Visuality and Trauma in Michael Ondaatje’s
{
\textbf{Anil’s Ghost}\

Supervisors:
Dr. Stef Craps
Ms. Sofie De Smyter

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By Dora Wuyts

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0. Introduction

The Sri Lankan civil conflict, in which the Sinhala majority and Tamil minorities have been fighting each other, has been going on for more than thirty years now. While press attention for the conflict had subsided for a long period, the conflict, which is far from resolved, has recently received renewed attention in the international press. Although news articles touch upon the socio-political effects of the war, literary narratives enable the reader to partake in and learn of the conflict in a different, more dynamic and creative way. In 2000, Michael Ondaatje published a novel that presents a fictional account of the Sri Lankan conflict. This dissertation is an attempt to examine Michael Ondaatje’s trauma narrative *Anil’s Ghost* in the light of the Sri Lankan conflict and focuses on the traumatic experiences of its characters and the relation of these experiences to the visual discourse and metaphors that manifest themselves throughout the literary narrative.

While trauma studies has discussed the functions of the body as a whole in relation to instances of trauma, a discussion of the separate sensory experiences connected to traumatic aspects is still lacking. In this dissertation, I have opted to focus on the sense of vision and to connect its properties, characteristics and workings to aspects of psychic trauma as presented in *Anil’s Ghost*. Michael Ondaatje uses the realm of the visual to engage in a treatment of conflict and trauma that is deeply rooted in human perception and the sensory connection that exists between human beings and reality. Although I occasionally touch upon the workings of the human sensorium in traumatic experiences, I intend to discuss the visual sense staged as a literary device. I have scanned the research that has been done on the relation between the visual and trauma and have discovered that its exploration is generally limited to the realm of the visual or plastic arts. Scholars such as Lisa Saltzman, Eric Rosenberg and Jill Bennett examine the strength and ubiquity of visual imagery in terms of material iconography and representations of trauma:

> We are convinced of the centrality of pictures, of the visual, or, more specifically, artistic production and practice [...]. The formulation of trauma as discourse is predicated upon metaphors of visuality and image as unavoidable carrier of the unrepresentable. From primal scene to flashback to screen memory to the dream, much of the language deployed to speak trauma’s character is
emphatically, if not exclusively, visual. It may even be argued that the very form taken by trauma as a phenomenon is only, however asymptotically or not, understood as or when pictured. The inability to frame trauma in and of itself lends the form almost naturally to a process of visualization as expiation.

(Saltzman and Rosenberg xi –xii)

Saltzman and Rosenberg argue that literature tends to make a distinction between the visual and the verbal while trauma inhabits the space between the two. They claim that, as a result, the realms of art history and art discourse, which unite the visual and the narrative, are best suited to talk about trauma. I have encountered this line of thinking in Bennett’s scholarly work as well. It is worth noting, however, that visual imagery as a literary device is never further explored. I therefore intend to examine the visual metaphor in itself as it occurs in trauma narrative, conjoining the spaces of the visual and the verbal.

It is my intention to present an in-depth analysis of the novel's textual features and narrative strategies, embedded in a theoretical framework. Throughout my research, I have used the novel itself as a basis. The close observation and examination of textual phenomena has led to the formulation of broader assumptions, arguments and conclusions. The subsequent reading of philosophical articles and trauma-theoretical texts has clarified many aspects of the way in which the realm of the visual is implicated in trauma, its study and its narratives. Although the chapters start with a theoretical introduction before engaging in in-depth textual analysis, it is worth bearing in mind that my methodology followed the opposite direction. I have taken Anil’s Ghost as my point of departure and have attempted to establish a theoretical framework in regard to the relation between trauma and categories of visual perception in literary language use that is also more generally applicable to other trauma narratives. This framework draws on trauma-theoretical concepts, discussions and my personal insights.

In what follows, this introduction will further specify significant features and background information that inform my dissertation. For this purpose, I intend to (1) highlight the Sri Lankan conflict in political terms, (2) provide a synopsis of the novel, (3) discuss the author and the position of Anil’s Ghost in his oeuvre, (4) survey the research that has already been done on the novel and (5) briefly examine the general
significance of literature in the representation and treatment of trauma. In order to keep the focus of this dissertation as precise as possible, the analysis itself narrows down the initial discussion of visual discourse and general references to the visual to an examination of visual imagery. Afterwards, vision is taken into the realm of artistic (or inner) vision and insight, which is a specific kind of vision.

In the first chapter, I examine the connection between the realm of the visual and trauma in general. I identify a number of visual characteristics of psychic trauma and discuss these in relation to four scenes from Anil’s Ghost that stage the visual in concrete relation to Sri Lankan traumatic experiences. These scenes include the Sri Lankan disappearances, instances of visual witnessing, the narration of visual memories and the various occurrences of the gaze. The second chapter focuses on the particular use of visual metaphors in trauma theory and narrative, and deals with three eye-catching images from Anil’s Ghost: the darkness, the blue light and the photograph. A careful examination of the functions of these literary devices and strategies in connection to the theoretical framework helps to clarify the way in which the realm of the visual contributes to a productive treatment of trauma and helps to open up the subject matter to new forms of understanding or approaches toward understanding. The last chapter takes the insights produced in the preceding chapters further into the realm of artistic vision. By examining the two projects of reconstruction as containers of artistic vision and articulations of trauma, the discussion connects the realms of inner vision, artistry and imagination to notions such as remembrance and community. In the novel, the conjunction of artistic vision and traumatic recall produces profound moments of personal epiphany and (both inner and collective) regeneration.

0.1 The Sri Lankan conflict

The Sri Lankan political conflict is only present on the periphery of the narrative. However, in order for us to understand the Sri Lankan trauma that informs the experiences of the novel’s characters, it may be useful to provide some background information on the Sri Lankan Civil War. The Sri Lankan war started in 1983 and has been a succession of periods of intense warfare and truces. The two main parties involved are the Sinhala government and the Tamil separatists (known as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) or Tamil Tigers) who want to establish an independent Tamil state on the island. A third party can be added in the form of the
insurgent rebels in the south of the island, a splinter group of the LTTE who likewise fight the government. The tactics of combat have included suicide-bombings, guerrilla warfare and open conflict. These methods have been complemented with mass abductions, recruitment of child soldiers and the use of civilians as human shields. The various sides involved in the conflict have repeatedly been accused of violations of human rights and the Tamil Tigers have been banned in over thirty countries as a terrorist organization.

In March of this year, a government offensive drove the Tamil Tigers from their major strongholds in the north. In the past few weeks, fighting has increased again and one hundred thousand citizens have been evacuated from the strip of coastal land that harbours the remaining Tigers and threatens to become the site of a massive final battle. International organizations fear that the government will launch a final attack without having evacuated the remaining fifty thousand Sri Lankan citizens and warn for a humanitarian disaster. Although the government claims that the conflict is drawing to an end, there can be no doubt that the conflict has left deep humanitarian, social, economic and political scars. Official estimates show that sixty to seventy thousand people have died in the course of the conflict, but it is possible that this number is just the tip of the iceberg. In the light of these recent developments of the Sri Lankan conflict, an examination of Ondaatje’s literary narrative on the conflict appears to be highly topical. Furthermore, the aftermath of the conflict will only increase the need to come to terms with the decades of violence and trauma. According to Dominick LaCapra and Cathy Caruth, literature can play a prominent role in this process (cf. 0.5 Significance of literature in the representation and treatment of trauma).

0.2 Synopsis of Anil’s Ghost

In Anil’s Ghost, Anil Tissera, a UN forensic researcher born in Sri Lanka but educated in the West, returns to her home country to investigate possible murders and civil rights violations committed by the Sri Lankan government. The island suffers from mass abductions, murders and war crimes conducted by all parties. Anil is assigned to work with Sarath Diyasena, an archaeologist who recently discovered four bodies in a government-protected historical site. One of the corpses, nicknamed Sailor, turns out to have been buried only recently. The location of the corpse leads them to suspect a murder ordered by the government. Anil and Sarath embark on a dangerous project, in
which they try to identify and localize the victim, so that it can be used as evidence against the government. They call in the help of Palipana, Sarath’s former teacher, who directs them to Ananda, an artisan who lost his wife in one of the abductions. With his artisanal skills, he reconstructs Sailor’s face, which partly leads to his identification. When Anil presents her evidence to the government, however, it turns out that Sailor’s body has disappeared. Sarath recognizes the danger Anil is in and smuggles her and Sailor out of the building. For this action, Sarath is afterwards killed. After Anil has left Sri Lanka, Ananda is called upon to restore a destroyed Buddha statue and to paint the eyes on a second, new Buddha statue. The novel closes with his contemplations and panoramic view of the island.

0.3 Bio-bibliographical sketch of Michael Ondaatje

Philip Michael Ondaatje was born in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) in 1943 in a privileged family of mixed Burgher, Tamil, and Sinhalese origins. He spent his childhood in Colombo, moved to England with his mother, and finally relocated to Canada, where he became a Canadian citizen (Barbour 1-9). According to Douglas Barbour, Ondaatje returned to Sri Lanka only once or twice, and these journeys formed the background for his novel Running in the Family (1982), which provides a fictional account of his family history. It is in Anil’s Ghost that Ondaatje first engages in a fictional treatment of his homeland and its ongoing civil conflict.

In general, Michael Ondaatje is an extremely versatile artist who explores a plenitude of artistic domains and thematic issues. He can be described as a poet, a novelist, an anthologist and a filmmaker, and the range of his subject matter includes literary, political, cultural, and ethical topics. I will give a brief overview of his poetic, novelistic, cinematic and anthologist works. If we dip into the wealth of his poetic material, we come up with titles such as The Dainty Monsters (1967), The Man with Seven Toes (1969), The Collected Works of Billy the Kid: Left-handed Poems (1970, although there is still no consensus on the question whether this work should be categorized as a novel or a long poem), Rat Jelly (1973), There’s a Trick with a Knife I’m Learning to Do (1979), Secular Love (1984), All Along the Mazinaw: Two Poems (1986), Two Poems, Woodland Pattern (1986), The Cinnamon Peeler: Selected Poems (1989), Handwriting (1998) and The Story (2006). His novelistic work includes the award-winning novels Coming Through Slaughter (1976), Running in the Family (1982), In the
Skin of a Lion (1987), The English Patient (1992), Anil’s Ghost (2000) and Divisadero (2007). As a filmmaker, he was involved in the writing and/or directing of documentaries and films such as Sons of Captain Poetry (1969), Carry on Crime and Punishment (1972), The Clinton Special (1972) and Love Clinic (1990). His editorial and anthologist work is equally extensive. The two main titles to be mentioned here are The Long Poem Anthology (1979) and From Ink Lake: An Anthology of Canadian Short Stories (1990).

Apart from illustrating his versatile artistry, this overview allows us to situate Anil’s Ghost in Ondaatje’s extensive œuvre. In many respects, Anil’s Ghost is embedded in the continuous flow of artistic creativity that is so typical of Michael Ondaatje: the novel is marked by the same poetic strength, perspectival multiplicity, emotional intensity and fragmentation that characterise his major novelistic works. Ondaatje’s work tends to conflate fact and fiction and resists easy categorization. His handling of time displays a movement between flashbacks and flash-forwards. Ondaatje himself does not subscribe to any delineated program, describes his own writing process in terms of spontaneous creativity and frequently includes small personal details into his fiction (paraphrase from Barbour). In Anil’s Ghost, for example, he refers to the college he himself attended in Colombo (St Thomas College, Ondaatje 16). Contributing personal knowledge and details enables Ondaatje to sketch a lively and convincing portrait of his former home country and adds a sense of familiarity and fluency to the narrative. Many critics, however, have remarked that the novel signals a notable break from Ondaatje’s previous works:

The gravity of Ondaatje’s subject in "Anil’s Ghost" is undoubtedly connected to the book’s rhetorical restraint, its psychological gloom and the heightened importance of its plot. Dealing with a contemporary nightmare, Ondaatje lets the story lead. The result is a central plot arc that’s more morally clear-cut (the final twist has an almost Dickensian feeling) and, in purely what-happens-next narrative terms, more satisfying than those in his previous books. (Kamiya)

The fact that the plot is both surveyable and consistent is a major feature that indicates Anil’s Ghost’s deviation from Ondaatje’s other works. Gary Kamiya has addressed other deviant features, which include (1) overall narrative restraint, (2) the fact that the novel is both plot- and character-driven, (3) thematic gravity and (4) the allegedly clear-cut
morality that speaks from the novel and, especially, the novel’s ending. *Anil’s Ghost* thus seems to break away from the characteristics of Ondaatje’s former writing in a number of aspects. What remains, however, is the vigour of his imagery. Ondaatje’s sense for imagery has been described as one of his main strengths: “What Wayne Clifford saw in Ondaatje’s early poems was their sharply etched imagery and the already powerful emotional suggestiveness of his lyric voice” (Barbour 5-6). The focus on imagery in *Anil’s Ghost*, however, is also motivated by Ondaatje’s status as a poet: he understands and knows the power of images and carries them into his prose, which results in his highly acclaimed poetical prose. I will further discuss the strength and function of his imagery in the second chapter of this dissertation.

**0.4 State of the Art**

Before I embark on my analysis of the novel, I will briefly sketch the criticism and research that has already been devoted to *Anil’s Ghost*. Critics have tended to examine and review Ondaatje’s novel from a one-sided perspective, focussing predominantly on the political aspects of the Sri Lankan civil war and the way this conflict is staged in the narrative. In this respect, various critics have dismissed the novel or criticized it for being apolitical¹. Victoria Burrows briefly mentions this one-sided approach, however without complying with it: “The novel has been dismissed for its “irresponsible” apoliticism (LeClair 31) and attacked for the “exhilarating feeling” of its ending, which obfuscates the terror and pain of lost “lives and culture” ruined by civil war by offering the vision of a “permanent cure” through artistic vision (Ganapathy-Doré par. 15).” (162) Although it is true that Ondaatje attempts to steer clear from clear-cut political statements and stances in his writing (Barbour 9), this does not affect the literary value of the novel. Rather, his approach involves a particular perspective on and treatment of the conflict and its possible solutions. By addressing actual problems in an alternative way, he manages to create a space in which both actual problems and transcending questions can be addressed accordingly (Barbour 211).

¹ Marlene Goldman gives a good overview of this line of thinking in her article on the novel (included in Tökösy de Zepetnek’s *Comparative Cultural Studies and Michael Ondaatje’s Writing*. West Lafayette (Ind): Purdue University Press, 2005)
Although the research on Anil’s Ghost is varied, I have opted to make a rough distinction between two strands, so as to provide a comprehensible overview. The first strand consists of researchers who focus on political, cultural, religious or ethical aspects of the novel and occasionally touch upon literary features. These include Victoria Cook, Marlene Goldman, Sandeep Sanghera, Teresa Derrickson, Hilde Staels and Gilian Roberts. It is also worth noting that, although their essays deal with different topics and approach the novel from various angles, their arguments are often interconnected, both through explicit cross-references and thematic points of contact.

In her essay on transnationalism, Cook focuses on questions related to migration, hybridization and identity constructions in a postmodern and postcolonial world. She argues that Anil’s Ghost problematizes the idea of a unified, individual identity and presents identity in terms of a process of construction. Sanghera resumes the theme of identity in her essay on the language of citizenship and focuses on the importance of language for notions of belonging. According to her, the main form of communication in Sri Lanka transcends concrete languages and is based on subtleties. Goldman chooses to discuss Ondaatje’s fusion of Sri Lankan religion, history and politics. She examines the connections between Buddhist references in the novel and the idea of Sinhalese domination and claims that Ondaatje, by staging various references to Buddhism and the image of the quilt, does justice to the intricate political and religious situation and promotes unity through diversity. Roberts reverts back to Goldman’s statements and reinterprets them in his essay on ethical healing. Roberts argues that Ondaatje’s use of the ethical is his suggestion for national healing. He asserts that Anil’s Ghost presents embodiments of healing and hospitality as necessary for the process of national reconstruction. Staels elaborates the notion of the ‘inner stranger’ and claims that Ondaatje disrupts the narrative discourse in order to give expression to the ‘Other’ within the characters’ self, this ‘Other’ being the complex of repressed and unconscious forces within the individual mind. According to her, Ondaatje presents an ethics of love in Anil’s Ghost, which emphasizes the importance of activity and loving encounters with otherness as a way to deal with repressed emotions and experiences. The notion of compassion recurs in Derrickson’s essay on human rights movements. She explains that Anil’s Ghost troubles the widely accepted Western idea that truth about human rights violations is both discoverable and desirable and examines the way in which Ondaatje treats the human rights movements in his novel. The second strand of research consists
of scholars who have moved beyond these contextual aspects and focus more closely on textual aspects of the novel, while predominantly addressing questions that relate to the intermingling of historical documentation and fictional narrative. Sofie De Smyter has examined the ways in which Ondaatje deals with historical documentation in the writing of his narratives, claiming that the ‘ghosts’ of the novel are predominantly unvoiced, marginal stories unearthed by Ondaatje in the course of his narrative.

Burrows develops an argument on the heterotopic spaces of postcolonial trauma, claiming that it is still being viewed from a neo-colonialist perspective. According to her, Ondaatje's turning away from explicit accounts of traumatic experiences is a means to expose the neo-colonialist turning away from postcolonial trauma in general. Furthermore, she emphasizes the need to adapt research perspectives and to address the Sri Lankan trauma on its own terms.

