

# A Vertical Schema of Experience: Travel Writing from the Himalayas (Jerzy Kukuczka, Adam Bielecki)

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One could argue that any exploration of the experience of travel, the sense of the world captured in transit and the intellectual tools used to conceptualize the traversed (absorbed, consumed, etc.) space (geographically, physically and culturally) must be foregrounded by first identifying the basic obstacles to articulating the nuances of travel and its literary and textual counterparts. On the one hand, the arsenal of tools available for travel writing criticism is fantastically rich: it draws from the discourses of literary criticism, anthropology, ethnology and philosophical languages broadly conceived. Within this spectrum, classical attempts to identify the stylistic and poetic features of reportage, essays and travel literature sit alongside more contemporary strategies proposed by geopoetics, for instance, which reflects on the possibility of representing space within the scope of the text through mechanisms of language, culture and ideology; or in simpler terms: everything that falls within the territory of the spatial or topographical turn in the humanities.<sup>1</sup>

So far, these studies have limited their focus to strategies for documenting space in literary or paraliterary texts, or the observations of everyday experience. I would like to examine

<sup>1</sup> E. W. Soja, *Postmodern geographies. The reassertion of space in critical social theory*, London – New York 1990, pp. 10-42; E. Rybicka *Od poetyki przestrzeni do polityki miejsca. Zwrot topograficzny w badaniach literackich*, "Teksty Drugie" 2008, issue 4, *ibid*, *Zwrot topograficzny w badaniach literackich. Od poetyki przestrzeni do polityki miejsca* [in:] *Kulturowa teoria literatury 2. Poetyki, problematyki, interpretacje*, ed. T. Walas, R. Nycz. Krakow 2012.

a specific type of writing that seems to take a vested interest in the spatial situation of the writing subject and to posit this physical position as a necessary condition for the subject's very existence. This yields a scenario where, by documenting and publicizing his experience, the subject — traveling and viscerally in motion — exposes himself to the risk of instrumentalizing his “genuine” experiences or trivializing them in an effort to make them marketable.

What I have in mind is the expansive field of mountain literature,<sup>2</sup> and in particular, narratives by Himalayan climbers, who, as we might expect, began to attract interest at the turn of the twentieth century with their inconceivable achievements. Currently, as we progress into the twenty-first century, these climbers are active figures in public life, heroes of the collective imaginary, and pop-culture and media stars absorbed in a world dominated by fleeting events and celebrities who broadcast their privacy as a spectacle.<sup>3</sup> By examining the tools of interpretation and analytical procedures compatible with discourses of travel and the experience of spatiality written into these discourses in the stories of Himalayan travelers, we flag the crucial issue of where to locate these narratives in the literary criticism landscape.

Genealogically speaking, the narratives of Himalayan explorers have a unique status: on the one hand, they appear to be utilitarian and non-fiction texts. On the other hand, certain features link them to literature (such as thoughtful plot structure, narrative composition, and stylistic devices that link together multiple registers of the Polish language). Due to its particular literary mode, or perhaps its quality, prose by climbers has not yet garnered acclaim among readers or scholars, for whom the literary aesthetic canon is the exclusive property of highbrow prose and poetry, particular that of twentieth-century “high modernism.” This exclusivity seems to be the natural product of the opposition between high and low that dominates how we think about culture. I would argue that from a contemporary perspective, this opposition only remains valid if we carve out far-reaching caveats or abandon it wholesale.

I would claim that we can easily include travel literature, together with all its current variations, in the broader issue of readers' attraction to diverse forms of “authenticities,” non-fiction literature and reportage. We can discern a certain “fiction fatigue” in prose of the last few decades of the socialist period in Poland.<sup>4</sup> This shift was legitimized precisely by these “authentic” genres (biography, autobiography, reportage, diaries, memoirs, and perhaps also narrative guidebooks and field guides). Today, in the wake of this legitimization process, the reader's hierarchy locates fictional stories in an analogical position to other forms of nonliterary or non-artistic pragmatic writing. That which self-identifies as an artistic text no longer occupies a privileged position among all discourses and narratives. The fall

<sup>2</sup> M. Pacukiewicz, *Literatura alpinistyczna jako “sobąpisanie,”* “Napis” 2010, vol. 16, pp. 495-511.

<sup>3</sup> E. Cushmore, *Celebrity/culture*, New York 2006, pp. 1-17; G. Turner, *Approaching celebrity studies*, “Celebrity Studies” 2010, issue 1, pp. 11-20.

<sup>4</sup> J. Jarzębski, *Powieść jako autokreacja*, Krakow 1984, pp. 337-364 J. Kandziora, *Zmęczeni fabułą. Narracje osobiste w prozie po 1976 roku*, Wrocław-Warsaw-Krakow 1993; P. Czaplinski, *Ślady przelotu. O prozie polskiej 1976-1996*, Krakow 1997, pp. 11-105.

of literature proper's monopoly over literariness (literature proper being understood here not aesthetically, but as the gesture of self-differentiation from the non-literary) has given way to other categories of "readability"<sup>5</sup> — the consumption of content. This issue seems to deserve deeper scrutiny, especially since the contemporary tourist's gaze is informed by a consumerist disposition and a strictly visual absorption of impressions.<sup>6</sup> I would suggest that this shift is acutely visible in mountaineering prose, and particularly in the narratives of Himalayan climbers, for these narratives have proven to be full-fledged contenders in fiction and nonfiction literature, in spite of their seemingly niche status.

