

Vol. 17 No. 1

DEBATES *in* AESTHETICS



Debates in Aesthetics is a peer-reviewed, open-access journal for articles, interviews and book reviews. The journal's principal aim is to provide the philosophical community with a dedicated venue for debate in aesthetics and the philosophy of art.

BSA BRITISH
SOCIETY OF
AESTHETICS

Vol. 17 No. 1
September 2021

Edited by Sarah Kiernan and Claire Anscomb

Published by
The British Society of Aesthetics

Typesetting
Sarah Kiernan and Claire Anscomb

Proofreading
Laura Cadonna

Typeface
The Brill, designed by John Hudson
Avenir, designed by Adrian Frutiger

Cover
Photo by Simone Hutsch on Unsplash

Contact
www.debatesinaesthetics.org
editor@debatesinaesthetics.org

ISSN 2514-6637

Contents

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

Sarah Kiernan and Claire Ansbomb 5-11

ARTICLES

Harry Drummond 13-28
Architectural Value and the Artistic Value of Architecture

Guillaume Schuppert 31-49
Truth in Fiction & Natural Stories: About an argument

Marta Risco Ruiz 51-65
The contemplative walking in light: Somaesthetic experience in the projects of Ann Veronica Janssens and Olafur Eliasson

INTERVIEW

Matija Rajter 67-78
Aesthetic Education via Narrative Representation: An Interview with Rafe McGregor

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Harry Drummond, Guillaume Schuppert, Marta Risco Ruiz, Matija Rajter
80-81

Aesthetic Education via Narrative Representation

An Interview with Rafe McGregor

Matija Rajter

Rafe McGregor is a Senior Lecturer in Criminology at Edge Hill University in Lancashire, England. He specialises in the intersection of critical criminology and philosophical aesthetics. He is the author of *A Criminology of Narrative Fiction* (2021), *Narrative Justice* (2018), *The Value of Literature* (2016), and one hundred and fifty journal papers, review essays, and magazine articles.

1 Introduction

In his recent book, *Narrative Justice* (2018), Rafe McGregor seeks to establish a novel theory of aesthetic education. The main thesis that McGregor argues for in this work is that the cultivation of narrative sensibility can reduce criminal inhumanity. Narrative sensibility is the trait that enables the realisation of ethical value in exemplary narratives while criminal inhumanity refers to a category of crimes motivated by ideology (i.e., a category of political crime). McGregor works within the fields of both criminology and philosophical aesthetics and, as such, has the capacity to provide an interesting point of view from an interdisciplinary perspective. The context

of the book is situated firmly within the philosophical tradition of aesthetic education that traces its origin back to Friedrich Schiller, who argued that the cultivation of aesthetic sensibility can help bring about political harmony within a society.¹ The opening sections lay out the contemporary alternatives to the thesis of narrative justice in the form of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theory of global aesthetic education and Sarah E. Worth's theory of narrative education, after which the shortcomings of each are identified.² McGregor defends the deflationary account of the ethical value of narrative representation so that, while every story has a moral, that moral may be virtuous, vicious, or something

in between (2018, 53). Essentially, the theory is that there is a necessary relation between narrative representation and ethical value, but not between narrative representation and moral value. The theory of narrative cognitivism is laid out and defended: it claims that narrative representations can provide knowledge in virtue of their narrativity, regardless of their potential truth value. One of the ways narrative representations provide knowledge is through lucid phenomenological knowledge: "the realisation of what a particular lived experience is like by means of reproduction of a particular experience of a particular character for the audience who adopt the standard mode of engagement to the narrative representation" (2018, 76). Taken together, the arguments developed through McGregor's interdisciplinary methodology, and examples of how one might apply these ideas in practice to (among other things) undermine criminal inhumanity, present an exciting development in philosophical aesthetics and narrative criminology.

During the interview, we discussed aesthetic education and philosophical criminology as we reflected on the key takeaways of the book and the motivation behind it. One of the strengths of *Narrative Justice* is, as McGregor sees it, the fact that its advantages over alternative theses include that it does not require a radical rethinking of moral theory or ethical practice, nor does it rely on questionable empirical evidence. Additionally, the discussion

provides an insight into why, according to McGregor, narrative criminology has thus far largely ignored the relationship between fiction and documentary.

