

# Why is there so little media skepticism about *Leaving Neverland* and its allegations against Michael Jackson?

By David Walsh  
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On March 3 and 4, US cable and satellite television network HBO aired *Leaving Neverland*, a 236-minute documentary directed by British filmmaker Dan Reed, in two parts. The film is a co-production between HBO and UK broadcaster Channel 4. It premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in late January.

*Leaving Neverland* consists principally of two men, Wade Robson and James Safechuck, detailing their claims that pop singer Michael Jackson sexually abused them as children over the course of many years, in the 1980s and 1990s. Other members of their respective immediate families are the only other interviewees in the documentary.

Jackson, the third most successful musical artist of all time and a tragic victim of the American entertainment industry, died of a drug overdose in June 2009. Both Robson and Safechuck, who spent considerable time with Jackson when they were young, were strong defenders of the singer while he was alive.

Robson, a dancer and choreographer, twice testified under oath that Jackson had done nothing wrong. He was a defense witness in May 2005 during Jackson's trial on child sexual abuse charges (at the end of which the pop star was found not guilty on all 14 counts). Under sustained grilling by the prosecutor in the case, Robson was adamant that Jackson's conduct had never been inappropriate. He also spoke strongly about Jackson following the pop star's death.

Robson made a sudden volte-face in 2013, when he filed a lawsuit against the Jackson estate alleging that he had been systematically molested. That case was thrown out on the grounds that he had waited too long to take legal action. A subsequent suit against two corporate entities owned by Jackson when he was alive was also dismissed. Safechuck added his name to Robson's lawsuit in 2014. He too had always previously insisted on the innocence of his friendship with Jackson. Robson and Safechuck, who are appealing the dismissal of their suits, are represented by the same law firm. An attorney for the Jackson estate in 2013 termed the Robson lawsuit a money-grab, "transparent ... outrageous and sad."

Reed's *Leaving Neverland*, over the course of four hours, does not provide the opportunity for anyone to rebut the Robson-Safechuck charges. There are only two brief acknowledgements that "another side of the story" exists: an intertitle revealing that Brett Barnes and actor Macaulay Culkin, who are referenced in the film as other boys whom Jackson befriended, continue to deny any impropriety, and a brief video clip of Jackson's attorney in the 2005 case, Thomas Mesereau, commenting in 2013 on Robson's "very, very suspicious" change of heart.

The vast bulk of the interminable, claustrophobic *Leaving Neverland*, aside from the many irrelevant aerial shots of the various cities and locales mentioned in the interviews, intended presumably to help relieve

the tedium, consists of Robson and Safechuck setting out their claims. They do so in lurid and semi-pornographic detail. Things have come to such a pass that this exercise in voyeurism and prurience is described as "hard-hitting" and "riveting." On offer here is a purported view of what went on in Michael Jackson's bed, as though that could be illuminating or valuable in any possible fashion.

Even if Jackson were a pedophile, and the film's "first-hand account" provides no substantiation whatsoever of that claim, those who made *Leaving Neverland* and those promoting it are morally deplorable and shameless. They are seeking to profit from the film and exploit the events to advance their careers and make money.

Director Dan Reed is a dubious figure. His filmmaking career embodies the unattractive confluence of tabloid journalism, the "global war on terror" and #MeToo campaigning.

The *Pacific Standard* magazine in 2016 headlined an article about Reed, "Meet the filmmaker who recreates terrorist attacks for HBO." The piece explained breathlessly that Reed specialized "in helming non-fiction films about modern terrorist events. These documentaries air in the United States on HBO and are all preceded by a fittingly intimidating disclaimer—they are called (in order by year) *Terror in Moscow*, *Terror in Mumbai*, and *Terror at the Mall*." His next effort, which also aired on HBO, was *Three Days of Terror: The Charlie Hebdo Attacks*. (Other films include *From Russia with Cash*, *Frontline Fighting: Battling ISIS* and *The Paedophile Hunter*.) None of his works strays from the official government line on any issue and none indicates the slightest interest in the geopolitical and social concerns driving US and UK interventions in the Middle East, Central Asia and elsewhere.

