

Laboratory of Reportage: An Outline of Research Issues

Abstract

The paper aims to present the outline of the research conducted by the Laboratory of Reportage. The Laboratory represents a place of journalistic experimentations and explorations. The experimentations consist of collective work on texts, multimedia narration, penetrating the area between journalism and literature. The research is directed towards scientific and artistic knowledge. The paper portrays both the history and the achievements of the Laboratory of Reportage and the method it employs.

Keywords: reportage, documentary novel, polyphony, multimedia, oral history

The Laboratory of Reportage operating within the Faculty of Journalism, Information and Book Studies of the University of Warsaw is a centre for research, experimentation and journalistic exploration as well as the place of practical didactic activities. We consider reportage as the fullest form of journalistic expression. Reportage, as a particularly open genre, embraces elements of interview, column and essay. It is close to non-fiction literature and film documentary. For a journalist willing to dig deeper into their knowledge it offers fundamental experience. That is why the Laboratory of Reportage was established.

The field of the Laboratory's experimentation and research covers:

- collective work on text;
- multimedia angle on material;
- penetrating the area between journalism and creative writing, journalism and screenwriting, journalism and stage writing.

However, reportage remains the base. The belief in the unique role of reportage within journalistic genres stems from our practice and experience. This article is an attempt to describe the latter.

I. Research, exploration and experimentation programme

We do not hide that we have been long significantly inspired by the work of Juliusz Osterwa and Jerzy Grotowski. That is why we consciously refer to the symbol used by Teatr Reduta and to the sign of Teatr Laboratorium – two crossed ovals, the symbol of fertility and reproduction of ideas, as well as the never-ceasing strive for excellence. Despite the distance between subjects of interest (theatre – journalism), we share the great artists' regard for the work method and for constant consideration of technical principles. "Craft and vocation through craft" – as Grotowski would say – that is the subject of our interest. What is the source of interest defined that way?

A. Towards scientific cognition

First of all, we treat journalism as a cognitive tool – one useful in the attempt to answer the great questions about the mysteries of reality and human existence. A journalist cannot stay indifferent to these questions. We believe that the only kind of reportage worth putting effort into is the kind that can say something new about those mysteries. We definitely dissociate ourselves from journalism seen as a commodity. We dissociate ourselves from a way of thinking that puts journalism solely in the role of information and sees information as a commodity – so one delivers a product designed to meet the demand. That is a vision of crippled journalism that sold itself. Another widespread opinion – that news is allegedly the genre that constitutes journalism – is unacceptable to us because of its cognitive limitations. We are interested in a higher level explanation of reality, made deeper and broader owing to documentation. That is why we attach significance to the relationship between journalism and science; we feel particularly close to social science (anthropology, sociology, social psychology, history) and its research methods. We are especially interested in a comparative study of journalistic methods and:

- sociological, psychological and anthropological interview, in-depth interview, including the achievements of oral history;
- participant observation in social science;
- experimental initiation of events in social science;
- using elements of acting in journalistic work (in assumed identity reportage).

Shallowness, superficiality, lack of personality and information overload all cause – as already mentioned – the need of deep, human (holding elements of philosophical interpretation) consideration of reality and of studying it. This is the basic task of the Laboratory of Reportage.

B. Towards artistic cognition

Moreover, we believe journalism is also an art. We are trying to define the precise location of that art on the verge of culture, media business and citizen organisation, the consequences of that position for journalists and tasks it sets forward for journalism.

We want journalism – in its most ambitious projects – to be a creative art that mimics neither literature nor fiction filmmaking. That is why we keep penetrating the area between journalism and creative writing, journalism and screenwriting, journalism and stage writing. That gives way to our interest in the documentary novel, documentary narratives and cross-cultural reportage in macro scale. We want this to be our area of expertise, in which we dig deeper into culture, because it gives us better chances at cognition. We do not know whether we will succeed in creating a brand new journalistic genre – maybe it will remain a hybrid, a post-modern cluster. Nevertheless, we believe that we should experiment, that it has a purpose and is worthwhile. We also attach great importance to online, multimedia journalism – journalism on the border between media. We are of the opinion that the possibilities the Internet gives us in the realm of the multimedia are the future of journalism. Solving the problem of time and space, interactivity, growing accessibility of high-quality sound recording devices constitute a new situation in the realm of social communication. We want to explore this situation, particularly that of interactive creation of an online documentary novel, multimedia documentary storytelling.

While appreciating individual statements, the search for style performed in them and a strive for personal reflection and personal responsibility, we also see the outstanding significance of creative teamwork and the pieces it creates. Such teams can create texts, books, reviews that a single author would never be able to create. That is the field in which we want to experiment as we hold a belief that collective work on text can lead to expressing something new and important.

