

Michael: An exercise in image control

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The film *Michael* (2026) is a major commercial success, much like Michael Jackson (1958-2009), the late American singer and dancer whose life it depicts. It earned a remarkable \$217.4 million worldwide on its opening weekend. The film also resembles Jackson in that it has aroused controversy. The singer's family members have clashed over the way he is depicted, and the *New York Times* published new accusations of sexual abuse against him on the film's opening weekend.

The undeniably and unusually talented Jackson was one of the most successful pop musicians in history—but also one of the most profoundly damaged by the music industry. In the 1980s, crowds adored him, but he was later vilified by right-wing crusaders. Always seeking to encourage voyeurism and divert attention from social issues, the mass media amplified both Jackson's canonization and his demonization. An honest look at Jackson's life and music would be welcome, especially considering that most moviegoers were not alive during his heyday.

Michael, however, directed by Antoine Fuqua (*Training Day*), is manifestly not an attempt to help us understand who Jackson was, what drove him and what his work means. Explicitly approved by Jackson's estate, the film banishes all complexity and turns an essentially tragic story into a tale of public success and personal triumph. It is an attempt by the estate to burnish Jackson's legacy, capture a new audience and extend the singer's brand.

Fuqua has not distinguished himself as a creative or insightful director. One of his early films, *Tears of the Sun* (2003), encouraged support for the criminal US war on Iraq. Fuqua has also remade or rebooted previous films such as *The Magnificent Seven* (2016) and television shows like *The Equalizer* (2014–2023). Even if Jackson's estate had given him a free hand (and we should not assume that it did), we'd have little reason to expect him to make a penetrating or truthful film about the singer.

Indeed, *Michael* suffers from paper-thin characters and unremarkable acting. Jaafar Jackson, Michael's nephew and son of singer Jermaine Jackson, plays the lead role. He performs his uncle's dance moves ably and generally acquits himself well. But he is not given much room to maneuver. The film's Jackson is a gentle innocent and a genius who effortlessly becomes a hero to millions. This is a conspicuously sanitized, inoffensive image and not the real man.

The movie follows Jackson from boyhood to stardom with the Jackson 5 and into the first phase of his solo career. Its running theme is the singer's ongoing effort to establish his independence from his domineering and abusive father Joe (Colman Domingo). Despite this conflict at the center of the film, Jackson mostly seems to float from one triumph to the next. In addition, the film relies heavily on recreations of live performances, during which we hear Jackson's familiar hits. The singer's life story often takes a back seat to the music.

We briefly see Jackson's childhood in Gary, Indiana, where his father worked in a steel mill. Joseph drives his sons mercilessly to practice, insisting that they become "winners," not "losers." He beats Jackson with a belt for not wanting to rehearse immediately after a successful show. But very early in the movie, the boys are signed to Motown and score a number one hit with "I Want You Back" (1969).

The demands of stardom cut off Jackson's formal education and any meaningful contact with the outside world at an early age. The movie can't avoid acknowledging this fact, even if only implicitly. Jackson never tires of the games and toys that his brothers have since given up. Unable to form relationships with other children, he starts collecting exotic animals (a llama, a giraffe, a chimpanzee) that he calls his friends. The arrested development of such a talented artist is profoundly tragic, but Fuqua simply accepts it without comment.

Michael depicts Motown founder Berry Gordy and entertainment lawyer John Branca as benevolent figures who protected Jackson. This portrayal is surely one-sided if not outright false. Gordy and Branca are part of the industry that sought—and still seek—to extract as much profit as possible from Jackson. Not coincidentally, Branca is one of the movie's producers.

The movie skips over Jackson's early solo albums and shows him seeking a new sound and a new image. Despite his father's attempt to keep his focus on the group, the singer releases the successful *Off the Wall* (1979). Next, Jackson announces his wish to be the biggest artist ever, and *voilà!* He releases *Thriller* (1982), the best-selling album of all time. How much work went into these albums? What was Jackson thinking about when he made them? The movie offers few answers. Jackson simply shows up in the recording studio and sings.

Joe seeks to capitalize on the amazing success of *Thriller* by sending his sons on tour. He forces the unwilling Jackson to

acquiesce. While the group is filming a Pepsi commercial associated with the tour, fireworks set fire to Jackson's hair, and he suffers second-degree burns and nerve damage. But, according to the movie, this brush with death merely convinced Jackson to embrace the tour that he had resisted.

