Visual criminology and lives lived in public space

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Abstract

In January 2017, several homeless people gathered outside Flinders Street Station in Melbourne, Australia. The gathering gained significant media attention and led to an immediate political response, with the city council proposing changes to ban rough sleeping in the city. Drawing on insights from visual criminology and moral geography, I scrutinise how visual regimes and aesthetic judgements helped motivate this punitive response. To do so, I combine ten in-depth interviews with homelessness service providers and a critical discourse analysis of how Melbourne's two daily newspapers reported on the camp. I identify how the newspapers represent homeless people as violating the idealised aesthetics of the city, a violation which comes to discursively justify their criminalisation. Moreover, the way a person looks and their belongings, if stored in public space, direct their reception and whether or not they become subjected to police interventions. Finally, representations of homelessness matter and alternative representations of homeless people could shift the emphasis away from criminalisation, in favour of policy responses to homelessness attuned to structures of social and economic inequalities.

Key words

Aesthetics, criminalisation, homelessness, moral geography, public space, transgression, visual criminology, visual regimes
Introduction

During a couple of hot days in January 2017, several people, most of them homeless, gathered outside Flinders Street Station in Melbourne, Australia. The station is both an important transport centre of the city, and a key gateway to the Australian Open tennis tournament, which was occurring at the time. For these reasons, the gathering was quickly picked up by the news media. The Melbourne tabloid newspaper *Herald Sun* soon named the gathering the Flinders Street ‘homeless camp’ (for example, Davies and Hamblin 2017; Zervos 2017). Shortly after, Robert Doyle, the Lord Mayor of Melbourne at the time, proposed changes to the Activities Local Law 2009 to ban rough sleeping. After allowing the public to submit their opinions to the City of Melbourne, on September 26, 2017, the council abandoned these proposed changes (City of Melbourne 2017a), Instead, they announced a formal protocol ‘to address rough sleeping in the city’ (City of Melbourne 2017b, para. 5). According to the operating protocol, Victoria Police have the authority to intervene when a person carries more than a ‘reasonable minimum’ of belongings, when furniture, mattresses or tents are being used ‘that could be deemed as camping’, when large groups of people are sleeping rough near one another, and when entrances to buildings, fire escapes and disability accesses are blocked (City of Melbourne 2017c).

The Operating Protocol is a punitive response geared towards the criminalisation of people experiencing homelessness and their associated behaviours. This is in line with a propensity of governments in countries around the world to turn to criminalisation in responding to homelessness, the result of strict rules around public conduct from both local and state levels of government (Amster 2003). As Young and Petty (2019) note, following the Operating Protocol homeless people and their belongings in public spaces are further policed and regulated. They write: ‘it is not criminalisation as such – because there is no offence attached to having too many bags, or sleeping in the wrong formation on the street – but the police are able to enforce its micro-aesthetics despite them being un-criminalised’ (Young and Petty 2019, 452, emphasis in original). Criminalising visual cues of poverty and homelessness, I argue, is a way for governments to avoid addressing social and economic inequalities and other
structural causes of homelessness. Rather, such policies are intended to allow law enforcement to remove homeless people and their belongings from public spaces.

In light of this tendency to criminalise rather than aid, I draw from visual and aesthetic criminology in examining the visuality of homelessness. I outline the findings from a critical discourse analysis of *The Age* and the *Herald Sun*, the two most read, and only daily Melbourne-based newspapers. I also refer to ten in-depth interviews I performed with volunteers and staff working with homelessness service providers in Melbourne. Visual criminology is a perspective incorporating the visual, such as still or moving images, into criminological research (for example, Brown and Carrabine 2017). Drawing on the insights of visual criminology, I examine how visual cues and regimes shaped representations of homelessness in the wake of the Flinders Street ‘homeless camp’. I identify a tendency in the two newspapers to represent the homeless camp as impacting negatively on the image of Melbourne and homeless people as anti-social and even criminal. Such reporting appears to justify the City of Melbourne’s added restrictions on homeless people. Moreover, the way a person looks and the items they collect have implications on their representation, reception and whether or not they become subjected to police interventions. The result from this study thus fits into the recurring process of excluding what is considered non-aesthetic from urban public spaces. However, significantly, alternative representations have the ability to break this vicious cycle. Alternative representations of people experiencing homelessness, I argue, have the power to subvert these negative representations and to elicit responses to homelessness beyond criminalisation, addressing structural issues that contribute to homelessness and harm.

**Homelessness and its criminalisation**

Although the rough sleeping homeless person is the most conspicuous form of homelessness in the city, Petty (2016, 73) highlights ‘homelessness as a complex set of phenomena, rather than a singular material condition’. People experiencing homelessness are diverse with different needs, and there is a broad range of ways people experience homelessness (Kawash 1998, 324).¹ Yet, homelessness policy and research tend to be informed by simplistic framings situating homelessness in relation to poverty and issues of substance abuse (Lancione 2013, 238), constructing
homelessness as a discrete and quantifiable problem. This, Farrugia and Gerrard (2016, 269) write, ‘serves to disassociate its causes from the wider social relations of contemporary inequality’. Furthermore, a large proportion of homeless people in Australia are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and thus ‘to talk about “homelessness” here is to talk about colonisation, the unmaking of Indigenous place, about spatial inequality and structural violence’ (Giles and Carlson 2017, 9). Due to the aforementioned limitations of homelessness representations, in this article I examine and critique such framings. I also highlight various ways of countering these with alternative representations of people experiencing homelessness. Following critiques of how homelessness is represented (Farrugia and Gerrard 2016; Giles and Carlson 2017; Lancione 2013), I seek alternative representations that can resituate homelessness as a matter of social injustice and inequality.

