



The “soccer war” and the “city that sailed away”: magical realism and New Journalism in the work of Ryszard Kapuscinski¹

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Abstract

The Soccer War and The City That Sailed Away: magical realism and new journalism in the work of Ryszard Kapuscinski

*In this article, I examine Ryszard Kapuscinski's **Another Day of Life** (1987) and **The Soccer War** (1990). Kapuscinski is a Polish journalist who has written a number of books about his experiences as a foreign correspondent in Asia, Africa and Latin America. We encounter a range of diverse and sometimes contradictory approaches in his writing, since Kapuscinski utilises realist and fantastic, surreal, postmodern, intensely subjective techniques to convey his experiences and perceptions.*

As a result of his blending of realist and non-realist modes, Kapuscinski's work can be related to two important trends in contemporary literature: magical realism and New Journalism. Kapuscinski's writing illustrates certain significant points of comparison between these two approaches. These aspects of Kapuscinski's writing can, to an extent, be viewed in terms of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concept of rhizomatics and nomadism. This article indicates that Kapuscinski's

¹ The correct orthography for *Kapuscinski* should be with acute accents on the 's' and the 'n'. It is, however, not possible to format this with the available computer equipment of *Literator*.

writing differs from some forms of magical realism and New Journalism in certain key respects.

The significance of Kapuscinski's work lies partly in the way in which it juxtaposes and interrelates various modes, thereby challenging fixed, monologic ways of viewing events. As a result of this, his writing evades easy definitions and conclusive categorisation. Finally, one of the most striking aspects of Kapuscinski's work lies in the way in which it provides a dramatic reflection of the interface between the fantastic and reality and between the surreal, the postmodern and journalistic realism.

1. Introduction to Kapuscinski and his work

Ryszard Kapuscinski is a Polish journalist who has written a number of books based on his experiences as a foreign correspondent in Africa, Asia and Latin America. The following summary and extract from an article entitled, "The Soccer War", in *The Soccer War* (1990), provides an illustration of some of the qualities of Kapuscinski's work:

In 1969, Honduras and El Salvador were competing for the right to take part in the World Cup. Eighteen year old Salvadoran Amelia Bolanios was watching the match on television. When her team lost (they had been kept awake the whole of the previous night by screaming Honduran supporters), she shot herself with her father's pistol.

'The young girl could not bear to see her fatherland brought to its knees', wrote the Salvadoran newspaper *El Nacional*. ... The whole capital took part in the televised funeral of Amelia Bolanios. An army honour guard marched with the flag at the head of the procession. The president of the republic and his ministers walked behind the flag-draped coffin. Behind the government came the Salvadoran soccer eleven ...

[T]he return match of the series took place in San Salvador ... This time it was the Honduran team that spent a sleepless night. The screaming crowd broke all the windows in the hotel and threw rotten eggs, dead rats and stinking rags inside. The players were taken to the match in armoured cars of the First Salvadoran Mechanized Division – which saved them from revenge and bloodshed at the hands of the mob that lined the route, holding up portraits of the national heroine Amelia Bolanios.

The army surrounded the ground. On the pitch stood a cordon of soldiers ... armed with sub-machine-guns. ... Under such conditions the Honduran players did not, understandably, have their minds on the game. They had their minds on getting out alive. 'We're awfully lucky that we lost,' said the visiting coach, Mario Griffin, with relief.

The border between the two states was closed a few hours after the Honduran team departed. A few days later, war broke out (p. 157-159).

This passage, with its combination of the farcical, the surreal and journalistic realism, illustrates how, in his attempts to convey his perceptions and experiences, Kapuscinski blends non-realist elements with realism.

In this article I examine the way in which Kapuscinski's work combines a range of diverse, sometimes apparently contradictory approaches, through his combination of realist and non-realist modes. His work can be related to magical realism and New Journalism in terms of this quality. I also consider the extent to which these aspects of his work can be viewed in terms of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concepts of rhizomatics and nomadism. I argue that ultimately the significance of Kapuscinski's work lies in this combination of diverse elements and perspectives, thereby rendering it resistant to reduction to easy definition and categorisation that could restrict and confine it. Through this, it challenges authoritative, monologic views of events. In addition, his combination of realist and non-realist modes provides a striking example of the inter-relationship between the fantastic and reality.

