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## The Naked Mountaineer in the Mirror of Myth

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### Abstract

The author puts forward the thesis that nowadays in Polish mountaineering literature (auto)biographical forms replace the older genre of expedition books. This change is the effect of the search for fully revealed “real,” and somehow “naked” man as the main source of contemporary’s cultural discourses, which was diagnosed by Michel Foucault as the “anthropological sleep.” The article is an attempt to analyse the mountaineering discourse as the set of transformations of myth (in accordance with Claude Lévi-Strauss’s understanding).

**Key words:** mountaineering, mountaineering literature, anthropological sleep, myth

**Parole chiave:** alpinismo, letteratura di montagna, sogno antropologico, mito

## The State of Nakedness

In his foreword to the Dirk von Nayhauß's book *Rozmowy na szczycie. Ekstremaści w górach* [Conversations at the Top. Extreme Sport Performers in the Mountains, original title: *Extrem am Berg: Mit 20 Alpin-Stars im Gespräch*] Emil Zopfi characterises its unusual concept in an interesting way:

A book about female and male mountaineers that does not include a single photo of a mountain or a mountaineer in a vertical wall is something unexpected. Novelty! The author Dirk von Nayhauß, photographer and mountaineer, does not deal with dramatic events in rock and ice, but focuses his attention on the human being. We look into the eyes of men and women, from facial expressions, gestures and body positions we get to know their personalities. Nothing disturbs the image, no hooks, rope, helmet or ice gear, no sports-wear with sponsor emblems (with few exceptions). Anything that could obscure or mask the true self has been removed. A person is shown as they are (or as they think they are), close up and sometimes exposed. (2010: 6) [translation from Polish: *Katarzyna Strębska-Liszewska*]

The above words are, in my opinion, representative of contemporary mountaineering discourse. Firstly, there is the conviction that “extreme sport performers” – their transgressive experiences – will allow a better understanding of human beings in general. Secondly, in order to understand the human being emerging from the mountaineering narratives, one has to bare him or her. Thirdly, therefore, the “ordinary” story must be accompanied by attempts to literally capture the experience – in this case, the catalyst function is that of photography, which reveals:

Faces, disciplined bodies, gazes, at times hardened, at times dreamy, fingers with grated nails and frostbite marks reflect joy and suffering in rock and ice; they speak of stages of passion and one feels the mysterious force that drives these people. (Zopfi 2010: 6–7) [translation: *Katarzyna Strębska-Liszewska*]

This narrative is part of the classic model of modern mountaineering, which is the discovery of extreme, direct experience as the main shaping force of the contextual human being.<sup>1</sup> Since the mid-19th century, mountaineers had been per-

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<sup>1</sup> “Experience is the key and the lack of it is foolishness,” states Dominik Szczepański ([2021]: 158). This is a typical mountaineering statement. It is worth recalling that the notion of experience is central to modernity (cf. Wolska 2012).

ceived as those pushing the envelope and aiming at a source experience of nature (world and human). The logical consequence thereof was a gradual change in the climbing model, namely, the abandoning of many amenities, such as the assistance of guides, oxygen or the “siege-style” climbing in the Himalayas. The best expression of these trends is the light alpine style, which, in the words of Wojciech Kurtyka:

[...] meant the art of living and a certain state of consciousness, the essence of which was the ability to fall in love with a mountain and, consequently, the ease of entrusting it unreservedly with one’s own destiny. Later, I happened to call this state the State of Nakedness, expressing vulnerability and trust with this term. The moment of entrustment was usually preceded by great dilemma, uncertainty and fear, a source of rich experience and insight. (1994: 22)

Of course, this “baring” of the mountaineer has its limits; the mountaineer cannot and will not completely discard the “burden” of culture. The need to face extreme conditions that represent objective human limitations has led mountaineering to re-evaluate many general philosophical slogans (mainly existential-phenomenological), reducing them to the dimension of cultural practice. The mountaineer is forced to make rational use of the amenities of civilisation, but with an awareness of their imperfections (Pacukiewicz 2012: 261–261). Thus, in seeking a kind of “nakedness” of experience, they remain aware of their dependence on such fundamental and seemingly obvious issues as the clothes they climb in.