Neoliberal agendas, gentrification and intensified housing precarity contribute to evictions and homelessness around the world (Lancione 2017, 1013; 2020, 32). Moreover, many researchers have criticised the increased privatisation of public space (Chaskin and Joseph 2013; Iveson 2007; Toolis and Hammack 2015). As more and more parts of the city become privately owned, the right to the city streets and parks becomes constricted in favour of middle-class consumption and entertainment spaces (Ferrell 2012; Toolis and Hammack 2015). As a consequence, people experiencing homelessness are considered unwanted in public spaces (Iveson 2007; Kawash 1998; Mitchell 1997) and are often surveilled and targeted by police interventions (Amster 2003; Giles and Carlson 2017; Toolis and Hammack 2015).

A propensity to criminalise the unique aspects of homeless peoples’ lives, such as begging, camping, loitering and sleeping in public spaces, has been observed in cities around the United States, the UK and Australia (Amster 2003; Baker 2009, Coleman 2005, Young and Petty 2019). Researchers have documented the harms caused by such legislation within Australia, such as unnecessarily involving people in the criminal justice system and intensifying their financial difficulties (Adams 2012, 2013; Jordan 2012; Walsh 2004). Homeless people lack access to private spaces and they spend their lives in public. Amster writes: ‘constrained to exist in public places, the homeless are constant targets of regulation, criminalization, expulsion, and erasure’ (2003, 214). Accordingly, to criminalise their behaviour is to criminalise
their existence. Criminalisation is an irrational and profoundly harmful response to homelessness. Rather than recognising the structural issues that contribute to the vulnerability of some people, banishing them from public places achieves nothing but a displacement of the problem. By examining the visual aspects of homelessness that contribute to this policy response, I highlight and contest the harmful framings of homelessness that come to justify police intervention and criminalisation.

The aesthetic city

Lancione promotes the need to investigate the relationship between homeless people and the city (2013, 239). I respond to this challenge, examining the aesthetic and visual elements of urban homelessness. Aesthetics have long been a concern within art criticism, mainly surrounding the quality of art and the being or not being of objective beauty (Millie 2014, 2). Aesthetics have always been applied to cities where it concerns what is considered beautiful and ‘good’. ‘Aesthetic order’, Millie writes, reflects ‘an expressed need for an orderly urban aesthetic’ (2017, 4). The aesthetic order is essentially political, and anyone or anything contradicting it exposes themselves to resistance and criminalisation (Millie 2017, 4). Gerrard and Farrugia write, ‘the “sight” and “scene” of homelessness appear as stains and blights on the city space, whilst the infiltration of capital in public space appears customary and common sense’ (2015, 2221). This phenomenon is highlighted by ‘quality of life’ policies and policing such as anti-homeless laws (Ferrell 2012, 1689; Harvey 2008, 31). Consequently, many perceived crimes and transgressions are, in fact, aesthetic experiences and practices.

Moreover, ‘aesthetic signals’ strongly influence what behaviours and aesthetics, and thus what people, are accepted – or rather judged to be ‘antisocial’ or even criminal. Homelessness services often concern themselves with improving the aesthetics of homeless people through, for example, haircuts and clothing. ‘Improving’ the appearance of homeless people can give people dignity and allow them to avoid the stigma of looking homeless (Speer 2019, 576). This article complements this body of literature, demonstrating the nature of the aesthetic contraventions of urban homelessness to better understand the criminalisation of homelessness.
To engage with the aesthetic expectations of urban public spaces, I draw on the concept of moral geography to analyse the ‘ethics of space’; that is to say, what behaviours most people interpret as acceptable versus transgressive in a particular space (Proctor 1998). McAuliffe claims that it is ‘an empirical focus on what kinds of people and behaviours belong where’ (2012, 191). Places tell a story about normativity; they structure appropriate and transgressive behaviours (Cresswell 1996, 8). In defining a transgression, an ‘authority’ considers the place, the event and the meanings associate with that place, hence, Cresswell writes, ‘(s)omething may be appropriate here but not there’ (1996, 8).

Within moral geography, the definition of morality is often elusive. One of the few moral geographers who has suggested a definition is Matless. His understanding of ‘morality’ is based on one of Foucault’s definitions of the term: there are moral codes and expectations, based on which people tend to regulate their own behaviours (Foucault 1985, cited in Matless 1994: 129). Foucault identifies how individuals construct themselves as ‘ethical subjects’ and act ‘in reference to the prescriptive elements that make up the code’ (1985, 27). This definition of ethics helps me understand better the way individuals construct and engage with the ethical codes around them. The ‘normative expectations’ of space give rise to transgression (McAuliffe 2012, 191). Transgression can thus work on visualising the ethics of space.

Nonetheless, transgression means different things to different people. When diverse normative ideas meet in a place, the people with power come to define the ‘normative geographies’ (Cresswell 1996, 10). Power is central in defining appropriate and transgressive behaviour, and the media is critical in setting the parameters of transgression. For this reason, in teasing out how visual cues and regimes shaped representations of the Flinders Street ‘homeless camp’, I analyse and contrast media discourse with ideas expressed by homelessness service providers.

