

Editorial

Mikhaïl Bakhtin: His Time and Ours / Mikhail Bakhtin: Seu tempo e o nosso

*Clive Thomson**

Scholarship always dreams of a straight and steady passage, forgetting that history is not only the storm that blows it off course, but also the wind that fills its sails.

Ken Hirschkop

Reinventing Bakhtin

The scholars whose work was selected for inclusion in this collection will certainly be familiar to readers of *Bakhtiniana: Journal of Discourse Studies*. Our authors have several very significant characteristics in common. All have been publishing original scholarship on topics related to the Bakhtin Circle for some 25 years. All have made substantial contributions to Bakhtin Studies and to the broader field of Critical Theory Studies. They are also well known and highly respected for having provided inspiration and guidance to other researchers and to a whole generation of students through their teaching and supervision, archival work, public lectures, translations, and organization of conferences.

The articles in this issue of *Bakhtiniana* are infused with a depth of experience that can only come from many years spent in the archives, while also working with students in the classroom or in other kinds of intellectual dialogue. It would be fair to say that the authors: Iurii and Dar'ia Medvedev, David Shepherd, Craig Brandist, Caryl Emerson,

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Tatiana Bubnova, Stephen Lofts, Ken Hirschkop, Peter Hitchcock, Linda Hutcheon, and Anthony Wall have all played major roles in shaping and shifting the debates that have taken place within this broad international field that we call Bakhtin Studies. The present collection is evidence not only that their commitment to the field is just as vigorous and passionate as ever, but that their work continues to be creative, innovative, and original.¹ Our collection constitutes a variety of critical practices, and it is hoped that they will stimulate other researchers to undertake new projects in which Bakhtin's concepts are tested and reinvented.

The colleagues whose articles appear here share some important attitudes toward their objects of study. They concur with the idea that there are themes or topics in Mikhail Bakhtin's thinking that remain *more or less* constant over the course of his career; at the same time, they situate him as a thinker who contradicted himself and made abrupt shifts, even reversals, in his interests and methods. They do not adhere to the position that there is a conceptual *inside* and a contextual or historical *outside* to Bakhtin's ideas. Such either-or thinking is foreign to their approaches. Ken Hirschkop has summarized the basic point this way: "The truth of Bakhtin's works is bound to their painful history" (2001, p.10). Our contributors are at ease with the idea of a "fragmentary" Bakhtin and with the notion that the "mysteries" surrounding the disputed texts may never be cleared up completely.² Another essential tenet of their work within Bakhtin Studies is that concepts and ideas must be handled with care and precision. Ken Hirschkop, for example, enlists the support of

¹ The nine articles presented in this collection are revised and expanded versions of papers given in July, 2008, during the plenary sessions at the 13th International Bakhtin Conference that took place at the University of Western Ontario, London, Canada (a selection of other papers from this same conference was published in Mykola et al). Two of our nine articles were published previously in Russian and they appear in the Translation section of this issue of *Bakhtiniana* (Iurii and Dar'ia Medvedev and David Shepherd, 'Polifoniia kruga' [The Polyphony of the Circle], in *Khronotop i okrestnosti: Iubileinyi sbornik v chest' Nikolaia Pan'kova*, ed. B. V. Orekhov (Ufa: Vagant, 2011), pp.170–97; Tatiana Bubnova, 'Bahtin i Bem'janin (po povodu Gete)' [Bakhtin and Benjamin: On Goethe and Other Matters] in *Khronotop i okrestnosti: Iubileinyi sbornik v chest' Nikolaia Pan'kova*, ed. B. V. Orekhov (Ufa: Vagant, 2011), pp.54-67.

² In 2011, Jean-Paul Bronckart and Cristian Bota published *Bakhtine démasqué: histoire d'un menteur, d'une escroquerie et d'un délire collectif*, a highly polemical study in which the authors claim, among other things, that the only works attributable to Bakhtin with certainty are *Toward a Philosophy of the Act, Author and Hero, The Problem of Content*, and some articles from the 1960s. Serious doubts about Bronckart and Bota's claims have been raised by several reviewers (for one example, see Zenkine). In our view, a more credible and balanced position on the authorship question is expressed by Iurii and Dar'ia Medvedev and David Shepherd in their article in this collection.

