One must always take photos with the greatest respect for the subject and for oneself.

Henri Cartier-Bresson.

**Introduction**

Of late, criminology has rediscovered the photograph. Many criminologists now include photographic representation in their analytic purview, and following the lead of the new journal *Crime, Media, Culture*, even the most staid of orthodox criminology journals are now beginning to incorporate photographic illustrations among their pages.

This is of course an entirely appropriate – not to mention long overdue – response to a late modern world in which imagery and representation suffuse the practices of crime and crime control. Yet, it is also cause for concern. Importing photographs into a discipline defined by words and numbers may create a certain decorative appeal, but of itself it does nothing to address the taken-for-granted dominance of those very words and numbers. In fact, as we see time and again, many contemporary criminologists seem to believe that by calculating photographic frequency or measuring photographic size they can wrestle the image into analytic submission, and so conquer its visual obfuscation and opaqueness. Other criminologists readily relegate photographs to textual illustration, in the process creating a sort of visual ghetto where the dominance of the text likewise remains unchallenged.

Put simply, orthodox criminology and its social scientific underpinnings offer little in the way of a foundation for the photograph. No matter how many photographs are analyzed, no matter how many included, the dualistic hierarchy of content over form generally remains in place and with it the parallel dualism that divorces ‘real’ crime and crime control from their ‘unreal’ image. As criminologists increasingly turn to the photograph, then, we must find a different way – a way to engage the image on its own terms. Just as we should understand that photographs operate within particular social contexts and embody particular constellations of cultural meaning, we should explore ways of engaging such
photographs with honesty and sophistication and of immersing ourselves in the processes by which photographs come into being.

Current work in and around cultural criminology has certainly begun this reorientation to the image. Phil Jones and Claire Wardle (2008), Eugene McLaughlin and Chris Greer (2008) and other scholars have recently explored the ways in which the print media constructs the meaning of criminality through the selection and specific placement of photographs for publication. Meticulously analyzing the torture photographs of Abu Ghraib, Mark Hamm (2007) has shown that the photos themselves can be interrogated for evidence of torture’s political lineage. Utilizing “as data for cultural criminology an album of photographs taken by German soldiers and policemen involved in the Holocaust”, Wayne Morrison (2004: 341) has likewise explored the interplay of ‘genocidal tourism’ and war crime. Stephen Lyng and David Courtney have analyzed photographer Taryn Simon’s representations of the wrongly convicted (Courtney and Lyng, 2007); surely shattering any remaining shards of the fraudulent ‘broken windows’ theory of crime, Greg Snyder (2008) has carefully photographed and documented the convergence of illegal graffiti and high-end commerce. Heitor Alvelos (2005), Ken Tunnell (2006) and others have begun to publish visual essays in which their own photographs embody criminological analysis and critique; Michelle Brown (2006), Alison Young (2004), Richard Rodriguez (2003), Claire Valier (Valier and Lippens, 2005) and others have begun to theorize the image in the context of crime and transgression.

If cultural criminology is in this way coming to be associated with a certain visual trajectory, it is already even more closely identified with another: the resurgence of ethnographic field research. As embodied in the work of Jeff Ferrell (1996, 2001, 2006), Mark Hamm (2002) and Ferrell and Hamm (1998), and other cultural criminologists, ethnography has been revitalized within cultural criminology as a humanistic counterpoint to the arid data sets of orthodox criminology. Requiring months or years of submersion in illicit worlds, this sort of committed field research is designed to find a deep understanding of those under study, a sort of criminological verstehen (Ferrell, 1997), and so to grasp the meaning of crime and transgression for those who undertake it (or seek to prevent it). In this sense, good ethnography, as conceptualized and undertaken by cultural criminologists, is inevitably and intentionally political as well, at times granting agency and voice to those otherwise excluded from public debate, at other times exposing the contradictions that those in power work to mask.