In addition to drawing upon McGregor's interdisciplinary knowledge, critical points were also raised in the discussion. For instance, one point of contention within the framework of *Narrative Justice* is the following: in virtue of which property do narrative representations provide knowledge? According to the theory of narrative cognitivism (which McGregor advocates for in his work) narrative representations provide knowledge in virtue of their narrativity, while others seek to reduce narrative properties to aesthetic properties; the author lays out the reasons for his worry about reducing narrative properties to aesthetic properties and explains why the former should take primacy over the latter within the framework of his theory. Rafe McGregor provides an answer to all of these questions and more; it is up to the reader to judge the strength of his argumentation.

2 Aesthetic Education

What was the main motivation that lay behind the conception of your book?

It was unusual – certainly different from any other book I've written – and may be of particular interest to postgraduate students and early career researchers. By the end of

2016 I was in a very poor position career-wise. I was two years out of my PhD, my first (and only) fixed-term contract had just ended, and I was entirely reliant on precarious work in the adult education sector for the following term. By that point I'd applied for thirty-three permanent jobs, but only been invited to three interviews, none of which were successful. I decided that an interdisciplinary monograph (between philosophy and criminology) would make me more employable and set out to write a proposal over the Christmas break. The quickest way to do this seemed to be to base the book on my existing postdoctoral publications, of which I had five at the time, two on crimes against humanity, two on narrative representation, and one on ethical perception.³ I summarised the five abstracts and tried different ways of cobbling them together to create a coherent whole. I ended up with plans for two different monographs, one with a narrative focus incorporating four of the five and the other with a cinematic focus incorporating three of the five. As the former not only included more papers, but was more obviously interdisciplinary, I selected that plan. The plan became the narrative justice thesis and the four chapters, Chapters Three, Four, Seven, and

Eight of *Narrative Justice*. I submitted the proposal, received an overwhelmingly positive response from referees, and was offered a contract. I started my first permanent lectureship in June 2017 and while I was delighted that the monograph had served its purpose, the circumstances of its creation would come back to haunt me.

That sounds interesting and I would like to circle back to it later. What makes your theory of aesthetic education more compelling than other available alternatives (most notably Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theory of global aesthetic education and Sarah E. Worth's theory of narrative education)?

The first point to make is that I have a great respect for both Gayatri Spivak and Sarah Worth – as academics and as human beings (unfortunately, the two don't always align). I was lucky enough to meet Sarah shortly after the book was published, at Narrative Justice: A British Society of Aesthetics Conference on Aesthetic Education from Theory to Practice (5-6 March 2019, Edge Hill University), which I hosted courtesy of funding from the British Society of Aesthetics. She closed our discussion of the differences between *In Defence of Reading and Narrative*

Justice swiftly, stating, "We are in agreement," and she was right.⁴ With that in mind, I do think that narrative justice has at least one advantage over each of global aesthetic education and narrative education.⁵ Spivak's theory is entirely reliant on what I call her 'hyperbolic ethics'.⁶ Hyperbolic ethics involves a rejection of Kantian moral philosophy in favour of Levinas and Derrida, a reversal of *ought implies can to ought implies cannot*. Although I am sympathetic to this approach, an advantage of the narrative justice thesis is that no such radical reconceptualization of moral theory or ethical practice is required. Sarah's narrative education draws on the empirical evidence for the impact of reading narrative fiction on empathy and social cognition. Her summary ignores what I see as the fundamental flaw in seeking empirical evidence for aesthetic education. If there are empirical effects of reading or watching fictions (and I think there are), those effects are likely only evinced in the medium or long term. The problem is the increase in the likelihood of one or more confounding variables as the interval between exposure and measurement increases. This combination leaves those seeking evidence of empathy and cognition in a position where they must

either attempt to measure an insignificant effect accurately (short term) or a significant effect inaccurately (long term). In my opinion, no experimental work can be conclusive until this tension is resolved and an advantage of the narrative justice thesis is that it is not reliant on empirical evidence.

What would be the desirable outcome of that same aesthetic education?

Your questions don't leave much room for manoeuvre! There are two answers I can give. Ideally, the outcome would be the fulfilment of the project Schiller began in *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*.⁷ His argument involves two steps: the cultivation of aesthetic sensibility in the individual produces moral harmony in that individual; and a collective of individuals in moral harmony produces political harmony in society. The desired outcome of narrative justice would be political harmony conceived as social justice. A more realistic outcome is the recognition of the significance of stories to the prevention, reduction, and punishment of what I call *criminal inhumanity* - "serious crimes committed by a state or non-state actor against a civilian population, government, or public for ideological reasons."⁸ This rec-

ognition would include changes to public policy and institutional practice with respect to crimes against humanity, insurgency (which I prefer to the term 'terrorism'), transitional justice, and war crimes.

Why is the engagement with a narrative representation qua narrative representation incomplete without ethical evaluation?

