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Bakhtin and the Visual Arts¹

Deborah J. Haynes

Since Bakhtin's writings consistently began to appear in print in the 1960s, his name has often been associated with concepts such as "carnival," developed in *Rabelais and His World*, and "dialogue" or "dialogism," developed in *The Dialogical Imagination*. But concentration on the carnivalesque or the dialogic has tended to skew the adaptation of Bakhtin's work by scholars in a wide range of scholarly disciplines. Among the disciplines in which scholars have fruitfully engaged his ideas are: communication and media studies, composition, cultural studies, education and educational theory, ethics, film and television, law and critical legal studies, linguistics and philosophy of language, literature, medicine and studies on aging, multicultural studies, philosophy, political theory, psychology and psychoanalysis, religion, sociology, theater and performance, and urban studies. Curiously, art historians, art theorists, and critics have been slow to adapt his concepts to analyses of visual culture and the visual arts.

However, the philosophical language developed by Bakhtin – from his earliest published essays in the 1920s to his last notes in the early 1970s – contributes greatly to aesthetics, and it offers a new set of questions with which to query visual art. Whether interpreting Russian icons, Russian Modernism, Impressionist and Postimpressionist painting, or contemporary art, his ideas generate significant new insights. This chapter offers a brief overview of Bakhtin's understanding of aesthetics and discusses specific concepts that are useful for the interpretation of works of art.

Aesthetics

Although there is no clearly defined and universally understood definition of aesthetics in the present day, Bakhtin inherited modern aesthetic theories. He actively tried to refute formalist Kantian aesthetics; and he vehemently challenged the expressivist theories of German Neo-Kantians such as Theodor Lipps. Unlike both Kantians and Neo-Kantians, however, Bakhtin shunned orderly sys-

tematic thought. An analysis of his writing would suggest that he worked out his ideas by following the fragmentary meanderings of thought. Most aesthetic theories are concerned with the category of beauty, which is visible in nature and art, as in a glorious sunrise or in a photography or painting of a sunrise. Beauty may be less visible, or even invisible, in moral and intellectual activity, where cogency and coherence are a priority. These, of course, have their own inherent beauty, but this is different from beauty that is obvious in one's perception. Some give priority to the aesthetic object or work of art. Others privilege the perceiving subject, the viewer who looks and experiences. Bakhtin focused on the aesthetics of the creative process itself, on the activity of the artist or author who creates.

Since Alexander Baumgarten coined the term "aesthetics" in the 1730s, it has remained an ambiguous philosophical category. For Baumgarten, and for Kant who followed and expanded upon his ideas, aesthetics had to do with sensory knowledge or sensory cognition, which included but was not limited to the problem of beauty. Considered broadly, Bakhtin's interpretation of aesthetics fits into such a definition. He was concerned with how humans give form to their experience: how they perceive an object, text, or another person, and how they shape that perception into a synthesized whole. But Bakhtin did not focus upon beauty; rather, he developed an unusual vocabulary for describing the process by which we literally author one another, as well as artifacts such as texts and works of art. Concepts such as answerability and dialogue, outsideness and the chronotope, and unfinalizability were central to Bakhtin's aesthetics.

Still, Bakhtin never defined aesthetics explicitly. His early essays, especially "The problem of content, material, and form in verbal art," contain his most sustained treatment of philosophical aesthetics (Bakhtin, 1990, pp. 257–325). Following Kant and Neo-Kantians such as Hermann Cohen, Bakhtin treated the aesthetic as a sphere in which the cognitive–theoretical and ethical–practical spheres may be brought together. But he pressed further than Kant in defining their activity. For Bakhtin, each of these spheres describes reality differently. By assuming primacy, cognition tends to be falsely separated from ethical evaluation and the aesthetic organization of reality. Unavoidably, if we try to establish cognition as a pure and unique process, we get caught in both value judgments and aesthetic decisions. The realm of ethical action differs from the cognitive, because here one encounters conflict over moral duty or obligation, but it cannot be separated from cognitive functioning. Consequently, neither cognition nor action alone can provide a foundation for philosophy.

