The Arts and Science of Criminal Man
in Fin-de-Siècle France

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The arts were once the privileged vehicle through which individuals sought to describe and understand the human condition. The primacy of artistic creation has, however, always been challenged by the sciences, but perhaps never as aggressively as during the explosive growth of the human sciences in the late nineteenth century, when scientific inquiry stretched beyond an interest in the mechanics of the body and attempted to access the "soul" by positing innate factors to explain and predict behavior. This project required the creation of a new knowledge base as well as new methodologies and interpretive strategies, which the emerging scientific disciplines borrowed with little reservation from the arts themselves.

Several texts illustrate the complexity of this interdiscursivity and situate the arts, both visual and literary, at the crossroads of scientific inquiry: Cesare Lombroso's *L'Uomo delinquente* (1888); Jean-Martin Charcot and Paul Richer's *Les Démoniaques dans l'art* (1887) and *Les Difformes et les malades dans l'art* (1889); Edouard Lefort's *Le Type criminel d'après les savants et les artistes* (1892), and Émile Laurent's *Les Habitués des prisons de Paris* (1890) and *La Poésie décadente devant la science psychiatrique* (1897). Each illustrates a different appropriation of the arts by the nascent science of criminology, which at the turn of the century represented a distinctly modern approach to the understanding of man. Using techniques appropriated from multiple disciplines – literary portraiture, artistic sketching, anthropometrics, handwriting analysis, and photography – early criminology presented the criminal as a corporeal text to be interpreted. As these early human scientists
attempted to differentiate criminal types according to their physical presentation and their artistic production (writing, drawing, and tattoos) they appealed to longstanding interpretive techniques developed by the arts.

The study of criminal man in the 1880s was very much what Thomas Kuhn calls a preparadigmatic movement, attracting scholars from numerous fields who felt that they could contribute to what was largely an open-ended inquiry, a fact-collecting project without any established paradigm. This lack of disciplinary boundaries makes early legal medicine an extremely rich and diverse body of discourse, embracing theories and methodologies from many other disciplines without rigorous criteria for their relevancy.¹ At this historical juncture criminology would not meet Kuhn's definition of "normal science." Rather, it constituted a network of discourses reflecting what Foucault describes as an episteme, a "système de proche en proche," but also what Derrida refers to as a de-centered structure, a discourse confronting the structurality of a received structure or view of the world.² From a Derridian perspective, criminology unwittingly espoused the postulates of artistic discourse in the very act of trying to correct them through positivistic methodologies. A form of bricolage, criminology, like other emerging discourses in the human sciences, illustrated "the problem of a discourse which borrows from a heritage the resources necessary of that heritage itself."³

The abundance of sketches, photographs, autographs, and verbal portraits that embellished these texts reflected already

¹ Kuhn suggests that "in the absence of a paradigm or some candidate for paradigm, all the facts that could possibly pertain to the development of a given science are likely to seem equally relevant." Thomas Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 15.
outdated physiological notions, but they also represented a desire for new forms of intimacy with the criminal's body, which stood in curious tension with the alienating effects of positivism. In some ways, then, as criminology aspired to become a positive science in its treatment of the criminal body, it produced a discourse that was heavily invested with desire. At its core lay the same fundamental contradiction familiar in all literature that seeks to correct vice by displaying it.

**Lombroso's use of visual technologies**

The impetus behind the coalescence of this new community of inquiry did not derive from any discovery or anomaly challenging existing paradigms of thought. It was instead born of the controversy that sprung from the publication in 1876 of Cesare Lombroso's colorful portrait of criminal man, *L'Uomo delinquente*. It is difficult to grasp the momentous impact of Lombroso's work, particularly in light of the highly critical reception it received in France. Although an answer to immediate social and political concerns, it largely repackaged in positivist jargon discredited phrenological and physiological ideas of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Yet, despite its crude empiricist methodology, it fascinated the international scientific community. Whereas legal medicine and public hygiene as practiced by figures like Jean-Etienne Esquirol and Philippe Pinel had concentrated on theoretical models of behavior or on questions of penology and rehabilitation, Lombroso's criminal anthropology effectively brought new focus, however naïve and sensational, to the actual individuals who perpetrated criminal acts and, more precisely, to their bodies as an expression of innate character. Lombroso's criminal man raised in a very modern way the question of identity. Furthermore, the *nuova scuola*, as Lombroso's criminology was called, did not advance theoretical arguments as much as it exploited technologies in ways that had not previously been employed in legal medicine.

