

## 2.5

# After the Event: The Challenges of Crime Photography

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The coverage of crime by photojournalists has often been imagined in relation to speed. Of the many legends concerning the US photojournalist Weegee (Arthur Fellig), one of the most repeated lauded his ability to reach crime scenes first, before competitors or the police had arrived to block or dilute his access to such scenes. This rush to the site of a crime has been central to the image of the crime-oriented photojournalist, from Hollywood newspaper films of the 1930s through documentaries on tabloid crime photographers working in present-day Mexico City.<sup>1</sup> Even as the speed of the photographer is celebrated, however, this celebration bumps up against one of the all-but-inescapable features of crime news photography. This is the fact that photographers are rarely present to witness and record the criminal act itself. The arrival of photojournalists at crime scenes is almost always belated. This belatedness has shaped the practices, conventions, and aesthetics of crime-oriented photojournalism. Its effects are to be found in the coverage of crime in daily newspapers (such as those which employed Weegee) and in those twentieth-century periodicals, usually of weekly or monthly frequency, which specialized in crime coverage.<sup>2</sup>

Arriving after the criminal act has been committed, photojournalists are normally limited to capturing the visible residues of crime, such as dead bodies or damaged buildings. Because of this, the photographic treatment of crime is unlike most other sorts of photojournalism, such as those involving sports, military battles, or political rituals. In the latter, even the unpredictable—a spectacular home run, an unexpected explosion, a resignation—typically unfolds in front of a camera which is already present in anticipation that something of journalistic value will occur. In these cases, photojournalism represents an activity of witnessing, and this status of witness has ennobled the profession and enshrined the status of photojournalists as custodians of collective memory. Crime photographers, in contrast, are rarely able to witness the criminal act itself and must represent that act using its after-effects and constituent parts. (In this, it might be argued, the photographic practice of photojournalistic crime coverage overlaps considerably with that of official forensic photographers engaged in the documentation of those aspects of a crime possessing evidentiary value.) In photojournalism, weapons, suspects, victims, locations, accomplices, and bloody crime sites are usually photographed separately, often at some remove in time and space from the crime itself. Crime-oriented photojournalism is thus marked by high levels of

fragmentation, which break the criminal act into disparate images. While the reporter's text may bind these fragments together within a coherent narrative, the visual components of crime coverage are usually characterized by multiplicity. This multiplicity works against the production of the single iconic image typical of other genres of photojournalism.

The fragmented character of crime coverage has had two principal effects on the visual aesthetics of the crime news story. One is that crime photography in the periodical press is marked by a high degree of sameness. Whatever the singularity of each criminal act itself, the images which form part of its coverage are usually conventional, even banal, because they are drawn from a relatively stable repertory. Images of guns and mug shot portraits of perpetrators convey information which is swiftly grasped, but this legibility is an effect of their restricted stylistic range and their repetition from one crime news story to another. A second effect of the fragmented visuality of the crime news story is that the journalistic status of different images—their documentary news value—is highly variable. The images used to illustrate crime news stories typically come from a range of sources—photojournalists, archives, judicial and family collections, and so on—and thus possess widely varying degrees of currency and journalistic legitimacy. Newspaper layouts may contain photographs of a crime scene taken immediately following the crime itself, but these often appear beside portraits (of perpetrators, victims, or officials) taken in the distant past, or are set amidst stock photographs of the streets, buildings, or cities in which a crime took place. The indexical status of the photographs employed within a single crime news story—the extent to which such photographs bear the imprint of a punctual place and time—is likely to fluctuate widely.

A two-page spread recounting a murder in 1930s Chicago will be used here to demonstrate many of the characteristic features of crime coverage in the periodical press. “Un gangster s'évade à l'Audience” [“A gangster escapes during his trial”] appeared in the 18 March 1934 issue of the French weekly *Police Magazine* (Fig.2.5).<sup>3</sup> Typical rather than exceptional, this layout exemplified the fragmented visuality of periodical crime coverage, with an assortment of images arranged around a lengthy text. With no images available of the criminal act itself, the magazine's editors assembled an array of partial views, of people and things involved in the crime. They supplemented these with group shots, which enhanced the dramatic, theatrical dimensions of the story. Together, these images gather up the key people and situations involved in this crime, though such images come from a variety of sources and points in time.

