

Success: a value or a pseudo-value

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Consumer culture is in need of the Man of Success and, consequently, mechanisms of “creating” *idols* and *fans*. Treating success as some unconditional stock, it pushes people to achieve the latter by any means, including giving up one’s own personality and identity and betraying all other values. To those harnessed into this mechanism, which is motioned by “the wheel of fortune”, it offers the participants of the continuous show some unauthentic, substitute life. Unaware, they are drawn into a trap of self-destruction. *Idols* become victims of transitory fashions, whereas their *fans* turn into victims, identifying themselves with the fans deprived of any identity. The false awareness of “the ideology of success” is reduced to propagating internal emptiness and creating a demand for “artificial feeding” on the products of mass and populist cultural pulp.

Key words: value, culture, success

INTRODUCTION: THE MAN OF SUCCESS – THE RESULTANT OF A COINCIDENCE

“*Success is like the fire of your family home*”, wrote Malcolm Lowry in one of his few poems (Lowry 1965). He was the author of the novel “Under the Volcano”, the book which was the object of my generation’s worship, and which is both his autobiography and a biography of the world at the threshold of the Holocaust of World War II. The book was a success, yet the writer soon died as a result of alcohol abuse. So he had consciously committed a suicide in episodes identical to that which the Consul, the author’s alter ego, was trying to fight back, without much effort or result. The Consul had predicted the eruption of the Volcano at whose foot a crowd of the inhabitants of a Mexican town was dancing cheerfully on All Saints’ Day, with a carousel going round in the background.

When I first read the novel, many decades ago, I did not manage to discern a relation between Success and Fire, between the zenith which is getting top fame and self-destruction. Having read the novel again and again, I am closer, I believe, to grasping the paradox; namely, Success, by its very nature, brings death. I would like to communicate my discovery of the mechanism of that luring trap which is set for all of us by the modern culture – Consumer Culture (Adorno 1991; Allen 1983; Marcuse 1964) which in its name itself reveals a trait of idolatry and ruthlessness at the same time. Despite its etymology, culture is neither “cultivation” nor “cultivating” spiritual values, but rather a “cult” of something completely different. This is a cult of using and using up both objects treated as goods, and people, similarly, perceived as goods.

The main feature of the consumer culture, which rejected the *sacrum* (which guards the dignity and respect for the human being), is its *idolatry*. Idolatry is a lame copy of religion and its specific parody. The difference between a god of an authentic religion and the idol of a pseudo-religion, between worship and cult, is the difference between fear and love of the believers and admiration and fascination of the fans. Religion is as infinite as its object, whereas cult is temporary, transitory and treacherous. Contrary to faith, requiring an act of

believing and loyalty, which are strong emotions related to the will of keeping them against any uncertainty or doubt, fascination is a volatile and childish emotion. It is characterized by some incapability of concentration, not to mention any permanency or loyalty. The need to be fascinated, which is taken up, exaggerated and reproduced by the institutions of mass-culture and pop-culture, generates the mechanism of the Carousel of Success.

The metaphor of a carousel is not my idea. It is commonly used by TV journalists hosting the programs of "The-Wheel-of-Fortune" type. After all, it is the TV that has made drawing lots an everyday event. A purely statistical chance can make an average, anonymous player a hero who deserves the admiration and envy of millions of others. And all that he had done was to buy a lottery ticket and cross out a few numbers. This is in fact a prototype of any Success and the Success as such. To grasp "an opportunity for success" is to get on the Carousel, having bought a ticket before. The carousel is a particular facility whose only purpose is to provide people with excitement. This is the excitement of speed which creates a false impression that the world got moving and spinning at a crazy speed. This feeling can lead to dizziness, and sometimes even vomiting. As if the organism had lost its natural balance and rhythm and was now taking its revenge for such violation of the laws of nature...

The bewilderment and swirl which people accept voluntarily, letting their destiny go into the "wheel of fortune", brings some actual fortune to the owners of this machine which is a kind of an "inward carousel". Both parties enter the system voluntarily, with no force whatsoever, some of them hoping to find entertainment and the others hoping to earn significant sums. The whirl is spinning continually, sometimes as a Carousel, horizontally, sometimes as a Great Eye, vertically, and sometimes as their mixture.

The Lottery Machine mixes and shakes colorful balls ruthlessly, and each of the balls is accompanied by someone's hope to have their fortune altered. Looking at the machine, we can see and clearly understand the phenomenon when people let their fortune out of their hands and into the unemotional lottery machine.

