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Dead Time

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DEAD TIME*

Aris Fioretos

If historically, the gothic, in one way or another, tended to include the uneasy affiliation of technology and mortality, photography — the concatenation of inscription and disappearance, hence always at home at the cemetary — might provide a good starting point to address some of its latterday legacies and implications. While I am in no manner versed in things nor texts gothic, I hope that the trajectory of my talk — tracing, as it does, the phantomatic temporality seemingly always involved in attempts to account aesthetically for the unavoidability of death — will intersect sufficiently often with the vectors of today's two other talks to warrant if not reflection, at least reaction.

Let me begin with a quotation:

> Because we have neither hereditary nor direct knowledge of Death
> It is the trigger of the literary man's biggest gun
> And we are happy to equate it to any conceived calm.

The lines are culled from a poem rather conscientiously entitled »Ignorance of Death,« written by William Empson. All we can say about death — this being the paraphrastic wisdom made available by the text — is founded on, and forced to remain, secondary knowledge. No death may ever be experienced with perception maintained intact, hence neither can it ever be represented reliably. As a matter of concern for art, death is even more void of intelligibility than those other *thèmes préferés* of aesthetic ambition: infinity, divinity, and immortality. It will only ever serve as a place holder in tropologically organized systems of understanding. Another way of putting this by no means particularly upsetting or unknown fact would be to say that death is inscribed as that which no text can make available to knowing. It has reference, but lacks meaning. Aesthetically rather than epistemologically considered, this »single, expressionless syllable,« as Hegel termed death,[1] is

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* This paper was first presented at the University of Aarhus in September 1996. Parts of it have been culled from »Fantombilden. Porträttet, tystnaden och frånvarons alfabet,« *Ord & Bild* 1 (1996), 51-65, an essay which in its turn contains material from *En bok om fantomer* (Stockholm: Norstedts, 1996). No attempt has been made to change the oral character of the delivery. Thanks to Lis Møller and Marie-Louise Svane for invitating me.

1 *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, Theorie Werkausgabe, ed. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt am Main, 1970), 3:xx.

always only a question of style.[2]

It is, of course, no coincidence that Empson proposes to treat such semantic scandal as the »trigger« on literature's »biggest gun« — he thinks, needless to say, of the most trigger happy of human faculties: imagination — nor is it by chance that the trigger on a camera tends to be considered to be of similar dent and drive. That photography is a manner of writing, namely with light, was an insight codified already by Talbot, when he termed the *camera obscura* »nature's pencil.«[3] In the same manner that death triggers literary imagination, capturing the flight of vivaciousness in the rigidity of words, so the trigger of a camera freezes fluid reality into flat imagery. In both cases it is a question, upon closer scrutiny, of killing time with style. When Empson claims that »we are happy to equate it [death] to any conceived calm,« he merely points to the purpose of art — or at least one sort of art: to sublate time and to sublimate death. The calm we have thus created is, evidently, conceitful. All things considered, it remains a parenthesis in that succession of events — that cocatenation of coercion and occasion — we term life. Literature as well as photography are, metonymically conceived, such folds of calm, pockets of precipitous arrest, in which time figures as figures of temporality. In the following, I would like to focus more closely on the parenthetical status of art thus hinted at — a status to which gothic literature, too, whether willing or willy-nilly, seems to ascribe.

Let me attempt to open my parenthesis by turning to the perhaps most canonical text within the theory of photography.

1

In his much quoted but perhaps less understood essay on the history of photography, Walter Benjamin argues that the photographical portrait could enter into the social history of art »without prior burden.« The »first reproduced men« — anonymous, thus exemplary — literally lacked precursors. »The human face had a silence around it, and in this silence the gaze rested.«[4] Here, the constrictive pressure of practice and tradition is not yet presiding, threatening the *acte* to become an exercise in style, the painted

2 Cf. Garrett Stewart, *Death Sentences: Styles of Dying in British Fiction* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984), 3. The Empson quotation above recurs as a motto in Stewart's book (4).

3 *The Pencil of Nature* (London, 1844-46).

4 »Kleine Geschichte der Photographie,« *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Hermann Schweppenhäuser and Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main, 1974-89), 2;1:372.

portrait to become a template. Both the symbolical and emblematic could be thought away without therefore the history tacitly breathing in the picture vanishing. The first mechanically reproduced people seemed, rather, impregnated with more genuine reality — as if they had just emerged from authenticity's own bath of exposure, sufficient in and of themselves, calmly intimating a lost, yet somehow still curiously captured time.

In the spectator, Benjamin assumed, these images gave birth to the demanding desire to know the name of the person who »lived there and then.« To read the identity of the people reproduced constituted the first impulse of every spectator confronted with the examples from a first generation of photographically anonymous beings. But these were people who obstinately refused »to take the step into art« and make themselves or their time available to aesthetic knowledge.[5] They had not yet made themselves at home in the pictorial space with which the artist soon would make all strands of society familiar. The artless silence in which the gaze of such nameless souls rested was, rather, affiliated with the solitude of a cemetery, a place where the living may always find peace, but where they nonetheless will never feel at home (**figure 1**). Infinitely welcoming, such spaces of silence secure a zone still unavailable to art. Sublated by light — still more monuments than documents — the gazes would save themselves from time's work of destruction, tracing the contour of »tombstones,« to cite Benjamin's words, »which are hollow as furnaces and in whose interior you see letters rather than fires.«[6] These are images conjuring up our lived lives' posthumous character.[7] The portraits exist in the manner of inscriptions, ignorant of the necromantic ornaments with which aesthetic attitudes toward the unavoidability of death soon would acquaint them, and aimed at sentimentalizing — hence to make us familiar with — that about which we can never have any firsthand knowledge.

In these earliest portraits, not yet part of art proper, »actuality and photography had not yet had time to come in contact with each other.« The first photographical reproductions of people required long exposure and thus the most neutral surrounding possible. In the serene, somewhat rigid gaze that meets us in, for example, Nadar's or David Octavius Hill's portraits, time is gathered and contained in the empty pupil's peaceful interior. The exposure time assured that the models »could not emerge out of the moment,« as

5 Benjamin, 371.

6 Benjamin, 373.

7 I borrow this observation, as well as a few later on, from Eduardo Cadava. See »Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History,« *Diacritics* 3-4 (1992), 89.

Benjamin emphasizes, but rather must »live themselves into it.«[8] Here, we are still far from the era of snapshot rapidity, the epoch of instamatic imagery. The model guiding the portraitees' efforts was not the flight of fancy nor the golden opportunity of chance, but the calm cool of the corpse. In these pictures, *rigor mortis* was *de rigeur*. The precious instant into which the people portrayed had to live themselves belonged to a future their reproduction might experience, but never they themselves. To be photographed, hence to live oneself into the deferred instant of exposure, was not yet an art for the *salons*. Still, the rigidity required already signaled the interpenetration of photography and that vexed practice out of which all art must emerge: to sit model was, that is, an *ars moriendi*. Hill's pictures from the Greyfriar's Cemetery in Edinburgh, for example, literalize the truth that such forms of reproduction contain, but later portraiture art awould ttempt to cover up, defer, displace: the true homeground of photography is the cemetery.[9]

The stiffness and stillness of these first photographic portraits, rigidified both in time and space, had to vanish like ghosts in the morning hours, as the »darkness« that had seen them emerge was shaken out of the collective unconscious,like sleep out of a blanket.[10] Soon, what remained was the tried, trite, and tired. Props were introduced, cultural contexts both explored and exploited, and the portrait photograph lost its original character as a memento. No longer a monument, it became a document. Now, it did not carry the signs of timelessness — the inscription of death in life — but reduced the notion of permanence which each inscription implies to the sum total of the social and psychological components that made it possible to classify the face reproduced according to social background and temperament — hence to introduce it into *doxa*. The portrait no longer contained a memorandum concerning the figurative volatility of life, but became instead its literal trace and remnant. By henceforth emerging *from* the moment — as a remaining token of actuality — the portait abandoned the living-oneself-into-time that earlier had been its condition of existence. The authentic replaced the true. To not immediately grant the image-as-document the absolute veracity which it still had been able to lay claim to as a monument, soon became a gesture as automatic as the camera itself. The silence which might or might not exist in the photography could no longer be discerned. Portraits became »telling«

8 Benjamin, 373.
9 Cf. Cadava, 89.
10 Benjamin, 368.

(*parlant*), and the conditions they reproduced were animated. Illustration had replaced the example.

