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# Things Turned Out the Way They Did

## Failure and Weakness in the Culture of Central and Eastern Europe

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**Abstract:** The text is the introduction to the new issue of *Studia Litteraria et Historica*. As such, it presents and conceptualises the category of failure in reference to Central and Eastern Europe in the last few decades of the twentieth century. It outlines the subject matter of respective texts and convergences of the points of view of their authors.

**Keywords:** failure; weakness; Central and Eastern Europe

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By the time the Polish translation of *The Queer Art of Failure* by Jack Halberstam (Halberstam, 2011) was published in 2018 (Halberstam, 2018), the way had already been paved. Narratives of failure and depictions of demise had filled not only the Internet but also bookstore shelves – Kamil Fejfer’s *Zawód. Opowieść o pracy w Polsce. To o nas* [Professional Disappointment: Tales About Work in Poland: It’s About Us] (Fejfer, 2017) was published in 2017. The book, written by the author of *Magazyn Porażka* [Failure Magazine], extremely popular in social media, can be described as something between non-fiction and an op-ed. In a serious, yet sometimes painfully sarcastic way, *Zawód* depicts life stories of twenty- and thirty-somethings desperately trying to find their place on the job market, which as of recently has been referred to as “an employee’s job market” (the sarcasm now borders gallows humour). The stories are similar to those that the readers know from short narratives in *Magazyn Porażka*: months-long job searches, and months-long therapy after having found a job, working hard from dawn till dusk on junk contracts, daily exploitation, mobbing and taking it out on employees, an organised system of complete uncertainty and unpredictability, with barely any social security, at the cost of one’s health, emotional wellbeing and family life, a cost that often surpasses even the relatively high earnings of those who had taken the lead in the rat race, and – it would appear – established themselves in the corporate or company hierarchy. Seemingly, and for a short while. There are also stories of physical labour, oftentimes in difficult and harsh conditions.

Similar situations are the subject of Olga Gitkiewicz’s non-fiction book *Nie hańbi* [No Disgrace], published in the same year (Gitkiewicz, 2017). Failure in professional career is juxtaposed here with the narratives of success that were fed to the society by the press in the era of so-called transformation, or, in fact, capitalist restoration – *Magazyn*

*Porażka* is indeed an outright mockery of the *Sukces* monthly, which since 1989 has been instilling in the Poles the new, capitalist, “Western” norms of behaviour and life-style (in a similar manner, other social media pages emerged, e.g. *Make Life Harder* was created as a losers-created parody of Katarzyna Tusk’s *Make Life Easier* blog). *Sukces* formatted the habitus of the middle class, whose strength – as the election slogan of a liberal party proclaimed in 2001 – was to guarantee a strong Poland. What the use of a strong Poland was remained unexplained by Unia Wolności (Freedom Union), because that was to be guaranteed by the doxa, the common sense embedded permanently in the symbolic universe.

In and around the years 2017–2018, professional success or a strong middle class, or a strong Poland, were no longer unquestionably certain in the public sphere (in fact, they obviously never were). Stories of professional failures were combined with stories about social collapse, about the working poor chasing their tails, about health problems and mental disorders, about dropping out of school and drifting inertly through life. Unlike young people looking for a job, who, if they had any hopes in the first place, were in for the titular professional disappointment, the word *przegryw* made a career: in 2016, it was nominated the Youth Word of the Year – in two meanings, as outlined by the dictionary definition (*Przegryw – Młodzieżowe Słowo Roku PWN*, 2016): ‘lack of success in life’ and ‘loser, unlucky person’. Internet copy-pastas, memes, and demotivators about failures, losses, awkwardness, and mediocrity were accompanied in visual arts by a flood of glitch – in 2015 there was an exhibition of glitch art at the Barakah Theatre in Krakow, followed by the publication of *Glitch Art Is Dead*, edited by Aleksandra Pieńkosz and Piotr Pudzian Płucienniczak, that collected visual works and theoretical texts on glitch, an art that celebrates error, mistake, and fault (Pieńkosz & Płucienniczak, 2016).

