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Putting the Music Back into Michael Jackson Studies

CHRISTOPHER WILEY

While news of Michael Jackson's death sent shockwaves around the world, it was particularly keenly felt in London, the city that was to have been the site of his much-hyped, and rapidly sold out, "This Is It" comeback concert series.[1] For that reason, Jackson had been locally topical for some months, making London possibly the only place in the world where record stores were prepared (albeit for entirely the wrong reasons) for a sudden resurgence in sales of his music. Amongst the many tributes paid to the departed megastar in the days that followed, notably at the Glastonbury Festival and the Black Entertainment Television Awards, the reference hastily included within popular London-based soap *EastEnders* provided one of the most artful commemorations.[2] London was also no exception in witnessing the scenes of mass mourning and impromptu pilgrimages seen across the world in response to the news (stirring up memories, at least in Britain, of similar occurrences following the premature death of Princess Diana twelve years earlier). It also saw renewed interest in *Thriller – Live*, the stage show celebrating Jackson's music established in the UK three years earlier, which, in addition to various international tours, had found its present home at the West End's Lyric Theatre that January. Other local concerns included the question of whether refunds would be issued for the "This Is It" bookings – assurances from the major ticket-selling companies that the money would

[1] The "This Is It" concerts were due to have taken place on 50 dates between July 2009 and March 2010. The opening nights of the series had previously been postponed, and its scope significantly expanded from the 10 dates originally planned. Footage of rehearsals for the concerts was posthumously included in the documentary film *Michael Jackson's This Is It* (dir. Kenny Ortega), released in cinemas across the world for a limited period in October 2009 and subsequently on DVD.

[2] In a specially-written scene, the June 26 2009 installment of the show saw Denise Wicks (Diane Parish) discuss the news of Jackson's demise with her surrogate father Patrick Trueman (Rudolph Walker).

be returned in full being complemented by the offer from concert promoters AEG Live for customers to receive the specially-issued souvenir tickets as originally planned in order that they might keep them as collectors' items.

Firsthand reflection on my participation in UK-based press coverage of the tragic events of Thursday June 25 2009 reveals that disproportionate attention continues to be paid, even after his passing, to aspects of Jackson's life and career other than the music itself. My intentions in this chapter are to rehabilitate Jackson's music within the context of his videos and their sociocultural (particularly racial) backgrounds, thereby situating him within wider disciplinary debates concerning academic engagement with music in popular culture. By way of introduction, I briefly attempt diagnosis of the perceived problem with reference to the discourses that emerged in the wake of Jackson's death as well as broader tendencies in scholarship on musical multimedia. The following sections are dedicated to examination of themes emerging from two thought-provoking studies of Jackson's music videos, Kobena Mercer's "Monster metaphors: Notes on Michael Jackson's *Thriller*" (1986)[3] and Robert Burnett and Bert Deivert's "Black or White: Michael Jackson's Video as a Mirror of Popular Culture" (1995).[4] In the course of these discussions, I seek to reorient the authors' readings by placing the music (and its relationship with lyrics and images) closer to the centre of analysis, exposing certain biases towards the images with reference to more musicologically-oriented writings on music video by Andrew Goodwin, Alf Björnberg, and Nicholas Cook. In a concluding section, I explore the danger of over-interpreting music videos through the lens of the artist's own biography, and propose that

[3] Subsequent citations to Mercer's article in this chapter will refer to the 1993 republication.

[4] Another stimulating article on Michael Jackson, by Susan Fast (2010), appeared too late for inclusion within my chapter. In brief, Fast's study discusses both Jackson's music and the controversies with which he was famously associated, exploring manifestations of difference in his artistic output and his biography and proposing counter-narratives by which he might be posthumously reconceptualized.

academia has a duty to recontextualize popular music for non-specialist communities as a means of refocusing public opinion to the art rather than the controversy.

Informed by Jackson's wider *œuvre*, this study therefore crystallizes around two of his most famous songs and music videos, "Thriller" (music 1982; video 1983) and "Black or White" (1991),[5] which form an apposite pair in that they are the products of Jackson's two collaborations with Hollywood A-list director John Landis.[6] They also represent, respectively, the iconic title track of *Thriller* and the first single released to promote *Dangerous*, two of the best-selling albums of Jackson's career, and they are the two of Jackson's songs with notable spoken voice sections (only one of which can correctly be termed "rap"). Intertextuality and image-manipulation effects are important features of both music videos, and, at 14 minutes for "Thriller" and 11 (in its uncensored form) for "Black or White", each exemplifies Jackson's expansion of the genre in the direction of the short film. Ultimately, however, my choice of case studies has been governed by the availability of suitable academic literature with which to engage. Yet this chapter should not be considered in any way an attempt to devalue previous research or to reclaim Jackson for musicology, more a demonstration of the additional knowledge contributed by reconfiguring discourse on music video such that the music is accorded more of a central position. Given the obvious value of cross-disciplinary enquiry, I have resisted specialist or exhaustive methods of musical analysis in order to highlight the more immediately comprehensible insights that may be garnered through non-discipline-specific means of examining music, images, lyrics, and sociocultural contexts in tandem. But before we

[5] Amongst various other sources, both the "Thriller" music video and the full-length version of "Black or White" appear on Jackson's DVD *Video Greatest Hits – HIStory* (2000).

