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Fiction, Knowledge and Cinematic Realism
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In his latest monograph Rafe McGregor argues in a lucid and concise way that narrative fiction has an aetiological function for criminology insofar it provides different types of knowledge about causes of crime and harm which can be used as data for reducing both crime and harm. Whereas in the first three chapters McGregor positions himself in relation to existing relevant criminological literature, the main argument is presented in chapters four to six, each of which explores one type of knowledge – phenomenological, counterfactual, and mimetic. I must admit that I am not an academically trained criminologist (though I appear to be a participant in popular criminology as defined in the book) so I unfortunately cannot evaluate a range of claims about how this monograph relates to existing criminological literature such as that attributing aetiological function to narrative fiction is very unpopular in the field and whether, as McGregor proposes, previous work in the discipline has not provided defence of narrative fiction’s aetiological function despite claims to contrary. Here, as a trained film scholar, I can only say that given the prevalent (and rarely explored) assumption that narrative fiction influences real-life beliefs, aetiological function is accepted as a possibility within film studies although the bulk of the discipline’s attention has been devoted to how films cause social harm through misrepresentation rather than how they can be used for alleviating it (cf. Slugan 2023). But as McGregor himself points out the monograph’s first part has no bearing on the book’s main argument – that narrative fiction provides knowledge about causes of crime and harm – so with one exception I will focus most of my remarks on the second part of the book.

I will start with the exception because I think it is important as it sets up the context for his argument – McGregor’s discussion of the distinction between fiction and nonfiction in chapter 1. For McGregor “the boundary is not only porous, but to at least some extent arbitrary” (2021: 9). In other words, McGregor outlines three approaches to identifying the fiction/nonfiction distinction and dismisses them in turn. The first, according to which nonfiction is true and fiction is false, cannot hold because nonfictions can lie (think of propaganda documentaries) while fictions can convey truths (even fantastical films like Ronald Emmerich’s 1996 *Independence Day* are accurate when it comes to facts like White House is located in Washington). The second, which claims that nonfictions invite beliefs while fictions mandate imaginings, is also false because there are numerous

nonfictions like Roméo Dallaire's 2003 memoir *Shake Hands with the Devil: The Failure of Humanity in Rwanda* which invite imaginings and fictions like Oliver Stone's 1991 *JFK* that invite beliefs. The last, which purports that the content of nonfiction is existent while that of fiction is invented, cannot hold either because again propaganda documentaries can invent things while even films like *Independence Day* will represent a range of existent material including the aforementioned White House and the US capital. But having argued for porousness and arbitrariness of the boundary McGregor mounts his main argument about aetiological function with recourse to case studies of what he regularly refers to as fictional narratives. Moreover, for all three types of knowledge conveyed by these fictional narratives he repeatedly claims that conveying this type of knowledge "would not be feasible for nonfictional representations" (2021: 58, 77, 98). If I were writing with tongue in cheek, I would wonder whether McGregor has unwittingly found a boundary between fiction and nonfiction.

The real point here, however, is that if the distinction between fiction and nonfiction is porous and at least partially arbitrary, then why continue discussing the two as though this argument has not been made? Furthermore, why call the project "criminology of narrative fiction" rather than "criminology of narrative" or simply "narrative criminology"? And if that is the case, what happens to the emphases on distinguishing his own work from Louis Presser's narrative criminology which has, according to McGregor, "been almost exclusively on nonfictional narratives" (2021: 139)? The main reason to continue with the fiction/nonfiction distinction seems to be precisely because "fictional representations [...] have been marginalised within criminology" (2021: 11-12). This then leads McGregor to propose a border after all based on Peter Lamarque's and Stein Haugom Olsen's (1994) work:

fiction [is] a rule- bound practice that informs a particular type of communication between an author or director on the one hand and a reader or audience on the other. [...] The authorial or directorial invitation to experience a work as fiction is matched by a set of expectations in readers and audiences. The expectations associated with the practice of fiction differ from those associated with the practice of nonfiction. Typically, there is a desire for a closer correspondence between representation and reality in the practice of nonfiction and a greater tolerance for inventiveness, imaginativeness, and fabrication in the practice of fiction. In addition to avoiding the pitfalls of the true/false, belief/imagination, existent/invented dichotomies, the conception of fiction and nonfiction as different practices explains why the former practice has been – and continues to be – marginalised in criminology. (2021: 12).

