

Grzegorz Stępnik

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Grzegorz Stępniaak

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Queer studies emerged as a separate scholarly discipline in US academia in the early 1990s. A host of social, political, and cultural changes contributed to the emergence of this new field, as did changes in academia itself. Most significant was the HIV/AIDS epidemic, which decimated gay districts of the largest US cities, with San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York at the forefront. With Ronald Reagan's conservative government continuing to consider the illness a taboo subject, activist organizations started to emerge, campaigning for access to essential medicines while challenging myths and cultural stereotypes around HIV/AIDS, which was commonly referred to as a 'gay disease'. The most important organizations included ACT UP and Queer Nation, with their activities making a significant contribution to the lesbian and gay movement's subversive transformation of the meaning of the previously pejorative term 'queer'.¹ Since then, the word has become a positive marker of identity and identification for representatives of LGBTQ communities. Its commonplace meaning remains significant, particularly from a scholarly perspective, as it refers to 'strangeness' and 'degeneration'. This is all the more evident if we consider the independent American cinematography that emerged around this time. Film directors including Gregg Araki, Tom Kalin, and Todd Haynes all belonged to sexual minorities, and they not only began to openly tell the stories of homosexual protagonists, but also started experimenting with aesthetics in their films. Furthermore, the identities of the characters in their films appeared as fluid, performative constructs that shifted over time. It was as if these figures were made of a patchwork of incompatible elements. The films celebrated inconsistencies, ruptures, and difference without ever seeking to normalize these elements or mentioning the right to life of those who 'love differently'. The film critic Ruby B. Rich traced these new cinematic trends at the time in the influential magazine *Sight & Sound*, stressing that it was not a matter of assimilating sexual difference. She assigned the term 'New Queer Cinema' to this vein of films, thus transforming the meaning of the epithet 'queer' by ascribing positive meanings to it.²

1 For more on the cultural and social performances around HIV/AIDS, see David Roman, *Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture and AIDS* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988).

2 See Ruby B. Rich, 'New Queer Cinema', *Sight & Sound*, 2 (1992).

In her 1993 essay 'Critically Queer', Judith Butler voiced her programmatic scepticism towards stable and unambivalent academic concepts, processes, and constructs, including the term 'queer'. She noted that 'queer' can never fully express the experience of those it represents, adding that

it will be necessary to affirm the contingency of the term: to let it be vanquished by those who are excluded by the term but who justifiably expect representation by it, to let it take on meanings that cannot now be anticipated by a younger generation whose political vocabulary may well carry a very different set of investments.³

Butler makes it clear here that the concepts 'queer' and 'queer studies' should not only be subjected to persistent critique, but should also be opened up for use in exploring new and unknown areas of research and language, since their power lies in their ability to resist institutionalization and ideological ossification. This is particularly evident if we consider that this scholarly discipline is, like the films described by Rich, formed of a patchwork of diverse, seemingly incompatible elements drawn from fields including philosophy, cultural studies, theatre studies, literary studies, anthropology, and sociology.

In the 1990s, queer studies was largely interested in theories created by white academics and did not problematize to a significant degree the issues of race or class. Its primary interest was in sexual identities and the dynamics of desire and eroticism. It is no surprise, then, that queer studies faced accusations of perpetuating a race- and class-based elitism that contrasted sharply with the ideals of the field's founders. This approach also limited the scope of queer studies research. Subsequently, textbooks and handbooks started to appear that explored critically the relations between race, sexuality, and class, viewing these categories in accordance with queer principles. Thus they were not treated as essentialist categories but as constructs resulting from mutual interactions and from multifaceted processes of identification.⁴

Particularly crucial to the opening up of queer thinking, ensuring that it emerged from the narrow constraints of exploring nonnormative sexuality, is Judith (Jack) Halberstam's theory of queer time and space. In the book *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, Halberstam writes that

what has made queerness compelling as a form of self-description in the past decade or so has to do with the very way it has the potential to open up new life narratives and alternative relations to time and space. [...] Queer subcultures produce alternative temporalities by

