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“BLACK SPACE IS TIME:” INTERMEDIALITY, NARRATIVE, AND COMMUNITY IN MICHAEL ONDAATJE

This essay proposes to explore some aspects and implications of intermediality in three novels by Michael Ondaatje. I shall mostly refer to *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987) and *The English Patient* (1992), and, more limitedly, to *Divisadero* (2007). I wish to suggest that Ondaatje's work displays an open thematization, as well as a diegetic and stylistic use, of other media. In visual terms, it engages drawing, painting, sculpture, and photography. In broader, not exclusively visual terms, it also bears traces of voice and sound, by means of a literary rendition of music and systems of sonic reproduction, such as the radio and other (mostly analog) devices. Moreover, Ondaatje repeatedly highlights the non-coincidence between voice and body, thematizing theatrical impersonation and employing authorial techniques involving voice-over and ventriloquism. Crucially, Ondaatje does not merely thematize other media; to the contrary, he opens up his writing style and structure to the reverberating “presence” of the “other” code, as I shall attempt to exemplify in what follows. Due to the space limitations of a single essay, I shall restrict my focus to the intermedial dialogue involving literature and two visual codes, i.e. painting and photography. Finally, in the last part of the essay, I shall offer some tentative reflections on how Ondaatje's intermedial thematic and stylistic choices relate to the ethical and political dimensions of his work.

The concept of *intermediality* and the critical debate around it have gained momentum and visibility for the past two decades, especially in Germanophone and Anglophone academic environments.¹ Within the context of a discussion of intermediality, it may be somehow surprising, or even disappointing, that the texts under consideration completely “remain,” in terms of the medium they recognizably use, within the realm of literary fiction, i.e. of the written/printed word. On the other hand, while the study of intermediality is clearly informed by critical discourses developed within non-literary or only marginally literary fields – such as, for instance, Media Studies and Cultural Studies – it is actually possible, as Irina O. Rajewski has argued, to approach intermediality from a literary perspective. From the point of view of literary criticism, the difference between an “intermedial” approach and previous approaches – based on putatively more “literary” concepts such as the idea of intertextuality, or on thematic criticism – is to be found in a distinctive attention to the specific means/techniques/formal characteristics of each medium, or “medial system,” and how these specificities can be translated into other media – hence the term ‘intermediality’ (*Intermedialität*). According to Rajewski,

a given media product cannot use or genuinely reproduce elements or structures of a different medial system through its own media-specific means; it can only evoke or imitate them. Consequently, an intermedial reference can only generate *an illusion of another medium's specific practices*. And yet it is precisely this illusion that potentially solicits in the recipient of a literary text, say, a sense of filmic, painterly, or musical qualities, or – more generally speaking – a sense of a visual or acoustic presence. (Rajewski 2005, 55; my emphasis)

Perhaps because I also come from a literary background, I am especially interested in how *literary narrative* can be inflected by other codes and media. In this essay, I regard my case studies as examples of (*literary*) *intermedial storytelling*. This implies that I shall be paying special attention to the enunciative and temporal dimension that I consider intrinsic to, if not all, at least *most* narrative acts. In my view, the selected works by Ondaatje that I shall be tackling testify to their author's conception of (literary) narrative as a modus that

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¹ For some selected studies on intermediality, see Wolf 1999; Bolter and Grusin 2000; Rajewski 2002; 2005; 2010; Paech and Schröter 2008; Grishakova and Ryan 2010; Breitbart 2012.



involves both the written word and other arts, including visual codes of communication and expression. While one of the aims of intermedial criticism may be devising critical instruments for an investigation of media *in general* – paying attention to the intrinsic, unrepeatable features of each medium – it seems to me that an intermedial perspective is perhaps more productive for an approach to individual creative materials (including Ondaatje's) if and when it does *not* crystallize into a definition of the intrinsic characteristics of a medium – mostly to be identified, in this case, with a specific technology and/or technological apparatus that will tend to appeal to certain sensory channels. To the contrary, I would embrace the opportunity for reflection opened by “the ability of individual works to expand the expressive potential of their medium by revealing possibilities that had remained so far unexploited. An example of this [...] is the creative uses of visual elements, such as photographs, maps, and sketches in recent novels” (Grishakova and Ryan 2010, 2). Those “unexploited possibilities,” it seems to me, are not necessarily “external imports” from another code or technology; they are, in principle, as “native” to a visual code as to a written one. The encounter of literary writing with other media has these intrinsic yet previously underexploited possibilities coalesce and emerge as historical facts of style.

