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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### THRILLER, THE BEST-SELLING ALBUM IN HISTORY AND THE SHORT-FILM THAT FOREVER CHANGED THE HISTORY OF INTERNATIONAL ENTERTAINMENT

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#### ABSTRACT

The object of the research is a study of the short-film of the song Thriller, given the legible effects of global culture about 35 years after its publication. The video clip Thriller, by Michael Jackson, published December 2, 1983, has been awarded, several times, as "Best video clip of history" (from MTV in 1999 and from Imaginaction, the first music video festival in 2018), accompanied by record sales of the album beyond all expectations, such as "The best-selling record in history" (certified by Guinness Book of World Records and Billboard). Even the videocassette of the video clip, containing the short-film plus the backstage of the production, became the most sold videocassette ever, surpassing the records of Star Wars and Gone with the Wind. What were the global cultural dynamics of this immense success is still a great universe to explore, given that the success of Thriller was pervasive in different generations, from teenagers to the elderly, in every country of the world and in different artistic and design fields. Jackson, with this short film: he affirmed forever - and unquestionably - the value of the short-film for the promotion of a product, on the global scene; from that moment on he made the use of the music video clip absolutely indispensable for the promotion of a record product, with effects still on the global scene; recorded a new style in the history of international contemporary dance, which, accompanied by the performances of other songs, remains one of the most famous and beloved choreographic styles in the world.

#### INTRODUCTION

As an introduction to research, it is useful to report the historical-cultural context of the seventies and early eighties, to contextualize Jackson's artistic elaborate. The seventies inherited, from the previous decade, a positive social trend and economic growth, based on a trust towards progress, towards technology, with a growing social well-being that seemed unlimited. The musical productions, the television production and the cinematographic productions, succeeded in having great developments. In the music scene the Sixties had established the great pop and rock stars, Elvis Presley, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Bob Dylan. Some of these, having become strong symbols of the cultural and youth revolution of the time, had a fundamental role for the international music industry, imposing it as the most representative art of cultural and social changes. The record productions, in the seventies, had the birth of many rock-derived genres, such as soft-rock, pop-rock, hard-rock and dark-rock. There was the birth of psychedelic music, progressive rock. For black music, however, there was a sharp decline. The international recording and television world was still limited by racial principles: while the "white" artists - elected representatives of the most successful genres, such as rock and pop - were given

passages in every media, to black artists, instead - under the pretext that soul music, R & b, funk and disco sold less - media spaces were denied, condemning the whole world of black music to appear as a second series universe. Even when disco music began to dominate the fledgling nightclubs, the reactions of the media world were highly critical. Music critic Craig Werner wrote:

*"The attacks on the disco music gave strength to a racism of the worst way". (C. Werner, A Change Is Gonna Come: Music, Race & the Soul of America, Penguin Publishing Group, New York, 1999).*

The 1980s opened in the wake of the positive economic and social trend of the 1970s, bringing these trends to relative maturity. The television, radio and video games (born in the mid-seventies) began to be economically reachable for all citizens (in industrialized countries) and domestic and car Hi-Fi systems spread in very large scale, plus Sony invented, in 1979, the walkman, so anyone and everywhere could listen to music in excellent quality, giving musicians a media power like they never had before. As the instrumentation evolved, the panorama of TV and radio broadcasters also had a great development: the first private TV and radio stations were born.

Television and especially radio channels became absolutely protagonists in the diffusion and approval processes of international music production, creating a highly dependent system in which, if a musical product was not transmitted by radio or TV, it appeared as "non-existent". In addition, the radio system, based on portable equipment, could follow the individual everywhere, allowing the creation of an extremely deep and dependent "individual-product music" relationship. This tendency benefited the birth of MTV in 1981, a television exclusively dedicated to music, based in New York, which quickly established itself as a media base for record productions. Following the example of radio stations, MTV too, however, brought its selection exclusively to pop and rock artists, or "white" performers. The extraordinary diffusion of the radio and television media channels also had negative aspects for the recording industry which, in the space of two or three years, found itself in a severe crisis. Many operators in the sector predicted that the music, on LP and music cassette support, would not survive the new passion of young people for home consoles, for private dedicated radios and the possibility of sharing music by recording it on cassette. The *Thriller* album, therefore, began in this international context, not favorable in general terms and even less favorable for a disc by a black artist. Yet *Thriller* had the greatest sales success in history, and even in cultural success it entered history, forcing every radio and every television to open up its schedules to black artists, so much were the requests of the public and therefore the impossibility, by broadcasters, to exclude Jackson's video clips from their programming. What were the winning factors of this cultural, artistic and commercial operation?

