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**Michael Jackson, dancing open-field: the man nobody knows**

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Michael Jackson, thanks for being you

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## Introduction

Michael Jackson is certainly one of the most fascinating figures of American Culture today, as he stands out both for his body of work and his public persona. Starting very early at the age of five, Michael Jackson and his brothers would tour clubs, and amateur shows before signing a contract with -leading Black record company- Motown in the 1960s. Their rise to success afterwards was phenomenal, and their move from rags to riches became -to many- a symbol of the American dream come true. Subsequently Michael Jackson had secured a spectacular solo career from the end of the seventies onwards to this day, which brought into broad daylight his outstanding genius for music and short-film production, and show business. He paired with -then outsider jazz producer- Quincy Jones to produce his first solo album -*Off the Wall*- for *Epic* records in 1978, and started showering the world with his idiosyncratic universe of music, dance, and films. Michael Jackson's subsequent efforts -*Thriller* (1982), *Bad* (1987), *Dangerous* (1992), *History* (1995), *Blood on the dance floor* (1997), and *Invincible* (2001)- will more or less successfully display those three determining features of his body of work. Besides his remarkable art, Michael Jackson's public persona has gradually taken center stage, notably due to his numerous outlook changes by use of make up and plastic surgery. To crown it all Michael Jackson mesmerized millions, as his skin color conspicuously turned white by the early nineties. The content of his work was afterwards overshadowed by tabloid negative depiction of him as a freak, not to mention the nefarious allegations of child molestation that blighted his career in 1993 and 2001. In spite of all the negative images Michael Jackson is an artist that is as widely known as Coca Cola, Mickey Mouse throughout the world, and touched millions with his music, film and dance. His body of work has to me always exuded imaginative visual and sound patterns, sustained by his incredible creative will, unfettered freedom, joie de vivre and a -much decried- escapist policy. In spite of its entertainment value his work has never stopped reflecting and commenting on the American culture that nurtured him. The content and forms of his commentaries are so unique, scholars -the guardians of the Fifth Estate- need to give him a fair treatment. Consequently I will take pain in this paper to provide a clear outline of the anatomy of his art. The first part of the paper "My soul, my

body art” will focus on his music and film works. The second part “This is my body take it” will deal with his dance and his public persona that –as we will see- is governed by the very same principles as the other elements of his body of work. His persona will then appear –this is one my assumptions- as an interesting extension of his body of work. I will toil to highlight and decipher little known aspects of Michael Jackson’s works that are reflective of his self-determined style in all these various fields, in the hope that it will shed an honest light on his tremendous legacy and hopefully enable scholar to see him, as he actually is, i.e. a virtuosic musician and a dancer extraordinaire, as well as a powerful catalyst of American culture.

- **My soul, my body of art**

## **A. Music beyond category**

Steve Harvey: “I don’t get off on anybody’s personal lives, but you brotha, you have meant a lot to people man. And I want to say something special to you man, cause a lot of people don’t give this one to you. But I gotta tell you something you mean something to black people, man. Don’t ever think you don’t and you haven’t. Cause you have made a difference for a lot of minorities across this country, and you remember that about your videos. You touch us that way. And I’m giving you something man, just from one brotha to another that the mainstream American can’t give you. That is, what you have done in representing black people.”

Michael Jackson: “I’m proud of my heritage, I’m proud to be black, I’m honored to be black. And I just hope that one day that they will be fair, and portraying me the way I really, really am; just a loving, peaceful guy, wanting to make a wonderful, unprecedented entertainment in songs and music and film, uh, for the world.”

Excerpt from *Michael Jackson’s interview by Steve Harvey*, on LA radio Station, 100.3 The Beat LA, in Los Angeles, California<sup>1</sup>

“There have been others, but never two lovers like music, music and me”

From *Music and Me*, 1972

## **1. Togetherness in motion: from the Chitlin Circuit, to the solo years**

### **a) The Chitlin Circuit**

Before Berry Gordy and Motown enrolled them to stardom and international success, Michael Jackson and his brothers cut their teeth on the legendary Chitlin Circuit. This network of theatres, clubs, concert, and dancing venues, was helmed by black men to promote black artists for a black audience. Deriving its name from soul food course chitterlings -fried pigs intestine, the Chitlin Circuit was the sole outlet for black entertainment before integration. Nelson George provides a clear description of the circuit in his seminal book, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues*.

Michael Jackson shared his view on this cornerstone of black culture in an article from Jet Magazine called *Singers who have stood the test of time*<sup>2</sup>. Asked the secret of his longevity, Michael Jackson named his parents’ training along with the “infamous Chitlin Circuit” he describes as a “training ground for survival”. In spite of his abundantly publicized painful youth, Michael Jackson’s

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<sup>1</sup> Jel D Lewis, *Michael Jackson the Big Picture*, p°277

<sup>2</sup> Mon, 16-March-1998

biography *Moonwalk* is teeming with vivid memories of those early years. He added further in the interview:

"If you didn't learn survival while working the Apollo in New York, The Regal in Chicago, the Howard in Washington, D.C., and the Uptown in Philadelphia, you never would. We didn't make lots of money, but we learned love and respect for one another"

After he found out his kids played with his guitar secretly, Joseph Jackson decided to train his kids properly, and groom them for talent contests, with Michael as the lead singer. This choice became self-evident after his winning public performance of "Climb every Mountain" from The Sound of Music in front of mesmerized schoolmates, parents and teachers. Michael Jackson was only in first grade.<sup>3</sup> By the age of eight the boys won the Gary citywide talent show with a cover of the Temptation's "My Girl" and set out to target Chicago, and subsequently New York that offered more work opportunities. These shows would enable his father to meet M. Keith who commissioned them to record a tune called "Big Boy", which was their first record ever on wax. Steeltown Records distributed it and M. Keith was even kind enough to give them free copies of the record, they could sell after shows. Thanks to the circuit Joseph Jackson became friendly with influential people such as Sam Moore of *Sam & Dave*, and Bobby Taylor of the *Vancouver*s. Bobby Taylor and Gladys Knight –who saw the kids perform several time in Chicago and New York- turned out to be pivotal in the Jacksons future, as they saw to it that they be auditioned by Motown in early 1968. This experience got the Jackson boys acquainted with the amazing black popular music repertoire of the time, as they personally met or performed songs by artists such as Tyrone Davis, Jerry Butler, Curtis Mayfield, Chuck Berry, Sam & Dave, the O'Jays and Little Richard to name just a few. But two artists among them inspired Michael Jackson particularly, as he watched the performances from the aisles of the Apollo Theatre in New York: Jackie Wilson and James Brown, he still names as inspirations to this day.

"Most of the time I'd be alone backstage. My brothers would be upstairs eating and talking and I'd be down in the wings, crouching real low, holding on to the dusty, smelly curtain and watching the show. I mean, I really did watch every step, every move, every twist, every turn, every grind, every emotion, every little move. That was my education and recreation. (...) The talent that came out of those places is of mythical proportions. The greatest education in the world is watching the masters at work. You couldn't teach a person what I've learned just standing and watching. Some musicians –Springsteen and U2, for example- may feel they got

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Jackson, *Moonwalk*, p°28

their education from the streets. I'm a performer at heart. I got mine from the stage"<sup>4</sup>

(Talking about James Brown and Jackie Wilson's shows at the Apollo)

"They made me cry. I've never seen nothing like that. That kind of emotion, that kind of fever, feeling it was like another higher, spiritual plane they were on. They were like, in a trance, and they had the audience in the palms of their hands. I just loved how they could control them like that, that kind of power. When they'd sing they'd have tears running down their faces. They'd get so into it"<sup>5</sup>

Michael Jackson is still very proud to this day of this heritage, and never fails to salute his mentors, when it comes to talking about inspiration. This legacy would interestingly reveal itself in his attitude and enormous body of art later on.

### **b) The Motown and Philly years**

Besides Stevie Wonder, Michael Jackson and his brothers were the youngest act of Motown records –the *Sound of young America*. Its founder Berry Gordy targeted the rising teen market, and tailored the Jackson brothers to meet this objective. Motown was a machine with a songwriting team called the Corporation and an equally savvy marketing team. The Jackson Five were told how to dress, and how to talk in interviews, and they made history thanks to the Corporation that crafted four successive number one records for them: "I want you back", "ABC", "The Love you Save" and "I'll be there". These songs topped the Pop charts in the early 1970s, and Michael and his brothers became overnight the symbols of crossover<sup>6</sup>. The Jackson Five featured both in major National publications like *Time* and *Rolling Stone*, and black magazines such as *Right On* and *Soul*. They enthralled both black and white folks<sup>7</sup> and were lauded for their accomplishments and hard work. Then Motown started promoting Michael Jackson as a solo artist in 1972, with outstanding records like "Got to be there", "Rockin' Robin" and "Ben". But he would never enjoy the same artistic freedom bestowed to Marvin Gaye and Stevie Wonder, who were allowed to write and produce their own materials from the 1970s onwards. This will ultimately lead to his quitting Motown in 1975. Michael Jackson was grateful to Gordy for introducing them to the public though, and cannot but admit that he had learned a

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p°48-49

<sup>5</sup> Brett Ratner Interview, *Michael Jackson: decades before all of the charges and countercharges, he was a pint-size singer with a big dream*

<sup>6</sup> Nelson George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues*, p°157

<sup>7</sup> Nelson George, *The Michael Jackson Story*, p°67

lot from Gordy's perfectionism and clout<sup>8</sup>. But Michael also resented the mechanical and stifling creative process, as well as the disturbing media overexposure<sup>9</sup> they had to face at Motown. As he puts it "It was hard to have your life turn into public property, even if you appreciated that people were interested in you because of your music". That was learning show business the hard and inevitable way. Michael Jackson felt it was time for change, and decided to start all over again with a brand new label, whose name sounds like a symbol, *Epic Records*.

Michael Jackson and his brothers did not produce their own music straightway after signing with *Epic*. Their first two albums "The Jacksons" and "Going Places" were written and produced by then-trendy Philadelphian artists Kenneth Gamble and Leon Huff<sup>10</sup>, who were actually appointed by their new label. The duo produced for them hits such as "Show you the way to go" and "Different Kind of Lady" and allowed two of their own tracks on the albums, to wit a jam directed by Tito called "Style of Life" and Michael's own composition "Blues Away". But that was it as far as their collaboration is concerned. Michael did not feel Gamble and Huff's materials were reflective of what he perceived as the Jacksons' identity. Their music –subsequently called the Philly sound- was a mix of political messages and trademark instrumentations composed of "percolating rhythm sections with latin percussion breaks, swirling string and horn arrangements"<sup>11</sup>, that made the Jacksons sound according to Michael "more like the old O'Jays"<sup>12</sup>. Still Michael liked the policy underlying Gamble & Huff's creations, which consisted in promoting "peace and let the music take over"<sup>13</sup>. More than this, the Philadelphia experience enabled Michael to improve his composition technique decisively. As Michael remarks:

"Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff are such pros. I actually got a chance to watch them create as they prepared song to us and helped my songwriting a lot. Just watching Huff play the piano while Gamble sang taught me more about the anatomy of a song than anything else. Kenny Gamble is a master melody man. He made me play closer attention to the melody because of watching him create. And I would watch, too. I'd sit there like a hawk, observing every decision, listening to every note"<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *Moonwalk*, p°77-81 Michael Jackson reveals the making of "I want you back", and dispute on his vocal rendition of "Lookin' through the windows"

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, p°73

<sup>10</sup> They were responsible for successful songs such as "If you don't know me by now", and "Love is the message"

<sup>11</sup> Nelson George, *the Death of Rhythm and Blues*, p°146

<sup>12</sup> Michael Jackson, *Moonwalk*, p°12

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, p°123

Following to this *Epic Records* agreed to let the Jacksons produce their next album. “Destiny” was released in 1977 and spawned all time classics “Blame it on the Boogie” and “Shake your body down onto the ground”, and opened up a new era of creative explorations for Michael Jackson.

### c) Retronuevo

Besides these live experiences on the chitlin circuit and the studios, Michael Jackson also names as influences artists such as Tchaikovsky, Copland, The Beatles, Rodgers & Hammerstein, The Bee Gees, Debussy and Prokofiev, along with his aforementioned favorites James Brown and Jackie Wilson. Still such eclecticism does not prevent Michael Jackson from acknowledging his indebtedness to African American culture. “Retronuevo” is a term coined by music critic Nelson George to describe a creative process -not limited to music- consisting in embracing “the past to create passionate, fresh expressions and institutions”<sup>15</sup>. According to George, Michael Jackson and Prince were actually the “two most important retronuevo artists” and “proved to be the decade’s (the 1980s) finest music historians, consistently using techniques that echoed the past as the base for their superstardom”<sup>16</sup>. This echo George refers to is somewhat similar to Henry Louis Gates Jr’s concept of “unmotivated signifying”, which consists in a more or less subtle reverential and invocational pastiche of the past<sup>17</sup>. These theories do apply to Michael Jackson’s music to a certain extent, as far as the instrumentations, the themes, as well as his vocals are concerned. If one takes a close look at his music, one could see that discursive practices have always been present in his work, and that a lot of these discussions are engaged with African American culture. As far as themes are concerned, “Can you feel it” general idea is for instance according to Michael himself a nod to Gamble and Huff, “because the song was a celebration of love taking over”<sup>18</sup>. The invocation is subtler in “Wanna be startin something”, a song about an insecure character struggling with detractors that interestingly echoes Jesse Jackson’s poem “I am somebody”.

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<sup>15</sup> Nelson George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues*, p°186

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p°194

<sup>17</sup> Henry Louis gates Jr, *The Signifying Monkey*, p° XXVI-XXVII, p°121-24

Gates opposes “unmotivated signifying” to “motivated signifying”, which is more of a severe critiquing parody of past works

<sup>18</sup> Michael Jackson, *Moonwalk*, p°168

If you wanna be startin somethin  
 You gotta be startin somethin, (..)  
 It's too high to get over, to low to get under  
 You're stuck in the middle,  
 And the pain is thunder (...)  
 Keep your head up high  
 And scream out to the world  
 I know I'm someone and let the truth unfurl  
 No one can hurt me now,  
 Cause you know it's true, I believe in me  
 As I believe in you, Help me sing it (...)<sup>i</sup>

(...) I am somebody! I may be poor,  
 But I am somebody (...)  
 I may have made mistakes,  
 But I am somebody.  
 My clothes are different,  
 My face is different,  
 But I am somebody,  
 I am black, brown or white  
 I speak a different language,  
 But I must be respected,  
 Protected, Never rejected.(...)<sup>ii</sup>

As far as instrumentation is concerned one could mention peer-to-peer pastiches like the synthesizer bass line from “Bad” that is somehow reminiscent of the bass breakdown towards the middle<sup>19</sup> of Stevie Wonder’s “Ordinary pain”<sup>20</sup>. There are also instances of entire genre summoning. By the time Michael Jackson created “Beat it” in the early eighties, electric guitar has become so associated with white rock bands that the record broad success was referred to as a major break in the rock radio color barrier<sup>21</sup>, while Michael Jackson was actually breathing new life into that instrument wonderfully used by overshadowed black luminaries like Chuck Berry and Jimmy Hendrix. Furthermore some of his choir progressions -he would do alone most of the times- have ostinatos<sup>22</sup>, and call and response structures, counter-voiced by intensity-increasing ad-libs<sup>23</sup> that are typical of gospel and soul songs. Michael Jackson interestingly uses these techniques in secular-gospel-feel songs like “Man in the Mirror”, “Earth Song” and “Keep the faith”, but also in rock-feel songs like “DS”, funk-feel songs like “You rock my world”, “In the Closet”, and in more unclassifiable songs like “Leave me alone”, “Smooth Criminal” and “Beautiful Girl”<sup>24</sup>. Then there is of course the culture of drum and percussion based polyrhythm<sup>25</sup> that is pervading Michael’s work from “Workin day and night” (1978) to “You rock my world” (2001). Most people would take that structure for granted nowadays, which is pervading almost any non-classical music globally. It is yet worth reminding incidentally that this key element is one of African, and African American music’s contributions to the world’s music. That structure is very easy to perceive in “You rock my world”, on which Michael and

<sup>19</sup> 2:45 from the beginning

<sup>20</sup> Michael Jackson, *Bad*, From *Bad* Album, 1987

Stevie Wonder, *Ordinary Pain*, From *Songs in the Keys of Life*, 1974

<sup>21</sup> Nelson George, *The Michael Jackson Story*, p°169

<sup>22</sup> A musical figure that is repeated persistently in a composition

<sup>23</sup> Spontaneous, improvised musical lines

<sup>24</sup> Audio excerpts of all these songs can be found on the CD enclosed in this paper

<sup>25</sup> Learthen Dorsey, *And All that Jazz has African Roots*, from *African American Jazz and Rap* p°48-49

Rodney Jerkins play all the instruments. After the thirty seconds intro chat to the song between Michael Jackson and Chris Tucker, a deep bass, an electric guitar riff and a shaker sounding percussion open the track with three different rhythms. Then fifteen seconds later the piano steps in with another layer of percussive riff, and finally ten seconds later two synthesizers brings two wholly different rhythms, violin-like, one quicker, and one in the background slower than all the precedent rhythms. When Michael starts to sing with the line “My life will never be the same”, the piano and synthesized violins recedes, leaving the shaker percussion, the bass line, the electric guitar riff alone with the voice, and a second different guitar riff that started with Michael’s voice. The piano and synthesized violin will surge afterwards only in the florid pre-choruses, the choruses, the bridge and the ostinato choruses in the end.

Michael’s talent for polyrhythm could have been nurtured by his several trips to Africa with the Jackson Five, and later on his own. As he confesses in a 1992 interview from *Ebony* magazine “The rhythms (in Africa) are incredible” and he was especially moved by the way it affects their soul, and has their body start to move<sup>26</sup>. But Michael Jackson must also be grateful to James “Funky Drummer” Brown who redefined polyrhythm with his bands –the Famous Flames and later on the Jbs- in the 1960s. Indeed James Brown had every instrument from the guitars, to the bass, and horns play in a percussive way, as if they were a drum orchestra<sup>27</sup>, starting thus a revolution, which was incepted in –now called Jazz- African American bands. These bands from the early twentieth century were first to use drum and percussions kits to sway the magical and infectiously danceable ingredient called swing. Michael Jackson’s ability to transpose and infuse the legacy techniques in his various pieces of music will perforce appear as astounding to the close listener.

Finally there is Michael’s grain, Michael’s voice, the “geno-song”, the “diction of the language”, which according to Roland Barthes is responsible for an indescribable listening thrill<sup>28</sup>. Michael’s voice is often reduced to that high-pitched soft voice he would adorn in interviews. Yet his music is teeming with a myriad of different voice characters, ranging from the crystalline peaceful

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<sup>26</sup> *Moonwalk*, p°108 and *Ebony* magazine, *Michael Jackson: crowned in Africa, pop music king tells real story of controversial trip*, May 1992

<sup>27</sup> David Brackett, *Inventing popular culture*, p°144  
Rickey Vincent, *Funk*, p°60-62

<sup>28</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Grain of the Voice*, p°181-82

prophet's voice in "Heal the World", to the husky menacing voice in "2 BAD", the aerial falsettos of a rhapsodizing guy in "Beautiful Girl", and the deep basso in the sexual-laden "2000 WATTS". Asked about rumors that Michael took female hormones to keep his voice soaring high, his voice consultant Seth Riggs provided interesting information about Michael's vocal performance:

"I'm his voice teacher, and I'd know. He started out with a high voice, and I've taken it even higher. He can sing low-down to a basso low C-but he prefers to sing as high as he does because pop tenors have more range to create style."<sup>29</sup>

Michael's extensive vocal modes and abilities are one the important basis of his music. His voice contains the African American expressive modes of cries, hollers, shouts, syncopation, falsettos, slurs and yodels<sup>30</sup>, he sublimated in his very personal fashion.

There is no ignoring the marks of African American Culture in Michael Jackson's work, the presence of which Michael not only acknowledges but is also very proud of. Yet the concepts of retronuevo and signifying are not enough to highlight the quintessence of Michael Jackson's art. There is more to Michael's body of art than this. There is definitely some black, along with every other color.

