

Introduction to Literary Theory
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Lecture – 12
Dialogism (I)

Welcome back all of you to another lecture on Literary Theory and today we are going to talk about the works of Mikhail Bakhtin.

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Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin
(1895 - 1975)

- Polyphony
- Heteroglossia
- Carnavalesque
- Chronotope



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Who has been one of the most influential figures, not only in the field of western literary theory, but also in the field of 20th century humanities in general. And this is in spite of the fact that Bakhtin was able to publish only two book length works under his own name during his lifetime. And we will come to this publishing works under his own name this might sound a bit odd, but when we go through our lecture today you will understand why I am using this word.

So, he was able to publish only two book length works under his name during his lifetime. And the rest of his creative output is primarily available in the form of long essays many of which were compiled and published only after his death. So, why is Bakhtin so popular? One of the reasons why Bakhtin enjoys such a great reputation within the field of literary studies is because of the striking uniqueness of his work.

Thus, though Bakhtin was associated with the intellectual circles of a Russian formalism and though he too liked the formalists was repressed by the communist government of the day his theoretical works on literature cannot be easily categorized under the rubric of formalism. On the other hand attempts to categorize his theories as post structuralist are also I think equally misplaced. And such attempts to categorize his works as part of the greater category of post structuralism were actually made, because his works became widely known in the western world only during the 1980's and 1990's. When post structuralism as a theoretical school was on the rise both in Europe as well as in America.

But this categorization is flawed and I do not think it can really be sustained, because Bakhtin major works preceded by quite a few decades; the rise of post structuralism and were not in any way influenced by any of the major theorists who ushered in the post structuralist wave during the second half of the 20th century.

And therefore, this resistance to easy categorization makes it imperative to study Bakhtin and his theoretical works separately, as a separate category all together. Thus in this course we will be dedicating two lectures exclusively; on Bakhtin we will be dedicating two lectures to elaborate on the contribution of Bakhtin from within the field of literary theory.

Now, in this as well as in the following lecture I will be using the word dialogueism and I will be using it as a blanket term to discuss some of the key theoretical concepts that Bakhtin introduced; concepts like polyphony, concepts like heteroglossia, like carnivalesque and chronotron. So, these are some very unique concepts that Bakhtin came up with. But here, I would also like to introduce a caveat, because I know that some of these concepts that I just mentioned are distinct as theoretical ideas. And therefore, they deserve to be studied individually and on their own right. But I also believe that in spite of this distinctness there is an underlying coherence connecting all of these concepts. And in any case I will be using the term dialogism not to bulldoze the distinctness of these different concepts, but rather as a sort of rough and ready category to signify the theoretical works of Bakhtin in its entirety.

But, before I move on to discuss Bakhtin theoretical concepts let us go through some of the historical context that framed this work and also we will acquaint ourselves with a bit of his biography.

Now to narrate the life of Bakhtin is also to narrate the various stories of his being discovered and rediscovered by the academic circles. The first time Bakhtin was quote unquote discovered was actually in 1960's. When he had already lived for 6 decades and had finished some of his most important theoretical works.

In this case he was discovered by a group of young scholars, who had come across his works in the Maxim Gorky institute of Moscow, and who then went on to rescue Bakhtin from obscurity and bring him to limelight. He was also discovered by the Western Academic World at large during the same time when his book *Rabelais and His World* was published in English translation in 1968. But, it is important to note here that for long this was the only text *Rabelais and The World* was the only text of Bakhtin through which the western academia knew him.

His popularity surged further only during the 1980's and during the 1990's when his other works were also made available in translation. And through both these discoveries, first by the group of students in Moscow and then by the Western Academia at large Bakhtin emerged onto the world stage not only as a scholar, but also as a kind of a semi mythical heroic figure, who had been both a victim as well as a survivor of political persecution. And even more remarkably as someone who had continued to produce wonderfully thoughtful pieces during this period of hardship.

Now, the problem of this emergence as a heroic figure is that the biography of Bakhtin that we have with us is almost a kind of mythologized history in which one is never quite sure about the boundary line separating fact from fiction. But nevertheless, these are some of the broad outlines of his biography.

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Bakhtin was born in 1895 in a Russian town called Orel but mostly grew up in cities like Vilnius and Odessa.

So, Bakhtin was born in 1895 in a Russian town called Orel, but mostly grew up in cities like Vilnius and Odessa.

