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CRIMES OF THE SENSES: YARN BOMBING AND AESTHETIC CRIMINOLOGY

ANDREW MILLIE*

Yarn bombing involves the display of knitted or crocheted items in public space, often without permission. This article draws on interviews with yarn bombers in the North West of England and considers who the yarn bombers are, their motivations and experiences and their views on the legal status of yarn bombing. Although the visual is important for yarn bombing—and it is therefore of interest to visual criminology—this article also looks further to consider other sensory experience. In this way, it contributes to an emerging aesthetic criminology concerned with broader sensory, affective and emotive experience. Drawing on Thrift's work on urban affect or mood, as well as Anderson and Young on affective atmospheres, yarn bombing is regarded as a crime of the senses affecting both the look and the feel of the city. The scope for further development of an aesthetic criminology is suggested, including specific methodologies that embrace the full range of sensory experiences associated with crime, disorder or social harm.

Key Words: yarn bombing, urban intervention, visual criminology, aesthetic criminology, affect

Introduction

This article contributes to an aesthetic criminology by exploring the sensory qualities of yarn bombing as it occurs at the margins of legality. Yarn bombing happens when knitted or crocheted items are displayed in public space, often without permission and thereby having the potential to come into conflict with civil and criminal law though issues of trespass and property ownership, criminal damage, littering or other legislation on nuisance, incivility or antisocial behaviour. Although yarn bombing can occur indoors, it is most often an outdoor interaction with public space. By affixing or placing woollen items on street furniture, walls, trees or other surfaces, not only is the look of the city challenged but so too its *feel*. In this article, it is argued that such unauthorized changes to the feel of cities can be celebrated, yet they are still often illegal, and if not to others' sensory tastes there can be criminalizing consequences. In line with Thrift (2005), a city's feel can be similarly regarded in terms of mood or affect. Anderson (2009) and Young (2019) have also talked of affective atmospheres. As shall be discussed, affect is not easy to define, but it is an important consideration for an aesthetic criminology concerned with 'emotive and affective responses to sensory encounters' and with 'the regulation of tastes' (Millie 2017:16). By building on existing scholarship in visual and cultural criminology, it is suggested that aesthetic criminology (Millie 2016, 2017; Cooper et al. 2018; García Ruiz and South 2019) is a useful approach to aid understanding of the intersection between sensory encounter and the regulation

*Andrew Millie, Department of Law and Criminology, Edge Hill University, St Helens Road, Ormskirk, Lancashire L39 4QP, United Kingdom; Andrew.millie@edgehill.ac.uk

of taste, as demonstrated by yarn bombing. The discussion is supported by empirical evidence from a study of yarn bombing in the North West of England, which also considered yarn bombers' motivations, experiences and views on the legal status of yarn bombing.

Following in the footsteps of visual sociology (e.g. Harper 1988), recent decades have witnessed the emergence of visual criminology (e.g. Hayward 2009; Hayward and Presdee 2010; Carrabine 2012; Rafter 2014; Young 2014; Brown and Carrabine 2017). According to Rafter (2014:129), 'visual criminology is the study of ways in which all things visual interact with crime and criminal justice, inventing and shaping one another'. It is a strand of criminology that stretches what are legitimate interests and means of representation. It is a challenge for a subject that has always 'preferred the textual to the visual, numerical tables to pictures' (Rafter 2014:128). Much can be gained by considering the visual, as Rafter (2014) has noted, in terms of understandings of power, social relations, social control, rituals of death and degradation and means of self-empowerment. Although the visual is clearly important for any study of yarn bombing, this article also looks further to consider other sensory experience as well. Young (2010:83) has previously suggested scope for studying 'criminological aesthetics', but her focus was the visual, being concerned with 'the images themselves and the relation between the spectator and the image'. An aesthetic criminology has interest in all the senses. Examples include work by García Ruiz and South (2019) who have considered the criminological relevance of noise. In a study of the public perception of brothels, Cooper et al. (2018) found that although the visibility of brothels was a concern for residents, touch and smell were also important, as were multiple emotional responses. In my own work (Millie 2017), I have considered forms of urban intervention that not only challenge the visual but also broader aesthetic experiences of the city. Elsewhere, I have explored relationships between taste, aesthetic judgement and expectations of antisocial and criminal behaviour (Millie 2008, 2014, 2016). Drawing on philosophical aesthetics, an aesthetic criminology is also concerned with emotional and affective encounters with crime, deviance and social harm in art, cinema and literature (Millie 2016). Although not writing about an aesthetic criminology, Valverde (2012:77) has observed how municipal law can 'actively regulate taste and culture ... by banning certain sights and sounds and smells but also ... by using law to compel people to maintain aesthetic standards'. Aesthetic criminology is interested in such issues of taste and power and how they dictate different aesthetic standards. Recent work by Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2017:1279) has taken this further by exploring what she called 'the aesthetics of violence' or 'criminality against the senses'. The focus was an 'occupation of the senses' as experienced in East Jerusalem. According to Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 'the field of criminology must become more attentive to crimes committed in the sensory realm' (2017:1297). Examples given by Shalhoub-Kevorkian included solitary confinement, sensory deprivation, waterboarding and music as torture. Drawing on cultural criminology, and the work of Jack Katz in particular, the aesthetic experience of criminal, deviant or harmful activities is significant, 'what it means, feels, sounds, tastes, or looks like to commit a particular crime' (Katz 1988:3). Aesthetic criminology is concerned with such experience from both victim and perpetrator perspectives. It is also interested in *everyday* aesthetic experiences and it is here that this article aims to contribute.

