

# Mediální obraz Michaela Jacksona napříč jeho kariérou a po jeho smrti

## Diplomová práce

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# The Portrayal of Michael Jackson in the Media throughout his Career and after his Death

## Diploma thesis

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## ZADÁNÍ DIPLOMOVÉ PRÁCE

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### Zásady pro vypracování:

Cílem diplomové práce je zmapovat vývoj mediálního obrazu Michaela Jacksona v různých fázích jeho kariéry a po jeho smrti.

Teoretická část se bude věnovat mediálnímu obrazu obecně, základům jeho vytváření a jeho dopadům na osobní život a kariéru slavných osobností. Praktická část bude aplikovat poznatky z teoretické části na život a kariéru Michaela Jacksona, zmapuje, kdy a k jakým změnám došlo v jeho mediálním obrazu a pokusí se tyto změny analyzovat a poukázat na jejich příčiny.

#### Metody:

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**JACKSON, Michael. Moonwalk. New York: Doubleday, 1988.**

**Living with Michael Jackson: A Tonight Special. 2003. UK. DVD.**

**Michael Jackson: Legacy. 2009. USA. DVD.**

**Michael Jackson: Mega Star. 1987. GER. DVD.**

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**Sekundární literatura:**

**GLEDHILL, Christine. Stardom: Industry of Desire. London: Routledge, 1991.**

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**SHUKER, Roy. Understanding Popular Music Culture. London: Routledge, 2001.**

**WALL, Tim. Studying Popular Music Culture. London: Hodder & Stoughton Educational, 2003.**

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## **Poděkování**

Děkuji panu Mgr. Zénó Vernyikovi, Ph.D. za cenné rady a vstřícnou pomoc při zpracování této diplomové práce.

## **Anotace**

Diplomová práce s názvem Mediální obraz Michaela Jacksona napříč jeho kariérou a po jeho smrti se zabývá vlivem způsobu prezentování zpěváka v médiích na jeho život a kariéru. Cílem práce je popsat důležitost mediálního obrazu, a na konkrétním případě Michaela Jacksona ukázat, jak negativní vliv mediální obraz může mít na osobní život slavné osobnosti.

## **Klíčová slova**

Michael Jackson, média, hvězda, vzhled, identita, sexualita

## **Annotation**

The diploma thesis "The portrayal of Michael Jackson in the media throughout his career and after his death" deals with the influence a singer's media portrayal has on his life and career. The aim of the thesis is to describe the importance of media presentation and to show, with reference to the particular case of Michael Jackson, that it can have a negative effect on a famous person's life.

## **Key words**

Michael Jackson, media, star, appearance, identity, sexuality



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# 1. Introduction

Michael Jackson is one of the most famous performing artists of all time. He was not only a singer and dancer, but a writer, composer, an actor, a film director and much more. He showed his enormous talents as a child and as an adult he became a performer known all over the world. It is only natural that with success like this comes massive interest from the media. Jackson appeared in various forms of the media on a daily basis. Due to the changes that his body underwent, an identity that was considered ambiguous by the public and the controversial events that accompanied his personal life, Jackson was often a target of unpleasant media speculation. "Some of the more controversial aspects of his biography were almost always viewed by the media in a negative light"(Fast 2010, 259). Jackson himself considered this speculation an attack on his personality and had a hard time dealing with it. People very often believe everything that the media present them with without thinking about it or asking additional questions. "Why we do not challenge more fiercely, and with compassion, media representations of popular music artists who are hated for their difference?" (Fast 2010, 266) Unfortunately, media literacy and critical thinking are sometimes left to one side because the sensation, the scandal and the controversy are simply too attractive and "juicy" for people to apply common sense.

The aim of this thesis is to analyse the media portrayal of Michael Jackson throughout his career and after his death in terms of its influence on the singer's personal life and career. The second chapter deals with the theory of being a popular music star, with particular reference to Michael Jackson. It first of all describes the study of popular music in general. Then it focuses on what it means to be popular. Finally, this chapter describes how the media influence the popularity of stars.

The third chapter is a short biography of Michael Jackson, describing his life, mainly from his own point of view. Jackson's childhood, life and the beginning of his career are essential for an understanding of the problems he had in his personal life as an adult, which are analysed in this thesis.

The fourth chapter applies the information from the previous chapters to Jackson's portrayal in the media. The chapter is divided into three parts. The first focuses on how the media portrayed Jackson from the beginning of his career until the success of the Thriller album. The second part deals with the period from the success of Thriller until Jackson's death. It analyses the topics most frequently discussed about him - his appearance, identity and sexuality. The last part deals with the time after the singer's death.

This Diploma thesis will attempt to demonstrate in these three chapters that **the portrayal of Michael Jackson in the media mostly had a negative effect on his life and career, particularly during the period that**

**stretched from the colossal success of his Thriller album, and his worldwide super-stardom, to his death.**

## **2. Popular music theory**

### **2.1. Studying popular music**

Popular music is an integral part of our everyday lives. We hear it on television and radio in our homes and cars and even in shopping centres, restaurants or elevators. People are used to hearing it everywhere; it has the ability to set their mood and sometimes makes them dance or sing without even thinking about it. Since it is such a big part of people's lives, it was only a matter of time before the academic study of popular music and its impact on our culture began to develop. "Academic analysis of popular music and its associated manifestations was initially slow to develop. During the 1970s and 1980s, even the increasingly popular field of media studies tended to concentrate its attention on the visual media, particularly television, and neglected popular music" (Shuker 2001, 1). The main focus of these studies was the stars of the screen, meaning actors and films in general. "Given how important pop stars are within the music industry, and how important they are to our everyday discussions about pop music, it is surprising how little has been produced by academics on the subject" (Wall 2003, 153). The demand for examinations of popular music began to grow and popular music studies established their importance:

There were notable exceptions, with the work of scholars such as Simon Frith, George Lipsitz, Iain Chambers, Angela McRobbie, Richard Middleton, John Shepherd, Dave Laing, Lawrence Grossberg, and Nelson George. During the 1990s, there was a veritable flood of material, as well as a marked increase in the number of courses either directly focusing on popular music or on this genre as an aspect of popular culture and media studies (Shuker 2001, 1).

A large part of popular music studies is devoted to rock/pop music because this is what appeals to the young audience that provides such a huge contribution to the music and mass-media market:

The new prominence of popular music studies reflects recognition of rock/pop music's centrality as a global cultural phenomenon, associated with a multi-billion dollar industry, and a many faceted pop-youth culture reaching out into every aspect of style. This emerging literary explosion takes a number of forms and approaches to the topic from a range of perspectives, including political economy, cultural studies, feminist studies, and media studies, this last with its own rich theoretical mix of film theory, semiotics, psychoanalysis, feminism, and social theory (Shuker 2001, 1).

The term popular music might be confusing, in that different people may associate it with different meanings. The interpretation of the term lies in three possible ways of understanding it:

Popular music is associated with the music that sells the most CDs and the stars with a large fan following. To others it is the poorest type of 'dumbed-down' music that is easy to listen to and enjoyed by people who know little about, or do not appreciate, more complex music. Finally, though, popular music is seen in very positive terms as any type of music made and enjoyed by a particular scene as a way of celebrating its distinctive identity (Wall 2003, 2).

It is not possible to limit our understanding to only one of these interpretations because every one of them offers a unique way of looking

at popular music. "It seems that a satisfactory definition of popular music must encompass both musical and socio-economic characteristics. Essentially, all popular music consists of a hybrid of musical traditions, styles, and influences, and is also an economic product which is invested with ideological significance by many of its consumers" (Shuker 2001, 7). Popular music is music that is appreciated by a significant number of people and whose recordings are successful on the music market.

In order to be consumed in its various forms, popular music must be brought to the attention of the people; its audience:

The music can be reproduced in various formats (or 'texts') – vinyl, audio tape, compact disc, DAT (Digital Audio Tape), and video – and on variations within these: the dance mix, the cassette single, the limited collector's edition, the remastered CD, and so on. The music can then be disseminated in a variety of ways – through radio airplay, discos and nightclubs, television music video shows and MTV-style channels, live concert performances, and the Internet and MP3. Accompanying these can be advertising, reviews of the text or performance, and interviews with the performer(s) in the various publications of the music press (Shuker 2001, 4).

All these elements are dealt with by producers, record companies and record labels:

The artists and repertoire (A&R) department of a recording label are responsible for working with acts who are already under contract, and finding new talent. They are constantly seeking out new material and acts to sign, attempting to develop a roster of artists for the company. A&R staff are frequently involved in all aspects of an artist's relationship with the record company, including the initial negotiations and the signing of the contract, the rehearsal, arrangement and recording of songs, and liaising

with the marketing, video production and promotion divisions of the recording company (Shuker 2001, 46).

The mass media also play an important role in promoting popular music stars. "Then there is the music press, which plays a major part in the process of selling music as an economic commodity, while at the same time investing it with cultural significance" (Shuker 2001, 83). The mass media are essential for a singer who wants to succeed in the field of popular music because they play the role of mediator of their work to the people, the consumers of music.

The consumers of popular music are often called fans and can be divided into two categories – the fans that are interested in the music and the fans that are interested in the star:

The 'serious fans' are characterised by what can be termed 'secondary involvement' in music: the seeking out of rare releases, such as the picture discs and bootlegs; the reading of fanzines in addition to commercial music magazines; concert going; and an interest in record labels and producers as well as performers. These are fans in terms of the word's origins in 'fanatic', but their fanaticism is usually at more of an intellectual level and focused on the music *per se* rather than on the persona of the performer(s). 'Fans', in the more widely accepted pejorative sense of the term, will collect the records put out by their favoured 'star' performers, but these are only one aspect of an interest focused rather on the image and persona of the star (Shuker 2001, 213, 214).



## 2.2. To be popular

Music is a part of our lives from the day we are born until the day we die. "Popular music has been called the soundtrack to our lives: we can hear it on the radio, on our CD player, on the tape in our Walkman, piped into shops, and during television adverts and programmes. Like the soundtrack to a film it plays an important part in cultivating our moods and feelings. We listen to it because it is a source of pleasure, excitement and passion" (Wall 2003, 1). Ordinary consumers of popular music may take the music they hear on their radios for granted, unaware of the work of the production companies and mass media in promoting a particular song or pop star. People listen to CDs and go to concerts because it is what they like to do, but making people happy is not the only goal or aspect of the popular music market. "These experiences are not only part of our culture, they are also part of the culture of the record industry, which uses them to promote the music they have produced. This relationship between music, the industry, and consumers is what constitutes popular music culture" (Wall 2003, 1). Popular music culture therefore has to be considered the sum of all of its attributes.

When talking about popular music culture and the consumption of popular music, it has to be mentioned that the central role is played by the protagonist of the music - the star - because the star is what gives the

music and the efforts of the music market and media a face, a face that embodies all the other parts of the process behind it. "The important question is not so much 'what is a star?' but 'how do stars function – within the music industry, within textual narratives, and, in particular, at the level of individual fantasy and desire?' While there is a large body of theoretically oriented work on film stars, the study of stardom in popular music is largely limited to personal biographies of widely varying analytical value" (Shuker 2001, 116). Popular music studies distinguish between the terms musical auteurs and stars:

Musical auteurs are producers of art, extending the cultural form and, in the process, challenging their listeners. Critics and fans generally refer here to several interlocking criteria: the ability of the auteur to break new ground, innovating, crossing or blurring genre boundaries; the ability to perform their own 'original' material, especially by writing their own songs; the exercising of a fair measure of control over various facets of the production process; and the holding of some sense of personal overarching vision of the music and its relation to the canon. Auteurs are usually considered to maintain their high profile over a period of time (Shuker 2001, 118).