[6] Landis's other directorial credits include such blockbuster films as *The Blues Brothers* (1980), *An American Werewolf in London* (1981), *Trading Places* (1983), *Coming to America* (1988), and *Beverley Hills Cop III* (1994).

reinterpret past scholarship on Jackson in light of more recent developments, we must first return to the events that prematurely ushered in a new era of contemplation of his career.

The King of Pop is Dead

Since the news of Jackson's passing first appeared on the celebrity website TMZ.com shortly after 2:30 p.m. Pacific time (10:30 p.m. British Summer Time), the story essentially broke overnight in the UK, such that the Press was fully mobilized the following day to enable major coverage of what looked set to become one of the most important music-related news items of the decade. It was certainly difficult not to come to the conclusion that one news story eclipsed all others that weekend – so much so that the British Broadcasting Corporation received a significant number of Jackson-related complaints remarking that, in the words of the Head of BBC Newsroom, Mary Hockaday, "his death didn't justify the prominence and scale of our reporting through Friday [June 26] and into the weekend" (Hockaday, 2009). By way of keeping the story running as long as possible, the Press were understandably anxious to interview as many spokespeople as they could, from all walks of life. Fans were approached on the streets to share their feelings as to what the star had meant to them and how they had reacted to the news of his passing; a plethora of high-profile popular musicians offered personal stories of their memories of Jackson and his music; medical doctors shed light on the circumstances of his death, at the time still very much shrouded in mystery. Predictably, tabloid journalism quickly ensured that the controversies that had afflicted Jackson's career for the past two decades or more – the cosmetic surgeries, the fading skin pigmentation, the dependency on drugs, and of

course the serious allegations (never proven) of child sex crimes – were also revisited at some length.

My own contribution to the UK-based news coverage, much of it for the BBC,[7] was made in my capacity as an academic teaching and researching on the phenomenon that was (and is) Michael Jackson. I adopted the line that the focus of posthumous discussion should fall on Jackson's contribution to music and the entertainment industry, rather than allowing the controversies to predominate – in short, that he should be remembered as the King of Pop and not as Wacko Jacko (see, for example, "Lecturer says...", 2009). In the course of the many interviews I gave in the days and weeks following Jackson's death, two themes emerged strongly, both of which are to be extended and developed in the course of this chapter. The first I was expecting: while various questions were put to me about my teaching on Jackson and whether I might go about it differently in future given the news, inevitably more controversial ground was also thoroughly ploughed. The second, however, I was not. In my newfound role as "music expert" to the British media, I envisaged being asked about Jackson's songs and his place within the history of popular music, yet much of the questioning on Jackson's videos and musical performance did not extend very far into the realm of the music *per se*.

I am by no means suggesting that we should retrospectively endeavor to gloss over the unavoidable fact that certain areas of Jackson's life story represent extremely sensitive terrain; I was doubtless not the only viewer uncomfortable with some of the revelations of, for instance, Martin Bashir's documentary-interview *Living with Michael Jackson* (2003).[8] My contention is

[7] These activities included several live televised appearances on BBC One and the BBC News Channel on 26 and June 27 2009, as well as a number of subsequent interviews on regional BBC radio stations.

[8] First broadcast on ITV1 in the UK on February 3 2003 and subsequently in the US and elsewhere, *Living with Michael Jackson* quickly led to official complaints made to the Independent Television Commission and the Broadcasting Standards Commission by lawyers acting for Jackson, as well as to the rebuttal program *The*

[continued]

simply that these controversies should not allow us to lose sight of his historical import as an artist. After all, his international renown derived almost exclusively from his contributions to music – his childhood career with (and without) The Jackson Five, and the monumental success of the solo albums *Off the Wall* (1979), *Thriller* (1982), *Bad* (1987), *Dangerous* (1991), and *HIStory* (1995) – though it was the controversies that kept him in the media spotlight during the later decline of his professional activity exemplified by the comparatively lukewarm (though nonetheless impressive) reception of *Invincible* (2001). Often, as we shall see in this chapter, the two are inextricably linked in that our engagement with the art becomes informed by our knowledge of the artist, especially since listeners unfamiliar with Jackson's basic biographical details are very few and far between.