The study reported here advances aesthetic criminology by considering the everyday feel of cities and how affect and tastes interact with illegal aesthetic practice to determine acceptance or otherwise. For instance, the yarn bombers interviewed were keen to point to the importance of the texture of yarn, the feel of their work and the affect this has on passers-by, a theme this article returns to. In this regard, aesthetic criminology can draw on work on material culture and urban cultural geography—in particular, research that has become known as sensory urbanism (e.g. Rogerson and Rice 2009). For instance, Henshaw (2014) has examined what she terms ‘urban smellscape’. And working at the borders between criminology and urban studies, Atkinson (2007) has explored the sonic order of urban space. The geographer Nigel Thrift has already been mentioned, and his non-representational¹ work on affect has clear relevance (Thrift 2004, 2005). For Thrift, affect is difficult to pin down but is ‘usually associated with words such as emotion and feeling, and a consequent repertoire of terms such as hatred, shame, envy, jealousy, fear, disgust, anger, embarrassment, sorrow, grief, anguish, pride, love, happiness, joy, hope, wonder’ (Thrift 2004:59). According to Thrift, there are at least four ways to understand affect. First is a phenomenological idea of affect ‘as a set of embodied practices that produce visible conduct as an outer lining’ (2004:60). From this perspective, emotional responses are context dependent, non-representational and not reliant on words—and here Thrift quotes Jack Katz:

The doing of emotions is a process of breaking bodily boundaries, of tears spilling out, rage burning up and as laughter bursts out, the emphatic involvement of guts as a designated source of the involvement (Katz 1999:322).

Second is a Freudian emphasis on physiological drive. The third approach regards affect as naturalistic and always emerging, constantly becoming (cf. Deleuze 1988). And according to Thrift, a fourth approach is a Darwinian take on emotion as a product of evolution. For this article, a phenomenological understanding of affect is adopted, where emotions are not dependent on words, while also recognizing that we often also need to use words to communicate these emotions. A focus on emotion and affect blurs boundaries between the material and the sensory; yet meanings—including criminological meanings—are derived from both physical interaction and feeling. I have argued elsewhere (Millie 2011) that decisions to criminalize are influenced by our value judgements. The focus for this article is aesthetic judgement, but it is worth noting that behavioural acceptability may also be influenced by combinations of moral, economic and prudential (quality of life) judgements.

In an urban context spaces gain meaning as places dependent on our emotional and affective interactions with them (Tuan 1977). Drawing on Anderson (2009), according to Young (2019:2) affective ‘atmospheres’ are created that connect ‘individuals within and to the spaces they occupy or move through’. Young gives an example of a change in atmosphere from a high street to a shopping mall—both functionally similar but having quite different atmospheres. For Young, important determinates for atmosphere are spatiality, affect and the aesthetic.

Aesthetic criminology is further influenced by Simmel’s (1968) sociological aesthetics (see also de la Fuente 2007) and notions of *everyday* aesthetics (Light and Smith

¹According to Lorimer (2005:83) non-representational theory is a catch-all term for works that seek ‘better to cope with our self-evidently more-than-human, more-than-textual, multisensual worlds’. For Lorimer, a label ‘more-than-representational’ makes more sense than non-representational.

2005; Saito 2007) drawing on Lefebvre's 'everyday life' (2008 [1961]). For Saito (2007:9), everyday aesthetic concerns might include 'any reaction we form toward the sensuous and/or design qualities of any object, phenomenon, or activity'. Thus, everyday aesthetic experiences of interest to criminology might include the reading of graffiti, the sight of street art, the smell of an illegal market, the sound and feel of a bassline emanating from a late-night club or the textural qualities of a yarn bomb as it envelops a tree. Aesthetic criminology is also concerned with broader affective and emotive impacts, for instance, the feelings of fear or (in)security that are associated with certain architectures or public spaces—what have been labelled as architectures of fear (Ellin 1997) or securitescapes (Azaryahu 2000). According to Yi-Fu Tuan (1993:1):

... the pervasive role of the aesthetic is suggested by its root meaning of 'feeling'—not just any kind of feeling, but 'shaped' feeling and sensitive perception. And it is suggested even more by its opposite, anaesthetic, 'lack of feeling'—the condition of living death. The more attuned we are to the beauties of the world, the more we come to life and take joy in it.

Life, joy and beauty are significant considerations for aesthetic criminology, yet clearly not all aesthetic experiences are positive. Individual tastes, and whose tastes get to determine aesthetic acceptability, are important considerations. In Young's (2014) work on street art, she identifies both democratic and anti-democratic aspects of the practice. Street art is democratic in that anyone can be a street artist, yet it is undemocratic in that 'street artists remove individual choice by imposing their works upon the passerby and by adopting an autocratic position with respect to other people's property' (Young 2014:28). It is a question of taste whether the street art is regarded as a positive or negative contribution to the streetscape. As this article reveals, yarn bombing is an aesthetic experience full of life and joy—and potentially beauty—yet it is also an imposition on the street. Its acceptability or alternative criminalization is down to taste.