The finesse and wit with which Halberstam characterised collective failure – as opposed to the neoliberal narratives of individual success that anyone can achieve and that simply needs to be desired enough to be fulfilled – fuelled the increasingly ubiquitous, nonconformist rhetoric of failure and losing. Losing became the subject of one of the issues of *Dwutygodnik* [Biweekly] in 2018 (<https://www.dwutygodnik.com/cykl/53-przegryw.html>), which featured an excerpt from Halberstam’s yet-to-be-published book. And although the final title of the Polish (incidentally, unsuccessful) translation of this work made the queer art of failure “bizarre” (*przedziwna*), from the very beginning queer was another important context for discussing failure, especially if it was queer presented and problematised in the artistic context, on the stages of theatres and in art galleries. Art became a privileged sphere of failure, where it was possible to test strategies of losing and create representations of the attendant states, emotions and experiences. Art as a medium of failure – along with social media, where failure is more and more present – has enabled a circulation of a poetics of defeat that is broader and more legitimate than in the case of demotivators. And with it, the circulation of stories of depression and melancholy, otherness and rejection, exploitation

and poverty. At some point, failure even became fashionable, and various courses, workshops, and training sessions to extract strength from failure and learn from mistakes began to spring up like mushrooms. The carnivalesque venting of neoliberal, capitalist violence – a violence which in Poland goes hand in hand with national chauvinism and militant (and triumphant) homophobia – has been casually included in the mainstream, as, on the one hand, a colourful curiosity and a social symptom, and, on the other, as a venue of release, increasing the efficiency and endurance of the system. You've had your celebration of failure, now go back to work. The ease and pace of this change indicate that, although on a symbolic level failure broke the intolerable propaganda of success, it remained a failure politically. Ineffective. In the same way, the strength of weakness is still a weak strength.

### **“Chase the West! They Tell Me. Chase the West! Even If with Contempt”**

The texts in this year's issue of *Studia Litteraria et Historica* have a slightly different origin and therefore differ from the discussions on failure that occurred in the last two or three years. They are the late aftermath of the academic conference *Epic Fail: Failure and Weakness in the Culture of Central and Eastern Europe in 1970–2000*, organised in 2015 by the Practices of Late Modernity Research Group – an ephemeral research team founded by PhD students and young doctors associated mostly with the Institute of Polish Culture at the University of Warsaw. Although inspired by the book by Halberstam, the conference was one step ahead of the explosion of defeat in art and popular culture. Reflection on failure was used by the conference organisers to ask questions about the conditions for the possibility of success, and the cut-off criteria on the basis of which an action was considered effective and properly implemented, or failed and incomplete. Understanding queer theory as a social theory of difference made it possible to see failure as a potential “tool for [the] critique of culture and as a subversive strategy”, as proclaimed in the conference's call for papers („Konferencja «Wyszło jak wyszło»”, 2015).

The culture of success and the dominant narratives of victories and accomplishments constituted one point of reference; the second was the common notions of failure, including the phrases, known from scientific and journalistic texts, about the “failure of socialism” or the “failure of transformation”. In other words, the works of Halberstam and other contemporary theorists of failure and weakness in culture prompted the organisers to look at how the categories of failure and weakness (and related concepts) functioned in the last decades of the twentieth century, and in various discourses pertaining to the period. The last quarter of the twentieth century was selected due to its importance for the years to come, as a time of social, cultural, political

and economic changes that set the framework for the new reality, opened the door to problems, conflicts and contradictions that various social groups continue to struggle with nowadays, but also outlined new lines of division, and the structure of the battlefield.

The choice of Central or Central and Eastern Europe was also associated with a double failure inherent within these concepts: the inability to precisely define their designation (what exactly is, or is supposed to be, Central Europe?), and the failures that marked both the history of the region and the history of the idea of Central Europe. As indicated by Xavier Galmiche (2013) and Larry Wolff (1994), since the Enlightenment, Central and Eastern Europe has functioned as “the other” of Western (proper) Europe: different, worse, wild and out of touch, one that had to be civilised and subordinated, and compared to which the West could be perceived as a bastion of civil rights and freedoms, rationalism, and civilisation. The West was the norm of which the East was an aberration, necessary so as to be constantly corrected; as we know, one of the most ambitious attempts at such a correction was made by Nazi Germany. The concept of Central Europe worked somewhat differently during the Cold War, when intellectuals of Polish, Hungarian and Czechoslovakian democratic opposition used it against the geopolitical division into the Eastern and Western Blocs. The desire to draw attention to “small nations”, “poor countries” located between Germany and Soviet Russia was supposed to validate and empower them. However, it was itself lined with (usually easily noticeable) Russophobia, and disrupted by local ambitions: the vision of Central Europe was fraught with contradictory notions of which of the Central European countries was to lead and set the tone for it. On the other hand, the reverse of Western prejudices against Eastern Europe was the local fascinations with the “imaginary West” (Yurchak, 2005), which, as a dream object, co-formed the identity of Eastern Europe of the late socialist period, and which had to be chased “even if with contempt”, as in the 1986 song *Video Dotyk* [Video Touch] by Anna Jurkiszowicz, with lyrics by Jacek Cygan (*Anna Jurkiszowicz – Video Dotyk*, 2009).

