

The features of contemporary Polish reportage as a literary-journalistic genre¹

Paweł Urbaniak, **University of Wrocław**
pawelurbaniak@interia.pl

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Abstract

Reportage as a journalistic genre has a strong position in Poland and its representatives achieve the highest status in the journalistic environment. At the same time controversy has grown around the issue of reportage. It stems from the fact that the representatives of the Polish school of reportage treat the genre as a border one lying between journalism and literature. Therefore, sometimes their texts include the elements of fiction and the subjective description, which is against the idea of journalistic objectivity. The article attempts to characterize the examples of reportage written by the contemporary Polish authors presenting the ways of combining the literary and journalistic elements in the texts.

Key words

Reportage, objectivity, journalism, fact, literature, fiction, non-fiction, literature

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Características del reportaje contemporáneo polaco como género periodístico literario²

Paweł Urbaniak, **University of Wrocław**
pawelurbaniak@interia.pl

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Resumen

El reportaje como género periodístico ha adquirido protagonismo en Polonia y sus representantes logran el más alto reconocimiento del mundo periodístico. Al mismo tiempo, el reportaje también suscita ciertas controversias. Los representantes de la escuela del reportaje polaco entienden este género como una frontera entre el periodismo y la literatura; por tanto, en ocasiones, sus textos incluyen elementos de ficción y descripciones subjetivas que contrasta con la idea de la objetividad periodística. Este artículo intenta caracterizar ejemplos de reportaje escritos por autores polacos contemporáneos que presentan el modo de combinar la literatura con elementos periodísticos en sus obras.

Palabras clave

Reportaje, objetividad, periodismo, hechos, literario, ficción, no ficción, literatura

² Este artículo utiliza partes de la última obra impresa en Polonia por el autor: Urbaniak P. (2009), *Literackość w twórczości współczesnych polskich reportażyistów*, in K. Wolny-Zmorzyński, W. Furman, J. Snopek (Ed.) *Mistrzowie literatury czy dziennikarstwa*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Poltext; Urbaniak P. (2008), *O obiektywności w poznaniu reportażowym. Przykład twórczości Ryszarda Kapuścińskiego*, in I. Borkowski (Ed.) *Nowe Media – Nowe w Mediach*. Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego.

Introduction

Reportage is a genre for which real life and real events are raw materials. Therefore, it became especially popular when its topic concerned all its readers. People want to read about things which concern them, which they meet every day, which are shared by bigger community, by the whole society. Therefore, two wars had a great influence on the appearance of modern non-fiction literature, especially reportage. War events caused a certain equalization. The readers themselves became the heroes. Having survived tragic events, they think that facts known to them, their life story are more interesting than the most fantastic fiction. The readers become not only the heroes but even the co-authors of the plot.

In the interwar period reportage became extremely popular not only in Poland but all over the world. However, at that time the most of the reporters did not try to change the existing patterns in their writing. Their reportages contained detailed information about the authors themselves and the ways to obtain information described by them. They included also the assessment of the described facts. The readers did not have the possibility of their own interpretation. These reportages were limited to the description of the events.

In comparison with these schematic and rather craft-like reportages in the interwar period, aspiring to be more scientific than literary, two techniques of reportage writing are completely different. These two techniques are connected with two surnames which are very important in the field of Polish non-fiction literature. It is worth having a look at these two reporters because they had a big influence on the Polish post war reportage. These two influential reporters are Ksawery Pruszyński and Melchior Wańkowicz.

1. Truth and fiction in reportage

Melchior Wańkowicz was a unique author in comparison with his contemporary reporters. His reportage combined the authenticity of events with the elements of reminiscences, fiction and anecdotes. Both the outstanding individuals influencing history and common people involved in the historical events were the heroes of his texts. What is characteristic in his works is an attempt to show things which are typical and universal. It makes him different from other reporters who aimed mainly at presenting details. Similarly to Wańkowicz, Egon Erwin Kisch realized his writing about facts. He was seven years older than Wańkowicz and was treated as the master of world reportage.

According to Wańkowicz, reportage should be up-to-date not only at the moment when an event which is described is the subject of the heated debate. Reportage should be long-lived and should be used by the next generations as it is in case of literature. However, in order to achieve it, reportage must be universal. Similarly to Wańkowicz, Ksawery Pruszyński also included in his texts the elements of tales. However, more than Wańkowicz, he shortened the descriptions, focusing on the most important features of the described people and events.

In order to characterize Polish reportage, it is necessary to analyze the general definition of the genre. 'Reportage is a journalistic genre which uses artistic means from the literary prose. It is based on authentic material and lacks fiction, literary fiction. However, this authentic material is often shaped like a narrative plot.' (Głowiński, Okopień-Sławińska, Sławiński, p. 375).

