

## Summary of Proposed Research

The research proposed here will study a corpus of several hundred sensational, crime-oriented periodicals published in four countries during the 1950s. During this decade, publishers in France, the United States, Quebec and Mexico produced a wide array of magazines and newspapers which exploited, for commercial purposes, public interest in crime. The periodicals to be studied here defined their focus explicitly as that of true crime. They offered treatments of criminal events which, however lurid and stylized, were to be distinguished from the crime fiction to be found in pulp magazine or mass market paperbacks. My key concern in this research is with the visuality of the true crime periodical, its role in gathering up and circulating a variety of visual forms with long histories, such as photojournalism, narrative illustration, graphic typography, cartography, and portraiture.

Crime, as the French historian Dominique Kalifa has suggested, is more than simply one theme among many within popular culture. Rather, crime is at the centre of a broad expressive and stylistic system through which we imagine contemporary life. Crime is not just the subject matter of specialized cultural genres, but a name for the sense of insecurity or urgency which may run through a variety of cultural forms. As such, ideas of criminality are at the heart of the ways in which contemporary life has come to be stylized and aestheticized within cultural imagery.

The research proposed here will look at representative examples of the crime periodical in four national cultures, as follows:

- (1) from France, we will examine crime-oriented weekly picture magazines such as *Détective* and *Police Magazine*, representatives of a genre born in the 1920s;
- (2) from Québec, the corpus will include the *journaux jaunes* or yellow papers, such as *Montréal Confidential* or *Allo Police*, published from the 1950s through to the early 1970s;
- (3) from Mexico, we will analyse the so-called *nota roja*, a class of lurid, violent magazines and newspapers offering themselves as treatments of true crime;
- (4) from the United States, we have chosen for analysis the American *true crime magazine*, a genre born in the 1920s which had risen to its highest levels of popularity in the years after World War II.

The history of each of these genres has been marked by its place within the broader media ecology of the country in which it emerged. The history of the Mexican *nota roja*, for example, has been interwoven at important points with that of the Mexican comic book, from which crime magazines borrowed a penchant for the telling of stories using sequential photographs. The Quebec *journaux jaunes* show the influence of both the celebrity gossip magazines and crime-oriented urban tabloid newspapers published alongside them, even as they turn the imagery and graphic styles of these other genres to new purposes. The visuality of the American true crime magazine, by the early 1950s, had moved from a reliance on painterly portraits of glamorous women to stark, greytone photographs posed to resemble genuine documents of crime. The surrealistic excesses which had marked the French crime weekly in the 1930s gave way, by the 1950s, to highly standardized photographic styles which mimicked those of mainstream news magazines.

This program of research will have, as its outcomes, (a) a well-illustrated monograph on crime and visuality in the 1950s; (b) a highly annotated on-line visual archive of print culture imagery related to crime; and (c) a book on the Quebec-based crime tabloid *Allo Police*, which ceased publication in 2004 after fifty years.

## Crime, Visuality and Print Media

### Objectives

The research proposed here deals with examples of sensational, crime-oriented periodicals published in four countries during the 1950s. During this decade, publishers in each of these countries produced a wide array of sensationalistic magazines and newspapers which exploited, for commercial purposes, public interest in crime. The periodicals to be studied here defined their focus explicitly as that of true crime. They offered treatments of criminal events which, however lurid and stylized, were to be distinguished from the crime fiction to be found in pulp magazine or mass market paperbacks. My key concern in this research is with the visuality of the true crime periodical, its role within the circulation and assemblage of visual forms such as photojournalism, narrative illustration, graphic typography, cartography, and portraiture.

The print media to be studied are the following:

- (1) *Détective* and *Police Magazine*, crime-oriented weekly picture magazines published in France since the 1920s;
- (2) *Allo Police*, *Montréal Confidentiel*, *Nouvelles et Potins*, *Jour et Nuit* and other examples of what, in Quebec, had become known as the *journaux jaunes* or yellow papers;
- (3) *Metropolitica*, *Nota Roja*, *Policia*, *Prensa Policiaca* and other periodicals belonging to the Mexican tradition known as that of the *nota roja*;
- (4) *Inside Detective*, *Real Detective*, *Famous Detective* and other versions of the American *true crime* magazine.