For Bakhtin, the aesthetic sphere is fundamentally different from the other two, because in artistic creation reality and life interpenetrate with art. As he wrote:

Aesthetic activity does not create a reality that is wholly new. Unlike cognition and performed action, which create nature and social humanity, art celebrates, adorns, and recollects. . . . It enriches and completes them, and above all else it creates the concrete intuitive unity of these two worlds. It places man in nature . . . it humanizes nature and naturalizes man. (Bakhtin, 1990, pp. 278–9)

This statement articulates why Bakhtin focused on the aesthetic dimension of life. By unifying nature and humanity (and cognition and action), aesthetics could become the basis for a new approach to philosophy.

Bakhtin understood aesthetics as a "sub-function" or sub-category of the broader category of architectonics, as Michael Holquist has observed (in Bakhtin, 1990, pp. xxiii–xxiv). Like aesthetics, architectonics is not a strict formal cognitive structure, but it describes how relationships between self and other, self and object, self and world are structured. As Holquist wrote, the architectonic activity of authoring or building a text parallels the activity within life of building a self (Holquist, 1990, p. 64). Both are structures in a sense, though the first leaves physical evidence, while the second is often a hidden process. Bakhtin's approach to aesthetics is thus unique. It is based not only on categories such as the aesthetic (the aesthetic attitude or aesthetic object) or aesthetic values (truth, goodness, or beauty), but also on the phenomenology of self–other relations, relations that are embodied in actual bodies, in space and time. In some of his essays Bakhtin treated traditional aesthetic categories such as detachment, empathy, isolation, and the aesthetic object, as well as theories of art and the relationship of art and morality. But in discussing each of these categories and topics, he focused on the unique human being, located spatially and temporally and thus having a particular relationship to all other persons, objects, and events in the world. An analysis of Bakhtin's writing demonstrates that he was compelled to understand the nature of these interrelationships.

Humans engage in aesthetic activity in order to express and to shape perception and experience. Bakhtin called such activity "authoring," another name for creative activity. He did not limit his interpretation of authorship to literary texts, but he saw this as a process involving other persons and nature. Although he wrote much about literature, he occasionally mentioned works of art. To author, in Bakhtin's vocabulary, is to create. But just as he avoided clear definitions of aesthetics and creativity, Bakhtin never produced a systematic theory of the creative process. In fact, his early essays are both an implicit and explicit critique of unified and ordered systems. In "Toward a philosophy of the act" Bakhtin used the term *theoretism* (also translated as *theoreticism*) to describe his aversion to unified and orderly structures or systems (Bakhtin, 1993).

While Bakhtin's critique of *theoretism* was neither sustained nor systematic, it is pertinent to consider in relation to theories of art in general. In "Toward a philosophy of the act," Bakhtin was adamant about the limitations of theory. "Any kind of practical orientation of my life within the theoretical world is impossible," he wrote:

The theoretical world is obtained through an essential and fundamental abstraction from the fact of my unique being and from the moral sense of that fact "as if I did not exist".... It cannot determine my life as an answerable performing of deeds, it cannot provide any criteria for the life of practice, the life of the deed. (Bakhtin, 1993, p. 9)

Bakhtin made two interrelated assertions here. On the one hand, theory cannot provide the basis for responsible action in the world. Immersion in the theoretical too often takes place at the expense of the everyday practical realm. Theory does not translate directly or easily into daily life and experience. On the other hand, a specific act or deed (*delo* or *postupok*) does provide a basis for creating an adequate orientation in life. Where theoretical arenas do not provide a standpoint for determining the meaning of life, specific acts do. Bakhtin identified theorism, his name for all kinds of theories isolated from action, as the enemy. Nevertheless, his resistance did not preclude writing theoretical texts. In many of his essays Bakhtin avoided systematic and practical analyses of individual texts and authors, but he articulated the basis of his aesthetics and his notion of creativity.

