

OPINION

by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Sylvia Emilova Borissova-Spassova (Institute of Philosophy and Sociology
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for the dissertation:

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

by Nataliya Atanasova

for the acquisition of the educational and scientific degree

“Doctor”

in Professional Field 2.3. Philosophy

**at the History of Philosophy Department, Faculty of Philosophy, Sofia University “St. Kliment
Ohridski”**

1. Formal characteristics of the application for the educational and scientific degree “Doctor” and the dissertation work

The dissertation has a total volume of 345 printed pages. It is written in English and consists of: an introduction, representing a general outline of the dissertation; three parts; conclusion; limitations and challenges presented; findings and contributions of the dissertation; bibliography and appendix with 16 figures. The analytical content makes it easy to follow the logical structure, but also the rich conceptual network of the dissertation topic. The general bibliography counts 190 titles, of which 185 in English, 4 in Italian and 1 in French languages and is completely sufficient in information and hermeneutic terms; in the heavily predominating primary literature, all leading authors with relevant thematic works from the mid-twentieth century to the present are covered.

The dissertation abstract in a volume of 49 pages analytically presents the main hypothesis, the methodology of the research, the goals and tasks, the actuality, and the structure. The abstract correctly reflects the contributing 7 points in the dissertation – at the same time, they clearly highlight the scientific novelty and approbation of the dissertation work.

There are 8 publications on the topic of the dissertation, written in English and placed in international scientific collections and periodicals. All publications are relevant to the professional direction of the procedure and are explicitly related to the dissertation topic. In this way, doctoral student Nataliya Atanasova has collected and significantly exceeds the required minimum of 30 points according to the minimum national requirements for acquiring the educational and scientific degree “Doctor”.

I have no co-publishing with the author.

2. Structure and contents of the dissertation work

The *research topic* of the dissertation covers the genealogy, development and influence of the cultural movement Situationist International on contemporary cultural production, and the potential of this movement (R. Vainegem, J. Rancière) to overturn the order of capitalist power dynamics, including their objectifications in culture and the dynamics of production of goods and products. This potential of situationism – the main *object of research* – is systematically derived by the author’s inquiry, including its consequences in contemporary political art, through the catastrophic and the revolutionary in their capacity of negative-aesthetic categories containing a heuristic and generative charge: and, in particular, through the catastrophic imaginations (the

pluralist mode of imagination is emphasized) and the revolutionary aesthetics, setting the conceptual framework and the *subject of research*.

The central *thesis* of the dissertation is expressed in the following statement: “the dominance of late capitalism has created a totality in which the dominant economic system encompasses all aspects of reality, imagination and everyday life. In response to this hegemony, the Situationist International (SI) movement uses catastrophic phantasies as one of the possible means of envisioning alternative futures and challenging the already existing order” (p. 5). The thesis is brilliantly and logically-consistently defended by arguing the role of culture and art as agents of transformation and even construction – through language, discourse, through all possible means of expression – of a desired change of the existing socio-cultural, but also political-economic order, of its specific ideology and normativity.

Hence, the main *objective* of the study is precisely the analysis and articulation of the “dual role of art and cultural production” used as “tools of both social manipulation and political denunciation” (ibid.) when used through a critical lens. On this basis, Nataliya Atanasova aims to explore the “subtle relationship between art, political denunciation and the co-opting of cultural criticism by capitalist dynamics”.

Accordingly, the research *tasks* are focused on answering three questions leading for the work: 1) why is it necessary to use the term and phenomenon “catastrophic imaginings” as a conceptual framework of the dissertation – here special attention is paid to the element of “visual thinking” (Mirzoeff) in them as an alternative to the discursive language and expressiveness of human thoughts, emotions, anxieties, hopes, dreams and aspirations “for better” – for the desired world of self-realization, but also more – as generating an “authentic ‘artistic mode’ with distinct and destructive ‘modes of doing and realizing’” (p. 18) in the name of a more desirable and as yet unnamable new order of the world and things; 2) what is the key role of revolutionary aesthetics as a scientific research field with a powerful both theoretical and applied charge for overturning orders in a heterotopic spirit and therefore – for generating changes; 3) what is the relevance of the Situationist International and its conceptual core – including in the direction of the increasingly dynamic development of engaged art (social, ecological, political, public, etc.).

