Chapter 12

Elliot Smedley

ESCAPING TO REALITY
Fashion photography in the 1990s

Foreword
By Pamela Church Gibson

We have elected to reprint Elliot Smedley’s essay of 2000 for a number of reasons. It captures as eloquently as any photograph the decade that was closing as he wrote, which had seen ‘grunge’ and ‘heroin chic’ enter the international vocabulary. His essay, read today, enables us to follow the process of ‘action and reaction’ not only in the decade he describes and which is here vividly recreated for us, but in that which followed when the ‘realist fashion imagery’ which he analysed was, as he predicted, ‘inevitably … superseded’.

The new century has, of course, brought with it an extraordinary technical innovation in the form of digital manipulation. This is the most radical change within fashion photography, but interestingly there is no single dominant aesthetic. Instead, there is now a bewildering diversity of images, ranging from the high-gloss colour-saturated photographs of Mert and Marcus to more realistic pictures, like some of the fashion spreads created by David Sims with Grace Coddington at US Vogue. The other change to affect fashion photography is the new power and prominence of the luxury brands; there is a seamless sweep of photographs across and through magazines, between the fashion editorials and the endless pages of advertising that preface and follow them, so funding many of these publications. There are some constant elements within the overall picture; many of the photographers whose work has been most prominent in magazine journalism across the last decade have now been working continuously for twenty years or more – Mario Testino, Peter Lindbergh and Steven Meisel, for example.

Juergen Teller, whose earlier work is described in the essay that follows, is still taking fashion photographs; perhaps the changes in his work perfectly illustrate the power of the brands and the lure of advertising. His best-known work during the last decade was probably his collaboration with Marc Jacobs and the celebrities whom Jacobs tempted into one particular advertising campaign, Victoria Beckham, in the fallow years before her reincarnation as designer, was shown struggling inside an enormous carrier bag while Winona Ryder, at that time in the public eye after her arrest for shoplifting, was depicted lying across a bed surrounded by endless, possibly pilfered, paper bags containing designer merchandise. The campaign was notable for its pallid, carefully chic colour palette. In contrast to Teller, Nan Goldin has not abandoned her original aesthetic. She has continued to work within fashion and in 2010 created a series of advertising images for luxury brand Bottega Veneta. But this particular campaign quite deliberately evoked the photographs taken for her book of 1986, The Ballad of Sexual Dependency. She has continued with her documentary work, while her images have made the transition from printed page to gallery wall. The current work of other contemporary photographers may not follow quite the same trajectory.

Reference


Escaping to reality: fashion photography in the 1990s

I want to make photographs of very elegant women taking grit out of their eyes, or blowing their noses, or taking the lipstick off their teeth. Behaving like human beings in other words … It would be gorgeous, instead of illustrating a woman in a sports suit in a studio, to take the same woman in the same suit in a motor accident, with gore all over everything and bits of the car here and there. But naturally this would be forbidden.

(Cecil Beaton cited in Hall 1979: 202)

In the 1990s, the desires of that seemingly conservative fashion photographer, Cecil Beaton, are no longer ‘forbidden’. Clothing manufacturer Diesel has produced advertising that imitates motor crashes, while models taking grit out of their eyes or lipstick from their teeth are perfectly normal – as in David Sims’ pictures of supermodel Linda Evangelista, fingers in mouth, for a Jil Sander campaign in 1993. Behaving like ‘human beings’ and documenting ‘realistic’ activities became a prominent feature of contemporary fashion photography in the early 1990s, and dominated the decade. The role of fashion photography as a commercial instrument, although still intrinsic to its purpose, seemingly became superseded in this decade by the need to reflect wider concerns, rather than just endorsing product placement. This became manifest in a gritty ‘warts and all’ realistic style that eclipsed the glossy, groomed fashion spreads of the past, which had served to convey a seemingly unattainable ideal of beauty. Such a shift may seem unsurprising, given the socio-economic conditions of the time and the perceived ability of fashion photography to ‘capture the spirit of an era’ (Craik 1994: 101). Yet the concerns that this style introduced and conveyed in the 1990s have implications both for, and beyond, fashion photography.

It is important to establish and understand the motivation for the prevalence of this style in the 1990s, since a ‘recourse to
the documentary and vernacular image is not entirely a contemporary phenomenon’ (Williams 1998: 104). Periodically, there is an attempt by the fashion world to shed what it perceives as an overly commercial image – and its search for something new often results in a flirtation, even a courtship, between fashion and the art world. In this case, the ‘art’ concerned is documentary photography, a strand of photographic practice now accepted as a legitimate art form. This courtship is crucial to the realist aesthetic of the 1990s, with practitioners in both arenas crossing the boundaries – and thus blurring them. The concerns of documentary photography – ‘the perfect tool for the representation of the human plight and experience’ (Mack 1996: 232) – presented fashion photography with the chance to challenge its own role. While this role has traditionally been to create fantasy, fusing this notion with that of documentary has led to some misinterpretation.

