

Review

of the dissertation "Catastrophic imaginaries and revolutionary aesthetics: the situationist aftermath in contemporary political art" by Natalia Atanasova

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from

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Natalia Atanasova's dissertation is a text that should be approached carefully and seriously. Not only because of its length (346 pages, organized in three chapters, introduction, conclusion, appendix, contributions and limitations) and comprehensiveness, but because of its broad erudition and at the same time independent position, defended consistently and persistently. This is a work that exceeds the ordinary criteria for a doctoral defense.

At the same time, it is a text with whose theses I find it difficult to agree, as I find them subservient to wishful thinking, in such a sense tendentious, even if I am sympathetic to the emotional charge of their exposition. A text that reads like a 300+ page long manifesto. I'll try to explain what I mean by sparing praise, because the merits of the dissertation are obvious. I will concentrate on the objections in the belief that they might be useful for N. Atanasova 's further work.

First of all, I have serious doubts about the influence of the SI (Situationist International) on contemporary art, and even on that part of it which we could define as revolutionary. I think the author herself is aware of this and in the introductory annotation she cleverly replaces the term "art" with "cultural production", whatever that means, but I prefer to stick to the terminology set out in the title of the thesis. Of course, I do not expect strict definitions regarding any art, as these are questions with impossible to pin down answers, and yet, there is a need for a distinction between political and revolutionary art. Leaving aside the all-too-common conception of all social art as political, it seems to me that these days engaged art is denouncing rather than catastrophically revolutionary: the closest example in this country is undoubtedly the political spectacle of the National Theatre's *The Hague* (presenting the war in Ukraine and the totalitarian regime in Russia

through the eyes of a child), which could in no way be described as revolutionary. In general, in the second half of the twentieth century and throughout the twenty-first, it is difficult to find examples of revolutionizing art of the kind of Russian Futurism, although when creativity is persistently sought and ideologized as an activity that itself destroys conventional frameworks (something characteristic of the theoretical attitude not only of SI, but also of those following the basic tenets of Foucault, Marxist post-Freudians such as Deleuze and Guattari), it can also lead to the following:

“Studying the creative power of guerrilla tactics, he contests the reactive nature of negative critique and advances a notion of the artistic war machine, one that underscores the political dimension of contemporary art at the level of subjectivity (how subjectivity is produced). What he finds especially interesting about Baader and Meinhof is how dissent and the affirmation of the new are implicated in one another. He subsequently uses this observation to consider the broader ontological problem of subjectivity arguing that the connection between art and living a creative life has a political undercurrent, insofar as it encourages us to produce our own subjectivity instead of taking it as an a priori given”.

This is not a quote from N. Atanasova, but from a review of Simon O'Sullivan's book *Art Encounters Deleuze and Guattari*. I bring it up because I want to ask her to what extent she would subscribe to the thesis of the inherent artistry of the Red Brigades' activity as thus understood, since the above quote sounds to me in line with some of Guy Debord's ideas accepted in Natalia's text.

Along these lines, at the very beginning of my review, I will state my answer to the question posed at the end of the thesis, "Why is Situationism still significant today?": As far as the directions of contemporary art are concerned, I believe it is not significant. Perhaps one can look for indirect traces: through Bourriaud's social actionism, the spirit of Situationism can be felt in some art events. Although, if anything, I see echoes of SI ideology more in punk, which has proved remarkably enduring in its total subversiveness.

Here I want to highlight something else that is somehow overlooked in the thesis. Actionism and artistic attempts at "subversion" at the end of the twentieth century were not necessarily aimed at a contestation of modern capitalism and have very little in common with the Marxist rhetoric of

some French left thinkers. In fact, particularly striking examples (because of the threat to their authors) are from resistance to totalitarian socialist regimes: the actions of the opposition to the military regime of Gen. Jaruzelski's in Poland, the activities of artists such as Ai Wei Wei in China, not to mention the numerous Russian examples of dissent expressed through political actionism. To provide a justification for my skepticism about the main conclusion of the dissertation, I will offer specifics. I am puzzled by the categorical assertion that Banksy's *Dismaland* project "embodies Situationist principles and reflects Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality as an afterthought...and further employs theories such as Rancière's 'distribution of the sensible.'" Even if it is likely that Banksy was familiar with Baudrillard's theses, which were quite popular in the second half of the twentieth century, even if he may have read Rancière, art extremely rarely follows theoretical prescriptions. Banksy's artistic activity could be regarded also in such a clue, and I like the detailed analysis of *Dismaland* offered in the thesis. However, the above conclusion seems strained to me in an effort to dredge up as many arguments as possible about the influence on twenty-first century art, of a movement forgotten by the art world not because of its catastrophic revolutionary nature, but simply because of the lack of quality work that could be cited, developed or confronted by later generations, as is usually the case in artistic practice. To elaborate, I would suggest a comparison of the importance for the development of cinema of Eisenstein's undeniably revolutionary films and Debord's cinematography. The only assertion about the possible influence of the editing of Guy Debord's film propagating the *Society of the Spectacle*, on the construction of Alain Resnais's *Hiroshima My Love*, cited by N. Atanasova, was launched by the situationist Asger Jorn and it hangs lonely in the space of world film criticism. The PhD student also praises the *Howl for Sade* experiment, but I see it as nothing more, but an illustration of Debord's thesis about the absence of art than an art film, even though it is in line with a certain short-lived trend in 1950s art that contests artifice itself (John Cage presented his *Silence 4'33* in 1952). As for Banksy, I think the value of his work is not due to philosophical acumen, but simply his timely social reflex that gives him a special place among other street art artists and wins him followers and plagiarists.