A musician is considered a star when he is famous, has a large fan base and is constantly in the public eye. "Auteurs enjoy respect for their professional performance, especially their ability to transcend the traditional aesthetic forms of the genres they work within. Stars go beyond this and indeed may not be stars primarily on the strength of their music, also enjoying wider public interest and public fascination with their personas and personal lives" (Shuker 2001, 115). Being a star does not

necessarily mean achieving success within the public domain illegitimately, without making any actual contribution to the music industry. "There are popular music performers who can be considered both stars and auteurs, combining a high level of creativity and innovation in their work with broader media interest and public visibility" (Shuker 2001, 116). There are plenty of musicians who can be considered both auteurs and stars and Michael Jackson might be considered one of them.

To appear in the media means to have an audience. "Music is a form of communication, and popular music, as its very name suggests, always has an audience" (Shuker 2001, 36). On the one hand, it is very common on the contemporary popular music scene for a lot of publicity to be given to new, young and in certain ways attractive musicians, but their audience is likely to forget them when they stop appearing in the mass media. On the other hand, there are performers with long careers, a relatively stable audience and a steady position in the media:

At one pole the publicity is aimed at giving a personality to an artist who, it is believed, will have a limited period as a star. This is the classic pop strategy, often aimed at young mainstream fans. At the other pole are artists who sell consistently over several years and whose records are seen as catalogue material. Here the artists and audience are constructed as serious music lovers who have stayed with an artist over many years (Wall 2003, 155).

The public tends to like stars because they offer more than one kind of entertainment. For many people, the star's personal life is their most attractive feature, meaning that the presentation of the star in the mass

media is essential. "This is to emphasise star constructions as dynamic processes, in which the musical forms of the recorded performances, and our interpretation of artists, is altered by the developing star personae. In this approach the media, and their attempts to attract fan attention, have a far greater role in defining the star persona than the recording artist themselves" (Wall 2003, 156).

The popularity and stardom of Michael Jackson is unquestionable, as is his successful career in popular music. "Jackson is reputed to have amassed a personal fortune of some 75 million dollars at the age of 26. Even more remarkably, he's been a star since he was 11 and sang lead with his brothers in the Jackson Five, the biggest selling group on the Tamla Motown label in the 1970s" (Gledhill 1991, 305). Jackson was also successful in popularizing African-American music:

Jackson has not 'crossed over' from black to white stations to end up in the middle of the road: his success has popularised black music in white rock and pop markets, by actually playing with imagery and style which have always been central to the marketing of pop. In so doing, Jackson has opened up a space in which new stars like Prince are operating, at the interface between the boundaries defined by 'race' (Gledhill 1991, 308).

Jackson was a true star in the sense that he appeared constantly in the mass media for decades. The roots of his popularity lie in his remarkable talents – singing, dancing and song-writing. "His *Off The Wall* LP of 1979, which established him as a solo star, demonstrates the lithe, sensual texture of his voice and its mastery over a diverse range of musical

styles and idioms, from romantic ballad to rock" (Gledhill 1991, 305). Jackson's voice is characteristic and unique and his singing fascinating. "Undoubtedly, it is the voice which lies at the heart of his appeal. Rooted in the Afro-American tradition of 'soul', Jackson's vocal performance is characterised by breathy gasps, squeaks, sensual sighs and other wordless sounds which have become his stylistic signature" (Gledhill 1991, 305). Jackson was also an exceptional dancer. "The emotional and erotic expressiveness of the voice is complemented by the sensual grace and sheer excitement of Jackson's dancing style: even as a child, his stage performance provoked comparisons with James Brown and Jackie Wilson" (Gledhill 1991, 305). It is not only Jackson's appeal to the mass media that led to him being proclaimed the king of Pop, but also his many professional achievements.

### **2.3. Media related**

The study of popular music is closely connected to studies of the mass media:

While not all popular culture is associated with the mass media, there is a reciprocal relationship between the two. The mass media involve large-scale production, by large economic units, for a mass, albeit segmented, market. The term 'mass media' refers to print, aural, and visual communication on a large scale – the press, publishing, radio and television, film and video, the recording industry, and telecommunications, to mention only the

more obvious mediums of production and dissemination (Shuker 2001, 3).

The mass media play an important role in the promotion of popular music.

In order to embrace popular culture and popular music to the full extent, it is essential to acquire a certain level of knowledge about the mass media:

The arguments in support of media literacy are various, but centrally involve two facts of contemporary life. First, the mass/popular media's saturation of society, and the high levels of its consumption among young people; and, second, the pervasive influence of these media, which act as 'consciousness industries'. The second core argument for media literacy is the sheer influence of the media, reflecting its pervasiveness and high levels of consumption. As is frequently pointed out by commentators, the media operate as consciousness industries, shaping our perceptions, values and norms, and confirming or denying these (Shuker 2001, 10).

Since the media have such an enormous impact on the public, its opinions and its demands, it is important for the public to understand how the mass media work. "The study of popular music is part of the more general project of critical cultural studies: to 'read' the commercial media in a critical manner, in order to acquire media literacy" (Shuker 2001, 9). The audience needs to understand that the portrayal of stars in the media is not a true representation of reality and that they have to use their skills of critical thought to be able to distinguish the relevant information from images constructed by the media. "We need to understand how stars are signalled as special individuals, and how star personae are constructed"

(Wall 2003, 153). The image of a star consists of three main parts: the star's talent and professionalism, his/her personal charisma and behaviour and his/her media image, a well-constructed decoy to attract the audience:

Stars are famous individuals, widely known, and often admired and desired. These attributes are usually seen as the product of talent or personal magnetism; of charisma. We feel we know stars as individuals, but our experience of them is always mediated through the interviews, records, photographs and video appearances we consume. Our awareness of these individuals, and our knowledge of their fame and talent, is the product of carefully executed publicity campaigns. In turn our knowledge of the star is used to encourage us to purchase records and an array of secondary merchandise through which we are invited to express our commitment (Wall 2003, 153).

Everything is carefully planned in order to maximize profits.

Our experience of popular music is saturated by the popular mass media, which provide us with a variety of information about our favourite music stars. "These publications reinforce the star aspect of pop consumption, feeding fans' desire for consumable images and information about their preferred performers" (Shuker 2001, 84). The media that focus on music in particular are referred to as the music press. "The term 'music press' obviously covers a wider range of publications. Most newspapers and general magazines include some coverage, with reviews of contemporary recordings, artist profiles/interviews, and, most commonly, lifestyles and associated gossip" (Shuker 2001, 84). Popular music journalism is not just about what goes to print, however, but about radio and television broadcasting and the Internet. A considerable amount of

popular music journalism focuses on the personal lives of stars and the scandals surrounding them rather than on the musical aspect. "Popular music journalism includes the proliferation of 'quickie' publications aiming to cash in on the latest pop sensation. Reading like press releases, these concentrate on the pictorial aspects of their subjects rather than provide any extended critical commentary, and are often little more than pseudo-publicity" (Shuker 2001, 84).

Jackson's fame has its roots in his talents and professionalism and in his frequent appearances in the media. "But there is another element to Jackson's success and popularity - his image. Jackson's individual style fascinates and attracts attention. The anklecut jeans, the single-gloved hand and, above all, the wet-look hairstyle which have become his trademarks, have influenced the sartorial repertoires of black and white youth cultures and been incorporated into mainstream fashion" (Gledhill 1991, 306).

Jackson's unique style was all part of his image, his trademark, but after the success of *Thriller*, the mass media started to focus more on Jackson's personal life and his changing appearance. "Most striking is the change in Jackson's looks and physical appearance as he has grown. The cute child dressed in gaudy flower-power gear and sporting a huge 'Afro' hairstyle has become, as a young adult, a paragon of racial and sexual ambiguity" (Gledhill 1991, 306). Jackson's face, hair and skin started



changing and the public were curious about these changes, with the mass media beginning their never-ending speculation about the star:

What makes this reconstruction of Jackson's image more intriguing is the mythology built up around it, in which it is impossible or simply beside the point to distinguish truth from falsehood. It is said that he has undergone cosmetic surgery to adopt a more white, European look, although Jackson denies it. But the definite sense of racial ambiguity writ large in his new image is at the same time, and by the same token, the site of a sexual ambiguity bordering on androgyny (Gledhill 1991, 306).

The public, and indeed the media, speculated as to whether

Jackson was a man or a child, black or white, masculine or feminine:

The media have seized upon these ambiguities and have fabricated a 'persona', a private 'self' behind the image, which has become the subject of speculation and rumour. This mythologisation has culminated in the construction of a Peter Pan figure. We are told that behind the star's image is a lonely 'lost boy', whose life is shadowed by morbid obsessions and anxieties. He lives like a recluse and is said to 'come alive' only when he is on stage in front of his fans. The media's exploitation of public fascination with Jackson the celebrity has even reached the point of 'pathologising' his personality (Gledhill 1991, 306).

His eccentric life style and life choices constantly put Michael

Jackson on the pillory of the mass media.

### 3. Michael Jackson's life

Michael Joseph Jackson was born on the 29<sup>th</sup> of August 1958 in Gary, Indiana, USA. He was the eighth of ten children born to Joseph Walter and Katherine Esther Jackson. Michael, his parents and his siblings (Brandon, Rebbie, Jackie, Tito, Jermaine, LaToya, Marlon, Randy and Janet) lived in a small house on the Jackson street.

Since the father played the guitar in his own band and the mother liked to sing, the whole family shared a love of music. Jackson's brothers formed a band called *The Jacksons* and Michael himself joined them when he was five years old. As he mentions in his autobiography, Jackson does not remember his early days with the band. He was too young to understand much of what was happening around him and simply did as he was told. "So here's what I remember. I remember singing at the top of my voice and dancing with real joy and working too hard for a child" (Jackson 1988, 1). According to Jackson, his childhood was hard. He had practically no leisure time from the age of five. As soon as school was over, he had to go home and practise with his brothers. "I was not forced to it, I enjoyed it, but had to work really hard, sometimes there was not enough time to eat" (Jackson 1988, 2). Looking at it now, it can be said that the hard work paid off because Michael Jackson became one of the biggest pop-stars ever.

Joe Jackson, Michael's father, had a clear vision. He wanted his boys to be famous and successful. In order to achieve this goal, he was very strict and did not leave anything to chance. "Dad was grooming us for talent contests. He was a great trainer, and he spent a lot of money and time working with us" (Jackson 1988, 10). Soon the band became well known in their hometown and started to attend shows in bigger cities, which was a real challenge for a child band. "We were competing against people of all ages and skills, from drill teams to comedians to other singers and dancers like us. We had to grab that audience and keep it. Nothing was left to chance, so clothes, shoes, hair, everything had to be the way Dad planned it. We really looked amazingly professional" (Jackson 1988, 12). In 1969, the Jackson family, and the band, moved to Southern California, signed with Motown Records and changed their name to *The Jackson 5*. This was the beginning of their stardom. "In 1971, we played forty-five cities that summer, followed by fifty more cities later that year" (Jackson 1988, 36). By now they were famous all over the United States. Everybody wanted to see *The Jackson 5* singing and dancing.