Paving the way: historical precedents

Fashion photography emerged within and grew to dominate the commercial arena during the 1920s and 1930s, largely as a reaction against fashion illustration – or what Condé Nast, the publisher of Vogue, called ‘wilful, wild, willowy, wonderful drawings’. Vogue readers, he exclaimed, ‘were so literally interested in fashion that they wanted to see the mode thoroughly and faithfully reported – rather than rendered as a form of decorative art’ (Sebohlm 1982: 178–9). Photography was at first seen as a form of representation that possessed the ability to depict clothes realistically, without any artistic distortion.

However, rather than just providing an exact likeness of fashionable garments, in practice it constructed other forms of representation that held wider connotations. These were the same as those of the fashion illustration: the impression of a fashion ideal or chic – ‘a far more tantalising and marketable idea than a precisely detailed photograph’ (Maynard, quoted in Craik 1994: 98). In effect, early fashion photography was a continuation of this ideal, creating a visual fantasy to which women could aspire, and a standard that conventional fashion photography still pursues. The practice of using aristocrats or socialites further endorsed such a concept and it was not until art movements – surrealism, realism and modernism – surfaced within fashion and its photographic representations that such notions were challenged.

Certain fashion photographers borrowed from the different movements, creating a plurality of photographic styles. Modernism gave to fashion photography a graphic and geometric influence; surrealism inspired dream-like images. Realism, on the other hand, inspired a less formal approach: sometimes models were depicted (as never before) in action and in movement. Such a look came from ‘the realist imagery of sports fashion photography which offered the modern woman a look she could apply to her own life’ (Hall-Duncan 1979: 77). Static poses began to disappear, to be replaced by moments of narrative, fleeting impressions and relaxed actions. Elitist fashion imagery, which owed much to illustration, was superseded by more commercial pictures. While clearly shaped by the fashions of the day, such as the influence of sportswear, the impact of Hollywood was central to the construction of this new ideal. ‘Films threw up the new role models, images of a consumer society, visually based fantasies and narratives, and new codes of representation’ (Craik 1994: 101). These representations were plundered by fashion photography, most notably in the way models became ‘blemish free’ and ‘uniformly youthful’ while their potential as commodity increased (Craik 1994: 101).

While early fashion photography became less restricted, its capacity to reflect women realistically was not fully realised until the 1940s, and specifically during the Second World War. This furthered the transition to a realistic approach to photographing fashion, since magazines discouraged displays of excess and frivolity while fashion itself became more austere due to the rationing of fabrics. Lee Miller, the one-time partner of Man Ray, emerged as a key fashion photographer of this period, mainly working for British Vogue. Her photographs were as much a social documentary as a recording of fashion, showing women in wartime Britain in everyday situations. Condé Nast complimented her on one series for Vogue in 1942, asserting that:

The photographs are much more alive now, the backgrounds more interesting, the lighting and posing more dramatic and real. You managed to handle some of the deadliest studio situations in the manner of a spontaneous outdoor snapshot.

(Sebohlm 1982: 244)

This emerging realist aesthetic was also felt in America; the art director at Vogue, Alexander Liberman, realised that ‘the immediacy of the unposed news photograph could be grafted onto fashion photographs to give them a wider appeal, greater realism’ (Harrison 1991: 42). In the 1950s, Liberman commissioned photographers who used the techniques of social documentary, specifically Richard Avedon and Irving Penn, whose images contained a contrived spontaneity. Avedon captured the looks, mannequins and postures of ‘human beings’, while Penn emphasised the anthropological and sociological elements of fashion (Hall-Duncan 1979: 140–54).

In Britain a similar style to that of the ‘spontaneous snapshot’ became a hallmark of certain photographers during the 1950s. While this trend contained an element of ‘reality’, signified by the use of locations rather than the studio, its limitations were seen in the continuing construction of an aspirational feminine ideal. In effect, many of these photographs contained a fiction of reality; idealised moments that enabled ‘women to imagine what they would look like, to men, in this situation or outfit, without having to commit themselves in any way to that situation or that outfit’ (Barnard 1996: 120). While this notion may hold true of much conventional fashion photography, consumed as it is primarily by women, it is not the aim of this chapter to challenge any notion of the ‘female gaze’ – although in the 1990s, it raises problems around fashion imagery.

