

'It's as plain as the nose on his face': Michael Jackson, modificatory practices, and the question of ethics

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In recent media reports Michael Jackson has been described variously as: The boy who never grew up; a man without boundaries (McCarthy, 2003: 27); an irrational cosmetic surgery junky who provides the general public with a graphic example of what *not* to do with plastic surgery (Ibid.); a weird asexual effeminate creature whose once normal face is now bizarre, unnatural, and permanently disfigured; a black man who has tried to turn himself into a white woman; someone who no longer looks human; a self-mutilator who is obviously psychologically unstable; a latex monkey in a bad wig; a damaged soul on a crusade to obliterate all traces of resemblance to an abusive father who called him ugly (Arogundade, 2000:104); a freak; a bad parent; a paedophile (Tagg, 2003: 1); someone who is either unbelievably naïve or morally corrupt; and someone whose activities should, according to US based family lawyer Gloria Alfred, be scrutinized. If we are to believe the media reports such as those from which these characterizations are taken, Michael Jackson is a profoundly disturbed and disturbing person, and evidence of his perversion resides in his flesh, or more specifically, his face—a face that many have described as increasingly monstrous. However, the extent to which such characterizations provide us with access to the truth of Jackson remains open to debate.

Rather than scrutinizing this face in an attempt to wrest-forth, once and for all, the truth of the psyche, the subject, that is Michael Jackson, the aim of this paper is to turn the tables somewhat and focus instead on this face as a discursive site which has been (and continues to be) problematized and constituted in historically and culturally specific ways. Given this, my intention is neither to condone nor condemn “Michael Jackson”—whoever or whatever “Michael Jackson” might be—nor to advocate or denounce the cosmetic procedures that seem so inextricably associated with this discursive figure. Instead of attempting to define Michael Jackson “the person” I want instead to problematize (in the Foucauldian sense of the term) the ontological assumptions inherent in attempts to determine the truth of this figure, of the other and, by association, the truth of “cosmetic surgery”.

Polemics, Politics and Problematizations

In an interview with Paul Rabinow entitled “Polemics, Politics, and Problematizations”, Michel Foucault discusses what he sees as the important differences between polemics and problematization as modes of investigation concerned with the search for “truth” and the relation to the other. For Foucault, what is perhaps most important is the way in which these competing methodologies are constituted, and constitute themselves, in relation to politics and ethics, and it is this issue that my paper sets out to examine.

According to Foucault,

[t]he polemicist ... proceeds encased in privileges that he possesses in advance and will never agree to question. On principle, he possess rights authorizing him to wage war and making that struggle a just undertaking; the person he confronts is not a partner in the search for truth but an adversary, an enemy who is wrong, who is harmful, and whose very existence constitutes a threat. For him, then, the game consists not of recognizing this person as a subject having the right to speak, but of abolishing him, as interlocutor, from any possible dialogue ... [The polemicist's] final objective will be not to come as close as possible to a difficult truth, but to bring about the triumph of the just cause he has been manifestly upholding from the beginning. (1997b:112)

What becomes clear from this description is that the polemicist—at least as Foucault envisages him—is not interested in

remaining open to the other and the experiences, challenges, and indeterminable knowledges that the other may bring to this encounter. Rather, he is a person to whom pre-emptive strikes seem like the only reasonable response. And of course, this waging of war—of a war against alterity that must be won at all costs—is infinitely justifiable since it is undertaken in order to determine “the intangible point of dogma, the fundamental and necessary principle [the truth, if you like] that the adversary has neglected, ignored, transgressed”(1997b:112). In and through such a process, then, the polemicist (re)affirms himself as the moral guardian of the body politic by inscribing the body of the silenced other as enemy. The body of the other is thus de-personalized, de-faced, rendered anonymous and at the same time absolutely knowable.