I shall now begin circumscribing the terms of a possible triangulation involving literature, painting, and photography, and how this triangulation can spark a reflection on narrative and time. In their 2010 edited collection *Intermediality and Storytelling*, Marina Grishakova and Marie-Laure Ryan have, for instance, attempted to sort out the (inevitably plural) narratological relevance of a dialogue among different media. While we may tend to associate images (including artistically crafted ones such as paintings and art photographs) with “stasis” – in both a spatial and a temporal sense – pictures are not necessarily to be regarded as static. Jan Baetens and Mieke Bleyen (2010) have, for instance, challenged the idea that photographs, including single snapshots, cannot be read narratively in a rigorous and convincing fashion. Moreover, one only has to think of how Mieke Bal has repeatedly engaged and successfully demonstrated, during the past two decades, the narrative power of images.² Offering convincingly narrative readings of visual artifacts, Bal's work repeatedly questions the deeply ingrained idea that visual art forms such as painting, photography, and sculpture are essentially non-narrative because they are “still.” In *Quoting Caravaggio* (1999), Bal reads the great Italian artist's painting *Resurrection of Lazarus*, wherein, she observes, light travels from left to right of the canvas and *visually condenses two moments in time* – Jesus' arm gesture and its effect on Lazarus's corpse – thus also making pictorial representation explicit:

Light is the “discourse” of representation [...]. The light travels from left to right, stopping on glistening bodies and spotting faces, but principally on pieces of fabric, like as many stations of the cross, until it accompanies Lazarus's hand downwards, where it ends as a marker of the skull that [Louis] Marin construes as representative of the viewer. The figure drops it in response to the gesture made by Jesus' arm [...]. As Marin aptly proposes, the temporal conflation of Jesus' performative gesture and Lazarus's response to it [...] constitute this picture's narrativity [...]. (Bal 1999, 49-50)

Caravaggio's art, in other words, does not abide by the unity of space and time established by Renaissance art: to the contrary, it is imbued with *narrative* and *temporal* value.

At least three previous critical approaches to Ondaatje's novel *In the Skin of a Lion* (Sarris 1991; Ingelbien 1995; Simmons 1998) have tended to focus on its intense visual quality, especially in the sense of repeated gestures towards painting. Not coincidentally, of course, a character named Caravaggio is present in both *In the Skin of a Lion* and *The English Patient* – and he also resurfaces, albeit nameless, in *Divisadero*. All three novels can be regarded as “Caravaggesque,” playing out the “light vs. darkness” opposition as a sequence of scenes taking place in dark spaces that are “suddenly” illuminated by a visible cone/source of light, as it happens in many of Caravaggio's paintings. The following examples are two excerpts from *In the Skin of a Lion*:

² See Bal 1996, 1997, 1999, and 2009.



He could not see her face at all, just the hem of her skirt at her knees where the light bounced as she crouched. (Ondaatje 1988, 193)

She steps into the half-lit kitchen and her bare arms pick up light. He catches the blink of her earrings. (204)

And the following one is from *Divisadero*:

The ochre color of the lamp came through the trees like lit a vessel being carried over the sea. [...] The lamp hung from her fingers beside her dress. [...] As if they knew that darkness was also a liquid, and just one uttered work thrown out would ripple back to the house. (Ondaatje 2008, 261)

In Ondaatje, the encounter of many arts and codes in the “cave” of literary narrative intermittently brings to the foreground the almost intrinsically constant intertwinement of light and darkness in the physical world – substantiated in, and shaped by, the author’s engagement with both painting and photography, including his use of both “pictorial” and “photographic” writing techniques. If light and darkness engage in interplay, it must be possible to distinguish between them, at least at some level of inquiry; on the other hand, they are also shown to be indispensable to each other. There are, it seems to me, at least two possible configurations of the light/darkness interplay which traverse Ondaatje’s oeuvre. On the one hand, light and darkness mirror each other as extreme poles which blend, in concrete, in infinite shades of grey, mirroring a photographic process. On the other hand, darkness surrounds, in a Caravaggesque fashion, pools of light illuminating fleeting moments in time; the latter configuration is also, to an extent, *ante litteram* photographic – if we regard photography, in Henri Cartier-Bresson’s fashion, as an “art of the moment” – and as a medial act that (quite literally) “writes with light.”

At the same time – and this is crucial to my argument – what should be emphasized in reading Ondaatje is the complex *temporal quality* of the dark spaces inevitably surrounding the moments of light. Conceiving of light and darkness in terms of reciprocity, in constant shift and exchange, may as well be, I would suggest, alternative to a more “traditional” narratological approach, one emphasizing the well known dialectics between “showing” and “telling.” Gestures towards media and codes and communication that are “other” from literary fiction may be regarded not so much as moments of intermission or stasis as of, instead, *pregnant suspension* in the flow of a narrative movement (mostly, or *materially*) brought about by words. Intermedial gestures are demonstrated, within these texts’ logics, to be necessary to the very possibility of *narration*, to its onward movement in space and time. At the same time, these gestures always entail a level of, so to speak, *fecund invisibility*. As it will hopefully be clarified from what follows, “fecund invisibility” can refer to both the possibility of a future and, in a “Benjaminian” fashion, to the excavation of a dark(ened) past – which, on the other hand, does *not* become any *less dark* for having been recuperated.

