

Kobena Mercer, from "Welcome to the Jungle"

1

MONSTER METAPHORS: NOTES ON MICHAEL JACKSON'S *THRILLER*

Michael Jackson, megastar. His LP, *Thriller*, made in 1982, has sold over thirty-five million copies worldwide and is said to be the biggest selling album in the history of pop. At the age of twenty-six Jackson is reputed to have amassed a personal fortune of some seventy-five million dollars. Even more remarkably, he has been a star since he was eleven and sang lead with his brothers in The Jackson Five, the biggest selling group on the Tamla Motown label in the 1970s. The Jacksons practically invented the genre of "teenybopper" pop, cashed in upon by white idols like Donny Osmond. While such figures have faded from popular memory, classic Jackson Five tunes like "I Want You Back" and "ABC" can still evoke the enthusiasm which marked the assertive mood of the Black Pride era.

After he and his brothers left Motown in the mid-seventies, and took more artistic control over their own productions, Jackson developed as a singer, writer and stage performer in his own right. His 1979 *Off the Wall* LP, 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. Just what is it that makes this young, gifted and black man so different, so appealing?

Undoubtedly it is the voice which lies at the heart of his appeal. Rooted in the Afro-American soul tradition, Jackson's vocal performance is characterized by breathy gasps, squeaks, sensual sighs and other wordless sounds which have become his stylistic signature. The way in which this style punctuates the emotional resonance and bodily sensuality of the

music corresponds to what Roland Barthes called the "grain" of the voice—"the grain is the body in the voice as it sings" (Barthes, 1977: 188). The emotional and erotic expressiveness of the voice is complemented by the sensual grace and sheer dynamism of Jackson's dancing style: even as a child his stage performance provoked comparisons with Jackie Wilson and James Brown.

But there is another element to Jackson's popularity—his image. Jackson's individual style fascinates and attracts attention. The ankle-cut jeans, the single-gloved hand and, above all, the curly-perm hairstyle which have become his visual trademarks have influenced the sartorial repertoires of black and white youth cultures and have been incorporated into mainstream fashion. Most striking is the change in Jackson's 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. Michael reclines across the gatefold sleeve of the *Thriller* LP dressed in crisp black and white on a glossy metallic surface against a demure pink background. Look closer—the glossy sheen of his complexion appears lighter in color than before; the nose seems sharper, more aquiline, less rounded and "African," and the lips seem tighter, less pronounced. Above all, the large Afro has dissolved into a shock of wet-look curls and a new stylistic trademark, a single lock over the forehead, appears.

What makes this reconstruction of Jackson's star 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 in order to adopt a more white, European look, although Jackson himself denies it.¹ 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. He may sing as sweet as Al Green, dance as hard as James Brown, but he looks more like Diana Ross than any black male soul artist. The media have seized upon these ambiguities and have fabricated a persona, a private self behind the public image, which has become the subject of mass speculation and rumor. Such mythologization 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 "pathologizing" his personal eccentricities:

Even Michael Jackson's millions of fans find his lifestyle strange. It's just like one of his hit songs, *Off The Wall*. People in the know say—His biggest thrill is taking trips to Disneyland. His closest friends are zoo animals. He talks to tailor's dummies in his lounge. He fasts every Sunday and then dances in his bedroom until he drops of exhaustion. So showbusiness folk keep asking the question: Is Jacko Wacko? Two top American psychiatrists have spent hours examining a detailed dossier on Jackson. Here is their on-the-couch report. (*The Sun*, April 9 1984: 5)

In particular, Jackson's sexuality and sexual preference have been the focus of intense public scrutiny, as a business associate of his, Shirley Brooks, complains:

He doesn't and won't make public statements about his sex life, because he believes—and he is right—that is none of anyone else's business. Michael and I had a long conversation about it, and he felt that anytime you're in the public eye and don't talk to the press, they tend to make up these rumors to fill their pages. (quoted in Nelson George, 1984: 106)

Neither child nor adult, not clearly either black or white, and with an androgynous image that is neither masculine nor feminine, Jackson's star image is a "social hieroglyph," as Marx said of the commodity form, which demands, yet defies, decoding. This article offers a reading of the music video *Thriller* from the point of view of the questions raised by the phenomenal popularity of this star, whose image is a spectacle of racial and sexual indeterminacy.

