

THE MAN IN THE MIRROR: Jackson's skewed self-image

As anyone who has not been ensconced in a hyperbolic chamber for the last week knows, Michael Jackson is dead.

The 50-year-old King of Pop succumbed to cardiac arrest on June 25 at his Holmby Hills residence, apparently the victim of prescription drug addiction.

Doctors have performed an autopsy and begun their postmortem assessment of the performer's demise. In the meantime, the media and Jackson's fans have begun their own dissection of the life and times of the legendary pop star.

I am among these.

The man in the mirror

Over the years, Michael Jackson's reputation was tarnished by an array of controversies, scandals and erratic behavior. Nonetheless, he leaves behind a memorable catalog of music sure to light off the fireworks on any dance floor. (Don't believe me? Give Jackson's "Rock With You" a spin at your next party.)

He also leaves behind some valuable lessons. Foremost among these is the importance of accepting ourselves as we are, body and soul.

At one time, Michael Jackson seemed to have it all: fame, money and more talent in one gloved finger than most people have in their entire body. What he did not have, however, was a strong sense of self-esteem.

Over the years, the world watched Michael Jackson go through a staggering amount of plastic surgery, leading to what amounts to self-mutilation. It was a sad progression.

Once an undeniable PYT (Thriller-speak for "Pretty Young Thing"), Michael Jackson shaved more and more width off his nose; played with pigment (I'm referring to the tattooed-on lipstick and eyeliner, not the pancake makeup and depigmentation therapy he reportedly used to combat the skin condition vitiligo); and enlisted surgeons to sculpt his face like so much clay.

It became clear that the pop sensation had body dysmorphic disorder, a form of mental illness in which the afflicted person cannot stop obsessing over a flaw, or perceived flaw, in his or her appearance.

Judging from the many areas Michael Jackson targeted during his litany of procedures, it is likely that his preoccupation extended to most of his features.

An off-the-wall self-image

If you suffer from body dysmorphic disorder, sometimes referred to as "imagined ugliness," you may withdraw from the world because you view yourself as so repellent you don't want to be seen by anyone.

People with a skewed self-image spend hours scrutinizing their appearance, experiencing frustration and despair and looking for ways to fix the perceived problem, according to the Mayo Clinic website.

Perhaps the most common manifestations of body dysmorphic disorder are eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia.

Celebrities who have struggled with eating disorders—starving or purging themselves to be thin—include Lucy Lawless, Billy Bob Thornton, Dennis Quaid, Elton John, Tracey Gold, Paula Abdul, Sally Field, Christina Ricci, Geri Halliwell, Brittany Snow, Brandy, Kelly Clarkson and Kate Beckinsale.

Most recently, The Hills' Stephanie Pratt opened up to US Weekly about her battle with bulimia, brought on by the pressure to be as thin as her skinny co-stars.



Another part of me

Along with fixating on their shape, people with body dysmorphic disorder may fixate on features they find undesirable. Some seek numerous cosmetic surgeries to achieve the perfect form.

Famous people who have admitted to or shown signs of addiction to cosmetic surgery include celebrity mom Jackie Stallone, socialite Jocelyn Wildenstein (She has spent upwards of \$4 million to achieve a more feline appearance, and is now known in the tabloids as "Cat Woman"), model Janice Dickinson and concert promoter (and Liza Minelli ex) David Gest.

Others who may have the condition are Mickey Rourke, Donatella Versace, Melanie Griffith, La Toya Jackson, Carrot Top, Tom Jones, Kenny Rogers, Cher and Joan Rivers.

The above list shows that Michael Jackson was not alone, but he still was remarkable for the sheer amount surgery he underwent and for the visible damage it wreaked on his face and career.

You might say that he became the poster child for body dysmorphic disorder or BDD.



Vested interest: This poster launched a thousand crushes.

A thrilling performer

He wasn't always a cautionary tale.

When Michael Jackson released his 1982 mega-sensation Thriller, I was 8 years old. I fell in love with the charismatic pop star.

I was not alone. When I attended a retreat for a father-daughter organization in which my family participated, we were delighted to learn that one of the more technology-forward fathers had brought a VCR and a videotape of "The Making of Thriller" to the sleepover.

The 20 or so girls—local Indian Princesses of various YMCA-sponsored tribes—screamed every time Michael Jackson appeared on the scene. It was Beatlemania all over. Our dads, puzzled at the swoon-appeal of what they viewed as a somewhat strange and effeminate man, just shook their heads.

Who knows how many times I spun the Thriller record—certainly often enough to learn Vincent Price's rap in the midst of the title track ("The funk of forty thousand years!") and to be intrigued by the lyrics to "Billy Jean." (If, as the protagonist so vehemently insists, the kid is not his son, why do the baby's eyes look like his?)

I liked Michael Jackson's gentle speaking voice. I appreciated his boyish enthusiasm for carnival rides, arcade games, Disneyland and wild animals. Most of all, I liked how he looked.

What do you do when it's 1983 and you are in love with Michael Jackson? You tear a pull-out of Michael Jackson from a teenybopper magazine like Bop or Tiger Beat and tape it to your wall.

If you're my age, you know the one. Michael Jackson poses casually, hands in his pockets and a brooding expression on his face. The slight whiff of menace is softened by the fact that the superstar is wearing a yellow vest that looks as if it were knitted by a solicitous grandmother.

My passion for Michael Jackson died down a bit by the following year, replaced by a new obsession named Madonna.