Interestingly, however, contemporary issues of clothing (technology, fashion, ethos) have receded into the background in the popular discourse on mountaineering, with the “naked” mountaineer, at the same time, having taken the centre stage. There used to be a lot of attention paid to the colour of mountaineering gaiters, how to sew/make an expedition suit for oneself, the proper cut of climbing shorts, the space technology used in the production of climbing clothes, and finally how to “utilise” them (especially for hygiene purposes). Today, it would seem that the foregoing context has become trivialised, and the boundary of moral shame has also shifted.<sup>2</sup> The most important thing is the “real” human being, the public discourse is dominated by questions about the mountaineer, his or her motivations, the particular “case” of humanity they represent. It is noteworthy that in the analysed discourse there is now less of the relationality in general, and the context present in the statement quoted from Kurtyka, where the starting point is the mountain, that

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<sup>2</sup> This is how Félicité Carrel recalled her 1867 ascent of the Matterhorn: “I could have easily climbed to the top, but I was ashamed of my companions, for the wind blew my dresses too much” (after: Nyka 1976: 73).

is, the extra-human and the objective – ultimately mountaineering is, in his terms, the “Path of the Mountain” (1988–1989: 37–43).

Regardless of the transformations within mountaineering itself, it seems obvious that the “nakedness,” that is both proposed and searched after therein, has come to be an expression of broader cultural trends which define anew what is human. The direction of this search is well illustrated by a statement by Desmond Morris: “[...] in becoming so erudite, *Homo sapiens* has remained a naked ape nevertheless; in acquiring lofty new motives, he has lost none of the earthy old ones” (1967: 9). This is by no means about the biologisation of humanist discourse, but rather the notion that “nakedness,” broadly conceived, is the key to understanding human beings. The Enlightenment question of the Nature of Man, independent of his culture, still reverberates here, but it returns in a slightly different guise.

## The New Clothes

The aforementioned intertwining of nature and culture is ironically found in Thomas Carlyle’s novel *Sartor Resartus*, an apologia for the imaginary Philosophy of Dress. Here, the narrator points out that while man is by nature a Naked Animal, he is tacitly recognised as a Clothed Animal, and clothing as his distinguishing feature. It is worth quoting a longer passage at this point, which shows in a distorted mirror the discourse sketched above and the accompanying ideas about the human being:

How, then, comes it, may the reflective mind repeat, that the grand Tissue of all Tissues, the only real Tissue, should have been quite overlooked by Science,—the vestural Tissue, namely, of woollen or other cloth; which Man’s Soul wears as its outmost wrappage and overall; wherein his whole other Tissues are included and screened, his whole Faculties work, his whole Self lives, moves, and has its being? For if, now and then, some straggling broken-winged thinker has cast an owl’s glance into this obscure region, the most have soared over it altogether heedless; regarding Clothes as a property, not an accident, as quite natural and spontaneous, like the leaves of trees, like the plumage of birds. In all speculations they have tacitly figured man as a *Clothed Animal*; whereas he is by nature a *Naked Animal*; and only in certain circumstances, by purpose and device, masks himself in Clothes. (Carlyle 1902: 2)

Thus, directly beneath the clothing, only the human Soul, his essence, is already hidden. Note, however, the peculiar oscillation between nakedness and clothing: in essence, the Philosophy of Dress articulates human nakedness. At the same time, the title of the novel, which can be translated as 'The Tailor Re-tailored', reveals that the text of the philosophy of clothing is the fabric from which human clothing is made. Applying this to the problem of the "naked mountaineer," an analogous situation can be observed: a silent "baring" discourse envelops the figure of the mountaineer.

It is worth emphasising at this point that – from today's point of view quite paradoxically – the mountaineer was not always the central figure of mountaineering. Andrzej Wilczkowski points out the parallel between two dates – 1786 (the conquest of Mont Blanc) and 1789 (the French Revolution): "[...] it is about the (bloody) hatching of the empowerment of the human individual in society as a whole" (1991: 42). Nevertheless, the rise of mountaineering was team-based and appeared in an ontological context. Although George Leigh Mallory was referred to as a Superman in the United States, he became famous for stating that he wanted to conquer Everest "because it is there," so he placed the existence of the Mountain at the heart of mountaineering; interestingly, when Reinhold Messner conquered Everest without oxygen in 1980, he stated: "There is no answer. I am the answer" (Gillman 2000: 221–223), thus referred back to the man, though still contextualised.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, at the dawn of Polish mountaineering, the question of the subject was only a pretext for considering the meaning and model of contemporary mountaineering activities. It is therefore hardly surprising to learn about such words uttered by Roman Kordys in 1929:

[...] aside from "Tatra mountaineer" there is "Tatra mountaineering," aside from "alpinist" there is "alpinism," and therefore a certain common direction of thought and deed, not perishing with the individual, but alive and active throughout the generations. [...] Tatra mountaineering, therefore, although from its innermost essence an extremely individualistic activity, becomes to

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<sup>3</sup> It is noteworthy that in *Druga śmierć Mallory'ego. Zagadka Mount Everestu i jej rozwiązanie* [*The Second Death of George Mallory. The Enigma and Spirit of Mount Everest*], Messner acknowledges the mountaineer – whose almost naked corpse was discovered on the slope of Everest in 1999 and whose photograph was made public on the Internet – as the creator of the myth of the Mountain of Mountains: "[...] Mallory is the man to whom the mountain owes its myth, a myth respected by all, an aura that cannot be picked up by walkie-talkie or telephone, cannot be seen by telephoto lens or satellite and which television will not transmit. No diary of Mallory's last expedition survives, no photograph, nothing. But even so, above all Mallory is and will remain the man who gave Everest life and history" (Messner 2000: 204) [translation from Polish: *Katarzyna Strębska-Liszewska*]. In what follows, I will attempt to indirectly revise this claim.

a certain extent a social activity – albeit within a very strictly defined environment of people thinking and acting alike. (1976: 221–222)

It should be emphasised that despite the individualism, the pantheon of great figures, the Polish Himalayanism of the so-called golden period also upheld the team model for a very long time. However, this was not just about social issues. Also, the climbing experience, whose inexpressibility was stressed and considered the foundation of mountaineering, was treated as something very intimate that should not be eulogised. Attitudes seen as “Romantic” and “sentimental” were openly contested, with Ferdynand Goetel’s ironic pre-war text *Wycieczka – jak się o niej nie pisze* [Mountain Excursion – How One Shouldn’t Write about It] serving as a benchmark in this regard:

Summit! The view, the feeling. I use to know mountaineers who, having eaten, did not enjoy the sensation – but I have not known any who enjoyed it despite not having eaten. [...] Then of all these conditions, at the time I fulfilled just one – I ate. It isn’t strange that today I can remember nothing of the moments I experienced at the summit. (1976: 107)

Consequently, for a very long time, the identity of the mountaineer was more or less consciously characterised by its cultural function. And just as alpinism, regardless of the criteria adopted (sport, art, science), has always been “something more,” so too has the alpinist been recognised in a broad context as a being mediating between extremes and worlds; as a result, his symbolic humanity is stretched between the semi-divine and animal realms, sometimes he appears to be a supernatural man, a hero, at other times a monster fallen into atavism, stripped of what is human (Pacukiewicz 2012: 271–272).

The mediation between oppositions<sup>4</sup> is clearly visible in mountaineering narratives, which allows Agata Rejowska-Pasek to speak of a “fractured discourse of Polish mountaineering.” This fracture runs between six pairs of oppositions: spiritual – rational, path – summit, happiness – skill, nature mysticism – parameterisation, myth – history, community – individualism (Rejowska-Pasek 2016: 175–181). According to the author, it is responsible for both the shape of the “traditional ‘mythology’ of mountaineering” and the process of “‘disenchanted the world’ of mountaineers” (2016: 15). Arguably, this is because, in both its “modern” and “postmodern” vari-

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4 Confirmation of this tendency in thinking about mountaineering can be found in two titles of texts published in a single issue of the Gliwice magazine *Bularz* in 1991: *Cwaniacy czy frajerzy?* [Sly Dogs or Muggins?] by Andrzej Wilczkowski and *Apes or Ballerinas?* by Tom Patey. The above juxtapositions perfectly specify the two main lines of mountaineering discourse: altruism (social) vs. egoism (individualism) and biology vs. art.

ants, this discourse makes use of a very distinctive and firmly established (at least in Western European culture) symbolism; a point I will return to in my consideration of myth.