Before we know it, Jackson has recorded and released his follow-up album *Bad* (1987), which is another smash. The film leaves Jackson on a London stage in 1988, basking in the applause of his ecstatic fans.

Michael leaves out far more than it includes. For starters, it provides no insight into the time in which Jackson lived. For the movie, as for Jackson himself, the outside world barely exists.

We get no sense of the social conditions in Jackson's hometown of Gary, which rose and fell with the steel industry. Jobs were already disappearing in the 1960s, when Jackson was a boy. Nor is there any reference to the civil rights struggle, including the riot that broke out in Gary after the 1968 assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. This struggle helped create opportunities for workers, students and artists like Jackson.

The Jackson 5 shot to fame at a time of swelling opposition to racism, the Vietnam war and exploitation. Artists such as Marvin Gaye, Stevie Wonder and Curtis Mayfield were bringing political themes into their songs, often against music executives' wishes. In contrast, the Jackson 5 played bubblegum soul, which, even at its best, was as innocuous as it was infectious.

As a solo albeit intensely gifted artist, Jackson never showed a great deal of social insight. *Off the Wall* was compatible with the moods of social layers turning to hedonism and "self-discovery" in the late 1970s. *Thriller* was released during the Reagan years, when the worship of wealth and celebrity was promoted relentlessly. As enduring as many of its songs have proven, the album was highly polished and "safe" for mass audiences. It fit in with—and epitomized—the era of blockbusters such as *Star Wars* (1977) and *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981).

In an early scene from *Michael*, an impressed Gordy tells the young Jackson, "You've got something to say." In a sense, he is right. The feeling and technical skill in Jackson's singing conveyed genuine exuberance and joy, as well as the pain and yearning that were hidden from public view.

But in another sense, Gordy is wrong. Even when Jackson's lyrics addressed racism or other social issues, they never rose above banalities or appeals for harmony. How could they, when Jackson lived in a show-biz bubble from the time he was 10 years old? In a scene in which he is talking to producer Quincy Jones, Jackson describes his music as "pure escapism." But the movie does not explore the implications of this honest comment.

Nor does it give us insight into who Jackson was as a man or an artist. It takes as good coin his stated reason for his first rhinoplasty: to look good in photos. His subsequent surgeries

are ignored. In fleeting moments, we hear Jackson mention having vitiligo and see him apply makeup. But the psychological side—and objective roots—of Jackson's acute concern with his appearance are never explored. One can reasonably imagine that Jackson was trying to be the attractive, unthreatening star that the music industry was demanding him to be. His self-transformation may also have reflected his lack of mature self-knowledge and self-direction.

Most glaringly, *Michael* omits the last 20 years of the artist's life. During this period, Jackson had more surgeries and ever-lightening skin. The media focused less on his talent and more on his increasingly eccentric behavior. The superstar became a notorious oddball, a subject of tabloid gossip and mockery rather than of concern and sympathy.

Not surprisingly, given the involvement of Jackson's estate, the movie refuses to acknowledge the allegations of child sexual abuse that were made against him. The singer was the victim not only of politically motivated district attorney Tom Sneddon, a conservative Republican, but also of the media, which denied Jackson the presumption of innocence and gloried in the scandal. Jackson was visibly devastated by the ordeal but ultimately acquitted of all charges. Rather than showing this persecution for what it was, the filmmakers have avoided it entirely so that they can continue to profit from his legacy.

As mentioned above, four siblings recently filed a lawsuit alleging that Jackson groomed and sexually abused them. The fact that these individuals previously defended his innocence—and timed their *New York Times* interview with the movie's release—provides ample grounds for skepticism. We again insist that Jackson must be presumed innocent.

In 2009, Jackson announced a series of concerts that he hoped could reduce his debt, which totaled almost \$500 million. About three weeks before the tour was to begin, he died of an overdose of propofol and benzodiazepine. But Jackson's sad fate is excluded from the movie, which ends with a title reading, "His story continues," as if to tease a sequel.

Michael does not do its subject justice by examining him objectively. Rather, it perpetuates the image of the genius pop star that was cultivated in the 1980s: an image that conceals the singer's humanity and true social significance. It makes no attempt to explain why Jackson's music touches so many people. Instead, it uses this music to pander to fans' nostalgia and to sell movie tickets. In death, as in life, Jackson continues to be exploited by the entertainment industry.



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