

# Ryszard Kapuściński

## From Imperium

### Photographs

Zachęta  
National Gallery  
of Art

18 December 2010 –  
– 20 February 2011



Moscow, 1991

**A flag moved by** the hands holding it. Men and women, some barely entering life, others already of age, and between them Russia, swaying with the current of a restless river. This photograph is impressive. It is one of the fifty that have made up the exhibition *From Imperium*, a new presentation of the photographic work of Jerzy Kapuściński. First came the photo album *Z Afryki / Out of Africa*, published in his lifetime, and two years ago came out another, *Ze świata* [From the world]. It featured several pictures made in the years 1989–1991, during Kapuściński's travels through the republics of the (former) Soviet Union. The Zachęta show is the first major presentation of that body of work, featuring photographs selected from a total of several hundred. They were discovered in Kapuściński's archive by Bożena Dudko after the artist's death. Several grey envelopes and in them, strips of negatives and small prints of the author's favourite shots. The actual selection and the way it is organised suggest it was prepared for an exhibition, and a much larger one than that which took place in the autumn of 1990 during the Photography Days in Świdnica, where, in the window display of the Smyk store, twenty photographs from Ryszard Kapuściński's eight-month trip around the USSR, ended in September that year, were presented. In that case, claims the show's organiser, Jacek Czernik, the author had provided all the photos with descriptive captions, although only one such description has survived,

thanks to the fact that it was quoted in the event's newsletter *Luks* ('Drohobych, spring this year, corner of Czackiego and Mickiewicza streets, the place where Bruno Schulz was shot by a Gestapo man'). We are presenting this photograph in the exhibition. The wall plaque shown in it has made positive identification possible. The remaining photographs, making up a collection of nearly 1,000 shots, were never properly described. Writing *Imperium* proved more important. From the *Imperium* photographs come from two periods: 1989–1990 and 1991. During the former, Kapuściński focuses on events in cities like Moscow or Vilnius. We also find here series of images from Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia. In many cases, we can only guess where a particular photograph was taken. The other, much smaller, set from 1991 is almost exclusively about Moscow. A dozen or so prints have also survived for which neither the negatives nor prints exist. That is a great loss. Today, almost twenty years after Kapuściński's journey around the republics of the former Soviet Union, the Zachęta exhibition offers us a chance to see the life of the *Imperium*, as he saw it then, captured in photographic images. These several dozen black-and-white photographs form a unique epic narrative. Viewing the exhibition, it is worth reflecting on whether these pictures have stood the test of time. They would surely have not if they

had been just a photographic travelogue or simple documentation of the 60,000-kilometre trip around the fifteen republics of the former USSR. A characteristic feature of Ryszard Kapuściński's work is that he uses word and image in different ways. In 'Moja przygoda z fotografią' [My adventure with photography], his introduction to the album *Z Afryki*, he wrote, 'Well, I can't simultaneously be doing research for a news story or reportage and taking photographs, I can't be a journalist and a photojournalist at the same time. For me, these are completely different activities, mutually exclusive. This is because I view the world differently as a reporter and as a photo reporter, I look for different things, have a different focus'. From the *Imperium* photographs are by no means illustrations for the book *Imperium*. This is a standalone artistic statement. A unique emotional photographic reportage, or rather photo essay, consisting of a polyphonic collection of images featuring faces, places and events bound by a common denominator. The idea is similar as in *Imperium*, but the result is very different because of a different view adopted on the surrounding reality. When the photographs of this series are made, Kapuściński is already an experienced photographer with his own style. I browsed through this material with great interest, wondering whether these pictures are different from the African ones. Photographing the Soviet empire, Kapuściński went a step further: for the first time, he created

a photographic whole, a complete, finite story. The result made possible publishing a new photographic album.

