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**Depth of Field:
Aspects of Photography and Film in the
Selected Work of Michael Ondaatje**

Sarah Williams

Doctor of Philosophy

University of Sussex

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**SARAH WILLIAMS
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

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SELECTED WORK OF MICHAEL ONDAATJE**

SUMMARY

This thesis examines aspects of photography and film in the selected work of Michael Ondaatje, specifically analysing their implementation and function within *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, *Running In The Family*, *In the Skin of a Lion* and *The English Patient*. Ondaatje's two films, *Sons of Captain Poetry* and *The Clinton Special*, as well as Anthony Minghella's film adaptation of *The English Patient*, are also examined.

My critical approach is eclectic and driven by the demands of individual texts, focusing on some of the ways in which photography and film affect and help define the formal and thematic components of the prose works. My approach addresses photographic perspective and reader response with specific reference to the ontological nature of photographic stillness, as well as various components of filmic writing and the challenges of prose to screen transfer in cinematic adaptation.

This study reveals how an exploration of the photographic and filmic aspects of the texts provides new insights into the way Ondaatje's work promotes indeterminacy of meaning and a blurring of the boundaries between genres.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Michael Ondaatje's poetry, with which he was primarily concerned in the early stages of his writing career, is full of images of photographs and scars. In "The Time Around Scars" he writes of the sleeping scar on the wrist of an old girlfriend that he caused with his penknife and of the "raindrops" of scars spread across his wife's legs. Two short lines reveal much of the thematic concern of the poem: "We remember the time around scars/ they freeze irrelevant emotions"¹. In discussing Ondaatje's scar imagery, Solecki writes, "a physical scar represents caught motion, just as a mental or emotional scar is caught memory. In other words, the scar literally incorporates and records an emotion, an act, or an experience"². In much the same way, photographs are records of an act or an experience, and in a complex relationship to be detailed in this study, a significant holder of memory and emotion. While not often used together in Ondaatje's poetic imagery, the scar and the photograph function in an analogous way in his work.

This thesis began as a study of photographic metaphor in Ondaatje's work and quickly shifted to encompass a wide range of photographic elements evident throughout his earlier texts. Aspects of photography in this thesis will include photographic perspective of various characters in Ondaatje's work as well as photographic perspective as a commentary on the artistic impulse and creative process. Photography will be considered in light of its relationship to history and how the ontological nature of photography sheds light on the difficulties of the representation of history. Specific

¹ Michael Ondaatje, *The Dainty Monsters* (Toronto: The Coach House Press, 1967), p.46. Hereafter the work is abbreviated to DM and further references are given after quotations in the text.

² Sam Solecki, *Ragas of Longing: The Poetry of Michael Ondaatje* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), p.106.

uses of photography will be examined – photographs as evidence, photographs as documentary and the function of the familial photographic image. Finally, I will be reading Ondaatje’s fragmented narrative in his texts as a specific photographic structure and revealing how this formal technique influences the thematic concerns of the individual works. As this study turns to the examination of film in Ondaatje’s work, I focus briefly on how Ondaatje’s prose can be read like a film text in terms of its fragmented narrative structure. The chapters devoted to film demonstrate how these fragments can be observed as analogous to specific film shots and their juxtaposition equivalent to the montage effect in film. This study also analyses Ondaatje’s two documentary films, which have been consistently ignored in the critical work on this writer, as well as engaging with the film adaptation of *The English Patient*.

I am partial to Monica Turci’s assertion that “the consideration of the role of visual material within Ondaatje’s texts needs to be understood within the particular dynamics of the thematic concerns of particular projects as well as in terms of Ondaatje’s own attempts to formulate an aesthetic of indeterminacy”³. This is precisely the approach I am taking in this study: individual texts will each demand an engagement with different aspects of photography, and later film, in order to gain a new understanding of the connection between formal and thematic elements in Ondaatje’s work. The “aesthetic of indeterminacy” is Ondaatje’s perpetual disallowance of any fixed or defined set of meaning in his work. Through the engagement of various aspects of the visual in his writing, Ondaatje is able to construct a space that accommodates and promotes simultaneous (and often ambiguous) meaning. This study will demonstrate both how this effect is achieved and how it relates to issues of representation, history, and time and place. I will be examining how this particular aesthetic lies at the core of

³ Monica Turci, *Approaching that perfect edge: A reading of the metafictional writings of Michael Ondaatje (1967-1982)* (Bologna: Patron Editore, 2001), p.54.

Ondaatje's work and investigating elements of both photography and film that are consistently used to perpetuate this insistence on indeterminate meaning.

My discussion of aspects of photography and film in Ondaatje's selected work incorporates a range of theories from postmodernism to postcolonialism and to Lacanian psychoanalytic thought on the concept of the subject and desire. I draw on visual critics to elucidate specific points of my argument and these include Susan Sontag, Roland Barthes and Andre Bazin. I found John Berger's essays on Cubism and the photograph particularly enlightening and I engage with his critical work in each of the chapters on photography.

The examination of filmic technique draws primarily upon the film texts *How to Read a Film* by James Monaco and *Film Art: An Introduction* by David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson. Ondaatje's book *The Conversations: Walter Murch and the Art of Editing Film*, a collection of conversations between Murch and Ondaatje is an illuminating study on the process of editing both film and fiction, and the chapters on filmic technique on *In the Skin of a Lion* and the film adaptation of *The English Patient* have benefited from its inclusion in my analysis.

This thesis is not a comprehensive study of Ondaatje's literary output, but rather engages with texts that lend themselves best to a critical analysis of aspects of photography and film in his work. I have organized this study in the texts' chronological order as opposed to structuring my analysis around central themes or topics in Ondaatje's work. George Elliott Clarke comments, "Ondaatje's works are so alike that each is best read as an adjunct of the other. They form a canon: they must be read in the light and shadow of each other before their individual illuminations or

obscurities can be seen”⁴. Sam Solecki qualifies this comment in his own explanation for structuring his study of Ondaatje’s poetry in chronological order of each individual volume. He sees “Ondaatje’s personal ‘canon’ as an evolving one in which each book of poems builds on its predecessor while simultaneously preparing the ground for the following, often quite different volume” (Solecki, *Ragas*, p.5). I certainly found this observation by Solecki to be the case in my study of the photographic and filmic aspects of Ondaatje’s longer works. Although each of the texts examined in this thesis could be considered disparate in content – from an outlaw surviving the Wild West to an (auto)biographical work about the author’s familial past in Sri Lanka to a portrayal of immigrant life in 1920s and 30s Toronto to a sweeping story of love, betrayal and the fracturing nature of identity set in multiple times and places – the visual aspects of these works begin in one book and continue into the next. I specifically found this to be the case in regard to the use of photographic stillness in Ondaatje’s work.

Current criticism concerning photography in Ondaatje’s earlier texts centres on the cinematic conception of photography. This narrow focus eliminates any engagement with different conceptions of photographic stillness as considered by Jonathan Friday in his critique of the differing ontological nature of photography theorized by Andre Bazin and Roland Barthes. Friday writes:

If one thinks of photography, as it is often tempting to do, from a perspective in which this medium’s qualities are primarily identified through a contrast with cinema, then the stillness of the photographic medium is almost too trivial a matter to merit serious examination. But then the cinematic conception can exercise such an influence that it obscures other conceptions of photographic stillness, blinding us to the multifaceted nature of this quality”⁵.

⁴ George Elliott Clarke, ‘Michael Ondaatje and the Production of Myth’, *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 16 (1991), 1-21 (p.1).

⁵ Jonathan Friday, ‘Stillness Becoming: Reflections of Bazin, Barthes and Photographic Stillness’, in *Stillness and Time: Photography and the Moving Image*, ed. by David Green and Joanna Lowry (Brighton: Photoworks, 2006), pp.39-54 (p.39).

This seems to be the case with current analyses of how photography functions in texts such as *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and *Running in the Family*. While cinema's influence upon photography is certainly an element to be considered in an analysis of the former text, this study will argue that an examination of the thematic concerns of *Running in the Family* demonstrates a shift in how the reader understands photographic stillness.

The shift in photographic stillness that this study points to as one of the distinctive qualities of Ondaatje's engagement with the visual in his work asks the broader question: Why is Ondaatje interested in visual representation? The answer lies in a specific time and place: the decade of the 1960s in Canada, which was a watershed period for all Canadian arts and this flourishing period led to what John Cooke labelled a "borderblur in the arts"⁶. This time period coincided with Ondaatje's arrival in Toronto where the emergence of the small publishing press and the creative disciplines of visual art and literature were colliding. Collaborations between painters, photographers and writers abounded and Coach House Press was at the centre of this visual art and writing borderblur.

Coach House Press was founded in 1965 by Stan Bevington, a designer whose main interest was hand setting type and it was here that Ondaatje would meet and collaborate with writers such as Victor Coleman and bp Nichol. This latter poet's 1967 book, *Journeying and the Returns*, is a classic example of Coach House Press's emphasis on book production. It consisted of a box that contained a chapbook, an envelope of poems all printed on individual cards, a flipbook meant to be fanned with one's thumb and a record of the author chanting⁷. In a 1969 review of small Canadian publishing houses, Ondaatje wrote, "the other most obvious trait of small presses [other

⁶ John Cooke, *The Influence of Painting on Five Canadian Writers: Alice Munro, Hugh Hood, Timothy Findley, Margaret Atwood, and Michael Ondaatje* (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1996), p.46.

⁷ Douglas Fetherling, *Travels By Night: A Memoir of the Sixties* (Toronto: McArthur, 2000), p.111-112.

than size] – the visual”⁸. This borderblur between the visual and the written word would not only define small presses such as Coach House, but also the early work of Michael Ondaatje.

Ondaatje would publish his first poetry collection, *The Dainty Monsters*, at Coach House Press and Douglas Barbour points out that even when Ondaatje’s books were published by other houses, Coach House was still involved in either their design or printing⁹. *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (published by Anansi) was designed and printed at Coach House and the Anansi archives in the National Library of Canada reveal the great attention to visual detail applied to the book. The initial print run estimates reveal that the total cost for a print run of 500 books including the design by Stan Bevington, two colours and varnishing on the cover, a colour title page, and the covers unscored would cost almost \$1600. This was a relatively high printing cost at the time and a note with the estimate indicates that Ondaatje would like the covers sewn.

bp Nichol was an integral member of Coach House Press and this study will examine the documentary film Ondaatje made on Nichol in 1970. At Coach House Press, Nichol was creating concrete poetry and this medium’s insistence upon the typographic content of a work being of equal importance to the typical poetic formal aspects (rhyme, lyrics, theme) was of great influence on Ondaatje’s early literary production. In the seminal study *New Direction of Canadian Poetry* published in 1971, John Robert Colombo writes about the concrete poetry being produced in Canada and insists “one of the major themes [of this study is to point out] that reading poetry, far from being a passive process, is an intensely active one. Increasingly, contemporary poets are demanding the imaginative participation of their readers in order to ‘complete’

⁸ Michael Ondaatje, ‘Little magazines/small presses 1969’, *arts canada*, 143/135 (August 1969), p.17.

⁹ Douglas Barbour, *Michael Ondaatje* (Toronto: Twayne Publishers, 1993), p. 5.

their poems”¹⁰. This thesis will analyse how Ondaatje’s engagement with the visual in his writing results in a conscious construction of space that invites the involvement of the reader to actively participate in the literary work.

Chapter Outline

Chapter Two analyses the photographic aspects of *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and outlines most of the issues I will be further examining in the chapters on *Running in the Family* and *In the Skin of a Lion*. In existing criticism of photography in this work, there have generally been two prevailing lines of enquiry. The first looks at photography as metaphor for Billy’s perspective and the second tackles the reader response to the photographs included in the actual text. Both approaches are integral to understanding the book and I find it impossible to privilege one over another. There are a multiplicity of readings possible of this work and they directly influence each other. Subsequently while my examination of *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* is for practical purposes divided into two sections that look at both of these critical approaches, in no way am I asserting that they can be treated separately.

This chapter begins by looking at the photographic perspective of Billy the Kid and using Susan Sontag’s theory of “tourism photography” to demonstrate the way in which Billy separates himself from the flux of the moving world around him. The paradox between photography and motion has been well documented in previous criticism on this work but I fill in a crucial critical gap by analyzing this paradox in light of the specific case of photographic stillness as it has been conditioned by cinematic thought. This specific use of photographic stillness provides an important way to analyse Billy the Kid’s desire to stop both motion and time as an inherent desire to halt

¹⁰ John Robert Colombo, *New Direction in Canadian Poetry* (Toronto: Holt, Rinehart and Winston of Canada Limited, 1971), p.79.

change. It is when Billy's immutability begins to fail that cinematic imagery creeps into the text and the image of the blurred photograph is a major indication of this disintegration of Billy's photographic perspective. By using Ondaatje's poem 'The gate in his head' from the collection *Rat Jelly*, I analyse how the blurred photograph stands as representative of a major thematic concern in Ondaatje's early work: how to artistically represent the complexities and spontaneities of life without fixing them into an aesthetically static entity.

This dilemma points to Billy's role as artist in the work, another issue of the text that has been well-debated by critics. However, I suggest that Billy's role as artist can be examined specifically through the consideration of the use of photographic stillness in the text. Billy uses "photographic stills" in an attempt to reconstruct, and therefore re-order, the world around him. This act of reconstruction is an essential element of the work and performs a two-fold task. Billy's reconstruction of these still images exemplifies the nature of photographic stillness as directly influenced by cinema and it also points to the nature of the artistic process both Billy and Ondaatje are involved in. An analysis of Billy's precarious position between the mutable experience of life and fixing it through photographic perspective without a sense of suffocation or stasis leads to an inevitable question: Why does Ondaatje choose to include photographs within the text? Their allusive denotative nature indicates that they do not perform an illustrative function and the second part of this chapter examines their role in the work and the reader response to their reproduction.

This analysis asserts that their reproduction in the text is indicative of the indeterminate boundaries between media and literary genre and of the representation of history as a fictional construct. I also point to the photographs' role in the destabilisation of meaning in the work through slippages in time and space, the

relationship between text and image, and use of photographic appropriation. I specifically examine the photograph within the text as being signalled as one of the methods through which the reader should interpret and discover the figure of Billy the Kid, in addition to the photograph's unique relationship to history. It is through the reader's vigorous engagement in determining the photographs' purpose in the text that an example of destabilisation of meaning can be observed. This destabilisation of meaning is one of the thematic concerns that will continue to be considered in *Running in the Family*.

Running in the Family is the focus of Chapter Three and begins with a brief examination of the poem "Light" from the collection *There's a Trick With a Knife I'm Learning To Do*. This poem is structured around the image and function of photographs and, more crucially, concerns Ondaatje's personal life and family connections. *Running in the Family* is a significant departure in form from the two longer prose works that precede it due to its focus on a *personal* history.

While *Running in the Family* incorporates photographic images into the text as in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, they do not replicate the photographic perspective of the protagonist, but rather demonstrate that aspects of the photograph are representative of the thematic concerns of the text. The "dual nature" of the photograph will be used to examine these thematic concerns – the poles of presence and absence present in a photographic image that exemplify Ondaatje's doubling movement between "running to" his long forgotten past in Sri Lanka and yet "running from" the family and homeland with which he struggles to reconcile. Salman Rushdie's concept of "stereoscopic vision" is a useful way to analyse the dual action with which Ondaatje engages as he writes from a position of both insider and outsider, as foreigner and expatriate.

Aspects of the photograph as representative of the dialectical relationship between memory and imagination are analysed in this work and Ondaatje's portrayal of his ancestral past is achieved through the imaginative reconstruction of fragments of memory provided to him from his family's various anecdotes. It is the familial image, specifically, that assists in this fictional reconstruction of the author's personal past and Marianne Hirsch's theory of the specific space between the myth and reality of family life when observing a family photograph is a crucial part of analysing this text. It is through perpetuating the myth of his familial past that Ondaatje primarily represents the tragic marriage of his parents. By analysing the reproduction of Ondaatje's parents' honeymoon photograph and its placement within the text, I look at this constructed space between myth and reality in the text and demonstrate that there has been a fundamental shift in Ondaatje's use of photographic stillness.

My emphasis on the personal history being presented in the work engages with criticism that *Running in the Family* eschews any real discourse with ethnicity and the troubled colonial past of Sri Lanka. This examination of the text will suggest that Ondaatje is, in fact, engaging directly with the concept of "otherness" through the photographic aspect of "double vision", and this vision is an implicit representation of the Burghers' isolated position in Sri Lanka. Another criticism of the work is Ondaatje's exploitation of the exotic in his description of Sri Lanka. I suggest that this aspect of the text points to three different issues at play in *Running in the Family*: the difficult nature of Ondaatje's autobiographical task, the function of escapism necessary for the in-betweenness of identity, and the subsequent pathos that appears in the work.

The overwhelming sense that each of these issues raises is one of uncertainty. This chapter concludes by way of investigating this indeterminate space from which Ondaatje fictively constructs this work and the crucial implication it has for reading the

representation of history in *Running in the Family*. The reader is necessarily implicated in the organization of the fragments of this text and in so doing assists in shifting aside a public history and restoring a private one in its place.

In The Skin of a Lion, the focus of Chapter Four, also engages with a personal history as a major thematic concern of the work. Specifically, this novel emphasises the refusal of any one authoritative version of history and I will analyse how there is a symbiotic relationship between the formal elements of the text and this particular thematic issue. The focus of this chapter necessarily shifts slightly from an engagement with photographic perspective to an emphasis on the structure of the novel.

A notable difference between this longer work and the others that precede it is the absence of any source material produced within the text. Instead, I will argue that the narrative structure itself functions photographically and examine the photographic frame and the use of partial view as devices used to construct this particular narrative strategy. My engagement with the concept of partial view is influenced by Rochelle Simmons's analysis of *In the Skin of a Lion* as a Cubist novel. I discovered several analogous elements between her Cubist approach and aspects of photography in the work, particularly concerning the consideration of space in the novel and the insistence on multiple viewpoints.

The analysis of how this novel details its photographic structure perpetuates the phenomenon of the moment of origination, building upon this concept of photographic stillness first encountered in *Running in the Family*. This aspect of photographic stillness and partial view is used within the text to promote multiple slippages in time and a non-linear narrative structure that results in an aesthetic of indeterminacy.

Finally, this chapter examines the role of Arthur Goss in the work, the city photographer who makes a cameo appearance in the novel but whose photographs

remain conspicuously absent. I argue that the lack of photographs in the text implicates the reader as “searcher” alongside Patrick Lewis, but the reader’s position is to navigate and understand the temporal, geographical and metaphorical boundaries that are constantly shifting within the novel.

The chapter concludes with an examination of the criticism leveled at Goss’s position in the text: that he does not produce photographic images of the harsh working conditions and desperate plight of the immigrant worker, in contrast to his contemporary – the photographer Lewis Hine. Yet, my research in the City of Toronto Archives reveals that Goss’s photographs from this time period do portray these harsh and unsanitary conditions and I examine why they are not reproduced, or at least referenced, in the novel.

Chapter Five shifts the focus of this thesis to aspects of film in Michael Ondaatje’s work and this analysis inevitably begins with a study of the two documentary films Ondaatje directed in the 1970s. While these films do not contribute significantly to Ondaatje’s artistic work, they do warrant examination in terms of understanding how the formal elements of Ondaatje’s work (both film and prose) affect its thematic concerns. I analyse both *The Clinton Special* and *Sons of Captain Poetry* and counter the prevailing criticism that this latter film is a less successful documentary. While *The Clinton Special* is a valuable film text to examine in light of the thematic parallels to Ondaatje’s prose work, it is the film on bp Nichol that promotes a more significant analysis of equivalent filmic techniques between the two mediums.

This consideration of equivalent filmic techniques leads into the second part of this chapter, which provides a brief overview of certain elements of film that can be replicated in prose for various desired effects. I have chosen a specific passage from *In the Skin of a Lion* and demonstrate how it can be read like a scene from a film and

understood through shot selection and montage techniques. This lays a brief groundwork from which to analyse the filmic aspects of *The English Patient* in the following chapter.

The final chapter of this thesis focuses on the film adaptation of *The English Patient*. My analysis of the novel differs from the majority of current criticism as I use the somewhat backward technique of examining the film adaptation in order to illuminate a new way of understanding Ondaatje's book. Specifically, I analyse the emergence of the gaze in the film and demonstrate how it performs an analogous function in the novel.

In order to ensure an inclusive viewing experience with the film text, I turned to the work of Todd McGowan who has re-assessed the theory of the gaze in the manner Lacan traditionally conceived it. This theory of the gaze relies on desire as a result not of a sense of mastery over the screen image but rather through the structuring of absence within film. My analysis of the gaze in *The English Patient* will demonstrate that the position of the reader in this novel, as in the previous texts, is one of assembly and construction of the fragmented text and detail how the gaze functions in this process. In the process of analysing both of these versions of *The English Patient*, I address and define film adaptation and use specific problems of novel to screen transfer to elucidate my argument in terms of the appearance of the gaze within both texts.

Finally, the title of this thesis is an enlightening way in which to proceed through this study of aspects of photography and film in Michael Ondaatje's work. "Depth of field" is a term used in both the mediums of photography and film to describe an optic field in which the subject remains in focus. However, if you consider any visual image that is focusing on a particular element within its frame, you are always aware of the *other* object or subject in the image that is fuzzy and unfocused, but

inherently part of the entire frame of vision. In his analysis of *In the Skin of a Lion*, Douglas Barbour comments on the multiple storylines evident in the work. He writes, “The presence of more than one story makes metamorphosis not only possible but inescapable: in sliding from one story to another, characters necessarily change, especially as they move into the foreground of their own stories or retreat into the background of others” (Barbour, p.181). Characters in this novel move in and out of the depth of field, but are always present and affecting the other figures in the various storylines. In much the same way, my analysis of each of these literary and film texts will focus on its formal elements and yet this focus inevitably will take into account and affect the thematic concerns of each individual work.

CHAPTER TWO

THE COLLECTED WORKS OF BILLY THE KID:

Perspective and Response

As the first of Ondaatje's longer works, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, published in 1970, has solicited a great deal of analysis by literary critics and much of this criticism deals with the use of photography in the work. "The use of photography" is a broad term and it is imperative to detail precisely how photography is used in the work and what this phrase encompasses. Monica Turci writes in regard to photography in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* that there are two broad categories into which critical analysis falls:

In the first instance, some critics have predominantly approached the role of photography through the way in which it bears on the articulation of the figure of Billy the Kid, viewing the latter as an agency of photographic representation. In the second category, photography is considered in the light of reader/response theories which draw attention to different effects of the use of photography and how these bear on the process of reading the text. (Turci, p.36)

Both approaches to the text are integral to understanding the book and I find it impossible to privilege one reading over another. By examining both possible readings of the book, I will be laying the specific groundwork from which to continue an examination of photography (and later cinema) in the works of Ondaatje's that follow *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*.

While Turci provides a good general overview of the possible readings of the text, my own examination will involve the analysis of photography in the following, slightly more specific ways. The first section of this chapter will focus on photography as a metaphor for perspective within the text. This photographic perspective is generally attributed to Billy and documents his detached response to the world around him. Examining Billy's photographic perspective has inevitably led critics to question the

character's emotion, or more often lack thereof, and the implications of this within the book. I will be analysing this contentious critical argument and demonstrating how it relates directly to the portrayal of Billy as an artist, a position some critics label as analogous to Ondaatje's position as artist/author of the book. The second part of this chapter will consider the reception of the photographic images in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and their instigation of acute reader involvement with the text. This analysis will reveal the primary functions of the photographic reproductions: as a demonstration of the limits of representation, to destabilize meaning, and as an indication of the problematic nature of biography and history as fictional construct.

The photographic perspective of Billy the Kid

MacLulich asserts that "photography supplies an apt metaphor for Billy's detached way of responding to the outside world"¹¹. Billy has almost a primal need to separate himself from the violence he encounters on a daily basis and he accomplishes this by viewing his reality photographically. Though talking about photography and tourism when asserting that photographs "help people to take possession of space in which they are insecure", Sontag's photographic theory here also sheds light on Billy's perspective¹². She writes that "A way of certifying experience, taking photographs is also a way of refusing it – by limiting experience to a search for the photogenic, by converting experience into an image, a souvenir" (Sontag, p.9). Billy survives by killing those who are after him, it is a necessity of his experience in much the same way that viewing monuments in an unfamiliar space is a necessity of the traveler. The tourist takes a photograph, documenting what they have seen but this documentation also delimits any true experience with the object, place or event held within the photographic image. This

¹¹ T.D. MacLulich, 'Ondaatje's Mechanical Boy: Portrait of the Artist as Photographer', *Mosaic*, 14.2 (1981), 107-119 (p.107).

¹² Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1973), p.9.

is a necessary activity for Billy, who must perpetually participate in violence but immediately contain it *outside of himself*, disallowing anything other than a documentation of that experience. In the process, this is the way he soothes himself, or recovers from the horror of this violence. Again in regard to travel photography, Sontag writes:

“The very activity of taking pictures is soothing, and assuages general feelings of disorientation that are likely to be exacerbated by travel. Most tourists feel compelled to put the camera between themselves and whatever is remarkable that they encounter. Unsure of other responses, they take a picture. This gives shape to experience: stop, take a photograph, and move on” (Sontag, p.9-10).

When Billy describes the death of Charlie Bowdre for the second time, he concludes by saying, “Snow outside. Wilson, Dave Rudabaugh and me. Now windows, the door open so we could see. Four horses outside”¹³. These four short lines read like a basic description of the denotative elements of a photograph. There are no windows where Billy is holed up in hiding from Pat Garrett, only a door that acts as a lens through which Billy views the scene. There is snow outside along with four horses, but nothing else: Billy is separating himself from the violent death of his good friend. Though the “blood trail he left straight as a knife cut” (*CW*, p.22) must still be present on the ground, Billy only sees the innocuous snow and horses, framing this image as a photograph in his mind. Like Sontag’s tourist, he has stopped, taken a photograph and moved on.

One key element of this mental photograph that Billy has taken is a complete lack of movement. The horses do not sway or shift, they are simply present as if frozen within a photographic frame. This is the ontological nature of photography – it freezes time and stops motion in the captured image. MacLulich writes that this kind of stasis is indicative of “the dynamic aspects of living escap[ing] the photographer’s lens. Life

¹³ Michael Ondaatje, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1970), p.22. Hereafter this work is abbreviated to *CW* and further references are given after quotations in the text.

cannot be caught in any single image – especially when we remember that any living observer is necessarily himself in motion, part of the flux of life. Ondaatje’s book exploits the paradoxical relationship of photography and motion” (MacLulich, p.108). This paradox, which is crucial to the depiction of Billy’s perception, is immediately signaled by the original cover of the book. This photograph is one of the famous series taken by Eadward Muybridge in the 1880s where he was attempting to capture every stage of movement made by a galloping horse in order to definitively ascertain if the horse ever lifted all four legs off of the ground simultaneously. Paradoxically, only by stopping movement was he able to truly *see* movement. It is by stopping motion through the fixity of “photography”, through implementing his photographic perspective, that Billy can impose order on his chaotic world.

Photographic Stillness

This paradox between photography and motion necessitates a specific reading that has been neglected in the focus of criticism on photography in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and has implications for analysing Ondaatje’s use of photography in the later works, most specifically in *Running in the Family*. It is imperative to examine the ontological nature of photographic stillness as it is implemented in this book and consider whether it lies in the perspective of photography alone or in contrast to the cinematic conception of stillness. This is an issue examined well by Jonathan Friday, who compares the theories of Andre Bazin to Roland Barthes and the manner in which these critics wrestle with the nature of photographic stillness as it relates to the cinematic interpretation of this element.

Friday’s definition of “the conception of photographic stillness conditioned by cinematic thought about the photograph” is composed of two parts and is outlined as:

First, what is depicted in a photograph is not capable of movement within the picture-frame: it is a still image in contrast to cinema's capacity to depict objects in movement relative to each other and the frame enclosing them. Secondly, cinematic influences upon thought about photography have also resulted in a conception of stillness as the extractedness of an individual image from the real or implied series of images that precede or follow it. An indication of this extractedness can be found in the term 'film still', which is sometimes used to refer to a single image extracted from a strip of camera film and printed in isolation. (Friday, p.41)

It is my assertion that Billy's photographic perspective insists upon a conception of photographic stillness that has been influenced directly by cinema. This will be demonstrated towards the end of the work when the "persistent cinematic pressure", as labelled by Dennis Cooley, begins to infiltrate the text in determination of derailing Billy's obsessive distancing through photographic perspective¹⁴. (It is also interesting to note that in an interview, Ondaatje stated that "with Billy the Kid I was trying to make the film I couldn't afford to shoot, in the form of a book"¹⁵.) But primarily, Billy's photographic perspective has its motivation in separating himself from the flux of the living world around him. The function of this photographic snapshot of the aftermath of Charlie Bowdre's death and his own reaction to it is an example of this. No longer does Billy have to experience the trauma relayed in the first description of the death:

When I caught Charlie Bowdre dying
tossed 3 feet by bang bullets giggling
at me face tossed in a gaggle
he pissing into his trouser legs in pain...
while the eyes grew all over his body (*CW*, p.12)

The word "caught" makes it seem almost as if Billy witnessed this death accidentally, as if he was unprepared to see such a nasty and upsetting event. The eyes growing all over Charlie's body suggest that it is Billy being watched, helplessly standing by while his friend lies dying. The second description allows Billy to experience the death with

¹⁴ Dennis Cooley, 'I Am Here On The Edge: Modern Hero/Postmodern Poetics in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*' in *Spider Blues: Essays on Michael Ondaatje*, ed. by Sam Solecki (Montreal: Vehicule Press, 1985), pp.211-239 (p.224).

¹⁵ Sam Solecki, 'An Interview with Michael Ondaatje (1975)', in *Spider Blues: Essays on Michael Ondaatje*, ed. by Sam Solecki (Montreal: Vehicule Press, 1985), pp.13-27 (p.20).

some semblance of control. No longer is Charlie “tossed” into the air by bullets, but rather “lifted” back into the room. And most importantly, Billy is now the one watching, photographing the moment in the last four lines on the page. These lines act to completely separate Billy from the past death of his friend and the future he must eventually continue into without Charlie. The stasis of this verbal photograph (by which I mean a section of prose that is devoid of movement or elaborate description, but simply the basic denotative elements of a static photographic image) taken by Billy denotes “the immobility of the subject matter, its seizure and extraction from the rhythmic movement of the world: this is the cinematic conception of photographic stillness described and embodied in a picture” (Friday, p. 41). By isolating moments of the ever-changing world around him, Billy is able to achieve the order he so desperately seeks.

While critics tend to agree that “the reader finds in Ondaatje’s Billy a strong desire for order”¹⁶, the motivation behind this desire has been interpreted in a number of different ways. MacLulich observes that Billy’s drive “to establish a rigid machine-like control over his inner self” is to lessen the effect of “what he perceives as the arbitrary violence of the external world” (MacLulich, p.109). Dennis Lee asserts that Billy is reacting to the grander cosmological scheme at play – the earth (a neutral, value-free entity) is being controlled, usually through violence, by “the moral vision which consciously-controlled planet needs in order to function”¹⁷. This “moral vision” is also executed through precision and order, a manner of living that Billy must subscribe to in order to walk away “nonchalantly as the bodies he has shot writhe and die” (Lee, p.170). Owens sees the desire for order as one connected to Billy’s inner self; he “seeks

¹⁶ Judith Owens, “‘I Send You a Picture’: Ondaatje’s Portrait of Billy the Kid”, *Canadian Literature*, 8:1 (1983), 117-139 (p.117).

¹⁷ Dennis Lee, ‘Savage Fields: *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*’, in *Spider Blues: Essays on Michael Ondaatje*, ed. by Sam Solecki (Montreal: Vehicule Press, 1985), pp.166-184 (p. 170).

or imposes order in the external world to compensate for a disintegrating inner world, a state which he projects upon the world around him” (Owens, p.119). Dennis Cooley’s assertion that Billy’s “ceremonies of control are meant to ensure that the future will be a predictable copy of the past” is perhaps the most pertinent one to my argument, as it relates to the notion of time (Cooley, p.220).

Time and Mortality

Billy’s concept of time is inexorably linked with his acute awareness of mortality. Another motivating factor in Billy’s attempts of ordering his world is to evade Garrett and the other gunslingers who are trying to kill him. This sought after order is achieved by the stillness of photographic perspective and Nodelman points out that Billy’s “tendency to view things photographically...is also a matter of self-defense. In distancing himself and in taking his own ‘pictures’, he can protect himself from the attempts of others to capture him”¹⁸. This awareness of his own mortality affects how Billy experiences time. Since ultimately, Billy’s desire to produce an ordered world completely under his control where “the future will be a predictable copy of the past” is impossible, the future remains a chaotic, frightening concept for him (Cooley, p.220). Subsequently, the notion of time is one which Billy does everything in his power to either control or ignore.

Time, to Billy, is also the enemy, for it will eventually move forward until claiming Billy by a death of some description, be it natural or at the hands of others.

At the beginning of the book, Billy muses:

MMMMMMMM mm thinking
moving across the world on horses
body split at the edge of their necks
neck sweat eating at my jeans

¹⁸ Perry M. Nodelman, ‘The Collected Photographs of Billy the Kid’, *Canadian Literature*, 87 (1980), 68-79 (p. 70).

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 dont 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 (*CW*, p.11)

This long stanza opens with the sense of forward movement as Billy is in motion on horseback, the phrase “across the world” suggesting an enormously felt distance and pointing to the notion of time (that it would take to cover such a distance). His vehement opposition to this sense of forward motion is portrayed in the discomfort he feels as his body is “split” and his sweat is almost corrosive, “eating at my jeans”. He repeats the second line, “moving across the world on horses” as if reminding the reader of its importance or running its message over in his head again as he then attempts to give order and a sense of stasis to this forward motion and sense of encroaching time.

In examining this passage, Judith Owens asserts that “since an awareness of the inexorable, forward movement of time contributes so largely to the knowledge of mortality, Billy tries to deny mortality by qualifying the movement of time, by blocking any sense of the absolute passing of time” (Owens, p.120). He thinks about a watch, but at first only the diagram of one. Like “the moral of newspapers” where the horror of death exists only in a snapshot on newsprint, flat and innocuous, this watch cannot tell time, but simply display its inner mechanism.

The next image of the watch is unlike the first as it involves motion, but again it denies the sense of time moving forward. Only the “stomachs” are what Billy concerns

himself with, watching them “shift their wheels and pins into each other/and emerge living, for hours”. Owens points out that in this image, “time does not appear to move. More precisely, it seems to circle endlessly round and round rather than move forward” (Owens, p.121). The first movement “across the world on horses” has not been stopped entirely by the end of the stanza, but importantly, it has ceased its movement forward: its sense of time has been halted by this image of the inside of a faceless clock. While Billy has not been able to stop motion all together here by invoking a measure of photographic stillness, he has made clear his opposition to movement as it relates to the notion of time. He has subverted this initial movement at the beginning of the stanza to a cyclical motion at the end of it, which emphasizes his extreme need to turn away “when the bullet leaves you/walk off see none of the thrashing”.

“The pain of change”

This insistence on “believing...the moral of newspaper” and having “a newsman’s brain” is an important part of Billy’s motivation, but is also a key point in establishing how photographic stillness in this work is influenced by its cinematic conception. By insisting upon this detached journalistic view of the world around him, Billy can both justify and ignore the trauma of the chaotic life he’s living. Cooley asserts that “when Billy’s thrashing victims are caught in a journalist’s snap-shots they become reduced to “mindless flowers” on the dull flat page of newsprint, shaven clean of their real-life depth and agony” (Cooley, p.219). In this way, the victims remain still in a photograph and do not change into the deformed, pained creatures that Billy cannot bear to witness.

Bazin insists that photography “embalms time” and that “the photographic image is the object itself, the object freed from the conditions of time”¹⁹. Or to read

¹⁹ Andre Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, ed. and trans. by Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), p.14.

Jonathan Friday's clearer interpretation of Bazin's thought here, "photographs...preserve objects from time, by bearing their imprint and thus conveying something of their being through time, but outside its effects" (Friday, p.42). This is precisely the immutable effect Billy is trying to achieve – he wants to preserve moments and events from time. He can see "through time" by observing time as only the diagram or inner mechanism of a watch, but he does not allow time to function in its usual capacity, thereby bypassing any of time's effect. Bazin's thoughts on this quality of photography are in direct contrast to that of film, which he sees as a far superior medium because "Film is no longer content to preserve the object, enshrouded as it were in an instant...Now, for the first time, the image of things is likewise the image of their duration, change mummified as it were" (Bazin, p.14-15). Where photography can hold off the effects of time, film portrays it and displays this change to the viewer.

In another essay, Bazin writes about this crucial difference and Friday points out that it "indicates the way in which photographic stillness is constructed through a contrast with cinematic motion" (Friday, p.44). Bazin asserts that: "photography is a feeble technique in the sense that its instantaneousness compels it to capture time only piecemeal. The cinema does something strangely paradoxical. It makes a molding of the object as it exists in time and, furthermore, makes an imprint of the duration of the object" (Bazin, p.96-7). This is an important distinction because it illustrates that Billy's desire to stop motion and time is founded in a more inherent desire to ignore *change*. Change, to Billy, means constant motion and the inexorable forward movement of time, which subsequently points to his own mortality. Change, writes Nodelman, "disturbs Billy because it implies that nothing can be depended upon" (Nodelman, p.73). This is why Billy wants "the moral of newspapers or gun/where bodies are mindless as paper flowers you don't feed/or give to drink" (*CW*, p.11). Flowers that are composed of

paper do not grow, they remain free from the process of change, and therefore, completely harmless to Billy²⁰.

On the previous page, Billy describes the horrific image of a wound that appears and how it morphs and changes its form to become something so horrific to Billy, he tells no one. This passage ends with Billy declaring that “In the end the only thing that never changed, never became deformed, were animals” (*CW*, p.10). But just a few pages later, this statement of Billy’s proves itself to be false. He describes an episode in which he takes refuge in a barn for a week while burning off a fever. The description of the barn is almost camera-like, with “the cold dark grey of the place” and “the colour a grey with remnants of brown...where I sat, setting up patterns in the dark” (*CW*, p.17). Billy opens two windows and a door upon his arrival at the barn so “sun poured blocks and angles in” and while existing inside of this camera-like space, he was able to feel safe and “began to block my mind of all thought” (*CW*, p.17).

Nodelman sees this barn as both a camera and a dark room, and insists that Billy “is most at ease in the dark rooms which let in blocks of light through small openings, rooms that resemble cameras” (Nodelman, p.71). Joining him in the barn are “animals who did not move out and accepted one as a larger breed”; a statement that affirms his earlier assertion that animals are the only immutable presence in Billy’s world. But then it rains and the rats eat the fermenting grain in the barn, changing from placid creatures to ones who turned on each other and became “grotesque” in the way they attacked and killed. Billy’s response is to shoot the rats and the description of this action is crucially one that manipulates time: “The smoke sucked out of the window as it emerged from

²⁰ Interestingly, Billy’s mortal enemy, Pat Garrett, harbours the same fear of flowers. It is said that “He became frightened of flowers because they grew so slowly that he couldn’t tell what they planned to do” (*CW*, p.28). Billy and Garrett share the same desire for order and mechanization, but Garrett ultimately proves victor to Billy’s loser in their battle for immortality. I would argue this is indicative of Billy’s role as artist in the work – an element that Garrett noticeably lacks. In this way, Garrett could be viewed as a warning against the dehumanizing nature of photographic perspective.

my fist and the long twenty yard space between me and them empty but for the floating bullet lonely as an emissary across and between the wooden posts that never returned” (*CW*, p.18). This manipulation of time into a kind of slow motion film reel displays that “the noise, the agitation and disorder, the emotion of this violent scene are filtered out of Billy’s memory. Only an elegant visual pattern is left in Billy’s version of the scene” (MacLulich, p.113). Billy’s original statement regarding the changelessness of animals is foreshadowing Billy’s denial of his inability to stop change. More importantly, it indicates that change is a grotesque phenomenon for Billy and one that he will continue to photographically intercept.

Though writing about the cosmological properties of world and earth that he asserts exist in the book, Dennis Lee describes this scene with the barn rats in a way that can be adapted for my own analytical purposes here. He writes that the sequence “functions in the book as a kind of first fall” (Lee, p.175). It is, indeed, the first instance in which the reader witnesses how Billy’s desire for immutability fails. His perceived safety in the camera-like barn is interrupted and the only course of action he could take was to attempt to photographically cease the movement of the rats. The slow motion sequence is unable to achieve this, remaining more on the side of cinema where the “floating bullet” still moves “across and between”, continuing to exist with a sense of forward motion. This is not a snapshot of a bullet halted in motion, but rather it is an example of Bazin’s description of “an imprint of the duration of the object” (Bazin p.97). Friday’s interpretation of Bazin would see this as a recording or imprint of becoming (the realm of cinema) as opposed to that of being (the realm of photography). He explains this theory: “the photograph enables the phenomenological being of its subject to persist through time without being subject to the mutability of becoming” (Friday, p.46). This “first fall” into “the mutability of becoming” is a hint of what

eventually befalls Billy – his own inner disintegration because he cannot consistently achieve photographic stillness in his world.

Billy inadvertently implies that such a fate awaits him while drinking at the Chisum ranch on one occasion. Garrett is with them on the porch, but he does not factor into Billy's growing discomfort, rather Garrett is simply "here but asleep" (*CW*, p.68). Billy, on the other hand, says, "My eyes are burning from the pain of change and the whisky and I cant see very well" (*CW*, p.68). This "pain of change" is visually represented by the fact that Billy seems unable to stop motion. He views John's checkered shirt that is slowly rocking back and forth as "just a red arc daze like some blurred picture" (*CW*, p.68). Unable to photographically halt the usual disorder he feels, a sense of anxiety overcomes Billy.

He then thinks back to when "they took the picture of me there was a white block down the fountain road where somebody had come out of a building and got off the porch onto his horse and ridden away while I was waiting standing still for the acid in the camera to dry firm" (*CW*, p.68). Nodelman asserts that in this instance, Billy "is intrigued by the difference between the motionless world of the photograph and the actual movement of the world it was meant to depict" (Nodelman, p.70). I agree that Billy observes this intrigue here, but I also argue that, more importantly, these two examples of a blurred object in a photograph are representative of one of the major thematic concerns of this work – how to artistically represent the complexities and spontaneities of life without fixing them (and therefore destroying them) into a lifeless entity.

The blurred photograph

The blurred photograph that fascinates Billy is also one that fascinates Ondaatje, as evidenced in “The gate in his head”, the poem that Solecki insists sits at the centre of Ondaatje’s poetic oeuvre²¹. I will be examining how this image is an allusive one that promotes multiplicity of meaning and go on to consider how and why photographs are used within the text. First, the blurred photograph projects a foreboding sense of the failure of photographic perspective for Billy, which signals a movement toward the cinematic qualities of the text. The element of the cinematic imagery in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* that I will be focusing on is that of reconstruction, which I will detail has major implications for Billy’s photographic/cinematic perspective and his portrayal as an artist. In a kind of circular way, this examination of Billy as an artist will lead the analysis back to the blurred photograph and its pronouncement of the manner in which the text should be read, which influences directly any consideration of the photographs within the text.

The foreboding sense of the failure of photographic stillness for Billy is part of the sequential process of the collapse of his carefully ordered world. MacLulich points out that “the principal action of *The Collected Works* is not the confrontation between Garrett and Billy, but the gradual disintegration of Billy’s defenses against his own discontent with the world” (MacLulich, p.115). As Billy begins to be unable to photographically halt the mutable world around him, he inches closer to his death as first announced by the protagonist himself at the very beginning of the text. Billy’s initial list of the dead also includes his own demise as he tells the reader that Pat Garrett “sliced off my head./Blood a necklace on me all my life” (*CW*, p.6). The tone of this revelation is calm and understated, without any hint of the anxiety and trauma that will

²¹ For a detailed analysis of this poem see Sam Solecki, *Ragas of Longing: The Poetry of Michael Ondaatje* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), p. 104-106.

befall Billy eventually. The poetic nature of the image even suggests a sense of satisfaction or acceptance as Billy is still able to maintain order and control over what he considers a chaotic and disordered world. MacLulich notes the discrepancy between Billy's calm announcement, which he describes as "dispassionate and factual" and this image and points out that "as Billy repeatedly relives his death throughout the book...his controlled thoughts are increasingly overwhelmed by the irrational images which fuse the disorder of natural processes with the moment of Billy's death" (MacLulich, p.115).