## **2. The Solo years: in a class of his own**

### **a) Paint it black and every other color**

In order to convey his distaste of music critics and their trade, which he considers as vain activity, Elvis Costello expressed himself as follows:

"Writing about music is like dancing about architecture –it is a really stupid thing to want to do (...). Framing all the great music out there only drags down its immediacy. The songs are lyrics, not speeches, and they're tunes not paintings"<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> *Why he's a thriller*, Time Magazine, Mon 19-March-1984

<sup>30</sup> A yodel involves rapid change in vocal pitch, from chest voice to head voice, as exemplifies in "*What more can I give*"

<sup>31</sup> As quoted in David Brackett, *Interpreting Popular Music*, from the October 1983 issue of Musician magazine

Very few people would indeed approach music as painting, and suffice it to listen to radio today to realize –one could surmise safely- that no recording artist has such an elaborate approach to song making. Michael does and his interest in art dates back to the early years of Motown. As he puts it:

“Most of the time I’d spend the day at Diana’s and the night at Berry’s. This was an important period in my life because Diana loved art and encouraged me to appreciate it too. She took time to educate me about it. We’d go out almost every day, just the two of us, and buy pencils and paint. When we weren’t drawing or painting, we’d go to museums. She introduced me to the works of the great artists like Michelangelo and Degas and that was the start of my lifelong interest in art. She really taught me a great deal. It was so new to me and so exciting. It was really different from what I was used to doing, which was living and breathing music, rehearsing day in day out. You wouldn’t think a big star like Diana would take the time to teach a kid to paint, to give him an education in art, but she did and I love her for it”

This education undeniably touched Michael, and proved fundamental to his artistry. So when asked by Brett Ratner what elements of his job makes him go to work every day, Michael gave the following remarkable answer:

“I want to work every day--just the idea of creating worlds. It's like taking a canvas, an empty canvas, you know, a clean slate. They give you paint, and we just color and paint and create worlds. I just love that idea. And having people see it and be awe-inspired whenever they see it.”<sup>32</sup>

The most amazing thing is that Michael, Quincy Jones and sound engineer Bruce Swedien just happen to have the same pictorial approach to music arrangements. Indeed Quincy Jones described soul -while talking about scoring- as “the process of painting the psyche with musical emotion lotion”<sup>33</sup>. Whereas Bruce Swedien<sup>34</sup> remarks in his very instructive memoir “Make mine music”, that synthesizers can enrich the palette of musicians and make the “departing from the traditional, into the new and unexplored areas of music and sound” possible<sup>35</sup>. So very much like Michael, Bruce has his mind set mostly on feelings and emotions, rather than the technical envelope. As he puts it:

“I always try to remember that just as fine artist such as Van Gogh never attempts to paint the precise reality of a scene or landscape (which he cannot do anyway), instead he captures the emotion of his interpretation of the canvass. I realized long ago I couldn’t paint the reality of a sonic image. We can’t even define reality. The feeling of the music is what I am after. I want the people to experience the sincerity of the emotion. It’s when the technical covers the primitive that we lose the passion of music”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Brett Ratner Interview, *Michael Jackson: decades before all of the charges and countercharges, he was a pint-size singer with a big dream*

<sup>33</sup> Quincy Jones, *Q*, p° 210

<sup>34</sup> Bruce Swedien is a sound recording engineer, musician and producer who has been working with Michael Jackson ever since 1978 and “the Wiz” and “Off The Wall” albums

<sup>35</sup> Bruce Swedien, *Make mine music*, p°225

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, p°99

Just like great musicians Duke Ellington, who was also fond of experimentation, Michael keeps his mind open, and would certainly agree with Miles Davis', when he said in defense of technology and electrical instruments that "bad music is what will ruin music, not the instruments musicians choose to play"<sup>37</sup>. One of Michael Jackson's policies when it comes to work is competence. As a result he would end up working with musicians of every tendencies, naturally regardless of race. Thus his records feature musicians such as hard rock guitarists Slash and Eddie Van Halen, The Spiritual Choir of Andrea Crouch, rock and independent producer-musician Bill Bottrell, new jack swing producer-musician Teddy Riley, classical arranger Marty Paich, funky bass player Louis Johnson, and the whole crew of Italian-American band "Toto" –David Paich (Marty's son), Steve Lukather, Jeff & Steve Porcaro- as session musicians. Besides musicianship, competence and technique, color-blindness is one of Michael Jackson's unshakable policies. Thus when as early as 1978, he decided to found a production company with his brothers in their attempts to establish themselves as writers, composers, arrangers, producers and publishers, Michael came up with the idea of an animal to symbolize their state of mind. The company was eventually called "Peacock productions". Michael interestingly specifies in his autobiography the reasons for that choice was Berry Gordy's peacock at one of his homes and that he happened to have read an article about the animal, which said the peacock's full plumage would spread and shine with all the colors of the rainbow on one body, only when it was in love. That was the perfect epitome of his vision of art. As he puts it:

"I was immediately taken with that beautiful image and the meaning behind it. That bird's plumage conveyed the message I was looking for to explain the Jacksons and our intense devotion to one another, as well as our multifaceted interests. (...) Our first world tour had focused our interest in uniting people of all races through music. Some people we knew wondered what we meant when we talked about uniting all the races through music –after all, we were black musicians. Our answers was 'music is color-blind. We saw that every night, especially in Europe and the other parts of the world we had visited. The people we met there loved our music. It didn't matter to them what color our skin was or which country we called home"<sup>38</sup>

When Michael set out to work with Quincy Jones, his point of view on raceless music was even more strengthened as Quincy had the very same opinion, probably resulting from his extensive Jazz and touring adventures in America and the world. Quincy in fact confesses in his autobiography that his

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<sup>37</sup> Rickey Vincent, *Funk*, p°27, as quoted from Miles Davis' 1989 autobiography

<sup>38</sup> Michael Jackson, *Moonwalk*, p°146-47

entire career and entire life has been dedicated to and “based on trying to break down the walls between people of all colors throughout the world”<sup>39</sup>. As regards music composition Michael Jackson has gotten rid of every tenet of pseudo race and technical purities, ever since the beginning of his personally creative career in 1978, and has extended the richness of his palette even more by allowing his imagination to play with the principles of reality conjured up in lyrics.

“It always surprises me when people assume that something an artist has created is based on a true experience or reflects his or her own style. Often nothing could be farther from the truth. I know I draw on my experiences at times, but I also hear and read things that trigger an idea for a song. An artist’s imagination is his greatest tool. It can create a mood or a feeling that people want to have, as well as transport you to a different place altogether”<sup>40</sup>

Michael Jackson’s songs have every kind of narratives from the first person narratives in “The way you love me” and “Who is it?”, to omniscient narrators in selfless message songs like “Heal the world” and “The lost children”, and third person narratives in “Little Susie” and “Whatever happens”. One wondrous fact is that a lot of the songs have all of these types of narratives merged in them, building in the process a mind-blowing drama, like in “Smooth Criminal”, “Blood on the dance floor”, “Morphine”<sup>41</sup>, and “History”.

In the light of all these things, it is not surprising that Michael’s music productions should be so different and diverse. So much so that it sometimes puzzle critics. Thus Rolling Stone magazine critique James Hunter could not for instance understand the conflating of “dynamite jam” like “This time around” and “Scream” with string-laden “Hollywood fluff” like “Childhood”, “Smile” and the waltz-flavor “Little Susie” on Michael’s 1994 album “History”. Hunter really could not understand Michael’s taste for this kind of track, he amusingly refers to as a “blend of rampaging ego and static orchestral pop” and “a Streisand-size mistake”. Yet Hunter’s laud of bass and heavy beat laden pieces like “This time around” and “Scream” -as he puts it “mammoth funk-rock constructions”- reveals a clear misunderstanding of the term “funk” as well as a devious reductionist understanding of “African American” artistry. Michael’s painter’s way of composing music, combined with his total openness to technical advancements, his color-blindness when it comes to musicians and recording collaborators,

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<sup>39</sup> Quincy Jones, *Q*, p°217

<sup>40</sup> Michael Jackson, *Moonwalk*, p°159

<sup>41</sup> Transcriptions of the lyrics can be found in the appendix

and an amazing imagination that fuels his narratives, accounts for Michael's immensely broad sound palette, and for such a diverse and musically colorful repertoire. To Nelson George, his versatility is "less a calculated attempt at mass stardom, than a reflection of his idiosyncratic personal tastes"<sup>42</sup>. In order to comprehend his work properly, it is useful to use the concept of "Funky", which is a term Michael will not use to refer to a specific beat or a lovable piece of music. Instead he would call it "smelly jelly"<sup>43</sup>, hence Quincy's nickname for Michael "Smelly". How ironic it was since years afterwards, the very term "funky" turns out to be the one that best befit him.

### **b) Smelly's got the Funk**

Rickey Vincent delivered a wonderful analysis of "What is Funk?" in his seminal book "Funk", which won the ASCAP-Deems Taylor awards. *Funk* has become over the years a commodified word to refer to a vague type of Black music from the late sixties and the seventies with some kind of heavy backbeat, and was used to categorize the music of artists such as "Sly and the family stone", "James Brown and the Jb's", and "George Clinton and the Parliament". Vincent points out as its main features the collective and spontaneous creation of music in the studios, that incorporates a lot of African musical figures such as antiphony, call-and-response, and a tendency to use the body and every other instruments in a percussive manner<sup>44</sup>, intertwined with somehow political messages. As Vincent puts it:

"Funk is a many splendored thing (...) Funk is that low-down dirty dog feeling that pops up when a *baad* funk jam gets to the heated part, and you forget about that contrived dance you were trying, and you get off your ass and jam (...). Funk can be out of control like the chaos of rebellion, or instinctively elegant, like that extended round of love making that hits overdrive (...). Funkiness in a person's behavior or attitudes can mean anything from an ego trip, to a protest, to escapism. Funkiness is much more than a style, it is a *means* to a style (...). Funkiness for our purposes is an aesthetic of deliberate confusion, of uninhibited, soulful behavior that remains viable, because of a faith in instinct, a joy of self, and a joy of life, particularly unassimilated black American life (...) Thus Funk in its modern sense is a deliberate reaction to –and rejection of– the traditional Western world's predilection for formality, pretense and self-repression"<sup>45</sup>

Vincent adds further in the book that one "essential aspect of the nature of the Funk is that it is self-aware, and comfortable with itself", while talking about Jimmy Hendrix, Miles Davis, George

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<sup>42</sup> Nelson George, *The Michael Jackson story*, p°172

<sup>43</sup> Quincy Jones, *Q*, p°237

<sup>44</sup> Rickey Vincent, *Funk*, p°34-36

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, p°3-5

Clinton's clique, and Sly Stone's pride and awareness of their "freaked-out image"<sup>46</sup>. All these descriptions could as well be applied to Michael Jackson, Vincent reverently refers to as the "indubitable Michael Jackson" and "king of pop". Vincent extols further in the book the "Off the wall" album as "one of the few pop crossover albums that still dropped the heavy load of groovalistic function"<sup>47</sup>, and the "Bad" album as a bold, and successful pop attempt "to combine social commentary, celebration and state-of-the-art dance funk"<sup>48</sup>. As was mentioned above, some of Michael Jackson's music like "You rock my world", "Jam" and "Smooth Criminal" contains all the percussive and musical elements of Funk, but more than this Michael's entire body of music oozes the Funk attitude, as he appears to have made his the verse from his "off the wall" album, which reads "life ain't so bad at all, if you live it off the wall". We will delve a little bit more into Michael's attitude and political presence in the last part of this paper. As far as music is concerned, though it may go without saying, it is worth noting Michael's repertoire is a diverse body of music that stands out as one of the greatest demonstration of freedom in contemporary music history. Paradoxical as it may seem, Michael Jackson's albums are funkier and more off-the-wall after the "Bad" album (1988), as he always made it a point to exhibiting the extent of his universe of feelings and emotions in these collections, totally free of inhibitions and regardless of the market. Thus the "Dangerous" album (1991) had rock-flavored track "Give in to me", secular-gospel-feel tracks "Will you be there?" and "Keep the faith", along with funky sexy tracks like "In the closet", "She drives me wild" and "Can't let her get away", funky message tracks like "Jam", "Why you wanna trip on me?" and "Black or White", funky soulful complaints "Who is it?" and "Dangerous", requiem orchestrated song "Gone too soon", and hymn "Heal the world". Having such non radio-friendly tracks like "Childhood", and "Little Susie" feature on the "History" album (1994) along with funky rock tracks like "Scream" is certainly baffling. But ranging the endeavor as merely pop reveals an inability of mainstream critique such as Hunter from *Rolling Stone* Magazine to understand black artist's –like Michael Jackson and Duke Ellington- need to renew themselves through their music<sup>49</sup>, totally gotten rid of self-repression,

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid, p°177

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, p°222

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, p°284

<sup>49</sup> John Edward Hasse, *Beyond Category the life and genius of Duke Ellington*, p°328

of notions of propriety, and with an iron will to hand the floor to unbridled joy. As Michael wrote in his poem “Ecstasy”:

“We have come to celebrate here  
The getting rid of every fear  
Of every notion, every seed  
Of any separation, caste or creed

Feeling free, let us fly  
Into the boundless, beyond the sky  
For we were born to never die  
To live in bliss, to never cry  
To speak the truth and never lie  
To share our love without a sign  
To stretch our arms without a tie

This is our dance, this is our high  
It’s not a secret, can’t you see  
Why can’t we all live in ecstasy”<sup>50</sup>

The concept of *Funk* is relevant to appreciate Michael’s music, as it should be. Nadia Boulanger told Quincy Jones “the music can never be more or less than the creators are as human beings”<sup>51</sup>, and as regards Michael’s music, that statement could not be closer to the truth. Indeed as P-Funk bass player Bootsy Collins articulated in a song called “The Pinocchio Theory” dating back to 1977 –that turned out to be testimonial for Michael- “If you fake the funk, your nose gots to grow”. We will see in oncoming parts of this paper, as we study Michael Jackson’s videos, and various bodily art forms, how the policy of funkiness that does apply to his music, equally pervades other aspects of his art and life.

Each of Michael’s song has its own universe, and it would require another entire study to explore and appreciate each of them. Yet it is necessary for the purpose of this study to single out a couple of them, which in my humble opinion could be illustrative of Michael Jackson’s funky quintessence: “Blood on the dance floor”, and “History”.

### **c) Some models of MJ funk**

“Blood on the dance floor” is an outtake from the “Dangerous” album sessions (1987-91) that eventually appeared on the same titled album in 1997. The song opens with a thick polyrhythmic structure composed of a slapping riff of electric guitar, an obstinate drumbeat, a synthesized bass line,

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<sup>50</sup> Michael Jackson, *Dancing the dream*, p°91

<sup>51</sup> Quincy Jones, *Q*, p°306

and a synthesizer emulating an electric guitar, along with an organ-sounding keyboard. That sound ensemble contributes in creating a florid chaos that has the listener step –in medias res- in the world of an unnamed character tormented by a lady –Susie- he was romantically and sexually involved with. The narrative starts with an omniscient narrator obviously addressing the trapped man, in all the verses and the pre-choruses of the song, and reminding him that some mysterious woman -he got pregnant- has his number, is out to kill and to get some kind of revenge. The omniscient narrator imparts the situation to the listener in the verses in a deep mournful basso, and similarly reigns over the pre-choruses. He laments on men’s doleful sexual instincts, before handing the floor only briefly to the main character, who attempts to clear himself of any kinds of immoral misdeeds. The following table draws a parallel between the narrative and instrumentation progressions of the song

Lyrics	Instrumentations
Instrumental introduction with all the instruments playing throughout the track, plus a brief synthesizer raging electric guitar	
<p>Verse 1:</p> <p>She got your number            She know your game            Look what you're under            It's so insane            Since you seduced her            How does it feel            To know that woman            Is out to kill</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Mournful deep basso voice</li> <li>- Ostinato drumbeat</li> <li>- Synthesizer bass line</li> <li>- Percussions in the background suggesting closed and banged doors, along with a quasi subliminal percussive pattern, very reminiscent of choked off sounds of laser gun shots in 1990’s videogames</li> </ul>
<p>Pre-chorus hook 1:</p> <p>Every night's stance is like takin' a chance            It's not about love and romance            And now you're gonna get it            Every hot man is out takin' a chance it's not about love and romance            And now you do forget it</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sly and slick fast articulating voice</li> <li>- Same instruments</li> <li>- Symbolic introduction of organ sounds,</li> <li>- Brief sizzling sounds of a violin synthesizer which along with the organ sound emphasize the momentum gathered in the dramatic lyrics</li> </ul>
<p>Vamp 1:</p> <p>To escape the world            I've got to enjoy that simple dance            And it seemed that everything was on my side            (Blood on my side)            She seemed sincere like            It was love and true romance            And now she's out to get me            But I just can't take it</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Hollering voice, full of complaints and helplessness</li> <li>- Same instruments</li> <li>- The organs and synthesizers step out</li> <li>- Same rhythmic guitar as in the introduction</li> <li>- Thick chorus mouthing and amplifying the character’s innermost feelings</li> </ul>

(I just can't take it) Just can't break it	- The Chorus gently echoes the character's words in brackets
Chorus 1: Susie got your number And Susie ain't your friend Look who took you under With seven inches in Blood is on the dance floor Blood is on the knife Susie got your number And Susie says it's right	- Same instruments - Even thicker chorus, with additional counter voices - Hollering voice of the doomed character do adlib singing off and on with the chorus, suggesting he is aware of his situation and pay heeds to his inner voices
Verse 2: She got your number How does it feel To know the stranger Is about to kill She got your baby It happened fast If you could only Erase the past	- Very same instruments as in verse 1
- Pre-chorus hook 2, Vamp 2, and Chorus 2 have the very same lyrics and instrumentations as Pre-chorus hook 1, Vamp 1, and Chorus 1	
Susie got your number Susie ain't your friend (It's going down baby) She's stuck seven inches in Blood is on the dance floor Blood is on the knife (It's going down baby) Susie got your number Susie says it's right It was blood on the dance floor (Ooh blood on the dance floor) (four times) And I just can't take it	- Same instruments as in Chorus 1 - Swelling chorus towards the end, introducing a resigned sounding melody - Antiphonal part between the chorus and the character: the trapped character adds some ad-libs, singing portions of the chorus, along with hollers and the Michael Jackson trademark "whoooo" yelps
- Instrumental fade out similar to the introduction, minus the raging synthesizer electric guitar	

This song is illustrative of Michael's amazing imagination and ability to stage short stories in five minutes. The intertwining of these multiple voices, beautifully channeled by his versatile voice, and backed by well arranged polyrhythmic instruments contribute in building an efficient sense of drama. The narrative part of the song dealing with the unfortunate sexual intercourse, which is introduced by the discharge of short organ sounds, is one of the captivating moments of this sound canvass, probably along with the pathos expressed in the vamps. "To escape the world I've got to enjoy that simple dance, and it seemed that everything was on my side" is one of these phrases you can find off-and on in popular music, and really make yours like the Dylan verses "How does it feel, when you're on your own, like a complete unknown, like a rolling stone" from *Like a rolling stone* and Joni Mitchell's phrase "don't it always seems to go but you don't know what you got 'til it's

gone” from *Big Yellow Taxi*. The political messages is subtle and requires the listener to question the notions of escapism, a theme that is very dear to Michael Jackson -as we will see further in this paper. The song three-stages structure composed of a chorus, a pre-chorus hook and a chorus is a Michael Jackson trademark that can also be found in songs like “You rock my world”, “Who is it?” and “History”. The combination of the narrative and instrumental arrangements produces a unique work of art that is so unmistakably typical of Michael Jackson.

“History” featured on the same titled album from 1995. Its choice for the purpose of analysis is interesting because the song reflects a lot of colors from the Michael Jackson sound palette. Two versions of the song were released; whereas the first version incorporated in the introduction a portion of Mussorgsky’s “Great gate of kiev”, the second one uses parts of Aaron Copland’s “Fanfare for the common man”. The song also uses samples from “Beethoven lives upstairs” to introduce the bridge, as well as a battery of historic sound clips extolling human excellence, like Muhammad Ali’s “I’m the greatest” speech, reports of Thomas Edison’s invention of the phonograph, Disneyland’s creation, speeches by Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, and Michael Jackson as a young boy who is quoted as saying “I don’t sing it if I don’t mean it”. Michael Jackson resorts in this record to the use of sampling that was trendy from the late 1980’s onwards in the music business. But his pastiches are always used as “unmotivated signifying”, and in this case enables him to contextualize his very own contribution to history. The verses of the song stages an omniscient narrator –the eye of history- who percussively hammers an account of Michael’s –then latest- trials and of his fortitude. Then the “real” Michael Jackson addresses the audience in the pre-chorus vamp, as a selfless prophet reminding that the pains and losses of the ancients could turn out to be vain if we do not learn the lessons of history. The song is accompanied by a wide range of instruments ranging from classical piano and strings, to live drums and electric bass, as well as synthesized drum sounds. The following table draws a parallel between the narrative and instrumentation progressions of the song.

