



## Rafe McGregor, "Critical Criminology and Literary Criticism"

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**Rafe McGregor.** *Critical Criminology and Literary Criticism*. Bristol University Press 2021. 144 pp. \$83.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781529219678).

Academics worldwide receive and respond to many emails daily as a part of their work. Particularly, those whose names frequently are part of congresses' programs and academic journals' lists everyday receive 'spurious' proposals for publishing and participating in dubious publications and meetings. Exerting some opposition, universities warn against these peculiar invitations by establishing new control measures and rules. Not surprisingly, however, academic business is partially sustained by universities because the tools they employ for evaluating individual and collective knowledge production open wide enough for such supply and demand. One can argue that universities may use these methodologies and tools for evaluating and divulging knowledge since there seems to be nothing else warranting a more efficient public control of science. To some extent, however, quantitatively measured 'impact' in academia overlaps with a 'neoliberalization' of university education. That is the contemporary universities' conundrum, especially in the humanities and philosophy.

Rafe McGregor's *Critical Criminology and Literary Criticism* turns the expression of *academic philosophical intervention* into a non-contradictory formula that precisely aims for a high-quality epistemological insight into fiction entirely compatible with an opening path to discuss how the literary criticism and the philosophy of literature can 'make a difference to the life of anyone who wasn't in the audience' of academic philosophers (1-2). Its expected perlocutionary effect, then, is not reduced to other academic discourses in the bounds of philosophy, literary theory, or literary criticism. Rather, as in his last three published books, McGregor's work aims to interact with other disciplines beyond the canonical ones restricted to literature. So, although its rich academic dialogue focuses on recent writings such as those by Iris Vidmar Jovanović, John Gibson, Gregory Currie, and Frederic Jameson, *Critical Criminology and Literary Criticism* transcends technical discussions, departing from these writings toward an interesting intervention in different social sciences, in particular on critical criminology. As more than a methodology in action, the book offers a research program connecting literary criticism, philosophy, and critical criminology. The particular way this happens takes the form of a strong thesis: fiction is a 'source of knowledge about crime and harm' (3), possessing irreducible heuristic insights into reality and explanatory potentials. In that sense, audio-visual and written fictions have epistemic benefits allied, in turn, with a political benefit, defined as the possibility to intervene beyond the limits of the academic world. So, those neoliberal academic features frequently implied in a numbed social impact are fought by applying philosophy and literary theory to critical criminology, which has a more immediate relation to the life of people around the globe. It could be, however, just another book on literature trying to reach a broader public but failing; so how is it possible to make an ambitious intervention without producing more pages of esoteric discussions?

Its general aim requires extending the readers' range to non-philosophers and non-academics. Consequently, many of its formal aspects are carefully treated. The selected lexicon and grammar features enable easy access to complex theses and arguments. Beyond these two basic elements, the



general organization of its contents also aligns with that goal. So, the chapters where McGregor interprets fiction are equal in number to the most theoretical ones (one introductory chapter, three theoretical chapters, three chapters on three works of fiction, and one helpful conclusion constitute the entire book's structure). So, the role of interpretation throughout the book surpasses mere exemplification, making the fiction just as relevant as arguments, definitions, and theses. Even the order in which the chapters on fictional works are placed among the book participates in this general insight: fiction takes its place in chapters three to five, making chapter two a smooth introduction that will produce extremely fruitful guides for the chapters on fiction before the theoretical sixth and seventh chapters.

