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LITERATURE OR JOURNALISM? THE EMPEROR: A CONTROVERSIAL REPORTAGE BY RYSZARD KAPUŚCIŃSKI AS AN IMAGE OF THE AUTHORITY CREATED BY THE AUTHOR AND AN EVIDENCE OF HIS WRITING MASTERY

Abstract

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Ryszard Kapuściński, a worldwide-known, prize-winning writer, is also regarded as a controversial author. After his death there are still many people who question the value of his reportages and his credibility as a reporter. In this paper I want to examine the nature of his work on the example of *The Emperor: Downfall of an Autocrat*. I wish to focus on the way he decided to present his observations from his stays in Ethiopia in the 70s of the 20th century, as well as to find the reasons why he chose a particular writing strategy. This paper seeks to explain the phenomenon of these controversies which tend to place the author either in the world of literature or journalism, as in the title. Furthermore, I will briefly focus on the image of Haile Selassie and his authority as presented in the book. Ryszard Kapuściński described the Ethiopian ruler who already had a big influence on people who surrounded him as he had been on the throne for over forty years. The author of *The Emperor* examined the relations between those who worked on the court at the time as well. It seems that he found the principles that were followed both there and in the People's Republic of Poland. In my study, I also want to rely on some other sources such as *A Reporter's Self Portrait* and *Travels with Herodotus* by Ryszard Kapuściński and *Kapuściński Non-fiction* by Artur Domosławski.

Keywords

Emperor, Kapuściński, magic journalism, reportage



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A worldwide-known war journalist and a prize-winning writer, Ryszard Kapuściński is still remembered as a controversial author. Many of his books had their source in numerous voyages that he undertook as a correspondent and a person truly fascinated with the world around him. Having been to Latin America, the Middle East, Asia and Africa, he witnessed important historic events, such as changes in political systems and local conflicts, which he reported on to the Polish Press Agency (PAP). He met hundreds of people and spent a lot of time with them, which means he had the opportunity to talk with them, learn their culture and personalities and, last but not least, discover their mentality. All his experiences have prompted him to develop an extraordinary sense of observation as well as an ability to dissect events into pieces and to recognise and then identify in them some principles common to all human beings regardless of their nationality, education, skin colour, or the time and historical conditions they had to live in. He used to emphasise this, in spite of the fact that, as he mentioned in the *Travels with Herodotus*, he had to overcome many linguistic, cultural or political obstacles¹ and differences (Kapuściński 2004). He tried to present to the readers the reality he had observed, depicting both aspects characteristic solely to a given community he was describing and the ones shared by all Europeans as well as people from other cultures. This can be part of the explanation of Kapuściński's popularity all over the world as the readers of his books can understand the described events better, being aware of some analogies between the situation that took place far away and the realities known to them from their daily lives.

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One who does not know anything about the works of Kapuściński may be surprised by the controversy that surrounds him. His characteristic observations may have stemmed from the unusual perceptiveness and keen journalistic sensitivity. The core of the problem is that some of his works are said to be unreliable or even fabricated (Shafer 2007, Domosławski 2010a). This is a serious charge, considering the assumed veracity of the reportages we encounter in our daily experience. Rigging the facts or spinning tales on the basis of these facts would ultimately result in unhinging of the common perception of reality. However, since the aim of Kapuściński's work is not only to inform the public about the news, this very reality can be interpreted or expressed in different ways.

¹ Most of the journeys Kapuściński were supervised, monitored and directed by the Communist Parties – both Polish and foreign ones (Kapuściński 2004: 55–58).

Reportage and journalism

Reportages or documentaries are associated with the presentation of facts. The person who offers them to the public is supposed to have been to the places he or she is talking about and witnessed certain situations, or interviewed those who were there when important events were taking place. At least, such definition of journalism is given by *Britannica* (2014): “this is an action and a result of gathering, processing and distributing news adequately commented, usually in a form of an article, through different media”. We can also read that “the word *journalism* was originally applied to the reportage of current events” (*journalism*). Thus, these two ideas seem to be inseparable. Confirmation of this can be found in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2014). According to it, a reportage is a “writing intended to give an account of observed or documented events”. What The Oxford Dictionary (2014) adds, is “the factual, journalistic presentation of an account in a book or other text”. “Factual account” is a key phrase here. Meaning “true, objective, nonfictional record of affairs,” it requires a journalist who writes a reportage to refer to facts and implies that the result of his work is based on actual events. Being a witness of a certain event and having access to a popular magazine, TV channel or Internet portal, a reporter is very often the only person that can inform the whole world about what happened in a comprehensible, reliable and professional way. Summing up, the combination of these definitions gives us the idea of what a reportage should be like and how important precision is in presenting any piece of information.

