



The social perception of environmental victimization. A visual and sensory methodological proposal

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Abstract

This article proposes a visual and sensory methodology useful to the study of environmental victimization from the perspective of people exposed to environmental harm and crime. Given the scarcity of tools with which to approach these dynamic and elusive phenomena, I focus first on the methodological and theoretical positioning that sees the encounter between green, cultural, visual, narrative and critical criminologies. Second, I discuss photo elicitation, a technique for a green criminology “with” images, where visual images are used as a heuristic tool in order to explore more thoroughly the social perception of environmental victimization. Third, I discuss the importance of sensory techniques for a green criminology open to the complex and situational dimension of environmental harm, with some examples involving a special form of mobile methodology called itinerant soliloquy. The conclusion notes the potential of a visual and sensory mode of research to social and environmental harms in sensitizing scholars, practitioners and policy-makers to the need to change some taken-for-granted views that inform our relationship with the environment.

Keywords Green criminology · Visual methodology · Sensory methodology · Environmental victimization

Introduction

Questions regarding environmental harm and victimization present complex practical challenges as they concern intrinsically multi-disciplinary fields, both highly politicized and global in their reach. Even more clearly than in the case of other disciplines, the criminological field is *overdue* in facing the challenges raised by the ecological crisis. Over the last three decades, however, green criminology has become known on an international level as a multifold theoretical perspective that extends beyond the

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boundaries of criminological tradition to become a theoretical laboratory for thinking about environmental issues in the richest and broadest meaning of the word (South et al., 2013; Brisman & South, 2020). In particular, green criminology is a sort of ‘conceptual umbrella’ under which researchers and scholars examine and rethink, from different perspectives, the causes and consequences of different environmental harms, such as pollution, the deterioration of natural resources, the loss of biodiversity, and climate change (South et al., 2013). In the field of green criminology, a broad definition of environmental crime prevails, encompassing also those dimensions of damage, injustice and social harm often neglected by criminal law and by the criminal justice system (Lynch & Stretesky, 2003; White, 2011; see also Barton et al., 2007).

As Heckenberg and White (2020) maintain, the study of environmental crime requires new modes of observation of the world and new methods capable of synchronizing the spatial (both local and global) and temporal dimensions of the ongoing changes occurring in and to our environment (see also Brisman & South, 2014). If visual criminology may be defined as ‘the study of ways in which all things visual interact with crime and criminal justice, inventing and shaping one another’ (Rafter, 2014: 129; see also Brown & Carrabine, 2017a), this approach can help in imagining new ways of seeing the socio-environmental harms considered. The aim of visual criminology is to develop its own theoretical and methodological approaches, suggesting new visual ways of exploring and critically analyzing social and power relations, harm, suffering and justice in the criminological field (see also Brown, 2014). Visual research methods in the social sciences embrace both doing research ‘about’ images—where the focus is on the visual dimensions of the social and cultural phenomena—and conducting research ‘with’ images—where visual images are used as a heuristic tool in order to explore more thoroughly specific socio-cultural contexts (Beirne, 2015; Ferrell, 2020; Ferrell et al., 2015; Greek, 2009; Van de Voorde, 2012). In the intersection between green, cultural and visual criminology, some scholars have contemplated visual representations of environmental harms (Brisman, 2017, 2018). However, the use of visual mediums for gathering data on environmental harms, rather than just as a subject of analysis, remains mostly unexplored (see also Natali & McClanahan, 2017).

After a discussion of photo elicitation, a visual technique for doing qualitative interviews, the article analyzes a special form of mobile methodology, called itinerant soliloquy, open to the sensorial dimension of environmental harm. In doing this, I will include some excerpts taken from my empirical research with people affected by environmental harm. The conclusion notes the potential of a visual and sensory methodology to sensitize scholars, practitioners and policy-makers to the need to change some taken-for-granted views about our relationship with the environment and to empower communities, citizens and those who suffer socio-environmental harms.

The exploration of environmental victimization

In the socio-criminological field, the processes of environmental victimization have received little empirical attention (Hall, 2013; Williams 1996). On the whole, environmental victimisation poses a series of new questions that criminal justice systems are unprepared to face: (1) the harms can affect an extended

group or even a community of victims, sometimes representing rival interests; (2) the causality nexus is extremely complex to reconstruct. In particular, systematic denial of harm and responsibility further frustrate efforts to create causal connections between offenders and victims. In fact, the various strategies of neutralization of responsibility on the part of corporations or the state include: denying the problem; putting into perspective what is seen as damaging; and reproaching, blaming, dividing, and confusing the victims (Williams, 1996). In this context, victims sometimes learn to accept irreparably altered landscapes and sometimes they simply ‘delete’ them, as one does with an illness or death (Settis, 2010). Focusing on the mechanisms of denial (Cohen, 2001; Pulcini, 2013) thus contributes to an understanding of silence, apathy and a range of other possible responses by those who witness daily the destruction of the environment that they inhabit (Williams, 1996). For all these reasons, it is important to explore the nature of victimization as an active social process, which implies relationships of power, control, and resistance (White, 2011).

