



HAL
open science

“My city square, city square”: Windows and Spectatorship in Ian McEwan’s Saturday

James Dalrymple

► **To cite this version:**

James Dalrymple. “My city square, city square”: Windows and Spectatorship in Ian McEwan’s Saturday. Polysèmes, 2022. hal-03810245

HAL Id: hal-03810245

<https://hal.science/hal-03810245>

Submitted on 11 Oct 2022

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L’archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d’enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Polysèmes

Revue d'études intertextuelles et intermédiales

27 | 2022

Ian McEwan and the Visual

“My city square, city square”: Windows and Spectatorship in Ian McEwan’s *Saturday*

« *My city square, city square* » : fenêtres et spectateurs dans *Saturday* de Ian McEwan

JAMES DALRYMPLE

Résumés

Français English

Cet article examine le roman *Saturday* (2005) d'Ian McEwan à travers le prisme du cinéma et du rôle du spectateur. Souvent attiré à sa fenêtre pour observer la ville, le protagoniste Henry Perowne est un spectateur de la vie des autres. Cependant, malgré les tentatives du neurochirurgien pour rester un observateur détaché, les crises politiques de l'époque et les tensions de la vie urbaine envahissent sa vie privée. Les stratégies de cadrage créent une tension entre l'observation pure et simple impliquée par la transparence de la fenêtre et les effets organisationnels du cadre, une tension qui est essentielle à la théorie du cinéma et à l'une de ses œuvres fondatrices, *Rear Window* d'Alfred Hitchcock (1954). L'article analyse également les dispositifs récurrents de projection dans le roman, ainsi que les analogies entre la perception visuelle et l'affichage d'images sur un écran, à la lumière du discours du roman sur le modernisme et la représentation de la conscience. Enfin, nous examinons les effets potentiellement libérateurs du jeu dynamique de la perspective et de la temporalité du film sur l'écriture de McEwan, et comment ces effets sont liés aux questions de focalisation et d'omniscience dans le roman.

This article examines Ian McEwan's 2005 novel *Saturday* through the prism of cinema and spectatorship. A watcher through windows, its protagonist Henry Perowne is a self-confessed spectator of other people's lives. Despite the neurosurgeon's attempts to remain a detached observer, however, the broader politics of the period and the tensions of urban life conspire to invade the private sphere of his "city square". We argue that such framing motifs create a tension between the unadulterated observation implied by the window's transparency and the organizational effects of the frame, a tension that is key to film theory and one of its core works, Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954). The paper also analyses the recurrent motifs of projection in the novel, as well as the analogies between visual perception and the display of images on a cinema screen, in the light of the novel's discourse on modernism and the representation of the consciousness. Finally, we examine the potentially liberatory effects of the filmic dynamic play of perspective and temporality on McEwan's writing and its visual qualities, and their connection to questions of focalization and omniscience in the novel.



Entrées d’index

Mots-clés : spectateur, cinéma, cadrage, fenêtre, projection, modernisme

Keywords: spectatorship, cinema, framing, window, projection, modernism

Œuvres citées : *Saturday*

Auteurs cités : Ian McEwan, Walter Benjamin

Texte intégral

- 1 Ian McEwan’s 2005 novel *Saturday* opens with its protagonist, neurosurgeon Henry Perowne, drawn to his bedroom window in the middle of the night, only to find himself witness to a burning plane making a risky descent over London. Mistakenly believing himself to be the onlooker of a terrorist attack, the sight is the first of many instances of spectatorship in *Saturday*, in which windows and other framing devices operate as both a way for Perowne to examine and to interpret his urban environment. The surgeon’s “city square” (S 170), the title of the song his musician son dedicates to him, is not only the architectural space beyond his bedroom window, but also the symbolic frame through which he observes urban life from the apparent safety of a privileged vantage point. In its recurrent use of motifs such as frames, screens and projections, as well as that of the hidden observer, the novel reveals itself to be self-consciously cinematic but also actively engaged in questions of spectatorship intrinsic to the medium. Moreover, the allusions to cinematic apparatus and perspectives create a dynamic and self-reflexive tension with the novel’s experiments in literary modernism, threatening at times to undermine our apparent immersion in Perowne’s consciousness.

Window-philia

- 2 An omniscient narration tightly focalized on Henry Perowne’s thoughts and perceptions, *Saturday* is written in a present tense that gives a sense of immediacy to, and immersion in, his consciousness. Through free and indirect discourse, the novel charts the surgeon’s progress and thoughts over the course of twenty-four hours, which a number of critics have linked to great works of literary modernism. As Mark Currie suggests, *Saturday* recalls in this respect works such as Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* and James Joyce’s *Ulysses* which depict the life of a character over “a single day”, and especially the latter which also “starts where it finishes” (129). In *Saturday*, the action begins and ends in the protagonist’s bedroom, and the novel “awakes” with Perowne having “no idea what he’s doing out of bed: [...] as if, standing there in the darkness, he’s materialised out of nothing, fully formed, unencumbered” (S 3). Perowne moves towards the windows with such “ease and lightness” that he wonders if he is “dreaming or sleepwalking”; indeed, he “glides” across the floor (S 3-4). This sense of disembodiment and the peculiar sense of floating towards the window remind us of cinema—both the viewing conditions and the movement of a camera—which is confirmed by the passages that follow. Pulling up the shutter and opening the window he “leans forwards [...] exulting in the emptiness and clarity of the scene. His vision—always good—seems to have sharpened. He sees the paving stone mica glistening in the pedestrianised square, pigeon excrement hardened by distance and cold into something almost beautiful, like a scattering of snow. He likes the symmetry of black cast-iron posts and their even darker shadows, and the lattice of cobbled gutters” (S 4). The “clarity of the scene” is important in a novel which consistently emphasizes the visual but also stages Perowne as a spectator of London life, and particularly that arranged beyond



his window. The compositional qualities of the image, their geometric “symmetry”, lattice effects and shadows, are particularly filmic.

