**Narrative Redemption: A Commentary on McGregor’s *Narrative Justice***

Vladimir Rizov

McGregor’s *Narrative Justice* 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]](#endnote-1) Ultimately, McGregor’s argument is one of highlighting the possibility of a political education through aesthetic engagement. The exemplary narratives that McGregor uses in his book in order to argue his thesis are varied and richly evocative. My commentary on the book is in keeping with this spirit and suggest 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 to first comment on the book in more depth and situate it in relation to the uses of narrative in criminology more widely. McGregor’s Narrative Justice has at its centre the idea that the experience of narratives leads to a sensibility towards narratives, their content, and the interaction between a given narrative’s form and content[[2]](#endnote-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]](#endnote-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.

With regards to the treatment of narrative in criminology. McGregor’s book stands out as a strong contribution to the field of narrative criminology – the theoretical paradigm which highlights how ‘stories influence human actions and arrangements, including those that harm’.[[4]](#endnote-4) Moreover, *Narrative Justice* 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 non-state 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, and one that is especially welcomed considering philosophy’s frequent detachment from political considerations. Moreover, McGregor actively endeavours 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 behaviour’[[5]](#endnote-5) is also one of a clear commitment to the roots of aesthetics with regards 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]](#endnote-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]](#endnote-7). In particular, I will highlight the concept of lucid phenomenological knowledge (LPK) and explore it in relation to the interactive narrative of RDR2. McGregor briefly touches on video games with regards to their relation to violence[[8]](#endnote-8). Importantly, McGregor 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]](#endnote-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]](#endnote-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 ‘realisation of what a particular lived experience is like’[[11]](#endnote-11), then LPK is a subcategory of the former that is acquired through exemplary narratives:

The realisation 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]](#endnote-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 realisations of what a particular lived experience is like is central to political organisation, 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. Aarseth has commented that the difference between games and narratives is not immediately apparent or easy to highlight[[13]](#endnote-13). Moreover, games and narratives appear to share ‘a number of elements, namely a world, its agents, objects and events’.[[14]](#endnote-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 […] they can’t [solely] be read as texts or listened to as music, they *must be played’*.[[15]](#endnote-15)

RDR2 is the second game in a series that focuses on a fictionalised Wild West. The game takes place in 1899 and covers several south-eastern states (e.g. 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 non-fictional references. For example, the metropolis of Saint Denis is clearly inspired by New Orleans, both in terms of some of its key and most recognisable signifiers of the surrounding swampland area and the legacy of French colonisation. In contrast, the game also features references to both New York and the University of Princeton in New Jersey. As such, the game aspires for a real world referentiality, while simultaneously signalling 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 micro-society of outlaws in which he finds himself. All of this occurs against a backdrop of exceeding industrialisation, 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 *standard mode of engagement* that involves exploration, interaction with the multitude of non-playable 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 a ahistorical manner and as a result it fails to seriously engage with the moral issue it highlights. A key game mechanic that is of significance for this is the honour system. Depending on the player’s choices, the character’s honour 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 honour, while the act of helping out 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 conceptualisation 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]](#endnote-16)

With regards to the former, the game defines its own medium-specific mode of engagement, where the player must make choices. With regards 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 *Romeo and Juliet*.[[17]](#endnote-17) Moreover, the LPK associated with the honour 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]](#endnote-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, a revolver, a ledger and a pocket watch, the only remnants of his glorious past which are now inaccessible to him and lie abandoned in his repossessed house. In the case that 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 realises 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]](#endnote-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 honour 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]](#endnote-20) Put simply, the player is not afforded a choice to fulfil a favour 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]](#endnote-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]](#endnote-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 in the affirmative. Since the exemplary narrative is ‘ethically valuable in virtue of its narrativity’ and ‘narrative sensibility enables the realisation of ethical value in exemplary narratives’, then the cultivation of said sensibility increases the realisation of ethical value in narratives.[[23]](#endnote-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]](#endnote-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]](#endnote-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]](#endnote-26)* In the narrative, this transition is only revealed 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 non-interactive 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 to not 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]](#endnote-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 Currie has referred to as the prompt to ‘imitate salient aspects of [the narrative] – notably evaluative attitudes and emotional responses.’[[28]](#endnote-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 *is incomplete without a dual ethical evaluation*, from both the internal and external perspectives. (emphasis added)[[29]](#endnote-29)