2

In his last, personally phrased book on photography, *Camera lucida*, written half a century after Benjamin's essay but quoted just as frequently, Roland Barthes tried to render precise the particular sort of knowledge that the photograph seemed to offer according to both him and Benjamin. What made this »anthropologically considered new object« so singular in comparison to the objects that other forms of expression had created in earlier times?[11] What made the portrait of Lewis Payne in his cell on death row in 1865, for example, differ so dramatically from a drawing of or poem about him (**figure 2**)? The general part of Barthes's answer drew its persuasive power from the fact that a photograph demanded a chemical process. It was — to a large part it still is — based, as it were, on a base. A photograph constitutes the real trace of certain conditions of light that existed at a particular time at a certain place. It always maintains a lost moment and can thus — in contrast to the line of a pencil or the ligatures of a written word — never give witness to what has not existed. It marks both that something has existed and that it no longer exists in this manner. It constitutes a 2D remnant of real time. In Barthes's eyes, this fractured temporality exposed the greatness of photography, but also its poverty and pity.[12] Despite its possibly construed or compromised character, the photograph always only contains the traces of that which has been.

To this by no means particularly radical observation concerning the premises of photography, Barthes added the conception of a cultural field of interests expressed in the picture — »a sort of general and certainly attentive engagement, but without any real focus« — which he proposed to term »studium.«[13] The studium of a photograph contained, among other things, the social, political, aesthetic, and ideological markers that assured that we would still be able to see what it reproduced. Studium is that knowledge we share with others, hence its photographic function must remain illustrative. It offers a set of coordinates organizing a familiar system of values and knowledge. But nothing in studium, Barthes maintained, could explain why we linger on a

11 *La Chambre claire. Note sur la photographie* (Paris, 1980), 136.
12 Barthes, xx.
13 Barthes, 48.

certain photograph. What is it that makes us scrutinize a particular photograph at the expense of the others, often more adroitely done, contained in our shoe box or album? Why do we wish to know more about precisely this picture, which may not even exhibit the same technical sophistication or aesthetic sensibility as its siblings?

In order to explain this oddity, Barthes suggested that an unexpected detail — an intensity, a rift — sometimes would rupture the thin veneer with which studium covered the photograph, thus giving it both sense and singularity. It seemed to be, he thought, the unexpected deviation from the general that caught our attention. Only a defect in the surface of the reproduction secured individuality and fascination. Barthes termed this moment of surprise, this momentous occurence of hazard and happenstance, »punctum.« It could be anything, but usually punctum was some apparently minor aspect which, once noticed, reorganized our understanding of the photograph in our hands. A pair of shoes with straps rather than laces, for example, some too big, too stiff collar, a finger wrapped in bandages . . . or an enticingly extended arm whose palm seemed to have precisely the right »degree of abandon« . . . most things could offer a critical point when we, in a moment of painful exultation, experienced the particular sort of insight that precisely this photograph was able to offer. Punctum made the picture exemplary.[14]

That this view is in no way novel, nor was proposed for the first time by Barthes, is revealed by a further reading of Benjamin's »small history of photography.« In one passage in the essay, toward the middle, Benjamin turns to a portrait of Karl Dauthenday and his bride, in which the inaccessible gaze of the woman ignores the spouse and instead »seems intensely directed toward some distant fate« (**figure 3**). Here, the sad future fate of Dauthenday's wife who many years and six children later cut her veins, is already inscribed metaleptically into the particular now documented by the reproduction. »If you have emersed yourself long enough in a picture such as this one,« Benjamin asserts, »you realize to what extent the extremes touch each other here, too.« Technical precision and mechanical savvy do not need to render impossible a living representation, but may »give its products a magic value.« »No matter how skillfully the photographer exercises his art,« Benjamin continues,

> and no matter how conscious the model is in his or her posture, the spectator experiences the irresistible need, in such a picture, to look for that tiny spark

14 Cf. Barthes, 47-50.

> of chance, of here and now, with which reality ignites, so to speak, the pictorial stylization — to find that unremarkable point in the midst of an isolated and long since vanished moment, in which future lives so vividly that we, in the perspective of looking back, experience it still today.[15]

Despite the fact that the quickly established familiarity with the photograph as an art form made possible not only a technical perfection which in its turn would invite manipulation, but also encouraged the models to pose, hence to adopt an ironic stance toward the medium, today's spectators might still find, under fortunate circumstances, »a spark of chance« which will not allow itself to be subordinated to either the aesthetic ambitions of the photographer or the stylistic intentions of the model. Benjamin establishes this possible point of ignition in what he terms »the optical unconscious« — a dimension of the photograph which belongs neither to some »lost moment« captured pictorially, nor the now in which our gaze reanimates the past. Rather, due to a »moment in which future lives vividly,« it emerges at an *unscheinbare Stelle*, an »unremarkable spot,« in that texture of transience and vanity of which the photograph is composed.[16] This peculiar time — which remains that proper to the photograph — is always posthumous, yet always also futuristic. Paradoxically, it speaks about death prior to its occurrence. Its tense is that of the future exact: »I will have been.«

It is because of this paradox that the portrait of Lewis Payne in his cell after the attempt to assassinate the then foreign minister of the United States, W. H. Seward, occupies such a central position in Barthes's album. In contrast to the other pictures so lovingly described in his book, the punctum in Alexander Gardner's photograph of the young prisoner is not constituted by some detail in his dress code or appearance, a slight eschewing of the perspective or some morbid or moribund oddity introduced into the composition, but by an abstract complication in what Barthes terms the picture's »fractured time.« Here, we have the same »unremarkable point« of which Benjamin had spoken several decades earlier, an unnoticeable spot in the photograph which literally cannot be located among its iconic props, but nonetheless deftly characterizes it in every detail. This complication might be part of each photographic image, but in the portrait of Payne it receives a particular pregnancy, according to Barthes, which ignites the pictorial stylization. »The photo is

15 Benjamin, 371.

16 Benjamin, 371. In this context, there is no reason to linger on Benjamin's far-from-unproblematic concept of an optical unconscious. Rosalind E. krauss has attempted to mobilize it within art theory. See *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), esp. 178-80.

beautiful,« he remarks, »the boy, too. That is the studium part. But punctum, that is that *he shall die*. I both see that *this will happen* and that *this has happened*. Terrified I can observe a perfect future whose gambit is death.« Gardner's portrait of the inmate makes the peculiar temporality of the photograph — and hence its formal conditions of possibility — evident. From a place which precedes the unavoidable end, it confronts us with »a catastrophe which has already taken place.«[17] The portrait is the irrefutable sign of an absence-to-come which has already had time to take place in the now in which we happen to look at it. The metaleptic tense in and thanks to which it survives — making it possible for us, in another present, to appreciate it anew — may paradoxically only ever belong to what »speaks to each one of us and all,«[18] always generally applicable, yet each time inalienably singular: death.

There seems only one way to characterize this peculiar mortuary temporality that both Benjamin and Barthes discover in the photographic portrait: it is phantomistic. Any possibly uncanny aspect of such future perfect cannot be that it would remind us of the fact that we are finite beings and hence — in accordance with our exotic ontology — one day will die;[19] this is a triviality with which philosophy, art, and literature, too, insists on making us aquatinted. The photographic portrait may tell us that we will vanish and that, one day, we will only exist the way we always have, as images, but by acknowledging the death of that which is photographed — and it cannot avoid doing it — the photograph also implies the uncanny survival of that which is dead. When Benjamin in his essay on »The Art Work in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility« states that »the person withdraws from the photograph,« he is not speaking of the decorum, timidity, or reservation with which most of us confront the eye of a lense, but about that moment in which the portrait turns into art. For the first time, »the exhibitory value« now »appears to be superior to the cult value.«[20] But this withdrawal makes not only possible the photographic portrait as art. Benjamin does not speak merely about an empirical withdrawal, he also discusses a structural one. When the exhibitory — or market — value, for the first time reveals itself to be more important than the cult value — at that moment, in other words, when man withdraws and the modern art of photography is conceived — its fundamental

17 Barthes, 150.

18 Barthes, xx.

19 Here, and through the end of the paragraph, I rely on Cadava. See »Words of Light,« 90.

20 »Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner mechanischen Reproduzierbarkeit,« *Gesammelte Schriften*, 1;2:485.

temporal structure is also revealed. No photograph is possible if that which is photographed does not withdraw. Each picture is predicated on the presentation of something absent. As the maintaining of a disappearance, it offers a tomb for the living dead. If the essential difference between dead and living is that only the former may be buried — and hence, as Heiner Müller once remarked, that the dead are solely a concern for city planners — then the photograph offers us a substitute grave. The photographer is, properly speaking, a maintenance person. The photograph's counterpart in the world of 3D is neither the crypt nor the mausoleum, but the cenotaph with its marking of a spot where the mourned and deceased cannot be found. This is the only thing that could be possibly uncanny, potentially terrifying in the photograph: it demonstrates, as Barthes writes, »that the corpse is living *in its capacity as corpse*.« The temporality of photography exists only as »the living image of something dead.«[21] It is an inscription, a legend, a cenotaphic *caveat* of vanity and vanishing. To the extent that we appear alive, if not kicking, in a photographic portrait, it can only be as props, proxies, or indeed phantoms.