The Soviet pictures represent a tenth of Ryszard Kapuściński's overall photographic oeuvre. Because of their subject matter, they live a kind of their own life, but they still fit harmoniously with the rest of the author's work because they bear the imprint of his style, already discernible in his African or South American photos. Here, Kapuściński again beguiles us with outstanding portraits of people. He was always interested first of all in the people. Writing about them and taking pictures of them. When comparing the Soviet photographs with the African ones, I get the consistent image of a photographer operating within a similar poetics. Kapuściński almost never accompanied his pictures with descriptive captions — probably because for him they were more than just a purely photojournalistic documentation of facts. This lack of captions is a dangerous trap for an archivist. I fell into it myself when I credited one of the pictures from the *Ze świata* album as 'Vorkuta, 1989', because many facts ensuing from the archive's original organisation suggested that was the case. Today, I know the picture shows a street in the city of Magadan. The year fits as well as the fact that there are millions of such streets, 'with small wooden cottages sinking lower with each snow melt', in Russia. Writing the captions for the photographs from *Imperium*, I tried to determine at least the date and the place. This was not always possible, though. In this work, I was helped greatly by Sławomir Popowski, Kapuściński's friend and a witness of his travels through the former USSR, and by Wojciech Górecki, an expert on Russia.

The selection includes two photographs from Kapuściński's 1979 trip to his home town of Pińsk, his first in forty years. I chose from them close to two hundred pictures. They fit greatly here and without them, the image of the 'imperium' would be incomplete. One is very clear in both form and content — a road with a sign saying 'Pińsk' (not in Polish anymore), with distant outlines of trees, clouds, a car, looming far on the horizon. Many of the photographs featured here are from street demonstrations in Moscow: the slogans, the banners, the faces. Serving as a perfect counterpoint for those are the pictures from the former Soviet republics.

I think Kapuściński travelled around the Soviet empire first of all as a writer and his photographic nature prevailed only in really special moments. This makes the pictures featured in this exhibition all the more valuable for us. In selecting the photographs for the show, I tried to pick as many as possible of those originally selected by Ryszard Kapuściński himself.

**Izabela Wojciechowska**

Izabela Wojciechowska died suddenly on 6 December 2010. For many years she was the custodian of Ryszard Kapuściński's photographic archive.



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**Coming to Moscow**, Ryszard always brought with him a photo camera, a Nikon, if I remember well, and a Sony transistor radio. The radio was what we, the Moscow correspondents, envied him more than anything else. Small, compact, with a special automatic search system and a list of the several hundred stations from all over the world that could be received with it. We didn't pay attention to the Nikon. To us, a photo camera seemed a natural extension of a reporter's work. And nothing more. A tool that you can create an illustration for a text with. If anything, we held a grudge against our own bosses for not being able to provide us with anything of the kind.

Ryszard mentioned that photography was one of his great passions. But it was only his first exhibition, at a small gallery at Polna Street in Warsaw (I still have the, seriously faded now, invitation, with an image of Rysiek sitting on the edge of the bathtub) — that made me aware of how important photography was for him. That as a means of describing the world it was equal in his eyes to literary reportage or philosophical essay.

When today I compare Rysiek's photographs from, say, Africa with the relatively few surviving pictures from his travels through the collapsing Soviet empire, what strikes me is their monochromaticity. The former are colour-rich and sunlit — and among the latter there is not a single colour one. Just black-and-white ones. Pure chance or a deliberate choice? I think it's rather the latter. In their mood, these pictures are like the world Ryszard describes in *Imperium* — kind of sad. And they couldn't be different. It was us, the excited correspondents, who were eagerly