The sentence from the definition: 'Reportage is a journalistic genre which uses the artistic means from the literary prose' is the subject of the heated debate and most serious disputes around reportage as a genre. These disputes concern the affiliation of reportage. The theoreticians of the genre classify it either to journalism or to literature. It is worth analyzing the specificity of basic communication macroforms.

Table 1.- Basic communication macroforms

	Fiction significant or only acceptable	Objective information, free interpretations, evaluations, views,	Formulation of true sentences in the models closer and closer to reality
Action in public interest	Literature	Journalism	Science, Education
Action in particular interest	Advertising	PR	

Source: Furman (2008)

The aim of the reporter should always be the action in public interest. This is the feature of both literature and journalism. In Polish reportages the main story is most often taken from life; however, it is not presented precisely. It is often colored, with changed order, for example. Such changes are introduced always to achieve certain aim, most

often to make the text more understandable, more universal, interesting for a bigger number of readers.

The formal closeness of journalism and literature present in reportage seems to be unquestioned in many realizations. Only by sticking to radical definitions of both macroforms of communication we can claim that there are certain tools which allow to separate quite effectively the texts belonging to these two types of writing. According to the definition, literature should be fictional and reportage, in turn, should not only use reality as the basis for the plot but also should be characterized by the authors' objectivity in presenting the reality. These both types of communication have characteristic ways of building narration and they sometimes borrow them from each other. Therefore, the reporters use in their texts the tools traditionally connected with literature.

2. The character created on the basis of many biographies

Melchior Wańkowicz claimed that the reporters cannot limit themselves to reporting only. They should build reality probable in given historical and geographical realities. However, they do not have to copy it thoughtlessly. They have the right, for example, to create the character on the basis of the biographies of a few met people. Wańkowicz treats reportage as the work which can use the mechanisms of the literary presentation of the reality. Such work can include both documentary as well as esthetic elements. He uses such techniques in many of his reportages, for example *Battle of Monte Cassino*. In this reportage the characters wearing military uniforms combine often the experiences of a few soldiers fighting in war with whom the reporter talked.

Similar techniques are used by contemporary reporters. Wojciech Jagielski writes, for example, about his 'Night Wanderers': 'It is a true story, similarly as true is the city of Gulu where it takes place. True are also the characters in the story, namely, haunted Joseph Kony, old Severina, Keneth Banya, the king Aczolich, chiefs, priests, soldiers, and children who directed by the ghosts become cruel guerrillas at night. For the sake of this story Nora, Samuel and Jackson were created out of a few real people' (Jagielski, 2009, p. 6).

His explanation shows, first of all, the reporter's trustworthiness and, secondly, seems to be justified because of a few reasons. The reporter could not ask children too many questions because it could be harmful for their psyche. Let me remind that the title wanderers were Ugandan guerrillas from The Lord's Resistance Army, armed, cruel and

dangerous. They are really young (few years old) and they attack Ugandan villages to find more children who will become guerrillas, too. They force these children to murder grown ups who try to protect their families. Therefore, in order to present the real picture of each character's experiences, Jagielski would have to carry out very detailed interviews with children who managed to escape from children troops created by a madman Joseph Kony. These children try to come back to normal life and out of murderers become children again. Therefore, detailed interviews describing bloody murders and the motives of such actions were not possible. The author could not expect it from these children only for the sake of sensational reportage. As a result, he looked for some other, rather than specific children, sources of information. Many stories about children murderers let build the characters who were called with exemplary names, with a boy called Samuel as the main hero of the book.

Jagielski used the possibility to build fictional characters on the basis of the authentic biographies mainly because of ethical reasons. Giving the readers a fictional character he admits that described reality is close to the literary presentation of the world, the world which is probable but not fully authentic.

In spite of this, the description of the events proposed by Jagielski has much in common with reportage, because the characters made out of many children's biographies are the only fictional element of the book and they show the true story about the lives of children soldiers, Kony's units and cruelty in Uganda.

3. Individual biography as the picture of the society

It was In 'Lapidaria' Ryszard Kapuściński wrote: 'the present situation of literature is like that: on the one hand, we've got literature which more and more concentrates on the internal life and psyche of the individual. Single person is a starting point. On the other hand, we've got news transmitted by media, news which is short, hard and easy. What's in between? An empty field which I try to cultivate' (Kapuściński, 1997). The author of the 'Emperor' writes that in order to do it, he needs to use the literary techniques. At the same time he does not want to resign from the journalistic techniques because it is information about the facts that tells about the most important thing – becoming of the history.

