

The Case of Michael Jackson

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ABSTRACT

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This is a study of Michael Jackson as a self and cultural construct over the last 20 years. Michael Jackson is one of the most eminent cultural phenomena of our time, with a mass, global reach. The play within his artistic productions (which include his performances, films, and body) between more conventional modes of imagery, such as the religious, mythic, supernatural, and totalitarian, and the postmodern use of the breaking down of traditional binary oppositions, and the fact that these have all been consumed and mediated through the mass media of film and television, expose the hyperreality which marks the postmodern universe. We see how his productions as an artist are inseparable from his consumption as an image, the dissolving of this type of boundary and the ensuing game that is played out because of it being one of the primary tenets of postmodern theory.

For a theoretical approach the study will use the literature of science fiction, especially cyberpunk, and postmodern theory, which both speak to the question of what happens to art, the concept of self, and the quest for transcendence in a world in which the boundaries between the public/ private, natural/cultural, organic/ inorganic, real/ imaginary have collapsed and reality itself has moved into the realm of the simulacrum.

This work is an exploration of the continuing mass fascination with The Case of Michael Jackson, and the implications that it has in terms of definition of self (also the possibilities of freedom and transcendence associated with the self), as well as our present cultural condition, and the relationship that is being played out between them. Prior work in this area has addressed these issues both fictionally and critically; the study will apply them to a “real world” model, precisely to show the implosion of theory, fiction, and the real. Prior works related to Michael Jackson have focused on his use of science fiction conventions, and how he himself can be read as a science fiction border text. This study will take these studies further and suggest that Michael Jackson is not only a science fiction author and text, but is playing a game in simulation, and how he embodies *the future in the present moment* as science fiction itself seeks to do.

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“It was a bright cold day in April, and the
clocks were striking thirteen.”
George Orwell, *1984* (1949)

“The sky above the port was the
color of television, tuned to a dead channel.”
William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (1984)

“You close your eyes
and hope that this is just imagination”
Michael Jackson, *Thriller* (1984)

The stark, discordant note struck by the first line of George Orwell’s classic dystopian vision of the future continues through the novel’s unfolding of a world in which human instincts and the desire for freedom are sublimated and ultimately erased. It is a world in which the state exercises total control over the citizens, power residing in the form of Big Brother, the looming figure who is always WATCHING YOU. It is a world in which every person is constantly in view of the telescreen, through which he can be heard and observed, and through which information/propaganda is disseminated. The telescreen cannot be avoided, cannot be shut off. This vision uncannily anticipated the future ghost of the concerns of cyberpunk literature, arguably first and best articulated in William Gibson’s 1984 novel, *Neuromancer*. However, this novel’s opening sentence situates us in a world in which the screen is no longer simply an external presence that exerts control and maintains power for a political end. In 1984 the future was a place in which the physical world itself is described through the discourse of technology and media, “the sky the color of television.” And it is precisely this type of blurred distinction, between what seemed to be the irrefutable opposition of the natural and the technological, that drives postmodern theory. While Orwell saw in the future the power of the media to control our thoughts, as well our own inability to escape it, his work could not have anticipated “the confusion of the medium and the message [which] is the first great formula of this new era,” as Jean Baudrillard describes in *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981). In his influential collection of speculations on postmodern culture, Baudrillard goes on to say, “The eye of TV is no longer the source of the absolute

gaze...There is no longer any imperative of submission to the model, or to the gaze 'YOU are the model!'...Such is the watershed of a hyperreal sociality" (29).

The task of dealing with such a conceptualization of culture, according to postmodern theorist Frederic Jameson, created a need for "radically new forms" of art (qtd. in McCaffery 16). It seems that cyberpunk literature was an evolving answer to this call. Quoting Jameson, Scott Bukatman says, "cyberpunk is, 'henceforth, for many of us, the supreme *literary* expression if not of postmodernism, then of late capitalism itself.' Such a comment reveals a salient truth: science fiction has, in many ways, prefigured the dominant issues of postmodern culture" (6). With this realization of intersection of postmodern theory and the literature of science fiction then, a new and exciting realm of discourse seemed to be opening up. There was the beginning of a dialogue that spoke to what it meant to be human, what was to become of human *being*, in a hyperreal world of simulation, where the once imaginary possibilities of the fusion of man and machine, global electronic communication, and multinational capitalism were "real" and the real itself was becoming increasingly hallucinatory. And in the very moments this discussion was being born, questioning the place of man in the face of a world dominated by global mass media and television, there was one man's face that dominated that very medium, so much so that he would become synonymous with it, captivating mass audiences on a truly global scale, and continuing to do so through the next 20 years.

It was and is Michael Jackson, and 1984, according to Greil Marcus was "the year of Michael Jackson" (105). Michael Jackson had of course been known to audiences since the late 1970s as the child prodigy and driving talent behind the Jackson 5, the wildly popular musical group made up of Michael and his four older brothers. His popularity surged as he began his solo career in 1979, yet it was with the release of the album *Thriller* in 1984 and the ensuing fascination that accompanied it that signaled that there was something else going on, something heretofore unprecedented. As Marcus notes, it was at this time that Michael Jackson became an image, and began to be consumed as an image. Yes, he had previously won us through television appearances, and had already become animated in the Jackson 5 Cartoon. But "then *Thriller* became an image...neither the form nor content remained tied to the record itself...*Thriller* reinforced its own reality principle" (Marcus 105-6). It was then that I believe the game

began, the game that I am going to call The Case of Michael Jackson. A game starting with pyrotechnic explosions and implicating a huge implosion, that of fiction, theory, and the world of experience.

Here an understanding of the importance of the image is crucial. Based largely on the linguistic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure, the postmodern conception of the image is that of a sign without a real world referent; it is a sign that refers always back to itself, devoid of meaning. According to Baudrillard, "Such would be the successive phases of the image:

it is the reflection of a profound reality;
it masks and denatures a profound reality;
it masks the absence of a profound reality;
it has no relation to reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum" (6).

From this formulation of the precession of the image, it is not difficult to see that television and mass media are prime sites of simulation, as well as being its primary arbiters. Through these media there is a total saturation of images that refer only to themselves or to other images. And as the traditional relationship of sign to signified is destroyed, so is the very notion of causality. What we have then is an "implosion of meaning." That, in Baudrillard's terms "*is where simulation begins*" (31). We have moved away from Orwell's telescreen as the medium with its inescapable message into the world of television where we are faced with "power as seduction, not (primarily) power as coercion," as Arthur Kroker and David Cook suggest in "Television and the Triumph of Culture" (232). The difference between the words *telescreen* and *television* is illuminating here. The *telescreen* is flat, a two-way mirror. *Television* implies a totality, 360 degrees. No longer a mirror of reality, to watch television is to enter a complete, simulated reality where nothing is being communicated and nothing means.

What then becomes of the audience? Where are we when the distance between the screen and the viewer has collapsed? In *Neuromancer*, our protagonist is Case, a "console cowboy" who prefers to spend his time "jacked into a custom cyberspace deck that projected his disembodied consciousness into the consensual hallucination that was the matrix" (5). The matrix, or cyberspace, is "a graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines

of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data” (51). In the novel cyberspace is the place where the action or “dance of biz” occurs, where a cranial jack allows one to enter into a visual, virtual representation of information. Actions in cyberspace of course have effects in the real world, and the real world simultaneously changes the shape of cyberspace: an appropriate metaphor for the “real world” nonspace of television. Compare participation in the matrix to Kroker and Cook’s description of the television audience that “may be, today, the most pervasive type of social community... electronically composed, rhetorically constituted” (233). At this point the circuit of hyperreality becomes doubly apparent. On the one hand there is the dissolved boundary of television and television audience. On the other is the conflation of a mode of literature and theory. As Bukatman notes in his analysis of *The Ecstasy of Communication*, “Baudrillard becomes a science fiction writer” (83). This circularity is intrinsic to the existence and the concerns of cyberpunk postmodernism and as Baudrillard notes, when speaking to the question of whether it is the loss of meaning that escalates the simulacrum, or the simulacrum which leads to loss of meaning, “useless to ask which is the first term, there is none, it is a circular process—that of the simulation, that of the hyperreal. The hyperreality of communication and of meaning. More real than the real, that is how the real is abolished” (81).

With this in mind we come back to 1984, the year of *Neuromancer* and of Michael Jackson and *Thriller*, the event that “reinforced its own reality principle.” In his analysis of the media event that was Michael Jackson, Marcus quotes Guy Debord’s famous theory of the “society of the spectacle” in which he states that “reality rises up within the spectacle, and the spectacle is real” (105). This is related to the idea of simulation, but for both Debord and Marcus the spectacle or image is always a commodity, tied to the consumption of the product. Marcus says, “it was the first pop explosion not to be judged by the subjective quality of the response it provoked, but to be measured by the number of objective commercial exchanges it provoked” (109). He also makes much of Michael Jackson’s endorsement of Pepsi in a television commercial, and how “willingly” he transformed “Billie Jean,” “his most seductive record[ing],” into an advertising jingle. While true, this is a limited reading in that it assumes that the importance of the image lies in its value as a commodity. According to Marcus, “with

Thriller you could join social life simply by acknowledging it; here through the act of buying the record, you could become part of the world” (112). However as noted before, “neither the form nor content remained tied to the record itself” and therefore, neither did its impact. In the world where the image reigns, it supersedes even the logic of consumption. As Baudrillard says in *The Ecstasy of Communication*, the

“period of production and consumption gives way to the ‘protenic’ era of networks, to the narcissistic and protean era of connections, contact, contiguity, feedback, and generalized interface that goes with the universe of communication. With the television image—the television being the ultimate and perfect object for this new era—our own body and the whole surrounding universe become a control screen” (127).

The Case of Michael Jackson is so intrinsically tied to this new era that a reading of Michael Jackson as an example of the commodification of the image is incomplete. It is a reading that forgets something vital, that Michael Jackson is a self and cultural construct that has remained one of the most eminent cultural phenomena of our time with a global reach that is perhaps unparalleled by any other single human being alive today. The trajectory of his career, or life in the public eye, has spanned the move from the 20th into the 21st century. His productions as an artist are inseparable from his consumption as an image, the dissolving of this type of boundary and the ensuing game that is played out because of it being one of the primary tenets of postmodern theory. Given this, and the fact that Michael Jackson is aware of science fiction as a genre, using it in constructions of his public self, his private self, and his art, and that all of these have been consumed through the technologies and culture of television and film, it is appropriate to apply the discourse of what we can call cyberpunk postmodernism. In addition to the literature and theory of cyberpunk and postmodernism, this study will use as texts Michael Jackson’s body, films, and representation by the media, in most part his television appearances, especially the recent series of programming including the “documentary” by Martin Bashir, subsequent analyses and commentary of the documentary by the media, and Michael Jackson’s “rebuttal” of the documentary.

I would argue that the play within his artistic productions between more conventional modes of imagery, such as the religious, mythic, supernatural, and totalitarian, and the postmodern use of the breaking down of traditional binary

oppositions, and the fact that these have all been consumed through the mass media of film and television, expose the hyperreality which marks the postmodern universe; and, how any drive towards rediscovering the “real” (motivated by nostalgia perhaps) necessarily increases a hallucinatory, simulated effect. This study seeks to explore the continuing mass fascination with *The Case of Michael Jackson*, and the implications that it has in terms of definition of self (also the possibilities of freedom and transcendence associated with the self), as well as our present cultural condition, and the relationship that is being played out between them.

These issues have been addressed both fictionally and critically; I would like to apply them to a “real world” model, precisely to show the implosion of theory, fiction, and the real. Prior works related to Michael Jackson have focused on his use of science fiction conventions, and how he himself can be read as a science fiction border text. However I would like to take these studies further and suggest that Michael Jackson is not only a science fiction author and text, but is playing a game in simulation. Therefore, while they may be touched upon tangentially, the study will not focus on biographical events. As one of the primary notions of postmodernism is the death of the subject, to try and draw conclusions based on “real life” experiences would be an inappropriate and limited reading. The issue of “real life” is itself open to debate. Neither will there be in-depth close readings of song lyrics, as I am concerned primarily with the existence and consumption of Michael Jackson as an image. The study will chronologically follow major moments in *The Case of Michael Jackson* to show its evolution, and how Michael Jackson always embodies *the future in the present moment*, as science fiction itself seeks to do.

THRILLER

By the time *Thriller* came out Michael Jackson was already being termed a hero. Having risen from a working class black family to international fame, he “occupied the center of American cultural life: no other black artist had ever come close” (Marcus 108). But early on it was apparent that he was not just a hero in the sense of this American dream story, nor just in terms of record sales. In 1983 he performed at Motown Records’ 25th Anniversary, and unleashed the “moonwalk,” the dance move that would become his

signature, for the first time. Through this gliding movement in which he moves backwards while appearing to move forwards, Michael Jackson was already becoming something otherworldly, somehow not subject to the same laws of motion as the rest of us. Seeing the moonwalk was like seeing the wheels of a moving vehicle from another moving vehicle, the same as seeing the wheels of a moving vehicle on film, and knowing that somehow it was happening in “real life.” He was making the leap from hero to superhero, from star to superstar, and yet it didn’t stop there.

