Introduction: Ian McEwan’s Sensationalist Impressionism

Adèle Cassigneul and Elsa Cavalié
I like writers generally, and Nabokov is another who is supreme in this respect, who recognizes that forty percent of the brain’s processing is given over to the visual, and the visual region projects deep into other parts of the brain, of language and emotion. We are visual creatures and the novel, more than cinema, for me is ultimately a visual medium.


Crafting his novels for “visual creatures”, Ian McEwan time and again creates impactful, or impressive scenes where vision is the triggering element of the plot: one may think chronologically of murderer Robert seeing Colin and Mary on their arrival in Venice in The Comfort of Strangers, of the mesmerizing and deathly hot air balloon scene in Enduring Love, of Stephen losing “sight” of his daughter in The Child in Time, of Briony watching Cecilia and Robbie in Atonement, of Henry Perowne gazing at a burning plane in Saturday, and more recently of Charlie watching Adam in the first chapter of Machines Like Me and People Like You, the list could go on. As John Updike puts it: “Picture after picture [...] arises to challenge and flatter the reader’s capacity for visualization”.

In an interview with the novelist, Zadie Smith intuitively described McEwan’s style as “lyrical realism” both hinting at the importance of images and associating somewhat conflicting terms without clearly defining the manner in which the two concepts might coexist. Few critics have indeed paid specific attention to McEwan’s uses and abuses of the visual, often subsuming it to his “aesthetics”, or “style”. In Atonement, Briony’s (in)famous scene at the window is, for instance, mostly analysed in terms of ethics, or as a metaphor of the writing process, and while those angles are obviously highly
relevant, they tend to evacuate the centrality of “vision” in the understanding of the issues at stake. Similarly, recent critical trends on McEwan have brilliantly explored his conflicted relationship with modernism (Dancer), his “reluctant impressionism” (James 2012, 135), or “pseudo impressionism” (Matz 2017, 279-280) without specifically tackling the role that images, in their most mundane, literal sense, play in the organisation and style of the novel.

This issue thus sets to explore the various ways in which McEwan uses the novel as a “visual medium” (Lynn). His literary artfulness subtly blends aesthetic sophistication with novelistic entertainment to create literary images that work at different levels: as motifs or narrative strategies, and in McEwan’s clear-cut style. This introduction aims at showing that, as the self-proclaimed heir of realist and modernist traditions, McEwan relies on the imaging power of his prose to create an idiosyncratic impressionism which conjoins both visual accuracy and dramatic sensationalism.

Voyeurs and spies: Ian McEwan and the scopic drive

As critics have often noticed, McEwan’s writing, and specifically the way his plots are driven usually relies on his use of the “spectacular”: murders, child abductions, homejackings and balloon accidents happen with astonishing regularity, and those incidents usually have a strong visual dimension (a spectacle being, etymologically, something that is meant to be seen). The most striking instance of that taste towards the “spectacular”, or perhaps the sensational, is probably that of the accident, as a recurring ploy in McEwan’s fiction, encountered in *Enduring Love*, in *Saturday* (when Perowne crashes his car into Baxter’s), but also in *Atonement* (when Robbie sends the wrong letter to Cecilia). All of these accidents are primarily rendered through the powerful visual trace they leave on the protagonists and the readers, and it seems that for McEwan, the importance of an event is directly correlated to its visual impact. After the balloon incident Joe Rose states that “[he’d] never seen anything as terrible as that falling man” (*Enduring Love* 17), Briony surrenders to the power of vision in the fountain scene (“she accepted that she did not understand, and that she must simply watch”, 39) while Mary is crushed by what she sees in *The Comfort of Strangers*: “And though Mary was watching into the light, and the three figures by the window were silhouetted by the sky behind, she saw with total clarity the obscene precision of every movement, of every nuance of a private fantasy. The intensity of her vision had drained her faculties of speech and movement” (94). The ubiquity of the scopic drive in McEwan’s novel may explain the presence of one of its corollaries, or literalization, the figure of the spy, whose etymological root is interestingly the same as “spectacular”, may then be an emblematic, or paroxystic version of the characters’ relationship to vision: someone who knows more than the ones around him, and whose knowledge has been acquired through intense, constant watching.