Cultivating the field, which, according to the author, at present situation of the social communication is not cultivated, is observable in many of his works. In his great

reportages describing societies, nations, continents, the lives of individuals serve as the basis for the description. The focus on the individual, a detailed description of his/her features as the member of a certain group, the presentation of environmental and historical experiences allow for a better social characteristic of the community than the observation of the problem from a broader perspective. Kapuściński, planning to show the essence of the African reality, decided to limit himself to the description of a few met people. In the introduction to 'The Shadow of the Sun' he writes: 'It's not a book about Africa but about a few people from there, about the meetings with them, time spent together.'

This continent is too big to be described. It's like an ocean, separate planet, diverse, rich universe' (Kapuściński, 1998). One has to agree that the book describes the story of a few people only. It does not try to synthesize everything that is African. But in spite of this, it is a book about Africa. Maybe even more than thick books about this continent. It is like that because Kapuściński's reportage tells about the people who make this continent, about its main heroes, about those who are the elements of the African reality. The description of the group on the basis of a single biography, the focus on the individual is characteristic for literary cognition. Journalistic cognition, more scientific, aims at describing the reality with the use of statistical data, syntheses and generalizations as the tools which make the described phenomena more objective. It often turns out, however, that we can come closer to the truth thanks to the selection. Sometimes the choice of a few elements shows the reality better than the synthesis. For instance, the meeting with Tania, a nine-year-old girl met by accident in Jakuck, described by Kapuściński in 'Imperium' reflects in a great way the atmosphere in the USSR shortly before its collapse.

The girl is really wise and therefore, 'like a grown up person she takes everything into consideration and evaluates situations. She does the same with things like jumping over the paddle. One has to jump so precisely in order not to wet one's shoes because where could one find another pair? Describing the atmosphere present in people's minds and souls is always the most important aim of Kapuściński's reportages. In his opinion, these elements are important for understanding the events and community. He repeatedly postulated broadening the definition of the fact.

According to him, not only observable events and phenomena can be called facts. In his opinion, these are also the elements outside a direct perception like, for example, the atmosphere, mentality, feelings of described characters. Depicting them in his reportages he used the techniques traditionally belonging to literature because journalism rarely

presents the emotional states of the described people, lacking needed methodology. Kapuściński presenting individuals with the world of their internal experiences used the techniques traditionally reserved for literature.

4. Fictional Background

The above mentioned proposal by Wańkowicz to broaden the traditional definition of reportage assumed the intentional use of fiction. He suggested that the author of the reportage can manipulate the facts as long as their meaning is true. The authenticity of the described events can be treated as something less significant. It is not the most important whether the facts which are the basis of the reportage are authentic in every detail. However, their meaning must be true.

Wańkowicz's proposal was accepted by many reporters all over the world. Obviously, many realized it not knowing the texts of the Polish reporter. It is even possible to say that those who decided to combine the reality with fiction in the reporter's texts were especially liked by the readers and their texts became the part of reportage classics.

These were, as far as Polish reporters are concerned, Wańkowicz, Pruszyński, Kapuściński. From abroad it was a legendary master of the reportage – Egon Erwin Kisch – who combined the elements of scientific and artistic reporting of the facts through the introduction of guessing, so called the logical fantasy. He used fiction in many of his reportages. The background presented by the reporter is fictional but the described events are real.

A similar technique is used by Wojciech Tochman in his reportage from 2007 entitled 'The Rabid dog'. The text starts with a sentence typical for church rhetoric: 'Today, dear brothers and sisters we've got the world sick day' (Tochman, 2007, p.443). Later the narrator and the main hero says 'today's homily will be too hard for many of you' and he adds 'it's very difficult for me to stand today in front of you' (Tochman, 2007, p.443). Later on he reveals 'I'm gay' (Tochman, 2007, p.443). The reportage has the form of the homily and the hero is the priest who in several pages of the text describes his erotical experiences and the fear that somebody will discover his sexual preferences. The text finishes with the following words: 'Everything I said is true. I'm thirty three, I live in Poland, I'm a priest, homosexual, I'm infected. (...) I'll never say this homily. In my next homily I will

talk about the Bible, as I was taught in the seminary. And let it be like that' (Tochman, 2007, p.458).

In his reportage Tochman presented a real character of the priest from one of Polish churches who described his experiences. The material is authentic then. The form of reportage causes, however, that if we want to treat this text as a reportage, we have to allow the elements of fiction, agree with Kisch that the background can be fictional when the events are real and agree with Wańkowicz that broadening the convention of reportage with fictional elements makes sense, because their introduction makes the description of the events better.

Wańkowicz wrote that the reportage can be similar to the panoramic painting. 'In the foreground there is a real fence, the second is painted in' (Wańkowicz, 1977, p. 13). Thanks to such techniques the reader can understand better the sense of the described story. The homily made up by Tochman is this second fence, fictional but showing the facts revealed by the hero to the reporter in the intimate talk.