Originally published in 1987, *In the Skin of a Lion* centers on Patrick Lewis, born and raised in a wild and unnamed Eastern Ontario region. A young man in the 1920s, he moves to Toronto and makes contact with the city’s population of immigrant workers in construction – among them, those who are building the Bloor Viaduct bridge connecting the western and eastern portions of the city. Over the years, he falls in love with two women and together with the second of them, Alice, he becomes involved in the workers’ radical political activities. After Alice’s tragic death, with the help of David Caravaggio, an Italian immigrant worker-turned-thief, Patrick sets up dynamite (a skill he learned from his father) in the water filtration plant he had contributed to build on an inadequate salary, and confronts his class enemy – powerful Commissioner Harris – with a blasting-box in his hand. The two talk in the dark until Harris realizes that Patrick has fallen asleep. While Patrick has clearly been on the verge of committing an unlawful and violent act, Harris does not have him arrested.

In the Skin of a Lion openly embeds all five human senses, their activity, and their function as channels of communication; disparate senses often inhabit the “distilled” space of a cluster of sentences, or even of a single sentence. In one of the initial pages, for instance, sight, touch, and hearing are all conjured up because of the presence of moths clinging to the kitchen window where twelve-year-old Patrick stands, looking out into the summer night:



The kitchen *light radiates* through their *porous* wings; even those that are squat [...] appear to be constructed of *powder*. Patrick pulls a double-ocarina from his pocket. Outside he will not waken his father, the *noise* will simply drift up into the arms of soft maple. Perhaps he can haunt these creatures. Perhaps they are not mute at all, it is *just a lack of range in his hearing*. (Ondaatje 1988, 10; my emphasis)

In a scene at the end of Part One, when Patrick is still a boy, stylistic Caravaggism accompanies and underlines his enlivening sensation of encountering complete strangers, and his willingness to overcome the boundaries that have defined his life so far. The distant vision of dots of light that will be revealed to emanate from cattail torches held by skating loggers – seasonal workers who live in shantytowns near the area where Patrick and his father homestead – makes Patrick suddenly go into “the familiar woods as if walking into, testing the rooms of a haunted house. [...] Skating the river at night, each of them moving like a wedge into the blackness magically revealing the grey bushes of the shore, *his shore, his river*” (Ondaatje 1988, 21; emphasis in the original). To Patrick, his own familiar environment has suddenly become *unheimlich*, but this is positively connoted as “benign,” “joyous” (ibid.). This scene is narrated as the moment when a seed is planted that will remain with Patrick, bearing fruit in him and anticipating his future movements and acts of bordercrossing. The wedges of light, cutting the darkness like arrows, create movement and reverberations across space, in contrast to the circular light created by the lamp in the kitchen, where Patrick had previously waited for the world to come to him, reading maps and waiting for the insects to cling to the windowpane. This contrast between two different uses of the light is remindful of the use of light in Caravaggio’s paintings in contrast with those by Flemish seventeenth-century painter Matthias Stomer. While the light in Stomer radiates from a center around which the scene is built, in Caravaggio, especially in the final years of his activity, light is much more dynamic, dramatic, and *narrative*. It may be suggested that Ondaatje intermedially grafts onto Caravaggio’s intrinsically “intermedial” potential, thus further blurring the boundaries between what is deemed to be (intrinsically) literary versus what is purportedly (intrinsically) pictorial.³

I shall now consider a conspicuous case of photographic ekphrasis in *In the Skin of a Lion*, which openly gestures towards material medial objects – in this case, really existing photographs – outside of the novelistic fictive world. Book Two of the novel contains a description of some photos by American photographer Lewis Hine, known for shooting work scenes and portraits, especially of child workers. While Hine’s photos are “present” in the text in the sense that they are ‘ekphrastically’ translated into words, we are crucially told that “Patrick would never see the great photographs of Hine, as he would never read the letters of Joseph Conrad. Official histories, news stories surround us daily, but the events of art reach us too late, travel languorously like messages in a bottle” (Ondaatje 1988, 145-46).⁴ One may here claim that Hine’s photos are of no diegetic importance, and that their presence is merely a token of Ondaatje’s lyrical, poetic language (“art”) in the midst of diegesis. Or, conversely, we may speculate that often, in Ondaatje, crucially narrative moments, sparked through intermediality, do not necessarily occur in illuminated spaces, but can, instead, also *occur into darkness, and resurface at unexpected moments*. In a case like the one quoted above, literature accompanies/complements/accommodates photography in two possible ways: literary narrative can make space for the medium of photography so that photos “emerge” across the time-lag of

³ This triple intermedial “conversation” involving literary narrative, painting, and photography may be regarded – to use Bolter and Grusin’s influential term – as an instance of “remediation:” if, according to Bolter and Grusin (2000), new media appropriate – i.e. “remediate” – the intrinsic features of older ones, Caravaggio may be regarded as remediating a narrative power often associated with words, and photography may be regarded as “remediating,” in its technologically based use of light and darkness, the dramatic potential of painting.