Now, the reason I mentioned these places is because of the impact they had on Bakhtin in terms of languages. Bakhtin from his early days could speak not only Russian which was his mother tongue, but also a German which he picked up from his governess. And this acquaintance with multiple languages was only enhanced with his move to Vilnius, where though the official language was Russian the locals usually spoke in Polish or Lithuanian. And also in Odessa where young Bakhtin spent some part of his youth he encountered multiple languages, because Odessa was a port city is still a port city where the inhabitants came from different cultural communities and they spoke varied languages.

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Now, Michael Holquist who is a Bakhtin scholar in his book titled dialogism Bakhtin and His World identifies this exposure to different social Milieus where, various languages were equally accepted and were equally current as one of the key influences that later inspired Bakhtin theory of many languages. Now there is a technical term for this I am deliberately not using it, because otherwise you might get confused we will go into this many languageness or what I am calling many languageness right now during the course of this lecture and the next lecture.

Now, as far as Bakhtin education is concerned he seems to have mostly followed on the footsteps of his elder brother Nikolai, but there is also this opinion that in reality Bakhtin received very limited formal education beyond the school level and actually passed of his brothers more successful academic career as his own. Later on in his life you need one Bakhtin scholar is of the view that because Bakhtin formal higher education was next to nonexistent.

His approach to academic research remained somewhat cavalier, and he had little scruple while lifting entire sections from the book of a German philosopher named Ernst Cassirer

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Ernst Alfred Cassirer
(1874 - 1945)

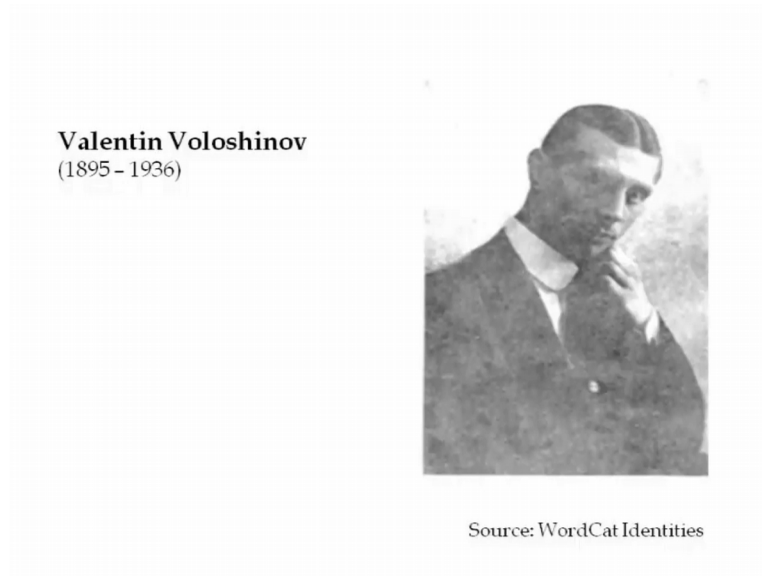


Source: WordCat Identities

And using them in his doctoral thesis on Rabelais, but in the decade following the Bolshevik revolution in Russia Bakhtin was able to gather around himself. And, irrespective of how well educated he was able to gather around himself a diverse group of intellectuals which included people like Valentin Voloshinov and Pavel Medvedev.

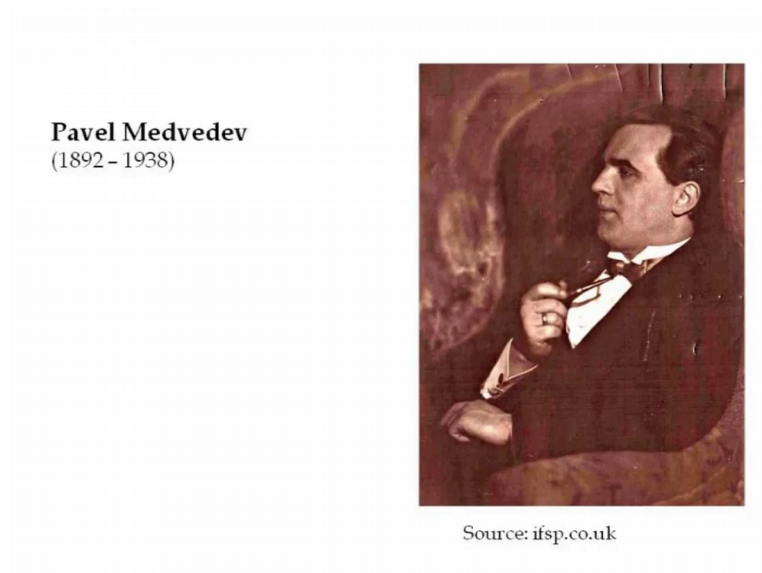
Again, I refer to these names and these names are important, because during the 1920's a number of works were published under the names of Valentin Voloshinov Medvedev, and other acquaintances of Bakhtin which have been claimed by later scholars as being written by Bakhtin himself. And the examples of such works of disputed authorship would include a study on Freudianism.

