NARRATIVE PHOTOGRAPHY

BY AVIS CARDELLA WITH A PORTFOLIO BY PHILIP-LORCA DICORCIA

September 2000: the fall fashion issue of W magazine is chunky and jam-packed with advertising and editorial pages. Nestled within the well of the glossy tome is a twenty-four-page spread titled ‘Stranger in Paradise’ which, thanks to the keenly focused lens of photographer Philip-Lorca diCorcia, captures a mise en scène that appears to question the very values the magazine tends to endorse. Within the borders of each thoughtfully constructed frame a story is played out, cinematic and smoky-hued. Characters, ranging from beaming blond socialites and their tuxedoed escorts to an army general and a mysterious ‘boy’, are seemingly attending the same cocktail party. This, as each carefully chosen detail will attest, is a rarefied world of money and privilege. But something is amiss. This world of exclusion has somehow been permeated. Turn the page and the buff, translucent-skinned boy is naked, centre stage in this theatre of manners, enclosed in a glass shower. Turn the page again and he is sprawled on a sofa, flanked by two willow-imbred and carefully coiffed socialites. The threesome is then caught sharing lunch, his plate of overflowing fries and gooey grin in sharp contrast to their designer salads, rail-straight posture and ‘oops, you caught me’ smirks. While the editorial copy speaks of ‘impeccably tailored suits’ and ‘elegant evening dresses’, it’s easy to forget that this is a fashion spread constructed within the commercial codes of a fashion magazine. The fashion appears almost incidental. Welcome to the world of narrative fashion.

In explaining his construction of these images diCorcia says: ‘At first I thought the class exploitation and decadence thing was a little predictable but then I decided that it was important for me to maintain a critique of the medium in which I was working, which I have consistently tried to do. I saw the characters as both models of production and consumption at a time in the US when big money and rampant materialism were so all-pervasive as to have become inescapably enjoyable to most.’ Is this the fashion photograph that Vogue editor-in-chief Anna Wintour speaks of in the preface to the book The Idealizing Vision, where she writes: ‘Our needs are simple. We want a photographer to take a dress, make a girl look pretty, give us lots of images to choose from, and not give us any attitude? Or do diCorcia’s images fall more in line with the observation of novelist and essayist Susan Sontag, who writes: ‘The greatest fashion photography is more than the photography of fashion? Sontag could have easily been making reference to diCorcia’s ‘Stranger’ as well as a large portion of the fashion imagery produced over the past year. The actual fashion – the very thing that calls a fashion photograph into being – has taken a back seat in photographs that create deliberate fictions with symbolism and innuendo, constructed realities with social signifiers that affront the viewer.

Just as documentary-style ‘realism’ was appropriated in fashion’s vocabulary in the 1990s, so have narrative, staged scenarios and cinematic views – which have gained legitimate approval in the fine-art world over the past decade – evolved and been adopted by fashion in parallel. As Elliott Sondel points out in an essay entitled ‘Escaping To Reality: Fashion Photography in the 1990s’: ‘Periodically, there is an attempt by the fashion world to shed what it perceives as an overly commercial image – and its search for something new if flirtation, even courtship, between fashion and the art world.’ The art presently involved in this flirtation is narrative. And the flirtation has been realized via the crossover of fine-art talent (the aforementioned diCorcia, and Nan Goldin, for example) into the fashion arena, as well as via the appearance of imagery produced for commerce fashion purposes on gallery and museum walls. Naturally, the resulting images attempt to do more than simply show pretty girls in pretty dresses. More often than not they imbue style and fashion with allegory and expression, connecting with the viewer on social, psychological and emotional levels.

But employment of a narrative and vernacular image in fashion photography is not an entirely contemporary phenomenon. Strirings of the genre’s desire to do more than simply show clothing can be seen in the 1950s within the work of Richard Avedon and Irving Penn. Avedon’s penchant for capturing mannerisms and gestures from real life, and Penn’s utilization of sociological and anthropological elements, made the point that a model is more than the clothing she carries on her back. Yet, it is the introduction of filmic techniques in the 1960s and 70s that led to clothing becoming more incidental in the fashion photograph. Two names that immediately come to mind are Helmut Newton and Guy Bourdin, who both reworked fashion images into complex documents encoded with erotic hieroglyphics. Suddenly, a Bourdin photo wasn’t about high-heeled shoe but became a commentary about the type of woman who wears them. Newton hadn’t simply photographed an Yves Saint Laurent suit but had embarked on an exploration of the delicate balance between male and female roles in the era of the liberated woman.

A seminal narrative construct comes via the lens of Bob Richardson, who in 1967 produced a series of photographs for French Vogue set on the Mediterranean beach. The lone female model, dark-haired and with a anxious, feral expression in her eyes, sits in a café inhabited only by men, whose gazes are eerily reflected in a mirror or caught in the bluntness of the flattened background. The sequence follows her to a rocky beach where she sits alone, smoking a cigarette and rolling pebbles with her palms, while in another frame she reclines in the sand, her head propped on the spine of her lover. Apparently uninterested, he looks out into the horizon as a single tear rolls down her cheek. Again Richardson’s series is remarkable not so much for the fashion it features but for its observations about the woman who may wear it. Unlike much of the fashion photography produced until then, these images embrace themes of melancholy and despair and brooked questions about t
artificial nature of fashion photography itself. Although not realist in their actual style, their realistic nature departed from fashion photography's unattainable ideal and set the stage for future imagery to comment honestly about cultural and social themes beyond the scope of fashion.