Bakhtin's language theory in order to critique theories of language adopted by cognitive scientists. Thus, Hirschkop cautiously lays the groundwork for a new linguistics or pragmatics that would account for why it is so problematical and anxiety-producing for us human beings to find our place in language. Caryl Emerson maintains that certain technical terms need to be used carefully and that certain kinds of texts cannot be read productively through the Bakhtinian filter. In a similar vein, Anthony Wall stresses the importance of making clear distinctions between iconic and verbal languages in the context of his study of painting. Finally, in reference to the title of our editorial, our nine contributors clearly agree that much more research remains to be done, if we want to have a better understanding of Bakhtin's relation to the time in which he lived. And, as Tatiana Bubnova writes in her article, an attentive reading of Bakhtin's works has the potential to help us better understand and evaluate our own time.

Our collection has multiple objectives, which are outlined in the paragraphs that follow. Readers will be able to see how successfully these senior scholars go beyond the limits in an area of research that has a long, productive, and very complex history stretching back to the 1960s, when the works of the Bakhtin School were rediscovered. This is not the place to trace that long history. If carried out on an international scale, a proper study of the reception of the ideas of the Bakhtin Circle over the long term would undoubtedly require several lengthy volumes. Suffice it to say that following the "boom" of the 1990s, when Bakhtin's earliest writings finally appeared in translation, there appears to have been a gradual decrease in published references to his work. However, the ideas of the Bakhtin Circle continue, at present, to be cited and appropriated by literary scholars, cultural critics, and linguists just as frequently as those of most other major theoreticians of the 20th century.³ The seven-volume edition of Bakhtin's *Собрание сочинений* [Collected Writings] which appeared with the *Russkie Slovari* publishing house in Moscow was completed in 2012. There seems to be no evidence that this new edition has inspired a surge

³ The statistics available from the on-line bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America give the frequency with which Mikhail Bakhtin's works are referenced and quoted by scholars around the world. Between 1966 and 2015, 3,515 articles and books made reference to Bakhtin. For the same period, there are 4,841 references for Jacques Derrida and 3,184 for Michel Foucault. The following statistics provide a rough gauge of the declining trend in references to Bakhtin's works over the past 25 years: for 1990–1999, 1,397 references; for 2000–2009, 1,062 references; for 2010–2015, 351 references.

of new publications, as one might have expected.⁴ It is to be hoped that non-Russian speaking scholars will eventually gain access (through translations) to the rich material contained in this new edition.⁵

If we leave aside the daunting task of describing the general reception of the Bakhtin's Circle's work since the 1960s, it is very useful to look briefly at a somewhat more manageable project: an investigation into current research trends over the past approximately five years. This examination will provide a context for the nine articles in our collection and allow us to see how our articles connect with current trends.

While the overall numbers of publications on the Bakhtin Circle may be going down since the 1990s, the work of Circle is still receiving sustained attention at international conferences, such as those on the Bakhtin Circle which took place in Italy (2011), India (2013), New Zealand (2014), and Sweden (2014).⁶ All four conferences were exciting events which attracted large numbers of senior and junior scholars and can thus be seen as one symptomatic measure of the healthy, vibrant state of research on the Bakhtin Circle. Another equally important indication of the flourishing state of the field is the journal *Bakhtiniana*, the only journal of its kind currently in existence and it publishes three issues per year. Since 2008 the journal has successfully pursued its mission to offer high quality scholarship on the Bakhtin Circle and on topics in the field of discourse analysis more generally.

⁴ For a critical overview of the collected works, see: John Givens, "The Complete Bakhtin: The Moscow Text in Russian Literature," *Russian Studies in Literature*, 50. 4 (2014): pp.3–6.

⁵ Sergey Sandler is to be commended for taking a step in this direction. See his translation of "Additions and Changes to *Rabelais*" (Bakhtin, 2014), which contains notes made by Bakhtin in the mid 1940s when he was revising his book on Rabelais. Michael Wachtel has translated two texts by M.L. Gasparov, a major Russian literary scholar, who played an important role in the reception of Bakhtin's work in that country (GASPAROV, 2015).

