



An Insider's Look at the Michael Jackson Case

There is this wonderful Chinese proverb that reminds us: “Nail that stick up, hammered down.” We in the States express a similar sentiment when we declare that we are “flying under the radar.” Both notions recognize that heightened visibility means heightened vulnerability.

Enter Michael Jackson, AKA “The King of Pop.” Virtually everything about Michael, except his career of late, is like the proverbial nail that sticks up. To say it another way, Michael’s radar echo is as strong as a crop duster flying near the White House.

Comedian Chris Rock asks the following question in his standup routine: “Remember when we were kids and we would debate who was better...Michael Jackson or Prince? Well, Prince won.” What is fascinating about the “Prince -- Michael Jackson comparison is that both men are high profile, arguably eccentric, and let’s not forget, gifted performers. But for all of Prince’s eccentricities and outlandish behavior, Prince comes in under the radar, Michael does not.

Long before allegations of child abuse surfaced, there was this story about Michael sleeping in a see-through life-extension chamber. Then there were reports that Michael made efforts to purchase “Elephant Man’s” bones. I don’t know if those stories are true, but those stories were still not enough to tilt the Chris Rock debate toward Prince. But I will tell you what did. Michael shows up on everyone’s radar because he chose to redesign his facial features. Mind you, a lot of people rehab their face, but *redesigning* it is quite another proposition.

Data on cosmetic and plastic surgery procedures in the United States inform us that in the year 2003, 8.7 million Americans had some form of cosmetic procedure. Botox, followed by chemical peels, then microdermabrasion, led the pack in non-surgical facial rehabilitation. When we analyze the surgery data, nose reshaping, followed closely

by lipoplasty, then breast augmentation and eyelid surgery, were performed 1.7 million times in the United States. But how many facial *redesign* surgeries were completed?

If we don't count reconstructive surgery designed to correct congenital facial deformities, reconstruction on burn or accident victims, redesigning a "normal" face is virtually unheard of. The only place where we find anything close to facial redesigning going on is in the tattoo/body-piercing parlor.

So why does redesigning a face make the nail stick up? Realize that we make hundreds of instant and unconscious assessments about others based on their facial features. For instance, the size of a man's jaw and the prominence of his browline is a very good predictor of dominance. In fact, researchers have demonstrated that simply by referencing the size of a first year military cadet's jaw and browline, one can predict which cadet will achieve the highest rank 20 years down the line. We all know what is meant when I say: "She has bedroom eyes." Newborns are more likely to cry when confronted with a pen and ink drawing of a face with a turned down mouth versus a drawing of a smile

Michael's redesigned face leaves the viewer confused about who he is as a person. He and his surgeons, quite inadvertently I'm sure, have altered and/or removed many of those features that inform the viewer of intent, personality and character. What Michael and his surgeon(s) have done is transform his face into a Rorschach Inkblot Test.

For those who don't know, the Rorschach is referred to as a projective test because when the patient responds to the Rorschach Inkblots, what they are really doing is projecting their own internal thoughts and feelings onto the blot. To give you a simple illustration of how projection works, while looking at the exact same inkblot, one person may "see" dancing bears while another person may "see" two people engaged in a life and death struggle.

Some people look at Michael Jackson and project their fears and suspicions onto someone whose looks are unfamiliar. Others project their child-like faith onto Michael and see the living embodiment of a saint. Saintliness should look different. In the absence of facial features that contradict those projections, viewers are left to project whatever they want. Mix in allegations of pedophilia with Michael's looks and behavior and you have a perfect storm of sorts. Those who saw suspicious designs in the inkblot

before allegations of child sexual abuse surfaced, see confirmation of their suspicions in everything Michael does. Those who projected onto Michael child-like innocence deny that he could do anything bad, not to mention something so horrible, as take advantage of a child.

These two groups are represented on the nightly talk shows arguing about the case, they can be seen outside the courthouse bickering with one another, and if Michael is lucky, these two groups are on the jury that will look at the same evidence, the same face, and will project - excuse me...logically arrive at diametrically opposite conclusions. I am reminded of these lyrics from Michael's song: *Man in the Mirror*:

*I'm Starting With The Man In The Mirror
I'm Asking Him To Change His Ways
And No Message Could Have Been Any Clearer
If You Wanna Make The World A Better Place
Take A Look At Yourself, And Then Make A Change*

Dr. Anthony Napoleon is the President of Napoleon Legal Consulting, Inc., a trial consultancy firm. He is an expert on visual image and non-verbal communication. His book on visual image, *Awakening Beauty, an Illustrated Look at Mankind's Love and Hatred of Beauty*, includes a chapter on Plastic Surgery. He can be reached at www.napoleonlegal.com