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| **Copyright © 1998 Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture All rights reserved.ISSN 1070-8286***Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture*, 6(1) (1998) 10-14**Beyond the Negative: A Criticism of*Police Pictures: The Photograph As Evidence* [**[**1**](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is1/kirvin.html#one)**]**Tristan H. KirvinBoston CollegeIn [Clyde Edgarton's](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is1/kirvin.html#edgarton) short story "Send Me to the Electric Chair" (1996), a sturdy heartland matron takes her son Paul and his friend Terry, ages six and seven, to the local prison to view an electric chair. Mrs. Toomey tells them, "The reason we're doing this is so you-all can see what will happen if you ever let the devil lead you into a bad sin. If you commit a bad crime they'll put you in the electric chair and electrocute you." She winks to the guards that the sight is a primer of sorts, to teach the kids "right and wrong." The moral instruction is sufficient for Paul, who by the end of the story is blamed, falsely, for an accident that leaves Terry mangled; in the ensuing confusion, the electric chair appears in Paul's head and he runs crying from the scene. Through Mrs. Toomey's obtuse reasoning and crude lesson, Mr. Edgarton delivers a subtle, instructive treatment of the preeminence of criminality in the popular imagination.The image of a ghastly electric chair materialized again recently, in *Police Pictures: The Photograph As Evidence*, a historical survey of forensic photography shown at New York University's Grey Art Gallery. The exhibition is a sophisticated look at representations of illegality and deviance. In one portrait, the chair is blurry, quivering in orangish light. Ironically, the journalist observing this execution was taking unauthorized photographs of the dying woman. In a second, black-and-white photograph later appropriated by pallid Pop artist Andy Warhol, the electric chair is desolate, eerie, and still. A gallows humor, perhaps unwitting, prevails at this site, for the photographer wryly caught the word "SILENCE" written over the chamber's entrance, an order to the living and an everlasting sentence to the condemned. If indeed either of these two photographers intended their pictures to be so unsettling and dry, then their work is among the exceptional pieces in the exhibit, matched only by the hard-boiled, but not unkind, photography of Weegee. The gallery's profoundly disturbing collection illustrates a century's attempt to delineate sanity and insanity, typecast the antisocial individual, and demystify death through the use of photography, especially for punitive, evidentiary, or explanatory purposes. *Police Pictures* obliquely substantiates [Michel Foucault's](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is1/kirvin.html#foucault) observation that in modern society, "each punishment should be a fable" (113). Visitors to the Grey Art Gallery, looking at images of prostitutes in doorways or the bodies of dead communards unceremoniously in coffins, see themes of exclusion, pharisaism, and shame, and a dearth of sympathy. **[End page 10]***Police Pictures* is organized into seven varied and sometimes disconcertingly ambiguous categories like "Race, Heredity, and the Criminal," "Criminal Files," and "Surveillance and Identity," which certain photographs seem to exceed. Portraits of Cambodian internees at Tuol Sleng, for example, surpass the narrow title "Surveillance and Identity" to which they were assigned; although the Khmer Rouge did photograph their victims ostensibly for their records, the finished portraits are unspeakably haunting. A girl, maybe ten, returns the photographer's (and viewer's) gaze with her own, intelligent and unperturbed. The images of adult internees betray terror, particularly one woman's, whose sleeve is in the grip of an unseen child."Race, Heredity, and the Criminal" best demonstrates the exploitation of photography for abominable objectives. This section of the exhibition shows the work of nineteenth-century' Western anthropologists and criminologists who purposefully applied corrupted versions of Darwin's evolutionary theories to various interrogations of race and criminality. Pursuing evidence to confirm the alleged superiority of the European, early photographs both embellished and corroborated the scientists' expositions on these lesser humans. In American Joseph T. Zealy's daguerreotypes of plantation slaves, an audience should see the unmistakable likeness of inferior mankind. Instead, one beholds the images of melancholy men and women with suffering eyes, wedded in sorrow, who comprise the exhibit's finest testimony to a lense's equivocality.Research into criminal behavior during the same era devoted considerable effort to describing the physiological attributes of the archetypal criminal, partly by measuring the dimensions of known malefactors, partly by investing the features of deformed or unattractive individuals with a lurid significance. A copy of *Criminal Man: According to the Classification of Cesare Lombroso*(1911), on display in a vitrine and opened to a chapter on the criminal's hallmark traits, reads: "In addition to the psychic and physical characteristics of the epileptic, [criminals] possess others peculiar to themselves." Traits included "facial and cranial asymmetry," "receding forehead," and protuberant ears. Writers in the emergent genres of detective, mystery, and horror fiction freely appropriated Lombroso's criminal stereotypes. Consider this description of Dr. Grimesby Roylott, the villain in Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes tale "The Speckled Band:" "[H]is deep-set, bile-shot eyes, and the high thin fleshless nose, gave him somewhat the resemblance of a fierce old bird of prey." Or, from [*The Hound of the Baskervilles*](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is1/kirvin.html#doyle): "There could be no doubt about the beetling forehead, the sunken animal eyes . . . the face of Selden, the criminal." In their conversation about another case, Holmes advises Watson to "concentrate [himself] upon details, a pat summation of nineteenth-century attitudes toward a person's physiognomy and (corresponding) temperament." Fittingly, *Police Pictures* includes odd series photographs of ears and noses. A bleary image of the lifeless, gnarled hand of **[End page 11]** "Chinese Strangler" Chin See Foo, whose crimes terrorized turn-of-the-century San Francisco, prefaces the entire exhibition. If the photographer did not simply take the picture spitefully, gloating