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ABSTRACT

This research seeks to surface the social, cultural and political effects of Michael Jackson’s “Thriller.” As a whole, this body of work investigates the performative elements of “Thriller” as discourse. Using Ferdinand de Saussure’s semiotic approach, Mikhail Bakhtin’s heteroglossia and theory of the carnivalesque, Karl Marx’s concept of commodity fetishism, Thorstein Veblen’s notion of conspicuous consumption and Homi Bhabha’s concept of mimicry, this study finds that Jackson is able to be filtered through rituals and traditions in order to produce an image that is not only larger than life, but extremely malleable and able to signify a variety of cultural conditions. Thinkers are challenged to see Michael Jackson, through the work of “Thriller” as a multifarious entity, worth more than mere entertainment value. The examination of “Thriller” establishes that although Jackson is a popular culture icon, his relevance and influence exceed the arena in which he primarily performed. Jackson, as a complex figure, is more than an entertainer; he is a performance. Inasmuch as others depict elements of “Thriller,” its very concept is rooted in the anticipated future reinterpretation and redistribution of other performances. Encompassing lyrical content, music, and moving images, Jackson’s brand is an inimitable and persuasive example of how a commodified aura is multifunctional. Ultimately, this research solidifies “Thriller” as an important cultural artifact that retains its value over twenty years after its inception.
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… And finally, to the memory of Mr. Jackson…
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INTRODUCTION

Tortured, genius, postmodern, and iconic are all words used by the academy to characterize the life and career of Michael Jackson. When viewing Michael Jackson through the lens of popular culture, whether with feelings of admiration or detestation, one thing is for certain: he is a complex and constructed text worth serious academic attention. Contemporary writing about Michael Jackson tends to focus on one of three things: a racial project concerning him, a hypothesis of sexual deviance, or his biography. While these investigations continue to emerge, it becomes evident that the varying foci speak to the impact that Jackson has had complicating and transcending racial, economic, and cultural politics. Contemporary research, specifically by scholars Gregory Tate (2010) and Mark Anthony Neal (2010), has sought to unify the work of Jackson and focus on the stages of the development of his musical contributions to popular music. Conversely, very recent additional investigations by scholars Bonnie Brooks (2010) and Raquel Moore (2010) analyze the moving body of Michael Jackson as a postmodern site of semiotic study. However, a consistent theme in the research, which I will build on in this thesis, is that Jackson is a site for political, cultural, economic, and social contestation.

Michael Jackson, as a text, is inimitable in that he is able to be filtered through countless rituals and traditions and adapted to create meaning internationally in ways that produce living, recorded, and performed attributes symbolic of Americanism. In this context, I define Americanism as an ideology that emphasizes core American values such as truth, justice, and freedom. As a text, Jackson represents the ideology of Americanism and the American Dream by representing “familiar narratives of immigration, assimilation and the transcending of economic boundaries” (Meizel 5). In short, I contend that as Michael Jackson embodies those characteristics he is larger than life: not only is he able to be performed by other people, but he
performs himself as well, making him the quintessential entertainer. Jackson’s audience experiences who he is through his filtered performances of his inspirations, including Jackie Wilson, James Brown and Fred Astaire. As such, Jackson permits others to mimic his work and perform it as their own. As Jackson is influenced, he performs and morphs into this moldable figure that seems larger than life itself. Essentially, Jackson acts as a raceless, sexless, ageless, and anomalous outline that is constantly being copied and colored according to the individual or individuals who choose to perform him. Regardless of the variations of performance, Jackson is still recognizable in presentation. The song “Thriller” serves as the ideal conduit through which one can investigate the performance aesthetic of Michael Jackson. Both song and video serve as rich texts for critical analysis. “Thriller” is a layered text, and as such, this research seeks to deconstruct these layers to articulate how performance is critical to the perception of Michael Jackson as the mythical entity that he became.

Through an examination of “Thriller” as song and video, as well as of the contributions it made to Jackson’s celebrity, Americanism, and international appeal, this thesis seeks to unite all of the pieces that contribute to the overall effectiveness of “Thriller.” Jackson, through “Thriller,” did more than simply provide entertainment to a wide array of people: he made a cultural statement that was adapted, adopted, and performed internationally. Jackson served as the orchestrator (with substantial assistance) of a movement that changed music and popular culture worldwide. He became the archetype for the global popular culture superstar while simultaneously illustrating its problems.

The story of Michael Jackson is quickly becoming popular culture legend, in that it is readily accessible and many people have experienced (on some level) Jackson’s story through his words or someone else’s. Born Michael Joseph Jackson, the “Moonwalker” is perhaps the
largest popular culture entity of the twentieth century. Known for his philanthropy, captivating
delivery, and signature dance moves, Jackson has delivered some of the most memorable and
poignant performances in the history of popular music. Jackson was introduced to the world as a
childhood performer in a band with his brothers as part of Motown’s precocious phenomenon,
Jackson 5 (Terry 74). Although much of what Jackson became is in large part indebted to his
group’s successful career at Motown and the active participation of their father, Joseph Jackson,
Michael Jackson did not become the type of multifaceted and commodified celebrity with
Motown and the Jackson 5 that he did when he became a solo artist. It could be said that
Jackson was a product of the Motown machine; indeed, from the beginning he and his brothers
were groomed for crossover musical and advertising appeal (Posner 2). Knowing his history,
one could infer that his success as a solo artist, particularly with Thriller in 1982 was the logical
next step for someone that had the extensive training Jackson underwent at Motown.

While in the group with his brothers, Jackson experienced several chart-topping
successes including: “I Want You Back”, “ABC”, “The Love You Save”, “I’ll Be There” and
“Never Can Say Goodbye” (Billboard). Clearly, these successes were garnered during the late
1960’s and early 1970’s during a period of social unrest in America. The Jackson 5 represented
a group that truly became a crossover sensation: regardless of the fact that they were young black
men – a racialized minority, they were molded to represent a particular music type rather than be
purely objectified for their skin color. Because of the image that Motown perpetuated, Jackson’s
audience was not as age, race, or socioeconomically specific as that for many other groups like
the Jackson 5. Jackson and his brothers were able to perform nationally and internationally
because of the stamp of approval that they received from Motown.
After experiencing commercial success with Motown, Michael Jackson felt that he needed to continue as a solo artist, and he continued his career with the record label Epic. Jackson’s critically acclaimed 1979 project titled *Off the Wall* had chart-topping singles including “Don’t Stop ‘Til You Get Enough,” “Rock With You” “Off The Wall” and “She’s Out Of My Life.” (Whitburn 504) The team slated to work on Jackson’s debut solo album included the award-winning production team of Quincy Jones, Rod Temperton, and Stevie Wonder, just to name a few. Despite the fact that he encountered success with his first project, no one could have predicted – with the exception of Jackson – the effect of his sophomore follow-up, *Thriller.*

On November 30, 1982, *Thriller* was released. To date it has sold a rumored 110 million copies, produced seven (of nine tracks available on the album) hit singles, and changed the way music is marketed. The title-track of the award-winning *Thriller* album garnered critical acclaim, selling 29 million copies alone in addition to the variety of awards and analyses of the music video that changed how music artists became commodities. In addition to the great influence Jackson was able to create through his music, his celebrity also represented an emergent, commodified black persona that had not, prior to “Thriller,” had the same kind of representation on MTV, among other popular arenas. As a result of his influence both in music and the business of music, Jackson is now revered as one of the preeminent and trailblazing popular music performers of the twentieth century. Additionally, his work *Thriller* is now held in the Library of Congress and is labeled as a significant cultural work by the American archive. Jackson died June 29, 2009, leaving the musical inheritance of “Thriller” as an archetype of popular music as a political, economic and social artifact because of its continuous rearticulation for such causes since its debut. Jackson’s “Thriller” contribution will be rerecorded and rewritten for future generations, demonstrating a specific type of influence that had not happened
previously, and may occur again. The musical legacy of the “Thriller” song forms the basis for the musicological review in the first chapter.

The Message of the Music

Musicological analysis seeks to define the words and music as convergent texts that have separate but collaborative meanings. More than just musical, a song is a gathering of creativity, funneled through channels of unique expression. The focus of this research is first on the musical text, which include the instruments, words, and interpretation of musical phrases. Without the music, there is no launching pad for a video concept. I maintain that the music provides a foundation on which Jackson and his multiple production teams were able to audibly attach meaning. The audience is able to associate meaning through Jackson, because of his vocal performance. Therefore, “Thriller” is the principal text with Jackson as the principal author, with subsidiary texts and authors that contribute to the overall perception of Jackson as singer/celebrity. Using Bakhtin’s idea of heteroglossia, I seek to deconstruct how authorial voice is constructed. Through the interpretation of Jackson, the audience decodes much of what is attempting to be relayed. As such, he serves as the primary voice among other voices in musicological analysis. This chapter aggressively discusses about who the other authors are and why Jackson must assume the authorial voice. In addition to establishing Jackson as the primary author, the musicological review is also concerned with unpacking the compounded “pop music” genre as it relates to “Thriller.” “Thriller” is an amalgamation of genres and to provide clearer information on what “popular” signifies in this context one is required to identify the conventions of the several genres that “Thriller” seems to include.
The purpose of the musicological review is to critically examine how the text is constructed as a complete whole rather than incongruent parts. Because “Thriller” is a combination of words, musical phrases, rhythmic patterns, and production elements, it is imperative to provide a framework to situate how these pieces work cooperatively to produce the desired effect. In order to understand the multiple pieces working simultaneously, I employ semiotic textual analysis as my positioning: thorough research must be concerned equally with words and their meanings. Even more important is to know what the musical signs signify culturally inside and outside of the text, which leads to my analysis of the visual that accompanied “Thriller” months after the album was released. The musicological findings help set up the analysis in chapter 2 of the visual element that was later added to the musical track.

Thriller Carnivale: The Thriller Short Movie

There are a myriad of ways to describe the evolution of music video conventions over time. Modern music video as a form of music artist promotion came to the forefront with the advent of MTV, and since has become a standard in advertising new and established artists alike. In music video, however, the purposes are unified: the goal of the music video is to showcase the star, reflect the lyrics in some way, and underscore the music all within a span of time that is usually very short (Vernallis 4). The original purposes of music video are expounded upon in Jackson’s “Thriller.” That particular video defied popularly employed practices, and chose to present itself in a new, creative, expressive, fantastical nonnarrative video (Vernallis 141). This cinematographic exposition of “Thriller” as the extension of the song was critical to its success. In addition to the words, the world has a recorded and distributed visual interpretation from the artist himself. Instead of having to imagine the meaning of the song for themselves, audiences are given a prescribed and promoted performance spelling it out for them. Titled Thriller
Carnivale, this chapter analyzes the performative elements of the song. This performance, like the music, was a fusion of style and medium: it involved a variety of dance conventions along with cinematographic elements that created “hysteria.” Whereas themes were suggested and alluded to in a musical track for audience listening pleasure, there were concurrent and occasionally conflicting themes that were performed through mediated aesthetic stimuli.

The themes of death, fright, and fantasy present in “Thriller,” make Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the carnivalesque instrumental to deconstructing the visual and the aural. Bakhtin aids my thesis in that the carnivalesque provides the opportunity to understand Jackson’s performance, in this instance, as an adapted performance of something else – the spectacle. The power of performance works well for Jackson as they are recorded and replayed to be reinterpreted and appropriated. Because of the widespread influence of the video, Jackson became a household name: his performance was readily accessible for any consumer. Jackson and his performance became commodity. Through the complicated and decentralized entertainment industry, Jackson’s persona was exchanged for goods and services. In becoming a commodifiable entity, Jackson also faced challenges of embodying both self and product, causing the carnivalesque atmosphere to leak into spaces other than the “Thriller” video.

Commodified Celebrity: Betwixt and Between Person and Artist

Jackson’s movement from the arena of music video allowed him to evolve, especially as he became a celebrity. As a commodity, Jackson’s specific type of celebrity is problematic. The area of celebrity is rich with information regarding the pulse of popular culture and how forms of culture are articulated across mass media. Works such as Stars Don’t Stand Still in the Sky: Music and Myth expound upon the myths assumed in scholarly research about celebrity by
integrating them with other musical professionals to discuss how myth and popular music are interrelated, as well as critiquing reoccurring themes and trends in the ascension to stardom. Because Jackson was both man and product, he symbolized many things to many people. In consuming “Thriller,” audiences are simultaneously exposed to the values “Thriller” portrays. As a celebrity, Jackson begins to develop heroic tendencies in American society, thus demonstrating and hyperbolizing American-ness. Performing, as a consistent theme, is important in Americanism: the varieties of values as set forth by the governing laws of the land are all performed according to individual adaptations. Performing these values the way Jackson does, however, is complex, to say the least. Questions such as “who/what is in control?” and “does Michael lose himself?” become critical to how one views his performance. More importantly, through the lens of “Thriller,” Jackson becomes incredibly tough to comprehend because the audience is negotiating the dynamics of Jackson’s text. Therefore, the aim of this chapter is to talk about how commodification is also performance. Does performance determine worth, and if so who determines Jackson’s worth? Because of the intricateness of Jackson’s commodity, and the accessibility of popular culture due to technology, Jackson’s brand expands beyond national, racial, ethnic, economical, social, and political borders. The object of this chapter is to question and complicate Jackson’s influence as a result of “Thriller”.

Jackson in Jail: Localized Performance with an International Stage

It is evident that “Thriller” went beyond the boundaries of “American” music and infiltrated other cultures, thus changing the international musical discourse. As technology changes, the American influence expands. As Stuart Hall (1991) notes moving images have constituted the emergence of a different kind of globalization that is American, and not just western or English (27). Just as sheet music, records, and now mp3s have altered the way people
consume music, music video did the same. With images accompanying music, artists such as Michael Jackson became ideal sites for localized performance: Michael Jackson was not just an American phenomenon, he was an international sensation. It is important to note that his influence was not only effectual in terms of American popular culture; it had paramount effects internationally with developing countries.

As a product of timing, talent, and preparation for the moment, Jackson represented a discussion of music as a means of socialization, localization, and globalization. Using YouTube phenomena as international case studies, this chapter gives concrete examples of how people can perform Michael Jackson in order to provide social commentary on their own plights. The YouTube clip used as an example of Jackson’s worldwide reach was produced twenty-four years after the initial “Thriller” video: while performing the same essence, its message was drastically different. Even more significant than how the “new authors” conceptualize the aesthetic qualities of the remake video is the meaning behind the new interpretation of “Thriller.” This chapter discusses the effect of the “Thriller” music video on Philippine prisoners and how they rearticulate meaning as a form of localized performance.