The article draws on a series of in-depth interviews with five prolific or high-profile yarn bombers who operate in Liverpool and wider Merseyside in the North West of England. Each interview lasted approximately an hour and took place between 2013 and 2015. Where appropriate, a photographic record was kept of local examples of yarn bombing. The research received ethical approval from the author's institutional research ethics committee. The yarn bombers were given pseudonyms of Kerry, Helen, Lauren, Morag and Hannah. It is acknowledged that there are more than five yarn bombers operating in this part of the world, yet those interviewed represented some of the key people in the emergence of yarn bombing in this region. All those interviewed were female. The interviewees noted that men sometimes help them, and they talked of a rich history of men engaged in knitting and crochet, but that in their experience yarn bombing was almost exclusively female.

Background

In writings on yarn bombing (Hahner and Varda 2014; McGovern 2014; Haveri 2016), it is claimed that the practice started sometime in 2005 when a Texas retailer, Magda Sayeg, decided to use yarn to decorate part of the outside of her shop and then, following positive feedback, ventured further afield. According to Sayeg:

When I started this ... I didn't have a word for it, I didn't have any ambitious notions about it, I had no visions of grandeur, all I wanted to see was something warm and fuzzy and human-like on the cold steel grey façade that I looked at every day, so I wrapped the door handle. ... Little did I know that this tiny piece would change the course of my life ... The reaction was interesting, it intrigued me and I thought, what else could I do? Could I do something, like, in the public domain that would get the same reaction? So, I wrapped the stop sign pole near my house. The reaction was wild. It was, like, people would park their cars and get out of their cars and stare at it ... take pictures of it ... and the more that I did, the stronger the reaction. (Sayeg 2015)

Others were inspired to follow suit and over the next few years, yarn bombing became a global practice with ideas and images shared across numerous social and news media platforms.

Yarn bombing—alternatively referred to as guerrilla knitting or knitted graffiti—is an example of an urban intervention that challenges the aesthetic order of the city (Millie 2017). The label 'urban intervention' has also been applied to street installations by artists, graffiti writing and street art, street performance and flash mobbing, guerrilla gardening, parkour running, skateboarding, urban exploration and numerous other activities by urban activist and artistic groups (Brejzek 2010; Brisman 2010; Klanten and Huebner 2010; Young 2014; Millie 2017). What these interventions have in common is that they are 'performed amidst the normality of everyday urban existence' (Millie 2017:4), they appear to be impromptu and are often ephemeral in nature. According to Pruesse (1999:9), one of the first to talk about urban interventions, they are mostly 'not advertised. They are not in gallery settings, not [necessarily] signed by artists, not for sale, and do not have arrows pointing to them screaming "this is art!"'. Urban interventions—including yarn bombs—fit with the current zeitgeist for temporary, adaptable and seemingly spontaneous urban use and form, what Ferreri (2015:181) has called temporary urbanism featuring examples such as 'pop-up shops, guerrilla gardens and interim uses'; although there can be a lot of planning behind seeming spontaneity as discussed later in this article. According to Tonkiss (2013:313), the temporary or makeshift city is associated with 'a mode of urban practice that works in the cracks between formal planning, speculative investment and local possibilities'. Much of her focus was on urban activism, especially that which challenged the status quo of austerity. By drawing on Holloway's (2010) notion of 'crack capitalism' Tonkiss saw possibilities for urban activists in 'identifying the weaknesses, the joins, the blind spots and inconsistencies in a given strategy or settlement, and working both against and within them' (Tonkiss 2013:317). It is in these cracks where urban interventionists operate.

Urban interventionists can play with and challenge our expectations for the look and feel of the city and yarn bombing is no different. For some, yarn bombing is a type of street art (Haveri 2016), broadly defined as 'artworks whose use of the street is essential to their meaning' (Riggle 2010:255). Yarn bombing is also regarded as part of a 'new alternative craft scene' (Haveri 2016:103). And although 'males have traditionally dominated art history ... craft culture is markedly feminine' (Haveri 2016:103). According to Price (2015:88–89), yarn bombers are not a homogenous group but can introduce to public space 'multiple femininities and creative practices that are intergenerational, with complex histories of empowerment, disempowerment and relationships'. Yarn bombing presents a softer, potentially more feminized urban aesthetic, but this softness

comes with a challenge. For McGovern (2014), yarn bombing ‘may be about subverting ideals of the feminine and women as homemakers’. According to Crang (2014:284), ‘knitted “graffiti” is deployed to re-craft the city, to soften and domesticate it, at the same time as stitching a stereotypically feminine practice into the urban fabric’. The reference to knitted graffiti is important, as yarn bombers have at the same time also adopted much of the harder, potentially more masculine language of graffiti writing² with talk of ‘bombing’ carried out by ‘yarn bombing crews’. Graffiti bombing usually refers to the saturation of a given area by a writer’s tags or ‘throw-ups’³ (Ross 2016:475). Yarn bombers similarly attempt to target specific urban spaces, although their aim may not be saturation. The language of graffiti—if not the precise meaning—is adopted as it sounds right, it sounds credible. It is of course a mistake to assume that soft language always equals feminine and hard equals masculine, yet the juxtaposition of ‘yarn’ and ‘bomb’ is ironic and comical. ‘Guerrilla knitting’ or ‘knitted graffiti’ sound similarly absurd. It is challenging that something traditionally regarded as a ‘granny hobby’ (Sayeg 2015) can have any street credibility. That said, as discussed in this article, some yarn bombers are less certain about adopting the harder language of ‘bombs’. An example of a typical yarn bomb is shown in Figure 1 with a tree covered in crochet on Ropewalks Square, Liverpool. According to one of the participants, Helen, ‘it doesn’t matter if it’s knitting or crocheting’. For Lauren, crochet may be more appealing as ‘you could make things three-dimensional really quickly’.

