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Lost Cosmonauts: On Ryszard Kapuściński's Imperium and Its Critics – Once More.

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When writing about a book whose author is well-known all over the world, analyzed by hosts of critics and literary experts, it is good to delay – if only for a moment – the need to quote all the names and commentaries discussing the book or its author. I would like to draw the reader's attention to two texts recently published concerning Russia. The first, Yuri Afanasyev's historical essay entitled *Kamienna Rosja, martwy lud* (*Stone Russia, dead people*) was published in one of Poland's leading dailies[1] *Gazeta Wyborcza*. The second was Daniel Kalder's *Lost Cosmonaut*, a fictional account of the "rotting interior of an empire."[2] Afanasyev's essay has been afforded special status by the editorial board of *Gazeta Wyborcza* who designed the layout of the essay in such a fashion as to allow it to be pulled out of the newspaper and be kept as a brochure – a guidebook of sorts for the dark and dingy imperial history of Poland's eastern neighbor. The

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1 Afanasyev, Y. "Kamienna Rosja, martwy lud" (original Polish title). In *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 24-25.01.2009, 11-30.

2 Stasiuk, A. "Introduction" to: Kalder, D. *Zagubiony kosmonauta* (*Lost Cosmonaut: Observations of an Anti-Tourist*). Wydawnictwo Czarne. Wołowiec. 2008, 6.

author's main premise – spread over eleven richly-illustrated, newspaper format pages, replete with informative footnotes – is to show the essential unchangeability of Russia, which has, it seems, been locked into Tatar/Great Horde-like structures for aeons, creeping slowly from "bad to worse."[3]

Russia has in no way forsaken totalitarianism and its modern elites are in no way different from the depraved Stalinists of years ago. In fact, in many ways their antics were more depraved than the worse "filth" of the Soviet system. The distinguished expert on Russian ideas, Andrzej Walicki, rejected the offer of discussing the article believing it to be an attempt at "legalizing extremism" and being "grist to the mill for traditional Polish Russophobia."[4] On the other hand, the young Scottish journalist and traveller Daniel Kalder book has written a book which is a fragmentary and chaotic collection of absurd stories amassed during his wanderings around several former Soviet republics. Andrzej Stasiuk, Poland's unrivalled anti-tourist, writes in the introduction: "a thirty-year-old Scotsman who wanted to see what 'nothing' looked like, set off on a journey to the heart of Russia, or to be precise the Russian Federation, and his dream came true completely."[5] He found "old, cracked concrete buildings, shreds of plastic wraps fluttering about, stench, rust, squalor, a caricature of a culture, piss, a dead fox and cement-grey boredom."[6]

What do these two texts have in common with *Imperium*? In answer to this question I shall analyse certain aspects of both books and the opinion of critics and literary experts. I realize that this is a rather curious introduction to a text about Ryszard Kapuściński, who was without a doubt one of Poland greatest twentieth century writers and reporters. My reading of his book on Russia is not a malicious criticism, or a futile attempt to undermine his prestige. What is more, I do not want to join the throngs of "jealous devil's advocates."[7] I would like to draw attention to the fact that writing on Kapuściński often

3 Afanasyev, Y. "Kamienna Rosja, martwy lud." In *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 24-25.01.2009, 12, 28.

4 Walicki, A. "Afanasjew, sojusznik polskiej rusofobii" (Afanasyev: Ally of Polish Russophobia"). In *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 31.01-01.02.2009, 16.

5 Stasiuk, A. "Introduction" to: Kalder, D. *Zagubiony kosmonauta* (*Lost Cosmonaut: Observations of an Anti-Tourist*). Wydawnictwo Czarne. Wołowiec. 2008, 5.

6 ibid., 6.

7 Pisarek, W. "O twórczości Ryszarda Kapuścińskiego w związku z ewentualnym postępowaniem nadanie mu tytułu Professor honoris causa Republicae Polonicae." ("On the Work of Ryszard Kapuściński in Relation to the Idea of the Author Receiving an Honorary Republicae Polonicae Doctorate"). In *"Życie jest z przenikania..." Szkice o twórczości Ryszarda Kapuścińskiego* (*Notes on the Work of Ryszard Kapuściński*). Edit. Wróblewski, B. PIT. Warszawa. 2008, 21.

equates to writing about the author himself rather than his texts and that all reservations are marked as criticism or methodological incompetence. The ubiquitous generalizations made by the author of *Shah of Shahs* which in every other situation would most certainly be seen as painfully stereotypical, are called "metaphorical generalizations, distilling the general characteristics of the world presented herein.[8] This overly cautious approach to analysing the work of Ryszard Kapuściński is visible in these two complementary works which were published at the end of 2008: the first full biography of the writer[9] and a volume of articles, thoughts and papers[10] dedicated to Kapuściński. If one reads *Imperium* (as well as the similarly-composed *The Shadow of the Sun*, which I will not be discussing here), it is worth paying attention to how Kapuściński shapes his own image as an authority on ethnography in order to later arbitrarily and wantonly make use of this "authority."[11]

Let us begin with another consideration of the critical voices, of which Maxim K. Waldstein's *A Postcolonial Reading of Ryszard Kapuscinski's Account of Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia* seems to be the most significant.[12] The importance of the Russian literary scholar's voice (who works at an American University) largely rests upon a novel line of argument (discussed later) rather than the impact of the article on the Polish research community. The only objective discussion of Waldstein is Aleksandra Chomiuk's riposte,[13] the others either recapitulate Waldstein's thesis[14] without criticizing it or believe his text to be

8 Chomiuk, A. "'Prawdziwa' rzeczywistość i 'punkty widzenia.' Ryszard Kapuściński i Mariusz Wilk o Rosji na przełomie epok" ("'Real' Reality and 'Points of View.' Ryszard Kapuściński and Mariusz Wilk on Russia...." In *Wokół reportażu podróżniczego*. (*On Travel Reportage*). Edit. Malinowski, E; Rotta, D. Wydawnictwo UŚ. Katowice. 2004, 226.