“Thriller” was more than just a high risk/high reward entertainment gamble, it is a cultural movement. It dramatically changed how humans experience music. Each part – music, video, commodity, soundtrack, distribution and replication – solidify “Thriller” as a significant work that is worthy of critical analysis. This work seeks to call attention to the need for popular music study dedicated to the combination of musicological, political, economic, cultural, and visual analysis because all are interdependent. To make claims independently of music, political, or cultural appeal essentializes Jackson and simplifies his mass appeal and cultural significance. When we think about popular music, it should not be merely for the purpose of entertainment:
the popular music arena must divulge greater details about values and practices within culture. Succinctly, this research seeks to destabilize the assumption that popular music is devoid of cultural and political significance. We are constantly reminded that music is not as black and white as the keys on the piano; there are gradations of grey in the *Thrills, Kicks and Moonwalks.*
CHAPTER ONE: THRILLS AND TRILLS: MUSICOLOGICAL REVIEW

The third released single and title track of Michael Jackson’s second studio album, **Thriller**, is a two-tiered experience. The engaging part about “Thriller” is that the experience intertwines both the aural and the visual. This chapter will address the audio through a musicological review that relies on the use of semiotics as the chosen theory for textual analysis of the lyrical and musical content. Semiotics – the study of signs – helps shape a broader understanding of popular music by allowing the researcher to look at the construction of syntax and significance concurrently, and thus deduce intentionality and audience response. Although lyrics and music are used for the purpose of entertainment, especially in terms of Michael Jackson, there is noteworthy cultural information embodied in the multiplicities of “Thriller” performances. According to researcher Konrad Sidney Bayer (2010), there are a few conventions that popular music employs and Michael Jackson exploits in order to incite widely used mechanics within the popular music genre. Chief among these is creating a dissonance in the communication of meaning, allowing for multiple interpretations (47). Bayer notes that the world of popular music involves a feedback loop of sorts: the performer is sending information through mediated channels and the audience interprets the sent data into their own interpretations of what it means and how they will apply it (46). Citing Susan McClary, Bayer argues that for the duration of the performance, “we inhabit a world in which everyone participates in performance. Tradition balances with individual invention; the self conjoins harmoniously with community, and body, mind, and spirit collaborate, wherein the possibility of a sustained present replaces tonality’s tendency to strain for and against closure” (47). Jackson’s contribution has not only encouraged worldwide participation, it is recorded for public memory for listeners (and researchers) to revisit in order to discover new meanings.
Written by Rod Temperton, “Thriller” is perhaps one of the most important musical productions of the twentieth century. I use the word “production” purposefully because the written song’s meaning is continually enlarged by the performances that are birthed thereafter. Although Temperton wrote the song, “Thriller” is a “production” because of the collaborative project that it became, especially considering how it gave rise to the blockbuster music video as well as the countless studies and adaptations that have emerged since its 1982 debut. Also, “production” is critically used because the written song spawned subsequent creations of meaningful extra-textual elements which became equally as important as the music itself.

Although the significance of “Thriller” has as much to do with performance of the visual stimuli within the music video as it does the audio component of the musical track, this musicological reading, focuses on the audio cues: the words, music, and sound effects used in the song. In particular, this reading will focus on first the aural amalgamation of several genres as well as a semiotic and postmodern reading of the text within “Thriller.” Different letters create words, which then key certain sounds. These sounds have to work cooperatively to create phrases that make literal and musical sense. One of the key details in creating a musical journey is to phrase songs in such a way that allows for “natural” inclines and declines to create a phrase (Dayme 122). Particularly, Jackson indicates the beginning and end of phrases by grunts and vocal impulses that are signature to his sound. As a singer, Jackson has to be intently aware of his vowel and consonant sounds, and simultaneously the rhythm of the text.

Rod Temperton writes “Thriller” at a 4/4 metric time (four beats to a measure; each quarter note receives one beat) and a metronomic speed of 120. As Michael Jackson sings, “Thriller” navigates in and out of D flat (C sharp) and its relative minor B flat (A sharp) to produce a contrast between smooth tenor and piercing countertenor, fitting the criteria for
Richard Miller’s *tenore buffo*. The *tenore buffo* normally is a lighter tenor voice which has the desire for a larger sound. Furthermore, the buffo tenor is “usually small in stature,” and can be considered non-convincing in romantic roles because his voice and physical stature deny him believability on a stage (Miller 10). The contrast that Jackson displays is apparent in the vocal differences between the verses and the chorus.

**The Art of Recording**

“Thriller,” from a musicological standpoint is a production of various authentic and manufactured sounds that had previously not been widely incorporated into popular music. Each instrument or sound made a distinct impact that contributed to this song’s makeup. While the sound effects (howling wolf, door creaks, wind blowing, etc.) add character to the song, Temperton and Quincy Jones were also expressly concerned with what instrumentation was most appropriate for the sound of “Thriller.” They chose a brass section consisting of a trumpet, flugelhorn, saxophone, flute, trombone and lead synths, a synth bass, a muted guitar, a pipe organ, a conga/bongo drum loop and some sort string-like synthesized pad that provided a foundation for the sections through which this song goes: the introduction, three verses, three choruses, bridge, and outro. Inasmuch as “Thriller,” (originally recorded in 1982), is an exposition of mass marketed musical production, it is also the tell-tale sign of the technological advances and product availability during this era, when technology dramatically changed the music industry on several fronts. Digital recording made it possible for artists to no longer be held captive to background singers and live instrumentation. Furthermore, editing became more systematic and the sound engineer’s job became more important. Perfection was a product of aligning suitable “sound bites” together that were most likely produced by the originator over a period of time rather than in one setting. And as with most industries, the more financial
investment in the production, the greater the likelihood of a quality arrangement. And although many fanatics of live instrumentation would argue that this type of advancement led to the degradation of music, rapid development in music technology expanded the parameters of what could be considered musical instrumentation and gave synthesized sound a permanent place within popular music.

Throughout “Thriller,” there are several different synthesized sounds. Synthesizers are sound modules that take on characteristics of the sound waves that are passed through it at a variety of frequencies, which at times are capable of mimicking other instruments or generating sounds that are enhanced extensions of instruments that are commonly used (Pressing 4). For “Thriller,” Rod Temperton chose synthesized pads to lay foundation and background tracks and a synthesized bass to provide a solid “bottom.” The intentional use of the synthesizer is effective in creating the ambiance indicated by the lyrical content. Considering Quincy Jones’ executive production, the synthesizer’s use is even more purposeful as he was the first producer and arranger to have a synthesized-based pop song in the hit television series *Ironside*, which ran from 1967-1975 (Wilbekin). Synthesized instruments did not replace live instruments, but they did provide suitable alternatives.

Multiple Authors, One Voice

Popular music is a site for multiple authors within one particular text. As Mikhail Bakhtin argues, heteroglossia is the ability of a text to articulate the coexistence of, and conflict between, different types of speech. I argue that the same concept applies within music as well. The strength of music, especially evident in this case, is found in the collaboration of several types of authors within one text. In “Thriller,” it can be argued that there are four major authors
that work collectively and individually within one musical text: Rod Temperton, Quincy Jones, Michael Jackson, and Vincent Price. In the same line of thought as Bakhtin, I argue that Jackson’s performance of these authors embodies the hybrid speech pattern that Bakhtin discusses at length.

As a work of music, “Thriller” is not one single, unified form. Instead, it exists within a genre that consists of several subsumed subgenres, and the work is not created by a singular author, but several with a variety of different points of view. Bakhtin argues that heteroglossic texts are “multiform in style and variform in speech and voice” with a chief authority or a master puppeteer who is a conduit for the other voices to speak (Bahktin 261). I argue that Michael Jackson works as the chief author: his performance is the quintessential product of his singing voice and interpretation, the creative direction of Quincy Jones and the written inspiration of Rod Temperton. As the principal author, Jackson is able to articulate all these voices simultaneously. The coexistence of these “narrators,” other “characters,” and “authors” are consolidated because ultimately Jackson is the face and the literal voice through which the other components are expressed. Jackson demonstrates that although popular music borrows components from classic poetry like telling a story, like Bakhtin’s novel, popular music is not one-dimensional. All the voices that speak in music like “Thriller” are intentional and serve the purpose of building the perceived persona of Michael Jackson, which only tells part of a story. Reading “Thriller” from the perspective of one author does not give it the dimensional justice necessary. Michael Jackson manages to unite these voices in one body through the element of performance, which multifariously allows each author appropriate representation.
Hybrid Genres

Music for mass consumption is produced by competing and converging ideologies and styles. From the perspective of genre, this song’s production is an assortment of several genres including, but not limited to, soul, rock, and electronic dance music. Yet all of these genres work together in one song to articulate a popular music that spoke volumes of the artist performing the music. The instrumentation and style of singing denote genre types. Because “Thriller” incorporates so many types of instruments and styles, it truly reflects the hybridity of the popular music of the late 1970s and 1980s. Depending on era of music, the conventions within the broad genre of “popular” could be very different. Within music, conventions function to provide an ideological apparatus that encourages specific thoughts about how populations should feel and act. They serve as suggestions as to how people should socialize themselves into certain cultures. Therefore, it is not happenstance that musical conventions should guide musicians, producers, sound engineers, and dancers to carry out uniform functions depending on the genre of which they are a part. Conventions guide not only the consumer; they also guide the performer/musician.

Popular culture, specifically popular music, thrives on the constant negotiation of hegemonic conventions. In the case of Thriller, popular music is a fusion of several different styles of music combined within one song. The song’s structure is built around soul, rock, and electronic/house. Genre conventions are also indicative of time and technology. All of the aforementioned genres had specific characteristics that were woven together by the production team that seemed to be able to capture what they deemed the most functional parts of that music and create a sound that is specific to the voice and style of Michael Jackson.
For obvious reasons, soul music is embedded in the history of Michael Jackson. As this single is the title track of his second solo project, Jackson’s performance repertoire prior to launching out on his own was on the chitlin circuit as a member of a young soul group from Gary, Indiana. This soul group’s music was a response to dominant hegemonic White music of the time. The musical retort, however, was especially specific to the intersection between the sacred and profane, and the certain “soul” music that was specific to the Black community. During Jackson’s first years of performance, genres were (and arguably still are) often grouped according to ethnic and racial boundaries (Holt, 2007). The cataloging was based on an interpreted racial performed difference between dominant popular culture and marginalized group subculture. Soul music represents conventions and inventions of rhythm and blues music while maintaining a reverent gospel tone; depending on the environment which the song is performed, the meaning could create an ethereal-like atmosphere engaging something that is above human reproach, almost worshipful. Being a product of Motown Records, Jackson also had successful experiences in crossover music, which allowed him to expand his musical scope. Jackson and his brothers, through Motown’s endorsement of crossover music, engaged multiple conventions of several types of genres in order to garner and maintain relevance across racial and ethnic boundaries.

Rock music of the 1980’s was generally characterized by heavy bursts of guitars and bass with some sort of foundational keyboard instrument – organ, piano, or synthesized keyboard. Furthermore, rock music thrived because of the predictability of its rhythm. Unlike the improvisation of other music types that Black artists stereotypically thrived in (i.e., jazz, gospel, rhythm and blues, etc.), the drums in most rock music of the 1980s were unsyncopated and the snare always landed on the beat (in 4/4 time – beats 2 and 4) (Biamonte 98). Rock music
continued to be predictable because its chord changes were simplistic, as most music was, with the primary focus on the presentation of the song; songs seemed to highlight the vocal or instrumentalist soloist’s ability as the subsequent musicianship merely accompanied their work. The rhythms mostly focused on driving the song into an instrumental solo towards the end (Biamonte 100). Usually the solo is characterized by a piercing high note with cascading riffs, scales, and skips.

Since rock music was one of the most popular music genres in the 1980s, it seems somewhat predictable that Jackson would incorporate elements of rock music to appease that audience. Considering the two songs from the album *Thriller* that preceded this song as a single were “The Girl is Mine,” which was considered an appeasement to a crossover audience and a light rock/pop ballad, as well as “Beat It,” which features the signature Eddie Van Halen rock guitar solo at the end of the bridge – it is not difficult to see that Michael Jackson’s persona seems to align with what is “popular” in popular music.

Along with rock music, electronic dance music became an emergent music form that was employed in “Thriller.” Electronic dance music (EDM) is heavily attuned to the sound of movement. With the declining popularity of disco during the 1980s, there was a shift in the way club culture was structured (Butler 39). As a result, electronic dance music became the soundtrack of a subculture of dance. Electronic dance music is especially problematic to analyze because it was primarily concerned with experience rather than conventional musical rules (Butler 40). With “experiences” of the music being vastly diverse with stylistic choices left to disc jockeys, regions, and sometimes specific clubs, EDM took on a variety of sounds as a genre with no consistent verbal component, rhythmic pattern, or sound. Therefore, there are no standard ways of discussing its content like other forms of music. However, one consistent use
of electronic dance music focused on merging with already made tracks to create different sounds. “Even though they usually function within a larger context, their individual meaning (or range of potential meanings) has much to do with how they can be combined, as well as with how they are combined” (Butler 13).

Because of the liberty within the genre, it is sufficient to say that the EDM genre is as nomadic as those experiencing it: both people and music contribute equally to the creation of this culture and genre. The use of EDM was especially important to the construction of songs like *Thriller* because typical EDM tracks ranged from 110-120 beats per minute (Butler 8). Culturally EDM signified the rebirth in a different form of the rhythmic and instrumental conventions of the 1970’s disco movement which was representative of homoerotic overtones, subcultural symbols of freedom like Studio 54 in New York, and emergent marketability.

Combining all of these genres in “Thriller” was necessary to appeal to the types of audiences of which Jackson already had the attention. Weaving together these different styles of popular music signified the production team’s commitment to experimentation and market adaptation. Music has to be cleverly constructed as keeping within the trends or aggressively changing the trends being set. Either choice leaves the artist in the hands of the cruel and inconsistent audience. Considering the high risk taken in the multiple layers of “Thriller,” including its lyrical content, instrumentation, and sound effects, Jackson and his team certainly reaped high dividends.

Semiotic reading of the lyrics and singing

When “Thriller” was produced, it went through several changes in titles including “Moon Man” and “Stardust” before arriving at a clear decision (Kirkland 35). When Temperton
ultimately decided that “Thriller” was his final song title choice, he began lyrics that shaped the overall mood of the song. From the beginning, the sound effects color the melody, which suggests dark themes, which are then solidified by the sinister lyrics that follow. It is important that Temperton lyrically sets the tone early on so that the music correlates with the sound effects. As a writer for mass-marketed and distributed music, it is imperative to write music that is consistent – lyrics, tone, mood, and melody, especially if one desires longevity in a commercial career.

The track begins with what sounds like a creaking opening door, wind blowing, footsteps of hard-soled shoes, thunder, and a howling wolf for an entire seventeen seconds before the downbeat of synthesized drums and pads are introduced to the listener. The sound effects work together within the text to introduce a dark emotive ambiance. This evokes a feeling of drama, indicating transitions from one musical movement to the next. After the aforementioned effects within the introduction, the music starts with a kick drum (bass) that accent beats 2 and 4 in order to build up to the synthesized foundational pads. It seems intentional that the foundational pads key the song, but do not give away the melody. The expressive effect of foundational synthesizer precedes the brass hits of familiarity: “Thriller, thriller night.”