going through the roller-coaster of Gorbachev's perestroika, fascinated with every street protest by the democratic opposition, with slogans like 'Communism to the communists, bread to the people' or 'Down with the KGB', arguing heatedly over how it would all end, whereas Kapuściński kept his cool... We talked about democracy, freedom and big politics and he only sometimes interrupted our disputes to offer a remark about the cultural, civilisational, significance of washing your teeth and wearing clean shoes. It may not be that important for the revolution itself but without it, the world will never change... I saw Rysiek excited like this over a photo only once: we went to Zagorsk (today: Sergiyev Posad) to see the Holy Trinity Lavra, an Orthodox monastery miraculously saved from the Poles during the Time of Troubles, which today plays a role similar to Częstochowa's in Poland. We saw the remnants of St. Sergius of Radonezh, the burial place of Boris Godunov. But Ryszard-the-photographer was fascinated by something else: the rear window of an old rickety tourist bus, spattered with Russian mud, not cleaned all winter... 'Look at the texture... It's incredible', Ryszard kept enthusing as he took yet another picture. I'd give a lot to find that photograph today.

**Sławomir Popowski**

1-5 Moscow, 1991

6 Byelorussia, road to Pińsk, 1979

7 Ukraine, Drohobycz, house in the Florianska Street, where Bruno Schulz lived between years 1915-1941

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**Reportage is a genre** which combines journalism, non-fiction and fiction writing. It is marked by objectivism, honesty and factual accuracy. A piece of reportage is a result of investigations carried out by the author, told in a style different than dry journalistic. The colourful language of reportage makes it possible to paint a broad context of the events. Lacking column-style subjectivism and personal tones, it is an account drawn up by a direct observer of the process. Reportage uses text and pictures, both still and moving. It performs a reporting function, but also a literary one. The contemporary mass media, with their quick montage of images and rapid information flow, have seemingly pushed the art of reportage into the background. Taking up reportage forms, artists approach the limit of what is regarded as artistic. Do they thus expand the boundary of artistic expression, creating a new form of reality documentation and commentary? Can we speak of artistic reportage? How does reportage function in the visual arts?

While static, photography is a medium that offers narrative possibilities. It records both realistic and poetic images, capturing a moment or a situation. Reporting photography — informational, journalistic — should be devoid of authorial commentary. It is an objective, though selective, illustration of an event. It is a different case with the photograph, a work of art, which besides informational and aesthetic functions carries other meanings as well. As an observer of a situation or commentator on social or political events, the artist contains in the picture elements characteristic for the reality at hand, which is a procedure close to reportage.

Olga Chernysheva's 2007 *High Road # 8* is a series of photographic portraits of immigrant workers from Central Asia. Their daily life, living conditions, dress and lifestyle, all shown in the pictures, report on and diagnose a social issue. In another work, the artist describes the Russian society in an analogous way: *On Duty* (2007) is a series of portraits of white-collar workers. Pensive and bored with the monotony of their work, they sit in their crossing attendant booths or ticket office windows, gazing into space, their thoughts wandering away from empty desk and duty uniform. The subjects pose in a convention dictated by the artist. Their surroundings are real — drab and poorly furnished offices — highlighting other issues noticed by Chernysheva. It is also worth mentioning her 1999 *Metro. Moscow*. The characteristic long, always crowded escalators, the sea of the passengers' heads and the stations' unique architecture have been captured in colour photographs. The pictures show the people of Moscow, talking about the urban tissue and the way it functions. Cramped conditions, crowd and semi-darkness are the metro passenger's daily reality. The viewer receives a photo report, a story about people.

