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# The Last Mountain and the Last Words of Jerzy Kukuczka: The Mountaineer's Diary as Panorama and Oligopticon

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*During his last expedition and just before his death on the South Face of Lhotse, the world-renowned Polish high-altitude climber Jerzy Kukuczka wrote a brief diary that provokes some general questions concerning the inner motivation of a mountaineer, but also the nature of mountaineering literature, to which the diary belongs. The laconic style of the diary suggests, following Philippe Lejeune, an invisible galaxy of the untold and unknown context beyond the text. Instead of reducing the diary to a literary text, the article attempts to treat it as a kind of logical tool that creates a cultural model of the world. Applying the anthropological concept of the collective, it analyzes Kukuczka's diary as a kind of ontological mediation between nature and culture. Following Bruno Latour, the diary can be seen as both an oligopticon and a panorama, combining the richness of a partial network of collectives created in the process of climbing with the general view of the setting as the substantial entity of the mountain.*

Keywords: literature and alpinism / Polish literature / mountaineering literature / diary / narrative technique / oligopticon / panorama / Kukuczka, Jerzy

On 24 October 1989, when Jerzy Kukuczka died attempting to climb the South Face of Lhotse, a new act in the discourse on the meaning and purpose of mountaineering was initiated. All the facts surrounding the death of the famous Polish mountaineer seemed to lead to questions such as: Why did he attempt to climb the eight-thousand-meter peak after having already scaled all the eight-thousanders? What did he really want to achieve? Why did he choose the life of a mountaineer? As usual, such questions articulate a more general problematic of what it means to

be human, and mountaineering itself becomes a symbol of motivation, existential substance, and fate. “Today the question *why do this?* is included in nearly every mountaineering narrative.” (Grebowicz 13)

Neither the great mountaineer nor mountaineering can be explained by the few laconic remarks that we have from Kukuczka, who did not see the point of stopping when things were going so well. Paradoxically, the diary from the Lhotse expedition, published in 2019, offers no revelation either; it does seem helpful, though, if we want to explore some of the paradoxes of mountaineering literature in general.

## Mountaineering Literature

Let me start with an anecdote. Years ago, a friend of mine who is a literature expert asked me about the early canon of Polish mountaineering literature, comprised of texts from the period 1904–1939: “You’ve read it, haven’t you? There’s nothing in it!” Of course, now I know that this was a simple provocation from my older colleague, but at the time I got irritated and replied: “There’s everything in it!” I begin with this exchange because the words “everything” and “nothing” seem to encapsulate the ambiguity of mountaineering literature. According to my friend, there was “nothing to interpret,” whereas for me, a scholar of culture, there was a lot to analyze, and we simply spoke from different perspectives. This seems to be the paradox of mountaineering literature: from the point of view of literary studies, mountaineering literature often seems very boring and schematic, while from the perspective of the study of culture, it is an intricate texture that reveals essential cultural phenomena.

Value judgements are of course not rare in literary studies, no matter what kind of literature is at stake. In this regard, it is enough to recall the titles of two Polish-language essays on mountaineering literature from the late 1980s, which was a period when mountaineering and its literature were thriving in Poland. These titles are “Quo vadis, Mountaineering Literature?” (“Quo vadis, literaturo górską?”, see Kolbuszewski) and “Could Polish Climbing Literature Be Less Bad?” (see Tumidajewicz). Between the dozens of mountaineering books written in the 1970s and 1980s, there were more than a few highly acclaimed texts, but this did not change the general critical perception of the genre. But if this is so, what could be the sources of this seeming aesthetic shallowness of mountaineering literature?

Firstly, mountaineering literature seems to be very schematic in most cases, as the literary form is shaped by the model of climbing. Jan Józef Szczepański writes that mountaineering literature (even mountaineering fiction) is a kind of specialist literature which accompanies mountaineering (Szczepański 4). The narration on a mountaineering expedition has its beginning and end, which corresponds to the vertical climbing route. The opinion of Polish mountaineer and author Zbigniew Tumidajewicz seems revealing in this context:

As years went by and attained summits were higher and higher, the climbing community produced a custom—a must—of describing each expedition in a book; usually of the following content:

Chapter I—The Birth of the Expedition. or Preparations.

Chapter II—Through Two Continents. or With Camera in—. or The Walk-in.

Chapter III—Base Camp. or In the Basecamp.

Chapter IV—Assault. or Attack. or Fight for—.

Chapter V—Return. or Downward Bound.

Chapter VI—Polish Mountaineers in the Mountains of—.