*It’s close to midnight and something evil’s lurking in the dark/*

*Under the moonlight, you see a sight that almost stops your heart*

This line of lyric gives more specific imagery than the sound effects. There are two key settings that Temperton sets up at this point. He specifies time and a general place: midnight and darkness with the faintness of moonlight. Setting a time and place works to effectually establish a point of reference for an audience if they have ever seen moonlight and been awake at midnight. It is important that the author acquaint an extensive audience with familiarity that is
general enough for many to capture its essence, but specific enough where people have their own personal experience with it. Midnight has been associated with the evil hour, the “witching” hour, and all sorts of other tales, because it is believed to be the darkest hour of night where the supernatural has free reign (Ammer). Furthermore, the night time is crucial to heightened senses as sight is limited because of darkness. When Temperton chooses that specific time and begins to detail the events thereafter, he successfully keys emotions, thoughts, and atmosphere in the song text. It becomes evident that the moonlight is symbolic of the little attention that the evil gets at first. Moonlight pales in comparison to sunlight, and as such, “evil” can be concealed by the darkness. The first two lines of lyrics are meant to heighten the senses of the subject; primarily Michael Jackson and secondarily his audience. Therefore, since darkness overshadows and become synonymous with the evil subject, the author has already debilitated the sense of sight, and begins to deal with feeling. One reason why the sight may have been weakened could be because evil is not something that you tangibly see. Evil – in its etymological root – works as a noun, adjective, and adverb but always used as a clarifier to an object. At this particular point of the lyrical text, it serves as the noun to be expounded upon later in the song. Temperton is masterful in continuing the unspecific subject: we move from feeling the evil unknown to seeing whatever it is that causes the heart to stop. Of course the most obvious referent for all of this is not actual lived experience at all but horror-movie clichés with which the audience is certainly familiar.

This evil, terror, and unknown thriller has instilled fear at a deep level. As Rod Temperton insinuates, that fear can be indicated by a shriek or scream: “you try to scream but terror takes the sound before you make it.” He also implies that this unknown evil that he speaks of has the power of muting someone. Not only does it silence individuals, but it also freezes
them. This “horror” is debilitating: it acts as a paralytic when it takes the initiative and looks individuals in the eyes. This thriller that Jackson sings of is incredibly powerful, weakening those who come in contact with it, with no signs of an antidote to counter it.

As Jackson performs the song, it is evident that he is attempting to create a specific eerie ambiance for the words that he is singing. He shows musical contrast by acquainting the listener with dialectic contrast: solo and background, whisper and scream, conventional musical rules and individualized stylistic choices. He introduces the distinction of solo and background when he is able to sing both solo lines of lyric and background harmony in the words “scream” and “freeze.” While the backgrounds are singing three different notes with the same intensity, Jackson also sings a solo cascading scale run as a contrast on those aforementioned words. He follows those lines of lyrics with “but terror takes the sound before you make it” following the traditional “rise-and-fall” of musical phrasing where it is evident that the emphasis is supposed to draw attention to “you try to scream” and “you start to freeze”. However, Michael chooses stylistically to change the timbre of his voice from a softer, mellow intense whisper into an emphatic warning before reaching its peak in the rough and yelling quality of the words “you’re paralyzed.” It is evident that “as horror looks you right between the eyes” is a momentum builder for the last three words of the verse – almost as if Jackson is rushing to get to that point of the song, which is the chorus.

Chorus:

‘Cause this is thriller, thriller night/ And no one’s gonna save you from the beast about to strike
You know it’s thriller, thriller night/ You’re fighting for your life inside a killer, thriller tonight
Etymologically speaking, a “thriller” denotes a sensational story that provides excitement and suspense. In addition, the suspense keeps people engaged because the object is to never know what is next. It is important that Temperton connected these lyrics with the previous verse for the sake of consistency and validity by reiterating the “night.” As such, the thriller is characterized as the logical extension of every word and emotion that preceded the chorus. The verses serve to capture the essence of what “thriller” is, and the chorus works to consistently reinforce the precise word that is intended. However, this feeling of unknown and fear gets more description by adding the word “killer.”

As Jackson sings the chorus the first time, he performs the lines “‘Cause this is thriller, thriller night” and “You know it’s thriller, thriller night” at full forte voicing. Michael Jackson serves the audience a taste of his signature heralding tenor then continues in the vein of contrast by altering his vocal approach to the chorus line by line. “And no one’s gonna save you from the beast about to strike…” is not as intense and forward as the resonating chorus’ emblematic “thriller, thriller night” because the main point of the song is to inform you what the thriller is. As the song plays, the audience is made aware of the multifarious nature of the “thriller.”

As Jackson sings, You’re fighting for your life inside a killer, thriller tonight, there are instrumental emphasized breaks between the words “killer,” “thriller,” and “tonight” that are used to emphatically draw attention to the nature of the thriller’s objective, while reiterating the song’s catchy title, setting, and time. Jackson enhances the general effect by singing those words syncopated while the instrumental emphasis is on the beat, giving the song a counter-rhythmic feel. Everything about the chorus of the song is built on rhythmic call-and-response: Michael Jackson beckons (both the audience and the instruments) and the music responds according to his signaling. The last word tonight is sang in a cascading run, and it describes the immediacy of
the thriller. The instrumental breaks give Jackson the opportunity to make “tonight” stand out stylistically and make it memorable as it is the last word of the chorus. As the song continues, it is evident that the lyrics are keying more detailed information about this thriller. Typical of popular music, the chorus is repetitiously ingrained in the minds of the audience that drives the song’s central theme, in this case – the thriller.

The lyrical line, *You hear the door slam and realize there's nowhere left to run* indicates that now the thriller has entrapped you. Thriller is now explicitly stated as a predator, and the audience is the prey. *You feel the cold hand and wonder if you'll ever see the sun* personifies the thriller because it has now gained the ability to physically touch its prey. The coldness of its touch is particularly important to signify, as cold is generally comparable to evil which cues the idea of death, or perhaps the undead. Thriller has the power to take away thoughts of a future because the sun symbolizes daylight. The thriller is posited as having the ability to take away the hope for morning and produce this perpetual evil night. *You close your eyes and hope that this is just imagination, girl* marks a strategic shift in the song. The thriller has now moved from a figment of the imagination or an ethereal being to something substantive with the ability of touch. The prey, additionally, has been sexualized as being feminine. The aforementioned lyric line specifies the victim of the thriller and causes the information preceding this line to be re-read. Rereading the text from the perspective that the thriller is ultimately after the female, reinforces certain gender stereotypes of women – including but are not limited to receiving pertinent information about the thriller from the male perspective, bolstering arguments of women being afraid, possessed, and consumed. These possible avenues for argument perpetuate gender-centered hierarchical structures which thwart possibilities of gender equality. While
“girl” is an adlib, it definitely can be used to comment on hegemonic masculinity and women as victims.

The chorus enters again and this time there is a bit of variance within the second line. Although the melody is the same, Temperton gives more description of what the thriller looks like, calling it a “thing with forty eyes.” The more description Temperton provides, the closer the audience moves to unifying their separate imaginings. Temperton and Jackson are creating imagery based on the combination of written and performed narrative-like conventions. The telling of the story and the story’s performance work together to engage the willing audience on separate and simultaneous levels of cognition: what is said is just as important as how it is said.

After performing the chorus, the song moves into a bridge which brings a change in melody and a focal point of the song. *Night creatures calling, the dead start to walk in their masquerade / There’s no escaping the jaws of the alien this time (They’re open wide) / This is the end of your life* affirms that the thriller is not human and most likely dead. The dead rising is particularly problematic as it denotes magic or sorcery because when things die, they normally do not come back to life without the assistance of some superhuman entity or force. Death is considered a permanent fate. The idea that the walking dead are walking in masquerade along with the thriller is even more frightening because the suspense of where and when the thriller will strike is cloaked in a state of metaphoric darkness with several possible candidates for who/what the thriller is. Masquerade balls are noted for their elaborate costumes, and the extent to which individuals conceal their identities among a crowd of others who are doing the same. Therefore, the masquerade could provide an environment in which the thriller and perceived prey dance together.
Furthermore, the thriller connects back to the earlier part of the song – not only is it being walking and calling, but it is hiding in plain sight under the moonlight at midnight. The word choice is particularly indicative of something non-human and extraterrestrial because the words “night creatures,” “the dead,” and “alien” are used earlier in the song. All of the aforementioned beings in some way challenge the notion of life beyond human existence. If these creatures are able to conceal their identity among humans, they are able to attack unsuspecting prey at any time. The lyrics suggest an incessant fear of a stealthy and savvy enemy. As Jackson emphasizes the line “they’re open wide” with harmonies, one can deduce that the logical next step is consumption and inevitable death, which is keyed by the words “this is the end of your life.”

Instead of ending the song at the bridge, Temperton reacquaints the audience with the thriller’s pursuit of its prey saying “they’re out to get you” in the third and final verse. It becomes evident by the first line of this verse that Temperton moves from anticipation of the thriller to experiencing the thriller’s imminent capture by becoming more direct in his lyrical approach. The audience is moved from this ambiguous thriller to the more specific demon. It is especially interesting that the word “demon” is chosen considering the Jackson family’s devout Jehovah’s Witness beliefs. *Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained* by John Milton, an essential text of the twentieth century Jehovah’s Witness faith, came under ridicule for the association of demons with sexual immorality, chief among other discouraged behaviors prevalent among youth and promoted by popular culture. Considering that movies such as *Poltergeist* were released in the same year as the album *Thriller*, there were obvious religious concerns with any negative ethereal coming in contact with people – especially if it was directed towards (or consumed by) children. Although louder than the previous verses, when Temperton pens the
words, “demons closing in on every side,” he is to engage the inescapability of the demons plot. It is intentional to musically differentiate the bridge’s soaring and ambient sound to this louder intense whisper. Whereas the previous two verses have told the story of the thriller’s imminent strike, its presence, and the responses of the individual to the thriller, Temperton’s last verse informs the audience of the intentions of the demons’ hunt. He says that “they will possess you,” but offers an alternative to possession if “you change that number on your dial.” The audience is given the opportunity to escape the scheme of the enemy thriller by trusting Jackson – the performer – to lead them to safety: he is giving pertinent and explicit information on how to circumnavigate peril.

The following lyrical lines in the verse have a different poetic feel because now Temperton allows Jackson to move from being the authority on thriller to the savior from the thriller. The scared feminine audience can now cuddle close with Jackson and he can save her from the terror. “Now is the time for you and I to cuddle close together, yeah / All through the night I’ll save you from the terror on the screen... I’ll make you see” suggests that the male presence is the remedy to thriller’s siege. Thus, it could be inferred that the entire story was tactical: the informant’s (Jackson) assignment was to concoct or assemble a narrative that meddles with an audience’s emotions by linking a variety of horror narratives and religious taboos, so that he could be the hero.

The return to the chorus emulates the new feel that the song takes on: one that has shifted focus from the thriller to the supposed newfound protagonist (Jackson). Like before, the “thriller, thriller night” lines are the same. The two lines between them “‘cause I can thrill you more than any ghost would ever dare try” and “let me hold you tight” insinuate a thrill that moves from being eerie and scary to sexual. Following the next “thriller, thriller night,” he suggests that the
woman should let him hold her tight so they can share a “killer, diller, chiller, thriller here tonight”. Adding another word in the last line of the last chorus changes the timing slightly, but is still emphasized with instrumental breaks.

After the end of the last chorus, a pipe organ (or simulation thereof) is introduced to the track which implies yet another transition. Since pipe organs are traditionally found in nineteenth and twentieth century European church music and later were included in symphonies, this introduction marked by instrumental interlude pays homage and segues Victor Price’s dramatic lyrical flow. Many people will find examples of pipe organ music in popular culture like segmented portions of Johann Sebastian Bach’s *Toccata and Fugue in D minor*, commonly used in horror films. Similar to this tune, the purpose of integrating pipe organ music is to evoke that same horror feel to the song while saluting its use across other media. Furthermore, the pipe organ adds ambiance and is purposeful in managing an important transition: it emphatically unites Price’s macabre to popular music. At this junction, we see a delicate weaving of what popular music really is – the integration of different styles to create a hybrid genre.

Vincent Price begins saying, “darkness falls across the land” reiterating the setting. Suggesting that “darkness falls” also indicates that darkness came suddenly and took over the setting. Price craftily ties his dramatic rap with Rod Temperton’s lyrics by not only reiterating the setting, but also the time. As Price aligns his contribution to Temperton’s work (and ultimately Jackson’s performance), there is intertextual harmony despite the multiplicity of “authors” the text has. Furthermore, creating a seamless flow of authors within a single text works toward all of their advantage; the audience then understands the text as coherently whole rather than as segmented parts. For instance, when Price draws attention to the time and setting
he insinuates that these particular facts about the story have specific correlative affects between authors, which strengthen the overall idea of what the thriller is and what it does.

Price continues to say that the “creatures crawl in search of blood to terrorize y’alls neighborhood.” Price’s rap connects with the earlier verses of the song, because the song has consistently referred to the being in similar vague terms. The fact that the creatures are mentioned here again draws a parallel with earlier references in the texts that focus on a non/post-human entity. The fact that they are in search of their prey signifies that the predator needs the prey to remain alive when they find it. However, this pursuit begs the question: if we are talking about an entity that is not human or does not “live,” what purpose does capturing the prey serve? Price continues to say that the intent of the creatures searching for blood is “to terrorize y’alls neighborhood.”

It is also poignant to point out that Price emphasizes that the creatures are coming from outside of the neighborhood to disrupt its harmony. Any time an unwarranted force threatens the continuity of familiar territory, it is seen as a menace to those who are inhabitants. The uneasiness of the unwelcomed visitors is compounded as Price says, “And whosoever shall be found/ without the soul for getting down/ Must stand and face the hounds of hell/ And rot inside a corpse’s shell” gives the audience an ultimatum, which is made clearer when the video representation is shown. Price gives an explicit account of what is the penalty for being caught by the creatures.

Price engages the audience further by heightening a sense that has not been mentioned: he talks about smell. Smell is a chemical sense tied closely to memories (Tomono, Kanda and Otake 9). Although no one has been alive for forty thousand years, nor do they have olfactory
sensors that would be able to detect a “funk” and “foulest stench” for that long, crafting lyrics like that for an audience to connect unpleasant smells to themes of death is instrumental.

Price then strengthens the imagery by revealing a new name for the creatures, “grizzly ghouls” and detailing where the creatures are from: “every tomb.” These creatures come from beyond death, reeking with the smell of death thereby “closing in” on the prey “to seal your doom.” As these ghouls draw nearer to their prey, the inevitable seems to have happened: the pursuant has found and taken over its victim. The victim’s response is that it is fighting to stay alive. Eventually, the cold hands that Rod Temperton alluded to earlier, have reached their desired target, and turned its body cold, too. The temperature is indicative of the dead overtaking the living. The body’s reaction to dying is that over an extended period of time it goes from being warm to being cold.

Using the last spoken or sung words in the song, Price reestablishes a conflict between the mortal and the not-so-mortal that Temperton sets in motion from earlier in the song. When he uses the words “no mere mortal,” he means that any being that does not have additional superhuman ability or assistance, will not be able to resist “the evil of the thriller.” The audience is not privy to what type of evil that the thriller has; however, from the context clues throughout the rest of the song listeners learn that this “evil” is something that has an odor, is cold, comes unexpectedly, and desires to consume its prey. The song ultimately ends abruptly with a musical break and Vincent Price’s resounding cackle echoing until it fades out.