“Keep all heroes going long enough, and they become gods,” writes Neil Gaiman in his introduction to Alfred Bester’s 1956 science fiction classic *The Stars My Destination*. But what if we keep a hero going in a world that has since reached out to the stars, science fiction has become cyberpunk, and its concern is not the real outer space that is out there, but the hyperreal cyberspace that is in here? What if we keep the hero going in a world that has moved? Then what becomes of the hero and his transcendence to the god? What if the hero we speak of is already a superstar, an artist that has styled himself a hero/god, both using and embodying science fiction as a mode of expression? Then we’d have *The Case of Michael Jackson*, and unfolded would be an example of how a mode of literature, cyberpunk, and the theoretical mode of postmodernism have moved into the realm of experience—and how this realm itself is no longer real, but simulated.

The themes of transformation and transcendence pervade *The Case of Michael Jackson*, as they do the literature of science fiction. This is nowhere more apparent than in the music video, or as Michael Jackson prefers, short film, *Thriller*. The film opens with a car driving through dark woods, the classic horror movie setting, and as the car comes to a stop, we see Michael Jackson at the wheel with his girlfriend next to him. From their clothing we can tell the story is set in the 1950s. When the car stops, Michael explains that they have run out of gas, the girl obviously suspects that he has other intentions. The next shot shows them walking down the road; the girl is apologizing that she did not believe him. He stops and tells her that he likes her, and asks if she would “be my girl?” She replies, “Oh Michael,” and he puts his ring on her finger. After her acceptance, they embrace, and then he says, “there’s something I have to tell you...I’m not like other guys.” She answers, “That’s why I love you,” to which he insists, “No, I

mean it, I'm different." We see the clouds pass by to reveal the moon, and then Michael screams in agony. We watch him undergo a transformation, growing fangs, claws, his eyes turning yellow, until he is a full werewolf, growling at her. She is screaming, terrified, but cannot look away, and he advances towards her, the tension mounting.

Through this opening sequence we are introduced to the idea of the artist's transformation. Simply the presence of Michael Jackson in the film disallows a generic narrative reading. It is not just any transformation; he is already too well known to us as himself. His name in the "fictional" work is still Michael. So we read it as a commentary on the relationship between artist and audience. We can read the girlfriend as the audience, and Michael as himself, the artist. He wants her/our acceptance, and once he has it, decides to reveal his terrible, uncontrollable secret. And even though she has told him that she loves him for his differences, she is terrified when she sees what he becomes, or what he has inside of him. But the flipside of terror is always fascination, and so while the monster within terrifies, we cannot avert our gaze. This idea of the monster is one that is deeply imbedded in classical mythology. The monster, which is always the Other, resides outside the known world, as represented by the dark, wooded setting. However in this case, the monster is within and therefore the distinction between self and other is blurred. This problem of the uncertainty in defining the self is addressed in classic science fiction, exemplified by John W. Campbell's 1938 short story, "Who Goes There?" In this story a team of Arctic explorers has uncovered an alien that has the ability to take on any form or shape. The atmosphere becomes charged with hysteria as the team cannot be sure if a member of the team is his human self or the alien assuming human form. This short story incorporates Gothic elements such as the isolated locale, an undead villain, the anxiety and obsession with the possibility of inner demons. We see these same conventions in the opening sequence of *Thriller*, which is styled as a horror movie. Yet the self in this case must be read also as the artistic self, because of the very fact that it is Michael Jackson whom we watch undergo a metamorphosis.

Thriller, however, takes a turn that pushes the question of the possibility of anthropomorphic transformation and the anxiety of the alien other/self out even further, into the world of simulation. In the typical manner of the horror movie, we watch the monster approach the terrified young girl, as the tension increases. At the climax the

camera moves, and while we never get the satisfaction of *seeing what happens*, we realize that the narrative we were watching is in fact a film being projected in a movie theater, and seated in the audience are Michael Jackson, and his “girlfriend” Denise, the same person who portrayed his girlfriend in the movie. The two principal actors are now the spectators (but once again the principal actors), and we can tell from their clothing that we are now situated in the present day. Denise is scared and wants to leave. Michael, enraptured by the movie, says, “I’m enjoying this.” When she gets up and leaves, he reluctantly follows her. Standing outside in front of the theater we see that the name of the movie they were watching is also *Thriller*, billed in big neon lights. It is at this point that *Thriller* the song begins, and Michael Jackson is now the performer we know him to be, within the narrative of the film. He and Denise walk through an isolated, desolate environment that is an updated, urban version of the dark woods in the movie, as he sings the lyrics and dances around her. Slowly, the atmosphere turns sinister and we see figures rising up out of tombs in a cemetery moving in a choreographed dance, until they surround Michael and Denise.

Once again, as danger closes in, at the moment of highest tension, there is a flip. Denise looks at Michael to discover that he too is one of the undead. He joins them as leader of their dance. During the dance sequence, Denise is not part of the frame, and Michael goes back to “normal” while continuing to lead the ghouls’ dance. This fluid movement from supernatural being to “himself” and then back to supernatural being collapses the boundaries between the two, that by this point in the film had already been shaken up. Previously however, the difference was between the Michael on the screen of the horror movie *Thriller* and the Michael in the audience. Now there is a further implosion: that of Michael the leader of the ghouls and Michael Jackson the singer/dancer. And once more, as the unearthly creatures, led by Michael, close in around Denise, there is a reversal and the “normal” Michael is shaking her awake; it was all a dream. But even this resolution is problematic. What was *all* a dream? Did the dream include only the segment in which Michael becomes one the undead? Was going to the movies also a dream? Was the movie a dream? And as we ask ourselves these questions, a smiling, innocent Michael leads a relieved Denise out of the house, now bright and daylit, then turns and smiles at us, with the yellow eyes of Michael the werewolf. It is

important to note that he does not have the face of Michael the ghoul here, but the eyes of the creature that we were shown on the screen. We, the audience of *Thriller*, now know that the Michael on the screen in the film cannot be separated from the Michael in the film. And what took place on that screen could have all been part of a dream. The levels of fantasy and reality become indiscernible, through the medium of film both within the entire production and the production itself. And if this weren't enough, *Thriller* ends with the disclaimer that "all characters and events in this film are fictitious." So, all of the Michaels in the film are fictitious, *Thriller* is fictitious? On some level, all of this is true; it adds another layer to the game. It's interesting that Michael was laughing first while watching the horror movie, though the rest of the audience was scared, and at the film's end, when he turns and lets us in on the "secret" that he is "really" the werewolf.

He was already the hero and the villain of the story, but never a villain that caused harm. He was already the familiar self and the monstrous other. He was already Michael Jackson the artist. Within the film the series of transformations is always related to the possibility of escape. Each time it seems that danger is closing in, there is a transformation, from reality to fiction, from human to supernatural being and back again, and the threat is removed. In this way it seems that *Thriller* posits the ability to transform as a means of escape and freedom. However it is not only transformation, but also evasion. Each time we were prepared to see an action that would allow us to define Michael, he becomes another Michael, all and none of which we can call "himself." And so in this sense the ability to transform is a means to freedom, and it is the same as the ability to elude definition.

It becomes apparent that within the film and because of it, our ability to define anything is being destroyed. But rather than a violent destruction, it is a playful and seductive one. In *Thriller's* lyrics, Michael Jackson sings, "I'll save you from the terror on the screen/ I'll make you see." On one level he seems to be telling us that he will be our liberator, our savior. But isn't *he* the terror on the screen? And both the screen and what we will see are unstable and ultimately unknowable. The two meanings of "see" play together here in the way that the use of the screen also plays. "I'll make you see" in a traditional, prophetic sense implies a truth that will be revealed. However it also functions as "I will make you look." While the film's metaphor may contain the idea that

transformation offers the chance of freedom and transcendence, the metaphor is contained within the screen and its intrinsic circularity, which is the site of a world beyond metaphor, beyond meaning. And really, no matter what meanings exist, what conventions are used to tell the story, the one thing that is certain is that we will look. In a hyperreality, it is the only way we have any contact. Of this phenomenon Baudrillard says that since the boundaries between public/private, real/imaginary selves have dissolved, there is no more alienation, no more Other of the type the monster of *Thriller* tries to represent. “At bottom the message already no longer exists; it is the medium that imposes itself in pure circulation. That is what I call (potentially) ecstasy... all functions abolished in a single dimension, that of communication. That’s the ecstasy of communication” (*Ecstasy* 131). This is not to say that *Thriller* is merely a failed attempt at representation, but that it operates in a space that is the dissolution of the dimensions of reality and fiction with an awareness of this space, while in some ways still holding to the metaphor of transformation and the monstrous self/other.

The Circus: Ring One

If *Thriller* defined Michael Jackson as an image, it also defined the form of the music video itself. In his dissertation “Music Videos and Television Commercials,” Peter Gershon says, “although MTV made its debut in 1981, music videos did not appear to become anchored into the American television landscape until approximately 1984-1985” (18). While obviously many factors contributed to this, we can see how the history of Michael Jackson and the history of television are completely intertwined. *Thriller* has often been cited as perhaps the most influential music video, instrumental to defining the genre. Further, Gershon argues that the distinctive MTV production style had a major impact on all types of productions including prime time entertainment, mainstream films, and especially advertising (21). And so he becomes diffuse in the television medium, making it apparent that Michael Jackson influenced the way we watch TV as TV itself influenced how we consumed the image of Michael Jackson. In “The Celebrity Freak: Michael Jackson’s Grotesque Glory” David Yuan says,

“ Jackson’s art exists in the combination of his hyperkinetic, explosive yet subtle dance ‘moves’ with the lyrics and music of his songs; this is why Jackson has

always insisted that his videos are the real measure of his achievements. Jackson is doing something more encompassing than ‘dancing.’ Not just specific dance steps, but every gesture, every facial expression, and every detail of his costume signify during [his] best performances...” (372). This is enlightening, because it also speaks to the fact that his performances include all the instances he has appeared, not just those we would traditionally label his artistic productions. And this performance is one that has been evolving and ongoing throughout his solo career, experienced by us through the media.

The term “media circus” is one that we often hear, but it takes on special significance in *The Case of Michael Jackson*. Early on in his career, he “gave his manager a copy of a book about P.T. Barnum’s ‘theories and philosophies’ telling him ‘this is going to be my bible and I want it to be yours’ and add[ed], ‘I want my whole career to be the greatest show on earth’ ” (Yuan 372). His embracing of Barnum’s notion that “any publicity is good publicity” and the rumors he leaked to the media about himself seemed to put him in the role of ringmaster, orchestrating a grand performance full of “fun, fantasy, catastrophe, confusion.” This last is the dictum adopted by Gully in *The Stars My Destination*. Gully creates the Four Mile Circus, a traveling extravaganza, as a disguise for his own objectives (which eventually lead to his transcendence and role as a messiah). The use of a circus as a means of disguise is recurrent theme in science fiction, central as well to Bruce Sterling’s cyberpunk classic, *Schismatrix*. In this novel, the hero Abelard Lindsay also creates a circus so that he can move freely. In describing the plan he says, “you will spread rumors about me: my charm, my brilliance, my hidden resources...and establish a free-wheeling, free-spending atmosphere of carefree hedonism. It will be a huge confidence trick that will bamboozle the entire world” (34). These same ideas operate in the “real world” of Michael Jackson; this excerpt could have been something he himself said. For his project also, the ability to move is crucial. “He must always be moving, evolving, transforming himself...in the world of pop entertainment, stasis means a weakening of one’s grip on the public” (Yuan 371). And in the world of simulation the grip is maintained as long as the power to appear is maintained.

And so we have the media frenzy over the rumors surrounding Michael Jackson, which according to Yuan, he himself initiated. Most famous perhaps is the one that he

slept in a hyperbaric chamber (a photo of him in this chamber was published in the press) in order to stop the aging process, a hoax with a distinctly science fictional character. However, this itself initiated a media that took this and started its own circuit of references to Michael Jackson as an alien, or wedding an alien, references that went out beyond his control, but were necessarily always referring to him, or his image. In his article “Cyberpunk and Neuromanticism” Ivan Csicsery-Ronay correctly identifies Michael Jackson as a “hyperreal icon of the human simulacrum infiltrating reality” (185). But it goes beyond this. His productions, which exist in the circuit of hyperreality, use the signs of reality and simulation within them, exposing the absence of a reality to be infiltrated. In this game of simulation, Michael Jackson both resembles science fiction motifs and employs them in the construction of his image.

