



Book Review

Rafe McGregor (2021) *Critical Criminology and Literary Criticism* Bristol: Bristol University Press

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Sarcastic commentators may describe the concepts and methods of critical criminologists as science fiction, and their imagination, concerns, their interpretations as belonging to the realm of the improbable, the phantasmatic. The illusionary, incorporeal nature of science fiction constitutes, instead, a key component of Rafe McGregor's proposal for a theoretical partnership between critical criminology and literary criticism. After a brief preliminary review of previous criminological efforts to use fiction as a source of knowledge about crime and harm, the author investigates whether fiction provides specific explanations of the causes of both. The criminological knowledge offered by fiction pertains to lived experiences, hypothetical social scenarios and detailed everyday reality. At least, this is my understanding of McGregor's knowledge triad: phenomenological, counterfactual and mimetic. More specifically, the author explores the aetiological value of allegories by 'practising criminological criticism' on a feature film (*Mad Max: Fury Road*), a television series (*Carnival Row*) and a novel (*The Cuckoo's Calling*). Far from being a futile exercise, the exploration intends to test 'if and how allegories can contribute to the reduction of harm: whether criminological criticism can constitute an actual intervention in social reality' (McGregor 2022: 6).

Stories can possess a pleasurable aesthetic value, but they can also stimulate emotional and evaluative responses, particularly if they offer new socio-political insights. *Critical criminology and literary criticism* adopts Fredric Jameson's (2019) notion of fourfold allegories and thick narratives, that refer to different elements and levels of interpretation and meaning(s) that create new meaning(s). The new meaning thus created is not the mere sum of its constituents, but an autonomous field of interpretation that hints at possibilities for collective action.

Critical criminology is characterised as 'being concerned with harm and social justice rather than with crime and criminal justice' (McGregor 2022: 15). Conversely, the criminal justice system is the cause of multiple harms as it aims at safeguarding or increasing the inequalities that lead to offending. McGregor links these concerns with Jameson's arguments, highlighting how allegorical narratives reveal causal relations by holding up 'both a mirror and a microscope to everyday life' (ibid: 18). Drawing on John Gibson's (2018) work, he then focuses on the extra-representational capacity of art, namely the capacity to depict degraded realities while prefiguring more desirable social arrangements. In this way, it could be suggested, the art of fiction will supposedly change the views and feelings of readers and pave the way for social change.

McGregor's approach relies on fiction as a particular form of communication between a producer and a receiver - an exchange carried out through imaginative codes that, potentially, may shape counter-values. After 'practising criminological criticism' on the three items chosen, McGregor reiterates his case that the explanation of the causes of harm can be achieved by allegories.



If fiction is to be worldly, however - that is composed around perceptions of the real - how can worldliness be expressed while using allegories? McGregor replies by stating that allegory is fictional testimony and is, in itself, worldly. Perhaps he means that allegories are the product of the social world and are historically located in the moments in which they are formulated?

In the final pages, *Critical criminology and literary criticism* draws a trajectory whose stages include the identification of the cause of particular harms, the translation into policies of the knowledge acquired, the progressive reduction of harm, and the removal of the causal factors identified. This process is described as a progression from professional critical criminology to policy critical criminology. In brief, critical criminologists are said to influence the public who, in turn, will influence the policies to be implemented. However, are not novelists and criminologists alike influenced by the collective action of those who suffer those harms? An answer to this question, in my view, can only be provided only when the relationship between academic disciplines such as criminology, social change and progressive social movements is clarified (Ruggiero 2022).

If my understanding of Jameson's overly complex analytical framework is correct, we could note that his fourfold allegory is, itself, an allegory, as it echoes sociological (progressive) interpretations of crowds and Durkheimian concepts such as collective effervescence and magical moments. Crowds furnish individuals with a collective mind, which makes them feel and think quite differently from how every individual would otherwise feel and think. Progressive goals engage crowds in a type of *vita activa* that connotes oppressed multitudes when they find a unitary way of responding to injustice. Collective effervescence and magical moments convey an idea of vitality and creativity when individuals transcend themselves and prefigure a higher social order. Perhaps more clarity should inform the analysis of how critical criminology relates to these issues.

The links between fiction and sociology-criminology are often more explicit than we seem to realise, particularly when the focus on the Anglosphere is expanded to include world literature. Think of Lombroso's admiration of Dostoevsky's depiction of crime in *L'uomo delinquente*, Zola's mention of Lombroso's theories in *Nana*, and Cervantes' description of organised crime, which still stands up when compared with most criminological literature on the subject matter.

In sum, this original and engaging book encourages further theoretical explorations. Sociology and criminology are themselves probing disciplines that imitate detective work as they attempt to uncover the hidden dynamics of events and interactions (Boltanski 2014). Social reality is cast into doubt by novelists as well as by sociologists, whose gaze extends beyond the visibility of the obvious. Fiction and sociology problematise reality: they detect intrigues, undeclared intentions and illegible plots. They borrow from each other and, in doing so, blur their identity while gaining intellectual agility. The postman in the eponymous film featuring Massimo Troisi writes a letter to the woman he loves that consists of a Pablo Neruda poem. When called to account for such blatant plagiarism, Troisi stresses that poetry belongs to those who need it, and in more general terms to those who appreciate the use-value of literature.

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