Consider the images that Billy associates with Angela Dickinson. When Billy is at his most human, having sex with Angela (and literally connected to another human being), the imagery is consumed with a frenzied and dangerous energy: the body is "spitting electric", the "bright bush jumps" and there are "a string of teeth marks" (*CW*, p.16). In this moment, Billy seems vulnerable and the description of his physical state after their lovemaking indicates an inability to defend himself either by camera or gun:

later my hands cracked in love juice
fingers paralysed by it arthritic
these beautiful fingers I couldnt move
faster than a crippled witch now (*CW*, p.16)

But like the manner in which Billy is able to photographically re-order the death of Charlie Bowdre, Billy revises this scene into a much slower, seductive, and controlled account of sleeping with Angela. This time she "turns toppling slow back to the pillow" instead of "shattering the pillow" and Billy introduces a new sense of detachment by having Angela refer to him as "Bonney" instead of "Billy" (*CW*, p.21). Billy is able to resume his photographic perspective and remain within this ordered, safe realm as the passage ends, "I am very still/I take in all the angles of the room" (*CW*, p.21).

However, Angela's last appearance in the work has reverted back to images that disrupt and disturb Billy and they are an example of MacLulich's assertion that irrational images are fusing the natural disorder of the world with Billy's death. In this verse, Angela's eyes are "bright scales" and she has "bullet claws coming/at me" in a threatening image of attack (claws) and death (bullets) (*CW*, p.73). When Angela touches Billy, she leaves his skin "in a puff" and "fire pours out" of his "red grey brain" (*CW*, p.73). This image of red and grey colour is in contrast to the greyness of the cool barn in which he spent "a calm week" and where the only colour to invade this grey was the equally cool "remnants of brown", creating the stable imagery of a sepia photograph. But Billy can no longer maintain his photographic perspective and the angry, anxious colour of red invades this imagery, with Angela's eyes then being described as "like a boat/on fire her throat is a kitchen/warm on my face" (*CW*, p.73). Billy begins to be smothered by Angela, he can no longer control her or his environment and as he begins to feel asphyxiated as "she swallows your breath/like warm tar", Billy has a prophetic flash forward to his encroaching death. He has a vision of "the man in the bright tin armour star/blurred in the dark", which is the figure of Pat Garrett (*CW*, p.73). This is a fascinating image that again makes use of the "blurred" photograph.

It is important to point out one crucial word of this verse, which is actually set aside and placed in parentheses. The first two lines actually read:

The eyes bright scales
(watch) bullet claws coming (*CW*, p.73)

Billy tries desperately to separate himself from this chaos he feels with Angela, he wants to insert distance through the photographic perspective I have previously detailed and retain a sense of order. But he fails and the word "watch" is necessarily

placed in parenthesis and separated from the verse itself. Billy cannot simply watch anymore, he now has fallen into involvement with the action and can no longer extricate himself from this external reality. When Garrett appears “blurred in the dark”, Billy has returned to the realm of mutability, to that “pain of change” he first experienced at the Chisum ranch when John’s shirt became blurred and Billy began to lose his grip on the stable, motionless photographic perspective that sheltered his fragile inner psyche. Cooley describes this “blurred” image of Pat Garrett as one “that indicates a loss of the clear focus that in Billy’s past has incisively defined the world as photograph or empty screen” (Cooley, p.229).

‘The gate in his head’

An analysis of the image of a blurred photograph necessarily involves a more detailed look at “The gate in his head”. As a small detour, I will briefly examine this poem here in order to provide a base from which to continue my examination of the actual photographs within *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*.

Solecki insists that this poem is Ondaatje’s “most explicit articulation of how he thinks a poem should mirror or enact or express reality” and that ideally, the poem should be “less an artefact than a process of discovery” (Solecki, *Ragas*, p.104-5). This last sentiment is crucial when we consider the opposing forces within this poem and eventually reveal the result of their paradoxical nature. It is the penultimate stanza that contains this oppositional force. Its first quatrain projects a sense of constricting stasis and rigid form:

My mind is pouring chaos
in nets onto the page.

A blind lover, dont know
what I love till I write it out²².

The poet, seemingly lost as “a blind lover” cannot understand his experience until he represents it in strict poetic form, or “nets” onto the page in front of him. The second quatrain promotes a sense of movement as the poet receives a photograph with the blurred image of a gull:

And then from Gibson’s your letter
with a blurred photograph of a gull.
Caught vision. The stunning white bird
an unclear stir. (*RJ*, p.64)

This blurred photograph is not representative of the stable, static pictures that Billy is taking or that appear within the text. It could be viewed as “the red arc daze” that Billy sees at the Chisum Ranch. This type of blurred photograph is a product, or representation, of Billy’s anxiety unlike the positive, fulfilling image that will be revealed by the final stanza of Ondaatje’s poem.

Turci also emphasizes this opposition within the stanza and writes:

“the two quatrains do not so much imply an opposition between photography and writing, but rather between an aesthetic of definition and clarity and one focused on allusive impressions, the latter concerning itself with an attempt to convey the trace of something that can be alluded to but never entirely represented by the blurred image of the photograph” (Turci, p.35).

The final stanza reveals that this paradox can never be resolved but rather it is the ideal to strive for in portraying experience in artistic form:

And that is all this writing should be then.
The beautiful formed things caught at the wrong moment
so they are shapeless, awkward
moving to the clear. (*RJ*, p.64)

²² Michael Ondaatje, *Rat Jelly and Other Poems 1963-78* (London: Marion Boyars, 1980), p.64. Hereafter this work is abbreviated to *RJ* and further references are given after quotations in the text.

“The beautiful formed things” will necessarily remain “shapeless” when they are captured at “the wrong moment” or accidentally and without a previously conscious act of preparation. In this way they are able to maintain a sense of movement “to the clear” as indicated in the last line of the poem. The poem is indicating that the image which remains allusive and undefined is actually the perfect end result of writing – it is the indeterminate meaning of the art object (in this case, the blurred image of a gull) that allows art to represent life without a sense of stasis.

The title of the poem is a line taken from Victor Coleman’s poem “Day Twenty” which also concerns the work process of a poet. Annick Hillger remarks that this phrase as a title “serves to prepare the readers for a poem about perception” and what follows is a meditation on the way we perceive our reality and present it in art²³. The first stanza also has implications for our image of the blurred photograph:

Victor, the shy mind
 revealing the faint scars
 coloured strata of brain,
 not clarity but the sense of shift (RJ, p.64)

Here is the scar imagery that I first alluded to in my introduction, where I insisted that the scar could be analogous to the photograph in Ondaatje’s work. I will clarify my position about this intriguing analogy here. Hillger and Solecki both point to this scar imagery in ‘The gate in his head’ as associated with the poetry of Victor Coleman.

Hillger sees the scars as ones on Coleman’s brain itself:

“Entering the poem, we enter the poet Victor’s mind. As the title suggests, the mind can be opened or shut by ‘the gate in his head’. Sense impressions may be let in or shut out. But once they have entered the space of the mind, they leave behind scars in the brain, the “faint” but indelible traces of the aesthetic experience” (Hillger, p.64).

²³ Annick Hillger, *Not Needing All The Words: Michael Ondaatje’s Literature of Silence* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2006), p.64.

As Billy loses control over his world, he opens ‘the gate in his head’ and his brain is left exposed to his experience. The imagery of his “red grey brain” echoes that of the previous instance of his foreshadowed death when he “had a rat fyt in my head” as the bullets that kill him enter his body and there is “floating barracuda in the brain” (*CW*, p.38). An interesting connection to the “sense impressions” that Hillger insists can be “gated” from the mind is Cooley’s astute observation that Billy’s inner disintegration is associated with a shift from the strictly visual to the auditory as well. The poem that begins the final scene of his death starts “with the directions of a movie script: ‘Sound up’ ” (Cooley p. 226) and Billy’s auditory sense is almost excruciating in its detail and amplification as he hears straw in the mattress “each blade loud in its clear flick against each other” (*CW*, p.90). He even hears the “crack at the glass as the day’s heat evaporates from the window” and the breathing surrounding him in the exaggerated way it is presented on the page as “spilling through his teeth hisssssssssss” (*CW*, p.90). This slip into the dual auditory/visual realm occurs as the cinematic imagery takes over the narrative and the auditory invasion disrupts “Billy’s spatialization of time in his silent capsules” (Cooley p.227). Billy can no longer preserve moments from time and the distance he is able to acquire visually through his photographic perspective disappears. The very mutable cinematic world Billy is now thrown into emphasizes both time and movement; and unable to contain his experience in the static, ordered photographic snapshots, Billy’s brain will become scarred from this final aesthetic experience.

Solecki sees these “faint scars” as “metaphors for Coleman’s poems (“One Eye Love”, “Stranger”) which, in a mode much more radical than Ondaatje’s, attempt to give the reader a sense of life as pure process, as ‘shift’ and ‘chaos’” (Solecki, *Ragas*, p.106). Solecki goes on to argue that these “faint scars” should be considered in light of

what this image often represents in Ondaatje's poetry: "the scar literally incorporates and memorializes an emotion, an act, or an experience" (Solecki, *Ragas*, p.106). Solecki goes even further in his argument to insist that the scar is analogous to the perfect poem as he writes that "one could even say that a scar is finally analogous to an ideal, because non-verbal, poem in which the distinction between word and thing or event has disappeared, and all that is left is a symbolic trace" (Solecki, *Ragas*, p.106). The term "symbolic trace" explains that the scar is symbolic in the manner that it represents the trauma of the event and it is a trace in its indexical sign. The scar displays that an act or event (or in the case of an emotional scar, a memory) occurred in the first place.

I would like to argue that the scar is analogous in this manner to the *blurred* photograph. The photograph is first and foremost a trace, it is an indexical sign of something that has occurred or was present, yet it is fundamentally separate and detached from that which it represents. However, a photograph alone is not like the scar (and thus, the ideal poem) because it could be viewed as analogous to words. It is itself an art form like the poem. But if we consider the qualities of the *blurred* photograph, its movement, its sense of shift and multiplicity of meaning, its ability to portray a "caught movement" without strict and static form: it is like a scar or "all this writing should be then".

Billy's role as Artist: Reconstruction

A good introduction to cinema as it pertains to *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* is Cooley's description that "cinema provides a fitting version of a mobile world that cannot be isolated and edited into stills, that resists Billy's steps to solidify motion, to turn events into nouns" (Cooley, p.222). This "mobile world" is the changing, mutable world that Billy attempts to order, these attempts gradually failing until he is eventually

killed by Garrett at the end of the book. As this process of visually extracting moments and events from the mobile world around him begins to fail in terms of photographic stillness, cinematic imagery invades the text. The calm and controlled perspective where Billy can watch “the white landscape in its frame/a world that’s so precise/every nail and cobweb/has magnified itself to my presence” (*CW*, p.74) that could be a camera lens keeping objects at a distance and zooming in to see their detail, is overcome by frantic and rapid cinematic shots. For example, the verses concerning Billy’s death are portrayed through multiple, different camera angles like the climax of an action film. There is “Garrett running from a door – all seen sliding around/the screen of a horse’s eye” in a distorted wide-angle lens and the sudden shift to the close up of “the naked arm from the body, breaks through the window” (94)²⁴.

This is Ondaatje’s first use of cinematic camera angles in his work and will be explored in greater detail as this technique develops in his later novels. The element of the cinematic most central to my analysis is one that has been referenced but not fully examined by other critics of this text. This element is what I will term *reconstruction* and involves, again, the consideration of photographic stillness in regard to its cinematic counterpart. Before the film shots that detail Billy’s death are fully present in the text, there is an attempt on Billy’s part to take the photographic images, which could also be interpreted as film stills, and rearrange them into a new construction of reality that better suits his fragile state. Cooley comments that “Billy desperately wants, more than anything, by his unblinking gaze, to freeze action in a series of still photographs, or a series of shots approaching still photographs” (Cooley, p.217). These “series of shots approaching still photographs” or cinematic film stills, play a central role in Billy’s portrayal as an artist.

²⁴ For a detailed analysis of the cinematic camera shots in the text, see Cooley 222-9.

First I will analyse how the act of reconstruction is performed by Billy before leading into an examination of how this is a demonstration of his role as artist in the book. When Billy is unable to cope emotionally with a difficult situation, he attempts to replay and reconstruct it, in order to observe the situation in an assuasive manner. We observed this with the death of Charlie Bowdre, but as the narrative progresses, Billy finds it increasingly difficult to photographically stop the chaos around him. In the section beginning “His stomach was warm”, Billy needs to separate himself from the unpleasant act of pulling a bullet out of a stomach:

His stomach was warm
 remembered this when I put my hand into
 a pot of luke warm tea to wash it out
 dragging out the stomach to get the bullet
 he wanted to see when taking tea
 with Sallie Chisum in Paris Texas

With Sallie Chisum in Paris Texas
 he wanted to see when taking tea
 dragging out the stomach to get the bullet
 a pot of luke warm tea to wash it out
 remembered this when I put my hand into
 his stomach was warm (CW, p.27)

Discussing this passage, Nodelman at first writes that the passage “implies...Billy views things photographically himself to avoid emotional involvement with them” (Nodelman, p.70). He then uses cinematic terminology to determine that “each line becomes a separable component, like the individual frames of a motion picture” and that the second stanza is “like a film run backwards” (Nodelman, p.70). These two stanzas are composed of cinematic still images because they have, in Bazin’s words “mummified change”. Instead of the stark, unemotional observance Billy wishes he could recreate here, he is failed by the active verbs such as “taking” and “digging” and the fact that he explicitly recalls this incident as memory instead of one of his usual

tales that have no temporal signifier. Cooley also makes an excellent point that the inverted second stanza “further heightens the sense of trauma when it returns the poem to its point of origin, reminding us in stark finality that ‘his stomach was warm’” (Cooley, p.224).

While Billy’s attempt here to control the traumatic circumstance of this event is not entirely successful, it is important to note that he is trying to achieve control through reconstruction. Hutcheon points out that “motion frozen into form comes to be associated with the fixity of madness, though Billy fights this by dynamic attempts at real understanding: he recomposes, retakes, replays scenes of trauma, but always as an attempted means of control”²⁵.

The act of reconstruction is an essential element of this book. It performs a twofold task: Billy’s reconstructions delineate the nature of photographic and cinematic stillness that I have been discussing and they also point to the nature of the artistic process both Billy and Ondaatje are involved in. A poem from Ondaatje’s first collection, *The Dainty Monsters*, makes first reference to the act of reconstruction in these terms. In “Four Eyes”, the speaker wants to record what his lover is seeing and he says:

I would freeze this moment
and in supreme patience
place pianos
and craggy black horses on a beach
and in immobilised time
attempt to reconstruct. (DM, p.46)

In his analysis of this poem, Solecki writes that “it is concerned with what happens when a poet tries to ‘reconstruct’ a lived moment as art” (Solecki, *Ragas*, p.29). Billy’s status as an artist has been an oft debated issue in the criticism surrounding this book.

²⁵ Linda Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988), p.48.

Scobie points to the poetic image that Billy first uses, “Blood a necklace on me all my life”, coupled with this use of the first person to argue that “Ondaatje’s legendary context for Billy is poetry; the transformation will be carried out mainly through the poetic image; the book will present Billy himself as an artist”²⁶. He goes on to affirm that Ondaatje and Billy are “a composite figure” (Scobie, p.193) while Nodelman argues that it is through the gradual rejection of the legend of Billy the Kid in the book that Ondaatje is able to “purge” himself of Billy.

He does concede, however, that “Billy’s activities *are* identified with the methods of photography, and they might be a metaphor for the work of artists” (Nodelman, p.77). York’s line of inquiry also points to the rejection of Billy’s legendary status by Ondaatje “in order to study Billy as the prototype of a certain type of artist – a potential creator who becomes a destroyer”²⁷. Finally, Linda Hutcheon provides an emphatic statement when she writes that in the book “Michael Ondaatje uses photography as the controlling metaphor for perception and (even more problematically) for artistic production” (Hutcheon, p.47).

My argument lies on the side of Billy performing the role of the artist and it is his reconstructions that demonstrate this position. Billy repeatedly moves to “freeze this moment” and in this perceived state of “immobilised time” rearranges the now immutable things around him in an “attempt to reconstruct”. But the crucial part of this continual act of reconstruction that Billy performs as an artist is the separation from the world around him that necessitates these “artistic” maneuvers. Solecki writes about the consequence of the speaker’s reconstruction in “Four Eyes”, that it is

²⁶ Stephen Scobie, ‘Two Authors in Search of a Character: bp Nichol and Michael Ondaatje’ in *Spider Blues: Essays on Michael Ondaatje*, ed. by Sam Solecki (Montreal: Vehicule Press, 1985), pp. 185-210 (p.193).

²⁷ Lorraine M. York, *The Other Side of Dailiness: Photography in the Works of Alice Munro, Timothy Findley, Michael Ondaatje and Margaret Laurence* (Toronto: ECW Press, 1988), p. 104.

“his necessary separation from the experience itself, as if he must choose between the perfection of life and the perfection of art (Yeats). In order to write about it, he must leave it: ‘This moment I broke to record’...’broke’ questions the writer’s choice of art over life while also suggesting that in some ways he betrays or commits violence against life in order to turn it into art. Instead of being a participant, he becomes a detached observer who prefers searching for the verbal equivalent of a lived moment to life itself” (Solecki, *Ragas*, p.29).

This is precisely the process which Billy repeatedly engages in throughout *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. His separation from the living flux of the world around him is the inevitable result of his desire for photographic stillness. This is perhaps the reversed process from most criticism analysing Billy’s photographic perspective, but it demonstrates why his artistic persona is one, in York’s terms, that destroys instead of creates. It also points to the integral function of reconstruction in Billy’s artistic pursuit – he, like the speaker in “Four Eyes” wants to freeze the moment, immobilise time, and reconstruct the scene around him. While the purpose may be different (the poem’s speaker wishes to cement this moment with his lover and Billy’s desire stems from an impending sense of death) the process is one and the same. Both figures here are artists and both are faced with the dilemma of leaving life behind in order to successfully create their art.

This is the same paradoxical situation that the blurred photograph hopes to successfully navigate. Ondaatje’s poem points out the allusive representation of experience that can be captured in art. It is a way to provide form to something that should remain formless, providing an aesthetic with multiple methods of interpretation that involves the reader or viewer and allows the artist to remain within the moment itself, instead of separating from it. The blurred photograph allows for an artistic persona that creates, not destroys. Billy’s inability to accomplish this in his own role as an artist is perhaps a signal that the role of *the reader as artist* should not be drawn into the same failure. A metafictional text such as *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*

necessarily involves the reader in its act of production as well as reception and it is through the photographs reproduced within the text that I will now analyse this process.

A Response to the Photographs Within the Text

Reading Billy's role as an artist as one that questions how to navigate the separation between the mutable, moving experience of life and the suffocating fixity of presenting it through photography, the question inevitably arises: Why does Ondaatje choose to include photographs within the text? Their allusive denotative nature insist that they do not serve a purely illustrative function, therefore their placement within the book must perform a different task. Jones comments that the allusive nature of the photographs may be a factor in the neglect of commentary on their existence within the text. She writes that "considering their resistance to interpretation as conventional 'illustrations' of the text, [this neglect] is not surprising. The photographs do not, as one might expect, simply 'translate' written material into images or refer unambiguously to readily identifiable historical subjects"²⁸.

Ondaatje makes an interesting remark in a 1975 interview with Sam Solecki regarding the design of *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. He says, "Certainly with [this book] design was very important. We had to determine the type, the paper design, the paper texture, where the photographs would go, things like the first page on which Billy's photograph doesn't appear" (Solecki, *Interview*, p.21).

This remark, coupled with the perplexing photographs (and lack of photographs) within the text, seem to point toward an investigation into their existence and function in the book. Turci also makes reference to this Ondaatje quotation and insists that "Far

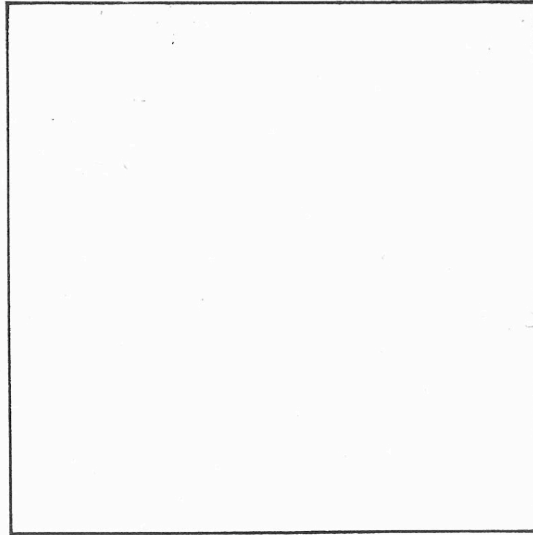
²⁸ Manina Jones, *That Art of Difference: 'Documentary-Collage' and English-Canadian Writing* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), p. 73.

from being an incidental question of presentation, this is a fundamental aspect of this work, arguably as important as its content” (Turci, p.40).

Analysing the function of these photographs is particularly crucial because they set a template for an examination of the narrative and textual concerns that Ondaatje will engage with through the books that follow *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. We must remind ourselves here of Hutcheon’s assertion that postmodern writers, specifically including Ondaatje, are highly self-conscious of the nature of their medium and “overtly aware of the twin processes involved in their production: their creation and reception” (Hutcheon, p.45). By examining how the reader responds and engages with the photographs in the text, we can interpret how these images function in the work. They point to the indeterminate boundaries between media and literary genre; the representation of history as a fictional construct; and the destabilization of meaning through slippages in time and space, the relationship between text and image, and photographic appropriation.

The “Missing” Portrait of Billy the Kid

Nodelman’s comment that the inclusion of photographs in Ondaatje’s first major work “is an interesting experiment” but that his “choice of specific images is bewildering” is quite an appropriate one (Nodelman, p.68). The author is indeed experimenting with the manner with which he will later work with all of these thematic and textual issues I have outlined here. The bewildering nature of the images only leads us into a demanding examination of how they function and what Ondaatje is trying to achieve by their inclusion. Or as my analysis of the photographs in the text will begin, their *exclusion*.



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. I shall show you what can be done from the saddle without ground glass or tripod — please notice when you get the specimens that they were made with the lens wide open and many of the best exposed when my horse was in motion.

Figure 1

The first page of the book displays what appears to be a large, blank square.

(Figure 1) Beginning my analysis of the photographs in the text through this image (or non-image) facilitates a brief outline of most of the thematic and structural concerns of the work. Critics have contributed a variety of different responses to this first page of the volume: concerning the necessary readjustment of textual response and the involvement of the reader, the problem of accurate perception and the representation/construction of history, and my own argument that this blank space insists upon an engagement with multiplicity of meaning in the photographic images.

It is not until considering the italicized words below it that it is realized to possibly be an empty picture frame: “I send you a picture of Billy made with the Perry shutter as quick as it can be worked – Pyro and soda developer” (*CW*, p.5). Assuming that these words indicate this is a “missing” photograph of Billy the Kid, critics have generally interpreted the space as an example of the difficulties in capturing and portraying the true character of the protagonist. Lorraine York insists that the blank space is representative of the struggle between flux and fixity in the work: “any portrait of Billy...which demands fixity can only be incomplete, a blank portrait. Motion and flux, instead, must be captured by the fictional photographer” (York, p.107). This impossibility of showing a portrait of Billy in motion could be affirmed by another blank space (though unframed) in the book above the four short lines: “Up with the curtain/down with your pants/William Bonney/is going to dance” (*CW*, p.63). The reader cannot witness a photograph of Billy dancing (such an exaggerated demonstration of movement) because to do so would betray the fact that Billy eventually fails at his attempts to stop motion.

Two ends of the same argument surrounding the empty frame point to another possible meaning behind the missing image. MacLulich sees the space as “an

undeveloped photograph, the reader's as yet unformed image of Billy" (MacLulich, p.109). Others see the photograph as undevelopable at all. The Billy the Kid that Michael Ondaatje wants to portray in this book, free from the historical trapping and mythic legends that surround him, does not exist in a photograph. Its absence "suggests Ondaatje's desire to present a fresh image of the famous outlaw"²⁹ as well as symbolizing the "failure of the writings, documents and testimonies to yield a final coherent image of who Billy the Kid actually was" (Turci p.40).

Continuing this reading of the blank space, one of the most interesting interpretations of it is that of W.F. Garrett-Petts, who points out that if we hold this single page up to the light, the blank space is suddenly filled with text by way of the poem on the page verso. The reader cannot see Billy's image but instead sees a verbal representation of the list of people who have been killed. Garrett-Petts insists that this shifting between the visual and verbal is first experienced here by the framed white space; its function to "refuse conventional strategies of textual response"³⁰. The reader will have to become overtly involved in the process of reading this text. Any understanding of the story will necessitate flipping back and forth between the pages, considering the photographs as they pertain to the words surrounding them, asking questions of both the verbal and visual elements of the text. The character of Billy the Kid must be deduced in this fashion, or he will be "like the seemingly empty space on page five of Ondaatje's book, remain[ing] invisible only to those who rely on words alone to explain it all" (Garrett-Petts, p.160).

If we then consider this visually arresting space in conjunction with the words the accompany it, a quotation from L.A. Huffman, a number of different meanings

²⁹ Timothy Dow Adams, *Light Writing and Life Writing: Photography in Autobiography* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), p.105.

³⁰ W.F. Garrett-Petts, *Photographic Encounters: The Edges and Edginess of Reading Prose Pictures and Visual Fictions* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2000), p.158.

emerge. MacLulich sees this quotation as an indication of “the problems of accurate perception” and the ways in which the photographs within the text reflect and address this (MacLulich, p.109). He points to the concluding lines of the quotation that read “please notice when you get the specimens that they were made with the lens wide open and many of the best exposed when my horse was in motion”. MacLulich asserts that Ondaatje is also writing with his “lens wide open” in an attempt to put Billy on exhibition, like the denotative qualities of a photograph. By so doing, he is avoiding any one interpretation of the figure, allowing the reader to determine his or her own mind about Billy’s motivations, successes and failures. But the blank space suggests that such a task will be a difficult one, as there is no single interpretation, or image, of the protagonist to be found in this book. This insistence upon the role of the reader in the text is necessarily connected to the author’s construction of the book in this manner. The role of the author is also pointed to by this blank space and its accompanying quotation, in two different ways.

The first stems almost directly from the quotation. Jones points out that Huffman’s words contain an “ostensibly simple, referential quality [that is] clearly ruptured by the absence of the photograph in question, signaled by the open frame” (Jones, p.76). It is impossible for the reader to see this blank space as a historical document, like the quotation indicates. Instead, this blank space now belongs to the realm of fiction; it marks itself as an instrument of the author’s and there is a shift from “the apparently historical and factual reference of the paragraph to a fictional, poetic referent (the poem as a whole)” (Jones, p.76). Jones uses the title of Judith Owen’s paper as a further description of this shift from the historical to the fictional: it is titled “I Send You a Picture: Ondaatje’s Portrait of Billy the Kid”. This is not an archival photograph, it is *Ondaatje’s* “photographic” portrait of his protagonist.

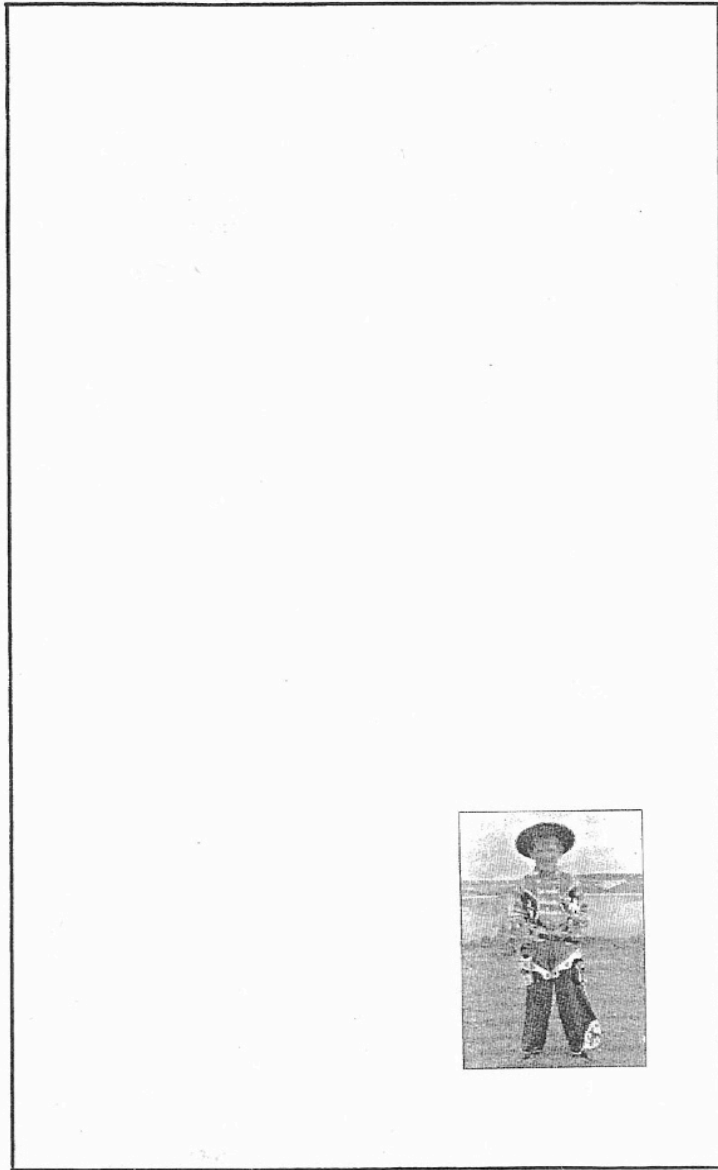


Figure 2

The blank frame at the beginning of the book is not the only one in the book. The second occurs on the very last page of the volume. Instead of an accompanying quotation, this time there is a tiny photograph in the bottom right hand corner – of Ondaatje as a child, perhaps five or six years old, and dressed in a cowboy costume. **(Figure 2)** I would suggest that this image is a kind of reply to the mysterious empty frame that opens the book. Turci also sees a connection between the two blank spaces, writing that this image of Ondaatje is “a substitution of Billy the Kid’s body for the author’s, one that alludes to the ways in which this myth has become integrated into his own biography” (Turci, p.41). This line of thought would back up Nodelman’s assertion that Ondaatje is purging himself of the legend of Billy the Kid throughout the book (Nodelman, p.77).

Garrett-Petts views this photograph of Ondaatje as “a complex visual signature – an image of identification that links author and subject, and involves the reader in multiple interpretative tasks” (Garrett-Petts, p.153). I agree that the photograph links Ondaatje with Billy and that it is, indeed, a “complex visual signature”. For this “signature” seems to not only refer to Ondaatje as the author, but also as the *reader* of this collection of poems. This implication of Ondaatje as reader is partly created by the childhood photograph. It is a reminder that the author was enthralled and captivated by the storybook legend of Billy the Kid, the mythology of which was most likely inspired by old photographs, films, and comic books (like the one reprinted in this book). But perhaps these old documents must have failed to present the complete image of Billy the Kid to Ondaatje and he is pointing to the fictional elements of historiography.

By assembling these “documents” – photographs, comic book sketch, jailhouse interview, graphic illustrations – into a collage, Ondaatje is also affirming his place as the reader of these texts: he, too, is playing a role in the re-collection and re-imagining

of Billy the Kid. Smaro Kambourelli writes of Ondaatje's role in this context: "Ondaatje denies himself the authority of the author; instead, he foregrounds his role as a reader of found narrative; a reader who becomes a writer"³¹. This is what the small childhood photograph of Ondaatje seems to be saying: I am still a reader of the verbal and visual texts surrounding Billy the Kid, but I am rearranging and presenting a variety of different contexts and meanings for his character and story. This multiplicity of meaning is promoting the fictionalization of any process that reconstructs the past.

Finally, this "filling in" of the blank space or empty frame at the beginning of the book by this childhood photograph signals one more important thing to the reader. Garrett-Petts points out that the common critical assumption that the blank space is representative of an "absence" or an undeveloped photograph, or that it signifies a "negative", is not necessarily the only interpretation possible. He writes that "it might easily signify an overexposed presence" (Garrett-Petts, p.156). If we consider the Huffman quotation, then these "specimens" the reader will encounter throughout the text have been "made with the lens wide open" – too much light from a wide open lens would result in an *overexposed* photograph. MacLulich grapples with the reader's purpose in this book, as he considers the reader to be, in fact, "the last photographer in the series that extends from Huffman to Billy to Ondaatje" (MacLulich, p.109). He questions whether the reader should view the book "as a warning against the dehumanizing consequences of photographic voyeurism" (MacLulich, p.109)³².

I would argue that the possibility of an *overexposed* presence of Billy at the beginning of the book is a similar warning. Ondaatje's presence at the end of the volume, connecting with this overexposure, is providing a cautionary hint towards not

³¹ Smaro Kambourelli, *On The Edge Of Genre: The Contemporary Canadian Long Poem* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), p.186.

³² MacLulich refers to Sontag, p.40-42 in this argument.

reading only one interpretation of Billy the Kid, as he perhaps did as a child. To fall victim to the myth surrounding his character and not use all of the elements of the collage before the reader in the book would be to overexpose Billy into invisibility – thus, the blank space at the beginning of the text. The lines in the book uttered by Billy himself caution this possibility, when he says: “I am here on the edge of the sun/that would ignite me/looking out into pitch white/sky and grass overdeveloped to meaninglessness” (*CW*, p.74).

The Photographs as Instruction

On the page with the caption (a rarely seen element in this book) “Paulita Maxwell: The Photograph”, there is another large blank space, underneath which are a few italicized lines regarding a photograph taken of Billy the Kid by a travelling photographer. The words, seemingly spoken by Paulita Maxwell, tell the reader that the photograph is an unsuccessful representation of Billy: “I don’t think it does Billy justice” (*CW*, p.19). On the following page, Billy’s voice returns and he makes a remark that could be a direct reference to this misleading photograph: “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, to be in” (*CW*, p.20).

Billy seems to be warning the reader that the story being told here and his character as it is revealed will not be the one of old myth and legend. The reader must instead “find the beginning...the key to unlock” a different, and perhaps more accurate, version of Billy the Kid. Finding “the beginning” of this story is a perplexing task due to the fragmented nature of the narrative and the collage-like structure of the entire book. Jones writes about this task of the reader and suggests that they “should perhaps be looking less for keys than keyholes, entrance not into a teleological narrative

structure that terminates in a single exit, but through and into textual/narrative uncertainties” (Jones, p.72). She goes on to assert that the description of Boot Hill and its cemetery is a good indication of the “maze” that is about to confront the reader. She writes that it “represents a symbolic structure of both entrance and indirection” (Jones, p.72) and its description details this: “There is an elaborate gate/but the path keeps to no main route for it tangles/like branches of a tree among the gravestones” (*CW*, p.9).

The most interesting part of this description in regard to my analysis of photographic metaphor in the work is the element of the gravestones. In the midst of so many pages of text that tell the story of death – from a list of the killed to Tom O’Folliard’s death, to chaotic hallucinations of the dying, and then to the demise of both Gregory and Charlie Bowdre – there is a moment when the bodies and methods and circumstances of death are left aside. Instead, the focus comes to rest on the gravestones themselves. Jones comments that the path, which is associated with this “maze”, does not lead “directly to the dead themselves, but in a tangled, indirect route ‘among the gravestones’, signs of the dead” (Jones, p.72). That there is a moment just before the instructive words of Billy the Kid to the reader’s role in the story that focuses on “signs of the dead” rather than the dead themselves is a crucial signal towards photographic metaphor within the text. Gravestones are a *trace*, or an indexical sign, of someone who was once present – and photographs perform this identical function. It is my assertion that the role of the photographs within the text are being signalled here as one of the methods through which the reader should interpret and discover Billy the Kid.

I have already discussed the various ways in which *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* can be read photographically, and as Jones points out, to do this demonstrates that there is “mediation at the first level of perception” (Jones, p.73). Not only does Billy the Kid interpret the world around him through a process of mediation, but the

reader is performing this task as well while trying to ascertain precisely what he or she is witnessing in this text. Jones asserts that this photographic method of understanding the verbal parts of the text “suggests a continuing process of ‘reading’ or reinterpretation that transgresses the boundaries between media” (Jones, p.73).

These “boundaries between media” have been discussed thoroughly by Linda Hutcheon in her work on postmodern literature and its place in redefining the various genres of literary study. Hutcheon singles out Ondaatje as the Canadian poet “who seems most aware of generic borders, and of how they can be usefully trespassed” (Hutcheon, p.82). In *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, we are witness to Ondaatje’s first experimentation with using various texts to signal the fictional construct of history as well as the blurring of boundaries between history, biography and fiction. This will be seriously and emphatically presented in *Running in the Family*.

The thought that distinctions between genres have been “radically destabilized” according to Hutcheon, that “poetry, fiction, biography, history, criticism, theory – all can be seen primarily as *texts* and therefore can be read as such, that is with suspicion” (Hutcheon, p.82) is an important one when looking at Ondaatje’s work. To view Billy the Kid and his story with suspicion is precisely the author’s aim; for questioning the authority of the text and determining the fictional nature of its construction is one of its underlying thematic concerns. To achieve this aim, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* is dominated by a perpetual destabilisation of meaning and the inclusion of the photographs within the text is a major factor in this process.

If we consider Jonathan Culler’s argument that the reader should be a factor in the determination of genre, this signal of the importance of photographs as a trace within the text that I have just detailed, could be viewed as an instruction to the reader. Culler explains that genre should be not one simple category but rather “a set of

expectations, a set of instructions about the type of coherence one is to look for and the ways in which sequences are to be read”³³.

The Photographs

Let us consider the six photographs that appear within the text (excluding the childhood photograph of Ondaatje previously discussed). They are grainy, seemingly nineteenth century era images of the following: three men in a field, one dressed in a cavalry uniform, one painting a sign and a skeleton in the foreground; a log cabin with two men and a woman outside of it; a portrait-like photograph of a seated man and woman; the interior of a log cabin with bed, stove, table, chair and various objects hanging from the wall; a man and dog sitting atop a canvas parcel; a close-up shot of the bed from the interior cabin image, which reveals a gun and gun belt next to it.

All of these images do not immediately portray a firm message to the reader, they simply look to be of the past and of a poor quality. Even when considering their placement within the text and using this context to determine their message, no stable meanings emerge. For example, the photograph that lies opposite Billy’s second telling of Charlie Bowdre’s death remains a mystery even when considering the context of its adjacent text. The photograph contains a log cabin with three people outside its door. It cannot be the house at Tivan Arroyo where Charlie is shot because it prominently shows windows and one of the figures outside is a woman. It cannot be the Chisum ranch, which is described as having a porch. Only with some research will the reader discover that this appropriated photograph is actually titled “Ye Studio-La Atelier 18x40. 3 rooms” and is Huffman’s photographic studio in Montana. By bringing the artist into the book in this way, there is an emphasis on the story as fictional construct.

³³ Jonathan Culler , ‘Toward a Theory of Non-Genre Literature’, in *Surfiction*, ed. by Raymond Federman (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1981), pp. 255-262 (p.255).

By forcing the reader to question the content of the photograph, and by providing no clear answer, the meaning of the text remains unstable. The reader remains unsure of where or what this photograph is and this creates an ambiguous sense of time and space. Commenting on this log cabin image, Turci writes that “the illustrative function of the photograph is both suggested and thwarted. It seems to have been quoted out of context: there has been a slippage in time and/or space” (Turci, p.74). Using this technique of placing photographs seemingly out of sequence to its textual context in order to destabilize meaning with this slippage of time is one Ondaatje will use to great effect in *Running in the Family*.

Bethell writes about the reader’s difficulty in grasping a firm foothold in the text in terms of spatio-temporal location. She describes the position of the reader to be analogous to that of a “historian examining fragmentary material that has little or no context”³⁴. The reader is consistently faced with uncertainty regarding where and when an event is occurring and often who or what is involved because each poem in the volume remains separate from the others and there is no context from the surrounding fragments to provide clear meaning. Bethell points out that “without the context of the surrounding material (a jumble of similarly decontextualized fragments), the poem becomes a curiosity with no historical value” (Bethell, p.75). Similarly, the lack of textual context to the images in the book results in the photographs remaining a “curiosity” to the reader, with no intrinsic “historical value”. In this way they remain representative of the difficulties in recording the past and the reader is forced to become involved in the process of creating history himself, as asserted by Hutcheon.

The photographs included in the book also are emblematic of the stillness that portrays the desire for immutability on Billy’s part. They seem to replicate Billy’s

³⁴ Kathleen I. Bethell, ‘Reading Billy: Memory, Time, and Subjectivity in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*’, *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 28:1 (2003), 71-89 (p. 75).

perspective in the way they halt time and create a sense of distance. The historical feeling of the photographs provides a sense of intrigue for the reader – did Billy the Kid actually live in this cabin and befriend or kill the people depicted? Is that his gun lying beside the bed? But because no definitive answer to questions like these is ever provided, the images remain distant from us, representative only of a long ago time and place. Turci comments on this dual reaction of the reader: “To view these photograph is to be subject to different kinds of ‘lure’; to be both drawn into this world of trace, but also simultaneously to register a sense of distance from the world they portray. One is aware of the images as a container of time and of how images sever the time they entrap from the experience of duration” (Turci, p.43).

In *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, Ondaatje is using the photographs within the text to replicate Billy’s perspective. The photographs, as they are used to demonstrate both this notion of containing time and (as we will now see) problems with historical representation, function in the realm of cinematic conception. They always carry with them a sense of halted time and a portrayal of the past that cannot be fully understood or reached. This destabilises meaning in the text but it also points to the photographic perspective as a destroyer. Billy’s artistic persona is displayed in this function of the photograph as a destroyer rather than creator. This is an important determination to make because the indeterminate meaning of the photographs within *Running in the Family* will operate in a completely different manner – this will function through the intimacy created between reader/viewer and the photographic stillness present in the image.

Friday’s discussion of photographic and cinematic stillness points out that “where photography often gains in intimacy as a result of its stillness, duration and movement in cinema are prone to smother its subject matter with expectation” (Friday,

p.47). Considering this statement, it is apparent that the photographs within the text and the distance they exude belong to the cinematic conception of photographic stillness. There is no intimacy between the images and the reader, only a sense of bewilderment (in Nodelman's terms) and separation. This is an important distinction to make here because we will see a completely different use of photographs within the text when analysing *Running in the Family*. In this latter book, a sense of intimacy through photographic preservation is a key component of the work.

The problematic representation of History

This sense of distance is created by the representation of history in the images. The ambiguous nature of the images is representative of the difficulties in portraying history in a postmodern text. Hutcheon argues that in postmodern fiction, history is "being rethought as a human construct...Its accessibility to us is now entirely conditioned by textuality. We cannot know the past except through its texts: its documents, its evidence, even its eye-witness accounts are *texts*"³⁵. We have established that the photographs in the text do not serve an illustrative purpose, but can we understand them as evidence of the historical past?

Allan Sekula writes about photographs as evidence when debating the status of photographic meaning and he uses the analogy of a bank robber caught on a security camera. While the photographic image can definitively say: yes, this person was present in this space at this time, it can't do much else as evidence. In the courtroom, lawyers take over to argue the circumstances and possibilities surrounding this captured presence on film. Sekula writes that, in fact, "the only 'objective' truth that photographs offer is the assertion that somebody or something – in this case, an automated camera –

³⁵ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988), p.16.

was somewhere and took a picture. Everything else, everything beyond the imprinting of a trace, is up for grabs”³⁶. The photographs in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* function in the same manner. They do not provide evidence for any of the tales told within the pages of this book but instead remain just traces that are “up for grabs” in terms of the reader’s interpretation of their meaning. The reader is thus implicated in the construction of history as it is being presented here. History is being asserted as a human construct in this process of the reader interpreting the function and meaning of the photographs within the text.