There were of course variations: some chapters were split or [...] joined, the end was at the beginning, or instead of historical, one could read linguistic, sociological, etc. introductory (or closing) remarks. A result? A mountain of suave and lifeless books in which names of mountains and group pictures are fully interchangeable. (Tumidajewicz 110)

Schematism is determined by the notion of the climbing route as the core of the mountaineering ethos. As Margaret Grebowicz puts it: “It is commonplace in much ‘philosophy of climbing’ to make the distinction between climbing focused on summiting and climbing focused on relationships—with the mountain, fellow climbers and oneself.” (Grebowicz 26; see also Pacukiewicz, *Grań*) So it comes as no surprise that mountaineering literature, too, is interested in the routine and perils of narration set in the physical world rather than in bringing human intellect to its peak.

Furthermore, even when authors refuse to follow the climbing route and instead choose the way of introspection the resulting meditations are often schematic and fully reducible to the monotony of “omphaloscopy,” to use Jan Gondowicz’s term for the study of one’s own “psycho-naval” (Gondowicz 133). Now, stylistically, both Western (see Hołata) and Polish mountaineering literature (see Kaliszuk) oscillate between the private account and the official expedition log. The study of literary genres therefore seems to be unable to grasp the specificity of

mountaineering literature. To my mind, it seems more worthwhile to study the cultural and existential model of mountaineering itself.

Following Victor Turner's work on liminality (see Turner), mountaineering literature could be viewed as a kind of liminal literature. On the one hand, climbing is a very sensual experience based on the peculiar vertical ontology of the climbing route: the world of mountaineering is structured within serious existential limits and borderlines. On the other hand, the experience of mountaineering is one of transgression and is often described as uncommunicable: if you want to understand a mountaineer, you must climb a mountain yourself. This indeterminacy of experience results in the schematic and laconic style of mountaineering narratives, which often oscillate between seemingly obvious facts and apparently unspeakable impressions.

According to Voytek Kurtyka, "[m]ountaineering engages almost all kinds of human energy, moreover, because of the extremity of experiences and situations, it engages those energies to the highest degree"; as such, "[c]limbing surpasses the circle of hackneyed and repetitive situations and escapes from the monotonous routines of reason and logic which usually don't allow the busy man to notice the sky over his head" (Kurtyka 41, 40). Nevertheless, the mountains themselves seem to be eternal and ontologically constant—and hence silent. Not surprisingly, then, the specificity of mountaineering literature is often associated with the cultural and existential pattern of mountaineering and its experience. It is striking to see how similar Kurtyka's view of mountaineering is, for example, to Armand E. Singer's reflection on mountaineering literature: "Interpreted broadly, climbing may be the one compleat [sic] sport [...]. Thus, the sport appeals not only to macho types and physical fitness buffs, but also to the most cultured. [...] All of which may help to explain the quality of much of its literature; if not necessarily its emotional and artistic intensity, at least its presence." (Singer xiii)

Singer's view articulates the aesthetic point of view, but the word "presence" seems crucial here, as it indicates the importance of the ontic base of the ontological route of mountaineering, which George Leigh Mallory registered back in 1923 when, asked by an American journalist why he wanted to climb Mount Everest, he gave the following famously laconic answer: "Because it's there." (qtd. in Gillman and Gillman 221) Hence, there always seems to exist some "inaccessible background" in mountaineering narrations (see Pacukiewicz, "Inaccessible Background"). In the words of Wawrzyniec Żuławski, "notes take shape, are made flesh, they speak and talk—and beyond

them mountains are still the inaccessible background” (Żuławski 249). Stefan Osiecki is also worth quoting in this context: “The results of our expedition were enclosed in maps, chronicles, and descriptions, immortalized on plates and film reel. Our every step, our every hour and every minute were noted meticulously. There is only a small gap between the lines of the bald chronicle left to fill, the time between noted hours when we lived, moved—and felt.” (Osiecki 74)

The same “gap” can be found in Jerzy Kukuczka’s diary, but in order to fill it with interpretation we ought to first describe its historical context. Analyzing the text, we may hope to return to the more general question about the substance of cultural context in mountaineering literature.

### **Lhotse South Face: The Last Expedition of Jerzy Kukuczka**

Lhotse was Kukuczka’s first and last Himalayan mountain: on 4 October 1979, he climbed the mountain as the first of his fourteen eight-thousanders without the use of bottled oxygen; in 1989, he returned to climb the mountain’s South Face, where he died on 24 October. Lhotse was arguably the mountain for Kukuczka—the most important mountaineering venture in his life.

