

Michael Jackson's *Gesamtkunstwerk*: Artistic Interrelation, Immersion, and Interactivity From the Studio to the Stadium

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Michael Jackson produced art in its most total sense. Throughout his forty-year career Jackson merged art forms, melded genres and styles, and promoted an ethos of unity in his work. Jackson's mastery of combined song and dance is generally acknowledged as the hallmark of his performance. Scholars have noted Jackson's place in the lengthy soul tradition of enmeshed movement and music (Mercer 39; Neal 2012) with musicologist Jacqueline Warwick describing Jackson as "embodied musicality" (Warwick 249). Jackson's colleagues have also attested that even when off-stage and off-camera, singing and dancing were frequently inseparable for Jackson. James Ingram, co-songwriter of the *Thriller* album hit "PYT," was astonished when he observed Jackson burst into dance moves while recording that song, since in Ingram's studio experience singers typically conserve their breath for recording (*Smiley*). Similarly, Bruce Swedien, Jackson's longtime studio recording engineer, told National Public Radio, "Recording [with Jackson] was never a static event. We used to record with the lights out in the studio, and I had him on my drum platform. Michael would dance on that as he did the vocals" (Swedien ix-x).

Surveying his life-long body of work, Jackson's creative capacities, in fact, encompassed acting, directing, producing, staging, and design as well as lyricism, music composition, dance, and choreography—and many of these across genres (Brackett 2012). It should be noted that Jackson's writings weren't restricted to song lyrics; in 1992 he authored a book of poetry and reflections called *Dancing the Dream*, a companion piece of sorts to his 1991 *Dangerous* album.

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In it, Jackson wrote poems, short essays, and reflections on the themes of nature, love, community, and spirituality. Jackson's creative direction also extended to his stagecraft for live performances, from designing the lighting to planning his costumes. As his costume designer and dresser Michael Bush recounted to *Rolling Stone*, Jackson "would be very involved in what he wore [for live shows], starting by sketching out his vision." As Susan Fast confirmed with Jackson's lead guitar player, Jennifer Batten, Jackson also designed Batten's costume and hairstyle on his solo tours (285). Surprisingly, two years after his death another facet of Jackson's corpus of work was revealed. In 2011, the *LA Weekly* reported that over one hundred paintings and drawings that Jackson had skillfully produced over the years were stored in a Santa Monica airport hangar (quoted in Duvernoy). Although Jackson had shared numerous sketches with fans since he was a boy (a few of which were featured in his album art), the volume of this collection, apparently once intended for exhibition and sale, was unexpected by fans and public alike.

Given his mastery of multiple art mediums, claims that Jackson was a consummate "entertainer" and "song and dance man" (quoted in Price) are certainly accurate, yet they do not capture the scope of his artistic expression over his lifetime. The question thus arises of how Jackson's framework should be contextualized and conceptualized. I contend that through the entirety of his lifelong artistic endeavors Michael Jackson epitomizes the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Translated as "the total work of art," the *Gesamtkunstwerk* in art theory and aesthetics refers to the synthesis of the different art forms such as singing, dancing, poetry, painting, sculpture, and architecture, as well as the multi-sensory and deeply immersive experience that a "total" performance provides. Jackson harnessed and blended what are often artificially separated art forms to communicate a consistent and coherent message (of love for the planet and the unity of its diverse peoples), demonstrating the holism of his framework. To understand the artistic integration and total performance that Jackson provided I call attention to various integrative and immersive aspects of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* in his work.

Although Jackson did not state in his interviews or his publicly available writings an intentional engagement with the concept of the total work of art, I propose that it offers a very fruitful and fitting way to read his work. The full range of Jackson's artistic expression strongly suggests that there was a system to his approach, meaning, his output featured a collection of interdependent parts that comprised a broad narrative, which the concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk* aptly conveys. I suggest that in his totalizing approach Jackson operated in a continuum with the performance and presentation styles of two other influential figures associated with the total work of art: Richard Wagner and Walt Disney, even as Jackson's message of universal unity diverged from their goal of national unity. I am inspired partly by Matthew Wilson Smith's *The Total Work of Art: From Bayreuth to Cyberspace*, which examines links between the work of Wagner

and Disney, both of whom would seek to unify the arts in their presentations and promotions of mythic times. Considering such connections is especially relevant given Jackson's own collaboration with Walt Disney Imagineering, his ranch Neverland based on the amusement park Disneyland, and his research into Disney's history and philosophy (Jackson 258). I examine Jackson's expansion of the total work of art concept by looking at the interlocking themes of his writing and drawing and certain aspects of Jackson's stagecraft, as well as drawing on interviews I conducted with Todd Gray, Jackson's former photographer. I show how in concert performances Jackson used participatory techniques such as on-stage serenades to enfold fans of diverse nationalities and cultural backgrounds into the pop spectacle and to personalize the projection of his theme of unity. I hope to help broaden the study of Jackson's artistry by looking at his live performances, as they receive less scholarly analysis than his albums and his short films (cf. Fast 2012). Jackson's re-iterations of Wagnerian opera stagecraft and Disney's immersive park techniques locate him within a lengthy tradition of performance interaction and immersion primarily associated with white European and American men. Bringing the late 20th century, record-breaking black artist into conversation with Wagner and Disney reveals new insights into Jackson's style of synthesis: with the contribution of his "archive" (Neal 2012) of black music, performance, and history, Jackson ruptured and revitalized a white, Western European tradition of artwork and stagecraft. His contributions to the total work of art illustrate the blurring between "high art" and popular culture. And in contrast to Wagner's and Disney's embrace of German "national folk" and American nationalism, respectively, in their total works of art, Jackson added a globally inclusive and racially diverse message and method to the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, demonstrating that he is not only an inheritor in the genealogy of this concept but also an innovator of it.

A Total Work of Art

The total work of art and its conceptualization of integrated arts and unified impact has been a movement within art and aesthetics discourse for over two centuries. It is found in the work and approach of artists and architects such as Gustav Klimt and Frank Lloyd Wright. The total work of art is, however, most commonly associated with the 19th century German opera composer, conductor, theater director, and writer Richard Wagner. In his 1849 essay "Artwork of the Future," Wagner argued that the total work of art represents the re-unification of the separated "sister" arts: music, dance, and poetry. These elements had been isolated and reformulated into a "cheapened pseudo-synthesis" in the opera of the time (Smith 9). In the *Gesamtkunstwerk* that Wagner proposed, the arts are combined in the service of an over-arching narrative or message(s) to offer what he considered a "total" experience for the audience. In his writings and his opera

productions, Wagner strove to wed the fine arts to the “plastic” arts, and he would eventually include painting, architecture, and sculpture in his vision to provide the most complete and all-consuming experience for opera-goers. Wagner was inspired by the Ancient Greeks and their synthesis of the arts.

Wagner has earned a deservedly dark place in history for his offensively nationalist stances and anti-Semitic writings. However, contemporary art scholars and humanists stress that his development of the concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk* has contributed immeasurably to modernist discourses of art history, architectural history, and popular culture (see Koss 2010; Smith 2007). As an ancestral figure in the genealogy of this term, any substantive discussion of the total work of art must acknowledge Wagner’s application of it in opera (or, “music-drama” as he termed it) which enhanced the audience experience. Moreover, the concept has evolved over the centuries through other artists’ and innovators’ engagement with it. From the Bauhaus to Walt Disney’s California Institute of the Arts, the concept’s interdisciplinarity has come to guide artist communities and art school curricula around the world. Disney originally conceived of California Institute of the Arts (hereafter CalArts) in the 1950s as a “City of the Arts,” reminiscent of Wagner’s opera theater *Festspielhaus* (“Festival Theater”) in Bayreuth, and the German Bauhaus. The goal of Disney’s City of the Arts was to integrate the fine arts and foster a sense of community between art students and the public. CalArts continues to stress the benefits of what their website refers to as “cross-pollination” education with the hope that continual visual, aural, and kinesthetic engagement with the unbounded arts will produce an ever-evolving creative sensibility (and commercial viability). From CalArts to his parks to his 1940 film *Fantasia* with its own multi-sensory appeal for the “total” experience, Disney’s institutions and visions have for decades, as Smith argues, invoked the total work of art, demonstrating the concept’s primacy in popular entertainment (Smith 124-5). Disney parks strive to steep their visitors in a world of wonderment through a variety of high tech and low tech interactive tactics—from 4D exhibits such as Jackson’s *Captain EO* film to in-person costumed character encounters. Disney’s endeavors and methodology, in turn, greatly impacted Jackson. Not only was *Captain EO* produced and designed by Walt Disney Imagineering and screened at Disney parks in California, Florida, Tokyo, and Paris, but also Jackson spoke often of his love for all things Disney and collected Disneyana. Jackson’s Neverland Ranch was inspired by Disney’s amusement park environment. Even digital media have been influenced by the *Gesamtkunstwerk*: virtual worlds and online role-playing games such as Second Life and World of Warcraft epitomize the total work of art in the depths of interaction and immersion they offer users. Analysis of rock concerts—especially pop spectacle—also necessitates consideration of forms of immersion and interactivity that the total work of art entails. While this essay is not an exhaustive analysis of the total work of art in all its iterations, teasing out some of the connective threads be-

tween the work of Wagner, Disney, and Jackson through the *Gesamtkunstwerk* adds to an understanding of how the arts have been synthesized by prominent artists and innovators in order to produce a “total” experience.

