

Body, Image and Dialogue in Bakhtin's Thinking¹

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Abstract

"How do we give meaning to ourselves and other people?" Through fifty years of thinking, from the 1920s to the 1970s, Bakhtin puzzled away at a set of questions surrounding this central problem of human understanding. The aim of this essay is to examine Bakhtin's theories of understanding throughout his writings, also drawing on unpublished notes written in the 1940s.

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problems at such a primary level of human experience.

I and Other constitute two fundamentally different ways of understanding what it is to be a human being in the world. I have my personal experience of the world, and then I have my experience of other people out there in the world. For me all other people are, to an extent, whole and finished: I can see them acting in the world as whole figures within the environment; they

Introduction

In his earliest writings he framed his thoughts around a set of oppositions, most important of which was that between I and Other. When Martin Buber wrote about the relationships of I-and-Thou, and I-and-It, he called these pronouns 'primary words'. We should think of Bakhtin's I and Other as just such primaries. For me, the enduring appeal of Bakhtin's thinking is that it approaches philosophical

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have an existence that is independent of me; but, for all this, I cannot actually experience another person in the way I experience myself. I can *imagine* myself as others might see me, just as I can imagine what it might feel like being another, but these are acts of imagining, not knowing.

In *Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity* (1990) Bakhtin argues that we can only understand or value ourselves with the outside intercession of other people, for, as I noted above, only they can grasp me as a whole, that is, as *an image*. They can see me acting in the world as an independent agent. One could call this an everyday act of understanding. Bakhtin goes on to argue that the aesthetic work of an author transforms this visual image of a person into the verbal image of a hero, that is, a story with a meaning, and, importantly, with an ending. To some extent, this is still part of everyday experience: even when we are people-watching at a station or airport, we are seeing these as little stories. An author goes on to give these stories permanent form. Using one of Bakhtin's favourite distinctions, one could say that while the visual image is *given* to the viewer, the verbal image is *created* by the author.

The problem at the heart of this aesthetic theory is that it carries over this sense of given-ness, of finished-ness, of a visual image, into the aesthetically-

created verbal image. Two questions follow from this problem: is the meaning of the life of a hero, something that is finished and done with? Later in his career Bakhtin will argue that the meaning, indeed the life, of an aesthetic creation is also the work of a reader. The word 'work' moves from being a thing, a finished noun, to an active verb, an unending process of meaning-making.

Author and Hero is complemented by a shorter manuscript *Towards a Philosophy of the Act* (1993) which sketches out a theory of ethics. His *Philosophy of the Act* introduces two very important concepts that will be developed in his later thinking. The first concerns time as a lived dimension of meaning; the second concerns the body as a condition of meaning.

Bakhtin's aesthetic theory might reduce a hero to a finished whole, but his ethical theory questioned the validity *for me* of such an image. This artistic image of my life maybe gives my acts a validity that others can appreciate, but, as far as I am concerned, it is valid only *up to now* – my life ends there. In this early manuscript Bakhtin begins his life-long exploration of time as a lived dimension of meaning. Regarding the finished-ness of the artistic image of me he comments, "I do not accept my factually given being [...] I cannot count and add up all of myself, saying: this is *all* of me – there is *nothing more* anywhere else or in

anything else; I already exist *in full*.” Later on the same page he makes the point even more clearly:

What constitutes the organising principle of my life from within myself [...] is solely my consciousness of the fact that in respect to all that is most essential *I do not exist yet*. (BAKHTIN, 1990, p. 127, my italics).

“To deny any possibility for change in the future results in ‘a certain hopelessness with respect to meaning’ (BAKHTIN, 1990, p. 117), and this is because as far as the author is concerned, “in respect to meaning [the person observed] must be dead for us, formally dead” (BAKHTIN, 1990, p. 131). Here he is writing about the ongoing meaning of a person but we will later see is true of an utterance, written or spoken. Human culture has to be an ongoing process of meaning-making, otherwise the result is a culture which is ‘formally dead’.

I said above that *Philosophy of the Act* explores how the body is the condition, indeed the guarantor, of meaning. Bakhtin’s conception of ethics concerns the performance of acts. These acts are a response to what I, from my unique place and time, ‘ought’ to do. It is what I have to do. An act is the embodiment of everything that I represent: “my participation transforms every manifestation of myself (feeling, desire, mood, thought) into my actively answerable deed” (BAKHTIN, 1993, p. 57). I respond from the very centre of myself.

My active unique place is not just an abstract geometric centre, but constitutes an answerable, emotional-volitional, concrete centre of concrete manifoldness of the world, in which the spatial and temporal moment [...] is a necessary but not exhaustive moment of my actual centrality. (Ídem)

The opposition here is between the notion of an ‘active unique place’ and an ‘abstract geometric centre’. Throughout this essay we will see him oppose active with abstract knowing, that is, actual knowledge that comes from embodied experience, and potential knowledge drawn from what is already known (and, for example, written in books). In *Philosophy of the Act* the entire world is seen from the ‘concrete centre’, in other words, the body of our act-performer.

What constitutes this centre is the human being: everything in this world acquires significance, meaning, and value only in correlation with man - as that which is human. (BAKHTIN, 1993, p. 61).

