

Introduction to the 2020 Edition

Fifteen years ago, when I wrote about the culture of narcissism, I did it primarily from a theoretical viewpoint. References made to the thesis and examples from Christopher Lasch's book *The Culture of Narcissism*¹ (NB, the book was published in 1979) seemed far from the reality in Poland, a post-Soviet country traumatised by its history. The notion of social narcissism was not addressed at numerous scientific debates or discussions in the media; at the time, this topic seemed too abstract and considered a niche even in scientific circles. Social media were still a voice of the future. In 2005, in the Web 2.0 paradigm that had just started at the time, interactivity boiled down mainly to commenting on available content or running one's own website or blog. There was more to the value of Internet comments than just easy accessibility. These statements revealed a need to express oneself and manifest one's views, a need to become noticed. On yet another level, one can talk about a need to participate, to belong, or to be part of a community. Such was my interpretation of comments about Michael Jackson charged with sexual molestation of a minor that appeared at the time.

Internet users in Poland eagerly commented on Jackson's trial. It was not just the idol they discussed when expressing their opinions about him; they also wrote about the culture they participated in (not necessarily aware they were doing so) and which they were co-creating on a daily basis. Jackson's trial was like a trigger that started a process of confronting individual and social values and norms, including the taboo of paedophilia.

Michael Jackson was first charged with child sexual abuse in 1993. Despite great interest of the public, the case had never been brought to court – the parties concluded an agreement. Ten years later, the same theme – Jackson's sexual molestation of a minor – returned and again became widely discussed in the media. Jackson was arrested and charged with numerous acts of indecency against a child below 14 years of age. The trial against him (*People v. Jackson*) commenced in

¹ The Polish translation of Lasch's book was published in 2015.

January 2005 and lasted until June 2005. Ultimately, the jury announced Jackson not guilty of all the charges he was facing.

Four years later, in June 2009, Jackson suddenly died. The interest sparked by the suspicion of child sexual abuse gave room for reports about unclear causes of the idol's death. Above all, his accomplishments in music were recalled – again, and Jackson became ‘the king of pop’ – until 2019, when the documentary *Leaving Neverland* premiered. James Safechuck and Wade Robson who starred in the film, today grown-up men, told in front of the camera what allegedly had happened many years earlier between them and Jackson at the Neverland Ranch. Not only did the film cause a big commotion, but it also raised a number of questions.² These include probably the most important one, namely, who really was Michael Jackson? A paedophile?

In this book, I did not put forward this question explicitly. I analysed beliefs about Jackson. While investigating statements about him, I focused on social reactions he triggered. As in 2005, I still claim today, that Jackson's figure is a metaphorical lens that focuses attention and in which various social beliefs not only converge but are also reflected. These beliefs are traces leading to complex levels of understanding the phenomenon of modern culture and its taboo. This book is an attempt to follow these trails and reflect on them.

² See, among others: *Oprah Winfrey Presents: After Neverland*, Oprah.com, <http://www.oprah.com/own-oprah-winfrey-presents-after-neverland/oprah-winfrey-presents-after-neverland>.

Introduction.

What kind of anthropology do I practice?

We breathe pop culture as we breathe air and, just as air, it is invisible. Pop culture surrounds us like a cocoon; we might make an attempt to free ourselves out of it but always at the cost of marginalisation, for today, to claim the oxygen niche of the so-called higher culture is to be marginalised, indeed. Everyone is pop in one way or another.

(Wojciech J. Burszta¹)

Pop culture is not an autonomous, self-reliant, and solid being. It rather resembles liquid, chaotic sticky mass out of which various forms and constructs may arise. Pop culture bears neither stillness nor solitude. It makes up its own mythologies, creates its own heroes, but it does so with a reference to the more complex cultural wholeness.

The aim of this book is to investigate how traits of a mythical hero are manifested in modern culture and, to be more precise, in social beliefs about the pop culture idol. The said idol is Michael Jackson.

Jackson is one of the most popular figures in modern pop culture. However, it was not only the phenomenon of Jackson's popularity that drew my attention but the emotional reactions, or more precisely, the extreme reactions Jackson used to evoke and still does. Therefore, by choosing Jackson as the subject of my study, I wanted to take a closer look at reactions of the global audience; to examine what they experienced while virtually attending a legal action concerning paedophilia allegation brought against the idol in 2005. With this aim, I decided to analyse online statements published on Polish websites reporting on Jackson's trial. I found these statements a manifestation of a spontaneous need for sharing something, commenting on an important event attended by the public (consciously or not) only via the media. On the example of selected statements, I shall analyse a phenomenon of imposing some traits of a mythical hero onto the idol, which, in my opinion, relates to the phenomenon of the culture of narcissism. While discussing

¹ WJ. Burszta, *NIKE – wybierz styl życia*, "Polonistyka" 2002, no. 1 (391), pp. 9–11.

Internet users' beliefs about Jackson I shall indicate narcissistic sources of modern culture.