Social and cultural perspectives are the basis for an empirical exploration of what constitutes environmental victimization (Hall, 2013). In many cases, to understand the different narratives orbiting around a (broadly understood) case of environmental crime, it is necessary to understand the perceptions of that harm *from the inside*, starting from the symbolic and cultural perspectives expressed by the social actors affected. In this field there is a lack of detailed qualitative data on the lives of people living in polluted areas, describing *from their perspective* what they know of, think about, and feel towards the reality in which they live. This raises the following questions: How do people live and make sense of their experiences in polluted places? From the inhabitants’ perspective, what is the relationship between knowledge of the risks in a contaminated environment, their lived experiences of environmental suffering and injustice, and their responses to these threats and experienced harms? What do or can they expect from the justice system? (Bisschop & Vande Walle, 2013; White, 2013).

The crux of the matter is what Rob Nixon (2011) defined as ‘slow violence’: that which does not kill you at once, but kills you *slowly*, as a creeping disaster, is very difficult to recognize as having a violent content. However, it is still a real *attack* against the body or rather, against the *bodies*, considering the many victims often involved in cases of environmental crimes. As Nixon (2011, 2) explains:

...we urgently need to rethink—politically, imaginatively, and theoretically—what I call ‘slow violence.’ By slow violence I mean a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all. Violence is customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant sensational visibility. We need, I believe, to engage a different kind of violence, a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales.

Remaining alert to such aspects is a fundamental challenge when attention is focused on the narratives that people construct about the complex experiences of environmental contamination. Living in a polluted environment is, in fact, an extremely complex experience built from many interacting spheres: from the personal to the social as far as the political. The result of this interaction is often a slow, gradual process of “attuning,” through which the inhabitants of these places, with the passage of time, negotiate the contaminated reality, though still in conflict about the interpretation, the seriousness and the responsibilities related to it.

Empirical research on the inhabitants of highly polluted places has revealed that there are multiple interpretations guiding their decision to act – or to abstain from acting – in response to their environmental victimization (Auyero & Swistun, 2009). Methodologically, such an empirical research requires a peculiar sensitivity to the situation on the part of the researcher, respect for local knowledge and culture and acknowledgement of the dimensions of (political and economic) power that may be present in the contexts studied. But how can we then access the perspective of those who have experienced socio-environmental harms in the first person? In the next sections, I suggest that a radical interactionist approach together with a sensory and visual methodology can help to make environmental victims’ narratives and experiences more visible.

The theoretical and methodological framework: greening radical interactionism and visual methods

My proposal is clearly located within “radical interactionism” (Athens, 2002, 2007, 2015). This theoretical horizon can be described as “a leading alternative to conventional symbolic interactionism (SI), integrating critiques of the theoretical and political conservatism inherent in SI with a comprehensive understanding of the foundational insights offered by this rich theoretical tradition” (Shaw, 2017). In Athens’ proposal (2002), radical interactionism recognizes the principle of “domination” as a cornerstone of society and its basic institutions. This notion replaces Mead’s principle of sociality (Mead, 1963 [1934]; Blumer, 1969) in order to better understand and to make visible the assumptions of superordinate role and subordinate role operating within social interactions (Athens, 2007; see also Hviid Jacobsen & Picart, 2019). Moreover, in radical interactionism, the Meadian notion of the generalized other (the “Me”) is replaced by the one of the “phantom community”—a distillation of past and present experiences as interpreted by individual social actors throughout the course of their individual biographies and in dialogue with their internalized significant others. (Athens, 1994). In brief, radical interactionism helps to uncover the symbolic processes whereby the actor assesses if and how certain elements (beliefs, desire, emotions or ideas) concern him/her; and decides what to say and do – or *not* to say and *not* to do – in a given situation. It is this internal soliloquy—which has a psycho-social and relational nature (Archer 2003)—that confers meaning on one’s actions. Using this theoretical perspective in the analysis of environmental victims’ narratives (1) helps us to understand better how “individuals’ narratives are both shaped by social structure as well as being creative and agentic” (Fleetwood, 2016: 174); (2)

allows us to explore and understand environmental victimization taking into account the biographical uniqueness and the multiplicity of points of view, even conflicting, that inhabit our Self in today's society (Ceretti & Natali, 2022). The crucial point in this representation of the experience is the idea of a contact between the subject and himself. This contact is not truly a proper "reflection": it is a "listening" to one's presence and to the possible self-narratives we use when we have to give meaning to our experiences (see Pemberton et al., 2019) in a context that is influenced by social structure and by the domination role operating in the symbolic and social interaction.

