The Criminal Type in Popular Culture: A Case Study

Stephen Brauer, St. John Fisher College

The comic strip *Dick Tracy*, distributed by the Chicago Tribune-New York News Syndicate, went out to hundreds of newspapers and was devoured eagerly by millions of readers around the country, especially during its heyday in the 1930s and 1940s. In the late 1930s Chester Gould, creator of the strip, began to populate his strip with flamboyant characters with abnormal features and physiques who were known commonly as the Grotesques. Gould imagined and represented them as physically distinct from the rest of the characters. Drawn with bulging, scarred foreheads or the eyes, nose, and teeth of a mole, or with tiny facial features or deep wrinkles spread over their entire face, the Grotesques interacted each day with other characters who were drawn with regularly proportioned bodies and features.

Gould conceived of his strip during these years as a representation of the battle between good and evil, right and wrong, with the contemporary world as the setting: the police fighting against criminals who were always easy to identify because they were the only characters who were disfigured. The Grotesques were the villains, and their abnormalities were meant to demarcate their moral status. Gould exaggerated their grotesque bodies in order signal a threat to his readers. While not realistically drawn, the Grotesques represented a powerful manifestation of very real anxieties about criminality at the time.

In speaking of these characters, Gould said, “I wanted my villains to stand out definitely so that there would be no mistake who the villain was.” This deeply telling statement implies that the reader needed physical markings to delineate the bad guys from the good guys. In drawing his villains so that “there would be no mistake who the villain was,” Gould employed a logic that derived from the concept of the criminal type.

The concept of the criminal type first came into vogue in academic circles in the US in the early twentieth century, advanced by such men as Arthur McDonald, Henry Boies, C.R. Henderson, August Drahms, and others. Although most social science scholars dismissed the concept as viable or valuable, by the 1920s, the concept had found purchase within the greater American public. The persistence of the concept on how the public conceived of criminality was due in large part because it theorized that criminality could be predicted and identified in advance of the actual crime – which certainly would allay public anxiety about criminals and criminality. Although scholars moved away from the concept of the criminal type as a way to understand criminality, the general public did not fully do so.

The theory of the criminal type has had lasting resonance in American culture far beyond the time that it had within the scholarly community. Chester Gould’s drawing of his villains as disfigured provides a striking example of how this concept persisted for decades in the American consciousness. I would argue that this persistence continues today in a variety of representations of criminality in popular culture. The criminalized body as articulated over a hundred years ago was one that was racialized, ethnicized, and located among the working-class populace. The criminal as recognizably “other” and therefore identifiable in advance of the actual crime was central to the concept then and continues to be central to how criminals are represented in
popular culture. From the manipulation of OJ Simpson’s mugshot on the cover of *Time* magazine to the street criminals in *Grand Theft Auto*, we can readily perceive the influence of the criminal type in our culture.

In this paper I will examine the concept of the criminal type and its persistence in American popular culture, as illustrated especially in *Dick Tracy* but also in a variety of representations of criminality in contemporary culture.