One feature that distinguishes mountaineers' tales from other travel texts is what I would describe as their vertical spatial schema. While the most widely-read classics of travel literature attend to horizontal space, asserting a prototypical experience of movement by way of travel, mountain tales generate the trope of vertical movement with the same intensity, which leads to an entirely distinct mode of storytelling and forces the narrating and authorial subject to devise new expressive tools that will not simply rehash the horizontal schema. As a result, these discourses and stylistics are shaped by heterogeneous experiences of the narrator's physical position in space, be it at one fixed point or between several places. Embedded in the Himalayan climber's travel account is the pressure to forge an original conceptualization of one's own location.

To define these Himalayan tales, we must address a key question: how can we succinctly characterize this form of writing? Should we defer to the broader category of mountaineering discourse,<sup>7</sup> which embraces long-form prose alongside other discursive practices and events, so that we might bypass the inconvenient and often aporetic issues haunting the definition or definability of these peculiarly "pragmatic" texts? Perhaps the heading "mountaineering/Himalayan travel discourse" would be more apt? These anxieties indicate the "shimmering" quality of travel writing by these climbers, who intuitively locate their texts at the intersection of genres. By camouflaging their texts' genre attributes, they are in a better position to express their own dilemmas over how to convey the experience of vertical travel. Despite the concrete and pragmatic orientation of these texts, they seem to harbor the potential for critical self-reflexivity on travel writing as a practice that mires its author in so many paradoxes.

How can we date the beginning of mountain literature? Mountains – or more specifically, high elevation mountains – have captured our interest since the dawn of modern western culture. This interest gained traction throughout the modern period. In the Polish context, we can discern a galvanized interest in exploring and climbing mountains in utilitarian guidebooks written as early as the turn of the nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup> Mountain themes quickly infiltrated romantic literature and later on, in a slightly altered form, became a fixation for modern

<sup>5</sup> This is Raymond Federman's formulation. See: R. Federman, *What are Experimental Novels and Why are there So Many Left Unread?* [in] *ibid*, *Critifiction: Postmodern Essays*, New York 1993

<sup>6</sup> J. Urry, *The Tourist Gaze*, London 1990.

<sup>7</sup> M. Pacukiewicz, *Grań kultury. Transgresje alpinizmu*, Krakow 2012, pp. 12-17.

<sup>8</sup> J. Żmidziński, *Przewodnik jako scenariusz rytuałów turystycznych (na podstawie dawnych bedekerów pienińskich). Narodziny pewnej religii*, "Napis" 2010, vol. 16, pp. 476-493.

artists.<sup>9</sup> Even a few examples suffice to give a sense of this phenomenon: Julian Przyboś's well-known poem "From the Tatra Mountains" (*Z Tatr*)<sup>10</sup> (fascination with the Tatra landscape gives Przyboś the impetus to devise his own tools of expression), Jalu Kurek's novel *Mount Everest 1924* (on the death of the first person to summit Everest), the poetry of the Young Poland movement and the tragic death of Avant-Garde artist Mieczysław Szczuka (who avidly developed a cult around alpine and Tatra symbolism, perhaps most importantly among circles of "non-pragmatic" intellectuals and artists), Stanisław Vincenz's essays on the Hutsul'shchyna region (*On the High Uplands / Na wysokiej połoninie*). This constellation also includes the founding text for Polish mountaineering tales, Ferdynand Goetel's (*A Trip – How Not to Write about it / Wycieczka – jak się o niej nie pisze*)<sup>11</sup> from the turn of the twentieth century. Intonations of the Young Poland movement<sup>12</sup> still linger in this text, although the author relates ironically to the notion that the experience of climbing a mountain can truly be captured in words. We might also mention Kazimierz Sosnowski's modern guidebook for alpine tourism, which came out in 1914.<sup>13</sup>

It seems telling that climbing, alpine tourism (mainly in the "recently discovered" Tatra mountains, but also in the more accessible and developed Beskid mountains) and the act of conquering summits are typically framed as being beyond human reach (think of George Mallory and Everest). This notion circulates as early as the turn of the twentieth century, and we can locate it at the intersection of cultural registers: it offers thematic impetus for the artistic strategies of the Avant Garde and sits thematically at the very heart of modernism. It becomes a new iteration of the rapid experience of modernization as well as a new and popular physical practice for promoting human fitness.<sup>14</sup> Climbing joins the domain of sports but lacks the rules that regulate typical competition, for at the time, climbing offered no awards, distinctions or medals. Adepts of this new activity, contending with sweeping changes in the rational and practical trajectory of modernization,<sup>15</sup> seemed most intrigued by the activity's inexhaustibility and its rejection of practicality.

In the twentieth century, the social transformations prompted by modernity brought with them a gradually maturing branch of writing that cannot be analyzed solely through the

<sup>9</sup> M. Pacukiewicz, *Grań kultury*, op. cit., pp. 47-69.

<sup>10</sup> See: K. Obremski, *Zamarła turnia, siostry Skotnicówny i ekwiwalentyzowanie. "Z Tatr" Juliana Przybosia*, "Pamiętnik Literacki" 2011, no. 2.