3

The particular field of knowledge that was first to make practical gains from this rather trivial realization was not art, but criminology. For the criminologists of earlier epochs, well aquainted with the death that Benjamin could see in the gaze of a young bride, and which terrified Barthes when it met him in the facial traits of young Mr. Payne on death row, the possibilities offered by the discovery of photography did not acquire immediate nor drastic importance in the day-to-day police work. Portraits had already been used as early as around 1840, mainly in order to contribute to the physiognomic description of criminals, but the technical know-how was skittish at best, and the pictures lied as often as they spoke the truth. When identifying chronic criminals, so-called »recidivists,« the police still preferred standard police procedure. During raids, the genial Vidocq, for instance, a former thief turned police, usually marked previous friends that he recognized with a piece of chalk on the shoulder, so that his present colleagues could apprehend them at the exit. Another popular method when identifying recidivists was to post a constable at the prison gate. Given the task of greeting arriving interns as if they were old friends, he would trick them to return the

21 Barthes, 123.

greeting — thereby betraying their familiarity with the place. In order to boost the number of arrests, five francs were handed out to each policeman who managed to identify a recidivist — leading to the pedagogically perhaps less desired consequence that corrupt officials collaborated with inventive interns and split the reward.[22]

But mainly and generally, police work faltered in method. Granted, for a long time the issue had been how to secure traces with the help of which unknown person could be translated into authentic culprits. But by using categories such as »normal« or »average« when describing length and weight, the officials did not gain any essential insights into either the identity of criminals or how such identity might be best established. Working from the premise that criminality consisted of a set number of elements — like an alphabet with twelve, fifteen letters — the criminologists of the nineteenth century had construed a tropology of evil. An interpretatory theory grounded in equal parts on Bible hermeneutics and scientistic wishful–thinking, it gave itself the task of making the criminal brain understandable. Source material was provided by the *demi-monde* of the turn-of-the-century metropolis, a nether world this side of death, to which thugs, murderers, pocket pickers, pimps, and prostitutes belonged (**figure 4**). The anthropology that provided such worldly un-world with the possibility of conceptualization, making previous police methods (stigmatization, maiming, tattooing) if not obsolete, at least less prevalent and popular (**figure 5**), was based on the premise that delinquents belonged to a region which, while invisible to common man, was neither absent nor non-existent. With an adequate method, the traces of the culprits' deeds could be read, it was thought, as clearly as a baker's fingerprints in flour. Based on typologies of earlier epochs, as well as on contemporary advancements within phrenology, an archive was to be constructed from which a typology of lost souls might be established. The police replaced the spirit hunters of a medieval age. Hermeneuts of evil, they became well versed in the alphabet of absence.

An important advancement was made when Caesare Lombroso, the Italian criminologist, began to »gather, compare, and order« the elements of crime in his book about »the criminal,« *L'Uomo delinquente*, first published in a series of installments between 1870 and 1876 (**figure 6**).[23] Now, a typological

22 Cf. Henry T. F. Rhodes, *Alphonse Bertillon: Father of Scientific Detection* (London, 1956), 73-74. In the following I rely on Rhodes.

23 *L'Uomo delinquente, in rapporto all' anthropologia, alla giurisprudenza ed alle discipline carcerarie* (Milan, 1876).

gallery might be established, displaying a systematized version of delinquency and dereliction, in which wax models, body parts, and anthropometric measuring units could be used to penetrate and lay bare the sole object that eluded the criminologist, that dark spot of anomaly and aberration: the psyche of the criminal. Guiding was the notion that criminality consisted in a determined and, for scientific knowledge, available form — coded as any other gene or social occasion. The formulas behind the forms should be revealed. Chins protruding like revolvers and necks as thick as dictionaries, pupils brown as coffee or black as the night, cheeks that had grown together like unkempt flower beds, hare-lippedness, arms long as loops of suspender and legs short as matches . . . everything constituted signs that the police would interpret and formalize (**figure 7**). If the methods of interpretation were only adequate, it would be possible to read, in the face of the gambler, Mafia member, or rapist, true motives, circumstances, and inclinations. (This practice of reading was gradually refined so as to identify, among others, homosexuals, geniuses, and heroes of the revolution [**figure 8**].)

Accordingly, by emphasizing not only the gathering of data, but also interpretation and causal explanation, criminology was able to transform itself, slowly but securely, from an empirically grounded, to a theoretically organized science. No longer only a question of synthesizing and coordinating a record of criminals, with which to keep track of the actions of thieves, hoodlums, and murderers (a task purely archival or antiquarian with as much actuality as a paper from the year preceding), police work learnt how to predict — and thus, for the sake of prevention, to anticipate — future crimes. If, earlier, the detective had always arrived at the scene of crime too late, and hence had based his claim to existence on the securing of traces, it was now possible to advance and promote an anticipatory activity which could prevent such traces from ever occurring.

Still, it would take time before the photograph began to contribute to the police force's labors of identification in anything remotely akin to a scientific manner. And the preamble to the technological innovations that gave birth to the phantom image seemed anything but remarkable. It was a tall young man, at least for the France of that time, roughly 1.80 meters tall, with a clear-cut profile but of slender built, who turned up at the police *préfecture* in Paris on March 15, 1879. His facial traits were sharply cut and the half-beard that adorned the lower part of his face was as regular as a geometrical figure. His

clothes betrayed attentiveness as well as certain flair, but the brusque manner of the man soon betrayed that this was not some malplaced dandy. With an academic career behind him consisting of burnt bridges and never trodden paths, the twenty-six-year-old Alphonse Bertillon had arrived for his first day of work as a low-paid underling at the *premier bureau*. His task was to fill out, copy, and file facts, folders, and documents.[24]

As a son and brother of two well-known statisticians, this — if not black, then gray sheep of the Bertillon family soon established, despite his distaste for routine work, that the archival methods of the *préfecture* left things to be desired. The role performed by the forms in front of him was almost exclusively ritual. They hardly offered any constructive contribution to the police's attempt to establish the identity of criminal elements: the categories used were simply too vague and statistically uncertain. Six days a week the young Bertillon handled these forms with their many, laborious, and thoroughly unsatisfactory descriptions — until, after eight months, he had had enough of procedures that appeared meaningless even to the untrained eye. If the forms succeeded in identifying a single recidivist, it was more likely because of chance than thanks to sound detection. On October 1 of the year, Bertillon therefore sent a report to the prefect, Louis Andrieux, in which he presented a discovery he had just made. By measuring the human body, the newly hired clerk was able to demonstrate that no two individuals were ever exactly identical, not even twins (**figure 9**). Employing statistical methods which, in part, had been developed by his father, Louis-Adolphe, Bertillon attempted to show how individual deviations might be isolated within general tendencies. According to the young clerk, these first results, crude and in all respects incomplete, were nonetheless sufficient to establish that a perfectly normal person, corresponding to the average in all measuring categories, was a statistical improbability.

The prefect found the argument incomprehensible. In light of his experience with police procedure, he also thought it rather precocious coming from a colleague of the lowest rank. Accordingly, the clerk received a reprimand and the report disappeared among those files whose arbitrariness it had tried to criticize. It would take another couple of years, until Andrieux was replaced by a certain Camecasse, before Bertillon's invention met with understanding. Meanwhile, he tried to transform his initial observations into a reliable

24 For biographical details, see Rhodes and Suzanne Bertillon, *Vie d'Alphonse Bertillon, inventeur de l'anthropometrie* (Paris, 1949).

system. The strength of the theories on which the report had been founded lay in their simplicity. The questions Bertillon had posed were practically oriented. To gain answers he now searched for statistical explanations (**figure 10**). If, for example, in a select group of men a hundred individuals could be found whose heads were 190 mm tall and 155 mm wide (**figure 11**), how many of these would also measure 170 cm from head to toe? Could a person with 180 cm between extended fingertips be isolated in a group of men on whom the left foot was 18 cm long and the right ear 50 mm wide? How many measurements were needed to establish a formula that would fit one and only one person?

