

Journal of

Theoretical & Philosophical Criminology

ISSN: 2166-8094

Jtpcrim October 2021 Special Edition: 13:111-125

Fictional Realities and Criminology: Apprehending Social Reality Through Narrative Fiction
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to advance an appreciative critique of Rafe McGregor's, *A Criminology of Narrative Fiction*, and to raise some general issues about the intersection of criminology and fiction that have not been adequately dealt with within criminology. The overall argument is that the value of narrative fiction for criminology lies with the allegorical and counter-factual role it might play.

KEY WORDS

narrative fiction, allegory, folk concept, signification, interpretation, explanation, counter-factual

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Novelists – whose serious work embodies the most widespread definitions of human reality – frequently possess this [sociological] imagination and do much to meet the demand for it. ... In the absence of an adequate social science, critics and novelists, dramatists and poets have been the major, and often the only, formulators of private troubles and even of public issues. Art does express such feelings and often focuses them – at its best with dramatic sharpness – but still not with the intellectual clarity required for their understanding or relief today.

(C. Wright Mills, 1959a: 14, 18)

Introduction

In 1980, criminologist Edward Sagarin argued literature was a significant source of insight into the human condition. The point made was that criminology could be greatly enriched by the literary world but that criminologists hadn't understood this even though "literary intellectuals" and social scientists often examined the same phenomena.

Scientific 'grammars' of action do not have a monopoly on meaningfulness and coherence, and a retreat into them as the sole means of understanding, discussing, and coping with crime would be disastrous because, among other things, the scientific enterprise would lose its breadth should it deprive itself of opportunities to cross-fertilize with art and humanism (Sagarin 1980: 87).

In 1991 criminologist Robert Kelly highlighted the important role literature played in humanising criminology, particularly a criminology that championed cold, detached observation. Kelly's intervention followed Frank Williams (1984) lamenting the "demise of the criminological imagination" due to scientific imperialism. Kelly argued literature could illuminate the often intricate and complex relations between psychological dynamics, social action, and structural features of social life. As did Sagarin, Kelly argued for the cross-fertilisation of literary studies and criminology as each could enrich the others, avowing literature would likely have the greater impact. "Literature," Kelly (1991: 58) argued, "is a source of knowledge for criminologists," a source of penetrating insights into the struggle of being human.

When looking over the field of criminology we see a rich tradition of engaging with narrative fiction. Jeffrey Wilson (2015) offers a convincing and fascinating account of the history of the term, "criminology", tracing it back to the 19th century English "Newgate" tradition of crime fiction. This genre offered "systematic, rigorous, organized, and methodical" argument, although not scientific in its presentation. The scientific work of Caesar Lombroso who, according to the standard view, is considered the founder of scientific criminology, evinces the hallmarks of fabulism, a genre of narrative fiction. He conceptualised criminals as medical monsters and, in contrast, the criminal anthropologist as monster hunter (Frauley 2021a). According to Rafter and Ystehede (2010: 265), "many of the trappings of literary and visual Gothicism" figure into Lombroso's science. It is surely not happenstance that there is a strong relationship between the "three great modern prototypes of monstrosity" (Claeys 2017: 75) – Shelley's, *Frankenstein*, Stevenson's, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and Stoker's, *Dracula* – and the Lombrosian science of criminal anthropology. Just as gothic fiction informs Lombroso's work, Stoker's description of *Dracula* mirrors Lombroso's description of the criminal (Frauley 2021a).

Quite apart from "narrative" and "cultural" criminology, there is a rich and varied literature within the field that engages with narrative and popular culture. For example, there is gothic criminology (Picart 2021; Picart and Greek 2003), scholarship on the imagination, popular culture, and the arts (Bailey and Hale 1998; Deflem 2010; Farrant 2016; Frauley 2015a,b,c; Frigon and Jenny 2009;

Jacobsen 2014; O'Neill and Seal 2012; Phillips and Strobl 2013; Seal and O'Neill 2019; Young 1996, 2008, 2013) as well as scholarship concerning cinematic and novelistic fiction (Boyd 2008; Brown and Rafter 2011; Frauley 2010; Kelly 1991; Picart *et al* 2016; Ruggiero 2003; Sagarin 1980; Wilson 2015, 2017; Young 2009). A recent addition to this literature is Rafe McGregor's (2021), *Criminology of Narrative Fiction*.