2. The limitations of realism

Kapuscinski's combination of realist and non-realist elements needs to be viewed in the light of some contemporary attitudes to reality, which highlight the limitations of realism as a literary mode.

Reality has become a problematic concept for us. Increasingly it has been perceived as bizarre, surreal, contradictory and unstable. Philip Roth says that contemporary reality "is even a kind of embarrassment to one's meagre imagination. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents" (quoted in Waugh, 1984:9). The above-quoted extract from *The Soccer War* reinforces Roth's statement.

In postmodern terms, reality is not easily definable or solid and unquestionable. Brian McHale (1987:37), for instance, describes reality as a collective fiction, while Patricia Waugh (1984:7) refers to the sense that reality and history are no longer viewed as a world of fixed, eternal truths, but are instead seen as temporary structures and impermanent contrivances.

Consequently, as the concept of reality becomes increasingly fantastical, fragmented and uncertain, so straightforward realism as a literary mode becomes increasingly problematic as well.

Furthermore, Waugh and Catherine Belsey comment on the way in which realism can endorse specific restricted views of reality that support dominant ideologies.

They emphasise how power structures are reinforced and sustained through everyday language, which presents oppressive practices or views that reinforce dominant ideologies as “obvious” or commonsensical. In literature, this “obvious”, everyday language is reflected in the traditional novel’s conventions of realism (Waugh, 1984:11; Belsey, 1980:2-4).

In Kapuscinski’s writing, the limitations of realism are apparant in the way in which he makes use of a combination of realist and non-realist modes to express his perceptions and experiences, thereby destabilising the established ways of seeing that the realist mode imposes on the reader. As a result, his writing can be related to aspects of magical realism.

3. Kapuscinski and magical realism

Kapuscinski’s writing can be compared to magical realism in that in his writing the magical and the surreal are situated within the everyday, the familiar and the realistic. Through his fusion of the real and the fantastic, the magical realist aspects of Kapuscinski’s writing highlight the bizarre, fantastical, absurd nature of contemporary socio-political situations.

For magical realists, the fantastic is not something separated from reality. Gabriel Garcia Marquez, for example, goes as far as to assert that he does not regard the fantastical elements in his writing as fantasy (Mendoza & Marquez, 1983:35-36). He states:

I was able to write *One Hundred Years of Solitude* simply by looking at reality, our reality, without the limitations which rationalists and Stalinists through the ages have tried to impose on it to make it easier for them to understand (Mendoza & Marquez, 1983:59-60).

In the following extract, Kapuscinski presents contemporary reality in magical terms, in a way that makes this aspect of his writing comparable to the work of magical realists such as Marquez. In *Another Day of Life*, set in Angola in 1975, the white inhabitants of Luanda are frantically preparing to flee because they are convinced the FNLA is going to destroy the city:

Everybody was busy building crates. ...

Thanks to the abundance of wood that has collected here in Luanda, this dusty desert city nearly devoid of trees now smells like a flourishing forest. It’s as if the forest had suddenly taken root in the streets, the squares, and the plazas. ...

Gradually, from night to night, the stone city lost its value in favour of the wooden city. ...

[Q]uarter after quarter, it was taken on trucks to the port. ...

The wooden city sailed away on the ocean. ... This happened suddenly, as if a pirate fleet had sailed into the port, seized a priceless treasure, and escaped to sea with it. ...

I don't know if there had ever been an instance of a whole city sailing across the ocean, but that is exactly what happened. The city sailed out into the world, in search of its inhabitants (13-18).

A passage such as the above one, with its dreamlike quality, is juxtaposed with the intense realism of Kapuscinski's writing. His style consists most often of short, clear, deceptively simple sentences through which experience is vividly conveyed.

