

Jędrzej Morawiecki, PhD.

Between the individualism of Ryszard Kapuscinski and the feature factory. Reporting of the War for a literary reportage.

Imagine the front of the war. Imagine we try to wander across the front, ignoring the battlefield. However, when we turn left, we see noble reporters standing on the barricade. They are individualists, they are sensitive reporters, reporting honestly about what they see and what they find. They do so not from a desire to a profit but by a mission.

When we look in the opposite direction, we see companies - generating similar products with ISO certification.

When I wrote about the erosion of trust in Ryszard Kapuscinski one year ago<sup>1</sup>, I realized such writing becomes an assault on the flag. Deconstruction of the icon of the god of literary reportage pushed us inevitably towards one side of the barricade, weakening unintendly a position of those who believe in the individual way of the journalism<sup>2</sup>.

Do not let us go across this time. Let's try to accept the front line. Inscribe in the opposition, and try to make a fair balance.

How does Kapuscinski become a part of the Polish tradition of a literary reportage? I would say this tradition is close to the physiological school, but not in the French variant, but rather in the Russian version. This tradition is closer to the ethos of intelligence, implemented through a specific, Polish

---

<sup>1</sup>J. Morawiecki, El emperador del reportaje sin reportaje. Sobre la conservación y la erosión de la confianza en El Imperio de Kapuscinski, CUADERNO DE COMUNICACIÓN. RYSZARD KAPUSCINSKI, N° 2 - AÑO 2010, ed. Jose Luis Gonzales Esteban (transl. by M. Kolankowska), pp. 19-46.

positivism.

These texts were engaged, utilitarian, missionary. With time, the creation of these texts became increasingly associated with the display of ego. This trend is strong so far thanks to a friendly free-market environment. Today, both functions - to the art - and - not without significance - economic conditions, conducive to such exposure. It is positively correlated with creating an image of the author-reporter, as well as with implementing effective communication with the critics in Poland and other countries.

Kapuscinski gave an example of excellent use of symbols, combined with the plasticity of the narrative, offering real or apparent explanations, synthesizing them within simple, vivid descriptions, which were pop culture, not scientific. These narratives were positioned as left-wing, alternative, anti-corporate etc.

When we talk about such reportages as texts by Kapuscinski we see that the conclusion of the reference pact (we mean by that trust of the reader to the reporter) is in line with the requirements of a market segmentation and product positioning adequate to the typology of genres. Both the author, the publisher and the owner are interested in building a stable, predictable, yet individualized (not identical with the other) image. They are all interested in generating simple slogans for critics. The author must not be homogeneous and static. He should, however, clearly inscribe in the discourse, he must obtain energy from the polarization that had already been red hot, widely exploited and placed on high speed by the mass media. Or he needs to operate the symbols that are already on the market and are promoted in a different way.

Literary reportage must be on an appropriate shelf in the

---

<sup>2</sup>I accepted this opposition in the book: J. Morawiecki, Mały człowiek. O współczesnym reportażu rosyjskim, Warszawa 2010.

bookstore. Such a text must include a bait - a sentence that will promote the book. That's why when I was writing reviews for the publishers, I had to determine whether the texts have commercial potential. That has happened even in case of the reviews written for the publishers considered as ambitious. They all clearly identify their audience and implement corporative mechanisms to instruct their employees how to simulate the path of book production.

It can be very frustrating and it can kill some reporters who are not there, if the market is too shallow. In such a situation, the off-stream would not survive, or it would be very weak. Authors who did not accept primitive but hard market conditions, would be marginalized.

This situation, however, need not be frustrating. Kapuscinski is an example of both the artistic and commercial success. He is an example of the success achieved in various fields.

Remember, yet, taking the extreme position on the left side of the barricade has its price. Most of the authors become ronins then, they are no longer soldiers of the corporate army. Maybe they will even take with honors in their former newsroom, maybe their book will be reviewed and they will give an interview, but they will be never allowed to enter the barracks, they do not spend the night with their former comrades in arms anymore. Operation in several fields is possible only when we fit into existing mechanisms and come back with a different rank, differently promoted and labeled.

I see how my book-products sink or sail in the waters of the publishing market. Their existence has nothing to do with the ethos of an intellectual or a social activist, with honesty or social engagement.

"Shelling the light" („Łuskanie światła”)<sup>3</sup> is my best promoted book. This is because it tells the story of a former Russian traffic policeman, who proclaimed himself to be Christ in Siberia. Only after that I gave earlier reports "Głubinka" („Głubinka”)<sup>4</sup> telling of the loss of Polish transformation. This book has already referred to the previous product (it reports "for all who seek the true province of Russia. This time, the author explores the province in Poland").