3 Judith Butler, 'Critically Queer', in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 230.

4 The first phase of queer studies in Poland was primarily interested in issues of non-normative sexualities and identities. See Joanna Mizielińska, *Płeć, ciało, seksualność. Od feminizmu do teorii queer [Gender, Body, Sexuality: From Feminism to Queer Theory]* (Kraków: Universitas, 2006), and Jacek Kochanowski, 'Podmiotowa i przedmiotowa polityka queer. Zarys problematyki' ['Subjective and Objective Queer Policy: An Outline of the Issue'], in *Z odmiennej perspektywy. Studia queer w Polsce [From a Different Perspective: Queer Studies in Poland]*, ed. by Monika Baer and Marzena Lizurej (Wrocław: Arboretum, 2007).

allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience—namely birth, marriage, reproduction, and death.⁵

Queer ideas of time produce new modalities of space that are not necessarily connected to lesbian or gay subjects and instead refer to nonnormative logics and structures of sociality, corporeality, and agency. Citing the clichéd phrase ‘there is a time and a place for everything’, Halberstam writes that such sayings contribute to the reproduction of not only emotional but also physical responses to various modes of time. Consequently, people feel guilty if they are not doing anything, they are frustrated when waiting and proud when they are punctual, productive, and efficient, etc. In turn, such emotional responses lead us to naturalize our reaction to time. The question of time becomes even more complex if we consider it in the context of the implications of gender and race. Writing of ‘queer subjects’, including clubbers, members of the rave subculture, the homeless, drug dealers, prostitutes, and the homeless, Halberstam notes that they, too (and thus not only LGBT persons) have opted to live outside the heteronormative time of reproduction and the family. They are also positioned at the margins of the logic of work and efficiency. The time of African Americans was for an extended period determined by the supposedly objective and transparent norms of whites. Following Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Halberstam defines queerness as temporality, as a moment linked to both power and Foucault’s ‘way of life’. The temporal-spatial theory that Halberstam proposes is thus conditioned by the queer as it makes references to the disruption of widespread socio-cultural norms.

Another of Halberstam’s theories also challenges these norms. I draw on it to examine cases referring to defeat and failure. In light of then-current turns in queer studies and the significant shifts in the field that have occurred since the 1990s, it is evident that alternative ways of life and ways of organizing social structures are not necessarily linked to the lives of LGBTQ subcultures. *The Queer Art of Failure* subverts the myth of success and positive thinking to celebrate the eponymous concept of failure.

Halberstam thus forms part of a broader trend that has emerged in queer studies over the past decade, namely the analysis of phenomena and affects that are generally considered negative. It is worth mentioning, for example, Heather Love’s book *Feeling Backward*, which draws attention to the ways regret, shame, escapism, and passivity are interconnected with experiences of social exclusion and the historical impossibility of desire directed at members of the same sex coming into being.⁶ In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam suggests a different, affirmative perspective on the question of failure and defeat by exploring their subversive potential, which lies precisely in the fact that their deviation from generally accepted norms enables a new social order to come into being, as they challenge the normative and disciplining impact

5 Judith (Jack) Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), pp. 1–2.

6 See Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

on society of the prevalent politics of success and positive thinking. The author begins the book with a motto drawn from the gender rebel and actor Quentin Crisp, who once said, 'If at first you don't succeed, failure may be your style.' His statement is, of course, a travesty of the popular saying 'If at first you don't succeed, try, try again.' But with his typically subversive sense of humour, Crisp claimed that it is better to give it a rest and celebrate failure. Halberstam draws on this maxim to offer a somewhat different perspective on the ubiquitous politics of success and happiness, deviating from dominant discourses presented in the media, everyday life, educational institutions, and workplaces. The study considers both high and popular culture alongside sophisticated cultural theory and 'common sense', pop culture, and esoteric practices, in order to overcome the binary opposition between art and life, practice and theory, thinking and doing, and, above all, to propose a chaotic reality that emerges from both knowledge and ignorance. *The Queer Art of Failure* presents theories that speak of the queer potential located in losing, ignorance, forgetting, and not knowing. Thus traits that are usually presented as barriers to fulfilment are confronted with the current economic and political situation. Halberstam notes that if success really does require so much effort and hard work, then perhaps failure is easier and thus brings with it different kinds of rewards:

[F]ailure allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhood to orderly and predictable adulthoods. Failure preserves some of the wondrous anarchy of childhood and disturbs the supposedly clean boundaries between adults and children, winners and losers. And while failure certainly comes accompanied by a host of negative affects, such as disappointment, disillusionment, and despair, it also provides the opportunity to use these negative affects to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life.⁷