This is somewhat strange because despite Lamarque and Olsen's emphasis on fiction as a social practice, what the fictive stance for them amounts to is "making-believe that actual particulars, fact, places and so forth, are being described" (Lamarque and Olsen 1994: 77). Given that Lamarque and Olsen are writing in the tradition of Gregory Currie's (1990) and Kendall Walton's (1990) theories of fiction it is clear that make believe here is synonymous with imagination. Put differently, their definition is still firmly within the second type of definition – belief v. imagination.

The social practice aspect of Lamarque and Olsen's account does not change much because what they mean under social practice is essentially a form of Gricean model of communication i.e., "a particular type of communication" where the author intends the reader to take a certain stance precisely because the reader recognizes that the author intends her to do so. In other words, social practice here boils down to authorial intentions about the fictional stance and reader expectations about these intentions, but the stance itself remains a matter of imagination.

My own view (Slugan 2019a, 2019b, 2021, 2023) is that imagination is the defining aspect of fiction but in a different way than Lamarque and Olsen (or Currie and Walton, for that matter)

would have it. We all agree that fictions are what mandate or authorize imaginings. But while for Lamarque and Olsen (and Currie) this mandate is established by authorial intentions – something is fiction if the author intends it to be fiction – in my account it is the negotiation between the production, promotion, distribution, exhibition, and reception factors that secure the mandate. Under my model, for instance, cultural texts like Greek myths are nowadays fictions despite originally being communicated as matters of fact i.e., nonfiction during the heyday of Greek civilization more than two millennia ago. In other words, this is an institutionalist model of fiction where a text can change its fictional status over time because it is not defined by its intentions once and for all.

Moreover, McGregor's initial objection that belief v. imagination cannot be at the core of fiction does not hold because the real claim here is not that fiction cannot convey beliefs or that nonfiction cannot invite imaginings. Rather, the claim is simply that fiction is a text which mandates imagining *all* its content (and whether or not it also invites beliefs is irrelevant). Stone's *JFK* invites audiences to believe a specific conspiracy behind the assassination of the titular US president, but it crucially also authorizes the audiences to imagine the whole storyline presented. Under the institutional theory of fiction, importantly, this mandate does not come from authorial intention (alone), but from the fact that the film was and continues to be promoted, distributed, exhibited, catalogued, and received as a fiction film. Conversely, Delleaire's *Shake the Hands with the Devil* undoubtedly invites imagining "the sounds, smells, depredations, [and] the scenes of inhuman acts" (2003: xviii) on many occasions, but the book's overall framework is to believe that "[t]his account is my [Dellaire's] recollection of the events as I saw them" (2003: xxi). And again, this belief is not established (solely) by the content of the memoir or by Dellaire's intention, but by network of promotion, distribution, cataloguing, and reception of the book as a memoir which establishes his work as nonfiction.

But does any of this really matter for a book which is not a theory of fiction but a criminological work? Probably not too much because we can simply bracket off all the theory of fiction in chapter 1 and say there are generally accepted categories of fiction and nonfiction. So, what McGregor chooses to focus on are what his fellow criminologists would see as standard fictional texts and what they have been dealing with hitherto are standard nonfictional texts. But if that is the case, there was no need to have the whole discussion about fiction especially because it is not fiction as practice in Lamarque and Olsen's sense that explains its marginalization in criminology but rather the traditional views about fiction, especially truth v. lie and invention v. existence, that do so. Moreover, in the way that fiction and nonfiction are discussed in his later case studies, there is a nagging feeling that McGregor himself has some traditional views about the pair. And although these things do not necessarily undermine claims about aetiological function of fiction, they are opposed to claims that in these particular cases fiction performs the aetiological function better than nonfiction (2021: 58, 77, 98).

McGregor essentially holds that there are some stylistic techniques which belong exclusively to fiction and other to nonfiction. For instance, when discussing phenomenological criminology on the example of Martin Amis' 2014 novel *The Zone of Interest*, McGregor claims that the "narration allows the reader to gain direct access to the thoughts of the three perpetrators of genocide, an access that would not be possible in nonfiction" (2021: 64). In his chapter on counterfactual criminology, he claims that providing knowledge of counterfactual situations "would not be feasible for nonfictional representations" (2021: 77). Lastly, in his analysis of mimetic criminology on the example of Michael Mann's 2006 film *Miami Vice*, McGregor asserts that "Mann has the freedom to [manipulate the sequence of events in his film] precisely because the events being represented are fictional: he is not restricted by an actual sequence of events that must be reproduced on screen" (2021: 106). McGregor continues: "[e]ven with the contemporary technology available in terms of

miniature and satellite cameras, it would be impossible to reproduce a meeting between cartel leadership and new employees at the level of detail provided in Mann's fiction" (2021: 107).

