

**‘An Oscilloscopic Machine’: the Lens, the Image and the Canvas  
in Michael Ondaatje’s *Running in the Family***

Rūta Šlapkauskaitė

The word *imago* designated the effigy of the absent,  
the dead, and, more precisely, the ancestors:  
the dead from whom we come, the links of the lineage  
in which each of us is a stitch. The *imago* hooks into the cloth.  
It does not repair the rip of their death:  
it does less and more than that. It weaves, it images absence.

Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Ground of the Image*

In *This is Not a Pipe*, a study of Rene Magritte’s famous painting, Michel Foucault explores the aesthetical logic behind the relationship between image and text within the suggested bounds of the work of art. Like all of us, he is intrigued by the puzzle that links the image of the pipe and the verbal statement *Ceci n’est pas une pipe* in Magritte’s canvas. In Foucault’s view, ‘What misleads us is the inevitability of connecting the text to the drawing (as the demonstrative pronoun, the meaning of the word *pipe*, and the likeness of the image all invite us to do here) – and the impossibility of defining a perspective that would let us say that the assertion is true, false, or contradictory’ (2008: 20). What Foucault’s analytical gaze penetrates in the visual operation at hand is, what he calls, a *calligram*, a tautological visual construct that seemingly *says* what it *shows*, thereby calling into question ‘the oldest oppositions of our alphabetical civilization: to show and to name; to shape and to say; to reproduce and to articulate; to imitate and to signify; to look and to read’ (2008: 21). For Foucault, Magritte’s masterpiece is a laboratory of intellectual speculations as endured by the viewer’s eyes and consciousness in the process of reading a pictorial paradox: a visual text that simultaneously claims its identity and cancels it out.

By endorsing the picture as an intellectual space shared by language and image, Foucault foregrounds the dialogue between the visual and the verbal that the viewer’s consciousness negotiates in the uncertain course of the building of meaning. Consciousness becomes not unlike a crucible in which relations between

different media are measured against the rigorous force of our reading practices, our modes of looking and, more generally, our habits of thought. French scholar Jean-Luc Nancy offers a no less palpable insight into the correlation between verbal and visual discourse, contending in his book *The Ground of the Image* that ‘The horizon of the image is the text, with which it opens an indefinite power to imagine, before which the image is only a closure, a closed contour. But the horizon of the text is the image, with which it opens an indefinite power to imagine, before which the text is only an impotency, a permanent postponement of images’ (2005: 69-70). In other words, text and image cannot help but reach out to one another by way of appealing to the muscles of our creative imagination, on the one hand, and examining the limits of our modes of expression, on the other. The present paper borrows Nancy’s idea of the *oscillator* to examine the reading consciousness of Michael Ondaatje’s *Running in the Family*, where the ‘intersection of [...] double reference’ (2005: 73) that foregrounds the book’s verbal and pictorial media complicates our response to its historiographic narrative. In so far as this essay considers the ways in which Ondaatje constructs and questions systems of visual inspection that frame narratives of transcultural experience, W.J.T. Mitchell’s notion of *imagetext*, Susan Sontag’s and Roland Barthes’s commentaries on photography and Erna Fiorentini’s concepts of *projective* and *prismatic* seeing will prove crucial to our understanding of the ideological implications of viewing, and the ambivalence of its historical resonance that Ondaatje’s narrative engages with. In oscillating between the different notions of specular practices, this reading of *Running in the Family* analyses how the narrative itself oscillates between different optical modes and builds the ambiguity of critical reflection on place, memory and identity.

At the core of Nancy’s philosophical argumentation is the idea of text as textile, ‘the material of sense’ (2005: 66), which entails both the sensual experience of reading and the intellectual activity of making sense of that which has been woven, meshed or knit together. I find this idea particularly useful in analysing the relationship between text and image in *Running in the Family*, a book that is ‘at once poetry, travelogue, anecdote, autobiography, biography, female history, photograph album, and journal’ (Bolton 2008:22) and that centres on Ondaatje’s poetic reconciliation with his Sri Lankan roots. Notoriously, it has received a spate of critical responses ranging from praises for the author’s playfully postmodern use of auto/biographical conventions and ironic takes on historiographic practices to accusations of colonial nostalgia, romantic clichés, solipsism and political co-opting. Yet if anything, the critical reception of the book has testified to the precarious double bind of an expatriate consciousness that attempts to recover and understand a version of the past as a tapestry of private and communal memories: ‘To jungle and gravestones [...] Reading torn 100-year-old newspaper clippings that come apart in your hands like wet sand, information tough as plastic dolls’ (1993: 58). It being a narrative that focuses on

