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ENWR105
Spring 2010
Documented Essay

But Did We Have A Good Time? An Examination of the Media Massacre of Michael Jackson

June 25, 2009, a day that will live in infamy. It is our generation's version of "the day the music [and the dance] died." Michael Jackson, the King of Pop, was dead. In the days that followed two things became tragically apparent: the media would stop at nothing in their relenting assault upon his legacy and we, the public, would clamor for it like maggots on a carcass. The phrase "respect for the dead" apparently had no meaning here. From the moment the news broke, there was 24/7 news coverage of all things Jackson. While in the immediate aftermath there seemed to be a bi polar-ness to the coverage—he was a wonderful man, but no! he was a pedophile; he was a musical genius, but he was tortured; he was one of the greatest artists ever, but he was a freak, etc—it now appears that the world is finally realizing the sheer phenomenal genius that was Michael Jackson. With the recent release of the docu-concert *This Is It* there has been an outpouring of love and admiration from both the public and media alike. But what good is it now? The abuse which the media and society at large dealt out to him cannot be so easily forgotten, especially when it holds some blame in his downfall and death.

What is it that causes us as humans to thrive upon the pain and suffering of others? Time and again we are privy to the propping up of various public figures, only to see them brought crashing down in a hail of controversy and shame. The tabloid news industry is a multi-million dollar business. From blogs, to magazines, TV shows and radio we thrive on the chance to gossip about others. Be it escapism or otherwise, many of us live for the chance to dissect lives outside our own. *Schadenfreude* is a German term which means "pleasure derived from the misfortunes of others." It is this which so permeates modern pop culture to the point of tragedy. According to his article "The Impact of Deservingness on Schadenfreude and Sympathy," author Wilco Van Dijk states, that "research on Schadenfreude has shown this malicious joy to be evoked by the downfall of high achievers, especially when they are envied or resented." (291) We need look no further than any tabloid news show or the comment section of any blog to see how true this is. Those who most often come under the malicious thumb of Schadenfreude generally possess some attribute which we, as outsiders, envy and on some level may even desire. In his article "Why Do We Laugh at Idols?": Self-Evaluation and Schadenfreude Following Another's

Misfortune in the Media" Ouwerkerk argues "that another's misfortune may serve people's striving for a positive self-evaluation" (2). We overcompensate for the attributes that we do not possess, or the things we dislike about ourselves by bashing others who have these qualities. Schadenfreude occurs in our everyday lives, but most explicitly it rears its head in the media. It is here that all one could ever desire is put on high definition, 24/7 display.

No one has been victim to this mentality more than Michael Jackson. His rise and fall are epic. The ancient Greek poets would be hard pressed to spin a better tale. His was a life wrought with turmoil, outrageous talent and everything in between. Raised in the poor steel town of Gary, Indiana by an abusive work horse father, he grew to be known as one of the most talented, and flawed, men in show business. How did the media, and indeed the general public, get to be so comfortable with a modern day public stoning of such a force? Indeed, many would argue that Jackson's own actions are to blame for much of his public image. From purportedly purchasing the Elephant Man's bones, to sleeping in a hyperbaric chamber, to his ever changing skin color and facial features this is definitely not an allegation that I would disagree with. It is, however, one that I would argue against. One has to look no further than to such controversial figures as Elvis Presley, Roman Polanski and R. Kelly. In these three figures we are able to examine in just what ways Michael Jackson may indeed have been a special case.