According to McGregor, then, literary nonfiction about genocide is incapable of first-person narration while documentaries must respect actual timeline and are unable to produce audio-visually rich documentation on par with Hollywood. But this is clearly incorrect. Diaries by Nazi perpetrators are not uncommon – just consider the 29-volume edition of Joseph Goebbels' diaries spanning the period between 1923 and 1945 (*Die Tagebücher von Joseph Goebbels*, Elke Fröhlich 1996-2006) or Alfred Rosenberg's diary.¹ *Thin Blue Line* (Errol Morris, 1988) famously re-enacts various accounts of a murder by different witnesses, effectively juxtaposing counterfactual descriptions of one and the same event. The documentary was so effective that it contributed to the release of Randall Adams who has spent 12 years in prison for a murder he did not commit. There are examples of documentaries which do not respect linear chronology either. A whole string of what Bill Nichols (2017) refers to as poetic documentaries like *Koyaanisqatsi* (Godfrey Reggio, 1982) and *Sans Soleil* (Chris Marker, 1983) are regularly disinterested in presenting a timeline conveying sequences of impressions instead. More recently, interactive documentaries like *Life Underground* (Hervé Cohen, 2019) allow the spectator to organize their own trip around world metros either by choosing specific cities or themes (e.g., love, migration, aging). There is also no reason why a traditional story-line documentary could not be presented in, say, a flashback if the director so chose. Lastly, pace McGregor, it is also perfectly possible to have an as audio-visually rich depiction of a new cartel hiring as in Mann's film – the only thing needed is the budget. McGregor's invocation of miniature and satellite cameras implies that the only true documentary depiction would be the recording of an actual event where the cartel leadership takes on a new employee. But this misunderstands the nature of documentary film which only claims that what is shown *represents* an actual event and not that what is shown is a *recording* of an actual event.

McGregor does not argue that whether something is narrative fiction or not boils down to narrative's textual features, but he clearly does state that some textual features are exclusively traits of narrative fiction and other textual properties sole characteristics of narrative nonfiction implying that the jump from latter to the former assertion is possible. Both claims, however, have been demonstrated to be false for some time in film studies and philosophy, respectively. Concerning the latter claim, already Michael Renov evinced that "documentary has availed itself of nearly every constructive device known to fiction (of course, the reverse is equally true)" (1993: 7) and that there is no reason why it could not help itself to any that is left. In the former case, Currie pointed out that one and the same linguistic text can be both fiction and nonfiction: "There simply is no linguistic feature necessarily shared by all fictional works and necessarily absent from all nonfictional works" (1990: 3). If we replace "linguistic feature" with "textual feature", the same holds for narrative fiction and narrative nonfiction more broadly.

The above has been a lengthy discussion of McGregor's understanding of fiction and nonfiction as context for his claims about the aetiological function of fiction but I have yet to address the main thrust of his argument. The closest I have gotten is to address how effective fiction is in its aetiological function as opposed to nonfiction. Until this point, I have only argued that when it comes to the potential for aetiological function based on the availability of stylistic devices and techniques nonfiction is as effective as fiction because it has recourse to all textual traits that fiction does. This does not mean that I have said much about how effective fiction is or if it does fulfil the aetiological function in the first place.

¹ Available online at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, ushmm.org.

In principle I agree with McGregor that fiction can be the source of different types of knowledge – phenomenological, counterfactual, and mimetic – about the causes of social harm and their reduction in turn. For me this derives from my understanding of fiction as a potential vehicle for instilling beliefs independent of its essential mandate to invite imaginings. But in practice I am less convinced that McGregor has really demonstrated what he set out to do. The reason is twofold: the case studies are not as detailed as they could be and, more importantly, the mechanism through which the invited beliefs constitute knowledge is not elaborated.