Jackson had a very close relationship with his mother, Katherine. He considered her loving, generous and encouraging. She taught her children to love God and be good people. "Because of Katherine's gentleness, warmth, and attention, I can't imagine what it must be like to grow up without a mother's love" (Jackson 1988, 5). Jackson often said that he had no childhood.

One of the reasons for this was that from the age of five he spent all his time working on his future career. The other reason was the behaviour of his father. Joe Jackson was very strict with his children. He was more of a boss to them than a father. In the documentary *Living with Michael Jackson: A Tonight Special*, Jackson claims that all of the children were beaten by the father. Joe was training them, preparing them to be stars, and often used rather heavy-handed methods. Jackson remembers that he was practising some dance moves and his father was watching him closely, holding a belt. If he missed a step, he would get beaten. The children were scared of their father, who often lost his temper. He did not even let them call him father: they had to call him Joe.

Joe was so focused on his children's career that he was able to relate to them only through music and business. They knew him as a manager, not as a father. "I still don't know him, and that's sad for a son who hungers to understand his own father. He's still a mystery man to me and he may always be one" (Jackson 1988, 6). Joe protected them and looked after them, but he also made them work hard and had no understanding for their child-like wishes, treating them as adults. They could not do the things other children could:

There was a park across the street from the Motown studio, and I can remember looking at those kids playing games. I'd just stare at them in wonder - I couldn't imagine such freedom, such a carefree life - and wish more than anything that I had that kind of

freedom, that I could walk away and be like them. So there were sad moments in my childhood. It's true for any child star (Jackson 1988, 2).

Michael Jackson understood as an adult why his father made him work so hard, but never stopped feeling sad about his lost childhood.

Apart from his siblings, Jackson did not have any friends, had no time to find friends and was too famous to attend a regular school, meaning he had to be schooled at home. The lack of social relations was not the only problem he had to face during his adolescence. His body started to change and Jackson had a hard time dealing with those changes. "I looked in the mirror one morning and it was like, "OH NO!" I seemed to have a pimple for every oil gland. And the more I was bothered by it, the worse it got. I didn't realise it then, but my diet of greasy processed food didn't help either" (Jackson 1988, 39). The pimples were only the beginning. He grew taller and stronger, resembling a young man rather than a child, something that was received negatively by the fans. They were used to a cute little boy and demanded that little Michael perform on the stage. When they saw the adolescent Michael, they showed their dissatisfaction. "Adolescence is hard enough, but imagine having your own natural insecurities about the changes your body is undergoing heightened by the negative reactions of others" (Jackson 1988, 39). Jackson was very famous now and everywhere he went people would watch him, gaping at him, and he started to be ashamed of his own appearance. "I became subconsciously scarred by this experience with

my skin" (Jackson 1988, 40). Since he had been in show business for a long time, he understood how it works, that image is essential for a performing artist. Receiving so many negative reactions made Jackson over-sensitive about the way he looked.

Jackson's mother used to tell him that he had a gift from God, by which she meant his exceptional talent. In the documentary *Michael Jackson: The Life of an Icon* she mentions a baby Michael trying to dance to the sounds of a broken washing machine. This talent was a true blessing for Jackson:

Ever since I was a very little boy, I've been able to watch somebody do a dance step and then immediately know how to do it. Another person might have to be taken through the movement step by step and told to count and put this leg here and the hip to the right. When your hip goes to the left, put your neck over there . . . that sort of thing. But if I see it, I can do it (Jackson 1988, 56).

Jackson used to watch famous dancers performing, trying to learn as much as possible. His talent and his hard work made him a really unique dancer.

Jackson knew how to dance and sing, but he was also a very successful songwriter. When he had an idea for a song, he was able to create the whole picture in his mind: the lyrics, the music and even the dance steps. He realised that he wanted to be more creative in his career during concerts in Las Vegas. "Because we had creative control over our Las Vegas revue, it was harder for us to return to our lack of freedom in recording and writing music once we got back to Los Angeles. We'd always intended to grow and develop in the musical field" (Jackson 1988, 46). At that point Jackson started

to think about a solo career. He knew his brothers depended on him, but he depended on nobody. He was completely capable of continuing his music career on his own. "All I wanted was control over my life. And I took it. I had to do it" (Jackson 1988, 63). Jackson took full control of his career in 1979, when he was twenty one years old. He did not wish his father to remain his manager, so he found a new one – Quincy Jones.

Jackson created his music for people. He knew that music is a great and useful means of communicating with others. He had a lot to say to his fans and to the world and did it through his music. "An artist's imagination is his greatest tool. It can create a mood or feeling that people want to have, as well as transport you to a different place altogether" (Jackson 1988, 66). Jackson was not *a* star during his solo career, he was *the* star. He found the success and fame he had always wished for. His life was at a peak. Unfortunately, this kind of dream-come-true always comes with a price. "Success definitely brings on loneliness. It's true. People think you're lucky, that you have everything. They think you can go anywhere and do anything, but that's not the point. One hungers for the basic stuff" (Jackson 1988, 69). The more Jackson achieved in his career, the more problems he had in his personal life.

In 1984, Jackson had a terrible accident. "In January, I was burned on the set of a Pepsi commercial I was shooting with my brothers" (Jackson 1988, 93). Jackson suffered second and third degree burns and had to have

plastic surgery on the back of his head and take medication to relieve him of the pain. Pepsi offered Jackson compensation. "They gave me \$1,500,000 which I immediately donated to the Michael Jackson Burn Center. I wanted to do something because I was so moved by the other burn patients I met while I was in the hospital" (Jackson 1988, 94). Jackson dedicated a lot of his time and money to charity. He wanted to help people that were less fortunate – poor people, people with health or social problems, under-privileged children - and received many awards for it. One of them he even received at the White House. "Michael Jackson received a Presidential Humanitarian Award from President Ronald Reagan at the White House in May 1984, in recognition of Jackson's contribution to the government's campaign against drunk driving" (IMDB 2015). This was just one of the many charities and campaigns he contributed to.

Jackson continued his charity work when enabling children to visit his ranch, Neverland. "Jackson founded the Heal the World Foundation in 1992. The charity organization brought underprivileged children to Jackson's ranch to enjoy theme park rides that Jackson had built on the property. The foundation also sent millions of dollars around the globe to help children threatened by war, poverty, and disease" (Wikipedia 2015). Jackson loved children and believed in their pure souls and innocence, so he tried to help as many children as possible. This love of children also caused him many problems. In 1993 Jackson was accused of child molestation. He settled with



the family financially at his lawyer's advice, so there was no trial. Jackson was accused again in 2004, but this time he refused to sign a settlement. The trial took five months and Jackson was acquitted on all counts. According to Tito Jackson, even though the result was positive, Michael was "totally devastated after the trial and was never ever happy again" (Eastel 2011, 02:17:30).

Michael Jackson died on the 25<sup>th</sup> of June, 2009. His death was proclaimed homicide. "Michael Jackson's physician, Dr. Conrad Murray was charged with involuntary manslaughter in February 2010. The trial began at the end of September 2011 and the guilty verdict arrived on the 7<sup>th</sup> of November, 2011" (Contact music 2015). Murray was sentenced to four years in prison, but he served only two because of his good behaviour. "A memorial was held for Michael Jackson on the 7<sup>th</sup> of July 2009 at the Staples Center in Los Angeles. Amongst the performers were Mariah Carey, John Mayer, Jennifer Hudson, Usher, Stevie Wonder and Lionel Ritchie" (Contact music 2015). Jackson's death was an unexpected tragedy and saddened his millions of fans.

Jackson constantly wanted to help people and he was more than successful in this mission. "As a philanthropist, Jackson constantly traveled the world attending events honoring his humanitarianism and in 2000, the Guinness Book of Records recognized him for supporting 39 charities, more than any other artist or entertainer" (Wikipedia 2015). All his life Jackson

wanted to show people that it is possible to change the world. "If you want to make the world a better place, take a look at yourself and make a change. Start with the man in the mirror. Start with yourself. Don't be looking at all the other things. Start with you. That's the truth. That's what Martin Luther King meant and Gandhi too. That's what I believe" (Jackson 1988, 106).

## **4. The portrayal of Michael Jackson in the media**

### **4.1. From J5 to Thriller**

Michael Jackson was famous since he was eight years old. His exceptional talent for dancing and singing was apparent not only to the audience, but to music producers, who were more than happy to welcome him and his brothers to their companies. Jackson's performances were attractive because of his high level of professionalism. "Not only was it superior to other child singers, it was superior to other adult performers" (Nyong'o 2011, 46). When performing, Jackson showed an exceptional talent for dancing and singing. With talents like that, Jackson did not have to wait too long for success. "Michael was just fourteen years old (two years younger than Justin Bieber was in 2010), and already an industry veteran with three solo albums and six studio albums with his brothers in the Jackson 5" (Nyong'o 2011, 51). When he was eight years old, he rose to the position of lead singer, leaving behind his older brothers. As lead singer, he had to sacrifice all his free time to practising and performing. He could not afford a day-off; he had to work even if he was sick, he had to perform. As a child performer, he missed out on a lot of things that a "normal" child would have had and done. Instead of going to school and

playing with friends, he had to work hard on his performances and act like an adult and often he was exposed to things that probably should not have been seen by a child:

As was true for many other child performers, his experience as a professional entertainer exposed him to a world that middle-class family values deem unsuitable for a child: the little boy shared a stage and backstage space with strippers, foul-mouthed comedians, and drag performers. Some of the effects of this eye-opening apprenticeship were to instill in him a profound sense of professionalism, and a keen ear and eye for what worked well on stage (Warwick 2012, 242).

The unsuitable conditions for a child to grow up in and his problematic relationship with his father marked Jackson for life. "Instead of toughening him up, Jackson presents his own upbringing as producing the polar opposite of black macho: a delicate, shy oddity, comfortable only around children" (Nyong'o 2011, 53). Since Jackson was a famous child performer, he came into contact with the mass media when he still was very young.

Jackson understood the importance of the media in show business, but was not completely comfortable with being constantly followed by journalists and publicists. "It was hard to have your life turn into public property, even if you appreciated that people were interested in you because of your music" (Jackson 1988, 29). In the early years of his career, the press was interested in Jackson mainly because of his work, his music, but when his appearance started to change, it brought more

attention to him than he had wished. "His transition through puberty created anxiety, as the attributes considered appealing for a little boy would strike audiences differently coming from an adult" (Warwick 2012, 241). The public wanted to see the little boy Michael perform on stage and it took them time to get used to the fact that Jackson was not a boy anymore. The more Jackson achieved in his career, the more problems he had in his personal life, possibly because of the fact that his appearance started to change.

According to Randy Taraborrelli, Jackson had his first plastic surgery in 1978. It was a rhinoplasty procedure and Jackson claimed he needed it in order to breathe better and to be able to reach a higher tone with his voice. Jackson underwent his second rhinoplasty operation in 1981 (Eastel 2011, 01:25:40). Because the changes in his appearance were so apparent, the media and the public took a huge interest in them and started speculating. Jackson's looks and image were simply too attractive and too confusing for people to let pass without creating stories about them and what was behind them.