After the initial measurings, Bertillon had widened his perspective from being limited to the head to encompass the entire body. This method, which later would receive the name *bertillonage*, *portrait parlé*, or *portrait parlant* (**figure 12**), assumed that eleven units of measure were sufficient in order to establish an individual's »anthropometric« uniqueness with satisfactory probability — that is, as long as the measurements demonstrated life-long constancy, since otherwise, they might be forged by particularly audacious recidivists. Bertillon therefore chose measurements which almost all included skeletal parts that do not change after puberty: the length and width of the head and the right ear, the length of the arm from elbow to the middle digit's tip, the length of long and ring fingers, the size of the left foot, the general height, as well as the distance between armpit and hip and that between the tips of the indexes when stretched apart as far as possible. The likelihood that two individuals would demonstrate eleven identical measurements was one to 4.194304. (If he had added another three categories, the risk for mistaken identity would have decreased to one in 268.435456 — a statistical impossibility at least in the world of the 1890's.)[25]

It was Bertillon's intention to describe the look of a human being as precisely as possible, the task being ultimately to arrest the referent. In order to refine the methods involved in this enterprise, he started to cut up photographic portraits. The photographs accompanying the forms which his job had forced him to fill out were impossible to employ with any degree of success. No norm had been established and the police register therefore contained photographs in both profile and half profile, photographs taken frontally and in surroundings hardly neutral. In some cases the light conditions had been

25 Among Bertillon's more important criminological studies are *La Photographie judicaire* (Paris, 1890) and *Instructions signalétique* (Melun, 1893). With Arthur Chervin, he coedited *Anthropologie métrique* (Paris, 1909).

poor, in others the distance between camera and the arrested person was too far. Bertillon aimed to standardize the procedure. The face of the criminal should be photographed frontally and in profile, under identical conditions of light and always from the same distance (**figures 13, 14**). Moreover, the criminal element should be placed infront of a minutely marked system of coordinates, which facilitated the comparison of bodily parts with one another. Finally, any distinctive traits should be noted (warts, scars, birthmarks, tattoos), and the color of eyes and hair should be described in accordance with exact terminology. In short, the human apparition should be disciplined. In the portraits taken by Bertillon, there was, in a sense, room only for studium.

In 1882, Andrieux received his pension. When Camecasse was installed as the new prefect, Bertillon was given the chance he had waited for. With the help of two assistants, the now twenty-eight-year-old was given three months within which to identify a recidivist according to the methods he had developed during off hours. During two months, all individuals arrested in Paris were photographed systematically; thus was laid the ground work for a new and more reliable police register. The first recidivist was discovered in February 1883. A certain monsieur Dupont seemed familiar to the photographer. After having consulted the cabinet in which the different identification forms were kept in 81 studiously labeled drawers, Bertillon discovered that he apparently was dealing with a monsieur Martin. The man had been arrested on December 15 the preceding year, having stolen two empty bottles. Initially, the person denied the earlier arrest, but having been confronted with undeniable statistical facts, monsieur Martin-Dupont confessed, adding that his true name was a third one — »if they had not already figured that out.«

Thus Bertillon's system had won its first victory and within one year, several new cases were identified. In March 1883, recidivist number two was found, and during the succeeding three months, another six. Between July and September, fifteen criminals were identified, and during the last quarter of the year, another twenty-six cases. Together with his wife, who noted down all measurements and kept the filing cabinet in order, Bertillon created 7,336 forms during the first year his system was in operation. Paris soon became »the Mecca of the police,« as the chief of police in Dresden, Robert Heindl, put it, »and Bertillon was its prophet.«[26]

26 *Dactyloscopie* (Berlin, 1937 [1927]).

4

With the help of Bertillon's *portrait parlé*, Lombroso's gallery of delinquency, as well as the somewhat atavistic methods of earlier criminology, were replaced with less brutal means. But the register of types of ears and different eye colors, varying forms of facial hair and personal traits that had been created, made it not only possible to chart variations in the human anatomy and to identify recidivists according to an anthropometric science of dereliction and thievery (**figures 15, 16**). At least in theory, it was now also possible to create new so-called »individualizations.« With the support of Bertillon's »signaletic encyclopedia,« criminal types could be pieced together and identities construed which did not correspond to individuals who existed in reality, but which, paradoxically, gave the police a better idea of whom they were tracking. In some sense, real chimerae were now chased. Criminology had started to stake out the future. The vital (or, in more appropriate parlance, indispensable) premises of the phantom image had been established.

By way of the *bertillonage*, something thus happened to the concepts of reality and illusion which until then had organized not only crime, but also its prevention. If earlier, it was possible to talk about the fictitiousness of reality, thus implying the manner in which reality was only available through the assistance of illusion (just as in the case of other typologies, Lombroso's register of criminals had been a fictive construction which made claims to represent the variables of reality in systematized fashion), the new means made available by Bertillon's »signaletic encyclopedia« offered the possibility of fiction's own reality. Earlier, a conception of the invisible had been correlated with the notion of a trace in such a way that the former left the latter in a manner that analogous techniques could and would reconstrue — making it visible and evident. The new technique championed by Bertillon implied that these traces no longer needed to be treated as remnants or relics of what belonged to the past, but could rather be considered as the original components of that which appeared. Absence had acquired a face. The image the police construed could now claim to present a new kind of identity: the phantom.

The phantomistic image which the criminologists and police officers at the bureau of identification in Paris — and soon in most major cities — construed after having excluded a series of alternatives, was no longer a reproduction or an imitation, but a virtual composite, in which an identity appeared though

still lacking a content. This artificial ego constituted a pure form waiting for the future to provide it with essence or existence. This was the first novelty of the image made possible by Bertillon's *portrait parlé*. It consisted of a combination of a practically infinite number of facial traits which, together, formed a visage without antecedent. Bertillon's phantom image lacked an original and constituted, in this sense, no longer a photograph. The second novelty was that since it belonged to the idiosyncrasy of the image thus created that it be marked by a certain intended indeterminacy. Otherwise it would not be possible for the spectator to read his or her impressions and recollections into the montage of facial facets: the image would be too dominating and thus impede identification. In order to contribute to the apprehension of a person still unknown, the image had to be made consciously vague — not so diffuse as to lose a concretion it had never possessed (and thus relevance as an image), but neither so clear or concrete that it appeared as that which it could never be (that is, as reproduction). Systemic space for the interpretative gaze of the spectator had to be written into the image as a calculated approximation in a program.

A phantom image exists, therefore, only more or less. It belongs to the gray zone of optics. Despite the fact that it intends to contribute to identification — thus aims to define — the construed composite is grounded on controlled indefinition. The phantom image remains for ever only *nearly* an image. It lacks truth. And hence it cannot, in contrast to a regular portrait, insist on its own historical I-have-existedness. It does not constitute proof of presence, but revels the anemia of the past. Composed of separate elements, it empties history of naturalness. In this the phantom image resembles human language. About it could be said what Barthes termed the »disaster« of language, but also considered its »pleasure«:

> to its nature, it is purely fictive, and to attempt to make it un-fictive would demand an enormous apparatus of investments in the form of logic or, if this is not enough, of affidavits, whereas the photograph functions entirely independent of that sort of interlinkings since it does not invent something, but is in itself proof enough of its authenticity.[27]

In contrast to the portrait, the phantom image consist exclusively of »interlinkings.« Nonetheless, no more than language is it an ahistorical phenomenon. As a matter of fact, and more to the point, the phantom image is

27 Barthes, 134-35.

made up of individual pieces all of which are authentic though differently contextually located. Only their combination, or »individualization,« lacks an original, and hence history. This explains the »enormous apparatus« needed in order to connect the image with a particular person. In contrast to the photograph, which for to Barthes, is »full to the brink,« the phantom image must be made sufficiently hollow in order to fit the face of a criminal. It is dead emptiness waiting for presence, construed out of futurity. A cenotaph. The moment when the image is filled with reality, thus becoming actual — when the referent, as it were, has been arrested — it has fulfilled its task and become superfluous.

5

Among the more interesting paradoxes to which Bertillon's *portrait parlé* gave rise is the curious fact that the police, when beginning to use the phantom image, returned to techniques considered to be the domain of the aesthetic disciplines. Here, the *as -if* of art has, in some sense, become *that*. The phantom offers traces of a past to the eye, which have never been its own. The time presented in the portrait is quite literally fractured. The remnants which, when gathered, make up the face, can no longer be determined solely by way of analogy. With the phantom image, the guarantor of art, mimesis, has played out its normative role. Now, a digital — or, at the very least, a digitilizable — relation must be assumed, since the image has real relevance only as long as it insists on its own composed fictitiousness. It constitutes a sketch to a future existence whose particularity it is to remain empty.