At this point, I would like to draw attention to the context in which the said series of oppositions may be used. In classical mountaineering narratives, they took on a spatial character, inscribed in the mountaineering route. They defined and were an expression of the symbolic relationship between “here” and “there,” “high” and “low,” but formed a concrete ontology. Nowadays, they seem to be more and more clearly inscribed in the framework of subjectivity in the form of states, behaviour, reactions of the individual subject to constant interpretation. This trend is responsible, I believe, for the great popularity of all kinds of mountaineering biographies, autobiographies and interview-essays, mostly of a memoir nature, which have superseded the expedition books.<sup>5</sup> It is significant that back in 1960, Jacek Kolbuszewski asked in the title of his review: “Czego nam potrzeba: *Notatnika alpejskiego*, czy *Siedmiu kręgów wtajemniczenia*?” [“What we need: *The Alpine Diary* or *The Seven Circles of Initiation*?”]. Comparing Utracki’s and Szczepański’s books, Kolbuszewski insisted on the form of conveying the climbing experience: the former reviewed author “does not really experience the climbing” (although he records it precisely), thus “losing the human being,” whereas the latter author “gives up [...] the dramatic nature of the description and the dramatic nature of the action in favour of showing the human psyche”; according to Kolbuszewski, “true literature” of mountaineering should follow the latter path (1960: 39–40). As a result, the Polish expedition book, although still very popular until the 1980s, was constantly criticised from literary and literary studies standpoints (Kolbuszewski 1961: 23–24, Tumidajewicz 1991: 106–110).<sup>6</sup>

Two points should be strongly emphasised here. Firstly, it should be remembered that from the very beginning the British expedition book was accompanied by personal accounts, and over time subjectivism became more and more a component of this convention (Holata 1991). Secondly, the “schematicism” of the post-war Polish expedition book is not due to the insufficient erudition of the mountaineering community, but to the firmly established cultural patterns organising the high-altitude experience around the model of the climbing route. At the same time, it would be naïve to claim that “sincere” (auto)biographies are similarly “schema-free” and thus “truer.”

5 This observation is rather intuitive and requires verification. Of course, I do not claim that (auto)biographies did not appear in earlier years, but there were rather fewer of them and they took on a somewhat different form (suffice it to recall, for example, Hillary’s *View from the Summit* or Kukuczka’s *Mój pionowy świat* [My Vertical World]).

6 A cultural studies approach avoids taking high culture as a criterion to value the “quality” of this literature (Pacukiewicz 2010: 218–231).

Interestingly, Kolbuszewski's postulate was fulfilled, but did not produce new literary forms; at the same time, however, it fitted well into the framework of colloquial journalistic discourse. It is not a question of subjectivising mountaineering narratives, but of condensing them: instead of the climbing route shown in an expedition book sometimes taking the form of a monotonous itinerary, in a biography we get impressions of the extreme journey of life, which is supposed to answer key questions about the human being. This is where the "naked mountaineer" comes in:

These are not the heroines and heroes that extreme sport performers are sometimes falsely believed to be: "We, too, are human beings" [...] "The mountains are the mirror of your soul," says someone else looking at us as if we were a mountain [...] What makes the extreme sport performers different from us "normal" people [...]? (Zopfi 2010: 6–7)

Here is a series of questions asked on the human/not-human demarcation line that leads towards the human being, while the mountains are, as it were, absorbed into his or her cognitive and existential horizon.

The phenomenon I am pointing to can easily be linked to the phenomenon of the "anthropological dream" described by Michel Foucault that shapes our contemporary humanist "sensibility"; perhaps a variety of which is the "mountaineering dream." According to Foucault, the figure of Man is merely the driving force behind the machinery of contemporary discourse: "[...] the pre-critical analysis of what man is in his essence becomes the analytic of everything that can, in general, be presented to man's experience" (2005: 163). Thus, the human being is the pretext of the discourse of knowledge, and his or her truth – the foundation of all truths. This discourse is made possible by the ambiguity and the split of man – *homo duplex* – between oppositions postulated in the humanities and sociology at the turn of the 20th century.<sup>7</sup> Significantly, this referring to the "Man" *ad infinitum* has the effect of neutralising the context, which becomes knowable only through the figure in question. Paradoxically, however, the more we talk about the man, the more he disappears behind the veil of discourse. It seems to me legitimate to draw an analogy between the anthropological dream and Rejowska-Pasek's proposition cited earlier, but with a minor correction: it is not the mountaineering discourse that is fractured, but the epistemological fracture – temporarily intended to bare the mountaineer – is what makes this discourse possible. The fabric of the discourse is, in effect, so "natural" that it imperceptibly veils this nakedness.