Analysing the latest artefacts, Natalia Atanasova has not overlooked the issue of so-called NFT art, and this is one of the qualities of her work, but again, it is also considered in a "fight the capitalist" perspective, which again borders on the wishful thinking tone of the dissertation. For, much as I dislike it, there is a great danger that its development will move in the direction of convergence with business art, which, along with kitsch, is making a triumphant return to the

contemporary art world. That is to say, in Marx's terminology: the "expropriation" by the "vampirically thirsty for fresh blood" capitalist market of the new, NFT-related digital creativity (which does not overcome the commodity status of art at all), is quite probable.

In her quest for comprehensiveness, the PhD student also lists what she sees as the shortcomings of the dissertation, but remembering Lafontaine's fable, I will not drop my cheese - I will rather point out what I see as a deficit of her otherwise so rich text, because it is due to my main objection to the bias of most of its conclusions. An objection that I persist in repeating, as I believe that for an erudite researcher, as Natalia Atanasova undoubtedly is, constructive skepticism towards the object of study would be more helpful in convincing the thesis. And so: not the lack of reference to the aesthetics of Kant and Schelling, but the lack of categorical analysis. Instead, one is being misled by the beautiful but not very deep philosophicality of a theorist like Debord with his, in my opinion, dubious attachment to Marxist aesthetics (which, by the way, is also an indefinite concept, because of the rather divergent factual background, and because of the absence of developed aesthetic theses in Marx himself). I would rather be interested in reading what, in the context of contemporary revolutionary or, more generally, political art, is going on with the category of the "sublime", which continues to be present in the "de-aestheticized" world of postmodernism, or what some theorists today call metamodernity. Instead, we are offered an conjecture of the notions of catastrophicity and revolutionary, which is quite unjustified, since there are a number of striking examples of "static" catastrophism: from the famous ruins in Romanticism, to American photographers focusing on images of abandoned Detroit or the Nevada desert. Of course, one could say that the ruin itself calls for social change, but that would be an elementary ideologization, something that is below the level of Natalia's text, given the analysis of ideology in the dissertation.

All of us crave for social change, whether we seek the causes of our dissatisfaction in developed capitalism and consumerism or in the legacy of real socialism, or both. Culture and art can undoubtedly influence individual attitudes, although I would dispute their quite so fundamental role in reshaping the 'political and social landscape', as Natalia seems to believe. In this case, my view is more Marxist: I am looking for the main source of social change in the direction of economic factors.

The problem is that the Situationists with Guy Debord offer no idea of the more just political order that will grow out of the "ruins of capitalism" and so are much closer to Bakunin's anarchist *Catechism*, proclaiming the task of simply destroying all the institutions of society, than to Marx's visionaryism, which, though utopian, is logically complete. The extent to which the "reversal of perspective" proposed by Vaneigem is capable of reversing the distribution of wealth in a capitalist economy, and what kind of social governance would realize this, is a question that none of the Situationists, nor of the later left philosophers, has deigned to answer. Although he plays with quotations here and there from Marx, and from August Czeszkowski (the Polish religious Hegelian who may have influenced Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach* with his "philosophy of action", but is not considered one of the left Young Hegelians precisely because of his religiosity, that replaced the revolutionary dictum of the movement), Debord concentrated on the thesis of redefining everyday life, without realizing that for this redefinition to be sustainable, it had to be accompanied by a vision of concrete political changes and the way in which they would become permanently established. Moreover, Debord, I will follow Bourriaud's critique here (Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, Les presses du reel, 2002, p. 19), is ultimately not particularly interested in the artistic charge of SI's theses at the expense of the political gesture, which, however, becomes nothing more than an isolated gesture.

I will now move on to the far more pleasant task of justifying my high opinion of this dissertation, the main theses of which I argue.

Natalia Atanasova's text is extremely informative; she seems to be at pains not to miss a single corner of what she calls 'the contemporary cultural landscape'. Such informativeness implies and offers many references to more or less popular cultural scientists, philosophers and art historians, including contemporary Bulgarian ones, but this abundant citation does not lead to the impression of lack of independency of her thought. It cannot be said of this dissertation that it is a collection from Natalia's library. It is the product of careful selection and logical structuring of examples and authors, analysed in detail towards a conclusion that seems fully justified from the author's point of view. I do not consider this in itself to be a shortcoming of the text, but a challenge to discussion, which in turn, in itself, I find very useful for stirring up the theoretical climate in our country, against the backdrop of all-consuming political obfuscation. The historical return to SI's

theses, despite my conviction of their not very significant artistic influence, is interesting and instructive in one way or another.

Also impressive is the rich but precise language, evident in the detailed table of contents itself, with subsection headings worthy of the eloquence of the French philosophite authors discussed there.

The bibliography is relevant and detailed. The publications are more than sufficient for the requirements, the abstract well presents the whole dissertation, to which 7 pages of appendices with 16 illustrations are added to illustrate the author's analyses. The listed contributions are adequate.

Therefore, I am convinced that, on the basis of the dissertation "Catastrophic imaginaries and revolutionary aesthetics: the situationist aftermath in contemporary political art", the degree of Doctor of Education and Research should be awarded to Natalia Atanasova, and I invite the esteemed jury to do so.

I declare that I have no joint publications with the doctoral candidate, nor any other common professional interests.

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