McGregor's book is stimulating and rich and hopefully it will push criminologists to read closely and deeply. It is sophisticated but silent on important issues. It is deeply complex and philosophical, but its brevity sacrifices clarity. His exemplificatory mode of presentation is less suited to the complex position he endeavours to construct than is explication and critique. The book is challenging to read for these reasons but no less rewarding. However, in my view, his overall goal of producing a "theory of the criminological value of fiction" (McGregor 2021: 13) is not fully realised. There are undeveloped claims that I believe weaken his position. The purpose of this article is to advance an appreciative critique of McGregor's book and to raise some general issues about the intersection of criminology and fiction that have not been adequately dealt with within criminology. My overall argument is that the value of narrative fiction for criminology lies with the allegorical and counter-factual role it might play.

McGregor in Brief

At first glance we might be tempted to place this book within the context of cultural or narrative criminology and read it as offering analyses of narrative fiction. McGregor's exemplificatory mode of presentation lends to this. However, situating the text in this way is to misread it, as I believe Andrew Millie does in his Foreword to the book.¹ The text is primarily philosophical and is concerned with epistemology.

According to McGregor, narrative fiction is an overlooked source of three types of knowledge valuable for producing criminological explanation of real-world crime and harm: (1) phenomenological knowledge (about subjective experience); (2) counterfactual knowledge (about possible other conditions under which one might act and/or think differently) and; (3) mimetic knowledge (detailed and accurate knowledge about the everyday world beyond the narrative). The first three chapters of his book outline its theoretical and ontological orientation. These chapters include a cursory discussion of narrative criminology (particularly the work of Lois Presser [2009, 2016]), cultural criminology, and works by Nicole Rafter (2006), Jon Frauley (2010) and Vincenzo Ruggiero (2003). Noticeably absent, however, is discussion of almost all the literature mentioned in the previous section. McGregor overlooks this rich tradition within criminology and forgoes an opportunity to bring this fragmented scholarship together, to offer his analyses and perhaps a reworking or synthesis. We do not know how McGregor has understood or attempted to remedy the problems of, built upon, or has offered an advance over this scholarship because he is silent on this.

The core of the book consists of several chapters that begin with an overview of a film that exemplifies the types of knowledge under consideration (mentioned above). McGregor then offers a very brief, somewhat perfunctory discussion of scholarly literature pertaining to these respective types of knowledge before offering in-depth examinations of two fictive narratives. It is these two longer and deeper analyses that make up the heart of each of the three most important chapters. McGregor refers to the longer of the two as a "case study". These, however, are not case studies of the dramatisations or novels examined but of the type of knowledge under consideration, illustrated with reference to these narratives. These examinations are *exemplificatory* of his position that phenomenological, counter-factual and mimetic knowledge of real-world crime and harm can be found in narrative fiction.

¹ Millie views the book as a contribution to narrative criminology. McGregor (2021: 29, 31, 33) is adamant his work does not follow from that of Lois Presser, credited with originating "narrative criminology". Although he does suggest his work emerges from this context, I don't find that claim convincing because he does not utilise the scholarship of narrative or cultural criminology to construct his account of the criminological value of narrative fiction.

McGregor states several times throughout Chapter 2 that his interest in narrative fiction is with its *representational* value; that is, with the way in which narrative fiction *represents* reality. This is explicitly set against narrative fiction's *constitutive* dimension. Additionally, in Chapter 3 he states his interest in narrative fiction is for how it can play an *aetiological* role, that it will "provide knowledge of the causes of crime or social harm" (37, references omitted). This is in line with the view that narrative fiction can represent a reality beyond the fictive story world. This aetiological role is set apart from a *semiotic* role (which provides "knowledge of the production and reception of representations of crime and its control" [37, references omitted]) and a *pedagogic* role (which "is to facilitate, augment, or enhance the communication of criminological knowledge" [37, references omitted]). Therefore, McGregor holds that narrative fiction offers credible and adequate representations of the real-world causes of crime or social harm. The phenomenological, counterfactual, and mimetic knowledge argued to be embedded in narrative fiction is considered to be knowledge germane to criminological explanation. *Epistemologically* speaking, narrative fiction has value for understanding and explaining real-world crime and harm.

The Introduction of his book supplies an underlying premise for his position that narrative fiction is valuable because of its representational and aetiological dimensions. Here McGregor states there is no difference between works of fiction and non-fiction as they both *represent* (real or imagined) events in the same way. He suggests the division between the two different types of narrative owes to the *conception* that fiction and non-fiction texts are outcomes of *differing types of practices* (2021: 12). However, what is different, according to McGregor, is not the *practice* upon which the texts owe their existence but simply the *expectations* of authors and directors about how readers and audiences will experience their work and with how audiences and readers expect to experience the work (2021: 12). *Ontologically*, then, fiction and non-fiction narratives are the same.