The conviction that guides my qualitative exploration is that in order to understand macro-social phenomena, such as industrial pollution, it is necessary to examine the phenomena at the micro-social level by looking at the consequences of this dynamic process upon the daily life of people living in the areas involved. Daily life is certainly the place of the "taken for granted"; however, this acknowledgement must not lead us to undervalue the experience of social actors and the creative role they play in giving life to the picture of social and symbolic interactions within which they situate themselves with respect to others. The dimensions of the conflict that interrupt what is taken for granted are therefore decisive in this perspective and can be enhanced in value by studies that investigate cultural practices in relation to power—as green and cultural criminology does (see also Brisman & South, 2014).

In the adopted radical interactionist perspective, the researcher's reflexivity, concerning his/her own methodological choices, his/her own position in the field and the "right distance" or better "nearness" to the subjects observed, assumes an explicit relevance—one quite far from an "outsider arrogance" (Spencer, 2011: 40). A "close contact" with the people encountered and interviewed will make it possible to explore a full moral and symbolic complexity in their narratives. It is above all, on this level, that the radical interactionist perspective I have adopted has worked, complicating the moral (and symbolic) vision we have of these contexts (see Becker, 1997[1963/1973]) and sensitizing us to new categories of social facts and experiences to be considered important. Within this frame, from an ethical-political perspective, a visual qualitative research that adopts a sensitive look at the personal experiences of environmental victimization renders visible and audible stories and life contexts that are often thought marginal and unworthy of the attention of mainstream scientific literature¹.

Although there is considerable interest within qualitative research methods literature in researcher's reflexivity, participants' reflexivity has been underexplored. However, in the context of a visual and sensory participatory research work such as

¹ As Harcourt (2006: X) points out, the actual choice of adopting a determinate theoretical and methodological approach does not rest on a "neutral" scientific decision; it is rather an ethical option with consequences and costs (in social and ecological terms) that are relevant to both society and the individual. In this regard, visual and sensory methods represent a challenge for the ethical practices that should always accompany social research. Besides the most evident questions linked to informed consent, to the principle of confidentiality and anonymity, to the law concerning copyright and ethical codes (Wiles et al., 2011), the personal and ethical position of the researcher is what represents the decisive point. In particular, my proposal is inspired by an ethic and a responsibility of "caring"—one totally consonant with col-

the one described, if the researcher's reflexivity is important, participants' reflexivity should be considered as equally relevant. This kind of reflexivity has been addressed from a participants' perspective in the field of video ethnography (Pink, 2008) and has been considered as critical to enhancing participatory research practices (Yang, 2015). Some authors call it *participant reflexivity* to underline the participants' role as knowledge producers in the context of a participatory research and to suggest the need to take seriously the reflexivity experienced by participants (Yang, 2015).

This is even more important in the environmental field, where there is a tendency to "leave the question to the experts" (White, 2008: 78) and where science has always marginalized the voices of "lay" people and their narratives because of the prevalent conviction that in those narratives no reflexivity would be found (even less, "truth"), but only distorted perceptions. It is a level of the criminological discourse on the environment profoundly rooted in the local context, in the unique knowledge of those who live the experiences of pollution. In this sense, the experiences the inhabitants of a place gather about their territory definitely represent another knowledge—and a no less valuable knowledge—that must be taken into account: it is a knowledge that often remains *invisible* and *unheard* because it comes from social actors having no power to act in a significant manner on their own environment (see also Presser, 2023). As I will suggest, using photo elicitation and itinerant soliloquies in the field of green criminology can allow access to the personal and social experiences through which environmental victims may become aware of the "existence" of the environmental harm they live first hand and can help identify which multiple dimensions, recalled by their narratives, allow us observers to capture their "reality".

Before describing the visual and sensory techniques used, one last point is in order. Even if my primary focus in this contribution is on the theoretical aspects and on the data collection of this investigation, it seems appropriate to suggest some insights regarding data analysis in the context of visual research. From the point of view of the researcher, this theoretical option implies a gradual approach to the reality investigated: an "exploration" phase, characterized by an extreme flexibility, and an "inspection" phase, providing the development of "sensitizing concepts" that restrict themselves to suggesting where to look rather than defining how to look once

Footnote 1 (continued)

laborative and participatory research and orientated by a "participant reflexivity" (Yang, 2015). It is not a question of working out a balance between the social and/or scientific costs and advantages of the use of certain methods, but rather of negotiating in the field the limits to be respected so that, in that context and with those participants, the practices adopted will prove ethical. This also implies taking care of the most "dangerous" aspects of an in-depth listening to socio-environmental suffering, that is, the fact that during participation in the described methodologies one can enter into contact with still raw biographical wounds. In some cases, it was necessary to have a further moment of listening – beside the experience of the interview or of the itinerant soliloquy – dedicated to helping the participants to narrate and to cope with these difficult memories.