In the 1960s, a shift in social attitudes and new directions in publishing – particularly the influence of the magazine Nova – traversed the boundaries customarily placed around the editorial fashion story in a defiant yet controlled way. These concerns extended the role of fashion photography into a larger debate that encompassed discussions of race, sexuality and class within fashion and style (see Williams 1998). The emphasis on sexuality in fashion photography was promoted by the self-styled ‘Terrible Three’ – David Bailey, Terence Donovan and Brian Duffy – working-class Londoners with an irreverent
attitude to the world of fashion and the pretensions of its protagonists. Theirs was a vision that developed a theme of women’s independence, yet also placed value on beauty, sexuality and success. In summing up their style, Brian Duffy stressed the fact that the three of them were ‘violently heterosexual butch boys … We emphasised the fact that there were women inside the clothes. They started to look real’ (Craik 1994: 96). This was evident in a look, a gesture, a way of wearing clothes – and in documentary observations taken from their East End roots. Models such as Jean Shrimpton and Twiggy typified this new ideal; indeed, Shrimpton attributed her success to ‘ordinariness’ (Craik 1994: 105).

They were also identifiable role models for a newer, younger audience who were more attuned to the rising success of the new designers and smaller boutiques that emerged as the dominance of couture waned. The liberated new woman, who was as much a Nova construction as a reflection of the time, was reinforced within fashion imagery by the influence of metropolitan youth culture. While much 1960s fashion imagery was resolutely positive in its construction and depiction of the ‘liberated woman’, Bob Richardson reflected another side of her personality that had rarely been seen in fashion photography. He incorporated images of despair, melancholy and anxiety, using images that clearly resembled snapshots, often within a wealthy or glamorous setting – such as the famous narrative sequence set on a Mediterranean beach. However, Richardson invariably used clearly constructed tableaux to portray these wider concerns; despite the fact that he developed realistic themes within his narratives, they cannot properly be described as ‘realistic’.

In the 1970s some of these themes were taken up by photographers such as Helmut Newton and Guy Bourdin, whose style Jennifer Craig (1994: 108) calls ‘brutal realism’. However, the glamorous fashions of the period and the highly stylised images in which they were portrayed could hardly be seen as documentary. But the issues they developed, mainly the eroticism of the women, involved wider cultural debates. They could be seen as reflecting the underlying tensions about the fantasies, myths and images of sexuality – and in many ways, therefore, there is a questioning of the dominant orthodoxy of the ‘liberated woman’ that was the creation and legacy of the 1960s. Their photographs were extraordinarily explicit; it has been suggested that ‘it was difficult to imagine the spectator, whether male or female, identifying with anyone in the photograph’ (Harrison 1991: 52). They therefore encountered charges of misogyny and sexism; the photographers were accused of being exploitative and regressive. Here, fashion photography encountered critical discourse – and entered the public consciousness – through feminist debate.

Yet a new strand of documentary photography was emerging, that recorded the street styles of the time, specifically the subcultures of punk. This genre had originated in the 1960s, when photojournalists captured the upsurge in youth cultures for the newspapers and supplements of the time. Its purpose was not to record styles of dress but to document this new social phenomenon. Fashion photography had never even attempted this; it had merely tried to reflect and respond to the youthful spirit of the age and its attendant subcultural styles, while never fully abandoning its preoccupation with conventional ideals of beauty and with aspirational images of women. The powerful, growing influence of subcultures – and of increasingly subversive forms of self-presentation – was largely ignored by high-profile magazines such as Vogue, until in 1978 its then art director, Terry Jones, produced a volume entitled Not Another Punk Book; this featured portraits of punks on London’s Kings Road (Williams 1998: 11).

In 1980 this work became the basis for the magazine i-D which he founded. Its fashion editorials, known as the ‘straight up’, owed much to these portraits. The ‘straight up’ pages of photographs – featuring people spotted on the streets rather than using professional models – functioned both as portraiture and as social documentation. Yet, because of the use of credits informing the reader where the subjects had purchased their clothes, they were also within the domain of fashion photography. These images took as their point of reference and basis of style the notion of the ‘ordinary person’. However, they still worked to create an ideal of the ‘fashionable’ self. This style, which i-D and its competitor, The Face, made into the visual currency of the early 1980s, reinforced the credo that fashion was ‘lifestyle’. This notion, which has continued within their fashion editorials, has acted as a formative influence on many of the most directional photographers of the last two decades – and other publications have followed where ‘the style magazines’ led.