The second of the aforementioned themes is illustrative of a general lack of focus on the music where Jackson is concerned;[9] yet it seems utterly superfluous to state the case for the global importance of the best-selling artist of all time, whose songs numbered among the Top Five downloaded tracks in virtually every major country in the days following his death (the UK being particularly enamored of "Man in the Mirror"). In addition, as I demonstrate below, the contextual issues that have pervaded discussions of Jackson can be seen reflected not just in the images of the videos, but also in the music itself. More widely, such practices of privileging images at the expense of the associated music are firmly embedded within discourses on multimedia artforms; in a landmark study that aimed to redress the balance, Nicholas Cook even complained that despite the substantial attention paid to Madonna's "Material Girl" music video, there had yet to appear "a single sentence specifically about the music" (1998, p. 150).

Michael Jackson Interview: The Footage You Were Never Meant To See, which featured material shot by Jackson's own videographer.

9 One important exception is provided by Björnberg (1994), which article includes a brief analysis of Jackson's music video for the lesser-known "Remember the Time" from *Dangerous* (pp. 64-6).

Nonetheless, Alf Björnberg has proposed that "the distinctive features of music video may arguably be better explained on the basis of an understanding of the syntactical characteristics of popular music than by prevalent theories of postmodernism" (1994, p. 51), and Andrew Goodwin has advanced a compelling case for what he termed "A Musicology of the Image" (1992, pp. 49-71). The height of the careers of artists such as Jackson (and Madonna) may have been coincident with the mainstream ascendancy of music videos and MTV, but the fact that he is well-known for the precision of the execution of his trademark choreography alone testifies to the importance to his work of the co-ordination of images and music, as well as to the suitability of that music (in terms of mood, rhythm, and "groove") in motivating the body to the visual spectacle of dance.[10] Clearly, then, the time is ripe for the music to be reintegrated within Michael Jackson studies.

Mercer, "Monster metaphors", and the Music Video of a Megastar

Thriller has set records that are unlikely ever to be broken: becoming the best-selling album within fifteen months of its release in November 1982, it has sold tens of millions of units to date. By the time that the music video to its title track appeared in December 1983, Mercer argued, there was no need for it to fulfill the usual function of public promotion, leading him to suggest that it instead "celebrates the success the LP has brought Michael Jackson" (1993, p. 96).[11] But the mammoth success of the album has nonetheless since been eclipsed by the video, which reinvented the genre to the extent that it reportedly cost around half a million dollars (ten

[10] Of course, following the star's demise, music videos represent one of the few remaining means of accessing the visual experience of Jackson in performance.

[11] The single version of "Thriller" appeared later still, in January 1984.

times the industry average at the time) to produce. So thoroughly intertwined are the histories of the song and video that it is easy, three decades later, to forget that one preceded the other by such a long period. For example, the commemorative album *Thriller 25* – which sold several million copies independently of the original – was actually released in the anniversary year of the video (2008), and features a publicity shot from the video on the cover; and BBC news coverage commemorating 25 years since the release of the album placed a notable focus on the video (see Winterman, 2007).

The length of time between the appearance of the "Thriller" song and that of the video provides an apposite point of comparison with Cook's essay on "Material Girl", in which he remarked that the song's music and lyrics together yielded such a tightly-ordered structure that little space remained for new meaning to be created by its postmodern video (1998, pp. 151, 158), which similarly followed the year after the song's original release on *Like a Virgin* (1984). However, even Cook's acclaimed case study led him to contend that "The pictures… are ultimately there to foreground and sell the music" (p. 167), which, while it may have been true of "Material Girl", would seem rather unnecessary as a primary aim of the "Thriller" video given the album's prior sales figures. "Thriller" therefore raises a number of distinctive questions. How was the song used in the music video in the absence of its conventional commercial function, and given its elevation to the genre of short film? And how might that video have subverted the music and lyrics in order to open up new space (as "Material Girl" did) for the resulting multi-parametric narrative, an original story combining 1950s B-movie pastiche with the more contemporary setting in which this "film within a film" is supposedly screened?