Beside the historiographic metafictional process at work here, it is worth noting that photographs can be considered to have a unique relationship to history.

Photographer Paul Strand wrote an influential article in the penultimate issue of the seminal photographic journal *Camerawork*, in which he discussed the role of photography in history. Strand writes:

“a small group of men and women worked with honest and sincere purpose, some instinctively and few consciously, but without any background of photographic or graphic formulae much less any cut and dried ideas of what is Art and what isn’t; this innocence was their real strength. Everything they wanted to say had to be worked out by their own experiments: it was born of actual living”³⁷.

Strand is revealing that photography seems to reject cultural inheritance and is instead formed solely from human experience – that it is a medium which has been developed *outside of public history*³⁸. This is perhaps why photography is an attractive medium to Ondaatje in the context of this text – by eschewing the past historical documents that have followed and “explained” the legend of Billy the Kid and instead placing photographs of indeterminate meaning within the text, Ondaatje is addressing a major

³⁶ Allan Sekula, *Photography Against the Grain: Essays and Photo-Works 1973-1983* (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia School of Art and Design, 1984), p.57.

³⁷ Paul Strand, ‘Photography’, in *Camera Work* 49/50 (1917), reprinted in B. Newhall (1982) *The History of Photography* (New York: MOMA), p.326-7.

³⁸ Derrick Price and Liz Wells, ‘Thinking about photography: debates, historically and now’, in *Photography: A Critical Introduction*, ed. by Liz Wells, 3rd ed (Milton Park: Routledge, 1996), pp.9-64 (p.20).

thematic concern. He is asserting that the reader cannot be burdened with the past texts of Billy the Kid because they bring with them the baggage of cultural inheritance. It is the human experience that Ondaatje wants to foreground in this work. Part of this is achieved by creating the focus on Billy's imagination and conscious experience – the reader is witnessing Billy's world through his viewpoint most of the time, not trying to justify the cultural and historical texts about him that have been passed down to us. In order to emphasize this point, Ondaatje uses the photographs within the book to signal a historical past that cannot be interpreted solely by its “text” (the photograph). The acknowledgments indicate that some of the photographs are by L.A. Huffman, which gives them a sense of credibility in terms of representing the past. But any sense of authority that this knowledge might give the photographs is relinquished by Ondaatje's appropriation of them for his own use.

According to John Berger, “Photographs bear witness to a human choice being exercised in a given situation. A photograph is a result of the photographer's decision that it is worth recording that this particular event or this particular object has been seen”³⁹. If we consider this assertion in light of the photographs in the book, it is worth noting that Ondaatje is choosing an image that has already been chosen once.

The function of this photographic appropriation can be analysed in light of Abigail Solomon Godeau's discussion of the implications of such use for the reader. She writes, “inasmuch as appropriation functions by putting visual quotation marks around the stolen image, its critical application lies in its ability to compel the viewer to see dialectically”⁴⁰. Jones points to this quotation as an example of Linda Hutcheon's definition of Billy the Kid as a “historiographic referent” (Hutcheon, p.86). By writing

³⁹ John Berger, ‘Understanding a Photograph’, in *John Berger: Selected Essays*, ed. by Geoff Dyer (New York: Vintage, 2001), pp.215-218 (p.216).

⁴⁰ Abigail Solomon Godeau, ‘Winning the Game When the Rules Have Been Changed: Art Photography and Postmodernism’, *Screen*, 25.6 (1984), (88-102), p.91.

about Billy in a metafictional fashion, Ondaatje is creating a figure that is both the real historical Billy the Kid and simultaneously not this figure, but instead the product of the text's writing (*historiographic*). Hutcheon explains that "the referent here is doubled; it partakes of two realities" (Hutcheon, p.86).

Any quick glance of the original Huffman photographs appropriated by Ondaatje will reveal how he has manipulated the original image to his own use, thereby creating his own dialectical process. The photograph of a man and dog sitting atop a cart is placed before the section which tells the story of Livingstone being eaten by his mad canines. The dog is the focus of this image, but it is not central to the original photograph, which is comprised of a much larger frame. Its title is "Wolfer's tri-wheeled outfit used in rough country" and shows a large wagon with the dog and wolfer sitting on it as well as two horses and a large, imposing hill in the background. The symbolic sign of the original photograph is one of hardship and bareness of living in such an inhospitable land. However, by reducing the frame of the image and making the dog the focus of the photograph, the symbolic sign shifts to one of camaraderie between man and animal – a direct contrast to the brutal nature of Chisum's anecdote.

This example of an appropriated image reflects on the nature of a photographic image as evidence, the disparity between text and image that points to a destabilisation of meaning in the text and the continual process of determining the multiplicity of meanings that the reader must engage with in this work. Questioning the ambiguous nature of these photographs points to Hutcheon's assertion that "History, like narrative, becomes...a process, not a product. It is a lived experience for both reader and writer" (Hutcheon, p.86). The photographs have difficulty presenting themselves purely as product because the reader is consistently unsure as to what they are depicting, what they are illustrating in regard to the text, and what their meaning subsequently is or

suggests. This emphasis on the limits of photographic representation is assisted by the noticeable lack of captions, or any other written reference to the images in the text.

The credit given to Huffman seems to indicate that the reader should view these photographs with a sense of documentary purpose. Such a purpose typically will involve the images illustrating the documentary text and this is very often accompanied by instructive or descriptive captions to the image. Barthes sees this usage of captions as an antiquated one and finds that the opposite now holds true. He writes that “the text constitutes a parasitic message designed to connote the image...the image no longer *illustrates* the words; it is now the words which, structurally, are parasitic on the image”⁴¹. However, neither of these two approaches to text and image are applied in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. I have already detailed the lack of an illustrative function to these photographs and while the text surrounding the images may occasionally appear to be contextual (the dog on cart next to the Livingstone anecdote, the portrait of a couple next to lines that could be spoken by Sallie Chisum but meaning is never clear, and the reader is never entirely sure if the text and image are related to each other⁴²).

Turci makes a good point that this absence of captions highlights the interruption between text and image that is created by the superimposed frame around the photographs. She concludes that “if the superimposed frame separates photograph and text from a visual point of view, the absence of captions or textual references to the image creates a gap in the articulation of the contextual relationship between text and image” (Turci, p.46). When we analyse this phenomenon in the later work *Running in the Family*, this purpose of this usage of text/image disconnect will be a useful comparison to its function in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. I would argue that in

⁴¹ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Vintage, 2000), p.25.

⁴² A detailed analysis of this particular partial caption in Turci p.46-7

this first long work of Ondaatje's the author is promoting the limit of representation of the past by example of these photographs. We will see this thematic concern and its textual implication echoed in *Running in the Family*.

The past as only comprehended through its texts is an issue Ondaatje seems well aware of. This implementation of photographs seemingly taken from the era of Billy the Kid exploits this issue and demonstrates failures in any system of representation that asserts a comprehensive knowledge of the past. Turci points out that "the pairing of photograph and caption would most probably serve to achieve an impression of unified meaning and to enforce the kind of 'reality effect' that the photograph or text by itself could never acquire" (Turci, p.46). But in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, this "reality effect" is never achieved and meaning remains open to a multiplicity of possible versions. It would seem that Ondaatje is wary of this "reality effect" because it could mean turning the photograph into an object of historical representation, burdened with this function instead of opening up a realm of possible meanings to the reader. Or as Barthes puts it, "today, the text loads the image, burdening it with a culture, a moral, an imagination" (Barthes, p.26). This would be to reverse the process described by Strand, of photography as a result of pure human experience which has left all cultural inheritance and historical baggage behind. The dialectical meaning of the photographs in the text – as historical documents that the Huffman credit suggests and as indications of the impossibility of stable meaning in a historical context - ensures that the reader is involved directly in construction of history itself. This is a reflection of Hutcheon's theory of history as process, not product.

As my argument has implied, the reader's involvement in the creation of the historical past of Billy the Kid in this work can be viewed to function through a multifaceted response to the photographs reproduced within the text. The indeterminate

denotative meaning of these images leads to a multiplicity of connotative suggestions which could be interpreted as a reaction against the singular, asphyxiating photographic perspective of Billy the Kid.

My analysis of the photographs included in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* necessitates the reader's vigorous participation in determining their purpose and the subsequent destabilisation of meaning that is the result of this process. York's analysis of the photographs also argues this line of inquiry, that "the use of actual photographs in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* emphasizes this necessary interplay between fixing Billy's story but not rendering it as a static artifact from the past" (York, p.106). The reader, it is supposed, is to engage with the same interplay between text and image. Concluding my examination of this process in the work, it is perhaps prudent to again observe the very first photograph in the book: the cover image of Muybridge's horse stopped in motion. Nodelman points out that if we viewed the entire sequence of the Muybridge experimental photographs in order, this "sequential viewing of them could appear to duplicate the movement of the horse; they are unmoving photographs that could in fact depict movement" (Nodelman, p.78). Imagine the reader picking up these photographs and flipping through them, creating a moving image of Muybridge's horse. In order to view Billy's story as a moving, living thing, the reader must perform a similar task, except there are no photographs of Billy himself present in the book, only other perplexing images that urge the reader to actively participate in investigating their meaning. The challenging nature of this reading process is representative of the difficult role of the artist. As Nodelman asserts in regard to the fictional process, it is a "difficult struggle to make things live and move in words, rather than simply to capture their image and stop them dead" (Nodelman, p.78).

CHAPTER THREE

RUNNING IN THE FAMILY:

Personal Photography

Any discussion of *Running in the Family*, published in 1982, should begin with a consideration of Ondaatje's poem "Light" which was first published in *Canadian Forum* in 1975. Solecki writes of its later inclusion in *A Trick With a Knife I'm Learning To Do* that it is "the poem in the volume that most clearly anticipates the return to Sri Lanka" (Solecki, *Ragas*, p.131). For this reason alone it is worth analysing as *Running in the Family* is a significant departure from form for Ondaatje – it is the first major work to concern a *personal* history.

While it is similar to *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* for its inclusion of poetry and to *Coming Through Slaughter* for its fragmented structure, it is the first of Ondaatje's longer works to explicitly involve the writer's own life and utilise a sustained first person narrative in sections of the text. So any poem that first portrays his long ago departed homeland would seem to be an appropriate place to look for clues toward this new work. (As Solecki also asserts, "Light", "like so much of Ondaatje' poetry and fiction...recalls early work and anticipates later" (Solecki, *Ragas*, p.131).) But this poem is essential to my analysis of *Running in the Family* because it is structured around the image and function of photographs.

Ondaatje writes about his relatives in this elegy for his mother and it is through observing them on slides "re-shot from old minute photographs so they now

stand/complex ambiguous grainy on my wall⁴³” that their, and Ondaatje’s past, is recollected. The photograph will continue to be the object through which Ondaatje portrays his familial past in *Running in the Family*, not solely in the reproductions of actual photographs in the text, but more crucially by functioning as a representation of the various questions, difficulties and thematic concerns of writing about memory, cultural inheritance, and public and private histories. “Light” hints at most of the issues that the photograph will associate with in *Running in the Family*.

Ondaatje is only able to evoke his ancestral history through fragments. He makes reference to only knowing this past through fragments twice in the poem: “These are the fragments I have of them” (*TWAK*, p.106) and “These are their fragments, all I remember/wanting more knowledge of them” (*TWAK*, p.107). This desire for knowledge of his ancestral past forms the basis of *Running in the Family*, but it will necessitate a fictional reconstruction of his family and personal history. The lines in this poem that give brief anecdotal descriptions of his uncle, aunt, father and grandmother are not events Ondaatje could have himself witnessed. They are memories passed onto him from other relatives and acquaintances that through the work he will imaginatively reconstruct. This tension between memory and imagination is a major theme of this book.

The poem’s line “The past, friends and family, drift into the rain shower” (*TWAK*, p.105) evokes a sense of slowly emerging consciousness, as if the past and his family is organically being pulled from his memory. Solecki comments on this general mood in the poem: “The long, often enjambed, easily and slowly flowing sentences evoke a dreamlike mood, as if the mind is on automatic pilot and memory and feeling are allowed to flow with minimal conscious intervention” (Solecki, *Ragas*, p.133). This

⁴³ Michael Ondaatje, *There’s a Trick With a Knife I’m Learning to Do: Poems 1963-78* (McClelland & Stewart, 1979), p.105. Hereafter the work is abbreviated to *TWAK* and further references are given after quotations in the text.

organic presentation of consciousness occurs as well in *Running in the Family*, as it is a work that does not seem to carefully construct its fragments in the same manner as *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, but rather its structure is emblematic of the natural unfolding of consciousness and the resulting manner in which it explores its past.

The photographs in “Light” are composed of a familial image, as they will again in *Running in the Family*. This is an important distinction to make for it affects the function of the photograph in the work. A photographic image of family invokes a sense of ancestral lineage (and often an emotional response) as we look for similar features and characteristics within ourselves, which is evident when Ondaatje writes “A picture of my kids at Halloween/has the same content and laughter” (*TWAK*, p.106) and “In the mirror and in my kids/I see them in my flesh” (*TWAK*, p.107). In *Running in the Family*, the familial photographs that Ondaatje encounters will supercede their documentary purpose and promote the text as a personal, rather than public history.

Finally, this poem hints at the poles of absence and presence and the oppositional pull between closeness and distance that will permeate his longer work. When Ondaatje writes here of “the trees across fields leaving me” but “when in truth like me they haven’t moved/Haven’t moved an inch from me” (*TWAK*, p.107), we will become familiar with this doubling movement that the photograph will embrace and promote within *Running in the Family*.

***Running In The Family* – A doubling movement**

As in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, *Running in the Family* incorporates photographic images into its text, signalling the importance of photography to the work. But unlike *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, the emphasis is not placed upon the photographic perspective of the protagonist, but upon how the photograph is

representative of the thematic concerns in the text, namely the difficulties in representing the past in literary form especially when it concerns a personal history and the complex realm of memory. It is this latter element of the personal recollection that shifts Ondaatje's use of the photograph slightly. While touching on the previous extrapolation of the problematic nature of historical reconstruction in fiction that *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* exemplified, this later work must necessarily also consider how the personal history Ondaatje engages with changes the use of the photograph in the work. Turci also notes this shift in photographic use as she writes, "In some respects *Running in the Family* reworks some of the strategies and ideas that appear in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, but also introduces new concerns with photographic imagery which make it a more complex and subtle work, one that creates varied semantic effects in the relationships established between the photographs and the text" (Turci, p.49). So while this chapter will look at Hutcheon's historiographic metafictional impulses that are at work in the text, as they were in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, I will primarily be examining how the familial image affects the photograph's function in the text, how the central focus on memory affects the structure of the work, and how the photographic concept of stillness has crucially shifted from a cinematic perspective to one that is ontologically separate.

The most important shift to consider from the two previous works is that of the referent. In historiographic metafiction, the reader is aware of the "doubling" of the referent – the text's self-reflexivity points to the referent's fictional construction but they are also aware of its basis in a historical context. Both *Billy the Kid* and *Buddy Bolden* are examples of this double referent, but because Ondaatje is himself the subject of *Running in the Family*, an added dimension to the referent has been created. Hutcheon writes about the changing historiographic referent in this text: "In *Running in*

the Family, Ondaatje adds one further element to the linguistic tension between art and life by making the history a personal one, subject to his own fictionalizing memory as well as that of others” (Hutcheon, p.86). If Ondaatje was previously trying to affirm that history was a process by pointing to the fictional construction of his historical referents, he now demonstrates this in *Running in the Family* by actually becoming the subject of the construction himself. Hutcheon points out that Ondaatje briefly inserted himself into *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* with his childhood cowboy photograph and then again in *Coming Through Slaughter* by describing how he photographed the areas of New Orleans once inhabited by Bolden. But now “the process of recording and narrating history becomes part of the text itself...Ondaatje is not only the recorder, collector, organizer, and narrator of the past, but also the subject of it, both as Ondaatje whose tale will be told and as the writer who will tell it” (Hutcheon, p.86). The reader is constantly reminded that it is Ondaatje who is telling this story through the self-reflexive gestures of descriptions of the author writing this text. Ondaatje seems to be searching for his past during the day and then writing it at night: “A school exercise book. I write this at the desk of calamander looking out of windows into dry black night...At midnight this hand is the only thing moving”⁴⁴.

Hutcheon’s analysis brings up two important aspects of this work. First, photography is the method through which Ondaatje has previously inserted himself into his texts, therefore it must again be an important element in *Running in the Family*. This analysis will argue that it performs the most formidable role in all of Ondaatje’s texts due to its inclusion of almost every thematic concern of the work. Secondly, Ondaatje’s “fictionalizing memory” is a crucial concern to the text as it will affect the manner in which he writes about Sri Lanka, eventually turning a public history into a personal one.

⁴⁴ Michael Ondaatje, *Running in the Family*, 2nd edn (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Ltd., 1982), p.162. Hereafter this work is abbreviated to *RIF* and further references are given after quotations in the text.

The dual nature of the photograph

In *Running in the Family*, the photograph continually presents itself as a dual image with often contrasting functions. I argue that beyond being an interesting manner in which to analyse the text, it is the most engaging method because it relates directly to the crucial verb in the title of the work. While the titular phrase is Running *in* the Family, the author's confession, or revelation, in the first section of the book in the midst of a drunken party trick during his farewell fete before journeying to Sri Lanka that "I knew I was already running" seems to suggest more than the preposition "in" (*RIF*, p.16). Chelva Kanaganayakam notes this semantically ambiguous title and writes that "the notion of 'running' is particularly appropriate, suggesting as it were several alternative prepositions, all of which define the preoccupations of this work"⁴⁵.

Ondaatje seems to be – at various times and places in the book – to be running toward his family and a need to connect with them and yet also running away from this familial past, creating a necessary sense of distance between himself and the other Ondaatjes through mythic tales of their exploits. He is running toward a culture he long since abandoned and yet running away from this cultural past by presenting himself as an outsider to a place he emphasizes as exotic.

Kanaganayakam makes reference to an essay written by Aamer Hussein about this writer's struggle with visiting and writing about his homeland of Pakistan after an absence of almost twenty years. Hussein's interesting argument about the nature of exile for the writer is a relevant one to my argument about the representative fiction of the photograph in *Running in the Family*. Hussein writes that "there is a tremendous inherent privilege in the term ['exile']: a mobility of mind if not always of matter, to

⁴⁵ Chelva Kanaganayakam, 'A Trick with a Glass: Michael Ondaatje's South Asian Connection', *Canadian Literature*, 132 (1992), 22-42 (p.35).

which we as writers should lay claim: a doubling instead of a split”⁴⁶. Ondaatje takes on this “doubling” movement in *Running in the Family*. Instead of a decisive “split” between being born in this country and now being an inhabitant of another place and culture, there is a sense of a movement toward being both of these things. This is a concept that Salman Rushdie explores in his essay “Imaginary Homelands” as he writes about the ability of expatriate writers to simultaneously be both part of the country of origin and yet also a foreigner to this place. Rushdie labels this “stereoscopic vision” as writers “are capable of writing from a kind of double perspective: because they, we, are at one and the same time insiders and outsiders in this society”⁴⁷. This stereoscopic vision, or “doubling” movement occurs repeatedly in the text and it is through the photograph that we can observe this element of the work. There is a doubling movement between presence and absence, closeness and distance, running to and running from, the photograph’s ability to preserve memory and invoke imagination, as well as the first doubling movement we will analyse: truth and rumour/myth in the recollection of the past.

As we examined in the photographs of *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, the iconic and indexical sign of a photograph remains constant, but any interpretation of this photographic image could carry a multiplicity of meaning. This contention between what the photograph could or could not represent functions in *Running in the Family* as well. Ondaatje relates the anecdote of the photograph that cost Sir John Kotelawala a political election. A young couple were photographed, the man suddenly burying his face toward the top of the lady’s thigh, citing a snake bite. The developed and published photograph of the young lady “in the throes of ecstasy” (*RIF*, p.134) told a different

⁴⁶ Aamer Hussein, ‘The Echoing of Quiet Voices’, in *Asian Voices in English*, ed. by Mimi Chan and Roy Harris (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1991), pp.101-108 (p.102).

⁴⁷ Salman Rushdie, ‘Imaginary Homelands’ in *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Granta, 1981), pp.9-21 (p.19).

story entirely. York points out the crucial element of the photograph that becomes representative for the nature of Ondaatje's book: "one must recognize that the dual nature of the photograph – as icon and barefaced liar – comments on the very nature of Ondaatje's fictional biography" (York, p.119).

There is a strong sense in *Running in the Family* of Ondaatje's desire to uncover the historical truth about his relatives and their Sri Lankan past and yet the knowledge that this is ultimately impossible. This conflicting desire is first pointed to in the text through the epigraphs. Both of the epigraphs purport myths about Sri Lanka – the first indicating larger than life fowl "and other miraculous things which I will not here write of" from the 14th century; followed by a more self-deprecating anecdote quoting the Sri Lankans' belief that the earth was flat. The reader is being led to recognize that myth will be an important part of this work and that contrary to the first epigraph, Ondaatje *will* be writing about these "things" in the text. In commenting on the use of the epigraphs in the text, Kanaganayakam writes that "myths persist to shape the present" (Kanaganayakam, p.38).

While recognizing that Kanaganayakam's assertion is correct and that any telling of both his relatives' past and the historical past of Sri Lanka will necessarily involve myth, there is a further element at play in this doubling movement between the photograph as "icon and barefaced liar". Ondaatje seems aware that in writing about his personal past, facts can be limiting while imaginative reconstruction is able to portray a fuller and more satisfying version of events. In discussing Ghose's essay about his return to Pakistan, Kanaganayakam points out the specific space necessary to write about one's identity. He writes that Ghose notes "a constant awareness of the space that separates the real from the everyday, and the power of imagination to transform the referential into a fictive construct that speaks more eloquently about the self than any

preoccupation with meticulous detail” (Kanaganayakam, p.36). So while Ondaatje makes reference to searching for factual details of his past, it does not assume much space in the text. He writes of “Reading torn 100-year-old newspaper clippings that come apart in your hands like wet sand, information as tough as plastic dolls” (*RIF*, p.58). It is described as a frustrating process, perhaps indicative of the rest of this passage, which abandons any further preoccupation with data gathering and instead depicts the lush and exotic surroundings: “One morning I would wake and just smell things for the whole day, it was so rich I had to select senses” (*RIF*, p.59).

York points out another doubling movement of the photograph: that there is a dual response to it – “as a key to memory, kinship and personal history, and as a severe restraint on human imagination” (York, p.99). The photograph at the beginning of the section “Eclipse Plumage” is a comment on this doubling movement between memory and imagination. As often structured in the text, the photograph of a group of people dressed in fancy costumed attire on a densely foliated lawn is presented to the reader without context⁴⁸. It is not until several pages later when Ondaatje is visiting his Aunt Dolly that the origin of this photograph is revealed. It is a group photograph that includes herself and Ondaatje’s grandmother Lalla: Dolly “reels off names and laughs at the facial expressions she can no longer see” (*RIF*, p.92). For Dolly is blind and the details of this photograph are stored in her memory, brought forth by her imagination.

Imagination is also at play for the reader. As Turci notes, “Despite the fact that Dolly’s description establishes the fact that this is a family photograph and includes some of Ondaatje’s relatives, at the same time this photograph and its brief explanation seem to raise more questions than answers. We do not find out who Ondaatje’s grandmother or Dolly herself are in the picture” (Turci, p.53). It is up to the reader’s

⁴⁸ For a detailed analysis of the signification between title captions in the work see John Russell p.28-31 and Monica Turci’s opposing argument p.49-54

imagination to pick out who is who in the photograph, signalling a privileging of imagination over fact and detail here. Ondaatje employs imagination over memory when he recounts that six months before his birth, his mother witnessed two kabaragoyas “incopula” and a reference is made to this event in *A Coloured Atlas of Some Vertebrates from Ceylon, Vol. 2*. He says, “It is my first memory” (*RIF*, p.62). This is impossible, of course, but it signals that any factual detail, like this one actually recorded in a national publication, does not carry the same weight or significance of a first memory, which is actually a construction of imagination on the author’s part.

The Shift in Photographic Stillness

This displaced sense of time, Ondaatje recalling his first memory at a moment before he was actually born and could logically do so, brings my analysis of photography in the work to consider again the concept of photographic stillness. It is my assertion that Ondaatje’s use of photographic stillness has shifted from its indication of a halting of the inexorable movement of becoming to an entirely different use. No longer is the photograph functioning like a film still and demonstrating a moment of time removed from the moments that precede and follow it, but rather is able to “depict its own temporal limit, the moment of origination after which time begins to take its effect” (Friday, p.51.). To understand this shift in the concept of time in regard to a photograph, it is important to take note of Barthes inquiry into what he considers the uniqueness of the photographic referent:

Photography’s Referent is not the same as the referent of other systems of representation. I call ‘photographic referent’ not the *optionally* real thing to which an image or sign refers but the *necessarily* real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph...[I]n photography I can never deny that *the thing has been there*...And since this constraint exists only for Photography, we must consider it, by reduction, as the very essence, the *noeme* of photography” (Barthes, p.76-7).

By insisting that the essence (*noeme*) of photography is its unrelenting referential nature, we can understand this theory of photography to be in direct opposition to Bazin's sense of the photograph as an extraction from the moving world. If we consider Barthes's emphasis on the indexical sign of the photographic image, that "*the thing has been there*", we are now primarily concerned with the moment the subject of the image was placed in front of the camera and the moment the photograph was taken. The photographic referent is unable to portray any knowledge of what has happened to the image *prior* to the moment that the shutter was released and light imprinted upon film. It is at this moment that the specific photographic image the viewer is observing is, in a manner of speaking, born. It is from this point onward that time begins to have its effect on the photographic image – the referent can never be changed but the connotative understanding of it can, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

Jonathan Friday explains this temporal limit that the photograph possesses unto itself this way:

"The unchanging photographic reference to its originating cause, to the temporal limit of the photograph's existence, the starting point of its becoming, provides us with a conception of photographic stillness very different to that formulated in contrast to cinematic motion. For example, as the temporal limit of its own existence, there is no sense of the extractedness from a real or implicit series of images that characterizes cinematic conceptions of stillness" (Friday, p.51).

This shifted sense of the photograph possessing its own temporal limit and not existing as an extracted moment from the continuity of time has ramifications for Ondaatje's quest to uncover his familial past. Ondaatje shows his frustration with uncovering this past when he writes, "I still cannot break the code of how 'interested in' or 'attracted' they were to each other. Truth disappears with history and gossip tells us in the end nothing of personal relationships" (*RIF*, p.42).

Photographs, as we understand them in this context, display nothing of the past and the viewer necessarily can only attempt to decipher and understand the photographic image from *present time*. John Russell discusses Ondaatje's frustration in this passage and determines that "what needs to be decoded, it turns out, requires some form of steepage – which must be managed in present, not past time"⁴⁹.

The past that Ondaatje is trying to decode is analogous to the photograph here. As Friday explains, photographs can necessarily only be witnessed from our historical context of present time: "We can only understand and react to photographs from our position in the here and now, and this too changes over time, both individually and collectively" (Friday, p.49). This perhaps explains why Ondaatje can never seem to obtain a stable handle on the stories being relayed to him – they, like the observance of a photograph, have been individually and collectively altered as recalled in various moments of present time over many decades. This process is exaggerated when Ondaatje writes that "No story is ever told just once. Whether a memory or funny hideous scandal, we will return to it an hour later and retell the story with additions and this time a few judgments thrown in. In this way history is organized" (*RIF*, p.19). These exaggerations and judgments are facets of imagination that are privileging their position over the factual basis of any story. The iconic and indexical sign of a photograph will always remain stable to the viewer, but any "factual basis" is impossible to sustain over time because "as its only possible witnesses become ever more removed from its origin, [they become] wiser or more ignorant about its subject matter" (Friday p.48). As Ondaatje writes, "In this way history is organized", an indication of the fictional construction of history as we have seen time and again in his work.

⁴⁹ John Russell, 'Travel Memoir as Nonfiction Novel: Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*', *ARIEL* 22.2 (1991), 23-40 (p.26).

Presence and Absence

In addition to this concept of photographic stillness that insists upon its own temporal limit and emphasising the present space in which a viewer necessarily observes the image, there is another essential element of this ontological understanding of the photograph functioning here – one that is crucial to another of Ondaatje’s thematic concerns in the work.

Friday asserts that “unlike the cinematic conception of photographic stillness as the absence of motion, the present conception of stillness posits this quality as a presence rather than an absence. Photographic stillness fills the image and displays itself as unchanging pictorial reference to its originating cause” (Friday, p.51). This understanding of photographic stillness, as one that focuses not on the absence of motion but on the iconic and indexical signs in the image, results in an overwhelming sense of presence. However, this sense of presence is matched by one of absence, creating another dual function (or doubling movement) of the photograph that functions in *Running in the Family*. The sense of presence emanates from the undeniable existence of the indexical sign – this object was once here. But opposing this presence is the notion that this referent is no longer here in the “present now” from which the viewer sees the photograph. Sontag writes that “A photograph is both a pseudo-presence and a token of absence” and makes reference to the photographs we carry with us as a reminder or possession of the absent (Sontag, p.16). Berger also sees the photograph functioning this manner. He discusses absence and presence this way:

The objects recorded in any photograph (from the most effective to the most commonplace) carry approximately the same weight, the same conviction. What varies is the intensity with which we are made aware of the poles of absence and presence. Between these two poles photography finds its proper meaning. (The most popular use of the photograph is as a memento of the absent.) (Berger, p.217)

For Ondaatje, there is a sense of the “reality effect” discussed by Turci in regard to *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. The photographs that Ondaatje encounters in his Sri Lankan research show members of his family that due to their indexical and iconic signs are heavily present for Ondaatje. But at the same time, these people are now absent – no longer alive or present at all to Ondaatje (except for Dolly in the “Eclipse Plummage” photograph). There is again the dual function or doubling movement of the photograph between the poles of absence and presence that the image projects. The dichotomy between absence and presence in a photograph points to two crucial issues at work in the text. The first is the complex nature of family history that Ondaatje is forced to confront in his (auto)biographical explorations and the second is a return to the opposition between memory and imagination in the work.

The Familial Image

In his quest to uncover the past of the Ondaatje clan, in the hopes of rectifying “a childhood I had ignored and not understood” (*RIF*, p.16), the discovery of old, family photographs must have been an exciting and promising prospect. His statement when observing his parents’ honeymoon photograph for the first time (which will be discussed in greater detail in a moment) seems to emphasise this: “My aunt pulls out the album and there is the photograph I have been waiting for all my life” (*RIF*, p.135).

Julia Hirsch discusses the unique process of looking at family photographs and the information that can be gathered from them: “In family photographs, the visible signs – the physical resemblances, the gestures, sometimes the places – can...tell us when and where pictures were taken, and so provide us with all kinds of information about families’ lives and times”⁵⁰. There is a process of gathering information that

⁵⁰ Julia Hirsch, *Family Photographs: Content, Meaning and Effect* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p.6.

functions as Ondaatje observes his family photos. But the overwhelming sense of presence in the image, one that Barthes describes as violent, creates an emotional stirring that supercedes any documentary sense of the photograph. Barthes writes that “the Photograph is violent: not because it shows violent things, but because on each occasion *it fills the sight by force*, and because in it nothing can be refused or transformed” (Barthes, p.91). This violent sense of presence ultimately leads to its oppositional force and Turci points out that for Ondaatje, “such absence is spurred by the realization of the temporal and spatial distance that separates him from the people and places in the pictures” (Turci, p.34). Beyond this temporal and spatial sense of absence, there is absence in the inability of these family photographs to provide any factual or definitive familial history.

Marianne Hirsch writes that due to the indexical sign inherent in the photograph, which “gives the illusion of being a simple transcription of the real...it has the effect of naturalizing cultural practices and of disguising their stereotyped and coded characteristics. As photography immobilizes the flow of family life into a series of snapshots, it perpetuates familial myths while seeming merely to record actual moments in family history”⁵¹. This is why Ondaatje finds it an impossible task to decode who was actually attracted to whom and the other delicate pieces of knowledge that remain hidden from him and the recorded parts of history. For the photographs only perpetuate myths that are being relayed to him (and perhaps give permission for the author to continue with this mode of representation).

Hirsch suggests that “photographs locate themselves precisely in the space of contradiction between the myth of the ideal family and the lived reality of family life” (M. Hirsch, p.8). This familial myth is perpetuated by its “imaginary power, a power

⁵¹ Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photograph, Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), p.7.

that photographs have a particular capacity to tap” (M. Hirsch, p.8). It is through perpetuating the myth of his familial past that Ondaatje primarily represents the doomed marriage of his parents. For every anecdote of the nightmarish aspect of their relationship, Ondaatje provides a charming and engaging one. Ondaatje writes of his father’s ability to smooth the rough seas of his marriage when achieving moments of sobriety: “In this way an incident, which most had felt could never be surmounted and which no doubt would destroy the marriage, was cemented over” (*RIF*, p.145). An anecdote about his father’s drunken suicide attempt in a train tunnel is appeased by what we assume is an imaginary conversation between his parents. “How *dare* you follow me?” Mervyn Ondaatje snaps at his wife, and Ondaatje’s mother dutifully and lovingly replied, “I followed you because no one else would follow you” (*RIF*, p.124-5). In just two lines, Ondaatje is able to transform a terribly sad incident into an amusing, mythic moment in the canon of Ondaatje family stories. Ondaatje’s father taking a train hostage during a drunken rampage is appeased just a few pages later by the revelation that he had trained the family dog to fart specifically around his mother-in-law.

The photograph about which Ondaatje writes he has been waiting for his entire life, of Doris and Mervyn Ondaatje on their honeymoon fits into the space between the myth and reality of family life as asserted by Hirsch. Its referent is an indication of the reality of the image (these people were once present) and yet the photograph’s humour perpetuates the mythic status of this couple that Ondaatje has been constructing. It is apparent that the fact this photograph has even survived is somewhat miraculous and Ondaatje reveals that “It is the only photograph I have found of the two of them together” (*RIF*, p.136). Julia Hirsch writes about the survival of family photographs and points out that “whenever we choose which of our family photographs to keep, and

which to discard, [we make these decisions] not in the name of ‘historical accuracy’ but for the sake of a standard of meaning that the images either uphold or betray” (J. Hirsch, p.12). She details that we do not usually keep photographs that demonstrate anger between spouses or a miserable time we had on a specific vacation. The survival of this honeymoon photograph falls in line with this process. It is a photograph that provides for Ondaatje “the evidence I wanted that they were absolutely perfect for each other” (*RIF*, p.135-6). The reader knows this is not to be the case, of course, but it demonstrates that the portrayal of his parents is one Ondaatje is placing in the realm of myth.

The placement of the actual photograph within the text is also representative of the perpetuation of familial myth and functions within the dual movement of absence and presence. Ondaatje is not the only one who has been waiting a long time to observe this photograph. The reader first encounters “The Honeymoon” over a hundred pages earlier in the one and a half page section titled as such. As this section immediately follows the section “April 11, 1932”, which provides a brief description of the farcical drive that guests had to endure to attend the wedding of Doris and Mervyn Ondaatje, it would be assumed that the “Honeymoon” section would continue this narrative sequence and produce an anecdote of the actual honeymoon. What the reader encounters, however, is a fanciful list of the events occurring in Sri Lanka and around the world during the Ondaatjes’ honeymoon period.

These snippets of information all carry a sense of myth, either inherently such as the newspaper headlines of the murdered Lindberg baby and the attempted theft of Valentino’s corpse by crazed female fans, or through the manner in which Ondaatje presents them. Seemingly unimportant details such as “the lepers of Colombo went on a hunger strike, a bottle of beer cost one rupee” are transformed into humorous or

mythic events when followed by the phrase “there were upsetting rumours that ladies were going to play in Wimbledon in shorts” (*RIF*, p.29). The penultimate event listed is also interesting: “Charlie Chaplin was in Ceylon. He avoided all publicity and was only to be seen photographing and studying Kandyan dance” (*RIF*, p.29). While appearing like a documentary event, the fact that Chaplin shunned publicity means that his activities in Ceylon have been relayed through visual witness and conjecture. Like the anecdotes of his parents the reader will encounter in the text, this is a detail or moment that like a family photograph, cloaks itself in historical accuracy but is actually a functioning myth.

Linda Hutcheon discusses this peculiar placement of the photograph in the text and also points to the earlier section titled “Honeymoon”. She writes that these listed events “are not randomly selected... The couple may not appear, but the things that impinged on them do: from the price of beer to the ideal of feminine beauty at the time. It is only much later in the text that the lacuna is partially filled” (Hutcheon, p.85). By detailing events that affect the Ondaatje couple, all of which are presented in mythic fashion, Ondaatje is creating a specific space for his parents to function within – the space that Marianne Hirsch suggests exists for photographs to function between the mythic family and the real, lived family.

There is a detail in Ondaatje’s description of this photograph that seems to support this construction of space between myth and reality. Ondaatje writes that his “father’s pupils drop to the south-west corner of his sockets” (*RIF*, p.135), a detail better suited to a map than a photographic portrait. This directional detail recalls the previous description of the false maps of Ceylon on his brother’s wall in Toronto. There is an identical use of this detail: “on the south-west corner of some charts are satyrs, hoof deep in foam, listening to the sound of the island, their tails writhing in the waves”

(*RIF*, p.53). These maps with their “rumours of topography” are used as a metaphor for the dominance of myth Ondaatje seems to find in his journey back to Sri Lanka. Or rather, that imaginative reconstruction of his familial past is more meaningful than simply gathering accurate facts and records. Though he writes that these maps grow “from mythic shapes into eventual accuracy” (*RIF*, p.53), Lorraine York asserts that Ondaatje’s “photographic fiction reverses the process, leading us from mere accuracy into the compelling ‘mythic shapes’ of our own past” (York, p.120). Following this line of inquiry, we could view the honeymoon portrait as a kind of “false map” – one that provides the reader with tantalizing myth as opposed to the factual accuracy of the Ondaatje marriage.

When the reader finally gets to read about the honeymoon over a hundred pages later, it is important to note that this occurs *before* the photograph is reproduced within the text. Hutcheon writes that “Ondaatje is not finished playing with his reader’s expectations. After describing the photo in detail, only then, on the next page, does he actually reproduce it. By then, of course, it is redundant: words can be as real as photographic reproductions” (Hutcheon, p.85). I disagree with this statement in one aspect: there is a significant contrast between intimacy and expectation through photograph stillness. The reproduction of this particular photograph functions as a moment of intimacy for the reader, which I will detail here.

Intimacy and Expectation

There *is* a sense of expectation at play in the text regarding this photograph, for both Ondaatje and the reader who have been waiting, respectively, his entire life and over a hundred pages, to bear witness to this image. However, I am intrigued by the notion of photographic stillness at work here. Friday writes that “where photography often gains

in intimacy as a result of its stillness, duration and movement in cinema are prone to smother its subject matter with expectation” (Friday, p.47).

I have examined how the photographic stillness exemplified in *Running in the Family* has shifted from its cinematic conception of freezing time to one that emphasizes its own origin of time, which is assisted by the dominating sense of presence in the image. Subsequently, when the reader finally views this honeymoon photograph, they are struck by its intimacy above anything else. It is not a redundant image. If the entire work was dominated by the sense that the photographs and narrative snapshots written by Ondaatje were extracted moments of time, all building toward a movement of becoming or transformation, the honeymoon image would, indeed, be redundant and merely an illustrative marker of time. But instead, it presents to the reader (and very possibly for Ondaatje as well) an intimate moment with the two people this work is struggling to decipher. It is a fulfilling moment of stasis, a welcome pause in the struggle to decode the familial past of the Ondaatje clan. That this photograph is a moment of intimacy and pause is perhaps backed up by the interesting observation by Turci that of all of the reproduced photographs in the work “only [this one] can, in fact, be seen as straightforwardly conforming to a caption title that establishes a secure chain of significations between the image and the text” (Turci, p.50).

Instead of intimating that this photographic image is redundant after being shown immediately following its intricate description, perhaps the image is, in Barthes’ terms, “authenticating itself” (Barthes, p.85). Barthes posits that the photograph is not pointing to something that is no longer there (thereby instigating memory) but

“only and for certain what has been. The distinction is decisive. In front of a photograph, our consciousness does not necessarily take the nostalgic path of memory...but for every photograph existing in the world, the path of certainty...No writing can give me this certainty. It is the misfortune (but also perhaps the voluptuous pleasure) of language not to be able to authenticate itself” (Barthes, p.85).

It is this element of the authenticating image of the photograph and the intimacy it exudes combined with the space being constructed between familial myth and reality that allows Ondaatje to create an imaginative world for the reader. In discussing the unique nature of the family photograph, Julia Hirsch expounds that each person involved in the taking of a picture has their own motive at work. The person being photographed “took a chance on their own visual immortality...and those who look at the picture answer to their own longings and curiosities...The person who has kept the picture may not have been there at all. For him, reading the photograph becomes an imaginative exercise, in which he may well have to second-guess reality” (J. Hirsch, p.9).

Memory and Imagination

Reading the photograph as an imaginative exercise is representative of Ondaatje’s method of recollecting his familial past through imaginative, fictional construction. The poles of presence and absence are still at work here. In his essay detailing his return to Pakistan after 28 years, Zulfikar Ghose writes of an incomplete statue of the Buddha:

The missing parts of the statue appear to have a vital presence: the starved, absent organs – shrunk, withered, annihilated – throb bloodily in the imagination; that which is not there startles the mind with the certainty of its being; it is an image of amazing contradictions, and illustrates the ambiguity of all perception: reality can be composed of absent things, the unseen blazes in our minds with a shocking vividness⁵².

This image of the incomplete Buddha is analogous to the photograph that displays both the poles of absence and presence. It is also analogous to the entire experience that Ondaatje is moving through: of picking up a shard of memory given to him by a relative and imaginatively constructing it into a moment of his historical past. Observing this

⁵² Zulfikar Ghose, ‘Going Home’, *The Toronto South Asian Review*, 9.2 (1991), 15-22 (p.15).

quotation about Ghose's incomplete Buddha, Kanaganayakam writes that "for the exile, the expatriate, the referential surface is not without significance, but remains part of a larger perception that seeks continuities, detects dichotomies and connections, and forces the imagination to transform what is seen to reflect and accommodate what lies below the surface" (Kanaganayakam, p.33).

The oppositional force between memory and imagination introduces itself early in the book. Ondaatje, still in Toronto, writes about "Those relations from my parents' generation who stood in my memory like frozen opera. I wanted to touch them into words" (*RIF*, p.16). There is immediately a desired connection between the stored images in the author's memory and his need to use language to mobilize this "frozen opera" into a fully constructed living being for the reader. Or as York writes, in this way, "Ondaatje feels an overwhelming desire to make image and word meet and create" (York, p.115). But the very end of this section, depicting the author's farewell party in Toronto, invokes not memory but imagination. When asked how his grandmother died, four short lines indicate that fictional construction of Ondaatje's familial past through imagination will often be used in the place of historical accuracy: "Natural causes." "What?" "Floods." And then another wave of the party swirled me away" (*RIF*, p.16).

The last line, the description of Ondaatje being "swirled away" is an apt description of what will be the continued narrative structure of the work. As with his previous works, Ondaatje abandons any attempt of a linear narrative structure, and while this emphasizes the fictional construction of history as it has in his past texts, there is an added thematic element being implemented in *Running in the Family*. Helen Hoy has argued that the structure of the work is "organic and...not collage; rather it's the scrupulous dissection – anatomization – of consciousness"⁵³. This is a description of

⁵³ Helen Hoy, 'Letters in Canada', *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 52 (1983), 330-331 (p.330-331).

the manner in which a *personal* past is recollected; a past that necessarily relies on the revealing and examination of memory.

