest, also been softened and subsumed under the weakening-grip of an abstracted reality. Abstracted, that is, because one's ability to understand, visualise or otherwise imagine fear, especially for the vast majority who have never experienced the terror of war, can only be glimpsed through images.

When Benjamin quotes Karl Kraus about 'these unspeakable times' he might have been writing of our contemporary, and highly visual, experience with war: 'when precisely what is happening could not be imagined, and what must *happen* can no longer be *imagined*' (Benjamin 1978: 242). The crises of modern experience have overtaken our ability to imagine (or otherwise articulate them), or as Ackbar Abbas succinctly explains, 'the weakening of the image both produces and stems from a weakening grip on experience' (Abbas 2001: 45). Terrorist footage of beheadings and their subsequent airing in the media and via the internet are, unequivocally, repugnant, and is an extreme example of how technology has, often gratuitously, played a part in reproducing terror or capturing the imaginary. Such acts of 'formal evil' (in their original form and, one might argue, in their reproduction) now mark out the boundaries of modern experience wherein 'the most advanced elements can co-exist with the most primitive and regressive' (Abbas 2001: 45). A product of this weakening grip might be fear, but it is not only our imaginary that is considerably weakened by the 'brightness' of our highly technologised consumption of 'public opinion', it is also, as Susan Sontag argues, an 'intensity of awareness' and 'deadening of feeling' that is being sapped by images disseminated by the media (Sontag 2003: 106). Sontag's profound and masterly critique of the representation of atrocities, however, challenges the emerging orthodoxies of the 'CNN effect' of images to influence state policy and the belief that the abundance of images inculcates a form of moral callousness. It is, rather, as Sontag explains, the '*sense* of reality that

is eroded [and that] there is still a reality that exists independent of the attempts to weaken its authority' (Sontag 2003: 109).

Here we might consider Sarath's circumspect appraisal of the use value of 'truth' as a critique of the global media: 'he had seen truth broken into suitable pieces and used by the foreign press alongside irrelevant photographs; a flippant gesture towards Asia that might lead, as a result of this information, to new vengeance and slaughter' (Ondaatje 2000: 156-57). Sarath's comments are more applicable, if not solely to the Western press, then more generally to the notion of 'public opinion' which journalism has a vested interest.<sup>160</sup> Sarath's insistence on the 'archaeological surround of a fact' is a necessary prescription to counter the lethal 'truth' effects of the 'irrelevant photographs' espoused by the press.<sup>161</sup> Irrelevant, we might assume, because the spectacularised image has, at least for the privileged viewer, induced a cynicism about the interests and intentions of those who have produced them. Laying full blame, however, on a global, and hence, predominantly Western media for the pictorial economy of news coverage falls short of making political sense of the framework within which fear and terror operate. Sontag argues that the reproaches made against the image for its exploitative tendencies are no different from the characterisations of sight itself:

It is felt that there is something morally wrong with the abstract of reality offered by photography; that one has no right to experience the suffering of others at a distance, denuded of its raw power; that we pay too high a human (or moral) price for those hitherto admired qualities of vision—standing back from the aggressiveness—the world which frees us for observation and for elective attention. But this is only to describe the function of the mind itself. (Sontag 2003: 118).

It is, as Sontag suggests, an imaginary proximity—not the plethora of images—, which has produced an ethical passivity 'that is yet one more mystification of our *real*

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<sup>160</sup> The moral distinctions that are made within the public sphere of 'news' are, undoubtedly, the most pervasive force in the current 'war on terror'. Greenwald's (2004) examination of Rupert Murdoch's Fox News Channel, for instance, presents the moral and ethical dangers multi-national corporations bring to the delivery of supposedly 'fair and balanced' news.

<sup>161</sup> Truth from this perspective is interrogated with regard to the transformation of what is essentially opinion into that of public judgement. Benjamin's essay on Karl Kraus describes the way in which 'the very term "public opinion" outraged' the Austrian writer. Benjamin writes 'it is precisely the purpose of the public opinion generated by the press to make the public incapable of judging, to insinuate into it the attitude of someone irresponsible, uninformed' (Benjamin 1978: 239).

relations to power' (Sontag 2003: 102, emphasis added). I am referring here more specifically to the limitations of, to use the title of Sontag's book, 'regarding the pain of others' and the responses that fall outside and are excluded from the frame. That is to say, even if feelings such as apathy, along with anger, sympathy, impotence and frustration, were accurate or desirable descriptions of our responses to seeing terror up close (Sontag suggests they are not), such feelings still do not fully explain political (in)action. How, then, are 'irrelevant photographs' used to arouse the moral impulse? Especially if, according to Sontag, 'a photograph that brings news of some unsuspected zone of misery cannot make a dent in public opinion unless there is an appropriate context of feeling and attitude' (Sontag 1979:17). Here we might well be reminded of Stoler's contention that nineteenth-century enquiries into race (see chapter two) relied on the 'combined palpability and intangibility' of the colonised Other (Stoler 1992: 206).

In an essay entitled 'The Fascist Longings in Our Midst', Rey Chow (1998) also takes her cue from Foucault and examines the idealising and technologised impulses of fascism and, in so doing, provides a radical critique of 'the good conscience and noble obligations of the new liberal fascism' with 'its sophisticated enterprises of visibility' (Chow 1998: 32). Chow's cogent analysis intersects with the concerns of this chapter in two important ways. Firstly, in examining the 'projectional idealism' of fascism, Chow highlights the role vision and images play in 'inhabiting' us, thus revealing the productive aspect of idealising technologies. Secondly, Chow's argument articulates the other side of Ignatieff's 'lesser evil approach' and the notion that good intentions are mutually exclusive of good outcomes. More to the point, Chow's question 'how then do we understand the relation between noble intentions and atrocious deeds?' (23) opens up a way for thinking visually about the truth of terror as an antidote to the 'floatingness' and the 'termites' of political rhetoric.<sup>162</sup> Indeed, the double character of photography 'to generate documents and to create works of art', as Sontag's earlier work *On Photography* highlights, exercises a power in its appeal to morality:

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<sup>162</sup> Here, we might consider George Bush's self-proclaimed 'war on terrorism', aimed initially at radical Muslim fundamentalism, has transformed into war aimed at a more nebulous and faceless form of 'terror'. The pursuit of 'freedom from fear' has resulted in a diffusion of power that continues to draw, at least in the West, on the moral capital of the freedom of 'democracy'.



Desire has no history...it is aroused by archetypes and is, in that sense, abstract. But moral feelings are embedded in history, whose personae are concrete, whose situations are always specific. Thus, almost opposite rules hold true for the use of the photograph to awaken desire and to awaken conscience. The images that mobilise conscience are always linked to a given historical situation. The more general they are, the less likely they are to be effective. (Sontag 1979: 17)

Quoting Alice Kaplan, Chow points out that the idealised images of fascism gave birth to a new kind of 'ideological vulnerability': 'when fascism took power, it took charge of the imaginary' (Chow 1998: 24). In this context, Chow identifies the fascist quality of fascism as a positivistic, idealised technology:

The 'beautiful' images are not images that 'hide' (the content of horror); rather they are the cognitive form of the technological age, the surface or superficial phenomena that present themselves as evidence of themselves instead of some other, 'inner' meaning. What is fascist about fascism's idealised images is not only that they are positive, but also that they pose and posit, and are positivistic. This positivity is the 'projection' that the followers of fascism 'internalise'. (Chow 1998: 23-24)

By discussing the receptivity of film as a way of overcoming the abstract problem of projection, Chow's analysis reveals how images have been, and can be used, as an 'alibi' in the manipulation of history. As an illustration of this logic of fascist idealisation, Chow draws on Andre Bazin's work on the retroactive quality of Soviet cinema in its ability to 'mummify' and 'monumentalise' the image as past. It is this technologised aspect of fascism which, in Bazin's words, becomes 'indispensable to the reconquering of historical virginity' (cited in Chow 1998: 25). The appearance of self-evidence in the image, as Chow explains, is 'the sacrifice of the masses' own knowledge of history in submission to the mythic image' (25). It is here, I think, that the discourse of human rights and the necessarily violent intervention—however well-intentioned—executed in its name share a common logic: oscillating between the twin operative of the self-evidence of truth (positivism) and the sacrifice of history (retroaction).

By doing away with the notion of projection traditionally associated with Freud as one of 'lack' and of 'hidden evil' motives, Chow enables us to understand the effectiveness of fascist aesthetics and the visual logic at work in acts of terror. It is the *projective* character of terrorist acts that, I think, allows it to be seen as the ideal

position. More specifically, the projection of terror, either in the pursuit of 'freedom from terror' or 'justice', can be understood as positivistic insofar as 'good' intentions become self-evidently transparent in the dissolution of the boundaries between a 'false outside' and what is 'hidden inside'. In this formulation, the notion of a 'lesser evil' or a 'higher good' can be displaced from the very self-evidence in which it stakes its claim. That is to say, stripped of the 'true-false' dichotomy, the effectiveness of the logic and visualisation of terror can be understood, if not more clearly, then at least examined from the same 'luminously self-evident' light from which it draws its positivity. To view terror in this way, however, is not the same as putting forward a claim for an anything-goes relativism. Rather, it proposes a type of relativism that is restricted and ethical in its perspective. This particular viewpoint keeps separate, to return to my previous point, the moral urgency of bringing genuine abuses to justice from the manipulation of the language of good intentions (whether it is human rights, truth, justice, or democracy). By pointing out the 'fascist longings in our midst', Chow allows us to see the larger historical question of terror as it applies to their projection onto our imaginaries. Terror as an inhabitant of the imaginary may be understood, then, as a force of light that governs our own appeals for the truth, effectively relegating history to forgetfulness.

In its highly mediatised, visualised and transformative capacities, terror may not be the only response to the perceived need for political or, in most cases, military action, but if the original intent of human rights serves as a guide then even 'noble' intentions can have disastrous effects. Stephen Holmes warns of the danger of uncritically supporting human rights intervention in the context of the 'war on terror':

The 1990s advocates of humanitarian intervention...have helped to rescue from the ashes of Vietnam the ideal of America as a global policeman, undaunted by other countries' borders, defending civilization against the forces of 'evil'. By denouncing the U.S primarily for *standing idly by* when atrocities abroad occur, they have helped to repopularise the idea of America as a potentially benign imperial power. They have breathed new life into old messianic fantasies...By focusing predominantly on grievous harms caused by American inaction, finally, they have obscured public memory of grievous harms caused by American action. (cited in Lewis 8-9)

While the politics of human rights, as Ignatieff has argued, are a lot more intricate than Holmes's critique suggests,<sup>163</sup> the important point is that historical memory forms part of the archaeology necessary to bring 'the present into a critical state' (Benjamin 1999: 471). This form of historical rescue entails making visible the historical and political contexts wherein moral distinctions are made. Holmes's allusion to a specifically 'American' ideal as one that is imperialist also demands analysis not only as it applies to America's history of intervention but the context in which intervention was seen as having been justified. In answer to essentialist critiques of an 'American obsession with power', for example, Koh argues that the 'war on terror' is 'less a manifestation of American national character than of short-sighted decisions made by a particularly extreme American administration' (Koh 2003: 4). This particular perspective serves well to recuperate knowledge from the generalised and historicised explanations of war especially if, as *Anil's Ghost* suggests, the use value of truth—as opposed to The Truth—has become an intractable part of the cycle of war.<sup>164</sup>

We could count, then, amongst the 'positive' aspects of terror, the ability to erase difference and replace it, instead, with forgetting. This state of forgetfulness, as Nietzsche points out in *The Genealogy of Morals* can be seen as a 'force': 'an active and in the strictest sense positive faculty of repression... a door-keeper, a preserver of psychic order, repose, and etiquette' (Nietzsche 1969: 57-58). The force of forgetting is perhaps why, as Gutman points out, we might count the diffusion of human rights as moral progress even if for the most part we are aware of the moral gap between the instruments and the actual practices used to deploy them (Ignatieff 2001: 4). As *Anil's Ghost* leads us to suggest, the relation between terror and surviving might be one of forgetting but it is the *struggle* against forgetting that is most salient to a critique of truth. Anil's hypothesis that fear is 'made by us and by our own histories' is significant because it suggests that a critique of history may be the only way to

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<sup>163</sup> Ignatieff also argues against such essentialised explanations but he does, however, conflate the Bush administration with a specifically American intention. See Ignatieff (2001).

<sup>164</sup> The 'war on terror', according to Tujan et al, has made the world hostage to a form of truth-telling which defines 'global security' as the security of global powers: 'Development cooperation is increasingly being influenced or captured by the global security agenda. Security considerations are being promoted as key in the granting of development aid, either in the selection of programmes or partners or in the actual promotion of military or quasi-military assistance as development aid. Governance and the rule of law, promoted in development co-operation, are also being reinterpreted to encompass more effective anti-terror legislation and enforcement. (Tujan et al 2004: 54-55)

overcoming the amnesic effects of fear. If the reason for war is war how do we extricate ourselves from the cycle of retaliation that necessarily relies on differing notions of justice? How to transform terror into, as Martha Nussbaum asks, 'a shared sense of ethical responsibility'? (Nussbaum 2003: 14).

### **Anil's Ghost**

If the final image of *Anil's Ghost* is that of Ananda painting the eyes of the Buddha, it is not to show that enlightenment has finally been achieved.<sup>165</sup> If Sarath, through his death, appears to provide positive proof of his account of truth it is not because Anil's claims for truth are necessarily false. The novel, as I have been arguing, remains resolutely opaque in the search for truth, and herein lies the 'ghost' of the novel: the spectre of enlightenment. This is the ghost that continues to preside over the difficult and ambiguous question of truth. Its existence in the novel, however, is less about haunting the present than it is about leaving a *haunting presence* in the mind of the reader. It is in this second evocative sense that allows the reader to engage in a form of negative enlightenment that uses truth itself as an instrument of illumination. The novel's use of scientific discourse does not provide 'theories' of truth, but rather sketches out, through the filter of Anil's supposed objectivity, the critical dilemmas encountered within the empirical domains. The visuality of terror, as documented and reported in the media, now provides a significant context from which moral dispositions are buttressed and expanded.

The conscience-shocking situations of severed heads propped onto stakes, babies shot close-range through the palms and roadside crucifixions described in *Anil's Ghost* may appear to be the 'fictional' work of Ondaatje's 'dark mural' but their textual resonance are no less attenuated than the visual immediacy of photographs of suffering. The difference, however, is the text's ability to position the reader up close whilst allowing for distanced reflection. The consubstantial irony of images is perhaps an indication of the response it seeks: we have an ethical responsibility to

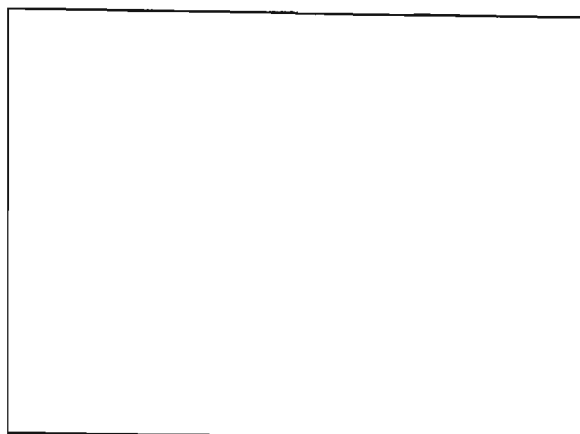
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<sup>165</sup> Indeed, the seductive images evoked in the final pages of the novel – of Ananda experiencing '[the] sweet touch from the world (Ondaatje 2000: 307) risk being interpreted along the lines of a liberal humanist critique. See, for example, Scanlan (2004) and Derrickson (2004: 149) who makes the incongruous (humanist) conclusion that Ondaatje does not find a solution in 'the ideals of liberal humanism' but 'in the material world itself, in the simple show of compassion that travels from person to person.'

inspect more closely the seeming moral divinity of Truth in the same, luminously self-evident light with which it casts its shadow.

## Chapter 6

### Mythic Landscape: The Western Frontier & The Ragged Edges of History in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*



I send you a picture of Billy made with the Perry shutter as quick as it can be worked – Pyro and soda developer. I am making daily experiments now and find I am able to take passing horses at a lively trot square across the line of fire – bits of snow in the air – spokes well defined – some blur on top of wheel but sharp in the main – men walking are no trick – I will send you proofs sometime.

(Michael Ondaatje, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, 1989: 5)

There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.

(Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 1992: 248)

The novel *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* begins provocatively with a blank square accompanied by a quote borrowed from frontier photographer, L.A. Huffman. The quote's allusion to an experimental form in photography suggests that within the pages of *The Collected Works* lies a deeper engagement with the aesthetic context within which the legendary outlaw resides. The historical Billy the Kid may be dead but his legend, the West and the Western continue to live through the pages of Ondaatje's novel. A vision of the Kid's image and its reproducibility appear at once as life, death and ghost. The 'proofs' emanating from Ondaatje's account of Billy the Kid's life, while highlighting the relationship between technology and history, effectively remove Billy the Kid from the legendary and mythological. The blank square is an invisible image in that it represents both the activity of a passing and an attempt to capture it. How does one, then, make the traces of the image come to life? I suggest that the converging themes of historical death and photographic absence form the basis from which to develop an image of the much-exposed outlaw.

In this chapter, I will follow the resonances of death and the notion of historical ruin in Walter Benjamin's thinking as a way of mimetically examining the same tropes in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. I suggest that Ondaatje's vision of the cowboy outlaw is less about re-envisioning the Kid's biography than it is about the historical in, and the historiographic functions of, the Western genre.<sup>166</sup> I will show that *The Collected Works*, while demonstrating most clearly Benjamin's conception of the catastrophic and hallucinatory qualities of history, also works well to undermine and underscore the mythologies associated with a gun-slinging cowboy.

### **Billy's West: Myth & History**

Any discussion of Billy the Kid generally entails an understanding of his place both in history and American Western history. Ondaatje's version of the legendary outlaw is no exception to this understanding. Billy the Kid's historical personage set as it is against a backdrop of horses, log cabins, sheriffs, saloons, and shooting typifies the Western genre. The Western genre itself is reworked through Ondaatje's artistic license and, conversely, through Ondaatje's authorship Billy the Kid's biography is given historical license. *The Collected Works* must, therefore, be read as alloying these historiographic concerns. Ondaatje's bringing to life of a historical person and events serve as an implicit announcement (no matter how fictional) to a real life person and events. In such a representation, the historical becomes a concern for historicity and a will to accuracy, and where there are departures from historical fact, the ramifications of such digressions are scrutinised.<sup>167</sup> As Janet Walker's cogent introduction to *Westerns: Films Through History* points out, a comparative study is only one of the ways in which the 'Western *is* history' thesis has been pursued (Walker 2001). In addition to this approach, discussions of the Western as historical have also centred on the authenticity and discernible documentary quality of early

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<sup>166</sup> A similar conclusion is made by Donnell (1985) in his thought-provoking although obviously undeveloped 'notes' on *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. Suffice to say, in this chapter I will elaborate on Donnell's comment as a way of reply to Ondaatje's defensiveness about the uses of literature. Foremost is my argument that the notion of an absent Billy is an unavoidable feature of Ondaatje's novel and it is this 'blank canvas' approach that necessarily opens the novel to a variety of readers' responses. Indeed, my response to the invitation for a complicit reading in the novel derives from my own interest in the visual and the politics of historiography.

<sup>167</sup> My own study cannot be separated from my initial reluctance to read *The Collected Works* on the basis of my preconceptions about the anti-feminist and racist perspective of the Western genre. Nevertheless, approaching the text in this way proved to be an important impetus for historicizing the text in relation to the construction of identities.

motion picture Westerns<sup>168</sup> and/or a concern with the historical value of the period in which a given film was produced, of which Richard Slotkin's insightful *Gunfighter Nation* (1998) has come to be representative. Walker argues, however, that within the topography of 'Western is history' enquiry there is a discernable reluctance to give proper attention to the Western as *historical* (Walker 2001: 4; emphasis added). Although Walker's comments relate more specifically to Western films, her insight into the historiographic function of the Western as, to use White's term, historiophoty, is not only applicable to the ekphrastic element of *The Collected Works* but, moreover, highly relevant to my overall thesis, as she persuasively argues:

Through the lens of history, we come to realise that westerns incorporate, elide, embellish, mythologise, allegorise, erase, duplicate, and rethink past events that are themselves—as history—fragmented, fuzzy, and striated with fantasy constructions. The relation between the western and the history of the West must be more complex than an "is". (Walker 2001: 13)

This suggests that there is much to be gained from the presumption that the Western genre is profoundly historical, especially in highlighting Western history as constitutive of narrative and ideology. Myth, according to Slotkin, expresses ideology through narrative and implies a theory of both cause-and-effect and history. Moreover, myths disarm critical thinking through their appeal to structured and traditional forms of story telling and 'the clichés of historical memory' (Slotkin 1998: 6). As Walker rightly points out, although Slotkin makes an implicit distinction between the Western genre as a mythological form and history writing as discursive and argumentative, the complexity of Slotkin's work ultimately resolves the disparity between myth and history (Walker 2001: 7). 'A culture', according to Slotkin, 'has its heritage of "lore" which is preserved for use by lore-masters, storytellers, or *historians*' (1998: 7). Hence, Slotkin's careful explication of the cultural implications of the frontier myth offer valuable insights into the way literature can be used as a vehicle for mythological and historical understanding. As Walker argues, there may well be a mythographic component to history writing as much as there is a historiographic element to mythological discourse (2001: 7). In many ways, then, this chapter shares the 'Western through history' perspective offered in Walker's

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<sup>168</sup> Walker cites Richard Schickel's forward to *The BFI Companion* (1988), ed. Edward Buscombe, London: The British Film Institute, and Thomas Schatz (1981) *Hollywood Genres*, New York: Random House



stimulating collection. From this perspective, *The Collected Works* is more than just a version of a cowboy outlaw: it reveals, amongst the many other strands of historiography, the mythographic component to history writing.

### **The Blank Portrait**

The blank square accompanying Huffman's borrowed quote is foremost a portrait of the Kid that is yet to be developed and can only come into existence with the reader's collaborative efforts. This motif of the 'blank portrait' is the most significant aspect of Ondaatje's version of the legend of Billy the Kid. It does, for example, also signal the inevitable death of the Western protagonist whose biography has now become the pulp of comic books and Hollywood films.<sup>169</sup> This visual announcement of Billy's death as a textual strategy works well to place the reader within Billy's own line of sight and Ondaatje's vision as artistic historiographer. In writing a history that is already so well known (if only as a B-grade Western movie plot), to begin with Billy the Kid's death effectively signals the notion of a reconstructed history and, moreover, compels the reader to become critical historiographer. As the Kid tells us from the grave: 'Not a story about me through their eyes then. Find the beginning, the slight silver key to unlock it, to dig it out. Here then is a maze to begin, be in' (Ondaatje 1981: 20).

Through the *readers'* eyes, then, *The Collected Works* provides not so much a *tabulae rasa* or the opportunity to 'fill in the gaps' but rather the opportunity to participate in, and reflect on, a familiar story. In relation to Billy, the standard story typically revolves around variations of the young cowboy who, while escaping the hangman's noose for several murders, eventually dies at the hands of the sheriff assigned to hunt him down.<sup>170</sup> The seeming familiarity of *The Collected Works'* subject matter, as Barbour points out, 'invokes historical explanation only to render it impotent' (Barbour 1993: 52). Barbour makes the important assertion that the Billy of Ondaatje's novel is 'a hero of representation' because the 'collected works' are not

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<sup>169</sup> See Stephen Tatum *Inventing Billy the Kid: Visions of the Outlaw in America 1881-1981* which cites Ondaatje's *Collected Works* as 'the most significant publication in the Kid's biography' (1982: 149).

<sup>170</sup> See Will Wright (1975) for variations to the standard Wild West story. Wright (2001: 6) points out that the cowboy 'emerges from the wilderness a free and equal individual. He is the cultural version of the theoretical individualist, and the culture calls him a cowboy hero whether he herds cattle or not.' In this sense, the 'cowboy' is most often a gunfighter, gambler, rancher, sheriff and/or scout.

composed *by* Billy but because he is composed *of* them (Barbour 1993: 41). Ondaatje's multiple fragments of prose, poetry, interviews, newspaper clipping and dime novel extracts, which aid in the construction of Billy the Kid, extricate him from the 'sources' of history. The central question addressed in *The Collected Works* is, therefore, not *how* to represent history but, rather, *why* represent history at all. That is, if the historical subject has passed away, the task of recreating the subject lies not in recreating a history which has been persistently reproduced but in representing the difficulties involved in capturing that which has passed away: how does one reconcile language with evanescent experience and the activity of its passing? From this standpoint, the blank portrait also signals the methodology and the rationale underpinning Ondaatje's project.

The foreshadowing of inevitable death places Billy, firstly, within the vantage point to his past and secondly, within the 'progress' of the novel's 'narrative'. Benjamin's challenge to modernity's faith in progress is exemplified in the maze-like narrative of *The Collected Works* where the death mask is literally and metaphorically invoked from the very beginning of Billy's story. Death itself, like the photographic image, functions to signal the absence of the subject in the novel's chaotic structure. In relation to the blank portrait, then, the dialectical themes of death and life, destruction and creation, emerge as the governing tropes of *The Collected Work*, tropes that converge with the larger project of challenging conventional forms of historiography. I am particularly concerned here with Ondaatje's provocative comments that when he wrote *The Collected Works* he was writing about a subject that had always interested him and thus the novel is 'not out there having some political or sociological meaning.' As Ondaatje explains further, 'I'm not interested in politics on that public level. The recent fashion of drawing journalistic morals out of literature is I think done by people who don't love literature or who are not capable of allowing its full scope to be seen' (cited in Mundweiler 1984: 13). For Benjamin, 'history happens when something becomes present in passing away, when something lives in its death' (Cadava 1997: 128). In this respect, any representation of the Western genre must contend with larger epistemological questions of the continuing appeal of the cowboy and why it holds such an enduring place, most especially, in the American cultural landscape. What does Ondaatje's approach reveal about his audience and the cultural context of its reception? Such reflexivity does not take away from the aesthetic and

surrealist qualities of *The Collected Works* but, rather, heightens the need to understand such qualities in the text.

I argue that 'filling in' the blank portrait of Billy is an effort to write, read, and think of history in the ways advocated by both Foucault and Benjamin. The connection that needs to be made here is between Ondaatje's poetic and subversive vision of the outlaw and the more formulaic conceptions of Billy the Kid not within history, but more specifically within the discursive function of historiography. The Kid's position within the landscape we call the Western frontier is an inextricable part of the history *The Collected Works* is, in Benjamin's words, 'rubbing against the grain'. As I have suggested, while the meaning of Billy has changed throughout the years, the conception of the outlaw's historiography has not shifted from the belief that his legend and myth can be put to death in the historiographic process (a process which even Ondaatje's 'blank portrait' version is not entirely innocent). While poststructuralist approaches to history have exposed the link between language and reality in the construction of historical 'truth', there remains the problem of capturing the Kid as human being. In Tatum's visually pertinent words, 'as long as interpreters focus on cleaning the windowpane of others' grimy fingerprints...this Billy the Kid will remain as elusive as ever' (Tatum 1983: 175). Before I go on to an examination of the ways in which Ondaatje achieves this task, I want to firstly look beyond the image of Billy as historical figure to the image of the frontier landscape which remains an enduring and intractable part of the Kid's mythology. By invoking the word 'landscape', I want to draw attention to the invisible traces in the blank portrait which play a pivotal backdrop in Ondaatje's artistic and historical conception of Billy.

Just as Benjamin's analysis of Baudelaire's poem '*À Une Passante*' draws our attention to the missing crowd, the landscape in *The Collected Works* can be apprehended in a similar way.<sup>171</sup> The frontier, to use Benjamin's word, 'is nowhere named in either word or phrase. And yet the whole happening hinges on it, just as the progress of a sailing-boat depends on the wind' (Benjamin 1983: 124). As the backdrop to Billy's history, the Western frontier must be considered in relief, as an unchanging *mise en scène* where all inventions—legend, myth, and history—play

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<sup>171</sup> See Benjamin (1973: 9-106) 'The Paris of the Second Empire' and 'Some Motifs in Baudelaire' (109-54).

themselves out. Thus, in the following section I examine how the Kid's landscape as historical discourse has allowed for a historical license.

## Imagining the Frontier Landscape

Two years ago Charlie Bowdre and I criss-crossed the Canadian border. Ten miles north of it ten miles south. Our horses stepped from country to country, across low rivers, through different colours of green. The two of us, our criss-cross like a whip in slow motion, the ridge action rising and falling, getting narrower in radius till it ended and we drifted down to Mexico and old heat. That there is nothing of depth, of significant accuracy, of wealth in the image, I know. It is there for a beginning.  
(Michael Ondaatje, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, 1981: 20)

The image that Ondaatje presents via Billy the Kid's narration is there, when we consider Benjamin's conception of the image as a trace of disappearances, for *appearances*. If, as Slotkin claims in his magisterial account of the significance of the frontier myth in American history, the most memorable images of the Western frontier are drawn from Western movies rather than history books (Slotkin 1998: 238), the image of cowboys criss-crossing the Western landscape inevitably entails questioning its appearance and its significance both in 'real' American history and the mythic space covered by fantasy, of which the Western as genre is a part. Although an analysis of this sort is beyond the purview of this chapter,<sup>172</sup> it is important to note, however, that this form of analysis necessarily involves uncovering the ideologies which support both myth and its expression, and the varied and complex uses with which they are put to use. As Slotkin points out in *Gunfighter Nation* (1998):

[Myth] becomes a basic constituent of linguistic meaning and of the processes of both personal and social 'remembering'. Each of the mythic icons is in effect a poetic construction of tremendous economy and compression and a mnemonic device capable of evoking a complex system of historical associations by a single image or phrase. (Slotkin 1998: 6)

Slotkin's comments into the 'tremendous economy and compression' of mythic icons such as the cowboy, provides a compelling reason to adapt Benjamin's own rationale

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<sup>172</sup> This ground has already been admirably covered by Slotkin's monumental three volume study which traces the historical development of the Myth of the Frontier in American literary, popular and political culture. See Slotkin's *Regeneration through Violence* (1973), *The Fatal Environment* (1985) and *Gunfighter Nation* (1998). Michael Coyne's *The Crowded Prairie* (1983) also approaches the same question of American identity in the Western albeit at an implicitly micropolitical level.

for ‘blasting’ objects out of their continuum. Jon Tuska’s study of the American West, although eschewing the ‘The Western as Myth’ approach, similarly seeks to apply techniques of ‘defantatisation’ to the Western film in order to draw attention to ‘the common bond between what in Communist countries is called propaganda and what in the United States is entertainment’ (Tuska 1985: 4). The relevance of both Slotkin’s and Tuska’s work lie in the role they accord to the historical contingencies that have shaped myths of the frontier. Tuska, for example, counts the authorship of Western film as a historically contingent factor that has helped shape the narratives of frontier legends such as Billy the Kid.<sup>173</sup>

Tatum (1983) too, places the Kid at the intersection of the West and Modern America to reveal the meanings behind dominant inventions of the Kid. What is particularly useful about Tatum’s study in relation to this thesis’s emphasis on the work of Foucault and Benjamin is the attention given to revealing the cultural preoccupations of the Kid’s interpreters during different periods. Confronting the Kid and the West does not necessarily entail retreating into an environment of, in Tatum’s words, ‘sage-bushes and six-shooters’, but entering the terrain of the historical and the cultural. If reality, as Foucault would have it, is constructed via language *and* material affects, then the recreation of a historical figure such as Billy the Kid requires an analysis of the cultural and political landscape within which his identity as a historical figure has been formed. The image of the frontier, as in Benjamin’s formulation of a dialectical image at a standstill, marks the point when the past and its relevance to the present moment flash in constellation. The image of the Kid’s border-crossing can be read as symbolic of the borders one must cross to negotiate the ragged terrain of historical understanding. The appearance of the image is there to mark this beginning and, in relation to the American West, the beginning is the notion of a frontier.