Mercer's reading of "Thriller" considers the music insofar as it informs discussion of visual phenomena, including Jackson's own image (as evidenced by album covers and publicity

shots) as well as the video itself. While he identifies at the outset of his study that “it is the voice which lies at the heart of [Jackson’s] appeal” (1993, p. 93), his endeavors to locate Jackson within the African-American soul tradition are exclusively concerned with the extent to which his image fits the mould of female antecedents (notably Diana Ross, his onetime mentor and lifelong friend) rather than male counterparts such as James Brown (to whom his style of dance is nonetheless indebted) and Al Green. Likewise, in investigating the mythology that has emerged around Jackson, Mercer located the site of what he terms the “definite sense of racial ambiguity... [and] sexual ambiguity” (p. 94) in his image, specifically, the cosmetic surgeries that he held to have lessened his visual appearance as a African-American male and given him more of an androgynous, White European look instead. Yet the indeterminacy that Mercer identified in Jackson’s image may equally be located in his voice. His description of him as “Neither child nor man, not clearly either black or white and with an androgynous image that is neither masculine nor feminine” (p. 95) is surely as applicable to his sound as to his look: his vocally high tessitura and quasi-falsetto whooping perfectly exemplify the gendered contradiction he embodies. Even Mercer subsequently conceded, with reference to the work of Iain Chambers, that “the power of soul as a cultural form to express sexuality does not so much lie in the literal meanings of the words but in the passion of the singer’s voice and vocal performance” (p. 97). Jackson’s voice, however, functions as an implicit indication not merely of the sexual boundaries he has navigated, but those of age and race as well. Its idiosyncratic pitch calls to mind his formative career as a lead singer of The Jackson Five and as the teenage solo artist whose chart hits included “Rockin’ Robin” and “Ben” (both in 1972). Similarly, as I discuss further below, his music inherently embraces racial plurality given its distinctive fusing

of the predominantly non-White traditions of soul, disco, and funk with more mainstream pop and rock.

One of the principal ways in which "Thriller" itself is revealed to be extraordinary stems from the fact that the music of the original song by Rod Templeton is completely restructured for the purposes of the video. As Table I(a) demonstrates, the track that appears on the *Thriller* album proceeds via alternating verses and choruses, with a bridge section included between the second chorus and the final verse, and culminating with the celebrated voiceover by veteran horror-genre actor Vincent Price. However, the video, which is charted in Table I(b), places all three verses first, followed by Price's voiceover, before the song is interrupted for dramatic effect for nearly half a minute, during which we hear one of the non-diegetic cues of "scary music" by renowned film composer Elmer Bernstein;[12] the groove is then retrieved, yielding an instrumental section during which the zombies' famous dance routine is executed, and only at the end do the three choruses appear in succession (plus a reprise for the end credits).[13] Consequently, while the original song adopted the verse-chorus structure paradigmatic of pop, the music video rejects this normative sequence in its coherent pursuit of a fresh narrative. Indeed, the delay between the end of the final verse and the choruses, with the spoken voice section in between, makes nonsense of the lyrics: the closing words of verse 3 ("I'll make you see") are clearly intended to lead into the first line of the ensuing chorus ("That this is thriller, thriller night"). This is all, of course, completely irregular for the genre of music video; though traditions have emerged (as seen elsewhere in Jackson's *œuvre*) of extending the timeframe on

[12] Bernstein, whose major credits as film composer include *To Kill A Mockingbird* (1962), *Thoroughly Modern Millie* (1967), and *Ghostbusters* (1984), had contributed the scores to both Landis's *An American Werewolf in London* and *Trading Places* (see n. 6) in the years immediately prior to *Thriller*.

[13] The counter markings supplied in the tables that appear within this chapter are taken from the PAL-format DVD (cited in n. 5) available in the UK; timings for NTSC-format DVDs may differ.

either side of the music and even of repeating the groove to lengthen instrumental passages, the song itself is sacrosanct.

Mercer's aforementioned proposition that the video commemorated *Thriller*'s success is therefore exemplified by the music's being reordered to culminate with the choruses – typically the defining section of any pop song, and "Thriller" is no exception – rather than with Vincent Price's contribution, which functions in the video to bring the first half of the song to a close rather than as the natural conclusion of the whole. Particularly remarkable is the interruption of the song, the very aesthetic product that music videos would normally function to sell, partway through in order to advance the video's narrative at its expense. Likewise, once the music is recovered, an instrumental section absent from the original track serves to showcase Jackson's characteristic dance moves.[14] Conversely, the song's bridge is omitted in its entirety, hence the line of lyrics that Mercer (pp. 99, 103-4) specifically highlighted as informing the visual content, "Night creatures call and the dead start to walk…", does not actually appear in the video itself – instead, the instrumental is substituted in its place. "Thriller" is thereby revealed as the generic exception that proves the rule: a music video of filmic proportions, commercially superfluous in a very real sense, whose late appearance relative to the song necessitated the development of alternative strategies (the dismantling of the original) in order to cultivate new layers of meaning.

