The Problem With Stories: The Gap, Through A Fictocritical Lens

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This article examines the existence and function of the narrative in the philosophies of modernism and postmodernism through application of these notions to The Gap, an ocean cliff in the eastern Sydney suburb of Watson's Bay. Written in the experimental fictocritical style, this article uses fictocritical eye to delve into the function of postmodern local narrative and espouse the differences between it and the more prevalent metanarrative of modernism. While scholars continue to study the differences evident in modernism and postmodernism, here they are married in an inseparable manner that asks readers to rethink the notions of modern and postmodernism and their time-periods.

The Gap. Even the name exudes of enigmatic suggestions, ensuring that the mind is asking the questions of '*how?*' and '*why?*' before anything else. '*How did it come to be named that?*' one might ask; or, '*why did they name it that?*' another may inquire. In asking '*how*,' or '*why*,' the mind is requesting the story that frames The Gap, and in those six letters and the one grammatical item that construct "The Gap", a story is screaming, begging to be told, begging to edify the world. And yet, there is no gospel truth here, no single story that resonates with the sentiments of each person that has experienced The Gap. That, in itself, is the problem with stories. A subject may be a singular in nature, but its purpose and meaning in stories are vast, perhaps infinite, and they differ from author to reader, reader to reader. Take a moment to return to your childhood; almost all of us can pull from these juvenile years a token item, something that appears insignificant to others yet remains invaluable to ourselves. There is a story there in that token item, a personal one which ties us to the memento in a way others cannot grasp.

As I pensively survey my own infantile days, I can already envision an old set of *Carte Bresciane* forming with faded illustrations, fanned across an ancient timber table with a wobbly leg. These Italian playing cards were nothing but *Briscola* cards to me in those years. Even today, I will fondly remember them as the game name, *Briscola*, in lieu of their proper name, for that was the card game that defined my relationship with my *nonni*. That is my token item, and not another person can relate to that deck of *Briscola* cards in the same way I do.

In Regards to Narrative: Modernist and Postmodernist Perspectives

We have begun here, with this introspective look at our own childhood memories, as to unveil the fallacy that is the metanarrative. The metanarrative or the grand narrative assumes that it is a "*global or totalizing cultural narrative schema which orders and explains knowledge and experience*," (Stephens 1998, p.6). In

modernity, it functions as one of the primary forms of hegemony over 'right' action and thought, as the metanarrative legitimizes specific actions or beliefs under the guise of a universal truth. It is, on the whole, a compelling idea in modernity due to the "*belief in progress*" becoming "*ubiquitous*" by the mid-nineteenth century (Gillen & Ghosh 2007, p.33). As such, modernism can be surmised to be a movement concerned with unrestrained progress and pragmatic approaches to the world that improves the human condition. And yet, even with this "*Victorian ideal of progress*" that "*consists of irreversible changes in one direction…towards improvement,*" (Wright 2004, p.3) we have begun to swing towards clinging onto sentimental tales and personal principles with little concern for time periods or relevancy in the contemporary realm. Perhaps this comes to no surprise; after all, in the twenty-first century, the metanarrative is dying and perhaps, it was its own pride and joy – science – that killed it, with technological progressions and advancements that have made us doubt this modernist outlook, such as the nuclear bomb.

That is not to say that we reject the idea of progress; we still accept progression in this contemporary era as fundamental – perhaps because it is happening at a speed too fast to measure – but we are more inclined to scrutinize the proposed progressive changes put forth by scientists and the like. Progress for progress' sake is no longer an ideal we hold as highly as previously held, due to the collapse of the metanarrative and the downfall of the notion of universality in the twentieth century. Instead, we latch onto the uncertain. The notion of a working, universal and infallible concept of knowledge is replaced with the idea that knowledge is incomplete and constantly morphing to the social sector. We describe our wisdom and intelligence as unstable and unfinished – perhaps, unfinishable. Lyotard coined the new ideology as postmodern, and in "*simplifying to the extreme*" he defined postmodern as a direct "*incredulity toward metanarratives,*" (2004, para.3). His argument, written on the cusp of the digital age, promoted the idea of modest and localized narratives replacing the larger, grander metanarrative. These modest, localized narratives are thought to be more illustrative of the diversity of the human experience and support a "*multiplicity of theoretical standpoints*" (Peters 2001, p.7) over the singular, linear nature of the metanarrative. These new forms of narrative are, perhaps, familiar; they strike remarkable similarity to Foucault's work on social discourse wherein he assumes that meaning in society can be multifaceted and multiplicative (Rabinow 1991). Even so, despite being championed and cited by postmodernist advocates as an early pioneer of the postmodern era, Foucault has denied the label of postmodernist for himself.