⁶ *The Fourteenth International Bakhtin Conference: Bakhtin Through the Test of Great Time*, Bertinoro, Italy, July 4–8, 2011 (some 100 papers were presented); *Bakhtin in India: Exploring the Dialogic Potential in Self, Culture and History*, Gandhinagar, Gujarat, India, August 19–21, 2013 (some 50 presentations); *The Fourth International Interdisciplinary Conference on Perspectives and Limits of Dialogism in Mikhail Bakhtin: "Dialogue at the Boundaries"*, University of Waikato, New Zealand, January 15–17, 2014 (some 50 presentations); *The Fifteenth International Bakhtin Conference: Bakhtin as Praxis: Academic Production, Artistic Practice, Political Activism*, Stockholm, Sweden, July 23–27, 2014 (well over 200 papers were presented). The *Sixteenth International Bakhtin Conference* will take place at the College of Foreign Languages and Literatures, Fudan University, Shanghai, China, in July, 2017. (For information, consult the home page of the Bakhtin Centre, University of Sheffield, United Kingdom, <http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/bakhtin>).

Our comments here are limited to the most recent conference which took place in Stockholm, and which was quite different and perhaps more innovative than previous ones. The stated aim of the conference was to enhance a dialogue between theory and practice; hence the title: *Bakhtin as praxis*. The conference organizers announced three specific sub-themes in their call for papers, *Artistic Practice*, *Academic Production*, *Political Activism*, and then skillfully crafted a program in which the three threads created a definite sense of coherence and continuity that has not always been present in the earlier conferences in this series. The organizers' careful preparatory work seemed to encourage and stimulate participants in the desired way, with the result that some quite new research directions were inaugurated. *Artistic Practice*, for example, has been a theme virtually absent in earlier conferences. During the Stockholm meetings, five artists with international reputations exhibited their work in various forms, including participative indoor and outdoor installations, performance pieces, and choreographies. The artists explained how their artistic praxis integrated notions, such as the carnivalesque, resistance, hyper dialogism, chronotopias, and ritual. It was clear that some artists saw Bakhtin as a kind of fellow *practitioner* and not simply as a theoretician whose ideas they were applying or borrowing. The impressive works created by the artists were complemented in sessions where papers focused on topics such as "Bakhtinian Analysis and Public Space," "The Art of Carnival," "Contemporary Art and Carnival," etc. The critical approaches used in the present collection by Linda Hutcheon to study the music criticism of Edward Said and by Anthony Wall to explore eighteenth-century painting have affinities with the ones used by the artists and scholars at the Stockholm event. Such an approach could be called integrative, in the sense that the theory/practice division is abandoned and replaced by a dialogical interweaving of three discourses or voices: Bakhtin's, the critic's/artist's, and that of the object under study.

Under the second sub-theme announced by the conference organizers, *Academic Production*, various areas of research were strongly represented: educational practice; clinical practice in the fields psychology and neurolinguistics; archival research on the intellectual context in which the Bakhtin Circle members worked; and the reception of the ideas of the Bakhtin Circle.

At least six sessions were devoted to educational practice (or pedagogy): “Bakhtinian Principles in Learning,” “Becoming, Coming to Know, and Coming to Be: Explorations in Theory and Educational Practice,” “Bakhtin and Civic Education,” “Bakhtinian Theory and Institutionally based Pedagogical Practices,” etc. One group of presenters reported the fascinating results of their radical experiment in the classroom that was based in Bakhtin’s notion of dialogism. Students were assisted by teachers in making collaborative—i.e., dialogical, participatory—decisions about all aspects of the class, including curriculum, instruction, management, assessment, class policy, and the purpose of education. The presenters demonstrated that such an approach is valuable because it stimulates students to investigate critically the cultural values on which their education is based. Education thus became “a praxis of a praxis.”

