

THE INCOMPARABLE POSTMODERNIST DANCING FEET OF MICHAEL JACKSON [1](#)

by

Ntongela Masilela

To talk about black postmodernist practices is to go back to be-bop music and see how it relates to literary expressions like Reed's and Charles Wright's. It is to go back, in other words, to the genius of Charlie Parker, John Coltrane and Miles Davis. . . Certainly, it emerges together with Abstract Expressionism, which is distinctly an American art form. . . Michael Jackson and Prince are cross-over in another sense: their music is less rooted in black musical traditions and much more open to white rock and so forth.

-Cornel West, "Interview on Postmodernism", in *Flashart* .

There can be little doubt that the present phenomenal success and spectacular impact of Michael Jackson on world mass culture and popular culture is a process deeply interconnected to the dominant cultural forces expressive of the social conditions prevalent in late capitalist countries: the cultural forces and the cultural coordinates of postmodernism. The phenomenon of Michael Jackson is directly a product and an expression of this cultural and political field of forces. Culturally and politically, according to the very brilliant American literary scholar, Fredric Jameson, postmodernism is an expression of the American way of life transplanted on a world-wide scale; militarily, it graphically illustrates the superiority of the United States . [2](#) The law of uneven cultural development is such that although the postmodernist conditions and artistic products first emerged in the United States, it was on the other side of the Atlantic divide, in France that the philosophical and metaphysical structure of postmodernism was theorized, and in England that the cultural consequences of its emergence for mass culture and popular culture was formulated. Though there is much dispute and disagreement as to what are the real constitutive features and characteristics of postmodernism, probably the following would assent universal agreement: it attempts to obliterate and dissolve the distinction between high culture and mass culture; it is parodic and attempts to dissolve art into the present forms of commodity production; its attempt to empty art of political content; and its eradication of historical memory, and its mimicking of other artistic forms. [3](#) Within the context of all these complex relationships and constellations, the

phenomenon of Michael Jackson is in actual reality the commodification of American postmodernism for world consumption.

The emergence of the postmodern dance in the early 1970s announced its arrival as a revolt against the technical brilliance and perfection which Martha Graham and Merce Cunningham had achieved in modern dance. It is not accidental therefore that some of the inventors of postmodernist dance forms, like Douglas Dunn, Laura Dean and Trisha Brown, had once been students of Cunningham, if not in actuality then in the continuation of a particular modern dance tradition. The real incubator of postmodernism in dance was the Grand Union, a collective of improvisatory group of young dancers based in New York of the 1960s, which included the above three dancers, Daviv Gordon and others. If the tradition of modern dance which has characterized the work of Cunningham and Graham has been one of utter hostility towards ballet, what characterizes the ideology of the form ushered in by postmodernism has been the effort and attempt of Trisha Brown and others to fuse ballet and modern dance together, or at least, to hold them in a state of mutual reciprocity. While it would have been inconceivable that the modernism of Cunningham could have found anything of interest in Balanchine's neo-classicism, today a postmodernist dancer like Twyla Tharp easily choreographs for the Jeffrey Ballet Company and, likewise, Douglas Dunn choreographs for the Paris Opera. In fact, the post-postmodernist dancer and choreographer, Mark Morris, uses ballet pointers in his work with constant frequency. Hence one of the great mottos of postmodernism in dance has been: fusion of forms, structures and ideologies. It is the concrete realization of this motto to tremendous effect by Michael Jackson in his music and videos, as it will be apparent in a moment, that has been the constant brilliance of his genius.

David Gordon's postmodernist dance works achieve a different fusion of forms: that between dancing and walking. It is here then that the anti-technique of postmodernism expresses itself against the formalistic technical perfection present in the modernism of Graham and Cunningham. To be sure, between the two there is a great difference: while the choreographic work of Graham is an attempted summation of the cultural legacy of Western civilization, especially the formidableness of classical antiquity, the choreographic work of Cunningham is an attempted postulation of the history of modern dance forms. Nonetheless, both epitomize the classicism of modern dance. Even if today paradoxically, with the passage of time, postmodernism has attained an anti-technique technical perfection, this does not in the least obscure the fact that its second motto against the modernism of Jose Limon and Hanya Holm was: anti-technique. Naturally, the postmodernism of Pina Bausch is different from the postmodernism of Lucinda Childs, and likewise, that of Carolyn Carlson from that of Sonje Mayo in South Africa .

