



The Physiognomic Turn

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There has been a physiognomic turn in the humanities, a growing interest in the ideological and highly technologized treatment of the human face and form. Physiognomy is the ancient *faux* scientific study of human and animal form that, by the 19th century, became a key technique of race science. Yet film studies, visual culture studies, art history, and science and technology studies are looking again at physiognomy and the facialization of social difference to address the relationships between bodies, media genealogies, and histories of technology from new perspectives. In this essay, I briefly consider the new scholarship on physiognomy, then turn to my study of bodies, faces, and urban witness in the 1964 sexual assault and murder of Kitty Genovese in Queens, NY (Rentschler, in press).

Some of the recent academic interest in physiognomy responds to the increasing significance of facial recognition technologies in international border security systems, where scholars such as Kelly Gates (2006, in press) attend to the physiognomic dimensions of surveillance technologies and their racist ways of seeing the human face. Historian Carlo Ginzburg (2004), film scholar Tom Gunning (1997), and media scholar Mark Seltzer (2007) all draw upon physiognomy to examine the historical role that the face and its technological reproduction have played in media development — Gunning with the facial close-up in silent film, Seltzer with the faciality of criminals in true crime publications, Ginzburg with Galton's composite photograph as an index of social difference.

Still other authors want to reclaim the ways otherness and sexual difference can be given face in portraiture against their intended bureaucratic uses within photographic systems that discipline and criminalize deviance. Historians use police archives, for instance, to tell counter-histories of sexuality and class that put a face on queerness, anti-normative bodies, and identities, as well as on the informal economies of class survival (Doyle, 2005; Seitler, 2004). Reclaiming these institutional portraits as artifacts of other kinds of sexual and class histories does not erase their dominant histories or the role they play in systems of social control and containment, their "pathologizing medical discourses of surveillance and punishment" (Seitler, p. 74). As Dana Seitler's history of sexuality and Peter Doyle's history of police photography in Sydney suggest, such portraits also become key artifacts of counter-histories, screens onto lives made difficult by social inequalities and class oppressions, as well as by variable modes of living.

Physiognomic ideals about the truth-telling functions of the human face — as a veridical screen onto human interiorities and the hidden traits of criminality and deviance — are still operative today in the very media systems and technologies around us. Their physiognomic gaze tends to prioritize certain features for display and analysis, as Cesare Lombroso's studies of male and female criminality did in the

19th century (Lombroso, 1887/2006, 1986/2004). The shape of the eyes, nose, ears, and jaw, for instance, becomes a key site for the expression of deviance and criminality, just as they did for Lombroso and others. Through the technologically-enhanced classificatory gaze, corporeal and facial features have become more intensified targets of surveillance, as well as of aesthetic and political judgment.

Yet precisely through this targeting of physical features, human differences — as value, rather than liability — become visible. Rather than treat the body as a unified whole, physiognomic modes of seeing and depicting the face, critics suggest, can also illustrate the ways individual differences physically mark the human body counter to “racial and ethnic types,” serving as an example of a technology of human science that “not only invents its objects of study but proliferates them” (Seitler, 2004, p. 80). To read police portraits in this way, for instance, is to treat them as forms of representation whose meaning and depiction are not fully commensurate with the institutions in which they are produced and used.

While Gunning (1997), Seltzer (2007), and Gates (2006) analyze the raced facialization of technology and media systems, Ginzburg (2004), along with Dana Seitler (2004), reclaims physiognomy as part of a genealogical methodology that can upset, and reinvent, the codified forms in which genealogical analysis is conducted (see also Povinelli, 2002). Ginzburg reinterprets Victorian polymath Francis Galton’s use of composite photography in order to build into its genealogical framework ways of seeing difference — not as a mechanism to control and contain human perversions, but as a means of proliferating human differences and enabling their social recognition. Galton sought to construct out of real-life photographic portraits the common traits of particular human types, a non-scientific “statistical portrait” (e.g., Green, 1985) produced through composite exposure methods. While Galton sought to reveal the similarities of certain facial features shared by criminal, racial, and ethnic classes (and thoroughbred horses) through the superimposition of individual photographs into composite images, his composites also reveal the minutiae of human difference as an unintended, and indeed opposite, outcome. According to Ginzburg (2004), “Galton’s composite portraits” may have “articulate[d] a new notion of the individual: flexible, blurred, open-ended” (p. 549) — a feature Ginzburg interprets through the blurred edges of Galton’s composites, where individual physical differences reassert themselves against the physiognomic rubric of “common features.”

As a study of physical form and bodily expression, 19th century physiognomists’ search for common physical attributes that could, in turn, be used to identify, police, and warehouse “social deviants” and racial and ethnic others also inadvertently revealed the stubborn attributes of individual uniqueness. Ginzburg reads along the edges of the composite photograph form to examine them as documents of difference, rather than similarity. For Gaonkar and Povinelli (2003), such an interpretive task involves “attentiveness to the edges of forms as they circulate so that we can see what is motivating their movement,” what they also describe as the “pursuit of the hidden hand” (p. 392). This is not simply a matter of reading against the grain or providing an alternate interpretation of documents such as police photographs. It is, instead, an analytic framework that attends to the ways such representations circulate, being transfigured in the process of moving from one context (the police database) to another (an archive of sexuality), “refunctioning the text for different demanding sites” (p. 396).