Throughout *Philosophy of the Act* he emphasises the unique and therefore unrepeatable moment in which the act takes place. There is no universal, no general truth. It is a truth of and in the moment: *that time, that place, my body*.

One can trace this sense of embodied meaning throughout Bakhtin’s writings. In his early writings the body in its unexchangeable situation in time and place guarantees the meaning of an act or utterance. In his later writings Bakhtin dwells on the crucial difference

between cognition or abstract thinking and embodied thinking. He argues passionately that only an embodied utterance has a particular, a personal meaning; the other is general and lacks any authenticity (in the sense of having been personally authored).

In his early philosophy the human subject is caught in an existential dilemma: even though another person can offer a completed image (thereby investing my life with value), I know that this cannot possibly sum me up, because I shall continue to live in active relation with other people. Although Bakhtin doesn't put it in these terms, I would say that although another can lend an objective, finished reality and meaning to my life, this does not halt the ongoing progress of my subjective living. Thus, even in his early thinking there was this 'loophole' through which new possibilities for meaning could occur. The distinction here is between a finished 'life' and the ongoing process of a living being.

Notes written during World War II retain the concepts of body, image and dialogue, but with the critical difference that the aesthetic engagement is now conceived as an ongoing process rather than a once-and-forever event. At the heart of his later conception of both dialogue and carnivalesque imagery is the resistance to forms of 'understanding' where a living person,

utterance, or artwork is reduced to a finished object, thus denying them any potential for future meaning. Constant throughout these conceptual shifts is the question of how one person can give meaning or value to the acts or utterance of another person. Another constant is the motivation for this aesthetic activity – love.

A central problem of meaning: bodies, wholes, time and space

Bakhtin's early philosophy conceived of wholeness (both in terms of a visual and a verbal image) as a spatial and static entity. A character is a verbal image that renders the life of a person meaningful, and Bakhtin uses the term 'architectonic' to convey the sense that there are strict structural principles that guide this construction. Certainly by the 1930s when he was writing about novelistic discourse and forms of time and space, he was conceiving a whole as an ongoing process. Wholeness shifts from being a spatial and static entity into being a spatio-temporal process. His wartime notes convey the dynamic element in his conception of process. A whole is no longer a finished, delimited thing, precisely because it extends into the yet-to-be; the notion of wholeness now lies in a potential for future meaning and interpretation and any 'arrest' of

this process results in a certain death of meaning. This same feeling for process is present in the grotesque body described in *Rabelais and his World*, which in a constant state of death and regeneration, is always in a state of becoming.

An embodied utterance as an act

I want to argue that an utterance is a verbal act with the same quality of personal answerability as Bakhtin's early conception of an act and that it is "unique and unrepeatable" (VOLOSINOV, 1973, p. 100). Rather than studying language in the abstract Bakhtin and Volosinov argued that 'speech' is always the speech of one person addressed to another. A verbal act, or utterance,

[...] makes response to something and is calculated to be responded to in turn. It is but one link in a continuous chain of speech performances (VOLOSINOV, 1973, p. 72).

Note the shift from the *personal answerability* of an act to the *social answering* of an utterance. With this sense of an utterance as a social act we move to Bakhtin's Rabelais study where he presents Street Cries as a very particular kind of speech utterance.

Street Cries can still be heard in street markets today – go the Ballaro market in Palermo and you will hear men and women selling their wares. One seller I heard was nothing short of operatic. Bakhtin explains

We must recall that not only was all advertising oral and loud in those days, actually a cry, but that all announcements, orders, and laws were made in this loud oral form. Sound, the proclaimed word played an immense role in everyday life as well as in the cultural field. (BAKHTIN, 1965, p. 182).

Street cries are only one aspect of the rich, vulgar speech activity that Bakhtin studies. Swearing, cursing, praising, insulting, nicknaming – all these are features of this non-official language. But remember!

Languages are philosophies - not abstract but concrete, social philosophies, penetrated by a system of values inseparable from living practice and class struggle. (BAKHTIN, 1965, p. 471).

Without labouring the point, the distinction is still being made between abstract and concrete, between that which is merely thought and something actually said. These utterances are a form of

[...] colloquial speech, always addressed to somebody or talking for him, or about him. For this other party there are no neutral epithets; there are either polite, laudatory, flattering, cordial words, or contemptuous, debasing, abusive ones. (BAKHTIN, 1965, p. 420).

In other words, we are dealing not just with the particularity of time and place, but also with an attitude towards what is being discussed. It concerns what this thing means for me, and what I think it means to you.

Killing future meaning

Common to his thinking of the 1920s and the 1940s is the idea of a person's continuing possibility to develop or change their meaning. By the 1940s this open-ended meaning includes objects and works of art as well as people, and any attempt to arrest this extension into the future is considered an act of violence. To offer a final, definitive opinion on anything is to render that thing dead, by which he meant, no longer able to generate further meaning. (This is the instrumental attitude that Buber's calls I-it.) While Bakhtin's published writings are optimistic, indeed sunny in tone, his hitherto unpublished notes reveal darker tones, especially when it concerns how official discourses most often close off further debate or interpretation. There are various ways that this feeling for ongoing process – and the arbitrary arrest of this process by authorities - is described by Bakhtin, the first being his approach to the human body.

