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Index marks the spot? The photo-diagram's referential system

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Abstract

This article explores the genealogy of a paradox in the evidentiary logic of the press photograph. While such photographs are supposed to gain their special authority from their unmediated relationship to the events they represent, they are often illegible without supplementary graphical material. The picture press of the 1920s and 1930s, saturated with re-creations of brutal crimes and messy accidents, fashioned an elaborate system of arrows, daggers, circles and crosses added by hand in paint or ink to help guide the viewer's attention to the salient detail. Examining the hybrid idiom of the photo-diagram, this article investigates how photography's indexicality and its multiplicity seek reconciliation at this revealing juncture in media history, and explores the ramifications for the evidentiary status of the press photograph in the digital era.

The flowering of the picture press in the 1920s was characterized by a particularly flexible relationship to accuracy, a trait that made these venues hospitable to some extraordinary inventiveness with the putatively objective medium of photography. The first of these publications, New York's

Illustrated Daily News, with its mélange of scandals public and private, created a successful formula that was soon imitated by the *Evening Graphic* and by William Randolph Hearst's *Daily Mirror* (Brazil 1981). The photographically saturated newspapers of this era sought to balance readers' thirst for images of death and destruction with the inevitable belatedness of the photographer's arrival on the scene, and accomplished this with the refinement of a peculiar genre: the photo-diagram. Though the tabloid papers were pioneers in the inundation of their pages with photographs, by the 1920s they were emulated by mainstream publications in serving their readers a steady diet of post-facto reconstructions of catastrophic accidents and grisly discoveries (Bicket and Packer 2004; Schwartz 1999). These images, more often than not, were insufficiently decipherable to serve the evidentiary claims for which they were adduced, and an elaborate repertoire of arrows, daggers, circles and crosses were graphically added in paint or ink, by hand, to help guide the viewer's attention to the salient detail. One widely used instructional manual prepared by a team of newspaper editors and photographers made the nature, and purpose, of this sacrifice plain, asserting that 'if a picture contains too much confusing detail in the midst of which are news figures in action', any 'objectionable detail [may] be obliterated' (Vitray 1939: 141). In this strangely hybrid idiom of the photo-diagram, photography's indexicality and its polysemy seek reconciliation in ways that indicate something of the historical instability of photographic referentiality. It also provides an important perspective on the tension between graphical mark and image in the later form of the digital image, indicating the durability of a problematic which suggests that the graphical mark/image relationship is never merely a question of technological capacities, but rather of photography's cultural position.

The history of photography is replete with instances in which the need to make a photograph legible to a broad audience vied with the assertion of non-intervention that was required to maintain the indexical sanctity of the image (Daston and Galison 1992; Lynch 1991). In the case of a photograph of a historical event, or a microphotograph of bacteria, the 'pure' photograph might be illegible, containing a surfeit of irrelevant data, or an insufficient prioritization of the key phenomenon represented. However, the insertion of supplementary information or graphical emphases that are external to the photographic process would clarify the image only at the cost of contaminating the very state of mechanical purity under whose aegis the photo might be proffered as evidence. The peculiar interaction between the image and the graphical mark is, thus, interesting because it illuminates the fundamental incommensurability of photography's two most frequently imputed characteristics: its indexical proximity to its referent, and the dispersed situation of its multiplicity of possible meanings. While the former seems, like 'connective tissue' (Krauss 1977: 60) or an 'umbilical cord' (Barthes 1981: 81) to wed the photograph to that which it depicts, the modes of distribution through which photographs become available to their audiences pull at that cord with the full force of modern technology. This is a conceptual tension that lies at the very heart of the press photograph and it is, perhaps uniquely, illuminated by the largely overlooked artefact of the photo-diagram.

Indexical fingers

In a recent discussion of the historiographical status of photography's referentiality, Mary Ann Doane wondered, 'Why is the index so insistently associated with death?' (Doane 2007: 5). This is a compelling question, especially once we review the extraordinary prevalence – and variety – of this connection. Peter Geimer has drawn attention to this diversity by noting that 'photography, more than any other visual medium, has often been described as a trace, impression, or index of the real' (2007: 7). He cites the chain of equivalences deployed by Susan Sontag in *On Photography*, where the photograph is

'not only an image (as a painting is an image), an interpretation of the real; it is also a trace, something directly stencilled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask ... having a photograph of Shakespeare would be like having a nail from the True Cross.