the narrator's journey to Sri Lanka and his efforts to 'rediscover' his dead father, the formal arrangement of *Running in the Family* invites an analogy to *hypomnemata*, in which, as Marilyn Adler Papayanis shows, 'individuals would record "quotations, fragments of works, examples, and actions to which one had been witness or of which one had read the account, reflections or reasonings which one had heard or which had come to mind"' (2005: 10). This is especially evident in the chapters where the narrator writes his own diary: 'Sit down in my room and transcribe names and dates from the various envelopes into a notebook' (Ondaatje 1993: 57), or reproduces the stories he hears from others: 'Remember all the pillows he had to sleep with? Remember how he used to make us massage his legs? Each of us had to do it for ten minutes [...]' (1993: 148). Ondaatje knits together discursive fibres to compose a texture that reflects upon his narrator's experience of meditating on 'running' *in, with, into, after* and *against* his family, community, memory, and gossip. In this, as Matthew Bolton convincingly argues, Ondaatje's writing 'commits itself – on formal, thematic, and ethical levels – to not choosing historical fact or creative fiction, but instead committing to both simultaneously' (2008: 235).

As much as Ondaatje's *hypomnemata* blend historical factuality with fictiveness, they also interweave narrative with maps and photos, thus reinforcing the epistemological problem at the heart of the narrator's historiographic endeavour: 'During certain hours, at certain years in our lives, we see ourselves as remnants from the earlier generations that were destroyed. So our job becomes to keep peace with enemy camps, eliminate the chaos at the end of Jacobean tragedies, and with "the mercy of distance" write the histories' (1993: 152). This is particularly pertinent to the narrator's identity as an expatriate, a Sri Lankan born Canadian, which may explain what Graham Huggan sees as his 'complicitous relationship with his metropolitan readers' (1996: 118-119). Ondaatje's narrator himself admits: 'We own the country we grow up in, or we are aliens and invaders' (1993: 67). More significantly, the images *Running in the Family* includes make demands not just on the eyes, but also on the whole intellectual apparatus that is imposed on them as a lens that guides the gaze and organises the optical forms into cognitive material.

Visual documents of reality as they are, maps and photos used in *Running in the Family* entice the reader's eye so as to caution us against mimetic reading and to expose the ideological paradigms that condition our knowledge of what used to be Ceylon. Ondaatje is mapping the Western consciousness and its perception of Ceylon, at the same time as he is mapping his family history and the very process of writing: 'How I have used them [...] They knit the story together, each memory a wild thread in the sarong [...] I would love to photograph this' (1993: 90). The text effectively becomes a map envisioning a territory of the mind's eye. In that sense it works as a visual, as much as verbal, reconstruction of memory. By extension, then, Ondaatje's narrator is as much a historian as a

photographer in as much as both describe a lost world, for as Sontag reminds us in *On Photography*, ‘All photographs are *memento mori*. To take a photograph is to participate in another person’s (or thing’s) mortality, vulnerability, mutability’ (1979: 15).

*Running in the Family* opens as a site of encounter with the cultural Other, ‘a contact zone’ (Pratt 2003: 7) where disparate discourses, viewpoints and identities collide, transect and infuse one another to measure the reader’s habits of reading *alterity*. Two epigraphs, which precede the actual narrative, seem to build a conceptual framework for the whole text as a canvas of opposing perspectives, not unlike that in Cubist painting. The first is attributed to Oderic, a fourteenth century Franciscan Friar: ‘I saw in the island fowls as big as our country geese having two heads [...] and other miraculous things which I will not here write of.’ The second epigraph comes from Sri Lankan painter Douglas Amarasekera’s observation made in 1978 in *Ceylon Sunday Times*: ‘The Americans were able to put a man on the moon because they knew English. The Sinhalese and Tamils whose knowledge of English was poor, thought that the earth was flat.’ Both epigraphs emphasise the social force of the gaze and bring forth the idea that truth is an artifice of seeing. Oderic’s impressions of Ceylon are symptomatic of medieval Europe’s accounts about unfamiliar lands and cultures, which were perceived as ‘marvellous’ and therefore inferior. In Stephen Greenblatt’s words, ‘The marvellous [was] a central feature then in the whole complex system of representation, verbal and visual, philosophical and aesthetic, intellectual and emotional, through which people in the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance apprehended, and thence possessed or discarded, the unfamiliar, the alien, the terrible, the desirable, and the hateful’ (1991: 22-23). In this respect, then, the first epigraph projects the perspective of imperial power, to whose possessive hands, as we later learn, Ceylon continuously succumbed throughout history: ‘The island seduced all of Europe. The Portuguese. The Dutch. The English’ (Ondaatje 1993: 53-54). Amarasekera’s remark, on the other hand, exposes the ideological implications of discourse used to explain the world: mapmaking being the imperial privilege, the Ceylonese had little access to the Western intellectual capital and were thereby restricted in their understanding of the complexity of the universe. As Arjun Appadurai notes, ‘We must get away from the notion that there is some kind of spatial landscape against which time writes its story. Instead, it is historical agents, institutions, actors, powers that make the geography’ (2008: 9). The recourse to maps is also significant here because the epigraphs are followed by a visual reproduction of a map of Ceylon/Sri Lanka, whose two-dimensional flatness extends Amarasekera’s words, soliciting our attention to the intellectual density of the optical device and the reading practices it entails. Partaking of both visual and verbal means of expression, the cartographic text is