As with Bakhtin's early manuscripts his notes from the 1940s place great importance on the present moment. While this might seem to contradict his emphasis on the constant unfolding of time, it is a statement of simple fact: an act can only be performed in the present. Bakhtin's theory of embodied meaning rests on the fact that an actually-performed act is a bringing

to present experience of a potential meaning through bodily action which takes place at a particular moment of time and space. There is no contradiction between his emphasis on the present moment and on acts of meaning having an unending history. It is only because, only once an act has been publicly performed – put out there – that it can become opened thereafter to future to interpretation. It is a response and a contribution to an ongoing historical dialogue – the 'continuous chain of speech performances' mentioned by Volosinov above.

In Bakhtin's universe there are no first and last words. He rejects any approach to understanding that reduces 'a thing to origins, to ancient ignorance, to non-knowledge —and by this, we think we can explain it and be rid of it.' He also rejects any historical or anthropological argument that sees a direct and linear connection between the present and the past:

Various ways of assessing movement forward: now conceived of as a pure, endless, limitless distancing from origins, as a pure and irreversible departure, a distancing in a straight line. Space was presented in precisely the same way: as an absolute straightness. (BAKHTIN, unpublished:b)

Note the key words and phrases in this strategy: 'distancing', 'irreversible', 'absolute straightness.' Such reductive forms of understanding the past aim to shut down any further discussion.

In contrast, Bakhtin proposes “the valuational model of becoming” (BAKHTIN, unpublished:b) where the focus is both on values (what something means to a person) and on an ongoing process of growing.

Why does Bakhtin’s thinking constantly return to a critique of abstract meaning? What is so wrong about ‘abstract’ meaning? Quite simply, abstract meaning is not generated through an act of thinking that comes from an answerable person, acting in a particular time and place, in response to a particular situation. Unattributed and acknowledged meaning is what Bakhtin calls cognition, and in his wartime notes the critique is unambiguous:

Word-violence presupposes an absent and unspeaking object, unhearing and unanswering; it doesn’t address the object and doesn’t demand its consent; it exists in absentia. (BAKHTIN, unpublished:b)

Elsewhere he describes the “present generally-accepted worldview” knowing “only itself and is thus endlessly self-confident, dull-wittedly self-confident”. (BAKHTIN, unpublished:b). Throughout these notes he focuses on the reductiveness of word-violence: it reduces a living subject to a dead object whose meaning has been decided on once and for all, whose voice has been rendered unnecessary. The conversation is at an end. It has been ended.

Knowledge and cognition today have the tendency to simplify and impoverish the world, to deflate its complexity and fullness (it is smaller, less rich, and simpler than you thought), and—most important—to deaden it. (BAKHTIN, unpublished: a).

This bleak outlook on human communication at first seems so unlike the jovial and optimistic tone that we associate with Bakhtin, champion of dialogue, of the bustling vulgar energy of the grotesque body. But these dark tones are entirely in keeping with all of those ideas – this is the dystopian flip-side to the utopian world of Rabelais.

Not being for publication these notes could offer a much more personal take on the institutional attacks upon valid and honest forms of dialogue. The opposite of truth is a lie, the opposite of free speech is violence: these themes echo throughout his personal reflections. One paragraph begins: ‘The element of violence in cognition and artistic form.’ He goes on to describe how the ‘deadening force of the artistic image’ derives from an attempt to ‘circumvent the object from the side of the future, to display it in all its exhaustiveness, and thus deprive it of an open-ended future, to present the object with all of its boundaries’. It concludes,

The object is all here and nowhere else; and if it is all here, in its entirety, then it is dead and can be devoured. It is extracted from unfinalized life and becomes an object for possible consumption, it ceases to be an independent participant in the event of life, walking further alongside you; it has already spoken its last word and no inner open kernel is left to it, no inner infinity. (BAKHTIN, 2017, pp. 205-207)

Cognition is violent because it robs the world of objects and people of any future meaning. Two processes that result in this reduction of meaning are seriousness and thingification¹ (a non-Latin form of the word *reification*). Seriousness involves in separating ‘death from life, praise from invective’ to avoid ambiguity and thus to “declare something stable and unchangeable” (BAKHTIN, 2014, p. 526). Thus we are removed from festivity and enter “the kingdom of objecthood, thinghood, the kingdom of clear-cut doneness, of necessity, where thingifying cognition operates.” (BAKHTIN, 2017, p. 223). In this kingdom “The one who is deceived is transformed into a thing. This is one of the methods of violence and reification of the human being.” (BAKHTIN, 2017, p. 213). Once again, we should recall the reductive instrumentality of Buber’s I-It.

Maybe this pithy statement sums up his concerns, ‘Only a thought localizes me wholly in being, but living experience doesn’t believe thoughts.’ (BAKHTIN, 2017, p. 217). Here he contrasts living experience with abstract thought.

What is unfamiliar about his notes is the focus upon the negative rather than the positive aspects of human communication. Here he focuses on strategies whose purpose is to close down rather than open dialogue:

The hidden appeal of such explanations boils down to discrediting the contradictory complexity of meaning, to discrediting what is *living*, all things large, growing, and not coinciding with themselves (which therefore cannot be finally pinned down, are practically inconvenient). (BAKHTIN unpublished: a)

Bakhtin rejects the lure of simple, linear accounts of processes. As we shall see in the next section, the images of the carnivalesque are double-voiced, ambivalent. His approach to human acts of understanding is characterised in the phrase ‘the contradictory complexity of meaning’.

