

Gazers in Visual Space of *Cloud Atlas**

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Ekphrasis refers the vividly use of language to describe the visual details in literature. David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* has abundant literary ekphrasis of spaces. David Mitchell combines visual descriptions of environments with characters' emotions to convey themes. Utilizing the lens of visual culture and through the eyes of various protagonists, this essay examines two kinds of active gazers, namely "flâneurs" and "flâneuses", as well as the "imperial gazers" in flowing spaces and colonial spaces respectively. This essay adopts the methods of urban studies and colonial criticism to explore Mitchell's portrayal visual spaces in *Cloud Atlas*.

Keywords: David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, visual studies, gazers, urban studies, colonial criticism

Introduction

Modern civilization is witnessing the transition from a language-centered to image-centered culture. Instead of "reading words", the age of "reading image" is now in effect. The 1890s "linguistic turn" emphasized language and text as the primary means of understanding and interpreting the world. But it has been gradually substituted by "the pictorial turn" in the 1980s. Under the circumstances of this trend, language is subordinated to images, being used as the explanation of the appendix of pictures, movies, or advertisements.

W.J.T. Mitchell proposed the term "pictorial turn" (Mitchell, 1994, p. 11) to describe the growing attention to visual culture across art history, media studies, and philosophy. Therefore, he prepares the groundwork for "visual turn". The visual turn reemphasizes the importance of the visual image and how it affects the way people see the world. It draws people's attention to how pictures, both still and moving, have taken center stage in modern culture and society. Furthermore, it has led to new approaches to visual analysis, including semiotics, iconography, and visual rhetoric and cultures of "the gaze". "Visual turn" also highlights the importance of visual culture in shaping people's understanding of the world, and offers new ways of thinking about the relationship between spaces, images, language, and meaning.

"Ekphrasis" or "ecphrasis" is an ancient Greek metaphor practice which involves vivid and precise language descriptions of events or art works. The objective of ekphrasis is to evoke lifelike images in readers' minds, regardless of types of artworks such as painting, sculpture, photograph. The earliest known example of

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ekphrasis dates back to Homer's *The Iliad* (1998), where he described the crafting of the Shield of Achilles in great details.

In the contemporary era, researchers have refined the concept of ekphrasis to analyze not just poetry but also novels and examine the connection between vision and language. David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* utilizes ekphrasis to portray visuality of surroundings, emotions through individuals' visions.

Flâneurs and Flâneuses in Flowing Spaces

Charles Baudelaire started arguing that conventional art was insufficient for the new dynamic in contemporary life after the French Revolution in 1848. Baudelaire (1995) identified the flâneur as an amateur observer. Being a cultural figure in the nineteenth century, the flâneur carried abundant set of connotations: an unoccupied idle man, an urban explorer, and so on.

Flânerie is an inspective pose which involves casual looking. Spectatorship of a flâneur could be attached or detached. Therefore, a flâneur could simultaneously be "part of" and "apart from" the present space. As a participant and a detached watcher of spatial activities, a flâneur plays a crucial part in comprehending, engaging with, and representing the city.

The image of flâneurs abounds in art and literary works. The impressionist artist Claude Monet's early works sometimes involve passers-by as flâneurs. For example, in his painting *The Beach at Trouville* (1863), Monet captured a beach scene where people strolled and rested aimlessly by the sea. Impressionists themselves were also spectators and flâneurs in the space. They walked outside to sketch the urban or rural sceneries, and by utilizing light and colour, they were able to freeze a moment in time in their paintings.

In Baudelaire's time, domesticity was women's gender role. They were expected to uphold a housewife standard, doing domestic chores and taking care of the children at home. Therefore, originally, the flâneur was a masculine figure of privilege who carelessly wanders around the cities. With the progression of gender equality and women's empowerment, female street strollers are therefore mentioned as "flâneuse". A woman who strolls through cities and observes her surroundings would be the counterpart of "flâneur".

Walter Benjamin (2002) adopted the notion of the flâneur from Baudelaire. Benjamin began *The Arcades Project* in 1927, which remained unfinished at the end but had left a significant paradigm for later modern and postmodern urban studies. It is a record of the flâneurs' wanderings around Parisian retail arcades in the nineteenth century. The goal of this project is to document the emotional and psychological impact of urban life in a bustling city. It involves examining individuals' liberty and commodification present in the urban center. *The Arcades Project* is also an example of the indifference sphere of the city and the alienation of human resources. Flâneurs serve as the conductor of modern life in *The Arcades Project*.

The most prominent feature of modern flânerie is mobility. In *Cloud Atlas*, flâneurs and flâneuses' paces are accelerated by the advancement of transportation. *Cloud Atlas*' chronic storyline paves a foundation for this research to examine the development of flâneries. By moving while watching, narrators of *Cloud Atlas*' six stories are constantly experiencing the flowing of spaces. Thus, *Cloud Atlas*' spatial writing is also a development of spatial forms with the protagonists as mobile flâneurs and flâneuses.

