



Book Review

Bill McClanahan (2023) *Visual Criminology*. Bristol, UK: Bristol University Press

Kajsa Lundberg

The University of Melbourne, Australia

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Many years ago, I wrote my master's thesis on the visual aspects of homelessness and the implications for the increased criminalisation of homelessness in many parts of the world. Engrossed in the developing field of visual criminology, I was fascinated to learn about the many ways in which the so-called 'criminal justice system' is concerned with regulating the image, aesthetics and visual indicia of 'deviance'. I argued that understanding the criminalisation of homelessness requires us to scrutinise the visual hierarchies that structure the social world. Since then, I have turned my attention to climate change, state-corporate harm and human-non-human relations. Meanwhile, I have let myself drift away from 'the visual', almost starting to believe that 'the visual' while not unimportant was, well, relatively irrelevant in the context of my research.

Bill McClanahan's (2023) *Visual Criminology* has rekindled my interest in the visual and has inspired me to contemplate what visually attuned criminology could bring to my work. McClanahan dexterously shows the reader that even areas seemingly far from the visual have much to learn from interrogating visual displays and their governance. The book is the perfect starting point for everyone—from students to established academics—who wants to immerse themselves in the visible and to integrate techniques and insights from visual criminology in their training, research and teaching.

Part of Bristol University Press's *New Horizons in Criminology* series, which highlights innovative theoretical perspectives relevant to the discipline, *Visual Criminology* is a straightforward and easy-to-digest summary of this theoretical perspective. 'Visual criminology', as defined by McClanahan, is an orientation geared towards images, their production and the processes to which they give rise in our encounters with visual displays. Significantly, these encounters shape our understanding of crime, harm and justice. Hence, 'visual criminology' is about more than images and the use of images to present criminological work; it is a new way of looking at the social world as it relates to topics relevant to criminology more broadly.

In addition to defining 'visual criminology', the book (in Chapters 1–3) introduces the theoretical foundations underpinning such work and outlines some of the methodologies associated with the field. After that, it engages with various examples of what a visual criminological way of seeing reveals on the topics of environmental harm, drugs, punishment and prisons, and the police (Chapters 4–7). (Many of the issues addressed in the book draw on or connect to McClanahan's earlier work in areas such as green and cultural criminology and police violence). In the concluding chapter (Chapter 8), the author contemplates the constraints or limitations of visual criminology and its intersections with various related perspectives, such as cultural, spatial and sensory criminology perspectives. The book pays tribute to the work that preceded it; however, it also moves beyond mere



descriptions. In the words of the author, the book is both about what ‘has been done, and how that might be done’ (McClanahan, 2023: 14). In that sense, the book is aspirational; it identifies several areas of potential exploration for visual criminology and discusses what the techniques and methodologies that form part of the perspective can bring to scholarly analysis.

I imagine that most people working in criminology have at least some idea of what constitutes ‘visual criminology’. Crimes, punishment, law enforcement, courtrooms and other forms of criminal ‘justice’ interventions clearly form a significant part of our lives through images, television shows, documentaries, social media and so on. Without denying the importance of these representations in shaping public understandings of crime and justice, many students and scholars might feel that visual analysis is not for them. McClanahan’s engaging book, however, could convince even the most sceptical readers of the utility of a visual field for criminology. This, for me, is the book’s most significant contribution.

For example, in relation to environmental harm, it becomes clear that even the very meaning of ‘nature’ is intertwined with *looking*, which is mediated through our visual culture. Moreover, ‘greenwashing’, which involves the conscious manipulation of packages and branding to appear more sustainable, is another area that McClanahan highlights for its visual importance. McClanahan also emphasises cinema and media representations and other mediated images of drug use as significant areas of contestation in relation to the meaning of drugs, their use and their prohibitions. These issues, we learn, are connected to central questions around the ethics of representation. For scholars interested in punishment, the author argues convincingly that our understanding of prisons, punishment and even to some extent, state power is formed mainly through the visual imagery of prisons. As McClanahan (2023: 108) writes, ‘the world of punishment is a visual one’.

Images also form a significant means of resistance. This is demonstrated in the book through the imagery of prison abolition as a form of resistance and in the ways in which visual representations are used to depict and contest environmental harm, such as images of the polar bear at risk of extinction or kangaroos and koalas escaping bushfires. That is to say, resistance is often employed and communicated through still or moving images. Finally, drawing on the murder of George Floyd by a police officer in May 2020 in Minnesota, the author notes the significance of a (public) spectacle in producing, materialising, expressing and resisting police power.

There is little to critique in this book, or, at least, there is little that McClanahan has not anticipated in terms of criticisms and that he has not subsequently addressed. For example, as the author acknowledges early on, the book draws primarily from American perspectives and examples. That said, what is important—and what translates to other cultures and peoples—is the insights that visual approaches can bring to criminological analyses on a range of topics. Clearly, sight is not the only one of our senses that matters, and there is more to crime and justice than visual criminology can capture. McClanahan is, of course, not ignorant of the importance of avoiding ocularcentrism, given that one of his most celebrated works in recent years has been a paper co-authored with Nigel South on sensory criminology (McClanahan and South 2020).

In conclusion, the book is a significant rallying cry for ‘visual criminology’. I hope this work contributes to further critical engagement with the visual qualities of social and political life. All areas of criminology, not only those that are apparently visual, such as photographic or film analyses, will likely benefit from engaging with the theoretical and methodological approaches of *Visual Criminology*.

Correspondence: Kajsa Lundberg, PhD Candidate, The University of Melbourne, Australia. kajsa.lundberg@unimelb.edu.au

References

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