REMAKE, REMODEL: VIDEO IN THE MARKETING OF *THRILLER*

In recent years the new, hybrid medium of music video has come to occupy a central importance in the sale and significance of pop music. As ads to promote records, videos are now prerequisites to break singles

into the charts. As industrial product, the medium—now institutionalized in America's cable network MTV, owned by Warner Communications and American Express—has revitalized the declining profitability of the singles market by capitalizing on new patterns of consumption created by the use, on a mass scale, of video technologies.² From its inception in 1981, however, MTV maintained an unspoken policy of excluding black artists. Jackson's videos for singles from the *Thriller* LP were among the first to penetrate this invisible racial boundary.

Videos for "Billy Jean" and "Beat It" stand out in the way they foreground Jackson's new star image. "Billy Jean," directed by Steve Barron, visualizes the cinematic feel of the music track and its narrative of a false paternity claim by creating, through a studio-set scenario, sharp editing and various effects, an ambience that complements rather than illustrates the song. Taking its cue from the LP cover, it stresses Jackson's style in his dress and in his dance. Paving stones light up as Jackson twists, kicks and turns through the performance, invoking the "magic" of his stardom. "Beat It," directed by Bob Giraldi (who made TV commercials for McDonald's hamburgers and Dr Pepper soft drinks), visualizes the antimacho lyric of the song. Shots alternate between "juvenile delinquent" gangs about to start a fight, and Michael, fragile and alone in his bedroom. The singer then disarms the street gangs with his superior charm as he leads the all-male cast through a choreographic sequence that synthesizes the cinematic imagery of *The Warriors* and *West Side Story*.

These videos—executed from storyboards by Jackson himself—and others in which he appears, such as "Say, Say, Say" by Paul McCartney and "Can You Feel it" by The Jacksons, are important aspects of the commercial success of *Thriller*, because they breach the boundaries of race on which the music industry is based. Unlike stars such as Lionel Richie, Jackson has not "crossed over" from black to white markets to end up in the middle of the road: his success has popularized black music among white audiences by explicitly *playing* with visual imagery and style which has always been central to the mass marketing of pop. In so doing, Jackson's experimentation in music video has reopened a space in which new stars like Prince are operating, at the interface of cultural boundaries defined by "race."

"Thriller," the title track, was released as the third single from the

album. The accompanying video went beyond the then-established conventions and limitations of the medium. According to Dave Laing, these conventions have been tied to the economic imperative of the pop sales process:

first, the visuals were subordinated to the soundtrack, which they were there to sell; second, music video as a medium for marketing immediately inherited an aesthetic and a set of techniques from the pre-existing and highly developed form of television commercials.³

Thus one key convention, that of rapid editing derived from the montage codes of television advertising, has been overlaid with another: that of an alternation between naturalistic or "realist" modes of representation (in which the song is performed "live" or in a studio and mimed to by the singer or group), and "constructed" or fantastic modes of representation (in which the singer/group acts out imaginary roles implied by the lyrics or by the atmosphere of the music). "Thriller" incorporates such montage and alternation conventions, but organizes the image flow by framing it with a powerful *storytelling* or *narrational* direction which provides continuity and closure. Since "Thriller," this storytelling code has itself become a music video convention: Julian Temple's "Undercover of the Night" (Rolling Stones, 1983) and "Jazzin' for Blue Jean" (David Bowie, 1984) represent two of the more imaginative examples of this narrativization of music by the direction of the flow of images. "Thriller," moreover, is distinguished not only by its internal and formal structure at the level of *mise-en-scène*, but also by the fact that it is "detached" from a primary economic imperative or rationale. The LP was already a "monster" of a success before its title track became a single: there was no obvious need for a "hard sell." Thus the "Thriller" video does not so much seek to promote the record as a primary product, but rather *celebrates the stardom* which the LP has brought to Michael Jackson. In the absence of a direct economic imperative, the video can indulge Jackson's own interest in acting: its use of cinematic codes thus provides a narrative framework in which Jackson may perform as a "movie star." Jackson himself had acted before, in *The Wiz* (1977), Motown's all-black remake of *The Wizard of Oz* in which he played the Scarecrow. He professes a deep fascination with acting *per se*:

I love it so much. It's escape. It's fun. It's just neat to become another thing, another person. Especially when you really believe it and it's not like you're acting. I always hated the word "acting"—to say, "I am an actor." It should be more than that. It should be more like a believer.⁴

In "Thriller," Jackson enacts a variety of roles as the video engages in a playful parody of the stereotypes, codes and conventions of the horror genre. The intertextual dialogues between film, dance and music which the video articulates also draw us, the spectators, into the *play* of signs and meanings at work in the "constructedness" of the star's image. The following reading considers the specificity of the music track, asks how video "visualizes" the music and then goes on to examine the internal structure of the video as an intertext of sound, image and style.