what Mitchell calls an *imagetext* (1994: 89),<sup>1</sup> a composite intellectual construct that brings together image and text. In this regard, the map, which functions as a paratext to Ondaatje's narrative proper, becomes a virtual *mise en abyme*, reflecting the narrator's very act of writing as mapping, his concern with the role of the tourist gaze in geographical and cultural exploration as well as the convergence of discourse and power that unfolds through the relationship between the verbal and the visual in the book.

Mapping is one of the key metaphors through which Ondaatje organises the imagetext of *Running in the Family*. Yet, as Milena Marinkova observes in *Michael Ondaatje: Haptic Aesthetics and Micropolitical Writing*, 'Ondaatje aims to restore a cartography that is not confined to the two dimensional page, that spills into sound, touch, and smell' (2011: 76). In other words, Ondaatje embraces a cartography of *perception*. The narrative of the section 'Jaffna Afternoons', where the narrator describes the governor's house he is staying in, is particularly hinged on the narrator's sensual experience. It opens by appealing to sight:

2:15 in the afternoon. I sit in the huge living room of the governor's home in Jaffna. The walls, painted in recent years a warm rose-red, stretched awesome distances away to my left to my right and up towards a white ceiling. When the Dutch first built this house egg white was used to paint the walls. The doors are twenty feet high, as if awaiting the day when a family of acrobats will walk from room to room, sideways, without dismantling themselves from each other's shoulders. (1993: 17)

The evocative use of verbal imagery comes as a complimentary piece to the black-and-white photo of the governor's estate that opens the chapter titled 'Asian Rumours' in which 'Jaffna Afternoons' finds its place. In translating pictorial terms into the verbal medium Ondaatje makes us aware of the very process of mediation that guides our perception of place and understanding of the narrator's experience. We follow the trace of his senses as he breathes in the gusts of the revolving fans in the room, ruminates on 'the mosquito nets stranded in the air like the dresses of hanged brides, the skeletons of beds without their mistresses', drinks ice-cold palmyrah toddy, eats with his hands, 'shovelling in the rice with my thumb' and listens to Aunt Phyllis delight in remembering that 'there is another terrible story [...]' (1993: 18-19). In this respect, the whole text may be read as a powerful study of the epistemological implications of witnessing and making sense of sensual experiences that guide the narrator's (and by extension the reader's) oscillating consciousness: 'I witnessed everything. One morning I

---

<sup>1</sup> Mitchell uses the slash to designate 'image/text' as a problematic gap, cleavage, or rupture in representation. The term 'imagetext' designates composite, synthetic works (or concepts) that combine image and text. 'Image-text', with a hyphen, designates relations of the visual and verbal.

would wake and just smell things for the whole day, it was so rich I had to select senses' (1993: 59).

A similar air of sensuality is evoked in the poem 'The Cinnamon Peeler', whose lyrical subject imagines making love to a local woman:

If I were a cinnamon peeler  
I would ride your bed  
and leave the yellow bark dust  
on your pillow

Your breasts and shoulders would reek  
you could never walk through markets  
without the profession of my fingers  
floating over you. The blind would  
stumble certain of whom they approached  
though you might bathe  
under rain gutters, monsoon. [...] (1993: 78)

Trapped in the poem's erotically-charged enjambments, the woman remains unnamed and virtually absent because she is configured through the dynamics of the speaker's senses: his touch, sight and sense of smell. To us, in other words, the poem's female figure emerges by way of the speaker's perception; she is sensual because contained by the language of the speaker's perceptual experience.