These four national traditions were chosen, in part, because they are among the richest and distinct to be observed during the period under analysis. During the 1950s, the markets in English Canada and the United Kingdom were dominated by true crime periodicals from the United States, and there was little indigenous publication of true crime periodicals. Quebec and Mexico each saw a proliferation of titles, during the 1950s, which was almost unmatched elsewhere, even if many of these titles were short-lived. The choice of the 1950s corresponds to my own historical interests, but represents as well, I would suggest, the richest period in the history of the crime-oriented periodical. During this decade, residual forms like the judiciary gazette co-existed alongside newer genres, like the scandal magazine, producing a thick sedimentation of historical forms which was without precedent.

None of the periodical genres to be studied here was original or distinctive in an absolute sense. Indeed, each took shape through a particular assemblage of elements from the tabloid newspaper, the judiciary gazette, the fiction magazine and more peripheral genres such as the comic book or the moral-confession magazine. The migration of these influences, from one periodical type to another, transpired within each national culture but it was often, as well, transnational. (Mexican periodicals often borrowed or purloined photographs from U.S. true crime magazines, for example.) Nevertheless, the French picture crime weekly, the Quebec *journaux jaunes*, the Mexican *nota roja* and the U.S. true crime magazine each represent a distinctive national tradition within crime-oriented periodical publishing. That distinctiveness is evident, above all, in the particular combinations of visual materials assembled within each magazine. The magazines and newspapers of each national tradition show consistent and distinctive ratios between staged and genuine photographs, official and counterfeited documents, clean and cluttered layouts.

Crime, Visuality and Print Media grows out of preliminary research already undertaken on one of these traditions. In **Cyanide and Sin** (2006), I analyzed the visuality of the American true crime magazine in terms of the shifting relationship of these magazines to other print culture forms: to romance and pulp fiction magazines, for example, and to the newspaper exposé feature and post-war fashion magazine. The true crime magazine's distinctiveness was produced in its ongoing negotiation of a relationship with these other forms, from which it borrowed visual motifs and, in relation to which, it marked its differences.

This program of research will have, as its outcomes, (a) a well-illustrated monograph on crime and visuality in the 1950s; (b) a highly annotated on-line visual archive of print culture imagery related to crime; and (c) a book on the Quebec-based crime tabloid *Allo Police*, which ceased publication in 2004 after fifty years.

## Context

A core conceptual point of departure for this research program is the recognition, by French historian Dominique Kalifa that crime is more than simply one theme among many within cultural discourse. Kalifa suggests that criminality is at the centre of what calls a vast anonymous intertext (1995: 107), within which many of the common ways of representing urban life and conveying sensation have taken shape. This *intertext*, Kalifa implies, consists of both fictional and documentary forms, illicit and official discourses, and innumerable ways of imagining social and geographical space. The play of light and shadow in painterly or photographic treatments of cities, for example, almost invariably accompanies an assumption that the balance between shadow and light is a barometer of danger or moral illicitness (and not just the marker of phases of the 24-hour day.) Crime and criminality, in this sense, ground a loosely organized expressive system, in which they function as principal source for the stylization and sensationalized rendering of contemporary life. Crime, then, is not just the subject matter of specialized cultural genres, but a name for the sense of insecurity or expressive urgency which may run through a variety of cultural forms.

