The American true crime magazine died quietly at the end of the year 2000, when the genre’s last surviving title, *Startling Detective*, was shuttered by its publisher. This book is one contribution to what, following film noir, we might call an “archaeology of crime culture.” In the pages that follow, I will attempt to rescue from neglect some of those who worked on true crime magazines, but that is not my central purpose here. The richness of the true crime magazine lay not in its uniqueness, but in its unrestrained absorption of countless elements from the culture around it. In the first forty years of its existence, the American true crime magazine soaked up the styles of tabloid journalism, film noir, New York street photography, Surrealism, American urban realist painting, revolutionary montage and innumerable other currents criss-crossing American culture between 1920 and 1960. True crime magazines reassembled these styles within dynamic juxtapositions of image and text.

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Thousands of artists, writers and photographers worked on these magazines, rarely rising above them into careers of greater renown or prestige. Historians and collectors have sifted through the enormous corpus of pulp magazine or comic book illustration, re-constructing the careers of individual artists and building markets for their art. In contrast, very few of the people who worked for American true crime magazines during their 80-year history have been spared from anonymity.

In the 1940s, the design of true crime magazines overcame some of this lag, if only at the high end of the field. In magazines published by Delil or Fawcett, a new glamour and fashionable simplicity made the true crime magazine chic and respectable. Having found a style, however, the magazines of the 1940s maintained it, with only minor variation, for over a decade. It was not until 1953, a key year in the genre’s history, that true crime magazines completed their break with the paintery imagery and melodramatic sensationalism of crime sat side-by-side with no obvious discomfort.
Police Gazette had been common in the American colonies since the pre-Revolutionary period. Broadsides recounted the exploits of criminals and described their punishments. These single sheets of paper, typical of early print technology, had been used for official proclamations, then turned commercial and sensational with time, adding woodcut images and lingering on the details of horrific acts.

Throughout these magazines, one finds a fascination with a virtually every sensation-al element in American culture. In their core, which had been extraordinarily long life (it lasted until the 1980s), the Gazette was one of the earliest forms of printed matter, had been used for official proclamations, then turned commercial and sensational with time, adding woodcut images and lingering on the details of horrific acts. From their birth to their disappearance, true crime magazines exploited the uncertainty of purpose which hung over them. They fanned the interest in real-world police procedures and scientific method which grew exponentially during the 20th century. The world of true crime, in present-day American television and cinema, has made it the most popular form of entertainment.

Throughout these magazines, one finds a fascination with the details of police and detective work, which police forces could communicate news to each other and to the public. In contrast, the American National Police Gazette, a non-commercial, its various articles set crime within broader mixtures of titillating events and settings. Despite its official-sounding title, the focus of the Police Gazette shifted restless-

In their early years, true crime periodicals were more commonly known as "true fact" or "fact detective" magazines, more emphasis on facts in the telling of stories nearly side-steps questions about the status of their accompanying images, to which the question of factuality did not seem to offer greater accuracy? These are the familiar dilemmas of visual documentation, but they were not the true crime magazine. A reliance on official photographs limited a magazine to a restricted repertory of mug shots and banal pictures of the houses in which some of the crimes had taken place. These images conveyed little of the complexity or horror of particular crimes.

Genuine photographs of criminals and crime scenes, from a variety of sources, were used throughout the history of the genre. In the pages of Writer's Digest, "Author and Journalist," would-be contributors to true crime magazines were instructed to acquire photos from coroners or police forces and to send them along with their stories. (In the early days, this was often a condition of acceptance for writers.) In their own turn, writers were instructed to include photographs of similar nature help dress up a layout or "photographs to illustrate fact." Scullin continued, "Acceptance frequently hinges on the merit of the art, and rejection is doubly painful when the writer realizes that it came about through no fault of his own."

In the 1930s, the French novelist and critic Pierre Mac Orlan captured the magnitude of crime's aesthetic significance in his notion of the "social fantastic." For Mac Orlan, the "social fantastic" refers to the way our understanding of the world has changed (or could change) through the lens of crime. Mac Orlan wrote: "In Paris, behind the main road yards, stiletto heels, sunglasses, playing cards, and so on."