Ondaatje's evocation of sensory perception is suggestive of Adler Papayanis's idea that the expatriate consciousness tends to partake of the aesthetical principle of *sensorium*, a term she borrows from Fredric Jameson to describe 'the place of quality in an increasingly quantified world, the place of the archaic and of feeling amid the desacralization of the market system, the place of sheer colour and intensity within the grayness of measurable extension and geometric abstraction' (2005: 19). The notion of *sensorium* aptly resonates with the narrator's attempts to access both personal and collective memories about his family and the former Ceylon, whose colonial legacy builds an aura of Oriental exoticism that appeals to the sensuality, if not sensibility, of the Western reader. The logic of *sensorium* permeates the governor's house in Jaffna:

There are so many ghosts here. In the dark mildewed wing, where the rotting mosquito nets hang, lives the apparition of the Dutch governor's daughter. In 1734 she threw herself down a well after being told she could not marry her lover, and has startled generations since, making them avoid the room where she silently exhibits herself in a red dress. And just as the haunted sections are avoided for sleeping, the living room is avoided for conversation, being so huge that all talk evaporates into the air before it reaches the listener. (1993:19)

Like the narrative itself, the house is haunted by the colonial past whose significance is measured through the visitors' response to their sensual probing. In effect, the mystery that lingers in the Jaffna residence harbours the memories of the long-standing European presence that claims the narrator's family as accomplices in the imperialist enterprise. Posing as a form of intellectual shelter, the narrative's *sensorium* eventually translates into an Orientalist frame that primes the reader to question the reliability of the narrator's memories and the limits of his interpretative gaze.

Ondaatje's concern with the dynamics of the gaze in communicating cultural perception is not limited to the verbal narrative. In the chapter 'Tabula Asiae' – a title itself resonating with the image of a pictorial surface and thus a framed look – the narrator comments on the maps his brother keeps in his study:

On my brother's wall in Toronto are the false maps. Old portraits of Ceylon. The result of sightings, glances from trading vessels, the theories of sextant. The shapes differ so much they seem to be translations – by Ptolemy, Mercator, Francois Valentyn, Mortier, and Heydt – growing from mythic shapes into eventual accuracy. (1993: 53)

The narrator's identification of the maps as false actualises the historical context from which they originate – from Ptolemy's ancient maps through Mercator's sixteenth century designs to the eighteenth century cartography of Valentyn, Mortier and Heydt – and the ideological worldview they project and impose. For as Robert Rundstrom helpfully explains, 'The meaning and use of maps, is, like all human actions, set in a cultural context of values and beliefs that reinforce, and are reinforced by, the act of mapping itself, and the people behind the scenes' (1991: 1). Arguably, then, by pointing out the falseness of his brother's maps of colonial Ceylon, Ondaatje's narrator both employs and questions Western cartographic literacy, suggesting a link between the mapping of territory and the claiming of land: '[...] Zeilan, Seyllan, Ceilon, and Ceylon – the wife of many marriages, courted by invaders who stepped ashore and claimed everything with the power of their sword or bible or language' (1993: 54). In this, the maps are viewed as a consequence of a particular mode of looking and seeing, they result from 'surveys' and 'observations'. Like the tenuous changes in the spelling of Ceylon with each new colonisation, the maps have to be approached as imagetexts to be both seen and read. Ondaatje is tracing sight in order to achieve insight into the penumbra of the imperialist activity which lingers in the Western discourse about Ceylon.

His concern for visual modalities is reinforced in the seven photographs, which are reproduced in the book and set up the problem of the image-text. Ondaatje's use of photographs reflects his concern for perception, and thus, a way of seeing. In fact, formally, the verbal narrative of *Running in the Family* is structured into what, for lack of a better word, may be called 'snapshots', brief

'impressions' of places and people, fleeting memories of relatives, and most of all, gossip descriptions. Many of such stories have no identifiable narrators:

Wait a minute, wait a minute! When did all this happen, I'm trying to get it straight [...]  
Your mother was nine, Hilden was there, and your grandmother Lalla and David Grenier and his wife Dickie.  
How old was Hilden?  
Oh, in his early twenties.  
But Hilden was having dinner with my mother and you.  
Yes, says Barbara. And Trevor de Saram. And Hilden and your mother and I were quite drunk. (1993: 85)

In generating and unfolding the dynamics of memory (personal as much as communal), the photographs and narrative 'snapshots' refract one another and thereby enhance our awareness of the unreliability of the narrator's historiographic effort: 'But the book again is incomplete. In the end all your children move among the scattered acts and memories with no clues' (1993: 172). In Huggan's view, 'Ondaatje seems to want to see, but also to prevent himself from seeing. He avails himself of the licence of ethnic indeterminacy in order to dream about a past that remains strategically out of focus' (1996: 121). Like memory, whose dynamics the narrative investigates and reiterates, *Running in the Family* both brings Ceylon closer to the reader and distorts its form. Considerably, the 'mythic' quality of the stories about the narrator's father and his native land is mirrored in the photographic images. In one of them, attributed to the chapter 'Don't Talk to Me About Matisse', we see a group of people on a street flooded with water. Their faces are indistinct (some of them are covered with umbrellas), anonymous and unwelcoming to close visual inspection. In the background the houses are suggestive of a shopping area, with big signs such as 'Zahir's' hanging down from a roof. Although a materialised memory trace, the photo remains silent about the reality it depicts and the people who inhabit it remain genuinely unknowable, a source of gossip and anecdote, much like the narrator's father, Mervyn Ondaatje. Perhaps it is fitting to remember Sontag's observation that 'Through photographs the world becomes a series of unrelated, freestanding particles; and history, past and present, a set of anecdotes and *fait divers*' (1979: 22-23).

