From Dirty Realism to Heroin Chic: How Fashion Becomes a Scapegoat for Cultural Anxieties

Jenna Ledford
Department of English & Honors College

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Heroin chic was a controversial fashion trend during the nineties characterized by, but not limited to, models with blank or strung-out expressions, an unkempt appearance, and unusual or contorted body positions, often set against seedy backgrounds. The look varied across the board from the minimalism of Calvin Klein’s fragrance and jean ads to the made-up bruising of models seen on the runway for Antonio Berardi in fall 1997/98, yet all the styles carried with them implications of violence, victimization, and self-destruction. These implications incited many admonitions of glamorizing drug abuse, promoting child pornography, encouraging eating disorders, and mocking poverty. Such intense reactions are indicative of the fact that fashion is not simply a by-product of the human need for shielding the body from the elements; rather fashion and the reactions it spawns are often indicators of larger cultural issues. From Flappers to Punks, ‘straight’ society has reacted with indignation to the chosen fashions of their youth and the youth have used fashion as a means of expressing and communicating differing values or beliefs. Heroin chic was no different, yet it prompted one of the strongest reactions: a federal investigation into Calvin Klein, an address by the president, and rallying by various groups to ban the images. Such heated reactions indicate a heightened anxiety and tension within society during this era that calls for analysis.

Beginning with the social context that allowed a space for heroin chic to develop, this analysis follows the chronological development of heroin chic throughout the nineties. It looks
at the economic and social factors that led to the creation of an anti-fashion rhetoric, which
spawned a type of photography called dirty realism. Dirty realism’s embrace of unconventional
themes in fashion photography created a space for heroin chic to form. Once the imagery began
to leave the avant-garde and enter the mainstream via Calvin Klein, controversy began to brew,
and consequently dirty realism became heroin chic. During its peak, the fashion industry’s use
of heroin chic imagery became the proof of the moral demise of the younger generations. Upon
the death of heroin chic photographer Davide Sorrenti in 1997, who was misreported as dying of
a heroin overdose, heroin chic experienced a swift demise. Sorrenti’s death served to reinforce
the notion that heroin chic reflected a rampant drug problem among America’s youth, which
consequently was an indicator of their moral demise. Ultimately, heroin chic became a
scapegoat for the cultural anxieties of an older generation concerned with the uncertainty of a
future for their youth and themselves in a world they helped to create.

Heroin chic surfaced during a time of recession, when the assurance of a stable future
eluded much of the younger generation. College graduates were entering a deflated job market
assumedly created by the mistakes of the baby boomers, and the innovations of science and
technology had not improved their lot as promised. These conditions created a sense of
pessimism and nihilism among this emerging generation and the power dressing of the eighties
no longer suited this new social context. The overt glamour of buxom models like Cindy
Crawford and Claudia Schiffer sprawled on lush beaches in tropical paradises seemed
constructed lies to the disillusioned Generation X. The fantasy of 1980s fashion imagery did not
suit the sense of hopelessness of this generation. Generation X craved something more authentic
in the culture of its time, something that would not create a sense of false hope in them. They
wanted to reclaim the body from the “dictates of fashion” and the “rationality of science”
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(Arnold, “Heroin Chic,” 286). This demand spawned an era in pop culture obsessed with ‘being real.’ It was under these conditions that punk found a revival, and new movements like grunge, indie kids, and riot grrrl took hold. What all these looks shared was a desire to reject the “yuppie materialism and the ‘health and fitness’ craze of the 1980s” (Paglia and Room 10). Grunge, indie rock, riot grrrl, and later heroin chic were all anti-fashion movements; an antithesis to the spectacle of traditional fashion.

