

Sex, Kids and the Slut Look

JOY OVERBECK

THE OTHER DAY MY 10-YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER AND I breached the prurient wilds of the Junior Fashion Department. Nothing in what she sneeringly calls the "little kid" department seems to fit anymore. She's tall for her age and at that awkward fashion stage between Little Red Riding Hood and Amy Fisher. She patrolled the racks, hunting the preteen imperative—a pair of leg-strangling white tights culminating in several inches of white lace. Everywhere were see-through dresses made out of little-flower-print fabric, lacy leggings, transparent tops and miniature bustiers for females unlikely to own busts. Many were garments that Cher would have rejected as far too obvious.

Lace leggings? When I went to grade school, you were sent home if you wore even normal pants. The closest we got to leggings were our Pillsbury Doughboy snow pants, mummy-padding we pulled on under our dresses and clumped around in as we braved the frigid blasts of winter. Today's high-school girls have long dressed like street-corner pros; but since when did elementary school become a Frederick's of Hollywood showroom?

Grousing that her dumb clothes compromised her popularity, the offspring had herded me to fashion's outer limits. She appeared to be the only 10-year-old in the area; the rest were 14 or so, unaccompanied by their mothers. She pranced up, holding out a hanger on which dangled a crocheted skirt the size of a personals ad and a top whose deep V-neck yawned like the jaws of hell.

"Isn't this great! I want this!" she yodeled, sunshine beaming from her sweet face once more. "You're 10 years old," I said. "Shhh," she hissed, whipping her head around in frantic oh-God-did-anybody-hear mode. Then she accused me of not wanting her to grow up. She's 10 years old and the kid talks like a radio shrink.

It's not really that I want her to be a little girl forever. It's just that it would be nice if she were a child during her childhood. Instead, she's been bathed in the fantasy of bodies and beauty that marinates our entire culture. The result is an insidious form of premature sexual awakening that is stealing our kids' youth.

Meredith was 8 and we were in the car, singing along to some heartbroken musical lament on the radio, when she said, "Mom, why is everything in the world about sex?" I laughed and asked where she got that idea. But then, listening as she knowledgeably recited examples from music, movies, MTV and advertising, it hit me that she was right. The message of our popular culture for any observant 8-year-old is: *sex rules*. Otherwise, why would it deserve all this air



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time, all this agony and ecstasy, all this breathless attention?

Kids pick up on the sexual laser focus of our society, then mimic what they see as the ruling adult craze, adding their own bizarre kid twist. Recently, I read that the authors of "The Janus Report on Sexual Behavior" were shocked to find how many had sex at 10, 11 and 12. Too young to know how to handle it, kids mix sex with the brutal competitiveness they learn in the two worlds they know best: sports and the streets. Sex is grafted onto their *real* consuming passion—to be the most radical dude or dudette in their crowd. Peer pressure—what I'm seeing now in my 10-year-old's wardrobe angst—takes over. The result is competitive sex: California gangs vying for the record in number of girls bedded; teenage boys raping girls my daughter's age in a heartless sexual all-star game where all that counts is the points you rack up. In Colorado Springs, not far from where I live, gangs are demanding that kids as young as 10 have sex as a form of initiation. It's the old "chicken" game in "Rebel Without a Cause," played with young bodies instead of cars.

The adult reaction to all of this is outrage. But why should we be shocked? Children learn by example. Sex is omnipresent. What do we expect when we allow fashion designers to dress us, grown women, in garments so sheer that any passing stranger can see us nearly naked for the price of a casual glance?

Or look at Madonna on the cover of *Vanity Fair* wearing only a pink inner tube and hair done up in cutesy '50s pigtails. Here's a 34-year-old heroine to little girls—the core of her fandom is about 14—posing as innocent jailbait. Inside, she romps on a playground in baby-doll nighties, toying with big, stuffed duckies and polar bears. This is a blatant child molester's fantasy-in-the-flesh. Does kiddie porn encourage sex crimes against children? Who cares!

Rudimentary good sense must tell us that sexualizing children not only sullies their early years, but also exposes them to real danger from human predators. What our culture needs is a little reality check: in an era when sexual violence against children is heartbreakingly common—a recent study estimates that about one quarter of women have been victims of childhood sexual abuse—anything that eroticizes our children is irresponsible, at best.

It's up to adults to explode the kids-are-sexy equation. Our kids need us to give them their childhood back. But this summer, the eroticization of our girl children proceeds apace. The crop tops! The tight little spandex shorts! (Our moms wore them under their clothes and called them girdles.) My daughter's right, everybody struts her stuff. I've seen 5-year-old *Pretty Babies*.

As for me, I don't care anymore if my kid has a hissy fit in the junior department. She's not wearing the Slut Look. Let her rant that I'm a hopelessly pathological mom who wants to keep her in pacifiers and pinafores forever. Let her do amateur psychoanalysis on me in public until my ears fry—I've shaken the guilt heebie-jeebies and drawn the line. So you can put those white lace spandex leggings back on the rack, young lady.

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Selling the woman-child

Kate Moss is in the news again, this time for getting tied up and shot to death in a music video. Actually, the murder isn't shown on the video. She is seen beautifully dressed, dead and bound to a chair while Johnny Cash warbles his recording of "Delia's Gone."