and for all (Blumer, 1969). In this context, the Grounded Theory Method (GT)² is an interpretative research method, frequently used in qualitative research. However, to make a visual and sensory “turn” of the method is not simple task. In fact, it requires data that pertain to the visual dimension. Regarding data analysis, in particular, in this research there were visual and sensory data “generated” by the researcher and by the interviewees. During the analytical process, it is important to bear in mind that, although these images produced what can be considered to be “empirical data,” they do not represent “objective truth”: “[t]he very act of observing is interpretative, for to observe is to choose a point of view” (Harper, 2000: 721; see also Chalfen, 2011: 26, 27). These visual and sensory dimensions have also been “integrated” by the narrative description of the photos or of the concrete environment the participants inhabited during their itinerant experience. In this sense, the proposed method may be helpful for both grasping the “voice” of visual data and for making visual processes emerge³.

Photo elicitation as a visual technique to explore environmental victimization

During my empirical research with people affected by environmental harm, I used sensory and visual techniques of qualitative research in order to explore the experiences of environmental victimization and the socio-environmental harms related to them. In order to give greater concreteness to the theoretical and methodological considerations proposed, I will present some excerpts taken from a research on environmental victimization that I have been carrying out for the last ten years and more⁴ in Huelva (Spain) – a highly polluted town in Southern Spain that represents a case study useful to deepen the perception of the environmental pollution of a territory following production activities that go back in time. Huelva, in fact, is a town highly polluted by an imposing industrial plant built in the early 1960s, encompassing a large number of corporations. The hub was built next to the town, in what could be defined as its ‘backyard’ (Natali, 2010, 2016, 2017). What Beck (2007) calls ‘organized irresponsibility’ captures both the seriousness of the pollution of the territory and the absence of an answer by the authorities to this grave situation.

² In GT, data analysis and data collection are concurrent processes. In particular, scholars in this field refer to GT data analysis as coding: the process through which the researcher defines what the data refer to, the set of procedures and techniques for retrieving patterns and conceptualizing data (Glaser, 1978; Suchar, 1997; Charmaz, 2014). It is here that challenges arise about how to analyze the data. Suchar (1997) suggests that the shooting scripts can be regarded as a series of questions about the subject matter, and Clarke (2005) proposes some guiding questions for the organization and the analysis of visual data (Who produced the visual data? With what objectives? And for what “audience”? Where did they produce them? And what was their “social” world? How did they produce them? What does this image/video mean for the participant(s)?). At the same time, the researcher engages in theoretical development (Charmaz, 2014).

³ Further methodological decisions will concern theoretical saturation and the construction of a theory (see Anzoi & Ghirrotto, 2018).

⁴ The narrative fragments of the photo elicitation and of the itinerant soliloquy were realized in Huelva (Spain) between May 2008 and May 2015.

In spite of its being a worrying scenario, it seems that it remains surprisingly *invisible* – for the state, for the law and for a large section of the local population.

Methodologically, the images employed during visual research *with* images may be those produced and then selected by the researcher or by the participants in order to facilitate posing ‘visual questions’ to the interviewees. As Harper (2001: 16) explains, photo elicitation is ‘a process of organizing interviews around photographs’ (see also Rose 2012: 304–317). The assumption is that the meaning of the image rests in the mind of the viewer (Becker, 1974; Holm, 2008; Pauwels, 2011: 12). Pauwels (2017: 67) remarks that ‘many types of images can be used (still and moving, paintings or drawings, etc.).’ More importantly, visual images can be used to elicit and probe meaning—as a tool for the interviewer to delve deeper into the participants’ visual and verbal narratives. This technique generates a kind of visual *verstehen* creating a deeper unity between the subjects interviewed and the researchers (Harper, 1988)—one favoring the sharing and creation of multiple, even conflicting, versions of reality.

Specifically, in previous work, I suggested that photo elicitation proves useful in enhancing the active role of social actors and in placing their perceptions in the context of the social and cultural worlds in which they are embedded, starting directly from the perspectives of those with specific environmental experiences. In the context of qualitative research on environmental victimization, I created a photographic collage of Huelva (Spain)—a town overwhelmed by industrial contamination—and showed it to several inhabitants of the place (Fig. 1).

As in the excerpts above (Fig. 1), the same photograph, in spite of its visual ‘evidence’, becomes the starting point for different and often conflicting interpretations, that define its meaning and the possible consequences in terms of socio-environmental claims. Photographic images are always permeated with similar dilemmas



Fig. 1 Photo elicitation (Author, 2008). Excerpts from the interviews: Virginia (female, 18 years old, student): “What else can I say when this photo already says everything? And it makes me sad... What can I see in this photo? The photo shows how ‘poor’ we are, doesn’t it? The pollution, the stains... the colour of the ground and of the water...”. Alejandra (female, 20 years old, student): “I don’t think there is as much contamination as they say ... many people measure the pollution by the quantity of white smoke coming out ... but that does not contaminate ... what contaminates is the black smoke ... my fiancé works at Fertiberia, he is a chemical engineer in the laboratory and he gives me a lot of information ... there is pollution but not so much...”

