The bone in the throat: some thoughts on baroque method

Maggie MacLure
Manchester Metropolitan University

Keynote Presentation to the Australian Association for Research in Education
Adelaide, November 2006

Abstract

Can research resist the state-sponsored intolerance of diversity and complexity that characterises education policy and research governance in many countries? Driven by audit and the global tournament of standards, policy makers and sponsors seem animated by the desire for certainty and control. And researchers are being obliged to comply – to submit to what some have identified as a ‘methodological fundamentalism’ that seeks comfort in the retreat to science. Even the principal intellectual acts of research and scholarship – reading, writing, interpretation, analysis and argument – have become liable to aggressive regulation, disparaged by the evidence-based practice ‘movement’ for their hapless resistance to the ‘transparency’ demanded by the audit culture.

How might research resist these closure-seeking tendencies, and remain open to new questions and dilemmas? I will make the case for irritating methodologies that resist incorporation into easy solutions and comfortable knowledge, and sketch some recalcitrant research practices that could be described as ‘baroque’. A baroque method would resist clarity, mastery and the single point of view, be radically uncertain about scale, boundaries and coherence, and honour the obligation to get entangled in the details of educational scenes, rather than rise above them. Lambert (2004) refers to the term baroque as a ‘bone in the throat’ - a persistent irritant for theory, because of its resistance to definition. The bone in the throat cannot be spat out or swallowed. It is a hopeful figure for a productively irritating method.

Preamble

The context for my talk today is the resistance to research, especially to qualitative research. This is a familiar and long-standing resistance, and it comes from many quarters, in many countries. It often comes from constituencies that hold themselves responsible for, and to, the real world – from policy makers, journalists and practitioners for instance – and their resistance revolves around the perceived failure of research to serve the interests of that real world. This resistance was succinctly expressed by a notorious Chief Inspector of Schools in England who dismissed research journals with these words:

There is too much to do in the real world with real teachers in real schools to worry about methodological quarrels or to waste time decoding unintelligible, jargon-ridden prose to reach (if one is lucky) a conclusion that is often so transparently partisan as to be worthless. (Woodhead, 1998: 51)

Woodhead’s critique emerged at the same time as a series of high-profile reports which were contemptuously dismissive of the state of educational research in the UK. I recently heard the
Head of Research at the UK Home Office publicly dismiss most social research in almost identical terms.

My concern here is not with the legitimacy or otherwise of the resistance to research, but rather with where it comes from. What is the nature of the offence that qualitative research seems doomed to repeat, and the resistance that it seems inevitably to provoke? I’m going to suggest that the resistance to qualitative research is traceable to deep-seated fears and anxieties about language – about the problematic relationship between language and the real world, and about those elements in language that resist predictability and management. The fear of language, and the desire to control it, has, I think, intensified in these times of audit and knowledge management. You could see the movement towards evidence-based research, and science-based research, partly as attempts to bypass or discipline the insubordinate textuality of qualitative educational research. I’ll give a few examples from UK policy shortly.

I would argue that the attempt to discipline and intervene in the language of research has some alarming implications for the nature of academic work and identity, for the usefulness of the knowledge produced by research, and most importantly, for the ways in which teaching and learning, and teachers and learners, are invoked in contemporary policy discourses. There is a rage for clarity and transparency in audit systems, and an intolerance of diversity, indirectness and complexity. My main argument today is that qualitative method needs to find ways of resisting, rather than colluding with, the desire for clarity and mastery of knowledge. I’m going to sketch some features of what I have called baroque method – a set of research practices that might exploit the irritating potential of qualitative research to mess up neat distinctions between language and reality, global and local, relevant and irrelevant knowledge. The aim of such a method would not be to wreak mischief for its own sake, but hopefully to let new bits of knowledge, wonder and insight spark out of the static and weary imaginaries of educational scenes that are often conjured in policy and research discourses.

I’ll be using some art-works and images alongside these methodological musings, as well as a few small fragments of qualitative data.

_________________

OK, let’s go back to the resistance to qualitative research. As you can see in the Woodhouse quote - the resistance often seems to involve the textuality of research. The exasperation of policy makers and others seems to stem from anxieties about reading and writing. Research reports and articles offend because the writing is unclear, or too fancy, infected with the writer’s prejudices, or inflated by her vanities. At the very least, there is almost always too much of it. Most of all perhaps, research offends precisely because it is seen as being trapped in writing, irreparably cut off from the real world, when what people want is undiluted, unmediated access to evidence, or truth, or knowledge, or the authentic voice of subjects. What research fails to do, over and over again, is to achieve that alchemy of transmuting the base material of language into pure – ie text- and context-free - knowledge, evidence or action.