Jackson continued in his popular music career as an adult and became one of the most successful singers in history. "With *Thriller*, Michael Jackson established himself as the King of Pop, an imaginative songwriter, singer, dancer, and video artist, setting new standards in pop music and blurring the boundaries separating rock styles from pop, white

from black" (Warwick 2012, 256). When *Thriller* was released, Jackson agreed to perform on the Motown 25 show and that particular performance of Billie Jean made him a media sensation. Being an attractive subject for the media can have a massive effect on a person's personal life, and this was particularly true in Jackson's case. "Popular narratives of Jackson's life trajectory reveal how these virtual media constructions affect the visceral. Witnessing his many metamorphoses, audiences confronted the psychic pain of social constructions and the physical effects of injustice" (Fisher 2011, 102). The singer himself comments on the way the media portrayed him at the time of the *Thriller* success in his autobiography:

One of the side effects of the *Thriller* period was to make me weary of constantly being in the public eye. Because of this, I resolved to lead a quieter, more private life. I was still quite shy about my appearance. You must remember that I had been a child star and when you grow up under that kind of scrutiny people don't want you to change, to get older and look different. When I first became well known, I had a lot of baby fat and a very round, chubby face. That roundness stayed with me until several years ago when I changed my diet and stopped eating beef, chicken, pork, and fish, as well as certain fattening foods. I just wanted to look better, live better, and be healthier. Gradually, as I lost weight, my face took on its present shape and the press started accusing me of surgically altering my appearance, beyond the nose job I freely admitted I had, like many performers and film stars. They would take an old picture from adolescence of high school, and compare it to a current photograph. In the old picture my face would be round and pudgy. I'd have an Afro, and the picture would be badly lit. The new picture would show a much older, more mature face. I've got a different hairstyle and a different nose. Also, the photographer's lighting is excellent in the recent photographs. It's really not fair to make such comparisons. They have said I had bone surgery done on my face. It seems

strange to me that people would jump to that conclusion and I thought it was very unfair. (Jackson 1988, 92)

Thriller and Motown 25 saw Jackson gain a huge amount of popularity:

Drawing on the video he had made for 'Billie Jean', Jackson lip-synched to a recorded track, leaving him free to execute his outstanding dance steps, including the debut of the 'Moonwalk'. Jackson's performance indicated the power of such mass exposure in the marketplace. His album *Thriller*, released on 1 December 1982, had already reached number 1 over the Christmas period, and looked like emulating the success of Jackson's previous solo album *Off the Wall* (which sold 6 million copies). But the singer's charismatic and electrifying performance of 'Billie Jean' boosted the sales of *Thriller*, which went on to sell 40 million copies, the best-selling album in history (Shuker 2001, 182).

Since Jackson was now a real star, it was only natural for the mass media to follow his life story. "He or she has to be written up, photographed, filmed, interviewed, shown in the mass media. Without the mass media we would not be aware of their existence and their attributes to be celebrated. While the actual accomplishments of celebrities are of limited importance in defining and establishing their appeal their physical appearance and patterns of consumption are central to their portrayal" (Hollander 2010, 150). Jackson's appearance and behaviour were from now on considered a public issue and the mass media reported on it regularly. "This is to emphasise star constructions as dynamic processes, in which the musical forms of the recorded performances, and our interpretation of artists, is altered by the developing star personae. In this approach the media, and their attempts to attract fan attention, have a far

greater role in defining the star persona than the recording artists themselves" (Wall 2003, 156). The media are so powerful because usually they are one of the only connections, links, between the fan and the star. "The experience of most of us is saturated by the popular mass media" (Shuker 2001, 10). Due to the enormous success of *Thriller*, Jackson started appearing in the media on a regular basis.

The most famous documentary about Michael Jackson from the era that led to him being proclaimed the King of Pop, the 1980's, is *Michael Jackson: The Legend Continues*, directed by Patrick Kelly. This documentary focuses purely on Jackson's singing career. It shows his beginnings with the *Jackson 5* and him becoming a famous popular music star. His personal life is discussed only in relation to his career, for instance the incident that happened to him when shooting the Pepsi commercial. The documentaries in which his personal life was the main focus came later, mainly in the connection with his changing appearance and the child molestation accusations.



## **4.2. From the success of Thriller to his death**

### **4.2.1. Identity, appearance**

Identity is generally considered to be a set of distinctive characteristics describing an individual, a particular unit, category, or social group. "The self is reflexive in that it can take itself as an object and can categorize, classify, or name itself in particular ways in relation to other social categories or classifications. Through the process of self-categorization or identification, an identity is formed" (Burke, Stets 2000, 224). In terms of an individual, identity is how the person sees himself, a kind of self-conception, how the person presents himself, and the aspects that make him unique, how he differs from other people. "We present certain signs that identify us as an individual in the past and the present, and that will continue to do so in the future. In other words, the signs that set us apart from others are our personal identity" (Clarke 2008, 513). A person's identity is not only a matter of inner perception, but is also constructed by the society the person lives in. "The self and identity are both constructed by and maintained in parallel with societal norms" (Clarke 2008, 513). Every society has a certain set of rules, stereotypes that determine what is normal, what is acceptable,

and what is too different to be considered tolerable. "In identity theory, the core of an identity is the categorization of the self as an occupant of a role, and the incorporation, into the self, of the meanings and expectations associated with that role and its performance" (Burke, Stets 2000, 225). As far as a person's appearance is concerned, the way a person presents himself is to a certain extent influenced by the restrictions imposed by a particular society.

These social restrictions are embedded very deep within us. People usually feel uncomfortable when they have to go beyond what they had established as their identity. "Although the presentation of self is of central importance to every individual, it is typically done within a very narrow and often stereotypical range that comprises what the person thinks he or she 'is'. If forced to go beyond this range, people become awkward, embarrassed, shuffling and incompetent" (Davies 2001, 38). Most people are not able, or willing, to cross the borders of the safe zone of their own, established identity because it would make them feel very uncomfortable. "Most of us could never succeed as actors or actresses, spies or undercover agents; our upbringing and social training have had much too limiting an effect" (Davies 2001, 38). On the other hand, there are people who are able to go beyond their identity on a regular basis without a problem. "By contrast there is a minority of individuals for whom disguise is central to their lives"

(Davies 2001, 38). For some people, it is what makes their living. For professional entertainers – actors, singers, performers - changing their identity, acting, presenting themselves as different characters, is essential to their lives and careers. Show business is the best place for people that have some kind of problem with their own identity:

The theatre is attractive to the stigmatized and to those of uncertain identity because it offers a tolerant and amorphous refuge from an often hostile and rigidly structured and bounded world; it is tolerant and amorphous because it is the home of disguises. In the theatre no one has an essence, only a disparate series of 'masks', costumes, make-up and illusions that can be donned and doffed according to the tastes of an audience and the demands of a production. Those with a stigma can take refuge in the view that they have the freedom to represent themselves as, or indeed to be, whatever they choose (Davies 2001, 44).

It is understandable that for people with identity troubles, theatre or any other kind of show business is very attractive; they can use their ability to disguise to their advantage and even build a career upon it.

In the case of Michael Jackson, the question is to what extent the changes in his identity were intentional and to what extent they were the attempts of a lost man trying to find his way in this world. "His public racial and gender permutations have often inspired critics and journalists to label him a "wannabe," someone lacking in identity through his desire for someone else's" (Fisher 2011, 96). Jackson's appearance has always been the most discussed aspect of his life. As a

child he was a cute, a little African-American boy. As an adult he was a tall, thin, white man. It is no wonder that the change that his body went through was an enormous mystery and spectacle to the public. Jackson was full of differences that were difficult for people to understand. "Differences that were most troubling - racial, gendered, able-bodied/disabled, child/teenager/adult, adult man who loved children, father/mother. These differences were impenetrable, uncontrollable, and they created enormous anxiety" (Fast 2010, 261). Jackson first began to experience changes in his body during adolescence. "My appearance began to really change when I was about fourteen. In those days, the biggest struggle was right there in my mirror. To a great degree, my identity as a person was tied to my identity as a celebrity" (Jackson 1988, 39). Jackson had been in show business since he was a child and was therefore aware of the importance of one's visage. His problems with acne, together with the inability of the public to accept that little Michael was no longer a cute little boy, caused Jackson considerable frustration connected with his appearance. "I got very shy and became embarrassed to meet people because my complexion was so bad" (Jackson 1988, 40). Jackson became over-sensitive about his looks and image and maybe it was here that the seeds of his future desire to change the way he looked were planted.

Jackson found it hard having this inner difficulty in accepting his own body while he was constantly in the public eye. Speculation about the way he looked, the way he presented himself, were ever present and his identity became a mystery to the public. "He was unknowable. He was impossible to "figure out." Some of his differences were viewed in the mass media as "eccentric" behavior" (Fast 2010, 261). He tried to deal with these problems the best way he could:

I've been accused of being obsessed with my privacy and it's true that I am. People stare at you when you're famous. They're observing you and that's understandable, but it's not always easy. If you were to ask me why I wear sunglasses in public as often as I do, I'd tell you it's because I simply don't like to have to constantly look everyone in the eye. It's a way of concealing just a bit of myself. After I had my wisdom teeth pulled, the dentist gave me a surgical mask to wear home to keep out germs. I loved that mask. It was great - much better than sunglasses - and I had fun wearing it around for a while. There's so little privacy in my life that concealing a little bit of me is a way to give myself a break from all that. It may be considered strange, I know, but I like my privacy (Jackson 1988, 107).

However, the way Jackson dressed and the accessories he used to protect his privacy were not the only peculiar things about him.

The public and the press started to notice changes in Jackson's skin colour during the 1980's. "His skin had gradually become paler since 1982, and had now become a light brown color. This was now so noticeable that the entire press took out widespread coverage on it and claimed that Jackson had bleached his own skin" (IMDB 2015).

Jackson felt disappointed and disgusted by those allegations and claimed that the changes in his skin tone were natural, although combined with the consequences of the skin disease vitiligo, which Jackson was diagnosed with:

I can't help but pick up on some of the criticism levelled at me at times. Journalists seem willing to say anything to sell a paper. They say I've had my eyes widened, that I want to look more white. More white? What kind of statement is that? I didn't invent plastic surgery. It's been around for a long time. A lot of very fine, very nice people have had plastic surgery. No one writes about their surgery and levies such criticism at them. It's not fair. Most of what they print is a fabrication. It's enough to make you want to ask, "What happened to truth? Did it go out of style? (Jackson 1988, 100).

The public became more and more interested in Jackson's skin color and the changes in his facial features, provoking speculation of numerous plastic surgeries. "The self immolating transfigurations of plastic surgery apparent in changes in Michael Jackson's physiognomy had been, for some time, an object of continual and cruel fascination" (Epstein, Steinberg 2007, 444). The media claimed they were confident that Jackson had undergone plastic surgery all over his face. Jackson resents all these allegations in his autobiography:

I'd like to set the record straight right now. I have never had my cheeks altered or my eyes altered. I have not had my lips thinned, nor have I had dermabrasion or a skin peel. All of these charges are ridiculous. If they were true, I would say so, but they aren't. I have had my nose altered twice and I recently added a cleft to my chin, but that is it. Period. I don't care what anyone else says - it's my face and I know (Jackson 1988, 100).

Until his death, Jackson maintained that he had undergone only those three plastic surgeries.