The ‘indie kids’ movement emerged in the early eighties in Britain as a “fusion of punk and leftover hippy aesthetics” (Polhemus 123). Indie kids were often middle-class college students with a dedication to indie rock bands and labels. In the late eighties-early nineties, during the emergence of bands such as Nirvana, Pearl Jam, and The Smashing Pumpkins, grunge became the American version of the British indie-kid style. Both movements were marked by over-sized or under-sized clothing often from thrift shops, second-hand stores, and army surplus stores: “a middle-class (mis?)interpretation [author’s wording] of the style of the underprivileged” (Polhemus 122). From this spawned the riot grrrl movement: an indie-punk feminist movement characterized by a fiercely independent, do-it-yourself attitude and leftist politics. Riot grrrls mixed the opposing styles of overtly sexualized feminine fashions, such as babydoll dresses, lingerie, red lipstick (deliberately smeared), and Catholic schoolgirl elements, with punk and grunge fashions, such as army surplus clothing, leather work boots, and tattoos and piercing. Similar to the riot grrrl look was what came to be known as the ‘Kinderwhore’ look, popularized by such female musicians as Courtney Love of the band Hole
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(wife to Nirvana front man Kurt Cobain and well-known for her drug problems) and Kat Bjelland of Babes in Toyland. All of these movements contained the ideology of punk: defiance of traditional norms and nihilism.

With this emerging ideology among the youth, mainstream fashion magazines like *Vogue* and *Harper’s Bazaar* did not communicate to the younger generation the way they did to the older generation. Consequently, this opened up a door for alternative culture magazines like Britain’s *The Face* and *i-D*, and America’s *Detour* to enter. These magazines with their “hybrid concern with music, film, politics, dance, and fashion” blended high fashion with streetstyle and formed “style journalism” (Breward 128-9). In their article on fashion photojournalism, John Hartley and Ellie Rennie contended that fashion magazines have replaced weekly, mass circulation magazines like *Life* as documenters of “contemporary life in pictures” (46). *The Face* became a magazine of style journalism for the alternative culture. *The Face* founder Nick Logan perfectly epitomized the tone of these magazines when he said: “I wear second-hand clothes and eat cheaply” (Calcutt). Logan understood that there was a gap in the market that needed to be filled. By targeting those who had “grown up in the shadow of punk,” these magazines provided a space in which the attitudes and concerns of this disillusioned generation could be expressed” (Jobling 35). They hired young, up-and-coming photographers who shared a similar vision as an alternative to the photography seen in mainstream magazines like *Vogue*. Similarly rejecting the eighties notions of glamour, many of these new photographers wanted to present a “truer image of young nineties life” (Arnold, “Heroin Chic,” 280). This perception that came through in their photography came to be called ‘dirty realism.’

However, dirty realism as a form of fashion photography is inherently flawed due to the concept of realism within photography itself. Although the photograph depicts concrete images,
it is still skewed by the vision of the photographer (Sontag *Regarding the Pain of Others*). The photographer creates or finds a setting and places an individual, who, in most cases, is aware of the presence of the camera, within this constructed setting. In fashion photography, this becomes even more constructed because the fashion model is trained to pose for the camera. The photograph is then cropped in order to hone in on the artist’s vision to a greater degree. As is the case in fashion photography, the photograph is placed within the confines of a fashion magazine where the photograph, as a form of artistic expression or cultural transgression, often loses its original meaning, especially in more mainstream magazines. Stylist for Corinne Day, one of the key photographers in the promotion of dirty realism, Anna Cockburn said in *Imperfect Beauty*: “The pictures were out of the context of fashion, they were portraits, in many ways. What made them fashion was the fact that I was choosing what she wore, the clothes were for sale and the images ended up in the magazine.” (qtd. in Hartley and Rennie 474). Even here the creators of the image fall prey to this precarious notion of reality by describing the pictures as portraits, which would indicate they are closer reflections of reality than standard interpretations of fashion photography: “[...] photography has to abandon its commitment to an objective or evidential notion of ‘the real’ even as it continues to strive for ‘the truth’” (473).