While maverick tendencies within fashion photography and publishing were pioneering the idea that a fashionable lifestyle was accessible to many, rather than the prerogative of a favoured few, their traditional glossy counterparts continued to depict an upwardly mobile lifestyle based on the glamorous heritage of fashion photography. This was seen in the construction of an inaccessible ideal that perfectly reflected the excess associated with the 1980s, exemplified in fashion pages by the repeated use of certain models possessed of almost superhuman physical qualities. Later, these particular women were to be nicknamed ‘supermodels’ and they would become staple journalistic fare. It was the chasm between this unattainable ideal of beauty and the very different notion of the fashionable self previously created by i-D and The Face that created a space, even a vacuum, within which the new realism in fashion photography could operate, and which it proceeded to fill. This was a realism never witnessed before within fashion photography. By breaking completely with tradition, it exceeded the confines that the unspoken politics of fashion had placed upon photography in the past, and thus called into question its role not only in the portrayal of the fashionable, but in a far wider social context.

Harsh reality: fashion photography in the 1990s

Decisive moments and turning points in fashion photography have been identified as successive styles reflecting new moods. Fashion photography has constituted both techniques of representation and techniques of self formation. It has served as an index of changing ideas about fashion and gender and about body habitus relations. (Craik 1994: 93)

As the history of fashion photography shows, it has developed the ability to reflect the spirit of its time rather than merely to showcase the preferred modes of the day. However, a number of photographers – often subversives within their field – have tried to reflect this mood as realistically as possible. Such endeavours, while still servicing the needs of fashion, have...
questioned preconceived ideals in a way that their conventional counterparts have not. These successive attempts paved the way for a photographic practice within the fashion arena that captures the reality of everyday life in a defiant and deliberate ‘anti-glour’. This style, which has been labelled the ‘school of London’ (Muir 1997: 14), has stripped bare the fantasies and the superficial ideals that the fashion industry had formerly felt compelled to portray and disseminate. Iwona Blazwick (1998: 7) describes this 1990s style of realism: ‘Constructed tableaux are rejected for a truth located in the artless, the unstaged, the semiconscious, the sexually indeterminate and the pubescent – the slippages between socially prescribed roles.’

The photographers who worked in this way, although not strictly London-based, had surfaced from within the innovative style magazines currently centred there. Among the most prolific were Corinne Day, David Sims, Juergen Teller and Nigel Shafran. While they each had their distinctive individual style, they all shared a similar aesthetic based around notions of realism. Their style had its roots in the insecure political climate of post-Thatcherism and global recession; there was a perceived platform for change. Fashion had reacted to this mood – designers presented expensive versions of the street style that the press quickly designated ‘grunge’. In fashion photography, such a change was not just made manifest in its depiction of a particular ideology, but also in the photographic technique that had helped to construct the ideal images of perfection of the past. Corinne Day, an ex-model turned photographer, was one of the first to define this change. She encompassed the mood of the new decade with a seemingly ‘unprofessional’ technique – exemplified by a series of photographs of Kate Moss (not then a ‘supermodel’) that appeared in The Face in 1990.

On a denotative level, the series shows a young, free-spirited girl, happily playing on a beach, in simple relaxed clothes or in a state of near-nudity. Her semi-nakedness signifies not an eroticism but a natural quality that is also denoted by her surroundings, her lack of grooming and the daisy chain that she wears in one particular shot within the series. Her laughing expression, her squinting eyes and playful gestures hold connotations of innocence, immaturity and a teen spirit that is further signified by her under-developed body. In some ways Moss’s ‘ordinariness’ and waifish appearance parallels that of models such as Twiggy in the 1960s. Where they differ is that, although the 1960s images reflected the new, ‘liberated’ woman of that era, who owed much to the sexual revolution, the photographs themselves were taken by male photographers, invariably the ‘Terrible Three’, who infused the images with their own sexual desire. In contrast, Day’s images neither empower nor undermine Moss’s sexuality; she appears passive; this is an image of a woman taken by a woman. The intimacy that is apparent within the series, and the natural surroundings within the image, reflect a more private, unstaged moment being acted out before the camera – like a snapshot in a family photo album. That Corinne Day was at this time a close friend of Kate Moss adds credence to this feeling, as does a photographic technique that clearly eschews the technical perfection of conventional fashion photography. Day explained, ‘She was like my little sister; we’d go off, have a laugh, take some pictures’ (Roux 1996: 12). In essence, this is what Day captures, combining a realistic documentation and a fashion photograph, thereby negating the strictures of a precise photographic technique and the false ideals of ‘femininity’ previously created within fashion imagery.

However, the title of Day’s series, ‘The Third Summer of Love’ is of course a direct reference to the 1960s and the original ‘Summer of Love’ of 1967. The evocation of the hippie ethos of ‘peace and love’, and an alternative lifestyle that was a reaction against consumerism, in some ways reinforces the connotations of Day’s images. Where it differs is in the impetus behind the second Summer of Love: the second time this term was used, in 1988, it was to describe the emergence of acid house and rave culture. Although vaguely similar in its ideals to its 1960s counterpart, it was rooted firmly in drug culture and hedonism, particularly in the use of Ecstasy, rather than in the counter-cultural philosophical concerns of the original hippies (Polhemus 1994: 64). While Day’s images in this series do not directly draw on such references, apart from that implicit in its title, her realist style later explored the surrounding culture and therefore lost much of its optimism.