<sup>11</sup> F. Goetel, *Wycieczka — jak się o niej nie pisze* [in:] *Czarny szczyt. Proza taternicka lat 1904–1939*, ed. J. Kolbuszewski, Krakow 1976, cited in: M. Pacukiewicz, *Literatura alpinistyczna jako "sobąpisanie"*, op. cit.

<sup>12</sup> E. Skulmowska, "Pokolenie zdobywców." *O intelektualnej i artystycznej drodze Ferdynanda Goetla*, "Świat Tekstów. Rocznik Słupski" 2013, vol. 11, pp. 58-62.

<sup>13</sup> K. Sosnowski, *Przewodnik po Beskidzie Zachodnim. Od Krynicy po Wisłę łącznie z Pieninami i terenami narciarskimi*, Krakow 1914.

<sup>14</sup> N. Lewis, *The Climbing Body, Nature and the Experience of Modernity*, "Body and Science" 2000, vol. 6, pp. 58-80.

<sup>15</sup> From this perspective, it might be interesting to juxtapose climbing figures with the myths of individuality that spearheaded modernism. See: M. Berman, "All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity," New York 1982; I. Watt, *Myths of Modern Individualism: Faust, Don Quixote, Don Juan, Robinson Crusoe*, Cambridge 1996. The alpine or Himalayan explorer forms a hybrid of sorts of the dreamer or hero who challenges the order of nature, and the one who fervently enters the whirlwind of modern life. We might reflect on whether the postmodern or late-modern climber exists who is the product of an entirely different set of visions, concepts and processes than the modern mountaineers of the twentieth century, or those who relate entirely differently to these circumstances.

prism of historical travel writing genres (travel literature, reports, letters, diaries), utilitarian literature (guidebooks, manuals) or even personal writing (autobiographies, memoirs, diaries, essays) or journalism (reportage, feuilletons). For all these genres frame this new branch as one that continues and participates in modern travel discourses.<sup>16</sup> The strategy of transgressing genre and stylistic borders is not particularly innovative and in itself does not justify introducing an entirely new category into literary criticism's established network of concepts and nomenclatures. This being said, one idiosyncratic feature of this emerging branch of literature is its introduction of a heterogeneous and hybrid modality. To be more precise, the travel texts that interest me here do not uniformly operate in the context of one category. They operate at a point of contact between multiple strategies (and multiple poetics) used to convey the experience of travel. For in the climate of the early twentieth century context, when mass tourism first appeared as a phenomenon,<sup>17</sup> travel became a fetishized commodity, or an ideological product of electronic media and the tourism market.

In my mind, what is crucial here is the question of the sources behind this hybrid modality. The modality's intentions in the context of modern and postmodern approaches to travel discourse are also essential. It might seem like a stretch to claim that in popular culture, non-fiction travel prose written by "extreme athletes" picks up the writing strategies developed in twentieth-century "intellectual journey"<sup>18</sup> narratives. Yet modernism proposed certain tactical poetics for documenting travel that offer an intuitive and lucid foundation for comparison and reference.

I will not attempt to provide a historical cross-section here of the prose of Polish Himalayan climbers. I will focus, rather, on two select texts, and by juxtaposing the two, I hope to effectively convey a sense of the writing conceived by the Himalayan climber shaped by late modernity. Both cases feature authors who began to publish their prose just as a narrative canon devoted to the mountaineer's vertical experience had solidified. This being said, their stories are informed by vastly different backgrounds.

Here, I am thinking of Jerzy Kukuczka, the "mountain main" most famous outside of the Polish mountaineering community, and Adam Bielecki, who captured the attention of the public and media after the tragic circumstances surrounding his climb to the summit of Broad Peak in Karakoram in the dead of winter. Both figures drew infamy as reckless climbers who not only neglected to care for other members of their expeditions, but were allegedly directly implicated in the deaths of their climbing partners. This aside, they have indisputable accolades as climbers, and this alone justifies their decisions to share the stories of their Himalayan adventures. Out of the vast community of Polish mountaineers who took on the Himalayas

<sup>16</sup>D. Kozicka, *Wędrowcy światów prawdziwych. Dwudziestowieczne relacje z podróży*, Krakow 2003, pp. 46-68.

<sup>17</sup>J. Urry, *The Tourist Gaze*, op. cit., pp. 13-22, 36-59, 223-240.

<sup>18</sup>D. Kozicka, op. cit., pp. 69-94; *ibid.*, "Dwudziestowieczne podróże intelektualne." (*Między esejem a autobiografią*), "Teksty Drugie" 2003, issue 2-3, pp. 41-59.

and contributed to mountain literature, these two figures<sup>19</sup> offer narratives that we can locate in a chronological schema of generational differences between climbers and their stories.<sup>20</sup> We can also reflect on how these climbers' strategies for representing vertical travel in writing are contingent on the sociocultural conditions of their moment, or on how their moment defined literature and literariness.

Kukuczka and Bielecki faced the challenge of how to convey the experience of high elevation climbing to both mountaineering connoisseurs and experts in adjacent areas. As a result, their discourses straddle layman's explanation and hermeneutic reporting.

