

“The Millstone of His Own Likeness”:

Photography as Disclosure, Concealment, and Correspondence in Detective Fiction

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Abstract

Scholars of popular culture have demonstrated how the rise, expansion, and popularization of photography (and the uses to which it was put by law enforcement agencies) parallel the expanded presence of photography in detective fiction. Ronald Thomas notes that the two nineteenth-century foundational figures of the detective story, Poe and Doyle, were keenly interested in photography and that both authored essays on the subject. In the same time period, emerging disciplines included photography enthusiasts who understood the inestimable value of the fixed and measurable image, subject to reproduction, distribution, and minute study, to their respective fields—Bertillon, Locard, and Lombroso in criminology, Kraft-Ebbing in psychology, and later, Goddard in ballistics. By 1935 Henry Morton Robinson declares confidently that after the criminal image is photographically captured and archived, his physical apprehension is not far behind: “from that moment forward the millstone of his own likeness is inexorably fastened around his neck; wherever he goes it betrays his infamous identity, and, if he is a fugitive, makes certain his ultimate detection and capture” (139). The reference to “identity” and “detection” presumes that individuality cannot long remain secret or hidden away when subjected to the impersonal gaze of the photographic apparatus. The disclosure of this identity is mediated by a supposed correspondence between photograph and world, undistorted by ideological forces. This view is belied, however, by a number of American detective fiction authors from the 1930s onwards—cautiously in George Harmon Coxe’s investigative photographer-journalists Flash Casey and Kent Murdock, but with increasing anxiety in Raymond Chandler, Ross Macdonald, and Paul Auster. Indeed, an examination of texts by these authors demonstrates the collapse of correspondence between the image and its supposed referent, and the impenetrability of identity. We arrive at Thomas’s assertion that “for all its claims to scientific objectivity, the photographic image is a product of its historical and political circumstances” (198), one which while initially hailed for its capacity to reveal, subsequently works to conceal and to render ambiguous.

Keywords: photography, detective fiction, identity

Works Cited

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