over Chin's death, then the picture should impart insight into a murderer's mentality; but the photo seems only to indicate death's banality and human pettiness.Obviously, criminals comprise the greater portion of social outcasts featured in *Police Pictures*, but the narrow title is belied by the range of subjects featured. Because the exhibition catalogues a century's worth of "types," it is a bazaar of society's various misfits. Jacob Riis's famous photographs of the urban poor are the sole entry to depict ignored or unwanted people compassionately. While Eugene Atget's work, which shows prostitutes slumped listlessly on their beds and in doorways, evinces artistic similitude with Riis's, Atget's eye exploits rather than illuminates. The exhibition nods modestly to photographic comments on sexual mores and deviance with an entry from *The Jesse Brown Cook Scrapbooks*, kept by a long-time San Francisco officer. Surprisingly lovely, the black-and-white photographs show the image of an attractive brunette with strong features, dressed chastely, looking straight into the lens. The individual is Ernest Long, Chief Engineer of the steamship *Rose City*. Mr. Long, the caption reads, "was arrested for impersonating a woman." The exhibition's accompanying catalogue asserts that Jesse Brown Cook took the photographs for "personal" reasons and lets the viewer speculate whether his reasons were prurient. Although the photo conveys no outright animus toward the cross-dressed chief engineer, inveterate misgivings over sexual pluralism and gender heterodoxy are evident.In this exhibition, subjects alive at the time "their" photographs were taken often evade a photograph's confines with a sign of irreducible humanity, detectable in posture, the crook of an elbow, a loose strand of hair, lucid eyes. It seems, however, that death diminishes the deceased to the level of caricature and even renders physical space absurd. The gallery is sprinkled generously with crime-scene photography, which constitutes another major concern of the exhibit. Most visitors to *Police Pictures* will recognize the shots of the bloody footprints on the walk of Nicole Brown Simpson's home; these familiar tabloid images were so much a part of daily life that their reappearance as historical artifacts is jarring. The too-bright, grainy pictures still convey the same sense of unnaturalness. The "OJ Simpson trial" footage shares this artificial, profane quality with its nineteenth-century precursors. Police Pictures includes a series of photographs taken after a rash of killings of the elderly in late nineteenth-century France. Although discreet (if bodies are visible, they are usually obscured), no photographs in the exhibit offer as compelling an intimation of the dream-life aftermath of violent death. The rooms and hallways and furnishings, exuding fin-de-siècle stuffiness, look superfluous. Search in vain for hints of redemption, meaning, God. **[End page 12]**The most outstanding entries in this "genre" belong to Arthur Fellig, alias Weegee. Tireless and unflinching, Weegee chose the underbelly of mid-century New York City as his subject. In fact, Weegee's noirish portraits from the forties of streets bloodied by Mob excesses are actually gorier than photos circulating in print media today. Yet Weegee is distinguished primarily because he incorporated self- conscious critique into the frames, usually by magnifying voyeuristic curiosity. *Human Head Cakebox Murder*(1940), taken from a bird's-eye perspective, overlooks the scene of a gruesome discovery: a man's severed head, recently removed from the cakebox in which it had been stuffed. Weegee's coup, however, is to have photographed not the head itself, but a flock of photographers taking its picture, crowding around the small lump like vultures. A second troubling photograph, *Their First Murder* (1941), shows the close-up images of children being restrained by several adults, as they crane their necks to see something in the foreground, invisible to the viewer. A girl is at the center, wild-eyed and fiendish- looking, a wholesome blond boy at her right; and staring into Weegee' s lens and into the viewer's eye, a contemplative adolescent. The anguish of a woman in the background, probably wailing, is ignored.None of *Police Pictures's* minor shortcomings is vitiating. The exhibit suffered from the forced logic of some "cultural studies" pieces, in which the point, in this case that representations of criminality reflect the (misbegotten) prejudices of the contemporary cultural milieu, submerges overextended content. A significant number of featured photographs (e.g. Weegee's tabloid shots) do not conform to the exhibit's official impetus "to reveal the deep, continuous presence not necessarily of an individual's personal vision but . . . of cultural ideas about who is good and who is not." Even granting the inclusion of idiosyncratic photographs for variety's sake, curatorial discretion was sometimes suspect. The curators complicated one's sympathetic assessment of the exhibit's theme by leaving unacknowledged the culpability or innocence of the photographed subjects; at times it seemed arbitrary to group together portraits of slaves, assassins, and the insane. Another riddle, of course, is whether evidentiary, surveillance, or crime-scene photography is art. While there may be consensus regarding the positive artistic attributes of "realistic" photography, the pictures in the exhibit do not largely evince an artist's touch. The poignancy residing in most of them is accidental. But *Police Pictures* coheres, albeit with effort on the viewer's part, and the cumulative effect is impressive and grim.Endnote[1] *Police Pictures: The Photograph As Evidence*: on view at the Grey Art Gallery, New York University, 100 Washington Square East, New York City until 18 July 1998; organized by Sandra S. Phillips, Curator of Photography, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; at NYU, the exhibit opened with the cooperation of Lynn Gumpert, Director, Grey Art gallery. The exhibit does **[End page 13]** not travel, and contributions will be returned to their executors.**Bibliography**Edgarton, C. (1997). "Send me to the electric chair." In E. Annie Proulx with Katrina Kenison (Eds.), *The best American short stories*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.Foucault, M. (1995). *Discipline and punish* (Trans. Alan Sheridan). New York: Vintage Books.Keating, H. R. F. (Ed.). (1992). *The best of Sherlock Holmes*. Rutland, VT: Charles E. Tuttle.Phillips, S. S. (1998). *Police pictures: The photograph as evidence*. New York: Grey Art Gallery at New York University.**[End page 14]** |