

Michael Jackson & Michel Foucault Walk Into a Bar

“Is it surprising that the cellular prison, with its regular chronologies, forced labor, its authorities of surveillance... should have become the modern instrument of penalty? Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?”

—Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish*

“That’s ignorant.”

—Michael Jackson, *Living with Michael Jackson*

A string of songs from the late seventies into the mid-eighties aspire to the identity of the American everyman. These are mostly white, working class anthems: John Mellancamp’s “Jack & Diane,” Journey’s “Don’t Stop Believin’,” Bon Jovi’s “Livin’ on a Prayer,” and especially Bruce Springsteen’s “Born in the USA.” These are power ballads fallen out of time but not out of favor, sung alike by middle-aged men who were teenagers when the songs first climbed *Billboard* charts, thirty-something women stuck in traffic listening to rush hour radio, and drunken fraternity boys in karaoke bars from Topeka to Tokyo. It would be difficult for me, as it would be for many, I suspect, to say I don’t love these songs, though en masse they become a ubiquitous blur, a sprawling shopping center with McDonald’s, Wendy’s, and Subway, where the chords might be different, but the meat tastes blandly familiar and comforting.

One song from this era also claims universality, but stands astride the crowd: Rockwell’s 1984 hit “Somebody’s Watching Me.” “I’m just an average man,” contends the first verse, “with an average life. I work from nine to five; hey hell, I pay the price. All I want is to be left alone in my average home.” Rockwell’s home was anything but. His given name was Kennedy William Gordy; he was the son of Motown founder Berry Gordy, who claims he named his son after John Kennedy and William “Smokey” Robinson. In 1984 the father and son were estranged, and Rockwell lived with Berry’s ex-wife, R&B star Ray Singleton. Somehow, without his father’s knowledge, Rockwell attained a recording contract at Motown and wrote his biggest hit about the paranoia of living under the shadow of such a figure. He might have claimed to be average, but he wonders as the first verse moves into the song’s bridge, “Why do I always feel like I’m in the Twilight Zone?”

The Digital Age has made us all citizens of a surveillance state. How surveyed we are, of course, depends on any number of factors. I live in Washington, DC, one of the most surveyed cities on the planet, and cameras, visible and invisible, watch me as I commute to work, order coffee, go to the gym, and then walk to Captain Cookie & The Milk Man, a food truck with the most delicious vegan chocolate chip cookies I have yet to find. (An iPhone app, MyFitnessPal, estimates this cookie has 250 calories and I will have to run 2.55 miles to burn them off). If you travel regularly by plane, train, or automobile on our nation's turnpikes and interstates, your picture is taken, your identity checked and cross-checked for general security purposes. Some of this—and my libertarian friends would scoff at me saying this—seems innocent enough, and at times necessary. I've seen enough movies where terrorists take over The White House to know we need their picture, that it helps us not only determine who they are and what they want, but also which rogue agent (Kiefer Sutherland, Harrison Ford, Matt Damon) to send in. God Bless America.

Well, it's easy to say God Bless America as a white guy. If you are a woman, our country is obsessed with surveying your body. In 2012, the state of Virginia passed a law requiring women to get an ultrasound before having an abortion. During early stages of pregnancy, when most abortions are performed, this must be done by penetrating the woman's vagina with a camera. If you appear Latino, you can be asked to prove citizenship at any point, and if you are African American, your body is far less likely to be protected by and three times more likely to be assaulted by our nation's police forces. And god bless you, indeed, if you appear even vaguely Muslim in post-9/11 America.

When my father calls to say he has cancer, his first request is "Now I don't want this posted on Facebook." He's mostly concerned two of my sisters, both evangelical Christians, will narrate his battle online, posting a stream of prayer requests as the cancer cells divide and multiply, or praise reports when a doctor tells him his latest blood counts look promising. Our father, a Vietnam veteran, also refuses to call this a "battle" with cancer. He is too rational, and explains scientists are seeing an uptick in lymph node cancers amongst veterans who fought in Southeast Asia and were exposed to Agent Orange. I want to post rabid liberal rants on social media about how the industrial military complex gave my dad cancer. Maybe my father, a scopophobe, should be concerned about his atheist son, too, the one who writes this essay, this act of writing both an agent and conduit of surveillance. What are those burdensome

categories of essayistic nonfiction, if not our surveillance of the world, and memoir or confession, if not the surveillance of ourselves?