Inasmuch as this chapter focuses on the performance of “Thriller” and its ability to translate musical phrasing and lyrical proficiency, the total performance includes the aforementioned with a visual component. Whereas Ferdinand de Saussure’s theory of semiotics
helps to elucidate how meaning is constructed from language, Mikhail Bakhtin work helps contextualize inter and extra-textual elements to theorize about how the moving images, in this case, erase the line between artist and public. As a result, both aural and visual stimuli are engaged in a symbiotic relationship: musical trills are accompanied with graphic thrills. Inasmuch as the video is about stimulating the trills and thrills are, the fact is – nobody is actually supposed to be scared by any of it. The song engages heteronormative traditions of going to horror movies on dates, paying homage to the 1950s drive-in horror films, better known in the 1980s as “creature features.” Strangely enough, however, the combination of video and music meant signified a much deeper meaning of imminent concerns.
CHAPTER TWO: THRILLER CARNIVALE

“Carnivalesque” is best described as deep social satire. Bakhtin’s supposition of carnivalesque hinges on the element of performance: he argues that the carnivalesque is syncretic pageantry wherein both performers and audience act and dance in a subversive carnival square (Bahktin 250). Because of the intimate nature of audience and performers, everyone becomes an integral participant on a stage. Therefore, lines of sacred and profane, as well as the divine and earthly, are all transgressively crossed with great significance, and purposely juxtaposed with one another. Within the pageant of the sacrosanct and perverse, however, there is a consistent element of ritual in which the carnivalesque mocks and satirizes “normal life.” Traditionally, carnivals adapted rites of season to call attention to the irony of divine rule and right. Kings are crowned to signify authority, and the carnivalesque exploited this tradition to signify the rebirth and renewal of the carnival. Through adapting ritual practices, the carnivalesque functions as a way for commoners to provide social commentary, ask questions, detest social hierarchy, and protest society’s rules, politics and beliefs while cloaking their critique in a festive atmosphere without fear of persecution (Bahktin 251).

Additionally, the carnival was incredibly inclusive: it affected people of varying backgrounds by equalizing social norms and positions, which in turn magnified its dynamic nature. While the carnival symbolized liberation, it was only a momentary escapism because of its restrictions. The carnival stage was limited in time – it could only last for a certain amount of time before its inhabitants had to return to the regular routine of life. Furthermore, it had limited space: of all the defined spaces it could exist in, the traditional carnival existed in a square. The irony is that a square in mathematics symbolizes shape perfection: a square’s shape is congruent on all sides making ninety degree angles (Merriam-Webster). Perhaps this is the
reason the carnival exists in a square: it signifies the irony in perfection – it can be confined and controlled.

The carnivalesque applies to the “Thriller” text in a variety of ways. First, what is “popular,” as Stuart Hall notes, is always an area of contention in which media can be considered a carnival space. Hall goes on to argue that the qualifier “popular” in popular culture tends to subsume other categories and posits the masses as uniform and fixed when culture, as a whole, encourages fluid movement (Hall 1998, 443). Because of the expansive stage of media combined with the limited credibility of popular culture, critique of political, economic, and social institutions can get lost in the carnival. Music videos, including “Thriller,” are sites where people can engage meaningful commentary and critique of a carnival space but are also burdened with the task of being advertising pieces for the artists they represent as well.

Michael Jackson was able to simultaneously pioneer and maximize the space of music video, as a cinematographic text. Inspired by the 1981 blockbuster hit movie American Werewolf in London directed by John Landis (Folsey), who is also the director for the “Thriller” music video, “Thriller” represents a space that Jackson and his production staff were allowed to create without limits - something that could not possibly have been acted out in reality or on a smaller budget. The team of people who made the “Thriller” music video possible united camera effects, lip-syncing, elaborate costuming, actors, and choreography together to produce a visual representation of an aural stimulant. With obvious film inspiration, Jackson was able to inhabit, maintain, and maximize the use of the emergent entertainment music video form to construct an image of “Thriller” that is relevant decades after its debut. Although Jackson was the performer, chief authorial voice in the performance of “Thriller,” and the subject of this research, his worldwide audience is also important in terms of their influence on the success of the video: they
lapped up the performance. It does not matter if segments of the audience enjoyed the acting, choreography, or the music, the audience tangibly endorses Jackson and “Thriller” with their spending power. In addition to the buying power, the audience also can be affected on a religious level.

The artistic and pioneering edge of Jackson and his team in music video also correlate with themes of personal sacred belief in which Jackson proclaimed the earnestness of his Jehovah’s Witness convictions at the opening of the video. These contrasted both theologically and visually with the profane consuming monsters that he himself was turned into during several points in the video. Quite literally, the pageantry of dance is also a creative way of indicating mood and demonstrating possession. Taken as a whole, the video is a recorded example of contemporary, acceptable forms of the carnivalesque.

**Tying Michael Jackson to His Crowning Achievement**

Although this crowning has no inherent value, the fact that Jackson was crowned “King of Pop” is demonstrative of how carnivalesque translates as a lifelong performance for Jackson. The act of crowning a king is a ritualistic and ceremonial Mardi Gras tradition. In the same way that the title “King of Mardi Gras” represented satirizing the King of France, the title “King of Pop” could be said to mock then important socio-political and entertainment figures of American society including President Ronald Reagan. In any case, this particular video demonstrates how popular culture is the carnival and the king is the always-entertaining Michael Jackson. He dazzles the audience with tricks, and within the confines of popular culture is celebrated as a champion. He is only regarded as an artist by popular definition, not by “official” designation or high art criteria. Although Jackson’s prowess as a performer has cultural, social, political, and
economic effects, his influence is diminished in the realm of the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government. Because of his occupation within the carnival space, Michael Jackson is a commodifiable image that has been used intermittently to signify diplomacy and philanthropic causes.

Even more importantly, because of the carnival space of popular media, it would be a grave error to not connect the example of the Mardi Gras carnival to popular media, establishing that both are confounding levels of the sacred practice and profane pastiche. History records that on Mardi Gras lower dignitaries within the Catholic Church parodied the rituals of the Catholic faith by lampooning the season of Lent. Lent, in the Christian faith, symbolizes a period of time that people consecrate themselves in preparation for the Holy Week, the season celebrating the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Gulevich 260). Often, people use this time to fast, pray, and self-sacrifice for Christ’s sake for a period of forty days. The forty days represent the time that Jesus spent in fasting in the desert and after which he endured the temptation from Satan (Gulevich 19). This forty day period is taken very seriously by believers. Given the sanctity of the season, it is very simple to understand that leadership at any level critiquing the sacredness of a religious holiday is problematic. Yet, Mardi Gras has been widely accepted and celebrated despite being blasphemous under any other circumstances. Mardi Gras presents the Lent season with an ultimate juxtaposition because on some level it desensitizes a hallowed tradition.

In contemporary times, the Mardi Gras season is notorious for riotous sexual escapades, random nudity, and the consumption of excess amounts of alcohol. This modern adaptation of the carnival practices of old accentuates the idea of anonymity: under a mask and in a costume, one could assume any identity he or she desires. The masquerade alluded to in the lyrics of “Thriller” becomes even more important in the construction of the carnival. People assume
anonymity to cloak themselves in temporary rambunctiousness, all for the sake of suspending reality only to ironically consecrate themselves a few days later, signifying devout religiosity. In this, I find parallelism in “Thriller.” Despite having a written disclosure statement before the beginning, the music video takes creative liberty in embellishing the arena of popular culture carnival by extending melodramatic themes in the hybrid space of music video.

Spectacle of Cinematography

The cinematography of “Thriller” is a hybrid spectacle. Robert J. C. Young (1995) expresses that “hybridity is making one of two distinct things” (24). John Landis and the image of Michael Jackson accomplished hybridity by featuring two dramatic transmogrifications (man to werewolf and man to undead), synchronized choreography, and recorded musical arrangement. Even within the musical arrangement, as said before, there is active engagement with hybrid genres that seem to also encourage the hybrid space of the “Thriller” music video. The original video prided itself on its ability to merge cinematography with music, revolutionizing the medium of music video. As a thirteen minute, forty-three second video, “Thriller” symbolizes hybridity as not only the blending of media; it also brutally crosses the lines between sacred and profane and dead and alive, while simultaneously balancing the artistic perspective by engaging elements of the carnivale. Hybridity is woven intricately throughout the original video seamlessly; so much so that this video is one of the most critically acclaimed music videos ever created because of its multifaceted approach incorporating both cinema and music.

Critics have accused music videos of taking away viewer’s ability to create meaning for themselves, instead dictating suggestions on how one ought to interpret the concept of the song. Because of the commercial nature of music videos, they endorse certain messages (and reaffirm
them because videos are repeated) while discouraging other interpretations. Deborah Rouse (2007), in her article “The Artistic Realm of Music Video,” argues that Jackson’s “Thriller” steps up the pace of music video by engaging hybridity in a way that previous videos had not. With the aid of special effects, costuming, and quality production – better than most commercial Hollywood movies at the time— Rouse argues that “artists could no longer be satisfied with simple choreography or unimaginative backdrops; audiences were far too savvy to be excited by visual clichés… companies [now] regularly allocate substantial budgets to bring an artist’s music to life. Industry moguls understand that these tasty morsels have the astonishing capacity to transform a modestly selling tune into a hit” (37). Rouse is able to capture the essence of what the function of music videos is – promotion.

Music videos were particularly instrumental in the development of Music Television (MTV) because MTV created the demand for them. With MTV, record companies paid for production of the music video, but did not have to play to get it played. With round-the-clock advertising, “MTV changed the way the industry operated, rapidly becoming the preferred method for launching a new act or promoting the latest release of a major superstar” (Starr and Waterman 383). Audiences could now put faces to the music they enjoyed, and could be entertained. Many of MTV’s earlier videos were focused on rock and roll. Jackson broke the mold of the artists typically shown on MTV because not only did he not sing rock and roll music, but he was black. The production of “Thriller” was incredibly divisive in that Jackson was permitted the latitude to be black and popular in an arena that had not previously allowed people that looked like him. He stood out among his counterparts because during MTV’s first eighteen months, MTV only aired about 20 of the submitted 750 videos that featured people of color (Woog 90), and Jackson’s “Thriller” “set new standards for production quality, creativity, cost,
and established the medium as the primary means of promoting popular music” in addition to usurping MTV’s “all-white rock music format” (Starr and Waterman 384). This new format that Jackson introduced gave a different color to a medium that even in its inception presented Jackson with a disadvantage. Considering the social and economic terrain of the MTV in the 1980s, Jackson particularly stood out among artists. MTV, as a cable network, was primarily concerned with the middle-class white suburban and rural communities because few urban centers had access to their programming (Denisoff 47). The collaboration of rock music and access produced a market that was seemingly uninterested in the black music. In time, however, MTV revised its programming policies to accommodate the growing interest in black music and demographic that had access to its network. Jackson and other influential black musicians, including Tina Turner and Prince, along with hip hop music changed the format of MTV.

One of the utilities of music video is to provide a new aesthetic dimension to the music itself. With this new aesthetic dimension comes a broader stage on which Black, American, and ultimately popular cultural identity may be performed and objectified with both positive and negative consequences. More importantly, music videos are a technologically advanced form of storytelling. The essential part of the music is the ability to tell a captivating story both lyrically and through musical phrasing. As the video became commonplace, technology gave audiences access to commodified visual representations of oral traditions that were once imagined. Therefore, music videos create and allow “performances that entail the presentation or ‘reactualization’ of symbolic systems through both living and mediated bodies” (Butler 3). Moving beyond the dialogue and acting, symbolic systems are employed heavily throughout “Thriller” using dance.
Equalizing Dance Forms – Ballet, Jazz, and Hip Hop

Dance is critical to the visual aesthetics of the “Thriller” accompanying video. The noteworthy dance sequence incorporates pieces of several different dance forms including modern, jazz, and hip hop. All of the aforementioned dance forms are evolutionary milieus of ballet. Ballet is stringent in that it heavily relies on a system of rules, techniques and graceful movement (Daprati, Iosa and Haggard 2). Such a foundation allowed for this video to incorporate many dance flows because of the techniques Jackson performs. Much of the freelance movement that Jackson integrates into the performance of the verses deals with dancing on the toes, or point dancing, which is an element of ballet. Typically, students of point take ballet first. In many programs, ballet dancers are not permitted to take point without recommendations from their instructors because of the coordination and strength it requires. Many people experience point dance injuries when they employ improper technique and lack lower leg strength. Point dance requires agility and dexterity because it requires the dancer to balance the weight of the body on the toe and sustain it for long periods of time.

Whereas ballet is regimented and considered one of the high art forms of dance, modern dance is considered to be quite the opposite. Modern dance, at times, incorporates hip hop and jazz, is “born free of the traditions of classical ballet,” and acts as a carnivalesque performance of ballet (Terry 8). Modern dance is carnivalesque in that it defies conventional rules of ballet and is a space in which most body movement is considered expressive and permissible. Because of the wide array of subject matter and movement that modern dance includes, its lack of conventionality allows for renegotiations of its constant definition and articulation. Modern dance is often regarded as requiring little experience as it is primarily concerned with telling a story with the body.
There are two major camps of modern dance: Horton technique and Graham/Cunningham technique. Martha Graham is considered the “high priestess” of modern dance as she pioneered emotive expression through dance. Prior to Graham, professional dance seemed rigid, and bound by a system of rules that governed movement. Throughout her seventy year career, Graham challenged traditional form by “losing herself” in the characters that she played, creating more emotional connection by which she said herself that her purpose of dancing was “to objectify in physical form my beliefs” (Terry 90). Her movements were primarily regarded as having many curves, lots of body “melting” (morphing her body into curved shapes to represent words and objects) and often full of throws.1 Merce Cunningham, a dancer in Graham’s company, extended the emotional connection and fluid dance to also include the “impression of being closely allied to those forms of nature which lie outside the human body” (Terry 148). Cunningham was known for exploring “dance-by-chance” methods in which he theorized while performing that dance and accompaniment operated concurrently but independently of each other. He was interested in neither form nor dramatically planned sequences, he was more interested in utilizing space for space’s sake and breaking free from the constraints of what was considered “dance.” As a result of their ambition, tenaciousness, and unconventional resilience, both Graham and Cunningham are celebrated in the field of modern dance because they chose to go beyond the rules of the conventional dance art form.

Lester Horton is also a pioneer in modern dance, as he developed his technique in California – unlike both Graham and Cunningham who experienced success in New York City. Lester Horton, renowned for his “emphasis on flat backs, pelvic hinges, and "lateral T’s"”, produces a long-muscled, powerhouse dancer--something not easily toppled” (Straus 130).

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1 Graham is cited for causing not only seeming bodily harm to herself, but to others as well with her “pummelings, scratching, and bitings” that her male counterparts suffered from.
Horton’s technique is employed more visibly in the “Thriller” video than Graham’s or Cunningham’s. Horton’s technique is concerned with shapes and angles which produce snap movements that are on the beat. His innovation in dance led to dancers becoming more cognizant of their muscular balance and “using each exercise to explore its expressive qualities” (Straus 131). During the signature dance breakdown, Jackson and the accompanying dancers move in a pyramid shape. Additionally, the choreography is mostly about conforming to sharp angles rather than loose movement. As such, the Horton technique has produced choreographing giants such as Alvin Ailey. Perhaps Horton’s technique gave inspiration to Alvin Ailey’s student, Michael Peters, who choreographed both the “Beat It” and “Thriller” videos for Michael Jackson.