This dissertation will not address Ondaatje’s characteristic mingling of fact and fiction, nor will it elaborate the post-colonial, religious, political or ethical layers of the novel, although these are very much present in the narrative. Opposed to these essays and discussions, I intend to focus on textual aspects and strategies of the novel and to examine the workings of vision as a literary device in close connection to the trauma aspects Ondaatje stages in Anil's Ghost. However, the novel’s various layers are sometimes difficult to separate and political, ethical and religious remarks sometimes simmer through in the course of the discussion.

0.5 Significance of literature in the representation and treatment of trauma

Lastly, I will discuss the general significance of literature in regard to the representation and treatment of trauma. Both Caruth and LaCapra have discussed the special contribution literature and literary narrative can make to the study of trauma. The ability of literary language to complicate understanding and to underline the deficiencies of knowledge and language both in general and in the context of traumatic experiences makes it apt to function as a vehicle for a critical and dynamic treatment of and engagement in the subject matter:

Especially in the recent past, fiction may well explore the traumatic, including the fragmentation, emptiness, or evacuation of experience, and may raise the question of other possible forms of experience. It may also explore in a
particularly telling and unsettling way the affective or emotional dimensions of experience and understanding. (LaCapra 132)

Literary discourse can be interpreted as a mode of language that corresponds to the characteristics of traumatic experience itself in that it moves beyond the established boundaries of our understanding. Furthermore, literature prompts the reader to explore the boundaries of language, knowledge and understanding, to move beyond established frameworks and to engage creatively and imaginatively with new depths of experience: “The purpose of any piece of literature, no matter what culture it was produced in, is to show us something we were previously unaware of. Just as literature is a bridge of connecting a life lived with a life not lived, so, too, all literature that is effective is a voyage into a previously untraveled world” (Larson 65). The articulatory and explorative force of literature especially lies in the workings of literary devices (such as metaphors) and stylistic strategies.

In regard to the use of the visual in metaphors, I have to add a remark by Bennett, who mentions the fundamental discrepancy between the visual and the verbal: “Although words can clearly serve sense memory, vision has a very different relationship to affective experience – especially to experience that cannot be spoken as it is felt.” (35) Although the use of visual metaphors draws on a conjunction of the verbal and the visual, we should keep in mind that this combination of modes contains fundamental discrepancies. Whereas vision stages a direct confrontation with sensation, literary language tries to recreate this through words and verbal descriptions and invariably introduces an element of distance. Let us now take a closer look at the conjunction of the visual and the traumatic as exemplified in the visual discourse of \textit{Anil’s Ghost}. 

1. The importance of visual perception in trauma theory and literature

I will start with a close examination of a theoretical quotation on the subject of psychic trauma, which indicates that the theoretical text in question deals with the realm of the visual, visual perception and visual imagery in describing its approach and subject matter. The works of Caruth, LaCapra, Dori Laub, Henry Krystal and Kalí Tal lend themselves for this purpose, but I have opted to concentrate on the work of Caruth and to pay close attention to her specific use of words and descriptive phrases. In her introduction to *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Caruth describes her subject matter in the following terms:

To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event. And thus the traumatic symptom cannot be interpreted, simply, as a distortion of reality, nor as the lending of unconscious meaning to a reality it wishes to ignore, nor as the repression of what once was wished. [...] Indeed, modern analysts as well have remarked on the surprising *literality* and nonsymbolic nature of traumatic dreams and flashbacks, which resist cure to the extent that they remain, precisely, literal. It is this literality and its insistent return which thus constitutes trauma and points toward its enigmatic core: the delay or incompletion in knowing, or even in seeing, an overwhelming occurrence that then remains, in its insistent return, absolutely *true* to the event. (5)

If we take a closer look at this description of trauma, we notice the various references made to aspects of the visual domain. Caruth refers to the “image” and the “incompletion in seeing”: the realm of the visual and categories of visual perception inform these words and phrases and their use already indicates that vision and visual perception might occupy a noteworthy position in the theoretical study of trauma. A further quotation from Caruth’s work, in which she quotes Henry Krystal, further supports this line of thinking: “Henry Krystal, calling on the work of Cohen and Kinston, refers in his essay for this volume to the impact of an event in which “no trace of a registration of any kind is left in the psyche, instead a void, a hole is found.”” (*Trauma: Explorations in Memory* 6). Krystal obviously uses references to visual perception and imagery as well. The images of the trace and the void will recur in this dissertation’s discussion on the Sri Lankan disappearances.
If we were to look closer into other theoretical texts (for example Laub's contribution to *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*), we would notice that plenty of trauma discourses are suffused with categories of visual perception and visual imagery. Moreover, trauma itself can be read as a metaphor borrowed from medical vocabulary, in which the term was used to indicate a physical wound. The term has been transferred unto psychological vocabulary and the vocabulary of trauma studies to indicate a mental or psychic wound. The very subject of the field turns out to be metaphoric in nature and it almost follows that the field’s core concepts and discussions are informed by visual rhetorics and metaphorics as well. The connection between trauma and the metaphorical can thus be traced back to the very beginning of the field of study.

According to Caruth, trauma can be interpreted as an image that has been registered by the senses in its literal details and belatedly recurs as such in the form of hallucinations, dreams or flashbacks (Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* 5). Although the traumatic image can be informed by vision, hearing, touch, smell and taste, I have opted to focus on the registration by vision and the visuality of its occurrence in traumatic recall. In what follows, I will examine (1) the dominance and unreliability of vision in general human perception, (2) the registration of trauma by the (visual) sense(s), (3) the visual nature of dreams, flashbacks and hallucinations and (4) the various areas in which aspects of the visual and traumatic experience conjoin in *Anil's Ghost*.

**1.1 The visual characteristics of trauma**

To start with, I will examine the dominant position of the visual sense. I agree with the commonly accepted assumption that human beings rely on vision for the majority of their activities. For the elaboration of this assumption, I use Martin Jay's examination of the workings of vision in French philosophical writing. Although his work focuses on the denigration of vision and visual vocabulary in philosophical thought, he presents various discussions that explain the dominance of vision from a biological, ontological and discursive point of view. In order to steer clear of lengthy philosophical discussions, I will focus on the biological background for vision’s dominance. This biological explanation also fits in my further argument on man’s sensory relation to the world and the consequences of its distortion. According to Jay, the dominance of visual perception is a biological consequence of the early development of the human species: “As a diurnal
animal standing on its hind legs, the early human being developed its sensorium in such a way as to give sight an ability to differentiate and assimilate most external stimuli in a way superior to the other four senses." (5) This quotation describes the dominance of the visual sense with respect to the processing and organization of knowledge. Vision is thus inextricably bound to mankind’s exploration and knowledge of the surrounding world and embedded in man’s sensory connection and relation to that world. A lot of scientific research has been carried out on the significance and reliability of visual or empirical experimentation and evidence. Although human beings tend to believe in the authenticity of their visual perceptions, there has been a tradition of suspicion in regard of vision’s relationship to reality. Various theories have undercut the assumed transparency, immediacy and reliability of sight and it is now common knowledge that whatever we perceive is fundamentally distorted by our personality, which guides our view and forms our impressions according to known and established schemes of comprehension. We could take Kant’s “Copernican revolution” as a point of origin for this common knowledge. Reality itself can thus never be seen or perceived as it is: our eyesight and mental processing form a screen that cannot be removed and the relationship between visual perception and reality is fundamentally and unavoidably distorted.

Secondly, I will discuss the ways in which traumatic events are perceived and registered by the senses. Although vision can be interpreted as the dominant sense, I assume that all the senses are equally active and highly sensitive in moments of perception and registration of trauma. In the detailed and literal registration of the event, human perception creates the “etchings on the brain” mentioned by Caruth (Recapturing the Past 153). The traumatic image that results from this inscription is the visual manifestation of the experience to the (closely interconnected) mind and senses of the person who is inhabited by this experience. Through its insistent and pervading recurrence to the victim’s mind, the traumatic image comes to constitute the traumatic experience itself: it is first and foremost in the visual manifestation of the experience to the mind and senses that the trauma appears (Caruth, Trauma: Explorations in Memory 4). Furthermore, all the senses can function as triggers for traumatic recall, though the traumatic image that re-appears is predominantly visual: the dominance of vision is thus sustained in the process of traumatic recall. One of the established definitions of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder by Cathy Caruth (Trauma: Explorations in Memory 3)
describes trauma as the collapse of understanding. The trauma (and more specifically, the image of traumatic recall), however, is not a simple distortion of reality. The human sensorium, in other words, is implicated in the processes of traumatic perception and recall in a way that its workings are both accurate and inaccurate. The human sensorium is accurate in the sense that it registers the traumatic event in great detail: the recurring traumatic image maintains the precision of its registration. The human sensorium, however, also appears to function inaccurately: although the traumatic image is literal and true to the event, its belated recurrence to the eye and mind’s eye of the victim entails a touch of the delusional. In this respect, we could argue that flashbacks and hallucinations present themselves to the victim in their combined delusional and literal fullness.

Thirdly, we have to pay attention to the visual quality of (traumatic) dreams, flashbacks and hallucinations, the modes in which the traumatic image manifests itself most profoundly. As vision dominates the range of human impressions and informs the images that result from perception in general, it follows that dreams, flashbacks and hallucinations (which manifest these mental images) are predominantly visual as well. Catherine Wilson has discussed this visual quality in dreams: “Yet as a highly visual species, we have dreams that are predominantly visual; our visual sense is so differentiated and our aesthetic impulses are so keyed to the production of visual replicas that the possibility of exact sensory replication turns quite naturally on the sense of sight.” (124) In the same vein, we could argue that traumatic dreams, flashbacks and hallucinations (as modes for the manifestation of the traumatic image which maintains the dominance of vision) are predominantly visual.

This discussion on the visual characteristics of trauma has underpinned the assumption that several core concepts and aspects of trauma theory rely heavily on categories of vision or visual perception. Vision can be interpreted as man’s prime vehicle for connection with the world and relates to man’s ways of knowing, exploring and relating to the world. The human sensorium is implicated in traumatic registration and recall and mankind’s connection to the world is thus subjected to the effects of traumatic experience. Ondaatje’s Anil’s Ghost can be interpreted in this light: the novel likewise stages a strong interconnection between trauma and vision and brings about a treatment of trauma that is set in human sensory experience with broader (ontological, social and philosophical) overtones, which are solidified in the form of the loss and
restoration of identity as a marker of existence, the formation of new communities and the treatment of mourning and healing.

The literary interconnection of vision and trauma can be specified into (1) references to categories of visual perception (rhetorics) and (2) the use of visual imagery and metaphors (metaphorics). The difference between the former and the latter seems to be a slight one and both are present in literary language use. Nonetheless, I have opted to maintain a distinction. I have used the term visual rhetorics to indicate instances and references in which visual perception is used in its perception and registration function, while visual metaphorics indicate the use of visually informed figures of speech. I will elaborate the former in this chapter; the latter will be discussed in this dissertation’s second chapter. Following this, I will draw attention to four profound visual categories that figure in Anil’s Ghost: (1) disappearances, (2) visual witnessing, (3) visual memories and (4) the gaze. The following subchapters are informed by the preceding theoretical framework and focus on the significance attributed to the categories of visual perception in the context of trauma theory and literature. To start with, let us move into an in-depth analysis of the Sri Lankan disappearances as presented in Anil’s Ghost.

1.2 The Sri Lankan trauma: disappearances

Early in the novel, the protagonist Anil Tissera expresses a first impression of the nation-wide trauma that results from the civil conflict: “She used to believe that meaning allowed a person a door to escape grief and fear. But she saw that those who were slammed and stained by violence lost the power of language and logic. It was the way to abandon emotion, a last protection of the self.” (Ondaatje 55-56) This quotation articulates a sense of trauma that pervades Sri Lankan public and private life. From the beginning, the reader becomes aware of the trauma that simmers through the narrative, even though Anil herself is not a direct victim of the war violence. Furthermore, Ondaatje draws attention to the shortcomings of language in regard to the treatment, representation and articulation of trauma. Although literary language allows us to treat trauma in a way no other medium can, there seem to be failings as well. The novel, in other words, self-reflexively underlines its own inadequacies and the need for alternative forms of expression, which could be found in the literary use of visual categories. Ondaatje’s literary description of Sri Lanka and its ongoing civil conflict
primarily figures the vast number of disappearances that have occurred throughout the years. Although we have to be cautious in ascribing a trauma to an entire nation, I have decided to combine the totality of disappearances and their effects on the Sri Lankan population. The novel sketches a nuanced image of the conflict and underlines the fact that the three sides involved in it are responsible for the problem:

There had been continual emergency from 1983 onwards, racial attacks and political killings. The terrorism of the separatist guerrilla groups, who were fighting for a homeland in the north. The insurrection of the insurgents in the south, against the government. The counterterrorism of the special forces against both of them. The disposal of bodies by fire. The disposal of bodies in rivers or the sea. The hiding and then reburial of corpses. (Ondaatje 42-43)

It is worth noting that, although Ondaatje does provide a geographical location and short description of the various parties involved, he does not name the sides in the conflict. This indicates that Ondaatje is not interested in the political conflict as much as he is concerned with the humanitarian, psychological and social consequences of the violence. Another quotation from the novel touches upon the central and visually informed aspect of the Sri Lankan trauma that I intend to elaborate in this subchapter: the traumatic pain caused by the multiple disappearances that take away the possibility of mourning and closure. The idea of disappearance is characterized by the juxtaposition of visibility and invisibility: most of the crimes, perpetrators and victims remain hidden from view and the visual acknowledgement of the Sri Lankan violence and subsequent trauma is thus hindered. Furthermore, due to an absence of bodies to mourn for, the nation is unable to come to terms with its human losses:

In a fearful nation, public sorrow was stamped down by the climate of uncertainty. If a father protested a son’s death, it was feared another family member would be killed. If people you knew disappeared, there was a chance they might stay alive if you did not cause trouble. This was the scarring psychosis in the country. Death, loss, was ‘unfinished,’ so you could not walk through it. There had been years of night visitations, kidnappings or murders in broad daylight. The only chance was that the creatures who fought would consume
themselves. All that was left of law was a belief in an eventual revenge towards those who had power. (Ondaatje 56)

The disappearances stage the absence or visual removal of human existence. By analogy with the vocabulary encountered in the theoretical discourses of Caruth and Krystal, it could be argued that the Sri Lankan disappeared leave behind a blank spot or space that indicates the removal of a human being from the span of vision. This removal remains empty as long as no information, knowledge or visual proof fills it. Those who stay behind (for example family members and intimates) manifest the human need for (visual) proof to solidify their assumptions, fears and hopes in regard to the disappeared person. When visual proof and indications stay away, the impossibility of closure and mourning is introduced and the blank space is maintained. The blank space thus comes to represent the split between the experience of the event and its visual affirmation, and this representative trace of the trauma preserves the literality and immediacy of the traumatic event.

Furthermore, we could argue that the blank spaces add up and in time threaten to become an overwhelming non-presence in Sri Lankan society. As almost everyone is somehow implicated in or connected to a blank space, a general feeling of unsettlement and fear takes over, which is explained in a speech by Sarath: “It was like being in a room with three suitors, all of whom had blood on their hands. In nearly every house, in nearly every family, there was knowledge of someone’s murder or abduction by one side or another.” (Ondaatje 154) Although Sarath refers to “knowledge” here, what is meant is actually the absence of knowledge regarding the whereabouts of the disappeared person. To sum up, the blank space can be connected to the suffering on the part of the actual victim, the suffering on the part of those who stay behind and live on with a blank space in their presence and the suffering of the nation as it is gripped by fear.

The feature of disappearance in Anil’s Ghost is further highlighted by Anil’s short reference to Archilochus’ account of the Greek wars (Ondaatje 11), which underlines the particular character of the Sri Lankan war as drawing on the absence of bodies, the invisibility of war crimes and the absence of visual evidence. In this respect, the restoration of visual presence and subsequent existential affirmation become essential features of the discovery process that is staged at the core of the novel. The forensic
research carried out by Sarath and Anil is a way to restore or re-establish the lost identities of mutilated war victims, who are often “burned beyond recognition” (Ondaatje 17). Their research revolves around the visual reaffirmation of a victim’s identity. The recurrent verbs ‘to recognize’ (for example Ondaatje 167, 175, 186, 188) and ‘to identify’ (for example Ondaatje 42, 176) entail associations such as: to name, to grant a person the status of subject instead of object and to re-establish humanity by retrieving lost identities and the stories connected to them.

Sailor represents all the other unnamed war victims and all the other lost voices and stories hidden underneath the surface of Sri Lankan life: “Who was he? This representative of all those lost voices. To give him a name would name the rest.” (Ondaatje 56) Anil wants to recall and reclaim the nation’s disappeared citizens and restore the war and its proceedings to clarity and transparency so that the Sri Lankan people might start working toward a solution. As long as the problems are not made ‘visible’, the war cannot be denounced. Furthermore, the full proportions of the conflict remain unknown. In the same way Anil pursued a name for herself, she wants to pursue a name and a history for the victims. The name ‘Anil’ is said to have a stripped-down quality (Ondaatje 68), which further refers to her professional stripping down of layers of evidence. This practice enables her to reconstruct a victim’s identity and establish the cause of death.