One of the most disturbing things about the “ontology of war”¹ that informs this particular mode of investigation is its “sterilizing effects” (Foucault, 1997b:113). What I mean by this, is that such a practice not only does violence to the other, but it also closes down (rather than opening up) channels of investigation. It falls back continually on the staunchly held assumptions, the same old stories, that have informed the polemicist’s attack on the other from its inception and which have served, and continue to serve, to justify the polemicist’s cause, his *modus operandi*, and of course, his very being. I will illustrate the claim that polemics is a sterilizing mode of investigation which is constituted and constitutes itself in and through a particular (problematic) relation to “truth”, to the other, and to ethics, through a critical analysis of the media construction of “Wacko Jacko”, and through an engagement with claims made more generally about cosmetic surgery.

Corporeal Evidence: Reading the (Perverse) Bodies of Freaks and Femmebots²

I want to begin with Martin Bashir’s documentary *Living With Michael Jackson* which I’m sure most readers will be familiar with given that it generated a state of moral panic on a seemingly gargantuan scale. The documentary, which Bashir claims provides the viewer with access to “the disturbing reality of [Michael Jackson’s] life today”, opens at the gates of Jackson’s (ex)home, Neverland, a property inspired by Peter Pan, the boy who never grew up. We are no sooner inside the gates than the disembodied rational voice of Bashir proclaims that this “multi-million dollar man-made slice of make-believe” is “paradise for a 10 year old child”, but—and then comes a well-timed and rather ominous pause—“Michael Jackson is now 44”. So, from the opening moments, the implication is that there is something not quite right here, that there is, or will be, trouble in paradise/Neverland. The documentary then proceeds in this vain, and whilst Bashir *does* allow Jackson to speak, dialogue, as such, does not take place. This is because the possibility of an equal discussion is necessarily nullified in advance by the methods of investigation that Bashir and his team employ. In other words, the investigation which takes place in and through this particular text is polemical in that it does not constitute a “work of reciprocal education” (Foucault, 1997b:111), but rather, consists of the “processing of a suspect; it collects the proofs of his guilt, designates the infraction[s] he has committed, pronounces the verdict and sentences him”(112)—or at least, encourages us, the viewers, to do so. In this sense, the documentary functions to “define alliances, to recruit partisans”(112) or, to put it more simply, it inserts us into a game in which we are forced to identify ourselves against (or with, however, this position is constructed as a far less viable one) the other whose being is harmful, and whose very existence therefore constitutes a threat to the well-being of others and of the body politic more generally.

A friend of mine recently likened Bashir’s role, his investigative technique,—very aptly it seemed to me—to that of a smiling assassin. What Bashir does, is to invite confidences from Jackson, and then to frame them in such a way as to render them irrational, strange, delusory, questionable, suspect, juvenile, improper, illegitimate, and therefore unworthy of serious consideration. In and through the construction of Jackson’s utterances as bizarre responses to seemingly rational questions, Jackson is inscribed as “wacko” and therefore as someone who should not be taken at his word. At the same time, the figure of Bashir is, by opposition, positioned as normal, rational, legitimate, and so on.

Rather than questioning the assumption that Jacko *is* wacko—an assumption that drives the narrative from its inception—Bashir searches for the cause of Michael’s malady in his history. Thus begins the rather predictable story of Jackson’s stolen childhood and the abuse suffered at the hands of his father who not only beat him, but also made disparaging remarks about his appearance, branding him “fat nose” and “lubber lips”. And thus, thanks to Bashir, our fortitudinous hero, we arrive at the crux of the matter, at the thing(s) that (allegedly) motivate(d) Jackson to hate himself and his (black) face, and to become a self-abusive cosmetic surgery junky, and of course, by association, a bad parent, and perhaps even a

paedophile.

Of course, the mainstream media is not the only place where the logic that forges such associations can be found. It is also apparent, for example, in the work of feminist theorist Kathryn Pauly Morgan. Pauly's paper, "Women and the Knife: Cosmetic Surgery and the Colonization of Women's Bodies", begins with a discussion of the necessity of listening to the voices of women who "choose" to go under the knife for cosmetic reasons. Listening to the voices and the explanations that these women offer, will, writes Morgan, enable the feminist theorist to "assess the extent to which the conditions for genuine choice have been met" (1995:312). However, what soon becomes clear to the astute reader of "Women and the Knife", is that Morgan does *not* speak to individual women at all, but rather, uses quotes from various mainstream media sources—the majority of which seem to be opposed to cosmetic surgery—in order to support her claim that there is a significant difference between what women who undergo cosmetic procedures *say* they are doing (that is, making an autonomous and potentially liberatory choice), and what they are *really* doing (becoming both dupes and agents of patriarchy and its misogynist, racist, and heterosexist values). Like Jackson, then, these anonymous figures are discursively constructed as deluded beings who cannot, and should not, be taken at their word, since it is not their voices that tell the truth, but their perverse bodies.