The texts *My Vertical World* (*Mój pionowy świat*) and *Under Frozen Eyelids* (*Spod zamrzniętych powiek*) feature two essential building blocks of narrative: 1) an introduction shedding light on the climber's life leading up to his arrival in the Himalayas, and 2) a realistic and elaborate travel report suffused with autobiographical details indispensable for grasping the mountaineering experience. These components form the basic structure of the narrative, which goes on to focus on climbing in the Himalayas and everything that comes with it.

In their introductions, Kukuczka and Bielecki pen genealogies of themselves as climbers-in-making. These genealogies rest structurally on the metaphor of travel: a hike into the mountains (progressing from hiking to climbing, or walking from the lowlands into the boulders at the mountain's base) offers an analogy for the amateur's metamorphosis into a semi-professional climber (which is not the same thing as someone who climbs for a living) and his ultimate ascendancy to the world of high-elevation mountains. This initiation narrative consists of transposing the horizontal and vertical orders: by accumulating experience and honing skills, they are free to explore increasingly hazardous regions and literally ascend upwards. Also latent in this emphasis on mountain space are motifs of self-discovery and self-improvement. These introductions are crucial devices through which Kukuczka and Bielecki forge meaningful approaches for narrating vertical travel in the Himalayas. The introductions support their efforts to articulate the radical otherness posed by climbing.<sup>21</sup> Even in the prelude to the adventure itself, preconceptions of the mountain dissolve in the face of the Himalayas.

At the same time, these prologues mobilize strategies that differentiate the two writers' discourses. For Kukuczka, this brief episode is only a set-up for the tale of his victory over the "eight-thousanders." For Bielecki, the younger of the two, the prologue forms the axis of narration. Bielecki harps on the differences between tackling one section of a mountain and journeying into an eight-thousander. He establishes a chronological schema based on gradual temporal progression, building up the dramaturgy of the young adept's biography.

<sup>19</sup>J. Kukuczka, *Mój pionowy świat*, ed. C. Kukuczka, Katowice 2014, first edition: *Mój pionowy świat, czyli 14 x 8000 metrów*, London 1995 and *Mój pionowy świat*, review, consultation, editing, images and commentary by Z. Kowalewski, Warsaw 1995; Adam Bielecki, Dominik Szczepański, *Spod zamrzniętych powiek*, Warsaw 2017.

<sup>20</sup>M. Pacukiewicz, *Literatura alpinistyczna jako "sobąpisanie"*, op. cit., p. 504.

<sup>21</sup>On the difference between sport and adventure climbing, see: P. Donnelly, *The Great divide. Sport Climbing Vs. Adventure Climbing* [in:] *To the extreme. Alternative sports, inside and out*, ed. R. E. Rinehart, S. Sydnor, New York 2003, pp. 291-304.

This strategy has the double purpose of reinforcing Bielecki's right to tell his story, while softening the strangeness of his experiences for the reader. It also creates a sense of intimacy between the reader and author (once a rookie himself), and establishes a hierarchy of achievements: taking on the eight-thousander (or even supporting other climbers' attempts) becomes the capstone of the climber's capacities.

Kukuczka, meanwhile, chooses a more traditional model for his chronological recollections: individual anecdotes conform to the order in which he summited a series of eight-thousanders. In Kukuczka's account, the formative period is only a brief and necessary phase that prepared him for what would actually matter. It is a backdrop whose only purpose is to paint an image of the Himalayas that contrasts starkly with the reader's world. Kukuczka uses this developmental phase to better reconstruct and draw out his stay in the harsh reality of the uniquely inhuman "vertical world." His access to this space and his capacity to reach certain destinations (in this case, in the Himalayas) reflects his "vertical" evaluation of a climber's trajectory. Both Kukuczka and Bielecki develop plot structures that privilege vertical movement as their central motif: the rest is mere backdrop.

Each climber takes a fundamentally different approach to storytelling, which seems to reflect their age difference, the historical timing of their achievements, and finally (and perhaps most importantly), their contemporary sociocultural contexts. This being said, their narratives remain rooted in certain principles consistent with the canon of mountaineering literature that help them transcribe the vertical Himalayan experience into a "shaggy dog story" accessible to readers. Each author creates a diary-like pseudo-document, or a private autobiography pushed through a literary filter.

It strikes me that the essential question here concerns these climbers' authenticity and the poetic tools they use to establish that authenticity. Kukuczka and Bielecki's texts mobilize the deliberate strategy of bearing witness to events to seal the referential pact. Authenticity thus becomes an embedded value in the adventure climbers' ethos, a measure of the texts' truthfulness, and a justification for the authors' deferral to stylistic and narrative tactics. Authenticity also operates as the story's baseline and fundamental structure. The narration template consists of a hybrid between documentary details, autobiographical perspective, memory and self-analysis, and that special brand of pragmatism associated with climbing, expressed in rigorously accumulated descriptions, reflections and words of advice. The Himalayan climber's discourse, just like the discourse of alpine mountaineering, strives to transform — at least temporarily — into a substitute climbing practice.<sup>22</sup> Underlying this impression, however, is the acute knowledge that this wish cannot be fulfilled. If I can run ahead of myself for a moment, this dynamic is what sets Kukuczka and Bielecki apart from other authors of Himalayan travel accounts and informs the shift proposed by *Vertical World* and *Frozen Eyelids* in how we conceive vertical narration.

