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Narrative Redemption: A Commentary of McGregor's <u>Narrative Justice</u>

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<u>Abstract</u>

<u>Rafe McGregor's</u> Narrative Justice <u>provides a powerful argument for the merit of an education by and through aesthetics as a way of challenging criminal inhumanity. As a work at the intersection of critical criminology and philosophy, it is a challenging and thoughtful articulation of the criminological imagination. Ultimately, McGregor's argument highlights the possibility of a political education through aesthetic engagement. The exemplary narratives that McGregor uses in his book are varied and richly evocative. My commentary on the book is in keeping with this spirit and suggests an exemplary narrative of my own from the medium of video games as a way of both complementing McGregor's book and outlining its merits, as well as proposing a future line of study. With focus on</u> Red Dead Redemption 2<u>, I argue for the importance of considering a given narrative's context of production and historicity</u>.

Rafe McGregor's <u>Narrative Justice</u> provides a powerful argument for the merit of an education by

and through aesthetics as a way of challenging criminal inhumanity. As a work at the intersection of critical criminology and philosophy, it is a challenging and thoughtful articulation of the criminological imagination.[1] Ultimately, McGregor's argument highlights the possibility of a political education through aesthetic engagement. The exemplary narratives that McGregor uses are varied and richly evocative. My commentary on the book is in keeping with this spirit and suggests an exemplary narrative of my own as a way of both complementing McGregor's book and outlining its merits, as well as proposing a future line of study.

Before this, however, I would like first to comment on the book in more depth and situate it in relation to the uses of narrative in criminology more widely. McGregor's <u>Narrative Justice</u> has at its center the idea that the experience of narratives leads to a sensibility toward narratives, their content, and the interaction between a given narrative's form and content.[2] This, according to McGregor, is cognitively, ethically, and politically valuable; and it produces individuals who are more capable of making those subsequent evaluations. By focusing primarily on the notion of criminal inhumanity, a type of crime committed in the name of political ideology, he also provides particular examples of how a narrative could produce a perpetrator of such crimes, as well as illuminating examples of how to understand this process.[3] In particular, his analysis of the narratives of "white genocide" and the "crusader," ultimately demonstrating the equivalence between narratives of white supremacy and jihadism, is particularly elucidating.

McGregor's book stands out as a strong contribution to the field of narrative criminology—the theoretical paradigm that highlights how "stories influence human actions and arrangements, including those that harm."[4] Moreover, <u>Narrative Justice</u> also contributes to the field of critical criminology—through its focus on the concept of criminal inhumanity, which incorporates a critique of both state and nonstate actors, and is exemplified in McGregor's book by engagements

with particular manifestations of white supremacy or antisemitism and a more general engagement with violence and terrorism. As such, at the core of McGregor's book remains an interest in power relations, one that is especially welcome considering philosophy's frequent detachment from political considerations. Moreover, McGregor actively endeavors to ground his argument for an aesthetic education through narrative—an education that is both ethical and political—in real experiences of reading, as well as conceptual tools to make sense of reading. His discussion of "the mapping of narrative patterns onto criminal behavior"[5] is also one of a clear commitment to the roots of aesthetics with regard to education, premised on key thinkers such as Kant and Schiller. With the admirable aim of "the reduction of criminal inhumanity" and outlining how that can be achieved through narrative,[6] Narrative Justice provides ample ground for future engagement with narratives and stands as an important expansion of narrative and critical criminology.

In this commentary, I would like to defend McGregor's thesis by way of exploring some of its key concepts through a focus on an interactive narrative—in this case, the video game Red Dead Redemption 2 (henceforth, RDR2).[7] In particular, I will highlight the concept of lucid phenomenological knowledge and explore it in relation to the interactive narrative of RDR2. McGregor briefly touches on video games with regard to their relation to violence.[8] Importantly, he does not explicitly set out to distinguish video games as a distinct form of narratives from, for example, movies or books. Similarly, my intention here is to treat RDR2 as an exemplary narrative, without going into a discussion of the narrativity of video games as such.[9] I will do so in keeping with McGregor's definition of an exemplary narrative: "the product of an agent that is high in narrativity in virtue of representing (i) one or more agents and (ii) two or more events which are (iii) causally connected, (iv) thematically unified, and (v) conclude."[10]