The tension between intimacy and anonymity as testified by the photographs in *Running in the Family* is enhanced through the ambivalence of deictic relations between verbal and pictorial discourse. As readers, we remain largely ignorant of the photographs' captions, except for the photograph depicting Ondaatje's parents that appears both in the form of visual reproduction and ekphrasis:

My father's pupils droop to the south-west corner of his sockets. His jaw falls and resettles into a groan that is half idiot, half shock. (All this emphasized by his dark suit and well-combed hair.) My mother in white has twisted her lovely features and stuck out her jaw and upper lip so that her profile is in the posture of a monkey. The print is made into a postcard and sent through the mails to various friends. On the back my father has written '*What we think of married life*'. (1993: 135)

Other images, however, remain demonstrably ambivalent as regards their deictic relationship with the surrounding text. An interesting case in point is the aforementioned group photo that opens the chapter 'Don't Talk to Me About Matisse'. The phrase stands within a tenuous grasp of both the photo and the whole chapter it presumably names. More importantly, though, it guides us towards a poem by Sri Lankan poet Lakdasa Wikkramasinha:

Don't talk to me about Matisse, don't talk to me  
about Gauguin, or even  
the earless painter van Gogh,  
& the woman reclining on a blood-spread –  
the aboriginal shot by the great white hunter Matisse  
with a gun with two nostrils, the aboriginal  
crucified by Gauguin – the syphilis-spreader, the yellow  
obesity.

Don't talk to me about Matisse...  
the European style of 1900, the tradition of the studio  
where the nude woman reclines forever  
on a sheet of blood  
Talk to me instead of the culture generally –  
how the murderers were sustained  
by the beauty robbed of savages: to our remote  
villages the painters came, and our white-washed  
mud-huts were splattered with gunfire. (1993: 71)

In so far as Ondaatje's text is a viewing, as much as a reading experience, his reader operates as an embodied eye. Significantly, the narrator writes for the eye sensitive to the legacy of colonial discourse. This ekphrastic poem, of which, curiously, Ondaatje quotes only the second stanza, evokes the visual template of Orientalist painting with the central figure of the Odalisque metonymically giving access to the Western epistemological discourse about the East. In other words, Matisse's name, although linked to the many Odalisques the Fauvist painted, stands in for the whole paradigm of Western thought and aesthetic practice (Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres and Leon Gerome also spring to mind) that contributed to the idea of imperial domination 'fundamental to eighteenth and

nineteenth century understandings of the East as exotic, ornate and mysterious' (Quiazon 2006: 50).

The first stanza, however, is dominated by a dramatically more violent imagery. Wikkramasinha recalls the perilous force of the painterly eye that transforms the Oriental reality into images of 'crucified' natives that are reminiscent of colonial enslavement. The memory of imperial conquest is extended through numerous intertextual references to Western writers, like Paul Bowles, D.H. Lawrence, Leonard Woolf, and Edward Lear, to name but a few, whose authority on the subject of Ceylon was sustained as much by their actual experience of the island as by the 'imperial eyes' (to borrow Pratt's phrasing) whose ethics they used in their observations about cultural difference. For example, Woolf sums up his experience in a nutshell: 'All jungles are evil' (1993: 65). Lawrence appears to be equally economical with words: '[...] Ceylon is an experience – but heavens, not a permanence' (1993: 65). Much like the epigraph from Oderic these 'alien tongues' project a view of the island as a dangerous and possibly savage place only to be rebutted in Ondaatje's quoting of Wikkramasinha's poem.

