

The Game of Devotion

On the Production of Idolatry¹

'Charisma' is a kind of blanket term we use when trying to understand the alluring, glamorous and mysterious qualities of a social figure whose captivating aura makes them seem like a heroic exception to common social life. The heroically charismatic fills us with awe; it makes us marvel, and it excites us. In turn, we praise the extraordinariness of these heroic figures and give tribute to them. Whether we are referring to saviours in ways that resemble religious motives, political representatives or revolutionary leaders, people who are regarded as charismatic seem to be endowed with a unique appeal. This appealing presence not only ensures that they are approved and trusted by their followers, but is also constitutive for their exceptional social position of power. The world of mass media entertainment, for example, offers a culture industry of charisma, utilizing a strategy of symbolic idealization to place stars, icons and cult figures at the top of the social strata. The veneration of 'iprophets' in the digital age, the frenetic enthusiasm for a supposed 'god of football' and the enthronement of an entertainment icon as the 'king of pop' are all expressions of the mediatized omnipresence of countless charismatic heroes and of the mass cultural production of idolatry in which charisma is even made out to be a fundamental condition for success. The perceived extraordinary attractiveness of these figures secures the adoration and emotional affection of fans, not to mention their willingness to purchase goods that are the basis for the symbolic greatness and economic power of these adored stars.

Such exceptional figures embody something that can be regarded as 'more than normal'. They seem to operate along the margins of, or

beyond, the social standards of normalcy, transcending them and rising above what is common and mundane (see, for example, Bataille, *Souvereignty*; Giesen; Lipp). They represent *venerabilis* – in other words, those values and virtues that are respected and regarded as sublime within a social group. This is one of the reasons why the figure of the charismatic hero is awarded a superlative social status. Representing a concentration of the attention, esteem and veneration of his or her followers in turn guarantees this status. Saviour figures thus not only embody what a social group regards as venerable, but the charisma ascribed to them, simultaneously, constitutes a vital element of this very collective. Their nimbus-like aura is regarded as a captivating effect that enables them to attract the attention of vast audiences and to mobilize a collective in their name.

It is this social power of charisma that has repeatedly been in the focus of public and academic attention.² On the one hand, public and academic valuations of charisma affirm the motivational, transforming, and recreating power of charisma. For example, in the field of 'transformational leadership', management theories suggest that cultivating the apparently constructive dynamics of charisma can awaken hidden potentialities in employees by means of increasing their motivation (see, for example, Bono/Ilies; Conger et al.). In the field of politics, there is also a recurring call for charismatic dignitaries. Charisma is said to inspire a new enthusiasm of citizens to participate in politics, thereby counteracting a contemporary frustration with politics.³ On the other hand, by pointing to the destructive dimensions of the revolutionary and seductive power of charisma, to the social and psychological dangers of blind devotion, and to an irrational over-identification with a venerated idol we are confronted with quite an opposite scenario of the effects of valuing exceptionality.⁴ From this perspective, charismatic enchantment is ultimately a kind of manipulation, staged and produced by political leaders or the culture industry to cover

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up the illegitimate character of an asymmetrical power structure. From the enthusiastic fan and loyal acolyte, the humble believer, the screaming masses threatening to pass out in the face of their pop hero, to the martyr who sacrifices him- or herself, to an outsider devotion appears as a dubious passion. The people who are affected by this frantic and jubilatory affirmation of another's power seem to be only weak-willed individuals overcome by their strong feelings willing to give everything to the person they adore. The seductive power of the charismatic person seems to impair the ability of followers to judge.⁵ The veneration of the charismatic person thus appears irrational, because the devotees willingly engage in an unequal power relation in which they are the powerless part. Thus, adoration serves as the affective foundation for the greatest possible antagonism of power and the asymmetrical relationship of dependence to which the follower falls prey in his or her emotionally motivated superstition – the “disease of submission” as Richard Sennett (87) calls it.

Along with adoration, an uncomfortable suspicion seems to enter onto the cultural stage. In light of such devotion to an overpowering Other, those who are not enchanted by the charisma of this Other, the enlightened outsiders (and hence also the academic critics), inevitably challenge the legitimacy of this veneration and question the power relations based on adorers' humility. Whether we see charisma as an opportunity for a social group or as a threat to the social realm, in both cases the charismatic is regarded as having a vital significance for society in that it refers to the emotionally mobilizing potential of this exceptional phenomenon. As contradictory as these two perspectives on charisma may be, they both share a belief in the power of charisma, in its ability to incite the masses. For the most part, however, it remains unclear what is actually being referred to when we talk about a person's charisma. What is the basis for believing in a charismatic phenomenon and its seductive power? The purpose of my argument is to address this principle of seduction, while also demonstrating that, in order to answer the question of whether or not this asymmetrical power structure is legitimate, it is necessary to refer to people's faith in and devotion to the extraordinariness of charisma. Using this as a basis, I will demonstrate that this faith is the result of a production process designed to create and make visible signs of charismatic extraordinariness.