What makes this even more interesting is that he concurrently employed the motifs of history and of myth, the foundations of human culture. At the end of a performance, he would stand in the form of the cross, eyes closed. The obvious invocation of Christ, the great martyr, threw crowds into religious-like ecstasies. And I do mean *crowds*. During this time, the mass hysteria and response of the public to Michael Jackson was utterly astounding. While Beatlemania definitely lent precedence to The Case of Michael Jackson, his global impact was completely unprecedented. Of course we point to television and film as the arbiters of this phenomenon, and they of course point right back to Michael Jackson. There were a plethora of symbols that came to be associated with him as well. One silver sequined glove, silver socks, sunglasses: the mere sight of any of these had immediate recognition and immediate response. And yet these are not symbols in the sense that they are deeply imbedded in a collective unconscious. They are manufactured symbols that do not refer to something outside of themselves, to a deeper idea. They always refer back to their creator, Michael Jackson. The cross is the symbol that one meditates on in order to come to an understanding of Christ. However, in The Case of Michael Jackson he is both the cross (the symbol) and Christ (the idea).

MOONWALKER

In *Simulation and Simulacra* Baudrillard addresses the role of nostalgia when reality has given way to hyperreality in the following terms, “When the real is no longer what it was, nostalgia assumes full meaning. There is a plethora of myths of origin and of signs of reality—a plethora of truth, of secondary objectivity, and authenticity” (6). This drive towards rediscovering the real, of reinfusing hyperreality with reality, is a constant presence in *The Case of Michael Jackson*, one of the most salient examples being the 40 minute short film, *Smooth Criminal*. This film is part of the larger work, *Moonwalker*, released in 1988, which begins with a “multi-image live performance spectacle,” then moves into a “retrospective of 24 years of hits,” and includes three music videos, *Badder*, *Speed Demon*, and *Leave Me Alone*, before arriving at *Smooth Criminal*, described as “the centerpiece of the entire film.” A complete reading of *Smooth Criminal* necessarily includes not only this film, but also its inclusion within *Moonwalker* as whole. This reading reveals the desire to create a referential world in which Michael Jackson exists as a reality, as well as how this world is contained in the circuit of hyperreality.

Before we get to *Smooth Criminal*, a fiction created by Michael Jackson the artist, the film takes us through the creation of Michael Jackson the superhero, and Michael Jackson the superstar. And once again the distinction between lived experience and fiction is annihilated. With *Thriller*, this boundary was challenged within the fiction itself by the use of a film within a film, and the fluid movement of Michael Jackson between the two. In *Moonwalker* however, the real (live footage/performances) and the imaginary (films) exist in separate modes and points in time, and yet they are inseparable: imploded. *Moonwalker* opens with the words “the magic begins” as if to set up the founding of the myth, and yet right away we realize this not going to be an ordinary myth; the magic begins with a performance that is a Pepsi commercial. Because the commercial is in fact a “real” performance, and the song is a “real” song from the album *Bad*, with altered lyrics, there is no distinguishable difference between this performance and any that follow. While the film goes on to show us Michael the messianic figure, the superstar, the artist, what we can read is that his is always the myth of the image. It is after the commercial that “*Moonwalker* proper” begins. We first see the spotlight, the

stage, the black shoes, and those magical socks: all of the symbols that we understand and associate with Michael Jackson. However, as was discussed before, these are not symbols in the traditional sense that resonate in some primal collective unconscious with real world referents; they are symbols created by Michael Jackson himself, which always refer back to himself. They are symbols that have been produced in lieu of a subconscious that no longer exists, but to a mass extent. And then the title *Moonwalker* (reiterating of course his supernatural being) appears superimposed over a massive concert crowd illuminated by the orange glow of lighters, which call to mind devotees with candles, creating an unmistakably religious aura. This gives way to a montage of footage in which Michael Jackson is performing, mobs of people are fainting, screaming, dancing, crying, and convulsing in uncontrollable religious-like ecstasies. We see Michael Jackson alone on stage in front of a literal sea of people, thousands and thousands of faces; sometimes there are aerial shots that show the unprecedented magnitude of the crowd, at other times close-ups on individual faces contorted with emotion.

This performance footage is interspersed with images of real world figures including Mother Teresa, Mahatma Gandhi, Jimmy Carter, Robert Kennedy, starving children in Africa, and events such as Martin Luther Jr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech, the bombing of Hiroshima, and marches at Chernobyl; all of this is set to the soundtrack of Michael Jackson's voice. The images of Michael Jackson and his performances become conflated with these images, thereby situating him among the great events and personalities of history. There are a series of clips in which the screen is broken into a grid and images of Michael dance alongside those of John Lennon, of the civil rights marches of the 1960s, as if to say the history of Michael Jackson is not separate from the history of the world. He is right there with us through it all. The montage ends with Michael Jackson alone on stage standing in the figure of the cross, with a blue light behind him that seems to emanate from him, his features first held in the expression of a Christ-like martyr, then finally dissolved by the light he radiates.

Given Michael Jackson's use of mythological and science fiction conventions in his artistic productions, it is appropriate to examine the creation of himself as a superhero through the lens of a classic science fiction work. Central to ancient religions and

mythologies and *The Case of Michael Jackson*, the idea of making the transformation from human to superhuman is also crucial to Bester's breakthrough science fiction novel, *The Stars My Destination*. The hero, Gully Foyle, starts as a common, uneducated brute. Through technological enhancement, a warping of space and time, and a newly discovered love of humanity, he experiences divine revelation. The novel ends with Gully as a messiah figure; the revelation he will offer the masses is the knowledge of space-jaunting, or the ability to transport oneself across previously unconquerable distances in space and time. Michael Jackson's role as a messiah is painted in similar terms but through the medium of film. We see his deep love for the masses, as he sings to them, entertains them, enraptures them, telling them that they have the power to change the world inside of them. The film montage is set to the lyrics of "Man in the Mirror" and Michael Jackson sings, "If you wanna make the world a better place/ take a look at yourself and then make a change...you know it/ you know/ you know." Compare this to Gully's cry to the people of the world, "You got the most in you, and you use the least...Got a heart in you and feel empties. All a you. Every you" (255). The interesting thing is that the fictional Gully, though his world is one far in the future, must jaunt with his physical body to different cities around the world to reach the people. Michael Jackson of course, can warp space by addressing the global audience of television and film. And he is able to warp temporal boundaries as well, for whenever one watches the film, they watch it in the present moment. As many theorists have noted, through the medium of television and film time is collapsed into an eternal present. And even if you did not live the experience, you can live it in whichever now you please. And so while Gully's gift to the masses was this ability to space jaunte, Michael Jackson allows them to do this through his use of the technologies of television and film: the fusion of the message and the medium.

So, through the conflation of the symbols of Michael Jackson and the symbols of peace and history at the beginning of the film, the historical and messianic presence of Michael Jackson is established. However, Michael Jackson's presence is always part of a performance, it speaks to his greatness as a performer. As such the conflation of performance and history does not only show his desire to place himself within history; it shows the fictive aspect that is the present conception of history itself. It is a history of

clips, a history of editing, a history with a soundtrack, made more real on film than it was while it was happening. If this sequence establishes Michael Jackson the martyr, the man that stands alone on the stage and the stage of history for all of us, if it shows us Michael Jackson the superhero, the following sequence can be read as the creation story of Michael Jackson, superstar.

As the sequence begins we hear various voice-overs of media coverage related to famous episodes in Michael Jackson's life: the announcement that the Jackson 5 would be performing on *The Ed Sullivan* show; the news that *Thriller* had just broken records for the most sales; the rumor that he was building a shrine to Elizabeth Taylor; Ronald Reagan's address in which he says, "your success is an American dream come true." During these voice-overs the camera pans over a dressing table covered in Michael Jackson symbols and memorabilia: his silver glove, sequined hat, sunglasses, various awards, a microphone, make-up, baby photos, photos of the Jackson 5, photos whose images are changing within their frames. This last suggests that while all of this may be history, contained within a frame, it is a living and evolving history. We finally come to a television on which is a montage of performance footage, clips of music videos, and behind-the-scenes shots of the making of these videos. Of course they are no longer behind the scenes, but part of the greater transparency that suggests that we are being let in on the "real" story. Yet these glimpses of reality are indiscernible from both the videos and performances; the clips on the screen move rapidly and fluidly through them. The screen then shows images of Michael Jackson leading marching soldiers, an image we had seen in the first sequence. This time the image is shown on the screen, then zooms in to fill our entire screen (without the frame of the television on film), then zooms back out so that we see the image framed within a screen once more.

This television is then catapulted out into space and hangs among the stars. Going back to the comparison with Gully, we see Michael Jackson reach the stars through the medium of television. From here we see piano keys stretched out in space, with cardboard cut-out figures of the Jackson 5 dancing on them. The message seems to be one of the possibility of reaching the stars through music and dance. And yet the television was in effect the spaceship that took them there. The Jackson 5 are next depicted as claymation figures—always as images, in different forms. Then we are back

to the television screen, this time floating against the backdrop of ever-changing epic clouds. On the screen is the Jackson 5, with extended close-ups of a 10-year old Michael Jackson, in the famous *Ed Sullivan Show* appearance. This focus on the years of the Jackson 5 serves to fulfill our nostalgic longing for the past, for the cute young boy whom we all loved, the gifted child prodigy that sang love ballads. It also serves to create a sort of myth of origin for the superstar status Michael Jackson was to achieve/ create. Those performances were our introduction to him, they marked the conception of the Michael Jackson in our view. Also, for those who were not there, the myth is preserved, handed down, and the present is validated. And further, it confronts us once more with our own inability to define which Michael Jackson we are talking about. They all exist, simultaneously—because of and despite time. Look! They are all right here, right now. In this way there is even nostalgia for the present, as it recedes on film.

The next image is a robot moving mechanically in time to the music. As the camera pulls back we see another performance of the Jackson 5 being played on a television screen and the robot dancing on the film reel as it plays. The robot and Michael Jackson are doing the same dance moves, but we are watching the robot “live” and Michael Jackson on the screen. We also see the robot’s dance before we see Michael Jackson’s robotic dance. The relationship of technology to the human body is crucial to an understanding of The Case of Michael Jackson, and one that will be discussed in further detail later. It is interesting however to note here Donna Haraway’s conception of the cyborg. In her influential essay “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century” (1985) Haraway defines the cyborg as “a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as social fiction” (696). While this will gain saliency further on in this study, the juxtaposition of the dancers, man and robot, is an important step in the association of Michael Jackson’s body with that of a machine, and the suggestion of the cyborg that begins to challenge the distinction between nature and technology, thereby calling into question (on yet another level) the nature of the self.

Two more important elements in this sequence that establish Michael Jackson the superstar are a segment from the music video *Human Nature* and the enhancement of live performances. In the video the environment and the figure of Michael Jackson are drawn

in a shifting, vague style with apparent brush strokes and vivid colors. While the background remains depicted in this manner, Michael Jackson becomes increasingly clearly defined, until he is photorealistic, standing posed in the foreground as if for the camera against the still moving backdrop. While this points to his reality in a fictitious world, it also points to a hyperreal existence, one that is only an image and not at all related to the world in which it is situated. We then see an old fashioned 1950s jukebox with a screen on it. On the screen are various interspliced performances of “Billie Jean,” one of the Michael Jackson classics. There is a double nostalgia here: the one evoked by the jukebox for a bygone era in which music was something that was listened to on records (which cannot be copied and are therefore not subject to the fate of the image), the other for the earlier days of Michael Jackson when it all started, when it was new. But there is no difference between them. Both imply a loss and a desire to regain something lost. It is not necessarily nostalgia for anything, but simply nostalgia. And then within this, on the screen the film has been altered so that a trail of sparks follows each of Michael Jackson’s movements. So the nostalgia is for something that perhaps never existed in its own present and yet the past has been infused with a magical quality that makes us feel its loss even more greatly, while exposing this present as a simulation.

The sequence winds up with a heady, rapid collage of all of the media accolades and attention received by Michael Jackson. Drawn images of the magazine covers he appeared on, newspaper articles about him, and awards he won pile on top of each other; his own image is depicted as a photo cut-out from a magazine or newspaper. The voice over is a montage of announcements of his being the winner of award after award, voices full of praise and excitement. This is followed by another rapid assemblage of music videos and live performance footage. Here we have it: the instrumental role of the media in the construction of Michael Jackson, Superstar. Within his film, there is a reiteration and a redrawing of the “real” images that sold millions of magazines, millions of newspapers, of awards shows broadcast into millions of homes. This reproduction of his image through the media is inexorable from and perhaps as important as his music videos and concert performances. The play between these representations and re-representations are what help solidify and realize his superstardom: a simultaneous fulfillment and creation of nostalgia, and a persistent, multiple, and indefinable image.