Although I agree with the basic upshot of the book – that the fiction/non-fiction distinction has only served to devalue fiction and exclude it from being taken seriously as a source of information by which social scientists can develop understanding and explanation of the causes of crime and social harm – to my mind the overall goal of producing a "theory of the criminological value of fiction" (McGregor 2021: 13) is obstructed by a curious absence of discussion of important issues concerning the ontological and methodological underpinning of his position.²

Folk Concepts, Interested Reading, and Found Knowledge

There are important ontological and methodological claims and assumptions held by McGregor that are either unexplicated or glossed over in favour of moving straight into discussions of dramatisations and novels. However, the novels and dramatisations analysed are not what are important. McGregor uses these to illustrate his epistemological argument that there is valid, credible, and generalizable knowledge embedded in fiction and that this is valuable for criminological explanation of real-world crime and social harms.

McGregor's view on the role and utility of narrative fiction is clear, but I question the robustness of his argument. *Why* McGregor believes these forms of knowledge are embedded in narrative fiction is not sufficiently explained. It seems appropriate to offer explanation of why we should not think this is simply knowledge of the fictional story-world and of how knowledge of social reality has become embedded in narrative fiction. Perhaps this knowledge is there because the author intentionally put it there. Perhaps it is there because the cultural conditions under which the author was writing had unknowingly impressed upon them these sentiments. Or, perhaps the reader has placed this knowledge there through their act of interpreting the text and it doesn't actually exist in the narrative at all. That McGregor (2021: 44) regards "the meaning of the text as co-created by authorial intention and reader interpretation, both of which are constrained by the text itself" does not

² I do not mean by the term "methodology" a technique of data collection or some mechanical and technicist procedure such as coding. "Method" refers to techniques of data collection and interpretation whilst "methodology" is broader and more philosophical, and which includes contemplation of methods and their epistemological and ontological assumptions. All methods require a perspective framing – a set of analytic concepts that work together as a set and which allow us to be systematic and methodical in order to 'say' something about what we are observing and to be coherent in doing so.

illuminate why we should think narrative fiction contains credible and valid knowledge of real-world causes of crime and social harm, explain how these forms of knowledge have become embedded in narrative fiction, or indicate how social scientists can identify, extract, and scrutinise this knowledge. There are ontological and methodological issues that I think worthy of further consideration and clarification if McGregor is to advance a fuller, more robust “theory of the criminological value of fiction”.

Additionally, McGregor (2021: 37) posits the *representational* and *aetiological* dimensions of narrative fiction can be examined *apart from* considering its *constitutive* and *semiotic* dimensions. This is to sidestep the important real-world processes of *interpretation* and *signification*. I suggest McGregor here has conflated an analytic distinction with a substantive one as it seems implausible that there could be representation without signification or understanding and explanation without interpretation. These are important social processes which impact knowledge production. They also subtend a growing movement within qualitatively oriented social science against viewing data as representing objective reality in a direct or straightforward manner. This critique is primarily aimed at interview researchers, but it applies equally to McGregor. Apart from arguments made by post-structuralists or strong constructionists, but obviously informed by these, Alvesson and Kärreman (2011), Whitaker and Atkinson (2019), Atkinson and Silverman (1997), Silverman (2017), Blakely and Moles (2017), Bourdieu (1992), and others (see Hammersley 2013), all of whom are realist but not positivist about the existence of an objective reality, argue that all data are constructed and reflect the context, instruments, and practices of this process of construction. This does not simply concern, as McGregor (2021: 36-37) implies, the *epistemological* role that these data might play (e.g., what he terms a *semiotic* role). Rather, this concerns their *ontological state*. These data are emergent outcomes of sets of practices, of intersubjectivity, structural conditions, and the use of instruments including linguistic categories. This means information found in narrative fiction needs to be critically scrutinised as it does not mirror some psychological or social reality in any straightforward manner, and this restricts any aetiological role narrative fiction might play for criminological explanation. This does not mean we cannot draw inferences from data about some aspect of social reality or produce explanations. It means we are not given a straightforward view of this reality via these data and so, in my view, we must consider both signification and the interpretive process.

I think one way toward a fuller more robust position on the criminological value of narrative fiction is for McGregor to more fully engage with and explicate his conception of the process of representation, to specify what domains of social reality are indicated in this process, and how this process works. Equally important is to specify a *means of accessing* knowledge about social reality that is concomitant with this conception of representation and the ontological model adopted. These conceptions must be theorised and not simply stated. Since McGregor does not explain how this knowledge of reality finds its way into the narrative but does assume narrative fiction represents the reality beyond the narrative, I will refer to this knowledge as *found knowledge*. Since he does not specify or develop a sufficient mode of accessing, uncovering, extracting, scrutinising, or constructing this knowledge I will refer to his methodology as *interested reading*.