The authors' strategies for sampling stylistics from other literary or pragmatic genres are all at the service of reinforcing the authenticity of the story being told. First-person narration

<sup>22</sup>M. Pacukiewicz, *Literatura alpinistyczna jako "sobq̄pisanie,"* op. cit., p. 505.

supports the text's reliability and legitimates the storyteller: The "I" must experience what he describes, for otherwise, he does not qualify as a reliable narrator and source of the truth. The compulsory eyewitness motif coincides, by analogy, with the extreme experiences of modernity (e.g., the war) that forced us to reformulate our cognitive, conceptual and discursive canons.<sup>23</sup> Only experience – often intimate and resisting objectification – can reinforce the nation's sturdiness and help construct the story. This requirement, however, is not necessarily transparent to the reader as an external axiom. It is embedded, rather, in the very impulse to narrate the experiences unique to alpine travel. Only those who have put themselves on the line as adventure climbers have earned the right to tell these stories. This condition provides the foundation for all narrative and nonfiction work devoted to extreme experiences, a fact that becomes particularly clear in the case of reportage. As a mediated genre, reportage requires its author to densely cite the testimonies of the stories' heroes and to furnish full documentation and archival materials on climbing.<sup>24</sup>

First-person narration is the only adequate strategy for constructing narrative, for only this mode can certify authenticity. The author enters into an autobiographical pact, asserting his extraordinary journey as a crucial piece of his biography, and moreover, as the founding condition for his trajectory as a climber — a trajectory shaped by the rhythm of his summit attempts. When Kukuczka or Bielecki narrate individual trips, they describe logistics, interpersonal relations on the trail and climbing techniques. Most importantly, however, they situate themselves within this vertical space and its internal order. To reinforce their referential and autobiographical pacts, the authors lay down an elaborate foundation of fact. This neurotic and somewhat compulsive "accumulation" of facts includes descriptions of climbing conditions, hard data (e.g., the exact times specific events occurred), and information on the expedition's gear and attire (often listed at length). By speaking at times in a climber's sociolect, the authors defend themselves from allegations that they are imprecise or document their travels incompetently. The texts also include archival materials independent from the author's personal memories and travel notes that objectively confirm motifs he establishes elsewhere. Photographs and links to audiovisual materials (films, maps, topographical diagrams) sit in the body of the texts as QR codes<sup>25</sup> but reach beyond them, leading to specific online resources.<sup>26</sup> These strategies all simulate the reader's participation in the event as mediated by the text. This operation validates the author's qualifications to tell these stories and cements the documentary mechanisms of the text as a whole. Emerging digital media seems to be a novelty for Kukuczka. For Bielecki, on the other hand, digital elements form a natural component of his toolkit for establishing the authenticity of his stories.

<sup>23</sup>J. Świąch, *Wojny a projekt nowoczesności*, [in:] *ibid*, *Nowoczesność. Szkice o literaturze polskiej XX wieku*, Warsaw 2007, pp. 192-220.

<sup>24</sup>A selection of recent, relevant publications: B. McDonald, *Freedom Climbers*, Sheffield 2012; J. Hugo-Bader, *Długi film o miłości. Powrót na Broad Peak*, Krakow 2014; D. Szczepański, P. Tomza, *Nanga Parbat. Śnieg, kłamstwa i góra do wyzwolenia*, Warsaw 2016; D. Kortko, M. Pietraszewski, *Kukuczka. Opowieść o najstydniejszym polskim himalaiście*, Warsaw 2016.

<sup>25</sup>QR Code, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/QR\\_code](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/QR_code) (November 4 2017).

<sup>26</sup>A. Bożek, L. Kamińska-Mazur, *Książka hybrydowa — kod QR sposobem na koegzystencję książki drukowanej z e-bookiem*, "Biuletyn EBIB" 2012, issue 7.



The experience of space forces the climber-author to pursue new tools for conveying the events in which he partakes. A certain paradox emerges: the authorial first-person narrator/subject is immobilized within the text, but is obligated (by the reader, but also by himself) to produce an adequate textual substitute for mountain space. To this end, the climber reconstructs his surroundings using geographical names and verbal equivalents of visual topographical maps: he describes the climbing route by detailing its technical challenges and rock formations,<sup>27</sup> evokes sensory impressions (what he saw, his physical condition at a certain point along the route), and most importantly, reconstructs his techniques. This last rhetorical device locates him firmly in vertical space.<sup>28</sup>

The Himalayan climbing discourse produces a constant tension between memory and the need to support it with supplementary documentation.<sup>29</sup> Memory is always in a conflicted and somewhat aporetic relationship with authenticity: personal perspective is the only possible medium for conveying the facts objectively. At the same time, memory's imperfections expose the climber's tale to relentless processes of erosion, creating a demand for supplementary materials. Both Kukuczka and Bielecki scrupulously inform us of landscape formations, record all their movements through space, paint portraits of their climbing companions (both passive ones hired to assist the expedition and active climbing partners) and describe weather conditions in detail. All this amounts to something resembling a protocol or calendar that lists all significant data and provides a narrative and stylistic schema for the tale that is as necessary as it is boring. The schema divides the story into the preparation period, arrival at the mountain and the time spent on the mountain (with intimate details of life at base camp). The time on the mountain is rhythmically divided into subsequent summit attempts (supplemented with reconstructions of various climbing maneuvers), arrival at the summit or failure to do so, and the return to the everyday world beyond the Himalayas.

