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BREAKING THE OFFENDER

THE REPRESENTATION OF CRIMINALS IN TV
SERIES

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Mass media play an important role in shaping public perceptions about different thematics, including crime and justice. The consumption of mediatic contents in different forms, such as newspapers, television news and crime dramas, can affect the way people perceive and interpret concepts as deviance and punishments, the attitude towards the criminal system and the level of concern for becoming a victim. In the last years, Streaming Videos On Demand platforms have made easier the access and the consumptions of contents as crime dramas; the changes in the modality of fruition have been followed by changes in the representation of characters, with the introduction and the increasing diffusion of morally ambiguous figures. This opens new possibilities of research, particularly regarding the modes of representation of criminals as antiheroes. The purpose of the article is then to investigate how the figure of the offender is constructed as antihero in four Original Netflix Productions (*You*, *Narcos*, *Ozark*, *La Casa de Papel*). A Critical Discourse Analysis of two narrative themes is conducted combining Marxist and Postmodernist interpretative approaches.

Keywords: Offender; Antihero; Crime Drama; Synthetic Approach; Marxist/Postmodernist perspective; Critical Discourse Analysis

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Introduction

As we witness the rapid transformation of our lives in a highly technological, fluid society, we have access to an increasing number of sources of information to form our ideas, also regarding crime and justice. The consumption of media, in all its forms - newspapers, television, internet, films, videos, tv series, social media - and the exposure to its contents, contribute to shape societal and individual conceptions of crime, the level of concern or fear of victimization and attitudes about the criminal justice system; current social issues and anxieties find as well expression in crime dramas and films (Rafter, 2000; Tzanelli et al., 2005; O'Brien et al., 2005^b; Dowler et al., 2006; Welsh et al., 2011; Turnbull, 2014).

Scholars tend to consider media as a shared social space in which we develop and negotiate perceptions, attitudes and beliefs; a shared forum that allows the social construction of cultural understanding of justice and, accordingly, the shaping of our expectations about justice and appropriate responses to crime (Kang, 1997; Surette 2007; Welsh et al., 2011). Therefore, seen from the perspective of Cultural Criminology, movies and other media are cultural products that provide an insight into the shared meanings of crime, justice and punishment, that highlight the current tensions in society and mold the way we think about these issues (Berets, 1996; Ferrell, 1999; Rafter 2006; Welsh et al., 2011). Social phenomena are actively constructed by media, particularly in those situations lacking other sources of information, for example crime related events (Welsh et al., 2011). Crime fiction, then, becomes an important resource.

The 2010s have seen a shift from forensic procedural crime drama like CSI and NCSI and their logical processes of criminal investigation to a more self-conscious Quality TV. Early 2000s broadcast TV was structured on the cathartic resolution of normality-subverting crimes, Quality TV employs cinematic esthetic and noir atmospheres to blend narrative complexity and encounters between conventional structures and characters with more avant-garde and surreal approaches to crime procedural. Another step has been taken by Streaming Video On Demand platforms, foremost Netflix, that to the revolution of television aesthetics and narrative structures introduced by the Quality Tv representative par excellence - HBO -, has added new cultural practices of content release and spectatorship that stimulate the intensity of the experience; the simultaneous release of all the episodes facilitate the consumption of entire seasons in a short time (binge watching) and the re-watching of particularly outstanding episodes; the interactions with tv contents are freed from the rigid schedules of the traditional broadcasts (Cardini, 2017; Balanzategui, 2018).

Emblematic of this new type of seriality is the antihero, a morally ambiguous figure, whose actions stand out for traits of both heroism and evil: a complex character, not totally bad, but marked by a profound humanity in showing affections, pain, fears and flaws that make him so close to the viewer. The characterization of the antihero as a whole person makes his behavior at the same time relatable and questionable, challenging the viewers to ponder their belief of standing on the good side (Cardini, 2017).

This new trend in crime drama production opens new possibilities of research; particularly significant, and little investigated, are the modes of representation of criminals as antiheroes, which is the objective of this article.

The aim of the research

I have tried to emphasize the impact films and tv series have on the way we form our perceptions of crime and justice, along with the growing presence and effect of morally ambiguous characters in the narratives. The use of online streaming platforms facilitates the access to and the fruition of this type of contents on a worldwide scale. Netflix, which launched its streaming service in 2007 (Balanzategui, 2018), currently count more than 182.9 millions of subscriptions worldwide (Il Post, 21/04/2020): considering that there are more viewers per subscription and that many share the same account, Netflix's offer reaches about 1 on 10 people worldwide (hypothesizing 4 users per account) – removing the people who do not have access to internet, Chinese, North Korean and Syrian population (who supposedly cannot benefit of the services), and the elderly, the estimate reduce to 1 on 2,5 people (United Nations, Department of Economics and Social Affairs; 2020; World meter, 2020; Statista, 2020). Some of the most viewed contents one can find on Netflix are undoubtedly tv series; highly appreciated are some the original productions belonging to the crime drama class, and, as before mentioned, current crime dramas often portray antiheroes as key characters, if not as protagonists (see above).

In the light of these considerations, the purpose of this paper is

- a) to analyze how the representation of offenders as morally ambiguous characters is constructed in four of the most watched Netflix's original crime tv series (You, La Casa de Papel, Narcos, Ozark)
- b) in relation to the synthetic interpretative approach developed by Tzanelli, O'Brien and Yar (Tzanelli et al., 2005; O'Brien et al., 2005^a; Yar, 2010), which combine Marxist and Postmodernist perspectives.

Theoretical Background

As stated by Hayward and Young (2004, pp. 259), Cultural Criminology place "crime and its control in the context of culture" and considers "both crime and the agencies of control as cultural products" (see also O'Brien et al., 2005^a): this implies a focus on the relation between cultural practices, organized around symbolic meanings, imagery and style, and those behaviors classified as criminal by the legal authorities. In other words, it means concentrating on popular culture constructions of crime, in particular mass media productions, and disclose how collective and socially shared understandings of crime, deviance, justice and punishment are created and affirmed through mediated meaning-construction and textual reading (Ferrel, 1995, 1999; Kort-Butlere & Harstshorn 2016).