⁴ The concept of the *event* has been variously tackled by many twentieth and twenty-first century philosophers – such as Martin Heidegger, Alain Badiou, Gilles Deleuze, and Jean-Luc Nancy. For Nancy, “[t]he event is not an episode; it is, if it is at all necessary to say that it is, that it be [*qu’il y ait*] – that is, that there be something, something different than the indeterminacy [*indifference*] of Being and nothingness [...]. The event indicates what has to be thought at the very heart of becoming, pointing to it as something more deeply withdrawn and more decisive than the ‘passage-into’ to which it is ordinarily reduced” (Nancy 2000, 163).



(unofficial) history, as exemplified by the previous quotation; or, conversely, literary narrative can become photographic, absorbing the stylistic features of photography.

One of these stylistic features is, it seems to me, photography's peculiar relationship with time. Julia Breitbach has offered a very interesting "photographic" reading of *Divisadero*, claiming that this novel works according to a *chronophotographic* principle. In chronophotography, the unfolding of time is either rendered through a very tight sequence of shots able to capture temporal progression at very close intervals, or, by contrast, by the superimposition of several photo-impressions – corresponding to different moments in time – in a single spatial frame. Especially in the latter case, "[t]ime, as a concept of linear progression, is suspended [...] and folds back on itself" (Breitbach 2012, 184). Similarly to what Bal writes about Caravaggio's *Resurrection of Lazarus*, the temporal density of the picture is also seen as charged with a meta-discursive, meta-stylistic value: Breitbach assimilates the chronophotographic logic in Ondaatje's literary narrative to a gesture in which *style itself becomes explicit*, like "a metaphor of a metaphor" (Breitbach 2012, 167).

Time itself becomes visible: it may be argued that Ondaatje highlights the co-presence of different temporalities – some slower, some faster –, different threads of time in the limited space of a framed scene. And I would suggest that it is especially in this respect that Ondaatje's literary narrative can be regarded as photographic – namely, in its reclaimed, perhaps previously underexploited possibility to tune itself to another time, letting the dark(ened) parts of another time seep into the words, granting them power. While Breitbach mainly discusses *Divisadero*, it seems to me that the temporal friction between, so to speak, the "time of the word" and the "time of the image"⁵ also emerges in *In the Skin of a Lion*:

A chain was pulled that forced wet steam into the room so that their bodies [bodies of workers from the abattoir and tannery on Cypress Street in Toronto] were separated by whiteness coming up through the gridded floors, tattoos and hard muscles *fading into unborn photographs*. (Ondaatje 1988, 136; my emphasis)

In narratological terms, the interplay of light and dark is germane to a peculiar narrative style, in which *darkness is not a blockage to the flow of information* – neither in terms of information exchanged among the characters, nor in terms of narrative information flowing from the text to its readers. In *The English Patient*, David Caravaggio, the thief – and Patrick's friend – from *In the Skin of a Lion*, is in Italy, working as a spy for the Allies during WWII. He knows that a woman, a German officer's mistress, has accidentally photographed him during a social event, and he sets out in the night to retrieve the camera and destroy the film. He enters a dark room where the woman and her lover are having sex; in spite of walking noiselessly, Caravaggio is suddenly made conspicuous by a car beam entering the room from a window, and he realizes that the woman has seen him. The moving light of the car beam becomes the momentary medium for sending a message across darkness:

He hears the car turning and waits for another moment of light. The face that emerges out of the dark is [...] an arrow upon him. The light moves from her face down onto the body of the general, over the carpet, and then touches and slides over Caravaggio once more. He can no longer see her. He shakes his head, then mimes the cutting of his throat. The camera is in his hands for her to understand. Then he is in darkness again. He hears a moan of pleasure now from her towards her lover, and he is aware it is her agreement with him. (Ondaatje 1996, 37)

In *In the Skin of a Lion*, when he confronts him with the blasting-box, Patrick has Commissioner Harris turn off the light: "He had been drowning in Harris' eyes and sleepy hand-movements, felt hypnotized [...] Without light he felt more awake, discerning shapes" (Ondaatje 1988, 236). This act resonates with Patrick siding with the workers, those who attempt to articulate an alternative history from dark spaces and times. While paying attention to the Caravaggism of *In the Skin of a Lion*, Raphaël Ingelbien has discussed Ondaatje's overall historiographic (perhaps, one may specify with Linda Hutcheon's categories in mind, postmodern

⁵ The theoretical (and stylistic) problem of the relationship between words and images is too broad to be tackled in this essay; for two authoritative approaches to it, see Mitchell 1986 and 1994.



historiographic) operation – one, it may be maintained, Ondaatje would further develop in later works, among which *The English Patient*. Ingelbein remarks that “light allows past events/lives to be integrated into history” (1995, 33). He aptly quotes a passage from *In the Skin of a Lion* in which what stays in the dark is explicitly connoted as “unhistorical” (Ondaatje 1988, 172). While acknowledging Ingelbein’s valuable insight in linking Ondaatje’s Caravaggism to the creation of an “alternative history,” I would rather suggest that the “dark backdrop” is actually fundamental for narratively connecting the illuminated frames: “[b]lack space is time” (Ondaatje 1988, 35); “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” (Ondaatje 1988, 143).