Since postmodernism came into being on the streets and in the lofts of New York , it is not surprising that, originally and in its infancy, it embodied a populist culture. This again separates it from modernism which was the very epitomy of elite culture. It is in these lofts that postmodernism underwent its gestation, formation and metamorphosis. Since its cooption and incorporation into the mainstream of American culture, through television, postmodernism has attempted to fuse together elite culture and mass culture. [4](#) If today postmodernism is to be found at the Lincoln Center cavorting with elite culture, it ought not to be forgotten that third founding motto was: for a popular and oppositional culture. The coopting of postmodernism into the mainstream of American culture, from expressing an alternative and oppositional culture to embracing an affirmative culture, has parallels with Michael Jackson's incorporation into it (mainstream American culture) and its subsequent transmission internationally through the new electronic technologies. The revolution effected by him is in the combination of his great popular dancing style and the new video technologies.

The substratum of popular music is black American rhythm and blues. If popular music exists today to a large extent as a commodity within mass culture, it originally evolved out of rhythm and blues music which played a functional role within popular culture. The very designation of rhythm and blues indicates the synthesis of African and African-American elements, for whereas blues reflect the melancholic and traumatic conditions into which black Americans were subjected to in slavery, rhythm refers to the euphoric percussive movements which was a central part of African life before the advent of European slavery and colonialism. Amiri Baraka's classic book, **Blues People: Negro Music in White America** , theorizes the dialectic between blues and rhythm in the following manner: "The most apparent survivals of African music in Afro-American music are its rhythms: not only the seeming emphasis in the African music on rhythmic, rather than melodic or harmonic, qualities, but also the use of polyphonic, or contrapuntal, rhythmic effects. . . Classic blues is called 'classic' because it was the music that seemed to contain all the diverse and conflicting elements of Negro music, plus the smoother emotional appeal of the 'performance'. It was the first Negro music that appeared in a formal context as entertainment, though it still contained the harsh, uncompromising reality of the earlier blues forms." [5](#) What these two passages imply is that within black cultures, whether in America or Brazil or Africa , music and dance form an inseparable unity or entity; music develops in relation to dance, as much as dance emerges within music; they form an integral whole. This dialectic of unity partly explains the superior dancing poetics of James Brown and Michael Jackson and Bill 'Boujangles' Robinson above Gene Kelly and arguably Fred Astaire, for within European music and dance culture, often music and dance co-exist as separate entities, without the pull of tension binding them together.

It is only within the migration of rhythm and blues from the natural environment of the American South to the urban spaces of Northern states, through the massive of African-Americans to the North from the South, that there was a threat of disjuncture between dance and music. This threat of disjuncture between the two was constantly there for within the urban environment African-American dance and music culture, for economic survival and cultural continuity, had to seek admittance and acceptance to dominant white American culture. The assimilation and attempted synthesis that white American culture demanded of black American culture was one of total conformity, rather than of on-conformity and mutual enrichment. [6](#) A classical instance of this was at the Cotton Club in Harlem where the cultural tastes and economic power of the white clientele dictated and determined, within certain parameters, the evolution and form of black American dance and music culture. All of this developed within a context of an emerging black middle class. The black middle class was not particularly favourable towards the blues. A transition was effected from the classical blues of Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey to the 'pop' style of the young Ethel Waters. [7](#)