*Police Magazine* was launched in 1930, in an effort to mimic the runaway success of Gallimard's crime-oriented newspaper *Déetective*. It presented itself, at least in part, as a weekly news periodical. Significant parts of each issue were devoted to coverage of recent and spectacular French crimes, such as the murder of financier and political figure Alexandre Stavisky or the sensational Violette Nozière affair of 1933, in which a working class woman killed her father. At the same time, *Police Magazine* sat alongside *VU* or *Voilà* (and equivalents in several other countries, like the Mexican *Todo*) as one of the new “picture magazines” of the early 1930s which transformed periodical publishing through the development of elaborate photojournalistic features and inventive layouts. These magazines were known for monochrome covers which simultaneously mobilized the power of the single photographic image and indulged in fanciful practices of superimposition or spatial distortion. Their interior layouts often involved extravagant interweavings of text and image and radical juxtapositions of scale (such as those which set group scenes alongside close-up portraits of equal size.)

Like these other picture magazines, *Police Magazine* partook of the vogue for lengthy reports on far-off spaces, with Orientalizing articles on vice capitals of the world or illustrated guides to the everyday customs of exotic populations. As Myriam Boucharenc has shown, the more ambitious of French magazines of the 1930s sent well-known authors to far-flung corners of the globe, to report back on



Figure 2.5 “Un gangster s'évade à l'Audience,” *Police Magazine* 173, March 1934, 18: 10–11.

places or customs in lengthy articles and photojournalistic spreads deemed to possess artistic merit.<sup>4</sup> *Police Magazine* indulged in this practice on occasion, but its more limited resources meant that its feature articles were typically assembled in its Parisian offices, with materials reworked from other sources or acquired through international syndication services.

*Police Magazine* published its two-page spread on the murder of Chicago policeman John Sevic by bankrobber John Scheck nine months after the crime had occurred and one month before Scheck was executed for the act. The murder itself had made the front pages of newspapers across the United States, fitting neatly within that narrative of relentless Depression-era lawlessness which Brian Burrough has reconstructed in his recent book *Public Enemies*.<sup>5</sup> By March of 1934, when *Police Magazine* published its article, the events possessed little conventional journalistic interest. (The impending execution of Scheck, which might have served as a news hook, is not even mentioned.) Like so much of its coverage of crimes present and past, “Un gangster s'évade à l'Audience” permitted *Police Magazine* to revisit a place rich in narrative and visual materials. Throughout the 1930s, Chicago had served as one of the exotic locales covered most frequently in French picture magazines. Its status as a center of jazz-age nightlife and criminality prompted regular features filled with photographic imagery of its show girls, nightclubs, and celebrity criminals. The images assembled by *Police Magazine* in its coverage of the John Scheck crime are more limited in their variety and specialized in their content, but there is still the

observable effort to offer the familiar visual tokens of a broader gangland criminality: dead bodies lying amidst crowds of onlookers, murder weapons, institutional settings, and portraits of defiant criminals and virtuous victims.

While *Police Magazine* presented itself, at least in part, as a news magazine, closer examination of its reportage reveals a complex relationship to journalistic actuality. As noted, the murder of John Sevick was several months old, with little currency as news, and the appeal of the article apparently lay more in its exotic assemblage of places, people, and actions than in any informational function. Closer attention to the provenance of the various elements in this two-page spread confirms the suspicion that a punctual criminal act has been reconstructed from sources acquired over long distances and from very different moments in the unfolding of this criminal narrative.

The article “Un gangster s'évade à l'Audience” was credited to a Roger Nivès. The signatures of other articles in *Police Magazine* were sometimes prefaced by the words “enquête de”, designating their authors as investigative reporters, but that is not the case for Nivès. Indeed, the name Roger Nivès turns out to have been one of several pseudonyms used by H.R. Woestyn, a prolific author of French-language crime novels and one of the translators of Edgar Allan Poe. Bibliographies of French crime fiction list one novel published under Roger Nivès' name—*La Fleur Fatale*, from 1921—and the style of the *Police Magazine* article is that of the quickly sketched short story as much as it is one of journalistic witnessing.<sup>6</sup> One can only assume that *Police Magazine*'s reconstruction of the events in Chicago was based on the reworking, by Nivès/Woestyn, of materials produced by others.