As in *The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing*, by November the fourteenth, 1841, Ewing records his mobile footage in the Island where he moves and observes landscapes with his feet. And after landing on the ship “Prophetess” again, his visual experiences of environments shift on board from land.

In the era of *Letters from Zedelghem*, cars had been popularized. In 1908, Henry Ford popularized cars with mass produced automobile assembly lines, making cars affordable not only for wealthy people but for the average people. Robert Frobisher is picked up by Dhondt’s “1927 Bugatti Royale Type 41” (Mitchell, 2019, p. 158). During the grim journey, Frobisher is absent-minded looking sights on the way: “The land grows crater-scarred, criss-crossed with collapsing trenches and pocked with burnt patches where not even weeds take root. The few trees still standing here and of green on the land seems less nature revived, more nature mildewed” (Mitchell, 2019, p. 158). As he moves forward in the car, the countryside scenes gradually reveal war-time remains in front of him, triggering memories from his past.

Half-Lives-The First Luisa Rey Mystery is a detective story. The image of flâneurs or flâneuses is closely related to detective novels. Characters in detective stories carry missions and mysteries while exploring the hidden corners of urban sites. In *Cloud Atlas*, Luisa Rey is a detached observer of the city and a detective who actively participates in fighting against criminals and seeks justice in the chaos. The flâneur, flâneuse, and the detective represent two archetypes of urban heroism, each embodying a different ideal: the flâneur is an idealized figure of leisure and reflection, carrying an artistic and carefree spirit; the detective is a hero who fights for justice and righteousness with tough attitude and wisdom. Both the flâneurs and the flâneuses, as well as the detectives are romantic figures of urban life. Therefore, Luisa Rey is a combination of the flâneuse and the detective who intends to explore urban fascination and complexities.

Then, in *An Orison of Sonmi-451*, Mitchell depicts a postmodernist space form, namely “hyperspace” (Jameson, 1992). It refers to the blur boundaries between the physical world and the virtual world in the postmodern state. According to Jameson (1992), such a new type of space in contemporary society transcends the traditional concept of temporal-spatial geography with technology and media. Hyperspace is a continuous stream of sensations, images, and information that shapes individuals’ experiences and identities. It is a byproduct of the current stage of capitalism, where consumerism culture and the media play a dominant role in influencing city dwellers’ perception of reality. Additionally, hyperspace expands the use of digital technologies and virtual environments and allows people to interact and communicate with each other in new ways.

Postmodernist spaces are characterized by movement rather than stillness. In postmodern culture, media screens such as computers, cell phones, and flat-screen TVs are incorporated into everyday life. As Sonmi-451 strolls on the street, she notices that the digital advertisements displayed by a 3D projector, and even the moon needs to be made with technology and to be sponsored by corporations to lighten up the night in the city. “Galleria” (Mitchell, 2019, p. 236) is an upgraded version of Benjamin’s retail arcades. The galleria is a commercial community full of commodities. Compare to the modern sense of “flâneurs and flâneuses”, “consumers” and “customers” are postmodernist identities of Neo Seoul’s citizens. Furthermore, the postmodern retail arcades are decorated with images and videos made by cutting-edge technology and media. The images are constantly changing in the commercial urban areas, which enables Sonmi-451 to experience “postmetropolitan visibility” (Brandt, 2009, p. 558).

With transportation such as cars, trains, ships, and even lifts inside buildings, protagonists' visual observation journeys among different spaces become smoother and faster. From walking to driving, stories in *Cloud Atlas* record the fleeting moments and visual fragments in daily life. Flâneurs and flâneuses, while wandering around the modern and postmodern cities, observe and participate in the intricate cultural activities both as engaged participants and disengaged spectators.

Imperial Gazers in Colonial Spaces

Taking place in the nineteenth century, the first tale of *Cloud Atlas*, namely *The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing*, is initially set in the Chatham Islands in the South Pacific Ocean, which are only located about five hundred miles east of New Zealand. And the narrator Adam Ewing is a notary from San Francisco, California. *The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing* is written in an epistolary style whose first-person narration allows Adam Ewing to record his thoughts at the moment from the perspective of a White colonizer, adding more realism factors to the story.

Landscapes of the Chatham Islands in Ewing's journal contain cultural scenes and human activities. For example, in November the ninth, as stated in his journal, Ewing passes an Indian village where "an outer ring of ponga huts (fashioned from branches, earthen walls & matted ceilings) groveled in the lees of 'grandee' dwellings, wooden structures with carved lintel pieces & rudimentary porches. In the hub of this village, a public flogging was under way" (Mitchell, 2019, p. 6). For the imperialistic inhabitants, silver ferns are usually symbols of the imperialism trophy. Constructed from tree-fern trunks, Ponga huts are exclusive constructions of the Chatham Islands. "Ponga" is the Māori word for silver ferns, which is endemic to New Zealand. Locals use this kind of plant to build temporary accommodations. Therefore, to Adam Ewing, an American, though poorly built, Ponga houses are noteworthy landscapes, which he had never seen before arrived on this colonial island. Therefore, he records the images of local ponga huts elaborately in his journal with curiosity.