This transition resulted in shifting the base of African-American dance and music culture from popular culture to mass culture, that is. on the whole. Popular culture is a social space where a particular people forge their singular social consciousness in order to overcome oppression and repression, and are in possession of a historical memory. It is this possession of historical memory that made black people in the American South resist the intrusion of dominating white cultural systems. Rhythm and blues was and is a vital cultural shield which facilitated a continuation of historical connections. In mass culture on the other hand, memory is dehistoricized, cultural products are diluted of cultural richness, in order to make the people existant within it easily malleable to commodification of culture. It was in the 1920s, and in relation to, and in context of, the Harlem Renaissance that this complicated process affected portions of black American dance and music culture. The brilliant dancing poetics of Josephine Baker reflect and are a product of this historical transition. A whole historical moment of African-American dance culture, from the period of Ragtime (1900) to the period of Classical Negro Musicals (1930), can be traced through her poetics of dancing. [8](#)

For several reasons, the significance and greatness of James Brown within international dance and music culture, can never be overestimated: first, standing at the median ground between popular culture and mass culture, he invented and founded and shaped in the early 1960s the New Black Music, [9](#) which was a continuation, restructuring and reshaping of rhythm and blues within new

historical and social conditions. In him, the hollering and shouting characteristic of classical blues, is still very much present, whereas in Michael Jackson it has totally disappeared, standing as he is in mass culture. Secondly, through his invention of New Black Music, he opened a new cultural space for international pop music which without him is incomprehensible or would not be in existence, or would exist differently---in England, from the Beatles and the Rolling Stones to Culture Club and U-2, in America, from the Byrds to Alabama and from Stevie Wonder and Dionne Warwick to Whitney Houston and Prince. Thirdly, he affirmed that within African-American culture, dance and music are integrally interwoven into each other. Even the great abstract and complex jazz music of John Coltrane and Miles Davis, when profoundly understood and appreciated, compels dancing to. For instance, Amiri Baraka states that while listening to the extreme abstruse moments of Coltrane's jazz in preparation for a commissioned essay, he stood up and started dancing requesting John Coltrane to cool it. [10](#) In fact, it could plausibly be argued that one day a choreography organic to Coltrane's 'sheets of sound', a revolution in contemporary dance culture would be effected as much as Balanchine initiated one in relation to Stravinsky's music. Fourthly, many of the contemporary popular dance patterns in popular culture, like breakdance, come in many ways from the breakthrough opened by James Brown. Lastly, he established a line of continuity which Michael Jackson has carried forth to the present. To be sure, the mutation effected by Brown in international popular music and dance culture was not singularly initiated by him, for Little Richard and Chuck Berry were principal exponents within it. James Brown has been a classical representation of it.

Continuation of a black legacy and tradition from James Brown to Michael Jackson, more than justifies one speaking of the modernism of the former and the postmodernism of the latter. The phenomenon of parody and pastiche, the fusion of artistic forms, the cross-over between cultural boundaries and the dehistoricization and depoliticization of the cultural imagination, which are some of the defining and constitutive characteristics of postmodernism, are very much apparent in the musical composition and dancing patterns of Michael Jackson: there is the attempted fusion of New Black Music and rock music, as the above lead quotation from Cornel West makes clear; the distinction between cultural boundaries, between popular culture and mass culture for example, is not resolutely held on to. Perhaps also, the demarcation between high culture and low culture, is not strictly adhered to; and the intermixture of media so evident in the brilliant work of Laurie Anderson, another postmodernist artist, seems to have penetrated and affected the present preoccupations of Michael Jackson. The intermixture of forms, modes and artistic ideologies, which is perhaps the ruling ethos of postmodernism, has been taken to such extremes by Jackson that it has affected his ontological status as a black person. In appearance, one cannot easily tell whether Michael Jackson is a black person or a white person. This has

prompted Terence Trent D'Arby to make the following observation recently to a London magazine, *City Limits* : "The transfiguration close-up is a sad indictment in America: the brown boy in the bubble so distrusted his own sepia image that every distinguishing feature likening to his father is now a prize conversation piece in a plastic surgeon's parlour. . . " [11](#) The foregoing comment should perhaps be understood as the positioning of post-postmodernism in relation to the postmodernism of Michael Jackson.