This exasperation with writing is of course a very old one. Derrida has noted how writing has been a constant irritant for philosophy – a necessary vehicle for truth and meaning, yet also ’a lodging for falsification and vice’ (1976: 205). Always a poison as well as a remedy. But the exasperation with
writing has definitely escalated over the last decade or so, as I’ve already pointed out, with the intensification of the audit culture and its demands for transparency, accountability and performativity. What we seem to be seeing is a growing policy hysteria, to use Ian Stronach’s phrase (Stronach & Morris, 1994), about the unpredictability of reading and writing, and in fact about language in general – a growing intolerance of language for its wretched inability to render itself transparent, so that evidence or information might be seized without having to worry about, multiple meanings, alternative interpretations, rhetoric or bias. In the UK, the result has been a variety of attempts to discipline the language of research – to remove, or at least minimise, its open-ness to interpretation and argument.

Let me give a couple of examples. In the UK, as in other countries, there is a strong movement for evidence-based policy and practice, and its members have led a decade-long attack on the methods and motives of qualitative researchers, for their failure to deliver the kind of hard evidence putatively enjoyed by medicine and the health professions. One popular remedy for this lack of transparency is systematic review – a method for evaluating and synthesising the evidence contained in primary research studies, with the aim of correcting the laxity and partiality of traditional academic reviewing. One notable aspect of systematic review, especially in the form developed by the EPPI-Centre at the University of London, is an antipathy to the very act of reading itself. This antipathy is so strong that the word ‘reading’ has virtually been erased from the vocabulary of systematic reviewing, to be replaced by an alternate lexicon of screening, scanning, mapping, keywording and data-extraction. Anne Oakley, the Director of the EPPI-Centre, describes the first stages of systematic review like this:

[Systematic review includes] a mapping stage, in which relevant literature is captured and systematically keyworded… and an in-depth review stage, in which a subset of the literature … is examined and interrogated in more detail and data extracted from primary studies. (Oakely, 2003: 24; original emphases removed)

The terminology invokes a pretty aggressive campaign of capture, interrogation and extraction – of texts being forced under duress to give up their evidence. The teams of reviewers are subjected to strict discipline too – that is, to ‘external quality assurance’. Each step in the process – coding, keywording etc – has to be cross-checked by the EPPI-Centre to make sure that everyone is thinking and coding alike.

There is a particular view of reading implicit – actually fairly explicit – in systematic review. It is one that assumes that meaning, or evidence, resides ‘in’ texts, and with the right procedures can be forced up to the surface and stripped of rhetoric – of those traces of argument and interpretation that render meaning variable, incomplete, partly tacit and always entangled with the interests and personal histories of those who are doing the reading. For the proponents of systematic review, as for advocates of the return to scientific methods in educational research, interpretation and argument are problematic. Interpretation is a clandestine, and therefore shady practice. Argument is venal, tainted by human partiality and need. And Theory is a vain distraction from the imperatives of the real world. There is a depleted vision of the kind of academic required to do the work of systematic review, and it is quite close to the figure satirised in another century by Montaigne:
In the absence of such honest or simple men, in the UK we have systematic review. Interpretation and argument are to be energetically managed through coding systems and quality assurance measures. The aim is to render the practice of reading transparent. Ann Oakley is quite clear about this: what systematic reviews are supposed to provide is ‘a clear audit trail from primary research to conclusions’ (2003: 23; my emphasis). This may be what Marilyn Strathern had in mind when she wrote of the ‘tyranny of transparency’.

The view of reading conveyed by systematic review also assumes that you can do it without either touching, or being touched by, the text. The discourse of mapping, screening, capture, interrogation and extraction suggests that reading can be done at arm’s length, as long as you have the proper scientific, or forensic, or industrial tools. I want to contest this view of reading, and ultimately of inquiry, and to insist, with Derrida, that reading is always a matter of getting your fingers caught in the weave of the text (1981: 63-4). Reading always involves both mastery and surrender, grasping meaning and being grasped by it. It involves reason and seduction. Texts never have firm boundaries enclosing static bodies of knowledge, and readers never take ‘out’ of texts exactly what their writers supposedly put ‘in’ them.

There are many other examples of the disciplining of language in contemporary academic work. Writing, for instance, is now routinely regulated by templates and bullet points. Reports and curriculum documents are compiled by filling in the blanks in pre-scripted pro formas. The Economic and Social Research Council – the ESRC – has set up an electronic submission system for research proposals that allocate pre-set numbers of characters or words, and lock you out of the system if you exceed these, or want to leave a section blank. So again, tolerance of diversity, surprise and stylistic variation is very low. The bureaucratic reason that drives audit systems abhors diversity and prefers language to operate as far as possible in what Lyotard called the mode of the ‘already said’ (1992). This is a bad thing, as I’ll elaborate in a minute.

