While scattered examples of Poor Chic can be found historically in North America and Europe, the controversy of it, but never named generally as such, did not surface in any major way in public consciousness until the early 1990s. Even during the 1970s, with the Sex Pistols' frontman Johnny Rotten (named for his decaying teeth) singing about privileged people taking a "holiday in other people's misery" and the ironic subsequent fashion of torn up and tattered punk clothes (worn by Rotten originally as necessity), poverty chic was still in a relative state of immaturity. It was not until the 1990s that public awareness increased, with moral and aesthetic critics condemning Seattle’s “grunge” music, with its “dirty” guitar sound and angst-filled lyrics, most notable in the mainstream by Kurt Cobain’s band Nirvana that climbed the charts in 1991, and by Pearl Jam, shortly thereafter. The disheveled Cobain look, that matched his apathetic and defeated view of life in general, soon caught on as trendy grunge style: ripped jeans, flannels, Doc Martens, an affinity for loud guitars and teen angst, and at least a voyeuristic familiarity with heroin. Grunge fans learned of the more intimate lethal realities associated with the drug, as they mourned the tragic suicide that claimed the life of Cobain in 1994, a suicide that some say was a choice Cobain made over facing the brutal truth of selling out, going mainstream, and thus losing subcultural "authenticity" (Heath and Potter 2004).

A year later, heroin—a drug shortly before strictly associated with street junkies—would surface in Hollywood as a style in its own right, or as “heroin chic” (Scheerer 1996). A "good reading" article in Playboy explained the fashionable and economical use of heroin among what it labeled as "Ph.D. heroin snorters:"

You can get high now without going the more dangerous IV route by smoking or snorting the drug. Until you get your habit up, there are no messy rigs, needle tracks, blood or threat of AIDS. All the pleasure and mystique of heroin ingestion, and less of the risk. A kind of Naked Lunch lite (Ehrman 1995).

One informant explained of similar celebrity use, The young actors and musicians have the money to have parties in their own home or hotel suite, so they have a secure environment...Basically, everyone gets together and starts doing junk. You play music and you watch Drugstore Cowboy over and over. Some times some chick throws up and that's that (Ibid).

Mark Ehrman explained further that at the end of their weekly gatherings the 'chipping' professionals returned to their high status jobs, and socially distanced themselves from ‘real’ addicts.

Beyond its glamorization in film and carefully guided use among high status professionals, heroin gained further cultural legitimacy through "mother of heroin chic" photographer Nan Goldin’s work that was...
Heroin Chic, Poor Chic, and Beyond Deconstructionist Distraction

featured in 1996 at the Whitney Museum of American Art. The same year singer Fiona Apple gave greater exposure and respectability to heroin through her music video "Criminal." Harold (1999) claimed that this video was the epitome of heroin chic.

While academic, fashion, and/or art worlds were more accepting of the aestheticization of heroin addiction, many in the mainstream media during the mid-1990s criticized films such as Trainspotting (1996) and Basquiat (1996) that provided unflinching insider perspectives. The gist of the complaints was that such films transformed addictive heroin use into fascinating and voyeuristic ‘other’ world adventure and exotica.

More controversy emerged in September 1996 when Calvin Klein introduced its infamous “heroin chic” advertising campaign, where supermodels posed as emaciated, strung-out junkies. The cK Be cologne campaign featured photos of supermodel Kate Moss and Felix DeN’Yeurt, Vincent Gallo, and several other unknown models, that appeared in wide-readership magazines such as Vogue, Elle, and Arena, and Marie Claire. The original twelve-page advertisement in Details advertised with the slogan: “to be. or not to be. just be.” Subsequent ads promoted with the slogans: “be good. be bad. just be.” and “be hot. be cool. just be.” The photos depicted being pale, disheveled, dirty, tired, strung out, starved, scratched, pierced, and tattooed.