First, a word on McGregor's recourse to case studies to make his point. McGregor construes case study as "a research design in which a single case is studied intensively for the purpose of understanding a population [...] [and] more loosely, to describe the illustration of practice or theory by means of an example" (2021: 48). There are altogether seven case studies in McGregor's monograph, two for each of the three types of knowledge and one more for discussing the pedagogical function of fiction. Given the length of the chapters – exquisitely uniform 20 pages for all chapters but the introduction and the conclusion – this comes to about 5 pages (or 2,000 words) per case study. If the key to this research design is that "a single case is studied intensively" then my impression is that McGregor's case studies are too short. Perhaps I am suffering from a professional deformation stemming from a diet of reading academic literary and film criticism where exemplary case studies like Gerrard Genette's (1983) building of narrative theory on the example Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* run in hundreds of pages, but in reading McGregor's illustrations I kept feeling there was much more to be said.

Just to take two examples. If, as McGregor argues, one of the key techniques for conveying phenomenological knowledge in *The Zone of Interest* of how it is to be a perpetrator of genocide is first-person narration, then I would have liked to read a lengthy analysis of various internal motivations and thought processes of these three perpetrators rather than what comes across as a schematic account of their psychology. Similarly, if *Miami Vice* excels in conveying mimetic knowledge about the power and wealth of cartel leadership by showing "a great amount of perceptual information in a very short amount of time" (2021: 106), then I would have expected to hear more about the sheer resources at their disposal – types of weapons, list of personnel, catalogue of riches, items of interior design, perhaps even discussion of taste to be gleaned from these collections, etc. – rather than a paragraph-long narrative description of the meeting between the film antagonists and protagonists.

Second, and more to the point, McGregor does not explicitly address what I think is key for any discussion of how knowledge is potentially conveyed in fiction – viz., how is the audience *justified* in *believing* that what is fictionally represented is *true*? In other words, the traditional view is that at least the necessary condition (if not sufficient) of knowledge is justified true belief (cf. Ichikawa and Steup 2018). If that is indeed the case, then for something to have aetiological function it has to be demonstrated that it at least affords justified true beliefs. Perhaps McGregor has some other view of knowledge such as "lightweight knowledge" where for something to count as knowledge true belief suffices (Hawtorne 2002). But even then, McGregor does not spend any time on demonstrating that, say, the rich audio-visual depiction of cartel leadership is factual. Put differently, McGregor simply assumes that what is represented is true (in a relevant sense which I will clarify on the three types of knowledge below). So, in the absence of the discussion of knowledge on McGregor's part, I will argue that at the very least the truth of what is represented needs to be

established and, to pass the scrutiny of traditional epistemology, the belief in this truth together with the justification of this belief needs to be secured as well.²

Interestingly, at one point when discussing phenomenological knowledge – knowing-what-it-is-like – on the example of *The Zone of Interest* McGregor does recognize the importance of certainty about truthfulness of representation. For him, nonfictional accounts such as perpetrator interviews are problematic for gaining phenomenological knowledge about causes of genocide because “the reader could never be sure that the perpetrator was being completely honest” (2021: 64). The appeal to “sure”-ness seems to cover the truth, belief, and justification conditions alike i.e., it is not enough for the perpetrator to be honest the reader also needs to believe and be sure or justified in believing that the perpetrator is honest. But even if this were an implicit articulation of knowledge as justified true belief, it is only raised in relation to nonfiction.

In the sentence preceding the one quoted in the above paragraph, McGregor is contrasting this uncertainty about interviewee honesty with the access to internal thoughts of fictional perpetrators where truth, belief, and justification are never in doubt. Now, of course, the reasoning of fictional perpetrators is not literally true in the sense that it is *precisely* like the reasoning or motivation some actual perpetrator like Goebbels or Rosenberg had. Rather, in the case of phenomenological knowledge, what we gain is “knowledge of the actual lived experience of the *types* of people to which the works refer” (McGregor 2021: 60, my italics). And the justification in the honesty of fictional representation of the perpetrator’s lived experience comes from the fact that the narrators-perpetrators are reliable. So, McGregor appears to be happy to accept these fictional representations as phenomenological knowledge about causes of genocide because the narration is in first person (direct access to causes of harm) and the narrators are reliable (truth, justification, and belief condition).