Lyrics	Instrumentations
Introduction, “Great gate of Kiev”, history clips sounding like old radio and TV excerpts	
Verse 1:	- The verse is only supported by a

<p>He got kicked in the back  He say that he needed that  He hot willed in the face  Keep daring to motivate  He say one day you will see  His place in world history  He dares to be recognized  The fires deep in his eyes</p>	<p>polyrhythmic structure of synthesized drum sounds, suggesting slashing, absorption, and hushed up blow sounds.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The combination of these drums with the hollering narrator emphasizes the battles described in the lyrics.</li> </ul>
<p>Pre-chorus vamp 1:  How many victims must there be  Slaughtered in vain across the land  And how many struggles, must there be  Before we choose to live the prophet's plan  Everybody sing</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Michael's crystalline voice is backed by a live drum, a humming electric bass, and a grand piano with subtle touches of additional symphony-like keyboards in the background</li> </ul>
<p>Chorus 1:  Everyday create your history  Every path you take you're leaving your legacy  Every soldier dies in his glory  Every legend tells of conquest and liberty</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Michael's voice is similarly crystalline, much louder and self-echoed.</li> <li>- Same instruments as in pre-chorus vamp 1, the electric bass and additional keyboard steps more forward from the background</li> </ul>
<p>"Great gate of Kiev" excerpts, rewind sound, history sound clips</p>	
<p>Verse 2:  Don't let no one get you down  Keep movin' on higher ground  Keep flying until  You are the king of the hill  No force of nature can break  Your will to self motivate  She say this face that you see  Is destined for history</p>	<p>Same instrumentation as in verse 1</p>
<p>Pre-chorus vamp 2:  How many people have to cry  The song of pain and grief across the land  And how many children, have to die  Before we stand to lend a healing hand  Everybody sing</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Same instrumentation as in pre-chorus vamp 1, plus additional non lexical warm vocal harmonies by Boyz II Men and Michael, exuding pathos and empathy</li> </ul>
<p>Chorus 2:  Everyday create your history  Every path you take you're leaving your legacy  Every soldier dies in his glory  Every legend tells of conquest and liberty  Everyday create your history  Every page you turn you're writing your legacy  Every hero dreams of chivalry  Every child should sing together in harmony</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Same as chorus 1, with additional vocal layers by Boyz II Men, and trumpeting string and brass orchestra touches</li> </ul>
<p>Bridge:  All nations sing  Let's harmonize all around the world</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Same as in Chorus 2</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Instrumental part, Martin Luther King speech "I'm happy to stand with you today in what will go down in history as the greatest demonstration for freedom in the history of our nation"</li> </ul>	
<p>Pre-chorus vamp 3:  How many victims must there be  Slaughtered in vain across the land  And how many children must we see</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Same as Pre-chorus vamp 2</li> </ul>

Before we learn to live as brothers And leave one family, oh	
Chorus 3: Everyday create your history Every path you take you're leaving your legacy Every soldier dies in his glory Every legend tells of conquest and liberty Everyday create your history Every page you turn you're writing your legacy Every hero dreams of chivalry Every child should sing together in harmony	- Same as Chorus 1, with grand piano going wild, and thick uplifting extra background vocals by the Andrea Crouch singers, counter voiced by Michael's ad-libs
Vamp out: A soldier dies A mother cries The promised child shines in a baby's eyes All nations sing Let's harmonize all around the world	- Same as chorus 3, climaxing strings, with antiphony between Michael, the choir and a little girl.
- History clips anthology	

“History” is a warning message song that tells the listener, progress in history must not be taken for granted, and that one must bear in mind all the technical, artistic and human achievements of the past, first so that the progress of civilization may take place, and then mostly to prevent the pains and lives of “the soldiers” from being vain. The instrumentation revives the Mussorgsky’s progressive piece “Great Gate of Kiev”, that is so smoothly merged with Michael’s new modern lines. The perfect conflation of this classic piece, with Michael’s modern drum sounds in the verses, and the terrific secular-gospel-choir in the end is illustrative of Michael’s message. As the subtitle of the “History” album suggests –“past, present and future, book 1”- the past must be as inescapable as the future. Obviously Michael seems to think therein lies the keys to peace, harmony and progress.

The general form of the song, like that of “Blood on the dance floor” is so unique, it is nowhere else to be seen in the recorded music landscape of the world. These songs have a mood, and specific sound colors that make the listening experience also pictorial –if not cinematic. The virtuosity and self-assured freedom radiating from the song arrangements are illustrative of Michael’s quintessence. A lot of other Michael Jackson songs –if not all of them- could be used to illustrate the truth of that notion. One could thus mention the idiosyncratic Michael Jackson track “Morphine”, a multi-voiced depiction of a morphine addict, who is verbally assaulted by some kind of moralizing demon throughout the verses. A raging guitar riff and hammering drums -played by Michael himself- illustrate the addiction battle throughout the song, that is only interrupted by a two minute orchestral piece -about some kind

of watcher's empathy- right in the middle of the song, and short respite vamp-choruses that have a personified voice of morphine murmuring the lines "trust in me, just in men put all your trust in me". One could also mention "Stranger in Moscow" with its unique drumbeat, which is actually Michael's digitalized human beat box, "The lost children" with its waltz rhythm and redeeming empathic philosophy, and "Speechless" which is an ironically melodic expression of Michael's incapacity to channel his emotions to a loved one. The song has a swelling orchestra, a children's choir and the amazing line "gone is the grace for expressions of passion, but there are a worlds and worlds of ways to explain, to tell you how I feel, but I am speechless".

Michael's music universe is -like that of the character from "Speechless"- extended and composed of a myriad of worlds. This body of music from Michael's very personal world is -as we have seen- not foreign to African American Culture. Some of its musical elements have indeed unmistakably permeated Michael somehow from his early years on the Chitlin Circuit to Philadelphia and afterwards. But Michael's subsequent evolution as an artist put him in a class of his own. His painter's approach to song making, combined with his wide range vocal abilities, and his self-confident unfettered imagination provided him with a huge sound palette, that spawned an incredibly diverse body of music. Curiously enough, Michael Jackson like Duke Ellington founded no school, probably because their art was too personal, and too virtuosic for anyone to be able to copy it. One could presume for instance that no one will ever venture to cover "Blood on the dance floor", since its vocal narrative is essential to the tune, and mostly because it should be too hard to match the emotions conveyed by Michael's incredible vocals. This virtuosic aggregation that oozes a unique Funk spirit, cast Michael in a class of his own, beyond category. The very same Funky attitude pervades his film creations.

## **B. Visionary short films**

Michael Jackson's approach to so-called "music videos" has been foreign to that of the market from the very beginning. Before he revolutionized the medium in the early eighties, "music videos"

mainly consists in producing image collages centered on the singer to support the music<sup>52</sup>. Michael abhorred such practices, so much that as he repeatedly affirmed in interviews, the word “music video” was taboo with him. Instead he would use the term “Short film” and always made a point of adorning any such work with a plot and all the thrilling ingredients of long form movies in a deliberate visionary attempt to extend the visual proprieties of his songs.

Michael’s first major foray into that medium was the splendid “Can you feel it” short film (1980), and subsequently carried on such exploration to promote the *Thriller* album (1982). Yet things did not go his way at all in the beginning, for –then major though burgeoning hip music channel- MTV refused to air the “Billie Jean” video (1983). As Walter Yetnikoff recalls in his memoir, it was so because “Billie Jean” and its black creator plainly did not fit in their mainstay format, namely “white rock”. At Michael Jackson’s request Yetnikoff –then CEO of CBS records- successfully pressurized MTV to air the video. As a result “Billie Jean” ended up being the first video ever to break the race barrier, and thus opened the door to “the MTV crossover markets” for Michael’s other oncoming works “Beat it” and “Thriller”, and also for “every other black artists, including hip-hoppers and rappers”<sup>53</sup>. From this period onwards, Michael has been constantly setting new standards with his use of short films as extensions of songs. Thus each of his albums spawned videos, which are reflective of his idiosyncratic world. These videos are as diverse as his songs, with their own specific universe. Some of Michael’s songs are literally interpreted like “Beat it”, that is originally highly visual in its narrative. Other instances of literal videos are the “Bad” video (1987), “The way you make me feel” (1988), “Stranger in Moscow” (1995) and “Earth Song” (1995). But most of his videos are compositions with a disjunctive plot and subtle interpretations of the song’s narrative. The “Black or white” (1991) video, “Jam” (1992) and “Leave me alone” (1990) can be ranged in this category. I propose to study some of them below, and especially the “Black or white” video that outstandingly epitomizes Michael Jackson’s film work.

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<sup>52</sup>J.D. Lewis, *Michael Jackson the Big Picture*, “Michael talks to Oprah”, p°191  
TV Guide Interview, December, 1999, 239  
Michael Jackson, *Moonwalk*, p°200

<sup>53</sup> Walter Yetnikoff & David Ritz, *Howling at the moon*, p°154-55

## 1. “Black or white”

On November 14, 1991, the “Black or white” video premiere was broadcast simultaneously in twenty-seven countries throughout the world. Fascinatingly Michael Jackson performs a solo destructive dance that caused an incredible uproar in the final segment of the song, while the short edited version received massive airplay on video channels<sup>54</sup>. “Thriller” director John Landis directed the “Black or white” short film and indicated in interviews that the movie’s concept is Michael Jackson’s brainchild<sup>55</sup>. As we will see below the “Black or white” short film is an extension of an already cinematic song that is sustained by a fast driving drum beat, with hectic percussions, an obstinate guitar riff, electric bass guitar and “moog” synthesizer. Its musical specificity lies in its uplifting rhythm, smooth incorporation of a hard rock-flavored section, and a rap breakdown. The tables below draw a parallel between the song’s narrative progression and that of the video.

### a) Structure



<sup>54</sup> Rolling Stone magazine, *The making of the King of Pop*, Wed, 09-Jan-1991

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, and another article from Time writers Alan Citrone and Daniel Cerone, “*There Are No Limits in Michael Jackson's World of Make-Believe*” When director John Landis is asked to explain somehow Michael’s destructive dance performance in the final segment of the video, he would just say “It was simply 'I'd like to do this,' and me giving him what he wanted.”



Introduction: audio staging of the argument between the father and son. In the song the father just repeatedly tells the son to turn the music off.

Sequence 1: The movie starts with an intrusive bird's eye view, coming down from some unidentified place in the sky to visit a suburban American middle class home. Maucley Mc Culkin stars as the little boy, who is getting high on music. The argument is stronger in the video. The father complains about the noise and refers to the song as garbage. As he slams the door of his son's bedroom he breaks a "Michael Jackson" picture frame. The son as a revenge comes in the living room with huge speakers. His fat father is watching some baseball game on television, while his mother is reading some tabloid paper about UFO abduction. The little boy triggers off an angry guitar riff that sends the father -through the roof- across the ocean, off to Africa.





Verse 1:  
 I took my baby  
 On a Saturday bang  
 Boy is that girl with you  
 Yes we're one and the same  
 Now I believe in miracles  
 And a miracle has happened tonight

Sequence 2: The music starts in the background of a hunting scene, staging some African hunters with spears and shields, who are tiptoeing to surprise the lions. The boy's father lands amid the scene –mesmerized. The hunt is stopped by his arrival. The hunters start to dance with Michael Jackson. They run right, and the setting changes with the camera doing a tracking sideways to follow the dancers. Michael and the dancers pop in some fantasy scene with some Indian women dancing against a grey background. The African hunters just run through the scene and vanish on the far right of the screen. Michael stays and dance with the Indian women and starts to sing. On the "It don't matter" line, two American Indian guys appear next to Michael in a mid shot. The grey background falls down.



Sequence 3: The short instrumental section of the song on the record is extended in the video. Michael dances on a kind of shoe box, the color of the grey background that has just fallen down, with American Indian kids. The camera zooms out and gives a wide shot that shows a kind of "Buffalo Bill" Disneyland show, with Indians firing guns, riding horses, and doing stunts



Verse 2:  
 They print my message  
 In the Saturday sun  
 I had to tell them  
 I ain't second to none  
 And I told about equality  
 And it's true  
 Either you're wrong or you're right

Sequence 4: Michael dances with an Indian girl right in the middle of road. Michael crumples some disposable newspaper. Cars are passing by, but do not prevent the couple from dancing

Vamp-chorus 2:  
 But, if you're thinkin' about my baby  
 It don't matter if you're black or white



Sequence 5: The short instrumental section of the song on the record is extended again in the video. Michael performs a dance with eastern European dancers. As he strikes a final pose, there is a dissolve. He is turned into a toy. The camera zooms out again and shows a long shot of two white and black babies in diapers playing with the toy, while literally sitting on top of the world



Rage breakdown:  
 I am tired of this devil, I am tired of this stuff, I am tired of this business  
 So when the going gets rough, I ain't scared of your brother, I ain't scared of  
 no sheets, I ain't scare of nobody, girl when the goin' gets mean

Sequence 6: Michael repeatedly makes a way through walls of fire, as he marches on with a swagger.



Rap:  
 Protection, for gangs, clubs and nations  
 Causing grief in human relations, It's a turf war, on a global scale  
 I'd rather hear both sides of the tale, see, it's not about races, just places, faces  
 Where your blood comes from is where your space is  
 I've seen the bright get duller, I'm not going to spend my life b eing a color

Sequence 7: A bunch of black and white kids, lip-synch the rap lyrics on the steps of an obviously black suburb house.



Vamp-chorus 3:

Don't tell me you agree with me, when I see you kicking dirt in my eye  
 But, if you're thinkin' about my baby, it don't matter if you're black or white  
 I said, if you're thinkin' about my baby, it don't matter if you're black or white  
 I said, if you're thinkin' about my brother,  
 It don't matter if you're black or white

Sequence 8: Michael pops from the behind of the Statute of Liberty's flame, sings and ragingly dances to the song. The camera zooms out and shows a beautiful long shot of a tableau, including monuments of the world such as the Sphinx and the Eiffel Tower.



Adlibs:

Alright, alright, Ooh, ooh alright, yea, yea, yea now  
 It's black, it's white, it's tough for you to be  
 Who, it's black, it's white, it's tough for you to get by

Sequence 9: A concatenation of close shots of human of every races and gender, using the revolutionary technique of “morphing”, that has the viewer see the change as a mutation rather than a succession of different faces.







Sequence 10: The music ends, the director say “it’s a wrap” and congratulates the black actress, the camera gets a higher angle and shows a black panther roaming backstage. The Panther goes down into some basement, and turns into “Michael Jackson”. Michael then steps out into the street, gathers afflatus as the wind blows, and performs an angry dance with tap steps, spins, on the sounds of percussive mouth beat. Michael smashes car windows with the inscription “niggers to go home”, and destroys other signs such as the Nazi symbol and a graffiti supporting the KKK. Michael then turns into a panther and walks away. The camera zooms out again and shows the scene -of the Panther walking away- from a cartoon’s television. The final scene shows Homer Simpson arguing with his son Bart, who got too excited about Michael Jackson’s “Black or white” video.

### b) Analysis

The introduction of the song and that of the video are quite similar and both stage an argument between a father and son about noisy music. The scene is more developed in the video, and clearly symbolizes the customary inter-age struggle about new music forms in the twentieth century. Except for this sequence, the short film’s narrative is quite different from that of the original song.

The song’s story is first about an interracial couple’s hardships, and the nagging remarks they have to face because of miscegenation. Then the narration extrapolates from this personal issue to address the race issue on the global scale. The message of the song that can be summarized by the line “It don’t matter if you’re black or white” is differently dramatized in the short film. As a revenge for abusive censorship, the little boy from the movie sends his father off through the roof- for a little lesson in tolerance and diversity. He lands in Africa with his armchair, and witnesses –like the viewer- a little lesson from Michael Jackson. Dressed in a symbolically white shirt and black trousers and his trademark black loafers, Michael successively dances with a cast of African hunters, Asian women, Native Americans, dances solo with an Indian woman and with a troupe of Russian dancer. These sequences are offered to the viewer as a tracking shot, as if to emphasize the closeness of all these different dances and cultures. The one bridging the gap between these cultures is Michael Jackson, who stars as a universal dancer -the “danseur total”- able to feel, embody and make his all the dances

of the world. While the backdrop keeps changing he is distinctly in tune with whatever variety and novelty he encounters. His identity does not suffer from these interactions, as symbolized by his unchanged clothes throughout the world tour of dance sequences (sequence 2-5). During these collective dance sequences the movie is mostly composed of mid shots that emphasize the selflessness of Michael Jackson's teaching endeavor. Michael then has a multi-racial bunch of kids present an exposé against race (sequence 7), stating in their conclusion "I ain't gonna spend my life being a color". Then he keeps on with his lesson, swaggers through fire and posits himself as the lively flame of liberty. The musical part of the video ends with the "morphing" scene (sequence 9) that beautifully highlights the idea of oneness of humankind. By 1991, computerized special effects was still burgeoning and Michael's use of the "morphing" technique to bridge the racial gap, shows his love of innovation and - one could say- some kind of confidence in technology and in the possibility of a better world. Sequence 1 to 9 of the video form an amazing fantasy, so much that only the dances and dancers give the feeling of real life. Indeed as far as the backdrop is concerned, there has undoubtedly been but very little attempt for verisimilitude, as exemplifies the grey shoebox right in the middle of the American Indian dance routine (sequence 3).

But the viewer is offered a disturbing experience of seemingly verisimilitude in sequence 10, as the camera withdraws backstage. The very fact of shooting what is happening backstage has the viewer reject any possibility of scripted drama, and leads him to believe what he is seeing is real and factual. So after the shooting of the musical part of "Black or white" the camera spots a roaming panther backstage that will turn into Michael Jackson. The setting is a dim lit desert street. Michael feeds himself on some urban wind and suddenly burst in gets into an angry dance. As he dances to his own rhythm -accompanied by his very own live human beat box beat- Michael gets into a trance and sets out to destroy various racist signs targeting blacks and immigrants. The most significant of them was certainly the windscreen that had "nigger go home" written on it. This sequence that was conspicuously singled out to echo the song verse "it's not about races, just places, faces, where your blood comes from is where your space is", could be perceived as a sly castigation of any Garvey-inspired ideas of return to Africa. Some of his moves suggests masturbation and he even unzips his trousers, but would show nothing ultimately, as if to state dance is not only linked to wooing and

sexuality –thus signifying on the controlling image reducing African Americans to entertaining dancers.

Dance as celebrated in the “Black or White” short film is as a matter of fact way more than this. It is a means to catharsis and a speaking medium to express one’s feelings, including joy, rage and anger. It would be interesting to note by the way that John Landis confessed in *Rolling Stone* magazine that some of the dances Michael asked him to shoot for the final segment of “Black or white” were even more extreme<sup>56</sup>. By the end of the trance, Michael turns into a panther again, and walks away. So as to defuse any possibility of moral panic, and controversy –he obviously foresaw- Michael added the nesting with the cartoon Simpson’s pastiche at the end of the video to instill a misleading feeling of fantasy. But it was of no use.

Few people would grasp the meaning of the final segment of “Black or white” straight away, which resulted in Michael publicly apologizing and specifying clearly he was only embodying the panther, and transcribing his feeling into a dance<sup>57</sup>. Amusingly enough, Michael later ironically comments on the controversy in the “Dangerous short films” DVD, and included as a preface to the short film a chapter entitled “reaction to Black or white”. This portion is actually a compilation of news tidbits voicing the controversy worldwide, and starts with a cacophonous choir of fidgety journalists. Thus some unidentified voice can be quoted first as saying “Even if you don’t like it, understand it, or could really care less, you couldn’t pull your eyes away from the spectacle”. Then Elaine Blythe –president of the Film Advisory Board- voices her concerns about kids starring in the video and watching it. Her words are immediately counter-voiced by some unidentified kids saying, “I love Michael, and he’s the best”. Then Michael hands the floor to music critic Kim Zayac, who expresses his doubts about the final dance sequence being “gratuitous violence and sex”. Finally as a kind of preface to the short film, he quotes an unidentified anchor saying his guess is that “it’s

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<sup>56</sup> Rolling Stone magazine, *The making of the King of Pop*, Wed, 09-Jan-1991

“ ‘He wanted it to be even more sexually explicit,’ says Landis, adding that some of the dancing they shot was even more extreme.”

<sup>57</sup> See part III of this paper for a study of Michael’s panther reference, and revolutionary art

Michael's childlike playfulness that got him into this problem and that it is his childlike openness that solved it"<sup>58</sup>.

If one had to pick a single video to illustrate Michael Jackson's film artistry, it would be "Black or white". Indeed the song "Black or white" has a powerful message originally, and its non-linear film adaptation –a device Michael used as early as 1983 with the "Billie Jean" video- effects additional perspectives on the song's topic – "race". All this concurs to make this short film an allegorical fantasy that has all the Michael Jackson ingredients for a theatrical film drama, that is to say dance, special effects, and a meaningful plot.

## **2. Other Short film highlights**

Michael Jackson's repertoire has many other "short films" that are worth studying. Interestingly enough, every Michael Jackson song is not automatically extended into a short film though. As the logic goes, only songs released as a single benefit from the movie translation, and these are not necessarily the radio friendly ones. In order to give overview of this repertoire, I will briefly analyze below some of these videos, according to the following subjective typology: first person narrative love song videos, **relationship drama videos**, and message videos.

### **a) First person narrative videos**

Very few Michael Jackson first person narrative love song have been translated into film. Throughout his career only two videos of that kind have been produced, namely "She's out of my life" (1978) and "You are not alone (1995). The former one is of little interest as it is focused on Michael sitting on a stool, and lip-synching the song. The latter one is a little more interesting and has Michael standing alone on a stage of an empty concert hall, where he reflects on his relationship with then wife Lisa Marie Presley. Some portions of the film are staged in a dreamed setting suggestive of Maxfield Parrish's 1929 painting *Daybreak*. Michael Jackson is obviously not fond of making videos for first

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<sup>58</sup> *Dangerous Short Films*, Sony Music Videos, 1993

person narrative songs. Thus even if they were released as singles, and met global success, songs such as “I just can’t stop loving you” (1987) and “Butterflies” (2001) have not been translated into film.