“A Model of Artistic Interrelation”

The *Gesamtkunstwerk* represents “a model of artistic interrelation” according to art scholar Juliet Koss (xxii), and the same could be said for Jackson and his lifelong output. The totality of Jackson’s art conveyed some of his lifelong passions - the environment, civil rights, escapism, and charity – and the power and potential of all four to forge a sense of unity between diverse peoples. Jackson is certainly not the only artist who has merged art forms and worked across media, but he was the rare pop icon to do so with both enormous material resources (he became a co-owner of Sony music publishing which included the music of The Beatles and Elvis in its ownership) and a persistent, encompassing message over four decades. Jackson stated in his 1988 autobiography that he wanted his albums to reach “all races” as it was “my dream since I was a child to somehow unite people of the world through love and music” (252, 264). In a 1984 interview with *Ebony* magazine, Jackson was asked how he conveyed his ideas about racism outside of conventional public forums. He responded that he used both song and dance to communicate tolerance: “I try to write, put it in song. Put it in dance. Put it in my art to teach the world.” His message was heard on the radio and on albums, and seen on television and in film, as well as live performance. According to his costume designer Michael Bush, “Michael didn’t choose his wardrobe on a whim. Dressing him was a multilayered process of conveying a message, evoking an emotion, and stimulating a thought...His clothing was both reflection of and companion to his lyrics, music, short films, special effects, and tours; *it contributed to a greater whole*” (2, italics added). In order to express himself and convey his messages, Jackson was clearly compelled to use a variety of art forms.

A lyricist since his teens, Jackson inscribed the ideal of unity in songs over the decades. In the 1980 song “Can You Feel It?,” co-written with his brother Jackie, the lyrics “All the colors of the world should be / Lovin' each other wholeheartedly.... The blood inside of me is inside of you” asks the listener to recognize the common humanity that links people despite external, phenotypic variation. In his 2001 charity single “What More Can I Give?” the lyric “We Are One Global Family” again refers to the ideal of coming together in a (vaguely) universal kinship. The lyrics for “Heal the World,” the song Jackson told fans he was most proud of, called to improve the world “For You and For Me/ And the Entire Human Race”. In live performances of that song, Jackson led a multi-racial assortment of children and adults on the stage in linked hands, the children sometimes wearing a variety of international “costumes” as seen in his 1992

Dangerous concert in Bucharest, visually underscoring the ideal of unity. The ethos of unity was most visually evident in the famous morphing scene of the short film “Black or White,” with its close-up of women and men of varying racial and ethnic backgrounds moving to the music as they meld into one another.

Jackson included the lyrics to several of his songs (as well as pictures from his tours) in his 1992 book *Dancing the Dream*, demonstrating, as Willa Stillwater has pointed out, the interconnectivity of his approach (Stillwater, “Dancing with Michael’s Dream”). Jackson described the book as “a verbal expression of what I usually express through my music and my dance”. For instance, in the poem “Heaven Is Here” he celebrated the idea of a cosmic oneness: “You and I were never separate/It’s just an illusion/Wrought by the magical lens of/Perception” (45). A fluid connection between entities permeates this and other writings. Many of Jackson’s poems reflect his passion for nature, animals, and community, and the interdependence between all three. In an ostensibly autobiographical reflection in “Enough for Today,” he writes of a sense of communion between dancers, including dolphins who “dance in the sea” (31). Hearing of a dolphin that was killed, its dance eclipsed, Jackson expresses solidarity: “[A]t least I can pause in memory, as one dancer to another” (31). Cherishing animal-human bonds was a life-long sentiment for Jackson and evident in his song lyrics, illustrating the difficulty of isolating his expression to just one art form or medium. In “Earth Song” Jackson calls out what he sees as a global failure to see the communality between the earth, animals, and humans with the lyrics, “What about elephants / Have we lost their trust / What about crying whales / We’re ravaging the seas / What about forest trails / Burnt despite our pleas / What about the holy land / Torn apart by creed / What about the common man / Can’t we set him free / What about children dying / Can’t you hear them cry”. Jackson creates a call-and-response with the chorus of “What about us?” to signal humankind’s shared responsibility for these issues (Vogel 50).

Wagner had predicted that the future of art would entail the integration of its various forms; that the *Gesamtkunstwerk* would come to be so spectacularly embodied by a black artist who began his career on the Chitlin Circuit, however, reveals that the concept became re-iterated in ways that Wagner could not, or would not, have foreseen.¹ Indeed, much of Jackson’s work is a testament to his

¹ In fact, in contrast to the anti-Semitic Wagner, Jackson not only introduced internationalist sentiments in his work, but also incorporated strands of Judaica. For instance, the title for Jackson’s song and charitable foundation, “Heal the World,” borrows from the ancient Jewish value and social action of *Tikkun Olam*, which translates from Hebrew to “Repair/Heal the World”. His song “Little Susie” from the *HIStory* album samples the “Sunrise, Sunset” chords from the popular Broadway musical of Jewish *shtetl* life, “Fiddler on the Roof,” based on Sholem Aleichem’s stories. In 1995 Jackson faced accusations of anti-Semitism because he used the phrase “kike” in his lyrics for “They Don’t Care About Us” on his *HIStory* album (“Kick me/Kike me/Don’t you black or

ideal of integration: not just artistic, but racial and social. Reviewing Jackson's work over several decades, critic Armond White posits that Jackson's legacy is his effort to unify races and cultures. As White noted,

Raised in the Motown ethic of assimilate-and-accommodate, Michael Jackson means it when he preaches brotherhood in "Black or White." Integration and racial unity are indispensable tenets for his philosophy for showbiz success (partly because of the practical need for Black artists to work with white musicians, technicians, and business people, *partly because Jackson, no doubt, believes in it*. Jackson ain't just whistlin' Dixie, to use an old phrase... (19, emphasis added).

While the commercially-minded Jackson chose to collaborate with white, Latin American and Asian colleagues over the years in an increasingly global economy, the sheer repetition and reiteration of Jackson's lyrical message of unity over the decades strongly suggests a sincerity that transcended market concerns. After all, as one of the iconic figures of post-Civil Rights success, Jackson was shaped by the legacy of activists such as Martin Luther King, and he recalled the import of King's assassination in his autobiography. He promoted multi-racial biological and social kinship in the lyrics of numerous songs as in "Black or White" where he proclaims that to be his baby or his brother, "it don't matter if you're black or white". It wasn't until 1967, it should be noted, that the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that bans against interracial marriage were unconstitutional; at that point, nine year old Jackson was old enough to be a working professional, and likely old enough to be aware of such racial divisions, as well.

To be sure, Jackson rarely acknowledged the complex political and economic histories that specifically comprise global relations in his "one-world humanitarianism," and his Disney co-venture *Captain EO* can be interpreted as deploying an imperialist theme (see Williams 192). However, Jackson's lyrically conveyed stance on American race relations became more critical and nuanced over the years. Acknowledging historical obstacles and objections to the theme of racial unity he boldly referenced the Ku Klux Klan in 1991 with the lyric "I Ain't Scared of No Sheets!" in "Black or White". He also wrote of police brutality in 1996's "They Don't Care About Us" ("Black Male, Blackmail, Throw Your Brother In Jail") and a newscast heard in the co-written "Scream" refers to racialized police brutality: an 18 year old black male is wrongly identified as a robbery suspect and "brutally beaten to death by police". ("They Don't Care About Us" has become an increasingly popular protest song sung and referenced in Ferguson-inspired #BlackLivesMatter protests around the U.S.) Even when

white me"). Jackson protested his innocence, claiming that he was taking up the voice of the accused: "I am the voice of everyone...I am the Jew, I am the Black Man". Jackson's implementation of positively associated Jewish themes in his work complicates accusations of him as anti-Semitic.

Jackson performed lyrics written by other artists, such as Siedah Garrett and Glen Ballard's "Man in the Mirror" at the globally-broadcast 1988 Grammy awards show, he ad-libbed his own passionate calls for inclusiveness. In a gospel-infused moment toward the end of the song, with the Andrae Crouch Choir behind him, Jackson calls upon the audience: "Stand up, Brother!...Stand up, Sister!... Black man gotta make a change... the White man gotta make a change!... Stand up everybody!"

Jackson's song lyrics and published poetry and reflections underscore that writing was an inalienable—and an intentional—part of Jackson's art; however, writing was just one of the mediums in which Jackson was compelled to convey his message. The recent discovery of over one hundred paintings and sketches reveals the degree to which Jackson was dedicated to that area of the arts even as he continued to work in the recording studio, reinforcing that his artistic expression did not adhere to pre-determined boundaries. "His interest in art, in drawing it, was just another level of his creativity that went on over a long period of time," commented Brett-Livingstone Strong, the renowned painter, sculptor, and monument artist with whom Jackson formed a partnership in 1989 and continued to work with over the years (quoted in Duvernoy; *The Jackson-Strong Alliance*).

