

# **The Transforming Aesthetic of the Crime Scene Photograph: Evidence, News, Fashion, and Art**

Brittain Bright

Department of English and Comparative Literature  
Goldsmiths, University of London, UK

## **Abstract**

The crime scene photograph, which came into being as part of an official evidence-gathering process, evolved through the tabloid news industry in the mid-century United States into a form of entertainment. From sensational news, the imagery, which had become ingrained in the public imagination, was co-opted by fashion and art to stage photographs that stylistically evoked the crime scene's visual rhetoric. The crime scene aesthetic is now part of the vocabulary of many major fashion photographers, and a number of contemporary artists use both fashion and crime to question popular perception of these images. The various adaptations of the crime scene photograph have altered the aesthetic consideration of the original, so that archival examples from police departments and newspapers are being treated as art in galleries and glossy monographs. These re-imaginings and re-uses raise questions about the impact of staged imagery on the perception of authentic imagery.

## **Keywords**

photography, crime scene, evidence, fashion photography,  
murder, news, art photography

The “Scene of the Crime” is an evocative term, and designates an evocative image. Crime scene photographs are presented in courtrooms, films, and newspapers, layering upon each other to create a contemporary visual concept of crime, one reinforced by every police drama on television. These images have deep roots in the history of photography, and have developed alongside the medium. This article considers the development of the crime scene photograph from forensic document, through journalism and popular entertainment, to its contemporary place as art object and fashion motif.

In his famous satirical essay of 1827, “On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts,” Thomas De Quincey describes the Society of Connoisseurs in Murder: “Every fresh atrocity of that class, which the police annals of Europe bring up, they meet and criticize as they would a picture, statue, or other work of art.” Has such a state of connoisseurship become a reality? Tabloid and police photographs from the first half of the twentieth century currently claim an altered status as art objects, and crime scene imagery has become a prominent motif in art and fashion photography. Violent death has indeed become a subject of aesthetic consideration, and notions of the portrayal of death are actively explored in contemporary art.

Wendy Lesser, author of *Pictures at an Execution*, offers an explanation of the desire to form a narrative shell around the event of murder: “One of the reasons we try to view a real murder as theater—a grand tragedy, a significant event, at the very least an authorially constructed plot—is to remove some of the terrifying randomness from it” (190). This contention accounts to some degree for the sensational tabloid coverage regularly received by murders, particularly those with photogenic victims or bizarre complications. Does the same urge that leads us to theatricalize real murders also account for the need to create a stylized, staged representation of the act, perhaps as an exercise in exorcism?

## I.

The images that introduce this article diverge in many ways, but the contemporary viewer will, no doubt, recognize each as a “crime scene photograph.” The first is “On the Spot,” a photograph of the great press photographer Weegee at work at the scene of the murder of David “The Beetle” Beadle (Figure 1).<sup>1</sup> The second is *Hugo’s Camera*, by Melanie Pullen, a contemporary artist whose series

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<sup>1</sup> Uncredited, 1939.

*High Fashion Crime Scenes*<sup>2</sup> addresses historical crime scene images by restaging them in luxurious fashion and saturated color (Figure 2).

In the journalist's photograph, there are many hallmarks of the era, the place, and the motive of the photographer. The bricks on the surface of the street, the formal uniforms of the police, and the interior of the café in the background provide evidence of the time, 1939. The murder the photographers are gathering to cover takes precedence in the foreground. The police stand by, allowing the press but protecting the scene. Street signs denote New York City, the corner of 10th Avenue and West 46th Street, but it is the name of the café, On the Spot, that provides the photograph's title as well as a commentary on the press photographer at work.

Color is not the only aspect of *Hugo's Camera* that proclaims it a different type of work. Again, the photographer at work is the titular subject of the image, but the corpse draws the eye, which only returns to the incongruous details of the other figure after it has taken in the deadly details. Though the scene is contemporary, the large-format view camera the photographer is using to document the subject is a tool of a much earlier age. His dress also alludes to mid-century newsmen, but that of his murdered subject is obviously modern. The location is anonymous, industrial, and unpopulated—vacant save for the photographer and his subject.

The journalist's photograph provides a crime scene complete with victim, police on the job, and photographers to document every detail. This might be taken as the very definition of the "crime scene." The artist's photograph, though similarly legible on the surface, becomes a more complicated object upon examination. This timeless, placeless spectacle leaves only the shorthand of the crime scene, stripping away other information in a mockery of the quest for evidence.

Between the creation of the first photograph in 1939 and the second in 2004, tabloid journalism fed a public hunger for sensation, the crime scene became inextricably entwined with entertainment culture, and fashion and art photography began to appropriate these images for other purposes. The crime scene photograph—an image of a victim and/or site of a crime, usually murder—may be real or staged, explicit or implied, mundane or outlandish. The transformation of the crime scene from a place of forensic examination and record to a locus of creative

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<sup>2</sup> *Hugo's Camera*, Melanie Pullen, 2004. <<http://melaniepullen.com>>. This and all footnotes following that indicate a website refer to sites where photographs referred to in the text are published.

speculation is rooted in the popular entertainments of the twentieth century, but equally in art history and photographic technique.

