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## Lévi-Strauss as a protagonist in his ethnographic prose: a cosmopolitan view of *Tristes tropiques* and its contemporary interpretations

*Lévi-Strauss como protagonista na sua prosa etnográfica: uma visão cosmopolita sobre Tristes Trópicos e as suas interpretações contemporâneas*

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# Lévi-Strauss as a protagonist in his ethnographic prose: a cosmopolitan view of *Tristes tropiques* and its contemporary interpretations

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Inscribed into the intellectual tradition of anthropology as literature, the article offers a critical view on an iconic (albeit problematic) text of the discipline, *Tristes tropiques*, by Claude Lévi-Strauss. The frame of reference is broadened to make the analysis more cosmopolitan, more biographical, and more historical. In accordance with the methodological principles of the anthropology of art, this approach focuses not just on the work itself, but also on its author and reception. Firstly, *Tristes tropiques* is situated in the broader context of ethnographic prose, thus showing the working of disciplining practices of academia (following Michel Foucault), which kept literary writings of anthropologists outside the profession. These observations are confirmed by the biographical context of the origin of *Tristes tropiques*. Next, applying James Clifford's categories, the analysis of the way the author presents himself in his text shows that he describes himself consistently as an anthropologist, not only rhetorically but also on a deeper level of his professional habitus. The reception of *Tristes tropiques* and its hero in various places and times – by the French public and anthropological community, a reaction to it in Brazil, where the author's journeys took place, and in Poland at the time of the post-Stalinist “thaw”, where the book was published for the first time in the Soviet bloc – shows how differentiated the process of reading is. These interpretations are finally put in its historical context and reasons for the unwavering popularity of *Tristes tropiques* are suggested: in addition to criticism, it inspires profound reflection and a broader interpretation of the modern world.

**KEYWORDS:** *Tristes tropiques*, Lévi-Strauss, travel writing, literary anthropology, history of anthropology.

Lévi-Strauss como protagonista na sua prosa etnográfica: uma visão cosmopolita sobre *Tristes Trópicos* e as suas interpretações contemporâneas ♦ Inscrevendo-se na tradição intelectual da antropologia como literatura, o artigo apresenta uma visão crítica sobre um texto emblemático (embora problemático) da disciplina, *Tristes Trópicos*, de Claude Lévi-Strauss. Ao alargar o quadro de referência, a análise torna-se mais cosmopolita, biográfica e histórica. Respeitando os princípios metodológicos da antropologia da arte, centra-se não apenas na obra, mas também no autor e na receção. *Tristes Trópicos* é situado no contexto mais amplo da prosa etnográfica, evidenciando a ação das práticas disciplinadoras da academia (segundo Michel Foucault) que mantiveram a escrita literária dos antropólogos separada da sua profissão. Estas observações são confirmadas pelo contexto biográfico de origem da obra analisada. Com recurso às categorias propostas por

James Clifford, verifica-se que o autor se apresenta na obra descrevendo-se clara e consistentemente como antropólogo, não só em termos retóricos, mas ainda a um nível mais profundo do seu *habitus* profissional. A receção de *Tristes Trópicos* e do seu herói em diferentes tempos e lugares – pelo público francês e pela comunidade antropológica, uma reação no Brasil, onde as viagens do autor decorreram, e na Polónia no tempo do “degelo” pós-estalinista, onde o livro teve a primeira edição no bloco soviético – mostra como o processo de leitura é diferenciado. Por fim, estas interpretações são situadas no próprio contexto histórico e são sugeridas razões para a incessante popularidade da obra: para além de criticismo, inspira reflexões profundas e uma interpretação mais lata do mundo moderno.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Tristes Trópicos*, Lévi-Strauss, literatura de viagens, antropologia literária, história da antropologia.

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IN THE TITLE OF HER RENOWNED ESSAY “THE ANTHROPOLOGIST AS hero”, Susan Sontag (1994) placed Lévi-Strauss on a high pedestal of human and intellectual recognition.<sup>1</sup> The anthropologist is a hero because he struggles with the difficulties and dangers of his travel adventure, which he takes on in a search for alleviation of the alienation experienced in the modern Western world. But he is also a hero for grappling with the philosophical aporia of the known/unknown. And he does all this in a way that shows literary mastery.

My intention is not to distance myself from Sontag’s enthusiasm, but I hope to look at the anthropologist from a different perspective. I want to examine him as a literary hero and place him in a certain interpretive context in which he has previously not been seen (at least in anthropological terms). In this essay I present the results of my analysis of *Tristes tropiques* (Lévi-Strauss 1973 [1955]) as a representative of the literary genre which I call ethnographic prose.

It is not easy to consider the question of the genre of writing that characterises Lévi-Strauss’s work. Clifford Geertz (1988) settled this issue in his important essay “The world in a text: how to read ‘Tristes tropiques’”, in which he claims that we are dealing not with one text, but with several overlapping ones: above all, this is a travel book (comparable to works by Burton, T. S. Lawrence, Gide, Loti, Malraux), but at the same time it is ethnographic (the mystique of

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1 I would like to thank: Jadwiga and Jan Chroboczek, Ricardo Nascimento, Agnieszka Pasieka, Wiktor Stoczkowski for their help in my research and their comments on this text, and Ben Koschalka (for improving my English).

fieldwork and a neat presentation of structuralism), philosophical (references to Rousseau), a reformist treatise (radical critique of colonialism), while not ceasing to be a symbolic literary text (in the tradition of Baudelaire, Mallarmé and Rimbaud). And all this to create the myth of the History of a Quest and the myth of the Anthropologist as Adventurer. In his essay, Geertz discusses the various narrative levels in Lévi-Strauss's work, but I am interested in it mostly as an anthropological travel book.

It is important to note that the pioneer of critical-literary interpretation of Lévi-Strauss's oeuvre was James Boon in his 1972 book *From Symbolism to Structuralism: Lévi-Strauss and Literary Tradition*. In one of his later texts, he tackled the topic of "heroism", which is particularly interesting to me here. According to Boon (1990: 161, 163):

*"Tristes Tropiques* was an autobiography dissolving its 'self' in the act of discovering a cross-cultural, transhistorical 'language', a method. It was a quest *en texte* that metaphorically figured the world's forms, experienced across its tribal vestiges, its wartime outcast in their degraded circumstances. [...] It was and is a book of its culture (France, the West) and against it, a book of its century and against it, and also against those few other centuries of the West's political mission to dominate the world's differences."

Boon's important observations emphasise the ambiguity of Lévi-Strauss's work, as Sontag also indicates.

*Tristes tropiques* is discussed in many contexts and discourses. To name but a few: in the framework of the French tradition of ethnographic writing (e.g. Debaene 2010a), together with anthropologists' "academic" works (e.g. Clifford 1997; Geertz 1988), or in the context of the popularisation of anthropology or its being engaged (e.g. MacClancy and McDonaugh 1996; Eriksen 2006). Furthermore, in the context of ethnographic heroism (Doja 2005; Hartman 2007), anthropology of tourism (Graburn 1983; Crick 1995); various views on colonialism and racism (Bastos 1998; Douglass 2003; Visweswaran 2010), and many others. I will refer to these works in later parts of my paper.