In order to understand what the meaning of this mountain was for Kukuczka, we ought to revisit his first meeting with high mountains. In 1974, Kukuczka joined Silesian climbers of the Mountaineering Club in Katowice in their expedition to the mountains of Alaska and Canada. Although he reached the summit of Mount McKinley, he suffered from altitude sickness, which effected in foot frostbite and a toe amputation. As a result, Kukuczka had to return to Poland early, leaving the expedition, as Roman Trzeszewski recalls, “with tears in his eyes” (Trzeszewski 186).

Kukuczka’s first major expedition cast a shadow on his mountaineering future: “This experience really hit my confidence, and my mountaineering lifestyle got stuck in a groove. I felt I didn’t belong anymore, though I managed to get places on some climbing trips organized by the mountaineering and students’ clubs.” (Kukuczka, *Challenge* 10)<sup>1</sup> But there were colleagues from Silesia at the time who gave him a second chance, first on Nanga Parbat and then on Lhotse:

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<sup>1</sup> In the Polish edition of Kukuczka’s book we can read that he has been out of circulation (see Kukuczka, *Mój* 10).

Inviting me to participate in it, the board of the Gliwice club turned a blind eye to all my deficiencies as a high-altitude mountaineer. It was Adam Bilczewski and Janusz Baranek from the Gliwice club who knew first hand how much I'd failed in Alaska when altitude sickness cut me down at a mere five thousand metres. They were there when it happened and saw it all but still they invited me to join their expedition. (Kukuczka, *Challenge* 16)

Although Kukuczka climbed Lhotse without supplemental oxygen, it was also the only one of the fourteen eight-thousanders whose summit he reached both outside winter season and without carving a new route. It is easy to understand that the ambitious climber wanted to correct, as it were, his already spotless achievement (the so-called Crown of the Himalaya: the conquest of all fourteen eight-thousanders) by establishing a new route on the legendary, unclimbed South Face.

The South Face of Lhotse was one of the so-called key problems of Himalayan mountaineering during the 1970s and '80s and there were regular attempts to reach the summit from that side, including a Yugoslav and a Czechoslovak expedition. Prior to 1989, Polish climbers also tried to establish a Polish route, causing the deaths of two Polish climbers, Rafał Chołda and Czesław Jakiel; in 1985, Kukuczka took part in one of those expeditions. Finally, superstar mountaineer Reinhold Messner organized an international expedition in the spring of 1989; it is striking that Messner invited Krzysztof Wielicki and Artur Hajzer into the team instead of Kukuczka, who completed his last eight-thousander (Shishapangma) in 1987, beaten only by Messner. Finally, in the fall of 1989, Kukuczka organized an expedition himself, but it almost did not take place. On 27 May, five Polish mountaineers, all Himalayan veterans, lost their lives on the Lho La Pass near Everest, namely Eugeniusz Chrobak, Mirosław Daśal, Mirosław Gardzielewski, Andrzej Heinrich, and Waclaw Otręba. Kukuczka wrote about his friends in the introduction to the diary: "In my mind's eye I could see their faces—my climbing partners and friends. The cream of Polish mountaineering." He also admitted feeling an "irrational sense of guilt" (Kukuczka, *Challenge* 240). As we know today, this marked the beginning of the decline of the so-called Polish Ice Warriors. Back then, the tragedy jeopardized Kukuczka's expedition to the Lhotse South Face, as many climbers resigned from taking part in the project. Another sign of changes in high-altitude mountaineering probably influenced Kukuczka's decision to climb the Lhotse South Face as well. Initially, he wanted to traverse Kangchenjunga, but then Russians "blitzed Kangchenjunga, just murdered it," for "[t]hey traversed it from left to right, or the other way round, diagonally and across, with dozens of

porters, climbers, fixed camps, loads of money, gear, food, you name it” (240). At first, Kukuczka wanted to re-traverse Kangchenjunga in the so-called clean style (without supplemental oxygen), but when he heard that Messner’s team withdrew from the Lhotse South Face he decided to attempt to climb that wall instead.

Unfortunately, because the team and the goal had to be rearranged quickly, the organization of the expedition did not follow the well-tried practices of past expeditions. As Ryszard Warecki recalls, expedition members were selected “at random” (*Królowa* 149). Moreover, the venture was an international media event and television crews from Poland, Italy, and Switzerland followed the expedition all the way to the base camp. The climbers were very often tired and irritated with the presence of cameras.