Following the “multi-image live performance spectacle” and the “retrospective of 24 years of hits” which establish Michael Jackson as historical figure, prophet, and superstar, are three music videos that precede *Smooth Criminal*, the “centerpiece” of *Moonwalker*. A brief discussion of these videos, *Badder*, *Speed Demon*, and *Leave Me Alone*, is useful here in a further analysis of Michael Jackson’s artistic productions within the context of the world of simulation in which they operate. *Badder* begins as if it is Michael Jackson’s video *Bad*. The camera slowly moves down the length of his body, until reaching his shoes, where it hesitates for a moment. When the camera travels upwards again, we realize that it is a young boy dressed in the same outfit Michael Jackson was wearing. In fact, all of the adult characters from the original *Bad* video are replaced by children wearing the same clothes, doing the same dance moves, replicating even the facial expressions and gestures of their adult counterparts. One little girl, who is playing a character that was originally male in *Bad* even has stubble painted onto her face. It is undoubtedly playful, yet there is more than simple replacement at work here.

The video does not try to hide its simulated nature. The lyrics are still sung by Michael Jackson; the children are lip-synching. We even see Michael Jackson in the film, through his clothing, dance moves, and gestures; the fact that it is actually the body of a child and not his seems immaterial. At this point he, “himself” does not even need to be there, questioning the very idea of self. Is it something that can be copied through reproduction of external elements? Where is Michael Jackson in *Badder*? On one level the video suggests that anyone can be Michael Jackson, it is an inspiration for children especially: you too can be this hero. On another level it plays with the idea of art and the artist. Is the same effect created by this video? Perhaps because of the complete saturation of images, if the medium remains the same the message remains the same. We will watch the same Michael Jackson video, sing and dance along to it whether he “himself” is there or not. What is interesting, however, is that *Bad* is not included in *Moonwalker* at all. There is the brief shot at the beginning that sets up the expectation that we will be watching Michael Jackson in *Bad*, and while this expectation is upset nothing else is different; we experience them in the same way. So while *Badder* refers to something that is outside of it, and outside of the larger work *Moonwalker*, it is in effect a reference to itself, a simulation. *Badder* exists because of *Bad*; we understand the one

because the other exists. And both refer back, as always, to Michael Jackson. Through the interplay of the ideas that anyone can be Michael Jackson, and that he himself is an unstable concept, Michael Jackson seems to say with a wink, you may not know who I am or where I am, but you know me when you see me, in whatever form I appear.

The next video, *Speed Demon*, plays with not only what form Michael Jackson takes, but the forms that his fans, spectators, and the media take on as well. It is a continuation of *Badder*, in which the “little Michael Jackson” walks away with his entourage (out of the studio they were evidently in), who of course address him as Michael. As they walk into a cloud of smoke, it is the adult, or “real” Michael Jackson who emerges with his adult entourage. There is a studio tour in progress, yet the people on the trolley are claymation figures with exaggerated features. Michael Jackson is the most real person we see. When the tourists see him, their benign expressions become crazed, carnivorous, and they start to chase him. As he takes off, Michael Jackson’s expression is not one of disgust or fear, but a huge smile that seems to say, “let the games begin!” And they do. Running from the crazy fans and paparazzi, he ducks into the wardrobe room, of course not before a model of the Statue of Liberty observes the fans and comments, “America: land of the free, home of the weird.” The paparazzi are reminiscent of a military unit, their cameras and film like machine guns and ammunition.

We now return to the recurring theme of transformation. In the wardrobe room Michael Jackson picks out a costume, but when he emerges he is not simply wearing it, he *is* the costume, now the claymation figure of a rabbit in an old-fashioned aviator outfit. We have moved beyond the mask as disguise; the costume here is as real as the self. Of course he is not recognized in this new form, but before taking off, he cannot help but continue the game. He taunts his pursuers by firing off the distinctive dance moves, by which they recognize him. The reality of Michael Jackson, then, is not in his form but in the essence of his movement. And this reality is both offset and reinforced by the preceding *Badder*. In that case it was also the moves that made Michael Jackson, but it was also obvious that it was not “really” Michael Jackson moving. On recognizing him, the crowd begins their pursuit once again. While the ability to transform allows an escape, it is also contingent upon the continuation of the chase. As the pursuit ensues, the song “Speed Demon” begins, and we are rushed through a vivid, neon cityscape.

Michael Jackson's bicycle becomes a motorcycle, a jetski; he grows a rocket-powered jetpack and sails over clouds, landing once again on his motorcycle, finally outrunning his pursuers as the police stop them, and riding out of the city into the canyons.

This movement from the studio lot to the intense speeded-up urban world and into the desert embodies the aesthetics, tropes, and concerns of cyberpunk postmodernism, as can be seen in Larry McCaffery's introduction to his collection of fiction and non-fiction works, *Storming the Reality Studio: A Casebook of Cyberpunk and Postmodern Science Fiction*. This collection seeks to explore "the way in which cyberpunk and other innovative forms of SF are functioning within the broader realm of postmodern culture generally" (2). The book is prefaced with an excerpt from William S. Burroughs' *Nova Express*: "Storm The Reality Studio. And retake the universe." This idea of the reality studio encapsulates the idea of hyperreality: reality itself is something that is composed of sets and facades, ultimately to be experienced as an image. This is exactly where the beginning of *Speed Demon* situates the viewer. We are at the studio with the "real" Michael Jackson, and of course the "real" tourists are cartoon characters. The real Michael dons a costume and of course becomes a cartoon himself. Reality here is limited only by what can be imagined; the studio is real. And when we leave the studio, or rather as our hero (on a bike) is chased out of it, we are rushed through the type of urban world that is the premiere site of cyberpunk fiction. Compare the city Michael Jackson (as rabbit-aviator of course) zips through to William Gibson's descriptions of Night City in *Neuromancer*: a "neon shudder" (15) replete with criminals, everyone "swarming the street in an intricate dance of desire" (11). This type of location is often the site of cyberpunk works because of the extreme sensory overload and density, the extreme expression of a capitalist technoculture. And the bike is of course the vehicle of choice, allowing one to move agilely and freely through the twists and turns of the city's grid; this is exemplified by the bike messenger Chevette Washington in Gibson's *Virtual Light*.

Sometimes, when she rode hard, when she could really proj, Chevette got free of everything: the city, her body, even time. That was the messenger's high...though it felt like freedom, it was really the melding-with, the clicking-in, that did it. The bike between her legs was like some hyper-evolved alien tail she'd somehow extruded..." (131).

The bike in *Speed Demon* is of course Michael Jackson's agent of liberation; he is able to escape those that were pursuing him, and rides alone into the desert, where he takes off his costume and is the "real" Michael Jackson once more. But the "desert of the real" is not only that. It is also the title of McCaffery's introduction, and a phrase he borrows from *Simulacra and Simulation*. The desert of the real is the postmodern universe, where the model precedes the real, and this is the desert into which Michael Jackson rides. After taking off his costume, he sets it down, only to see that it comes to life in the same claymation form it had when we understood it to be Michael Jackson. The rabbit then starts doing his dance moves, and a dance battle ensues between Michael Jackson and his alter ego; for a time they dance together, then the rabbit starts spinning faster and faster until he is moving in a way that Michael Jackson himself cannot. At this point the issue of the model and the real has become so convoluted and twisted, there is no disentangling them. We are completely in a hyperreal space. In his final move, Michael Jackson starts spinning, and as he revolves becomes all of the various characters we have seen in *Speed Demon* up until now, and the rabbit disappears. So it seems that Michael Jackson has won, he is more real and he is free because of his ability to transform his body, and be "everyone." But then a police officer stops him and writes out a ticket, pointing to a "no dancing" sign. He then says, "I need your autograph right here." So he has not escaped, the fans are still there, in one form or another. And as he rides off, he sees the rabbit's face carved into eternal rock, smiling at him, and at us.

As in Chevette's case, it seemed the bike offered freedom, but it was the "melding...that did it." This is precisely what we see when Michael Jackson enters the "desert of the real." He is free from his pursuers, free of the disguise he had to wear. But the disguise became real, challenged his own identity, and so to defeat it he had to "click-in"; instead of becoming separate, he had to become more realer than real, encompassing everyone and everything in a swirling dance of transformation. And even then he did not truly escape anything. The space he inhabits in this video can be compared to the cyberspace inhabited by Case, *Neuromancer's* protagonist. As George Slusser writes in "Literary MTV," cyberspace for Case "is everywhere and it is nowhere. Because he can never step outside it he ignores it" (339). The difference seems to be that Michael

Jackson does not ignore it, but plays with it. He is not simply the cyberpunk text or character, but the author as well.

The next video is *Leave Me Alone*. While it reiterates many of the same ideas this reading of *Moonwalker* has already discussed, a few key points are worth mentioning. This video is a sort of animated collage of surreal images that address the plethora of bizarre media and tabloid rumors that have been associated with Michael Jackson. What is interesting is that while he may be singing “leave me alone/ just stop doggin’ me around,” the video brings the rumors to life in a way that their mere presence in the media never could have. For example, one of the rumors is that Michael Jackson had built a shrine to Elizabeth Taylor. In the video, he moves through a space (in his rocket) in which photos and scenes from her films are animated and alive, literally off the page. While he may seem to be refuting the rumor that he ever bought the Elephant Man’s bones, in this video he is dancing with them. This exposes the simulation inherent in media images that seem to correspond the third phase of the image, by masking “the absence of a profound reality.” However by making this image “real” we see that there is no reality to be masked: pure simulacrum, exposed through simulation. The other noteworthy aspect of *Leave Me Alone* is how all the events we are seeing take place in an amusement park that is built on a huge larger than life Michael Jackson, who is tied down with rope. This has interesting implications for the body as the site of simulation equal to that of the screen; as Baudrillard notes, in a world of simulation there is “too great a proximity of everything, the unclean promiscuity of everything which touches, invests and penetrates without resistance, with no halo of private protection, not even his own body, to protect him anymore” (*Ecstasy* 132). We can see this operating in *Leave Me Alone*, these words themselves expressing the desire for a no longer possible distance. However, in the video there is a sort of resistance. The Michael Jackson that sustains the amusement part breaks free of it, rising, towering above mountains as it crumbles. Dressed in a black, red, and gold military uniform he stands wearily, and perhaps this construction on film has the ability to resist, though it must necessarily reinforce the simulation of its own image.

This journey through *Moonwalker* has now led us to the work’s centerpiece, the 40-minute short film, *Smooth Criminal* which, as the film’s cover tells us is “based on a

story by Michael in which he plays a superhero who pits himself and all his powers against the evil Mr. Big...in the course of this battle, Michael transforms himself into a robot and then a spaceship that destroys the forces of evil and then vanishes into the heavens, only to return later as Michael for a performance...” The film uses a mix of motifs in the seemingly clear-cut, classical tale of good versus evil, of the lone hero who takes on the dark side. It opens with a shot of the stars and space, then pans down to three orphans on a rooftop, Sean, Zeke, and Katie. Interestingly Zeke is the young boy who was the “little Michael Jackson” in *Badder*. They watch as Michael Jackson, dressed in a 1930s mobster outfit, emerges from a brownstone, only to be fired on by an army of foot soldiers whose faces are covered by huge helmets. The lighting and style is that of the film noir. The soldiers work for Frankie Lideo, a drug dealer who is targeting the children of the world, and whose evil plot Michael Jackson and Katie have discovered. After the shooting, Lideo realizes that Michael Jackson has escaped, and a chase scene through a deserted city begins. Finally, he is cornered in a dead end, and it seems that he will be caught. However, we see him drop to his knees with an agonized expression, and then see the shape of his shadow change from that of a man to a that of a futuristic car which fires rockets as he speeds away from his pursuers once more. When cornered, Michael Jackson has the ability to transform to gain his freedom; the transformations, however, are evolving and ongoing, as we shall see. Also, this time the metamorphosis is not anthropomorphic as in *Thriller*; in *Smooth Criminal* man and machine are fused.

Meanwhile the children are at Club 30s, where Michael Jackson evidently told them to meet him. When they enter the club, however, it is abandoned, dark, covered in cobwebs. But when he arrives (and Katie sees the shadow change from the shape of the car back to the figure of Michael Jackson the man) and steps into the door, a blinding white light pours out, and the inside of the club is hopping, populated with people dressed in the style of the gangster world of the 1930s. As in cyberpunk fiction, *Smooth Criminal* uses a mix of familiar objects and motifs and creates a new mode of understanding by placing them in different contexts. For example, as McCaffery notes, “yes, *Neuromancer*’s hero, Case, is a ‘detective’...Molly is a ‘moll’ out of 1940s a film noire...true, the ‘messages’...bear similarities to...the hero lost in a society of criminal

and impersonal forces, a nostalgic longing for a more authentic, uncorrupted past” (15). He goes on to say that within this framework of conventions, Gibson is able to introduce the present concerns of cyberpunk postmodernism in a new discourse. These include

“the contrast between the human ‘meat’ and metal...the denaturing of the body and the transformation of time and space in the postindustrial world...the ‘dance of data’ that comprises so much of life today (a ‘dance’ which Gibson employs as a metaphor for everything from the interaction of subatomic particles to the interactions on multinational corporations)...the uneasy recognition that our primal urge to replicate our consciousness and physical beings (into images, words, machine replicants, computer symbols) is *not* leading us closer to the dream of immortality, but is creating merely a pathetic parody, a metaexistence or simulacra of our essences that is supplanting us...” (15).