## II.

Forensic photography appeared soon after the invention of stable photographic processes, as a documentary tool to assist police investigations. Alphonse Bertillon, the French statistician who promoted the standardization of identification photography that led to the mug shot,<sup>3</sup> was one of the first criminologists to methodically photograph crime scenes. By the turn of the twentieth century, most large police departments in Europe and North America had their own photographic departments, and a pamphlet of guidelines for photographic evidence-gathering was published by Friedrich Paul, a Berlin court official.<sup>4</sup>

Swiftly, though, the documentary function of crime scene photography gave way to entertainment value. The development of tabloid journalism fed a public hunger for sensation, and that sensation became linked to an entertainment culture. Weegee, one of the greatest press photographers of all time and a significant contributor to the development of the noir style, observed of his subjects:

These are the men, women, and children on the sidewalks of New York . . . always rushing by . . . as if life depended on their reaching their destination . . . but always finding time to stop and look at a fire . . . murder . . . a woman about to jump off a ledge . . . also to look at the latest news flashes on the electric sign on the Times Building in Times Square . . . the latest baseball results pasted in the windows of stores . . . and to listen to music coming out of phonograph stores.

They always want to know what paper I'm from and if the person is dead. They seem to be disappointed if they see a sign of life as the stretcher with the injured is carried before them. (34)

His description consciously positions murder and disaster alongside news and amusement; it also conflates witnesses and subjects, acknowledging that it is the photographer who differentiates between them.

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<sup>3</sup> Known as *bertillonage*, this system was adopted by the Paris police force in 1883.

<sup>4</sup> Friedrich Paul, *Handbuch der criminalistischen Photographie für Beamte der Gerichte, Staatsanwaltschaften und der Sicherheitsbehörden* 1900.

The work of tabloid news photographers became a staple of the inter-war visual vernacular, particularly in the United States. Tabloid newspapers were the main source of public distribution of crime scene photography, and it is largely from these sources that the idea of the crime scene as a consumable image arose. The *New York Daily News* was established in 1919, and helped create the hunger for sensational news still prevalent today. The idea of “human interest stories” took hold during this period as well: suddenly, anyone could be news. In a way, it was a far more democratic media culture than our celebrity-centric one, but *this* sort of celebrity came at great cost: one became news only by dying. In Luc Sante’s words: “A prosaic life, conducted in such ordinariness that it might as well be a cloak of secrecy, is lit up all at once, at its termination. . . . Suddenly that supine figure, beneath notice when erect an hour ago, becomes an object of interest, at least momentarily” (*Evidence* 59).

The appetite for sensational news grew quickly: in the *New York Daily News*, crime coverage rose from six percent of its content in 1920 to twenty-three percent in 1930. In the 1940s and 50s, many newspapers published truly shocking images in a competition for sales. A dramatic photograph on the front page promised drama inside, much as contemporary glossy magazines promise juicy gossip to the reader. The crime scene photographs, often striking in themselves, sometimes emphasized this quality with a tragic or dryly comic caption: “Death Throws a Strike” shows police officers at work in the aftermath of a murder which happened during an argument about a World Series baseball game.<sup>5</sup>

The pithy caption was only one of the talents of Weegee, the best-known press photographer of his day.<sup>6</sup> Weegee, born Arthur Fellig, is remembered largely as a crime photographer who was always the first at the scene of the crime, and the first to turn in his pictures. He had two (sanctioned) police radios, one in his car and one beside his bed. He was known for these radios, his Speed Graphic camera, and his car, which had a darkroom in the trunk so that he could process the night’s images in time for the morning’s press. Weegee’s work, much of which was published by *PM Magazine*, among others, provided not only mass entertainment and human interest, but also an aesthetic that defined an era and style of photography. His images are a record of New York as he saw it: “The people in these photographs are real. Some from the East Side and Harlem tenements, others are from Park Avenue. In most cases, they weren’t even aware that they were being photographed and cared less” (11-12).

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<sup>5</sup> <<http://www.nydailynewspix.com>>.

<sup>6</sup> <<http://museum.icp.org/museum/collections/special/weegee/>>.

Weegee was a creation of the post-World War I hunger for the new, and helped create the post-World War II media age. Though he photographed the living and the dead from all walks of life, it is his crime scene work and that of his contemporaries that defines much of the present conception of the crime scene aesthetic. It is essential to note that this photography was journalistic—created with an eye for the dramatic and edited (even sometimes altered) for the greatest impact. The beginning of the cross-over from documentary to interpretive photography is noted by Tim B. Wride in “The Art of the Archive”:

One of the problems with thinking about photographs that depict “the scene of the crime” is that it is irresistibly tempting to conflate them with work whose purpose is something other than the dispassionate description of a random occurrence. One always has to ask, at what point does the image cease being about the scene and start being about the photograph. The New York crime scene images by Weegee are a great example of this phenomenon. Weegee’s images and those by his countless competitors were the staples of tabloid illustration. They have become the standards by which we know how a crime scene looks. When one confronts forensic images with their victims and criminals, evidence and clues, one is inevitably given entry into a world that few have actually witnessed first-hand. (21-22)

The entrée into this world was tempting, illicitly thrilling, and part of the interest was the new visual rhetoric established in these images. Weegee allowed his viewers to join in a dark experience from the comfort of their home, office, or subway car, and his aesthetic definition of this experience became the accepted one. This definition was cemented through its evolution into film noir.

Weegee, who was a skilled self-promoter, was a part of Hollywood’s acceptance and transformation of crime scene imagery. After his solo show “Murder Is My Business” at the New York Photo League in 1941, his work was included in two exhibits at the Museum of Modern Art in 1943 and 1944. He found a publisher for his own collection of work, *Naked City*, in 1945. The success of *Naked City* inspired a movie of the same name, and Weegee was hired as a consultant in Hollywood, which signaled the end of his news photography days.