It is only the individuals desiring extraordinary emotions, who are replaced by others from time to time. Nobody looks back at those whose time is over. The crowd, greedy for entertainment, pushes its way forwards, and those afraid of getting onto the carousel make comments about the ups and downs of the more courageous ones. The ups make the onlookers shout enthusiastically, whereas the falls make them sneer.

Human fate, even though it always remains a mystery, adopts different names in particular epochs. Subsequent periods of European culture gave it the names of Fate, Providence, Fortune, Chance or Historical Necessities!...

Which model of Fate is hidden behind the image of the swirling Carousel? It must be without any doubt related to the Renaissance image of the Wheel of Fortune. Yet in the modern mass and populist culture, the victims of the indifferent Wheel of Fortune are not any more the subject of the attention of Shakespeare-like playwrights. They are not the object of compassion, either, because they become instantly forgotten. And this means non-existence. The annihilation of "the losers" is carried out through pushing them into an Orwellian "grave of oblivion". This is accepted by the mass society which, as a whole, reveals the traits of immaturity, or even childishness, especially in reference to its unwillingness to concentrate on or get attracted to anything for a longer period. A small child pursues adventures, their diversity and flashy character. A virtue in a five-year-old child, which is a sign of his or her virtual curiosity, becomes a manifestation of superficiality, a kind of neurosis and hyperactivity in an adult.

Unable to concentrate and persist also in the sphere of mutual relationships, the members of the mass society accept unconsciously their status of atom-people. Just like in Democritus, they form loose and temporary relationships with the help of “holes” and “hooks”. They find or lose contact due to Chance. Thus they become *a resultant of a coincidence*. Their love for all forms of *drawing lots* confirms their lack of belief in having any influence on the shape of their lives. Words like “destiny” or “vocation” were junked long ago. They have been overtaken by others: Good Luck and Success. Treating the latter ideas as dominating ones in the ideology of Mass Consumer Society means that two different meanings of “fate” are overlapping. Namely, Fate as destiny, which man is wrestling with throughout his lifetime, trying to recognize and beat it, and fate as a lottery ticket with a statistical coincidence deciding about the winners and losers.

The unbelievable success of “Success”, the career of this word and the promise it carries provide an indirect proof that the contemporary culture does not appreciate any more the value of individuals’ self-steering and independent decision-making concerning their life goals and routes. They have let go the reins which are used to drive the chariot of our soul in Plato’s image, and which now have been handed over carelessly to some anonymous Charioteer. They are completely disinterested in his intentions and do not care about the destination. They paid the Charioteer for their season-tickets – and bought a right to turn on the TV and switch channels.

THE SUCCESS AND THE SCANDAL

Success is the peak of prosperity. A dictionary definition of success says: “Success (Latin *succes-sus*) achieving something, a good result of an undertaking, event, etc., well-being, triumph”.

It should be noted here that there is no mention about any long-lasting effort or work necessary to become a success. The success or its lack is rather a question of coincidence. And coincidence is another name for chance.

Just like the ideas of “destiny” and “vocation” have disappeared from everyday use, the contemporary language has also erased the ideas of “achievement” and “acquisition”. You can achieve or acquire something during your whole lifetime, through everyday, colorless, persistent labor, in sweat. This is an unimpressive lifestyle which brings fruit after a number of years. It requires orderliness, patience and humility, which are “boring” virtues of an old-fashioned farmer or citizen. They can rely on themselves only, or on God’s, the landlord of the world’s, favors. The achievements can be discussed first after one’s death, when one’s lifetime is assessed and balanced. A proper place to do this is an obituary or a biography. A person who is work-oriented, in any domain, does not make potential achievements a condition to continue this work. As shown in family sagas, such as “Nights and Days” by Maria Dąbrowska, historic defeats which ruin people’s whole achievement do not discourage the protagonists who start everything anew (Dąbrowska 2001: 129–131). Thus, they are not dependent on prosperity or favorable circumstances. Apparently, to them the fundamental value was not success or the result, but the activity understood as service to themselves, to their nearest and dearest and to the rest of the society.

Unlike the Man of Success who gives himself fully to external circumstances, either expecting their lucky coincidence or trying to “organize” them, to provoke them to happen sooner, the achievements of the Man of Service are accumulated behind him, in the past, whereas the game of the Man of Success is played exclusively in the presence. Now or never, now and immediately – this is his motto.

Success is related to the calculus of probability, with the statistical image of the world. It is obvious that, just like in a lottery, someone must draw the winning lot. It could be me, why not?