Following Carlo Ginzburg, I am interested in how we can interpret the physiognomic representation of faces across different demanding sites, in order to respond to the physical and social type-casting endemic to our media environments. Can we re-orient the racist and sexist classification engines of physiognomic thought and practice toward new ways of responding to the burdens of truth, proof, and fantasy that faces bear in current regimes of surveillance and technologies of social control? How might it be possible, drawing from Ginzburg in particular, to mobilize police photographs and other institutional databases of human "type" and identity toward different genealogies of power and resistance?

The story of Kitty Genovese's murder was that 38 of her neighbors watched or heard Winston Moseley, an African-American business machine operator and family man, assault and kill Genovese, a lesbian barkeep, but did not call the police (see Gansberg, 1964). The story of her witnesses was used to transform criminal justice practice, urban crime prevention, and psychological research on bystanders up to the present. Among other things, it serves as the founding myth on which the social psychological theory of mass society "bystander effects" is based (e.g., Latané & Darley, 1970). The story of the 38 witnesses is taught in every introduction to psychology textbook in the United States and Britain, and in many other countries as well (see Manning, Levine, & Collins, 2007), and has been made popularly known through television programs and books, such as Alan Moore's, Dave Gibbons' and John Higgins' 1986 graphic novel *Watchmen* and Malcolm Gladwell's 2000 bestseller *The Tipping Point*.

Among other things, I use the concept of physiognomy to analyze the spatial communication between bodies and cities in the Genovese case. My interest lies in the conceptions of urban witnessing that have been produced through news photographs of the crime scene and the mug shot of the victim used as her news portrait after her death. The crime scene photos and the mug shot of Genovese constitute a *physiognomy not of the victim, but of the murder's witnesses*. They enable an attempt to interpret the psychology of Genovese's white neighbors, and the story of their non-intervention, from the photographic images of her face and the place of her killing. In particular, the press photographs that accompany Martin Gansberg's 1964 *New York Times* article on the case produce a face-system that spoke not to the victim's identity or the conditions of her life and death, but to a fantasy about her neighbors' visual and aural access (which they may or may not have had) to the violence she suffered on their shared street and sidewalks (see DeMay, 2004, 2009). In the process of presenting the story through these photographs, the physical features of the street and the victim's face became surface-level topographies from which newsmen and other cultural technicians and readers thought her neighbors' psyches could be read. Journalists and social psychologists interpreted Genovese's neighbors' supposed inaction as a surface detail that revealed the depths of urban apathy and public indifference in the United States. Yet these images could be interpreted differently, as surfaces whose features instead provide needed insight into the historical construction of urban witnessing as a particular problem of communication and power in the city.

As a tale of public inaction and white anomie, the Genovese murder was at once both specific to middle-class Kew Gardens and argued to indicate a national epidemic of urban apathy. Its story created "a peculiar physiognomy of the subject" (Seltzer, 1998), a subject who was neither the killer nor the victim, but the "made up subjects" of urban witnessing. The place of the crime and the face of the victim became facial markers for a national imagination of street crime, proxies for the mental life of the metropolis (see

Simmel, 1905/2002). The murder site sat at the confluence of commercial, communication, and transportation infrastructures connecting Kew Gardens to Manhattan. A host of urban/suburban encounters were enabled by these infrastructures and their classed, raced, and sexed mobilities. The physiognomy of witness to Genovese's murder reveals this network of encounters. It also reveals the attempts the city and its neighborhoods made to manage encounters and meanings across social difference, especially white fear of black crime and white distrust of African Americans.

The portrait of Genovese also told another story, a subjugated narrative of her lesbianism that her lover at the time, Mary Ann Zielonko, confirmed in a moving radio interview she did with National Public Radio on the 40th anniversary of Genovese's murder. Just as Galton's composite photographs "acquired a life of their own, opening up new spaces of reflection" (Ginzburg, 2004, p. 546), closer study of the face of Genovese and the urban landscapes of violence against women could make us think, too, about the anomalies and differences that reassert themselves at the edges of forms as they move along and sometimes interrupt the cultural circuits in which they travel. The photograph in which Genovese appeared in some news coverage of her murder, for instance, was a photo taken upon her being arrested for bookmaking in 1961; the board on which her charge and name are identified are visible by the chain around her neck. Furthermore, since Genovese's lesbian identity was kept out of the press at the time of her murder, it is only through her photograph that she "speaks" her sexuality in the press. Her piercing, desirous eyes and butch Italianate features signal a kind of sexual confidence and visible identification in front of the police camera — a gendered sexual style that is the embodiment of her lesbianism. Her face and its expression speak sexual difference within the system of police photography, revealing the form's "inconsistent renditions," and even its abilities to *queer* physiognomy (Seitler, 2004, p. 74).

Viewed through the lens of physiognomy, the Genovese case and its representation illustrate new approaches to analyzing urban life, sexually and racially embodied personhood, and the portrait forms in which city life and personhood circulate. The faces of people and the faces of landscapes are continually asked to bear an unfair and unjust burden of truth telling, especially around violent crime and its sources in homophobic, sexist, and racist thought. But they can also speak against the grain, asserting meaningful differences in the face of monolithic convention, the standardization of human beings, and the apparatus of social control that such a logic sustains.

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