In novels populated by spies, one could almost suggest that if an event takes place, it needs to be seen, it demands “watching”, however horrific its details may be. Indeed, Mcewanesque events rarely take place off-stage, or “off-page” as if they needed to be
actualized into images to exist. Scopophilia, or the scopic drive, is defined by Laura Mulvey after Freud as “taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze. [Freud’s] particular examples centre on the voyeuristic activities of children, their desire to see and make sure of the private and forbidden” (16). In McEwan’s fiction, characters obsessively want to see, like Clive in Amsterdam who “was watching hungrily, waiting for a reaction” (70) and readers are pushed into scopophilia (or might it be that their scopophilic desires are met?) by the tension between vision and blindness that McEwan orchestrates and which often drives the plot (in Atonement of course, but also Amsterdam, or Sweet Tooth). What the three examples we have just suggested actually show is that scopophilia, be it in a professional, or amateurish capacity, often creates the conditions of its own failure: Briony watches but does not actually see (the budding romance between Cecilia and Robbie), Serena Froome is a spy who does not notice that her lover has discovered who she actually is. Clive’s moment of scopophilic fascination towards the rape scene is matched, in a sardonic instance of poetic justice, by the fact that he cannot “see” that he is going to be euthanized against his will. In her essay, Maxence Gouleau dissects one extreme case of staged blindness: that of the sightless foetus in Nutshell and its echographic vision.

6 Scopophilia thus interestingly represents a characteristic that the protagonists in McEwan’s novels and his own readers share, for the importance of images, the “impressions” they make, are part and parcel of the novelist’s poetics. This visual and emotional impact is incidentally at the heart of what Héloïse Lecomte explores in her reading of The Child in Time as a visual elegy.

Im-pressions in McEwan’s fiction

7 Rather than a mere sensationalist ploy, it might therefore be useful to envisage scopophilia in McEwan’s fiction as the mode through which the text is interfaced with the reader. The novelist has time and again quoted Conrad’s famous preface to The Nigger of the “Narcissus” (“My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you see”, vii) as an accurate formulation of his own conception of the use of the visual in fiction. And while we have amply commented on the centrality of the verb “see”, denoting the visual dimension of McEwan’s fiction, it might also, perhaps, be interesting to pay attention to what comes before, i.e. the verb “make”. Would it be possible to envisage the term “make”, connoting coercion and force, as the connector between “young” McEwan, taking an almost sadistic pleasure in representing cruel acts of violence and incest for his readers to see (The Cement Garden, The Comfort of Strangers, “Butterflies”) and his “mature fiction” (Parey & Roblin), where the impulse has been reined in, but is still present, as the novelist masterfully dissects the never-ending moment of a crash accident (Saturday), or a man suspended to a hot air balloon (Enduring Love). The recurring slowing down of the narrative that the reader witnesses in these scenes not only mimics the neural intensification experienced in life-or-death moments, or the filmic representation of those moments, it also traps the reader in the event, so as to intensify the impression it leaves. One might add that the process is highly effective, for these scenes are often the ones that are remembered (and liked) by the readers. In that sense McEwan might well hark back to what Philippe
Hamon describes as the nineteenth century’s conception of the relationship between the real, impressions, and fiction: “The general stylistics of the nineteenth century is a kind of imprint stylistics that functions by reciprocal adjustments: the writer is a kind of ‘sensitive plate’ receiving impressions and imprints from the outside world, and he reproduces them in his work, by hollowing out and by ‘reliefs’, which will in turn be imprinted symmetrically, by symbolic interlocking, in the brain of the ‘impressionable’ reader” (2001, 274, translation ours).

McEwan’s impressionism, then, is not only limited to the importance which visual impressions have in the construction of his plots, but is rather defined by the interplay between those impressions and the way the reader is supposed, or made, to receive them—a process Cécile Beaufils analyses in McEwan’s approach of affect through images of the body and the eye. Jesse Matz, citing Poe, evokes “a ‘unity of impression’ in which ‘there must be the pressing steadily down of the stamp upon the wax,’ [as] Poe returns to classical means by which to theorise the lasting imprint, and draws on the impression’s double status as stamper and stamped” (39). The impression’s “double status as stamper and stamped” is indeed at the root of McEwan’s use of impressions, especially visual ones, for they are both the technique used and what the reader is left with.

**Impressionistic motifs and strategies**

Although it would be impossible, and perhaps irrelevant, to offer an exhaustive list of the visual motifs and techniques that McEwan uses in order to create impressions, and to “impress” the reader, it might be interesting to shine a light on a few crucial ones, whose ubiquity can be connected to the visual arts (painting, photography and cinema): recurring motifs, or images, may be likened to tableaux, photographs, or still shots, while the narrative techniques favoured by McEwan often adapt cinematic techniques of montage.