**A broadened visual perspective**

Until two decades ago, ‘visual representations’ were marginalised in social sciences, as this branch of science considered images to lack scientific rigour (Carrabine 2017, 27). Within criminology, the same scepticism surrounding images prevailed (Finn
Increasingly, however, criminology is turning its gaze towards the visual (Carrabine 2017, 23), and this article is an attempt to augment these efforts. Visual criminology joins the criminological analysis of structures of control and power, such as criminalisation, with the focus on representations of crime through visual regimes, their contestation and effects (Brown and Carrabine 2017, 1). Visual criminology examines the way sensory information gives rise to understandings of crime, crime control and resistance (Brown and Carrabine 2017, 6). Therefore, it is well suited to examine the Flinders Street homelessness camp’s visual displays which induced the local government’s punitive response to homelessness. In contrast to more recent work that examines sensory information beyond ocular impressions (for example, McClanahan and South 2020; Millie 2019), this article centres on the visual othering and contestation of homeless people in public space.

Visual criminology places a large emphasis on the emotional aspects of crime (Cavender and Jurik 2017, 226) and on ‘the emotive and affective life of the criminovisual…’ (Brown and Carrabine 2017, 2). Affect is an under-studied quality of urban activity (Thrift 2004, 57), and in my analysis, I draw on affect theory to understand the response the homeless camp evoked. According to Young, ‘affect denotes an intensity that connects individuals to the social world in a relation that pre-exists the emotional states to which we give names such as “fear”, “anger”, “pleasure”, “outrage” and so on’ (2014, 162). Following Young, I understand affect as something that connects us to the world. Affect is distinct from emotions but can give rise to emotions, understanding and actions.

According to Pauwels, ‘the “visual” should not be reduced to or equated solely with images’ (2017, 63). We do not need a photograph of homelessness to view and judge it, instead, Gerrard and Farrugia write, ‘images of homelessness are familiar scenes in everyday life, and the opportunity to view, represent and judge occurs in every encounter and viewing’ (2015, 2223). This article draws on this statement, by looking at the way the ‘image’ of homeless people is represented and received, considering media images in addition to encounters with homelessness in the streets. There is a clear difference between media images which are selected, framed, confined and curtailed through the editorial process and the visual landscape of homelessness, which is far broader and more ambiguous.
Although I recognise that the visual is one of many senses (McClanahan and South 2020), I argue for the acknowledgement of the ambiguous, mutable, flexible and subjective interpretations that ensue from the encounter with homelessness, in the media and public spaces. I value the observable and pay attention to visibility (and invisibility) in the construction of social problems. Following Young’s ‘criminological aesthetic’, I examine images together with the acts of spectatorship and interpretation (2010, 83). There is an ‘affective nature’ to the encounter with an image, highlighting the aesthetic and political elements of that engagement (Young 2014, 161). Similarly, an affective process ensues as we encounter homelessness on the streets of our cities. Following Young (2010; 2014), it is this process, rather than the spectator or the vision of homelessness in isolation, that gives rise to affective encounters with homelessness. Hence, the affect does not just depend on the vision of homelessness but also on the state of and the interpretation by the spectator engaging with that scene.

Methods

Homelessness is an issue often portrayed in the media. The media also contributes to popular understandings of homelessness (Hodgetts et al. 2006, 502; Mao et al. 2012, 6). In line with analyses examining how print media represents homelessness (for example, Mao et al. 2012; Zufferey 2008; Zufferey 2014), my analysis primarily examined newspaper articles narrating the 2017 Flinders Street ‘homeless camp’. This article incorporates an analysis of twenty-five articles from (the only) two Melbourne-based daily newspapers, fourteen articles from the Herald Sun and eleven from The Age, reporting on the homeless camp at Flinders Street Station. Both papers represent the two most read news sources online and in print in Victoria. The Age is a broadsheet, Fairfax publication, whereas the Herald Sun is a tabloid News Limited publication (McKay et al. 2011, 613). I sampled purposely (see for example, Mao et al. 2012, 3): choosing most of the articles that referred to the ‘homeless camp’ between Monday, January 2nd and Tuesday, February 28th 2017, as this was the time the two newspapers most frequently discussed the camp. I excluded only smaller news items and opinion pieces due to their lack of images and their different style. Finally, I sampled the forty-two images from the chosen articles.
Of interest to my analysis was the language, discourses and images that were drawn upon to represent homelessness and the homeless camp. For this reason, I scrutinised the media articles using critical discourse analysis, a diverse and problem-oriented approach to research (Weiss 2003; Wodak 2018). This approach assisted me in analysing the relationship between media representations and social, historical structures and events (Jørgensen 2003: 63). This process included looking at my sampled texts as a form of discursive practice, recognising their role within larger discourses and power relations (Fairclough 1993; 1995). Furthermore, using principles from work within visual criminology, such as visual structures, regimes and representations, I examined the representations of homelessness in the media images accompanying the articles (for example, Brown and Carrabine 2017). Using these analytical tools, my analysis identified various themes, narratives and tropes that recurred throughout the 25 articles.