One of the many shortcomings of Morgan's paper stems from her failure to consider the fact that media reports are never an unmediated source for women's voices, nor are they neutral and objective texts. Rather, as Kathy Davis points out in her critique of Morgan's approach,

whatever a cosmetic surgery recipient might say, her experience is invariably reworked by the journalist who selects, condenses, translates, and polishes her words, and then reassembles them into a narrative which fits his or her interests as well as the editorial policy of the magazine or newspaper (1998: 292).

Likewise the Bashir documentary, which, despite claims to the contrary, does not simply provide a neutral and unmediated space in which Jackson's being, is, or can be, bodied-forth.

A second and related problem with Morgan's methodology stems from lack of self-reflexivity and the (implied) claim to objectivity. For example, Morgan fails to explain how and why she came to choose the quotes that appear in her article and which are presented as representative of the justifications used by recipients of cosmetic procedures. These disembodied voices are never contextualized or personalized, and thus the implication is, as Davis argues, that they can (and should) be read as universally applicable, as representative of the thoughts and experiences of "everywoman" (1998: 292). One might argue then, that whilst the voices of cosmetic surgery recipients do appear to speak in Morgan's text, just as Jackson's does in Bashir's, theirs is a ventriloquism of the voice of the person who selects, condensed, translates, edits, and so on, that is, the god-like figure (of Morgan, of Bashir) who author(ize)s the other's being within the limited and limiting terms of his or her own (body) project.

Consequently, despite Morgan's purported aim to converse with women who have undergone cosmetic procedures, her methodology, like Bashir's, dis-enables a reciprocal interchanging of ideas and produces homogenizing effects. In fact, both Morgan and Bashir could be said to take up the position of the polemicist in that both

proceed encased in privileges that [they] possess in advance and will never agree to question ... [Both] possess rights authorizing [them] to wage war and making that struggle a just undertaking ... [In both cases] the person confront[ed] is not a partner in the search for truth but [is constituted as] an adversary ... who is wrong, who is harmful, and whose very existence constitutes a threat (Foucault, 1997b:112).

Given this it seems fair to say that neither Bashir nor Morgan appears to be particularly interested in grappling with complexities, contradictions, questions without answers, in short, with the alterity of the other. Rather, each, in their own way, is blinded by their determination to bring "about the triumph of the just cause s/he has been manifestly upholding from

the beginning”(112), and as a result, both de-face the other. Moreover, each presumes that their individual undertakings are ethical and this is a point I will return to later in the paper.

“Self-Mutilation”: Author(iz)ing the Truth of the Other

In another recent documentary entitled *Michael Jackson: The Face* the voice of the other is also rendered inaudible through the use of different, although no less polemical, techniques. In this text a kind of reverse logic (which also functions, albeit in less explicit ways, in Bashir’s documentary), is made explicit when “Jackson’s ever-changing face” is read not only as the effect of an abusive childhood, but also as evidence of escalating psychological problems. *The Face* maps the changes in Jackson’s face as they coincide with the many albums he has produced and the increasingly bizarre events he is reported to have been involved in, from his immersion in a buriumchamber, to his alleged sexual abuse of Jordy Chandler and others, his procuring—by seemingly unconventional means—of off-springs who are forced to wear masks in public, his “confession” that he “sleeps with children” who are not his own, and his refusal to concede that such behaviour is “inappropriate”. But then none of this should come as any surprise since (allegedly) if we look closely enough; the problem is writ large; it is as clear as the (monstrous) nose on Jackson’s face.