Among the general public McEwan is often famous thanks to the film adaptation of *Atonement* by Joe Wright, whose trailer multiplies the shots framed by windows, doors and sometimes even trees, consequently drawing attention to an important feature of the novel. The scopic drive is indeed often intensified, but also sometimes created by the frames that abound in McEwan’s fiction. As James Dalrymple argues in his essay on *Saturday*, McEwan nurtures a window-philia that has intermedial affiliations with cinematographic depiction. Other examples comprise Briony standing “at one of the nursery’s wide-open windows” (37) when she is blinded by her vision, Henry Perowne as “the centre window” when he sees the burning plane or Stephen Lewis having a time-bending vision of his mother being pregnant with him through a pub window (*The Child in Time*). McEwan’s use of windows and framing devices in general may be likened to Hamon’s description of the window as a techneme: “it announces and organises what is being watched, both framing and justifying the following descriptive ‘tableau’ and transforming the viewer into the spectator of a work of art” (1993, 174, translation ours). Windows and frames thus often create tableau-effects which fixate narrative moments into impressions. Framing draws the reader’s attention to events parading their own “spectacularity”, i.e. events which need, or demand being watched with attention, but also produce the effect they announce, as framing itself produces “impression”.

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The plastic prose of McEwan’s texts mirrors what it sets to unfold: it does not only “narrate”, as Ford Maddox Ford would put it, “but render[s] [...] impressions” (1924, 276); visual effects thus becoming readerly effects or readerly impressions. And this is often produced by working into the varying qualities of light. In the final scene of On Chesil Beach, “Edward and Florence’s symmetrically failed visions echo their unsuccessful attempts at understanding each other” (Cavalié). On the blurry beachscape, both characters’ outlines flicker and dissolve. In the words of Elsa Cavalié, objects and characters “lose their three-dimensionality to become ‘glowing’, or ‘gleaming’ points, for vision seems to become an impressionistic mode of perception”. This impressionistic mode of perception recurs throughout McEwan’s oeuvre, to create atmospheric settings which heighten the ambiguity of the author’s style through visual effects (blur, fog, shadows, overexposure, spectrality) that need to be deciphered by both character and reader, so as to be understood. McEwan’s prose works the very “in-betweenness” essential to impressions, which “falls somewhere between analytic scrutiny and imaginative invention” (Matz 2003, 16). And it bears the same “strange glow” as Tom Hayley’s writing in Sweet Tooth, it has the same “hallucinogenic effect on the reader’s inner eye” (446).

As the author of five scenarii, two of which are adaptations of his novels On Chesil Beach and The Children Act, McEwan is closely acquainted with the silver screen and the expressive or impressionistic power of images. His imagination, say Hayes and Groes, has been “schooled in the demands and conventions of visual media” (27). So, to “make us see”, McEwan deploys two main representation strategies which derive from both still and moving images.

To Daniel Zalewski, he confesses liking “a certain kind of terseness into which the occasional image will shine brighter”. This terseness is efficiently expressed through extreme scrutiny: by means of scalpel descriptions McEwan fondles details, surgically editing his texts. One may think of the war and hospital scenes in Atonement, of the precision with which Adam’s brand-new android body is examined (Machines 8) or of the depiction of the emergency operation that brings Saturday to an end. Indeed, Henry Perowne’s scrutiny when he is looking at the damaged head of his patient, Baxter, is highlighted by overhead lights and McEwan emphasises their clarity, as if doubly spotlighting the surgical procedure when, with a skin knife, Perowne “extends the laceration by several inches, and deepens it” (251). With its “calculated style of observation” (James 2019, 186), McEwan scrupulously redoubles the surgeon’s incisive act. His textual dissections disclose his characters’ insides as an anatomical drawing or an extreme close-up would do. They also betray McEwan’s allegiance to the literary explorations born in the nineteenth century in the wake of the invention of photography which, according to Philippe Hamon, privileged a writing style focused on “details, series of snapshots, compilations, fragments or kaleidoscopic vision” (2001, 43).

McEwan’s attention to details and their sharp Barthesian reality effect also enhances the haptic quality of his prose. Rather than only cutting deep into the flesh, his words seem to smoothly caress the skin and his literary eye functions “like the sense of touch” (Deleuze 2003, 122). When Fiona Maye enters Adam Henry’s hospital room, she steps into “semidarkness” and notices “the focused bright light around the bed” (The Children Act 99). Screens glow in the gloom as Adam is sitting upright, “lit as though by a single spot in a theatrical production” (99).
It was a long thin face, ghoulishly pale, but beautiful, with crescents of bruised purple fading delicately to white under the eyes, and full lips that appeared purplish too in the intense light. The eyes themselves looked violet and were huge. There was a mole high on one cheek, as artificial-looking as a painted beauty spot. (99)

The focus on sharp colours modulates the painterly qualities of McEwan’s prose and enhances Adam’s Levinasian vulnerability. They participate in the reader’s strong affective impression or reception (artworks by Henry Tonks or Francis Bacon spring to mind). And the narrator’s metacommentary on the artificiality of representation underlines the actual making of the literary image and its deliberate impressionistic impact. Just like the android Adam, the young man is exhibited as an image to be contemplated. In her essay, Solène Camus furthers this reflection by analysing the relation between monstration and monstruosity in McEwan’s Machines Like Me and People Like You.

