

ACADEMIC REVIEW

for the research activity and scientific achievements of Sylvia Emilova Borissova – Spassova, Senior Assistant Professor of Aesthetics and Doctor of Philosophy, participating in the competition for the academic position of “Associate Professor” in the professional field 2.3. Philosophy (Aesthetics) for the needs of the Culture, Aesthetics, Values Department at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology – Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, promulgated in the State Gazette No. 67 of 28.07.2020

Reviewer: Prof. **Ivan Stefanov**, Doctor of Philosophical Sciences

Senior Assistant Professor of Aesthetics Sylvia Borisova – Spassova, PhD, is the only contestant in the competition for “Associate Professor” in the professional field 2.3. Philosophy (Aesthetics), promulgated for the needs of the Culture, Aesthetics, Values Department in view of the needs of the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. She was born in Varna on April 23, 1984; she received a Bachelor’s and Master’s Degree in Philosophy at Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”. At the beginning of her scientific career she was a full-time PhD student in Aesthetics at Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”, and in 2011 she became a **Doctor** of Philosophy with a defended dissertation on the topic titled: “Limits of Aesthetic Consciousness”. Since 2015 she has been an Assistant Professor in the Institute for the Study of Societies and Knowledge at BAS – present Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, and since 2016 – Senior Assistant Professor of Aesthetics; from 2019 until now, she is Acting Head of the Culture, Aesthetics, Values Department at the same Institute. As a young researcher, she was awarded a scientific award by BAS in 2019 for supporting the most successful project (Programme for Supporting Young Scientists and PhD Students at BAS – session 2017) in the field of philosophy.

Along with her active scientific research, organizational and official (head of department) activities, Sylvia Borissova – as a part-time assistant – conducts specialized courses on Contemporary Aesthetics with students from Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”, as well as in Philosophy of Sports, Ethics and Aesthetics with students from the National Sports Academy. She regularly participates in scientific conferences, and is recognized as an expert on culture, art and aesthetics issues; she actively works in the Philosophical Department of the Union of Scientists in Bulgaria. She is a member of the editorial board of the Philosophical Alternatives Journal (published by BAS), as well as of the editorial boards of three international journals from India, Serbia and Japan: Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics, Filozofski pogledi and Journal of Management and Training for Industries. She translates philosophical and fiction literature from English to Bulgarian. Scientific publications of Sylvia Borissova have been cited or reviewed in Bulgarian and foreign philosophical publications.

The above facts clearly show that this is a young, but already prominent and recognized researcher and therefore I will add that Sylvia Borissova is justifiably applying for a higher academic title.

S. Borissova participates in the competition for “Associate Professor” of Aesthetics with one monograph, “Aesthetics of Silence and Taciturnity” (2019, 232 pages), with 3 scientific studies (“Aestheticization of Emotions in Art (2019), “Is “Absolute Mythology” an “Absolute Metaphorology”? The Bridge between Losev and Blumenberg” (2017), “Systematic Potentialities of Negative Aesthetics” (2016); all three studies have been published in the Philosophical Alternatives Journal). 5 more author’s articles have been added, dedicated to separate problems of aesthetics, related to the aesthetics of dress, myth and metaphor, the mythology of beauty, the creation of new aesthetic heterotopias. Two of these articles have been published in English in international

philosophical journals. These articles draw attention to important issues of contemporary philosophical aesthetics and they successfully support S. Borissova's candidature of for a new academic position.

In my opinion, the publications submitted by Sylvia Borissova in their quantitative totality are sufficient for participation in the specific scientific competition, and in their content characteristics they outline the image of a very reliable researcher, distinguished by her literacy and having a lasting and deep interest in the current development of both Western and Bulgarian aesthetics.