and paradoxes (Barthes, 1980). On the one hand, they have always represented the emblem of descriptive neutrality and objectivity: the saying that ‘an image is worth a thousand words’ communicates explicitly the aptitude of photography to put us in contact with the ‘raw and naked’ reality. This contact may also activate feelings that are more or less tied to the perception of an injustice denounced by the image, together with any moral reasoning that might follow. On the other hand, though, photographic images are bearers of a constitutive ambiguity and, for this reason, they can initiate multiple and conflicting discourses and narratives, inviting our imagination to generate innumerable readings, ‘each plausible, each understood as an accurate report of what the image represents’ (Bencivenga, 2015: 32). They can be interpreted in various ways, according to the symbolic and moral perspective, more or less shared within a certain society, which opens our eyes and directs our looking. Between these two paradoxical aspects of the photographic image, there is not a separation, but a continuous dialogue, in the form of oscillation. Images ‘are not restricted to represent, but intervene in the moral debate taking place inside and outside us; they express consensus or condemnation, approval or rejection’ (Bencivenga, 2015: 40). Naturally, when in a certain society values and criteria are not only prevalent but so widely shared that they are taken for granted, ‘the ambiguity is less perceived, till it becomes nearly invisible’ (Bencivenga, 2015: 124). Catching these ambiguities in the discourses of the interviewees is an essential moment for entering into the symbolical complexity running through the multiple experiences of environmental victimization. These narratives are obviously influenced by the discourses circulating in the public sphere through mass media, structured by those who have the power and the means—and not only economic means—to impose and ‘naturalize’ or, conversely, to neutralize a certain definition of reality.

In other cases, the photographic image became a bridge for other visual forms such as that of a pictorial representation. As happens in the following fragment of an interview “with” images, a painting, created by the interviewee himself to give a visible form to what was happening in Huelva, expressed, in his view, in a more *realistic* way than a photograph, the deterioration of the socio-environmental context he lived in (Fig. 2).

As Auyero and Swistun (2009) maintain, when studying the experiences of pollution by those who live in degraded environments, one needs to pay attention not only to what certain businesses and those who manage them ‘are’ and ‘do in reality,’ but also one should explore how people perceive those activities and their consequences, the extent of their knowledge about them, how they feel and think about their environment, and how they make sense of it. From this perspective, it was not important for me to know what the images really represented: the main focus was on the meanings that the interviewees connected to those images—the symbolic and emotional ‘lenses’ that directed their visual perspectives. Thus, the images worked as a paned window—with surfaces sometimes transparent, sometimes opaque and ambiguous—opening on to the social perception of pollution and the socio-environmental harm considered.

This interview process resulted in a number of different narratives about socio-environmental harms. In particular, photo elicitation: (1) allowed the narratives to develop around a ‘now and then’ with reference to the creeping environmental



Fig. 2 Image produced by the interviewee (male, 65 years old, retired). Excerpts from the interviews: Manolo (male, 65 years old, retired): “The painting represents a synthesis of what according to me is happening in this town... so full of light in appearance... so dark, on the contrary, in its future perspective... the picture shows a sky full of smokestacks that emanate a black and polluting smoke, that kills the birds... the Ria is full of a black mud...having nothing in common with the white sand we enjoyed back in time... and there are dead fishes because of the water pollution, a symbolic place like the monument to Christopher Columbus, at the Punta del Sebo, which totters...”

disaster and led the participants to reflect on the extent of contamination from a different perspective; introducing into the conversation the historical dimension of the phenomenon and, with it, the collective memory of the inhabitants of the area in question, granted broader narrative potential about the various ways of feeling, living, remembering and seeing the socio-environmental history of a particular place; (2) served as a means for activating an interpretative process of the visual and symbolic content of the perceived reality; (3) made it possible to place more value on an important facet of environmental harms—their *spatial* dimension(s). Reflecting upon our mode of perceiving the environment and its possible destruction implies, in fact, the recognition of the *concrete space* (a place) of which we are part. Each social actor is also, or perhaps above all else, a “spatial” actor, one who moves in a physical, not just symbolic, space, as I will describe in the next part.

An example of itinerant soliloquy: nostalgia for a ‘shining past’ and ‘the folly of politics’

The strategy of data collection described, oriented by a co-construction process between the researcher and the participants, ensured access to the wide variety of *ways of seeing* the polluted environment, reconstructing an articulated range of personal visions about it. However, as visual criminologist Michelle Brown (2017) elucidates, ‘[t]he turn to the visual is indicative of a larger turn to the sensory that brings back the material, physical, affective and embodied experiences of harm, control, injustice, and resistance’ (see also McClanahan & South, 2020).

