

Michael Jackson's artistic contributions: a different perspective

Deadline for submitting contributions: 1st March 2021

Journal issue edited by Isabelle Petitjean

PRESENTATION

The number of academic studies on Michael Jackson has increased in recent years, no doubt coinciding with both an awareness of his impact on the music industry, music history and society, and the growing interest he represented for cultural studies. However, many of the studies concerning him have focused much less on his artistic contributions than on the so-called anxiety-provoking fluidity of his artistic image (Dalmazzo 2009, 2010; Scott 2012), his startext (Raphael 2012) or his ability to blur all the codes simultaneously (Fast 2010, 2012). Michael Jackson engages essentially the fields of "race" (Zulu ed. 2010; Brackett 2012; Woodward 2014), gender (Scott 2012), sex (Fuchs 1995), "strangeness" (Fast 2012; Jefferson 2006), even in a musical (Roberts 2011; Malela 2012; Gondwe 2013; Petitjean 2019) or choreographic (Takiguchi 2014) context. His songs and his musical short films have been dissected through orientalist (Faust 2012), nationalist (Rossiter 2012), post-essentialist or post-constructivist interpretations (Fuss 1989; Awkward 1995) and previous reviews of his work (Zulu ed. 2010; Hawkins & Fast eds. 2012) have largely subscribed to these melanic and musico-colorist prisms. Admittedly, his sound and visual work evolved in a context where genre and pigmentation have always been connected, however, Michael Jackson never ceased to fight to avoid being locked into a monochrome marketing niche. And to do so, he never stopped echoing and deploying a pool of pluralist references, interacting with the fragmentation and rotation of genres within the mainstream (Mercer 1994: 95), playing with, rather than breaking categories (Brackett 2012), and proposing an eminently multidisciplinary, combinatory and federative art.

By dedicating a special issue to Michael Jackson, *NaKan* proposes to shift this perception and broaden the approaches that are too often melano-centric to generate a reflection that is more oriented towards the artist's work and the mediums of his expressions, as so many channels offering a possibility of contextualization, and historical and stylistic analysis. The challenges of this edition will reside in the capacity of the contributors to renew the discourse on this "racial" question by moving away from the American context, for example, and to propose disciplinary or multidisciplinary approaches to the artist's sound, choreographic, video and stage production, per se. This is what is at stake in the three proposed fields of investigation and analysis.

Reception and perception of Jacksonian production outside the United States

If, for good reason, it is not possible to free Michael Jackson from all identity and community issues, it seems incumbent upon us to question the effectiveness and validity of these considerations outside the United States, in countries where the recording market is not necessarily segmented, where agents and music from communities and margins are co-equal with the most generalist, without discrimination. Have Michael Jackson's identity, and the pluri-stylistic and decategorizing nature of his artistic expressions, been treated and approached differently by the public or the media? Has it been (or is it) possible to view his work from the same angle as the pop of artists such as Madonna, Whitney Houston, Prince, or George Michael,

i.e. beyond their (generally less conflicting) identity profiles? Did he manage, in the European countries where he was highly successful (England, Italy, Germany, France) or on other continents, to achieve the post-racial artistic ideal he was aiming for? (McLaren 1992: 77; Lewis Jones, 2005: 233, 279-280)

Historical Contextualizations and Contemporary Impact

Michael Jackson's musical, stage, video, and choreographic productions are as much a milestone as they are the pinnacle of a historical and secular dynamic of stylistic evolutions and complex combinatorial borrowings now feeding the supra-genre of pop (Brackett 2000: 68). The conventions and influences that innervate his work are numerous and cross disciplinary fields as varied as great music, ballet, musical comedy, fine arts or cinema. Some of them have even aggregated around his charismatic character to the point of becoming inseparable and being assimilated as a true signature. And it is essentially through two mediums that this kaleidoscopic, chameleon-like aesthetic (Malela 2012: 19) has been carried and popularized on a massive scale: musical short films and the stage...

...Short films often broadcast in mondovision and conceived with cinematographic specifications that one might wonder whether they were, in any case, an inevitable mutation of their initial advertising function or whether they really triggered a paradigm shift on the part of contemporary artists whose videos have often been balanced (Madonna in the USA, Duran Duran in England, A-Ha in Norway, Mylène Farmer in France).

... A staging thought in a certain tradition of total art, combining live performance (music, dance, circus, magic) and technology (video, special effects), abolishing space-time (Smith 2012: [1]) and creating a true space of ritual, sometimes codified, and of spiritual or profane communion (Coman 2011). An artistic approach marked by multidisciplinary, poly-expressive, even synesthetic dynamics (Harper 1989), linking it to African ethnic practices as much as they question the shackles and hierarchical scales between the so-called noble arts and the more commercial and popular ones. What about the impact of his large-scale multidisciplinary performances? How have they been able to mark, since the Victory Tour in 1984, the reversal of the power relations between artists and concert organizers that we recognize in them (Greenburg 2014: 80-95; McLaren 1992: 144-145)? Is it the result of effective communication strategies, capitalizing on an already considerable commercial success coupled with lucrative advertising contracts and bold artistic content? Have they really had an effect on the way of thinking and promoting pop music?

Artistic Heritage

Finally, Michael Jackson's work deserves, almost 12 years after his death, to be examined as a legacy. What is the content of the legacy left by Jackson's artistic conception on the current scene? Many artists in recent years mention his name as an influence or stage his work or gesture more or less directly in their musical, textual or visual productions (Bruno Mars, Chris Brown, Justin Bieber, Justin Timberlake, Usher, The Weeknd, Akon, Drake, Beyoncé, MKTO, Black M, Soprano, Christine and the Queens, BTS, Dimash...). Is it a simple instrument of legitimization, of artistic capitalization, of simple nostalgic evocations, of winks or is it a real stumbling block, the stigmata of a pop music marked durably by his advances and creations? Finally, is there a Jacksonian legacy and how can it be defined?

SUBMISSIONS

Contributions may take the form of original articles, case studies, analyses, syntheses, interviews or reviews drawing upon transnational and multidisciplinary perspectives:

- Language sciences: musicology, choreography
- visual and performing arts
- cultural studies

- humanities and social sciences: history, sociology, and a variety of related fields
- semiotics and semiology
- comparative literature

SELECTION PROCESS AND TIMELINE

The selection of proposals will be done in two stages.

- **From 1st February to 1st March 2021:** submission of abstracts and bio-bibliographic note
Proposals should include a title and an abstract of approximately 400 words (maximum) in the author's usual language. They should also include a short bio-bibliographic note, not exceeding 150 words.

- **From 1st March to 10 May 2021:** selection of proposals.

Authors will be notified by 10 May 2021 of acceptance or refusal of their proposals. These will then be processed into articles limited to 35,000 characters, including spaces.

The submission of abstracts, with their bio-bibliographic note, must be sent to nakancontributions@gmail.com. For more informations, please send you message to nakancontributions@gmail.com

Key words: Michael Jackson; music industry; musicology; performing arts; transdisciplinarity

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