In his influential essay ‘The Significance of the Frontier in American History’ (1893), Frederick Jackson Turner suggests that the pioneering experience of the Europeans

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<sup>173</sup> Tuska’s *The American West in Film: Critical Approaches to the Western* (1985) centres on an analysis of film directors during different periods. Tuska’s fastidious application of the concept of ‘historical reality’, however, verges on the same sort of ahistoricity he vehemently argues against (see, for example, chapter fourteen). In Tuska’s argument, historical specificity is lost to the ‘historical personality’ or rather, the artistic imperative, of the director as auteur.

who moved west during America's colonial expansion in the seventeenth century, helped to create a distinctively American way of life and thought. This claim, although not explicitly hypothesised as such by Turner, has become known as the Turner or frontier thesis.<sup>174</sup> Of the frontier, Turner writes:

In a recent bulletin of the superintendent of the census for 1890 appear these significant words: "Up to and including 1880 the country had a frontier of settlement, but at the present the unsettled area has been so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line. In the discussion of its extent, its westward movement, etc., it cannot, therefore, any longer have a place in the census reports." This brief official statement marks the closing of a great historic movement. Up to our own day American history has been in a large degree the history of the colonisation of the Great West. *The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of the American settlement westward explain American development* [emphasis added]. (cited in Edwards 1969: 183)

'The frontier', as Turner states in a following paragraph, 'is the meeting point of savagery and civilisation'. Thus, the most influential frame of reference for American self-understanding was created and galvanised two strands of thought. On the one hand, it depicts the frontier as an abundant wilderness available for the taking, and, on the other, it conceives American history as a violent one based on the subjugation and extermination of the Native American for land that has never been free. If the notion of such a frontier has become the indices of a specifically American history then the duality of Turner's thesis needs to be unpacked.

In a critical genealogy of the narrative traditions that have shaped the American West, of which Turner's work is a central focus, Kerwin Lee Klein contends that 'the frontier was not just a place where civilisation and wilderness made American democracy, it was the ragged edge of history itself, where historical and nonhistorical defied and defined each other' (Klein 1997: 7). Within the discourse of America's West, the nonhistorical relies on the erasure of othered groups from the myth of American civilisation as progress and in doing so, helps to shore up the necessary linkage with the 'free land'. Klein concludes that the very idea of 'America' has

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<sup>174</sup> 'The frontier' as put forward by Turner's highly elastic definitions in subsequent published anthologies, began to spawn 'hypotheses' in the academic jungle. See Billington (1978) for a bibliographic evolution of Turner's theories.

continued to rest on the shifting frontiers of historical imagination. Thus, in Klein's formulation historical contingency gives way to the language of historiography. While I think using the term imagination in this sense captures the way in which visions of the land plays a central role in defining a specifically American 'frontier', it is important to note, however, the persuasive role language has played in producing progressive accounts of history. Walker's assertion about the historical profundity of the Western becomes clearer when we consider the different narrative forms and argumentative modes through which the history of the West, especially as it relates to 'the frontier', have been conceived through language. Indeed, the historical nature of the Western genre may not be vastly different from the reading protocols required of historiographies of the West. Up until Turner's address, the frontier had always been identified with a particular geographical space but, through writers like Turner, the West has transformed into 'a set of symbols that *constituted* an explanation of history' (Slotkin 1998: 61). A foundational aspect of Slotkin's study usefully highlights the way in which the mythical illusion of a frontier has been produced through 'the historical metaphysics' of the language of history (Klein 1997: 7).

### **Winning the West: Racialist Historiography**

Insofar as the image of the cowboy plays a central role in popular understandings of the 'Wild West', Slotkin makes a crucial distinction between Turner's conceptualisation of the frontier and Theodore Roosevelt's formulation of the thesis.<sup>175</sup> Roosevelt's hero-centred narratives, Slotkin argues, have had more of an influence on mass-culture mythology in comparison to the 'depersonalised sociology' of Turner's histories, which has remained prominent in academic historiography (Slotkin 1998: 61). J. Hoberman, voicing a similar view, states that 'in the national imagination America's real founding fathers are less those celebrated gentlemen...than the rogues, adventurers, and land boomers, the Indian fighters, missionaries, explorers, and hunters who killed and were killed until they had mastered the wilderness' (Hoberman 1998: 85). In Slotkin's analysis, the historiographical projects of both Roosevelt and Turner (while upholding the values and practices of a republican democracy) differed in the meanings they ascribed to the

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<sup>175</sup> At the time Turner had delivered his famous address, Roosevelt had already published the multivolume *The Winning of the West* (1885–94). Roosevelt, who was not yet a major figure in national politics, was Turner's senior as a historian and had praised Turner for having 'put into shape a good deal of thought that has been floating around quite loosely' (cited in Slotkin 1998: 29).

frontier past. As Slotkin succinctly points out the duality of the frontier myth provides the necessary linkage to its constituent themes: ‘the “virgin land” theme symbolically addresses the economic aspects of ideological concern, while the “race war” or “savage war” theme addresses political concerns (the use of force, the right of conquest’ (Slotkin 1998: 33). Whereas Turner’s version can be seen to have its roots in an agrarian nostalgia, in Roosevelt’s version there is a marked tendency to smooth the ‘ragged edges’ through the imaginary figure of the hero who emerges triumphant through the strife of races. In *The Winning of the West* (1907), Roosevelt marks out the frontiersman as the maker of history:

A race of peaceful, unwarlike farmers would have been helpless before such foes as the red Indians... Colonists fresh from the old world, no matter how thrifty, steady-going, and industrious, could not hold their own on the frontier; they had to settle where they were protected from the Indians by a living barrier of bold and self-reliant American borderers. (cited in Slotkin 1998: 49)

For Roosevelt, justification of the race war theme represented the culmination (and provided a desirable outcome) of civilised progress in the West: ‘a Darwinian arena in which “races” representing different phases or principles of social organisation contend for *mastery*’ (Slotkin 1998: 39). Roosevelt’s extrapolation of Darwinian theory was underpinned by the racist historiography of, amongst others, the French Orientalist scholar Count Gobineau<sup>176</sup> and English historians Freeman and Stubbs. Moreover, the rationale for ‘civilised progress’ through expansionism in the name of civilisation, legitimated and naturalised the use of physical force. For Roosevelt, the ‘fighting spirit’ of the earlier frontiersman assisted the justification of a righteous war:

On the border between civilisation and barbarism is generally normal, because it must be under the conditions of barbarism. Whether the barbarian be the Red Indian on the frontier of the United States, the Afghan on the border of the British India, or the Turkoman who confronts the Siberian Cossack, the result is the same...without force, fair dealing usually amounts to nothing. (cited in Slotkin 1998: 52)

Within the law of nature and progress, the Indian was representative of the anti-progressive principle of the West and, hence, was anti-historical. Put another way, the

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<sup>176</sup> The notorious author of the *Essay on the Inequality of Races* (1853-5) and whose ideas have generally been accepted as having influenced Hitler in *Mein Kampf*. Young (1995: 99) notes, however, that Gobineau’s essay did not propose a theory of race as such but a theory of the decline and fall of civilisation of which race becomes the key determinant of history.



history of the Indian wars, according to Roosevelt, *is* the history of the West (Slotkin 1998: 55). Here Slotkin makes the most radical point about the disagreement in

Turner's and Roosevelt's thinking: the role of race as an agent for history. This observation is particularly significant when we consider, as Robert Young has lucidly shown, the historical and fundamental role race has played in the self-definition of Western culture and civilisation (Young 1995).

Young's assertion that 'the most consistent arguments regarding race have always been cultural and aesthetic ones' (Young 1995: 94) finds resonance in Roosevelt's war-oriented historiography and the ways in which the frontier myth, as a cultural construction, has become inseparable from (and interdependent on) racial, political, scientific, and social constructions. Slotkin rightly points out that Turner marginalises the role of violence in the historiography of the West and in doing so, devalues the power of violence as a political symbol implicit in Roosevelt's myth-history (Slotkin 1998: 55).<sup>177</sup> Yet, even in Slotkin's careful analysis, there is, as Patrick Wolfe points out in relation to accounts of race and racism, the danger of viewing race simply as the answer to ideological problems. Wolfe argues that within these accounts there is always the problem of trying to 'reduce pathologies of modernity to a rational calculus of interests' (Wolfe 2002: 53).<sup>178</sup> From this perspective, the mythic space carved out by both Roosevelt and Turner should not just be seen as endeavours to advance American 'democracy' through the 'rational' discourses of the social and economic, but from the more revealing view point of what the frontier myth means *as* racial discourse. As Frantz Fanon argues, 'racism is never a super-added element discovered by chance in the course of investigation of the cultural data of a group. The social constellation, the cultural whole, are deeply modified by the existence of racism' (Fanon 1970: 46). Or, as Benjamin claims in the epigraph to this chapter, 'there is no document of civilisation that is not at the same time a document of barbarism'. In 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', Benjamin warns us in relation to the adherents of historicism that 'empathy with the victor invariably benefits the rulers' (Benjamin 1992: 248). If we accept the historical in the Western as being

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<sup>177</sup> Most of Turner's references to Indians, as Slotkin points out, relate to the economic rather than to events surrounding expansion.

<sup>178</sup> As an illustration of the 'emotional intensity' of race's appeal, Wolfe rightly argues that no rational calculus of interest can possibly account for the disturbing acts of violence inflicted on black people most especially during the late nineteenth century (Wolfe 2002: 53).

underpinned by the racial, then violence must be seen to lie at the core of the Western where both history and myth coalesce into a *national* iconography. Benjamin's comments remind us that the narratives espoused in historical accounts of the 'taming of the frontier wilderness', of which Roosevelt's *The Winning of the West* is paradigmatic, are written from the celebratory perspective of the European settler. Within this discourse of the onward march of civilisation and progress the (non) representation of the Native American 'could scarcely but be unsympathetic, Eurocentric and degrading' (Buscombe 1988: 156).

Walker takes aim at the critical practice of genre criticism in recognising this historical bias in the Western genre. In relation to critiques of myth and history, Walker argues that genre criticism 'wants to have it both ways' in allowing for 'historical interpretation presented in narrative form to parade as mere myth (Walker 2001: 10). Indian characters in the Western are not 'real' Indians so their 'mythical' portrayal or absence should not be seen as offensive. Walker's comments are exemplified in Michael Coyne's study of the Hollywood Western. Coyne takes issue with Jon Tuska's denouncement of celebrated directors who marginalised Indians in their Westerns. Coyne argues that 'Westerns marginalised the Indian because they were only marginally *about* the Indian' and that 'what the genre actually reinforced was not white *supremacy* but white *centrality*' (Coyne 1998: 4). Coyne's argument is essentially about semantics rather than a lack of academic acuity in Tuska's work. Further, Coyne's disclaimer that the general thrust of his own study is essentially about white American identity within the Western misses the point entirely. If the Western habitually represented American identity as white and male, as Coyne suggests, then this position of 'white centrality' must be brought to bear on the issue of violence which lies at the core of the Western. As Walker argues, 'Westerns are as much *about* Indians as they are *about* settlers (even where the latter are represented by their non-appearance as a structuring absence)' (Walker 2001: 10). I would add that the Eurocentric perspectives that dominate historical accounts of the frontier are constitutive also of the structuring violence of the American West's history and it is where myth and history become inseparable.

The 'ragged edges' of the Western, like historical narratives, are given shape and form through what is marginalised, omitted, and exorcised but it ultimately remains ragged

because of the traces left behind in subsequent accounts of the frontier. Thus, the historiographical component of the Western can be viewed as, if not complicit in Western racism, then at least reflective of the repeatedly propagated violence constitutive of the genre. Also, it bears to keep in mind Slotkin's useful reminder that the centrality of violence in the Western genre derives from sources that are pre-cinematic (Slotkin 1988: 233). *The Collected Works*, through its taken-for-granted Western iconography makes way for the return of the catastrophic nature of history. But, as I argue, the return of history is an exercise in brushing history – a specifically American Western history - against the grain. In the next section, I discuss the structuring absence and violence of American Western historiography as it relates to *The Collected Works* before returning to my analysis of Ondaatje's 'hero of representation'.

## A Photograph from the Grave

Take a good look. We're not going to see this kind of thing much longer. It already belongs to the past.

(The anthropologist George Bird Grinnell to frontier photographer Edward S. Curtis, referring to the Sun Dance of Blackfeet, Algonquin, and Bloods in 1900)

In Boot Hill there are over 400 graves. It takes the space of 7 acres. There is an elaborate gate but the path keeps to no main route for it tangles like branches of a tree among the gravestones.

300 of the dead in Boot Hill died violently  
200 by guns, over 50 by knives  
some were pushed under trains – a popular  
and overlooked form of murder in the west.  
Some from brain haemorrhages resulting from bar fights  
at least 10 killed in barbed wire

In Boot Hill there are only two graves that belong to women  
and they are the only known suicides in that graveyard  
(Michael Ondaatje, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, [1981] 1989: 9)

The image from frontier photographer Edward S. Curtis (see page xvi)<sup>179</sup> and Ondaatje's description of Boot Hill graveyard, illustrate what Cadava, in writing

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<sup>179</sup> Edward S. Curtis, Sun Dance Encampment–Piegan (1900), *The North American Indian* Vol. VI (1911).

about Benjamin's thinking, terms 'the posthumous character of our lived experience' (Cadava 1997: 8) in relation to the photograph and its subject. Cadava cites Benjamin's discussion of the portraits of David Octavius Hill in which the cemetery is the 'home' of the photographed:

In short, of all the possibilities of this portrait art arises because the contact between actuality and photography has not yet occurred. Many of Hill's portraits originated in the Edinburgh Greyfriars cemetery – nothing is more characteristic of this early period, except maybe the models were at home there. And indeed this cemetery, according to one of Hill's pictures, is itself like an interior, a separate closed-off space where the gravestones, propped against gable walls, rise from the grass, hollowed out like chimneys, with inscriptions inside of tongues of flames. (Benjamin 1979: 244)

Benjamin's insight into the funereal quality of the photograph and its ability to announce the death of the photographed is, according to Cadava, similar to the dying characters of Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* study. Only as corpses can the characters 'enter the homeland of allegory' (Benjamin 1977: 217) in much the same way, as Cadava suggests, that the photograph can be the 'uncanny tomb of our memory' (Cadava 1997: 11). The 'uncanny tomb', as it relates to the graves of Boothill, draws attention to the ways in which the frontier myth (synecdochically represented by the image of the cowboy) has come to rely on the issues of masculinity, race, and a manifest destiny. In juxtaposing Curtis's image with the description of Boot Hill Cemetery, Grinnell's comments emerge, not just as a theoretical possibility of the photograph, but also as a haunting epitaph of the decimation of the Native American.<sup>180</sup> In this context, the corpses of Billy the Kid's Boothill cemetery reveal an insight into the structuring absence and violence of historical memory; the posthumous character of which is lodged within the mythology of the frontier. Walker's point about the inaccuracy of genre criticism in viewing historical interpretations presented in narrative form as mere myth is again significant here. The presence of the absent Indian can only be discerned within the frontier myth as the nonhistorical factor of the West's history.

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<sup>180</sup> Curtis's twenty volume magnum opus *The North American Indian* (1907–1930) was the culmination of a thirty year odyssey photographing and documenting the lives of the indigenous American. I use the word 'haunting' here in the same way Barthes writes about the *punctum* of the photograph. Irrespective of the recent criticisms surrounding the authenticity and exoticising tendency of Curtis's photographs, the majority of his subjects exude a nobility that resists and defies the critical language of interpretation. Take, for example, the proud comments of one of the Native American descendants of one of Curtis's subjects: 'He's not a stereotype, he's my great-grandfather' (Makepeace 2000).

I will leave my discussion of the (non) presence of the Native American here because I am well aware of the risks involved in presenting a counter-history that may appear tokenistic at the least (after all, there is little mention of the Native Indian in *The Collected Works* apart from their being shot by Billy 'from a very safe rock').<sup>181</sup> Nevertheless, I think mention of the fact that the Native American (as opposed to 'The Indian') is absent in the Western genre because of the effects of supremacy and centrality, and the persistent rationale of the myth of the frontier speaks volumes about the structuring violence implicit in the Western. To state at the outset that nearly fifteen million indigenous Americans were *exterminated* 'is to place a very different interpretation on the history of hemispheric holocaust' (Walker 2001: 13)<sup>182</sup> and, indeed, holds the violence underpinning the frontier myth to account. Only in death, through emerging counter-histories can the indigenous occupants of North America enter the world of the living and into historical understanding. Not surprisingly, the Native American Indian is absent in Ondaatje's version of Billy's West, but as I shall argue, the omission does not infer the type of 'epistemic violence'<sup>183</sup> I have been describing. *The Collected Works*, rather, draws attention to the Western as a historiographic practice not by conveniently 'forgetting' the native population, but through its innovative revision of the Western genre. Instead of relying on the generic conventions of the Western to represent Billy, Ondaatje uses the genre precisely to challenge traditional beliefs about knowledge and truth, which as I have argued, are notionally bundled up in the myth of the frontier.

