

REVIEW

by Prof. Dr. Miglena Nikolchina
on Nataliya Atanasova's dissertation
"CATASTROPHIC IMAGINARIES
AND REVOLUTIONARY AESTHETICS:
THE SITUATIONIST AFTERMATH"

for the award of the educational and scientific degree "doctor" in the
professional field 2.3. Philosophy, Category: History of philosophy

Nataliya Atanasova's thesis offers a careful, insightful and ardent exploration of the philosophical, historical and political aspects of a cultural phenomenon that has not attracted much attention in Bulgarian academia. The qualities of Atanasova's work are unquestionable and the study fulfills all the necessary requirements for a Ph.D. thesis so I will begin my review by straightway expressing my support for bestowing the educational and scientific degree "doctor" in the professional field 2.3. Philosophy, Category: History of philosophy to Nataliya Atanasova.

In evaluating Nataliya Atanasova's work I will focus on the significance of her object of study, on the theoretical scope of her methodology, the richness of the empirical material she employs to illustrate her arguments, and the contemporary relevance of her analyses. The dissertation sets as its task exploring, on the one hand, the role of art and the cultural industry as, precisely, an industry and as tools for social manipulation and ideological control mediated by the market; on the other hand, however, art is examined as endowed with the potential for critique and as a vehicle for radical social change. The author's focus is on the "catastrophic imaginaries," which she regards as an important aspect of revolutionary aesthetics. The avant-garde's old dream for transforming the world, which Atanasova takes into account in her analysis, becomes reincarnated in Situationism and the Situationist International, which, in their turn, exert their influence and have their aftermath on the contemporary art scene. The study is guided by the hope that art may contest and oppose

dominant ideologies and create new social realities. Opposing the totality in which late capitalism traps all aspects of everyday reality and imagination, catastrophic imaginaries serve as both the means to imagine an alternative future and as a challenge to the established order.

Atanasova approaches her task through a plethora of thinkers belonging to a wide range of disciplines. This multi- and interdisciplinarity is one of the great qualities of her work. From Hegel and Marx to Lukacs, Benjamin, Althusser, Debord, Vaneigem, Lyotard, Baudrillard, Agamben, Ranciere, Zizek – I randomly enumerate part of the formidable theoretical apparatus – the study intertwines multiple perspectives in its own argumentation. In this way the author introduces the conceptual background which is typical of the visual arts field and which, in her case, is characterized by both consistency and relevance. Atanasova employs her sources elegantly and in depth, endowing her analysis with solidity and scope, despite the relative scarcity, which she herself points out, of the available reflection on Situationism. She achieves this effect by examining the object of her study not only within the web of different theoretical approaches, but also in the framework of contemporary artistic corollaries of the Situationist movement. While - as Atanasova points out - Situationism as such "glues together" bits and pieces of various more coherently and comprehensively developed discourses, the poignancy of its formulations and actions becomes a *sigla*, succinctly naming a fundamental problem and the proposal for its solution by means of art. Ultimately, what is also at stake here is Situationism's deliberate refusal of a coherence that, in its own view, would place it within the regime of ideologies. Thus, in an era marked by multiple projects for the dismantling of ideology, including institutions such as authorship and representation - both by the means of theory and by the means of art, especially on the French stage - Situationism manages to preserve its uniqueness. This explains its enduring presence among other projects and among more consistently developed discourses.

The study deals not only with social conditioning and theoretical stipulations, but also with the history of Situationism. To the extent that this history remains under-told, Atanasova's dissertation is undoubtedly a contribution not only in the Bulgarian context. It devotes a substantial amount of space not only to

Debord, but also to the lesser known of the two central figures of Situationism, Raoul Vaneigem, and his concept of 'active nihilism'. The historical part of the study is vividly and engagingly told and offers a dynamic and, at times, dramatic account of the fifteen years of the Situationist International.

The conceptual center of the study is the catastrophic imaginary, which the author considers as an aspect of a revolutionary aesthetic and as a tool for positive change. The dissertation devotes considerable space to specific examples, with particular detail given to Banksy's Dismaland project. Alongside this relatively recent example, Atanasova applies her catastrophic approach to other manifestations of contemporary visual art, including developments in the digital sphere. To the qualities of the work, both with regard to its theoretical aspects and its concrete analyses, must be added its brilliant structuring - a clear, logically thought-out, yet elegant composition, surprising in its twists and turns, interesting and fascinating. The same can be said of Atanasova's style, which is precise, dynamic and invariably engaging. Finally, the high degree of self-reflexivity of the work should be highlighted: it not only unfolds certain theses, but there is also a clear awareness of their scope and power.

Despite its title and its focus on the catastrophic imagination, Nataliya Atanasova's work has a rather optimistic and even utopian character. I am not referring here to the utopian dimensions of any avant-garde at all, however destructive its techniques, but to the particular horizon of this study. Utopianism takes a particularly visible form in the discussion of the psychogeography of situationism as a pendulum between the spirit shaping the world and the world shaping the spirit. Even in their own time, situationists are aware that they are being outflanked by the system, and Atanasova points this out, yet the gesture of hope survives. The question I would like to ask at this point is this: will it not turn out that it is precisely utopianism, despite Situationist reservations, and not the catastrophism of the imagination, that is the fundamental feature of Situationism and its successors? And is it not, in fact, one of the last utopias, worthy of the name, of Western civilization - which explains the cool attitude of the outdated situationists towards the new greens that Atanasova points out?

I will expand on this question. In the decades since the end of Situationism, the catastrophic imagination, not the realism with which it struggled, has captured the mass media. From *Jaws* to *Titanic*, with which Hollywood seems to have ship-

wrecked as well, apocalyptic and dystopian scenarios dominate today in the age of Walking Dead and Fallout. The same can be said of politics, which manipulates mass consciousness precisely through the incessant production of apocalyptic scenarios, from pandemics to ominously looming environmental disasters. How can the avant-garde apocalyptic imagination still claim to distinguish itself from prevalent manipulative scenarios? What aesthetic categories might we use to draw this distinction?

Finally, a critical note: if the usual problem with dissertations written in English in this country is the English, in this case the problem is with the Bulgarian of the abstract. The machine translation has not been properly edited and the result is rather unfair to the qualities of the language and thought of the main work presented in English. I see this fact as a symptom of a more general problem, which I would in no way want to put down as Natalia Atanasova's personal responsibility. I will call it a symptom of the imperial left. The enormous apparatus of the study - whose impressive richness I do not intend to belittle - has passed through the prism of - to use Tsvetan Stoyanov's Aesopian language - an abstract "Alexandrian" reception, with the result that French, Italian, Slovenian and even Bulgarian authors are there, but not the implications of their specific points of view, even when - as in the case of the French scene of the 1960s - they share the social and cultural stage with Situationism.

I will not go further into this problem. We are, after all, talking about a study that deserves praise not only in terms of quality but also as sheer volume and comprehensiveness, so my remark is only with an eye to the future development of a brilliant young researcher. Last but not least I would like to mention the solid number of publications. The abstract - leaving aside the problem with the Bulgarian translation - objectively presents the main ideas of the work. The contributions are correctly indicated. The study satisfies the criteria for a doctoral dissertation. Emphasising once again the scientific excellence and the importance of the topic, I propose to the esteemed scientific jury to support the award to of the educational and scientific degree "doctor" in the professional field 2.3. Philosophy, Category: History of philosophy to Nataliya Atanasova.

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Prof. Dr. Miglena Nikolchina