"THRILLER": A READING

Consider first the specificity of the music track. The title, which gives the LP its title as well, is the name for a particular genre of film—the "murder-mystery-suspense" film, the detective story, the thriller. But the lyrics of the song are not "about" film or cinema. The track is a midtempo funk number, written by Rod Temperton, and recalls similar numbers by that songwriter, such as "Off the Wall." The lyrics evoke allusions and references to the cinematic genre of horror films, but only to play on the meaning of the word "thriller." The lyrics weave a little story, which could be summarized as "a night of viewing some . . . gruesome horror movies with a lady friend" (George, 1984: 108) and narrate such a fictional scene by speaking in the first person:

Its close to midnight and somethin' evil's lurkin' in the dark
 . . . You try to scream, but terror takes the sound before you make it
 You start to freeze, as horror looks you right between the eyes
 You're paralyzed.

Who is this "you" being addressed? The answer comes in the semantic turnaround of the third verse and chorus, in which the pun on the title is made evident:

Now is the time for you and I to cuddle close together
 All thru' the night, I'll save you from the terror on the screen
 I'll make you see, that [Chorus]
 This is thriller, thriller-night, 'cause I could thrill you more
 than any ghost would dare to try
 Girl, this is thriller, thriller-night . . . So let me hold you
 close and share a killer, thriller, tonight.⁵

Thus the lyrics play on a *double entendre* of the meaning of "thrill."

As Iain Chambers has observed: "Distilled into the metalanguage of soul and into the clandestine cultural liberation of soul music is the regular employment of a sexual discourse" (Chambers, 1985: 148). Along with the emotional complexity of intimate relationships, sexuality is perhaps *the* central preoccupation of the soul tradition. But, as Chambers suggests, the power of soul as a cultural form to express sexuality does not so much lie in the literal meanings of the words but in the passion of the singer's voice and vocal performance. The explicit meanings of the lyrics are in this sense secondary to the sensual resonance of the individual character of the voice, its "grain." While the "grain" of the voice encodes the contradictions of sexual relationships, their pleasures and pain, the insistence of the rhythm is an open invitation to the body to dance. Dance, as cultural form and erotic ritual, is a mode of decoding the sound and meaning generated in the music. In its incitement of the listener to dance, to become an active participant in the texture of voice, words and rhythm, soul music is not merely "about" sexuality, but is itself a musical means for the eroticization of the body (see *ibid.*, 143–8; and Richard Dyer, 1979). In "Thriller" it is the "grain" of Jackson's voice that expresses and plays with this sexual subtext and it is this dimension that transgresses the denotation of the lyrics and escapes analytic reduction. Jackson's interpretation of Temperton's lyric inflects the allusions to cinema in order to thematize a discourse on sexuality, rather than film, and the "story" evoked by the lyrics sets up a reverberation between two semantic poles: the invocation of macabre movies is offset by the call to "cuddle close together."

The element of irony set in motion by this semantic polarity is the "literary" aspect of the sense of parody that pervades the song. Sound effects—creaking doors and howling dogs—contribute to the pun on the title. Above all, the play of parody spreads out in Vincent Price's rap,

which closes the tune. The idea of a well-established, white, movie actor like Price delivering a rap, a distinctly black, urban, music form, is funny enough. But the fruity, gurgling tones of the actor's voice, which immediately evoke the semicomical self-parody of "horror" he has become, express the playful sense of humor that underpins the song:

Darkness falls across the land. The midnight hour is close at hand.
Creatures crawl in search of blood, to terrorize y'all's neighborhood.
And whosoever shall be found, without a soul for getting down,
must stand and face the hounds of hell, and rot inside a corpse's shell.

The parody at play here lies in the quotation of soul argot—"get down," "midnight hour," "funk of forty thousand years"—in the completely different context of the horror genre. The almost camp quality of refined exaggeration in Price's voice and his "British" accent is at striking odds with the discourse of black American soul music.