Likewise, the selection and order of the three works of fiction (one per chapter) are another easy access to McGregor's book. Chapter three interprets the movie *Mad Max: Fury Road*, chapter four studies the television series *Carnival Row*, and chapter five approaches J. K. Rowling's *The Cuckoo's Calling*. Unlike most academic writing, McGregor's book changes the criteria for choosing its materials. Successful commercial audio-visual and written fiction are also used to explore theoretical theses with an extra-academic impact. Moreover, the narrations' focal themes have a global significance rather than a local one, which makes the contents valuable in a global context. Such themes are gender (*Mad Max: Fury Road*), race (*Carnival Row*), and class (*The Cuckoo's Calling*). Finally, the order of these three chapters has a significant role: their plots and narratives are progressively more complex. Because of the simplicity of its plot, *Mad Max: Fury Road* was an interesting candidate to open the question about how the global problems of gender are treated in fiction. With a more complex plot and narrative, *Carnival Row* follows *Mad Max* showing the representational and extra-representational powers on race. In the last place, the complex plot and narrativity of *The Cuckoo's Calling* closes the chapters dedicated to fiction, illuminating some hypotheses on how 'celebrity culture exacerbates rather than alleviates elitism, aggravating the difference between the upper and lower class conditions by means of media capital' (77). Considering the book's problems, theses, and arguments, beyond their thematic and formal organization, it can be said that they are also engaged with transcending the boundaries of academic philosophical writing on literature.

Not all narrative fictions have explicative and heuristic powers, but many can impart criminological knowledge in theoretical and practical forms through their representational and extra-representational capacities. How is that possible? The valuable objects of critical criminology are the *fourfold allegories*, following the concept pioneered by Frederic Jameson. Every fourfold allegory has a representational capacity, which consists of intentionally representing events, persons, and places so that every fourfold allegory is a *complex narrative*. In turn, every complex narrative as an allegory involves diverse kinds of meaning (literal, symbolic, ethical, and anthropic) whose particular perspectivalizations constitute the base from which the philosophical attribution of values, such as aesthetic ones, but also its extra-representational dimension supervenes. Rafe McGregor carefully explores each level of meaning in each chapter on those already mentioned fictional allegories (chapters three to five). However, as he affirms in chapters two and six, reducing allegories to mere objects of interpretation dissolves their interventional character.

Conceived as McGregor does, allegories exceed all those levels of meaning, making the allegories' extra-representational dimension possible. When considered as *testimonies*, the apparent allegories' representational capacities then turn the interpretation's objects into artefacts with the power of agency, which are precisely their extra-representational capacities.

So, following Iris Vidmar Jovanović's and John Gibson's theses, *Critical Criminology and Literary Criticism* advocates an epistemic benefit for fiction, in this case from the irreducible *literary thickness* characteristic of complex allegories. Rafe McGregor keeps this concept of literary thickness in mind, as he has posed in many papers on poetry and narrative and in *The Value of Literature*. What he understands by thickness is the *inseparability of form and content*, which surpasses any translating effort of literary texts into literal ones. The peculiar ways through which literary contents are presented draw on the diverse representational perspectives on characters, events, and places as an allegory. Perspectivation, which is the basis of literary value, conceptually joins McGregor's other central theses on allegories as *testimonies*. Instead of conceiving the relationship between the world and fiction in terms of similarity, which is problematic in several respects, literary criminology presents allegories as agencies, namely as a practical relationship under the form of a *communication act*, not merely as objects of interpretation. *Sincerity* and *reliability* substitute for the typical criteria from the mere representational conceptions of fiction. So, reading the perspectival representative character of narrations as testimonies makes it possible to take fiction's epistemic benefits seriously. Therefore, allegories can contribute to 'establishing the causes of harm or social injustice' (15).

However, allegories with agential powers also require complex and subtle collaborations among several spheres of critical criminology. When a work of fiction is successfully conceived as a source of explanations (so, when interesting new hypotheses, theses, and theories are identified), critical criminology spreads the voice of complex allegories beyond the limits of the academic world. That is exactly the point of the seventh chapter. Departing from Michael Burawoy's proposal on the labour of sociology, Rafe McGregor elucidates the fourfold disciplinary structure of critical criminology. Regarding critical criminology not only as a purely academic discipline but also as a scientific discourse that is in dialogue with the public sphere becomes, in that fourfold structure, a key for transcending a purely academic interest. In that sense, *Critical Criminology and Literary Criticism* turns prejudices on the epistemic and political uselessness of fiction and its interpretation into practical, valuable thoughts on the criminological powers of allegories.

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