For Halberstam, such 'toxic positivity' contributes to the production of knowledge and power, while also normalizing its distribution in the realm of capitalist societies. As Halberstam writes, we are 'in an age when the banks that ripped off ordinary people have been deemed "too big to fail" and the people who bought bad mortgages are simply too little to care about'.⁸ Failure is not only supposed to offer an antidote to ossified norms of education and disciplining citizens, but it should also contribute to opening up of new perspectives when it comes to a critique of the crisis-ridden capitalist economy and creating alternatives to it for future generations of humanity.

Halberstam creates a kind of 'low theory', borrowing this term from Stuart Hall, who suggested that theory should become a way of imagining a new form of reality. The conscious and provocative confrontation of the writings of Michel Foucault, Walter Benjamin, and Sigmund Freud, to name but a few renowned thinkers, with the frivolous and joyful (or gay) examples drawn from pop culture, enables Halberstam

7 Judith (Jack) Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 3.

8 Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, p. 3.

to suggest new ways of organizing knowledge beyond rigid modules and divisions into disciplines. As the conclusion to the introduction to *The Queer Art of Failure* states:

[T]his is a book about alternative ways of knowing and being that are not unduly optimistic, but nor are they mired in nihilistic critical dead ends. It is a book about failing well, failing often, and learning, in the words of Samuel Beckett, how to fail better.⁹

One of the things explored through the 'positive model' of failure is animated films using CGI technology. They have become a huge cultural hit over the past couple of decades, bringing about a complete transformation of the visuals and content of traditional animated films, with the films made by Pixar particularly instrumental in this. Whatever the studio, all of the films explored in *The Queer Art of Failure* depict a world emerging from various kinds of revolutions: a chicken-based revolution in *Chicken Run* (dir. by Peter Lord and Nick Park, 2000), monsters in *Monsters, Inc.* (dir. by Pete Docter, 2001), bees in *Bee Movie* (dir. by Steve Hickner and Simon J. Smith, 2007), toys in *Toy Story* (dir. by John Lasseter, 1995), and penguins in *Happy Feet* (dir. by George Miller, 2006). Halberstam created a name for this genre, 'Pixarvolt', a portmanteau of the technology in which the films were made and their subject matter (revolt). The author notes that certain motifs that would never appear in films aimed at adult audiences become central elements in the success of the narratives here, such as the feminist utopia in *Chicken Run*. According to Halberstam's description of the genre,

[P]erhaps even more surprisingly, the Pixarvolt films make subtle as well as overt connections between communitarian revolt and queer embodiment and thereby articulate, in ways that theory and popular narrative have not, the sometimes counterintuitive links between queerness and socialist struggle. While many Marxist scholars have characterized and dismissed queer politics as 'body politics' or as simply superficial, these films recognize that alternative forms of embodiment and desire are central to the struggle against corporate domination. The queer is not represented as a singularity but as part of an assemblage of resistant technologies that include collectivity, imagination, and a kind of situationist commitment to surprise and shock.¹⁰

Above all, failure, together with the forgetting and ignorance associated with it, are depicted in these films not as a transitional phase on the road to success, as is the case in most mainstream and independent cinema, but as a permanent state that opens up new potential in the ways that family, community, and memory are organized.

One example of a cultural product worth viewing through a queer perspective that departs from an analysis focused on (homo)sexuality and instead looks at class issues and ongoing queer failure is the podcast *S-Town*. It has broken audience records across the Atlantic. It is difficult to establish exactly which conflict is central here. Is it the ecological

⁹ Ibid., p. 24.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 29.