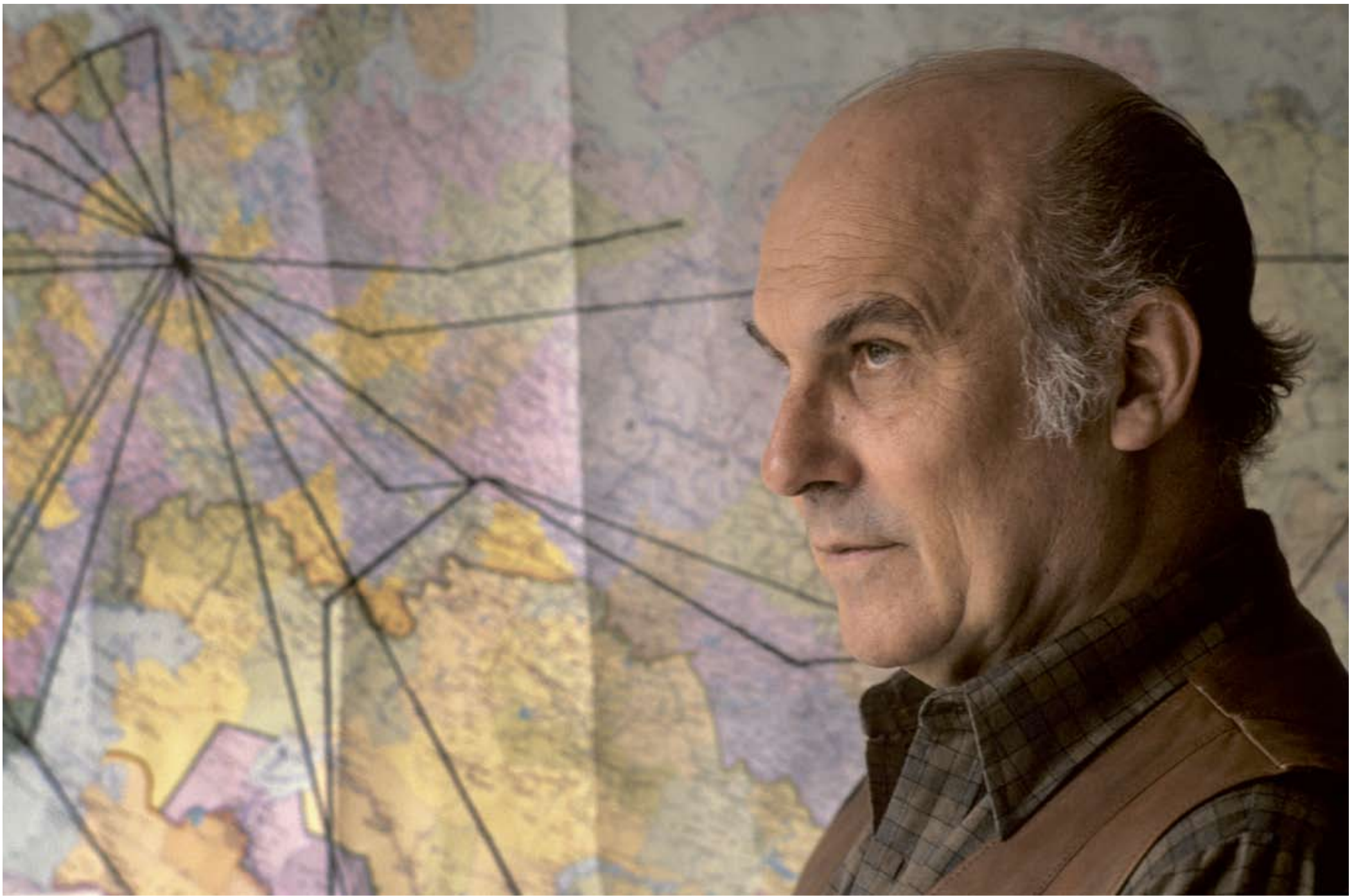
Adapted to the visual arts, photographic reportage makes formal variations possible. This way, the artist draws the viewer's attention to other aspects and meanings of reportage photography as well as emphasizing the greater significance of the image in contemporary culture. Zbigniew Libera's 2002–2003 *Positives* consist of photographs staged to resemble iconic documentary shots, such as *The Death of Che Guevara* (1967) or *Vietnam Napalm Girl* (1972). The reactions to the work were mixed — for some, it is scandalous. Libera directly alludes to certain images, journalistic photos, that function in the viewer's mind. Manipulating the capacities of human memory,