If you begin to search for “Somebody’s Watching Me,” Google assumes you are looking for Michael Jackson, though it is not his song. Jackson appears on the track as the melodic voice of the chorus — *I always feel like somebody’s watching me*. Michael Jackson’s fame, of course, eclipsed that of Rockwell, who rests now in relative obscurity. This was especially true in 1984, a year when “Somebody’s Watching Me” steadily climbed the *Billboard* charts, yes, but also a year when Jackson ascended his throne, with *Thriller* taking home eight Grammy awards and becoming the best-selling album of all time. The album’s title track begins “It’s close to midnight and something evil’s lurking in the dark.” The something remains lyrically vague, though in hindsight this seems a pivotal moment for both Jackson personally and Jackson the cultural zeitgeist. Perhaps the something evil was us, a public that would not stop watching his every move, a gaze Jackson most often welcomed, but a gaze that eventually devoured him. Perhaps the something evil was also Jackson, or rather, his vexed need to be seen and then not seen, a change that would render the adult Jackson confined to his secure homes or various hotel rooms for much of his life. In his 1975 study *Discipline & Punish*, philosopher Michel Foucault argues that not only modern prisons but also schools, hospitals, and the general mechanisms of public society have used the idea of surveillance to make us all self-disciplining citizens. His original French title, in fact, is *Surveiller et Punir*. Jackson, though I cannot claim he read Foucault, seemed keenly aware of the principles therein, and of the irony inherent in the fact that the thing which made him famous eventually also made him a prisoner.

“Wherever you go from now on, people will be watching you,” Dianna Ross told ten-year-old Michael Jackson in 1968. By 1981, Jackson explained to *Rolling Stone*, “I would sleep on the stage if I could.” As the Scarecrow in 1978’s *The Wiz*, Michael quoted Henry IV, “Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown,” but he wouldn’t become known as the King of Pop until 1991, a title he requested for himself in a memo to MTV.

In his theory of a modern surveillance society, Foucault put forth the idea that the Panopticon — that circular prison where inmates were constantly watched — is a model

for many other systems. He especially distrusted the medical gaze, as outlined in his later book *The Birth of the Clinic*, where the philosopher imagined doctors as co-conspirators with governing régimes, arguing “the struggle against disease must begin with a war against bad government... Man will be totally and definitively cured only if he is first liberated” from eyes who gaze upon him. The symptoms Foucault began exhibiting in the early 1980s would be clear to us now, though biographers, scholars, and activists waver on whether or not Foucault knew he had AIDS.

In a February 2014 interview with the *Telegraph*, the American novelist Edmund White, a friend of Foucault’s, claimed that in 1981

I was warning Foucault about AIDS. When I first told him about the disease he said: “Oh that’s perfect Edmund: you American puritans, you’re always inventing diseases. And one that singles out blacks, drug users and gays – how perfect!”... I tried to insist that it was real despite its ideological aspects... The doctors were intimidated by Foucault’s anti-medicine stance. They didn’t want to be accused of having a paternalistic or an I’m-better-than-you attitude. He himself wasn’t sure what his illness was until the last few months.

I find it hard to believe Foucault was so ingrained in his own ideology that he didn’t know he had AIDS until the very end. He lived in Paris, after all, spending a majority of his time outside France in either San Francisco or New York, epicenters of gay men’s health. While in residence at Berkeley during the seventies, he was a frequent visitor to Bay Area bathhouses. How could he not know? But this is easy for me to say as a gay man in the twenty-first century. And in examining Foucault’s past, I aim not to shame but to understand: he, like many of us, didn’t want his body to be under the surveillance of anyone, let alone prodding doctors at a moment when many thought those with AIDS had only themselves to blame. Perhaps he chose not to know, one of the few choices we are truly offered.

As a teenager I was diagnosed with hypochondria, so my need to know has long trumped any desire to remain blissfully unaware. At sixteen, I let a businessman jack me off in the steam room of the Pat Jones YMCA in Springfield, Missouri; I immediately left the gym and stopped at Walgreen’s, purchasing an \$89 HIV-home-testing kit, which I performed in the bathroom of a library and dropped in the mail to await my phone-in test results. Of course this was ignorant, both of how HIV is spread and its incubation period, but when it comes to issues of the body, I have always assumed the worst. So when I

returned from Washington to Missouri one weekend this past June to visit my parents, and my father complained of a swell on the right side of his neck, I quickly asked, “Could it be a tumor?” *No*, said my father and mother, both of whom worked in medicine before retiring; it was just summer allergies or a cold. When one, then two, then three rounds of antibiotics didn’t relieve the swelling, my father’s doctor ordered a biopsy. By mid-August, Dad called to tell me had cancer.