Jazz dance can probably be considered a division of modern dance. Although jazz is about expressive body movement and steady eight-count beats like modern dance, it is very much about accenting the beat with bodily impulses. Because of its marginalized representation, early jazz forms of dance were seen as “ethnic body isolations and rhythmic step patterns” (Stayley and Lapointe-Crump 1), which brings attention to a person’s background more than the movement. Jazz was primarily a black American dance form that was the antithesis of dominant forms of dance. Because black dance was seen as highly sexualized (which also correlates with stereotypical black characteristics), isolations became an essential term in describing black dance. Isolations are simply “movements that involve only one part of the body while the other parts remain still. Dancers most often isolate their heads, shoulders, hands, ribs or hips” (Rivers 54). While watching the video of “Thriller,” one can see that the choreography is an exposition of the element of jazz influence with the use of open hands and isolated hip movements.
Michael Peters’ choreography is also indicative of the jazz dance inspiration as the dancers move uniformly, repeating specific dance counts correlating with musical phrases.

Jazz dance derives from West African cultures that used dance for what is believed to be ceremonial and communicative events (Stearns 13). Movements used in these dances demonstrated not only a communal connection, but also relationships with nature. Because of its imprecise, often overlooked history, and ethnic connections, American forms of jazz dance are not considered to be a high dance art. Despite its weakness, in terms of dance hegemony, jazz remains a popular form of expression.

In many ways, jazz dance has a distinct relation to choreographed group expressive performances. Because jazz dance was not seen as an employable art form like ballet could be, much of what people understand about the mechanics of jazz dance is centered on the entertainment value that it created. Like most popular culture, jazz dance is an amalgamation of ethnic representations. The root of jazz dance is in modern mechanics: however, the performance aspect of jazz dance is grounded in West African tradition. Marshall and Jean Stearns (1968) argue that West African “styles of movement” hinge on the importance of precision, frequent performance, animal imitation, improvisation, centrifugal movement, and constant propulsive rhythm (15). The aforementioned five characteristics, in conjunction with the fundamentals of conventional professional dance, readily lend themselves to adaptive and interpretive dance.

Much like jazz, hip hop dance is more concerned with improvisational bodily movement than rigid rules. However, hip hop dance is much more deliberate in straight side to side hesitation movement and flowing in down-and-up movements (Wisener 82). Popular forms of
hip hop dance include locking, break-dancing, and popping, just to name a few. Of those dance styles within hip hop, there are consistent rules, explains dance teacher/choreographer Kennis Marquis: “the closer you are to the ground, the more control you have over the movement, much of hip hop involves isolations, so you have to know how to move each part individually--that knowledge will help you move better as a whole later on, and focusing on the music helps you know what accents to hit” (quoted in Wisener 82). Whereas modern and jazz dance focus on the repetitious count, hip hop dance seems to be much more individualized to the performer and the song. Both the music and the dance work cooperatively – not independently of one another. Choreography within hip hop dance is more about the connection with the piece of music, the creativity invoked when telling the story with the body, and improvisation. From that aspect, the “Thriller” dance routine fits the qualifications for hip hop dance, because the dance and the song complement one another to the point of inseparability. Additionally, traditional hip hop forms of dance such as popping and locking are given attention as the ghoul-like dancers are allowed a brief moment of extemporaneous dance against the brick wall background. Choreographer Michael Peters, originator of the acclaimed “Thriller” dance, was formally trained in all three genres of dance fused in this presentation. As a dancer in the Alvin Ailey Dance Company, Peters honed his skill set to be able to successfully incorporate all of the dance forms into one music video that canonized him in popular choreography and catapulted Jackson’s dance repertoire into a dimension of unmatched artistic ability and resulted in his crowning as a new lord of dance. Further, Michael Jackson embodies the heteroglossic image even in the dance: as Marshall and Jean Stearns (1968) note, “When a star performed a routine which he had been carefully taught by a coach – down to the slightest gesture – the public naturally thought it was his own and gave him all the credit. Nobody saw anything wrong in such an arrangement”
(161). As the face of competing and cooperative styles, forms, genres, and personalities, “Thriller” allowed Jackson to arise as an über-celebrity because of how he owned his performance.

Carnival Ride: Themes within the Video Text

MAN VS. WOMAN

John Landis, director of the video, chooses to disrupt the harmony of nature first by problematizing male normalcy. Intermittently throughout the video, Jackson’s masculinity is negotiated consistently pre and post-transformation. Under the direction of Landis, Jackson acts out elements of popular representations of masculinity, suggesting two sides of adolescent manhood: boy and beast. In the first scene, Jackson and his young female companion are watching a movie, although the audience is not privy to the suspension of reality until later. The scene portrays what looks to be the aftermath of a romantic, yet adolescently innocent date between Jackson and a young woman. Adolescence is cued by their wardrobe as Jackson sports a loafer/driver shoe, white tube socks, self-cuffed jeans, and a letterman jacket. Ola Ray, Playboy playmate, is sporting an Oxford shoe, color block fit - poodle skirt with ruched-shoulder pink polo, and a ribbon in the hair keying that the setting of this movie is at least twenty years prior to its 1981 debut.

While on this excursion through a wooded area, Jackson’s car breaks down, and the two are sitting in the car, alone, and in the dark. Though the dialogue never explicitly refers to sex, the date scene between Jackson and Ola Ray implies the unspoken desire to experiment with sex. Extratextually, considering Ola Ray’s association with Playboy and the age of the characters both she and Jackson played, it can be assumed that the dating and sex were commonplace for youth their age. The suggestion of sex is blatantly under-mentioned when Ola Ray’s character
asks Jackson, “What are we going to do now?” Jackson looks at her and the camera cuts away to the couple walking, leaving the audience to make assumptions about what did or did not happen prior to their exiting the vehicle.

The next lines of dialogue reveal Jackson admitting his affection toward his date:

Michael: “Can I ask you something?”
Ola: “What?”
Michael: “You know I like you don’t you?”
Ola: “Yes.”
Michael: “And I hope you like me the way I like you.”
Ola: “Yes.”
Michael: “I was wondering if… you would be my girl.”
Ola: “Oh Michael!”
Both hug. Michael gives Ola a ring and places it on the middle finger, left hand.
Ola: Laughs. “It’s beautiful!”
Michael: “Now it’s official.”

After the exchange admitting that they care for one another, Jackson’s conversion from man to beast is preceded by his statement, “I’m not like other guys,” the keying of ambient music in the background, and the sight of a full moon. As Jackson starts to change form, one could infer that this metamorphosis could also provide cinematographic social commentary on the awkwardness of the changing male body during puberty. Alongside the physical changes Jackson is making, his expressed feelings about the female change as well: instead of showing affection, the werewolf side of Jackson hunts his date as if the relationship now becomes predator/prey and she screams “go away.” The audience is made aware of the difference in adolescent male and werewolf appetite. Within a matter of seconds, the desire for the female shifts from healthy heterosexuality to disturbingly carnivorous. It is evident that the female is scared of what Jackson has become, so she runs away. While he chases her through the woods, Ray becomes the object of Jackson’s consumption. He traps her to feed on her. I assume because of the
graphic nature of a werewolf eating a person, Landis does not allow the woman to be consumed on-screen. However, both Landis and Michael Jackson are purposeful in continuing to weave the dichotomous relationship of male and female even as that scene ends.

The ambiguity does not end at the first scene; it is carried over to the second and replicated to illustrate Jackson on a then contemporary date with a young woman, implying parallels between mediated representations of masculinity and actual representations. Jackson is again portrayed as the normal young man dating a woman. This time, Ray’s character is afraid of the aforementioned “fictional scene” of the werewolf consuming the woman, and leaves the movie theatre in protest. As Jackson performs the verses of the song, he playfully teases her about her fear – acknowledging the assumed maturity of a young man on a date, while again affirming routineness between couples of the same age as he and Ray. Instead of interrupting this date with the transformation from man to werewolf, Landis makes the artistic decision for Jackson to be converted to one of the dead. Despite the modifications in the “contemporary” transformation, both scenes – werewolf and dead – illustrate the healthy male interest for female companionship interrupted by some irregularity.

When converted by the dead into the living undead, Jackson abandons his companion to join the dead in dance. Even though the nature of the male is always in question (is he human or monster?), within the same suspension of humanity and clear gender dichotomous relationship, Landis also suspends what is “fantasy” versus what is “reality.” He juxtaposes time and reality. As the video develops, the line between imagination and actuality are blended together. The irony is that the “movie” foreshadows the rest of the video: it suggests that fiction imitates life.
After Jackson taunts his date for being scared of the “movie,” the video shifts by focusing the theme on death. The non-diegetic spoken word by Vincent Price precedes the entrance of what are perceived to be zombies, dead bodies, and other malformed creatures. As indicated before, Price is known for his macabre technique in the horror genre, which often includes visual and implied representations of death. The beings not only appear, but they also actively pursue Jackson and his date. Though Jackson’s date manages to escape, Jackson is captured and transformed into one of them. At this point of the performance, Michael Jackson becomes an Other and is consequently objectified; in personifying the position of other, his transformed self is effectively used to assert a deliberate and impactful space. The performance of death in “Thriller” engages a dynamic dialectic relationship: adhering to and breaking away from conventions of what death is perceived to be. This intentional defiance and acceptance of norms creates an intertextual commentary that creates an adapted performance of death. Part of the appeal of the song and the video is that it is an ode to death, something that living beings speculate about but can never know. To some degree, *Thriller* simultaneously sensationalizes death by performing it strategically as the inevitable end of the thriller’s capture, and adds to the mystique by hypothesizing (and subsequently performing) the impermanence of death. As the consummate example of a performer, Jackson is the ideal choice in performing death: his talent gave him the latitude to create a physical representation of how one can overcome death by making the undead accessible through music and dance. Although the audience is not privy to how the dead overtake him, the evidence of whatever the undead beings have done is apparent in how Jackson moves as well as how he is costumed. At this level, Jackson engages in a carnivalesque behavior on multiple levels: he participates in the masquerade of the dead as he
has become a part of their performance, and through elaborate costuming he now mocks death for the purpose of social commentary in an entertaining fashion.

The dramatic organ music foregrounds the attack, as a musical interlude as they walk by a graveyard. The lighting draws attention to the graveyard – indicated by headstones. Smoke machines are added to enhance the effect of haunting. These smoke machines are emulating the condition of visual impairment at an already visually debilitating night. Although the camera angle is focused on Jackson and Ray at first, the new graveyard setting becomes the new subject as Price’s dramatic reading begins.

Price starts with the line, “darkness falls across the land….” A pipe organ overshadows the principal text with minor chords, changing the feel of the song, which is followed by moving images of appendages appearing and moving casket covers signaling the resurrection of the dead. As the camera zooms back in to capture the movements of the formerly “dead,” it highlights the various ways the dead rise, namely, hands emerging from the ground and bodies coming out of mausoleums, above-ground caskets, and sewers. The graveyard is the appropriate place for the dead, though the music video brings to light the fact that it is not the only place where the dead reside. Also, the set designers draw particular attention to the graveyard’s state of neglect. This particular final resting place is overrun with a variety of vegetation and looks abandoned, which could indicate that these predatory undead are forgotten. For that reason, it may be acceptable to attach certain narratives as to why these beings attack: perhaps their relatives no longer care to visit or they have been dead for so long that they are not remembered any longer. Whatever the narrative, the cinematographic element is important here: simulating the dead as abandoned and predatory beings who can consume the living from beyond the grave sets the song up to appear as a tale of the “forgotten’s” ultimate revenge.
In addition to portraying death, the video contrasts the nature of death to life and liveliness in its presentation. Particularly, “Thriller” juxtaposes human strength and ability to the perception of the dead, as a fancy of human imagination. In fact, the illusion that Landis constructs is that the dead have the ability to consume a classic sign of virility and rebellion: a young and Black male. Not only do the dead consume Jackson, but they perform alongside him as well. This action makes the audience question if he joins their performance or are they a part of his. The critically acclaimed choreography of Michael Peters in the famous dance sequence of “Thriller” gives an additional layer of meaning to this work. Michael Jackson’s dancing mirrors his physical transformation from human to ghoul.

During the highlighted choreography, the living dead are lively, crisp, and uniform—everything that the dead are not perceived to be in typical popular cultural representations. Through this performance, Jackson and the cast of “Thriller” deconstruct and rebuild the significance of the idea of the other, especially as it relates to the dead. The audience sees the dead move while losing appendages, breaking through walls and doors, and dancing. The video continues by having Jackson’s female love interest go into an abandoned house, where all of the monsters attempt to consume her. Landis and Jackson conclude the video by providing cognitive dissonance by exposing the conflict of authentic and artificial embodiment by positing the actions of the living dead as Ola Ray’s hallucination. When Jackson tells his date that he is going to take her home, he turns and provides the ultimate theatrical incongruous act when he gazes into the camera, creating an extra-diegetic connection with the audience by changing his eyes to resemble the werewolf’s eyes.

The signs Jackson gives the audience, the hybridity of media and style, along with the irony inherent in performing the living dead, created an aura that began to attain value, as the
video’s popularity grew. Beyond its obvious entertainment value, “Thriller” became a commodifiable experience. Just as the music video seemed to obscure time, space, and even Michael Jackson for entertainment’s sake, its aftermath had real life consequences as well.

“Thriller” became bigger than just a one-time performance; it became the site of a new kind of blurred space that intersects the artist, person, and commodity.
CHAPTER THREE: COMMODOIFIED CELEBRITY: BETWIXT AND BETWEEN PERSON AND ARTIST

As a product, “Thriller” remains as culturally relevant now as it was when it was created. Critics and casual consumers alike still point to the “Thriller” video as an encounter that changed the experience of music. “Thriller” was not only paramount in terms of the music and short-film presentation: this particular creation commodified a constructed persona of Michael Jackson, and broadened the scope of music video from national to international notoriety as an advertising technique among its many functions. As a result, both Jackson and “Thriller” grew into popular culture icons and commodities simultaneously. Since then, these iconic symbols have become sites of conspicuous consumption and commodity fetishism.

Commodity is defined by Karl Marx as a good or service that can be bought and sold. Marx then asserts that because all commodities are not comparable and have prices attached to them, the unequal exchange of goods is seen in markets because of specific relationships consumers develop with specific products. Michael Jackson is a commodity because the consumer’s relationship with him is highly based on the products he, in turn, “creates.” Jackson represents a vast industry that includes his music, dance, wardrobe, concerts, and subsequent music videos. “Thriller” is a commodity in the literal sense; it was created for the purpose of music marketing.

John Landis recalls that music videos were seen as commercials to sell records in 1983 – the year the video debuted (Kirkland 185). As a unique marketing device, most music videos involved very simplistic scenes, which is far from what transpired as a result of “Thriller.” Landis also recalls that most marketing executives thought that since the Thriller album had already set records for albums sold, it had reached its peak and financing another “commercial”
was unnecessary and a waste of resources. Not only was this the third music video of the album, but it cost $500,000, a price that no one wanted to finance to make it. However, through creative marketing and discouraging Michael Jackson from paying for it himself, Landis convinced *Showtime* and *MTV* to cover the costs for making the video (Kirkland 185). As a result of having other companies pay for the video, they were then able to resell the “Making of Thriller” and copies of the “Thriller video” for a profit, a course which produced tangible examples of video as commodity.