I begin *Narrative Justice* by identifying narrative representation as gradational rather than categorical and establishing a continuum from 'minimal narratives' to 'exemplary narratives'.⁹ Even at their most basic level, for example a single sentence representing one person and two chronological events, narratives combine action with agency. All intentional action (and inaction) is subject to ethical evaluation, whether that evaluation is that the act (or decision to take no action) is morally permissible, morally prohibited, or morally obligatory. The essential combination of agency and action in narrative representation is what makes narratives essentially ethical, and this essence should be at least acknowledged in any evaluation, appreciation, or interpretation.

On what grounds do you defend your deflationary account of ethical

value of narrative representation?

Returning to your second question, about different theories of aesthetic education, I think it's important to recognise that the crucial question with which the thesis is concerned is whether narrative, fiction, literature, or art can make some difference to the cognition, emotions, or behaviour of those who engage with it (whether or not that can be measured). If there is no change in readers or viewers, then aesthetic education is fatally flawed. If there is a change, then it seems naive to think that it would only be in the 'right' direction. Why should reading books or watching films always make us (morally) better people? The direction of the change is surely dependent on the content and context of what we read or watch. In other words, I don't see how we as philosophers can propose a change in one direction only and ignore the potential of narrative, fiction, literature, or art to make people, for example, more selfish and less empathetic. This is the crux of my deflationary account, that narratives are essentially ethical (there is a necessary relation between narrative representation and ethical value, whether positive, negative, or in between) rather than essentially moral (there is a necessary relation

between narrative representation and positive ethical value).

According to the theory of narrative cognitivism that you articulate in your work, you claim that narrative representations can provide knowledge in virtue of their narrativity, regardless of their truth value. What justifies your claim that narrative properties are not reducible to aesthetic properties?

Although *Narrative Justice* is first and foremost a thesis of aesthetic education, I have avoided using the term 'aesthetic' wherever I can, much as I did in *The Value of Literature*, where I was concerned with literary rather than aesthetic value.¹⁰ In each case, I was concerned with a particular phenomenon, literature in *The Value of Literature* and exemplary narratives in *Narrative Justice*, and wary of generalising beyond that phenomenon. I guess this is a symptom of my postgraduate training in analytic aesthetics, where one is encouraged to be as specific as possible and discouraged from generalising in the absence of sustained argument or substantial evidence. My specific worry about reducing narrative properties to aesthetic properties and, in consequence, extending my theory of narrative cognitivism to aesthetic cog-

nitivism, is that attention will be turned away from the cornerstone of narrative justice – exemplary narratives – to artistic narratives. Of course, many exemplary narratives are (also) works of literature and cinema, but many others are not. I discuss several of these in the book, including Morgan Spurlock's *Super Size Me* (2004), Evelyn Barish's *The Double Life of Paul de Man* (2014), and Jacques Pauw's *In the Heart of the Whore* (1992).

Why should the former take primacy over the latter within the framework of your theory?

Iris Vidmar Jovanović has challenged me on precisely this point, which she articulates as a dismissal of aesthetic cognitivism.¹¹ The short answer is that the narrative justice thesis does not require speculation on aesthetic properties or on works of art and analytic caution (or perhaps, less charitably, parsimony) prompted me to restrict my thesis to the relationship between exemplary narratives and phenomenological knowledge. I'm not sure how satisfied either you or Iris would be with that answer, however, so let me say that I do consider myself an aesthetic cognitivist. But I don't think that truth (whether understood in terms of accuracy or authenticity) is a com-

ponent of aesthetic value. In this respect, my aesthetic cognitivism is probably closest to Tzachi Zamir's, as set out in *Double Vision* (2007), *Ascent* (2017), and *Just Literature* (2020). In the last of these, he states: "Aesthetic value (that which makes a work worthy as literature) and epistemic value (that which we are able to learn from the work) often interlock."¹² The key word for me is *often*, i.e. frequently but not always, which allows me to reject any necessary relation between aesthetic value or works of art on the one hand and cognitive value or knowledge on the other.

3 Philosophical Criminology

In what way does the cultivation of narrative sensibility have the capacity to either increase or decrease criminal inhumanity?