In addition to examining these media representations of the 2017 Flinders Street homeless camp, I draw from ten interviews with volunteers and staff representing seven homelessness service providers around Melbourne. From these interviews, I learnt about the social responses to homelessness (see, for example, Zufferey 2008). Although interviews with people experiencing homelessness would have contributed an important perspective to this study, this article supplements such work (for example Lancione 2019; 2020), drawing from service providers’ insights into the challenges facing people experiencing homelessness. My focus was on second-generation homelessness services that help to manage the homeless peoples’ existence on the streets rather than attempt to provide housing. Once again, I used purposive sampling for the interviews, as I attempted to find organisations providing a variety of services that a homeless person requires. The volunteers interviewed represent services that together provide showers, laundry, haircuts, food, temporary shelter, clothes and sanitary items. The interview participants were thus able to talk about the experiences of encountering and assisting people experiencing homelessness in public spaces.

Although the project is located in critical discourse analysis and visual criminology more broadly, I coded the interviews and media analysis inspired by grounded theory principles, a methodology mainly centred on generating theories from empirical data.
(Charmaz and Belgrave 2015). Following Gioia, Corley and Hamilton, I coded the data thematically in three steps (2012). In figure 1, I outline the steps taken from the initial data gathered, (that is the first order analysis), to the higher-level themes (the second order analysis) and the final theoretical development (see Gioia, Corley and Hamilton 2012, 15). In particular, I highlight the visual and aesthetic properties while crediting the voices of the interview participants.

As highlighted by visual geographers, seeing ‘makes us responsible in all kinds of ways’ (Yusiff 2010, in Moran 2017, 95). Similarly, Armstrong (2017, 416) emphasises ‘the visual as problematic’ and that ‘taking on (visual or any other kind of) representation is at the same time reproducing it’. This reproduction is very prominent in relation to the image representation of poverty and homelessness (Elwood and Lawson 2018, 4). Any form of photographic representation is therefore fraught, and, in this article, I refrain from including the news media photographs. Instead, I describe the general tendencies identified.
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<td>‘a blight on our city’</td>
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<td>‘shirtless man who urinated in public’</td>
<td>Moral geography around Flinders Street Station</td>
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<td>‘particularly with the start of the Australian Open’</td>
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<td>‘shopping trollies full of JUNK’</td>
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<td>‘moved him because he was a mess’</td>
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<td>‘aggressively pursued locals and visitors’</td>
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<td>‘photographed using drug paraphernalia’</td>
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<td>‘a part of your wellbeing, to be able to look after yourself’</td>
<td>The importance of looking good</td>
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<td>‘No, I’m not allowed to, because I’m on the street, I’m too dirty’</td>
<td>The importance of looking good</td>
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<td>‘they’ll see five or six people drunk, with a tin, and they’ll think: that’s homeless people!’</td>
<td>The visual regimes</td>
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<td>‘standing over people is just a bit impersonal’</td>
<td>The visual regimes</td>
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Figure 1: Examples of the first order terms, second order themes and final concepts developed through the analysis.
The aesthetic city violated

The image of Melbourne

The analysis of the two newspapers reveals that one of the most considerable problems concerning the homeless camp, noted by six of the twenty-five articles, was the adverse impact that the homeless camp was having on the image of Melbourne. The *Herald Sun* mostly highlighted the image of the city from the perspective of the tourists attending the Australian Open.

The sight of the camp has shocked overseas visitors. American Jack Fielding said: ‘I’m from (Washington) DC, and I’ve never seen anything as bad as this… It’s not a good look for Melbourne. It doesn’t look like the world’s most liveable city from what I’ve seen so far,’ Mr Fielding said. ‘More like something you would find in the backstreets of Delhi’ (Jefferson and Masanauskas, 2017, January 18, 1).

Such comments might well make a reader worry about the impact of homelessness on the image of the city. The comparison with ‘the backstreets of Delhi’ invokes an image of slums and deep economic despair. *The Age* similarly highlighted the visual impact the rough sleepers were having on the city. Still, instead of interviewing tourists, it included quotes, mainly concerning the need to intervene, from local authorities such as the Launch Housing deputy chief executive, an anonymous councillor spokeswoman and the Lord Mayor:

‘I welcome any move by police to bring an end to what has become a blight on our city, and the City of Melbourne continues to work with them to do that’ [Lord Mayor Cr Doyle said] (Preiss & Choahan, 2017, January 21: 5).

‘Homelessness is the most important issue facing the council at the moment,’ the councillor said, ‘and this looks completely intolerable as far as I’m concerned’ (Dow and Toscano 2017, February 3, 6).
The newspaper articles framed the homeless individuals as ‘blight’ on the aesthetics and the image of Melbourne, and the papers called for measures to reduce the perceived problem. Such representations come to discursively justify the removal of homeless people from urban public spaces. These representations are in line with research (for example, Ferrell 2012; Mitchell 1997) claiming that the priority attributed to the quality of urban life comes to exclude some people from public spaces.

Moral geography around Flinders Street Station

The fact that Flinders Street Station was on an important passageway for Australian Open visitors is key to understanding the perceived transgression of the homeless camp. The Australian Open transformed the moral geography of Flinders Street Station in a way that not only made the visibility of the homeless and the homeless camp even more contradictory to the ethics of space but also increased the ‘newsworthiness’ of the camp (see Jewkes 2004).² The Herald Sun represented the homeless as transgressing the ethics of space. Moreover, it implied that the tennis tournament visitors altered the expectations of conduct:

Yesterday, as tourists passed through the railway station on their way to visit the Australian Open tennis and other city attractions, at least 20 people were still camping outside. They included an aggressive shirtless man who urinated in public despite a nearby public toilet (Masanauskas and Davies 2017, January 19, 1).

