Visualizing Theatrical and Novelistic Discourse with Bakhtin

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

ABSTRACT

A constant vision in Mikhail Bakhtin’s works: polyphonic dialogue, this above all in the novel, but his love for theatre should not be neglected. Consequently, a central focus in Bakhtin’s reflections is the polyphonic novel which he first identifies in Dostoevsky’s novels. Bakhtin establishes a close relation between the novel, popular culture and carnival, evidencing the carnival component of novelistic discourse, therefore of life. Moreover, as he recounts in his 1973 conversations with Victor Duvakin, his interest in the novel overlapped with theatre, in particular the Moscow Art Theatre. In Bakhtin and Theatre, Dick McCaw relates Bakhtin’s vision of art and life to theatre as visualized by Stanislavsky, Meyerhold and Grotowski, each of whom operated a “revolution” in their own original terms comparable to the so-called “Bakhtinian revolution” in philosophy of language and literary criticism. With the difficult socio-political events of the time on the background, this essay explores important aspects of the real dialogue between these three masters of the theatre and of the ideal dialogue established between the latter and Bakhtin, thereby creating a special perspective on theatre with special reference to the Bakhtinian concepts of “polyphony” and “dramatization”. Overall are evidenced, for the quality of life, the importance of such values as dialogism, otherness, participative unindifference, creativity which also emerge as characteristics that specify the artwork, whether novelistic or theatrical, thereby showing how art and life are vitally interrelated and capable of enhancing each other.

KEYWORDS

Carnival Imagery, Dialogic Vision, Otherness, Polyphony, Unfinalizability

1. SPEAKING OF THEATRE: BAKHTIN IN CONVERSATION WITH DUVAKIN

That Mikhail M. Bakhtin (1895-1975) dedicated almost all of his works to novelistic discourse is renowned. We also know that he was fascinated by its manifestation in the polyphonic form as conceived by Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881). Thus, organised the novel, that is, the polyphonic novel was Bakhtin’s great love.

In the second 1963 edition of his monograph on Dostoevsky, Problemy poetiki Dostoevskogo (Eng. trans. Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, 1984) – the first edition was published in 1929 under the title Problemy tvorčestva Dostoevskogo (Russian and Italian translation now available in Bachtin e il suo circolo 2014: 1053-1423) –, Bakhtin introduces a new element: the connection between novel, polyphony and popular culture, the latter being characterised by that orientation and worldview described as “carnivalesque”. Dostoevsky’s polyphonic novel avails itself of the carnivalesque component in the novelistic genre. Bakhtin pursued his studies on popular culture and the “carnivalesque” with special reference to François Rabelais and his novel Garantua e Pantagruel.

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during the time of his exile. In fact, only two years after the appearance of the 1963 edition of his Dostoevsky monograph, Bakhtin also published his 1965 monograph Tvorčestvo Fransua Rable i narodnaja kul’tura srednevekov’ja i Renessansa (Eng. trans. Rabelais and His World, 1984) (elaborating on what was originally his doctoral dissertation, written during the 1940s, which the commissars judging his work did not appreciate). The second 1963 edition of Bakhtin’s Dostoevsky book was inevitably influenced by his readings of Rabelais.

As to theatre, though not a central focus in Bakhtin’s work, it seems that so-called “art theatre” too was one of his passions. Was Bakhtin in love with theatre as well, as a spectator at least? This is a question Viktor Duvakin asked Mikhail Bakhtin during their second conversation of six, all of which took place in 1973 (Besedi VD Duvakina s M. M. Bachtinym 1973, first published in 1996). Bakhtin declared that his experience of the Moscow Art Theatre was not related to Moscow (where indeed he visited every now and again), but to Odessa where he took his university courses.

Bakhtin narrates that as a fan of Konstantin S. Stanislavsky (1863-1938), co-founder of the Moscow Art Theatre inaugurated in 1898, he would go to the “London Hotel” and with his friends they would watch this great master of the theatre through the great window on the first floor, overlooking the road, as he sat in the restaurant eating his meals. This narration led to Duvakin’s question: “Therefore, you loved theatre as a spectator?” (in Bakhtin, 2002, p. 9); and Bakhtin’s answer: “I can’t say that I loved it. I liked it, it had an effect on me, I remember seeing …. Brandt overwhelmed me,” as though to imply that his great love continued to be the polyphonic novel.

2. BAKHTIN AND THEATRE, A BOOK BY DICK MCCAW

In Bakhtin and Theatre. Dialogues with Stanislavsky, Meyerhold and Grotowski, published in 2016, the author Dick McCaw relates Bakhtin (see Figure 1) to the theatre directors, Konstantin Stanislavsky (see Figure 2), Vsevolod E. Meyerhold (1874-1940) (see Figure 3) and Jerzy Marian Grotowski (1933-1999) (see Figure 4), creating a special perspective on theatre which we will now explore.

The word “dialogues” in the subtitle of this book alludes to the dialogue that effectively took place in real life between the three masters of the theatre, Stanislavsky, Meyerhold and Grotowski. But “dialogue” can also be interpreted as alluding to the imaginary dialogue and ideal relation established between the latter and Bakhtin. McCaw relates the architectonics of Bakhtin’s thought system to theatre as visualized by these masters, with insights that are noteworthy. Stanislavsky, Meyerhold and Grotowski each operate a sort of “revolution” in their own original terms, comparable to Bakhtin’s revolution in philosophy of language and literary criticism, the “Bakhtinian revolution” (see Ponzio, 1997, 2015; Petrilli, 1996, 2012a; Petrilli & Ponzio, 2005).

Stanislavsky founded the Moscow Art Theatre in 1898, giving rise to an intense and complex dialogue with Meyerhold and eventually with the young Polish student Grotowski, who in a sense challenging his predecessors invented the “Poor Theatre” less than twenty years after Stanislavsky’s death and Meyerhold’s assassination. Bakhtin had similar relations to members of the so-called “Bakhtin Circle”, all being connected with him and each other by research itineraries and open dialogue, ever more topical in the present day and age (Petrilli 2016b, 2016c, 2017).

McCaw develops the implications of Bakhtin’s reflections on the differences between novel and theatre, referring to a series of central notions in his discourse, including the “chronotope” (see in particular the following publications by Bakhtin: Toward a Philosophy of the Act [1920-1924], 1993; “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel” [1937-1938], in Bakhtin, 1981, pp. 84-258; “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity” [1920-1924], in Bakhtin, 1990, pp. 4-256; Russian original in Bakhtin, 1979). Our own focus in this essay is on the difference between novel and theatre with reference to the concept of “polyphony,” it too pivotal in Bakhtin’s writings. The question of polyphony absorbed Bakhtin’s attention during the 1920s, ensuing in the first 1929 edition of his monograph on Dostoevsky, published the same year as his arrest and exile to Kustanaj in Kazakhstan; and the question of polyphony continued claiming his attention from the 1930s onwards, for the whole time
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