Vision of the Other: 
Word and Image in Mikhail Bakhtin

Susan Petrilli, University of Bari “Aldo Moro,” Bari, Italy

ABSTRACT

This article describes how the pathways and modalities through which self-consciousness and self-valuation are reached are closely interdependent with the vision of others. But the vision of the other can never be known directly by any one of us, not even in the other’s presence: even when I am in front of the gaze of the other, the other is always the other-for-me. Neither studies of the psychological or psychoanalytical orders, nor those conducted in the sphere of philosophical reflection oriented autonomously from other spheres can contribute to a semiotics of the image of self as this is construed interpreting the signs of the vision of the other. Literary writing above all can contribute in this sense. The Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin resorts to literature, verbal art for his semiotics and philosophy of language and is often interpreted mistakenly as a literary critic precisely because of this. In this framework, he analyses the signs forming one’s own image of self for each one of us, in the interlacement between I-for-myself, the other-for-me, I-for-the-other.

KEYWORDS

Image, Otherness, Self-Consciousness, Self-Valuation, Vision

1. FOR A NEW IMAGE OF THE OTHER: THE BAKHTINIAN REVOLUTION

Readings of works by Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) often do not fully account for his contributions in the sphere of philosophy, specifically philosophy of language and semiotics, which are closely interrelated, as observed by Umberto Eco (his 1984 book is entitled Semiotica e filosofia del linguaggio). Bakhtin, in fact, has been interpreted above all as a literary critic. However, on more than one occasion he declared himself to be a philosopher, as in his conversations with Viktor Duvakin (which took place in 1973; see Bakhtin 1996; Ponzio 2008). Here he says explicitly that he is a philosopher, a statement that finds immediate confirmation in his programmatic essay of the early 1920s, “K filosofii postupka” (“Toward a Philosophy of the Act”). And yet Bakhtin dealt with literature all his life and the reason is because he elected the language of literature, of literary writing, as the perspective of his philosophical reflections.

A collection of Bakhtin’s works in Russian has been published in recent times under the title Sobranie sočinenij (Collection of Works), in seven volumes edited by S. G. Bočarov et al. (Bakhtin 1996-2010). Some of these works that had not already been included in earlier collections of his writings have been translated into various languages, specifically his monographs on Fyodor Dostoevsky, 1963, and François Rabelais, 1965, and his collections of 1975 and 1979.)

Especially important are his notes from the early 1940s (in Bakhtin 1996, vol. 5), translated into Italian as “Dagli appunti degli anni Quaranta” (Bakhtin 2004). We will begin with a focus on a section dedicated to the problem of the violence of the “image in absence”, that is, the image without dialogue, without encounter, without otherness. This section is published under a title chosen by the editors of

DOI: 10.4018/IJSVR.2018010108

Copyright © 2018, IGI Global. Copying or distributing in print or electronic forms without written permission of IGI Global is prohibited.
the Russian original, “Ritorika, v meru svoej lzvosti” (“Rhetoric, considering its deceitfulness”), which repeats the opening words of Bakhtin’s annotations, dated 12 October 1943. In the Italian edition the title chosen is “La violenza della parola e l’immagine in assenza” (“The violence of the word and the image in absence”, see Bakhtin 2004: 113-121).

As we have already observed, Bakhtin attributes special importance to the vision of literature, whether a question of the novel, in particular the so-called polyphonic novel inaugurated by Dostoevsky, or of lyrical poetry. In his text from the early 1920s, “K filosofii postupka”, for example, he dedicates particular attention to dialogism and to encounter among points of view on the basis of his reading of a poem by Aleksandr S. Puškin titled (again not by the author) Razluka (Separation / Departure, (see Ponzio 1990, 1994a, 2007) 1830).

Literary language operates a shift in the viewpoint of discourse, namely, from the self to the other, from identity to alterity, which is the condition for its aesthetic capacity and worldview. In fact, in “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity” (an early essay of 1920–1924), Bakhtin claims that “Ethical and aesthetical objectification requires a powerful point d’appui outside itself; it requires some genuine source or real strength out of which I would be capable of seeing myself as another” (Eng. trans. in Bakhtin 1990: 31).

Bakhtin’s philosophy is semiotics particularly interested in the verbal sign, on the word insofar as it starts from listening and demands listening. And Bakhtinian semiotics elaborated in terms of the “art of listening” is “semiotics of literature”. With the expression “of literature” the reference is not to semiotics applied to literature as the object of study, but rather to literature, literary language as subject, as viewpoint and perspective thanks to which it is at last possible to understand what dialogue really is.

For Bakhtin, the shift in perspective from the I to the other, from identity to alterity meant to get free of the theoreticist orientation that dominated over philosophy and the human sciences at the time (see Bakhtin 1974; N. Bakhtin 1995). This shift in the center of value from the self to the other characterizes the architectonics of Bakhtin’s thought system, operating what has been significantly described as a revolution, the “Bakhtinian revolution” (Ponzio 1997; see also Petrilli 2012a). Indeed, the revolution operated by Bakhtin and his collaborators (the so-called Bakhtin Circle, see Bakhtin e il suo circolo 2014; Ponzio 2013) is a revolution that can be described as “Copernican,” a revolution that has overturned dominant conceptions of the relationship between self and other.

In his studies on the relationship between self and other, Bakhtin shifts his attention from identity understood as closed identity and its centrifugal forces (whether identity of the individual, for example, self consciousness, or collective identity, as in the case of the extended community, historical language, cultural system) to otherness, alterity and its centrifugal forces (see also Vološinov 1926, 1927, 1929).

Working in this direction, Bakhtin too, like another great twentieth century philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas – (a Lithuanian living in France), who was also strongly influenced as a philosopher by Dostoevsky –, has contributed substantially to the critique of identity (see Ponzio, 1993, 2006, 2009), where “identity” is understood here as closed, short-sighted and egocentric identity, monological identity, achieved on the basis of sacrificing the other, autrui.

The language of literature converges with an exotopic vision of life. Bakhtin studies the human capacity for exotopy (synonyms include extralocality, extralocalization) and its conditions of possibility by comparison with a worldview trapped in the logic of identity, or better the “ideo-logic” of identity (see Ponzio 1993: 130-131; Petrilli 2004). The capacity for exotopy calls for a different type of logic, precisely the logic of otherness (see Uexküll 1967; Vernadsky 1926; Vygotsky 1934).

This new vision of the world as thematized by Bakhtin and staged by the language of literature inaugurates the possibility of a “critique of dialogic reason,” where the expression “of dialogic reason” is another subject genitive alluding to the capacity for critique inherent in dialogic reason, critique possible thanks to dialogism (see Petrilli and Ponzio 2005, 2016). Only on the basis of critique oriented by dialogical reason is it possible to recover the multiplicity of voices in dialogue, including those resounding in a single voice, and thereby obtain polyphonic dialectics. Conceived in
Decision Method of Optimal Investment Enterprise Selection under Uncertain Information Environment
www.igi-global.com/article/decision-method-of-optimal-investment-enterprise-selection-under-uncertain-information-environment/126197?camid=4v1a