

The media, the entertainment industry and Michael Jackson

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The prosecution's case in the Michael Jackson sexual molestation trial, now in its third week in Santa Maria, California, appears to have been seriously damaged by the alleged victim's own testimony on March 14. The 15-year-old boy acknowledged under questioning by defense attorney Thomas Mesereau Jr. that he had told a school official the popular singer had not molested him.

Under redirect questioning the following day by District Attorney Thomas Sneddon, Jackson's accuser testified that he denied the molestation because he wanted to avoid being teased by classmates. Nonetheless, the boy's acknowledgement of his conversation with the school official raises questions about his credibility and could affect the district attorney's effort to convict Jackson on 10 felony counts, for which the singer faces up to 20 years in prison.

The prosecution claims that the pop singer sexually molested the boy, then 13, at his Neverland Ranch in February 2003. The defense argues that the family of the boy has a history of making dubious accusations in order to obtain cash, and that the present case arises from another such attempt.

In the first weeks of the trial, prosecutors placed the accuser, his brother and sister on the witness stand. The two boys leveled a variety of charges against the singer: that he encouraged them to drink alcohol, provided them with sex magazines, and inappropriately touched the older of the two. The defense revealed inconsistencies in the witnesses' accounts and suggested that they had been coached to lie.

The Jackson trial has become the latest media extravaganza, given saturation coverage and endlessly hyped as part of the effort of corporate-controlled "news" outlets to coarsen and corrupt public sensibilities. The sordid character of the trial should come as a surprise to no one. Could a case shaped by such quintessential and deplorable features of contemporary American public life—money, celebrity and a prurient interest in sex—proceed in any other manner?

This spectacle has different aspects to it. First, there is the ongoing "passion of Michael Jackson." The singer appeared near collapse last Thursday. He failed to arrive in court on time, angering the judge, who threatened to revoke his bail. Jackson was apparently in a hospital emergency room having his back examined and showed up at the courthouse more than an hour

late in pajama bottoms, slippers and a suit jacket. After seeing the pop star in this condition, his former "spiritual adviser," Rabbi Shmuley Boteach, told a television interviewer he feared the singer would die before the abuse trial ended.

We do not claim to know whether Jackson is guilty or innocent of the charges leveled against him. He is, it goes without saying, a deeply troubled and conflicted human being, capable of bizarre behavior. So much of his life having been bound up with popular adulation, it seems likely that whatever the outcome of the trial, Jackson will emerge severely damaged. One questions whether he can survive being portrayed as a child molester and "monster." His financial state is also said to be increasingly perilous.

Guilty of the molestation charges or not, Jackson obviously needs psychological help. Whether the most intensive therapy could ever fully repair the damage that has resulted from a life spent in America's limelight, however, is questionable.

There is hardly any social enterprise more unforgiving than American "show business." It has the blood, so to speak, of countless talented individuals on its hands. The combination of vast and sudden wealth, hero worship from the public (often tinged with envy and resentment), and relentless commercial demands is often a fatal one, physically, artistically or both.

The "passion" metaphor is not entirely inappropriate. The entertainment "superstar" is the focus of a good deal of popular desperation, particularly in the US at the present time, when so many people are emotionally and intellectually at sea.

Jackson, from a working class family in Gary, Indiana, is nothing if not conscious of (and conscientious about) his public. One imagines that he feels the immense popular longing as a pressure and a demand, and finds it a heavy cross to bear. He must also sense that adoration, perceiving itself betrayed by its object's supposed misdeeds, can rapidly turn into its opposite.

The emotional claims of the public are more than matched by the relentless financial requirements of the industry. Nowhere else in the world has the relatively seamless transformation of the star performer into a machine for the making of profits been so perfected, and with such devastating results.

This may not, of course, be fully understood by the artist—or, for that matter, by the entertainment industry executive—but the

vampire-like demands of the media conglomerates inexorably suck the creativity and life out of the performer. In the end, what the entertainment industry gains, the artist must lose. And vice versa: insofar as the individual singer or actor refuses to make his soul fully available for commodification, he robs the record company or film studio. This is a struggle, often literally, to the death.