(Sontag [1977] 1989: 153–54)

The photograph is, by this logic, a stencil, a footprint, a death mask and a relic, each of which proposes an entirely different account of agency and neutrality. In contrasting traditional to digital photography, William J. Mitchell views the former as 'a direct physical imprint, like a fingerprint left at the scene of the crime' (1994: 24), which in turn echoes Andre Bazin's influential claim that 'the photograph as such and the object in itself share a common being, after the fashion of a fingerprint' (Bazin 1960: 15). This array of metaphors is expansive and contradictory but it also betrays an idiomatic regularity, namely, the spectre of death, crime and investigation. These motifs dominate the peculiar genre of the photo-diagram, which reached its apotheosis in the heyday of the picture press.

The most-photographed investigation of the early twentieth century not only highlighted the unsteady position of photographic referentiality, but also helped to nurture the set of metaphors through which this status was expressed by subsequent critics. When the infant son of American aviator Charles Lindbergh was kidnapped from his parents' country estate in the spring of 1932, the journalist H. L. Mencken quipped, apocryphally, that it was 'the biggest story since the Resurrection'. The disappearance of the 'eaglet' provoked an intensive search that, after the expenditure of all available resources, yielded only useless clues. The kidnappers had left behind their marks, but these were ultimately insufficient to save the life of the child. When two sets of fingerprints were located on the windowsill outside the boy's nursery, hopes were raised and then dashed, as one newspaper headline reported that 'Marks can not be matched to any criminal'. Later, footprints were seen leading away from the scene of the crime, which 'were followed to the main highway about a half mile from the house where they disappeared. The kidnappers evidently had entered an automobile at

that point' ('Lindbergh Baby'). An accompanying photograph showed police investigators hunched over, making their own photos of the footprints.

Despite high hopes that the child could be recovered alive, these seemingly secure traces were not enough to enable the crime to be solved in time. The fingerprint and the footprint – favoured metaphors for photographic referentiality – failed to cash out their supposedly direct relationship to their creators. When the decaying corpse of the younger Lindbergh was finally located months later, quite serendipitously by a passing labourer and his boss, a newspaper photographer was dispatched to help recreate the scene of discovery. We note the two men, fixed on an empty space, one of them pointing out the now-vacant place of discovery (Figure 1). The referent in this photographic re-enactment has become unmoored, for the child's corpse had been removed immediately after the original discovery. The passer-by now points at nothing, indicates only that which traditional referential modalities were unable to locate. This most notorious crime was one in which the index is split apart from its maker, in which the fingerprint belongs to nobody, the footprint leads nowhere, and the photograph arrives only in time to fabricate the discovery of an already departed victim. The photograph and its investigative metaphors were joined conceptually in this moment, not as exemplars of the invulnerable bond between trace and referent but, rather, of the dissolution of that bond, of the tenuous contiguity of the two. The impotent indication of the two men, in its belatedness and its fundamental non-referentiality, belied the limited ability of photographs to serve the basic functions of indexicality that are so often foisted upon them. But the quiver of arrows, daggers and crosses that were deployed in other, competing photographs introduced their own kinds of ambivalence into this relationship.

The arsenal of the photo-diagram

In the short-lived but influential journal *Documents*, Georges Bataille reviewed the anonymously published book *X Marks the Spot: Chicago Gang Wars in Pictures* (Figure 2). A gruesome collage of photographs and newspaper-like reportage detailing the rise of Al Capone, this volume was quickly pulled from news-stands by Scarface's goons. It was oddly appropriate, then, that Bataille was writing about a book that had, effectively, ceased to exist, for this was precisely the problem raised in the book's photographs (Bataille 1930). In addition to publishing extraordinarily grisly photographs of corpses, *X Marks the Spot* returns us to the scene of crimes that had already unfolded, recreating them with the presence of officials who had discovered the body of evidence, often pictured pointing towards 'the spot' to clarify for the viewer its precise location. Beyond this direction provided by the literal finger of the law, a graphical white 'X' was inserted in the photographs, over the site. More precisely, the 'X' is a cross pattee – a mark traditionally used on maps to indicate the presence of a Christian site – deployed here with irreverent irony. One caption asserts that



Figure 1: Re-enacting the discovery of the corpse of the Lindbergh Baby, 1934, unknown photographer.