These pessimistic signs, which in some ways reflect Bob Richardson’s style of the 1960s, can be seen in a series of photographs for Vogue in 1993 entitled ‘Under Exposure’. Here Day’s style switches from a sense of the abandonment embodied by her youthful models into one that evokes a feeling of loneliness and urban alienation. This is signified by Kate Moss alone, in her cold, starkly furnished flat, again in a state of undress. That it is cold is signified by Kate sitting on a radiator, in a dishevelled quilt that connotes poverty; so too does her pale thin body and the sparse surroundings. The sense of urban alienation is indicated by Kate looking out of her window on to the world outside, with a television and telephone as her only means of communication. Her expression is mainly blank as she stares out of the shot, or window, suggesting boredom; this is further connoted by her nonchalant poses, which may indicate a reference to drug culture, as could the Lou Reed cassette seen in one image.

The narrative of this series seems to suggest an awkwardness and uncertainty that are integral to youth; its grim reality likens it to a series of snapshots, further enhancing this feeling. But there is an ambiguity about these images. Writing in the New Yorker, Hilton Als remarked:

The pictures in question were in some ways Day’s apotheosis as a photographer. Besides being intensely moving – Day had managed to catch on film Moss’s transition from young chum to commodity – they are a first testimony to the fashion industry’s now pervasive flirtation with death. The naked bruised look in Moss’s eyes was an apt expression of the brutality that Day was beginning to experience in the fashion world.

(Als, quoted in Williams 1998: 114)

While Als notes that the photos are a form of documentation in the sense of Moss’s career trajectory, like many other media commentators he saw them primarily as holding wider connotations – for him, these spoke of death and mortality. Such a message was conveyed by elements of despair within the narrative of this series – but that these images held such extreme connotations is largely due to their context in a glossy fashion magazine, and specifically within the pages of Vogue. Als’s understanding of these images seems to be based on the perception of traditional fashion photographs, which is that they are designed to create an unattainable ideal and a fantasy, in other words to function as fiction. However, Day seems to challenge the notion of how fashion photography should be perceived by breaking with the previously accepted practices that created
these impossible ideals. Robin Muir, picture editor of Vogue at the time, describes them as ‘eerie stills from a gritty documentary or freeze frames from someone’s home movie. Whatever they were, they weren’t fashion photographs’ (Muir 1997: 14). As Als and Muir both note, Day challenges what a fashion photograph should be by incorporating elements of documentary. She seems to back this up in her description of the pictures and of Moss herself:

we were poking fun at fashion. Halfway through the shoot, I realised it wasn’t fun for her and that she was no longer my best friend but had become a model. She hadn’t realised how beautiful she was and when she did, I found I didn’t think her beautiful anymore.

(Day quoted in Muir 1997: 14)

Therefore these images are as much, if not more, about making a documentary of her friend, in her own flat, evolving into a model and consequently into a commodity, as they are a narrative of a typical teenage girl. Indeed, the fact that the photographs were shot in Moss’s own flat further links them with documentary photographs. However, as this fact is not usually known to the spectator, they can only be understood within the context of traditional fashion photography. They are therefore seen to create not a realistic ideal but a narrative of misfortune. In doing this, Day pokes fun not only at fashion conventions – showing tights-over-knickers as never before seen in Vogue – but at the industry as a whole. Whatever the ambiguous function and possible readings of these images, whether they are seen as documentary or as realistically stylised tableaux, there is an element of discomfort about the possibly voyeuristic nature of viewing such intimacy that has led to misinterpretation. Their context, then, can be seen to confuse their meaning; indeed, if they had been placed within The Face or on a gallery wall, it is likely that they would not have caused any offence.

Testament to this assumption is the social documentary work of photographic artist Nan Goldin. Cited as a major influence for fashion photographers of the 1990s, Goldin has created a compelling photographic diary of her life that explores the depths and heights of human existence, recording the deaths of many of her friends and fellow-travellers from drugs and AIDS-related illnesses. Michael Bracewell, writing in Frieze, notes that ‘she records photographically, that portion of society that is divorced from the usual restraints and support systems that service and control contemporary urban life’ (Bracewell 1993: 34). However, the apparent intimacy between Goldin and her friends in her photographs deflects the sense of voyeurism, while the snapshot aesthetic further averts such a feeling. It is as if we were invited to join and view her world with all of its highs and lows – above all because it is hung on a gallery wall, or seen within a book, and thus validated by the critical value that the art world places upon it.