The yarn bombers

Of the five interviewees, Morag and Hannah ran local wool/craft shops, Kerry and Helen had office jobs and Lauren volunteered for a local arts festival. They were all female and aged in their 20s to 50s. Helen noted that the youngest in her group was 17. For Morag, those in her group ranged ‘from about 20 up to about, who was the oldest, she must have been in her 80s’. Only one of the five interviewees had previous experience of urban interventionism. This was Kerry who had been an ‘urban explorer’ involved in trespass to discover abandoned and hard-to-reach urban spaces and take a photographic record of what was seen (Kindynis 2017). All five of the interviewees were involved in other craft activities and most had links with other local yarn bombing groups. One of the interviewees had set up a Facebook page to bring yarn bombers from the area together. There was awareness of wider national and international yarn bombing, but very little contact beyond the region.

Yarn bombing—in Merseyside at least—was mainly a female enterprise. According to Morag, ‘I have a lot of male customers [to my wool shop], I don’t think they were involved in the yarn bomb. They all said afterwards they wished they’d have been’. The invisibility of male yarn bombers was attributed to the social structures where the yarn bombs were prepared, the various craft groups, crochet groups or ‘knit and natter’ social groups, which attracted mainly women. According to Hannah, ‘[i]t tends to be because we do it, a lot of it with social groups, do like craft meetings and that, and the

²There are female graffiti writers and a possible ‘increase in female participation (or visibility)’ (Macdonald 2016:191), but graffiti subculture has historically been dominated by young males (see also Macdonald 2001).

³Tags are usually the graffiti writers’ quickly written name. A throw up is also quickly done but with large lettering filled in a single colour for speed (see also Ross 2016:478).



FIG. 1. Yarn bombing Ropewalks Square, Liverpool.

men don't tend to come along to that sort of thing'. Morag noted that 'I had a team, I had my "knit and natter" ladies, my "crafternooners", friends and family'. She first heard of yarn bombing via 'the Internet really and I get monthly knitting magazines'. For Hannah, she first got involved though being a member of local craft groups. Helen was a member of an existing crochet group that got involved in yarn bombing after being invited to contribute to a local festival:

... we started [a] crochet group about two years ago now and it was to just kind of meet other people who were into crocheting, get inspiration from ideas, kind of thing. And someone approached us ... they knew our group and asked us to help her and a few others to do the yarn bombings for a ... festival ... That wasn't just our group, that was with other people.

According to Kerry, after seeing what they had done, other local groups started to yarn bomb, for instance, 'because since then, the Women's Institute [at x], they have seen it and have now set up their own crochet group ... doing exactly the same because of it'. The person who organized the yarn bombing element of this festival was Lauren:

Well, I volunteer for [a] multi-arts grass-roots festival ... I knew nothing about yarn bombing at all, but the festival was taking place ... and the area looked quite, not as friendly, not very friendly. So it needed softening up, so one of the ideas was yarn bombing and using knitting to sort of brighten up the area. So we were sent loads of knitting and I ended up with the job of putting it together and putting it up on things. Someone else helped as well, but I didn't have a clue what I was doing, to be honest, it was really piecing things together, it was very naïve. (Lauren)

The yarn bombers were very interested in the public's reaction to their work. For Kerry, 'I think it's the reaction of people. It's kind of putting yourself out there as well

in a way ... putting it out in the open'. According to Helen, it's about 'people seeing something that they don't usually see and it makes them smile and makes them want to talk to other people about it'. According to Hannah:

... people are, always tend to see knitting and crochet as quite an old fashioned sort of, something your nan always does, sort of thing, but then whenever you're doing it in public and putting it up, the reactions are always brilliant from people.

As soon as the pieces were up the yarn bombers were keen to find out how people reacted, including on social media; as Hannah noted, 'I like seeing other people's reactions to it. I always, whenever anything goes up I watch social media very very closely that day'. Although reactions were mainly positive, this was not always the case. According to Hannah, some members of the public questioned the purpose of yarn bombing, '...you get some very strange looks, like, "what are you doing?" ... [or] "This is just like wool on trees, what's the point?"'

For the yarn bombers, their main motivation centred on fun. For Lauren, 'I do it for fun and for pleasure and to give other people pleasure'. Kerry noted that 'we don't want to offend or anything ... we're not doing it to cause trouble'. There were broader motivations for putting yarn bombing groups or 'crews' together, as Kerry put it, 'I think also us doing it was because we wanted to find likeminded people'. There were also community benefits of 'being part of a social group' (Helen).