The photographs accompanying the article are of widely varying documentary value and suggest different relationships to the practices of photojournalism. The portrait of John Scheck in the upper left corner of the article was distributed by the International News Photo Inc. of Chicago (the agency of the Hearst newspaper chain), according to an eBay dealer's listing which offered the original print for sale in 2013 and reproduced the back of the photograph on which this provenance is confirmed.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, this photograph is similar in pose and dimensions to an official mug shot and may well have originated as such. It exemplifies, in any case, that defiant demeanour which, in the words of art historian Cuauhtémoc Medina, marks the “theatre of the battle of identities” in which the incarcerated criminal resists the dehumanizing operations of police photography.<sup>8</sup> The head-and-shoulders shot of policeman John Sevick, who was killed by Scheck in his attempted escape from the courtroom, may well be a slightly altered version of the official police force photo of Sevick, which is now reproduced on a website devoted to law enforcement officers killed in the line of duty in the United States.<sup>9</sup>

Two of the images within *Police Magazine*'s layout arouse immediate suspicion as to their documentary legitimacy. The image at the top of the second page, ostensibly of John Scheck being treated in a hospital (“gravely wounded after his escape attempt”) reveals upon close examination that it may be a drawing or, at the very least, a photograph of low resolution touched-up for minimum legibility. There is good reason to doubt that photojournalists would have had access to a hospital room in which the killer of a Chicago policeman lay dying, and little reason to suppose that a French news magazine, reporting on the events a year later, would need to be scrupulously authentic in its use of images. Likewise, the image offered as that of Scheck's murder weapon, ostensibly held forth for examination by attorney Dougherty, may well fall within a long history of murder weapon imagery which employed posed or stock, archival photographs. What is of interest here, in any case, is less the photojournalistic authenticity of this image than the generic requirement that it fulfills, that of including, amidst the other features of this particular crime, a revolver held by an extended hand. Here, as in so many photojournalistic treatments

of crime, the isolated photograph of a pointed revolver stands metonymically for the inaccessible image of the actual shooting.

To these, the *Police Magazine* feature added a group shot of six women, identified in the story as the habitués (*belles de jour et de nuit*, in the reporter's words) of a speakeasy frequented by members of the gang which undertook the bank robbery. From American newspapers, which used this same photograph, we know that, like the head-and-shoulders portrait of Scheck, this image was distributed by the International News Photograph Service.<sup>10</sup> The women shown here figured in the narrative of John Sevick's murder in two ways. As witnesses for the defense of one of the accomplices of accused bank robber John Scheck, these women testified in court that said accomplice had been with them at the speakeasy Chez Nanette at the time of the robbery. More dramatically, one of the women, John Scheck's sister, had carried into the court the revolver with which Scheck killed the policeman as he attempted to escape during his trial. None of this information is conveyed by the photograph itself, of course, and the reasons for the choice of this picture clearly lie elsewhere. As an image of women over whom the suspicion of prostitution hangs, this picture joins dozens of others in *Police Magazine*, which throughout the 1930s documented, in almost anthropological fashion, the bands of women participants in night-time sexual commerce.

This image sits roughly opposite a picture at the bottom of the second page, in which men in a courtroom gather around the body of slain policeman John Sevick. The relationship between these groups is one of multiple kinds of contrast, of which the division between women and men is the most obvious. Other lines of distinction flow from this: between women returning the camera's stare and men gazing with concern at a murdered policeman, or between the former's clearly outsider status vis-à-vis the judicial setting and the latter's obvious sense of belonging there. Together, these two images capture the two dimensions of Chicago most prominent in coverage of the city in French picture magazines in the 1930s. The group of women stand in for "*le milieu*," "*la mondaine*", the aforementioned worlds of nightlife entertainment. In the range of their expressions they express the coquetry, solidarity, and hard-bitten defiance which form part of the inventory of stereotypical characterizations applied to women inhabiting this world. The men in the second photograph offer a more narrow range of expressions, but the impression collectively conveyed is of a distress held in check by the jaded professionalism of the Chicago justice system.