As a matter of fact, a positive trend has manifested itself in our aesthetics from the recent past. Highly talented research figures emerged who outlined their own problematic **thematic** trajectory. I am speaking of the fact that Prof. Isaac Passy, who – as he himself admitted, did not want to occupy “society with himself, with his own inventions” and this helped him to reveal the richness of German classical aesthetics and other important names in the history of Western aesthetics and include them in our current scientific research; Prof. Atanas Natev defended against the dogmatic aesthetics his magnificent thesis that to the avant-garde Western art we should not take the tactics of ‘burnt land’, but we should try to understand its deeper inner and humane meaning and starting from the analysis of contemporary Western dramaturgy, he joined us to it and finally introduced us to the main literary ideas of the 20th century; Prof. Krastyo Goranov adopted Herbert Read's idea of ‘education through art’, grouped around himself a research circle and thus gave a slightly different look to the public education of that time. I note all this because I find that in her publications submitted for participation in the competition, Sylvia Borissova, whether she wants to or not, perhaps more spontaneously, but is approaching the maintenance of this trend. Because she is also concerned and even struggles to outline her own perimeter of research, to demonstrate an individual creative profile, which is based mainly on the results of the development of Western

philosophical aesthetics. This is exactly what I will reveal in my review as a contributing feature. I mean the following.

As a perfectly well-informed researcher of the current development of artistic trends, Sylvia Borissova certainly has in mind that the basic, axial concept of the old classical aesthetics of **beauty** is not able to cover the diversity and abundance of artifacts offered by modern and postmodern art. As amazing as it is, it is undeniable that avant-garde art today does not claim to be only beautiful or beautiful at all; on the contrary, this art today is mostly humorous, ironic, critical, grotesque, absurd, erotic or, most often, downright ugly. That is why in her first book “Limits of Aesthetic Consciousness” S. Borissova successfully defended a new and essentially sufficiently voluminous concept; she accepted the concept of **‘aesthetic’** as more comprehensive than traditional and modern art, because it immediately includes the concept of **aesthetic consciousness**, and the latter on its side leads to the fundamental and highly generalizing philosophical concept of **consciousness**; and since philosophical consciousness and especially the aesthetic consciousness still dare to oppose the pure available being (that is, to consider it critically and in a completely negative plan), S. Borissova logically reaches the actual task of developing and describing the historical course of **the tendency of negativization of philosophical aesthetics** by examining the authors and the limits within which it has comfortably settled down. Thus, in our aesthetics – both as a problem and as a current research task, etc. – ‘negative aesthetics’ quickly arrived; to be more precise: this is not only inevitable, but also necessary modern transformation of the philosophical-aesthetic discourse, or “of classical modern aesthetics in particular”.

Here, of course, in the first place as evidence I will point out the study “Systematic Potentialities of Negative Aesthetics” (2015), which really focuses our aesthetic thinking in a new, but not fully realized or given-meaning direction

of development: to distinguish affirmative from negative aesthetics. This distinction is already necessary in principle, because the negative aesthetic, in its subjective (internal) dimension acquires legitimacy within the modern and postmodern worldview. Therefore, the problem of the division of aesthetic values into ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ is the main content of the cited study. In it S. Borissova characterizes the essential characteristics of positive aesthetics as a certain **integrity and harmony** in the parts of the work of art, clarity of form, emotionally immediate impact on people; the defining characteristics of negative aesthetics, however, are integrity in **fragmentarity, disharmony** of the parts, **ambiguity** or delusion of the art form, which, on its part, very often repulses the audience. Thus, negative aesthetics stimulates the creation of art outside the known and widely used traditional forms and norms, but at the same time it more successfully reaches the revelation of the meaninglessness or horror of human life; negative art focuses on depicting the ugly, the inner dissonance and despair of personality. But does it follow from all this that contemporary art itself is only a negation and nothing else?