one? Or perhaps the class one, or the sexual one? The question of small-town America or the broader issue of Trump's America? Perhaps the leitmotif is that failure runs through all of these realms that appear in each of the seven hour-long chapters that form Brian Reed's podcast. He is a Jewish, New York-based journalist who has made other well-known radio shows, including *Serial* and *This American Life*. His podcast first appeared in late March 2017, and within a few days it had been downloaded by over ten million listeners. *S-Town* is a classic example of the genre of investigative reporting as it tells the true and fascinating story of a fifty-year-old inhabitant of the small town of Woodstock, Alabama. One day, John B. McLemore called Reed and started telling him about a mysterious murder, police corruption and, above all, his own life in what he himself called a 'shit town'. Following several months of intense correspondence and telephone calls, the journalist came to meet John in person and help him solve the mysterious crime. Listeners are told the story from Reed's perspective, as he reveals further details in a first-person narrative and in recollections of numerous conversations he held in person in Woodstock and over the phone with McLemore, whose voice appears in the show alongside those of his friends, relatives, and neighbours. The original soundtrack was inspired by the country music typical of the region. All of these devices mean that listening to the podcast resembles a soap opera or series. This undoubtedly contributed to its unprecedented popularity.

It soon turns out that the main focus is not solving the murder mystery, as it fades into the background by the second episode, when listeners learn that McLemore committed suicide by swallowing a potassium cyanide-based poison. This arrangement of the plot allows Reed to shift the focus onto the eponymous conservative, racist, and narrowminded 'shit town' itself, which comes to stand for the contemporary United States under Trump as a whole. Reed is careful to avoid appropriating John's story and presenting it as some kind of exotic novelty. Still, after the premiere he faced numerous accusations that he had presented Woodstock through a colonialist and metropolitan gaze, while also revealing to the world the truth about McLemore's sexuality and his other demons. As John himself stated, he was 'semi-homosexual' and preferred to describe himself as queer. His tattooed chest, pierced nipples, and unusual hobbies certainly suggest that he was nonnormative rather than defined primarily by his erotic preferences and inclinations, on which he remained unclear. He proudly showed Reed around his large house, where he lived with his almost ninety-year-old mother, who suffered from dementia. McLemore had planted a substantial hedge maze around his property that became something of a local sensation with its sixty-four possible combinations for finding a way through it.

McLemore hated his native 'shit town' with a passion. However, to suggest that he presented a metronormative narrative of the kind that queer studies experts have criticized for suggesting that large cities are the only environment where LGBTQIA people¹¹ can live successfully, would not only be a gross simplification but also inadequate

11 See Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*.

to describe McLemore's situation. Indeed, despite having the means to do so, he refused to leave Woodstock. Still, he complained incessantly about the cultural, social, and political backwardness of a town that is 95% white, with the population formed largely of 'white trash'. It was in this area that racial segregation lasted longest, as it was only abolished in schools in 1967. In his long telephone tirades, John also outlined his other obsessions to Reed, including the greenhouse effect, environmental destruction, such as the melting of the icecaps, and other harmful effects of human activity. The sole bastion that he desperately sought to keep under control was his own body, which John described as a 'church'. His torso was covered in numerous tattoos, with new additions by his twenty-something acquaintance Tyler replacing existing ones in what had become an everyday ritual, which was accompanied by drinking cheap bourbon in a barn by his house. The two men enjoyed long conversations together about life, as well as even longer silences, which formed part of their ambivalent, intimate relationship. Tyler's voice appears on several occasions in the podcast following the news of McLemore's death. He reveals that he was responsible for inscribing John's body with new tattoos as well as piercing his nipples multiple times, because pain was not only a fetish for his friend but also a way of making him feel better about himself and his body for a moment. There are many similar emotional moments in *S-Town* revealing the complex landscape of love and emotions that the central protagonist inhabited. However, these moments are never sentimentalized, nor do they make an appeal to romanticized rural idylls. Instead, they can be read through the prism of a queer failure that is based, on the one hand, in an almost certainly subconscious self-destructive desire, and, on the other, in the ostentatious rejection of inscribing oneself into potentially promising normative ways of life, including, first and foremost, the metropolitan.

Furthermore, shortly after his friend's death, Tyler is accused by a cousin of stealing property, while John's acquaintances and family start searching for a rumoured bounty of gold bullion he supposedly left behind. As a result, it is not erotic/melodramatic experiences that come to the forefront of the narrative, but McLemore's acute loneliness. He spent a large part of his adult life living in voluntary celibacy, which was to a large degree a result of the conservatism, homophobia, shame, and fear produced by the particular conditions obtaining in his 'shit town'. The failure he experienced in realizing his identity came, on the one hand, from the impossibility of living according to the normative heterosexual script expected of an adult man, while on the other hand this failure is integrally linked to the in-built 'failings' of the culturally and geographically peripheral region he inhabits in the US. It is hundreds of miles away from metropolitan centres inhabited by LGBTQIA communities.

