Capturing the criminal image: From mug shot to surveillance society
Framing crime: Cultural criminology and the image
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Capturing the criminal image: From mug shot to surveillance society
by Jonathan Finn
Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009, 200 pages
ISBN-10: 0816650705 (paperback) Price $22.50

Framing crime: Cultural criminology and the image
edited by Keith Hayward and Mike Presdee
London: Routledge-Cavendish, 2009, 224 pages
ISBN-10: 0415459044 (paperback) Price $53.95
Reviewed by Gabry Vanderveen, Institute for Criminal Law & Criminology, Leiden University

Capturing the criminal image: From mug shot to surveillance society is an informative and significant book for people interested in law enforcement, surveillance, social control and the problematic nature of visual images (and databases utilised) within these fields. The book illustrates, both verbally and visually, how older and more recent criminal identification practices have remained the same and yet, at the same time, have changed remarkably. Identification tools still need photography, because mug shots, fingerprints and DNA evidence are only useful in combination with a photographic representation. It is the photography of material, whether taken from an offender at the police station or at the scene of the crime (not the actual fingerprint or DNA material) that can be stored and (digitally) exchanged.

How identification practices have changed is persuasively substantiated by Finn. Building on, among others, Michel Foucault, Bruno Latour and John Tagg, he analyses the different ways in which the criminal has been made visible, starting with nineteenth-century police photography. At first, mug shots documented the identity of criminals brought into police custody: known criminals, such as individuals who were caught in the act, were photographed. The photographs were used as supplements of textual narratives and documented the offender’s criminal identity. Collections of these mug shots were used by police departments world wide to identify, for example, repeat offenders. The standardised form and classification system developed by Bertillon enabled the police to store and exchange criminal records more effectively. Photographs of criminals were also analysed as data to study the relationship between physical characteristics and criminality, for example, by Lombroso.

Finn uses Latour’s concept of inscription to show how photographic representations have changed in law enforcement practices. Inscriptions are material representations produced by specific procedures and
devices, although the labour, procedures and processes involved are lost in the final representation. These procedures are entirely hidden or ‘black-boxed’, especially in the highly specialised (and profit-driven) production of DNA evidence, consisting of an autoradiograph and numerical probability calculations. This transition is crucial: photographs as visual representation of a live body of an offender became inscriptions, abstracted pieces of data.

So while older and newer techniques share the use of photography, the more recent identification tools are fundamentally different. Although fingerprints and autoradiographs (in the case of DNA) are, like the first mug shots, representations, they are not representations of pre-existing criminal bodies, but of data. Such inscriptions create new possibilities for the collection, control and use of personal identification data (49). Finn provides a balanced discussion of these possibilities and their consequences for state power and federal control by focusing on the standardisation of the production of the inscription of DNA and on two post-9/11 registration and border-security programmes in the United States. This analysis emphasises the power of visuals and their institutional use by controlling them.

Power, (social) control and the necessity of problematising the image are also key concerns of Framing crime: Cultural criminology and the image; the image is not approached as sheer representation or reproduction. On the contrary, the image and its multiplicity of meanings are considered a site of power relations, of negotiation, a practice and performance and as the production of a modern spectacle. The book, edited by Keith Hayward and the late Mike Presdee, is a welcome supplement to other criminological books on media and popular culture and is rather unusual in its aim of offering ‘thoughts and advice for those wishing to conduct their own visually focused criminology project’ (9). Framing crime consists of a collection of 12 chapters by different authors. The global structure of each of the chapters is the same, but the chapters differ in their subject, level of theoretical abstraction, methodology and concrete practicability. The images of interest range from Hollywood blockbusters and documentary footage of the execution of Timothy McVeigh to car advertisements and online images of football supporters. Attention is also paid to the image as tool of resistance. For example, Cunneen studies the literal meaning of Australian Aboriginal artwork and demonstrates how these are related to political activity, express Aboriginal law, document (historical) state violence and critique imposed colonial law and discrimination of Indigenous people in general.

The book is highly critical and problematises the image in different ways. Thus, one would expect a thorough analysis of the actual images used in this book. In a number of chapters the images are indeed discussed, integrated in the analysis and referred to in the text. In some chapters, however, the images seem to have been included for illustrative purposes only, without questioning their roles or meanings and without reference to them in the text. For example, in a significant plea for the convergence of the photodocumentary tradition and ethnographic field research, Ferrell and Van de Voorde highlight four dialectical questions or creative tensions with respect to images in (cultural) criminology. These are the tension between objectivity/subjectivity, image/text, between attentiveness to the subject photographed and broader critical (political) analysis, and the tension between immersion/immediacy by which they ask for a merging of form and content ‘with the resultant photograph embodying both the photographer’s understanding of an event’s social significance and the photographer’s ability to capture and communicate that significance formally’ (46). With regard to these dialectical questions, I would have appreciated a discussion of the three photographs printed at the end of this chapter. All in all, the book offers a kaleidoscopical mix of theoretical articles and characteristic studies employing deconstruction, semiotic analysis and discourse analysis of various visuals related to crime and transgression.

Both of these books are worthwhile reading. Capturing the criminal image offers an intensive argument and provides an analytical framework for understanding and questioning (future) developments with respect to visual identification practices in the field of law enforcement. Framing crime elicits many interesting research questions and presents some methodological and analytical tools to study them. It is a step forward in the development of a visual criminology, indeed one that anticipates more to come.

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