Media play a central role in building social phenomena, in particular in those cases when the available materials are few or there are no other sources of information: one of these concern crime and all the related issues, given that most people have little or no direct experience with criminality (Surette, 2003, 2007; Welsh et al., 2011; Kort-Butlere & Hartshorn, 2016). All the mediated images of criminal violence that surrounds us daily undoubtedly have the effect of shaping public perceptions and crime control policies: the consumption of different forms of media, such as newspapers, television news and crime dramas, have in fact been proved to influence the viewers' perception of crime, their level of concern of becoming victims and their attitudes toward the criminal system (Dowler et al., 2006).

Media then absolve the role of mediator between culture and deviance, using specific strategies to report on crime, providing the elements on which cultural and subcultural styles are build, presenting, representing and shaping criminal events and perceptions of criminality (Ferrel, 1995).

It is true, in fact, that “film does not simply copy and rehearse the meaning system of culture, it also revise them” (Turner, 1999, pp. 152): as a matter of fact, the re-dramatization of crime in cinematic productions is a process of re-design and re-negotiation of popular ideologies, where socio-political conflicts and realities are questioned and criticized and where societal fears, desires and needs are expressed (Ryan & Kellner, 1990; Garland, 2001; Sullivan, 2001; Tzanelli et al., 2005). Films can legitimize and strengthen popular crime discourses, make circulate frameworks that make sense of them, depict fantasies and dreads about crime and the breakdown of social order, delineate the relation between deviance and the dynamics of social life: criminal activities find place into wider discourses regarding family, morality, gender, success, role legitimacy, etc. (Taylor, 1999; Tzanelli et al., 2005).

In this framework, two interpretative approaches, the Marxist ideological perspective and the postmodernist interpretative style, suit the investigation of the methods of representation used to build the image of the antihero in contemporary tv series. Both perspectives focus on the meaning of images, characters and narratives, although the former aims to uncover power relations and dominant ideologies used to reproduce them, while the latter stresses the diversity and indeterminacy of meaning deriving from interpretation, and thus the impossibility of producing a coherent ideology of films (Yar, 2010).

According to Marxists, all cultural products are a reflection of values that legitimate and empower the interests of the dominant class, reproduce distorted understandings of society, promoting and hiding the responsibilities of social inequalities and injustices (Yar, 2010). Mass media and popular culture are either ideological instruments that publicize a conforming version of reality, corrupted by the interests of capitalism (Althusser, 1994; Adorno, 2001), or rather the battleground of dominant representations with counter-hegemonic criticisms and alternative understandings of society (Yar, 2010).

Kellner and Ryan (1988) view popular films as the mean through which conservative, liberal and radical viewpoints find expression on issues of morality, justice, order, violence, and retribution. Rafter (2001, 2006), instead, distinguishes two trends: “traditional”, reproducing hegemonic interpretations of reality, or “critical”, revising dominant claims. “Traditional” productions feature the depravity of the offender, the heroism and decency of the law enforcement, an inevitable just punishment for the lawbreaker and the division between the normal law-abiding people and the abnormal, who deviate from social norms and values as a result of individualized circumstances and not because of intervening social factors. This line of movies tends to avert any criticism of the relation of crime with prejudices and inequalities in order to reinforce the authority of the legal institutions and their normative codes. To say it with Young’s (1997) words, this trend ensure that the audience looks at the film narrative through the “eyes of the law” and identifies with its moral rectitude (see also O’Brien et al., 2005^b). “Critical” films, on the other hand, tend to expose the way dominant narratives of law and order figure in popular representations, enforcing opposite processes of inclusion and exclusion, normalization and stigmatization: the real intention is to remark social

conflicts and inevitable injustices, deny heroism and any definite contrast between good and evil (Yar, 2010).

In a Marxian perspective, the meaning content of a text can be classified either as an expression of the dominant ideology or as counter-hegemonic: cultural products, though, can convey both traditional and critical meanings, resulting ambiguous. Moreover, this approach does not take into account the active role of the public; meaning construction, in fact, varies among individuals, may leading to very different interpretations of the same text. (Yar, 2010).

On the other hand, Postmodernists believe that the change into fluid social structures has erased stable social classes, and with them the basis for a widespread ideology: the unstable and unpredictable nature of contemporary society allows the only existence of temporary, ephemeral views (Collins, 1989).

Furthermore, it is impossible to have an objective understanding of society; cultural meaning are indeterminate, fragmented and contradictory: cultural representations do not have a definite meaning, it rather depends on the way people perceive and interpret the text. Cinematic productions, then, do not represent, for example, crime in just one specific way, the meaning will vary from viewer to viewer. The problematic aspect of this perspective is then that tv series and films mean anything and nothing specifically: depending on the viewer, the same text offers divergent and contradictory meanings, resulting in ambiguous interpretations. If films, and tv series do not carry an ideological or moral message, the analysis should rather uncover the different textual meanings viewers may attribute to them and the way individual versions of cinematic “truth” are produced (Yar, 2010).

Tzanelli, O’Brien and Yar (see Tzanelli et al., 2005; O’Brien et al., 2005^a, 2005^b and Yar, 2010) have developed a synthetic approach, which combine the two interpretative styles by placing the textual reading of individual meaning production into the wider socio-political context that shape cultural frameworks.

The Marxist approach’s critical analysis of crime films and crime drama exposes current relations of power in systems of inclusion and exclusion, normalization and stigmatization, preserved through dominant narratives of law and order; it makes surface the cultural and political background in which meaning production processes transpire, those macro-level political frameworks and interests that shape individual and local constructions of meanings. The interpretation of crime representations, then, take place in the wider framework of the dominant ideology, structured by classes and capitalist relations of power (Yar, 2010).

The Postmodernist perspective, instead, provides the awareness of an intrinsic instability in communicative and interpretative processes that prevent any permanent identification of codes and believes in any cultural representation; the instability of meaning that produces contradictory visions of crime and justice is the reflection in any given text of the tensions and divisions within the society represented. Cinematic productions are, in fact, a mean through which notions of crime, criminality and justice are investigated and negotiated; as such, they reproduce conflicting visions and ambivalent meanings of crime and justice circulating in society (O’Sullivan, 2001; Yar, 2010; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

The synthetic style of analysis overcomes the divergence between the Marxist and Postmodernist perspectives, bringing together the value they can add to

criminological analysis of films and tv series: to consider the variety of meanings and their role in shaping politics of law, order and punishment.

Ambivalent interpretations of deviance emerging from the analysis are then unconscious impressions of normatively conflicting dispositions of crime as repulsive, yet seductive, evil and heroic, brought to our conscious attention by a sensitive reading of the complexity of cultural meanings. At the same time, cinematic images reveal the connection between cultural understandings of crime and contemporary pertinent issues, such as gender, race and political violence.