Everything about *Leaving Neverland* produces a bad odor.

Reed, Oprah Winfrey and others insist that the film is not meant as an indictment of Jackson, but intended to "open a discussion" on child sexual abuse and related questions. If that is so, why does the film not include a single appearance by a psychiatrist, an expert on pedophilia or anyone else genuinely qualified to address such issues? The sordid, sensationalized motives are expressed in the structure and overall feel of the film itself. *Leaving Neverland* is not designed to educate, but to numb, intimidate and pollute.

In a February 7, 2019, letter addressed to HBO Chief Executive Officer Richard Pepler, attorney Howard Weitzman, representing the Jackson estate, asserted that his client had "spent years litigating with Robson and Safechuck, and had *four different lawsuits* by these two men *dismissed with prejudice*. (Today, Robson owes the Estate almost seventy thousand dollars in court costs, and Safechuck owes the Estate several thousand dollars as well.) In those litigations, the Estate discovered troves of information about Robson and Safechuck that made it unequivocally clear that they had no credibility whatsoever."

Weitzman went on, “Robson and Safechuck are now appealing the dismissal of their multi-million dollar lawsuits. Not coincidentally, their appeals are likely to be heard later this year. HBO’s ‘documentary’ is simply just another tool in their litigation playbook, which they are obviously using in a (very misguided) effort to somehow affect their appeals.”

Referring to the trial in 2005, he argued forcefully, “Michael Jackson was subjected to a decade-long investigation by an overly-zealous, ethically-challenged, and ultimately disgraced prosecutor in Santa Barbara County, Tom Sneddon, who looked anywhere and everywhere for supposed ‘victims’ of Jackson’s. Yet, he never found those ‘victims.’ Indeed, the 2005 criminal trial of Jackson was a complete farce, and Michael Jackson was completely exonerated.

As anyone who has studied that trial knows, the jury utterly repudiated the prosecution’s case. In both his opening and closing statements, Jackson’s attorney, Tom Mesereau, took the unusual step of telling the jury that they should acquit Jackson because Mesereau and his team *had proven Jackson innocent*. In other words, he did not try the case as a ‘reasonable doubt’ case. Mr. Mesereau tried the case with the purpose and goal of proving Jackson innocent. And he did exactly that. As recently as 2017, several jurors were re-interviewed about the case in light of Robson’s about-face, and they all agreed that they would still acquit Jackson today. The jurors have been interviewed many times; they are articulate bright people, not the gullible idiots that Dan Reed tries to paint them as in his ‘documentary.’ Yet HBO is relying on the uncorroborated stories of two admitted perjurers over the weight of the American justice system.”

Weitzman concluded, “We know that HBO [now owned by AT&T] is facing serious competitive pressures from Netflix, Amazon and other more modern content providers, but to stoop to this level to regain an audience is disgraceful. We know HBO and its partners on this documentary will not be successful. We know that this will go down as the most shameful episode in HBO’s history.”

It remains the case that “sex sells,” and HBO officials were more than willing to degrade themselves with this travesty of a documentary in the interest of audience numbers and profits.

The WSWS wrote a number of times on “Michael Jackson’s tragedy,” beginning in December 2003 and continuing through his death and memorial in June 2009.

At the time of his arrest on charges of child molestation in 2003, we noted that “a life spent in a show business cocoon” had seriously damaged him (the “Peter Pan” complex, the immaturity, the questionable marriages, etc.): “What are other people to make of Michael Jackson when he obviously has so little idea of who he is himself?”

We insisted that Jackson was entitled to the presumption of innocence and argued that even if he “were proven guilty of such crimes as to justify his being separated from the community, a humane society would view him with sadness and even sympathy, rather than scorn and hatred.” We argued that “having helped create Jackson, manipulated his appeal and nurtured his personal eccentricities,” the establishment would now make use of him as a scapegoat or sacrificial lamb.