"The end of winter" („Schyłek zimy”)<sup>5</sup> is a book that is the most important for me personally. This participatory report tells about the dark side of Polish collectivized village, about a combination of life of farmers, scientists and frustrated workers of international corporations living in the suburbs). It was published in a niche in a small circulation (publisher has no money to promote me to a new segment).

A book about industrial neo-shamanism in Buryatia "Four Western crone" („Cztery zachodnie staruchy”) will be easier to release.

We are not rewarded for our integrity, our commitment. For ethos. For the courage to experiment. Rewarded us for market timing. Commercial intuition is not only important to success. It is essential to writing, even to non-fiction writing.

But before we dive into the thicket of writing and talk about marketing rules of the world of books, let us go back to the other side of the barricade. Let us see what is happening in the Polish newspapers. The said battle between reportage and the feature continues. The barricade has not collapsed. The barricade separates the corporate feature from the literary reportage. But what is this feature?

Under this concept we understand texts that occur in the

---

<sup>3</sup> J. Morawiecki, Łuskanie światła, Warszawa 2010.

<sup>4</sup> J. Morawiecki, Głubinka. Reportaże z Polski, Warszawa 2011.

<sup>5</sup> J. Morawiecki, Schyłek zimy, Wrocław 2011.

U.S. since the 40s, in Europe since the '60s, in Poland - from the 90s. As Kazimierz Wolny-Zmorzyński, one of the most famous Polish typologists of media studies, writes, "feature is a form simpler than reportage"<sup>6</sup>.

This means in practice the stringer gives the publisher ordered quotes, and also the age of the caller, his clothes, and sometimes the behavior described with few words. The feature is then processed in the newsroom, tuned with additional data, drawing a background of the event. These data come from company resources or other sources, mainly press. Such data may be produced by the researchers<sup>7</sup>.

Wolny-Zmorzyński writes a feature "lets just slide through the event, briefly introducing the reader to the subjects"<sup>8</sup>.

Ewa Owsiany writes about surrogate-reporting, devoid of beauty and punch<sup>9</sup>. Wolny-Zmorzyński claims a feature competes with a television reportage and it happens to the detriment of the classic written reportage. When the researcher writes about the written reportage, he puts emphasis on individualism, building up a hero-author, giving a predisposition to portraying human relations, which modern methods of communication are not able to illustrate<sup>10</sup>.

---

<sup>6</sup> A. Magdoń, *Reporter i jego warsztat*, Kraków 1993, p. 95.

<sup>7</sup> Information about other aspects of working for corporational agencies as Reuters, you can find in the text: K. Konarska, J. Morawiecki, *The dominance of the Great Four - outcome of profit and loss. An attempt of sociological operationalization with using participating observation* [in:] *Content, channels and audiences in the new milenium: interaction and interrelations*, pp. 494-497, Moscow 2009

<sup>8</sup> K. Wolny-Zmorzyński, *Reportaż...*, p. 182.

<sup>9</sup> E Owsiany, *Uleczyć życie (szkic o reportażu)*, [in:] *Abecadło dziennikarza*, ed. A. Niczyperowicz, Poznań 1996, s 24 [by:] K. Wolny-Zmorzyński, *Reportaż...*, p. 182.

<sup>10</sup> I presented a similar analysis of the genre of feature in the Polish article: J. Morawiecki, *Rosyjski oczerk a zachodnioeuropejski feature. Dwa wektory rozwoju współczesnego reportażu* [in:] *Reportaż bez granic? Teksty, warsztat reportera, zjawiska medialne*, ed. I. Borkowski, Wrocław 2010, pp.17-

However, such approach to the subject by academics is problematic.

The above description is omitted for the function of entertainment, which is not part of the opposition mentioned above.

This method of treatment of the subject is dangerously normative. Feature appears in fact as inherently inferior, and the transformation of the reportage in the feature - as disturbing or even pathological.

This valuation, however, seems unavoidable if we take into account the artistic quality of reportage. The transformation of art into the massive craft is indisputably its degradation. Feature may be therefore regarded as a form of inferior from the viewpoint of historical and literary, as Wolny-Zmorzyński does.