There are, for example, the descriptions of the procedure involved in transmitting a press release successfully, or the account in *Another Day of Life* of what it feels like to travel to the southern Angolan front in a battered Mercedes truck, with a cab "as hot as a furnace and [reeking] of oil and sweat", "between two walls of thorny bush" (p. 68) along a road in enemy territory through which no convoy or truck has been able to pass in a month. Then there are practical factual aspects, such as the fact that the survival of the MPLA in Angola in 1975 depended on two people: Ruiz, the pilot who flew ammunition and food to besieged cities on the borderlands, and the engineer Alberto Ribeiro, who maintained and repaired the pumps at the pumping station that supplied water to Luanda.²

We can relate Kapuscinski's combination of the surreal and bizarre with basic factual details to a description of magical realism in the *Oxford Dictionary of Art*: "[O]bjects are depicted with a photographic naturalism but which, because of paradoxical elements or strange juxtapositions, convey a feeling of unreality, infusing the ordinary with a sense of mystery" (quoted in D'Haen, 1995:190).

Consequently, physical realities or factual details play an important role in the effect created by magical realism. For example, David Mikics (1995:390) states that in magical realist aesthetics, it is the extreme or hyperreal "actuality" of the world that is presented that makes it appear all the more fantastic. Contemporary magical realist literature is characterised by, as Salman Rushdie puts it, a "dense conmingling of the improbable and mundane" (quoted in Faris, 1995:174).

This relationship between realism and non-realist elements is, however, not just a feature of magical realism, but occurs in New Journalism as well, another

2 Salman Rushdie (1991:206) comments on this point and the way in which it reveals Kapuscinski's eye for detail in his essay "Kapuscinski's Angola".

important contemporary literary trend. In order to further consider the effect of Kapuscinski's blending of realist and non-realist modes of representation, his writing can be examined in relation to New Journalism.

4. Kapuscinski and New Journalism

New Journalism is frequently viewed as having developed from the mid sixties onwards out of an increasing awareness of the limitations of conventional journalism and its inability to adequately convey the bizarre, disturbing, unpredictable nature of contemporary American society. (This can, of course, be debated. For instance, it has been argued that the *Drum* writers' descriptions of life in Sophiatown and other parts of Johannesburg in the fifties could be regarded as a form of New Journalism.)³

Similarly, in describing his career as a journalist, Kapuscinski states: "I was always left with a feeling of inadequacy. I had only covered the political event, and not really conveyed the deeper, and, I felt, truer nature of what was going on" (quoted in Buford, 1987:94).

According to John Hellman (1981:x-xi), new journalistic works "[deal] with fact through fable, discovering, constructing, and self-consciously exploring meaning beyond our media-constructed 'reality', our 'news'". This can be compared to the attitude reflected in magical realism that conventional realist modes offer too narrow and limited a vision of reality. Both New Journalism and magical realism thus turn to non-realist modes to convey and explore the nature of contemporary experience. In the same way that the use of fantasy elements and techniques in magical realism represents a way of challenging fixed, established versions of reality, reinforced through the use of limited, straightforward realism, New Journalism represents an individual revolt against monolithic, authoritative versions of the "truth" (Hellman, 1981:8). Consequently, through their blending of realist and non-realist elements, both magical realism and New Journalism can be viewed, to use Robert Scholes's term (1979), as examples of contemporary fabulation. The points of comparison between these two modes are particularly apparent in the work of a writer such as Kapuscinski.

A New Journalist that Kapuscinski can be compared to in some respects is Michael Herr, whose book *Dispatches* (1977) deals with the Vietnam war. *Dispatches* is not so much an account of the war, as an exploration of Herr's memory of that war, in which Herr combines realist and non-realist techniques to convey his experience. His techniques can be viewed as non-realist in terms of

3 This point has been made by Kevin Carlean, for example (1990:36).

their postmodern, highly personalised, sometimes surreal qualities. The structure of *Dispatches*, for example, is fragmented, exploring Herr's images of the war, juxtaposing short scenes, brief narratives and longer pieces, in which Herr mediates his perceptions of the war. By means of these methods, Herr is able to escape the limitations of both the conventional journalistic approach and literary realism (Hellman, 1981:127-128, 133-134).