Generally, these two dimensions of cultural criminology – its engagement with representation and the photographic image and its commitment to in-depth ethnographic research – are seen as alternative strategies within the larger cultural criminological project of critical inquiry into the contested meaning of crime. But what if the two converged? As we go about visual analysis, an ethnographic sensibility could nicely attune us to the nuances of the photographic world and to the complex human process by which visual productions are invested with cultural and political significance. As we go about ethnography, a sensitivity to
Jeff Ferrell and Cécile Van de Voorde

photographic dynamics could (and should) help focus our field research on the myriad visual representations that increasingly animate everyday life and everyday crime. And if in exploring this convergence of the photographic and the ethnographic we were to look back as well as look forward, we could find yet another reason to embrace this convergence: it has productively been underway for decades.

Focus

The photodocumentary tradition

Traditionally, photography as social documentary has taken two major forms: photojournalism and war photography. The assumed goal in each has been to provide truthful, candid photography – visual narratives reporting on social reality. The photojournalistic style originated with the reporting of news from European battlefields in the nineteenth century. In 1855, British photographer Roger Fenton pioneered the use of documentary photography during the Crimean War, effectively becoming the first official war photographer when his depictions of soldiers were used to complement battlefield sketches. Likewise, the American Civil War was famously documented by U.S. photographer Mathew Brady, who is often lauded as the father of photojournalism.

As photojournalism (reportage) became a staple of newspaper and magazine reporting, the golden age of photojournalism (1930s–1950s) exposed the public to the works of influential photographers like W. Eugene Smith, Margaret Bourke-White and Robert Capa. Known for his near-limitless temporal and moral commitment to the subjects of his photographs, Smith described his approach as ‘photographic penetration deriving from study and awareness and participation’ (in Miller, 1997: 150). French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson also gained great fame during this period, to the extent that he is now generally credited with being the progenitor of modern photojournalism. Cartier-Bresson worked to master candid in situ photography and his emphasis on capturing the ‘decisive moment’ (images à la sauvette, ‘images on the run’) remains an inspiration for documentary photographers today.

Yet, this ‘golden age’ was also marked by patterns of sensationalized crime coverage and photographic profiteering. Most infamously, Arthur Fellig (a.k.a. Weegee) used on-the-spot black-and-white photography to document street crime in New York City, sometimes resorting to questionable tactics in order to find and photograph crime scenes before the police could arrive. ‘If I had a picture of two handcuffed criminals being booked’, he once said, ‘I would cut the picture in half and get five bucks for each.’ Naked City (1945), his first collection of these controversial photographs, inspired Jules Dassin’s 1948 film The Naked City, and Weegee’s dubious practices notwithstanding, the book is today regarded as a fine art masterpiece (see relatedly Hannigan, 1999).

The US Farm Security Administration (FSA, 1935–1942) spawned another moment in the evolution of photojournalism. Part of President Franklin D.
Roosevelt’s New Deal, the FSA was designed to fight rural poverty and highlight the urgency of rehabilitating rural areas. Roy E. Stryker, an American economist and photographer, was in charge of the FSA Information Division (Historical Section) and, as such, was responsible for a massive photodocumentary project that eventually produced nearly 80,000 images of the Great Depression through the lenses of Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, Russell Lee, Gordon Parks, Arthur Rothstein and others. A number of these photographs – perhaps most famously Lange’s ‘Migrant Mother’ – have endured as emblematic representations of the Great Depression and the suffering it engendered.

World War II documentary photography is mostly associated with the work of Robert Capa, though W. Eugene Smith and others also created memorably ‘in-the-moment’ images of the war. As a combat photographer, Capa covered several conflicts – including the Spanish Civil War, where he produced a famous and controversial image of a soldier at the instant of being killed by a rifle shot (see Miller, 1997: 27–9 for a review of the debates surrounding this picture) – but he remains best known for his work in the 1940s. He is especially celebrated for the dozen photographs of the second assault wave on Omaha Beach on D-Day in June 1944. ‘If your pictures aren’t good enough, you’re not close enough’, Capa once declared – poignant words indeed from a man who risked his life to document warfare and eventually lost it, camera in hand, while trying to get closer to troops on an Indochinese battlefield.