On the question of the legitimacy of enthusiastic power relations

Classic works of mass psychology and the sociology of religion in the tradition of authors such as Gustave Le Bon, Sigmund Freud, Émile Durkheim and Max Weber address the function and logic of this mobilizing potential with the attempt to explain the social effect and the cultural significance of such exceptional figures of social life. The aspect of people 'becoming emotionally affected' by the charismatic person, thereby developing jubilatory devotion to him or her, serves as a recurring motif in theoretical attempts to account for the phenomena of charisma: Whether referring to how an irrational mass of people has become infected through the suggestive power and nimbus of a seducer (see Le Bon), how they have developed a libidinal connection to an idealized leader (see Freud), or how their enthusiasm toward a charismatic person has transformed into obedience (see Weber), affections and feelings appear as prerequisites in the explanation of charisma's vital social potential. Yet what is the source of the charismatic person's power to affect people emotionally? The reference to the ability to infect others with strong emotions makes this quality appear even more mysterious. It only defines the captivating and binding aspect of this phenomenon without explaining the social construction of this quality as well as the cultural logic that drives the belief in someone's affective aura.

The most radical sociological explanation is Durkheim's. He describes this enthusiasm and devotion as sacred emotions. According to his sociology of the sacred, these passions should be regarded as social facts (and thus not as psychological phenomena) and should therefore be understood as being based on social foundations:

Moreover, now as in the past, we observe society constantly creating new sacred things. Let a man capture its imagination and seem to embody its principle aspirations as well as means to fulfil them, and this man will be set apart and considered nearly divine. Opinion will invest him with a majesty quite similar to the majesty that protects the gods. [...] Furthermore, the simple deference that men invested with social positions inspire is not inherently different from religious respect. (Durkheim 160)

Seen from this perspective, charisma is not the inexplicable and mysterious gift belonging to a

chosen figure. Rather, faith in the divinity of such figures is grounded in their existence as symbolic representations of condensed collective ideas. As a result, these representations are said to have a socially regenerating and creative potential and fulfil the function of symbolic integration. Their idolatrous character can thus be regarded as something imposed and projected on them by society, something that needs to be staged and continuously reactivated in the social realm through practices of worship and cultic veneration.

What Durkheim understands as “religious respect” Weber regards as an “interest [...] in obedience” (212). In the case of charisma, this interest is legitimized “by virtue of personal trust” (216) in that

this recognition is freely given and [...] consists in devotion to the corresponding revelation, hero worship, or absolute trust in the leader. (242)

Although the motifs are similar, Weber’s perspective is very different from Durkheim’s because Weber focuses primarily on the question of what conditions are necessary for an asymmetrical power structure to be recognized as legitimate, and how the belief in the charismatic person’s power is established and stabilized. If we apply this to the followers venerating the charismatic person, it becomes clear that this adoration is actually based on a belief in otherness, in not being bound by ordinary rules, and, therewith, in the extraordinariness of the charismatic person. If we take Weber’s point of view and regard charisma as a type of domination that follows an extraordinary logic, then the basic relation of power between the honourable hero and his or her followers can be defined as a relationship that is not regulated by force or violence, but by the belief in the legitimate power of the person bestowed with charisma. The charismatic relationship of domination is radically different from other “everyday forms of domination” (Weber 242), at least in its ideal-typical form, because this relationship is not based on producing symbols indicating how rational or traditional the system of domination is. Its legitimacy does not rest upon a rationally defined or historically established body of rules that can be discursively analysed. Since it is not bound by rules, it appears fundamentally irrational compared to rational domination and essentially revolutionary when compared to traditional domination.

Charismatic domination draws its legitimacy from symbols indicating how extraordinary this form of rule is. Its authority is justified by the belief in the charisma of the ethical, heroic and/or

religious virtuosity of a powerful Other and their claim to power through the enthusiastic approval of followers. It is exactly this affirmative experience of power I am referring to in my discussion on adoration and devotion. This said, adoration can be defined as an enthusiastic emotional attitude toward a sacred figure, whose extraordinary appearance is based on the belief that he or she is acting in the name of a higher order and a sublime power that has bestowed him or her with charismatic talent. This means that belief in the legitimacy of charisma primarily depends on the production of symbols indicating that the Other is extraordinary, mysterious, irrational and revolutionary.⁶ The belief in the charismatic person’s extraordinariness is fundamental to the logic of adoration because this logic rejects any rational power of order. But, likewise, the seeming irrationality of an “internalized devotion [...] appears undignified to the outside observer” (Weber 1108). How can we then understand this construct of extraordinariness – in other words, that which seemingly overrides any rational and traditional order and which, according to Weber, is fundamental for the belief in the charismatic giftedness and the emotionally motivated enthusiasm for it? According to Weber’s concept of validation, charisma must be produced and staged to be effective. Its validity depends on the devotion of followers and their belief in the extraordinariness of this heroic position of power.