Jackson has had an entertainment career more exacting and “total” than most. A star nearly all his life, he has the music business to thank in large measure for what he is. As we wrote at the time of his arrest in late 2003, “Why should anyone be overly shocked or outraged by Jackson’s physical transformation? He has merely followed the culture’s own arguments, its relentless addiction to the false and unreal, to their logical, if grotesque, conclusion.

“His immaturity seems bound up with the same facts—a life spent in a show business cocoon, at a certain point surrounded by a gigantic entourage devoted to fulfilling his every whim. The ‘Peter Pan complex,’ the apparently fake marriages, the surrogate mother for his third child—everything points to a man floundering in a set of conflicting demands.” (See “Michael Jackson’s tragedy”)

At the same time, the Michael Jackson case has its rightful place in America’s peculiar and stunted official political life. Sneddon, the Santa Barbara County district attorney, no doubt has a personal ax to grind. After overseeing the failed effort to convict the singer on similar charges in 1993, he became the thinly veiled target of one of Jackson’s songs. However, the hostility toward Jackson of a Sneddon, a conservative “law-and-order” Republican (once nicknamed “Mad Dog”), has more to it than that.

Jackson, vaguely perceived as a liberal icon, has become a useful *bête noire* of the ultra-right, one of the human targets against which reactionary elements attempt to direct some of the disoriented rage washing around in the American populace. Racism and homophobia lie just beneath the surface of their attacks. The pornographic right, always on the lookout for filth, cannot invent punishments too severe for Jackson’s alleged crimes: prison for life, castration, even execution.

The sexual witch-hunters are obviously fascinated and attracted by what they attempt to persecute. Here we see America’s Puritan traditions turned inside out. The Clinton-Lewinsky scandal opened a floodgate of media prurience and obsession with perversity that has never closed. The thirst in right-wing, proto-fascistic quarters for the sordid lowdown on personalities they despise, even if it has to be hyped or invented, is unquenchable.

For its part, the mainstream media adopts a two-faced policy toward episodes like the Jackson case. On the one hand, the television networks and newspapers compete with one another to provide the public with the latest salacious allegations. Editorialists and op-ed writers, on the other hand, lament the attention paid to such a case and the fallen moral state of a

population that supposedly cannot get enough of its details.

Whether the population is fascinated or not, and one feels a certain weariness in regard to the Jackson affair, it has little choice in the matter. Media-driven scandals succeed one another like clockwork. Each is turned into the focus of national attention until a new one comes along and bumps it from view.

If two weeks go by without a celebrity scandal or a particularly grisly murder case, the media and its talking heads grow noticeably restive. The Kobe Bryant, Martha Stewart, Scott Peterson, Robert Blake and Jackson cases tend to merge into one lengthy, undignified assault on public intelligence and decency.

The basic trend in the American media is toward a vast expansion of “yellow journalism,” with its sensationalism and scandal-mongering, even within “respectable” outlets. This has deep social causes. The US is a country seething with social contradictions and tensions, none of which can be discussed openly. The vast chasm between the elite and the rest of the population must remain a secret as far as the media is concerned.

And yet the media establishment is aware of the discontent and restlessness that pervades so much of American daily life and finds expression most often in violent, anti-social acts. The task of “yellow journalism” is to tap into popular hostility without ever permitting it to become focused on the underlying social relationships of capitalism. Confused, populist resentment against overpaid performers and athletes, or even individual corporate criminals, can be fairly easily manipulated.

There is also a specific need to divert attention not only from the war in Iraq, with its casualties and atrocities, but also from the preparations for new acts of aggression, whether against Syria, Iran or some other target of US imperialist interests.

Michael Jackson’s legal fate remains unclear. The media, switching its tone from day to day, is somewhat undecided as to how things should turn out. The singer may be convicted and branded a sexual predator—an outcome that would certainly please many media movers and shakers. On the other hand, the possibility remains that Jackson will be “vindicated” and permitted at least a partial heart-warming comeback, in which case we will be reminded that never for a day did the singer cease to be one of America’s pop culture icons.

Either way, the media circus will pack up and move on to its next venue, unconcerned about the mess it has left behind.



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