The Gap: A Part Of My Story

Breakers pound the cliff's face. The cliff stands, motionless. The breakers retreat. They try again.

When I had first visited The Gap, the ocean cliff at Watson's Bay, I was taken aback by the visceral nature of the forces at play. I was standing on the topmost ledge of some weather-beaten rocks, looking out over the Tasman Sea from a vantage point far along the track. Powerful breakers pounded against the cliffs

then retreated back into the sea, before returning again with equal ferocity. Chilly winds enveloped the cliff-side and sea spray began to travel in unison with it, gradually soaking the ledge of weather-beaten rocks where I stood. It was cold; it was wet; it was probably downright unhealthy despite the fresh sea air. And yet, instead of moving back down to The Gap Park where my family was, I sat there. I sat there, on that weather-beaten ledge of rocks, and simply started.

Breakers pound the cliff's face. The cliff stands, motionless. The breakers retreat. They try again.

I must have sat, frozen, for half an hour or so; maybe more. It wasn't until my phone rung – my parents, of course – that I decided it was best to head back to the car. There was something there though, in that natural scene, that drew me to stay, to watch and to reflect. It was, undoubtedly for me, a moment of perfect serenity. It is now, perhaps, unnerving in retrospect. I had never experienced something quite like that until my time at The Gap. But I never felt unsafe. Actually, I felt right, sitting there, watching those breakers try and try to defeat the steadfast cliff.

Breakers pound the cliff's face. The cliff stands, motionless. The breakers retreat. They try again.

Modernist Metanarrative At The Gap

Metanarrative, as a universal method of ordering and explaining knowledge and experience (Stephens 1998, p.6), is present at The Gap. Applying this modernist approach to the ocean cliff unveils a very specific way of understanding The Gap; a specificity that constitutes further exploration.

When exploring The Gap, I found that posted sparingly across the trail were signposts. These signposts were generally untended to, dirty, washed out and spread out far enough along the track that they would most likely be missed by trekkers and tourists. I wondered why there was such little care for these small informative treasures. While there weren't many, they told observers more about The Gap than any other source could, considering information regarding The Gap is extremely scarce. More interestingly, these signposts suggested a metanarrative of The Gap, wherein the same points were continually reinforced and other relevant points were abolished or added simply as an afterthought, despite being just as relevant – if not more relevant – to The Gap's existence. Through these signposts, we are only supposed to understand the site in a singular way: practicality.

These signs were historical in nature, spanning from timelines to art to simple information. However, the tie that bound them was that they all told of The Gap's metanarrative as a pragmatic military site. '*Why is there no pride in the gorgeousness of the view, or the nature here?*' I found myself pondering. Still, I recorded what I found and went on to experience those aspects for myself.

The Gap's metanarrative, when deconstructed, is built from pride and politics. The signposts detail The Gap's rich military history, referencing the one hundred and fifty years of military purpose that restricted The Gap from residential meddling. The timeline signpost focuses on military mobilisations over other events, leaving a stark imbalance between that and other non-military happenings. For example, the Dunbar shipwreck at The Gap is barely recognised as an occurrence on these signposts, despite the shipwreck's historical significance to New South Wales, scientific significance to advances in maritime safety and tragic yet inspiring story (Dictionary of Sydney 2008).

As a result of the modernist metanarrative, fundamentally relevant and important historical information is simply left to be forgotten in favour of statistical data that has little bearing on the site's history or general aesthetic. If we continue this tolerance for the metanarrative, we can lose such cultural and era defining events such as the Dunbar shipwreck in favour of more mundane information designed to fulfil purposes not representative of a society's wants.