Within the emerging literature on yarn bombing a further political motivation is highlighted. For instance, according to [McGovern \(2014\)](#), yarn bombing 'is just one example of a range of new and creative forms of activism'. The use of craft for political ends has gained its own portmanteau, often being referred to as 'craftivism' ([Robertson 2011](#); [Wallace 2012](#); [Corbett 2013](#); [McGovern 2019](#)). And within Merseyside, there is evidence of craftivism in action. For instance, [Figure 2](#) shows a crocheted crown that was installed high on a lamp post in Liverpool, along with a quote from the Sex Pistols, referring to a 'Fascist Regime'. This and other woollen crowns were put up in honour of the Queen's Diamond Jubilee in 2012. The crown in [Figure 2](#) was still in situ in Sefton Park a year later. This was by a group that operated separately to those represented by the interviewees. According to Lauren, '[t]here was an anti-Jubilee party that they had, so [the crowns] appeared there as well'.

Lauren wanted to emphasize that this protest was by a different group and that her group was not political in any way:

I did get asked, someone approached me and asked me about, would I get involved, [what] would our yarn bombers think of being involved in one of the protests? It was the bedroom tax protest, and I had to say no because I do it for fun and for pleasure and to give other people pleasure. Stirring up, you know, I'm not politically motivated in doing it. It doesn't mean that I approve of the bedroom tax, it was just that I just thought that, you know, that when if you're organising something like that, you've got to think of, you know, everyone else and how comfortable they feel about what they're doing.

Helen had similarly turned down an invite to contribute to the bedroom tax protest: 'we were kind of like, "We don't really want to get involved in anything political"'. According to Kerry, 'we don't have any kind of political statements or some kind of cause'. Similarly, for Hannah, 'we've never done any with a political message; like, we've done one's with a charity-based message before where we've been trying to promote local charities'.

So politically motivated yarn bombing does occur, but it was not a motivation for the groups represented by those interviewed. That does not mean their actions were not political. Mann (2015) has called yarn bombing a politics of whimsy. Challenging people's aesthetic expectations and their understandings of the everyday use of urban space—even if this is with wool covered trees—can be regarded as a political action. Illegal beautification (Millie 2011, 2017), or as Morag claimed, making the town 'look better', is political even if it does not shout the message to the onlooker. Morag saw her work, in part, as a reaction to the local authority's inaction, that 'people feel passionate, you know, about the town and I think it's very sad that in this day and age it is down to the individual to put right what the council have done wrong'. Such a challenge is perhaps less overt than sewing a message to a yarn bomb, as with Figure 2. According to Reynolds (2008:16), guerrilla gardening can be regarded as 'the illicit cultivation of someone else's land'. Yarn bombing is in effect the illicit beautification of someone else's property, and this beautification is political, even if the yarn bombers' main motivation is fun.

Yarn bombing and criminality

Those interviewed started out yarn bombing without permission, although most went on to also do yarn bombs with permission as well. When permission was granted by a local authority or business owner, some yarn bombers stretched their remit and did far more than originally agreed. According to Kerry, 'in the beginning when we did it, I felt, it did feel like I was doing some sort of graffiti, like I shouldn't be doing it'. Kerry noted that there was perceived safety in numbers. Her first yarn bomb was done



FIG. 2. 'God save the Queen and her fascist regime': Yarn bombing as craftivism.

on her own, and if she did that now, ‘for my own and then go away, that just would feel naughty’. There was some uncertainty whether it was in fact illegal to put up a yarn bomb without permission. For Lauren, ‘the first thing you get asked is, “How illegal is it?” I’ve never had any problems so far. “How illegal do you want it to be?”’ According to Kerry:

I don’t know where it sits legally. As I say, it doesn’t feel legal. If there were a van full of policemen standing there, I wouldn’t get up a tree and start crocheting my stuff on it, do you know what I mean. [But] I would be shocked if we actually got into trouble.

According to Hannah ‘a police officer has offered to help ... like, “You alright there ladies do you need any help at all?” And it was like 7 o’clock in the morning when we were yarn bombing, we were like, “No, no thanks”. A lot of people stop and ask what it’s for more than “do you have permission”’.

As noted, the act of yarn bombing has the potential to breach civil and criminal law, but this was not a major theme for those interviewed—although Helen noted that she ‘wouldn’t yarn bomb stuff that would get in people’s way’. The potential for nuisance was highlighted by Lauren, who suggested that ‘you’ve got to be aware of what it is you’re interfering with ... like, if you pick a lamppost, don’t pick one that’s got a traffic sign on’. Most of those interviewed did not consider trespass as an issue. According to Helen, most of what they do is on what they perceive to be public land and public property. A line is drawn between this and what is regarded as private property:

... it is all public stuff, it’s not private stuff, so when we did [named] Street, we did consider if we could put things up, higher up, but then it was like going up and attaching it to buildings and actually those buildings belong to businesses and we didn’t want to get into that. (Helen)

Helen was of the view that anything on public property was fair game (although laws of trespass apply to public property as well). Kerry similarly stated that ‘it has always been public places, not like we’ve trespassed’. That said, Kerry’s prior experience of urban exploration meant that she might consider trespassing, although she did not think she had done that yet. According to Kerry:

I used to do a lot of urban exploring ... we did get caught by the police a few times, and got a lot of warnings, but, which is why I think I would be happy trespassing to yarn bomb something, because we did that for quite a few years.