A further point is in order. How an interested reading can enable a *criminology* of narrative fiction is unclear. McGregor’s arguments and orienting concepts are not rooted in the stock of knowledge that makes up criminology. This is both a positive feature of the text but also a weakness. The book transcends criminology as it speaks to all social sciences. McGregor is a big thinker and criminology needs this sort of broad and high-level thinking. In many respects, though, McGregor has sold himself short by only addressing a very narrow audience. His arguments are important, and they deserve a broader airing. However, although the audience has been narrowed to a subfield of criminology, he doesn’t employ any of the discernable *analytic languages* (Frauley 2010) that would make his orientation to narrative fiction *criminological*. To the extent he is analysing “crime” fiction toward crafting explanations of “crime” that can lead to more robust “crime” prevention policies he has organised himself around a *folk concept*. I suggest that attention to “crime” does not make for a *criminology* of narrative fiction. “Crime” is not a criminological concept but rather what Pierre Bourdieu (1992) calls a “preconstructed” object requiring scrutiny or what C. Wright Mills (1959a)

calls a “sponge word”, an unhelpful and obfuscating term incapable of guiding critical analysis. Folk concepts such as “crime” make up what Gramsci (1957) has called a “spontaneous philosophy”, a world view that has not been worked out “consciously and critically” and which guides thinking without critical awareness. It is necessary to purge any theory of the criminological value of narrative fiction of folk concepts and replace these with well-explicated and theorised analytic concepts so we can then move from *interested reading* to a more methodical and circumspect use of analytic tools designed for our task. If we do not do this, we will end up accepting folk concepts, some of which will be furnished by the author or filmmaker.

Folk concepts do not allow us to get outside of and scrutinise the things to which they refer or might perhaps mask. Their use in analysis impedes new and deeper understandings and explanations of complex social phenomena. If we do not explicitly and consciously employ a set of analytic tools designed for critical scrutiny, we will not generate sufficiently nuanced ways of ‘seeing’ (Frauley 2016b) and we allow ourselves to accept and to ratify instruments of thinking and issues for consideration that have been constructed by others for different purposes (see Bourdieu 1992).³

An early proponent of the criminological value of narrative fiction is Frank Pearce, who coined the term “crimes of the powerful” in 1976. He was an early proponent of “radical criminology.” Although Taylor, Walton and Young’s (1973), *The New Criminology*, is championed as a bible of this movement, Pearce’s work is far more radical, theoretically coherent, and much more analytically powerful (Frauley 2018). In 1978 he examined “the relationship between the reality of [criminal] syndicate activities and their portrayal by Hollywood” (246). Importantly, he (1978: 246) adopted the position that “art is not so much a *reflection of reality*, but a *reflection upon reality*.” This complicates the view that there is *found knowledge* to be discovered in fiction through *interested reading*, particularly that we can identify criminologically valuable phenomenological or mimetic knowledge.

Reality is not self-evident, there is no such thing as a naïve, pre-conceptual apprehension of the world. We experience and know the world through socially derived categories which are themselves constantly open to revision as our conditions of existence and our knowledge are transformed through history. ... To explore issues in which they are interested, artists use as raw materials objects, situations and experiences taken from ‘reality’ and relocate them in a different context, that of the art object. ... images of society, the explanations of criminality and the implicit guides to action found in these works must be assessed adequately if they are to be treated with any seriousness (Pearce 1978: 246-247, references omitted).

A perspective framing designed to produce understanding or explanation enables systematic and coherent analyses. Interpretive frames are sets of *thinking tools* designed for critical scrutiny. This is what makes an analytical interpretation different from an ‘everyday’ interpretation. Each field has its own specialised analytic languages for use in crafting social science narratives. This is an important but overlooked aspect of methodology. When we perceive and interpret, we utilise both our (limited) human senses but also a conceptual apparatus (Sayer 1992). Thus, a crucial component of understanding, of human perception, and for producing any interpretation is the set of filters or lenses we apply (Alvesson and Kärreman 2011; Frauley 2010, 2016b; Sayer 1992). Thus, categories must be employed to understand our surroundings, our relationship to our environment, and our experience of this. We can either employ folk concepts, or we can employ those designed for critical and analytical work.