Robert Capa is also well known for cofounding the international photographic cooperative Magnum Photos with Henri Cartier-Bresson, David ‘Chim’ Seymour, and George Roger in 1947. As Cartier-Bresson (in Miller, 1997) explained, ‘Magnum is a community of thought, a shared human quality, a curiosity about what is going on in the world, a respect for what is going on and a desire to transcribe it visually.’ Today Magnum photographers continue to document world events and their participants, and the Magnum Photos library constitutes a living archive of the past sixty years, with roughly one million photographs in the physical library and 350,000 online images. In many ways, keepers of the photodocumentary tradition, Magnum and its photographers like to point out that when one thinks of an iconic image, the likelihood is it came from Magnum.

Today both photojournalism and documentary photography are widely recognized as legitimate tools for the representation of events and people, and in many cases as art forms in themselves. And the tradition continues to evolve. James Nachtwey (1999) today produces startling war photography; Sebastião Salgado (2001, 2005) is developing an astounding body of black-and-white photographs documenting developing countries and pressing social issues. Camilo José Vergara (1995) has produced some 9,000 images of urban space over an eighteen-year period, so as to create ‘pictorial networks’ of urban change. Heitor Alvelos (2004) has likewise engaged in a complex, long-term photographic study of urban graffiti, documenting shifting patterns in the dissemination of criminal and commercial images. The historical foundation for much contemporary photography, the photojournalistic/documentary photography tradition continues to
inform the world of the image – and continues to offer critical insights into the methods by which the image is produced and given meaning.

**Methodological reflections**

**The dialectics of the decisive moment**

The photodocumentary tradition provides an invaluable intellectual and experiential foundation on which to build a photographically attuned cultural criminology. Anticipating cultural criminology’s ethnographic sensibility as well as its attentiveness to the image, this tradition offers a framework for critical engagement with the photograph, and for human engagement with the situations out of which photographs emerge. Indulging in a bit of *post hoc* history, we might even say that photographers like W. Eugene Smith and Robert Capa were doing cultural criminology long before cultural criminology existed – that is, that they were immersing themselves in the nuances of everyday transgression, and communicating the vivid symbolism they found and invented there, all in the interest of activism and critique. But lest we reify the work of photodocumentarians as some sort of permanent visual template for cultural criminology, we would do well to remember that this work is most certainly not the answer to contemporary issues and images of crime, control and culture. It’s really more a set of dialectical questions, a series of creative tensions that, in animating the history of photodocumentary practices, can usefully come to animate cultural criminology’s visual work as well. Among these many tensions, four in particular highlight issues essential to cultural criminology’s engagement with the image.

**Objectivity/subjectivity**

At its most basic, the photodocumentary tradition embodies a tension that has long bedeviled criminology and other ‘social sciences’: that between objective inquiry and subjective analysis. In fact, photodocumentary work forces this tension to the front, and in more than one dimension. On the one hand, unlike commercial photographers and others, documentary photographers do not seem to stage photographs or resort to special photographic tricks and effects. Instead, they document the external events they encounter – and moreover, they do so not with imperfect personal memory, but with a camera, a machine designed to capture the visual reality of an event and to commit it to film (or now, digital memory). Yet, on the other hand, documentary photographers quite intentionally put themselves in the middle of the most politically and morally charged of events – Walker Evans (1989) in 1930s revolutionary Cuba, W. Eugene Smith (1998) amidst the tragic aftermath of corporate criminality, Magnum photographers in the middle of one war and another – and then use their photographic skills to interpret and communicate these events, and so to force the viewers of their photographs into visual confrontations with horror, violence, injustice and death.
If ever there were a dialectical tension between the objective and the subjective, between careful documentation and crafted emotion, it is in W. Eugene Smith’s photos of corporate crime victims, Robert Capa’s images of wartime violence or the FSA photographers’ photos of Depression-era suffering.