Regardless, this ultimately results in a moral closural order of *is-and-ought-to-be*. 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]](#endnote-30) Namely, the moral closural order here remains detached to 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 USA. 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 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]](#endnote-31)

This is of significant importance in order to situate the incongruous and ahistoric representation of Arthur’s moral condemnation of slavery, a white immigrant with English-born parents. While slavery in the USA had been formally abolished for a little over 30 years by means of the 13th amendment of the constitution, in 1899 the problem of racial inequality persisted, as did the systematic processes of it reproduction into individual prejudice. For example, more contemporary writers than Du Bois, such as Davis[[32]](#endnote-32), Robinson[[33]](#endnote-33) and Wang[[34]](#endnote-34), have problematised the clear-cut demarcation of the end of slavery in the 13th amendment of the US constitution 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 regards 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 contextualised, 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 does not mean 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 anti-racists 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 centres 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 regards to contextualisation in the sense of what, when, and how has a given narrative 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. That is why I suggest a potential future direction for research in McGregor’s framework of narrative justice. Namely, the incorporation of historical inquiry and contextualisation, as well as incorporating 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.

1. Jock Young, *The Criminological Imagination* (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. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Rafe McGregor, “Introduction to the *Narrative Justice* Symposium,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* (**this issue**). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Rafe McGregor, *Narrative Justice* (Rowman and Littlefield International, 2018), 174-182. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Lois Presser and Sveinung Sandberg, “Narrative Criminology as Critical Criminology,” *Critical Criminology* 27 (2019): 131-43. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. McGregor, *Narrative Justice*, 21. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. McGregor, *Narrative Justice*, 109. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Red Dead Redemption 2 (Rockstar Games, 2018). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. McGregor, *Narrative Justice*, 120-3. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. For such a discussion, see Espen Aarseth, “A Narrative Theory of Games”. *Proceedings of the International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games* (2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. McGregor, *Narrative Justice*, 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. McGregor, *Narrative Justice*, 75. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. McGregor, *Narrative Justice*, 76. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Espen Aarseth. *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Baltimore and London:Johns Hopkins UP, 1997), 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Aarseth, “A Narrative Theory of Games,” 130. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Espen Aarseth,“Computer Game Studies, Year One,” *Game Studies* 1 (2001), no. 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. McGregor, *Narrative Justice*, 57. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. McGregor, *Narrative Justice*, 76. Also, see Tzachi Zamir*, Double Vision: Moral Philosohpy and Shakespearean Drama* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 113-25. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. In video games, a quest is a self-contained micro-narrative that often has little to do with the main storyline of the game, but allows for further immersion into the game’s world. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. GTA Series Videos. “Red Dead Redemption 2 Stranger Mission - The Iniquities of History.” YouTube video, Jan 24, 2019. <https://youtu.be/nv9Bl4LDEgI>. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. McGregor, *Narrative Justice*, 57. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. McGregor, *Narrative Justice*, 144. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. McGregor, *Narrative Justice*, 144. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. McGregor, *Narrative Justice*, 103. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. McGregor, *Narrative Justice*, 104. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. McGregor, *Narrative Justice*, 104. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. McGregor, *Narrative Justice*, 68. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. A.W.Eaton, “Where Ethics and Aesthetics Meet: Titian’s *Rape of Europa*,” *Hypatia* 18 (2003):164-66.Also, see McGregor, *Narrative Justice*, 8. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Currie, Narratives & Narrators, 106. Also, see McGregor, *Narrative Justice*, 55. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. McGregor, *Narrative Justice*, 56. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. McGregor, *Narrative Justice*, 8. Also, see Eaton, “Where Ethics and Aesthetics Meet,” 164-66. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. W.E. Burghardt Du Bois, “The Study of the Negro Problems,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 11 (1898), 7. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Angela Davis, *Women, Race & Class* (Penguin Books: London, 2019). [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Cedric J. Robinson, *On Racial Capitalism, Black Internationalism, and Cultures of Resistance* (Pluto Press: London, 2019). [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Jackie Wang, Carceral Capitalism (MIT Press: New York, 2018). [↑](#endnote-ref-34)