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The Michael Jackson Affair: A Postmodern Morality Play

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In a very real sense, the Michael Jackson affair represents the intersection of America's celebrity culture and postmodern morality. This collision has produced one of the most sickening and strange contexts for moral consideration. Obsessed with celebrity, fascinated by eccentric entertainers, and increasingly unsure of even the most basic moral principles, the public mind is torn between moral repugnance and gawpish fascination.

Jackson's appearance on CBS News' 60 Minutes news magazine moved this morality play into its next act. Ed Bradley's interview was significant, not so much for new material uncovered, but for Michael Jackson's steadfast insistence that he can live by his own contorted morality.

Charged with sexually molesting a 13-year-old boy, Jackson now faces his second public accusation of pedophilia and sexual abuse. In 1993, Jackson was similarly accused, but that case never came to criminal charges because Jackson paid his accuser a financial settlement and the boy refused to testify. The 1993 controversy prompted public concern about Michael Jackson's increasingly weird behavior, his bizarre appearance, and his strange attraction to children. His decision to pay off his accuser short-circuited the legal process and prevented any moral resolution. Most Americans simply hoped that the controversy—and Michael Jackson—would simply disappear from the public arena. Not hardly.

In the 60 Minutes interview, Jackson was asked to respond to the charges brought by the district attorney in Santa Barbara. Jackson responded that the accusations of sexual molestation are "totally false." Jackson added: "Before I would hurt a child, I would slit my wrists. I would never hurt a child. It's totally false. I was outraged. I could never do something like that."

The next several minutes of the interview afforded Jackson the opportunity to play the martyr. It was an unconvincing performance. He claimed that police officers had manhandled him during his arrest and that his shoulder had been dislocated. "It's hurting me very badly. I'm in pain all the time. See this arm? This is as far as I can reach it. Same with this side over here." He also claimed to have been locked in a restroom for 45 minutes and mistreated repeatedly by the police. He further complained that his Neverland home had been torn apart by police searching for evidence. His attitude was defiance mixed with his pathetic claim of abuse.

Throughout, Jackson's appearance and voice added to the confusion. After a series of plastic surgery procedures, Jackson now has the appearance of an androgynous cartoon character—complete with pancake makeup, lipstick, and eyeliner. His bizarre appearance and effeminate voice created the impression of a pathetic figure caught in a constant process of self-invention and gender confusion.

The most morally repulsive aspect of the 60 Minutes interview came when Michael Jackson steadfastly defended the practice of sharing his bed with young boys. Jackson had first made this argument in a documentary broadcast earlier this year for which he was interviewed by journalist Martin Bashir. Even after the 1993 allegations of sexual abuse, when he was accused of sexually molesting a young boy during overnight stays at Neverland, Jackson defended his practice of bed-sharing: "Why can't you share your bed? The most loving thing to do, is to share your bed with someone." He described this practice as "very charming" and "very sweet." We are dealing here with a very sick man.

Amazingly, Jackson also insisted that sharing his bed and bedroom with underage boys has no sexual overtones. "When you say bed, they make that sexual. It's not sexual. We're going to sleep." He explained that he customarily tucks the boys in, puts some music on, reads them a book, gives them cookies, and then goes to sleep. "We have cookies. It's very charming. It's very sweet. It's what the whole world should do." So the problem is simply in the perverted imagination of his critics, Jackson proclaimed.

Ed Bradley pressed Jackson on his defense of what any normal person would see as pedophilia. Jackson insisted: "If you're gonna be a pedophile, if you're gonna be Jack the Ripper, if you're gonna be a murderer, it's not a good idea. That I'm not." Well, even CBS News found this just too much to take. Give Ed Bradley credit for not letting Jackson get by with this kind of moral evasion. After Jackson insisted repeatedly that sharing his bed with boys had nothing to do with sex, Bradley asked: "Do you know any other man your age, a 45-year-old man, who shares his bedroom with children?" When Jackson insisted that he did in fact know of others who shared the practice, Bradley lowered the boom: "Well, let me say, from my perspective, my experience, I don't know any 45-year-old men, who are not relatives of the children, who share their bedroom with other children."

For the better part of his life, Michael Jackson has been a celebrity, a media invention, and an obviously tortured soul. His first recording contract came as a part of the "Jackson 5" through a contract with Berry Gordy's Motown Records. At that time Michael was only ten years old, nevertheless, he had already been performing with the family group in strip joints and nightclubs. He had been pushed into this entertainment culture by his father, and was then taken to religious services on Sunday by his mother—a devout member of the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Jackson's first solo album hit the charts in 1972, when he was only 14. The rest is recording history. In 1984, Jackson won eight Grammy awards for his album "Thriller." In 1986 his song "We are the World" won Song of the Year at the Grammy's. His various tours and singing albums made Michael Jackson one of the wealthiest entertainers in history, and he spent his wealth in ways that befitted his bizarre personality—with the creation of Neverland as his private amusement park and his infamous multi-million dollar shopping sprees.

Jackson's evolution as a celebrity followed a sickening path that included not only his various experiences with plastic surgery, but also his fascination with childhood and sexual confusion. His crotch-grabbing antics advertised his descent into prurient sexual confusion. But his behavior on the stage pales against the criminal charges he now faces.

Michael Jackson has become a parable of the moral confusion that lies at the heart of the postmodern age. His appearance, public statements, and documented behavior are beyond the pale of moral decency. He is not only reinvented himself as an androgynous figure of sexual confusion, he documents and confirms that confusion in his steadfast defense of sharing his bed with young boys.

Regardless of the outcome of the criminal charges currently pending against him, Jackson has declared himself before the world guilty of a perverted moral vision and of practices that the rest of the world will see as sexually perverse—even if Michael Jackson continues to live in a Neverland of his own warped imagination.

Beyond his moral hallucinations and claims of mistreatment lies the hard reality of the criminal charges he now faces. Even in this day of moral evasion and euphemism, the text of these criminal charges brings an amazing clarity. The felony complaint lodged against Jackson in California's Superior Court charges that he "did willfully, unlawfully, and lewdly commit a lewd and lascivious act upon and with the body and certain parts and members thereof of John Doe, a child under the age of fourteen years with the intent of arousing, appealing to, and gratifying the lusts, passions, and sexual desires of the said defendant and the said child." Those charges are repeated to a total of seven counts of sexual molestation. A further count charges Jackson with unlawfully administering to the child "an intoxicating agent with intent thereby to enable and assist himself to commit a felony."

With his immense wealth, Jackson can afford a legal “dream team” that will exceed the fire power even of O.J. Simpson’s infamous band of lawyers. Mark Geragos, Jackson’s lead attorney, charged that the whole controversy comes down to money—even though the victim and his family have not brought any civil action against the defendant. As Geragos told 60 Minutes: “I think, in all fairness, most people ‘get it’. Most people understand that this case is not about anything but money.”

Actually, it is Mark Geragos and Michael Jackson who do not “get it”. The Jackson controversy now demands the attention of all morally serious persons, if only because it symbolizes the deep perversity that dares to raise its face and make its defense in the public arena. Michael Jackson may somehow escape conviction on these criminal charges, but he has convicted himself in the court of public opinion. Any lingering doubts—held by even the most morally obtuse—were erased when Michael Jackson decided to make his case on 60 Minutes.

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