Over the years Jackson had shared his drawings with fans with entertainment icons such as Mickey Mouse and Charlie Chaplin being frequent subjects. However, back in 1975, as a guest on "Dinah!" the teenaged Jackson shared with TV audiences a drawing of a more serious nature: a portrait of black actress Cicely Tyson in her Emmy award-winning portrayal of Jane Pittman in *Miss Jane Pittman*. Based on the eponymous novel by Ernest Gaines, the story revolves around the former slave who narrates the struggles of post-slavery life in the American South. As the clip of the show on YouTube reveals, amid the corny jokes and canned enthusiasm from the show hosts, an earnest young Jackson offers this portrait up, citing Pittman a "great role;" evidently, Pittman's story made an impact on the young man.

Underscoring the unified approach of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the portrait he drew of Tyson as Pittman and, later in life, the portraits he sketched of Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr., connect up with Jackson's reading interests in black history and civil rights. Archived in Jackson's library at Neverland was Alex Haley's "The Autobiography of Malcolm X," Eli Reed's "Black in America," and "Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America" (Julien's Auctions). Jackson was known to be an avid reader, and as Joe Vogel relates, Jackson's library at Neverland contained more than twenty thousand titles on poetry, history, art, and psychology, including the works of Emerson, Wordsworth, Jung, and Freud (7-8). His reading matter clearly served his art; for instance, in the co-written song "HIStory" the listener is treated to a lyrical archive of diverse cultural events and historical moments such as the Gettysburg

address, the discovery of penicillin, Charles Lindbergh's famed flight, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the accomplishments of Thomas Edison and Muhammad Ali, and the activism of Rosa Parks. Snippets of speeches from Martin Luther King, John F. Kennedy, and Malcolm X are also sampled. These spatially and temporally disparate events converge in this audio assemblage of speeches, announcements, and roll calls, reflecting the sensibility of someone who was keenly aware of the importance of studying history to contextualize oneself. In this ensemble of dates and events he apparently also wanted to elevate the actions of black and sometimes marginalized figures to those of white mainstream figures; after all, this was the artist who, when he spoke of meeting the daughter of black songwriter Otis Blackwell in a speech in 2002, said "I met [Otis Blackwell's] daughter today, and I was honored. To me it was on the same level of meeting the Queen of England when I met her." This intersection of biography and history for Jackson in "HIStory" recalls sociologist C. Wright Mills' notion of the sociological imagination which refers to the "capacity to shift from one perspective to another....the urge to know the social and historical meaning of the individual in the society and the period in which he has his quality and his being" (7). The first two dates recited in the song, Lisha McDuff astutely points out, happen to be the death of Ludwig van Beethoven, and the birth of Motown founder Berry Gordy, Jr. (the latter a profound influence in Jackson's life), signaling, she suggests, the "shift between written and recorded music" (McDuff, "Important Dates in HIStory"). In the song, Jackson equalizes the value of those diverse figures' contributions.²

The shared subject matter in drawing and reading reflects Jackson's lifelong concern with issues of racial justice that, in a similarly interlocking fashion, are also invoked in his music. One of Jackson's drawings that Livinstone Strong shared with the *LA Weekly* was titled "White House Doors" — a set of doors at the White House that Jackson had likely encountered on his visit there to President Reagan in 1984. Yet Jackson inscribed a quote above the doors that is attributed to former President John Adams and is actually carved above the fireplace in the State Dining Room of the White House, under President Roosevelt's order. Adam had bestowed a blessing on the White House in which he declared, "May none but honest and wise Men ever rule under this roof" (Jackson added "and women" in his rendering in a nod to gender equality). Jackson's drawing of the White House doors, with his insertion of Adams' quote from another part of the White House, appears to illustrate his hope for institutional justice emanating from the highest levels of government.³

² As McDuff astutely observes, "I think Jackson could be advocating that as we historicize great music in the future, we don't fall into the trap of preferencing 'dead white men'" (<https://dancingwiththeelephant.wordpress.com/2014/05/22/important-dates-in-history/>).

³ See the supplements page at <http://liminalities.net/11-5/mj.html> for links.

While his poetry and painting skills may not match the professional standards of his choreography, dance, music composition and vocal talents, Jackson used an impressive array of art forms to express his multifaceted message. Jackson's interdisciplinarity also operated at multiple scales: in addition to linking different art forms, he took an inclusive approach *within* each form, tacking between diverse genres and styles (see Fast 287-8). Such juxtapositions further helped Jackson transcend socio-historically constructed divides. For instance, on the track of the song "HIStory," he sampled speeches of such oppositional socio-political figures as Malcolm X and Princess Elizabeth of England—one an anti-establishment figure in the American context and the other the very epitome of the establishment in the British national context. For "Will You Be There," he mixed gospel with classical music, starting the song with a portion of Beethoven's "Ode to Joy". In "Little Susie" on the *HIStory* album, Jackson included *Pie Jesu* from Maurice Durufle's "Requiem Op. 9." His integration of classical music with pop and R&B added complexity to pop conventions that many music critics of the time derided, although, as Joe Vogel perceptively claims, other artists such as the Beatles were afforded experimentation and evolution in music style and composition (14). Despite his grounding in soul, R&B, and pop, Jackson was no stranger to the influence of classical music, thus his musical composition comprised an assemblage of musical influences. Jackson was known to be an avid listener of classical music from childhood to death, and Tchaikovsky and Debussy were heard on the grounds of his Neverland Ranch. As Daniel Sweeney wrote of the *HIStory* album for the Acoustic Sciences Corporation in 1995, "HIStory" brings together such renowned studio musicians and production talents as Slash, Steve Porcaro, Jimmy Jam, Nile Rodgers, plus a full sixty piece symphony orchestra, several choirs including the Andrae Crouch Singers, star vocalists such as sister Janet Jackson and Boys II Men, and the arrangements of Quincy Jones and Jeremy Lubbock. Indeed, the sheer richness of the instrumental and vocal scoring is probably unprecedented in the entire realm of popular recording." The *Gesamtkunstwerk* represents synthesis and the combination of different elements that, through interaction, result in a newly complex entity, and Jackson's incorporation of a wide array of genres exemplifies that.

From "National Folk" to "We Are the World"

Wagner, Disney, and Jackson all acquired iconic status in their respective specializations of the arts and entertainment, and they share certain similarities: they developed spaces of performance and presentation (Bayreuth's opera theater *Festspielhaus* ("Festival Theater"), Disneyland, and Neverland, respectively), and they all worked to bridge the spectator and spectacle divide. Yet Jackson differed from Wagner and Disney in some important ways. Emerging partly from the Western European influence of Romanticism, the total work of art

promised emancipatory potential through its “longing for unity amidst fragmentation, for collectivity amidst alienation” (Smith 8). The operas performed at Wagner’s opera theater *Festspielhaus* in Bayreuth also came to be known for hailing not just humanity at large, but, as Smith writes, “one national folk as supreme” (23). Bayreuth attracted visitors from all over the world, including Mark Twain and Pyotr Tchaikovsky, the composer Jackson credited with influencing his *Thriller* album strategy. Wagner built the *Festspielhaus* to stage the Ring cycle, a four opera series which drew from Norse and German mythology. In this way, Bayreuth and Disneyland promoted an ethos of exclusivity—romantic visions of a white world—unsurprising given their founders’ respective eras and status.

While Wagner interpreted the integration of the arts as a template for German national unity (and this idea would be adopted and developed by the Nazi party a century later), Jackson appropriated the emancipatory potential of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* in a very different spirit. The post-civil rights music icon would fuse his arts to champion the ideal of a *global* citizenry. He achieved groundbreaking success in the American music industry in the 1970s and 1980s, and although he was seen as a symbol of the American dream, his world tours in a globalizing political and cultural economy apparently provided him a broader perspective than a national one. “I just couldn’t see myself not being touched by the things I have seen, like that village in China, and the things I have seen in Africa and Russia and Germany and Israel” (Boteach 138). Besides the lyrics of numerous songs he wrote and co-wrote that emphasized a global oneness, and the array of musical genres he employed that synthesized different socio-historical traditions, this transnational perspective was also evident in his choreography and staging. In his short film “Black or White,” he dances among Thai, Native American, West African, South Asian, and Russian dancers. He also repeatedly included indigenous people in his short films whose political organization had existed outside the construct of the modern nation-state. In “Earth Song” we see visual imagery of the upheaval and environmental concerns of native communities. Those at the socio-legal margins of society were also granted visibility in his short films. As Jackson said of filming with real-life Los Angeles gang members for “Beat It,” “I came to realize that the whole thing about being bad and tough is that it’s done for recognition. All along these guys had wanted to be seen and respected, and now we were going to put them on TV. They *loved* it. ‘Hey look at me, I’m somebody!’” (204). The totality of Jackson’s work strongly gestures towards a spirit of universality not typically seen and heard in the work of other 1980s and 1990s pop stars. This sweeping universality, while arguably also employing a dynamic of essentialism and erasure, nevertheless rejuvenated Wagner’s and Disney’s *Gesamtkunstwerk* with an international and inclusive perspective.