Of course, sometimes, the complicated decision to know renders us suspended in life, if not entirely saved. In an exploratory surgery, my father’s doctors found a cluster of small tumors in his throat and nasal cavities. The prognosis was good, albeit complicated: the growths were lymphoma, an easily treatable cancer, but one my father would live with for the rest of his life. For the rest of his life, my father will have quarterly positron emission tomography (PET) scans, where a radioactive tracer will course through his body and make diseases glow neon green or electric blue on a laboratory computer screen. I ask Dad, who hates to be photographed or discussed or dwelt upon, if this bothers him. “What are you going to do?” he answers, shrugging his shoulders.

A similar philosophical quandary rocked Michael Jackson since his late teens, though under different circumstances altogether. Diagnosed in 1983 with vitiligo, a disease that causes areas of the epidermis to lose pigmentation, Jackson began treatments—not to appear whiter because he was ashamed of being black, but to even out his increasingly blotchy complexion, an understandable vanity given the public circulation of Jackson’s image. He was, Jackson regularly claimed, first and foremost a dancer, destined to be gazed upon. Thus began the complicated relationship Jackson would have with the medical community until well after his death.

During the filming of a Pepsi commercial in January of 1984, Jackson’s hair caught fire, causing second- and third-degree burns. In 1993, Jackson would admit this was when he started taking painkillers, an addiction for which his friends Elizabeth Taylor and Elton John finally convinced Jackson to enter rehab, though his sober days following treatment would be few and far between, according to sources from Janet Jackson to Michael Bashir. Prescription drug overdose — Propofol and Benzodiazepine particularly — eventually led to cardiac arrest and Jackson’s death in the summer of 2009. Yet the medical gaze that so consumed public discussions of Jackson were those of his plastic surgeries: rhinoplasty, chin cleft, cheekbone reconstruction, lip alteration (to give but a few of the speculations). What consumed us most fervently, however, was Jackson’s ever-changing nose, reconstructed initially to resemble that of Bobby Driscoll,

the child actor who served as the voice for Walt Disney's 1953 *Peter Pan*. Though a metaphoric trifecta between Foucault, my father, and Jackson seems implausible, admittedly impossible, it bothers me now, when I see how my father hates not only the gaze of his doctors but also the pitying looks of his wife and children, that we all treated Jackson so obsessively—obsessing, as his doctors, well-meaning or not, must have obsessed, over the star's ever-changing look, an obsession we justified in the name of concern for our icon. Perhaps it was escape that drove Jackson to wear disguises, to surgically alter his appearance. As he prophesied in 1987's "Price of Fame": "I want a face no one can recognize."

Scopophobia, sometimes called ophthalmophobia, is the fear of being stared at. In the age of social media, it would seem few suffer from this condition. We snap selfies, pictures of the food we are eating, the coffee we are drinking, the friends we are hanging out with, and approaching thunderstorms from the patios of our parents' homes, as I have just done while sitting with my father the afternoon before his first exploratory surgery. We upload these to Facebook or Twitter or Tumblr or Instagram or Pinterest. We write clever captions punctuated by hashtags, "New shirt for new job! #Successories" or "Not to be one of *those* people but LOOK at this macaroni & cheese! #FoodPorn." We live in a world of exclamation points, when our daily lives are usually a series of commas, ellipses, periods, and semi-colons. A wise writing professor I had for the course "Modern Grammars" told us, "If you're lucky, you get one, maybe two exclamation points a year."

I am guilty of this, too. I have announced publications and promotions on Facebook, ranted about long lines at Starbucks on Twitter, Tumbled pictures of assholes who double-park their BMWs at my local Whole Foods. What am I saying? I am an asshole. What is perhaps more frightening: people have liked these, shared these, retweeted them. I can log on at any point in the day and know exactly what my friends are doing, what they're reading, where they're eating, and how they feel about this unseasonably cool September day. What is perhaps more puzzling is that at any point I can log on and know what people I would not even consider friends are doing: that guy from elementary school who moved to Japan, an old co-worker from The Gap who is now a Jehovah's Witness, or my second cousin in Iraq. I've met him once. And what is he doing? Playing Halo and drinking contraband whiskey outside Fallujah. He reports, "This is fucking awesome, dudes!"