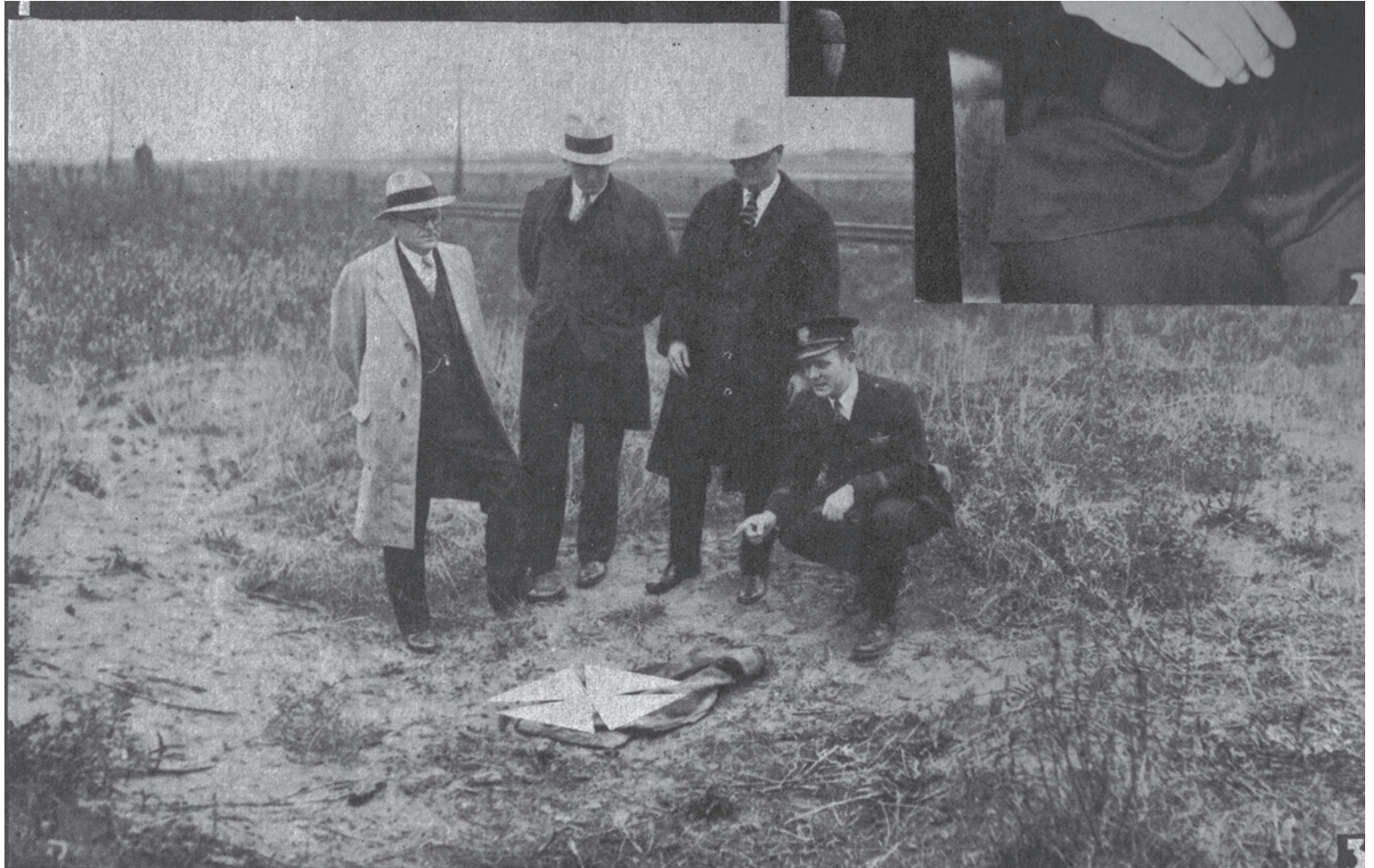


Figure 2: Policeman pointing out the location of the bodies of Capone's rivals, ca. 1930, unknown photographer.

'X marks the spot where Anton's body was found after a long search. It was buried in quick-lime. Anton made a nuisance of himself trying to get out of the racket' (Figure 3). The referential architecture, here, is surprisingly complex given that this is a work that relies upon the neutrality of the photographic medium to make its case. What we are presented with is temporally complex. It is a retrospective recreation of the scene of discovery – the remainder of an act that had already taken place – in which the actual discoverer returns to point his finger, not at the residue of the act but, rather, at an empty space in the dirt that will, only later, have been overlain by a graphical figure marking the spot.