Similarly, because of the surreal, fragmented, often highly personalised quality of many of the episodes and descriptions, Kapuscinski's writing evades easy definition and categorisation (for example: this is an account of the Nigerian war of 1966 or this is a description of the events leading to the Angolan independence in 1975).

Like Herr's *Dispatches*, Kapuscinski's personal perceptions of events form the basis of his writing. Kapuscinski evades a straightforwardly realist approach, for he does not so much seek to give us a detailed, factual account of events that took place, as of his experience of living through them, and the impact they had on his consciousness, on his imagination. In an interview with Bill Buford, he states:

There are so many complaints: Kapuscinski never mentions dates, Kapuscinski never gives us the name of the minister, he has forgotten the order of events. All that, of course, is exactly what I avoid (quoted in Buford, 1987:94-95).

In *Another Day of Life* for instance, the South African army seems poised for victory in their march towards Luanda. Suddenly the tide turns and they are driven back. Kapuscinski does not explain that this was the result of factors such as the increase in the amount of weapons supplied by the Soviet Union to the MPLA forces and the fact that the South African army did not at that stage have the right vehicles or equipment to carry out a successful invasion of Angola. What he does convey vividly, however, is what it is like to be in a besieged Luanda that has been abandoned even by the dogs and the garbage collectors, or to be a soldier at an isolated spot on the Angolan front. As Kapuscinski states, "it is not the story that it getting expressed: it is what surrounds the story" (quoted in Buford, 1987:94).

Like *Dispatches*, Kapuscinski's writing tends to have an episodic, fragmented quality. In *Another Day of Life*, we have a series of episodes and descriptions. Similarly, *The Soccer War* consists of a range of different pieces, many describing isolated incidents and events, some consisting of short notes and ideas, with titles like "Plan for a Book That Could Have Started Right Here", "More of the Plan of a Book That Could Have Been Written" or "High Time I Started Writing the Next Unwritten Book".

Thus Kapuscinski does not present us with any single complete line of narrative, containing the answer or any unified message. His approach to his experiences is diverse, varied and open-ended, rather than closing in on one fixed, authoritative meaning. Through this, Kapuscinski challenges definitive versions of events (thereby decentring established, monological versions of reality).

This diverse, open-ended quality is a feature of magical realism as well as of New Journalism. Magical realist texts, in their blending of the real and the fantastic, disturb conventions like the traditional – and reliable – linear development of a realist plot. For example, although Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1978) moves from creation to apocalypse, it does so in a winding, convoluted way, as it explores the multiple stories of the Buendia clan, often wandering off in parallel directions. Similarly, Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1992) is bewildering in its elusive, repetitive structure.

In analysing Kapuscinski's writing in relation to magical realism and New Journalism, we have seen that his work combines and juxtaposes contrasting realist and non-realist modes, disrupting expectations in its refusal to provide one clear-cut version of events or a definitive meaning. These varied, contrasting, open-ended aspects of Kapuscinski's writing can be examined in the light of Deleuze and Guattari's theory of rhizomatics and nomadism.

5. Rhizomatic, nomadic aspects of Kapuscinski's writing

Deleuze and Guattari oppose rhizomatics to the arborescent model: systematised, orderly, hierarchical, centred and unified. Rhizomatics, on the other hand, seeks to undermine fixed, definitive unities and disrupt dichotomies, and to send out roots and branches in all directions, in this way multiplying and diverging, creating differences and a profusion of possibilities and setting up new connections (quoted in Best & Kellner, 1991:99). Kapuscinski's writing can be related to this concept of rhizomatics in terms of the way in which it covers a range of experiences and combines diverse realist and non-realist elements. It breaks attempts at a conclusive, unified vision in its fragmented, episodic quality and its refusal to provide a comprehensive, authoritative version of events.