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‘Magic journalism’

However, it seems that talking merely of a journalistic reportage in its strictest sense would be too narrow, as far as Kapuściński’s works are concerned. Whether we like them or not, we should not criticise them without reflection on the possible reasons that made him tamper with the truth of the “observed events.” Not to mention cases when a reporter manipulates an information to serve the politicians or businessmen, it is known that news can be presented in many different ways in mass media (e.g. by camera frames, a sequence) which can affect how people would assimilate the information. For this reason it is not possible to render facts with no hint of subjectivity, especially when we are aware of the fact that there are always some restrictions (e.g. time on the air) and that a reporter

must choose the most important issues and decide which are not necessary for his or her account. Thus, Kapuściński as a correspondent and a journalist, must have chosen his own tactic while writing his works. One part of the answer which explains it is given by Kapuściński himself in *Autoportret reportera (A Reporter's Self Portrait)*, where he notices that a "reportage should head towards essaization and reflection, since a simple description of the events is being done with camera and television". As he continues, "there is no future for a reporter who limits himself to a pure description"² (Kapuściński 2003: 92). Taking into consideration the fact that since the Second World War news have been published more and more frequently by television and then via Internet, it is reasonable enough to think about a reportage as a genre which is no longer sufficient in its dry, simply informative form. Since it is a matter of hours (or sometimes even minutes) that one article is replaced by another, it is logical that an author who wants his work stay valid for a longer time or become a truly significant piece, must come up with a new strategy which would make their writings somehow distinct from others. Personally, I would not condemn anyone for choosing such a way and being consistent in it, because, on the one hand, there are always many reporters who keep us informed and, on the other hand, I think that writers like Kapuściński, who describe events from a broader perspective, are the only ones being able to transfer some records of history to the upcoming generations. May the truth be told: there are few people who read newspapers older than one week and even fewer who rummage an archive of newspapers from the last six months to find out all the twists of a particular affair when they want to get just the main idea of it. Thus, there is a niche which can be treated as a sort of mission consisting in synthesizing reality with care not to provide a distorted image of the world but to, e.g. unmask some harmful elements and to warn others against them.

Adam Hochschild introduced the term of 'magic journalism' (1994), a pun on the 'magic realism', a genre which evolved in the literature of South America and consists in mixing realistic elements and fantastic ones. According to Ewa Zubek (2014), "Kapuściński is best known for his 'literary reportage' – political and historical ac-

² „Kierunkiem rozwoju tego gatunku jest jego ewolucja w stronę eseizacji, refleksji, gdyż czysty opis został zabrany przez kamerę filmową i telewizję. Reportaż ograniczający się do czystego opisu nie ma przyszłości”.

counts told with a gripping narrative voice (...). The reports are far from dry; they cross the limit of the simple transmission of fact and become engrossing narratives". *The style used by Kapuściński has resulted in making the essence of the events he was talking about easy to grasp by the public. He has presented their 'nature' so that readers could imagine the realities, feel the atmosphere, and finally understand what had happened and what the author had witnessed. Apparently, Kapuściński is not the only author who opted to present what he saw realizing the vision he considered the best. The article on reportage published by Britannica mentions, among others, the English writer Daniel Defoe and the American, Truman Capote. Defoe wrote a Journal of the Plague Year, which pretended to be a realistic account of the events in which Defoe could not take part himself (as the plague took place in 1665). Capote, who wrote Cold Blood, created his work basing on true data he collected. Some biographies listed in the article are said to perform the idea of "the presentation of factual material as art."* It can be applied to the work of Kapuściński as well (Burgess 2014).