For Helen, she ‘would trespass to get somewhere that I thought was a high impact kind of space’. As far as she was concerned, she had not so far trespassed when yarn bombing.

According to all those interviewed, the main issue in terms of legality—and the main perceived difference between yarn bombing and graffiti (and other forms of street art)—was whether the yarn bombing caused damage. According to Helen, ‘I suppose the only difference is ours can be taken down, removed, without doing damage to anything’. For Hannah:

... if you graffiti something it’s either got to be paint remover or somebody is out there with a scrubbing brush, or its just got to be painted over and then there is a cost to affect the local businesses or the local people who’s it is. It’s not always to everyone’s taste what’s graffitied somewhere. Some people just don’t like graffiti art full stop, where with the yarn bomb, it’s kind of, people have already

got the impression that it's only going to be there temporary and it's not going to cause no lasting damage and it can be removed very, very, quickly.

Like graffiti, the yarn bomb may not be to everyone's taste, but for Hannah its temporary nature made a difference. If you do not like it, you only have to put up with it for a limited time and there would be no lasting damage to the streetscape. For Morag, 'you are just enhancing an area you're not actually damaging it in any way'. Similarly, according to Kerry, 'we're not damaging anything, we're adding to something, aren't we? ... yeah, because it can be easily get removed and ... it doesn't cause any offense or anything'. According to Morag, 'the beauty of wool is, it's never going to damage anything it's attached to, it's usually tied on or just lightly stitched so, whatever you do, unless you glue it, it's not going to be permanent'. Lauren made the point that 'I was careful about what I was attaching it to as well so that I wasn't going to damage anything'. This point was picked up by Hannah, who also noted that, despite taking great care, people can still complain:

... when you're doing one that you don't have permission for it is a case of get it up as quickly as possible and then get away from it, because we do have people stop me all the time, even when you have permission, going, 'Do you have permission to do this?' And some people get very funny about [it]. We decorated lampposts ... and people were stopping saying they were going to report us for doing it. It was a bit, sort of, like, 'it's not causing any damage it adds a bit of colour to the area'.

It may be adding a bit of colour but it might not be to everyone's taste. Hannah described the installation of woollen flowers on one street: 'when we did the flowers down the door ...we looked at ... things like, how many CCTV cameras are around and things like that, is any local business in the area going to be really funny about it being up there?' Yet, according to Hannah, some businesses actively encouraged the installation of yarn bombing, that 'local businesses by and large tend to like it because it draws attention to the business. I've been in other shops around the city ... and they've always asked me, "can you yarn bomb something outside?"' The possibility of complaint was raised by Helen:

If people were complaining about what we were doing and they were complaining to the police or to the council, then we might get into trouble. ... I think if people started complaining about it, then the law would then be able to pull something out of the bag and go, 'actually...', I can't imagine we would get done for something straight away. I would hope we would be asked to quietly remove it or not do it again.

Although it is true that yarn bombing does not damage property in the same way that graffiti or other forms of street art do, it can possibly contribute to a littering problem. For instance, in Scotland, one local authority has responded to yarn bombing by simply stating: 'However colourful the yarn may be, it is littering and will be removed' ([BBC News Online 2015](#)). Also, the assumed temporary nature of yarn bombing can be questioned with some yarn bombs remaining in situ for several months, if not years (as is evident in [Figure 2](#)). Although great care is taken in putting the work up, there is not always a plan to take it down, which can be problematic; as Kerry highlighted, 'once it has been there for a few months and it looks trashy, it's like littering, isn't it?' She went further in noting that 'One of the things that we haven't done, we haven't needed to yet, is go and remove old wool'. Helen made the similar point that 'we just haven't got

around to it yet'; yet she admitted that for one yarn bomb she was involved in, 'it's not in the best of states, it has been there for quite a while now'. Lauren made the point that 'the other thing that we're very mindful of now is taking stuff down, not just leaving it up'. According to Hannah, 'they don't last for very long, you can get about six months out of them before they start to look a bit droopy and a bit knackered and then we'll take them down'.

For the yarn bombers, the state of a yarn bomb that is left may be less of an issue than pieces being taken by the public; as Lauren put it, 'The main problem was people nicking the stuff'.

... we'd cemented the [woollen] flowers into the troughs to weigh them because it's very windy down here. And people just snapped them off and came in with a bunch of them and said, 'how much are these?' I just said, 'where have you got them from?' 'Well I've picked them'. 'You've what?' and I said, 'Why would you do that?' And then I thought well I suppose there's rebels in all of us really isn't there. (Morag)

Helen recounted a yarn bomb she was part of for the New Year. According to Helen, 'we did about 46 and they got taken, which was fine ... we just didn't expect them to disappear so quick'. Hannah noted that she had seen some of her work appear in friends' houses. According to Hannah:

We don't like it when things go missing, the whole idea is that, after a certain amount of time we don't mind ... you know, we have no further use for it once it's been outside for a bit. (Hannah)

For Kerry, 'You have to accept that it might get stolen, and that's fine, you are putting it in a public space, but for some of the other women, because it was their first, it was their first experience'. Sometimes the issue was damage done to a yarn bomb:

[I] arrived Monday morning and the [woollen] flowers were just strewn everywhere, somebody had obviously got drunk and it was all trailing off down [the] street there which was a bit, it was upsetting. (Morag)

The yarn bombers felt that their activities were often not legal but were not in the same league as graffiti and other forms of street art that caused criminal damage. Although their activities involved trespass, this was not perceived as an issue for most yarn bombs. Ironically, given that yarn bombs are not always with permission, some yarn bombers expressed concern when their works were stolen. Others were more accepting of this possibility. Some admitted that yarn bombs that had been left were likely to contribute to a littering problem. If left in situ, yarn bombs may start to have an increasingly negative aesthetic impact on the street.