Time is willingly suspended – or better, willingly *forgotten* – in a scene from the final pages of *The English Patient*, in which Kirpal Singh – nicknamed “Kip” – and his unity of sappers are in Naples in the month of October 1943. In a partly historical, partly fictional reconstruction, Ondaatje imagines uncertainty as to whether the city has been mined by the Germans and will blow up in flames:

On the twentieth of October, three days before electricity was to be restored, a German turned himself in. He told authorities that there were thousands of bombs hidden in the harbour section of the city that were wired to the dormant electrical system. When power was turned on, the city would dissolve in flames. He was interrogated more than seven times, in differing stages of tact and violence – at the end of which the authorities were still uncertain about his confession. This time an entire area of the city was evacuated. [...] By dusk on the evening of October 22, 1943, only twelve sappers remained behind. (Ondaatje 1996, 276)

Exhausted, instead of leaving with the other sappers, Kip walks into the (really existing) 14th century church of San Giovanni a Carbonara and waits there for electricity to be restored. The scene is constructed as a tableau – thus emphasizing a *momentary* stillness – wherein the artistic and human element merge harmoniously:

He enters that corner of the church now, with the terracotta figures painted the colour of white humans. The scene depicts a bedroom where a woman is in conversation with an angel. [...] When he steps forward into the room he realizes everything is larger than life. His own head is no higher than the shoulder of the woman. The angel’s raised arm reaches fifteen feet in height. Still, for Kip, they are company. [...]

He has been up all night on a final search for caches of dynamite and time cartridges. Walls will crumble around him or he will walk through a city of light. At least he has found these parental figures. He can relax in the midst of this mime of conversation. [...]

At her feet the small Indian sapper, in uniform, beside the six slippers. *There seems to be no time here*. Each of them has selected the most comfortable of positions to *forget time*. *So we will be remembered by others*. [...] The tableau now, with Kip at the feet of the two figures, suggests a debate over his fate. The raised terra-cotta arm a *stay of execution*, a promise of some great future for this sleeper, childlike, foreign-born. (Ondaatje 1996, 279-81; my emphasis)

The tableau is the visual/narrative correlative of a momentary lull, a pause in the flow of word narrative. This pause, once again, occurs at the porous frontier between light and darkness. While darkness brings uncertainty and an almost unbearable state of suspension, the element of light epitomizes the alternate possibilities of both safety and complete destruction. The reader is poised at this “stay of execution” that resonates with hopeful as well as apocalyptic implications. Marlene Goldman has read the angel in *The English Patient* against the figure of the Angelus Novus, Paul Klee’s painting famously described by Walter Benjamin. Reading *The English Patient* in a Benjaminian frame of reference, Goldman aptly maintains that

in [*The English Patient*], the discourses of science, art, and religion function as maps that convey crucial knowledge; if properly understood, these maps have the power to forestall disaster [...]. [T]he discourses of science, art, and religion are invested with “chips of Messianic



time” – that is to say, they constitute maps in which are encoded the Utopian, spiritual dreams of past eras. (Goldman 2001, 903; 913)⁶

Significantly, I would add, the positive role of (among else) the arts in hindering the progress of historical destruction is matched – again, it seems to me, in a Benjaminian fashion – by a sense that the tragic, violent quality of the past will forever haunt the present. Accordingly, Ondaatje’s Caravaggism (historically) values darkness as much as light, and his photographic ekphrasis resonates (as remarked above) with “unborn” photos – those that, for historical reasons that have to do with the unequal distribution of power, were never taken.

Published in 2007, *Divisadero* emphasizes the palpable quality and paradoxical importance of darkness as well as blindness for the functioning of the narrative. For the purpose of my argument, I shall briefly summarize its plot and structure in what follows.

The novel is divided in three parts. Part One follows the lives of Anna, Claire, and Coop. When Anna’s mother dies in childbirth, her father brings the infant home together with another girl, Claire, born of another deceased mother in the same hospital during the same week. The girls grow up like twins on their father’s farm in Petaluma, California; they also grow side by side with Coop, the slightly older orphaned son of neighboring farmers, who has been taken in after he witnessed the murder of his parents. The girl’s father raises Coop as a farmhand rather than as a member of the family. After the children have grown up, life on the farm is traumatically disrupted when Anna and Coop, who are having a secret romance, are discovered by the father, who attempts to kill Coop – at which point Anna stabs him with a shard of glass in an attempt to protect the young man.

Years later, Anna is a literary scholar temporarily residing in France, where she is researching the life and work of the writer Lucien Segura. Of all places, Anna is living in the writer’s former house in Dému, Gascony. Claire has instead become a research aid for a defense attorney based in San Francisco. Coop has become a professional cardsharp. Part One concludes by narrating Anna’s romance with Rafael, a French-Romani guitarist and, when a child, an acquaintance of the old Segura; meanwhile, Claire and Coop are brought together again by a fortuitous turn of events.