These are the very ideas that are illumined by *The Case of Michael Jackson*; this is apparent within *Smooth Criminal* and the larger *Moonwalker*. However, since his project is not limited to what we recognize as a purely fictional mode, such as a video or film, his presence in such a fiction heightens and further enlightens these concerns. Because even within a Michael Jackson film we are confronted with the body of Michael Jackson, a site of futurism, and subject of much debate in the “real world” of the media and the public sphere. And by infusing one fiction within another, it points to the simulation and hyperreality of not only the work, but also of the very medium through which we receive the work, the space in which we receive it, and consequently of supposed reality itself. So, upon entering the club, the song “Smooth Criminal” begins, and the film’s narrative is interrupted by a choreographed song and dance. The choreography and dance moves are distinctly Michael Jackson’s, yet they are also reminiscent of old musicals, the surrounding scene especially calling to mind *Guys and Dolls*. Within the greater frame of *Smooth Criminal*, we have this fluid interjection of a musical and music video. In fact, an edited version of just this sequence would become the video for the song “Smooth Criminal” aired on MTV: a model preceding a model, if you will.

As the music reaches a crescendo, a skylight explodes and glass shards cascade into the room. At this point the internal logic of the dance sequence is interrupted. The music stops and is replaced by a long low whistle, we are in the jungle. Everything is bathed in blue light. Michael Jackson lets out a long, “oooohhhh,” and a cat moves

across the piano keys. The dance goes from the choreographed format of the musical to one of primitive, animalistic movements, the dancers no longer aligned in rows, but crowded together, overlapping, movements slowed down, the atmosphere intensified. They are writhing and arching in primal, sexual movements; we see the sweat on their faces. They shriek and cry, controlled by an unseen force. Michael Jackson nods his head again and again as if to say, yes, yes, yes, signaling—*this* is it. And then the cries start to gain coherence and momentum until they are chanting the chorus of the song, “Annie are you okay/ are you okay Annie?” And then in a moment, as if this sequence was never there, the song comes back, the lights return to normal, and we are in the world of Club 30s and the musical dance format once again.

This rupture is one of the most interesting aspects of the film in my opinion, and points to Michael Jackson’s awareness of the hyperreality in which it exists. For while the film is imbued with signs of a nostalgia for a past reality, such as the clear-cut battle between good and evil, the film noir of the 1930s, the classic musical, even the notion of salvation and freedom through transformation, this segment returns us to the source of the artist. It points to the origin of sound and movement that drive any artistic creation, especially the dance. And so while the action may seamlessly flow back into the world of crime noir and the musical, the source is exposed and embodied. It is telling that as the lyrics return and the dance sequence continues, Michael Jackson notices Katie (the observer), smiles and winks at her, and then reassumes the tough expression of the gangster. He must continue to embody the various levels of the narrative, but not before briefly exposing their simulated nature with a knowing look. This type of rupture and the following primitive expression occur in the music video *The Way You Make Me Feel*, and again in the later *Black or White* (though it takes an further turn there, as will be discussed later). Interestingly, this aspect of Michael Jackson’s productions is not often discussed. It is crucial, however, to an understanding of the evolution of the simulation game.

The Club 30s sequence continues until we see the evil army surrounding the place, pointing their weapons inside. Michael Jackson releases a round of machine gun fire at them, then flees the club. Along with Zeke and Sean he goes to Frankie Lideo’s headquarters to rescue Katie, who has been abducted. However, he is separated from the

boys, and faces Lideo and his army alone for the final showdown. Again, at the moment in which it seems that he has been defeated, Michael Jackson begins to undergo a dramatic transformation. He is on the ground on his knees, and as he concentrates the heavens open up. We see his eyes become lasers, and his face and body become metallic, showing their electronic inner circuitry before closing to recreate his features as a robot. He rises, huge, a celestially glowing robot standing in the figure of Christ. As he is attacked, he continues to develop features that allow him to fend them off and unleash his own offensives. It is important to note that the transformations are both a response to the attacks and a way to further his own objectives. The morphing continues until he has transformed from robot into spaceship, the form in which he finally defeats Lideo and the forces of evil.

With his eventual victory the children are safe and Michael Jackson the spaceship flies off into the stars. The children of course miss him, especially Katie, who makes a wish that he would come back. The fulfillment of this wish is realized through another transformation, and he returns in his “real” form, wearing the gangster jacket, but this time over his studded leather “performance” outfit. He leads the children back into Club 30s, which this time leads to the backstage of a concert venue. We discover that it is one minute before show time, and Michael Jackson proceeds to get on stage and go into a “real” performance of the Beatles’ famous “Come Together” as the children watch from the side of the stage. There is no distinction between the “real” Michael Jackson the performer, and Michael Jackson the transformer. Those of us watching the film know, as perhaps the concert audience does not, that moments ago he was a car, a robot, and a spaceship. The imaginary Michael Jackson is completely imploded with the real, and this real is still and always an image. But as the inclusion of the “primal dance” shows, the image himself can change the shape of the simulation with a wink and a smile.

Moonwalker then seeks to establish Michael Jackson’s status as historical figure, martyr, superhero and superstar, and reveals a desire for a referential world in which he exists as a reality. However, through the collapsing and reshaping of the boundaries between the real and the imaginary we see how this world operates in the circuit of hyperreality. All of this is accomplished of course, through the medium of film, which is *Moonwalker*, and through an awareness of this *within* the film. The repetition of images

as well as the play between types of images allow for a warping of time and space into a continual present, while at the same time creating and fulfilling a sense of nostalgia and exposing this present as a simulation. While these ideas exist within *Moonwalker*, the film retains the sense of the artist's power. In the films and video narratives that would be conventionally known as Michael Jackson's artistic productions (though *Moonwalker* makes it apparent that this includes media representations, "real" footage, and the body itself) there are transformations that are now beyond the anthropomorphic and into the realm of the technological and ruptures that seek to expose and regain the primal source of the artist and the dance, holding to the idea of the artist's self (as creator, prophet, and hero), though it is one that must continually morph and evolve. While embodying the aspects of simulation, it employs them as well to found the image as reality.

The Circus: Ring Two

In the years that followed *Moonwalker*, Michael Jackson released another album, 1991's *Dangerous*. And while this album reached #1 on the pop charts, what seemed to obsess the public were the increasingly noticeable changes in his physical appearance. Many have identified Jackson's own physical metamorphosis as an actualization of the dream of the cyborg; according to Victoria Johnson in her essay "The Politics of Morphing: Michael Jackson as Science Fiction Border Text," he is the " 'boundary creature' residing *between* male and female, black or white, human or animal, child or adult...[in a] cybernetic era... [which allows] the unprecedented capacity for one to choose and autonomously *construct* one's own identity, granted one has the financial resources to do so" (59-60). It seems that Michael Jackson was, in his physical body, realizing the ideals of transformation by which his other artistic productions had already been informed. If the ability to elude definition is a means to freedom, then his changes can be read as such, as well as a conscious implosion of the fictional and the real.

The possibilities associated with the post-biological body are among the primary concerns of cyberpunk postmodernism. In "Terminal Notions of What We May Become: Synthflesh, Cyberreality, and the Post-Human Body," Louis J. Kern says,

"the presence of cybernetic organisms in popular cultural texts, grounded in cutting-edge technologies such as noncircuitry, computer-enhanced brain

functions, artificial intelligence, genetic alteration, neuro-chemotherapeutics, mechano-electronic prostheses, and surgical techniques of body modification and perfection, has penetrated human consciousness to such an extent that it has become a virtual sub-text of everyday life” (95).

A fictional work that explores the territory of the human body as a site of alteration is Sterling’s *Schismatrix*. Within this work, the fusion of humanity and technology is drawn as the inevitable evolution of the race. There is a breakdown of the opposition between the organic and the inorganic; this is what allows us to colonize space and to progress. In fact, it is through this “techno-transcendence” that Lindsay, the novel’s hero, is able to escape his body and finally the Schismatrix universe. Michael Jackson, then, is the “real world” example of this theoretical and literary concern.

Of course, techno-transcendence is not how most interpreted the physical transformations they observed. It was attributed to his wanting to look white, or to the fact that he was simply a “freak.” So it was one of the main topics in his 1993 televised interview with Oprah, a media event that had the fourth largest viewing audience in the history of television. For the first time, we were told, we would be allowed into Michael his home, and learn the truth about the “private Michael Jackson.” So, through the medium of television, millions entered his home. And this home was an amusement park appropriately called Neverland. The amusement park, of course, has been identified by both Eco and Baudrillard as the supreme expression of hyperreality. During this interview Michael Jackson attributed the change in his skin color to the condition vitiligo, which destroys pigmentation. There is an obvious disconnect between this clinical explanation and what we see in his body and other artistic texts. It shows, however, that the types of questions he is asked when there is a move to expose the truth do not correspond to the future moment which he embodies, but to an outdated conception of the world, one based on cause and effect, or underlying psychological motives. The latter refers to the explanation that he changed his nose so as not to look like his father, with whom he had a troubled relationship, or that his desire to live in the world of a child is solely the byproduct of having missed out on childhood. This psychoanalytic model, however, is inadequate within the reading of *The Case of Michael Jackson*. The comment of Michael Jackson’s then-wife, Lisa Marie Presley, in a 1994 interview with

Diane Sawyer on *Prime Time Live* is somewhat more illuminating, “he is constantly re-modifying something or changing it or reconstructing it or you know, working on some imperfection that 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.”

Also related to Michael Jackson’s body at this time were the allegations that he had sexually molested a young boy. The case was, as can be expected, a huge event in the media circus. Apart from the damage to his reputation, the charges can be read as an attempt to pin him down by giving him a very real, human weakness, to say you are this, this explains why you are like this—to define him as a freak or as a criminal. In some ways we can see the creation of *HISTORY* as a response to this, that can be read in the same way he eluded danger in *Smooth Criminal*: an ever-evolving movement towards the future in response to attack. Here the actions in his “real” life follow those in his earlier fictions, showing us both the collapsed boundary between the fiction and real life, and the idea of the model preceding the real, as well the lack of distinction between the two. The creation of *HISTORY* can also be read as an evolved simulation to respond to the threat of death in the form of disappearance, which is the only way one can die within a simulation. According to Baudrillard, power is only contained within the power to appear (*Simulacra* 24). And so he created an appearance so large it was appeared to be absurd, yet powerfully so.

HISTORY: PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

Whatever the motivation behind its creation, with *HISTORY* we have a further evolution of The Case of Michael Jackson. The title itself is a rich source for an investigation of hyperreality. First and foremost there is the obvious linguistic duality in the word *HISTORY*. Again the idea is that the story of Michael Jackson is inherently tied up with history itself, which is supposedly based on an objective reality. But by reading it as “his story” the notion of any sort objective reality is destabilized; history becomes a subjective concept, given shape by whoever is telling the story. Then there is the “past, present, and future” part of the title. The “past” is obvious; it belongs to our standard conception of history. The inclusion of the future however, points to the nature of history as simulation; it is a future that has already happened, and at the same time shows how all

of history is ultimately as unknowable as the future. And it posits Michael Jackson as the embodiment of the science fictional, postmodern world in which we live; he too is the future that exists in the present. In fact, once again we have the collapsing of the past and the future into an eternal present, for when we experience “*HISTORY* on film” as the film’s cover describes it, we are simultaneously experiencing all time *right now*. Of this phenomenon Jameson says,

“Note that as temporal continuities break down, the experience of the present becomes powerfully, overwhelmingly vivid and ‘material’: the world comes before the schizophrenic with heightened intensity, bearing a mysterious and oppressive charge of affect, glowing with hallucinatory energy. But what might for us seem a desirable experience—an increase an increase in our perceptions, a libidinal or hallucinogenic intensification of our normally humdrum and familiar surroundings—is here felt as a loss, as ‘unreality’ ” (*Postmodernism* 120).

And with this sense of loss, as we have seen before, “nostalgia assumes full meaning.” Hence the invocation of history. While we saw this idea operating in *Moonwalker* as well, with the founding myths of Michael Jackson, his/our pasts, etc., in *HISTORY* there is an evolved use and greater awareness of the signs of reality and of simulation combined. The scale of the project is increased, its intrusion in the “real world” more obvious, and our ability to define the “real world” becomes increasingly difficult and irrelevant.