On 24 October, Kukuczka and his partner, Ryszard Pawłowski, set off from Camp V to attack the summit. Somewhere above 8,000 meters, leading a pitch, Kukuczka lost his footing and started to fall. As Pawłowski, who aided the climbing, recalls, the protection of two anchors did not hold: “My hands clenched on the rope. I braced myself against the hefty yank that I knew was coming. Its force slammed me against the rock, but the thin rope snapped on a sharp edge just above me. Dumbstruck, I looked down into the abyss, three kilometres deep. For a few moments I could still hear the sound of Jurek’s ice-axe bouncing off rocks. I could see his red mitten falling slowly down.” (Kukuczka, *Challenge* 252)

Finally, the new route on the South Face of Lhotse was established: on 1 October 1990, Russians Sergey Bershov and Vladimir Karataev reached the summit from the south, using supplemental oxygen. It is worth mentioning that the same year Slovenian mountaineer Tomo Česen claimed climbing the South Face, but his achievement is generally perceived as an unlikely one because of the lack of photographs from the summit and the climber’s incoherent reports.<sup>2</sup> As such, the South Face of Lhotse seems to be the source of some of the most meaningful events and narratives Himalayan mountaineering had to offer in the late twentieth century. If we were to treat Lhotse as a nonhu-

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<sup>2</sup> Commenting on Česen’s attempts in the Lhotse South Face as well as Kumbhakarna, Slovenian Himalayan expedition leader Tone Škarja suggested in 2017 that “the best solution would be to suspend both achievements, that is, to withdraw them from official documentation of Slovenian Himalayan achievements, while preserving them in the archive as unresolved matters” (Škarja 39). In his opinion the fact that none of Česen’s photographs was taken on his route does not prove that he did not climb the Lhotse South Face.



man actor it would appear to us surrounded by a network of meaning. Finally, it most likely provides the last great moment in the period of Himalayan mountaineering that is considered Romantic in Poland due to its heroism.

## The Structure of the Diary

Kukuczka's diary has been quoted quite a lot, especially in the context of his tragic death. Of the entire text, only a few sentences tend to be selected by journalists and mountaineers, and these are the sentences that now circulate in the discourse of Polish mountaineering. They are often treated as almost supernatural premonitions of the forthcoming death. For example, the beginning of the introduction to the diary reads: "For me, the expedition has a strange beginning." (*Królowa* 54)<sup>3</sup> At the beginning of the diary, the entries for 28 and 29 August include the following sentence: "Katmandu—dreamed of graves." (Kukuczka, *Challenge* 242) Finally, the last warning follows the accident in which Kukuczka fell off the rope: "God, you watch over me, you gave me a second life." (244) Sometimes the plan of the descent from the mountain and of the return to Poland, the shopping list featuring presents for the family, and the plan for a trip to Italy are also mentioned as belonging to an unrealized future. Although these are all important parts of Kukuczka's diary, they reduce its integral narration when quoted in isolation. Thus, we would do well to describe the structure of the complete edition of the diary.

Kukuczka kept his diary in a simple planner for the year 1989. The editors decided to publish only the part about the Lhotse expedition. During the expedition, Kukuczka only used the space allotted to a given date, except when he added supplementary texts. Unlike his previous diary (from the 1987 Shishapangma expedition), there are a few important paratexts before the first entry, namely the dedication and the introduction. The diary alone seems to be different: entries are short, laconic, and difficult to interpret, as if there really was "nothing," only the basic places, people, actions.

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<sup>3</sup> The English translation of the diary appended to the English edition of Kukuczka's last book *Mój pionowy świat* (literally "My Vertical World" but translated as *Challenge the Vertical*) reads: "The beginnings of this expedition go back a long way." (Kukuczka, *Challenge* 238) For the complete Polish edition of the diary, to which I refer whenever the English translation is incomplete, see *Królowa*.

In terms of literary text, the diary features not only the original diary kept by Kukuczka during the Lhotse expedition, but also a foreword by his wife, Cecylia Kukuczka, an introduction by the editor, Katarzyna Ziolo, a history of the conquest of Lhotse, and a history of Kukuczka's last expedition. There is also a recollection of the accident by Pawłowski, followed by an afterword by Ryszard Warecki, Kukuczka's friend and a member of the expedition.