As their names suggest, Disneyland and Neverland represented all-encompassing universes to their creators. Disneyland exemplified the “total

world” that reconciled Walt Disney’s idea of the past and the future, the local and the global (e.g. Frontierland and Tomorrowland, Main Street, U.S.A. and Adventureland) (King 121), and in its artificiality was a highly exclusionary space, devoid of many peoples and problems that its audience members encountered outside the park gates. Disneyland would hail a largely white American national identity, designed as it was during the Cold War in 1955 with a mid-West sensibility (Smith 121); into the 1960s civil rights leaders exhorted park officials to hire black people. The plaque in Disneyland’s Town Square, unveiled on July 17, 1955, read, “Disneyland is dedicated to the ideals, the dreams, and the hard facts that have created America...with the hope that it will be a source of joy and inspiration to all the world.” After the U.S.’s victory of World War II and amid its Cold War with Russia, as old empires were crumbling and new ones were forming, Disney used the space of escapism and role-playing to promote American primacy. As King points out, the Disney parks were “perfect museums” of prevailing American sentiments, “as well as American beliefs about other cultures” (King 129). Observing footage of the opening of Disneyland in 1955, the crowds appear to be mostly white, with an “all-white Dixieland jazz band” among the performers (Pettit 5). Native Americans in the parade are portrayed by members of a Boy Scouts troupe from Orange County, as opposed to an indigenous organization. Disneyland, particularly in its initial years, offered token and essentializing representations of Native Americans, Africans and African Americans, Asians and other ethnic groups in rides such as Jungle Cruise and Enchanted Tiki Room which trade in Orientalist, colonialist fantasies. Even today, the ride Splash Mountain continues to use a storyline and music from Disney’s *Song of the South*—a film infamous for its plantation nostalgia among former black slaves and Uncle Remus character, and which Disney Enterprises has chosen not to release on home video in the U.S.. When Walt Disney released the film in 1946, he was aware it was a risky race relations film (Gabler 434-5), but chose to go ahead with it regardless, and its premiere was greeted with protests from NAACP. Incidentally, Jackson’s musical history with Disney extended back to 1969 when the Jackson Five covered “Zip A Dee Doo Dah” from “Song of the South” for their Motown album *Diana Ross Presents the Jackson 5*. *Song of the South*’s racism did not, however, stop Motown from recording the song nor, later, did it stop Jackson from collecting Disneyana. In fact, according to reporter Bob Thomas, Jackson would seek out Disney’s former nurse in order to learn more about the innovator (quoted in Thomas).

It is extremely likely that in his research about Disney—and through his Hollywood cohorts—Jackson learned of Disney’s virulently anti-union stance, as well as his views on race and Jews.⁴ Disney became noted for his jingoism

⁴ As Disney’s biographer Neal Gabler notes, Disney was for years disliked by many people and progressives in Hollywood. His relations with Jews were chequered; despite his donations to Jewish organizations and friendships with Jewish employees, he was

under McCarthyism, evident from his House Un-American Activities Committee testimonies in which the studio head publicly informed on his Hollywood colleagues for their supposedly Communist sentiments, blacklisted studio members, passed names to the FBI, and became an active member in the reactionary Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals (Gabler 454). In contrast, Jackson expressed an inclusive, “citizen of the world” ideal up into his last years. When speaking in New York in 2002 and asked by a Fox News reporter how he felt about the 9/11 attacks that had happened there, Jackson quickly and emphatically answered that he’d “hate it” if such attacks happened *anywhere*, making it clear that his compassion was not confined solely to Americans (“Michael Jackson Speaks Against Tommy Mottola and Sony”). Nevertheless, among the notes he wrote to himself shortly before he died in 2009, Jackson compiled a list of “great innovators” and in it he included Walt Disney (Greenburg 217); clearly, Jackson admired many of Disney’s ventures as well as his showmanship, and he built upon selected elements of Disney’s total work of art to develop his own, more inclusive vision.

Jackson’s global anthems such as “Heal the World” and “We Are the World” signal a departure from the American exceptionalism of the Disney parks and Wagnerian opera’s intense German nationalism in considering the trajectory of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Wagner and Disney worked in a Western European art tradition that allowed them to reinforce their respective imaginings of a largely mono-racial, mono-cultural world. Both Wagner and Disney pursued the goal of spectacling national unity (German and American, respectively) through the adaptation and interpretation of various folk stories and mythology (Smith 119). Wagner wanted his audience to return, through immersion, to their roots; Teutonic mythology inspired operas such as “The Ring”. Jackson’s work showed appreciation for his ancestral roots (see Martin 288); however, he also wanted to move people *beyond* their roots, through diverse interactions. Jackson’s dance ensemble for Captain EO is racially mixed, as it is in “Beat It,” “Black or White,” and “Smooth Criminal”. Jackson didn’t only cast diversity for onscreen representation; he also hoped to see it reciprocated in audience participation. In describing the audiences for the Victory Tour, Jackson recounted, “Everybody is swaying, their hands are up, and they’re all singing... They love it and it’s so beautiful-all the races of people are together doing this... Those are great moments” (244). As Michael Eric Dyson noted, “Even though rooted in black experience, [Jackson] felt it would be a crime to limit his music to one race, sex, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation or nationality. Michael’s art transcended every way that human beings have thought of to separate them-

affiliated with the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals, a reactionary and “red-baiting” organization that even the FBI suspected was also anti-Semitic (Gabler 457-8).

selves, and then healed those divisions, at least at the instant that we all shared the music" (Dyson 84).

Jackson disrupted the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*'s cultural and racial assumptions of Anglo-European purity by offering a more contingent worldview. Disney stories often drew from "epic" battles of good and evil (echoed in "Captain EO") yet many facets of Jackson's work challenged the white racial logic of Wagnerian operas and Disney films and parks. Disney tales do not as a rule feature interracial unions; even in Disneyland's renowned ride "It's a Small World," each nation and cultural group are displayed in a sequential and separable order as they sing the same song. However, in the staging for "Black or White" Jackson, a black man, dances with East and Southeast Asian and Native American women, and in later tours, Jackson would perform with a white female bassist, and a racially diverse group of backup singers and dancers. Some of the "hard facts that have created America" that Disney excluded are tackled head on by Jackson in his representations of racialized police brutality and incarceration in the official prison version of "They Don't Care About Us," as well as representations of indigenous knowledge and suffering in his drawings, lyrics and short films. He displayed alienation and angst in the short film "Scream" with his sister Janet. In "Money" he laments the lure of greed and proclaims, "If you want it / Earn it with dignity," proceeding to quietly name-check various American "robber barons" and magnates over the past century whose extreme wealth lay in dubious origins as the fan collective The MJAP insightfully pointed out in their 2012 video. Indeed, among some of the "hard facts that have created America" are the pioneering American eugenics and social engineering research that the Nazis would later credit as inspiring their own ethnic cleansing program; this research was funded by the families of some of those industrialists that Jackson named (such as Carnegie and Rockefeller) (Black 31, 93-95, 369-370; The MJAP 2012). Jackson's *Gesamtkunstwerk* did not shy away from revealing the legacy of American "facts" such as white supremacy, settler colonialism, police brutality, and corporate corruption.

Despite his ideals about unity, Jackson wasn't naïve about lingering boundaries. According to his sister La Toya, around 1984, Jackson was attacked in a shop in Alabama (his mother's home state), the owner kicking and calling him a nigger for allegedly stealing a candy bar; after the Jacksons filed a lawsuit, the man threatened to kill Jackson (144-5). Years earlier, in 1971, also in Alabama, Jackson and his brothers were met with a hostile driver who, according to brother Jermaine, left some Ku Klux Klan paraphernalia "clearly intended" for their eyes in the car's trunk with their luggage (133). As Jackson told an interviewer about the panther dance in "Black or White," it was his way of expressing frustration "about injustice and prejudice and racism and bigotry and within the dance I became upset and let go" (quoted in Vena). Jackson seemed to know that unity isn't necessarily the same thing as equality; when people would

“come together” as he noted of his concerts, they often did so from varying socio-economic statuses, political histories, and racial backgrounds. That moment of communion doesn’t dispel the lived differences between people. As Elizabeth Chin comments on his panther dance in “Black or White,”

The appearance of the panther comes just when the idea that we are all getting along is exposed as a production number, and the morphing is revealed to be merely technological tricks. Colorblindness, too, is being called out as a technology used by society to achieve “equality” or “democracy”. The whole message is that this “I don’t see color” notion is a sham—and the real world is out there, outside that door that leads into the street. And out there on the street is all that real stuff that we simply cannot or will not talk about. Stuff like racism and sex and violence (Chin 66).

As a black man who achieved unprecedented success in an industry with a long history of appropriating black talent, Jackson was well positioned to appreciate nuances of socially constructed divides and artistic boundaries. “The genius of Motown’s strategy,” writes David Brackett, “was to address multiple constituencies in ways that felt convincing even when the music was heard from varying social perspectives” (170). The multiracial ensemble dancing of “Beat It” and “Black or White” was prescriptive rather than descriptive in a sense. The *Gesamtkunstwerk* thus highlights that boundaries within the arts are dynamic, not fixed, and Jackson’s work further reflects that fluidity. As musicologist Lisha McDuff explains, [T]he white rap section in “Black or White” uses black hip hop, but runs it through a white perspective, Bill Bottrell’s feel good lyrics and performance. The previous section, “I am tired of this devil” uses white hard rock and heavy metal but runs it through a black perspective and the frustration of racial injustice. [Jackson] is deliberately confusing musical codes here, attempting to integrate all these perspectives into a single view in a very trans-ethnic way (the way he uses his body). He is autonomously choosing the perspectives he wishes to use, ingeniously expressing the Black or White theme in the song” (McDuff, “I’d Rather Hear Both Sides of the Tale”). Jackson’s life-long interest in black history and Civil Rights issues expressed across mediums underscore that Jackson was well aware of the resilience of boundaries and borders despite his efforts to cross and thus blur or even diminish them.