The aesthetic experience of yarn bombing

There was a thrill associated with the act of yarn bombing; as Hannah put it, '...there is always like real excitement and like adrenaline about it which seems really bizarre when you're sewing blankets to trees'. Hannah highlighted that it can be hard work, especially when people have other commitments, but the rewards were worth it:

...as soon as you've got it done there is a big sense of accomplishment and pride in your work and then it's waiting on everyone's reaction on it as well. So the bonus of it comes after it's up, rather than during the process of it going up. (Hannah)

The timing and the time it takes were important for the yarn bombers—especially if yarn bombing without permission. According to Helen, 'originally it was like yarn bombing under the cover of darkness, putting things up so you don't get caught. You would wake up in the morning and it's like, "Oh, where did this come from?"' Even if permission was given, the yarn bombs took place at night with as few witnesses as possible; as Lauren put it, 'We try and put things up when people aren't around, when there's as few members of the public around, so early in the morning or late at night because the idea is it's a surprise the next day'. For Kerry, this contributed to the nervousness of doing the bomb:

The first time I went, it was 2 am, 3 am. It was a weekend, so it was fine. I couldn't say a time when we weren't really nervous, we wanted to make sure no one was around, because we just didn't know what to expect. ... Everyone was fine, but it did feel very stealth.

Time was also an issue for the planning of a yarn bomb. According to Lauren, 'it takes you about six weeks, you know, to get it all organised and done, and that's the minimum time'. Other issues to consider were 'CCTV coverage, traffic and footfall ... Is somebody going to walk past, pick up their mobile and call the police and say "there is crazy women wrapping some trees"' (Hannah).

The bigger the project, the harder it was to keep the planning and installation out of the public eye. According to Hannah—who was part of a group decorating trees with yarn—'we were there at 5 am, it took us to half 11 to get them all up because there was so many of them, and each tree had been individually measured and organised'. She claimed that '[p]eople were stopping on their way to work and volunteering to help'. By the time they had finished, 'it was on the local news'. Yarn bombing is like graffiti and other forms of street art in that it is often an illegal aesthetic practice that is thrilling for those who do it. Like graffiti and street art, its presence on the street is usually ephemeral but it is frequently kept for posterity via images on the internet, with yarn bombing crews actively interacting via social media. The sensory and affective experience of yarn bombing is thereby extended beyond its physical presence in urban space.

For Lauren, yarn bombing involves the creation of ornamentation, while at the same time getting people to work together as a team. For Kerry, yarn bombing is, 'I suppose it's seeing the environment in a new way'. She went further claiming that it is about 'changing the environment'. As noted, two ways this was possible was in terms of the visual and textual feel of the city. For Morag, the yarn bombing 'was so vibrant and colourful'. According to Kerry, 'you find people hugging the trees or hugging the lampposts and treating the environment in a way you wouldn't normally'. The sense of touch was emphasized by Hannah who noted that 'it was nice seeing people stop and like touch them and have their photos taken with them'. According to Lauren:

... there was a little girl [who] ran up and hugged the tree, and there were people stroking trees, and I thought wow. You know, like normally, people wouldn't have looked at the tree, but it sort of, I don't know, I think it makes people look at things differently, you know, so if it's something that's natural that's in the city that you take for granted, you're highlighting it in a way and people are going up and touching it.

People's interactions with the yarn bombs were multi-sensory experiences involving sight and touch that altered their everyday aesthetic experience of the urban streetscape. The yarn changed the look and the feel of the city. Furthermore, a change in the city's atmosphere could be felt (cf. Young 2019)—and following Thrift (2005), an affective transformation to the city's mood. As noted, people's perceptions of the city were further affected beyond the physical life of the yarn bomb, with numerous images shared on social media. The look of the city is recorded, but also its texture is imagined by those viewing the numerous images, and the feel of the city regarded as something softer, potentially more feminine.

The language used to describe yarn bombing also contributed to aesthetic experience. Some of the yarn bombers liked to use the graffiti-inspired language of 'bombing'. For instance, according to Morag, 'I prefer yarn bombing ... I just like it, the fact that you bomb an area with yarn and it looks, it looks fabulous'. For Hannah, what the activity is called, 'entirely depends on whether we have permission or not. If we don't have permission, it's guerrilla, if you do have permission its yarn bombing'. Lauren had another take on the language used and was not so sure about the language of bombs:

...when I chose my Facebook page name [X Yarn Storm], I thought I don't want 'bomb' in the work, you know, keep that out of there. We do still talk about yarn bombing though, but the name of the page I chose that purposefully. So, I suppose I'm a little bit afraid of the language, I'm not quite that radical.