9 Nowacka, B.; Ziątek, Z. *Ryszard Kapuściński. Biografia pisarza (Ryszard Kapuściński: A Biography of the Writer)*. Znak. Kraków. 2008.

10 *"Życie jest z przenikania..." Szkice o twórczości Ryszarda Kapuścińskiego* (*Notes on the Work of Ryszard Kapuściński*). Edit. Wróblewski, B. PIT. Warszawa. 2008.

11 It is worth noting that the research of Paweł Zajas was completed before the publication of Artur Domosławski's *Kapuściński Non-Fiction* (Świat Książki. Warszawa. 2010). Editor's note.

12 Waldstein, K. Maxim. "Observing Imperium: A Postcolonial Reading of Ryszard Kapuscinski's Account of Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia." *Social Identities*. 3 (8). (2002): 481-499.

13 Chomiuk, A. "'Nowy markiz de Custine' albo historia pewnej manipulacji" ("'The New Marquise de Custine' or a Story of a Certain Manipulation"). *Teksty Drugie* 1/2 (2006): 310-319.

14 See: Janion, M. *Niesamowita Słowiańszczyzna. Fantazmaty literatury* (*Amazing Slavdom: The Fantasies of Literature*). WL. Kraków. 2006, 229-235. Janion presents the main arguments of Waldstein in the context of a chapter on Polish "orientalizing" in Polish-Russian relations. Janion previously used Waldstein's line of argument in the context of the east-west division of Polish identity in her "Polska między Wschodem a Zachodem" ("Poland between East and

an example of a "caricatured interpretation" of postcolonial theory.[15] Regardless of one's opinion of Waldstein's article, it is surely symptomatic that only three people decided to reply to this important voice from outside. What is more, only one of the replies, Aleksandra's Chomiuk's, came in the form of a polemic. In her assessment, the Russian's work is "original and revealing." Chomiuk quite rightly highlights the ideological entanglement of his text. Waldstein falsely idealizes Polish-Russian relations; negates the repressive nature of Russian colonialism as well as Polish awareness of political dependency on Russia; he passes over the Russian orientalizing approach to Poland; attempts to dehistoricize Kapuściński (by smoothing away the writer's own view) and claims that Kapuściński creates an image of Russia as a pathological Other in order to minimalize the marginalization of Poland (Central Europe) in the eyes of western readers. Kapuściński, therefore, highlights the concerns of Milan Kundera and Marian Brandys regarding the dangerous proximity of "us" and "them."

However, instead of being content with obvious abuses regarding the interpretation of the text and its historical context, Chomiuk herself unnecessarily ideologizes what she says thereby weakening its polemical force. On the last page of his article, Waldstein concludes that Kapuściński wrote *Imperium* at a time when Western Europe was ready to "take over the trio of Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary," which meant there was a need to demonstrate that the intellectuals of Central Europe "did not have anything in common with the great emptiness to their east."[16] Chomiuk replies to Waldstein in the same ideological tone, accusing him of opportunism and trying to "disgrace the idea that the countries recently freed of Soviet domination had a western European identity" claiming that the date of the text's publication (2002) was of no coincidence in that it overlapped with Poland's plans to join western European political structures. Chomiuk rightly condemns Waldstein and gives numerous examples of his "particular reading of *Imperium*, his selective excerpts and quotations," however, she appears to begrudge the Russian

West"), *Teksty Drugie* 6 (2000): 131-149. This recapitulation does not include reference to particular fragments in Waldstein that are too ideological. Janion also refers to Chomiuk in the footnotes, however, dulling the tone and real meaning. She writes "the main thesis of the author is that the Russians have been seeking to 'orientalize' Poland, not the other way around." (ibid., 252).

15 Domańska, E. *Badania postkolonialne* (*Postcolonial Research*), an afterword to Gandhi, L. *Teoria postkolonialna. Wprowdzenie krytyczne* (*Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*). Polish translation by Serwański, J. Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, Poznań. 2008, 164.

16 Waldstein, K. Maxim. "Observing Imperium: A Postcolonial Reading of Ryszard Kapuscinski's Account of Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia." *Social Identities*. 3 (8). (2002): 496.

literary scholar's critical analysis of Kapuściński's text claiming it is "an attempt to do the writer's job of representing himself... making Kapuściński's text redundant."[17] Do all disloyal interpretations deserve such an opinion, asks Chomiuk. She laments the fact that Waldstein "as early as in his introduction portrays Kapuściński's text as orientalist."[18] However, is not a clearly presented thesis a mark of a well-constructed piece of research? As always, the problem becomes one of poetics, as is so often the case when researchers begin discussing the legacy of the author of *The Emperor*.[19] Waldstein supposedly "dilutes the epistemic values of *Imperium*," by undertaking an unambiguous judgement of the text's referentiality."[20] However, two pages prior to this, Chomiuk makes a completely contrary accusation stating that the literary aspect and the ambiguity related to it as well as symbolism have been overlooked, which has therefore distorted the conclusions of the analysis.