Concepts for Interpreting Visual Arts

Bakhtin's ideas – answerability, dialogue, monologism, polyphony, outsideness, chronotope, the carnivalesque, unfinalizability, and heteroglossia, to name but a few – not only offer scholars categories for aesthetics, but also for analyzing visual art. Whether describing the breakdown of traditional genres and the re-emergence of new narrative structures in contemporary art or creating taxonomies for interpreting works of art in relation to one another, his ideas are enormously generative. In what follows, I indicate possibilities and directions for such analysis by referring primarily to painting, but Bakhtin's concepts are widely applicable to other media within the visual arts.

Any discussion of the usefulness of Bakhtin's ideas must begin with a brief description of his understanding of the phenomenology of the self and self-other relationships, which he articulated with the concepts of answerability and the dialogic. Unlike some of his contemporaries such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Henri Bergson, Bakhtin's goal was not to create a moral or philosophical system. Instead, most of his essays are predicated on the presupposition that the human being is the center around which all action in the real world, including art, is organized. In his writing, the 'I' and the 'other' are the fundamental categories of value that make all action and creativity possible, as in the work of Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas.

In Bakhtin's early essays this sense of the relationship of self and other was expressed with the concept of answerability. Art and life answer to each other much as human beings answer each other's needs and inquiries in time and space. Answerability was his way of naming the fact that art, and hence the creative activity of the artist, is always related, answerable, to life and lived experience. For him, the idea that we are answerable, indeed obligated, through our deeds is the basis of the architectonic structure of the world and the basis of artistic creativity. Thus, his interpretation of creativity emphasized the profound moral obligation we bear toward others. Such obligation is never solely theoretical, but

is an individual's concrete response to actual persons in specific situations. Because we do not exist alone, as isolated consciousnesses, our creative work is always answering the other. Answerability contains the moral imperative that the artist remain engaged with life, that the artist answer for life. At every point Bakhtin insisted upon obvious ethical aspects of creativity.

To what extent can we speak about answerability in individual paintings or artworks? Answerability, as responsibility or moral obligation toward others and expressed as an artist's concrete response to actual persons in specific situations, may seem obvious, as when artists such as Leon Golub and Nancy Spero address social and political issues. It may also be irrelevant, if an artist is most concerned with commercial success. But nearly all art is answerable in the sense that it evolves in relation to history and historical artifacts, to personal experience and reflection, and to identifiable formal issues.

Whereas answerability was a broad concept in his early essays, Bakhtin developed a more linguistic interpretation of this process in his book on Dostoevsky, where he began writing about dialogue and the dialogic. The concept of dialogue lends itself to facile application, because everyone has a common-sense understanding of what it is. An individual talks. Another person listens and responds. In a work of art, an artist enters into dialogue (in actual, historical, or mythological time) and expresses something about a place, person, or event. Bakhtin, however, meant more than this. As Caryl Emerson and Gary Saul Morson have shown, he used the concept of dialogue and the dialogic in at least three distinct ways (Morson and Emerson, 1990, pp. 130–1). First, dialogue refers to the fact that every utterance is by nature dialogic. An utterance can never be abstract, but must occur between two persons: speaker and listener, creator and audience, artist and viewer. It is always directed at somebody in a living, concrete, unrepeatable set of circumstances. For instance, a Russian icon is directed toward the Orthodox believer. The paintings of Claude Monet may be interpreted as a dialogue with his contemporaries, artists such as Auguste Renoir, Edouard Manet, Berthe Morisot, James Whistler, and John Singer Sargent, and with his critics and dealers. Richard Long's environmental and site-specific installations may be interpreted as a profound dialogue with the physical environment. This range of dialogues shows that the self is never autonomous, but always exists in a nexus of formative relationships with persons, places, or events that are reflected in an artwork.