Perhaps this transition also completed the translation of the journalistic photography style into entertainment. Many famous films of the period certainly bear the stamp of Weegee’s visual influence. In a still of the murder scene in

*Double Indemnity*,<sup>7</sup> one of the most iconic Hollywood Noir thrillers, “The framing for the body, the desolate surroundings, and, most importantly, the single light source mimicking a news photographer’s flash gun, are all visual elements the public recognized through tabloids. By using this established visual language, the studios were able to convey theme and plot to viewers, and the viewer knew what to expect” (Sante, *New York Noir* 21). By the 1940s, then, the crime scene was imbued with glamour, mystery, and suspense, and its association with film noir only strengthened these perceptions.

However, it is also at this point that a significant shift in the imagery occurs. In the transition from news photograph to film still, while the visual vocabulary remains the same, there is an essential difference: the documentary scenes are frequently crowded, full of the observers Weegee described, who often become subjects themselves. Police and observers crowd into the press photos, jostling for priority in the image, or to get a better view. Yet the staged images are often very lonely, focusing on a corpse alone, only occasionally including others with a questionable relationship to the dead.

This alteration begs the question: How does this shift alter the position of the viewer? Are we more complicit in the crime itself, now that we cannot join the ranks of innocent bystanders? Do we become criminals or investigators?

The loneliness of the staged scenes is more reminiscent of evidence photographs taken for the purpose of police investigations. Rather than engaging the viewer as a participant in the shot, the staged photograph encourages a dispassionate appraisal. This shift does not decrease the narrative impact or dispel the curiosity aroused by the image—on the contrary, it may increase it by allowing for a filmic dramatization of the subject.

Film noir imagery brought the crime scene further into the orbit of fiction. Film and film stills, then and now, use the crime scene’s visual vocabulary to represent a type of event. The aesthetic of the crime scene, meaning the system of symbols<sup>8</sup> that represent the documentation of the results of presumably violent criminal activity, has been established. Though this aesthetic began as a reference to actual events, the transference of the subject into the fictional realm creates an even greater need for the awareness of this vocabulary as a symbolic system. Conscious of the scene’s fictionality, the viewer is at a double remove from the subject; not only is the photograph a representation of an event, but the event itself is a representation.

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<sup>7</sup> <[http://www.ew.com/ew/gallery/0,,20441438\\_20874899,00.html](http://www.ew.com/ew/gallery/0,,20441438_20874899,00.html)>.

<sup>8</sup> After Nelson Goodman’s definition of “aesthetic.”

### III.

The fictionalization of death has become an important motif in art photography, but, as Elizabeth Bronfen contends in *Over Her Dead Body*, this is not a contemporary phenomenon. Bronfen situates the imagery of the beautiful dead woman in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Western art history, literature, and culture. Well-known images such as Millais's *Ophelia* and various literary examples including *Dracula*, *The Woman in White*, and *Wuthering Heights* support the contention that this imagery was, and is, part of a prevalent cultural pattern.

The influence of this tradition is evident in the alteration of the subject when journalistic photographs give way to artistic ones: the dead man has now often become a dead woman. The combination of the "beautiful dead woman" image and the crime scene aesthetic has created a typology of its own. As Bronfen says, "This image of a feminine corpse presents a concept of beauty which places the work of death into the service of the aesthetic process, for this form of beauty is contingent on the translation of an animate body into a deanimated one" (5). She is referencing a popular nineteenth-century painting (Gabriel von Max, *Der Anatom*, 1869),<sup>9</sup> but her statement could apply to photography as a medium—that which stops, freezes, preserves the image of an animated being and, in a staged crime scene, characterizes that being as de-animated.

Perhaps it is the tradition of idealizing the beautiful dead woman that ultimately allied the crime scene with fashion. Edgar Allen Poe said, in an essay about the composition of "The Raven," "the death . . . of a beautiful woman is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world." As a source of motivation for the artist, this seems to hold true in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As the central subject of fashion photography is the beautiful woman, it seems inevitable that death, this most poetic of topics, should also be a part of the fashion photographer's vocabulary.

By the time A. D. Coleman published his seminal 1976 article in *ArtForum* proposing a new "directorial mode" for art photography (56), fashion photographer Guy Bourdin, along with others such as Richard Avedon, Helmut Newton, and Irving Penn, had been practicing in that mode for decades. Fashion photography, because it had no documentary duty, had even more interpretive leeway than tabloid news photography. Though some felt, as did *The New York Times* in 1975, that the images Bourdin and Newton published in *Paris Vogue* were "indistinguishable from

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<sup>9</sup> <[http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Gabriel\\_von\\_Max\\_Der\\_Anatom.jpg](http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Gabriel_von_Max_Der_Anatom.jpg)>.

an interest in murder, pornography and terror” (qtd. in Rushton), others found them revolutionary.