The procedure of *becoming a success*, drawing the winning lot, is reduced, in candidates' view, to increasing such probability. To make this happen, apart from the candidate for success, other people get involved in the procedure. Specialized troops of *managers, promotion experts, image specialists and stylists* are investing in the candidate for success and doing their best to *create* him or her. "Creating" means in fact changing the image of the candidate in such a way that it should match the expectations of those who should vote for him or her either in local elections or on a ten-top list. So the whole "creation" is in fact stripping a person of his or her personal, authentic properties and then re-modeling the candidate according to a current fashion. Since the Consumer Culture is reigned by the dictatorship of fashion. Fashion is an invisible, powerful force, resembling that of "the invisible hand of the market". Actually, the former is even more powerful, because it also decides about what is going to become a bestseller on the market. Fashion dictators also decide about market tendencies, or at least about its many segments.

In Consumerism, that *overwhelming civilization of goods*, man, as I mentioned, also becomes some goods. People appear on the market in a double role of the buyers and the salesmen. They buy and sell all goods, including themselves. To increase their own attractiveness, they undergo all sorts of "cosmetic" procedures. The so-called "aestheticizing", along with consumption, makes the packaging more important than its content. Yet there is a limit to improving the aesthetics of the wrapping. When "the covers" become fabulously beautiful, which makes the choice a serious problem, you have to find some extra way out. Namely, something must be done to overcome that attack of colors.

A trick that should make the consumer ignore the competition and attract to your product is a scandal. Scandal is not just the presentation and external looks any more. It is a highly spectacular maneuver of breaking social or moral principles, performed in front of a large public. This must be an impressive and spectacular act of overcoming a taboo only to show off how unconventional you are, to shock the onlookers and thus focus their attention (Mizińska 2002: 77-92).

Excesses and the eccentricity of actions are to "push their way" through the dispersed attention of the public and to attract it and trap by force. This is not ordinary luring others by creating your image; this is an act of violence, and also a theft – of one's time and interest. After all, the public are not angry about this, as being a viewer means rejecting the right to choose and select. It means that you have sold your rights to those who decide for you what is worth seeing and learning.

The Consumer Culture follows a corrupted feeding rule, which originally says: get their stomachs and you will get their hearts. Now it says: attract their eyes and you will get their hearts. A "vision" of what can be potentially swallowed and digested should wet the appetite which should make people take some action to acquire "the means of consumption". Thus, the producers concentrate on winning the space of vision. The first battle is won by Fashion which creates some extremely forceful pressure on the way you should look like in order to be noticed and accepted among those "welcome" and thus having a privilege of *being seen*. Those who want additionally to become a Success, being unsatisfied with their mere matching the background, and who desire to stand out as "figures" must make some extra effort. Taking a shortcut, the best idea is to provoke a Scandal which is the fastest way to "become present".

Consumerism has a particularly temporary character which was mentioned earlier. Namely, this is a cult of *here-and-now* that is of a transitory moment. A scandal should lead to

grasping such a moment. Since both the audience and the actors realize that nothing can last long, the ambitious ones are fighting for “their five minutes”. If you fail to attract the audience’s attention for this very short time, a chance to become a success is lost.

Thus, the creators of Success are not only the candidate and his managerial team, but also the viewers whose votes can dominate the opinion of the experts and the jury. And you have to respect the latter because of the popularity of a program or a newspaper which can be calculated into the income of mass media tycoons.

The Man of Success is therefore a common product and common “goods” of the whole “System of Success”. It must be immediately added, though, that he is also their... victim. In a double sense: a victim as someone soon used up and rejected by the mechanism because of his having become an out-of-fashion, out-of season, cheap article, a victim of his own ambitions which usually last longer than the triumph itself, and also a victim as a sacrifice made to an anonymous Demon of Success who does not care what, or rather who, he is currently feeding on. The only thing that counts is that the game should continue and bring profits to the creators of transitory tendencies and the owners of the Wheels of Fortune.

THE “AXIOLOGY” OF SUCCESS

Success, as seen by the participants of the Consumer Culture, is basic goods. It should be desired and is worth any price, including the cost of renouncing your own identity. To become successful, any betrayal can be committed. It is worth changing your sports team, your country or the color of your skin, your wife, friends, or even forfeiting your biography. You can change your family name and assume an artistic pseudonym which is easier to pronounce for your “fans”. Studying the attempts to prolong the success made by such popular idols of mass entertainment as Michael Jackson or Madonna, it could be said that they have become people-pseudonyms on the whole. This means that they have sacrificed to success everything they ever got from nature: the shape of their eyes, hair color, skin color, or their bodies in general, but also everything they received from their family and social heritage. Rejecting their own original identity, they assume subsequent layers of mass-culture identity. And since mass culture requires constant change, they try to fulfil this necessity and make constant transformation a sign of a specific, Proteus-like pseudo-identity.