C. S. Peirce famously claimed that 'the index asserts nothing; it only says "There!"' (1982: 162). Yet the indices that saturate this photograph, which ostensibly 'just' point the way, are converted into referents themselves by the unstable causality inherent in these pictures of bodies that are already long gone. Anthony Vidler has written of one photograph in *X Marks the Spot* that still shows the body in-situ: 'the corpse acted as its own mark, one to be rendered permanent only in the police photo' (2000: 123). But what is the status of photographic documentation when its object is already missing, replaced by proxies that only serve to destabilize the camera's transparent capacities by pointing precisely to the place of its insufficiency, its not being quite 'in time'? The substitution of the hand-made 'X' for the corpse shatters the literal and metaphorical contiguity between referent and photographic representation. The introduction of an obviously external graphic into the photo not only violates the impermeability of its referential frame, but also aims this non-photographic mark at the absence of the referent to which those who populate the photograph fraudulently gesture. To borrow a phrase from Mitchell, 'the referent has come unstuck' in these photographs (1994: 31). And with it has come unstuck the metaphorical contiguity that seemed to so many to ground the idiom of investigation.

As the repertoire of graphical additions proliferated and their use matured, the pressure on the photograph's indexicality increased proportionately. In the full-blown photo-diagram, the failure of the photograph to arrive in time is rectified, but only at the expense of eroding the indexical privilege of the medium. As destabilizing as the 'X' of the Chicago gang pictures was, it constituted a relatively restrained intrusion into the scene. In a contemporaneous image the story of a Denver nurse – who killed her fiancé, who had left her at the altar, before attempting to do herself in – is told with considerable graphical panache (Figure 4). Here, the scene of the crime is reconstructed in a narrative form: a hand-drawn representation of the murderess is montaged onto the blood-soaked bed from which her actual body had been removed to the operating theatre. She grasps the revolver in her right hand, a delicate puff of smoke emanates from its barrel. Yet this smoking gun was hardly decisive within the logic of the image, for on the floor we see yet another drawn iteration of this weapon, marking the location where the wounded woman hurled it. And this iconic representation is itself reiterated by a cross pattee, located directly beneath it. The temporal inadequacies of the



Figure 3: Cross marking the spot where Theodore Anton's body was buried, ca. 1930, unknown photographer.



Figure 4: Nurse kills her former lover and wounds herself, Gelatin silver print with pasted-down drawings and India ink, 1928, unknown photographer and artist. Copyright Stanley B. Burns, M.D. and The Burns Archive.