Newton’s preoccupation with sexual fetishes and Bourdin’s fascination with death and ambiguity were intended to be disruptive—the way these photographers envisioned their role as authors of the image changed the way that fashion photographers practice. The disturbing power of Bourdin’s work is particularly important to the discussion of the crime scene’s progress from document to art object. His photographs introduced into fashion a stylized, extravagant vision of death that has been influential ever since.<sup>10</sup>

Bourdin was one of the great fashion photographers of the 1960s and 70s, and left behind an unparalleled body of work, only published in his lifetime in fashion magazines. Early in his career, Bourdin contacted Man Ray and expressed a desire to align himself and his work with the Surrealist movement. A strong sense of surrealism is certainly evident from his earliest photographs, but the narrative power of the images grew throughout his career. “Bourdin understood,” says Alison M. Gingeras, “that the cultivation of desire in fashion photography did not come from the simple description of the featured product.” He created drama around that product, and made the photograph itself an arresting object, the hat, shoe, or bra only a part of it.

Bourdin’s often-surreal images are vibrant, saturated with color, and narratively ambiguous. Many echo a crime scene, in more or less explicit terms. One famous image features a chalk outline, others prone bodies, but something about the photographs, perhaps simply their exaggeration and powerful color, makes them seem more alive than dead. His references are sometimes merely teasing suggestions. An image for French *Vogue*, for example, which features a woman draped across a chair and a man’s hand extending as though to switch out a light, suggests death, but equally sexual abandon or satisfaction. The man might be a murderer, a lover, a voyeur. And the tantalizingly half-closed door indicates, perhaps, that the viewer is both meant to see and not to see, to always remain unsatisfied. Francine Crescent, editor of French *Vogue* from 1968 to 1987 and Bourdin’s first champion, said: “He knew before anyone that sex and violence were going to be very important factors in our society. But I think that he was interested in, and wanted to describe, life itself” (qtd. in Gingeras).

Bourdin described death, like sex, as a necessary part of life’s drama, a seductive and intriguing part. In doing so, he became a hugely influential figure in the fashion world: many contemporary fashion photographers cite him as an

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<sup>10</sup> <<http://www.guybourdin.org>>.

influence, and his narrative vision certainly contributed to the idea that fashion spreads have become “stories.” In his unique photographs, he was pursuing more than the perfect image. Indeed, says Serge Lutens, he “conduct[ed] his own psychoanalysis in *Vogue*” (qtd. in Haden-Guest 139). The confluence of darkness and humor in Bourdin’s photographs may suggest that he was searching for a lighter side of perversion, violence, and psychodrama.

Bourdin’s visual concepts are innovations in that the viewer finds himself present at a crucial point in the drama—even while having the impression that the important actor isn’t *in* the image, that it’s taking place separately, before or after, that some threat is looming, that some inexplicable event is happening, betokened only by a clue in the corner of the frame. Are we in the realm of dream or reality? In some unsettling between-place? There, anything is believable . . . the viewer projects his imagination, lets it run wild. Soon, however, panic ensues, because the photograph poses more questions than it answers, suggests more than it shows. Thus Bourdin creates images that are never serene. The suffocating atmosphere is reinforced by the fact that the scenes often take place in closed, confined spaces—a telephone booth, a windowless room, a corner of a room or a wall. The use of a 15mm Nikon lens, on the market in the 1970s, allows him to obtain a clean, undistorted frame, in which no “piece of evidence” is given priority. (Guerrin; emphasis in original)

Michel Guerrin’s reference to “evidence” above is telling. It is impossible to view Bourdin’s most powerful narrative images without some consciousness of their crime scene antecedents. Gingeras also argues that Bourdin’s engagement with the crime scene “might also have been motivated by a highly conceptual understanding of photography’s history.” She reads the self-referentiality and conscious fictionality of the images as a commentary on the evidentiary quality of photography itself.

Since his death, Bourdin’s work has been more accessible, and has gained a new generation of admirers. Despite his estate’s desire to “disassociate” Bourdin’s work from its crime scene antecedents, as evidenced by their refusal to allow the publication of his images in this article, his photographs continue to speak for themselves.

One image resonates particularly with police photographs of a notorious and unsolved crime, the Black Dahlia murder. These crime scene photographs,<sup>11</sup> taken in Los Angeles in 1947, may be read as a theoretical precursor to a 1978 Charles Jourdan shoe advertisement by Guy Bourdin.<sup>12</sup>

The Black Dahlia, as the press dubbed Elizabeth Short after her death, was the victim of a particularly gruesome, and thus particularly newsworthy, murder. Her naked body was found in a vacant lot, bisected and drained of blood; she had been restrained, tortured, and mutilated, probably over a matter of days. The case remains unsolved, though many people confessed and were accused, and it has recently been theorized that the murder was a perverse act of Surrealism on the part of Dr. George Hodel.<sup>13</sup> Though it was widely reported and sensationalized, images of the murder were considered too shocking even for the press of the time, which frequently featured violent crime scenes. The only photographs of the scene are those taken by the Los Angeles Police Department. James Ellroy, who wrote a novel based on the case, writes: “She may have been a party girl, a movie extra, or a part-time prostitute. The savagery of her murder distances and seduces and leaves one at a loss to ascribe context or motive” (13).

The connection to Surrealism may be evidentially tenuous, but it is psychologically and visually compelling. Considering the fractured images of the body photographed and filmed by Man Ray, Marcel Duchamp, and Georges Hugnet, the intentional positioning of the body at the Black Dahlia murder scene appears to be a purposeful directorial act. Film critic David Thomson muses that “the intellectual daring of such pictures cannot quite be separated from a torturer’s coolness”; the theories of disruption that proved so seductive in art may also have inspired murderers.