3 Moreover, Perowne’s bedroom windows give onto a square, which he describes as having the quality of a set or stage. “People often drift into the square to act out their dramas”, he explains later in the novel, “Passions need room, the attentive spaciousness of a theatre” (S 60). An unseen observer “in a curious mood”, and with the “advantage of height”, Perowne “not only watches” people in the square, “but watches over them, supervising their progress with the remote possessiveness of a god” (S 13). Here we might be reminded of McEwan’s 2001 novel *Atonement* in which Briony, “Unseen, from two storeys up, with the benefit of unambiguous sunlight”, mistakenly believes she “had privileged access” (A 39) to the adult world. Like Briony, Perowne misinterprets the scene from his window, believing a passing plane, on which he observes a fire at a point where one of the wings meets the fuselage, to be a terrorist attack. Written in the aftermath of the events of September 11th 2001, the novel is set amidst protests against the imminent US-led war in Iraq a year and a half later. For Perowne, “the spectacle” of the burning airplane “has the familiarity of a recurrent dream” (S 15), a “scene construed from the outside [...] from a safe distance” (S 16), like the Twin Towers terrorist attacks seen on television. Even if it later transpires that the plane landed safely and was not intended as a weapon, the sight of it—to which Perowne felt inexplicably drawn—seems to serve as an omen for the way in which the world outside the window will soon intrude upon the domestic sphere.

4 In his *New York Magazine* review of *Saturday* entitled “Heart of Glass”, critic Keith Gessen referred to “McEwan’s window-philia”, owing to the recurrent significance of windows in his work. “People in Ian McEwan’s novels are always gazing out of windows”, Gessen argues, “Briony Tallis is doing so in *Atonement* when she witnesses the crucial scene by the fountain [...]; the narrator of *Enduring Love* [1997] spends much of the book looking out the window for his mad Christian stalker” (Gessen 2005). Crucially, the aforementioned stalker—Jed— becomes convinced that the protagonist of that novel, Joe, is sending him secret messages via the positioning of the curtains at his bedroom window. In both these earlier novels, the window seems to symbolize the constricted view we have of both the outer world and the inner life of others. It also suggests, as we will explore, the author’s playful refusal to fully commit to the impressionistic register that the novel’s allusions to literary modernism might be seen to promise. The recurrent recourse to framing implies both the limits of our immersion in the characters’ consciousness but also invites us to reflect upon the constructed nature of what they “see”.

5 Perowne’s descriptions of the view from his window are often expressed in terms that could have been extracted from a film or television script: “Two figures in dark overcoats [...] crossing the square diagonally, [...] their high heels ticking in awkward counterpoint [...], and though their steps don’t match, they walk close [...] in an intimate, sisterly way” (S 12). Here we are reminded of McEwan’s stint in the early 1980s as a screenwriter, something he largely abandoned until adapting his own work for the cinema in the late 2010s.¹ As Hayes and Groes assert, the author’s “attention to detail” and emphasis on “visual perspective and point of view” indicate “an imagination schooled in the demands and conventions of visual media” (27). There is also a self-reflexive dimension to McEwan’s cinematic rendering of Perowne’s observations. During a second extended spell of watching from the window, this time in the light of morning, he refers to what he initially perceives at “first sight” to be “two girls in their late teens, [...] lost to a family drama of their own” (S 59). Once again Perowne has misread the scene but quickly readjusts, deciding “that the figure facing him is a boy”, and that he is, in fact, witnessing some kind of quarrel, with the girl landing “ineffectual blows on [the boy’s] chest, like an old-fashioned Hollywood heroine” (S 60).

6 This recourse to popular culture, and particularly cinema, is not unusual in




McEwan’s novels. During his tryst with Cecilia in the library in *Atonement*, Robbie is initially “uncertain enough to think she might [...] hit him; movie-style, across the cheek” (A 135). A similar impression is given in Perowne’s initial encounter with a troubled young man called Baxter, a road rage incident in which he reports feeling “cast in a role, and there’s no way out. This, as people like to say, is urban drama. A century of movies and half a century of television have rendered the matter insincere. It is pure artifice” (S 86). According to Sebastian Groes, Perowne’s inclination to view the scene through the prism of film and TV suggests that, for McEwan, “our contemporary understanding of the self and community is a fantasy about the collective mediated by” competing narratives, notably those of “mass media” (112).