The Age highlighted the connection between tennis visitors and the reaction to the homeless camp:

A homeless encampment outside Flinders Street Station has attracted increasing attention in recent weeks, particularly with the start of the Australian Open (Dow and Mills 2017, January 19, 13).

The representation of the homeless camp as impacting negatively upon the aesthetics of the city and the added concern of the large number of tennis visitors both contribute to the framing of the camp and its residents as anti-social and transgressive. Studies have indicated that both personal observations of homelessness and mass media influence the public opinion of topics including homelessness (for a substantial
review see Calder et al. 2011). Such media representations of the homeless camp are therefore alarming and they appear to discursively justify the added restrictions on homeless people later introduced by the City of Melbourne (City of Melbourne 2017c).

Homelessness as a law enforcement issue

The ‘othering’ of the homeless population

Based on their conversations with people, reactions from friends and family and their perceptions of homelessness before they started volunteering, all participants of this research expressed the view that the dominant image of people experiencing homelessness is negative. The participants experience the public perception of the homeless as a combination of various visual tropes, such as long hair, beard, and dirty body and clothes. ‘Beard and long hair, sleeping rough, that’s how most people would see it’ (interview quote). Furthermore, according to the majority of interview participants, homelessness is regarded by the public as a matter of individual responsibility or choice, and the homeless population is often associated with violence as well as drug and alcohol dependency. ‘The perception that people on the street are homeless because of drug and alcohol’ (interview quote). These answers are in line with previous researchers’ critique of the dominant framing of homelessness as occupying a distinct space within urban environments, and as homeless due to individual defects (for example, Farrugia and Gerrard 2016).

The image of the homeless person conveyed by the participants thus emphasises their ‘otherness’ compared to the general public. The normative community considers people experiencing homelessness to be morally flawed (Amster 2003, 199) and homeless people to be defective consumers and defective users of public space. In other words, people experiencing homelessness tend to live their lives in ways culturally understood as different and transgressive of the general ‘understanding of how to be on the streets’ (Shand 2018, 261). This othering, in part, depends on visual representations of homelessness in the media and the urban landscape and it often results in exclusionary policies, securitisation of public spaces and criminalisation to remove that which does not fit in (Low and Iveson 2016, 13).
By contrast, the participants of my interviews all emphasised that people experiencing homelessness are representative of all segments of society. The volunteers said that it normally is difficult to tell the volunteer and the people experiencing homelessness apart when they provide services on the streets. In other words, the dominant image of the homeless among the majority of the public is different from the understanding of the service providers. We know that the visual is ‘as much about what cannot be seen (or understood) as what can’ (Carrabine 2015, quoted in Brown 2017, 488) and the stereotype of the homeless person is created as much from what is seen as from what is not. It is therefore essential to consider the many aspects of homelessness missing in this interpretation. Missing are, for example, women and children, who do not fit the stereotype of a rough-sleeping male. Since criminalisation is the (very flawed) act of separating right from wrong, good from bad and, acceptable versus unacceptable behaviours at a particular time and place, the view of homeless people as essentially different from the general population is fundamental to their criminalisation.

The battle to belong and for belongings

Based on the interviews, the perceived disruptiveness of the homeless aesthetic is exacerbated by a tendency to consider belongings, when encountered in public space, as ‘junk’ or ‘a mess’. One interview participant explained:

There was a lot of people camping out under the bridge... when the council got sick and tired of the mess down there, they moved people on and ... a young couple had seven shopping trollies full of JUNK, and they wondered why it got thrown in the compactor rubbish truck.... They had a double bed, double mattress, a double bed base, two side boards and just all their clothes and push bikes and other paraphernalia that they’d collected as possessions. … It becomes an eye-sore.

A bed, a bike and some clothes, common things to own, become seen as a problem and ‘an eye-sore’ when stored in public space. As a consequence, such belongings can be removed by the council. Hence, ownership connotes access to private space. Similarly, when a person experiencing homelessness is deemed by authorities to
impact negatively on the aesthetics of the city, by collecting items around them, they get ‘moved on’ by the police. One participant explained:

Unfortunately, homeless people can be their own worst enemies, leaving litter and stuff everywhere and continually getting moved on…. There was one guy on Elizabeth Street … and he was fine, the council and the police left him alone cause he kept the area clean and tidy. And then he started collecting items, to have as personal items and unfortunately, he started to have it clotted-up, so the council came in and moved him because he was a mess.

Homeless people become seen as a problem (and a police matter) when they start to impact negatively on the aesthetics of the city by collecting too many belongings and by storing those belongings in public space. Likewise, many news stories on the homeless camp mentioning their ‘stuff’ invited the reader to conclude that homelessness is directly associated with an aesthetically lacking city which contributes to framing homelessness as a law enforcement issue. As stated in the Herald Sun: ‘As the makeshift camp grew in size yesterday, tourists and locals were forced to navigate through the piles of bedding, rubbish and pet waste’ (Davies 2017, January 19, 5). Many newspaper photos also highlighted the possessions stored around the station, thereby enhancing the view of the camp as negatively impacting on the aesthetics of the city.