Within the framework of Cultural Criminology, this approach “offers the ability to uncover the complex mediation and construction of crime and criminality in its socio-political context, linking symbolic framings to the broader currents of sensibility with which they constantly interact” (Yar, 2010: pp. 21).

Methodology

Qualitative research offers an understanding of how people interpret experiences, how they construct the interpretations of social phenomena and what meaning they attribute to these interpretations; despite the accusation of providing too subjective interpretations of the textual meaning, it values and take advantage of these subjectivities in relation to the theoretical framework and the researcher’s interests (Yar, 2010; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

It is based on the assumption that individuals construct knowledge engaging in and making sense of activities, experiences or phenomena (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Particular aspects of social life and different social practices are represented through discourses (van Leeuwen, 2008; Guo, 2010; Fairclough, 2012).

Discourses are “practices which form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault, 1972, pp. 49): they refer to a set of meanings, representations, images, stories, statements and so on that together produce a particular version of events. Each discourse regarding the same object focuses on different aspects, raises different implications and issues to consider, constructing and portraying the object in fairly dissimilar ways (Burr, 2003).

Discourses manifest through texts, and anything that can be read for meaning can be considered a text (verbal, visual or multimodal) – i.e. speeches, written material, images as advertisements and films (even clothing and hairstyles) (Burr, 2003; KhosraviNik, 2010). Tv series, then, can be examined as texts in an analysis of discourse. Discourse Analysis, in fact, investigates the way knowledge is produced within different discourses (Ritchie et al., 2013); Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), in particular, allows to do so adopting a critical perspective: theoretical concepts, as power and ideology, provide an account for the links between the discourse and its social macro structure, where the processes of production and interpretation of the discourses take place (KhosraviNik, 2010). Critical approaches in Discourse Analysis aim to critique the present social order and social relations of power by setting their findings into a wider social context (Fairclough, 1992^a; Van Dijk, 1993; Baker et al., 2008; Billing, 2003; KhosraviNik, 2010).

In the light of these considerations, a qualitative research approach through Critical Discourse Analysis seems the most appropriate method to serve the purpose of this article – investigating the ways criminals are portrayed as antiheroes in contemporary crime tv series from the synthetic perspective above explained.

Materials

Considering that nowadays the most common accesses to tv series are on demand platforms (see Balanzategui, 2018) and that Netflix is the legal online streaming platform that claims the highest number of subscriptions, more than 182.9 millions worldwide (Il Post, 21/04/2020) (followed by Amazon Prime, which detains 150 millions of users – Il Quotidiano.net, 01/02/2020), the sample of analysis was selected within Netflix offer.

To be subject of investigation the tv series had to meet some criteria: being classified as crime dramas, meaning prominent depictions of crime had to be the central elements around which the whole narration developed, absence of supernatural or fantastic elements and dystopic settings, offenders had to play main roles in the narrative, and they had to be popular: given the impact that cinematic representations, and media in general, exercise in shaping individual and public perceptions of criminality, order and justice, the more considerable is the popularity, the bigger the audience subjected to their influence.

A first selection was obtained through a search in Netflix section “tv series” and then “crime drama”. In the assumption that being produced by the same production company gives some coherence to the representations of contents, the choice was further narrowed to Netflix Original series. Plot summaries and trailers served to identify the tv series featuring criminals as protagonists, leaving a total of 14 options. A further discrimination was conducted considering the length of the whole production available at the moment of the selection: “When they see us” was excluded because it is categorized as mini-series, with only four episodes, against the 10/13 episodes per season of the others. Taking into account the time necessary to watch all the episodes and time available to conduct the research, a maximum of 3 seasons was considered sufficient for an appropriate character development.

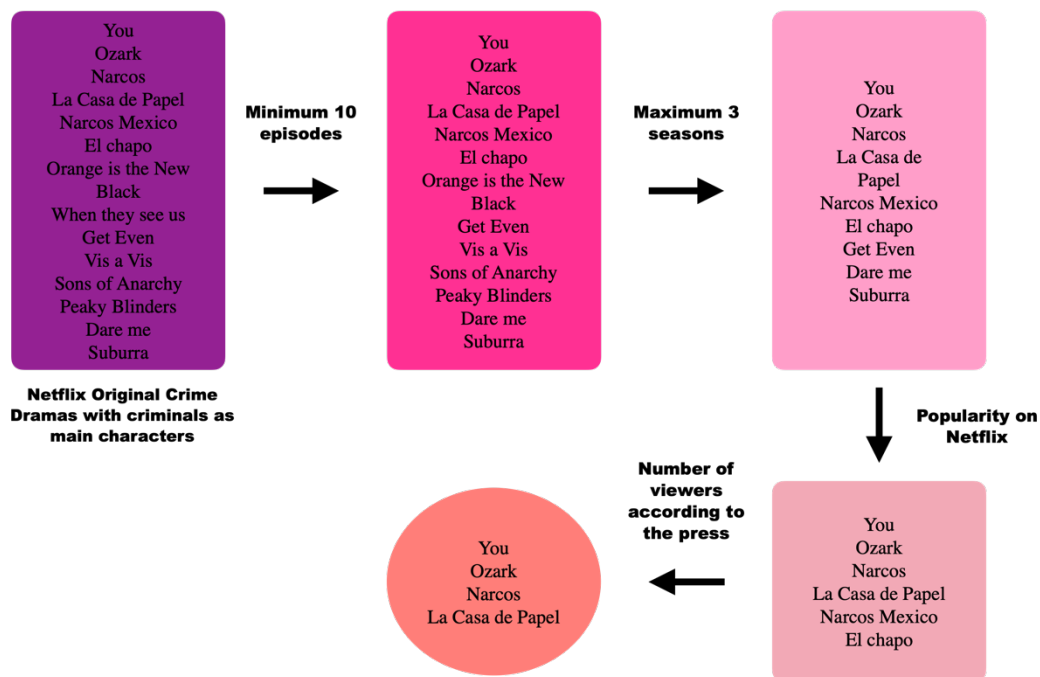


Figure 1. Flow chart of the tv series selection process

Popularity was the last element of the selection process: of the remaining 9 crime dramas only 6 were listed either in “the most watched on Netflix”, “trending on

Netflix” or “the top 10 in Italy”: You, La Casa de Papel, Narcos, Narcos Mexico, El Chapo, Ozark. Netflix does not make available to the public data regarding the number of accounts that have watched a specific content to protect the privacy of its clients, information released by Netflix to the press (Cinema Blend, 14/09/2017; Coming Soon, 18/01/2019; Globalist, 27/03/2020; Hall of Series, 04/2020) were used to control for the effective size of the success among the public worldwide. In the case of Narcos Mexico and El Chapo any concrete data was unavailable; moreover, the type of crime portrayed (narco-traffic) and narrative overlapped with the contents of Narcos. To avoid redundant representations in favor of a most diversified selection in terms of criminal act presented, they have been excluded from the analysis, leaving four series to be investigated.

