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Public Execution, Sing Sing Prison, 1928

Richard Meyer

On the night of 12 March 1927, Albert Snyder, an art editor for *Motor Boating* magazine, was bludgeoned and strangled to death in his home in Queens, New York. Snyder's wife, Ruth, described the murderers as a pair of overweight Italian-speaking intruders who attacked without warning. As was quickly ascertained by the police, Ruth's story was entirely fictional. The actual intruder was Ruth's lover, corset salesman Judd Gray of East Orange, New Jersey, and the killers of Snyder were Gray and Ruth herself. Shortly before the murder, Ruth had taken out a \$48,000 life insurance policy on her husband. The policy carried a so-called "double indemnity" clause, which meant that, in the case of a violent death, the beneficiary (Ruth) would be paid twice the face value.

The double trial of the lovers created a media sensation in the local, national, and even international press. The *New York Daily Mirror*, the *Daily News*, and *Evening Graphic*, the city's major tabloids, covered the trial with a disproportionate degree of visual attention focused on Ruth. Photograph after photograph of the accused murderess was published alongside written accounts of her physical, sartorial, and emotional state. No other criminal event up to 1927 allegedly generated as many images.¹

Both Gray and Snyder were found guilty of first-degree murder and sentenced to death by electrocution at Sing Sing prison. No photography was permitted in the execution chamber but this did not dissuade the *Daily News* from commissioning a picture of the event. Because the presence of a local photographer at the execution would have been deemed suspicious, the *News* dispatched Tom Howard, a Chicago-based photojournalist, to attend the electrocution. Howard strapped a miniature plate camera to his ankle and then ran a shutter release cable up his pant leg and into his pocket. Because of its small size, Howard's camera could carry one glass plate, meaning that the photographer had but one opportunity to get the desired picture. At the precise moment when Snyder was executed, Howard pointed his foot toward the electric chair, raised his pant leg, and snapped a shot of the scene.

The uncropped version of Howard's picture shows Snyder seated in the electric chair near the background corner of the photograph, with the fragmented figures of various prison officials in nearer space. As cropped, enlarged, and printed by the *Daily News*, the picture seems to provide head-on, unmediated visual access to Snyder. It is, perhaps, because of the degree of enlargement and retouching that was necessary to achieve this view that Howard's picture loses a certain degree of pictorial resolution or crispness, and achieves a visual quality somewhere between photographic and hand-drawn. In this

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 Sunday, 1,357,556
 Daily, 1,193,297

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 2 Cents Daily 5 Cents

DEAD!

—Story on page 3



(Copyright, 1928, by Pacific and Atlantic photos.)
RUTH SNYDER'S DEATH PICTURED!—This is perhaps the most remarkable exclusive picture in the history of criminology. It shows the actual scene in the Sing Sing death house as the lethal current surged through Ruth Snyder's body at 11:06 last night. Her helmeted head is stiffened in death, her face masked and an electrode strapped to her bare right leg. The autopsy table on which her body was removed is beside her. Judd Gray, mumbling a prayer, followed her down the narrow corridor at 11:14. "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing?" were Ruth's last words. The picture is the first Sing Sing execution picture and the first of a woman's electrocution. Story on 3; other pics. 9-12 and back page.

Figure 1.10 Tom Howard, Execution of Ruth Snyder on New York *Daily News* cover, "Dead!", 13 January 1928. *NY Daily News* via Getty Images.

sense, it is almost as though the picture were combining the different sorts of visual images—photographs and illustrations—that the *News* used in its coverage of the trial.

Together with the exclamatory headline (“Dead!”), the picture stood virtually on its own as front-page news. Indeed, an extra half million copies of the newspaper were sold on 13 January 1928, the day the electric chair photograph ran on the front page. A caption running beneath the picture emphasized its lurid audacity:

Ruth Snyder's Death Pictured! This is perhaps the most remarkable exclusive picture in the history of criminology. It shows the actual scene in the Sing Sing death house as the lethal current surged through Ruth Snyder's body at 11:06 last night. Her helmeted head is stiffened in death, her face masked and an electrode strapped to her bare right leg. The autopsy table on which her body was removed is beside her. Judd Gray, mumbling a prayer, followed her down the narrow corridor at 11:14. “Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing?” were Ruth's last words. The picture is the first Sing Sing execution picture and the first of a woman's electrocution.²

In reading this caption today, we cannot fail to register the grim parallel between the electrode strapped to Snyder's leg and the camera covertly strapped to Howard's. If camera and electrode became peculiarly twinned devices at the moment of Snyder's execution, so the illicit commission of Howard's photograph came to rival the Snyder–Gray case as a topic of public fascination and, in certain circles, outrage.

The New York State Commissioner of Corrections, for example, asked the Attorney General to prosecute the *Daily News* but, in the end, no legal charges were brought against either Howard or the newspaper. But *the News* did issue an editorial in response to the controversy:

We doubt that many readers of *The News* want any apology from us for having obtained and printed this picture. Considered a feat of newspaper enterprise, the publication of the photograph was remarkable and will not soon be forgotten . . . the incident throws light on the vividness of reporting when done by camera instead of pencil and typewriter . . . Why other newspapers, which gave column after column of infinitely more gruesome descriptive language to the Snyder execution, should criticize THE NEWS for publishing a photograph thereof is something we cannot understand.³

Tabloid newspapers had long recognized (and exploited) the unique power of photographic images to render the news vivid and immediate. The difference between the *News*' visual capture of the Snyder execution and the “descriptive language” of its rivals in covering the same event would have been clear to the paper's editorial staff. Yet the primary claim of the editorial—that the publication of the photograph was “a feat” that would long be remembered—has proven quite accurate.

Today, the photograph is typically recalled not because of the crime that occasioned the execution. Indeed the crime is not even very sensational by today's more violent standards. Instead, the photograph is remembered because of Howard's ingenuity at capturing it. On display at the Newseum in Washington, DC is both a facsimile blow up of the “Dead!” front page of the 13 January 1928 edition of the *Daily News* and, on loan from the Smithsonian, the modified miniature plate camera, complete with ankle strap, that Howard used to capture the photograph. It is the surprise attack of photography—rather than the murder of one's husband for money—that now seems to capture the public imagination.

Notes

- 1 V. Penelope Pelizzon and Nancy M. West, *Tabloid, Inc: Crimes, Newspapers, Narratives* (Columbus: Ohio University Press, 2010): 124.
- 2 *New York Daily News*, 13 January 1928: 1.
- 3 *Daily News* editorial, cited in William Hannigan, "News Noir," in *New York Noir: Crime Photos from the Daily News Archive* (New York: Rizzoli, 1999): 15.