As we "listen" to the production of meanings in the music track, the various "voices" involved in the process (Jackson, Temperton, Price, Quincy Jones) are audibly combined into parodic play. One way of approaching the transition from music to video, then, would be to suggest that John Landis, its director, brings aspects of his own "voice" as a Hollywood auteur into this dialogue. It seems to me that Landis's voice contributes to the puns and play on the meaning of "thriller" by drawing on the filmic conventions of the horror genre.

STORY, PLOT AND PARODY

Landis introduces two important elements from film into the medium of music video: a narrative direction to the image flow, and special-effects techniques associated with the pleasures of the horror film. These effects are used in the two scenes that show the metamorphosis of Michael into, first, a werewolf, and then, a zombie. Such cinematic technologies, which introduce the dimension of the fantasmatic, clearly distinguish "Thriller" from other music videos. Moreover, it is in this way that "Thriller" gives the video audiences *real thrills*—the "thrill" of tension, anxiety and fear whose release underlines the distinct pleasures offered by the horror genre. The spectacle of the visceral transformation of cute,

lovable Michael Jackson into a howlin' wolf of a monster is disturbing precisely because it seems so convincing and "real" as a result of these techniques. As Phillip Brophy remarks: "The pleasure of the (horror) text is, in fact, getting the shit scared out of you—and loving it: an exchange mediated by adrenaline" (Brophy, 1983: 88).

Both special effects and narrative return us to the authorial voice of John Landis, who directed *An American Werewolf in London* (1979). *American Werewolf* is actually a horror-comedy; it recalls the folkloric werewolf myth, setting its protagonists as tourists in England attacked by a strange animal, into which one of them turns during the full moon. The film employs pop tunes to exacerbate its underlying parody of this mythology—"Moondance" (Van Morrison), "Bad Moon Rising" (Creedence Clearwater Revival) and "Blue Moon" (Frankie Lyman and the Teenagers). And this humor is combined with the verisimilitude of special effects and makeup techniques which show the bodily metamorphosis of man to wolf in "real time," as opposed to less credible time-lapse techniques. "Thriller" not only alludes to this film, but to other generic predecessors, including *Night of the Living Dead* (1969) by George Romero and *Halloween* (1978) by John Carpenter. Indeed, in keeping with the genre, the video is strewn with allusions to horror films. As Brophy observes:

It is a genre which mimics itself mercilessly—because its statement is coded in its very mimicry. . . . It is not so much that the modern horror film refutes or ignores the conventions of genre, but it is involved in a violent awareness of itself as a saturated genre. (Brophy, 1983: 83)

Thus cinematic horror seems impelled towards parody of its own codes and conventions as a constitutive aspect of its own generic identity.⁶ With hindsight it is tempting to suggest that "Thriller" 's music track was almost made to be filmed, as it seems to cue these cinematic references. Certain moments within the video appear to be straightforward transpositions from the song: "They're out to get you, there's demons closin' in on ev'ry side . . . Night creatures call and the dead start to walk in their masquerade," and so on. But it is at the level of its *narrative structure* that the video engages in an intertextual dialogue with the music track.⁷

Unlike most pop videos, "Thriller" does not begin with the first notes

of the song, but with a long panning shot of a car driving through woods at night and the "cinematic" sound of recorded silence. This master-shot, establishing the all-seeing but invisible eye of the camera, is comparable to the discursive function of third-person narration. The shot/reverse-shot series which frames the opening dialogue between the two protagonists (about the car running out of gas) establishes "point-of-view" camera angles, analogous to subjective, first-person modes of enunciation. These specific cinematic codes of narration structure the entire flow of images, and thus give the video a beginning, a middle and an end. "Thriller" incorporates the pop video convention of switching from "realist" to "fantastic" modes of representation, but binds this into continuity and closure through its narrative. The two metamorphosis sequences are of crucial importance to this narrative structure; the first disrupts the equilibrium of the opening sequence, and the second repeats but differs from the first in order to bring the flow of images to an end and thus reestablish equilibrium. Within the storytelling conventions of generic horror the very appearance of the monster/werewolf/vampire/alien signals the violation of equilibrium: the very presence of the monster activates the narrative dynamic whose goal or ending is achieved by an act of counterviolence that eliminates it (see Stephen Neale, 1980: 21, 56, 62).

