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The Trickster, the Transformer, and the Culture Hero: Michael Jordan as a Mythical Figure

Sports icons are the modern-day mythical heroes. In the narrowest sense, the sports star is a brand myth – “not the biological being, but the social and cultural signifier that has become a brand” (Smart 10). Sports stars, just like celebrities, are “fabricated on purpose to satisfy our exaggerated expectations of human greatness” (Boorstin qtd. in Smart 11). In a broader, Barthesian understanding of myth, the sole names of sports stars signify their extraordinary skills, their way of conduct, and marketability. The transition from sports stars to mythical figures “purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and external justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact” (Barthes 143). By becoming myths, sports stars are stripped down to their essence, which goes beyond statistics, highlights, and games. Nevertheless, only exceptional sports stars become the heroes of myths in the anthropological sense of the term – in everyday speech they are presented as almost inhuman characters that singlehandedly win games and trophies. Such is the case with Michael Jordan, whose exploits in particular games bear resemblance to the adventures of mythical heroes, with titles like “The Shot,” “The Shrug,” or “The Flu Game.” As Mary G. McDonald and David L. Andrews have observed, “Jordan has and will continue to mean different things, to different people, in different cultural contexts within diverse historical moments” (33), and analogously his mythical status can be understood and analyzed in the diverse meanings of the term.

The first major occurrence of the phenomenon named Michael Jordan happened at the Olympics in Barcelona in 1992, where “Jordan showed that a celebration of the individual and the team could happen simultaneously in a way that changed the game on a global level” (Cunningham xviii). When he arrived at the global stage, accompanied by his predecessors Larry Bird and Magic Johnson, Jordan was already a sports icon in the United States. But it was during the Olympics in Barcelona that he became a culture hero, one of the mythical characters that give the world its present shape; a figure so recognizable that Chinese schoolchildren chose Jordan as the second greatest human being of the twentieth century (qtd. in Cunningham 7). This article’s aim is to examine Jordan’s mythical status and prove that he exemplified the characteristics of the three mythical figures mentioned in the title. To reach that aim,

the term “myth,” in its various interpretations,¹ is applied to Jordan’s illustrious career and public image. Jordan was a gifted athlete, as well as a savvy businessman, and by combining both he defined what it means to be a modern sports star. He was a pioneer, an icon, a brand, but none of that would have been possible without him reaching a mythical status. The figure of the culture hero, simultaneously a trickster and a transformer, accurately characterizes Jordan’s dichotomous personality and his position among modern athletes.

Jordan’s myth is the story of the “so-called ‘Culture Hero,’ who gave the world its present shape, who killed monsters that infested the land, and gave the man the arts that make life worth living” (Boas 407). William J. Hynes and William G. Doty state that “the diversity and complexity of the appearances of the trickster figure raise doubt that it can be encompassed as a single phenomenon” (2). Furthermore, Hynes finds it hard to clearly define the differences between the trickster, the transformer, and the culture hero, because “to define (de-finis) is to draw borders around phenomena, and tricksters seem amazingly resistant to such capture; they are notorious border breakers” (33). The ambivalent nature of the culture hero is the reason why “the culture hero often appears as twins, who usually symbolize opposites” (Long 2092). He is noble and cunning, egotistic and giving. Yet the most important characteristic, which according to Jerome H. Long sets apart the culture hero from the trickster, is the probability of defeat – the culture hero, unlike the trickster, always comes out victorious. The aura of inevitable triumph that surrounded Jordan in his years with the Chicago Bulls played an enormous part in elevating the player to the mythical status. He is the one player everyone is measured up against, therefore it is fitting to refer to him as the culture hero. New superstars like Kobe Bryant, LeBron James, or Kevin Durant are constantly compared to Jordan, their achievements to his MVP trophies, scoring titles and championships. The concept of the culture hero captures Jordan’s special status and separates him from other great players.

