



## On the Economy of Disappointment

Why is there so much disappointment around us? How might one explain disappointment? What is the political nature of disappointment? Artūras Tereškinas writes for Tohu Magazine about the notion of disappointment, following "Bjaurūs jausmai", his recently-published book, a collaboration with Adomas Danusevičius about ugly/negative feelings.

Essay / Artūras Tereškinas June 25, 2021

Life feels like a collection of individual scenes. All day long you lie in a black metal bed under a black silk blanket. You don't want to get up. The blinds are tightly closed, although it is dark outside at any hour of a short February day.

What do you feel? Most often, disappointment that envelops the room and then pours into the newly repainted radiators and the yellow wooden doors. The eclecticism of disappointment: your everyday life gradually wears off until something unexpected happens. Until then, you dream of escaping, forgetting, at least briefly checking out of this wintry hotel and defeating the twilight that surrounds you.

It may be naive to ask why there is so much disappointment around us. We often find it difficult to hide our disappointment with the state, the government, our first or second love, a long-term friendship – one day, we realize that they cannot satisfy us emotionally. In addition to these rather big disappointments, we experience micro-disappointments every day: a disappointing book that we close after a few pages, disappointing food delivered to our homes, and we even disappoint ourselves with our inability to write a single text message all day.

Perhaps in the face of all the disappointment that annoys our imagination, we should rather ask what our style of disappointment is and how we express it. After all, disappointment, like joy, is a political thing since it reflects our social, political, and historical realities: whoever we are – optimists or depressive realists – we feel committed to finding the right environment for us to thrive with as little despair as possible.

Affects including disappointment circulate, flow, and direct us to some objects and even create disorientations. They form different affective economies. Lawrence Grossberg notes that affective economies "articulate affective struggles into a limited set of structures"<sup>1</sup> that makes them matter or not matter to us.

Speaking of an affective economy of hate, Sara Ahmed argues that affects do not reside in us or in signs or commodities, but are produced only as effects of their circulation. What Ahmed attempts to say is that hate as an emotion or affect is not contained within us but moves between different subjects, aligning or dividing them. She uses the term "economy" to point out that "emotions circulate and are distributed across a social as well as psychic field."<sup>2</sup> In the same way that Ahmed writes about hate, it is also possible to talk about disappointment that does not inhabit a single subject, but makes him/her "one nodal point in the economy".<sup>3</sup>

How might one explain disappointment? Like some other affects, disappointment comes into being when we feel unable to control an object in which we have invested a lot of effort, energy, and time. Many of us experience disappointment as an inevitable companion to our failures. But it is only when failure and negativity recur and turn into an impasse, which feels like a symptom of an inevitable crisis, that we find ourselves in a shrinking and collapsing social reality.







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## Untitled/ be pavadinimo, 2020

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The political nature of disappointment is also confirmed by the fact that the socio-political system in which we live (it may be called capitalism, post-capitalism, or affective capitalism that uses affects to produce an economic effect) successfully allocates to us different amounts of disappointment. Too much disappointment can threaten our belief that the labor of everyday life makes sense, that we can learn from mistakes, and that our failing dreams are just a faint reference to a string of accidents and contingencies. Conversely, too much disappointment can be costly for those who want to govern us and maintain the current system.

Disappointed people are often overwhelmed with anger, rage, and hatred – these affects are a predictable consequence of disappointment. In this regard, disappointment can be used as a diagnostic tool to point out our social traumas, our ongoing psychic harm and misery.

What is the proof for this diagnosis? In browsing social networks and reading people's comments about media reports and news, it is easy to notice that disappointment has become a chronic symptom: disappointed with our life-worlds, we drown ourselves in various forms of aggression, celebrate our ability to hurt, to be hurt and to feel bad – all this becomes as common as being angry, worrisome, mournful or resentful.

Could disappointment motivate us to perform political action? I doubt it. Strange as it may seem, disappointment is one of those affects that not only makes us feel bad, but also stifles political motivation. Sometimes the damage suffered is just damage, and the apathy and passivity that accompany disappointment can hardly inspire new collective struggles. Disappointment is more conducive to lying prostrate in a black metal bed with your eyes fixed on yellow wooden doors.

Unlike anger or rage, disappointment usually, though not always, impairs people's ability to be active. In other words, instead of looking for collective solutions, disappointed, vulnerable, and obedient individuals get involved in therapeutic practices, sign up for subjective well-being programs, and indulge in a drill of relaxing fantasies. The neoliberal normality based on a phantasmic narrative of individual success and social mobility contributes to this individualization by turning economic and social problems into purely emotional ones: "If you want to change the world, first change yourself!"

There is no expiration date for disappointment. Disappointing lives exist in a state of constant delay and procrastination. While we would like to sever our attachment to them, we often don't know how to do it. Thus, we tread in a poisonous, complex, and at the same time messy reality. The prize of our exhausting labor is the inexhaustible hope that it is possible to adapt to the ever-changing genres of capitalist instability.

Yes, we can achieve hope individually: most of us have a sufficient archive of energy generated by "good" affects and emotions we experience on a daily basis. This energy is an indelible tool of individual self-change and self-construction, which we often use insufficiently. But do we always take advantage of what we have received and return to others what has been given to us?

To hell with the disappointed. They carry with them qualities that are not socially valuable ("who needs compassion and care?"). They consider both themselves and others to be monsters ("my nature contradicts their nature"). They can control neither the material conditions of their lives nor their dependency on fantasies destroyed by the cruelty of everyday life ("why am I so offended by the gaze of others and why do I see this strange face in the mirror?").



Things, people, ideas, feelings, relationships, activities, and institutions merge into a powerful lump of disappointment in the throat. When you wash yourself, the mirror helps you come to terms with your disappointment: the same sad, pale face with big green eyes, shivering lips, and a meaty nose. After taking a shower, you no longer see yourself in the misty glass. You write on the mirror with your finger: "Blessed are they who expect nothing, for they will never be disappointed."

This text is part of a special issue in collaboration with The Lithuanian Cultural Institute, edited by Juste Jonutyte.

- [1.](#) Grossberg, *Dancing in Spite of Myself: Essays on Popular Culture*, 1987, p. 45.
- [2.](#) Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2004, p. 120.
- [3.](#) Ibid, p, 121.

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