Two different views

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Both during his life and after his death, Ryszard Kapuściński has been charged with a tendency to embellish the reported reality (Leslie 2012: 70), his writings being considered by some as utterly fictional literature. Another tendency in interpreting Kapuściński's works takes a much broader perspective. It focuses on the function of reporting events. Thus, if it exists simply to let the readers *know* about them or make them *understand* the reality described. The latter cannot occur without the involvement of imagination in the process and this can be boosted by a range of literary devices, which Kapuściński successfully employs. Such proceedings can hardly be criticised. Making people in a way intuit the described events should not be disregarded. Especially in the era of instant information, when a text is simply informative, with little other value, it quickly becomes, at best, an artefact, or it is forgotten sooner than it might be expected. Therefore, Kapuściński attempted to present the events he witnessed in a broader context. As put by Barbara Musiał:

according to Kapuściński, reflection is part of a reportage. (...) Among information sources, in the first place, he listed people, then books and articles, and, last but not least, the whole world in its full extent with its colours, temperature and ambiance. This 'full extent' was for him intangible, spiritual values. He deeply

regretted that nowadays, we tend to omit them and present only dry information without really reflecting on them. (...) He opposed the mass culture, approving and creating a case-oriented culture³ (2010: 47).

Means

To achieve his goal, he reported the affairs in a very vivid and convincing manner. And he did it, it must be said, with artistry. Usually, before starting to write he would spend hours plunging into the works of eminent authors to find some stylistic inspiration. Very often it was really exhausting as he referred to information from dictionaries, literature and specialist studies (Musiał 2010: 54–55). As a result, he created worlds full of autonomous, individualised characters, whose tales depict their unique beliefs, opinions and views, very often completely different from ours. Thanks to this procedure, readers learn cultures which are unfamiliar to them (Musiał 2010: 55–56). Finally, by generalization, exaggeration, and even grotesque he gave his texts a parabolic dimension which, through creating another reality, expressed universal truths and revealed hidden meanings. A good example of this is the history of Haile Selassie.

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The Emperor

The text which I would like to briefly analyze in this paper is “The Emperor: Downfall of an Autocrat”. It was published as a book in 1978 (although it had been coming out in parts in a monthly “Kultura” [the Culture] before the first book edition) and then translated into many languages. The whole story refers to Kapuściński’s stay in Ethiopia during the country’s great political and economic transformation that saw the decline of the emperor Haile Selassie (1930–1936 and 1941–1974) which culminated in 1974 in a coup d’état. The book is composed around the memories that Kapuściński had collected during interviews with servants and, generally speaking with people who had worked close to His Majesty before the revolution in Addis Abbeba

³ Ryszard Kapuściński uważał, że refleksja jest nieodłączna od reportażu. (...) Pisarz wymieniał źródła informacji, z których czerpie reporter. Na pierwszym miejscu stawiał ludzi, na drugim książki i artykuły, na trzecim świat w całej swojej rozciągłości, tj. jego barwy, temperaturę, atmosferę. Poprzez świat „w całej swojej rozciągłości” rozumiał wartości niemierzalne, duchowe. Bolał nad tym, że współcześnie są one często pomijane, a górę bierze sucha, pozbawiona refleksji informacja. (...) Ryszard Kapuściński sprzeciwiał się kulturze masowej, a próbował i tworzył kulturę problemową.

broke out. The book is divided into three parts, each of them preceded by a selection of epigraphs and quotes which present or summarize the main thought of a given chapter. The narration goes simultaneously at two different levels: the first one, where the author introduces the reader to the described world (by creating a scenery he travelled through in Ethiopia) or comments upon it, and the second one, where former followers of Haile Selassie talk about the life in the palace, at least the one that they remembered and had been participating in for years.

Haile Selassie: Painting of an image and a final glimpse at emperor's portrait

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What we learn from their stories is, for example, what the emperor's day looked like and what kind of personality he had. In the first chapter ("The Throne") his servants report that he used to wake up even before the sunrise and then draw up a very detailed schedule. The hour of denunciations, the hour of appointments, the treasury hour and the one of justice, which used to follow one another, illustrate the importance of the state organisation and the constant supervision of the palace hierarchy. This kind of surveillance used to be executed by several commissions, offices, and last but not least, the emperor himself. He used to start each day with collecting reports from different coteries about people, places and subjects of their meetings as well as information on who they were forming alliances against (Kapuściński 1983: 9). The emperor's tight schedule suggests that he was a hardworking and very demanding person: he was critical not only of others but also of himself. Being an emperor, Haile Selassie did not trust anyone and wanted to keep everything under his control. In this regard, he can be seen both as a lonely, mistrustful and a restless man, a sovereign who worries a lot about his position. "His Most Extraordinary Majesty was in the habit of receiving each minister separately because a dignitary would then denounce his colleagues more boldly, giving the monarch a better insight into the operation of the Imperial apparatus" (Kapuściński 1983: 50).