7 The shift from Perowne being the watcher of other people’s dramas to finding himself “cast in a role” in another is telling: initially presumed to be strangers sitting on a bench, Baxter and his friend Nigel will, at the novel’s climax, emerge from the backdrop of the square to invade his home. At first, Perowne sees them through the doorway of his home but does not recognize them, as their “backs are turned and they’re sitting close together, hunched forward” (S 197). As in *Atonement*, there is therefore also something cautionary about windows in *Saturday*. They suggest a threshold between observer and observed, which, when breached, has dangerous real-life consequences. Just as the news spectacle and politics of international terrorism start to enter the surgeon’s world (via the burning plane and the Iraq War protests), Baxter also represents the breaching of the boundaries between personal and professional worlds: a thug with a neurodegenerative disease that holds Perowne’s family hostage.

8 Not only does Perowne’s window-philia have the effect of transforming the mundane into the cinematic but one could read certain scenes in terms of voyeurism. “The square’s public aspect grants privacy to these intimate dramas”, Perowne tells us, “[c]ouples come to talk or cry quietly on the benches” (S 61). From the luxury of his spacious family home, Perowne watches on as these people emerge “from small rooms in council flats or terraced houses [...] into a wider view of generous sky” (S 61). Here we are reminded of a Hollywood movie that is not only recognized as a classic among audiences but also serves as a vital text for debates over cinematic spectatorship. Consider, for example, this description: “A man [...] observes through a rectangular frame—as a way to pass the time and entertain himself—the *human dramas* that unfold before his eyes. He is capable of alternating his visual field between a wide panorama and a closer view for detail. His *position is elevated and privileged*, while the events seem to unfold independently of his gaze, yet without making him feel excluded” (Elsaesser and Hagener 14, my italics).

9 The man referred to here is L.B. Jeffries (or “Jeff” to his friends) in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rear Window* (1954), the photographer who is reduced to spying on his neighbours while recovering from a broken leg. With the action taking place during a New York heatwave, the open windows and curtains of the neighbouring apartments afford Jeff (played by James Stewart) a privileged view of their lives from across the courtyard, while he remains unseen. The fact that we are impelled to watch with Jeff, to follow his suspicions as he detects—through the surrogate cinema screen of his rear window—a possible crime in one of the facing apartments, “is often held to figuratively re-enact the viewing situation of classical cinema” (Elsaesser and Hagener 14). Absorbed by *a wide panorama* from an *elevated and privileged* position in the relative darkness of his home, Perowne is, like Jeff, a movie spectator, with all the voyeuristic connotations that implies. This voyeurism is innate to the “disembodiment” of the spectator’s experience, of his or her “not having to take responsibility for one’s bodily presence in a given space or at a given time” (Elsaesser and Hagener 97), insulated from the characters and action. Yet this apparent safety is brought into question in both the film and the novel.

 *Rear Window* and *Saturday* both begin with a forward movement (or “glide”) towards the window to see through their protagonists’ eyes, although of course

expressed in the very different terms specific to each medium. Although he does not indulge in quite the same level of scopophilia as Jeff does (there are no semi-naked women to ogle from Perowne’s window), the surgeon is frequently struck by the “sudden interest of what’s happening in the square” (S 58), where “there is real excitement” (S 61). Jeff remains safe as long as he “maintains his distanced role of observer”; only when he “transgresses this threshold does the world ‘outside’ pose a threat to the one ‘inside’” (Elsaesser and Hagener 14). In *Rear Window* this transgression occurs when Jeff incites his friend Lisa (Grace Kelly) to go across the courtyard to the flat opposite and investigate while the man he suspects of having murdered his wife is out. Realizing that he has been observed, the murderous neighbour later attacks Jeff in his apartment, literally trying to throw him out of the window. In a self-reflexive ploy, Jeff gets some reprieve by momentarily blinding his attacker with the flash of his camera. In *Saturday*, Baxter returns to the square the evening of his encounter with Perowne to avenge a humiliation, namely that of losing face in front of his friends. This occurs when the surgeon talks himself out of a violent beating by expressing concern about the younger man’s medical condition. Baxter is also thwarted at the climax of the novel by means of a metatextual intervention, his resolve in holding Perowne’s family hostage weakened by the beauty of Matthew Arnold’s poem “Dover Beach”, recited by the surgeon’s daughter, Daisy.

11 Significantly, Perowne is able to diagnose Huntington’s Disease because “Baxter is unable to initiate or make saccades—those flickering changes of eye position from one fixation to another. To scan the crowd, he is having to move his head” (S 91). This opens up further questions about how Perowne’s privileged and elevated position as observer—his “clinical vantage point” (Adams 554)—are indicative of his relative social power over Baxter. Indeed, this is emphasized by the latter’s inability to easily “scan the crowd” during the protests, something that the surgeon does at his leisure. Just as Jeff’s power over his nemesis in *Rear Window*—the observer over the observed—is reflected in his use of the camera flash as a weapon, Perowne’s social authority relative to Baxter is made manifest by the latter’s visual impairments. As Anne-Marie Adams argues, “knowledge of Baxter’s disease is actually what allows him to exert partial control over the intruder” in their initial confrontation but also, crucially, highlights the real-world authority of a doctor’s “trained eye” as opposed to the emphasis on the impressionistic in much literary modernism (559-560). Despite the novel’s emphasis on lived experience over the course of a single day, and its implicit engagement with the modernism of Woolf and Joyce, McEwan offers a materialist counterforce by thematising neuroscientific explanations for consciousness. As David James argues, the author thus “creates a tension” between the rational-scientific perspective and “the highly phenomenological register with which he charts characters’ mental lives” (156).