Throughout this particular documentary the viewer is introduced to a range of “experts” whose authority not only lends weight to the thesis proposed by the film makers, but at the same time, functions to silence any other dissident voices or knowledges.³ For example, Elizabeth Bradbury whose appearance is accompanied by the title “psychologist and face expert”, and who has presumably never met Jackson, describes his behaviour as “that of somebody addicted to surgery”. Bradbury invites the viewer to identify with her position by explaining that she is disturbed by “the fact that [Jackson] keeps having [cosmetic surgery] even though most rational people [read: ‘you and I’] would say ‘stop’”. But not only does Jackson’s visage—which Bradbury describes as “abnormal and appalling”, much like that of “the bearded lady in the Freak Show”—function as a sort of fleshly confession of his inner turmoil, it also has the power to predict what is yet to come. Jackson’s face and the desires that have lead to its “deformation” don’t augur well, this modern day physiognomist tells us, for a happy, healthy, and successful future. As our “expert” puts it: Jackson’s future “looks pretty bleak really. With somebody on his trajectory there is always the fear that in the end there is nowhere to go apart from complete self-destruction”.

In an interesting and insightful critique of “(self-)mutilation discourse” and the ways in which it is employed in the mainstream media to delegitimize body modification by constructing modificatory practices and those who participate in them in negative ways, Victoria Pitts makes the following claims, all of which are applicable, I would argue, to *Michael Jackson: the Face*. Mutilation discourse, writes Pitts, involves “the presentation of mental health practitioners as experts on body modification” (1999:293). These experts, whose authority resides in their professional qualifications, and who present a united front, are then asked to comment on what is constituted from the outset as “the problem”. The lack of diverse or conflicting views from equally qualified persons implies that there is only one possible, one true and legitimate, interpretation of such practices. The “truth” that is constructed in and through mutilation discourse is that people who participate in “non-mainstream” or “extreme” modificatory practices are self-mutilators who are driven by irrational and uncontrollable psychological impulses.

In and through these texts and the discourses that inform them, the bodies of “self-mutilators” are constructed as corporeal confessions of self-loathing which speak the truth of the mutilators being, even if his or her voice does not. As one psychologist, Corinee Sweet puts it: “From my experience as a counselor, what we do on the surface nearly always has some deep structure behind it”(cited in Pitts, 1999:294-5). This kind of (humanist) logic and the model of subjectivity that informs it and is informed by it, is reiterated in an article entitled “A Photographic History of Michael Jackson’s Face” in which the anonymous author writes “someone with this going on visibly outside has to have a lot of demons going on inside” (<http://anomalies-unlimited.com/Jackson.html>). Rather than being “true”, I would assert that interpretations such as these are based on, and reaffirm the problematic but nevertheless “recurring idea that is deeply rooted in Western scientific and popular thought” that “individuals identified as socially deviant are somatically different from “normal” people”(Terry & Urla, 1995:1), and vice versa.

As Pitts points out, this particular (polemical) mode of investigation “lends to body modifiers a powerful stigma, rendering them ‘discredited person[s]’” (1999:300), or, as Foucault might put it: the rules and methods of this particular game necessarily consists of *not*, “recognizing this person [the modifier] as a subject having the right to speak but of abolishing him[/her], as interlocutor, from any possible dialogue”(1997b:112). The question this raises then, is whether or not there *is* a way of listening to the voice of the other or reading the face/body of the other that doesn’t de-face the other, and, by association, produce sterilizing effects?

What “specialists” such as Bradbury and theorists such as Morgan fail to consider is that the meaning of any modificatory practice may not be internal to that practice, to the intentions of the subject who participates in it, or to the psychosomatic history of that subject, but rather, is constructed in and through the relation between the practice, the bodies involved in it and in its interpretation, and the context in which such practices occur. Consequently, what is overlooked in both the theoretical texts and the documentaries I’ve discussed thus far is the possibility that both (modified) subjects and modificatory practices are heterogeneous and are produced by and produce complex and sometimes contradictory meanings and affects.