Dialogue understood as utterances that are directed to someone in a unique situation can be either monologic or dialogic. This is the second way in which Bakhtin used the term. Although his discussions sometimes lack clarity, monologism means that dialogue becomes empty and lifeless. As he wrote in 'Notes made in 1970–71': 'Take a dialogue and remove the voices . . . remove the intonations . . . carve out abstract concepts and judgments from living words and responses, cram everything into one abstract consciousness and that's how you get dialectics' (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 147). Bakhtin argued that modern thought, including literature and art, has been dominated by a narrow dialectical mono-

logism and by monologic conceptions of truth. Dostoevsky, he claimed, was the first truly polyphonic writer, who thought through paradoxes, differing points of view, and unique consciousnesses. To be polyphonic, communication and social interaction must be characterized by contestation rather than automatic consensus.

Even though the word polyphonic refers to sound, can we read brushstrokes within a painting or chisel marks on a stone sculpture as polyphonous? I would suggest that the unique visual contest of color or directionality of marking in an artwork can express a dialogic and polyphonic sensibility. Colors meet and interact. Complex lines together define three-dimensional form. Analogously, there is an implicit dialogue in any artist's serial procedure, where a similar scene is painted under differing conditions, or the same form is sculpted numerous times. To use Monet as an example again, in Bordighera on the Mediterranean coast, he painted from slightly different vantage points and under differing conditions in order to record objective changes in weather, lighting, the sea, and vegetation. His series of paintings of grainstacks from 1890 were the result of these experiments on the Mediterranean. Later, in Venice he experimented with new approaches in order to eliminate time as a variable in his paintings, by concentrating on the interrelationships of atmosphere, light, and color.

Polyphony presupposes the third and most general sense of dialogue. Bakhtin understood life itself as dialogue:

To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree, and so forth. In this dialogue a person participates wholly and throughout his whole life: with his eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit, with his whole body and deeds. He invests his entire self in discourse, and this discourse enters into the dialogic fabric of human life, into the world symposium. (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 293)

Dialogue, therefore, is epistemological. Only through it do we know ourselves, other persons, and the world. Working with paint and canvas, with chisels and stone, with earth and sticks, or only with voice and body in a solo performance piece, an artist engages in a dialogue with perception and shares knowledge about the world.

Works of art therefore may express not only a profoundly answerable and dialogic relationship with persons and with the environment, but they may also be interpreted in relation to time, duration, and change. Although he did not create a typology of time, Bakhtin wrote about "small time" and "great time," which are related to Fernand Braudel's concept of *longue durée*. A work of art considered in "small time" would be examined in relation to its present context, as well as the recent past and foreseeable future. The category of "great time" is more useful for understanding cultural artifacts and whole cultures. "Great time" means the "infinite and unfinalized dialogue in which no meaning dies" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 169). By these definitions, the canonical works of art history exist in such great time, while the artworks created by contemporary artists in their

studios inhabit small time. However, the ability to discern how an artwork exists in time is based not on a grand historical metanarrative, but on a nuanced interpretation of outsideness and the chronotope.

With the concept of outsideness, Bakhtin tried to show that both self and other are knowable because of the boundaries that frame and define the self over against others and the world. The artist's creative activity is also possible only because of these boundaries. Working at the temporal and spatial boundaries of the outer body, as well as at the axiological boundaries of inner life, an artist creates new visions. This is especially clear when considering both historical traditions and contemporary examples of landscape painting, photography, and sculpture. In order to understand fully the effects of urbanization and globalization, for example, we need an other, an outside vantage point that functions to demonstrate both what cities do and do not offer. Artists who represent the rural, country life, and wilderness – from John Constable and Thomas Cole to Alfredo Jaar and Noboru Tsubaki – provide that outside standpoint.

Where dialogue describes the process and practice of communication and relationship among selves or objects, the concept of the chronotope describes the time/space nexus in which life exists and creativity is possible (Bakhtin, 1981, pp. 84–258). The idea of the chronotope is fairly easy to understand. There is no experience outside of space and time, both of which always change. Subjectivity dictates that an artist create objects that are always constituted differently. The fact that all conditions of experience are determined by space and time, which are themselves variable, means that every artwork exists in a unique chronotope. Within any situation there may be many different chronotopes, values, and beliefs, and these derive from actual social relations.