12 The central importance of Perowne’s role as a spectator, and the square as a theatre for his observations, is emphasized by the fact his son Theo, a musician, writes and performs a song apparently dedicated to it. “So let me take you there”, the lyrics go, “My city square, city square” (S 170). The city square which features in Theo’s chorus seems to stand not only for the literal urban space which the house gives onto but also Perowne’s bedroom window and its symbolic potential for the way we frame, and thus implicitly distort or transform, the world. The promise to “take you there” is also arguably an authorial *clin d’œil*, a self-reflexive offer to see the world through Perowne’s eyes. The repetition of “city square” in the song’s chorus could thus be an allusion to the novel’s dual framing: the highly focalized and occasionally impressionistic passages which delineate Perowne’s consciousness, and the omniscient narrator which occasionally reminds the reader of its presence. David James refers to McEwan’s “choreographed role-play as an external narrator”, a voice that “operates at a sly remove, insinuating a ‘commentary on its own creation’” while stopping short of fully undermining the illusion.



Passive vs. active spectatorship

- 13 Throughout the novel, the tensions of the time percolate into Perowne’s private sphere, not only via the burning plane and the anti-war protests, but also through appearances of both on news programmes glimpsed by the surgeon. According to Keith Gessen, “Perowne experiences the burning plane as more than just a plane: It is an emanation of the News” (2005). The broader politics of the period and Perowne’s window-philia are brought together in another image derived from news media when he “imagines himself as Saddam, surveying the crowd with satisfaction from some Baghdad ministry balcony” (S 62). Although the sight of the burning plane at the beginning of the novel threatens his sense of being wholly detached from what he sees, above the fray of ordinary life, Perowne tries to persuade himself otherwise, notably when he asserts that it’s “an illusion, to believe himself active in the story. Does he think he’s contributing something, watching news programmes [...]?” (S 180). As Sebastian Groes suggests, “Perowne’s obsession with round-the-clock news broadcasting is indicative of his thwarted desire to connect with the general public in a wider narrative” (S 112), or, as the surgeon puts it, *to believe himself active in the story*.
- 14 When Perowne observes, from his bedroom window, a car similar to Baxter’s passing through the square, “he doesn’t feel quite so detached. But what is he then? Interested, or even faintly troubled?” (S 146). Perowne’s detachment is under threat, as the scene from the window can no longer be enjoyed with the “remote possessiveness of a god” (S 13). As in *Rear Window*, watching from the window suggests an ambivalence about the dividing line “between passive and active, between manipulation and agency, between witnessing and voyeurism” (Elsaesser and Hagener 20). As with Jeff in the Hitchcock film, for whom “the events seem to unfold independently of his gaze, yet without making him feel excluded”, Perowne will become active in the story evolving outside his window in a manner that will feel like a violent transgression of the role of spectator.
- 15 Despite their common window-philia, Perowne is in most respects the antithesis of Briony in *Atonement*. A surgeon and an “unredeemable materialist” (S 134) who distrusts fiction, especially that of an unrealistic bent, he is not given to melodramatic fabulation. He spends much of the titular Saturday tuning in to the television news to find out whether his suppositions about the burning plane were correct. He is even “unmoved” by the technical feat, shown in more realist fiction, of transcribing thought into language: “The details were apt and convincing enough, but surely not so very difficult to marshal if you were halfway observant and had the patience to write them all down” (S 67). Perowne’s dismissal of the achievements of literature is laced with irony, not least because the protagonist acts as a conduit or surrogate for complex and richly visualized descriptions of his urban environment. That Perowne spends so much time trying to account for what he sees is unsurprising given that, as McEwan himself reminds us: “We are visual creatures. Forty per cent of our brains are involved in visual processing. [...] The key to emotions, feelings and the swirl of human exchange is best fixed if you can capture the visual essence correctly” (Cook *et al.* 133). We could equally query Perowne’s own efforts to distance himself from the role of observer, as he attempts to do when he claims that: “Nor does he really want to be a spectator of other lives, [...] even though these past hours he’s put in an unusual number of minutes gazing from the bedroom window. And it interests him less to have the world reinvented; he wants it explained” (S 66). As Mark Currie argues, this is ironic “since Perowne’s world is a reinvented one, and his life is imaginary” (125), while he himself “is watched or known from above” (127) by the author and reader. This self-conscious tension between the authorial omniscience and tight focalization explains in part the cinematic quality of his observations and the curious sense of disembodiment and detachment Perowne feels as spectator,



notably during his observations from the bedroom window.

16 Moreover, Perowne’s observations of the world may be those of a materialist, but it does not make them any more objective. This tension between wanting the world elucidated or transforming it into a spectacle is at the heart of debates about the nature of representation in both literature and the cinema. In his seminal work of critical theory, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, M.H. Abrams “identifies two common and antithetic metaphors of mind, one comparing the mind to a reflector of external objects, the other to a radiant projector which makes a contribution to the objects it perceives” (viii). The *mirror* and the *lamp* therefore become synonymous both with apparently opposing modes of representation—of the mimetic and the expressionistic (in Abrams’s study, Romantic literature)—and with opposing conceptions of the “mind as receptor or projector” (59).