Unlike Morgan, Bradbury, and others, I do not want to make homogenizing and silencing pronouncements about modificatory practices and the people who participate them, nor, however, am I interested in attempting to elaborate a method of practicing an idealized form of dialogue which would supposedly allow the modified other to present him or herself in her entirety, thus enabling me to “know” him or her. Whilst the approaches taken by Bradbury, Morgan, Bashir, and so on, are in some ways, significantly different from one another, each nevertheless tends to read the modified body of the other as a source of diagnostic information, as a kind of fleshly confession which provides access to the psyche, the soul, the “fragment of darkness” (Foucault, 1980:69), that is the very heart of the person(s) under investigation. In doing so, each of the theorists mentioned (re)writes the body of the modified other in much the same way as does Kafka’s killing machine (1995).

What Kafka’s infamous Harrow does, is to produce bodies which signify the law on and through themselves; “there the law is manifest as the essence of their selves” (Butler, 1990:135). But, as Butler, following Foucault makes clear, these “interior selves” are not the source or the origin of desires, actions, and so on, but rather, are “truth effects” produced in and through the inscription (the reading and writing) of bodies (Foucault, 1979). The parallel that I am trying to draw here between the work of those theorists ideologically opposed to cosmetic surgery (and often to other modificatory practices also), the narrative elaborated by Bashir, and Kafka’s Harrow, lies in the effects they produce.

Earlier I spoke of the sterilizing effects of the “ontology of war”, of the reduction of the other to an object of knowledge, and it is my contention, that like the Harrow, the stories told by Morgan, Bradbury, Bashir, inscribe the body of the other—and thus constitute the other’s selfhood *as* other, as alienating and alienated—with judgements that each has made in advance, and is unwilling to question. In other words, in and through the unquestioned pathologization of modificatory practices the subject who participates in such procedures is inscribed as the source of pathological desires and actions, as thus, at heart, as a sort of “non-person”, that is, someone who lacks the characteristics essential to “personhood” (rationality, self-control, the capacity for self-reflection, and so on). Given this, rather than providing us with access to the truth of cosmetic surgery and the subjects who participate in it, the readings/writings of modified bodies posited by Morgan and Bradbury, and by the makers of both the Jackson documentaries discussed, produce nullifying “truth effects”.

Problematizing “The Will to Knowledge”⁴

As an alternative to “the form of critique that claims to be a methodical examination in order to reject all possible solutions except for the one valid one” (Foucault, 1997b:114)—that is, polemics—Foucault formulates what we might think of as a sort of ethical “problematization”. Problematization in this sense involves asking politics (that is, institutionalized knowledges and practices) what it has to say about the so-called problems it finds itself confronted with, critically analyzing

the ways in which “problems” have been constituted *as* problems, how they have been problematized. Foucault, envisages problematization as a mode of critical engagement which should

be considered not as ... a doctrine, nor even as a permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating; it has to be conceived as an attitude an *ethos*, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them (Foucault, 1997c: 319, my emphasis).

Problematization in this sense, does not involve taking up a particular political position, making a homogenizing judgement, and pursuing it relentlessly to the detriment of others, but rather, asking ourselves, the institutions we are associated with, the knowledges we (re)produce, what it is (im)possible to say about the problems with which we are faced, what the assumptions that inform our responses (and the knowledges informing them and informed by them) might be, and the possible effects of not only the responses (and the forms of knowledge they engender), but also the methods employed in order to justify and to sustain them (Foucault, 1997b: 115). Problematization, then, is, as Foucault says, an *ethos*, a way of being, a critical attitude towards the formulation of provisional and partial knowledges that are culturally and historically specific, in process, and must be acknowledged as such. Thus unlike ethics as it is commonly understood—that is, as a definable set of moral codes and conventions—problematization as an ethics of inter-subjectivity, of heterogeneity, of alterity, does not foreclose, in advance, an openness to the other and the experiences, challenges, and indeterminable knowledges that the other may bring to any and every encounter. In attempting, then, to elaborate “an analysis of the [specific ontological] limits imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them” (Foucault, 1997c: 319), problematization as an ethical (rather than a polemical) practice, must necessarily challenge “forms of humanism that begin with an a priori theory of the subject and proceed to define the universal and necessary conditions for the possibility of ethical action and thought” (Sawicki, 1998: 103). And it is this that the work of Bashir, Morgan, Bradbury, each, in its own way, fails to do.