The periodicals to be studied here all announce crime as their distinctive focus. At the same time, each assembles a distinctive range of subsidiary concerns which are then sensationalized through stylistic devices designed to suggest criminality. A key concern of this research, then, is the way in which criminality functions to bind together a wide variety of themes, actors and what might be called *atmospherics*. In *Déetective* and *Police Magazine*, the lives of war-time dictators are regularly recounted alongside those of bank robbers, in imagery which suggests the similarity of their humiliating capture or defeat. In the Québécois *journal jaune*, graphic headlines reduce instances of linguistic intolerance and cases of police corruption to the same clipped phrases of the *faits divers*. The photomontage covers of a Mexican magazine like *Metropoliciaca* turn scenes of criminal apprehension into elaborate examples of almost superhuman endeavour which are little different from those to be found in comic books. A sense of criminality, then, is produced through stylistic motifs which mediate the differences between individual stories and produce a sense of the affinity between them.

The four national traditions on which this research is focused here have been the object of only scattered, intermittent scholarly attention. Most of what is written about them does not address the 1950s, the period with which this research is concerned.

1) The French weekly crime newspapers *Déetective* and *Police Magazine* were both launched in the late 1920s. Scholarly attention to them, most of it in English, has focused largely on the esteem with which the Surrealists and other artistic avant-gardes held these newspapers in the 1930s (Rifkin, 1993; Walz, 2000; Walker, 2002). *Déetective*, in particular, has received attention for its role in the elaboration of the aesthetic sensibility which French writer Pierre Mac Orlan called the social fantastic (cf. Baines, 2002). There are no treatments of the subsequent histories of these magazines, or of their survival (or revival) in the period after World War II. By the 1950s, the period under study here, the distance of these papers from cultures of artistic experimentation seemed to be total (there is no known link between these papers and the Situationists, for example). This would appear to be one reason for the absence of scholarship dealing with them.

2) The Québécois term *journaux jaunes* (derived from yellow journalism, an American term for newspapers of low esteem) was applied to cheaply-printed newspapers or magazines which, during the 1950s and 1960s, covered crime, morality and a wide range of sensations within Quebec (cf. *Faits et chiffres sur le jaunisme*.) The category includes both 8 1/2 x 11 weeklies like *Montréal Confidenciel* and weekly tabloid newspapers like *Allo Police* and *Photo Police*. Scholarship on these papers has come exclusively, to date, from gay/lesbian historians, who have traced the dual role of the *journaux jaunes* in fuelling morality campaigns against homosexuality and in offering clues as to the spatial organization of gay/lesbian communities during the 1950s and 1960s (e.g., Chamberland, 1996; Chamberland and Higgins, 1992.) The emergence of the *journaux jaunes* in a process of differentiation from other periodical forms, and the visual styles which rendered them distinct, have received no scholarly attention. In particular, no analysis has discussed the *journaux jaunes* in relation to patterns of periodical publishing unfolding in other countries during this period.

3) *Nota roja* is a Mexican term for the chronicling of violence and crime; it has come to stand more generally for the variety of ways in which crime may be narrated within popular cultural forms (e.g., Broca, 1993; Lorini and Diez, 1988; Piccato, 2001). While the label occasionally serves to designate crime fiction, I am using it here in its common and more restricted sense, to refer to newspapers and magazines specializing in true (rather than fictionalized) crime. Examples of the *nota roja* during the 1950s include *Metropoliciaca*, *Nota Roja*, *Policia* and *Prensa Policiaca*. Scholarship on these periodicals during the 1950s has been nourished by growing interest in two media whose forms and personnel overlapped considerably with those of the *nota roja*. In recent years, considerable attention has been paid to Mexican crime-oriented photojournalism, much of it by photographers who worked across a range of periodical genres. The best known of these, Enrique Metinides and Nacho Lopez, worked in venues which included both mainstream newsmagazines and the more respectable *nota roja*. The work of these photographers has been the focus of international museum retrospectives and monographs in recent years (e.g., Metinides, 2001; Mraz, 2003.)