It is this dimension of devotion and adoration that I want to address in the following – with the goal of focusing on the production of extraordinariness. My hypothesis is that the staging of power and extraordinariness by those who are perceived to be endowed with charisma depends on their enthusiastic counterpart, on the adoring audience that engages in the production of the extraordinary logic behind the validity of the charisma by emotionally affirming and stabilizing it in the social realm. Therefore, affection, devotion and veneration are not seen as factors that explain the belief in the extraordinariness of these figures; rather, they are regarded as elements in the production of this belief. I will therefore concentrate my investigation on the type of hero that represents the charismatic core of a social group of followers⁷ that adore and venerate the hero’s giftedness.⁸ Using this as a basis, I will focus on the charismatic dyad of adoration understood as the mutually constructed logic of the relationship between hero and follower. In this way, I will approach the production and realization of extraordinariness and its symbols step by step, all the while concentrating on two essential aspects for the dyad of adoration and its seductive logic: the construction of mysteriousness,

and the symbolic exchange. While the production of mysteriousness will prove fundamental for the extraordinariness of the venerated person, I will also demonstrate that this veneration is based on the belief in an agonistic game of the mutual expenditure. My argument is that these two mechanisms are constitutive for the belief in the extra-economic value of adoration, meaning they represent dynamic elements in the production of charisma's illusory value. I will conclude the investigation of the dyad of adoration by discussing the perspective of the unaffected outside audience. Understanding the onlookers this way – not identifying them with the circle of venerating followers – means to include the audience in its role as the 'fourth wall' into the analysis. Because this is the position of an observer who does not actively interfere in the production of idolatry, but who judges it from the outside, the focus on the outside audience enables a different perspective on the belief in extraordinariness, while also providing the observing audience with an essential function regarding the logic of adoration. Acquiring the function of interpreting the dyad of adoration from the social periphery, the outside audience plays the role of a third party (for more on the complementing function of the outside figure, see especially Simmel, *Sociology*). Therefore, the point of view of the not-enchanted, enlightened audience – whether they be the public, or a scholar who is searching for substance in the blanket term 'charisma' – becomes significant for the formation of this dyad and the production of the principle of seduction on which it is based.

Signs of extraordinariness: The adoration of opacity

Charisma must be staged – after all, adorers need signs to believe, and in this case, they need signs that vouch for the extraordinary giftedness of the charismatic person. According to Weber, the production of signs of exceptionality is a constitutive instrument for the stabilization of this fragile form of authority and the power structure that goes with it. Charisma only exists as long as the mysterious and magically attractive virtuosity of the venerated person is constantly kept alive without it becoming routine. The visible construction of arcana is one of the most common tools of power: What is hidden and opaque provides a foundation not only for the mysterious extraordinariness of the adored person by presenting what is impenetrable, unobtainable and incommensurable; it also provides

a foundation for his or her exclusiveness and publicity. As Georg Simmel wrote, the many are "those denied something valuable" and mysterious (*Sociology* 326).

Charisma is by definition an "opaque symbol of reference" (Schneider 130). Because of this lack of transparency, the nimbus of the venerated person is constructed as impenetrable. As long as the nimbus cannot be explained and comprehended, it remains an extraordinary effect, letting the adored person appear important yet untouchable, which is essential for the stability of this extraordinariness. In this way, charisma, which is constantly threatening to disappear, becomes immunized. The production of charisma is always in danger of becoming the opposite, and overproduction can cause the routinization of charisma. When a charismatic person is a public figure, their mysteriousness risks becoming profane, causing their magic, inexplicable and attractive effectiveness to wane. Only when the mystery of charisma is maintained and preserved can it unfold its captivating and seductive effect.⁹

Ultimately, the danger of becoming routine can only be counteracted by safeguarding and stabilizing this mysteriousness. This is also true for the adorers, who are interested in maintaining charisma's emotional attractiveness. In order to protect this mysteriousness, followers use a sacred language (see also Paulhan), which in turn preserves the belief in the untouchability of the adored person. The marvel and enthusiasm of fans who tremble and are struck dumb when in the presence of the object of their desire, the fundamental incomprehensibility of the numinous as defined by Otto, or the inability to describe this experience in an adequate manner, as Agamben states in his engagement with Hegel's *Eleusis*, are examples for the usage of sacred language. The rhetorical reliance on the stylistic means of impenetrableness, incomprehensibility, and indescribability is an essential element of adoration. The guise of language and the communicative framing of charisma as something ineffable transforms it into a blanket term without definite content. However, what cannot be communicated must be indicated in the realm of the social (and it must be communicated as non-communicable) for its mysteriousness to take effect. Communicating extraordinariness thus necessarily relies on "figures of alienation" (Waldenfels 90) that indicate a distinction from the everyday world of experience by referring to what is incomprehensible and is hence a "surplus" (ibid. 91). The rhetorical method of relying on the fundamental impossibility of communication therefore strengthens the belief in the incommensurability

of this phenomenon by demonstrating that all attempts to approach it with signifiers will necessarily fail, because charisma rejects a clear definition: “It is insignificant” (Schneider 145).

