The Influence of Guy Bourdin’s Advertisements for Charles Jourdan

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Introduction

With creative freedom and a taste for controversy, Guy Bourdin was one of the most experimental and influential fashion photographers of the twentieth century.

Guy Bourdin had an extraordinary following in the field of fashion photography. He broke taboos and reflected the escalating violence of society, inspiring many contemporary artists. You can see his reflection on photographers like Mert and Marcus, Inez and Vinoodh and Terry Richardson. Critical, autocratic and eccentric, he had a chaotic, may be sadistic life. He pushed his models into tears and death, and even deprived of his fame during his lifetime and legacy upon his death.\(^1\) Perhaps because of the morbidity and violence of his personal life, Bourdin has had a profound influence on the late twentieth century in photographic and artistic currents.\(^2\)

From 1955 to 1987, Bourdin did thousands of masterpieces for *Vogue Paris*. At the same time, he also worked with many big brands such as Chanel, Dior, Gianni Versace and Loewe. Among others, the most famous one is his advertising work for Charles Jourdan shoes. In Bourdin’s hands, the shoe was considered to be a fetish object, both the object of desire and the focus of a violent scene.\(^3\) While other photographers worried about selling clothing and

\(^2\) Ibid.
\(^3\) Ibid.
accessories, Bourdin created a narrative atmosphere and a bold subversion of time and space that changed fashion photography.

**Background**

Bourdin opened up a new generation of fashion photography. To better understand his contribution, firstly let’s return to his time, the anxious decades: 1960s and 1970s. With the sexual revolution, student revolts in France, The Cold War, The Vietnam War, weak economies and on and on, sex and violence intensified in movies and television. All of these social events made women feel they were more defenseless than before and more dissatisfied with unhappy lives. Feminism was beginning to make its mark, stimulating questions about the gender stereotypes of women (and men). When Bourdin’s exhibition “Image Maker” was on show in London, British fashion writer Colin McDowell wrote an article for The Business of Fashion and concludes “Feminist magazines like Cosmopolitan (which thought it was radical, but was really very tame) were increasingly examining the status of women and, only too frequently, rejecting the idea of high fashion dress because they saw it as means of imposing subservience.”

France, Bourdin’s homeland, however, surprisingly went slowly. As Colin McDowell observes, although Bourdin worked during an era when feminism was beginning to make its mark, France lagged

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6 Ibid.

behind the discussion about what, who and how ‘modern’ women should be. People weren’t ready to accept women who had acquired new liberty. Photography critic Vicki Goldberg indicates, “Images like Bourdin’s made disquieting fantasies publicly acceptable, which was not a great comfort.” As we know now, the exposure was like Pandora’s box; once opened, it could not be locked up again. Guy Bourdin marked a seminal turning point away from the 1960s photographers like David Bailey who created fantasies of the girl-next-door.

**Spring 1975**

Bourdin’s photograph in 1975 depicts a bloody car, a body marked in chalk on the sidewalk next to the featured shoes. The power of this image is legendary: an image of death and tragedy would be used to sell shoes was unthinkable but unforgettable. Bourdin placed the centre of the car at the mid of the double page spread and marked it by the edge created between the two car doors. This division separates the blood splattered female body and head on the right page from the silhouette of a woman’s feet and bright pink shoes, cast to the left side of the image. The campaign was particularly successful in commerce. According to Gérard Tavenas (who ran Jourdan’s Paris office), people were horrified at first. They hated it. But as time went on...
on, Tavenas said: “It was as if we were publishing not advertisements but a paperback novel or a comic strip. People were hungry to see what was next.”

They surrounded the crime site and tried to catalyze the plot.

Charles Jourdan

Author Nancy Hall-Duncan explains the reason behind Charles Jourdan’s success in her book *The History of Fashion Photography*. She writes:

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14 Charles Jourdan, Spring 1975.
“Bourdin’s photographic violence was thematically akin to the bloody climax of the film 
Bonnie and Clyde, the dental torture in Marathon Man, or the orgiastic violence of The Wild 
Bunch. The new brand of violent fashion photography and film supplies the viewer with a 
fantasy fulfillment unavailable in everyday life.”

Bourdin’s photograph satisfied people’s secret fantasies. He transformed an object into a 
blank canvas and encouraged viewers to create their own stories. He let people play with their 
daring ideas buried in heads. People saw a provocative movie with imagine in this carefully 
constructed and dramatical image. As Stephen Farber explains in his New Yorker article "The 
Bloody Movies: Why Film Violence Sells”:

"One of the functions of popular art has always been to give people some notion of 
experiences denied them in reality-a taste of romance, glamour, adventure, danger." Firstly 
Richard Avedon and Bob Richardson introduced the brilliant and sensitive use of nudity and 
sexual hints into fashionable depiction. By Bourdin’s time, the style of violence, dark reality, 
death and rape was ripe.