In 2010 I attempted to show how criminological theorising requires a craft practice of operating concepts toward producing fuller more robust forms of understanding and explanation. The value of what I called the “fictional reality” for criminological theorising and analysis lies in its potential to facilitate concept construction and reformulation. Following a pathbreaking text by Ruggiero (2003), one that McGregor discusses, works of fiction offer us the opportunity to work closely with

³ “Language,” argues Bourdieu (1992: 241), “is in effect an immense repository of naturalized preconstructions, and thus of preconstructions that are ignored as such and which can function as unconscious instruments of construction.”

criminological concepts toward better understanding their limitations and toward refining them or inventing new ones. In doing so we can identify and extract an author's insights or be inspired by the implications of their narrative to improve understanding of both criminology and of social life. The upshot here is that social scientists must work to locate or produce insights and in doing so apply social science filters or lenses to help them 'see' what is in the text, to make connexions that others perhaps could not, or to ponder what might be plausible or possible. One thing we want to *avoid* is adopting the idiom of the author, filmmaker, culture industry, official control apparatus, and so forth as these are made up of misleading and obfuscating folk concepts.

This paper opens with the words of C. Wright Mills, who Joseph Scimecca (1975) has argued is the "father of radical sociology". Mills had high regard for those he termed "cultural workmen" – intellectuals who worked as artists, novelists, filmmakers, journalists, scientists, among others. Mills believed truly critical and creative thinkers possessed a "quality of mind" that enabled them to illuminate or articulate the existence of oppressive aspects of social life, features not well understood by the majority. But he also argued that dominant and widely employed perceptual filters (i.e., "sponge words"), which were absorbed from what he called the "culture industry" – made up of Hollywood, corporate controlled mass news media, public education, and their practices of "symbol manipulation" – were mystifying (Mills 1951, 1956, 1959b).⁴ Since the products of the culture industry reflect the commercial values of that industry, and it is the culture industry that widely circulates dominant folk concepts for mass consumption, commercial values become predominant for understanding value in everyday life in pecuniary terms.

Although the important quality of mind Mills thought social scientists needed was displayed by intellectual craftspersons such as novelists and filmmakers, their aesthetic works, he argued, were *not* sufficient or adequate replacements for sociological analyses because those works are not the outcome of a systematic, methodical, or analytical practice. The creative and critical quality of mind is present but the clearly articulated methodological, theoretical, and epistemological platform is absent. And although these creative works might inspire one to move beyond one-dimensional thinking about the (constraining) impact of institutions and political and economic organisation on human well-being, such works are not able to clearly explain these problems or articulate why or how to ameliorate them. They cannot clarify for us the relations between our individual experience and the impersonal institutional forces at work that unknowingly shape daily life. As Sagarin (1980: 77-78, 81) points out, "The distinction between novelist and social scientist is a difference of metier and method. ... [They] use different means to arrive at their results, different methods to explain them" (Sagarin 1980: 77-78, 81). This is a difference of craft and approach. Social scientists use different tools in their work and utilise a different manner of analysis to meet different objectives. This is why Mills, although he had a deep respect for novelists, playwrights, filmmakers, and others, argued aesthetic works could not offer the "intellectual clarity" needed when attempting to generate the type of understanding or explanation that could then inform transformative social practice. In many respects, McGregor takes narrative fiction as offering criminological understanding and explanation instead of as data to be scrutinised using criminology's analytic tools.

As the process of representation requires symbolic systems such as language and ideology, which play a significant role in organising and reproducing violence and domination in social life, one cannot help but to engage with the social processes of signification and interpretation. Although McGregor is want to sidestep these, stating he is not interested in the *constitutive* or *semiotic* role of narrative fiction (see above), he *does* grapple with signification, but in a less than effective way. For instance, he asserts a relation between (1) the viewer/ reader; (2) the director/author; (3) the carrier of meaning/ information/ knowledge (i.e., the narrative) and; (4) some object beyond the narrative to which the representation refers (i.e., the causes of crime and harm). This is a set of structural relations that indicates a model of signification. This is not explicated or argued for. McGregor is engaging with signification, but because he has sidelined this as an interest, he is silent on this

⁴ His view in this regard is similar to Pierre Bourdieu's idea of "symbolic violence" as well as that of the Frankfurt School.

process and its implications for both representation and interpretation (and, indeed, for criminological knowledge production).