As compelling as the Surrealist associations of this murder may be, what is undeniable is the relationship, intentional or accidental, of the evidence photographs with the Bourdin image. The bisection of the body by the camera is not a literal dismemberment, but it removes the model’s identity, so that she becomes only body parts. The pristine, saturated orange of the sofa and the accessories at once evokes the brightness of blood and deprecates its vulgarity. The hard flash recalls the tabloid or police photographer; it illuminates every corner of a dark place. The woman’s legs are spread, though arguably in a way that is less wanton than coy. Is

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<sup>11</sup> <<http://heulnicht.blogspot.com/2011/02/elizabeth-short-die-wahre-schwarze.html>>. (Warning: graphic documentary crime scene images)

<sup>12</sup> <<http://artisnotdead.blogspot.com/2010/05/guy-bourdin-hot-fashion-photography.html>>.

<sup>13</sup> See Hodel; Nelson and Bayliss.

this woman alive? The awkwardness of her pose seems to call her agency into question, if not her physical animation. What is she doing in such a strange position? The viewer is compelled to imagine the larger scene; though the conscious mind knows the photograph is designed to advertise shoes, the unconscious wants to delve further into the story.

A story is the allure of all crime scene images, both staged and forensic. The newspapers created a dramatic narrative and a romantic nickname for Elizabeth Short because of the horrifyingly theatrical manner of her death. A viewer is compelled to wonder about the awkward elegance of a Bourdin photograph. Perceived drama draws the viewer into the image—the apparent theatricality even of a documentary photograph implies a surrounding narrative, and engages curiosity. While evidence and advertising are distinct image types, the visual rhetoric linking them has a historical and thematic, as well as formal, logic.

#### IV.

To compare an evidence photograph and an advertising photograph is certainly a gross exaggeration of the glamour of one and the violence of the other. However, the implications of both violence and glamour have become intrinsic in all crime scenes and create a complicated visual relationship between fiction and forensics.

It is perhaps in fashion that the crime scene theme has been most influential, and most inflammatory. Guy Bourdin's visual influence, and more generally the confluence of fashion and crime, is evident in the work of many of today's most important fashion and art photographers: David LaChapelle, Inez van Lamsweerde and Vinoodh Matadin, Steven Klein and Tim Walker owe to Bourdin something of their saturated and exaggerated styles. Other photographers who frequently employ crime scene references, including Steven Meisel, Mert Alas and Marcus Piggott, and Miles Aldridge, are currently among the most published in major fashion magazines.

Photographs that clearly reference the crime scene aesthetic have recently appeared in *Vogue Italia* (Meisel, "Water and Oil," August 2010),<sup>14</sup> *Vogue Korea Girl* (Oh Joong Seok, "Oh My Ophelia," April 2007),<sup>15</sup> *W* magazine (Mert and Marcus, "Into the Wood," August 2007)<sup>16</sup> and in ad campaigns by Louis Vuitton

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<sup>14</sup> <<http://www.trendhunter.com/trends/vogue-italia-and-steven-meisel>>.

<sup>15</sup> <<http://thethinkingtank.wordpress.com/2010/03/29/oh-my-ophelia>>.

<sup>16</sup> <<http://fairytalenewsblog.blogspot.com/2009/09/goldilocks-goes-into-woods-for-w.html>>.

(Meisel, S/S 2010),<sup>17</sup> Marc Jacobs (Juergen Teller, A/W 2010),<sup>18</sup> Versace (Mario Testino, S/S 2010),<sup>19</sup> and Superette (Charles Howells, A/W 2009).<sup>20</sup> Celebrity portraits in fashion magazines also regularly adopt this vernacular, including Rooney Mara (Mert and Marcus, American *Vogue*, October 2011),<sup>21</sup> Madonna (Meisel, *W*, June 2006),<sup>22</sup> and Charlize Theron (Mario Sorrenti, *W*, February 2012).<sup>23</sup>

All of this work demonstrates mainstream acceptance of crime scene imagery; though frequently it is denounced as deplorable, it is still in fashion. The idea of the crime scene as a subject of fashion photography has become increasingly legible, as is evidenced by its use in 2007 on the popular television program *America's Next Top Model*.<sup>24</sup> One episode's photo shoot staged the contestants' death scenes as though they had been "killed by another model" in various ways. However, the inclusion of this crime scene theme shocked many viewers, provoked a protest from the National Organization for Women, and was reviewed negatively by many press outlets, including the liberal Huffington Post (Lafsky). The intensity of the response to this program is interesting, given not only the precedent in fashion photography for such images, but also the television context—presumably viewers of *Top Model* overlap with viewers of graphic police procedural shows, in which images of crime scenes are common. Why, then, did their displacement into a fashion context provoke condemnation?

Jacque Lynn Foltyn asserts that "corpse chic" is a phenomenon that embraces both genres. She associates the performance of death in these images with dramatic representation, pointing to "an era of media convergence" in which television shows inspire fashion editorials. Certainly, the perceptual intersection of fact and fiction seems to be increasing. The imagery of the crime scene photograph has been perpetuated by television shows, beginning with reality-based docudramas such as

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<sup>17</sup> <<http://fashiongonerogue.com/louis-vuitton-spring-2010-campaign-lara-stone-by-steven-meisel/>>.

<sup>18</sup> <<http://fashiongonerogue.com/marc-jacobs-fall-2010-campaign-monika-frida-ann-juergen-teller/>>.

<sup>19</sup> <<http://fashiontography.blogspot.com/2010/01/versace-ss-2010-mario-testino.html>>.