If we are to explore and learn from this tension, we’ll do well to first note its technical underpinnings. In a sense, technically, photographs provide a point-by-point visual correspondence to the subject photographed (though the subject is generally reduced in size, made two-dimensional, and sometimes made colourless). As Susan Sontag (1977: 53) notes in *On Photography*, ‘unlike the fine-art objects of pre-democratic eras, photographs don’t seem deeply beholden to the intention of an artist. Rather, they owe their existence to a loose cooperation (quasi-magical, quasi-accidental) between photographer and subject – mediated by an ever simpler and more automated machine … In the fairy tale of photography the magic box insures veracity and banishes error, compensates for inexperience, and rewards innocence’. And indeed, technically, a good photograph can operate as a stunningly objective reproduction of an external reality, capturing the finest of nuances and the most subtle of textures.

Yet, even at this technical level, this reproduction is far from simple; surely only nonphotographers can imagine that a photograph represents an inevitably objective account of the reality it reproduces. At the decisive moment of the shutter’s click, the photographer must choose angles, f-stops and distance. Later, decisions must be made about processing, cropping and presentation. In fact, many of the most iconic of documentary photographs – Dorothea Lang’s downcast ‘Migrant Mother’ of the Great Depression, W. Eugene Smith’s Pieta-like mother gently bathing a child horribly deformed by corporate poisoning – are in fact carefully cropped and reprocessed versions of the original photographic images (Hill, 1998). Despite its stature, Lange’s ‘Migrant Mother’ has even come to be criticized for a lack of ‘truthfulness’, after the discovery of negatives and contact sheets showing that the photograph was posed and cropped to convey a specific message. And for Lange’s ‘Migrant Mother’, Smith’s mother and child, and many other documentary photos, of course, this is precisely the next dimension of the objective/subjective tension: the message. After all, it is not only the photo itself that embodies the photographer’s perspective; it is the chosen subject, the morally charged setting and the critical account the photographer wishes to communicate.

As intractable as it may seem, this tension resolves into an essential insight for cultural criminologists, ethnographers and others concerned with the human image: the documentary photograph is neither the objective reproduction of an external reality nor a subjective construction of the photographer, but rather a visual documentation of the relationship between photographer, photographic subject, and the larger orbits of meaning they both occupy. The reality that such a photograph captures is not that of the people in front of the lens, nor that of the photographer, but of the *shared cultural meanings* created between photographer and those photographed in a particular context. In this sense, a good documentary

photograph is both objective and subjective – and profoundly *intersubjective*. ‘Leaving aside planned fabrications’, Collier (2001: 35) argues, ‘it may be said that photographs … are, ultimately, complex reflections of a relationship between maker and subject in which both play roles in shaping their character and content’. As we’ll note subsequently, this relationship can be seen in the content of the photograph – and it can also be seen in the photograph’s composition and style, as photographers work to represent their subjects and their relationships with them through these more formal elements as well.

**Attentiveness/analysis**

A parallel tension in photodocumentary work plays out between the demand for careful attentiveness to the photographic subject and the agenda of broader critical analysis that has regularly animated the efforts of documentary photographers.

The photography of Walker Evans – especially that which he produced in conjunction with the writer James Agee for the book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* – occupies one side of this dialectic. Setting out to document the lives of Southern US sharecroppers during the Great Depression, Agee and Evans (1960: xiv–xv) saw themselves as undertaking ‘an independent inquiry … [in which] the immediate instruments are two: the motionless camera, and the printed word. The governing instrument – which is also one of the centers of the subject – is individual, anti-authoritative human consciousness.’ Agee and Evans (1960: xv) adamantly argued that they were not interested in producing art or politics – or a book, for that matter – but rather ‘an effort in human actuality’, and so they created text and photos that documented the lives of sharecroppers in intricate detail. So successful were they in this attempt to ‘live inside the subject’, as Evans (Agee and Evans, 1960: xi) put it, that the book is now considered a classic of phenomenological inquiry – that is, of meticulous commitment to the phenomenon under study, rather than to any external agenda.