Anil and Sarath thus subject the skeleton Sailor to visual examination, try to restore his identity and story and as such attempt to fill in the blank space Sailor left behind. The endeavour of filling up Sailor’s blank space takes the form of an archaeological (layer-oriented) or detective-like (clue-oriented) project. The restoration of the victim’s identity becomes a testimonial token in itself and opens up possibilities for mourning both in terms of the individual victim and the victim as a representative of all victims. We have to add, however, that this restoration process can never be complete: although the research can provide information that fills up the blank space of the disappeared, this blank space always remains present as an indication of the traumatic event, the disappearance, especially for the intimates and family members of the disappeared person. The fact that Anil and Sailor continue to refer to the skeleton as Sailor, even after they have identified the victim, could be interpreted as a textual indication of this (Ondaatje 271). Informed by knowledge, it can, however, provide openings for mourning, community (through shared grieving) and a form of closure.
However, the novel paints a bleak picture in regard to national closure. As the government is reluctant to confess to crimes committed on its part, it places a strain on the forensic project and is even willing to go to great lengths (such as murder) to stop it altogether from achieving its goal. Although Sailor’s identity has been restored at the end of the novel, the government makes sure it covers up the visual material (again) in an attempt to discredit the research project and dismiss it:

When they returned to the lab, there was confusion as to where the skeleton was. Now, standing in the small auditorium that was half filled with various officials, among them military and police personnel trained in counter-insurgency methods, she felt stranded. She was supposed to give her report with no real evidence. It had been a way to discredit her whole investigation. (Ondaatje 271)

Sailor’s body is literally removed from sight and secretly taken away by government officials before Anil can present her evidence to the government: his blank space thus reasserts itself, this time for Anil. When she gives her presentation for the assembly, Anil feels insecure due to the (renewed) removal of Sailor’s visual presence. Her endeavour to fill up a blank and provide visual proof and affirmation of a human being’s identity, existence and suffering seems empty without the visual token that should testify to the disappearance. Sarath then takes a risk and returns the project’s visual proof (Ruwan Kumara’s body) to Anil, hoping that it might reach other researchers as well. The scene in which the bodies are switched relies on the fundamental visual resemblance the corpses bear to one another.

Furthermore, the novel hints toward cover-up operations that re-bury visual evidence of government crimes. The novel for example relates the discovery of a mass grave in Naipattimunai, the identification of one of the skeletons as a former enemy of the government and the subsequent reburial of the corpses and abrupt ending of the investigation (Ondaatje 42). This scene indicates that, although Anil and Sarath’s project has (partly) succeeded in restoring a single victim to the light of knowledge and in affirming its former human existence and suffering, certain pitfalls and dangers remain as well. An extensive and large-scale investigation and restoration of civil war victims seems possible only if the three participating sides are willing to unearth, expose and face their own deeds.
1.3 Visual witnessing in Anil’s Ghost

The issue of witnessing recurs throughout the novel. In most cases, the characters witness the results of crimes that have already been perpetrated: they never witness the actual event. Except for two scenes (the murder in the train tunnel and the suicide bomber scene), there are no accounts given by perpetrators, whereas there are several references to victim accounts, for example the story of Lakma (Ondaatje 103) and Linus Corea (Ondaatje 120-125). I will discuss a victim’s account, or more precisely, a scene that renders the actual witnessing process, namely the scene in which Sirissa witnesses the crimes in her village before she is abducted herself. This scene stages what I want to call an instance of ‘visual witnessing’: the scene is not recollected or narrated from recollection but rather introduced directly to the reader with a minimum of mediation. The reader is led to witness the war atrocities along with Sirissa and her abduction at the end of the excerpt. In a sense, the reader is the only witness of this last known day of Sirissa’s life. This fact conveys a sense of close and direct implication in the civil conflict on the reader and makes the Sri Lankan trauma more palpable.

In an italicized sub-story, we enter the life of Sirissa, Ananda’s wife, and we learn of her daily conduct through character-focalization. This story abounds with references to visual perception and visual imagery: “This is where Sirissa would start to see” (172); “They would acknowledge her with their eyes” (172); “to catch their curious watching of her” (172); “not even looking down, but peering at the chalked numbers” (173); “The streets dark, the fall of electric light out of the shops. It was her favourite time, like putting away the senses one by one” (173); “a shutter halfway down its darkness, the light slowly dwarfed […] a line of gold varnish, and then the turning of a switch so that horizon disappeared.” (174) These fragments highlight the importance that is attributed to instances of vision, including eye contact, watching and light imagery. The exchange of glances is a vehicle for acknowledgement and contact between Sirissa and the teenagers. This habitual move on the bridge can almost be interpreted as a ritual and later recurs in a profoundly altered form, which articulates an intense moment of visual witnessing:

*She is about ten yards from the bridge when she sees the heads of the two students on stakes, on either side of the bridge, facing each other. [...] She sees two more heads on the far side of the bridge and can tell even from here that she recognizes...*
one of them. She would shrink down into herself, go back, but she cannot. She feels something is behind her, whatever is the cause of this. She desires to become nothing at all. Mind capable of nothing. She does not even think of releasing them from this public gesture. Cannot touch anything because everything feels alive, wounded and raw but alive. She begins running forward, past their eyes, her own shut dark until she is past them. Up the hill towards the school. She keeps running forward, and then she sees more. (Ondaatje 174-75)

This scene drags the reader along with Sirissa. A narrator manifests himself as he adds commentary from a clear point of view, which contrasts with Sirissa’s own confusion: “She does not think of releasing them from this public gesture.” Apart from this single addition, the reader has the feeling that the scene develops as the reader reads on: the event appears to happen at the very moment or in the very act of reading. This effect is achieved through the use of simultaneous (instead of retrospective) narration, which is quite common in trauma literature. In this excerpt, the past is experienced as if it were present. It is thus first and foremost in the action and participation of the reader that the fate of Sirissa is witnessed and recorded. Furthermore, the reader possesses slightly more knowledge on Sirissa’s fate than any other character in the novel. When we are introduced to the suffering of Ananda, we come to experience the kind of entrapment Ondaatje constructed for the reader: although we have slightly more knowledge, we are in no position to share information. The reader is thus bound to witness or to participate in the witnessing process, without being able to contribute to the process of revelation. In a sense, the reader is muted as well.

Moreover, the excerpt contains numerous references to the imagery of the eyes and the rhetorics of visual perception: Sirissa visually recognizes several of the victims and shuts her own eyes to avoid the eyes of the victims. This shutting of her eyes seems to be a belated attempt to ignore or shut out both the scene in front of her and the traumatisation resulting from her witnessing it. Sirissa’s eyes are thus associated with the registration of a traumatic event, while the eyes of the victims are connected with the lack of closure of the event: the killings happened only recently and there has been nobody yet to shut the teenagers’ eyes, a gesture which would acknowledge their deaths and the traumatic experience of the village. As long as the eyes of the youngsters remain open, the traumatic quality of the event remains unacknowledged: Sirissa tries to avoid
the trauma and its recognition by removing the scene from the range of her visual perception. The heads on stakes further confront her with the condition of her surroundings in a direct and visual way and affirm her latent knowledge of the crimes being perpetrated around her during the night (Ondaatje 174).

The last sentence shows that, while Sirissa functions as the main focalizer, the narrator, too, seems to stop short when she witnesses the condition of the school. Possibly, the traumatic scene leaves such an intense impression that words fall short, even for the narrator. The absence of further narration underlines the traumatic quality of the scene and produces the traumatic feeling that lingers when the sub-story has ended. The unfinished quality of the excerpt places the reader (who has looked over Sirissa’s shoulder) in the place of a family member or intimate, for example her husband Ananda: “We feel a sense of empathy and connection with Sirissa, and because we know her subaltern history, it is possible to identify with and understand Ananda’s spiraling self-destructive reaction to his wife’s disappearance.” (Burrows 171) The reader is left with an equally disturbing sense of ignorance; of empty blanks remaining open where closure should be or come. The reader experiences the emptiness of the space left behind by Sirissa’s disappearance and is unable, like the husband, to fill it in.

1.4 Visual memories in Anil’s Ghost

Before examining an example of traumatic memory and its visual manifestation, it is useful to elaborate the difference between traumatic and narrative memories, as discussed by Caruth and Pierre Janet (Caruth, Trauma: Explorations in Memory 153-154). In short, narrative memories are the regular or ordinary memories we have of moments, events or people from the past. They are structurally organized as stories and include notions of causality, time and place. Traumatic memories are the memories that result from living through an event with traumatizing effects that has been recorded by the senses as a traumatic image. The image that returns to the victim in a moment of recall is called a traumatic memory and may take the form of a dream, flashback or hallucination. The main difference between these two types of memory lies in the form: whereas narrative memories have a narrative form, structure and linearity, traumatic memories lack these formal elements. Traumatic memories thus remain in the visual stage of their registration.
A variety of theories have presented the narration of traumatic memories as the most significant step in the working through or healing process of a trauma victim (LaCapra 118). Traumatic memories that have received a narrative form partially become narrative memories: the narration applies certain forms of structure and thus allows for integration of the memory in the victim's cognitive system. At the same time, the narrated traumatic memory continues to lack the profound structure, linearity and story-like character of actual narrative memories.

In regard to narration, the characteristics of literary language reappear in the picture: a literary text generates a movement from the visual to the narrative through figurative language; the reader then generates a movement from the verbal to the visual as texts lead a reader to construct his own mental world on the basis of his reading. The text and the reading process thus re-create the visual on the basis of textual material: this is another way in which literary texts present themselves as apt vehicles to deal with the difficulties surrounding trauma and its articulation, representation and transmission. By combining the visual and the verbal in the form of visual rhetorics and imagery, Anil's Ghost additionally recreates the visual within the narrative. This literary strategy both explicitly underlines the twofold transition and shortens the distance between the two modes. The reader applies his own interpretative framework to the revisualization and thus confronts the narrative both visually and verbally. As such, the reader is led to sympathize more profoundly with the trauma survivors whose experiences have been fictionalized. Through the use of imagination, the reader is introduced to and implicated in the fictionalized traumatic experiences: "The trauma, it often seemed, was not evinced in the narrative component or in the ostensible meaning, but in a certain affective dynamic internal to the work." (Bennett 1) A significant scene in which a traumatic memory is narrated and opened up to revisualization is the scene in which Sarath testifies to an event that left a great impression on him. Sarath witnessed how a blindfolded man was abducted on a bicycle:

' [...] Why transport a blindfolded victim on a bicycle? It made all life seem precarious. It made all of them more equal. Like drunk university students. The blindfolded man had to balance his body in tune with his possible killer. They cycled off and at the far end of the street, beyond the market buildings, they turned and disappeared. Of course the reason they did it that way was so none of
us would forget it.’
‘What did you do?’
‘Nothing.’ (Ondaatje 155)

Sarath’s account can be interpreted as a verbalized or narrated traumatic memory. Throughout his account, the significance of visuality is emphasized in the forms of observation, blindfolding and visual impression. It is important to note that the blindfolded man could not witness the situation, whereas the others could: the victim was literally kept in the dark. The reason for the use of a bicycle is to leave a visual impression upon the witnesses: the abductors wanted the witnesses to remember this specific scene, not because of its cruelty, but because of its banality and everyday character. The abduction scene is almost staged as a piece of theatre and makes a strong statement about the fact that violence can be inherent in both brute and subtle actions. Furthermore, the witnessing is accompanied by inactivity or stasis. The story ends with an affirmation of inaction and passivity rather than with a climax. It seems that either (1) the bystanders could do nothing but register the scene or (2) the bystanders did not do anything because their main function was the witnessing and registration of the event. The excerpt connects to the previous discussion on disappearances through the use of the verb “to disappear”.

Though Sarath’s traumatic memory is profoundly narrated and verbalized and includes notions of time, place and causality, it becomes clear that the narration itself does not entirely do away with the traumatic effects of the experience. In the theoretical context, this is the point on which Janet and Caruth differ (Caruth, Recapturing the Past 153). Janet believes that traumatic memory can be conversed into narrative memory for once and for all. According to Caruth, this amounts to a form of denial. In Anil’s Ghost, the memory and traumatic impact of the event linger and Sarath admits that he did nothing to stop the abduction: the testimony thus reveals possible layers of guilt. However, the narration does allow for revisional visualization both by Anil (the primary listener) and the reader (the secondary listener) and thus allows that different parties become involved in the memory as it is related. As such, the traumatic memory is opened up to possibilities of sympathetic knowledge and community.
1.5 Visual perception categories in *Anil's Ghost*: the gaze

Lastly, I will focus on a category of visual perception that appears regularly in philosophical discourses on visual perception: the gaze. The gaze is alternately equated with violent intrusion and alternative methods of connection. The line of thinking that presents the gaze as a vehicle for violent intrusion holds that it is a fundamentally penetrating and intrusive type of viewing: it forces the object under view to open up itself and to allow the gaze to observe it in all its aspects. As such, the gaze is connected to problems of power relations and inequalities. In various accounts, the intrusive gaze has been equated with colonial presence and intrusion (cf. Said). Mieke Bal has elaborated the second line of thinking. According to her, the gaze is able to produce alternative forms of community:

> Active, but secretive, masking understanding with visuality, pursuing a knowledge that is more profound and new for being unacknowledged: such is the particular form of vision I want to put forward. What I mean is vision as an act of connecting, though potentially unacknowledged, silent, that others may not notice; a gaze that enables subjects to communicate without opening up. (141)

This quotation touches upon a number of central elements that link the gaze with the visual characteristics of trauma elaborated previously: the gaze is associated with new forms of knowledge, connection and communication while disavowing the violent intrusion that is otherwise attributed to it. Bal touches upon the ability of the gaze to obtain knowledge that lies beyond the ordinary forms of perception and understanding. Taking this line of thinking further, we could argue that the gaze thus qualifies as a means to approach traumatic understanding and knowledge. However, we need to nuances this assumption. Though the gaze can be connected to knowledge and new forms of community, in *Anil's Ghost* it has to struggle past the absence of visuality (visual proof or evidence in the form of bodies) in order to bring about this special effect. In the novel, the gaze figures in contexts of civil war violence, human rights research and medical healing and can be applied to both explanatory backgrounds (the gaze as violent intrusion and as alternative form of communication).
The gaze is the most direct and intense instance of visual perception and as such, opposes the glance or the shutting of the eyes elaborated in subchapter 1.3. The gaze signals a steadfast confrontation with the object of our perception and acknowledges or underlines the perception process itself: “It means learning not to shut our eyes to that which we would rather not see. It means learning to look with a steady and calm gaze that does not willfully impose its images on what it beholds, but lets what is present and visible show itself from out of itself.” (Levin, *Sites of Vision* 14) If we apply this description of the gaze to trauma theory, we could say that the gaze allows traumatic images to appear while subjecting them to a steady and calm viewing that possibly opens up new ways of access to the traumatic experiences.

Lisa Dickson has distinguished three types of gaze: the pathological, the corrective or clinical and the investigative gaze. Whereas the first type refers to the visual perception by the perpetrator, the second and the third type refer to the views of the healer and the researcher respectively. All three types are present in the novel, however disproportionally. The novel predominantly focuses on the corrective and the investigative gaze and leaves the perspective of the perpetrator largely out of view. Anil, Sarath, Palipana and Ananda are the major representatives of the investigative gaze and Gamini is the main representative of the corrective or clinical gaze. The suicide bomber who occurs toward the end of the novel provides the most obvious instance of the pathological gaze.

1.5.1 The observational gaze

The type of gaze that is associated with the protagonist Anil is the observational or investigative gaze. As a forensic researcher involved in human rights investigations, Anil performs close and careful visual examinations of bodies and tries to extract information and evidence from them. In order to be able to produce a precise narrative from her research, Anil’s gaze is characterized by fine and detailed intrusion of bodily remains. The violence of the gaze appears to be justified by the human rights ends it serves. The observational gaze also occurs in contexts outside the novel’s core investigation, which underline the gaze’s function as a vehicle for alternative forms of communication and community. In this subchapter, I will therefore examine (1) the chain movements of observation, (2) the methods of observation used by Anil and Sarath and (3) the implications of their gazing.
Firstly, I will elaborate the workings of the gaze in the form of chain movements of observation in a context that is separate from the investigation on Sailor. A first reference to the observational gaze occurs in the introductory pages, which describe Anil’s previous excavation work on South American sites. It is said that the family members watch the researchers and the excavation project in an attempt to contribute to a possible revelation and recovery of lost relatives (Ondaatje 5). The presence of the observational gaze is linked to the practice of discovering and reclaiming, which implies that the absence of the human gaze would be associated with the loss of human beings. The family members seem to feel that their gaze on the site is necessary in order to substantiate the excavation process. Furthermore, their presence could allow them to confront their loss at last, making it possible for them to start mourning and work toward provisional closure. One woman draws Anil’s special attention, who admits that the image of that specific South American woman still haunts her:

One day Anil and the rest of the team walked to a nearby river to cool off during their lunch break. On returning they saw a woman sitting within the grave. She was on her haunches, her legs under her as if in formal prayer, elbows in her lap, looking down at the remains of the two bodies. She had lost a husband and a brother during an abduction in this region a year earlier. (Ondaatje 5-6)

This scene sets off a chain-reaction of observational gazes: Anil observes the woman who is observing the two bodies she imagines to be her relatives. An additional spectator is added in the form of the reader. The chain reaction of observations establishes a larger perceptual framework and induces a sense of strong connection and human community. A significant aspect of this scene appears to be the woman’s facial expression, which defies linguistic description. The significance of visual perception is underlined in the first pages of the novel as Anil acknowledges the failure of words in the face of visual witnessing of trauma and grief: “There are no words Anil knows that can describe, even for just herself, the woman’s face. But the grief of love in that shoulder she will not forget, still remembers. The woman rose to her feet when she heard them approach and moved back, offering them room to work.” (Ondaatje 6) Apart from underlining the deficiency of language, this introductory analysis touches upon several elements that are central to this discussion, such as the connection between observation and knowledge and between observation and human compassion,
articulated by Anil.