These incoherent incriminations, after close consideration, seem to reflect the very nature of Kapuściński's (ethnographic) authority and prestige, which he so carefully and thoughtfully cultivated. His style is a combination of prestige and fictionality. As both a credible and world-famous journalist and writer, Kapuściński is like Flaubert's God present everywhere in the text, contriving various descriptions and explanations, adding personal confessions and the suchlike. He can play the role of a writer who "does not for one moment stop being a reporter."[21] This is only possible thanks to the prestige in which he is held in the sphere of ethnography, built up in *Imperium*

17 Chomiuk, A. "'Nowy markiz de Custine' albo historia pewnej manipulacji" ("'The New Marquise de Custine' or a Story of a Certain Manipulation"). *Teksty Drugie* 1/2 (2006): 312.

18 ibid.

19 A review of discussions on the poetics of Kapuściński's word can be found in the *Wprowadzenie* (*Introduction*) to Beata Nowacka's *Magiczne dziennikarstwo. Ryszard Kapuściński w oczach krytyków.* (*Magical Journalism: Ryszard Kapuściński in the Eyes of Critics*). Wydawnictwo UŚ. Katowice. 11-23.

20 Chomiuk, A. "'Nowy markiz de Custine' albo historia pewnej manipulacji" ("'The New Marquise de Custine' or a Story of a Certain Manipulation"). *Teksty Drugie* 1/2 (2006): 314.

21 Nowacka, B. *Magiczne dziennikarstwo. Ryszard Kapuściński w oczach krytyków.* (*Magical Journalism: Ryszard Kapuściński in the Eyes of Critics*). Wydawnictwo UŚ. Katowice. 23. The issue of fictionality and facts overlapping collected during "field work" is not, as Nowacka puts it, an "academic problem," limited to "empty disputes between critics." This is not enough for Nowacka who, like Aleksandra Chomiuk, understands the popularity of Kapuściński and his place in world literature. She wants to see him both on shelves with "high literature" as well as on shelves with guidebooks on sociology and social anthropology. Nowacka ends the chapter in idiosyncratically emphatic fashion: "In absolutely no way can one agree with the idea that Ryszard Kapuściński crossed the line between journalism and literature. He invalidated it!" (ibid.).

in three parts: the ethnographic signature of "being there";[22] traces of personal experience and thirdly the attitude of being an anti-tourist which is highlighted throughout by the author. As someone who respected the work of Bronisław Malinowski, Kapuściński knew full well the importance of the first part, a *sine qua non* for the credibility of field work. He knew that it is not conceptual elegance or the extensiveness of a description that convinces the reader that the ethnographic text is credible but the ability to convince the reader that the text in question is the result of an actual distortion of another way of life, a result of "being there." This feature of ethnographic texts is so clear and prominent that it is often overlooked or only marginally recognized. The forthright nature of the statements in the text remind one of those that might be found in a stolen letter – they are impossible to verify. Therefore, the reader believes everything (the given time and place, the informants and the cultural conditioning of the ethnographer) or nothing at all[23]. In *Autoportret reportera* (*A Reporter's Self Portrait*), a commentary of sorts of his own work and writing methods, Kapuściński highlights the fact that, "I write 'from my travels,' I am not a 'dreamer.' I do not describe my own world or some imagined one; I describe a world that really exits"[24]. Several pages on we read: "For me, what I have to say takes on real worth due to the fact that I was actually there and witnessed those events. There is an element of egotism in how I write: I might complain about the heat, hunger or pain but the fact that I experienced it all makes it authentic."[25]

The signature left behind by the author is intrinsically linked to the second element of his ethnographic prestige and authority in the biographical traces he leaves in the text. Elżbieta Dąbrowska notices that *Imperium* is preceded with an introduction which is some ways a "referential pact" that the author signs with the reader. The author informs us that the following text is a "personal account of his travels."[26] The stories from his hometown of Pińsk;

22 Geertz, C. *Dzieło i życie. Antropolog jako autor* (*The Anthropologist as Author*). Polish translatioj by Dżurak, E; Sikora, S. Wydawnictwo KR. Warszawa. 2000, 13-14.

23 ibid., 14.

24 Kapuściński, Ryszard. *Autoportret reportera* (*A Reporter's Self Portrait*), Biblioteka Gazety Wyborczej. Warszawa. 2008, 13.

25 ibid., 53. Emphasis mine –Z.