The publisher and the editor decided to accompany the text of the diary with a good amount of supplementary material. As we can read in the commentary to the 2019 edition of the diary: "*Królowa. Lhotse '89* is an extraordinary book. It is comprised of more than just words. An integral part of the narration is offered by archival material." (*Królowa* 8) Thus, the reader can find such supplementary material as photos from the Jerzy Kukuczka Archive, scans of fragments of the original diary,<sup>4</sup> as well as scans of letters, memos, and press coverage. There is also ample multimedia, including fragments of films shot during the expedition by Elżbieta Piętak and Witold Okleka (*Lhotse '89*) and by Fulvio Mariani (*Lhotse: l'anno nero del serpente*, in English *Lhotse: The Black Year of the Serpent*), documentary films by Wojciech Kukuczka and Anna Teresa Pietraszek, and audio material with fragments of interviews with the members of the expedition. This multimedia material is accessible on a CD that comes with the book and by QR codes to the Virtual Museum of Jerzy Kukuczka.

The added contents describe everyday life in the base camp, climbing efforts, and, of course, the main character of the entire narrative, seen during the ascent and explaining his plans. Then there is a lot on his death: Pawłowski's explanations of the accident, condolences, press coverage. Human activity can thus be observed in the setting of unmoved mountains.

All this supplementary material covers the already mentioned inaccessible background. As an important part of the narration, it aims at telling the untold. The brevity of Kukuczka's original narrative has to be enriched (page by page, entry by entry) with iconography and audiovisuals to make the reader understand the narrative's context and contents. As Katarzyna Ziolo explains in the introduction: "The diaries left by Jerzy are bald recordings of the expeditions and preparations. The message received by anyone who has read the book or seen the film about Jerzy is clear—he was a reticent, very precise man

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<sup>4</sup> These scans resemble a diary not only as a physical medium (for which see Lejeune 175–178), but also as something solid and coherent—whereas its content seems to be brief and partial.

who pursued his goals firmly. And this is probably the truth [...]. But the other Jerzy also reappears out of the laconic notes and hurried memos.” (*Królowa* 12)

Very rich and ingenious, the structure of Kukuczka’s newly published diary can help us rethink slightly the theory of diary proposed very influentially by Philippe Lejeune, who also approached the study of diaries beyond the field of literary studies. As Julie Rak’s reading of Lejeune shows, the diary in general is characterized by two features—discontinuity and self-writing: “Diaries do not present consistent pictures of a life: they show an identity in process, even as they are part of the process itself of creating identity, day after day.” (Rak 24) For Lejeune, “[d]iscontinuity [...] is part and parcel of the diary’s rhythm” (Lejeune 193). This enables Lejeune to compare the diary to a piece of lacework or a spider web: “It is apparently made up of more empty space than filled space. But for the person who is writing, the discrete points of reference that I set down on paper hold an invisible galaxy of other memories in suspension around them. Thanks to association of ideas and allusions, their shadows and virtual existence linger for a while.” (181) But in the case of Kukuczka’s diary, this rhythm is rather external and independent from the author’s presumable expectations: it is the rhythm of the climb and of the expedition that is inscribed in the diary’s pages. As a result, the central place of the subject within Kukuczka’s diary is no longer obvious.

Inspired by Paul Ricœur’s notion of narrative identity, Lejeune proposes a concept reminiscent of Foucauldian self-writing: “Yes, you write your diary *for yourself*, and that is what makes it private [...]. You put yourself in the hands of the stranger you will become. The current identity that it is the diary’s purpose to create and define will one day become part of an unforeseeable identity, one which it will have given rise to and which will judge it.” (Lejeune 324) Needless to say, Kukuczka’s diary could not have been re-read by the author. We also cannot be sure of its function: probably it was a kind of mnemotechnical device, a sketchbook for a book that Kukuczka would have written had he come back from the mountain. Nevertheless, the main threads of the “spider web” (laconic, itinerary-like entries of the diary) still frame here a kind of “empty space” of an “invisible galaxy,” and also a kind of inaccessible background of mountains and climbing.

The title itself is significant in this respect. *Królowa* means “the queen,” and by the intention of the publisher it also refers to the mountain on the book cover, as if there were two main characters in the narration, namely Kukuczka and Lhotse. This is in line with the ani-

mistic imagery that is so common in the mountaineering discourse. But there is a more revealing twist here: whereas the editors suggest that “the queen” refers to Lhotse, in Kukuczka’s diary “the queen” is—the weather: “On every expedition everyone writes a lot about the weather because she is the queen of all mountaineering activity. Every expedition or team act at the queen’s mercy. And she acts at her own mercy, according to her own liking.” (*Królowa* 111) While the editors present the mountain as a singular actor, Kukuczka refers rather to a network of circumstances that impersonates the weather as a kind of *mana*, a magical ether that knits together every part of the context. Presumably, what most readers expect from such a narrative is a text as solid as a mountain, rather than one that is as transitory and indeterminate as the weather.