While these explicit images provoked critique, what was more disturbing (at least to this author) was the placement of Moss (or in other cK ads, another straight-looking male model) at the end of pictorial sequences of junkie-looking models, and under the slogan “just be.” Moss and other end-positioned models appeared anorexic thin, but otherwise strikingly normal/straight looking compared with the other models. The end-models’ difference, their conventionality in the midst of a series of vivid ‘junkies’, had the effect, as the critics, including President Bill Clinton, rightly charged, of glamorizing the lifestyle, or at least a very superficial pretense of it. Placing straight/normal-looking models at the end of pictorial sequences promised predictability when playing with or upon one of the tragic material realities traditionally associated with poverty. Playing at the “hotness,” the “coolness” or the “hipness” of being a “bad” junkie—the dangerous exotic other—was thus produced and consumed as safe and familiar consumer play. Calvin Klein’s commodified promise was that one could emerge unscathed when traveling to and through radical superficial otherness, emerging with conventional identity intact. The latter would become one of the most basic themes of Poor Chic in the years to follow, in numerous forms, from socially distanced and culturally upgraded HMMWVs (into Hummers) to ‘shit-kicker’ work boots (into Timberland ‘Tims’).

Calvin Klein’s notorious advertising was short-lived. But the fashion world has since offered a number of trendy equivalents, such as Dior’s "Addict" cologne, with the slogan "Admit It.” Washington Post writer Robin Givhan (2002) described the “Addict” Internet trailer film that featured "a sweaty and anxious model who appear(ed) to be craving a fix…of Dior Addict lipstick.” Givhan concluded sardonically that the model's "jones (was) satisfied by the film's end when she smear(ed) bright red gloss on her pouting lips.” Gaining less attention or criticism was competitor designer Yves Saint Laurent’s perfume, Opium.

Around the same time, Americana: The Institute for the Study of American Popular Culture (2001) was also commenting on the endurance of heroin chic. Its “Style” section argued that heroin chic was not subsiding but becoming even more pervasive and severe. The article read as follows:

Not only is heroin chic again appearing in print advertising, as if to seek revenge on those who forced those images off of pages and billboards, as if to prove Susan Faludi’s backlash thesis, the new heroin chic knocks women on their backs and spreads their legs in a pose that either reveals a recent rape or invites one--as the drug-induced femme is in no state to say no. These unprotected positions are compounded in that these ads often place the women in public, unprotected spaces; we see them draped down staircases in an inner city apartment house or across busy, flowery carpeting, the kind we most often see in hotels. And each time, the underside of her arm is exposed as if waiting for the next shot. The eyes show us that indeed it would not be the first…

While Heroin Chic and related fads and fashions have been condemned for glamorizing addiction, some postmodernist-spirited writers, such as Harold (1999) (referenced rather innocuously above), interpreted high fashion models posing as anorexic junkies as a way of teaching the public how to be deconstructionists. In other words, the assertion was that heroin chic promoted the realization that standards
Heroin Chic, Poor Chic, and Beyond Deconstructionist Distraction

of beauty, fashion, death, and the body are arbitrary constructions, or that there is no intrinsic meaning in them. More specifically, she suggested, against allegedly conservative critics, that heroin chic offered to “broaden and reshape the public sphere” by letting in the “abject,” or what she said is “radically excluded and draws me to the place where meaning collapses” (Julia Kristeva quoted in Harold 1999). Still another way of expressing this lofty idea is that lifestyle shopping, such as heroin chic, promotes a more open, inclusive, and fluid notion of identity, one aimed at shattering the inherently meaningless boundaries between normal and stigmatized. What is apparently missed or dismissed in such arguments is the sociologically understood point that arbitrary constructions are frequently lived as compelling and consequential ‘realities’.

In sum, the critical view expressed here is provocatively suggested in Anselmi and Gouliamos’ (1998) critique of Canadian media representations in Elusive Margins: Consuming Media, Ethnicity, and Culture. There the authors explain how media representations fragment and fetishize the materiality of subjects and their lived experiences. Their critique focuses on “technologies of exclusion” in representational forms. The authors seek to decode Canadian media structures that obscure the lived inequalities of the present through representations of an imaginary “nostalgia for the future,” or a deceptive image of “pluralistic equality.”

This short note, culled from a much broader study of fads, fashions, and media that make stylish, recreational, and often expensive ‘fun’ of an array of symbols of lower class statuses, aims at critical interrogation of the exclusionary features of popular consumer culture’s representational forms and of often untenable assertions of the (“medium is the message”) breakdown of status categories through so-called “lifestyle” consumption.

References