Ondaatje seems aware of the delicate nature of memory and the ambiguous manner in which consciousness reveals itself. In one of the self-reflexive gestures persistently found throughout the text, he writes, “Watch the hand move. Waiting for it to say something, to stumble casually on perception; the shape of an unknown thing” (*RIF*, p.162). The unknown shape of his personal, familial past is like the once unknown shifting shape of Sri Lanka on his brother’s maps. On each map, “the shapes differ so much they seem to be translations” (*RIF*, p.53). In this way, we can understand *Running in the Family* to be another text in the line of these translations.

There is a sense in the text not of a carefully constructed collage of facts and anecdotes, but of what these fragments *invoke* for Ondaatje, and at this point imagination takes over and he is able to touch his relatives and his past into words. He writes of “the silverfish [that] slid into steamer trunks and photograph albums – eating their way through portraits and wedding pictures. What images of family life they consumed in their minute jaws and took into their bodies no thicker than the pages they ate” (*RIF*, p.112). As York writes, “Ondaatje is clearly horrified by this loss of a recorded past” (York, p.118) but the fragments that remain are not meticulously pieced together to provide a reconstruction of the past. Rather they are the starting point for an organic exploration of the past, like the photographic image that creates its own temporal origin through stillness - these fragments operate in the same way.

The family photographs, half consumed by silverfish, are representative of what Julia Hirsch calls the “segments in an on-going historical and psychological pageant” (J. Hirsch, p.9). The term “pageant” is appropriate here, as it is precisely what Ondaatje is

creating through his imaginative reconstruction of these photographic fragments: an elaborate and richly fabricated parade of characters and tall tales.

John Thieme comments on the text's structure and writes that "for much of the time one does not so much have the sense of a deconstructed text as of one which foregrounds the problem of arriving at any kind of construction at all"⁵⁴ (41). This is not to say that Ondaatje is abandoning a search for truth in the uncovering of his family past, or the manner in which he presents it to the reader. At one point he wonders, "Where is the intimate and truthful in all this?...After the cups of tea, coffee, public conversations...I want to sit down with someone and talk with utter directness, want to talk to all the lost history like that deserving lover" (*RIF*, p.43). But as we know from the dual nature of the photograph as iconic referent and "barefaced liar", the truth will often remain evasive. So, "the issue, then, is less with sincerity of motive than with representation of reality, of the manner in which a consciousness probes its own past" (Kanaganayakam p.38).

Ethnic Authobiography and Exoticist Travel Memoir

It is the particular examination of memory that will also lead into an analysis of how Ondaatje writes of Sri Lanka itself, a country that occupies a space between the author's childhood memories of it and his return to it in present time.

While invoking the imaginative tale of his grandmother's death (that will be left here at the beginning of the text and not written about again for another ninety or so pages) Ondaatje writes, "I tried to communicate some of the fragments I knew about my father, my grandmother" (*RIF*, p.16). It is this fragmentary nature of memory and the past that dictates the narrative structure: the flashbacks and flash forwards, the thematic

⁵⁴ John A. Thieme, "'Historical Relations': Modes of Discourse in Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*" in *Narrative Strategies in Canadian Literature*, ed. by Coral A. Howells and Lynette Hunter (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1991), pp.40-48 (p.41).

elements and imagery dropped into the text (like these four lines about Lalla) and not again discussed until later. Writing about the fragments of memory that confront an expatriate writer, Rushdie says these “shards of memory acquired greater status, greater resonance, because they were *remains*; fragmentation made trivial things seem like symbols, and the mundane acquired numinous qualities” (Rushdie, p.12).

The predominant mode of imaginative reconstruction of the past, one that has elements of magic realism⁵⁵, and presents Sri Lanka as an exotic land, has been criticized by a few critics who see Ondaatje’s work as “pandering [to a] mainstream reading public”⁵⁶. In so doing, some critics insist that Ondaatje is abandoning or eschewing any real discourse with ethnicity and the troubled colonial past of Sri Lanka. Ajay Heble points out that “the text has come under attack recently for its tendency to aestheticize political and cultural issues, for its failure to acknowledge and thematize the conditions of a Sri Lankan writer in Canada”⁵⁷. Arun Mukherjee has been particularly critical of Ondaatje’s failure to engage with the concept of “otherness” and the historical realities of Sri Lanka. She writes, “Ondaatje, coming from a Third World country with a colonial past, does not write about his otherness...[t]here is no trauma of uprooting evident in his poetry”⁵⁸. Further to this, Mukherjee complains that “Ondaatje’s success has been largely won through a sacrifice of his regionality, his past, and more importantly, his experience of otherness in Canada”⁵⁹.

While not an invalid criticism, I would assert that Graham Huggan’s countering argument as to Ondaatje’s persistent engagement with otherness is the most pertinent

⁵⁵ See Leslie Mundweiler, chapter 7.

⁵⁶ Graham Huggan, ‘Exoticism and Ethnicity in Michael Ondaatje’s *Running in the Family*’ in *Writing Ethnicity: Cross-Cultural Consciousness in Canadian and Quebecois Literature*, ed. by Winfried Siemerling (Toronto: ECW Press, 1996), pp.116-127 (p.118).

⁵⁷ Ajay Heble, “‘Rumours of Topography’: The Cultural Politics of Michael Ondaatje’s *Running in the Family*”, *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 53 (1994), 186-203 (p.187).

⁵⁸ Arun Mukherjee, *Toward an Aesthetic of Opposition: Essays on Literature Criticism and Cultural Imperialism* (Stratford, ON: Williams-Wallace, 1988), p.33-4.

⁵⁹ Arun Mukherjee, ‘The Poetry of Michael Ondaatje and Cyril Dabydeen: Two Responses to Otherness’, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 20.1 (1985), 49-67 (p.50).

one to my analysis of how the photographic affects these issues in *Running in the Family*. Huggan insists that “Mukherjee overlooks the obvious fact that much of [Ondaatje’s] work has to do, precisely, with otherness. Many of his fictional characters are constructed semi-autobiographically as go-betweens, hybrids, outsiders, while a major theme of his poetry, as of his fiction, is that of the migrant’s ‘double vision’” (Huggan, p.118). Instead of “otherness” being an ontologically distinct and separate state of being, defining itself only by a contrast to belonging to a place or people and insisting on the *opposite* of this belonging, Ondaatje’s sense of “otherness” depends entirely on this “double vision”. It is, again, a dual function or doubling movement between being present and absent in both Canada and Sri Lanka and desiring to belong and yet disengage from the Sri Lankan culture he is acquainted with upon his return to Sri Lanka.

It is worth analysing briefly this doubling movement as Ondaatje’s engagement with his position as a Burgher. Nekula Silva writes:

“While documenting and reclaiming his family history, Ondaatje’s *Running in the Family* presents a microcosmic portrait of the Burgher community whose lineage blurs the distinction of race and history. In keeping with its subject matter, the text is ‘hybrid’ in form, interweaving photographs, poems, conversations, personal memories and excerpts from socio-historical documents. Ondaatje’s graphic representation of racial mixing celebrates the diverse composition of the Sri Lankan nation”⁶⁰.

Ondaatje’s stereoscopic vision is an implicit representation of the Burghers’ position in Sri Lanka – and it opens up a liminal space necessary for the author to write within. Turci describes the position of the Burghers in a manner that emphasizes this space that occupies both sides of a cultural and political divide: “Caught between the categories of the colonialist and the colonized they were deprived of any clear political role of cultural and social identity and never fully assimilated within the country.

⁶⁰ Nekula Silva, ‘Situating the Hybrid ‘Other’ in an Era of Conflict: Representations of the Burgher in Contemporary Writings in English’, in *The Hybrid Island: Culture Crossings and the Invention of Identity in Sri Lanka*, ed. by Nekula Silva (London: Zed Books Ltd., 2002), pp. 104-126 (p.105-6).

Unable to fully belong to a particular racial or ethnic group they remained in an indeterminate zone between different nations, races, idioms and cultures” (Turci, p.53). Ondaatje writes from this indeterminate zone as the text perpetually asserts his position as both foreigner and expatriate along with his conflicting desire to belong to this abandoned country and yet remain distant from it. The criticism of the text’s failure to engage with the colonial exploitation of Sri Lanka should be focused not on the argument that Ondaatje is being acquiescent in his position of a Sri Lankan Burgher, but on this position being permeated by a frustrating sense of “hybridity” that does not easily fit into any secured position or place. This is exemplified at the beginning of the work in the image of the human pyramid that repeatedly reveals itself to Ondaatje. The author realizes that he is part of this human pyramid composed of members of his entire family and “with cumbersome slowness we are walking from one end of the huge living room to another [...] we are approaching the door which being twenty feet high we will be able to pass through only if the pyramid turns sideways. Without discussing it the whole family ignores the opening and walks through the pale pink rose-coloured walls into the next room” (*RIF*, p.20). This image is representative of the inability of the Burgher Ondaatje clan to fit into the dominant cultural or societal position in Sri Lanka and the precarious balancing act that their position endures. The family’s unspoken decision to eschew any attempt to “fit” into the next room by maneuvering themselves through the small doorframe, instead magically floating through the wall, demonstrates the liminal space they function within and the imaginative narrative discourse Ondaatje’s will use in this text to portray it.

Minoli Salgado also uses the term “liminal space”, referring to the space in which Ondaatje negotiates his own identity. She asserts:

“Through the use of real and metaphorical maps of the place and its people the text attests to the incompleteness of both colonial ownership and postcolonial reclamation,

creating a liminal space of identification [...] The spatial configurations in the text are closely connected to the process of storytelling and the construction of identity. While one critic has claimed that *Running in the Family* is “a picture without a frame”⁶¹, it would be more appropriate to claim that the text’s many narratives have too many frames, and that the mapping of space and story is dependent upon a slippage between the two”⁶².

I agree with Salgado’s interpretation of a multiple-framed narrative structure: the fragments that Ondaatje retrieves from his journeys back to Sri Lanka – the anecdotes relayed by family members, the factual details he uncovers through research, the memories of acquaintances as well as his own, and the brief descriptions of the landscape he encounters – all could be interpreted as photographic snapshots of information. They are brief moments, events, or places captured by the fictional photographer and presented to the reader in a kind of photo album – one that carries no linear movement or progressively revealed story.

The “liminal space of identification” is presented at the very beginning of the book, as Ondaatje awakes from “the bright bone of a dream” that fuses his own identity with his father’s and blends the landscapes of Canada and Sri Lanka. In the dream he sees his father surrounded by dogs who were “screaming and barking into the tropical landscape. The noises woke me. I sat up on the uncomfortable sofa and I was in a jungle, hot, sweating” (*RIF*, p.15). The chaotic, oppressive tropical landscape of Sri Lanka is fused with the cold Toronto winter Ondaatje awakes within. The night is broken with the street light reflecting off the snow and entering the dark room and there are jungle-like “vines and ferns at my friend’s window” (*RIF*, p.15). Siemerling writes that “At the moment of awakening, the speaker is simultaneously in two worlds that are characterized by sharp contrast” and the text will repeatedly blend these two worlds,

⁶¹ S.H.J. Suganasiri, “‘Sri Lankan’ Canadian Poets: The Bourgeoisie that Fled the Revolution’, *Canadian Literature*, 132 (1992), 60-79 (p.63).

⁶² Minoli Salgado, *Writing Sri Lanka: Literature, Resistance and The Politics of Place* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), p. 132.

and the identities of Ondaatje and his father, together⁶³. A moment like this “brings two worlds together that previously appeared isolated [...] The image of the other appears as metaphor of an aspect of the self” (Siemerling, p.137), another representation of the hybrid self of the Burgher identity that Ondaatje contends with. S. Leigh Matthews furthers this point regarding the other as aspect of the self, insisting that “the culturally assimilated, Torontonians adult academic/artist self apparently can no longer stay contained from the culturally marginalized, Ceylonese childhood self”⁶⁴. As this Toronto self returns to Sri Lanka to engage with the childhood self Ondaatje had “ignored and not understood” (*RIF*, p.16), a constant negotiation of a space that contains both of these identities is in play. This begins with the dream and “the chaotic reappearance of the father, the chief representative of familial and cultural origins [and this] destabilizes the author” (Matthews, p.359). If we consider Mervyn Ondaatje to be this primary representation of the author’s ancestral past and cultural origins in Sri Lanka, the entire book which functions on one level as Ondaatje’s desperate quest to understand and come to terms with this man, should be interpreted both as the unfolding of a personal history and an engagement with Burgher isolation in Sri Lanka.

Dreams, and alcohol-soaked states that function in a similar way, occur repeatedly through the text, echoing the dream that opens the book⁶⁵. The most startling example of the fusing of identity between Ondaatje and his father, and points to the “destabilization of the author”, occurs toward the end of the work in the section titled “Thanikama”. The passage describes his father in third person narration – he is drinking heavily and navigates his way around Colombo, eventually driving to the house in

⁶³ Winfried Siemerling, *Discoveries of the Other: Alterity in the Work of Leonard Cohen, Hubert Aquin, Michael Ondaatje and Nicole Brossard* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), p.142.

⁶⁴ S. Leigh Matthews, “‘The Bright Bone of a Dream’: Drama, Performativity, Ritual, and Community in Michael Ondaatje’s *Running in the Family*”, *Biography*, 23.2 (2000), 352-371 (p.359).

⁶⁵ Matthews asserts that “only in moments of extreme relaxation, such as sleeping and drinking, can Ondaatje apparently be aware of the shaping force of his familial and cultural past” (360).

Kegalle where he is lonely and surveying the empty property in drunken sorrow. But in the middle of this passage, there is an abrupt shift in tense to the first person. Suddenly, the narrative reads, “The bottle top in my mouth as I sit on the bed like a lost ship on a white sea” (*RIF*, p.160). More than simply a self-reflexive gesture to underscore the metafictional text, the entire passage “increasingly superimposes the points of view and the images of the written father and the writing son, to the point of identity”

(Siemerling, p.150). The passage, like the dream that opens the book, describes the invasion of the jungle landscape into the house: “And nature advanced. Tea bush became jungle, branches put their arms into the windows. If you stood still you were invaded” (*RIF*, p.160). This last line is an indication of Ondaatje’s struggle with his position as both belonging to and being distant from Sri Lanka. He is not standing still, he is caught in the “running” movement of the book’s title and to use the word “invasion” seems to suggest the difficulty of understanding his Burgher position of both colonizer and colonized. Ondaatje is constantly aware of this doubling sense of otherness, he proclaims that “I am the foreigner. I am the prodigal who hates the foreigner” (*RIF*, p.65)

There is one aspect of Ondaatje’s portrayal of himself as “the foreigner” that Mukherjee also takes issue with. Huggan describes this as “Ondaatje’s commercially driven exploitation of the exotic...for Mukherjee, *Running in the Family* is an Orientalist travelogue that feeds on romantic cliché” (Huggan, p.118). Passages of the work do tend to read like an exotic tale:

Watched leopards sip slowly...Have seen the outline of a large fish caught and thrown in the curl of a wave, been where nobody wears socks...Driven through rainstorms that flood streets for an hour and suddenly evaporate...where jak fruit rolls across your feet in the back of a jeep, where there are eighteen ways to describe the smell of durian, where bullocks hold up traffic and steam after the rains” (*RIF*, p.58).

This aspect of the text, its deferment to the “exotic”, points to three important issues at play in the work: the difficult nature of Ondaatje’s autobiographical task, the function of escapism necessary for the in-betweenness of identity, and the resulting sense of pathos that points to *Running in the Family* as an elegiac text.

Huggan asks if “In consciously exoticizing the country of his birth, might Ondaatje be doing it – and himself – a big disservice?” (Huggan, p.118). He answers this question by pointing to the ironic nature of this exoticization and that “these ironies in *Running in the Family* are conspicuous, and that they derive from Ondaatje’s sense of the impossibility of his autobiographical task” (Huggan, p.118). Huggan further asks, “How can he retrieve the past if he is simultaneously inventing it?” (Huggan, p.119). Any attempt to factually record his past through the fragments the author is working with is interrupted by a necessary engagement with the imaginative reconstruction of the past. The difficulty to even establish his ancestral ethnic makeup is made apparent from the beginning of the text – he will have to invent it. Ondaatje writes early in the book that in the twenties and thirties, “Everyone was vaguely related and had Sinhalese, Tamil, Dutch, British and Burgher blood in them, going back many generations...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 alone knows, your excellency’” (*RIF*, p.32).

The photograph that begins the section “Eclipse Plummage” is representative of this ethnic indeterminacy. Just as the reader is unsure of who these guests precisely are, the costumes and masks disguise any indication of racial characteristics. Turki claims that “the photograph discretely stands for the dislocations of the positions of the Burghers within Sri Lanka [and that] paradoxically these masks confer upon these individual precisely the kind of status the country in which they lived has deprived them

of” (Turci, p.53-4). As if embracing this ethnic dislocation, the costumes include an Indian sari, an immaculate British officer’s uniform, an American flag and various other ensembles that could have stepped out of a number of theatrical productions. Ethnic dislocation is being emphasised by an engagement with the exotic. “Ethnicity scorns the exotic,” writes Huggan, “and yet it partakes of the exotic. Ondaatje negotiates this double bind by striking a delicate balance: between the recuperative mythologies of ethnic autobiography and the pseudonostalgic longings of exoticist travel memoir” (Huggan, p.119).

Huggan’s brief description of ethnic autobiography is taken from Caren Kaplan, who discusses its potential, which “is the construction of links and bonds between past and present, between cultures and nations, between difference of gender, race and class”⁶⁶. This “in-betweenness”, as Huggan calls it, “can be liberating, allowing the freedom to experiment with alternative identities or to oppose and outmaneuver monolithic codes” (Huggan, p.119). However, at the same time, this in-betweenness can create a sense of loss, because it enforces a constant state of motion between two places, a kind of perpetual transient state that emphasises the negative feelings of displacement.

There is a dual sense of freedom and pathos in ethnic autobiography, which is played out in *Running in the Family*. We can understand the photograph to function this way as well. The authenticating iconic sign and the indexical presence of the image points to an identity that must then be mediated by the viewer – a sense of freedom occurs in interpreting their identity. And yet, the absence also inherent in a photograph recalls a sense of pathos. This process is played out in the honeymoon photograph that Ondaatje is shown by his aunt.

⁶⁶ Caren Kaplan, ‘Michael Arlen’s Fictions of Exile: The Subject of Ethnic Autobiography’, *A/B: Auto/Biography*, 4.2 (1988), 140-49 (p.140).

To manage this sense of pathos, Ondaatje employs the technique of the “exoticist travel memoir”. Paul Fussell describes this kind of travel book as “a sub-species of memoir in which the autobiographical narrative arises from the speaker’s encounter with distant or unfamiliar data, and in which the narrative – unlike that in a novel or a romance – claims literal validity by constant reference to actuality”⁶⁷. The photograph also functions in this manner. It, too, claims validity by reference to its iconic and indexical signs. The interpretation of the photograph, however, leads to indeterminacy of meaning, and the exoticist travel writing functions similarly. The travel memoir “insists that it has witnessed places and events it may just have invented; instead of recording facts, it may be spreading or ‘substantiating’, rumours” (Huggan, p.121). This is precisely what Ondaatje is doing in his work. By picking up a fragment of memory from a relative, he develops the fragment into a narrative snapshot for the reader. When he writes that “It was almost impossible for a couple to do anything without rumour leaving their shoulders like a flock of messenger pigeons” (*RIF*, p.42-3), the reader has to be aware of Ondaatje being complicit in this process. Lines in the text such as, “The maps reveal rumours of topography” (*RIF*, p.53) demonstrate a self-reflexive gesture towards the process.

As the exoticist travel memoir excites the reader with tales of strange places and people, these things seem “often strangely familiar, for travel writers frequently see what others have seen, or claim to have seen, before them” (Huggan, p. 121). The strange becomes familiar and this is reassuring to the reader. Photographs function in a similar fashion, for the photographic image also prompts a feeling of familiarity. Others have seen this photograph, or can easily be witness to this photograph now, and thus, what is contained within its frame becomes reassuring even in its particularity.

⁶⁷ Paul Fussell, *Abroad: British Literary Traveling Between the Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p.203.

The inclusion of the photographs within the text of *Running in the Family* enforces this reassurance. The photograph of a rainswept Sri Lankan street, the people huddled under umbrellas and knee-deep in water familiarise the reader with descriptions such as “the thunderstorm we walked through for five seconds from porch to car, thoroughly soaked” (*RIF*, p.59). The photograph beginning the section “The Prodigal”, which shows train tracks rising above an imposing cliff connect the reader to the mythic exploits of Mervyn Ondaatje taking a train hostage. They can imagine here, the twenty-five bombs he found on the train and then dropped “into the river below, witnessing huge explosions as they smashed into the river” (*RIF*, p.130). Even the photograph of the senior Ondaatjes on their honeymoon, making carnivalesque faces at the camera allows the reader to feel familiar with these two mythic people, which in turn facilitates a reading of the various tall tales concerning them to seem reassuring, instead of unbelievable.

Escapism as a Function of In-Betweenness

This emphasis on exotic rumour functions as a mode of escapism, a relief from the pathos encountered in Ondaatje’s search for his identity through ethnic autobiography. Huggan writes that “Ondaatje’s text...is marked by a persistent urge towards escapism: it maintains a tension between his wish to reunite himself with his family and his equal and opposite need to keep his family at a distance” (Huggan, p.119). Ondaatje is running both towards his relatives and away from them, as I previously asserted in my analysis of the book’s title – this in-betweenness insists upon escapism to function.

The narrative snapshot concerning Ondaatje’s discovery of his name in an old church in Colombo demonstrates this desire to discover his ancestral past and his own history within Sri Lanka, and the pathos that results – which prompts the use of

exoticism to balance it. The anxiety of searching for familial roots is apparent when Ondaatje writes that “After all these generations the coming darkness makes it necessary to move fast in order to read the brass plaques on the wall” (*RIF*, p.55). This is an event that is not allowed much time, Ondaatje seems hesitant to perform this particular task. But seeing his name chiseled on the stone floor built in 1650, the letters the size of his forearm, is astonishing to Ondaatje: “So the sound which came immediately out of my mouth as I half-gasped and called my sister spoke all that excitement of smallness, of being overpowered by stone” (*RIF*, p.55). Kanaganayakam describes this moment as “the sense of inadequacy, the anguish of having been severed from history” (Kanaganayakam, p.37). The excitement turns quickly to a sense of pathos, emphasized by Ondaatje’s description of this moment “in twilight” and the church that is bearing signs of its age yet “Its grounds were once beautiful” (*RIF*, p.57). After handling the old ledgers to continue looking for traces of his ancestors, Ondaatje is left with the dust of this ancient paper on his hands. He writes of “the eerie moment”, or what reads as a metaphor of heartbreaking loss, “when I wash my hands and see very clearly the deep grey colour of old paper dust going down the drain” (*RIF*, p.57). The image of dust as representative of pathos will occur again at the very end of the work in the passage describing the author writing alone during a downpour of tropical rain. Ondaatje writes that he can smell “the dust, the tactile smell of wetness, oxygen now being pounded into the ground so it is difficult to breathe” (*RIF*, p.163).

While in astonishment at seeing his name chiseled in stone, Ondaatje writes, “What saved me was the lack of clarity” (*RIF*, p.55). Huggan points to this passage as one that “captures the balance in Ondaatje’s text between inscription and erasure – between the desire to retrieve the past and the need to cloak it in suspicion” (Huggan, p.120). This line is also reminiscent of “The gate in his head” and the photograph of the

blurred gull which “saved” Ondaatje from his struggle to represent reality on the page without the anesthetizing sense of stasis and loss. Perhaps this lack of clarity in the slab where “a good portion of it had worn away” (*RIF*, p.55) also prevents an unbearable sense of loss – the permanent absence of his relatives and his past in Sri Lanka. The worn letters also recall the photographs of Ondaatje’s relatives in “Light” that remain, for the author, “grey grainy pictures on the wall”. It is as if any clear, unobscured picture, or reminder, of Ondaatje’s familial past contains too much pathos to experience – this must be balanced by a “lack of clarity”. This need to obscure is achieved through the exotic at various points in the book, including this passage. Between discovering his name in the church and washing the metaphorical dust of his ancestors down the drain, Ondaatje interrupts this sequence with an anecdote of the mythic exploits of the four Ondaatje brothers who spent every Sunday after church erupting into violent argument and the hilarity that ensued.

Chelva Kanaganayakam writes about this passage in the Colombo church: “To have to be reminded of one’s history in this manner is uplifting and painful”

(Kanaganayakam, p.37), again a dual movement between exhilaration and pathos, between reclaiming a place in a long-forgotten history and yet remaining permanently disconnected from it by time and irretrievable facts and details. Rushdie also writes about the dual sense of belonging and disconnect and its accompanying sense of loss:

“It may be that writers in my position, exiles or immigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge – which gives rise to profound uncertainties – that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands” (Rushdie, p.10).

Rushdie’s assertion that writing from the expatriate position inevitably and immediately “gives rise to profound uncertainties” and that writing on this ambiguous ground leads

to a fictional creation, as opposed to an absolutist portrait of a time and/or place attempting to be depicted, has crucial implications for reading the representation of history in *Running in the Family*. This uncertainty is necessary for the mitigation of pathos experienced by Ondaatje, it implicates the reader in the process of organising the text, and most importantly, it underlies the fictive construct of the history Ondaatje is assembling in this work as he shifts aside a public history and creates a private one in its place.

To establish that Ondaatje is most concerned with writing a personal, as opposed to public history (one that critics feel is sorely lacking in its engagement with the political difficulties of Sri Lanka), we need look no further than the multiple ways he attempts to balance the pathos that occurs when writing about his father and his own journeys back to Sri Lanka. I have already analysed the use of exotic discourse to create a sense of escapism necessary to deal with the emotional upheaval apparent in the text. The lack of clarity and need to obscure as exemplified in the scene in the Colombo church also underscores the fictional construction of the history Ondaatje is uncovering. Huggan points out that the past as revealed in this book “yields no coherence, only a sequence of exquisite glimpses” and that the text “restores a vision of a past that it simultaneously effaces. It hovers at the threshold between recollection and amnesia” (Huggan, p.121). This “threshold between recollection and amnesia” is the in-between state of wakefulness and sleep and the dream-like state between sobriety and inebriation that repeatedly occurs throughout the text. This lack of clarity also manifests itself in moments that the narrative indicates it will describe, but then abandons either completely or until a much later point in the book. The section titled “April 11, 1932” begins, “I remember the wedding...” but the wedding is never described in the book. Hutcheon writes that “reader expectation (of a description of the remembered event) is

immediately disappointed, since the wedding remains a textual gap, never to be described” (Hutcheon, p.85). The day is remembered and then forgotten, an obscured event that is recalled only peripherally through Ondaatje’s description and subsequent presentation of the couple’s honeymoon photograph. This space between recollection and amnesia is analogous to the space created by the dichotomy of presence and absence in a photograph. The family members and images of landscape that Ondaatje encounters in the photographs he uncovers in his research are both present (from their indexical and iconic signs) and yet now absent in time and occasionally place. Ondaatje is able to write from the space between these two states and it allows him to recreate his personal history through imaginative reconstruction. These textual gaps that exemplify the state between recollection and amnesia, and between presence and absence, promote the fugitive nature of a past being recollected: the author is dealing only with fragments of memory that he must then fictively construct.

Siemerling points out that there are two journeys taking place in this book: the physical one from Canada to Sri Lanka (actually a composite of two separate trips in different years) and the fictional one that recreates the journey for the reader. He writes that this fictional journey “enfolds the implications of the dream at the beginning. The unmediated juxtaposition of two worlds that touch briefly between dreaming and waking invites the imagination to travel the space in-between, and thus create a text as the spatial and temporal extension of a brief moment” (Siemerling, p.144). Ondaatje is writing from this specific space between two countries and it insists not upon any definitive presentation of his experience in Sri Lanka but upon an imaginative reconstruction of this journey. The “brief moment” is the fragment Ondaatje constantly encounters and any extension of it into a story for the reader necessarily involves a process of re-imagining and re-invention.

The startling image of the silverfish consuming the photographs of Ondaatje's familial past points to the impossibility of establishing any definitive version of history: we will always be dealing with fragments and missing pieces, always remaining reliant on a reconstruction of the past that necessitates imagination and "rumour". The various modes of discourse used in the book – photographs, poems, diary entries, snippets of dialogue and conversation (which I will shortly examine in closer detail) – exemplify this process of dealing solely with fragments. The juxtaposition of these modes is unexplained and seemingly random – there is no privileging of one mode of discourse over another – and this is indicative of the difficulty in reassembling any truthful version of Ondaatje's past, or the intricate public history of Sri Lanka. Thieme writes that "many of the work's short sections are themselves like snapshots that punctuate the text; they offer single windows on to the past, which give minimalist insights; but since they are left essentially unrelated to other sections – there is little sense of linear movement in *Running in the Family* – a clear historical pattern fails to emerge" (Thieme, p. 44). As in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, the difficulties in the construction of history in a postmodern text are paramount. And as in this previous text, Ondaatje foregrounds the position of the reader as recipient, collector, and organizer of the fragments presented in the book.

The section 'Dialogues' is an example of the dominant mode of placing the reader in a position of collecting and interpreting fragments of narrative information. These snippets of dialogue are not placed in any authorial context; we do not know who is speaking or often have any sense of the place or time in which these vignettes are occurring. Hutcheon calls this section "a microcosmic version of the structure of the entire text: the fragments of the past that Ondaatje works to put together are mirrored in the fragments he offers to his readers" (Hutcheon, p.91). Thieme writes about this

section: “There is a very strong sense that the recipient of the information is the pivotal point of the action and in this particular section that is expressed lexically by the frequent use of the second-person pronoun and that section’s being entitled ‘Dialogues’, even though the format is ostensibly that of a series of monologues” (Thieme, p.44). As Ondaatje is also the recipient of these ‘dialogues’, his position as both writer and receiver of this story echoes his position as both reader and writer of Billy the Kid’s story in his previous work. The author’s position as analogous to that of the reader in *Running in the Family* is further exemplified in the section that follows ‘Dialogues’ as Hutcheon points out that Ondaatje’s “use of the inclusive first-person plural [...] underlies his desire to implicate the reader (as ‘we’) in his own process of interpreting and ordering the fragments of experience” (Hutcheon, p.91).

This insistence on a collective history, one that involves both reader and writer inevitably assumes a state of subjectivity and ambiguity. In fact, it is possible to read *Running in the Family* as a text that asks more questions than it answers. Huggan writes that the book seems to ask: “To which community, or country, does he seem to belong? Where do his sympathies lie? Which group, or place, can he call his own? These questions, in *Running in the Family*, are left deliberately unresolved” (Huggan, p.123). Daniel Coleman declares that the book “closes in profound ambivalence, certain about the need to re-establish ties with the past, but uncertain about the possibility of meeting that need; certain about the inescapable influence of the father upon the life of the son, but uncertain about how to trace or interpret that influence”⁶⁸. This uncertainty is a result of the doubling movement in the book between the “running to” and “running from” the author’s ancestral homeland. It is a necessary component of the stereoscopic vision of writing as both insider and outsider, and of the consistent engagement with

⁶⁸ Daniel Coleman, ‘Masculinity’s Severed Self: Gender and Orientalism in *Out of Egypt* and *Running in the Family*’, *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 18.2 (1993), 62-80 (p.73).

imagination as a response to memory and the fictive reconstruction of a personal past. Toward the end of the book the narrative reads, “You must get this book right,” my brother tells me, “You can only write it once.” But the book again is incomplete. In the end all your children move among scattered acts and memories with no more clues” (*RIF*, p.172).

This realization is representative of the aesthetic of indeterminacy found in Ondaatje’s work. There is no tidy conclusion to this story and we (the reader *and* writer) are not much closer to understanding the figure of Mervyn Ondaatje or the complex past of Ondaatje’s family in Sri Lanka. Even the border between fiction and non-fiction, between art and life has been irrevocably blurred in the construction and reception of *Running in the Family*. This text looks backward to *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and its questioning of the representation of history as a fictional construct. It echoes the crucial involvement of the reader as collector and organizer of fragments that will tell a personal history. Yet *Running in the Family* simultaneously looks forward to *In the Skin of a Lion* and the insistence on the plurivocality of history, the denial of only one authoritative version of events, and again, the implication of the reader as assembler of a fragmented and complex text.

CHAPTER FOUR

IN THE SKIN OF A LION:

A Partial View

On April 22, 2009, Michael Ondaatje stood next to the Bloor Street Viaduct, the landmark structure that the immigrants of his 1987 novel *In the Skin of a Lion* built and off which another character plummets, to commemorate the fusion between place and its literary invocation. Next to the viaduct now sits a plaque with a passage from this novel inscribed upon it. The passage concerns, of course, Alice's fall from the bridge, and partly reads:

"He saw it was a black-garbed bird, a girl's white face. He saw this in the light that sprayed down inconsistently from a flare fifteen yards above them. They hung in the halter, pivoting over the valley, his broken arm loose on one side of him, holding the woman with the other. Her body was in shock, her huge eyes staring into the face of Nicolas Temelcoff"⁶⁹.

The plaque is the first of many that will be erected across Canada due to Project Bookmark Canada, which places passages of prose that involve a specific Canadian landmark or landscape next to its actual location. The founder of this project describes her vision behind the installations: "Readers can step right into stories, experiencing the authors' visions and real locales simultaneously...My vision is that you should be able to read your way right across Canada"⁷⁰. What is vastly more interesting in the case of *In the Skin of a Lion* than this idea of reading or experiencing a specific place is the

⁶⁹ Michael Ondaatje, *In the Skin of a Lion* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1987). First Vintage Canada Edition 1996, p.32. Hereafter the work is abbreviated to ISOL and further references are given after quotations in the text.

⁷⁰ Alison Flood, 'Let's follow Canada and display writers' words in the places they describe', *Guardian.co.uk*, April 24, 2009, (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/booksblog/2009/apr/24/canada-writers-words-on-display>).

reflection in this project of the dialectical relationship between space and the human element that is so crucially present in the novel.

The human element is a term I will be frequently using in my analysis of *In the Skin of a Lion* and by which I mean the personal, human factor in the otherwise anonymous assembly of figures that a public history will represent. The human element could be considered as the personal contribution to an official history that often ignores its presence and recognition of this human element is a central concern of the novel.

“A Novel”

In regard to the shift from more experimental work to what one would consider a traditional novel, Douglas Barbour points out that “*In the Skin of a Lion*’s subtitle, ‘A Novel’, calls attention to genre as none of Ondaatje’s other books have done” (Barbour, p.179). More specifically, Barbour points to the book as setting “itself up as a novel in the larger sense of historical reclamation, multiple characters, interwoven narratives, and political reflection, the latter of which some critics find lacking in Ondaatje’s earlier works” (Barbour, p.179). Linda Hutcheon explains that *In the Skin of a Lion*, like the previous longer prose works, “is a somewhat fragmented novel in its form, [yet] it also both uses and abuses, exploits and subverts the conventions of realist fiction in a way that is very postmodern, though different from Ondaatje’s earlier prose works” (Hutcheon, p.93).

One crucial element that is different from the works preceding *In the Skin of a Lion* is that in this text, Ondaatje does not reproduce any source material, specifically, the archival photographs depicting the construction of the Bloor Street Viaduct and the Waterworks, though these photographs are referenced in the novel. However, photography remains present in this text through the photographic narrative structure I

will detail as well as the thematic implications that these archival photographic references have for the examination of the role of history in the work.

Susan Spearey also remarks upon this departure from reproducing photographs within the text. She writes:

“Ondaatje’s adoption of this seemingly more coherent and less unconventional mode of presentation should not be taken to signal an abandonment of experimentation with form. On the contrary, through his revised techniques of (re)presenting source material, and through his pronounced concern with spatial dimension as an arena for resistance and for transformation, Ondaatje pushes back the frontiers of form that have been delimited by his earlier textual experiments”⁷¹.

This “concern with spatial dimension” is a crucial element in the text, exemplified by a photographic narrative that ensures a disruption of any linear plot structure.

“Architecture”

We can observe this particular narrative structure as the “architecture” of the novel.

This is a term that Ondaatje has used to describe the structure of his poetry and fiction.

In an interview with Sam Solecki, Ondaatje discussed the physical and tonal components of his work:

...what I want is something more physical, something having to do with the placing of a scene in one place and not in another – that kind of thing. How one composes a book. How one turns the real everyday object into something more by placing it in exactly the right place, with the right tone. There is an architecture of tone as well as of rhythm. What academics are obsessed with is who won the horse race or what it really means. But if you watch a replay you start discovering form. You don’t watch the horse in front anymore – the leading horse representing ‘content’ – but it’s the horse in fourth place saving himself. I think that writers think about and are interested in that kind of thing, the undercurrents of shape and tone as opposed to just the meaning”⁷².

As I detailed in regard to *Running in the Family* and *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, the formal and thematic elements of Ondaatje’s texts are intertwined. Any analysis

⁷¹ Susan Spearey, Mapping and Making: The Migrant Experience in Michael Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of a Lion*, *Journal of Commonwealth Studies*, 29:2 (1994), 45-60 (p.45).

⁷² Sam Solecki, ‘An Interview with Michael Ondaatje (1984)’, in *Spider Blues: Essays on Michael Ondaatje*, ed. by Sam Solecki (Montreal: Vehicule Press, 1985), pp.321-332 (p.323-4).

of the “architecture” of *In the Skin of a Lion* must necessarily be considered in light of the thematic concerns of the text. In reviewing this comment of Ondaatje’s, Sarris insists that the architecture of *In the Skin of a Lion* also affects the broader themes of the novel. He writes, “The form of a novel, however, is verbal, so unlike actual architecture (or to a far greater degree than architecture), a novel is, notwithstanding academic obsessions, a structure of signification. It is, therefore, difficult to separate the architecture of a novel from its meaning; hence, if one is to explore the formal components of a novel one must keep in view their thematic implications”⁷³.

The inexorably intertwined nature of the formal and thematic elements of this text stem most certainly from the central theme of how one tells a story, or writes a novel, in the second half of the twentieth century. This concern is immediately signalled at the beginning of the text in the second epigraph from John Berger: “Never again will a single story be told as though it were the only one.” Berger’s influence on this novel is paramount, as I will be detailing, but this initial sentiment at the opening of the novel signals an engagement with the specific method of telling this fictional story. Dennis Duffy, in his analysis of the archival source materials that Ondaatje used to research this novel proclaims that the “works” of the Rowland C. Harris Waterworks are not the “power we acknowledge and the vision to which we submit at the end of reading *In the Skin of a Lion*...[More importantly,] the ‘works’ that [the reader] looks at are those of the architectonic constructor of the fiction. Ultimately, the text’s subject is the art of narrative”⁷⁴.

The term “architecture” that both Ondaatje and Sarris use is an important one because it refers specifically to a premeditated and intended assembly of the formal

⁷³ Fotios Sarris, ‘*In the Skin of a Lion*: Michael Ondaatje’s Tenebristic Narrative’, *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 44 (1991), 183-201 (p.183-4).

⁷⁴ Dennis Duffy, “A Wrench in Time: A Sub-Sub-Librarian Looks beneath the Skin of a Lion”, *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 53 (1994), 125-140 (p. 129).

structure of the literary work⁷⁵. One major thematic concern in the novel that formal components of the book's structure will influence is the narration used. Critics such as Spearey and Simmons have pointed to John Berger's criticism regarding narration in the modern novel in his essay, "The Changing View of the Man in the Portrait". I will make reference to it here as well, for it succinctly outlines the most crucial element of the architecture of *In the Skin of a Lion*:

"We hear a lot about the crisis of the modern novel. What this involves, fundamentally, is a change in the mode of narration. It is scarcely any longer possible to tell a straight story sequentially unfolding in time. And this is because we are too aware of what is continually traversing the story line laterally. That is to say, instead of being aware of a point as an infinitely small part of a straight line, we are aware of it as an infinitely small part of an infinite number of lines, as the centre of a star of lines. Such awareness is the result of our constantly having to take into account the simultaneity and extension of events and possibilities"⁷⁶.

In the Skin of a Lion begins with Patrick's childhood in rural Ontario and then immediately jumps to the construction of the Bloor Street Viaduct with Temelcoff, Alice, Caravaggio, and Harris. But the story then shifts again in both space and time to Patrick's arrival in Toronto and the introduction of Ambrose and Clara. While all of the central characters are now presented in the novel, the story is told from their various viewpoints and the interconnection between all of these characters (such as Alice and Clara, Patrick and Alice, Carravaggio and Patrick) is not yet alluded to. There is an insistence on these various characters all inhabiting a small space within several storylines that will inadvertently cross each other and that will eventually connect for the reader. It is Patrick who will represent the reader's understanding of this lateral sense of space when his research in the Riverdale Library and discovery of Hana's photograph reveal the connection between Temelcoff and Alice. Patrick will realise that

⁷⁵ In the following chapter examining the filmic elements of *In the Skin of a Lion*, I will detail how the term "montage" has implications for the "architecture" of Ondaatje's work.

⁷⁶ John Berger, 'The Changing View of Man in the Portrait', in *John Berger: Selected Essays*, ed. by Geoff Dyer (New York: Vintage, 2001), pp. 98-102 (p.101).

“His own life was no longer a single story but part of a mural, which was a falling together of accomplices. Patrick saw a wondrous night web – all of these fragments of a human order, something ungoverned by the family he was born into or the headlines of the day. A nun on a bridge, a daredevil who was unable to sleep without drink, a boy watching a fire from his bed at night, an actress who ran away with a millionaire – the detritus and chaos of the age was realigned” (*ISOL*, p.145).

These “fragments” that need to be “realigned” are part of a process that the narrative structure of the book is replicating. Hutcheon remarks about this textual passage, “And that realignment is this novel, the narrative that we too, as readers, have been piecing together” (Hutcheon, p.99).

This realignment of how one should tell a story (or write a story) and subsequently read or interpret the story can be examined by an analysis of specific narrative methods used in the novel – all of which contains aspects of the photographic. The multiple viewpoints that are implemented ensure the prevention of “a single story...told as though it were the only one” and are assisted by a narrative structure that uses a photographic frame and photographic perspective as a metaphor for memory as well as a consideration of the function of space and “partial view” that can be understood as both a Cubist and photographic method of telling or seeing.

The Photographic Frame

The novel is a framed story – the opening section (in italics) describes an unnamed young girl and man who are driving and conversing and it is not until the end of the book that these characters are shown to be Patrick and Hana. Linda Hutcheon discusses the importance of this frame, as it is one

“concerned primarily with the telling of stories. The language used to talk of the telling, however, is an odd one: it is a story to be ‘gathered’; ‘he picks up and brings together various corners of the story’, as if it were a palpable thing, and particularly, a literal frame. Readers are thus alerted early to the kind of physicality that will characterize the lives of the characters and the history of Toronto in this book” (Hutcheon, p.93).

Greenstein also points to the reader's place in this process of "gathering" the story as signalled by this inset frame passage: "Reader, writer and rider together gather Ondaatje's story, participating in a dialogic process"⁷⁷.

The "literal frame" that Hutcheon refers to is used throughout the first section of the novel, "Little Seeds", as an element of the text's photographic narrative structure. This section is primarily composed of brief passages, or fragments, that provide a description of moments or scenes from Patrick's childhood: they act as narrative photographs. The entire section contains only three lines of spoken dialogue and even a moment that conveys a sense of action or excitement – rescuing the cow from the river – is halted by a line that provides a photographic image of the event: "Patrick looks up – at the grey rock of the swimming hole, the oak towering over the dirty brush that spikes out of the snow. There is a clear blue sky" (*ISOL*, p.13). The action is muted by Patrick's photographic perspective.