Powerpoint presentation is another mundane example of operation in the mode of the already-said. When I get invitations to give seminars I am now routinely asked if I will send my powerpoint slides in advance (it is assumed that I will be using powerpoint), so that the slides can be copied and pre-circulated to the audience. Powerpoint etiquette seems to expect that the slides will summarise what the speaker is saying, with headings and sub-headings, so that the presentation often consists of the speaker reading out the content of her slides, which the audience can also see both on the screen and on their handouts. The problem is not with Powerpoint technology: it’s a great medium for working with images. If I had had the skills and time, I might have designed my slides more in keeping with the baroque theme. I might have had my headings and sub-headings wafted in by cherubs; or hidden them in grottoes or labyrinths. The problem is not really that powerpoint pedagogy involves pre-scripting - lectures and talks, including this one, are generally written to be read out. The problem is the extreme degree of pre-scription, and the speaker-controlled transmission model of teaching and learning that it promotes. This is a model that assumes that what is uttered is what is heard; that what is taught is what is learned; and that learning consists in
the assimilation in a linear fashion of pre-digested bits of knowledge. Hope, fear, power, desire, delay, idiosyncrasy or accident have no part in the process.

That same transmission model, with its heavy reliance on the scripting of pedagogy, also underpins the methodology of training and curriculum development in the UK. Training packages – whether for inspectors, local authority advisers, teachers or classroom assistants – now come heavily pre-scripted, in a quite literal sense. Trainers read from scripts that also contain prompts for when to display a slide, refer to the relevant policy document, or play a video excerpt. Here is an example from the literacy training materials for teaching assistants delivering the national ‘Early Literacy Support Programme’ for 5 – 7 year olds. There are 60 sessions in the programme, and each one is broken down into five timed segments entitled Oral Opener, Phonics Five, Text Ten, Fast Finisher and Take Away. This fragment comes from the Text Ten segment on Guided Reading in Week 3, Session 15, Friday. The teaching assistant’s ‘script’ is in italics:

**Book introduction:** show the children a copy of the book. Look at the front cover: *Do you remember what the Baby Bear said when he saw that the bowl was empty?* Take the children’s suggestions and then point to the words *Somebody’s Been Eating My Porridge!* Look back at the back cover. Point to the speech bubble. *Do you remember that we wrote a speech bubble? Who’s talking this time?* (Baby Bear)

(DfES, 2001: 36; italics in original)

So the regulation of language extends to spoken language too. There is a deep anxiety about deviation and diversion from the policy script, and an unwillingness to allow practitioners to exercise professional judgement.

Notice also that the pedagogy promoted in these literacy programmes is one that has been the subject of decades of critique by learning theorists and analysts of classroom discourse – the kind of classroom talk that is heavily teacher-directed and organised around the asking and answering of ‘closed’ questions. One of the main platforms of the critique of teacher-led talk, though not phrased in these terms, is precisely that it is pre-scripted. Built around the asking and answering of questions with pre-ordained ‘right’ answers, this kind of classroom talk makes learners passive recipients of teacher-controlled knowledge rather than active participants in the learning process. To invoke the theme of this conference, this is not an engaging pedagogy.

To round up so far: there seems to be a fear of language abroad in education and research policy, certainly in the UK, to a point where the proliferation of meaning becomes something to be feared, and the principal intellectual acts of research and scholarship - reading, writing, interpretation, analysis and argument – become suspect, and therefore in need of aggressive regulation, in the attempt to minimize difference and diversity.

You can also detect this fear of language, as I mentioned earlier, in the retreat to scientific method in research policy and funding in many countries. It is particularly strong in the US. Quantitative method, and the rigours of randomized controlled trials, seem to promise knowledge stripped of rhetoric and bias. Popkewitz (2004) is clear that this retreat to science is a nostalgic one – it comes from a desire for ‘a simple and ordered universe that never was’. Diversity – even when this is promoted in other policy discourses – of equality, flexibility and so on – has become threatening or tiresome when it comes to the methods of educational research. This is spelled out in the founding
of a new Society in the US – the Society for Research on Educational Effectiveness, whose remit is to ‘focus solely on advancing scientifically rigorous studies in education’. This new society has been set up in explicit opposition to the American Educational Research Association – the US equivalent of AARE. One of the founders of the new Society recently said that ‘While AERA has made important contributions to the field, both its power and its limitations are in its diversity.’

Attempts to control language and meaning, to evacuate them of nuance and surprise, tend to be felt as deeply threatening by writers and academics. Lyotard (1992) retracts the link between the policing of language and totalitarianism. Revisiting Orwell’s 1984 and the workings of Newspeak, Lyotard says that Newspeak comes from a fundamental hatred of ‘writing’, for its ‘uncontrollable contingency’ and its contamination by idiom, and therefore by desire. Newspeak wants only to operate, says Lyotard, in the mode of the ‘already-said’. This is the mode that, I have argued, is preferred in contemporary policy discourses.

Educational researchers have also begun to react with fear and anxiety to the attack on qualitative method. Norman Denzin has recently talked of a new ‘methodological fundamentalism’ of scientific method in the US.

