

metro



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The Boys: Rowan Woods interview

Frank Hurley x 2

Finalists: ATOM Film and Television Awards

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Festivals / Barrett Hodsdon on Mitchum and Stewart**

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THE VIEWS EXPRESSED IN SIGNED ARTICLES

Aren't You Wearing Death?

Mark Roxburgh

It had been a busy year. Numerous cases had been competing for my attention and the demands of my day job slinging hash at UWS Nepean, which I was still hanging onto until I got into the black, didn't make life any peachier. I felt that at any stage now a case would come along that would crack it wide open, give me enough space and cash to finally call myself a private dick full-time. And then it happened.

I should have seen it coming, the case came from a client who'd given me a few jobs in the past, all tricky in their own way, but now she was really asking me to crack a tough one. I was stumped for a while, I didn't know where to start looking and then when all seemed doomed I came across the photos. It happened while I was having my regular fortnightly trim at Mick's. Amongst all the cheep girlie mags and the tacky old copies of *Strip and Street* I found a relatively recent copy of *Juice* and it was there that Jez Smith's photo spread called "Live Fast: Fashion To Die For" leapt out of the page at me screaming 'semiotic minefield beware!' But caution was the last thing I had on my mind, apart from Mick's number two clippers, and I jumped from the chair to get on the case straight away, knowing it was my big chance. I raced out the door, straight to my office to examine my find in private and to contemplate what it all meant.

My first hunch was that the function of advertising is as much about selling an image as it is about selling a product¹ and that the image that Smith and *Juice* were selling, on that initial viewing, was essentially that of death. Not just any kind of death, though, but a fashionable and youthful death.

Each shot consisted of a model or models posed as if dead, with descriptions of what they were wearing, how much it cost, where to purchase it and how they 'died'. The death details were brief and read as if they were a copy of the kind of note a cop might make in their notebook at the scene of the crime. For example, a shot of a young black woman floating in a bath, semi-naked with a shower hose wrapped around her neck stated at the top of the page that 'She wears black chiffon dress. \$20 at Recycle Path' and at the bottom of the page the manner of death was described '11.30 am. Black female, age 23. Cause of death: Drowning.'

The sign value of the 'police notes' on their manner of death appeared to position all the models as victims, they all died in suspicious circumstances. This was reinforced by the descriptions being juxtaposed with images of bodies that appeared to have been dumped, bound or bashed. This textual device, however, lost its emphasis for me, as the death descriptions became conflated with the fashion descriptions and the models became not just murder victims but fashion victims. This was further reinforced by the style of the photographs themselves. If the photographer had been trying for an authentic scene of the crime-look, he could have utilised consistent stylistic devices; however, the lighting and film stock varied from shot to shot and had more in common with a contemporary fashion shoot. Hardly surprising given that this

was indeed what it was, rather than the type of clinical photo-document required of forensic photography. He was obviously a putz and an amateur.

The aesthetic concern of each photo appeared to be directed at how best to reinforce the idea behind that image, thus a shot of a young man bound into a chair and gagged, as if having been tortured, utilised spot-lighting to give the shot the appearance of a classic noir film still. On the other hand the shot of the drowned woman in the bath used light that appeared to be coming in through a window out of camera shot, light that seemed more natural than in some of the other photos. These devices caused me to read these images less as simulated forensic documents for 'police' purposes and more as happy snaps of the handiwork of 'murderer' or 'murderers'. Thus I realised that this putz photographer was in fact the metaphoric killer as opposed to the fictitious cop.

I decided to investigate the cultural precedents for this type of work before I cracked and ranted hysterically about the imminent demise of western civilisation as I knew it, or the degeneration of the nations' youth as evidenced by this seedy body of photographs. If I could just deconstruct them, from something resembling an historical perspective, I might, I thought, begin to see them less as an indication of how degenerate western youth had become and more as a continuum of the notion of rebellion of popular youth ideology and the way in which that rebellion had been co-opted by the media to colonise youth as consumers.





The caption of the spread "Live Fast: Fashion To Die For" was a vital clue to the origins of the work itself. Live fast, die young and leave a good looking corpse had been an enduring theme of teen culture in the post-war period of western capitalist countries. It was personified early in film by the exploits of Marlon Brando in the *Wild One* [1953] or Jimmy Dean in *Rebel Without A Cause* [1955] and *East of Eden* [1955]. A theme given impetus by the death of Dean in a car crash in his early twenties which effectively preserved his angst-ridden teen rebel persona in filmic amber.