17 The notion of “projection” is of particular interest to us in consideration of McEwan’s interest in optical devices (which we will return to) but also of the questions of spectatorship raised in *Saturday*. In cinema, the tension between *mirror* and *lamp* is problematized by the cinema screen, allegorized by the window in Hitchcock’s film. For, as Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener explain,

the window offers a detail of a larger whole in which the elements appear as if distributed in no particular way, so that the impression of realism for the spectator is above all a function of transparency. By contrast, foregrounding the frame shifts the attention to the organisation of the material. The window implies a diegetic world that extends beyond the limit of the image, while the frame delineates a filmic composition that exists solely for the eyes of the beholder. (18-19)

Despite his unabashed materialism and scepticism about literature, Perowne admits that the arrangement seems, to paraphrase Elsaesser and Hagener, *to exist solely for his eyes*. Having “gone to the window for no reason”, the surgeon ruminates at the beginning of the novel, “he should acknowledge a hidden order, an external intelligence which wants to show or tell him something of significance” (S 17). The irony here is that Perowne is “being narrated by a fictional authorial presence” (Groes 104); the “external intelligence” referred to here could be a self-reflexive aside from the novelist. It is also, however, an acknowledgment of the “hidden order” hinted at by the window frame and its capacity for drawing attention to the compositional qualities of the view beyond. We are also reminded again of Briony in *Atonement*, who is tempted to “regard what she had witnessed” in the scene by the fountain “as a tableau mounted for her alone” (A 39).

Perowne frequently attempts to decipher the “hidden order” behind his observations, accentuated by the window frame. Not only does he survey the city from his bedroom window, he also observes it through the windscreen of his car when he visits his mother, who is suffering from Alzheimer’s, at a care home. Offering framed perspectives of the urban environment, each change of traffic lights provides a “shift of scene” (S 124). Interestingly, he chides himself for being unable to imagine the “wonderous” and “teeming illumination” of the modern city through the eyes of the great figures of the Enlightenment. He claims he “doesn’t have the lyric gift to see beyond” what he calls “the iron weight of the actual”; “he’s a realist, and can never escape” (S 168). And yet, on this congested drive home to central London, he even “lowers his window to taste the scene in full” (S 167-168), transforming the traffic jam into a vision of modernity: “the abrasive tang of icy fumes, the thunderous idling machinery in six lanes east and west, the yellow street light bleaching colour from the bodywork, the jaunty thud of entertainment systems, and red tail lights stretching way ahead into the city, white headlights pouring out of it” (S 168). The cinematic quality of his vision is similarly emphasized en route when he describes “recent office buildings of glass and steel” where he “glimpses people as neat as architectural models, at their desks, before their screens, even on a Saturday. This is the tidy future



of his childhood science fiction comics” (S 154). In his elevated position from “a vantage point on the White City flyover”, he projects onto London, once again through recourse to popular culture, a particular impression of metropolitan life. Despite his claims to be a “realist” who wants things “explained” rather than “reinvented”, he transforms the urban landscape into the embodiment of the “modern city” in “the last days of the petroleum age” (S 168). Similarly, the buildings surrounding Perowne’s square are transformed under his gaze into “a biological masterpiece—millions teeming around the accumulated and layered achievements of the centuries, as though around a coral reef” (S 5).

Representing the visual in the age of mechanical reproduction

18 Notwithstanding the motif of the window as a means of both viewing and distorting the world, there are numerous other allusions to optical tricks and devices that also recall cinema and the spectatorial experience. Seeing through Perowne’s eyes can sometimes seem like a mechanical process, perhaps fitting for an avowed materialist (and also for an author with a special interest in science). Take, for example, his early appraisal of the skies when catching sight of the burning plane: “In an instant, he revises his perspective outward to the scale of the solar system [...]. The sound holds at a steady volume while he revises the scale again, zooming inwards this time, from solar dust and ice back to the local” (S 14). It is telling that the novel features an allusion to the Hubble telescope (S 226), a space-based observatory that allows high-resolution images of faraway objects. The telescope is also referenced in *Enduring Love* (38), McEwan’s earlier novel staging a conflict between scientific rationalism and erroneous belief, the opening passage of which features an aerial “shot” that the author places in the eye of a passing buzzard. The view endows its hero, Joe, “the privilege of distance unavailable to traditional intradiegetic narrators, offering his readers a perspective [...] which constitutes an attempt at objectivity, if not omniscience” (Gagneret 85). Yet such radical changes of perspective are also an opportunity to transform the image into something almost abstract; in short, to *reinvent* it, rather than *explain*. Just as a literal bird’s-eye-view transforms a hot air balloon accident in *Enduring Love* into the “comforting geometry” of “a snooker table” (2), a “helicopter’s view of Hyde Park” seen on the television news in *Saturday* sees the “massed crowds” of the Iraq War protests metamorphose into “a smear of brown, like lichen on a rock” (150). Such *elevated and privileged* perspectives suggest an emancipation of the confines of human perspective heralded by modern technology. It is a feeling of liberation that was described by Walter Benjamin in his seminal work “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, who foresaw the impact of the cinematic medium on other forms of representation:

By close-ups of the things around us, [...] the film [...] manages to assure us of an immense and unexpected field of action. Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go traveling. With the close-up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended. (16)

This “immense and unexpected field of action” is particularly evident in Perowne’s observations from his bedroom window, the view afforded by which he describes as “an eighteenth-century dream bathed and embraced by modernity, by street light from above, and from below by fibre-optic cables, and cool fresh water coursing down pipes, and sewage borne away in an instant of forgetting” (S 5). Here we see how



Perowne goes *travelling* into and beyond the image, opening up and expanding his field of vision as if he was directing a modern movie with all the tools at his disposal.

19 In addition to these dynamic shifts in perspective, the novel also features passages which remind us of another cinematic technique: the close-up. Early in the novel, for example, Perowne passes by the front door to the house, which gives straight on to the square, that theatrical space which the surgeon likes to watch from a safe distance. Inexplicably, the doors “suddenly loom before him strangely with their accretions—three stout Banham locks, two black iron bolts as old as the house, two tempered steel security chains, a spyhole with a brass cover, the box of electronics that works the Entryphone system” (S 36). The “looming” effect here makes sense later in the novel when Baxter and Nigel gain entry to Perowne’s house, not by attempting to disable the apparently formidable security system but by threatening his wife on her return from work. Akin to a zoom or close-up, the odd optical effect here anticipates later events. Like all “clues”, it is a sign “that can be construed as a promise and annunciation, enchainé toward a construction of significance” and “the underlying intentionality of event” (Brooks 94). It could be argued that this is a sign that Perowne is anxious about his home security, and the privileged positions over the city it offers him, without even articulating it to himself.

20 Just like Walter Benjamin, Perowne ruminates on the revelatory power of the camera when he passes a shop window display full of different types of television screen, all of which are tuned into a television interview with Tony Blair during which the “close-up of a face is steadily becoming a close-up of a mouth, until the lips fill half the screen” (S 140-141). Perowne speculates as to whether, with this “slow zoom the director is consciously responding to a calculation a watching population is bound to want to make: is this politician telling the truth?” (S 141). With “the resources of its lowerings and liftings, its interruptions and isolations, its extensions and accelerations, its enlargements and reductions”, Benjamin argues, the film “camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses” (16). What might ordinarily escape the observers’ attention, the little clues in a politician’s facial expressions, become magnified by close-up.

21 Such “interruptions and isolations” and “extensions and accelerations” are also evident in a later scene in which Perowne and his son topple Baxter, who is armed with a knife, down the stairs of the family home. “There’s a moment”, Perowne reflects, “which seems to unfold and luxuriously expand, when all goes silent and still, when Baxter is entirely airborne, suspended in time, looking directly at Henry with an expression, not so much of terror, as dismay” (S 227). Baxter’s curious facial expression is explicitly shown here through the twin techniques of close-up and slow motion, by imagining the scene through the prism of the cinematic apparatus. Like the buzzard’s-eye view in *Enduring Love*, there is a sense in McEwan’s writing of a visual perspective liberated by the dynamism of cinema.

22 But unlike the lingering close-up of Tony Blair’s face in the shop window, we sense here a pull away from a representation grounded in Perowne’s sensory impressions to something more dynamic and omniscient. “I felt myself floating away,” says Perowne’s wife Rosalind when recounting the trauma of Baxter’s intrusion, “It was as if I was watching all of us, myself included, from a corner of the room right up by the ceiling” (S 229). Like Perowne gliding across his bedroom floor to witness the burning plane from his window, we see again here the kind of disembodied perspective redolent of the film camera and the unusual angles it affords. Although McEwan places these impressions in the mind or voice of his characters, we also sense a knowing disregard for purely “perceptual, phenomenological depictions of experience”, fittingly for a novel which pits such accounts against the “rational” and “neuroscientific” (James 151). The origins of this tension, as seen earlier, seems to be McEwan’s desire to engage with literary modernism while playfully hinting at its constructed nature. How, the novel also seems to ask, can one imagine a novel from the viewpoint of a single person in a world saturated by mass media imagery and the



dynamic perspectives it offers?

“*Son et lumière*”

23 Notwithstanding Perowne’s window-philia, filmic illusion—both literal and figurative—is ubiquitous in *Saturday*. The television news is a constant presence throughout the novel, not least because Perowne is waiting for news about what happened to the burning plane. Perowne even makes a critical commentary on the “grandiose preamble” of a particular bulletin and how the “pulsing synthetic music, spiralling, radiating computer graphics” combine “in a *son et lumière* of Wagnerian scale to suggest urgency, technology, global coverage” (S 29). His assessment of the techniques of news media are made in cinematic terms, with Perowne referring elsewhere to an “establishing shot” (S 178) of the United Nations buildings in New York in a bulletin about tensions over Iraq. Yet Perowne is not averse to applying *son et lumière* to his own life, as evinced by his remarks on the effect of listening to Schubert in his car: “he always enjoys the city from inside his car where [...] hi-fi music confers pathos on the humblest details—a Schubert string trio is dignifying the narrow street he’s slipping down now” (S 76). Similarly, he appreciates music while performing surgical procedures on his patients, remarking on how a “tender, wistful Aria begins to unfold and spread [...] and makes the theatre seem even more spacious” (S 250). In both instances, we are encouraged to imagine the situation in cinematic terms, and how the music could transform mundane and professional scenes into something imbued with “pathos”, or something “tender” and “wistful”.