- **You:** the story evolve around Joe, a bookstore manager from New York, who develops an obsession over a girl and to feed it turns to all the means available to remove any obstacle to their romance (people included). The series, which have reached more than 40 millions of viewers only during the first month of release, is composed by two seasons, both subject of analysis.
- **Narcos:** the first two seasons narrates the rise, success and decline, till his death, of Pablo Escobar, one of the most famous Colombian narcotraffickers, and his fight with Colombian Police and DEA agents. Netflix have estimated a medium of 3.2 million views per episode.
- **La casa de Papel:** all the three seasons, subject of analysis, portray a group of robbers and their undertaking first at the Royal mint, then at the national bank. The series, watched in 160 countries, have reached 34 millions of streaming during the first week of season 3.
- **Ozark:** a nice family of four move the family business – money laundering for a Mexican cartel – from Chicago to the lake of Ozark, and try to keep the activity going between the threat of the FBI, the pressing requests of their “business partner” and dangerous neighborhood relationship. The three seasons have reached a smaller, though still significant, public, counting 8.7 millions of viewers in the first 10 days after the third season.

Respectively, subject of analysis were season 1 and 2 of You, season 1 and 2 of Narcos (season 3 was not considered as it does not feature the main character, Pablo Escobar), season 1, 2 and 3 of La Casa de Papel (season 4 still had not been launched) and season 1, 2 and 3 of Ozark.

Interpretation

Contemporary seriality is marked by the development of complex characters, provided with a fully structured personality that leaves behind the more traditional characterization as totally good or totally bad to embrace a more ambiguous one. This typology of character is defined antihero, or morally ambiguous character. Crime dramas are no exception to this trend, and of particular interest for this research are the representations of criminals as antiheroic figures.

More specifically antiheroes are portrayed as whole persons, in the round individuals, with passions, affects and normal, almost boring, family lives; they can be depicted as loving fathers, protective husbands and unfaithful wives; the viewer

can see them suffering for a love not corresponded or the difficult communication with a teenage son. Their behavior partly adheres, partly not to the moral standards, their actions stand out for traits of both heroism and evil: acts of selflessness and altruism coexist with violent, often deviant, expressions of cruelty. Antihero are characterized by their realism in being not just good or evil, but rather making mistakes or committing bad things independently from their good qualities; their complexity resides in their profound humanity, in showing affections, pain, fears and flaws that make them relatable to the viewer. (Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012; Cardini, 2017; Meier & Neubaum, 2019).

To analyze the ways the representations of criminal as antiheroes are constructed in the four tv series selected, firstly it was necessary verifying that the characters, the protagonists specifically, could be identified as morally ambiguous characters. This process was conducted on the basis of seven character descriptions, modeled by Eden et al. (2017) on the features described on TV Tropes¹ - hero, Disney antihero, pragmatic antihero, classical antihero, unscrupulous antihero, nominal antihero and villain (see the full descriptions in *Table 2*). The descriptions present seven categories distinguished by various personality traits, which can be used to generally classify characters portrayed in mediatic contents. Except for the first category (Hero) and the last (Villain), all the others six illustrate different typologies of antiheroes. The protagonists of the four tv series examined in this paper were evaluated by confronting a matching their personality traits with the ones outlined in each category.

For each crime drama, and through the attentive vision of each episode, then, detailed information was collected on characters and narrative structures using both dialog and visual images to isolate pattern of representation. Conducting a CDA, two narrative themes emerged in particular as means through which the representation of criminals as antiheroes is built: “the (anti)hero and the good cause”, evident in *You* and *Ozark*, and “the Robin Hood narrative”, present in *Narcos* and *La Casa de Papel*; these themes will be further discussed in the following sections through the lenses of the synthetic approach developed by Tzanelli, O’Brien and Yar (see above).

Findings

In this section the evaluation of the protagonists as antihero will be outlined along with the two narrative themes identified to construct the representations of offenders as morally ambiguous characters: “the (anti)hero and the good cause” and “the Robin Hood narrative”.

¹ TV Tropes is a popular website and platform (<http://www.tvtropes.org>) dedicated to commonly used “tropes” in different media: tropes are common and widely spread character types and descriptions appearing in different media, so that they might be considered descriptions of prototypical characters (a prototype is list of the most relevant features of a concept). TV Tropes present an inclusive classification of hero-to-villain character types, detailing as well relevant features of anti-heroes; the emerging categories have been applied to thousands of media characters and are immediately recognizable through the listing features of the prototypical characters and the examples presented for each category. All users are allowed to edit content collectively, producing a consensus-driven process that over time results in shared and highly valid categorizations and typologies (for further information see Eden et al., 2017).

The protagonists

The identification of the main characters as morally ambiguous was conducted on the basis of the seven character descriptions delineated by Eden et al. (2017).