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7 Foucault identifies four fundamental correlations: human being as object and subject of knowledge (Being-Representation); the Empirical and Transcendental; the Cogito and the Unthought; the Retreat and Return of the Origin (2005: 127–156).



Perhaps this is also the starting point of any “demythologisation” and “debronzing” of Polish mountaineering, especially in its Himalayan variety. Over the years, discussions on ethos have taken on the character of discussing specific, personal cases. A statement by Andrzej Wilczkowski during the famous “Gliwice Summit” organised in the late 1980s is a case in point:

The situation now is that we have come incredibly close to the edge of human capabilities. And what (else) is there to say; as far as ethics then and today are concerned, in my opinion it was the same and is the same, only at some point all those who thought we were heroes suddenly saw that the king is naked. Which does not change things at all; we should be trying to make things better. For ourselves. Not for the public. (*Szczyt Gliwicki...* [Gliwice Summit] 1988–1989: 89)

This diagnosis appears in the context outlined above: the question regarding human beings leads to “baring” them and questions of ethics, although in this case the climbing context is still a fundamental issue, separate from journalism. However, over the years, the tendency to “bare” mountaineers has been stronger and stronger and has resulted in a stronger re-evaluation of the historical mountaineering ethos. In an interview given to Joanna Dzikowska, Wojciech Kurtyka subjected winter Himalayanism and the achievements of its main representatives to criticism, with the result that in this case it is difficult to say clearly whether the criticism concerns the ethos itself or is aimed at specific individuals (*Wojciech Kurtyka...* 2024). It has become a logical consequence of highlighting individual cases to challenge the general pattern of attitudes or to point out inconsistencies between it and reality; however, the discourse itself is thus proliferated and diffused. To summarise: it is not difficult to point out that the “baring” of the mountaineer is accompanied by the “demythologisation” of mountaineering itself, colloquially understood as its demystification, that is, revealing and acknowledging its true character; a discourse focused on the “naked” mountaineer is supposed to reveal the social truth of mountaineering. However, this relationship may appear differently if we reflect on the nature of myth and adopt an anthropological understanding thereof.

## The Demythologisation of Ontology and the Deontologisation of Mythology

In essence, the difference between classical and modern mountaineering is not qualitative but quantitative. The same components remain in play here, but are used with different intensity and in different densities. It is worth recalling Rejowska-Pasek's statement that both the classical mythology of mountaineering and the contemporary "demythologisation" of it are based on a foundation of the same oppositions. However, if you look at the history of mountaineering you will find that "classical mythology" as well as "disenchantment" do not simply follow one another, but intertwine and sometimes even coexist.

On the one hand, it is possible to speak of a kind of "demythologisation of the ontology" of mountains, as a result of which mountaineering, around the mid-19th century, became increasingly independent of the traditional symbolism and metaphors (based on the sacred and the sublime) that were supposed to "tame" the peaks. The ontology of the climbing route, that is, "[...] both a part of nature and a 'cultural text'" (Matuszyk 1998: 134), becomes the basis for a "fundamental ontology" of mountaineering based on the subject's experience of the distinct boundaries of nature and culture, as a result of which mountaineering "eludes [...]" from the immediacy of cognitive matrices and conventionalised patterns of behaviour, increasingly emphasising the individual's climbing style" (Pacukiewicz 2012: 55), and therefore, the "climbing style" has become increasingly independent of the "style of the epoch (Kolbuszewski 1991: 37–42), and mountaineering is developing its own ethos. At the same time, this ontologised ethos based on the direct experience of being draws on the "classical" archetypes and potential for meaning surrounding the categories of summit, road, boundary, while at the same time actualising them, in each individual experience. Paradoxically, then, "classical mountaineering" not so much disenchant the mountains as it subordinates them to new narratives that also belong to the mythological order, not only in terms of their content (the Mountain–Man relationship) but also formally (climbing as mediation).