This dual aspect of failure in the vision of Central Europe is addressed by Weronika Parfianowicz’s article “‘Born of Crisis, Buried by Catastrophe’: Central Europe as a Project Doomed to Failure”, which is fundamental to this year’s issue:

Indeed, failure is inscribed in the very project of Central Europe. It could even be said that it is inscribed in it dually – firstly, those projects that invoked the retrospective utopia of Central Europe as an area of harmonious coexistence of the multicultural, multireligious and multinational community turned out to be doomed to fail. Secondly, for those projects that polemize with the ones idealizing the past and the present, sometimes in the form of overtly kitschy tales, the point of departure is a recognition of Central Europe as the arena of numerous failures: civilizational, cultural, and political. In the latter approach, Central Europe is a region where both grand modernizing and emancipatory projects have failed: even though the majority of communities that inhabit this region have acquired the right to self-determination within nation states, the emergence of modern nations took place at the cost of relations with all neighbours, and this state of animosity of everyone against everyone is

constitutive for the region of Central Europe. The specific process of rebirth of national awareness often led also to blocking the emancipatory processes of groups other than nations, the consequences of which we can observe to this day (Parfianowicz, 2020).

The author adds, somewhat contrary to the national megalomania eagerly practised in Central European countries, that it is precisely the weakness, fragility, ephemerality, and scarcity, so typical of this region, that could be transformed into virtues especially needed in the face of the refugee crisis and the climate crisis. At the same time, she notes the “nostalgic and mocking” convention and the “poetics of absurdity” in the literary depictions of Central and Eastern Europe, especially those that refer to ideas of the melting pot of nationalities, religions, cultures and languages in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In these stories, the kaleidoscopic changeability of identity, blurring of boundaries, and the suspension of norms are combined with a melancholic mood and a longing for an idealised past (Parfianowicz, 2020).

A kaleidoscopic confusion and permeation of identities, norms and cultures combined with a sense of melancholy and crisis are the subject of Laura Waniek’s spectacular essay on the film *Until the End of the World* by Wim Wenders, a gigantic project which ended with a total fiasco but is paradoxically fascinating precisely thanks to it. The desire to include in the film as many favourite places, landscapes, actors and bands as possible resulted in the music video-like and burlesque character of the picture, one of its few advantages, according to critics. However, this happened by accident, or even mistake, and not through deliberate intention of the director, who “is not creating the film, but rather trying to find his way in it”(Waniek, 2020). In short, Wenders lost his way during the making of the film, much like his heroes, who wander all around the world, and the resultant picture blew up the framework of all genre conventions, except for the road movie. The latter, usually associated with identity-seeking, is typical of Wenders, about whom the author writes: “The motif of abandoned and lost children, of lost, childish and forever seeking adults, characteristic of his movies, is sometimes interpreted as an effect of failed attempts at building a cultural identity” (Waniek, 2020). In this issue, Waniek’s text is probably the one closest to Halberstam’s point of view: affirming failure, aimless wandering and immaturity due to their potential for subversion and the unpredictability of their effects. For the same reason, it is also probably the most dreamy article.