Table 1. Seven Character Descriptions (Eden et al., 2017)

<i>Most Common Characters Per Character Type</i>		
Type	Most-mentioned characters	Character description
Hero	Superman	This type of character is a character who is always right, selflessly fights for noble causes, is kind to all and is a natural and charismatic leader. He successfully fights against evil, saves those in distress and always reaches his predefined goals. Examples of this type of character are: Luke Skywalker from Star Wars and Superman
Disney antihero	Shrek	This type of character has heroic intentions but often have a sour, cynical view of the world. This type of character stands a good chance of positive transformation over the course of the story, once they confront their internal conflicts, or find someone or something they want to fight for. Examples of this type of character are: Shrek and Tyrion Lannister from Game of Thrones
Pragmatic anti-hero	Robin Hood	This type of character is willing to do immoral things for a good cause. In their view, the end justify the (where necessary violent) means. The intentions of these characters are pure and good and they abide by a strict personal moral code, which they follow in reaching their goals. Examples of this type of character are: Katniss Everdeen from The Hunger Games and Batman
Classical anti-hero	Karate Kid	This type of character is full of self-doubt, mediocre (or worse) in combat, has trouble seeing the whole picture, unsuccessful in love, frightened, cowardly and/or not particularly bright. He or she tends to “grow” over the course of the narrative and overcomes his or her own weaknesses. Examples of this type of character are: Elsa from the movie Frozen and Spiderman
Unscrupulous hero	James Bond	This type of character will fight for the good cause out of good intentions. However, they are unaffected by the collateral effects and damages they create along the way. They live according to a code, are often violent (in pursuit of justice and vengeance), are cynical (due to personal trauma) as well as opportunistic”. Examples of this type of character are: Jack Bauer from 24 and Mad Max from the similarly-titled movies
Nominal hero	Hannibal Lecter	Even though this type of character fights on the side of good, their intentions/motivations are anything but pure or good (often focused on selfish goals). This type of character is often seen through the lens of the enemy of my enemy – the lesser of two evils. Examples of this type of character are: Dexter Morgan (from Dexter the TV-show) and Loki from the Marvel universe (Thor, The Avengers)
Villain	The Joker	This type of character is the one that works against the good guys, is characterized and even admired for his or her determination in being evil, having selfish goals, cunning and intelligence. Nevertheless this character almost never reaches his or her goal, is almost always beaten or vanquished and fails in his or her evil intentions. Examples of this type of character are: Sauron (from Lord of the Rings) and Darth Vader from Star Wars.

Only two characters, Joe Goldberg from *You* and Pablo Escobar from *Narcos*, matched perfectly one of the categories; Wendy and Marty Bird and all the protagonists from *La Casa de Papel* (LCDP) presented traits compatible with two descriptions (see *Figure 3*).

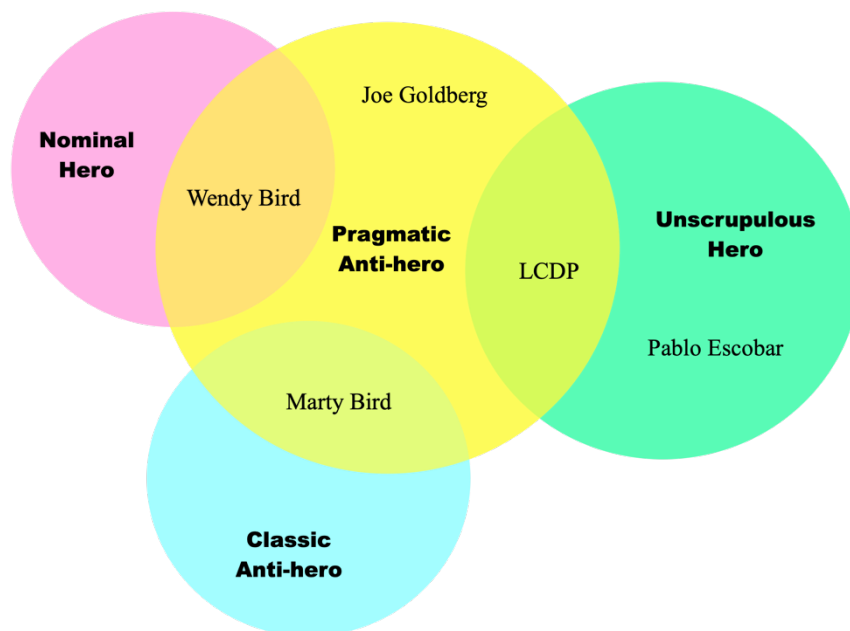


Figure 3. Main characters' assignation to tropes categories

Joe Goldberg's personality corresponds to the Pragmatic Anti-hero; he is indeed prone to good intentions and demonstrates to possess qualities as kindness, selflessness and altruism - for example in saving Paco and his mother from her abusive and violent partner and Ellie from being raped, he puts himself in danger without hesitation, or in the effort he put in trying to help the girl he is in love with to have a better and happier life; but his desire to help others and do some good knows no limits: the end justifies the means, and so violence and brutality becomes legit, theft, kidnapping, murder, all his actions are justified by a higher purpose.

Pablo Escobar fits the description of the Unscrupulous Hero, according to which "this type of character will fight for the good cause out of good intentions", as protecting his family and implementing his although illegal business, even though "they are unaffected by the collateral effects and damages they create along the way", as being unconcerned by the violence, intimidations and killings perpetrated on his order to achieve his goals. "They live according to a code, are often violent (in pursuit of justice and vengeance)" – particularly evident when he resolve to bombing the capital in response to the police's attempts to catch him-, "are cynical (due to personal trauma) as well as opportunistic", considering he took any chance to better his situation, be it expanding his trades to the USA, establishing his leadership among the other narco-traffickers or using children as lookouts (Eden et al., 2017, pp: 373).

Marty Bird's character features traits belonging both to the Pragmatic and the Classical Anti-hero; as far as he is willing to resort to crime and violence to protect his family (i.e. collaborating with heroin producers, threatening, killing the priest) and acts following his personal moral code, he alternates moments of extreme confidence and cleverness to moments of self-doubt, fear and lack of foresight,

although always proving to be able to overcome his weaknesses and to be a charismatic guide, in particular for his young assistant Ruth.

Wendy Bird, as her husband, proves in more occasions to be willing to pursue a good cause to all costs (for example letting her brother being killed by the cartel to protect her children), but unlike Marty, who acts out of love (or at least that is his ultimate aim), she shows a more daring and selfish side, oriented to self-determination, especially in the research for equity with her partners both in her marriage and in business; several times, in fact, she acts behind Marty's back to pursue business arrangements they did not agree upon or making direct deals with the cartel lord. Therefore, she can be described as a Pragmatic Anti-hero and a Nominal hero.

All the main characters of *La Casa de Papel* display personalities compatible with the Pragmatic Anti-hero and the Unscrupulous Hero categories: their actions are guided by good intentions (becoming rich without actually stealing money from anyone, or saving Rio and exposing the Spanish institutions' involvement in terrorism acts, war and violations of human rights), but eventually the chain of events puts them in the position of adopting violent strategies to preserve the control of their operations, position they assume without hesitation. They show to be unaffected by the collateral effects and damages they create (for example Berlin forcing one of the hostages into a relationship with him and deliberately ignoring the hurt he is causing), impulsive and reckless (Tokyo in any situation, Stockholm joining the group of criminals who kidnapped her), vengeful (for example Palermo retaking control of the band by helping the chief of the Back Director's personal escorts to free himself).

