Visual criminology: cultural criminology-style

Keith Hayward makes the case for 'visual criminology'.

One of the defining features of the last decade has been the rise of the 'Mediascape' – that bundle of media which manufactures information and disseminates images via an ever expanding array of digital technologies. From criminals who record their crimes and post them on YouTube, to the grainy CCTV footage that drives the slurry of primetime 'cops and robbers' compilation shows. From unreal 'reality TV' moments that shape moral values and social norms, to stylised representations of crime and power in comic books and even on criminology textbook covers. Ours is a world 'where the screen scripts the street and the street scripts the screen', where there is no clearly linear sequence, but rather a shifting interplay between the real and the virtual, the factual and the fictional.

The power of the image

Such conditions are especially worrying because today the 'story' of crime and crime control is told as much through the image as through the word. Some might say there is nothing inherently new about this; that mug shots, surveillance photographs, and newspaper pictures of notorious criminals have long been a part of the 'spectacle' of crime and punishment in modern society. However, given the manipulative force associated with the late modern Mediascape, the situation we face today is considerably more intense and ubiquitous. Whether it is mobile phone footage of degradation ceremonies in Iraqi prisons; streamed compilation videos of suicide bomb attacks and roadside IED detonations

(filmed from several angles) in Afghanistan or Chechnya; or underground 'fight videos' and other images of brutality and victimisation viewed on office computer screens and children's mobile phones, it should be clear to all that whilst everyday life in Western society may or may not be suffused with crime, it is most certainly suffused with images of crime.

Given this is the case we have no option but the development of a thoroughgoing *visual* criminology. For some, such a 'visual criminology' is already with us. After all, phrases like 'images of' and 'media constructions of' are now common, and commonly accepted, prefixes to conventional criminological categories such as policing and prison studies. However, this disciplinary drift into the realm of the image hardly constitutes an adequate visual criminology. Simply importing images into a discipline defined by words and numbers is in fact likely

to *retard* the development of new forms of visual criminological analysis. Instead of simply studying 'images' we need a new methodological orientation towards the visual that is capable of encompassing meaning, affect, situation, symbolic power and efficiency, and spectacle in the same 'frame'. This new approach must seek to fuse precise visual attentiveness with politically-charged analysis, to be as attuned to representation and style as it is to the ways visual culture impacts on individual and collective behaviour. Put simply, the time for a criminology capable of understanding the dynamic force and power of visual culture is now.

Contemporary visual representations of crime, transgression, and punishment take us far beyond the realm of the criminal justice system or law-and-order politics; even beyond established understandings of the media's role as 'a storehouse of illicit excitement', a ready resource for the voyeuristic consumption of violence and tragedy.

Cultural criminology

This is exactly the point where cultural criminology enters the frame. Over the last decade or so, cultural criminology has emerged as a distinct theoretical, methodological, and interventionist approach that situates crime and crime control squarely in the context of cultural dynamics (see Ferrell et al., 2008, for a general introduction). From this view, crime and the agencies and institutions of crime control operate as cultural enterprises – that is, as richly symbolic endeavours created out of ongoing human interaction and power relations. As such they must be read in terms of the contested meanings they carry. That said, concepts such as situated meaning, symbolic richness, or cultural flow are, of course, meaningless unless they incorporate a thoroughgoing consideration and appreciation of the visual. Thankfully, cultural criminologists have a longstanding interest in both symbolic interaction and the way meaning and power

Figure 1: Signs of control. Photos: Tim Turner and Majid Yar.

are negotiated and displayed through the effervescences of mass-produced imagery. Similarly, from a methodological perspective, cultural criminology embraces visual analysis, with readings and counter readings of images and imaginative media/textual case studies and deconstructions featuring from the outset (see e.g. the international

journal *Crime, Media, Culture*).