Part Two and Three literally turn the story on its head, presenting a (non-chronological) narrative the life of Lucien Segura: his meeting Rafael’s wandering family in his old age; his losing his father at four; his life with his mother, his subsequent marriage and fatherhood; WWI; and his triangle with Roman and Marie-Neige, a peasant couple who have moved in the small farmhouse next to where he and his mother live. Lucien befriends Marie-Neige out of a common passion for literature, and eventually has a brief, star-crossed romance with her. When she dies, he celebrates her by “reincarnating” her in the various characters populating his literary world.

While the novel is thematically and stylistic very rich, for the purpose of the present argument, I shall restrict my attention to how it seems to accommodate visual limitations germane to the acts of looking, processing vision, and producing images. For instance, as part of an intensely photographic imagery, the text mentions the stereoscope twice. While the stereoscope is an instrument devised to blend two slightly different pictures together, so that their superimposition can provide a sense of tridimensionality mimicking the stereoscopic quality of human vision, the metaphorical stereoscope in *Divisadero* does not attain a harmonic blend: “there were two indelible versions of Marie-Neige that Lucien had been unable to adjust and combine into one, as if gazing into a flawed stereoscope” (Ondaatje 2008, 226). Lucien himself is the victim of an accident in his youth that deprives him of one eye; in spite of this accident – or perhaps because of it – he will grow up to be a writer. His gift for literary creation seems to come at the cost of partial blindness – or, as Marie-Neige speculates, maybe visual impairment is somehow intrinsic to him:

In spite of their proximity, they had their own lives and separate beliefs. When Marie-Neige reconsidered his accident with the dog, she felt as if that partial blindness must have already

⁶ The presence of benjaminian themes in Ondaatje has been noted by Goldman, as well as by Beverley Curran and Milena Marinkova.



been there in him. For someone so intuitive and empathetic, he was, for instance, unknowing of the true nature of his wife [...]. And he was a dreamer in terms of his compassion, unaware of how the world was knit together unequally, so that the radius of his generosity was short. (Ondaatje 2008, 253-254)

Interestingly, the scope of Lucien's physical vision is, according to Marie-Neige, inversely proportional to his capacity for empathy and compassion. As this quotation exemplifies, while he undoubtedly takes artistry and form very seriously, and while his works display a (typically postmodern) very high level of metatextual and metavisual awareness, Ondaatje also grapples with deeply ethically and politically charged issues, such as the scope and limits of communication, empathy, intimacy, solidarity, and community building – highlighting both the possible scope of a given “community of beings” and the limits thereof. Exchanges among different and often discrete medial codes accompany/reflect/question both the contact and the separation and compartmentalization among selves and subjects of various scales. In the last part of this essay, I wish to reflect on some political and ethical implications of Ondaatje's intermedially inflected literary practice. I would argue that the intermedially significant interplay of light and darkness – wherein, as I have emphasized, darkness takes on a temporal as well as symbolic value – is the visual correlative of an attempt at creating solidarities among distant fellow humans, turning such solidarities into a ground for political action; at the same time, the (re)creation of solidarities and allegiances is never idealized – and its price, in terms of possible estrangement from other subjects, including one's dear ones, is explored in its full poignancy.

The limits of human bonding is a major theme in *The English Patient*. In this novel, Katharine Clifton accuses her lover – the (in)famous Hungarian spy Laszlo de Almásy, who will be later speculated to be the nameless burned man living in the Tuscan villa where the three other main characters also converge – of having “become inhuman [...] You slide past everything with your fear and hate of ownership, of owning, of being owned, of being named” (*TEP*, 238). In *In the Skin of a Lion* – as evident from the very title of the novel – politics and ethics involve actions – including revolutionary violent ones – performed at the frontiers of humanity, sometimes in sharp relief *against* one's humanity: “[e]ach person had their moment when they assumed the *skins of wild animals*, when they *took responsibility for the story*” (157; my emphasis).⁷

In ethical and political terms, my reading of *In the Skin of a Lion* partly diverges from both Ingelbien's – who maintains that, despite its representation of political radicalism, the novel takes distance from “left-wing extremism” (35) – and Fotios Sarris's – who argues that the novel ultimately subscribes to an ethics of (human) compassion as opposed to the blind ideology of revolutionary activism (see Sarris 1991). Significantly, *In the Skin of a Lion* has been criticized by Frank Davey with opposite ideological overtones; Davey maintains that Ondaatje's stance in representing the socially disempowered – workers and immigrants – by artistic means is basically non-revolutionary. To the contrary, he argues, it is intrinsically bourgeois in the sense of being aestheticizing, de-politicizing, and exploitative (see Davey 1993). Reconnecting Benjamin's historical materialism to a much later philosophical elaboration, I would suggest that Ondaatje entwines a discourse on the limits of humanity with a discourse on the continuous re-drawing of the boundaries of the *polis*. Giorgio Agamben's titular argument in *Homo Sacer* (1995) is well known by now: in the ancient Roman legal system, according to Agamben's reconstruction, the *homo sacer* was he or she who could not be put to death within the law; at the same time, he or she could be killed by anybody and this killing would, in no case, qualify as an infringement of the law. To be *homo sacer* is to be conflated with vulnerable, naked life; it is also to be potentially, at any given moment, subjected to violent exclusion from the *polis*, the community of men, and ascribed to a “state of nature” at the borders of civilization. Germane to the functioning of these shifting paradigms of exclusion, the limits between “nature” and “culture,” as well as humaneness and animality, are continuously redrawn.⁸

⁷ The use of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* as an explicit intertext is, in this respect, quite significant.