As we think about artistic cognition, we fully accept the postulate born in the filmmaking world – that of the Polish school – about art that is both artistically and socially valuable. Upholding social bonds, support in social

adaptation, fighting evil and pathologies remain the essence of journalism. We have to and we want to be useful. We believe that even in the time of ruthless domination of market power and customs, and profit-based logics journalism does influence the public eye directly; by shaping human approaches and behaviour, it strives for change, for action. What would be, what could be the deeds of the “fourth estate”? What directions of change can be considered fair and workable? We believe these are important questions that should be answered through research. The breadth of our interests stems from an attempt at a holistic, anthropological look at the model of social communication and the role of the journalist – their vocation, situation and challenges of the future.

II. History and achievements of the Laboratory of Reportage

A. Reportage Workshop



The activities of the Laboratory of Reportage started at the Reportage Workshop established in Łódź in April 1980. The idea was to work on text collectively. The first reportage written by five authors was entitled “Będzie tydzień w mieście Łodzi” (A Week to Come in the City of Łódź). It described seven days in the city’s life. The idea of the experiment was to describe that week before it started. The reportage began on the day the weekly paper was printed.

Our forward-looking experiment about the predictability of social life failed in confrontation with reality. The text was already present in the draft prints for the front page of *Polityka* weekly (issue 28, 12th July 1980) but it was taken down by the censor as its publication coincided with the outbreak of the first workers’ protests in Lublin.

The second experiment of the Reportage Workshop was the book *Kto tu wpuścił dziennikarzy* (Who Let the Journalists In) – the story of the birth of Solidarity through the eyes of journalists who participated in the August protests at the Gdańsk Shipyard. It was also a story about their job – a confession and an examination of conscience for the whole milieu. It was composed from 41 accounts recorded on tape between September 1980 and May 1981. In 1986 the book received the Jerzy Zieliński Award of



large number of people we wanted to interview. It also resulted from the fear that we would not be able to gather content in time – the state of relative freedom in Poland would finish abruptly – it did as the martial law was introduced. The basic structure used in making this book was the schedule of a reporter’s fieldwork: birth of a topic, decision to go, journey, entering the shipyard, events during the protest, going back to the office, attempt to print or broadcast the material. The story moved forward in blocks presenting the above-mentioned structure. Each block was composed of edited statements of our protagonists. Owing to panoramic images and polyphonic form, we

could not only compare the motivation and behaviour of reporters gathering material during the protest, but also present the particular means of expression they used. Independent Journalists (Polish Journalist Association). It was read in parts on Radio Free Europe during the martial law, and in 1991 it was performed on the stage of TV Theatre, directed by Mikołaj Grabowski. Eighteen writers co-authored the book – young journalists from Łódź. We were an informal group of friends, though the position of Marek Miller as the founder and leader of the team was never put into question. We were undoubtedly influenced by the then trendy concepts of contestation and student “open theatre”. This number of writers was partly the result of the poetics of that time – the appreciation for community and teamwork; and partly of the



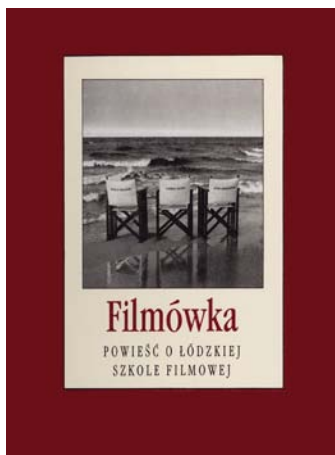
Twenty-five years after the events in the Gdańsk Shipyard students from the Laboratory of Reportage visited the protagonists of *Kto tu wpuszcil dziennikarzy* and asked about their participation in the protests – what did it become in their future lives and careers? Those accounts were published in 2005 by Rosner i Wspólnicy as the second part of the book initiated by the Polish Journalist Association. Owing to its documentary value, the book was also

marked with the logo of the Committee of the 25th Anniversary of the Gdańsk Agreement and the creation of the workers' union Solidarity.

We met at the Reportage Workshop to discuss reportage and work methods. Three documentary films were created as a result: *Hanna Krall*, *Krzysztof Kąkolewski*, *Ryszard Kapuściński* – about three styles in Polish reportage. All three were broadcast on the Polish Television (TVP) in 1990. We were always open about the fact that the work of those three reporters was our reference and unending inspiration.

Years later, at the Laboratory of Reportage, an unpublished book was written based on interviews made for the film. The book is *3 x K: Polska Szkoła Reportażu* (3 x K: the Polish School of Reportage) (Kąkolewski, Kapuściński, Krall). Today it remains the basic book at the Laboratory, an introduction to all exploration and experimentation. The work of those three reporters was, in our opinion, the peak of Polish reportage – it defined the situation – they were the ones who continued, following the path of Ksawery Pruszyński and Melchior Wańkowicz, what is most important in Polish reportage – combining the artistic with the social. We believed that we should draw from this tradition and uphold it. But before that could happen, it took two years of student groups gathering material: interviews with our protagonists (press, radio, TV, Internet) and their texts about technical aspects of writing. Once that stage was over we invited three journalists to work with us: Anna Fidecka, Marta Sieciechowicz and Jacek Antczak. They were the ones to provide a preliminary edition of the material, intertwined with interviews they conducted: Anna Fidecka with Ryszard Kapuściński, Marta Sieciechowicz with Krzysztof Kąkolewski, Jacek Antczak with Hanna Krall. It was an interesting challenge – is it possible to create a book from nothing but quotations? Will the Frankenstein live? This book is a result of collective curiosity and penetration regarding the technical matters relevant to the whole guild of journalists. In order to turn quotations into organic text, we had to interfere with them slightly, adding conjunctions or changing the form of questions. But every time we did it we tried to stick to the essence of the thought of the author and of the interviewed reporter. We believed that, as Ludwik Feuerbach said: “Solitude means being finite and limited, community means being free and infinite. For himself alone, man is just man (in the ordinary sense); but man with man – the unity of ‘I’ and ‘You’ – that is God.”¹ For that reason, we shaped the book as a dialogue – a meeting, an extended interview.