The other medium whose pertinence to an understanding of the *nota roja* is increasingly clear is the Mexican comic book. Mexican comic books of the 1950s are distinctive in large part because they used illustrations which combined drawn and photographic imagery (as in the highly-regarded work of José G. Cruz.) This role of sequential photographic narrative, as a form migrating across several genres within Mexican print culture, has been the focus of detailed, theoretically-informed scholarship by photographic historians, most of them writing for the journal *Luna Cornea* (Rubenstein, 1999; Aurecochea, 1999; Bartra, 1999). Additional, intermittent discussion of the Mexican *nota roja* has come within the rich tradition of anthropological work on Mexican urban cultures (e.g., Tovar de Arechederra and Mas, 1994).

4) The American true crime magazine, throughout its history, has been the object of neglect, even as adjacent forms like the pulp fiction magazine, the comic book, the tabloid news photograph and the paperback original novel have received scholarly attention (e.g., Denning, 1998; Beaty, 2005; Pelizzon and West, 1994; Whiting, 2005). It is common, as well, in the literature on cultural forms adjacent to the true crime magazine, to regard the 1950s as little more than a period of decline for *film noir*, New York street photography and other canonical styles (e.g., Rabinowitz, 2002). My own contribution to an analysis of the true crime magazine, while partial, is the first extended study with which I am familiar (Straw, 2006). My intention with this research is to situate the American true crime magazine more firmly in relation to tendencies observable in the other three countries. The corpus which will form part of this research program will include a wide sample of U.S. true crime magazines from the 1950s, but will concentrate on those published by Dell, Fawcett and Hillman, publishers who dominated the field during that decade.

### **Relation of proposed research to ongoing research**

Previous SSHRC-funded research dealt with periodical publishers of the 1920s and 1930s who worked at the low, disreputable ends of the magazine industry in the United States and Canada. The new research represents a logical shift in focus, from periodicals oriented towards sexual titillation and gossipy insinuation to magazines and newspapers specializing in the coverage of crime. In this shift, which marks one difference between pre-World War II and post-World War II periodical publishing, we see U.S. companies (like Dell or Fawcett) grow into market leaders, and may observe their magazines becoming more reliant on photographic and design elements which bear the mark of a heightened professionalism. In this respect, the current research program represents an up-dating of the work undertaken for the previous program. At the same time, my interest in the U.S. true crime magazine grew out of earlier research on the urban exposé film of the 1950s, portions of which have been used in Straw (1997 and 2008). Further research on the U.S. crime magazine resulted in my gallery book **Cyanide and Sin** (Straw, 2006); my essay therein is the first known study of the true crime magazine genre.

Interest in the Quebec *journaux jaunes* and tabloid newspapers of the 1950s may be traced to earlier research on the public morality campaigns of the period, but my commitment to investigating the print culture of this period is recent. My interest in the Mexican *nota roja* has been nourished over fifteen academic visits to Mexico City, in which I have collected materials and grown familiar with the rich but still embryonic traditions of research on Mexican popular culture in its most commercial forms. Finally, my proposed research on the French weeklies *Déetective* and *Police* is shaped in part by having taught their 1930s versions extensively in undergraduate and graduate courses on urban culture and crime media. While there is a rich legacy of writing about these publications in relationship to pre-war Surrealism, nothing has been published on their history in the 1950s.

### **Methodology**

Materials of the sort to be analyzed here have rarely been collected by libraries or public archives. There are some exceptions with relevance to this research program. Holdings of *Déetective* and *Police* may be found in the *Archives nationales* in France. The McGill Library Rare Books Department has a complete, bound run of the Quebec-based *Allo Police* from its inception through 1968. Some examples of Mexican crime periodicals may be found at the *Hemeroteca Nacional de la Ciudad Universitaria* in Mexico City, though runs are typically incomplete and the representation of titles is spotty. American true crime magazines have not been collected by research or public libraries.