In the ensuing years fashion photography has continued to show that it can reflect the spirit of a time. Narrative has been a vehicle to do so. Image-makers such as Bruce Weber, with his high contrast black-and-white Americana, created photographic stories throughout the 1980s that presented a dichotomy of old-fashioned apple pie values and an increasingly sexualized male. And, on the heels of an era of glamour and supermodeldom, narrative returned in the early 1990s in the form of documentary-style realism. The storylines here often reflected urban isolation, anomy, and a suggestion of the pervasiveness of drug culture. Photographers who made these the conscious subjects of their narratives included Corinne Day, Juergen Teller, and Nan Goldin, with Goldin being especially noteworthy because she exemplifies the cross-fertilization of the fine-art photography and fashion photography worlds. While Goldin was solidly recognized as a fine-art talent she seamlessly stepped into the fashion world, ultimately producing advertising images for designers such as Helmut Lang and Matsuda.

Today's narrative trend comes into focus as a representation of the multi-tentacled creature that fashion photography has become: selling clothing, being auctioned as art, addressing complex social issues. It accepts itself as a soldier of commerce, yet often becomes so loaded with drama and innuendo that it threatens to burst from its glossy walls. Stylized fictions can act as an escape route for fashion's commercial aspirations, especially when created by fine-art photographers. The boundaries between both worlds becomes further blurred, begging the question: Can art look like fashion, fashion like art? Such as is the case with diCorcia's 'Stranger.' diCorcia states that he stopped doing cinematic narratives in his personal work back in 1994. Yet the fashion world was still clamoring for a narrative style in 2000 and fashion photographers appeared anxious to further explore the theme.

The past year has seen new talent emerge, often published by smaller 'couture' magazines such as Spoon, Numero, Flaunt and Dutch, which have adopted a style of 'staged fashion photography.' Richard Mistri, for example, takes the trappings of American pop culture, particularly the idiosyncrasies of Southern California, and creates unsettling scenes that often parody the excesses of the culture's incessant focus on appearance. Jerome Esch creates fashion photographs that incorporate themes of infrastructure, 'how things are put together.' In the 'Terra Nova' issue of Spoon, Esch creates a thematic fashion story that explores the pervasive and silent presence of big corporations in all our lives. While the 'fashion' is present in each photo, he injects a sinister sense of corporate culture sterility by interspersing frames of models wearing hard hats and trendy clothing with frames of the naive, happy, park-like atmosphere of a gated community. Esch succeeds in achieving an eerie balance between a place that is both beautiful and horrible. As the photographer explains: 'Just beyond the frame are the dangers, the bad guy lurking just past the protective fence.'

What makes these images new and noteworthy is not only the open-ended storylines but the attempt to connect with the viewer on a deeper psychological level through them. In doing so they further challenge fashion's ability to transcend itself, to move beyond the built-in obsolescence of its subject matter. Fashion has velocity. But now that images such as those produced by Guy Bourdin for French Vogue in 1981 are sold at Pace MacGill Gallery in New York for tens of thousands of dollars, can we say that the fashion image is on its way to being stopped in its tracks? What is clear is that the image of the pretty girl in the pretty dress will not be able to transcend its sell-by date. But perhaps fashion with a narrative can. As art photography is gaining respect in the art world, wouldn't fashion photography care to garner some of the same respect?

In the premier issue of British magazine The Fashion, photographer Jonathan de Villiers produced a fashion editorial set in an art auction house. As de Villiers explains: 'The auction house shoot came about because the evaluation, promotion and selling of art objects is a lovely way of tackling the issues surrounding both the wider selling machine that fashion is a part of, and the art/commerce dynamic that everyone who works in an industry like fashion has to fret over.' de Villiers creates a photographic story crammed with 'a lot of stuff.' While fashion is its starting point, by virtue of its setting and publication, the photos also include images by both Thomas Struth and Nan Goldin up for sale in the auction room, alongside Philippe Garner (one of the world's foremost photographic print experts) assessing a Bill Brandt (who, according to de Villiers, 'decisively influenced 60s fashion photography') and the Sotheby's in-house photographers shooting a silver dress. The dress, says de Villiers, 'is a nice metaphor for the transformation of the ephemeral and diaphanous into hard precious metal. Another metaphor to be found in LeVilliers' multi-layered document has to do with fashion photography's recent trend for narrative. His positioning of art within fashion within art exemplifies the inspiration that fashion has taken from fine-art photographers over the past years, the movement of fine-art photographers into fashion photography, and the continued need for both to find new and exciting outlets for their ideas and stories.'

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