Secondly, the observational gaze occurs in the context of the forensic research of the skeleton Sailor. The observation and examination of corpses can be compared to a close reading practice: the forensic researchers read the wounds and construct a narrative on the basis of their observations and impressions. At the beginning of the novel, Anil is invited to examine two fresh corpses together with two medical students (Ondaatje 13). This scene precedes the main investigation and is significant because it underlines Anil’s need to verbalize visual impressions derived from the forensic reading practice: “The important thing is to say out loud what your first impressions are. Then rethink them. Admit you can make mistakes.” (Ondaatje 14) Anil emphasizes the need to affirm and substantiate initial, visual impressions. Through (spoken) language, the observations can be separated from the researcher’s mind, so the investigator can look at them again from a different angle. Implicit in this excerpt, however, is the belief that visual impressions that are not articulated remain in the body or mind of the researcher. The forensic reading practice and observational gaze are predominantly developed in the novel’s core plot line, namely the examination of the skeleton Sailor. The various aspects to be discussed here are: (1) the observation of the burial site, (2) the observation of the body and (3) the observation of visual markers of occupation on the body. These three aspects allow Anil and Sarath to constitute a narrative on the identity and the traumatic experiences of the victim they nicknamed Sailor.

In the first place, the observation of the burial site provides important information. We are led to conclude that there is possible government involvement, as the recent body was discovered in an excavation site guarded by the government. It appears that the perpetrators wanted to taunt fate, as they tried to hide corpses in places where (archaeological) researchers were already doing exhumations. On this site, temporal notions are confounded as present and past catch up with one another and conjoin: “Three almost complete skeletons had been found. But a few days later, while excavating in the far reaches of a cave, Anil discovered a fourth skeleton, whose bones were still held together by dried ligaments, partially burned. Something not prehistoric.” (Ondaatje 50) Anil’s knowledge of the interaction of minerals and corpses reveals that the body was buried twice to obstruct discovery. The information on minerals could reveal the initial burial site and the possible region of origin of Sailor. In the case of Sailor, the interaction between human bones and earthly minerals takes
form in the presence or absence of lead in the body (Ondaatje 51). This ironically draws parallels to weaponry and possibly also to the gun with which Sailor was shot before he was burned.

The second aspect in which the observational gaze contributes to the research project is the close examination of the bones of the body. Anil discovers that the body was burned shortly after the person’s death. This is something she reads in the twisting of the bones. The twisting functions as a visual marker or bodily inscription that reveals the traumatic experiences of the victim and can refer both to physical wounds or markers and to mental trauma (a twisting of the mind accompanying the twisting of the bones):

‘Twisting happens to bones that get burned when they are “green,” that is, flesh-covered. An old body whose flesh withered away with time and then was burned later on – that’s the pattern with most of the Bandarawela skeletons. This one was barely dead, Sarath, when they tried to burn him. Or worse, they tried to burn him alive.’ (Ondaatje 51)

Anil creates a narrative in which the various elements that surface from her examinations are included and conjoined. Her thinking contains ironic twists as well: she imagines how the fire of Sailor’s burning probably provided the killers with enough light to dig his grave. This narrative, however, is a subjective and partially imaginative construct on the part of Anil. The victim cannot speak for himself anymore, so the researcher reads his wounds and constitutes a story on the basis of visual examinations and imaginative empathy:

She could read Sailor’s last actions by knowing the wounds on the bone. He puts his arms up over his face to protect himself from the blow. He is shot with a rifle, the bullet going through his arm, then into the neck. While he’s on the ground, they come up and kill him. Coup de grace. The smallest, cheapest bullet. A .22’s path that her ballpoint pen could slide through. Then they attempt to set fire to him and begin to dig his grave in this burning light. (Ondaatje 65)

Thirdly, Anil continues the reading practice as she searches for markers of occupation. The markers of occupation are visual markers on the body that indicate long-term and continued activity, which results in certain bodily deformations through repeated
movements or stress on certain body parts (Ondaatje 177). Markers of occupation are thus visual tokens that testify to the victim’s prior life circumstances. The observation of these markers broadens Sailor’s narrative and includes other periods of his life, apart from the last moments. Sailor’s body, however, allows for multiple readings, which correspond to different life-styles and subsequently, different personal stories: the differences are later attributed to a professional change made by Ruwan Kumara (Ondaatje 269).

These aspects show that the observational gaze is characterized by close and meticulous attention and examination. In Anil’s Ghost, observation is understood in terms of both distance and immersion: the researchers are drawn into their work while trying to sustain a critical distance from the object of their study. Although the observational gaze presupposes professional empathy and involvement at the most, Anil and Sarath cannot prevent themselves from being drawn into Sailor’s case and story. In the case of the research on Sailor, the gaze is one-directional and directed toward dead bodies. As already mentioned, the Sri Lankan conflict is marked by an absence of visual evidence: the observational gaze of Anil and Sarath restores the bodies as objects of the gaze and thus enable the opening up and reading of their traumatic stories. We have to keep in mind, however, that Anil’s investigative gaze is largely informed by her position as a professional forensic researcher with Euro-American educational training. At the beginning of the novel, her alienation from the island is emphasized through the very detachment of her gaze and the persistence of the Euro-American perspectives she adopted during her training (Ondaatje 11).

In conclusion, we could say that the observational gaze, however fundamentally violent and intrusive, is a vehicle for knowledge in the context of the Sri Lankan civil violence. Apart from that, it also is a vehicle for alternative forms of communication. The victim’s body is opened up to investigation and as such can release its hidden story. Though the victim cannot speak for himself anymore, the body can testify to the traumatic suffering in an alternative way of communication. Sailor’s story could also represent many other buried stories. The observational gaze and its endeavour can thus be connected to new forms of community as the voices of the dead are revealed and restored to the world of the living.
1.5.2 The medical gaze

The medical, clinical or corrective gaze features predominantly in the chapters dedicated to Gamini and his work as a doctor. Gamini is constantly immersed in the bodily horror and destruction and tries to heal as much as he can. Because he is continuously exposed to the Sri Lankan violence, he is unable to step out of the psychic numbing that has taken over in his professional occupation. Gamini is the major representative of the medical gaze, which relates to material or bodily healing. Like Anil, he performs (close) examinations, but unlike Anil, Gamini applies his gaze to the still living bodies and tries to decide on the nature of their wounds and the appropriate treatment. In cases of real emergency, this procedure is done quite roughly and hastily (Ondaatje 125-126). Anil’s investigative gaze was equated with intrusion for the sake of knowledge. Gamini’s gaze, however, can hardly be equated with violence, because (1) the bodies have (literally) been opened up already and (2) the gazing serves healing rather than knowledge purposes.

There is one instance of intense medical gazing that includes hints of the observational gaze as well, namely the scene in which Gamini stares down on his brother’s dead body, tries to read the old and fresh wounds and tends to the body as if trying to heal him posthumously. Although his medical gaze cannot serve its healing ends in the literal sense of the words, Gamini feels that he has to tend to his brother’s wounds in order to restore their lost ties, secure their connection for the future and to heal himself mentally in the present. His gaze crosses temporal borders and allows for new forms of community here:

Mentally Gamini prepares to examine the body, to understand his brother’s death and life [...]. The wording suggests that Sarath’s physical body serves as the object of a meditation in which Gamini will begin a “permanent conversation” with Sarath, so that his brother will be more present to him in death than he was in life (282).). [...] In any case, Gamini’s act of remembrance, and his tacit promise to keep Sarath’s spirit alive in memory, resonates with Anil’s contemplation of the Guatemalan mourner and Sarath’s memory of the rock sculpture [...]. (Davis and Lee 100)
This quotation underlines the possibility of new forms of community and includes other characters that have experienced intense moments of (observational) gazing. Now that his medical gaze is free to wander across his brother’s body, new and formerly unacknowledged insights along with the bodily wounds seem to reveal themselves to Gamini. This new knowledge then allows for alternative forms of communication and community or restoration of family ties. Their newfound communication and connection crosses the borders of life and death and may thus allow for a permanent conversation and presence. The combination of the investigative and the medical gaze leads to a treatment of Sarath’s body that is rooted in notions such as mental healing, remembrance, knowledge, community and connection.

There were things he could do perhaps. He could see the acid burns, the twisted leg. He unlocked the cupboard that held bandages, splints, disinfectant. He began washing the body’s dark-browning markings with scrub lotion. He could heal his brother, set the left leg, deal with every wound as if he were alive, as is treating the hundred small traumas would eventually bring him back into his life.

(Ondaatje 287)

In this excerpt from the novel, Gamini tries to tend to Sarath’s wounds as if his brother were still alive and within reach of his medical gaze and practice. This action appears to be a belated attempt to heal his brother physically. The healing gesture is the least and perhaps only thing Gamini can do in this moment of grief: if he could not take care of Sarath in life, he will care for him in death. While he tends the wounds, he reads them and reconstructs the story of their shared childhood and adult life, both of which were characterized by distance and alienation. He treats the body as if curing “a hundred little traumas” (both in the sense of physical wounds and childhood memories of strife between them). While he is tending to his brother’s wounds, Gamini is finally able to tend to his own mental wounds: the death of and medical gazing on Sarath thus enable Gamini’s own healing process. In effect, it is Gamini’s gaze and the verbalization of his impressions that recreate large parts of Sarath’s personal narrative, which both the reader and Anil have been unable to grasp or even touch upon.
1.5.3 The pathological gaze

I mentioned before that the pathological gaze or gaze of the perpetrator is largely absent from the narrative. While I am aware that the question of perpetration is a complex one, I choose to denominate the suicide bomber in the novel a perpetrator. A brief elaboration of the suicide bomber scene will serve to clarify the pathological gaze and its functions in Anil’s Ghost. Although the perspective of the suicide bomber is introduced in third-person narration, we get a fairly good picture of the perpetrator’s actual viewing of the situation:

In any case, he had been waiting for this day, when he was sure he would be able to get to Katugala on the street. There was no way R----- could have entered the presidential grounds with explosives and ball bearings strapped to him. The bodyguards were unforgiving. There were never exceptions. Every pen in every pocket was examined. So R----- had to approach him in a public space, with all the paraphernalia of devastation sewn onto himself. (Ondaatje 293)

It is worth noting that the perspective of the active perpetrator comes seeping in only toward the end of the novel and after Anil’s departure and Sarath’s death. The pathological gaze enters the story world only after the central investigation has ended and it is largely separated from the human rights project in which Sarath and Anil were immersed. Nevertheless, it is closely connected to the Sri Lankan trauma as the perpetrator attacks Sri Lankan public life in an attempt to kill the president. The same excerpt contains references to the perspective of the president (Ondaatje 293), which illustrate the pathological gaze as well. We could argue that president Katugala is as much a part of the war crimes as the suicide bomber who confronts him.

The excerpt underlines the significance of visual perception and the visual in the description of the explosives. The suicide bomber has a bomb strapped to his body which is hidden underneath his clothes, so that the threat of violence is initially hidden from view (Ondaatje 292). However, the reader is already introduced to the hidden danger in advance. The reader is aware of the invisible danger that approaches the Sri Lankan people and the president and is thus made an accomplice. The reader is forced to look along with the pathological gaze, which further complicates the perpetrator question in the novel. The fact that the name of the bomber is left out (the suicide
bomber is called R------, Ondaatje 292) shows the reader that Ondaatje continues to maintain a sense of secrecy, anonymity or impersonality regarding the perpetrators. The censoring of the name reminds us of official documents, but also allows for multiple interpretations and keeps the debate open by showing that it is (1) not necessary to name the perpetrator, but to end the perpetration of crimes in the first place and (2) rather difficult to pin down names in a country where notions of guilt and crime are fleeting.

The scene of the bombing contains a number of visual images and associations. Firstly, it is worth noting that the president has been idealized through posters. Furthermore, the narrator suggests that his real image induces compassion regardless of the president’s record (Ondaatje 291). The image of the tired president contrasts with the propaganda pictures in the background, which show him as a vibrant person. The president is thus presented to the outside world through the use of (manipulated) visual means. Before the bomb goes off, the narrator already comments on the events following it: the Sri Lankan military staff censor the last photographs of the president and adhere to photographs that show him as a healthy leader (Ondaatje 292-293). The visual propaganda is thus continued posthumously, which also underlines the importance of visual evidence to solidify and affirm the former existence of victims.

In conclusion, the profound use of visual rhetorics and categories of visual perception serves to bring about a treatment of trauma that is (1) deeply rooted in human sensory relations to the world, (2) explores the possibilities of knowledge of traumatic experiences and (3) allows for new forms of community, healing and communication. Trauma defies ordinary understanding and close attention to visual rhetorics and references to the realm of vision can help to (1) understand the borders of that very understanding, (2) groove those boundaries and (3) engage in creative and imaginative attempts to move beyond former limits of connection and empathy. The following two chapters will use these insights as a basis and elaborate them in regard to their specific focus (imagery and artistic vision respectively).
2. Visual metaphors in Anil’s Ghost

I already mentioned that Anil’s Ghost displays a varied and lively use of visual imagery, metaphors and stylistic devices and I have touched upon the fact that the theoretical discourses of trauma studies are suffused with visual metaphors and visually informed categories. The latter has been elaborated in the previous chapter and I will now proceed to discuss the ways in which visual metaphorics contribute to the novel’s creative treatment of the Sri Lankan civil violence and the resulting trauma. Whereas I could elaborate the presence of visual rhetorics by referring to the visual characteristics of traumatic experience and recall, I will discuss the prevalence of visual metaphorics by drawing attention to the associative and creative functions of metaphors in general.

I will first elaborate a brief theoretical framework on visual metaphorics in trauma texts and then, I will focus on three images or metaphors that are prominently present in the narrative: the image of the darkness, the image of the blue light and the image of the photograph. These metaphors appear in contexts that are closely related to the Sri Lankan conflict and can be connected to various aspects of the broader trauma issue. The (traditional) image of the darkness and the photograph are partially renewed or adapted in regard to the subject matter they deal with, the blue light presents an entirely new image in the context of trauma. In what follows, I will (1) briefly examine the presence of visual metaphors in everyday and literary language use, (2) discuss the use of metaphorics in trauma theory and narrative and (3) elaborate three eye-catching images in relation to the theoretical insights that precede their discussion.

2.1 Use of visual metaphors in trauma discourses

By way of introduction, I will briefly examine the presence of visual metaphors in ordinary and literary language use. For this purpose, I will use an introductory quotation from Jay’s Downcast Eyes. Jay contends that visual metaphors suffuse human thought and (written and spoken) speech, which occupies a central position in the description, representation and study of trauma (cf. Introduction):

Even a rapid glance at the language we commonly use will demonstrate the ubiquity of visual metaphors. If we actively focus our attention on them, vigilantly keeping an eye out for those deeply embedded as well as those on the surface, we can gain an illuminating insight into the complex mirroring of
perception and language. Depending, of course, on one's outlook or point of view, the prevalence of such metaphors will be accounted an obstacle or an aid to our knowledge of reality. It is, however, no idle speculation or figment of imagination to claim that if blinded to their importance, we will damage our ability to inspect the world outside and introspect the world within. And our prospects for escaping their thrall, if indeed that is even a foreseeable goal, will be greatly dimmed. (Jay 1)

I will elaborate two major tensions that are present in this quotation. The presence of visual imagery in (literary) language can be connected to (1) the tension between the surface and hidden narrative and (2) the tension between perception images and reality. The tension between embedded and surface metaphors (which can be extended to the tension between prominent and latent or dead metaphors) summons the tension between surface narrative and embedded or hidden narrative, the examination of which is a core aspect of literary trauma studies. In both cases, the hidden or embedded meanings and images articulate the depth of the narrative. A second core tension that is emphasized in this quotation is the relationship (which is adequately called mirroring; cf. chapter 3) between perception and reality, which is fundamentally distorted (cf. chapter 1). Visual imagery is a stylistic embodiment of this distortion and can be interpreted both as an additional hindrance and an alternative vehicle for understanding. I tend to agree with the latter. According to David Punter, the working of

<sup>2</sup> “There are some [...] visual metaphors [...], many of them embedded in words that no longer seem directly dependent on them. Thus, for example, vigilant is derived from the Latin vigilare, to watch, which in its French form veiller is the root of surveillance. Demonstrate comes from the Latin monstrare, to show. Inspect, prospect, introspect (and other words like aspect or circumspect) all derive from the Latin specere, to look at or observe. [...] These are latent or dead metaphors, but they still express the sedimented importance of the visual in the English language.” (Jay 1-2) It is important to note that the quotation draws attention to linguistic roots that express notions of observation and examination, two concepts that recur throughout the various subchapters. The “sedimented importance” draws attention to the basic quality of these metaphors (they constitute the basis of many other phrases and expressions) and the multilayered trauma narrative, which contains layers that have to be uncovered through the careful examination of literary strategies.
the metaphor in regard to new forms of understanding lies in its ability to articulate the relation between the unfamiliar and the familiar and to reveal that understanding cannot be fixed:

Metaphor makes us look at the world afresh, but it often does so by challenging our notions of the similarity that exists between things; how alike they are; and in what ways, in fact, they are irreconcilably unalike. Thus, metaphor represents a basic operation of language: it seeks to ‘fix’ our understanding, but at the same time it reveals how any such fixity, any such desire for stability and certainty, is constructed on shifting sands. (9-10)

Metaphors are described here as literary strategies that (1) challenge the reader’s established notions about reality, (2) prompt the reader to grope for new forms of knowledge and (3) provide a fluid idea about (processes of) understanding. These features are significant in trauma narrative. In Anil’s Ghost, close attention to the occurrence and workings of visual metaphorics helps to understand the ways in which the Sri Lankan trauma is presented, developed and interpreted by Ondaatje. Several of the core aspects of the plot development receive narrative depth through the use of metaphors, while these maintain familiar aspects, articulate unfamiliar features and re-figure the trauma context that is closely connected to them.