Bourdin pushed the boundaries of fashion photography in terms of their violent content. 
Critic Luc Sante, who writes the foreword for Bourdin’s book Exhibit A, concludes: “For 

16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
Bourdin, beauty never appeared without its accomplices death, filth, and laughter.” Bourdin’s eyes could track the elegancy of violence. His carefully planned and crafted shots successfully brought people more imaginations behind image.

1977

[Image of two models lying on a bed, one wearing a black and white outfit and the other in black, high heels.]  

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Though sex may be an abiding theme in much of fashion photography, the topics Bourdin focuses on belong in a more controversial category of sartorial eroticism. This movement against sexual ambiguity and related representations started in the 1970s, targeted particularly at the works of Helmut Newton and Guy Bourdin himself. In his advertisement for Charles Jourdan in 1977, a woman dressed as a maid is sitting on a silver sofa with another woman holding her foot to buckle up the shoe. Bourdin depicts a latent image of lesbianism and narcissism. At that time, the modern fashion world encompassed an increasingly large amount of female viewers, but it still seemed that many fashion photographers directed their soft-core pornographic shots in a pro-male direction. Bourdin falls heavily on sexuality and intended it to be incendiary and sexually liberating. He implicitly argues for the omnipresent sexual flaunter within each and every one of us. The aesthetic power of photography in general arises when human emotions are evoked, primal instincts derived through a carefully constructed frame. The human sexuality is no exception to this rule, and fashion photography often appeals to this very drive, as aesthetic libido is not only allowed, but celebrated. Bourdin’s images often contain a particular stylized looking with an over saturation of hues, in which powerful yet simple elements screams out, leaving the audience either entranced or disturbed. Bourdin set the tone and aesthetic philosophy


21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

of advertisements like this Tom Ford Campaign and this one, also Sisley, Jimmy Choo, and anything by Gucci.

“Walking Legs”

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In 1979 Bourdin took a Cadillac road trip from London to Brighton to shoot for Charles Jourdan’s campaign. Dispensing with live models, he comprised a range of disembodied mannequin legs, beautifully shod in heels, to tell a story that’s as much about quintessentially British landmarks. Bourdin utilizes the body part as a physical metaphor for the female corpus, of which the audience’s imagination recreates organically and spontaneously.\textsuperscript{26} The portraits themselves are highly sophisticated, consisting of a variety of different situations such as a women strutting past a bus station, tied up against train tracks, walking in front of a row of English houses. The mood and tone of the piece are not explicitly projected upon the audience, quite the opposite, the visual atmosphere of the art piece is inadvertently assumed by the audience themselves.\textsuperscript{27} The subtle evocation of the human libido is littered then throughout the mundane everyday scenery of an English countryside, stalking and omnipresent. The viewers project their own desires unto the subjects, until they realize that their desires stare back at them, erotic, attractive, and disturbing.\textsuperscript{28} The isolation of the body part gives a certain creative, and thereby sexual freedom for the viewers’ libido. The female body, as interpreted by the viewers themselves, emerges out of the experience.

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.
Conclusion

As a fashion photographer, Bourdin doesn't show us a romantic, carefree world that represents traditional fashion image, but a violent, forbidden world of sexual perversions and psychological corruptions\textsuperscript{29}. With his crafted composition, patented blend of hue, subtlety and sexually freeing motifs, Bourdin’s art as a mere trend influences and recurs in fashion world.

Bibliography


Bourdin’s images lean toward the surreal, owing in part to the influence of Man Ray, who was a mentor in the 1950s. In one photo, a woman, her lips lacquered cherry red, covers her hands with her hands—four pairs of them, all sporting matching red manicures. The surreal and the commercial come together in “Walking Legs,” a series of advertisements Bourdin did for the shoe company Charles Jourdan, which besides Vogue Paris was his most frequent and longstanding client. Bourdin dispensed with a model in favor of a set of disembodied mannequin legs, cut off just below the knee, which he packed into a Cadillac for a full tour around Britain in 1979. (The accompanying film is seen here for the first time.) An image from Charles Jourdan, Spring 1976 Photograph: ©The Guy Bourdin Estate/Courtesy A+C/Guy Bourdin. The pictures were troubling but they shifted product. Though actual shoes are often the last thing you see in Bourdin’s photographs for Charles Jourdan, the company credits those advertisements for a turnaround in its fortune, according to O’Neill. Now, he said, shoe designers take inspiration from Bourdin constantly in their advertisements: “Look at Louboutin,” he said, “who riffs on Bourdin time after time.” O’Neill and Cartner-Morley were speaking at a Guardian Membership event. The ne