

ESCAPING THE NEED FOR A VISUAL RECORD:
 THE RESTORATION OF NARRATIVE IN PAT BARKER'S *DOUBLE VISION*
 AND JON MCGREGOR'S *IF NOBODY SPEAKS OF REMARKABLE THINGS*

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This article takes issue with Jean-François Lyotard's now-canonical postmodern thesis that refutable and verifiable 'scientific' knowledge structures have come to dominate and force into subordination more multiplicitous narrative forms of knowledge (8). By closely reading Pat Barker's *Double Vision* (2002) and Jon McGregor's *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things* (2002) in the context of Lyotard's conceptualisation, this article investigates some of the ways in which both authors structure their fictions around a tension between scientific and narrative knowledge structures. More specifically, the essay examines the crucial role given to the figure of the photographer in negotiating and setting up such a tension. Ultimately, the article argues that fundamental to these novels by Barker and McGregor is an attempt to restore knowledge – both within the time-space of the text and beyond – to the social, narrative realm for which Lyotard, and his postmodern sensibility, mourns.

Narrative has a recent history of fraught relationships with literary, cultural and philosophical theory. Postmodern sensibility has been characterised as a scepticism towards “master or meta-narratives” (Hutcheon 6), while feminist and queer-theory scholarships have questioned the degree to which existing cultural narratives might serve as epistemological frameworks in constructing and understanding culturally intelligible human subjects. As Judith Butler argues, human lives appear to emerge through narrative structures which are increasingly “reducible to one story,” leaving those who fail to fit into such legitimised structures as both “unthinkable” and “unrepresentable” (18). Notions of narrative have therefore come to sit uncomfortably with those of truth, inclusiveness and the power of explanation.

However, close readings of Pat Barker's novel *Double Vision* and Jon McGregor's debut *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things* reveal that a reaffirmation of the need for narrative is integral to the dynamic of both novels. Through a close engagement with the postmodern tension between narrative and scientific forms of knowledge, identified by Jean-François Lyotard in his work *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), this discussion seeks to investigate how, by taking narratives as both their structure and their subject matter, Barker and McGregor advocate the value of narrative as a cultural means of both

constructing and transmitting knowledge. Furthermore, the discussion will explore the ways in which both writers resort to extreme narrative measures – even to death – in order to restore the eminence of story-telling in the human construction and communication of knowledge.

To clarify therefore, Lyotard essentially characterises the postmodern logic as one increasingly concerned with the question of what should and what should not be allowed to constitute knowledge. According to Lyotard, his ‘working hypothesis’ in *The Postmodern Condition* is “that the status of knowledge is altered as societies enter what is known as the postindustrial age and cultures enter what is known as the postmodern age” (4). Lyotard goes on to portray this postmodern alteration in knowledge structures as one in which narrative knowledge and the transmission of knowledge through gaining competency in story-telling have become subordinate to what he describes as “scientific knowledge” (8). This essentially means that due to the predomination of cybernetics and computer studies, approved “knowledge” has become increasingly synonymous with “truth,” to the point that our conceptualisation of knowledge risks being reduced to a “set of statements which, to the exclusion of all other statements, denote or describe objects and may be declared true or false” (18). In other words, knowledge statements and empirical truths become increasingly conflated. Consequently, the danger arises of neglecting the fact that knowledge “is not only a set of denotative statements, far from it,” but rather “goes beyond the simple determination and application of the criterion of truth,” to encompass far more qualitative notions such as “the beauty of a sound or color” which only narrative transmission can capture (18). According to scientific structures of knowledge, however, the only “truths” are those deemed “to be worth discussion in a sequence of argumentation and refutation” (24). As a result, postmodern, scientific logic demonstrates a scepticism towards the ability of narrative statements to enter the realm of endorsed “knowledge,” since narratives are “never subject to argumentation or proof” (27), and thus fail to fulfill science’s constructed criteria of “speak[ing] the truth about the referent” (23). Consequently, Lyotard explains, we are left “mourning the fact that knowledge is no longer principally narrative” (26).

The debate as to whether the relevance of Lyotard’s thought to *Double Vision* and *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things* allows these works to be considered as postmodern is outside the scope of this article. Instead, this essay aims to emphasise the fact that, like Lyotard, both Barker and McGregor write back from worlds in which narrative accounts and empirical attempts to capture or fix meaning and truth are constantly

brought into tension. In the case of the two novels, this tension crucially surrounds the figure of the photographer.