<sup>20</sup> <[http://adsoftheworld.com/media/print/superette\\_stairs](http://adsoftheworld.com/media/print/superette_stairs)>.

<sup>21</sup> <<http://www.magxone.com/vogue/rooney-mara-vogue-us-november-2011/attachment/rooney-mara-vogue-us-november-4/>>.

<sup>22</sup> <<http://www.inquisitr.com/22231/madonna-falls-off-horse-minor-injuries-reported-p2s/>>.

<sup>23</sup> <<http://www.stylebrity.co.uk/celebrity/8240/charlize-theron-for-w-magazine.html/?pid=16141>>.

<sup>24</sup> *America's Next Top Model*, Cycle 8, Episode 4. <<http://www.zap2it.com/news/custom/photogallery/zap-photogallery-antm8-crimescenevictims,0,4676308,showall.photogallery>>.

*America's Most Wanted*. The interest in the investigative process itself has led to more process-based television dramas like *Law and Order*, but it has culminated, from the point of view of forensics and evidence photography, in *CSI (Crime Scene Investigation)*, which has spawned many imitators and is the most-watched television drama in the world. The series is premised upon its “veneration of evidence” (Kompare 14), and its structure is such that the crime scene continues to exert not only fascination but also narrative primacy. However, it is only another step of the crime scene’s passage into our modern visual vernacular—“memories” of crime scenes in movies, TV shows, or books seem more real now than crime scene photos released by police departments.

It seems clear that contemporary society embraces a double standard regarding dramatized versus glamorized crime scenes. Though fashion photographs may have an implicit narrative, the photograph may still be said, in Susan Sontag’s words, to “turn . . . people into objects that can be symbolically possessed” (14); certainly fashion is often accused of “objectification.” It is at this point that the question of narrative, and the definition thereof, becomes paramount. The television drama is to some degree exempt from allegations of exploitation because crime scene images are needed to spur the central focus of the story, which is the investigation that takes place afterwards. In staged photographic crime scenes, any narrative must expand from the still image or set of images; although the implication of narrative is central to the creation and staging of such images, it is often intuitive, illogical, and fantastic.

The lack of a framework of justification for fashion stories leaves them open to attack. Like Surrealism, fashion refers to its own interior logic, which Caroline Evans, in *Fashion at the Edge*, terms “cultural poetics” (10). She argues that dark imagery is a natural part of the fashion industry:

The fascination of the dark side of life is the other side of the coin of fashion’s emphasis on idealized bodies. These norms and stereotypes are only half the picture, so we are drawn to the negated or neglected other side, be it cultural otherness or death. In these images fashion functions as a symptom to evoke its opposite, so that glamour masks decay, but the latter returns as the repressed of the former. (227)

Death in fashion imagery acknowledges the undercurrent of ephemerality and alteration that underpin the constant production of new styles and new ways of presenting them.

## V.

Contemporary art photographers working with this artistic heritage have made more direct references to crime scene photography, and made efforts to deconstruct its aesthetic appeal. Melanie Pullen, the American artist whose staged photograph introduces this article, became famous with her *High Fashion Crime Scenes*, shot between 1995 and 2005. She references Luc Sante's *Evidence* as her inspiration, saying,

It made me think about what had anaesthetised me to the photographs and I decided to make a series that purposely distracts one from the crime in every way possible. Vivid colours, beautiful models, fashion. Anything. My intention is that you walk away from my show with the reaction I had when I was looking at that book. You only realise afterwards what you were looking at and you reflect for a second about it and yourself. (qtd. in Crissell 11)

Pullen's photographs, some based on images from *Evidence*, others on her research in the Los Angeles police archives, include an image of beautifully-shod feet poking out of a barrel that is distinctly reminiscent of Bourdin. Her work, however, frequently pushes further into the graphic and definite. In images such as *Phones* (Figure 3), Pullen's aim is realized: the detail of the environment and the lushness of the overall image make it difficult to concentrate on the model, and even more difficult to process her condition as dying or dead.

Pullen's work examines the crime scene through fashion, and vice versa. The initial impression of many individual images may be similar to that of a fashion photograph, but there are subtle differences that become apparent when one views the work as a whole. The photographs acknowledge their roots in evidence by placing as much emphasis on the surroundings as on the model. The repetition of "death" also sets this work apart from a fashion story. In a magazine, only occasionally is a story entirely composed of "dead" images—usually these are offset by others of the same model in other poses, so that the fictionality of her death is reinforced. In "High Fashion Crime Scenes," however, the models are not resurrected or repeated. They are simply dead, like the victims in the evidence photographs.

Guerrin's statement that "no piece of evidence is given priority" is equally true of Pullen's photographs. The viewer is faced with a discrepancy between two

visual urges, to take in detail and to accept the presentation of a narrative. Pullen's photographs use the idea of evidence as a tool—by presenting too much, any value is nearly lost.

In restaging these scenes, Pullen is questioning, among other things, the ability of the photographic medium to represent reality in the way it intends. Wendy Lesser comments: "As readers or viewers of a fictional work, we are meant to be taken in, to be deluded into believing, and we are also meant to understand that what we are believing in is not real, is not life on the same order or under the same rules as we live it" (14). Staged photography allows the viewer to become absorbed in an image, but at the same time to be conscious of the fraught relationship between the performance in that image and the source text (the original crime scene photograph).