Clinical practice, as it relates to the disciplines of psychology and neurolinguistics was the focus in several other sessions: “Beyond Professional Monologue: Rendering Oppressed Voices Audible in Reflexive Dialogical Practice and Research,” “Bakhtin in Clinical Analysis,” “Bakhtin Therapy and Care,” etc. Bakhtin’s philosophy of language was deployed and shown to be productive, for example, in helping not only to understand language functioning in pathological conditions such as deafness, aphasia and Alzheimer’s Disease, but also in developing clinical practices that are of benefit to patients who suffer from such conditions. In another clinically-oriented presentation, a group of psychotherapists showed the advantages of adhering to Bakhtin’s view that the human psyche is partly located between people—i.e., social from the very beginning and enmeshed in cultural and historical factors. Language (the word) is understood as historical, concrete, ideological and as only reaching its meaning in the self-other interaction. Such a view of language is deployed by Ken Hirschkop in his article in this collection, as an effective way to counter the idealistic view of language espoused by cognitive psychologists such as Stephen Pinker.

Some participants in Stockholm pushed the boundaries on topics within Bakhtin Studies that have been central to the field for some time. For example, Caryl Emerson, Galin Tihanov, Craig Brandist, and Nikolaj Vasiliev, all of whose research is based in archival investigations, presented new information about the genesis and the intellectual

context of the Bakhtin Circle's work. The articles in Part One of the present collection are examples of the valuable research that needs to be pursued in order to have a more complete picture of Bakhtin and his time. In his paper in Stockholm, Brandist, after focussing his presentation on how the work of Mikhaïl Tubianski shares some features with that of members of the Bakhtin Circle, went on to consider how the ideas of the Circle can play a productive role in overcoming the ideological legacy of colonialism.

For the first time at the international Bakhtin conferences, a delegation of scholars from China was present and able to enlighten us about the reception of Bakhtin Studies in their country.

Under the third main sub-theme of the conference, *Political Activism*, some eight panels took place: "Bakhtinian Perspectives on (National) Politics," "The Political Culture of Protest," "Bakhtin, Contemporary Social Movements, and Global Democratic Struggles," "Bakhtinian Political Theory," "Bakhtin and Social Critique," etc. One thread running through these sessions was that Bakhtin's notions of dialogism and carnival are relevant and powerful analytical concepts for the study of protest and cultural history. The unitary languages of racism, imperialism, and Catholicism, for example, can be challenged through the heteroglossic language of music and films of protest. Case studies involving several countries, discourses, and situations were presented: Italy (Beppo Grilli, Silvio Berlusconi), Argentina (President Kirchner), Taiwan (Gay Pride parade), United States (John Carroll University, blues musicians, Occupy Wall Street), Yugoslavia (the journal *Praxis*, a film). The carnivalesque was identified as a powerful analytical tool and even a potentially spontaneous form of resistance, but its limitations were also explored—Bakhtin's carnival was described as an expressive practice with no instrumental purpose. Peter Hitchcock's article in our collection is part of this movement to seek a better understanding of the political uses to which Bakhtin's ideas can be put.

In summary, the Stockholm conference may very well represent a turning point in Bakhtin Studies, or rather a "turning toward." Although the organizers set out to "enhance a dialogue between theory and practice," they may have achieved something more specific and significant. By conference end, *praxis* appeared to have taken on a new prestige in

relation to theory. The future of Bakhtin Studies may well have difficulty ignoring this turn toward *praxis*.

1 Bakhtin's Time

The authors of the articles in Part One of our collection are philological experts who have spent enormous amounts of time working in the archives. The four articles fulfil a double function: they explore and elucidate various aspects of the intellectual, social, and political context in which the members of the Bakhtin Circle lived and worked; and our authors also suggest ways in which their findings can be extended in new directions.

By carefully examining recently discovered archival materials, Iurii and Dar'ia Medvedev and David Shepherd provide insight into the complex relationship between the ideas of Bakhtin and Pavel Medvedev on the notion of polyphony. What is required is a broader philosophical perspective on polyphony, because the term has most often been studied in a narrowly restrictive, technical or formal sense. The situation to be studied is all the more complex because there were, in fact, three circles that correspond to the three cities where the members of the circles lived and worked: Nevel, Vitebsk and Saint Petersburg. The article argues convincingly the important point that the members of the Bakhtin Circle—a kind of “thought collective”—in fact, shared common ground as regards the topics that interested them. Their differences were ideological and stylistic.