Today, two trends have a strong influence on the shape of mountaineering: the widespread discussion (especially in Poland) of its ethos in the context of successive tragic events (Broad Peak, Nanga Parbat) and successes (K2), and the concomitant proliferation of symbolism defined by its ethos. In the first case, mountaineering is stripped of its "romanticism," the biographies of individual climbers and subsequent accidents become the basis for "baring" a situation in which the "classical" ethos does not correspond to "real" mountaineering; as we saw with Kurtyka, what constitutes the axis here is the process of "unmasking" particular persons. In

the second case, however, mountaineering and the mountaineer have long since become part of the reservoir of the modern imagination. As Margret Grebowicz notes, mountaineering today has its own global audience and its influence extends beyond the mountain world (2021: 11). As a result, the expressive “fundamental ontology” of the limits explored by mountaineering has dissolved into the world in the form of catchy metaphors exported far beyond the high-mountain context. A phrase “the Everest of...” has come to describe success in every domain, climbing signifies the “vertical mobility” of personal and individual development, and the climbing route is a metaphor for a good life, subordinated to successive goals (Grebowicz 2021: 15–19). This state of affairs is confirmed, among other things, by the fact that the climbers themselves have specialised in running various types of motivational courses for the business sector. In both cases, one can speak of a kind of “deontologisation of mythology”: “classical” discourse of mountaineering (in the form of its ethos), largely “untethers” itself from the ontology of cultural concreteness uncovered by the mountaineering experience and becomes highly metaphorical. Of course, this happens largely through media representations of various kinds. As Grebowicz points out, in this day and age, Mallory’s response has been replaced by HD images, and GoPro camera videos are a kind of *a priori* experience (2021: 13); social media accounts, also often based on photographs, become the equivalent of earlier narratives; discussions about partnerships and the nature of high altitude activities are based on live tracking of rescues and online maps. However, this is not only a kind of “simulation” of the high-mountain experience based on multiple representations, but also a secondary metaphorisation of the mountaineering ethos. “Mythology” remains, but undergoes not so much a re-evaluation as a rearrangement that changes both the style of the narrative and the place assigned in it to the human being-alpinist.

It seems to me that the difference built on a common foundation is mainly formal and occurs between the concepts of myth and discourse cited by Rejowska-Pasek. Obviously, there is no room here for an in-depth analysis of the two concepts and the relationship between them. I would like to highlight only the key aspects by referring to the proposals of two towering thinkers, a philosopher and an anthropologist, who can be considered representative in this matter: Foucault and Lévi-Strauss.

Firstly, according to Foucault, discourse is “a group of statements that belong to a single system of formation” (1972: 107), a certain well-defined way of thinking and speaking”; the production of discourse is organised by a set of general epistemological conditions, it is thus about “a way of giving shape to the requirement to speak” (1978: 35). Myth, on the other hand, although according to Lévi-Strauss: “The total body of myth belonging to a given community is comparable

to its speech" (1969: 7),<sup>8</sup> nevertheless, unlike discourse which, according to Foucault, *ad hoc* creates reality, rather reorganises it; myths are "[...] conscious approximations [...] of inevitably unconscious truths" (Lévi-Strauss 1969: 18). A clear opposition is thus drawn in these approaches: between the diachrony of a discourse overseeing the shape of current speech and the synchrony-anchored system analogous to language – for myth is "different language" (Lévi-Strauss 1990: 645). Being "a kind of logical tool" (Lévi-Strauss 1963: 216), myth orders the existing cultural reality by mediating between its oppositions and recoding between its different spheres. Of course, in the case of discourse and myth, it would not be a question of the *parole/langue* (message/code) alternative, but rather a different accentuation of the relationship between the two: the myth of mountaineering starts from ontological experience to shape the code of the ethos, the discourse treats the ethos as a distant reference point, dispersing the individualised experience in successive narratives.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, secondly, the function of the subject in shaping discourse and myth changes. In the structuralist interpretation, myths are independent of the subject; they think among themselves and "within" people, without their knowledge (Lévi-Strauss 2010: 19). Meanwhile, discourse is characterised by the "hyperactivity" of the speaking subject (Foucault 2000: 36): the will to truth motivates the subject to produce knowledge whose rules of speaking and thinking the subject has adopted in advance. It is not just a matter of subjugating the individual, but also of making him or her a "blind spot" of discourse (an anthropological dream). Therefore, the discourse is often governed by a poetics of confession, appealing to the "depth" of the individual experience, which is also present in contemporary mountaineering narratives. Meanwhile, although a myth must always be uttered by a specific narrator, it is only the transmission between successive versions that reveals the fundamental significance of the structure understood as a network of connections and transformations of cultural categories; interestingly, however, in view of further considerations, Lévi-Strauss does not wish to emphasise in this way the difference between collectively created myths and the literary works of a single author, for in his view it is a difference not of substance but of degree (1990: 626–627). Return-

8 The anthropologist uses the term "discourse" primarily for the order of *parole* (speaking) (1990: 633, translators' footnote).