Jackson's largest burden throughout the latter part of his life was due to allegations of child molestation. These charges, one of which was proven to be false, would follow him until his death. However, while the charges against Jackson were in many ways unfounded, there exists concrete documented proof pertaining to the guilt of Presley, Polanski and Kelly of sexual misconduct with minors. It is common knowledge that Presley began a relationship with Priscilla when she was no more than 14, while Polanski fled the country to avoid sentencing pertaining to the rape of a minor. Most explicit of all, however, are the R. Kelly sex tapes which show him engaging in various sexual acts with a minor. None of these men ever served time in prison, and indeed many escaped public persecution or experienced a significant waning of it at some point. When people discuss Elvis Presley, the fact that he had a child bride is largely ignored. He is praised as the "King of Rock and Roll" with little to no mention, aside the accolades, of this crime. In Polanski's case many in Hollywood defend him to this day. He has won Lifetime achievement awards, and there is even an ongoing petition circulating to clear him of any wrongdoing. Out of the three only R. Kelly has seemed to face any real public scrutiny. There have been no "free R. Kelly petitions." Few if any of his peers have publicly stepped forward on his behalf as far as these allegations were concerned. While he did experience periods of public scrutiny over this, none of it was as harsh as what was dealt out to Michael Jackson. Perhaps this is because his star is dimmer outside of the Black community. To this day many refuse to

buy his records. That has not, however, stopped his recent resurgence and acceptance into the scene. I am then left to conclude that Jackson's public crucifixion is in large part due to his freak factor and even to a small extent his status as an extremely talented and business savvy Black man. Further, the nature of his alleged crimes (little boys as opposed to little girls) is significantly different than those of the aforementioned men which, in conjunction with the other factors, helps to paint a picture as to the treatment he received in the media.

At one point in American (and indeed worldwide) pop culture Michael Jackson was THE biggest thing ever. He ruled the '80s as a powerful creative force, forever revolutionizing the music video medium and evolving dance with every move he made. His reign was so strong that he was even christened the "King of Pop" by his pal Elizabeth Taylor at an awards show. For a time it seemed as though he could do no wrong. In some ways we can mark public perception of him, and indeed his so-called "creep factor," by the physical changes which he underwent. It appears that the whiter his skin got, and the more surgeries he underwent to change his facial features, the odder his behavior got. In actuality, it just took us that long to notice. Jackson's public admiration of children did not magically begin once the child molestation allegations surfaced in 1993. Rather, publicly, they date back to at least 1984 when child star Emmanuel Lewis accompanied him to the Grammy's. According to Jackson biographer J. Randy Taraborelli, "to the world at large, his interest seemed odd, but not necessarily inappropriate." While undoubtedly there was a slight unease even then, he was still "normal" Michael Jackson. As long as he appeared as we knew him then all oddities could be chalked up to his "eccentricity" and therefore ignored. As a result, the more foreign he became to us in appearance the easier it became to associate negative things with him. Journalist David Schultz highlights how this has continued, even after his death, by noting how "in all the major papers and music sites, the photos are of Jackson from his younger, pre-plastic surgery days because this is the Michael Jackson we all want to remember"

As time wore on the changes to his appearance had become so drastic that in many ways he had become both MORE familiar to us and shockingly UN-familiar. Through his ever changing skin tone, brought on by the skin disease Vitiligo, he ceased to be a color, becoming universalized in a way by his dual nature as both a black AND white figure. Though he would always be a Black man on the inside, his pale outer appearance, in conjunction with his soft spoken peace loving nature, made him an unthreatening figure to many "what with his too short pants [and] white socks" as Anne Zaleski points out in her article "Remembering Michael Jackson." His increasing un-familiarity, however, became his downfall. The more he changed the more the public was able to dissociate him with the MJ of old. If any negative feelings existed about him before then there were really some to be had now! When the allegations hit

the news, television reports and articles were littered with the words “freak”, “odd ball” and “eccentric”. Furthermore, it was around this time that the media began referring to him as “Wacko Jacko”, a name that would stick with him until his death. Although the public was still largely under his spell their opinion was slowly turning against him and conditions were becoming ripe for what would turn out to be a defining moment in Jackson’s life.