The *methodology* is fully relevant to the research goals and objectives thus set and the argumentation of the thesis and combines the fields of critical theory and cultural studies with the textual and comparative analysis of primary sources in the sphere of cultural, political and aesthetic discourses. The *approach* is accordingly interdisciplinary and expresses the author’s gropings in the fields of philosophy, sociology, art and culture history.

The structure of the three parts is oriented in sequence from drawing up a picture of the contemporary situation (Part One, pp. 21–126), through a scrupulous presentation of the history and theory of the Situationist International (Part Two, pp. 127–201) to a dynamic involvement in the finest details and nuances of the contemporary cultural landscape and its spaces (Part Three, pp. 202–302). The construction of the content is thoughtful and filled with enviable ease, which also means – with an excellently familiar and mastered topic of the study. The logical structure of the studied phenomena, concepts and categories is derived in a network architectonics, however, the relations between general, particular and private are not lost in any way from the research focus.

The dissertation abstract adequately and accurately reflects the scope, scientific-methodological apparatus, structure and content of the presented work.

Nataliya Atanasova’s dissertation presents a logically consistent and successfully systematized research on the cultural-historical role and relevance of Situationism (in the face of

the Situationist International) in the context of using the potential of “catastrophic imaginations” and revolutionary aesthetics to generate new political (in Rancière’s sense) orders. The research thesis is explicitly tied to Foucault’s 1967 concept of so-called “other spaces” – heterotopias, and their ontology, which ontology of the “other spaces” unfolds into a whole swarm of subsequent more private concepts, among which we also have Rancière’s aesthetic heterotopia: very densely demonstrating the relations between the irreducible orders of the political, the ethical and the aesthetic in their specificity, and accordingly the world-creating role of the aesthetic as the new, as the special and as the miracle, a Promethean enlightening in a world darkening under the pressure of its own inertia.

In this regard, taking into account the analytical comprehensiveness and systematic completeness of the doctoral thesis, I would put a few questions to the doctoral student only in a discussion order and I would be glad to hear her personal philosophical position:

- 1) In what does the author see the resilience of the situationist conceptuality, but also of revolutionary aesthetics? Is there a connection between the consideration of such resilience and the negative-dialectical charge of these two related directions in culture, aesthetics and art – and if so, what does this connection consist of?
- 2) Proceeding from the situationist pathos of the “kairos sense of urgency of action in the present”, can we talk about a tendency already settled in the aesthetic and artistic sphere to search for the process nerve in art – instead of the old search for perfection and completion in the art works; respectively, for thinking in a heterotopic mode – instead of a utopian one, when searching for essential answers and solutions regarding human self-realization and prosperous history?
- 3) Are cultural-historical moments conceivable in which materiality, and in particular the order of the world in man-made matter, is not subject to any situationist action?

3. Scientific contributions of the dissertation work

I agree with the contributions of the dissertation research formulated by doctoral student Nataliya Atanasova: the self-assessment of the seven main contribution points is correctly and clearly reflected.

I would add regarding the overall contribution characteristic of the dissertation that it is at the same time among the few studies in Bulgaria of contemporary aesthetics – in the context of the socio-political engagement of cultural and artistic agency and the explanation of the full-blooded revolutionary potential of this agency.

4. Conclusion

Based on the materials and scientific works presented during the procedure, and in particular – the dissertation work, bearing in mind its contributing worth and its indisputable scientific qualities and erudition, I give my positive assessment and am convinced to vote “pro” the awarding of educational and scientific degree “Doctor” to **Nataliya Atanasova** in Professional Field **2.3. Philosophy**.