This method of using rhetorical guise and language taboos can be interpreted as one of the sacralizing practices that are essential to the interaction with the venerated person. In the relationship of adoration, the motif of the taboo is constitutive for stabilizing its logic. The logic of veneration is based on an ambivalent interplay between prohibition and desire – between closeness and distance, attraction and repulsion (see, for example, Bataille, *Attraction and Repulsion* I and II; Freud, *Totem and Taboo*). When the Other is elusive, when something is constructed as hidden, followers strive toward it, meaning the arcanum is recognized for what it is. When the Other comes too close by becoming too accessible, his or her nimbus seems too much to bear and demands that followers resume a distance and show a “pious shyness” (Assmann 63). In this way, the constitutive difference in status and significance between adorer and venerated person is affirmed through an honouring attitude.¹⁰ This playful tension between closeness and distance is essential for ensuring that extraordinariness remains attractive, while avoiding routinization through constant closeness. Absolute closeness has a homologizing effect and erodes the constitutive difference between the adorer and the adored. Maintaining maximum distance, on the other hand, presents the danger that followers will see the Other in an objective and emotionless manner, because he or she is not perceived as important within their social sphere of influence. This tense hyperbolic nature of “proximity-distance” as described by Plessner (116), for example, safeguards the mysterious extraordinariness of the dyad and is thus not only staged by the charismatic person, but reproduced by the venerating subjects as well.

This relationship can thus be understood as a form of adoration.¹¹ While the boundaries (and thus the imbalance of power that must be reproduced) between the two parties are acknowledged and maintained as constitutive, there is also an attempt to create a sympathetic bond of veneration. It is this interaction between honour and devotion that is characteristic for adoration. If we think about prayers, for example, or collective rituals like cultic celebrations or sacrifices – in other words, practices through which an attempt is made to make the sacred Other present and to call upon, worship and invoke him or her – we realize that these are always ambiguous gestures that both preserve the untouchability of the venerated person and create a relationship that

is impelled to follow an extraordinary logic. Adoration is, as Kümmel-Schnur¹² points out, a dissociative phenomenon: when invoking or calling on the Other (*ad-orare*), he or she is perceived as a tangible entity that does not lose his or her overwhelming and overpowering potential. Although the social and cultural boundaries between the two parties are cultivated, they are also invoked as selectively permeable. The actual performance of adoration, or *proskynesis*,¹³ that we know from courtly etiquette and religious liturgy – for example, in physical practices of honouring like kneeling or kissing feet – can therefore serve as a metaphor for the aspects of veneration visualized in them. On the one hand, the venerated person is excluded from the profane through a negative ritual in the sense of Durkheim in which the untouchability and greatness of the Other is not only preserved, but staged in the realm of the social; on the other hand, devout, honouring veneration also manifests a communicative and sympathetic connection between the person venerated and the adorer.

This honouring and sympathetic connection is therefore staged as holy, untouchable and venerable.¹⁴ The act of adoration itself is regarded as sacrosanct: narratives of predestination and fate¹⁵ lead us to understand the dyad as extraordinary, as destiny, as the result of giftedness (*charis*) and charisma. This aspect is important because the venerated person is called to take up the adored position, meaning the dyad is prefigured as an untouchable sacred object (*res sacra*). As a result, the relationship with the adored power acquires the status of exclusivity.

The game of devotion: Playing with power

Both parties, the venerated person and the honouring followers, are responsible for maintaining the logic of the dyad of adoration and are thus equally dependent on it. The subject does not question this logic but devotes him or herself to it. That is why the belief that veneration is based on a one-dimensional social relationship in which the adored seducer is regarded as a manipulator of a submissive mass in the sense of Le Bon must be questioned. The adorer can also be understood as playing an active role – as someone who, like the charismatic person, participates in an interplay of closeness and distance and affirmatively reproduces the logic of this power relation. As already elaborated upon, impenetrability is the principle of seduction that guarantees the followers’ devotion. Therefore, adoration is

not dependent on signs indicating that the power of the venerated person is justifiably legitimate, rather the exact opposite is the case. The motif of veiling constitutes the playful aspect here, along with the “tendency towards illusion” as described by Plessner (115), which rejects rational comprehension. Since the relation between the venerated person and his or her adherents is characterized by a ludic strategy of deception (*il-ludere*) adoration is to be understood as a social game.¹⁶ That is why it is important to ask whether the adorer is devoting him or herself to another, more powerful player or whether or not these two parties are both devoting themselves to the seductive principle of idolatry – to the unquestionable rules of the idolatrous game. This could explain why the differing values – that only one is the master – and why the legitimacy of a difference in status are not brought up at all. They are both, at least from the perspective of the adorer, engaged in this intimate and mysterious relationship that has a logic accessible only to the interacting parties. The assumption is therefore that veneration is based on an interactive relationship within which the gesture of devotion and honour can be regarded as a constitutive aspect for the reproduction of this asymmetrical power structure. This gesture not only affirms the mode of veiling; the untouchability of the adored Other is also maintained, and the power positions of ‘superiority’ and ‘inferiority’ are confirmed and reproduced.