9 In the case of fashion, Roland Barthes makes a more decisive cut: written clothing "is a systematised set of signs and rules: 'Language in its pure state'"; photographed clothing is a "semi-systemic" state, "fixed speech"; it is only in worn clothing that the classical distinction between Language and Speaking can be found (2009: 14–15). It is worth noting that "photographed clothing" is very close to "mountaineering discourse" not only through its relationship to speaking, but also because of the aforementioned great importance of photographic representation in shaping its relationship to experience.

ing to the theme of nakedness, it can be said that the discourse of mountaineering makes the “nakedness” of the mountaineer its *ad hoc* content, whereas myth seeks not so much to reveal “the naked man” (significantly so, this [*L’Homme nu*] is the title of the final volume of the *Mythologiques* series by the French structuralist) as to present him in its mirror.<sup>10</sup>

## Minimized Oppositions

To summarise the considerations so far, it would be fair to say that, firstly, rather than pointing to the rapture between myth and discourse, in the case of mountaineering we should think of the continuity of myth and, secondly, when trying to determine the significance of the mountaineer in contemporary culture, rather than revealing his or her “bare humanity,” we ought to see him or her as a function of mythic narrative and assume that their essence is revealed in the mirror of myth. But how do we reconcile this take with the shift in narrative convention signalled at the beginning of our considerations?

Adhering to the structuralist view of myth, we touch upon a significant paradox here. On the one hand, in Lévi-Strauss’s terms, myths “are in-terminable” (1969: 6), yet at the same time he suggests in the title of one of his texts that myths die... Here we touch on the question of the changing form of mythological narrative.

According to the French anthropologist, any change of narrator results in a modification of myth, especially when myth is transferred between social groups (Lévi-Strauss 1990: 675). In the case of mountaineering narratives, we are dealing with just such a transfer but doubled: with the transition between expedition book and biography, there is a shift from a somewhat collective subject to an individualised subject; in turn, mountaineering discourse (not only literature) is of such interest that it has become, as I have already indicated, universally useful, especially for some originally “non-alpine” social groups, although it serves for them primarily as a provider of capacious metaphors. Nevertheless, Lévi-Strauss states that although these transformations may take different shapes (e.g. concerning a message or a code) and occur in different contextual relations (myth–myth, community–community), nevertheless they always “respect a sort of principle of conservation of mythical material, by which any myth could always come from another myth” (Lévi-Strauss 1976a: 256). This means that even a change that leads to the scrapping

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<sup>10</sup> This is why Lévi-Strauss calls the study of myths anaclastic. On the structuralist metaphor of the mirror cf. Pacukiewicz (2016: 37–39).

off of a particular myth does not erase its structural reflections, which become the foundation of another myth.

Interestingly, Lévi-Strauss cites genre-specific transformations (to be understood here as cultural conventions rather than narrowly as literary conventions) as examples of the “weakening” of myths. Tracing the changes in the Story of Lynx between several indigenous peoples living in Canada, the anthropologist concludes that the myth can either take the form of the “romance formula,” that is, become “its own metaphor” due to the conventional treatment of the elements of the initial myth (1976a: 265), or move into the convention of legend, that is, to tell a “story” that legitimises the present state or possible future transformations of a given cultural group (1976a: 266–268). “Thus, a myth which is transformed in passing from tribe to tribe finally exhausts itself—without disappearing, for all of that” (Lévi-Strauss 1976a: 268).