Lombroso made use of the full potential of illustrated publishing, reproducing myriad representations of criminal types.
in art as far back as antiquity, which he juxtaposed with original sketches, engravings, and photographs of contemporary criminals. He also graphically reproduced their tattoos and graffiti and offered facsimiles of their handwriting and drawings. Charts and tables of measurements empirically confirmed the impressions that figurative representations were intended to make. While much of what he assembled existed in various forms in other fields of intellectual production, he was the first to bring these technologies collectively to bear on material man—not on an artistic or ideal conception of man.  

Not only did Lombroso advance a new conceptual model, which could be (and was) criticized on the merits of its clarity and logic, but he also invited his readers to participate in the construction of his criminal man. By supplying material data in the form of illustrations and verbal portraits he constituted a community of interpreters of that data. So actively did Lombroso exploit visual images that he published a separate atlas with forty plates to supplement his already heavily illustrated masterwork. In the preface to the 1888 French edition of the Atlas, Lombroso explained its centrality to his work, actively interpolating the reader in the interpretive community:

> The principal goal of this Atlas is to offer the reader a means of understanding and verifying, on his own, the truth of our assertions. . . This Atlas is therefore an integral part of the work, and perhaps, the most important part.  

The possibility for the reader to evaluate the data produces, at least rhetorically, the impression of verifiability, the cornerstone of good experimental science. The text also foregrounds its ability to appropriate methods and techniques from other

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4 By way of contrast, Victor Hugo, for example, had called attention to what could be learned from prison graffiti as early as 1828 in Le Dernier Jour d’un condamné, but Hugo did so to make a literary and political statement. He did not make anything approaching Lombroso’s theoretical claims.

disciplines in order to refute their challenges. The integral role of the image as the most meaning-laden part of the text implies an excess of the signifier in relation to the poverty of the signified. This non-formulated residue, which can be read as the essence of the signified, makes Lombroso's approach as artistic in fact as it intended to be scientific in theory.

**Charcot looking for illnesses in classical art**

Lombroso's sporadic references to classical art failed to impress the scientific public in the way that Jean-Martin Charcot's forays into art criticism later would. Charcot was not only the pioneer of scientific inquiry into hysteria but also a leader in using the canon of art history to establish retrospectively the timelessness of his nosological discoveries. Although he was not a criminologist, his work with the criminally insane and his documentary techniques became a reference for the emerging field of criminology.

Charcot and Paul Richer were active proponents of the affiliation between the arts and sciences, stating unequivocally in the opening pages of their *Les Difformes et les malades dans l'art* that "artists have long understood" that "in practice, art and science are joined together." Elaborating on the way in which art and science mutually enrich each other in their earlier *Les Démoniaques dans l'art*, Charcot and Richer cited Hippolyte Taine: "The kinship that ties art to science is an honor to both of them; it is a distinction for science to provide art with its principal foundations, as it is a distinction for art to rest its greatest achievements on the truth." The two neurologists expressed their hope that their own treatise might lead art historians to a greater appreciation of certain masters' genius.

Their project began with a chance observation that illustrated the art/science symbiosis in concrete terms. During a trip to the  

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Santa Maria Formosa church in Venice, Charcot was surprised to discover that one of the grotesque figures decorating the church presented "a perfectly defined morbid deformation, of which he had only a few days earlier shown some remarkable examples to the attendees of his lectures at the Salpêtrière."\(^8\) The modest goal of Charcot and Richer's analysis was thus clear: to "illustrate works in which artists did not fear to copy, not works of perfection chosen with care, but infirmities, deformities, illnesses, mistakes, and the deviations and aberrations of nature."\(^9\) In their own words, "If you like, it is pathology invading art."\(^10\)

In both *Les Démoniaques* and *Les Difformes*, the doctors used canonical works of art history to lend credibility to Charcot's discovery of hysteria, which had been charged with being fabricated and staged. Georges Didi-Huberman notes the paradox: "Art, in short, provides the decisive refutation to the suspicion of artifice."\(^11\) Sensitive to charges that art has divergent concerns from science, Charcot and Richer insisted on their complicity:

Some say that art thrives on conventions and exaggerations, that it is above, or at least outside the domain of science and has nothing to do with it. There are those who feign outrage at the very thought of science insinuating itself into the domain of art. Analytic practices, the fragmentation of work, specialization, which are at once a consequence and source of modern progress, seem to favor this attitude. But we should not fail to see the forest for the trees. Seen from above, science and art are but two manifestations of the same phenomenon, two faces of the same object.\(^12\)