“With a Friend to Call My Own, I’ll Never Be Alone....”

The relevance and resonance of the total work of art in relation to Jackson was also confirmed in my interviews with photographer Todd Gray. As Jackson’s photographer, Gray observed that Jackson chose to model his image partly on that of Mickey Mouse, in that Mickey Mouse was generally perceived as universally beloved and threatening to none. Before, and later alongside, his claims of affiliation with Peter Pan, Jackson seemed to feel real affinity for Mickey

Mouse. In addition to the animated mouse being a favorite subject of Jackson's sketches, throughout his life Jackson was seen wearing Mickey Mouse-themed clothing (first as a child at Motown and later in adult years in rehearsal footage for *Thriller* and photos in his autobiography *Moonwalk*), and posing with Mickey characters at Disney theme parks.⁵

Walt Disney claimed that Mickey Mouse won over everyone from King George and Queen Mary of England to the "natives" of the "savage South Sea Islands," and bragged that Mickey was "the one matter upon which the Chinese and the Japanese can agree," signaling the mouse's own capacity for crossover appeal (Thorpe and Smith 138). Disney loved children and animals, and he described this mouse as a "happy little fellow" (Smith 118) who is in certain ways also childlike. At the Disney parks, the costumed Mickey character greets park visitors, and has ushered generations of people into the Disney universe and experience. Co-creating the cartoon character for film with Ub Iwerks in the late 1920s, Walt Disney was pleased to actually supply Mickey's film voice for nearly the first twenty years. Disney's biographer Neal Gabler points out that Mickey served as Disney's alter-ego, an adventurous creature with whom the showman shared a near obsessive kinship. "Whether he is turning an auto into an airplane or a cow into a xylophone, Mickey...like Walt Disney himself, is always in the process of reimagining reality, and this is his primal, vicarious connection to the audience—the source of his power. He sees and hears things others don't. He makes the world his" (Gabler 155). Mickey's transformative power of the imagination and trickster-like quality apparently struck a chord with Jackson.

Unlike the Peter Pan of Jackson lore, Mickey Mouse is an animal, and not the first rodent with whom Jackson was affiliated, a rat named Ben being the first. "Ben" was the Golden Globe winning and Oscar-nominated 1972 single for the film of the same name that many have noted for Jackson's impassioned performance. In a song not written by Jackson but performed with his trademark earnest conviction, a pre-teen Jackson pledges his love to a rat, pleading for the listener to understand his identification with the rodent. The lyrics mark the solidarity between the boy and the rat: "Ben, the two of us need look no more/We both found what we were looking for/With a friend to call my own/I'll never be alone." It seemed a natural move for Jackson the performer and the individual to be able to later express love for a mouse, also a member of the rodent order—the human-animal distinction another boundary that Jackson blithely disrupted. His brother Jermaine recalls that mice were cherished pets of young Michael's back in Gary, Indiana: as a little boy, Michael nurtured a mouse only to be caught by his father Joseph, and beaten for his transgression (32). Jackson's fondness for Disney's mouse—anthropomorphized at Disney parks—was therefore not very surprising.

⁵ See the supplements page at <http://liminalities.net/11-5/mj.html> for link to image.

Gray visited Disneyland with Jackson in 1980, and over time observed how Disney's ideas about the power of performance interaction took root in Jackson. Gray was hired to photograph Jackson and his brothers back in 1974, and by 1979 he was hired by Jackson to be his official photographer for professional and personal events until 1983. Currently an art professor whose own multimedia work has appeared at museums and galleries around the world with studios in Los Angeles and Ghana, Gray earned both his BFA and MFA at Disney's CalArts. He was encouraged by famed animation professor Jules Engel (who worked on Disney's *Fantasia*) to study different art forms (such as dance) as a way to become a more "complete" artist, in line with the school's promise of "soft edges" between the different arts.

As a black man photographing members of the music and entertainment industries in the 1970s and 1980s, Gray was particularly attuned to how Jackson navigated social expectations and cultural biases in his presentation style and persona. In 2012 Gray invited me to his studio in Inglewood, Los Angeles, to show me CD ROMs he had created of multi-media images of Jackson, some of which had been the subject of his MA thesis at CalArts. Gray accompanied and photographed Jackson for his 1980 performance for Disneyland's 25th anniversary TV special, where Jackson sang a Disney tune and *The Wiz*'s "Ease on Down the Road" while dancing with Mickey Mouse and other Disney characters at the park. Gray recalled that when reviewing photographic proofs with Jackson, he preferred the boyish pictures of himself over the more "manly" ones that his management preferred. Of his observations of working with Jackson in the early 1980s, Gray told me, "Michael didn't want to be the "bad" Negro, like Sly Stone; Michael wanted to be the "good" Negro, to *be* Mickey, to be playful and non-threatening...and lucrative" (Interview with author, 2/12/2012).⁶

Gray pinpoints characteristics that would become part of Jackson's trademark in the 1980s particularly to a white public: a clean-cut figure with commercial ambition. While Jackson's performance persona would become more complicated and mature over the years, the Mickey Mouse influence that Gray noticed was evident in the soft-spoken, family-friendly identity Jackson projected, particularly in his earlier adult career when he was also a practicing Jehovah's Witness. The Disney parks offered visitors "everyday life as an art form, with entertainment, fantasy, play-acting, role-playing" (King 127) for Jackson as much as for the audience. Gray described Mickey as an offstage, off-camera alter ego that Jackson could access, unsurprising given the pop star convention

⁶ Incidentally, a few years later Jackson would purchase the rights to Stone's music, and acknowledged The Jacksons' debt to their music in his autobiography.



Figure 1. Michael Jackson with Mickey Mouse at Disneyland in 1980.
Photo by Todd Gray; used with permission.

of creating alter egos to expand the imagined potential for the performer (e.g. David Bowie's Ziggy Stardust, Beyonce's Sasha Fierce). At the height of his crossover fame, during the *Thriller* years, Jackson contrasted his "soul man" croonings with photos of himself in Mickey Mouse clothing and posing with the character. Jackson's association with Mickey Mouse offered Jackson a safe visual retreat from any stances that could be perceived as aggressive by white audiences and executives in an entertainment industry whose film and television divisions had historically offered threatening representations of black masculinity; Mark Anthony Neal points out that Jackson knew that he'd have to appear "non-threatening" to gain white parental approval in his bid for commercial

domination across age groups (Neal, “After the Dance: Conversations on Michael Jackson's Black America”). Jackson and his brothers had, after all, been cautioned in the 1970s by Motown to refrain from stating in interviews any affiliation with the Black Power movement, and Jackson at times tried hard to remain non-threatening. Blaxploitation films, popular in the pre-Thriller years, and marginal representation in mainstream film and television had limited the range of black masculinity in American motion picture entertainment. Yet in his post-*Bad* album era, after Jackson had started to musically express more indignation with prevailing socio-political forces, he continued to be photographed posing with Mickey Mouse (even merging their personas), repeatedly offering a multidimensional image of himself and, more broadly, black masculinity.⁷

Gray's observation about Jackson and Mickey Mouse was quite prescient; a few years after Gray worked with him, Jackson attempted to officially tether his image to Disney's brand ambassador for his 1988 *Moonwalker* film. According to entertainment writer Jim Hill, in July 2013, a set of twelve storyboards that Jackson had commissioned of himself and Mickey Mouse dancing together came up for auction at the Profiles in History animation art auction. The storyboards were designed by a former Disney artist that Jackson had hired to sketch Jackson's planned segment with Mickey Mouse in the first combined live-action footage and animation of its kind for the mouse for what was at the time Jackson's upcoming film, *Moonwalker*, on the heels of his film for Disney, *Captain EO*. In the storyboards, a toy Mickey Mouse comes to life at Jackson's “magical touch” with the two dancing their way through an enchanted land until Mickey is pursued by “giant dinosaur-like musical notes [that] threaten to eat the world's most famous mouse” (quoted in Hill)⁸. Mickey Mouse is (of course) saved from the killer notes by the King of Pop. Disney's CEO at the time, Michael Eisner, declined this unprecedented deal, but Jackson's affinity for Mickey Mouse—and the expression of a multi-faceted masculinity—never left him.

Immersive Performance

From his televisual imagery to his concerts, Jackson—arguably more than any other performer of his time—demonstrated the imperative of interdisciplinarity in the visual and aural presentation of popular music, summoning as he did the full resources of science and engineering as well as the fine arts to deliver a highly affective experience. The total work of art, as Smith reminds us, “has always been connected to mass culture and technological innovation” (116). Even technology entrepreneurs recognize the interdisciplinary imperative; when Steve

⁷ See supplements page for links to images.

⁸ See supplements page for link to website.

Jobs introduced Apple's iPad, he commented, "[T]echnology alone is not enough—it's technology married with liberal arts, married with the humanities, that yields the results that make our hearts sing."