The article by the Medvedevs and Shepherd is followed by translations of three book reviews published by Pavel Medvedev in 1911 and 1912. The reviews are fascinating because they allow a glimpse of the profound dissatisfaction of Pavel Medvedev at the very beginning of the 20th century with regard to the state of literary studies. In the first review, Pavel Medvedev expresses some admiration for the efforts of the turn-of-the-century French scholar, Gustave Lanson, but he adds that literary historians in Russia have failed to articulate a definite purpose or clear methodologies for their work. In the second review, Medvedev again expresses his criticism of Russian literary institutions because of their “cold” reception of Nietzsche’s work which deserves “clear, in-depth examination.” Medvedev’s strong theoretical and interdisciplinary interests, as well as his remarkable

talent as art critic, are evident in the third review, in which he gives an account of Paul Signac's book on 19th century French painting, specifically the movement known as neo-impressionism, or *pointillism*. The various topics addressed by Medvedev in his reviews: the need for specific methodologies and subject boundaries in literary studies, the dangers of the kind of theorizing that reduces art and literature to technique, the importance of being open to innovative and speculative ideas from elsewhere are, of course, central themes in Bakhtin's *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*. Iurii and Dar'ia Medvedev and David Shepherd's article is a salutary reminder of two essential points: we still have much to learn about the earliest work of Pavel Medvedev and of his significant influence on all members of the Bakhtin Circle; advances in our understanding of these matters will only come from more work in the archives and a careful reading of new archival documents.

The articles by Craig Brandist, Caryl Emerson, and Stephen Lofts resonate strongly with that of Iurii and Dar'ia Medvedev and David Shepherd, in the sense that they also seek to provide a clearer picture of Bakhtin and his time. Brandist presents very precisely documented information about how the members of the Bakhtin Circle struggled intellectually at the time of the Revolution in their shift toward a materialist aesthetics, and he then goes on to examine in detail two new influences that Bakhtin underwent in the late 1920s. Aleksandr Veselovskii (1838–1906) and Izrail' Frank-Kamenetskii (1880–1937) play an important role in Bakhtin's work in the late 1930s, especially in the development of his idea of carnival as syncretic pageantry and, more generally, as a structuring feature of literature. Bakhtin's new interest in a particular way of analysing plot structures and metaphors can be traced, in part, to his reading of Veselovskii and Frank-Kamenetskii. Brandist enhances our understanding of the genesis of Bakhtin's notions of the chronotope and carnival. The result is that these notions are thus perceived as more layered and nuanced, giving them the potential to become useful tools for future research.

The longstanding tradition in reception studies is to look primarily at examples of how certain ideas have been positively or constructively appropriated. By examining in fine detail the reactions of two Russian critics who disliked Bakhtin's ideas intensely, Emerson's novel approach shows how productive the study of a *negative* reception can be. In Emerson's analysis, we learn new and precise information about some very recent trends

in 20th century literary criticism in Russia, as well as the connections between these trends and the “new nationalism long on the rise in Putin’s Russia.” Our attention is also drawn to aspects of Bakhtin’s concepts and methodologies that should be the object of closer scrutiny and, just as importantly, to our own sometimes unexamined and complacent ideas. The aim in Stephen Lofts’ article is to deepen the work of earlier researchers on the relationship between Bakhtin and Cassirer. Lofts shifts the discussion from the controversial question of Cassirer’s influence on Bakhtin to the fascinating topic of what the two thinkers had in common. Their work represents a counterpoint to the pessimism of certain contemporaries.

2 Bakhtin and Our Time

Part II of our collection is programmatic and interdisciplinary. If we read carefully between the lines, we might also be tempted to place this set of articles under the double heading “annoyance and dissatisfaction.” Our time, like that of Bakhtin, is characterized by some “big ideas” that are fashionable and as yet unchallenged. In his early writings, Bakhtin was impatient with certain tendencies in Neo-Kantianism or some aspects of *Lebensphilosophie*, such as its pessimism or potential nihilism—as Stephen Lofts points out in his article. In a similar way, the popularity in our time of the work of some cognitive scientists can be seen to provoke a certain irritability in Ken Hirschkop, who marshalls Bakhtin’s “realistic” ideas on language to lay bare the idealistic presuppositions and excessive claims of the cognitivists. Peter Hitchcock takes issue with the complacency of certain critics whose appropriation of Bakhtin’s notions of genre and chronotope are reductive.