Of course, in this case, the key change is to be found within the deep structure, and it is to this aspect that Lévi-Strauss draws attention when comparing his proposal with Vladimir Propp’s formalist analysis of the Russian tale. The anthropologist, while appreciating the Russian theorist’s role as a precursor, maintains the thesis of the analogy between tale and myth, but in his own way reformulates his initial intuition: “[...] myth and folktale exploit a common substance, each in its own way,” for “Tales are miniature myths, where the same oppositions are transposed to a smaller scale” (1976b: 130). This means that in fairy tales the starting point, as in myth, are sequences of oppositions, but these are “minimized oppositions”: “[...] tales are constructed on weaker oppositions than those found in myths. The latter are not cosmological, metaphysical, or natural, but, more frequently, local, social, and moral,” hence all permutations in fairy tales are “comparatively freer” (Lévi-Strauss 1976b: 128) (which can be read as a weakening of the code in relation to the message). At the same time, however, Lévi-Strauss stresses that the tale is not a “residual myth,” they rather form a pair, like a planet and its satellite – when the myth disappears “the tale tends to get out of orbit, to let itself be caught by other poles of attraction” (Lévi-Strauss 1976b: 130), which agrees with the contemporary gravitation of the fairy tale between different conventions and media.

The structuralist mechanism corresponds both to the relationship, based on a series of oppositions, between the “classical” myth and the “disenchanting” contemporary discourse in the Western European tradition (perhaps, viewed from this perspective, we should speak of their thickening or loosening) and to the shift proposed in this text between the expedition book and the mountaineering (auto)biography. In the latter case, there is also a weakening of opposition. It seems that the contemporary biographical formula focused on the figure of the mountaineer treats him or her less as a symbolic mediator between widely separated points in physical

space and between poles of culture, rather it seeks to present a holistic, coherent picture, where the initial oppositions become an inherent component of human existence, and as a result they become very close to each other. Based on the model of the road, the biography shapes life as a combination of opposites, insists on their seamless identification with each other: the summit becomes the success, the road the essence of existence, “there” and “here” can be reconciled in terms of identity, the world of the mountains becomes the world of a complex human subject – but nevertheless – of a subject. While in the “classical” model “[t]he mountain is a boundary but also a promise of mediation” (Kowalski 1996: 20), which also implies the relationality of the individual elements, here the mountain is somehow subjectively absorbed, it is always the drama or success of the individual. Climbers are no longer monsters, shamans, tricksters who, by overcoming limits, achieve a new form of existence (Kowalski 1996: 8); they are now real people (“of flesh and blood”) who reach the fullness of existence, ascribed to humanity in advance, who lay bare and proofread the text of humanity for coherence.

At this point, it is worth noting another aspect of myth treated as a cultural text. According to Lévi-Strauss, every text is built on the basis of two key logical operations, metonymy and metaphor, in a process of progressive decomposition of the syntagm and increasing generalisation of the paradigm: the former operation (metonymy) makes it possible to move from the particular to the whole and to introduce relations of appropriateness between them by expanding the code, whereas the latter (metaphor) enables synthesis but also recoding from system to system (1990: 678–679). According to the French structuralist, at the core of myth is the process of metaphorisation, but it should be remembered that metaphor and metonymy always work together (Buchowski 2004: 187–202, Czeremski 2009). In this context, the weakening of opposition can be seen as a process of metonymisation, in which binary pairs no longer generate successive sequences of mediation, but rather become their own repetitions, contained within each other, for example, top and bottom become the rungs on the ladder of success, and successive peaks weave into the horizon of biography. As a result, in contemporary mountaineering narratives, the finite code of mountaineering is kept in store, and what is moved to the forefront are the precedents of “bare life.” The progressive metaphorisation of mountaineering in contemporary narratives, on the other hand, primarily serves to metonymise along the line of climbing and life, which is to impose continuity on this construct. Mountaineering – once an exclusive activity – is becoming increasingly pragmatic, and not only epistemologically speaking. Despite the changing proportions, however, it is still up to us to decide whether what we want to read from the mountaineering narratives is a cultural myth or a fable of Man.

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## Abstrakt

### Nagi alpinista w lustrze mitu

Autor stawia tezę, że współcześnie w polskiej literaturze górskiej formy (auto)biograficzne zastępują starszy gatunek książek wyprawowych. Zmiana ta jest efektem poszukiwania w pełni odsłoniętego, „prawdziwego” i niejako „nagiego” człowieka, jako głównego źródła współczesnych dyskursów kulturowych, co Michel Foucault zdiagnozował jako „sen antropologiczny”. Artykuł jest próbą analizy dyskursu alpinistycznego jako zespołu mitycznych transformacji (w rozumieniu Claude’a Lévi-Straussa).

**Słowa kluczowe:** wspinaczka górska, literatura górska, sen antropologiczny, mit