From the other side of this dialectic, consider again W. Eugene Smith’s photographs of corporate criminality and its aftermath – and his agenda in producing them. Smith shot these photos in and around Minamata, a Japanese fishing village whose inhabitants had been poisoned, deformed and killed by the Chiso Corporation’s pervasive discharging of toxic mercury. Smith went to Minamata precisely to promote the villagers’ cause and to reveal the company’s guilt – and despite being beaten almost blind by company thugs, he managed to produce a series of searingly effective photographs: photographs of filthy industrial waste and arrogant company officials, of protesting villagers and their deformed children. ‘Each time I pressed the shutter’, Smith has said, ‘it was a shouted condemnation….’ (Miller, 1997: 140; see Smith, 1998: 302–12)

Quite a dialectic indeed – on the one side, the phenomenologist focused only on the precise particulars of the photographic subject, on the other, the partisan inflamed by a passion for photographic expose and moral condemnation. In reality, though, each of these orientations requires something of the other – and Walker
Evans, W. Eugene Smith and other documentary photographers have long explored this very tension and the human insights it can provide. Agee and Evans’ project of documenting the lives of sharecroppers, for example, was in many ways as morally charged as was Smith’s photographic indictment of corporate crime. Agee and Evans (1960: xiv, 9, emphasis added) characterized their work as an effort at the ‘recording, communication, analysis, and defense’ of those they studied, and all ‘in the service of an anger and of a love and of an indiscernible truth’. For them, to pay close and respectful attention to those they studied was also to declare a certain affiliation with them, and so to defend them against those who would degrade or dismiss them. Carefully recording the lives of those forced to the social margins, they quite intentionally invested those lives with dignity and visibility; through this process they in turn offered moral condemnation for those too privileged to pay such attention (including, by the way, those who would encounter the text and photos only as momentary diversion). Even the book’s title was meant as ‘a deception’ (Agee and Evans, 1960: xiv, 405), an ironic commentary comparing the usual adulation afforded the powerful with the anonymity afforded those ‘which have no memorial; who perished, as though they had never been’.

Moreover, as Agee and Evans made explicit, they could not in reality ‘live inside the subject’ and document it at the same time; after all, a written description is not the thing described, a photograph not the person photographed and a book not the world it narrates. Instead, they were left to create an elegantly aesthetic representation of a marginalized group generally excluded from such representation; that is, they were left to craft words and images that, in their tone and style, could attune others to the texture of their subjects’ everyday lives. This, they well knew, was an inevitable act of cultural translation in the interest of creative communication, an act that both affirmed and violated their commitment to the phenomenon under study.

By the same token, W. Eugene Smith’s political commitments were in many ways indistinguishable from his personal commitment to those he photographed. To produce his Minamata photos, Smith lived for three years in the village, conducting research, assisting the villagers and ‘existing on $50 a week and a diet of home-grown vegetables, rice and whiskey’ (Miller, 1997: 156). Agee and Evans, it can be noted in comparison, lived among the sharecropper families they studied for four weeks. Earlier in his career, Smith had likewise been sent on a brief assignment to produce photographs of the city of Pittsburgh – and ended up spending four years on the project, along the way impoverishing himself, ruining his family and endangering his mental and physical health. Taking Benzedrine so as to work around the clock, Smith shot more than 13,000 photos in an attempt to capture the city’s unnoticed nuances. Here again, though, attentiveness was also critical analysis; Smith meant this deep phenomenology of Pittsburgh to undermine the shallow boosterism of his original assignment and to exact ‘revenge against the commercial system’ (Trachtenburg, 1998: 174) that reduced photographers to paid image producers.
This subtle dialectic of attentiveness and critical analysis seems essential to the continued development of cultural criminology and its visual orientation. Lacking moral and political focus, even the most detailed of ethnographic work into culture and crime will produce little more than a scattergun chronicle of one situation or another; absent the understanding that the researcher inevitably transforms the situation by recording it, such work will perpetuate an unfortunate sort of naïve objectivity as well. Yet, moral and political analysis in cultural criminology cannot stand alone, either; divorced from the particulars of social life, disembedded from the nuances of everyday struggles, such analysis becomes abstract and ill-defined, more an imposition on those we study than a commitment to them. Like the documentary photographers, we must find ways to produce images of crime and culture that embody both—both little moments of human pathos and larger patterns of social harm.