A certain disproportionality strikes me: the Himalayan travel account is, naturally, populated by the act of climbing (the ascent and the action on the summit), yet these events are contextualized at the author's sole discretion. At the beginning of his text, Kukuczka exoticizes the local cultures of India, Nepal and Pakistan.<sup>30</sup> As he progresses through the story, he gradually mutes the presence of these cultures. Although he mentions basic geographical data, he confines his focus to the mountaintop. Bielecki, on the other hand, weaves local culture into his narrative right up to his conclusion, but (significantly) does not go beyond stereotypical images: these post-communist societies lying to the East are depicted as sincere and kindhearted, but developmentally backwards and unorganized.<sup>31</sup> The specific space of a given region and its cultural climate and socio-ethnic complexities fundamentally do not interest these Himalayan climbers. Kukuczka and Bielecki do not take up the role of tourist or ethnographer, nor do they wax philosophical like the wanderer or pilgrim. The autobiographical

<sup>27</sup>*Jakie są formacje skalne w górach i skałach?*, <http://drytooling.com.pl/serwis/art/artykuly/988-formacje-skalne-w-skalkach-gorach> (November 4 2017).

<sup>28</sup>N. Lewis, *The Climbing Body*, op. cit., pp. 70-71.

<sup>29</sup>See also: M. Pacukiewicz, *Grań kultury*, op. cit., pp. 235-237.

<sup>30</sup>See: J. Kukuczka, *Mój pionowy świat*, op. cit., pp.17-22, 70-75.

<sup>31</sup>A. Bielecki, D. Szczepański, *Spod zamarznętych powiek*, op. cit., pp. 48, 53, 65-68; the description of a terrorist attack provides one exception, see: pp. 231-233.

documentary mode coincides with a form of pragmatism that seems specific to Himalayan discourse. These writers focus on everything pertaining to movement, climbing, and life at high elevations. The Himalayan climber himself, as Kukuczka shows us, senses his own exotic qualities in his immediate social context<sup>32</sup> but makes no effort to mediate this experience. The above-mentioned disproportion between “ethnographic” and climbing descriptions reflects the authors’ belief that any attempt to understand the cultures around them would be futile. In other words, vertical movement in this remarkable place becomes the fundamental impetus and justification for the labor of writing

Alongside authenticity and memory, the third pillar and condition for conveying the Himalayan adventure that I would identify is the pragmatic narrative mode. Kukuczka strives to formulate generalized, existential reflections. He keeps personal self-reflection to a minimum, although he cannot quiet this impulse entirely: writing is a form of understanding and working through one’s own experiences. Bielecki (or rather, the duo formed by Bielecki and Szczepański) takes this even further, for he eschews the temptation to posit universal observations on the human condition and instead centers his voice around common sense and objectivity, yielding a style reminiscent of reportage.<sup>33</sup>

Kukuczka and Bielecki’s discourses are governed by the same principles: authenticity, non-fiction, autobiographicality and pragmatic observations. Kukuczka proposes an “athletic” model, seeing the Himalayas as a limit case on the fringe of the sports world that nonetheless has a penchant for metaphysical problems:

For me, mountains are a constant conversation with myself. Do I keep going or do I give up? Do I have enough in me to go further? I’m in it for these moments.<sup>34</sup>

The climber in *My Vertical World* is thus interrogating the climber’s place in the order of human activities, reflecting on the meaning of climbing in the Himalayas, contemplating the relationship between mountain space and the subject and relying on the body and its physical fitness in the face of the high, impassable summits.

Kukuczka’s book offers no answers to the questions posed so often about the meaning of high mountain exploration.

I never felt a need to define it. I went up into the mountain and conquered it. That’s it.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>32</sup>When Kukuczka takes part in an international expedition and no longer has to watch his spending, he comments: “When we are all together, we go to a restaurant where I am already treated like a normal, white man: I order what I want and not what I can afford. I don’t have to stay in the cheapest inns from day one and cook for myself to save money.” (J. Kukuczka, op. cit., p. 168).

<sup>33</sup>It would be difficult to maintain clear boundaries between the two authors given their consistently first-person narratives that are somewhat uniform in style. Here, I am describing one particular author: Adam Bielecki.

<sup>34</sup>J. Kukuczka, *Mój pionowy świat*, op. cit., p. 64.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid, p. 12

Kukuczka conceptualizes climbing (and with it, his own climbing narrative) in terms of his idiomatic experience of vertical motion. This motion simultaneously suppresses and foregrounds how he thinks of himself and the reality of horizontal space. His writing seeks to translate into pragmatic terms this strange existential and cognitive mode: a mode centered around the solitude of the subject located within inhuman, inhospitable space. I would argue that Kukuczka brushes close against a vision of modern man pitched against nature and his own conditions. This adversity is expressed as the need to conquer all eight-thousanders and to transgress the borders of what is humanly possible. Several times in the text, Kukuczka hints that his intentions are to push back against the problem of inexpressible experiences and epiphanies. This reveals something about the genealogy of his amateur writing: his model is modern realism and its pursuit of reality as it strives to objectivize the universalization of individual experience through literature.