Circumstances paid a crucial role in establishing the myth of Michael Jordan. The USA basketball men’s national team in Barcelona, whose focal point was Jordan, became known as the “Dream Team,” because for the first time its roster consisted of the best professional players, playing in the best league in the world. “International reaction to the Dream Team, from fans across the globe to multinational corporations, was astonishingly positive” (xv). Cunningham attributes this enthusiastic response to three factors that blossomed simultaneously: “liberal capitalism, technological innovation, and basketball” (319). In Barcelona, with 108 medals – 14 more than in Seoul – the USA emerged as “the home team” of world sports. According to historian David Halberstam, this success can be attributed to numerous factors. First of all, the USA was the richest country in the world. Secondly, it had a large broadcasting apparatus. Its language was popular and accepted around the world, and “it was on the cutting edge of popular culture.” Therefore “if America was the home team in the new international culture, then it was inevitable that sooner or

1 Since Jordan’s image was family friendly, the sexualized representations of his myth have been omitted from the paper. The same is the case with its racialized representations, as Jordan transcended race to become a global icon of American sports.

later some American athlete would become a signature commercial figure” (130). The sport in which this athlete would excel needed to be popular in America as well as globally because only then could the country prove its superiority. For that reason, American football, baseball, and soccer were excluded. According to Halberstam, “the other dominant sports were eliminated because of the nature of their footwear” (131).

When Jordan joined the Chicago Bulls in 1984, the changes that shaped the present-day NBA were already taking place. The focus on the individual and not on the team started to prevail in the NBA of the 1980s. David Stern, the new commissioner, decided to market stars, not teams. As sports fandom became more casual and less local, individuals had greater chance of reaching new audiences. That is why the rivalry between the most dominant teams of that decade – the Boston Celtics and the Los Angeles Lakers – was marketed as the duel between the teams’ stars: Larry Bird and Magic Johnson. Thus Jordan, once he reached superstar status, was bound to become a specifically American myth. The USA is “the inventor of the most individual hero, the cowboy, who again and again saves the society he can never completely fit into. The cowboy has a special talent [...] so unique that he can never fully belong to society” (Bellah 145). The cowboy is never one with the dwellers. He defends the town and leaves. He is an individual in a team sport, often admired from afar. Jordan was likewise a loner, partially because of his emotional approach to the game of basketball, partially because of his status. The best example of Jordan’s extraordinary position is presented by Sam Smith, a journalist who followed the Bulls during their first championship season. During the escalation of the conflict in the Middle East other players were reluctant to sit near Jordan during games, as he was considered “a national treasure,” therefore a potential target of a terrorist attack, and they thought that even being in his close proximity put their lives at risk (149).

A contemporary sports star, who travels around the country or the globe, is expected to present his or her extraordinary skills for the fans to enjoy. After the technological revolution involving instant replays and multiple camera angles, a sports star is no longer a hero of folk tales, whose exploits are related by word of mouth. He or she has to constantly perform to his or her highest standards to uphold the mythical status. In consumer culture, the myth of the sports star is a “brand myth,” which means stars are products, which by pure association may increase the sales of other products, and since they mean “different things,” they are able to sell diverse commodities. The creation of myths usually takes place in “populist worlds,” which D. B. Holt describes as “places where people’s actions are perceived to be guided by intrinsic values, not by money or power” (11). This makes it especially hard to understand the myth of a modern sports figure, inseparable from the material, organized aspect of the sports world as, on the one hand, “the elements of play often associated with sport [at least unorganized sport] have been described in idealist terms that focus on notions of subjectivity, spontaneity, and freedom from necessity,” while on the other “[c]ommodified sport, in which a person exchanges his or her abilities for money or other material gains, significantly alters such idealized notions of sport” (Holt and Pitter 17). In a sense, a sports star cannot be fully “experienced”

without the products that he or she is promoting. Drinking Gatorade or eating at McDonald's was for Jordan fans a "ritual action," a way of experiencing "the identity myth that the icon contains" (Holt 13). The same can be said about fans who attended games just to see Jordan perform in person. According to *Fortune* magazine, his overall impact on NBA attendance was worth \$165.5 million. His overall worth during his last year with the Chicago Bulls was estimated at about \$10 billion (Johnson).