In contrast, Day’s images could – wrongly – be seen as exploiting her intimacy with Moss due to their primary use within a fashion magazine. It was never the job of fashion photography and fashion magazines to invite us into a private world; theirs has never been a domain of truth but rather one where the prevailing function is that of commerce. It therefore seems that the context in which photographic realism is seen confounds its meaning; seemingly ‘art photography’ and ‘realist’ fashion photography have ostensibly different roles. In fashion’s case, this role is seen as promoting a destructive ideal, rather than the fantasy which it is normally expected to purvey; within an art context it is seen as making visible the situation and the needs of the less fortunate. As Scott William (1986: 9) writes, ‘social documentary encourages social improvement ... It works through the emotions of the members of its audience to shape their attitude toward certain public facts ... It is that maligned thing, propaganda.’

With the blurring of these boundaries, both art and fashion photography are imbued with different meanings; fashion appropriates the richness of art, while art – in this case Nan Goldin – can fall prey to the fictitious values of fashion. Thus, when Goldin works in the fashion arena, the validity of her personal work has been questioned. Collier Schorr in Frieze comments that ‘as much as we count on fashion to lie, perhaps we have begun to rely rather too heavily on art to be sincere’ (Schorr 1997: 93). But while some question Goldin’s work in fashion, her intention is clearly that of the documentary photographer – to work on the viewer’s emotions, to shape attitudes. In Goldin’s fashion work, for Matsuda and Helmut Lang, she affronts her audience into questioning the preconceived ideals that fashion holds. In one advertising image for Matsuda, two fully clothed women are seen lying in a form of embrace on a bed. One of the women is wearing revealing, sheer clothing, while both have sweaty complexions. The photograph is entitled ‘Sharon and Kathleen embracing, Bowery, NYC, 1996’, furthering the ambiguous connotations; the Bowery in New York is synonymous with social deprivation. These women could be prostitutes, lesbian partners or friends comforting each other, sharing an intimate moment. Their grimy complexities and setting also reference a drug-induced setting. Goldin’s previous work, including her book The Balliad of Sexual Dependency (1989), lend credence to such connotations, although its implications are apparent even for a spectator completely unaware of her other work.

The fact that this work is actually fashion advertising confuses the issue further since the role of fashion advertising (even more than that of the fashion editorial spread) has traditionally been to sell an ideal and a lifestyle. Therefore Goldin’s images could be seen as an attempt to promote an ideal of deprivation. However, the idea that fashion photography could play an active role in influencing social habits and lifestyles is not wholly convincing, despite a plethora of media claims during the last decade. Indeed, such claims have never been substantiated – Goldin was not trying to promote prostitution or drug abuse; Corinne Day was not advocating anorexia. Such images can work as a conventional marketing tool when used in a context where their audience will understand the dominant conventions, especially in fashion advertising, where they can promote a completely different lifestyle to that actually depicted. The prospective clients are not buying into a world of deprivation but into the usual ‘ideal that anybody can be fashionable’, however disenfranchised from society that person is. However the book Fashion Photography of the Nineties (Nickerson and Wakefield 1996) seems to suggest that such images do have a deeper meaning, other reverberations. Containing images culled from the fashion world, both traditional celebrations and their ‘wilder counterparts’, and using both ‘art’ and documentary photography, the book confuses fiction with reality by placing these various images within the context of a single volume. The very brief text claims that:
In these photographs the body and its gestures report on the defining characteristics of a decade ... The ambiguity of gender and beauty lays bare our secret desires, dissolving the boundaries between what is worn and the way we wear it ... Out of the collision between style and the subconscious emerges a portrait of our time.

(Nickerson and Wakefield 1996)

That it 'lays bare our secret desires' is an ambitious claim, but one image by Juergen Teller reproduced within the previous edition, 2000, of this book consolidates many of the issues surrounding the realist fashion imagery of this decade. First published in the German broadsheet supplement *Suddeutsche Zeitung Magazin*, the image is taken from a series entitled 'Morals and Fashion'. In the series the model Kristen McMenamy is seen naked but for the word 'Versace' written in lipstick in a heart shape on her breasts and buttocks. In part of the series the poses replicate that of contrived fashion photography, in others she is walking around a stark room like a model preparing for a fashion show. In what is clearly a constructed tableau, although formally resembling a series of snapshots, Teller sends up the fashion ideals denoted by the use of the word 'Versace', whose clothing is generally considered to connote glamour and sex. McMenamy's skin is mottled, scarred and bruised, while a tampon string is clearly visible. Teller is surely questioning the value of Versace's sexy ideals by showing very different images of women within this tableau. In a sense, considering McMenamy's bruised body, Teller seems to go as far as suggesting that women are exploited by the fashion industry. That McMenamy appeared flawless in a glamorous high-profile advertising campaign for Versace, shot by Richard Avedon, in some ways substantiates this suggestion. Of the images, Teller said,

I chose Kristen because I am fed up with the glorification of the model. You see her in so many magazines looking glamorous and polished, but she's not like that. She's wild and funny and more like an actress. I agree that the bruising is quite grotesque, but that shows the fragility of the body. And that fragility is more beautiful to me than any amount of retouching.