But first-person narration and narratorial reliability only work as far as what is *fictionally* phenomenologically true or phenomenologically true *in the world of fiction*. Put differently, this only secures *fictional* phenomenological knowledge i.e., the reader only has *fictionally* justified true beliefs about the causes of genocide. For the reader to have a justified true belief that the characters’ lived experience is of the *type* of people like Goebbels and Rosenberg (at least in the case of one of the three narrators – the camp commander) first person narration and narratorial reliability do not suffice. Nor do the other two technique that McGregor mentions play a role – juxtaposition of first-person narratives (camp commander, SS commander and capo) and vagueness (the of avoidance of exposition about facts that would be familiar to narrators). Juxtaposition is a matter of the richness of narrative content while vagueness makes the first-person narration more convincing as a *first-person* narrative.

What is required for fictional representation to amount to phenomenological knowledge about causes of genocide in the real world, is that the lived experienced represented is sufficiently like that of the *type* of people like Goebbels and Rosenberg, that the reader believes this to be the case, and that the reader is justified in believing that to be the case. This is not impossible, but it cannot rest on the discussion of narrative techniques alone. In chapter 2 McGregor claims that he subscribes to the view that society has an objective existence the truth of which can be

² Given that McGregor is effectively arguing that because fictions have aetiological function they *should* be treated as having aetiological function, it could be said that McGregor needs to establish only the truth of fictional representations and the justification of believing in this truth. (In the lightweight version of knowledge this only includes the truth of fictional representations). He does not say anything about whether the audiences believe in fictional representations, because this is precisely what he is trying to make his fellow criminologists do – believe the truth represented in fictions. Even if that is the case, the truth condition remains unexplored by McGregor, and this is what I devote the bulk of my attention in the remainder of the review.

approximated and that narratives represent reality rather than constitute it. Within that framework one would expect first that the truth of the representation needs to be ascertained somehow. Perhaps by comparing the fictional representations of lived experience to extant diaries of actual perpetrators. The second step could be identifying psychological studies that evince that fictional representations generate beliefs about the real world. And lastly, the beliefs could perhaps be justified by appealing to the institution of genre of historical novel to which *The Zone of Interest* belongs, arguing that readers have reasonable expectations that historical novels be as factually accurate as possible when it comes to the historical context. Whatever the potential solution is, however, McGregor never discusses the criteria for determining the truth of the representation, belief in the truth of the representation, or the justification in believing in the truth of the representation.

McGregor's second case study of phenomenological knowledge – Tom King and Mitch Gerard's 2018 graphic novel *The Sheriff of Babylon* – falls short on these counts as well. McGregor identifies three devices as providing knowledge of the lived experience of contributing to mass harm in Coalition Forces occupation of Iraq. Focusing on the American protagonist Christopher, these are different modes of representation reserved for each of the three protagonists, the immersive visual representation of hyper-violence, and the subversion of murder mystery plot. Christopher is presented as a man of action who, for instance, deliberately engages a girl wearing a suicide vest and thereby forces the tactical team to shoot her instead of negotiating with her. Graphically, Green and Red Zones are represented in titular colors, while onomatopoeias like “bang” and “pow” are peppered throughout the text. Last, the perpetrator of the murder plot driving the graphic novel is never revealed but a man is executed simply for the sake of closure. I do not doubt the dramatic or aesthetic effectiveness of these devices. But they are never related to truth, belief, and justification conditions of lived experience of some relevant type of real-life person – say an American contractor in Iraq.

Would an American contractor in Iraq typically engage potential suicide bombers? While the Green and Red Zones are undoubtedly experienced differently due to their diametrically opposed security levels, does color coding approach the difference of actual lived experience? Can incessant onomatopoeias really convey the lived experience of hyperviolence? And does a typical American contractor actually feel like Iraq is a meaningless place without any closure? McGregor ascertains the truth of none of these things and offers no method for doing so. (Presumably, comparison with published memoirs could be a first step). Whether readers believe in these things after finishing the graphic novel and whether they are justified in doing so is not tackled either.

When it comes to mimetic knowledge McGregor understands it as “detailed and accurate knowledge of everyday reality” (2021: 97). For him, “Michael Mann's *Miami Vice* (2006) provides knowledge of the power dynamics of organised criminal enterprises by means of the combination of cinematography, acting, and structure. Fernando Meirelles and Kátia Lund's *City of God* (2002) provides knowledge of the complexity of the relationship between organised criminal enterprises and the communities within which they operate by means of an intricate narrative architecture composed of four levels of self- reflexive storytelling” (ibid., 97-98).