Obese and twelve years old, I told a therapist my biggest fear was my father watching me eat. I was not really afraid of this, though it annoyed me when we were at McDonald's and Dad would watch me squirt a big glob of ketchup on a napkin, stir in salt, and dip greasy French fries from tabletop to mouth. Obviously, this was a deflection: I was afraid of being abandoned but didn't want to talk about it. Years later, I would relate this story to a different therapist in a different state. He would tell me this wasn't deflection, but my unconscious surfacing: "Classic Oedipal complex. Your biggest fear is your father catching you with a penis in your mouth."

When Michael Jackson was accused of molesting Jordan Chandler in 1993, Santa Barbara County sheriff's officers were issued a warrant to photograph and video Jackson's entire naked self, "including his penis, anus, hips, buttocks and any other part of his body." Allegedly, the thirteen-year-old Chandler had described to police white blotches on Jackson's genitalia in detail, which incensed the public even more, many of whom thought Jackson was not only a child molester but also attempting to become white before our very eyes. In reality, Jackson bleached his skin because of vitiligo. But the police demanded to examine the most intimate parts of Jackson's body, a surveillance that left us, his public, tantalized.

In line for security at Chicago's O'Hare International, one of the busiest airports in the world, I found myself approaching a sexy TSA agent. I do not particularly have a uniform fetish, but suffice it to say, he filled out his baby blue shirt and navy slacks quite nicely; about thirty-five, he wore his facial hair long enough to accentuate but not hide his Roman jaw; his eyes were bright green. I took out my phone in attempt to snap a picture of him, which I would send to a friend with the caption: "Can I request a TSA strip search, or is that against protocol?" Suddenly, the man behind me tapped my shoulder and asked what I was doing. "Um, taking a picture of the hot guy," I told him as he removed a badge from his jacket pocket. He was a United States Air Marshall.

In an interview room off the B Terminal, I learned Homeland Security is highly suspicious of people taking covert pictures of federal officers. The marshals went through my luggage and asked a series of questions. *Where are you going?* Missouri. My dad has cancer. *How long will you be there?* Three days if his surgery goes well.

You're flying in from Washington? Yes. I'm a PhD student there. *In what?* English. *Why were you taking a picture of a federal officer in a busy airport?* Because he was hot.

The German literary critic Walter Benjamin explains, "The scene of a crime, too, is deserted, it is photographed for the purpose of establishing evidence." If you Google "how often are we photographed," as I have just done, the first search result is from a forum at What to Expect®, an online community on pregnancy and parenting. The question prompting the forum comes from a woman named Sharon, who asks, "How often should we have professional baby photos taken?" I have known parents who do this monthly, though in many multi-child households I have noticed the frequency of pictures decreases with subsequent children. My sister Jennifer, for instance, had photos taken incessantly of her first child, my niece Natalie. Natalie's sister Nicole, born seventeen months later, was photographed decidedly less. Their third, my nephew Nicholas, has few baby photos. My sister expresses regret over this, as I have heard other parents do. Perhaps they know Benjamin is right, that our lives are all crime scenes in a sense, and happy baby photos relieve parents from blame. "See," they can tell their adult children, "you were happy once and here is proof."

Michael Jackson fascinates us so much, I believe, because he simultaneously fulfills our biggest fantasies and our biggest fears. A poor kid from Gary, Indiana, Jackson worked hard — harder than most of us ever work — from the age of four to overcome poverty. He was the American Dream anew: rich and known by everybody, but yet nobody. Not surprisingly, though shamefully, Jackson frightens us because he both transcends and overflows our knowable markers of race, gender, and sexuality. In her book *Dangerous*, Susan Fast explains, "The over-arching thematic in Jackson's art and life is what has often been viewed as his 'transgression' of normative boundaries." For over four decades we surveyed him — *Is Jackson black or white? Does he want to be a woman? He's gay, right?* — but even after his death in the summer of 2009, we've found few answers.