### **A Hero of Representation: The Outlaw as Artist/The Artist as Outlaw**

The landscape in which Billy conventionally resides is one where myth and history are concurrently and inextricably invoked. Making sense, therefore, of the complex

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<sup>181</sup> Wright's chapter 'Removing the Indians' in *The Wild West: The Mythical Cowboy & Social Theory* is specious to say the least. He grossly misreads Slotkin's assertion that the frontier myth is founded on the metaphoric representation of history as an extended Indian war, and instead reduces the image of the 'savage Indian' to the 'rational calculus of interest' of market individualism. Wright argues, 'the image of savage inferiority always had racial overtones. It was never, however, only about race. It was also, and perhaps more importantly, always about class...the myth always reminds us, as little else does, of the central importance of the image of the Indians to the development of modern society' (Wright 2001: 170-171). See also Jon Tuska's chapter 'Images of Indians' (Tuska 1985: 237-260) which does not discuss the politics or events behind 'the calculated distortions' of the 'historical reality' of the Native American, he relies instead on a descriptive, textual reading of the image.

<sup>182</sup> Walker quotes Ward Churchill's impeccably researched chapter 'Nits Make Lice: The Extermination of North American Indians, 1607-1996' in Churchill (1997).

<sup>183</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1999: 266) term for Western epistemologies which racialise third-world Other.

duality of the frontier myth begins firstly with an acknowledgement of the inseparability of the myth/history duality in Western historiography. In an essay about the revisionist strategies in Jim Jarmusch's, *Dead Man* (1995), Melinda Szaloky asks whether it is history or simply countermyth that is offered up from the 'scattered remnants of the frontier myth' (Szaloky 2001: 49). I suggest that Ondaatje's version of Billy the Kid's life, as revisionist Western, ambiguously yields both. In much the same way that Szaloky describes 'the hallucinatory netherworld' of *Dead Man* with its 'distorting/distorted vision of a dying/dead dreaming protagonist' (Szaloky 2001: 66), Ondaatje seeks to place Billy outside history and legend thereby placing him in an alternative narrative.

In his study of Billy the Kid's biographers, Tatum concurs that historians and biographers are as prone to inventing fictions as novelists and poets. In elucidating this claim, Tatum makes the useful distinction between the Kid historian<sup>184</sup> as a symbolic 'outlaw' and the artist as 'outlaw' in order to bring to light the tension existing within traditional epistemology. As Tatum argues:

To capture the Kid in history – to provide for his fitting death – is to eliminate dissent, to control the imagination which would invent or exaggerate the Kid, in effect to master the chaos of Nature. To remove the Kid from legend, in short, is not only an honourable attempt to discover a historical truth, it is also to reveal the futility of the Kid's outlaw activities. The ironic fact is that the legendary Kid as well as the historical Kid posed no revolutionary threat to established social institutions. (Tatum 1982: 141)

The historian as outlaw stance is, therefore, only a temporary stance against the prevailing *status quo* as 'any final criticism is not of society, but of society's failures—which are correctable' (Tatum 1982: 141). A more honourable attempt, in Tatum's view, is the artist's role in permanently renouncing the inherited traditions of objectivity and detachment in traditional historical accounts. Ondaatje's *The Collected Works*, which Tatum describes as 'the longest and richest' poetic treatment of the Kid (Tatum 1982: 149), seeks to cast the Kid as an artist of the Wild West. In this way, the Kid's artistic vision is used 'to map thinking going its own way' (Ondaatje 1981: 72) thereby subverting the requirements of historical investigations.

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<sup>184</sup> Tatum here refers to the 'truthsayer' role adopted by commercially-oriented researchers such as Ramon Adams, Harry S. Drago and James D. Horan. Their attempts to demythologise the Kid from the 'romanticism' of popular accounts and into the 'real history' otherwise ignored by academic historians

In developing the blank portrait of Billy the Kid into a 'hero of representation', a hero who is both outlaw and artist, I want to highlight the efficacy of Benjamin's methodology of creating politically subversive 'types'<sup>185</sup> that combine sensory concreteness with historical consciousness. It is primarily 'the outlaw as artist/the artist as outlaw' perspective that enables *The Collected Works* to challenge traditional prerogatives of historical authorship.

Take, for example, a moment in Billy's reflexivity (and I quote it at length here because it also provides an excellent illustration of Ondaatje's use of language throughout the novel):

MMMMMMMM mm thinking  
moving across the world on horses  
body split at the edge of their necks  
neck sweat eating at my jeans  
moving across the world on horses  
so if I had a newsman's brain I'd say  
well some morals are physical  
must be clear and open  
like diagram of watch or star  
one must eliminate much  
that is one turns when the bullet leaves you  
walk off see none of the thrashing  
the very eyes welling up like bad drains  
believing then the moral of newspapers or gun  
where bodies are mindless as paper flowers you don't feed  
or give to drink  
that is why I can watch the stomach of clocks  
shift their wheels and pins into each other  
and emerge living, for hours (Ondaatje 1989: 11)

Ondaatje's argument with 'journalistic morals' surfaces in Billy the Kid's detachment and his need for self-preservation from the 'moral of newspapers or gun' or traditional history and the popularised forms of knowledge and truth. The Kid's defence of this form of morality, as evidenced throughout the novel, is borne out of introspection and a self-reflexivity not normally accorded to a figure operating outside the boundaries of the law. Accordingly, Tatum attributes to Ondaatje 'the impulse to discover a total idea of the Kid', an approach that has been overlooked in accounts of the outlaw's

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<sup>185</sup> This includes, amongst others, the angel of history, the flaneur, the collector, and the rag-picker. See Wohlfarth (1986).

historiography (Tatum 1982: 142). Tatum quotes the dissident poet Charles Olson to describe the process of filling in the blank square with a 'man's interior's' as a way of preserving history's 'energy in the present' which, according to Olson (and Foucault and Benjamin to be sure) 'is the only place where history has context' (Tatum 1982: 43). *The Collected Works* relies on the Kid's 'interiors' to guide the reader through the ostensibly familiar terrain of the Western genre and the relatively unfamiliar terrain of a subversive historiography. Ondaatje's Billy becomes both the outlaw as artist and the artist as outlaw not only because of his killer status but also because his perception of the world is different from those around him (Tatum 1982: 149). As Billy confides to the reader:

The others, I know, did not see the wounds appearing in the sky, in the air. Sometimes a normal forehead in front of me leaked brain gasses. Once a nose clogged right before me, a lock of skin formed over the nostrils, and the shocked face had to start breathing through mouth, but then the mustache bound itself in the lower teeth and he began to gasp out loud the hah! hah! going strong—churned onto the floor collapsed out, seeming in the end to be breathing out of his eye—tiny needle jets of air reaching into the throat. I told no one. (Ondaatje 1981: 10)

Billy's perspective takes on the status of the sort of modern heroism associated with Benjamin's politically subversive illuminati types. 'It takes heroic constitution', Benjamin writes, 'to live modernism' (Benjamin 1973: 74). In the context of the frontier landscape, where Western imagery is typically bound up with the myth of the frontier, heroism in the form of cultural resistance is what is needed to illuminate and dismantle the underlying mythologies of the frontier. As Benjamin describes it in relation to Surrealist writings, 'we penetrate the mystery only to the degree that we recognise it in the everyday world, by virtue of a dialectical optic that perceives the everyday as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday' (Benjamin 1978: 190).<sup>186</sup> Ondaatje's hero of representation thus draws on destruction as a pathway to a purer form of vision reminiscent of the Surrealist project, reducing 'symbols of the previous

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<sup>186</sup> This 'dialectical optic' is everywhere to be found in *The Collected Works* and can be read as a metaphor for Billy's perception—an anatomising vision that draws on violence and destruction for clarity. For example, Sallie Chisum describes Billy as a 'good looking, clear eyed boy' (Ondaatje 1989: 52), and when his girlfriend Angela's hand is shot open, Billy picks the bullets out: 'look at it, I'm looking into your arm / nothing confused in there / look how clear / Yes Billy, clear' (Ondaatje 1989: 66). Also, Billy's desire for interior vision is apparent in another moment of 'thinking going its own way': 'I am here with the range of everything / corpuscle muscle hair / hands that need the rub of metal / those senses that / that want to crash things with an axe / that listen to deep buried veins in our palms' (Ondaatje 1989: 72).



century to rubble even before the monuments representing them [have] crumbled' (Benjamin 1978: 161). Billy's 'thinking going its own way' is, in Benjamin's terms, 'the organ of historical awakening' (Benjamin 1978: 162) striving to awaken dream elements from the ruins of myth.

Donnell points out that simple objects in the novel such as oranges on a bed, alcohol, birds, urine, windows, take on 'a quiet filmic clarity' in contrast to the violence (Donnell 1985: 241) and it is this aspect of *The Collected Works* which allows for the necessary vantage point from which to separate the legend and myth: through the filter of the Kid's consciousness. Ondaatje's creation of the Kid from the inside out reveals the outlaw 'as a human being caught in a maelstrom of biological and political circumstances' (Tatum 1983: 151). Indeed, this is the same maelstrom in which Benjamin's angel finds himself wherein the veneer of progress is shattered by the entropic force of decline. By entering into the workings of the Kid's mind, Ondaatje's novel can be seen as displaying, as Tatum argues, a stance towards an external reality that concomitantly reveals the historical experience of postwar society (Tatum 1983: 151). Although the violent style demonstrated by Ondaatje's murderous vision of reality through the constant shifting of time, scenes and ideas might readily be attributed to a repudiation of mainstream American institutions and values, the only conclusion that can be made about the received legends of the Kid is 'the shattering of meaning as an index to a fragmented American society' (Tatum 1983: 154).<sup>187</sup> If in this analysis, opacity has given way to fragments and irony, Ondaatje's parallel use of this condition needs to be seen not as a shibboleth of postmodern aesthetics but, to return to Jameson's words, an effort to think historically in an age that has forgotten how. Ondaatje's revisionist Western, as I have argued, consistently draws our attention to my larger argument that frontier history is not 'history' and, thus, the historical in, and the historiographic function of, the Western has much to offer us in revealing the hallucinatory qualities of history.

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<sup>187</sup> Tatum draws this conclusion through an examination of three Billy the Kid the films produced during the early seventies: *Chisum* (1970), *Dirty Little Billy* (1973), and *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* (1973). Tatum's attributes the 'ironic vision' of the films as symptomatic of the events underscoring sixties reform movements: the Watergate scandal, the bombing of North Vietnam, the invasions of Laos and Cambodia.

In an imaginary ‘jail interview’ in *The Collected Works* Billy is asked how he thinks he will be remembered. The interviewer asks, ‘I mean don’t you think that already several feel you are morally vulgar? I mean all these editorials about you...’. To which Billy replies, ‘...editorials don’t do anything they just make people feel guilty’ (Ondaatje 1981: 84). The critique here is once again aimed at the ‘newsman’s brain’ wherein, as both Ondaatje and Billy warn, ‘one must necessarily eliminate much’ to discount the violence intimately linked to such sanitised visions of history. Or, as Benjamin would have it quoting Schopenhauer, to think historically in modernity it does not suffice to compare Herodotus and the morning newspaper (Benjamin 2002 : 14) and it is precisely in the minutiae—of what Benjamin terms the “intervening”—that the ‘eternally selfsame [nature of history] is manifest’ (Benjamin 2002 : 545). There is, in Ondaatje’s acknowledgement of the raggedness of history, a propensity to keep distant and the most recent ‘facts’ intact. In *The Collected Works*, the ragged edges of history are literally reproduced on the page as a violently shifting art form as a way of keeping the reader attuned to changes in point of view; the agile and kinetic art form ‘accomplish[ing] the same effect as fast cutting in time and space in the cinema’ (Tatum 1982: 152).

*The Collected Works*’ multiple exposures of form ultimately paint an image of ruin with the Kid at its centre: ‘the angel of history’ of the American West who is, like Benjamin’s ‘Angelus Novus’, caught in the storm blowing from Paradise. The image of an existential and surreal Billy and the fragmented structure of the text work well to provide ‘wreckage upon wreckage’ of ‘continual images of a world going out of focus’ (Donnell 1985: 242). As David Donnell’s forceful description of the novel illustrates, ‘there are more deliriums, tension, vomiting, diarrhoea and flaky red-mud western migraine headaches than there are actual gunfights at OK corral’ (Donnell 1985: 243). In Ondaatje’s version of William Bonney’s alter ego, the Kid is less nihilistic and more reflective of the angel of history’s melancholic gaze. From the second page of the novel, Billy as dead subject delivers, in a tone that oscillates between the bizarre and the mundane, the surveyed ruins of his world:



I'd shot him well and careful  
made it explode under his heart  
so it wouldn't last long and  
was about to walk away  
when this chicken paddles out to him  
and as he was falling hops on his neck  
digs the beak into his throat  
straightens legs and heaves  
a red and blue vein out

Meanwhile he fell  
And the chicken walked away

still tugging at the vein  
till it was 12 yards long  
as if it held that body like a kite  
Gregory's last words being

get away from me yer stupid chicken (Ondaatje 1981: 15)

The absurd nature of this particular type of iconoclasm successfully subverts the aesthetic usually associated with the Western's 'ballets of the bullet'<sup>188</sup> and reduces violence to a stark futility. The image of the frontier as the symbolic 'cutting edge' of American civilisation and progress is blasted out from the confines of the frontier myth and its discourse of redemptive violence for, certainly, there can be no rational justification to account for a vein-tugging chicken.<sup>189</sup>

### **Death: Mythic Consciousness**

For all its fragmentation, raggedness, violent overtures and cross-cutting of point of view, *The Collected Works* returns finally to the beginning of its argument with history—the blank portrait. The morning after the death of Billy in history (Ondaatje re-enacts the shoot out with Pat Garret cited in the history books), a nameless narrator announces:

It is now early morning, was a bad night. The hotel room seems large. The morning sun has concentrated all the cigarette smoke so one can see it hanging

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<sup>188</sup> An apt term used by Szaloky (2001: 62) to refer to Paul Seydor's description of the Westerns directed by Sam Peckinpah in *Peckinpah: The Western Films* (1980), Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

<sup>189</sup> If the iconoclastic chicken is not enough to blast Western imagery from its continuum and the reader to attention, Ondaatje's *Kid*, asserting his outlaw status further, hallucinates a sexual encounter with Jesus Christ. (Ondaatje 1989: 77)

in pillars or sliding along the roof like amoeba. In the bathroom, I wash the loose nicotine out of my mouth. I smell the smoke still in my shirt. (Ondaatje 1981: 105)

In ending with an image of life—is it Huffman, Billy, Ondaatje, or the angel of progress himself?—the text draws attention to a catastrophic happening. The morning after and the traces of ‘ghosts’ hang in the air. The reader is confronted with just one conclusion: Billy continues to live. Whether in words, in an image (the final page is a photograph of Ondaatje playing cowboy as a child) and in the reader’s ‘filling in’ of the blank portrait, the nature of history returns, ironically, as a blank portrait. Not only is it a reminder of the catastrophic nature of historical progress it is also, more importantly, an *offer* to return history to the living. As Cadava succinctly puts it, ‘Death, both the word and the event, is a photograph that photographs itself..[it] therefore speaks *as* death, as the trace of what passes into history...photography does not belong to history; it offers history’ (Cadava 1997: 128).

Ondaatje’s Billy the Kid, while challenging Truth, ultimately speaks the truth when he states, ‘I’ll be with the world till she dies’ (Ondaatje 1989: 84). While the popularity of the Western has, for various reasons, gone into decline since the 1970’s, the point to be made here is that the violence structuring the iconography of the Wild West continues to leave—*live in*—(in)visible traces.<sup>190</sup> The challenge, as I have argued, is acknowledging the effects the myth has had on our historical memory; for the mythographic component of history is, as Benjamin reminds us, also one of barbarism. As I shall discuss in the next chapter, the mythographic component of history is also apparent in the political symbolism of cartography. The (in)visible

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<sup>190</sup> When the current American President declares, in echoes of Roosevelt’s *Winning of the West*, ‘You are either with us or against us’ as justification for the ‘war against terror’ in Iraq the spectre of the frontier myth must be called into account. In a joint news conference with French President Jacques Chirac, President Bush said that there was no room for neutrality in the war against terrorism: ‘A Coalition partner must do more than just express sympathy, a coalition partner must perform ...Over time it’s going to be important for nations to know they will be held accountable for inactivity. You’re either with us or against us in the fight against terror’. (CNN: 2001) See also <http://www.rushonline.com/halloffame/thiscowboy.htm> a pro-Republican website where a photograph of the US president in cowboy hat is accompanied by such commentary as: ‘[Liberals] hate President Bush because he distinguishes between good and evil. He calls a spade a spade, and after 9-11 called evil “evil”, without mincing words...that’s what cowboys do you know...The Radical Muslims are wrong. In the Old West, might did not make right. Right made might. Cowboys in white hats were always on the side of right...I am glad my President is a cowboy’. The Angel of Progress and the debris blowing in from Paradise.

traces of the map are, as I shall argue, enduring symbols of political authority and play a central role in the making of myth and tradition.