#### ETHNOGRAPHIC PROSE: CHARACTERISTIC QUALITIES

More or less until the 1970s, the academic discourse binding in anthropology did not allow for ethnographers' own experiences, besides not leaving much room for their literary creativity. In order to express their experiences, doubts and fascinations and portray the background of their fieldwork, as well as to fulfil their literary ambitions, some of them wrote prose in addition to their regular monographs.

By the term “ethnographic prose” I understand various forms of literary works written on the basis of researchers’ experience in the field. This category includes travel books, novels, memoirs, autobiographies and diaries. In other words, both fact and fiction. Characteristic is the interesting literary form (vivid, riveting and providing readers with aesthetic pleasure) as well as the wide readership to which these works are addressed. In contrast to ethnographic prose, formal field monographs are usually written for other anthropologists, often in a hermetic language, as a stage in the author’s academic career. The main difference here, then, is the virtual reader (wide audience or professional anthropologists) as well as the resultant form (“literary” or “academic”).

When I examined the biographies of the authors of ethnographic prose, it turned out that almost all of them produced their literary works while outside of academia. They worked in museums, research institutions and other places. Good examples are: Adolph Bandelier, working for the Archaeological Institute of America; Michel Leiris, Jacques Soustelle and Georges Balandier for Musée de l’Homme; Maria Czaplicka, who wrote her travelogue as a Siberian explorer before taking a lectureship at Oxford, and many others. There were very few active academics among ethnographic authors: only Melville Herskovits (who wrote his memoir with his wife, Frances), Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, Hilda Kuper and David H. P. Maybury-Lewis.

Some anthropologists, before becoming involved in this discipline, were interested in literature, which they also often practised (such are the cases of Maria Czaplicka, Zora Neale Hurston, Michel Leiris, Hilda Kuper and Alicja Iwańska). For these authors, the experience of fieldwork, just like any other, was a potential literary material. Without doubt they were interested in how to describe their meetings with native culture not only from an academic point of view, but in other ways too. This might mean subjective, authorial, personal, and introspective writings. The researcher’s experience, in a natural way, became the axis of the narrative.

This illustrates very well the fact that writing was (and still is) one of the more important disciplining practices reinforcing the “scientific character” of the ethnographic enterprise in academic discourse (I recall here Michel Foucault’s concept of discipline, as presented in Foucault 1975). This clear division of literature and science also shows a typical motif of modernist thinking involving organising and classifying (the later, postmodernist thinking permitted a “blurring” and mixing of genres). James Clifford (1986: 13) adds that in the writing of anthropologists the subjectivity of the author was separated from the objectivity of the text, although some works (e.g. *Tristes tropiques*) were “disturbances, but they were kept marginal”. According to him, it was only later that a sub-genre of ethnographic writing, the reflexive field report, appeared. I do not agree with Clifford in this matter, as I believe that both the

authors and the readers of the ethnographers' literary enterprises in the classical period of the discipline's development clearly defined their "genre" and distinguished it from academic writing. This is evident when one reads prefaces to the works of ethnographic prose, as well as the reviews of them written by anthropologists for professional journals.<sup>2</sup> Ethnographic works of prose, then, were no "disturbance", as Clifford has put it, but a separate genre with a specific poetics. It could be said that anthropologists wrote literary works with their "other hand", not the one used for their academic works. They changed their stylistic code as if changing between linguistic codes.

In this article I am particularly interested in one genre of ethnographic prose: travel books written by anthropologists. I will begin by attempting to describe the "travelogue pact" formed by the author and his/her readers. Here I refer to the concept of the French literary scholar Philippe Lejeune (1975) and his term "autobiographical pact", which assumes that in the narrative about him/herself the author describes facts from his/her life which really happened, as opposed to the "novel pact" (where the author can and should "make things up"). What elements of the "travelogue pact" can we distinguish? Above all, readers expect the author to describe what he/she really saw. The narration takes place in the first person, which translates into self-reflection and self-expression. It is therefore a kind of account by a witness who constitutes a filter between the reader and the reality described (Douglass 2003: 128).

Readers also harbour hopes that the author's literary talent will ensure them aesthetic pleasure, as well as illusions that they themselves are participating in the described events, impatiently waiting to see what will happen next. The narration must therefore be lively, dynamic, appealing to the senses, describing adventures and not shunning moral judgements (see Wheeler 1986).

The anthropologist writing a travel book takes into account a certain fundamental distinction connected with the writing methods: the anthropologist should pass on "knowledge" about the reality studied, i.e. "hard" facts gathered in the field and put in his/her theoretical system, whereas the traveller above all describes his/her "impressions" as a representative of a civilisation encountering the exotic. To put it somewhat simplistically, works of ethnographic prose combine these two writing methods; they attempt to transmit knowledge in a literary way. The objective of the exercise therefore remains "scientific", although the style is often impressionistic and appeals to a wider range of readers.

2 A good example is *The Savage and the Innocent*, in the preface of which Maybury-Lewis (1965: 9) wrote: "This book is an account of our experiences; it is not an essay in anthropology. Indeed I have tried to put down here many of those things which never get told in technical anthropological writings".

The tradition of French ethnographic prose constitutes a particular case, as shown clearly by the literature scholar Vincent Debaene (2010a) in his study *L'adieu au voyage: L'ethnologie française entre science et littérature*. His inspiration for writing this book was his observation that the representatives of the first generation of French ethnographers, who were all pupils of Marcel Mauss, usually wrote two books after returning from the field: an academic monograph and a literary book. This was the case with Michel Leiris, Maurice Griaule, Jacques Soustelle, Alfred Métraux, Georges Balandier and, of course, Claude Lévi-Strauss.

According to Debaene, the reason for these ethnographers writing two works of different genres was the nature of French anthropological theory, and in particular its connection with philosophy and nostalgia for the Enlightenment, or even the Renaissance.<sup>3</sup> This could be seen, for instance, in the choice of subjects or perception of society. For Mauss this meant the atmosphere, moral climate and way of thinking. Social fact had a moral nature. And it was here, according to Debaene, that the problem appeared, because ethnography did not produce good methods for documenting non-material reality. It is impossible to describe the “atmosphere” or “moral climate” of a culture in a scientific way. In order to do so, anthropologists reverted to literary techniques.

The specificity of the French tradition, then, would consist in anthropological theory itself pushing ethnographers into the arms of literature, and I would add that this was all the easier as those concerned were mostly scholars associated with museums and research institutions. French anthropology was and continues to be unique from an institutional point of view insofar as it has always been conducted mostly in research institutes, which are also educational centres (see Rogers 2001: 485). Their mission is to promote academic training through research.