*Daybreak* by Maxfield Parish (1929) – *You are not Alone* by Michael Jackson (1995)

## b) Relationship drama videos

- **Billie Jean**

Michael Jackson’s first “relationship drama” song turned into film is “Billie Jean” (1983). The song is originally about a woman accusing Michael of fathering her son, and Michael responding to her “the kid is not (his) son”, and that the kid’s mother “Billie Jean is not (his) lover”, though the kid turns out to have eyes like his. Yet the plot in the film is more about violation of privacy than paternity charges. Michael is stalked throughout the video by a private detective, who is attempting to expose his private affair. Wherever he goes, whatever he does and touches, whether he walks or dances, Michael leaves a white glow that enables the private detective to stalk him to the bedroom, where Michael climbs in a bed -all dressed-up- with some mysterious woman towards the end of the film. But he always vanishes away –as if by magic- every time the detective attempts to take his photograph. As we see white lightning moving away on a fantasy road, the viewer realizes Michael cannot but resort to magical power and invisibility to be able to enjoy some kind of privacy. Although Michael Jackson’s superstardom really exploded only a few months after the “Billie Jean” video was aired, precisely after his live performance of the song at Motown’s 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary, privacy and the motif of “the chase” have always been an issue for him, ever since his early years at Motown’s. The short film’s non-linear translation of the song’s narrative, along with its incorporation of dance to express anger and smoothness, as well as special effects suggesting magic, intertwined with the song’s

message –urging respect for privacy and honesty- makes this film an intricate signifier ensemble that foreshadows Michael’s future works.



*Billie Jean* video (1993) – *Give in to me* video (1992)

- **Dirty Diana & Give in to me**

“Dirty Diana” (1988) and “Give in to me” (1992) mainly consist of a filmed live performance of the songs. “Dirty Diana” is a song about a social climber groupie attempting to ruin a musician’s life. Michael provides an electrifying performance of the song on the wings of spectacular winds recreated on stage. The feeling of drama conjured up by the song is even more bolstered by intersecting images of Diana’s silhouette roaming backstage and laying back in Michael’s limo.

“Give in to me” is about a hard-to-get girl that gives the wooing character a rough time. Images literally depicting the story of the song overlap with Michael’s stage performance. These overlapping images show a struggling and loving couple in situations that illustrates portions of the lyrics such as “she always takes it with a heart of stone” and “quench my desire, give in to the fire”. Besides Michael -again- literally electrifying performance, one can actually see in the video electricity passing through the bodies of the musician and Michael to the speakers, turning the song in a way into a song of the “body electric”. One can see that even in obviously raw video forms, Michael makes it a point to always playing with the idea of reality and instilling some form of dramatization. Some other videos like “Smooth Criminal” (1989), Leave me alone (1990) and “Blood on the dance floor” (1997) are equally notable.

- **Blood on the dance floor, Smooth Criminal and Leave me alone**

Michael Jackson himself along with friend choreographer Vince Paterson<sup>59</sup> directed the “Blood on the dance floor” short-film, and staged it in a dancing club. As it was described previously, the song’s narrative is originally very dramatic. It was consequently granted a rather literal translation, and the movie direction successfully transcribes the song’s feeling of rapturing sex and dance.



Photo 1: Michael gets everyone in a trance, and sympathize with Annie’s lot – Photo 2: Michael performs a mind-blowing dance-step, called “the lean” – Photo 3: Michael, protects some girls from brute fellows

*Smooth Criminal* video (1989)

“Smooth Criminal” is a song with a hectic drum and bass beat about a mysteriously murdered girl called Annie. The “Smooth Criminal” short film is an excerpt from Michael’s movie “Moonwalker” (1988). After being chased by some police for no apparent reason, Michael ends up in a place that is evocative of early twentieth century Chicago jook joints. That portion of the film could appear at first sight as mere entertainment, as one can see Michael plainly dancing to the song playing from a jukebox of some club. But very interestingly Michael disturbs the normal course of card games, pool and prostitution going on at the club - and sets everybody dancing along with him. His character from the film –unlike the helpless one from the song who cannot prevent Annie’s murder- acts as a seducing protector of all the ladies from the club (photo 3). Besides the mind-blowing choreography (photo 2), the interest of that film lies in the plot’s nicety, which seems to imply that though prostitution and mistreatments are as old as time, and though we know the tune, there is no such things

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<sup>59</sup> Vince Paterson co-choreographed the dance from the “Smooth Criminal” video (1988), choreographed the native dances from the “Black or White” video, directed and choreographed the “Will you be there” video, and co-choreographed and co-directed the “Blood on the dance floor” video. He is also know for the choreographer part he played in Lars Von Triers “Dancer in the dark” (2000)

as inescapable determinism. The short film could thus appear as a cathartic experience of the song (photo 1).

Finally “Leave me alone” is certainly with “Billie Jean” Michael Jackson’s most impressive “Relationship drama” work. The song has a hammering beat, and an obstinate thumping bass, along with a thick chorus that supports Michael’s irate account of some girl, he lavished a lot of money on and who eventually deceived him. Michael’s character from the song just asks the girl to leave him alone. But the short film is once again an oblique translation of the song. In a setting that is evocative of George Melies, Michael presents his body as a funfair stuck on the ground by a rollercoaster, built by some parasitic dogs in costumes that see to it that things remain the same. The viewer follows another character -also played by Michael- that takes him on a plane trip in the body of “bigger Michael”. Along the internal trip one can see Michael dancing with a skeleton of the Elephant Man, his chiseled nose and Elizabeth Taylor in some area close to his heart. As the song ends, so does the visit. The “bigger Michael” stands up and eventually breaks free from the circus. This short-film is obviously metaphorical for Michael’s love and hate relationship with the preying medias, he cannot love anymore.



*Leave me Alone* video (1990)

### **c) Message videos**

Michael Jackson’s first message song was “Beat it” (1983). He felt that the “Beat it” short film should be literally true to the song’s lyrics, which stages a character trying to prevent a stupid gang

fight<sup>60</sup>. Similarly the “Man in the mirror” video (1988) was a quite literal adaptation of the song and its spirited lyrics “if you want to make the world a better place, take a look at yourself and make a change”. It was composed of a collage of historic clips, extolling the feats of luminaries such as Martin Luther King, Gandhi, and John Lennon, along with thought provoking images of man’s misdemeanor such as the nuclear bomb havoc. Even if the point of message songs is often explicit, they are nevertheless conducive to oblique video translations, as the “Black or white” video exemplifies. Two other momentous video works of that sort from Michael Jackson’s repertoire are the film version of “Bad” (1987) and “Jam” (1992).

- **Bad**



1- Terry Malloy in *On the Waterfront* (1953) 2- Darryl in *Bad* (1987) 3- Darryl’s Technicolor fantasy

The “Bad” song is a funky piece about a young guy, who has to resort to self-assertion as a survival necessity. Thus the character from the song roars at some evil opponent words like “they say the sky’s the limit and to me it’s really true, but my friends you have seen nothing, just wait ‘till I get through, because I’m bad!”. The original version of the “Bad” short film –directed by Martin Scorsese and executive produced by Michael Jackson- is eighteen minute long<sup>61</sup>.

The film stages the story of Darryl -a kid from a derelict neighborhood, who gets away from his home place to go to some private school. He really does well in that school and is congratulated by his fellow students. Trouble starts when he comes home for the holidays, and gets bored because his mother is off to work. So he ends up roaming with his former friends from the neighborhood. These boys think Darryl has been “sissified” in the whitey’s school and put him through a test. Darryl was on

<sup>60</sup> Michael Jackson, *Moonwalk*, p°203

<sup>61</sup> *History the Short Films*, Sony Music Video, 1995

The edited version of the video only shows the musical part of the original short film

brink of holding up a quarter from a poor old man in the subway, but backed down at the last moment, which brought about an argument with his friends. Darryl gets mad and says to his friends “You ain’t bad, you ain’t nothing”. The sequences so far have been shot in black and white. Then the fantasy enters in. As if by magic Darryl’s dream self-assertive response is in Technicolor. A cast of street-styled dancers comes out of the blue, from behind the exposed beams of the subway, and supports Darryl’s fantasized character throughout his percussive self-asserting rant at his crook friends. As the song ends, the film turns into black and white again, Darryl friends walk away, leaving him alone, and one realizes the song and dance sequence was just an amazing fantasy. With the “Bad” short film Michael Jackson signifies on the African American understanding of the term “bad”, that cannot connote excellence unless one behaves honestly. The film also tackles the issue of race and integration, and seems to promote a meritocratic policy. One could think at first that Darryl’s light skin accounts for his success at his private high school, though he is congratulated and given a high five by one of his teachers in the first minutes of the film. But as the story goes on, one is made to realize that skin color matters little, since one of Darryl’s crook friend has even lighter skin than him. Darryl’s pathos is quite suggestive of that Marlon Brando’s character -Terry Malloy- in “On the waterfront”<sup>62</sup>, who incidentally utters the same self-assertive word “you ain’t nothing” in the movie. The short film’s message is cleverly staged, and though it takes pain to give a street feeling of verisimilitude, also makes room for fantasy and imagination at the heart of the song and the dance sequence. This process enables Darryl to eventually assert himself and to be understood by his crook friends. The “Bad” short film specificity lies in its well-devised plot and its clever incorporation of dance –a Jackson trademark.<sup>63</sup>

- **Jam**

One must also mention the noteworthy “Jam” short film (1992), Michael Jackson co-directed with David Kellog. The song is a funky track with a firing synthesizer, a percussive structure of drums and synthesized horns, and an obstinate electric guitar slapping riff. The song’s first verse and chorus sums up quite well the song’s message about the fortitude and solidarity required to face the problems of the

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<sup>62</sup> Elia Kazan’s movie, *On the water front*, (1954)

<sup>63</sup> See next chapter for an analysis of Michael Jackson’s dance

world. To do so Michael advocates a funky approach that consists in just going with the tide of things and face the music, totally unprepared but willing and able to think and tune in quick, the way great musician extemporize in jams. This funky unafraid jam attitude is the means Michael suggests to cope with the various difficult affairs of the world. As the song says:

“Nation to nation all the world must come together, face the problems that we see then maybe somehow we can work it out. I asked my neighbor for a favor, she said later, what has come of all the people, have we lost love of what it’s about? I have to find my peace cause no one seems to let me be, false prophets, and cry of doom what are the possibilities? I told my brother they’re will be problems, time and tears for fears, we must live each day like it’s the last. Go with it, go with it, Jam, it aint too much stuff, Jam, it ain’t too much, Jam, It ain’t too much for me to Jam”

The “Jam” short film is staged in some undefined derelict inner city American neighborhood. As the song starts, the first sequence shows a symbolic ball -the color of planet earth- dropped out of the window (photo 1). Some one from the street symbolically kicks the ball to get rid of it, and it goes around the neighborhood. The ball miraculously crosses a fire in a scrap yard, and escapes being run over by a car. As Michael stars singing the lyrics of the song, we are shown various very talented characters, dancing, playing basketball and some music in a huge disused warehouse from the neighborhood. By the middle of the song one can see each of them practicing on their own. A symbolically huge wall separates dancer Michael Jackson from basketball player Michael Jordan that also stars in the film. The two of them do not get on well at first, but ends out quickly sharing their talent with one another. Jordan throws the ball above the wall to show he is bothered by Jackson’s din. Jackson throws back the ball, scores an incredible basket and breaks the ice (Photo 2-7) Jackson ends up teaching Jordan to dance, and vice versa. As they get together, all the kids from the building join them to dance (photo 8) and play basketball. By the end of video, the last sequence shows a kid picking the ball again from a puddle (photo 9).



Photo 1



Photo 2



Photo 3



*Jam* video (1992)

The short film takes into account another meaning of “jam”, which is a basketball term for a dunk shot. The latter kind of jam, like the musician’s jam, requires a whole lot of talent, attitude and physical abilities. This short film extols this jam attitude as the keys to the problems of the world. The film has a fast pace editing, with sometimes exhilarating trackings that somehow to keep up with the players’ virtuosic movements. The “Jam” short film quality lies in these beautiful shots of moving bodies, that appears as a metaphorical counterpoint to the jams –the fix and predicaments of the world. Its clever plot, and savvy use of the body and dance bears the mark of Michael Jackson’s genius art direction.

These brief descriptions illustrate the extent of Michael Jackson’s video repertoire, which is as wide-ranging as his song repertoire. Whether the song’s narrative is given a literal or oblique translation, the video pieces are always based on a meaningful plot, and not merely image collages bound to promote an artist. Michael Jackson crafts his short films the very same way he does with songs, i.e. by freely using every trick in the book of film ingredients, from neologistic special effects, to make up, plot, and the framing techniques. So he can whether create entirely new images as in the

“Black or white” film, or resort to “unmotivated signifying” as in the “Bad” short film and the “You are not alone”. These aforementioned films are enough to illustrate my point of view. Still the list is very limitative, and some other great works such as “Speed Demon”, “Remember the time”, “In the closet” and the fantastical “Ghosts” have thus been omitted. I will delve in length on these other gems in an oncoming ontology in progress.

Michael Jackson’s solo years have been marked by his incredible mastery of the music, and music video mediums, he has always used to channel more than apolitical entertainment. Above all his music and films succeed in framing his body moves and sounds properly, so that it may fully express its idiosyncratic idiom. The last part of this paper will analyze Michael Jackson’s political message. But before doing so, the next chapter will deal with more recondite aspects of his body of art. Besides the music, the voice and the movies, one must also take into account Michael Jackson’s bodily expressions –his other dances.

## **This is my body, take it**

« When we were tiny little boys, we used to dance, we used to sing before we even learn to crawl or walk. As we grew up, we didn't change. I guess we knew right from the start we'd love the spotlights and the stage, cause we were born to entertain”

*We're here to entertain you*, performed by the Jackson 5 (1975)

“I think it creates itself... nature”

Michael's Jackson's answer to Diane Sawyer's inquiry about his look<sup>64</sup> (1995)

### **C. Dance to the music of life**

Dance has always been part of Michael Jackson's performances since his early years with the Jackson Five. Through the years he has developed this craft dramatically to produce solo and cast choreographies on stage and in his films that mesmerized millions. Kobena Mercer referred to his dancing style as full of “sensual grace and sheer dynamism”<sup>65</sup>. In order to comprehend Michael Jackson's style, I propose to study below its possible influences, the intertextual environment of its production and the grammar of his body language.

#### **1. Dance of ages**<sup>66</sup>

During the Motown years the Jackson 5 were given extra dressing, dance and singing lessons. But Michael's special relationship with dance started long before. As the lyrics from “We're here to entertain you” show, both the Jacksons and Motown were well aware of that. During his audition sessions at Motown's, Michael and his brothers performed James Brown's “I got you (and I feel good)”, and attendants were stunned by his impersonation of Brown's shimmies. Indeed Michael Jackson has never made a secret of his indebtedness to James Brown, he refers to as “the King of them all, Mr. Dynamite, Mr. Please Please himself”. As he puts it:

« Before he came along, a singer was a singer and a dancer was a dancer. A singer might have danced and a dancer might have sung, but unless you were Fred Astaire or Gene Kelly, you probably did one better than the other, especially in a live performance. But he changed all that. No spotlight could keep up with him when he skidded across the stage –you had to flood

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<sup>64</sup> Jel D Lewis, *Michael Jackson The Big Picture*, p°218

<sup>65</sup> Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle*, p°35

<sup>66</sup> I intentionally avoided to include subcategories in this chapter to underline Michael Jackson's belonging to the wide intertextual worlds of body languages

it! I wanted to be that good”<sup>67</sup>

Michael’s way of grabbing the microphone and his self-assured strutting on stage are to this day very brownesque, even if he has adorned it with some intangible personal ingredients that makes his very own style. Choreographer Bob Fosse regards him as a “terrific” dancer, whose moves are “clean, neat, and fast with a sensuality that comes through”. Praising his personal style, which he considers as the most important thing in a dancer, Mr. Fosse sees him though as “more a synthesizer than (an) innovator”<sup>68</sup>. Choreographer and company founder Twyla Tharp confirms Mr. Fosse’s insight, as she goes into details about Michael Jackson’s connection with the African American tradition.

« He’s very precise. He’s obviously very quick. That’s been in black dancing for a long time –with the early tap dancers and the street dancers. It’s part of a tradition that Michael Jackson clearly had access to. There’s probably no-one so accurate and just basically sexy »<sup>69</sup>

Some of Michael Jackson’s moves are indeed very quick, and include high-speed figures such as his incredible three to five times spins on two feet – ballet dancers usually do this on one leg to reduce the slowing frictions. The dances from the “Black or white” short film illustrate well this aspect of his dancing style. Sequence 6 from the short film suggests incisiveness, power and fortitude, especially when he literally walks through the fire, and so does the final segment (sequence 10). The concatenation of pelvis rotations, pull up leg, spins, tap dance supported by his human beat box<sup>70</sup> in the latter sequence is a clear example of his swiftness.

But paradoxical as it may seem, Michael Jackson most famous move is a mid-tempo one. As Lynne Faukey Emery remarks in her book on Black Dance<sup>71</sup>, Michael Jackson became closely identified with a single dance –the Moonwalk- just as Chuck Berry did with his “duckwalk”. This incorporation of dance and spectacle in performances is to Emery typical of Black Rock Stars. Michael Jackson’s *Moonwalk* was premiered at Motown’s 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary TV show, when he performed the song “Billie Jean” live for the very first time. The performance met such a success that it became a classic, and was included in all of his concerts from 1983 onwards. *New York Times* critic Anna Kisselgoff

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<sup>67</sup> Michael Jackson, *Moonwalk*, p°50

<sup>68</sup> Jay Cocks, *Why he’s a Thriller*, *Time Magazine*, March-19, 1984

<sup>69</sup> Catherine Dinneen, *Michael Jackson in his own words*, p°73

<sup>70</sup> Percussive sounds performed by human voice

<sup>71</sup> Lynne Faukey Emery, *Black Dance From 1619 to today*, p°360

reviewed a show from his 1988 *Bad Tour*, and gave an interesting analysis of Michael’s trademark *Moonwalk* she perceives as “an apt metaphor for his dance style”<sup>72</sup>. According to her “his ability to keep one leg straight as he glides while the other bends, and seems to walk, requires perfect timing”. This body-feat is so demanding that it requires –to her- the qualities of a technician, those of “a great illusionist” and “a genuine mime”, and as she adds to sum it up, “Precision is the name of the game”. Yet the authorship of this particular step is not to be attributed solely to Michael Jackson. As he confesses in his autobiography:

« The Moonwalk was already out on the street by this time (Motown 25 performance), but I enhanced it a little when I did it. It was born as a break-dance step, a ‘popping’ type of thing that black kids had created dancing on street corners in the ghetto. Black people are truly innovative dancers; they create many of the new dances, pure and simple »<sup>73</sup>

One usually tends to attribute his dynamism to his black legacy, whereas his grace is rather perceived as coming down from Fred Astaire. But things in actuality are far more complex than this, for the theories of intertextuality can also be applied to the world of dance, and of body languages.

Besides his repertoire of swift moves, Michael Jackson also has a palette of very slow and gracious moves. This comprises for instance his ballet-like freeze<sup>74</sup> on his toes (the Toe Stand), he would usually do at the end of three times spin (photo 1), as well as his “march against the wind” that can be seen in the “Jam” video (photo 2) and also sporadically in his live concerts. This latter move can be both found in the performance of break-dancers, as well as Mime Marceau’s, Michael Jackson cites as a major influence.



Photo 1

Photo 2

<sup>72</sup> Anna Kisselgoff, *The Dancing Feet Of Michael Jackson*, March 6, 1988

<sup>73</sup> Michael Jackson, *Moonwalk*, p°210

<sup>74</sup> A pose is held or frozen

According to Marcel Marceau, as a youngster, Michael Jackson would anonymously attend to most of his performances when he was on tour in the US. He reports that what Michael Jackson loves about his craft are “the slow motion mime poetry, the slow rhythms of pantomime and silence”<sup>75</sup>. Marceau also incidentally points out in that interview that even if Michael Jackson worships Fred Astaire and himself, he does have his personal style and is no imitator. He equally corroborates previous analysis of Michael Jackson’s style, as he expresses his amazement at the quickness of some of his moves. The “pantomime de la marche contre le vent” is a Marceau trademark-move, but break-dancers also have a similar dance called the “windmill”. Michael Jackson has his very personal version of that move, though he humbly claims indebtedness to both Marceau and the Street Dancers.