Dirty realism reveled in flaunting the mortality of the body and the mediocrity of the everyday. Instead of giving the viewer voyeuristic titillation, dirty realism made voyeurism uncomfortable by presenting its viewer with the bleakest aspects of reality: poverty, violence, self-destruction, and banality. Photographers of dirty realism did this in order to “examine and reflect cultural and physical imperfections, instead of constructing a lie of transcendent beauty” (Arnold, *Fashion, Desire, and Anxiety* 22). A similar revolt occurred mid-century in the work of such photographers as Richard Avedon, Helmut Newton, and Guy Bourdin. These men sought
to break away from the image-makers; the magazines, designers, corporations, etc. Avedon defied the traditional image of the female model (or mannequin as it was known at that time) as emotionless and austere with images of models smiling, laughing, and in action. Newton and Bourdin were particularly significant to dirty realism due to their heavy emphasis on violent, erotic, and fetishistic imagery: “They pushed the limits of fashion photography to produce images that shocked by questioning the foundations of fashion and making intertextual references to the other cultural debates” (Craik 109). These artists helped push the boundaries of fashion photography to enable a wider cultural dialogue that would allow such looks as dirty realism to form.

Though not a fashion photographer, a popular influence among dirty realism photographers was the work of fine art/documentary photographer Nan Goldin. Goldin emerged during the sixties and continues to be an influential photographer today. He work has often focused on documenting the alternative lifestyles and subcultures of adolescents, punks, gay and transvestite communities, drug culture, and similar socially transgressive communities. Her work carried with it themes of sex, violence, addiction, dysfunction, domestic violence, drugs, AIDS, and self-destruction. Goldin particularly focused on her own life. One of her self-portraits depicted her after being beaten by a boyfriend: I want to show exactly what my world looks like without glamorization, without glorification. This is a bleak world, but one in which there is an awareness of pain, a quality of introspection (qtd. in Weinberg vii). In order to give
an aura of realism and spontaneity, Goldin would often deliberately blur her shots, heighten the color with a technique called cibachrome, and utilize a snapshot aesthetic. The snapshot aesthetic would become highly significant in formulating the notion of reality in dirty realism photography.

The snapshot aesthetic and thematic concerns in Goldin’s work, combined with the daring work of Avedon, Bourdin, and Newton, gave dirty realism photographers like Corinne Day, Juergen Teller, and Terry Richardson a space in which to explore their own visions of dirty realism. Notably, the social climates of both these eras shared similarities that allowed a space in which this imagery could briefly flourish. Marred by cultural instability, the sixties emerged as an oppositional reaction to the conservative fifties; much like the nineties, marred by economical instability, became a revolt against the more conservative eighties. Punk emerged in the seventies as a rejection of conformity and a refusal to ‘sell-out’ to the mainstream, much like indie kids, grunge, and riot grrrl, which heavily drew on punk ideology. It was under these conditions that heroin chic found a niche.

For the most part, dirty realism images stayed within the realm of the avant-garde and alternative culture magazines where they were appreciated for their authenticity and innovation. In the eighties, the innovative fashion label Commes des Garçons became the first to use this “anti-fashion rhetoric” in their promotions and marketing (Breward 129). Commes des Garçons though has never been a mainstream label, remaining within the realms of fashion aficionados due to their highly conceptual designs. It was not until 1993, when British Vogue hired Corinne Day that controversy began to brew. Rebecca Arnold hit the nail on the head when she described this predicament in her analysis of heroin chic: “...it is when magazines like Vogue, which stands for the older generations’ more traditional morality, use the style that there is the greatest
outcry” (“Heroin Chic” 291). Fashion photography has always struggled to gain respect as a legitimate art form “with its own aesthetic conventions,” but at the same time fashion photography “had been based on projecting images of femininity in terms of desire” (Craik 92). Consequently, when unconventional fashion photography moves from the realm of the avant-garde to the context of the mainstream fashion magazine like Vogue or Harper’s Bazaar it loses some if not all of its original meaning. Hartley and Rennie feel fashion magazines should be praised because they are “the cheapest and most accessible source of high aesthetic imagery available today” (477). Yet, within the context of a traditional fashion magazine, fashion photography is about selling the clothing and the image the label creates via the construction of the fashion photograph, not about the cultural dialogue it may create through its imagery.