In this sense, the central theme of an autobiographical text seems to be, not the person itself, struggling to find his or her identity, but rather the cultural context in the form of a complex collective (see Pacukiewicz, *Grań*), “a procedure of grouping [...] humans and non-humans into a network of specific interrelations” (Descola 422, note 1). Now, we should of course analyze what the context evoked by Kukuczka’s diary is. Is it the same “invisible galaxy” of experience or a substantial cosmos created by co-operating agents? Is it only the distant world that leaves nothing but single and random traces, or is it perhaps the inner reality of the text?

## **The Substance**

As already mentioned, Kukuczka preceded his diary with a motto, a dedication, and an introduction which is partly the description of the preparations for the expedition and partly the expression of his feelings about it. Significantly, these paratexts are not dated, which enables us to classify them somewhere beyond time and space.

At the beginning of the diary, Kukuczka notes: “Paradise—raj.” (*Królowa* 50) The English word is followed by its Polish equivalent, which suggests its importance. But what does it designate, the mountains or the Christian heaven of Kukuczka the Roman-Catholic? The author’s intention remains a riddle. Interpretations may vary anywhere from premonition, to oblivion, to yearning. Yet the dedication that follows suggests a bond between the living and the dead. Surplus and repetition are striking in the dedication:

1. For those who will never come back and who will stay in the mountains forever.
  2. For the relatives who never saw my friends return.
  3. For friends, partners, and especially for those who never returned (and who stayed in the mountains forever).
  4. For my sons and wife—who always wait.
  5. For those who remain anxiously waiting—for my wife and sons (the beloved ones).
- For friends.  
For those who never returned.  
For the families awaiting their loved one's return. (*Królowa* 50)

These words are so moving not just because of the events they anticipate, but also due to the repetition through which the author seems to restore the community of his dead friends and the families that await them. Pointing to the Christian concept of the communion of saints as the model of such imagery would not be an overstatement here.

Somehow, this community of the living and the dead specifies the activities on Lhotse, which Kukuczka describes in his short, probably unfinished introduction. As is often the case with mountaineering narrations of ascents, everything starts with a mere picture of the Lhotse South Face (see Kukuczka, *Challenge* 238).<sup>5</sup> This panoramic view becomes more real with subsequent attempts to climb the route and with the experience of mountaineering as such. Significantly, the narration starts with an evocation of a picture of solid integrity symbolized by the mountain. And here appears the communion as well: Kukuczka recollects the ventures of (or with) his living friends, but there is also the legendary figure of Nicolas Jaeger (named “F. Jäger” in the text)—the “taciturn lone climber” who attempted a solo climb on Lhotse but failed, while his girlfriend had to come back home alone (238).<sup>6</sup> Kukuczka, as already mentioned, was overwhelmed with an irrational sense of guilt when his friends died on the Lho La Pass, yet he decided to reassemble the team, with the living replacing the dead. In this context, Kukuczka admits that his action was beside “any logical consideration”: “I should wait before organizing another expedition. Next year I could prepare it at ease.” (240) But inner instigation won: “I decided to go about it in exactly the same way I had done before. To follow my gut feelings.” (241) Hence, the continuity of the narration up to this point is secured by a kind of mystic participation that estab-

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<sup>5</sup> In the original text, Kukuczka stresses that this is a nice picture (see *Królowa* 54).

<sup>6</sup> The original text speaks of a silent loner (see *Królowa* 57).

lishes a multipresence,<sup>7</sup> and it can be said that the diary's imagery is founded on an animistic ontology. The relationship between the main actors is a close one. As Grebowicz suggests, "[m]ost mountain writing talks about something like an exchange between humans and mountains, one in which humans are altered by the encounter" (Grebowicz 9–10). With subsequent diary entries, the list of participating agents will be expanded.

The opening entries of the diary (30 August–6 September) are just an itinerary of places passed by on the way to Lhotse: "Flight to Lukla," "Namche Bazaar," "Tengboche," "Chukhung," and, finally, "Base" (*Królowa* 78–82). These toponyms, however, establish the road that will be continued in the mountains. Hence, the continuity of the diary is secured by the vertical perspective of climbing. Around this core the network of agencies expands. The brevity of subsequent entries is perplexing: one goes up, another one goes down, avalanches one after another, constant threat from the mountain, which "growls every day" (108), problems with people competing with each other, different perspectives, different goals, sacred and profane interjections, and so on. In Kukuczka's case, the typical narrative scheme of Himalayan expedition is reduced to a few words: "The threesome go to Camp II [...]. The weather as usual—lousy." (Kukuczka, *Challenge* 246) He is more communicative when it comes to his feelings and his social views.