In the previous chapter, I touched upon the fact that several trauma scholars (such as Caruth, Krystal and Laub) rely on visual metaphors in their writings on the nature and workings of trauma. In a number of prominent trauma theories, metaphors such as ‘the gap’ (Caruth, Trauma: Explorations in Memory 7; Laub, “Truth and Testimony” in Trauma: Explorations in Memory 69) and ‘the void’ (Caruth, Trauma: Explorations in Memory 6) have come to occupy a central position. This reversion and apparent attachment to visual metaphors seems to manifest trauma scholars’ need to use metaphoric devices in order to move beyond the inaccessibility or impossibility of understanding that is inherent in their subject matter. I will now, therefore, examine the ways in which visual metaphors function in trauma discourse and narrative.

The (visual) metaphors that are used in the discourse of trauma studies emphasize three major aspects of metaphoric language use: (1) distance (the metaphor can be used as a vehicle for descriptive detour), (2) distortion and (3) alternative or new forms of access, understanding and knowledge brought about by the creative and
original combination of the connotative meanings of the stylistic device. These three aspects of the (traditional) metaphor apply to the visual metaphors encountered in trauma theory and narrative as well, although the basic features are more prominent in the latter. Trauma metaphors deal with and express the collapse of ordinary patterns of knowledge that is a part of traumatic experience. Their expression of distance, distortion and alternative access is intensified in order to be able to give voice to this collapse while attempting to approach it from a literary or imaginative point of view. The reinforcement thus allows for a more profound treatment of the depth of human experience that is the subject of trauma studies: “[...] metaphor represents a deepening, an intensification of the world in which we customarily think we live.” (Punter 84)

In regard to the aspect of distance, I have to add some remarks. Not only does the use of metaphors imply the inevitability and the necessity of distance on the part of the scholar, it also explicitly draws attention to and embraces this distance. The use of metaphors appears to be the only way to attempt trauma research: not only is it impossible to do away with the distance between scholar and subject matter (this distance is already present between traumatizing event and victim of traumatization and is reinforced as scholars move into the subject matter as well), the scholar appears to need the obvious and explicit distance in order to enable his research and approach of understanding. When we use metaphors, we are aware of the distance we create: the distance is acknowledged, emphasized and, through the use of creative and imaginative means, turned into a productive instrument of description and treatment.

Visual metaphors prove to be highly significant in trauma theory and also the imaginative and literary treatment of trauma abounds with visual imagery. In the context of trauma narrative, visual metaphors generate palpable images of trauma for the reader and their use can thus be seen as a literary strategy to bring about a creative and productive encounter between reader and trauma. Although the metaphorics of theory and narrative correspond in many aspects, I would argue that a slight point of difference is the fact that metaphors in trauma literature are more informed by imagination: the literary writer can create new metaphors or develop creative adaptations of established visual metaphors from trauma-theoretical discourses. In the same way visual metaphors allow for new modes of understanding in theoretical discourses, they entail new approaches toward understanding in trauma narratives.

In what follows, I will draw attention to three eye-catching images: (1) the
darkness, (2) the blue light and (3) the photograph. The first and second image belong to the realm of light imagery, the last image is a category in its own right. Each of these images relates to the Sri Lankan trauma and can be associated with two different aspects of it. The image of darkness can be connected to both traumatic testimony and the obscurity of war crimes. The image of the blue light can be connected to both mental healing and pending violence or threat and lastly, I will examine the workings of the photograph-image in relation to remembrance and testimony. Occasionally, other images or hints toward visual rhetorics simmer through the excerpts as well. However, I will only elaborate these when they contribute to the discussion on the three images I have selected. To start with, I will examine the narrative function of darkness (and, to a lesser extent, brightness) as figured in two significant moments of murder and testimony.

2.2 Darkness and brightness: narrative function

The imagery of light acquires a narrative function in the form of the juxtaposition of darkness and brightness in the description of the novel’s setting. In the narrative, brightness retains its traditional associations of insight and clarity. It is the image of darkness that receives new meanings and therefore, I will give special attention to the latter. Darkness is traditionally associated with evil, madness, the unconscious, the repressed and the hidden. In Anil’s Ghost, these associations are combined and taken a step further, so that the dark becomes a space of secrecy, contemplation and testimony. The interplay between darkness and brightness occurs most intensely in two instances: (1) in the scene of a war crime (the murder of the official in the train tunnel) and (2) in a scene of personal testimony (Gamini’s account of his personal trauma). The former indicates the persisting connection between darkness and evil, the latter summons the interplay of excavation and illumination of a character’s (personal) trauma. In this regard, the space of darkness becomes the space in which the character explores or excavates his trauma, while the alternating spaces of brightness serve to highlight the subsequent illumination of the repressed and the unconscious. As such, the alternation between darkness and brightness can be connected to the notion of working through (LaCapra 119) Darkness and brightness as narrative devices do not, therefore, necessarily oppose one another, but work together and conjoin. Firstly, I will look into the scene of the murder. From the beginning, the train journey is described in terms of
alternating darkness and brightness. The following quotation is introduced from the perspective of the perpetrator:

It was a slow train, travelling through rock passes, then emerging into sudden vistas. He knew that a mile or so before they got to Kurunegala there would be a tunnel and the train would curve into the dark claustrophobia of it. A few windows would remain open – they needed fresh air, though it meant the noise would be terrible. Once past the tunnel, back into sunlight, they would be getting ready to disembark. (Ondaatje 31)

The train journey in this description is divided into sequences of brightness and darkness as the train alternates between tunnels and open passages, visibility and invisibility, hindered and unrestrained visual perception. The dark tunnel, connected to ideas such as threat, fear, crime and secrecy through the reference to claustrophobia, gives the scene a sense of premonition and pending danger (the murderer plans to strike during a longer tunnel passage). After the tunnel, there is a prospect of sunlight, combined with the murderer’s prospect of getting off the train before he or his crime is discovered. The open window that would normally be associated with life (access to light and oxygen) will later become the gate to death for the official. The murderer moves into action as soon as the train enters the dark tunnel:

He stood just as the train went into darkness. For a few moments there was the faint muddy light of the bulbs and then they went out. He could hear the bird talking. Three minutes of darkness. The man moved quickly to where he remembered the government official was, beside the aisle. In the darkness he yanked him forward by his hair and wrapped a chain around his neck and began strangling him. He counted the seconds to himself in the darkness. When the man’s weight fell against him he still didn’t trust him, didn’t release his hold on the chain. (Ondaatje 31)

The light bulbs in the train produce a faint light and then give in to the darkness that surrounds them. The extinguished light can be connected to the life taken by the murderer just minutes later. “Three minutes of darkness” refers to the spatial and temporal conditions of this crime: the phrase seems to capture the pace and mood of the entire scene. The criminal counts seconds in the dark so as to determine his own
temporal position within the crime scene: in the darkness, it is as easy for the victim as it is for the perpetrator to lose track: “He had a minute left. He stood and lifted the man into his arms. Keeping him upright, he steered him towards the open window. The yellow lights flickered on for a second. He might have been a tableau in somebody’s dream.” (Ondaatje 31) The yellow lights flicker on for a moment: the lights seem to rebel against the covering up of the crime, but they are only able to highlight a single moment, which is not enough to enable any intervention as witnesses would think they were dreaming or having a nightmare, rather than actually witnessing a crime scene. The flickering of the lights produces a snapshot of the scene and temporarily freezes the action. The murderer actually imagines himself being witnessed by someone else: he imagines his own visibility. This moment of self-observation could be a moment of self-reflection, but this is not the case. The official’s body then disappears into the noise and the darkness. At the end of this scene, the darkness can thus be connected to the notion of disappearance as well (cf. chapter 1). The brightness further functions in the preparation and conclusion of the crime and adds a moral flicker in the form of the image of the light bulb. The second major scene stages a train journey that alternates between stretches of darkness and brightness as well. In a moment of personal testimony, Gamini reveals his feelings toward his sister-in-law to Anil and testifies to her suicide:

*I was the one she should have loved, Gamini said.*

*Anil sitting beside him assumed she was to get a confession. The mercurial doctor about to expose his heart. That category of seduction. But there was nothing he did or said during the remaining journey – to the ayurvedic hospital he had offered to show her – that used the reins of seduction. Just his slow drawl as the train swept unhesitatingly into the darkness of tunnels and he would turn from looking at his hands towards his own reflection in the glass. That was how he told her, looking down and away from her, and she seeing him only in a wavering mirror image lost when they moved back into light.* (Ondaatje 251)

In this scene, Gamini alternately looks at his hands (possibly connected to his profession) and at his own reflection in the window: at this moment of personal testimony, he uses the window reflection to look simultaneously outward and inward. Anil only sees him in the wavering mirror image, which echoes his equally wavering
narrative. The mirror image is strong due to the darkness surrounding the train in the tunnel and disappears as soon as the train enters the sunlight again. This might indicate that the testimony is limited to excavation and does not reach the realm of proper illumination. The absence of the woman’s name might also point toward this line of thinking. Gamini relates to Anil how Ravina, Sarath’s former wife, was brought into the hospital where he was working. In a final attempt to reach her, he tried to wake her and open her eyes in order to restore visual contact. However, Ravina closed her eyes again, which might have indicated both the pain she was in and her resolution to block out the visual world and thus to die:

*It was selfishness on my part. I should have just knocked her out, let her go. But I wanted her to be comforted by me being there. That it was me, not him, not her husband. I held her eyelids open with my thumbs. I shook her until she saw who it was. She didn’t care. I’m here. I love you, I said. She closed her eyes, it seemed to me in disgust. Then she was in pain again. I can’t give you any more, I said, I’ll lose you completely. She put her hand up and made a gesture across her throat. The train was sucked into the tunnel and they moved within it, shuddering in the darkness.*

(Ondaatje 252)

The train then enters another tunnel and makes a shuddering movement: possibly, Gamini is shuddering himself at the memory or Anil is shuddering when she hears this testimony from him. The darkness emphasizes the tone and mood of the story recounted by Gamini. At this moment, Anil cannot see anything despite the flickering light and both Gamini and Anil are in darkness: Gamini is possibly immersed in depressed thoughts, while Anil is immersed in doubt and uncertainty. The woman’s identity remains hidden until the last sentence of the conversation, in which Gamini connects her to Sarath and lends an explanation to her act (Ondaatje 252-253). The train briefly emerges from the darkness and then plunges back into it, possibly indicating the subsequent contemplation of the previous testimony by both Anil and Gamini. The concluding darkness might also indicate the absence of personal illumination following the excavation and testimony on the part of Gamini or might indicate that he keeps being haunted by his past. Thus, the image of darkness can be connected to both the obscurity of crime and the excavation of personal traumatic experiences. Following the testimony, however, the novel does not stage an
illumination. This might support Ondaatje’s view that, although healing is possible, there are many difficulties that surround the processes of testimony and excavation.

2.3 Blue light

The blue light is an eye-catching, recurrent image that allows for multiple interpretations. There are two major scenes in which the blue light occurs: each of these instances is closely connected to the context of the Sri Lankan civil war. Firstly, Gamini experiences the blue light in a hospital’s children’s ward, secondly it occurs in the description of the bomb strapped to the suicide terrorist. In both instances, the blue light receives a set of associations and connotations and as such, a new image emerges that combines these meanings and allows for multiple readings and functions. The first instance connects the blue light to (medical and mental) healing, comfort and consolation. In an instance of chain observation, Gamini watches the mothers who watch over their sleeping children (‘watching over’ interpreted as ‘guarding’ rather than actually ‘looking at’). He sees a child bathed in a powerful blue-coloured light that radiates a sense of warmth rather than of coldness. The blue light (together with the presence of the mothers) is thus associated with the idea of healing and comfort. This consolation, however, applies more to Gamini than to the children.

He would turn to watch a child with jaundice bathed in the pale-blue light as if within a diorama. A blue light that was warm rather than clear, with a specific frequency. ‘Pass me a gentian. Give me a torch.’ Gamini wished to be bathed in it. The nurse looked at her watch and walked from her desk to wake him. But he was not asleep. (Ondaatje 119)

The blue light connects both to medical healing from bodily illness (on the part of the children) and mental healing from psychic traumatisation (on the part of Gamini). The verb form “bathed”, the blue colour and diffuse movement further associate the light with water and its healing properties. The background presence of the mothers might further indicate the connection between the warm womb and the human being’s desire to return to the primordial state of security and safety, which is intensified in the face of traumatic stress and disconnection.

This association between blue light and comfort, however, is not all-inclusive and the blue light recurs in a different context that problematises this first
interpretation of the image. The second instance of blue light occurs in the scene of the suicide bomber and connects the image to the palpable threat of civil war terrorism. The blue bulb underneath the perpetrator’s clothes indicates that the bomb is armed, but as it is buried beneath many layers of clothing, the danger remains hidden from view: “One blue bulb lighting up deep in his clothing.” (Ondaatje 295) Here, the blue light indicates the presence of pending danger, death and destruction. The blue light can thus be connected to both the context of healing and the context of destruction and subsequent traumatisation. From this discussion on light-imagery, I will move on to another aspect of visual imagery: the area of photographic images, which brings together various aspects I have already elaborated.

2.4 Capturing the image: the photograph

Throughout the novel, Michael Ondaatje draws attention to instances of spatial-temporal recording both by referring to visual recording equipment and by including verbal descriptions of photographs. The photograph in itself functions as a metaphoric image, whose traditional associations are partially sustained and partially renewed in the trauma context of its occurrence. Photographic images draw attention to the image as an image and the image of the image and as such, they add self-reflexivity and a second layer of imagery to the narrative. In Anil’s Ghost, there are several instances that include photographic metaphors. I have opted to limit my discussion to one instance, namely Gamini’s confrontation with a photograph of Sarath’s dead body while working in the hospital. This scene allows for the most profound examination of photographic imagery in relation to the Sri Lankan trauma.

By way of introduction, I will touch upon the basic aspects of photography in relation to notions of truth, knowledge, temporality and distance (all of which are of further significance in the context of trauma). Firstly, it is worth noting that although

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3 The other scenes that contain photographic imagery are scenes that highlight Anil’s personal trauma, i.e. her alienation from and reconnection with her home country. These scenes include (1) the photograph of Anil as a swimmer, (2) the family picture of Lalitha and (3) the photograph taken of Anil and Lalitha together. In all three instances, photography is closely linked to notions of memory and remembrance and stages a multifaceted interaction between past, present and future.
photography appears to be representation rather than interpretation, all photographs are individual (and thus subjective) statements on reality (Sontag 6-7). Along with this, a photograph both creates the illusion of immediacy and exposes its fundamental distance toward the object under view (Sontag 163-164). Thirdly, it is important to think of photographs as vehicles of temporal fluidity. A photograph enhances or constitutes a fluid narrative as it connects various temporal dimensions (Sontag 166-167).

However, we have to keep in mind that these characteristics apply to the material manifestations of photography. Although I will not engage in an exhaustive comparison of real photographs and photographic metaphors, it is worth noting that there are both strong resemblances and deviations between material photographs and its verbal descriptions or manifestations. There is one remarkable feature I will underline, namely the relation between photographs and photographic metaphors on the one hand and notions of access and accessibility on the other. Susan Sontag has discussed the various ways in which real photography relates to reality, and I will take her insights as a starting point to discuss the functioning of photographic images in this respect: “While the Proustian labors presuppose that reality is distant, photography implies instant access to the real. But the results of this practice of instant access are another way of creating distance. To possess the world in the form of images is, precisely, to reexperience the unreality and remoteness of the real.” (Sontag 163-164)

Sontag emphasizes that photographs express both the illusion of immediacy and the acknowledgement of distance and remoteness from reality. Although real photographs might create the illusion of immediacy and direct access, this illusion is done away with in the literary image of the photograph, as words take the place of visual and material representation. Furthermore, the photographic metaphor does not entail the illusion of objectivity either, as it consists of words and subjective formulations as much as the rest of the literary narrative. In Anil’s Ghost, the photograph only exists verbally and as such, the illusion of immediacy or objectivity evaporates and is replaced with an additional emphasis on distance and distortion.

This distance and distortion figure prominently in the scene in which Gamini recognises his brother on a photograph and rushes over to confront his brother’s dead body (Ondaatje 287). I have already elaborated various elements of Gamini’s
professional occupation in the previous chapters and this discussion serves to complete the picture. The examination practice described in this scene is hinted at beforehand: every week, the interns of the hospital have to list the wounds and photograph the bodies of political murder victims that are brought in. Gamini then observes the photographs, adds remarks and signs the reports (Ondaatje 212). From the description of this weekly routine, it becomes clear that Gamini attempts to remove the actual horror through (1) the medium of photography that produces a replica of the victim rather than presenting the real victim and (2) his request to the interns to cover the faces of the victims, which allows Gamini to contemplate the pictures with even greater (emotional) distance: “He walked away from the week’s pile of photographs. The doors opened and a thousand bodies slid in, as if caught in the nets of fishermen, as if they had been mauled. [...] They had begun covering the faces on the photographs. He worked better this way, and there was no danger of his recognizing the dead.” (Ondaatje 212-213) He refers to the bodies in terms of fish, possibly diminishing the humanity of the bodies and creating even more distance between his own eyes and mind and the victims pictured and subjected to his medical gaze. Gamini calls this work “the darkest hour of the week” (Ondaatje 213): he has to confront victims of the war that are beyond his help or healing skills. These bodies give voice to the civil war in a direct and abrupt way. There is, however, an instance in which both Gamini’s routine and emotional distance are broken. The next scenes that figures these medical photographs stages a single photograph that attracts Gamini’s attention: a quick reading of the posture and bodily wounds informs the doctor that he has come across his brother:

4 It might also be the case that Gamini experiences this participation in photography as an additional violation of the victims. Susan Sontag has examined this aspect of photography: “Still, there is something predatory in the act of taking a picture. To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed. Just as the camera is a sublimation of the gun, to photograph someone is a sublimated murder – a soft murder, appropriate to a sad, frightened time.” (Sontag 14-15) Although Gamini does not participate in the practice of taking photographs, he might as well feel like a predator himself, as the bodies are given over to his gaze.
When he got to the third picture he recognized the wounds, the innocent ones. He left the reports where they were, went down one flight of stairs and ran along the corridor to the ward. It was unlocked. He began pulling the sheets off the bodies until he saw what he knew he would see. Ever since he had picked up the third photograph, all he could hear was his heart, its banging. (Ondaatje 287)

The face of the body is covered and does not allow for recognition, contrary to the head of Sailor, which was the prime part of the body that allowed for identification. However, the small and innocent wounds on the body allow for close reading and recognition. Directly after he has read this photograph, he feels an urge to test this picture-based recognition and he rushes down to confront Sarath's body. The confrontation affirms his assumptions and reveals that his brother's face, the one thing Gamini could not recognize on the photograph, is left unharmed (Ondaatje 290). In the remainder of this excerpt, Gamini tends to his brother's wounds and reconnects with his childhood and his elder brother through this belated healing practice (cf. chapter 1: the medical gaze).