**Conspicuous Consumption**

Conspicuous consumption, as Thorstein Veblen defined it in 1899, is essentially the idea of consuming for the mere sake of indicating one’s affluence to the world (77). Veblen articulates that through the expendable income of the emergent middle class, goods began to be acquired for the mere sake of being purchased. This budding socioeconomic group within the industrial population was concerned with demonstrating values through their consumptive patterns: they wanted to buy objects for the purpose of people noticing their purchases. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, this theory is extended to include lower classes that want to perform wealth without actually attaining it and is also used to define the patterns of contemporary consumer culture. Many critics argue that consumerism and conspicuous consumption enable capitalist practices, and in some cases, widen the gaps between low and high class.

Despite the fact that Jackson had the funds to bankroll the $500,000 price tag that accompanied his idea, there is still the question: “why make ‘Thriller?’” With Michael Jackson and this “Thriller” project, those who do buy engage in leisure spending. This video is an
example of conspicuous consumption. Birthed in the imagination of Jackson, “Thriller” was not necessary. The album had experienced success, in terms of music industry goals. As indicated earlier, most music videos of the time were basic: they involved minimal sets, makeup, and costumes. Prior to “Thriller,” music videos were lip-synced advertising pieces that visually added the aesthetic of what the star looked like. When Landis and Jackson concocted an involved plot with accompanying production effects, the music video became a high priced and high risk marketing tool that, done correctly, had high returns.

In the grand scheme, the “Thriller” video has no inherent value. Any value that one associates with it is objective, which determines its exchange value. Especially considering Jackson’s death on June 25, 2009, there is now a higher exchange value because there is an association of immediacy with every product that is chosen to represent some part of Jackson as a celebrity. In this way, Jackson and “Thriller” become not only sites for conspicuous consumption, but fetishized products as well.

Michael Jackson as Character

In his autobiography entitled Moonwalk, it becomes evident that Jackson was deliberate, especially in terms of his performance. As a self proclaimed perfectionist, Jackson strove to achieve that greatest level of performance. Through performance, he accomplished feats that are continuously celebrated in the popular culture arena. As such, his performances became his associated persona. Jackson’s persona is commodified, packaged, and distributed for consumption through the variety of media that he inhabits. As a persona, Jackson becomes somewhat of a character. Although one could argue that Jackson is not a candidate for commodity fetishism because this move would involve associating human characteristics to
inanimate or nonhuman subjects, I argue that Jackson’s character and mediated persona is
inanimate and therefore can be fetishized as a commodity. Jackson is a production of mediated
images and recorded performances: the masses that “know” him experience him through his
performance, not his personhood. Jackson seems to be more a character in the sense that John
Cawelti outlines in his “The Study of Literary Formula.” Both the music video and the
character of Michael Jackson are a consequence of methodical planning and intention.

Formula, over time, is illuminated in many facets of popular culture. Though Cawelti
analyzes literature, many of the same principles can be applied to a critique of Jackson’s music
videos. Foremost, Cawelti argues that literary form is an element of enjoyment and escapism.
Much of what the audience receives from Michael Jackson recordings is geared toward
enjoyment and escapism. Considering the album “Thriller,” Jackson did engage a formula. His
previous two videos, leading up to “Thriller,” were important stepping stones from which
“Thriller” was launched. Jackson’s first major music video, “Billie Jean,” was an advertising
device to acquaint a new audience with Jackson and the benefits of successful marketing through
music video (Taraborrelli 245). With this first video, Jackson was able to market his persona as
a preeminent talent: he was able to attract an audience through performance. It is important to
note that this was at a price of $60,000; Jackson’s promotional piece accomplished his ideal
outcome: he acquainted a large population with the brand he was selling (Latham 118). When
the sidewalk lit up as Jackson danced in “Billie Jean,” it was a sample of the special effects that
“Thriller” was going to employ in the future. The next video, “Beat It,” took a more expansive
approach, and a consequently larger budget of $150,000 (Latham 121) to further the persona that
Jackson sought to build for himself: whereas he was directed in “Billie Jean,” Jackson took more
of a lead role in developing the concept for the West Side Story adaptation for “Beat It.”
Jackson was not only a superlative individual dancer, now he ventured to tell a story with his body along with other bodies in synchronization. Each time, Jackson utilized a formula: he uses a marketing tool to tell a story, incorporates special effects to draw greater attention, and uses break-out dance sequences to highlight his particular talent in dance.

“Thriller” fits the same set of rules: it incorporates an anecdotal narrative, a multiplicity of special effects with costuming, makeup, and cinematography, along with memorable instrumental-accompanied choreography. Juvenile fan fiction author Jerry Lawrence writes that “Thriller” was most ambitious of all, which is especially important when thinking about where it is sequentially in the videos that Jackson made. Lawrence (1984) argues that “Thriller” “is the embodiment of Jackson’s world of fantasy and spirits, of mystery and suspense, of the macabre and the supernatural” (91). As a result of perfecting all of these three areas that he had engaged in his previous videos, Jackson’s “Thriller,” according to the Record Industry Association of America, was the first music video “to apply for immediate gold and platinum certification” and has been “by far the best-selling video to date” (Taraborrelli 275).

Public persona of Michael Jackson

According to Cawelti (1976), a character is an individual that, if he becomes “too complexly human he may cast a shattering and disruptive light on the other elements of the formula” (12). Jackson’s life was a perpetual performance. Ever since his early debut on stage at the age of six, Jackson, on some level, was an actor. Taraborrelli (2009) says that “acting was easy for Michael: he’d done a form of it onstage, singing, all his life” (247). In his acting, Jackson had grown to exhibit characteristics of other performers – continuing to mimic them.
over time. By the time “Thriller” was released, Jackson had rehearsed to the point of
quintessential performer.

In his series of his best performances, Jackson was able to seamlessly integrate elements
of his inspirations such as Jackie Wilson, James Brown and Fred Astaire – just to name a few –
to make an even greater name for himself. Jackson expounded the performances of
entertainment giants to redefine conventions for his own style of branding. As Cawelti notes, a
dynamic character has the ability to re-invent the characters that explicitly adhere to the
historical identity of the genre, but also having new inventions of characteristics which the
audience can find refreshing. Since Jackson’s persona incorporates the element of performance,
it becomes increasingly evident that the persona is an example of a semi-hyperreal existence.
One of the issues surrounding the creation, maintenance and the furtherance of the character is
that Jackson embodied the character that he created. Furthermore, as a population, our appetites
are predisposed for a human dialectic – there is a need for safety and order, but also for anxiety
and uncertainty. As such, we look for those characteristics in characters of the novel. Cawelti
argues that in an entertaining novel, we look for three literary devices: suspense, identification,
and the creation of an imaginary world. For Jackson, we see all of these devices employed in the
making of “Thriller.” Its story involves the suspense, as audiences wonder whether the thriller
will ever capture its victim. Temperton lyrically establishes imagery that identifies certain
environments that the vast majority of Jackson’s immediate audience would be familiar with.
Additionally, with the assistance of John Landis, the visual aesthetics of the storytelling aid the
audience’s relationship with certain settings, times, and routine behaviors.

Popular culture is the story of Michael Jackson, and he is a character within it. The
audience often has difficulty blending Jackson’s staged persona and product with Jackson’s
personhood. Whereas many artists tend to be cunning at detaching themselves from the time and space of their created personalities, it is not as clear with Jackson; he does not have another name for it. Therefore his personhood, especially because so much of his life was spent onstage, is merged with the expectation of entertainment that he has as a performer. Jackson’s “reality” is constructed and contextualized within the music. In “Thriller,” he was contextualized in a way that would follow him throughout his career: man and monster existing in one body. The embodiment of entertainment is problematic when entertainment begins to leak into actuality. As a product, unifying his product and personhood is incredibly dangerous because at some point the lines of leisure and business are blurred. It is more damning than profitable to Jackson to blur those lines: as people consume the music, they consume him as well.

As society consumes Jackson, it becomes even more challenging to define the stage perimeters and parameters. Jackson’s personhood is always performed and mediated through moving images. Ultimately, Jackson is responsible for his persona, regardless of how much he has been edited to fit inside of the space he has been allotted. In turn, the perpetually performed Michael Jackson is “more real” to the mass audience than any other Michael Jackson could be. Every element that the mass audience understands of Jackson is hyperreal: his history, his performance, the way the general audience has grown with or apart from him, seems more real than its originator.

Shortly after “Beat It” was released, some of Jackson’s critics, who became “unable to separate Michael Jackson the musical enigma from Michael Jackson the actor, missed the point” of conflict resolution through dance (Taraborrelli 246). Although he was highly acclaimed for his skills as a performer, people were unable to separate Jackson’s artistic performance from his assumed personhood and performed character, and thus arguably displaced the meaning to
dissolve both into one-in-the-same. Rather than the audience losing Jackson, the more interesting question is whether Michael himself became unable to extricate himself from the persona he cultivated as an entertainer. Even in “Thriller,” Jackson made deliberate decisions regarding his artistic creativity and his personal life, which on occasion came in conflict. The concept of “Thriller” came about prior to Jackson hiring Landis. Furthermore, Landis’ hiring was predicated on him directing the vision of Jackson (Taraborrelli). However, after making “Thriller,” Jackson was concerned with the tone of the video. It is recorded that Jackson wanted to bury the finished “Thriller” for fear he would be excommunicated from the Jehovah’s Witness faith. After negotiations, Jackson agreed to put the cautionary statement at the beginning of the video (Taraborrelli). The conflict between person and artist is perhaps best illustrated in the construction of the celebrity.

Über-Celebrity

The prefix “über” befits the type of celebrity that Jackson represents and articulates through “Thriller.” As a result of this one video, Michael Jackson’s name is synonymous with a specific type of celebrity that had not been seen before. The German word “über” means “super” and translates in Greek as the prefix “hyper.” In the case of Jackson, his level of stardom is definitely seen in the records that he broke with the “Thriller” video alone. The Guinness Book of World Records proclaims Jackson’s “Thriller” to be the best-selling album of all time (Glenday). As mentioned before, “The Making of ‘Thriller’” is the first music video that was a candidate for gold and platinum status as well. These record-breaking and pioneering numbers consequently place Jackson in the category of “über” in terms of hyperbolism and super-stardom.
Jackson’s image is indicative of celebrity, and as researcher Dr. Glen D. Smith (2009) would argue, celebrity is a hyperbolized version of the American Dream (223). The conspicuous consumption that celebrity encourages enables the egalitarian consumption of celebrity. By definition, a celebrity is something or someone that is recognized by many people (Nayar 8). In American society, and arguably world society, the phenomenon of celebrity tends to get overlooked in serious academic study, although the pervasiveness of celebrity images are “viral” and emergent, extending themselves to many populations at once through technology. Even before the advent of satellite, cable, and internet, there has been an audience for celebrity for quite some time (Nayar 8).

Jackson becomes a particularly interesting site of celebrity, especially as he exhibits grandeur-like status amongst his fans. Artists like Michael Jackson that are able to capture the essence of several performers into one performance further reflect the element of emulation. The spectacle of celebrity is a product: Jackson is selling his aura, his dance moves, and furthering the cause of celebrity. Particularly, celebrity culture has its roots in “minstrelsy, bardic songs, imperial arches and reports of royal festivities” (Nayar 8). It had local implications: it allowed people to know who the important figures were in their respective communities and where they were going to be. Mass culture desires to link up with celebrity. Those who inhabit the mass cultural arena are involved in a veneration loop: celebrities adore the fans because the fans are the reason for their elevations, and lay people have an “Apparently widespread desire to be close to them physically – to touch them, or share the same space with them and be able to serve them from close quarters” (Hollander 150).

One of the intriguing parts about celebrity is that it engages part of the American Dream. Celebrities materialize as modern-day heroes in popular culture because of the strength and
endurance of the American Dream – or the myth thereof. Essentially the American Dream, a term coined by James Truslow Adams (1932), is the idea that life can be full and rich for every man: everything one desires in life can be attained through hard work and dedication regardless of social status (viii). The ambiguity of the language used in the American Dream enables the mythic quality of the dream itself. Even further, the dream was canonized in American founding texts, nearly two centuries before Truslow wrote about it in The Epic of America. The inherent problem herein is that the American Dream still promises the “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” from the opening lines of “The Declaration of Independence” that some Americans still do not possess.

Even in the life of Michael Jackson, there have been long associations with Jackson, his brothers and the American Dream. The 1992 VH1 biopic, “The Jacksons: An American Dream” reifies the myth of the American dream as being an accomplishable, informally standardized and popular narrative. The Jackson Five is one story that is used to strengthen the narrative of the American Dream. Like many other popular narratives, this movie frames the specific course of action that responds to a chief principle in the American Dream: individual achievement. At the pinnacle of achievement, Jackson’s Thriller illustrates the contrast from Jackson’s past as a neighborhood kid in Gary, Indiana to reigning champion in entertainment – providing a real-life narrative that enables the American Dream to persist.

The language of the American Dream gives life to the celebrity. Whereas Nayar’s (2009) definition of celebrity is somewhat vague, Daniel Boorstin (1987) defines celebrity as more of an image. He argues that a celebrity is “a person who is known for his well-knownness. He is the human pseudo-event… fabricated on purpose to satisfy our exaggerated expectations of human greatness. He is morally neutral… The celebrity is distinguished by his image or
trademark” (47). From this definition it is not difficult to understand why celebrities, as characters in popular culture, become sites onto which people can project their beliefs. Celebrities, in general, are blank canvases onto which values can be projected. The idea of celebrity is a reflection of mass society’s values. Furthermore, the egalitarian nature of American society, especially in terms of how celebrities rise to fame, is indicative of why the image of celebrity is easily disseminated. Celebrity researcher Paul Hollander (2010) extends Boorstin to assert that “It is the egalitarian ethos of American culture and society which provides the foundation of the celebrity phenomenon, since it encourages everybody to seek fame and fortune and makes it possible for virtually anybody to become a celebrity provided he or she can muster sufficient publicity to become widely known for some reason” (148).

Egalitarianism, the belief in equality, is a critical part of establishing the idea of celebrity. More importantly, egalitarianism is founded on the belief that all people are, in principle, equal and should enjoy equal social, political, and economic rights and opportunities afforded to them by their society (Oxford University Dictionary). American culture, especially rhetoric inspired by the Western European Enlightenment, encourages egalitarianism. Defining documents in American history encourage the premise that people are not created equally but are equal. However, the irony in terms such as egalitarianism is that people find ways to differentiate themselves from others through political affiliation, social prominence, religious practice, and racial/ethnic differences, just to name a few. Therefore, true egalitarianism is still something to be achieved. Perhaps, American egalitarianism is a myth that American people subscribe to as an accepted practice. At the very least, egalitarianism combined with the basic celebrity archetype presents a series of problematic examples for people to idealize. Just as impractical as egalitarianism is to achieve in actuality, the American Dream and celebrity present their
believers with a multiplicity of identity issues: they standardize a heterogeneous American people. Through “Thriller,” Michael Jackson reinforces the complicatedness of über-celebrity, the American Dream, and egalitarianism, the challenges of Americanism and commodity fetishism that bruise the otherwise celebrated narrative.