The diary is marked by a constant struggle to make all the actors—people, weather, snow, gear—play together. But there are also dilemmas pondered in isolation: "After 5 AM I get out of the tent and for an hour stand there considering what to do. Uphill or downhill?" (Kukuczka, *Challenge* 245) It is easy to see how this mountaineering cosmos needs constant rearrangement: "What is going on? The world is turned upside down. I distinctly remember the expedition from ten years ago. The sun in the morning when I woke up, the stars at night, and so it went for the entire month and a half. And what about now?" (*Królowa* 108) Things fall apart, and things come back together, very often seemingly independently from human action: "I am standing in front of the tent and don't know what to do. The weather seems to have stabilized." (112) Unfortunately, this network will not hold the balance, as the last entry in the diary reads: "What's going on!!! I've got a feeling we lost the first round." (Kukuczka, *Challenge* 251) All the reader is given are brief notes, sometimes even just a hint at some-

<sup>7</sup> I refer here to Lucien Lévy-Bruhl's concept where collective representations are a kind of metaphysical phenomenon (see Mousalimas 35–39).

thing; such is the case with the first failure: “At Base, ironic smirks of my colleagues.” (243) Sometimes things to do and things already done seem to almost form a regular schedule. It is very moving, knowing that Kukuczka is dead, when under 24 October we read the entry “Descent,” under 26 October “Caravan,” and under 1 November a shopping list that includes big earrings. In this case, we are dealing with a diary that seems bigger than life as it bonds past and future, allowing us to see more clearly the complex collective of agents in different settings. A cosmos, that is, that seems very substantial.

## **Panorama and Oligopticon**

If we assume the perspective developed by Philippe Descola, we can try to specify Lejeune’s problem of continuity and discontinuity in the diary as a question of cultural ontology. Referring to the network of the collective narrated in Kukuczka’s diary, we can argue that the main problem of mountaineering literature lies in finding a continuity between nature and culture. A diary is an evidence of an attempt to create a bridge (or, using the language of mountaineering, to traverse the ridge) between the entity of mountains and human agencies and values.

One can thus suggest that, between the two parts of the narrative (the introductory fragments and the main diary), there is a shift that occurs between an animistic and an analogue ontology. In the introductory paratexts, nature and culture are isomorphic but separate, and the continuity between them is the projection of culture on a separate nature. In the main diary, there is a collective of human and nonhuman agents, all playing together. Here, one is reminded of Descola’s concept of analogism, which he defines as “a mode of identification that divides up the whole collection of existing beings into a multiplicity of essences, forms, and substances separated by small distinctions and sometimes arranged on a graduated scale so that it becomes possible to recompose the system of initial contrasts into a dense network of analogies that link together the intrinsic properties of the entities that are distinguished in it” (Descola 201).

In Kukuczka’s diary we see very clearly how these different beings (people, tents, rocks, snow, gear, etc.) are assembled into a vertical climbing route. This climbing route is the core of both the collective and the diary. One could even argue that, where the diary is comprised primarily of text, its code is specified by the direction of the climbing route outside the text. As such, the climbing route is a model of a logi-

cal structure that creates a collective. The diary is analogous to a climbing route insofar as it is “a kind of logical tool” of mediation (to use Claude Lévi-Strauss’ description of the Oedipus myth, see Lévi-Strauss 434). At the same time, however, Kukuczka’s diary also features a kind of mystic bonds that create supplementary connections between things. He often mentions luck or chance in mountaineering, as well as the bond of prayer which restores a wider perspective: “I walk to the glacier to take some photos and to say my prayers. Wedding. Rosary, holy mass in Częstochowa.” (Kukuczka, *Challenge* 247) That is why, when Descola specifies the principle of analogy, it perfectly fits the diary: “analogy is a hermeneutic dream of plenitude that arises out of a sense of dissatisfaction.” (Descola 202)

In conclusion, it seems that Kukuczka’s last diary is an exemplary model of mountaineering literature’s transition from the metaphysics of mountains to what Andrzej Matuszyk has called “the ontology of the climbing route” (Matuszyk 134). The metaphysic of mountains is a metaphysics of an entity with an integrity of unquestionable presence, while the ontology of the climbing route is an ontological structure that rearranges the richness of the experience of mountaineering. In Kukuczka’s diary we can see how the ontology of a climbing route between nature and culture, which forms the pattern of the mountaineering culture, is more than just a single vertical core: it creates a broad network of agencies and agents, not all of which cooperate with each other at all times. Therefore, the diary reveals the rediscovery of the integrity of being represented by the mountain and an epistemological attempt to reinvent the evidence of climbing its route.