Bakhtin returns to these concerns in notes written while revising his Dostoevsky book (Russian publication 1963). The argument still revolves around the binary of finished/unfinished, dead/living, abstract/actual. He argues that Dostoevsky proposed

A completely new structure for the image of a human being - a full-blooded and fully signifying consciousness which is not inserted into the *finalising* frame of reality, which is not finalised by anything (not even death), for its meaning cannot be resolved or abolished by reality (to kill does not mean to refute). (BAKHTIN, 1984, p. 284)

Although not accompanied by the references to violence and lying, he still insists that “truth, according to D, can only be the subject of a living vision, not of abstract understanding”.(BAKHTIN, 1984, p. 153). Dostoevsky, like Rabelais, is a writer who propagates living meaning.

In D's world generally there is nothing merely thing-like, no mere matter, no object - there are only subjects. Therefore there is no word-judgement, no word about an object, no second-hand referential word - there is only the word as address, the word dialogically contacting another word, a word about a word addressed to a word. (BAKHTIN, 1984, p. 237)

Here we see a broader, more sophisticated development of Volosinov's notion that human communication is a 'chain of utterances'. Bakhtin has an organic conception of meaning whereby the utterance is that oxygenating element which keeps the cultural organism of tradition alive.

What is it that drives human acts of understanding? Love. Why else would we bother to help another person to make sense of their lives, to reassure them that their lives have value? Without comment I shall cite two short passages, the first from *Author and Hero*, the second from his wartime notes.

Word of love and acts of genuine concern come to meet the dark chaos of my inner sensation of myself: they name, direct, satisfy, and connect it with the outside world - as with a response that is interested in me and in my need. (BAKHTIN, 1990, p. 50)

Only love can see and represent the inner freedom of the object. Love is still serious, but it wants to smile; this smile and joy ceaselessly conquer seriousness, smoothing out the features of its face, conquering the threat in one's tone. Only in love is it revealed that an object can never be absolutely consumed; love leaves the object wholly outside of itself, next to itself (or behind). Love cherishes and caresses boundaries; boundaries acquire new significance.(BAKHTIN, 2017, p. 208)

Laughter, street cries and the grotesque and philosophy

Laughter and philosophy in Rabelais

Reading Bakhtin's darker toned notes made me re-read passages from *Rabelais and his World* in a new light. When revising his doctoral thesis on Rabelais for possible publication his notes make a connection with many themes already discussed:

Laughter and the zone of contact with the incomplete present. Laughter first discovers the present time as an object of depiction. A familiarization of the world and the premise of fearlessness set the stage for a researcher's orientation toward the world and for free experience. The past (in distant view) cannot be the object of laughter. (BAKHTIN, 2014, p. 524)

Once again 'finished' time of the past is distinguished from the incomplete time of the present, familiarisation is favoured over distance, and laughter is

offered as the antidote to fear. Notions like ‘zones of contact’ and familiarisation will be explored further in connection with the grotesque body; you could consider them the spatial equivalent of time present since both are about closeness, about the moment of present experience.

Continuing the theme of laughter and fear, the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote these words when serving as a stretcher-bearer in the World War I:

A man who is happy must have no fear. Not even in the face of death. Only a man who lives not in time but in the present is happy. [Journal entry on 8 July 1916]

One takes the words of such a philosopher seriously, not least because he wrote them whilst a stretcher-bearer on the killing fields of Flanders. I don’t find as many scholars taking Bakhtin so seriously, but I would argue that he makes a similar point to Wittgenstein. Take a couple of short passages from his Rabelais study:

Fear is the extreme expression of narrow-minded and stupid seriousness, which is defeated by laughter. [...] Complete liberty is possible only in the completely fearless world. (BAKHTIN, 1995, p. 47)

Laughter, [...] overcomes fear, for it knows no inhibitions, no limitations. Its idiom is never used by violence and authority. It was the victory of laughter over fear that most impressed medieval man. (BAKHTIN, 1995, p. 90)

In the light of the unpublished notes maybe we can now assign more weight to such phrases as ‘narrow-minded and stupid seriousness’, ‘violence and authority’, and ‘complete liberty’. My aim in the following pages is to argue that Bakhtin’s laughter has the same philosophical gravity as the happiness of which Wittgenstein wrote.

There are various dimensions to Bakhtin’s conception of laughter. In keeping with his insistence upon participative acts (doing not thinking), laughter is something that brings people together: ‘The people do not exclude themselves from the wholeness of the world [...] he who is laughing also belongs to it.’ (BAKHTIN, 1965, p. 12) We should note two characteristics of this laughter: it is not a caustic laughter that distances the laugher from the person or thing laughed at, this is a laughing *with*, an act of drawing close to someone. And it is a laughter with not just people but the vaster notion of ‘the wholeness of the world’. Bakhtin would argue that laughter has philosophical weight precisely because it has a cosmic dimension; and it is precisely this dimension that others might find hard to take seriously.

While Bakhtin and Wittgenstein agree that one has to overcome fear, it is only Bakhtin that argues that this is achieved through laughter. Fear of what? Bakhtin’s cosmic vision includes the “mystic terror of God” and

[...] the awe inspired by the forces of nature, and most of all the oppression and guilt related to all that was consecrated and forbidden (BAKHTIN, 65, p. 90).