Day’s spread for Vogue called “Under Exposure” depicted an unknown, nineteen year-old Kate Moss frolicking in her underwear. Upon publication, Vogue received a smattering of criticism. Unlike today, a model in scanty lingerie in a magazine like Vogue was not common fare. In combination with the pre-pubescent-like figure of Kate Moss, many readers felt Vogue was promoting child pornography. British Vogue editor, Alexandra Shulman, stood beside her decision to print the pictures, claiming they were a subversion of the common ‘male gaze’ and represented a different interpretation of beauty (Jobling 119). The look had yet to be full-blown heroin chic, but it did create a ripple of changes within the imagery of fashion.

One of the looks that this publication spawned was the waif look. Designers and labels loved how clothing hung off the slender frames of lanky models like Moss. Today, one often
hears designers say they want their models to be merely living hangers for the clothing, yet there was nothing new about the androgynous female figure. In the 1960s, the explosion of the Mod look, which called for a slender frame, shot the model Twiggy to the status of icon. Twiggy was a marked contrast to the mature, curvaceous female shape of the 1950s much like Moss was to the ‘glamazons’ of the eighties. Of course, even the shapely supermodels of the eighties were thinner than the average woman, but a fear of how fashion influenced the psyche of the young female had been building up since the seventies when new social ‘epidemic’ called eating disorders reached national attention.

In 1973 Hilde Bruch published her monumental work *Eating Disorders*, which gave rise to a new area of study for many researchers and cultural analyzers. The problem with a lot of these earlier works according to Susan Bordo was their oversimplification of the complexity of eating disorders. Often development issues, family problems such as the mother/daughter relationship, and perceptual/cognitive dysfunction were targeted as the sole sources of distorted body image:

Perceptual/cognitive models theorized the role of “sociocultural factors” solely in terms of “the pressure towards thinness,” “indoctrination by the thin ethic”; what passed for cultural analysis were statistical studies demonstrating the dwindling proportions of Playboy centerfolds and Miss American winners throughout the 1980s (45).

These earlier analyses failed to examine how the ideal of thinness was perpetuated by Western culture as a whole; instead they targeted specific institutions, such as the fashion industry, to serve as a scapegoat for such cultural anxieties:
"the media," "Madison Avenue," and "the fashion industry" typically were collectively constructed as the sole enemy – a whimsical and capricious enemy, capable of indoctrinating and tyrannizing passive and impressionable young girls by means of whatever imagery it arbitrarily decided to promote that season" (46).

In combination with this misconception, the wide-spread reports on rising eating disorders aided in creating a new cultural crisis. Even the models themselves became targets of criticism for creating the ‘epidemic’ of eating disorders among young Western women. In response to these accusations, fashion theorist Valerie Steele said: "This [girls looking at Vogue and becoming anorexic or boys looking at Playboy and viewing women as sex objects] is such a crude “monkey see, monkey do” model of human behavior that it is amazing it has achieved such wide currency, except as an ideological response to the equally reductionist instinctual model" (168). In the September 1996 issue of American Vogue, Rebecca Johnson compared letters concerning representations of females within the magazine over the course of three decades. Letters dating from the late seventies and eighties praised Vogue for presenting an aspiring ideal, while letters from 1996 harshly condemned Vogue for “portraying sickly thin models as desirable.” Johnson concluded that: “The model is chosen for her job precisely because she does not look like you or me. She is selected because she is extreme. Extremely pretty and extremely thin” (65). This debate still continues to be played out in Western society today as seen in the recent ban on size-zero models in various European countries. However, as more mainstream companies and labels began adopting dirty realism and taking it to new extremes, the emergence of the waif look was soon overshadowed by the emergence of heroin chic. One of the first mainstream designers to adopt this new look was Calvin Klein.
In 1993, Calvin Klein hired Kate Moss as the face for his new youth-oriented perfume CK One. A series of black and white ads, shot by Steven Meisel, depicted models whose urban dress and abundance of tattoos gave the impression Klein had recruited them off the street for his new ad campaign. They were posed like “group portraits suggesting membership in a cool tribe of urban hipsters” (Elliot, “To be or not to be”). In comparison with his Eternity and Obsession ads, the CK One ads clearly targeted the cynical Generation X. Klein replaced the high-fashion, fantasy element of his Eternity and Obsession fragrance ads with the anti-fashion rhetoric of the grunge movement and dirty realism photography. Klein transformed an anti-fashion rhetoric into a fashion statement in and of itself. For the most part though, the reaction to these ads remained minor in comparison to his later ad campaigns. The few instances of topless women in the ad may have stirred some controversy, but Calvin Klein was already known as this point for his scandalous marketing tactics.