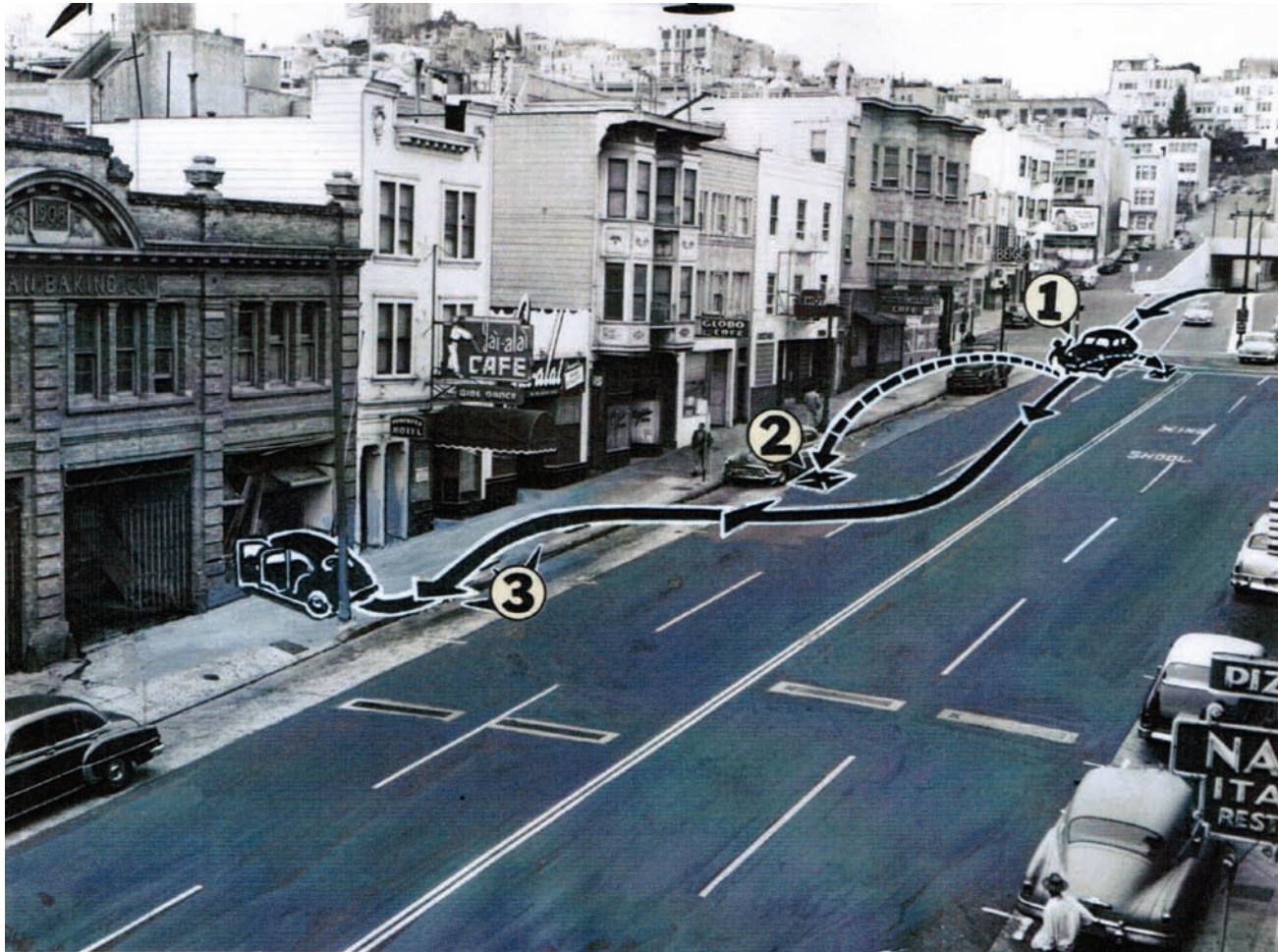


Figure 5: Automobile Accident, San Francisco. Gelatin silver print with applied pigment. 1953. Metropolitan Museum of Art. Purchase, The Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation Gift, through Joyce and Robert Menschel, 2008, unknown photographer.

photograph could hardly be more melodramatically revealed. The bizarre multiplicity of revolvers and the seemingly extraneous cross do articulate a sense of narrative progress, but only at the expense of any sense of indexical linkage. The legibility of the nurse's tale is secured, almost exclusively, through the additive drawing, while the photographic image is relegated to the status of mere backdrop (Burns and Cleary-Burns 2009).

By the 1950s, one can note the frequency with which entire representational scenes have been conjured up where previously a nominally neutral mark would have sufficed. The inventive staff at the *San Francisco Examiner* found itself confronted with a dilemma when, in 1953, a maniacal motorist zoomed out of the Broadway Tunnel in a stolen car with sufficient velocity to strike a pedestrian, sever his body in two, and careen down one of the city's hills to smash through the front window of a bakery (Figure 5). The difficulty for the creators of this event's photo-diagram arose from a surfeit of indices that, paradoxically, served to saturate the picture with graphical guideposts and to obliterate the photograph's indexicality. A solid arrow in black and white pigment applied to the surface of the photograph (which was taken later) re-enacts the path of the death car as it emerged from the tunnel and, in doing so, passes to the left of another car that was present at the time the photograph was made. Darting through the intersection, the stolen car materializes for the first time to strike a graphically added pedestrian, whose disconnected body parts fly in two directions that are indicated by a pair of dotted lines. At the base of these lines, two crosses mark the spots at which the unfortunate man's fragmented corpse came to rest. The solid vector continues down the hill to where the auto reappears amidst the rubble of the shop window. The circled numbers '1', '2' and '3', marked on the photo-diagram, hover over the scene and correspond to the three moments described in the accompanying narrative caption.

With one exception, the photographic element of this ensemble gives little evidence of the 'Trail of death' that the *Examiner* sought to show its readers. The only index of what had occurred is the visible damage done to the bakery window in which the car lodged itself. The car painted over this meshes uneasily with this trace of destruction, as it hardly appears weighty enough to have wrought such havoc. Indeed, the passersby and the traffic depicted in this photograph give no indication that anything dramatic might be unfolding, for the very simple reason that nothing *was* unfolding at the moment of the photograph. We see here a fundamental conflict that is registered unswervingly in the juxtaposition of incongruous representational approaches: on the one hand, an indexical but insignificant photographic scene and, on the other hand, one that is legible yet referentially dubious.

However we might disparage the sometimes clumsy intermingling of photographic and hand-drawn elements in photo-diagrams, it is often that very clumsiness that proclaims the materiality of the photographs most directly. They are three-dimensional, a fact signalled by the obvious physical layering of representation, in which the drawing is in front of, or on top of, the photographic field.

