Phrenologists in the early nineteenth century conceived of crime as an important space for the negotiation of expertise over the body and mind. Phrenologists thus made continual use of prisons as demonstration spaces of phrenological theories and convicts as research subjects for the development of same.

While the common perception of phrenological practice has focused on the manual examination of heads, in their work on criminals, phrenologists developed a visual regime that required no direct interaction. By focusing on the area of the “animal propensities” which ringed the side of the head, particularly the phrenological organ of “Destructiveness” (sometimes known as the organ of murder), they articulated a clear, visual difference between “good” heads and “bad” heads. Thus a phrenologist, upon entering a prison, could rapidly view a collection of convicts and pass judgment on them, determining their crimes at a glance. Moreover, these visual markers of crime became common currency in popular culture as well, as visual cues for predicting the potential of strangers to commit crime.

In this paper, I explore the uses of vision for the phrenological assessment of criminals in the nineteenth century, as well as the influence of these visual markers for the assessment of individuals in popular culture, drawing connections between expectations of criminality based on appearance in the nineteenth century and present-day scientific practices of criminal prediction.