Although Jackson was persistent in his efforts to convince the public that he had not made any major artificial changes to his body, people never entirely believed him and continued speculating about his body and appearance. "Jackson's body has been a site of intense conversation for years, from the change of his skin color, to his numerous experiments with plastic surgery, to the assertion during his 1993 sex abuse case that Jackson's genitalia were readily identifiable" (Albrecht 2013, 706). In the documentary *Michael Jackson: The Life of an Icon*, Jackson's biographer and long-time friend Randy J. Taraborrelli states that Jackson's image was very important to him because he believed that the biggest stars leave the best impression. After the success of *Thriller*, Jackson was constantly in the public eye and wanted to look better and better. Taraborrelli claims that Jackson had more than three plastic surgeries, indeed that Jackson was addicted to plastic surgery and was not able to stop 'upgrading' his face. Taraborrelli also claims in this documentary that Jackson had bleached his skin and that the disease vitiligo may have been a result of the bleaching process. Jackson's mother Katherine claims that Jackson's skin needed to be consolidated in order to look natural because of the vitiligo disease and that this was why he had bleached his face, hands

and chest (Eastel 2011, 01:22:00). Jackson's autopsy proved that he had suffered from vitiligo.

The autopsy also revealed that Jackson had various scars on his head and face which may have been caused by plastic surgery. Jackson's appearance and identity were always an attractive topic for the media because he was full of contrasts and contradictions, creating a cloud of mystery around him, and something unknown, different or mysterious will always attract attention, no matter if in a positive or negative way. "Nevertheless, part of Jackson's popularity emerged from the multiplicity of contradictions that he embodied, though that popularity was simultaneously coupled with a strong anxiety to fix him, and one of the ways that discourses attempted to fix these categories was by addressing the very physicality of his sexuality" (Albrecht 2013, 718). Jackson's sexuality was another unknowable, mysterious quantity that people discussed.



#### **4.2.2. Black or white**

Michael Jackson's identity was a mystery to many people, speculation about his appearance and self-presentation appeared regularly in the media, and the public was amazed, or even terrified, by his complex negotiations of race, sexuality, and gender. He never fully fit into the standards of any of these categories. "Jackson often straddles the line between acceptable and unacceptable by occupying liminal spaces regarding normative identity categories and consequently works to challenge those identity categories that are often presented as entrenched in contemporary society" (Albrecht 2013, 714). Jackson was aware of the fact that people were speculating whether he was male or female, black or white, homosexual or heterosexual, and about other things concerning his appearance, identity, and behaviour. He himself always claimed he was male, black, and heterosexual.

The fact that he did not exactly perform the roles connected to these identity categories correctly in the eyes of society does not mean that he was not male, black and heterosexual. With all his ambiguities, in fact, he was challenging our stereotypical opinions. "The act of transgressing these social norms, through the figure of the grotesque body, is a means of resisting these social norms" (Albrecht 2013, 714). All the ways he presented himself allowed him to address the issue of

the rigid social restrictions that still exist in modern societies. "Michael Jackson was not just a black person changing his appearance. He, like "The Artist Formerly Known as Prince," was engaging in an interrogation of race and gender at the same time and in much the same way that Madonna has tested gender and sexuality and Dennis Rodman has obscured race, gender, sexuality, and sexual orientation" (Culp 1990, 348). He proved that one's identity is not something that is simply given to us, something fixed, something we can never change. "Jackson's representation creates a space to overcome life difficulties ranging from personal psychological issues to structural inequalities. The role of identity and the ability to transform, transfigure, and transcend within one's identification is central to Jackson's critical race representation" (Fisher 2011, 98). Whether intentionally or not, his transformation into a man of white skin means that his life can be seen as an "attempt to oppose the dominant culture and its racially oppressive forms of world-making" (Rossiter 2012, 206). Jackson always claimed he was a black man. In the 1993 interview with Oprah Winfrey, he clearly states that he was "proud to be a black American" and "proud of his race".

He also claims that his "whiteness" is only an unfortunate result of his illness, Vitiligo. However, the public and the media were not satisfied with the illness as an explanation of Jackson's skin colour

change and accused him of not being "black enough" to be a black man. "Popular discourses about Jackson often chastised or condemned him for failing to perform his authentic blackness correctly" (Albrecht 2013, 717). Nevertheless, his skin colour was not the only issue discussed about his racial identity. Many people had troubles believing that his children were actually biologically his. "But what brings the entire Vitiligo narrative around for re-interrogation is Michael's claim that he is the biological father of his ethnically white children" (Scriven 2010, 102). People wondered why Jackson would lie about his children if the only reason for his skin colour change was the illness:

Why would Michael lie about fathering children who bear no physical resemblance to his pre-Vitiligo self? Two answers immediately surface in my mind. The first is that the explanation for Michael's choices is an intense self-hatred, abnegation of blackness, and overt preference for whiteness that caused him to create an external life-world that reflected his innermost desires. Within this response, the fact of Michael's Vitiligo is negligible in that it could be viewed as an unrelated, albeit ironic, condition that has very little to do with his mindset. In the same vein, Vitiligo could be seen as an opportunity of sorts that facilitates, and perhaps legitimates, Michael's flight into synthetic white-skinned privilege. The other, competing answer is that Michael used his body and personal life as canvases on which to paint a mural of inclusion that transcended race and gender while teaching his audience to embrace his behavior as a paradigm shift (Scriven 2010, 103).

Only Jackson would be able to shed some light on this mystery. Nonetheless, Jackson's vague racial identity is one of the many things about him that was constantly targeted by the media. "His liminal

racial status reflected on Jackson's failure as a person to perform his race correctly, and subjected him to constant ridicule" (Albrecht 2013, 717).

Despite the opinions of the public, the change in his skin colour was actually beneficial for other African-American artists:

Jackson has not 'crossed over' from black to white stations to end up in the middle of the road: his success has popularised black music in white rock and pop markets, by actually playing with imagery and style which have always been central to the marketing of pop. In so doing, Jackson has opened up a space in which new stars like Prince are operating, at the interface between the boundaries defined by 'race'" (Gledhill 1991, 308).

Jackson was a star on a global scale, he was known almost all over the world. "Before Hiphop, before President Obama, Jackson was the most recognizable black body traveling across the world and using new technologies in the media of multinational corporations such as Warner's MTV" (Fisher 2011, 104). In fact, he became an unofficial ambassador of American culture. "After the phenomenal success of the albums "Thriller" and "Bad," Jackson virtually became a cultural ambassador for the U.S." (Martin 2012, 286). And yet, despite this role, Jackson refused to perform in his homeland for the last twenty years of his career. "In early 1993, just before he was accused of pedophilia, Jackson performed at two quintessentially American events: the inauguration of President Clinton and the Super Bowl. These were two of his last performances on mainland US soil" (Arnold 2011, 81). It is

an open question why it was so - we will never know Jackson's motives - although it is more than possible that it was precisely because of the way the media and the public were treating him. "From Jackson's perspective, the uncanny might have resided within American racial discourses and the commercial and social pressure to perform race in very specific ways" (Arnold 2011, 76). The media accused him of failing to uphold his own race correctly and of his alleged desire to be "white". Jackson reacted to this through his music:

There was a number of newly composed songs which respond aggressively to what he sees to be the ruthless and ubiquitous injustices perpetrated upon him by the racist forces of white cultural hegemony. This aura of rage is articulated most compellingly in the song "They Don't Care About Us," both in the contents of the musical recording itself and in the two music videos released to accompany the track as a single (Rossiter 2012, 203).

Jackson very often addressed the problems of racism, social restrictions and stereotypes.

In his songs, Jackson addressed many issues, such as poverty, racism, social injustice, and environmental problems, he tried to bring these topics to his listeners, he wanted to make them think about what was going on in the world around them. This tendency is most apparent on both *History* albums with songs like *Earth Song*, *They Don't Care About Us* and *Black or White*. Through his music, he sent messages to the whole world. "It is precisely in this way that Jackson wishes to speak

on behalf of marginalized communities, to whom he grants visibility, and from whom he receives the strength of their symbolic capital, hence assisting in his own battle against hegemonic forces that seek to represent him in a sinister light and thus bring his name and career into disrepute" (Rossiter 2012, 211). His messages were not only about love, tolerance, and acceptance of people's differences, but also expressed a strong empathy with black nationalist concerns. "None subscribes to an African-American group identity, or to the feeling of being a powerless and victimized member of a social minority, as rigorously as "They Don't Care About U." (Rossiter 2012, 208). In this particular song, Jackson addresses his own personal problems, as well as the problems that social minorities experience:

Lyrically, Jackson's testament here is infused by his sensitivity to the brutalities enacted upon the African-American community by the dominant culture, as well as by his own asserted mistreatment at the hands of the police, criminal justice system, and corporate media. His commentary, therefore, vacillates between a critical interpretation of the moral crisis pervading the treatment and representation of social minorities in American society and allusions to the personal plight he endured during the course of the child abuse scandal. From the beginning, he attacks the futility and ignorance behind the still-thriving practices of white supremacy and racial discrimination—psychological shortcomings which he believes a great multitude of society to be susceptible to. In this, he envisions a parallel between the barbaric nature of the media and the reckless gun violence perpetrated on the streets of the United States (Rossiter 2012, 208).

There is another song in which Jackson points out the problem of racial identity and issues of racism.

In his song *Black or White*, and the video that was made for it, Jackson tries to show that we are all the same human beings, no matter what colour of skin we have:

Michael's video for "Black or White" can be interpreted as further accentuating the erosion of group cohesion by morphing myriads of distinct ethnic faces into a blended cacophony of difference, reflecting a more global idea of community. In one sense Michael is right in an uncontroversial way. "It don't matter if you're black or white" when the object is racial harmony and appreciation of the unique gifts that ethnic heritage brings to the table of diversity (Scriven 2010, 103).

In other songs like *Man In The Mirror* or *We Are The World* Jackson challenges his audience to identify with the poor and people in need, to realise that if we want to change something, we have to start with ourselves, with our own attitudes and behaviour, and that our opinions of people should not be influenced or affected by skin colour. "We understand that through his music, his surgeries, his skin bleaching, and even his rearing of white children he unsuccessfully sought to transcend the lofty barriers that the American concept of race has so securely set in place" (Scriven 2010, 100).

### **4.2.3. Sexuality**

A sexual identity is how a person thinks of himself in terms of romance and sexual attraction. Sexual orientation consists of sexual or romantic feelings towards the opposite sex, the same sex, both sexes, or indeed having no attraction at all. There are many different theories of

how our sexuality is constructed. The most essential ones can be called nativism and social constructivism. Nativism claims that sexuality is a set of fixed characteristics given to us. "At the bedrock of our culture's thinking about sexuality is the assumption that a given pattern of sexuality is native to the human constitution" (Connell 2007, 179). To this theory, it is not important how we got these characteristics, but that they are fixed and already established when we are born and that it is not possible for us to change them. "Whether laid down by God, achieved by evolution, or settled by the hormones, the nativist assumption is that sexuality is fundamentally *pre-social*. Whatever society does, in attempts to control, channel or restrict, cannot alter the fundamentals of sexuality" (Connell 2007, 179). Social constructivism stands in opposition to this and claims that a significant part of our sexuality is constructed by the society we live in, social interactions and family upbringing. "The view that sexuality is shaped by society was stated with particular clarity by Gagnon and Simon (1974), who developed the image of sexual conduct as the enactment of social 'scripts'" (Connell 2007, 183). This theory is acknowledged by many.