The (anti)hero and the good cause

Traditionally, and consistently with Greek mythology, heroes are described as strong, smart, selfless, caring, resilient, reliable and charismatic; their actions reflect moral integrity and exert a positive influence on others. Heroes accomplish remarkable tasks that require a high degree of both morality and physical or intellectual competency. They voluntarily and consciously put themselves at risk for the good of one or more people, as an expression of altruism, and are willing to pay the ultimate price; individuals find in them inspiration and role models. They exemplify human excellence and human capacity for exceptional goodness. (Zimbardo, 2007; Allison & Goethals, 2011; Franco et al., 2011; Kinsella, 2015; Riches, 2018).

The antihero, instead, is "a protagonist who lacks the attributes that make a heroic figure, as nobility of mind and spirit, a life or attitude marked by action or purpose" (Mackey-Kallis, 2001: pp. 91), and yet the characters claim a heroic disposition, purposing their actions in the name of a good cause.

This is particularly evident in the case of Joe Goldberg, protagonist of *You*. He thinks of himself as a knight in shining armor ready to save and protect his princess; in his depiction of himself attributes and qualities prototypical of heroic figures are used to justify his morally reprehensible behavior in purpose of a good cause and mask his actions as noble deeds. More specifically, his presentation is based on the representation of heroisms in literary tradition, in which heroes' characterizations are extreme portrays of virtuous behavior, prototypical depictions of accentuated

goodness; his prime inspiration is a Prince Charming-like figure, who emerges as the hero who rescues a woman in distress (Allison & Goethals, 2011): Beck, Joe's love interest in the first season, dreams of publishing her poems, but she is hindered by financial stress, the sexual harassment perpetrated by her professor in exchange for his help, the unstable and insincere relationships with her friends and her former boyfriend. Love, in season 2, is divided between the complex relationship with her parents, the commitment in helping her brother to recover from his drug addiction, provoked by the sexual assault he experienced in childhood, the premature death of her husband, and her passion for cooking.

His actions follow the pattern of myth and epic tales, in which the narrative is defined by three major components: the departure, the forces that set hero's journey and quest in motion or, as in *You*, the voluntarily decision of the hero to undertake something great (Campbell, 1949; Allison & Goethals, 2011): winning the love of the girl of his dream, while rescuing her from her prison of wrong or possibly dangerous social relationship. The initiation, in which the hero must overcome some obstacle and challenges in order to succeed (Campbell, 1949; Allison & Goethals, 2011). To this part corresponds all the obstacles Joe faces, as Beck's previous boyfriends, getting rid of a body (or more), Beck's affair with her psychotherapist, a noisy neighbor, etc.. And finally the return to society, after the hero has completed his task, in which he experiences a spiritual awakening (Campbell, 1949; Allison & Goethals, 2011). This part is rather substituted an epiphany, the realization that behind the claim of acting in the name of a good cause hides the selfish pursuing of personal interest (or, in this case, obsession).

In fact, despite his efforts in leaning towards heroism, what impedes Joe to reach the status of hero is the brutality of his actions. He commits a number of violence and crimes, as stalking, murder, aggression, to help the people he loves and care about. He masks his bad behavior as pure acts of selflessness and love, committed in the name of a superior good, a good cause.

Less blatant, but still relevant is the presentation Marty and Wendy Bird (Ozark) make of themselves. Their conduct, in fact, partially corresponds to Franco et al.'s (2011) description of the social hero, one of the three typologies of heroism they delineate - civil, martial and social. Social heroes do not confront physical danger, they rather act for the good of other people facing social risks or personal sacrifice as loss of social status, finances, job or freedom, showing a particular prosocial behavior, civic engagement and sense of community (Zimbardo 2007; Franco et al., 2011; Eden et al., 2017). When approaching desperate business owners on the verge of bankruptcy with a business plan proposal and a conspicuous offer to lift it up, they appear as social heroes, risking their own wealth to invest in not so promising commercial activities, yet making (or trying to make) flourish the community. This is what has been defined as "rescue altruism" (Oliner & Oliner, 1988; Franco et al., 2011).

Social heroism tendentially unfolds over extended time frames and is mostly undertaken in private rather than public settings. Despite this, the Birds' approach eventually impacts the public sphere: their investments first in the restaurant/motel and then in the casinos, although concerning private activities, give a new shape to the community life, creating meeting points and new job vacancies, allowing the economic growth of the area. One of the goals of social heroism is in fact the preservation, rehabilitation or progress of community standards, sometimes in the attempt of establishing a new set: Wendy and Marty's businesses sustain the local

economy during tourism offseason and slightly push it towards the offer of different services.

Nevertheless, rather than the result of authentic altruism and civic sense, their actions are more correctly the only way they have to avoid being executed with their children by the cartel, and often cross the limits of legality in the name of a good cause (saving themselves).

The Robin Hood Narrative

Despite the different local adaptations and inflections, the construction of the outlaw hero involves a number of elements that, together, constitute a recurring and self-sustaining framework – the Robin Hood narrative: the traditional outlaw hero is a charismatic, strong, brave, clever and skilled individual (or group of individuals in the case of La Casa de Papel), who is forced to defy the law by the oppressive forces and interests of the power-holders; he outwits and escape the authorities; he distributes loot among the poor and helps the cause of the oppressed, gaining their support and sympathy (Seal, 2009). All this element are present in the narration of Narcos and La Casa de Papel: Pablo Escobar is a very intelligent man, who thanks to his cunning and sagacity escapes the police multiple times thanks to a thick and spread net of interpersonal connections and underground tunnels; the brilliant Professor and his group of brave and reckless criminals outwits the law enforcement agencies through and elaborate plan, running away with more than a billion euros - he then throw part of that money on the city of Madrid.

Robin Hood's figure refers directly to Hobsbawm's (1969, 1981, 2000) description of the social bandit, an individual acting against the law to subvert the status quo of the ruling and powerful elites, to denounce the oppression of minorities and poor, to fight social inequalities and stress underling tensions revolving around class, religion, ethnicity and other factors. The outlaw hero has the support of different communities and of the public opinion as his actions resemble forms of political resistance (Gates, 2006; Seal, 2009; Schneider & Winkler, 2013).