#### TRISTES TROPQUES AS AN EXAMPLE OF ETHNOGRAPHIC PROSE

How does Lévi-Strauss's work fare against this background? On the one hand, it is an obvious example of what Debaene describes: this stylistic duality of the writing of French anthropologists, and, one might say, the outstanding example of it. Furthermore, its author had direct links with philosophy as a result of his education and made frequent references to the classics, especially the Enlightenment as an ideal of thought (Rousseau in particular). Lévi-Strauss himself, in the chapter “How I became an anthropologist” near the beginning of the book, emphatically shows his individual intellectual path: from the futility of philosophy to the neolithic extensiveness of anthropology: “My mind

3 The connection between French ethnological tradition and philosophy has long been recognised (Lowie 1937: 196; Saleminck 2000: 309).



was able to escape from the claustrophobic, Turkish-bath atmosphere in which it was being imprisoned by the practice of philosophical reflection. Once it had got out into the open air, it felt refreshed and renewed" (Lévi-Strauss 1973 [1955]: 59).

On the other hand, though, Lévi-Strauss does not fit the model of the 1930s' French anthropology. Firstly, his area of research was South America, where he searched for the most primitive natives. Most of his colleagues did not share this fascination, choosing instead to study the French colonies in Africa, which had already been subjected to the process of modernisation (this is discussed, with reference to Leiris, by Price 2004: 28).

Secondly, Lévi-Strauss was not a pupil of Mauss, although in later years he emphasised his affinity with him. He was influenced by American anthropologists, however, which he expressed emphatically: "the authors to whom I willingly proclaim my debt, Lowie, Kroeber, Boas" (Lévi-Strauss 1973 [1955]: 59).

Furthermore, Lévi-Strauss was not a particularly active participant in the French intellectual and artistic life of the 1930s (described so thoroughly by James Clifford 1988), as for most of this period he was on the other side of the Atlantic. The atmosphere of the time did, however, pervade *Tristes tropiques*, as is especially visible in the surrealist practice of making familiarity alien, as well as in the use of collages and paradoxical juxtapositions. This surrealist value of the book is rendered well by the illustration that decorates the dust coverjacket of the first edition of *Tristes tropiques* from 1955 (figure 1). It makes use of a drawing done by a Caduveo woman depicting the image of a native woman who, instead of a face, has a subtle and complicated arabesque. This picture brings forth associations with 1930s' art, which draws inspiration from the artistic creativity of "primitive" peoples. In this case it is a work of "primitive" art, and the surrealist effect is thus strengthened further.

Another circumstance that distinguished Lévi-Strauss from other French anthropologists of the time was his several years experience of emigration, first in São Paulo, and during the war in New York (the significance of this period in his life is discussed by Debaene 2010b); as well as his later work in French diplomacy and for UNESCO (Stoczkowski 2009). We should also stress that Lévi-Strauss's book, unlike other texts of French ethnographic prose, was written not immediately after his return from the field, but only over a dozen years later, and moreover following an external impetus.

The biographical context of the work was presented by the author himself in a discussion with Didier Eribon:

"After this double misfortune I was certain that I would never again do what is known as a career. I made a break with my past, rebuilt my private life and wrote *Tristes tropiques*, which I never would have dared publish



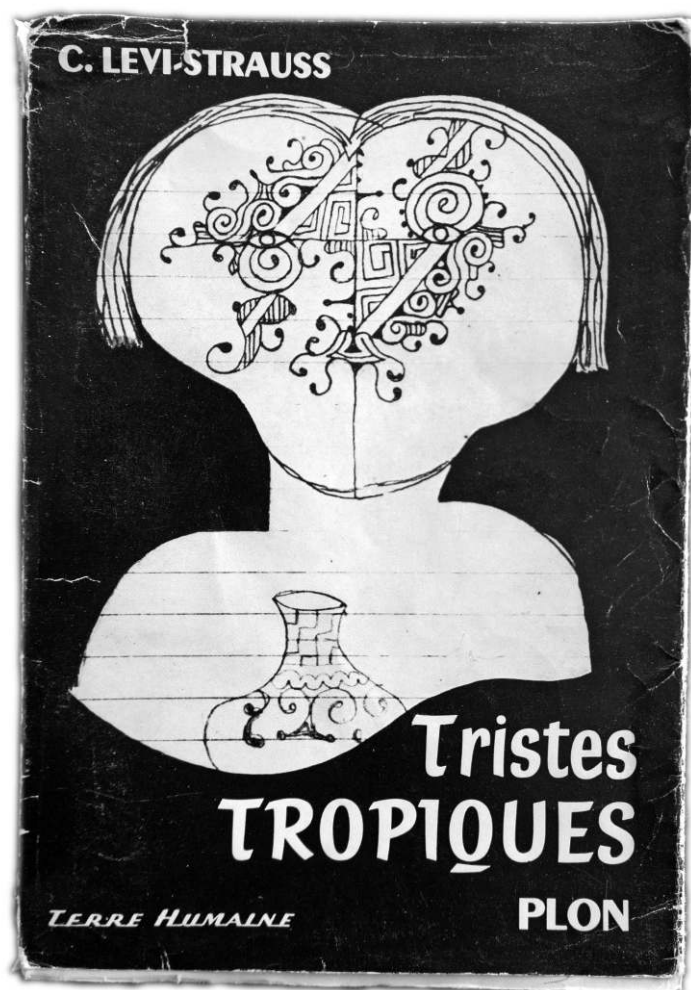


Figure 1  
Coverjacket of the first edition of *Tristes tropiques*, 1955.

if I had been involved in applying for any university job whatsoever. [...] I loosened myself up too much [*se déboutonner*] as Métraux liked to say” (Lévi-Strauss and Eribon 1994 [1988]: 64, 75).<sup>4</sup>

However, Lévi-Strauss’s biographer Patrick Wilcken (2011: 82) shows that, in spite of these pessimistic visions at the time, his career was then developing very promisingly, as in late 1950 he became director of research at the Section 5 of the *Ecole pratique des hautes études*, which carried out studies in religion.

What led Lévi-Strauss to write *Tristes tropiques*? He told Eribon:

“At first, the proposal of Jean Malaurie [...], who had created the series *Terre humaine*. The idea of writing about my travels had never crossed my mind before. In the end, with time, I acquired a certain distance. It was no longer about copying out a diary of the expedition of sorts. I had to rethink my old adventures; I had to think about them and philosophise about them, form conclusions. [...] I suffered from a guilty conscience that I wasn’t working on a second volume about the complex structures of kinship [...]. I thought I was committing a sin against science. You can see that in the book, especially the first edition, which was full of serious mistakes” (Lévi-Strauss and Eribon 1994 [1988]: 73).<sup>5</sup>

Lévi-Strauss’s words show clearly the workings of academic disciplining, of which he himself was aware.

