

**REPORT**

on

**“ CATASTROPHIC IMAGINARIES AND REVOLUTIONARY AESTHETICS:  
THE SITUATIONIST AFTERMATH IN CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL ART”**

**PhD Candidate: Nataliya Atanasova**

**Supervisor: Assoc. Prof. Todor Todorov, PhD**

**PhD Dissertation, Faculty of Philosophy, History of Philosophy Department Sofia Uni-  
versity, “St. Kliment Ohridski”**

by

**Assoc. Prof. Boyan Manchev, Doctor of Letters**

**(New Bulgarian University)**

## Subject, problems, context and approach

Natalia Atanasova's PhD dissertation offers a mature and critically rigorous reading of the theoretical and ideological underpinnings of the Situationist International, as well as its practices and their political and artistic stakes (despite the Situationists' self-identification as political doers rather than artists). The theoretical apparatus is complex; it can be conceived as a theoretical intervention in itself – an intervention in which Situationist theories, contemporary philosophy and critical theory play a key role. Situationist practice is grasped not only historically in its context, but also in its typological potential as a means of exploring contemporary artistic practices. Working myself in the fields of philosophy and art theory in parallel, I have noticed an impressive ability to transfer theory to artistic practice and to analyse the political stakes of artistic practices as well as the mechanisms of meaning production and the social relations and tensions that weave artistic practices.

Insofar as the work is presented in the History of Philosophy Department's program, I will formulate an extended question in relation to the central philosophical concepts of the thesis. The thesis' title, *Catastrophic Imaginaries and Revolutionary Aesthetics*, implies the idea of rupture or disruption as well as historical *kairos*. Obviously, the disruptive conceptual structure in question refers to the concept of *situation* developed by the SI in opposition to the concept of *spectacle*. Undoubtedly, the idea of situation as a space of possibility and spontaneous ignition of forces as well as of authentic relations – of *authentic life*, to make use of Debord's quasi-vitalist notion – has inspired generations of artists, and remains one of the main paradigms of artistic/political action in contemporary art to this day. Situating the concept within conceptual constellations of contemporary philosophy and critical theory can illuminate its unrealized potentials; at the same time, the risk of hypostatizing *situations* as a quasi-mystical immaterial double of the historical materiality of artistic and political action, a risk noted nearly twenty years ago by Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello in their celebrated book *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, also cited by the dissertation, must be taken into account. In short: have we arrived at a situation in which 'situations' have been appropriated by hegemonic mechanisms for the production of meaning and value to a new form of 'spectacle' and spectacularity?

In elaborating on this first question, I should note that the focus of this dissertation does not include some of the hegemonic practices in the field of contemporary art today, which present and legitimate themselves precisely as heirs of Situationism. Of course, the self-definition in question constitutes in itself a rather problematic gesture, insofar as the practices I refer to are fully legitimated and supported by a powerful and normative new institutional discourse. (Incidentally, I have discussed the phenomena in question at length in my book *The End of Contemporary Art?* and in the English prototypes of the texts that compose it). My main example is the work of Tino Seghal, who identified himself as a Situationist in a conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist, related to my critique of Nicolas Bourriaud's use of the concept of situation in the context of a theoretical amalgam combining late humanist and crypto-religious ideas such as Levinas' with the revolutionary practice of the Situationists or the Althusser's political theory. (In this respect, I am fully sympathetic to Atanasova's critical attitude towards Bourdieu, and her alignment to Rancière.) Of course, this metacritical orientation is not formulated as the task of Natalia Atanasova's dissertation; at the same time, it seems to me that it is difficult to speak of the legacy of Situationism in the contemporary situation without taking into account its appropriation by contemporary new-normative critical discourses – whose normative claim is precisely what should be destituted.

Sharing in high degree the stakes and critical pathos of the PhD dissertation, I would question whether the non place at stake is utopian. Are the institutional practices under consideration (e.g., "street art") not already quasi-institutional forms as well, or at least not on their way to being institutionalised (I am also obviously referring to Banksy)? In the same way that performance art has been conceived in the past as ungraspable by capitalism (see Peggy Phelan's thesis), we have witnessed the *recapitalisation* of immaterial forms through new modes of value production invented by contemporary art institutions (I call this process the *performative turn* of the contemporary art institution, of which the Performance series at PS1, initiated during Biesenbach's tenure at MoMA, became a paradigmatic example). From this perspective, isn't a higher dose of skepticism and critical reflection on the hegemonic theoretical apparatus needed? – skepticism on the apparatus that has itself become an instrument of institutional legitimation and normative power obvious in the context in which this work has taken place?

This is the critical field in which I would like to invite the PhD candidate to defend her theses, stressing that these are not critical remarks, but an attempt to create a situation for conversation around a text making strong and bold proposals and offering thorough and original analyses.

Also, given that Nataliya Atanasova herself has a PhD in art practice, it would be interesting to know how she situates it in the field of visual arts today – and whether her critical reflection is sympathetic to the principles of her art practice.

### **Critical notes and questions**

Already in the annotation of the work it is stated that “Inspired by philosophers such as Hegel, Marx, Lukacs, Lefebvre, Benjamin and Bataille”. However, there is a slight inaccuracy in this statement – the Situationists could have hardly been inspired by Benjamin, as his work was virtually unknown in France at the time (except within Benjamin’s small circle of French friends, primarily Georges Bataille). I myself have suggested the possibility of Bataille’s structural influence on Situationist projects (especially on Mustapha Khayati), but this influence is highly apocryphal. Also, SI is definitely not a *cultural movement* ((neo-)Situationists would be certainly among the most radical critics of the *cultural turn*, corresponding to the neoliberal assimilation of social space as a sphere of meaning and value production). Similar minor contextual inaccuracies or discrepancies can be noted in other parts of the work.

It is clear that the dissertation was carried out in an English context, which is why, apart from strategic references to two English texts by Miglena Nikolchina (which I welcome), the author does not refer to Bulgarian research. However, insofar as the dissertation will be defended at the Sofia University, it would be important to take into account at least a few works by other significant Bulgarian theorists and researchers who have contributed specifically to the field in which Nataliya Atanasova is interested. In passing, I would mention Ivaylo Znepolski’s book *Catastrophe as Film Metaphor* (Sofia, 1992), as well as closer to us studies by Boryana Rossa, Ani Vaseva (a significant part of her monograph *Theatre and Truth* is dedicated to Guy Debord, and her research has repercussions on neo-situationist

practices in both Bulgaria and Germany); the catalogue to the exhibition *Apocalypse Now or Gorgons in the Depot* by B. Rossa, A. Vaseva and Monika Vakarelova; texts by Stanimir Panayotov.

### **Conclusion**

Natalia Atanasova offers an original research problem and interpretive perspective, little developed by Bulgarian philosophy and art theory. The PhD dissertation demonstrates a mastery of the research context, a deep motivation and the ability to structure a complex research project, and to argue an original thesis. CATASTROPHIC PERCEPTIONS AND REVOLUTIONARY AESTHETICS: THE IMPLICATIONS OF SITUATIONALISM IN CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL ART represents an original and valuable study that claims a new research horizons and a new critical voice. On this basis, I recommend with full conviction that the esteemed scientific jury award Natalia Atanasova the degree of Doctor of Education and Science (PhD).