In both newspapers, people experiencing homelessness are presented as a problem partly on account of the aesthetic impact they have on the city spaces they occupy. The solutions to this impact that currently dominate in Victoria are regulation and criminalisation. As outlined in the introduction, the Operating Protocol introduced as a response to the homeless camp is strongly associated with the ‘stuff’ a homeless person might collect. Victoria Police are authorised to intervene when a person collects more than a ‘reasonable minimum’ of belongings, mattresses, tents and other furniture in public space (City of Melbourne 2017c). The Protocol, Young and Petty write (2019, 10), ‘signals a shift towards the conjoining of the force of criminal regulation with the problem of visible homelessness.’ The ‘stuff’ collected by
homeless people and their camps is utilised in the protocol and police enforcement as an excuse to remove homeless people from public spaces.

**Associating homelessness**

Media reporting is influential in creating and sustaining stereotypes surrounding people experiencing homelessness. At the time of the homeless camp, the media was crucial in constructing a view of the homeless camp as intolerable and dangerous. Nine of the twenty-five articles focused on how people experiencing homelessness were acting aggressively or using ‘drug paraphernalia’ at the homeless camp or close to it. In their reporting, the two newspapers tended to either highlight aggressive behaviour witnessed by the public, or the fear the public was experiencing in encountering homeless people, such as this quote from the *Herald Sun*:

> Several rough sleepers aggressively pursued locals and visitors. And many were photographed using drug paraphernalia (Jefferson and Masanauskas 2017, January 18, 1).

Since the media tend to inform the public about events outside their direct experiences, the media has a significant ‘agenda setting function’ (Hall et al. 1978, 62). The events reported on by the media are highlighted as important and pressing. As the media often is the primary source of information, the way the media represent and frame an event also comes to influence how the public interprets an event (Hall et al. 1978, 57). This type of narrative continually brings together the events, such as homelessness, aggression, drug use and violence, leading to processes of normalisation (see Abbot 2008, 44); that is to say, these events become framed as connected and contributing to homelessness as a law-enforcement issue.

Illustrative media images tend to reinforce the visual and moralised tropes of homelessness. The homeless people captured in the photographs in the articles were often unshaven white men, sitting or lying down on the street (see for example Zervos 2017, January 25, 8). There was also a tendency in the newspapers to associate homelessness with law enforcement and crime visually. Three of the images displayed people smoking out of bongs, and another twelve depicted rough sleepers and uniformed police officers together. Thus, the images came to solidify and augment a
narrative that normalised the association between homelessness and drug use, and between homelessness and law enforcement.

Similar to graffiti and street art, homelessness comes to challenge the ‘prevailing aesthetic order of the city’ (Millie 2017, 4). Ferrell (1993, 116) has noted that when determining the legality of street art, style and aesthetics are crucial. The result from this study thus fits into a more extensive, perceivably repetitive, process in society, where what does not correspond with the dominant aesthetic order of the time, is criminalised and banned from urban public spaces. Broken Windows Policing, for example, originated with a hypothesis by Wilson and Kelling (1982) assuming that visible signs of disorder such as broken windows, graffiti, or beggars will lead to more serious crime in a neighbourhood. Police forces in and beyond the US draw on this criticised hypothesis to justify the removal of ‘undesirable’ people from public spaces, based on the assumption that their mere presence will lead to serious crimes (Amster 2003, 207). Theories such as Broken Windows Policing contribute to framing people experiencing homelessness as an undesirable presence in public spaces. Moreover, they frame homelessness as a criminal justice issue, which comes to marginalise further and penalise already vulnerable people.

**Representation matters**

The importance of looking good

Similar to Speer (2019, 576), I found that various services focus on the visual appearance of people experiencing homelessness in an attempt to maintain good hygiene and health and because they believe this will contribute to wellbeing and provide an increased sense of dignity to people experiencing homelessness. Services provide showers, haircuts and laundry, while a clothing shop allows homeless people to express themselves through brand new clothes. Many of the service providers interviewed emphasised the importance that self-perceived physical appearance has on the wellbeing, self-esteem and dignity of an individual, in short, their ‘internal wellbeing’. As one service provider expressed:
I think it’s a part of your wellbeing, to be able to look after yourself to be able to be clean and to be able to exercise your sense of style, and individuality. I think that is really important. It’s a part of a bigger puzzle that makes up your wellbeing.

Moreover, the way a person looks will also have implications on how others, such as potential employers, perceive a person experiencing homelessness. The way people look - their visual appearance, dress sense, hair, cleanliness, presence of facial hair - all of their personal aesthetics, will influence the affective response they receive. A participant explained: ‘A lot of the people that we see at the Soup Van don’t have work, because they can’t get experience, because they don’t look right - perceptions!’ Although ideally, we would live in a world where the way we look, and dress does not define us to others, we know that, to quote Goffman, ‘(w)hen an individual enters the presence of others, they commonly seek to acquire information about him… enabling others to know in advance what he will expect of them and what they may expect of him’ (1956, 1). Changing the visual appearance of a person experiencing homelessness can thus be a means to prevent others from associating them with the negative stereotypes of homelessness and criminality.

Nonetheless, one participant also described how people experiencing homelessness might be too dirty to access a shower. ‘James’, who had been living on the streets for years, told a service provider that he had not had a shower in ‘six or seven years’. When the service provider questioned this, saying that there was a place just nearby where he could have a shower, James claimed that he was not allowed to shower there:

Then he goes ‘No, I’m not allowed to, because I’m on the street, I’m too dirty. They tell me that they don’t wanna catch anything. The other people complain.’ So, yeah, I went inside and talked to the guy that run it, and sure enough he said: ‘No, James is not allowed to shower in there because all the other people complain.’