Following this direction, another technique I have employed in order to investigate the individuals' social perception of environmental harms and victimization is a special form of mobile methodology that I called 'itinerant soliloquy' and that aims at exploring the physical and multi-sensorial dimensions linked to the personal experience of a place (Natali & de Nardin Budó, 2019; Natali & McClanahan, 2020; Natali et al., 2023). The itinerant soliloquy is partly inspired by the explorations of visual anthropologist Andrew Irving (2011) and is intended to decipher 'how spaces become places' (see also Brisman & South, 2014), in the concrete complexity of the dynamic relationship between social actor and living space.

Specifically, in my research, the participant was asked to take the researcher to a place that had something to do with his/her perception of the socio-environmental harm in the city where s/he lived. The participant was then asked to walk around the place and verbally express the stream of consciousness (thoughts and emotions) that might arise during the walk. The spoken soliloquies of the participants were recorded and their movements in the space/place filmed from a distance. In essence, what becomes significant and central during the itinerant soliloquy is not only 'seeing' but also, and above all, 'being in the world' – enhancing a kind of 'democracy of the senses' (Back, 2007). Every observer is immersed in the disorder of the real world, in its synesthetic messiness (see also Robins, 1996), and his/her observations and narratives are always embedded in a specific experiential context – in a real and true 'web of life' (Degen & Rose, 2012) – quite far from the ideal of a detached and impersonal observation, often at the centre of traditional scientific methods (Blumer, 1969; Irving, 2011).

In my experience, the proposal of carrying out the performance of the soliloquy may be received in different ways by the participants: some do not show any hesitation, explaining that for them it is natural to tell stories; others, in contrast, may express uncertainty and doubts about their ability to produce 'good stories'; others refuse to participate, justifying the refusal on the grounds of fear of an excessive emotional involvement and of not wanting to express themselves as far as that. However, also in this specific case, after the few moments necessary to "settle into the role", the participants managed to carry out the performance quite naturally. During their experience, the participants considered the 'imagined' listener – or the 'phantom others' (Athens, 2007) to whom any narrator turns when telling his/her own story – as a symbolic point of reference to whom they tell the story of their relationship with the polluted environment. Clearly, it was a sui generis performance: "public" because it was realized in a public space but "protected" from the danger of the spectacularization of the content of the soliloquy. Even though they were solicited soliloquies – and the audio and video recorded by the researcher – the dimension of solitude was up to a certain point guaranteed by the fact that the participants were followed at a certain distance, so that they could develop their own narrative course more freely and without the near presence of the researcher, that would have changed the soliloquy into a dialogue (see also Schoepfer, 2014, 12). The participants were wearing the microphone and the researcher could not hear their narrative "live" – he could only access it once it was all finished. Moreover, the shooting was done at a distance, with a small

Fig. 3 Manolo as he walks describing to himself the landscape he is crossing. Still image taken from the video of the itinerant soliloquy (Author, 2015)



camera, so that the participant could somehow keep the presence of the researcher (sometimes unseen, sometimes barely seen) in the background. The audio was then added to the video – and to the background sounds recorded by the microphone of the camera – during the editing process.

The thought motivating the planning and the experimentation of this technique is based on the conviction that the cognitive dimension, even if amplified by the use of visual dimensions, is not sufficient to capture the sense of our relationship with the environment (see also Brown & Carrabine, 2017b). If *what* happens depends on *where* it happens, it is necessary to think of methodological approaches that might help in interpreting the phenomena investigated in a complex and multi-sensorial way (Ingold, 2000; Pink, 2008; O’Neill, 2017). More precisely, the itinerant soliloquy can be defined as a technique which tries to enhance the reflexive and experiential richness arising from the coming together of walking, observing, interpreting, reflecting and narrating – to oneself and to others – opening the socio-criminological imagination to new forms of reflexivity and research in the field. Furthermore, considering that the perception and the interpretation of places crossed during an itinerant soliloquy are deeply tied to the self, to the social mindscapes (Zerubavel, 1999) and the story of a single social actor, this approach enhances the uniqueness of the multiple, and often paradoxical, points of view on the human–environment relationship. In this way, our self becomes a space of reflexivity, crossed by sounds, voices and images coming from different places and times.

In order to explore these complex dimensions, in my research in Huelva I invited the participants to choose the places that in some measure echoed their biographical experiences tied to the social-environmental harms deriving from the environmental contamination of the town. Here below I present as an example of itinerant soliloquy that of Manolo (aged 70, retired), who chooses to conduct his visual and narrative exploration near the wharf of the *Río Tinto*, the rail terminus, where the ore, extracted from the British mines towards the end of the 1800s, arrived; it is now used for fishing and leisure activities. The personal memories evoked by the place are interwoven with the historical memories and the nostalgia for a past long gone and irretrievable (Fig. 3).

