EMERALD POINTS

MAKING SENSE OF ULTRA-REALISM

Contemporary Criminological Theory Through the Lens of Popular Culture

JUSTIN KOTZÉ
ANTHONY LLOYD

MAKING SENSE OF ULTRA-REALISM

Ultra-Realism is one of the most exciting and innovative theoretical frameworks to have emerged from criminology in a long time. But its roots in continental philosophy and theoretical psychoanalysis are relatively unfamiliar to the discipline and quite different from its usual intellectual wellsprings. Consequently, ultra-realism has acquired a somewhat unfair reputation for being dense, inaccessible and intimidating to newcomers. Making Sense of Ultra-Realism *corrects this in one fell swoop. A mash-up of high theory and popular culture, Kotzé and Lloyd offer the uninitiated a highly accessible guide to ultra-realism, making foreign concepts and terminology familiar by quilting them through movies and television shows such as the* Avengers *films,* Fight Club *and* Game of Thrones *among others. Fun, thought-provoking and intellectually accomplished, it will be useful for established academics and undergraduate students alike. Quite simply, it is the book that ultra-realism needs.*

–Dr Thomas Raymen, Associate Professor of Criminology,
Northumbria University, UK

This book is a straightforward and accessible introduction to ultra-realism. This body of theory represents by far the most significant shift in criminological sense-making in recent years. It propels criminology into the twenty-first century, bringing with it a set of new, innovative conceptual frameworks and analytical tools. This text helps students of criminology – both within and outside of formal education – get to grips with ultra-realism. It uses relatable, contemporary examples that will resonate with them, and as such, facilitate their understanding. Theory can often be intimidating, abstract and impenetrable, but this book breaks through all of those barriers. Engaging and approachable texts like this help students see the real-world applications of theory. It shows them how they can use ultra-realism in their studies and beyond to make sense of the late modern world we find ourselves in, and begin to tackle the harms that emerge within it.

–Professor Elizabeth Yardley, Professor of Criminology,
Birmingham City University, UK

An enjoyable book that will be very useful for academics and students interested in exploring ultra-realism. The use of examples from popular culture work effectively to engage the audience and explain complex ideas. Ultra-realism is a theoretical framework with significant scope for development across criminology and the social sciences, and this book provides the opportunity for readers to appreciate its capacity and, I hope, take it in to realms of thinking where it has not previously been used.

–Professor Zoë James, Professor of Criminology,
University of Plymouth, UK

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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Dr Anthony Lloyd is Associate Professor in Criminology and Sociology at Teesside University, UK. His research interests primarily focus on work and labour markets. His research also includes investigation of urban sociology and migration. He is particularly interested in blending analysis of the workplace with emerging theoretical frameworks around critical criminology and social harm to understand experiences of low-paid, insecure and flexible forms of labour. He has published widely in this area and is the author of *The Harms of Work: An Ultra-Realist Account of the Service Economy* (Bristol University Press, 2018) and co-author of *Lockdown: Social Harm in the Covid-19 Era* (Palgrave, 2021).

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FOREWORD

Ultra-realism was really born of frustration. For us, much of criminology is polluted by out-of-date ideas and the sort of dour abstracted empiricism that fills databases with little more than quantified confirmation bias. What should be a field of dynamism, creativity and revealing intellectual discovery is beset by a range of tranquilising conventions that actively prevent the discipline moving forward to better represent the complex realities that today surround the abstract concepts of crime, harm and victimisation. Strapped firmly to the unchallengeable domain assumptions forced by various cultural activists to the forefront of the discipline, ultra-realists decided that the criminological agenda looks badly misaligned with popular social and political concerns.

Our project began quite simply as an attempt to represent more accurately the world in which people experience crime and harm and in which politicians and social administrators react. The early ultra-realists felt weighed down by the discipline's tendency to focus almost exclusively on social reaction rather than the contexts that underpinned crime and harm. These contexts needed to be revisited because political, economic, cultural and social life had changed quite substantially since the times in which the discipline's most influential texts had been written. Early ultra-realists knew that the suggestion to revisit what had become sacred ground might upset vested interests within the discipline, but they were unprepared for the hostility of the reaction that ensued. We were resilient enough to field the criticism, but we were very worried about leading students into the sort of censorious reaction that could damage their careers. But, of course, that decision is not ours to make, and the authors of this book number amongst a growing body of researchers who without fear decided to be faithful to their own curiosity. The discipline still refuses to celebrate them in the way it did its rather mediocre figures of the past, but that, thankfully, is not their main concern.