Jackson’s complete hold on pop culture came to a staggering halt in 1993 during the second leg of his “Dangerous World Tour.” Jordan Chandler, a young man whom he had become acquainted with the previous year, had accused him of sexual molestation. “Jackson had befriended the boy in 1992. Soon the boy became a regular guest at Jackson’s Neverland Ranch in Santa Ynez, California. Mark McClish notes in his article, “Michael Jackson’s Child Molestation Charges” how “Jackson gave the boy gifts and paid for several vacation trips around the world. [And that in] in 1993, the boy started to spend the night at Jackson’s residence” (McClish). It is at this point that things become unclear, and the line between fact and fiction is heavily blurred. It is common knowledge that pedophiles never have one victim, the web article “Pedophiles and Their Characteristics explains that pedophiles “often have numerous victims and many claim to have abused hundreds or thousands of children.” (AboutTips) This should possibly have been the first tip off to the news media to handle this case with caution and care. Michael’s, at this point decade long, history with children was nothing new. He was known to frequent the pediatric wards of hospitals and was an active supporter of charities including the Make-A-Wish Foundation. By 1993 it was not necessarily odd to hear that he was having sleepovers with children as “he would often have children sleep over at his Neverland Ranch.” (McClish) However, the trouble came when it was revealed the extent to which these sleepovers occurred. Through the first round of allegations we found that Jackson often shared a room, if not the same bed, with the children and that their parents were not always present. Things that would have caught little if any steam in the ‘80s set off a firestorm of controversy amidst the shameful allegations. In her explosive 1994 GQ article “Was Michael Jackson Framed?” Mary A. Fischer explained how “Within twenty-four hours [of this news being leaked], Jackson was the lead story on seventy-three TV news broadcasts in the Los Angeles area alone and was on the front page of every British newspaper. The story of Michael Jackson and the 13-year-old boy became a frenzy of hype and unsubstantiated rumor, with the line between tabloid and mainstream media virtually eliminated” (Fischer).

In early 1994 the case was settled out of court for an estimated 20 million dollars. In a 1996 interview with Diane Sawyer Jackson discusses why he opted for an out of court settlement.

Diane Sawyer: Why did you settle the case? And it looks to everyone as if

you paid a huge amount of money

Michael Jackson: Well most of that is folklore. I talked to my lawyers, and I said 'can you guarantee me that justice will prevail?' And they said, 'Michael we cannot guarantee you that a judge or a jury will do anything'. And with that I was like catatonic, I was outraged. Totally outraged. So what I said was 'I have got to do something to get out from under this nightmare. All these lies, and all of these people coming forth to get paid and these tabloid shows. Just lies! Lies, lies, lies!' So what I did, we got together, me and my advisors and there was hands down a unanimous decision - resolve the case. This could be something that could go on for seven years!

And with that thought in mind Jackson paid off his accuser, hoping to leave this mess behind him. Unfortunately that was not to be the case. The media would not allow it. Schadenfreude would be a constant presence in Jackson's life until, and even after, his death.

During and following the investigation of the original allegations there came out of the woodwork many who attempted to cash in on the uproar surrounding the case. There was the "Neverland 5", a group of disgruntled soon to be former employees who sold stories to tabloid papers and news shows such as "Hard Copy" about what they had supposedly witnessed at Jackson's home. All were eventually discredited in one way or another. Even Jackson's own sister, LaToya coaxed by her husband Jack Gordon, gave sensationalistic interviews to the tabloid media. None, however, were more malicious than Evan Chandler, Jordan's father. In Mary A. Fischer's 1994 GQ article he was exposed as the mastermind behind the allegations. While released to little fanfare, and rarely mentioned when discussing the allegations, it stands as documented proof that the child molestation allegations may have indeed been a complete lie. Revealed in the article, and later leaked to the media, is a taped phone conversation where Evan Chandler states:

"And if I go through with this, I win big-time. There's no way I lose. I've checked that inside out. I will get everything I want, and they will be destroyed forever. June will lose [custody of the son]...and Michael's career will be over."

[Further on the tape he foretells what will occur exactly six weeks later]

"It's going to be bigger than all of us put together. The whole thing is going to crash down on everybody and destroy everybody in sight. It will be a massacre if I don't get what I want." (Fischer)

What Evan Chandler wanted was money, specifically a script writing deal. He was a dentist by profession, but his heart was in screen writing. He even co-wrote the 1992 film "Robin Hood: Men in Tights". When his ex wife and son made friends with Michael Jackson (and he perceived that they were leaving him out) he saw the perfect opportunity.