The films *HISTORY Volume 1* (1995) and *Volume 2* (1997) are both retrospectives of Michael Jackson’s “greatest” videos and performances that include additional footage as well. A tandem reading of these films reveals an intensification of the drive towards reality and the necessarily accompanying movement into hyperreality, but also a more sophisticated awareness and employment of the signs of both. The cover of *HISTORY Volume 1* depicts a huge granite statue of Michael Jackson in the semblance of a military figure, a statue that does not exist anywhere in the “real world.” The film then opens with a montage set to the epic “Carmina Burana” composed by Carl Orff. The montage shows huge mobs of people surrounding Michael Jackson, chasing his cars, screaming, crying, the same sort of footage we had seen in the beginning of *Moonwalker*. However this time, the music lends it an excitement, a vividness, and a hysterical edge where the *Moonwalker* montage created a softer atmosphere. Here the crashing of symbols is coordinated with onstage pyrotechnic explosions, pumping fists of fans, their feet

pounding on the pavement as they try and get close to him. It is a symphony that he seems to be orchestrating both consciously and through the response to him. There are repeated images of Michael Jackson in pseudo-military regalia with huge armies following him, armies in different uniforms that recall the armies of different nations at different times, but can never be pinned down to a specific origin, like Michael Jackson himself. The montage winds up with a dizzying collage of magazine covers, photos, videos, all of the various images of Michael Jackson throughout the years, until finally he (again in the shape of the cross) becomes illumined, and spins until bursting into sparks that swirl like the image of the cosmos, the “kaleidoscope” ending finally with the words “Brace Yourself.” The first video is “Billie Jean” and so begins the retrospective.

While at first this montage seems to operate in the same way as *Moonwalker*, setting up the foundation of Michael Jackson as international superstar, intergalactic superhero by an infusion of past “real” images, reading it in parallel with the opening of *HISTORY Volume 2* reveals that there is something else at work here. The cover of this film depicts the same statue against an epic sky as *Volume 1*, only this time it is golden rather than granite. We see the boots of a marching army again, we see men working, with molten lava being poured, the sound of pounding metal corresponding with the marching. Michael Jackson leads the armies (again always changing), dressed in black and silver military regalia, and what can only be described as “mirrorshades” over his eyes. This is of course the title of the classic cyberpunk anthology edited by Bruce Sterling, who in his preface writes that within cyberpunk literature there are “oddly common symbols, which seem to crop up...with a life of their own. Mirrorshades, for instance. By hiding the eyes, mirrorshades prevent the forces of normalcy from realizing that one is crazed and possibly dangerous...they are the symbol of the sun-staring visionary”(xi). So the literary symbol finds its way into the “real” and fictional worlds of Michael Jackson. We have seen him wearing them in the live footage as well as within the fiction of the films, further dissolving the difference between them. But back to *HISTORY*. We see Michael Jackson enter a huge square with the army, while thousands chant his name, wave posters, scream in adulation and love. There is a huge poster of one of his eyes, with the distinctive eyebrow and hair, above the square, reminiscent of the watchful eye of Big Brother. But then Michael Jackson removes the mirrorshades,

smiles a sweet smile and waves at the throngs. The camera pulls back and we see the army in some sort of square/plaza that recalls Eastern Europe or China.

We then see a bright orange setting sun, helicopters flying out in front of it. Huge crowds gaze up at a stories-tall veiled monument. There is chaos, people running, shouting, all holding candles. The helicopters circle the monument, and floodlights are pointed at it. The atmosphere is that of a great, historic event. The signal is given and the ropes that are keeping the cover on the monument snap one by one until the cloth gives way, and we see the huge granite statue of Michael Jackson that was depicted on the cover of *HISTORY Volume 1*, released two years before the film in which the statue is realized. In a classic move of simulation, the image of the statue preceded the reality of it, however in this case the reality itself was one presented on film. This statue did not exist in the physical world, however its hyperreal existence seems to make this irrelevant. As Umberto Eco notes in his essay “The Fortress of Solitude” in the collection *Travels in Hyperreality*, “the ‘completely real’ becomes identified with the ‘completely fake.’ Absolute unreality is offered as real presence” (7). What takes this even further is that some years after the release of *HISTORY Volume 2* these statues were actually erected; but after the fanfare with which we saw them unveiled on film, this reality was a somehow less important and less “real.” The model preceding the model, preceding a real that isn’t.

But this is only the beginning of a complex network of levels of meanings, images, and communication at work in *HISTORY*. A close examination of the military/totalitarian imagery employed in the films reveals this. If we read the opening of the two films in parallel, we see that they show many of the same images, though *Volume 1* was a montage of “real” footage and *Volume 2* depicted “fictional” events. The masses of people surrounding Michael Jackson, chanting his name are the same. The people holding candles, having to be carried out on stretchers, held back by the police are the same. The pounding rhythm is the same, though in the first film it is the epic music and in the second it is the sounds of the military and of construction. And of course Michael Jackson himself is the constant presence, dressed in the same regalia, wearing the same mirrorshades. *Volume 1* showed him alone, onstage, or on his way to and from the stage, surrounded by the masses, all over the world. *Volume 2* shows him as leader of a

worldwide regime, the same masses responding to him in the same way. Right away we can point out the implosion of the fictional and the real, and how these are operating in a larger simulation. However, the parallel that Michael Jackson seems to be drawing between his “real” role as himself and his “fictional” role as totalitarian dictator is enlightening as well. It exposes the performative aspect of history and of politics, one that relies on symbols and theatrics in order to function. In this sense Michael Jackson can embody the role of the King of Pop and of the King: they are the same in their essence, and he highlights this for us.

Baudrillard notes, “History is our lost referential, that is to say our myth. It is by this virtue that it takes the place of myths on the screen” (*Simulacra* 43). But in *HISTORY* we have the operation of both myth and the myth of history, exposing them as exercises in simulation. The sophistication of *HISTORY* goes beyond this, however. Many, on seeing the film, commented on its obvious associations with Hitler’s infamous Nazi propaganda film, *Triumph of the Will*. And they dismissed it as an offensive example of self-promotion and megalomania. But what the parallel between the openings of *Volume 1* and *Volume 2* shows is that the response already exists, the one is just the other in a different form. It is in its very epic grandeur completely absurd, and shows itself to be so. The Michael Jackson film has no underlying ideology, there is no claim to power; he is a performer. The people are not rallying around a destructive cause, or one that promises them anything except itself. The symbols are what have been appropriated, but not to use them for any particular end, only to refer back to themselves as emptied of meaning, used in pastiche characteristic of postmodern works. The form resonates, the symbol does not, and the ultimate game is that while exposing this as simulation, it heightens its own effect.

In the televised with Michael Jackson and Lisa Marie Presley, Diane Sawyer asks about *HISTORY* being “modeled after *Triumph of the Will*...a Nazi film with a Nazi meaning...

MJ: It’s not true. None of that’s true...It has nothing to do with politics, or communism, or fascism at all...

DS: Well, the critics have said that it’s the most...body vain, glorious, self-deification a pop singer ever undertook with a straight face.

MJ: Good! That’s what I wanted.

DS: For the controversy?

MJ: Yeah! They fell into my trap.

DS: But for the people who say those symbols matter?

MJ: No. The symbols...no...

DS: The suffering...

MJ: No. The symbol has nothing to do with that. It's not political. It's not Fascist. It's not dogma. It's not...y'know, ideology and all of this stuff. It's pure, simple love. You don't see any tanks, you don't see any cannons...it's art!"

We see that there is a discrepancy in the question that is being asked and the type of response given by Michael Jackson; the same one we saw in the interview with Oprah. The questions still assume that the symbol is attached to some sort of real-world referent, while Michael Jackson himself explains that “the symbol has nothing to do with that.” And in *HISTORY* it does not. The symbol is exposed as just that, an empty form that can be filled with any type of meaning. He was right in saying that the symbols do not matter; it is the deployment of the symbols that has effect. Sawyer's question is based on a conception of the world that no longer applies, a world with a modernist conception of the symbol, and this is another example of Michael Jackson embodying the future in the present moment—precisely because he uses the aspects of the hyperreal present in his artistic productions.

The employment of images of fascism, however, has further implications in the game of simulation. In his book *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics*, Hal Foster addresses the current fascination with fascism, focusing his analysis on the works of artist Robert Longo; many of the ideas within Longo's work and Foster's analysis enlighten a reading of the fascist tropes used in *HISTORY Volume 2*. Foster uses Baudrillard's notion that we are suffering from nostalgia for reality as the basis for his reading of Longo's work. The idea is that even though it contained apparent paradoxes, fascism was our last experience of reality (before World War II and the ensuing consumer culture), and therefore is the one that we hold onto, “for it is in fascism that one sees a culture struggles with the loss of the real” (80). He points to the Nazi propaganda films (which of course informed *HISTORY*) and says that within them we see the art and authority of architecture give way to that of film, and how the environment of the film is built “essentially as a set for a cinematic event” (80). This is what we see in *HISTORY Volume 2* as well: the monument of Michael Jackson, the square in which the army marches, all

of these are created for the film event. And the idea of culture as construct is exposed as well, as we see the “actual” construction of the monument in the film, knowing however that it was never really constructed, “so that we are paradoxically made aware of our own seduction” (83). As in the work of Longo, *HISTORY* “strips each form to its surface [as opposed to its essence], to effects without origin or reference” (81). We do not know where the events are taking place (the signs and the army uniforms are written in a non-language that at times resembles the Cyrillic alphabet, at times others); we do not know why the army is marching, or why the statues are being erected, but within these archaic representations, which no longer reflect our world, there is a recognition and perhaps a sense of security that at least the image of these ideas may provide (84). Foster says, “Longo participates in this archaism deliberately—as if to rehearse the obsolescence of our thought, the inadequacy of our representations” (86). I believe this also relates to The Case of Michael Jackson. Think of the confession that he has had two plastic surgeries, or his explanation of the changing of his skin color being due to vitiligo. While he gives these conventional answers to questions, the text of his own body (as an artistic creation) suggests something very much of the future, and these inadequate responses themselves illumine the fact that our conceptions of the body and assumptions about it belong to an irrelevant past.

“Could it be that in our society of the spectacle art has begun to interiorize its logic, to be based not simply on exchange value but on *sign* exchange value...not only is its form dominated by processes of image reproduction, but so its content?” (92). The answer to this question in light of *HISTORY* seems to be yes: hence the rapid repetition of past images of Michael Jackson, and of the construction of himself as a larger than life statue. And yet, as Foster notes in the case of Longo, the use of these images is not simply to expose them as simulacra, nor to fulfill a nostalgic longing, instead “to rid them of ideological import but retain the utopian charge” (95). A simultaneous reading of the openings of *HISTORY Volume 1* and *Volume 2* reveals exactly this. By conflating the reality with the fiction, the real public response to Michael Jackson the performer with the constructed response to Michael Jackson the totalitarian figure, fascism is drained of its ideology and politics, but the hope for an alternative, or for belief in anything remains because we are shown that it exists, that it has happened. And what separates The Case

of Michael Jackson from the work of Robert Longo is that Michael Jackson is not simply the artist who is bringing up these issues in art that will be consumed by a select group of people; the presence of himself raises these issues, and confronts a truly global mass audience with them.

As in *Volume 1*, the “retrospective” portion of *Volume 2* begins with “Billie Jean.” However, in *Volume 1* the labels for the video were written in typefont on the screen, and in *Volume 2* they are carved into stone, as if to reiterate their historical and eternal character. Also, in *Volume 1* we saw the music video for “Billie Jean” while in *Volume 2* it is the famous Motown 25 appearance in which Michael Jackson sang this song, and did the moonwalk for the first time. Both volumes also include *Thriller*. This repetition of these two songs serves the sort of purpose we saw in *Moonwalker*; they are the founding myths of Michael Jackson, and therefore must appear in any history in order for that history to be accurate. It is interesting to note that *Billie Jean* is the first performance in each film, and *Thriller* is sixth, in the exact center of both volumes. While the length of this study precludes an in-depth close reading of each video and its positioning within *HISTORY*, analyses of *The Way You Make Me Feel* and *Black or White* from *Volume 1*, and the *1995 MTV Video Music Awards Performance* from *Volume 2* reveal issues crucial to an understanding of The Case of Michael Jackson.

The Way You Make Me Feel was originally released in 1988, from the album *Bad*. It is a simple narrative in which Michael Jackson tries to woo a girl; he follows her through the streets, singing and dancing alongside her as she playfully eludes him. Like *Smooth Criminal*, it employs the conventions of the old Hollywood musical, this time recalling *West Side Story*, with men on one side, women on the other in kind of courtship ritual. And also like *Smooth Criminal*, there is a rupture in the narrative, as the girl disappears and we watch a sort of primal dance, the breath of the dancers replacing the lyrics, a blue light enveloping the scene so that only their silhouettes of Michael Jackson are seen. This interjection seems to enforce the same idea that it did in *Smooth Criminal*, as recognition of the source of the inspiration of the dance, and recognition of the film as fiction. However, what makes this interesting in *HISTORY Volume 1* is its juxtaposition with *Black or White*, the video that follows it in this collection.