24 “[*Son et lumière*” also appear in *Saturday* on a figurative level, analogous to perception itself. Perowne transforms the scene through his car windscreen, and its “receding geometry of pavement cracks and small bare trees” into “an image projected onto a sheet of thin ice” (S 126). Moreover, he compares the brain to that of the cinematic apparatus, marvelling that “mere wet stuff can make this bright inward cinema of thought, of sight and sound and touch bound into a vivid illusion of an instantaneous present” (S 254-255). On one level we can read this as a self-reflexive touch whereby McEwan draws attention to the authorial grey matter that creates the “vivid illusion” of Perowne’s life. Yet the analogy between thought and cinematic illusion is also inferred when Perowne describes his thoughts as having “a sinuous, snaking quality, driven by an “undulating power”, while his feelings “have become in this respect like light itself—wavelike” (S 262). The notion of human perception as light projection is telling as it casts doubt on Perowne’s rationalist-materialistic worldview. For Abrams, after all, it was romantic literature that sought not to mirror reality but to transform it through imaginative illumination: “Feelings project a light—especially a colored light—on objects of sense” (Abrams 60). Perowne suggests that the “self” is just “another brightly wrought illusion, hovering like a ghost” (S 254-255), undermining his desire to have the world “explained” rather than “reinvented” (S 66). To perceive, it is suggested, is to transform. For James, the focus on the illusory, cinematic quality of consciousness actually undermines “the assumption that the pictures of experience our brains paint for us are generated by the impressions we receive” (156). It could be argued that the resulting “contradiction”, whereby McEwan seems to be “an impressionist and a neurologist at the same time” (156), has its origins in the thinly veiled omniscience lurking behind Perowne’s focalized impressions, the authorial “wet stuff” that creates, and almost breaks, the “vivid illusion” of his life.

25 The analogy between the mind and the cinema does not stop at the projection of the image onto a screen, however. It also extends to the projecting apparatus itself and the décor of a movie theatre interior. Much earlier in the novel, there is an



evocative description of Perowne’s vision as he returns to the darkness of his bedroom after spending a moment talking to his son Theo, whom—incidentally—he finds in the kitchen in “a single pool of light, as though on stage” (S 25). Climbing the stairs causes “local excitement on his retina”, depicted as “ghostly swarms of purple and iridescent green [...] rolling in on themselves to become bolts of cloth, swathes of swagged velvet, drawing back like theatre curtains on new scenes, new thoughts” (S 37). It is these same “heavy curtains” that Perowne describes as eclipsing the cinematic frame of the window and the view it affords, “cleanly eliminating the square and the wintry world beyond it” (S 181).

26 Modern cinemas do not have curtains, of course, but the anachronistic reimagining of the cinematic apparatus does not stop there. Several times Perowne compares a literal beam of light through an aperture to the inner illuminations of the mind. In the final passages of the novel, returning to the house after operating on Baxter, he struggles to sleep, focusing on a “blurred rod of soft white light across the floor and up the facing wall” (S 264). For a time, Perowne “lies on his back, patiently waiting, head turned towards the bar of white light on the wall” (S 271), before resignedly opening the shutters to appraise the scene at the window. Although he finds that the “square below him, deserted and still, gives no clues to the future”, he anticipates future projections upon the window/screen: “from where he stands up here there are things he can see that he knows must happen” (S 273). Although the nature of his predictions (notably his mother’s death) are not overly speculative, the image of the beam of light in the darkened chamber recalls a similar passage in *Atonement*, in which Briony’s mother, Emily, nurses a migraine in her bedroom. Although the “long, blurred strip of daylight” that “broke the darkness” (A 64) in that novel does not allow Emily to travel into the future, she “beamed her raw attention into every recess of the house” (A 69), projecting herself into the different rooms and their occupants like a surrogate for the omniscient narrator. As Adèle Cassigneul and Elsa Cavalié suggest, Emily “turn[s] her room into a camera obscura” and also “makes the past uncannily visible in the darkened present” (131). Alluding to the work of John Locke, Abrams describes, in his survey of the “changing metaphors of mind” throughout history, “the analogy of the camera obscura, in which the light, entering through a small aperture, throws an image of the external scene on the wall” (57). Throughout *Saturday*, McEwan seems to play self-consciously with the notion of thought as being analogous to light projection, from the earliest types of camera to the modern language and apparatus of cinema. When Perowne observes that Baxter “inhabits the confining bright spotlight of the present” (S 224), there is self-reflexive irony; the reader is also *confined* to Perowne’s present, a “bright spotlight” which is as much a “radiant projector” (Abrams viii) or lamp as a mirror of reality.