But beyond the confusion of ontological realms, the importance of Michael Jackson in our contemporary context is that he is a summation and culmination of a tradition and, equally, through that very summation he is a beginning of a new cultural phenomenon within a new historical conjuncture. The tradition which finds its fullest expression in Michael Jackson is that of great black concert dancing: stretching from Juba, a former slave and the most brilliant black dancer of the nineteenth-century, through Earl Tucker, an authentic genius in dancing in the early part of our century, to James Brown, the interconnector of all dancing styles in the history of black dancing. If there should be any doubt that Jackson arguably belongs to this constellation of fascinating dance stars, one need only consult the television tape of the celebration of the twenty-fifth anniversary founding of Motown Company, where he is in superb dancing form. In fact, it could be argued that the popularity of Michael Jackson's music videos is precisely the great dancing form displayed in them. It is the music video of *Thriller* which made possible the selling of forty million copies of the *Thriller* album, and in the process generating one hundred and eighty million dollars for CBS/Epic record company. If the *Thriller* music video was the first video to show the importance of this form of advertising and profit-making, then the *Bad* music video, released simultaneously all over the world on television channels a few months ago, was the first video to show the ideological potency of this medium in postmodernist conditions. Throughout this music video a social message was carried forth. But what is music video?

Music video is one of the original artifacts which could only have come into being under postmodernist conditions. [12](#) In it also, there is the hybridization of modes and crossover of artistic forms so characteristic of the cultural dominance of postmodernism. Though music video began as a promotional and advertising medium for record companies, it has in the few years of its development transformed itself into an artifact which is both art and advertisement, and is simultaneously both avant-garde and kitsch. Its structure is both music, dance and performance. It equally combines the elements of television, live musical performance and film. Music video cassettes function on television systems as both programming and marketing. This new cultural development in the new electronic technologies has undoubtedly been accelerated and facilitated by the genius behind the *Thriller* music video: Michael Jackson (singer, dancer and

performer), Quincy Jones (producer), and John Landis (director). But it is the postmodernist dancing feet of Michael Jackson which have captured the cultural consciousness of world audience, postmodernist salespeople and producers. In causing a revolution in music video production today, the postmodernist dancing feet of Michael Jackson announce the coming of purely dance videos tomorrow.

1 The essay was commissioned by *Tanz Aktuell* in 1987 but was not published. The editorial board, of which this author was a member, of this West Berlin's dance review felt the essay was too celebratory of postmodernism and of Americanisms. In actual fact, the essay was celebrating the black expressive forms of postmodernism [1993].

2 Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism", in *New Left Review*, no. 146, July-August, 1984, pp.53-92.

3 Jean-Francois Lyotard, **The Postmodern Condition**, University of Minnesota Press, 1984; Terry Eagleton, "Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism", in **Against the Grain: Selected Essays**, Verso, 1986, pp.131-147; Fredric Jameson, "Architecture and the Critique of Ideology", in **Architecture, Criticism, Ideology**, (ed.) Joan Ockman, Princeton Architectural Press, 1985, pp.51-87.

4 Marcia B. Siegel, "Vanguard Meets Mainstream", in *The Hudson Review*, vol. xxxv no.1, Spring 1982, pp.99-104.

5 Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka), **Blues People: Negro Music in White America**, William Morrow and Company, 1963, p.25, p.86.

6 *ibid.*, p.191.

7 *ibid.*, p.128-129.

8 See the fascinating observations in Helmut Gunther, **Die Tanze und Ritten der Afro-Amerikaner: Von Kongo bis Samba und Soul**, Verlag Dance Motion, 1982.

9 Amiri Baraka on the historical moment of the founding of New Black Music: Leroi Jones, "The Changing Same (R&B and New Black Music)", in **Black Music**, William Morrow & Company, 1967, pp.180-211.

10 Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka), *ibid.*, p.66.

[11](#) Cited in *New Society* , "Race and Society", October 2, 1987, p.1.

[12](#) Peter Wollen, "Ways of thinking about music video (and postmodernism)", in *Critical Quarterly* , vol. 28 no.1&2, Spring-Summer, 1986, pp.167-170. A three-page sketch of brilliant penetration. I followed it closely on the issue of music video.