Moss is the emaciated supermodel whose vacant stare, unsmiling lips and frequently nude 105-pound body are on endless public display these days, mostly in Calvin Klein ads. Her wan "New Waif" look irritates many women, mostly because it seems to glorify anorexia. Her ads have been targeted by a Boston-based group called Boycott Anorexic Marketing. In some cities, antistarvation graffiti often appear on Kate Moss outdoor ads, usually "feed me" or "give me a cheeseburger." Sometimes the skull of a skeleton is drawn over her face.

"To many people, she represents a skeleton and death anyway," says Barbara Lippert, a columnist for *Adweek*. Lippert thinks that getting tied up and gunned down by Johnny Cash can be viewed as a logical extension of the ghostly victim theme pushed so hard in some of Moss's work. In many ads, the naked Moss looks like she has been abused, or is about to be.

Moss is a very troubling figure and a prime indicator of our degraded popular culture. She is the modern female as blank, fragile stick figure. Her pictures are full of strange allusions, many of them perverse. In a report last month on the new glamorizing of heroin use, the *New York Times* mentioned that "some social critics see an allusion to hard drugs" in Moss's dead-eyed, hollow-cheeked look.

Here and there, her photos flirt with themes of masturbation (fingering her breasts under her bra), bestiality (posing nude with a large dog), incest (under a towel, apparently nude, being hugged by her brother) and violence (bare-breasted, with blackened or bruised eyes, holding her hand over her mouth and looking upset).

20, going on 12. None of this is unusual in the fashion world. What makes these themes explosive is her very young look. She has just turned 20, but as she said a year or so ago, "I look 12." This propels many of her photos into the category of child sex.

In her ads, Moss often looks like a vulnerable and compliant child, stripped for sexual use. "The message of these pictures is that she is very young and very available," says Linnea Smith, a North Carolina psychiatrist and anti-porn crusader. Other commentators have noted the theme of Moss as a slightly soiled and exploitable street urchin. *Harper's Bazaar* says she looks "like a kid from a latter-day Fagin's gang."

The naked child, staring vacantly and helplessly at the

camera, is a staple of child pornography. One of Moss's photos shows her cringing nude in the corner of a huge sofa, with legs locked and arms pressed to her breasts, as if bracing for an impending sexual assault.

A more familiar shot of Moss shows her lying nude on her stomach on a sofa, legs parted, looking up pliantly at the camera as if to say, "Is this what you want me to do?" In the picture, she appears to be about 10 or 12 years old, slightly fearful and unusually androgynous, thus appealing to pedophiles of all persuasions. A cropped version of this photo appears in outdoor Calvin Klein ads, on buses and phone booths.

With little resistance, Calvin Klein has placed images that sexualize children onto the streets, where they register with adults and children alike. "You can't turn the dial to escape it," says Smith. "What are we supposed to do, run for a bus with our eyes covered?" Well, no. A good rule is that those who want soft core should be able to get it, but those who don't should be able to avoid it. In the current circumstances, they can't.

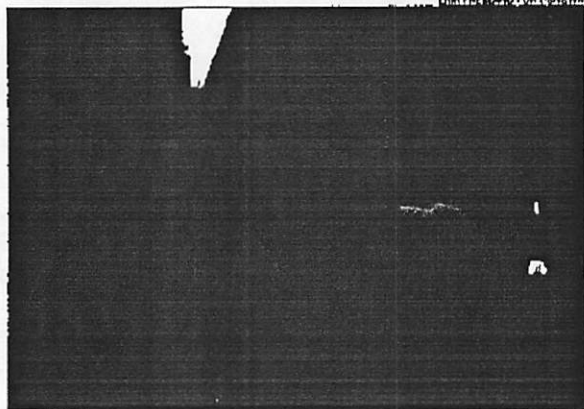
The usual interpretation of no-frills nymphets like Kate Moss is that they represent a reaction to the busty Amazonian models of the 1980s and express the

bleak, antiglamour, antistatus spirit of the 1990s. Calvin Klein says they represent a return to more sensitive, more fragile beauty.

Could be. But they also represent the old game of taboo breaking. Six years ago, Klein was quoted in *Vogue* as saying that in his ads, "I've done everything I could do in a provocative sense without being arrested." But scrounging around for taboos to break in the age of Oprah is a hard business. Sexualizing children may be the final frontier.

Then, too, there is the personal input of Calvin Klein to consider. In *Obsession*, the new unauthorized biography of the designer by Steven Gaines and Sharon Churcher, he is portrayed as sexually ambivalent. Klein eroticizes both sexes in his ads, but the males are portrayed in a straightforward way—lots of writhing and crotch grabbing but no death masks, bruised eyes, anorexia or child exploitation hovering around the edges. That seems to show up only in his women.

His clothes are nice, but in advertising he's a perverse force. The child-sexuality theme alone is enough to make magazines and billboard companies think twice about the stuff they are pumping into the culture. Consumers should consider letting a boycott come between them and their Calvins. ■



Eroticized klosks. The ubiquitous superwaif Kate Moss