Images of dead bodies lying on streets or floors constitute the most cherished of crime photographs insofar as they are typically closest in time to the criminal act itself. Two additional, more formal features of such images are worth consideration. Both have been noted by Leonard Folgarait, in his study of Mexican photography. The dead body, Folgarait argues, is the perfect still object for the photographer's camera, because it is devoid of any of the movement which might render photography imperfect or call attention, through such imperfections (such as blurring) to its status as a technologically-based medium. Folgarait further explores the tendency, in photographs of those killed in acts of violence, for bodies to stretch in diagonal fashion across the space of the image. In the photographs of Revolutionary killings which Folgarait analyzes, this diagonality is said to underscore the "ultimately unknowable" character of political violence, through its difference from the grid-like, rectangular structure of those photographic genres (like the mug shot, perhaps) whose claims to truth are stronger.<sup>11</sup> Certainly, the diagonal arrangement of Sevick's body in the photograph analyzed here conveys a sense of disrupted institutional functioning, through the ways in which it forces the onlookers to position themselves in a disorderly, multi-plane arrangement.

For the inaccessible drama of the criminal act itself, photographs such as this one substitute the rich social theatre of the assembled crowd. Dead body scenes such as this one function as variants of that

tableau structure which cuts across several genres of photography, from images of families to group shots of sports teams, university classes, or military units. In press coverage of crime, these images of human gatherings strive to offer a dramatic energy appropriate to the criminal act itself, but the frozen immobility of the onlooking crowd almost always fails to convey a sense of urgency or alarm. Neither the totality of the photographs illustrating the *Police Magazine* article nor the sequence in which they are arranged provide information enabling us to reconstruct the narrative of the criminal act itself. That act comes to life only in the reporter's text, which offers a retrospective witnessing of murderous action and traces the interplay of people, settings, and behaviors in time. The photographs accompanying this text, which follow no sequence and show us people or settings as they existed before or after the criminal act, detached from the criminal act, are reduced to the status of illustrative ornaments.

## Notes

- 1 See, for discussions of the myth of the photojournalist in US culture of the 1930s, Penelope Pelizzon and Nancy West, *Tabloid, Inc.: Crimes, Newspapers, Narratives* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 2010). For treatment of contemporary photojournalism in Mexico City, see Vice Magazine, VBS.TV, "Alarma," Parts 1–3, <http://www.vbs.tv/watch/vbs-news/alarma-1-of-3> (accessed 10 January 2010).
- 2 See Will Straw, *Cyanide and Sin: Visualizing Crime in 50s America* (New York: PPP Publications/Andrew Roth Gallery, 2006) and Will Straw, "Nota roja and journaux jaunes: Popular crime periodicals in Quebec and Mexico," in Graciela Martínez-Zalce, Will Straw, and Susana Vargas, eds. *Aprehendiendo al delincuente: Crimen y medios en América del norte* (Mexico City: CISAN/UNAM and Media@McGill, 2011).
- 3 R. Nivès, "Un gangster s'évade à l'Audience," *Police Magazine* 173, 18 March 1934: 10–11.
- 4 M. Boucharenc, *L'écrivain-reporter au cœur des années trente* (Villeneuve d'Acsg: Septentrion, 2004).
- 5 Brian Burrough, *Public Enemies: America's Greatest Crime Wave and the Birth of the FBI, 1933–34* (New York: Penguin, 2009).
- 6 See the website "A propos de littérature populaire." <http://litteraturepopulaire.winnerbb.net/t667-woestyn-hr> (accessed 20 September 2013).
- 7 eBay listing. [http://www.ebay.com/itm/Crime-Photo-Bank-Bandit-John-Scheck-Kills-Policeman-in-Chicago-Courtroom-1933-/301016863454?pt=Art\\_Photo\\_Images&hash=item461600d2de](http://www.ebay.com/itm/Crime-Photo-Bank-Bandit-John-Scheck-Kills-Policeman-in-Chicago-Courtroom-1933-/301016863454?pt=Art_Photo_Images&hash=item461600d2de) (accessed 15 November 2013).
- 8 J. Lerner, *El impacto de la modernidad: Fotografía criminalística en la ciudad de México* (Mexico, DF: Editorial Turner de Mexico, 2009): 26.
- 9 Officer Down Memorial Page. <http://www.odmp.org/officer/12046-patrolman-john-g-sevick> (accessed 12 November 2013).
- 10 See, for example, the photographic spread entitled "Principals in Chicago Courtroom That Stirred Officials to Action," *Syracuse Journal*, 26 July 1933: 20.
- 11 Leonard Folgarait, *Seeing Mexico Photographed: The Work of Horne, Casasola, Modotti, and Alvarez Bravo* (New Haven: Yale, 2008): 12–14.