This photographic perspective is enforced by the use of the frame in this first section. The window frame stands in, or acts as, the frame of a photograph as Patrick "stands at the bedroom window and watches: he can see two or three lanterns between the soft maple and the walnut tree... The boy walks downstairs and moves to a window in the kitchen where he can look down the driveway" (*ISOL*, p.7). And again, Patrick "walks back into the bright kitchen and moves from window to window to search out the moths pinioned against the screens" (*ISOL*, p.9). Patrick looks out of these frames, these windows, as if witnessing the world around him like a series of snapped photographs. This manner of observing his landscape will continue to function as a comfort to him as the novel progresses. For example, in a tense conversation with Alice, Patrick will stop talking and comfort himself by mentally photographing the scene in

⁷⁷ Michael Greenstein, 'Ondaatje's Metamorphoses: "In the Skin of a Lion"', *Canadian Literature*, 126 (1990), 116-130 (p.118).

front of him, using the window frame as a tool: He “shook his head continuing to look out the window into the rain. He felt there was space in her small rooms only when he looked out” (*ISOL*, p.122)⁷⁸.

Butterfield notes that this novel “is strangely devoid of a main character that is a catalyst for action. Patrick Lewis is primarily an observer, a watcher, a recorder of life (not unlike a writer)”⁷⁹. It could be added: not unlike a photographer. However, if we consider the photographic perspective of Patrick in contrast to that of Billy the Kid, there is a crucial difference that lies in the motivation of each character. Where Billy the Kid photographed his surroundings out of fear and panic, Patrick uses his photographic perspective as one of witness. One of the main narrative movements of the novel is Patrick’s journey from being an isolated subject, one who does not understand his place in the world, to a man who accepts the collective space of a community and realises that every moment of his past, his own private history, has played a crucial part in his development as a human being who is able to successfully engage with others⁸⁰. Butterfield describes Patrick’s process as beginning in a psychic space that is “closed and self-contained, arriving in the city psychologically shut off from his childhood” until eventually he “is painfully reborn as he opens himself up to affection, to community, to the goals of community and his past” (Butterfield, p.162-3). It is by using his photographic perspective to visually witness the scenes or moments surrounding him and coming back to this visual imprint later as he considers the implications of these moments that Patrick is able to piece together his own personal story. Douglas Barbour explains that this first section of the novel “gives us a

⁷⁸ Patrick is also occasionally observed by others in this photographic frame. Clara “watches him through the window on his walk to the train station, striding from one frame of glass to another” (78).

⁷⁹ Martha Butterfield, ‘The One Lighted Room: *In the Skin of a Lion*’, *Canadian Literature*, 119 (1998), 162-167 (p.166).

⁸⁰ For an interesting interpretation of Patrick’s journey as an acquisition of subjectivity using Lacanian theory, see Rod Schumacher’s essay “Patrick’s Quest: Narration and Subjectivity in Michael Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of a Lion*”, *Studies in Canadian Literature* Vol 21:2, 1996.

fragmented and opaque view of character, imaged moments rather than psychological explanations” (Barbour, p.183). The “psychological explanations” will come later in the novel as Patrick retrieves these “imaged”, or photographed, moments from his memory.

The most startling example of this is Patrick’s realization while speaking with Alice that the mysterious, magical skaters with flaming cattails from his childhood were Finnish loggers. This scene portraying Patrick’s witnessing of the Finnish loggers on the river is central to the novel. It reveals how Patrick photographs a moment of his life to be stored away in memory and accessed later, and crucially, it is the first major indication of the influence of the human element upon space and the relationship between subject and landscape.

In analysing this passage, Stolar writes that “the episode in the river is photographed into Patrick’s memory”⁸¹ and though Patrick does not witness this scene through a framed window, the imagery and language used to describe the picture in front of him captures this moment photographically for the boy. Patrick puts down his lamp before moving towards the bank of the river in darkness, yet there still is a source of light provided as required for the “photograph” to be taken – these are the “sheaf of cattails and the tops of these were on fire. This is what lit the ice and had blinked through the trees” (*ISOL*, p.21). Patrick compares the scene in front of him to the “illustrations...he had pored over in his favourite history book” (*ISOL*, p.21) as if the frenetic movements in front of him are so mesmerizing that he is experiencing the scene as a static photograph. The narrative does explain that “Patrick was transfixed” and the entire scene is “Something joyous. A gift” (*ISOL*, p.21). It is not until almost 130 pages later, Patrick now an adult and with his lover Alice, that he discovers who exactly these magically skating men were: “Now in his thirties he finally had a name for that group of

⁸¹ Batia Boe Stolar, ‘Building and Living the Immigrant City: Michael Ondaatje’s and Austin Clarke’s Toronto’ in *Downtown Canada: Writing Canadian Cities*, ed. by Justin D. Edwards and Douglas Ivison (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), pp.122-141 (p.134).

men he witnessed as a child” (*ISOL*, p.151). The moment of realisation is a joyous one for Patrick, and its significance is not lost on him. Patrick “was smiling as if a riddle old and tiresome had been solved, a burr plucked from his brain...He knew now that he was the sum of all he had been in his life since he was that boy in the snow woods” (*ISOL*, p.151-2). By retrieving this photograph from his memory and combining it with these new moments he is sharing with Alice, Patrick is able to achieve a greater level of understanding of his place in the world. He is realising that this process is achieved by bringing together the various fragments of his personal past and that he is “the sum” of all of these fragments.

This first section of the novel, in which these individual moments are photographed into Patrick’s memory and retrieved and pieced together with a new understanding later, is entitled “Little Seeds”. Spearey points out that the “little seeds” referenced in this section “are not symbols of growth and development that the opening scenes might lead one to expect...rather, they are seeds of dynamite, from which “abrupt lessons” are learned and by way of which the unexpected unfolds” (Spearey, p.51). I agree with this interpretation of the section title, but would like to add one further possible meaning. Instead of being the “little seeds” of Patrick’s future development into adulthood, perhaps they are functioning as the seeds of his emerging consciousness later in the novel. Every person and landscape and event that will further shape Patrick is like the water, soil and sunlight required to ferment these seeds of consciousness that will later provide his sense of connection and community.

Interestingly, Douglas Barbour describes the inset frame passage as “an analeptic frame” (Barbour, p.182), indicating the restorative or healing nature of this narrative method. This “analeptic frame” points toward the use of this photographic narrative structure as one that is able to restore or piece back together the fragments of

Patrick's past that he has struggled to understand. This connection between "photographing" a moment and storing it in his memory, only to be accessed later is reminiscent of the similar narrative technique in *Running in the Family*. In this previous text, Ondaatje wrote about the characters from his parents' generation "who stood in my memory like frozen opera. I wanted to touch them into words" (*RIF*, p.16). This text continued to use the photograph (both literally and metaphorically) to represent fragments of memory that were later expanded into a meaningful personal history and brought together by both Ondaatje and the reader to create a non-linear, but cohesive, narrative work.

As I showed earlier, Ondaatje is aware of the delicate nature of memory and the ambiguous manner in which consciousness reveals itself. In *Running in the Family*, Ondaatje describes this subtle and often inexplicable revelation of memory and consciousness in these lines that step away from the narrative telling of the story: "Watch the hand move. Waiting for it to say something, to stumble casually on perception, the shape of an unknown thing" (*RIF*, p.162). There is a similar self-reflexive gesture in *In the Skin of a Lion* that points toward the connection of fragments of memory and how they should be read in the novel. Only one page after the instructive passage that reads, "The first sentence of every novel should be: 'Trust me, this will take time but there is order here, very faint, very human'" (*ISOL*, p.146) is a shift in point of view that is indicative of the metafictional nature of the text. Patrick is struggling to find words to describe Alice, who it is revealed is only a memory for him at this point. (This is almost a reflection of Ondaatje trying to "touch" his own loved ones "into words" from the fragment of memory he maintains of them.) He struggles with these lines: "She could move like...she could sing as low as...Why is it that I am now trying to uncover every facet of Alice's nature for myself?" (*ISOL*, p.147). Yet the

very next sentence is a complete shift to a third person narrator as it reads, “He wants everything of Alice to be with him here in this room as if she is not dead” (*ISOL*, p.147-8). Hutcheon comments on this passage and switch of point of view: “Whose voice is this?...The narrative voices of the writing artist-figure and the memory-ridden protagonist merge; memory and creation are more closely related that we might like to think” (Hutcheon, p.100). This merging writer/protagonist figure is perhaps the one who utters the lines that follow this abrupt shift in point of view: “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” (*ISOL*, p.148). Whether a self-reflexive gesture by the author or a conscious realisation on the part of Patrick, these lines are representative of the narrative structure of the text and the interpretative method with which the reader should experience it.

The importance of this particular photographed memory from Patrick’s childhood is hinted at in the novel before Patrick makes the connection to the Finnish skaters by lines such as “His mind skates across old conversations” (*ISOL*, p.128). The immigrant workers will walk across the new bridge they construct carrying candles, like “a net of summer insects over the valley” (*ISOL*, p.27). They will be the community that embraces Patrick, they are being described here like the “blink of amber”, the “lightning bugs” or fireflies that beckon the childhood Patrick towards the river (*ISOL*, p.20).

The importance of this photographed memory for Patrick’s journey toward his accepted place within a community is evident from the detail of the moonlight. As Patrick makes the connection to the Finnish skaters, he looks at Alice and “the moon showed her face clearly. A moon returning from when he was eleven” (*ISOL*, p.151). Except there was specifically an absent moon on the evening Patrick saw the skaters: “a

moon lost in the thickness of the clouds so it did not shine a path for him towards the trees” (*ISOL*, p.20). This shift in detail is an indication of Patrick’s successful process from an isolated subject to one accepted within a community – he has re-imagined his childhood to contain the moonlight he now positively associates with the affection of Alice. It is also a crucial detail which points to the continual transformation of landscape in the novel. Patrick’s benevolent photographic perspective has implications for the portrayal of landscape in *In the Skin of a Lion* and there is a definitive shift in the use of landscape from Ondaatje’s previous works.

A shifting landscape

Observing his surroundings through window frames that perform as photographic frames emphasises Patrick’s sense of being an outsider. There is a sense, as there was in *Running in the Family*, of the photograph representing the boundary between inner and outer psychic space. In this previous work, Ondaatje longed to (re)claim the landscape and events portrayed in the familial photographs he uncovered. Yet, he always remained separate and isolated from the private past within the photographic frame. Similarly, Patrick is separated from the loggers he sees outside his window that he yearned to join (“He longed to hold their hands and skate the length of the creek” (*ISOL*, p.121)). Greenstein points out that this inset frame passage calls “into question the relations between inner and outer, structurally and thematically” (Greenstein, p.118).

The subject position that Patrick takes up is one that also straddles the boundary between inner and outer, of belonging and distance. The photographic perspective he uses at the beginning of the novel as he watches the world outside his window and through the window frame projects this boundary. In *Running in the Family*, the photographs displayed the exotic, foreign land that Ondaatje tried to reclaim while

mitigating the complex nature of his familial past. Along a similar line, the photographs in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* projected the inhospitable landscape that Billy tried to freeze and stop dead in his quest for immutability and immortality. The “photographs” in *In the Skin of a Lion* (even though they are narrative snapshots, not actual reproductions) also provide images of a harsh landscape: “There is no colour” (*ISOL*, p.11), “the oak towering over the dirty brush that spikes out of the snow” (*ISOL*, p.13), “A river exploded behind him, the crows leafing up” (*ISOL*, p.17). Yet, there is a crucial difference in regard to the photographic perspective of this landscape. Instead of a desire to conquer it, reclaim it, or freeze it in time, there is a dominant sense of movement and transformation. Spearey contends that Ondaatje’s

“exploration of the relationships obtaining between landscapes and their inhabitants departs from the earlier writings in this tradition insofar as Ondaatje does not document the individual’s taming of, or coming to terms with, a wilderness that is at once external and internal, alien and familiar. Rather, he traces the ongoing *transformations* of landscapes and individuals as he explores their influences upon one another” (Spearey, p.46).

Patrick’s childhood landscape will be one that transforms for him throughout the novel – he will gain a new understanding of it as the story unfolds. This is signalled throughout the section “Little Seeds” as descriptions of the rural landscape are interrupted by passages such as “Years later at the Riverdale Library he will learn how the shining leaf-chafers destroy shrubbery, how the flower beetles feed on the juice of decaying wood or young corn. There will suddenly be order and shape to these nights” (*ISOL*, p.9). What begins as a foreign, almost bizarre, landscape to Patrick will become one that is understood, but not until he has moved to another landscape - the city of Toronto. When it is described that Patrick “Imagines himself through the winter until he is a white midsummer shadow beside his father” (*ISOL*, p.14), this points to the process in the novel where his photographic snapshots become memories that are then imagined into a new understanding of his landscape – a re-imagining of the space around him.

This re-imagining is exemplified in the transformed detail of the moon as Patrick discovers the identity of the skaters from his childhood. When Patrick first encounters the skating Finns, there is a tone of annoyance in the description, their life is “magically revealing the grey bushes of the shore, *his* shore, *his* river” (*ISOL*, p.21). This is a brief moment reminiscent of the previously implemented photographic perspective in Ondaatje’s work – Patrick is under the impression that this landscape belongs to him, there is a strong sense of possession on Patrick’s part and one of trespassing and betrayal by these immigrant workers. Discussing this scene, Stolar asserts that it “indicates [Patrick’s] first acquiescence to the immigrants’ natural right to (or ownership of) his native land” (Stolar, p.134). This acquiescence, Stolar argues, stems from a realisation that these loggers possess greater skill and a method of using this landscape that Patrick is unable to obtain (Stolar, p.134). It will be through his encounters with this immigrant community that Patrick is able to re-imagine this landscape from his childhood and consider that the landscape he inhabits in Toronto is emphatically under the possession of those who constructed it.

This insistence on the transformation of landscape is an element of the most important feature of the novel: the acute consideration of space. Spearey discusses “Ondaatje’s pronounced concern with spatial dimension” (Spearey, p.48) in relation to the novel’s tropes of transformation and migration. My analysis will eventually lead into a consideration of this connection – and its implication for how time is projected in the book – but first I will engage in a more in-depth examination of *how* space is considered in the text.

A Consideration of Space

There is a passage near the beginning of the text that describes the precise and acrobatic work Nicholas Temelcoff performs on the bridge. It is a passage that also describes a particular use of space and encapsulates the purpose of considering space in a manner that will affect our reading of the novel.

Temelcoff is all over the bridge, “using the wind to push himself into corners of abutments” and he “falls off the bridge like a diver over the edge of a boat” (*ISOL*, p.34). This last phrase emphasises that the space surrounding the bridge, the space that is simply air which Temelcoff freefalls into, is just as much a part of his landscape as the hard metal of the building structure. This particular concern with space points to the line in this passage taken directly from the title of an influential Berger essay: “The moment of cubism” (*ISOL*, p.34). In this essay, Berger details the style of Cubist painting and the profound effect it had not only on “The nature of the relationship between the painted image and reality [but] by so doing it expressed a new relationship between man and reality”⁸². Cubism broke a centuries-old tradition of painting that imitated reality by presenting objects in an ordered, static place from the singular viewpoint of the painter or spectator. Instead, Cubists refused to paint in the “illusionist three-dimensional space which had existed in painting since the Renaissance...It did not destroy it...It broke its continuity” (Berger, ‘Cubism’, p.84).

Simmons discusses *In the Skin of a Lion* in terms of its Cubist stylistic parallels and explains that “instead of presenting an object as perceived from a single position in space, the Cubists presented the object as seen from multiple points of view”⁸³.

Ondaatje describes not only the Bloor Street Viaduct, but insists that the space

⁸² John Berger, ‘The Moment of Cubism’, in *John Berger: Selected Essays*, ed. by Geoff Dyer (New York: Vintage, 2001), pp.71-92 (p. 80).

⁸³ See Rochelle Simmons, ‘*In the Skin of a Lion* as a Cubist Novel’, *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 67.3 (1998), 699-714, (p.700).

surrounding it is just as crucial to Temelcoff. Or as Berger writes, “Space is part of the continuity of the events within it. It is in itself an event, comparable with other events. It is not a mere container. And this is what the few Cubist masterpieces show us. The space between objects is part of the same structure of the objects themselves” (Berger, ‘Cubism’, p.86). Previous to this passage, Ondaatje writes of the “4000 photographs from various angles of the bridge in its time-lapse evolution” (*ISOL*, p.26), photographs that depict the form and structure of the bridge’s construction. But Temelcoff’s presence in these photographs insists on a consideration of the space surrounding the bridge: “Even in archive photographs it is difficult to find him. Again and again you see vista before you and the eye must search along the wall of sky to the speck of burned paper across the valley that is him, an exclamation mark, somewhere in the distance between bridge and river” (*ISOL*, p.34).

The difficulty in spotting Temelcoff in this photograph seems to suggest the parallel difficulty that the reader will face in pulling together the threads (or “corners”) of this story, ones that in a Cubist way are not told from a single perspective but from multiple and changing perspectives. There must be a consideration of the space surrounding all of the subjects of this story and, more importantly, how it is this space that links them (and the narrative as a whole) together. Ondaatje writes about Temelcoff in this passage: “He links everyone” (*ISOL*, p.34) and, indeed, it will be Temelcoff who links Patrick and Alice and Hana together when Patrick discovers the photograph of the bridge builder in Hana’s suitcase. It is at this point in the novel that the text proclaims, “In books he had read...Patrick never believed that characters lived only on the page. They altered when the author’s eye was somewhere else. Outside the plot there was a great darkness, but there would of course be daylight elsewhere on earth” (*ISOL*, p.143). The characters in this novel are living and existing even when the author’s eye

is not focused upon them – or more crucially, they are continuing to inhabit space that surrounds the other characters and there is consequence in this, there is an influence of space upon characters and vice versa. For example, Spearey points out that the “linear narrative is undermined [by] the frequently employed tactic of presenting characters in spatially contingent positions without any indication of their awareness of each other or of the ways in which they will come to influence each other” (Spearey, p.51). In “The Bridge”, the reader will encounter Caravaggio tarring the road, Rowland Harris inspecting the construction of the viaduct, Temelcoff building it and Alice falling off it, but apart from the brief moment between these latter two characters (and there is no indication in the novel that Temelcoff realises later that Alice is the nun from this night) there is an absence of connection or “link” between them. There remains only the space of their communal landscape.

Patrick’s deduction that characters lived *off* of the page and the imagery of light and darkness utilised to portray this exemplifies a critical element of the consideration of space and how the photographic perspective assists it: the narrative’s insistence on *partial view*. The entire novel is presented in fragments, snapshots of narrative that portray a subject/event/moment, but there is no linear movement that connects these fragments. In his review of the novel, George Packer writes that its fragmented plot is “broken up...into separate moments of illumination”⁸⁴. We can view the entire narrative as taking place in the darkness of this space where the author’s eye is absent, and the fragments that are presented are the photographs taken as light suddenly shines onto the space the characters move and migrate through.

There has been much critical work produced on the relationship between light and dark in *In the Skin of a Lion* and I would assert that in addition to the *chiaroscuro* or

⁸⁴ George Packer, ‘Refractions’, Rev. of *In the Skin of a Lion*, *Nation*, 17 (1987), 421-422 (p.422).

tenebrism that infiltrates the text as a result of this imagery, a reading of the novel's narrative fragments as photographs and the light required to take them is also possible⁸⁵. The original title of Ondaatje's novel was "Available Light" and it is as if moments of the narrative can only be displayed or photographed where there is an available source of light (Butterfield, p.164). This occurs with natural light: "A sudden flinging of sheet lightning and Clara sees Alice subliminal in movement... The rest of her ascent lost to darkness till the next brief flutter of light" (*ISOL*, p.76). Photographic snapshots occur also in scenes infused with artificial light: "Ambrose Small holds a wooden match above his head, its glare falling onto the shoulders of his nightshirt" (*ISOL*, p.93) and "...there is no other light in the tunnel but this one lamp and as he moved his shadow shifts like a giant alongside him" (*ISOL*, p.107).

Butterfield writes that "in psychological symbolism, darkness represents the unconscious: the precondition of consciousness; the ground for disintegration and/or germination before experiencing new insight, the white light of consciousness" (Butterfield, p.163-4). Patrick's role as a searcher is not only one that looks for Ambrose Small. He is also persistently searching for his place in the landscape around him and this journey is portrayed in the novel with the metaphoric imagery of light and darkness. In the light, Patrick witnesses the fragments of his life and in the darkness he is able to unconsciously piece them together until finally he realizes that "His own life was no longer a single story but part of a mural which was a falling together of accomplices" (145).

The reader is also participating in this process of searching and discovery, except I would suggest that instead of the metaphor of the mural, they are assembling a kind of photo album or photographic exhibition, one that tells a life story. Each

⁸⁵ See Martha Butterfield and Fotios Sarris

narrative fragment is a photograph and the gaps in-between – on the literal page as well as the larger narrative gaps between spaces and events in the text – are the darkness within which they can be pieced together. Sarris writes that “the physical gaps between all these fragments or ‘moments of illumination’, the large blank spaces and empty pages in the book embody actual gaps or patches of darkness in the narrative itself” (Sarris, p.189). It is within these “patches of darkness” that the illuminated snapshots of the story can be pieced together. We could even consider this darkness to be representative of a darkroom, the space in which the reader waits for the photographs to be exposed in chemical process, revealing the photographic narrative image within its frame.

The light/dark imagery is also at play in this structure concerning partial view. In discussing the formal devices used in the novel (particularly that of the repetitious use of this imagery), Julie Beddoes asserts that “the book endlessly reminds us of the ways that images are constructed...It shows us that all illumination is partial, whether by design or because restricted to what is available – Carravaggio, a burglar, works in ‘available light’”⁸⁶.

I am reminded of Annie Leibovitz in the documentary *Life Through a Lens*, which constantly shows her putting together both a book and exhibition with photographs that tell the long and complex tale of her life. Scene after scene in this film depicts Leibovitz picking up individual photographs and arranging them on the wall of her studio, then shifting the photographs around into a different space and sequence. **(Figure 3)** It is as if she is performing a similar task to the narrator of *In the Skin of a Lion*, pointed to at the beginning of the text, “as he picks up and brings together various corners of the story”. This is the “palpable thing” that Hutcheon alluded to, this is “the

⁸⁶ Julie Beddoes, ‘Which Side Is It On? Form Class, and Politics in *In the Skin of a Lion*’, *Essays on Canadian Writing* 53 (1994), 204-215 (p. 207).

kind of physicality that will characterize the lives of the characters and the history of Toronto in this book” (Hutcheon, p.93). It is also the physicality that will characterise the reading process of this novel.



Figure 3

The Moment of Cubism

This insistence on the process of reading the novel is exemplified by the persistent use of the partial view – a central concept in Cubist painting, but one we can also view as photographic. The opening section “Little Seeds” signals the partial view that the reader will be subjected to throughout the novel. The section is composed of five passages that are only snapshots of information for the reader. We are witness to Patrick’s view of the loggers framed through his window, his ritual of reading his school geography book in darkness, the rescue of the drowning cow in the river, Hazen Lewis’s career as a dynamiter, and Patrick’s magical witnessing of the Finnish skaters. These narrative fragments only provide a partial view of Patrick’s childhood; the reader is not privy to the origin of his family or the whereabouts of his mother or given any sense of the

progression of Patrick's journey from adolescence to adulthood. He will simply appear twenty pages (and one entire textual section) later in Union Station at the age of twenty-one.

In "The Moment of Cubism", Berger writes about this insistence on partial view: not only is there a "multiplicity of viewpoints – so that, say, a view of a table from below is combined with a view of the table from above and from the side – but also...the forms portrayed never present themselves as a totality. The totality is the surface of the picture, *which is now the origin and sum of all that one sees*" (Berger, 'Cubism', p.85). As we examined in light of photographic stillness in *Running in the Family*, the photograph can act as its own temporal origin. In this previous text, the photographic stillness of these narrative snapshots lies on the side of Barthes' theory of the photographic referent as opposed to Bazin's assertion of an extracted moment from time. As Jonathan Friday explains, due to the unchanging nature of the photographic referent over time, the photograph "depicts its own temporal origin, the moment of origination after which time begins to take its effect" (Friday, p.51).

The structure of this novel perpetuates this phenomenon of the moment of origination – the narrative photographs consistently portray characters at a beginning point, or a moment that has no source explanation supporting it. Spearey explains the presentation of the characters this way:

"None is portrayed as being essentially linked to or determined by his or her respective origins, which by and large remain obscure. Rather, each is designated by the narrative with points of beginning which underscore the relation of that character to the stories mapped out in the text. These textual beginnings are shown to be arbitrary or constructed, and in no way deterministic" (Spearey, p.52).

As I previously asserted, Patrick's childhood is presented in photographic snapshots that contain no designation as to his family's arrival in Depot Creek or how he came to live with his father in the manner portrayed in the book. These narrative fragments contain

their own origin of time. It is described that Alice “has delivered him out of nothing” (*ISOL*, p.152); Patrick is continually presented in moments of unexplained re-birth or new arrival. When Patrick arrives at Union Station at the age of twenty-one, and again after being released from prison, he simply arrives without any explanation of the cause to this effect. In the latter arrival, the only details provided are those of events happening both within Toronto and around the world in 1938: “Everyone sang ‘Just One of Those Things’. The longest bridge in the world was being built over the lower Zambesi” (*ISOL*, p.209). This technique of placing seemingly random or inconsequential details of a specific year was also used in *Running in the Family* and we can observe a similar functioning of these details in this novel. In regard to the “Honeymoon details” in the earlier text, Hutcheon pointed out that the events “are not randomly selected...The couple may not appear, but the things that impinged on them do...It is only much later in the text that the lacuna is partially filled” (Hutcheon, p.85).

Similarly, the details listed in this section of *In the Skin of a Lion* will have direct influence on Patrick and his actions later in the text. The people who “were crowding together in large dark buildings across North America to see Garbo as Anna Karenina” are suggestive of the theatrical performance Patrick attends with throngs of people in the deserted Waterworks. The “Red Squads” that disrupted mail service and broke up political meetings will be the authorities Patrick encounters as he bands together with the immigrant workers to fight against their oppression and the bridge being built over the Zambesi is, of course, representative of the Bloor Street Viaduct. Caravaggio is introduced early in the novel as a tarrer of the road leading to the bridge but is not seen again for well over a hundred and fifty pages when he re-emerges to stand on the “blue tin jail roof” with Patrick. It is a new beginning here for this character as well and the reader finally encounters his story in the novel.

In this way, the characters are never presented as a totality – they begin in one place and then begin again in another – there is no linear narrative construction for the characters, as this would betray the persistent use of partial view. This manner of presentation insists that the characters in this story develop and transform due to their interaction with the other characters or events taking place in the novel, or as Spearey asserts, these constant originating points “underscore the relation of that character to the stories mapped out in the text” (Spearey, p.52). Even as the characters connect with each other, this connection is not composed of an emotional engagement with the other’s past, but created solely in the present. At the farmhouse, “Conversation dips again into childhood but the friend Alice plucks only details from the present to celebrate. She reveals no past, remains sourceless” (*ISOL*, p.74). Patrick does not have much luck gaining knowledge of Clara’s personal history either, he “feels he knows nothing of most of Clara’s life. He keeps finding and losing parts of her” (*ISOL*, p.79).

This partial view that creates the photographic sense of a moment of origination, as opposed to the linear plotting of events or characterisation, allows for the particular use of time in the novel. There is no linear forward movement of time in this novel and Barbour writes that “Time is incredibly malleable in *In the Skin of a Lion*: figures remember within memories, and analepses contain Chinese boxes of further flashbacks and flash-forwards” (Barbour, p.181). This malleable sense of time is presented at the very beginning of the novel in several flash-forwards. For example, when walking towards the skaters on the river, a few lines are placed in parentheses: “(Years later, Clara making love to him in a car, catching his semen in a handkerchief and flinging it out onto the bushes by the side of the road.” (*ISOL*, p.20).)

Simmons discusses the partial view in *In the Skin of a Lion* as one that also results from “the high degree of indeterminacy in the novel. It is difficult, if not

impossible, to establish the order of events in certain places” (Simmons, p.703). The omission of information such as how Temelcoff and Alice reunite as friends or who constructed the bomb that kills Alice or the circumstances surrounding Patrick’s return to Toronto after his confrontation with Ambrose Small is an element of the text that points to the reader’s partial view. Simmons writes that “this evidence of a ‘partial view’ serves to make us focus upon the process, or medium, of representation itself” (Simmons, p.704) and goes on to point to the parallel technique in Cubist painting. Berger describes how one views a Cubist painting and we can observe this process as identical to how the reader engages with *In the Skin of a Lion*: “We start from the surface, we follow a sequence of forms which leads us into the picture, and then suddenly we arrive back at the surface again and deposit out newly acquired knowledge upon it, before making another foray” (Berger, ‘Cubism’, p.87). The reader begins with the entire novel in front of them, opens the book and enters the narrative by reading the photographic fragments. The formal devices used to present this story reflect the fictional construction of the text and the reader is reminded or brought back to considering the text as a whole.

Berger writes that “We begin with the surface, but since everything in the picture refers back to the surface, we begin with the conclusion” (Berger, ‘Cubism’, p.87). This is exemplified in the text by the inset frame passage that opens the work. Patrick and Hana are in the car, which is actually the very end of the narrative tale. The conclusion is presented first to the reader, who then must make connections between the fragments of the narrative to understand the story. Or as Berger insists, “In a Cubist picture, the conclusion and the connections are given. They are what the picture is made of. They are its content. The spectator has to find his 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, ‘Cubism’, p.87). Similarly, the reader must find his or her own position within the novel from which to describe and interpret and gather the threads of the story that are collected from their partial view. If, as Simmons asserts, this position in partial view insists upon a focus toward the narrative method, it is crucial to examine why the archival photographs referenced in the text are not physically reproduced within its pages. What is the purpose of this omission and its consequence for the reader, the formal and thematic components of the text, and for the man who took these photographs and will make a brief cameo in the novel?

Introducing Arthur Goss

By eliminating any reproduction of the archival photographs Ondaatje used in his research for this novel, the ones that are only alluded to by the narrator and by Patrick, the text seems to insist upon a different kind of engagement on the part of the reader. Instead of the process in which the reader questioned the authenticity of the photographs in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* or the textual placement of the honeymoon photograph of Mervyn and Doris Ondaatje in *Running in the Family*, a more subtle and perhaps more active engagement with the photographic narrative is at play here. The reader must find his or her position within the text as Berger insists in regard to Cubist painting. Spearey also makes note of this shift in reader participation. She writes:

“Because of the description of, or reference to, primary materials within the narrative – as opposed to their direct citation – *In the Skin of a Lion*, unlike Ondaatje’s earlier texts, does not “jolt” the reader into active engagement with the various voices encountered in the text. Instead, he or she is lured into the role of searcher, a role which demands the ongoing pursuit and exploration of the boundaries which delimit the novel’s textual and even geographic worlds, all of which exists in a state of perpetual flux” (Spearey, p.47).

It is this “state of perpetual flux” and the manner in which the reader navigates it – drawing threads of the story together, picking up the photographic fragments and re-assembling them – that insists upon a story that is not a single voice or single viewpoint or single source of power. Fraser writes that “By such means Ondaatje makes extreme requirements of the reader, left for much of the narrative to wander like a migrant amid turnings and side-turnings”⁸⁷.

If the reader is a “searcher” for these threads and fragments of the story, just as Patrick is a searcher for Ambrose Small (and eventually his own place within a community), it is worth examining a particular critical inquiry made by Hutcheon. She writes about Patrick’s attempt to interpret the fragments he obtains (the photographs, a bracelet, a rosary) into the private history of his friends: “Once a searcher for the disappeared, he becomes a re-searcher for the re-appeared” (Hutcheon, p.98). I would argue that this is an identical process to that which Ondaatje performs with the photographs of Arthur Goss. After “finding” the previously anonymous, or invisible, figures such as Nicolas Temelcoff, and making them “appear” in a fictional reconstruction, Ondaatje then himself becomes a “re-searcher for the re-appeared”. This “re-search” is actually a fictional re-imagining of the people and places he writes about in the work. It is also a fictional re-imagining of the archival photographs taken by Arthur Goss.

In its description of the architecturally informed and visionary mind of Rowland Harris, the narrative reads, “Before the real city could be seen it had to be imagined, the way rumours and tall tales were a kind of charting” (*ISOL*, p.29). Dennis Duffy continues this thought as he writes, “Yet once imagined, it becomes ripe for re-imagining, a project helped along by those long-ago photographic images of its

⁸⁷ Robert Fraser, ‘Postcolonial Cities: Michael Ondaatje’s Toronto and Yvonne Vera’s Bulawayo’, *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 26:2 (2001), 44-52 (p.47).

building”⁸⁸. Ondaatje engages in this process of “re-imagining” the city of Toronto and one could argue that it is the archival photograph that promotes this “re-imagining”. If we consider, as with my analysis of the specific use of photographic stillness in *Running in the Family*, photographs that promote their own origin of time (which I have already pointed out is the case with the photographic narrative of *In the Skin of a Lion*) present the viewer again with the unique position of observing those photographs not as a container of time, but as a beginning moment witnessed from our own time in the here and now. Or, as I previously asserted, photographs, as we understand them in this context, display nothing of the past and the viewer necessarily can only attempt to decipher and understand the photographic image from present time. In *Running in the Family*, Ondaatje realized, somewhat frustratingly at first, that the “facts” presented in a photograph can never be sustained through time because “as its only possible witnesses become ever more removed from [the photograph’s] origin, [they become] wiser or more ignorant about its subject matter” (Friday, p.48). The result of this process in Ondaatje’s previous work was a complete re-imagining of his familial past and the presentation of a private, rather than public, history.

An identical process is at work in *In the Skin of a Lion*. The “rumours and tall tales” that “were a kind of charting” (*ISOL*, p.29) are the same as the stories or “hideous scandal” that Ondaatje and his Sri Lankan relatives constantly returned to and re-told “with additions and this time a few judgments thrown in. In this way history is organized” (*RIF*, p.19). This last sentence could also have been lifted out of the pages of *In the Skin of a Lion*. In addition to indicating the fictional construction of history in the novel, this line also points to the official, public history Ondaatje is eschewing in favour

⁸⁸ Dennis Duffy, ‘Furnishing the Pictures: Arthur S. Goss, Michael Ondaatje and the Imag(in)ing of Toronto’, *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 36:2 (2001), 106-129 (p.121).

of the private, intimate history he is organizing in this text. If the factual basis of the archival City of Toronto photographs has disappeared due to our witnessing of them in present time, imagination can take over and the fictional reconstruction, or re-imagining of these characters, can take place. A parallel process can be seen in the novel as Patrick, in the Riverdale Library, matches the photograph in the newspaper to the one he holds in his hand. At this moment, when he has made a public, archival photograph private, he has discovered that it now has meaning. He realises immediately that he was part of the people and community around him: “He saw the interactions, saw how each one of them was carried by the strength of something more than themselves” (*ISOL*, p.144). The “something more than themselves” is the sense of private history and the meaning and possibility of connection that it carries. It is also the “human element” that is overtly present in this novel and the method through which not only the characters in the work are portrayed, but the city of Toronto itself.

Stolar opens her essay on Toronto as an immigrant city in *In the Skin of a Lion* with the following remark: “Literary representations of the city, like historical photographs, tend by their very nature to capture an aspect of the city and freeze it in a particular moment in time” (Stolar, p.122). Ondaatje’s portrayal of the city of Toronto is one that does not follow this prescribed presentation as it promotes transformation and movement rather than any one frozen moment from a linear continuum. If there is a “certain aspect” of the city that is “captured” by the author, I would assert that it is its human element, which insists on continual metamorphosis and thereby eliminating any sense of stasis in this portrayal of the city. Commissioner Harris quotes Baudelaire to his critics: “The form of a city changes faster than the heart of a mortal” (*ISOL*, p.109). Ondaatje portrays Harris as a true visionary – a man who understood the metamorphosis

of the city as it was being built as opposed to simply the production and construction of a highly functioning metropolis.

Duffy comments that “in setting up a photography office, Harris displayed historically his sense of the organic – and the ceaseless, wrenching metamorphosis that drives the organic – the novelist credits him with possessing” (Duffy, ‘Furnishing’, p.119). The novel’s portrayal of Harris in the final section of the book when he is confronted by Patrick and the dynamite is one of a benevolent constructor rather than threatening adversary. Like the author of this novel who is concerned with the aesthetics of its structure, Harris is described as dreaming about the form of his buildings: “the brass railings curved up three flights like an immaculate fiction” (*ISOL*, p.109). More than any other character in this novel (except perhaps Caravaggio, which will be explored in the following chapter), I would argue that Rowland Harris is aware of the dialectical relationship between space and the human element. As with the previous quotation appropriated from Baudelaire, his descriptions of the space he is attempting to transform consistently use human imagery: the viaduct is described as “his first child” (*ISOL*, p.29), he “knew every image of it as well as his arms – west wing, east wing” (*ISOL*, p.109), “Harris saw the new building as a human body” (*ISOL*, p.22). Although he is the man who does not know the names of the workers and is the symbol of authoritative power that tries to deny the multiple stories of this history, he does seem to recognize the human element that is at work in the novel. This is “the ‘human’ order that Ondaatje proposes...is an alternative to the formal structures of Toronto, something etched against the economic infrastructure of the town” (Fraser, p.47). Spearey writes that “it is no accident that the city assumes almost human proportions; it too is a character that wears many skins, acts and is acted upon” (Spearey, p.57). One wonders what qualities in the archival photographs of the construction of Toronto landmarks

Ondaatje noticed to provide the city with such human characteristics in its portrayal in this novel. This is an impossible determination, obviously, but a question that leads my analysis toward these archival photographs and the figure of the man who took them.

Arthur Goss was employed in the photographic section of the Department of Works, an agency headed by R.C. Harris. His photographs first appeared in this municipal function in the *1911 Report of the Medical Health Officer Dealing With The Recent Investigation of Slum Conditions in Toronto Embodying Recommendations for the Amelioration of Same*, and later documented the building construction of major Toronto landmarks such as the Bloor Street Viaduct and the Waterworks⁸⁹. Though the archival photographs are what we now chiefly consider as the oeuvre of Goss's photographic talents, he did not consider this to be the case. As Duffy's research into Goss indicates, he began his photographic technique firmly "within the pictorialist tradition of art photography" (Duffy, 'Furnishing', p.113). Associating himself with the aims of the Group of Seven, the exclusive painting group that promoted artistic interpretation of the Canadian landscape, Goss's early photographic work emulated the soft, picturesque composition of this movement. However, as Duffy aptly notes, during this time,

"The hard realities of artistic survival in Toronto, the fact that anyone who wanted to shoot anything other than weddings had better find a day job, dragged Arthur Goss into the future and transformed his work into visionary, historical record. Toronto's institutional structures and the men directing them swept the artist – whatever his personal tastes – into recording the forces that were dislodging him from familiar shores. When a literary artist came later to reimagine that decisive time in Toronto's history, he found Goss and his oeuvre awaiting him like some Easter Island outcrop on the further shore" (Duffy, 'Furnishing', p.118).

Goss's photographic work does continue to present a pictorialist sensibility within its utilitarian frame, a quality that perhaps Ondaatje noticed during his research for the

⁸⁹ For an analysis of a few archival items fictionalized by Ondaatje in this novel see "A Wrench in Time: A Sub-Sub-Librarian Looks beneath the Skin of a Lion" by Dennis Duffy, *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 53 (1994), 125-140.

novel. This quality performs a three-fold task in the novel, which I will analyse here: it demonstrates beautifully the inexorable connection between landscape and the “human element” (and the space linking the two); it provides the opportunity for Ondaatje to take this passive figure of Goss from archival oblivion and reassert the photographer as an active, artistic character in the work; and finally it points to what Hutcheon calls “the separatist aestheticism of art that denies history and human pain” (Hutcheon, p.98).

The Cyclist Photo

A consideration of Goss’s photographic work should perhaps begin with the photograph that is mentioned twice in the novel – a photograph of a lone cyclist riding over the newly completed Bloor Street Viaduct. **(Figure 4)** When Patrick begins to research the construction of the bridge in the Riverdale Library he uncovers a photograph accompanying the description of the bridge’s opening on October 18, 1918: “one newspaper had a picture of a cyclist racing across” (*ISOL*, p.143). This cyclist had been described by the narrator much earlier in the story, it is the person who broke through the police barriers during the political ceremony to commemorate the bridge’s completed construction, a full hundred and twenty pages earlier: “The first member of the public. Not the expected show car containing officials, but this one anonymous and cycling like hell to the east end of the city. In the photographs he is a blur of intent. He wants the virginity of it, the luxury of such space. He circles twice, the string of onions that he carries on his shoulder splaying out, and continuous” (*ISOL*, p.27).

Duffy's research indicates that this photograph must be the one taken by Goss and reprinted here⁹⁰. Besides the contextual differences of its reproduction in a 1918 newspaper, there are other minor details that have been erased or recreated by Ondaatje.



City of Toronto Archives, Series 372 s0372_ss0010_it0868

Figure 4

In the archival photograph, the cyclist is not alone on the bridge and the whimsical detail of string of onions is reminiscent of the superfluous, almost mythical details that Ondaatje created from the photographs of his family in the pages of *Running in the Family*. But two important elements of this photograph are representative of the thematic concern of this work. First, the photograph captures a specific moment: the camera's shutter opens and shuts on a single fragment of time and space that the

⁹⁰ For a further explanation of the contextual differences see Dennis Duffy, 'Furnishing the Pictures: Arthur S. Goss, Michael Ondaatje and the Imag(in)ing of Toronto', *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 36:2, (2001), p.128.

narrative of *In the Skin of a Lion* displays repeatedly in its structure. Duffy singles out one line of the text that he feels is representative of this continual presentation of events in the novel, the description of Alice Gull just before she discards her nun habit and transforms into the character that Patrick (and the reader) will meet later in the novel: “What she will become she becomes in that minute before she is outside, before she steps into the six-am morning” (*ISOL*, p.41). Duffy writes, “Let that sentence caption the photo of the blurred cyclist: actors in this fiction get snapped at defining moments. Shifting away from visual range, they are caught again when the narrative lens drifts their way. The photographic print with its blur, a chance by-product of the technology Goss employed, visually defines the function of the printed narrative” (Duffy, ‘Furnishing’, p.121). Similar to the process by which Patrick photographically captures the events and people through the frames of his window in “Little Seeds”, the characters of the novel themselves are captured photographically like this cyclist on the bridge. The reader experiences the figures in the book in fragments, in defining moments that are snapped by the photographic narrative structure.

When Patrick finds this photo in the Riverdale Library, the narrator points out that “Each character had his own time zone, his own lamp, otherwise they were just men from nowhere” (*ISOL*, p.143). While this sentence does mean to illustrate that the characters live off of the page while the author’s eye is elsewhere and that they continue to transform and exist in the spaces that the author and reader is not observing them, I think there is another element of the text being pointed to here. The “time zone” that each character possesses is their “defining moment”, of which there are multiple versions within a novel and the lamp that they carry is the light with which it is necessary to photograph them. Without these photographically captured moments, they would remain “men from nowhere” – it is these illuminated moments in the text when

they are caught and defined by the narrative that give them a place within their landscape.

To be “from nowhere” indicates an absence of origin and this is an element of the novel that functions through the partial view of the reader, as I previously detailed. The cyclist who “wants the *virginity* of” the newly constructed space is representative of this perpetual re-birth (my emphasis). Also, the narrator’s description of “the luxury of space” points toward the influence of the human element on landscape and vice versa – there is a recognition of the force that the space between human and setting achieves, in this case, it is a “luxury”. But the concept and use of space in this novel is also indicative of the struggle for power and the danger of assuming authority over space.

Blindfolding Space

In a novel where a central theme is the presentation of an untold history, and a consideration of this untold history as being equally, or more, important than the documented one, there is an inevitable insistence on questioning the authority or power that makes this documented history the official one. This is the authority that Patrick discovers and is repulsed by in the Riverdale Library when he is able to find information on “every detail about the soil, the wood, the weight of concrete, everything but information on those who actually built the bridge...Official histories and news stories were always 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 on his own lawn” (*ISOL*, p.145).