¹ L. Feuerbach, *Principles of Philosophy of the Future*, p. 85, <https://rowlandpasaribu.files.wordpress.com/2013/09/ludwig-feuerbach-principles-of-philosophy-of-the-future.pdf> [accessed on 25.09.2018].



Let us get back to the Reportage Workshop. It has another important meaning in the ancient history of the Laboratory of Reportage. It was the place of birth of the documentary novel, which was incarnated in the book *Filmówka. Powieść o Łódzkiej Szkole Filmowej* (Film School. A Novel About the Łódź Film School). The second part of the title was suggested by Andrzej Wajda. After reading the text, during one of our meetings, he said: “You painted a large fresco of human fate, events and the endurance of an institution through time. This book has leading and secondary characters, there is a main plot and

background plots. What you have done is an attempt to record something unique – Polish film in a totalitarian era. How is this any different from a novel?” That was true. *Kto tu wpuścił dziennikarzy* covered the 20 days of the protests. *Filmówka* covered half a century, and it took us a decade to collect material for it. But we never got rid of doubts. Is it possible to write a documentary novel using just a voice recorder? Are the words “write” and “novel” even adequate in this context? At first, we tried to collect everything that has ever been written, recorded and filmed: books, articles, manuscripts, radio programmes, records from symposiums and meetings, hundreds of frames from student films, documentary and fiction movies. The other part of our effort was to meet professors, graduates, film critics and historians. Finally, having done all that, we were ready to prepare a list of questions to ask our protagonists – a “negative” of the future novel. We started conducting interviews.

At first, there were six co-authors. Several years later there were four of us. We asked friends for help. We used opportunities and coincidences. We reached our protagonists in Los Angeles (Krzysztof Malkiewicz, Roman Heinberg), New York (Adam Holender, Zbigniew Rybczyński), Cologne (Kurt Weber), Jerusalem (Regina Dreyer) but also in Sopot (Jerzy Afanasjew) and in the Bieszczady Mountains (Zofia Komedowa-Trzcińska). We spoke with them at their homes, at restaurants, film studios, festivals... even in hospitals. When most of the interviews were over, we began the phase of preliminary editing. At this stage we used principles and rules worked out during the

work on our first book, *Kto tu wpuscił dziennikarzy*. Here the main issues were those of the story, chronology and time: the time of events, the time of telling about them, the time of putting them down in the book – how is the reader supposed to tell one from the other? We did not want to act as narrators as we believed that our protagonists would do it best. Each conversation took place at a different time and location. The reader can, however, feel as if all protagonists have met after a long time and now are recalling the past while being seated at one table. Sometimes the account they give of events sounds as if they were happening here and now. At other times they stress the passing of time. We placed them at one table in the world of our imagination but they never really sat at one. Sometimes they mention a person with just a single word – usually, they said much more, but the single word is what we have selected. We had to decide and accept the responsibility for selecting parts of the gathered material and for the way we edited it. There could be as many versions of this book as we had interviews. Would traditionally understood interview authorization be possible in this case? And so we edited the material in a strictly personal and independent manner. We brought a specific documentary reality to life. It resembled the results of an experiment conducted by a man who decided to make a film about the fluid growth of human hair. During preparations for this unusual task, he performed an initial trial. He shaved his hair and photographed the process of growth throughout six months – he would always take the shot in the same pose, in front of the camera. He made a detailed description of the context in which he took the photo, e.g. meal, sleep, intercourse. Then he transferred the photos to film tape. We could watch the result of this experiment. When the lights went out what we saw on screen was a bald scalp. Suddenly something lava-like started flowing from the head. The face of the man moved, it turned wry – it was a half-year-grimace. Something strange and moving... We collected the accounts of our protagonists throughout 10 years. When edited, they moved too, started talking to one another, reminisce, quarrel... live. A 50-year-grimace about fluid growth. Of a school.

After initial editing that gave us an outline of the whole book, we moved to another stage. We modified our questionnaire and went deeper – into detail. We call this stage the hyperreal stage. We presented the book draft to some of our interlocutors; they were supposed to respond to the words of their colleagues. That way they became co-authors. We created a model structure that could be filled as long as the school existed. We wish that opportunity had been used.