Like Lyotard, the art historian and cultural theorist Griselda Pollock detects a totalitarian impulse running through the current attempts to regulate academic and artistic work. She argues that the audit culture carries the traces of fascism, in its abhorrence of variation or divergent opinion, and its contempt for independent thought and judgment. Pollock identifies an irreversible moment of bureaucratic terror instituted by the holocaust. She suggests, with due attention to the impropriety of the claim, that audit has rendered thought ‘Jewish’. Here is the full quote:

It would be wrong, trite and unacceptable to compare our trials and tribulations as thinkers and artists in the age of audit culture and other insanities with the pain inflicted on human beings by the sadism of the totalitarian regimes of the 20th. […] But, none the less, I want to suggest a degree of cultural affiliation between the grossest of atrocities and the daily drip- drip-drip of destruction of the conditions for thought, that Strathern and others have anthropologically studied as audit culture. While seeking merely to regulate and render accountable audit culture effectively makes thought ‘Jewish” – ambivalent, unpredictable, unassimilable.

(Pollock, 2006: 11)

Of course there are dangers of exaggeration and misdirection in big buzz-words such as fundamentalism and fascism. There are other stories that could be told of contemporary conditions, and alternative discourses of person-centred and flexible learning, of diversity and creativity. And there are always slippages between the intentions of policy and the multiplicity of human actions and experiences in specific contexts.

But to the extent that state-sponsored intolerance of difference and complexity is now part of the story of education policy and research funding in many countries, I want to argue that there is an obligation upon qualitative research to try to interrupt these clarity-seeking and closure-seeking tendencies. Because what such policies attempt to suppress is education’s ‘Other’ - the pain, conflict, failure, chance, irrationality, desire, judgement, frailty, frivolity and singularity that are also, unavoidably, implicated in the rationalist projects of teaching, learning and research. The ‘basic
language’ that Newspeak tries to impose is, Lyotard wrote, ‘the language of surrender and forgetting’. It is important for research not to forget; not to collude with the rage for transparency and predictability that drives bureaucratic and scientific reason.

And indeed qualitative researchers around the world are taking on that task. But it’s a difficult one to sustain, because we have our own resistances and anxieties about language and representation. The resistance to language does not just come from the ‘outside’, from some culture clash between different worlds - research, policy and practice. Resistance also comes from within the practices of qualitative research. Many of the methodological debates that have been running for decades now can be seen as playing out similar anxieties – about the treacherous relation between words and reality; about the distortions that research exerts on the authentic voices of subjects; about the cultural imperialism inherent in representation. Qualitative method aspires to open-ness, nuance and multiplicity, but it still frequently ends up working for closure. We are still nostalgic for the reconciliation of difference, and troubled by ethnographic guilt. We would still like to have innocent knowledge. We continue to work behind our own backs for direct access to the real world beneath the fabrications of our writing - still troubled by ‘the strange notion that reality has an idiom in which it prefers to be expressed’, to quote the late, much-lamented Clifford Geertz (1988: 140).

So, I want to take the remainder of this session to ask what an interruptive, disruptive method could look like? I want to sketch some features of a research practice that could be described as baroque, taking my lead from recent work in a range of disciplines that has detected, a ‘return of the baroque’, to use Gregg Lambert’s phrase. The art and philosophy of the baroque - dated roughly and retrospectively from the end of the 16th century to the middle of the 18th, - is currently providing new theoretical energy in fields including art and cultural theory, actor network theory, philosophy and aesthetics, surrealism and literary theory.

Lambert refers to the term baroque as a ‘bone in the throat’ because it has been a persistent irritant for traditional baroque criticism. The baroque is resistant to periodisation and definition. I have taken Lambert’s phrase for my title today precisely because of this gesture towards the obstructive potential of the baroque. The bone in the throat cannot be spat out or swallowed. It is, I think, a hopeful figure for a productively irritating research method.

The baroque has come to stand for an entangled, confounded vision that resists the god’s eye perspective and the clarity of scientism. Baroque figures and metaphors – the ruin, the labyrinth, the library, the (distorting) mirror, the trompe l’oeil or illusionistic painting, the fold – have some affinities with contemporary imaginaries of the postmodern, as does the appetite for spectacle and the blurring of distinctions between subject and object, surface and depth, reality and representation. A baroque method would resist clarity, mastery and the single point of view. It would be radically uncertain about scale, boundaries and coherence. It would favour what Harbison (2000) calls ‘the unconcluded moment’ and ‘interrupted movement’. A baroque method would also honour the obligation to get entangled in the details and decorations of educational scenes, rather than trying rise above them, or to view them in orderly perspective from the vantage point of the masterful viewer.

Here are some of the traits that have been associated with the returning baroque. I have presented them as a list, but of course they are baroquely entwined.
A baroque method would favour:

- movement and tension over structure and composure
- defamiliarization – the estrangement of the familiar
- loss of mastery of self and of other
- dislocation of time and space through vertiginous shifts of scale and focus
- theatricality – life, art and philosophy as performance
- productive of doubles, illusions, copies, fakes, simulacra and apparitions
- the attempt to ‘represent the unrepresentable’
- embrace of the nonrational and the supernatural
- resistance to generalisation, abstraction or totalization
- proliferation of fragments, details and marginalia
- epistemic excess – ie overflowing of boundaries and structures
- confusion of opposites such as reality and representation, light and dark, life and death
- fragmentary or distorting textual devices – montage, assemblage, allegory, analogy, parody, the mis en âbime (the text within the text)
- illusionistic and distorting visual representation - mirrors, anamorphic images; trompe l’oeil paintings
- production in the spectator/reader of disconcerting emotional states – vertigo, wonder, fascination, rapture, awe, nausea, melancholy
- an abject status as frivolous or degraded vis-a-vis dominant culture

