

Visual criminology

Peter Francis introduces the contributions in the themed section.

The last decade has witnessed an extraordinary expansion in the nature, power and influence of visual images of crime, social harm and crime control. Whereas previously photography, film, art, television and the printed word coexisted and complimented each other, today, the mass development, manufacture and use of an array of accessible yet sophisticated digital technologies, together with the mediatization of society, has meant that images of crime and crime control are far more ubiquitous than ever before. So much so, according to **Keith Hayward** in the opening piece, the 'story' of crime is told as much today through the visual image as through the written word.

From video games that engage players in murder, mystery and mayhem, to sophisticated surveillance systems that recognise and respond. From the posting of displays of criminal activity on YouTube to facial recognition software. From television programmes that reinterpret post war community policing, to HD films that depict the future of crime control as dystopian and repressive. From signs and images that reassure to those that promote exclusion and surveillance. Today, the visual spectacle of crime and its control is without doubt intense, dynamic, complex and enmeshed throughout contemporary society.

Images have for centuries promoted particular or established meanings, symbols and discourses about crime, deviance and control. They have constructed the parameters around which the acceptable and the unacceptable, the good and the bad, the appropriate and the inappropriate, and the ordered and the disordered are framed. For example, media images of the bobby on the beat, the

austerity of the Victorian prison system, or the mug shot of the notorious criminal. Moreover the image has long since been associated with the work of the police, criminal investigators and the courts, and remains a mainstay of crime prevention strategies and techniques. The presence of CCTV, night vision cameras, infra-red hardware and Efit software all demonstrate the ways in which the visual image is used in crime and its control.

Criminology has also utilized, analysed and interpreted the image and its use over the centuries. However, it is only since the 1960s onwards that the discipline drew particular critical attention to the production, dissemination and manipulation of the media and the use of the visual image. And yet, for Hayward, it is questionable whether criminology can fully develop understanding and give meanings to the image in today's mediatized society without developing further its theoretical, methodological and conceptual frameworks. It is for this reason that he states that there is 'no option but the development of a thorough-going visual criminology... capable of understanding the dynamic force and power of visual culture'. For some, this is a project well underway – see for example the work published in the journal *Crime, Media, Culture* - and the forthcoming volume of essays by Hayward and Presdee (forthcoming 2010).

Given the size and *raison d'être* of *cjm*, this issue is not the place to articulate a coherent and sustained rationale for a visual criminology underpinned by a cultural analysis such as that promoted by Hayward and colleagues, however persuasive their perspective is (see Hayward et al 2008). Rather the approach here has been to bring together a range of practitioners and academic

researchers whose work broadly falls under the heading of visual 'criminology', in order to showcase scholarly and creative work, and to highlight the potential of a criminology that embraces the dynamics and power of the image and visual culture. This rationale underpinned the CCJS photographic competition entitled What is crime? a highly successful competition held in 2008/2009 reported on by **Tim Walker** for *The Independent* newspaper.

While each of the contributors to this issue articulate well the importance of visual analyses of crime and its control, none does so better than **Jeff Ferrell**, whose own work over a number of years has developed understanding of the relationship between visual culture, crime and society. Here he uses the art of graffiti to demonstrate the need for a critical and reflexive visual cultural criminology, informed by ethnographic documentary photography. The danger in 'reading' graffiti, he states, is to take at face value the visual accessibility of the work. He argues that subtleties of meaning informed by visual and interactional codes undermine 'easy understanding or analysis' of graffiti art. '...[T]hese subcultural codes confound what can seem so visually self-evident'.

Today the power of the visual image is as much a consequence of its immediacy and accessibility as it is the symbolism and meaning it conveys. Images of crime and control can be created, downloaded, uploaded, reproduced and disseminated in a matter of minutes to an audience already primed on where to look and informed about what to look out for. The speed and ease through which images can be produced and disseminated has for some contributed to a 'democratization' of crime control. As **Sharron Lea** highlights, its use by artists, activists and academics has opened up criminal justice organisations such as the police to scrutiny and critique. Take for example the death of Ian Tomlinson at a G20 protest in London. The Guardian newspaper obtained visual images of Tomlinson, who was not

part of the demonstration, being assaulted from behind and pushed to the ground by baton-wielding police.

Or the way in which inexpensive cameras, mobile phones, web based media and mobile streaming technologies have challenged mainstream discourses on crime and its control. Similarly, the image has, as **Jo Aldridge, Cecil Greek, Susan Takata and Jeanne Curran** demonstrate, been used to support the development of a range of participative and reflexive methodologies in social research and learning and teaching.

Yet it is not just a collective of arts activists and academics that have embraced developing visual imaging technologies. So too, has much of the criminal justice system itself. **Rob Mawby** highlights how organisations such as the police and local authorities are now more adept at managing their 'public face', their visibility and thus 'accessibility' to the public through image manufacture and digital interfaces. However, as Mawby goes on to note, the use of the image and visual digital technologies to promote accountability, democracy,

participation and engagement must be weighted heavily against the threats posed by it.

The rapid development and refinement of technologies of image creation, production, manipulation and dissemination mean that the likelihood of its misuse and misinterpretation are high. Certainly there are ethical issues that surround image capture, use, dissemination, interpretation and storage. As **Katherine Biber** reminds us, images require interpretation, something that for her is not necessarily the uppermost in the mind when courts utilize photographic evidence.

Scrutiny, intrusion and surveillance are often by products of an image ready society. Another surrounds the manipulation of such imagery, especially at the hands of the powerful, big business and the state. **Roy Coleman** uses the example of the post social city to examine the consequences of the prioritization of the visual over the social in much regeneration practice to create and reproduce spaces and places of power and influence and exclusion and regulation, with accompanying discourses able to bring to the fore, hide and

manipulate. Cultural renaissance alongside symbolic and performed regulation and enforcement are played out through tightly constructed visual frames.

Whether it is the dystopian visions of social control promoted in science fiction films, the exhibition of crime through contemporary art practices, the construction of idealised spaces through specific images and accompanying language, or the identification of wrong-doing through lens based photography, there is a need for criminology to further engage in careful analysis and understanding of the power and dynamics of visual culture and of the meaning and purpose of the image in contemporary society. ■

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References

- Hayward, K, Ferrell, J and Young, J. (2008), *Cultural Criminology* London: Sage.
- Hayward, K. and Presdee, M. (2010), *Framing Crime: Cultural Criminology and the Image* London: Routledge.
- Crime, Media, Culture* London: Sage. An international journal.



Dark Waters by Alex Masi. The blackened contaminated waters of the Krishna river are photographed in the village of Chandenamal, pop. 1,500, Muzaffarnagar District, Uttar Pradesh, India. The river flows through the Indo-Gangetic plains of Uttar Pradesh, India, where discharges from numerous industries enter watercourses and penetrate underground reservoirs, endangering the health of local communities and the environment.