This does not mean, however, that the central objective of the creators of *S-Town* was to perpetuate the harmful stereotypes that depict the Southern United States and rural areas as inhospitable towards any form of otherness. As Christina Belcher notes in an article in *Society and Space*,

John's story is not one of a queer who could have lived otherwise, had he moved to a city [...]. *S-Town* is not a story about a man who died in a shit town; it's a story about a man who lived in a shit world. [...] This is a different story of being queer in the country, in Alabama, in what is now Trump's America. With his melancholic attachment to the earth and its destruction, John wore our collective pain of environmental disaster on his body, slowly being damaged and poisoned, like the rest of us.¹²

As becomes clear towards the end of the podcast, the passionate amateur horologist McLemore spent many hours in his workshop polishing old timepieces with gold and restoring them. He used the dangerous technique of fire-gilding, which produces a lot of mercury vapours that must have found their way into his lungs. He thus suffered from the 'mad hatter disease' that was common among American industrial workers at the turn of the twentieth century. Its symptoms include insomnia, irritability, emotional changes, muscle twitching, cramps, and in extreme cases, powerful depression. John had all of these symptoms, and they were most likely responsible, in combination with the general sense of hopelessness that was largely a result of his obsessive concern for the environment, for his suicide. Instead of solving the murder mystery that brought Reed to Woodstock, listeners are confronted with the touching story of a man whose body and mind were marked by an ultimately fatal illness, a side effect of inhaling the toxic substances that find their way into the ecosphere in America and beyond. It is thus difficult to avoid reading *S-Town* through the broader ecological disaster facing the US and Trump's belief that global warming is fake. Many people were poisoned in Michigan, for example, because of lead seeping into the water supply over the years. A few months ago, meanwhile, Trump signed a decree allowing environmentally damaging coal mines to reopen as part of his programme to 'make America great again'. John B. McLemore, a queer man from small-town Alabama suffering from mercury poisoning, experienced the impact of global warming on his own body, and he thus wanted his story to be heard, doing all he could to make that happen while he still lived. He did not do so to save himself or salvage his hated 'shit town' (indeed, both endeavours ended in failure anyway), but to make others aware that despite what they might think, they too live in 'shit America'. Full of hate, racism, homophobia, and prejudice, ignoring the ecological costs of their way of life, which is destroying the lives of their fellow citizens and indeed the Earth itself: that is the merciless analysis that *S-Town* leaves listeners in Trump's America with. Meanwhile, the sexual, class-based, race-based, and ecological failure of the protagonist becomes a site not only of his personal revolt and refusal to accept his inscription into normative narratives and social orders, but also for making new, disruptive registers available to listeners. It is thanks to them that the toxicity of the system becomes clear, revealing opportunities for searching for alternatives to the status quo.

12 Christina Belcher, 'S-Town, Shit World', *Society and Space*, June 2017, <http://societyandspace.org/2017/06/06/s-town-shit-world/>, [accessed 2 September 2019].

The queer art of failure is also evident in a performance directed by Wiktor Rubin based on a text and dramaturgy by Jolanta Janiczak and myself. The premiere took place on 22 February 2019 at the Zagłębie Theatre in Sosnowiec. The play, *Dead Girls Wanted*, was inspired by and based on Alice Bolin's book *Dead Girls: Essays on Surviving an American Obsession*. Bolin examined closely the cultural obsession with women who have been subject to harm and humiliation, offering a feminist analysis of the eponymous figure of the dead girl. She bases her analysis on sources including detective fiction and American serials such as *Twin Peaks*, which provided a model for television narratives about a world permeated and indeed literally infected by dead females. Bolin rightly observes that in much cultural production, girls are often depicted as wild yet sensitive creatures who should be protected at all costs, likewise from themselves and their blossoming sexuality. Despite their recurring oppressive and sexist tropes, the series that she terms 'dead girl shows' offer just one lesson: do not trust any men. Dead girls are most commonly attractive and white, models of the perfect victim who can simultaneously evoke pity, fear, and a perverse sense of satisfaction that they were 'asking for it'.¹³