Through the veneration of the followers, the charismatic person is not only called upon to assume this position of power, he or she is also challenged in this position, and must constantly prove him or herself through indications of extraordinariness. That the adorer places the venerated idol in a position of power is not only a way of challenging the idolized person to prove him or herself worthy of this authority; this challenge also serves as an attempt to gain power over the venerated person. This can best be seen in the form of symbolic practices of honouring by giving gifts, which we perceive as a game of honour.¹⁷ Both players, the charismatic person as well as the adorer, enter the idolatrous playing field making different promises: the charismatic person promises care, guidance, virtuosity and protection, while the adorer promises loyalty, praise and devotion. Veneration is thus not about a one-sided behavioural rule of humility; rather, it follows the agonistic game logic of a symbolic exchange, as described by Marcel Mauss, Pierre Bourdieu and others. Along with the motif of veiling, agonism is thus added to the logic of the game (see Caillouis’ typology of the game). *Euergetism* shapes the code of honour of the

person adored, but the followers are impelled to devote themselves to him or her. If we therefore understand veneration as a form of symbolic exchange, not only does the supposed irrationality of such expending acts become clear; the one-sided hierarchical relationship of power is revealed as a game of power or as a game with power. Whether it be in the form of little presents for the venerated person, cultic practices of adoration, the demonstration of a willingness to sacrifice, or even devotion itself, all are elements of the veneration game. That said, devotion itself is the greatest possible sacrifice. As Bernd Bösel remarks, in devotion “the dialectic of the gift [is] active in an existential way” (Bösel 58). While the symbolic gifts dignifying the Other are a way of affirming and recognizing his or her honourable status, they are also an appeal from the follower to be given recognition, affection and gifts in return. Whether the adored figure is indeed moved by the gifts offered is of course unclear, but this appears to be secondary. Adorers give the venerated person gifts as a way of attempting to get through and appeal to, and thus gain, as Mauss (18) says, “hold over” the charismatic person by honouring him or her. We can thus interpret this as the mutual attempt of each to bind the other to the game of exchanging veneration, of mutual expenditure, which in turn strengthens the game logic.

If veneration is a devotional game with power, then it is about more than merely establishing two antagonistic status positions. It also organizes the social strata of the community of followers according to “charismatic qualities” as Weber calls them – from the “administration staff” of “disciples”, faithful “followers” (Weber 243), and a circle of passive followers, all the way to the unenthusiastic audience lacking all charismatic qualities. The quality of charisma refers here to two things. First, it demarcates the followers’ social, symbolic and emotional proximity to the adored person, because it measures the degree to which each member of the community is endowed with charisma. Second, it is based on the ritualistic means that are available to each figure within this social strata. It is therefore the participation in the process of producing idolatry through veiling and through honouring practices of giving gifts that determines whether someone belongs to the community and hierarchy of adorers. This is especially clear in the example of symbolic exchange. The gift given to honour someone must have a unique symbolism and singularity in order for the giver to stand out from the faceless circle of adorers. Because a gift has a value that is measured by the amount of expenditure and demands mutual recognition, the

gift of honour always has the potential to create a closeness to the charismatic person, thereby lending the connection between adorer and venerated person a social dimension. A gift as exorbitant as possible thus functions as a social distinction, because it begs the appreciation of the bearer of charisma. This appreciation is usually linked to a rise in the status of the venerating person, receiving emotional gratification and a symbolic bonus of loyalty – meaning it qualifies the follower's charisma.¹⁸ The adorer must therefore prove him or herself a worthy partner of veneration through the gift and must demonstrate through expensive symbols (for more on this, see Alcorta/Sosis) that he or she has sufficient emotional and material resources that can be spent freely for the benefit of the venerated icon. Gifts of honour therefore always represent the social and symbolic potency and the esteem of the devoted person. Hence, these acts of expenditure serve to establish a social stratification by not only suggesting a closeness between the venerated person and the adorer based on the significance of the gift, but also by establishing social hierarchies in the social structure of the group of adherents.

The audience and the danger of becoming profane

Charisma is by definition a fragile construct, because it is constantly in danger of becoming routine through overproduction. Maintaining adoration's illusionary and agonistic game logic safeguards the produced reality of charisma by working against this danger, while also having a prophylactic effect with regard to all attempts to find a rational explanation for the magical appeal. The disenchanted gaze of the unaffected audience looking for an explanation represents this danger of profaning the ludic reality, because it "breaks the magical circle and confronts the world of the game with the unreality of its construction" (Gerster 106).