My siblings are much older, born in the late sixties and early seventies; they grew up alongside Jackson, and because I worshipped them as a young child, some of my earliest memories are dancing to "Thriller" or "Smooth Criminal" with my sister Jennifer and her friends. I vaguely remember the early nineties child molestation scandal, though solely through the lens of my parents' comments as we sat watching nightly news from

our living room in the Ozarks. My first knowing surveillance of Jackson came on September 8, 1994. Michael Jackson opened the tenth anniversary of the MTV Video Music Awards by bringing his new bride, Lisa Marie Presley, the daughter of Elvis, onstage. "Welcome to the MTV Video Music Awards," Jackson greeted audiences with a sly smile, Lisa Marie at his side, unsure of what to do with her hands. "I'm very happy to be here," he continued, "And just think, everybody thought this wouldn't last." Jackson smiled, pulled the Rayban Aviators off his face, and kissed Lisa Marie.

What I remember then, a memory confirmed now by watching clips of the kiss online, was how forced it all seemed. How Jackson appeared to be trying to prove something. How Presley took part, but quickly pulled away from the kiss and subtly pushed her husband away.

I am not a scopophobe. I like to be watched. In bars men with husbands pull me into the bathroom and stick their tongues into my mouth because we both know we are being watched, or that we might get caught, and that there is something at stake here. But I like how they begin to watch my body on the dance floor, hungry, how I can catch their gaze and return it. I do this one night with a colleague, David, and stupidly he texts me to say, "Kissing you is like calamine lotion to my seven-year-itch." His partner of seven years, Steven, finds the text on David's phone, left on their kitchen counter as David takes their dogs out to piss.

In June of 2013, the Obama administration admitted to a broad-reaching surveillance program in which it tapped the phone lines and scoured the communications records of tens of millions of Americans and foreigners alike. The probe went as far as the cellphone of Germany's Prime Minister Angela Merkel, despite the fact that her government is one of the United States' biggest allies. People were rightfully pissed and in response the Obama White House released a white paper defending as both constitutional and reasonable this continuation of Bush-era politicking that stole civil liberties in a vague, ongoing, all-encompassing War on Terror. The white paper claims Justice Department officials need only find a person's "relevance" to terror, easy in post-9/11 America, and that relevance is "a broad standard that permits discovery of large volumes of data in circumstances where doing so is necessary to identify much smaller amounts of information within that data that directly bears on the matter being investigated." If, as pundits and scholars have argued, it was the

significant millennial vote that ushered Obama into office under vague promises of hope and change, it is clear now that little had changed from administrations prior. What is less clear, though plausible, is that millennials welcome surveillance into their lives.

“Scream,” Jackson’s 1995 duet with his sister Janet and the lead single from his ninth album *HIStory*, is an anthem against surveillance in many ways. Here are two stars we’ve watched neurotically since early childhood, the most successful members of a, let’s be honest, fucked up family. Michael, fresh off a settlement for child abuse allegations in 1993, aimed the song at American media: “Stop pressurin’ me. Just stop pressurin’ me. Stop fuckin’ with me,” the chorus rings. But the blame is complicated. Certainly the media obsessed over Michael, has always obsessed over him and continues to even in death, but they wouldn’t if we ourselves didn’t demand the obsession. Further, Jackson himself is not blameless; he lived a lifestyle that required such infamy. He even fed sensational stories to the tabloids himself before the molestation charges completely changed the public tenor. By all accounts, Jackson’s desire for attention and adoration was insatiable, which leaves us in both awe and fear, for him and for ourselves.

The TSA urges us all: *If You See Something, Say Something*. The phrase, trademarked by the US Department of Homeland Security, can be heard over the loudspeakers of our airports and on posters adorning transit systems across the country. I ride the Washington Metro and see them every day. One especially telling poster explains that now I can text in the suspicious behavior I see. It is a strange thing, this desire to be safe, to act accordingly, and yet to be seen. It is a struggle for power against both ourselves and those we elect to watch us. It is not unlike what Foucault saw in the past and predicted for the future in *Discipline & Punish*.

The effect of the prison system, which mirrors the general shift of a culture that assumes we are always watched and watching, is that we are now self-governing. Foucault describes the public prisoner: “He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribed in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection.” In the digital age, our self-governing becomes public spectacle as we willfully give over our private lives not only to an online community of friends, but also the police, the IRS, the

military, the banks... Our own willingness to give up our lives as art objects becomes a right to demand such transparency from others, from our friends and coworkers, from our politicians and celebrities.

Following the death of Michael Jackson, Pew Research found two-thirds of Americans thought media coverage of the star was excessive, and yet eighty percent of Americans polled also said they followed the coverage enthusiastically.