In the development of his argument, Lyotard outlines that for a knowledge statement to be considered a “truth” and therefore viewed as legitimate by scientific logic, the objects to which the knowledge statement refers “must be available for repeated access” (18). In other words, knowledge can only be formulated and transmitted if the known-about object is freely available for observation and re-observation. This is crucial since both Barker’s and McGregor’s novels work through a tension which attempts to create and circulate knowledge about events and situations for which there exists a visual record and which, therefore, are *not* so freely open to such repeated empirical access and re-observation. Within this dynamic, photography becomes a vital body of evidence that can be consulted repeatedly, thus allowing the object or event captured in a photograph to be observed, re-observed and finally known through assimilation into the scientific knowledge structures which Lyotard describes. However, both *Double Vision* and *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things* dedicate a large part of their narrative to unfortunate events – respectively, a violent robbery and a road traffic accident – of which, most pertinently, there exists no visual record. No concrete, pictorial evidence is available for the repeated access which Lyotard defines as crucial to the formation of a scientifically verifiable ‘truth’ about an object, place or event. Subsequently, both Barker and McGregor’s texts explore the ways in which the lack of concrete, photographic evidence of events can actually encourage knowledge of these events to be restored to a “principally narrative” form identified by Lyotard (26). The rest of this discussion will therefore analyse how such a lack of visual evidence allows for the resurrection of narrative knowledge, thus encouraging the local communities of each novel to construct narrative accounts of what ‘might’ have happened during the robbery or in the accident, respectively. However, in both novels, a sacrifice is made so that such narrative knowledge may retain its place above a ‘scientific’ fixing of meanings through images: namely, the death of the photographer.

Jean Baudrillard draws attention to the “symbolic murder” of the photographer as a crucial “part of the photographic act” (143). For Baudrillard, the poignancy of photography – that which Barthes describes as its *punctum* (25) – works on the fact that the object photographed “once was,” but “no longer is” (143). For this poignancy to take effect, however, the photographer himself must also be made to “disappear;” he was once there to capture the object, but now he is gone, making the moment of the photo “irreversible” (140). However, Baudrillard’s analysis only describes the “symbolic” necessity of the death of the photographer *within* the images produced. What

both Barker and McGregor pay attention to is the way in which the literal, physical death of the photographer might also be seen as a symbolic act: a metaphor for the loss of the “accompanying image,” without which “no experience is valid” (Barker 293). Subsequently, as both novels show, an event without a visual record to be observed and re-observed is incompatible with the verifiable knowledge structures which Lyotard defines as scientific, and lends itself instead to the more multiplicitous forms of storytelling and narrative knowledge.

Throughout *Double Vision* are scattered instances in which past events are focalised through the novel’s principal protagonist, ex-war reporter Stephen Sharkey. During Stephen’s postings in a variety of war-torn destinations, the reader learns that his photographer friend Ben has been on hand to provide lasting, verifiable evidence of the often harrowing events which the pair have experienced together. “We can’t escape from the need for a visual record” Ben confirms (101), and be it the conflicts in Bosnia and Afghanistan, or the terrorist attacks of 9/11, Ben is there to establish this record. However, Ben’s death in Afghanistan means that when a more local crime occurs in which Stephen’s brother’s home is burgled and babysitter Justine is violently attacked, there is no photographer to capture evidence of the scene. Running to Justine’s aid, Stephen sees “flashbulbs exploding in his head” (250), but Ben is no longer there to capture Justine’s assault on film, as he had been to fix the figures and events that Stephen re-experiences through Ben’s photographic archive, including the body of a young rape victim on a Sarajevo stairwell (52) or the execution of a man on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border (123). As a result, local knowledge of Justine’s attack becomes principally formulated through everyday narrative accounts. As Richard Johnson et al. argue, knowledge of the past and present is, to some degree, produced by the public in their quotidian lives. “Such knowledge,” they argue, “may circulate, usually without amplification, in everyday talk and in personal comparisons and narratives” (210), and it is in this manner that Justine’s attack becomes constructed as part of a body of narrative knowledge within the community.

