



Reclaiming Hope: Affects, Temporality, Politics

B. Taş

Reclaiming Hope: Affect, Temporality, Politics

Summary

The critical task I take up in this research is to reconceptualize hope as an affective orientation in time, which requires remaining open to the risks that the unknowability of the future entails. I consider this opening a political contestation that is necessary to critique the current instrumentalization of hope as exclusively forward-looking, individualizing, and depoliticizing. Drawing on selected sources from queer theory, disability studies, affect theory, art, the critique of neoliberalism, and philosophy, each chapter of my dissertation engages diverging contemporary objects, including an online suicide prevention campaign, a Google commercial, self-help books, works of art, and political practices, in the hope of understanding hope anew. Following an interdisciplinary methodology, this research attempts to restore hope as a critical resource that has the potential to contribute to theories of time, affect, and knowledge production.

My research attempts to demonstrate that in order to better understand hope, we need to situate it in a process of becoming, which amounts to living with uncertainty, disappointment, vulnerability, and injury, but also with joy, surprise, and the other possibilities that hope can bring to us. Conceptualizing hope as an affective orientation in time that is produced through a process of uncertainty requires the critical reflection of its temporal and affective openness. Because hope entails uncertainty, a critical analysis of hope requires following it in process, the consequences of which cannot be mapped in advance.

The main argument of this dissertation is developed through four chapters. My trajectory moves from a critique of privatizing forms of hope that serve the logic of the neoliberal capitalist economy, towards an affirmative aesthetics and politics of collectivity. With the acknowledgement that the economic and political cooptation of

hope is currently all-pervasive, this dissertation attempts to revitalize practices of hope that may be provocative and potentially revolutionary.

The first chapter centers on two videos as the main objects of analysis. The first is the video by Dan Savage and Terry Miller that started the It Gets Better Project (IGB), an Internet-based video campaign initiated in the US to provide hope for LGBT youth after several teenagers across the US committed suicide. The second video I focus on in this chapter is a commercial by Google, which used the IGB to promote its browser, Chrome. I look at the ways in which these videos implicitly define hope and track how they mobilize, transmutate, and manipulate it.

Chapter 2 investigates three self-help books that purport to innervate hope in depressed or suicidal LGBT youth. I focus on *The Velvet Rage: Overcoming the Pain of Growing up in a Straight Man's World* (2005) and *It Gets Better: Overcoming Bullying, and Creating a Life Worth Living* (2012) to criticize individualized accounts of hope as well as the enforced elimination of negative affects in favor of success and normalcy. *Hello, Cruel World: 101 Alternatives to Suicide for Teens, Freaks, and Other Outlaws* (2006) helps me discuss hope in its critical relation to vulnerability. This discussion opens up towards a theory of the interconnected and relational aspects of hope.

Moving away from this context, in the third chapter I look at visual artworks that enable me to reorient hope both affectively and temporally. I start my discussion with a contemporary video composed by the philosopher Alain de Botton, who comments on the relationship between art and hope, and who connects hope with “pretty” images. He offers Claude Monet's *Water Lilies* (1899) as the prime example of an artwork that is able to offer hope to its viewers. I discuss the ramifications of coupling hope with specific artworks that are taken for granted as invoking hope in their viewers. I subsequently discuss Monet's painting in relation to another painting from the nineteenth

century, one of the most well-known allegorical representations of hope in art history, *Hope* (1886) by George Frederic Watts. In analyzing *Hope*, I trace a form of hope that is grounded in uncertainty. My last object of analysis in this chapter is *Berek* (Game of Tag, 1999), a short video by the visual artist and filmmaker Artur Żmijewski. The video shows a number of naked people playing a game of tag in a former Nazi gas chamber. This work helps me to propose a form of hope that is uncompromisingly political, and simultaneously grounded in memory and collective action in the present.

In the fourth and last chapter, I explore the ways in which hope can be learned by focusing on concrete political practice. My object of analysis here is the struggle of Rojavans for a stateless democracy in Northern Syria. Rojava is the name of a confederation of three non-contiguous enclaves or cantons, which declared its de facto autonomy in early 2014, after the Syrian government withdrew from the region in 2012. Rojava implements a political project called “democratic confederalism,” also known as “stateless democracy,” which is based on the ideas of imprisoned PKK (Kurdistan Workers’ Party) leader Abdullah Öcalan.

In a time of global economic crises, insurgent social movements, and increasing precariousness, the reconsideration of hope can contribute crucial insights into theory, criticism, and practice. Because the circulation, deployment, and performance of hope cannot be thought outside of the intricacies, articulations, and reconfigurations of power, I conclude that a critical analysis of hope can open up space for new directions in cultural analysis and practice.