Like Ondaatje's writing itself, Wikkramasinha's poem hinges on the tension between verbal and pictorial art, juxtaposing the power of enunciation to that of painting. We are reminded of the fifth century B.C. graffiti poems scratched on the walls of a fortress: 'Short verses to the painted women in the frescoes which spoke of love in all its confusions and brokenness' (1993: 70). The beauty of 'the first folk poems of the country' is contrasted to charcoal drawings on the walls of the University of Ceylon done by Sri Lankan rebels during the Insurgency of 1971: 'When the university opened again the returning students found hundreds of poems written on walls, ceilings, and in hidden corners of the campus. Quatrains and free verse about the struggle, tortures, the unbroken spirit, love of friends who had died for the cause' (1993: 70). As in Wikkramasinha's critique of European avant-garde's blindness to the consequences of the exoticising practices of Western artists, the poetry of Sri Lankan revolutionaries operates as a medium of resistance against the constraints of oppressive ideology. Yet, the political significance of the insurgents' poems survives only in the visual medium, the photographs the narrator discovers in a book published in Switzerland: 'At the back of the book are ten photographs of charcoal drawings done by an insurgent on the walls of one of the houses he hid in' (1993: 70-71). Interspersing its narrative with its own photographic images *Running in the Family* partakes of the same political force, blending as it does the poetic and the pictorial, the private and the public. In this, the visual medium gives body to the voice of the imagination that is courting a peripheral vision of the master narrative of History.

This intersection between the verbal and the visual goes in tune with Mitchell's suggestion that 'the medium of *writing* deconstructs the possibility of a

pure image or pure text, along with the opposition between the “literal” (letters) and the “figurative” (pictures) on which it depends. Writing, in its physical, graphic form, is an inseparable suturing of the visual and the verbal, the “imagetext” incarnate’ (1994: 95). In fact, the narrator’s memories of learning the Sri Lankan alphabet as a five-year-old resonate with a powerful awareness of the visual dimension of language: ‘Years later, looking into a biology textbook, I came across a whole page, depicting the small bones in the body and recognized, delighted, the shapes and forms of the first alphabet I ever copied from Kumarodaya’s first grade reader’ (1993: 69). For Ondaatje, the alphabet is a ‘self-portrait of language’ (1993: 69) that envelops the whole book: ‘I must confess that the book is not a history but a portrait or “gesture”’ (1993: 176). This highlights his attentiveness to the process of composition and the creative medium employed in *Running in the Family*.

The self-conscious activity of textual organisation is reflected in the process of mapping as the book’s visual reconstruction of memory. In looking at his brother’s false maps, the narrator calls them ‘translations’, which attempt to balance the ‘mythic’ and the ‘accurate’. Similarly, he compares Ceylon to a mirror, an interpreting mechanism that ‘pretended to reflect each European power till newer ships arrived and spilled their nationalities, some of whom stayed and intermarried [...]’ (1993: 54). Effectively, as a site of cultural encounters and a testing ground for the Western reader’s perception of Ceylon as the cultural Other, *Running in the Family* operates as an endeavour to translate the reality of colonial Ceylon and today’s Sri Lanka into a Canadian narrative, the past into present, absence into presence, gossip into fact, the private into the public and vice versa. The formal convergence of the visual with the verbal, which creates the problem of the *image-text*, reflects the network of interlocking ideological relations that attenuate the narrator’s (and by extension, readers’) access to the discursive territory of what today is Sri Lanka.

The ambiguity of the translating act as simultaneously constitutive of *confusion*, *transmission* and *production* (Godard 2003: 87) may account for the numerous critical observations about Ondaatje’s complicity in the exoticising of Ceylon/Sri Lanka. The narrator’s collection of intertextual (and intermedial) traces against which his own discourse is measured is suggestive of his Trickster-like approach to storytelling. His interest in myth and gossip may be linked to the figure of *thalagoya*, a Sri Lankan sub-aquatic monitor: ‘The thalagoya has a rasping tongue that “catches” and hooks objects. There is a myth that if a child is given thalagoya tongue to eat he will become brilliantly articulate, will always speak beautifully, and in his speech be able to “catch” and collect wonderful, humorous information’ (1993: 61). The thalagoyan tongue seems to provide a metaphor for the narrator’s own narrative technique, keen as he is on ‘catching’ stories and ‘captivating’ his reader with verbal and visual ‘marvels’. Not least among these are mysterious tales about people and wildlife:

After my father died, a grey cobra came into the house. My stepmother loaded the gun and fired at point blank range. The gun jammed. She stepped back and reloaded but by then the snake had slid out into the garden. For the next month this snake would often come into the house and each time the gun would misfire or jam, or my stepmother would miss at absurdly short range. The snake attacked no one and had a tendency to follow my younger sister Susan around. (1993: 81)

Grandmother Lalla is similarly described as linked to Nature: ‘My grandmother died in the blue arms of a jacaranda tree. She could read thunder’ (1993: 93). Arguably, the aura of mystery that is placed around the narrator’s relatives, especially his grandmother and his father, contributes in no small measure towards our mystification of the whole of Sri Lanka (as well as colonial Ceylon), complicating our perception of its cultural universe on its own terms. As Huggan aptly notes, Ondaatje’s travelogue taps into Western sensibility and he ‘heightens the effect by drawing on the estranging force of the European exotic’ (1996: 121).