Burnett and Deivert, "Black or White", and Intertextuality

Burnett and Deivert (1995) persuasively argued that the "Black or White" music video may be understood as a polysemous nexus of intertextual references, whether intentionally

[14] Such extended repetitions of the groove were, however, a feature of Jackson's stage shows (for example, during performances of "Billie Jean") precisely in order to enable the execution of choreographed routines.

constructed or not, which they unraveled through systematic analysis of its scenes informed by ethnographic research conducted with Swedish and Norwegian undergraduates. Reading their study (which, like Mercer's, made some consideration of the music in examining its associated images) alongside the video itself reveals that its constituent scenes fall fairly neatly into a total of seven larger sequences: the opening father-son dialogue; the sequence in which five different global cultures are presented; the scene in which Jackson sings against a background of flames; the section featuring the kids' street gang; the scene where Jackson dances in the Statue of Liberty's torch; the sequence of morphing heads; and the so-called "panther" ending, which is frequently cut for its controversial substance. For clarity, this information is summarized in Table II, together with further description as to the contents of individual sequences; also indicated is the striking level of correspondence between the overall structure of the video and that of the song. Notably, the song's bridge is coincident with the "background of flames" sequence, while the rap section corresponds to the scene with the kids' street gang. The start of the song proper also matches perfectly the switch from the opening father-son segment (an audio version of which similarly introduced the song on the album) to the sequence depicting different ethnicities, which marks Jackson's first appearance in the video as well as the commencement of the choreography. Other sections, conversely, are characterized by the absence of music: in the "panther" ending, in which Jackson executes dance moves in the street, unaccompanied and in free time, the aural backdrop instead comprises Jackson's feet-tapping, vocalizations, and the exaggerated "swooping" sound design accompanying his body movements.

The video juxtaposes the "Black or White" track, written by Jackson himself, with multiple visual intertexts explicitly referencing different films, cultures, and landmarks as revealed by Burnett and Deivert's reading; the images and choreography accompanying the

song's opening verses alone lead the viewer from Africa to South-East Asia, Native America, India (within a Westernized urban setting), and finally Russia.[15] That the same song appears throughout this pluralistic visual *bricolage* (albeit one constructed from a North American perspective) therefore provides a continuity that binds the various scenes and sequences together. Thus it is the music in collaboration with the images, rather than the images alone, that explicates the overall messages of worldwide unity and multicultural acceptance (where the lyrics to some extent refer instead to a more personal, romantic narrative concerning an interracial relationship). It is the music that ultimately clarifies the video's meaning of bringing different countries and demographics together, where the images might (for their fragmentariness) have been taken to emphasize their separation. Finally, the music provides the "constant" that aesthetically connects the complex mesh of what Burnett and Deivert (p. 24) termed "recurring motifs" – felines, broken glass, father-son relationships, and so forth – that occur in different segments of the video that at first glance are seemingly unrelated.

However, while the identity of the musical text of "Black or White" may be a unified one, it does not merely speak with a single cultural "voice." Much modern popular music is ultimately traceable to two very different roots, African-American blues and European classical music. However, Jackson's idiom is more racially complex, for although he inherited the artistic mantle of the Motown label with which he was associated during his childhood career, his mature sound (as noted) combined soul, disco, and funk with commercial pop and rock, creating an aural product whose congruity implicitly embodies the messages of "Black or White" itself. Its video also offers various allusions to the far-reaching extent of the influences that informed Jackson's music. The featuring of an Eddie Van Halen model guitar in the opening sequence

[15] This sequence therefore provides a precursor to the renowned video for Jackson's "Earth Song" (1995), which was filmed on four different continents.

calls to mind that artist's contribution to *Thriller*, notably the virtuosic solo of "Beat It"; and it is undoubtedly not by accident that the start of the "Black or White" song proper (and Jackson's initial appearance within the video) occurs in the setting of Africa, which, as Burnett and Deivert (p. 26) noted, reflects another facet of Jackson's musical heritage.

One of the most distinctive of the various musical elements incorporated within "Black or White" is the central rap section, with lyrics by Bill Bottrell (who co-produced the *Dangerous* album) and performed by guest artist L.T.B. Rap is otherwise relatively uncommon in Jackson's best-known output, one obvious comparator being the spoken voice section of "Thriller", whose delivery by a Caucasian horror actor matched well the video's 1950s B-movie intertext (which, as previously observed, it antedated by over a year) but not the music's own intertextual allusion to this stereotypically African-American artform, in which context it was clearly intended ironically.[16] In "Black or White", however, the opposite is the case: the rap is executed by a perceptibly African-American voice but lip-synched onscreen by child actor Macaulay Culkin.[17] Surely it cannot be coincidence that this scene is immediately followed by one in which Jackson is seen singing and dancing in the torch of the Statue of Liberty, referencing the city in which rap and hip hop emerged in the later 1970s. It also has its parallels in the images that soon thereafter accompany the song's closing section, which demonstrates the racial plurality of what has hitherto been constructed as a Black-White dichotomy through its series of 13 morphing heads – recognizably of different ethnic origins, and including a mix of males and females – all lip-synching the same refrain to Jackson's voice on the soundtrack and, by extension, sharing in his message. Both instances exemplify the music's unification of a blend of races and cultures: it