The lifestyles and early deaths of musicians such as Janis Joplin, Jim Morrison, Sid Vicious and Kurt Cobain to name but a few, had also been well documented in the media

and each became icons of youthful excess, exuberance and rebellion for their respective generations' youth. All embodied the live fast, die young credo of living life on the edge, and this was what these images had in common, they suggested a fashionable life lived on the edge.

Further investigations revealed the image of youth-living-on-the-edge and youth-as-trouble could be traced back to last century. I discovered this when I cornered a weaselly little rat called McGuigan. After roughing him up a bit he coughed up that his analysis of cultural studies on youth and consumption referred to the work of Stanley Cohen and Geoffrey Pearson who had both traced 'the figure of the troublesome youth' (McGuigan, 1992: 90) back to the hooligans of 1890s England. Well, I wasn't about to travel back there to find out if he was right so I took him at his word. I figured a guy who held out on me as long as he did had to be telling the truth. I had this confirmed when I ran across Dick Hebdige. After I backed my car off him he informed me the costers'

of 1850s London were one of the earliest examples of youth being regarded as a social problem. (Hebdige, 1988: 20)

The significant difference, I discovered, between the pre-war conception of youth and its post-war counterpart was the distinction between the notion of youth-as-trouble (pre-war) and youth-as-fun (post-war). The youthful consumer is a semiological construct of consumer capitalism in the second half of the twentieth century, coming to prominence with the American-originated 'teenager' of the 1950s. (McGuigan, 1992: 90) I recalled McGuigan gasping as he passed out again. I explained the circumstances in which McGuigan had told

me this and it was in this context that Hebdige posited that the social and political objectives of the representation of youth-as-trouble, became conflated with the consumer image of youth-as-fun, and the result of this binary collapse was that by the 1960s the image of youth that began to be portrayed, not least by youth themselves, was the image of trouble as fun. (Hebdige, 1988: 30) A thought that appealed to me in my line of work.

Hebdige blurted out that the 'outrageous displays which some (photogenic) sections of youth engage in in Britain today can be seen as a response to the exploitative, supervisory and voyeuristic attention which has been lavished upon them by a variety of interested parties since the early industrial revolution.' (Hebdige, 1988: 8) (I smacked him in the chops for that one, just for the hell of it. He was squealing and squealing good now and I wasn't going to let him off the hook, besides I had a hard enough time getting him on it in the first place.) These responses were designed as a means by which new spaces could be articulated for and by youth where they could construct their 'own immaculate identities untouched by the soiled and compromised imaginaries of the parent culture,' he muttered. (Hebdige, 1988: 30) In this context, I mused, youth culture was tied intrinsically to the consumption not just of objects but of the images associated with those objects, where the images marked out boundaries and articulated those identities.

It dawned on me then that the radical recontextualisation of the images associated with consumer objects or the incorporation of images not intended to be associated with those objects acted as a form of resistance to the kinds of identities that might be represented in the media of youth. That extreme and marginal kinds of identities could be formulated came as no surprise when I considered how representations of youth in the media have been colonised by others.

I left Hebdige for awhile to cool his heels and headed off to the *Metro* for a stiff drink. I needed one, the work was tough and I didn't think I was getting far, besides my head was spinning from the number of ideas he spouted, more in one sentence than I'd had in a lifetime, and I needed a scotch to stop it. It was there that I saw Helen Yeates. She was talking to some stiff called Grossberg who I muscled out of the way so I could get to her, but before I could grill her she took to the stage and started to sing. And boy, did she sing.

In reference to the work of Grossberg, Yeates wailed about the 'contested discursive zone between 1990s youth and the dominant ageing baby boomer generation who are clinging to their own nostalgic youthfulness, and redefining their own ageing process accordingly.' (Yeates, 1997: 27) This contestation revolved around the 'control of its (ie., youth's) meaning, investments and power' and a fight 'to articulate and thereby construct its experiences, identities, practices, discourses and social differences.' (Grossberg qtd in Yeates, 1997: 27) It wasn't a pretty tune, particularly if you were a youth, but it gave me a hint of a motive.