Yet it does not mean automatically such a form is less useful. Conversion of literary reportage in the direction of feature can be considered as the most desirable from the viewpoint of the dynamics of an advocate of functionalism, examining media system, expecting the editorial integrity, preservation of democracy and pluralism. Standardization of the text, simplifying language, predictability, compatibility, help controlling the postulated impartiality of media. Consuming artisanal calibrated products, appears safer. Meanwhile, the receipt of art generates a higher risk. It seems Mark Chylinski and Stephan Russ-Mohl, who define the feature as "more ambitious genre" than the report, accept the above functionalist perspective. The positive valorization of the genre may be related to provenance of the researchers who are not independent and publish the book by the international group, Polska Presse which favors features.

---

44. However, in the Polish version I decided to compare the Anglo-American genre with the Russian genre „*ocherk*”.

However, even if our previous study were closer to the Polish tradition of artistic reportage and even if we feel personally dislike of large corporations monopolizing or dominating national media markets (many of researchers share such criticism, not only in Poland), we should honestly ask: what if we are prejudiced to the feature? And perhaps only a caricature of this genre reaches us? Perhaps the feature has been artificially imported and mindlessly imitated? Maybe it is implanted in violence to the Polish soil, contrary to the existing tradition of documentary?

The difference in output of both types of texts does not generate a strong tension while a field work. Stronger contrasts of the two currents are revealed when analyzing the motivation of reporters and a type of creation/production.

In the case of features satisfaction of the work is more similar to the motivation of a gunman from a newsroom, floating in the adrenaline and taking pleasure of his self-efficiency.

Although a pleasure of loosening the bonds of genres may also be an important factor as well, which is typical for Anglo-American reporters (the feature gives a freedom from the rigid matrix of news).

As we see, among typical elements of the literary reportage a reporter's recognizable style deserves special attention.

Analysing the composition one should also mention anecdotes, digressions, elements that are not pursuing the topic, not confirming or refuting the thesis, seemingly detached from the plot, asking questions.

The reportage should ask questions. The feature should be an illustration for an answer. It often carries a decorative function, it is a bonus, extra extension or a popular explanation for the sociological and parasociological reports.

It performs the function of a servant, and not autonomous.

While reading the feature we understand the purpose for which a given quotation is placed. Meanwhile, the reportage is more open and ambiguous narrative.

Is the reportage polyphonic in the sense in which Bakhtin spoke about this? Perhaps it may be like that. Although it is difficult to imagine a polyphonic feature, which is homogeneous by definition.

So the literary reportage may be characterized by:

- intertextuality
- emotionality
- stylistic individualism
- autotelism
- digressions
- introspective
- resignation of the reporting of the events, and even total escape from the nominal topic.

These characteristics are not likely to be realized in the feature.

Is it possible to "reportage", mentioned by Kisch, understood as a collection of substantively important data for the spiritual development of a topic<sup>11</sup>? "Reportaging" understood as a study of the environment, carried out by "any writer, even a non-realist"<sup>12</sup>? It seems so. The articulation of this process, however, is impossible or its expression is very limited. This happens because of the nature of the production of the feature, which implies the subordination of a stringer to the editor.

---

<sup>11</sup> K. Wolny-Zmorzyński, *Reportaż...*, p. 179.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*.



The feature is closer to deduction. We have an aggregate data, we rely on the theory and look for empirical examples. Feature rather preserves and reproduces the vision of the of the world, it confirms hypothesis. Meanwhile, the reportage is inductive.

Standardization gives immediate benefits. Thanks to unification of the production process a controller or a reader who knows the matrix is able to find elements of text that are not calibrated. Standardization, however, has its price. Obviously, a center of production will always require field work, it would require external receptors. However, these organs become more tentacles than the eyes. A reporter - mostly a stringer - turns into a collector of quotations. Field work is treated then as a supply of components from sub-contractors, who need not know the whole production process, or even use of all components.

In line with this tendency, when I was sent to Auschwitz to gather quotes to the feature about March of the Living, the editor gave the following command: "Find an old Jew who survived the camp <sup>13</sup> and say that it was hell. Find a young Jew, who says it is just a history for him, but that this march is a moment of reflection and speculation about his ancestors. Find and finally a young Pole, who says he has had enough of the Auschwitz museum and would like to have a disco in here " <sup>14</sup>.

Headquarters require something more than just providing

---

<sup>13</sup> It was necessary for them to write about Auschwitz. A Jew who survived the camp in Plaszow, was not a good source of quotes, although he also said about the "hell".

<sup>14</sup> J. Morawiecki, Judeus marcham para relembraar vítimas do Holocausto,

quotes from a stringer. A reporter should give the substitute of descriptions - similar to those in the reportage. These descriptions, however, are constructed and applied without reflection: after amputation of subjectivity and literary dentures are being restored. Or let us try to express it less normatively and call the mentioned process as restoring the substitutes in the form of reproducible and comparable quantitative information corresponding to the already signaled questions: about clothes, age etc.