This self-image needs more contextualisation, which can be found in Pierre Bourdieu’s *Homo Academicus* (1984), where Claude Lévi-Strauss is presented as an example of an alternative career trajectory. He points out that the Collège de France has occupied a unique position in the French academic field from the very beginning, as it was established against the Sorbonne and academic conformities. Professors at the Collège were “consecrated heretic”, many of them lacking any power in university institutions. But at the same time the Collège was (and still is) a very prestigious and dynamic institution, enjoying more freedom and encouragement for ambitious projects. Thus we can imagine that his writing of *Tristes tropiques* was more acceptable for a future Collège de France professor than for a professor at the Sorbonne.

4 The “double misfortune” refers to the fact that, twice in succession, Lévi-Strauss failed to be elected to the prestigious Collège de France.

5 Jean Malaurie (born 1922) is a well-known geographer, ethnohistorian and writer. He participated in an expedition to Greenland. In the mid-1950s he proposed the “*Terre humaine*” series to Plon publishers, the idea being that it would not be “normal” travellers’ reports that be published, but “voyages philosophiques”. Several literary books by anthropologists were published in this series.

As for the literary qualities of the book, the author himself did not place his work in the tradition of ethnographic prose. He did not refer either to Leiris, or to Griaule, or even to his friend Métraux or American authors. One name, Mac Orlan, mentioned by Lévi-Strauss as a source of his literary inspiration, comes from outside of this tradition (Lévi-Strauss and Eribon 1994 [1988]: 74). Pierre Mac Orlan (1881-1970) was a very popular French writer, maker of reportages, songwriter and author of pornographic novels (under various pseudonyms), film critic and visual artist, member of the Montmartre artistic *bohème*, World War One veteran and war correspondent. Of him it was written that he tried to bring forth a new era of Jules Verne by discovering with a fresh eye the geography of the world in which he found himself. And also that he was particularly interested in the opposition between, on the one hand, eternal ways of life and people in the margins such as travelling jugglers, and on the other, the rationalism of the modern world (Lykiard n.d.). We can surmise that this inspiration from an author looking with a “fresh eye” at the world around him matched the approach of the anthropologist, who in just the same way attempted to view the Amazonian Indians, the architectural chaos of São Paulo, or Asian cities.

However, although Lévi-Strauss did not refer to the literary works of his anthropological colleagues – or perhaps because of this – it seems as if certain parts were directly addressed to them. (While reading, I sometimes had the impression that, after one of his stylist fireworks, the author seems to be saying “That’s how to write, Michel Leiris!”) Although *Tristes tropiques* is an extremely original work, its author drew much from his contemporaries, and the book sits well in the tradition of the writings of French intellectuals leaving the metropolis to search for knowledge and enlightenment (Wilcken 2011: 207).

The book more than fulfils the “travelogue pact”. We assume that Lévi-Strauss really was everywhere that he claims he was. We would be disappointed if it turned out that, for example, he described the Tupi-Kawahib using other sources, and never in fact reached them himself. He also made the book engrossing, and we are impatient in “waiting for the savages”. We find enchanting his descriptions using fresh and bold metaphors. *Tristes tropiques* also fits the bill of travelogue insofar as its author-protagonist described his “impressions”. On the other hand, the book does not fulfil the requirements of travel literature popularly understood as vivid descriptions of natural and cultural exotica – instead, we find an image of a tropical world as “a seedy and decrepit version of Western civilisation converted into a corrupting global force” (Douglass 2003: 115). The book is a good example of an ethnographic travelogue, as it presents not only “adventures”, but also the scientific results of the enterprise as well as an outline of structural theory.

## LÉVI-STRAUSS AS A PROTAGONIST OF HIS PROSE, I.E. A TRAVELLING ANTHROPOLOGIST

What, though, defines this particular type of travel book written by an anthropologist? Above all, the author distances himself from the concept of the journey as an objective in itself, which I suspect results from the logic of scientific disciplining. Lévi-Strauss lays his cards on the table right at the start of the book in the famous and often quoted sentences “I hate travelling and explorers. Yet here I am proposing to tell the story of my expeditions” (Lévi-Strauss 1973 [1955]: 17). This line has been interpreted by various authors on a number of occasions; I would like to focus on its “distancing” meaning. Anthropologists travel the world, Lévi-Strauss seems to be suggesting, but they do not do this out of a tacky desire to travel and search for exotic tourist sights. They travel because they must, but they do not like to. It is just like with writing: true literature, claim writers, emerges only from travails and suffering; only hacks write with pleasure. In this first line of *Tristes tropiques*, then, at one fell swoop the author distances himself from “ordinary” travellers (as he explains in the next paragraphs), creates an attention-grabbing paradox, presenting himself here as an “ornery and ironic persona” and expresses a certain elitist vision of his profession (Narayan 2007: 133).<sup>6</sup> This coincided with a negative evaluation of tourism as inauthentic activity, which was characteristic of anthropologists until recently (Graburn 1983).

However, the negative image of travellers is not only about their voyages being an objective in themselves, but about the fact that they personify certain cultural characteristics which according to Lévi-Strauss are mythologised by society. He wrote provocatively that

“It is obvious that this ‘quest for power’ [typical of young people in native societies] enjoys a renewed vogue in contemporary French society, in the unsophisticated form of the relationship between the public and ‘its’ explorers. [...] [they] are all, in their different ways, enemies of our society, which pretends to itself that it is investing them with nobility at the very time when it is completing their destruction, [...] I refuse to be the dupe of a kind of magic” (Lévi-Strauss 1973 [1955]: 40-41).

This can be understood as follows: the traditional model of heroic manhood, aggressive and seeking adventures (see Connell 1995), is today dysfunctional in Western society, and can only be fulfilled outside of it, for example during exotic and dangerous expeditions. According to Lévi-Strauss, the enthusiastic

6 He was consistent in his attitude, as he refused the Golden Pen prize for travel and exploration books (Dosse 1997: 135).

public adoration of travellers who embody this mythical model might give the impression that it continues to be socially desirable, which is not the case.

Lévi-Strauss's book does, however, present the narrator-protagonist as just that, a heroic researcher struggling with various problems in a bid to gain knowledge and experience. Sontag (1994: 74) noted that anthropology "is one of the rare intellectual vocations which do not demand a sacrifice of one's manhood". One can also encounter the opinion that fieldwork is popularly viewed as a form of adventure, and the role of the anthropologist merges with that of the traveller (see Lutkehaus 2010: 235). In my opinion, both were modal realisations of the model of heroic manhood: different incarnations of the same myth. In the protagonist of *Tristes tropiques*, we can thus see manifestations of that traditional active masculinity in a new, "scientific" version.

On a number of occasions in *Tristes tropiques*, Lévi-Strauss criticises travellers and their literature for dazzling readers with descriptions of "barbarian" customs, and for ethnocentrism, resulting mainly from the fact that they made no attempt to live like the locals. The narrator-protagonist did do so, and was able to note that:

"at that moment I understood the alleged gluttony of savages, which is mentioned by so many travellers as a proof of their uncouthness. One only had to share their diet to experience similar pangs of hunger; to eat one's fill in such circumstances produces not merely a feeling of repletion but a positive sensation of bliss" (Lévi-Strauss 1973 [1955]: 322).