“Calvin Klein has consistently produced marketing images that have caused uproar, and the image of his clothing and cosmetics is largely based on a sexuality bordering on the fringe” (Brown and Patterson 37). In 1979, Klein’s infamous jeans campaign with a young Brooke Shields stating “nothing comes between me and my Calvins” generated uproar. Shields was well known for her role as a child prostitute in the 1978 movie Pretty Baby. Shields’ reputation in combination with the sexual statement of the ad led some to believe that Klein was promoting child pornography. In the early eighties, his underwear ads in Times Square, showing male models clad only in underwear, incited ire, as well. In response to the indignation prompted by
the 'crotch shots', Klein said "It was done to get attention.... I certainly don't want the ads to go unnoticed" ("American Fashion"). In 1986, his commercial for Obsession was banned from British television. The commercial centered on the relationship between a young boy and an adult woman with sexual undertones. In his defense, Klein said "Every small boy has a fantasy, about a school-teacher or even his mother... It was never my intention to do anything in bad taste" ("American Fashion"). By the time of the 1993 CK One campaign, the American public, whether fashion conscious or not, was all too familiar with the eroticism inherent in Calvin Klein marketing.

In 1994, an advertisement for Obsession depicting Kate Moss lying naked on a couch brought Klein under fire once again for promoting child pornography. The Advertising Standards Authority ruled the ads irresponsible for "portraying children as sex objects to sell goods" and asked they be withdrawn ("Child advert rebuked"). This reaction however was only a predecessor for what was to come when Klein debuted his 1995 jeans campaign. Deliberately amateurish, the ads depicted young-looking models in provocative poses with a wood-paneled backdrop. Journalist John Lee claimed the models were "posed in what look like opening scenes from a porn movie" and called it "a deliberate attempt to invoke the cheap thrill of pornography" (Elliot, "The Media Business"). In a New York Times article asking whether or not the reaction to Klein's ads would "redraw the lines of taste," a former New York public relations executive said the ads created an "image of young people as whimsical sexual marionettes in the hands of adults" and that the
commercials which featured an off-screen interviewer asking the models questions “was
‘virtually indistinguishable’ from video tapes billed as auditions for adult films [...]” (Elliot,
“Advertising”). Even individuals and companies known for racy advertising expressed aversion:

Richard Kirshenbaum, co-chairman and chief creative officer of Kirshenbaum
Bond & Partners in New York, an agency known for cutting-edge creativity, said:
"I've long been a fan of Calvin Klein and his work. His position has been always a
very sexual one. But I feel he crossed a line in the allusions to children or teen-
agers and sexuality. And I had problems with that (Elliot, “Advertising”).

The furor led to an FBI and Justice Department investigation into these accusations of child
pornography. The inquiry was dropped as soon as they discovered no minors were used, but
Klein pulled the ads anyway. Later in the year, Klein would once again come under fire for his
underwear ads, which were no different than his earlier underwear ads: hunky male models in
nothing, but underwear. These ads were not criticized for promoting child pornography, but for
their overall provocative nature. Society was still recovering from the shock of the jeans
campaign and consequently any new ads were heavily scrutinized for anything too provocative,
despite those boundaries of provocation having already been crossed by Klein years earlier. In
the Face of Fashion, Jennifer Craik commended designers and artists like Klein for pushing the
boundaries of acceptable fashion imagery: “Fashion photography provides a commentary on
changing definitions and critiques of sexuality through authorized erotic images which are
acceptable because they are produced for fashion rather than gratuitously” (114).