Even Freud, who is considered to be an expert on human sexuality, mentions the influence society has on forming one's sexuality. "With astonishing delicacy – given his cultural context – Freud documented the role played by social relationships, especially



those within the family, in the shaping of the sexual-emotional life of his patients" (Connell 2007, 183). The way and to what extent society influences our society differs and depends on the specific culture, its customs and traditions. "The various sexual customs are thus particular ways in which cultures solve common problems of naturally-given human need, each making sense within the *Gestalt* of its own culture. The culture provides context for the resolution of natural need" (Connell 2007, 184). The culture and society we live in dictates how our sexuality should develop, what we are supposed to be like in that aspect of our lives. "The realm of sexuality also has its own internal politics, inequities, and modes of oppression. As with other aspects of human behaviour, the concrete institutional forms of sexuality at any given time and place are products of human activity" (Rubin 2007, 143). Every particular culture has its own ways of forming and influencing our sexuality, as well as a set of rules of what type of sexual behaviour is considered acceptable.

One of the social constructs that influences and forms our sexuality is the concept of gender. Gender is usually described and understood as one's sense of being a man or a woman. In every modern society there exists a set of gender attributes that are assigned to males or females. In most Western societies these are considered gender binaries, meaning different, usually opposite characteristics attributed

to men or women. Gender is a part of our identity that we create in terms of the culture or society we live in. "Originally intended to dispute the biology-is-destiny formulation, the distinction between sex and gender serves the argument that whatever biological intractability sex appears to have, gender is culturally constructed: hence, gender is neither the causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex" (Butler 1999, 9). In the eyes of society, in the ideal case a woman should have female gender and a man should have male gender and they are both heterosexual. "The institution of a compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term, and this differentiation is accomplished through the practices of heterosexual desire. The act of differentiating the two oppositional moments of the binary results in a consolidation of each term, the respective internal coherence of sex, gender, and desire" (Butler 1999, 30). But in reality it is not always like that: social restrictions and influences are not powerful enough to force these attributes on everybody, meaning that in every society there are people that refuse to conform or people that struggle with establishing their sexual, gender and therefore social identity.

In terms of sexuality and sexual identity, our Western culture has a very strict set of rules and traditions to determine what is

considered normal and acceptable and what is not. "This culture always treats sex with suspicion. It construes and judges almost any sexual practice in terms of its worst possible expression. Sex is presumed guilty until proven innocent. Virtually all erotic behaviour is considered bad unless a specific reason to exempt it has been established. The most acceptable excuses are marriage, reproduction, and love. Sometimes scientific curiosity, aesthetic experience, or a long-term intimate relationship may serve" (Rubin 2007, 150). These are rigid terms implying that everyone should ideally have the same sexual needs and desires. "Sexuality is supposed to conform to a single standard. One of the most tenacious ideas about sex is that there is one best way to do it, and that everyone should do it that way" (Rubin 2007, 153). Best of all is heterosexual marriage, ideally agreed to with the intent to reproduce. Societies and cultures have many tools to try to ensure this.

These include traditions, stereotypes, social understanding and acceptance and such powerful weapons as the law. In every culture there exist many laws dealing with sexuality and sexual behaviour and some of them tend to be very strict. In fact, there is only one type of sexual practice that is legal in all states of the USA. "The only adult sexual behaviour that is legal in every state is the placement of the penis in the vagina in wedlock" (Rubin 2007, 159). Laws and social restrictions that deal with sexuality promote heterosexual intercourse

within marriage, in that all other sexual practices are considered strange, unnatural, wrong or even unacceptable or illegal, even if the practice is consented to by all the people involved. "That is, some sex acts are considered to be so intrinsically vile that no one should be allowed under any circumstance to perform them. The fact that individuals consent to or even prefer them is taken to be additional evidence of depravity" (Rubin 2007, 159). To avoid all sexual behaviour that does not serve to produce children, Western societies tend to allow only heterosexual marital engagements. "Because all cultures seek to reproduce themselves, and because the particular social identity of the kinship group must be preserved, exogamy is instituted and, as its presupposition, so is exogamic heterosexuality. Hence, the incest taboo not only forbids sexual union between members of the same kinship line, but involves a taboo against homosexuality as well" (Butler 1999, 93). The situation has now started to change:

As a result of the sex conflicts of the last decade, some behaviour near the border is inching across it. Unmarried couples living together, masturbation, and some forms of homosexuality are moving in the direction of respectability. Most homosexuality is still on the bad side of the line. But if it is coupled and monogamous, the society is beginning to recognize that it includes the full range of human interaction. Promiscuous homosexuality, sadomasochism, fetishism, transsexuality, and cross-generational encounters are still viewed as unmodulated horrors incapable of involving affection, love, free choice, kindness, or transcendence (Rubin 2007, 152).

As far as Michael Jackson is concerned, it was impossible for the public to say with certainty what his sexual desires were and what his sexual identity was, meaning that it became a widely discussed topic.

Jackson's love life was a mystery to many people. In his autobiography he mentions several women he had affairs with, but in most of his public appearances he was seen alone. In 1994, Jackson married Lisa Marie Presley, the daughter of Elvis Presley. They divorced less than two years later. In 1996 he married Debbie Rowe, the nurse of his dermatologist. They had two children together – Prince Michael and Paris-Michael Katherine - before divorcing in 1999. Jackson received full custody of both children. His third and last child, Prince Michael II, also known as "Blanket", was born in 2002. His mother is unknown.

Jackson was constant in his claim that he was heterosexual, but the media, and therefore the public, kept questioning this claim. "Jackson's insistence on his heterosexuality, despite his feminine gender performance, was constantly called into question" (Albrecht 2013, 717). Many people did not believe that he was capable of having a normal relationship with a woman, so they assumed there must be something wrong about him. "This logic maintained that if Jackson was unable to successfully perform his role as a heterosexual adult, the only

logical conclusion would be for him to be a deviant, and the worst kind of deviant, a child predator" (Albrecht 2013, 720). Jackson's love of children clicked very well with this opinion.

Jackson grew up in a big family and was used to being around children. In his autobiography he openly acknowledged that he liked children and that one day he wanted to have a big family himself:

I believe in love - very much so - how can you not believe after you've experienced it? I believe in relationships. One day I know I'll find the right woman and get married myself. I often look forward to having children; in fact, it would be nice to have a big family, since I come from such a large one myself. In my fantasy about having a large family, I imagine myself with thirteen children (Jackson 1988, 100).

Jackson considered children pure and innocent and believed that they always tell the truth, meaning he appreciated their opinions of his music. He sacrificed a lot of his time to helping children:

I spend a lot of free time - in California and when I'm travelling - visiting children's hospitals. It makes me so happy to be able to brighten those kids' day by just showing up and talking with them, listening to what they have to say and making them feel better. It's so sad for children to have to get sick. More than anyone else, kids don't deserve that. They often can't even understand what's wrong with them. It makes my heart twist. When I'm with them, I just want to hug them and make it all better for them (Jackson 1988, 108).

Jackson donated a lot of money to various charities, many of them providing help to less fortunate children.

In Martin Bashir's interview *Living with Michael Jackson: A Tonight Special*, Jackson expresses his sadness at not having himself

experienced a proper childhood. He considers himself Peter Pan, the boy that never grew up. Now that he had the finances and the means to do so, he could afford to make up for lost time. Jackson built an enormous mansion and tailored it to the wishes of the little boy's soul inside him. "The name of his 2700-acre ranch near Santa Ynez, California, is Neverland Valley Ranch. It contains Jackson's house, an amusement park co-designed by Macaulay Culkin, a private theater and dance stage, and a petting zoo with exotic animals" (IMDB 2015). Jackson used to organize free tours at his ranch for sick or unprivileged children. Some of the children stayed at Jackson's overnight and it was this that caught the public's attention.

We tend to be very protective when it comes to our children and sexuality. Western societies have many legal ways by which they try to make sure that children are kept safe:

The law is especially ferocious in maintaining the boundary between childhood 'innocence' and 'adult' sexuality. Rather than recognizing the sexuality of the young, and attempting to provide for it in a caring and responsible manner, our culture denies and punishes erotic interest and activity by anyone under the local age of consent. The amount of law devoted to protecting young people from premature exposure to sexuality is breath-taking (Rubin 2007, 158).

A person is legally allowed to have a sexual experience only if he is of a certain age, which is defined by age-of-consent laws. These laws make no distinction between the most brutal rape and the most

gentle romance. When an adult has a sexual relationship with a child or an adolescent under the age of consent, it is considered to be a form of child abuse and the person is considered a sexual predator. Even though there was never any sustainable evidence against Jackson, his sort of obsession with children and childhood itself was very suspicious to the public. "Michael Jackson's blind enthusiasm for the culture of the Child was precisely what rendered him so suspect to many" (Nyong'o 2011, 41). The first molestation case came in 1993.

Jackson was accused of sexually abusing a young boy, Jordy Chandler. The case was settled before trial for over twenty million dollars. The second case took place in June 2005. Jackson had to face another child molestation accusation from the father of Gavin Arvizo. This time he refused to settle, but the trial caused him a lot of stress, he could not sleep and experienced enormous weight loss (Eastel 2011, 01:50:00). "The People v. Jackson trial began on January 31, 2005, in Santa Maria, California, and lasted five months, until the end of May. On June 13, 2005" (Wikipedia 2015). Jackson was acquitted on all counts.

During the 1990's, Jackson's personal life was a target for the tabloid media. A lot of things had happened to him: the first child molestation accusation, marriage to Lisa Marie Presley, marriage to Debbie Rowe and having become a father. A documentary called *Living*



*with Michael Jackson: A Tonight Special* aired in 2003. Journalist Martin Bashir offered Jackson the chance to talk about his career and life and Jackson agreed because he felt the urge to explain himself to the public after his image had suffered great damage because of the first child molestation accusation in 1993. Jackson invited Bashir into his home and into his life. During the interviews, Jackson is open and answers all of Bashir's questions.

The viewers learn about the sadness inside Jackson's heart because of his lost childhood. He calls himself Peter Pan, because he feels like he is a child trapped inside an adult's body and refuses to grow up. This is the reason he built Neverland. He wanted to compensate for his lost childhood. Jackson is also willing to talk about his father and the way he treated him and his brothers. Jackson talks to Bashir not only about his troubled childhood, but also about the rumours surrounding his plastic surgeries and about the child molestation accusation. Bashir gets a chance to visit Neverland, Jackson's home, and is allowed to accompany Jackson when he goes shopping. He also meets his children.

To begin with, the documentary looks neutral and Bashir seems like he wants to learn the truth about Michael Jackson. As the documentary continues, however, Bashir's questions are more and more aggressive and his additional comments are more biased and evidently aimed against Jackson. He describes Neverland as a strange place not

suitable for children and seems willing to admit that it might be even dangerous for children to be there.

