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HARD-BOILED TABLOID HAPPILY LOW-BROW

BARBARA CHURCHILL

This
short
essay
discusses
American
tabloid
photography from
the 1920s and 30s. The
essay argues tabloid
images of gangsters and
murder scenes by Weegee
and others are free from
academic restraints, and,
instead, they happily remain
“low-brow.”

There is an implicit critique of the American dream in works by Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, among others, a critique which also existed in the way the tabloid image of the gangster from the 1920s and 30s became part of a complex urban folklore which was to a large degree at odds with the dominant values of the middle-class. Simon Bessie, in his 1936 book *Jazz Journalism*, notes how the tabloids were read by all social classes, but I would argue that the front-page images spoke differently to different social groups. Erin A. Smith, for example, in her book *Hard-boiled: Working-class Readers and Pulp Magazines*, has examined how

working-
class
attitudes
toward hard-
boiled fiction
differed from that
of the middle- to upper
classes, and the same can be
said for tabloid photographs.
Tabloid readers of the 1920s
and 30s were “poachers” (to
use Michel de Certeau’s term),
who made their own meanings
out of the photos of gangsters,
in particular. Evasive readings
often undermined the dominant
privileged reading which was
“Crime does not pay.” It is always
tricky to attempt to reconstruct
the reading practices of marginal
readers and viewers who did not
have meaningful access to cultural
production, and who have left limited
traces. However, the fact that the
figure of the gangster, along with those

evasive readings, remain entrenched in the popular consciousness does provide some understanding of how the gangster was perceived in the early days of his legend-formation.

A recurring motif I encountered in scholarship on early-twentieth-century tabloid photography is the lament that tabloid photographs have been domesticated. To quote Penelope Pellizon and Nancy West, tabloid crime photographs have been “tamed, removed from [their] working-class tabloid context, and polished up as a cultural relic[s]” (Pellizzon and West 38). “The museum’s interest in tabloid photographs,” they say, is a class-conscious way of enjoying the visions of crime now canonized by academia, and further disassociates those images from the decidedly lowbrow tabloids (Pellizzon and West 23). I asked myself if academia and museum culture really has the power to sever the images from their “low-brow” origins, since they have become so enmeshed in the popular visual repertoire. Is it not popular culture that has in a sense “canonized” them?

Geoffrey O’Brien, in his book *Hard-boiled America*, notes, “Unlike the art that some critics may yearn for—a self-sufficient structure with clearly defined limits—these everyday creations are inseparable from life, are part of the definition of a particular moment they inhabit” (O’Brien 10). Tabloid newspapers, with their front-page crime photographs of murderers and dead gangsters, were “everyday creations”

that defined a particular moment. Tabloid crime photography articulated a particularly pessimistic vision of American modernity, which O’Brien aptly describes as “a glittering hell ruled by money and violence” (O’Brien 16).

The American tabloids first appeared in New York in 1919 with the publication of the *Illustrated Daily News*, followed soon after by *The Daily Mirror* and the *Evening Graphic*. The word “tabloid” referred to its compact size (almost half the size of the traditional paper) and its concise presentation of the news (Bessie 16). Unlike the more familiar supermarket tabloids of today (Nostradamus predicts...or Angelina Jolie’s extra-marital affair—and the baby that is NOT Brad Pitt’s), the early tabloids covered a wide range of material—from quick synopses of conventional news to crime and lurid scandal. The tabloid was the city paper par excellence, a commuter paper for working-class city dwellers. According to Bessie, “The contents of a page could be grasped at a glance and the whole paper could be handled with ease in the most crowded subway” (Bessie 83).

As Bessie notes, what made the tabloid especially distinct was its exploitation of the “graphic eloquence of the camera” (Bessie 99): “with the exception of a single headline and some small type, the front page was covered entirely with pictures” (Bessie 16). The front page was often a dark vision of American modernity, a “ceaseless manipulation of the ancient curiosities in Love, Death, Sin, Violence and Money” (Bessie 43-

44). During the Jazz Age, detractors claimed the tabloids were a menace which would produce nothing but soiled and rotten minds (Bessie 213). This fear was rooted in a shift taking place from conventional journalism to photojournalism, a concern that images had the power to circumvent the word, a possibility that was gleefully trumpeted by the tabloids themselves: for example, the leading editorial in the first issue of the *Daily News* proclaimed, “The story that is told by a picture can be grasped instantly” (quoted in Bessie 84). No need for the concentration and effort required by elite viewing practices. This was an art of distraction, as Benjamin would put it.

During the 1920s and 30s, the crime rate in New York soared, and as tabloid newspapers increased their crime coverage, their sales rose accordingly. It was a time when “Crime paid,” and “pictures of crime paid even more” (Hannigan 17). Bessie claims that embalmed in the arresting tabloid photographs “are the happenings and persons which comprise the folklore of [the] times, more so than conventional newspapers because from the start the tabloid identified itself completely with the common people” (Bessie 17). The story told in a photograph of a dead gangster, combined with the concerns and interests of the “common people”, comprised a particular folklore of fatalism, a critique of the American Dream for those who had been largely denied access to that dream.