In the opening sequence equilibrium is established and then disrupted. The dialogue and exchange of glances between Michael and "the girl" (as the male and female protagonists of the story) establish "romance" as the narrative pretext. The girl's look at Michael as the car stops hints at a question, answered by the expression of bemused incredulity on his face. Did he stop the car on purpose? Was it a romantic ruse, to lure her into a trap? The girl's coquettish response to Michael's defence ("Honestly, we're out of gas") lingers sensually on the syllables, "So . . . what are we going to do now?" Her question, and his smile in return, hint at and exacerbate the underlying erotic tension of romantic intrigue between the two characters. Michael's dialogue gives a minimal "character" to his role as the boyfriend: he appears a somewhat shy, very proper and polite "boy next door." The girl, on the other hand, is not so much a character as the "girlfriend" type. At another level, their clothes—a pastiche fifties retro style—connote youthful innocence, the couple as archetypical teen lovers. But this innocent representation is unsettled by Michael's state-

ment: "I'm not like other guys." The statement implies a question posed on the terrain of gender, and masculinity in particular: why is he different from "other guys"?

The sequence provides an answer in the boyfriend's transformation into a monster. But, although the metamorphosis resolves the question, it is at the cost of disrupting the equilibrium of "romance" between the two protagonists, which is now converted into a relation of terror between monster and victim. The ensuing chase through the woods is the final sequence of this "beginning" of the narrative. The subsequent scene, returning to Michael and the girl as a couple in the cinema, reestablishes the equation of romance and repositions the protagonists as girlfriend and boyfriend, but at another level of representation.

In structural terms this shift in modes of representation, from a fantastic level (in which the metamorphosis and chase take place) to a realist level (in which the song is performed), is important because it retrospectively implies that the entire opening sequence was a film within a film, or rather, a film within the video. More to the point, the narrative "beginning" is thus revealed to be a *parody of 1950s B-movie horror*. This had been signalled by the self-conscious "acting" mannerisms that Jackson employs and by the pastiche of fifties teenager styles. The shift from a parody of a fifties horror movie to the cinema audience watching the film and the long shot of the cinema showing the "film," visually acknowledge this "violent awareness of itself as saturated genre." The cultural history it taps into has been described as follows:

While Hammer were reviving the Universal monsters . . . American International Pictures began a cycle whose appreciation was almost entirely tongue-in-cheek—a perfect example of "camp" manufacture and reception of the iconography of terror.

The first film in this series bore the (now notorious) title *I Was a Teenage Werewolf* (1957). . . . The absurdity of the plot and acting, and the relentless pop music that filled the soundtrack, gave various kinds of pleasure to young audiences and encouraged the film-makers to follow this pilot movie with *I Was A Teenage Frankenstein* and with *Teenage Monster* and *Teenage Zombie*, creations that were as awful to listen to as they were to see.

Parody depends on an explicit self-consciousness: in "Thriller" this informs the dialogue, dress style and acting in the opening sequence. In its parody

of a parody it also acknowledges that there is no "plot" as such: the narrative code that structures the video has no story to tell. Rather it creates a simulacrum of a story in its stylistic send-up of genre conventions. But it is precisely at the level of its self-consciousness that "Thriller" 's mimicry of the *gender roles* of the horror genre provides an anchor for the way it visualizes the sexual discourse, the play on the meaning of the word "thriller" on the music track.

GENRE AND GENDER: "THRILLER" 'S SEXUAL SUBTEXT

As the video switches from fantastic to realist modes of representation, the roles played by the two protagonists shift accordingly. The fictional film within the video, with its narrative pretext of "romance," positions Michael and the girl as boyfriend and girlfriend, and within this the horrifying metamorphosis transforms the relation into one of terror between monster and victim. If we go back to Michael's statement made in this scene, "I'm not like other guys," we can detect a confusion about the role he is playing.

The girl's initial reply, "Of course not. That's why I love you," implies that it is obvious that he is "different" because *he* is the real Michael Jackson. When, in her pleasure at his proposal, she calls him by his proper name she interpellates him in two roles at once—as fictional boyfriend and real superstar. This ambiguity of reference acknowledges Jackson's self-conscious acting style: we, the video audience, get the impression he is playing at playing a role, and we "know" that Jackson the singer, the star, is playing at the role of a "movie star." Michael's outfit and its stylistic features—the wet-look hairstyle, the ankle-cut jeans and the letter "M" emblazoned on his jacket—reinforce this metatextual superimposition of roles. If Michael, as the male protagonist, is both boyfriend and star, his female counterpart is both the girlfriend and, at this metatextual level, the fan. The girl is in two places at once: on screen and in the audience. As spectator to the film within the video she is horrified by the image on the screen and gets up to leave. "Fooled" by the violent spectacle of the metamorphosis, she mistakes the fantastic for the real, she forgets that "it's only a movie." The girl's positions in the

fictional and realist scenes mirror those of the video spectator—the effects which generate thrills for the audience are the events, in the story world, that generate terror for the girl.