Captain EO was a 4D film with in-theater effects such as smoke and lasers to enhance the experience. It was also presented in 5.1 surround sound which Jackson's sound designer and mixer worked with Disney to develop specifically for *Captain EO*. "Much of the equipment that would be required didn't yet exist, so Disney's Imagineers designed a proprietary system from scratch" (Greenburg 114). Jackson and his team were essentially part of Disney's "Imagineer" team, which harnesses production, creative development, engineering, architecture, show writing and special effects. Jackson's team also brought in John Napier, a theatrical costume and set designer to work with the Imagineers to "incorporate real smoke, laser beams, and fiber optic stars that descended from the ceiling"—even raising the ceiling of the Disney theater by five feet, according to Rusty Lemorande, the writer-producer of *EO* (Greenburg 115). The merging of architecture and set design with, for instance, singing, is exactly what Wagner had in mind regarding the future of artwork and exemplified in the *Gesamtkunstwerk*; we see how these elements come together in the totality of Jackson's work, connected as it is to Disney Imagineering. Jackson's other short films also featured the most cutting edge technology at the time. The computer animation software used for "Black or White" was created by Pacific Data Images and was at the time of viewing the most sophisticated and extensive use of computer animation in music videos. Sometimes Jackson's task was, similar to Disney's with his animators, to oversee and inspire his team in the design process. When Jackson wanted to adapt the famous, forty-five degree anti-gravity lean that he performed in his short film "Smooth Criminal" to the stage for his concerts, he turned to his costume designers, Dennis Tompkins and Michael Bush. Tompkins used his engineering and artistic skills to design a special pair of boots that would allow him to perform the same feat for live audiences around the world. Jackson "surprised us [Bush and Tompkins] with a forward-thinking decree: This needs to be patented" (Bush 160). The "anti-gravity illusion" as Patent #5,255,452 is described (Bush 157, 161), was acquired in 1993 and confirms Jackson's inventive streak similar to Wagner's and Disney's.

While many artists work in multiple media and across art forms, Jackson, as an influential and commercially successful pop artist, operated on a rare scale in terms of material resources. The 1987-88 world tour of *Bad* epitomized the mass consumption and high production values of that musical era, which Jackson brought into the 1990s with his *Dangerous* tour as well. The *Bad* World Tour required three cargo planes to stage the production at all the concert stops, and "the stage set used 700 lights, 100 speakers, forty lasers, three mirrors, and two 24-by-18 foot screens" with nearly 150 support staff (Bush 162). For the "Live in Bucharest" film of the *Dangerous* World Tour, liner notes state that "The incredi-

ble staging took nearly 3 days to set up and 20 trucks of equipment were shipped between countries on cargo planes". Onstage Jackson displayed not just his love of magic and illusions but the capability of what Jason King calls Jackson's "sci-fi techno-megaspectacle" (King 191). On the *Dangerous* World Tour, for instance, Jackson ended his show not with a bow, but by flying out of the stadium on a jetpack (he switched with a stunt double at the last moment). His shimmery military jackets and glittery gloves combined with staging and special effects also enhanced the theatricality of his live performances—a theatricality that had been evident in Alice Cooper and Led Zeppelin rock concerts of the 1970s with special effects but clearly taken to an extreme by Jackson. It was on the Jacksons' 1984 *Victory* tour where Jackson, music journalist Steve Knopper notes, first

turned tricks into art. The band opened every show with a brightly lit, Star Wars-style laser sword fight. Jackson referred to the light show as "my laser heaven" and sweated every detail. 'He never missed anything,' recalls Steve Jander, a retired lighting designer who worked on the tour. 'Out of thousands of lights, if one light was out, he would notice it'" (quoted in Knopper).

Jackson's devotion to the power of magic was no simple endeavor. According to his dresser and costume designer Michael Bush, the design of the *Thriller* jacket that Jackson wanted to light up on stage required three engineers to wire it. Bush recalls that it also took "one computer tech to keep it all working with a remote control, because there was no way Michael would touch his jacket to turn it on. That's not magic, that's flipping a switch...the final coat weighed seventeen pounds and had to include removable lining that was also flameproof" (76). Magic was indeed a crucial part of Jackson's stagecraft: David Copperfield and Doug Henning both served as consultants for various tours. For his final *This Is It* concert, he planned to use 3D images on screen behind as he performed on stage. "It was a groundbreaking effort," said Vince Pace, whose company provided cameras for the shoot, a 3D system he created with filmmaker James Cameron... Four sets were constructed for Jackson's production, including a cemetery recalling his 1983 'Thriller' video... the audience would have felt like they were visiting the 'Thriller' experience, like they were there," Pace said (quoted in Germain and Nakashima, *Billboard*). Just as Walt Disney showcased the advancements of American science and power at park exhibits (such as the TWA Moonliner, a rocket built by a Disney Imagineer and a German rocket scientist) during the Cold War, decades later Jackson would represent American innovation and consumer capitalism at its close; he did so, however, in the service of a more cosmopolitan sentiment.

Techniques of Participatory Pop

Jackson extended the total work of art by applying participatory techniques used by Wagner and Disney to his live performances. While Jackson's work and performance style is typically considered in the context of artists such as Diana Ross, James Brown, Jackie Wilson and Fred Astaire, in this essay, I argue for the inclusion of the "King of Pop" in also considering contemporary expressions and expansions of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. It was Wagner who popularized the theatrical practice of darkening the house lights so that the audience was compelled to direct their gaze to the lit stage, rendering a more affectively totalizing opera experience (Smith 30-1). Over a century later, Jackson would wear a glittery glove, white or sparkly socks, a glittery jacket, and at times white tape on his fingers to draw focused attention to his hand and foot movements. Jackson's sparkly glove with which he performed on stage has become iconic of the performer. His use of them is part of his stagecraft, and, along with his extensive use of stage lighting, another link to the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Jackson explained, "I love to accent movement. The eye goes to where the white is, you know, the glove. And the feet, if you're dancing, you can put an exclamation point on your movement if it has a bit of light on it. So I wore the white socks" ("The Once and Future King"). Michael Bush told Reuters that "as the stadiums got bigger, Jackson's pants got shorter and shorter, the better to see his rhinestone socks" (quoted in Reaney). Bush told another interviewer, "Michael's mentality was, 'I am going to sing the beat and you have to help me *show* the beat'" (quoted in Foreman, italics added), illustrating the multi-modality of his performance. For the 1988 Bad Tour, Jackson's Thriller jacket had 11,000 light bulbs attached to it that would light up and, as Bush described it, "pulse to the beat of the song" (quoted in Raymundo, *Rolling Stone*). While contemporary pop artists are indebted to Wagner's development of light design, in focusing audience attention by uniquely *becoming* the light in this way, Jackson demonstrates his role of further innovating Wagner's participatory techniques.

The visualization of sound was also a famous approach of Disney's. Disney's renowned 1940 animation film, "Fantasia" exemplified "total performance" in its multi-sensory experience of what Disney referred to as "visualized music," meaning, as he explained, "music you can see and pictures you can hear". Similarly, Jackson would write years later in his autobiography of "Thriller," "I was determined to present this music as visually as possible" (200). A landmark film, "Fantasia" envisioned the evocative music of Bach, Tchaikovsky, Stravinsky, and Beethoven through such whimsical images as dancing flowers, mushrooms and a magical Mickey Mouse, the music and the visuals intended by Disney to fully complement one another. To heighten the immersive experience further, Disney developed "Fantasound," a stereo sound system with which he equipped theaters (Smith 119). Disney wanted the film to be exhibited on wide screens, in

3-D, and even wished to utilize all the theater walls for additional screen projections, but was unsuccessful. His hope for flowery perfume to be sprayed in the movie theaters in order to intensify the effect of the flower ballet in “The Nutcracker Suite” for the audience also did not materialize, but underscores his desire to thoroughly embed and engage the audience at all levels, marking another link to Wagner’s “participatory” performance.

Wagner blurred boundaries in other ways that would impact pop performers’ style of presentation and performance. In contrast to the 1870s convention of opera houses with box seats and balconies that encouraged audience socializing during performances, Wagner decided to stage his operas in an auditorium with arena-style seating. This minimized the opportunity for audience chit chat and helped evoke a sense of “reciprocity” between the audience and the artists (Koss 25). Juliet Koss notes that “the auditorium’s architecture would encourage direct visual, acoustic, and emotional absorption, providing equal access to the work of art—a notion of aesthetic immediacy in keeping with Wagner’s idea of spectatorship as active and participatory” (29). The arena-style stadiums in which rock groups and contemporary solo artists perform benefit from this interactive style of architecture.

Wagnerian opera’s extensive tradition of expressiveness and flourish renders it a not inappropriate context for understanding Jackson’s spectacular live performances with their evocative showmanship and illusions. For his performance of “Earth Song,” on the HIStory World Tour, Jackson posed in front of a tank, à la “Tank Man” in Tiananmen Square, to protest war and destruction—high drama worthy of any opera, and a political statement not often found in pop concerts. As can be seen in YouTube footage of that performance in South Korea, Jackson elicited tears from fans whose own country had experienced a divisive war. Jackson’s various tours also featured him being “toasted” wherein he would be ejected off a platform onto the stage (like bread from a toaster) and hold his pose for three minutes to a growing roar from fans, an example of how Jackson even silently interacted with his audience, playing off of thousands of peoples’ response to his charismatic aura in an enclosed space of heightened ecstasy and effervescence.