While the ultra-realist literature can often appear quite abstract, in the vast majority of cases the work of ultra-realist researchers is rooted in face-to-face investigative work with criminals, 'deviants' and victims. Actually meeting and getting to know active criminals tends to display just how idealistic and unworldly so much criminological theory really is. Despite what critical

criminologists have often claimed, many criminals believe their crimes have absolutely no political resonance. When violent offenders, drug dealers, thieves and fraudsters commit crimes, they are really not trying to fight back against the unfairness of capitalism. The true realities that make up the probabilistic contexts in which crime and harm are played out are far more complex.

We had no particularly grand ambitions when we set out on our project. We simply wanted to carry out our research on real-world crime problems, publish it in books and journals, and generally add to the canon of criminological scholarship. On occasion we were mildly acerbic when discussing the empirical and theoretical work of some of our disciplinary colleagues, but at no stage did we over-step the mark or go beyond disciplinary conventions. However, as time passed it became clear that some notable figures within the discipline were keen to censor and misrepresent our work. We were simply not interested in reproducing the discipline's dominant orthodoxies. We wanted to revisit reality and at the same time use new ideas from intellectual fields usually ignored by criminologists. We even had the temerity to introduce a handful of new analytical concepts. We developed a reputation as outsiders.

In truth, this probably has something to do with our shared class background, which clashed with academic criminology's tendency to reflect the concerns – and indeed the underlying fears – of middle-class left-liberals who dominate the discipline. Our outsider status created a range of problems for us, but we also managed to make contacts with others who were equally keen to poke their heads outside the main door of liberalism's criminological cathedral in order to accurately represent the real world.

Perhaps the most gratifying part of our long careers has been to work closely with many talented, open-minded and intellectually ambitious colleagues who, like us, have been willing to defy convention and follow the intellectual track wherever it takes them. Two of those colleagues are the authors of this book, and many others are mentioned within it. Some of these colleagues were once our students, and it has given us a huge amount of pleasure to watch them develop into world-leading criminologists. We still read their work carefully, and the sheer intellectual breadth and depth of their various studies and analyses gives us a vague sense that, even though criminology continues to display manifold problems, there are sections of the discipline that continue to forge ahead to illuminate contemporary crime problems.

For us, Kotzé's and Lloyd's *Making Sense of Ultra-Realism* will act as the definitive introduction to ultra-realism for some time to come. Kotzé and Lloyd have both contributed enormously to the development of ultra-realism,

and they know the field inside out. The book itself, as you're about to discover, is both accessible and a pleasure to read. The authors utilise a range of movies and TV series to show how a number of ultra-realism's core ideas can shed light on various features of everyday life.

In our long academic careers numerous open-minded students from all sorts of backgrounds have told us quite clearly that when it comes to understanding crime and harm, ultra-realism makes far more sense than other schools of criminological thought. There's no doubt that this book is an invaluable introductory text for students at all levels, but the fact of the matter is that ultra-realism is for everybody. We have no desire to maintain control over its development. We welcome the involvement of anyone who cares about accurately representing forms of crime and harm in their relevant contexts.

As Kotzé and Lloyd show, there's no need to be intimated by the various abstractions of ultra-realism. With a little work and some imagination, anyone can grasp its core concepts and put them to work explaining various features of the world we live in. We welcome you to the book, and we thank the authors for taking the time to write such an accessible and engaging introduction to the ultra-realist perspective.

Simon Winlow, Professor of Criminology,
Northumbria University, UK
Steve Hall, Emeritus Professor of Criminology
February 2022

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We would like to thank Katy Mathers and her colleagues at Emerald for helping us bring this book to life. For stimulating our interest in ultra-realism, we are eternally indebted to Steve Hall and Simon Winlow; your excellent scholarship, collegiality and unwavering support over the years has been invaluable to us and we are forever grateful. We would also like to acknowledge a debt of gratitude to Philip Whitehead, Georgios A. Antonopoulos, Thomas Raymen, Oliver Smith, Anthony Ellis, Luke Telford, Alexandra Hall, Louise Wattis, Georgios Papanicolaou, Victoria Bell, Daniel Briggs and Mark Bushell for their friendship and continued encouragement. For contributing their valuable insights and helpful study tips, we would like to thank all those students who took the time to share their thoughts and experiences with us. Your participation has certainly helped us in our endeavour to make ultra-realism more accessible and we are sure the reader will benefit immeasurably from your efforts.