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And another on Marxism and the philosophy of language which were published under the name of Voloshinov, and another work titled the formal method in literary study which was published under the name of Medvedev.

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So, some scholars quite a number of scholars actually claim that these works were actually written by Bakhtin, but irrespective of whether they were entirely written by Bakhtin himself or not these works bear testimony to the diverse topics of research. And discussion that characterizes a circle of friends that Bakhtin had gathered around himself

during this time. And during the 1920's Bakhtin also published a work under his own name which was a study of the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky.

And the work was titled Problems of Dostoevsky's Art and this work is widely regarded as one of the seminal contributions of Bakhtin to the field of literary theory and this is a work which he later expanded and published under a slightly different title and the title is Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics so not Dostoevsky's Art but, Dostoevsky's Poetics. We will discuss this work in further details when we start elaborating Bakhtin theoretical concepts later during our lecture.

But for now, let us move on to the discussion of his life the year 1929 was the year when this Dostoevsky book was published, but that was really a calamitous year for Bakhtin. Because, that was also the year when Bakhtin was arrested and he was sent to exile to a distant part of Kazakhstan modern day Kazakhstan which was at that point of time part of the Soviet union.

But nevertheless, this period of exile proved very fruitful intellectually for Bakhtin, because this was a time when he worked on some of the very important monographs important studies on novel which later became very famous and which later were translated, and collected in the book the dialogic imagination. In the late 1930's and early 1940's Bakhtin completed two other works.

The first was a study on Bildungsroman or novel of growing up, novel of education, but this work today only exists as a fragment, because the manuscript that Bakhtin had sent to the German publisher was destroyed during the bombing of the Second World War and the copy that Bakhtin had with himself was apparently used up by him to roll cigarettes in the absence of cigarette paper. So, that document is largely lost.

The second book that he produced during this period was actually his thesis on Rabelais which he submitted in 1941 to the Maxim Gorky Institute of World literature in Moscow, and he submitted that for a doctoral degree, but it was only admitted by the institute years later and after much controversy. And this is in fact, the work that was later published under the title Rabelais and his world, and became again one of Bakhtin seminal contributions to the field of literary theory.

Bakhtin's fortune really began to turn in the 1960's when as mentioned earlier he was discovered not only by a large number of readers within Russia, but also abroad Bakhtin whose health was ravaged by years of hardship. And, who had also lost one of his legs to a decaying bone disease was now suddenly transformed from being a German teacher in an obscure town of Russia to being an intellectual hero.

And his last years were spent in Moscow in academic limelight where he returned back to some of the philosophical interests that he had in his younger days and during this period of time he worked on essays which he had produced before his Dostoyevsky's book these were. However, not published during his lifetime and it was only after his death in 1975 that these along with most of his other important monographs on literary studies were compiled and published.

And as mentioned before Bakhtin really became a prominent name almost a phenomenon in the western academia after 1980. So, though some of his works now date back almost a century their impact nevertheless retains a kind of freshness within the field of western literary theory. So, with this background in, please let us now move towards his theoretical concepts and the first set of ideas that we are going to take up is the notion of polyphony, and how this notion of polyphony is related to the concept of dialogism.

Now, if you open your dictionary and look for the term polyphony, you will see that it is usually used to denote certain pieces of music certain pieces of music, in which different melodic lines are sung or played simultaneously they are played parallel to each other and this achieves a kind of harmony. So, this playing simultaneously of different melodic lines to achieve a harmony is what is usually known as a polyphony.

Bakhtin in his study problems of Dostoyevsky's poetics which was published as problems of Dostoyevsky's art borrowed this term from the world of music, and used it to signify what he considered to be a unique feature that characterized Dostoyevsky's novels in his authors professor Bakhtin writes an a quote.

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In his author's preface Bakhtin writes:

"We consider Dostoevsky one of the greatest innovators in the realm of artistic form. He created, in our opinion, a completely new type of artistic thinking, which we have provisionally called *polyphonic*."

(Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics)

"We consider Dostoyevsky one of the greatest innovators in the realm of artistic form. He created, in our opinion, a completely new type of artistic thinking, which we have provisionally called polyphonic".