According to Deleuze and Guattari, rhizomatics is a form of "nomadic thought", which opposes "State thought", which seeks to discipline, to impose totalising ideologies and to control. Nomad life is non-conformist and anti-traditional and aspires "to keep moving, even in place, never stop moving" (quoted in Best & Kellner, 1991:103). Kapuscinski's life could be compared to this concept of nomadism. He has travelled extensively (as foreign correspondent for the Polish Press Agency he was responsible for fifty countries and covered 27 revolutions) and has been described by film maker Andrzej Wadja as "a man who can't sit still" (quoted in Buford, 1987:91).

This nomadic quality is reflected in Kapuscinski's writing, much of which is about moving, about travelling from place to place.⁴ Its non-conformist qualities can be related to the way in which it challenges the "who what when why" of traditional journalism, as well as conventional realist techniques.

However, Kapuscinski cannot fully be viewed in terms of this concept of nomadism. In his interview with Kapuscinski, Buford (1987:96) comments:

[Joseph Brodsky states] that so much of the [twentieth century] literary imagination is dominated by the state – either in obeisance to it, or even in necessary resistance to it. Your work probably comes closest to being freed from the constraints of the state. Its allegiances are to history.

Deleuze and Guattari's thinking has its limitations in that it is ultimately dominated by images of State power and control in relation to which nomadic, rhizomatic approaches are viewed. Kapuscinski's writing does not exist in opposition to systems of control and domination as much as it exists outside of them, in its refusal to take them into account.

Furthermore, unlike the way in which postmodern nomads strive to free themselves of "all roots, bonds, and identities" (quoted in Best & Kellner, 1991: 103), there is a strong sense of identity and allegiance in Kapuscinski's work, which means that it cannot be analysed purely in postmodern terms.

6. Identity and allegiance in Kapuscinski's writing

Kapuscinski's own sense of allegiance to a particular principle in his writing, as evidenced in his desire to convey "the deeper, ... truer nature of what was going on" (Buford, 1987:94), is reflected in this statement:

Mine is not a vocation, it's a mission. I wouldn't subject myself to these dangers if I didn't feel that there was something overwhelmingly important – about history, about ourselves – that I felt compelled to get across. This is more than journalism (in Buford, 1987:97).

This can, to an extent, be compared to the way in which New Journalists such as Herr feel the need to go beyond the limits of conventional journalism in order to, in the words of New Journalist Gay Talese, "[seek] a larger truth" (quoted in Hellman, 1981:3).

4 Kapuscinski can be compared to Bruce Chatwin, partly in terms of this concept of nomadism, which was a major concern in Chatwin's life and work. Chatwin examines this concept most fully in *The Songlines* (1987).

However, Kapuscinski's sense of allegiance can be related to his sense of his own identity. His commitment to his own roots play an important role in his writing. He was born in the small, very poor Polish town of Pinsk, which was occupied by the Russians during the Second World War. In a refugee camp after the Turkish invasion of Cyprus, he says to the refugees:

I understand your despair because I come from a country that has known many invasions. I myself have been a refugee, and I know what it means to have nothing, to wander into the unknown and to wait for history to utter a kind word (Kapuscinski, 1990:208).

Consequently, Kapuscinski's writings tend to deal more with ordinary people caught up in wars and revolutions, than with the rich, successful and powerful people and the leaders. He was friends with figures like Che Guevarra, Salvador Allende and Augustinho Neto, but he says very little about them in his writings.

During his childhood in Pinsk, he was deprived of elementary things such as shoes, food and housing, and describes how he still feels "uneasy" and "uncomfortable" with technology (quoted in Buford, 1987:83-84). He comments:

Pinsk, even though borrowing so much from Europe, was not part of Europe. ... I have always re-discovered my home, re-discovered Pinsk, in Africa, in Asia, in Latin America. ... Amid poverty I am at home. I know what the life means (quoted in Buford, 1987:84).