The division between different groups which were continuously competing with each other was for the emperor a guarantee of "blessed peace" (Kapuściński 1983: 29).

If one of the coteries gained the upper hand, His Highness would quickly bestow favors on its opponents restoring the balance that paralyzed usurpers. His Majesty played the keys – a black one and then a white one – and brought from the piano a harmonious melody soothing to his ears (Kapuściński 1983: 29).

One of the narrator's interviewee admits that a loyal servant was much more precious for Haile Selassie than any talented person (Kapuściński 1983: 32). And, as confessed later on, "in point of fact, His Gracious Highness liked to keep an eye on everyone, he liked to keep everyone within reach" (Kapuściński 1983: 49). This emperor's willingness to steer the actions of people surrounding him mentioned several times in the servants' memories indicates the sense of authoritarianism as central to his reign and growingly important for the emperor with the passage of time.

Kapuściński clearly presented to the reader the realities of the court too. "Life in the Palace, however lively and feverish was actually full of silence, waiting and postponement. Each minister chose the corridors in which he thought he would have the greatest chance of meeting the distinguished monarch and making a bow" (Kapuściński 1983: 50). Thanks to numerous metonymies, metaphors, enumerations and onomatopoeic expressions, the reader is able to feel the strong sense of fierce competition among all servants and officials who wanted to be noticed by His Majesty and increase their chances to be promoted at the hour of appointments. A former Minister of the Pen related:

We all gathered early so as not to miss the Emperor's arrival, because that moment had a special significance for us. Everyone wanted very badly to be noticed by the Emperor. (...) One wanted only the smallest, second-rate sort of attention (...), a passing notice, a fraction of a second. (...) the owner of the face over which the Imperial gaze had passed could build his hopes. Because he could already count on some passing trace, even an indistinct trace, having imprinted itself in His Highness's memory. Now, you had to maneuver in the crowd with such perseverance and determination, so squeeze yourself and worm through, so push, so jostle, so position your face, dispose and manipulate it in such a way, that the Emperor's glance, unwillingly and unknowingly, would notice, notice, notice (Kapuściński 1983: 15).

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Although the narrator does not say anything or only a little about the emperor, specific image of him composed of the relations and tales told by the palace service appears in the reader's mind. In this way, plunging into memories of the narrator's interviewees, the reader learns ever more about the emperor and is able to create his own idea of him and his reign. This polyphonic narration also enables the reader to get to know more about the Ethiopians and their mentality, which has been shaped, among others, during the time when Haile Selassie was in power. Moreover, tales told successively by different servants lend credibility to the whole story.

Thus, Haile Selassie is told to have been rather a short man⁴ of a firm and resolute character, who was interested in economic and in-

⁴„He was so slight and frail that you couldn't see him – he was lost among the sheets" (Kapuściński 1983: 6).

dustrial development of the state as well as in all other kinds of innovations. Among others, he brought cars, airplanes and printing presses to Ethiopia, he opened the first bank, introduced electricity, carried out the prison system reform, stopped the slave trade and other backward customs, abolished forced labour and introduced postal service (Kapuściński 1983: 12, 51). In other words, Haile Selassie was, first of all, a man of idea which means that once he had a vision, he looked for state-of-the-art solutions or for other ways of obtaining his aims. From the common knowledge both about the emperor and the Ethiopian history, we know that while in exile during the Italian occupation of his country in the mid-thirties of the 19th century, he called for the Europeans states' attention and real help that finally allowed him to recapture his homeland. The efforts he made prove his great persistence. According to the memoirs of the dormitory servants, at the end of his life, when he already had some difficulties walking, Haile Selassie still attempted to retain a majestic, stately posture every time he was exposed to public view. When he got older,

his knees stiffened up, and when he was alone he dragged his feet, swaying from side to side as if on stilts. But when he knew that someone was watching him, he forced a certain elasticity into his muscles with great effort, so that he moved with dignity, between leaning and the vertical line (Kapuściński 1983: 6).

