

Afterword

1 June 2009

What will (not) happen in London at O2 Arena on 13 July 2009?

It has been three years since the end of Michael Jackson's trial. What has happened over that time, what has changed? In early March 2009, at a conference held specifically to this end, Michael Jackson's concert tour was announced under the illustrative title *This Is It!*. The show, referred to as the final show in the idol's career, was to take place in July this year in London.

What is the sense hidden behind the words *This Is It!*? Does it really mean "it's over"? Are these the last concerts in Jackson's career? The title of the announced concerts (*This Is It!*) seems provocatively modest compared to the live conference transmitted online via Jackson's website (www.michaeljacksonlive.com¹). The entire 'endeavour' lasted several minutes. Jackson walked on the stage in intense black colour wearing one of his characteristic outfits that resembles a uniform with abundance of decorations, and a shiny band on his arm; he was also wearing sunglasses. Before walking up to the microphone, with a smile on his face, he made several of his hallmark gestures, such as the 'victory'. He then greeted the gathered audience ("I love you so much") and ceremonially declared the title of the London concerts, stressing that, "*This Is It!* really means this is it!"²

Following Jackson's conference, speculations regarding his deteriorating health appeared immediately in the media. Surprisingly, the idol's very lean body had been ignored until that moment. References were made to opinions of physicians and psychologists, who were allegedly concerned about Jackson's health and suspecting him of suffering from anorexia. Doubts arose due to his health condition, leading to a number of questions whether the king of pop would actually make it through the announced concerts. Will these performances really take place? He completed the last tour over ten years ago, that is, long before his

¹ The site also involves the conference video and an interview with concert directors.

² *Michael Jackson announces his UK gigs at the O2 this summer*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=11&v=SMIEe0EjHAQ&feature=emb_logo. Cf.: R. Sankowski, *Nieudany powrót Michaela Jacksona*, "Gazeta Wyborcza" 2009, 6 March, http://wyborcza.pl/1,75475,6352531,Nieudany_po-wrot_Michaela_Jacksona.html.

exhausting court trial regarding child sexual molestation. Nonetheless, regarding the news about Jackson, my greatest interest was drawn to statements made by Internet users. Reading through comments below the news about the planned summer concerts, I had the impression that the idol, despite the time that has passed, still evokes emotional and, at the same time, extreme reactions of the public. The statements show a clear distinction into his fans and haters. Interestingly, it seems that these beliefs about Jackson do not change. Again, suspicions of paedophilia are made – some of these comments involve satirical and offensive statements, while others take the form of a joke. There are also numerous confessions of fans who often verbally attack their adversaries to protect their idol. Nonetheless, the prevailing statements are those about Jackson's looks, particularly about his face and, most specifically, his nose. Hence, there is something about Michael Jackson's face that makes the public unable to remain indifferent.

In the culture of narcissism, a person expresses herself/himself by means of her/his appearance, and thus, also by means of her/his face. The entire truth about one's face seems hidden in its nakedness. Since the face is always bare, it speaks. As Jean-Jacques Courtine and Claudine Haroche³ write, the face is both the most intimate and the most exposed part of a individual, directly subjected to the strongest public assessment and requirements. What if the face cannot be seen or when it resembles a mask? In such cases the face, and by means of the face the entire person herself/himself becomes not only inaccessible, but also 'unreadable'. The identity becomes mysterious. That which cannot be seen creates ambiguity, evokes various assumptions and also suspicion. Of what? Suspicion of fault, insincerity or, at least, accusation of attempting to hide something from the eyes of the public (a stare is not neutral). A question arises, whether by hiding his face, Jackson fears exposure, confrontation with social reception of his persona?

Popular culture leaves less and less room for assumptions. This culture demands its heroes to be transparent, completely open to the point of obscenity (everything has to be shown, the public must see everything). Is that not by any chance coercing or even tyrannically forcing the postulate of authenticity onto someone? Here, it is also worth reflecting on the phenomenon of the Internet, which serves both as a source of information and a communication tool that facilitates 'taking a peek' into others' lives (or often stalking them), and then revealing and forwarding pieces of information that are often confidential to a wide group of recipients.

Pop culture hates silence – silence becomes unbearable. Not only is it a sign of boredom but also that of indifference. If Michael Jackson is silent and/or hides his face behind the mask, then perhaps it is his strategy for avoiding the

³ J.-J. Courtine, C. Haroche, *Haroche, Histoire du visage. Exprimer et taire ses émotions (XVIe – début XIXe siècle)*, Payot et Rivages, Paris 2007.

controlling stare of the public. By covering the face one can consciously refuse others the right to observe it, to 'read' it and to evaluate it. At the same time, however, the mystery becomes even greater, just as the interest in what the face might be hiding increases.

I've watched again Michael Jackson's concert from the year 1992 from a tour promoting the album *Dangerous*. Michael suddenly appears on stage, catapulted. He is standing still for over two minutes, his fists clenched. He is watching the public through sunglasses. For a moment, it is him who is the observer of the spectacle. Then, he takes off the glasses very slowly, and casts them aside rapidly. The show takes off.

What will happen in London at O2 Arena on 13 July 2009? I do not know the answer to this question yet.