## Chapter 7

### The Eloquence of Maps: The Language of Cartography in *The English Patient*

The last mediaeval war was fought in Italy in 1943 and 1944...in meetings with strategic command [the medieval scholars advising the Allies] kept forgetting the invention of the airplane. They spoke of towns in terms of the art in them.

(Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient*, 1993: 69)

There was no order but for the great maps of art that showed judgement, piety and sacrifice...character, that subtle art, disappeared among them during those days and nights, existed only in a book or on a painted wall. Who was sadder in that dome's mural?

(Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient*, 1993: 70)

My exploration of the visual rhetoric contained in each of Ondaatje's novels must, literally, end with a map. If the previous chapters have successfully conveyed a picture of Ondaatje's texts as a dense concatenation of images—indeed, a mural—then the concerns of *The English Patient* represent, I think, the apotheosis of the ethics of seeing or ekphrastic hope that underpins the author's work. The vast constellation of themes in *The English Patient* (ranging as they do from space, place, nationalism, colonialism, war, violence, the body, identities, and, of course, cartography), while providing salient links with Ondaatje's other novels, require a 'mapping out' exercise in order to usefully unpack the visual theme of maps and map-making so densely woven into the narrative. My examination of cartography in *The English Patient* as the final chapter to this thesis is thus pertinent for two main reasons. Firstly, as is this thesis' concern, cartography is explored as a discursive activity in that maps help to conceive, articulate and structure the world. In this sense, cartography is used both literally and metaphorically to explore the ways in which the novel 'speaks' about maps and, conversely, how maps themselves articulate the past.<sup>191</sup> Secondly, while not a conclusion as such, this chapter will itself act as a 'map'—a return journey—of some of the themes explored in the previous chapters to further highlight the visual logic at play in Ondaatje's work. In this chapter, too, Benjamin's Angel of Progress can be seen to appear in a series of tableaux which

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<sup>191</sup> The title of this chapter is, thus, taken from J.B. Harley's reference to Carl Sauer's understanding of the 'eloquence of maps' (see Harley 1988: 277).

highlight the novel's fragmented and ruinous narrative. I will argue that the language of cartography in *The English Patient* is in fact a historiographic method insofar as the novel's highly stylised aesthetic provides the means by which the ordering of knowledge is made transparent. To this end, I will draw on the novel's Italian setting with its references to Renaissance frescoes and paintings in order to situate the discourse of maps within the context of an enlightened historical critique. The visual authority of Renaissance art—of which cartography can be included—is, I will argue, embedded in the cartographic language of *The English Patient*. The opening epigraphs are thus a cartographical overview of the themes explored in this chapter, examining as it does the relation between maps as art and art as maps. As such, it intricately weaves its way through a concept of space, Renaissance cartography, Herodotus and the disciplines of history and art. If my ordering of the 'chaos and tumble of events' has only so far hinted at chaos' eventual realignment, this final section of the mural should be accompanied once again by Ondaatje's useful advice: 'trust me, this will take time but there is order here, very faint, very human. Meander if you want to get to town' (Ondaatje 1987: 146). Reader, I supply you here with a map.

### **Conceptualising Space**

*The English Patient* is principally set in a bombed-out villa in Tuscany during the last days of the Second World War. Ondaatje's 'English Patient', Almasy (a fictionalised rendition of the Hungarian desert explorer, Count Ladislaus 'Laszlo' de Almasy) is the badly burnt occupant of the *Villa San Girolamo*. Hana, a twenty year old Canadian nurse who has stayed behind to look after Almasy, is later joined by David Caravaggio, a cat-thief, and Kirpal 'Kip' Singh, a Sikh explosives expert with the British army. The supplementary storyline—and as I will later explain, this is not the same as saying it is not central to the novel—comes in the 'English' patient's recollections, recounted to Hana, about his passionate and doomed affair with Katherine Clifton, the aristocratic wife of his exploration colleague, Geoffrey Clifton. The affair, we later find out, was what led Almasy to fall from his plane in flames into the desert. And hence, through Almasy's storytelling and Hana's reading, the novel leads into a dense network of memories and histories. The novel's war setting offers, at the outset, a ready mix of metaphors—of 'bombs and bodies'—from which to explore, once again, the theme of the political morality of war which I explored in



chapter five, albeit in a different historico-political setting. The constellation of themes that arise from the gathering of postcolonials at the villa, for example, provides a complex and intriguing mix of viewpoints about the heritage of colonialism. Not surprisingly, it is this aspect of the novel that has already been covered quite well in various critiques that have picked up on the novel's (post)colonial impulse.<sup>192</sup> Karen Piper's *Cartographic Fictions* (2002), in particular, uses Ondaatje's novel to examine the Nazi mapping of Africa. Needless to say, my exploration of cartography in its imperial formulation will no doubt touch on and intersect with some of the points put forward in Piper's and other colonial critiques; however, in keeping with this thesis's overall concern with challenging the limitations to an ethics of seeing, this chapter will pursue a line of analysis that necessarily takes up as its central subject of enquiry the visual rhetoric of cartography. In this regard, *The English Patient* is not 'for Western eyes' but, rather, *about* Western eyes, and that the novel's 'romantic vision' (Piper 2002: 127) is, consubstantially, the argument about colonialist exploration.

The novel's cartographical gaze, as embodied through the character of Almasy, epitomises, I think, the visual rhetoric of the narrative. The preface to the novel begins with a fictionalised quote from the minutes of the Royal Geographical Society announcing the tragic death of Geoffrey Clifton and the disappearance of his wife Katherine Clifton during the 1939 expedition in search of the legendary oases of Zerzura in the Libyan desert. The preface, whilst providing background information to the narrative, also acts as the novel's leitmotif of mapping and exploration.<sup>193</sup> It is Almasy who literally—not least because the novel's title refers to him—provides the direction in which the narrative unfolds. That does not mean, of course, that the narrative unfolds unproblematically in a linear fashion. As I have pointed out in the previous chapters, the 'precarious architecture' (Simpson 1994: 216) of Ondaatje's narratives demand more of the reader in its fragmentary and multiple form. In this sense, the novel's focus on Almasy as the explorer/cartographer who 'desired to walk upon an earth that had no maps' (Ondaatje 1993: 261) can be looked upon as a form

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<sup>192</sup> See, for example, Simpson (1994), Younis (1998) and Ismail (1999).

<sup>193</sup> Ondaatje's acknowledgements (to the Royal Geographical Society archives in particular) also underscore the centrality of this leitmotif: 'While some of the characters who appear in the book are based on historical figures, and while many of the areas described—such as the Gilf Kebir and its surrounding desert—exist, and were explored in the 1930s, it is important to note that this story is fictional.' (1993: 305).

of *negative* cartography. That is to say, if cartography can be defined as being positive in the sense that it produces knowledge (geographical or otherwise), the ‘cartography’ of the novel produces a different kind of knowledge which is in keeping with the type of ethical viewpoint I have been writing about. Almasy becomes our guide throughout the novel problematising his own expertise for the purpose of an enlightened critique of the world. In a crucial section of the novel, where Almasy retrieves Katherine’s body after her plane crash, he laments:

We die containing a richness of lovers and tribes, tastes we have swallowed, bodies we have plunged into and swum up as if rivers of wisdom, characters we have climbed into as if trees, fears we have hidden in as if caves. I wish for all this to be marked on my body when I am dead. I believe in such cartography—to be marked by nature, not just to label ourselves on a map like the names of rich men and women on buildings. (Ondaatje 1993: 261)

And here we come to the primary concern of this chapter: what exactly does this mean to be marked by such cartography? In order to answer this question, it is necessary at the outset, before the language of maps can be understood, to examine the concept of space underpinning the novel.

Apart from the desert, there are many other spaces—both physical and mental-- in Ondaatje’s novel which compels the reader towards a more informed reading of the particular ‘space’ it describes. The *Villa San Girolamo*, as the most striking example, is described as being ‘built to protect inhabitants from the flesh of the devil [and] had the look of a besieged fortress...there seemed little demarcation between the house and landscape, between damaged building and the burned shelled remnants of the earth’ (Ondaatje 1993: 43). Similarly, and as an indication of the novel’s own fragmented structure, the books Hana reads to the English Patient ‘had gaps of plot like sections of a road washed out by storms, missing incidents as if locusts had consumed a section of tapestry, as if plaster loosened by the bombing had fallen away from a mural at night’ (1993: 7). It is not surprising, then, that Marlene Goldman describes Ondaatje’s narrative as ‘mapping a wounded geography’ (Goldman 2001: 903). Goldman’s examination of the novel, which draws on the Benjaminian view of contemporary ruin and apocalyptic catastrophe, is particularly relevant to this chapter; especially Goldman’s argument that ‘the discourses of science, art and religion

function as maps that convey crucial knowledge [which] if properly understood...have the power to forestall disaster' (Goldman 2001: 903). While this chapter does reiterate and considerably builds on this aspect of Goldman's argument, I will also extrapolate somewhat on the notion of art as being more specifically about Renaissance cartographic art. I am, in this regard, also more concerned with the current cartographic literature which view maps as a combination of art and science and the questions arising from such a fusion. What is the nature of their overlap? What is the basis of their resemblance? What are the legacies of Renaissance cartographic consciousness? While the image of the ruin certainly provides the context to this chapter's concern with cartography, this chapter approaches the themes of Goldman's study from the other way around. That is, that maps in themselves are the medium—not just the message—for conveying the socio-political and philosophical messages addressed in the novel. Put simply, I take cartography—as opposed to ruination—as the predominant allegorical way of seeing in *The English Patient*. As I will later elaborate, mapmaking in an imperial context was in many ways catastrophic which suggests that an analysis of a cartographic language in the novel might provide a more refracted dialogue on the notion of ruination. If, as Gaston Bachelard suggests, the house is 'a tool for analysis of the human soul' (1994 : xxxvii) then the physical architecture of the villa does not just pre-empt a metaphorical reading—that is, put somewhat crudely, a damaged space housing damaged lives—but also compels a reading of space itself. The villa's architecture, to use Mark Simpson's provocative assessment, 'orients reading space so as to calibrate, on and off the map, textual excursions, textual passions, textual crises' (Simpson 1994: 216).<sup>194</sup> Simpson's observation about the 'precariousness' of the novel's architecture in that it is 'resolutely untrustworthy, explosive and implusive by turns' (1994: 216) provides a useful way to begin thinking about the use of legible space in *The English Patient*.

The perpetual doubt and unsettling nature of space has generated abstractions of space which, as Nikolas Rose and Thomas Osborne point out, are not necessarily about control and rationality, but perhaps only a human response to the doubts we have about space (Osborne and Rose 2004: 209). As all of Ondaatje's novels suggest, this

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<sup>194</sup> Qadri Ismail (1999: 411), for example, relates the notion of the ruined villa to reading: to reading as itself 'discontinuous, destructive, violent even – compared to storms, locusts, bombs.'

doubt reveals a productive tension between (self) knowledge and space. For example, as the characterisations of Buddy Bolden, Billy the Kid, Patrick Lewis, and Ondaatje himself demonstrate, the fashioning of oneself is inextricably tied to the intimate spaces of our existence. The mobilisation of, in Bachelard's words, 'hostile space' in each of Ondaatje's novels—whether the open space of the Western frontier, the teeming space of New Orleans' jazz district or the crowded migrant slums of Toronto—can be seen to be marked as much by an aestheticising logic as by a rational one. The doubt of space or the spatialisation of human existence is, as Osborne & Rose write, a matter of life itself:

[Space] comes to be given a kind of vital or vitalistic form – the spaces of illness, the spaces of birth and death, of crime and madness, of sexuality and domesticity, of toil and relaxation. And knowledge is to alleviate those doubts – the spatial form of the vicissitudes of existence is to be the object of a knowledge that is itself spatial. (Osborne & Rose 2004 : 210)

In putting forward this abstraction of space as a response to the 'vicissitudes of existence', I want to suggest that the practice of spatialisation—the trope of cartography notwithstanding—in Ondaatje's work is less an attempt to *tame* the doubtful and hostile nature of space than a way of managing, negotiating and coping with space as doubt. As the quotation at the beginning of this chapter suggests, Ondaatje's description of the Sikh sapper, Kip, finding comfort under the painted faces of a Piero della Francesca fresco is as much a response to the irrationality and catastrophic nature of war as it is a response to the poetics of space. If the fragmentary quality of Ondaatje's work, as I have argued throughout this thesis, is itself an attempt to order the 'chaos and tumble of events' then, similarly, the image of the ruin and fragmentation, which Goldman argues is predominant in the text, can be viewed, if somewhat ironically, as giving the novel a coherent meaning. For Goldman, the explosive forces of war are given meaning in the novel's melancholic gaze and its ability to 'forge connections and shape tableaux (sic) that implode space and time' (Goldman 2001: 921). This implosion or compression of space and time is also applicable to Almasy's cartographic gaze wherein the rigidity—of the boundaries and lines drawn on maps—with which knowledge of space has come to be used 'to turn space against itself' is subverted (Osborne & Rose 2004: 210). If indeed there is little demarcation between house and landscape, that is, between the physical

and mental spaces of the characters in the novel then it is worthwhile to begin with an exploration of space that takes into consideration the mutable and discontinuous aspects of space. What follows, then, is an analysis of space which takes into consideration this constitutive aspect of *The English Patient*: the space that Almasy inhabits, as with the conceptualisation of space itself, is one that is not just imagined but is also lived and realised.

In *The Production of Space* (1991), Henri Lefebvre constructs a theory which aims to unify our physical, mental, and social conceptions of space. Lefebvre is concerned with the 'logico-epistemological space, the space of social practice, the space occupied by sensory phenomena, including products of the imagination such as projects and projections, symbols and utopias' (Lefebvre 1991: 12). In this way, and as the title to his seminal work implies, Lefebvre conceives space, not as a natural given, but as being socially 'produced' through the conceptual, perceptual and physical endeavours of the individual. Following Lefebvre's magisterial work, Edward Soja also argues that the interrelations between, and the overlapping of, the three elements need to be theorised and understood as 'part of the spatiality of social life'. Spatiality, as Soja explains, 'exists ontologically as a product of a transformation process, but always remains open to further transformation in the context of material life' (Soja 1989 : 120-122). This conception of space as one that is transformatively dynamic of socio-cultural conditions can nowhere be better illustrated than in the spatial consciousness of the Renaissance; a period wherein 'spatial practices were codified, a spatial sensitivity was created, and a cartographic literacy was established' (Short 2004: 8). The visual logic of the period, characterised as it was by perspectivism and a supposedly scientific discourse, revolutionised the ways of seeing the world until the beginning of the twentieth century and, arguably, continues to influence how we see the world today.<sup>195</sup>

I want to suggest that, through Almasy's cartographic gaze, the language of Renaissance maps finds resonances throughout *The English Patient*. The novel's cartography, however, rather than duplicating the tenets of Renaissance geographical scholarship, is a response to the authority of a universal and universalising

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<sup>195</sup> See John Rennie Short (2004) who argues that the conception of modern space was created in Europe roughly between 1475 and 1600.

knowledge. In this respect, it is important to keep in mind the premise that Renaissance maps are a visual synthesis of different branches of knowledge which equally addressed philosophical issues as it did geographical curiosity. The visual language contained within Italian Renaissance maps, as Jurgen Schulz usefully points out, meant that a map was not always a map and more likely a tangible metaphor for nongeographical ideas (Schulz 1987: 122). At the beginning of the Renaissance, Schulz writes:

Maps as often as not had served a didactic rather than a reporting function. Alongside the value-free maps drawn by medieval surveyors, architects, and illustrators—maps that we may call technical maps to distinguish them from others—there had been produced, chiefly by artist, a mass of ideal maps, maps that were not in themselves but vehicles for higher ideas. They illustrate religious verities, moral and political conceits, and other matters; in them the map is the medium, not the message. (Schulz 1987: 111)

In this sense, then, the spatialising logic--the cartography—of *The English Patient*, can be more usefully understood as being a visual, metaphorical and heuristic device for the organisation, retrieval and interrogation of different branches of knowledge, of which the nature of history is a central concern. To illustrate this point, I shall sketch out the beginnings of the cartographic image and its interaction with other forms of knowledge during the Renaissance. I draw mainly on Francesca Fiorani's lucid and recent study of *The Marvel of Maps: Art, Cartography and Politics in Renaissance Italy* (2005) because it forcibly conveys the pervasiveness of cartographic images and their relevance to Renaissance culture. The significance of cartography in *The English Patient* can only be understood—as in Fiorani's study—on the basis of their interaction with other forms of knowledge (history) and representation (art).