The fragmented narrative structure, with its leaps through time and space that force the reader to piece together the photographic snapshots into their own “photographic album” that assembles the story, ensures that the authoritative “single story” is denied in this novel. Sarris writes that the novel’s “refusal to illuminate all

aspects of the story produce[s] a narrative devoid of a rigid authority or officialism” (Sarris, p.190). Along a similar line, in discussing the novel’s persistent use of partial view, Simmons points out that these “disruptions to narrative coherence not only have a fragmenting effect but also cause us to question the novel’s authority” (Simmons, p.703).

However, in addition to this use of partial view and fragmented narrative structure to convey the use of multiple stories to be considered in the construction of a history - many of which deny authority or sources of power - there is another way that this refusal of power is demonstrated in the novel. The determined portrayal of space in the work is also one that plays out the struggle with power and insists upon an allowance of consideration of the human element within its boundaries in order to successfully negate this authoritative power. The scene in which Patrick blindfolds himself and performs an acrobatic trick for Clara is a portrayal of how “in Ondaatje’s text, the knowledge of space is implicitly equated with the exercise of power within its bounds” (Spearey, p.54).

The narrative describes how “Sometimes when he is alone Patrick will blindfold himself and move around a room, slowly at first, then faster until he is immaculate and magical in it” (*ISOL*, p.79). Patrick maintains a false sense of supremacy and control over this space – the darkness created by the blindfold is representative of his unconscious mind that he also falsely thinks he can control. When feeling inadequate and “inarticulate against the power of his unseen enemy” (*ISOL*, p.79), Ambrose Small, he tries to prove his control and authority to Clara by performing the blindfold trick in her presence. But when she moves, the trick is ruined and Patrick crashes into her, injuring himself. The last line of this section reads, “So much for the human element, he thinks” (*ISOL*, p.81). Spearey asserts that “In not allowing for any movement save his

own, Patrick learns an ‘abrupt lesson’ about the control of space” (Spearey, p.54).

Similarly, the ease with which Temelcoff maneuvers around the viaduct in the pitch black night suggests a sense of control over this space, which is abruptly shattered when the human element enters it. This occurs in the form of Alice plummeting off the bridge and toward him in the darkness. The human element will transform Temelcoff’s sense of space through this incident. The following morning when he walks outside the restaurant, “he sees the landscape as something altered, no longer so familiar that it is invisible to him” (*ISOL*, p.48).

Following a similar critical analysis of this passage, though one that focuses less on spatial dimension than the power contained within the human element, is Fotios Sarris. He asserts that the blindfold scene is a metaphor for “the need to account for the ‘human element’...As long as the ‘human element’ is absent, darkness remains innocuous (throughout the novel, darkness and blindness are, of course, correlative); but in the presence of the human element, there is danger in proceeding blindly” (Sarris, p.187-8). The insistence on acknowledging the human element is perhaps a warning toward describing or interpreting a history without this element at its forefront. Sarris’s argument here points to the work of photographer Lewis Hine, who is mentioned in the novel. He writes, “Hine’s photographs put a human face on American industry, and continue to reflect the human experience that official history often ignores” (Sarris, p.187). The novel makes a point of discussing Hine’s photographs, that they “betray official history and put together another family. The man with the pneumatic drill on the Empire State Building in the fog of stone dust, a tenement couple, breaker boys in the mines” (*ISOL*, p.145). It then makes a further point of saying, “But Patrick would never see the great photographs of Lewis Hine” (*ISOL*, p.145). Patrick does not see the photographs of Lewis Hine, but he does inadvertently lay eyes on the photographs of

Arthur Goss in the newspapers at the Riverdale Library. However, these particular photographs taken by Goss do not display the difficulties in immigrant and worker life in Toronto at this time, a striking difference from the work of Lewis Hine: a point that has been repeatedly made by critics of this text.

Lewis Hine vs. Arthur Goss

It is at the mid-point of the novel when Arthur Goss makes his appearance. He takes the photograph of two men shaking hands in a tunnel under Lake Ontario, “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 into the sunlight” (*ISOL*, p.105).

In her essay that examines the immigrant city, Batia Boe Stolar is critical of Goss’s position within the novel. She compares his work to that of Lewis Hine and insists that the two photographers are, in fact, performing opposite functions. She argues that “Unlike Hine’s testimony of the reality of the working conditions, the official city photographer in this passage undermines the worker’s cause by betraying their reality” (Stolar, p.131). This betrayal is created by two elements of Goss’s appearance in the text, both of which are briefly pointed out by Stolar. I will examine these elements in detail and discuss their consequence for Goss’s position in the novel.

The first concerns the photographic manipulation of the scene and the second stems from his quick exit as compared to the novel’s description of Hine’s photography.

The passage reads:

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. (*ISOL*, p.105)

The artificial light Goss employs to take this photograph “creates a vista of open tunnel” behind the workers: a false sense of space compared to “the cut of the shovel into clay [which] is all Patrick sees digging into the brown slippery darkness” (*ISOL*, p.105). This photographic manipulation becomes even more apparent a few pages later with the description of how “moisture in the tunnel appears white”, a glimmer of light in a work environment that is “all else...labour and darkness. Ash-grey faces. An unfinished world. The men work in the equivalent of the fallout of a candle” (*ISOL*, p.111). In contrast to the photographs of Lewis Hine which portray this darkness and the deplorable conditions of the worker, Goss’s manipulation of light produces an inaccurate image of underground space and a friendly handshake.

This passage then describes Goss packing up his equipment and making a quick exit from the underground shoot, a detail that Stolar insists is an affront to the workers. She explains that “the novel further distances Goss from the workers by having him do what [they] cannot – climb out of the tunnel and into the sunlight. Metaphorically, few climb upwardly and out of economic darkness. Unlike Hine’s photographs, which provide an entry, Goss’s image maps an exit” (Stolar, p.131). This last comment of Stolar’s is perhaps a reaction to the narrative’s description of the work of Lewis Hine, that “his photographs are rooms one can step into – cavernous buildings where a man turns a wrench the size of his body” (*ISOL*, p.145). The contrast between the work of Hine and Goss is an interesting element of the text when, in reality, much of Goss’s work for the city of Toronto did portray the harsh working and housing conditions of the time. In a study of Canadian photography between 1839 and 1920, it is remarked that “Goss’s photographs of housing conditions in the poverty-stricken core of the city

and of sewer construction are an astonishing contrast to his work as a pictorialist”⁹¹. In fact, a description of one of Hine’s photographic techniques could be applied to equally to that of Goss’s: “The straight lines in his pictures are often strong diagonals that slope toward the lower right, or more rarely, the lower left side of the picture. The visual effect of these diagonals is to draw our vision into the image and toward the subject, suggesting that we can enter as well as observe”⁹².

If we view this photograph of a slum interior taken by Goss in 1913, we experience the same visual effect created by the diagonal line slanting to the left of the frame and feel as though we could sit with these men in the cramped quarters. **(Figure 5)** Similarly, this photograph of two small children standing next to their squalid living conditions could employ the same description of Hine’s particular shooting technique involving children and doorways: “Posing the children in doorways gave his pictures a greater visual focus and a sense of scale” (Guimond, p.83). **(Figure 6)**

If these less pictorial and more instructive, or documentary, photographs of Arthur Goss exist within the archive, why are they not referenced or reproduced within the text? I have already detailed how the omission of actual photographs within the novel instigates an active engagement with the text on the part of the reader. In regard to the lack of reference to these images of the struggling worker and difficult conditions, I would assert that one possible answer can be found in the function of the photographer himself in this novel.

Duffy questions Arthur Goss’s purpose, or function, in the genesis of *In the Skin of a Lion*. He answers his own question by asserting that Goss is transformed by the narrative from a passive to active figure. Duffy writes, “He had been there, seen things,

⁹¹ Ralph Greenhill and Andrew Birrell, *Canadian Photography: 1839-1920* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1979), p.146.

⁹² James Guimond, *American Photography and the American Dream* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1991), p.83.



City of Toronto Archives, Series 372, s0372_ss0032_it0254

Figure 5



MEDICAL RESEARCH NO. 40 FEB 23 1912 REAR CENTRE AVE
City of Toronto Archives, Series 372, s0372_ss0032_it0040

Figure 6

and snapped them. Historically a passive figure, a taker of images, delegated by Hastings and Harris as an instrument of their will, Goss now springs into activity as his achievement releases him from archival entombment and delivers an analogue to Ondaatje's literary project" (Duffy, 'Furnishing', p.121). What exactly is the "analogue" that Arthur Goss is delivering to this literary project?

I would assert that Goss is performing an analogous function to Patrick Lewis, specifically in the manner in which both men attempt to involve and distance themselves from the harsh environment surrounding their work. When Patrick joins the dyers in the tannery, he imagines them as a painting, in a way that Hutcheon suggests "he attempts to distance himself from" this harsh world and experience (Hutcheon, p.97). Patrick thinks that:

"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 five hundred yards from Front Street? What would the painting tell? That they were twenty to thirty-five years old, were Macedonians mostly... That on average they had three or four sentences of English, that they had never read the *Mail and Empire* or *Saturday Night*... That they would die of consumption and at present they did not know it". (*ISOL*, p.130-1).

Hutcheon writes, regarding this passage of the text, "Social commentary challenges the separatist aestheticism of art that denies history and human pain – but, in a typically postmodern paradox, we learn this through art, that is, through Ondaatje's novel" (Hutcheon, p.98). Considering this postmodern paradox at play here, we could ask a similar question of Goss's photographs: "What would the *photograph* tell?" As with all historiographic metafiction, it is the reader who is assembling the history presented in this work and perhaps any reference to Goss's non-pictorialist photography would result in "the separatist aestheticism of art" instead of the construction of a socially-conscious story that does not deny suffering.

This is a history that is being constructed rather than documented. As Butterfield points out, the details of the bridge construction are meticulously researched: “281 feet and 6 inches make up the central span of the bridge. Two flanking spans of 240 feet, two end spans of 158 feet” (*ISOL*, p.35). She writes, “Authenticity is assured. It is what Ondaatje does with these facts, their ordering, their tone, their end argument, that ultimately transforms them into something more. His brother Christopher [Ondaatje] says, ‘He takes the facts and then creates them’. Documentary becomes art” (Butterfield, p.165). Perhaps Ondaatje is allowing for the same process in regard to Arthur Goss. By withholding the photographer’s more sobering images from this novel, Ondaatje is reassigning Goss from the realm of documentary to the photographer’s much preferred venue: the pictorial. This sentimental suggestion aside, a shift from the “documentary” to an emphasis on art (or the story’s fictional construction) is one of the narrative strategies referred to by Simone Vauthier: “To counter the trend of the dominant discourse which has suppressed the immigrants’ voices, the novel relies on a number of narrative strategies which shift codes from documentary to ‘realistic’, to lyrical or metafictional”⁹³.

A final possibility to explain the lack of social commentary in Goss’s appearance in the novel takes this analysis back to the inset frame passage that began the book. In addition to the frame’s function of indicating the “gathering” method of reading this story and its use of partial view, there is one other narrative strategy being employed here that points toward the troublesome nature of artistic representation of a historical period. Who exactly is telling this story?

The italicized passage at the beginning of the novel insists that it is the young girl, later revealed to be Hana, who is the passenger and listener, “she stays awake to

⁹³ Simone Vauthier, ‘A Story of Silence and Voices: Michael Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of a Lion*’, in *Multiple Voices: Recent Canadian Fiction*, ed. by Jeanne Delbaere (Sydney: Dangaroo Press, 1990), pp.69-90 (p.70).

keep him company” (*ISOL*, p.1). Yet the closing frame passage reverses this scenario and it is Hana who is driving the car. Frank Davey points out that “the reliability of both this young woman and her informant is also specifically cast into doubt by the frame”⁹⁴. The frame passage reveals that the girl would believe a castle lay in the field next to the car, the man “is tired, sometimes as elliptical as his concentration on the road, at times overexcited,” there is only “the faint light of the speedometer” (*ISOL*, p.1). The questionable identity of the driver is a crucial representation of the necessary indeterminate narrator.

As I have previously detailed, passages such as those involving Patrick’s struggle with language concerning Alice and the subsequent slippage of time and shift in point of view create a narrative that refuses one authoritative voice. As Davey asserts, the omission of this inset frame passage would mean that:

“responsibility for the narrative moves entirely to its signator; it becomes a text, not of Hana and Patrick’s 1938 consciousness reconstructed in 1987, but entirely of one in 1987; it represents, not the experiences of a disempowered Patrick Lewis, narrated in part on behalf on his less-articulate fellow workers, but the selections and inventions of an urbane, highly educated late-twentieth-century professional writer” (Davey, p.145).

This is highly problematic for a text whose epigraph insists, “Never again will a single story be told as though it were the only one” and for a narrative concerned with the absence of the marginalized voice. The indeterminate and unnamed driver and storyteller combined with the almost magical sense of setting – that anything could and should be possible – is an indication of the problematic nature of representation in this novel.

Davey goes on to pose the crucial question: “How can one use a widely published novelist’s powerful position to ‘represent’ both artistically and politically those who are excluded from power, without appearing both to be in a custodial or

⁹⁴ Frank Davey, *Post-National Arguments: The Politics of the Anglophone-Canadian Novel* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), p.145.

paternal relation to these and to be making ‘use’ of the unempowered to create bourgeois art?” (Davey, p.146) He answers this question by insisting that “*In the Skin of a Lion* be Patrick and Hana’s narrative” (Davey, p.146). I would argue that if the more socially-conscious photographs of Arthur Goss were referenced or present in another way in the text, they would be suggesting Ondaatje’s position as one who was using the “unempowered to create bourgeois art”. Instead, by allowing Goss to function as a figure pulled between the harsh and unsettling landscape he must document for work and the pictorialist sensibility he wishes to protect, the photographer is emblematic of the troublesome nature of the fictional representation of history.

CHAPTER FIVE

ONDAATJE AS FILMMAKER

There exists little critical work concerning Ondaatje's filmmaking efforts, probably due to the fact that his films were not particularly successful. By the term "successful", I am not referring specifically to the scant acclaim with which they were received by the public, but rather to the unsuccessful nature of their intended purpose and effect. Simply put, the films present themselves as an earnest effort on the part of a young and idealistic filmmaker. Bart Testa describes Ondaatje's filmmaking efforts this way: "Michael Ondaatje was never a strong filmmaker, nor do his films constitute a substantial portion or significant extension of his accomplishment as an artist"⁹⁵.

While I cannot argue with this sentiment, I do believe that a brief examination of his two documentary films can be useful in two aspects. First, there are thematic parallels between the documentary films and the prose work Ondaatje was writing around the same time, namely *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and *Running in the Family*. Secondly, the formal components of film can be observed as functioning in Ondaatje's prose work and this engagement with filmic technique is a valuable method through which to understand how the formal elements of Ondaatje's work (both film and prose) affect its thematic concerns.

In regard to the formal techniques of film, Testa writes, "Aside from his own commonplace that movies can and should be mythic (see the *Manna* interview, for example), Ondaatje's response to films indicates little imaginative engagement with the formal potentials of the medium" (Testa, p.156). While Testa may have been at a slight

⁹⁵ Bart Testa, 'He Did Not Work Here For Long: Michael Ondaatje in the Cinema', *Essays on Canadian Writing* 53 (1994), 154-166 (p.154).

disadvantage with this line of inquiry due to his article being written well before the publication of *The Conversations: Walter Murch and the Art of Editing Film*, I fundamentally disagree with his assertion.

While I will be making reference in this chapter to the conversations held between Ondaatje and Murch, the content of which provides useful insight into the specific interests Ondaatje holds in regard to film (and particularly montage), this book is by no means an instructive guide to the filmic aspects of Ondaatje's work. However, a close reading of Ondaatje's prose using what theatre and film critic Martin Esslin describes as the "grammar" of the screen, demonstrates a new way of analyzing Ondaatje's prose work – one that reveals the dialectical relationship between formal structure and thematic concern in his work⁹⁶.

The Documentaries

The first of Ondaatje's documentaries was produced in 1970 and titled *Sons of Captain Poetry* – it is a film of 35 minutes about the late poet bp Nichol. Made in 1974, *The Clinton Special* is a slightly longer documentary portraying the production and performance of the Theatre Passe Muraille Company in the farming community of Clinton, Ontario. In between these two films, Ondaatje made what Testa labels "a narrative whimsy" (Testa, p.156): *Carry On Crime and Punishment*, which is a brief, five minute vignette (without dialogue) about the theft of a family dog by two scoundrels and its recovery by a gang of children. Finally, Ondaatje returned to filmmaking in 1990, writing *Love Clinic* while acting as writer-in-residence at the Canadian Film Center in Toronto.

⁹⁶ Martin Esslin, *The Field of Drama* (London: Methune, 1987), p.104-5.

Both Testa and Finkle seem loathe to write about this last film and indicate that for a variety of reasons (including cinematography, editing, costume and character development) it is an abject failure. Testa writes, “The less said about *Love Clinic* the better. I would prefer to ignore it entirely and so, reportedly, would the author, except perhaps to express regret that this is the work with which Ondaatje returned to filmmaking after twenty years” (Testa, p.162). I will be omitting this film entirely from my discussion of Ondaatje’s cinematic efforts, not due to its critical failure but rather because apart from scripting the 20 minute piece, Ondaatje did not himself have any control over the finished product. Finkle explains that “Ondaatje was able to establish the bare bones of a story and to work in a few of his main obsessions, but the film’s aesthetics are undermined by a narrative weakened by the constraints placed upon the film’s director and producer”⁹⁷. Since my analysis of the films, and subsequently the filmic elements of the prose work, depends almost entirely on the choices made by Ondaatje in selecting film shots and crafting these shots together through montage, *Love Clinic* does not contain the substance from which to further this particular examination.

The critics who have written most extensively on Ondaatje’s film work, Testa, Finkle and Mundwiler, all view *The Clinton Special* as the more successful film. Testa writes rather bluntly, “*Sons of Captain Poetry* is a well-meant and cluttered failure. The success of *The Clinton Special* is, therefore, that much more striking” (Testa, p.158). Finkle makes the point of agreeing with Mundwiler, who comments that “...*The Clinton Special* is a strong work, offering many levels of reflection on experience, art, and community”⁹⁸. Subsequently, these critics have focused more attention on this documentary about the theatrical experiment of Theatre Passe Muraille. My analysis

⁹⁷ Derek Finkle, ‘From Page to Screen: Michael Ondaatje as Filmmaker’, *Essays on Canadian Writing* 53 (1994), 167-185 (p.183).

⁹⁸ Leslie Mundwiler, *Michael Ondaatje: Word, Image, Imagination* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1984), p.121.

will take the opposite approach, touching briefly on this film and then into a more detailed examination of *Sons of Captain Poetry*. This particular way of examining the films is driven by their respective cinematography and editing techniques. *The Clinton Show* contains very few cross cuts between shots and only three types of footage, which Testa labels as “face-to-face interviews with the subjects and actors of The Farm Show; scenes from the show shot in real locations; and scenes being performed on stage with members of the Clinton community in attendance” (Testa, p.159). The pace of the documentary is slow and steady, providing a stable entry to the narrative of the film. In an interview, Ondaatje comments on shooting this film and the type of shots used:

“I think I was very annoying to the camera-man. Cos he kept saying that the camera should be moving in and out, that it should be zooming, or the film would be very dull. But I wanted that sense throughout the film that each shot would almost be a static photograph. Thus throughout the film the camera doesn’t move very much at all except in the scene where Miles does the hay-baling. It’s talking photography” (Solecki, *Interview*, p.16).

Sons of Captain Poetry, on the other hand, has a more frenetic pace and there are multiple cross cuts and interesting juxtapositions between shots. Ondaatje comments that in *The Clinton Special*, “I think I only had 2 or 3 cut-aways where in the Nichol film there must have been 5000” (Solecki, *Interview*, p.16). So while *The Clinton Special* is a valuable film text to examine in light of thematic parallels to Ondaatje’s prose work – and I will begin the chapter here - it is the earlier documentary that promotes a more in-depth analysis of equivalent filmic techniques between the two mediums.

The Clinton Special

Theatre Passe Muraille is an alternative theatre company that was formed in the late 1960s and was involved in the creation of a Canadian voice for theatre and a community theatre experience. The experimental and collective theatre production that

this documentary depicts is described by Brian Arnott in an article about the theatre troupe:

In the summer in 1972, Paul Thompson mobilized a company of five actors and took them to the farming country near Clinton, Ontario. None save Thompson had had any measurable experience to farming life. Each day was spent partly in visiting and working with local people and partly in a process of culling from observed reality kernels of theatrically usable material that might be refined into scenes truthfully illustrating farm life in an amusing, evocative, startling or saddening way. It was, in short, dramaturgy and performance rolled into one and practiced co-operatively⁹⁹.

There are three textual elements of the film that I will examine in light of their thematic importance to Ondaatje's later prose work. These thematic concerns include the insistence on the play as a fictional construct, the use of myth as a method of representation and the denial of an authoritative figure that constructs and presents the subject matter of the documentary.

Testa points out one particular technique employed in the film whereby members of the farming community give their commentary and review of the actors' performance before this performance is shown. He writes that "their appreciations have a certain accent and underline the truth that the play is a constructed artifact, a work of fiction" (Testa, p.160). This is a thematic concern that runs throughout Ondaatje's literary work and similar techniques of slippages in time and juxtaposing incongruous events are a common thread. One parallel technique is particularly striking and one wonders if Ondaatje first experimented with it in this film before utilising it in literary form.

As I detailed in my analysis of *Running in the Family*, Ondaatje only reproduces the honeymoon photograph of his parents after he has described it in great length. I argued that any sense of expectation caused by this delayed presentation was cancelled out by the intimacy created by the photographic stillness at work in the image. But if we

⁹⁹ Brian Arnott, 'The Passe-Muraille Alternative', in *The Human Elements*, ed. by David Helwig (Ottawa: Oberon Press, 1978), pp.97-111 (p.104).

consider Jonathan Friday's statement that "where photography often gains in intimacy as a result of its stillness, duration and movement in cinema are prone to smother its subject matter with expectation" (Friday, p.47) – how is this sense of intimacy created in this cinematic form? It is fostered by Ondaatje's technique of creating each shot with minimal movement within its frame, as if it was a static photograph¹⁰⁰. After revealing this technique to Solecki (as previously quoted), Ondaatje went on to say, "In this film it was very important to let people take their time, you know, and to give a sense of the pauses" (Solecki, *Interview*, p.16). Allowing for these pauses creates a specific space that both the characters and actors portraying them can operate within. This is a similar space to the one created in *Running in the Family* between myth and reality that allows for the re-imagining of the author's familial past and the reconstruction of it in literary form. As to this latter function in this specifically created space, it itself echoes what Testa insists is Ondaatje's primary concern of the documentary: "the literary and performative give-and-take of the farming community and the playmaking...the slippage between self-presentation in interviews and dramatic representation by the actors" (Testa, p.161). This is a parallel process to that of Ondaatje's gathering of fragments of his ancestral past (often through interview or conversation) and then representing this past on the page for the reader.

The boundary between presentation and representation often takes the form of a self-reflexive gesture in *Running in the Family*. In the film, this boundary is overtly pointed to by the introduction of Allison Lobb – or, I should write, the non-introduction of this figure. When she appears on screen, she is not accompanied by a caption or any other identifying signifier. The viewer is unsure as to whether she is a member of the

¹⁰⁰ When a voice over that reveals the anticipated crowd for one of the first performances was 50-75 people yet over 200 people arrived, the film shifts to depicting photographic stills of the crowd instead of moving images, emphasising the intimacy created between the performers and the audience.

farming community or an actor – it is not until several minutes after her initial appearance when a caption is provided that the viewer discovers her to be the former.

One of the most intriguing passages of the documentary involves the portrayal of the only member of the community not physically present: Charlie Wilson. One of the first things the viewer learns about Charlie Wilson is that he's dead and his presentation in the film is composed entirely of anecdotes relayed by the farming community, a few shots of the shack he lived in and a handwritten letter he once sent to someone in the town. Testa writes that "he is re-created from his neighbours' recollections of him. Wilson becomes a film character possessing considerable pathos, and Ondaatje's precise montage of these diverse materials conveys this quality remarkably well" (Testa, p.161). This portrayal of a "character possessing considerable pathos", of a man not physically present, and of a figure that Ondaatje searches for but must eventually recreate through fragments of memory is almost an exact replica of another character in Ondaatje's literary work: his father.

Ondaatje speaks about the character of Charlie Wilson in his interview with Solecki: "We were looking for photographs of him when we were shooting, but I'm glad, really glad, that we didn't find any cos he becomes more detailed just cos he is so abstract. It's the kind of thing, you know, where it's left up to the imagination and it's preferable that way" (Solecki, *Interview*, p.18). Similarly, Ondaatje does not find any photographs of his father, save the honeymoon photograph, in his research for *Running in the Family*. The figure of Mervyn Ondaatje is instead presented through an imaginative reconstruction of the fragments of memory and anecdote that are passed onto the author from his friends and relatives in Sri Lanka. In this way, the creation of

his father stems from the entire community just as the figure of Charlie Wilson emerges solely through the recollections of his former neighbours.

Finkle is insightful when referring to the first line of the acknowledgments in *Running in the Family*, which reads, “A literary work is a communal act” (*RIF*, p.205). This line could also be pointing toward the process of constructing this documentary about the farming community in Clinton, Ontario. Every person interviewed in both the book and the film is an active contributor to the history and story being told by the respective mediums. Finkle asserts that “this may very well be a lesson Ondaatje learned from the world of filmmaking and from the exercise of shooting *The Clinton Special* in which the people of Clinton...are the unknowing participants in the creation of their own myth” (Finkle, p.178).

This communal act of storytelling points toward one final parallel thematic concern between *The Clinton Special* and *Running in the Family*. Discussing the film with Sam Solecki, Ondaatje comments that he did not want to make “the CBC kind of documentary which knows what it’s going to say before the actual filming begins” (Solecki, *Interview*, p.15). Testa makes note of two other types of documentaries that this film is not modelled after. He observes that a National Film Board “filmmaker would, predictably, have told us what the play means in the social process. An American documentarian would typically have focused on the struggle the actors endured to create the play. Ondaatje does not entirely reject either approach, but he relegates both to passing mention” (Testa, p.161). There is a similar engagement with genre in *Running in the Family*. As I previously detailed, Ondaatje does not write a book that falls into the realm of exoticist travel memoir or into the category of ethnic autobiography – yet he does not deliberately eschew both. Instead, the work exists in an “in-between” state that involves elements of both of these types of literary work and yet

focuses its attention on what Testa asserts will become one of the most prominent themes in Ondaatje's literary work: "The plurivocality of history" (Testa, p.158).

Sons of Captain Poetry

In an interview with Sam Solecki, Ondaatje talks about the impetus behind making the film:

At the time I was very interested in the possibilities of concrete poetry and I'd just finished the actual writing of *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and there was a real sense of words meaning nothing to me anymore, and I was going around interpreting things into words. If I saw a tree I just found myself saying tree: translating everything into words or metaphors. It was a very dangerous thing for me mentally and I didn't want to carry on in that way. I just felt I had to go into another field, something totally visual. The film was quite a help cos it freed me from going around and doing this kind of thing. (Solecki, *Interview*, p.14).

Leslie Mundwiler describes this film accordingly, "as an escape from literary language" (Mundwiler, p.114) and I agree with Derek Finkle that he tends to overanalyse this element of the film¹⁰¹. Finkle, on the other hand, insists that an examination of the film is better served by "an exploration with many literary parallels, especially to *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*" (Finkle, p.169).

One parallel Finkle points out is the interview method Ondaatje employs in the film and the book's fictional interview which is titled "The Kid Tells All: 'Exculsive Jailhouse Interview'". Mundwiler feels that this narrative interview method in the film is a failure and writes, "the camera's subject is occasionally discovered to be in dialogue with Ondaatje, the filmmaker outside the frame, and this can be disturbing, even when the subject is an actor [referring to *The Clinton Special*] and supposedly capable of working within such an artificial limit" (Mundwiler, p.118).

Finkle takes issue with the fact that Mundwiler does not make any connection between the film's interview method and this jailhouse interview in the book,

¹⁰¹ See Leslie Mundwiler, *Michael Ondaatje: Word, Image, Imagination*, (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1984), p.114-121.

considering that the latter “makes a direct reference to Nichol, the subject of Ondaatje’s soon-to-be-made first film” (Finkle, p.169). In the book, Billy tells the interviewer, “...I was up there [in Canada] trying to get hold of a man who went by the name of Captain P _____. Never found him” (*BTK*, p.84). In addition to this irrefutable connection, I would assert that this slippage in the film from a closed frame that depicts only Nichol to an open frame that allows for the presence of Ondaatje as interviewer, points to the communal act of representing Nichol and his poetry movement (an act that will be further explored in *The Clinton Special*); and depicting the poet, like Billy the Kid, as a collage-type figure.

While I will analyse Ondaatje’s use of open and closed frames more closely in regard to a specific prose passage later in this chapter, the strategy to understand from this usage of frames in the documentary is one of interruption and audience. By interrupting what seems like a closed frame by his own brief vocalisation toward Nichol (not dialogue, but an acknowledgement of Nichol’s effort to explain his views on concrete poetry), Ondaatje is making the viewer aware that there is a *process* at work here. The film is not a critical commentary on the work of bp Nichol, but rather an exploration of his thoughts and emerging philosophies surrounding his own poetic work and concrete and sound poetry in general. There is a reflection of this in the brief scene depicting Nichol walking down the city street carrying a large letter “A”, as if this physical manifestation of language is being literally carried around as he figures out what everything means. The voice over affirms this line of inquiry as it says, “He is unsure of what it all means. He’s just figuring it out himself.” I would assert that the brief one second length shot that follows this longer tracking shot of Nichol walking with his letter “A” is meant to reinforce this process as the central focus of this film. The shot is a nondiegetic insert, or the process by which the filmmaker cuts from the

scene in progress to a metaphorical or symbolic shot that is not part of the space or time of the narrative. In this case it is a shot of a blinking neon sign that reads “POWER”, conveying that Nichol’s indeterminate meaning in his own poetic work is what creates its “power” and effect.

Interpreting this film as “a critical work” is perhaps Mundwiler’s main failure in his analysis (Mundwiler, p.116). Finkle agrees with this misinterpretation and writes “it is obvious from the final product that Ondaatje was not trying to make ‘a critical work’ as much as he was attempting to create a montage-style filmic portrait of an artist” (Finkle, p.170). Necessary to this “montage-style portrait” is a perpetual movement of interruption – a signal to the viewer that this portrait is an assembling of various fragments. This is, of course, a parallel technique to *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, which creates a collage-type portrait of Billy the Kid through photographs, poems, comic books and illustrations. As I pointed out in my reading of this work, by assembling these pieces of “collage”, Ondaatje is affirming his place as the *reader* of these texts. He is taking up a position alongside his own readers as one that must play a role in the re-collected and re-imagining of Billy the Kid. If the insertion of the childhood photograph at the end of the volume is a reminder to the reader of this process, Ondaatje’s arm breaking open what initially appeared to be a closed frame echoes this reminder. **(Figure 7)** Even though he is shooting and assembling this documentary, he remains a viewer and interpreter of Nichol’s poetic process alongside the viewer.

There are two other parallel elements between this film and *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* which are important to detail. The first is one that has not yet been mentioned in the criticism concerning Ondaatje’s filmmaking efforts, but one that I assert reflects the use of photographic stillness as a particular form of perspective that



Figure 7



Figure 8

is replicated from the book. After the film begins with a rather frenetic Nichol in performance of a sound poem, the tone of the film shifts slightly and a voice over of a much gentler and emotional poem emerges. The poem is a longer and more comprehensible piece about his family. The voice over is played over various shots that are all heterogeneous non-diegetic inserts.

There is then a shot of a still photograph of a dog cross cut with frames that contain a moving, living dog (barking rather ferociously at the camera). This dichotomy between photographic stillness and cinematic movement replicates Billy's perspective - and failure of this perspective - in the book. Nichol's poem depicts how his sister died at six weeks old and years later he found her shoes, no bigger than the palm of his hand. This poetic anecdote refers implicitly to the halting of time - an element that Billy creates by photographically viewing his world and stopping all movement: it is replicated in the film by the still photograph of the dog. But just as Billy is unable to sustain this photographic stillness and his perspective finally shifts to one that is filmic in nature, so too does this portrayal of Nichol's fragility and the still photograph cuts away into a shot of a moving, living dog.

Finally, perhaps the most important parallel element between *Sons of Captain Poetry* and *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* is the use of the frame at the beginning (and end) of the respective works. In both cases, it is an emphatic and arresting image - and in the case of the documentary is one that is sustained throughout. The documentary begins with a shot (seemingly in an abandoned warehouse) of an enormous wall of windows, the glass shattered in most of the panes, leaving only shards or fragments around the edges of each one¹⁰². Into the frame walks bp Nichol and, almost acrobatically, eases himself through one of the broken window frames and into the

¹⁰² Perhaps indicating the importance of this shot to the film, the re-released documentary has eliminated the original opening shot of the film (a herd of cows, reminiscent of the establishing shot of *The Clinton Special*) and instead begins with this one.

space outside the warehouse. Testa describes this shot as “portentous...a set of broken windows fills the screen like a grid, Nichol passes through one of the windows, making his entrance, as if he were slipping through the grid of conventional language” (Testa, p.158). **(Figure 8)**

This entrance is also an exit, as Nichol enters the frame and then leaves it (as well as leaving the physical setting of the warehouse), another indication of the non-linear process with which the film will engage. Manina Jones’s assertion in regard to the curious “entrance” into the narrative of *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* would equally apply to Ondaatje’s film: the viewer “should perhaps be looking less for keys than for keyholes, entrance not into a teleological narrative structure that terminates in a single exit, but through and into textual/narrative uncertainties” (Jones, p.72). Jones describes the maze that is present at the beginning of the book as “a symbolic structure of both entrance and indirection” (Jones, p.72) and along this line, I would label this opening window frame shot in the film as a symbol of entrance and the disassembling authoritative structure. When the shot of Nichol returning to the warehouse through the window frame (the opposite movement of the opening shot) occurs halfway through the film, the shot further becomes symbolic of re-entry and the continual reassessment of structure and narrative.

Finkle makes the connection between this shot and the opening page of *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* as he writes, “When we see Nichol climb through the frame of a broken window and then disappear over the horizon, leaving us with the original empty window frame, we are prompted to recall the blank frame at the opening of *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*” (Finkle, p.171)¹⁰³. In fact, this parallel opening leads me to consider one further possibility to the ones I previously detailed in regard to

¹⁰³ This shot also recalls the lines describing Billy the Kid’s death: “the naked arm from the body, breaks through the window” (94).

the interpretation of the blank square at the beginning of Ondaatje's book. Though the italicized lines read "*I send you a picture of Billy made with the shutter as quick as it can be worked*", perhaps this blank square is not a photograph but a film still extracted from a film sequence that captured Billy's entrance, and then exit, in an analogous manner to the opening of the documentary that depicts Nichol's entrance and exit. (If the opening shot of the film was, instead, a film still extracted from the longer shot the viewer sees, it could depict an empty window frame, similar in nature to the blank frame at the beginning of the text.) To explain this possibility further, we should consider Finkle's assertion that "the passing of Nichol through the frame also represents the central, underlying focus – the poet himself, frozen in time yet also passing on out of sight" (Finkle, p.171). This is a position in which Nichol is able to achieve what Billy cannot – he is able to portray his reality through art and remain in the desired state of flux, not stasis.

Lorraine York asserts that the childhood photograph of Michael Ondaatje dressed as a cowboy which ends the book is "a filling in of the blank rectangle which opened the collection. If analysis and dissection are futile tools in the search for Billy, Ondaatje presents the tool which is alone able to capture fixity-in-flux, life in the very act of being lived: the poet" (York, p.107). The final shot of the film is an echo of the first – Nichol climbs back outside through the broken window – except that the screen is quartered and we see four distinct images of this movement simultaneously. Finkle writes that "there is no explanation for this other than it seems to be a metaphor for Nichol's embrace of the survival technique; he has mastered as many levels of perception as possible, connecting with all the different elements of the film" (Finkle, p.171). While this aesthetic effect could be emphasising Nichol's success in this



Figure 9



Figure 10



Figure 11

process, it is the sequence of the final *three shots* that is of greatest interest to this parallel structure and image between the two works.

The first shot of this sequence portrays what looks like a still photograph of Nichol, until the slightest movement by the poet indicates that it is a cinematic shot.

(Figure 9) A long zoom out by the camera reveals Nichol to be standing behind a window and inside a house – the zoom shot is a long one that leaves Nichol as a tiny speck of a figure in the centre of the frame, suggesting that he is trapped. **(Figure 10)**

The next, and penultimate, shot of the film utilizes a similar zoom out of what appears to be a framed image of outdoor space but achieves the opposite effect in term of Nichol's position. This framed outdoor space that Nichol walks through from right to left is revealed by the zoom out to be actually unframed. **(Figure 11)** It is the viewer, not Nichol, who is now inside a building and behind the frame of the window, watching Nichol move freely through the outdoor space. Finally, the last shot is the quartered effect of Nichol maneuvering with ease through the broken grid of windows. **(Figure 12)**

There is a definitive movement in these linked shots of Nichol emerging from a static, trapped position in what initially appears to be a photographic still image to a moving, free figure who is able to glide effortlessly through the windows (or levels of perception). Nichol is able to achieve artistically what Billy the Kid could not – presented by the successful transition of the end of the film from photographic stasis to cinematic movement. In contrast, this is the shift in perspective that accompanied the death of Billy the Kid. This achievement is why we are able to view bp Nichol at the beginning of the film, rather than the opening blank image the reader is confronted with in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*.



Figure 12

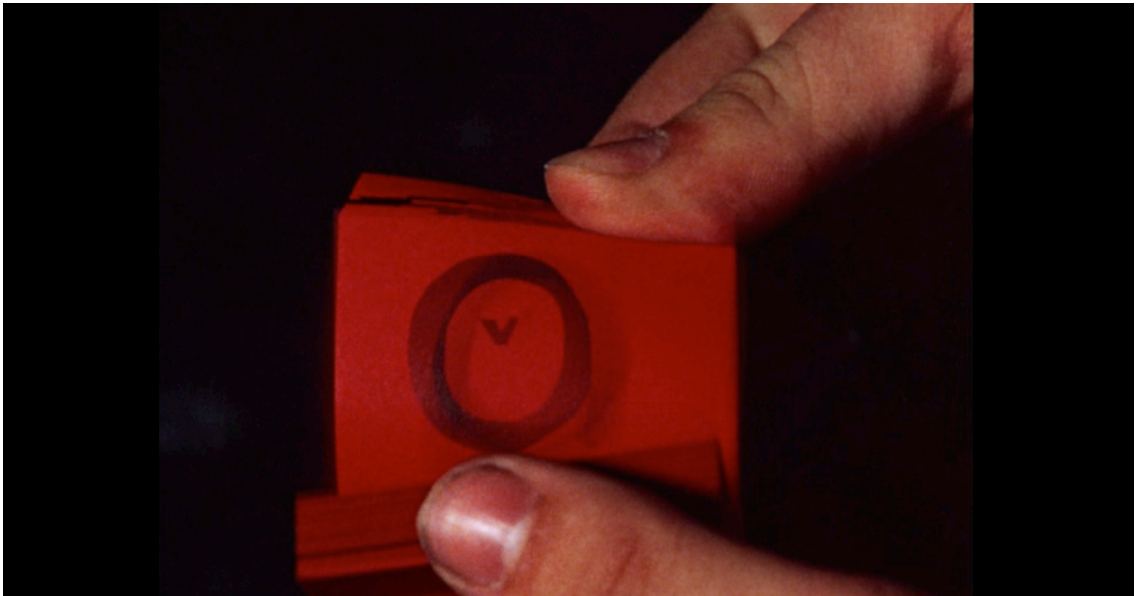


Figure 13

There is one other shot in the documentary that provides a hint toward this successful navigation between the moving flux of life and the struggle to artistically capture it without a paralytic sense of stasis. In my conclusion to the analysis of *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, I pointed to the image of Muybridge's galloping horse and showed that by putting the images together and flipping through them, a moving image of the horse could be created. This kind of "flipbook" is one of the non-diegetic inserts employed by Ondaatje in *Sons of Captain Poetry*, consisting of a single shot of a hand making a the pages of a tiny flipbook move so the large font image appears to be moving. **(Figure 13)** This shot is representative of what Nodelman asserts in regard to the fictional process being examined in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. That it is a "difficult struggle to make things live and move in words, rather than simply to capture their image and stop them dead" (Nodelman, p.78). The collective imagery, shot selection and juxtaposition of these film shots seem to indicate that this is a struggle that bp Nichol is winning.

Filmic Technique in *In the Skin of a Lion*

In her examination of the Cubist aspects of *In the Skin of a Lion*, Rochelle Simmons writes, “By categorizing *In the Skin of a Lion* as a Cubist novel, I do not wish to imply that such a classification provides an exhaustive description of the visual characteristics of Ondaatje’s text. Rather, these Cubist qualities should be seen as part of an intense and unwavering fascination with the visual in Ondaatje’s work in general and this novel in particular” (Simmons, p.699). This excellent explanation is one I will appropriate for my own use in describing *In the Skin of a Lion*, and later *The English Patient*, as works that fall into the category of “filmic novel”. By this I mean that Ondaatje’s awareness and interest in filmic technique is apparent in the formal elements of the texts. I will not be providing a detailed list of each individual filmic element utilised by the author, but rather will point out those techniques that seem to stem from film and provide us with a new way of understanding the particular construction of the text.

Simmons refers to the work of Wendy Steiner in her analysis of *In the Skin of a Lion*. Steiner wrote the book *The Colors of Rhetoric* which examines the relationship between painting and modern literature. In this study, Steiner uses the term “stylistic parallelism” and defines it as “the matching of technical elements of painting with those in writing”¹⁰⁴. This term could equally be applied to the technical elements of film that are matched in the prose of *In the Skin of a Lion* and it is through examining this “stylistic parallelism” that a new method of understanding the thematic concerns of the novel can be illuminated. I will be approaching this analysis of the filmic aspect of the text through two primary elements: shot selection and montage.

Shot selection involves what the filmmaker chooses to shoot and then how the shot will be constructed. This includes decisions such as the angle of the shot, the

¹⁰⁴ Wendy Steiner, *The Colors of Rhetoric: Problems in the Relation Between Modern Literature and Painting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p.179.

movement of the shot, and if the frame of the shot will be open or closed. Montage involves the juxtaposition of one shot with another and in my analysis of the filmic techniques used in Ondaatje's writing, is emphatically the more important element.

One could look for statements made by Ondaatje that hint at his interest in the editing art form. He says to Walter Murch, "I'm more likely to be influenced by the craft in a film's editing than in a film's content"¹⁰⁵. However, the importance of montage in Ondaatje's work is related to the "architecture" I detailed in my analysis of the photographic aspects of *In the Skin of a Lion*.

We can understand this connection between the careful construction of a text and montage through its French and North American usage. Montage is a synonym for editing and the use of the term is often dependent on where the film is being made and the attitude of the filmmaker toward that process. In North America, the work of putting together the shots of a film is generally referred to as editing or cutting. This suggests a process by which a large amount of material is gathered and the filmmaker then hacks away at it in a trimming exercise until the final product is revealed. However, in French, montage translates as "putting together", which suggests the opposite process. In this latter definition it is imagined that the film is constructed by placing specific shots next to each other, building up from the raw material as opposed to cutting it away. The disruption of linear narrative in *In the Skin of a Lion* is insistent on the carefully assembled fragments of narrative involving elements crucial to the thematic concerns of the novel, such as partial view. I will be analysing the architecture of one specific passage in the novel and demonstrating the key element of montage used to emphasise the function of partial view in the text.

¹⁰⁵ Michael Ondaatje, *The Conversations: Walter Murch and the Art of Editing Film* (Toronto: Vintage, 2002), p.206.

The specific passage from *In the Skin of a Lion* I have chosen to detail will provide a new method of understanding the connection between formal and thematic elements in Ondaatje's work by an examination of the filmic technique implemented in his prose. This passage also includes several filmic techniques that appear again in *The English Patient* and an understanding of how they function will serve my analysis of this latter novel's adaptation into film in the following chapter.