Black or White is the music video that most directly confronts the issue of race and the physical changes Michael Jackson has undergone over the years, most obviously in the progressive lightening of the color of his skin. The chorus of the song repeats, “it don’t matter if you’re black or white.” The film begins above the clouds, then gets increasingly closer to the earth as we see the lights of a city spread out like a constellation, moving from the macro level to the micro until we are in one suburban American home. We see a young boy (actor Macaulay Culkin, a “friend” of Michael Jackson’s in “real” life) in his room listening to rock music until his father comes in and tells him to “turn that noise off”, before angrily slamming the boy’s door, causing a framed poster of Michael Jackson to fall, the glass shattering (and it seems, releasing the spirit of Michael Jackson from the framed image). Culkin proceeds to go downstairs where his father is sitting in a leather recliner watching television and his mother on the couch reading a tabloid. Culkin sets up huge speakers and with one strum of his electric guitar blasts his father through the roof of the house. The music begins, and we then see lions on the plains of Africa, and a group of African tribesmen stalking through the grasses with their spears ready. This is the scene into which the father lands (still in armchair), and then Michael Jackson appears (wearing black and white). He begins to dance with the tribesmen. The father is at first confused, but then as the dance/entertainment begins he relaxes back into his chair to watch. This seems to comment on the fact that we are always spectators, even within a “real” scene like the African plains. As long as we have something to watch it does not matter if it was something we had earlier condemned, in this case rock music.

Michael Jackson seems to be pointing out that whatever our criticisms or misunderstandings of his project, we are seduced and fascinated, and will continue to watch. The dance sequence with the African tribesmen also forces us to confront Michael Jackson’s plastic appearance. We know that he was a “black man” or at least had darker skin, at one point, and now we see that with his “white” skin he stands out in sharp contrast to the black men with whom he is dancing. And yet they dance together, doing the same moves. And what is interesting is that we must accept this. Whether we are confused or disgusted, we cannot say that it isn’t Michael Jackson. It is and so we are involuntarily having to accept that we know him beyond our ability to define what color

he is, and hence reinforcing what he is singing at that very moment, “it don’t matter if you’re black or white.”

Michael Jackson and the dancers then run out of the plains, into the next scene, a grey room in which Thai women are dancing in traditional dress. The tribesmen keep running until they are out of the frame, and Michael Jackson continues the song, at times his dance matching theirs. In the next scene he is dancing with a group of Native Americans in ceremonial dress (including children) as a battle on horses swirls around them. However, the scene is not completely “real” as was the one in the African plains. It begins against a white backdrop that falls to reveal the American west. Also, the dancers are on top of a huge grey platform, the scene is around them, but not quite integrated. Then we see Michael Jackson dancing with an Indian woman, and this time they are both out of place, dancing on the sidewalk in an industrial snowy city. The snow then ties us to Russia, and Michael Jackson dances in with a group of Russian men in front of the Kremlin, until it becomes a scene in a snow globe held by two babies, one black and one white, who are sitting on top of the earth. Michael Jackson then bursts out of flames, which we see are the flames of war and tanks; they also seem to be transformative flames out of which he emerges, unscathed, challenging us perhaps to do the same. We then see him dancing in the torch of the Statue of Liberty, with all of the famous monuments of the world behind him, “literally on the same plane” (Johnson 62). Following this is the now famous “morphing sequence” in which people of all races transform fluidly into one another, suggesting that we are one race. While Johnson is correct in saying that this “possibility of one world and one people through smooth melding of identities may be read as utopian and idealistic,” (61) this reading does not seem to take into account the film’s own recognition of all of this taking place through the medium of film itself.

The morphing sequence ends with “cut!” and the director of the film walking up to the actress who was last in the sequence. We see the entire set, the cameras and other equipment. Also, the scene with the Thai dancers and the Native Americans both acknowledged themselves to be out of place; they were obvious constructions. A comparison of this with the Indian dancer is revealing: she was in a “real” scene (no set was obvious), but one in which she appeared totally out of place. In this sense the

simulation of film seems only to be an extension of the simulation of the “real” world. In addition, though the world monuments were on the “same plane,” they were obvious simulations, and so the idea of Las Vegas was just as salient as the utopian vision of a unified world. This sort of construction already exists in the world, and although in one site it is a symbol of both capitalism and hyperreality, its simulation in *Black or White* exposes this and appropriates its image for another end.

It seems that in some ways, Michael Jackson has realized the cyberpunk postmodernist possibility of transcendence of the body through cybernetic transformation. If before (as in *Badder* and *Leave Me Alone*) we had identified him by the essence of his movement, and here he is identified with the dances of all cultures, as “everybody,” then he has perhaps transcended the body, “the prison of his own flesh” (*Neuromancer* 6). However, *Black or White* does not simply leave it there. As mentioned before, it too includes the type of narrative rupture we had seen in *Smooth Criminal* and *The Way You Make Me Feel*. However, in this music video, it has evolved beyond a more simple recognition of the narrative film/music video as construction and return to the primal source of art. Like The Case of Michael Jackson as a whole, this idea has undergone transformation and embodied a more complex understanding of the present cultural condition.

After we have seen the morphing segment of the film to be taking place on a set, we notice a black panther prowling around on that very set. The panther walks out of the studio, and once outside transforms into the figure of Michael Jackson. He is alone in the same sort of desolate urban landscape we see in *The Way You Make Me Feel*; the lighting is similar to the blue-black lighting that was used in the previous videos as well. With a spotlight on him, he goes through a series of quick movements, looks once straight at the camera, and then walks out of the spotlight through a cloud. We then see him standing feet planted firmly on the ground, face hidden by the tilt of his hat, and after he untucks his shirt, strong winds start to blow everything around as he holds his ground. He then goes into a quick, intricate dance, the only sounds we hear are his feet, his breath, interspersed with roars that seem to be emanating from him. The dance intensifies, becoming a dance of destruction as he smashes the windows of a car, throws the steering wheel through a glass window with a “condemned” sign on it, and finally he spins until

falling to his knees in a puddle of water. He screams and roars, ripping his shirt open, as a neon sign crashes to the ground and sparks shower around him. He then transforms back into the panther and stalks off.

This scene can be read as another invocation of the animal, primitive nature of the artist, and also as the struggle against the confines of society, as signified by the breaking glass and the smashing of the word “condemned.” Breaking glass and the destruction of a car all seem to signify a desire to be free of the constraints of the present world, a release of the animal within, similar to what we had seen in previous videos, but with a greater rage and intensity. However, what sets this apart from the previous incarnations of this idea is that instead of returning to the narrative of the video, Michael Jackson does not become his “normal” human self again, nor does his “performance” as such continue. He returns to himself as the panther, and as he walks off the music returns, we see the frame as a television set, being watched by the cartoon Bart Simpson in his living room. He is watching the video, wearing a Michael Jackson t-shirt, and his father Homer comes in and tells him to “turn that noise off,” the same admonition the “real” father had given in the beginning of the film. This is why *Black or White*'s position within *HISTORY*, after *The Way You Make Me Feel*, is especially telling; it makes the necessary evolution of the idea apparent, as we move further and further into hyperreality.

The later film has a recognition that the image of Michael Jackson is one that is completely enclosed within the circuit of the image and of hyperreality, so it serves to make him even more diffuse. Instead of returning to the narrative in which he is the center of the camera's attention, the performer, we see that his image is one that has made its way into the “consciousness” and “real world” of a cartoon figure that exists in *our* real world. A well-recognized animated character is wearing a t-shirt with Michael Jackson's name on it, and while we see his desire to break the boundaries between the constructed and the primitive within the film, there is an awareness of the simulated space in which all of this is taking place. And so the discussion of black or white that this film started with has moved into a discussion of real and hyperreal, and the possibility of breaking oppositions through the media of film and television and also the self-referential space in which those media function.

Quoting Jameson, Foster says, “ ‘the point is not to allow one of the poles of the image to settle into the truth of the other which it unmasks...but rather to hold them apart as equal and autonomous so that energies can pass back and forth between them’ ” (94-5). Thus what we see when we look at the image of Michael Jackson and compare it to what he says about the change in his appearance, it is not to call one a lie, the other truth. There is not one Michael Jackson the fact, the other a fiction, not one the tangible, the other an image on a screen. The play between them is what signifies, allows us to see the double helix of representation and the self.

And of course, *Black or White* is positioned within *HISTORY* between *The Way You Make Me Feel*, in which he appears more “white,” and *Rock With You*, one of his first music videos in which he is “still black.” Even outside the fiction of the videos, we must accept the truth of Michael Jackson, in his “real” person; that he has embodied a change that defies our desire and ability to define. While this offers a type of freedom, the transcendence is one of the body and the perception of the body, not however of the media through which we consume the image.

If *Black or White*, then, showed us Michael Jackson’s power to embody all people, all cultures within himself, through the erasure of boundaries in his own body and his ability to move, while at the same time speaking to the ultimate diffusion of this self, the *1995 MTV Video Music Awards Performance* took this further and showed us his power to embody all of his various self constructions through time, in the present. By 1995 Michael Jackson was thirty-seven years old, had a thirty-year long body of work, and had altered his appearance drastically, and yet was perhaps the single most recognizable person on the planet. His performance at the MTV Video Music Awards is a medley of songs, each with the distinctive dance moves associated with that song through past videos and performances, and therefore past moments in time. The breakdown of temporal boundaries, then, is inherent in this performance.

As we watched the present Michael Jackson fluidly embody all of his various selves, it forced us to except the fluid nature of the self, and that “nature” as something that can be constructed. It is interesting that many of the songs were lip-synched, but it was not offensive, or shocking that this was so. It had been established that Michael Jackson was a great singer, that he himself had recorded all of these songs; this was a

performance that was greater than a concert. The lip-synching was made obvious when he seemed to have sister Janet Jackson's voice, during a point in which she sings on the album *Dangerous*. It is interesting that while we recognized all of the Michael Jackson's within this single performance, there were also moves that were new. The new moves were ones in which he hardly seemed to be moving like a human being at all; the movements seemed stripped down to a mechanical and robotic essence which suggested that Michael Jackson could in fact be part machine, or at least that he may in fact be able to do all of these things because of his fusion with technology. It was a riveting, fascinating performance, a "live" encompassing of a life as an evolving image. In this performance, and in the larger *HISTORY* of which it is part, what else do we see if not "the technological capability—the mimetic ability of cyber-machine-organisms to simulate (and replace) human consciousness, the power of electronic images of the self to imitate and replicate themselves [which] endows cyborgisms with a supra-natural and a supra-physical power that transcends the merely human and that displaces the simply organic and natural" (Kern 95). Within what seems like an attempt to insist upon a more forceful reestablishing of a reality, of the presence of Michael Jackson within the objective truth of *HISTORY* (its past and present consciousness), the aspects of simulation are used to a greater degree. Because of this, by making the image more real by employing the more fake, and awareness of the processes of simulation, Michael Jackson is further dissolved: nowhere and everywhere as part of our own hyperreality.

The Circus: Ring Three

So, what could follow *HISTORY*? It seems that has been the question throughout *The Case of Michael Jackson*: what can possibly come next? *HISTORY Volume 2* ends with the same montage with which Volume 1 began, the final image being the words "Brace Yourself." This loop serves the same sort of function that the "future" serves in the title *HISTORY*. It precludes the idea that Michael Jackson's future productions/performances are established before they have happened, so in a sense they have already happened: as in science fiction the future exists here in the present. It also warns us not

to look away, but to be prepared that *HISTORY* is a continuing one, and one that we do not want to miss.

And Michael Jackson's image was not absent in the years that followed the release of *HISTORY*, although he only released one album of original material, 2001's *Invincible*. While his performances have always included appearance in the media, in the years between 1997 and the present day these are the performances that took precedence, those beyond the traditional notion of artistic production. In 1993, after the famous Oprah interview, *Entertainment Weekly's* cover story "noted, 'How odd—suddenly Michael matters again?'" (qtd. in Johnson 58). This could easily have been part of an article published ten years later. In 2003 there were a string of "Michael Jackson incidents" that aroused the emotions/interest of the public. This included the "baby-dangling incident" which referred to Michael Jackson holding his baby over a balcony in Germany to "show" him to the crowds below. This set off a chain of reactions in which people debated over his fitness to be a father, there was even speculation that he would be tried back in California for child abuse, spokespeople for child protection agencies blasted him, and of course the video image was shown what seemed to be an infinite amount of times, of course with commentators who used "NFL pens" to analyze "exactly what happened." The clip was shown in slow motion, fast motion, on every network for days. And every commentary would go into an analysis of his "increasingly bizarre behavior," his physical appearance, and then recap the child molestation charges that had been brought against him and settled out of court a decade earlier. And it did seem that "suddenly," everyone was talking about Michael Jackson again, his image everywhere one looked, especially if like the majority of people, one was looking at the television.

In February, over a two-week period, there was a virtual frenzy of prime time television programming related to Michael Jackson, on three major networks: NBC, ABC, and FOX. First was a *20/20* special that featured the "documentary" by British journalist Martin Bashir, following that were two other "investigations" of The Case of Michael Jackson, and finally there was Michael Jackson's "rebuttal" of the "documentary," which he said was a "betrayal of his trust." What is interesting is that while all of these programs ostensibly had the "truth" as their central concern, and the competition between them became a fight over this truth, they all served to reveal that in

the present extreme hyperreality, truth is an unstable and irrelevant concept, subordinated to seduction and the game.