For the German pavilion at last year's Venice biennale, Thomas Ruff made, among other things, a shadow cabinet containing a series of 200 x 150 cm big gray portraits of young people (**figures 17, 18, 19**). (The proportions — 3:4 — were correlative with the format of the negatives.)[28] The pictures continue an inquiry started with an earlier series comprising 100 portraits, in which Ruff worked with a sort of existential neutrality and where the gazes of the people portrayed seemed to hover between openness and reservation, daring and discretion. Taken in an artificial milieu — that is, in a studio — these color photographs all emphasizes the importance of surface. In them, psychological realism had been replaced by dermatological realism (**figure**

28 Cf. Stephan Dillemuth and Thomas Ruff, »Det återstår att se. Mycket uar tänkbart som har lite förankring i verkligheten,« Swedish trans. Ingrid Windisch, *Thomas Ruff* (Malmö, 1996), 90. The German original is in Thomas Ruff, *Andere Portraits + 3D* (Venice Biennale, 1995).

20).[29] Any attempt to make looks cohere with meaning, skin with person, is counteracted by the passport photo'ish passivity of the portraits, a reservation which is at the same time tempered by the sheer size of the images (165 x 210 cm). In Ruff's mild, yet distressing portraits the document becomes, in part, monument again. The artist himself has termed his pictures »critical« — »because under the cover of the identifiable and the science of recognition, I destabilize them«[30] — and the moment they present is crucial in the sense reserved for art: neutral but not disinterested, open yet unavailable, they force the spectator to confront his or her own projections.

When, eight or nine years later, Ruff returns to these portraits he empties them of the dermatological realism to which they had laid claim. Rearranging the photographs according to principles of combination and approximation, he now develops them in black and white. The portraits have become »other portraits« (**figures 21, 22**). With their shaky shades and blurry facial traits, these destabilized images are closer to nature's eraser than to its pencil. In contrast to their colorful precursors, these other portraits, secondary in every sense of the word, inhabit an optical limbo, poised between sight and sign, fact and fiction. They are almost-images, constructions in which the anonymous has replaced that sensibility to which the portraits of earlier epochs had still laid claim and whose presuppositions Ruff's own color portraits subtly ironized. Male and female traits merge, making the question of gender identity secondary. The images may resemble passport photographs or portraits of fugitive criminals, but mostly they remind one of some cold-hearted automata's idea of future identities. These are the faces of phantoms.

The reality articulated in Ruff's silk-screened pictures is flat as a playing card. In them, the premise of photography no longer appears as white and pristine as the empty sheet of paper assumed by empirical philosophy — at least in its Lockean variation — to constitute our consciousness prior to being colored by experience, tainted by impression. Nor is it as black as the night in which the criminologists of earlier time had sought their villains. Nor, for that matter, is it »dark« as the origin that, according to Benjamin, once had seen photography being born. Ruff's portraits form files in a gray archive, pages in some mechanized but oblivious brain's drab album, permeated by recollections, experiences, and impressions, yet still — curiously —without

29 The observation is Dillemuth's. See »Det återstår att se,« 89.

30 In conversation with Matthias Winzen. »Minnesmärke över den okände fotografen,« Swedish trans. Rolli Fölsch, *Thomas Ruff*, 86. The German original is in *Kunst-Bulletin* 3 (1995).

history. The thick graininess of the pictures returns to the human countenance that silence which 150 years of use had taken from it. Here, there is an overwhelming sense of anonymity. But the gazes do not rest in a stillness created by inexperience, perplexity, or medial innocence. Doubled, they seem, rather, caused by an awareness of the reproducibility of each gaze, and thus also of its lack of singularity. »What is a ghost image?« Ruff asks in a conversation with Catherine Hürzeler. »Probably a blurred portrait of a person you once saw somewhere and vaguely recollect. A reproduction is a reproduction is a reproduction.«[31] Exuding gray calm and sensitive stillness, Ruff's portraits seem to live somewhere between the awareness of the unattainability of uniqueness and the experience of an arbitrariness without counterpart. The silence proper only of photography provides them with their private language.

Ruff's portraits offer no example of subjective, but of objective photography. About them could be claimed what he himself has said concerning an earlier series of portraits in which he had given twelve different people the same blue iris through digital retouching. Here, there is no question

> of portraits any longer, but rather, of non-portraits, timeless ones. The face has never existed in this way, the blue has been added afterwards, and therefore this is no longer a photograph. These photographs hover somewhere, liberated from the exposure of a factual moment.[32]

In contrast to the portrait of the young Payne that caught Barthes's admiring gaze, and whose fascination had rested in the fact that it demonstrated a catastrophe that had already taken place, Ruff's gray pictures possess no drama. These phantoms have never lived. Nor, for that matter, have they ever died. Exampleless, their form of existence is most akin to that of a place holder. To the extent that they contain any punctum, it can only be the absence of punctum.

*

In his book, Barthes posits a tripartite manner of going about photography. There are »three different forms of practice (or three feelings, three

31 »Intervju med Thomas Ruff,« Swedish trans. Tryggve Edmond, *Thomas Ruff*, 94.

32 Winzen, 86.

intentions),« he writes: to do, to endure, and to see. The first way is that of the »operator« or photographer, that is, the person who pulls the trigger. The second is that of the »spectator« or observer, that is, the person who, triggered, leafs through journals, newspapers, books, and archives, and hence encounters the image. The third and epistemologically perhaps most unsettling way to consider a photograph is that of the »spectrum.« This manner consists of »that or the one of which the photograph is taken«; it constitutes »the target, the referent, a sort of simulacrum,« leading Barthes to think on the one hand of a spectacle and on the other, of »that terrifying thing that exists in all photography, that is, the return of death.«[33] Spectrum is, thus defined, the insistent instance that must endure a picture. In order to close, I would like to turn my attention to an image which — allegorically — might demonstrate how these three ways in which the photograph functions — operator, spectator, and spectrum — collaborate to become an object of secondary knowing.

The picture I am thinking of is, of course, not at all a photograph, yet in a certain sense, it is more photographic, or at least photogenic, than most stills and shots — if, by that, is intended an image that is able to render the presuppositions of photography evident (**figure 23**). In Poussin's »Les Bergers d'Arcadie,« we are witness to a sort of *scène hérmeneutique*: three shepherds stand or kneel in front of a tombstone, one of them reading the inscription with his right index. The doings of the men is witnessed, perhaps also protected, by a goddess or a muse, who appears at their side, to the right in the frame. Representative, this woman she guards the act of interpretation in which the shepherds seem engaged, the point of origin of which — the text or inscription *Et in Arcadia ego* — she also, as goddess or muse, must know the meaning of. In this allegorical interpretation, the tombstone would be a picture in the picture and the woman on its side thus an implicit operator. Hence, the role assumed by the shepherds would be obvious: they are spectators involved in the process of deciphering and understanding signs from the other side. By emphasizing the tactility of reading — an act which searches across the stone's rough letters, thus also reading with the body — Poussin's painting allegorizes the act through which it itself, as image, is made available.

The question is only where, in this interplay of sight and sense, gaze and finger, or for that matter*sema* and *deixis*, we might localize »that slightly

33 Barthes, 22-3.

terrifying thing which,« according to Barthes, »is in all photography« and which he proposed to term spectrum. Where is the »return of death« in *Les Bergers d'Arcadie*? Quite quickly, of course, any confrontation with the painting will notice an anomaly. Only one of Poussin's four figures casts a shadow: the kneeling shepherd who reads the inscription on the stone. This umbrian contour is made possible thanks to the tombstone and is at once material (rough as stone) and immaterial (ungraspable as the absence of light). Allegorically — and which shadow is not always already an allegory? — the figure may be interpreted as the »I« speaking in the locution *Et in Arcadia ego*. The dead is given voice through the reading index (»I, too, have been in Arcadia«), but it is also — as several interpretations have it — death itself which here speaks (»In Arcadia, too, am I«). The shadow is both the dead and death — or what Barthes termed a spectrum.

Yet the remarkable thing with Poussin's painting is that it seems as if the shadow is reading the vaguely disquieting pastoral idyll which it lays out for view: the dark and ominous finger meets the kneeling shepherd in a mirroring that is also an inversion of premises. Death reads life as much as life reads death. It is perhaps of this critical moment — a sudden reversal of presuppositions by which the spectator is seen, the reader read — that Barthes speaks when he states that photography, on an imaginary level, »presents the exquisitely subtle moment when I am neither subject nor object, but rather a subject sensing that it is transformed into an object.« And he adds: »here, I have a micro experience of death (of the parenthesis) and I truly become a ghost.«[34]

Gothic or merely ghostly, it is hardly odd that we, as Empson writes, »are happy to equate« death »with any conceivable calm.« I hasten to close this extended parenthesis and can only thank you for having been willing to kill time with me.