Assessing and Evaluating Found Knowledge

The relationship between *accounts* of the social world and the social world itself is not straight forward. This brings us back to the earlier point regarding McGregor's claims that knowledge in narrative fiction can and does reflect the social world beyond the narrative. We require some ontological model for conceptualising this relationship and some sort of methodology for identifying in narrative fiction potentially useful insights and truths as well as for evaluating and scrutinising these. In Pearce's (1978: 259) discussion of 1954's, *On the Waterfront*, a classic film about organised crime, labour relations and unions starring Marlon Brando, he asks: "To what extent does this film tell us about the conditions of the docks, the state of unions and the conditions of working class life?" The answer is we cannot know unless we scrutinise the narrative and not accept at face value what is presented to us. Due to the "ideological confusion of many filmmakers" (Pearce 1978: 266), we must avoid the temptation to adopt their folk concepts. "A good starting point," Pearce (1978: 260) states, "is to analyse the film in relationship to the real history of dockland struggle." This makes the narrative an *object* of scrutiny with the possibility that it could then become a resource for understanding and explaining some aspect of the social world. Without a rigorous theoretical practice and systematic analysis using specialised analytic categories, it does not seem likely that fictive narratives could yield knowledge of social reality. To know if knowledge of reality exists in a film or novel, we need a model outlining how the knowledge of reality got into the narrative, how the narrative relates to the world beyond it, and a methodology – some systematic and analytical means of scrutinising the narrative and assessing the information we find there.

What we detect in narrative fiction might very well be the author's or filmmaker's ideological position, and this position would likely reflect hegemonic sensibilities found in the broader culture. This is to detect knowledge of reality, but this is *not* what McGregor has in mind. McGregor is suggesting that we can find valid, credible, and generalizable knowledge about the real-world causes of what is being depicted on the screen or in the text. From my point of view there is leap here that I think requires further elaboration because it seems as though there is an over-reliance on the novelist or filmmaker to tell the truth about their subject matter so that it corresponds to the social world beyond the narrative. If we accept there is phenomenological or mimetic knowledge in a film or novel, then we assume the filmmaker or novelist's depiction of experiences and social organisation corresponds to social reality. But we are given no reason why we should believe this. Also, and importantly, we must specify how we can go about identifying and extracting this knowledge. Additionally, there is a significant but unspecified difference between phenomenological and mimetic knowledge, on the one hand, and counter-factual knowledge on the other. Their differences impact not only how we conceptualise their value but also how we will go about obtaining this knowledge.

For accounts to offer phenomenological and/or mimetic knowledge the accounts must be true. "Mimetic knowledge", for example, is defined by McGregor (2021: 97) as "re-creation" and "mimicry". He (2021: 103) argues Michael Mann's film, *Miami Vice*, "provides knowledge of organised crime" via the filmic "reproduction" of this everyday reality. That is, the film provides "mimetic knowledge of the power dynamics of organised criminal enterprises, that is detailed, and accurate knowledge of the absolute power wielded by the senior management" (2021: 107). If this *is* true, if this film *does* contain detailed and accurate knowledge of "the power dynamics of organised criminal enterprises" this would mean the representation is a *reflection* of the reality beyond the screen. To know this, however, we must *compare* the fictive account to the scholarship on the issues. This means to identify and assess this information as credible we require a comparative method. However, first, any assertion of correspondence between the film's representation of organised crime and real-world organised crime is problematic because it is this correspondence theory of truth that underpins the fiction/non-fiction dichotomy that McGregor rejects (Frauley 2016a). Second, to know whether there is or isn't mimetic (or phenomenological) knowledge contained in a narrative we need to *already have* knowledge of the issue. Both caveats weaken the

position that mimetic and phenomenological knowledge, as types of found knowledge, can be revealed through interested reading and are valuable for criminological explanation.

McGregor would benefit from a stronger argument for the value of narrative fiction as a mimetic and phenomenological data source. The fuller account cannot escape the necessity to engage with both signification and interpretation, ontological and methodological issues germane to any theory of the value of narrative fiction for criminological explanation. In so far as a novel or dramatisation offers a *reflection of reality* – for example of some elements of real-life organised crime – this does not mean it offers credible mimetic or phenomenological knowledge for use in criminological explanation. Moreover, given the process of interpretation, it is unlikely that criminologists simply find knowledge and more likely they produce this through engaging with and often struggling over the signification process, even if they do not acknowledge this. Let me hastily add that this struggle to interpret signification is not the same thing as an intersubjective practice of meaning-making.

Unlike with phenomenological and mimetic knowledge, for an account to operate as a *counter-factual device*, the account need *not* be true. It need only offer a *reflection on reality* for it to be useful and in this we can escape the correspondence theory of truth. Allegories, for example, offer *reflection on reality* and are often useful for drawing our attention to some pressing real-world issue or in making us rethink a problem pertaining to our immediate circumstances, *if we can become attuned to second-order signification*.⁵ *American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis is an excellent example.