At the same time, though, he often describes himself as a "European traveller" or a "conscientious tourist". This ambivalence (or perhaps duality) is present throughout the book.

Marc Augé (1995: 86) adds one more dimension to this picture by writing that travel constructs a fictional relationship between the looking and the landscape and where the position of the viewer established the nature of the spectacle. For Augé, Lévi-Strauss's hatred for travel is an expression of his disagreement with the formation of "non-places".

But there is also another view of the problem expressed by contemporary researchers of tourism. They claim that there is not much difference between anthropologists and tourists. They are both direct descendants of colonialism, and they benefit from the encounter with the Other; they also share a material infrastructure offered for travellers, their romantic motives and exoticising of the Other. Tourists and anthropologists have structurally overlapping identities (Crick 1995: 211). One has to add here that the authors have mainly Western tourists and Western anthropologists in mind.

Let us now examine the narrator-protagonist of *Tristes tropiques* in order to establish whether, aside from direct declarations, he presents himself to readers

as a disciplined ethnographer, or rather as a typical traveller. This analysis will be helped by James Clifford's essay on spatial practices in which he analyses the ways of describing anthropologists' research situation and professional habitus in classical field monographs (often created in negative reference to travel literature; see Clifford 1997).

Firstly, "being there" is more important for the anthropologist than the journey that leads to the field. For Lévi-Strauss this is definitely the case, as I have already written. The fact that he also describes his travels and the adventures that went with them can be seen as a concession to the "travelogue" category of writing, but this genre was transformed by him artistically, gaining a philosophical depth and stylistic excellence.

Secondly, according to Clifford, anthropological texts tend to marginalise emotions, and especially negative feelings towards the society being studied; only a balanced affinity is permitted. Lévi-Strauss does not hide his emotions, particularly in the early parts of the book, which locate the figure of the narrator and his ambivalent position as a Jew seeking refuge from war-torn Europe (Lévi-Strauss 1973 [1955]: 24). Later, though, his uncompromising criticism of colonialism and descriptions of Asian cities betray deep feelings, often of an aesthetic nature. Meanwhile, the ethnographic parts, in which the author describes the cultures of various tribes in depth, are "disciplined" and express at most a "balanced affinity".

The next characteristic of ethnographic texts according to Clifford is the asexuality of the researcher: his/her sex does not exist as an intervening category. *Tristes tropiques* is no exception in this respect either: Lévi-Strauss does not problematize this issue, but neither does he deny that the fact that he was a man had some significance in the field (e.g. when he mentions he was sometimes aroused by the sight of young women, the physiological results of which he had to hide, Lévi-Strauss 1973 [1955]: 286).

At the same time, according to Clifford, in the classical model of ethnographic practice we find a strong sexual taboo concerning field researchers, who were not permitted to enter intimate relations with native women, in contrast to travellers, who were open to this type of experience. Lévi-Strauss makes no single reference to this aspect (apart from one enigmatic excerpt about his wartime escape from Europe and two German women, Lévi-Strauss 1973 [1955]: 29).

Another characteristic of the anthropologist's habitus was his/her "professional appearance". The academic community held a negative view of people "going native" and indulging in the dressing up that was popular among travellers. *Tristes tropiques* does not tell us how the ethnographer looked: nowhere is his attire described, and neither is there a photograph depicting the author. There are such photos (albeit few of them), however, in the album *Saudades do Brasil* (Lévi-Strauss 1996). One of them shows part of the camp: right by



the river bank stands a table made of quite thick sticks, and on them are some blackened pots and a plate. Next to it is the ethnographer: dark-haired, bearded, bespectacled; in a baggy grey linen trousers, a shirt of the same kind and high trapper's boots, with a monkey hanging off his calf (Lévi-Strauss 1995: 191). He looks like a true ethnographer should. So why did he not include an image of himself in *Tristes tropiques*? In this way, I suspect that he aimed to distance himself from travel books, which tended to include a picture of the author even in the frontispiece. The lack of such a photo, then, could be evidence of the scientific nature of the text.

According to Clifford (1997: 69-71), among the factors shaping the professional habitus of anthropologists is their criticism of racism and essential understanding of race. This was manifested in the term being denied its central theoretical meaning, but also in the subject of race not being conceived as a historical formation. The problem of race was therefore purged from ethnography, but remained in travel literature, whose authors often paid attention to skin colour, were more aware of the problem, and were sometimes simply racists. In this context too, Lévi-Strauss is a typical anthropologist. Although he would of course later tackle the issue of race in a remarkably clear way (see Lévi-Strauss 1952), in *Tristes tropiques* one searches for any such reflections in vain. Intuitively, however, it is present, especially when the author writes at the very beginning that he is a Jew fleeing Europe (read: a Europe rife with racism), or in his fierce and uncompromising criticism of colonialism. The word "race" itself, though, only appears as a popular linguistic *calque*, or in the description of the "diversity of races" that can be encountered at a Brazilian market (Lévi-Strauss 1973 [1955]: 110).

The next important characteristic that for Clifford distinguished travellers from anthropologists was the acquisition of a contextualised, deeper understanding of culture by the latter, as opposed to the superficial impressions of the former. On each page of his book, Lévi-Strauss gives evidence of the "deepness" of his approach: in terms both of his understanding of the natives and of his position towards the hidden structures at the basis of social life, which formed the principle of his anthropological theory. This was all possible thanks to the efforts of field research (e.g. Lévi-Strauss 1973 [1955]: 375). This picture of the activity of the protagonist-narrator showed the wider public what fieldwork meant, and justified anthropology's claims to "deeper" understanding of the studied culture, particularly in comparison with the descriptions that resulted from the flying visits of travellers.

It is clear, then, that Lévi-Strauss presents himself consistently in his work as a professional anthropologist, although at times he transgresses his professional habitus. This concerned above all the emotions shown in the text, which in classical ethnographies were reined in and could appear only in tightly rationed situations and limited intensity and directions. A further transgressive



element was the descriptions of the “impressions” of the protagonist at various stages of the journey. This intentional subjectivity and uncovering, rather than concealing, of feelings put the text in the bounds of literature.

What else can we say about the persona of the protagonist of *Tristes tropiques*? Above all, it is a dominant and overpowering figure, to the extent that we in fact do not know who accompanied Lévi-Strauss in the expeditions. The information about his wife, with whom he was conducting the research, appears only once, and this in a note saying that he had to discontinue the trip as she had a serious eye infection threatening her with blindness (Lévi-Strauss 1973 [1955]: 301). This nameless and silent wife was Dina Dreyfus, who in São Paulo gave a series of lectures on “The Science of Ethnography” – physical anthropology, linguistics, archaeology and carrying out fieldwork – besides founding the Brazilian Ethnological Society (see Wilcken 2011: 55). She was also one of the organisers of expeditions to Mato Grosso. The exhibits collected at the time were presented in the Musée de l’Homme in 1937 as the results of the “mission of Claude and Dina Lévi-Strauss”.<sup>7</sup> The second expedition, this time to the west of Mato Grosso, was made up of four people: Claude and Dina along with the anthropologist Luís de Castro Faria and the doctor Jehan Vollard (Wilcken 2011: 81). Lévi-Strauss completed his last trip without his wife (who stayed in France).