Jordan's phenomenon can be in part explained through a new way of thinking about the body. "There has been an individualization and privatization of the body in modern society. People invest more time and effort in the monitoring, control and appearance of their bodies" (Horne 128). Jordan's body in mid-flight, with his arms and legs exposed, was the epitome of statuesque qualities. He was actually turned into a statue after his first retirement, like a true mythical hero. "The body, including the sporting and physically active body, is now portrayed as an object of contemplation and improvement, in the spectacular discourses of the mass media, the regulatory discourses of the state, and in people's everyday practices" (Horne 2). And in few team sports is the athlete's body more exposed than in basketball. Although Jordan was "celebrated for being the embodiment of mythic masculinity" (McDonald and Andrews 29), this was not only a matter of his chiseled physique. His jumping ability visibly set him apart from other players. Never before did a player create the impression that he was actually flying. He inspired people to work on their bodies, to perfect themselves every day, and his existence was enough to convince them that near-perfection could be achieved. "Michael Jordan moved on the basketball court with a coiled athleticism that could seemingly be optimistically purchased by a fan through his Air Jordan brand" (Rein, Kotler, and Shields 187). Jordan made the fans believe they could maximize their potential, which was nevertheless related to the commodities he marketed. "Whereas Nike implied that fans could fly if they bought Air Jordans, Gatorade – utilizing the same sales theme as Wheaties – said that if you, too, wanted to excel in sports, drinking Gatorade was the answer" (Carter and Rovell 36). The commercials suggested that only by using the same products could one achieve the same level of success. In consumer culture, the products he offered became symbols of status and since people did not possess the same basketball skills as he did, they could always buy what he offered and thus participate in the rituals. "He sold Nike sneakers if you wanted to jump high, Big Macs if you were hungry, first Coke and then Gatorade if you were thirsty, Wheaties if you needed an all-American cereal, and Hanes underwear if you needed shorts" (Halberstam 12). The seemingly impossible acrobatics of the body is what lured people into buying the products Jordan was promoting.

After all, "myth is experience no less than art" (Chase 89), and watching Jordan on the court was equal parts experience and entertainment. Jordan was well aware of that, constantly searching for balance between efficiency and showmanship. "He knew if you were coming to see him play, you were expecting a performance, not just a basketball game" (Grover 181). The things he did on the basketball court were unparalleled. His play was art and, "like most great art, he expressed powerful, seem-

ingly dichotomous ideas simultaneously when he played: explosive athleticism with fine skill, grace with ferocious competitiveness, and teamwork with individuality” (Cunningham 258).

From the way he answered questions during interviews, to the color of the shoes he was selling, Jordan exhibited extraordinary control and awareness of the way he was expected to present himself. That is why it should be stressed that Jordan, the league, and its sponsors simultaneously contributed to and benefited from the creation of his myth. Roland Barthes claims that “myth is not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters this message” (107). The message of Michael Jordan’s myth was no different from other myths concerning modern-day sports stars: it communicated dominance, brilliance, and success. The way in which that message was conveyed, however, was something that set Jordan apart from his predecessors. According to Bill Simmons, a journalist and a devoted basketball fan, no player could captivate a crowd like Jordan as “there was just something dignified about the way he *existed*” (457). His larger-than-life personality, the never-seen-before ability to take over a game and the aforementioned awareness contributed to the meaning signified by “Jordan,” “Michael,” or “Mike.” In Jordan’s case, “the sum of signs” (Barthes 113) utilized to establish his myth refers to the impressive amount of incredible plays that turned meaning into form. At the same time, “Michael’s soft side, shown in playful spots [...] made the marketing difference. These commercials made Jordan appear more human, allowing legions of fans and consumers to relate to this ‘regular guy’” (Carter and Rovell 84). Image played a crucial part in creation of Jordan’s myth, because it separated “Mike,” as he was referred to by basketball fans, from other stars that seemed so distant.