From our research - conducted in recent years, and given what is evident in the international cultures of entertainment, short films, music and contemporary dance - some strategic strength factors of the *Thriller* product have been highlighted, sought after and/or involuntary by the production team, but effective and very innovative. One of the factors of strength was certainly the professional ethics of Michael Jackson who - ever since he was a boy, when he recorded his first international hits - had always declared himself eager to overcome the limits of musical genres, this to disintegrate the racial limits so present in the international entertainment world and, since those years, had always pursued this goal, standing outside of any political and/or religious scheme, this to try to reach the consensus of different ethnic and cultural groups. "*I want a music that has no skin colors, that doesn't have political flags, that has benches and blacks at the same time and of every person and every generation*". (Michael Jackson, *Moonwalk*, Doubleday, New York, USA, 1988).

With *Thriller*, then, Michael Jackson and Quincy Jones created an album that, first in history, included a highly varied panorama of musical genres, from rock to pop, mixed with soul, rhythm and blues, funk, disco, creating songs that, from international critics, were nicknamed "crossover", "an inseparable cross between different genres". With these songs, therefore, the selection by musical genres - justifications that the mass media used favoring the "white" artists - was immediately rendered inoffensive, and these songs, in fact, even seven out of nine total of the disc, occupied the first places of the several Billboard charts, both r&b-soul, and pop-rock charts. Second factor of strength, the one that in our research interests more, was the short-film *Thriller*, absolutely innovative product that: 1) has forever revolutionized the

history of the music video clip; 2) affirmed, forever, the incisiveness and the communicative potential of the short-film genre (since the "shorts", of the first decades of the birth of the cinema, were considered genre films, even if of short duration, while the shorts of the artistic avant-gardes have failed to reach a vast audience); 3) anticipated the birth of the fashion-film genre by imposing, for the attention of a global audience, a short-film propaganda of a product. Mainly a musical product, the *Thriller* album, but also a product-character, or Michael Jackson, with all the consequential fashion content, from dance to clothing; 4) at the beginning of the eighties, just in the first months in which a significant digital revolution started, opening new paths to multimedia and transmedia, Michael Jackson made choices for the *Thriller* concept that turned out to be decisive.

*Thriller*, at the behest of Jackson, who had to invest his capital as Sony Music refused to subsidize the project, was built as a highly multimedia and transmedia phenomenon. The *Thriller* product occupied the market with: musical supports, such as cassettes, vinyls, etc.; through the radios; through televisions (with the three video clips created, all strongly innovative and all with the short-film standard); through the cinemas (in which the short-film *Thriller* opened the evening before some films); through fashion, with the original clothes promoted by Jackson through short films (which have become so famous that they are present in the global collective imagination even through very simple symbols, like a single glove, the red leather jacket with black stripes, the black trousers) that ends on the ankles with white socks and black moccasins, the black trousers with the white side stripe, the sequined black jacket etc.) and through t-shirts, hats and branded jackets, etc; 5) has created a new era of the image of the contemporary musical artist, to which capacity for a complete audiovisual product is now required, as well as, in a good part of cases, also choreographic and dance skills are required; 6) carefully expresses the instances of the creative subject, artistic inspiration, plurality of languages and media supports, plurality of expressive techniques, emotional and psychic problems in the private sphere and in interaction with others and with the community, etc; 7) but above all *Thriller*, seen 35 years later, has become - rightly so - the symbol of an era, that of the end of the millennium, in which the figure of the artist was totally transformed in comparison to the past, consequently to the modern mass media system, which requires an artist to no longer be himself but to have a more functional managerial image for communication, causing art - and artists - to be absorbed in an immense game of transformism in which the characters who they live on the screen, or in the exhibitions of the figurative and performing arts, they die on the public tables as stored masks.