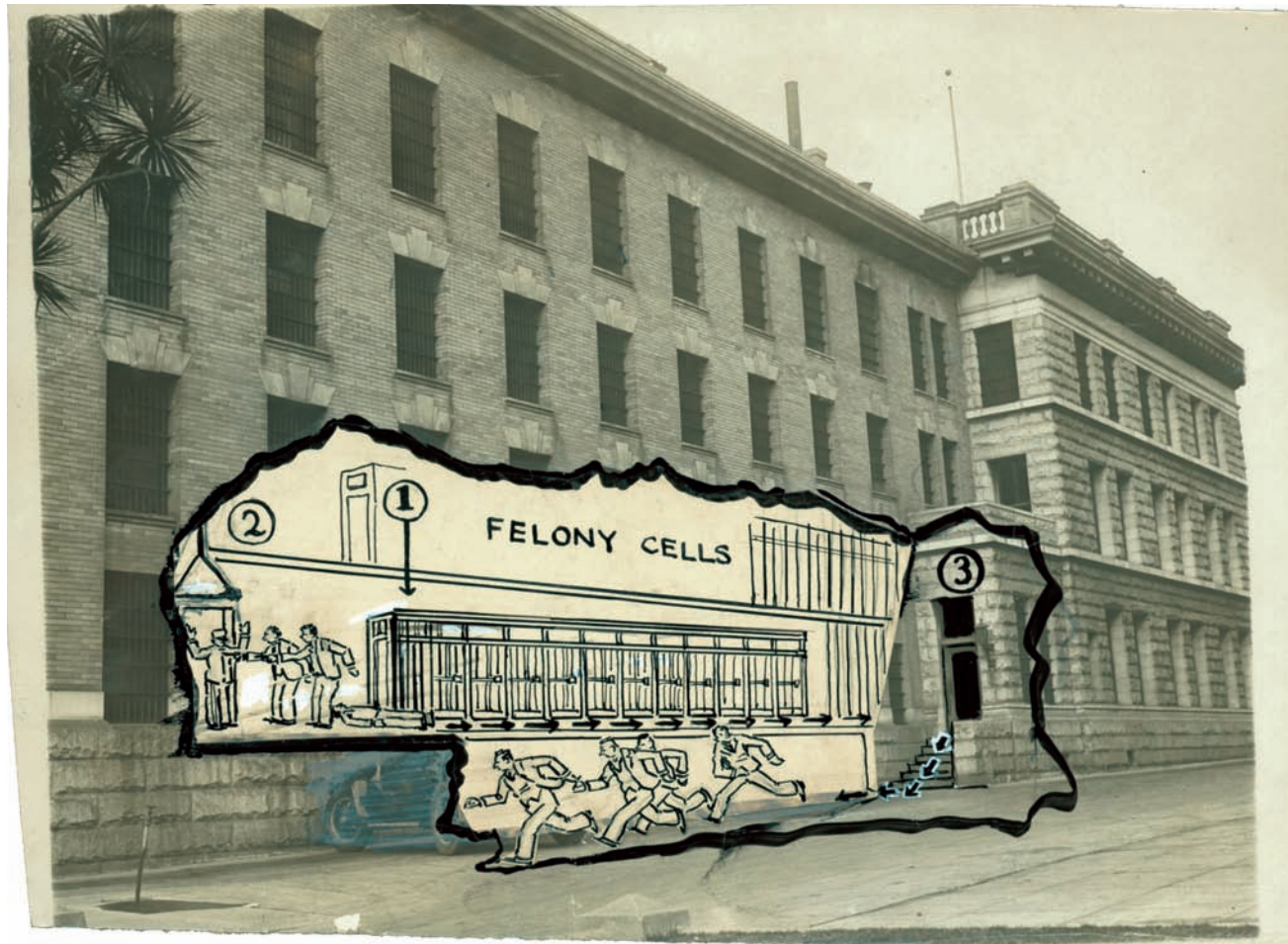


Figure 6: Photo-diagram of a prison break, 1926, Gelatin silver print with pasted-down drawing, India ink, and white paint, unknown photographer. Copyright Stanley B. Burns, M.D. and The Burns Archive.

One technically maladroit but very imaginative photo-diagram, of a jailbreak from the Alameda County lockup, makes particular use of this spatiality by merging the photographic exterior of the prison with a drawn cutaway view (Figure 6). Although the drawing is glued onto the photo, it announces itself facetiously as being underneath the photographic surface, 'inside' of the structure whose facade is rendered photographically. Similarly, in the case of the homicidal Denver nurse, the perspectival construction of photographic space is dismantled by the drawn figures, which have been placed on top of the image, rather than existing in a coherent spatial relationship with their milieu. They are alternately – and incommensurably – surfaces for writing and drawing, and depicted spaces deep enough to contain the photographic scene. This proliferation of layers and surfaces, of the accumulation of paper, ink and paint on both the recto and verso of the photo-diagrams makes their materiality, and the histories that attach to them as objects, insistent.