The outlaw tradition, in fact, exists within a set of social, political and economical circumstances which generate a conflict between different social groups, usually concerning the access to resource, wealth and power (Seal, 2009); outlaw heroes, in fact, arise in historical moments, when one or more social, religious, cultural and ethnic groups feel to be oppressed by the ruling and powerful elites: socio-political, economical and power differences cause underlying tensions, which may ultimately explode into an open conflict (Gates, 2006; Seal, 2009). Robin Hood-like figures take the side of the oppressed group, question, defy and, if possible, avenge the injustices. One example is Pablo Escobar's building houses and infrastructures in the slums - which earned him the surname Robin Hood Paisa - and then presenting himself as a candidate for the Congress to represent the poor Colombian class, neglected by the government and the institutions, gaining the eternal favor and support of the indigent, even after all the murders and bomb explosions he commissioned.

Outlaw heroes absolve the role of social bandits, representatives of the frustrations of the oppressed, denouncers of injustices and inequalities, the embodiment of political resistance to repressive governments and institutions, gaining the sympathy the support not only of the communities they stand out for, but of the general public opinion (Gates, 2006; Doods, 2011; Seal, 2009), as in La Casa de

Papel, where the Professor's band feats – occupying the Royal Mint and the National Bank – become a form of political protest against the established order in the eyes of the public.

Robin Hoods' actions are a reaction to social inequalities, an attempt to improve other people and their own condition.

Discussion

In traditional crime fiction, where the narration develops from the point of view of law enforcement representative, offenders are usually portrayed as irrational, violent and bad predatory outsiders. Crime becomes the creation of a psychotic mind, an evil threat invading normality.

Contemporary seriality scales down the criminal from an alien, monstrous identity to a person like us; perpetrators are set back in a social context: they have a family, friends, lovers, jobs – normal jobs; they have feelings, dreams; they make mistakes. They are human. They are no heroes, trying to save the world, nor villains, on a mission to destroy it – or more simply, to disrupt the social order.

Their construction as antiheroes results in complex and morally compromised characters, with a fluid identity – as emerged in the correspondence of the protagonists' personality with more character prototypes -, facing an endless struggle with society because of the refusal to meet its expectations and abide socially shared values and rules.

The ways of representation of criminals as antiheroes can then be traced within conflicts between familial and social structures and the characters personal codes of conduct (see Welsh et al., 2011; Shafter & Raney, 2012; Martin, 2013; Steward, 2016; Walderzark, 2016; Cardini, 2017; Di Martino, 2017; Balanzategui, 2018).

The (anti)hero and the good cause

The narrative theme “the (anti)hero and the good cause” produces a particular style of representation of the criminals as morally ambiguous characters. What emerges is in fact that offenders are portrayed as failed heroes, or, better, aspiring heroes. Both in the case of *You* and *Ozark* the protagonists are moved by the desire to help other people and to pursue good actions, but their willingness to accomplish it at all costs and by all means jeopardize their integrity. A proper hero, in fact, “is always right, selflessly fights for noble causes, is kind to all and is a natural and charismatic leader. He successfully fights against evil, saves those in distress and always reaches his predefined goals” (Eden et al., 2017, pp: 373). Not being able to achieve their goal by proper and legitimate means makes them consider crime as a solution and finally resort to it.

This representation of offenders as antihero correspond to a class of crime fiction representation delineated by Di Martino (2017), the “cathartic representation”, where the criminal acts in the name of a “good cause”. Di Martino calls this a strong mitigation of historical superheroes, always moved by good and ethically irrepressible motivations. This specific pattern, in fact, revolves around the transcendence of moral boundaries with the extenuating of pursuing a superior interest: acting towards evil to tend towards some good. The good cause functions as moral artefact of righteousness decriminalizing deviant acts (see Welsh et al., 2011 and Di Martino, 2017): offenders in fact infuse their crimes with a sense of

defending the good, presenting their acts as what had to be done at that moment, in that context, and thus as right; the moral artifact of righteousness allows offenders to commit deviant acts in a way that is not criminal (O'Brien et al., 2005^a).

In a Postmodernist perspective, ambivalent interpretations of deviance emerging from the analysis highlight conflicting dispositions of crime as evil and heroic at the same time, denying a definite contrast between good and evil.

However, crime representations take place in a wider social framework, marked by conflicts and injustices (Yar, 2010). In fact, "Heroic fictions presuppose some sort of failure of social arrangements [...] in a way that makes redemptive intervention from without necessary" (Richard Sparks, 1996 in Davis, 2014).

In Joe's case this means redeeming all the injustices and the factors that obstruct the achievement of a satisfactory life for his damsel in distress, and of which he is a witness; he cannot stay still in front of the failing promises of society disrupting the dreams of the girl he is in love with. Marty and Wendy Bird, on their account, try to face some implications of the capitalist economics, which tend to favor some at the expense of others, meaning the failure of many small commercial activities.

Societal conflicts, related to the power relations intrinsic of the capitalist, individualist and patriarchal society we live in, surface at an individual level, intersecting with the everyday life of the characters. They try to subvert the negative effects that living in our contemporary society might have, and alleviate the deriving struggles, by playing as *Deus ex Machina*, silently and covertly solving problems in their own and other people's life. Their tending toward heroism (both in a traditional and social conception) and their leaning into deviance blend the edges between good and evil, right and wrong, leaving the interpretation of the meaning to change from viewer to viewer.

The Robin Hood narrative

The Marxist approach's critical analysis of crime films and crime drama exposes the current relations of power and dominant ideologies preserved through dominant narratives of law and order as well as the cultural and political frameworks in which individual and local constructions of meanings are shaped. It uncovers the way dominant narratives of law and order enforces dissimulates social conflicts and injustices, providing alternative understandings of society (Yar, 2010).

Counter-hegemonic criticism can be applied to both *Narcos* and *La Casa de Papel* when taking them into consideration.

Outlaw heroes – Robin Hoods – rightly assume the role of social bandits, representatives of the frustrations of the oppressed, denouncers of injustices and inequalities, the political resistance to repressive governments and institutions that seem not to care about the most indigent and needy. Their actions are a reaction to social inequalities, a form of political protest against the established order (Gates, 2006; Doods, 2011; Seal, 2009).