Crimes were marked, in Mac Orlan's analysis, by an unde-
The true crime magazine entered the 1940s in a rapidly shifting competitive environment. The pulp magazines which had come to dominate their genre in the 1930s folded or went underground in the 1940s, as their decline, losing ground to comic books at the youngest end of their readership and to paperback books among adults who were consuming the spacy sex magazines born in the 1930s died, as their publishers moved into comic books and as morality campaigns removed them from newsstands. Paperback "pulp" books, however, remained strong during wartime, the 1940s marked a new kind of chic elegance. True crime titles became less concerned with corroborating evidence than with reconstructing a killer's commitment to this glamour. The detailed staging of crimes on covers, during wartime and its aftermath, lost its shock value. More likely, these magazines used glamour covers to promise entry into worlds of passion and luxury. The true crime magazines of the 1940s set countless stories in hotel rooms and boudoirs, the familiar settings of playboy-detective movies and romance magazines.

The use of portrait covers is one of the most striking changes in American magazine covers. It costs about $30,000 today to produce a full-color portrait cover for a magazine. By 1940, it was possible to purchase high-quality portrait photography. The use of portrait covers is one of the most striking changes in American magazine covers. It costs about $30,000 today to produce a full-color portrait cover for a magazine. By 1940, it was possible to purchase high-quality portrait photography. The true crime magazines of the 1940s hid this chaos behind their covers. The quiet continuity of these covers, from one issue to another, across titles and publishing houses, is all the more striking for having occurred during the war and its immediate aftermath.

The 1950s

In 1953, the look of the American true crime magazine changed dramatically. Across dozens of titles and a half-dozen publishers, the colorful portrait covers of the 1940s gave way to monochrome photographs of crime and criminals. True crime magazines now borrowed their cover styles from newspapers and detective novels. In the 1950s, designers still presumed that diagonal lines linking pages as well as connecting images on pages was a sign of dynamism. Interior layouts thus continued to give the impression of a collective effort. The symmetrical grid, in contrast, represented a killer's defiance or a victim's self-absorbed despair. The most inventive magazines of the decade, like Inside Detective and Crime Confessions, played skillfully with the cool chic of black and white photography.

The design of true crime magazines was now shaped by two conflicting impulses. One of these led to a new emphasis on simple, clean layouts, as magazine design moved ever closer to newspaper design and the treatment of pages as symmetrical grids. In the 1940s, designers still presumed that diagonal lines linking images on pages would convey a sense of menace and dynamism. Interior layouts thus continued to give the impression of a collective effort. The symmetrical grid, in contrast, represented a killer's defiance or a victim's self-absorbed despair. The most inventive magazines of the decade, like Inside Detective and Crime Confessions, played skillfully with the cool chic of black and white photography.
more stylish, true crime magazines had given in to the modernist orthodoxy of the blurred columns and straight, perpendicular lines. Straight lines and rigid boxes gave these magazines a contemporary sophistication, and also strengthened their credibility. The straightforwardness of some somehow seemed to reinforce a new honesty. If only because it seemed a retreat from the more blatantly manipulative use of angles and chaotic juxtapositions. The new, grid-like arrangement of images, on covers and inside pages, seemed to bolster a magazine's claims to believability. Photographs enclosed within small boxes and строки, more easily identified as official mug shots or genuine newspaper photos - images acquired from official sources rather than produced in studios. Even when scenes were posed by models, or recycled from one story to another, their presentation became more coldly matter-of-fact and official-looking as the 1950s unfolded.

Another impulse shaping true crime magazine design in the 1950s was the increasing use of words across covers. On Front Page Detective, for example, the number of words on covers tripled and quadrupled between 1949 and 1959. A major reason for this wordiness was the increased use of journalistic “date-lines,” brief identifications of place that resembled the headings to po-
ject matter (as in how stood as proof of a new honesty, if only because
Teenage Man-Killer
Magazine, from pin-up books to mainstream photojournal
ism that breaks with the convention of a model looking

The city expose was one of the most flexible feature stories of the genre. Founded by Monroe and his wife, "Sex Capital of the World" (page 141, bottom), in the October, 1956 issue of Police
Dragot Cases, was typical of the mid-1950s vice round-
up, a staple feature of the genre. His covers seemed to be set back from the colorful
(diptych or triptych arrangements. (For examples, see
the issues from March and July, 1958 (pages 078 and 163). These black and white pictures, of criminals or their victims, were carefully placed between blocks of text and color. The clash of bright, primary colors and the black and white photographs (whether staged or not) made these covers appear, somehow, both luridly exciting and more stylish.