(Roux 1996: 42)

However, the result of these images is almost a parody of his own work and of the realist fashion photographs of the decade. By mixing the realist snapshot aesthetic with contrived tableaux to make clear his own feelings about the fashion industry, Teller renders the images' likeness to reality inauthentic, since they are clearly as constructed as those criticised for conveying ideals of perfection. This questions the authenticity of other 'realist' images, and in doing so suggests that this style has possibly lost its primary impact – the ability to shock. However, realism in fashion photography, although less prevalent now than in the early 1990s, has refused to go away and its proliferation in the 1990s raises certain questions.

Can we agree that out of the 'subconscious emerges a portrait of our time' (Nickerson and Wakefield 1996)? Can we consider this style, then, as a collective movement? Roland Barthes has said of documentary photography that it is an 'explosion of the private into public, or rather into the creation of a new social value, which is the publicity of the private' (Barthes 1981: 98). Surely realist fashion photography possesses this capacity and, in the 1990s, this rendering of the private into the public acted as a subconscious attempt to affirm what has been lost through increasing virtual reality, through the process by which technology and media take the place of society or community. This implication can be seen in Corinne Day's series 'Under Exposure' for *Vogue*, where a sense of urban isolation, physical loneliness and social alienation are forcefully conveyed through these particular images of Kate Moss in her sparse flat, where her television set connotes her only visible bond with the outside world. Yet while images such as these may be seen as disquieting and uncomfortable (as indicated by the hostile media reaction), the sight of these fundamental actions and private moments are 'reassuring in their familiarity' (Muir 1998: 105). In effect, they seem to reinforce the bonds of human community by 'reclaiming lost areas of compassion and humanity' (Bracewell 1993: 37).

Perhaps realist fashion photography has been successful in pointing to this aspect of our culture where photojournalism has, seemingly, failed. As Michael Mack writes:

In an era dominated by the technological intrusion of the spectacular, the lament rings wide that such is our over-exposure to scenes of individual suffering and mass disaster that we are encompassed by a malaise and a hedonism that preclude their continuing significance.

(Mack 1996: 232)

It therefore seems that realist fashion photography in the 1990s has that function that photojournalism has lost, perhaps through its sheer volume. Furthermore, realist fashion photography can reach a wider audience than social documentary or art photography could ever hope to achieve. Indeed, when President Clinton of the United States of America refers to fashion photography's ability to influence social behaviour, as in his attack on 'heroin chic' (CNN 1997), then clearly it has a deeper impact, even if it does not or cannot activate any radical social change. By complicating its formerly established role, and in its evident capacity to evoke both literal reality and the collective unconscious, fashion photography now has much more to say to us than is credited or acknowledged.

In its inherent search for the new, fashion stumbled upon this particular photographic practice, which, while rooted in the avant-garde, went on to penetrate the mainstream. Perhaps the images that proliferated did more than present a challenge to conventional ideals, suggesting that fashion was now more democratic and that anybody could be fashionable. Nan Goldin, among others, chose to document and depict 'real' people wearing fashionable clothes.

One caveat, however – realist fashion imagery did not, and does not, go as far as it might. The exclusion here as elsewhere of the non-slim, the non-young and those who are not able-bodied must have certain implications. The collaboration between Alexander McQueen and Nick Knight on the 'Fashion-Able' shoot for *Dazed and Confused* (October 1998) is notable within fashion photography precisely because it is without precedent and – so far – without parallel.
But this is not to detract, hopefully, from the implications and potential of 1990s realism. Yet, through the sheer velocity of the mechanics that constitute the fashion industry, this style will at some point be superseded. But its impact, its ability to cause controversy where photojournalism has lost that power, is undeniable. It can confront problematic issues, force us to ask questions and to address wider concerns. Susan Sontag’s axiom makes a fitting conclusion: ‘Great fashion photography is more than the photography of fashion’ (Sontag 1978: 104).