However, the book’s exoticist appeal is not without ambivalence, which comes as a result of the complexity of cultural translation the expatriate consciousness is engaged in. Notably, the narrator himself partakes of the psychological discomfort and ironic ambiguity that seems to characterise his oscillating experience of transculturation: ‘I am the foreigner. I am the prodigal who hates the foreigner’ (1993: 65). His dilemma is reinforced in an episode where Sinhalese actors playing Arthurian characters are photographed in the house of a former Prime Minister:

While we eat, an amateur theatre group from Colombo which is producing *Camelot* receives permission to be photographed on the grounds. The dream-like setting is now made more surreal by Sinhalese actors wearing thick velvet costumes, pointed hats, and chain mail in this terrible May heat. A group of black knights mime festive songs among the peacocks and fountains. Guinevere kisses Arthur beside the tank of Australian fish. (1993: 134)

The theatrical nature of this ekphrastic photo strangely recalls the photographic illustrations of Alfred Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* that Julia Margaret Cameron produced in 1874. An iconic example of Victorian photography, Cameron’s work shows, in Gregory Currie’s view, that photo images need not necessarily be limited to empirical sources, in fact, they ‘are capable of representing unreal things’ (2008: 266). For Currie, what characterises Cameron’s Arthurian photographs is the effect of *representational dissonance* resulting from a clash between the intended and the actual effect of representation. A similar dissonance stabs at us in Ondaatje’s verbal description, where the displacement of Sinhalese actors into Arthurian legend results in ‘mimicry’ (Bhabha 1994: 86) that both

sustains and challenges the tokens of imperial presence in Ondaatje's Sri Lanka. This goes in hand with the double bind of the narrative of *Running in the Family*, in which pictorial discourse exposes its technology of recollection as both reliant on historical factuality and keen on assembling specimens of mystery and marvel.

Currie's idea of *representational dissonance* invites a link to what Roland Barthes in his *Camera Lucida* calls *punctum* (1982: 27), the unintended feature of the photograph that 'wounds' the spectator. The ironies and ambiguities of Ondaatje's narrative may be seen in a similar light as the book unfolds its attempt to present a portrait or 'gesture'. The interaction we establish between the visual and the verbal media raises questions about whose portrait the book attempts to depict: the narrator's lost father? his grandmother? the whole family? community? country? or narrator himself? Here, we are made aware of how photography, like memory, hides as well as reveals. This ironic doubleness is what, in Barthes's view, constitutes the madness of the photograph: 'The Photograph then becomes a bizarre medium, a new form of hallucination: false on the level of perception, true on the level of time: a temporal hallucination, so to speak, a modest, shared hallucination (on the one hand "it is not there", on the other "but it has indeed been"): a mad image, chafed by reality' (1982: 115). In this respect, it is as if Ondaatje's verbal account borrows from the photographic 'madness' to emphasise its own ambivalent nature.

What *Running in the Family* seems to highlight is that viewing (perception, in general) is tantamount to writing and reading (i.e. interpretation). Throughout the text, visual discourse sets up both a projection of the socio-cultural universe the narrator perceives and a prism through which we read the world of the book. Thus the book's concern for the 'sensibility' of reading, it seems to me, unfolds through the convergence of two modes of seeing, *projective* and *prismatic*. I have borrowed Fiorentini's terms, which describe the visual modalities of *camera obscura* and *camera lucida* respectively. Fiorentini shows that while both devices were used in the nineteenth century to survey land and represent it in drawing as based on the "'principle of conformity" between representation and territory' (2006: 16), *camera obscura* operated as a substitute for the eye, projecting a fixed view of the scene as 'captured' by the 'dark box', whereas *camera lucida* worked as an extension of the eye, allowing for a more flexible and accurate perspective on the scene observed. Effectively, both *camera obscura* and *camera lucida* functioned as devices of (visual) translation of the real into the pictorial, yet, '[...] the perspective of the Camera Lucida was instantaneous, intuitive, and more closely related to the observer's perception and the circumstances of observation rather than to the capacities of the instrument he or she used' (2006: 29). The mode of *projective* seeing, therefore, is rooted in its dependence on the authority of discourse that works as a 'seeing machine' and produces representations that are in essence artificial. *Prismatic* seeing, on the other hand, 'corresponds to the naked eye's perception of the natural object'

(2006: 33) and relies on the idea that visual impressions are “translated” onto paper while critically examining the momentary perceptual data’ (2006: 34). In other words, the distinction between the two optical experiences lies in the degree of critical reflection on the means of translating perception, which is then accepted as objective reality.