*Thriller* with its transformism with spectacular objectives, it imposes itself as the right symbol of an era in which the phenomena of communication - and of consumerism - incessant and global, have transformed individuals of every type (artists, religious, politicians, etc.) to exclusive masks appropriate to the business, on a case-by-case basis. If we keep in mind that, with the subject of the idealization of the neighbor by the perceiving subject, we connect to all the literature of the twentieth century, and to the current international aesthetic, neuro-aesthetic and media reflections, it seems clear to us that the short-film *Thriller* is not to be underestimated, even more, when, nowadays, social networks have multiplied the use of false identity, of multi-identity, of

"occasional masks", in an exponential way, representing one of the major languages and channels of communication of the new generations.

On March 15, 1984, the Rolling Stone wrote: "*Michael Jackson is now the most famous star in the cultural pop universe - perhaps better known than Jesus, as John Lennon said of the Beatles, but certainly more famous than the Beatles and any other star of the past. How famous is Michael Jackson? Let's analyze some of the most famous albums of this last year: add all the copies of Let's Dance by David Bowie, Synchronicity by the Police, Undercover by the Rolling Stones, COLOR BY NUMBERS by the Culture Club, METAL HEALTH by Quiet Riot's, the eponymous album by Duran Duran. Lots of records right? Now ... double these figures. That's how famous Michael Jackson is. The THRILLER album has sold over 25 million copies worldwide, more than any other album in history. The figures are unstoppable. No other pop star has ever sold so many records. No other album has ever generated seven Top Ten singles. Michael Jackson's media power appears limitless*". (M.Goldberg, C.Connelly, *Michael Jackson Trouble in Paradise?*, in Rolling Stone, 15 marzo 1984).

Music critic Joseph Vogel wrote: "*Thriller was more than a musical record, it was a massively successful cultural and multimedia phenomenon, more than any other in history. It marked the birth of a new sound, a new musical era, a new concept of pop-star and a new concept of pop music album. Thriller has overcome all the imaginable barriers, reaching children, young and old, blacks and whites, people of every social class, in every corner of the Earth*". (Joseph Vogel, *Man In The Music. La vita creativa di Michael Jackson*, Arcana Edizioni, Roma, 2012, pag.71).

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research was developed through all possible literary sources and video sources: monographs, magazine archives, newspaper archives, video interviews, literary interviews, videos, documentaries, etc. The text mentions *Billboard* and *Rolling Stone*, two of the most prestigious music magazines on the international scene; a text by music critic Joseph Vogel was also cited, judged by the *New York Times* among the 20 most influential music critics in the world.

## Conclusion

Among the fundamental dynamics - for what has been the greatest success in history in the recording field and in the show business in general - Michael Jackson's talent certainly seems to be clearly evident, able to sing, compose music, choreograph and dance like no one another artist existed, offering perhaps the most complete performer in history. The artist's desire to make music that was stronger than any racial and / or cultural limit, a music that could have the most universal soul possible, in order to be appreciated in every type of culture throughout the world. Not an easy target, but Jackson's skill consisted in having started pursuing this path since he was only nine years old, his international debut with *The Jackson 5*, so, for *Thriller's* work, when the artist had 24 years, by now Jackson was already mature to elaborate a product strongly characteristic of his artistic research and, luckily for him, strongly popular and universal, in the artistic aspect and in the commercial aspect. Then, in the research, the decisive choices to construct a multimedia and transmedia

product were highlighted, chosen - reconstructing from the sources - decidedly decided by Michael Jackson who, in order to realize them, had to finance with his own capital, because Sony Music put out from production. Choices able to attack the market on different media and different channels of communication, video, audio, but also on fashion products and gadgets of all kinds. Furthermore, it is very interesting, and to be explored, how we managed to impose a short-film so strongly in the global collective imagination, so as to: create a general revival of the "short-film" standard, which, by now, seemed no longer used, after the huge commercialization of TV shows and popular entertainment feature films; be a fundamental factor for all post-production productions, forcing every musical product to be equipped with video clips, and anticipating the "fashion-film" genre of contemporary promotional communication.

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