

Bakhtin and Cassirer: The Event and the Machine / *Bakhtin e Cassirer: o evento e a máquina*

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ABSTRACT

The influence of Cassirer's work on Bakhtin's writings from the 1930s has been studied in some detail but scholars have not examined Bakhtin's early work, *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* (*K filosofii postupka*), in connection with Cassirer's philosophy. The article first reveals how attuned Bakhtin was with the intellectual *Zeitgeist* not only of his own times, but also that of the 20th century. The uncanny intellectual harmony between the ideas of Bakhtin and Cassirer can be seen at the very beginning of Bakhtin's career. The two thinkers are united in their reception, transformation, and attempt to reconcile two antithetical philosophical positions dominant at the beginning of the 20th century: the *transcendental philosophy* of Kant, Neo-Kantianism, and the *Lebensphilosophie* of Simmel, Bergson, and Heidegger. Bakhtin and Cassirer were alarmed by the cultural pessimism and potential nihilism inherent in the position of *Lebensphilosophie*. Next, the author shows ways in which Bakhtin's and Cassirer's ideas resonate with those of the later 20th century Jacques Derrida.

KEYWORDS: Influence; Harmony; Transcendental Philosophy; *Lebensphilosophie*; Derrida

RESUMO

A influência da obra de Cassirer nos escritos de Bakhtin da década de 1930 tem sido estudada em detalhe, mas os estudiosos ainda não examinaram o trabalho inicial de Bakhtin, Para uma filosofia do ato (K filosofii postupka), em relação à filosofia de Cassirer. O artigo primeiramente revela o quão sintonizado Bakhtin estava não somente com o *Zeitgeist* intelectual de seu próprio tempo, mas também com o do século 20. A intrigante harmonia intelectual entre as ideias de Bakhtin e de Cassirer pode ser vista no início da carreira de Bakhtin. Os dois pensadores estão unidos na sua recepção, transformação e tentativa de conciliar duas posições filosóficas antitéticas dominantes no início do século XX: a filosofia transcendental de Kant, o Neokantismo e o *Lebensphilosophie* de Simmel, Bergson e Heidegger. Bakhtin e Cassirer ficaram alarmados com o pessimismo cultural e o potencial nihilismo inerente à posição da *Lebensphilosophie*. Em seguida, o autor mostra maneiras como as ideias de Bakhtin e de Cassirer repercutem nas de Jacques Derrida, no final do século XX.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Influência; Harmonia; Filosofia transcendental; *Lebensphilosophie*; Derrida

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Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the Shadow
T. S. Eliot

In the last few years, a number of critics have drawn our attention to the important influence of Cassirer's philosophy to the Bakhtin Circle in general and to Bakhtin's own notions of laughter, the carnival, dialogue, and language in particular. Many of the references are limited to statements of fact that are rarely followed up by any sustained systematic analysis of the core issues or tenets of Cassirer's philosophy and their relation to Bakhtin's thought. In his often quoted article *Bakhtin and Cassirer: The Philosophical Origins of Bakhtin's Carnival Messianism* (POOLE, 1998), Brian Poole establishes Bakhtin's debt to Cassirer by textually demonstrating where Bakhtin has employed Cassirer's words in his own writings on Rabelais without citing him. Although Poole does mention the second volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, which deals with mythical consciousness, the central focus of his article is on those works from which textual references have been taken, such as *Individual and Cosmos* and the *Platonic Renaissance in England*. However, these works are primarily historical treatments of the Renaissance and only implicitly contain elements of Cassirer's own philosophy of symbolic forms. To speak about the "philosophical origins" of Bakhtin's work based upon his reading of these volumes would be to overstate the nature and degree of influence these works might have had. Yes, Bakhtin read Cassirer's work, but if you are going to write a work on the Renaissance, it would have been difficult to avoid reading Cassirer's seminal treatments as they were, and still are, classics in Renaissance Studies.