This expands the field well beyond Wittgenstein's more prosaic fear of death. But beneath Bakhtin's rhetorical flourishes there is some acute philosophical and political insight. He notes how an "obscure memory" of past environmental disasters and a fear of "future catastrophes form the very basis of human thought, speech, and images". Global warming and its attendant images of floods and fire should make us realise this is more than rhetoric. And religious authorities use precisely these natural catastrophes as instruments to provoke fear and thus exercise oppression, cynically cultivating this fear "in order to humiliate and oppress man." (BAKHTIN, 1965, p. 336). Take for example a reaction to the floods that devastated my home town, Carlisle in 2007:

Some senior Anglican bishops are apparently claiming that the "floods that have devastated swathes of the country are God's judgment on the immorality and greed of modern society". The Sunday Telegraph reports that the Bishop of Carlisle, the Rt Rev Graham Dow, believes "laws that have undermined marriage, including the introduction of pro-gay legislation, have provoked God to act by sending the storms that have left thousands of people homeless".³

The carnivalesque – a way of understanding the universe

Bakhtin's conception of laughter is quite as much about philosophy as it is about comedy, and is at the heart of his conception of the carnivalesque. His is both *La Divina Commedia* and the *Commedia dell'Arte*. As with laughter Bakhtin used the notion of the carnivalesque to describe an outlook on life. He described the outlook of the circle of intellectuals that gathered at the flat of his brother Nikolay in Petersburg in 1911 to 1912 as being deeply 'critical, but not gloomily critical, rather, cheerfully critical attitude to all aspects of life and contemporary culture.' Members (some of whom were poets) would stage 'mock conferences' and write parodies, but not to satirise – 'theirs was a broader parody':

These poets didn't like seriousness, especially excessive seriousness, and strove to mitigate it with irony and humor.... Therefore, these were not parodies or stylizations of particular phenomena in life, of literature or science, no, everything was treated not with stern ridicule but with a sort of light, ironic humor. (BAKHTIN, 2019, p. 52)

Once again, we are dealing with an inclusive laughter, the very opposite of gloomy seriousness.

In his *Interviews with Duvakin* (2019) Bakhtin reveals his love and knowledge of contemporary poetry. He describes the poet Velimir Khlebnikov as being

‘a deeply carnivalesque man. Deeply carnivalesque. In him, carnival is not superficial, an exterior mask. [...] He could not be contained within any frames and did not accept any existing foundations.’ His nature “deep down was purely carnivalesque” because he was able to “move away from the particular, and capture the boundless, endlessly universal, the whole world, we might say” (BAKHTIN AND DUKAVIN, 2019, p. 113). Similar terms are used to describe the artist Kazimir Malevich whom Bakhtin befriended in Vitebsk when he lived there between 1921 and 1923:

He used to say that our form of Art exists in a tiny corner of the three-dimensional world. Just a small corner ... a tiny space, nothing more. The big Universe doesn't fit in it, and never will. And since you're limited by the little corner you exist in, you can't ever understand the Universe. (BAKHTIN, 2019, p. 127)

Even though the dimensions of the universe are terrifyingly vast, this doesn't mean that we should limit ourselves to the limited parameters of seriousness and realism. Or as Rabelais put it, “Never trust a man who peeps out at one hole.”

The grotesque, comedy and cosmos

One's place in the cosmos, an actor on stage

In his comments about Khlebnikov and Malevich Bakhtin makes a key

opposition between ‘tiny space’ and the ‘big Universe’. Spatial dimension is a guiding metaphor throughout his studies of Dostoevsky and Rabelais. Again, we are dealing with a world-outlook: on the one hand there is a concern with practical means and ends and local concerns, on the other there is the bigger picture that encompasses life and death. Seriousness is about insisting upon a narrow frame of understanding, whereas the carnivalesque seeks a cosmic framework which features heaven, hell and earth. Bakhtin compares the cosmic topography of Shakespeare's stage to that of the realist stage.

After all, the room (palace, street, etc.) in which the hero acts and gesticulates is not the room (palace, street, etc.) of ordinary life either, for it is fitted into the frame of the topographic stage, it is on earth, hell is underneath it and heaven above it, the action and the gesture taking place in the room are at the same time taking place in a topographically understood universe, the hero keeps moving all the time between heaven and hell, between life and death, next to the grave. (BAKHTIN, 2014, p. 532)

One might think that Bakhtin is exaggerating to make a point, but this is a factually correct image of the medieval and the Elizabethan stage. An early example comes from a 12th Century French drama that has the stage direction “Whoever will mention the name of paradise let him look in its direction and point it out with his hand.” (BEVINGTON, 1965, p. 81)

Having spent ten years producing medieval and Elizabethan plays for paying audiences in Britain and Australia, I can say that Bakhtin really grasps the “world” of this style of acting. It is broad, and yes, the acting does call up to the heavens and down to hell, and yes, it is fearlessly bodily. So we would agree with his argument that the actor’s gesture in Shakespearian theatre

[...] inevitably retains some degree of topographicity (symbolicity), so to speak: it points to the heights and the nethers, to the sky and the earth (as in taking oaths, and in ritual gestures in general) (BAKHTIN, unpublished: a).