In the numerous paintings surveyed, the doctors found bodies depicted in attitudes that mapped nearly perfectly on their own

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\(^8\) Charcot, *Difformes*, i.
\(^9\) Ibid., iii.
\(^10\) Ibid.
\(^12\) Charcot, *Difformes*, iii.
inventory of hysterical gestures, which led them to conclude that "the artist used nature as his model."13 At the same time, they noted the "fantastical and contradictory" flaws of artistic representation that relegated the artist to the role of imperfect copyist of nature, which has led Didi-Huberman to call Charcot's text a "clinique de l'art" rather than a "clinique dans l'art."14 Finally, if the extensive critical survey in which Charcot engaged, one that Binet called the first work of "retrospective medicine," replaced demons with hysteria, it also allowed Charcot to situate himself as the final avatar of the healer, replacing the Christian saints and even Jesus.

**Edouard Lefort and the criminal in art**

Lombroso's and Charcot's work directly inspired a number of studies published by the Lyon school of criminal anthropology. At the intersection of art history and criminology lies most notably Edouard Lefort's *Le Type criminel d'après les savants et les artistes*, which the doctor described as an examination of European art "à la Charcot."15 His methodological argument was simple: subjectivity must be governed by laws equally invariable as physical laws, but since immediate access to the mind is not possible, the face provides the most suitable empirical alternative. Although Lefort expressed reservations about the existence of the born criminal, he argued that the prevailing passions of an individual would become indelibly imprinted upon his face, if for no other reason than the long-term effects of repeated muscular contraction. If by the end of his survey he had succeeded in identifying in artistic creation the same traits that his medico-legal colleagues had documented, Lefort proposed that the only task that remained was to establish the nosological variety in question. His basis for comparison with contemporary

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13 Ibid., 51.
14 Didi-Huberman.
criminals was a collection of photographs that Alphonse Bertillon lent to him for the purpose of completing his study.

Lefort departed somewhat from Charcot's desire to find realism or naturalism throughout the canon of art history. Instead, he openly acknowledged that artists create imaginary figures, but he countered that "in all artistic creation, there is a some portion of truth." With this contention, he studied not only works that are arguably mimetic, but also depictions of monsters and demons in religious art. His analysis concluded with a number of generalizations that can be distilled to one platonic principle: the good is beautiful and the bad is ugly. The criminal type that Lefort identified in representations ranging from licentious monks to devils and from executioners to assassins was characterized by a number of traits: ugliness, large face, receding forehead, asymmetrical features, and lack of beard in contrast with abundant hair. Subsets of criminals, divided into those who commit crimes against persons and those who commit crimes against property, exhibited more distinctive traits. Assassins for example had more simian features, which Lefort compared to the "black or mongolian type with his large face." Lefort found similar traits among the demons and the damned of Michelangelo's Last Judgment, whom he described as "reminiscent of races foreign to the white race." Thieves, on the other hand, did not manifest traits of the foreign other, but of the sexual other. "The thief," he explained "is of a type similar to effeminate homosexuals." Despite his feigned skepticism about Lombroso's findings, Lefort concluded that there was a "perfect analogy between artistic creation from the last several centuries and Professor Lombroso's conception of the born criminal."

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16 Ibid., 35.
17 Ibid., 17.
18 Ibid., 41.
19 Ibid., 18.
20 Ibid., 96.
Emile Laurent and degenerate literature

Criminologist Emile Laurent was, like Lefort, a protégé of the famous Alexandre Lacassagne, who founded the Lyon school of criminal anthropology. Laurent was particularly interested in the potential dangers of cultural and literary decadence, which becomes immediately clear from the titles of his works, among which figure L'Amour morbide, Le Nicotinisme, Sadisme et masochisme, Fétichistes et érotomanes, and L'Occultisme et l'amour. In 1897 he published La Poésie décadente devant la science psychiatrique, which grew directly out of his clinical experience as a resident at the central infirmary serving the prisons of Paris in the 1870s. His treatise identified empirical connections between the medical theory of degeneration and the aesthetic movement known as decadence.