My concern with the exemplary narrative I have chosen for this commentary is one of

defending McGregor's argument for the value of phenomenological knowledge (PK), and more particularly—lucid phenomenological knowledge (LPK). If PK is understood to be a "realization of what a particular lived experience is like,"[11] then LPK is a subcategory of the former acquired through exemplary narratives: "[t]he realization of what a particular lived experience is like by means of the reproduction of a particular experience of a particular character for the audience who adopt the standard mode of engagement to the narrative representation."[12]

For McGregor, the value of LPK lies in a dynamic engagement with otherness. This is deeply interwoven with the notion of lived experience and, as such, has significant value for political education through aesthetic means. Put simply, the ability of (some) narratives to elicit realizations of what a particular lived experience is like is central to political organization, expressions of solidarity, and engagement in collective struggle. In the exemplary narrative that I will explore in the section below, the LPK of the unlawful era of the Wild West is incongruously and ahistorically represented in the video game Red Dead Redemption 2.

Red Dead Redemption 2

The question whether video games are narratives has a long history and has been instrumental in the delineation of the distinct field of game studies. Espen Aarseth has commented that the difference between games and narratives is not immediately apparent or easy to highlight.[13] Moreover, games and narratives appear to share "a number of elements, namely a world, its agents, objects and events."[14] With this in mind, I do not intend to engage in a discussion of the narrativity of video games. Rather, I posit that some video games consist of narratives, both in the sense outlined by Aarseth and McGregor. Particularly, the example of RDR2 fits perfectly into McGregor's definition of an exemplary narrative quoted above. It should also be acknowledged,

however, that games are "both object and process . . . [in that] they can't [solely] be read as texts or listened to as music, they <u>must be played</u>."[15]

RDR2 is the second game in a series that focuses on a fictionalized Wild West. The game takes place in 1899 and covers several southeastern states (for example, New Hannover, New Austin, Lemoyne, West Elizabeth), all of which have clear real-world parallels. The game relies on a mixed logic of fictional geography and nonfictional references. For example, the metropolis of Saint Denis is clearly inspired by New Orleans, both in terms of some of its key and most recognizable signifiers of the surrounding swampland area and the legacy of French colonization. In contrast, the game also features references to both New York and of Princeton University in New Jersey. As such, the game aspires for a real-world referentiality while simultaneously signaling its fictionality. The main narrative of the game follows Arthur Morgan, a member of a band of outlaws. Among other things, the game's narrative focuses on Arthur's personal journey of redemption, his experience of terminal illness, and the difficulties he encounters in managing the social relations of the microsociety of outlaws in which he finds himself. All this occurs against a backdrop of exceeding industrialization, increase in crime control, and the end of the Wild West era of lawlessness.

The game wears its narrativity on its sleeve and is explicitly delineated into separate chapters. As an open-world game, it encourages a <u>standard mode of engagement</u> that involves exploration, interaction with the multitude of nonplayable characters (NPCs), and immersion in the time period. Here, I will posit that, following McGregor, the standard mode of engagement with RDR2 provides the player with the knowledge that both redemption and justice are possible. However, I will focus on an exemplary narrative that provides an ethical evaluation, that is also political in nature, in an ahistorical manner; and as a result, it fails to engage seriously with the

moral issue it highlights. A key game mechanic for this is the honor system. Depending on the player's choices, the character's honor either increases or decreases. For example, the act of riding on a horse through a crowd of innocent passers-by will decrease the player's honor, while the act of helping a stranger randomly encountered in the world will increase it. As such, the game presents an interesting example both in terms of McGregor's discussion of the implications of a work of art's standard mode of engagement and his conceptualization of exemplary narratives as "essentially ethical in virtue of both the combination of agency and events represented and the agency of the author in inviting the adoption of a particular framework."[16]

With regard to the former, the game defines its own medium-specific mode of engagement, where the player must make choices. With regard to the latter, the outcomes of this standard mode of engagement results in a readymade ethical evaluation. For example, the player, just like Arthur, does not know what happened immediately before the game's storyline started--very much in keeping with McGregor's engagement with Zamir's discussion of <u>Romeo and Juliet</u>.[17] Moreover, the LPK associated with the honor system in the game is one of a constant ethical evaluation of one's actions.