How do we gain understanding of a chronotope different from our own? Critics and historians of art unavoidably must wrestle with this. If a work of art is only understood in relation to the local and particular, then it will be of narrow artistic or scholarly significance. An art historian or critic (and a viewer in general) must recognize not only his or her own chronotope, but also the unique chronotopes of the artist and object. Only then can one give an object a place in great time. An historian therefore straddles two chronotopes, his or her own and the historical context of the work.

Bakhtin tried to demonstrate this intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships in literature through discussions of literary genre. For instance, the epic (Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, or the *Gilgamesh* story) is characterized by a chronotope that values a national heroic past; it remains rooted in tradition; and temporal distance separates it from the present. By contrast, the novel, with its worlds in the making, is usually rooted in more present experience and multilayered consciousness. The chronotope of the novel expresses an open-ended relationship to the future that is lacking in the epic.

In analyzing works of visual art, from painting and film to graphic design and comic strips, such literary insights are useful, as Jay Ladin has shown in his essay "Fleshing out the chronotope" (in Emerson, 1999). We could describe differ-

ences in the way a chronotope in painting is expressed, depending upon its genre. History painting expresses a different self-consciousness about historical events than does landscape painting, portraiture (including self-portraiture), or images of religious or mythological subjects. We might compare the historical chronotopes expressed in Jacques-Louis David's *Oath of the Horatii* (1784) and Eugène Delacroix's *Death at Sardanapoulos* (1827–8); or we might compare the mythological chronotopes in Ivan Kramskoi's *Christ in the Wilderness* (1872) and Thomas Cole's series, *The Voyage of Life* (1842). When a particular moment is evoked through the image of a place or person, it expresses a unique chronotope, as would be obvious in comparing Ilya Repin's portraits of the writer Leo Tolstoy (1887 and 1901). As in the case of literary texts, each genre of painting could be examined in terms of the distinct ways in which time and space are represented.

We also might examine chronotopic motifs that function as condensed reminders of particular kinds of time and space. For instance, images of roads, of structures such as churches, castles, or bridges, and of elements in the natural world such as trees or mountains all have metaphorical resonances. Each image is saturated with a specific sense of time and history and carries all of the specificity associated with a particular faith, family, journey, or environment. To speak of chronotopic motifs offers another way of articulating how images carry symbolic meanings. In the end, the chronotope helps us to explain the fact that everything happens not only within a nexus of answerable dialogues, but also that no artifact of culture ever exists outside of a particular historical place and time.

An example of Bakhtin's own sustained interpretation of chronotopes and chronotopic motifs can be seen in his 1965 study of Rabelais, *Rabelais and His World*, which was first translated and published in English in 1968. One could say, for instance, that he studied a French novelist from the 1530s in order to relate his insights to the 1930s in Russia. In this book, he moved away from moralistic nineteenth-century readings of carnival and the grotesque and toward a reconstruction of the folk culture of carnivalesque laughter. He had also explored such themes in essays such as "forms of time and of the chronotope" (in *The Dialogic Imagination*), but in *Rabelais and His World* carnival became an example of a genre type. In carnival, and in folk culture more generally, official institutions as well as definitions of the sacred are intermittently transcended or reversed. Bakhtin's reading of Rabelais cannot be understood as solely an historical study of carnival, for he sought to show that the world is a place where the physical drama of the body (through birth, coitus, eating, drinking, evacuation, and death) is played out. In analyzing phenomena such as laughter, masks, grotesque images of the body, and various forms of debasement, Bakhtin created an encyclopedia of chronotopic motifs and of folk culture more generally, showing that the body is actually the foundation of society and of our relationships to nature. This work has been extremely useful to scholars analyzing historical artworks such as Giotto's *Last Judgment* (Miles, 1989, pp. 147–50), Diane

Arbus's modern photography (Budick, 1997), and the work of Ukrainian artist Ilya Kabakov (Tupitsyn, 1996), to name but a few.