I have already mentioned the dearth of detail when it comes to McGregor's analysis of the material signs of cartel power in *Miami Vice*. More importantly for demonstrating mimetic knowledge what is missing is the discussion of how cinematography and structure in fictional representation establishes justified true beliefs about *real-world* cartel power.³ This is not to say that McGregor does

³ Despite listing acting and structure next to cinematography as crucial for mimetic knowledge in *Miami Vice*, McGregor does not discuss acting (understood as a performance style) at all.

not speak of richness of cinematographic detail or of the effectiveness of the syuzhet in the film. He does. But precisely how first-person narration and narrative reliability in *Zone of Interest* secured only *fictional* phenomenological knowledge, this is how cinematography and structure in *Miami Vice* afford merely *fictional* mimetic knowledge.

To focus on cinematography, yes, in the fictional world of *Miami Vice* as visually represented the cartel possesses a range of material resources. But how can we be certain that this is “detailed and accurate” representation of actual material resources cartels have at their disposal: Do they really operate from undisclosed locations in Port-au-Prince? Do they really use motorcades to usher in new hires? Can they really jam mobile phone signals? Do they really operate killing fields of hundred meters or more? Do they really possess the exact cars, weapons, jewellery, etc. depicted in the film? Or is this simply iconography typical of how cartels are represented in crime films? In other words, just because cinematographic recordings provide audio-visually “detailed and accurate” rendering of what was in front of the camera, this does not mean that what was in front of the camera is what cartel wields. Importantly, I am not claiming that this representation cannot be true, but I am saying that McGregor did not demonstrate that it is. And much like with the discussion of phenomenological knowledge, there is no investigation of whether the audience comes to believe these things about real-life cartels upon seeing the film and whether the audience is justified in doing so.

McGregor’s discussion of *City of God* deliberately sets itself apart from previous ones which relate mimetic value to the autobiographical basis of the film, the majority local amateur cast encouraged to improvise, and the on-location shooting. All these could be related to truth, belief, and justification conditions. Autobiographies tend to be true while the institution of autobiography also demands of the readers to believe in the content divulged and provides justification for believing in it. Amateur cast, similarly, will be able to represent the lives of impoverished residents more accurately especially if they are free to improvise while a film making use of untrained actors is usually deemed as more believable precisely because it justifies that belief. Lastly, shooting in a similar impoverished part of city will provide verisimilar information of how the area looks like, and the promotional emphasis on this feature can be further used to satisfy belief and justification conditions. Undeniably, the film still remains a fiction film so there needs to be a further mechanism of establishing which representations should be deemed “accurate and detailed” of the real-world (next to being imagined) and which merely to be imagined. But in principle, this is not an unsolvable problem. It is one, though, that McGregor is not interested in.

What he focuses on instead is the film’s structure i.e., the embedding of stories within the stories all narrated by the protagonist Rocket. According to McGregor: “the narrative architecture and self- reflexive narration reproduce[] the way in which the multiple motivations of the characters overlapped, intersected, and opposed one another to create a situation that impeded resistance to organised criminal enterprises” (2021: 113). I am not denying that the narrative structure, due to its complexity and constant interruptions of stories with other stories, might be metaphorically said to mirror the conflicting motivations of characters. Nor am I suggesting that this does not add to the dramatic effectiveness of the film. I am merely pointing out that the way in which narrative structure *contributes* to the satisfaction of truth, belief, and justification conditions – if indeed it does – remains unexplored. How is precisely the content more “detailed and accurate” if it is told out of sequence and with constant breaks instead of being represented in a linear chronological fashion? Are viewers prone to believing content presented in complex narratives more than that in linear ones? And what is the justification for believing complicated narratives more than simple ones? McGregor does not shed light on any of this.

McGregor is on firmer ground when discussing counterfactual knowledge precisely because this is construed as “knowledge of reality provided by the exploration of alternatives to that reality” (2011: 91). In other words, precisely because narratives such as ITV’s season 3 of *Broadchurch* (2017) and Marlon James’ 2014 novel *A Brief History of Seven Killings* provide knowledge by exploring *alternatives* i.e., how something *could (and should) be*, there is no need to check whether what they are representing is actually true.