It’s obvious that the baroque, in its contemporary guise, shares many of the tropes and tendencies of postmodernism. But the reappearance of the baroque also attests to the untimeliness of the postmodern - a term as difficult to pin down as the baroque. Although postmodernism is often located as a phenomenon of the second half of the twentieth century, it may be that what we are calling postmodernism is the contemporary outbreak of a repressed Otherness that has haunted all closure-seeking systems or philosophies, at least since the late 16th/early 17th centuries (conventionally tagged as the beginning of ‘modernity’). You could understand the baroque as the ‘Other’ that disrupts discourse from within – the ‘spectral double’ to use Judith Butler’s term (2004: 233). Under this reading, the baroque might have reappeared in the 19th century as the literary gothic, and as surrealism and Walter Benjamin’s messianic Marxism at the beginning of the 20th. Perhaps, then, postmodernism is one manifestation of the spectre that has stalked modernity as its impensé: the trace of its ineffable, uncanny Other.

This is not to suggest that postmodernism, gothic, surrealism and the baroque are all ‘the same’. I am not suggesting a lineage from past to present, baroque to postmodernism. The untimely relation between past and present is part of the logic of the contemporary baroque. The theorist of
art, Mieke Bal, argues for a baroque notion of ‘preposterous history’ - a play on the temporal confounding of ‘pre’ and ‘post’ that understands the past ‘as it is enfolded into the present that constructs it’ (1999: 21).

**Some characteristics of a baroque method**

So, what could a baroque research method look like? I want to use some examples from art and literature to conjure some possibilities.

As a first possibility, a baroque method enact an *analytics of entanglement and displacement*. It would resist building hierarchies, frameworks and abstractions, and try instead to stay with the resistance and ambiguity of reading and interpretation. Instead of envisaging regularities of scale, and stable relations amongst categories, a baroque method would be caught up in shifting topographies and oscillations of scale. An example of the baroque disruption of space would be the ‘baroque architecture’ of *Paradise Lost*, according to Robert Harbison. Satan’s position in the universe, for instance, is presented as a kind of vertigo. Milton does not go for clarity and precision in describing Satan, but instead obliquely invokes his presence in ‘abrupt lurches of size and profundity, mechanisms which work like jokes or displacements’ (2000: 6-7).

An example of contemporary baroque analysis can be found in John Law’s work in science and technology studies. Law (2003) unfolds a baroque attitude to the ‘global’ that challenges common assumptions about its size and encompassing scale. Law looks for a global that is small, ‘broken, poorly formed and comes in patches’ (2003, p5 of 15). He adopts the principle of monadology from Leibniz/Deleuze, which assumes that phenomena are already present in the smallest particulars of practices and institutions. Law provides an example in an analysis of British aircraft development in the 1950s. He starts from a technical formula for calculating the best wing design — that is, the one that is most efficient, while being least lethal - and then in a quintessentially baroque movement, Law peers ‘into’ the formula, intensifying the ‘magnification’ of his view and opening up its folds and layers, until he comes upon ‘the Russians’ – not just ‘out there in the global environment’ of the Cold War, but also in ‘sets of assumptions traded in conversation or memos between young men working on the same corridor’ (p7 of 15).

So instead of ascending to ever-higher levels of abstraction or explanatory power, or purer states of authenticity, a baroque analytic would move between intense engagement with the complexity of the specific and encounters with generality. It would look for ways of working with, and deeply within, the intricate entanglements of global and local, sensual and intellectual, particular and general, and so on. The baroque follows a ‘logic of ramification’ according to Mieke Bal, which proliferates meanings and new connections, rather than converging on generalities or coalescing within boundaries. It does not aspire to clarity, never achieves full coherence, and, in John Law’s words, is ‘tolerant of the implicit’ (Law, 2003: 9 of 15). It is ‘wavering’ in its scale and focus (Bal, 24). Entities are not therefore intrinsically big or small, containing or contained. They are not disposed in stable layers or nested inside concentric circles of individual, family, society. The size, significance and dimensions of the object under study depend on how the folds of the fabric of the world are disposed at the place where we start ravelling and unravelling some of its threads, and upon the intensity of our interest.
What size, for instance, is “the classroom”? From some vantage points it is small and surrounded, buffeted or embraced by bigger stuff such as policy, history or progress; or pushed into a tiny corner of insignificance by the more pressing claims of lives lived more vividly elsewhere. From other viewing points the classroom is an expansive terrain, pock-marked by unevenly distributed fragments of ‘policy’ or ‘society’, torn by competing theories, with hidden depths and changing topologies of fear, desire, dedication, exile, silences, play, censure, effort, vanity, power, missed chances, pools of conversation, sparks of interest, blame, thwarted or fulfilled ambitions, feats of memory. It might be found in the doodles, scratches and malicious whispers of bored children, or the bad dreams of teachers haunted by the next inspection, or the ‘merciless laughter’ of student teachers watching a government-produced video of good practice in literacy teaching, as described by Coldron & Smith (1999). Or the classroom might explode into a boundless nightmare spreading out from Dunblane or Columbine or an Amish community in Pennsylvania.