The *Gesamtkunstwerk* has been criticized by the Frankfurt School as a manipulative form of spectacle that can spellbind the public into an uncritical passivity (Adorno 2009; Horkheimer and Adorno 2002). Footage of Jackson’s concerts show thousands of rapturous fans singing, chanting and swaying in unison as well as screaming, fainting and, in the case of one fan, climbing onto the crane Jackson was singing from. However, and especially since Jackson’s death, away from the stage the transnational, multi-racial, and multi-generational Jackson fandom is a diverse group whose members actively discuss and discern between the contents of his canon, at times critical of one another, and of Jackson, too. Many fans distinguish their interest in Jackson by album, by look, or life events,

and express their agency through fan vids and fan art. Over the years of researching Jackson's iconicity I've talked to fans of different national and racial backgrounds who are artists and scientists, lawyers and doctors, academics and military, conservative, progressive, high income, low income, religious and atheist. Although many self-described fans share a high regard for his talents – and a general suspicion for mainstream media reportage of Jackson – they also vigorously debate with one another regarding the artist's intentions with his music as well as his business and personal decisions. Jackson's fans are a heterogeneous community who strongly challenge the Frankfurt School's assumptions.

“You and I Were Never Separate...”

Gray's observation about Jackson as Mickey Mouse and Jackson's own musical and business relationship to Disney over the years invites us to think through other links between Jackson and Mickey Mouse; specifically, how Disney parks and Jackson used low tech forms of immersion. At Disney theme parks, “cast members” (who in Disney terminology wear “costumes,” not uniforms) must maintain the total performance onstage at all times (Smith 127). Costumed Disney characters approach “audience members,” or visitors, in meet and greets, posing for photos and friendly exchanges, including hugs, drawing visitors into the “magic” of Disneyland through such interaction. This kind of in-person interactive approach, while low-tech, can be highly effective and engulfing. Recalling my own childhood experiences at Disneyland, when these life-sized, human-animal hybrids, Mickey Mouse and Minnie Mouse, bounded out to greet me, I quickly became caught up in the wide-eyed wonderment of the moment. Like many audience members young and old, I was drawn into the magic of chatting and even dancing with these cartoon creatures that touched my cheek and put an arm around me for a photograph. This tactile, in-person experience collapsed the distance that comes with mere screen spectatorship of Disney characters on TV and in film or even playing with inanimate Disney dolls. Long after the park visit, I would remember the touch, the feel, the sound of these characters brought to life whenever I saw their animated forms on film or TV, the memory of that experience filling in the mediated distance.

In her critique of global capitalism, Naomi Klein chronicles how in the 1980s, corporations such as Nike and Starbucks realized that they must sell a “core meaning;” in other words, brands had to provide an *experience* for consumers, not just a product (Klein 5). The “spiritual” advertising of Starbucks and, as Klein points out, Disney in particular, have intensified those corporations' transnational hold by conveying a sense of community and happiness (i.e. “the happiest place on Earth”), respectively (Klein 17, 21). Brands such as Nike and Starbucks also draw upon the spirit of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*; they know how to immerse their customer in a narrative world that keeps the customer engaged.

Disneyland's character meet and greets help Disney personalize the themes they are striving to convey (happiness, magic, escapism). Jackson himself was not only enthralled by the enchantment that Disneyland marketed, he rejoiced in his capacity to feel that way, even as a veteran performer and conjurer of spectacle himself. In an interview filmed in the mid-1980s, after a career of two decades, Jackson spoke of his love for "magic" and "wonderment" and his enjoyment of escaping into the Disney world as often as he could, reveling in the role-playing and make-believe that Disney parks offer, as Gray noted to me. Footage on YouTube around this time shows Jackson delightedly playing and marching with Disney characters when they came to visit his home in Encino, capturing his own desire to immerse himself in the wonderworld of fantasy and joy that Disneyland projects.

Reminiscent of the Disneyland model of Mickey and other character meet and greets, Jackson incorporated female audience members into his on-stage performance at packed stadiums through a serenade. By staging highly emotional encounters with individual fans through serenades at his stadium tours Jackson immersed audiences in his world. In these encounters, adult female fans from varying racial and ethnic background would be brought to the stage to dance with Jackson who would sing a few lyrics of one of his ballads to her. By enfolding the fan into the heart of the spectacle, Jackson symbolically personalized the relationship between himself and his audience members, sealing a covenant of sorts. This inter-personal dynamic, even with one out of thousands of persons in the stadium, had enormous potential to deepen the immersion of the spectators, who could imagine themselves as the lucky participant drawn to the center of Jackson's orbit, and project their own desires onto him.

At concert stops from Denmark to India to South Korea, the (not always random) female audience member was selected and escorted onto the stage by security guards for certain ballads, such as "She's Out of My Life" on his 1992-93 *Dangerous* World Tour and "You Are Not Alone" on his 1996-97 *HIStory* World Tour. The fans for the latter tour are known as "YANA girls" in the Jackson fan community. In concert footage for both "She's Out of My Life" and "You Are Not Alone" one can see that the serenade often starts with Jackson clasping the fan to his body closely, sometimes exchanging hugs and caresses, stroking her hair, and, in a few cases, sharing kisses, with the fan usually clutching Jackson in adoration and Jackson trying to return a show of affection, in one case even sharing his microphone with her. For the "You Are Not Alone" serenade, once the female fan was on stage, in front of thousands, Jackson would serenade the visibly ecstatic (and often tearful) woman, starting by holding her close in a hug, and in some instances partnering her in simple, slow dance moves in a very gentlemanly manner, his trademark crotch grab and moonwalk absent from this *pas de deux* conducted amid screams and cheers. After approximately a minute, Jackson would usually kneel in front of the fan with

widespread arms à la Prince Charming.⁹ He would do this while continuing to perform, at times with some nervousness and considerable difficulty as the fan's affections (or fainting) might disrupt Jackson's momentum. At what seems to be a pre-arranged cue the security guards would remove the fan (often with a struggle) as Jackson would look on, appearing wistful at the departure, in a theatrical display of loss and loneliness—more than a touch of camp infusing this performance. Although other musicians such as Usher, Rihanna, Josh Groban, Bono, Justin Bieber, and Drake have subsequently sung to and in some cases danced with fans on stage, Jackson's one-on-one interactions, seen in the context of earlier immersive techniques, illuminates the total experience that the *Gesamtkunstwerk* promises, especially as Jackson, unlike Wagner and Disney, embodied it in presentation and performance.

While other pop artists have created an internally consistent performative world for their fans (Till 11), the moment in the serenade in which the fan is pulled away from Jackson after such a joyous communion with him enacts a loss we rarely see in pop performances (see also Fast 2014). Watching these interactions on YouTube, they recall the sometimes-uncomfortable dynamic of the character meet and greets at Disneyland where children line up (sometimes for many minutes in the southern California heat) and wait for their few precious minutes with the beloved Disney character. The hovering character host escorts and guards the Disney figure, helping to stage manage the waiting line of fans and keep the flow of the audience members moving so that no one person spends too long with the character; at a designated time, the host whisks the character away. The waiting children aren't always able to grasp why they, too, cannot have their chance at a tactile, verbal interaction with Mickey or Minnie Mouse, and tears and tantrums are not an uncommon sight after such a parting, with many of them left wanting to come back for more (which Disney parks count upon). Similarly, a popularly viewed "YANA girl" serenade on YouTube shows a female fan kicking and struggling against security when they whisk her away from Jackson's serenade. The presence of the security guard is a reminder of the time-discipline involved in the production of spectacle—the show must go on—and one senses the frustration of the dismissed fan in what is a stark power disparity between celebrity and civilian, as well as Jackson's occasionally studied rendering.

However, as if addressing this sense of loss, in many performances of "You Are Not Alone," after the fan has been escorted from the stage Jackson continues the song, gesturing to the audience as if he's reassuring them all that even when he can no longer physically "be there," he'll remain with them in a spiritual sense – that the unification between him and his audience will last beyond the immediate, localized staging of the tour. Often by the end of the song he adlibs

⁹ See supplements page for links to videos of Jackson performing *You Are Not Alone*.

and gets the audience to join in a bit; at one performance in Munich he interacts with the audience after pledges of “I love you!... I love you more!” At these performances, he was promising eternal love (his “L.O.V.E.”) to adult fans of all genders and sexual orientations, not just children and animals for which he became caricatured.

Jackson knew that his performance relied in part upon an interactive dynamic with the audience, and he described it as a communion of sorts. “[W]hen I’m on stage. I can’t perform if I don’t have that kind of ping pong with the crowd. You know the kind of cause and effect action, reaction. Because I play off of them. They’re really feeding me and I’m just acting from their energy” (quoted in Johnson 1992). Jackson’s stadium serenades also call to mind earlier instances of the “ping pong” experienced in smaller venues such as nightclubs, where Jackson first got his start. This immersive and interactive dynamic was also characteristic of late 19th and early 20th century American live performance traditions that also shaped Jackson’s style. “In beer gardens, minstrel shows, Chautauquas, amusement parks, Wild West shows, burlesque, vaudeville and melodrama, spectators were expected to laugh, to sing, to speak, to comment, even to argue” (Altman 279). Amateur shows such as those at the Apollo Theater, where Jackson performed as a young boy, also encouraged direct audience participation. The Jackson Five played six nights a week in Gary, Indiana, and part of the Chitlin’ circuit when he was between the ages of six and ten. In his autobiography, Jackson recalled performing a number called “Skinny Legs and All” when he was around nine years old (37). At a pre-determined point in the song, young Michael would surge out into the audience, drop on all fours, and peep up women’s skirt to act out the lyrics. Jackson cites the Jackson Five’s success with this tactic, and it is safe to assume that the efficacy of such audience interaction was impressed upon him. These kinds of stage tricks that recall Disney’s Fantasound and the directive of the Disney Institute to draw park guests into the “magic” of “the happiest place on Earth” as well as vaudeville, minstrel, and amateur shows all incorporate spectators into the show.

