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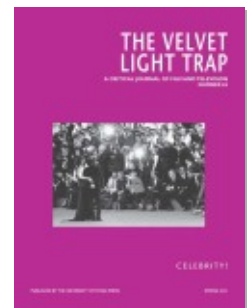
Hannah Montana's Bare, Unprotected Back: Miley Cyrus's
Vanity Fair Outing

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Hannah Montana's Bare, Unprotected Back: Miley Cyrus's *Vanity Fair* Outing

Here we go again: another kid we have made into a centerfold and tell ourselves is merely “cute” (as if there were a “merely” there). She follows our undercover instructions, tarts herself up for public consumption, and now takes the heat for doing as she’s told. This time it’s Miley Cyrus, subject of some photos, the most recent by the canny (and smarmy) Annie Leibovitz in June 2008’s *Vanity Fair*. The photo in question shows a heavily made-up Cyrus, then fifteen, hair messy, eyes droopy, clutching a sheet to her chest as she faces us from the side, flashing (gasp) bare shoulders and full back. The possibility exists—you care, right?—that she is topless, maybe bottomless, maybe even shoeless—who can know for sure? Some feel (and many have said) that she looks as if she had just had sex or something equally unthinkable for a fifteen year old (which explains why we think it). Others say, c’mon, get over it, she’s only doing what kids enjoy doing, get a life, leave her alone.

I side with the second group, I guess, though I can’t but wonder why so much attention is being paid. Hey, I went on one site inviting comments—I am a responsible scholar and figured I should inform myself—and blithely set the printer to running. I found myself, 347 pages later, with a couple of thousand gems like this:

This girl makes me sick. If she were a dog, I’d kick her in the face.

So she was wrong? It’s not nearly as bad as you morons looking.

It’s not OK. This is why teen pregnancy is at an all-time high.

I think it’s a cry for help that’s what I think.

I say get her started young just not to the point where it’s child pornography.



Figure 1. The exposure of Miley Cyrus (*Vanity Fair*, Annie Leibovitz, 2008).

I’m shock to see these pictures of Miley. But we all make mistake.

If you feel like judging someone judge yourself.

But I’m getting ahead of myself. You may not know too much about Miley Cyrus, may not even know who she is. Unlikely, but there are among us the uninformed and the snooty. So—Miley Cyrus (her real name is something else) is the star of a Disney Channel show called

Hannah Montana. It's not just any show but Disney's top show among its target audience and worth untold millions. Lumping together her earnings—she also sings, I think—she may be worth \$1 billion by the time she's eighteen, or so say the *New York Times* and the *New York Post*, which seldom agree on anything. A billion dollars is more than I make, more than is made by every English professor in this country combined, so we'd be well advised to speak with some respect here. It's true that my own knowledge of this megastar is of recent birth and still incomplete. *Parade* magazine invited me to take a Miley Cyrus quiz, twenty-five questions to test how well I really know her, and I did. Got four right, which isn't great but a beginning. I'll admit one was a lucky guess. (With which of the Jonas Brothers did she have a relationship? Nick, I luckily hazarded.) There was one I feel sure I should have had. (Which sport did Miley have to abandon to go into acting? Gymnastics, I figured, but turns out it was cheerleading.)

Still, ignorance aside, I have lots of opinions on this controversy. For one thing, we ought to be used to this by now: we do it to all child stars, virtually all children. Ever since the Victorian period we have so eroticized children that we cannot help but turn kids into centerfolds. Stars, paid to be the objects of our gaze, have little choice but to stand before us unprotected and often pretty much unclothed. Even when dressed (sort of) they are ogled. Graham Greene was run out of England for pointing out that Shirley Temple, that "little totsy," was swishing her fanny to theaters strangely empty of children, populated instead, he said, by "panting" middle-aged men, clergymen especially.

Germaine Greer has recently argued that what we think of as "woman viewing" in the West is really "little girl viewing": "In western art, most of the women portrayed semi-clad or totally nude are children." We might amend that to add little boys as well and cite the long line of the posed-to-be-looked-at: Jackie Coogan, Freddie Bartholomew, Mickey Rooney, Ricky Schroder, Macaulay

Culkin, and Zach and Cody from *The Suite Life*. Looking at kids, from Little League to tap dancing, is our major certified sport in the United States, and the looking is far from innocent. We position kids as erotic objects, helpless, innocent, and deeply vulnerable.

In this light the Leibovitz photo of Miley Cyrus could not be more directly up our alley. According to CNN, Leibovitz defended herself, through the magazine, as imagining a portrait "topless but demure." Though not, like me, an English professor with ready, almost automatic, access to the *OED*, Leibovitz, I'll bet, is aware of the meaning of "demure": "affectedly or constrainedly decorous, reserved, or coy, in a way that is not natural to the person or to one of his [*sic*] age or condition."

However that may be, we have positioned kids as almost completely vacant, without substance of any kind. Originally, "innocence" (the major attribute we pin on the young) meant something solid, even had attached to it positive qualities: sensitivity, quasi divinity, a deep connection to nature. Gradually, though, as the nineteenth century wore on, "innocence" came to mean little more than sexuality-not-there, an unthinkable eroticism that required us to think of little else.

Children are commonly imaged as empty slates on which we can draw our desires, figure our longings: empty faces, open hearts, eager glances. They are not so much illegible as infinitely open to inscription. Miley Cyrus's big, bare, unprotected back, carefully lit for all to see, is, then, a slate on which we can scrawl our rudest and most obscene comments without fear of detection.

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