This concealment of the presence of other participants on the expeditions shows not so much the author’s inflated ego as a literary device intended to render the loneliness of the protagonist during the Amazonian trips as well as other travels he undertook later. Marc Augé (1995) sees this solitude in the context of changing images as a figure of modernity.

Returning to the protagonist, though, he is also characterised by omniscience and a lack of doubt. He leads the reader by the hand in a manner that is authoritative and does not tolerate opposition. At times, the book’s narration resembled the ethnographic films of the time: the eye of the camera records only that which is visual, what can be seen. We do not hear the natives, but only the intrusive and all-knowing voice of the narrator from off camera. This is the impression given by the part of *Tristes tropiques* on the Caduveo: the author describes only what he sees – i. e. mostly the body paint – and analyses its homology with the social structure. Only in the next parts of the book does the situation change: we begin to “hear” the Indians too.

The protagonist-narrator is also a man of his time, not immune to prejudices. We can find examples of what we would today call sexist, such as the repeated use of the phrase (or rather *bon mot*) “shop girl’s philosophy” (on existentialism); homophobic – a remark about infertile couples in an infertile

7 Excerpts from the film made at the time were included in the documentary *A propos de Tristes tropiques* by J. P. Beurenaut, J. Bodanzky and P. Menguet (Zaradoc Films, 1990).

district (on the first gay/lesbian town in America, Cherry Grove); and finally ethnocentric – in an argument on Muslim societies with undisguised antipathy (in the chapter Taxila). The author's orientalising is often *à rebours*, as in his description of overpopulated cities, which finishes with the sentence "What frightens me in Asia is the vision of our own future which it is already experiencing" (Lévi-Strauss 1973 [1955]: 150).

More than anything else, though, he is a decided and uncompromising critic of colonialism, in both its economic dimension (globalisation) and its cultural one (e.g. his embarrassment in India in finding himself "in the shoes" of the British coloniser). Lévi-Strauss wrote that:

"Being human signifies, for each one of us, belonging to a class, a society, a country, a continent, a civilization; and for us European earth-dwellers, the adventure played out in the heart of the New World signifies in the first place that it was not our world and that we bear responsibility for the crime of its destruction; and secondly, that there will never be another New World: since the confrontation between the Old World and the New makes us thus conscious of ourselves, let us at least express it in its primary terms – in the place where, and by referring back to a time when, our world missed the opportunity offered to it of choosing between its various missions" (Lévi-Strauss 1973 [1955]: 393).

#### RECEPTION THEN AND NOW

Edmund Leach (1974: 86) believed that the great success of *Tristes tropiques* in France in 1955 was connected with the moods of the Parisian intellectual circles at the time, as well as the fall in popularity of Sartre, who, like Lévi-Strauss, combined literature with philosophy. The anthropologist's biographer describes these moods:

"By the mid-1950s the colonial paradigm, which had shaped not just geopolitical arrangements, but French attitudes and culture, was beginning to fall apart. Post-war France was gripped by a renewed sense of pathos and disillusionment, but it was coupled with a growing interest in the non-Western cultures then emerging from beneath the imperial boot. Anthropologists became well-placed witness to this moment of revelation" (Wilcken 2011: 194-195).

The book came out at the right moment, then: the French were ready to question colonialism and began to take a new kind of interest in other cultures.

*Tristes tropiques* was rated highly by critics, who compared it to Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* and the works of Cervantes and Chateaubriand (Dosse 1997:

133).<sup>8</sup> Many readers became interested in anthropology, some of them even making a career out of it, as was the case with Emmanuel Terray and Luc de Heusch. Yet French anthropologists, who were more established, did not respond with the same enthusiasm.

The second wave of interest in the book arrived after the publication of the English translation and Susan Sontag's famous essay, which I referred to at the beginning of this article. According to Sontag (1994: 72),

“the greatness of *Tristes Tropiques* lies not simply in this sensitive reportage, but in the way Lévi-Strauss uses his experience – to reflect on the nature of landscape, on the meaning of physical hardship, on the city in the Old World and the New, on the idea of travel, on sunsets, on modernity, on the connection between literacy and power.”

She sees the stylistic aspect of the prose as a mixture of pathos and coolness, like with the formalists of the “new novel” and film: “Sometimes the result is a masterpiece like *Tristes tropiques*. The very title is an understatement. The tropics are not merely sad. They are in agony” (Sontag 1994: 80).<sup>9</sup>

The reception of Lévi-Strauss's work in the anthropological community until the 1970s was summarised succinctly by Paul Rabinow (1977: 4): “The book was treated by anthropologists either as a fine piece of French literature or, snidely and true to form, as an overcompensation for the author's shortcomings in the bush”. And only after the publication of Geertz's essay “The world in a text...” (in Geertz 1988) did it begin to be treated “seriously” (see Deliège and Scott 2004). The change in attitude was the result of the “literary turn” in anthropology and its focus on the problem of representation. Until then anthropological texts were by most practitioners supposed to report a studied reality, and were often treated as transparent windows onto other cultures. The change in perspective came about in the mid-1980s with such publications as *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986), *Works and Lives* (Geertz 1988) and *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* (Marcus and Fischer 1986), which tackled the problem of anthropological writing itself and launched the willingness to experiment (Rapport and Overing 2000: 236). It also caused certain texts, until then excluded from the anthropological canon because of their “unscientific” form, to start to be treated as legitimate parts of the corpus of anthropology. *Tristes tropiques* is probably the best example of the process.

8 F. Dosse presents an overview of reviews of *Tristes tropiques* by eminent intellectuals: R. Aron, F.-R. Bastide, R. Etienble, J. Lacroix, J. Cazeneuve, G. Bataille, M. Chapsal (Dosse 1997).

9 Sontag's essay inspired scholars exploring the topic of anthropological heroism (see Doja 2005; Hartman 2007; Lutkehaus 2010: 163).

In addition to enthusiastic exegeses, I would also like to present critical views.<sup>10</sup> One of these appeared in Alan Campbell's ironically titled essay "Tricky tropes: styles of the popular and the pompous". Campbell expresses the view that Lévi-Strauss's books are good examples of the fact that a muddled text, masking trite ideas, can be viewed as profound writing. He claims (1996: 69) that *Tristes tropiques* is not a boring book, but he is surprised by all the commotion over it. He acknowledges that there are a few inspired extracts, but sees the ethnographic parts as superficial. The book cannot be recommended to Muslim students "because of the scandalous 'Taxila' chapter":

"If you're not involved with anthropology, and if you're not involved with academic discourse (and if you're not Islamic), *Tristes Tropiques* will remain an interesting enough read [...] Knowing first-hand about the disaster of structuralism, I find myself reading *Tristes Tropiques* in a different way. I find it a sinister book. It begins with an outburst of hate and ends exchanging glances, in a gesture of involuntary understanding, with a cat. In between are visits to Brazil and India, where all human encounters are like mime shows or silent movies. *Hauteur* is the tone: the condescending regard of the privileged outsider, who, having completed his observations, turns to apostrophize his elegant Parisian public" (Campbell 1996: 70).