26 Dąbrowska, E. "Od rzeczywistości do języka i tekstu – Ryszarda Kapuścińskiego opisywanie 'Imperium'." ("From Reality to Language and Text – Describing Ryszard Kapuściński's 'Imperium'") In *Wędrować, pielgrzymować, być turystą. Podróż w dyskursach kultury.* (*Wanderings, Pilgramages, Being a Tourist: A Journey in Discourses of Cultures*). Edit. Kowalski, Katedra Kulturoznawsta i Folkrorystyki Uniwersytetu Opolskiego. Opole. 95.

seeing the Red Army, "those savage faces, sweaty and angry," a drunken artilleryman firing at a church steeple[27] and his literary vision of the poverty of the first months of the war create an important interpretive framework and guideline for the reader: the author knows full well the empire he is describing and this gives him every right to travel across both space and time. However, Kapuściński's authority would not be complete without the third element: the idea of the anti-tourist. Kapuściński is convincing as he does not confine himself, as the author himself declares, to describing the "stage" upon which many events take place but he also continues to look behind the scenes. He is not interested in the centre of the world but he is "intent on immersing himself in the exceptions, the forgotten corners and backyards."[28] Kapuściński is a traveller but he despises tourists:

> When traveling and reporting, no tourism of any sort is involved. Reportage demands a great deal of hard work and theoretical preparation in order to collect information about the area to which one is going. This kind of travelling is never relaxing... When someone hears that a reporter has been in the Congo and he says that he's also been there and seen this and that, then they're talking about two different kinds of travelling. They are two different ways of experiencing and perceiving the world.[29]

Being a reporter is a mission in which one has to live like the people one is describing, "in order to experience and understand Africa, one has to eat and drink like an African."[30] This once again brings to mind Daniel Kalder's work which – should one have a sense of humor – could be interpreted as a caricature of *Imperium*. Unlike Kapuściński's work which begins with a great many quotations, in Kalder's we find an anti-tourist's manifesto readily adorning every page of his travels around Russia. Kalder decides to "forget about the center" and "wander around the tower blocks, take a peek inside an open window, take a photo of graffiti that decorates a grey wall, retrieve an old, worn-out teddy bear from a pile of rubbish and listen to people chatting..."[31]

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27 Kapuściński, Ryszard. *Imperium.* Czytelnik. Warszawa. 2007, 8, 15.

28 Nowacka, B.; Ziątek, Z. *Ryszard Kapuściński. Biografia pisarza (Ryszard Kapuściński: A Biography of the Writer)*. Znak. Kraków. 2008, 116.

29 Kapuściński, Ryszard. *Autoportret reportera* (*A Reporter's Self Portrait*), Biblioteka Gazety Wyborczej. Warszawa. 2008, 13.

30 ibid., 39.

31 Kalder, D. *Zagubiony kosmonauta* (*Lost Cosmonaut. Observations of an Anti-Tourist*). Wydawnictwo Czarne. Wołowiec. 2008, 229.

He behaves like Kapuściński from the critical reaction of Mariusz Wilk: "a few days here, a few days there and with every hole a new chapter."[32] In comparison to the great master, the young Scotsman has a much less inferential character believing that "one can travel around in circles but one still will not understand anything." An "intellectual chaos" prevails over the need to enlighten and the reader is told that even though the writer loves truth, "he does not despise lies. Especially his own."[33]

On a more serious note, in Kapuściński's case, we have an author who is aware of the fact that the reader needs to be convinced that every word written on every page is a real description of what really happened. What does the writer do with the trust that he has so meticulously worked to gain? How does he make use of this carefully-shaped ethnographic authority and prestige? According to Zbigniew Bauer, Kapuściński was aware of the problem that "he could well have written something about the decaying state of the tsars and first secretaries solely on the basis of reference books and press articles, but he decided to experience the murderous journey ... in order to see the superpower first-hand without any go-betweens."[34] However, the problem is that the trust for and admiration of the author who "was there" is overshadowed, in the opinion of most critics, by the fact that there are few traces of "field experience" that can be found in the text. In the first part of the book we only have fifteen informants, who Kapuściński names. Their role is to create reference points for more general considerations based on previous readings (the number of people corresponds roughly to the number of sub-chapters: one person, one story). This is a poetics of "excerpts," the characters who the author meets are not fleshed out in detail. In his approach to the description of an ethnographic experience, Kapuściński reminds us not of Bronisław Malinowski whom the author greatly admired, but rather more of the allegorical title page showing an armchair ethnographer of the 1724 *Customs of the American Indians* by Joseph-Francois Lafitau. It shows a young female ethnographer sitting at a writing desk surrounded by artefacts from the New World, Ancient Greece and Egypt. She is accompanied by two cherubs helping her in her comparative work as well as the bearded figure of Father Time pointing to a painting of God, the real source

32 Wilk, M. *Wilczy notes* (*The Journals of a White Sea Wolf*). słowo/obraz terytoria. Gdańsk. 1998, 60.

33 ibid., 14.

34 Bauer, Z. *Paradoksy prawdy. Pisarskie wybory Ryszarda Kapuścińskiego* (*Paradoxes of Truth: Ryszard Kapuściński's Choices as a Writer*). In *"Życie jest z przenikania..." Szkice o twórczości Ryszarda Kapuścińskiego* (*Notes on the Work of Ryszard Kapuściński*). Edit. Wróblewski, B. PIT. Warszawa. 2008, 43.

of all truth emanating from the scientist's pen.[35] The exponent of personal experience is secondary, literary testimony and borrowed voices collected more carefully than the voices of natives. I do not for one moment doubt the empathy that Kapuściński had for the people he met and I do not doubt his personal commitment to inter-human relations. There is more than enough evidence that testifies to this fact. I do, however, wish to point out that there is next to nothing of this direct experience in his text.