More to the point, because *Broadchurch 3*, in McGregor’s account, illustrates the *ideal* situation where rape myths should be dismissed as unethical the truth condition does not apply by definition. The belief and justification of the belief in the ideal, precisely because the content of a belief is a counterfactual of how things are and a belief in how things should be, unlike in cases with phenomenological and mimetic knowledge hinge simply on the effectiveness of the narrative rather than on how the narrative secures its correspondence with the real world. Similarly, because *A Brief History of Seven Killings* presents itself only as a *possible* counterfactual about the causes of crime and social harm in Jamaica, McGregor needs only discuss the plausibility of the CIA involvement in Jamaican politics via illegal drug sales which he does in relation to the reported links between the CIA, the contras, and the crack-cocaine epidemic in the 1980s Los Angeles. The discussion of plausibility paired with the discussion of the blurring of invented and factual content in the novel also suffices to secure belief and justification conditions for this possible counterfactual. But, it should be repeated, the discussion of counterfactual, phenomenological, and mimetic knowledge in terms of (counterfactual) truth, belief, and justification is not how McGregor frames any of his case studies.

I would like to devote the last section to McGregor’s traditional view of cinematic realism in relation to the mimetic knowledge and pedagogic function. In both cases, McGregor argues that specific traits of the film medium which constitute cinematic realism also make film better at mimetic knowledge and pedagogic function than other media. In what remains I will argue that this does not hold.

Regarding mimetic knowledge, “the characteristic realism of the cinematic mode of representation provides cinematic representations with an advantage over and above literary and hybrid representations with respect to the provision of mimetic knowledge” (McGregor 2021: 97). This, according to McGregor, is because film, unlike literary or hybrid representations, boasts all 7 of the following types of realism:

- (1) Content realism: the characters, settings, and action in a fictional representation are of a kind that exists in reality.
- (2) Photorealism: the animated image of a character, setting, or action in a representation is indiscriminable from a photographic image of the character, setting, or action.
- (3) Ontological realism: a photographic image has a causal rather than intentional relation to that which is represented because the representation is created by the capture of light waves emanating from that which is represented.
- (4) Epistemic realism: a photographic image offers strong although not conclusive evidence that that which is represented existed at the time the photographic representation was created.
- (5) Perceptual realism: the characters, settings, and action in a representation look (and sound) like their counterparts in reality.

(6) Transparency: a photograph presents rather than represents its subject; that is, the viewer sees the subject itself rather than a representation of the subject.

(7) Anti-illusionism: cinematic representations do not standardly create an illusion in the minds of their spectators. (2019: 100)

The main problem is that only (1) and (5) directly contribute to “detailed and accurate knowledge of everyday reality” insofar they provide potentially true information. (1) is a matter of propositional information (e.g., “Second World War started in 1939”) while (5) relates to audio-visual information (e.g., how an explosion looks and sounds like). But other types of realism do not add to mimetic knowledge. If one turns to Gaut (2010: 66-67), it becomes obvious that (2) deals only with nonexistent entities (e.g., King Kong) and properties of the photographic medium (e.g., motion blur, lens flare) so it’s unclear how these can hold information about *everyday reality*. (3), (4), and (6) admittedly speak to *certainty* that whatever is represented existed at the time of the recording so in that sense they provide justification for believing that what is represented existed. But this obtains only for nonfictional representations, not the fictional ones McGregor is interested in.⁴ Relating to (3), the cause of images of the cartel meeting from *Miami Vice* is not an actual cartel meeting, but actors make-believing a meeting. Even in films like *City of God* it is neither the autobiographical events and characters (these are only performed by amateur actors) nor original location (it is Rio’s North Zone and not Citadel de Deus that is on film) that are recorded. (4), similarly, would only give strong reason to believe that what is represented is an actual cartel meeting or an actual shoot-out in Rio in a documentary film, not in a fictional like *Miami Vice* or *City of God*. Whether (6) holds is up for debate, but even if it did, only documentaries could present actual cartel meetings or shoot-outs, and not films like *Miami Vice* and *City of God*, which would then present only actors make-believing those events.⁵ Concerning (7), lastly, realism that Gaut (2010: 62-65) discusses is in fact illusionism and not anti-illusionism which would mean that there is a type of realism that detracts from knowledge – illusionism in which the audience falsely believe something to be the case. It is true that McGregor endorses only anti-illusionism but, together with (1), all media are capable of it. More importantly, that (7) does not cause false beliefs is strictly speaking not a *contribution* to knowledge for it does not add any information – it simply prevents transfer of false ones.