**Image/text**

Given the logocentrism of mainstream criminology and other ‘social sciences’, a consideration of image, text and their appropriate interplay is especially critical if cultural criminology is to position itself as an alternative, visually-attuned criminology. As we have already suggested, mainstream criminology generally does photographic images a double disservice in relation to text—first by relegating them to textual illustration and second by doing so with little or no awareness of the assumptions underlying this relegation. As a consequence, as we have shown elsewhere (Ferrell et al., 2008), images of crime are often utilized only for their visual appeal, and worse, utilized in a way that perpetuates stereotypical misunderstandings of crime and justice rather than confronting them.

Unsurprisingly, documentary photographers have more than once confronted the problematic image/text dialectic that criminologists generally ignore—but, as before, have produced from this confrontation not so much clear answers as various creative tensions. The work of Walker Evans is again instructive. In *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Agee and Evans (1960: xiv–xv) take pains to point out that ‘the photographs are not illustrative. They, and the text, are coequal, mutually independent, and fully collaborative’—though they worry nonetheless that ‘by their fewness’ the photographs may be seen as subordinate by readers of the book. As if to guard against this, they group the photos exclusively in the front of the book—preceding even the title page and table of contents—with the 400 or so pages of Agee’s text following. Another of Evans’ projects reproduced this approach and reversed it. Asked to ‘illustrate’ a book on 1930s Cuba and its political upheavals (Beals, 1933), Evans agreed only on condition that he retain the right to ‘choose the photographs for publication, to establish the sequence, and to collect them at the end of the book so that they appear as an independent entity and not as illustration for the text’ (Evans, 1989; Mora, 1989: 9).

Of course, this is no solution to the problem of image and text; it is just a particular sort of disjointed tension. The segregation of photographic images
from text certainly serves to wall off the possibility of textual dominance and to deny assumptions that the images function only as textual illustration. Yet, when image and text are meant as complementary forms within a larger project – as in both of Evans’ book projects – this ‘separate but equal’ strategy seems in some ways an odd solution. Structurally divorced from one another, image and text struggle to find affiliation absent the power of immediate juxtaposition – and the reader/viewer is left to toggle, mentally if not physically, between a bank of images here and a swath of text there. Compounded further by the demands of publishers, the limits of paper quality or presentation technology, and other complications, this image/text interplay admits of no easy solution. Cultural criminologists are little help, either, with some of their works dispersing images throughout text (Presdee, 2000; Ferrell, 2001, 2006), and others grouping images between large sections of text (Ferrell, 1996; Hayward, 2004).

This problem of appropriate image/text dynamics can be at least partially addressed by considering the purpose of images vis-à-vis text and text vis-à-vis images. The first we have already addressed: The importance of images is such that they must serve a purpose vis-à-vis text that transcends simple illustration. The second – the purpose of text in relation to images – has been explored by Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag and others. In his seminal essay Rhetoric of the Image, Barthes (1978: 36) argues that ‘the viewer of the image receives at one and the same time the perceptual message and the cultural message’, thus illustrating the communicative power of mass images and the need, at times, for textual explication of their cultural norms and perceptual qualities. Barthes’ Camera Lucida (1981) and Susan Sontag’s On Photography (1977) further suggest a visual semiotics attuned to the layering of meaning, with denotation focusing on what or who is depicted and connotation emphasizing the various ideas and values that are expressed through the content and structure of representation.