It is also interesting to highlight the intertextual connections Michael Jackson has with the body languages of modern dancers such as Martha Graham and Mary Wigman. One could surmise that though Michael Jackson never mentioned these ladies as inspirations, he is anyway likely to have been acquainted with at least Martha Graham’s works. Indeed Martha Graham choreographed –one of Michael Jackson’s favorite composer- Aaron Copland’s ballet “Appalachian Spring” in 1944<sup>76</sup>. Maryvonne Ganne analyzed the temporal and spatial components of Martha Graham’s “Lamentation” and Mary Wigman’s “La danse de la sorcière” solo choreographies, and brought out their distinctive features as follows<sup>77</sup>. As she very helpfully describes, both performances were characterized by “L’ancrage au sol”, i.e. the anchoring of the dancer on the ground. She further adds, “the ground is to the modern dancer what the air is to the classical dancer. Both work in relationship with gravity. Whereas the latter tames it, the former negates it”. According to Ganne, the specificity of modern dance lies in the fact that the dancer’s body takes the center stage, and most importantly in his unpredictable asymmetrical moves that keep the audience in suspense to build a strong sense of drama. Furthermore these moves are mostly organic and do not indulge in acrobatic distortions. As Ganne

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<sup>75</sup> *Black & White Magazine*, Mars, 1996, Marcel Marceau was interviewed during a rehearsal session with Michael Jackson on a choreography based on his song « Childhood ». The whole performance was cancelled due to Michael Jackson’s health problem. He collapsed on stage due to severe deshydratation.

<sup>76</sup> Following to Michael Jackson’s demise in June 2009, Liza Minelli revealed on CNN that Michael Jackson was an eager learner and that she took him out once to meet Martha Graham at one of her rehearsals

<sup>77</sup> Maryvonne Ganne, *Graham-Wigman ou les deux esthétiques* –les années 30, excerpt from *Enjeu Esthétique* p°119

observes they explore and make the most of “the expressive tonalities of each anatomic region of the body, including the head, elbows, arms, forearms, hand, torso, pelvis and so on”. Michael Jackson’s repertoire of moves has some clear traces of these modern dance elements. As an illustration one could mention Michael’s accentuation of a starting or final beat by a peculiar percussive torso and elbow move along with other nonspecific dances involving head rotation, stomping feet, various pelvis and hand signals (see “Black or White photos). Still Anna Kisselgoff tends to regard Michael Jackson as more of an aerial dancer, which is to me not surprising at all as he merges all these organic moves with steps like the Moonwalk, and other nonspecific gliding, spins and fantastical innovation such as the “lean”<sup>78</sup> from the “Smooth Criminal” short film. A gracious backward move like the *Moonwalk* –Michael would perform often along more than ten meters on stage- is indeed more reflective of a taming of gravity than its negation. Michael Jackson is himself very conscious of this aspect, so much that the voice-over from the VHS he marketed in the late eighties –namely “Michael Jackson, the legend continues” (1988) and “Moonwalker” (1990)- proudly presents his dance as sometimes “defying the laws of physics”.

I would continue the contextualization of Michael Jackson’s dance with Anna Kisselgoff interesting linking of Michael Jackson to Merce Cunningham, another major figure of modern dance.

As she remarks:

« Michael Jackson is an avant-garde dancer, and his dances could be called abstract. Like Merce Cunningham, he shows us that movement has a value of its own and that what we read into it is provided by the theatrical context around it <sup>79</sup>

Kisselgoff’s remark proves again to be very insightful. Indeed whenever he talks about his dance creation, Michael Jackson puts the stress on the spontaneous quality of his body production. He thus confesses in his autobiography that until the day before his legendary performance of “Billie Jean” at Motown 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, he had no clue about how to stage the song. He just knew that it would be dramatic, and add a sense a threat if he wore a hat. He adds that he came up with the idea of incorporating the Moonwalk just after the song’s bridge –he had been rehearsing for quite a while by

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<sup>78</sup> Michael Jackson patented the shoe mechanical device -he conceived with his personal designer Michael Bush- that enables this gravity defying move

<sup>79</sup> Anna Kingelsoof, *The Dancing Feet of Michael Jackson*, March 6, 1988

then- only on the very eve of the performance<sup>80</sup>. As for the rest, Michael Jackson decided to leave it up to the music. As he confessed to Oprah, his secret lies in his ability to lose himself to the music, and still never lose his way. Thus when Oprah asked him about his tendency to grab his crotch on stage, Michael Jackson gave some clear indications about his dance principles. As he puts it:

“It happens subliminally. When you’re dancing, you know, you are just interpreting the music and the sounds and the accompaniment. If there’s a driving bass, if there’s a cello, if there’s a string, you become the emotion of what the sound is. So if I’m doing a movement and I go ‘Bam’ and I grab myself it’s... it’s the music that compels me to do it. It’s not that I’m saying that I’m dying to grab down there and it’s not in a great place, you don’t think about it... it just happens. Sometimes I’ll look back at the footage and I go... and I go ‘Did I do that?’, so I’m a slave to the rhythm”<sup>81</sup>

The man who describes himself as an “instrument of nature”<sup>82</sup> develops this principle even more interestingly in the preface of his poem collection *Dancing the Dream* and states:

“Consciousness expresses itself through creation (...). I become the singer and the song. I become the knower and the known. I keep on dancing and then, it is the eternal dance of creation. The creator and the creation merge into one wholeness of joy. I keep on dancing and dancing and dancing, until there is only the dance”<sup>83</sup>

These features of Michael Jackson’s dancing are indeed very much similar to those of Michael Cunningham’s, as Kisselgoff remarked.

Cunningham is an American choreographer famous for off-Broadway performances such as *Galaxy*, 1955, *Suite for five in space and time*, 1956, and *Summerspace*, 1958 –let us note the similar spatial lexicon used by Jackson and Cunningham to refer to their dance. His company –The Merce Cunningham Dance Company- was subsequently given tenure at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 1968, which enabled him to develop and consolidate his “Event” theory that sets great store by randomness. Paul Bourcier states about Cunningham’s dance, “an *Event* has neither a structure backbone nor a logical meaning; it can conjure up a robot world, an interplanetary journey beyond gravity in some space with variable time systems, as well as a pure and simple game of gratuitous and self-sufficient moves”<sup>84</sup>. This very idea of randomness also pervades the work of luminary

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<sup>80</sup> *Moonwalk*, p°210

<sup>81</sup> Jel D Lewis, *Michael Jackson The Big Picture*, p°178, Transcription of -Michael Jackson talks to Oprah (1992)

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid*, p°192

<sup>83</sup> Michael Jackson, *Dancing the dream*, p°1

<sup>84</sup> Paul Bourcier, *Histoire de la danse en occident*, p°265

choreographers such as Twyla Tharp –who was quoted above- and Andrew de Groat. Besides stressing the need of non-intellectual movements, De Groat's *postmodern* school developed and offered *spinning* in a variety of forms. The extensive use of such spinning produces an infectious depersonalization that could be passed on from the dancer to the audience<sup>85</sup>, which is the *raison d'être* of such artistic effort. It is worth noting that Andrew De Groat choreographed in America some successful staging of Tchaikovsky's ballets –Nutcracker and Swan Lake (1982)- and that Tchaikovsky happens to be a composer Michael Jackson has always named as an inspiration<sup>86</sup>. One could consequently wonder to what extent Michael Jackson could have been influenced by De Groat's style, as the spin holds a prominent part in his choreographies. As he puts it in his poem "Dance of life"<sup>87</sup>:

« Grinning, ducking my head for balance, I start to spin as wildly as I can. This is my favorite dance, because it contains a secret. The faster I twirl, the more I am still inside. My dance is all motion without, all silence within. As much as I love to make music, it's the unheard music that never dies. And silence is my real dance, though it never moves. It stands aside my choreographer of grace, and blesses each finger and toe»

Whether Michael Jackson's relationships with these various dance heritages are conscious or not, all these instances do substantiate Bob Fosse's reference to Michael Jackson as a "synthesizer". But if he is a synthesizer, he is a one that integrates every style regardless of color –not just black dancing. This conscious policy of his is beautifully represented in the "Black or white" short film.

Michael Jackson's openness is obviously responsible for the wide-ranging richness of his moves and rhythms palette, which in turn enables him to dance his wildest dreams. As he puts it in his poem "Planet Earth"<sup>88</sup>:

« In my veins I've felt the mystery  
Of corridors of time, books of history  
Life songs of ages throbbing in my blood  
Have danced the rhythm of the tide and flood »

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« Un Event n'a pas de construction ni de sens logiques ; il peut évoquer tout aussi bien l'univers robotisé, le voyage dans un monde interplanétaire sans pesanteur, dans un temps à valeur variable, qu'un jeu pur et simple de mouvements gratuits et se suffisant à eux-mêmes »

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, p°267

<sup>86</sup> Michael Jackson, *Moonwalk*, p°280

<sup>87</sup> Michael Jackson, *Dancing the Dream*, p°14-15

<sup>88</sup> Michael Jackson, *Dancing the Dream*, p°4

## 2. Dancing the dream

The title of Michael Jackson's poems and reflections collection *Dancing the Dream* could suggest, dancing has to Michael Jackson the somewhat unreal, cathartic and fleeting qualities of dreams. Like the performers cited above, Michael Jackson shares his dream dances live on stage, but also in his musical short films. Even if Michael Jackson enjoys the relationship with the public during his live performances, he considers it necessary to capture those **transiting moments** on film to avoid oblivion, for history, for the record and for it to have some kind of value<sup>89</sup>. In *Enjeu Esthétique* Mireille Arguel construes dance as whether factual, expounding a message, or sacred. Factual dance is to her the expressive non-intellectual dance for the sake of dance, and devoid of any intent to communicate ideas. The second category is self-explanatory, and she ranges as 'Sacred Dance' any dance expressing and inviting to some form of self-transcendentalism<sup>90</sup>. We have seen in the previous chapter that Michael Jackson's dance repertoire is partly composed of factual dance, but it also has elements of the two other categories.

### a) Dream works

Some of Michael Jackson's solo dance moves on stage and in his films could as a matter of fact be regarded as abstract, as Kisselgoff pointed out<sup>91</sup>. Yet in so far as his moves accentuate the beat and other variations in the song, an understanding of the song's narrative could make their interpretation easier. Within the context of Michael Jackson's art, dance is thus never exclusively factual for they always have some kind of narrative background. To illustrate the truth of this one could mention Michael's trademark freeze on his toes right in the middle of the "Billie Jean" short film. This move is so gracious and pleasant that it would be welcome anytime anyhow. But in the specific framework of "Billie Jean", where Michael's character is trying to cope with a woman harassing him about a pregnancy case, Michael's freeze on his toes<sup>92</sup> –along with his other face and

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<sup>89</sup> Michael Jackson expressed in Moonwalk (p°131) how tragic it is that there should not be footages of Stephanie Mills' performance of Dorothy in Charlie Smalls' stage version of the Wiz. Marcel Marceau also confirms Michael Jackson's obsession with filming all of his performances. So does Brett Ratner, who said Michael Jackson recorded all of their conversations (Brett Ratner interview)

<sup>90</sup> Le corps enjeu – Enjeu esthétique, p°136

<sup>91</sup> See photo p°38

<sup>92</sup> Rising up on one's toes without toe shoes is indeed quite an acrobatic feat

body expressions in the film- convey an idea of smoothness, grace, power and untouchable quality in the face of lies that are taking the upper hand over the truth<sup>93</sup>.

Besides echoing the messages lurking in the songs' narratives, Michael Jackson's dance reveals some other interesting policies. During his Oprah Interview, in addition to James Brown, Jackie Wilson and the Beatles, Michael Jackson ranked the Bee Gees among his mentors, and –one could say” hinted at his disco ties.

Disco as a genre is much decried. According to Nelson George, the genre just borrowed the musical formula of Gamble & Huff's Philly Sound, which is composed of “overripe strings, flowing French horns and Latin percussion”<sup>94</sup>, plus the kicking drums and bouncing bass. He also points out that interracial acts such as “Kool and the Gang” and “KC and the Sunshine Band” pioneered the genre in the early seventies, before record companies re-appropriated it by the mid seventies and turned it for the most part into “a sound of mindless repetition and lyrical idiocy”. Rickey Vincent adds up to the critics and remarks, these songs used new recording techniques and drum machines to create endless music<sup>95</sup>, with hedonistic and catchy sexually explicit songs such as Donna Summer's “Love to love you baby”<sup>96</sup>. While Nelson George resents the disco crossover mainly because of the poor quality of the “beige music”<sup>97</sup>, Vincent dislikes it because as he contends “the color-blind music gave the impression of a color-blind society, but that impression was far from the reality”. Yet as far as dance is concerned, the disco era witnessed the rise of discotheques, where Blacks, Whites and Latinos could dance together to the new music and socialize. Lynne Fauley Emery describes disco dance as a “fast-moving, synthesized, electronic genre”, which is a measure of society in the seventies, and brought out new moves such as the “Robot”, the “Funky Glide”, the “Freak”, and “the Freeze among many other ones. She particularly points out a dance routine called the “Electric Boogie” to

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<sup>93</sup> Reference to the lyrics of ‘Billie Jean’ : « Momma always told me be careful of what you do, don't go round breaking young girl's hearts, momma always told me be careful of who you love, be careful of what you do cause the lies become the truth »

<sup>94</sup> Nelson George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues*, p°153

<sup>95</sup> Rickey Vincent, *Funk*, p°205-215

« Record companies pressed ‘dance singles’ the size of twelve-inch albums but containing only one song »

<sup>96</sup> Ibid, Summer simulates a sex act in the song, which according to Vincent « marked a symbolic demolition of the age-old black musical tradition of innuendo »

<sup>97</sup> Nelson George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues*, p°159

epitomize the era<sup>98</sup>. “White rock” fans would repel the whole disco culture by 1979. As a result rock and pop radio stations would promote initiatives such as “abolish disco in our lifetime” and “no-disco weekend”. The boycott took a nasty turn when a Chicago Deejay organized a disco records demolition during a *Chicago White Sox* baseball game on July 12, 1979. As Rickey Vincent recalls, “between ten thousand and twenty thousand records were reportedly placed in the centre of the field and blown up, to the delight of the crowd, which according to news reports, went wild, tearing up the field and getting in fights and chanting ‘Disco sucks’ ”<sup>99</sup>. Even if he is highly respected by both Rickey Vincent and Nelson George, Michael Jackson is a disco fan and laments the widespread negative treatment of the disco culture. So when Reverend Jesse Jackson asked him in an interview from 2005, what gave rise to the “Thriller” album, Michael Jackson answered –somewhat desultorily- as follows:

« What gave rise to ‘Thriller’ was that the time, was pretty much disappointed and hurt –I lived in an area called Encino, and I used to see signs of graffiti saying ‘Disco Sucks’ and ‘Disco is this’ and ‘Disco is that’ and Disco was just a happy medium of making people dance at the time, but it was so popular, that the uhem, uhem, society was turning against it. I said, I’m just going to do a great album, because I love, uhem, the album Tchaikovsky did, The Nutcracker Suite, it’s an album where every song is like a great song”<sup>100</sup>

Michael Jackson’s answer clearly reveals his approval of the dancing policies of the Disco culture. This also seems to hint that he understands people were upset by the dismal music of some Disco records. So one may suppose he just endeavored with the “Thriller” album to infuse the Disco happy dance spirit in some new mind-blowing form of music. **Indeed even if his music** from the “Thriller” album onwards has almost nothing to do with the Disco music codes, the Disco dance spirit lives on through his practices, as the following quote from 1983 suggests:

« Moving your body is an art (...). Dancing is really showing your emotions through bodily movement. It’s a wonderful thing to get on the floor and just to feel free and do what you want to and just let it come out... It’s escapism, getting away from everything and just moving the body and letting all the tension and pain out”<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Lynne Fauley Emery, *Black Dance From 1619 to today*, p°355

As he describes it, “The Electric Boogie is of particular visual interest. It is both a social dance and an exhibition form in widespread use by breakdancers. Participants stand in a circle or line, locking hands. The first person performs a movement that he passes, wave-like, fro his arm to his hand and, thus, to the person next to him. In turn, the next person picks up the movement, transforms it, and transfers it to his neighbour. The movements are done in Robot fashion and resemble an electric impulse passing from body to body (The dance can also be performed by a soloist who autonomously passes the impulse from one part of the body to another)

<sup>99</sup> Rickey Vincent, *Funk*, p°215

<sup>100</sup> Michael Jackson’s interview by Jesse Jackson on *Keep Hope Alive* radio, March-31, 2005

<sup>101</sup> Nelson George, *The Michael Jackson Story*, p°16

Escapism is one of the governing principles of Michael Jackson's dance. James Brown cherished this notion as well, and included an instrumental track called "Escapism" in his influential -third live recording at the Apollo- "Revolution of the Mind" (1971). Yet this word has become derogatorily linked with Disco to underline its so-called apolitical, and hedonistic attributes by the end of the seventies. To Michael Jackson his films, music and dance must have some form of escapist quality, that is why he always makes it a point to infusing some sense of magic and unexpected to ornament the transcriptions of emotions in his works. He firmly believes in the power of such works to help people cope with the hardships of everyday life, and to add meaning to their lives. As he asserted in his interview by Brett Ratner:

« I'm one to bring some bliss and escapism, some joy, some magic. Because without entertainment, what would the world be like? You know? What would it really be like? It would be a totally different world for me. I love entertainment. And my favorite of all is film. The power and magic of movies. It's the greatest, it's the most expressive of all the art forms. I think it touches the soul. Music and movies are the most expressive. It's almost like religion: You get so involved, so caught up. You go in the theater a different person than you come out. It affects you that way. That's powerful. I think that's strong. I love that.»<sup>102</sup>

Both Vincent and George stigmatize the hedonistic and escapist aspects of the Disco culture, though they obviously do not voice the same pigeonholing concerns about -the escapism of escapisms- other more traditionally religious practices, which has the very same social function and has most of the time even less connection than disco with real life. Flimsy analysis of escapism such as Vincent and George's are so well publicized they tend to be prevalent. But these stances obviously only echoes the supposedly Marxist views of Adorno and Horkheimer, who saw the uniforming and predictable products of the culture industry as shackling for the masses. As Adorno & Horkheimer wrote:

« The escape from every day drudgery which the whole industry promises... (is a) paradise... (of) the same old drudgery... escape... (is) predesigned to lead back to the starting point. Pleasure promotes the resignation, which it ought help to forget »<sup>103</sup>

Fortunately Gilles Deleuze's concept of "ligne de fuite" turns out to be very helpful to bring to light the abstruse side of escapism, a lot of critics will not see. In fact Deleuze does not regard escape as a form of cowardice, but rather as action per se.

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<sup>102</sup> Brett Ratner Interview, *Michael Jackson: decades before all of the charges and countercharges, he was a pint-size singer with a big dream*

<sup>103</sup> John Storey, *Inventing Popular Culture*, p°29

« *Ligne de fuite* is a deterritorialization. French people do not really know what it is. They naturally escape like everybody else, but they think escaping is getting way from the artistic or mystical world, or that this is something cowardly, because one shuns obligations and accountabilities. Escaping does not mean keeping oneself away from acting, there is nothing more active than an escape. It is the opposite of the imaginary. »<sup>104</sup>

As the character from “Blood on the dance floor” suggests when he hollers “To escape the world I’ve got to enjoy that simple dance, it seemed that everything was on my side”, Michael Jackson does not idle in some drug pastime paradise to escape the world, but rather resorts to creation and dance. This escapist policy is thus channeled through Michael Jackson’s music and body. Nelson George describes his *Off the Wall* album as a “celebration of the body’s will to move”<sup>105</sup>, which is a definition that could be applied to Michael Jackson’s entire body of work. As far as dance is concerned the escapist dream policy can be found both in his cast choreographies and in his solo performances. The escaping experience takes the viewer –who has the goodwill to suspend his disbelief- on a dream journey, at the end of which he is impregnated with the more or less subtle message of the music and dance, he is empowered with the infectious energy exuding from the dance and wakes up somehow different from the beginning of the experience. As an illustration of this, one could cite the examples of the “Beat it”, “Smooth Criminal” and “Bad” short films. These films all have captivating cast choreographies, some one of the kind moves that can carry the viewer away, and quench some kind of aesthetic thirst in him. But these dances –beyond the escapist aesthetic lure- are never devoid of meanings. Interestingly these three films all use dance as an outlet for the anger and frustrations of the characters, and most of all present it as a redeeming alternative to sheer destructive violence. Thus the character from “Beat it” steps into a gang fight, starts to dance, stops the fight, and has everyone fall into step and perform his choreography. Similarly Darryl from the “Bad” video uses fantasy choreography to assert himself, make himself understood by his nefarious friend, and avoid a fight. As for “Smooth Criminal” the

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<sup>104</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Dialogues*, avec Claire Parnet, Ed. Flammarion, 1977, p.47

“La ligne de fuite est une déterritorialisation. Les Français ne savent pas bien ce que c’est. Évidemment, ils fuient comme tout le monde, mais ils pensent que fuir, c’est sortir du monde, mystique ou art, ou bien que c’est quelque chose de lâche, parce qu’on échappe aux engagements et aux responsabilités. Fuir, ce n’est pas du tout renoncer aux actions, rien de plus actif qu’une fuite. C’est le contraire de l’imaginaire”

<sup>105</sup> Nelson George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues*, p°168

character starts to dance and disturbs as if by magic the normal course of routine gambling and prostitution in a fictional brothel<sup>106</sup>.