Commodity Fetishism

Karl Marx describes commodity fetishism as typically relegating human-like characteristics to inanimate objects. Marx (2008) argues that the process of commodity fetishism begins as the acquisitions of certain qualities dictate social order. He says that the market is orchestrated so that workers are alienated and exploited to the point that the commodity and the capital used to relegate the economy become the official language used by both producer and consumer (Marx 91). The fetishism of commodities is realized when the commodity commands the ways in which people should act towards one another, thus giving it human-like ability. Commodities themselves have no inherent value. When humans attach certain values to the idea of commodity, we simultaneously give them the ability to segment population based on who has access and ability to possess it. The “Market” that Karl Marx so emphatically deconstructs is an articulation of what happens when multiple commodities compete. As the market changes, so do social relations. Market, ultimately, starts to relegate people to specific social orders, thus further alienating and exploiting the producers and ascribing worth to materials rather than intrinsic value. Wealth is purely objective and determined by the acquisition of commodities that have high exchange values, on which people have bestowed worth.
In the case of Michael Jackson, commodity fetishism contributed to his worth as a human. Because his persona was commodified and fetishized, Jackson was subjected to a value that was only as high as he was able to perform. The commodity Jackson was providing was very intangible and abstract, which problematizes the idea of commodity fetishism. I contend that the entity of Michael Jackson was able to sell an aura as a commodity. If people are purchasing distributed copies of Jackson’s aura, these consumers accept that they are actually purchasing a person. Aura is tied to atmosphere and experience, which is complicated when it comes to Jackson. Experiencing the atmosphere with a degree of authenticity is multi-layered with no clear answer to what an authentic encounter with Jackson is. There the purchase of products related to Jackson’s aura is merely an illusion.

Many people benefitted from Michael Jackson’s interweaving of persona and product. Because Jackson was selling aura, it becomes difficult to see how consumers can mistake an object for a human relationship. “Thriller” perhaps represents his achievement at the hand of commodity fetishism because every element of it was a production and was, therefore, sold. Everyone that contributed to the video, however big or small, conformed to the idea of it by their actions of Karl Marx’s “market.” Their worth was determined by the services they were able to provide – none of which, however, were as important as the final product. Furthermore, the “work” that was done is characterized by importance through the idea of commodity fetishism: if the point is to sell an illusion, the market rewards those who are most able to ensure it.

The idea of illusion is very instrumental not only in production, but it becomes even more relevant when we inspect “Thriller” further. The fantasy of “Thriller” and Michael Jackson is linked to the contextualized and multi-layered performance of illusion throughout the video,
which further complicates commodity fetishism. Beyond fetishizing Jackson, the consumers inadvertently fetishize every illusory theme in the “Thriller” music video.

Americanism

Americanism has been articulated in various ways over the span of American history. Even more importantly, the specificity of what Americanism truly is leads to sites of resistance, occasional conflicting ideas, and an amalgamated grouping of inspirations from many cultures. Americanism loosely can be thought of as an understood ideology that emphasizes core American values. These values are normally abstract and idealistic, emphasizing where Americans strive to go, but not necessarily clear articulations of where America is. Knowing the history of the United States of America, Americanism presents questions of authenticity – as America is a country made up of disparate populations.

Traditionally, Americanism is also synonymous with Americanization, which includes the injection of American products, culture, politics, and technology into other countries. Critics assert that Americanization is centered around globalized industry. In any case, the consequence of Americanization is Americanism. Normally, the products, culture, politics, and technology are inserted into other cultures with the accompanying American value systems. The bases of American values are fervent beliefs in liberty, equality and democracy. A critical examination of the idea of Americanism and Americanization reveals the phenomena that lie herein: both term’s very nature are dualistic. In its most positive form, Americanism/Americanization represents American achievement and economic expansion. It, in many ways, encourages patriotism and loyalty to one’s culture while simultaneously encouraging “America’s hallowed repertoire of guiding ideals, explaining its course and destiny to the American nation, while at
the same time providing an aspiration to non-Americans abroad” (van Elteren 101). Inasmuch as Americanism can seem positive in its approach, it is also met with resistance. Many other cultures view Americanism as culturally imperialistic and the ideological embodiment of “individualistic, materialistic hedonism of U.S. capitalist consumerism” devoid of a real ethical, moral and cultural center (van Elteren 102). In regards to “Thriller,” both arguments could be considered as valid critique. Jackson, himself, epitomizes this juxtaposition. As a man, he is able to achieve these incredible feats through performance and is rewarded handsomely for his efforts. In his occupation, he is given the liberty of expressing himself. Considering Jackson is a black man, however, he is unusual in that he is able to access things that many other black men would have never been able to attain.

Jackson serves as an anomalous racial project considering American racial history. Popular culture has been very stereotypical in presentations of blackness. Franz Fanon (2009) argues that blackness had been systematically annihilated through colonial practice. A black man’s “metaphysics, or less pretentiously, his customs and the sources on which they were based were wiped out because they were in conflict with civilization that he did not know and that imposed itself on him” (326-327). For Jackson, representing blackness was a delicate issue. Popular culture’s artificial and forced objectification relegates blackness to a specific space that is the opposite of white. Popular culture includes those products and persons that we attach value to (O'Brien and Szeman). Therefore, Jackson has to assert himself as a performer worthy of value while forced to perform an acceptable and non threatening black man. He walks this line very gracefully: through “Thriller” he draws attention away from himself to the character he plays, which he is greatly compensated for. Through music video, his style of blackness is
mediated, presented, and sold for profit despite the fact that Jackson symbolized American
citizenship at a time when it was not completely accessible to him.

As a construct, America is a patina: it models acceptable forms of what it wants to project
without actually being what its values suggest. In essence, Americanism is the false
consciousness of American culture. In order for Americanism to work as a functioning narrative,
Michael Jackson must project the ideal. The projection that was Jackson had the liberty to create
space for himself in an arena. Additionally, equality seemed to be extended through Michael
Jackson, at least on the stage of popular culture, because he was as or more visible nationally and
internationally as his white counterparts. Furthermore, if you believe the same things that
Michael believes and subscribe to the musical presentation that he presents, you too can inhabit
his world. The very parameters of egalitarian Americanism seem to be fixed rather than the
fluid in-between areas that they occupy in actuality. Although Americanism seems to be fixed,
this performance of Americanism exceeds American borders. The mass media served as a stage
for Jackson’s performances. Because of the accessibility of “Thriller,” Jackson became an
international canvas on which other people could project their idealism, as well. Michael
Jackson became a symbol of performed liberation because his performance was boundless.
CHAPTER FOUR: JACKSON IN JAIL: LOCALIZED PERFORMANCE WITH AN INTERNATIONAL STAGE

Michael Jackson, as an international public entity, is America’s symbol for both globalization and localization: his musical and performative influences on the world are indicative of the pervasiveness of American influence, specifically American popular culture. At the same time, his performances have been adapted to fit a variety of local styles all over the world. Jackson has had a profound effect on the concept of performance in general, especially in the creative ways he has navigated cultural, sexual, and national binaries by refusing to adapt himself (and his performances) to their restrictions.

Michael Jackson, as a site of performance, is particularly interesting because he defies categorization. He and the music presented in Thriller are ambiguous (with regards to race, sex and age), which allows for the international audience to own and adapt their personal Thriller experiences. Michael Jackson performs American-ness as he essentializes the dualistic nature of being both specific and ambiguous – which is, at its heart, truly American – through performance. America, arguably, has profited by being purposely ambiguous. Not having an “official” religion, race, or language allows people to consume American cultural products, especially American popular culture texts, and adapt them according to their particular human experiences. This chapter is focused on how Jackson has remained intact as an American icon and yet his performance has been segmented internationally to suit various purposes and cultural situations. Furthermore, I explore how Michael Jackson encourages a discourse on embodiment, body politics, and corporeality in his “Thriller” performances.

The vast influences of Michael Jackson’s music and performance are apparent in many locations. For the purpose of this research, I have chosen to analyze the Cebu Provincial
Detention Center’s youtube performance of Jackson’s title track, “Thriller,” as a case study applicable to other contexts. The youtube phenomenon was first introduced to the world at large on July 17, 2007 and soon garnered the interest and critique of international news hubs including The New York Times, CNN, and the BBC. Borrowing the choreography from the original video, Byron Garcia, the detention center’s superintendant, chose the “Thriller” dance to be the first of many subsequent videos because of the significance that the lyrical text offers to prisoners. Just as important as the lyrical text, the performative and historical context make the Philippine Islands prison video a formidable example of globalization and localization.

The youtube performance can be useful to critically examine the roles of globalization and localization and how they function as viable conduits for adaptations of performances. According to cultural anthropologist Ian Condry (2006), globalization describes the process by which regionalized social, political, and cultural economies are integrated into the global network through various communications including trade and transportation (18). For the purpose of this research, I would like to extend this definition to include colonization as well. Colonization, as it relates to American influence within the Philippine Islands, plays a crucial role in disseminating American culture. Without the function of localization, which is the cultural process by which a product is adapted and translated, it is difficult to see what Michael Jackson and “Thriller” meant to these prisoners thousands of miles away from its original context. In order to examine these two cultural processes, one need look no further than to the history of the Philippine Islands.

The Philippine Islands is a former territory of the United States. Captured as a war prize in the Spanish-American War in 1898, the Philippine Islands were an American colonial experiment that sought “to transform the Philippines into a model that would then ‘naturally’
expand into a transcontinental informal empire by proxy” (Cizel 690). Essentially, America’s original plans were to filter influence to Asia through the Philippines in order to set an example for (what was then known as) the Orient. Although liberated since 1946, this youtube video is a testament to that influence; American culture is an intentionally realized product, demonstrating the basic objectives of cultural imperialism (Cizel 690).

Many Filipino people, rather than overtly resisting American influence, as one might expect given the way it was forced on them through the colonial project, embraced it with open arms, although not did so. Specifically, American imperialism “empowered the islands and their inhabitants with technical developments, economic prosperity, religious freedom, and democratic education” (Cizel 691). Because of the lingua franca nature of music and the complex relationship that the Philippine Islands shared with Americans, one can see as a result of American occupancy, Filipinos have experienced success for their ability to play and sing American music especially through the systematic process of how colonization embeds itself in the collective consciousness of inhabitants. Needless to say, the American cultural export to the Philippines is dually important as a demonstration of power in that its nature is symbiotic: Filipinos have more access to America due to the once colonizer/colonized relationship, and America has more access to the Eastern hemisphere by allowing American culture to be performed from a Filipino perspective – personalizing the American experience abroad. For that reason, performing Michael Jackson, specifically in the case of the Cebu Provincial Detention Center, has substantial social and political consequences.

Filipino appropriation of American music is, in large part, due to the aforementioned forced and willing interaction between the islands and America. The musical byproduct created by the subordinate islands as a variation of the American art has everything to do with the power
in mimicry. Homi Bhabha (2007) discusses mimicry as the colonized’s attempt to etch out identity, aside from the colonial power (339). Although the Philippines is now its own nation, the remnants of colonial influence still lurk and are visible sources of cultural capital within the nation. In the case of human appropriation of a commodity such as Michael Jackson, the understanding is that the inmates will never be Michael Jackson, but they can perform him as a means of drawing attention to their undesirable condition. This act creates a social discourse on the nature of humanity; there are more things that bind us together regardless of condition and location, than those that separate us. Moreover, as a people, Filipinos (in addition to the prisoners) will never be American, but to perform American-ness, demonstrating their own interpretation of a musical work is critical to their definition of success.

Bhabha (2007) continues his argument by positing that “the effect of mimicry is camouflage… it is not a question of harmonizing with the background, but against a mottled background, of becoming mottled – exactly like the technique of camouflage practiced in human warfare” (337). This motif of camouflage is powerful in appropriated performance. In human warfare, camouflage is used to blend in with the environment for the sole purpose of evading and ambushing the enemy. Camouflage works to the advantage of those who understand the importance of strategic blending. Much like W.E.B. DuBois’s idea of the veil and double consciousness, this strategic mechanism is the social response of the globally colonized citizen. Strategic blending involves blending for cultural camouflage. Especially in the case of the Filipino prison dance and other appropriations of American culture, camouflage is essential in performance. In human warfare, it is understood that a human can never be the foliage. However, he or she can perform foliage for the purpose of accomplishing the desired goal: defeating the enemy that prison warden, Byron Garcia says is the thriller.
I also agree with Bhabha’s premise that “the menace of mimicry is its double vision, which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority” (Bhabha 339). The act of mimicry denies an originator exclusive to an idea. If a product is introduced to the market to be consumed, it can also be adapted. If it is adapted and personalized, it is no longer the sole property of the originator – it resembles the originator and nods to an inspiration, but it then becomes a new product. The double vision of the Filipino prison experiment is that in adapting a performance of Michael Jackson, Byron Garcia and the prisoners have, in turn, created a new product of and for themselves while simultaneously introducing a new way to consume, produce, and perform Michael Jackson. Since Jackson operates outside the confines of a border, he can no longer be considered just American because he can also be read now as Filipino. The Filipino prison population ultimately cultivates their own variation of popular culture: what historically seemed to be a clear instance of cultural imperialism evolves into a symbol for Garcia’s innovation involving dance as recreational therapy.

Of all the successful performers that Garcia has subsequently chosen, he elected to perform Michael Jackson first. Garcia, a self proclaimed Jackson fan, has celebrated the extreme worldwide success of Jackson despite the criticism Garcia has received by implementing his methods. After all, using dance as recreation and therapy for prisoners provided Garcia with an international stage. Using the familiarity of the song and performance along with the internet phenomenon of youtube, Garcia demonstrated another key characteristic of the album *Thriller*: exploiting media to disseminate a product to the greatest number of people possible. Garcia emulates Jackson’s style of performance and innovation by creating a unique interpretation of a variety of popular culture texts. As Jackson infiltrated MTV, Garcia disseminates his product through Youtube.com and garners the attention of the common man and mass media.
It is crucial to acknowledge youtube.com for the strategic role it played in the effect and dissemination of this video. For no cost, Garcia is able to gain attention for himself and the prisoners as non-Americans but symbols of the influence of Americanism. Jackson presents the international audience with an example of how the Other can be performed in a space outside of his or her creation. Keenly, Jackson is able to navigate various social terrains and provide American influence by one of the strongest communication media sources: the body. Through recorded memory – tours, apparel, and recorded music, Jackson’s body mediates a gruesome reality for the imprisoned Filipino men: they, like Jackson, are not restricted to time or space through the always-accessible internet. Inasmuch as Jackson and the Cebu Provincial Detention Center’s inhabitants have an open platform on which to articulate their desired messages, their performances also provide agency to two other important bodies: the imprisoned and the un/dead.

