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978-0-521-46647-9 - Mikhail Bakhtin: Between Phenomenology and Marxism

Michael F. Bernard-Donals

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The language theory of Mikhail Bakhtin does not fall neatly under any single rubric – “dialogism,” “Marxism,” “prosaics,” “authorship” – because the philosophic foundation of his writing rests ambivalently between phenomenology and Marxism. The theoretical tension of these positions creates philosophical impasses in Bakhtin’s work, which have been neglected or ignored partly because these impasses are themselves mirrored by the problems of anti-foundationalist and materialist tendencies in literary scholarship. In *Mikhail Bakhtin: between phenomenology and Marxism*, Michael Bernard-Donals examines various incarnations of phenomenological and materialist theory – including the work of Jauss, Fish, Rorty, Althusser, and Pecheux – and places them beside Bakhtin’s work, providing a contextualized study of Bakhtin, a critique of the problems of contemporary critics, and an original contribution to literary theory.

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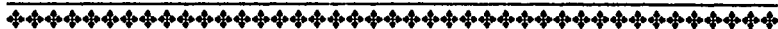
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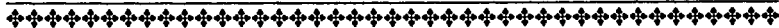
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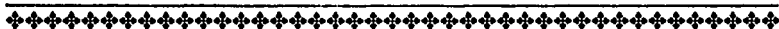
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Mikhail Bakhtin

between phenomenology and Marxism



MICHAEL F. BERNARD-DONALS

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Preface



This book's premise begins with two simple and related questions. First, why should we study aesthetic constructs, and what kind of knowledge does that study yield; and second, what does the work of Mikhail Bakhtin offer to such a study? The questions can be made more precise: how can aesthetic knowledge be said to have social significance; and, if literary analysis does affect or change human social relations, what is the nature of that change? Bakhtin's project – which he called a “sociological poetics” – is at once an analysis of how social structures are comprised of language, and of how aesthetic objects are uniquely formed social structures, and so is uniquely positioned to intervene in the space delimited by these questions.

Yet at the foundation of Bakhtin's work lies an ambivalence about the way the human subject is constructed. In his earliest work – which bears a close relation to Husserl's phenomenology, Gadamer's hermeneutics, and the aesthetic theory of the neo-Kantian resurgence of the 1910s and 1920s – Bakhtin proposes a human subject that is defined by its *relation* to other subjects, and the ways in which that relation is manifested in the creation of signs. The “phenomenological” works emphasize the inescapability of language, and suggest analyses of (aesthetic) language based on the complexities of one subject's relation to another. As his work progresses, however, Bakhtin pays more attention to the material conditions of the human subjects whose language is under analysis. Bakhtin reframes the question of language production (and the production of signs generally) as a question of the re-production of signs as ideological material, thereby effectively shifting the analysis of subject-formation away from questions of interpretation and “bias” toward an examination of the “characteristics and forms of the social intercourse by which this meaning is realized” (Bakhtin/Medvedev, *The formal method* 9). This shift of emphasis to analyze broader processes of

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subject-formation brings Bakhtin's work closer to the work of traditional historical materialist analyses of culture and history.

Mikhail Bakhtin: between phenomenology and Marxism accounts for the incongruities between these "individual" and "social" analyses. What is most interesting about these incongruities is *not* that they prevent "Bakhtinian" analyses of language, culture and aesthetic objects. The boom in Bakhtinian studies in all of these areas over the last ten to fifteen years is powerful evidence to the contrary. Rather, the disparity between the "individual" and "social" theories of subject-formation in Bakhtin points to a difficulty in the *nature* of the knowledge such theories yield. Though understanding language as a way to "change the minds" of its users is certainly valuable, the question remains as to how one moves from such new knowledge to less (or, if possible, un-) biased knowledge of one's material conditions and, armed with such knowledge, how one might effect real, measurable, change in those conditions.

One might ask why one needs yet another book on Mikhail Bakhtin. Quite simply, it is because in his work the perennial problems of subject-formation, the nature of the aesthetic, the possibility of the human sciences, and epistemology generally, are closely intertwined. More specifically, there are two reasons why I think this project is a valuable one. First, no one in the "Bakhtin industry" has adequately discussed Bakhtin's language theory in terms other than a *single*, unified theory. There are literary and cultural theorists who understand Bakhtin's work as fellow-travelling with historical materialism (Hirschkop; White; Bennett; Shepherd). There are others who see it as closer to a theory of prosaics (Morson), or a theory of dialogism (Bialostosky), or a theory of "authorship" (Holquist), but it has never been fully acknowledged that Bakhtin's influences were many and contradictory. Moreover, the fact that there have been so many attempts to reconcile Bakhtin's work under one "umbrella" theory suggests that no single unifying theory is sufficient. *Mikhail Bakhtin: between phenomenology and Marxism* undertakes to study the complexities of his work, particularly in relation to the problematic early "phenomenological" essays. Second, the ambivalence in Bakhtin's work reflects a similar ambivalence current in the literary and theoretical academy today. Are literary works aesthetic constructs that, by their very aesthetic nature, deserve attention from the public and media? Or are these works simply another cultural construct borne by the historical forces that create and affect the public and

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media? By whose definition are such constructs “aesthetic?” Bakhtin’s phenomenological works tried to get to the heart of the nature of aesthetic response. When those attempts dissolved into unanswerable questions of how subjective response is created culturally and how aesthetics can be considered a branch of material culture, he turned to materialism. There, Bakhtin considered *how* the work was material, and how its language – no longer considered strictly aesthetic, but part of the intercourse of culture – could act as an instrument of social change (either for the better or for the worse). All these questions, of course, are relevant today, during a time when theoretical approaches to language and literature are being interrogated for what value they can bring to the public in general; when questions are being asked about whether there is a need for a science of the underpinnings of texts when those texts are assumed to have value by definition; and when the very category of “the aesthetic” is seen as a questionable cultural commodity.