In our play, we present a series of female figures whose suffering, humiliation, and death has provided the focus in Western culture for perverse satisfaction. We begin with a fictional protagonist, Nastasya Filippovna, the principal heroine of Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel *The Idiot*, before moving on to two living women, Britney Spears and Lindsey Lohan. Their experience of a turbocharged rise to fame followed by a spectacular fall fed media and public opinion over the past two decades. Finally, we turn our attentions to three 'dead icons', the stars Whitney Houston, Amy Winehouse, and Anna Nicole Smith. We had no interest in a realistic retelling of the biographies of our protagonists, even though their lives provided the basis for a substantial critique of a patriarchal and sexist system. What we are more interested in is the mechanisms responsible for the performative construction of a cultural fascination with dead girls, both in fictional and 'real life' forms. The failure, in its common understanding and in the sense proposed by Halberstam, that is inscribed into each of our heroines enables us to create an emancipatory and subversive space for our protagonists. Our staging strategy was grounded in extracting this anti-systemic power from failure. The aim was to reveal the scope and force of the toxic politics of success to which the eponymous dead girls fell victim despite, and often in accordance with, their privileged class and economic status.

Divided into six parts, the play's structure resembles that of a television series. It opens with a video by Marek Kozakiewicz in which Janiczak comes to embody the various forms of dead girl. The explicit and often deliberately clumsy staging of death scenes involving drug overdoses, hangings, or car accidents has the aesthetic of a VHS tape, with the scenes then spliced with excerpts of cult films and television productions that uncritically exploit the figure of dead girls. This opening immediately reveals the theme of failure and a certain degree

¹³ See Alice Bolin, *Dead Girls: Essays on Surviving an American Obsession* (New York: William Morrow, 2018).

of impossibility. These tropes are then adopted in the stage design, which sees black soil-filled sacks hanging over the red laminated floor. The sacks then dump their contents of ash and dirt on the protagonists. Each of them, with the exception of Nastasya Filippovna, who is taken from a different, doubly fictive order (comprising Dostoevsky's novel and this performance), appear on stage wearing roller skates. The four female actors and one male actor all wear black beards and tights as they move around the stage more or less effectively and gracefully, before tripping, losing their balance, and proving unable to stop. This device is simple yet radically determinative in respect of the status of the bodies on stage, and it thus reveals the extent of the threat and impossibility that flow fluidly into the subject matter explored by the protagonists in six monologues that are absurd, fragmented, and based upon stream-of-consciousness narratives. They are all permeated in various ways by the theme of failure.

Most of the protagonists are heterosexual women, the exceptions being a lesbian episode in Lindsay Lohan's life, which she comments on by stressing, 'I identify as a 100% heterosexual person', and the case of Whitney Houston, who had an unrequited love for her friend Robyn. They all come from the largely Anglo-Saxon cultural order, which resonates to a greater degree than in Poland with the politics of success and positive thinking that Halberstam criticized. Failure as both an affect and cultural phenomenon accompanies the protagonists in several ways that we sought to ground in the theatrical 'here and now' of the performance in the Zagłębie Theatre in Sosnowiec, a post-industrial and provincial town in Silesia. This was the reason we structured the piece around a grotesque competition for the most desirable dead girl, an idea that alludes to the various 'Miss' beauty pageants. Even if the characters have just uttered the most touching or shocking words, each monologue ends with a stage direction aimed at the audience: 'applause'. Mocking the pageants that maintain traditional models of femininity, and instead siding with failure, including gender-based failure (indeed, Whitney Houston is played by a white heterosexual male, Łukasz Stawarczyk, who cannot, of course, express her experience that was so closely bound to her womanhood and blackness), enables us to capture the cultural mechanisms responsible for producing yet more dead girls. This strategy also enables queering of the lives of the selected protagonists, in the sense of ascribing them nonnormative connotations, inverting them, and making them strange or queer. By moving away from a series of stereotypes, taboos, and social rules that determine what is deemed a success and what a failure, what we should be ashamed of and what we should be proud of, allows us to rediscover the potentially subversive meanings of the biographical narratives that the media has appropriated.