These are not, in the first instance, images, but, rather, *photographs*. They are objects with fronts and backs, adorned by the variegated scars of their hardscabble provenance: annotations in greasy pencil, the *damnatio memoriae* of overpainting, airbrushing, highlighting and the deft incision of the monteur. The versos typically feature a stamped or handwritten indication of their location within the photographic archive's taxonomy – 'Autos – Accidents – S.F.' – and the date on which they were filed. More strikingly – and almost invariably – they also feature a clipping of the newspaper in which they appeared, the iteration of the photograph as a multiple image affixed tightly to its source (Figure 7). This juxtaposition of original and multiple might be taken to reflect a reconciliation of the photograph's duelling facets. And yet, the digitization efforts underway now at repositories across the globe almost uniformly neglect – or even repress – these elements, for it is precisely the multiplicity of surfaces, and of meanings, that proves so antithetical to many archival imperatives (Sassoon 2005). The photo-diagram crystallizes the kind of polyvalence that the digital archive threatens to obscure, and clarifies some of the problems at the centre of digital photography's relationship to its own referents.

Watermarks and fingerprints

When material photographs – objects – are digitally transformed into images, their own 'biographies' are not the only dimension that is obliterated. What is also concealed is any sense of the procedures through which they were brought into existence. This is especially clear in the case of the photo-diagram. However, photo-diagrams differ only in degree and not in kind from other photographs, since all photographs are *made* by someone who acts within particular material and aesthetic conventions and constraints. Attentiveness to these procedures is not merely a matter of connoisseurship, but is the basis for exercising a scepticism that must be set against the implicit empiricism of the archive. Exclusion of such procedural and 'biographical' data leaves us with no basis for interrogating



Figure 7: Verso of print in Figure 6.

the taxonomic scheme through which the photograph is organized, and effectively limits interpretive possibilities to those presupposed by the logic of the archive. Allan Sekula has noted, incisively, that this logic is very particular, for 'in practice, knowledge of this sort can only be organized according to bureaucratic means. Thus the archival perspective is closer to that of the capitalist, the professional positivist, the bureaucrat and the engineer ...' (2003: 446). The photo-diagram is such a disruptive genre because of its failure to sublimate the marks of its creation to either the conventional verisimilitude of photography or the broader archival programme with which that verisimilitude has been in accord. It announces the insufficiency of the image on its own for comprehending the world, and insists upon the indispensability of supplementary information, the very thing that is endangered by the vast digitization projects that are currently underway in repositories worldwide (Manoff 2006).

For an indication of the digital accommodation of mark and image, let us return to the scene of the Crime of the Century by examining another photograph that, like the scene of discovery already addressed, is *not* a photograph of the infant Charles Lindbergh Jr. (Figure 8). We might reasonably suspect that the shadow of an airplane cast upon the ground to the right of the photograph is a trace of an airplane that carries Lindbergh senior, but it is not. Nor does this indexical trace of the airplane, its vertiginous transformation into a black cross planted in the ground, mark the presence of the younger Lindbergh. It is, rather, the white cross to its left that marks the location of the corpse of Charles Lindbergh Jr., then and forever just two years old. The white cross marks the location of the discovery of his corpse from above, from the viewpoint of the news photographer who hired that airplane, the shadow of which is cast in the picture. And that shadow – or black cross – is the guarantor of the presence and presentness of the photographer, while the white cross – graphically added – must suffice as the evidence of the location of the child's body. The shadow's intimate connection to the making of the photograph condemns the white cross – the *raison d'être* of the entire picture – to a subsidiary evidentiary status.

There is, of course, an even more elementary reason why this is not a photograph of Charles Lindbergh Jr.: the simple fact that it is, arguably, not a photograph at all, let alone a photograph of something as specific as a celebrated aviator's kidnapped child. It is a digitization of a photograph created by an unknown photographer for the Associated Press in 1936. The status of the 'original' negative is unclear. It may or may not still exist. What, then, is the referential position of this later image? Its indexicality initially seems to be consistent with the kinds of hybrid graphical and iconic indices that were already commonplace. And, certainly, the competition between, and incompatibility of, these two referential systems is suggestive of a larger problematic in the evidentiary capacity of photographs to make events both visible and comprehensible. But the white and black crosses of this image are overshadowed by a third irruption that brings us to the very crux of the matter.