[16] Cf. Mercer's discussion of elements of parody and ironic humor inherent in Price's voiceover (1993, p. 98).
[17] Born in 1980, Culkin had been catapulted to fame one year prior to "Black or White" by the first *Home Alone* movie (which thereby provides another of Burnett and Deivert's intertexts).

doesn't matter that an African-American voice apparently emanates from Culkin's Caucasian lips because it doesn't matter if you're Black or White; in keeping with the messages of the lyrics, the music and images also refuse to be defined by color. Earlier I discussed how Jackson's crossing of boundaries of gender, age, and race is embodied by his voice, and its literal transference to onscreen characters of different sexes and cultures – and, correspondingly, that of L.T.B.'s voice to a White child – provides visual reflection of the point.

Consideration should also be made of one final intertext not explored in Burnett and Deivert's study: the prominence of the image of the burning cross in both the "background of flames" scene that immediately precedes the rap section, and the music video to Madonna's "Like a Prayer". Not only did Madonna's celebrated video appear in 1989, just two years before "Black or White", but it was notoriously linked to an advertising campaign for Pepsi, with which product Jackson was likewise associated during the 1980s; and both videos courted controversy at least in part for their openly anti-racist content.[18] Granted, the burning cross seen behind Jackson (together with other images of violence), like its intertextual counterpart in "Like a Prayer", makes explicit reference to the Ku Klux Klan and the history of race hate in the United States, amplifying the subtler allusion embedded in the lyric "I ain't scared of no sheets". The pacing of the music accompanying this scene, the song's bridge, similarly suggests a stark contrast from the verses given the tighter phrase structure, shorter lines, and fiercer tone of Jackson's voice; and it is through contemplating musical factors in addition to visual ones that the intertext's ultimate significance is revealed. The characteristic mix of far-flung elements of popular music in "Black or White", discussed above, is also a feature of "Like a Prayer", which notably combined Madonna's commercial pop idiom with gospel courtesy of the Andraé Crouch

[18] For an effective critique of the controversy elicited by "Like a Prayer" in relation to the Pepsi advertising campaign, see Savan (1993).

choir. Moreover, as Susan McClary (1991, pp. 163-5) has demonstrated in her provocative analysis of the song and images in tandem, the music of "Like a Prayer", for its blend of stereotypically White and Black traditions, is complicit in the construction of the racial and religious messages that prompted the video to be received so controversially. The meanings of "Black or White" are thereby strengthened by an intertextual connection with a well-known musical precursor in recent American pop-culture with whom its conceptual themes are shared.

Long Live the King of Pop

If the scope of this chapter has precluded comprehensive examination of the detailed relationships between music, images, and lyrics in "Thriller" and "Black or White", it has at least provided various indications as to how music might be positioned closer to the centre of a revised reading of the narratives of these songs and their videos. I now propose to bring my enquiry full circle by considering the perils of the general tendency towards interpreting such art in accordance with aspects of the biography of its originating artist,[19] seemingly inevitable though it may be; Andrew Goodwin, indeed, has written of the "centrality of understanding the star's persona(s) as an element in reading video clips" (1992, p. 98). Jackson again provides an ideal case study given the extent of his association with serious controversy coupled to the contradictory stance he has adopted with respect to publicly-aired speculation about him, as reflected in his musical output: on *Thriller*, he commemorated a fan's paternity claim in "Billie Jean" and responded to the spreading of rumors in "Wanna Be Startin' Somethin'"; later in his career, however, "Leave Me Alone" (from *Bad*) and several songs on *HIStory* condemned media

[19] On wider questions concerning relationships between music and biography, albeit in different contexts, see Wiley, 2008.

intrusion into his private life. With this fresh objective in mind, I shall briefly revisit one final time the two articles that have formed the backbone of my discussion.