he highlights the way images function in our mental world. Showing a 'positive', or reverse, of famous traumatic situations stresses the complex issue of perception. Another project, Robert Kuśmirowski's performance *Paris–Luxembourg–Leipzig*, as part of which the artist made the 1,200-kilometre trip, uses journalistic technique in mischievous manner. Kuśmirowski chose to negotiate the route riding an original 1920s bicycle, dressed in period-style clothes, and his photo reportage of the trip was also in 1920s style: yellowed photographs showing the consecutive stages of his journey. Film and video have huge reportage potential. Critical art, which developed in Poland in the 1990s, showed clearly a new goal of artistic practices: besides experimenting with the form and technical potential of the video medium, artists were searching for new means of perceiving reality. Video finds its protagonists and artists interact with them, talking to the participants, trying to evoke certain feelings in them. Artur Żmijewski's videos such as *Our Songbook* (2003), *Pilgrimage* (2003) or the widely discussed *Them* (2007) ask difficult questions and provoke reactions. Żmijewski sets the filmed events in motion, like in the famous video *80064* (2003), where he manages to persuade a former camp prisoner to retattoo his forearm number. A change of optics entails a change of aesthetics.

Reportage-like video was also present in installations in this year's Berlin Biennale, which, under the motto of *What Is Waiting Out There?*, raised the issue of art's imitating reality. Starting with an exhibition of Adolph Mentzel's realist graphics, the Biennale curator looked chiefly for documentary works. *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*, one of Mark Boulus's installations presented at Berlin's KW Institute for Contemporary Art, consisted of two monumental projections screened on opposite walls. The work concerned the global economy and the mechanisms of oil trade. One of the videos was a dynamic montage of footage from the Chicago bourse, documenting the dealers' reactions and behaviour. The other had been made during the artist's trip to Nigeria, where he filmed the statements/manifestoes of the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), a militant organisation that sabotages oil production in the region. The lack of any direct authorial commentary makes the work seem particularly powerful. The two juxtaposed images complement each other — a reportage about armed militants shot in a small fishing village is enriched with the context of the Western world and its markets.

In the visual arts, reportage has become an interesting means of observing reality. Artistic reflection stemming from recordings of human reactions and statements, sometimes provoked or quasi-documentary, serves to tell the story of a given situation. This leads to broader conclusions about contemporary society and culture. So can we speak of artistic reportage as one of the forms of the artist's observation of, and interaction with, reality? The analysis of a given issue and depiction of its greater significance through photography, film, video, installation or painting (e.g. the 'pop banalism' of Wilhelm Sasnal or Marcin Maciejowski) is presented in the gallery context. The introduction of forms from outside the dominant high-brow canon makes it possible to signal issues previously ignored, or over-aestheticised, in art.

**Anna Tomczak**



Ryszard Kapuściński — writer, reporter and journalist in his studio in Warsaw. In the background, a map of the journey through the Soviet Union he made when working on *Imperium*, 1990. Photo Krzysztof Wojcik/FORUM

**In 1986, Ryszard Kapuściński wrote down** Stanisław Brzozowski's sentence from 76 years ago in his diary: 'God! God! it's really hard to be a Pole today, to want to think, to want to work'. Indeed, it was not easy for Ryszard Kapuściński, neither then, during the gloomy and oppressive time of martial law, nor earlier nor later. And yet all his life he worked, thought and wrote. He created a unique body of work — a narrative about the world of those excluded from the world, as seen from the Polish perspective, written in Polish by a Polish writer. Ryszard Kapuściński's work belongs to the most important tokens of Polish presence at the heights of contemporary culture. He came from Polish poverty, from Pińsk. He told me once that he wanted to write a book about the town to repay what he owed to his own roots. It is a great pity he did not live to do it. What he did succeed in doing was write a great — worthy of Gogol's pen — account of a trip to Pińsk. Ryszard Kapuściński understood very well 'those moments when calm, deep waters begin to churn and bubble into general chaos, confusion, frantic anarchy', when 'it is easy to perish by accident, because someone didn't hear something fully or didn't notice something in time. On such days, the accidental is king; it becomes history's true determinant and master'.\*

