

How far can a photographer go to get a good image? At a time with no special effects or Photoshop, Guy Bourdin's imagination knew no limits. Two decades after his death, the documentary *When the Sky Fell Down – The Myth of Guy Bourdin* reveals the story of the man who made Fashion talk to Art.

By Rosário Mello e Castro.

Before Guy Bourdin, Fashion did not know that sex, crime and high heels went so well together. The name of the French photographer, who defined the aesthetics of pages and pages of editorials and advertising campaigns, may not raise eyebrows as immediately as Helmut Newton, but that is nothing more than a coincidence. His pictures are the most violent and at the same time the most glamorous in the history of the industry. Women in compromising or uncommon positions, violent scenes filled with humour and sex appeal, moments of paralyzing fear... And Fashion—always—as a side note. From the brightest black and white to the most vibrant colour, each image tells a story—Guy was only there to capture it.

Guy Bourdin was born in Paris in 1928. Abandoned by his mother (who he describes as a “well dressed and very fair-skinned red head”) he was adopted by Maurice Bourdin when he was just one year old. At twenty he enrolls in the Air Force where he gets the first notions of photography. Seven years later, he starts working for *Vogue Paris*, publishing, among others, the image of a model posing on a butcher shop underneath a line of calf heads. During nearly four decades of career, Guy Bourdin rarely gave interviews or exposed his work out of its original context.

He died in 1991, wrapped in mysteries and rumours. Loved by some, misunderstood by others, just as always happens to those people who like to push boundaries.

Directed by Sean Brandt, photographer and former assistant of Bourdin, *When the Sky Fell Down – The Myth of Guy Bourdin* wants to clarify every doubt. “Let us reinstate the truth”, says Brandt, who was helped by Samuel Bourdin, son of the artist and manager of his patrimony. Although the movie is only supposed to premiere this year, the idea came in 2003. The first retrospective of the artist had just arrived to the Victoria & Albert Museum, in London, when Brandt realized Guy was perceived in a sensationalist way by the media. They interviewed about 150

friends, relatives, lovers and models, and also photographers and modern designers who, in some way, were influenced by the artist's work. Simultaneously, Samuel Bourdin fought to recover the rights of his father's work.

The testimonies of famous people like Jerry Hall, Tom Ford, Nan Goldin, Karl Lagerfeld and Terry Richardson prove once again that Bourdin's aesthetic could not be more up-to-date. Not that it was necessary. Just look at the controversy behind the campaign of the *Opium* perfume, by Yves Saunt Laurent, in which Sophie Dall is laying down with her legs open, on a photo signed by Steven Meisel; the beautiful images captured by Nick Knight for the Christian Dior campaigns; or the video clip for Madonna's *Hollywood*, which earned the queen of pop a lawsuit filed by Samuel Bourdin.

"My pictures are just accidents. I am not a director, merely the agent of chance", Guy Bourdin once said. But the truth is that his images were planned in every detail. Starting with the castings. "Guy loved to choose new faces and models who were not models", says Sean Brandt. He sat down with his *Aviator* sunglasses camouflaging the movement of his eyes, and watched how the applicants behaved. He chose the ones who made him most curious and some days later the models were called to work without knowing why.

Accustomed to Bourdin's demands, Jane Birkin was much more than a "normal" model. For the actress and singer, whose image marked the Fashion of the 60s and the 70s, working with Bourdin was an intense experience. "Working with him made me someone else", she remembers, on an interview with *Vogue Portugal*. "It was as if the makeup artist gave me a new face". A regular presence in magazine pages, Birkin maintained a very close relation with Bourdin, which she describes as "sometimes stormy, others affectuous". But dealing with his occasional bad temper was a inglorious task. "He often got angry", she confirms in an endearing tone of voice. In one of their last productions together "he told me the all time that I could not open my eyes properly. He told me that Hollywood actresses could open their eyes, and that made me so mad that I left the production". Soon after that, the photographer sent her a card with a heart. "And the truth is that those pictures were more beautiful than ever".

Many stories similar to Jane Birkin's run in the industry, some more truthful than others. After all, this was the man who spent several days trying to change the colour of the sea, who set a house on fire to photograph the models running away, and who took sleeping pills for a week just so he could dream more. "Guy's ability to

**transform a dull dress into a fabulous Fashion image was fascinating “, says Birkin. Sean Brandt identifies the same attraction towards fantasy. “The models never knew what to expect from him, but the smartest ones knew that entering his world was the only solution”. In order to make it, they just had to consent to Guy’s greatest wish: accomplish the impossible.**

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