In this context, Barthes (1978) distinguishes, for example, between anchorage and delay. In Barthes’ terms, ‘anchorage’ suggests the use of text to fix the otherwise layered and uncertain meanings of the image. Here the text directs the viewer of the image, offering an interpretative guide for identifying and understanding its content. Of course, this dynamic in many ways re-establishes textual dominance of the image, not by relegating the image to textual illustration, but by confining its meaning within the explanatory power of the text. Alternatively, ‘relay’ suggests an interplay whereby text and image each complement the other – that is, serve to illustrate and illuminate the other – as fragments of a larger narrative. In this sense, both image and text become something more in the presence of the other, amplifying and deepening the layered meanings available within each medium, in the service of integrated communication (on this point in relation to the production of tabloid newspaper front pages see Carney, this volume). This sense of ‘relay’ does not provide the final answer to the question of image and text – but it does suggest for cultural criminology that the photographic penetration of criminology’s logocentrism can in fact produce more powerful images and text alike.
Immersion/immediacy

Henri Cartier-Bresson’s notion of the ‘decisive moment’ – the documentary photographer’s ability to capture an image, on-the-spot and in the instant – stands as a definitive concept in photodocumentary work. Yet, Cartier-Bresson meant to suggest far more than simply the quick click of the shutter; for him, the decisive moment signified ‘the simultaneous recognition, in a fraction of a second, of the significance of an event as well as a precise organization of forms which give that event its proper expression’ (Cartier-Bresson in Miller, 1997: 102). In the immediacy of the decisive moment, then, 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.

Now a half century old, Cartier-Bresson’s concept of the decisive moment today seems more appropriate than ever – and a particularly important concept for cultural criminology, as it goes about critically confronting the contemporary world of late modernity. The rhythms of this late modern world are frequently those of liquidity (Bauman, 2000) and speed (Virilio, 1986), its culture a fast-twitch flow of instant information, shifting populations and emergent meaning. In this world, traditionally stable structures of economy, law and crime are increasingly undermined by all manner of precarious contingencies – and knowledge of these structures and contingencies often comes as much from visual documentation as from textual account. Encountering this world, photographers – and criminologists – must be ready for the fleeting if decisive moment, ready to record the dynamics of power and transgression in the immediacy of a situation or event. Police brutality, street protest, political scandal, ethnic violence – all can be caught and communicated if we are attuned to the decisive moments in which they crystallize. Here, even, is a new sort of sensibility that reimagines cultural criminology’s twin foci on visual communication and ethnography: a sense of instant ethnography (Ferrell et al., 2008: 179–82), where depth of understanding develops not from long-term involvement but from the immediacy of short-term awareness.

And yet, if Cartier-Bresson’s notion of the decisive moment suggests this sort of immediacy, it suggests something of traditional ethnography’s long-term immersion as well. Recall that Cartier-Bresson demands, in the decisive moment, the recognition of an event’s ‘significance’ as well as an ability to capture that event in those visual forms that give it its ‘proper expression’. But of course understanding the social significance of an exploding street protest or a guard’s sudden attack on a prisoner cannot happen only in that moment; it requires prior familiarization, immersion and investigation. Likewise, the photographer’s ‘proper’ formal decision can only be made within an understanding of this same significance. Producing documentary photographs of a prison scene, should I shoot the prison guard’s face in shadow, or the prisoner’s? When I photograph street protesters, should I include the local police in the background,
The Decisive Moment

or the foreground, or not at all? As Cartier-Bresson makes clear, these questions cannot be answered on purely aesthetic or technical grounds; they can only be answered through intimate knowledge of the social dynamics that such formal considerations are meant to capture and communicate. Deep knowledge of the prison and its (in)human dynamics will suggest whether shadow or light better animates the photograph; close knowledge of the protesters and their grievances will position the photographer so as to put the protesters and the police in the right place. As with W. Eugene Smith’s years in Pittsburgh or Minamata, as with Robert Capa’s years in the Spanish Civil War or Indochina, the decisive moment emerges from the countless moments of cultural immersion and human commitment that have preceded it.