Even if Michael Jackson's music videos and stage performances are usually marked by special effects and some kind of theatrical setting, the escapist device relies heavily on Michael Jackson's use of his own body. When one watches Michael Jackson dance, it is undoubtedly quite hard to separate the performance from his larger-than-life but shy media persona – that we will tackle in depth in the last part of this paper. But whenever Michael Jackson performs, he would undergo some kind of transformations, which are so dramatic that some of his private friend, and long-time co-workers would not even recognize him. Sound-engineer Bruce Swedien admitted when they traveled with him to his concerts all over the world, his wife and he “have often thought that (they) don't know that Michael Jackson, the performer, that amazing person up there on the stage”<sup>107</sup>. The shy and coy media persona character of Michael Jackson's would thus turn -anytime he dances- into an unknown, and unpredictable being that exudes some extraordinary qualities. Jean-Louis Vaudoyer<sup>108</sup> notices some comparable qualities in legendary dancer Nijinski, whose physical outlook –stocky and shorty- could not indicate his incredibly aerial abilities. His reflections on Nijinski's transformation proves to be equally relevant to Michael Jackson:

« His transfiguration, metamorphosis, and sublimation during the moment of dance, creates a metaphysical quality –a grain of divinity, which changes, and diverts the material from its daily use, and mundane existence. The occurrence of these ‘extra-ordinarily’ aesthetic forms in everyday life, these mutants, acutely brings forward the interaction of formal aesthetic values, and aesthetic values related to the aggregation of the imaginary and the sensitive worlds, i.e. the interaction between an aesthetic approach of the body morphology –a superficial and microscopic vision of the body- and an aesthetic approach of the body –understood as a multi-dimensional blend of carnal and sensitive qualities, matter, social matter and so on- a macroscopic vision of the body”<sup>109</sup>

When Michael Jackson dances he often resorts to energy variations, that ranges from dynamic swift moves to very slow motion ones –like the ones suggesting masturbation in the “Black or White” short

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<sup>106</sup> Another interesting instance of this is Michael Jackson's Disney World film *Captain Eo* (1986), which incorporates dance as a means to avoid warfare in the galaxy. The film features songs *Another part of me* and *We are here to change the world*

<sup>107</sup> Bruce Swedien, *Make mine music*, p°141

<sup>108</sup> Jean-Louis Vaudoyer, *Serge de Diaghilev*, as quoted in *Jeu et enjeu, Le corps au défi*, p°206

<sup>109</sup> Ibid, “Cette transfiguration, cette métamorphose, cette sublimation dans l'instant dansé, crée cette dimension métaphysique –parcelle de divin- qui modifie, détourne le matériau de sa condition quotidienne, de sa triviale existence. Ces ‘hors normes’ esthétiques du quotidien, ces mutants, posent avec acuité le problème des rapports entre valeurs esthétiques liées à l'ensemble des mondes du sensible et de l'imaginaire, c'est-à-dire entre une esthétique de la morphologie corporelle –vision superficielle et microscopique du corps- et une esthétique du corps, celui-ci étant alors pris comme objet pluridimensionnel : charnel, sensitif, matière vivante, sociale, etc., vision macroscopique »

film- within the very same dance sequence, offering thus a wide variety of moves, the very same way a painter gives to see a wide range of colours. Particularly when he dances solo, as in the final segment of the “Black or White” short film and during performances of “Billie Jean”, Michael Jackson loses himself and turns into some ethereal dance. Dance is undoubtedly the expression of Michael Jackson’s “will to move”, but it has something more than this. **It often** appears as the only outlet out of the miseries from the various worlds of the characters from Michael Jackson’s works, and their fortitude –however contrived- is celebrated through the dances. According to Martha Graham dance is originally rooted in rites, which spring from the longing for a connection with beings that could bestow immortality. She also asserts that the kind of immortality we are looking for today is different and lies in the greatness of man<sup>110</sup>. Whenever Michael Jackson steps out of the realm of the customary with his dances, his macro- and microscopic body contributes to create something so monstrously unique that it waxes divine. And it does so because we are mesmerized by the freedom, easiness, swiftness, and unforced qualities of his moves, which combines with the positive narrative background of the songs -often celebrating man’s ability to cope with earthly drudgeries by use of expressionism and the enactment of his will to move- to produce a fascinating blend of talent, virtuosity, nobility, and heroism that inevitably cast him beyond usual human categories. Jean Luc Nancy stated that “the solo dancer is certainly the only artist that gathers in one body the means, the form, the end and the instrument” and added that “he needs nothing else –in the event that the choreography was not priorly prepared”<sup>111</sup>. Whenever Michael Jackson dances solo or with a cast of dancers, be it prepared or not, he gives his Promethean body for the world to see and experience. His dance is somewhat as Martha Graham envisioned it should be, i.e. “something absolute... that does not serve an idea, but is such a highly organized activity it can produce ideas”<sup>112</sup>. Michael Jackson’s dance has both functions. Indeed his dance both serves the background narrative setting of the songs, and produces something extra that toys with his constant principles of escapism, and ‘will to move’. This puts him in the Promethean

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<sup>110</sup> Bourcier, *Histoire de la danse en occident*, p°258

<sup>111</sup> *La danse en solo, une figure singulière de la modernité*, Jean Luc Nancy, *Seul au Monde* p°53

‘Un danseur solo est sans doute le seul artiste qui rassemble entièrement en lui le moyen, la forme, la fin, l’instrument ? Il n’a besoin de rien d’autre –dans l’hypothèse ou la chorégraphie n’est pas préalablement écrite’

<sup>112</sup> *Le corps en jeu – Enjeu esthétique*, p°116

“La danse est un absolu... elle ne se met pas au service d’une idée, mais elle est une activité si hautement organisée qu’elle peut produire l’idée”

category of divine people dedicating their body to a cause. I would venture to call such character “eccentric midfielder”.

His dreamlike dances are the very proof, his dreams and ideals are at work in his entire body of work, hence maybe his cherished expression “dancing the dream”, that also reveals in a way his joy and marvelling at the human possibilities of bodily expressions. One cannot comprehend Michael Jackson’s artistic world without a close look at his dance. Fascinatingly the governing principles of his dance –laisser-aller, escapism, and will to move- reigns over his body and soul.

### **b) The Dancing Mind**

Dance is to Michael Jackson not limited to the stage. Beyond the entertainment value, dance is a style of life, and life is a dance. As we have seen above, Michael Jackson is a versatile dancer, who has a large palette of moves. We have also noted his openness to the various dances of the world, from the street dancers to James Brown, and Marcel Marceau among many others. But his openness is not limited to the world of stage. As Quincy Jones points out with wonderment “(Michael Jackson) would watch tapes of gazelles and cheetahs and panthers to imitate the natural grace of their movements”<sup>113</sup>. He finds dances in every aspects of life. In his reflection “Dance of life”, Michael Jackson confesses he “cannot escape the moon”, which requires him to dance every time they meet. As he likes to describe himself, Michael Jackson appears thus as an “instrument of nature”, to be more precise as an instrument of dancing nature. As he writes:

“Since childhood I have reacted to the moon this way, as her favourite lunatic, and not just hers. The stars draw me near, close enough so that I see through the twinkling act. They’re dancing too, doing a soft molecular jiggle that makes my carbon atom jump in time. With my arms flung wide, I head for the sea, which brings out another dance in me”<sup>114</sup>

This kind of reflection might appear as mere pathetic fallacy, but Michael Jackson’s stance is sustained by similar theories by -theorist of movement- Rudolf Laban, to whom “Space is a huge universal flux” and “is the hidden aspect of the movement”, whereas “the movement is a visible aspect of space”<sup>115</sup>. But Michael Jackson does not perceive dance only in these far-off elements. Everything

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<sup>113</sup> Quincy Jones, *Q*, p°230

<sup>114</sup> Michael Jackson, *Dancing the Dream*, p°14

<sup>115</sup> *La danse en solo, une figure singulière de la modernité*, p°25, Elisabeth Schwartz, *Les partenaires du solo*

life has to offer, and every emotion shows potential for dance. Michael Jackson describes this concisely in his reflection “That one in the mirror”:

“How can anybody rush to help the earth if they feel disconnected? Perhaps the earth is telling us what she wants, and by not listening, we fall back on our own fear and panic. One thing I know: I never feel alone when I am earth’s child. I do not have to cling to my personal survival as long as I realize, day by day, that all of life is in me. The children and their pain; the children and their joy; The ocean swelling under the sun; the ocean weeping with black oil. The animals hunted in fear; the animals bursting with the sheer joy of being alive. This sense of the ‘world in me’ is how I always want to feel. That one in the mirror has his doubts sometimes. So I tender with him. Every morning I touch the mirror and whisper, ‘Oh, friend, I hear a dance. Will you be my partner? Come.’”<sup>116</sup>

Michael Jackson makes this phenomenon even clearer in his reflection “Dancing the dream”, as he acknowledges:

“On many occasion when I’m dancing, I’ve felt touched by something sacred. In those moments, I’ve felt my spirit soar and become one with everything that exists”<sup>117</sup>

With these words Michael Jackson shows an idiosyncratic vision of the world, where every move and emotion is perceived as a dance, he reacts to thanks to a loving heart and an open mind. But the nobility of this dancing mind lies in his will to share its vision, and to invite others to join the dance. The artistic production is in Michael Jackson’s world an invitation to dance. Art is understood as a creation, a production and mostly a distribution of knowledge. As he writes in the postface of his autobiography:

“What one wishes is to be touched by truth and to be able to interpret that truth so that one may use what one is feeling and experiencing, be it despair or joy, in a way that will add meaning to one’s life and will hopefully touch others as well. This is art in its highest form. Those moments of enlightenment are what I continue to live for”<sup>118</sup>

Toni Morrison perceives the essence of her craft as a writer very similarly. As she contends, the real life of the book world is “about making it possible for the entitled as well as the dispossessed to experience one’s own mind dancing with another’s”. She adds further that “Securing that kind of peace –the peace of the dancing mind- is (the writer’s) our work”<sup>119</sup>. Michael Jackson’s ‘dancing mind’ is yet a little bit different. His engages other goodwilled open minds –the way a dancer invites a

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“L’espace est un immense flux universel; il est l’aspect cache du mouvement et le mouvement un aspect visible de l’espace”

<sup>116</sup> Michael Jackson, *Dancing the Dream*, p°144-45

<sup>117</sup> Ibid, p°1

<sup>118</sup> Michael Jackson, *Moonwalk*

<sup>119</sup> Ibid, p°17

partner- but also sees the movements of the whole world of matter and emotion as a dance. Furthermore when it ventures to invite some strangers to a dance, Michael Jackson's 'dancing mind' resorts to some personal and distinctive method. Indeed the way Michael Jackson's 'dancing mind' confronts the audience is very particular, in that it offers a challenging and composite body of work for the world to experience. As far as music and film are concerned, he always makes it a point to presenting the audience with new colours regardless of what is trendy, radio and TV-friendly. When one takes a look at the composition of his albums, one can see for instance on the *History* album (1995) beautiful songs like *Childhood* and *Smile* –which are backed by a symphonic orchestra- along with very funky and street-flavoured songs like “2Bad” and “This time around”. A similar discrepancy can be found on all of his other albums. Michael Jackson's 'dancing mind' has a funky side, we have detailed in a previous chapter. Indeed such an effort might baffle the audience –as Rolling Stones critic was<sup>120</sup>- and cause it to meet a commercial failure. Michael Jackson's 'dancing mind' does not obviously take that into account at all, as it has been gleefully confronting the world for more than three decades now, through music, film and dance, and also as we shall see in the following chapter through his public persona.

As we have seen above, Michael Jackson's body of work is composed of music, film and dance that reflect his very idiosyncratic vision of the world. Be it for music, film or dance, we have seen that Michael Jackson's work is heir to various 'dances of ages' and is part of a huge intertextual world of moves and creations. Michael Jackson has embraced African American culture ever since his early years of live dancing and singing performances on the chitlin circuit. But he has also been open to other aesthetic cultures, such as classical music and painting regardless of trivial criterions such as colour and race. As his beloved symbol of the peacock implies, colour-blindness is a governing principle of Michael Jackson's art and life. Due to his openness and extensive acknowledgment of his indebtedness to these various cultures, Michael Jackson appears –as Bob Fosse suggested- as a synthesizer. If he is one indeed, Michel Jackson is a one who incorporates every music and dance of

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<sup>120</sup> See the chapter “Smelly's got the funk”

the universe –like the electronic synthesizer that has the “potential to reproduce nearly any audible sound”<sup>121</sup>, and uses this stock of experience the same way his sound engineer and friend Bruce Swedien uses the electronic synthesizer, i.e. as “a means for departing from the traditional, into new and unexplored areas of music and sound” and dance, hence maybe the dreamlike quality of his body of work. No matter how innovative they are, the brainchildren of Michael Jackson’s funky ‘dancing mind’ consequently have subtle traces of various texts of the world somehow. Besides its synthetically innovative and virtuoso style, what makes Michael Jackson’s ‘dancing mind’ fascinating and worth preserving for the History of the world, is its ability to instil his idiosyncratic concepts of escapism, ‘will to move’, along with a constant celebration of the greatness of life, and man even in his direst work<sup>122</sup>. This ideological aspect is what makes Michael Jackson’s body of work revolutionary<sup>123</sup>, in that it both reflects the various dances and emotions of the world, and also invites the world to dance some new escapist and enlightening dances, urging people to perceive life as a dance, and hopefully to “make it a better place for the entire human race”<sup>124</sup>. Michael Jackson is dedicated to the latter cause body and soul, like a Promethean artistic figure determined to win. Besides the body of work studied previously, these ideologies also pervade his public persona, whose presence and meaning we will study in the following chapter.

#### **D. Stranger in a strange land**

Talking about Michael Jackson’s performance of *Billie Jean* at *Motown 25*:

“He created the show; he was the show. Idea man, song-and-dance man, money man. But by the mid-1980s he had lot of us pay more attention to the freak than to the artist. The producer in him knew something had to be done. The outlet he chose was the daytime talk show, media home for our culture’s freaks. The place that invites them in to explain and display their lives to regular folk; justify, flaunt, challenge, beguile. In 1993, when the public questions about Michael Jackson’s whitening skin had become clamorous, he appeared on the Oprah Winfrey Show to explain that he had vitiligo, a disease that drained the pigment from his skin, leaving

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<sup>121</sup> Bruce Swedien, *Make mine music*, p°225

<sup>122</sup> See lyrics of “Blood on the dance floor”

<sup>123</sup> This reflection was inspired by Thomas J. Porter’s cogent essay “*The Social Roots of African American Music: 1950-1970*”, where he debunks Black Nationalism as a fetter to the development of Black Art.

“It is very important to understand that music, like all art regardless of its form, is ideological. That is it reflects or transmits certain political, class and national interests. A creative and revolutionary music, however, is more than just reflective, but criticizes the very social substance of the society, and ultimately contributes towards giving direction to the social reconstruction of that society”, p°84

“The Jazz and People’s Movement and the Collective Black Artist represent some of the more progressive developments musically, but there are still pockets of occultism, mysticism and reactionary nationalism which are fetters and need to be eliminated. Black music is already international; attempts to nationalize it represent a step backward. What is desperately needed is a scientific concept of the function of art”, p°89

<sup>124</sup> Lyrics from Michael Jackson’s *Heal the World*

white blotches. That's why he had to even it out with thick white makeup"<sup>125</sup>

From the mid eighties onwards –after the tremendous success of the *Thriller* album- Michael Jackson's private life has become widely associated with his entire body of work of dance, music and film. Michael Jackson's physical outlook has actually changed ever since 1978. Indeed some time after the *Off the Wall* (1978) album –just before the release of *Thriller* (1982)- Michael Jackson had a nose job, lost some weight<sup>126</sup> and changed his Afro hairdo to greasy curly hair, which still made him look like a regular Afro American man. But Michael Jackson's look has kept changing constantly ever since, to this day. His skin grew paler with the years, his *funky* nose has shrunk in broad daylight, and he now has long straight hair. Combined with his literally eccentric lifestyle –Neverland ranch was remote from the urban life of Hollywood and Los Angeles- this unashamed display of his body cast him “in a class with a bad name”<sup>127</sup>, as Margo Jefferson points out with a title from a chapter of her book, “Alone of all his race, alone of all her sex”. As the quotation above implies –and Margo Jefferson's intuition proved apposite- some elements tend to indicate Michael Jackson's public parade was somewhat orchestrated. I will endeavor to decipher below the “social hieroglyph” image of Michael Jackson's public persona, which as Kobena Mercer remarked, “demands, yet defies, decoding”<sup>128</sup>. To do so I will try to analyze Michael Jackson's idiosyncratic sartorial and physical self-authorship, and sort out their effects on culture, issues of race and gender. We will maybe see then the rhyme and reason for this unique spectacle, and to what extent it echoes, and is maybe fundamental to his body of work.

## **1. Self-authorship**

### **a) The dandy and his sartorial codes**

In his influential study of British subculture –mostly the Punks- Dick Hebdige remarks, “spectacular subcultures express forbidden contents (consciousness of class, consciousness of difference) in forbidden forms (transgressions of sartorial and behavioral codes, law breaking, etc.).

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<sup>125</sup> Margo Jefferson, *On Michael Jackson*, p°11

<sup>126</sup> Michael Jackson, *Moonwalk*, p°227-229

<sup>127</sup> Lyrics from *They don't care about us* (1994)

<sup>128</sup> Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle*, p°35, quoting from Marx

They are profane articulations, and they are often and significantly defined as unnatural”<sup>129</sup>. Well aware of his genius, and probably willing to capitalize on that and stand out, Michael Jackson has taken pain –from the *Thriller* era onwards (1984)- to present himself as someone unique. As he confesses to his date from the *Thriller* short film before turning into a werewolf “There’s something I wanna tell you (...), I’m not like the other guys, I mean I’m different”. One of the ways he chose to stand out was with the sartorial codes. Michael Jackson created a stage persona on the *Billie Jean*’s performance at *Motown*, whose dress would become one of his trademarks. The white socks, black fedora, black loathers and single glove would survive outside the stage, as Michael Jackson would don these elements in various public appearances. As a result he was notably nicknamed “the gloved one”. The red leather jackets Michael Jackson wore in the *Thriller* and *Beat it* short films met tremendous success with fans, who would buy replicas as if they were Basketball shirts<sup>130</sup>. Michael Jackson will subsequently create other characters in videos with different costumes –like Darryl from *Bad* in his leather black jacket and cowboy boots, but they will not be as trendsetter as the characters from the *Thriller* era. Michael Jackson gives a clue about his inspiration for such dress style in his autobiography. This is how he described the advent of the single white glove and the white socks:

“I had been wearing a single glove for years before *Thriller*. I felt that one glove was cool. Wearing two gloves seemed so ordinary, but a single glove was different and was definitely a look. But I’ve long believed that thinking too much about your look is one of the biggest mistakes you can make, because an artist should let his style evolve naturally, spontaneously. You can’t think about these things; you have to feel your way into them. (...) I admit that I love starting trends,, but I never thought wearing white socks was going to catch on. Not to long ago it was considered extremely square to wear white socks. (..) But I never stopped wearing them. Ever. My brother would call me a dip, but I didn’t care. (...) After *Thriller* came out, it even became okay to wear your pants high around your ankles again. My attitude is if fashion says it’s forbidden. I’m going to do it”<sup>131</sup>

Unlike Michael Jackson Punks and such subcultures –as Hebdige contends- would operate “exclusively in the leisure sphere”<sup>132</sup> and would not wear their punk outfit for work. Be that for music or sartorial, Michael Jackson is obviously willing and able to stand in a class of his own. He quite ignores ‘stylish solidarities’ that is rife among white, as well as African American groups, like the Hip

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<sup>129</sup> Dick Hebdige, *The meaning of style*, p°91

<sup>130</sup> Margo Jefferson, *On Michael Jackson*, p°89-90

<sup>131</sup> Michael Jackson, *Moonwalk*, p°217-219

<sup>132</sup> Dick Hebdige, *The meaning of style*, p°95

Hop Nation, and the Nation of Islam<sup>133</sup>. Michael Jackson has kept on speaking through his clothes<sup>134</sup> through the years. One constant feature of his style is the military influence. Ever since the *Thriller* era Michael Jackson would wear a huge variety of military-influenced jackets and shirts, with epaulettes, braids and stripes, and his trademark armband. He would wear during the *Bad* World Tour (1988) a huge belt suggestive of a boxing champion's, and a Versace designed gold fencing dress during the Dangerous World Tour (1992), as seen on the cover of this paper. The photos below show some instances of this, during the *Oprah Winfrey* Interview (1993), and in the *History* album teaser (1995)



This military tie was even more emphasized by his numerous marches under escort of armies throughout the world. Michael Jackson would keep on dazzling the world in the nineties with a black mask suggestive of *Zorro* –he would wear quite regularly. During his latest trial for a pseudo-molestation case, he would wear day in day out a new tailor-made colorful three-piece-suit with the unshakable armband, and always a beautifully embroidered badge. He would break the habit once, wearing a pajama, when he came late in court for an alleged back pain. This is how Michael Jackson dresses when he is not home or in the studios<sup>135</sup>. Margo Jefferson sees in Michael Jackson's dress style "a mode of confrontation"<sup>136</sup>. Indeed as Volisonov asserts "Whenever a sign is present, ideology is present too. Everything ideological possesses a semiotic value"<sup>137</sup>. Michael Jackson's dress style has obviously little in common with that of the common man, and is tied to any clothes –solidarity-based ethnic or class group. At his demurest Michael Jackson would still wear his armband on the 'normal' jacket. Margo Jefferson regards his sartorial style as an "audacious act of self-authorship". The

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<sup>133</sup> Paul Gilroy, *Against Race*, p°268

<sup>134</sup> Dick Hebdige, *The meaning of style*, p°100, Style as intentional communication  
'I speak through my clothes' (Eco, 1973°)

<sup>135</sup> Michael Jackson, *Moonwalk*, p°219

<sup>136</sup> Margo Jefferson, *On Michael Jackson*, p°88

<sup>137</sup> As quotes in Dick Hebdige, *The meaning of style*, p°13

endeavor obviously aims at presenting him as some kind of fighting noble soldier, and also –if one bears in mind his attitudinal parade of costumes during his latest trial- as a kind of dandy, rejecting the bourgeois values for some self-authored idea of first-rate.