The identity problems of the period of restoring capitalism in Germany are one of the main threads of Marta Brzezińska-Pająk’s article about the material culture of the GDR in post-1990 films (Brzezińska-Pająk, 2020). By analytically distinguishing the more pop-cultural “Ostalgie” from the “GDR nostalgia”, rooted in the attitudes of the citizens of the former German Democratic Republic, the researcher is able to take a more nuanced look at the ways in which the films present characteristic elements of East Germany’s material culture, especially textile and plastic products. On the one hand, these were often shown in a mocking manner, highlighting their shortcomings, flaws and low

quality (although, as the author states, from the Polish perspective, they were attractive and desirable). On the other hand, this was often accompanied by a longing and fondness. Consequently, selected products, or rather brands, of GDR provenance became fashionable – also because of their specific imperfections. What was perceived as weakness and junkiness turned out to be an advantage. If the production of the East German chemical industry was used in the propaganda as a proof of the advantages of socialist technology and design, although in practice it was often an imitation and ersatz of Western products, then the popularity of East German products – or their imitations – is a second degree of imitation. The consumerist culture absorbed what was left of the material culture of the GDR after the latter had been subordinated to the dominant culture of “united” Germany. The vogue for design from East Germany, although it seemingly is a manifestation of nostalgia for socialism, can be interpreted as an expression of Germany’s supremacy over the peripheral and lagging former East Germany.

Tomasz Szczepanek watches Polish cinema of the 1990s through a similar lens, with particular emphasis on *Psy (Pigs)* by Władysław Pasikowski and *Szamanka (She-Shaman)* by Andrzej Żuławski. Following the success of the Polish Film School and the Cinema of Moral Anxiety, the first decade of “freedom” brought a collapse in cinematography, and disappointment among critics. Polish films of the period known as the political transformation are an imitation of Western productions, which was particularly striking, as the “imaginary West” became relatively accessible and comparable, not only on video tapes but also in cinema and on television, and the critics could quite easily list all the borrowings and shortcomings. Szczepanek, however, does not focus on apparent imitativeness and awkwardness, but on how “thoughtless adoption of Western cultural patterns takes on the form of a symbolic colonization, which consolidates the position of Poland as a country of as of yet undefined identity” (Szczepanek, 2020).

### **“Chase the West! As Fast as You Can. Chase the West! But How Do You Beat Niki Lauda?”**

*Video Dotyk* by Jurkstawicz is a deeply ironic work and, as such, it is an example of an excellent self-awareness present in the popular culture of declining socialism. In the lyrics of the chorus, Cygan is mocking the efforts to “catch up” with the West, and then asks the rhetorical question: “But how do you beat Niki Lauda?” This is of course impossible – a pipe dream. Therefore, instead of chasing the West, the song proposes a vision of creating something completely new and original. It is a prospect as beautiful as it is terrifying, perhaps even more so than an unwinnable race against the Austrian ace driver.

Defeats, meanwhile, have a heuristic value: they display the rules of the game and hidden conditions in full light. Tomasz Szczepanek used the failure of Poland's genre cinema and *cinéma d'auteur* of the 1990s to reveal the norms of Polish neo-liberal capitalism and patriarchy that manifested themselves in the process. Weronika Lipszyc, in turn, analyses the photographic archives of new documentarists, who were interested in recording important social issues (Lipszyc, 2020). The researcher juxtaposes pursuing the truth of the document with Jerzy Lewczyński's project of an archaeology of photography, which presupposed the construction of various truths. From this point of view, documentary photography which critically depicts failure (especially the disastrous social and natural consequences of the re-establishment of capitalism) is itself a failure. Lipszyc refers to Susan Sontag's remarks: "concerned" photography has done at least as much to deaden conscience as to arouse it. The ethical content of photographs is fragile" (Sontag, 1977, p. 18). The new document can easily slip into a biased cliché and restraining convention, which, even when it touches upon topics important for society, at the same time divorces them from social reality.

For Magdalena Matysek-Imielińska, the failure of the research done from the 1960s to the 1980s on workers' culture in Poland becomes an opportunity to point out the weaknesses, prejudices, "insecurities" and errors of Polish sociology of that period. Scholars, who wanted to avoid "ideologisation" in social research, resorted to scientific, quantitative research on "participation in culture" (which is a category that weighs heavily on the study of culture in Poland to this day), or the more anthropological research on lifestyles, which, however, usually disregarded class issues. Those who were nevertheless interested in workers' culture, seemed to confuse it with the propaganda-derived ideals of the work and social commitment ethos, and because they did not find the latter in the social reality, they could conclude that no workers' culture existed – instead of looking at its real manifestations, such as theatres, music bands, newsletters and festivals at workplaces. The Polish sociology in the late socialist period, chasing "grand theory" or getting involved in ad hoc research ("urgent anthropology"), suffered from a lack of medium-range theories and a *longue durée* perspective able to track longstanding social and cultural processes and patterns. As a result,

choosing the standpoint of traditional history and accepting both the research conviction that there is no "workers' culture" and the ideological arguments, which persuaded a number of researchers that Polish society was classless, and thus it was impossible to distinguish a particular working-class lifestyle, we only confirm the Foucauldian claim that history is a discourse of power (Matysek-Imielińska, 2020).