Maybe we could try to think the classroom as looking rather like this:

![Image of George Deem's School of Caravaggio](image)

George Deem’s classroom is an uncanny space where the deeply familiar furniture of desks, blackboards and books coexists with supernatural beings in mid-air collision. It contains quotations, fragments and memories of other scenes and times (bits of Caravaggio's most famous works). This classroom has ambiguous openings onto a world outside that might also be an illusion, and many strange acts are going on alongside, or tangled up with, learning – sexual display and narcissistic self-absorption, boredom, sidelong glances, innocence and experience.

A baroque method would therefore find complicating, disconcerting ways of engaging and representing educational scenes. It would recommend disruptive writing, which intentionally
undermines its own self-certainty, interferes with the hierarchical disposition of its conceptual structures, and blurs the illusory transparency of its access to the world.

**The recalcitrance of the object**
A baroque method would respect the recalcitrance of the object of study – not only its complexity but also its capacity for resisting social explanation and for unsettling the composure of researchers. The recalcitrance of objects is commended by Bruno Latour, who argues for a social science that renders its objects able to ‘strike back’ (2000:107). Objects, says Latour, should be allowed to manifest their intransigent thingness or ‘objectity’ in the face of the rule- or pattern-seeking propensities of conventional social science (116). A focus on the object would represent a shift of emphasis in qualitative methodology, which has tended to be preoccupied with questions of subjectivity. However a baroque engagement with objects ultimately unsettles clear distinctions between subject and object: the oscillations of scale, the illusionism and the ‘microscopic’ intensity lead to loss of mastery, both of the object and the subject. Bal writes: ‘Subjectivity and the object become co-dependent, folded into one another, and this puts the subject at risk’.

This ‘shared entanglement’ (Bal, 30) of subject and object, and the risk to the viewing subject, is unmistakable in *trompe l’oeil* painting and sculpture – a form of art, or perhaps anti-art, favoured by baroque artists and again by the surrealists. The *trompe l’oeil* ‘fools the eye’ by imitating its object so faithfully that the onlooker is momentarily gripped by an inability to tell the difference between representation and reality, original and copy.

This is one of my favourites – a *trompe l’oeil* from the 17th century:

Cornelis Gijsbrechts. *Back of a painting*. 1670-72
The little frisson of vertigo or disorientation sparked by the *trompe l'oeil* marks a moment of ontological panic. The viewer is unable to deploy the usual strategies for mastering the visual field and penetrating ‘through’ the picture to the meaning or reality that lies beyond, and is momentarily trapped in an uncanny space where the usual distance between subject and object has suddenly collapsed. As many commentators have noted, the picture seems to ‘look back’ at the viewer, and its uncanny effects have frequently been associated with death, haunting, hallucination or magic.

The *trompe l’oeil*, according to Badie, opens a ‘breach’ in baroque space that interferes or misplays, not only with the laws of representation, but with those of objectivity and of meaning itself. It’s an irruption of Otherness into the scene of representation and mastery.

There are *trompe l’oeil* moments in research too – fleeting instances where the object of the inquiry (who may of course also be a subject) becomes recalcitrant, deflects the research gaze and resists being made an example of. I’m going to take a quick look at a small fragment from a life history interview that has a distinctly *trompe l’oeil* flavour – something like this painting by Samuel Van Hoogstraten:

Here is the interview fragment:

*Trompe l’oeil interview*

Prof X  ...I was rescued at the eleventh hour from a life of complete complacency by going to Cambridge and being shown there was a class system [laughs]

MM  [laughs] Do you think that was a risk though?

Prof X  I think there’s always a risk, you know. I mean it was a real trauma and awful at the time, but curiously I think looking back, I’m quite grateful that I, it probably was a rescue.

MM  Probably formative?

Prof X  Yeah. I think I could, if I hadn’t had that I might have just been a complete complacent bastard

MM  [laughs]

Prof X  As it was, this was postponed for several years [laughs]

Like a *trompe l’oeil* painting, the illusion of interpretive depth suddenly evaporates in this little interchange. The interviewee confounds the difference between veiling and unveiling, and mocks the queasy camaraderie of the interview genre, exposing its creaky discursive stage machinery for conjuring truth and insight. The performance destabilises my own self assurance as interviewer, and calls attention to the necessary illusion involved in attempting access to ‘inner’ things such as a person’s thoughts or his authentic self.