The fact that Kapuscinski himself originates from (and feels most closely connected to) the margins rather than the centre distinguishes him from the American New Journalists. The position of Western foreign correspondents is a problematic one, in that they tend to claim to interpret events and to speak on behalf of others. In postcolonial terms, the centre writes the margins. Kapuscinski avoids this, both in his refusal to convey definitive, comprehensive accounts of events and in his rootedness on the margins themselves.

Furthermore, Kapuscinski can be contrasted with many of the magical realists in terms of this sense of identity and allegiance. Many magical realist writers' backgrounds consist of a range of contrasting historical, social and cultural influences, which can affect their sense of identity. Gerald Martin (1989:28) comments on this in relation to the Latin American magical realists:

[T]he major problem for a Latin American ... is that identity is not given: it has to be searched for, discovered or even invented. ... A Latin American must face the fact that s/he is the product of many cultures.

Much magical realist writing is characterised by an ambiguous or uncertain sense of identity and allegiance. This is reflected in the ambivalent quality of a great deal of magical realism, which can express social and political commitment, as

well as ironic distancing. This is apparent not only in the work of the Latin Americans, but in a range of other magical realist writers, many of whom no longer live in their country of origin, for example Salman Rushdie and various West African magical realists such as Ben Okri and Kojo Laing (who grew up in Scotland and Ghana). In many cases, when magical realists write about the poor or the indigenous inhabitants of their countries, they are cut off from such people by their own background and social status, or (as in the case of the Latin Americans, for example) are “native only in a substantially qualified sense” (Cooper, 1996:211).

From this, it is clear that although Kapuscinski’s writing can be related to magical realism and New Journalism in a range of significant respects, certain differences between his work and magical realism and New Journalism need to be borne in mind.

In conclusion, having examined Kapuscinski’s writing in relation to magical realism and New Journalism, the significance of his work within the contemporary literary context can be examined.

7. Conclusion

The importance of Kapuscinski’s writing lies, firstly, in the way in which it combines realist and non-realist modes, which illustrates the interrelationship between fantasy and reality in contemporary fiction. For McHale (1987:83), for example, the fantastic is a “charge” that appears to be spread through postmodern writing. This reflects the potential of the fantastic to exist as an element, rather than a genre, in contemporary literature and also indicates the anti-generic quality of much contemporary writing.

As Faris (1995:167) points out, for example, magical realism is not so much a mode or a technique, but intertwined with many other aspects of contemporary fiction (167). In Luis Leal’s words, it is “an attitude to reality” (Leal, 1995:121). Similarly, New Journalistic techniques – the combination of facts and fiction to convey and explore historical events or current socio-political issues – form an important part of a great deal of contemporary writing (for example, it is evident in writers such as Norman Mailer, Robert Coover and Bruce Chatwin).

Categorisation and classification define and confine texts. While genre definitions close texts, the use of non-realist elements within an apparently realist text opens up that text (Armitt, 1996:33). Through his blending of the non-realist and the realist, Kapuscinski’s writing has a challenging, subversive quality, destabilising not only the notion of the text as a fixed, closed, easily definable unit, but also the reader, in terms of the way it disrupts conventional expectations and fixed assumptions.

We can relate the effect of Kapuscinski's blending and juxtaposing of realist and non-realist modes and his subversion of definition and classification to an image he uses to describe the nature of his writing and what he seeks to express through it:

You know, sometimes in describing what I do, I resort to the Latin phrase *silva rerum*: the forest of things. That's my subject: the forest of things, as I've seen it, living and travelling in it (quoted in Buford, 1987:96).

In a forest, there is variety, multiplicity and a range of possible directions and ways of seeing things. It is impossible to have a definitive picture of the forest as a whole, for instead you perceive specific aspects or parts. There is no centre point or uniformity that could help you order – and thus categorise and contain – what you perceive; instead there is variation and divergence. And a forest, traditionally, is the place where reality and fantasy meet.

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