The particular exemplary narrative in which I am interested here is a side-quest encounter with a stranger that becomes available to the player in Chapter 3 of the game. Following the band's relocation to the town of Rhodes, Arthur encounters a homeless drunk in front of the train station by the name of Jeremiah Compson. If the player chooses to engage, this results in a questline[18] called "The Iniquities of History," in which Compson mourns his sorry state and vaguely refers to a personal history of privilege. Then, Compson asks Arthur to procure his prized possessions, the only remnants of his glorious past: a revolver, a ledger, and a pocket watch, which are now inaccessible to him and lie abandoned in his repossessed house. If the player chooses to pursue

this quest, Arthur finds Compson's abandoned house, experiences a confrontation with two robbers, and easily procures the gun and the pocket watch. Following the encounter with the robbers, however, he notices a trapdoor leading to a basement, in which he discovers a dungeon that appears to have been used for imprisoning people. Upon discovering the ledger in the basement and examining it, Arthur realizes it is filled with the names of people that have been enslaved or caught while attempting to escape slavery, and it becomes clear that Compson was a slavecatcher. The player is then prompted to return to Compson. In the event of doing so, the player experiences a "cutscene" (a cinematic where one can only observe the game but not interact with it), in which Arthur confronts Compson at his camp outside town. In response to Arthur, Compson immediately demands respect and alludes to the status fitting to his former profession. Without giving the player a choice, Arthur then throws Compson's possessions into the fire. Compson vaguely refers to a "they" who "changed everything" and mourns his possessions as "his history," to which Arthur responds that "some jobs ain't for saving."[19] At this point, the cutscene ends after Compson declares, "I still exist." Considering the ubiquity of violence in the game's world and the nature of roleplaying in video games, the player is confronted with a choice—abandon Compson or kill him. Regardless of the choice, the character's honor will increase as a result of this sequence.

My interest in this exemplary narrative is in its negotiation of interaction, its suspension of what can be called the game's standard mode of engagement, and the inevitable ethical evaluation at its end. I specify here as ethical, in McGregor's sense, the "positive, negative, or ambiguous evaluation of agency or character."[20] Put simply, the player is not afforded a choice to fulfill a favor to a person who is remorselessly nostalgic for slavery. In one sense, this expands McGregor's example of Paul de Man's silence on his history of antisemitism and collaboration with the Nazi

occupation of Belgium.[21] Unlike de Man, Compson is not silent but vocally nostalgic about his former social position at the expense of an entire oppressed race. Moreover, following McGregor's use of R. M. Hare's identification of remorse as a "desire for reversibility," Compson not only would like to reverse the past but also actively mourns its passing and his loss of the privileges it attributed to him.[22] As such, the exemplary narrative of "The Iniquities of History" is an elucidating example that speaks to many aspects of McGregor's argument. In the next section, I will expand on its implications as a way of discussing Narrative Justice in more depth.

Narrative Redemption

The question that immediately stands out when applying McGregor's narrative justice thesis to the exemplary narrative outlined above is whether the narrative, and the narrative sensibility it seeks to cultivate, can work to reduce criminal inhumanity. On one level, the answer is simple and affirmative. Since the exemplary narrative is "ethically valuable in virtue of its narrativity" and "narrative sensibility enables the realization of ethical value in exemplary narratives," then the cultivation of said sensibility increases the realization of ethical value in narratives.[23] As shown in the exemplary narrative of Compson, and in keeping with McGregor's definition, the narrative can help develop narrative sensibility and, as such, can foster ethical understanding. To make this particular—the player is most likely to agree with the moral condemnation of slavery and subsequently that of Compson. However, I focus on this example because I claim that this is not in virtue of the narrative but in virtue of the contemporary context of its reading.

Compson's crimes are that of participating in slavery as well as its apologia—as such, they fit into the category of criminal inhumanity. McGregor highlights criminal inhumanity as a type of crime that is linked to ideology. I agree with McGregor's subsequent qualification that political

ideology is "supervenient on ethical principles" in the sense that "there cannot be a change in the former without a change in the latter."[24] This is then taken to mean that the relationship between ideology and ethical principles is one of legitimacy in the sense that "political ideology is justified by the ethical principles."[25] The narrative of Compson also conforms to McGregor's discussion of the moral closural order. The ending of "The Iniquities of History" narrative is moral in the sense outlined by McGregor of representing a narrative transition from is-but-ought-not-to-be to is-and-ought-to-be.[26] In the narrative, this transition is revealed only at its closing, thus paralleling our own engagement with the quest with that of Arthur—we both assume that we are helping a random stranger, not a villain. Upon finding that out, however, Arthur condemns Compson as a way of reaffirming the is-and-ought-to-be.