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It suggests that he was not only strong but also proud man who wanted to foster his image as an emperor until the very end of his life. Before his death, he was seen as a just, wise and infallible ruler appointed by God. To uphold these convictions and to make his image inviolable, he filled the palace offices with thankless and miserable posts. For example, there existed a scrivener ("the Minister of the Pen") whose duty was to write down and interpret the decisions Haile Selassie whispered to his ear. Unsurprisingly, in case of any mistake or wrong verdict, it was the minister, not the emperor, who was blamed and punished ⁵.

⁵ „During the Emperor's hours of official functions, the Minister of the Pen always stood at hand and took down all the Emperor's orders and instructions. Let me say that during working audiences His Majesty spoke very softly barely moving his lips. (...) Furthermore, the Emperor's words were usually unclear and ambiguous, especially when he did not want to take a definite stand on a matter that required his opinion. (...) When asked by a dignitary for the Imperial decision, he would not answer straight out, but would rather speak in a voice so quiet that it reached only the Minister of the Pen who moved his ear as close as a microphone. The minister transcribed his ruler's scant and foggy mutterings. All the rest was interpretation, and that was a matter for the minister, who passed down the decision in writing" (Kapuściński 1983: 8).

"If a move by the Emperor dazzled everyone with its accuracy and wisdom, it was one more proof that God's Chosen One was infallible. On the other hand, if from some corner the breeze carried rumours of discontent to the monarch's ear, he could blame it all on the minister's stupidity" (Kapuściński 1983: 8).

A mosaic portrait we get while reading the book reflects the complexity of the emperor's personality. On the one hand, there is a brave ruler determined to fight for his country when it was under the occupation of another nation and a very ambitious man who tried, at any cost, to catch up with the technological and industrial distance. On the other hand, there is a frightened person who chose to be part of a made-up order and live in an environment built up on appearances and falsehood, surrounding himself with wealth and splendour. As Kapuściński draws the reader's attention to the fact that Haile Selassie's court essentially rested upon fiction, he emphasizes that the palace inhabitants, both actors and creators of this fiction, were conscious of the roles they were playing and of their artificiality. The reader may find this quite similar to their own situation at work, home or in a club. As for Haile Selassie, we will probably never get the answer if some Machiavellian characteristics of the Ethiopian ruler originated in his lust for power and money, in his conviction that he was the one able to govern the country in the best possible way, or in the belief that he deserved more than the others. But again: the sovereign described by Kapuściński possesses all the characteristics which are usually attributed to the topos of an authoritarian ruler, all of them being part of the cause-and-effect chain related to the events that took place in Ethiopia during the 20th century.

Motivations behind and main goals of Kapuściński's strategy

Description of an unreal world, or an "empire of mind" designed by the emperor and other people who strived for higher positions in the state hierarchy, became even more meaningful and compelling in the form of narration chosen by Kapuściński. It may have been another, beside "mission" and "universality"⁶, reason for the strategy adopted by the author. What is more, it may be assumed that the situation the reporter observed in fact invited literariness into his writing.

Having focused on the daily life of the palace inhabitants and their complicated relations, not on the description of Ethiopia in general, Kapuściński offers the reader a parable about a totalitarian state⁷ or about relations in today's politics, economy, show business, and almost all other groups such as trade unions, scientists, artists. The readers of "Kultura" who read subsequent parts of the

⁶ See: paragraphs 1 & 4.

⁷ During the period between 1948 and 1989, Poland ("People's Poland" or "People's Republic of Poland") was governed by a communist party.

story “Trochę Etiopii” (“A bit of Ethiopia”) by Kapuściński could easily find an analogy between the organization of the emperor’s court and the reality controlled by Central Committee of the Polish United Workers’ Party (Komitet Centralny Polskiej Zjednoczonej Partii Robotniczej). One of The Royal Court Theatre’s director told Kapuściński that *The Emperor* was a story about all the people who work for corporations and many other institutions, every day trying to reach the top (Domosławski 2010b). In this dimension, the author made of the “The Emperor” a universal, timeless work that goes beyond cultural barriers and thus cannot be restricted to the limits of a reportage. On the other hand, it must be emphasized that the book’s author acquainted readers with the Ethiopian history by letting them ‘feel and taste’ the scenery, events and other aspects of that world, thus fulfilling the primary function of this type of journalism.