Although this is a good example of what I once called "reluctant reading", it is hard to disagree with Campbell in many questions, especially in recognising the superior tone in which the protagonist-narrator speaks in the entire book.

Another critical view tackles the problem of representation. Steven Rubenstein (2006) writes that Lévi-Strauss in *Tristes tropiques* constantly mourns "the damage done by European colonialism" (2006: 244) and criticises adventurers for their delusion that the Old World had not contaminated the New, and thus their power coming through misrepresentation. But Rubenstein observes that in fact the Western travelogue is not that much the result of the authors' sense of discovery, but rather of their compulsion to talk about it: "Contrary to Lévi-Strauss's critique, the power of travelogue comes not from misrepresentation but from representation itself" (2006: 244). It is a Western habit to describe what one is seeing. Rubenstein also observes that the style of *Tristes tropiques* "invited deconstruction", as was the case with Derrida (Rubenstein 2006: 251).

One of the most recent analyses of Lévi-Strauss's book was made by the feminist anthropologist Kamala Visweswaran, who points to its diversity (being "part elegy part disquisition") and ambiguity: "[it] hovers between witnessing

10 Here I am mostly interested in criticism within the profession, but it is also worth mentioning that done by Jacques Derrida (see Doja 2005).

a ‘primitive’ world on the wane and acknowledging membership in a civilization that has led to that world’s demise” (2010: 96). Cognitive criticism of Lévi-Strauss’s position concerns an important problem for him. Visweswaran notes that the cosmopolitanism of anthropology is traditionally seen as a radically anti-racist approach. However, she argues that cosmopolitanism is not an opposition to racism at all, various forms of which can be taken from it. This particularly concerns cosmopolitanism being seen as a universal ethic (e.g. in the case of human rights), which was used to justify (neo-)imperialistic projects. According to Visweswaran, in the history of anthropology there has been no suitable riposte to this universal ethic – neither in “salvage ethnography” nor in the self-reflexive structuralism of *Tristes tropiques* (Visweswaran 2010: 15-16).

#### RECEPTION IN THE OTHER CONTEXTS

The translation of *Tristes tropiques* into Portuguese was published in Brazil in 1957, only two years after the book appeared in France. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, in an interview commemorating Claude Lévi-Strauss, pointed out to the fact that the publication made Brazilians realise that “they were important and that they existed” (Kirsch and Castro 2009: 193), and he himself had learned from the book that the Indians existed, because during his sociological studies they appeared only as an element of a very distant past. From a certain point of view one may say that Brazilian anthropology as a discipline started only in the 1960s (Kirsch and Castro 2009: 200).

In recent years, several texts have appeared that refer to *Tristes tropiques*. The authors of one of them consider the role of Indians and the field in the work of Lévi-Strauss, and conclude that it is because of them that his book is still alive and continues to keep contemporary discussions alive. Lévi-Strauss’s Americanist works still continue to invigorate the contemporary debate (Souza and Fausto 2004). Fernanda Peixoto (1998) conducted thorough archival research concerning the Brazilian period of the anthropologist’s biography, looking through his local publications, classes he had and research he carried out. José Magnani (1999) focused on the cities described in *Tristes tropiques*. A Portuguese anthropologist working in Brazil, Cristiana Bastos (1998), made a comparative analysis of Lévi-Strauss’s book and Gilberto Freyre’s travelogue *Aventura e Rotina*,<sup>11</sup> as a part of her project of re-examining Portuguese colonial and post-colonial spaces, and especially the ideology of Lusotropicalism and its impact on society and recent revival. The concept was coined by Freyre to denote the distinctive character of Portuguese imperialism: more humane and adaptable to other climates and cultures, seeing miscegenation positively.

11 Another comparison of the two books was done by a Brazilian scholar, Fatima Quintas (2000).

His travelogue is a report from his journey to Africa in 1951-2 on an invitation of the Portuguese Overseas Ministry. Stylistically, the books are quite alike. But *Tristes tropiques* is written, according to Bastos, “from another universe: mental, social, political” (1998: 420). Lévi-Strauss’s approach is based on seeing otherness as the foundation of the social and the real, while Freyre proposes an implicit similarity. Lévi-Strauss orientalises the tropics, Freyre tropicalises the world (even if restricted to the Lusophone world). According to Bastos, Lévi-Strauss’s interjection “I hate travelling!” is not just a paradox and a literary device, but a sign of an attitude of aloofness and detachment, which is present throughout the book. His tropics are sad peripheries. On the contrary, Freyre’s language is not hegemonic; the tropics are the place *par excellence*, not only different and unique but in many aspects more humane and universal.<sup>12</sup>

To sum up, *Tristes tropiques* was a kind of a mirror in which Brazilians could look at themselves and their Indians. On the other hand, their colonial ideology enabled the critic to perceive Lévi-Strauss’s privileging of alterity despite the anti-colonial mission of the book.

On the other side of the world, behind the Iron Curtain, the reception of Lévi-Strauss’s book was obviously different. The Polish edition of *Tristes tropiques* came out quite early, in 1960. It was translated by Aniela Steinsberg (1896-1988), one of the first female Polish lawyers, a Holocaust survivor, in the communist era a defence counsel in political trials, an underground activist who was finally prevented by the authorities from working as a lawyer. Her translation faithfully renders the literary beauty of the original, although the title itself underwent a small change – the Polish version, *Smutek tropików* [“Sorrow of the tropics”], sounds more poetic.

The book was published during the post-Stalin “thaw” in the very popular and prestigious series “Rodowody Cywilizacji” [“The Origins of Civilisations”], and was received with enthusiasm by reviewers of cultural weeklies as a “remarkably interesting, written with huge narrative talent and typical French charm” (quoted in Zajęczkowski 1960: 872). Marcin Czerwiński (1960), an eminent sociologist of culture and columnist, noted the matters about which Clifford and Geertz would write years later, and he did this in the refined style of the work he was reviewing. Czerwiński distinguished several layers of Lévi-Strauss’s book, writing that *Tristes tropiques* “gleans its authority above all from its remarkably matter-of-fact – albeit processed by a great imagination – academic work”, while at the same time being “a diary of an explorer-philosopher who knows the thrill of poetic revelation” (1960: 4). The Polish sociologist also found a layer that we would today call reflexive:

12 This is certainly not an exhaustive overview of the Brazilian reception of *Tristes tropiques*, but rather an outline pointing out several problems.



“Inevitable becomes the question of the role of one’s own cultural conditioning in encountering foreign cultures. This leads not so much into the maze of gnoseology as sociology of cognition. In this maze Lévi-Strauss wages arduous battles on the pages of his book” (Czerwiński 1960: 4, my translation).