The lynchpin of my version of the aesthetic education thesis is, like Schiller's original, ethical value. Narrative representation is, as we have already discussed, essentially ethical. In consequence, the cultivation of narrative sensibility can develop ethical understanding. All I mean by this is that the more familiar we become with exemplary narratives, the more sensitive we become to the ways in which ethical value is realised in

them and the more likely we are to develop our ethical understanding through them. Criminal inhumanity refers to a category of crime that is ideologically motivated and ideologies are, in turn, underpinned by ethical principles (which may, in turn, be underpinned by religious principles). The more we develop our ethical understanding, the more insight into ethical principles we are likely to gain and the more likely we are to understand the causes of criminal inhumanity. My version of the Schiller-two-step is thus from narrative sensibility to ethical understanding and then from ethical understanding to criminal inhumanity. I am, naturally, concerned with the reduction of criminal inhumanity, but as we have already discussed, it would be naive to claim that narrative sensibility is only *for* justice. I use the term '*narrative injustice*' to describe the cultivation of narrative sensibility to increase criminal inhumanity.¹³ Aesthetic education is a thesis of political education by aesthetic means and that education can be aimed at creating a world in which there is genuine equality amongst human beings or justifying the continued supremacy of certain categories of human beings over others. The different aims of those different educations will be achieved by putting differ-

ent types of exemplary narratives to work, such as equality in Kurt Vonnegut Jr's *Mother Night* (1961) and J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) or supremacy in D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and William Luther Pierce's *The Turner Diaries* (1978).

While discussing methodology you conclude that: "The comparative analysis of documentary and fictional narratives has the potential to reduce criminal inhumanity."¹⁴ To what extent do you think this method would be applicable in practice, especially among a populace that is in risk of being drawn towards various terrorist narratives and indoctrination?

Let me begin by saying that the notion of an 'at-risk' populace is itself part of the problem. In criminology, the term is 'suspect communities' and the harm of this concept has been widely recognised since Paddy Hillyard's publication of *Suspect Communities* in 1993. If we look at the history of the concept in the United Kingdom in my lifetime alone, it has been used to target first the Irish population, then the Muslim population, and—most recently—the white population of low socioeconomic status (from which white supremacist groups typically recruit). The lesson

from *Narrative Justice* is that we are all at risk of being either complicit with or active participants in criminal inhumanity – which doesn't only involve perpetrating violence, but also condoning, enabling, or promoting that violence. Having said that, the narrative justice thesis is intended to be put to practical use and I have no doubt that it could influence public policy and institutional practices for the better. The application of theory to practice would have to be undertaken by experts in the respective fields and my own contribution has been to apply the thesis to the practice of criminology as an academic discipline.

You claim that "narrative criminology has thus far largely ignored fiction and the relationship between fiction and documentary."¹⁵ Why do you think this is the case?

Narrative criminology is a relatively recent development, pioneered by Lois Presser in three core monographs: *Been a Heavy Life* (2008), *Why We Harm* (2013), and *Inside Story* (2018). Presser and those who have developed her ideas have focused almost exclusively on non-fiction narratives, particularly self-narratives. There is a sense in which the life stories of the perpetrators of crime are most obviously

relevant to the central concern of criminology, explaining the causes of crime. I discuss the reasons for the marginalisation of fiction in criminology in my forthcoming monograph, *A Criminology of Narrative Fiction*, but I'll give you a quick preview here.¹⁶ First, as a social science, criminology is based on empirical investigation, which is founded on positivism. Second, the prevalence of the folk psychological association of fiction with falsity and non-fiction with truth. The consequence of this combination is that an initial reluctance to take fiction seriously is compounded by concerns about fiction as a source of empirical evidence.

What measures can be undertaken in order to increase the interest in fiction within narrative criminology?

I think the main point is to sever the link between fiction and falsity. What I find particularly interesting is that despite the prevalence of the view that fiction has little or no relation to truth, it is in fact very recent, connected to the recognition of the value of the formal elements of works of art popularised in the second half of the nineteenth century. Both Romantic and Classical approaches to art (which includes fiction, for our purposes) acknowl-

edged works of art as revelatory of a higher or purer type of truth than could be expressed or imitated by other means of representation. I am not suggesting that there is a necessary relation between fiction and truth, merely that fiction is not necessarily false, imaginary, or invented. My strategy in *A Criminology of Narrative Fiction* is to start by severing the link between fiction and falsity and then to argue for the different types of criminological knowledge that fictions can provide.

In your opinion, what would be the best strategy to defend the humanities from the pressure coming from neoliberal quantification?

I am much less optimistic about the success of any strategy now than I was when I wrote the book because of the continued rise of both right-wing populism and market fundamentalism. The humanities are a threat to authoritarianism and the conservative backlash has put – and will continue to put – increasing pressure on the humanities. Similarly, the very fact that the humanities are required to defend their value in economic terms is evidence of the victory of the neoliberal agenda in Anglophone higher education. When I am asked why the humanities matter

at public lectures or by acquaintances, I usually reply with something along the lines of: 'Scientific inquiry minus the humanities equals Auschwitz'. If this seems like an exaggeration, it is certainly true of criminology, which made a significant contribution to the National Socialist Genocide once freed from ethical constraints.¹⁷

Did you stop working on the ideas in your book once it was published or was there an instance where you had the chance to further develop some of the ideas present within the book?