Adam Bielecki comes to his high mountain adventures from entirely different circumstances. For Bielecki, Kukuczka is the stuff of legends. He therefore faces a choice: he can continue the narrative paradigm of the Himalayan climbers who came before him, or propose a story structure of his own, attending to the specificities of climbing in the current sociocultural climate as well as his own approach to the mountain. Of course, Bielecki by no means negates the act of storytelling. He merely shifts his emphasis to pragmatic, biographical and professional issues and curtails the scope of his universal reflections to do so.

Bielecki composes a compendium of sorts (an itinerary) that guides the reader through the world of high mountain climbing. Bielecki demonstrates the activity's practical valences and traces a historical profile of the Polish school of Himalayan climbers in the context of his own achievements. We might say he activates two travel narratives: first, he tells the story of his own journey to the high mountains. Secondly, he invites the reader on a meandering hike through the practical and historical issues of mountaineering. Ultimately, Bielecki transforms before the reader's eyes into a professional climber and athlete whose career consists of the personal conquest of space. Bielecki weaves back and forth between the first-person mode of his own story and his role as a guide to the exotic world of extreme athletes. Unlike Kukuczka, who describes unimaginable feats that disrupt his quotidian reality, Bielecki is more focused on spreading his knowledge of the Himalayan experience as a way of life, or as one of many existential modes.

Bielecki, the younger of the two climbers, abandons all inclinations to penetrate the mystery of climbing. Whenever he brushes up against these issues, he defers to pragmatic explanations. He emphasizes the contrast between the Himalayan experience and the layman's perspective. Bielecki's book becomes an instruction manual of sorts, or a pragmatic demonstration of what it really looks like to climb the Himalayas as a physical, bodily exercise. He refrains from burdening climbing with intellectual concepts. For Bielecki, the truth can only be represented by detailed descriptions reminiscent of reference guides that are nonetheless rooted in the experience of an actual climber. While Kukuczka sought existential justifications for his feats, which he then articulated in laconic pseudo-maxims (thereby resolving the dilemma of inexpressibility), Bielecki abandons these attempts, or perhaps voices them in a more private and unpretentious tone. For Bielecki, writing about climbing requires no

other explanation than the practice itself.<sup>36</sup> “You dissolve. You cease to climb, and you become climbing.”<sup>37</sup> This shift in the modality of the practice indicates a transition from the mystical and athletic model for approaching the Himalayas to the category of extreme sports as an everyday practice and way of life.<sup>38</sup>

Certain tales of Himalayan climbers and mountaineers who have conquered summits can be particularly inaccessible, exaggerating the scale of the danger and giving the reader a glimpse of a world that is doubly extraordinary. This space is remote and often exotic (with authors often projecting a sense of the exotic entirely unconsciously, thus reproducing colonial representations of the other). This space is closed to its readers, yet its stories open a view into this altered reality woven together with routine activities and duties on the one hand and on the other, the thrill, exertions and exhaustions required to master this space. These narratives focus on the specific properties of mountain travel, laying bare the paradoxical structure of a fixed routine unfolding against the backdrop of an exhilarating adventure. The narrators are tangled up in contradictions that reveal the special character of life on a climbing expedition, where movement and rest are interlaced, constituting the inverted and carnivalesque progression of the day that nonetheless proves to be surprisingly ordinary. Time spent on the road, distancing oneself from home and breaking off contact with the tame safety of domestic space, incrementally establishes a new space for a safe life.

Travel literature – to linger with this imprecise category a moment longer – enters into a symbiosis of sorts with the broader phenomenon of the fascination of those who manage to radically break out of the everyday grind. What was once a travel account transforms from a story about spatial, cultural and social otherness (bracketing, for now, the writer’s relationship to that otherness) into the story of an escape from the everyday rhythm of life and, indirectly, a testament to the fact that such an escape is impossible (and undesirable) on a broader scale. By narrating the extreme feats man pursues of his own free will (ultra-marathons, long-distance hikes, high mountain climbing in environments hostile to man or extremely remote from his life context), they intone the promise that we can take control over our own existence. In the conditions of late modernity, as sociologists tell us, this is fundamentally impossible.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>36</sup> “[...] cognizance of the written word – for example, as in the textural description of the rock-climb or route in the climber’s guidebook – is fundamentally undermined as being the principal means by which the climb is understood. The direct experience of climbing usurps the pre-eminence of cognitive apprehension as the key to acquiring knowledge.” (N. Lewis, *The Climbing Body*, op. cit., p.71).

<sup>37</sup> A. Bielecki, D. Szczepański, *Spod zamarzniętych powiek*, op. cit., p. 184.

<sup>38</sup> This distinction become particularly clear in passages devoted to preparations for a climbing expedition (training, keeping certain diets) and equipment (experimenting with different attire, climbing gear, shoes): Bielecki consciously deals with his own hybrid climber’s body (despite the fact that rhetorically, he speaks disparagingly of climbing gear; see: A. Bielecki, D. Szczepański, op. cit., p. 70), while Kukuczka confronts these extreme experiences as a rational and bodily being whose technical accouterments are merely one of many necessary elements. For Kukuczka, however, it is the climbing subject that ultimately determines whether the summit will be conquered. See also: P. Barratt, *Vertical worlds: technology, hybridity and the climbing body*, “Social & Cultural Geography” 2011, vol. 12, issue 4, pp. 397-412.

<sup>39</sup> U. Beck, A. Giddens, S. Lash, *Reflexive Modernization*, Stanford 1994; U. Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, trans. M. Ritter, London 1992.