The girl occupies a mediated position between the audience and the star image which offers a clue to the way the video visualizes the music track. In the middle section, as the couple walk away from the cinema and Michael begins the song, the narrative roles of boyfriend and girlfriend are reestablished, but now subordinated to the song's performance. This continuity of narrative function is underlined by the differentiation of costume style: Micheal now wears a flashy red and black leather jacket cut in a futuristic style and her ensemble is also contemporary—T-shirt, flight jacket and a head of curls like Michael's own. This imagery echoes publicity images of Jackson the stage performer. As the song gets under way Jackson becomes "himself," the star. The girl becomes the "you" in the refrain, "Girl, I could thrill you more than any ghost would dare to try."

On the music track, the "you" could be the listener, since the personal and direct mode of enunciation creates a space for the listener to enter and take part in the production of meanings. In the video, it is the girl who takes this place and, as the addressee of the sexual subtext encoded in the song, her positions in the video-text create possibilities for spectatorial identification. These lines of identification are hinted at in the opening scene, in which the girl's response to Michael's seduction enacts the "fantasy of being a pop star's girlfriend," a fantasy which is realized in this section of the video.⁹

BEAUTY AND THE BEAST: MASKS, MONSTERS AND MASCULINITY

The conventions of horror inscribe a fascination with sexuality, with gender identity codified in terms that revolve around the symbolic presence of the monster. Women are invariably the victims of the acts of terror unleashed by the werewolf/vampire/alien/"thing": the monster as nonhuman Other. The destruction of the monster establishes male protagonists as heroes, whose object and prize is of course the woman. But as the predatory force against which the hero has to compete, the monster itself occupies a "masculine" position in relation to the female victim.

"Thriller" 's rhetoric of parody presupposes a degree of self-consciousness on the part of the spectator, giving rise to a supplementary commentary on the sexuality and sexual identity of its star. Thus, the warning, "I'm not like other guys," can be read by the audience as a reference to Jackson's sexuality. Inasmuch as the video audience is conscious of the gossip which circulates around his star image, the statement of difference provokes other meanings: is he homosexual, transsexual or somehow asexual?

In the first metamorphosis Michael becomes a werewolf. As the film *Company of Wolves* (director Neil Jordan, 1984) demonstrates, werewolf mythology—lycanthropy—concerns the representation of male sexuality as "naturally" predatory, bestial, aggressive, violent—in a word, "monstrous." Like "Thriller," *Company of Wolves* employs similar special effects to show the metamorphosis of man to wolf in real time. And like the Angela Carter story on which it is based, the film can be read as a rewriting of the European folktale of Little Red Riding Hood to reveal its concerns with subjects of menstruation, the moon and the nature of male sexuality. In the fictional opening scene of "Thriller" the connotation of innocence around the girl likens her to Red Riding Hood. But is Michael a big, bad wolf?

In the culmination of the chase sequence through the woods the girl takes the role of victim. Here, the disposition of point-of-view angles between the monster's dominant position and the supine position of the victim suggests rape, fusing the underlying sexual relation of romance with terror and violence. As the monster, Michael's transformation might suggest that beneath the boy-next-door image there is a "real" man waiting to break out, a man whose masculinity is measured by a rapacious sexual appetite, "hungry like the wolf." But such an interpretation is undermined and subverted by the final shot of the metamorphosis. Michael-as-werewolf lets out a bloodcurdling howl, but this is in hilarious counterpoint to the collegiate "M" on his jacket. What does it stand for? Michael? Monster? Macho Man? More like Mickey Mouse! The incongruity between the manifest signifier and the symbolic meaning of the monster opens up a gap in the text, to be filled with laughter.