Note

1 Interview with Charlotte Cotton, assistant curator of photography, Victoria and Albert Museum, 20 December 1998.

References

Schorr, Collier (1997) ‘A pose is a pose is a pose’, Frieze, April: 63.
Chapter 13

Rachel Lifter

FASHIONING INDIE

The consecration of a subculture and the emergence of ‘stylish’ femininity

The term ‘INDIE’ is an abbreviation of the word ‘independent’. Originally, it was coined to refer to the independent music scene that emerged in the wake of punk in the United Kingdom during the late 1970s and early 1980s (Reynolds 2005). This scene was understood not only to be punk’s chronological successor, but also its heir (Hesmondhalgh 1999). That is, uncontrolled by the music industry, the small labels and musicians working in the independent scene were to carry on the legacy of punk by revolting against – resisting – ‘mainstream’ pop music. Simon Reynolds’ (1989) reading of the indie look of the 1980s explores this idea of ‘resistance’. In an article that appeared in Angela McRobbie’s (1989) edited volume Zoot Suits and Secondhand Dresses, Reynolds subjects the indie look of the 1980s to semiotic analysis. In a discussion that implicitly references Hebdige’s (1979) definition of subcultural style as a ‘Refusal’, he describes the indie look as a rejection of the celebration of sexual maturity promoted by popular fashion culture of the 1980s. He continues: ‘this ‘dream of purity’ is made manifest in a sartorial obsession with the 1960s and childhood – two pre-sexual periods’ (1989: 250). Reynolds’ analysis is extremely interesting, not least because he provides a detailed description of the garments and styles commonly associated with the indie look of the 1980s: for example, ‘cardigans, overcoats, slacks, short jackets, caps, headscarves, quaint jewellery, short-back-and-sides (absolutely no long hair or perms)’ (1989: 250–51; emphasis in original). However, his analysis needs to be updated to account for changes in indie and the indie look since the late 1980s.

Over the past twenty years, indie has expanded and diversified. At various points in its history, indie music has become widely visible in the UK and also internationally. In the mid-1990s, for example, indie bands such as Suede, Elastica, Blur and Pulp emerged onto the centre stage of popular music as part of the indie sub-genre known as Britpop. In the early 2000s, indie music experienced a second explosion when bands like The Strokes, The Libertines, Bloc Party and The Arctic Monkeys became widely popular throughout the UK. Indie’s growth has to do not only with music, moreover, but also fashion. My own introduction to indie came in the summer of 2005, when images of supermodel Kate Moss and her then-boyfriend Libertines frontman Pete Doherty at the Glastonbury summer music festival were ubiquitous throughout the popular fashion media. Such images served as my introduction to indie and its defining look of skinny jeans; however, they also drew attention to a blurriness of the boundaries around indie. By 2005, Moss was established as an internationally recognised supermodel, and outside of her relationship with Doherty she had few ties to indie. In the images of the two, she is representative of contemporary fashionable ideals and, specifically, British fashion. It is the goal of this chapter to problematise these interconnections between indie and popular fashion in the UK: how these connections were forged over the last twenty years and how they persist today.

Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s (1993a; 1993b) concepts of ‘consecration’ and ‘field’, the chapter begins by examining indie’s evolution, focusing on the way in which its figures and styles were consecrated within the field of popular fashion in the UK: first by the style press and later by the high-fashion media and broadsheet press. This story sheds light not only on developments within indie, but also on changes in the value system and organisation of the field of popular fashion. Specifically, it reveals a proliferation of discourses on ‘style’ across a range of print media genres. It is this pervasive discourse on ‘style’ that stands at the centre of analysis in the second part of the chapter. Drawing on Michel Foucault’s (2002) concept ‘discourse’, the chapter analyses contemporary representations of indie – specifically, a sub-set of indie representations having to do with ‘festival fashion’ – to explore how this discourse on ‘style’ creates a space for feminine identities to form. ‘Stylish’ femininity is not unproblematic, however. As the chapter shows, within contemporary culture ‘style’ is constituted through notions of both democratisation and exclusivity. The goal of the chapter is thus to provide an integrated account of indie and the wider field of popular fashion, into which it has become embedded. It is the contention of the chapter that such an exploration of the two sides together reveals new information about both.

Consecrating indie

As has already been noted, Reynolds (1989) contends that the indie look of the 1980s did not cohere aesthetically with contemporaneous popular fashion trends. This point can be explored not only in relation to the material garments used to construct the indie look, but also in relation to the representation – or rather, lack of representation – of the indie look within the popular fashion media. For example, across the years 1986 and 1987 – important years for the establishment of indie as a space for musical production – the youth style magazine i-D’s coverage of indie consisted of one article by William Leith that read,

What it comes down to is that today’s ‘Indie Scene’ … are not ‘anti-style’. They’re just not stylish. For the most part, they don’t wear anoraks and national health specs as some kind of showbiz rejection number. They wear them