This book is divided into three parts. Part One presents the general framework for the study and the methodology, as well as concepts pertaining to narcissism, followed by reflections on the *pop cult* phenomenon. Part Two of this book focuses strictly on a hero – here one can find Jackson's biography and the chronology of the trial the idol faced regarding child sexual molestation allegations. In the subsequent chapters of this part, I discuss the phenomenon of paedophilia. This is followed by my attempt to investigate how a modern concept of a child is constructed. The final chapter of this part is a presentation of online statements, that is, reactions of the public who virtually attended Jackson's trial. The last instalment of this book, Part Three, comprises a presentation of anthropological figures of a trickster, a scapegoat, and a carnival king.

What Kind of Anthropology Do I Practice?

This question arose and accompanied me throughout all stages of my work on this book. In its title, I contained the phrase, 'an anthropological perspective'. What does it exactly mean? In the initial approach, I referred this phrase particularly to the research subject. However, I soon realised that to me, the phrase "an anthropological perspective" means much more than a methodological strategy and a type of a research approach; it is primarily a specific style of practicing reflection and a way of writing. In the subject literature, this perspective has been repeatedly characterised as interpretative anthropology or reflexive anthropology. Hence, I practice anthropology of interpretation. What does it mean?

Not only does anthropology of interpretation deal with describing the image of the world, but it also co-creates it. It taps into the rich heritage of hermeneutics and phenomenology. Analysing cultural phenomena, as Clifford Geertz notices, is "not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning."² Its aim is to ensure "(...) the enlargement of the universe of human discourse."³ Geertz writes, "Cultural analysis is (or should be) guessing at meanings, assessing the guesses, and drawing explanatory conclusions from the better guesses, not discovering the Continent of Meaning and mapping out its bodiless landscape."⁴ Geertz's words determine the direction of the research process described in this book.

² C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books, New York 1973, p. 5.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 14.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 20.

This book concerns ways in which Michael Jackson's career was received. I decided to investigate these ways using anthropological figures as the analytic tool. I considered them to be ideal types in Max Weber's understanding. The very assumption of ideal types leaves no room for their abstract image being translated into reality. Consequently, this prevents the application of a quantitative approach and, hence, putting forward the issue of representativeness of the examined traits. It is physically impossible to familiarise oneself with all the statements concerning Jackson available on the Internet, which is by nature a highly instable source. It is impossible to present in quantitative categories the abundance and complexity of opinions (experiences, beliefs, and judgments) about Jackson. Therefore, the best solution to be adopted proved to be the ethnographic approach and qualitative content analysis in which the fundamental meaning is given to the category of understanding.

Hence, my reflection on traits of a mythical hero in popular culture is, above all, about examining cultural contents that appear in statements about the idol. Inspired by Geertz's "thick description" postulate and following Joanna Tokarska-Bakir's example, I wanted to take the road of "thick reading", hermeneutic reading that refers to the way a text is read and interpreted. "Thick reading" of a text, "(...) is intended to preserve for reflection everything that happens to be torn out of an ethnographic text under the cloak of redundancy, marginality, incomprehensibility, low artistic level (in the case of folklore accounts) or obscenity.⁵" Hence, my intent was to cautiously read selected statements and then suggest how they could be interpreted. The tool used for interpreting texts was the method of the hermeneutic circle. Martin Heidegger points out that the hermeneutic circle offers a positive opportunity to cognize the source. At the same time, he stressed that "Whoever is trying to understand a text, always engages in projecting (*Entwerfen*): he/she projects a meaning for the text as soon as some initial meaning comes to the fore.⁶" This means that before we undertake to interpret a text, we already have some belief about it that stems from our belief about the world. Interpretation is a process that resembles a circle – it does not start at zero (the starting point) but is intertwined in a researcher's previous experiences and interpretative processes. Hans-Georg Gadamer claims that it is impossible to interpret a text starting from a neutral position bereft of any expectations. As a part of some culture, a person is embedded in it and shaped by it, which means that s/he has a certain initial belief, the so-called a prejudgment, about a text. These will be confronted in the course of a research process – following the her-

⁵ J. Tokarska-Bakir, *Obraz osobliwy. Hermeneutyczna lektura źródeł etnograficznych*, Universitas, Kraków 2000, pp. 16–17.

⁶ H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. and ed. J. Weinsheimer, D.G. Marshall, Crossroad, New York 1989, p. 267.

meneutic circle – each time a researcher encounters resistance or difficulty when it comes to understanding the text he is interpreting.

As for my research, such an initial, very general concept (a prejudgment) was the concept of an idol, a concept that refers to the pre-modern substrate of the sacred and a cult. My attention was drawn to reactions Michael Jackson evoked among the online public; the ‘heated’ discussion that arose between the expounders. I did not encounter indifference towards Jackson and to me it seemed interesting and worth further examination. While reading statements about him, I found the emotional charge embedded in these comments puzzling. The basic question put forward implicitly which the presented statements answer is, “Who is the idol-Michael Jackson to the public?”. By adopting an ethnographic ‘close reading’ approach – coming from the fundamental question – I will be able to design subsequent models of answer, seek concepts that are increasingly more appropriate, as I follow the hermeneutic circle.

Interpretative anthropology assumes that in a social study one attempts to enter the ‘world’ of the research subjects, to understand how they interpret a given event. Therefore, the aim of my analysis is to arrange explicit content and to attempt to specify and then interpret implicit context in the statements about the pop culture idol. The aim is to examine stabilised complexes of symbolic meanings into which the reception types of Jackson’s figure, as existing on the Internet, can be embedded.