The way a person looks has direct consequences for how they are understood and responded to in a particular space, and whether a behaviour is considered transgressive or not. Negotiating personal aesthetics and expectations is, however,
tricky. If people consider a homeless person to look too good, it will impact negatively on their status as a person in need of donations or other forms of support. On the other hand, if a person appears too scruffy and untidy, they might instead be associated with ‘the undeserving poor’ (Gerrard and Farrugia 2015, 2230). I argue that this constitutes an expectation violation, as a homeless person’s visual appearance might violate the visual expectation of what homelessness is and what it looks like.

The way a person looks has direct consequences for, what I call, the ‘spatial meaning-making process’ that determines how others perceive them. This is a concept that connects representation, aesthetics and perception. Behaviours, seen as normal when taking place in private space or by people considered to have non-transgressive personal aesthetics, can be deemed improper when performed by people experiencing homelessness in public space. An example of this relates to the consumption of alcohol, as one participant expressed:

I get so many people saying ‘I’ll donate a product but I don’t wanna donate money cause I don’t know what they’re gonna spend it on, you know, they might spend it on alcohol.’ I spend [some of] my money on alcohol!

Millie has noted that ‘street drinking city workers are more acceptable than a street drinking homeless person, with the homeless person regarded as “unsightly” and moved on’ (2014, 5). The worker is assumed to contribute to the economy more than a homeless person and ‘if you are not making a significant contribution to the economy your presence is more likely to be criminalized’ (Millie 2014, 5). The personal aesthetics of an individual leads to a particular interpretation of that person, which has direct consequences for the perceived transgression of their behaviours.

Additionally, in public spaces, people have certain expectations as to how to look. Wearing certain types of clothes, or a lack thereof can come to transgress the ethics of a particular space. Personal aesthetics and moral geography thus work in tandem. Spatial meaning-making processes give rise to specific affects that come to define transgressive behaviour by a particular person, in a specific instance and place. The
stigma attached to homelessness comes down hardest on those that look a certain way. Furthermore, personal aesthetics understood as transgressive and unwanted affect the aesthetics of a place, which lead to attempts to remove some people from public areas, as exemplified by the Flinders Street homeless camp.

The visual regimes

However, most people experiencing homelessness do not concur with the dominant stereotype of a homeless person, as a person sleeping rough or begging. Therefore, they are often not recognised as such by the general population. Homeless or not, the few that do fit the stereotype, can thus come to structure the public perception of the rest of the homeless population (Gerrard and Farrugia 2015, 2221). As a service provider expressed:

‘Aren’t they all drunk? Aren’t they all on drugs?’ So, that’s people’s misconceptions as well. They’ll walk down Melbourne, and they’ll see 5 or 6 people drunk, with a tin, and they’ll think: that’s homeless people!

Homelessness is made sense of by the public through visual representations and regimes. The service providers pointed out that wearing vests or jumpers that distinguish the volunteers from the people experiencing homelessness can contribute to separating the volunteers from the service users visually and thus increase the divide. However, service providers can also contest the same regimes through human connections. One participant mentioned how sitting down next to a person experiencing homelessness can have a positive impact on that interaction:

So, if I approach someone, if someone is experiencing homelessness, when I’m walking around, I’m always dressed so that I can sit on the concrete with them, because standing over people is just a bit impersonal. It’s very, sort of dominating.

Visual regimes contribute to the social positioning of people experiencing homelessness. The media images of the homeless reinforced the representation of people experiencing homelessness as not only different but also subordinate to the general public by depicting them in sitting or crouching positions, often with their heads turned down towards the pavement. This repeated visual trope and lack of
alternative renderings of homelessness contribute to the manifestation of homeless peoples’ perceived subordination. In contrast, the visual positioning of the passers-by captured in the images was constantly ‘above’ the homeless person, backing visual regimes of homeless people as less than, different and separate from the public. Similar representations can be found among the visually homeless people in the city that are often looked down on, in a literal sense, by the public walking past.

However, homelessness service providers can subvert such negative representations of people experiencing homelessness. One of the most important parts of the homelessness services’ work with people experiencing homelessness, most interview participants claimed, is to create conversations. The meetings between the volunteers and the homeless people subvert the dominant, visual representations of the homeless population as unworthy, subordinate and separate from the public. A view that is, at times, internalised by people experiencing homelessness. Instead, it creates new and contesting visual manifestations and contributes to the wellbeing of the service seekers.

Elwood and Lawson highlight how different and disruptive forms of homelessness can challenge the dominant narratives and representations of poverty, homelessness and exclusion (2018, 3). Such alternative representations of homelessness, they write, can make the issue visible to the public and challenge the mainstream understanding of homelessness and poverty (Elwood and Lawson 2018, 11). Similarly, the meetings and conversations between service providers and people experiencing homelessness can construct positive representations of inclusion, giving rise to the opportunity for alternative encounters with homelessness in public spaces. Alternative encounters can produce different affective and emotional experiences compared to the negative representations of homelessness as a blight on the aesthetic city.