The construction of mysteriousness serves as the basis for demarcating between the spell-bound devotees and the critical and enlightened outsiders. The belief in mysteriousness that is at the core of adoration is based on a peculiar form of knowledge. According to Jan Assmann, adorers protect the mystery with indisputable devotion, while outsiders follow a pathos of transparency and strive to unveil, visualize, unravel and especially find a reason for this mysteriousness (see Assmann 53). What for some can become disenchanted through rather simple explanations,

or become an indication of a game of deception – a smokescreen for power that strives to conceal the true interests of the powerful – is for the adorer an expression and a sign of extraordinariness that must be preserved. Questioning the legitimacy of this asymmetrical relationship of power can be regarded as an attempt to profane it and is therefore an attack on the integrity of the relationship as such. The adorer thus has the choice of relinquishing his or her veneration to this disenchantment, or – provided he or she is interested in maintaining this extraordinary relationship – he or she can work against this by enhancing the exclusivity and impenetrability of the charismatic aspect. In this way, a corresponding zone of intimacy around the venerated superfigure and the adoring subject is marked out, which is necessarily inaccessible to questions from outsiders. As Bollnow writes, "Veneration is always based on a very personal relationship that is expressed through the necessary addition of 'my'" (22). In this possessive 'my' lie the roots of the unfathomableness of this phenomenon – an unfathomableness that is kept from the audience's view and has a seemingly inexplicable foundation accessible only to the enthusiastic follower. The attempt to profane is thus always in danger of having a positive effect on the process of producing idolatry. The adorer contributes to the integrity of the charismatic person's position of power through his or her own veneration. If the nimbus of the honoured person and the reality of idolatry is vulnerable to attacks from a spoilsport audience, the adorer will venerate them with even more enthusiasm.

The audience's disenchanting gaze is thus transformed into the opposite because it has the potential to symbolically idealize the relationship of devotion and the charismatic figure. Concerning how the symbolic exchange value of veneration can be interpreted, the attempt to profane also plays a vital role in the production of the illusory value of charisma. From the point of view of the adorers, the form of the symbolic exchange of veneration described above clearly seems to be exempt from the laws of rational economics, because for the devotees it operates in the sense of Bataille's *dépense improductive* (unproductive expenditure; see Bataille, *Accused Share*). Adorers exhaust themselves for the Other. From their point of view at least, the ritual practice of honouring is based on a pure, non-material relationship of gift-giving and is indifferent to material interests. Although this interpretation gives the impression that, with regard to acts of veneration, a clear boundary could be drawn between symbolism and economy, between useless expenditure and maximum

utility, this cannot hide the fact that the symbolic exchange relationship is based on a close connection between the symbolic and the economic. According to Baudrillard,

[w]e would like to see a functional squandering everywhere so as to bring about symbolic destruction. Because of the extent to which the economic, shackled to the functional, has imposed its principle of utility, anything which exceeds it quickly takes on the air of play and futility. (Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange* 94-95)

From the perspective of all those who do not participate in the symbolically charged game, the illusory value produced here acts as a pure smokescreen that is based primarily on the economic utilization of the ludic and thus ultimately leads to an accumulation of economic capital on the part of the praised person (see Bourdieu). This is perhaps most obvious in the area of pop culture, where the possibilities of venerating a hero are financially limited because these must be purchased with money – for example, in the form of a concert ticket or merchandise. This close connection between symbolism and economy is naturally not only a contemporary cultural phenomenon, or even the product of presentation techniques of the culture industry; it is rather an essential characteristic of sacralizing practices in general and can therefore be found in archaic gift relationships.¹⁹ The game of power, which here takes the form of a gift exchange consisting of the symbolic recognition of status positions, is always also based on an economic principle – an aspect that was clearly identified by Bourdieu. Although the separation between symbolic and economic capital may seem obsolete, this is not the case for the adorer and neither for the disenchanted. For them, this is precisely the supposed key to understanding veneration: only economic interests matter to the audience, while the devotee is only interested in the extra-economic aspect.

For the adoring followers, the logic of veneration must appear indifferent to the law of economics while conjuring the power of the gift of honour that lies in the symbolic formation of a social bond between the two parties. According to Mauss, this seemingly selfless gift of honour and devotion almost always takes

the form of the gift, the present generously given even when, in the gesture accompanying the transaction, there is only a polite fiction, formalism, and social deceit, and when really there is obligation and economic self-interest. (Mauss 4)

Veneration is thus about disguising the interdependence of quantitative assessment and the symbolically charged, qualitative practice of gift-giving – although, from an outside perspective, the economic law of value seems to be clearly in the foreground. We return to the motif of veiling or disguising here because the mystification of the economic law of value is constitutive for veneration and therefore forms a rule within the game of honouring that cannot be questioned. According to Bourdieu,

The whole society pays itself in the false coin of its dream. The collective misrecognition [...] is only possible because, when the group lies to itself in this way, *there is neither deceiver nor deceived*. (Bourdieu 195-196, emphasis VZ)