Arthur Fellig (also known as “Weegee the Famous,” a tabloid photographer at this time), noted in his autobiography, that when it came to crime photos, “the bloodier and sexier the better. [The] millions of readers had to have their daily blood bath and sex potion to go with their breakfast” (Weegee 40). Commenting on his image “Gang Gets Revenge” (1939), Weegee writes: “a just-shot gangster, lying in the gutter, well dressed in his dark suit and pearl hat, hot off the griddle...” as Weegee put it (Weegee 37). Weegee points out how well-dressed the gangster is: as Erin Smith and David Ruth have noted, the gangster’s apparel had powerful symbolic associations. The dream of American social mobility rested on visible consumer choices, and this particular “just-shot” gangster, Louis Cohen, dons polished shoes, an expensive suit, a silk scarf, and felt hat. He uncannily resembles a respectable businessman whose only error was to be caught alone and without the “protection” of a larger corporate bureaucracy. More importantly, Louis Cohen was able, through “dishonest” means, to shed class markers: leaving the ghetto and purging those ethnic traces that tended to restrict the social mobility of those who were “honest” (Ruth 63+). Louis Cohen is a morally ambiguous figure.

Tabloid photographers were trying less for artistic effect than for full coverage—a “meaty story” concentrated in one image. They needed to include as much information as possible in the frame. For example,

in “Dropped on the Spot” by Willard, a New York gangster lies dead on 46th and 10th. It’s a synthesized image that readers could understand at a glance. No need for much explanatory copy, except to identify the gangster as David (the Beetle) Beadle, from “Hell’s Kitchen”. Circumstance has also lent the photograph a good dose of black humour: in front of The Spot Bar and Grill, “The Beetle” was placed “on the spot” (slang for “killed where he stood”) and a street sign prompts us to be mindful of the Law: “Keep your sidewalk clean” and “Never sweep refuse into the street.” Clive Scott terms such an image a “rebus image” in which the photographer “frames the shot to capture a street sign or writing *within the image*. The writing functions as ironic commentary on the represented actions, as if the world is captioning itself....” It is unavoidably simplistic because the image’s meaning depends completely on the viewer’s getting the encoded “pun” (quoted in P&W 40).

But the viewer’s interpretation of this pun depends on the viewer’s subjectivity and position within the social hierarchy. The dominant or preferred reading is obvious: “Crime does not pay.” David the Beetle Beadle is no better than litter, street refuse: he is a criminal. Seen from another point of view, his crime was that he contributed to the erosion between social, ethnic and criminal class distinctions. Folklorist Richard Meyer, when discussing the figure of the outlaw (which gangsters were), comments that the death of the outlaw reveals the “schizophrenic

tension between optimism and fatalism which is so often a feature of those who perceive themselves as downtrodden” (115). Like Louis Cohen, David the Beetle Beadle had become a glamorous consumer, an optimistic, yet morally ambiguous, vision of the American Dream. His death, however, reinforced the idea that this dream was a hollow illusion: he was reduced to litter, to street refuse, despite his entrepreneurial aspirations.

These cheap, mean deaths were nightmarishly distended by the process of reproduction (Sante 9). Multiple copies of these front page photos appeared on newsstands, in shops, on the subway, a serial repetition that existed daily. According to Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” photography’s power to shatter tradition rests on its reproducibility: a plurality of copies exists instead of an “original.” The singular uniqueness of an original work of art, its presence, its “aura,” facilitates its becoming part of museum culture. As Benjamin was quick to point out, even with photography’s power to evade cult value, cult value does not give way without resistance (Benjamin 225). Benjamin acknowledged that even with an absolute emphasis on exhibition value, the artistic function may be recognized later (Benjamin 225). Such is the case with Weegee’s photos.

The domestication of the tabloid photograph began with the photographer, and publicity hound, Weegee the Famous. While the

photographs he took existed as a plurality of copies, with their shriveled aura, he compiled his New York photographs into a 1945 book titled *Naked City*, which became a best-seller. The disposable, tabloid photographs, destined for the trash bin, when placed in book form became the promise of durability. The book also offered the possibility of becoming “high art”. Weegee’s image “Corpse with Revolver” (1936) appears to be a “still life” of a corpse, revolver, and boater hat on blood-paddled pavement. Cult value requires a focus on the composition of the image, not the drama. According to Luc Sante’s introduction to *New York Noir: Crime Photos from the Daily News Archive*, the “alchemical transformation of passing trivia and historically moot tragedy into art is a process accomplished by the viewer, who adds a decisive distance that confers upon the photographs a condition opposite to that of their origins. The viewer looks at obscure individuals and sees archetypes, looks at chaos and sees design...” (Sante 9).

The provocative power of the tabloid photograph, however, can not be divorced from a larger popular folklore. As Sante notes, it is the viewer who adds the “decisive distance”, but only if the viewer exists in a bubble. The images of Dominick Didato, Lois Cohen and David Beadle, call to mind endless movies: from the 1931 film *The Public Enemy*, to *The Godfather* (1972) to *The Untouchables* (1987), to *Goodfellas* (1990), as well as the popular television show, *The Sopranos*. Some of these

photographs have made their way into the 2007 graphic novel, *Criminal*. The fascination with images of the gangster from tabloid photography rests on the drama, the rise and fall of the urban outlaw. Such images were free of academic restraints when they were created, and despite attempts to polish up these visions of crime, they happily remain decidedly “low-brow”.

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