Another artist who works with ideas about fashion, the crime scene, and the presentation of evidence is Japanese photographer Izima Kaoru. In the series "Landscapes with a Corpse" (Figure 4), he creates death portraits of celebrities, mostly Japanese, who choose the wardrobe in which they would like to stage their own death. His images operate in groups, beginning with the titular landscape, and often coming to rest in the end on the face. This sequencing technique reads in a filmic way, like a Hitchcockian zoom, moving from the overview to the personal. In this way, Izima plays on the idea of crime scene documentation and its attempt to create a complete description of the scene through multiple images.

In his view, he is working from the perspective of a spirit, and the multiple angles and distances are different ways of regarding death. Izima says that fashion photography liberates its artist as well as its subject: "Fashion photography is a simulation play on everyday lives or lifestyles, to fulfill the readers' desires for the ideal lives or styles that they want but cannot be courageous enough to lead. I think, then, the moment of death can be simulated as a theme of fashion photography, as well." His acceptance of death as a fact of the ideal life is a counterpoint to the idea of a "pornography" of death that results from the denial of its part in life (Gorer 21). Perhaps death does not have to be taboo to be glamorized, and perhaps it is not the glamorization but the death itself that is seen as objectionable.

Conversely, it is possible that the appeal of the crime scene theme is perhaps not death, but rather mystery. Narratively, these images contain mystery in that they connote the unsolved crime; the incomplete "evidence" of real or staged images is an invitation to participate in theorizing, or in completing the narrative. In a larger sense, such images evoke the impossibility of knowing the whole "truth," either of photography or of death.

The photographer who stages an image alters the medium, transformatively recording a pause or a suspended moment rather than capturing an event. No longer is the photographer an observer and recorder, but a creator. If the scene created is a crime scene, is the photographer the fictional murderer or the fictional witness? In *The Aesthetics of Murder*, Joel Black muses on the relationship between these two roles:

The intimacy between the murderer and the witness—the mutual experience of sublime suspension from worldly concerns that they share in the presence of the victim’s corpse, their secret knowledge that they (and the reader) savor for a few interminable instants before the alarm is raised and the event is made public—has a distinctly erotic character. The commonplace reference to sexual climax as a *petite mort* takes on a deeper significance with respect to murder (106; emphasis in original).

The staged photograph encapsulates this moment of witness, allowing the photographer to share with the viewer that experience of the sublime. Ironically, this moment of transcendence may be the reason for the linkage of crime scenes with fashion. The extremity and the narrative strength of the crime scene empower fashion, even as one distracts from the other.

The idea that death, particularly violent death, can be co-opted by art may seem incomprehensible to some, but the idea of the crime scene is so much a part of contemporary visual culture as to make this process inevitable. The permissive culture of the fashion photography has opened the door for these artists to use the aesthetic of the crime scene to comment on the relationship between art and fashion, as well as on popular imagination and the idea of the surreal.

Izima and Pullen, as well as other photographers working within the structure of the fashion industry, have created a new sense of the crime scene as an appropriate topic of art as well as a point of intersection between art and fashion. They are not the first, however, to find the crime scene a fruitful topic. It is a recurring theme in the work of British artist John Hilliard, whose photographs deal with perception, points of view, and the fraught nature of the photograph as evidentiary object. His photograph *Miss Tracy* (Figure 5) seems at first a wry commentary on the elimination of information practiced by contemporary news outlets. In recent years, the news media have provided increasingly less information. The photograph published by several British newspapers as documentation of the

scene of the murder of student Meredith Kercher in 2007 is a degraded photocopy, in which little of sensational or evidentiary value is visible. Nevertheless, the one small area in which a human form might be visible has been blurred out. The opacity of what might be the crucial part of Hilliard's scene recalls the illegibility of journalistic images, which stand in drastic contrast to those of the tabloid's heyday.

*Miss Tracy* also addresses the disturbing possibility of the crime scene as erotic object: the center of the picture is out of focus, "leaving us with no more than a general impression of a softly erotic figure, a reading encouraged by the lack of focus and by the red ground." This impression is contradicted by the sharply focused border of the image, which reveals bruised limbs and pieces of clothing. Hilliard continues: "The red ground turns out to be a white sheet so bloodied as to be like a butcher's cloth, and a presumption of violence overrides and condemns that initial erotic resonance."

The body at the heart of the crime scene image is the impetus behind much of the conflict surrounding such images, but it is also the reason for their power. American photographer Sally Mann<sup>25</sup> encountered resistance from her gallery when she created her series *What Remains*, which includes photographs made at the University of Tennessee Forensic Anthropology Facility, "a study site where scientists, students, doctors, and law enforcement officers research the decomposition of human remains."<sup>26</sup> Eventually shown at the Corcoran Gallery, this (untitled) section of *What Remains* addresses the evidentiary aspect of the photograph as well as the forensic process.

This work is at once documentary and subjective—the bodies themselves are real, but they are "staged" as subjects of study. Mann's photographs are at once documents of and meditations on these composed realities. Underpinned by the forensic nature of the subject, they function as meta-commentary on crime scenes and, in Mann's words, the "cultural iconography of death."

## VI.

Such an iconography is indisputably at work in the creation of the aesthetic of the crime scene. The legibility of the images created by artists and fashion photographers depends on cultural memory and continual reinforcement to establish a set of signs by which the crime scene may be defined, but also to define what it means. Caleb Williams writes: "It is about photography as testimony, photography

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<sup>25</sup> <<http://www.sallymann.com>>.