Douglas Barbour also singles out this passage, which is the passionate love scene between Caravaggio and his wife, in the novel and writes that "the narration here affects a completely different tone from the rest of the chapter (except, perhaps, the scene of his beating) fragmenting perception and event to create a metonymy of process the evokes the erotic through allusive and elusive imagery" (Barbour, p 200). This passage could be viewed as a "metonymy of process" for the entire novel and I will detail how elements such as partial view and a denial of only one viewpoint to tell a story can be exemplified here through the filmic elements of shot selection (open and closed frame, abuse of establishing shot, tracking shot, zoom shot or jump cut) and montage (elliptical editing, accelerated montage, and cross-cutting).

This scene involves Caravaggio and his wife Giannetta in an intimate and erotic moment of lovemaking. But the scene is also indicative of Caravaggio's awareness of space and boundaries in a way that contrasts with Patrick's struggle with spatial awareness. When Caravaggio re-enters the novel in his self-titled section, he is escaping from the Kingston Penitentiary by way of painting himself blue and disappearing from the roof in the same coloured sky: "If they painted long enough they would be eradicated, blue birds in a blue sky" (*ISOL*, p.179). This is an emphatic example of Caravaggio's ability to break boundaries – physical, in this case – but he is depicted in

the novel as a figure who is at ease in both physical and psychic space, as a man who understands the power within space and how it can be manipulated to his advantage. The first words he speaks in the novel are a comment on this awareness: “Demarcation, said the prisoner named Caravaggio. That is all we need to remember” (*ISOL*, p.179). Greenstein makes the astute observation that “the reader remembers these instructions when Caravaggio later makes Patrick invisible in preparation for dynamiting the tunnel. ‘Demarcation’, Caravaggio repeats, and we get the sense that it means its opposite – an effacement of all distinctions in air or water, fire or earth, four elements for a dynamics of making and destroying” (Greenstein, p.119). Spearey furthers this argument by asserting that “the observation that knowledge or recognition of boundaries and of the forces that operate within them is an essential precondition to their effacement, or to the project of pushing back their limits” (Spearey, p.55-6).

Caravaggio’s recognition of these boundaries and the power and use of space is evident from the intricate descriptions of his thieving practices as he is able to negotiate around furniture in only “available light” (*ISOL*, p.184), and ease in and out of occupied houses without being noticed. This ability that has been acquired and fostered (“He had trained as a thief in unlit rooms” (*ISOL*, p.189)), not an inherent skill, is described by the narrative as one that emerges from an internal power and a confident awareness – a skill Caravaggio holds within him: “He would step into an upholstery shop to pick up a parcel for his wife and read the furniture, displacing in his mind the chairs through that window” (*ISOL*, p.189). This ability is in contrast to Patrick, whose blindfolded performance for Clara indicated an absence of any awareness of the power held in regard to space and the human element within it.

One filmic technique that promotes the ease with which Caravaggio maneuvers through space and emphasizes to the reader an awareness of space and the rejection of a

singular viewpoint, is the use of open and closed frames in this passage. In his book, *Questions of Cinema*, Stephen Heath describes space in film this way: “The examination of space in film may be divided...into two: the examination of space ‘in frame’, of the space determined by the frame, held within its limits; the examination of space ‘out of frame’, the space beyond the limits of the frame, there in its absence and given back, as it were, in the editing of shot with shot or in camera movement within its reframings”¹⁰⁶.

The following is the scene in its entirety with each individual shot of the camera indicated by a **I** symbol and an indication in parentheses as to the frame being open or closed. James Monaco deems a closed frame to be one in which “the image of the frame is self-sufficient...Conversely, if the filmmaker has composed the shot in such a way that we are always subliminally aware of the area outside the frame then the form is considered to be ‘open’”¹⁰⁷. The italicized lines in this passage indicate a nondiegetic insert, or the process by which the filmmaker cuts from the scene in progress to a metaphorical or symbolic shot that is not part of the space or time of the narrative (for example, in *Sons of Captain Poetry*, the shots of the DC comic heroes.)

Now he pours milk into the tall glass and drinks as he walks through his brother-in-law’s house, the coolness of the milk filling him on this hot Toronto night. **I (closed)** He is seated on the stairs, facing the door. He hears the dog’s one clear bark and her laugh as she approaches the front door.

In the dark hall the whiteness of the milk disappears into his body. **I (open)** Her shoulders nestle against his hands. **I (closed)** *The home of the other.* Touching her, a wetness passed from her lip to him, his hands in her dark hair. She moves within the shadow of this shoulder. **I (closed)**

She steps into the half-lit kitchen and her bare arms pick up light. He catches the blink of her earrings. Removing one, she drops it to the floor. Her

¹⁰⁶ Stephen Heath, *Questions of Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), p.33.

¹⁰⁷ James Monaco, *How To Read A Film: Movies, Media, Multimedia*, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.151.

hands go up to the other ear – unscrewing the second pin of gold. Her laughter with her breast in his mouth. I (open)

He breaks the necklace and pearls fall around them. He can smell soaps in her hair. Her wrist moves up his arm riding on the sweat. Her cheek against the warm tile. Her other hand, sweeping out, touches the loose jewel. I (open)

Giannetta feels the scar on his throat. Her soft kiss across it. I (closed) He carries her, still in her, holding up each thigh, her eyes wide open, crockery behind her crashing from shelf to shelf, as she nudges the corner cupboard. Blue plates bounce and come through the lower panes like water and smash on the floor. I (open)

With each step her bare foot on a pearl or a fragment of plate. She opens the fridge door. In its light she pulls her foot up to her stomach and examines it, brushing something away. I (closed) He lies back and she sits over him, swallowing the cold wine. He traces the path down her body at the speed he imagines liquid takes. I (closed)

Her chin on her knee. I (closed) Planting her foot on his shoulder she leaves blood when she moves it. I (closed) When she opens her eyes wide he sees glass and crockery and thin china plates tumbling down from shelf to shelf losing their order, their shades of blue and red merging, I (open) her fingers on his scar, I (closed) her fingers on the thumping vein on his forehead. I (closed) She's a laugher who laughs while they make love, not earnest like a tightrope-walker.

Her low laugh when they stop, exhausted.

His breath is now almost whisper, almost language. I (closed) She turns, a pearl embedded in her flesh. I (closed) *A violin with stars walking in this house.* Fridge light I (closed) sink light I (closed) street light. I (closed) At the sink she douses her face and shoulders. I (closed) She lies beside him. *The taste of the other.* A bazaar of muscles and flavours. She rubs his semen into his wet hair. I (closed) Her shoulders bang against the blue-stained cupboard. I (closed) *A kitchen being fucked. Sexual portage.* Her body forked off him. I (closed)

She smells him, the animal out of the desert that has stumbled back home, back into oasis. Her black hair spreads like a pool over the tiles. She pins the earring her fingers had strayed upon into his arm muscle, beginning a tattoo of blood. I (closed)

There are jewels of every colour he has stolen for her in the past in the false drawers of her new bedroom, which he can find by ripping out the backs of the bureaus. I (closed) Photographs of her relatives in old silver frames. I (closed) A clock encased in glass which turns its gold stomach from side to side in opposite corners of the room. I (closed) A wedding ring he can pull off her finger with his teeth. I (closed)

He removes nothing. Only the chemise she withdraws from as if skin. He carries nothing but the jewelry pinned to his arm, a footstep of blood on his shoulder. The feather of her lip on his mouth. I (closed)

A last plate tips over to the next shelf. He waits for her eye to open. Here comes the first kiss. I (open)

All she can see as she enters the dark hall is the whiteness of the milk, a sacred stone in his hands, disappearing into his body. I (closed)

He lifts his wife onto his shoulders so her arms ascend into the chandelier. I
 (closed) (ISOL, p.204-6)

This scene, which on paper takes up only two pages of space, is actually composed of thirty three separate shots. Before beginning my analysis of the use of open and closed frames in this scene, it is worth examining how this fragmentation of the narrative involves the reader. This study has detailed multiple ways in which the reader of Ondaatje's previous works is involved in their often fragmented narrative structure, but in this textual passage I will detail how the reader is involved through filmic technique. To achieve this understanding of the reader's position, I will point to two comments made by Walter Murch in his conversation with Michael Ondaatje.

Murch discusses how "every shot has its own dynamic. One of the editor's obligations is to carry like a sacred vessel the focus of attention of the audience and move it in interesting ways around the surface of the screen" (Ondaatje, *Conversations*, p.277). In this passage composed of thirty-three separate shots, the viewer's eye is not only shifting around the hall and the kitchen and the bedroom, focusing on an intricate detail and then being pulled toward smashing crockery, but also between different unknown times in the ambiguous flashback. This is an analogous process to the act of gathering "the palpable thing" that the framed and fragmented narrative structure of the novel promotes – but on a much smaller scale. These brief shots, often abruptly juxtaposed incongruously with each other enforce a sense of frenetic movement and insist upon a reader who is able to piece them together into a coherent scene. This manipulation of space and time, occurring with such haste in a very small passage of the novel replicates "the state of mind of making passionate love to somebody – disorientation, spacelessness...By fracturing the grammar of film in that way, you induce in the audience a little of that same mentality" (Ondaatje, *Conversations*, p.277).

Thus, the reader's involvement in assembling the narrative fragments of this passage also provides a similar emotional impact to the characters on the page.

While of the thirty-three shots only six are composed of an open frame, the five that occur right at the beginning of the passage are crucial in their function of creating this disorientation and spacelessness for the reader that replicates Caravaggio and Giannetta's lovemaking. The first shot is focused on Caravaggio pouring himself a glass of milk and walking through the house. The preposition in this sentence is crucial because it indicates that the shot is a tracking shot and the camera follows him exclusively. This type of shot occurs when the camera as a whole changes position as it travels in any direction along the ground, usually following the subject of the camera on screen. This differs from a panning shot, which maintains a stationary camera that only turns itself left or right to screen the image, giving an impression of horizontally scanned space. If this was a panning shot, the viewer would not sense the action of following Caravaggio exclusively, being concerned only with this movement. A panning shot would have been indicated by the narrative reading, "As he walked across the room" or "He walked down the hall toward the door".

The succeeding shot contains an open frame because the reader is aware of the sound of the dog barking and the approaching laugh of Giannetta, which occurs outside the frame. Three shots later, when Giannetta is standing in the kitchen and removes her earrings, Ondaatje provides the detail that "her bare arms pick up the light" and that her husband "catches the blink of her earrings". If the action of the shot is focused on these details, the sound of her earring hitting the floor when she drops it occurs outside the frame of the camera and the reader is subliminally aware of it. Similarly, the reader is aware of the sound and shattering of the breaking necklace and crashing crockery in the open framed shots that follow.

Further to the disorientation that replicates the physical action of this passage, the alternating open and closed frame shots function as an effacement of boundaries. The juxtaposition of open and closed frames promotes a sense of positive spatial awareness – the reader is aware of an unnamed woman approaching the door and then shifting to brief images of just the two bodies in erotic proximity with each other and then shifting yet again to an awareness of the room around them as they drop jewelry and break crockery around them – there is an enforced ease with which the reader moves back and forth across the space these narrative fragments operate within.

Crucial to the scene is the last use of the open frame shot that occurs toward the end of the passage, just before the only break in the text. At first glance the shot may seem to be composed of a closed frame, but because the action is centered on Caravaggio as “He waits for her eye to open” and the anticipatory kiss is the main focus of this shot, the “last plate [that] tips over to the next shelf” must occur outside of the frame. This open frame shot prepares the viewer for what is about to come: a flashback to the beginning of the scene when Giannetta first enters the house. The alternating open and closed frames allow for the crucial effacement of boundaries in this passage and this passage is a “metonymy of process” for the novel’s own flashback to Patrick and Hana in the car at the very end of the text.

The use of partial view to emphasise the process of representation at work in this novel also occurs in this passage through specific filmic techniques known as the establishing shot, elliptical editing and accelerated montage. The establishing shot is a basic filmic technique where a shot is taken to establish the spatial relationship between the important figures, objects and setting in a scene. This is generally achieved by a long shot that emphasises context over dramatic action. A basic formulation used by many filmmakers is establishing shot – breakdown of the

shot – reestablishing shot. In so doing, the viewer is given the opportunity to gain a basic understanding of the scene: they see the basic set up of the action, then observe the shot broken down into details that are necessary to begin an engagement with the action, then are brought back into the establishing shot in a confirmation of what they have witnessed.

If we look at the opening of this scene in *In the Skin of Lion*, Ondaatje refuses to allow the viewer this luxury of time and confirmation. The establishing shot is brief and hesitant at best and doesn't even appear in the first shot, but in the second. The reader sees Caravaggio sitting on the stairs facing the door and because it is an open frame shot, they know he is waiting for his wife, thereby setting up the scene. But suddenly in the next shot "her shoulders nestle against his hands" and rather than being a breakdown of the establishing shot, Ondaatje has used a technique known as elliptical editing. This is a process by which shot transitions omit part of an event, so instead of witnessing Giannetta walking through the door and observing her surprise at her awaiting husband on the stairs, we jump directly into the physical action of the scene. Further to this, the next shot is not a reestablishment of Caravaggio sitting on the stairs, but a perpetuation of their physical contact.

This use of elliptical editing engages with the concept of partial view – the reader is only being presented with fragments of the action in this scene. There is no linear narrative structure in place here and the elliptical editing also emphasises the malleable sense of time in the text. On a much smaller scale, this elliptical editing is replicating the process by which characters are constantly in a state of origination, as I detailed in the previous chapter. Because the reader is never granted access to their movements or actions in their entirety, Giannetta and

Caravaggio seem to begin in one place and then begin again in another in each of these fragmented shots.

Accelerated montage is also used in this scene to promote partial view and replicate the passionate moment between Caravaggio and his wife. This is a technique used in montage where the interest in a scene is heightened and brought to a climax through progressively shorter alternations of shots between subjects. The climax of this scene is its central sentence: “A kitchen being fucked.” Beginning with the shot that encapsulates, “She turns, a pearl embedded in her flesh,” there are seven shots that precede this sentence, all occurring quickly and between different subjects. The viewer’s eye is pulled from focusing on the pearl embedded in Giannetta’s flesh to the bare, harshness of each of the lights, to the character washing at the sink, to lying on the floor, to banging against the cupboards in the act of sex in a frenetic, tumbling world into which it is impossible not to be involved. We will see a crucial example of how accelerated montage works similarly in the next chapter concerning *The English Patient*.

This use of accelerated montage also emphasises the Cubist-like awareness of space that Caravaggio possesses: “A tree bending with difficulty, a flower thrashed by wind, a cloud turning black, a cone falling – everything moved anguished at separate speeds. When he ran he saw it all. The eye splintering into fifteen sentries, watching every approach” (*ISOL*, p.183). This is an image of space observed through multiple perspectives and it is only through this awareness that he can see “it all”. Spearey writes that “In his intimate knowledge of space, Caravaggio recognizes the play of various forces, and is nervously attuned to their potential proliferation, and to the array of their possible effects on him. Only by

acknowledging and/or confronting these forces can he exercise power within – and not over a given space” (Spearey, p.55).

The first shot of this accelerated montage sequence has its own function as an introduction to this portion of the scene. It could be viewed as either a zoom shot or a jump cut. A zoom shot is fairly self-explanatory as it zooms in on a detail of the subject, and in doing so our perspective remains constant even as the image is enlarged. A jump cut occurs when there appears to be an interruption in a single shot, but this is due to technique of two shots of the same subject being cut together. The pearl is such a delicate item that Ondaatje is directing the viewer’s attention to this detail, they don’t see it in the casual turning of Giannetta’s head. It could be read as either a zoom shot or the comma could indicate a jump cut. Both of these cinematic techniques are designed to disorient the viewer, an effect Ondaatje wants to induce at the beginning of the accelerated montage sequence.

An editing technique used frequently in film is that of cross-cutting where shots of two or more lines of action are alternated providing two different results. The first result is providing the viewer with greater knowledge of either a certain character or a particular scene. The second is the suspense this technique of cross-cutting creates as it forms expectations that are only gradually clarified and fulfilled. Ondaatje uses cross-cutting once in this scene as the action shifts from the two lovers in the kitchen to the content of her bedroom. Interestingly, in addition to the cross-cutting technique, these shots are also a flashforward or flashback. The viewer is unaware of which time frame the cross-cutting exposes, which is the manner in which Ondaatje emphasises the exhaustion and disorientation after sex. The shots here are static; images of photographs, silver frames, and clocks, until the last shot where Caravaggio pulls her wedding ring off her finger with his teeth.

This creates an interesting juxtaposition with the following shot: the striking image of the removal of Giannetta's wedding ring with her husband's teeth is juxtaposed against a shot which reveals that the two lovers removed nothing in the lovemaking. While the desire of the first shot is evident, when it is cut next to succeeding shot, the desperation and passion of the love scene the viewer has just watched is evident.

In the midst of all this fracturing of linear narrative into fragment and induced spacelessness, Ondaatje does provide a filmic technique to bind this passage together. Greenstein writes, "Interception and interruption characterize two ways of proceeding through Ondaatje's text: narrative pushes the reader forward while lyrical imagery turns around on itself" (Greenstein, p.123). The "lyrical imagery" Ondaatje uses in this passage is that of jewel and colour tones and he employs the use of graphic match to achieve this necessary thread through the fractured shots. Graphic match consists of shots that are successive or near each other in the filmic sequence and are composed of a strong similarity of compositional elements. For example, after the shot that encapsulates "He breaks the necklace and pearls fall around them" the following shot has Giannetta sweeping her hand across the floor and touching a pearl. Note that it is the following shot that matches the elements together, not the following sentence – Ondaatje is working in cinematic technique here.

Colour is also an important element in the graphic matching that Ondaatje employs in this scene. The whiteness of milk is matched by the white tint of the pearls and the bloody footprint Giannetta leaves on her husband is matched in the succeeding shot by the red crockery crashing off the shelves. In the midst of the "bazaar of muscles" that flail around in the scene, there is one repeated gesture that

Ondaatje uses to hold the movement of this passage together. Giannetta's eyes are first "wide open, crockery behind her crashing," then "she opens her eyes wide," and finally her husband "waits for her eye to open". The change in the last gesture, that it has reversed itself, is Ondaatje's way of signalling an end to the scene.

These examples of specific filmic techniques utilised by Ondaatje to emphasise the concept of partial view, and more importantly, engage the reader in the scene, will be further explored in the following chapter on *The English Patient* and its filmic adaptation.

CHAPTER SIX

THE ENGLISH PATIENT:

Adapting the Gaze

My critical analysis of Ondaatje's 1992 novel *The English Patient* is able to engage with aspects of film on a slightly different level than with the previous prose works due to the existence of Anthony Minghella's 1996 film adaptation of the book. This chapter aims to examine the issues I will outline shortly that stemmed from two interrelated questions I initially asked of this text. *The English Patient* is composed of the most fragmented narrative structure and use of temporal slippage of Ondaatje's longer prose works to this date of publication. Does the reader assume the same position as assembler of these fragments as he or she does in the various works I have examined previously? Does the success of the film adaptation rely on an analogous involvement of the viewer in the film text?

Both the novel and film were a critical success, the novel winning the Booker Prize and the film walking away from the Academy Awards with nine statues, including one for Best Picture of the Year. This analogous critical acclaim between the novel and film led me to wonder if the success of these two mediums relied on the dominant involvement of the reader/spectator and how this factor was perhaps analogous between the two works. How exactly does Ondaatje involve the reader in *The English Patient* and is this technique matched by Minghella in the film version to achieve the same effect?

An investigation of viewer involvement in film inevitable leads to gaze theory and this chapter will be examining the function of the gaze in the film version of *The*

English Patient and demonstrating how it functions as an analogous technique in Ondaatje's novel. In the process of this analysis, I will be detailing the difficulties of prose to screen transfer and discussing how equivalent narrative units between the novel and film assist in creating a successful adaptation. A final question inevitably arises from this line of enquiry: By what criteria do we measure a successful film adaptation of a literary work and is the original work the standard by which adaptation should be measured¹⁰⁸?

Re-Assessing the Gaze

I found that attempting to view *The English Patient* through the lens of traditional Lacanian film theory, as first used by critics such as Christian Metz, Jean-Louis Baudry and Laura Mulvey, resulted in a frustratingly singular view of the cinematic experience, relying on a very specific spectator. The reaction to this insular theory some twenty-five years later by theorists such as Stephen Prince was useful in asserting that this narrow viewpoint is difficult: "film theorists...have constructed spectators who exist in theory; they have taken no look at real viewers. We are now in the unenviable position of having constructed theories of spectatorship from which spectators are missing"¹⁰⁹. This sentiment, obviously, expresses a crucial problem in answering my question of how an emotional response is obtained by the reader of a text. How could I possibly take into account the specific viewpoint of every reader of *The English Patient*?

To counter this dilemma, I turned to the work of Colin McGowan who asserts that the attack on traditional Lacanian film theory was not due to "its over reliance on

¹⁰⁸ See Alice Van Wart who also asks this question in 'Turning *The English Patient* Into A Film' in *Pop Can: Popular Culture in Canada*, ed. by Marlene A.D. Lynne Van Luven (Scarborough: Prentice-Hall Canada Inc., 1999), pp.117-122.

¹⁰⁹ Stephen Prince, 'Psychoanalytic Film Theory and the Problem of the Missing Spectator' in *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, ed. by David Bordwell and Noel Carroll (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), pp.71-85 (p.83).

purely psychoanalytic concepts, but because of its deviation from these concepts, and that, therefore, the proper response to the demise of Lacanian film theory is not a defense of its previous claims, but rather a return to Lacanian concepts themselves in the analysis of the cinema”¹¹⁰. McGowan’s book, *The Real Gaze: Film Theory After Lacan*, which has been an essential tool in my forthcoming analysis of *The English Patient*, details the necessary reassessment of the gaze in terms of the manner in which Lacan actually conceived it. In so doing, McGowan indicates that the realm within which spectators view a film actually has shifted from the Imaginary to the Real. It is necessary to briefly outline why and how this important shift occurs because this reassessment of the gaze contains a crucial element for our examination of *The English Patient*. Traditional gaze theory involved the viewing subject as remaining in Lacan’s realm of the Imaginary and replicating the child’s subject position in the Mirror Stage. Briefly, this stage dictated that the child looked at his or her reflection in the mirror and felt a sense of mastery over the reflected image, in so doing experiencing a sense of control and authority that the infant has not yet obtained¹¹¹. In this theory of the gaze, the film viewer derives this same sense of mastery over the images on the screen.

Not only does this theory of the gaze that relies on a specific spectator not allow for an inclusive reading of both the film and the novel, this sense of mastery over the image seems to function as the antithesis of Ondaatje’s use of reproduced images in his texts and the general rejection of an authoritative narrative structure or viewpoint in his work. We need only look back briefly at the indeterminate denotative meaning of the photographs reproduced in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* or the predominant use of partial view in *In the Skin of a Lion* to convey the multiple viewpoints necessary to

¹¹⁰ Todd McGowan, *The Real Gaze: Film Theory After Lacan* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), p.5.

¹¹¹ For a detailed explanation of The Mirror Stage see Sean Homer, *Jacques Lacan* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), p.24-26.

construct an inclusive history to understand that Ondaatje's texts consistently refuse a textual response that would involve any sense of mastery or authority over the story. His work does not allow for readers to gain footholds into the stories being told – the texts are insistent on slippages in time and place which result in constant destabilisation of meaning. Subsequently, it is crucial to investigate McGowan's clarified theory of the gaze as it relates not to the Imaginary realm and mastery, but as it relates to the realm of the Real and desire. This will allow for an analysis of the gaze in *The English Patient* to function as the driving force for both reader and viewer involvement in the work and a new critical understanding of the formal elements of the novel as they relate to this aspect of film.

McGowan insists that Lacan's true conception of the gaze lies not in the *spectator*, but rather in the *object* that the spectator views. Crucially, this understanding of the gaze determines that it is an objective, not a subjective gaze. By eliminating the particularity of the spectator this way, my analysis can now focus on the film text – and by extension, the analogous techniques within the novel – itself. It is by revealing the gaze within the film that the response of the spectator can be truly understood.

Lacan's exact words in regard to the gaze as a visual object are: "The *objet a* in the field of the visible is the gaze" (McGowan, p.6). We know from Lacan's theory of the Real, that the *objet petit a* functions in this realm as the sense of absence we feel within our lives. It is also the thing that exists to make up for this sense of absence, though objectively, this "thing" is nothing. The *objet a* is "not the object itself but the function of masking that lack...[it] is at once the void, the gap, the lack around which the symbolic order is structured and that which comes to mask or cover over that lack" (Homer, p.88). So then, as the *objet a*, the gaze in a film can never actually be *seen* as its own entity. This is a peculiar way of understanding a function that owns a place

within a visual medium, but the gaze is, in fact, the point in the visual field *around* which the images arrange themselves. In this way, the gaze is able to present itself to the viewer. Succinctly put, “if a particular visual field attracts a subject’s desire, the gaze must be present there as a point of an absence” (McGowan, p.6).

In order to better understand this objective gaze, it will be helpful to examine how it functions in a well-known visual field. Lacan even uses this specific example himself when discussing the concept of the gaze in *Seminar XI: The Ambassadors* (1533) by Hans Holbien. **(Figure 14)** Standing on each side of this painting are two wealthy travellers and the traditional depiction of the instruments and books these learned men would use are shown on the table between them. Disrupting this balanced and linear portrait is a large blur at the bottom of the frame. Upon a cursory first glance it could be an unrecognisable object sitting on the floor at the men’s feet or it could perhaps be a scar in the mosaic tiling. This blur is, in fact, a large skull, meticulously painted in anamorphic perspective. It is impossible to perceive this image as a skull from a frontal view of the painting. One must stand to the side and to the right of the frame, observing the portrait almost sideways in order to accurately interpret this skull image. This skull, Lacan insists, marks the site of the gaze in the painting. The gaze is the *objet a* – so the *object* itself cannot be actual gaze. The skull should be considered instead as a lacuna in the image, it is the *place* within which the spectator becomes a part of the painting himself. Without moving to the side of painting frame, the image does not exist. The gaze presents itself here “in the way that the spectator’s perspective distorts the field of the visible, thereby indicating the spectator’s involvement in a scene from which the spectator seems excluded” (McGowan, p.7). Let me emphasise again that the spectator’s perspective which distorts the visible field here, is not created by a subjective viewpoint *toward* the skull in the painting. This disruption is caused by the



Figure 14

skull itself: in a way, we could interpret the skull as “seeing” the spectator and taking his or her viewpoint into account. McGowan explains that this means “that spectators never look on from a safe distance; they are in the picture in the form of this stain, implicated in the text itself” (McGowan, p.7). If we are to understand the gaze in these objective terms, we can begin to examine how the film text of *The English Patient* manipulates the gaze so as to include the audience within its structure, though we are not immediately aware that this is occurring. This process, according to the model of a psychoanalytic session, is precisely the point. To understand the cinematic experience

in this manner, we must first consider how Lacan's theory of the gaze relates to desire and mastery.

The Concept of Desire

In the Mirror Stage, the subject experiences a sense of mastery over the image reflected to him. Traditional Lacanian psychoanalytic film critics translated this theory to determine that the pleasure one obtains from watching a film derives from a desire to procure mastery over the film image. (This concept of desire as mastery fed well into gender based theories such as Mulvey's, which concentrated on the male gaze dominating the image of female on screen.) However, McGowan points out that this desire to dominate is incorrect inasmuch as Lacan's insistence that desire has another function, with masochistic tones: "what we find at the foundation of the analytic exploration of desire is masochism" (McGowan, p.9). The manner in which desire functions in this masochistic way is simple. The goal of desire "is not finding its object but perpetuating itself. As a result, subjects have the ability to derive enjoyment from the process of desire itself. Though an object triggers desire, the subject actually enjoys not attaining its object rather than obtaining it" (McGowan, p.9).

Why do we go to the cinema and find watching a film an enjoyable experience? What attracts us to the cinema, argues McGowan, is the desire for desire. If the desire was contained within the need for mastery of the screen image, this would result in a very short and unfulfilling process. But what the viewer hopes to glimpse while seated in a darkened theatre is the gaze, the *objet a*, which would allow them to peek at that something which they know is always there, but just beyond their grasp.

Understanding desire in this capacity is crucial to any examination of the gaze, because the previously held concept of its derivation in mastery must be rejected. If we

were able to truly master the film image, we would be able to “consciously will ourselves towards an encounter with the real” (McGowan, p.12). To do so, of course, is impossible and in this way, the subject’s position within a film closely resembles that of a dream. In a dream, the critical part of ourselves is extinguished – we simply follow the “narrative” of the dream as it is presented to us. Film is similar in the way it “lures the subject into accepting the illusion it offers” (McGowan, p.12). McGowan explains that the consciousness we possess in our waking lives will always provide an image that obscures the distortion of the gaze within our vision, subsequently eliminating any sense of lack we might otherwise feel. The Symbolic can then dominate, disallowing the Real to be felt within our experience. However, when film allows the same experience as the dream state, “we can potentially experience the gaze when we submit to the process of fascination and cease to hold ourselves at a distance from what we see... We can meet the gaze when we follow the logic of the cinematic or dream image and in doing so deprive consciousness of its priority” (McGowan, p.13).

Depriving consciousness of its priority is no easy task when we are conditioned to submit readily to the boundaries of the Symbolic in our day to day lives. This is where we finally return to experiencing the gaze as we are implicated within a film in the manner of a psychoanalytic session. McGowan details how “the cinematic experience can lead us to the encounter with the gaze if it takes up the psychoanalytic session as something of a model for film viewing” (McGowan, p.14). In the psychoanalytic session, the subject lies on a couch and speaks in free association. The analyst sits out of view of the subject and interrupts only to interpret this free association when seemingly relevant. If successfully performed, this interruption hits the subject with the “weight of the Real” (McGowan, p.14). This interruption is analogous to the film gaze – it is the disruption within the film image that allows us

access to the Real and this “weight” results in our desire being provoked. But it is only by submitting ourselves wholly to the cinematic experience that this can occur – any examination of the disruption, like in the psychoanalytic session, must be performed after the experience. As McGowan states, a “genuine psychoanalytic film theory advocates fully immersing oneself in cinematic fascination and focusing on the points of rupture where the gaze emerges” (McGowan, p.15). By examining *The English Patient* in this manner, the “points of rupture” that emerge where the gaze is present can lead us to an understanding of how the spectator derives pleasure from this particular film. This, in turn, can provide a specific reading of the novel if the particular techniques of adaptation are examined in light of the gaze.

Cinema of Integration

Todd McGowan has broken down the specific types of film as they relate to the gaze into four classifications: Cinema of Fantasy, Cinema of Desire, Cinema of Integration and Cinema of Intersection. A detailed analysis, including filmic examples, of each classification can be found in his book, but for our purposes here it is only necessary to outline what each of these cinemas entail in regard to the gaze.

The Cinema of Fantasy (examples include Kubrick’s *Eyes Wide Shut* and Spike Lee’s *Do The Right Thing*) involves displaying the *objet a* in the form of the gaze. Because “the subject can take up a stable relationship to the world of objects but not to the gaze qua *objet petit a*...It doesn’t exist within the represented world through which the subject finds its bearings. Fantasy, however, offers the subject a way out of this dilemma” (McGowan, p.23). This is typically done by “disturbing spectators with the moments of too much satisfaction rather than reminding spectators of their dissatisfaction” (McGowan, p.25).

The Cinema of Desire creates the opposite effect within the spectator. In these films (examples include Truffaut's *Les quatre cents coups* and Welles's *Citizen Kane*) the gaze remains an impossible object and it structures and maintains absence within a film. Instead of an excess in the image which fantasy provides in an effort to satisfy the viewer, the gaze in the Cinema of Desire depicts "an absence in the visual field...By preserving an absence within the image, this cinema aims at sustaining desire against the reconciliatory power of fantasy...the *objet petit a* offers the subject the satisfaction that comes from simply being a desiring subject and following the path of the drive" (McGowan, p.71).

As we will discover when examining these two classifications in regard to the gaze within *The English Patient*, a film that remains solely in one of these categories is rarely successful. The excess of fantasy as it is used to cover the gap in our ideological structure will eventually be tiresome, or if used like Kubrick, to expose "in an extreme way the hidden enjoyment of symbolic authority itself" (McGowan, p.25), the political overtones can be too much. In contrast, in films relying on the gaze to perpetuate absence, the viewer is constantly forced to experience what they don't have – an exhausting and/or overwhelming cinematic experience. However, to merge these two opposing functions of the gaze into what McGowan labels the Cinema of Integration is to achieve the pleasures of both classifications in a balanced way that does not leave the spectator feeling abused. It is the "predominant cinema in the world today...because it offers subjects the opportunity to experience the traumatic excitement of the gaze while remaining safely within the structure of fantasy" (McGowan, p.115). I will be examining Minghella's *The English Patient* in terms of the Cinema of Integration and demonstrating how this specific implementation of the gaze replicates that of Ondaatje's novel. By using this somewhat backwards analysis – examining the film's

adaptation of a novel in order to reveal a specific element of the novel (the gaze) – we will achieve a new reading of the visual within Ondaatje’s work. This examination of the gaze as an important feature within the text will demonstrate exactly how Ondaatje has constructed his novel to include the reader, and this is the overlooked factor of the critical success of the book.

The Film: Mirage and the Real

Belonging to the Cinema of Integration, *The English Patient* must then “produce desire through presenting the gaze as an absence, and [depicting] a fantasmatic scenario that allows us to relate successfully to this absence. The key to this type of film lies in the overlapping of the realms of desire and fantasy” (McGowan, p.116). *The English Patient* is a peculiar film in this regard for these realms of fantasy and desire operate fundamentally as separate entities. The scenes taking place in the Italian villa at the end of the war provoke the gaze as an absence as the viewer takes up a place alongside the desire of the dying patient. In contrast, the desert and Cairo scenes offer the fantasmatic scenario that satisfies the viewer’s desire as we become witness to the engagement of Almasy and Katherine’s affair. The overlapping occurs, most obviously, during the moments that the novel and film shift between time and place. This is an overly simplistic rendering of how the gaze functions in the novel and film, but an important determination to consider when we begin examining these texts in a more detailed manner.

In Bronwen Thomas’s detailed summary of the ways in which Minghella’s narrative differs from Ondaatje’s in regard to place, time and point of view, she constructs an interesting metaphor for her analysis. She quotes the patient’s words describing Herodotus as “one of those spare men of the desert who travel from oasis to

oasis...piecing together a mirage”¹¹². Thomas uses this image of the mirage to stand for the “imposed coherence and continuity” that is perhaps found in the film as compensation for “the sense of fragmentation and precarious vulnerability which is so characteristic of Ondaatje’s novel”¹¹³. I am intrigued by Thomas’s use of the mirage image in this way and am going to procure it for my own use, shifting the focus of the analogy to my own purpose. The “mirage” technique that Minghella perhaps uses as a rectification of the fragmented, disharmonious nature of the novel’s narrative is not solely found within the film. This mirage exists within the novel as well. If we understand the mirage for what it ontologically is: an illusion (of water in the desert), we see that it functions in the realm of fantasy. The gaze when sustained as an absence that invokes our desire within the film becomes overwhelming for the viewer, fantasy takes over, and this gap is filled by the gaze becoming seen. However, this fantasy scenario remains an *illusion*, it is *a mirage*, because the viewer remains aware that in this villa at the end of the war it is only memory that satisfies the patient’s desire, there is no true relief here.

The mirage as acting in this capacity does not only appear in the flashback desert scenes. As Thomas aptly notes with her own mirage metaphor: “like the novel, the film does not offer us the reassurance of fixed and determinable boundaries between the mirage and the real. [Note: this is a wonderful and unintended pun. She is not referring to Lacan’s Real in this sense, but I am.] Throughout, the cutting between scenes, and the use of flashback, constantly forces us to reorientate ourselves in relation to what we are seeing” (Thomas, p.200). The success of both the novel and film

¹¹² Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1992) First Vintage Canada Edition 1993, p.118-9. Hereafter the work is abbreviated to EP and further references are given after quotations in the text.

¹¹³ Bronwen Thomas, “‘Piecing together a mirage’: adapting *The English Patient* for the screen’, in *The Classic Novel: From Page to Screen*, ed. by Robert Giddings and Erica Sheen (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp.197-232 (p.200).

originates here in the constant shifting between desire and fantasy, the real and mirage. By manipulating the gaze, Ondaatje is able to include the reader within the narrative of the story to achieve this effect. Minghella's success lies in following this formula of the gaze within the film and it is this unique analysis I will now be presenting.

Defining Adaptation

Simply examining the manipulation of the gaze in the film version of *The English Patient* and then pointing out the identical process within the pages of the novel would produce a somewhat elemental analysis of these works. Consideration of *how* the adaptation has been performed is essential to understand the ways in which the reader/spectator is involved within the respective texts. There exist many analyses of the structural and thematic shifts between the film and the book, many of which spend a good deal of time on discussing the ramifications of Minghella's omission of the atomic bomb. But for my purposes here, I will focus my analysis upon the analogous rhetorical techniques used between the two projects as a way of displaying how the gaze functions in both works. In order to see how the gaze functions, a breakdown of the specific problems of prose to screen transfer will be presented.

Anthony Minghella's film adaptation of *The English Patient* won nine Academy Awards and was hailed almost universally as an impressive adaptation. Gary Kamiya in *Salon* review insists that the film "does justice to its parent work – and in the process, it illuminates the respective domains of film and fiction, their strengths and weaknesses, their unexpected similarities"¹¹⁴. Other notable critics called *The English Patient* "a stunning feat of literary adaptation"¹¹⁵ and going so far as to heralding Minghella as

¹¹⁴ Gary Kamiya, 'A Romance That Burns Into The Mind', *Salon*, November 1996, (<http://www.salon.com/nov96/movies2961118.html>).

¹¹⁵ Janet Maslin, 'The English Patient: Adrift in Fiery Layers of Memory', *New York Times*, Nov. 15, 1996, (<http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9C01E6DE163AF936A25752C1A960958260>).

“redefin[ing] the art of translating books to movies. He turns a seemingly impossible-to-adapt novel into a cinematic joy that induces gasps with its sumptuous, layered treatment of themes and its visual feast of landscape”¹¹⁶.

The praise heaped upon Minghella’s adaptation raises an important question: by what standards do we measure the success or failure of a cinematic adaptation of a literary work? I will argue that a successful adaptation occurs when the audience achieves the same investment within the film that the reader did within the book. Before beginning my analysis of how this audience involvement is achieved, and how it performs analogously in the novel, it is important to consider the classification of adaptation that exists. While film and literature theorists have expanded upon this topic in great detail, for my analysis of *The English Patient*, I will consider Geoffrey Wagner’s three methods of adaptation. Other classifications include those determined by Dudley Andrew, Morris Beja, Michael Klein and Gillian Parker, and Keith Cohen¹¹⁷. However, I find Wagner’s the most suitable here because the three specific modes of dramatisation that he details do not oversimplify the adaptation process and present a suitably inclusive definition for our purposes.

The first category he labels *Transposition*. This is the most basic form of adaptation, where a “novel is directly given on the screen, with the minimum of apparent interference”¹¹⁸. The thought behind such adaptation is that the primary work be uppermost in the filmmaker’s process and the purpose is to replicate the original novel. This form of adaptation is the least satisfactory, as the film is often just an illustration of the book, with no integrity of its own. The second category Wagner identifies as *Commentary*, whereupon the “original is taken and either purposely or

¹¹⁶ Peter Stack, ‘Poetic, Passionate “Patient”’, *San Francisco Chronicle*, 22 November 1996, p.C1.

¹¹⁷ For summaries, see Robert Giddings, *Screening the Novel: The Theory and Practice of Literary Dramatization* (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1990), p.10-13.

¹¹⁸ Geoffrey Wagner, *The Novel and the Cinema* (Rutherford, New Jersey: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1975), p.222-3.

inadvertently altered in some respect. It could also be called a re-emphasis or re-structure” and will often use the primary work as a point of departure, whereupon the film will emerge into a different thematic entity (Wagner, p.222-3). The third category is *Analogy* and Wagner explains that “to judge whether or not a film is a successful adaptation of a novel is to evaluate the skill of its makers in striking analogous attitudes and in finding analogous rhetorical techniques” (Wagner, p.222-3). He goes on to detail that the analogy must involve a considerable departure from the primary work for the purpose of producing a new object, thus the analogy “cannot be indicated as a violation of a literary original since the director has not attempted (or has only minimally attempted) to reproduce the original” (Wagner, p.222-3). This last category has important implications for the manner in which *The English Patient* is viewed as a successful adaptation.

The film is obviously not a *Transposition*, due to the great number of differences in story and eliminations of large sections of the novel. One could view the film as belonging to the category of *Commentary* since it has been purposely altered in various respects and the love affair between Almasy and Katherine could be seen as a point of departure or centre point around which the rest of the film is focused. However, it is the category of *Analogy* which is of greatest concern to the adaptation of the novel to film. It is by discovering and implementing analogous rhetorical techniques between the original text and its cinematic adaptation that I argue is the key to the success heralded by critics.

By discovering what these analogous techniques are we will have a better understanding of how the gaze functions in each work. By so doing, the method by which the viewer/spectator is involved within the texts will be revealed. So to answer the question: is the original text the primary standard by which the success of an

adaptation should be measured? The answer should be: yes, only insofar as it remains the source material from which the involvement of the reader can be examined. If connections can be established between the technique the author uses to draw the reader into the text and the process with which the cinematic director accomplishes this, I maintain that the adaptation will be considered a success.

Narrative Equivalents

Narrative codes generally function at the same level in both literature and film, they are an interesting element to explore in light of Wagner's theory of analogous rhetorical techniques.

Dudley Andrews observes that:

Narrative codes always function at the level of implication or connotation. Hence they are potentially comparable in a novel and a film. The story can be the same if the narrative units (characters, events, motivations, consequences, context, viewpoint, imagery and so on) are produced equally in two works...The analysis of adaptation, then, must point to the achievement of equivalent narrative units in the absolutely different semiotic systems of film and language¹¹⁹.

Examining Minghella's adaptation in the light of Andrew's insistence of equivalent narrative units between the two disciplines, one could immediately point out the failure of the film to encompass every shift in past and present that the book describes, and thus, it is a failure in total. Or one could insist that the exclusion of such an important event of the novel – the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki – also indicates a failed adaptation. However, taking into consideration the overly complex nature of the plot structure of Ondaatje's novel, I argue that the most important narrative equivalents still exist between the two mediums. I will explain how these are the key to Minghella's successful adaptation of *The English Patient*, for it is within them that we can analyse

¹¹⁹ J. Dudley Andrew, *Concepts in Film Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p.103.

the manipulation of the gaze.

Examining each of these narrative units would be an overwhelming task if we dealt with each minute detail separately. In order to achieve an analysis that leads to an elucidation of both the nature of this particular adaptation and the function of the gaze within both works, I shall focus on the specific problems of prose to screen transfer. Giddings provides an excellent model with which to accomplish this analysis, as he breaks down the specific problems of transfer into several distinct categories that include: time, point of view, imagery, and selective perception. By examining each of these in turn, I will demonstrate how Minghella takes cues from Ondaatje's novel, which results in an identical functioning of the gaze in both realms of desire and fantasy.

Time

The most fundamental problem of transfer is time, and in more ways than simply the challenge of reducing a several hundred page novel to a two hour story on screen. Most succinctly, the novel has three tenses: past, present and future; while the film has only one. Its sign system simply cannot portray what will happen or what has happened in its purest form because the singular tense of the image is that of the present. Film theorist George Linden even goes so far as to label the screen image as "tenseless" due to the essence of film being held in its immediacy (Giddings, p.16). And theorist Jonathan Miller brings up an even greater question in regard to the adaptation of Ondaatje's novel. He realises that "although film has an unrivalled capacity for showing events as they happen, it has none of prose's fluent dexterity for representing the present in relationship to the past"¹²⁰. When the basis of the story of *The English Patient* is based

¹²⁰ Jonathan Miller, *Subsequent Performances* (London: Faber, 1986), p.233.

upon the main character's present in relationship to its past, how does Minghella translate this onto the screen? While an important question in and of itself, it also poses another crucial conundrum for Minghella to consider for his adaptation. If the relationship between the past and present is formulated in the concept of memory, how do you portray memory in a visual image?