Little irruptions of the ridiculous into the precarious order of the research encounter probably happen quite often; but they are easily overlooked or forgotten. A baroque method might try to resist the forgetting of these moments, when research is prevented from ‘being itself’ by the apparition something Other. It would look for ways of reminding itself of the delirious nature of the distance between self and other on which interpretive penetration or analytic mastery depends. Even if such difference is also essential to any attempt of one person to know another. A baroque method would consider the possibility that jokes, masks, camp performance, secrets, lies, uncertainties about who is fooling whom, or even about whether one is fooling oneself, are routine aspects of social interaction that can never be fully eliminated from interview encounters in the interests of disclosure.

A baroque method of analysis would also be radically undecided about the questions of mastery and surrender that have troubled qualitative research. It would recognise that analysis is always both an aggressive act that does violence to the realities of research subjects, and a submissive act of surrender to their persuasions. Something like this:
Alberto Giacometti, *Suspended Ball*. 1930-31

This is the art historian Rosalind Krauss, describing the oscillation of mastery and surrender in Giacometti’s *Suspended Ball*:

“For it is not clear, will never be clear, whether the gesture is a caress or a cut; it is not clear, will never be clear, whether the wedge is passively receiving stimulation from the sphere or sadistic, aggressive, is violating the surface of the ball... As the instrument of penetration the wedge is gendered male. And the wounded sphere is female. But as a labial surface stroked by its active, possessing partner, the wedge reverses its sex, flipping into an unmistakable image of the genitality of the woman. Swish. Flip. Alter. Every alternation produces an alteration.” (Krauss, 1993: 166)

Analysis – the attempt to understand another - will always be both a cut and a caress; mastery and surrender.

In this next example, you can see something of that alternation, and that dilemma of not knowing whether, as a researcher, you are merely passively recording what you see, or actively creating it – subjecting it to your interpretive will. This is a fragment from an analytic memo that I wrote for my co-workers on a project that was looking at issues surrounding adults touching children – a project that was influenced by Alison Jones’ work on this topic. The memo is grappling with the unanswerable nature of the analyst’s dilemma, in relation an account from one of the researchers of a class of 5 year olds and their teacher in a rural school. The teacher had said that she felt there
was a lot of ‘inappropriate touching’ amongst the children; and Helen, the researcher, thought that she might have seen this going on in the playground; but she wasn’t sure.

Fragment from analytic memo following a project meeting, Maggie to ‘Touchlines’ team, 16.3.05

Reminds me of *Turn of the Screw* […] you’re never sure whether the kids are bad (including in a sexually precocious way in the case of the little boy), or whether they’re really possessed by the evil dead guy Quint. And part of the uncertainty is because of the unreliability of the governess as the witness of all this. You don’t know whether she was unstable & hysterical, & therefore imposing all the horribleness on the 2 innocent kids, or saving them from a genuine threat.

That double bind of saving kids from a threat that could be emanating from oneself feels quite apt. It also reminds me of what Helen L was saying in the meeting before last about the kids in the rural school, and how one teacher at least was convinced that there was some pretty inappropriate stuff going on between boys and girls – to a point where the teacher wouldn’t allow touching at all. And how Helen had seen boys in the playground embracing girls in what could be seen as abusive ways. Similar dynamic – is the teacher ‘seeing’ stuff that’s really there, or is she putting it there (and maybe grooming Helen to see it in the same way… and then Helen grooming us…)?

A baroque method would have to come to terms with the possibility that there is no innocent knowledge; that scenes will always be susceptible of more than one reading; and that analysis can never be purely submissive. And such a method would have to find ways of ethically living and working through this dilemma again and again.

Confounded vision

A baroque vision, deployed in qualitative research, would accept the inevitability of a faulty, compromised access to truth, reality or other people. It would accept that it has blurred vision. It would make do, some of the time at least, with things dimly glimpsed or half-heard, knowing them always to be tinged with the theatricality of performance and tainted by the guilty pleasures of the spectator.

Relinquishing the pursuit of clarity and visibility at all costs – those quintessentially Enlightenment virtues - seems like giving up a lot. But it is worth recalling the high cost of visibility to those on the margins of any status quo. Postcolonial theorists such as Homi Bhabha (1994) have pointed out that, for those on the receiving end of colonial surveillance, secrets, lies, jokes, mimicry and partial visibility continue to be productive strategies for survival. Clarity is a highly politicised value, generally compliant with the bureaucratic or homogenising demands of a status quo that fears difference. And as we have seen those demands have become insistent within the audit culture.

The resistance to clarity can therefore be a form of subaltern recalcitrance. And this recalcitrance often has a *frivolous* aspect, mixing mimicry with mockery to unsettle the composure of the masterful gaze – like Professor X in my example from the life history interview. You can see this frivolous recalcitrance in the camp aesthetics of queer theory, and in the ‘excremental literature’ of writers in postcolonial Africa who wallow in the abject discourse of filth that has been used to denigrate them, for subversive purposes. You can also see it in the surrealist-inflected work of
South American artists such as Nadin Ospina, whose pre-Columbian Mickey Mouse mocks the erasures of globalisation and colonisation, and the pretensions of the Western/Northern art establishment.

