INTRODUCTION

I begin with a novel and engaging premise: what if Jacques Lacan—the brilliant and eccentric Parisian psychoanalyst—had left his home in the early 1950s in order to travel to England and work as a police detective? How might he have applied his theories in order to solve crime? A “what if . . . ?” that conjures up images of this most unusual personage: on the cross-Channel ferry swaying in the drizzling rain next to an ageing Citroën DS; being met in Dover by a steaming Jaguar filled with gruff chain-smoking cops. In my mental film clip Lacan’s Frenchness is amplified, highlighting the incongruity of the effete intellectual as he greets his new colleagues.1

But beyond this flippant or comedic starting point is a serious enough proposition: an attempt to put Lacan’s tripartite model of human mental functioning to use in the service of crime investigation—particularly through a consideration of visual evidence present at scenes of murders. In order to follow up on this proposal—or question—I began to make regular visits to the National Archive, requesting whatever material I could find on murders that took place in England between 1955 and 1970. Each bulky, dusty box file contained essential original documents pertaining to the crime—the Senior Investigating Officer’s (SIO’s) report to the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP), numerous witness statements, press clippings, and, decisively, copies of the original crime scene photographs: I had enough information to research and propose a series of Lacanian readings. And set out below are the results of my three-year-long inquiry.

Police photographs of a murder scene do not ordinarily capture the aggressive actions that Lacan characterized as “moments, similar in strange- ness to the faces of actors when a film is suddenly stopped in mid-frame [a freeze-frame].”2 Always arriving too late, the forensic photographer must depict instead only what is residual. The presence of Scenes of Crime Officers (SOCO) or Crime Scene Investigators (CSI)3 is menacing—or ominous—and immediately obvious through their distinctive regulation attire: single-use Tyvek brilliant white polyethylene hooded forensic scene anticontamination one-piece coveralls, nitrile gloves, and a face mask, or even a respirator.4

The term forensic, as is well known, refers to a context: work that is being carried out for legal purposes. As part of the “apparatus of the prosecution,” any evidence collected by these men and women may ultimately be produced and admitted as exhibits by the crown/prosecuting counsel in any future trial. Perhaps the most desirable type of forensic evidence is recovered material that includes a sample of a suspect’s—more or less unique—DNA; a single hair or saliva residue preserved on a glass is sufficient, and will more or less incontestably connect that suspect to the scene. Samples of clothing fibers, or even pollen, may be recovered. Possible fingerprint evidence is
also photographed and documented, as well as the patterns and formations of any blood residues. Such evidence will be photographed and enlarged by up to 1000x magnification.5

Yet, in addition to these highly technical materials and records, the CSIS will also make an extensive series of normal photographs, images that usually include diverse general photographic views of the scene taken from various perspectives and angles, often made using the same kind of familiar camera equipment that a wedding photographer might use—and it is examples of these more prosaic or workaday records that I have relied upon in this study.6

The Federal Bureau of Investigation Handbook of Forensic Services provides a comprehensive picture of the meticulousness that is essential to success in this demanding field. In the USA, a copy of that handbook is given to all law enforcement professionals including part-time staff, county sheriffs, and so forth, as decisions made by the first officer to arrive at a crime scene will be crucial—important forensic evidence is often destroyed or recovered inappropriately by nonspecialists long before the CSIS arrive. In the mêlée that often commences upon the discovery of violent death, appropriate procedure is not always followed, and the first priority of any law enforcement officer is to secure the scene; that is, to stop anyone but the CSIS from approaching or entering.7 In high contrast to the drama and excitement that such an event will provoke in the layman, the specialist CSIS seem to carry on their methodical, reflective work with an apparent nonchalance that often appears to be awkwardly respectful of the traumatizing events: for them it is just another day at the office. Indeed, for these experts the crime scene is their typical—but always temporary—workplace, and, in common with those attending many much less challenging working environments, they proceed with a confident familiarity.