RDR2, particularly "The Iniquities of History" narrative, does this by altering its standard mode of engagement—the player's control over Arthur and his decisions is suspended for the purposes of narration. From a critical perspective, the ethical choice is taken away from the player and replaced by a noninteractive narrative. On one hand, it can be speculated that the video game developers sought a way out of providing players with the opportunity to be supportive of slavery. However, this appears as a rather simplistic explanation since the simplest way of avoiding the moral pitfall of making the moment interactive would be not to include it at all. On the other hand, the exemplary narrative, by barring the player from exercising their choice (the question of what that would look like is put to the side here) sinks into didacticism and, in McGregor's terms, invites an ethical evaluation from an external, rather than an internal, perspective. In a manner of speaking, it makes explicit the "vision or perspective embodied by the [game]."[27] This, in turn, reframes the entire sequence of the exemplary narrative, since, by suspending the standard mode of engagement of the game, it also interrupts what Gregory Currie has referred to as the prompt to "imitate salient

aspects of [the narrative]—notably evaluative attitudes and emotional responses."[28] By inviting the player to adopt an ethical evaluation of the exemplary narrative, and of Compson's remorselessness, from an external perspective, purely because someone else is making the choice instead of the player, the latter's narrative evaluation is likely to be incomplete. McGregor himself claims so: "The engagement with an exemplary narrative qua narrative <u>is incomplete without a dual ethical evaluation</u>, from both the internal and external perspectives."[29]

Regardless, this ultimately results in a moral closural order of <u>is-and-ought-to-be</u>. However, the matter of moral value here is an issue that requires further discussion. McGregor, in his discussion of A. W. Eaton's five ways in which a work can be morally defective, focuses on "the vision or perspective embodied by the work."[30] Namely, the moral closural order here remains detached from the player and appears external to the player. Moreover, it must be noted that Arthur's moral condemnation of Compson, historically speaking, is unlikely. As such, it is one that, once viewed from a critical lens, is not merely didactic but also ahistorical and thus failing to engage with the significance of slavery as part of the history of the United States. Understood this way, the exemplary narrative fails to deliver narrative justice, as it does not engage with the political reality of the issue at hand but merely resorts to an ethical evaluation that is external to the narrative and clearly traceable to its creators.

The Context of Narrative Production

Thus, the matter of context—both in terms of what is represented in the narrative, when, and by whom—should be acknowledged. Only a year before the setting of the game's exemplary narrative, in 1898, W. E. B. Du Bois wrote on African Americans and "the fact that a definitely segregated mass of eight millions of Americans do not wholly share the national life of the people;

are not an integral part of the social body."[31]

This importantly situates the incongruous and ahistoric representation of Arthur's moral condemnation of slavery, a white immigrant with English-born parents. While slavery in the United States had been formally abolished for a little over thirty years by means of the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States constitution, in 1899 the problem of racial inequality persisted, as did the systematic processes of its reproduction into individual prejudice. For example, more contemporary writers than Du Bois, such as Angela Davis, Cedric J. Robinson, and Jackie Wang,[32] have problematized the clear-cut demarcation of the end of slavery in the Thirteenth Amendment and put forth concepts such as racial and carceral capitalism. Such perspectives have pointed out that capitalism (one of the main themes of RDR2) has always been inextricably linked to racism, and this often has expressed itself in severe forms of incarceration. Interestingly, in the spirit of the Wild West's ambiguity with regard to law and order, Arthur is often afforded the opportunity to become a bounty hunter. As such, Arthur's opposition to slavery appears to be a sentimental one, rather than an understanding of racial inequality, since his bounty hunting will have the same effects of reproducing racial inequality as Compson's "profession." As such, the supposed moral of the exemplary narrative discussed above stands in firm contradiction to the game narrative's treatment of other expressions of racial and carceral capitalism. The dynamic engagement with otherness that LPK is supposed to provide, once contextualized, appears contrived and lacking historical awareness.

To claim that Arthur is not likely to have such a strong view against slavery and to represent him in that manner is ahistorical is not meant to defend an argument that Arthur could not have realistically been an abolitionist; nor is it an argument that aims to erase the work of abolitionists and antiracists in that time period. Rather, the point here is that the exemplary narrative and moral

closural order of the condemnation of slavery is communicated through sentimental and strictly moral means. As such, it centers Arthur's individual ethical evaluation, rather than the structural reality of the problem. This, on its own, is not a critique of slavery and can hardly serve as a good basis for one.