In writing that the power of Kapuściński's ethnographic authority may have dulled the alertness of critics, I do not claim that they do not at all notice the "excerptive" nature of his book. However, reactions to this are restrained and are not openly critical. Zbigniew Bauer detects Kapuściński's need to "be among texts" and reminds us that Kapuściński was himself a great advocate of using quotations professing the views of Walter Benjamin in the idea that a book of quotations would be the "perfect book."[36] Kapuściński's biographers, Beata Nowicka and Zygmunt Ziątek, write (in the context of the *Lapidarium* series, although this can also be applied to *Imperium*) that in terms of poetics, the work of Kapuściński can be viewed as a cento, a literary composition made up of quotations. This crypto-criticism needs to be immediately annotated with a quotation from the author himself, who tells us that "quotations give a text plasticity" thanks to which they take on "cubist qualities."[37] Małgorzata Czermińska praises the "quoted" nature of *Imperium* calling it "interlocutory" with it being a "question as to the voice of the reporter and his relationship to other voices, which he allows to resonate in his texts"[38]. An interesting observation, albeit extremely cautious in its argumentation, is the aforementioned article by Elżbieta Dąbrowska. The excerpts, which are covered in a sixty-book bibliography at the end of his work, Dąbrowska

35 Clifford, J. *Kłopoty z kulturą. Dwudziestowieczna etnografia, literatura i sztuka* (*Troubles with Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature and Art*). Translation by Dżurak, E. et al. Wydawnictwo KR. Warszawa. 2000, 29.

36 Bauer, Z. *Paradoksy prawdy. Pisarskie wybory Ryszarda Kapuścińskiego* (*Paradoxes of Truth: Ryszard Kapuściński's Choices as a Writer*). In *"Życie jest z przenikania..." Szkice o twórczości Ryszarda Kapuścińskiego* (*Notes on the Work of Ryszard Kapuściński*). Edit. Wróblewski, B. PIT. Warszawa. 2008, 45.

37 Nowacka, B.; Ziątek, Z. *Ryszard Kapuściński. Biografia pisarza (Ryszard Kapuściński. A Biography of the Writer)*. Znak. Kraków. 2008, 288.

38 Czermińska, M. *Głosy rodziny człowieczej czyli o sztuce pisarskiej Ryszarda Kapuścińskiego* (*The Voice of the Human Family or the Art of Ryszard Kapuściński's Writing*. In *"Życie jest z przenikania..." Szkice o twórczości Ryszarda Kapuścińskiego* (*Notes on the Work of Ryszard Kapuściński*). Edit. Wróblewski, B. PIT. Warszawa. 2008, 21.

calls a "particular form of polyphony of a multi-faceted foreign voice."[39] According to Dąbrowska, the presence of somebody else's observations and reflections allows Kapuściński to "compose interlocutory content" confirming the "Gadamerian conviction that we 'understand the world only when we talk about it with ourselves ... and that sense in life is formed during linguistic communication.'"[40] However, Dąbrowska concludes her argumentation in vague fashion and is seemingly critical of Kapuściński's "transtextual travels." She refers to Mariusz Wilk: "Repeating the same journey loses all meaning, like searching for footprints in a swamp. The act of writing 'finds its own path, stomping on the firm ground that is language rather than tundra' and this means that 'the text is more real than the world, which is a pre-text for the world.'"[41] A criticism both delicate and measured, albeit accurate.

Let us return for a moment to Waldstein. Even though Chomiuk admits that he is "interesting" in that he "reveals the mechanisms of cultural translation" and "strips away the ambiguity of the relations between the traveler and the world he describes," the reader of Chomiuk's article will not discover which fragments of Waldstein's reading of *Imperium* are deemed by her to be valid, worthy of mention and methodologically motivated. Herein, I believe, we find a clear example of the Polish approach to writing about Kapuściński: criticism of his work will never be expressed directly and if it does appear it is always relegated to footnotes, ambiguous allusions as well as the tried and tested method of referring to foreign (as is often the

39 Dąbrowska, E. "Od rzeczywistości do języka i tekstu – Ryszarda Kapuścińskiego opisywanie 'Imperium'." ("From Reality to Language and Text – Describing Ryszard Kapuściński's 'Imperium'.") In *Wędrować, pielgrzymować, być turystą. Podróż w dyskursach kultury*. (*Wanderings, Pilgramages, Being a Tourist: A Journey in Discourses of Cultures*). Edit. Kowalski, Katedra Kulturoznawsta i Folkrorystyki Uniwersytetu Opolskiego. Opole. 96.

40 Michalski, K. "Wstęp" ("Introduction"). In Gadamer, H.-G. *Rozum, słowo, dzieje. Szkice wybrane* (*Mind, Word, Stories: Selected Essays*). Selected and prepared by Michalski, K. Translated by Łukaszkiewicz, M.. PIW. Warszawa. 2000, 13; after Dąbrowska, E. "Od rzeczywistości do języka i tekstu – Ryszarda Kapuścińskiego opisywanie 'Imperium'." ("From Reality to Language and Text – Describing Ryszard Kapuściński's 'Imperium'.") In *Wędrować, pielgrzymować, być turystą. Podróż w dyskursach kultury*. (*Wanderings, Pilgramages, Being a Tourist: A Journey in Discourses of Cultures*). Edit. Kowalski, Katedra Kulturoznawsta i Folkrorystyki Uniwersytetu Opolskiego. Opole. 96.