Given that literature, theatre, and comic books easily accomplish (1), we are left only with (5) as a potential advantage for film. But theatre is also capable of (5). Moreover, given that it is also three-dimensional and that in its more modern form it can also speak to the senses of touch, smell, and taste, we could even argue that it has greater potential for (5) than film does. Even if McGregor’s logic that the more types of realism are satisfied the better at mimetic knowledge a mode of representation is were true, film would still not come on top. But I doubt even this logic holds.

I suspect that what McGregor wants to say is something like all things being equal across modes of representation, (5) adds more information for “detailed and accurate knowledge” and therefore makes the mode capable of it better at mimetic knowledge. But are all things standardly equal across modes of representation? For example, history books on a subject regularly run to hundreds of pages long while the linguistic part (voice-over, written text, interviews, etc.) of historical documentaries on the same topic standardly cover far less ground. Does the fact that we gain audio-visual information on how participants, locales, equipment, etc. in these historical events sound and look like offset the fact that they provide far less detail when it comes to content of the event

⁴ Keep in mind that it does not even *necessarily* obtain for nonfiction films, as the discussion of documentaries above has shown.

⁵ For a general argument against transparency see Slugan (2019c: 90-101) and for how this is independent from ontological realism see Slugan (2017).

(timelines, causal relationships, cast of characters, etc.)? That, I would argue, depends on the genre in question rather than on a mode of representation in general. In case of histories, I assume the causal nexus of a relevant event to be expressed propositionally (e.g., Second World War) is more important than how the period's key protagonists (e.g., Hitler or Churchill) looked like. This is not to say that there are no "genres" where perceptual information is more important than content information. In art history, for instance, a photograph of a lost painting would I wager provide more mimetic knowledge than any treatise on the subject. In other words, just because a mode of representation is capable of (5) this does not make it better at mimetic knowledge than a mode which lacks (5). Rather, the success at mimetic knowledge will need to be decided on a case-by-case basis depending on the "genre" of representation.

According to McGregor, lastly, cinematic realism is a key component of pedagogic function cinema has because it "contributes to audience engagement. Unlike literary and hybrid representations, feature films engage audiences on two sensory levels, visual and aural, and the experience of watching a film is in consequence more immersive than that of reading a novel or graphic novel" (2021: 126). But why would that be the case? Photographic audio-visual richness is clearly a matter of perceptual richness, but perceptual richness is not a guarantee of immersion. We could also argue that immersion is a function of the potential for the play of imagination rather than of the level of perceptual richness i.e., that precisely because forms such as novels offer more space for (audio, visual, olfactory, gustatory, and tactile) imagination than audio-visual media do, readers are more immersed in novels than viewers are in film. There are certainly a range of reports of readers citing being completely lost in a novel while not at all drawn into a film. In fact, many contemporary viewers regularly watch films and shows while doing something else like cooking or scrolling through their phones making the whole experience deliberately one of split attention. Viewer audiences are probably larger than reading ones, but that something is more popular does not mean it is more immersive. Lastly, as I argue elsewhere, a statement of this type is essentially empirical and as such in need empirical validation (Slugan 2020) – McGregor provides no such thing. In other words, whatever the pedagogic function of film might be, film is no worse or better than other media narratives simply by virtue of cinematographic realism.

In conclusion, let me stress once again that I agree with McGregor in principle that some fiction should be treated as a source for a range of types of knowledge and that there is much to be gained by using some fiction films for pedagogic purposes. It would not surprise me to learn that, say, HBO's 2002-2008 *The Wire* disseminated phenomenological and mimetic knowledge about causes of crime and harm in contemporary Baltimore more broadly than all criminological literature on the subject combined. My main concern, however, is that McGregor missed the opportunity to discuss the precise mechanism of how that knowledge is conveyed in relation to truth, belief, and justification conditions which would have drove his point home. I am less sympathetic with his claims on the fiction/nonfiction distinction and the generalisations on cinematic realism in relation to mimetic knowledge and pedagogic function but as these are not crucial to the McGregor's main argument or to the readers of this journal, I'm sure we can continue this debate elsewhere.

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