Animals are regularly used to signify human attributes, with the wolf, lion, snake and eagle all understood as symbols of male sexuality. Jackson's

subversion of this symbolism is writ large on the *Thriller* LP cover. Across the star's knee lies a young tiger cub, a brilliant little metaphor for the ambiguity of Jackson's image as a black male pop star. This plays on the star's "man-child" image, and suggests a domesticated animality, hinting at menace beneath the cute and cuddly surface. Jackson's sexual ambiguity makes a mockery out of the menagerie of received images of masculinity.¹⁰

In the second metamorphosis Michael becomes a zombie. Less dramatic and horrifying than the first, this transformation cues the spectacular dance sequence that frames the chorus of the song. While the dance, choreographed by Michael Peters, makes visual one of the lines from the lyric, "Night creatures crawl and the dead start to walk in their masquerade," it foregrounds Jackson-the-dancer, and his performance breaks loose from the narrative. As the ghouls begin to dance, the sequence elicits the same kind of parodic humor provoked by Vincent Price's rap. A visual equivalent of the incongruity between Price's voice and the argot of black soul culture is here created by the spectacle of the living dead performing with Jackson a funky dance routine. The sense of parody is intensified by the macabre makeup of the ghouls, bile dripping from their mouths. Jackson's makeup, casting a ghostly pallor over his skin and emphasizing the contour of the skull, alludes to one of the paradigmatic masks of the horror genre, that of Lon Chaney in *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925).

Unlike the werewolf, the figure of the zombie, the undead corpse, does not represent sexuality so much as asexuality or antisexuality, suggesting the sense of *neutral eroticism* in Jackson's style as dancer. As has been observed:

The movie star Michael most resembles is Fred Astaire—that *paragon of sexual vagueness*. Astaire never fit a type, hardly ever played a traditional romantic lead. He created his own niche by the sheer force of his tremendous talent. (Mark Jacobson, quoted in George, 1984: 83–84)

The dance sequence can be read as cryptic writing on this "sexual vagueness" of Jackson's body in movement, in counterpoint to the androgyny of his image. The dance breaks out of the narrative structure, and Michael's body comes alive in movement, a rave from the grave: the scene can thus be seen as a commentary on the notion that as a star

Jackson only "comes alive" when he is on stage performing. The living dead evoke an existential liminality which corresponds to both the sexual indeterminacy of Jackson's dance and the somewhat morbid life-style that reportedly governs his off-stage existence. Both meanings are buried in the video "cryptogram."¹¹

METAPHOR-MORPHOSIS

Finally, I feel compelled to return to the scene of the first metamorphosis. It enralls and captivates, luring the spectator's gaze and petrifying it in wonder. This sense of both fear and fascination is engineered by the video's special effects. By showing the metamorphosis in "real time" the spectacle violently distorts the features of Jackson's face. The horror effect of his monstrous appearance depends on the "suspension of disbelief": we know that the monster is a fiction, literally a mask created by mechanical techniques, but repress or disavow this knowledge in order to participate in the "thrills," the pleasures expected from the horror text. Yet in this splitting of levels of belief which the horror film presupposes, it is the credibility of the techniques themselves that is at stake in making the "otherness" of the monster believable (Neale, 1980: 45).

The Making of Michael Jackson's Thriller (1984) demonstrates the special effects used in the video. We see makeup artists in the process of applying the "mask" that will give Jackson the appearance of the monster. Of particular interest is the makeup artists' explanation of how the werewolf mask was designed and constructed: a series of transparent cells, each with details of the animal features of the mask, are gradually superimposed on a publicity image of Jackson from the cover of *Rolling Stone* magazine. It is this superimposition of fantastic and real upon Jackson's face that offers clues as to why the metamorphosis is so effective. Like the opening parody of the 1950s horror movie and its layering of roles that Jackson is playing (boyfriend/star), there is a slippage between different levels of belief on the part of the spectator.

The metamorphosis achieves a horrifying effect because the monster does not just mutilate the appearance of the boyfriend, but plays on the audience's awareness of Jackson's double role; thus, the credibility of the special effects violates the image of the star himself. At this metatextual

level, the drama of the transformation is heightened by other performance signs that foreground Jackson as star. The squeaks, cries and other wordless sounds which emanate from his throat as he grips his stomach grotesquely mimic the sounds which are the stylistic trademark of Jackson's voice, and thus reinforce the impression that it is the "real" Michael Jackson undergoing this mutation. Above all, the very first shots of the video highlight the makeup on his face—the lighting emphasizes the pallor of his complexion and reveals the eerie sight of his skull beneath the curly-perm hairstyle. The very appearance of Jackson draws attention to the artificiality of his own image. As the monstrous mask is, literally, a construction made out of makeup and cosmetic "work," the fictional world of the horror film merely appropriates what is already an artifice. In this sense, I suggest that the metamorphosis be seen as *a metaphor for the aesthetic reconstruction of Michael Jackson's face*.