The true crime cover work from this period stood out for its inventiveness and clear challenge to the clichés of the genre. Owen's trademark was even more bold and specific. He used full-cover photo-
graphs, whether candid or constructed, whether tight or panoramic, with backgrounds that were responsible for the vast majority of

Nevertheless, two photographers with distinctive styles were responsible for this. The majority of Inside Detective's covers were designed during this period. One was Bill Stone, who had produced conventional painterly portrait covers for Detectives during the dazzling golden era of the 1950s. Stone's singular black and white cover for the December, 1953 issue of Inside Detective (page 087), top, introduced the new direction in crime magazine cover design. On this cover, a man and woman embrace through jail bars, in a tightly-framed composition. They gaze directly at the viewer, as if shouting at or beckoning directly back at the reader. Stone's characteristical

In 1956, Front Page Detective began organizing most of the 50s street photography along the lines of diptych or triptych arrangements. (For examples, see
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ed. Stone's compositions would loosen up after 1954, pulling back on his subjects to reveal some hint of setting and situation. As time went on, Stone more and more exploited images of treacherous or murdered women, or hovering over scenes of male murder. Stone's photographs, usually framing them within groups of men. The sprawling female body, a 30s pulp cliché, returned in the 50s, on covers modeled after film stills or genuine crime scene photography.

The covers of Burt Owen.

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Detective Over!"
in the way their energies animate the space within
in a murderous tableau. Like many of Owen's photo
photographers, showed his more artistic work in
the frame. The photojournalism of Weegee and others
commercial career and obvious artistic ambitions. The va
movement of professionals through the overlapping
those of Dell's competitors. Storch would become one
under his supervision had already, by the mid-40s, as
Timely and Brookside houses, among others.
The house on 92
or lifestyle
published his true-art career. His detailed obit
auspices of New Deal government during the depres
A documentary to include women was seen as somehow ines
addition of men brought out a documentary dimen
established a system by which he photographed
an inside story entitled
was art director for
was a respected col
Beginning in the mid-1950s, the geographical fo
classic film loosely based on the book of urban
or shooting "real locations" and often using non-actors (genuine inha
fashion poses, true crime covers and books on golf
The New York Times Sunday
Manso was a respected col
Luros' various pornography firms had annual profits
Back Roads of Crime
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"Birmingham, Alabama's Mad Dogs"
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The aesthetics of 1950s true crime magazine pho
photographers who left their mark on popular crime
imagery in the 1950s did so within careers of widely
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er, leaving in their wake an enormous corpus of imag
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Luros moved through science fiction
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the stock agencies then sold these im
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by its photographer, leaving in their wake an enormous corpus of imag
er, leaving in their wake an enormous corpus of imag
ly formal terms, the move to two or more characters
made each cover image the representation of a spe
Cincinnati, and true crime photography influenced each oth
or shooting "real locations" and often using non-actors (genuine inha
fashion poses, true crime covers and books on golf
The most notorious of careers that passed through the
Orchard" and other works; the semi-documentary
"if there's one woman in it, it's a semi-documentary." The opening up of the
cover to include women was seen as somehow ines-
capably fictionalizing. Women brought with them the
the geographical focus of true crime magazine covers of the 50s widened its scope to include men. The addi-
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Dell's art director is active on the 1950s covers. Hillman's true crime
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The aesthetics of 1950s true crime magazine pho
photography o"...
In 1960, however, the Garden City killings were just one more horrific crime in rural America. Like small-town media, films of the period, from wide-open spaces. We are close, here, to the light just after the assassination of JFK. This look flour the visual language of the true crime magazine as it rather than fixing on a cover model's eyes. The geog...20th century, or Chicago. 

The disappearance of the American crime magazine unfolded slowly over four decades after 1960. This pe...formed its most offensive longstanding feature, the staged cover photos showing scantily clad women under...attack by men.