According to Haveri (2016), the label 'yarn bombing' is used in the United States, whereas in the United Kingdom, it is 'yarn storming'. It is true that one high-profile yarn bomber in London has referred to her work as yarn storming (Deadly Knitshade 2011). Yet, if those interviewed are typical, the use of language in the United Kingdom is more fluid, with some quite comfortable talking about bombs, and others less certain and preferring softer, less confrontational language. The language used impacts on the aesthetic experience in that it influences people's expectations.

From talking to yarn bombers, the act of yarn bombing can be regarded as an intervention in public space that affects the feel of the city, that impacts on the atmosphere or mood of urban space. For those doing the yarn bombing, the impact is entirely positive, bringing colour and life and possibly a more feminine aesthetic to the street—and leading to the public not just viewing their work but also physically interacting with it. Yet, the yarn bombing is often illegal, it might not be to everyone's taste and, if left in situ, the yarn may start to have a more negative aesthetic impact on the streetscape.

Conclusions

Although those interviewed were aware that not everyone appreciated what they did, the public's response was thought to be broadly positive. In fact, what started out as a transgressive practice perpetrated by a few dedicated yarn bombing crews has become so widespread that in certain contexts it is essentially normalized. Compared to graffiti and other forms of street art, yarn bombing is softer, but still a little bit rebellious, and this seemingly acceptable rebellion has broad appeal. For instance, in 2016, a church in the East of England asked its members to knit woollen angels to be 'hidden' across the parish attached to an advert for Christmas services. Each finder was encouraged

to keep the angel to use as a Christmas decoration (Anonymous 2016). In 2017, the magazine of the National Federation of Women's Institutes carried a story promoting the merits of yarn bombing for its members (Bradley 2017). And for Remembrance Sunday 2018, towns and villages across England marked the 100th anniversary of the First World War armistice by decorating their streets with knitted poppies⁴. This normalization of yarn bombing does not diminish the possibility that the law is being broken. Furthermore, as noted for street art more generally (Young 2014), one person's taste is also being imposed on everyone else (although this is true for much publicly or commercially commissioned public art as well). But yarn bombing has broad appeal, it feels rebellious, but, as Kerry noted, 'I would be shocked if we actually got into trouble'.

The aesthetic experience of yarn bombing is important for the yarn bombers, and for the public. Of relevance to an aesthetic criminology, this experience goes beyond the visual. The visual change to the city is certainly significant and a challenge to expectations. And yarn bombers, members of the public and news media take pictures of the yarn bombs, posting images on various news and social media platforms. Yet, the yarn bombers and the public are also interested in the textual qualities of the yarn bombs and interact with them physically. As Kerry noted, 'you find people hugging the trees or hugging the lampposts and treating the environment in a way you wouldn't normally'. According to Crang (2014:284), such yarn bombs 're-craft the city', they 'soften and domesticate it'. In this way, yarn bombing presents an alternative to the usual aesthetic experience of urbanity and contributes to the creation of a radically new urban atmosphere (Young 2019). Yarn bombing is also clearly an aesthetic experience for the yarn bombers in the planning, the creating, the thrill of putting it up, and the wait for a response from the street or from social and news media. The practice of yarn bombing is an example of 'temporary urbanism' (Ferreri 2015), and part of the sensory experience is the excitement when yarn bombs appear on the street overnight. If members of the public choose to take them away, then they can disappear from the street just as quickly. This seemingly spontaneous, ephemeral and fundamental change to the textual form of the street is a challenge to what is normally legally permitted in public space, and a challenge to the aesthetic order of the city.

In this article, yarn bombing has been shown to be of interest to an aesthetic criminology concerned with sensory, affective and emotional experience. As noted in the Introduction, visual criminology has drawn attention to visual representation and has been an important development for criminology. An aesthetic criminology also has value for broader criminology in considering not just the visual but all the senses, along with affective and emotional responses to crime, deviance and social harm—whether these are the kinds of state crime highlighted by Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2017) or more prosaic everyday examples of aesthetic practice that occur at the margins of legality, such as the yarn bombing considered here. There is room for both visual and aesthetic criminologies working together as both stretch what are legitimate interests for criminology in new and creative ways. The test is how much visual and aesthetic criminologies are niche interests with little interaction with the outside world of criminology, or considerations for the mainstream.

⁴Various examples can be found at BBC News Online (2018).

The methods used for this study were conventional involving semi-structured interviews and taking photos where appropriate. Where work in this area could progress is with the development of specific aesthetic methodologies. These may draw on research on art criticism and judgements of taste (e.g. Bourdieu 1979), or from existing sensory methods including sensory ethnography (Howes 2006; Pink 2015), that ‘takes as its starting point the multisensoriality of experience, perception, knowing and practice’ (Pink 2015:xi). According to Mason and Davies (2009:589), across the social sciences ‘the idea of “the sensory” has been slow to filter into the methodological consciousness of researchers, and still more so their skills repertoire, than that of “the visual”’. There remains a clear need for visual methods in criminology, but there is scope for research and specific methodologies that embrace the full range of sensory experiences, as well as affective and emotional responses associated to crime, disorder or social harm. In this way, an aesthetic criminology—or a criminology of the senses (García Ruiz and South 2019)—has scope to make further positive contributions to the discipline by developing new theoretical and methodological approaches. Yarn bombing would be a suitable example for such an approach.

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