Postmodern Narrative At The Gap

The presence of the postmodern localized narrative at The Gap is a much more nuanced undertaking. These localized narratives are exactly that; they are generally internal (local) to people and thus extracting the full range of postmodern narratives at The Gap, let alone any site, is a mammoth undertaking as each interaction with the site is, in itself, a local narrative. However, these narratives do exist at The Gap. In reading *The Gap: A Part of My Story*, you would have read my own narrative of The Gap, wherein my first experience of the site was profound to my reception of it as a site of substance. As such, my own understanding of The Gap is not of it as some military outpost or of statistics and numbers, but rather, a place of serenity and visceral nature at play.

On a symbolic level, shades of local narratives are embedded at The Gap which can be pulled for study. These rely on more nuanced methods of telling, and rightfully so; they are designed to be subtle hints as to prevent the Werther Effect, or copycat suicides. In garnering a better understanding of The Gap and the postmodern narrative, The Gap as a suicide location can be studied.

The Gap is Australia's most notorious suicide spot, but this information is communicated via reputation; upon visiting the site, it shows no signs of being known as such except for sheer possibility. However, if we look closer, the local narrative begins to rise from obscurity. Lifeline phones are scattered across the site with a direct line to BeyondBlue; fences are designed with ease of access in mind and act as a mental deterrent from the act; signs are propped up asking for assistance and forward thinking when seeing a forlorn person. It's these little nuances, scattered around a site, that can flesh out its narrative and at The Gap, it is one way we can understand it with a postmodern perspective.

Enlightenment: Prologue to Modernism, Or Postmodernism In Disguise?

The 'Age of Modernism' or modernist stance taken in the early twentieth century is often attributed to being a cultural revolution, against principles, traditions and ideals that underpinned the 'Age of Enlightenment' (Johnson 2004, para.2). Modernity denounced Enlightenment ideals of objective truths and the use of reason for a more introspective approach, wherein the self was embraced as an imperfect and irrational canvas. Whilst this has been debated and links have been established, it is interesting to note that Enlightenment itself has ideals of the postmodern embedded in its structure. "*Sapere aude!*" Kant exclaims, "*have courage to use your own understanding!*" (Kant 1784, p.1) This is much of the postmodern argument; have the courage to create and abide by your own localized narrative and disregard the metanarrative, the immature guidance of another.

The Present Moment: What's After the Modernist and Postmodernist Era?

It is typical of our human curiosities to go on to ask, "what's next?" After the completion of the modernist and postmodernist era, what will come and be the next philosophical upheaval in our social spectrum? Perhaps, there is none. The semantics of the words 'modern' and 'postmodern' in the general social sector is clear-cut, after all. The average person would refer to present day affairs as the modern, and future endeavours as the postmodern, while moving at a speed that struggles to stay relevant to the modern times. Of course, this is purely a semantic look at the word from a social spectator's perspective, not the in-depth investigation that the semantic genre of capable of.

There is, however, the suggestion that issues of the modern and the postmodern are cyclical in nature and feed off one another to survive. This theory focuses on the postmodernism, articulating that

> "postmodernism is thus not in any simple sense an 'era' which
> can be said to come 'after' modernism. Instead, postmodernism
> is parasitical upon the very conceptual categories promulgated
> by modernism which it seeks to criticize." (Clegg 2011, pp.7-8)

In this, we see that postmodernism is the inevitable response to issues of modernism. However, in taking this notion on board, ultimately we are confronted with a new idea; that postmodernism possibly preceded modernism – at least, in concept, not in name. Could it not be said that the modernist response to the Enlightenment is, in fact, a postmodern response in itself? It is, after all, the negotiation of new modest, localized narratives overtaking the older metanarrative that has defined all the society's actions. In time, those localized narratives amalgamated and shifted until society settled into an 'ideal' metanarrative. At this point, the forces of postmodernity come into play again. It's an interesting subversion, considering that the Enlightenment ideal espoused by Kant can be considered a postmodernist perspective, too. Food for thought.

In Conclusion

The ideas of the modern and the postmodern are sprawling behemoths and yet, are ideas that barely cross our minds despite their penetration of almost every activity we partake in. In this modern era, we must be wary of the narrative that we allow to rule our lives, for while the metanarrative may be convenient, it is a one-sided deal. The Gap, as I espouse here, is not flat in character; it is a multi-faceted site with layers of meaning, meant for a postmodernist examination. Perhaps, in reading this, you, too, will visit The Gap and experience the serenity.

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