The literal construction of the fantastic monster mask refers to other images of the star: the referent of the mask, as a sign in its own right, is a commonplace publicity image taken from the cover of a magazine. In this sense the mask refers not to the real person or private self, but to Michael-Jackson-as-an-image. The metamorphosis could thus be seen as an accelerated allegory of the morphological transformation of Jackson's facial features: from child to adult, from boyfriend to monster, from star to megastar—the sense of wonder generated by the video's special effects forms an allegory for the fascination with which the world beholds his reconstructed star image.

In 1983 Jackson took part in a TV special celebrating Motown's twenty-fifth anniversary, in which vintage footage was intercut with each act's live performance; the film was then edited as used as a support act on Motown artists' tours in England. This is how the reception of the film was described:

The audience almost visibly tensed as Michael's voice . . . took complete control, attacking the songs with that increased repertoire of whoops, hiccups and gasps, with which he punctuates the lyric to such stylish, relaxing effect. And then he danced. The cocky strut of a superconfident child had been replaced by a lithe, menacing grace, and his impossibly lean frame, still boyishly gangly, when galvanized by the music, assumed a hypnotic, androgynous sexuality. Certainly, it was the first time in a long, long time I'd heard girls scream at a film screen.¹²

Amid all the screaming elicited by "Thriller" it is possible to hear an ambiguous echo of those fans' response. As a pop idol Michael Jackson has been the object of such screaming since he was eleven years old—and surely such fandom is, for the star himself, a source of both pleasure and terror.

In "The Face of Garbo" Barthes (1973 [1957]) sought to explore the almost universal appeal of film stars like Chaplin, Hepburn and Garbo by describing their faces as *masks*: aesthetic surfaces on which a society writes large its own preoccupations. Jackson's face may also be seen as such a mask, for his image has garnered the kind of cultural fascination that makes him more like a movie star than a modern-day rhythm and blues artist. The racial and sexual ambiguity of his image can also be seen as pointing to a range of questions about images of race and gender in popular culture and pop music. If we regard his face not as the manifestation of personality traits, but as a surface of artistic and social inscription, the ambiguities of Jackson's star image call into question received ideas about what black male artists in popular music should look like. Seen from this angle his experimentation with imagery represents a creative incursion upon a terrain in pop culture more visibly mapped out by white male stars like Mick Jagger, David Bowie or Boy George. At best, these stars have used androgyny and sexual ambiguity as part of their style in ways which question prevailing definitions of male sexuality and sexual identity. Key songs on *Thriller* highlight a similar problematization of masculinity: on "Wanna Be Startin' Somethin'" the narrator replies to rumor and speculation about his sexual preference, on "Billy Jean"—a story about a fan who claims he is the father of her son—he refuses the paternal model of masculinity, and on "Beat It"—"Don't wanna see no blood, Don't be a macho man"—he explicitly deflates a bellicose model of manliness.

What makes Jackson's use of androgyny more compelling is that his work is located entirely in the Afro-American tradition of popular music, and thus must be seen in the context of imagery of black men and black male sexuality. Jackson not only questions dominant stereotypes of black masculinity,¹³ but also gracefully steps outside the existing range of "types" of black men. In so doing his style reminds us how some black men in the rhythm and blues tradition, such as Little Richard, used "camp," in

the sense that Susan Sontag calls "the love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration," (Sontag, 1983 [1964]: 105), long before white pop stars began to exploit its shock value or subversive potential. Indeed, "Thriller" is reminiscent of the camp excess of the originator of the music and horror combination in pop culture, Screamin' Jay Hawkins.

Horror imagery has fascinated the distinctly white male musical genre of "heavy metal," in which acts like Alice Cooper and Ozzy Osbourne (Black Sabbath) consume themselves in self-parody. But like Hawkins, whose "I Put a Spell on You" (1956) borrowed imagery from horror mythologies to articulate a scream, "that found its way out of my big mouth *directly* through my heart and guts,"¹⁴ Jackson expresses another sort of screaming, one that articulates the erotic materiality of the human voice, its "grain." Writing about a musical tradition radically different from soul, Barthes coined this term to give "the impossible account of an individual thrill that I constantly experience in listening to singing" (Barthes, 1977: 181). "Thriller" celebrates the fact that this thrill is shared by millions.