However, the photograph that precedes this confrontation in the ward already signals that the exchange between the two brothers will remain a unilateral one: Gamini applies his gaze to Sarath, but there is no real exchange. The photograph appears to stand between the two brothers and functions both as a (protective) shield or screen (the photograph induces a sense of distance) and a fuse that causes belated recognition of connection and family ties (the photograph induces a sense of immediacy and contact). Bal has elaborated this one-directional exchange between object and subject that is inherent in photography and the practice of looking at photographs in general: “The conception of the photograph that Barthes will develop [...] is already present: it is a vision, by definition in the present, of a vision that is irrecoverably in the past. There is no exchange of looks, yet two looks confront each other, the one dead, the other alive. Between the two acts of looking the gap of time's passage is dug." (150) This confrontation between the dead and the living view is staged quite literally in the scene of Sarath and Gamini and is accompanied by a “gap of time”, which is a temporal-visual metaphor expressing distance.

In her discussion on photography, Sontag further elaborates photography’s ability to establish a form of interaction or connection with the past (instead of with the specific object or subject of the photograph): “A photograph is both a pseudo-presence
and a token of absence. Like a wood fire in a room, photographs – especially those of people, in distant landscapes and faraway cities, of the vanished past – are incitements to reverie. [...] They are attempts to contact or lay claim to another reality.” (Sontag 16) Her reference to the “token of absence” reminds us of one of the basic trauma concepts: the trace (as the presence of an absence). The photograph of the deceased shows the presence of the one who is absent and creates a visual token or palpable sign that attests to the previous existence and suffering of the deceased. It does not, however, become a representation of trauma, as this would imply that trauma could be both represented and read in a more or less straightforward way. The photograph does function as a testimonial sign. The dead victims are unable to speak, but the voice of the forensic or doctor together with the visual evidence of the photograph are able to express and sustain the victim’s voice and story. The photograph thus functions as a piece of visual evidence:

Something we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we’re shown a photograph of it. In one version of its utility, the camera record incriminates. [...] In another version of its utility, the camera record justifies. A photograph passes for incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened. The picture may distort; but there is always a presumption that something exists, or did exist, which is like what’s in the picture. (Sontag 5)

The picture of Sarath’s body not only testifies to the former life of the victim, it also testifies to the civil war violence and the importance of visual evidence in future attempts for clarification and justice. The scene thus highlights the recurrent significance of visual tokens of testimony. In the same way Sailor could speak for many victims, the photograph of Sarath seems capable of testifying to the wounds and suffering of many other, possibly unrecognizable, victims of civil war torture and murder. Photography’s ability to provide proof and its testimonial function make it highly significant, both in its actual form and in the form of a metaphor in the novel’s treatment of the Sri Lankan trauma. The photograph and the photographic image function in similar ways here: both allow for various interpretations and rely on different temporal dimensions to offer starting points for deeper investigations in and examinations of the past context captured in the picture (or described picture) and the present context of re-interpretation. In the case of the photographic image, this context
of re-interpretation may be located with the actual reader of the novel. York remarks that the photograph and the photographic metaphor may thus enable examination of the present in relation to the excavation of the past and the other way round: “If photographs allow us to fix the precious moment of the present, they are no less an entrée into the complex and often obscure world of the past.” (116)

By way of general conclusion on visual metaphors, we could say that the examination of the three chosen visual images from Anil’s Ghost reveals the ways in which (1) the use of traditional metaphors is modified by the trauma context, (2) the trauma context allows for new images to emerge and (3) these images contribute to a creative treatment of some of trauma studies’ central areas of concern, such as memory, remembrance, testimony and mental healing. In his description of the Sri Lankan trauma, Ondaatje opts for the reminiscences of the main characters on the subject and prompts the reader to move beyond the literal sediment of his writing and to search for deeper and hidden meanings. In this process of excavation by the reader, the visual metaphors occupy a central position as they draw attention to their own multi-layered and modified meanings. Ondaatje seems to invite the reader to explore and uncover the Sri Lankan trauma through a careful examination of the metaphoric devices that contain much of the depth of the narrative. Furthermore, Ondaatje’s use of metaphorics signals, acknowledges and uses the impossibility of access, knowledge and representation that is highly significant for the area of trauma studies. The visual metaphor (both in general and as employed by Ondaatje) represents the fundamental impossibility of direct access, knowledge and representation and embraces distance and distortion as alternative paths for understanding traumatic experiences, testimony and (provisional) healing.

3. Artistic vision and creation in the trauma narrative
In this chapter, the discussion moves from actual sight and its functions as stylistic device to the discussion of inner or artistic sight. Artistic vision in itself can be interpreted as a visual metaphor as the idea of creativity or insight is associated with the traditional image of the light representing truth and knowledge. The previous chapters have produced a number of insights on the workings of visual rhetorics and metaphorics, which I will now elaborate in the light of artistry and the artist’s inner eye. This new focus or perspective on the subject matter, which is also closely connected to the realm of arts to which the narrative in itself belongs, complements and helps to broaden the discussion on the visual characteristics of trauma and the functions of visual images in Anil’s Ghost. In what follows, I will provide a theoretical introduction on artistic illumination and its resemblance to, deviation from and combination with moments of traumatic recall. The novel stages these moments most profoundly in the reconstruction scenes, which will be discussed later on. In this introductory subchapter I will examine (1) the position of the artist figure in the narrative, (2) the characteristics of artistic illumination and (3) the ways in which artistic vision and traumatic recall can be related.

Anil’s Ghost figures two artist-characters, Ananda and Palipana, who are connected to artistic vision and visionary abilities respectively. Although both Palipana and Ananda can be categorized as artists (representing the domain of literary and plastic arts respectively), I have opted to focus on Ananda, as his artistic endeavours are more closely linked to the line of thinking on categories of visual perception and metaphors as it is elaborated in this dissertation. I will elaborate the character Palipana only briefly. It is important to note that the artist functions as an additional researcher in Anil’s Ghost’s plot. In his endeavour to represent or attempt to represent a part of Sri Lankan life that is closely related to the civil violence, the artist explores the outskirts of the conflict and attempts to articulate both the Sri Lankan and his personal trauma. Shapiro has touched upon the function of the artist as a researcher in the visual realm: “The painter and his kin are explorers and researchers in the realm of the visual, Nietzsche assumes, and so they must create, shape, and constrain their material.” (26) In Anil’s Ghost, the artist Ananda explores and attempts to visualize trauma through the artistic perspective he applies to the world and the artistic endeavour he is engaged in. As such, his occupation and its description in the trauma narrative become significant complements to the previous discussion on visuality. There are a number of ways in
which artistic vision can be connected to the issue of trauma. For this purpose, it is worth considering Kenneth Clark’s elaborate exploration of artistic vision’s special properties:

We can all remember those flashes when the object at which we are gazing seems to detach itself from the habitual flux of impressions and becomes intensely clear and important to us. We may not experience these illuminations very often in our busy adult lives, but they are common in our childhood, and given half a chance we could achieve them still. Such moments are the nearest many of us will ever come to the divine agitation of the creative artist. (2)

Clark here defines artistic vision in terms of visual flashes of illumination that occur beyond the range of our voluntary control. Artistic vision is associated with a certain sense of detachment and a sense of insight or deeper understanding of the nature of the things that are implicated in the moment of vision. Somehow, this might remind us of the way in which traumatic recall defies conscious control of the victim and seems to detach itself from the ordinary course of thoughts and impressions. Although a comparison fails in a number of fundamental aspects that cannot be overlooked, the juxtaposition of traumatic memories and flashes of artistic vision shows that there are a number of remarkable (superficial) correspondences.

Both artistic vision and traumatic recall are presented as predominantly visual images that manifest themselves to the mind’s eye outside of conscious or willed control of the artist or person inhabited by the traumatic image respectively. Furthermore, both seem to defy the normal workings of the human brain and the ordinary stream of human consciousness as they insert unusual and unexpected visual images in the mind of a human being. Although traumatic memory and artistic vision can be related to one another (rather than be equalled or compared), we have to keep in mind that these two types of mental appearance differ fundamentally. Whereas artistic vision presents creative ideas and insights, traumatic memories present a literal and belated return of the witnessed events. Flashes of artistic vision are unpredictable, fluid, and result in new forms of insight as they open up imaginative perspectives on familiar objects or events in a moment of artistic illumination. The traumatic memory, however, does not allow for new perspectives to open up, at least not as long as it maintains its visual literality and defies verbalization along with comprehension.
However, Ondaatje appears to present a mode in which artistic vision and traumatic recall conjoin. Artistic vision might reveal aspects of the world that contribute to and change a person’s line of thinking on reality. As such, artistic vision appears to be able to offer new paths of understanding that move beyond the boundaries of conscious experience and to create new lines of thinking that rely on the unconscious and the creative to grope with problematic issues, for example traumatic experiences and memory. Moreover, moments of artistic vision are accompanied by self-reflection and are characterized by a strong sense of confrontation (Clark 11). In Anil’s Ghost, some moments of traumatic recall are staged in conjunction with moments of artistic vision and as such, the characters implicated in these moments are somehow able to confront their own trauma, reflect upon it and to reach out for new paths of understanding and integration. These moments occur most profoundly in the two artistic endeavours of Ananda: the reconstruction projects.

Both the project devoted to reconstructing the head and the Buddha emanate the sense of artistic vision and insight that has been elaborated here. These projects become containers and vehicles of artistic vision. Furthermore, the artistic vision that informed their creation is allowed to flow further as their material form is observed by the artist and other characters in the novel: “[...] we can distinguish a process by which art might shift perception and thereby engender new ways of thinking.” (Bennett 152) Their (visual) material imagery is observed and triggers further reactions and responses. Clark draws attention to the fact that artistic vision can be experienced both as a collective and an individual experience:

The moment of vision, although it is a fresh individual experience for all of us, gains its power because it is a morsel of collective experience as well. The poet and the artist, born as we all are with a capacity for delighted self-discovery in certain symbols, finds amongst them a few which outlive his childhood because they nourish the centre of his creative being. (16)

In regard to the reconstruction of the head, Ananda’s artistic vision has the most profound impact on Anil, in the case of the Buddha statue it is Ananda who is the main receiver of the artistic vision he himself invested in the endeavour. Furthermore, Ananda’s individual experiences coalesce with the collective significance that is inherent in the identification of Sailor and the restoration of the Sri Lankan patrimony.
The quotation further underlines the imaginative character of artistic vision. Artistic vision appears to be informed by the force of imagination and to draw upon realms beyond reality for deeper and new insights in the surrounding world: “These flashes, which seemed at first to be no more than short – though mysteriously important – accidents in a work of art, turn out to be like sparks shot up from the molten centre of the imagination.” (Clark 17) In the same way visual metaphors engender a creative encounter with trauma, artistic vision could contribute to new forms of approach towards trauma through its imaginative and creative character.

Following from this, I will briefly comment on the subject of the visionary or seer. The manifestation of visionary abilities in relation to art in trauma narratives serves to underline and strengthen the aforementioned belief in the ability of artistic vision to move beyond the limits and boundaries imposed upon the mind in ordinary and, by extension, traumatic experience. Jay provides an initial definition of the visionary:

No less symptomatic of the power of the optical in religion is the tendency of the visionary tradition to posit a higher sight of the seer, who is able to discern a truth denied to normal vision. Here the so-called third eye of the soul is invoked to compensate for the imperfections of the two physical eyes. Often physical blindness is given sacred significance, even if at times as a punishment for transgressions against the gods. (12)

Jay introduces two major aspects of visionary abilities: (1) perception of a higher truth and (2) superiority of inner sight over actual eyesight. When we examine the first aspect, it becomes clear that the practice of searching for and uncovering hidden layers of truth is the element that superficially connects visionary abilities and trauma theory or narrative. Contrary to Anil and Sarath, who use material remainders as a point of departure for this practice, the visionary discovers hidden layers of truth without relying on actual material evidence: he sees the truth in a flash of illumination, in much the same way artists gain artistic insight and inspiration. Jay already associates visionaries with transgressive actions and behaviours. Palipana seems to fit this description, as his career is characterized by transgressions of the scientific paradigms and language. Palipana himself is not very much implicated in the forensic project or in the two reconstruction processes, but his contribution lies in his interpretation of the
notion of truth (Ondaatje 102) and in his recommendation of Ananda (Ondaatje 108). His visionary abilities are thus connected to the characters that figure in the reconstruction scenes.

I intend to elaborate the reconstructions as containers of artistic vision in the light of visual metaphors and the workings of artistic vision and insight. A close examination of the reconstruction scenes reveals that they combine various aspects from the previous chapters in the context of artistic creation, which is further characterized by a productive coalescence of traumatic memory and artistic vision. Although both Sailor’s head and the Buddha statue can be interpreted as visual or material articulations of the traumatic experience, I do believe this applies more to the head than to the Buddha reconstruction. Both reconstruction scenes, however, are closely linked to the Sri Lankan trauma: whereas the reconstruction of the head figures in Sailor’s identification process, the reconstruction of the Buddha takes place in a field known for killings and burials and symbolizes the reconstruction of the Sri Lankan patrimony and culture. To start with, I will discuss the reconstruction of Sailor’s head.

3.1 The reconstruction of the head: envisaging the dead

In regard to the reconstruction of the head, I will examine four aspects: (1) the reconstruction in relation to visual imagery, (2) the reconstruction as a fictional endeavour and creation, (3) the reconstruction as a vehicle for understanding trauma and (4) the reconstruction as a tool for identification. The discussion of these features should allow us to gain more insight in the functions of artistic vision in relation to trauma and the workings of the particular scene in the novel.

Firstly, it is worth noting the ways in which the realms of the visual and visual imagery manifest themselves in the scenes that describe the reconstruction of the head. During the various phases of his work, Ananda signals that the process relies heavily on visuality and artistic imagination. His preparations, for example, include an initial overview of the entire body (Ondaatje 162) and observations of the villagers who live nearby the walawwa, including their bodily characteristics, postures and food habits (Ondaatje 166-167). He also chooses a room with good light to work in, a room that formerly belonged to the artist who lived in the building (Ondaatje 167). The recurring notion of observation shows that Ananda needs to take in and observe the broader context in order to reconstruct or work on a smaller piece or particle of that context. His
working methods emphasize the ways in which the various pieces of the project are embedded within the whole and the need to pay an equal amount of time to additional elements and the reconstruction process itself. Although Anil is suspicious of the technique, it is she who watches the progress on the skull:

She recognized the technique of face construction. He had marked several pins with red paint to represent the various thicknesses of the flesh over the bone, and then placed a thin layer of plasticine on the skull, thinning or thickening it according to the marks on the pins. Eventually he would press finer layers of rubber eraser onto the clay to build the face. Collaged this way with various household objects it would look like a five-and-dime monster. (Ondaatje 167-168)

The reconstruction process proceeds in the form of a collage. Ananda combines household materials, coloured paper (Ondaatje 167) and clay, and as the fragments of material are brought together, they add up to a new creation, which allows for new interpretations and meanings. In a sense, this reminds us of the research project of Anil and Sarath, who brought together clues to create new complexes of meaning. Both in the present case and in the case of Anil's forensic research, the collage manifests itself as a significant visual metaphor in the novel. Moreover, the quotation signals that the reconstruction technique literally mirrors the forensic research methods. Whereas Anil and Sarath tried to remove layers, Ananda adds layers. Although both sides work with layered objects and try to bring about new forms of knowledge in a process of discovery, they move in opposite directions. Furthermore, Anil reports how, every afternoon, Ananda destroys the layers he created and starts afresh the next day (Ondaatje 171). This technique is attributed to Ananda's reliance on memory and his reluctance to take too big a step into realms that have yet to be imagined or created:

But early the next morning he would know the precise thickness and texture to return to and could re-create the previous day's work in twenty minutes. Then he thought and composed the face a further step. It was as if he needed the warm-up of the past work to rush over so he could move with more confidence into the uncertainty that lay ahead. (Ondaatje 171)
The head reconstruction is destroyed and re-constructed every single day. This marks a self-awareness of the very technique and realisation process of the reconstruction. Furthermore, this method safeguards the reconstruction until the final result is revealed: there is no progress that Anil or Sarath can witness as long as Ananda is not working on the head. The reconstruction thus only exists when Ananda is working on it; it only exists in progress until it is finished.