### **Renaissance Cartography**

As a precursor to the gridded maps of Claudius Ptolemaeus or Ptolemy, the dominant *mappaemundi* of medieval mapmakers best exemplifies the rationalisation of space according to cultural priorities. The maps, which appeared in illuminated manuscripts and on the walls of cathedrals, depicted the known world as a tripartite disk or *orbis terrarum*. The monogram-like map, which comprised a 'T' (representing bodies of water) inserted within two circles, divided the world into the three parts of the Biblical

story of Noah (Genesis 10): Asia (covering the top hemisphere), with Europe and Africa filling the bottom left and right hand corners of the inner circle. The *mappaemundi* of the Middle Ages were an expression of medieval Christendom which were 'more interested in orienting the soul toward heaven than in directing the body through the physical world' (Padron 2002: 28).

When Ptolemy's *Geographica*<sup>196</sup> was introduced in western Europe in the fifteenth century, the symbolism of the medieval maps was gradually overlaid with the 'reality' of geometry. By all accounts, Ptolemy's second century manuscript was the most influential geographical text in Renaissance Europe. The geographical order espoused by the classical astronomer – the organisation of maps from the general, local and specific regions - formed the basis for subsequent adaptations and revisions of Ptolemy's work. More importantly, Ptolemy's *mappaemundi*, which conceived the earth as a geometric grid with coordinates of latitude and longitude, constituted the most significant characteristic of the new cartography and played a crucial role in the development of perspectivism. The Ptolemaic grid, writes David Harvey citing Edgerton, 'gave the Florentines a perfect, expandable, cartographic tool, for collecting, collating, and correcting geographical knowledge [and] supplied to geography the same aesthetic principles of geometrical harmony Florentines demanded of their art' (Harvey 1989: 245). This is not to say, however, that the subsequent popularity of maps engendered a split between different forms of knowledge with the attendant advancements made in the areas of geography, chorography, philosophy, and architecture. While the principles of perspectivism did indeed reverberate through all aspects of social life, it should be noted that different forms of Renaissance scholarship, especially science and humanism, shared a common history and methods of inquiry.<sup>197</sup>

The supposed distinctions, then, between cosmography, geography and chorography, as Short points out, 'were not demarcations into separate fields of inquiry...but reflected a relative division of a unified view of the world' (Short 2004: 34). The

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<sup>196</sup> It is important to note, as a reflection of the fluidity of Renaissance scholarship, that Ptolemy's work was often translated as *Cosmography*.

<sup>197</sup> Leonardo da Vinci, to cite a well-known example, was also a skilled mapmaker. Leonardo, whose notebooks contain numerous references to Ptolemy's *Geographica*, used the principles of mapping to represent the human body.

global, regional and local concerns which separated each field of inquiry, to use Short's apt words, formed the 'the different lenses of a similar gaze' (Short 2004: 34). This focus on the interaction and overlaying of knowledge in Renaissance cartographic endeavours is particularly relevant to a reading of the discourses of science and art in *The English Patient* and, more specifically, to Almasy's identity as an explorer and cartographer. The fusion of disciplinary 'identities' is most apparent when we consider that during the Renaissance there was a blurred distinction between art and cartography as mapping was seen as forming part of the wider artistic and discursive representation of the world. In her study of Italian Renaissance map murals, Fiorani adopts an interpretive approach that is in keeping with the synthesis of different bodies of scholarship during the period: 'mapping was an enterprise integrating textual analysis, computation, and visualisation to which scholars, artists, merchants, and patrons contributed working side by side' (Fiorani 2005: 5). An understanding, therefore, of the language of Renaissance maps relies on a reading of the cartographic image as being 'positioned mathematically on the cartographic grid but also described with a plethora of qualitative details' (5). In her study of the cartographic artistry of the of map mural cycles of the Medici and papal courts, Fiorani describes the three-dimensionality of the work as an 'epistemological challenge' drawing as they do on the full resources of visual representation (3). Almasy's cartographic gaze poses a similar epistemological challenge in that his view of the world also embodies a fusion and reconciliation of different modes of observation and description. We learn very early in the novel that Almasy is a man of encyclopaedic knowledge:

I am a man who can recognise an unnamed town by its skeletal shape on a map. I have always had information like a sea in me. I am a person who if let alone in someone's home walks to the bookcase, pulls down a volume and inhales it. So history enters us. I knew maps of the sea floor, maps that depict weaknesses in the shield of the earth, charts painted on skin that contain the various routes of the Crusades. (Ondaatje 1992: 18)

Although the passage literally describes Almasy's knowledge of different forms of cartography, the allusion to reading and history is significant and warrants further examination. Indeed, as Qadri Ismail has cogently pointed out in his examination of the reading practices contained within 'this enormously complex novel', *The English Patient* 'works within the protocols of English literature only to dismantle them'



(Ismail 1999: 412-413). In the novel, Ismail argues, the proposition is put that history does its work through books, all books, by entering us unconsciously (Ismail 1999: 412). It is a contention which, I think, applies equally to the discipline of cartography in the novel. Almasy's cartographic gaze is firmly set not only on the reading of maps, but also to a reading of them as a form of historical discourse: history and cartography become an inseparable point of critique. Take, for example, a moment in the novel when Almasy recounts the genealogy of the Villa. He conjectures that the villa was once *Villa Bruscoli* in 1483 and owned by Poliziano, a translator of Homer, who associated with the Medicis, Michelangelo and Pico della Mirandola. Almasy tells Hana that this period of 'free will' and 'desire to be elegant' was extinguished during Savonarola's (a religious reformer) cries for a 'Bonfire of the Vanities': 'great maps lost in the bonfires and the burning of Plato's statue, whose marble exfoliated in the heat, the cracks across wisdom like precise reports across the valley as Poliziano stood on the grass hill smelling the future' (Ondaatje 1993: 58). Goldman makes the important observation that the 'stench of progress'—like the angel of history—is inhaled by both characters and readers alike (Goldman 2001: 916), yet for the moment at least, the point to be gleaned here is the ways maps and mapmaking are placed at the intersection of Renaissance knowledge forms. To borrow somewhat from Ismail's succinct formulation of the conceptual interdependence in *The English Patient*, the art of maps in the novel is the bind between cartography and history, whereas for Ismail it is between literature and history (Ismail 1999). That is, given the indelible visual presence of cartography in the novel, history, I think, is buried more deeply from explicit view. This is, of course, not the same as saying that the discourse of history in the novel is not significant; it is, rather, inextricably bound up with the discourse of maps. History is, to return to Ondaatje's words, 'inhaled' unconsciously in the novel, but what is exhaled is a critical recasting of historical knowledge into a knowledge that is itself spatialised.

The complex dialogue between the discourses of art, science, history and religion which takes place in the novel not only function as maps but is also indicative of the hybrid language—the 'marvel of maps'—that characterised Renaissance cartography. If we recall Jurgen Schulz's commentary about the 'moralised geography' which characterised the early Renaissance maps then the distillation of these knowledge forms for the purposes of critique is, indeed, an epistemological challenge. In this

regard, *The English Patient's* critique of disciplinary knowledge is in itself the most potent aspect of this challenge. The novel, Ismail asserts, is positioned at the 'crow's nest' (the position of vantage on a ship) of postcoloniality and is thus a 'thorough going critique' of disciplinarity (Ismail 1999). Almasy's critical relation to both history and cartography, which is made principally apparent through the novel's use of the *Histories* by Herodotus, presents another propitious vantage point from which to survey the novel's epistemological landscape. If Renaissance cartography is, as I have just outlined, characteristically about hybrid knowledge, perspectivism and geographical order, the proto-ethnography of the *Histories* can similarly be described as 'creating' space. In *The English Patient* both history (especially under the rubric of cartographic knowledge) and reading (from Almasy's copy of the *Histories*) help to define the language of mapping and exploration that is embedded in the novel. Following this line of thinking, the novel's use of the *Histories* as Almasy's personal travel journal provides the theoretical armature from which to proceed with my analysis of the cartographic language employed in the novel.

## The Art of Maps

'This history of mine,' Herodotus says, 'has from the beginning sought out the supplementary to the main argument.' What you find in him are cul-de-sacs within the sweep of history – how people betray each other for the sake of nations, how people fall in love...'

(Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient*, 1993: 119)

If, as I have been suggesting, Almasy's cartographic gaze provides the visual rhetoric to the text, then the central presence of the *Histories* in the novel provides the instrument through which that gaze is structured.<sup>198</sup> Almasy's 'sea of information' is imparted through his personalised copy of the *Histories* which acts as a narrative device from which Almasy's story unfolds: Hana reads to Almasy from his copy of the book and the reader, in turn, is led into a labyrinthine journey by both the classical writer and the modern explorer. In Herodotus's classic work, which traces the narrative of the known world from mythical times to the early fifth century, there is a bewildering array of historical and ethnographic information that is testimony to the

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<sup>198</sup> This is perhaps more apparent in the film adaptation of the text where Almasy's copy of the *Histories*, in which he pastes drawings, photographs and mementoes, is used as a central flashback device.

Greek writer being called both the father of history and the father of anthropology. While there is still much debate as to the intellectual context of Herodotus's narrative technique – was he, for example, the last in the long line of Ioan prose storytellers; a *logios*, a professional oral storyteller of the narratives of the past; or, simply, more of a storyteller of improbable tales than a historian? (Thomas 2000: 5)—the implication is that Herodotus's Janus-faced identity as the father of history and the father of lies is of more abiding interest. The status of the *Histories* as a factual historical account is, however, less important for my purposes than its status as a text that orders knowledge and helps to bring history into the present.<sup>199</sup> This particular perspective on the *Histories* provides the basis from which to view the novel's cartographic imagery as being an art of memory. That is, to reiterate my argument about the conceptualisation of space in the novel, the space which Almasy inhabits is marked as much by a rational, ordering logic as by an aestheticising one.

The reliability or factuality of the *Histories* is never a question in the novel; rather, it is the question of how the 'vicissitudes of existence', to return to the point made by Osborne & Rose, transforms into the object of a knowledge that is itself spatialised. If Almasy acts as a repository of knowledge for the others in the novel, then the *Histories*, for Almasy, acts as a heuristic and mnemonic prop for the ordering and retrieval of knowledge about his place *in* the world and *of* the world. A useful analogy can be made here with the heuristic use of Ptolemy's geographical order since antiquity and its persistence use throughout the Renaissance. For Abraham Ortelius who adopted Ptolemy's geographical order in what is regarded as the first modern atlas, *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* (1570), maps provided a mnemonic function: 'whatever we read accompanied with maps placed in front of our eyes like mirrors, remains in our memory longer' (cited in Fiorani 2005: 88).<sup>200</sup> As Fiorani herself comments using Herodotus as a prime example, a Renaissance scholar would have read the text in conjunction with a map in the same way that 'the Greeks and Persians moved through the region during the Persian wars [b]ecause maps offered a

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<sup>199</sup> In any case, a reading of Herodotus that sees him only (or primarily) within the development of historiography is, at the very least, misleading since a large portion of the *Histories* is devoted to geography and ethnography.

<sup>200</sup> Similarly, Joan Blaeu in his *Grand Atlas* of 1663 speaks of geography as 'the eye and light of history' because 'maps allow enable us to contemplate at home and right before our eyes things that are farthest away' (cited in Alpers 1983: 159).

syncretistic view of the world, both spatial and temporal, they made history present' (Fiorani 2005: 88). Indeed, as I have been suggesting throughout this thesis, the text's engagement with history is imagistic and, in *The English Patient* especially, the cartographic image is not only a reflection of the world, but is endowed with profound socio-political significance. Before I delve deeper into the ways in which the novel employs the power of cartographic images for critical ends (principally, as I have suggested, through the *Histories*), I want to return momentarily to one of the underlying themes underpinning this chapter: the relation, or rather, the *alliance*, between art and maps. In doing so, I hope to address my contention about the rational and aestheticising logic of the novel's cartographical gaze and to mark out the place of the *Histories* within that gaze; the crucial link, as I have already intimated, being the art found in maps.

If, as I earlier mentioned, there was a blurring of boundaries between art and cartography during the Renaissance, then Edward Casey's study of the reconfigurations of space in maps and painting further underscores '*the close collusion between art and maps*' (Casey 2002: 149). In addition to the many historical examples of the 'equally close embrace' between the artistic and the cartographic,<sup>201</sup> it is Casey's assertion that the 'art of painting, like the science of mapmaking, is to describe in both senses' (Casey 2002: 160) that is of particular relevance here. His contention, which relies heavily on Svetlana Alper's insightful discussion of Jan Vermeer's painting *The Art of Painting* (Alpers 1983), equably demonstrates the embodiment of the cartographical gaze while at the same time helping to explain the emblematic power of the cartographic image.

In Vermeer's celebrated painting, the map literally takes centre stage. The viewing subject is privy to an intimate view of the artist (presumably, Vermeer himself) in the process of painting his female model who are both positioned under a large wall-hanging of an actual map manufactured by Nicolaas Visscher.<sup>202</sup> The artist's model, who wears a crown of laurels on her head, is holding a trumpet and a book; emblems

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<sup>201</sup> In addition to his detailed examination of *mappae mundi*, sixteenth-century portolan charts, and seventeenth-century Dutch world maps, Casey cites the work of Woodward and Harley in relation to the aesthetic sensibilities of ancient Egyptian bowl maps.

<sup>202</sup> See Kees Zandvliet (1996) for an illuminating discussion of the significance of cartography in Vermeer's work.

which identify the woman as Clio, muse of History. Yet, despite its many allegorical features, the painting's most striking visual characteristic resides in the position of the map and its pictorial spatiality within the framed space: the viewer's gaze is inevitably drawn to it and hence, becomes, physically involved with it. The map of the Netherlands, as Casey describes it, 'being more finely detailed than, and as richly coloured as, any other part of the painting' (Casey 2002: 159). The more significant detail, however, is the inscription of the word *Descriptio* positioned on the top left-hand corner of the map. For Alpers and Casey, the presence of this word further enhances and encapsulates the richly descriptive nature of the painting wherein 'image and word conjoin in the very notion of *descriptio*' (Casey 2002: 159 -160). Casey, quoting Alpers, explains it as thus:

Images created under the aegis of description are both like something written *about* – the identifiable subject matter of the image – and something written *down*: down on the surface of the painting. Thanks to this double aspect of description, 'maps and pictures are reconciled', both being modes of describing the world...in this conception pictorial space is *the space of survey*. (Casey 2002: 160)

By surveyable space, Casey puts forward the notion of space *unframed* in contradistinction to the Albertian notion of space which projects the world through a 'window frame'. Following Alpers, Casey describes the surveyable as situating the viewer within the same space as 'if suspended in an indefinite viewing area that lacks determinate location...through a distance that represents privileged access to the scene [and from which] the basic sense that the viewer, however distantly situated, nevertheless belongs to the surveyed space' (Casey 2002: 161). The aegis of description and the space of survey should by now bring us closer to the relation between Herodotus and the logic of Almasy's cartographical gaze. The 'double aspect of description' in the *Histories* is, similarly, the reconciliation of maps and pictures. To reiterate the point I made early in this chapter, the spatialising logic of the novel—the cartography—is the map itself: the device for the organisation, retrieval and interrogation of different branches of knowledge. The picture, on the other hand, is the reflection of the world as seen—*described*—in Almasy's copy of the *Histories*. When we consider, especially, that maps in themselves do not (at least explicitly) tell a story, cartography *and* art are not only necessary, but become mutable forms for the novel's critical gaze of the world.

A similar reconciliation of maps with pictures can be found in the reconciliation of ancient and modern geography during the Renaissance. Fiorani cites Gerard Mercator, perhaps the most famous cartographer, as best articulating the dilemma of the Renaissance cartographer in that cartographic accuracy also required the reconciliation of the geography (and texts) of the ancients with the geography (and cartographic image) of modern times (Fiorani 2005: 104). Accordingly, in summing up the relation between Renaissance maps and classical geography, Fiorani writes (and I quote it here at length because, notwithstanding the implicit connections with Herodotus's classical text, it neatly summarises the points I have put forward in relation to the Renaissance cartographic image):

Ultimately maps came to articulate, at times superbly, the interactions and tensions between the tradition of classical geography and the discoveries of the modern voyages. As a synthetic construct of modern observation, classical knowledge, and visual conventions. Renaissance maps shared the same epistemology of other Renaissance scientific illustrations, that is, they aspired to a record of the world informed both by the standards of cartography and the by other non-mimetic forms of knowledge. Because of their encyclopaedic meaning, Renaissance maps, magnificent images at the boundaries between art and science, could accommodate and visually reconcile the new and the traditional, the rational and the imaginary, the wondrous and the scientific. (Fiorani 2005: 104)

The descriptive capacity of maps, following the Renaissance genealogy, resides in the productive tension between art and science, between images and text. Casey, however, asserts that maps in themselves do in fact describe in their capacity to represent measurable space, but he also reminds us that this capacity for description is the key to their symbolic power: 'the mensurational properties of maps are at once epistemological...and orientational' (Casey 2002: 164). A critique, then, of the political in maps, must necessarily reside in the inversion and problematisation of cartographic epistemology. While I shall discuss this critique in further detail with respect to *The English Patient's* particular treatment of the political in maps, I should first point out how the reconciliation of maps and pictures functions within the visual rhetoric of the novel.