The media circus that surrounded Jackson during and following the whole ordeal had a profound effect on the remainder of his life. Not only did it undoubtedly contribute to his chronic insomnia (which contributed to the prescription drug abuse that would later kill him) and feelings of loneliness, it also littered his next release "HIStory". Songs like "Scream", "Money" and "Tabloid Junkie" directly addressed what he had been going through the past few years. In general the album had a decidedly anti-tabloid media sensibility about it. On "Tabloid Junkie" he sang "Just because you read it in a magazine/ or see it on a TV screen/ don't make it actual/ factual", and on "Money" he spat "They don't care/ They'd do me for the money/ They don't care/ They use me for the money." Post allegations MJ was paranoid and he was definitely angry. On the track "Scream" he raged "Tired of injustice/ Tired of the schemes/ These lies are disgusting". Also notable is that he was sadder. On the track "Stranger in Moscow" he lamented "I was wandering in the rain/ Mask of life, feelin' insane/ Swift and sudden fall from grace/ Sunny days seem far away", and further into the song he begged the question, "how does it feel/ When you're alone and you're cold inside?". To say that he was depressed would be an understatement. The man was, on some level, emotionally ruined. No work, however, encompasses just what he may have been feeling and wanting to say quite like his 1997 short film *Ghosts*.

Ghosts was a short film that was already in production at the time that the 1993 allegations broke, but was shut down following news of the allegations. According to the original director, Mick Garis, *Ghosts* '93 was "something completely different" (Adams) than what we got in 1996. While not much is available to tell what the original would have been like, I think it would be safe to say that it probably did not start out as an allegorical representation of Jackson's life. *Ghosts 2.0*, however, is just that. Each character, each scene, each bit of dialogue and even the songs depict Jackson's media persecution and fall from grace.

Michael Jackson's *Ghosts* opens with a mob of townspeople heading up to the Maestro's mansion. The Maestro, played by Michael Jackson, is a mysterious figure that lives in the town

with his “family”. It doesn’t appear that he is part of ordinary town life because although they know of him they don’t actually know him and all of the adults, except for the Mayor, seem afraid. The Mayor, also played by Jackson, is out to get rid of the Maestro by any means. Representing California Prosecutor Tom Sneddon, who pursued Michael during his case in 1993, the Mayor leads the mob to the mansion with pitchforks and torches at the ready. Similar to in his own life, the trouble is brought on by his weird factor, in addition to his relationship with children. The Maestro relates better to the children than he does to the adult townspeople because the children do not judge him and are not afraid. He enjoys entertaining the kids through his magic tricks, scare routines, and ghost family. Before the first confrontation with the Maestro one of the young boys asks “why can’t we just leave him alone?” to which the Mayor replies, “He’s a weirdo, there’s no place in this town for weirdoes”. Finally, when the Mayor is first brought face to face with the Maestro he tells him that “we want you out. We have a nice normal town; normal people; normal kids. We don’t need freaks like you telling them ghost stories”. A couple of exchanges later he foams “you’re weird, you’re strange, and I don’t like you. You’re scaring these kids, living up here all alone.”

From this point on the Maestro attempts to show the townspeople what is it that he does, while also scaring them senseless as payback. He performs a series of songs, dance routines, and magic tricks for the townspeople, in a ghoulish and at times frightening fashion. Each song that he performs relates in some way back to his constant media persecution, especially the song “Ghosts” in which he directly addresses the media’s Schadenfreude:

And who gave you the right to scare my family? / And who gave you the right to scare my baby, she needs me / And who gave you the right to shake my family tree? / And who gave you the right to take intrusion, to see me? / And who gave you the right to shake my family? / And who gave you the right to hurt my baby, she needs me / And who gave you the right to shake my family tree? / You put a knife in my back, / Shot an arrow in me! / Tell me are you the ghost of jealousy?