In truth, I was plagued by doubts about the value of *Narrative Justice* because of the circumstances of its creation and these seemed to be confirmed when it was only reviewed by a single journal in the first year after its publication. I subsequently discovered that an administrative error on the publisher's part meant that no review copies had been sent and decided to try and stir some interest on my own. (In hindsight, I left this far too late and I encourage authors to avoid making the same mistake.) The results were surprisingly positive and I took the opportunities that arose to develop two of the ideas in the book. I conclude *Narrative Justice* by suggesting that the thesis may

also provide a methodology that could direct further inquiry into criminal inhumanity. I delineated this methodology in a blog post for the British Society of Criminology and a series of lectures in Israel, Croatia, and Italy (regrettably, the latter two were cancelled due to the pandemic).¹⁸ More formally, I summarised the methodology in my introduction to the *Journal of Aesthetic Education* symposium on *Narrative Justice*, which is due for publication shortly.¹⁹ I have also been able to develop and refine my argument for the practical application of the narrative justice thesis to undermining extremist recruitment strategies. Derek Matravers challenged my argument in his contribution to the aforementioned symposium and I was not entirely satisfied with the reply I gave.²⁰ The result of our dialogue is a forthcoming paper in the journal *Terrorism and Political Violence*, which is based on Chapter Nine of *Narrative Justice* but provides a more convincing argument than advanced either there or in my response to Matravers.²¹

Interview conducted by Matija Rajter 10/07/2020.

Endnotes

- 1 Schiller, J.C.F. von, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man: In a Series of Letters*, transl. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson & L. A. Willoughby, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1794/1967).
- 2 Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012); Worth, Sarah E., *In Defense of Reading* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017).
- 3 McGregor, Rafe, 'Making Sense of Moral Perception,' *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* (2015) 18:4, 745-758.; 'The Silence of the Night: Collaboration, Deceit, and Remorselessness,' *Orbis Litterarum* (2016a) 71:2, 163-184.; 'Narrative Representation and Phenomenological Knowledge,' *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* (2016b) 94:2, 327-342.; 'The Ethical Value of Narrative Representation,' *Journal of Aesthetics and Phenomenology* (2017a) 4:1, 57-74.; 'The Person of the Torturer: Secret Policemen in Fiction and Non-Fiction,' *Journal of Aesthetic Education* (2017b) 51:4, 44-59.
- 4 Worth 2017.
- 5 Spivak 2012.
- 6 McGregor, Rafe, *Narrative Justice* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2018), 112.
- 7 Schiller 1794.
- 8 McGregor 2018, 19.
- 9 McGregor 2018, 5.
- 10 McGregor 2016.
- 11 Vidmar Jovanović, Iris, 'Becoming Sensible: Thoughts on Rafe McGregor's *Narrative Justice*,' *Journal of Aesthetic Education* (2020) 54:4, 48-61.
- 12 Zamir, Tzachi, *Just Literature: Philosophical Criticism and Justice* (London: Routledge, 2020), 1.
- 13 McGregor 2018, 106.
- 14 McGregor 2018, 190.
- 15 McGregor 2018, 191.
- 16 McGregor, Rafe, *A Criminology of Narrative Fiction* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2021).
- 17 Rafter, Nicole, 'Criminology's Darkest Hour: Biocriminology in Nazi Germany,' (2008) 41:2, 287-306.
- 18 McGregor, Rafe, 'From Narrative Justice to Narrative Methodology,' *The BSC Blog* (published online 18 February 2019) <<https://thebscblog.wordpress.com/2019/02/18/from-narrative-justice-to-narrative-methodology/>>.
- 19 McGregor, Rafe, 'Introduction to the *Narrative Justice* Symposium,' *Journal of Aesthetic Education* (2020) 54:4, 1-5.
- 20 Matravers, Derek, 'Comments on Rafe McGregor's *Narrative Criminology*,' *Journal of Aesthetic Education* (2020) 54:4, 19-25.; McGregor, Rafe, 'Replies to Critics,'

Journal of Aesthetic Education (2020)
54:4, 62-75.

21 McGregor, forthcoming.



BRITISH
SOCIETY OF
AESTHETICS

DEBATES */in*
AESTHETICS