Manolo: These meanders are all that remains of the inlet of the river ... they are full of rubbish and detritus ... and in spite of it all animal life still goes on, proof of the strength of nature in this area of the town as polluted as the estuary ... but there, there is animal life that wants to survive and win ...

This was the wharf for the mineral cargoes of the Rio Tinto Mine ...and there they loaded all the minerals ... but all this area ... the vision I have from my childhood ... is that in all this area there was a totally hectic activity, with boats, ships, fishing boats ... that unfortunately no longer exists today ...

The high handedness of politics and certainly the feeling, of the politicians, that they are not part of this earth... we see them clearly expressed by the edge of this jetty that they started and have not yet finished... ... when I was a child I used to bathe in that area they call "bajamar" with a pure white sand ... *today it's no longer possible* ... because of the political folly and of the insensitivity of the political class towards the respect for the environment in which citizens live, they have also been deprived of their right to see their estuary but this estuary is ours, the citizens' ... and we have been deprived of all this environment we have here, of unparalleled beauty, for more than 60 years ... as a child I often came here and looked at the sunset ... and the sight was indescribable ... this was the feeling this landscape inspired ... this peace ... and this nature ... not broken by man's activity ... because fishing was an activity with much dignity ... and when we walked in that direction which is now taken over by the bulks of the chimneys of the contaminating plants of the Polo, well, down there, at the end, you could see perfectly well Columbus' statue and a place very popular as was the Punta del Sebo ...

For biological reasons and because of my age I will not see it, but ... I trust that this collective memory, that is still buried in the conscience of the people of Huelva, might still awaken and re-conquer that Huelva that has happily been with us throughout our childhood ... I am not saying that before Huelva was better ... but I do say that it certainly was more natural, more authentic ... more suitable to life ... so that you could feel part of the earth ...

While he is walking and soliloquizing, he meets some fishermen (F.), and starts a conversation – his soliloquy becomes now a dialogue that gives a special turn to his stream of consciousness:

M. What do you catch here?

F. Sea bream ...

M. Sea bream?

F. Sea bream and bass ...

M. It means the fish is coming back, right? And what's it like, the fish?

F. Yes, by now they have closed nearly all the plants

M. True, they have closed nearly all the plants, and the rivers begin to recover, don't they?

F. The other day they caught a sea horse here and they saw a turtle right here

M. Really? That's a good sign, isn't it? ...

F. Yeah, at least it's good ... it means that the contamination in the river is

going...

M. Well, then, let's see if we can again start a fishing activity at Huelva and all the other things ...

F. Yes, but in a short time they want to close down this place ...

M. Close down?

F. They want to make it into a seafront ... fishing will not be allowed ...

M. Ah, yes ... Well, good fishing then ... see you again ...

[Manolo starting again his soliloquy] Well, they tell me that they have caught a sea horse and that recently they have seen a turtle ... mmm, it's a good sign ... and naturally, they themselves give the explanation ... they say that the plants are closing down ... *one could imagine... well, no, I have seen it!* ... without plants, the quantity of fish that was here ... and I remember that more or less in this area ... when we came here to bathe as children the water was very clear and transparent ... and also all that area called "Bacuta", where it seems there are archaeological remains that go back to nearly 3000 years ago ... as usual, no public money was given to continue the research and make sure that this town might learn all its brilliant past, even if not the recent ... in antiquity yes, it did have a luminous past ...

Manolo's soliloquy calls directly into question the experience of (environmental) injustice linked to the deprivation of a right, such as that of being able to enjoy a healthy environment, not threatening or injurious to human health. It is a question central to the debated theme of environmental justice which concerns "the distribution of the environment among people in terms of access and of the use of specific natural resources in precise geographic areas, and the impact of certain social practices and of environmental risks upon some populations" (White 2008: 15). Moreover, the social perception of a place and of a "before" not yet damaged by the horizon of pollution becomes tinged with biographical shades in those who have lived those experiences personally, like Manolo. The memories are full of people and things belonging to unique and personal experiences. They are narrations which we could define as 'transitive' in the sense that they mediate between the inner world of the social actor and the surrounding socio-natural environment, condensing peculiar meanings and atmospheres.

Whether the victimization was perceived as equal or differentiated, the theme of injustice emerged all the more forcibly in the reflection that what was happening in Huelva would not have happened in another place – the recurring question being typical of any (collective) victim: 'Why us? Why right here, in our 'backyard', and not somewhere else?' The crucial point for such reflections is the conviction that the *experience of injustice* is rooted in our biography, in our lives, and within a socially constructed and structured context (see also Pember-ton et al., 2019). Albeit in different forms, coming into contact with a personal experience of injustice and questioning oneself about the origins of this injustice sometimes transforms the meaning of one's own relationship with oneself and with one's social and natural worlds and may lead one to fight against the injustice suffered, as in the case reported above.