It is precisely here that S. Borissova makes an important and reasonable reservation: she directly writes that negative aesthetics “remains a field of discussion of the still undiscovered, missing harmony of internal and external. That is, negative aesthetics is again based on harmony, but negatively – on the moment of its absence”. This means that aesthetic negativity is not only and is not just a fragmentarity and a complete negation of classical art, but it develops as other as well – as a **integrity in fragmentarity**; the work of art, even when it is fragmentary, horrible, absurd or impermanent, still feels the need to be somehow assembled as a whole in its both external and internal contradiction. That is, it is a peculiar or unique integral artistic act. Modern and postmodern art is really not internally and externally harmonious and complete, but it is a unity of opposites, on the basis of which it acquires artistic uniqueness, matchlessness

and only with these qualities it manages to have its own functional aesthetic and cultural presence – because through its negative impact on its audience it acquires the significance of a **new social and cultural fact**.

From now on it is quite logical that S. Borissova begins to look for **paths to overcome the problematic nature of negative aesthetics**. Specifically, she outlines two directions of thinking and action: 1) a possible path to overcome the dissolution of the aesthetic in the negative is the return of the aesthetic in the action, at that, in the reflexive action, and 2) the dissolution of the aesthetic in the negative can be overcome with new expressive potentialities, which are a guarantee for retaining the presence of the symbolic (idea) in the ugly works of art as well.

I accept the mentioned perspectives as realistic for thinking and acting, but in the following specific interpretation. S. Borissova agrees with Th. Adorno that negative aesthetic is the foundation for a new, another differentiation of the very principle of beauty as a kind of ‘magic over magic’; or, to put it more clearly: we can retaliate or repel the ironic or the ugly by fragmentary transforming or inserting beauty within the overall aesthetic action (which can happen, for example, in the charming garden of silence and taciturnity!). Here I immediately want to emphasize that this idea (for the heavenly aesthetic garden), in its general form, is well developed and presented as an initial project in her article “Durability of Beauty”, where it becomes clear that there is a possibility for the negative to re-appear by transforming itself into a **symbol**, that is, into something ideal. It is said very clearly here that the permanence of beauty “is actuality and vigorous reality whenever it finds an expression through which to be shared, whether through the traditional art of beauty – as it were – or through the high philosophical-aesthetic theories of the intellectualized and conceptualized beautiful. It is very well said, but I would still object: “magic over magic” is a good metaphor, but it does not have sufficient analytical

scientific value; and highly conceptualized theories do not act directly, but only indirectly – through the specific works of conceptual beautiful or negative art, they create their audience and through their specific unique reflective impact become part of the overall **life experience**; only **filtered through the recipient's overall life experience can negative art be transformed by spontaneously evoking affirmative or beautiful artistic notions or actions**. Receptive aesthetics has long drawn attention to the irreplaceable significant constructive role of the recipient in the structure of aesthetic and artistic action. (I also do not understand why this aesthetic is not a more permanent object of attention on our author's part – except partially in the article “Aestheticization of Emotions in Art”.) For its part, today's sociology of art convincingly argues too that the aesthetic process is complexly mediated by internal, structural, but even more decisive – from external (public) mediators and not accidentally insists that to a very large extent today it is a sociology of **mediators**. But on this issue – a little later.

I should note that in her second book “Aesthetics of Silence and Taciturnity”, with which S. Borissova best and most strongly defends her participation in the competition, a significant development and real progress of the basic idea of overcoming the dissolution and loss of the aesthetic, as well as for his resurrection, caused by the provocations of the negative art, has been reached. Based on a huge amount of factual and conceptual material taken as a “creative loan” mainly from Western philosophical and artistic thought, she sees the continuation of philosophical aesthetics in a new perspective – namely by developing an aesthetic of silence and taciturnity as a “private branch of negative aesthetics”. I take the “borrowed” from Western aesthetics as a positive act – it really allows us to overcome the great lag of our aesthetics and gives us the opportunity to jump, as well as to immediately participate in the latest themes and problems of today's art and aesthetics as a science. But this inspires

the author to describe her personal subjective and very romantic idea of the garden of silence and taciturnity, in which not only works in the spirit of negative aesthetics find place, but also other, different artistic worlds in which her parents, grandmother and great-grandmother lived, but also today's imaginary world in which her daughter lives with her dolls.