Another observation on the WSWS in 2003 proved all too prophetic, “However Michael Jackson’s court case turns out, one has the feeling that a sad, perhaps even tragic fate lies in store for the performer. Everything about American society and its entertainment industry in particular, of which he is both a celebrated figure and a victim, would seem to point in that direction.”

Even in death, it turns out, the sharks and scavengers will not let him rest.

A striking feature of the present situation is the almost universal acceptance of the Robson-Safechuck claims by the American media. The word of two individuals, who have been seeking monetary compensation

from the Jackson estate for years, is taken as gospel. Why is there so little skepticism, why are so few questions being asked? This is not a reflection of “popular opinion,” as it were. It is not difficult to find on various “non-authoritative” websites and blogs serious and sometimes insightful criticism of *Leaving Neverland*.

Even in the 2003–2005 period, during Jackson’s trial, which was a debacle for the prosecution, and in its aftermath, there was a general sympathy for the singer in liberal and left circles. We remarked in 2003 that the “campaign by Santa Barbara authorities against Jackson has reactionary political and social overtones. County district attorney Tom Sneddon is a conservative Republican with an ax to grind.” Sneddon was associated with the Bush forces and evidently saw himself as “a crusader in a cultural and moral war.” This writer was invited to discuss the Jackson case on a Wisconsin Public Radio program in December 2003, which included calls from listeners.

Things have changed. Upper middle class layers in and around the Democratic Party, immensely enriched by the stock market boom and other ill-gotten windfalls, have moved farther to the right. The #MeToo movement is one reflection of a social shift. Hostility to elementary democratic norms has “blossomed” among these layers. They have further differentiated themselves from the general population. Intense egotism and arrogance predominate among the affluent petty bourgeois, along with contempt for the masses. They calculate that with money comes wisdom, and their word should be law. The accuser “must be believed” is now the watchword, and presumption of innocence and due process be damned.

The allegations of Robson and Safechuck cannot be doubted or even scrutinized, because that would throw the entire #MeToo witch-hunt into question.

Billionaire Oprah Winfrey, who utters another banality every time she opens her mouth, is the spiritual-financial leader of this movement and the *New York Times* is its intellectual “backbone.”

The *Times*’ Maureen Dowd, one of the moral pillars of our time, penned a disgusting column denouncing Michael Jackson on February 16, “The King of Pop—and Perversion.” This is from the newspaper that speaks for New York City’s super-rich and has promoted every bloody crime of American imperialism for the past two decades.

Dowd writes, “As *Leaving Neverland* shows, Michael Jackson spent his life shape-shifting from best pal, father figure and beneficent idol into cruel, manipulative rapist.” The film, in reality, does not *show* anything. It passes on the unsubstantiated, unproven assertions of two individuals. The columnist continues, “It was apparent for decades that Jackson’s cotton-candy lair was sulfurous. But as with other monsters—Harvey Weinstein, Bill Cosby, R. Kelly, Woody Allen, Jeffrey Epstein and Bryan Singer—many turned a blind eye.”

Dowd’s reactionary, McCarthyite smear—merely one of dozens in the mainstream media along similar lines—is the product of an unhinged, increasingly right-wing layer.

To present Jackson as a “monster” is dishonest and reprehensible. His difficulties and peculiarities did not come out of the blue. What was his life? As we noted 16 years ago, “An almost preternaturally talented boy from a dysfunctional, working class family, Jackson was swept up by the American entertainment industry’s bone-crushing machinery.” One way or another, his quasi-infantilism was linked to the lack of a genuine childhood.

Now, more than ever, such social and psychological considerations are simply wiped away, dismissed with contempt. There isn’t a trace of sympathy or elemental humanity in the media coverage. The creation of “monsters,” sexual predators and the like, has become essential to the operations and agenda of the Democratic Party in particular, utterly incapable of addressing the underlying social rot and misery in America.

Michael Jackson has been dead for nearly a decade. Now he is being

excoriated, trampled upon once more—for what? The whole business has degenerated into a squalid pursuit of money and career advancement. We condemn it.

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