34 Barthes, 30.

Figure 1)

Figure 2)

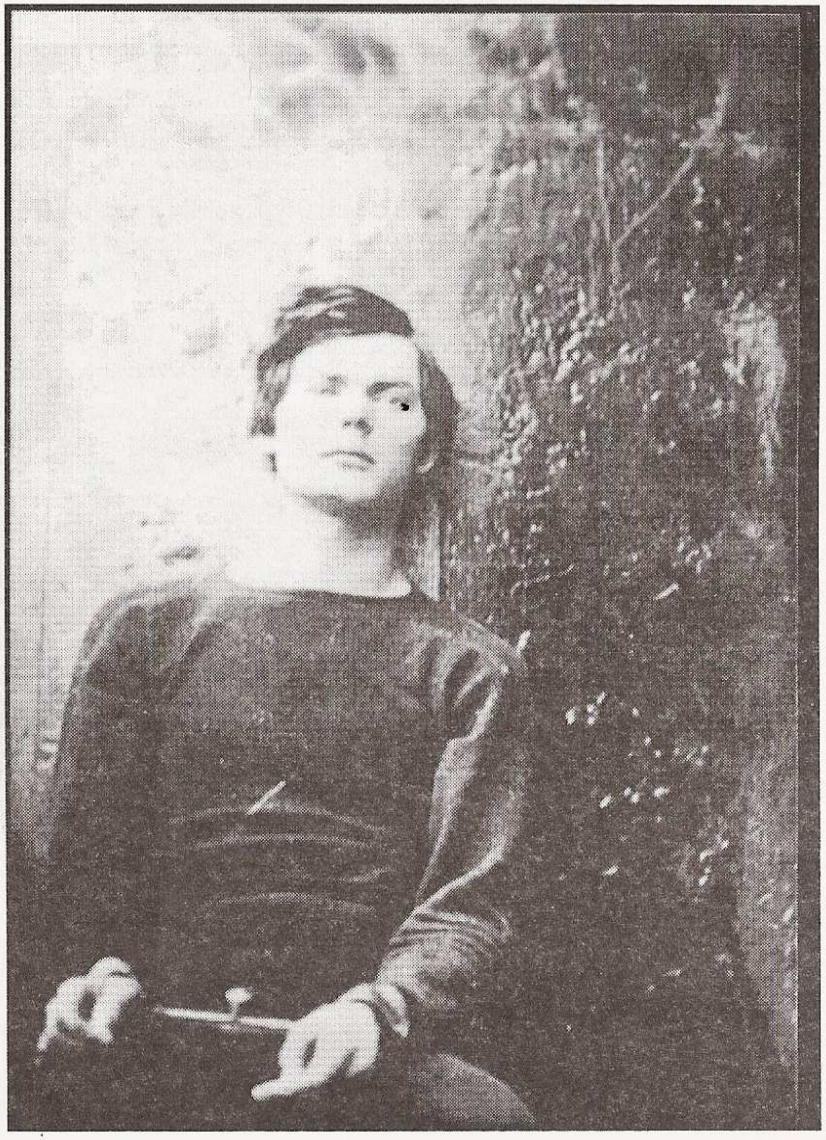


Figure 3)

Figure 4)

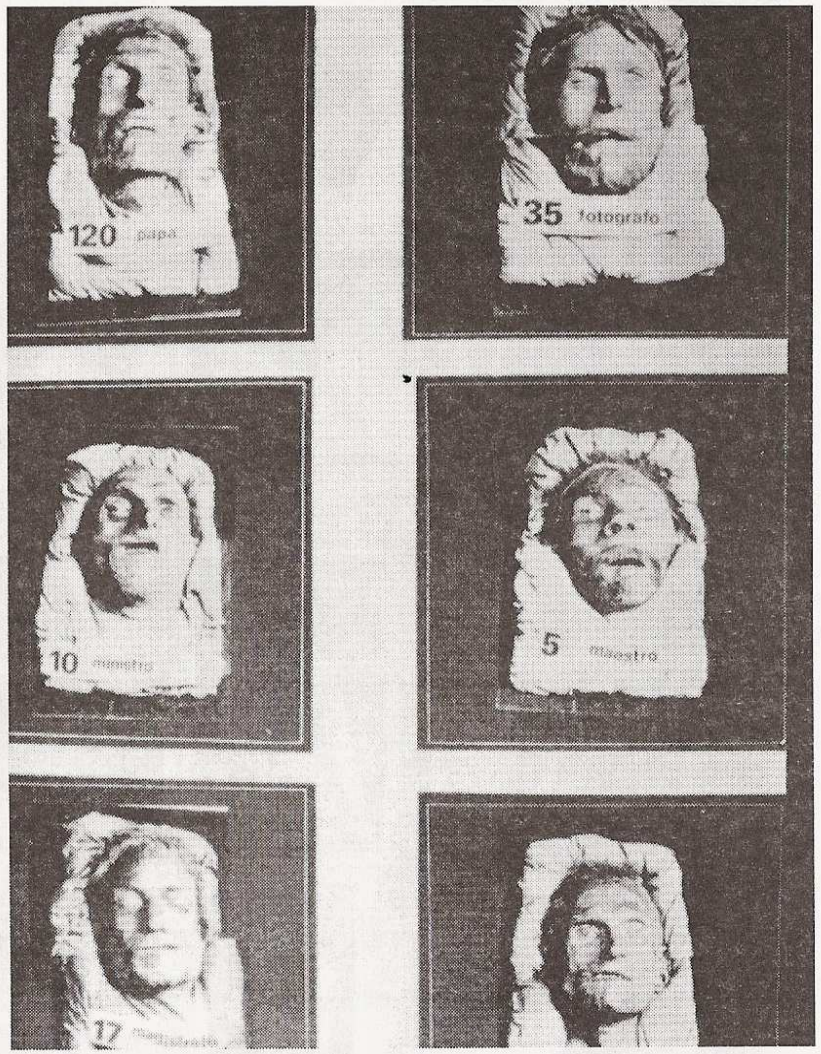


Figure 5)