Justin Kotzé thanks his co-author Anthony Lloyd for his friendship, support, encouragement and, of course, contribution to this book. It has been a joy to work with you on this publication. Finally, and most importantly, Justin would like to thank his wife, Claire. Thank you for everything you do and for your unfaltering love, support and encouragement.

Anthony Lloyd thanks his co-author Justin Kotzé for the friendship, support and continued collaboration. Most importantly, Anthony would like to thank Jo for, well, everything.

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INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

This book offers an introduction to the emerging theoretical framework of ultra-realism. The ultra-realist project is a relatively new development within criminological theory and still remains in the margins of the discipline (Hall & Winlow, 2015). Its founders, Steve Hall and Simon Winlow, in attempting to make sense of contemporary problems *as they exist in the world today*, found existing theories and explanations inadequate. Although aspects of criminological theory had proven useful and offered some insights, most interpretations either failed to address motivation and causation or did not appear to correspond with the reality emerging from research. This led to an intellectual search for tools that did provide coherent and logical explanations for the issues they had observed throughout their research (Hall, 1997; Hall, Winlow, & Ancrum, 2008; Winlow, 2001; Winlow & Hall, 2006). Ultimately, their efforts to answer a crucial question – why do some people willingly inflict harm on others in order to further their own expressive or instrumental ends? – moved them away from applying existing theories towards the development of new theoretical and explanatory tools. The aim of the book is to help the reader unpack the various concepts and theoretical tools that make up the body of ultra-realist theory.

Following Hall and Winlow's work, christened 'ultra-realism' around 2015, a small but growing group of criminologists and social scientists who agreed with its aim of offering a realistic interpretation of the problems of crime and harm and were committed to a 'warts and all' presentation of reality as it is began to use and interrogate this theoretical framework (Briggs & Gamero, 2017; Ellis, 2016; Kotzé, 2019; Lloyd, 2018a; Raymen & Smith, 2019; Tudor, 2018). Although marginal within the discipline, ultra-realism is

growing and has moved from looking at violence and masculinity to a wide range of issues including workplace harm (Lloyd, 2020), consumer culture (Smith, 2014), lifestyle gambling (Raymen & Smith, 2020), serial murder (Lynes, Kelly, & Uppal, 2019), environmental crisis (Raymen & Smith, 2021), counterfeit fashion (Large, 2018), steroids and performance-enhancing drugs (Hall, 2019; Kotzé & Antonopoulos, 2021), fraud (Tudor, 2019), drug addiction (Briggs & Gamero, 2017), debt (Horsley, 2015), hate crime (James, 2020), politics (Telford, 2022; Winlow et al., 2017) and the COVID-19 pandemic (Briggs, Telford, Lloyd, Ellis, & Kotzé, 2021). It seems that ultra-realism offers a degree of theoretical flexibility that allows its application to a range of contemporary issues. As such, it is also beginning to appear on undergraduate and postgraduate courses.

We have both taught criminological theory to undergraduate and post-graduate students for a number of years now and have incorporated ultra-realism into our modules. Given the breadth of its interdisciplinarity, ultra-realism's component parts often require readers at all levels to engage with subjects and disciplines outside of their area of interest or experience. Ultra-realism draws upon insights from theoretical psychoanalysis, philosophy and moral philosophy, neuroscience, history and criminological theory. This presents a challenge in teaching concepts like transcendental materialism, the pseudo-pacification process, special liberty and others. We have frequently discussed how best to break down these component parts, with examples that work best to hang these new and at times complex ideas in ways that facilitate student understanding. Using examples from popular culture has often helped. This book began as a discussion about how difficult it is to watch films without seeing elements of theory being played out on screen and, in particular, how the *Avengers* offered useful examples of transcendental materialism. From there, we quickly identified other cultural texts that provided useful insight, and we were off and running.