In 1997, a columnist for the on-line magazine Salon wondered where all the true crime magazines had gone. In 1960, New York, they had vanished from even the largest newsstands, James Suriowecki ob..., but had they ceased to exist? With a few phone calls, a few visits to local convenience stores, and a search through hundreds and hundreds of...hundreds of true crime magazines for a few months, then discontin...continued them all in 2000. The September, 2000 issue of...were launched by Bernard Macfadden in 1924. By 1997, Globe pub...true crime magazines, including significant titles...the late 1950s covers of photographers like Burt Owen, as we have seen, invited readers to...writer's Digest offered this advice to freelanc...by very few exceptions, these magazines never enter...margins of American popular culture. Like the risque, scatological humor which made the joke books directed at servicemen, the true crime mag...after 1965, then, had less and less to do with a focus on police photography or photo-journalism. The increased use of color cover...happenings of the era. From the mid-60s on, however, the most horrific aspects.

True crime magazines of the 50s went way, by the mid-60s, to lurid colors and regular articles on sex and politics. “How to...80s. In the 1986 Report of the Meese Commission on Pornography, true crime magazines entered the lists...sure that “newspaper for the sexual sadist.” Dietz noted the contrast between the lurid covers of true crime magazines, with their regu...in the active development of violent sensationalism. In 1995, Globe had closed down the last...parodied or treasured. It had moved to the tawdry...take on the true crime magazine in the 1960s, when things changed only slightly, African-Americans were absent, with the most minor of exceptions, from the true crime magazine. Asians and Hispanics, staple villains of the 1930s pulp magazine, were only slightly more common in true crime titles, and rare indeed by the 1950s. The world of the true crime magazine was consistently, and strikingly, inhabited by whites.

Other magazines of the 50s made questions of...other lingering titles, bemoaned the fact that the true crime magazine in the 20s by W. H. Fawcett...and other lingering titles, bemoaned the fact that the true crime magazine in the 20s by W. H. Fawcett, as he built a powerful...true crime magazines of the 1950s signaled a growing interest in the margins of American popular culture. Like the risque, scatological humor which made the joke books directed at servicemen, the true crime mag...true crime magazines in 1994 was the last for any American true...production; the disappearance of the American crime magazine unfolded slowly over four decades after 1960. This pe...this movement began when things changed only slightly, African-Americans were absent, with the most minor of exceptions, from the true crime magazine. Asians and Hispanics, staple villains of the 1930s pulp magazine, were only slightly more common in true crime titles, and rare indeed by the 1950s. The world of the true crime magazine was consistently, and strikingly, inhabited by whites.
In the 1930s, true crime magazines had offered themselves as more respectable, “official” alternatives to the pulp fiction magazines with which they competed. In 2000, they seemed more tawdry and disreputable than the supermarket tabloids or true crime paperbacks that had eaten into their readership. If their history was one of decline, we may see that history, nevertheless, as one of enormous productivity. A minor theme in the history of Western oil painting, crime would come to play a key role in organizing the visual culture of the 20th century. Crime lent itself readily to some of the most powerful impulses within modern image-making. It gave photographers drawn to social marginality subjects with which to avoid the sentimentality that too easily clings to images of the poor or downtrodden. Crime photography has served as the basis for transgressive violations of good taste, and for romantic glorifications of the doomed life. The images assembled in true crime magazines over their 80 year history have moved ceaselessly between what photographic historian Allan Sekula calls the honori-c and repressive functions of photography. Images celebrating an extravagant individuality, for instance, have sat alongside others calling for citizen complicity in the enforcement of state power.

Crime has been a key point of intersection in the traffic between avant-garde and commercial imagery, between popular and fine art traditions. We can see this traffic in the back-and-forth movement between Surrealism and the tabloid press, or between versions of Expressionism and popular ways of rendering the criminal mind. Newly-conceived labels like “pulp modernism” (writer Paula Rabinowitz) or “abstract sensationalism” (film critic Jan Hoberman) capture a 20th-century sensibility born in the traffic between venerated and shamelessly commercial forms of cultural expression. The millions of images which filled the true crime magazine are an important – if forgotten and unexamined – part of this traffic.