Unfinalizability is one of the most significant core concepts in Bakhtin's writing, and it appears in a variety of contexts. As Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson have written:

[unfinalizability] . . . designates a complex of values central to his thinking: innovation, "surprisingness," the genuinely new, openness, potentiality, freedom, and creativity. . . . His paraphrase of one of Dostoevsky's ideas also expresses his own: "Nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world, the ultimate work of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken, the world is open and free, everything is still in the future and will always be in the future." (Morson and Emerson, 1990, pp. 36–7)

Unfinalizability may help us to articulate complex answers to questions about particular works of art. When is a work finished? Can it ever be truly finished? When is a critical perspective or audience reception complete? The fact that sculptures such as the Samothracian *Nike* or paintings such as Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* have continued to generate scholarly and public interest for centuries verifies the central insight of Bakhtin's concept.

In Bakhtin's formulation, the sense of freedom and openness that is encompassed by the idea of unfinalizability applies not only to works of literature and art, but it is also an intrinsic condition of our daily lives. Such creativity is ubiquitous and unavoidable, and, as noted earlier, it should not be separated from one's responsibility toward others and toward the world. What can ever be fully finalized? There always is a tentative quality to one's work, one's action, and to life itself. Unfinalizability has at least two distinct levels: the ways we need others in order to finalize the self; and the ultimate unfinalizability of all things, events, and persons. Art and life are ultimately open-ended. Even though a person's life is finalized in death, that person's work lives on, to be extended and developed by others, an insight we certainly know vis-à-vis important historical artworks. The creative process, too, is unfinalizable, except insofar as an artist says, somewhat arbitrarily, "I stop here." Precisely because it is always open to change and transformation, artistic work can be a model for the possibility of change in the larger world outside the studio. Indeed, unfinalizability gives us a way to speak about the problems of representing the changing world through the artistic lens of our diverse and ever-changing subjectivities.

Concluding Remarks

Bakhtin's writing anticipated many contemporary concerns; and it predates a variety of movements within literary, visual, and cultural studies, such as Neo-Historicism, Poststructuralism, and Postmodernism. This is a key to his ongoing significance within many scholarly disciplines. In late essays and notes written in

the 1970s before he died, Bakhtin touched on numerous issues that need further interpretation by art historians and theorists of art. For example, his ideas about creative understanding and the uniqueness of the humanities, as well as his broad interpretation of genres, could be usefully developed.

Bakhtin's theoretical vocabulary moves us from a narrow interpretation of aesthetic theory to broader considerations of the relationship of art and life. To see another life for its significance *qua* life: this should be the goal of aesthetic experience and of art according to Bakhtin. Perhaps the most significant contribution of Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas to contemporary aesthetics, art theory, and art history is his affirmation that art must exist in an integral relationship with life. Art for its own sake is mere artifice, but art connected to life affirms the world-forming potential of the artist's creative vision and creative voice.

Note

- 1 Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin was born in 1895 in Orel, Russia, and grew up in Vilnius, a Lithuanian town called 'the Jerusalem of the North' because of its rich Jewish intellectual heritage. He studied philology and classics at Petrograd University between 1914 and 1918, and later lived in small Russian cities such as Nevel, Vitebsk, Kustanai, Saransk, Savelovo, as well as Leningrad and Moscow. Bakhtin's years in Nevel and Vitebsk overlapped with the period that Marc Chagall and Kasimir Malevich worked there, although it seems that he did not know them. For most of his life, Bakhtin was active in both literary and philosophical circles, but in the mid-1920s he contracted osteomyelitis, which limited his mobility. During periods of harsh repression, Bakhtin and his wife Elena Aleksandrovna were exiled from Moscow; he taught at high school and worked as a bookkeeper. Bakhtin was eighty years old when he died in 1975; and only since his death has his oeuvre become widely known throughout the world.

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