41 Wilk, M. *Wilczy notes* (*The Journals of a White Sea Wolf*). słowo/obraz terytoria. Gdańsk. 1998, 225. After Dąbrowska, E. "Od rzeczywistości do języka i tekstu – Ryszarda Kapuścińskiego opisywanie 'Imperium'." ("From Reality to Language and Text – Describing Ryszard Kapuściński's 'Imperium'.") In *Wędrować, pielgrzymować, być turystą. Podróż w dyskursach kultury*. (*Wanderings, Pilgramages, Being a Tourist: A Journey in Discourses of Cultures*). Edit. Kowalski, Katedra Kulturoznawsta i Folkrorystyki Uniwersytetu Opolskiego. Opole. 108.

case) devil's advocates[42]. In my opinion, it is worth returning once again to the more interesting points of Waldstein's criticism of Kapuściński: his fetishization of both wildlife and nature in *Imperium* and his persistent need to demonstrate the "stereotypical" nature of Russian thinking.

For Maxim Waldstein, an example of the fetishization of Russian nature by Kapuściński is his description of Siberia. Chomiuk refers to this part of Waldstein's work in the following way: the writer is accused of using the desolate landscape as a way of contemplating tsarist and Russian slavery; Kapuściński blurs the differences between the natural environment and his own prejudices erasing the presence of the peoples prior to this (in order to show the violation of humanity by nature). The Polish writer conducted a caricature metaphorization of the Siberian whiteness in native cultures: white as the color of approval and acceptance of what may come. In doing so, according to Waldstein, Kapuściński was able to achieve something superficially impossible and "expose the 'supposedly white' Russians who were in fact 'black.'"[43] Chomiuk thus effectively neutralizes all criticism, pointing out its absurdity and weak points, however, she passes over the Russian literary scholar's argumentation, which highlights the "orientalizing"[44] perspective of *Imperium*, therefore, Chomiuk admits that it exists but does not elaborate on it. Waldstein quite rightly notices that even though nature is not in a central position in Kapuściński's narrative, when it does appear it draws all attention to itself. Based on his impressions of the landscape, Kapuściński dreams up far-reaching historical and sociological deliberations. Russian space is contrasted with European and in delving into the white, boundless desert landscape which accompanies a "feeling of falling into nothingness and disappearing,"[45] the author remembers Blaise Cendrars' poem *Prose of the Trans-Siberian and of Little Jehanne of France* and the conviction therein that Siberia is "a long way from

42 The technique of using critical references (to other authors) in footnotes can be found in Przemysław Czapliński's "Kłopoty z nowoczesnością" ("Problems with Modernity"). In *"Życie jest z przenikania..." Szkice o twórczości Ryszarda Kapuścińskiego* (*Notes on the Work of Ryszard Kapuściński*). Edit. Wróblewski, B. PIT. Warszawa. 2008, 279. Czapliński's text is the only objective piece of research, differing greatly from the remaining texts in this nostalgic and apologetic volume. Czapliński shows that Kapuściński's stubborn attempt to find the "heart of identity" and his assumption that identity is essential and given to each and every one of us, allows us to define Kapuściński as a "successor to modernism" (ibid. 287).

43 Chomiuk, A. "'Nowy markiz de Custine' albo historia pewnej manipulacji" ("'The New Marquise de Custine' or a Story of a Certain Manipulation"). *Teksty Drugie* 1/2 (2006): 314-315.

44 ibid., 312.

45 Kapuściński, Ryszard. *Imperium*. Czytelnik, Warszawa. 2007, 38.

Montmartre."[46] The author remains under the spell of "Nikolai Berdyaev's old book" about the effect of great expanses on the Russian soul:

> The enormity of Russia, beyond volume, has an effect on the way its people think. It does not require the people to focus or concentrate their energy or to dynamically create an intensive culture. Everything disperses, is diluted in a volumeless formlessness. Russia's great expanse, on the one hand wide and boundless and on the other overwhelmingly enormous, takes ones breath away and leaves one with no air to breath.[47]

Nature becomes a tool for "Romantic anthropology" in the works of Kapuściński. Beata Nowicka and Zygmunt Ziątek write:

> Thanks to the romantics, nature has taken on a completely new meaning. Before, it was a separate entity, a self-sufficient intellectual object, able to communicate weighty ideas... [Kapuściński] has deciphered the coded details of the secrets of this space.[48]

Kapuściński's vision of nature determining the political culture of its inhabitants, connecting the belief in the power of symbols to the belief in the magical power of the expanse, does not raise any doubts in the minds of the author's biographers about the orientalizing essence of Kapuściński's portrayal of the Others. They accept in full his imagined Geography which has been abducted by History. They notice that the description of the journey on the Trans-Siberian railway fits "worthily into the romantic Polish literary topos of Siberia"[49] (although it is difficult to pinpoint what this stereotypical "worthiness" entails). The "oceanic boundlessness"[50] of Russian nature,

46 ibid.