An open conclusion

This article suggests that in order to investigate and narrate with both images and words the possible environmental scenarios that may enter the green sociological and criminological arena, it is useful to design and use different visual and sensory techniques that help to learn modes of seeing *and* sensing the manifold experiences of socio-environmental harm and ecological destruction. Becoming even more familiar with the ‘culture of the image’ and with its possible uses, we could thus discover unknown ways of ‘originating “new”—insightful, open, moving—descriptions of the world’ (Robins, 1996: 167). To obtain these results, it will be vital to promote a ‘visual scientific literacy’ (Pauwels, 2011: 14), which would have to include not only the skills necessary to interpret and produce images, but above all, would allow the development of a *visual thinking* – on the part of both researchers and participants – capable of permeating and animating the whole research process. The mutual relations and points of methodological and theoretical overlap between ‘green’, visual, critical and narrative criminological approaches will help to take into account these various aspects, representing the starting point for the promotion of new imaginative explorations of environmental harms and conflicts (see also Presser & Sandberg, 2019). These theoretical and methodological sensitivities will then be able to become part of the global environmentalist endeavor that refuses to turn a blind eye to planetary degradation and destruction. Albeit in a different context, O’Neill (2018: 80) suggests that “[c]ombining participatory, biographical and visual research, and ‘walking’, can open a shared space, an imaginary domain, generate sensory knowledge and shared ‘understandings’ about belonging and citizenship”. In this sense, the use of these methods opens the door to the exploration of different kinds of social harm, besides the ones connected to the phenomena of environmental victimization described in this article (Natali et al., 2021).

Furthermore, in the academic field, there is often the perception that when it comes to environmental harm, the way to bring about change is to obtain better information and use it rationally and systematically. However, as other researchers have shown (Stake & Trumbull, 1982), it seems that this strategy has not achieved great results. Even when relevant cognitive acquisitions concerning the seriousness of the environmental issues have been reached, significant changes in the collective action have not been easily realized. This is in part due to the fact that we have become trapped in excessively linear thought processes whereby research produces knowledge and information that will bring an improvement in the practices. As Stake and Trumbull (1982) remark, on the contrary, such practices are guided rather by personal experience and knowledge—often unspoken and implicit—than by formalized knowledge. Following this specific epistemological option, it becomes clear that to enlarge our understanding of environmental issues, it is necessary to introduce all the relevant knowledge—not just that of Science with a capital S. The experiences the inhabitants of a place gather about their territory definitely represent another

knowledge—and a no less valuable knowledge—that must be considered: it is an ‘expert’ knowledge that remains invisible and unheard of because it comes from social actors having no power to act in a significant manner on their own environment (both social and natural). Qualitative and ethnographic methodologies are decisive to promote this change and will also prove to be useful for policy makers as they will enhance the experience needed when imagining, planning and implementing public policies (Stake, 2000).

Some scholars (Fleetwood et al., 2019, 5) have already highlighted that “[n]arratives of victimization are both personal and existentially significant and motivators for political and social change. Analysis of both depends on a keen attentiveness to questions of power that infuse who can tell a victim narrative” (see also Walklate et al., 2019; Pemberton et al., 2019). This level of analysis becomes even more important considering how the state complicity in the routine and systematic production of corporate social and environmental harms often impedes the recognition of eco-crimes as ‘real’ crimes (Tombs & Whyte, 2015). Within this perspective, some important results to which social researchers may hope to contribute are: an understanding of the complex and multifaceted social-environmental harms; the weakening of the myths, prejudices and distortions that even now persist in the man-nature relationship; and bringing into focus the dimensions of injustice deriving from an uneven distribution of environmental resources and of technological risks, carrying out a critique of the present status quo. As I have suggested, using photo elicitation and itinerant soliloquies can allow access to the personal and social experiences through which victims may become aware of (or may deny) the ‘existence’ of the environmental harms they live first hand and can help identify which multiple dimensions, recalled by their narratives, allow us observers to capture their ‘reality’.

This methodology emphasizes collaborative participation of researchers and local communities in co-producing knowledge: the most ambitious goal is to ignite social change by making the voices of the participants in the research heard in the political sphere in order to orient policy decisions and to improve practices. In fact, qualitative and collaborative research methods may contribute to facilitating various steps towards social and political recognition and the visualization of environmental harm connected to human activity. This process can be assisted by shedding light on that ‘twilight state’ where environmental harms arise as happenings that do not yet exist in the social and discursive sphere (Szasz, 1994) by looking at, seeing and sensing things in different and multiple ways. To start seeing and recognizing these crimes and their harmful consequences will favour a process of socio-cultural and normative transformation and reparation capable of responding to the “new” that emerges in ever unexpected and disastrously real forms⁵.

⁵ This green and cultural approach to environmental victimization emphasizes “the needs of victims to adequately map their experiences, which for them develop over time” (Hall, 2017) as a starting point to new forms of reparation of environmental harm (Natali & Hall, 2021).

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The author has no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

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