These questions began to be asked f.e. by the editors of „Tygodnik Powszechny“, who had cared for the literary character of the magazine before. That happened when writing a reportage about a girl who was killed in the poor district of Wałbrzych city. In the quotation of a woman who worked at the school and has carried out children cross the road they wanted to add the phrase: "a woman with a face ruined by alcohol"<sup>15</sup> (such appearance was imaginary, the editor has never seen the woman). What such an element would be used for? Authors of books advising how to construct feature, argue that the descriptive words are not playing the role of the decorative, but informative.

The authors of the book "Media writing" give as an example of such a procedure a statement:

„The five-foot office desk is a deep brown mahogany. Its owner is rich and powerful"<sup>16</sup>. The massive mahogany desk must have legitimacy, it testifies to the social status of the interlocutor. Details in the text are indicators, which allow to

---

<http://members.libreopinion.com/us/revision5/jumarrel.htm> (on the base of the story from 19 April 2001).

<sup>15</sup> J. Morawiecki, Krajobraz po zbrodni, „Tygodnik Powszechny” nr 2, 14 stycznia 2007, tygodnik2003-2007.onet.pl/479679,archiwum.html.

<sup>16</sup> W. Richard Whitaker, Janet E. Ramsey, Ronald D. Smith, Media writing, New York and London 2009, p. 243.

adjust the attribute to a variable conceptualised previously (interior, age, type and color of clothing).

In this case, a given attribute belonging to a closed set of variants is being matched by indicator "furniture" to the variable "social status". Writing the text begins to resemble the use of a computer program, filling in the fields of spreadsheet "Excel", in which some columns are "required fields" (and therefore the editor will call a stringer, if he does not give the age or color of clothing, he will be obliged to supplement the data, even if the reporter does not remember such details). Under this procedure, however, we could not put the sentence: "The hero is fragile after yesterday's party, he is silent, doing Kogel-mogel and listening to <<Tangerine dream>>"<sup>17</sup>, unless listening to the German music group "Tangerine Dream" would classify the character of a particular subculture.

Writing a feature is similar to filling in the survey with open questions. The interviewer has to implement recommendations of the researcher, may not be as qualified (and talented) as in the case of qualitative research. On the other hand literary treatments are regarded by Anglo-American authors as distinctive and unique for the feature.

The authors of "Media Writing" emphasize freedom of creators of features from limitations of size of their texts and from the pyramid ranking a composition according to news value.

The feature is to be the embodiment of individual expression, creative freedom contrasted with the building of simple news. Impairment or privilege depends upon the reference group, which so far have been for us the authors of the literary reportage,

---

<sup>17</sup> J. Morawiecki, Poczworka, „Tygodnik Powszechny” 16 września 2001, p. 8-9.

which, however, is represented by gunmen, by producers of typically informational texts for the mentioned Anglo-American scholars.

The authors claim, however, that feature may add to the news. In this case, it is used as a "news story sidebar"<sup>18</sup>. Then they ask an intriguing question: why should we write a feature instead of the news (imagine the question: why do we need Kapuscinski instead of CNN?). And they give even more interesting answers: to make the recycling of the news, which has already been printed and which we want to regenerate, to write again, with fresh (other) language, with a new lead<sup>19</sup>.

A reportage is thus an idea for a new pack. Color stories are to be a gravy for the newspaper. They can also liven up the story which is too boring, focusing for example on the regulation of the insurance system, or statistics<sup>20</sup>.

Feature has to be written so as to bring an analytical text to the "common reader"<sup>21</sup>. Feature is intended for those less educated, not for professionals. In this sense we can speak of a degradation of a genre of literary reportage.

Reportages that have been transformed into a feature represent "human interest stories". What is significant - in the next book, devoted entirely to the mentioned genre, Anglo-American authors give as a model example texts from the tabloids<sup>22</sup>.

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem, p. 236.

<sup>19</sup> Note that the authors use the poetics of technology, which is not only representative of the critical anti-corporate discourse.

<sup>20</sup> W. Richard Whitaker, Janet E. Ramsey, Ronald D. Smith, Media writing..., p. 237.

<sup>21</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>22</sup> S. Pape, S. Featherstone, Feature Writing: A Practical Introduction, London-Thousand Oaks-New Delhi 2006, p. 152-155.