47 ibid., 42. It is worth noting that Mariusz Wilk, a stern critic of Kapuściński, also attempts to find the connection between typical Russian features and the mentality of the 'eastern man'; like Berdyaev, he eagerly highlights the link between the muddy expanses of Russia and the passivity of its inhabitants. [Chomiuk, A. "'Prawdziwa' rzeczywistość i 'punkty widzenia.' Ryszard Kapuściński i Mariusz Wilk o Rosji na przełomie epok" ("'Real' Reality and 'Points of View': Ryszard Kapuściński and Mariusz Wilk on Russia...." In *Wokół reportażu podróżniczego*. (*On Travel Reportage*). Edit. Malinowski, E; Rotta, D. Wydawnictwo UŚ. Katowice. 2004, 227.]

48 Nowacka, B.; Ziątek, Z. *Ryszard Kapuściński. Biografia pisarza (Ryszard Kapuściński. A Biography of the Writer)*. Znak. Kraków. 2008. 117.

49 ibid. 303.

50 Kapuściński, Ryszard. *Imperium*. Czytelnik. Warszawa. 2007, 37.

its inhuman character determines all kinds of authoritarianism, collectivism, nationalism and lack of mobility. Therefore, Kapuściński constructs his own Geography in a Hegelian fashion, underpinning it with *Weltgeschichte* as well as teleological, evolutionistic and monocentric assumptions.[51] Russia is standing in the place where once Europe found itself, on the brink of the era of enlightened maturity. Waldstein makes a great deal of mistakes and trips up on his own polemical feverishness, but in one aspect he is correct: the Russian expanse is a negative point of reference for Kapuściński for individualistic, humanistic, European values (which Russia has been excluded from in his text).

The other interesting part of Waldstein's criticism is Kapuściński's belief in a "stereotypical" Russian mentality and its resistance to the effects of time. The argument used by the author of *Imperium* matches to some extent the line of thought used by Yuri Afanasyev in the above-mentioned essay. In the opinion of both authors Russia is stuck in a "rut" and in this they discern recurrence, changelessness, and an age-old structural stability linked to the spiritual and political sphere (Orthodoxy, messianism, and expansionism). The "passage of the last half millennium," rather than being a passage towards progress and growth, is more akin to a stumbling around history."[52] As Zygmunt Ziątek notes, Kapuściński sees the "two-hundred-year-old history of the construction, demolish and reconstruction of Moscow's Christ the Savior (Orthodox) Cathedral"[53] as a metaphor for the stability and changelessness of Russian civilization. It is difficult to guess if the observations of Kapuściński's biographer and researcher are simply the superficial and simplified thoughts of an explorer looking for the alleged longevity of the structures of this civilization and culture. Are the suspension points given at the end of the sub-chapter ironic...? This may be wishful thinking on my part as the critic notices that this method is later "perfected" [my emphasis] in *The Shadow of the Sun*. Kapuściński began to more frequently explore long epochs of time arriving at great cultural formations rather than look at "current political history and events." Kapuściński performed a "natural dehistoricization of his image of Africa; he discovered a spirit of African ancientness and otherness underneath

51 Sekiguchi, T. "Azja nie istnieje" ("Asia Does Not Exist"). In *Teksty Drugie* 4 (2008): 49-60.

52 Afanasyev, Y. "Kamienna Rosja, martwy lud." In *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 24-25.01.2009, 15, 16.

53 Ziątek, Z. "Powrócić do Pińska... O przemianach pisarstwa Ryszarda Kapuścińskiego po 1989 roku" ("Returning to Pińsk: On the Transformations of Ryszard Kapuściński's Writing after 1989"). In *"Życie jest z przenikania..." Szkice o twórczości Ryszarda Kapuścińskiego* (*Notes on the Work of Ryszard Kapuściński*). Edit. Wróblewski, B. PIT. Warszawa. 2008, 113.

and outside contemporary history."[54] I do not understand how ridding Africa of history and "ancientness" or "otherness" could in any way be seen as "natural." This is probably also the case for the critic who suggests that it is enough to "believe this test of the importance of African issues which he [Kapuściński] has afforded himself over his whole life as a reporter."[55] It seems that the distinct traces of "being there," the first element in the construction of the prestige and authority of an ethnographer, is alive and well.

There is, however, a critical difference between Yuri Afanasyev and Ryszard Kapuściński in their search for the Russian stamp of changelessness. The Russian political writer seems to be conscious of the rhetorical devices he uses. He highlights the fact that the terms "Russian rut," "Russian civilization," and "Russian system" are only valid on condition that the "reader realizes the conventionality, mechanicalness, and fatalistic determinism that lies within them and does not understand them literally."[56] I do not know whether Kapuściński was aware of this conventionality, if so he did not convey this awareness adequately. In *Autoportret reportera* (*A Reporter's Self Portrait*), a commentary to his own work, he mentions his attachment to the *Annales* school, which he defines as an attempt to "build a picture of the whole from details and retrieving from history only those elements that last for long periods, unchanging."[57] He points out that he also wished to retrieve these elements in *Imperium*:

> Communism is no longer here, Gorbachev is no longer here, perhaps Yeltsin will soon be gone, but that old woman in Siberia with her wooden hut, her poverty, and her way of thinking, her attempts to find inner peace and harmony and her immunity to life's adversities was always there and perhaps, I believe, she will be there for a long time.[58]

Let us clarify, in calling himself an "admirer of Bloch, Braudel, Febvre,"[59] Kapuściński does not have in mind the emulation of a modernist marriage of history and economy, sociology or social geography (the first stage of An-

54 ibid., 115, emphasis mine – Z.