The identity which should be flexible is a paradox. Fighting for popularity on the entertainment (and any other) market, people of Success must pay the price of the lack of identity and a feeling of discontinuity, losing their spiritual compass which they used to have through their cultural heritage. They feel internal emptiness, which needs to be suppressed, and the call of nothingness which cannot rely on anything because all values indispensable to feel the sense of the existence had been sold out. The unpleasant awareness of betrayals, disloyal acts and concessions made while fighting for Success must be somehow dimmed by the person who is experiencing it. Hence the idols frequently reach for alcohol, drugs and sex. This enables them to cut the tape of memory for a while and to neutralize its painful fragments. The deceptiveness of those stupefying measures leading to voluntary amnesia is reflected in the fact that, bringing momentary forgetfulness, they ruin your health at the same time. They weaken your physical and mental strength, destroy your resistance against future stresses and frustrations, and increase spiritual suffering. In many cases they become so unbearable that the best way out seems to be a suicide.

Thus, success is anthropophagous. It devours not only those who couldn’t take advantage of its gifts and feel their lives have been wasted, but also the lives of its privileged ones. It must be

so, since the Man of Success is inscribed in the paradigm of idolatry which is based on delusion. It believes in idols and it wants to be one of them. Idols are made of wood, gold or plastic and, as such, they do not know pity or mercy. Hungry for admirers who let them exist, they care only about the numbers. They devour the admirers, treating them as victims which they deserve. The moment people call themselves "idols", they doom themselves to the fate of the devoured or the devouring. Despite any appearances, it is not only those pursuing Success who fall a prey to its dark side. Also the other, more passive party of their admirers and fans participates in the experience through the very fact of accepting the idea that it makes sense to waste your time to watch closely someone else's career, to pay tribute to someone else and to follow their behavior, to ruin your health or even life, to beat and be beaten by the fans of a competing idol.

Life in idolatry is, generally, a substitute life, taking advantage of someone else's glamour when you cannot have your own light. Since you lack your own emotions and experiences, you want to "get connected" to someone else's existence which is more interesting, diversified and impressive. The destiny of both the idol and the fan is a continuous escape from boredom, internal monotony and a feeling of barrenness.

While escaping from the monster of boredom, it is easy to fall into the mouth of devestation. So a fear of a potential void pushes you into the abyss of the authentic vacuum. Nothingness produces nothingness. This time nothingness has been created by people who do not trust their Creator, who are deprived of some elementary belief in existence and belief in their own existence is the Good since they are particular beings who cannot be replaced by anyone else. Being stripped of such basic trustfulness, they have an illusion that you can buy or blackmail love by means of scandal, bribery, satisfying the unrefined taste of the public or the transitory and exciting hysterics of fashion.

The Consumer Culture makes profit on our lack of trust, our complex of being unwanted children who must endlessly fight for love and praise, who have been abandoned by the culture accepting the man as he was created. Success is to play the role of an award and comfort for such deserved orphanage. A vain comfort of a miserable time which despises itself and the lasting which makes the nature of time itself.

Success, just like Chronos, devours its own children. It throws them into oblivion, which is a deserved punishment for ignoring your parent. The axiology of Success is a satanic reversion of the symbols of values: a plus when a crowd cheers for you and a minus when you respect yourself. If you don't respect yourself you must, after your momentary attractiveness has been taken advantage of, disappear in the short memory of the viewers hungry for another show. You disappear as one more victim of "blessed oblivion".

Received 6 November 2006

Accepted 8 January 2007

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Sėkmė: vertybė ar pseudovertybė

Santrauka

Kultūros vartojimas reikalauja sėkmės kūdikių ir stabų bei gerbėjų „kūrimo“. Sėkmės kaip besąlyginių išteklių traktavimas verčia jos siekti bet kuriomis priemonėmis, net atsisakant savo asmenybės ir tapatumo ir aukojant kitas vertybes. Įkinkymas į „fortūnos rato“ mechanizmą jo dalyvių gyvenimą paverčia neautentišku, surogatiniu. Nejučiomis jie patenka į savigriovos spąstus. Stabai tampa laikinos mados aukos, su kuriomis siekia susitapatinti jų gerbėjai, prarandantys savo tapatumą. Masinė popkultūra maitinama „sėkmės ideologijos“.

Raktažodžiai: vertybė, kultūra, sėkmė