The production of idolatry: The belief in extra-economic value

According to this argument, the venerating adorers do not so much blindly submit to the power of a hero as the venerated person and the devotees both submit themselves to the seductive principle of concealment. Although adoration indicates an imbalance of power between two parties, this does not automatically mean that we are dealing with a one-dimensional effect that comes from a manipulative and deceiving seducer who causes his or her followers to be blinded by their emotions and to fall victim to their power. The belief in the extraordinary logic and libidinous energy of charisma is based on the work done by both the venerated person and the adorers to conceal things from the audience. This means that the venerator is thus not simply deceived; rather, he or she actively collaborates in the reproduction of idolatry. As I have demonstrated, the question of power in this game can never be regarded independently from the economic principle on which the production and reproduction of idolatry are necessarily based. However, the belief in the extraordinary is based on the belief in the extra-economic value of veneration, which must constantly be (re)produced. Weber writes about the belief in the value of religion in a similar manner:

As such [...] the significance of distinctively religious behavior is sought less and less in the purely external advantages of everyday economic success. Thus, the goal of religious behavior is successively 'irrationalized' until finally otherworldly

non-economic goals come to represent what is distinctive in religious behavior. (Weber 424)

From the point of view of the audience unaffected by this game, economic value acquires a prominent position, because the seemingly seductive principle can be exposed as a mystification of the economic principle. However, the ability to unmask and hence profane charisma depends on the quality of the veiling efforts of the adorers and the worshipped person. The unmasking gaze of the audience can thus always be interpreted by devotees as an invitation to increase their enthusiastic work on idolatry.²⁰ The process of producing idolatry is thus based on generating illusory values through the dyad of veneration. Within this process, the point of view of the profaning outsider plays a potentially dynamizing role, because the attempt to confront the established game-world with its relativity and with a rational seriousness can also turn into the opposite and lead to an excessive increase of the symbolic values. The attempt to disenchant followers can thus indirectly become an important element in the production of this game.

Devoutly accepting the mysteriousness, making comprehension a taboo, maintaining untouchability and playing the potentially excessive game of devotion and veneration are all constitutive elements of the logic of adoration and the belief in extra-economic value it is based on. At the same time, these aspects of a symbolic transformation and the game of disguise with charisma also arouse the suspicions and draw the criticism of outsiders. What to the enchanted follower appears to be the expression of a meaningful, fulfilling phenomenon appears to the outsider like the crazy idolizing of an illegitimate superpower.

This difference in the assessment of adoration has a special status in contemporary culture and in a society in which the song *No More Heroes* by the Stranglers is just as applicable as the recurring social diagnosis that, because of our post-religious attitude, we live in an idolatrous age where everything and everyone can, in principle, become an extraordinary object of heroic fetishism.²¹ On all cultural stages and in all football stadiums we are confronted with religious, pop cultural and political idolatry and charismatic signs produced by the culture industry. The veneration of a religious icon can just as easily take on pop cultural attributes as the cultic engagement with a 'star' can adopt genuinely religious elements. From pilgrimages to Graceland, to private shrines for stars, all the way to imitations – there are countless

anecdotes about the symbolic transgression of the boundaries between religion and pop culture. In religion, certain aspects have obviously been adapted from pop culture, as Bergmann, Soeffner and Luckman have demonstrated in their study *Erscheinungsformen von Charisma* (Forms of Charisma) about two popes. Pointing out that "the categories pope and celebrity are becoming blurred" (Bergmann et al. 152), they investigated the effects this has on followers. In view of the postulated blurring of the boundaries of the sacred and considering the variety of venerable figures, a comparison of the different contemporary realms of veneration would be fruitful. Although religion, politics and pop culture all adopt the "logic of the 'event society'", as Joas (26) and others state, this does not mean that political and pop cultural events are simply 'quasi-religious' phenomena. The idea that they replace religion seems to fall short here because the scopes of meaning clearly differ in religion and the culture of entertainment. For example, in religion, it is not the *idea* of transcendence, but actual transcendence that is essential to the believers: it is "a reality that does not have an effect, but claims that it 'exists' independently of religious communication" (Knoblauch 181). While something higher and recognizably 'true' is referred to in religious veneration – something hidden beyond the limits of the social world – pop cultural adoration is committed to the enjoyment of what is offered and to the accompanying aura of the phenomenon. The belief in the existence of a transcendental that is only conveyed to this world in a distorted sense was always the framework for religious forms of veneration. In pop culture, on the other hand, at least from the point of view of the adorers, the quality of veneration does not lie within a reference to something otherworldly and true; rather it is embedded in the acceptance of this illusory world of stars and idols produced by the entertainment industry. The aspect of illusion thus gains an entirely different meaning; especially if we follow Michael Jackson's suggestion to "be part of the illusion". The diversity of veneration in contemporary culture demands that we reflect on the symbolic dissolution of boundaries and interpenetrations in light of the differences in cultural meaning of these social fields and to put the different processes of the production of idolatry and the social power thereof into perspective. In order to better understand the contemporary cultural significance of idolatry, we need a critical analysis of the symbolic and economic logic of adoration that not only approaches the phenomenon from the outside, but most importantly explores the production of veneration as a basis.

In other words, such an analysis should focus on where the work on idolatry takes place.