In Jackson’s adult solo concerts, we see the movement of the “Skinny Legs and All” interaction reversed: members of the audience joined him on stage. He invited the fans to break through the division between the audience pit and the stage, and embed them in the pop spectacle on stage. The interactivity so constitutive of the total work of art would come full circle; in his analysis of Jackson’s rehearsal film “This Is It,” Jason King points out that Jackson “apparently referred to the live 3D experience in upgraded terms as 4D as he intended to break the fourth wall by having the cast move from screen onto stage into the audience” (King 191).

Observing Jackson’s on-stage interactions during these concerts on YouTube and reading the comments there, it is clear that these serenades were a deeply affective experience for the fans chosen, and, vicariously, the thousands

of others—female and male, straight and queer—watching, both at the concerts and, decades later, online. In various languages, fans online express joy, adoration, and lust for Jackson, and happiness and envy for the women who were serenaded by him. These on-stage encounters reveal Jackson’s dynamism, his efforts at a more visceral connection across celebrity/fan and racial divides, and his celebration of emotionalism, which harkens back to opera.

Although the specifics of each encounter differ (some women are more frantic than others; the song may have occurred at different places in each performance) the general point is that he is interacting with female fans of many backgrounds in a fairly intimate manner. For all the flash of “sci-fi technomegaspectacle” that King describes in Jackson’s shows (191), Jackson knew that to offer up his body to hold and to hug is an extremely intimate bond for adult fans – a kinesthetic extension of the album, the music video. These interludes seem more emotionally intimate than even the lap dances that Usher and Rihanna offer their fans on stage. Also, Jackson’s planned partnerings contained within them the potential for spontaneous expression and agency on the part of the fan who, despite the security guards and stage managing, could say pretty much whatever she liked to Jackson, and grasp and grab at an icon that was famously reclusive. Jackson clearly took a risk with these impromptu serenades on the stage for all to see, despite his security present.

These serenades were a re-visioning and intensification of the Mickey Mouse meet and greets for Disneyland audience members, highlighting the power of basic in-person interaction, and indicate some of the ways Jackson expanded the total work of art. In viewing a selection of these serenades on YouTube, the encounters range in tone and gesture from chaste to tenderly romantic to intensely passionate, particularly on the fans’ part when they would tackle and grab him as seen in Santiago, Chile, and Munich, Germany.¹⁰ At a performance on his *Dangerous* tour, Jackson grabbed the fan’s face and planted what appears to be a lusty kiss on her lips. In contrast, images of Jackson’s sexual boldness towards women were not commonly found in mainstream (white) media at the time. Despite public and media criticism of his cosmetic surgeries and lightening skin, and amid persistent rumors about an ambiguous sexuality, Jackson has in fact been considered a heterosexual sex symbol by many female fans around the world for decades, many of whom in an anti-essentialist manner embraced his sometimes androgynous appearance.

What is more, Jackson engaged in these public, physical encounters with women from Europe, Asia and South America. In dancing and hugging (and sometimes kissing) these women, Jackson is attempting to literally embody his ethos of racial unity beyond the artifice of the studio and sound stage and into the live stadium. The object of adoration in these interracial stadium pairings is a

¹⁰ See supplements page for videos of these events.

black man—not a common sight in the American entertainment industrial complex, especially in the 1990s. Yet these expressions didn't come without repercussions for Jackson. He felt that there was resentment of these more intimate attempts to “cross over”:

Before me, you had [Harry] Belafonte, you had Sammy [Davis, Jr.], you had Nat King Cole. You had them as entertainers and people loved their music. *But they didn't get adulation, and they didn't get people to cry, and they didn't get, 'I am in love with you, and I want to marry you.' They didn't get people tearing their clothes off and all the hysteria and all the screams. They didn't play stadiums. I was the first one to break the mold, where white girls, Scottish girls, Irish girls screamed, 'I am in love with you, I want to...' And a lot of the white press didn't like that* (Boteach 123, emphasis added).

While it's speculative to say that such a direct cause-and-effect relationship existed between the adulation of white female fans for Jackson and an increase of negative media coverage of him (especially given his legal issues and unconventional life choices), Jackson was clearly aware of the challenges of attempting to embody racial unity in his interactions on stage. As Willa Stillwater observes, “when Jackson would talk about fans crying and fainting at concerts, many saw it as egotistical—completely overlooking the racial element, and what a truly “dangerous” act it was for him, as a black man, to arouse white women in that way” (Stillwater).

Conclusion

In 2012, artist Lorraine O'Grady reflected on the passing of Michael Jackson and his deliberate efforts to unify and represent the world, offering the pronouncement that, “There will never be another modernist with a vision as total as Michael Jackson” (O'Grady, “On Baudelaire and Michael Jackson”). Jackson's goal was not only to interlock the arts, but to anchor that totality with his vision of racial inclusion and humanitarianism. Collapsing the divide between spectacle and spectator, Jackson offered a total experience that fulfilled multiple senses and sentiments. His on-stage encounters as well as the way he merged art forms, combined genres, and conveyed an overarching message of unity show us just some of the ways in which the *Gestamtkunstwerk* continues to echo across popular culture. Just as Wagner strove to include the audience through lighting, staging and architectural techniques, and Disney's characters literally reached out to guests at Disneyland—thereby completing the totalizing experience of the amusement park—Jackson would embrace audience members at the Dangerous and HIStory concerts, providing the promise of a truly hands-on, multi-sensory experience to a privileged few who served as proxy for the thousands of other watching fans. The serenades illustrate Jackson's performance technique for immersing his fans in a meaningful universe of admiration and desire.

There is a discernible trajectory of iterations and innovations of the total work of art from Richard Wagner to Walt Disney to Michael Jackson in the way they all combined so many art forms to draw in audiences and express a core sentiment. Yet there is an important difference between Jackson and the other two: in this endeavor neither Disney nor Wagner faced the risks that come with being a crossover and transitional artist as Jackson did. Neither Wagner nor Disney had to grapple with reinventing themselves from cute child talent to credible adult star. A recently discovered manifesto penned by Jackson when he was 21 and shared on *60 Minutes* reveals his deliberate attempts to re-craft himself:

MJ will be my new name. No more Michael Jackson. I want a whole new character, a whole new look. I should be a tottally [sic] different person. People should never think of me as the kid who sang "ABC," [or] "I Want You Back." I should be a new, incredible actor/singer/dancer that will shock the world. I will do no interviews. I will be magic. I will be a perfectionist, a researcher, a trainer, a masterer [sic]. I will be better than every great actor roped into one (Logan, "MJ's Manifesto, Penned in 1979").

More poignantly, neither Wagner nor Disney was a minority artist who attempted to approach the power base of his profession or the majority of mainstream audiences from the position of racial Other. Even Jackson's choice of a date for a movie premiere early in his solo career was subject to racist commentary from the entertainment industry infrastructure. Actress Tatum O'Neal, who dated Jackson in the late 70s, was warned against attending the premiere for his film "The Wiz" in 1978. "Michael invited me to be his date. I asked my dad, who didn't care one way or another if I went, but my talent agency was dead set against it. I was told, in exactly these words: 'You can't go to a premiere with a nigger'" (O'Neal 101). Jackson would continue to answer to white critics and white media, particularly when he defied racially tinged expectations. In other words, the stakes for executing a totalizing vision were higher for Jackson, particularly since the tendency of some music journalists and cultural critics had been to dismiss his "song and dance man" contributions as derivative (quoted in Price). Armond White calls out this kind of cultural criticism as creating "an ideological block to Black artistry...white pop critics justify excluding Black artists from serious appreciation" (57). Jackson himself referred to this systematic discrimination in 2002 when he protested Sony Music and the history of racial exploitation in the American recording industry. He also raised the issue of innovation:

The history books are lying...you need to know that, you must know that, all the forms of popular music, from jazz to hip-hop, to be-bop, to soul...you know, you can talk about the different dances, from the cakewalk, to the jitterbug to the Charleston, to break dancing. All these are forms of black dancing....But if you go the bookstore down the corner, you won't see one black

person on a cover. You'll see Elvis Presley. You'll see the Rolling Stones. But where are the real pioneers, who started it?

Richard Wagner and Walt Disney did not emerge from society's sidelines, as Michael Jackson had, who was six years old and already performing in public places when the Civil Rights Act finally passed, formally ending racial discrimination so that young Jackson should have been able to reasonably expect equal treatment and access in public places, even though civil unrest would continue to plague the country. But Jackson's own pioneering efforts in the *Gesamtkunstwerk* cannot be denied.

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