Emblazoned across the centre of the image is a linguistic assertion of property rights: a digital watermark declaring that the Associated Press is the owner of this representation. This device is



Figure 8: Cross marks spot near a Hunterdon County road on 29 March 1936 at Mount Rose, New Jersey, where body of kidnapped baby Charles A. Lindbergh Jr. was found. Associated Press, 1936, unknown photographer.

employed today by a rapidly increasing number of repositories of photographic imagery, with the aim of making such images available for browsing and purchasing (Lynch 2000). The prominence of the watermark is intended to disfigure the picture, and to dissuade the unauthorized reproduction of the image by making it ostensibly unusable. There is, however, a contradiction inherent in this approach, for the assertion of the image's authenticity – that is, its authorized reproduction from a legitimate source – comes only by way of making that image into something entirely different. The indexical relation of the photograph to its archive can only be securely claimed by transforming the photograph into an image that makes it *unlike* its 'original', distinct from the property that is claimed. The way we know for certain that we are looking at an authentic iteration of the archival image is, paradoxically, not through a visual identity between the two, but rather by confronting an image that has been corrupted by the archive's graphical logo.

For an immodest fee, the repository owning the photograph on which this digitization is based will grant the user a limited set of rights, the most formally consequential of which is the removal of the watermark. Yet, the watermark would not really be removed – since it is not really 'on' anything to begin with – so much as it would be rendered non-visual, encoded digitally with a unique serial number indicating the identity of the user. This digital 'fingerprint', as it is often called, is again intended to ensure that the copy that has been authorized is not itself copied or redistributed (Lynch 2000). Like its namesake in the real world of real crime, this fingerprint is the putative storehouse of individual identity, and the image in which it is embedded is, accordingly, unique. We have in these digital images a new kind of referentiality, in which the encoded data refers back not to the scene represented, but to the transaction between the archive and the authorized user of the image.

This conception of photographic imagery attests to the long-standing incompatibility of the medium's indexicality with its multiplicity, and the precedent of the photo-diagram here is instructive. The graphical supplements we noted in the newspaper photographs announced their constructiveness by virtue of their materiality, by penetrating the safehouse of photographic objectivity with their crosses and arrows. For the sake of the legibility necessitated by their modes of distribution, these amalgamations were prepared to renounce their claims to indexical integrity. The rationale was articulated clearly by one sanguine news photographer: 'Newsphotos are retouched to improve their copy value. This is the most important purpose of retouching ... the purpose of such retouching is to produce not exaggerated effects but natural effects in halftone' (Price 1935: 47, 50). By 'copy value', this journeyman shutterbug meant the legibility of the photograph in the mechanical reproduction of the halftone process, but the term resonates pointedly with the balance sought by contemporary systems of photographic distribution, for which the dispersal of the 'copy' is no longer a measure of success, but a metastasis to be contained.

The demands placed upon the referential power of photography by the picture press tabloids of the 1930s – for wide distribution and clear legibility – and those required by the era of licensed

intellectual property – of a medium whose legibility is purposely scrambled in order to curtail distribution – may be seen as deeply antithetical. Certainly, disparate economic, aesthetic and moral valences attend these two iterations. And yet, for all the apparent dissimilarity between the digital and analogue incarnations of photography, it is in the interaction of the graphical and the iconic components that the special, if mutable, identity of photography has so regularly been thought to reside. Photographic practices like the photo-diagram have long been relegated to a marginal position in orthodox histories of photography, not least by scholars who have sought to establish the revolutionary nature of the arrival of digital imaging. Of the incursion of external elements into the photographic image, Mitchell, for example, claims that

A few of these mavericks have succeeded in producing convincing composite images: Henry Peach Robinson's and Oscar G. Reijlander's [*sic*] nineteenth-century 'combination prints,' John Heartfield's photomontages, and Jerry Uelsmann's haunting constructions of the surreal come to mind. But there is no doubt that extensive reworking of photographic images ... [is] outside the mainstream of photographic practice. When we look at photographs we presume, unless we have some clear indications to the contrary, that they have not been reworked. Here photography and digital imaging diverge strikingly.

(1994: 7)

And yet it is now, in the efflorescence of the challenges and potentialities of digital photography, that this history of 'maverick' practices is in greatest need of recuperation and study. That the persuasive power of the digital image might derive precisely *from* its unsettled 'impurity', from its strategic deployment of supplementary graphical marks, is the premise upon which the new visual economy of the digital is based. The historical negotiation of the photographic image and the graphical mark has never been more germane.

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