The frequent accusations of child pornography surrounding barely legal, underdeveloped
models resonated during the nineties for several reasons. Models were becoming younger and
younger due to the waif look with gangly girls as young as thirteen walking the runway, and consequently being exposed to a hedonistic world of glamour and seduction. The rise of the internet and the abundance of uncensored access to pornography it provided struck fear into the hearts of parents:

Two former Klein executives who once led CRK Advertising said they believed the tenor of the times -- from outraged protests against the film "Kids" to a lurid Time magazine cover article contending that "cyberporn" is widely available to children on the Internet -- played a significant role in the decision to bring the campaign to a premature close (Elliot "Advertising").

This rise also brought attention to the problem of child pornography. Combined with this concern and the emergence of talk shows, pop psychology, and groups like Tipper Gore’s The Parents Music Resource Center in 1985, there emerged a societal concern that the media was stripping the youth of their innocence. It would not be until the following year that Klein would once again become “a high-profit sitting duck for all those who think American morals are shot to hell” (Foley).

In 1996, Klein launched his cK Be fragrance, a spin-off of CK One. The campaign shot by Richard Avedon followed along similar lines as the CK One campaign, but the models were shot separately, rather than collectively. It depicted models that looked like kids.
from the street with tattoos, piercings, and black clothing and played around with constructions of gender. The tagline read “the new fragrance for people.” Klein described his conception as:

The whole idea of the CK fragrances stems from Generation X, or people who think that way, who have a young attitude… They're about honesty, about being very different in many ways, and they are very proud to be who they are… Targeting this young generation is very different from the luxury we normally think of in the world of fragrance and fashion (Elliot, “To be or not to be”).

Immediately, Klein came under fire for glamorizing heroin addiction. The models were described as resembling “teens waiting outside of a methadone clinic for their next fix” (Giroux 25). Much like the waif controversy, many felt the whole thing was being overblown. Linda Yablonsky, author of The Story of Junk, a novel about heroin use among a middle-class white New York community, declared: “They [heroin chic photographs] were made by commercial photographers seeking new ways to subvert reigning perceptions of taste. They’re about photographic style, not lifestyle.” Unfortunately for the parents who protested Klein’s ads, the furor of scandal surrounding his marketing only contributed to the notion of him as a rebel and his clothing represented this rebellion. As a buyer, the individual could engage in rebellion if only symbolically; it provided “relatively safe ways to rebel” (Elliot “Advertising”).

Klein was not the first to use heroin chic imagery within his marketing. As early as 1995, people had been criticized this new look in fashion. In November, President Clinton spoke out against the fashion industry’s use of heroin chic. Heroin chic, however, was not a new turn of phrase; rather fashion journalists applied the phrase to the look. In a 1986 article in London’s Sunday Times, Mick Brown used Boy George’s recent entry into drug rehab as a catalyst for
discussing how musicians popularize and glamorize heroin usage. Brown described the “myth of heroin chic” as the belief that heroin usage transforms social/cultural transgressors like rock musicians into “glamorous outlaws.” In this context, heroin chic was used in relation to its actual usage among certain iconic individuals who brought heroin usage to the forefront. Not until the mid-nineties do we see the term heroin chic connected to a specific style or fashionable persona. Eventually the phrase would be used retrospectively to describe almost any of the anti-fashion looks in the nineties: indie kids, grunge, riot grrrl, Kinderwhore.

Heroin chic hit its peak in 1996 and 1997 as a result of several over-lapping occurrences. In 1995, journalist Michael Gross released his book called Model: the Ugly Business of Beautiful Women, which brought attention to the rampant use of heroin within the fashion industry. Several films about heroin use had come out over the years: Pulp Fiction (1994), Basketball Diaries (1995), and Trainspotting (1996). Trainspotting, based on Irvine Welsh’s 1993 novel of the same name, delivered a gritty portrayal of heroin addiction among young working-class men in Scotland and quickly shot to cult status. Publications confirming the rising use of heroin, particularly among middle-to-upper class suburban white teenagers, were widely published and swiftly addressed by the media. These factors led to an explosion of anxiety about the future of Generation X. Any photograph that possibly alluded to heroin chic imagery became a target. Several sources cited a swimsuit picture in the January 1996 issue of W magazine in reference to heroin chic. In The Boston Globe, journalist Pamela Reynolds described the photo as “a skinny model with a deathly pallor...huddled in a chair. Beads of water, like perspiration, dribbled down her arms and thighs. The model held one lank forearm toward the camera. The only thing missing was the needle” (“A Fashion World Hooked”). Henry Giroux, in his critique of heroin chic, described this same photo as showing a “gaunt, sullen model drenched with sweat...
huddled in a chair, an arm extended toward the camera" (26). Yet, one may find it difficult to
describe the model’s pallor as deathly since the photography is in high-contrast black and white.
The position of her arm could just as quickly be written off simply as how her arm is propped on
the chair. Also, one could as easily assume she just hopped out of the pool as easily as one could
assume the beads of water indicate sweat. Interpretations could go either way, but the already
sensitized climate encouraged people to hunt around for any indications of heroin chic to confirm
their fears of a new heroin ‘epidemic.’