McEwan’s sensationalist impressionism also relies on the shock between his close attention to sometimes gory, shocking or unexpected details and gigantic views—between close-ups and wide-angle views. One may think of the wide Artic spaces and New Mexico landscapes in Solar, the vast open battlefields in Atonement, the blurry beachscapes in On Chesil Beach or the impressive and claustrophobic Provençal scenery in Black Dogs. McEwan seems to relish such discrepancies or contrasts to set up his spectacular narratives and impress the reader turned viewer. Indeed, most of his stories rely on montage effects which alternate between fixity and movement, and thus animate descriptions and galvanise the plot.

For Soviet filmmaker Sergueï Eisenstein, the narrative cinema of the 1910s built itself out of Victorian realist texts, Charles Dickens’s “plastic” prose in particular (Eisenstein 2004, 44). According to him, Dickens crafted “dynamic urban tableaux (pure montage)” through “the dizzying rhythm of a kaleidoscope of impressions” (63). “Cine-signs” (57) abound to create what he called “montage pages” (66). Similar filmic dynamics are at play in McEwan’s narratives, be it at sentence, scene or plot level. McEwan edits his narrative sequences through the repetition-with-variation of salient details—the sectioned leg in Atonement or the obscene cherry in On Chesil Beach for instance—, “chains of representations” (Eisenstein 1976, 221) which allow him to play on suspense and readers’ expectations as well as call upon their attention and imagination.

The motility of vision is often what drives McEwan’s descriptions, both in what is represented and in the narrative composition. Characters become vehicles of fiction, like small on-board cameras: Henry Perowne driving through London, Briony Tallis meandering through the family house or moving from one hospital room to the other, and Robbie Turner slowly pacing French roads during the war. McEwan’s prose collects movement-images, what Deleuze calls “mobile sections” (1986, 23), which at once are in motion and represent movement. Scenes are spatialized, even mapped out, increasing immersive effects and the affective dimension of dramatic and topographical artifice. And in the reader’s eye, “the series of detailed representations composes itself, in the mind and in the senses, into an overall image which includes all the separate elements” (Eisenstein 1976, 220).
Impressionist traditionalism

The whole visible universe is but a storehouse of images and signs to which the imagination will give a relative place and value; it is a sort of pasture which the imagination must digest and transform.

Charles Baudelaire, “The Salon of 1959”, 241

Combining affect and action, McEwan’s relation to the visual eventually proves to be the symptom of a more thorough relationship between literary representation and its tradition. Indeed, the author’s “innovative traditionalism” (James 2019, 183) incorporates the heritage of both literary realism and literary modernism. As he confessed a few years ago, his “life-time project” is to “marry modernism and postmodernism to all the grandeur of nineteenth-century fiction” (McEwan and Guignery 49:40-50:02). Just like the “celebrated novelist” (1) in My Purple Scented Novel, McEwan’s prose is “Tolstoyan in its ambition, it [is] also modernist, Proustian, Joycean in execution” (18). His “literary phenomenology” (Matz 2003, 14) simultaneously occupies and reconfigures the space once populated by other literary Impressionists—Joseph Conrad or Ford Maddox Ford, for instance—who wished to “produce an illusion of reality” (Ford 265) as well as “produce an impression […] keep interest awakened by keeping alive, by whatever means you may have at your disposal, the surprise of your reader” (268). Relying on both the ambiguity or liminality of impressions, McEwan’s visual prose exemplifies what Jacques Rancière names the aesthetic regime of art.

[The art of the aesthetic age] presupposes all past art to be available and open to being reread, reviewed, repainted or rewritten at will. It presupposes also that anything and everything in the world is available to art. Banal objects, a flake peeling from a wall, an illustration from an ad campaign, are all available to art in their double resource: as hieroglyphs ciphering an age of the world, a society, a history, and inversely, as pure presences, as naked realities brought to light by the new-found splendour of the insignificant. (9)

In their repurposing of Victorian and Modernist motifs and tropes, McEwan’s impressionist texts cipher canonised literary traditions in their “drive towards the image” (Hamon 2001, 7) and, through metafiction and a focus on contemporary issues, reveal fresh literary ways of stamping impressions.

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