

Domestic Abuse Is Not In Vogue, No Matter How You Style It



Katharine K. Zarrella Art April 4, 2014 — 04:18PM

My mother used to work with Haven, a shelter for abused women, when we lived in Detroit. One night, she came home very shaken up after a meeting for the charity. I asked her what was wrong, and she recounted a 911 call she'd listened to, in which a little boy was trying to save his mother, who had been beaten by her boyfriend. The boy kept saying, "My mommy's not moving," and just before hanging up, told the operator, "My mommy's dead." I was 10 years old at this time, and at that age, I had no idea such horror existed in the world. I sobbed for hours, and to this day, I feel sick when I think about that little boy, that haunting call, and that woman whose life was stolen from her.

I don't care who shoots it—a scenario like that one cannot, and should not, be translated into a fashion photograph. Franca Sozzani, however, attempted to do just that in her [April issue of *Vogue Italia*](#), which hits newsstands today.

Sozzani, who serves as the editor in chief of *Condé Nast Italia*, as well as *Vogue Italia*, is an original and often fearless creative thinker, and she has frequently addressed hot-button issues through the pages of her glossy magazine. In 2005, she ran a clever editorial about plastic surgery. In 2007, she produced an issue that tackled the elite's rising obsession with rehab. These editions sparked controversy, too—and Sozzani should be commended for her commitment to asking important questions through her often forward-thinking spreads. But the abovementioned

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problems more or less affect the privileged classes, and the shoots were done in a certain tongue-in-cheek manner. That approach is not appropriate when discussing domestic abuse.

I'm sure that April's Steven Meisel-lensed cover story, dubbed "Horror Movie," was conceived with the best intentions. In a statement, Sozzani explained, "Violence towards women has never been so hard-hitting as it is now, so reminiscent of a 'real horror show'...The intent is in no way to shock, but rather to raise awareness of a horror that must be condemned!" However, "Horror Movie" takes away from the seriousness of the topic at hand.

The first problem is that, while it's allegedly meant to raise awareness and provoke conversation, this spread is still selling clothes. It's using violence to push product. The images—like the one of Natalie Westling laying bloodied and lifeless on the floor in a red Moschino dress, ruffled Melissa Levy garters, and Alexander Wang shoes, her lover slumped in a chair, staring at her while drenched in her blood—are underscored by clothing credits. How can a photograph like this be seen as respectful and empowering to domestic abuse victims, or even taken seriously, when it reads, "chiffon smock, Marc Jacobs" in the corner?

Furthermore, these images are glamorous. They star young women dressed to the nines in the hottest new wares. The models' faces are elegantly painted, and the girls look pretty while cowering in the corner, hiding from a man with a knife, or grasping at a railing, pressed against a wall smeared with blood. Abuse is not glamorous, and the brutalization of women should never be portrayed as beautiful, especially in a fashion magazine. Additionally, these images are based off of classic horror films, and by design there's an almost comic quality to them. In a different context, as a commentary on our addiction to the nasty thrills of the ever-popular horror genre, say, they might have worked. The problem arises when Sozzani claims the intent is specifically to raise awareness of domestic abuse. Abuse isn't funny, period.



Of course, we've seen images like these before—in varying degrees of offensiveness and insensitivity. There's Helmut Newton, whose sexualized photographs of naked women in heels or bonded with rope bordered on misogyny. There's the particularly macabre Guy Bourdin, who often posed models as if they were dead—one of his snaps features a made-up woman lying in a pool of blood; another depicts two dead models, the first hanging from a noose, the second naked on a table. "Fear is something that we, despite ourselves, want to experience. And I think the violence does add glamour in a kind of perverse way," Nick Knight told the *Guardian* while speaking about Bourdin's photographs back in 2003. I don't necessarily agree with these images. But in the cases of Newton and Bourdin, the male character isn't pictured, there's an air of mystery and ambiguity, and the women aren't explicitly being abused. And—though again I wouldn't necessarily concur as quickly as some male critics would—you can argue that these are two great artists walking the line in the way that great artists are driven to do.

Vogue Italia's latest outing also calls to mind last year's *Vice* editorial, in which models were snapped while pretending to commit suicide. Unsurprisingly, the shoot sparked public outrage. Fashion photographs have an element of fantasy, and, as Knight mentioned, there is something unsettlingly sexy about death—this has been the case throughout history (Sir John Everett Millais' 1852 painting *Ophelia* comes

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to mind). But suicide, and domestic abuse, don't fall into a "fantasy" category. They're tragedies that real people struggle with every day. "Photography is such a powerful medium, which we read as being a literal depiction of reality," explained curator and fashion historian Dr. Valerie Steele when I asked her about this particular issue. "It can be very problematic when you have images of violence that have been staged for a photograph. The image of the fashion model being physically attacked and murdered is one that has considerable existence in pop culture, considering films like the *Eyes of Laura Mars* [1978]," she continued. "That further complicates the issue of trying to make a photograph have an ideological point against violence, since the exploitation of violence against beautiful young fashion models is something that has another fantasy existence, apparently."

It seems strange to me that, judging by social media and editorial responses, people can't seem to make up their minds about "Horror Movie." Perhaps they're afraid to take a stance because, as I mentioned before, it may have been created with the best intentions. But just because one's intentions are good, doesn't mean the results are, too.

During her twenty-six-year tenure at *Vogue Italia*, Sozzani has successfully confronted a bevy of heavy global concerns. For instance, her July 2008 issue, which featured only black models, was the magazine's best-selling edition. She has proven to be one of the most progressive editors of the last thirty years, constantly championing young designers; driving Italian fashion forward conceptually, commercially, and creatively; and helping her readers to understand fashion in a broader cultural context. This misstep won't change that.

Sozzani's more tasteful attempts, as well as efforts by the likes of Vivienne Westwood (always fighting to save the environment), Iman (who frequently speaks out on behalf of models of color), and Riccardo Tisci (who's aimed to rectify the lack

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of diversity in the biz with his multicultural runways and Spring '14 ad campaign), prove that fashion can have an impact. Considering ours is one of the biggest industries on the planet, we can absolutely change the world *through* fashion. We can get important messages across in magazines, during runway shows, through garments, and in newspaper articles. We just can't do it like this.

—Katharine K. Zarrella

Photo: vogue.it

*Culture / Art: Vogue Italia Domestic Abuse Fashion
Editorial*