It is for precisely this reason that we chose this kind of theatre rather than the realist stage which “is but an empty crate without topography and accents, a neutral crate” where one

[...] may only bustle about, but not make essential movements; forward, backward, up, and down—these are given a merely practical meaning by things that have been arranged thus and not otherwise. Its emptiness and lack of accents then has to be cluttered with naturalistic decorations, props, and accessories. (BAKHTIN, 2014, p. 528).

He concludes “If we think this topographicity away, nothing will be left from the genuine artistic nature of the image.” (BAKHTIN, unpublished: a).

“Topographicity” takes us some distance from the positionality of his early manuscripts, but it is still about the meaning of the body in relation.

In his Rabelais study he also considers the body’s relation to its surrounding space in terms of its composition. We are all made up of matter that has been used thousands of time before in other organisms. Bakhtin thus argues ‘the struggle against cosmic terror’ relied neither on ‘abstract hope’ nor on the “eternal spirit” but rather on the

[...] material principle within man himself. Man assimilated the cosmic elements: earth, water, air, and fire; he discovered them and became vividly conscious of them in his own body. He became aware of the cosmos within himself. (BAKHTIN, 1965, p. 336).

This quintessentially Humanist idea that man was a small version (microcosm) of the universe (macrocosm), argued how we belong to the world, rather than being apart from it. Folk culture overcame cosmic terror ‘through laughter, through lending a bodily substance to nature and the cosmos’. (BAKHTIN, 1965, p. 336). This is a poetic version of the principle that matter is a constant: what makes us now has made countless other objects and organisms over the life of the universe. It is all about changes of form.

It is precisely because worldviews have been limited to “merely practical meaning”, or what he elsewhere calls ‘the linearity and practical seriousness of life’ (BAKHTIN, 2014, p. 526) that we have lost a sense of our place in the world. A contemporary art form that retains this sense of the cosmos can be

found in cartoons. Consider three classic series of the 1990s – *The Simpsons*, *South Park* and *Family Guy* – where heaven and hell are places, and death, the devil, and God are characters. (Think also of the great bellies and even greater appetites of Peter Griffin in *Family Guy*, Homer Simpson in *The Simpsons*, and Cartman in *South Park*.) Or take the perspective of the astronaut who sees planet earth against the darkness of space and thereby develops a mental clarity called the “overview effect”. It is this big picture, this imaginative scope, which Bakhtin is asking us to consider. At this moment of climate catastrophe his perspective seems unusually pertinent.

The grotesque body

Now to turn to an image of the grotesque body whose vitality is the result of it being endlessly in process. François Rabelais trained as a medical doctor and possibly participated in public dissections and thus was in the vanguard of an experimental approach to the human body. His knowledge of the body was through practical experiment (he was a pioneer of dieting) rather than the medieval approach which took the books of Aristotle and Galen as unquestioned authorities. Once again the abstract is opposed to the experienced. Bakhtin argues that the doctor

participates in death and procreation. He is not connected with a completed and closed body but with the one that is born, which is in the stages of becoming. The body that interests him is pregnant, delivers, defecates, is sick, dying, and dismembered, in one word, it is the body as it appears in abuses, curses, oaths, and generally in all grotesque images. (BAKHTIN, 1965, p. 179)

This is not a new concept but simply the notion of unfinalisability transposed to the body: the grotesque body is “not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits”. (BAKHTIN, 1965, p. 26). The meaning of the human body is precisely the process of living, and that involves feeding and defecating, reproduction, birth and death. We make connection with the world and each other through our bumps and orifices:

The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world. (Ídem).

It is these reproductive parts – prick, arse, vulva - rather than neutral limbs like arms and legs that are the stuff of insults and praise; they are ambivalent, their meaning in endless process.

Bakhtin argues that this conception of an eternally unfinished world “can only be expressed in unofficial culture. There is no place for it in the culture of the ruling classes” (BAKHTIN, 1965, p. 166). It is such seemingly exaggerated

statements that make it hard to take Bakhtin's argument seriously. He has a tendency to argue from within the world he has created. Take his description of the classical body:

All signs of its unfinished character, of its growth and proliferation were eliminated; its protuberances and offshoots were removed, its convexities (signs of new sprouts and buds) smoothed out, its apertures closed. The ever unfinished nature of the body was hidden, kept secret; conception, pregnancy, childbirth, death throes, were almost never shown. (BAKHTIN, 1965, p. 29)

Poetic, overstated, but essentially this is true. Think of the scandal surrounding Gustave Courbet's *The Origin of Life* (1866) – the origin being a woman's vulva. Or think how the (surely pre-Christian) figures of Sheelana-gigs on the porches of churches were systematically removed, precisely because church-goers were being invited to enter her vulva. A more contemporary example is from *The Witches of Eastwick* (1987) where sculptress Alexandra Medford (played by Cher) creates figures that closely resemble Venus of Willendorf but with the opening of her vulva "tactfully" removed, rendering the image barren if "sweet". Or consider the euphemisms currently used for dying – the person "passed away" or "passed". We are afraid to acknowledge the fact that death is part of the process of living.