Considering this dichotomy of performance versus reflection in terms of the photographic, there is an immediate resonance with the critical assertion made by the French theorist and philosopher Roland Barthes, who noted that "the filmic, very paradoxically, cannot be grasped in the film 'in situ-ation,' 'in movement,' 'in its natural state,' but only in that major artefact, the still."8 Deferring to the residual, Barthes argued, is probably essential in order to comprehend cinematic action.9 The author William Burroughs also recognized that the affect connected to an event or activity might be revealed—grasped—only through documentation, observing that "you may not experience shame during defecation and intercourse, but you may well experience shame when recordings are played back to a disapproving audience. Shame is playback: exposure to disapproval."10 There is an idea advanced that remote documents may hold the key to comprehending human actions, events, and so on: a belief (or fascination) that may be traced back
through the advances and discoveries made—in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century—in the domain of photography technology.

In 1924, the Hungarian photographer and writer László Moholy-Nagy noted how the photographic camera "makes visible existences which cannot be perceived or taken in by our optical instrument, the eye: i.e., the photographic camera can either complete or supplement our optical instrument, the eye. . . . This principle has already been applied in a few scientific experiments, as in the study of movements—walking, jumping, galloping—and of zoological, botanical and mineral forms—enlargements, microscopic photographs—and other investigations into natural history; but these experiments have remained isolated phenomena, the inter-connections of which have not been established." And Moholy-Nagy’s exhortation to recognize the potential significance of the connections and links between data provided from diverse photo sources seems to precisely foreshadow the development of the modern forensic services laboratory, which is a contemporary instance par excellence of this proposition: a place where every possible use is made of diverse technologically advanced lens-based equipment, and where a single unifying purpose remains primary—the possible interconnections that might effectively incriminate a suspect.

The inventions and discoveries to which Moholy-Nagy alludes include the development of photomicrography (taking photographs through a microscope), an invention attributed to Reginald Fessenden in 1876; the high-speed camera shutter (stop-motion photography) attributed to Eadweard Muybridge in 1878, and Röntgen ray imaging (x-ray images) attributed to Wilhelm Röntgen in 1895. A common purpose shared by each of these pioneers was the desire to use science in order to reveal hitherto unseen worlds—to go deeper, further, and so on. And this attitude was shared, of course, by the Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud, who formulated his initial theory of the unconscious during precisely the years that these photo discoveries were also announced—The Interpretation of Dreams was finally published in 1899.

It was the philosopher Walter Benjamin who—almost thirty years later—first proposed a direct parallel between inventions such as photomicrography, Röntgen ray imaging, or the high-speed camera shutter and the theory of psychoanalysis. Benjamin—now famously—commented that "photography, with its devices of slow motion and enlargement, reveals the secret. It is through photography that we first discover the existence of this optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis." Benjamin’s assertion of a parallel with Freud’s proposition is instantly compelling, but if we take his proposal literally and relate it back to the analytic setting—"the session"—it can be noted that traces—evidence—of the unconscious are not wholly imperceptible, only
disguised. The hidden metanarrative—of the dynamic unconscious—emerges from the analyands discourse: the real story is not the one that the patient carefully relates, but is often located in seemingly incidental details such as denials, repetitions, hesitation, slips, and so on. The primacy of the analyands discourse has been qualified by the psychoanalyst Jacques-Alain Miller: “[Lacan emphasizes] the internal coherence of the patient’s discourse, that is, of what he or she says . . . you simply check whether his or her discourse is consistent . . . you look for discrepancies within the discourse itself.”

This theme also underpins the process that modern crime investigators follow: their basic procedure is to rule out or eliminate each suspect from the inquiry—a methodology that remains unaltered since Poe’s fictional detective M. Dupin observed that “they [the detective and his team] had fallen into the gross but common error of confounding the unusual with the abstruse. But it is by these deviations from the plane of the ordinary, that reason feels its way, if at all, in its search for the true. In investigations such as we are now pursuing, it should not be so much asked ‘what has occurred,’ as ‘what has occurred that has never occurred before.’”

And when this method of alighting upon inconsistency is applied to interpreting, for example, crime scene photographs, Benjamin’s parallel with the clinical setting is sustained: just as the privileged space of the psychoanalytic session enables an ordinarily dismissible instance of speech to be highlighted, here too all that was once incidental or unremarkable cannot be (must not be) ignored or overlooked. The scene of a murder is a rarefied space in which the banal is almost completely eradicated (or annihilated). Commenting on the power that a dead body has to alter the status of objects surrounding it, the French philosopher Maurice Blanchot noted: “even though the cadaver is tranquilly lying in state on its bier, it is also everywhere in the room, in the house.” And this factor is decisive—whether a violent death or otherwise—as it is the presence of a body that redefines the space and reconfigures the status of everything—or, everything else—in the room. As a consequence of that presence, every formerly mundane object must now be documented and scrutinized.