While McGregor's political commitments against criminal inhumanity and his position of critique and engagement with power relations are clear, the framework put forth in Narrative Justice nevertheless leaves a gap with regard to contextualization of what, when, and how a given narrative has been produced. As much as McGregor's engagement with form and content proves elucidating, it has been my intention to propose a trajectory for an even more political project of critique. Thus, I suggest a potential future direction for research in McGregor's framework of narrative justice: namely, the incorporation of historical inquiry and contextualization, as well as an engagement with social structure, as a way of expanding the discussion of narratives beyond form and content. I see this as a complement to and an expansion of the already critical framework. More importantly, it is a development that would be welcome in both critical and cultural criminological inquiries.

Notes

<NTXT>[1]Jock Young, The Criminological Imagination (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011). Also, see Rafe McGregor, "James Ellroy's Critical Criminology: Crimes of the Powerful in the Underworld USA Trilogy," Critical Criminology (2019): 14; https://doi.org/10.1007/s10612-019-09459-3.

[2]See Rafe McGregor, "Introduction to the Narrative Justice Symposium," in this journal.

[3]Rafe McGregor, <u>Narrative Justice</u> (London: Rowman and Littlefield International, 2018), 174-82.

[4]Lois Presser and Sveinung Sandberg, "Narrative Criminology as Critical Criminology," <u>Critical Criminology</u> 27 (2019): 131.

[5]McGregor, <u>Narrative Justice</u>, 21.

[6]McGregor, <u>Narrative Justice</u>, 109.

[7]<u>Red Dead Redemption 2</u> (Rockstar Games, 2018).

[8]McGregor, <u>Narrative Justice</u>, 120-23.

[9]For such a discussion, see Espen Aarseth, "A Narrative Theory of Games," <u>Proceedings of the International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games</u> (N.p.: ACM Digital Library, 2012). E-book downloadable at https://dl.acm.org/doi/proceedings/10.1145/2282338.

[10]McGregor, <u>Narrative Justice</u>, 5.

[11]McGregor, <u>Narrative Justice</u>, 75.

[12]McGregor, 76.

[13]Espen Aarseth, <u>Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature</u> (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 5.

[14]Aarseth, "A Narrative Theory of Games," 130.

[15]Espen Aarseth, "Computer Game Studies, Year One," <u>Game Studies</u> 1, no. 1 (2001), http://gamestudies.org/0101/editorial.html (accessed May 24, 2020).

[16]McGregor, <u>Narrative Justice</u>, 57.

[17]McGregor, <u>Narrative Justice</u>, 76. Also see Tzachi Zamir, <u>Double Vision: Moral Philosohpy and Shakespearean Drama</u> (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 113-25.

[18]In video games, a quest is a self-contained micronarrative that often has little to do with the

main storyline of the game but allows for further immersion into the game's world.

[19]GTA Series Videos, "Red Dead Redemption 2 Stranger Mission—The Iniquities of History,"
YouTube, January 24, 2019, https://youtu.be/nv9Bl4LDEgI (accessed May 24, 2020).

[20]McGregor, Narrative Justice, 57.

[21]McGregor, 144.

[22]McGregor, 144.

[23]McGregor, 103.

[24]McGregor, 104.

[25]McGregor, 104.

[26]McGregor, 68.

[27] McGregor, Narrative Justice, 8. Also, see A. W. Eaton, "Where Ethics and Aesthetics Meet:
Titian's Rape of Europa," Hypatia 18 (2003):164-66.

[28]Gregory Currie, Narratives and Narrators: A Philosophy of Stories (New York: Oxford
University Press, 2012), 106. Also see McGregor, Narrative Justice, 55.

[29]McGregor, Narrative Justice, 56. Emphasis added by the author.

[30]McGregor, 8. Also see Eaton, "Where Ethics and Aesthetics Meet," 164-66.

[31]W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Study of the Negro Problems," The Annals of the American Academy
of Political and Social Science 11 (1898): 7.

[32]Angela Davis, Women, Race and Class (London: Penguin Books, 2019); Cedric J. Robinson,
On Racial Capitalism, Black Internationalism, and Cultures of Resistance (London: Pluto Press,
2019); Jackie Wang, Carceral Capitalism (New York: MIT Press, 2018).