The frank discussion of pissing and shitting in Rabelais' *Gargantua and*

Pantagruel might offend some. Certainly these are not the subjects for polite conversation. They play no part in official discourse. So are they, Bakhtin asks, obscene? His response echoes his thoughts about laughter – such images of the body are philosophical rather than obscene or pornographic. "Rabelais's indecencies" he contests, "not and cannot stimulate any sexual erotic feelings and arousals", rather they "only arouse *laughter and thought* [...]. Rabelaisian sobering bawdiness may be called philosophical bawdiness". (BAKHTIN, unpublished: a) This may have little similarity to Wittgenstein's way of doing philosophy, but both were writing in times dark times, and both realised the importance of overcoming fear.

Taking Bakhtin seriously, taking Rabelais seriously

History enacted through images of the material body

It was Bakhtin's *Rabelais and his World* that helped me understand Rabelais's extraordinary novel *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. Our company, The Medieval Players, had decided to adapt the first book in 1983, so understanding this sprawling novel was essential. At the heart our artistic policy was an approach to history and contemporary practice that Bakhtin understood well. Like Bakhtin, we did not feel that history is

a linear progression from ignorance to wisdom. We all learned circus arts, and two core members had worked in puppet theatre, and we took from figures like Meyerhold and Brecht, Dario Fo, Els Comediants and Jacques Lecoq, all of whom drew on this rich tradition of folk images to create their own kind theatre for a contemporary audience. For us, these past cultural works still had living meaning and value and were not the product of an outdated worldview.

Bakhtin argues that the best way of understanding Rabelais is to study the folk tradition on which he drew;

[...] only thanks to this method of research can we discover the true Rabelais, to show, as it were, Rabelais within Rabelais. Up to now he has been merely modernised. (BAKHTIN, 1965, p. 58).

The phrase “merely modernised” is so apt! He is right to advise that we must ‘turn away from the limited and reduced aesthetic stereotypes of modern times’ employing the “narrowed, one-sided concepts that dominate the modern system of thought.” He gives the example of how we can understand the image of “shit in Rabelais” work.

Excrement was conceived as an essential element in the life of the body and of the earth in the struggle against death. It was part of man’s vivid awareness of his materiality, of his bodily nature, closely related to the life of the earth. (BAKHTIN, 1965, p. 224)

Possibly the most popular scene in our adaptation was the young Gargantua’s

“bum-wipatory experiments” when he explored the finest and most comfortable thing with which to wipe his arse (it was the neck of a goose).

Bakhtin was aware that such an approach might seem farfetched. After a discussion of one particularly violent episode where body parts are scattered all over the place he argues that Rabelais didn’t invent these images, but that they are “immanent in the traditional popular-festive system of images which he inherited. He did not create this system, but it rose in him to a higher level of historical development.” By arguing that Rabelais takes this system to a “higher level of historical development” Bakhtin sees off the criticism that it is “nothing but a dead and crippling tradition [...] which prevents the author from seeing and representing the true reality of modern times”. Bakhtin’s approach to history is one of progressive accretion and re-accentuation, thus in each new use

[...] this system grew and was enriched; it acquired a new meaning, absorbed the new hopes and thoughts of the people. It was transformed in the crucible of the people’s new experience. The language of images developed new and more refined nuances. (BAKHTIN, 1965, p. 211).

This a cumulative conception of history, rather than one where each step forward erases the previous one. When discussing what I have called the ‘body in process’ of grotesque realism Bakhtin points out that this is much more than

‘the biological renewal and rejuvenation of a man through his progeny’.

For him [Rabelais] the biological element could not be separated from the social, historic, and cultural element. The father’s flowering in the son does not take place on the same level but on a higher degree of mankind’s development. When life is reborn, it does not repeat itself, it is perfected....Mankind is incessantly progressing historically and culturally, and thanks to this progress, the youth of each generation attains a higher degree of cultural development. (BAKHTIN, 1965, p. 406).

There is historical and cultural progress but it is not one of the spirit (as in Hegel) but through and of the body in its endless activity. As already observed when discussing Shakespeare this tradition of popular imagery does not ‘reflect the naturalistic, fleeting, meaningless, and scattered aspect of reality but the very process of becoming, its meaning and direction.’

One last strategy for reducing the meaning of Bakhtin’s Rabelais study is to regard it as an anti-Stalinist allegory. Alert to this strategy he argues

But the use of the system of popular-festive images must not be understood as an exterior, mechanical method of defence against censorship, as an enforced adoption of Aesop’s language. For 1000’s of years the people have used these festive comic images to express their criticism, their deep distrust of official truth, and their highest hopes and aspirations. ...It is obvious that such a fearless and free language lent a rich positive content to the new outlook. (BAKHTIN, 1965, p. 269)

It is too easy, too reductive, to limit either Rabelais’ or Bakhtin’s book to one meaning. Quite likely there was an Aesopian layer of meaning, but this is far from the only one. Of course, his notes are more explicit in their analysis of how the political regime under which he lived deployed a discourse of lies which operated through fear and violence. But the same was true of the Medieval Catholic church. We must not limit the range of meaning simply to the present day.