Silence is an objective, real phenomenon and in her monograph S. Borissova devotes a significant place to the ontology of silence. But she prefers to study this phenomenon in its specific aesthetic and artistic manifestations. That is why in her book we find a huge number of artistic facts, author's statements and professional aesthetic opinions and views, which testify that silence and taciturnity become a new, widely used **foundation** for artistic creativity namely in the era of negative aesthetics. Here I would also like to draw attention to the fact that, at international level, the research work "Aesthetics of Silence and Taciturnity" is only the third comprehensive book devoted to the new problem. Generally, I have no doubt that the "Aesthetics of Silence and Taciturnity", considering silence as the ultimate product of negativized aesthetic consciousness, at the same time transforms it also into a phenomenon – a symbol of more distant and unexpected spaces and horizons for aesthetic consciousness; therefore, I can say that it has an innovative significance for today's cultural and aesthetic thoughts and agitations.

As a debatable moment for me in the otherwise erudite book of S. Borissova the following emerges. Successfully entering a new issue, however, the author does not give us an exact or final description of what is silence: an external ontological fact or an internal structural, artistic element of the artwork? Or both – in different proportions between the dynamic internal and external characteristics of the artwork, the arts and the environment for their realization?

In the book, silence is defined as "reality at the top of the senses", as "the last perfect sense" of aesthetic consciousness, as "autonomous existence of the

artwork”, as “matter of art”, but at the same time not only as matter, but also as a “basic object, shield and credo of contemporary art”, as a means of returning things to the “world of wholeness” and the “divine”, as a “freedom from practical interest” and “useless existence”, etc. All these definitions seem true. But I think that if we agree with José Ortega y Gasset and, for example, start thinking from nature, from the external, from ontology to spirit, the art of painting immediately stands out before us in an original way – with its always and eternally tacit presence; however, if we start from the emotional, from the sensual which flows in time, we will inevitably find that such arts as poetry and music are closest to us. Painting is doomed to absolute and eternal taciturnity, while poetry and music are always noisy and talk more, only sometimes silent. Painting is doomed to be tacit not by chance, because in this way it can say what poetry can never have a bent for, much less music can – the latter always “speaks” a lot to the human soul, but says nothing concrete! I want to say that the arts do not imitate, do not repeat each other but mutually – in their expressive manifestation – differ, but also dialectically complement each other. We have all seen – as a reproduction – the famous painting by Edward Munch “The Scream”, in which the innovative movement of expressionism found its inspiration and began to scream furiously: what happens to man on the eve and in the 20th century itself?

I think such artistic facts today’s sociology best tries to illuminate through its new notion of **mediators**; it means everything that objectively fits between a work of art and its audience in order to make its reception possible and rich in meaning. And the more a reception is mediated through a structured network of viewpoints, positions, institutions, actors or fans, the more it strives for autonomy and originality. It is here that I see the prospect of giving a more precise definition of silence and taciturnity as a long-known fact in the history of both Western and Eastern art, but also as a **specific and preferred mediator in**

the age of negative art. I think that this issue could still be considered and reflected on.

In conclusion: based on all that has been said so far, I summarize that the research carried out by Sylvia Borissova on extremely current aesthetic topics, defended at a high theoretical level, as well as the achieved real research **contributions and innovative conclusions**, give me every reason to fully positively appreciate her candidature for Associate Professor in field 2.3 Philosophy (Aesthetics). That is why **I will confidently vote with Yes for conferring the Doctor of Philosophy Sylvia Borissova – Spassova the academic title of *Associate Professor*.**

Sofia, 3. 11. 2020

Reviewer:

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Doctor of Philosophical Sciences