Then, as Ewing walks further, Ewing comes across and witnesses a public humiliation from an angle of both a detached imperial outsider and a virtuous Christian. With his race and gender, Ewing is allowed to step into the local's public space in silent acquiescence. He captures a view of a crowd of native people. Ewing and the native crowd share a common approach of watching, namely speculating and observing. However, since Ewing is not engaged in their internal politic affairs, his view is generally panoramic and aloof. On watching such a violent abuse with the native Indians, Ewing seemly scolds the locals' indifference: "Such inbred, bovine torpor! Pockmarked & pustular with haki-haki, these wretches watched the punishment, making no response ..." (Mitchell, 2019, p. 6). And Ewing thinks the Indian watchers are "bovine", which means dull and numb as a cow.

Whereas, Ewing unconsciously changes his compassion all of a sudden while noticing the executor's fit body, thinking it would be useful and profitable if the black executor is enslaved. He imposes an inhumane gaze on the skin of the savage executor by observing local people's skin and measuring it with price (Mitchell, 2019, p. 6). Ewing objectifies the local tribesmen. At last, after he regains his humanity as a kind-hearted Christian gazer, Ewing does not lend a hand to the beaten slave, Autua, as he is convinced by his companion not to get involved in trouble.

In short, in this event, Ewing is a contradictory gazer. Because on the one hand, he is a detached spectator with slightly caring sentiments out of his instinct and religious belief. On the other hand, he gazes at the people around him as objects with the imperialist ideology. On the other hand, by recording “the beaten savage raised his slumped head, found my eye & shone me a look of uncanny, amicable knowing!” (Mitchell, 2019, p. 6), Ewing romanticizes his attempt to rescue Autua by narrating the “friendly” and ambiguous eye-contact between Autua and him in his journal.

W.J.T. Mitchell (1992) argues that imperialism sees the expansion of culture and civilization into new spaces as a natural and inevitable development in history. Imperialism’s outward and inward movements are often accompanied by a renewed interest in representing and reshaping the home landscape, which becomes an emblem of national and imperial identity. The enclosure movement in the eighteenth century is an example of imperial landscape reconstruction. It involved importing new landscape conventions from Europe while simultaneously dispossessing the homes and fortunate of the English peasantry. The outward imperial movement is similar. Since the colonizers often imposed their beliefs, morals, and values onto the colonized nations and its population, in *The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing*, Catholic Churches were built on the Chatham Islands. Religions used it as a tool to spread their ideologies to the natives whom they considered uncivilized. Chapels or churches serve as symbols of Western dominance and as centers for the spread of Christianity.

The chapel is introduced on the island as an ideological landscape. In Ewing’s eyes, the colonial chapel is shabby: “we resembled more the Early Christians of Rome than any later Church encrusted with arcana & gem-stones.....the chapel creaked like an old tub & its congregation numbered little more than the digits of two hands” (Mitchell, 2019, p. 8), but it is still a necessary space to organize and control the locals spiritually in this colonial island.

Naturally, landscapes do not belong to the human. But with human interference, landscapes are owned by those who have more power. A chapel is not originally a cultural product on a South Pacific Island that is home to tribesmen. The religious institution helps the imperialists beautify and legalize their existence in an exotic space and cover the cruelty of evil colonial activities. Ewing believes the island is White inhabitants’ procession, therefore he poses a dissatisfied gaze on the chapel, thinking that the Christian rituals should be more formal in a well-built religious site.

Conclusion

Cloud Atlas is regarded as a cosmopolitan novel: “The narrative structure and the connection across time and space of different socio-cultural environments therefore lead to new forms of interconnection materializing, with imagination emerging as a cosmopolitan” (Shaw, 2015, p. 111).

The six stories of *Cloud Atlas* contain rich narrative genres, and the range of the novel’s temporal and spatial narrative is enormous. The story timeline spans from the nineteenth century to the future; the locations in the novel cover Europe, Asia, America and Oceania. Therefore, *Cloud Atlas* explores visuality through its multiple interrelated storylines that are set in different time periods and locations. Mitchell employs vivid descriptions and richly detailed settings to create visual landscapes for each story, which in turn, helps to convey the themes of the novel. Visual spaces in *Cloud Atlas* pave a broader way for scholars to investigate not only the

relationship between gazers and those who are gazed, but also the relationship between visual representations and literary space.

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