Mercer's reading of "Thriller" is clearly indebted to its two metamorphosis sections (see especially, 1993, pp. 102-5) as exemplifying the elements that separate it from other music videos, responding to the intertextual connotations of the song's title and disrupting the narrative – the "thrill" being revealed as one of horror rather than romance.[20] His conclusion, however, leads us away from the art and towards the realms of biography and controversy: in foregrounding the constructedness of Jackson's own image, he views the metamorphoses (the first in particular) as "a metaphor for the aesthetic reconstruction of Michael Jackson's face" (p. 105) through making explicit the use of make-up, emphasizing the facial features, and implicitly drawing attention to his cosmetic surgery. Yet if early evidence of Jackson's reconstructive treatment was visually discernible when the video was released in 1983, then the rather more extreme changes to his appearance that have since been witnessed only serve to augment the perceived relationship between the image of the actor, prosthetically enhanced and made up as a werewolf, and the real-life Jackson as a product of extensive cosmetic treatment. From the present vantage point, the danger of retrospective reading based on our knowledge of Jackson's subsequent biography threatens to color the reader's view of what essentially then becomes a revisionist interpretation of his video.[21]

Likewise, as Burnett and Deivert (1995, pp. 34-5) discovered, it seems difficult not to draw connections between the connotations of the song "Black or White" and Jackson's fading

[20] This is also suggested at the outset of the video by the ghoulish blood-like red text of the title, as well as by its being preceded by a statement from Jackson dissociating him from its occultist themes. These preliminary clues, of course, take nothing away from Mercer's analysis of the narrative proper.

[21] This possibility is further problematized by the complex publication history of Mercer's article, which, since its original appearance in 1986, has been reprinted in anthologies published in 1989, 1991, 1993, 2000, and 2007.

skin pigmentation which was very apparent by 1991, two years before the public explanation (vitiligo) was given in Jackson's landmark interview with Oprah Winfrey.[22] The dissolving of racial boundaries is critical to the messages imparted by "Black or White", and more widely recalls Jackson's success as a pathbreaking African-American artist at a time when Black music was still notably under-represented within the mainstream entertainment industry. But there is also another motif prominent in the video with deeply problematic biographical associations, namely the prevalence of children: Jackson dances with a Native American child in the sequence presenting global cultures; two babies sit astride the world in the shot just prior to the song's bridge; the street gang scene includes seven children led by Macaulay Culkin, together with Jackson dressed in a juvenile manner; and the video is bookended by father-child relationships, opening with Culkin in the role of son to George Wendt's character and closing with a brief animation featuring Bart and Homer from *The Simpsons*. In retrospect, this whole line of enquiry calls to mind the serious accusations of child sexual abuse and molestation made against Jackson in his later life as well as such controversies as the dangling of his nine-month-old son from the third-floor balcony of a Berlin hotel in 2002 and the media speculation as to the identity of the child's surrogate mother.[23] Yet the extent to which any of this can be held to apply to "Black or White" is somewhat limited. If the 1993 allegations (settled out of court) were temporally proximate, those of 2003 (for which Jackson was acquitted two years later) are not, while the other episodes cited are similarly located in the last decade of Jackson's life; possibly the only direct link with "Black or White" is that Culkin's testimony reluctantly contributed to Jackson's

[22] Televised live across the world from Jackson's Neverland Ranch on February 10 1993, this 90-minute interview was Jackson's first for some years.

[23] Having delivered versions of this chapter in the form of a research-led seminar on many different occasions, I find it particularly revealing that whenever discussion turns to issues related to children, controversies such as the above are quickly cited, whereas not a single student has ever mentioned (for instance) Jackson's extensive charitable and humanitarian work through the Heal the World Foundation he founded in 1992 to benefit disadvantaged children worldwide.

trial in 2005 was consequential to his defense.[24] From today's standpoint it seems almost unavoidable to think about these more recent controversies in connection with the motifs featured in "Black or White"; but whether we should do so is another question entirely.

By way of conclusion, I should like to propose that in cases such as Jackson's, academia has a social responsibility to reorient the public focus to the artistic output rather than the controversies. I am not for one moment suggesting that we dismiss or deny the seriousness of episodes such as those to which I have alluded above; rather, I am merely seeking reassessment of the publicly-articulated balance between the two. One of the most significant debates to have emerged in modern popular music studies has concerned the extent to which discourse should focus analytically on the aesthetic texts themselves, rather than on their sociocultural contexts; John Covach, for instance, has advanced the view that "popular music can… be considered as inherently *musical*, and only secondarily social" (1999, p. 466, emphasis in original). Yet my own experiences of participating in the media coverage of Jackson's death have suggested that in non-specialist arenas, it is the contextual (and controversial) issues that are foregrounded, and that even endeavors to engage with the art itself tend to crystallize around visual rather than musical elements. So, while it would obviously be undesirable to present the music as being devoid of its cultural contexts, we may at least seek to reposition it nearer to the heart of discussion, for just as reflection on Jackson's *œuvre* seems invariably to lead us to aspects of his biography, so it should be important to contemplate the artistic fruits borne of his exceptional career and not merely the controversies that tainted it. We should not be allowed to not lose sight of the fact that Jackson met with extraordinary success in the late twentieth-century entertainment industry, that he made a major contribution to contemporary popular music, and,

[24] In addition, around one month after Jackson's death, unconfirmed claims emerged that Culkin may have been the biological father of his third child, the result of Culkin's having donated sperm at Jackson's request.

as the public reaction to news of his death abundantly testifies, that he continues to be held dear to millions of fans worldwide. The day following Jackson's passing, I was repeatedly quoted in the British press as having described him as one of those "rare geniuses" capable of transcending boundaries (of race, age, and gender) through his art; and as we have seen above, the music is absolutely central in this respect.