Reality TV: Living With Michael Jackson Unmasked the Many Faces of the Footage You Were Never Meant to See

The first program in this series was *20/20's* acquisition of a documentary done by Martin Bashir, a journalist who had gained fame through his previous interviewing of Princess Diana. Barbara Walters introduces the documentary by telling us that Michael Jackson allowed Bashir exclusive access to his life for eight months, and says that what we are about to see is “bizarre, unsettling, riveting.” She tells us that we are about to see the “private” Michael Jackson, and then lets us know that after she saw the film she felt “first sympathy, then shock, and finally sadness.” This is the framework for the documentary entitled *Living with Michael Jackson*. Already told what we will feel at every stage of our viewing of the film; the rest of the documentary is a similarly huge and textbook exercise in simulation, from the “Real World” style of production and soundtrack, to the documentarian’s own opinion and subsequent role as interviewee at the film’s conclusion.

The film opens in Michael Jackson’s Neverland ranch, the site of the interview with Oprah ten years earlier. In fact what was so revealing about this simulated documentary was its completely diffuse and unspoken reference to the prior interview. From our luck at being allowed *in* to Michael Jackson’s home (again), to Bashir’s echo of Oprah’s request that Michael Jackson dance for him, and “teach him” how to dance, to the shocking revelations (already revealed in 1993) that he was abused by his father, we see this documentary as one that referred more to a previous interview than it did to any truth about Michael Jackson’s life. And unlike Oprah, Bashir did not try to dance, but simply alluded to it. Also telling is that Bashir’s interviewing style consisted in large part of repeating verbatim Michael Jackson’s responses to questions. In one sense this serves to simply reiterate something we had known before, and had just been told, and also in some cases to undermine what Michael Jackson had just said, to expose his answers as obvious lies. The interview tried to expose the “real” Michael Jackson, and at the same time expose him either as a liar or as delusional, by asking questions and applying logic

as if one was interviewing a “normal” person rather than someone who has been completely diffused into an image. But again, the disconnect between the form of the questions and the responses enlightens the game in simulation game that is being played. For example, when Bashir asked Michael Jackson, “didn’t he think it is wrong for a 44-year old man to sleep in a bed with children?” and he repeatedly answered no, that “it’s very right, it’s very loving,” Bashir insisted that it was wrong, and said that he couldn’t understand it. This was the conclusion that was given, that since the interviewer couldn’t understand the answer, it was a lie. The discrepancy is the only thing that could be revealing. And the comment that Michael Jackson made that seemed to expose this was overlooked, the camera moving away as he said, “cause you haven’t been where I’ve been: mentally.” Further, when Bashir asked about the changes in Michael Jackson’s physical appearance, the lightening of his skin, the narrowing of his nose, and other features, Jackson reiterated what he had said on the Oprah interview, by saying that “no one said anything” about white people tanning to “look black, trying to be other than they are.” Later he said, “I changed. People changed. I was changing. I’m changing.” Now within the film, this is given the look of a defense, or of a lie. And it might be a lie in the sense that Michael Jackson has had more than the two plastic surgeries he says he has. But everything we have ever experienced of him has been performance, so too can these answers be read as such. “I’m changing,” is the only truth we can point to, and any effort to get to the quantitative “reality” is bound to fail and completely irrelevant.

The form of the “documentary” itself appears unrelated to the content, the relation lies in the fact that, as Foster pointed out, the art of simulation has begun to internalize its own logic. But while documentary presupposes non-fiction, this documentary had the style of a TV special or MTV’s reality series “The Real World” (which was being filmed in Las Vegas at the same time as portions of this program, incidentally). The influence of the recent move into the world of “reality” programming has reached all levels of programming, and is of course the premiere site of simulation: reality on a screen, edited, with a soundtrack. To take this even further, right after the completion of the “documentary,” Martin Bashir the “filmmaker” was giving his subjective opinions about the subject of his film, telling us that Michael Jackson “still doesn’t get it” about the immorality of sharing his bed with children. This study is not trying to make a moral

judgment of this issue one way or another, nor with the truth or falsity of criminal charges brought against Michael Jackson; what it is trying to get at is this complete collapse between fact and fiction, and the elucidate the preposterous attempt to investigate the truth of a fiction with a fictional reality TV show dressed as documentary. But it is only preposterous in the way that simulation itself is preposterous: it is the marker of a hyperreal, postmodern universe. In a moment the interviewer was being interviewed, a completely fluid transition, and even there perhaps we see a diffusion of The Case of Michael Jackson.

In some senses, watching this program was like watching *Moonwalker* itself, with the different levels of reality and fiction that are in constant play. There was a scene in the beginning of *Living With Michael Jackson* in which Bashir and Michael Jackson were sitting in a movie theater at Neverland, watching an old performance of the Jackson 5. So on our television screens, we are watching a “documentary” in which Michael Jackson, supreme image, is watching his past self perform on a screen. We are completely in a cyberpunk world here. Veronica Hollinger’s reading of K.W. Jeter’s *The Glass Hammer* is especially relevant, where “being is *defined* by its own simulation” (36). Hollinger says this “novel is a chilling demonstration of simulated re-presentation to construct the ‘real’...there is no way to test the accuracy of the creation since the self produced by memory is as unreliable a re-presentation as is a media bio.” She then goes on to quote the opening sequence of the novel, “ ‘Video within video. He watched the monitor screen, seeing himself there, watching...everything would be in the tapes, if he watched long enough’ ” (36). This seems an appropriate description for what we see happening in the “real world,” of Michael Jackson. What is interesting also is that we saw this in his earlier artistic productions as well, in *Thriller* and in *Black or White*. Once again, we have the model preceding the “real,” and the recognition, once we arrive at the real, that it too has moved further out of reach. Not only this, but we see the science fictional concerns that were present in The Case of Michael Jackson *twenty years ago* being played out in the science fictional “real world” of *today*: hence his past embodiment of a future moment, his writing of the future into *HISTORY*, and his diffusion into hyperreality.

It would be impossible to include a complete analysis of the simulation playground that was the global media event *Living with Michael Jackson* in this study; it might actually be impossible to include it anywhere. However, it is important to mention that after this program, there were two serious “news” investigations into The Case of Michael Jackson, and then the simulation playground becomes a virtual amusement park, as FOX reveals that Michael Jackson had his own cameras rolling during the filming of the documentary, and airs his “rebuttal” of *Living with Michael Jackson*. Both the *Dateline* NBC and the *Prime Time* ABC news investigations, titled “Michael Jackson Unmasked” and “The Many Faces of Michael Jackson” respectively, employed plastic surgery experts and interviewed other “people who know” about Michael Jackson. The plastic surgeons, using x-rays and analyzing photographs seriously come to the shocking conclusion that he *must* have had more than the two plastic surgeries he admits to having. To further the realness of this claim and the authority of the plastic surgeon, while revealing this truth, he/she is seated in an operating theater (appropriately named) with surgical instruments within reach. Now all of this might convince us that yes, there have been more than two plastic surgeries and we now have irrefutable evidence of this, but what more do we actually know about Michael Jackson’s self, public or private, real or imaginary? As is the case in the circuit of simulation, all we have is a vast network of more and more useless information, data, and the seeming drive to get to the objective truth only makes this more apparent.

The emphasis on Michael Jackson’s face brings cyberpunk postmodernisms’ focus on external surfaces into the world of experience, and the inability to define his face belongs to the future. Both of the programs also included segments in which there was a computer-generated morphing of Michael Jackson’s face, from “black” to “white.” Again—Michael Jackson did this already! The music video, *Black or White*, do we remember? It used the same technology of morphing faces of all colors and features together. These programs used what he had already said and created, to expose him as a liar, but it was “admitted” long ago, in a film. Once more we see that Michael Jackson embodied the future in a moment that is now past and recorded this future in *HISTORY*.

The final “installment” of this series of programming was Michael Jackson’s “rebuttal” of Bashir’s “documentary” entitled, “The Michael Jackson Interview: The

Footage You Were Never Meant To See.” Of course it is uncertain what the point of having footage that is not meant to be seen is, but again we feel we are being let in on a secret, we have a chance to see through the camera that is behind the camera. And now Bashir is the one being exposed: a further implosion. By pointing to his program as a simulation, because things were edited, taken out of context, or left out altogether, this program seeks to disguise the fact that it of course can do the same thing. But as this is posited as the “real” and “secret” footage, it lays claim to authoritative truth. It seems that the ability to get behind more and more lenses and frames of reference is what enables this claim to authority, though it is precisely this move that increases the hyperreality of the entire circuit.

Conclusion: The Dream Continues...

So we have it, that while there ensues this elaborate dance of hyperreality in which we consume, observe, and comment upon Michael Jackson, it is a hyperreality he himself has created as well as embodied, as seen through the disappearance of a boundary between his artistic creations and any reference to him. There is no binary opposition to *The Case of Michael Jackson*. Any documentary about him becomes a performance in which he is a player and a director, and implicitly we must join the dance. So the news investigation that seeks to expose the “truth” that he is evidently hiding, shows the same film clips, has the same soundtrack, uses the same media he uses in his artistic productions, and because of the implosion of the message and the medium, or the medium and the message, he is the only referential which everything must refer back to. In an interview with *Ebony* magazine in 1992 Michael Jackson said the following,

“Deep inside I feel this world is we live in is really a big, huge, monumental symphonic orchestra...the same new miracle intervals and biological rhythms that sound out the architecture of my DNA also governs the movement of the stars. The same music governs the rhythm of the seasons, the pulse of our heartbeats, the migration of birds, the ebb and flow of ocean tides, the cycles of growth, evolution and dissolution. It’s music, it’s rhythm. And my goal in life is to give the world what I was lucky to receive: the ecstasy of divine union through my music and my dance.”

This quotation of course posits him as a supernatural being, in tune with the forces of the universe, but its *effect* is just that: universal. And this can be compared to our participation in The Case of Michael Jackson, our very necessary participation. In effect, we all become instruments in his grand symphony, actors in his play, or if you like, freaks in his circus. It seems that in any discussion of simulation or hyperreality what gets lost is precisely that statement, “in effect” and within The Case of Michael Jackson we cannot deny both effect and the power to affect. In each example we have seen, what is not simulated are the crowds, the people. The “I love you Michael,” “you mean the world to me,” “Please can I touch you,” “I came all the way from Israel to see you” were all said, over and over for the last 35 years. The fainting, crying, ecstasy, and sheer *emotion* throughout the masses of world happened and happens. In a hyperreal existence, this still has meaning; perhaps it has greater meaning. And the fact remains that after all of these years, we are still watching, fascinated. It seems that the “power to appear” is simply the future understanding of “any publicity is good publicity.” And in this, perhaps The Case of Michael Jackson has been “the greatest show on earth.” He has shown us the future, and in another turn of the screw it seems that he has shown us the future and yet retained something very old-fashioned. In a sense Michael Jackson is a song and dance man, perhaps the last in the tradition of great entertainers, the ones who can do it all, in a suit and a hat, with a wink and a smile.

In his article “Antimancer: Cybernetics and Art in Gibson’s *Count Zero*” Ivan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. identifies *Count Zero*, the novel that followed *Neuromancer* in the cyberspace trilogy, as ‘Gibson’s attempt to recover a place for the individual artist and work of art from the postmodern vortex that *Neuromancer* ended up affirming” (1). The tension between these two novels involves the same factors that are at play within The Case of Michael Jackson: the conception of self, the power to create, the possibility of transcendence, and very notion of a within an image-saturated, hyperreal simulation. And we see that the *comparison* of these novels is what The Case of Michael Jackson leaves out. It does not pit against each other desire for transcendence within the “matrix” and the awareness that such a desire is ultimately futile. It does not put in polar opposition a world that is the consciousness of an Artificial Intelligence and a world that can still be shaped by human consciousness. In the present hyperreality, all of these must

be accepted. Michael Jackson the superstar, the superhero, the creator of the simulation, the simulation that is created, the black Michael Jackson, the white Michael Jackson, the victim, the victor, the human, the machine, the real and the imaginary: time and again we see all of these in operation, they are all true and so any need to distinguish the true from the false or define the truth itself is irrelevant. The Case of Michael Jackson shows us the implosion of the worlds of fiction, theory, and reality, and the future already encoded in an evolving history. And if his productions (especially his body) have produced anxiety or fear, well, are not these the emotions with which we always face the future? Are they not the emotions that lead to the creation of science fiction itself?

Whether these things have power or meaning I believe in Michael Jackson. I believe in his image. I believe in his music. I believe in his dance. I believe his face and his feet. I believe his innocence, his dominance, his transcendence, his martyrdom. I believe in his genius, I believe in the game. I believe in him the way I believe in simulation, the way I believe in Jean Baudrillard the nihilist who does not believe in nihilism. While it might be a hallucination, it is a *consensual* hallucination, and I, like Case, like The Case of Michael Jackson, like being jacked in.

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