Michael Jackson dabbled first in the sartorial language for the sake of stage gimmicks. But as his success grew, he put his customary unfettered imagination and creative will into work to create an idiosyncratic dress style –expressing freedom and fortitude- that makes him very unique and –once again like music and dance- casts him beyond category.

### **b) Self-hybridation**

Plastic surgery was neither invented for, nor the privilege of Michael Jackson. He has kept mentioning in interviews he has only had two nose jobs, plus he had a cleft placed in his chin. As he confessed to Oprah, when asked about the frequency of his plastic surgery:

“You can count on my two fingers. (...) Let’s put it this way, if all the people in Hollywood who have had plastic surgery, if they went on vacation, there wouldn’t be a person left in town (...), I’ve never had my cheekbones done, never had my eyes done, never had my lips done and all this stuff, they just go too far...”<sup>138</sup>

In this landmark interview by Oprah Winfrey, Michael Jackson also revealed he had a skin disorder –called vitiligo- that destroys the pigmentation of his skin. The disease made blotches on his skin he had to even up with white make up. Jean Baudrillard regards plastic surgery as an attempt to remove, whatever is asymmetric, and negative on the face, to leave space only for an ideal of beauty<sup>139</sup>. Michael Jackson did elusively confess to Oprah he did not resort to plastic surgery because he did not like the way he looked as teenager<sup>140</sup>. As a teenager Michael Jackson, performed a song in duet with Roberta Flack called “When we grow up” (1972). The song was a cornerstone of Marlo Thomas TV program “Free to be you and me”, and the lyrics promoted inescapable difference as well as –as the name of the show suggests- the freedom to be whatever one wants to be.

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<sup>138</sup> Jel D Lewis, *Michael Jackson the Big Picture*, p°177

<sup>139</sup> Jean Baudrillard et Marc Guillaume, *Figures de l’altérité*, p°132-133

“C’est un peu comme un visage: on expluse tout ce qui est négatif de la chirurgie esthétique et on en fait un visage en principe idéal, (...) on ôte à son visage ce qui peut être son altérité, sa négativité, sa contradiction avec lui même, son asymétrie”

<sup>140</sup> Jel D Lewis, *Michael Jackson the Big Picture*, p°177

To the question “did you start having plastic surgery because of those teen years, because of not liking the way you looked”, Michael Jackson answered “No, not really”

When we grow up will I be pretty  
Will you be big and strong  
Will I wear dresses that show off my knees  
Will you wear trousers twice as long  
Well, I don't care if I'm pretty at all  
And I don't care if you never get tall  
I like what I look like and you're nice small  
We don't have to change at all (...)  
When I grow up, I'm gonna be happy  
And do what I like to do  
Like makin' noise, and makin' faces  
And makin' friends like you (...)<sup>141</sup>

One could see in this –now possibly ironic sounding- song a forerunner sign of Michael Jackson's future dandyism. But as Margo Jefferson clearly articulates “The face of Michael Jackson that we see today has nothing to do with his genetic inheritance from (parents) Joseph and Katherine, being wholly a product of surgery, cosmetology and fashion. Michael Jackson doesn't look like anything we can correlate with experience. That's why people keep saying he's absolutely crazy”<sup>142</sup>. As she asked earlier “why someone would voluntarily pass over into the world of solitary freakdom?”<sup>143</sup>. Michael Jackson and ex-wife Lisa Marie provided some very interesting answer to these questioning, during an interview with anchorlady Diane Sawyer<sup>144</sup>:

Diane: I wanna ask you both something (...) Somehow people are still not... they don't feel they've heard everything about the whiteness of your skin, and that it's somehow not a choice on your part... along with the make-up, to be... is it to be neither black or white... neither to look completely male –to be in the androgynous zone. I think they wanna know... is it a decision on your part somehow... the way you look? Where does it come from?

Michael: I think it creates itself... nature

Lisa: He's an artist. He has...

Michael: I'm an artist

Lisa: ... every right

Michael: I'm a performer

Lisa: And he is constantly re-modifying something, or changing it, or reconstructing it or, you know, working on some imperfection he thinks needs to be worked on. If he sees something he doesn't like, he changes it. Period. He re-sculpted himself. He's an artist

Michael: I might wanna put a red dot right there one day ... (points to his forehead) (...) and

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<sup>141</sup> Written and composed by Stephen Lawrence and Shelley Miller, from *Free to be you and me* LP, 1972

<sup>142</sup> Margo Jefferson, *On Michael Jackson*, p°86

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid*, p°86

<sup>144</sup> Jel D Lewis, *Michael Jackson the Big Picture*, p°218

two eyes right here (touches his cheeks)

Diane: Do you wish you were the color you were again? (...) Black color.

Michael: You have to ask nature that. I loved... I love black. I love black. (...) I envy her (Lisa) cause she can tan and I can't

There can be no clearer answer to Margo Jefferson's questioning. Quincy Jones' influence might also have been instrumental in shaping Michael Jackson's philosophy. Indeed as he puts it in his autobiography, "above all, a man must embrace the feminine side of himself, especially if he's an artist. You can't let your machoness mess up your good thang"<sup>145</sup>. But most interestingly to highlight the out-of-the-way sculptural body language of Michael Jackson's, it is worth studying its intertextual connections with that of French artist Orlan. Orlan refers to her work as "Carnal Art" that consists in disfiguring and refiguring her body within pictures or performances to channel notably feminist and secular values<sup>146</sup>. To do so she would don disguises, use make up and resort to plastic surgery. She would keep on with her efforts in the 1990s, and resorted to computerized transformations –using the morphing technique pioneered in the "Black or White" short film- instead of transformations within her flesh. Her self-hybrids incorporated African and pre-Colombian aesthetics<sup>147</sup>. As far as Michael Jackson is concerned, her manifesto on "Carnal art" proves to be particularly relevant.

"I am concerned about pushing art and life to their most extreme limits. My work and its ideas in my flesh question the position of the body in our society and its future for the oncoming generations through the new technologies and the looming genetic manipulations. My body has become a debating place that raises crucial questions of our time.

My work does not stand against plastic surgery, but against accepted standards of beauty, against the dictatorship of the leading ideology that is more and more written on men and women's bodies (...)

Unlike the transsexual, I do not long for a fixed and ultimate identity, I am a champion of nomadic, moving and mutating identities."<sup>148</sup>

Michael Jackson's own words above –in the Diane Sawyer interview- are very similar to Orlan's self- authorship, understanding and political use of the body. Margo Jefferson –once again- proves to be

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<sup>145</sup> Quincy Jones, *Q*, p°165

<sup>146</sup> *Le baiser de l'artiste* (1976), *A licentious Saint Orlan playing at wedding* (1986)

<sup>147</sup> Orlan and Pierre Bourgeade, *Self Hybridations*

<sup>148</sup> Christian Gattinoni, *Atlas Ethique de l'Orlangue*, p°64-78

"Il s'agit pour moi de pousser l'art et la vie à leurs extrêmes. Mon travail et ses idées incarnées dans ma chair posent questions sur le statut du corps dans notre société et son devenir dans les générations futures via les nouvelles technologies et les très prochaines manipulations génétique. Mon corps est devenu un lieu de débat public d'ou se posent ces questions cruciales pour notre époque.

Mon travail n'est pas contre la chirurgie esthétique, mais contre les standards de beauté, contre les diktats de l'idéologie dominante qui s'impriment de plus en plus dans les chairs féminines et masculines (...)

Mais contrairement au désir du transsexuel, je ne désire pas une identité définie et définitive, je suis pour les identités nomades, multiples, mouvantes, mutantes »

insightful and notes that Michael Jackson has never behaved like a person attempting to pass as white. As she points out, “passers are supposed to hide their past, shed their past, shed their racial and sexual history. Michael’s past is everywhere. It exists in thousands of photographs and film images. He makes no attempt to hide it”<sup>149</sup>. The most potent example of this is the *Pepsi Cola* commercial from 1992. Michael Jackson was so proud of it that he included it on his short film collection “Dangerous”<sup>150</sup>. The video stages Michael Jackson singing and playing the piano solo, performing the song “I’ll be there” from his childhood. Michael Jackson looks quite pale in this video, and looks like a classical musician. Footages from his joyful childhood intersect with the performance, suggesting reminiscence and pining for his past. Then a young Michael Jackson pops in the background, duets with him to perform gorgeous vocal harmonies. During this performance Michael Jackson performed only a selected portion of the original song’s lyrics that read as follows:

“Old Michael: I reach out my hand to you, I have faith in all you do (twice)

Young Michael: Just call my name and I’ll be there

Old Michael: Oh, oh yeah

Both: Just let me fill your heart with joy and laughter, togetherness well it’s all I’m after, whenever you need me I’ll be there”

These arrangements go to support Margo Jefferson’s insight about Michael Jackson’s relationship with his past, he is very proud of. As Paul Gilroy remarked, “his physical transformation of himself ushered in (a) new phase of creative (shape-shifting and phenotype-modifying) possibilities” and that his playful mut(il)ations did not contradict “his affirmation of an African American heritage”<sup>151</sup>. It is likely that Michael Jackson really suffers from –skin disorder- vitiligo, but he made the best of it and dramatized it spectacularly to channel ideas about race and gender we will tackle below. He actually posits his body in center stage, and -differently from Orlan mainly because of his fame and original race- offers it as a catalyst of contemporary issues of race, gender and alterity. Michael Jackson handles his public persona, like his sartorial style, his music, and his dance, i.e. with a lot of imagination, creative will, playfulness and fortitude. Painter Keith Haring, -who was personally

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<sup>149</sup> Margo Jefferson, *On Michael Jackson*, p°98

<sup>150</sup> Dangerous the short films, Sony Music Videos, 1993, Michael Jackson has the whole commercial feature in the collection but retrieved any blatant sign of *Pepsi Cola*

<sup>151</sup> Paul Gilroy, *Against Race*, p°23, In the original quote Gilroy also mentions Michael Jackson’s well-publicized “distaste for Africa itself” that is not verifiable at all, and is mostly based on rumors or assumptions. I removed it because it mars the original value of Gilroy’s reflection

acquainted with Michael Jackson- certainly provided the most potent analysis of ‘Jack the catalyst’.

As he wrote in his journal in 1987:

“I talk about my respect for Michael’s attempts to take creation in his own hands and invent a non-black, non-white, non-male, non-female creature by utilizing plastic surgery and modern technology. He’s totally Walt-Disneyed out! An interesting phenomenon at the least. A little scary, maybe, but nonetheless remarkable, and I think somehow a healthier example than Rambo or Ronald Reagan. He’s denied the finality of God’s creation and taken it into his own hands, while all the time parading around in front of American pop culture. I think it would be much cooler if he would go all the way and get his ears pointed or add a tail or something, but give him time”<sup>152</sup>

## 2. Freaks on this side

James Bladwin on Michael Jackson:

“The Michael Jackson cacophony is fascinating in that it is not about Jackson at all. I hope he has the good sense to know it and the good fortune to snatch his life out of the jaws of a carnivorous success. He will not swiftly be forgiven for having turned so many tables, for he damn sure grabbed the brass ring, and the man who broke the bank at Monte Carlo has nothing on Michael. All that noise is about America, as the dishonest custodian of black life and wealth; and blacks, especially males, in America; and the burning, buried American guilt; and sex and sexual roles and sexual panic; money, success and despair –to all of which may now be added the bitter need to find a head on which to place the crown of Miss America. Freaks are called freaks and are treated as they are treated –in the main, abominably- because they are human beings that cause to echo, deep within us, our most profound terrors and desire”<sup>153</sup>

Nina Simone on Michael Jackson:

“Greed has driven the world crazy. And I think I’m lucky that I have a place over here (Paris, France) I can call home. It’s no surprise that Michael Jackson, the man I adore the most in the world, has disappeared from the United States. I distinctly remember meeting Michael on a plane many years ago when he was little, and I said to him, ‘Don’t let them change you. You’re black and you’re beautiful’. But of course he was influenced by his family and everybody else. And I don’t mind if you say this, I think that the person who’s responsible for Michael Jackson’s tragedy is Quincy Jones. You can quote me. (...) It was Quincy who married a girl from Sweden. And with Quincy with all them white women, poor little Michael didn’t know what to do. Michael needed somebody to emulate, and I think he did everything that Quincy told him to do. This is what I believe. (...) I do not believe in mixing of the races. You can quote me. I don’t believe in it and I never have.”

To the interviewer’s question “what do you think is gained by keeping the races separated?”, Nina Simone added: “we can get rid of slavery”

Further asked about Michael Jackson’s plastic surgery, she answered:

“Oh darling, he is becoming the freak of the century! It’s unfortunate because I love him very much. When you write this, will you put that my sympathies are with him? I adore that kid and I have cried many days when I thought he wasn’t going to make it”<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Margo Jefferson, *On Michael Jackson*, p°81-82

<sup>153</sup> James Baldwin, *Collected Essays*, p°828, *Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood*, Playboy Magazine, January, 1985

<sup>154</sup> Interview by Alison Powell, *The American Soul of Nina Simone*, from the American Magazine interview, January, 1997, Michael Jackson was traveling around the world by then, with his *History World* Tour. Nina Simone elusively refers to Michael Jackson molestation allegation from 1993, which deeply affected him.

### a) Jack the Catalyst

These important quotations from two prominent figures of African American culture clearly reveal the turmoil caused by Michael Jackson's public presence. By parading his semiotic body Michael Jackson comments indeed on issues of race, gender and alterity in such a compelling way that critics and scholar usually tend to overlook his case, certainly because as Baldwin pointed out "he echoes deep within us our most profound terror and desires". Nina Simone's stance represents the conservative way of assessing Michael Jackson, i.e. as a tragic figure of self-hatred. Simone, like Bell Hooks and Nelson George all express a longing for the pre-integration time that is synonymous to them with black pride, self-reliance, and black solidarity<sup>155</sup>. Michael Jackson appears to them as a symptom of nefarious crossover. Other scholars like Cornel West and Patricia Hill Collins constantly attack the negative –and they say controlling images- of black people pervading the media and popular culture. Cornel West thus refers to images attacking "black intelligence, black ability, black beauty, and black character" and laments "the devastating effect of pervasive European ideals of beauty"<sup>156</sup>. Patricia Collins echoes his concerns and complains that actress with a lighter skin tone like Halle Berry should be more successful than her darker fellows<sup>157</sup>. She also mentions the infantilization of black men, who are often "depicted as immature men"<sup>158</sup> ever since slavery and colonial times, and convincingly analyzes its effect on black machismo, that in turn entails mistreatments that are highly detrimental to black women<sup>159</sup>. Furthermore these issues are intertwined with a favorite hobbyhorse, the defense of black culture against white appropriation, which enables them to cluster enough elements to promote ideas of Black Nationalism<sup>160</sup>. In the face of these agendas these scholars tend to overlook the catalyst power of Michael Jackson on these issues, as illustrates Cornel West's assessment of him:

"Michael Jackson may rightly wish to be viewed as a person, not a color (neither black nor white), but his facial revisions reveal a self-measurement based on a white yardstick. Hence, despite the fact that he is one of the greatest entertainers who has ever lived, he still views

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<sup>155</sup> Nelson George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues*

Nelson George's affection for the chitlin circuit, and its spirit in previous chapters

Bell hooks, *Yearning*, p°33-49, *The Chitlin Circuit*

<sup>156</sup> Cornel West, *Race Matters*, p°27-28

<sup>157</sup> Patricia Collins, *Black Sexual Politics*, p°195

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid*, p°191

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid*, p°225-251

<sup>160</sup> Bell Hooks, *Black Looks*, p°32-34, *Eating the Other*

himself, at least in part, through white aesthetic lenses that devalue some of his African characteristics. Needless to say, Michael Jackson is but the more honest and visible instance of a rather pervasive self-loathing among many of the black professional class”<sup>161</sup>

It would take an entire study to assess the relevance of such point of views, but as regards Michael Jackson, it is necessary to give a brief overview of the controlling filters that tend to give a cowardly biased image of him. The one scholar whose point of view is closer to Michael Jackson’s is certainly Paul Gilroy. As the title of his book “Against race” suggests, Gilroy has a completely different stance and goes so far as comparing black purity seekers with their white counterparts<sup>162</sup>The following quotation epitomizes his point of view quite well. It shows his indebtedness to Franz Fanon and the similarities of his views with those of Michael Jackson’s:

“It is not merely that European imperial powers wrongfully deprived colonial subjects of their humanity, but that Europe has perpetrated the still greater crime of despoiling humanity of its elemental unity as a species”<sup>163</sup>

The former influential scholars we mentioned lack this universalistic perspective that is so dear to Michael Jackson<sup>164</sup>. Moreover they tend to have a fixed idea of what blackness should be. These two conflicting views reign over African American Studies, though the former one has a tremendous precedence over the latter, hence the paucity of scholarly balanced assessment of Michael Jackson’s legacy. Yet there is a lot to be said about ‘Jack the catalyst’. If one looks a little bit deeper in his embrace of childhood, one could see for instance a motivated signifying on the stereotype of “infantile black men”. As Oprah marveled about his Neverland ranch, “A child did not put this together –this is really magnificent”<sup>165</sup>. Michael Jackson also challenges the standards of race, and gender. As we have seen in previous chapters, Michael Jackson can both don a crystalline voice and very hoarse one in his songs, but would generally speak in high-pitched voice in interviews. Similarly he would dance as a sexual angry man and contradict this image in interviews where the make up and lipsticks would make him look more like a girl, and such instances do abound. As Margo Jefferson rightly points out, “Michael Jackson, the performer, has never offered portraits of black or white masculinity that are at

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<sup>161</sup> Cornel West, *Race Matters*, p°137

<sup>162</sup> Paul Gilroy, *Against Race*, chap. 6 *The tyrannies of unanimism*

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid*, p°71

<sup>164</sup> Michael Jackson, *Moonwalk*, p°70, (Talking about James Brown, Sammy Davis Jr, Gene Kelly and Fred Astaire) “A great showman touches everybody; that’s the real test of greatness and these men have it. Like Michaelangelo’s workit touches you, I don’t care who you are”

<sup>165</sup> Jel D Lewis, *Michael Jackson the Big Picture*, p°185

all realistic or better, conventional”<sup>166</sup>. If one bears in mind a Michael Jackson song like “In the closet” –that stages a couple talking about “the truth of lust woman to man”, furnaces, opening doors, and vowing to keep their heterosexual relationship like that of gays *in the closet*- the latter quotation from Margo Jefferson could make sense differently. It could indeed reveal Michael Jackson as a pertinent commentator of Black machismo, and a counterpoint to images of ‘real’ black men like Wilt Chamberlain who –as Patricia Hill Collins recalls- “bragged that he had engaged in sexual contact with over 10,000 women”<sup>167</sup>. Ironically, though Patricia Collins shuns Michael Jackson in her book “Black Sexual Politics”, this particular erotic stance of his falls into line with Collins’ suggestion to “reclaim the erotic as a site of freedom”<sup>168</sup>. Michael Jackson does love to play with frontiers. As the lyrics from “Black or White” reads “Boy is that girl with you, yes we’re one and the same”. Whenever Michael Jackson parades center stage, instead of crying wolf and casting him right away to freakdom, scholars should do away with their customary filters, give him a chance and watch him as a scientist. For if truth lies in eye of the beholder, his usefulness as a catalyst lies in the hand of scholars.