George Bluestone insists that both the novel and film have difficulty in capturing the flux of time, and in particular the blurring of distinction that exists in memory between past and present. Language only has the ability to use one tense at a time, whereas memory, as a continuous entity, can blend two. Similarly, the screen image is always present (or "tenseless") and therefore cannot portray past's relationship to the present¹²¹.

Consider here the one major difference between the syntax of film and that of written and spoken language. In written/spoken language systems, syntax must deal only with aspects of linear construction – that is, the formation of words into phrases and sentences and paragraphs. In doing so, it concerns itself solely with the issue of time: this happened, and then this happened, until the end of the story. Even in the case of a complex narrative such as *The English Patient*, which is not told in chronological order, the story itself has a beginning, middle, and end – simply on an ontological level – and time is the primary concern of the language system. However, film syntax must deal with both time *and* space. There is simply no comparison to spatial composition in written/spoken language because we are unable to speak or write several things at the exact same time (Monaco, p.172). Thus, what exists here is a simple equation as illustrated by Bluestone: "The novel renders the illusion of space by going from point to point in time; the film renders time by going from point to point in space" (Bluestone,

¹²¹ See George Bluestone, *Novel Into Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), p.54-61.

p.61). This brings us back to our original question: how does Minghella portray the relationship of the past to the present, and more specifically, the crucial concept of memory in the film? If film must create the illusion of time by using its space, the key to this element of the adaptation lies in Minghella's use of mise-en-scene.

An integral part of mise-en-scene is the use of colour. In the director's commentary of *The English Patient*, Minghella describes how he purposely used different colour tonalities for each time period of the film. In the present scenes at the villa in Italy, he wanted a diffused colour scheme, as if a watercolourist had painted the scenes on the screen. Many of the shots are set in soft focus (or what Minghella calls 'liquid shots') to achieve this tonality, resulting in a muted effect. In contrast, the desert and Cairo scenes are shot with a crisp tonality, with sharp colours and definite lines. This is generally the opposite of how past and present timelines in a film are shot. Usually, the past is indicated by muted colours and a soft tone to the shots, creating a dreamlike sense for the viewer as they are "transported" back to the past. The present is the portion of the film that is sharply defined, as this type of colour scheme is literally more present to the audience. However, in *The English Patient*, Minghella is faced with the task of having the past be as "present" as possible in the Italian villa scenes, as his life with Katherine is what is present to him and this is an integral part of the story.

This difference in tonality is indicated by the text itself. The villa is perpetually described as being in low light and in shadow: "an abandoned villa lit only by candlelight and now and then light from a storm, now and then the possible light from an explosion" and "There was so little light in the room, just the candle at the table where she sat, not reading tonight; he thought perhaps she was slightly drunk" (*EP*, p.112). Not only are the physical traits of the room describing the tonality of the "shot" but the *possibility* of light and the thought that "perhaps she was slightly drunk" create a

sense of fuzziness to the scene. Throughout these pieces of the story that take place in Italy, Ondaatje will provide simple lines to carry this muted effect. While following the activities of Kip in the villa he writes, “The landscape around him is just a temporary thing, there is no permanence to it” (*EP*, p.86).

The desert does not appear in the novel as much as it does in the film, but the scenes in the novel taking place there have a sharp tonality. The imagery is concrete: that of sand, fire, and water and the thematic concerns are equally as sweeping, absence is perpetually described during Almasi’s expeditions and is frequently linked with thirst: “In the desert the most loved waters, like a lover’s name, are carried blue in your hands, enter your throat. One swallows absence” (*EP*, p.141). Activity in the desert also carries this tonal sharpness as the arrival of Clifton and his wife is described in this way: “In 1936 a young man named Geoffrey Clifton had met a friend at Oxford who mentioned what we were doing. He contacted me, got married the next day, and two weeks later flew with his wife to Cairo” (*EP*, p.142). There is no effusive or delicate description here, just the basic facts of what events occurred to bring the Cliftons to Egypt in two short sentences. The tonal boldness is continued in phrases such as “He was one for ceremonies” and was in “awe at our stark order” (*EP*, p.143). Images of Katherine also carry this sharpness: “There was classical blood in her face” (*EP*, p.143).

Mise-en-scene is not the only method through which Minghella is able to demonstrate the crucial element of memory in the film. As I detailed in my analysis of filmic technique in *In the Skin of a Lion*, the montage technique of cross-cutting can be a highly effective tool to portray slippages in time.

In the film, the scene in which Katherine recites the story of Candules and Gyges is cross-cut with a scene depicting Hana reading the same tale to the patient from

the pages of his copy of Herodotus. Four successive shots (**Figures 15-18**) depict the juxtaposition not only between time and place (the desert pre-war and the villa at the end of the war) but between two characters who were once lovers and now separated by time and geography, and in this case, death. In the novel, the narrative does not perform this act of cross-cutting between Katherine telling the tale of Candules and the burned patient hearing it from Hana, but the cross-cutting in the film does replicate another instance of this specific shifting between time and place. At the end of the novel, Hana's "shoulder touches the edge of a cupboard and a glass dislodges" and the next sentence depicts Kip, half a world away, completing this movement as his "left hand swoops down and catches the dropped fork an inch from the floor" (*EP*, p.302). As in the film, this passage is able to achieve a slippage in time and a compression of place through the montage technique of cross-cutting. This filmic element is able to reproduce the effects of morphine when it is injected into the patient, "imploding time and geography the way maps compress the world onto a two-dimensional sheet of paper" (*EP*, p.161).



Candules Shot 1 - Figure 15



Candules Shot 2 - Figure 16



Candules Shot 3 - Figure 17



Candules Shot 4 - Figure 18

Imagery

The ability of representational arts to “re-create” phenomena has meant they are the most realist aesthetic of the visual arts. While this facility of film has its advantages for providing a realistic experience for the viewer, it is subsequently unable to communicate metaphor or symbolism. The phrase “lips like rosebuds” cannot be transferred onto film – disparate screen shots of lips and rosebuds could be juxtaposed next to each other, but the intention has to be inferred by the viewer and can never be explicitly stated like it can in prose. Bluestone describes it as such: “where the moving picture comes to us directly through perception, language must be filtered through the screen of conceptual apprehension” (Bluestone, p.20).

The fragile state of Hana is never explicitly stated, but only portrayed in descriptions of her childlike hopscotch games and through the observations of other characters. During a flashback to the seaside hospital where he first meets Hana, the patient describes the distant look on her face, that he “knew she was more patient than nurse” (*EP*, p.95-6). Through the use of montage, Minghella is able to depict this symbolism almost perfectly. Near the beginning of the film, a scene takes place in a medical hospital tent and Hana is shocked to hear the news of her fiancé’s death. Suddenly, a bomb lands nearby and Hana is thrown to the ground. The last frame of this sequence is a close-up shot of her face caked with the moist mud of the floor of the tent. The next shot is that of the patient in the desert, burnt beyond recognition and having a Bedouin healer smear ointment onto his face. The graphic match between the mud in the tent and the ointment from the healer connects these scenes together and demonstrates that Hana is just as damaged as the patient. **(Figures 19, 20)**

The villa is a symbol of the chaos that the characters that inhabit it still experience. Ondaatje describes it: “There seemed little demarcation between house and



Figure 19



Figure 20

landscape, between damaged building and the burned and shelled remnants of the earth. To Hana the wild gardens were like further rooms” (*EP*, p.43). The initial two shots of the villa (actually a monastery in the film, but we will remain to call it a villa for our purposes) are seen as extreme low angle shots, from Hana’s viewpoint as she tends to

the patient on the ground after the jeep explosion. The frames are almost completely in darkness, with the looking villa lit from below like it is a slightly insidious battlement. Minghella is taking a cue directly from the novel here as Ondaatje describes the villa as having “the look of a besieged fortress” (*EP*, p.43). In the film, when Hana approaches the villa, the camera is at a low angle and set behind brush and other foliage, so it appears as if Hana is wading through the material of the garden to reach the villa itself. In this way, Minghella is mirroring Ondaatje’s description of the chaotic nature of both the villa and its landscape.

Point of View

In my simplistic rendering of how desire and fantasy as exemplified through the gaze function in *The English Patient*, I explained that desire is invoked through absence and fantasy fulfills this absence through a “mirage” of the pre-war flashback scenes to Cairo and the desert. However, the gaze as an absence functions in a more complex way than this basic explanation, and it is through examining point of view in a filmic adaptation, and specifically, the opening scene of the film and the opening pages of the novel, that can provide a crucial example of how desire through absence is piqued in both texts.

McGowan explains that in the Cinema of Desire, the:

“*objet petit a* or gaze manifests itself through the absence of the object of desire. Thus, the cinema of desire reveals the difference between the *objet petit a* and the object of desire. The *objet petit a* causes the subject’s desire, but it is not the object of desire. The latter is an ordinary object that holds out the promise of satisfaction for the subject who would obtain it, whereas the *objet petit a* offers the subject the satisfaction that comes from simply being a desiring subject and following the path of desire” (McGowan, p.71).

In *The English Patient*, the object of desire is primarily Katharine, though Kip and the patient also fulfill this role when the viewer or reader is a desiring subject alongside Hana. The intricacies of different points of view in a novel rarely transfer

well to the screen; it simply becomes too confusing, or tiresome, for the audience to follow. In the novel, Thomas points out that often “the narrative slips from third- to first-person narrative without any overt ‘gear-shifting’ as Ondaatje dispenses with quotation marks for his characters’ dialogue” (Thomas, p.218). This stylistic experimentation will be further explored in this section on point of view, but presently, it is worth emphasising that in order to maintain a semblance of order in the film, Minghella has abandoned most of the frequent slippages between characters’ point of view and relies on the patient and Hana as the main viewpoints of the film. Although, occasionally, the subjective viewpoint of the patient will be depicted on screen. While being carried by Bedouin across the desert, the camera suddenly shifts to the subjective viewpoint of Almasi. The camera shakes as though it is also atop a camel and the lens is obscured by the straw mask that he wears. In the novel, this viewpoint is also emphasised: “He is given sight only after dusk” (*EP*, p.22). This subjective shot in the film is immediately followed by a long shot of the desert, the line of camels Almasi is travelling in braced against the vast open space – the juxtaposition of the shot emphasising the fragility of the patient’s position. Thomas describes the patient as “the focaliser...through which we perceive much of the action of the film” and also writes that “the other main focaliser in the film is Hana” (Thomas, p.222). While we rarely witness events on the screen through their exact point of view as the reader occasionally does in the novel, the action of the film is focused primarily through these two characters.

The objects of desire, as I previously outlined, are not, however, the manifestation of the gaze in the film. As McGowan points out, desire is, in fact, achieved when the gaze, not the literal object of desire, invokes it. The beginning of both the film and the novel invoke the desire of the viewer/reader through a

manipulation of the gaze as an absence. Films can “create and sustain an absent and impossible object through narrative, editing, mise-en-scene, or framing” (McGowan, p.83). The beginning of both the film and novel of *The English Patient* create this sense of absence through editing and the juxtaposition of specific shots. As I have previously argued, the reader of an Ondaatje text is implicated in the process of constructing the work by assembling the fragmented narrative structure. The film viewer is implicated in the film in the same way and we can understand this by examining the visual equivalents that exist between the two mediums.

It is important to consider how a director achieves the same tone of the novel being adapted on screen. George Linden describes this process:

The director...must either discover or create visual equivalents for the narrator's evaluations...If the tone of a work is lost, the work is lost; but the tone of a novel must be rendered in an aural/visual patterning instead of by the use of descriptive dialogue or other narrative device. The author's intellectual viewpoint must become the director's emotional standpoint. (Linden, p.158, 163)

Linden goes on to insist that if the director succeeds in this effort, the film will be considered a new object, distinct from the text it was adapted from. The heralding of *The English Patient* adaptation indicates that Minghella has succeeded in his effort to transpose Ondaatje's subjective narrative and the ways he has done this will be examined here. Referring back to Linden's quote, I would like to point out that Minghella has *both* discovered and created visual equivalents for Ondaatje's evaluations – there are indicators in the text that assist this, which is a crucial aspect of the successful adaptation.

What enables these visual equivalents is twofold: the camera itself and the shots it produces, and the manner in which these shots are linked together for the viewer to witness. Both theorists Colin MacCabe and Bruce Morissette make points about this visual equivalents necessary for a successful film adaptation. MacCabe argues that it is

the narrative of the film that portrays the voice of the director (and in turn, the original author of the text if the equivalent is achieved) and this shapes our response to the work. He insists that just as the narrative prose surrounding the dialogue of a character is a “metalanguage” that shapes the reader’s response to what the characters are saying, the camera itself has this effect on the viewer of a film. The shots on the screen become a “metalanguage” and shape the response to the characters and action on a film that the director desires¹²².

Morissette continues this line of enquiry by pointing out that, “The camera becomes an ‘existence’ that appropriates and becomes in the film a point of view outside any mental content within a character or narrator or neutral ‘third observer’. The point of view passes in a way to the spectator himself, who becomes with the aid of the camera, a new kind of fictional god”¹²³.

This is the position in which the reader exists in each of Ondaatje’s texts I have previously examined in this study. The reader is responsible for piecing together fragments of the story presented to them and assuming responsibility as one of the constructors of the work. The reader’s position in *The English Patient* functions similarly, and it is through examining the film adaptation of the work that we can observe how the gaze performs a crucial part in sustaining the reader’s involvement throughout both the novel and film.

The beginning of both the novel and film immediately involves the reader/viewer through invoking desire through depicting the gaze as an absence. The opening shot of the film is an extreme close-up of the tip of a paintbrush sweeping across a muted tan material. The texture of each object is exquisite – the paint is wet

¹²² Colin MacCabe, ‘Realism and the Cinema: Notes on Some Brechtian Theses’, in *Screen*, 15:2 (1974), pp.10-11.

¹²³ Bruce Morissette, *Novel and Film* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p.37.

and seeps into the material, which itself is unrecognizable due to the close nature of the shot; it could be paper or it could be skin. The detailing is so precise in this shot that the actual subject of the painting is not immediately apparent. It is finally revealed throughout the length of the shot, one that last several seconds, that the subject of the painting is a swimming figure and it is being textured onto a sheet of thick paper or canvas. This shot dissolves into the next, which is a grand, sweeping high angle shot of the shadow of a plane flying over desert sand dunes. The shot dissolve creates a superimposed image of the painted figure swimming over the dunes. **(Figures 21, 22)**

This image that hints toward the connection between human body and landscape (echoing the merged image from *In the Skin of a Lion*) does not provide any clear meaning or setting for the viewer. The viewer is unsure what object is being painted, or where this desert is located, or what the significance of the superimposed image of human form and sand dune signifies. McGowan asserts that it is “this disjunction...between the subject and the signifier [that] creates the space in which the *objet petit a* emerges” (McGowan, p.84). The viewer’s desire is invoked here, wanting to gain knowledge of the meaning behind these juxtaposed images and it is this desire invoked by the gaze as an absence that begins his or her involvement in the film text. Minghella comments about this opening sequence:

“The film in constantly redefining and saying 'This is not what you think.' So it begins with what looks like some sand, then you realize its a bit of canvas. Then you see a paintbrush appear and that paintbrush starts to make a hieroglyph -- but no it's not a hieroglyph, its a body. Then that body starts to move and its seems to be with other bodies. Then you realize it's not a body, it's the desert....It's constantly re-defining the image”¹²⁴.

Minghella’s construction of the opening of the film functions in a similar way to this observation by the omniscient narrator of *The English Patient*, in a section of the novel where Hana is reading to the patient: “Many books open with an author’s

¹²⁴ Anthony Minghella, ‘The patience of making "The English Patient"’, November 8, 1996, (<http://www.splicedonline.com/features/englishtalk.html>).



Figure 21



Figure 22

assurance of order...But novels commenced with hesitation or chaos. Readers were never fully in balance” (*EP*, p.93). The reader of *The English Patient* is, indeed, “never fully in balance” as the opening pages perform an analogous task to that of the opening sequence of shots from the film – they open up a space that invokes the desire of the reader through the gaze appearing as absence. The first passage of the novel is composed of three short paragraphs and depicts an unknown woman walking through a garden and a house. There is a garden with swaying cypresses from “another gust of wind, a buckle of noise in the air” (*EP*, p.3). It is raining and there is a low wall and loggia between herself and the house. The unknown woman enters a kitchen which is shadowed in darkness except for “a wedge of light” from another room that is described as “another garden” and decorated with frescoes of foliage (*EP*, p.3). This ambiguity of landscape – a garden and then a room that appears as a garden – begins to present the gaze as an impossible object. Like the opening shot of the film where the viewer is unsure what is being painted and onto what material it is being painted upon, the reader of the novel is unsure as to what these images are signifying. And as with the film, the images of landscape and body are merged together, opening a space within which the gaze emerges and the reader begins to experience a feeling of desire. After a brief line that mentions “the man” who lies on the bed, the second passage of the novel begins, “Every four days she washes his black body, beginning at the destroyed feet” (*EP*, p.3). The intricate description of the body continues as the reader learns of this man’s “penis sleeping like a sea horse” and his “Hipbones of Christ” (*EP*, p.4). Ondaatje then merges the two sets of imagery together, much like the superimposed filmic image of body upon landscape. The narrative reads that the woman “loves the hollow below the lowest rib, its cliff of skin” (*EP*, p.4).

Thomas writes that “Minghella’s film...seems to start at a gentle pace with the image of a hand delicately painting a swimming figure...However, we are soon thrust into the realm of the spectacular” and images of a plane flying across the desert and a rattling train full of injured soldiers and a tense bomb disposal scene (Thomas, p.215). Thomas continues to argue that “this illustrates the extent to which Minghella is committed to the techniques of counterpoint and juxtapositioning of scenes, producing a mosaic effect on film to match that which is created in the novel” (Thomas, p.215). I would suggest that it is the crucial function of the gaze as an impossible object that emerges at the beginning of both the novel and film that allows for the reader or viewer to desire to piece together these fragments of narrative or shot selection.

This space that opens up in the novel, between the constantly shifting points of view and use of tense, its fragmented narrative structure and incongruous juxtapositioning of these fragments, “its whole strategy of temporal or spatial or cultural compression”¹²⁵, is how the gaze presents itself as an absence. However, in analysing the gaze in this way, there is a crucial element of how it functions in regard to narrative strategy. McGowan writes:

“Narrative cinema relies on the introduction of absence to the spectator, convincing the spectator that the film contains a secret, that there is some piece of knowledge yet to be revealed. Without absence, a narrative would have no structure and, what’s more, would have no way of prompting spectators to invest themselves in the narrative events. Absence – what the filmic narrative does not reveal – triggers the spectator’s desire” (McGowan, p.72).

However, McGowan cautions that desire as invoked by the gaze in film does not function in the same way as desire to seek completion of a narrative trajectory or a “filling in” of an absence in film. It is important to point out that the reader of *The English Patient* also does not experience desire in this manner. In Ondaatje’s work there always remains an unknowable person or place or element of the story – this ambiguity

¹²⁵ Rufus Cook, “‘Imploding Time and Geography’: Narrative Compressions in Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*”, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 33.2 (1998), p.109-125 (p.110).

of meaning is a fundamental element of each of his texts. It promotes an aesthetic of indeterminacy that lies at the core of Ondaatje's work.

McGowan explains that "Filmic narrative produces desire in the spectator through the introduction of an impossible object that resists meaning – the *objet petit a* in the form of the gaze. The eroticism of the cinema – its ability to produce desire – stems from this object that remains, no matter how much the spectator understands, irreducible to meaning" (McGowan, p.74). However, as previously explained, films that rely on the gaze to perpetuate absence inevitably result in an exhausting or overwhelming experience for the viewer. If Ondaatje's novel also relied on the gaze in this way, the reader would perpetually be desiring to have this absence relieved, resulting in a frustrating reading experience. Butterfield writes that it is the "recurring images...[that] build a coherent whole, ultimately linking the disparate parts" and that without such a unifying element in the work "the format would have had difficulty sustaining the book's progression" (Butterfield, p.165-166).

As I detailed in my analysis of the filmic techniques implemented in the scene between Caravaggio and Giannetta in *In the Skin of a Lion*, graphic match is used to bind the heterogeneous fragments of the textual passage together. The repetition of image and colour is the "lyrical imagery" that Greenstein insisted was necessary to balance the "interception and interruption" that is characteristic of engaging with Ondaatje's narrative strategy. Through the analysis of the film adaptation of *The English Patient*, we can observe a similar process at work in both the film and the novel – one that relies on the gaze manifesting itself through fantasy. The viewer/reader experiences absence in the film/novel and then is relieved by the gaze displaying itself through a fantasmatic image. This is the process of Cinema of Integration, a process that the novel also engages in as it blends "desire and fantasy [to] attempt to strike a

compromise and achieve a balance between desire's insistence on the absence of the gaze and fantasy's insistence on its distorting presence" (McGowan, p.118).

The "distorting presence" of the gaze is an oft-utilized element in Ondaatje's work. In writing about the imagery of *In the Skin of a Lion*, Butterfield comments that "this intense dwelling-on-things is a stock Ondaatje device. He rivets the reader to an image while he closes in on it, enlarges it until the lines on a hand become railway tracks, rivers. The image mesmerized, unsettles, and often shocks in its forced proximity" (Butterfield, p.165). In *The English Patient* novel, we witness this technique of focusing in and exploding apart an image in its intricate and often overwhelming detail. For example, at one point the narrative moves suddenly from a description of the vegetation in the villa garden and the patient's recommendation as to what seeds Hana should plant to an intricate description of Hana's moment of intimacy with Kip: "She likes to lay her face against the upper reaches of his arm, that dark brown river, and to wake submerged within in, against the pulse of an unseen vein in his flesh beside her. The vein she could have to locate and insert a saline solution into if he were dying" (*EP*, p.125). The gaze as an absence is being replaced by its function as a "distorting presence" that lies in the realm of fantasy and here "image overwhelms narrative" (Beddoes, p.209).

In film this "distorting presence" displays itself when the gaze appears through "moments of too much satisfaction" (McGowan, p.25) and we can examine this element through an analysis of another factor in prose to screen transfer: selective perception. The use of detail in a film is inherently different from that in prose. Jonathan Miller considers, "In some mysterious way, the description of a scene [in a novel] appears to be fully occupied by what it describes and never appears to lack what it fails to mention. In a film each frame would find itself inescapably loaded with unnecessary detail"

(Miller, p.229)". A novelist can indicate what is important in a scene by only pointing out the details in a particular description, the film image cannot do this in the same manner. For example, if a section in a novel detailed the scratch on the top of a mahogany dining room table, that is what the reader is focused on – the scratch and the dark wood. In a film, to adapt this exactly would confuse the audience – would it be a high angle shot of the top of a table, and only the part of the table that is scratched, with nothing else in the frame? If this was the case, would the viewer even know what he or she was looking at? The director has to fill in other details of the scene – the kitchen, the table, what else is in the room, the colours associated with the scene, as well as trying to portray the scratch itself.

This element of the representational nature of film would have to be considered carefully by Minghella due to Ondaatje's intricate and important use of detail throughout *The English Patient*. These detailed images are, in colloquial terms, the glue that binds the fragmented narrative together. Or in terms of the Lacanian approach I have been utilising, these images are the distorting presence of the gaze that relieves the persistent gaze as an absence that occurs through the various formal elements of the novel I previously detailed. Sadashige writes that "Ondaatje's novel derives much of its power from its canny ability to seduce and demystify all at once – what one might call the embodiment of postmodern longing"¹²⁶. The novel "seduces" the reader by invoking desire through the gaze as an impossible object and then "demystifies" this absence by overwhelming the reader with images that satisfy this lack, or absence, in the text. Ondaatje's use of details abounds in the novel and they can often provide more information and tone about a character than could be described in a whole page. A description of how the light falls upon Katherine reveals the most intricate and intimate

¹²⁶ Jacqui Sadashige, 'Sweeping the Sands: Geographies of Desire in *The English Patient*', *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 26.4 (1998), p.242-254 (p.247).

detail: “It falls upon her neck her feet the vaccination scar he loves on her right arm” (EP, p.156). The vaccination scar is an exquisite detail, representing the fragile nature of their affair and the blinding focus Almasi holds on his lover. This type of detail would not translate well upon the screen, it is simply too small and delicate and would be lost among the rest of the complicated mise-en-scene. But Minghella seems to have recognized that it is a crucial piece of the story, so he has made other parts of the body stand in for this textual detail, primarily the collarbone and the hand. The collarbone is the central image of the love scene between Almasi and Katherine during the Christmas luncheon and it holds the prominence of the shot in almost every intimate scene between the lovers.

The image of the hand dominates multiple shots in the film, displaying the gaze to the viewer in the process. **(Figures 23, 24)** In fact, the hand is the central focus of each shot that occurs in the scene Almasi and Katherine are trapped in the jeep during the sandstorm. The last shot of the sequence is a dissolve shot and Walter Murch describes it this way: “He has touched her hair and she has not moved. She turns instead and puts her fingers on the glass of the truck window, the shot dissolves, slowly – *into the present* – and we briefly see Almasi’s disfigured face under her hand. So it becomes her hand caressing his face across time in a tender gesture. It is emotionally haunting because ‘in the present’ Katherine is no longer alive” (Ondaatje, *Conversations*, p.180). **(Figure 25)**

Though the shot is emotionally haunting, it still displays the gaze through its “distorting presence” in this image and absence is held back from the viewer for the time being.



Figure 23



Figure 24



Figure 25

It is important to point out that the gaze displaying itself in a fantasmatic way will not necessarily function with a positive connotation. Julie Beddoes writes about the pattern of imagery in *In the Skin of a Lion* and suggests that “the scenes of violence repeat the imagery of the love scenes, and their objects are rendered similarly interchangeable” (Beddoes, p.209). We can observe the analogous functioning of imagery as assuming positive and negative characteristics with the use of hand shots in the film. In one shot, Almasy places his hand on Katherine’s back in a gesture of ownership and despair after she has left him. **(Figure 26)** In another shot, he places his hand across her throat, echoing this passage from the novel: “She could feel his sweat now, like blood left by a blade which the gesture of his arm seemed to have imitated” (EP, p.152). **(Figure 27)**



Figure 26



Figure 27

To conclude this study of the gaze in *The English Patient* and how an analysis of prose to screen transfer can help illuminate where it presents itself and how it shifts between desire and fantasy, I will examine the two main love scenes between Almasi and Katherine. The first love scene occurs in Almasi's apartment in Cairo when they first make love and the second during the Christmas lunch for the soldiers where the couple sneaks into the pantry. This Christmas lunch scene does not exist in the novel, but I will demonstrate that the way in which it is shot and constructed is taken directly from Ondaatje's work. Both the elements of mise-en-scene and montage of both love scenes in the film have taken cues from Ondaatje's narrative. Through the analysis of these two scenes we can examine the combined utilisation of point of view and selective perception at work in the film text.

The first love scene in Almasi's apartment consists of the following shots:

1) Establishing shot of Almasi's room. Tracking shot from the area of the room by the window, over suitcases open and contents sprawling on the floor, to the bed and a figure

lying face down on it. Only when Almasy lifts his head do we see who it is. The room is in subtle darkness contrasted with the light through the window as Cairo looms behind it **(Figure 28)**

2) Subjective shot from Almasy's perspective as Katherine walks from the light of the hall. Still shot **(Figure 29)**

3) Almasy on the bed facing her, looking at her. Still shot **(Figure 30)**

4) Katherine in the light facing him. Still shot **(Figure 31)**

5) Tracking shot of Almasy walking towards Katherine. **(Figure 32)** Violence as he falls to his knees and she strikes his head and shoulders. She falls to her knees, they kiss, he tears the bodice of her dress. They are left centre of the frame. **(Figure 33)** Centre of frame is the barred window with Cairo prominent in the background, the top of a mosque perfectly centred through the square break in the bars of the window. Contrast between the light city outside and the dark, forbidden nature of the room. **(Figure 34)** Zoom into the couple so they are forefront of frame as they grope each other. They fall to the floor and to the left of the frame, leaving the frame altogether. This suddenly makes what was a closed frame an open frame. Viewer is left with shot of the window for at least three seconds. **(Figure 35)**

Consider now the same narrative sequence in Ondaatje's novel:

I sank to my knees in the mosaic-tiled hall, my face in the curtain of her gown, the salt taste of these fingers in her mouth. We were a strange statue, the two of us, before we began to unlock our hunger. Her fingers scratching against the sand in my thinning hair. Cairo and all her deserts around us. (*EP*, p.236) In Ondaatje's scene, the initial contact of Almasy and Katherine is portrayed in just one, long shot. Minghella has taken this cue and has constructed his own scene in a similar fashion. Five shots are all he uses here: the first is the required establishing shot and the second through fourth are used to



First Love Scene – Shot 1 (Figure 28)



First Love Scene – Shot 2 (Figure 29)



First Love Scene – Shot 3 (Figure 30)



First Love Scene – Shot 4 (Figure 31)



First Love Scene – Shot 5 (Figure 32)



First Love Scene – Shot 6 (Figure 33)



First Love Scene – Shot 7 (Figure 34)



First Love Scene – Shot 8 (Figure 35)

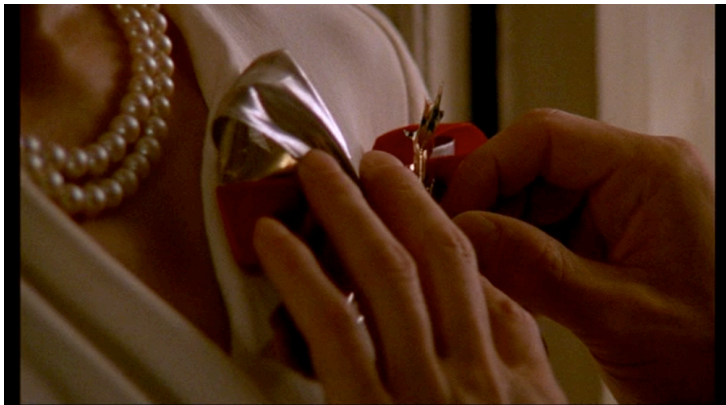
create tension between the two characters. Finally, the action of the scene is all held in the fifth frame which is extended through the use of tracking and zoom to be a long shot, in the same manner that Ondaatje describes the scene in his novel. Even the prominence of Cairo that the viewer sees as Almasy and Katherine fall out of the frame is predicted by Ondaatje's use of the line, "Cairo and all her deserts around us".

Compare this love scene to the next one that follows in the film, that of Almasy and Katherine at the Christmas luncheon. Minghella needs to demonstrate that this affair has become one of desperation and consuming lust. Without the ability of a novel to intersperse short sections of description that indicate the nature of their affair, Minghella must create a scene of intensity that rivals nothing else in the film:

- 1) Tracking shot as Almasy and Katherine enter the pantry. Camera moving backwards, facing them, as they walk under the doorway. Camera stops at their left in a medium shot as Almasy leans her against the shelf and touches her waist. We see crockery on the shelf behind them. **(Figure 36)**
- 2) Close-up of Almasy's hand unpinning the red ornament from Katherine's white dress. **(Figure 37)**
- 3) CU of Almasy's hand undoing the zipper on the side of Katherine's dress **(Figure 38)**
- 4) CU of Almasy's face – chin to forehead only **(Figure 39)**
- 5) CU of Katherine's face – chin to forehead only **(Figure 40)**
- 6) CU of Almasy putting his hand on Katherine's back **(Figure 41)**
- 7) Medium frame of Almasy pulling Katherine towards her **(Figure 42)**
- 8) CU of Katherine's pearls and her neck. Almasy leans in to put his mouth on her collarbone **(Figure 43)**
- 9) CU of Almasy pulling the dress off Katherine's shoulder. Details of her pearls, her flexing collarbone, Almasy's hand, her two bra straps **(Figure 44)**



Christmas Love Scene – Shot 1 (Figure 36)



Christmas Love Scene – Shot 2 (Figure 37)



Christmas Love Scene – Shot 3 (Figure 38)



Christmas Love Scene – Shot 4 (Figure 39)



Christmas Love Scene – Shot 5 (Figure 40)



Christmas Love Scene – Shot 6 (Figure 41)



Christmas Love Scene – Shot 7 (Figure 42)



Christmas Love Scene – Shot 8 (Figure 43)



Christmas Love Scene – Shot 9 (Figure 44)



Christmas Love Scene – Shot 10 (Figure 45)



Christmas Love Scene – Shot 11 (Figure 46)



Christmas Love Scene – Shot 12 (Figure 47)



Christmas Love Scene – Shot 13 (Figure 48)



Christmas Love Scene – Shot 14 (Figure 49)



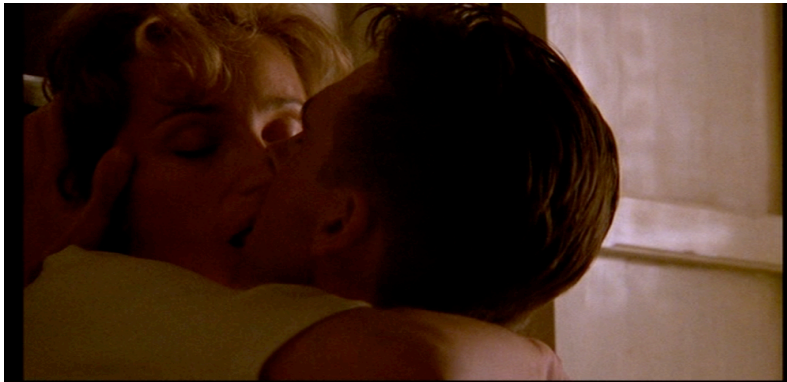
Christmas Love Scene – Shot 15 (Figure 50)



Christmas Love Scene – Shot 16 (Figure 51)



Christmas Love Scene – Shot 17 (Figure 52)



Christmas Love Scene – Shot 18 (Figure 53)



Christmas Love Scene – Shot 19 (Figure 54)



Christmas Love Scene – Shot 20 (Figure 55)

- 10)CU of their faces as they look at each other (**Figure 45**)
- 11)CU of Almasý pulling Katherine's bra strap over her shoulder (**Figure 46**)
- 12)CU of their faces as they look at each other (**Figure 47**)
- 13)CU of Almasý's hand pulling Katherine's dress up her leg (**Figure 48**)
- 14)Medium frame of their heads and torsos as he moves to enter her and they close their eyes (**Figure 49**)
- 15)Long shot outside at luncheon during singing of Silent Night. tables shot from normal angle (**Figure 50**)
- 16)Medium frame of Maddox and companion singing (**Figure 51**)
- 17)Bag piper to left of frame and frosted window just slightly to right of centre frame. We can barely see the movement of two figures behind it (**Figure 52**)
- 18)Medium frame of Almasý and Katherine kissing (**Figure 53**)
- 19)CU of Almasý's thumb in Katherine's mouth. The tracking of the camera becomes frenetic as they make love. Longest shot of sequence (**Figure 54**)
- 20)Outside. High angle shot of soldiers sitting at luncheon tables (**Figure 55**)

While this exact scene does not occur in Ondaatje's work, its structure is, in fact, taken from the novel. This sequence is the most important in the film in the manner in which it demonstrates the ferocity and passion of Almasý and Katherine's affair. In the novel this ferocity and desperation is constructed over three pages through brief and detailed descriptions that present the extent of their affair. It begins with, "Her fist swings towards him and hits hard into the bone just below his eye. She dresses and leaves" (*EP*, p.152). On the next page he writes, "A list of wounds. The various colours of a bruise...The plate she walked across the room with, flinging the contents aside, and broke across his head, the blood rising up into the straw hair. The fork that entered the

back of his shoulder” (*EP*, p.153). Ondaatje continues to describe in the shortest possible terms the nature of their affair: “He would step into an embrace with her, glancing first to see what moveable objects were around” (*EP*, p.154) and then details of his wounds and bandages, the sounds he hears when he awakens next to her, the Cairo markets they walk through together, the crockery he breaks when he is dining without her. Finally, Ondaatje sums up this ferocious section of injuries and desperation by writing, “He has been disassembled by her” (*EP*, p.155). This “disassembly” is portrayed in the film through the accelerated montage used in the Christmas love scene. This technique demonstrates the instruction that accompanies this scene in Minghella’s screenplay: “It’s as if the world has stopped and there’s only their passion, overwhelming reason and logic and rules”¹²⁷.

The “distorting presence” of the gaze in each of these images created by Ondaatje in the novel to depict the violent, overwhelming nature of emotion between Almasy and Katherine is replicated by Minghella through the montage of equally distorting images that have been chosen for their prime function within the difficulty of selective perception on screen. Minghella has successfully incorporated into this scene “visual equivalents for the narrator’s evaluations” and through a careful consideration of both point of view and selective perception has achieved a satisfying narrative equivalent (in this case, the gaze presenting itself through fantasy) between the two texts.

Rufus Cook writes that “If there is an emphasis on narrative discontinuity and disconnection in *The English Patient*...there is also an emphasis, at the same time, on the imagery of continuity and connection, on techniques for ‘bridging’ the gaps” (Cook,

¹²⁷ Anthony Minghella, *The English Patient: A Screenplay* (New York, Hyperion, 1996), p.92-3.

p.112). My analysis of the function of the gaze in the film adaptation of *The English Patient* has demonstrated how it replicates its analogous function in Ondaatje's novel and it is this particular technique that binds the fragmented plot and narrative twists and turns together. If I borrowed and adapted McGowan's term for the type of film that promotes desire through the gaze as an absence and then absolves that sense of lack through distorting images that involve fantasy, I would label Ondaatje's *The English Patient* as belonging to the "Fiction of Integration". By examining the various difficulties encountered in prose to screen transfer in order to illuminate where and how the gaze functions in both the film and the novel, I hope to have engaged with *The English Patient* in a new critical way that promotes a greater understanding of how the reader is involved within the text, and yet also demonstrates how the work maintains the aesthetic of indeterminacy that lies at the heart of Ondaatje's oeuvre.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION

In a way, this thesis has performed a cyclical analysis of aspects of photography and film in Ondaatje's work. Beginning with an examination of photographic perspective in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, the study engages with current critical work regarding Billy the Kid's separation from the mutable world around him and how this refusal of experience leads to a photographic perspective that stops motion. This paradox between photography and motion (only by stopping movement are we able to truly see movement, as exemplified by the Muybridge horse image) led my argument to consider the ontological nature of photographic stillness and how this is the distinctive quality of Ondaatje's engagement with the visual in his work. In *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* the use of photographic stillness has been conditioned by cinematic thought and Bazin's insistence that photography "embalms time" is a crucial way of understanding Billy's wish to halt change. This desire for immutability leads the analysis of this work into a consideration of Billy's role as an artist and how it relates to Ondaatje's own dilemma regarding how to artistically represent the complexities and spontaneities of life without fixing them into a static entity on the page that is one-dimensional in its purpose or meaning. It is through the "photographic stills" that Billy creates through his particular photographic perspective in an attempt to reconstruct the world around him that we again are able to consider photographic stillness as being irrevocably tied to a notion of cinematic thought.

To understand the manner in which the reader is able to engage in the process of determining the possible meanings of the text, the study turns to an examination of the

role of the photographs used in the book. The reader response to their reproduction in the work leads to an analysis of how destabilisation of meaning occurs through the relationship between text and image, slippages in time and space, and the photograph's relationship to history. These are all pertinent concerns to Ondaatje's next major literary endeavour, *Running in the Family*, and my brief analysis of the poem "Light" demonstrates how the use of the photographic image will be of central importance to this work.

Photographic stillness continues to be a defining quality of Ondaatje's employment of the visual in the text but it has shifted from being considered in the vein of the cinematic and now functions in this book as an ontologically separate entity. Barthes's view of the overwhelming presence of the photographic referent results in an understanding of the photographic image depicting its own temporal beginning and leads to a conception of photographic stillness as a welcome moment of stasis and intimacy. This conception of photographic stillness and the particular experience of viewing a familial image opens up a space between the myth and reality of family life that allows Ondaatje to fictionally reconstruct his ancestral past. This productive space mirrors the space that the reader occupies in this text as the reader is implicated in the organisation of the fragmented narrative structure of the work, which continues into Ondaatje's following book, *In the Skin of a Lion*.

While the focus of the analysis of Ondaatje's first novel shifts from an engagement with photographic perspective to an emphasis on the structure of the text, the use of photographic stillness still factors heavily as a formal device in the novel. It takes the form of partial view, as influenced by Rochelle Simmons's analysis of *In the Skin of a Lion* as a Cubist novel, and promotes multiple slippages in time and a non-linear narrative structure that results in an aesthetic of indeterminacy.

In engaging with the criticism of Arthur Goss's position in the novel, I argue that he is performing an analogous function to Patrick Lewis as both men insist on distancing themselves from their harsh working environment. To answer why there is an absence of Goss's non-pictorialist photographic work within the text, I suggest that this would result in what Hutcheon terms the "separate aestheticism of art" instead of assisting in the construction of a socially-conscious story that includes recognition of the human element within the authority of history.

In analysing how filmic techniques used in *In the Skin of a Lion* affect thematic concerns such as the human element and multiple viewpoints to ensure an inclusive portrayal of history, this study moved from an examination of photography not influenced by cinema back to consider film. Along the way, I have argued that while Ondaatje's foray into the filmmaking world may not have reached the critical acclaim of his literary endeavours, the two documentaries he directed in the 1970s can be considered a success when simultaneously engaging with the prose work he was writing during this time. The multiple thematic parallels that exist between *The Clinton Show* and *Running in the Family* are an important way of reading Ondaatje's (auto)biographical text and illuminate the difficult manner in which he had to write about his father in this latter work.

Finally, my analysis of the film adaptation of *The English Patient* promotes a new way of understanding the novel. Focusing attention on Todd McGowan's re-assessment of gaze theory allows for an inclusive viewing of the film, not reliant on a specific spectator, and demonstrates that gaze theory can be a useful approach with which to study an author who insists upon an aesthetic of indeterminacy in his work. As McGowan's clarified theory of the gaze conveys desire not as a sense of mastery over the image on the screen, but rather focuses on the points of rupture where the gaze

emerges as an absence, Ondaatje's narrative insistence on temporal and spatial slippages and a subsequent destabilisation of meaning can incorporate a critical assessment of how the gaze functions. This notion of the gaze as locating absence at the heart of the film concludes my argument regarding Ondaatje's search for the indeterminacy of meaning by exploiting the space between the visual and the written.

To conclude, in an interview with Catherine Bush, she asks Ondaatje about the kinds of books that have given him the most pleasure. Ondaatje responds, "I guess in spite of the fact that we've spoken about form quite a bit, I suspect that we are too skillful at it, too precious. So what we all suddenly desire is the blend of emotion and language and form. Heart and skills"¹²⁸. This sentiment perfectly concludes my study of the various aspects of photography and film in Ondaatje's work as it echoes the desire for the blurred photograph of the gull in 'The gate in his head'. "Heart" is representative of the life the writer is living and the "skills" are what prevents this life from being presented in its true form within art. The poem is indicating that the image which remains allusive and undefined is actually the perfect end result of writing – it is the indeterminate meaning of the art object that allows art to represent life without a sense of suffocation or stasis.

As I examined in this study, photographic stillness does not necessarily insist on being defined by cinematic thought, and therefore, does not always carry the sense of immutability that the artist is trying to avoid in artistic representation. Through the use of various aspects of photography, and later, filmic technique, Ondaatje constructs a space between the visual and the written that is able to promote the indeterminacy of meaning. The photographic image can also demonstrate its own temporal beginning, thereby opening up a space from which various elements of the writing process –

¹²⁸ Catherine Bush, 'Michael Ondaatje: An Interview', *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 53 (1994), 250-261 (p.248).

memory, imagination, reconstruction, presence and absence – can exist. As this study has examined this space and the visual aspects that assist in creating it, we have been able to analyse the productive role that photography and film have played in Michael Ondaatje's work.

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