The book is broadly divided into three main subject areas, and in each I provide an exposition of the earliest manifestations of Bakhtin’s work on the construction of the subject by way of the “other.” These appear primarily in *Art and answerability*, “The problem of the author,” “Discourse in life, discourse in art,” and “Epic and novel.” In these texts, Bakhtin’s phenomenology – the subject of the book’s first three chapters – most resembles the neo-Kantian position developed in the 1910s and 1920s, notably by Hermann Cohen, as well as Husserl and Gadamer (and to some extent, Ingarden). At stake in this exposition and subsequent comparisons is the extent to which Bakhtin’s “individualist” construction of the subject – and the resulting application of such a theory for the value of doing aesthetic or cultural analyses – confronts or elides the problems encountered by these “phenomenological” theorists. Specifically, I discuss the ways in which Bakhtin’s notion of how to define the object of investigation (the literary text or aesthetic object) improves on Husserl’s; whether it is possible for Bakhtin’s phenomenology to give a better account for divergent and competing readings of texts; whether he provides a method for adjudicating such divergent readings; and, finally, whether Bakhtin’s concept of “negotiating” the network that defines an utterance’s context is sufficient to ground such adjudications.

The next two chapters provide an exposition of the “social” theory of subject-formation found in the more “Marxist” Bakhtinian works,

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such as *Marxism and the philosophy of language*, *The formal method in literary scholarship*, his later *Speech genre* essays, and in certain sections of *The dialogic imagination* essays and of the Dostoevsky book. In these texts, Bakhtin pre-empts the phenomenological theory of the subject by producing a broader concept of subject-formation at the level of societies. Moreover, Bakhtin casts his argument in terms of ideology rather than simply language, making the case that ideological construction is in fact material and does contribute to subject-formation, but that one's historical situation also – and distinctly – contributes to such formation. I investigate what is an integral problem for language study generally and for Bakhtin's work specifically: namely, that there may be a distinct method for the study of the material/historical placement of the subject, and that that method is *scientific*. Here I provide a description of how Bakhtin's materialism is like and how it is unlike other versions of historical materialism – specifically Althusserian and post-Althusserian versions (Laclau and Mouffe, Pecheux, Coward and Ellis, and others) – since it is these latter versions that have had to wrestle with the possibility of the liberatory nature of a materialist *science*, and since Bakhtin ultimately shrank from the claim that such a science would work.

The final two chapters negotiate what might be possible for a materialist project modelled on Bakhtin's. Given the problems of both the "individual" and the "societal" descriptions of subject-formation, how does Bakhtin – who works at the margins of both – negotiate these problems successfully, if at all? Bakhtin's project might finally be called a "materialist rhetoric," which begins – like current anti-foundationalist language theories (such as Stanley Fish's and Richard Rorty's, the two main antagonists in this section) – by acknowledging and providing an analysis of the complex ideological network that interpellates subjects (a process which is much like Bakhtin's phenomenological project). It also accounts for the material/historical base for such a network, positing a proximate scientific method for the analysis for those specific historical, economic, and social articulations that overdetermine them. This *derives* from the Bakhtinian model, but not directly, since Bakhtin in fact never followed through on this analysis, though he often called for it (see White, "The struggle over Bakhtin"; Hirschkop's essays). It remains to be seen if such a "materialist rhetoric" can be constructed, and whether it can be successful.

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Abbreviations

- AR** Wolfgang Iser, *The act of reading* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978)
- CD** John Brenkman, *Culture and domination* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987)
- Doing** Stanley Fish, *Doing what comes naturally: Change, rhetoric, and the practice of theory in literary and legal studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990)
- FM** M. M. Bakhtin/Pavel Medvedev, *The formal method in literary scholarship: A critical introduction to sociological poetics*, trans. Albert J. Wehrle (Cambridge, MA: The Harvard University Press, 1985)
- For M** Louis Althusser, *For Marx* (London: New Left Books, 1969)
- IR** Wolfgang Iser, *The implied reader: Patterns of communication in prose fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974)
- LM** Rosalind Coward and John Ellis, *Language and materialism: Developments in sociology and the theory of the subject* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977)
- LP** Louis Althusser, *Lenin and philosophy* (London: Monthly Review Press, 1971)
- MPL** M. M. Bakhtin/Valentin Voloshinov, *Marxism and the philosophy of language*, trans. Ladislav Matejka and I. R. Titunik (Cambridge, MA: The Harvard University Press, 1986)
- RC** Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar, *Reading capital* (London: New Left Books, 1970)
- TAR** Hans Robert Jauss, *Towards an aesthetics of reception* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982)
- Text** Stanley Fish, *Is there a text in this class?* (Cambridge, MA: The Harvard University Press, 1980)