Ambivalent as it is, Ondaatje’s text oscillates between the two modes of seeing, thus complicating our perception of Sri Lankan cultural and historical reality. On the one hand, there is the projective violence of the false maps, historical testimonies and documented gazes of numerous Western artists who visited Ceylon; on the other hand, there is the critical force of Sri Lankan poetry, song, and gossip, which challenges the authority of ‘imperial eyes’. At the same time, though, gossip may also be linked to the optical effect of curved surfaces attributed to *camera obscura* and its impaired vision, in that it is also selective in the registering of perception. Yet, seeing as Ondaatje is conscious of his own transcultural identity and the traps of memory, gossip seems to elucidate the historical script as a projection of the *camera obscura* that was imperial discourse. As it is, then, the photographs in *Running in the Family* are the discursive terrain on which *projective* and *prismatic* seeing converge, which is why they are emblematic of the book’s transcultural footprint. For Ondaatje, as for Sontag, photos ‘are a grammar and even more importantly, an ethics of seeing’ (1979: 3). Both silent and articulate, native and colonial, factual and fictional, the photos in Ondaatje’s book awaken us to the need of what Nancy calls an ‘oscilloscopic’ (2005: 74) vision, a critical re/examination of different perspectives, *projective* as well as *prismatic*, so as to appreciate the complexity of transcultural spaces.

As Ondaatje’s travelogue explores the phenomenology of return to one’s cultural roots, it also problematises the media it employs, to the extent that the book operates as an *oscilloscopic machine*, where ‘the distinction between text and image is virtually effaced’ (2005: 74). By putting cultural memory, as it were, ‘in the lens’, pictorial structures in Ondaatje’s narrative foreground the course of reading as a constant encounter with the Other, a form of translation, where meaning emerges from the intersection of disparate media forms as well as cultural and historical narratives. In this respect, then, Ondaatje’s *Running in the Family* unfolds its transcultural concerns through the scope of its oscilloscopic aesthetics and elucidates the obscurity of discursive practices that sustain the vehicle of memory and our modes of perception.

## References

- Appadurai, Arjun. 2008. 'How Histories Make Geographies: Circulation and Context in a Global Perspective.' Paper presented at the opening ceremony of the Cluster of Excellence 'Asia and Europe in a Global Context' at Heidelberg University, October 20.
- Barthes, Roland. 1982. *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Bhabha, Homi. 1994. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Bolton, Matthew. 2008. 'Michael Ondaatje's "Well-Told Lie". The Ethical Invitation of Historiographic Aesthetics.' *Prose Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 3: 221-242.
- Currie, Gregory. 2008. 'Pictures of King Arthur: Photography and the Power of Narrative.' *Photography and Philosophy. Essays on the Pencil of Nature*, edited by Scott Walden. Victoria: Blackwell Publishing: 265-283.
- Fiorentini, Erna. 2006. 'Camera Obscura vs. Camera Lucida – Distinguishing Early Nineteenth Century Modes of Seeing.' Retrieved from Preprint 307, Max Planck Institut fur Wissenschaftsgeschichte: 1-38.
- Foucault, Michel. 2008. *This is Not a Pipe*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Godard, Barbara. 2003. 'Translation Poetics, from Modernity to Post-Modernity.' In *Translation Translation*, edited by Susan Petrilli. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi: 87-99.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. 1991. *Marvelous Possessions. The Wonder of the New World*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Huggan, Graham. 1996. 'Exoticism and Ethnicity in Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*.' In *Writing Ethnicity: Cross-cultural Consciousness in Canadian and Québécois Literature*, edited by Winfried Siemerling. Toronto: ECW Press: 116-127.
- Marinkova, Milena. 2011. *Michael Ondaatje. Haptic Aesthetics and Micropolitical Writing*. London: Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Mitchell, W.J.T. 1994. *Picture Theory*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc. 2005. *The Ground of the Image*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Ondaatje, Michael. 1993. *Running in the Family*. Toronto: M&S.
- Papayanis Adler, Marilyn. 2005. *Writing in the Margins. The Ethics of Expatriation from Lawrence to Ondaatje*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press.
- Pratt, Mary Louise. 2003. *Imperial Eyes: Transculturation and Travel Writing*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Quiazon, Regina Maria. 2006. *Mural Visions: Viewing Histories in the Works of Michael Ondaatje*. Phd. diss., Victoria University.
- Rundstrom, Robert. 1991. 'Mapping, Postmodernism, Indigenous People and the Changing Direction of North American Cartography.' *Cartographica*, Vol. 28, No. 2: 1-12.
- Sontag, Susan. 1979. *On Photography*. London: Penguin Books.