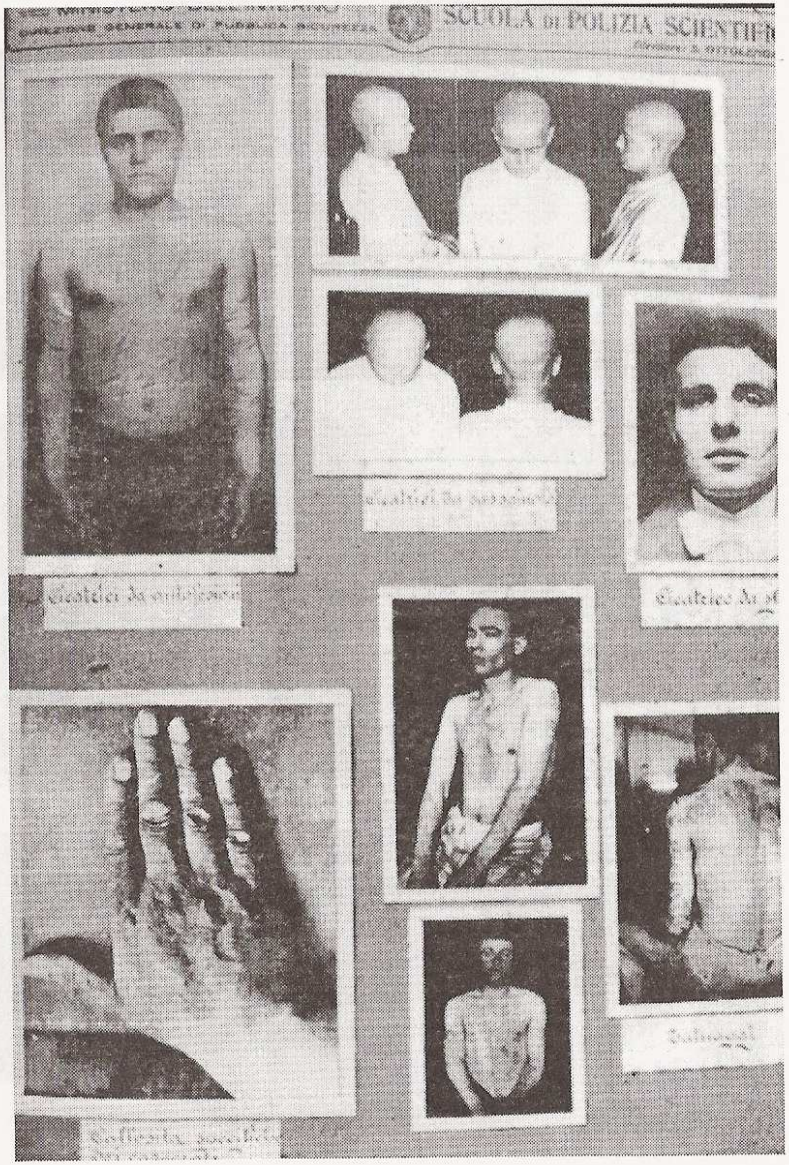
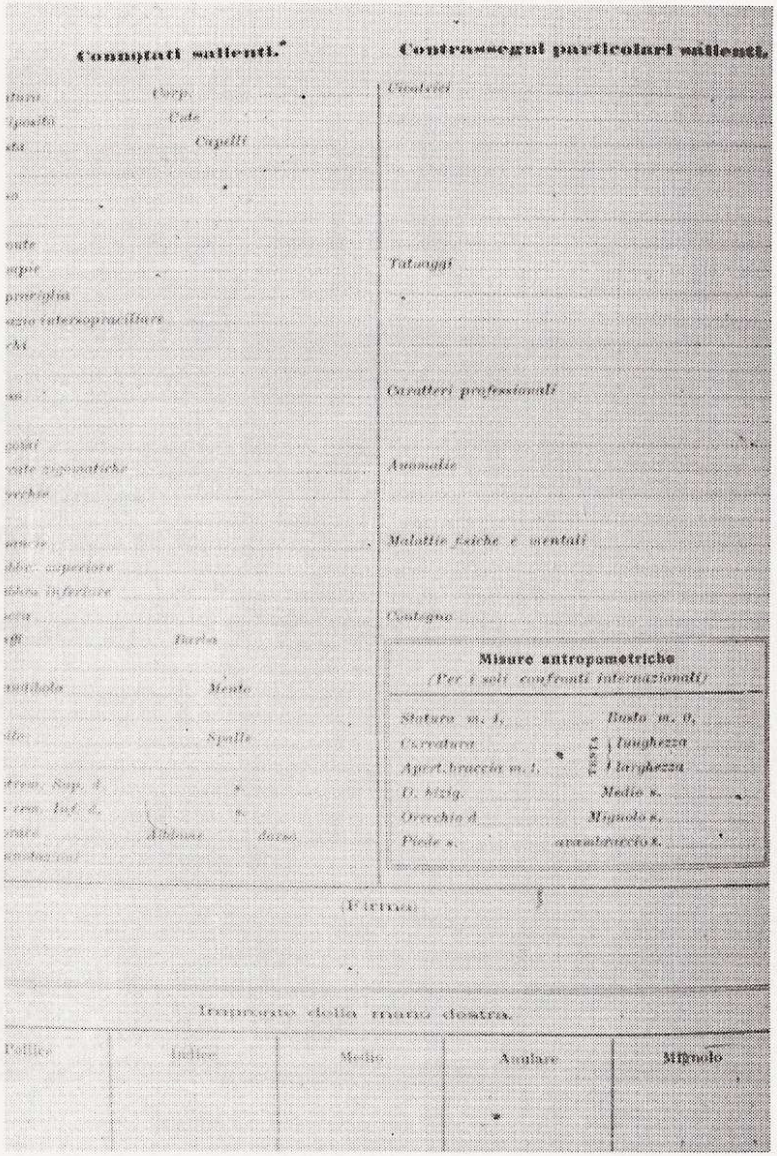


Figure 6)

Figure 7)



Connotati salienti.

Contrassegni particolari salienti.

Capelli

Tatuaggi

Caratteri professionali

Anomalie

Malattie fisiche e mentali

Cicatrici

Misure antropometriche

(Per i soli confronti internazionali)

Statura m. 1.

Busto m. 0.

Circonferenza

Apert. braccia m. 1.

Lunghezza

Larghezza

Medio s.

Mignolo s.

Avambraccio s.

Piede s.

Impronte delle prime quattro dimensioni

Pollice

Indice

Medio

Anulare

Mignolo

Figure 8)

МОСКОВСКОЕ ОХРАННОЕ ОТДѢЛЕНІЕ.

Figure 9)

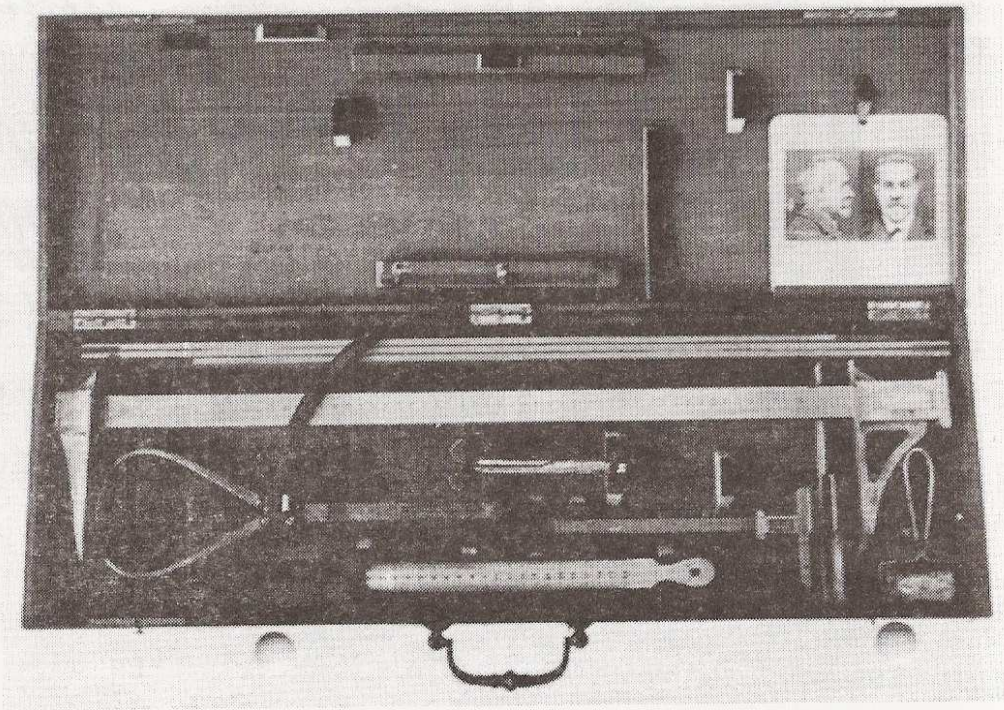
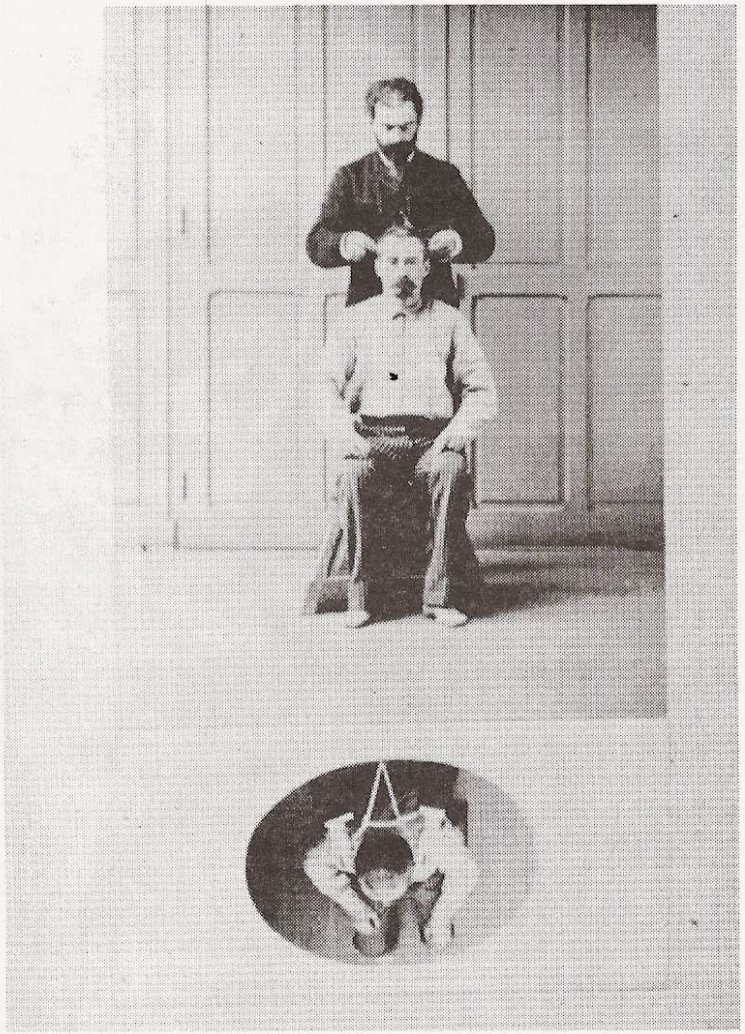


