

What On Earth Is Driving the Melodramatic, Histrionic Michael Jackson Coverage?

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The 24-7, wall-to-wall press coverage of the life, death, music, clothing, vitiligo, sex life, "dearest friends" and plastic surgeries of musician Michael Jackson raises the question, "What the heck is going on?"

Why are hairdressers wearing black and weeping into our curls? Does Larry King really care what Jermaine Jackson thinks about anything? Michael had how many locks on his bedroom door? (Five) Have we all gone mad?

Scholars at the University at Buffalo offer a few observations.

UB sociology professor Mark Gottdiener, Ph.D., is the author of the breakthrough book "The New Urban Sociology" and several other important and award-winning books in his field, including "The Theming of America: American Dreams, Media Fantasies and Themed Environments." Gottdiener says:

"This public circus arose out of the fact that the Jackson family turned Michael into a meal ticket when he was 10 years old and they will work to keep this up so they can bleed his celebrity for the rest of their natural lives.

"Neverland is not likely to be the final place for the Jackson memorial, by the way. He likely will be buried in the location that offers maximum profit. This public spectacle is really all about the 'green.'

"It also is all about the media, of course. Iran has quieted down. There are no good visuals available and TV media outlets are visually obsessed, so the Jackson situation is automatically more newsworthy than it might be otherwise, particularly for television. Michael Jackson is nothing if not the source of unending video. They can't just play clips, though, so it seems that every grief-stricken fan or passerby in the country is being offered a chance to say something -- anything -- to the camera.

"Here, too, it's about the money. Jackson's death is perfect for TV news and commentaries. Everyone has something 'newsworthy' to say. There is no way to assess whether they even know what they're talking about, but it doesn't matter because whatever they say takes up time and time is what advertisers buy.

"Finally, this is also being portrayed as of great importance to African Americans. A lot of energy is being poured into keeping this famous black entertainer's death alive. Ironically, it appears he wanted to be white, and serious questions about his pederasty and child molestation remain unanswered."

UB librarian and cultural historian Judith Adams-Volpe is the author of "Technology and Values in American Civilization" and "The American Amusement Park Industry," which, like Jackson's life, focuses on technology and thrills. Adams-Volpe says:

"Michael Jackson represented and continues to represent the culture of celebrity and the desire to abandon our 'selves' -- our individual identities -- and become artificial/fake/virtual chimeras.

"His behavior in life demonstrates this, but he represents many people today. Think 'Second Life,' or think Las Vegas, which proudly advertises itself as a place to go to lose your identity and transform into a creature of excess and exoticism.

"We live in a culture of transformers. Fake is the new 'reality.' As for the 'Jesus' imagery employed by his family and others to describe Jackson, in a culture in which transfiguration, not resurrection, is the ultimate desire, he truly is the savior people are looking for."

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