Secondly, I will discuss the reconstruction of the head in terms of the fictional project and creation it presents. The reconstruction of Sailor’s head by Ananda provides a profound example of artistic vision and creation in relation to trauma. The reconstruction recalls the decapitated bodies witnessed by Sirissa before she disappeared. As it is her husband who reconstructs the head, he is, in a sense, (unconsciously) reconstructing her experience and coming to terms with the uncertain fate that befell her. The reconstruction functions as a material token that attempts to fill the blank spaces or voids left by the disappearance of both Sailor and Sirissa. However, we have to keep in mind that the reconstruction is a fictional and imaginative creation based on Ananda’s subjective experiences and perspectives. This implies that (1) the project is far removed from a realistic representation and (2) the head becomes a visual sign that cannot truly fill the space that is left blank by the disappearances (even if this were possible in the first place). The fictional nature of the reconstruction moves Anil to doubt the scientific worth of the process from the start:

‘If the artist is as good as Palipana says, he’ll improvise the tools. Have you ever been involved with this kind of thing?’

‘No. Never done reconstruction. I have to say we sort of scorn it. They look like historical cartoons to us. Dioramas, that sort of things.’ (Ondaatje 161)

Anil expresses doubt concerning (1) the usefulness of reconstructions in general and (2) the capacities of the artisan Ananda. She calls reconstructions “historical cartoons”, which underlines their distance from and distortion of reality and their subsequent doubtful scientific value. Anil is sceptical of the mixing of elements of fantasy with subjective observations and artisanal skill and suggests that the artistic reconstruction of the head cannot assist serious scientific research. Both the fictional character of the project and the criticism applied to Ananda remind us of Palipana’s historiographical career.
However, when the head is finally reconstructed it shows a very specific person and reveals a distinct personality with a high reality-level, quite opposed to the monstrosity anticipated by Anil. Sailor has become more than just another corpse to read in a neutral and scientific manner; he has become a person. The visuality, the specificity and the life-likeness strike Anil. The visualization has revealed the object of study as a human being like the researchers themselves. This is a major confrontation for Anil: the study of bones and mass graves had become a detached profession for her, but now an element of human life is added. Anil watches the head and tries to come to terms with it, as a researcher and Sri Lankan citizen:

The firelight set the face in movement. But what affected her [...] was that this head was not just how someone possibly looked, it was a specific person. It revealed a distinct personality, as real as the head of Sarath. [...] She just watched it point-blank, coming to terms with it. There was a serenity in the face she did not see too often these days. There was no tension. A face comfortable with itself. (Ondaatje 183-184)

The most remarkable feature of the head is the serenity that lingers in its facial traits. This serenity reflects Ananda’s personal wish for the dead (possibly including his own wife) to have peace and is informed by his traumatic experience (the loss of his wife). The visualization of Sailor becomes a vehicle for him to come to terms with his loss. As he creates a material representation of the disappeared (including Sailor, Sirissa and possibly also the other disappeared Sri Lankan citizens), he expresses his pain in a visual and palpable form and is able to confront it. In contrast with the examination of the skeletons, the head does not, however, articulate suffering or trauma. Rather, the representation articulates the peacefulness of death. We could argue that the language of the plastic arts takes over as the object itself (although still in the form of a literary description) starts to testify to the after-math of the traumatic experiences of Ananda, Sirissa and Sailor while steering clear from the pitfalls that are inherent in attempted straightforward representation of trauma.

Moreover, the head also triggers deeper understanding of personal traumas on the part of the spectators. Anil learns the story of Ananda’s wife (Ondaatje 185) and feels the sadness, which the serenity tried to cover, seep into her. These feelings trigger
Anil’s suppressed traumatic grief for her fellow Sri Lankan citizens. Anil appears to have been a part of the Sri Lankan trauma all along, the traumatic events having entered her system through stories and civil rights reports. The head, its personality and newly created serenity stir Anil’s awareness of the profound human suffering of her homeland and the distance or alienation that has kept her from this insight all this time. A quotation by Bennett helps to clarify the emotional reaction expressed by Anil:

Empathy [...] is a mode of thought that might be achieved when one allows the violence of an affective experience to truly inform thinking. In this regard, the artist does not merely *describe* an inner experience but allows such experience to fold back into the world in a manner that can inform understandings both about the nature of relationships to others and about the political nature of violence and pain. (Bennett 55-56)

The reconstructed head seems to fold back into the world in the reaction of Anil. By gazing upon the reconstructed head and hearing the story that accompanies its creation, her feelings of grief and empathy are released and brought to the surface. It is in this moment of shared grief that Anil and Ananda reconnect on a level that defies their superficial language and cultural differences (Ondaatje 187). Thus, toward the end of the reconstruction process, it becomes clear that the project’s very combination of reality and imagination informs its function as a gateway to attempt deeper understanding of traumatic experiences and more profound forms of empathy and community. Bennett has elaborated this very thought:

Many of these trauma-related pieces, in fact, incorporated fictional or fantasy elements, even when the artist might lay claim to expressing an affective truth. Insofar as they could be deemed to promote understanding of trauma, their contribution tended to lie in the endeavor to find a communicable language of sensation and affect with which to register something of the experience of traumatic memory – and, thus, in a manner of formal innovation. (2)

Bennett attributes the function of “trauma-related pieces” to their ability to create new languages to attempt to communicate traumatic experiences. I have interpreted this ability in terms of the language or iconography of the material object, which becomes a passageway that might reveal new aspects of traumatic experiences, both of the
portrayed victim and the spectator. As the material object only exists in the form of a verbal description, this iconographic language becomes intertwined with the communicative strength of the narrative’s metaphorics. It is Anil, the sceptic, who becomes engulfed in the newly opened passage and its new forms of knowledge, communication, empathy and connection.

As a last step, the reconstructed head is used in an actual field search. Both Anil and Sarath fear that the face will not lead to Sailor’s identification because Ananda has created a new face instead of reconstructing an old or former one, due to the mixing of imagination and facts: “She slipped into the courtyard and saw Sarath still there facing the image of Sailor. He would already know as she did that no one would recognize the face. It was not a reconstruction of Sailor’s face they were looking at.” (Ondaatje 188) The reconstructed head emphasizes the impossibility of truthful, objective representation and the subjectivity of formative abilities. Furthermore, it underlines the various discrepancies that exist between the past and the representation of the past, between the individual and the representation of the individual, between reality and artefact. These discrepancies and difficulties are reinforced as the trauma context simmers through the project. Although the combination of fact and fiction informed the workings of the head as a vehicle for deeper understanding and empathy, the actual identification process could be hindered by it. Sarath nevertheless uses the head for further identification and takes it with him to the villages, as someone might recognize a once living person in the creation (Ondaatje 205). Although they do not believe that the reconstruction will lead to identification, it ultimately does and Sailor is identified as Ruwan Kumara:

Sarith and Anil had identified Sailor at the third plumbago village. He was Ruwan Kumara and he had been a toddy tapper. After breaking his leg in a fall he worked in the local mine, and the village remembered when the outsiders had picked him up. They had entered the tunnel where twelve men were working. They brought a billa – someone from the community with a gunnysack over his head, slits cut out for his eyes – to anonymously identify the rebel sympathizer. A billa was a monster, a ghost, to scare children in games, and it had picked out Ruwan Kumara and he had been taken away. (Ondaatje 269)
The actual identification takes up little narrative space compared to the research project itself. In a couple of lines, the life and abduction of Ruwan Kumara are sketched. Furthermore, Anil and Sarath continue to refer to the body as “Sailor”. The very fact of identification appears to be significant, while the actual name of the victim is of mere secondary importance. This excerpt also underlines the recurrent function of categories of visual perception and visual imagery. The perpetrators enter the darkness of the tunnel, which possibly symbolizes the imminent crime and the suppressed trauma of the village. Moreover, the traitor’s head is covered: the perpetrators and their assistants thus remain largely hidden from view. The slits for the eyes both enable and block visual recognition: whereas the traitor visually recognizes Ruwan as a rebel sympathizer, he is shielded from visual recognition himself. This quotation also hints to the assumed responsibility of the government in the case. Several aspects I have mentioned and elaborated here recur in the examination of the second reconstruction project.

3.2 The reconstruction of the Buddha: envisaging the future

The last chapter of Anil’s Ghost is entitled ‘Distance’ and is dedicated to the reconstruction of the Buddha statue and the painting of the eyes of a second, new Buddha statue. The word ‘distance’ may refer to Anil’s alienation, the general sense of alienation in Sri Lanka (cf. chapter 1) and the panoramic view experienced by Ananda. Although the destruction of the statue is no direct result of the civil violence (Ondaatje 299-300), it is indirectly related to it. We can connect it to the conflict as poor people trying to ensure their survival in the midst of the civil war start looking for treasure. Moreover, the site of the Buddha statue is directly connected to the violence as it is used for the torture and burial of abducted citizens (Ondaatje 300). This chapter in the novel signals that (1) Buddhism meets the harsh reality events of contemporary Sri Lanka and (2) the reconstruction of sacred symbols (the Buddha statue) in a collective project might support a personal or general regeneration and create a message of hope for the nation. The reconstruction of the statue, the construction of the new Buddha statue and the painting ceremony integrate fragments of Sri Lankan history and religion, moments of artistic vision and artistic creativity. Ananda, as the artist-character, may come to represent the author himself, who delivers his literary message through Ananda’s artistic endeavours and his experience of regeneration. In this discussion, I will examine
Firstly and in order to understand the reconstruction itself, it is worth looking into the significance that is attributed to Buddha statues in *Anil's Ghost*. The Buddha statue is the visual manifestation of the main deity in Buddhism. In his plastic form, the Buddha becomes the symbolic observer and protector of the Sri Lankan world: his gaze spans the landscape and its people in an act of protective surveillance. In general, there is a special connection between Sri Lanka and the figure of the Buddha: “Another deeply rooted legend is that the king of gods asked Buddha to protect the island. The chronicles further record that this island was blessed and consecrated not only by the most recent of the Buddhas, but by the three previous Buddhas as well.” (Meddegama 85) This protection, however, is criticized in the novel as the Buddha is presented as an impotent and inactive force. The statue looks on but the deity does not seem to be involved in the resolution of the conflict. The subsequent destruction of the material container and the disappointment of the thieves when they do not find any treasure inside the statue (Ondaatje 300) signal the fundamental emptiness of the statue and the collapse of its function as a protective deity. The spectatorship of the statue is robbed or devoid of agency and its gaze equals the distant, detached view Gamini attributed to Euro-American novel and film characters (Ondaatje 285-286).

Although the visual and material form of the deity suggests the presence of the divinity and the possibility of contact between humans and the divine, this suggestion reveals itself to be empty. Divine presence and contact are absent from the representation of the Buddha statue in the beginning of the chapter. Shapiro has discussed the inhabitation of religious statues: “The oldest image of the god [Götterbild] is supposed to harbor and at the same time conceal the god – to intimate his presence but not to expose it to view.” (35) In the beginning of the final chapter of *Anil's Ghost*, the reader feels that the deity is absent from the statue and the nation. The reconstruction and eye-painting process, however, reveal that the statue and site of the Buddha harbour a different kind of power that induces imagination, insight and hope. Ananda becomes the agent of this power and through his reconstruction this final chapter’s message of hope is reinstated in connection to the Buddha statues.
Secondly, I will examine the actual reconstruction process and emphasize three aspects of it: (1) the social value of the project, (2) the jigsaw puzzle and the fragmentation of the rock and (3) Ananda's surveillance of the work. To start with, it is worth noting that Ananda's endeavour reduces the intensity of civil violence in that particular region. He invites men and women from surrounding villages to help him, who eagerly accept because it provides them with a safe endeavour (Ondaatje 301-302). Two of his men take care of the bodies that are regularly found in the fields (Ondaatje 301) and in time, the killings and burials in the region subside (Ondaatje 301). The area appears to be cleansed of violence and is thus prepared as a site for inner healing. The project obviously has a positive social force and influence.

Furthermore, the description of the reconstruction process indicates that Ananda uses a variant of the collage method. This time, the collage becomes more like a jigsaw puzzle as Ananda has to put all the separate pieces of the statue (both small and large) back together again (Ondaatje 301). The preparation of the process is a procedure in which the bits and pieces of the rock are identified (Ondaatje 301). Ananda’s work displays his artistic abilities and is said to be “complex and innovative” (Ondaatje 301). The reconstruction of the statue does not rely on imagination as much as the reconstruction of the head did. In this project, imagination and factual information work together again, but differently, as Ananda is asked to perform a realistic re-creation of the former statue, which has a well-known model and form. During his work, Ananda gives special attention to the head and decides to leave the fragmentary appearance or jigsaw pattern of the statue’s body and head intact, possibly as visual evidence of the destruction and reconstruction processes:

During the months of assembly, Ananda had spent most of his time on the head. He and two others used a system of fusing rock. Up close the face looked quilted. They had planned to homogenize the stone, blend the face into a unit, but when he saw it this way Ananda decided to leave it as it was. He worked instead on the composure and the qualities of the face. (Ondaatje 302)

The fragmented lines can be interpreted as visual signs that testify to the violence and the subsequent artistic reconstruction, the way a scar on a human body points both to the former wound and the healing applied to it: “As Marlene Goldman notes, Ananda’s efforts do not claim some kind of ‘wholeness’ or ‘unity,’ since the Buddha’s scars, as it
were remain visible […], acting as a reminder of the wounds and the act of healing.” (Roberts 974-975) The fragmentation of the face can be interpreted as a symbolic testimony to the real-life fragmentation of Sri Lankan life that results from the civil violence and disappearances. From a broader cultural perspective, this display of fragmentation acknowledges the division of the nation without excluding the possibility of newfound unity. Ananda’s technique emphasizes that unity need not be homogenization and that diversity and fragmentation have to be accepted as a cultural value in order to move forward in a process of reconsolidation and peace: “The months of labor expended in the careful reconstruction of the Buddhist statue is immanently symbolic of a rebuilding that might eventually reunite the different factions of Sri Lanka into something whole and stable as well.” (Derrickson 148). The fragmented rock can also be connected to the Sri Lankan trauma narratives. In the same way the pieces of rock are collected and put together, the Sri Lankan trauma narratives can be brought together to create a totality that can start testifying to the national trauma as a whole. The visible fragmentation then testifies to the individuality of each narrative and its possible integration into a whole collection of narratives without losing its particular character.

I will add two more remarks to these assumptions. Firstly, the site of the project is said to resemble a “hundred-foot-long coffin” (Ondaatje 301) and together with the monsoon rains, this scene calls to mind the idea of resurrection and rebirth, which can equally apply to the statue, Ananda, the workers involved in the project and the Sri Lankan culture that is (partially) involved in the reconstruction. Due to the weather, the workers are constantly submerged in water, the major healing and cleaning substance. This supports the assumption that the reconstruction process might have individual, collective and cultural benefits. I also want to draw attention to the way in which the statue is actually put together again. The reconstruction process is finished when engineers burrow paths in the stone structure and workers pour liquid metal in the paths that glues the various parts of the body back together (Ondaatje 302-303). In this instance, coherence and assembling are emphasized. The liquid iron that is poured into the statue is said to resemble “red veins” (Ondaatje 303), which further underlines the renewal of inner life and the enlivening effect of coherence and unity. We have to keep in mind, however, that the fragmentary quality (especially of the head) becomes invisible as soon as the statue is erected again. The statue will give the long-distance
impression of coherence and its testimonial function will largely be removed from view. Its possible function as a marker of traumatic narrative, fragmentation and national unity is not straightforwardly given. Ondaatje here signals that the restoration of Sri Lankan patrimony has a limited symbolic and testimonial function that has to be complemented in order to be truly viable. I will return to this assumption in the course of this subchapter.

Near the end of the reconstruction process, Ananda climbs the scaffolding and surveys the project from above (Ondaatje 303). In this privileged moment, he is able to look down upon the Buddha. The destruction and reconstruction resulted in a change or reversal of spectator-relations, which continues into the scene of the eye-painting ceremony as well. The close contact between human life and artistic tradition triggers Ananda’s former belief in the powers of artistic originality and creation. This is a major revitalizing experience for him:

He saw the lidded grey eyes someone else had cut in another century, that torn look in its great acceptance; he was close against the eyes now, with no distance, like an animal in a stone garden, some old man in the future. [...] He looked at the eyes that had once belonged to a god. This is what he felt. As an artificer now he did not celebrate the greatness of faith. But he knew if he did not remain an artificer he would become a demon. The war around him was to do with demons, spectres of retaliation. (Ondaatje 304)

As Ananda faces the statue that once represented artistry, religious protection and tradition, he receives new insight in the inner strength lent to him by his work as an artificer and the inner strength of art and creation. The past tense of the verb “to belong” indicates the absence of religious faith. The scene, however, signals how this absence can be replaced by a newfound faith in art. Artistic vision and creation here become the new source for faith, hope and regeneration (Burrows 175; Derrickson 148; Roberts 974). This line of thinking is continued in the description of the second, new Buddha statue as well. A second Buddha statue is erected nearby the ancient one Ananda is rebuilding: “A quarter of a mile away, and simultaneously with the reconstruction of this large broken Buddha, another statue was being built – to replace the destroyed god.” (Ondaatje 301) In the description of the new statue, the white plaster contrasts with the stony rocks of the first Buddha, the colour white possibly
referring to birth of the second and rebirth of the first Buddha. While the first Buddha is reconstructed horizontally, the second Buddha is constructed vertically. Both, however, will end up surveying Sri Lanka in the very same direction. It is said that the eyes will always look north, to the major insurgency area. The fact that the restored and the new Buddha look in the same direction could indicate a number of things: (1) a reinforcement of a univocal view on cultural diversity and (2) a need for a shared goal and future vision to bring about progress, but also (3) the continuation of lack of conversation and connection, which is underlined by the fact that there is no facing and no visual contact between the two statues. In regard of the second Buddha statue, the eye-painting ceremony manifests itself as the most prominent feature. I will now, therefore, examine the workings of the eye-painting ceremony or Netra Mangala in three aspects: (1) the ceremony as life-fuse, (2) the significance of the mirror image and (3) the intertwining of traditional ritual and (personal) memory.