We cannot accept such a homily like the one presented by Tochman. We cannot even imagine it. The reviewers of the reportage suggested even that perhaps the reporter wanted to show us that Christianity nowadays has the petit bourgeois character as there is no place for a sin in it. The form of homily makes us realize that the hero of the reportage is in fact closer to us than we can imagine. Maybe it is a priest we meet every Sunday at church, the priest who has schematic homilies learnt at the seminary in which there is no place for the priest to talk about his sin. The fictional element makes Tochman's text more rich in senses, needing the use of literary tools to interpret them, but at the same time really true, showing its authenticity.

5. Reportage according to Kapuściński

The Ryszard Kapuściński was for sure the most popular and the most important representative of Polish school of reportage. His works suit really well the theoretical discussions about reportage as a genre because they changed from typical journalism to typical literature. His first important text published in 1955 in 'Sztandar Młodych' was about a dramatic social situation in Nowa Huta, the district of Kraków. This district was planned as an urban masterpiece without God. Before Kapuściński's text Nowa Huta was always presented as the district of richness. In his text the reporter presented the problems of

prostitution, unemployment and alcoholism. The text had many consequences. It started the heated debate among the readers. The chief editor of 'Sztandar Młodych' and Warsaw censor lost their jobs. The government replied, however, that Kapuściński is right and that they have to fight with the problems in Nowa Huta. The biggest consequences concerned Kapuściński himself. He got an order and as a reward was sent abroad as a foreign correspondent to reveal the problems of the world far from Poland. That is how he started writing about exotic, far countries.

The text about Nowa Huta was a typical journalistic text without any literary elements. In the next years his works became, however, closer and closer to literature. One of his most popular texts – 'Emperor', for example, is a book which in my opinion combines equally the elements of journalism and literature. It is a story of the Ethiopian emperor Hajle Sellasje, a real character. The story is told through the quotes of people from the emperor's court. Kapuściński met and talked to these people. Although at the first sight it is a journalistic work, the language of the story is strange, similar to the old Polish language, which made the book more universal. Thanks to this technique, it is not the book only about Hajle Selasje but about any dictator, any dictatorship. This book thirty years after its publication is still relevant and true.

The next books by Kapuściński were closer and closer to literature. It is interesting that the last two books are not reportages at all, and they have nothing in common with this genre. '[Travels with Herodotus](#)' from 2004 is a historical essay while in 2006 the volume of verse (poetry) was published. This evolution of Kapuściński shows how close the most important representative of Polish school of reportage was to literature and how close Polish reportage was to literature.

Ryszard Kapuściński uses a variety of ways to report about facts. It seems, however, that a dominating technique is a strong dramatization of the story which involves the description of the events with the use of the pictures that happen as if in the eyes of the reader. Owing to that, the reader can have an impression that s/he is a participant of the described stories. The story is built up scene by scene with the narrator who does not anticipate the action, does not reveal his/her omniscient knowledge but presents only what can be observed by him/her as the participant of the action. This type of description makes Kapuściński's writing closer to the traditional prose. Therefore, many reportages by the author of *The Shadow of the Sun* have the genre features of the short story. What makes these texts reportage is the topicality of the issues and basing the described stories on the facts. All other elements of the structure are typical of the short stories. Especially with

reference to these works it is possible to talk about the dominant role of the 'literary quality' in building the story.

An attempt to include Kapuściński's creativity into the greater whole – school, genre, movement must result in failure. Therefore, it should be assumed, after, among others, Beata Nowacka that Kapuściński is a writer who did not stop to be a reporter even for a moment. It is a fact that his books were not written in the privacy of the study but were the result of the trips and meetings with people. That is why 'the literary quality of these books (...) is not their only value. If it was so, some of them would not function as a required reading at the African studies, sociology or social anthropology classes. However, if they turn out to be useful as course books, it is not due to the fact that they are good literature but, first of all, because of their cognitive values. Therefore, it is impossible to agree that Kapuściński crossed the border between journalism and literature. He invalidated it!' (Nowacka, 2004, p. 23).

6. Conclusions

The article presents the formal closeness of the journalism and literature. Therefore, reportage, as a journalistic genre, can be the text which from the formal point of view is close to the short story, a literary genre. Both reportage and a short story are short texts with possibly quick action, small number of characters and a limited number of subplots. Different is, nevertheless, the aim set by the writer, the author of the short story and the journalist, the author of the reportage. Although they both aim at presenting the truth, this truth is different in each case. For the former it is most often existential, generalized and metaphorical truth, for the latter he factographic one. However, as can be seen in many Polish reportages, these two types of truth can coincide. The truth of the facts shaped in the proper form can gain the value of a universal and parabolic character.

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