Rafe McGregor, Literary Criminology and Literary Criticism

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Book Review

Rafe McGregor, Literary Criminology and Literary Criticism*, Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2022, 144 pp.*

In his new book, *Literary Criminology and Literary Criticism*, Rafe McGregor argues for a new methodology of critical criminology[1] that he calls *criminological criticism*. The features of criminological criticism are exploring the significance and value of allegories in narrative works of art, establishing a theoretical framework using Vidmar Jovanović's conception of fictional testimony (Vidmar and Baccarini 2010, Vidmar 2015, 2017), requesting collaboration between critical criminologists and literary critics, and focusing on narrative works of art as actual interventions in social reality. McGregor demonstrates the main aspect of criminological criticism (examining allegories) by exploring three narrative works of art: George Miller's feature film *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015), Prime Video's television series *Carnival Row* (2019) and J.K. Rowling's novel *The Cuckoo's Calling* (2013).

McGregor starts with an anecdote which explains his motivation for writing the book. He recalls being at a conference where each participant's contribution was referred to as an "intervention" and states that "… no one at the conference was actually doing anything that was going to make a difference to the life of anyone who wasn't in the audience" (1–2). He goes on to explain "… I do think that academics who study literature (whatever their discipline) should do more with their research than find interesting things to say about wonderful books that only a tiny percentage of the global population will ever read" (2).

In the second chapter, McGregor presents two essential tools for his criminological criticism: fourfold allegories (Jameson 2019) and extra-representational capacity (Gibson 2018). Fourfold allegory is an idea that every text or representation contains in itself four levels of meaning: the literal, the symbolic, the existential and the anthropic. The literal meaning is the representation of the sequence of events in the narrative. The symbolic meaning is hidden in the narrative representation and can be decoded with careful examination of the text. The existential meaning involves individual desire and the construction of subjectivity and is best understood as the ethical meaning of the narrative representation. The anthropic meaning involves the political unconscious and is best understood as the political meaning of the narrative representation. According to

[1] Critical criminology is a sub-discipline of criminology that focuses on issues of social harm and social justice.

McGregor, fourfold allegories correspond to the four values that we get from narrative arts—aesthetic value, cognitive value, ethical value and political value. The second tool McGregor presents is extra-representational capacity. Extra-representational capacity is best understood as an action by an artist to illuminate the important moral and ethical issues in our world. It emerges when we (the reader, the audience or the theorist) engage with the work through fourfold allegories and treat an allegory as an object. Extra-representational capacity should "… contrast our degraded world with a world worth having and then compel the audience to acknowledge the space between the two worlds" (19). The example McGregor uses to demonstrate extra-representational capacity, borrowing from Gibson (2018), is Kafka's *The Trial*.

In the third chapter, McGregor uses the film *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015) to discuss hegemonic masculinity, gender cooperation and radical feminist governance. *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015) is a post-apocalyptic action film that follows Max (a drifting loner) and Furiosa (a rebellious war captain) as they try to escape the pursuit of the film's antagonists—Immortan Joe and the War Boys – across the post-apocalyptic dessert known only as the Wasteland. According to McGregor, Immortan Joe, the War Boys and the social structure of the Citadel allegorically represent hegemonic masculinity. Perspectival narrative switching between Max and Furiosa and their reluctant cooperation allegorically represent gender cooperation. The last scene in the film where Furiosa ascends literally and figuratively to take control of the Citadel while Max leaves in the crowd represents the possibility of radical feminist governance. McGregor argues that the film enables us to envision a better and more just society in which women and men are truly equal.

In the fourth chapter, McGregor uses the television series *Carnival Row* (2019) to discuss racism, alienation and urban revanchism. *Carnival Row* (2019) is a fantasy series set in the imaginary city of Burgue in which mythical creatures (predominantly the Fae), after having fled their war-torn country, try to coexist with the native human population. The issues of racism, alienation and decivilization are depicted in the relationship between humans and the Fae. Humans generally treat the Fae as morally lesser beings through discrimination, decivilization and systemic and individual violence. McGregor argues that the series enables us to see more clearly the racism and discrimination in our own world.

In chapter five, McGregor uses the novel *The Cuckoo's Calling* (2013) to discuss elitism, class structure and celebrity culture. *The Cuckoo's Calling* (2013) is a crime fiction novel that follows the private investigator Cormoran Strike who is hired by John Bristow to investigate the possible murder of his sister, supermodel and celebrity Lula Landry, which the police ruled as suicide. According to McGregor, the issue of class structure is explored through the character of Cormoran Strike, the issue of celebrity culture through the character of Lula Landry and the issue of elitism in the way society treats both. Strike's class condition, a particular position in the distribution of material properties and symbolic capital, is a mixed bag. He is the son of a famous rock star, he went to Oxford and failed to graduate, likes beer, takeaway meals and football, but socializes with government ministers and aristocrats. Despite all these characteristics, people of a higher

economic and social status think less of him. Lula, despite becoming an overnight celebrity and multi-millionaire, struggles with the pressure of being a celebrity, which includes lack of anonymity and coping with mental problems. Notwithstanding these troubles, people still consider Lula to be a spoiled rich girl who suffers from "first world problems". McGregor argues that the novel "…provides convincing explanations of the constituents of class condition, the impact of celebrity culture, and the harm of elitism at its symbolic, existential, anthropic levels of meanings respectively" (72).

Building on his previous chapters, in chapter six McGregor argues that we can use works of narrative arts as legitimate and reliable epistemic sources to discover causes of social harm and social injustice in the real world. To make his point, McGregor relies on Vidmar Jovanović's conception of fictional testimony. Vidmar Jovanović's idea is that fictional testimony is not so different from real testimony. Even though Vidmar Jovanović recognizes that there are obvious differences between fictional testimony and real testimony, she argues that similarities between the two are present and relevant. In both kinds of testimony, we have an informant and a listener (or an author and a reader) and the listener can learn something if the informant is reliable and sincere. McGregor argues that this theory explains how criminologists can use narrative works of art as epistemic sources for their investigations.

In the penultimate chapter, McGregor argues for collaboration between critical criminologists and literary critics, calling this collaboration the critical criminologist. The critical criminologist investigation consists of several steps. First, she needs to draw on her knowledge of the discipline to discover whether the idea, argument, hypothesis or theory that she has is original. Second, she needs to assess whether the theory or hypothesis can be tested. McGregor offers an example: *The fear of crime plays a more substantial role than the actual crime rate in social disintegration* (102). Despite obvious difficulties, McGregor is adamant that these kinds of theories can be empirically tested. Lastly, when the theory is tested it can become available as a public policy.

In the conclusion, McGregor reiterates the benefits of his criminological criticism and emphasizes the need for "… synergy between the social sciences and the humanities to create a policy output that constitutes a genuine positive intervention in social reality" (104).

To conclude, I believe the book is well written and concisely structured. Additionally, it is an absolute joy to read. McGregor clearly explains complex concepts like extra-representational capacity and fourfold allegories. The narrative examples are fun and engaging while also serving a vital argumentative purpose. McGregor works within the argumentative framework from critical criminology, literary criticism and analytic philosophy. I would recommend this book to anyone interested in new and fresh ideas from these domains.*

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