Nadine Ospina (Columbia) *Idol with Doll*. 2000

Therese Ritchie, the non-indigenous artist based in Darwin, does something similar in this next image:

Therese Ritchie. *Would You Like a Skin Name with That?*
Like Ospina, Ritchie is critiquing the interpenetrations of global and local cultures and the selling of identities. Her work likewise mocks the pretensions and exclusions of fine art. She often uses the software programme called ‘Painter’ to paint like an old master. She works against the romanticising of the other by colonial artists, but mocks her own pretensions too. And she has a baroque understanding of the colonial violence inherent in projects of total understanding of the other. One of her works, which was recently displayed in an exhibition at the Flinders art museum, is called ‘We do not have the right to understand everything’.

The peep show
A baroque vision would not, in short, think that total clarity is necessarily a good thing. It would recognise, as did the surrealists, the inescapable absurdity of the postures adopted by the viewing subject, but also the strange insights that might be gained by contemplating objects under conditions of intimacy, distortion or difficulty. The surrealists experimented with alternative forms of display – mounting exhibitions that required viewers to glimpse their work through peep-holes or by pressing levers. This interest in occluded vision and a seductive address to the viewer was part of a wider interest in the delimitation of the visible and the invisible, in the erotics of the look, and in what could be ‘seen’ by not looking at things directly. By interfering with the remote and indifferent mastery of the gaze, the surrealists pursued and glimpsed shadowy things, and attempted to catch the viewer’s complicity in the act of looking.

The surrealists also often secreted their objects and art works in suitcases, boxes and cabinets - sometimes, as in Marcel Duchamp’s suitcases - in the form of doubles or miniatures of existing works. Joseph Cornell displayed strange objects of desire, images and text fragments inside boxes and penny arcade machines:

Joseph Cornell. Untitled (Medici Princess), c. 1948
Putting objects into peep shows, penny arcade machines and boxes produces sensations in the viewer that are rather different from the uncomplicated illumination that they are supposed to get from confronting things head on in the full light of day. Barbara Maria Stafford (2004), in an examination of what she calls ‘devices of wonder’ – prisms, magic lanterns, peep shows, optical instruments, cabinets of curiosities - describes the effect on the subject of such ‘devices of wonder’ as intensification – a kind of exhilaration of the senses that sets perception, cognition and imagination in motion. Learning, fascination, enchantment and seduction are caught up in each other, and in a complex relation to the object.

Perhaps a postmodern method could consider alternative visual apparatuses such as the peepshow or the magic lantern as new imaginaries for the relation to the object. Or at least think about a viewing position that is constrained by the aperture of the peephole rather than the proscenium arch or other more expansive openings onto the scene of research. The peep show brings the viewer into an intimate relation with the object, one into which desire, wonder and Otherness are folded, and out of which something might issue that would never be seen by shining a bright light upon the object in the empty space of reason and looking at it as hard as possible. But the peepshow also calls attention to the compromised, voyeuristic nature of the researcher gaze and the unavoidable absurdity of the research posture. To view the delights of the peepshow you have to bend down, present your backside to public view, put yourself at risk. You may start out standing, as Bob Dylan wrote, ‘but you will wind up peeking through [a] keyhole down upon your knees’.

I need to finish, if not to round up – which is not a very baroque thing to do. A baroque method would not be as assured as we would all ideally like to be about the demarcation between research and the real world, between representation and reality. It would have to live with something like the condition that Magritte represented as the human condition:

Magritte. La Condition Humaine.
I have suggested that there is a need for research and aesthetic practices that are mindful of the bureaucratic reason of the modern state, with its desire for mastery over knowledge and subjects, and persistent about resisting that desire for mastery. As long as research continues to work for, or collapse into, resolution, reconciliation, mastery or innocence, it colludes with the closure-seeking appetites of bureaucratic reason, with its punitive mission of transparency, standardisation and certainty. Interruptive methods are needed, to quote Susan Buck-Morss (1991), to try to ‘fracture the mythic immediacy’ of the educational present, and the inertia coded in the pedagogic encounter.

Lyotard, writing over fifteen years ago, had already spotted what was going on, with the intensification of what he called simplism. He sketched the task facing humanity, and I am going to closed by quoting him, The quote comes from ‘Ticket for a New Stage’:

At a minimum this task implies a resistance to simplism and simplifying slogans, to calls for clearness and straightforwardness, and to desires for a return to solid values. Simplification is already starting to look barbarous or reactive. The “political class” will have to (already has to) reckon with this exigency if it is to avoid sinking into decrepitude and dragging humanity down with it as it goes.
(Lyotard, ‘Ticket for a New Stage’)

19
References
Maggie MacLure is Professor of Education in the Education and Social Research Institute at Manchester Metropolitan University in the UK. She joined MMU from the Centre for Applied Research in Education (CARE) at the University of East Anglia, where she was Professor of Education and Chair of Research. She is interested in relationships between research methodology, policy and practice. Her book, *Discourse in Educational and Social Research* (Open University Press), won the Critics’ Choice Award from the American Educational Studies Association.