At the Santé prison, Laurent observed that prisoners wrote prolifically despite the high rate of illiteracy among them. He claimed to have collected more than one thousand manuscript pages from both prisoners and the mentally ill alike. While collecting and studying prison writing was far from a new practice, the use of these writings in the diagnostic process for what they might reveal about their creator's pathology was innovative. In his earlier Habitués des prisons de Paris, Laurent analyzed at length the writings of a mad gardener who believed himself to be the messiah and of a former priest who declared himself to be Pope Pius X. Laurent's analysis concluded that both patients "like flowery language, the sloppy use of punctuation, and words with multiple syllables." He also commented upon a short text written by a homosexual, noting that such men were particularly fond of pleonasm and the abundant use of adjectives. Laurent saw numerous similarities between the literature of the insane and that of criminals. Both "seek bizarre words, exaggerated pairings of words, extravagant metaphors, and audacious hyperboles. They even coin words."  

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22 Ibid.
In effect, he saw in the textual production of criminals the same excess that criminal anthropology discovered in their physiognomy. Hypertrophy became hyperbole, and physical stigmata found their textual analogy in stylistic deficiencies.

The textual production of criminals was, along with their physiognomy, an entryway into their psychology, which was crucial to legal physicians who were asked to determine whether the accused was competent to stand trial under Article 64 of the penal code. But the clinical gaze sanctioned by the law to detect mental disorder could also turn against the society that authorized it. After having noted the stylistic peculiarities common to criminals and the insane, Laurent shifted his focus to certain innovations taking place in modern verse:

I do not wish to make offensive comparisons, but there is a new literary genre that shows clear affinities to the texts under consideration here. Some of the "degenerate" poetry of the decadents is even more obscure and more hyperbolic that the compositions cited above.

One immediately wonders whether Laurent's intervention on the subject of poetry was not a play for discursive hegemony. Not only was medicine becoming a master discourse, but many physicians, including Laurent himself, had literary aspirations of their own.

The use of medical metaphors by a critic writing for the literary review, the Décadent, gave Laurent further confidence in his own clinical examination of contemporary poetics:

The Décadent's critic recognizes that "this miraculous sonnet is the product of a mind in torment." But of the anarchist orator, the megalomaniac vicar, and the decadent poet, who is the most obscure? They are probably all three mental cases.

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23 Article 64 exculpated individuals who acted in a "state of insanity" (état de démence) or who were constrained to criminal action by superior force.
24 Laurent, Habitués, 464.
25 Ibid.
In his treatise on decadent poetry, Laurent took on the entire symbolist constellation, including familiar names like Verlaine, Mallarmé, Moréas, René Ghil, and Stuart Merrill. He found in all of them "the incontestable signs, the indelible stigmata of cerebral disequilibrium," which he illustrated by juxtaposing their writing with the fragments he had collected during his clinical service in prison hospitals. His critique, however, drew primarily on traditional esthetics and what he called "common sense." It remains unclear upon what basis he unreflectively diagnosed the illness of the decadent artist rather than considered the artistic competency of the criminal and the insane.

Laurent saw literature as the expression or the symptom of a completely individual and idiosyncratic depravation, which was unwittingly revealed in artistic production: "Books are the fruits of mores." While many nineteenth-century critics held literature responsible for spreading depravation, Laurent argued instead that "an author does not produce the book that he wants to produce. He produces the book that he can, the one that his personality and his surroundings inspire." Laurent figured the text as a corporal production, which he could subject to analysis like any other biological sample.

My point here is not to demonstrate the weakness of Laurent's critical approach but to underscore the power play that his text enacted in attempting to reinforce the notion of a normal transparent language in order to control the proliferation of meanings. As Canguilhem has argued, the norm is not a natural law, but a practice of requirements and coercion. Normalization implies an exercise of power, a principle of qualification and of correction. Here we see a physician using the arts in order to consolidate discursive hegemony and assert the purview of the medical gaze over all segments of society.

26 Emile Laurent, La Poésie décadente devant la science psychiatrique (Paris: A. Maloine, 1897), vii.
27 Ibid., 1.
28 Ibid.
These observations illustrate criminology's use of tools and materials appropriated from multiple disciplines, notably from the canon of western European art. Derrida suggests that the birth of ethnology corresponded to a de-centering of European culture, to a particular political, economic, and technological conjuncture. Criminology might be seen as another effect of that conjuncture but a contrary one, describing an ethnocentric discourse wherein new technologies were deployed upon a sacrificed part of the social body. In response to the de-centering incidentally produced by the apprehension of the other – whether ethnic, sexual, or criminal – early criminology sought to re-center the scientific study of man through the cauterization or abjection of that other. This later dislocation is thus a gesture that symbolically effects a sort of re-centering. The proliferation of cases, the repetition of similar observations found in abundance in late nineteenth-century criminological literature, might thus suggest the desire to give predictable structure to the variance and play of human behavior.