What are the new conditions of the reportage, influencing the production rate and its quality? In most newspapers shortening of the production process and of structuring texts similar to the feature matrix are observed.

Feature as a genre - as said - is functioning successfully in Poland. Without a doubt, in some areas it occupies a dominant position, although it is not identified as a feature <sup>23</sup>.

Thus we observe the evolution of the reportage in the Western direction. In line with this tendency I had two days to write the above-mentioned story about the murder of a girl from Walbrzych<sup>24</sup>. Meanwhile, dozens of previous reportages were written for "Tygodnik Powszechny" without any time pressure.

Relation to current events is not a new phenomenon for the reportage and refers to its roots. For the past few years, however, more and more Polish reporters used to walk around the area trampled by TVN (/CNN). They just go into the field, when the blood is still fresh and before interlocutors besieged by the media unlock the door. How, then, newspaper columns are filled with quotes?

Filip Łepkowicz, a former photojournalist of the newspaper „Super Express”, co-operating with a tabloid "Fakt" (Axel Springer) and foreign tabloids, explained me: *"A good journalist is one who has a notebook full of numbers to the experts: sociologists, political scientists, sexologists, psychologists. He should have two representatives each of these areas: the first in the field, one in Warsaw, both on the phone"* <sup>25</sup>.

---

<sup>23</sup> The authors of the Polish group Presse also observe this phenomenon (M. Chyliński, S. Russ-Mohl, Dziennikarstwo, Warszawa 2007, z. 71)

<sup>24</sup> J. Morawiecki, Krajobraz po zbrodni...

<sup>25</sup> Conversation during the photography workshop at the IV International Festival of Photography in Lodz (11-13 May 2005, moderated Łepkowicz F., J. Morawiecki, M. Skawiński).

It is thanks to these experts, we can fill in the gaps of the quotations and save thematic coherence of the whole text written not only for the tabloid, but also for the opinion-forming press.

So that the modern reporter must work faster, be assisted by experts and non-reactive sources (including Internet) and last but not least - record a reality in several ways, often replacing the photographer or even a cameraman.

And so a reporter is often encouraged to take a picture "on the occasion". He can also hear that the text will be not published, because „it is like fragment of good books". Texts should be more supportive than the individual. They should not undermine the plan of consuming a newspaper, should not interfere with the rhythm dictated by the visionaries of the target groups and by the dense, delicious advertising.

Feature - as stated - is functioning in the Polish press well. However, there is no the environment of "featureists" in Poland although there is the enviroment of the authors of reportages („reportażysci").

Even if the authors of reportages are not a social group, they are without a doubt a social category<sup>26</sup>.

It seems that the vitality of reportage include such factors as:

- perception of the effectiveness of persuasion, an appreciation of the symbolic center of power
- competence of auditors - the development of tools for calibration, quality control
- ideas and impetus to chief editors, department heads
- competence of journalists, solidarity, ability to defend the

---

<sup>26</sup> In this way, Marek Miller wrote about the reporter in his book: Reporterów sposób na życie, Warszawa 1983.

form of reproducing the ethos of the profession, and connecting it with literature, art.

- literary tradition, education of readers.

The market has changed. Readers have changed. Do we know, however, what they are demanding? Or maybe it just seems to us that we know their desires?

How many of the less-known reporters would survive? How many of them would appear on the market? How many would survive and follow a super-product that Kapuscinski was? Kapuscinski, a visionary, a man growing out beyond his time and past economic conditions?

There has been an explosion of reportage books in Poland. Writing books has become a strategy for many reporters. Thanks to them, they can go in line with the economy, shaking the invisible hand of the free market.

The question is how deep is the market? Does it give us the promised freedom of choice? And how many texts will fall off - as unformatted? Also on the book market? How many texts will fall off simply because they do not know what phrase to use to promote the book and what type of polarization fit?

The creator of feature is just a lucky craftsman, an aristocrat among the laborers. Meanwhile an artist work, f.e. writing reportages, can not be reduced to a purely economic calculation, in contrast to the craftsman. An author of reportages should be both an artist and craftsman. He should sell his product, calculate the effort. He should find a patron, who will feed him and tolerate his frolics idle, unprofitable trips, endless field work, which would not accept any standard editorial staff.

The reporter writing reportages must be glued to the symbols of pop culture, he must find a picklock to slip back to the media discourse, or to return to it triumphantly on a donkey. He will shine at banquets and parties. He will talk about the mission, reproduce and consume ethos, will explain how hard his job is. He would build his image as Kapuscinski did masterfully. But that's another story.