Conclusion

The visual transgressions of homelessness in public space is central to understanding its criminalisation. Naturally, there are other factors at play, such as economic, historical and political dynamics. Nonetheless, the visual encounter with
homelessness, the homeless body’s positioning in public space as well as the belongings they collect, are essential to comprehend the response to homelessness in general and the Flinders Street homeless camp in particular. I want to end by highlighting some lessons from examining the ocular impressions of homelessness. These, I suggest, can assist the subversion of the criminalisation of homelessness, in favour of policy responses to homelessness that take into account broader structural issues that contribute to homelessness and harm.

Elwood and Lawson highlight how ‘creative poverty activism’, such as visual installations representing a different side of poverty and homelessness, can challenge the dominant narratives of exclusion (2018, 3). These forms of activism can work to bring people experiencing homelessness back into public spaces, providing them with a platform and crediting their knowledge and stories (Elwood and Lawson 2018, 11). This form of activism can also, Elwood and Lawson maintain, ‘force privileged people to witness and hear these claims and to enable direct (often uncomfortable) challenges to thinkable poverty politics and the subjects who reproduce them’ (2018, 11). The representation of people experiencing homelessness as complex people with rich inner lives and life histories subvert the prevailing negative representations and make possible alternative encounters with the homeless experience, through images as well as on the streets of our cities.

Homelessness is given meaning to, and made sense of, by the public through visual representations and regimes. An important task for homelessness services is therefore to contest current visual regimes that place homeless people as visually subordinate to the public. Homelessness services have the opportunity to create new visual regimes of equality, inclusion and community through personal connections. In addition, the way someone looks will impact on how that person feels and how others treat them. Therefore, homelessness services should (and, as this article indicates, many already do) facilitate the maintenance of the personal aesthetics of people experiencing homelessness. Moreover, possessions, when stored in public spaces, tend to be considered rubbish and negatively impacting on urban aesthetics. Therefore, giving the homeless person a safe place to store their belongings in a way that does not impact negatively on the visual experience of the public could improve the homeless
situation significantly. There are, however, currently few services that attempt to help people experiencing homelessness with safe storage locations.

These are examples of how homelessness services can support the everyday lives of people experiencing homelessness. The focus on aesthetics and the right look however ‘risks reducing homelessness to a problem of appearance’ (Speer 2019, 577) and this is a far cry from housing and caring for people experiencing homelessness. Nonetheless, the visual subversion of negative and harmful regimes that paint homelessness as other than the general population and challenges one-dimensional and unsophisticated understandings of homelessness is an important step to move towards representations of homelessness and poverty as structural issues rather than the result of individual flaws (Elwood and Lawson 2018, 18). This will encourage more positive and effective policy responses to homelessness and contribute towards banning the criminalisation of homelessness on local and state government levels, rather than excluding people experiencing homelessness from public spaces. An alternative is ‘mediated conviviality’, an approach to public spaces that encourages inclusive public engagement, where policies and governance are directed towards allowing different people and cultures to share the use of public spaces (Barker 2017, 856). Mediated conviviality is based on policy and design aimed at managing difference in public space without resorting to criminalisation, with the use of, as Barker (2017. 850) notes, ‘mediators skilled in persuasion, negotiation and procedural justice.’

As I make the final revisions to this manuscript, we are living through the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic of 2020. In so many ways this crisis has exacerbated the needs for private spaces, and emergency laws in places such as Melbourne mandate people to stay inside their homes. This is yet another example of how homelessness is criminalised as homeless peoples’ presence (hanging out or begging in public space), is, once again, outside the acceptable norms and rules of behaviour. The current health crisis, as any crisis, mostly affects those already in vulnerable positions and this includes people lacking shelter. The pandemic makes visible the normative expectations of space and how people experiencing homelessness, often unintentionally, come to transgress these. It also clearly shows that prohibitions and
criminalisation do little to mitigate these problems, highlighting the need for structural, cohesive and complex responses to houselessness.

The rapid governmental responses to homelessness during the pandemic in both the UK (Madden 2020, June 2) and in Australia (Knight 2020, June 8) demonstrate possible alternatives to such punitive responses. Before the Australian lockdown took effect, more than 7,000 people were moved off the streets and into motels, hotels and vacant student accommodations (Knight 2020, June 8). This is an unprecedented effort attesting that, with the right incentives, rough sleeping can be virtually terminated. This is an example of the government employing hands-on support rather than calling on the criminal law to remove homeless people from public space. Such initiatives, I have argued, should extend beyond the pandemic and beyond Australia.

Notes

1. Ritterbusch and Cilencio similarly emphasise the full range of experiences taking place in the streets, including friendships, heartbreaks, violence, work, education and drug use (2020, 8).

2. The activities in the homeless camp came to be considered ‘actions out of place’ (Cresswell 1996, 10).

3. Ferrell therefore considers graffiti to be ‘a crime of style’ (1993, 168).

4. See Barnesmoore’s discussion around ‘ontological justice in the city’ (2018, 197).

5. The term visual trope is borrowed from, among others, Kohm’s (2017, 190) work on representations of the paedophile.


7. People experiencing homelessness tend to be identified as the perpetrators of violence even though they are much more likely to become the victim of violence (Giles and Carlson 2017, 9).

Acknowledgements

I want to thank all people that volunteer to support people experiencing homelessness and especially acknowledge those that took the time to participate in this research. I also extend my gratitude to everyone who read and reviewed earlier drafts of this article.
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