To grasp these two perspectives, to understand both the ontological and the metaphysical dimension, we can make use of Bruno Latour’s concepts of oligopticon and panorama. Oligoptica are focused on actual connections within a collective seen as a network: “From oligoptica, sturdy but extremely narrow views of the (connected) whole are made possible—as long as connections hold.” (Latour 181) Panoramas, on the other hand, offer a different vision of the entirety as a substantial, external, and full landscape. Nevertheless, panoramas are always a kind of representation:

Although these panoramas shouldn’t be taken too seriously, since such coherent and complete accounts may become the most blind, most local, and most partial viewpoints, they also have to be studied very carefully because they provide the only occasion to see the “whole story” *as a whole*. Their totalizing views should not be despised as an act of professional megalomania, but they



should be *added*, like everything else, to the multiplicity of sites we want to deploy. (Latour 189)

This is why, “[a]t best, panoramas provide a prophetic preview of the collective, at worst they are a very poor substitute for it” (Latour 189–190). Hence the crucial difference: “Whereas oligoptica are constantly revealing the fragility of their connections and their lack of control on what is left in between their networks, panoramas gives [sic] the impression of complete control over what is being surveyed, even though they are partially blind and that nothing enters or leaves their walls except interested or baffled spectators.” (Latour 188)

In this manner, Latour solves the paradox of the notion of context, which Roy Dilley, for example, specifies as “a problem in delimiting the extent of the domain indicated by ‘context’” (Dilley 2). According to Dilley, “[c]ontexts can be *external* by pointing to a different domain of phenomena or order of existence to the one under study, or they can be *internal* in the sense of being contained within a closed system of like entities.” (14) From this point of view, we can also correct our understanding of context as the “invisible galaxy” that exists beyond Kukuczka’s diary. When the diary itself creates the limited oligopticon of multiple connections, agents, and agencies, the editors of the diary, Kukuczka himself, and we, the readers, imply a broader entity which encapsules all these elements: the mountain and the continuous, comprehensive chain of the climb.<sup>8</sup> We want to reach the fullness and intensity of the imagery, but this is attainable only through a description of the climbing route assembled by ambiguous, not always fully comprehensive forces. In this way, the panoramic view from the summit (even if Kukuczka would have reached the summit of Lhotse) is still a function (or projection) of the oligopticon. And yet, “Does anything really come to an end?”, asks Kukuczka at the end of his last book. “No. The vertical world never ends.” (Kukuczka, *Mój* 224)<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> In contrast to Latour’s concept, the mountaineering ontology—being analogous and vertical—cannot be flat.

<sup>9</sup> In the published English translation the passage reads somewhat differently than in my translation above, namely: “Is it over then? Not at all. My vertical world is bigger than that and I’ll keep coming back to take up its challenge.” (Kukuczka, *Challenge* 237)

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## Zadnja gora in zadnje besede Jerzyja Kukuczke: alpinistov dnevnik kot panorama in oligoptikon

Ključne besede: literatura in alpinizem / poljska književnost / alpinistična literatura / dnevnik / pripovedna tehnika / oligoptikon / panorama / Kukuczka, Jerzy

Med svojo zadnjo odpravo in tik pred smrtjo na južni steni Lotseja je svetovno znani alpinist Jerzy Kukuczka pisal dnevnik, ob katerem se porajajo vprašanja o notranji motivaciji alpinistov pa tudi o naravi alpinistične literature, žanra, ki mu ta dnevnik pripada. Lakonični slog dnevnika nakazuje, rečeno s termini Philippa Lejeuna, nevidno galaksijo neizgovorjenega in neznanega konteksta onkraj teksta. V tem članku dnevnik ni reduciran na literarni tekst, pač pa obravnavan kot logično orodje, ki vzpostavlja določen kulturni model sveta. S pomočjo antropološkega koncepta kolektiva je Kukuczkov dnevnik analiziran kot nekakšen ontološki posrednik med naravo in kulturo. Z gledišča, ki ga je razvil Bruno Latour, lahko v tem dnevniku vidimo tako oligoptikon kakor panoramo, saj bogastvo delnega omrežja kolektivov, ki nastaja v procesu plezanja, kombinira s splošnim pogledom na prizorišče kot na substancialno entiteto gore.

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