Conclusion

The decisive moment is now

In terms of history and culture, the decisive moment – for cultural criminology, for documentary photography, for the development of critical visual analysis – is now. Today we occupy a world so suffused with image and representation, so thoroughly awash in visual information, that it overwhelms even the steadiest of gazes. In this world, existing tensions between objectivity and subjectivity, between attentiveness and analysis, between image and text, are only amplified and exacerbated. Now the everyday use of mobile phone cameras and video phones is such that school kids, bus passengers and street gang members regularly come to operate, if for a moment, as news photographers and visual provocateurs. Now, through photo sharing technology like Flickr.com and Picasa, amateur photographers post and share images in such numbers that, collectively, they create a sweeping, polymorphous archive of everyday life. Now, as Jean Baudrillard (2006: 87) has said, “there is no longer the need for “embedded” [war] journalists because soldiers themselves are immersed in the image – thanks to digital technology, the images are definitively integrated into the war’ – and the goal of the wars they fight is less military victory than symbolic erasure. Now all those that criminology defines as its subject matter – criminals, police officers and law makers – produce, deploy and consume the image as part of their everyday endeavours. In this world, there is no escape from the image, no escape from its implications, no possibility of divorcing crime and crime control from visual representation. The decisive visual moment has arrived, it forms flickering before us, its significance assured.

Yet, the image’s increasing saturation of social life has hardly been accompanied by an increase in the general understanding of the image and its consequences; just as the distance between the image and the events it represents has collapsed, so has the critical distance separating the image from reflection on its meaning. The very availability of the image inhibits its understanding; the flashes from a hundred mobile phone cameras illuminating a late-night club, the shutters
of a hundred high-end cameras clicking at a police chief’s news conference, are today cause not for critical inquiry but a reassuring sense of normalcy. Meanwhile, in mainstream academic criminology, the venues are not clubs and press conferences but textbooks, journal articles and electronic lecture presentations – images, images everywhere, but seldom a drop of critical analysis. The monograph’s cover photograph, bought from a stock image bank, offers all the emotional depth of a survey research question; the staged textbook photo of ‘juvenile delinquency’ or ‘domestic violence’ recalls the stale stench of a laboratory experiment – yet, few criminologists look beyond the photographic decoration to inquire into its meaning and circumstances.

In this sense, we would suggest that now is not only the decisive moment, but the decisive crisis – the crisis of a mainstream criminology ill-equipped to critically engage with the image-saturated worlds of crime and control. With its attentiveness to meaning and representation, cultural criminology on the other hand is well-positioned to address this crisis – and with its existing strengths in visual analysis and ethnographic methods, it is particularly well positioned to draw on the insights offered by the long history of documentary photography. Still, as we’ve emphasized throughout this chapter, the photodocumentary tradition is most useful not as a template, but as a series of sensitivities to essential tensions that inform any serious engagement with the image. And even these tensions must be reimagined under present conditions. As we are seeing, for example, researchers and activists with access to emerging digital technology now create and share extensive photographic archives, in the process developing powerful photodocumentary accounts that can subvert officially sanctioned images. As independent documentary filmmakers like David Redmon, Ashley Sabin and Bill Daniel are showing, in-depth filmic accounts of social control, social harm and resistance are likewise now being created by those who are outsiders to political and economic power, but insiders in the world of do-it-yourself image-making technology (Daniel, 2005; Sabin and Redmon, 2007; see also Hoffman and Brown, this volume).

In fact, moving beyond orthodox criminology by revisiting and reimagining the photodocumentary tradition suggests a final tension, and one entirely appropriate to the iconoclastic style of cultural criminology: We might best learn the promise of documentary photography if we embrace it as an adventure in unlearning. The more we learn from the photodocumentary tradition, the more we unlearn the stifling imperatives of conventional research design, unlearn conventional images of criminals and control agents, unlearn an orthodox criminology choking on its own words. Moments of intellectual estrangement are, after all, moments of anomic insight – moments in which we can battle what Barthes (1979: 16) calls the ‘sedimentation’ of knowledge with sapientia: ‘no power, a little knowledge, a little wisdom, and as much flavour as possible’. As visual sociologist Emmanuel David (2007: 251) says, photographic work in this subversive context can operate as a significant form of ‘visual resistance’, not only to the powerful and their carefully calculated imagery, but also to ‘the milieu of social researchers who choose not to look at the world’.
Figures 3.1, 3.2 Decisive Moments – a triptych: photographs Hughes Leglise-Bataille, with permission.
Recognizing the significance of this decisive moment, catching something of its animating tensions, cultural criminology can only gain from formulating its proper expression.

References