Like the greatest practitioners of the genre — Curzio Malaparte or Ksawery Pruszyński — Kapuściński was an alert observer of the dialectic of necessity and chance in moments when history has been unleashed. He was fascinated by Russia and other parts of the Soviet Union. The *Kirghiz Dismounts* is a portrait of Soviet-style modernisation in a Central Asian part of the empire. *Imperium* is a story about bad history and the collapse of the Soviet Union. He notes aptly that the non-violence principle dominated whereas 'today blood flows only where blind nationalism enters the fray, or zoological racism, or religious fundamentalism'.\*\* Having witnessed so many revolutions, Kapuściński understood a great deal about them. He understood that the winners are those who 'arrive later. Often people from the back rows or from the most remote parts of the countryside. The revolution devours all those who stood too close to the barricade on either side. ... The paradox of this situation, which, like a sinking ship, takes everyone down with it.' He understood that 'in politics, the winners are often those who at all cost, without ethical scruples or mercy — want to win. Politics calls firmly for pressure, aggressiveness. Everybody knows who wants to seize power, they feel it. They become hypnotised by it and watch the wrestlers,

casting their vote for those who fought with greater vigour, greater will to win. They want to surrender to the strongest, so as to feel stronger themselves.'

He understood that this is how nazism may have been born. He repeated after Karol Ludwik Koniński: 'A lower-class movement, crude, off-putting, eternal type who wants to beat, beat anyone.'

Indeed: an eternal type... Rysiek was truly as great at reading as he was at writing. He saw Poland everywhere, like Ksawery Pruszyński, whose work he held in very high regard. As a result, the Polish vision is today becoming an irremovable part of universal culture. Just as Karol Wojtyła's vision from St Peter's Basilica; Czesław Miłosz's visions from San Francisco Bay; the visions of Andrzej Wajda's *Ashes and Diamonds*; Zbigniew Herbert's visions of Mr Cogito's condition.

Ryszard Kapuściński was a rare in Polish culture example of a cosmo-Polish writer. The cosmo-Polish Kapuściński wants to know Others, because he understands that in order to know ourselves better we need to know Others, because they are the mirror in which we examine ourselves. He realises that in order to understand ourselves better we need to understand Others, to be able to compare, measure ourselves against them, confront ourselves with them. Kapuściński,

a citizen of the world, is opposed to separating ourselves from Others, closing the gates shut for them. Xenophobia, he seems to be saying, is a disease of the anxious, those suffering from an inferiority complex, frightened by the prospect of examining themselves in the mirror of Other cultures. Ryszard Kapuściński's work as a whole is about building mirrors in which we can see ourselves more clearly and distinctly. He was not only a great writer and unique witness of his time. He was also a very wise man. He understood and explained to us that 'our world, seemingly global, is in reality a planet of thousands of the most varied and never intersecting provinces. A trip around the world is a journey from backwater to backwater, each of which considers itself, in its isolation, a shining star'.\*\*\*

#### Adam Michnik

This text is an abbreviated and modified version of the essay *Rysiek dobry i mądry* published in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 27–28 January 2007

\* Ryszard Kapuściński, *The Shadow of the Sun*, Vintage 2002, p. 78.

\*\* Ryszard Kapuściński, *Imperium*, Vintage 1995, p. 323.

\*\*\* Ryszard Kapuściński, *The Shadow of the Sun*, p. 171.



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#### exhibition

18.12.2010 – 20.02.2011

**curators** Rene Maisner, Izabela Wojciechowska, Anna Tomczak (Zachęta)

**execution** Krystyna Sielska and staff

**film programme accompanying the exhibition**  
Magdalena Komornicka, Anna Tomczak

#### leaflet

**edited by** Anna Tomczak, Izabela Wojciechowska

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