Madonna's website, by the way, currently features an in memoriam photo of Madonna and Michael Jackson together at an awards show, as well as a moving tribute I suspect was written by Madonna herself, not a publicist:

"I can't stop crying over the sad news. I have always admired Michael Jackson. The world has lost one of the greats, but his music will live on forever! My heart goes out to his three children and other members of his family. God bless."

Though I never again felt the white-hot heat of my Thriller-era fanaticism, I have retained a soft spot in my heart for Michael Jackson. As the old song goes, "Make new friends but keep the old/One is silver, but the other is gold."

I have always hoped that Jackson's association with young boys, though clearly in poor judgment, was asexual. I have continued to marvel at his flawless vocals and preternatural ability to turn his body into a full-throttle funk machine at the sound of a beat.

And I have stubbornly refused to supplant the image of Michael Jackson as a handsome and hopeful young man in a yellow vest with the image of the damaged man he became.

A history of transformation

There are many sites that chart the progression of Michael Jackson's surgical procedures. One of these, *The History of Michael Jackson's Face*, starts at the beginning, August 28, 1958, when Jackson was born "a cute African-American guy." (Heads up: The site contains some crude, and cruel, language.)

The transformation timeline begins during the Thriller era, when a 26-year-old Jackson began sporting a slightly narrowed nose and eyebrows that were finer and more arched than those with which he was born.

One year later, Michael began to look eccentric. His nose had been further whittled down and his eyes were darkened with permanent eyeliner. By 29, Michael Jackson had begun to look undeniably feminine, partially because his eyebrows were now so dramatically arched they were reminiscent of Joan Crawford.

Tongues began to wag about the fact that the pop singer was also beginning to look undeniably white. (Longtime friends of Jackson like author Deepak Chopra say that the reduced pigment was the direct result of his patchy skin condition, and that the singer was genuinely grieved when people insisted he was rejecting his race.)

By 32, Jackson had gone from looking feminine and ethereal—almost pixie-ish, quite appropriate given his identification with Peter Pan—to looking downright alien. I am nearly 35 now and it surprises me to see how old Michael Jackson looked by 1991.

The King of Pop had entered the period of facial sculpture. His nose, still a work in progress, took on a sharp and snub-nosed look previously unseen outside of the world of anime.

An array of surgeries over the next several years ranged from experiments in exaggerated masculinity (sculpted jaw, chin cleft, facial hair that was rumored to be transplanted) to attempts at repairing his badly damaged nose.

I'll stop with the timeline here. We know what happened from there: Michael Jackson continued to live with the fallout from too many surgeries, which were marked by questionable goals and botched outcomes.

In his 1988 biography "Moon Walk," Michael Jackson said his plastic surgery history was fairly limited: only two nose jobs and a surgery to create a chin cleft.

Plastic surgeons speculate that Jackson did much more, both before and after his admission. The performer, they say, had several rhinoplastic procedures, his lips thinned, his cheekbones "enhanced" and his forehead lifted.

Jackson's most repeated and famous target was his nose. After a slew of surgeries, Jackson reportedly had to wear a prosthetic tip on his nose; later, a plastic surgeon used cartilage from his ear to rebuild his ruined nose.

Jackson's morphology is consistent with someone who has body dysmorphic disorder, says Dr. Robert Guida, a Manhattan-based cosmetic surgeon who weighed in on the psychological condition in an article on Suite101.com.

"If a person is satisfied after a surgery or two, that's normal," he said. ". . . It becomes an addiction if they have plastic surgery procedures over and over, often to the point of making their appearance look worse instead of better. Patients who understand that perfection cannot be achieved display a more normal behavior, and are usually satisfied with their appearance."

Michael Jackson's body dysmorphic disorder was grueling to watch unfold and, without a doubt, much more grueling to live. It is unfortunate that no one was able to intervene with enough impact to get Jackson to stop seeking surgery and instead address the issues fueling his quest for perfection.

It is also unfortunate that there are cosmetic surgeons around who are willing to operate on stars and regular folks who have lost touch with their own physical reality.

A 2007 article on the Medical News site posits that it may well be a surgeon's duty to refuse to renovate the physical attributes of a person who has had an excessive amount of plastic surgery: "Like the bartender who 'cuts off' the person who has had too much to drink, does the surgeon decide when to draw the line?"

Beat It

As is the case with any addiction, the compulsion to get plastic surgery can be beat. First, however, the addiction, and the dysmorphic body image that fuels it, must be recognized. According to the Suite 101 article, the main symptoms of cosmetic surgery addiction are unrealistic expectations and "a refusal to listen to what their surgeon advises."

The Medical News article lists the following symptoms of body dysmorphic disorder: 1) enterprising in obsessive grooming rituals; 2) examining and picking at the skin; 3) staring at self-reflections continuously 4) avoiding social gatherings due to feelings of ugliness; and 4) undergoing multiple plastic surgeries.

What should you do if you or someone you love becomes addicted to cosmetic surgery? According to BeautySurgeries.com, someone with BDD should seek professional help just as you would for any addiction. Counseling can help and so can antidepressant medications. If your condition is bad enough, you may even want to consider checking into rehab.

All of us tend to be extremely self-critical, a quality that sometimes prompts us to do what Michael Jackson sang about in "Man in the Mirror": "I'm starting with the man in the mirror/I'm asking him to change his ways."

What we can learn from his tragic transformation is that the change should come from the inside out.

For more information, please visit: www.drguida.com