In this one song he sums up the media persecution that he has had to endure and its results. He’s been hounded, as well as his family and even first wife Lisa Marie Presley. He’s had his privacy violated in the most extreme way. During the 1993 allegations a search warrant was issued on his body, a strip examination was performed and photos were taken. As the Maestro sings this he is posing the question not only to the Mayor and the townspeople, but to the viewers as well. Who gave us this right? Who made society and the media think that they could just do this to someone and that it would be ok? Not only that, but what made us think that we

could do it, get away with it, and *enjoy* it?

The parallels between Jackson's own life are too obvious to dismiss simply as being just a part of the film. The taunts of "freak" and "weirdo" are what Jackson had come to be known as early as the late 1980s. At the end of *Ghost*, the Maestro asks if they still want him to leave and while most of the others shake their heads no the Mayor still says yes, despite being visibly shaken. At this the Maestro gets down on his knees and "kills" himself. First he smashes each of his hands against the marble floor and finally his face, causing him to crumble and disintegrate away. At this all of the children and adults show faces of shock and sadness. They comment on how good of a person he really was, and how he "never hurt anybody". The Mayor however will have none of this, he has gotten what he wants and is pleased, ready to lead the people back to their "normal" town free of the freak. The Maestro has the last laugh, however. As the Mayor opens the door to leave he is greeted with a giant comical version of the Maestro face which says "hello!" to him. Greatly disturbed he runs out of the house amidst the laughter of the Maestro and the townspeople. They then tell the Maestro how sorry they are for the misunderstanding and he accepts, asking one last question "but did we have a good time here?" They answer yes.

The death of the Maestro and his triumphant return are eerily similar to the events in Jackson's own life as of late. From the late '80s until his death in 2009, Michael Jackson had been through the wringer. From various unsubstantiated rumors to two bouts of child molestation allegations (the second of which occurred in 2005, he was later acquitted) Jackson's persona and life had become a media spectacle. Our Schadenfreude turned him into a cruel joke and it took his death for the mob which so relentlessly hounded him to take a moment to reflect upon the damage. Growing up as a kid in the 90s it was not necessarily hard to find books on him, or his CDs in stores. This all changed by the end of the decade. His commercial appeal had waned and his increasing freak factor did nothing to help public perception of him. From marrying, divorcing and having children with his dental assistant, to dangling his child off a balcony and forcing his children to cover their faces in public it seemed for a time that no one wanted much to do with him.

That has all recently changed with his death and the docu-concert release of the show that never was, *This Is It*. As of now the film has grossed over \$250 million worldwide and there is a planned DVD/Blu-Ray release slated for the spring which is sure to draw in even more interest. I had the pleasure of attending a midnight viewing of *This Is It* and the experience was amazing to say the least. The Clifton, NJ theatre was packed and it was a near religious experience as a reverent hush fell over the dark theatre as the film started. We laughed, we sang, we cried, we danced, we loved him. But why the sudden change? Why the renewed enthusiasm that in some ways is a more morbid version of the Michael Mania which ensued in the early

'80s? In an article on celebrity death culture journalist Stephen Marche had this to say: "We create celebrities in large part to watch them die" and once they die we hold them up to be these super hero versions of their living selves. For Michael Jackson this is proving to be true. Where were the en-masse accolades when he needed them? Both "Q-Tip and Spike Lee held competing parties in his honor to celebrate his first birthday as a dead man" (Marche) but where were the celebrity organized parties in his honor when he was alive to actually attend? The man had been dying a slow death since the early 1990s and by his second bout with child molestation allegations in 2005 he was on his last leg. J. Randy Taraborelli noted that during this time he "seemed to be dying in front of my very eyes. He was clearly in terrible pain, both physical and emotional" (Tarabroelli). We did this to Michael Jackson. Our Schadenfreudistic ways crippled an already fragile individual and yes we did have a good time.

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