As with most ephemeral print culture, the principal repositories of materials are within private collections or dealer's inventories. In preparation for this research, I have begun collecting true crime periodicals from dealers and markets, and am happy to support this acquisition activity with my own resources. I own (1) 80% of the issues of the French *Déetective* published during the 1950s, and extensive runs of *Police* from this decade, (2) over 100 American true crime magazines from the 1950s; (3) over 50 issues of the *journaux jaune* published alongside *Allo Police* in Quebec during the 1950s; and (4) a dozen isolated issues of *Metropolitica*, *Alerta*, *Patrulla 06* and other Mexican crime periodicals of the 1950s (along with approximately 50 issues from later decades.) My holdings of French, Quebec and U.S. titles are sufficient to ensure the integrity of the research proposed here. The Mexican periodicals in my possession will form the basis of preliminary analysis but, more importantly, help to orient the quest for others, to be found in archives or purchased.

My previous SSHRC-funded project dealt with what I called the logics of assembly characteristic of particular print culture forms. By these logics, I mean the patterns by which different magazine types gather up materials from adjacent forms, and from the surrounding culture more broadly, within variably coherent packages. Crime-oriented periodicals are repositories of social discourse as Marc Angenot has theorized this: they are intertextual apparatuses that select, absorb, transform, and re-diffuse certain images, maxims, and notions that migrate through the sociodiscursive network (Angenot, 2004: 212). True crime periodicals have long been known for combining the most earnestly official and luridly sensational of visual motifs: maps, mug shots, police sketches, cadaver photographs, telegrams, wanted posters, gothic landscapes, semi-pornographic images of women, and so on. These motifs have their origins in highly diverse cultural locations, from artistic avant-gardes through police laboratories. The specific balances of these motifs within individual magazines, and within the national traditions of which they are a part, are a key focus of this program of research. These shifting balances generate the variety which characterizes crime-based media in any one of the countries studied.

My approach to the analysis of visual materials is shaped loosely by Franco Moretti's imperative to approach cultural analysis through what he calls a distance reading, in which one is concerned with the patterns formed by large numbers of examples, rather than with the complexities to be uncovered within a more limited sample (2005: 1-14). In Straw (2006), a distance reading permitted me to shift the changing status of the portrait within the American true crime magazine, as it moved from the dominant form of cover illustration in the 1940s to a significantly diminished motif in the 1950s. A distance reading of the four national traditions to be examined here will trace the arcs by which particular visual motifs (maps, mug shots, drawings) assume or lose their centrality within each tradition's visual rendering of criminality.

In preliminary work on the American true crime magazine of the 1950s (Straw, 2006), I traced the transition of these magazines from a model based in the earlier true confession magazine (with its emphasis on portrait imagery and first-person narration) to a model based more obviously on the tabloid newspaper (with its presentation of photographs and headlines which, even when fictional, were meant to signal the documentation of unfolding action.) In this transition, the true crime magazine shifted its place relative to the broader array of print media published alongside it (drawing closer to the news magazine, for example, and away from a range of magazine types associated with moral instruction.) At the same time, the shift in these magazines during the 1950s, from chaotic montage-like design to symmetrical grids, offered material with which to test Sally Stein's claim that montage-based design flourishes in times of social insecurity, while design dominated by grids and boxes is characteristic of

periods of social harmony (Stein, 1992). My aim with this research is to extend these sorts of analysis to other national traditions, so that the particularities of these traditions (including that of the U.S.) may be accounted for.

One hypothesis of this research is that those crime periodicals which operated in closest proximity to official, judicial discourse on crime were most likely to be ordered and symmetrical in their visual presentation. A first look at Mexican *nota roja* such as *Metropolitica* suggests that these operated without the cooperation of judicial organizations which was common in the case of crime periodicals from the United States and France. This distance from institutions of authority seems to be confirmed by the highly fanciful photomontage constructions which characterize this magazine – constructions which, as suggested earlier, signal its cultural proximity to the comic book. During the same period, the French periodical *Déetective* can be seen to be shedding the eccentric layouts which marked it during the 1930s, in favour of grid-like layouts more closely resembling those of mainstream weekly picture magazines with quasi-official functions, such as *Paris Match*.

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