What outlaw offenders really dispute is the legitimacy of the institutions. In fact, if legitimacy is the right to rule and recognition of that right by the ruled, then government, social institutions, and the police as well, need legitimacy to develop and operate effectively (see Tyler, 2006^a; Bottoms and Tankebe, 2012; Jackson et al., 2012); it is based on the recognition and the justification of power through the moral alignment - a shared set of coherent and consistent norms and values - of citizens and institutions (Jackson et al., 2012). Through legitimacy authorities and

institutions are perceived as proper and just, the law and the agents of law as the rightful holder of the authority: as such, they have the right to establish appropriate behavior (Easton, 1965; Tyler, 2006^a, 2006^b; Jackson et al, 2012). The police is one of the most visible institutions, an agent of social order entitled to define right and wrong: police legitimacy and public consent are necessary to justify the use of state power; in other words, those subjected to policing (the citizens) must see the police as right and proper (Tyler, 2006^b; Schulhofer et al., 2011; Jackson et al., 2012). In other word, legitimacy is what allows the dominant classes to maintain the current relations of power and social order intact.

In the majority of crime dramas, police agents are portrayed as good and competent, while the offenders are bad, unsympathetic and blameworthy (Cavender & Deutsch, 2007; Welsh et al., 2011): such representations reflect values that empower the interests of the dominant class and hide the responsibilities of social injustices (Yar, 2010). In *Narcos* and *La Casa de Papel*, we are presented with a totally different image: we see the police recurring to illegal methods, the same methods used by the criminals they are chasing, or worst. In the third season of *La Casa de Papel* the public acknowledges that the police and government, with the support of other international institutions, have approved the use of torture as interrogation technique; other state secrets, as the financial support provided to a terrorist group, leak to the press. In *Narcos*, confronted by the escalating atrocity of Pablo's bombing attacks and frustrated by an endless chase, the police try to catch him and his "banditos" by using their same tactics: police agents torture and kill suspects; they use murder to send messages; they even reach the point of assassinating children.

Police officers, and governmental institutions, exerting their authority in unfair ways undermines citizens' sense of obligation to obey them and the public perception of their moral authority; it raises doubts whether the law defines appropriate behavior. It invalidates the moral identification with the authorities that legitimate their actions and power: this leads individuals to question whether the authorities are in the position to fulfill their function and whether they have right to exist (Tyler, 2006^a; Jackson et al., 2012), to question the present social order and dominant class's interests.

In this narrative theme, then, the construction processes of the offenders as antiheroes result in the ambiguous and contradictory representation of criminals, who may commit indescribable atrocities, yet champion social inequalities and become defenders of the helpless through their actions.

Limitations

There is a number of limitations affecting this research. First of all, the choice of only four contemporary crime drama and the following analysis of only two thematic narratives do not provide an inclusive understanding of the ways criminals' portrays as antiheroes are constructed. Furthermore, basing the study on still ongoing tv series implicates some risks, as future characters' development that may lead to completely different interpretations.

The choice of examining just two narrative themes falls back mainly into practical reasons: in fact, although the crime dramas taken into consideration are rich of interesting insights, which range from parenthoods, to femininity and masculinity

crisis, to leadership strategies to cite a few, analyzing all of them would have required too much time and much more space than the one necessary for an article. They constitute for sure some starting points for further research. It has to be noted as well that series propose very complex characters – protagonists and not - who would be worthy of research by themselves.

Conclusions

In the framework of Cultural Criminology, studying popular culture constructions of crime, in particular mass media productions, may help to disclose how collective and socially shared understandings of crime and justice are created and affirmed (Ferrel, 1995, 1999; Hayward & Young, 2004; Kort-Butlere & Harstshorn 2016). Media, in fact, play a central role in building social phenomena, and their consumption in different forms - newspapers, television news and crime dramas - have in fact been proved to influence the viewers' perception of crime, their level of concern of becoming victims and their attitudes toward the criminal system (Surette, 2003, 2007; Dowler et al., 2006; Welsh et al., 2011; Kort-Butlere & Hartshorn, 2016).

Contemporary seriality is marked by the development of complex characters, provided with a fully structured personality, marked by a profound humanity in showing emotions, that leaves behind the more traditional characterization as totally good or totally bad to embrace a more ambiguous one: the antihero, whose actions stand out for traits of both heroism and evil (Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012; Cardini, 2017; Meier & Neubaum, 2019).

Crime dramas are no exception to this trend, and of particular interest for this research are the representations of criminals as morally ambiguous characters in four of the most watched Netflix's original crime tv series (You, La Casa de Papel, Narcos, Ozark).

The analysis concentrates on two narrative themes: “the Robin Hood Narrative” and “the (anti)hero and the good cause”, examined through a synthetic interpretative approach, developed by Tzanelli, O'Brien and Yar (Tzanelli et al., 2005; O'Brien et al., 2005^a; Yar, 2010), which condenses the Marxist ideological perspective and the postmodernist interpretative style. Both perspectives focus on the meaning of images, characters and narratives, although the former aims to uncover power relations and dominant ideologies used to reproduce them, while the latter stresses the diversity and indeterminacy of meaning deriving from interpretation, and thus the impossibility of producing a coherent ideology of films.

What emerges is that in both narrative themes the construction processes of the offenders as antiheroes result in ambiguous and contradictory representations: criminals are represented as able to commit indescribable atrocities, yet champion social inequalities and become defenders of the helpless through their actions; this is the case where offenders become outlaw heroes, absolving the role of social bandits, denouncing injustices, inequalities and the frustrations of the oppressed, becoming the political resistance to repressive governments and institutions that seem not to care about the most indigent and needy. Their actions are a reaction to social inequalities, a form of political protest against the established order and the legitimacy of the institutions (Gates, 2006; Doods, 2011; Seal, 2009).

The way of representation deriving from the second narrative theme presents many common points: criminals in fact are represented as aspiring heroes, whose integrity is compromised by their willingness to pursue a good cause at all costs. The leaning towards heroism is triggered by the daily life conflicts that derives by the way contemporary society is structured; despite they resort into deviance in the absence of legitimate solutions to the problems they face, offenders aim to solve the conflicts, making the world a better place.

Through the synthetic perspective it is thus possible to acknowledge the instable and contradictory visions of crime and justice which reflect internal societal tensions without losing sight of the wider socio-political background in which they are produced. These visions contribute to shape the public perceptions of deviance and criminality: how the modalities of representation of offenders as antihero influence and build such perceptions still needs to be investigated.

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