<sup>26</sup> *What Remains*, Corcoran Gallery, Washington D.C., 12 June-6 September 2004.

working as a rationally-based evidence collecting activity, but also about each crime scene photograph as a receptacle for catching and commemorating something more.” This idea of something that has happened, of which only a remainder or a fragment of the truth remains to be seen, is alluring.

Curator and writer Laura Noble thinks that these photographs require narrative to sustain them: “While embracing the objective, the photo must have something subjective in order to sustain the attention of the onlooker. . . . Drama must be evident as well.” This of course applies not only to staged images but also, perhaps in a more empirical sense, to documentary photographs. In *Advanced Crime Scene Photography*, a handbook for practicing crime scene photographers, Officer Christopher D. Duncan proposes that the role of the crime scene photograph is to

inspire and excite the photographic image’s viewers. Not only should investigators document a scene as true and accurately as possible, they should also strive to create a lasting impression with the viewers, especially those viewers charged with deciding between guilt and innocence in a jury’s deliberation room. Creating powerful evidentiary images that make statements and have the greatest impact on viewers should be the goal of all crime scene photographers. (1)

The emphasis on viewers, in this case a jury or audience, recalls not the early evidentiary photographs of police departments, but the tabloid images, whose creators vied to make the biggest splash.

Lesser believes that “[T]he question seems to alter as we move away from the realm of fiction to the realm of the explicitly real. If it is acceptable to be interested in fictional murders, is it equally or similarly acceptable to be interested in real ones? Why does it matter that we ought to be able to tell the difference between real and fictional murders?” (4). In recent years, archival crime scene photographs have begun to appear in glossy books styled like art monographs. Exhibitions of evidentiary photographs have appeared in San Francisco, New York, Los Angeles, Amsterdam, and Sydney to coincide with the publication of these books.

The first, *Police Pictures*, was a diffuse exhibit of images from various locations and time periods, collected from archives by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Soon after, the individual institutions concerned began producing their own collections. The LAPD published *Scene of the Crime*, which covers the 1920s to the 1970s, in 2004. It was followed in 2005 by *City of Shadows: Sydney*

*Police Photographs 1912-1948*, then in 2007 came the exhibition and the book *Crime Scene Amsterdam*. These publications, along with those of newspapers including the *New York Daily News*, have made art of images that would have been considered either disposable or purely evidential. The purpose of the image has changed—these photographs have departed from their original intent and taken on a new identity as art objects.

The problem posed by crime scenes in glossy monographs, though they may be published by the LAPD, is that of their reality, and the difficulty of recalling it while viewing them. Many of these photographs, though they are police documentation, read as crime scenes in the suggestive or surreal way of a fashion story more than in the graphic manner of a *CSI* photo shoot scene. Frequently, the records of the investigations have been lost or become disconnected from the images, so that the story attached to the image becomes simply “Crime scene. Case information unavailable.” This disconnection from context, the absence of names and statements, must influence the viewer’s ability to connect imagery and reality.

The relationship of the real to the surreal becomes increasingly fraught as crime scene imagery proliferates. The philosophical idea that the crime scene is inherent in the photograph requires the viewer to consider the traces of reality in any image. Is the photograph itself part of the crime? It is possible to argue that in contemporary culture, this imagery is so easily legible that the crime scene photograph has its own value as an aesthetic object, regardless of the conditions under which it was made. This value has to do with the content of the image, but also with its meeting with the photographic medium. The recording of a crime scene is an event in itself. In their publication as art, in their familiarity as entertainment, these photographs have departed from their original intent and taken on new identities. Part of the irony of this transition, as discussed above, is that it is increasingly possible to look at real crime scenes, albeit those in the past, as art objects.

Crime scene photographs may have originated as documentary objects, but the transformation of the visual rhetoric attached renders them far more complicated. When drama and art mimic the forensic, and when documentation is presented as art, the meaning of “the crime scene” becomes increasingly complicated. Photographers and other artists continue to mine this tradition, and certainly there is further metamorphosis in the future. Recently Lady Gaga’s music video “Paparazzi” and Kanye West’s “Monster” have featured versions of crime scenes. The first uses the trope of the “beautiful dead woman” to explore obsession, the second to demonstrate power, but both expand the vocabulary of the image and

reinforce its presence in popular culture. Whether criticized as a negative social influence or defended as the preserve of art, the crime scene as an aesthetic object remains adaptable, and therefore all the more powerful.

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## Image Credits

### Figure 1:

Crime Scene of David "The Beetle" Beadle  
December 9, 1939  
© Bettmann/CORBIS

### Figure 2:

Melanie Pullen  
*Hugo's Camera*, 2004  
C-Print, Plexi Face Mount  
43"(H) x 57"(W)  
Ace Gallery Beverly Hills, 2005

### Figure 3:

Melanie Pullen  
*Phones*, 2005  
C-Print, Plexi Face Mount  
76 1/2"(H) x 99 1/2"(W)  
Ace Gallery Beverly Hills, 2005

**Figure 4:**

Izima Kaoru

*Natsuki Mari Wears Luisa Beccaria*, 2003

Four C-prints

Courtesy of the artist and Von Lintel Gallery, New York

**Figure 5:**

John Hilliard

*Miss Tracy*, 1994

Courtesy of the artist

### **About the Author**

Brittain Bright is a doctoral candidate in English and Comparative Literature at Goldsmiths, University of London. She is also a practicing photographer, holds an MFA from the Slade School of Art, and is represented by Diemar/Noble photography in London.

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