“Did you hear about the burglary? . . . Everybody keeps asking if she was raped,” says Kate Frobisher to fellow villager Angela, a rumour which Angela suggests is untrue, continuing: “That’s what Alec thought. When they got to the hospital, they’d taken all her clothes away, but apparently they were just looking for hairs on her sweater – things like that” (283). According to Lyotard, the postmodern, scientific logic which has led to the demise of narrative as the principle structure of knowledge maintains that in order for a statement to be granted status as accepted knowledge, the speaker should both “be able to provide proof of what he says,” and “refute any opposing or contradictory

statements concerning the same referent” (23). In the absence of photographic evidence, Angela cannot do this so easily in the case of the attack upon Justine, and so scientific knowledge proves an insufficient structure for the assimilation of the assault. Instead, Angela combines information gathered from Justine’s own words, her father Alec’s musings and explanations offered by medical staff in order to offer Kate a highly dialogic, narrative formulation of Justine’s attack. As John Kirk states, and as it is evident here, Barker’s narratives tend to strongly “refuse the pitfalls of monologism” (613). Hence, only by conversing with the voices of others and working through that which people have heard, do members of the community reach an understanding of what happened to Justine. The death of the photographer therefore offers Barker the opportunity to restore narrative as the principal medium through which the body of knowledge belonging to the community is created and transmitted. Lacking a visual record of events which can be repeatedly referred to in order to refute certain stories or explanations (as Lyotard stresses, is crucial in the formulation of scientific knowledge statements), Justine’s neighbours are therefore left with a need to talk about and listen to stories of her assault. Thus, this process of configuring knowledge restores part of the ‘social bond’ of “knowing how to listen” and “knowing how to speak,” a process Lyotard views as integral to narrative knowledge (21). According to Lyotard, it is through the transmission of such narrative knowledge statements that “the community’s relationship to itself and its environment is played out” (21).

Similarly, just as the living Ben acts as a crucial supplier of “visual records” in *Double Vision*, so the nervous “young man at number eighteen” (27) from McGregor’s novel is persistently caught photographing his neighbours in an attempt to construct and fix some verifiable knowledge of these people about whom he knows so little, despite wanting to “know them all” (216). Significantly, however, one of the few times we see the young man without his camera is during his failed attempt to intervene as an oncoming car hits little Shahid Nawaz, a young twin who lives on the anonymous urban street where the narrative unfolds (253). The shy young man drops his camera and runs to try to save Shahid, only to die mysteriously moments after trying to help the young boy. Consequently, this leaves no opportunity for him to add Shahid’s accident to his urban archive. As a result, the novel’s omniscient narrator declares: “There’s no pause or rewind, there is no image enhancement, no recording of the moment beyond a thick streak of black rubber . . . which itself will soon fade . . . the moment will never be again, the moment is gone” (270).

Just as Ben was unable to capture pictorial evidence of Justine’s attack, and thus cannot leave behind that re-observable evidence of the event which, for Lyotard, marks

the formation of scientific knowledge statements, neither can the man from number eighteen re-observe Shahid's collision. As in Barker's text, McGregor uses this undocumented event as an opportunity to restore knowledge to its traditional, narrative mode. Once again, absence of a visual record encourages local residents to regain participation in the cycles of speaking, listening and recounting through which narrative knowledge legitimises itself (Lyotard 21). The omniscient narrator speculates over "the narratives people will tell of this day," describing how they will use the noise of car brakes to open their accounts, which they will subsequently pass on "to friends, in letters, in diaries, to people in pubs if the conversation drifts that way" (McGregor 255). McGregor's omniscient narrator illustrates that for the news correspondent and the police however, unlike the residents of the street, the formulation of knowledge surrounding the accident relies upon confirmation or concrete evidence from the crash site. "On CNN," says the narrator, "the correspondent is saying no Christina . . . I can confirm the vehicle is still moving and I will keep you posted." Here, the language of "confirmation" emphasises precisely the notions of quantitative, verifiable and observable evidence which, for Lyotard, shapes the formulation of scientific knowledge statements (McGregor 254). Furthermore, the narrator painstakingly describes the braking process as the driver of the car attempts to stop, all the while with "the child looking at him and everyone looking at him and everyone frozen in the endlessness of Stopping Time" (254). As the narrator points out, however, the police's exclusive processes of sorting and quantifying information mean that "these things will not be remarked upon in weighty investigative reports" (254). Accounts of the accident given by the mainstream media and the police therefore run precisely the same risk that scientific knowledge does in Lyotard's thesis: namely, the conflation of knowledge statements with observable and quantifiable scientific "truths" (Lyotard 24).