According to Sri Lankan tradition, the eye-painting ceremony is the final and finishing step in the building process of a Buddha statue. The painting of the eyes is believed to enliven the statue and give it its divine life: “Netra means “eye.” It is a ritual of the eyes. A special artist is needed to paint the eyes on a holy figure. It is always the last thing done. It is what gives the image life. Like a fuse. The eyes are a fuse. It has to happen before a statue or a painting in a vihara can become a holy thing.” (Ondaatje 97)

Vision is staged as a life-bringing force, which underlines the traditional association between eyes and life. The eyes can be interpreted as a life-fuse, which can refer both to the trigger in explosive devices (implying violence and war weaponry) and in fireworks (implying celebrations). Both aspects are implicitly present in the last chapter’s celebration of regeneration. Furthermore, the eye-painting ceremony acknowledges the strength of vision as a catalyst that makes a difference between the earthly material and the divine being. The eye-painting ceremony connects the eyes to the notions of insight and (divine) enlightenment (which is in itself an important visual metaphor, Punter 110). Symbolically, the ceremony also has to be performed at the specific hour of the day at which the Buddha reached enlightenment (Ondaatje 99) so that the eye-painting ceremony becomes a visual re-enactment of this very event. In short, the statue’s eyes and their painting are associated with presence, existence, enlightenment and insight. These notions recur in the epiphany Ananda experiences toward the end, which will be elaborated later on.
During the painting ritual, the artist is not allowed to look into the eyes of the Buddha, as a human person isn’t allowed to face the divinity during his or her birth (Ondaatje 99). The artisan uses a mirror that reflects the eyes to guide his movements. As such, the creation of the statue’s sight is not observed directly, only indirectly, through a mirror reflection, which recalls the way Anil perceived Gamini when he confessed her his love for Sarath’s wife. This mirror reflection distorts the image and creates a distance between human artificer and divine statue: “The boy held up the metal mirror so that it reflected the blank stare of the statue. The eyes unformed, unable to see. And until he had eyes – always the last thing painted or sculpted – he was not the Buddha.” (Ondaatje 305-306) The image of the mirror thus (1) creates distance in a moment of profound contact and closeness between artificer and divinity, (2) draws attention to the distance between our material world and the spiritual realm and (3) underlines and reinforces the distortion that is inherent in our perception of reality. Furthermore, the mirror creates an illusion of double or simultaneous existence, in the sense that the Buddha appears as both material and ethereal being. The mirror also underlines the artistic practice of making images: the mirror presents an image of the statue, which is in effect an image of the Buddha, Buddhism and its cultural and philosophical values.

Furthermore, the eye-painting ritual is closely connected to moments of personal remembrance. When Ananda performs the eye-painting ceremony, he is dressed according to traditional rules. In this instance, he returns to his artistic and family roots and he reconnects with his family history of traditional artistry. Moreover, hidden underneath his brocade costume is Sarath’s cotton shirt. Ananda carries Sarath with him, both mentally and materially: “The sun lit the green bamboo of the ladder. He could feel its partial warmth on his arms, saw it light the brocade costume he wore over Sarath’s cotton shirt – the one he had promised himself he would wear for this morning’s ceremony. He and the woman Anil would always carry the ghost of Sarath Diyasena.” (Ondaatje 305) The hidden layers of clothing partially echo the hidden explosives of the suicide bomber. The shirt can also be interpreted as a visual layer of grief and memory. During the preparation and execution of the painting ceremony, Ananda moves between contemplations on the past to the present and the future. The site of the Buddha becomes a space for the temporal intertwining of memories or flashbacks, present impressions and prospects or reflections on what is yet to come.
By way of closing remark on the fourth aspect of this subchapter, it is worth noting that Ananda has to sculpt the eyes before he can start painting them. This reminds us of the way in which he sculpted Sailor's head and Anil's tear-wet face (Ondaatje 187). During his labour, it seems that Ananda is putting his own life energy into the statue: “Ananda was very tired. As if all his blood had magically entered into this body. Soon, though, there would be the evolving moment when the eyes, reflected in the mirror, would see him, fall into him. The first and last look given to someone so close. After this hour the statue would be able to witness figures only from a great distance.” (Ondaatje 306) He gradually merges with the Buddha and their eyes open simultaneously in a metaphorical sense (although the painting itself is not described): both the statue and the artist are imbued with a sense of (renewed) life and insight in this scene. Although the statue seemed devoid of divine power, Ananda reinstates a certain sense of divine presence in his description of the statue. The painting ceremony, the closeness to the face and the position high above the earth give the artist a sense of connection with the earthly and spiritual (therefore not strictly religious) realm.

Lastly, I will examine Ananda’s panoramic view of the landscape and the message of regeneration and hope that is present in its description. The broad view of the landscape takes place during the eye-painting ceremony and forms a climactic moment of the intertwining of traumatic memory and (artistic) insight or vision. The overview of the landscape actually occurs before the eye painting itself takes places (the eye-painting itself is never described) and results from the fact that Ananda cannot look at the statue itself. His gaze is thus forced toward the landscape that surrounds the statue and Ananda takes in Sri Lanka’s natural splendour and vitality: “Pale greens, dark greens, bird movement and their nearby sounds. It was the figure of the world the statue would see forever, in rainlight and sunlight, a combustible world of weather even without the human element.” (Ondaatje 306) The words “rainlight” and “sunlight” highlight the powerful combination of light radiated by the sun and filtered through slight rain. Light is thus connected to its principal source and to water as a healing substance. The human element, however, seems to be absent from the scene, which reminds us of the Sri Lankan disappearances again. Ananda’s renewed faith in art is complemented by a renewed insight in the vitality of nature and the power of imagination. This experience of renewed insight opens up the possibility of inner regeneration for himself, the Sri Lankan people and culture. Burrows argues that: “In
the beautiful last paragraph, Ananda finally sees the world anew through eyes alive to the beauty of the world and sees his place in it. It is a vision of propinquity [...]." (176) In this scene, the combination of actual observation and an artistic perspective on the world produces a powerful insight in the present situation of the country, together with a belief in reconciliation and hope for the future. The overview of natural Sri Lankan processes engages the entire human sensorium (Ondaatje 307). However, the scene asserts the dominance of the visual sense through emphasis on the imagery of the eyes, the horizon, the light and the broad panoramic view in itself.

Ananda is immersed in the view and adopts the perspective of the Buddha statue (which is associated with tradition, stability and permanence as well as distance from human life and inactivity). We could argue that this instance of immersion is a profound and prolonged moment of artistic vision, as a new perspective on the world reveals itself in the process of artistic creation. This entails a slight adaptation in terms of duration of the definition of artistic vision that has been provided in the introduction to this chapter: artistic vision manifests itself here as a prolonged view, rather than as a flash of illumination. In this instance of immersion, the contemplation of nature moves Ananda to contemplate his disappeared wife in terms of natural life and as such, artistic insight and a moment of traumatic memory become intertwined:

Ananda briefly saw this angle of the world. There was a seduction for him here. The eyes he had cut and focussed with his father’s chisel showed him this. The birds dove towards gaps within the trees! They flew through the shelves of heat currents. The tiniest of hearts in them beating exhausted and fast, the way Sirissa had died in the story he invented for her in the vacuum of her disappearance. A small brave heart. In the heights she loved and in the dark she feared. He felt the boy’s concerned hand on his. This sweet touch from the world. (Ondaatje 307)

As artistic vision and traumatic memory conjoin, the traumatic memory of his wife’s disappearance is opened up to the new possibilities that present themselves in the form of nature’s vitality and the creative work on the statue. This quotation also draws attention to the void left by Sirissa’s disappearance and the possible solution that presents itself to Ananda in this moment of profound insight. This solution consists of imagining or inventing a story that might fit into the void. The reconstruction of the head, the statue of the Buddha and the eye-painting ceremony have taught Ananda that
imagination is a possible and viable solution to the lack of closure that characterizes both his personal and the Sri Lankan trauma. In this instance, Ondaatje stresses the significance of his literary endeavour. His treatment of the Sri Lankan trauma imaginatively opens up the civil war violence and its political examinations and provides a fictional solution, which consists of (1) the use of literary narrative to provide (provisional) closure (both on a personal and collective level), (2) the use of visual metaphors and visualizations of traumatic experiences to allow for new forms of understanding and empathy and (3) the regeneration of art as a cultural cure.

The final chapter can thus be read as a self-reflexive comment on the power of literary narrative in the treatment of trauma and political conflict. Hillger has suggested the very same thing in regard to Anil’s Ghost: “The extent to which Ondaatje’s texts themselves ultimately constitute moments of this art becomes obvious in the final chapter of Anil’s Ghost, which reads like a self-reflexive comment on the nature of Ondaatje’s work.” (224) In this respect, Ananda comes to represent the visionary writer, who presents his view for the future in the form of a narrative to the reader.

The reader is implicated in these workings of the fictional project as well. Although the reader has followed Anil throughout the novel, she disappears before the end and the reader is led to follow the indigenous gaze, presented by Ananda. The participation in the indigenous gaze refreshes our perspectives and signals that the reader, too, has to open up his mind and possibly rethink commonly accepted ideas about, for example, foreign authorities (Derrickson 148-149): “Seeing, moreover, is not just doing. It is also undergoing. We are not only participating in creating what we see but are also transformed by our experience of seeing. One’s eye is not fundamentally different from the eye of the artist or the scientist, which is remade in each act of making.” (Ezrahi 324) The novel’s descriptive language draws us into the scene, up the scaffolding and then beyond the Sri Lankan horizon. At the end of the novel, we are left up there to ponder our newly obtained knowledge about the Sri Lankan conflict and the possibility of man’s redemption through artistry, natural vitality and fictional narrative.

According to Davis and Lee, the assassination of the president cancels a possible redemptive or regenerative reading of the final scene and the novel as a whole: “This anti-pietà [the attack on the president], and the resulting fragmentation of community and public space, is linked with the collapse of official narratives (as the public hears of
the assassination via cell phone and rumor) and of hope for a rational outcome to the investigation (295).” (Davis and Lee 100) I tend to disagree with their assumptions: rather than signal the impossibility of a rational outcome for the conflict, Ondaatje seems to suggest that the newly offered paths to healing and reconciliation are not necessarily without difficulties. The solution of the conflict will not rest on the efforts of characters such as Anil, Sarath, Gamini, Ananda and Palipana alone. Moreover, the rational efforts toward a solution of the conflict might need to be complemented with fictional or imaginative approaches and projects, in order to be truly viable for the future.

4. Conclusion

In the course of this dissertation, I have demonstrated that the use of visual discourse, metaphors and artistic vision in Anil’s Ghost can produce a treatment of trauma that (1) is deeply rooted in human perception, understanding and experience, (2) allows for
new ways of attempting to understand trauma and new paths for empathy, and (3) enables personal and communal regeneration. Vision becomes engaged in traumatic experience, and as such, man’s dominant connection with and perception of reality is implicated, distorted and re-interpreted as well. However, the visual sense also allows for a partial rediscovery of and reconnection with the world. Psychic trauma defies understanding, and the use of visually informed devices in trauma narrative serves to explore the boundaries of comprehension while proposing alternative routes of access, knowledge and empathy. New and re-interpreted forms of testimony, communication, community and healing accompany this exploration.

In the first chapter, I discussed the visual characteristics of traumatic registration and recall. I argued that traumatic experience is deeply informed by the realm of the visual and, consequently, found that trauma theory and narrative abound with references to the visual as well. An in-depth analysis of four visually informed phenomena (disappearances, visual witnessing, visual memories, and the gaze) drew attention to the fact that close attention to visual discourse can help to (1) understand the human sensory relations to the world that are refigured in the context of trauma, (2) probe the boundaries of understanding and (3) engage in creative and imaginative attempts to move beyond former limits of connection and empathy.

The second chapter focused on the workings of metaphors in literary language use and trauma theory and narrative. Trauma studies are suffused with (visual) metaphors: by using metaphors, scholars and writers are able to embrace, explore and use metaphor’s distance, distortion and alternative form of access to productive ends. The reader becomes involved in the practice of uncovering connotative and associative layers of the imagery that expresses the depth of human experience described in the trauma narrative. The use of metaphorics in this particular context indicates a partial renewal and partial maintenance of traditional meanings and associations. I have discussed darkness in connection to personal testimony and the obscurity of war crimes, blue light in connection to mental healing and the threat of violence, and the photograph in connection to testimony through visual means and new community in the novel.

Thirdly, I have examined artistic vision in terms of flashes of illumination. Anil’s Ghost stages scenes in which inner vision and traumatic recall come together. These moments figure most profoundly in the reconstruction scenes. The conjunction of
artistic vision and traumatic recall allows for the emergence of new forms of insight in regard to traumatic experience. Furthermore, the reconstructions, as material containers of artistic vision, testify to the visual restoration of identity (reconstruction of the head) and Sri Lankan patrimony (reconstruction of the Buddha) and thus articulate the possibility of personal and collective regeneration. Ondaatje’s message of hope is reinforced in the scene of the eye-painting ceremony through the association between eyes and life and the panoramic view of natural vitality. The reconstruction projects are accompanied by a renewed faith in the power of art and imagination. As such, the writer asserts the function of his own narrative.

My analysis of the novel, informed by theoretical insights concerning the visual character of trauma, the workings of trauma in visual metaphors, and the visual representation of trauma, has produced a number of insights that appear to transcend the novel itself. These insights (which are also the main insights of the three respective chapters) would include (1) the visual characteristics of traumatic recall, which are staged in contexts such as the Sri Lankan disappearances, testimony, identification, healing and crime and highlight man’s primordial connection to the world and the ways in which it is implicated in trauma; (2) the ability of visual metaphorics to produce a productive encounter between trauma narrative and reader that is firmly based in imagery’s distance to and distortion of reality, while offering new paths of attempted understanding and empathy and (3) the conjunction of artistic vision and moments of traumatic recall that opens up traumatic memories, renders a message of hope in the regeneration of inner strength and cultural patrimony and underlines the function of imaginative narrative in dealing with a traumatic past.

Although the arguments I have developed and the conclusions I have formulated are firmly rooted in Anil’s Ghost, I believe that the aspects of the theoretical framework mentioned above could be applied to other narratives as well, as they are relatively general and (1) allow for multiple adaptations in different narrative contexts, (2) enable further elaborations derived from areas of study such as psychology, literature and trauma-theory and (3) engage a wide range of onsets (such as the relationship between the other senses and aspects of trauma and the significance of art and nature’s vitality in the light of regeneration) that allow for further thinking. We have to bear in mind, however, that each trauma narrative possibly stages a different view on human perception, emphasizes different aspects of man’s relation to the world and provides an
alternative treatment of trauma. The precise insights that result from the application of the framework to concrete textual material will thus invariably differ. In short, this dissertation attempts to establish an initial framework with possible wider significance regarding trauma, visual perception and literary devices while keeping its close connection to the narrative that inspired it in the first place.

Former research on Anil’s Ghost has examined the ways in which Ondaatje engages in political, ethical and psychological aspects of the Sri Lankan conflict and trauma. Occasionally, scholars have pursued an analysis of the novel’s textual features, however seldom very exhaustive or extensive and almost always in conjunction with aspects from other domains or areas (for example historiography). My dissertation is an attempt to restore Anil’s Ghost to the realm of literary criticism while allowing ethical, political and cultural observations and side-remarks to seep in as well. Anil’s Ghost is a rich narrative that abounds with stylistic devices and literary strategies, many of which remain unexplored even after the conclusion of this dissertation. In regard to the research that has been conducted on Michael Ondaatje, it is worth noting that the bulk of scholarly works discusses Ondaatje as a poet. Consequently, an extensive discussion of his poetic imagery is already available. In the introduction, I mentioned his highly acclaimed poetry prose, which has been elaborated at length as well, for example in relation to his award-winning novel The English Patient. However, an in-depth analysis of the visual metaphors, rhetorics and references to artistic vision (which might function self-reflexively as a reference to artistry and imagination) in his novelistic work was formerly absent from the range of research. This dissertation is thus an attempt to make amends for this lacuna in the research on Michael Ondaatje. The discussion has been further specified in regard to one specific novel, Anil’s Ghost.

This dissertation has touched upon the special properties of literature in regard to psychic trauma: literature can stage subject matters that defy ordinary frameworks of understanding and normal paths of gaining access to knowledge. As literature immerses the reader in a mental world of images, we could say that literature, as a whole, is a privileged vehicle for engaging the reader fully in the subject matter of the trauma narrative. In Anil’s Ghost, Ondaatje tries to enter the Sri Lankan conflict imaginatively, through alternative routes, voices and perspectives. Ondaatje also humanizes the conflict by presenting the core of the conflict as a compilation of human stories and lives and by moving political and religious considerations to the
background. His endeavour brings the reader closer to the Sri Lankan trauma and allows for imaginative sympathy and broader understanding, enhanced by the varied and lively use of visual discourse and metaphors. The reader is immersed in the fictional proceedings and made to question his own position, both within the narrative and within the world that gave rise to it, which could possibly lead to new forms of community and communication, both inside and outside of the novel.

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