Queer Ethics, or Perverting the Course of Justice

Let us consider for a moment what dominant responses to the face/figure of Michael Jackson might tell us about the problems with which politics currently finds itself faced. Jackson, it has been claimed repeatedly in recent media reports, is a creature without boundaries: he is both and neither man and woman, child and adult, human and monster, black and white, heterosexual and perversely pansexual, asexual, non-sexual. In short, Jackson is queer. I making this claim, however, I do not mean to imply that there is some sort of intrinsic quality that Michael Jackson has, a quality which we can discover and correctly identify and label as queer. Rather, my contention is that this discursive figure currently functions in such a way as to queer dominant knowledges and identities, calling them into question, and of course, (ironically) simultaneously reaffirming them. And it seems to me that it is the radical heteromorphism, the queerness of this figure, which incites in us both fascination and fear.

The reason for this, I would suggest, is that this perverse figure—as it/he is currently configured—literalizes the ways in which “the strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and possessions” (Levinas, 1979: 43) calls into question the “self”, and thus engenders (and is engendered by) what Levinas refers to as ethics. Ethics, in the Levinasian sense—as the exposure to the Other which precipitates the simultaneous calling forth and undermining or overwhelming of the egoism of the self—necessarily haunts politics, and by politics I, following Levinas, am referring to ontology, judgement, knowledge, the regulation of differences, the promotion of some values and identities over others, and the institutionalized structures that allegedly enable the prevention of harm from one’s enemies (Diprose, 2002:169). In short, ethics makes politics both possible and impossible (and vice versa), and this is because the production of identity and difference in and through various discursive techniques and modes of regulation necessarily presupposes an inter-subjective relation with the other, with alterity, that is irreducible to thematization, and that in fact, incessantly interrupts processes of meaning-making, thus ensuring that meaning remains unstable and in process. It is this ambiguous and seemingly contradictory relationship between ethics and politics that “queers” any attempt to pin the other down, to read the face of Michael Jackson and decide, once and for all, who (or what) this stranger really is. But at the same time, it this ambiguous

and seemingly contradictory relationship between ethics and politics that motivates the polemicist to keep desperately trying to “bring about the triumph of the just cause he has been manifestly upholding from the beginning (Foucault, 1997b:112) since it is only in doing so that he can arrest the flux, the flow of being. In conclusion, then, queer ethics as a form of problematization perverts the course of justice (in the polemical sense) in (at least) two ways. First, it pushes against “the just” as that which, like the law, is (allegedly) “stabilizable and statutory, calculable”, the cornerstone and product of “a system of regulated and coded prescriptions” (Derrida, 1992:22), and second, and relatedly, it reconfigures justice as perverse, that is, as “infinite, incalculable, rebellious to rule and foreign to symmetry, heterogeneous and heterotropic (Ibid.). In doing so, queer ethics also problematizes and perverts the ontology of war which, as I have argued, is central not only to the polemical projects of Bashir, Morgan, Bradbury, and so on, but more importantly to the “mystical foundation of authority”⁵ that justifies their undertaking.

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Notes

¹ This is a term Emmanuel Levinas uses to describe both modes and theories of being which at best disavow alterity in and through the thematization of the other, and at worst, result in literal genocide. See, for example, ‘Preface’, in Levinas (1979).

² Morgan claims that cosmetic surgery, like other technological interventions into bodily being, is currently implicated in the production of what she calls ‘Robo women’.

³ Jackson’s own voice is absent from this documentary. However, as my discussion of *Living With Michael Jackson* shows, the literal presence of the voice (of the other) is not sufficient to ensure a reciprocal exchange of ideas in which difference is negotiated rather than silenced.

[4](#) For a critique of ‘the will to knowledge’ and the practices such as ‘confession’ that are integral to its functioning, see Foucault (1997a).

[5](#) This phrase from Derrida (1992) refers to ‘the law’ as transcendental but could equally well be applied to any ‘truth’ which functions to authorize a claim or a position.

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