Now, we will have to come back to this idea that polyphony is something that was invented as a literary device by Dostoyevsky's later on. Because, we will see that in his later essays like discourse in the novel Bakhtin treats polyphony and the associated notion of dialogism as a much more universal phenomenon than he is ready to admit in his Dostoyevsky book. But for now, let us move down a few pages to read the lines in which Bakhtin explains more elaborately, what he means by the use of polyphony in Dostoyevsky's novels and this is a long quotation from his book problems of the Dostoyevsky's poetics.

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“A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices is in fact the chief characteristic of Dostoevsky’s novels. What unfolds in his works is not a multitude of characters and fates in a single objective world, illuminated by a single authorial consciousness; rather a plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world, combine but are not merged in the unity of the event. Dostoevsky’s major heroes are, by the very nature of his creative design, not only objects of authorial discourse but also subjects of their own directly signifying discourse.”

(“Discourse in the Novel”)

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Now, there are two things here that I would like you to focus on. The first is how polyphony is being defined here. And if you notice carefully you will see that it is here defined in terms of plurality yes, but what is important to note here is this plurality is refer to as plurality of independent and unmerged voices as well as consciousnesses. So, here the qualifiers independent and unmerged are as important as a notion of plurality and we will see why this is so in a moment.

But there is also a second thing that is important to note in the quoted passage which is how polyphony is contrasted with the unity of a single authorial consciousness. Now try to think of any novel that you might have read recently and the chances are that you have encountered in that novel a number of characters. And each of these characters speak their different lines this is definitely a kind of plurality of voices, but according to

Bakhtin this does not automatically mean that the novel that you have read can be categorized as a polyphonic novel.

In other words plurality of voices does not automatically lead to genuine polyphony and why is that so? Well this is because according to Bakhtin many novels are written in a way that conveys just the single consciousness the worldview of its author, and the numerous characters that one might encounter in such a novel act merely, as so many mouthpieces of that single authorial consciousness.

So, there is plurality of speeches, but not plurality of ways in which the world is being looked at and is being engaged with and this uniformity is not only to be found in certain kinds of novels, but may also be encountered in other literary (Refer Time: 22:46) in a drama for instance and why I mention a drama, because in a drama the illusion of plurality might be even more intense as we physically encounter different characters coming up on the stage and speaking their own different lines.

But these two might not be truly polyphonic, because though the author might not be visible on the stage the lines that all the characters speak might just be so many echoes of the single authorial consciousness.

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So, this underlying unity and the sameness in a novel and by extension any other literary form is what Bakhtin describes as monologism. This is an important term monologism which would literally mean a single discourse or a single utterance.

Now, in problems of Dostoyevsky's poetics Bakhtin argues that Dostoyevsky's novels were able to break free from this monologism and.

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Bakhtin argues that Dostoyevsky's novels were able to break free of monologism:

"Dostoyevsky's major heroes are, by the very nature of his creative design, not only objects of authorial discourse but also subjects of their own directly signifying discourse".

(Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics)

Bakhtin puts this very well in his own words and I am quoting "Dostoyevsky's major heroes are by the very nature of his creative design, not only objects of authorial discourse, but also subjects of their own directly signifying discourse".

So, this is the last line of the previous quote and this means that each of these characters that we encounter in a novel by Dostoyevsky has a unique consciousness he or she has a unique way of interpreting the world around him or her, and that person also has a unique way of engaging with this world. And this translates into what Bakhtin calls the plurality of independent and unmerged voices which forms the essence of genuine polyphony.

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So whereas the assertion of the single authorial consciousness results in monologism, the presence of a genuine polyphony creates what Bakhtin calls **dialogism**.

So, whereas the assertion of the single authorial consciousness results in monologism, the presence of a genuine polyphony creates what Bakhtin calls dialogism. He therefore, categorizes Dostoevsky's novels as not just polyphonic, but also dialogic in nature. Now here we need to understand that a literary work like a novel or even a drama might have dialogues without being dialogic in nature. That is to say even a mono logic novel or a mono logic drama might have what is conventionally regarded as dialogues or lines uttered by different characters.

But if these lines are all pervaded by the single consciousness of the author then the literary piece will not count as dialogic in Bakhtin scheme of things Bakhtin points this out. In fact, in no uncertain terms and I quote.

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“The polyphonic novel is dialogic through and through. Dialogic relationships [...] are a much broader phenomenon than mere rejoinders in a dialogue, laid out compositionally in the text; they are an almost universal phenomenon, permeating all human speech and all relationships and manifestations of human life, everything that has meaning and significance.”

(Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics)

“The polyphonic novel is dialogic through and through. Dialogic relationships are a much broader phenomenon than mere rejoinders in a dialogue, laid out compositionally in the text; they are an almost universal phenomenon permeating all human speech and all relationships and manifestations of human life, everything that has meaning and significance”.

Now, this quotation makes clear the difference that Bakhtin observes between dialogues as mere rejoinders and true dialogic relationship between independent and unmerged voices, but what is interesting here is Bakhtin's assertion that dialogism is not something unique to certain kinds of literature, but rather is.

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Dialogism is not unique to certain kinds of literature, but is “an almost universal phenomenon, permeating all human speech and all relationships and manifestations of human life, [and] everything that has meaning and significance”.

(Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics)

And I quote “an almost universal phenomenon, which permeates all human speech and all relationships and manifestations of human life, and which permeates everything that has meaning and significance”.

But, though he states this universality of dialogism in the Dostoyevsky book he does not really develop it or at least he does not really develop it till his later essay discourse in the novel. So, let us now have a look at this essay this particular piece which was written during his exile in Kazakhstan elaborates on why dialogism is a universal characteristic of human discourse. In this essay Bakhtin argues that whenever we direct our utterances towards an object and this object might be a physical object or it might be an idea or a concept an abstract object.

So, whenever our utterances are directed towards any object then our words enter into a dialogue with other utterances and to quote Bakhtin.

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Bakhtin writes: "Between the word and its object, between the word and the speaking subject, there exists an elastic environment of other, alien words about the same object".

("Discourse in the Novel")

"Between the word and its object, between the word and the speaking subject, there exists an elastic environment of other, alien words about the same object". Now though this might sound rather esoteric and rather difficult to comprehend actually the idea behind it is really very simple.

So, imagine discussing with your sister the last movie that you watched or arguing with your friends about which restaurant serves the best kebabs or conversing with your classmate about the nature of romanticism in the poetry of John Keats. Now we will in all of these instances you will notice that your utterances are directed towards different objects, some of these objects are material. Like for instance material restaurants and very material kebabs and others are abstract objects like for instance the nature of romanticism in the poetry of Keats.

Now, none of these utterances are spoken in a vacuum all of these objects have already been spoken about by others and also by the people that you are at that point of time communicating with. And therefore, your words are articulated within a space which is already marked by all these previous utterances or to use Bakhtin phrase alien words that have been spoken by others.

So, your utterance is always in a dialogue with these previous utterances and it is precisely by being in a dialogue that any particular utterance gains any meaning; if for

instance I were to come up with utterance about something that nobody has ever heard or nobody has ever spoken about then there is little chance of me making any sense.

Thus, in Bakhtin own words.

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“Any concrete word finds the object towards which it is directed always and already qualified, as it were, disputed, evaluated, enveloped by an obscuring mist, or, on the contrary, by the light of other words already spoken about it. [...] The word directed towards its object enters this dialogically agitated and tension-filled environment of other words, evaluations and accents, weaves itself into their complex inter-relations, merges with some, [and] recoils from or intersects with others.”

(“Discourse in the Novel”)

“Any concrete word finds the object towards which it is directed always and already qualified, as it were, disputed, evaluated, enveloped by an obscuring mist, or, on the contrary, by the light of other words already spoken about it. The word directed towards its object enters this dialogically agitated and tension filled environment of other words, evaluations and accents, weaves itself into their complex inter-relations, merges with some, and recoils from or intersects with others”. Therefore, any concrete language use is automatically dialogic because utterances can only be meaningful once it enters the tension filled environment of other words, which are articulated by other people with consciousnesses that are independent and unmerged from my own.

This will mean that an example of a concrete language used like a novel for instance cannot, but be biological and the algorithm is therefore, not something that is merely confined to particular novels of the Dostoyevsky’s. Of course, it is very possible that in certain texts like those written by Dostoyevsky this dialogism is made more pronounced by stylistic innovations. And in the novels of some other author mono logic tendency might be observable where there is an attempt by the author to assert a single viewpoint.

But even in these little kinds of texts it is possible to hear the echo of alien words of other independent consciousnesses which creates the field of signification and meaning making. So, even if the author's tendency is monologic it is possible for a text to be read dialogically, by going beyond authorial intention and by locating the traces of the tension-filled environment within which utterances ultimately gain meaning.

We will see how this possibility of reading the underlying conflicts, contradictions, and plurality within any particular text plays an important role in other Bakhtinian concepts like heteroglossia or like carnivalesque. And we will take these concepts up in our next lecture.

Thank you.