

Agnieszka Dauksza

Insignificant people: practices of powerless contention

The proposed project emerged from powerlessness that soon grew into surprise: once again, literary and visual culture proved to be well ahead of cultural, social and anthropological diagnoses. The preliminary research shows a figure emerging from literary representations of powerlessness and representing whom the PI calls insignificant people. She perceives them as those who remain in the background, do not stand out, and in the public order have little significance as individuals; they are the “majority”, usually almost unnoticeable, or rather largely unimportant to those who manage them. Insignificant people feel immersed and entangled in everyday life that is not necessarily fair. The functioning of insignificant people is not, however, inactivity or a lack of action: it is an everyday, unglamorous, sometimes painstaking activity, which is often viewed as uncreative, mediocre, uncharacteristic, not meriting description, and which usually is not the object of interest and reflection in the humanities. PI proposes interpretations of literature and art of recent years, drawing from micro-diagnoses concerning changes in sensitivities and social emotional scenarios. In dialogue with these texts, she includes them in the wider circulation of engaged humanities and affective studies, develops new research methods and categories (such as insignificant people, practices of powerless contention, networks of passive connections).

Literary and visual texts from the last three decades will be selected according to the problem and analysed as case studies. Polish cultural texts in particular will be interpreted, although given the nature of more general, simultaneously occurring phenomena, texts from the global humanities commenting on local forms of insignificance will also provide relevant reference points. The plan and objectives will be as follows: characterising the figure of insignificant people and their experiences – referring both to the humanistic tradition of writing about “ordinary”, “simple” people and to contemporary works in the area of cultural, social and anthropological studies. The case analysis will be used to (1) create a collective portrait of tired, unhappy, irritated protagonists – a group of negative thinkers and practitioners of impotence, (2) describe the types of their positions in the dynamic socio-anthropological context, and the changes taking place in the forms of literary and visual representation, and (3) define the category of insignificant people.

This is directly linked to the second stage of the research, questions of passive activity, meaning unobvious forms of activation and agency. When passivity becomes a cognitive outlook, people begin to position themselves differently in the space, to act according to a different rhythm, and have a different sense of the divisions between the private and the public. The 3. stage is the study of the mode of insignificance associated with strategies of deliberate avoidance. The literature shows that insignificance is often a form of escape from unfavourable conditions, and develops an entire repertoire of practices of withdrawal, self-depreciation, reduction, retreat. The 4. stage of the research concentrates on insignificant people’s practices of resistance. Those who sense a deficit of significance frequently decide to lose their safe or at least fixed position, and search for a means of expression despite the unfavourable conditions. The 5. stage of the research concerns the dimension of the experience of insignificance that makes use of the affective modes of failure and accepts powerlessness using acts of manifestation, rupture, breakdown or collapse. Such cases result in expression of feelings using means socially recognised as undignified, shameful, bizarre, embarrassing, disgusting, or contemptuous.

The research will be conducted in stages, based on interpretation of literary and visual texts, with the main working method being engaged humanities in several guises: anthropological, socio-cultural, and philosophical-literary. The most important methods will certainly be: affective studies; the concepts of new materialism; the concepts of weak thought; Azoulay’s concept of the method of potentializing social history; another important reference is the study of performance; finally, the project utilises the methods developed by women’s and queer studies. As Halberstam writes: “All losers are the heirs of those who lost before them. Failure loves company”.