And there's a world of imagery out there to be studied – from the violent digital netherworlds of crime simulation video games, to the increasing use of signs and images as tools of social control in public space (see Figure 1). From the use of transgressive images in advertising (see Hayward, 2004; Muzzati, 2010) to the art/crime nexus that surrounds urban graffiti (see Jeff Ferrell's article in this edition). Moreover, consider if you will, how important visual technology and imaged form have become within contemporary Western policing (not to mention the ever expanding battalions of security and para-policing agencies). Whether it's identifying 'known offenders' via 'algorithmic surveillance' systems; using dashboard-mounted cameras in police squad cars; the photographing and videotaping of crowds and individuals at political demonstrations and protest marches; the use of TV shows like *C.O.P.S* and

L.A.P.D: Life on the Street by certain US police forces as both recruiting tools and informational devices to keep up with developments in other police departments; and now even the deployment of miniaturised uniform and helmet-mounted personal video cameras by beat officers, it's clear that police work is now very much visual work. Indeed, one might even venture that we are fast approaching the point where prospective police officers might be better off enrolling on a media studies course than a criminal justice degree!

Meaning, understanding, and consequences

Images permeate the flow of cultural meaning in any number of ways, and just as they can be used to serve the state, they can also be used to monitor and critique it. For example, anyone who has recently attended a political demonstration or even a football match in the UK will no doubt be familiar with the sight of

Figure 2: Two wheels bad for Officer Pogan. Source: YouTube.com.

police officers photographing and filming the scene for surveillance and crowd control purposes. Now while, for some, such practices are just further evidence of an all consuming Big Brother state, for cultural criminologists it might just be the trigger for organisation and resistance, as the power of the image is democratised as a result of the panoptic gaze of digital citizenry.

For example, it's 28 July 2008, and Times Square in New York City is deluged by hundreds of bicyclists as the activist group Critical Mass holds one of its monthly rides. During the ride committed urban cyclist Christopher Long, 29, is involved in a collision with rookie NYPD officer Patrick Pogan. Tension has been running high between the NYPD and Critical Mass since 2004, when 250 riders were arrested for parading without a permit during a protest rally against the Republican National Convention. Perhaps no surprise, then, that Long was arrested on charges of 'Attempted Assault in the Third Degree', 'Resisting Arrest', and 'Disorderly Conduct'. However, within days of the incident, a video of the collision (shot by a tourist) surfaced (see Figure 2).

It revealed that, far from being Long's fault, the 'collision' had been caused deliberately by Officer Pogan who violently body slammed Long off his bike and onto the pavement.

This being the case, it is increasingly important that all criminologists become familiar with the various ways in which crime and 'the story of crime' are imaged, constructed and 'framed' within late modern society.

Within days the story was taken up and publicised by video activists such as the Glass Bead Collective, the TIMES UP Video Collective, and *I-Witness Video*, all groups who know more than a thing or two about using images in defence of civil liberties. This small collision became big news (over 1.6 million people have viewed the YouTube footage of the incident) – and ultimately big trouble for Officer Pogan. In an incredible *volte face* by the NYPD, Pogan was first suspended and later indicted by a Manhattan grand jury for falsifying a police report and assault. In the words of *I-Witness's* Eileen Clancy,

> *This indictment is a signal event for video activists. Despite the abundance of video showing that police officers have fabricated charges against people arrested at demonstrations, in New York City at least, we have never before achieved an indictment of a police officer for lying in a sworn statement.*

Five years ago my colleagues and I commented that images of crime were becoming almost 'as 'real' as crime and criminal justice itself', with mediated anti-crime campaigns, visually constructed crime waves, and media fabrications of counter cultural imagery all circulating in 'an endless spiral of meaning, a Möbius

strip of culture and everyday life' (Ferrell et al. 2004, pp. 3-4). Back then, cultural criminology's goal was to provoke debate and play with the parameters of the discipline. However, surveying the world five years on, such proclamations – when set alongside the above example – now appear less flights of futurological fancy and more commonsense observation. This being the case, it is increasingly important that *all* criminologists become familiar with the various ways in which crime and 'the story of crime' are imaged, constructed and 'framed' within late modern society. Cultural criminology aims to provide both the method and the theoretical framework to allow criminologists to do just that. ■

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For more on visual criminology see Framing Crime: Cultural Criminology and the Image by Keith Hayward and Mike Presdee (2010, London: Routledge), a forthcoming edited collection that offers both theoretical insights and practical advice on how to carry out your own visual cultural criminology.

References

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