⁸ Slavoj Žižek has maintained that several (mostly U.S.-based) scholars have redeployed Agamben's *homo sacer* as a figure for expanding the limits of acceptance within a discourse of multiculturalism, “water[ing it] down into an element of a radical-democratic project whose aim is to renegotiate/redefine the limits of in- and exclusion” (Žižek 2002, 98). By contrast, Žižek has claimed that the *homo sacer* should be understood in all its radical potential. In Žižek's reading, the *homo sacer* points to the very unspeakable limits of liberal multiculturalism, limits that concern us all: “in today's ‘post-politics,’ the very democratic public space is a mask concealing the fact that, ultimately, we are all *homo sacer*” (2002, 100).



It seems to me that Ondaatje suggests that situating oneself on the threshold between light and darkness, as well as between words and images, is coterminous to being liminally positioned against, so to speak, the “illuminated backgrounds” of the law, official history, cultural belonging, and humanity. Both walking from darkness into the light and *the other way round* are key to narrative movement, historical recuperation, and political action – an action involving a solidarity that can expand to strangers and/or reveal the limits of empathy with(in) one’s putatively original and/or chosen community. Ondaatje radically re-elaborates the categories of strangeness and familiarity, and he presents various collective bodies as being constantly re-drawn on the basis of ethical and political choices on the part of individuals. Ondaatje’s characters know how to empathize with strangers, and new provisional “families” – like the foursome living in the ruined Tuscan villa in *The English Patient*, or Anna, Claire, and Coop in *Divisadero* – can be created. At the same time, this does not happen idyllically, or in a safe haven sheltered from the cruel reality of politics; to the contrary, these collective bodies are deeply political, and sometimes politics shatters them. Let us also, in this respect, consider the final pages of *The English Patient*. It is August 1945. Kip, the Indian Sikh sapper serving in the British Army, has planted his tent in the garden of a ruined Tuscan villa, gravitating around the postwar international (white) “family of strangers” formed by the nurse Hana (Patrick’s adopted daughter, whom we encounter as a child in *In the Skin of a Lion*), the thief-turned-spy David Caravaggio (also from in *In the Skin of a Lion*), and the burned, nameless “English patient” upstairs. This community of four strangers momentarily finding unexpected paths to intimacy while recovering from their respective war traumas (the war in Italy is already over) is suddenly and abruptly destroyed by the news of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Upon learning about this tragedy, Kip leaves in shock, after having almost killed the patient, whom he comes to see as the representative of a cruel and exploitative colonial system – thus breaking, if not a previous harmony, at least a semblance of it. Bruce Robbins (1999) has pointed out that through this abrupt choice – which is made, I would add, on a side of a “color line” – “Kip [...] assents to an alienness that he had earlier refused” (Robbins 1999, 167). At the same time, “[t]he self identification as ‘Asian’ that he acquires, thinking of the victim of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, is larger than national” (ibid.); Kip does not abide by national identity but he still takes on an identity, performing the political gesture of leaving the apparent haven of the villa and taking up a new allegiance. Crucially, Ondaatje is careful to point out the human cost of this re-politicization – the “sadness of geography” which, among else, abruptly terminates Hana and Kip’s romance. The term “the sadness of geography” is found in Hana’s letter to Clara – Patrick’s former lover and the only remaining member of Hana’s “family” – wherein she sadly muses that her father Patrick died alone, burned like the patient, and since she was far away, she could neither cure nor comfort him in his final moments:

He was a burned man and I was a nurse and I could have nursed him. Do you understand the sadness of geography? I could have saved him or at least been with him till the end. I know a lot about burning. How long was he alone with doves and rats? With the last stages of blood and

Stefano Marchesoni remarks that Agamben’s attempts at finding an alternative to the violent appropriation of “naked life” have led him to the idea of “form-of-life:” “[a] life that cannot be separated from its form is a life for which what is at stake in its way of living is living itself” (Agamben 2000, 3). Marchesoni suggests that “the exposition of a form-of-life presupposes an act of parrhesia” (2013, 82), referring to the late work of Michel Foucault and, in particular, to his broad-spectrum research on the meanings of the Greek term *parrhesia*, translatable into French as “franc-parler” and in English as “free speech.” The use of *parrhesia* as discourse presupposes, Foucault argues, a certain type of relationship of the subject to what he says. The enunciating subject speaks (what he considers) the truth, bounds himself to speaking it in the most direct manner; in so doing, he establishes himself as subject and, significantly, he takes on the risk of facing the consequences of what he says (see Foucault 2005 and 2009). It should be remarked that *parrhesia* as a verbal act and speech quality is reserved, in the ancient and late ancient context considered by Foucault, to free (male) citizens. Moreover, going back to Marchesoni’s reflection, it seems to me that a capital difference between the *homo sacer* and the subject of *parrhesia* (or *parrhesiastes*) lies in the fact that while the former is under a constant death threat because his (naked) life is expropriated, the latter can freely choose to take on a risk, including the threat of death, as a way to (freely) manage his own life. In other words, contrary to what happens for the *homo sacer*, the life of the *parrhesiastes* cannot be isolated, appropriated, and annihilated as naked life.