The residents' narratives on the other hand are rather characterised by deviation and difference. They will "disagree" as to why Shahid failed to move from in front of the car (251) and will describe the noise of the collision through a rich variety of expressions. For some, their knowledge and narrative of the event will begin with their looking "out of the window," whilst for others it might start as they "looked up from my newspaper or stopped walking and turned around" (255). All three perspectives emphasise both a literal and narrative diversity of viewpoint. The residents will talk so much and pass on their narratives of the accident so often that they will "run out of ways to express the sound, when they've tried talking about nails on backboards and screaming fireworks" (255). Just as Vincent B. Leitch describes of Lyotard, so McGregor "preaches an appreciation and respect for diversity, for local differences"

(Leitch 1610), and for the way in which narrative knowledge, like an “oral history . . . [gives] back to the people in their own words” the power and authority to create their own knowledge of the world around them (Johnson et al. 223). Rather than concentrating on the unreliability or questionable validity of their words, McGregor instead suggests that the residents have just as much right to construct their own knowledge of the event as do journalists and police officers, because, in terms of narrative knowledge, “the narrator’s only claim to competence for telling the story is the fact that he has heard it himself” (Lyotard 20). Furthermore, by constructing their alternative knowledges of the accident, the residents might help to heal their fractured social bonds and restore the values of speaking and listening to the heart of their community.

To this extent, the death of the photographer figures as a crucial narrative device for both writers. The consequent lack of visual evidence encourages the residents of Barker’s north-east village and McGregor’s anonymous city street back into networks of communication, restoring narrative knowledge above that of science, proof and the refutation of contradictory statements. Yet, it is not only the fictional characters of each novel that are coaxed back into the production and transmission of narrative knowledge. Indeed, an indeterminacy builds up into the conclusions of both novels which also encourages readers to construct and share their own narrative accounts as to ‘what happened’ to both Justine and the man at number eighteen.

In *Double Vision*, the emergency services conclude that Justine was not in fact raped during the burglary. Right through to the end of the novel however, sharing a bed with her continues to prompt Stephen Sharkey into flashbacks of the raped and murdered Bosnian girl photographed by Ben during their tour of Sarajevo. But a few pages from the end, “lying side by side” with Justine, “he saw the girl in the stairwell in Sarajevo” (302). Even with Stephen’s attempt to convince himself that his intimacy with Justine might help “banish” such flashbacks, the fact that the penultimate chapter culminates in a juxtaposition of the two girls reignites some of the equivocation as to whether or not Justine suffered a sexual assault. As a result, the end of *Double Vision* stimulates readers to construct their own narrative accounts of what they believed ‘happened’ to Justine. Furthermore, they might share and discuss these formulated accounts with other readers, thus creating a body of narrative knowledge about the novel through the dynamic of “knowing how to hear” and “knowing how to speak” (Lyotard 21).

The conclusion of *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things* creates a similar effect through the ambiguous portrayal of the young man from number eighteen’s death. His

experience of a “scorching pain through his left arm” (272) might suggest a heart-attack provoked either by the exertion of his attempt to save Shahid, or perhaps a previously undetected heart condition exaggerated by the stress of the situation. On the other hand, the elusive description of his death as “an interruption in the way of things” (273) seems more akin with magic realism than medical explanation, suggesting that in death, the young man metaphysically takes the place of the injured child. As in *Double Vision* then, the reader is encouraged to go on producing narrative knowledge of what might have happened even after the novel’s narrative ends. Readers are thus left to construct and share their versions of ‘what happened.’ Since neither text offers a firm conclusion for what exactly was done to Justine or how the man at number eighteen’s death came about, there is no fixed body of evidence to which the reader can return and re-read in order to produce the kind of incontrovertible knowledge statements which scientific knowledge structures require (see Lyotard 18). Consequently, these ambiguous fictional conclusions once more demonstrate both writers’ championing of narrative over scientific knowledge, emphasising that readers’ knowledge of an event should not solely lie in “[refuting] any opposing or contradictory” accounts (Lyotard 23), but must also be constructed by their role as both listeners and as narrators in their own right, transforming “the ‘I have heard’” into “the ‘you will hear’” (22).