If this closing note is felt to be controversial, then it is surely testament to the life of a controversial figure. But Jackson's influence, impact, and legacy remain so phenomenally important to global culture that I am confident he will still be acclaimed as a great artist long after the tabloid frenzy has abated, and that his music will continue to be discovered, and enjoyed, by generations of listeners yet to come.

Table I(a): “Thriller” (album version, 1982)

Counter	Section	First line of lyrics
0	Introduction (groove starts at 0.21)	–
0.59	Verse 1	It’s close to midnight and something evil’s lurking in the dark
1.29	Chorus 1	’Cause this is thriller, thriller night
1.55	Verse 2	You hear the door slam and realize there’s nowhere left to run
2.26	Chorus 2	’Cause this is thriller, thriller night
2.45	Bridge	Night creatures call and the dead start to walk in their masquerade
3.06	Verse 3	They’re out to get you, there’s demons closing in on every side
3.37 3.57	Chorus 3 (repeats)	That this is thriller, thriller night ’Cause this is thriller, thriller night
4.24 5.14	Spoken voice section	Darkness falls across the land The foulest stench is in the air
5.57	End	–

Table I(b): “Thriller” (music video version, 1983)

Counter (from DVD)	Section	First line of lyrics
52.43	Introduction (groove under dialogue)	–
53.13	Verse 1	It’s close to midnight and something evil’s lurking in the dark
53.46	Verse 2	You hear the door slam and realize there’s nowhere left to run
54.19	Verse 3	They’re out to get you, there’s demons closing in on every side
55.02 56.02	Spoken voice section	Darkness falls across the land The foulest stench is in the air
56.32	Music stops	[“scary music” by Elmer Bernstein takes over]
56.58	Music restarts	[extended instrumental]
58.11 58.28 58.47	Chorus (repeats) (repeats)	’Cause this is thriller, thriller night Thriller, thriller night Thriller, thriller night
59.22	Groove fades out	[Bernstein’s “scary music” again takes over]

Table II: "Black or White" (structure of the video as articulated by the music)

Counter (from DVD)	**Sequence**	**Description**	**Corresponding Music**
17.50	The opening father-son dialogue	The camera descends from the sky through the clouds to reach a house; inside, a child (Macaulay Culkin) is listening to heavy metal music and his father (George Wendt) tells him to turn it off; as payback, the child blasts his father through the roof with his over-amplified guitar	Generic heavy metal music (also heard as the introduction to the song on the album), ending at 18.44 to enable the dialogue to take place
19.38	The sequence presenting different global cultures	Depicts people from five different global cultures (with whom Jackson dances in turn): Africa (19.38), South-East Asia (20.28), Native America (20.53), India (with a Westernized urban backdrop) (21.16), and Russia (21.38); ends (22.02) with a shot of two babies sitting astride the world	Introduction (African scene); verse 1 (South-East Asian scene); instrumental (Native American scene); verse 2 (Indian scene); second instrumental (Russian scene)
22.11	The "background of flames" scene	Jackson performs in front of backdrops depicting violence and race hate (flames predominant in backdrops)	Bridge
22.27	The kids' street gang	Macaulay Culkin (as the leader of the gang) lip-synchs the rap performed by guest artist L.B.T.	Rap section
22.46	Jackson dancing in the Statue of Liberty's torch	Jackson sings and dances inside the Statue's torch, ending with the camera panning out to reveal other global landmarks too	Verse 3
23.18	The sequence of morphing heads	Different models lip-synch the song's refrain in turn, their heads morphing into one another; ends with a cameo by director John Landis as he calls out "cut"	Coda
c.24.12	The so-called "panther" ending (frequently cut for its controversial content)	The camera follows the panther outside (24.25) and it morphs into Jackson; Jackson dances solo in the deserted street before starting to smash some windows (c.26.30), interspersed with his dancing, transforming back into the panther to end; a clip of *The Simpsons* follows (28.39)	None (groove of "Black or White" music restarts at 28.39)
28.50	End		

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