Jordan wanted to create a wholesome, engaging image. He called upholding that image his biggest job as “it’s hard to live up to something like that, really harder than basketball” (qtd. in Smith 94). Everything about Jordan needed to be flawless in order to market him as a family-friendly brand. This succeeded greatly, as he was called a family man two years before he got married (Carter and Rovell 102). This family friendly image was “built upon traditional gender expectations that middle-class people have long been expected to abide by” (McDonald and Andrews 31). Jordan’s off-court persona was marketed as a noble and loving father and husband, whereas during games he was a restless competitor that would go out of his way to beat his opponents. As Barthes argues, “A form can be judged [...] only as signification, not as expression. The writer’s language is not expected to *represent* reality, but to signify it” (136). Accordingly, Jordan’s off-court persona would be of no importance if he would not have been able to perform in “clutch” moments. The illusion created by the highlights presenting Jordan’s best plays, which cleverly omitted all the important shots that he missed, and the commercials presenting him as a regular person, ignoring the tensions he created within the team, was what the fans wanted to believe.

That was the biggest feat achieved by the trickster – Jordan managed to successfully project the image of this perfect persona onto reality. From an anthropological point of view, when sports stars become mythical figures, they are usually tricksters, who outwit and “outskill” their opponents to achieve personal goals, at the same

time bringing joy to the public. "Laughter, humor and irony permeate everything the Trickster does. The reaction of the audience [...] to both him and his exploits is prevaillingly one of laughter tempered by awe" (Radin x). While the expectations concerning his or her teammates vary, a sports star is supposed to be the best on the field or the court on a regular basis. That is the standard set by Jordan, who turned the mediocre Chicago Bulls into six-time NBA champions. In the world's most popular basketball league, a sports star is supposed to dominate in each of the eighty-two regular season games and later on in the playoffs. In that sense, the sports star is like the mythical figure of the trickster, who "travels over the country and performs a series of actions, which are told in a definite order as his journeyings take him from place to place" (Boas 471). Each year, throughout his career, Jordan performed his tricks in at least eighty-two episodes. In order to uphold his mythical status, he needed to approach every game with the same mindset. His personal trainer, who later worked with basketball greats like Kobe Bryant or Dwayne Wade, claims that "Michael was the only player I've ever known who was completely in the Zone every time he played" (Grover 55). This almost inhuman ability to constantly stay focused separated Jordan from other players. Smart underlines the importance of repetitiveness, or in this case, the repetitiveness of excellence, which is needed of a sports star in order to remain mythical: "The athletic prowess of leading sporting figures like Jordan was demonstrated on court, on the field of play, again and again, in big games against gifted teams and players who tried their hardest to disrupt moves and prevent their opponents from succeeding" (115).

Jordan's persona was ambivalent and so was his myth, as he was a trickster, but he was also a transformer – a nobler mythical figure, who changes the world. "In most tales of the transformer, or of the culture hero, the prime motive is [...] a purely egotistical one, and that the changes which actually benefit mankind are only incidentally beneficial" (Boas 409). Jordan signed large contracts, his ultimate goal was to make money, but he also loved to perform. Apart from providing entertainment comparable to theater, cinema or literature, by turning games into spectacular shows he changed the sports world, as he became the first consciously "branded" superstar, who made great use of the circumstances. An example of Jordan's control over his image is the story of how he was supposed to pick the first model of Air Jordans. At some point during a meeting with Nike, someone proposed black and red sneakers. At first Jordan rejected them, claiming that those were "the Devil's colors" (qtd. in Halberstam 145). However, those were also the colors of his new team, which the sneakers had to match. In order not to be associated with something negative, Jordan unintentionally exemplified the qualities of the transformer, differentiating himself from the trickster. In the latter, "we have a condition corresponding almost exactly to the attitude of medieval Christendom to the devil. [...] The difference between these two series of myth lies mainly in the fact that the devil in all his adventures had only one object in view, namely, the acquisition of souls, while the Indian transformer struggled with a great variety of enemies who infested the country" (Boas 411). Just like Jordan, who each season had to beat over twenty other teams to reach his goal. He may have been a trickster, but he wanted to be perceived as a transformer,