In order to capture—privilege—such details in the primary material that I consulted—crime scene images from the DPP archive—I worked with a macro or “close-up” lens at around three centimeters from the surface of the original photographs, using a technique known as photomacrography. Commenting on his use of a similar setup, the artist Richard Prince wrote: “I thought of the camera [copy stand] as an electronic scissor,” and so, too, my rostrum–like movements over the image surface (the lens moving slowly across the ageing black-and-white photos) were made in order to seek out and alight upon (in the familiar clutter of the everyday) elements which
were recognizable as *symptomatic*.\(^{21}\) Immersed in the angle of view offered by my camera’s viewfinder, I “reentered” each of these scenes, and often the effect was as if I were physically present—cautiously (guiltily) creeping around, capturing my own evidence: a single high- heeled shoe on a kitchen table; some carefully folded clothes placed over the back of a chair; a plate of chocolate biscuits on a dinner table; a lewd graffiti inscribed into a train carriage door; an arrangement of workman’s tools in a forest clearing.\(^{22}\)

In *The Optical Unconscious*, Rosalind Krauss asks: “What can we speak of in the visual field that will be an analogue of the ‘unconscious’ itself, a structure that presupposes first a sentient being within which it operates, and second a structure that only makes sense insofar as it is conflict with that being’s consciousness? Can this optical field—the world of visual phenomena: clouds, sea, sky, forest—*have* an unconscious?”\(^{23}\) And in answer to Krauss’s vexed question, it may simply be asserted that the (supposed) unconscious of “clouds, sea, sky, forest,” are—at least in this study—irrelevant: the clues that I interrogate below are simply proposed as *indexical*—visual evidence that is always related back to (possible) human actions and behavior.\(^{24}\) Following Barthes’s terminology, the *studium* of murder scene photographs—insofar as I have worked with them—is always the depiction of a violent death (the corpse). Barthes characterized this element as “the general, cultural . . . interest one has in a photograph [that which] corresponds to the photographer’s work.”\(^{25}\) However, as the author Jim Ballard has observed, “cruel and violent images which elicit pity one day have by the next afternoon been stylised into media emblems.”\(^{26}\) Thus, the Barthesian *studium* may actually seem banal, repetitive, and empty, communicating only an emblem which is restricted, closed.\(^{27}\) Equally, the Barthesian *punctum*, “the detail that captivated me, surprised and awakened me . . . a kind of point, a sting, that touches me sharply,” seems to also depend—as do Miller’s and Poe’s—upon the notion of a discrepancy.\(^{28}\)

For example, of the fifteen paintings by the German artist Gerhard Richter which depict—almost grandiosely—the much-disputed “suicides” of Andreas Baader, Gudrun Ensslin, and Jan-Carl Raspe in the early hours of the morning of October 18, 1977 (while inmates of Stammheim Prison), it is a “subsidiary” painting that is not derived from the sensational press images of the harrowing cadavers, but merely depicts a secondary detail of a record (a vinyl LP) on a cheap record player which “touches me sharply,” that is, seems to be the most revealing—and poignant—image.\(^{29}\) The depressing futility of the RAF’s eleven-year campaign of violence and murder that was designed to achieve freedom from so-called Imperialist Forces is not implicit in the “heroic” images of their cadavers—which do seem to present them as martyrs in a “just cause” of the complete destruction of Capitalism—but might be glimpsed somehow in the record player: the
stirring revolutionary and anti establishment sentiment of late-1960s rock and pop music must have been how it all began. An example of the phenomenon that Luc Sante alluded to when he observed: “The fact that every life is a chaos of incidentals ensures that sudden death will magnify disorder; any ridiculous moment might be the last moment, any insignificant object might be forever associated with you through some terminal juxtaposition.” And it is precisely some instances of these “terminal juxtapositions” that I evaluate in this book—the detail that is usually glimpsed only at the edges of an otherwise lurid photo.