It was in light of this that I realised the association of youth fashion and simulated forensic images of death, such as occurred in the *Juice* spread, clearly marked a boundary between 'mainstream' fashion and 'youth' fashion and formulated a reactive youth identity which existed on the edge of that boundary. It identified a space that the 'mainstream' may not have wished to inhabit.



I went back to Hebdige with this in mind. He had come to by now and my head had stopped spinning. It had become apparent that in youth culture the body was often the space where this demarcation occurred for, as he spat from his broken teeth, 'if teenagers possess little else, they at least own their own bodies. If power can be exercised nowhere else, it can at least be exercised here' (Hebdige, 1988: 31). The dark narcissism displayed in the prevalence of body piercing, branding, tattooing and the like among certain contemporary youth cultures struck me then as defiant displays of burning one's bridges back from the edge of this imagined boundary. And likewise I could now see the *Juice* spread as being a symbolic gesture mapping out a similar terrain whereby the models in the photos had not only burnt their bridges but had made the ultimate bodily sacrifice.

The victims in the photos were all below 30, the youngest being 17 and the eldest being 26. While all but the 17 year-old were not technically teenagers their ages were not so far removed from this youthful space that they could not signify it. While it was important to note that as murder victims it might be argued that they had in fact not been responsible for the act of defiance themselves, the manner of their 'deaths' pointed to lives lived dangerously or on the edge.

The photo of the stiff lying bashed and semi-naked in an alley suggested he was in a part of town he should not have been. What remained of his suit and briefcase looked out of place in the grimy back alley. The dame in the bath had her dress open, exposing one breast and hinted to me of an unwitting invitation to a stranger who turned out to be a sex killer. The blonde in the lame dress, legs sprawled open and overdosed on the couch had a similar theme. The bloke bound to a chair suggested a dodgy business deal gone wrong. The dead 17 year-old girl lying strangled in long grass could have been a young hitch-hiker gone missing, and the photo of the couple in their underwear tied up and suffocated in bed also had connotations of a kinky sex killer at work.

It appeared to me then that the subtext of the spread was that the lifestyles and choices of the victims had been a factor in their demise. They had all died taking some kind of risk but at least they could console themselves with having died whilst fashionably dressed, and that by taking risks and thumbing their noses at more conservative elements of society they had fulfilled the youthful credo of living fast, dying young and leaving a good-looking (read well-clothed) corpse. Their deaths too were items as fashion for the description of their cause of death became conflated with the description of their clothing, both being signifiers of a hip lifestyle. Furthermore, the significance of this piece was that its use of 'dead bodies' to model fashion was a signifier of a youth identity which was located on the edge.

It was also a piece that was trying self-consciously to parody the fashion industry and was taking its critical cues from films like Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers* [1994] or Gus van Sant's *To Die For* [1994]. Both of these films, in their different ways, could be read as critiques of the media's obsession with the sensational, crime and in particular killers. An obsession not unlike the one needed for this case. "Live Fast: Fashion To Die For" linked this media obsession with the killer, also exemplified in Tarantino's films, with the fashion industry's obsession with amazingly thin models and the

heroin chic look. Models that looked starved and malnourished have dominated much fashion imagery this decade and the *Juice* spread had taken the next logical step from starvation to death as a means of selling fashion. For me this was underpinned by the failure of the piece to really work as a series of forensic photos, and instead appearing to be photos taken by the 'killer'.

Now that the dust has settled on the case and I write up my findings, for my client, I realise that on this analysis one could begin to trace some of the precedents that have in effect given birth to the *Juice* spread; and whilst it appears to be critiquing the fashion industry, at the end of the day I can't help but think that it trivialises death and murder by essentially constructing it as a commodified image to sell fashion and arguably the magazine itself. However, rather than advocating censorship to prevent this type of work being produced I feel that a critical evaluation of the context of its production is a far more productive way of understanding our youth and ourselves. With this in mind I close the case and head back to Mick's to have my haircut finished, all the while thinking I'd better just watch those young bastards in case I'm next.

Notes

¹ Andrew Wernick provides a useful summary of the way in which advertising links 'products to the wider circulation of signs' (Wernick, 1987: 277) in his article on images of men in advertising.

² Costers were young male street traders who earned their living selling perishable goods from barrows in London.

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