On one level this text is about a Harvard-educated, status-obsessed, vacuous yuppie who works on Wall Street by day and is a serial killer by night. The narrative, set in 1980s New York City, contains an avalanche of detail about its protagonist, Patrick Bateman, and his cultural context: beauty products, fashion, hot restaurants and bars, top 40 music, and so forth. What readers might not realise is that the information given about these products, trends, and fads is true, to make the narrative realistic. We are offered an understanding how a privileged, narcissistic, single, straight, homophobic, misogynistic, and wealthy white guy *might* experience the sights, sounds, and smells of homelessness and poverty (and other social problems) in his city as well as the ultra-competitive environment of Wall Street where money is the ultimate measure of success and value. Bateman is a composite of real people:

I knew a lot of friends at Bennington whose brothers were making a fortune on Wall Street and just living the whole '80s life and so I hung out with these guys for about two weeks because I wanted to find out what exactly people were doing (Easton Ellis in Clarke 1999: 74).

Also true, are many of the details about the murder scenes and mode of killing.

So I read a lot of books about serial killers and picked up details from that and then I had a friend who introduced me to someone who could get me criminology textbooks from the FBI that really went into graphic detail about certain motifs in the actual murders committed by serial killers and detailed accounts of what serial killers did to bodies, what they did to people they murdered, especially sex killings (Easton Ellis in Clarke 1979: 75).

It goes without saying that the information Easton Ellis collected was worked into the narrative and not simply reported, so the representation he creates is not a *reflection of the reality* beyond the narrative in any straightforward manner. And with its unreliable narrator, we might also doubt how true some of these details are for the *fictional* story world (Woodward 2011). The point here is that there is no reason to believe we could use these factual details to inform criminological understanding or explanation of the causes of serial murder or of the views or experiences of social problems. There is no mimetic or phenomenological knowledge to be found, despite the presence of factual information.

⁵ Roland Barthes' (1957) text, *Mythologies*, offers many examples and an explication of the differences between first-order and second-order signification.

The information on organised crime that McGregor argues is presented in the film, *Miami Vice*, is true for that fictional world but we have no reason to believe it is true of our world (see Woodward 2011). Herein lies one reason to articulate an ontological model of the domains of reality at work within both narrative fiction and the world beyond it and to articulate how each are connected so that we can plausibly explain why we will find knowledge of reality in narrative fiction without defaulting to a mirror-view understanding of this. That is, without defaulting to the idea that narrative fiction offers a *reflection of reality*.

As an empirical referent, the narrative can help us ponder conceptual problems and issues, it can serve as a useful tool to engage in critique and generate insights, but its value as a data source for investigating empirical problems is, I suggest, very limited. If reading *Dracula* in 1897 we no doubt would discover what McGregor has called mimetic knowledge of ‘the criminal’ as Stoker’s description of Dracula mirrors Lombroso’s account of the criminal. Today, however, we would not draw that conclusion because our stock of criminological knowledge precludes us from viewing Lombroso’s ideas as credible. Thus, either what is or is not to be construed as mimetic knowledge (or, for that matter, phenomenological knowledge) rests on an unhelpful relativism or there is simply no mimetic or phenomenological knowledge to be found in narrative fiction.

The value of narrative fiction, particularly allegories, lies in how it *reflects on* reality, not in how it might be a *reflection of* reality. Here the value is with how a narrative operates as a counter-factual device. Finkelstein (2010: 315) argues that Easton Ellis “provided a compelling ‘symptomatology’ of the times”, one that requires us to actively interpret the polysemy of the text if we are to extract any insights or information from the book about our own culture and society. As an allegory its author has an argument to make. As a reader we need to engage with the text to interpret and assess what this argument *could plausibly* be by examining the text in detail through an iterative and close reading. Importantly, we must use specialised conceptual tools for this and, when possible, move between sets of tools to actively generate various interesting and plausible interpretations of the text regarding the issues germane to our enquiry (see Frauley 2021b).