Czerwiński also finds in *Tristes tropiques* issues of a “general theory of culture”: what are the historical prospects for freedom of society, the verifiability of its cultural ideals? According to him, Lévi-Strauss shows that “these prospects present themselves – always as a fleeting moment – one by one in the history of various societies. They are not guaranteed by any mechanism of automatic progress” (Czerwiński 1960: 4). I can imagine how, in the eyes of Polish readers, Lévi-Strauss’s pessimism must have provided a refreshing contrast to the officially dominant optimism of Marxism and official propaganda, and made it clear that that time was probably not the “fleeting moment of freedom”, but a totalitarian period.

Another reviewer, Andrzej Zajączkowski, also a sociologist and anthropologist, was more restrained, writing that as a collection of ethnographic materials the book did not hold a great deal of value, and sarcastically pointing to the nature of French academia, which it embodied: “An eminent scholar, wanting to find general recognition for his eminence, must write in a beautiful (crucial) style a book read with interest by the cultural, but non-specialist, elite” (1960: 874). The popularity of *Tristes tropiques* in Poland, meanwhile, he put down to the snobbism of the “undiscriminating public”, grabbing the “latest shout of Western fashion”.

The doyenne of Polish ethnology, Zofia Sokolewicz, recalls that

“what was important then was the very fact of the book’s publication. After the drought [of Stalinism] it was like a flower in the desert. We welcomed it with enthusiasm. Professor Dynowski enthused about the description of the sunset, and told us to be enthused, and caught structuralism from the aesthetic side. But the ‘structuralist revolution’ began only with [the publication of the Polish edition of] *Totemism [Today]*” [private communication, my translation].

None of the academic journals included a review of *Tristes tropiques*. In later years, translations of Lévi-Strauss’s major works were published, and structuralism turned out to be not just an intellectual fashion, but also an alternative to the Marxism or mere idiographism dominant at the time in sociology and ethnology.

The reception of *Tristes tropiques* in Poland looked rather similar to that in the West, then, although it took place in radically contrasting socio-political



conditions. The difference was in the fact that Polish readers did not see in it mostly a critique of colonialism (they were used to this as a result of their communist media's heated attacks on Western imperialism), but rather a "meta-narrative" competing with Marxism, in addition written in a beautiful style, which must have seemed like a breath of fresh air after the choking social realism of the 1950s. Not until the 1990s, though, did *Tristes tropiques* make it into the courses of socio-cultural anthropology that were traditionally taught in sociology and ethnology departments.

In recent years, *Tristes tropiques* has also inspired two Polish conceptual artists, Mirosław Bałka and Janek Simon, who gave their exhibitions the same title as Lévi-Strauss's book. One of them was related to the memory of the Holocaust, another to post-colonial sensibility (Kubica 2013). It seems to me that the common denominator of these exhibitions could be the critical relationship of artists with modernity with its quest for "barbarians", and the ambivalent position of the observer.

## CONCLUSIONS

For historians of anthropology, Lévi-Strauss is a particularly important figure as he was the first anthropologist to make a theoretical equation between the "civilised" and the "savage" man in such a distinct way. Structuralism flattened the previous hierarchies of cultures and treated Amazonian and European myths just the same, seeing common, universal features in both. Moreover, *Tristes tropiques* is a radical and unambiguous condemnation of colonialism. In a television interview, Pierre Bourdieu said that Lévi-Strauss's books were a "powerful guide against racism". Wiktor Stoczkowski stresses that the anthropologist "never hesitated to utilise the very same academic authority to vilify the faults of modern societies and assign to ethnology the mission of transmitting to the West the lessons of wisdom provided by that part of humanity known as primitive" (2008: 348).

However, this historical and contextualised view of Lévi-Strauss does not have to correspond to the perspective of the contemporary reader, who might mainly see in the work a Eurocentric description of exotic cultures. In their book *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*, Marcus and Fischer (1986) pointed to the fact that the most important anthropological ideas were usually critical of the status quo at the time of their conception. For example evolutionism, which included the "savage" in one line of development with "civilised man", was a radical concept breaking with the multilinearity of evolution, which perceived individual races as ontologically different creatures. Later, however, this evolutionist way of perceiving humans was seen as unjust. A similar situation is reported by James Clifford about Raymond Firth, who in the early 1970s in a conversation with him said: "Not so long ago we were radicals. We thought

of ourselves as gadflies and reformers, advocates for the value of indigenous cultures, defenders of our people. Now, all of a sudden, we're handmaidens of empire!" (cited in Clifford 2012: 419). For Clifford this is to "feel historical". I remember my own conversation with Firth while lunching in his London club on Pall Mall (in the basement, the only place where women were allowed) in the mid-1980s: coming from communist Poland just after martial law I also "felt historical", but I was a part of another history, a subaltern one.

Let us return to Lévi-Strauss's work: a text which in 1955 was perceived in France as a radical break with colonialism is today often interpreted as an example of "intellectual imperialism" (Douglass), "protectionalism of the privileged outsider" (Campbell), an insufficiently anti-racist stance (Visweswaran), or privileging of alterity (Bastos). The times have changed, but there is more to that. The book was written with the "other hand", successfully fulfilling the "travelogue pact" locating itself outside academic discourse. But in the meantime it changed its position from the niche of ethnographic prose to the main corpus of anthropological texts, and started to be treated "seriously" by anthropologists. Another reason is the fact that *Tristes tropiques*, being a work of ethnographic prose, allows the author-protagonist to be revealed, as well as the interior of an ethnographer's workshop. They both can be scrutinised, and thus are prone to criticism.

The protagonist of *Tristes tropiques* – as I hope I have been able to show – does not for a moment cease to be an anthropologist, taking care to tend to his image as a researcher who travels "as he must", writes "reluctantly" and philosophises "spontaneously". What he does with attention and concentration is to observe the world "outside", to save it before it is gone, as well as to accuse his own world, responsible for this disappearance.

In this article I was trying to look underneath this Lévi-Straussian mask of self-creation, or rather look beyond it. Take a look at the interesting and ambiguous character who was the book's protagonist, as well as at the book itself, which I read this time with a mixture of delight and embarrassment. While understanding and sharing the critical views, I must stress that *Tristes tropiques* does not serve today's anthropologists and artists solely as a pretext for accusations and distancing from it, but rather as a starting point for deeper reflection and wider interpretation of the modern world. This became possible, as it is not a one-dimensional and homogeneous book, but one full of ambivalence and aporia. It is a book of its times and against them (Boon), a work that invites deconstruction (Rubenstein), written with great imagination and reflexivity (Czerwiński). And it is from the peripheries that one can see the Western concept of otherness as the foundation of the social and the real (Bastos) present in the book, as well as the subversive potential of it, making the readers attentive to the "fleeting moments of freedom"

(Czerwiński), and continue to invigorate the contemporary debate (Souza and Fausto).

For all these reasons it should perhaps come as no surprise to us that a protagonist who hated travelling came to embody the European traveller.

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