The media uproar created by the recent deaths of young, affluent white kids in Plano,
Texas in 1997 further spurred the heroin epidemic fear at this time. What was more or less an
isolated incident sparked a fear that heroin had filtered up into the mainstream and was now
destroying the promise of tomorrow: middle-to-upper class, Caucasian teenagers. In reality,
heroin use among this particular sector remained “modest,” with alcohol and marijuana
remaining the main drugs of choice (Wren). Ultimately, all this ruckus stole attention from
where the real drug problem lay: “The uproar over middle-class heroin use overlooks those with
the real heroin problem, addicts in the inner city. This population of hard-core users, numbering
about three million, constitute our nation’s true drug problem” (Massing).

Of course, this epidemic was no different than the heroin epidemic of the sixties and
seventies when young, middle-class white kids used it to distance themselves from ‘straight’
values. It was during this era that heroin use became romanticized and glamorized due to the
heavy media attention paid to the drug habits of such musicians as The Rolling Stones, Jimi
Hendrix, and Janis Joplin:
Rock music, to a large extent, took its habits from the 'hipsters' and 'beats' of an earlier jazz age, with heroin as the ultimate measure of distance from 'straight' values, and the notion of self-destruction as a romantic pursuit - in the cases of Brian Jones, Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix and Jim Morrison, even unto death (Brown).

Iggy Pop endorsed drug use as a means of articulating “his sense of alienation from mainstream American culture” (Hickman 131). At the same time this extensive drug use among musicians validated them as classic, tortured artists, much like tuberculosis came to be linked with Emily Dickinson and the Brontes in the nineteenth century and mental illness with Ernest Hemmingway and Virginia Woolf in the twentieth century (Sontag Illness as Metaphor). Drug addiction became the new illness connected with the romantic idealization of the tortured artist. Prior to this, heroin was used by minority groups who wanted to distinguish themselves from white, middle-class America (Hickman 30). As a romanticized notion, the tragic deaths of musicians by overdose helped to immortalize them as true artists in a metaphorical rock n' roll hall of fame. At the same time, the survivor stories of drug addicts like Aerosmith and Keith Richards became tales of “personal journeys through the ultimate anti-establishment ritual” (Giroux 23). Each survivor or non-survivor story brought heroin to the forefront of society: Hendrix, Joplin, and Richards in the seventies, John Belushi and Aerosmith in the eighties, and Nirvana and the Smashing Pumpkins in the nineties. The groundwork for heroin as glamour or romantic notion had already been set in stone by the time heroin chic emerged in fashion.

According to the Drug and Alcohol Services Information System Report, treatment admissions for heroin use increased in publicly funded facilities between 1993 and 1999, possibly due in part to ‘generational forgetting’ and its new availability in inhalant form.
Following the AIDS scare of the eighties, heroin experienced a dramatic decrease in usage, and crack cocaine took its place as the drug of the hour. However, crack cocaine tends to cause nervousness, restlessness, irritability, and paranoia as opposed to heroin which has a more mellow effect. Once heroin became available in an inhalant form, where the fear of dirty needles was eliminated, many drug addicts took heroin either in place of crack cocaine or to balance out the high caused by crack cocaine (Inciardi and Harrison). Since heroin use fell to the wayside during the late seventies and eighties, media attention to the topic declined and by the time heroin reemerged in its new form, the tragedies of the older generation were only mythical stories to a newer generation. As an inhalant, heroin had to remain in a purer state in order to produce a decent high. At the same time, new trade routes were opening and world-wide production of heroin was increasing. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, former Soviet satellites like the Ukraine, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan, became hotbeds for the production of heroin. In Africa, Kenya and Nigeria adopted the trade, and South America began producing heroin, as well (218). This resulted in not only greater access to heroin, but a lower price, as well. These three factors price, purity, and availability are all extremely significant factors when analyzing heroin usage:

Individuals are more likely to try heroin when heroin is relatively pure and inexpensive. This is particularly pertinent for persons who would sniff heroin, because one needs a fairly high grade of heroin to get a sufficient high. People who do not want to inject or are afraid of needles can try heroin without injection when the purity of heroin increases. In the earlier heroin epidemics, the rate of initiation of heroin use began to decline as the purity of heroin declined and the cost increased (56).
Similar to a fashion trend, heroin usage is cyclic reflecting such economic circumstances as price, purity, and availability. Thus, when heroin usage increased it was not necessarily a reflection of its glamorization by the fashion industry; rather the fashion imagery was a reflection of the rise in heroin use according to the abovementioned factors. Many individuals and groups such as the Partnership for a Drug-Free America recognized that the relationship between heroin chic imagery and actual heroin use was not a linear one, but the supposed heroin ‘epidemic’ still loomed large.

Heroin chic came to a crashing halt in 1997 as a result of the death of heroin chic photographer Davide Sorrenti. Sorrenti was misreported as having died of a heroin overdose, while in actuality Sorrenti, who was a heroin user, had a medical condition that only a miniscule amount of heroin exacerbated. This incident confirmed the public’s fears that heroin use was on a dramatic rise and that heroin chic imagery glamorized it. Politicians and journalists alike attacked the fashion industry for encouraging the look. Amy M. Spindler, fashion critic for the "The New York Times," claimed “what Mr. Sorrenti’s death has revealed is that fashion photography is indeed a mirror of the tightknit world that produces the photographs.” President Clinton made a statement in May about the fashion industry’s “deplorable” glamorization of heroin (Wren). In the presidential campaign the following summer, Bob Dole, also jumped on the bandwagon, and blamed heroin chic for “contributing to a loss of national direction, industry, integrity and moral purpose” (Hickman 135). The fashion industry seemed to finally acquiesce to the accusations of promoting heroin use: “Magazine editors are now admitting that glamorizing the strung-out heroin addict’s look reflected use among the industry’s young and also had a seductive power that caused damage” (Spindler). When Spindler asked where the companies and labels were going with their new lines, several told her they were specifically not
looking for a heroin look, thus acknowledging they had been deliberately looking for a heroin
look before. By the following season, as often happens in these cases, the industry switched
gears, and began promoting a new, healthy look: “fashion has completed its about-face from the
minimalism and moroseness of recent years, eschewing heroin chic for heroine chic” (DeCaro).
Some speculated that this was not so much admission to intentionally glamorizing heroin, but the
expression of guilt among an industry that failed to provide support for its workers who suffered
from drug addiction.

In today's commodity-based culture where we place vast meaning in symbols, a fashion
trend can easily be misconstrued as an actual indication of moral demise. Not only do we, the
viewers, envision reality in representations of fashion such as the photograph, but the creators of
these representations do as well. When a look that represents an alternative attitude or ideology
enters the mainstream and becomes isolated from its original context, hence its original meaning,
it can become a threat to the traditional values and standards of society in an era of heightened
anxiety. The trend/look then becomes a scapegoat for these anxieties. On the one side, it creates
a space in which to examine these cultural anxieties, but when the myths surrounding the source
of controversy are not disseminated, finding the appropriate means of action becomes lost. By
taking into account the economic and social factors that contribute to the development of wide-
spread disillusionment among a certain generation, and deeper rooted causes that lead to rises in
drug use and poor body image among young women we can develop a rational cultural dialogue
in which to explore and solve these problems.
Works Cited


Works Consulted