Summing up both parts of my paper, regardless of the critics and their critiques, it must be admitted that Kapuściński’s reportages show inimitable greatness. Prominence of his texts consists in “the ability to relate in such a way that an apparently minor and unimportant event becomes a carrier of generalization and part of a universal idea” (Michał Głowiński 2001), which results in complete understanding of a particular event and can serve as a warning for the future. As an author, Ryszard Kapuściński was described very accurately by Tadeusz Szkofut⁹: “Kapuściński has a unique gift, namely the sense of esthetics. Not only does he remember to present facts, but he also uses plenty of devices to create and recapture the emotional atmosphere of the described events. These include a masterly chosen language, proper images and a well-thought-out word rhythm. Thus, his books are not just a reporter’s account of particular events, but rather a magnificent literary work which portrays perennial authority mechanisms and helps to understand the contemporary world better than any political sciences, economic or sociological essay” (1996). Using all of these tools, Ryszard Kapuściński presented to his readers the figure of Haile Selassie as existing in the minds of the author’s Eu-

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⁸ „taka umiejętność opowiadania, że szczegół, drobny fakt, z pozoru niewiele znaczące wydarzenie, staje się przekaźnikiem uogólnienia, elementem wizji całościującej”.

⁹ „Kapuściński posiada też rzadki wśród reporterów dar – wrażliwość estetyczną. Dbą nie tylko o przedstawienie faktów, ale stara się też poprzez odpowiednie ukształtowanie tworzywa językowego, znalezienie właściwych obrazów i zastosowanie właściwego rytmu słów oddać opisywanym sytuacjom towarzyszący im klimat emocjonalny. To dlatego jego książki są czymś więcej niż reporterskim zapisem zdarzeń, ale pracą ukazującą w atrakcyjnej literacko formie pewne odwieczne mechanizmy władzy i pozwalającą zrozumieć świat współczesny lepiej niż niejeden dzieło z zakresu politologii, ekonomii czy socjologii”.

thopian interlocutors, as well as demonstrated the mechanisms that led to the monarch's fall, which came as a milestone in the period of transformations in that part of the African continent. In this context, I think that of *The Emperor*'author perfectly combined his work as a reporter with the skill of using literary devices and forms to create a multidimensional picture of power-driven people.

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Streszczenie

Ryszard Kapuściński, autor znany na całym świecie i zdobywca wielu nagród, jest też postacią kontrowersyjną. Po jego śmierci wciąż wiele osób kwestionuje wartość jego reportaży i jego wiarygodność jako reportera. W tym artykule pragnę przyjrzeć się twórczości autora na przykładzie powieści „Cesarz”. Skupię się na sposobie, w jaki opisywał wydarzenia, których był świadkiem podczas swoich pobytów w Etiopii w latach 70. minionego wieku, a także na powodach, dla których mógł zdecydować się na stosowanie wybranej strategii reporterskiej. Jak zasygnalizowałam w tytule, zastanawiam się też nad istotą kontrowersji wokół twórczości Kapuścińskiego (literatura czy dziennikarstwo?). Przyjrę się również ukazanej w książce postaci cesarza Haile Selassie, którego wpływ na państwo podczas przeszło czterdziestoletnich rządów był potężny. Czytając „Cesarza”, w tym relacje pracowników cesarskiego dworu, ma się wrażenie, że Ryszard Kapuściński widział pewne podobieństwa między tamtymi realiami a tymi panującymi w Polskiej Rzeczpospolitej Ludowej. W tekście powołuję się ponadto na inne utwory Kapuścińskiego („Autoportret reportera” i „Podróże z Herodem”) oraz „Kapuściński Non-fiction” Artura Domosławskiego.

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Słowa kluczowe

Cesarz, Kapuściński, dziennikarstwo magiczne, reportaż