The emergence and subsequent institutional consolidation of activities that fall outside of traditional sports disciplines have shed light on the extent to which we ritualize sport. What's more, they again lay bare the elite nature of Olympic sports, team sports and track and field. New disciplines have earned the moniker "extreme," which in fact denotes their contradictory status as both amateur and professional. These tend to be extremely difficult activities that require technical finesse and are often associated with the risk of serious bodily damage or even death.<sup>40</sup> On the one hand, these sports seem to be accessible to non-specialists (qualified trainers, clubs, organizations), which is surely due to their horizontal entry levels, for these sports are often first practiced as hobbies. On the other hand, they require incredibly difficult and time-consuming training regimes of the adept, and while they seem to promote a vision of collectivity (they build communities and are practiced in groups), they are ultimately individual activities.<sup>41</sup> The descriptor "extreme" introduces something interesting into the whole enterprise, for it effaces the contrast between athletic passion and the non-athletic everyday world, integrating these spheres into a more expansive life practice: a lifestyle. These spheres become codependent and therefore inseparable, so that the extreme athlete's social roles are all inextricably enmeshed.

There is also a nonathletic valence to breaking out of the daily routine. This gesture is linked to all forms of abandoning life routines in the relative stability of Western society, where routines are structured by a consistent rhythm of work, duties and pleasure forged off of middle class templates. The volume of published books, websites and magazines devoted to extreme exploits pulled off by renegades confirms the strong public interest in travel blogs and informal travel reportage that express a desire to disrupt the monotony of existence. These feats (e.g., setting a new record in an elite or niche discipline) are not broadcast in a sports context so much as in reference to the daily routines, social roles and duties that overpower us as twenty-first century subjects. In other words, these diverse travel narratives circulating in popular culture as thematic blogs, semi-literary essays and guidebooks (both digital and as printed matter) produce a discourse that expresses as much as about daily life and current socioeconomic problems as it does about travel itself as a decisive break from the domesticated and all-too-familiar existence of western man.

The travel discourse produced by these Himalayan climbers is at times a pragmatic record of authentic experiences and at times a layman's explanation of a remarkable feat. This discourse is profoundly linked to the widespread interest in extreme sports. At the same time, it revitalizes modern strategies (in altered forms) for describing travel, expressing the movement of the subject through space and conveying the extraordinary nature of practices that transcend everyday routine. These climbers' narratives are both sophisticated (demonstrating an expert knowledge of climbing and mountain terrain) and amateur (in terms of their literary strategies). They demonstrate a borderline position, for they do not fully conform to literature or pragmatic or non-fiction writing.

<sup>40</sup>V. Robinson, *Everyday Masculinities and Extreme Sport. Male Identity and Rock Climbing*, Oxford - New York 2008, pp. 41-59, D. Dornian, *Xtreem*; [in:] *To the extreme. Alternative sports, inside and out*, ed. R. E. Rinehart, S. Sydnor, New York 2003, pp. 281-391.

<sup>41</sup>R. E. Rinehart, S. Sydnor, *Proem* [in:] *To the extreme*, op. cit., pp. 3-7.

When we consider the modern genealogy of high mountain climbing, mountain literature figures as a unique variation of “life writing.”<sup>42</sup> However, as we see in Kukuczka and Bielecki’s texts, in the context of late modernity, we are witnessing a consistent and incremental repudiation of the modernist longing for an adequate means of expression. The vertical travel tale ceases to privilege literariness as the only tool that qualifies a text as “true” literature. Instead, it begins to express its own form of pragmatism rooted in the concrete register of “raw” experience. The Himalayan discourse is governed by the stern logic that is as clear and transparent as possible, satiating the “mountain appetite” of readers who typically cannot bring themselves to indulge in the pleasures of an extreme Himalayan expedition.

<sup>42</sup>While in the very definition of “life-history” (let me ignore the question of the disputability of this formula) there is some paradoxical exclusivity that favors literature, whereas in Himalayan narratives, especially in Bielecki’s book, the relation is clearly reversed or even annulled: it is climbing and its spatiality that comprise the foundation of writing this, because the climber is not focused on the possibility of combining his own practice and his own life with the machinery of literature. Cf. H. Bereza, *Sposób myślenia. 1. O prozie polskiej*, Warszawa 1989, p. 467-483; A. Karpowicz, *Proza życia. Mowa, pismo, literatura* (Białoszewski, Stachura, Nowakowski, Anderman, Redliński, Schubert), Warszawa 2012, pp. 13-22.

# KEYWORDS

Kukuczka

TRAVEL

*modernity*

**ABSTRACT:**

This article explores travel narratives in texts by Himalayan climbers. The author examines the modern provenance of the discourse of high mountain climbers, using two books as case studies: one written by Jerzy Kukuczka, and the other by Adam Bielecki. The article identifies the essential features of Himalayan narratives: the experience of space and vertical movement as a stylistic and narrative challenge, the relationship between memory, authenticity and autobiography, and finally, the textualization of experience as a stand-in for the climbing practice.

*Himalayan climbing*

**BIELECKI**

*c l i m b i n g*

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Przemysław Kaliszuk (b.1985) received his doctorate at UMCS in Lublin. His research interests include Polish prose of the late twentieth century, and the problems of modernity and late modernity in Polish literature.