As the previous chapters have shown, the visual rhetoric of Ondaatje's texts is analogous to the novel's ekphrastic element: the detailed descriptions of the

character's skill allows the reader to 'see' what is, ironically, made invisible by the character's perspectival knowledge. It is my contention, however, that Almasy's cartographical gaze is akin to the 'surveyable space' that Casey describes in that Ondaatje's cartographer/explorer is himself placed in the privileged position of the viewing subject. More to the point, Alper's assertion that 'like a surveyor, the painter is within the very world he represents' (Alpers 1983: 168) and, thus, includes the spectator/reader within this privileged gaze, drives home a major theme underpinning this thesis in relation to the complicity of the visual rhetoric of Ondaatje's texts and our efforts to describe it. Put simply, in *The English Patient*, the surveyed space is the space of critique. And, hence, my survey of art and maps returns us once again to the *Histories* and with the question proposed at the beginning of this section: what role does it play in Almasy's negative cartography?

If the texts of Herodotus 'served as [Almasy's] guidebook, ancient and modern, of supposed lies' (Ondaatje 1993: 246), Almasy describes his own monograph as 'stern with accuracy' (241). It is a distinction that neatly illustrates the novel's use of the productive tension between (self) knowledge and space. For Almasy, whose conception of Herodotus is that of 'a spare man of the desert, consuming everything without suspicion, piecing together a mirage' (119), the tacit knowledge that history is in effect palimpsestic provides a motivation to employ Herodotus's scrapbook style to his own personal narrative. Almasy's copy of the *Histories* is, after all, 'the book he brought with him through the fire' (16); the fire that brings about his disfigurement and anonymity. Almasy's 'only connection with the world of the cities was Herodotus's' (246) and, in contrast, the space of the desert is literally the blank space from which he could reimagine history, both public and private. The theme of exploration in the novel can thus be seen as extending to a cartography of the self, exploring as it does the mutable boundaries: between the self and other, the personal and the political.<sup>203</sup> This mutability, if we recall the concerns of chapter three in examining these boundaries within the autobiography, should not be confused with a

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<sup>203</sup> The Tale of Gyges, which appears prominently in the film adaptation, serves as a prime example where Herodotus is seen to exert a thematic and structural resonance in the exploration of these boundaries. The tale of the Lydian king, Candaules, displaying his wife's beauty to his lieutenant, Gyges, is a clear reference to the affair between Almasy and Katherine. It is Katherine who recites the story by the campfire while Almasy watches in the darkness, just as Gyges remained in the shadows watching the Lydian queen undress.

conflation (nor a reification) of the personal and (or over) the political, but a more nuanced critique of the ways in which writing and reading are implicated in the very configuration of political and personal boundaries. Ondaatje writes that within the space of the desert:

It was as if [Almasy] had walked under the millimetre of haze just above the inked fibres of a map, that pure zone between land and chart between distances and legend between nature and storyteller. Sandford called it geomorphology. The place they had chosen to come to, to be their best selves, to be unconscious of ancestry. Here, apart from the sun compass and the odometer mileage and the book, he was alone, his own invention. (Ondaatje 1993: 246)

The description here of the ‘pure zone’ is the neutral space wherein, to reinstate Osborne and Rose’s words, the ‘turning in of space against itself’ is subverted. That is to say, the metaphorical and physical ‘blankness’ of the desert allows for space, as a site of inscription (cartographical, historical, artistic, or otherwise), to be revealed as a medium for social transformation. If we recall Lefebvre’s space and the role of the individual in ‘producing’ or conceiving space, Almasy’s relation to the desert can be described as a critical *terra incognita*, a new and unexplored field of knowledge wherein spatialised knowledge—space as doubt—is managed and negotiated. This contention is perhaps more lucidly explained in the novel’s description of Almasy as a curious combination of Herodotus and Odysseus. Unlike his fellow members, who are likened to ‘Conrad’s sailors’ (Ondaatje 1993:133), Almasy is less the modern Herodotus than a reluctant Odysseus:

Men had always been the reciters of poetry in the desert. And Madox—to the Geographical society—had spoken beautiful accounts of our traversals and coursings. Berman blew theory into the embers. And I? I was the skill among them. The mechanic. The others wrote out of their love for solitude and meditated on what they found there...For them I was a bit too cunning to be a lover of the desert. More like Odysseus. Still, I was. Show me the desert, as you would show another man a river, or another man the metropolis of his childhood. (Ondaatje 1993: 240)

The novel’s cartographic aesthetic is encapsulated here in the mechanic and the lover, a combination which can be related to Short’s pithy description of the various disciplines of Renaissance cartography as ‘the different lenses of a similar gaze’ (Short 2004: 34). In describing himself as ‘the skill’ and ‘the mechanic’, Almasy



distances himself from the aesthetic scientism prescribed by the other members of the Royal Geographical Society. This, however, does not also mean that Almasy's passion for the desert is dictated by an uncritical romanticism; instead, the reader is informed that Odysseus himself 'perhaps felt alien in the false rhapsody of art' (Ondaatje 1993: 241), a description that, by inference, is attributed to Almasy. This critique of art is inseparable from the critique of historical knowledge in the novel, especially when we consider the status of Herodotus's text as 'map' rather than 'history', the art of maps sits contiguously with the art found in history.

Like Odysseus whose ten-year journey from Troy was beset by perils and misfortune, Almasy's cunning derives not only from his personal experience of the physical contingencies of the desert and exploration, but also of the vicissitudes of history: 'we all slept with Herodotus: "*For those great cities that were great in earlier times must have now become small, and those that were great in my time were small in the time before...Man's good fortune never abides in the same place.*"' (Ondaatje 1993 : 142). As we have seen in previous chapters which examined the 'artistry' of historiography, a critique of historical knowledge is not just a question of the (im)possibility of 'pure' historical knowledge, but also a question of contingency. The very public conception of the history of the rise and fall of empires is as much determined by the personal than it is by public or political activity. The 'supplementary arguments' and 'the cul-de-sacs' within the *Histories* can then be read as the signposts to a more enlightened critique of history. Sleeping with Herodotus implicates all of us into a critique which, as Hayden White puts it, 'drives us back to moral and aesthetic reasons for the choice of one vision over another as the "more" realistic' (White 1973: 433). The world described in Herodotus's journal does not, to invoke Walter Benjamin's words, claim finality for the images it conjures up about the world. But, rather, in presenting a double aspect of description, impels a reading which draws historiography back once more to an artistic base. Thus, the map placed in front of our eyes privileges a gaze which is both rational and aesthetic.

Apart from its inherent critical function, the novel's exploitation of the tension between a rationalising and aestheticising logic reminds us also of the ambiguities which accompanied the 'birth' of knowledge forms during the Renaissance. The shift from medieval symbolism to skepticism and rationalism, from darkness to light, was

not simply about rebirth (as in Jacob Burckardt's famous formula), but of conflict. Indeed, as Schulz usefully reminds us, the uncertainties which usually accompany the advance of new forms of understanding could not have left cartography immune (Schulz 1987: 1113). Schulz argues that the tension between a rational and mystical view of the world was never resolved during the Renaissance and that the discipline of geography 'continued to be coloured by the tenacious propensity of educated men to see ideal notions reflected in real facts' (Schulz 1987: 122). This particular legacy of the Renaissance scholarship as a form of moralised geography, as I have been arguing throughout this chapter, forms the basis of the novel's cartographical gaze. In what is perhaps the most literal example of the novel's cartographic critique, the climactic and apocalyptic ending of the novel marks its most striking argument with the emblematic power of maps. As Ondaatje's Kip comments after learning of the nuclear holocaust of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, 'never turn your back on Europe. The deal makers. The contract makers. The map drawers' (Ondaatje 1993: 284). In the following concluding section, I shall argue that the enduring and most powerful message of the map resides in the map's ability to legitimate reality.

## The Silence on Maps

The ends of the earth are never the points on a map that colonists push against, enlarging their sphere of influence. On one side servants and slaves and tides of power and correspondence with the Geographical Society. On the other the first step by a white man across a river, the first sight (by a white eye) of a mountain that has been there forever.

(Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient*, 1992: 141)

If he closes his eyes he sees the streets of Asia full of fire. It rolls across cities like a burst map, the hurricane of heat withering bodies as it meets them, the shadow of humans suddenly in the air. This tremor of Western wisdom.

(Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient*, 1992: 284)

The cartographic rationalisation of space during the Renaissance provided, as Padron states quoting Walter Mignolo, a powerful framework for systematic expansion and control which 'combined the appearance of ideological transparency with an unacknowledged political function' (Padron 2002: 31). The transformative dynamic of the conceptualisation of space can be seen as intersecting with, and participating in, the beginnings of European colonialism. For the first time, geometry allowed the spaces depicted on the map to be located and, consequently, empty space—as distinct

from a 'blank spot'—became highly visible. Padron describes this empty space as the map's 'positive' emptiness:

That space is not merely the blankness produced by ignorance of an undiscovered geographical or hydrographical feature – a 'negative emptiness' – but the abstract space into which [these features] are plotted – a 'positive' emptiness. It subtends the entire surface of the map, but its 'positive emptiness'—its substantial independence from the objects and locations it serves to plot—only becomes visible when we realise that it logically extends far beyond the borders of the image. (Padron 2002: 31)

Positive emptiness, in Padron's terms, is not physically represented on the grid, but its existence, nevertheless, is presupposed by the geometry of the grid. While Padron's description directly relates to European imperialism (more specifically, the European invention of America and the deterritorialisation of Amerindians),<sup>204</sup> the notion of a positive emptiness can be looked upon, more generally, as a way of apprehending the often subtle and elusive processes of domination through maps and mapmaking. Although there is now considerable literature which examines the cartographic links between empire and the rise of the nation state through 'practical' acts such as warfare and propaganda, there is relatively little commentary which highlight, in Harley's terms, the 'symbolic realism' of maps (Harley 1998: 299). History may document the practical actions committed in the course of territorial expansion and containment (and, hence, European power), but the map on its own is an enduring symbol of political authority. Measurement as cartographic 'fact' is also cartographic symbol and, thus, plays a central role in the making of myth and tradition. As Harley explains

Estate maps, though derived from instrumental survey, symbolised a social structure based on landed property; country and regional maps, though founded on triangulation, articulated local values and rights; maps of nation states, though constructed along arcs of the meridian, were still symbolic shorthand for a complex of nationalist ideas; world maps, though increasingly drawn on mathematically defined projections, nevertheless gave a spiralling twist to the manifest destiny of European overseas conquest and colonisation. (Harley 1998: 300)

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<sup>204</sup> Padron (2002) argues that the spatial imagination of the earliest European colonial powers had little to do with the order of abstraction ushered in by Renaissance humanism and that the contribution of Spanish imperialistic commitments to the history of cartography and spatiality drew on different conceptualisations of space.

Apart from Harley's adoption of Renaissance organisational principles (that is, from the local to global which characterised the study of chorography, geography and cosmography), his explanation of symbolic realism resonates with the tension underlying Renaissance geography articulated by Schulz in relation to 'the tenacious propensity of educated men to see ideal notions reflected in real facts' (Schulz 1987: 122). I suggest that the notion of the positive emptiness spaces on maps provides a more revealing aspect to the geopolitical history of maps with respect to overcoming the intractable duality of 'fact' and political symbolism. Accordingly, while the project of examining maps within a colonial context is an extremely important one, there is also much to be gained from exploring the emptiness of maps. Of course, this is not the same as saying that the two projects are mutually exclusive—they are, rather, inextricably intertwined—but insofar as the iconic power of the cartographic image may 'speak' of colonialism, the map is, nevertheless, silent on its inherent symbolic power. My point here, then, is less about the discourse of power which underpins the cartographic enterprise and which I take as the minimum level of critique, than the propensity of blankness and invisibility to instil a more critical gaze.

In analysing the image of the map in the novel, Goldman suggests that 'catastrophe springs from *a particular orientation towards knowledge* and is characterised by a desire to possess and reify' (Goldman 2002: 909; emphasis added). While this desire to possess and reify can readily be applied to imperial cartographies, I want to examine the implications of *reorientating* cartographic knowledge as it relates to the main argument of this chapter. I take the novel's negative cartography as also characterised by the desire to erase boundaries and to recreate a world that has no maps. Does this desire also have the effect of reifying other forms of moral and political conceits? As I have tried to show throughout this thesis, the deceptive simplicity of the idea of 'seeing' invisibility as 'insight' does not, I think, do justice to the fecundity of the image/text relationship. So while I may have pointed out this theme in Ondaatje's work, I have certainly tried to contextualise the theme to avoid confining it to a fixed theoretical equation. In this instance, the invisibility inherent in cartography entails not just looking beyond the coordinates of grid, but also looking beyond the Renaissance and the history of cartography. After all, the story of spatiality in itself tells us little of the suffering of non-Europeans in the carving up of the world on paper. John Berger perhaps best conveys my point. In an essay about

the drawings and paintings of those who endured the Hiroshima bomb, Berger resolutely states that his interest in these pictures cannot be art-critical for 'one does not musically analyse screams' (Berger 1985: 288). Similarly, one cannot look at the emptiness of maps in a geographical or historical vacuum.

For this reason, given that the cartographical gaze is embodied in the character of Almsy, I want to suggest that the positive emptiness of the map is only made visible to the reader through the novel's characterisation of Kip. The type of cartographic gaze I am talking about here is a refracted one that highlights 'the very different ways of approaching the acquisition and deployment of [cartographic] knowledge' (Goldman 2001: 909). In this regard, Kip's cartographic gaze is thus a different lens of a similar gaze. The 'English' patient and the sapper 'get along famously': 'The Englishman not only knew about the absurd Italian fuses but also knew the detailed topography of this region of Tuscan. Soon they were drawing outlines of bombs for each other and talking out the theory of each specific circuit' (Ondaatje 1993: 89). This shared knowledge of bombs anticipates the novel's critique of the catastrophic nature of the cartographic enterprise and, in so doing, forms the basis of the novel's critical response to the abstraction of space.

We might assume once again the enlightened gaze of the Buddha in reconstructing what has become obvious to our gaze. If we recall the mythic landscape of the Western frontier explored in chapter six, the emptiness of maps is manifest in the 'ragged edges' of history, that aspect of historiography where 'historical and nonhistorical defied and defined each other (Klein 1997: 7). Within the 'symbolic shorthand' of world maps and the maps of nations states, the nonhistorical relies on the erasure of native people through the stroke of a pen over a map in order to legitimate territorial appropriation. Visibility of the empty space must then rely on a form of visibility, of excavating and bringing to the surface the processes through which territories are impersonalised and 'desocialised'. Here we are reminded again of Walter Benjamin's and Michel Foucault's conceptualisation of the body and their efforts to 'expose a body totally imprinted by history and the processes of history' (Foucault 1984: 83). The mapping of both nation and body is effectively illustrated in *The English Patient* when Kip explains his complaisance towards the chalk scribbled

on his body (a similar marking to that of the ‘yellow chalk always scribbled on the side of bombs’) during a medical check-up in a Lahore courtyard:

Quite early on I had discovered the overlooked space open to those of us with a silent life. I didn’t argue with the policeman who said I couldn’t cycle over a certain bridge or through a specific gate in the fort—I just stood there, still, until I was invisible, and then I went through. Like a cricket. Like a hidden cup of water. You understand? That is what my brothers’ public battles taught me. (Ondaatje 1993: 200)

The explicit connection made in the novel between the chalk on the body and the chalk on the bomb needs little further comment. Ondaatje’s description of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as a ‘fire which rolled across the city like a burst map’ is the catastrophic consequence of Western knowledge. Yet, I think the comparison made between Kip’s ‘firebrand’ brother (who was jailed for refusing to enlist in the war) and Kip as the younger brother who ‘had the trick of survival, of being able to hide in silent places’ (Ondaatje 1993: 201) delivers a subtle yet equally powerful message. It points to the silent place as an essential characteristic of the cartographic gaze I have been writing about (and this, in part, answers my question about the desire that inheres in its gaze): the other ‘reality’, the processes and catastrophic possibilities of the grid are always kept in full and close view. To see emptiness, then, is the antidote to a short-sighted utopia. As Berger reminds us, ‘the construction of hells on earth was accompanied in Europe by plans for heavens on earth’ (Berger 1985: 292).