### **b) Traveling man, riding high**

“I’m gonna be exactly what you wanna see, it’s you who’s taunting me  
Because you’re wanting me to be the stranger in the night.  
Am I amusing you or just confusing you, am I the beast you visualized?  
And if you want to see eccentric comedies,  
I’ll be possessed before your eyes, let them all materialize!  
Is this scary for you baby? Am I scary for you boy?  
Is this scary for you, I think the stranger is you.”

Excerpt from Michael Jackson’s “Is this Scary?”, 1997

As the lyrics from “Is this scary” indicates, Michael Jackson is aware of his ‘Freak’ image and knows how to capitalize on it. As he claims in the song his freakiness is a result of people’s jeering at him. Yet as we have seen above this bad name should mainly be attributed to his physical

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<sup>166</sup> Margo Jefferson, *On Michael Jackson*, p°97

<sup>167</sup> Patricia Collins, *Black Sexual Politics*, p°292

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid*, p°290, Collins partly based her understanding of the erotic on poet Audre Lorde definition of it as “the deep feelings within each of us in search of love; affirmation, recognition, and a spiritual and/or physical connection to one another”, p°52

transformation that defies most comprehension. By parading his body to the face of –mostly- American and Western culture, Michael Jackson challenged the world with unwavering commentary on race and gender issues, most people would refuse to face. One could interpret his character as Monster –according to Foucault’s theories, in that Michael Jackson has all the elements of his understanding of abnormality. As Foucault points out “the monster is a combination of transgression and the impossible”<sup>169</sup>. Foucault defined three types of abnormal<sup>170</sup>: the human monster, the incorrigible, and the masturbator. If one splits hair Michael Jackson could fit in all three categories, and his crotch grabbing on stage will be sufficient to turn him into a masturbator. Foucault’s study takes place in a completely different setting, and goes as far back as the Renaissance and hermaphrodite cases. Yet his idea of the incorrigible rule-breaker is relevant to the present study, in so far as Michael Jackson is obviously beyond the control of anyone but he. Indeed he describes himself as “the captain of his faith”<sup>171</sup>, and would overtly celebrate his “will to self motivate”, “no force of nature can break” in his song “History”, studied previously. In *Location of Culture* Bhabha remarks about Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses* that beyond the heretic content, “it is the medium Rushdie uses to reinterpret the Koran that constitutes the crime”<sup>172</sup>. He further adds that “by casting his revisionary narrative in the form of the novel –largely unknown to traditional Islamic literature (they would use poetry instead)- Rushdie violates the poetic licence granted to the critics of the Islamic establishment”. Similarly Michael Jackson cogently commented on race issues in his “Black or White” short film, with the legendary lines “If you want to be my baby, it don’t matter if you’re black or white”. But his crime springs from his very personal, literal embodiment of the lyrics.

In their illuminating study of alterity –*Figures de l’altérité*- Jean Baudrillard and Marc Guillaume remark that “alterity is not a matter of distance, but rather the crossing of a border, a border that can be completely imaginary and invisible”<sup>173</sup>. Michael Jackson conspicuously crossed and despised the racial borders with his physical transformations, and thus gave various versions of him for the world to

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<sup>169</sup> Foucault, Cours du 22 Janvier 1975, p°51, “Disons que le monstre est ce qui combine l’impossible et l’interdit”

<sup>170</sup> Ibid, p°51-70, The free types are called in French: “le monstre humain, l’individu à corriger, le masturbateur”

<sup>171</sup> See liner notes from the *History* album, 1995

<sup>172</sup> Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p°322-323

<sup>173</sup> Jean Baudrillard and Marc Guillaume, *Figures de l’altérité*, p°64, “ (...) l’altérité n’ets pas un problème de distance mais le passage d’une frontière, et une frontière peut être complètement imaginaire et invisible”

enjoy. By the concept of Bovaryism<sup>174</sup>, Marc Guillaume describes this kind of individual's ability to create a fictional hybrid form, a fictional being out of his own self. In the light of this one may wonder, how can Michael Jackson assume in "In this scary?" that malicious people want him to be a stranger? Marc Guillaume and Baudrillard provide once again a possible answer, with their study of Sophie Calle's *Suite vénitienne*. The novel's character enjoys stalking people for no specific reason. She thus set out to follow a man for more than two weeks. The man became aware of her scheme and became irate. Baudrillard states that this example illustrates "a search for different form of alterity that consists in forcing the other into strangeness, and bullying him in this strangeness"<sup>175</sup>. Michael Jackson is in a way similarly stalked, and Baudrillard's assumption does apply to his life to a certain extent, as he is constantly stalked by paparazzo. But as far as his self-created look is concerned, this theory turns out to be irrelevant. Yet this mysterious stance of Michael Jackson's –that some would fain reduce to self-absorbed victimization- has a deeper meaning that will come to light by use of the notion of the "traveling man".

Michael Jackson has gone beyond the frontiers of every field he has experienced, from the music world, to short films, dance, and the entirety of his life outside these three artistic body of work. Michael Jackson has been adventuresome in every aspect of his art and life, displaying an unremitting playfulness, freedom and joie de vivre. In her assessment of Black Masculinity, Bell Hooks uses Toni Morrison's notion of the 'traveling man' to contradict what she perceives as white misrepresentations of black men as 'outsider' and 'rebel'. As she writes:

"Extolling the virtues of traveling black men in her novels, Toni Morrison sees them as 'truly masculine in the sense of going out so far where you're not supposed to go and running forward confrontations rather than away from them'. This is a man who takes risks, what Morrison calls a 'free man'"<sup>176</sup>

If one looks at Michael Jackson's physical metamorphosis as an affirmation of self-determination, and an adventurous building-trip, one could construe Michael Jackson's stance in "Is this Scary?" –i.e. his being scandalized by people's efforts to treat him like a stranger- as a mere traveling-man's dismay at

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<sup>174</sup> Ibid, p°68, le bovarysme "c'est l'idée qu'à partir de lui-même, un individu peut créer une fiction hybride. C'est à dire qu'il élabore un être fictive à partir de lui meme"

<sup>175</sup> Ibid, p°147, "c'est quand même un exemple de cette recherche d'une alterité différente qui consiste à forcer l'autre à l'étrangeté, et à le forcer dans son étrangeté »

<sup>176</sup> Bell Hooks, *Black Looks*, p°96

some mean form of inhospitableness, a somewhat postured disappointment at stupid fears in the face of the unknown and novelty. Morrison's notion of the 'traveling man' fits Michael Jackson wondrously. As he clamors in his song *Bad* (1987), "Well they say the sky's the limit and to me it's really true. But my friends you have seen nothing, just wait 'till I get through".

Michael Jackson's adventurous physical transformations, and outstanding dress style are reflective of his creative will, unfettered freedom and imagination that –as we have seen previously– also pervades his music, dance and short films. Yet his physical transformations cut into the nerve of popular culture, and commented –unawoded but not less appositely– on issues of race and gender. But as we have seen, the potency of 'Jack the catalyst' depends heavily on the goodwill and honesty of scholars that could give him a fair treatment and spread his happy freedom-laden message, notably by interpreting his body and body of work as a mind-blowing journey conducted by a unique traveling-man to some unsuspected realm of the possible. Until then Michael Jackson seems bound to freakdom, and to be a stranger in a not less stranger land.

## Conclusion

Michael Jackson's art and life are governed by his very own principles of openness, his imagination, and unequalled creative will. The joyful message of dance pervading his work is conveyed with lots of virtuosity through his various music and film works. His dancing body and mind have unsuspected limits, and toy with the limits of western culture under the guise of buffoonery and spectacle. Yet he does have his say about the ways of our society. By giving his body in a Promethean way -one could assume- to deride the shallowness of race and gender standards, Michael Jackson transgressed the customary ways of debating in our society, so much that it resulted in his being reduced to freakdom. His unfettered freedom, and challenging style are sometimes so assertive, people would often refuse to face the music he offers us to hear. One may agree with the universalistic message of "Black or White", "it don't matter if you're Black or White", but few people are willing to regard his physical transformations a something other than insanity. But we as scholars -and guardians of the Fifth Estate- must toil to tackle Michael Jackson's -too (?)- Free style with less prejudice as possible, the way scientists do, and just face his music and other messages. This paper attempted to give a brief overview of Michael Jackson's style and echo his escapist and free dance philosophy, in the hope that scholars will eventually treat him as he should be, i.e. notably as a revolutionary catalyst of race, gender and identity issues. As far as I am concerned, I will keep specializing on Michael Jackson, a little bit like Jean Tulard did with Napoleon. There is still so much to be written about Michael Jackson. I am currently studying possible ties he could have with notions such as archetype, trickster, superhero, and plasticity. I am also willing to delve a little bit more into his connections with modernism, and romanticism. Finally I will endeavor to conduct -at my own expense- in the oncoming years interviews with his musicians and co-workers to analyze more precisely his creative methods. Rod Temperton -composer and arranger of *Rock with you*- lives in the south of France, and like Bruce Swedien and Quincy Jones he is 'dangerously' aging. But I am really willing to dissect and record this men's point of views -and ask them non-journalistic questions- for the record and history. At the end of the Ghost video, Michael Jackson asks the people visiting his castle -who were at first scared at him, "do you still want me to go?". I would say a square no, for we need Michael Jackson to

stay center stage, one of his natural homes. But his question implies a statement answer that echoes Sylvester Stallone's –a.k.a. Sly Stone- sung affirmation from 1973, “If you want me to stay, you’ve got to let me be me”. Fellow scholars, let us be human, and plain scientists.

# *Appendix*

## MORPHINE

Written and Composed by Michael Jackson

Lead vocals by Michael Jackson

Background vocals by Michael Jackson

Brad Buxer, Bill Bottrell, and Jon Mooney

Arrangement by Michael Jackson

Classical Arrangement by Michael Jackson

Vocal Arrangement by Michael Jackson

Rhythm Arrangement by Michael Jackson

Orchestral Arrangement by Jorge Del Barrio

Keyboards: Brad Buxer, and Keith Cohen

Synthesizers: Brad Buxer

Grand Piano: Brad Buxer

Percussion: Michael Jackson, Brad Buxer and Bryan Loren

Drums: Michael Jackson

Guitar: Michael Jackson, and Slash

Violin: Robert Chausow

Viola: Juliet Haffner

Studios: The Hit Factory (N.Y.), The Record Plant (L.A.), and Ocean Way Recording (L.A.)

Contains An Audio Clip From "The Elephant Man" Courtesy of Paramount Pictures

He got flash baby Kicked in the back baby A heart-attack baby I need your body A hot kiss honey He dug the ditch baby You make me sick baby So unreliable I'm such a swine baby All down the line daddy I hate your kind baby So unreliable A hot buzz baby He want the buzz baby Another drug baby You don't deserve it	Put all your trust in me She doin' morphine, go on, baby  Relax this won't hurt you Before I put it in Close your eyes and count to ten Don't cry I won't convert you There's no need to dismay Close your eyes and drift away Demerol, demerol Oh god he's taking demerol Demerol, demerol Oh god he's taking demerol He's tried hard to convince her 'Til there's no more Of what he had Today he wants it twice as bad Don't cry I won't resent you Yesterday you had his trust Today he's taking twice as much Demerol, demerol Oh god he's taking demerol, hee Demerol, demerol Oh my he's got his demerol Hee, hoo Oogh!	Put all your trust in me She's doin' morphine, Hoo!  You just sit around and talkin' about it You're takin' morphine Whoo!  Go on baby You just sit around try talkin' about it You're takin' morphine Whoo hoo!  Just sit around Just talkin' nothin' about it She takin' morphine "Honey" You just sit around and talkin' about it You're takin' morphine Whoo hoo!  You just sit around Just talkin' nothin' and takin' morphine Whoo hoo hoo!
"You heard what the doctor Says?" He got the place baby Kicked in the face baby He hate your race baby You're not a liar You're every lick baby Your dogs a bitch baby You're make me sick baby You talk survival She never come for me She never want baby I got you up baby You're just a rival Always a play daddy Right up your league daddy You're throwin' shade daddy So undesirable	"You heard what the doctor says?" He got shit baby Your dog's a bitch baby You make me sick baby You are a liar He shoot the game daddy Deep in the pain baby You talk the same baby You're so reliable	Somethin's goin' down baby Whoo! You're talkin' morphine Go on baby Whoo! Whoo! Morphine Do it Whoo She takin' morphine Morphine Morphine Morphine
Trust in me, just in me	Trust in me, trust in me	Trust in me, trust in me

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Quincy Jones. *Q, the Autobiography of Quincy Jones*. Doubleday, 2001

M. Jones memoir gives the reader a glimpse into his chaotic childhood, and self-construction as a musician, composer and producer. His account of his collaboration with Michael Jackson proved valuable –though too short. Indeed M. Jones did not go into much detail about the precise creative process behind Michael Jackson’s works. He did not for instance mention anything about the complex *Bad* Album he co-produced with Michael Jackson, for some undefined reasons. The reader is instead given some anecdotes of their relationship, along with some general commentary about his idiosyncratic character. M. Jones occasionally shares an interesting approach of life and creation, that not too surprisingly appears to be quite similar to that of Michael’s.

John Edward Hasse. *Beyond Category, the life and genius of Duke Ellington*. Simon & Schuster, 1993.

Music Historian, serving as Curator of American Music at the Smithsonian Institution, M. Hasse gives an interesting outlook into the life, and work of American musician Duke Ellington. His vivid description of Duke’s creative methods, based on reflections from Duke himself as well as his fellow musicians, exposes the unique talent of one of America’s greatest music innovator, composer, and arranger. Linking “King of Pop” Michael Jackson to Sir Duke Ellington occurred to me as somewhat natural –for beyond the highness-the two of them shares a common interest in experimentations, and both spawned incredibly various and inimitable music that stands the test of time. Most of all, and more than any other musicians ever, these two incredible human beings embody the Duke-coined term “Beyond Category”.

Rickey Vincent. *Funk, the Music, the People, and the Rhythm of the One*. St Martin’s Griffin- New York, 1995.

M. Vincent’s seminal History of Funk is a charmingly precise account of twentieth century African American music evolution, and of the history of those musicians that turned out to be associated with the term Funk. Both Nelson George and Quincy Jones describe M. Jackson as a music historian, who is acquainted with American music history. Despite his crossover appeal and passport, Michael Jackson is given an interestingly fair treatment in this book. Beyond the persona Vincent still perceives the Funkiness, and African American legacy exuding from his works. Though Vincent’s perception of disco seems just slightly biased, though mostly accurate, his concise analysis of James Brown, Sly and the Family Stones, and last but not least George Clinton & Parliament turned out to be very precious in my attempt to contextualize the work of Michael Jackson’s.

Russell A. Potter, *Spectacular Vernaculars Hip-Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism*. State University of New York Press, 1995

This book is glorious defense of Hip-Hop as an art form and a culture. Potter notably relies on Gates’ theory of signifying to show the African American qualities of the new art form. He also uses theories of the Birmingham School and ties Hip-hop with other subcultures, the occurrence of which equally caused a form of “Moral Panic”. As far as Michael Jackson is concerned, this book provides an analysis of the 1990’s and the Black Machismo and nationalism that were a distinctive feature of that culture. The knowledge of this background is necessary in a way, to understand, why both Black and White cast Michael Jackson out to freakdom.

Catherine Dineen, *Michael Jackson in his own words*. Omnibus Press, 1993.

This is book of quotations by and on Michael Jackson. The author took pain to collect these quotations from numerous newspapers he divided it into clear categories, such as creation, spirituality, and so on.

Michael Jackson, *Dancing the Dream poems and reflections*. Doubleday, 1992

This book was a major success with mostly Michael Jackson's fan. One can find essays and poems that illustrate the policies of escapism, and 'dancing life away' advocated and implemented by his dancing mind. Michael Jackson displays in a florid language the quintessence of his philosophy, with phrases like "Life is my game" and "don't fool yourself, reclaim your bliss". The book contains song of himself like "Magical Child" and mostly odes to life like "When Babies smile" and "Planet earth"

Michael Jackson, *Moonwalk*. Doubleday, 1988

Michael Jackson's autobiography is the mainstay of this study. Michael Jackson describes vivid memories of his childhood on the chitlin circuit, as well as the genesis of some of his landmark works –like the performance of *Billie Jean* at Motown 25. One can also find some interesting reflections on dance, art, plastic surgery and life as a whole. This book is a must read for anyone interested in Michael Jackson's world.

David Brackett, *Interpreting Popular Music*. University of California Press, 1995

Brackett offers studies of musicians in his book, and analyzes the artistic and non-artistic ingredients that contribute to the success of a record. He thus provides an analysis of the voice, rhythm and meters of *Superbad* to highlight James Brown's genius. The book also contains an interesting comparison of Billie Holliday and Bing Crosby's cover of *I'll be seeing you*. He interestingly demonstrates how institutional factors are determining for the success of record. He also assumes that Billie Holliday's private life might have become intentionally associated with her music, and adds that the image of the *song mistress* she paraded could be understood as her way to escape other controlling images of colored women.

Harold Keith Taylor, *The Motown Music Machine*. Jagmeg Music, 2003

This book was written by a former sound engineer, who worked for Motown company before Berry Gordy relocated the company in Los Angeles. He gives an insider's view of the method and discipline implemented by Gordy that –to him mostly- accounts for the company's success. He attributes Motown's downfall to the loosening of that discipline when the company left Detroit. Taylor provides a concise idea of how the Jackson five have been nurtured at Motown's.

Toni Morrison, *The Dancing Mind*. Alfred Knopf, 2003

This very short book is the transcription of Toni Morrison's speech at the Nobel Prize Award ceremony that enshrined her among literature luminaries. She summarily introduces the notion of the "dancing mind" to describe the confrontational attitude –much like a dancer, and openness an author needs to have in the serious business of literature. This theory perfectly falls into line with Michael Jackson's understanding of dance.

Nelson George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues*. Penguin Books, 2004

This book is well written chronicle of Black Music in post WWII America. George posits that integration and crossover policies of major companies like Motown put the nails on the coffin of black solidarity and the chitlin circuit, which was the cradle of the Rhythm and Blues. He naturally debunks the artistic poorness of the disco era, which is to him the epitome of crossover. Black folks compliance to that trend accounts for what he describes a beige music. Consequently George hails anti-disco trends such as funk, and hip-hop. He also gives an interesting analysis of Michael Jackson's we referred to above.

Nelson George, *The Michael Jackson Story*. A Dell Book, 1984

This short book is an analysis of Michael Jackson's career in the early eighties. George produced interesting interpretations of Michael Jackson's musicianship, of imagery displayed in his videos, of dance and his showmanship.

Jel D Lewis, *Michael Jackson the Big Picture*. Amber Books,

The book is composed of mainly transcriptions of interviews Michael Jackson bestowed from the early 1990s onwards.

Margo Jefferson, *On Michael Jackson*. Pantheon Books, 2006

Margo Jefferson produced the most balanced scholarly assessment of Michael Jackson I have ever read. She brilliantly tackles every issue from the magic of his body of art, to the abstruseness of his surgically modified public persona. One of her merits lies in her effort to delve into the life of persona Michael Jackson would often refer to, like Peter Barnum and Edgar Poe. The book is concise and well written. I quoted her on many an occasion throughout this paper.

Walter Yetnikoff & David Ritz, *Howling at the moon*. Broadway books, 2004

Former CEO of CBS records Walter Yetnikoff describes the ups and down of his career, and gives a glimpse of Michael Jackson's –poorly documented- character as a businessman. Michael Jackson is described a self-determined musician, obsessed with success.

Roland Barthes, *Image Music and Text*. Fontana Press, 1977

This book was useful for Barthes reflection on the 'grain of the voice', I used to articulate Michael Jackson's musicianship in the first part of this paper.

Kevern Verney, *African Americans and US Popular Culture*. Routledge, 2003

Verney gives a concise overview of African American presence in the fields of stage, music, stage, radio and TV, and mostly deal with the device used by African Americans to cope with the pervading controlling images of them. The book span dates back to emancipation time, to this day. It is a very instructive chronicle of African American's trek through American Popular culture.

James L Conyers Jr, *African American Jazz and Rap Social and Philosophical examinations of Black expressive behavior*. Mc Farland, 2001

This very interesting book is a collection of scholarly papers that analyzes various aspects of African American Music, from its African roots, to Hip Hop, and Jazz, which are revolutionary international mediums that tend to fall in the claws of Black nationalists.

Bruce Swedien, *Make mine music*. MIA Musikk, 2003

Bruce Swedien is a sound engineer –sometimes producer and composer- that has been working with Michael Jackson ever since 1978, to this day. He describes the evolution of recording techniques and shares his vision of music –very much like Michael Jackson's- as a painting. He also gives appreciation to his various collaborators from Quincy Jones, to Duke Ellington and Michael Jackson. This is the kind of insider's view of Michael Jackson I am willing to develop in a near future.

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Brett Ratner, “Michael Jackson: decades before all of the charges and countercharges, he was a pint-size singer with a big dream”, Brant Publications, 2004

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<sup>i</sup> From *Wanna Be Startin Something*, by Michael Jackson, 1982

<sup>ii</sup> Jesse Jackson, *I am somebody*, as recited on children program *Sesame Street*, 1971