Cultural criminology long ago identified cultural texts as objects of criminological significance (Ferrell, Hayward, & Young, 2015). Academic research acts as a platform for understanding crime and criminology, but a growing recognition exists that other sources of knowledge can also generate pertinent insights (Rafter, 2007). Television and film have recently become central to the emergence of 'pop-criminology' (Rafter, 2007), where criminological theories are explored and representations of crime, criminals and the criminal justice system are dissected (Carrabine, 2008; Rothe & Collins, 2013). Pop criminology also offers insights into audiences (Wattis, 2021). As criminologists, we regularly field questions about serial killers and the latest Netflix documentary which indicates the popularity and reach of streaming services and the public

fascination with representations of crime, violence and harm. It also perhaps indicates that most people are unaware of the breadth of criminology as a discipline. Pop-criminology, however, allows for the exploration of criminological theory in relation to media embedded within the ideological framework of contemporary society (Raymen, 2018). Films and television perform ideological work by telling the viewer about crime, society and culture. How we perceive 'good' and 'evil', for example, is connected to the way these concepts are presented within mainstream culture. In this book, we explore some of this ideological work and focus on aspects of popular culture, through TV and film, to explore contemporary developments in criminological theory.

When teaching criminological theory, we have both found it useful to relate concepts to students in various ways, including using characters, scenes and plot from different shows or films. Although we have both learnt a great deal about what students do and do not watch (an entire first year social theory cohort springs to mind who had not seen *The Matrix,* therefore making a postmodernism lecture framed around the film much more challenging), using popular culture can help in terms of understanding theory and concepts and in testing and critiquing theoretical frameworks. For that reason, we have decided to introduce ultra-realist concepts in relation to a range of film and TV series. Our hope is that the reader can follow our analysis and begin to consider other examples that work as representations of each concept, or challenge the utility or accuracy of a concept.

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

The book begins with a brief introduction to ultra-realism and situates its emergence within the wider context of criminological theory. We outline the perceived limitations of a discipline that has moved away from questions of aetiology and motivation. Having highlighted the influences on ultra-realism, we briefly outline the core concepts of transcendental materialism, the pseudo-pacification process and special liberty. These represent attempts to move beyond existing ideas and concepts and offer tools that potentially explain challenging and troubling issues in the fields of crime and harm. From there, the following chapters each focus on a particular aspect of ultra-realism in relation to a specific film or TV series. In Chapter 3, we set out the transcendental materialist subject as a departure from existing interpretations of subjectivity and do so with reference to Loki, Ultron and Thanos in the *Avengers* films. Using insights from theoretical psychoanalysis and

neuroscience, the transcendental materialist position offers a unique interpretation of the complex relationship between the individual, ideology and society. Chapter 4 then focuses on Steve Hall's twin concepts of pseudo-pacification and special liberty. To examine these concepts, the *Pirates of the Caribbean* and *Indiana Jones* films offer useful insights. Pseudo-pacification draws on psychoanalysis and historical analysis to question whether human history is one of increased pacification and civility. It offers a critical interpretation of ways in which drive and libidinal energy are re-directed by social and economic forces but require balance and stabilising effects to prevent eruptions of violence, predatory behaviour and too much self-interested entitlement.

Chapter 5 introduces the concept of fetishistic disavowal through examination of *Game of Thrones*. This chapter considers Slavoj Žižek's concept, a key part of ultra-realist theory, and the 'reversal of ideology'; it asks a fundamental question about how ideology works on the subject in a postmodern culture of cynical distance. Using *Game of Thrones,* we demonstrate the human capacity to repress uncomfortable knowledge in ways that allow us to continue living our lives free from concern about wider harms and inequalities that may be present in the choices we make. In Chapter 6, Dan Brown's novel *Inferno* and its subsequent film adaptation provide insight into the idea of 'enlightened catastrophism' (Dupuy, 2014). This concept asks us to project ourselves into the future to recognise the reality of particular challenges and identify the scale of intervention required to prevent catastrophe. Drawing upon this key concept, ultra-realism's policy relevance is visible in its critical question: what is the level of intervention needed to change something?

In Chapter 7, we examine consumer culture, desire and lack in the context of Chuck Palanhiuk's *Fight Club*. Ultra-realism borrows from theoretical psychoanalysis and the work of Jacques Lacan to understand how we are driven by absence and lack but that desire is directed, through ideology, into outlets such as consumer culture. Here we consider the critical role of the unconscious and the power of ideology through discussion of the self-destructive behaviour presented in the book and film. Our last case study, in Chapter 8, investigates trauma and violent subjectivity through the TV series *Ray Donovan*. Ultra-realist criminology initially emerged from research on violence and masculinity and theoretical development has continued to look at 'violent subjectivity'. Most forms of committed and extreme violence are perpetrated by a small number of men and so insights into the unconscious, trauma, shame and humiliation, as well as the interrelationship between childhood trauma, biography and environment, offer a new way of looking at violence. In Chapter 9, we move from film and TV into the world of

criminological research. This chapter demonstrates how the concepts and theories outlined throughout the book have been applied in recent criminological research to show the wide range of contexts and the adaptability of these ideas. We finish with a short conclusion to summarise ultra-realism, its applicability and its future directions.