Conclusion: time, body, meaning

Before beginning to write this essay I had thought that I would have space to connect with my recent research into neuroscience. Although I have not cited any scientific works, my preoccupations with time and process, with embodied rather than cognitive knowledge, are all informed by such research. Bakhtin never describes actual processes, but throughout his writings he insists upon the radical difference in meaning and intent between cognitive and embodied understanding. In his early philosophy (1990, 1993) he writes about axiology (meaning that relates to personal values) and this sense of lived meaning carries throughout his writings. The processes by which such meanings are generated are always focused on the body in action, be it doing, writing or speaking. And

because we are dealing with bodies, the time necessarily is always in the present: we can mentally project into the future or recall moments from the past, but we can only ever act in time present. Bakhtin has referred to ‘the incomplete present’ which is an accurate description of the time of embodied and living processes. Being and doing are not simply questions of time but also of space. Spatially, his Rabelais study is about the proximate zone of closeness where bulges and hollows engage in reproductive activity. Closeness is the zone of actual activity, distance is the place of past or future reflection. Although it is a very simple and unavoidable fact of existence, it is not something we think about in terms of forms of space and time, or as he calls them, *chronotopes*.

To my knowledge Bakhtin never offered a sustained reflection on his own method, but it is clear that he considered both the human body, and society as living wholes, as constantly evolving, organisms. To sustain their life-giving processes they are in a constant search for their own good (once again, pointing up the difference between axiology and epistemology). The body in Rabelais is not just the individual, it is the whole social organism as it develops over time. Spatially, it exists in that zone of interaction between the bulging and hollow surfaces of the body and the environment. The body in its

operation has to be considered as part of the environment (a very important concept in the neuroscientific literature). Thus ‘whole’ in his later terminology must be understood as an entity that grows in time and space; it exceeds borders and time present. As living beings we are always caught up in the ongoing process of becoming and thus, as Bakhtin puts it, we can’t coincide with ourselves – there is always an element that is thrown forward into the not yet finished. Although Bakhtin never enters into a discussion of dynamics, his insistence on unfinalisability, and on the shaping patterns of genres, is central to an understanding of processes. For this reason he writes about ‘the contradictory complexity of meaning’, one that does not inhere in the body, but in its connections with the surrounding environment (both natural and social). In his embrace of complexity as opposed to linearity Bakhtin aligns himself with contemporary thinking in dynamics.

His opposition to seemingly simple pathways to meaning is as much ethical as it is methodological; these are reductions, limitations, not simplifications. His wartime notes describe the ethical and existential disaster when meaning is considered as a finished thing, all worked out, all loose ends tied off by the murderous, unlaughing, serious mind. An end to process spells death for any living organism.

I began by referring to Martin Buber's masterwork *Ich und Du* (I and Thou, written in 1923). Buber's book describes two kinds of dialogue: the first is a personal and transformative address of another person or thing as "*du*" (thou); the second reduces the other person to an object, a thingified "*es*" (it), a means by which an immediate practical need can be satisfied. Like Bakhtin, he argues that this exchange between beings only happens when the other person is not reduced a fixed form:

It does not matter how exclusively present the *Thou* was in direct relation. As soon as the relation has been worked out or has been permeated with a means, the *Thou* becomes an object among objects - perhaps the chief, but still one of them, fixed in its size and its limits. (BUBER, 1958, P. 31).

Like Bakhtin, Buber is for a dialogue where we leave that kind of meanings which "fixed in its size and its limits". He argues for a connection where the non-everyday, the non-ordinary, the artistic, can take place. The effect of such a dialogue opens one to the hitherto unknown, "strange lyric and dramatic episodes, seductive and magical, but tearing us away to dangerous extremes, loosening the well-tried context, leaving more questions than satisfaction behind them, shattering security - in short, uncanny moments we can't well dispense with". (BUBER, 1958, p. 51). This has so many echoes of Bakhtin's maximal conception of dialogue and understanding.

Writing this essay has given me the opportunity to engage with Bakhtin's notes which offer a new perspective on his published texts. His oeuvre offers us an ethical framework for dialogue, be it with things in the world, other people, or historical works of art. An instrumental approach to other people and to the world results in us devising strategies for exploitation, an approach that is blind to the future and deaf to voices from the past. His notes offer us a deeply saddening and tragic image of dystopia and his published works images of a human comedy in which we can, indeed, we must take part; one that restores humans and the world to life and meaning, to living meaning, to the meaning of living.

Corpo, Imagem e Diálogo no pensamento bakhtiniano

Resumo

"Como damos sentido a nós mesmos e a outras pessoas?" Ao longo de cinquenta anos de pensamento, dos anos 1920 aos 1970, Bakhtin se deparou com um conjunto de questões em torno desse problema central da compreensão humana. O objetivo deste ensaio é examinar as teorias do entendimento de Bakhtin ao longo de seus escritos, valendo-se também de notas inéditas escritas na década de 1940.

Palavras-chave: Corpo; imagem; diálogo; Bakhtin.

Notas

- ¹ Collaboration on review and text editing: Jean Carlos Gonçalves (UFPR/FURG/CNPq), result of an international partnership with the Laboratório de Estudos em educação, linguagem e teatralidades (Labelit/UFPR/CNPq - Brasil), research group led by por Jean Carlos Gonçalves e Michelle Bocchi Gonçalves.
- ² This is Sergey Sandler's translation of notes written when revising his Rabelais manuscript.
- ³ https://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/ni/2007/07/that_flood_again.html accessed 23/01/22

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