As if anticipating the eye’s inability to fully apprehend the consequences of Western wisdom, the novel powerfully conveys the ‘stench of progress’ through other senses; Kip tells the others in the Villa, after the bombing of Japan: ‘I’ll leave you the radio to swallow your history lesson...all those speeches of civilisation from kings and queens and presidents...such voices of abstract order. Smell it’ (Ondaatje 1993: 285).

### **The Space of Propinquity**

In the desert you have time to look everywhere, to theorise on the choreography of all things around you.  
(Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient*, 1993: 150)

I have concentrated my exploration of maps and mapping under the rubric of Renaissance cartography not only because of the overt links with this period in the novel, but, more importantly, because it helps to contextualise and thus make visible the impersonalised abstractions engendered by the Euclidean lines of the earth's Ptolemaic projection. If we accept the premise that 'maps are pre-eminently a language of power, not of protest' (Harley 1988 : 301) and, thus, are not generally regarded as a subversive mode of expression, *The English Patient* enables us to see the potential of problematising cartographic knowledge for the purposes of revealing the moralised geography of maps.

The very use of the *Histories* by Almasy challenges head-on the notion of a monolithic authority and scientific accuracy traditionally bestowed on the hero-explorer and the cartographer respectively. For Almasy, Herodotus's text is of prime interest because the Greek scholar writes of the people and places which the modern explorer is intent on discovering for himself. As a journal of exploration, Almasy's copy of the *Histories* reveals the logic of the production of truth contained within the explorer's journal while at the same time deferring its authoritative voice. Put simply, the myths of cartography and exploration—the 'inside' and 'outside' of the text and of objective/objectified knowledge—are problematised.<sup>205</sup> The construction of the heroic-explorer is undone since there are no stories of 'discovery' which can be attributed to Almasy; the explorer's own ruminations 'being in a sense footnotes to the Greek's peregrinations' (Ismail 1999: 419). Knowledge of the land remains firmly with Herodotus and Almasy's journal, while most certainly a palimpsest—a writing over of Herodotus's text—effectively serves as a map from which knowledge itself is navigated and interrogated. It is a map which serves to 'describe' through the reconciliation of text (past knowledge) with picture (a reflection of the world as described in the text). Yet, as I also pointed out through Casey's assertion, the map's epistemological and navigational quality at the same time derives from its

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<sup>205</sup> In *The Cartographic Eye: How Explorers Saw Australia*, Simon Ryan argues that 'once one begins to describe the land, to talk about space, one is involved in a cultural and linguistic activity that cannot refer outside itself to an unmediated reality' (Ryan 1996: 4). Ryan's examination of the myths of the 'heroic explorer' provides some useful insights in helping to situate the *Histories* within the rubric of a cartographic epistemology that highlights the textual 'transparency' of exploration endeavours at the expense of a certain stylisation of 'seeing'. The unified and authoritative voice of the narrator/explorer in the travel journal is, as Ryan points out, built up 'inside' and 'outside' the text: inside, through the controlling 'I' of the narrative and outside, through the institutions which construct and sustain the notion of 'exploration' as 'heroic' (Ryan 1996 : 21).

mensurational qualities. The role, then, of Almasy, as cartographer/explorer, is to interrogate the lines and boundaries with which knowledge of the world has come to be known. From this viewpoint, cartographic accuracy is of less concern than the legacy of the Ptolemaic system of latitude and longitude as the very backbone of cartographic knowledge. The 'facts', however, of cartographic knowledge have less to do with accuracy than with the perpetuation of 'symbolic realism' or myth.

The intractable duality of cartographic knowledge, residing as it does between 'art' and 'science', perforce a reading of the iconicity of the map which originates from and extends far beyond the descriptive possibilities of Renaissance cartography. The marvel of Renaissance maps may represent hybrid knowledge, but it is, nevertheless, geometry that continues to play a dominant role in the visualisation and spatialisation of the world. As I have argued throughout this chapter, *The English Patient* is able to articulate the elusive symbolic authority and catastrophic possibilities of the map through the exploration of the silent and empty of space of the desert. The map's positive emptiness informs Almasy's negative cartographic as the last lines of Almasy's soliloquy reveal: 'We are communal histories, communal books. We are not owned or monogamous in our taste or experience. All I desired was to walk upon such an earth that had no maps' (Ondaatje 1993: 261). The metaphorical and physical expansiveness of Almasy's desert exploration provides a fitting backdrop to the vision of a space not bounded by the maps of nation-states and the historical impositions of colonisation and decolonisation.

As with the blankness of Billy the Kid's portrait, the map 'placed in front of our eyes like mirrors' becomes, in this case, an open-ended metaphor which informs the present. The final images in the novel offers a glimpse of Hana and Kip living separate lives in different countries:

And so Hana moves and her face turns, and in regret she lowers her hair. Her shoulder touches the edge of a cupboard and a glass dislodges. Kirpal's left hand swoops down and catches the dropped fork an inch from the floor and gently passes it into the fingers of his daughter, a wrinkle at the edge of his eyes behind his spectacles. (Ondaatje 1993: 301-302)

While this image of Hana is compellingly evocative of Benjamin's angel of history, I want to trace the image of the map to its final appearance in the novel. This cryptic



juxtaposition of tableaux returns us, I think, to the doubts we might have about space. The novel's final scene does not only reside in the implosion of space and time nor is it only an evocation of the communal forces that bind individuals, it is, foremost, an illustration of the primacy of space in the historical imagination. The spatialisation of human existence may inhere in doubt but it, nevertheless, privileges a gaze that is at once logical, rational and aesthetic. As with Almasy's cartography, the management and negotiation of space as doubt radically problematises the notion of 'fixed' knowledge forms. If maps do not always speak the truth of cartographic knowledge, the novel itself is an eloquent articulation of the silence of maps.

## A Kind of Subtle Beyond

The trompe l'oeil of time and water. The jackal with one eye that looks back and one that regards the path you consider taking. In his jaws are pieces of the past he delivers to you, and when all of that time is fully discovered it will prove to have been already known.

(Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient*, 1993: 259)

And here we find our great affinity with water, for like reflections on water our thoughts will suffer no changing shock, no permanent displacement. They mock us with their seeming slightness. If they were more substantial – if they had weight and took up space – they would sink or be carried away in the general flux. But, they persist, outside the brisk and ruinous energies of the world. I think it must have been my mother's plan to rupture this bright surface, to sail beneath it into very blackness, but here she was, wherever my eyes fell, and behind my eyes, whole and in fragments, a thousand images of one gesture, never dispelled but rising always, inevitably, like a drowned woman.

(Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping*, 1981: 163)

If the loop of looking—the 360 degree view—must be stilled, it makes sense to return not to the beginning, but to the position of the subject observing. Within the mural form, the theoretical alternatives offered up by the 'variousness of things' cannot be dismissed simply as the position of a vertiginous postmodernism, but rather as literal necessity dictated by the material form of representation. If this is where the very notion of a critical eye begins, where can or does it lead? In my attempts to prise apart, among other things, the art-historical chestnut of 'the good eye' needing only a 'good hard look', I have suggested that perhaps the only way to counter such an outdated mode of connoisseurship is an understanding of what the 'best art' (in Ondaatje's sense) can offer the viewer. This final section could be read as a reflection on the different yet mutually informing perspectives—the concentric position—from which I have viewed Ondaatje's works as they relate to the imagetext, history, literature, and the photographic encounter; viewing positions which, in their reconceptualisation of the relations between reading and looking, challenge the limitations of various theoretical positions. Yet, as the epigraphs above might indicate, this 'kind of subtle beyond' is also motivated by a secondary reflection on the excess and plenitude of images. I want to also bring to the fore the issue of reciprocity (as Holly suggests) of the 'best art' as a theme that has, until now, simmered beneath the surface of my own visual reading of Ondaatje's work. Do

images, in effect (and *affect*), expect certain responses and confirm in the exchange what they anticipated all along?

Part of the answer, I think, is revealed in the epigraph taken from Marilynne Robinson's painstakingly evocative novel *Housekeeping* (1981) in which the transient protagonist recounts in appropriately Barthesian terms her memories of a deceased mother (a novel, incidentally, that Ondaatje counts as one of the books he 'carries around and builds a literary home out of' (cited in Bush 1994: 9). Robinson's hallucinatory account of a watery grave, while certainly reminiscent of the ghostly survival of Barthes's own mother within the text of *Camera Lucida*, readily brings together the 'trialectics' of the observing subject: life and death; testimony and impossibility; and the relations that exist between past, present and future. If the ontology of the photograph, as discussed in chapter one, is one of tortuous delirium, then Robinson's phantasmic metaphor evokes the surreptitious and compelling force of the image. In Barthes's words, 'it is not I who seek it out...[it] arises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me' (Barthes 2000: 26). The arrow is of course the *punctum*; and water, I suggest, provides a congenial metaphorical medium through which to re-examine not only the spatial (a room when can step into), but also the visceral property of the image as a mutation, a passing through and a washing over (in)visibility. As Barthes notes, the force of the *punctum* is 'a kind of subtle beyond' launching 'desire beyond what it permits us to see' (Barthes 2000: 59). Beyond what it *permits* us to see. It is this concept of authorization and the allusion to the image's power to mediate desire that I now wish to highlight through several of this thesis's imagistic revelations.

## **Mirage**

The visibility of literature is a mirage. This is not to say that literary texts are devoid of the type of scopic substance that makes critical looking theoretically worthwhile, it is rather to state that the question of the visual in literature necessarily throws open a new set of considerations. Visual culture is not only about an external world of vision, it also about internal visualisations: memory, dreaming, imagination, fantasy, and projection. Within this realm of virtual visibility, I have suggested that the genre of ekphrasis, as the verbal representation of visual representation, provides the reader

with a material form of inquiry in presenting an image and model of the world. To step into a room and see one's self reflected in the mirror of Velazquez's *Las Meninas*; to experience a sense of déjà vu in the cacophony and madness of Storyville; or, to view in cinematic proportions the escapades of the outlaw cowboy. Literature, in this way, might indulge our fantasy of 'making us see', but it is within the problematic gaps—the wisdom of uncertainty—that the reader is able to glimpse a certain ordering of the world, half-revealed and half-understood: the odalisque reclining forever on a sheet of blood; a hydrocephalic Toulouse Lautrec; the Palace of Purification; a skeleton under sulphur light; vein-tugging chickens; Odysseus in the desert. Scraps of images offering epistemological and historiographic possibilities. How then does the subject observing make sense of such pieces when, from whatever position, the view is bound to be always and only partial? The issue is not, as one might expect, about the insufficiency of partiality or the impossibility of universal explanations, but the need for critical negotiation. If we remind ourselves also that what images 'want'—in the sense of what they lack—is a presence while insisting at the same time on an absence, the observing subject's viewing position appears all the more tenuous. Barthes suggests that 'ultimately...in order to see a photograph well, it is best to look away or close your eyes' (Barthes 2000: 53). The *trompe l'oeil* of time and water.

### **Surface Tension**

The slipperiness of viewing histories (in both sense of the term) can be attributed to their mutability. The absence of presence and the presence of absence is a tautology that produces a specific mode of apprehension which, as this thesis has shown, inheres in the process of seeing histories as images and images as being innately historical, and, in some instances, historicised. Looking photographically entails the meeting of two gazes without the physical exchange of eye contact. While this theoretical proposition is visually and explicitly encapsulated in *Las Meninas* or in any one of photographs discussed in this thesis—'I am looking at eyes that looked at Velazquez, Matisse, Hine, Bellocq'—I have also put forward the notion that Ondaatje's novels produce photographic snapshots in the sense that the texts emphasise the factual immobility and apathy of the past. The snapshots of facts are abundant. A Sri Lankan insurgency in 1971. D.H. Lawrence was in Ceylon for 6 weeks in 1922. Prostitution

was legal in Storyville between 1889 and 1917. Construction of the Strachan Avenue storm sewer in Toronto began in 1913. The great Western photographer L.A. Huffman took photographs of the American frontier during the 1870s. The last medieval war was fought in Italy in 1943 and 1944. And so on, *the chaos and tumble of events*, the tireless murmurs of History. Yet Ondaatje's photographic album, characterised as it is by quick-shifting imagery, transfigures the observing subject into affective consciousness. It is neither the dates nor the facts we see, instead the reader comes into contact with the composition of the photograph. The past then becomes an experience of historiographical presence that brings not only imagination, but also inspired interrogation. What are the implications of this encounter for historical knowledge? As Ondaatje's imagetexts show, history's interminable and interpretive openness is the tensile film that enables us, as in the image of Nabokov's sprightly reader of history, to enter the present at oblique angles. To skim the surface of the photograph is to allow history to shine through ostensibly transparent things.

### **Suspension**

Giving weight to the seeming slightness and instability of the visual both external and internal is the purpose of ekphrastic hope. I have, in this regard, discussed the ways in which the visual rhetoric or apertures of each of Ondaatje's texts—such as the documentary photographer; the cowboy; the forensic anthropologist; and the desert explorer—are all informed by an ethics of seeing. Ekphrastic hope provides the ethical suspension to the weightless undecidability of the image and directs the wandering eye firmly towards historical, cultural, and political imperatives. It is for this reason that, for better or worse, my viewing of Ondaatje's work has not relied on psychological, psychoanalytic and phenomenological accounts of the visual. While it has never been my intention to make irrelevant the important work being done within those fields, it was my desire, however, to put forward a visual reading of literature which is emphatically attentive to historical and cultural realms. The intellectual artistry associated with the task of 'painting the eyes of the Buddha' cannot, I think, adequately be accomplished outside of epistemological theories that are *not* profoundly political in their implications. To cite the most explicit chapters, the violence and suffering inflicted in the name of nationalism and human rights, never only discursive abstractions or wholly Historical Fact, require a reciprocal response

and an acknowledgment of epistemological perspective. Ondaatje's visually poignant descriptions of Sri Lanka's colonial past and internecine war; the pathos of prostitution; the bombing of Hiroshima; migrant workers labouring like mules; and the comic violence of the Western cowboy film prompt, indeed, in some instances, demand, that the viewer question their existence beyond the mural—after all, murals are never bound by frames. Beyond what it permits us to see.

## Rebirth

If Klee's *Angelus Novus* has proven to be the melancholic muse of reflective history, I offer another angel for imagistic contemplation, one that is far less iconoclastic and apocalyptic, yet all the more exquisite in its seemingly benign disposition. Here I return to Robinson's narrator and to an 'angel' bearing fruit:

For need can blossom into all the compensation it requires. To crave and to have are as like as a thing and its shadow. For when does a berry break upon the tongue as sweetly as when one longs to taste it, and when is the taste refracted into so many hues and savors of ripeness of earth, and when do our senses know anything so utterly as when we lack it? And here again is a foreshadowing—the world will be made whole. For to wish for a hand on one's hair is all but to feel it. So whatever we may lose, very craving gives it back to us again. Though we dream and hardly know it, longing, like an angel, fosters us, smooths our hair, and brings us wild strawberries. (Robinson 981: 153)

The images, photographic snapshots and mural visions explored in this thesis are all veiled by desire. A desire that, contra Barthes, originated from words: 'all these fragments of memory...so we can retreat from the grand story and stumble accidentally upon a luxury, one of those underground pools where we can sit still. Those moments, those few pages in a book we go back and forth over' (Ondaatje 1987: 148). While enthralled as a reader by the pleasure of Ondaatje's novels, I also wanted to experience the pleasure of understanding how the author's words created various states of luxuriant reflection. To step outside and into the world of the text could not have been—and this I am sure—anything other than a visceral encounter, of longing and of holding up the text at different angles, under different lights. Mural visions: the observing subject's discovery of what words, as with images, crave; a presence that, like longing, insists on an absence. Attempts to understand the novel's very ontology, whether through the lens of history, literature or the imagetext, is

perhaps precisely the point of any curious, marveling or epistemological endeavour. *Their* point: to lure, to challenge, and to remain tenaciously aloof. The subject viewing may momentarily be transported and transformed; yet the images, as they must, remain curiously the same.

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