before whose arrival “bankrupt teams and drug scandals had diminished the number of viewers to such an extent that CBS aired the finals late in the night on tape delay” (Cunningham 283). It would be an exaggeration to state that Jordan saved the NBA, but without him the league would not have been able to grow as it did in the 1990s.

Jordan, his sponsors, and the league maximized his potential by using the political and social circumstances to their advantage. It was his participation in the Olympic Games in Barcelona that ultimately turned him into a global icon. “The Transformer is the being who changed the world as it was originally into its present condition” (Chase 99), and that is just what Jordan was to American sports. His contributions to culture were so large that the country felt indebted to him. To put things less romantically: “America’s social and psychic loyalty to Michael Jordan is an effect of a regulatory loyalty to America’s ethnopolitical fantasy of itself” (Jackson, Andrews, and Cole 93). Bill Russell, the eleven-time NBA champion and five-time MVP, may have been a better basketball player, but he played in a different era, before the technological revolution, that is why it is hard to compare him to Jordan. His was a myth that would not die as long as its hero performed miracles on the court. Every game was supposed to prove that “he is a being of great power; he performed many feats in consequence of which the world assumed its present shape” (Boas 415). The myth was established on the basketball court and only there could it be abolished. Jordan almost contributed to that, returning for the second time in a Washington Wizards jersey. For the last two years of his revived career he once again assumed the role of the trickster, disruptive and egotistical, his flaws universally acknowledged. When he finally retired, Jordan regained his status as the culture hero, and his contribution to the present shape of the world was undeniable. “The culture hero’s mode of being reveals the sacrality of cultural and social institutions and activities that constitute the context of ordinary life for humankind. Participation in these activities by the people of archaic societies provides meaning and value to their lives and enables them to live in a sacred cosmos” (Long 2092). Seeing Jordan on the court was not only about sports, but also about participating in a ritual of excellence, witnessing something as close to perfection as humanly possible. That is why to this day Jordan enjoys the exceptional status of a mythical hero and is largely considered the best basketball player of all time.

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Streszczenie

Kuglarz, kameleon, bohater kulturowy. Mit Michaela Jordana w ujęciu antropologicznym

Gwiazdy sportu to współcześni mityczni bohaterowie, prezentujący swoje umiejętności na stadionach i w halach całego świata. Ich mityczny status przekłada się na wartość rynkową, stanowiącą wyznacznik wyjątkowości danego atlety. Dla kibiców jest on bohaterem, dla sponsorów zaś marką, a pierwszym, który ucieleśniał zależność między tymi dwoma na pozór wykluczającymi się sferami był Michael Jordan. Artykuł, odwołując się do teorii antropologicznych, przedstawia Jordana, jako bohatera kulturowego, który stał się punktem odniesienia dla współczesnych sportowców.

Abstract

Sports stars are modern-day mythical heroes, showcasing their skills on fields and courts all over the world. Their mythical status translates to their market value, which is proof of an athlete's exceptional status. For the fans he is a hero, for the sponsors a brand, and Michael Jordan was the first one to exemplify the relation between these two apparently distinct aspects. Drawing on anthropological theories, this article presents Jordan as the culture hero – the one that has set the standards for modern-day sports stars.