27 In its recurrent motifs of looking through frames and projecting onto screens, *Saturday* is a novel replete with notions of spectatorship that raise a number of issues related to representation, especially in cinema. The novel interrogates in particular the voyeurism of spectatorship in similar terms to that of Hitchcock’s *Rear Window*, by which Perowne is reminded that the world outside the window (or on the television news) is not a drama staged for his own entertainment. Such motifs bring to mind not only McEwan’s own experiences of writing for cinema and television, but the liberatory power of the cinematic perspective as anticipated in Walter Benjamin’s writings in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”. McEwan’s use of zooms, close-ups and slow motion thus speak of a visual sense informed by the apparatus of cinema, the movement of the camera and the language of the editing suite. Despite *Saturday*’s tightly focalized third person perspective, the novel adopts a number of imaginative conceits to enable a *privileged* and *elevated* view of city life during a time of political crisis, from the vantage point of Perowne’s bedroom window—and the city square below—to his car windscreen. In doing so, the novel creates a tension between the more impressionistic register of literary modernism and the more self-reflexive, omniscient perspective that threatens



to undermine it. It is a tension that also maps on to *Saturday* at the level of plot, with the neurosurgeon Perowne championing materialist objectivity over literary reinvention. It is an attitude that is laced with irony, however, for Perowne is a character in a novel, and even his most avowedly clinical perspectives are shown to be either erroneous or highly subjective.

Bibliographie

Abrams, M.H. *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (1953). Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971.

Adams, Ann Marie. "Mr. McEwan and Mrs. Woolf: How a Saturday in February Follows 'This Moment of June'". *Contemporary Literature* 53.3 (Fall 2012): 548-572.

Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction". *Illuminations*, Hannah Arendt (ed.). Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1969.

Brooks, Peter. *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*. Cambridge (MA): Harvard UP, 1992.

Cassigneul, Adèle and Elsa Cavalié. "Making Us See Ghosts: Ian McEwan's Expressive Visual Style". *Reading Ian McEwan's Mature Fiction: New Critical Approaches*. Armelle Parey and Isabelle Roblin (eds.). Nancy : Presses universitaires de Nancy - Éditions universitaires de Lorraine, « Book Practices and Textual Itineraries », 2020, 127-142.

Cook, Jon, Sebastian Groes, Victor Sage. "Journeys without Maps: An interview with Ian McEwan". *Ian McEwan: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*. Sebastian Groes (ed.). London: Continuum, 2009, 123-134.

Currie, Mark. *About Time: Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2007.

DOI : 10.1515/9780748630400

Elsaesser, Thomas and Malte Hagener. *Film Theory: An Introduction to the Senses*. London: Routledge, 2015.

DOI : 10.4324/9781315740768

Gagneret, Diane. "'Rationalism Gone Berserk': Madness and the scientific mind in Ian McEwan's *Enduring Love*". *Reading Ian McEwan's Mature Fiction: New Critical Approaches*. Armelle Parey and Isabelle Roblin (eds.). Nancy : Presses universitaires de Nancy - Éditions universitaires de Lorraine, « Book Practices and Textual Itineraries », 2020, 81-95.

Gessen, Keith. "Heart of Glass". *New York Magazine* (16 March 2005): <https://nymag.com/nymetro/arts/books/reviews/11521/> [accessed 2 February 2022].

Groes, Sebastian. "Ian McEwan and the Modernist Consciousness of the City in *Saturday*". *Ian McEwan: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*. Sebastian Groes (ed.). London, Continuum, 2009, 99-114.

Hayes, M. Hunter and Sebastian Groes. "'Profoundly dislocating and infinite in possibility': Ian McEwan's Screenwriting". *Ian McEwan: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*. Sebastian Groes (ed.). London: Continuum, 2009, 26-42.

James, David. *Modernist Futures: Innovation and Inheritance in the Contemporary Novel*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012.

DOI : 10.1017/CBO9781139136754

McEwan, Ian. *Atonement* (2001). London: Vintage, 2002.

McEwan, Ian. *Saturday* (2005). London: Vintage, 2006.

McEwan, Ian. *Enduring Love* (1997). London: Vintage, 2016.

Notes

1 McEwan wrote the screenplays of adaptations of his novels *On Chesil Beach* (2007) and *The Children Act* (2014), both of which were released in 2017.



Pour citer cet article

Référence électronique

James Dalrymple, « “My city square, city square”: Windows and Spectatorship in Ian McEwan’s *Saturday* », *Polysesmes* [En ligne], 27 | 2022, mis en ligne le 29 septembre 2022, consulté le 03 octobre 2022. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/polysesmes/10017>

Auteur**James Dalrymple**

James Dalrymple teaches at Université Grenoble Alpes where, in 2017, he defended his doctoral thesis, “Playing the Detective in the works of Kazuo Ishiguro and the British metafictional *whodunit*”. With research fields including contemporary British literature, the television series and cinema, he has a particular interest in metafiction and the detective genre. His published work includes articles on Julian Barnes’s 2011 novel *The Sense of an Ending*, the cult ‘60s television series *The Prisoner*, Dennis Potter’s 1986 BBC serial *The Singing Detective*, Joe Wright’s 2007 film adaptation of McEwan’s novel *Atonement* (2001), and Robert Altman’s 2001 film *Gosford Park*.

Droits d’auteur

Tous droits réservés