Jackson allows Bashir to meet his children. We see that they are comfortable around their father and they look happy. When Jackson takes them to a public place he covers their faces with a piece of transparent fabric to hide their faces in order to protect them from the mass media. Bashir comments that this habit is eccentric and bad for the children. During the Germany leg of the European tour, Jackson wants to take his children (and Bashir) to Berlin Zoo, so his assistants call the zoo to arrange the visit. Unfortunately, somebody tips off the media. When Jackson and his family arrive, they are immediately surrounded by the press and by thousands of fans. It is impossible to tour the zoo and because of the crowd it takes Jackson more than four hours to get out. Bashir says in his commentary that Jackson is an irresponsible father that exposes his children to real danger and that Bashir himself felt scared during the zoo visit. The documentary includes many comments made by Bashir that are subjective and that shine a bad light on Jackson. Bashir ends his documentary by saying: "Neverland is Michael Jackson's world, a place where his enormous wealth allowed him to do what he wanted, when he wanted and how he wanted" (Bashir 2003, 01:40:52).

After the documentary was aired, Jackson felt betrayed by Bashir and claimed that Bashir distorted the truth and used clips out of context. "Following the broadcast, which was viewed by 14 million in the UK and 38 million in the US, Jackson complained to the Independent Television Commission and the Broadcasting Standards Commission, accusing Bashir of yellow journalism, claiming that he deliberately doctored the recordings in order to paint Jackson in an unflattering light, as well as emphasising the allegations of child molestation made against Jackson" (Wikipedia 2015). As a response to Bashir's documentary, Jackson released the videos his own cameraman had shot during the Bashir interviews. A new documentary was made using these videos – *The Michael Jackson Interview: The Footage you were never meant to see*. In this documentary, we hear Bashir's true comments and responses alongside the ones he uses in his own documentary. Originally Bashir claims that Jackson is an amazing person, that his ranch Neverland is a magical place which helps unfortunate children feel happy and that Jackson loves and protect his children so much that it almost makes him cry, so wonderful a father is Jackson. Why Bashir altered his comments is not known and something he has not yet explained. He only later said of Jackson during ABC's coverage of his death, "When I made the documentary, there was a small part that contained a controversy concerning his relationship with

young people. But the truth is that he was never convicted of any crime, and I never saw any wrongdoing myself" (Wikipedia 2015).

A second child molestation accusation came a couple of months after Bashir's documentary . Because of the documentary that pictured him as a 'freak', his love for children and the fact that he had been accused for a second time, many people were convinced of Jackson's guilt. "Michael Jackson's blind enthusiasm for the culture of the child was precisely what rendered him so suspect to many" (Nyong'o 2011, 41). This time Jackson refused to settle the case and a trial took place. "The Michael Jackson trial represented a spectacular and, indeed, macabre event on a global scale" (Epstein, Steinberg 2007, 441). The public was highly interested in this trial and the mass media were full of it. "An inordinate number of column inches of both "serious" and tabloid newsprint across the world featured the events leading up to the trial, the details of evidence given at it, speculations on the persona and identity of Michael Jackson himself, and the "histories" of his friendships with young boys over many years" (Epstein, Steinberg 2007, 443). At this time Jackson was considered more the king of scandal than the King of Pop. "The trial keyed into and recycled a number of contemporaneous cultural anxieties and fascinations. First was a seemingly inexhaustible popular craving for celebrity, excess and scandal" (Epstein, Steinberg 2007, 443). Jackson

presented himself as a humanitarian who spent a lot of money on various charities that helped children. With the molestation accusation, the public started believing that Jackson was a man with two faces and the mass media were willing to feed the public's hunger for sensation. "Jackson became the center of a media vortex over allegations of sexual misconduct that drew much of their fascination from the putative contrast between a fervent, Messianic public image and the scandalous fantasy of illicit private behavior" (Nyong'o 2011, 43). Although Jackson was acquitted on all counts, and was therefore innocent in the language of law, he had been pictured as guilty in the media prior to the verdict. It was simple: the majority of the public believed that he was guilty, so it was natural to think that they would buy the magazines and newspapers in which they could learn more about this 'child molester'. "The money to be made from reporting salacious details that painted Jackson as (more of) a freak, to say nothing of what a guilty verdict would have brought, kept the press from giving any kind of balanced view of the trial" (Fast 2010, 265). The media portrayed him as a criminal not because they believed in his guilt, but because they wanted to satisfy the part of the public that believed so.

Shortly prior to the trial, a documentary called *Michael Jackson's Boys* aired. "This particular documentary was screened on Channel 4, which has a broadcasting profile as a "serious",

“alternative” station (notwithstanding that it is commercial television) with a remit for socially responsible (often interpreted as socially progressive) broadcasting" (Epstein, Steinberg 2007, 446). This documentary is similar to the one Bashir had made in the sense that it takes a stand against Jackson, but while Bashir only suggested that there was something wrong with Jackson, this documentary openly claims that Jackson is a paedophile and presents it as if there could be no doubt about it. "This story is told and retold in the language of “grooming”, and the heavy implication is always that Jackson’s relationship with the boys\*/regardless of sustained claims to the contrary by Jackson, and indeed the boys themselves\*/is sexual. Thus the framing premise is not only that Jackson is guilty but, indeed, that it would not be possible to prove otherwise" (Epstein, Steinberg 2007, 448). Jackson is portrayed in this documentary as a sexual predator obsessed with young boys.

His relationships with boys are described here as sexual even though there is no evidence for that claim. Jackson's guilt is proved by the testimonies of 'reliable' witnesses. "What is offered as definitive are commentaries by “expert” witnesses. These include a psychologist (who never met Jackson), a tabloid journalist, and two former household employees, husband and wife, whom Jackson had fired" (Epstein, Steinberg 2007, 455). None of these witnesses actually saw Jackson doing the things he had been accused of - their testimonies are

based on what they think, not on what they know - but the narrator of the documentary makes a clear and definite conclusion based on these 'testimonies'. The documentary is structured in such a way as to evoke the feeling of court trial in the audience. "It is styled as testimony with explicit reference to a court trial. This is visually invoked through footage of Jackson's arrest, the official police mug-shot that attended it, and in an extended repertoire of forensic evidence hunting, and interviews with boys or witnesses or experts sometimes staged as police interrogations. This is a documentary in which Michael Jackson is explicitly "on trial" (Epstein, Steinberg 2007, 455). The result of the 'trial' is that the narrator finds Jackson guilty and claims that he had molested children all his life and was able to get away with it because of his star status and wealth. "Its central premise is not only that Michael Jackson was "obviously guilty" of the acts with which he had been charged, but that his "crimes" were long-standing and had been both facilitated and hidden by his extreme celebrity" (Epstein, Steinberg 2007, 442). Since this documentary aired before the actual trial, it severely damaged Jackson's image. "Accusations can be damaging to a person's reputation and social standing even if that person is found innocent" (Epstein, Steinberg 2007, 444). Even though Jackson was legally acquitted on all counts, a large part of the public never believed that he was innocent and this was devastating for him.

### 4.3. After Jackson's death

The public did not speculate only about Jackson's face and skin, but also his health. In that respect, his weight was one of the many things that were discussed, along with the illnesses he had and his mental health. Many articles in the press claimed that Jackson was suffering from some kind of eating disorder. Jackson never confirmed this claim. "I'm a vegetarian now and I'm so much thinner. I've been on a strict diet for years. I feel better than I ever have, healthier and more energetic. I don't understand why the press is so interested in speculating about my appearance anyway. What does my face have to do with my music or my dancing?" (Jackson 1988, 92). Jackson needed to be thin so that his movement was lighter and faster while dancing. The press seemed to be satisfied with this response and focused more on his skin problems. When the discussions surrounding his skin colour started, Jackson stated that it was because the effect of a skin disease, Vitiligo. "Vitiligo is a dermatological disorder that destroys pigment in patches of skin and becomes progressively worse over time. The exact cause of Vitiligo is unknown; however, it is primarily genetic and sometimes affected by environmental factors" (Scriven 2010, 102). Some people were sceptical about the singer's claim, but some believed him. "There is even speculation that the genesis of his sequined glove,



besides his brother Marlon's urging, was to cover his right hand in the early stages of Vitiligo. But despite the candid admission, scientific plausibility, and physician corroboration, many black people remained skeptical" (Scriven 2010, 102). Jackson's autopsy confirmed that he really did suffer from Vitiligo.

Jackson's mental health was also an issue discussed in the media. "In the 1990s, the downside as an 1980s pop phenomenon began to rear itself. Michael grew terribly child-like and introverted by his peerless celebrity. A rather timorous, androgynous figure to begin with, his physical appearance began to change drastically, and his behavior grew alarmingly bizarre, making him a consistent target for scandal-making, despite his numerous charitable acts" (IMDB 2015). According to Taraborrelli, Jackson's mental issues began after the child molestation accusations. He started becoming more and more anti-social. Taraborrelli heard him say: "It is over, I do not trust anyone now. They are going to kill me for what I've got" (Eastel 2011, 02:18:00). Taraborrelli says that Jackson had been addicted to painkillers ever since the Pepsi commercial accident and that he also became seriously addicted to medication prescribed for sleeping after the trial in 2005 (Kossoff 2009, 00:14:17). The autopsy revealed that Jackson had also been using several anaesthetics, which eventually led to his death. Michael Jackson died on the 25<sup>th</sup> of June 2009 and his death was

proclaimed a homicide caused by anaesthetic overdose. People all around the world were shocked by his sudden death and the media immediately started reporting it. "The death of Michael Jackson in 2009 took the world by surprise—on the night of his death, reports on global and local news stations were obviously put together in haste, with low-quality video clips, inaccuracies, and a general sense of incredulity that this iconic figure and mainstay of media frenzy was gone" (Warwick 2012, 241). Every television channel, radio station and news reporter was talking about Jackson's death.

This world-wide media frenzy lasted for days after his death. "As it may be recalled, for several days following Jackson's death all networks began their programs with the news of his passing followed by lengthy reminiscences of his life. It was impossible to turn on the television without getting yet another discussion of his immense and imperishable contributions. His death overshadowed and preempted all other news, domestic and foreign" (Hollander 2010, 147). Of course, the Internet was also full of news and speculation about Jackson's death. "Jackson's death triggered such a flood of reactions that it brought the internet to a standstill, causing "spikes" in web traffic and overwhelming social networks such as Twitter and Facebook with bursts of information and updates from millions of users all over the world" (Goh, Lee 2011, 3). Goh and Lee carried out research on the

tweets that were posted after Jackson's death. Their main aim was to map how people deal with grief with the help of social media. They chose Jackson's death because they considered him a star famous all over the world.

Their research revealed some interesting data that showed people's immediate reactions to the singer's death:

Surprisingly, Tweets that spread Jackson-related rumours were the second most frequently occurring category (18.00 per cent). With much uncertainty about the circumstances of his death especially during the initial few days, coupled with Jackson's celebrity status and colourful past, it appeared that rumours surrounding his demise and lifestyle swirling in cyberspace was inevitable. Rumour-related tweets ranged from malicious (“#michaeljackson not dead. Clever scam to earn more money 4 his painkiller bills. Massive royalties as his music is played across the world”), conspiratorial (“#iranelection Khamenei asked #michaeljackson to fake his death to draw the worlds attention away from the protests and it worked”), speculative (“Michael Jackson is dead. I heard a rumor Prince is refusing to perform at the funeral. #MichaelJackson”), to the hopeful (“He may still be alive #MichaelJackson”) (Goh, Lee 2011, 6).