This guiding principle applies to all six parts of the play, but it is expressed particularly powerfully and directly in the final monologue from Lindsay Lohan (Agnieszka Kwietniewska). The character constantly refers to and performs being an actress who is forced into begging for roles and attention once her star has waned. The humorous pretext that brings the plot to her complex, multi-layered monologue is an alleged visit to Harvey Weinstein's hotel room. Throughout the scene, Kwietniewska addresses a camera positioned up a several-metre-high

ladder, with the images relayed from the back of the stage. Slowly climbing the ladder, sometimes retreating a rung before gradually climbing up again, she speaks of her aging body while at the same time criticizing the film industry's fixation on beauty and youth. She is dressed in a pink ballgown, which she has carelessly draped over a black bodysuit with the label sticking out ostentatiously. She sits down in a puddle of artificial blood speculating on the subject of the anal sex that may be waiting for her on the other side of the producer's hotel-room door. She juggles various feelings, emotional states, and tones, from hope, through joy, fascination, and acceptance of her fate, to anger, dissent, and rebellion, thus extracting the aura of failure that accompanies the real and fictitious Lohan alike. In the finale, she calls upon the other female protagonists to take matters into their own hands and liberate themselves from the humiliation imposed by the patriarchal system. The response to her call comes with the actresses taking each other by the hand as they stand on tree stumps positioned at the back of the stage, in a powerful gesture of sisterhood and solidarity. An image of an American highway is projected behind them as a symbol of freedom and journeying into the unknown. Lohan encourages them all to travel far away in her Dodge pickup truck, which happens to have six seats. The very final scene, however, is a performance of failure involving an inevitably doomed attempt to revive a stuffed hawk. The bird previously made an appearance on video as the trophy intended for the most desirable dead girl. The protagonists try to make it fly by attaching dozens of black balloons to it while themselves blowing at it. The efforts are short-lived, but play out differently each night at the theatre.

Perhaps, as the final scenes and the monologue given by Kwietniewska's Lohan suggest, it is in the ostentatious failure endured by these stars of the music world, cinema, and pop culture, as well as in their representation in the theatrical 'here-and-now', that we should look for a solution to the sexist cultural impasse that results in the endless reproduction of the established system. Failure as performed by Lohan, a former Disney child star, might be a brave prophecy of a new, international, total style that applies not only to art but also, more broadly, to life. It disrupts established schemata for women and sets in motion queer scripts for all those who do not fit the framework of the rules for this murderous game, rules established for the benefit of white, male heterosexuals. This is a game that results in the literal and symbolic death of endless girls. By thinking of queer failure, potential is released that significantly transcends the queerness associated with models of (homo)sexuality. Similarly to the *S-Town* podcast, the play makes the desire for self-destruction the central issue. It becomes the only reasonable response to the toxicity of the system and the normative ways of life that the heroines can in no way subscribe to.

The failure of John from *S-Town*, or of Lindsay, Britney, Amy, Anna Nicole, Whitney, and Nastasya, does not lie in the fact that they did not reproduce dominant norms determined by the politics of success. Rather, in paying the highest price (their lives) for their spectacular failure, they reveal the mercilessly oppressive and subliminal convictions upon which 'a good and happy existence' is supposed to be based. They are dictated not only by the politics of success, the rat race for fame

and a career, wealth and material prosperity, but also by other oppressive ideological implications of reality that determine where one should live and work, how one should behave in everyday life and in the glare of the camera's flash, and even why and in whose name one should die. In light of this, Quentin Crisp's words about the liberating power of giving it a rest and accepting failure appear all the more powerful and principled. Meanwhile, much points towards the radical and queer art of failure actually offering an antidote to further unnecessary deaths driven by the racial, sexual, and gendered regime of success. And this applies not only to the realm of cultural representations, as the *S-Town* podcast and the performance *Dead Girls Wanted* are both based on real people and their stories.

Translated by Paul Vickers

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ABSTRACT

Grzegorz Stępnik

The Power of Queer Failure

Taking on queer studies theories, with particular regard to those that abandon the analysis of different models of (homo) sexuality, especially Judith (Jack) Halberstam's statements on queer failure, the author describes two cultural productions that deal with negative feelings, emotions, and states in new and unexpected ways. Starting with a brief introduction on the current state of queer studies as a methodology, the article offers a condensed yet thorough look at both the popular podcast titled *S-Town* and the play *Dead Girls Wanted*, read through the lens of failure and queerness as an alternative mode of being in the world.

Keywords: failure, queer, subversive, normative