This book was conceived in light of our discussions about teaching these ideas to our students and has been written with students and newcomers to ultra-realism in mind. We have tried to break down complex ideas into easily understandable language and use examples to relate these core ideas. As we have taught these ideas to our own students over recent years, we also include some of their insights throughout the book. You will hear their voices and their words in each chapter as they offer insights into how they have come to understand aspects of ultra-realism and provide tips for learning and engaging with each concept. We hope this book helps to make sense of ultra-realism: to do so, we need to start at the beginning and show where ultra-realism comes from and where it sits within the criminological tradition. This is the goal of the next chapter.

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WHAT IS ULTRA-REALISM?

INTRODUCTION

This chapter will offer a short but comprehensive account of the emergence and development of ultra-realist criminology, its response to mainstream criminology and its core components. If later chapters explore specific components of the theoretical framework, it is important for the reader to situate those elements in the wider whole. The first part of this chapter locates ultra-realist criminology as a response to mainstream criminology and its apparent departure from attempts to understand causation and motivation (Hall, 2012a). We present an ultra-realist critique of established criminological positions through the key question at the heart of ultra-realism: *why do some individuals and groups risk harm to others in the pursuit of their own instrumental and expressive interests?* To answer this question, we present the theoretical and methodological tools provided by ultra-realist criminology and show the varied disciplines and traditions that underpin them. First, we explore critical realism's domains, or layers, of reality and through critique are led into the transcendental materialist framework (Johnston, 2008). In situating the discussion within the thorny issue of structure and agency, this then leads us into an account of the pseudo-pacification process (Hall, 2012a) and the libertine drive of *special liberty* (Hall & Winlow, 2015). Ultra-realism offers a range of tools to answer the key question posed above and, as we argue, suggests that this question should be at the centre of criminological research and investigation. Before we address this further, let us start with an overview of the discipline into which ultra-realism emerged.

CRIMINOLOGICAL ATROPHY: THE STALLED DIALECTIC

Criminology is an ongoing conversation about how and why people transgress the law, patterns of crime over time and what we do about this as a society. A range of perspectives have sought to understand this, and there are a number of assumptions that underpin those viewpoints (Hall, 2012a; Hopkins-Burke, 2018; Ugwudike, 2015). These assumptions reflect criminology's status as an 'importer discipline'; it borrows ideas from philosophy, sociology, psychology and others (Hall & Winlow, 2015). These *domain assumptions* shape the conversation about crime in specific ways:

- How do we measure or identify crime (for example, positivism/empiricism, constructionism)?
- What is true about the world (for example, idealism and realism)?
- Are people inherently good, bad or both (subjectivity)?

Ultra-realist criminology did not emerge in a vacuum; rather, it developed from existing criminological traditions such as left realism (Lea & Young, 1993) and in opposition to the discipline's apparent departure from questions of motivation (Hall & Winlow, 2015). As any first year criminology student can attest, the development of the discipline in the nineteenth and early twentieth century placed great emphasis on understanding the causes of crime: Lombroso's biological positivism situated criminality in one's genetic and physiological make-up; whilst Merton's strain theory contended that *some* individuals who face a disconnect between society's pronouncements of success and attainment and their own means of achievement would turn to crime in order to bridge the gap (Vold, Bernard, & Snipes, 2002). The Chicago School's social ecological perspective believed physical space to be a factor in criminality with a city's 'zone in transition' acting as an incubator of crime, whilst Sutherland's 'differential association' insisted that criminal behaviour was learnt through association with delinquent others (Hopkins-Burke, 2018). These theories differ but all share a common determination to understand the reasons behind those acts we deem to be criminal. However, as the twentieth century progressed and criminology developed as a discipline, that curiosity about *aetiology* – the understanding of causation – diminished and emphasis shifted to questions about what we do with criminals (Hall & Winlow, 2015). Questions about risk management, public protection (Feeley & Simon, 1992) and the control of criminal behaviour, dubbed 'controlology' by Jason Ditton (1979), moved to the fore. Situational crime prevention, underpinned by