Therefore, Matysek-Imielińska proposes to start writing unconventional histories and micro-histories that would enable us to notice, after many years, the existence of working class culture under the cultural policy of the People's Republic of Poland, which has been ridiculed and reduced to its ideological function.

Unconventional history and micro-history as a way of overcoming prejudices and the chasm between dreams of grand theory and the short-term drift in cultural sociology and historically oriented cultural studies, harmonise with the minor histories and low theory proposed by Halberstam and other queer researchers and scholars. These diagnoses of failure in social sciences, and alternative methodological and theoretical propositions, interact with articles outside the thematic section of this year's SLH issue, primarily with Piotr Filipkowski's "Oral History as a Selection of Sources: Discussion Around 'O tym nie wolno mówić...' Zagłada Żydów w opowieściach wspomnieniowych ze zbiorów Dionizjusza Czubała ['It Is Forbidden to Talk About It...' The Extermination of Jews in Memoirs from the Collection of Dionysius Czubała]" (Filipkowski, 2020). The author criticises the positivism dominant in historical sciences in Poland, which was not disturbed by "Gadamer's hermeneutics, Hayden White's structuralism (perhaps too hastily dismissed along with postmodernism), or, on the domestic front, the output of Jerzy Topolski" (Filipkowski, 2020). The fetishisation of sources in the dominant philosophy of history increases the importance of folklore studies and ethnography, which focus on narrative and cultural motifs. A critique of the prevailing patterns of writing the history of the Holocaust according to positivist rules (which establish criteria for recognising historical sources that often cannot be met by sources potentially destabilising the current narrative) can also be found in Elżbieta Janicka's essay "*Herbarium Polonorum (Heimatphotographie)*" (Janicka, 2020). The author uses methods of a "hybridisation" of typology and de-tightening of classification rules. A similar critique of the principles of visibility and legitimacy of sources (and the multilevel construction of the cultural landscape) appears in the editorial discussion about Dominika Macocha's video-sculpture installation  $50^{\circ}31'29.7''N$   $22^{\circ}46'39.1''E$ ,  $50^{\circ}30'56.2''N$   $22^{\circ}46'01.0''E$ ,  $50^{\circ}30'41.0''N$   $22^{\circ}45'49.5''E$  (Janicka et al., 2020).

The thematic section of the issue concludes with illustrations of various authors, collected in the form of a separate essay, presenting and conceptualising various aspects of failure in the field of visual arts.

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Five years have passed since the conference presentations which were the base for the articles in the section devoted to failure and weakness. The road from writing and collecting texts, through their editing and review, to their development and publication, in this case has been long and winding, and has also been marked by many failures. Most of this path – asking speakers to send in their papers, preliminary evaluation and selection of the submitted texts, deliberation on the method and place of publication, etc. – I shared with Klaudia Rachubińska, whom I would like to thank wholeheartedly for the work done together. The failure of academic writing and publishing about failure is a topic for a separate study. I would like to thank the SLH editorial team, who welcomed the founding that was the collection of failure texts with kindness exceed-



ing my wildest expectations. Finally, I would like to thank the authors who were discouraged neither by the long wait for publication, nor by uncertainty and minor failures. It is said that success has many fathers, while failure is an orphan; in spite of that, I assume responsibility for any mistakes, shortcomings and misunderstandings.

Translated by Magdalena Kunz

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**Abstrakt:** Tekst stanowi wstęp do nowego numeru „Studia Litteraria et Historica”. Przedstawia i konceptualizuje kategorię porażki w odniesieniu do obszaru Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej ostatnich kilku dekad XX wieku. Należy do tematyki poszczególnych tekstów oraz zbieżności punktów widzenia autorek i autorów.

**Wyrażenia kluczowe:** porażka; słabość; Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia

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