As a result, Lyotard’s distinction between a prioritised, scientific mode of knowledge and neglected narrative knowledge prove useful critical tools in examining McGregor and Barker’s texts. Applying Lyotard’s framework reveals the ways in which both authors envision the nurturing of narrative knowledge as a possible remedy for the reticence which members of contemporary British societies often display in conversing with neighbours and other community peers. Both novels also challenge such societies’ excessive investment in the image of the word. In using Lyotard’s theoretical apparatus, however, this discussion regards both *Double Vision* and *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things* as celebrating narrative as a multiplicitous mode of knowledge which transmits qualitative as well as quantitative aspects of experience. In other words, narrative appears to be multitudinous and inclusive in opposition to the rigidity and exclusivity of scientific knowledge. To conclude therefore, one must return to the sceptics of narrative mentioned at the outset of this discussion, in order to deflect a possible counter-argument which might be raised against such a portrayal.

Discussing Lyotard’s later work *Discourse, Figure* (1985), Andrew Gibson notes Lyotard’s implication that narrative, this time in the sense of literary form, might actually be exclusive rather than inclusive in its structure. By shepherding events into “a coherent or complete system” (188), narrative accounts leave no room for “the

unrepresentable, indiscernible, inarticulable” (187). Judith Butler makes a similar claim by arguing that those who fail to occupy the legitimate subject positions offered by narrative formulations are left in “nonplaces,” outside the realm of the “intelligible and speakable” (18). However, the exploration of Barker’s and McGregor’s texts presented here tends towards a very different conclusion, combating such scepticism from the perspective of postmodern narrative and queer theories. Both novels encourage the reader to continue constructing narrative knowledge about ‘what exactly happened’ to certain characters long after the texts themselves reach their conclusion. Nonetheless, what remains to be emphasised is the way in which these extra-diegetic narratives weaved by readers are intensely shaped by exactly that which Gibson and Butler describe as the apparently “inarticulable” or the “unspeakable.” In *Double Vision*, the concluding ambiguity is created by insistent evocations of rape, a violation which does not fit the conventional, heterosexual romance narrative, and which, for Justine’s father, Alec, remains “unspeakable:” “He couldn’t say the word,” discloses Angela (283). Similarly, the auspicious death of the urban archivist in *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things*, which leaves the reader to complete their own narrative body of knowledge as to ‘what happened’ in the novel, also steps into the realm of the inarticulable. With strong suggestions of a swapping of places between the young man and the dying twin, such an uncanny, “remarkable” death (273) might appear to defy containment by the narrative structures through which fellow residents will come to relate the more culturally intelligible mishap of little Shahid Nawaz.

However, almost in defiance of such counter-arguments as to the exclusivity of narrative structures, Justine’s maybe-rape and the indeterminate death of the man at number eighteen remain, I would argue, the principal ‘talking points’ which endure long after the close of the two novels. Both Barker and McGregor therefore, like Lyotard, demonstrate that narrative knowledge is not to be equated with narrative as a heuristic for understanding which, as Gibson and Butler suggest, can be restrictive and exclusive. In outlining the contrasts which Lyotard draws between scientific and narrative knowledge, Robert C. Holub explains that, “[w]hereas narrative knowledge presupposed a shared social bond linking narrator and audience, scientific knowledge presumes no such bond,” as well as the fact that “[i]n scientific knowledge, competence is restricted to the sender of the message alone; in narrative knowledge, sender, receiver and referent all have competence” (93). In light of these criteria therefore, the endings of both *Double Vision* and *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things* further point to the central tenet of this article: namely, that it is specifically the value of narrative *knowledge*, as defined in opposition to scientific knowledge, which both authors advocate. With their suggestive

endings inevitably provoking questioning and discussion amongst readers, both texts thus overtly emphasise the “shared bond” between speaker and “audience” which Holub identifies as characteristic of narrative knowledge. Furthermore, the fact that the conclusions to both texts provoke the reader to construct their own extra-diegetic narratives after the last pages are closed also shows a championing of narrative knowledge in the sense which Holub’s second point suggests. By stimulating such extra-diegetic discussion about their texts, both Barker and McGregor indeed highlight the fact that an understanding of the narrative is richest when authors and their narrators (“senders”), their readers (“receivers”) and their texts (“referents”) are all granted an equal role in creating the body of knowledge which is the novel itself. As a result, Barker and McGregor champion narrative knowledge as a far more inclusive and communicative mode than that required by science, showing that, exactly as Lyotard claims, “knowledge [*savoir*] in general cannot be reduced to science” (18).

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