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2 Issue 4 (2012) of the magazine *Der Spiegel* with the theme "Charisma. Das Geheimnis der besonderen Ausstrahlung" (Charisma. The Secret of the Special Aura), which was sold with seven different covers, is an example of the continual public interest in the apparent mystery of charisma. The main feature takes mysteriousness as the starting point for understanding and explaining this phenomenon and explores its psychological and sociological mechanisms.

3 For more about an emphasis on the creative potential released by charismatic figures, see, for example, Patzelt; Fiol et al. For further exploration of the constructive and destructive dynamics of charisma within institutional and organizational structures, see Shils.

4 Especially Le Bon's remarks on the "Psychologie des foules" subscribe to the interpretation in which a characteristic weakness of will is ascribed to the masses. Precisely as a result of this weakness of will, the masses are seen as open to the suggestive power of manipulating authorities who have a strong will. For a study of contemporary evaluations of veneration, see especially the psychological study on the so-called celebrity worship syndrome by Maltby et al. in which the authors describe an intense and passionate devotion to an idol, cautioning that "the expression of celebrity worship is firmly rooted in pathology and thus may become a serious clinical issue. The case of the female adolescent who was willing to self-mutilate over her parasocial relationship with a popular musician subsequently might serve as an illustrative example" (Maltby et al. 29). This bathetic euphoria is regarded as a pathological disorder because it generates a dependency that absorbs the subject's attention in a way that qualifies as "poorer mental health" (ibid. 28).

5 The feeling of enthusiasm is especially suspected of being the opposite of sober rationality. For more on this, see Bösel's genealogical investigation of the philosophical discourse in which he discusses how the defamation of enthusiasm should be regarded in relation to, and as a result of, an enlightening attitude. For an analysis of the interpretative connection between being filled with God (enthusiasm) and madness in the area of religion, see also Foucault's discourse-analytical discussion of madness, *Madness and Civilization*. For more on what is suspicious about feelings toward a charismatic person and fear of illegitimate authorities, see Sennett, *Authority*. For a discussion on the precariousness of veneration from the point of view of contemporary culture, see also Zink.

6 By production, I mean "making" as well as Baudrillard's mode of visualization and realization in the sense of *production*. For more on the concept of production, see Baudrillard, *Seduction*.

7 In focusing on the hero as a charismatic figure, I refer here to Bernhard Giesen's definition of the hero: "Heroes embody charisma, they fuse the sacred into the profane world, they establish a mediating level between the humans and the Gods" (Giesen 16).

8 For a nuanced analysis of adoration as an emotion and its distinction from other feelings of praise, such as awe or admiration, see (among others) Bollnow; Schindler et al.

9 However, whether a secret really exists behind the veil is secondary. What counts is the construction of an impenetrable mystery.

10 In addition to Assmann, Bollnow also extensively explores the role of shame for reverence. See also Goffman's description of how distance is kept as a form of honour.

11 For more on adoration in the sense of worshipping and appealing to another person, see Marti. Jean-Luc Nancy also points out the terminological similarity between adoration and addiction when he writes: "The word developed its sense in the direction of 'to dedicate oneself,' 'to devote oneself,' 'to give oneself over to,' and later in the direction of obligation, indebtedness, and submission. It is impossible not to allow some vague relations to emerge between *ab-dicere* (and/or *abdicare*, since the two verbs are close to one another here) and *ad-orare*, even though *dicere* is related to the declaration and to its content, while *orare* (as Old French had it) suggests speech as address" (Nancy 8).

12 For more on this, see Kümmel-Schnur's remarks on *adorcism*, which he regards as the opposite of exorcism.

13 For more on gestures of adoration or *proskynesis*, see Marti.

14 Whether this 'actually' exists is only secondary here, of course. What is important in this context is whether adorers recognize this as real.

15 The motif of predestination and providence, on which the extraordinariness of this relationship is stylized, can also be found in narratives of love. See Simmel, *Fragment*.

16 For more on this, see (among others) Baudrillard. For more on the logic of the game, see also Caillais; Huizinga.

17 For more on the game of honour, see Bourdieu. For an analysis of the symbolic exchange of gifts, see Mauss 4.

18 See Mauss 18. For an analysis of the socially structuring effect of rituals from the perspective of interaction theory, see Collins. According to Collins's approach, the accumulation of emotional energy by the participants in the ritual decides on the position of the actors in the social structure. The question is, however, how these can be visualized in order to be effective in the social realm. Practices of expenditure are necessary in my opinion, because they are valuable signals that make visual the disposal of a sufficient amount of emotional energy.

19 One example is the transformation of a real sacrifice into a symbol in the form of objectified charter money that has been substituted by a coin on which only the picture of the sacrificial animal remains. See Baudet.

20 However, the attention we give to a phenomenon like veneration either in scholarly or media-related form increases exponentially with the asymmetry of these relationships and thus in connection with the rising dubiousness of the venerating acts of the passionate followers.

21 Or like Michel Maffesoli titles in a recently published monograph: "nos idolatries postmodernes". See also Horner et al.

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