55 ibid.

56 Afanasyev, Y. "Kamienna Rosja, martwy lud." In *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 24-25.01.2009, 15.

57 Kapuściński, Ryszard. *Autoportret reportera* (*A Reporter's Self Portrait*), Biblioteka Gazety Wyborczej. Warszawa. 2008, 16.

58 ibid.

59 ibid.

nales as purported by Ferdinand Braudel), but an attempt at following in the well-worn footsteps of historical anthropology (Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre).[60] It is telling that the methodology used for research on *mentalité*, usually covering the Middle Ages and the early part of the Modern Era, is used by Kapuściński in his description of modern Russia. When Marc Bloch looked at the Middle Ages and feudalism through the eyes of an anthropologist (and archaeologist), he treated pre-scribal ethnic groups as a material and spiritual unity and drew attention to the fact that in these cultures one cannot separate economic, social and political phenomena from magic, as they are intertwined as one *mentalité primitive*.[61] The historian-cum-anthropologist so often refers to the passage of time due to the fact that primitive societies were, allegedly, static with regards to development. Transferring this episteme to the realities of modern Russia is nothing other than its ethnicization, a suggestion that we are dealing with a non-causal world, a suspended society or a pre-modern entities residing in ahistorical timelessness. I doubt that using the "old woman in the wooden hut" metaphor is fortunate here in attempting to use the *la longue durée* method, as are a series of other stereotypical characters and metaphors outlined by Kapuściński who uses them to illustrate the discrepancy between Russian and Western culture (a Muscovite democrat *versus* a western politician,[62] the sweeping phrases of the Russian language *versus* the Cartesian discipline of a western-European language[63] as well as the servility of Varlam Shalamov with respect to Stalinist terror *versus* the obligatory rationalism in the land of the absurd of the Austrian communist Alexander Weissberg-Cybulski[64]). Aleksandra Chomiuk cannot understand why Maxim Waldstein does not like this "genuinely interesting example illustrating the difference between the cultures of the east and west."[65]

60 Wrzosek, W. "Metafory historiograficzne w pogoni za ułudą prawdy" ("Historiographical Metaphors in the Pursuit of the Illusion of Truth"). In Domańska, E; Topolski, J; Wrzosek, W. *Między modernizmem a postmodernizmem. Historiografia wobec zmian w filozofii historii* (*Between Modernism and Postmodernism: Historiography in View of Changes in the Philosophy of History*). Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM. Poznań, 9, 11.

61 ibid., 13.

62 Kapuściński, Ryszard. *Imperium*. Czytelnik. Warszawa. 2007, 113.

63 ibid., 314-315.

64 ibid., 216.

65 Chomiuk, A. "'Nowy markiz de Custine' albo historia pewnej manipulacji" ("'The New Marquise de Custine' or a Story of a Certain Manipulation"). *Teksty Drugie* 1/2 (2006): 316.

Herein lies the problem, however not with Ryszard Kapuściński himself but with his critics. A writer is afforded much, however literary scholars cannot be guided by the one criterion in their work, which is their admiration of an author. When Elżbieta Dąbrowska writes that "his [Kapuściński's] descriptions paint a picture of a country which is both absurd and difficult to fathom for someone on the outside but for someone within the 'Empire' it is normal[66]," she can only be congratulated on her gift of empathy and ability to look at the world through the eyes of a Russian. The quandary that we face is that Waldstein, a person of the 'Empire' albeit working at a western University, does not agree with this vision and protests its generalizations. His voice is ignored and relegated to the category of a distortion of postcolonial theory.

The comparison between Ryszard Kapuściński's *Imperium* and Daniel Kalder's *Lost Cosmonaut* made at the start of this article may appear nonsensical or even iconoclastic at first glance, however after consideration we are able to state, albeit loftily, that when Kalder writes about Russia he offers up a popular version of an ethnographic paradigm of subjectiveness. Kapuściński, on the other hand, wishes to show us not only the objective truth but the eternal truth. What is more, there is a critical textual difference between the two. Whereas the young Scottish vagabond has an overall ironic approach but is respectful of the truth; Kapuściński continues to construct his athoroty as an ethnographer with piety, convincing us of the "authenticity" of his experiences all the while gathering together arbitrarily-ordered metaphors and "stereotypical" characters. Whereas Kalder presents his travels as a way of constructing an amusing story, the author of *Shah of Shahs* dedicates himself to earnestly constructing a realistic, cultural fiction. However, when this earnestness and grandiloquence spread to researchers and scholars, it cannot be commended.

Translation: Rafał Uzar

66 Dąbrowska, E. "Od rzeczywistości do języka i tekstu – Ryszarda Kapuścińskiego opisywanie 'Imperium'." ("From Reality to Language and Text – Describing Ryszard Kapuściński's 'Imperium'.") In *Wędrować, pielgrzymować, być turystą. Podróż w dyskursach kultury.* (*Wanderings, Pilgramages, Being a Tourist. A Journey in Discourses of Cultures*). Edit. Kowalski, Katedra Kulturoznawsta i Folkrorystyki Uniwersytetu Opolskiego. Opole. 105.