Michael Jackson is a performance of the international audience with an ideal other. Moreover, as an American product, Jackson reflects American influence by one of the strongest communication media: the performed and mediated body, devoid of racial barriers and communicating in the comprehensive language of music and dance which is visible in the forms of recorded memory – tours, apparel, and recorded music.

The Cebu Prison performance provides interesting commentary on the world system that created Michael Jackson as a commodity. For the basis of commodity is an item that bought and sold; a good for which there is a demand. Because of the pervasiveness of “Thriller”-like themes, Jackson’s art not only signified a degree of truth, but of entertainment as well. Furthermore, it can be interpreted as a radical approach to viewing life as a prison. As Garcia argued, people are held captive by their situations. For the inmates that were a part of this video,
the presentation magnifies the world of corruption and crime by positing it as a dance sequence that mirrors reality.

It is a widely accepted belief that those who are jailed in any society are outcasts among freed persons. In most democratic societies (including both America and the Philippines), those who are imprisoned are typically in jail because of conviction by a jury of their peers, awaiting trial, plea bargaining, or confession. Once “freed,” these former inmates still are confined in a system that makes it difficult to survive. People who have been jailed are punished doubly: the penal system detains them for an allotted sentence, then the unwritten social system limits their employment opportunities needed for survival after they are released. Both lyrically and musically this song bespeaks of a greater condition for the Filipino prison population: dead on arrival.

The prisoners also perform death, which is a crucial element of life regardless of race, ethnicity, or gender, but perhaps particularly salient for the incarcerated. The combination of the non-diegetic spoken word of Vincent Price’s bellowing monologue and the men in orange jumpsuits performing zombies, dead bodies, and other malformed creatures is aesthetically engaging. In both the original music video and the Filipino prisoner youtube video, the character of Jackson is captured and transformed into the very monsters that he attempts to escape. All of the cinematography of the music video, which is adapted by the prison video, symbolically indicates an ambiguity surrounding life and death. Life, for the purposes of the video “Thriller,” is a young man in high school going on a date. Death is the indestructible and unforeseen predator that comes from beyond the grave only to duplicate itself – making its prey just like it. By performing death, “Thriller” sensationalizes the mystique associated with it. Whether extravagantly costumed or uniformed in prison garb, the sensation is enhanced when the dead
overtake Jackson. This strategic move to allow the dead to possess Michael is effectual on two levels for the international appeal of the song and video.

Performance allows anyone and anything to act as Michael Jackson without being Michael Jackson. When the “dead” overtake Michael Jackson, the audience is not privy to what they do to him order to “make” him dead. This suggests that the process of becoming dead is not as important as the end result of the transformation; whatever one has to do to “become Michael” is not as important as the performance of him. Additionally, the performance of the dead also allows a subaltern class to speak. Perhaps the most poignant reach of Michael Jackson’s work is the ability for his music to provide soundtracks for social movements and commentaries. Human brute force is no match for the dead. However, the fascinating directorial move in this performance of the “living undead” leaves a critical question: does Jackson join their performance or do they become part of his? After all, following his transformation, the undead bodies perform alongside Jackson. The critically acclaimed choreography of the Michael Peters “Thriller” dance sequence is additionally meaningful for the othered prisoners.

Throughout the dance sequence, the prisoners performed not only conspicuous consumption, adapted presentation, and the undead – but they did so being lively, crisp, and uniform as a performed contradiction of everything the dead is perceived to be in typical popular culture representations. Through this performance, Garcia allows the prisoners to deconstruct the Other and build meanings of their own. As Jackson does in his original music video, Byron Garcia challenges popular assumptions of what “dead” is supposed to look and act like. Going beyond mere popular representations, both authors (Jackson and Garcia) construct their text to reflect their perceptions of what “Thriller” means. By doing so, both Garcia and Jackson are
being progressive in their fields by expanding etymological and cultural assumptions about language by providing visual contradictions of those assumptions

The participants in this Filipino jail YouTube video are performing self just as much as they are performing Michael Jackson. Despite the fact that the video only exhibits a portion of the song “Thriller,” the audience interprets and Byron Garcia reinforces in his website commentary, that the prisoners perform only the part that is applicable to their imprisoned situation. The video is performed by over 1,500 inmates, featuring only a few inmates who mimic the Michael Peters original choreography performed in the 1983 video. The inmates are all uniformed in orange jumpsuits, and there is only one character that is strategically different from the rest – the adaptation of the Michael Jackson’s romantic interest from the original music video. From Garcia’s point of view, so many people are able to identify with Michael Jackson because they are able to identify parts of themselves in him, including the prisoners in this video. For the inmates participating in this dance sequence, Garcia makes it clear that Jackson serves as a canvas onto which any one of them is able project his own image; Jackson’s features are not as important as grasping the ideology that propelled his career – excellence through performance, specifically music and dance. Garcia articulates, “the whole concept of discipline and dancing as methods of rehabilitation has never been in the books. It deviates and does not conform to the principles of jail management and penology.” He sees the dance as particularly therapeutic to the prison experience, especially because of the content of the song and the work of the Jackson.

Garcia (2009) continues by saying, “whether inside or outside the jail, people in this world seal their own doom by the foul and decadent cultures in a society. Nobody can get away from this doom in life for as long as they don’t stay from the evil of thriller or the evils of sin. The living hell in jails is about corruption, violence, gang culture, culture of the insane, culture of
deceit and betrayal.” The message that Garcia and his prisoners are sending out is that the greater importance of the lyrics give warning to contaminated aspects within a culture that go unnoticed by that culture. In the above mentioned quote, it seems as though Garcia promotes the idea that there inescapable evils in the world around us: everyone has his own living hell. The “hell” Garcia mentions is not only the one experienced by the incarcerated population, but the world at large performs grueling hells on a daily basis. Themes such as the grim and dark consequences of life are not specific to Michael Jackson or “Thriller”; they are universal.

There is a causal relationship between the theme of the song and such regimented dance: falling victim to the “thriller” – both in the video and in life – has real consequences. In the original and adapted performances of “Thriller,” the protagonist who succumbs to the “thriller” is consumed by the undead, yet inspires them to dance to his direction. In reality, falling victim to the “foul and decadent cultures in a society” could result in fatality. As a contrast, there is an intentional and nuanced focus on choreography as a symbolic practice of life: one must subscribe to rules of order and formation within this dance to accept and move beyond “thrillers.” It is intentional that choreographed dance is a system of rules that require discipline, cooperation, exercise, and precision. Even though there are nuances and effects in the video that are unable to be duplicated in the prison setting due to lack of resources, it is important that Garcia emphasizes that the prison performance illustrates a greater truth of the prisoner’s experience.

The youtube video begins with the scene where Michael Jackson mocks the fear of his date. The actors in this clip are performing it with one effeminate character that looks like he is not a part of the prison system because he is the only one in a costume. All other characters are wearing orange jumpsuits with the letter “P” on them. This signifies uniformity of their condition and purpose in this video. Although the costumed character does not have much film
time, it is purposeful that gender is performed in regards to that portion of the video. The video focuses on the spoken word by Vincent Price and climaxes at the dance sequence. This exposition of the video is very large scale; probably ten times the number of performers in the original video. It resembles a large school marching band formation because every performer needs to have an assigned place to avoid chaos. This prison performance contrasts the original video because the primary focus is purposely and purposefully focused on the dance rather than the cinematography, costumes, and effects like the original music video is. By choosing to focus on the dance, Garcia creates his own storyline that gives the performance just enough audio-visual information to indicate the referent, but perform it completely differently.

The feature dance sequence is inspired by Vincent Price’s speaking portion on the original recording and the chorus sung by Michael Jackson:

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\begin{align*}
\text{The foulest stench is in the air} \\
\text{The funk of forty thousand years} \\
\text{And grizzly ghouls from every tomb} \\
\text{Are closing in to seal your doom} \\
\text{And though you fight to stay alive} \\
\text{Your body starts to shiver} \\
\text{For no mere mortal can resist} \\
\text{The evil of the thriller} \\
\text{‘Cause this is Thriller, Thriller Night} \\
\text{And no one’s gonna save you from the beast about to strike} \\
\text{You know it’s thriller, thriller night} \\
\text{You’re fighting for your life inside a killer, thriller tonight.}
\end{align*}
\]

Although the featured choreography is performed by a smaller set of inmates, all 1,500 inmates have a part. Everyone is moving the entire time of the clip. At the beginning, all of the prisoners act like zombies just like in the original music video and remain in formation. The star performer, the Jackson impersonator, has identifying marks on his face that make him
distinguishable among the other prisoners. The actors all assume the role of the dead beings for the duration of the video, which is indicative of the nature of Garcia’s aforementioned ideas of the imprisoned populations. Unlike the original video, the Filipino performers end their adaptation with the “zombies” attacking the effeminate character. Although this performance is only a four minute, twenty six second video adaptation of the original near-thirteen minute “Thriller,” it simulates the most poignant moments of the music video that allow all participants a part while simultaneously showcasing the coordination of such a large group.

It is interesting to note that the performers do not need makeup or costumes that signify the tribute that they are paying to the original music video. Their present condition of being incarcerated while performing suggests its own set of assumptions about what “Thriller” means, in both a literal and performative way. At its etymological base, “thriller” denotes a sensational story that provides excitement and suspense. This discussion suspends what is reality versus synthetic; people are constantly adapting fictional and nonfictional narratives to their life performance.

Just as Jackson made his performances adapted showcases of various influences within his lifetime, the Cebuano prisoners did the same. Michael Jackson was read and redistributed by the Cebu prisoners to a world community. While the commodified aspect of this performance is problematic considering the compounded and occasional conflicted nature of America and celebrity, the internet provided a stage on which a message separate from the original presentation emerged. In this instance, the performance was multitextual: it was a performance of both Jackson and the Cebuano prisoner life narrative. In transcending the aesthetic of cinematography, the confines of time, and the dichotomy of sex, Michael Jackson’s “Thriller”, within and outside America became a pliable symbol: the “Thriller” video becomes – in an
instant - a perfect canvas to a convict’s life story and Jackson’s dance steps serve as a brushstroke giving the canvas color.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION: … AND THIS IS IT… Well Sort of…

In 2009, Columbia Pictures released a posthumous glimpse into what was going to be Jackson’s last performances in London, but also a musical comeback, titled This Is It! This film was from the perspective of director and choreographer Kenny Ortega and gave the audience an insider’s glimpse into the production of this fifty concert series in London, England. In addition to viewing the production of the show, the audience also saw how Jackson embodied the same complex and constructed aura that is seen in “Thriller.” Twenty eight years after “Thriller,” This Is It! shows Jackson as author, performer, person, celebrity, commodity, and the performance as a grand spectacle. Though some argue that Jackson’s abilities pale in comparison to earlier work, the essence of performance is still arguably the same – Jackson still remains a complex figure that commands socio-cultural and political attention.

Because of Jackson’s death in 2009, scholarship on Jackson and his body of work is emerging as an area of serious academic exploration. This research is highly connected to the development of a body of scholarly work on Michael Jackson as he seemingly has become his own discipline. However, this particular investigation tends to separate itself because it is not focused on synthesizing Jackson’s life’s work, rather it seeks to make sense of a definitive moment. Focusing on the “Thriller” performance gives the research specificity and establishes a particular point of reference. This research establishes that although Jackson was a popular culture icon, his influence exceeded its parameters, especially in terms of “Thriller.” Through a series of performances, especially the worldwide attention he was able to capture in “Thriller,” Jackson is able to maintain cultural, political, economic, and social relevance. Therefore, it becomes important to develop research to understand why and how Jackson was capable of portraying and performing an inimitable text that is constantly reinterpreted.
Based on the evidence presented in this thesis, performance is discourse. The discourse is elaborate: it includes varying levels of communication between artist, immediate audience, extended audience, and society as a whole. Therefore, it was important to establish the words and syntax structure as the first level of analysis. Random letters create words, which then key certain sounds. These sounds, as a result, have to work cooperatively to create phrases that make literal and musical sense. The semiotic study in the musicological review highlighted the expressions and phrases used in “Thriller” that suggested certain culture value. Semiotics further helped establish the performance’s meaning by introducing the music as a production that contextualized subsequent adaptations. The musical production of the “Thriller” track is multifunctional as it provides the lens necessary for investigating the performance aesthetic of Michael Jackson: it establishes the performance context, provides a foundation for hybridity, and identifies Jackson’s image as heteroglossic in nature.

Bakhtin’s theories of heteroglossia and the carnivalesque were beneficial in contextualizing the performance event. Whereas heteroglossia aided in explaining the single authored text with multiple voices in both the musical track and the music video, the idea of carnivalesque was essential in defining the performance space as a spectacle. Through the spectacle of the carnivalesque, Jackson’s “Thriller” exceeds trivial conversations of fandom; it goes deeper to examine the cultural, social, and political values of a movement. The movement involves several layers of complexity as it relates to performance. Jackson, as performer, negotiates an assortment of identities in performances that are then mediated through various media outlets. In performing the virtuosity of a burgeoning pop star, he additionally performs artistic and aesthetic stimuli.
The stimuli produced in the “Thriller” video are not only evident in cinematographic detailing and elaborate costuming – they were embodied in dance and the way “Thriller” is portrayed. Adding the visual to the aural increased visibility for Jackson, thus furthering the celebrity he had already established. The celebrity evolved into “larger than life” status, and very much shaped how he was consumed. Essentially, Jackson is a site of familiarity: by performing, he allows others to perform him by projecting themselves onto his outline. Whereas the outline’s shape never changes, the colors and the details inside of the outline do vary. The media through which Jackson’s images are projected provide a solid foundation for Jackson and his body of work to be considered commodities. The fascination with the aura Jackson is able to brand and sell illustrates Karl Marx’s idea of commodity fetishism and Veblen’s conspicuous consumption. As this thesis implies, the consumption of Jackson’s product and the belief in the magical qualities it possesses is not happenstance: it is planned, edited and consumed to create a profit. For Jackson, it is dually beneficial: it is able to attain an amassed wealth coupled with unparalleled influence.

Additionally, Bhabha’s notion of mimicry helps unite the chapters in providing an example of how the spectacle, projection, and production work together to influence imitations of the original work. As the international example of Jackson’s “Thriller” influence shows, Filipino prisoners project their social condition onto Jackson’s image, and they use a dance sequence to make a statement. Inasmuch as the performance is Filipino and incarcerated, it is still a recognizable performance of Jackson. In prison, Jackson’s music and lyrics take on a different shape because of their cultural value to the Filipino imprisoned; the images from the video provide a foundation for the prisoners to perform the dance and because of the commodified image of Jackson, the prisoners have access to perform it as their own.
Future Research

As Jackson continues to be a compelling research subject, people will investigate how accessible he is through his performances now that he is deceased. While alive, Jackson was in control over who had access to his persona because it was his possession. However, now that his estate is under the control of his mother, Katherine Jackson, new perceptions of his performances may be within reach. Having access to rehearsal footage could prove incredibly insightful in detailing the planned nature of Jackson’s work. The story of “Thriller” helps academics realize a different kind of code of popular music: it is a complex system of signs that offer a myriad of interpretations depending on cultural condition. Jackson’s “Thriller” performance is a unique case in which the stage it is performed on is constantly recorded, reinterpreted, and never static. “Thriller” is Michael Jackson’s living undead.


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