Other tweets consisted of people expressing their sadness over the death of a great musician and artist. "Tweets paying tribute to Jackson comprised 17.21 per cent of all postings, making this the third most frequently occurring category. Such postings were essentially eulogies, positive in nature, and mixed with occasional touches of sadness. They focused on Jackson's prodigious musical talent, his contribution to the music industry, and his inspiration to or influence on

the author of the tweet" (Goh, Lee 2011,6). Jackson's death massively influenced the content of the media throughout the modern world.

As it was during his life, the public and the media continued to speculate about his body, the changes it underwent, and all the ambiguities so typical for Jackson even after his death:

However, no treatment of Michael Jackson had ever been so extensive and post-mortem in the clinical sense of the word as how Jackson's body was textually treated after his death 23 June, 2009. Jackson's body was, in a tradition reminiscent of 19th century anthropology, diagnosed from afar—ETV, Geraldo Rivera and every media pundit with a clip-on microphone espoused Jackson's illnesses: how he was "emotionally" a fourteen year-old child who just wanted to recreate himself as Peter Pan in both thought and physical incarnation, that he was bulimic, that he had body dysmorphic disorder, that he tried to look like Diana Ross, that he bleached his skin, among a myriad of other speculations. Jackson's life and body were analyzed ad nauseum to the point of revisiting his legal and financial woes and his legal troubles were revisited in a scene reminiscent of a very dark Christmas Carol such that it was clear that the "truth" about Jackson would only be revealed by attaching specific meaning to his body, in all its dimensions and polymorphic positionings (Vigo 2010, 30).

Jackson's body was a mystery to the public, so they speculated about it, about the curiosities that accompanied Jackson's life, in order to understand this ambiguous person more. The more we understand about his body, the more we can understand the man himself and the life he led. "The wealth of these contradictory, potentially transgressive discourses that have emerged since his death demonstrate that these characteristics are not inherent to Jackson's physical body; rather, they

reflect anxieties that work to structure the ways in which that body is understood and judged" (Albrecht 2013, 722). After his death, Jackson's sexuality was also widely discussed again.

Before he died, he was considered a child molester by many, even though there was never any actual legal evidence found against him. After he died, people realised that the story might actually have been different, so the media started reporting about the child molestation accusations again, shedding new light on them, sharing information of a positive nature:

The trial, held in 2005, was a media circus, and according to friends it broke his spirit, even though he was acquitted on all counts. Sadly, it is only in the wake of Jackson's death that counter-narratives concerning his difference might be possible. Sudden and tragic death is sobering; initially, at least, it softens us, making it possible to re-examine someone's life in more sympathetic terms, allowing a fuller, richer account to penetrate the noise of negative judgment (Fast, 262).

Jackson's friends and family started offering information about his personal life, how he loved children, and how great a father he was to his own. "We also learned in the wake of his death that he was a devoted and loving father/mother to his three children. Friends and associates gave testimony concerning how good he was at parenting, how well-behaved and loving his children were" (Fast 2010, 265). However, it was not just the media that began to show the positive sides of Jackson's life. After his death, scholars also realised that they had not

paid enough attention to Jackson's work because of all the media scandals surrounding him:

Within the realm of music studies, what is more, scholars were taken aback to find they had neglected Jackson almost entirely; despite his massive appeal, historical significance, celebrity status and artistic accomplishments, there was no substantial scholarly examination of Michael Jackson's music. So taken for granted was he, it seems, that few music specialists sought to look beyond the sensationalist tabloid stories that had dominated the narratives about him, and to examine the musicianship that first brought Jackson to fame, and ultimately enabled him to become—arguably—the single most influential entertainer of the late 20th century (Warwick 2012, 241).

Several film documentaries were also created after Jackson's death.

A documentary by Annie Kossoff, *Michael Jackson's Last Days: What Really Happened*, was released two months after the singer's death . This documentary tries to be as neutral as possible, discussing what led to Jackson's death, the facts about the day he died, and the events that followed. Nothing scandalous about Jackson is shown or discussed.

Probably the most famous documentary made after Jackson's death came in 2009 and was directed by Kenny Ortega – *This Is It*. This documentary consists of the backstage footage filmed during rehearsals for Jackson's upcoming *This Is It* series of concerts in London. The rehearsals took place from April to June 2009. "Rehearsals for these shows were filmed and four months after his death the documentary

Michael Jackson's *This is It*, pieced together from this footage, was released in movie theaters around the world. The film was critically acclaimed and widely viewed, taking in more than \$200 million in the first two weeks it was screened" (Fast 2010, 265). The audience can see Jackson creating and working hard on his planned concerts, as well as his many other talents in action, including film-making and set-building. Jackson's family cooperated with the film makers to make this documentary possible, a documentary showing Jackson as we know him from before all the media scandals— a great singer and dancer, working hard to make his shows perfect, come to life. "The film, and the return to his audio and video recordings by so many, is working to balance the media sensationalism, bringing the focus back to his brilliance as a musician and performer" (Fast 2010, 266). This documentary is not the only one that showed Jackson in a positive light, trying to focus on his talents, his contribution to the world of music and the actual facts, rather than on scandal and speculation.

Other documentaries about Jackson were made after his death, most of them trying to show Jackson and his life authentically, focusing on the facts, not on tabloid style speculation. Such documentaries include *The Secret Life of Michael Jackson*, created by Dateline NBC in 2010, and *Michael Jackson: The Life of an Icon*, directed by Andrew Eastel in 2011. In these documentaries, the curiosities of Jackson's life

are discussed, but not in a way that tries to suggest he is a freak, that there is something wrong with him. Instead, they show how Jackson was influenced by these media accusations, how difficult it was for him, and the effect it had on his state of mind and health.

Michael Jackson was, is, and always will be a spectacle. "Jackson's body continues to produce meaning even though it no longer exists "in reality." The body continues to perform the myriad contradictions in regards to identity categories as it did during his life, and the refusal of those performances to be solidified continues to produce anxieties through its ambiguities" (Albrecht 2013, 710). Jackson, his identity, his personal life and the way he presented himself will remain a mystery to the public forever. He did not fit into the traditional categories society created to identify and classify people - he was a challenge to these stereotypes - and society was not prepared for such a "rebellion against norms" of this extent in Jackson's time. "Despite it all, Jackson's passion and artistry as a singer, dancer, writer and businessman are unparalleled, and it is these prodigious talents that will ultimately prevail over the extremely negative aspects of his seriously troubled adult life" (IMDB 2015). Jackson's great contribution to modern pop music scene is indisputable, despite all the scandals and speculations that accompanied his personal life.



## 5. Conclusion

Michael Jackson was a star known world-wide, meaning that he was constantly in the public eye. The media regularly reported on him and his life. The portrayal of Jackson in the media can be divided into three main stages.

The first stage stretched from the beginning of Jackson's career in the *Jackson 5* until the success of his *Thriller* album. This can be described as a time when Jackson was on top of everything and when the public was amazed by the many talents he showed. The media focused primarily on his singing and dancing genius rather than on his personal life. The public, meanwhile, considered Jackson a star, the King of Pop.

The second stage runs from the success of *Thriller* until the singer's death. Jackson was now known all over the world and so naturally the media took a massive interest in him. The public started noticing the changes in Jackson's appearance and behaviour more and various rumours started spreading. The media speculated on Jackson's identity, the colour of his skin, his sexuality and, later on, mainly about the child molestation accusations against him:

The media, aware of the marketable potential of Jackson's ambiguities, consistently used them to manufacture the notion of an authentic or private self behind his public persona. As such, from the mid-1980s onwards, they chose to paint him as a Peter Pan-like figure—a misunderstood, reclusive man-child whose only real joy came when on stage in the presence of his adoring public. This exploitation of the public's captivation ultimately

resulted in the application of a pathological approach toward Jackson's idiosyncrasies (Rossiter 2012, 204).

This media speculation affected Jackson; he felt betrayed by the journalists, he stopped giving interviews and he refused to perform in his homeland for the last twenty years of his career.

After Jackson's death, the media and the public seemed to return to an appreciation of Jackson's talents and have been more willing to search for the real truth about him. Even the documentaries made about him tend to describe everything by using of facts and with consideration for Jackson's feelings. It is possible to say that after his death, Jackson's portrayal in the media returned from "freak" to King of Pop.

Despite the media circus surrounding the personality of Michael Jackson, his world-wide popularity and his contribution to the world of popular music are indisputable:

There is no doubt of his popularity, in the United States and abroad: tens of millions watched him on TV, bought his CD-s and records, listened to his music on radio and millions attended his live performances. Over a million people came to his memorial service in Los Angeles and the cash-strapped city did not hesitate to pay for the costly crowd control by the police at the event (Hollander 2010, 147).

The audience and the public were always free to believe the things they read, saw or heard in Jackson's media portrayal or not. People always have the chance to make their own minds; the question is whether they are willing to. Looking at the case of Michael Jackson, it is important to say that we should pay more attention to media literacy and the teaching of critical so

that people realise they do not have to believe everything they are told by seemingly reliable sources. I would like to end this thesis with Michael Jackson's lyrics to *Tabloid Junkie*, where he expresses how destructive media speculation can be:

Speculate to break the one you hate  
Circulate the lie you confiscate  
Assassinate and mutilate  
As the hounding media in hysteria  
Who's the next for you to resurrect  
JFK exposed the CIA  
Truth be told the grassy knoll  
As the blackmail story in all your glory

It's slander  
You say it's not a sword  
But with your pen you torture men  
You'd crucify the Lord  
And you don't have to read it, read it  
And you don't have to eat it, eat it  
To buy it is to feed it, feed it  
So why do we keep foolin' ourselves

Just because you read it in a magazine  
Or see it on the TV screen  
Don't make it factual  
Though everybody wants to read all about it

Just because you read it in a magazine  
Or see it on the TV screen  
Don't make it factual, actual  
They say he's homosexual

In the hood  
Frame him if you could  
Shoot to kill  
To blame him if you will  
If he dies sympathize  
Such false witnesses  
Damn self righteousness  
In the black  
Stab me in the back  
In the face  
To lie and shame the race  
Heroine and Marilyn  
As the headline stories of  
All your glory

It's slander  
With the words you use  
You're a parasite in black and white  
Do anything for news  
And you don't go and buy it, buy it  
And they won't glorify it, 'fy it  
To read it sanctifies it, 'fies it  
Then why do we keep foolin' ourselves  
Just because you read it in a magazine

Or see it on the TV screen  
Don't make it factual  
Everybody wants to read all about it  
Just because you read it in a magazine  
Or see it on the TV screen  
Don't make it factual  
See, but everybody wants to believe all about it

Just because you read it in a magazine  
Or see it on the TV screen  
Don't make it factual  
See, but everybody wants to believe all about it  
Just because you read it in a magazine  
Or see it on the TV screen  
Don't make it factual, actual  
She's blonde and she's bisexual

### Scandal

With the words you use  
You're a parasite in black and white  
Do anything for news  
And you don't go and buy it, buy it  
And they won't glorify it, 'fy it  
To read it sanctifies it, 'fies it  
Why do we keep foolin' ourselves  
Slander  
You say it's not a sin  
But with your pen you torture men  
Then why do we keep foolin' ourselves

Just because you read it in a magazine  
Or see it on the TV screen  
Don't make it factual  
Though everybody wants to read all about it  
Just because you read it in a magazine  
Or see it on the TV screen  
Don't make it factual  
See, but everybody wants to read all about it

Just because you read it in a magazine  
Or see it on the TV screen  
Don't make it factual, actual  
You're so damn disrespectful

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