Many have commented that *American Psycho* is about a serial killer. To read the book in this way, or to look for mimetic or phenomenological knowledge related to this, however, would be to dwell at the level of *first-order* signification. On a different level, however, we might find the book useful for pondering real-world problems. Scholarship on the novel that considers *second-order* signification argues it is about the violence of serial consumption in a vacuous mass society. Bateman is argued to be the embodiment of “consumer drives and desires” (Jarvis 2007: 331). These drives and desires are violent. Consumption is a form of violence. Consumer society is a way of organising systemic and symbolic violence. These two discourses – on consumption and on violence – are explicitly and overtly brought together in the category of the “consumer”. Bateman “consumes in all possible ways: buying, eating and destroying” (Baelo-Allué 2002: 71). The serial killing is about serial consumption, serial violence, commodity fetishism, structural inequalities, shallowness, hyper-individualism, status orientation, and the obfuscating mythologies of our own capitalist societies, particularly the US during the 1980s (Baelo-Allué 2002; Heise 2011; Jarvis 2007; Serpell 2010).

As Baelo-Allué (2002: 72) states, “blank fiction” writers such as Easton Ellis “point out the specifics of time and place, and are in direct relation to the social, cultural, and political dynamics of late 20th century US life.” These writers overload the reader with detail about consumer and popular culture and in so doing mirror the excesses of the yuppie culture of mass society that was predominant in the 1980s, particularly in large urban centres such as NYC. “These details,” argues Finkelstein (2004: 311) “are narrative devices that draw the reader into the verisimilitude of the novel.” In this way the detail does not play a mimetic or phenomenological role but is a vehicle for the author to construct a second-order meta-discourse and to draw the reader into the folk concepts that frame the story world but also make up the allegory about the world beyond the page. “The pervasiveness of these realistic details of ordinary objects locates us in a social situation we easily recognize as real” (Finkelstein 2004: 311), yet if we are to interpret texts analytically we must not be drawn into the narrative in the way the author intends. We cannot simply take at face value the

information presented to us and must construct our own “criminological narrative” about what we think the author is doing and the significance of this (Frauley 2010).⁶ I think this complicates the view that narrative fiction is a source of mimetic and phenomenological knowledge pertaining to real world problems and issues.

I am not suggesting there is no knowledge of reality in narrative fiction. I have elsewhere argued for *why we can* find knowledge of reality in fiction and how fiction can play a valuable role in the process of criminological knowledge production (Frauley 2010a; 2016a). Narrative fiction is an emergent outcome of “historically and politically situated social practices and therefore will bear traces of gendered, classed, and racialized structures of power and domination at work in the positioning of their author within his or her social hierarchy” (Frauley 2016a: 435). As such, we can find traces of social reality embedded in the story world, but this is in no way a straightforward *reflection of reality*. Rafter (2006), for instance, has argued that it is common for criminological knowledge to find its way into films, but it is re-presented in distorted form, not unlike Pearce’s (1978) suggestion that what we find in films are filmmakers’ ideological views.

Conclusion

What McGregor has done is important and interesting. He brings a philosophical sensibility to his work and illustrates the value of thinking theoretically and creatively for criminological enquiry. He offers an epistemological argument about the value of narrative fiction for criminological explanation and policy formation. There are, however, some important silences surrounding ontological and methodological issues that impede realisation of his theory of the criminological value of narrative fiction. These ontological and methodological assumptions must be explicated and argued for. This leads to what I believe is a well-founded scepticism about narrative fiction offering the sort of mimetic or phenomenological knowledge McGregor argues for. In my view, narrative fiction is valuable for criminological understanding and explanation because of its counter-factual role, but not as a source of factual, credible, and generalizable knowledge about substantive problems and issues. However, I remain open-minded, and it is my hope that this appreciative critique will push McGregor to reconceptualise some elements of this work and to elaborate more fully on others.

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⁶ Another way of interpreting the book is to view it through the lenses offered by scholars of corporate and power crime. We could then see that the book questions mass consumption societies and their pecuniary value systems. Indeed, Bateman can be viewed as a for-profit limited liability corporation and not a man at all: corporations are legally individuals with rights and are amoral like Bateman; corporations cannot be imprisoned for wrong-doing and are less likely to be punished than individuals (Bateman is able to evade capture and even his confession is not taken seriously); Bateman engages in virtue-signalling but acts contrary to his rhetoric (e.g., corporate social responsibility and/or green-washing); his wealth and power insulate him from serious suspicion; all of his relationships consist of impersonal commercial relations and transactions; he treats people as commodities to be used and discarded; he is a depersonalised actor; and all of the harms he produces are tantamount to the externalities of the corporation. To make this argument, however, it is necessary to examine second-order signification in the text by utilising the categories of the power crime scholarship. This is an iterative and comparative process. One could even compare the account of the novel or Mary Harron’s excellent film adaption to the documentary, *The Corporation* (Achbar and Abbott 2003), which argues that corporations meet the criteria set out by psychologist Robert Hare’s Psychopathy Checklist.

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