Figure 10)



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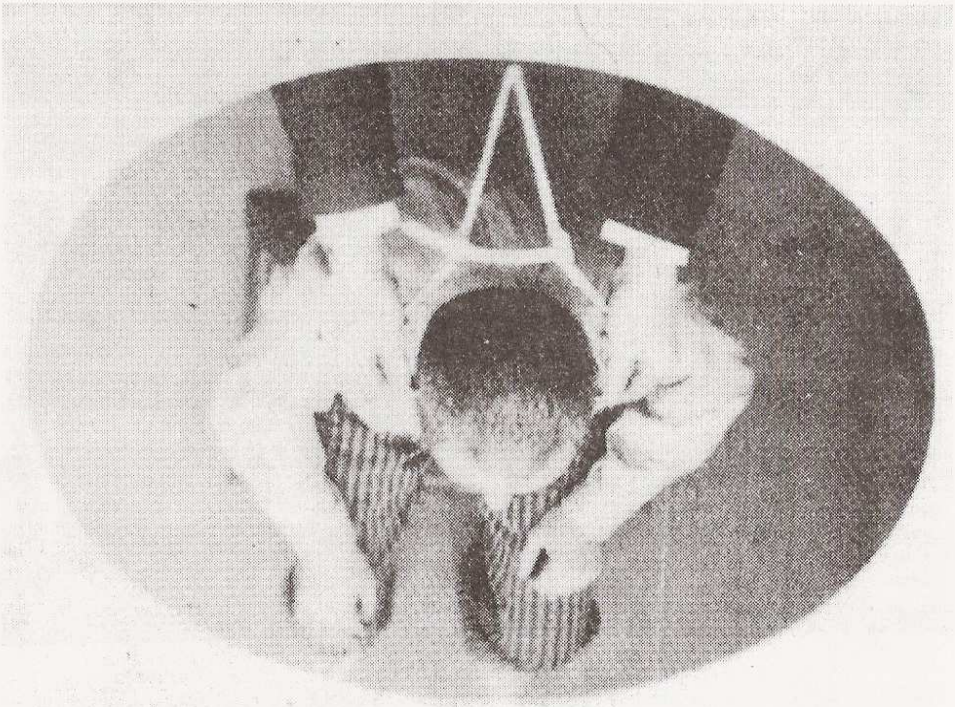

Figure 12)

Figure 13)

Figure 14)

Figure 15)

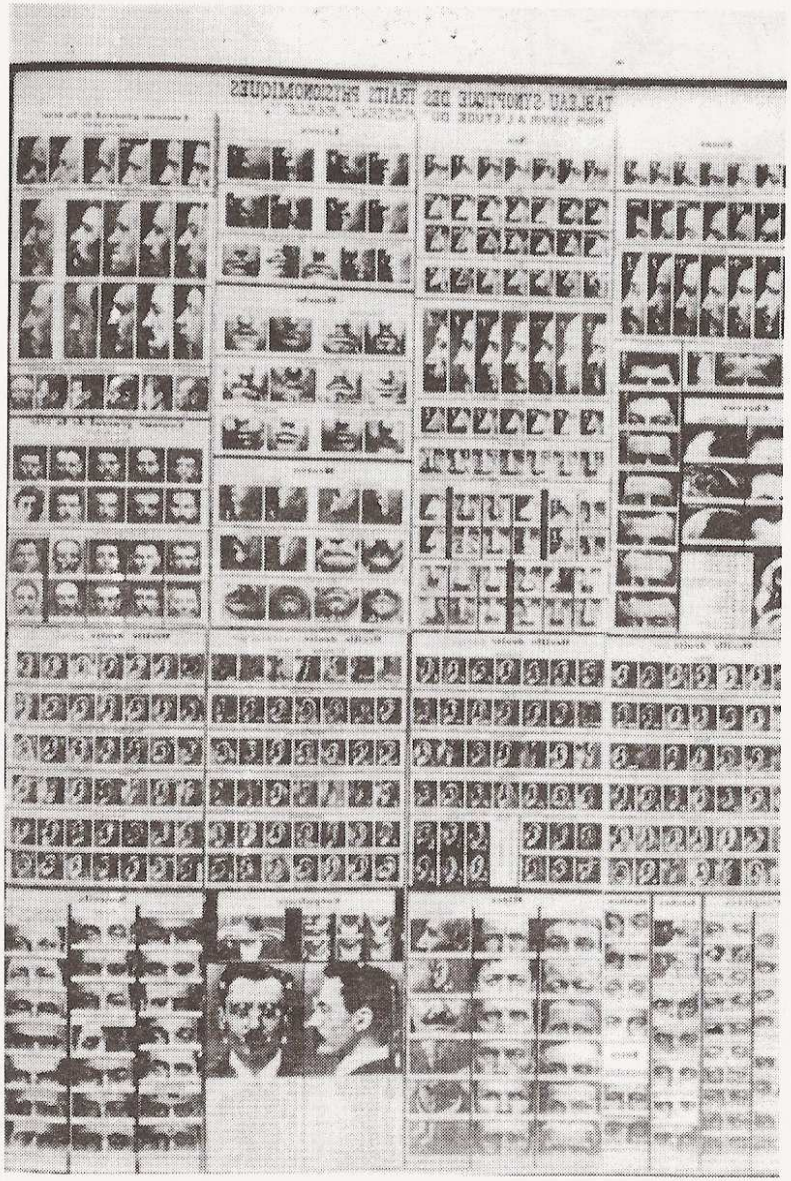

Figure 16)

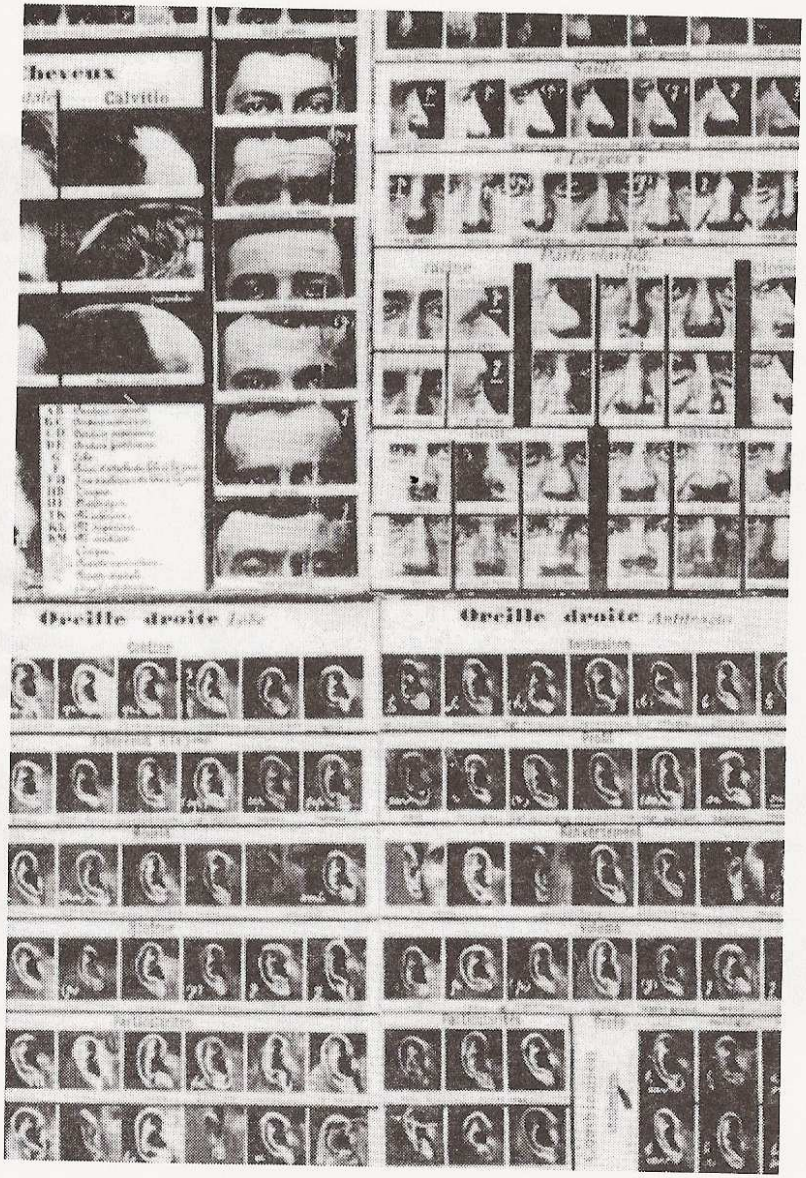

Figure 17) - 18)

Figure 19)

Figure 20)

Figure 21) - 22)

Figure 23)

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