There is an urgency in Tatiana Bubnova’s tone when she suggests that Bakhtin criticism risks becoming “old-fashioned” within our university discourse. She urges us to reconsider received ideas about Bakhtin and Benjamin’s seeming compatibility with regard to their attitude toward Romanticism, as well as the incompatibility of their positions on language. That very incompatibility, she suggests, helps us to see each thinker more clearly and allows us to distinguish in each of them aspects that would otherwise remain invisible.

Goethe was a “hero” for both men, but not in the same way. Linda Hutcheon and Anthony Wall’s articles share an ardent conviction—again, noticeable in their tone—about the importance of keeping Bakhtin’s ideas alive in the context of a certain kind of interdisciplinary work. Inspired by methodologies from literary criticism and musicology, Hutcheon’s ambition is to adopt a fresh approach, as she revisits the work of two “canonized” thinkers, Bakhtin and Edward Said. Anthony Wall proceeds from his longstanding enthusiasm for expanding the semantic possibilities of Bakhtin’s concepts. In his article here, he appropriates Bakhtin’s dialogical language theories, in order to carry out the analysis of iconic language as represented in the artwork of the 17th century Dutch artist, Nicolaes Maes.

Let us conclude our introductory comments with a word about *time*, since this is the element that we chose to highlight in the title of this editorial. It is our hope that we have managed to achieve several inter-connected objectives that relate, in a general way, to the theme of *time*. The first articles shed new light on Bakhtin’s relation to his time, on his relations with certain colleagues, and on the reception of his ideas in our time. The following articles contribute to important debates that are part of the intellectual and political landscape of our time. It is worth pointing out, however, that there is another large question connected to time that has remained somewhat in the background. Peter Hitchcock points to this question when he suggests that, in general, we do not know enough about “the temporal logic that Bakhtin espoused” (p.167). In Bakhtin’s early writings, his references to time are frequently associated with such words as “crisis.” His preoccupation with time appears again with full force when he invents his concept of the chronotope. The time of carnival seems to be of yet a different kind. And Great Time?⁷ Perhaps it is time to look *again* at Bakhtin and time, but in this much more comprehensive perspective. Recent archival discoveries make such a project look very promising.

⁷ For a study of the notion of “Great Time,” see David Shepherd, “A Feeling for History? Bakhtin and ‘The Problem of Great Time,’” *Slavonic and East European Review* 84.1 (2006): pp.32–51.

In memory of Iurii Pavlovich Medvedev (1937–2013)

This collection of articles is devoted to the memory of Iurii Pavlovich Medvedev who died on October 13, 2013. Iurii Pavlovich is remembered and valued by friends and colleagues for his important contributions to several fields: as editor and writer with the Soviet film studio *Lenfilm*, as writer with the journal *Avrora*, as instigator of various cultural events, and as council member with the human rights organisation *Memorial*. Those of us who are interested in the Bakhtin Circle remember him for his fine scholarship on his father, Pavel Nikolaevich Medvedev and on the Bakhtin Circle more generally. Iurii's painstaking and diligent detective work over many years resulted in the discovery of some 200 publications (articles and books) written by his father. Some of them have been republished in new editions, but many more remain unpublished. Through his writing about the Bakhtin Circle and specifically about his father's role, Iurii, ably assisted by his wife Dar'ia, effected a major change in our understanding of the relationships among its members. As Iurii and Dar'ia Medvedev and David Shepherd make it clear in their article in this collection, there were several Bakhtin Circles—not just one—and their members had interests and ideas that were both autonomous and overlapping. A realistic and responsible explanation of how the circles functioned requires that we take into account both institutional contexts and individual voices. Those of us who met Iurii at the international Bakhtin conferences remember him as a man of integrity and modesty, eloquence and passion, generosity and wisdom. We will remember him with fondness and we will not soon forget him.⁸

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⁸ For a more detailed account of Iurii Pavlovich's life, see Craig Brandist, 2013, "Iurii Pavlovich Medvedev: An Obituary," *Bakhtiniana*, 8.2: 254–57.

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