life in him? [...] He always hated darkness. And he was alone, without lover or kin. (Ondaatje 1996, 296; emphasis in the original)

At the end of *The English Patient*, when a few years have passed since the end of the war, Hana and Kip have become separated by time as well as by geography: one is in Canada, the other in India. The novel envisions them leading separate lives while still thinking of each other; this is stylistically attained by narrating a “superimposition” of events – a glass falling and, at the other end of the earth, a fork being caught mid-falling – which highlights their connection in spite – or through – distance:

And so Hana moves and her face turns and in a regret she lowers her hair. Her shoulder touches the edge of a cupboard and a glass dislodges. Kirpal’s left hand swoops down and catches the dropped fork an inch from the floor and gently passes it into the fingers of his daughter, a wrinkle at the edge of his eyes behind his spectacles. (Ondaatje 1996, 301-02)

This scene is remindful of the already-quoted passage from *In the Skin of a Lion* which suggests that literary characters make sense for their readers – so to speak, they take on flesh – precisely by means of their own non-coincidence with themselves; each character intermittently resurfaces, and appears to have changed, to be different: “[e]ach character had his own time zone, his own lamp” (Ondaatje 1988, 143) – discrete moments in time, brief pools of light surrounded by darkness. This surrounding darkness resonates with the echoes of lights from other “time zones,” as also epitomized in *Divisadero*: “With memory, with the reflection of an echo, a gate opens both ways. We can circle time. A paragraph or an episode from another era will haunt us in the night, as the words of a stranger can” (Ondaatje 2008, 280).

By way of conclusion, I wish to reiterate that, in Ondaatje’s literary narrative, ethical and political decisive moments, wherein responsibility tests the very limits of humanity, are punctuated by the intermedial use of painting and photography, “doubling up” the momentum of word narrative while sustaining it and moving it forward, underlying the different temporalities which compose it. As Fotios Sarris remarks with respect to *In the Skin of a Lion*:

Ondaatje’s tenebristic narrative [...] suggests the vast, unmasterable darkness at the same time that it illuminates it. The darkness is a part of the past, and eternally part of the human condition. In the romances Patrick read as a boy, darkness lay “[o]utside the plot” [...]. In his novel, Ondaatje infuses the darkness into the plot and envelopes his characters in it. The result is an order that is “very faint” but also “very human” [...]. (Sarris 1991)

The logger’s flamboyant movement in the scene from *In the Skin of a Lion* I have quoted above is described as a movement “against the night” (22). The scene of the loggers is “projected” against the “canvas” of the night, like Caravaggio’s painted scenes appear to be projected against a black canvas (Caravaggio’s blackness is, literally, a *darkened background*: as it is well known, Caravaggio re-used canvases by painting them over, thus “erasing” the traces of previous work; on the other hand, the previous layers of painting remain materially present, and previous versions of a given work, or completely different subjects, have been discovered by submitting his canvases to x-ray scrutiny. In this respect, Caravaggio’s paintings are *palimpsests*). “Against” also conveys a dramatic meaning, suggesting that a confrontation is taking place. In Ondaatje’s own terms: “If you’re writing a novel [...] then you’re writing *against* what you know the novel is” (qtd. in Breitbart, 175; emphasis in the original). To an extent, it seems to me, intermediality bears upon the *literary genre of the novel in itself, i.e. in its intrinsic possibilities, but not by itself – i.e., not in isolation* – because it is always in dialogue with other codes and media; this dialogue, on the other hand, is never idealized, and it is shown in its potential as well as in its inevitable moments of friction.

The possibility, for various beings (human as well as nonhuman), events, and medial codes to exist next to each other, without one forcefully assimilating the other, is key to a Benjaminian understanding and claiming of the past from the point of view of historical materialism: “a chronicler who recites events without distinguishing between major and minor ones acts in accordance with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history” (Benjamin 1969, 254). I would suggest that a Benjaminian kind of historical materialism resurfaces in Ondaatje’s intermedial use of light and darkness, in



which darkness is the indispensable space/time wherein the actions of the present resonate and acquire (historical) meaning:

A stone of history skipping over the water, bouncing up so she and he have aged before it touches the surface again and sinks. (Ondaatje 1996, 299).

“Only the best art can order the chaotic tumble of events. Only the best can realign chaos to suggest both the chaos and order it will become.” (Ondaatje 1988, 146; emphasis in the original)

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