Craig Brandist in his article *Bakhtin, Cassirer and Symbolic Forms* (BRANDIST, 1997) demonstrates the uncanny similarity between Bakhtin's concept of the novel and Cassirer's central notion of the symbolic form as it is developed by Cassirer in his three-volume *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, arguing that "while Bakhtin's own terminology differs significantly from that of Hegel and Cassirer, the structural features common to their works are too pervasive to be passed off as one influence among many" (BRANDIST, 1997, p.1). In his monograph *The Bakhtin*

Circle: Philosophy, Culture and Politics, Brandist (2002) goes a long way to establishing the philosophical context of Bakhtin's thought by situating his work in relation to numerous philosophical currents of the beginning of the twentieth century, including the neo-Kantianism of Cohen and Cassirer. At the same time, he demonstrates the important influence of Cassirer not only for Bakhtin's later work but also for the development of the Bakhtin Circle in general and Voloshinov's *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (1929) in particular.¹

Voloshinov was the first to take Cassirer's *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* seriously (BRANDIST, 2002, p.106) and was instrumental to the reception of Cassirer's theory of language by the Bakhtin Circle. Brandist speculates that the "the earliest trace of the influence of Cassirer's philosophy on Bakhtin's work" (BRANDIST, 2002, p.97) may already be found in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Art* (1929) and would have been the result of his reading of Cassirer's 1910 work *Substance and Function*, which appeared in Russian in 1912 (BRANDIST, 2002, p.97). However, Brandist clearly establishes that "Bakhtin read Cassirer's philosophy of culture *only* in the 1930s, and the many ramifications of this 'reversal' are played out in Bakhtin's *later work*" (BRANDIST, 2002, p.98; my italics). Cassirer's *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* had not yet been translated into Russian, though Voloshinov is said to have been working on a translation at the time of his death. It is thus not at all surprising that, like most Bakhtin scholars, Brandist does not treat at any length Bakhtin's earlier work, such as *Toward a Philosophy of the Act (K filosofii postupka)*,² in connection to Cassirer's philosophy. It is however precisely this earlier work, from what has been called Bakhtin's "philosophical period" (CLARK; HOLQUIST, 1984, p.3) that shall be the focus of this article.

Reading *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* from the perspective of the beginning of the 21st century, it is truly astonishing how attuned Bakhtin seems to have been with the intellectual *Zeitgeist* not only of his own times, but also with much of the 20th century to come. On the one hand, one senses the attempt by Bakhtin to bring into dialogue the various voices and debates of the early part of the last century. In

¹ "In a significant footnote Voloshinov records that neo-Kantianism has now moved away from an abstract conception of consciousness and placed symbolic representation at the centre of its attention. The work that is singled out for attention is the first volume of Ernst Cassirer's *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* [...] which Voloshinov was translating at the time" (BRANDIST, 2002, p.75).

² There are only five references to this work in the entire book: cf. pp.32, 35, 36, 37, and 39.

particular, the reader familiar with Cassirer and Heidegger cannot help but wonder if Bakhtin scholarship has erroneously dated the text; whether, in fact, *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* has not been written in 1930 after a thorough reading of both the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* and *Being and Time*, as an engagement with them, rather than in 1920-21 before these works had even been written. This impression is supported by a certain number of editorial and translation footnotes which draw comparisons with Cassirer and Heidegger in order to help clarify Bakhtin's intentions and language. On the other hand, the reader familiar with a certain group of authors such as Lévinas, Bataille, Deleuze, and Derrida will find themselves in the uncanny position of feeling at home in Bakhtin's 1920-21 text and will no doubt wonder (especially upon their first reading of Bakhtin) at the meaning of this strange experience of *déjà lu*.

What interests me here is not so much the degree of influence Cassirer may have exerted on the work of the later Bakhtin, as the uncanny intellectual harmony of their thinking right from the beginning, as well as the degree to which they have anticipated, as Derrida says, "a concern of thinking that has kept a certain number of 'us' working for the last few decades" (DERRIDA, 2002, p.74). The primary goal of this article will be to demonstrate the uncanny harmony between Bakhtin and Cassirer's thought, especially in terms of their concern for the nature of subjectivity. This done, I would like to illustrate how their mutual interest for subjectivity can be seen to resonate with later twentieth century thinkers and in particular with the thought of Jacques Derrida. But first, to Bakhtin and Cassirer.

It is safe to say that by the early 20s, when *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* (TPA) is said to have been written, Bakhtin was well on his way to being a mature and original thinker in his own right. That said, in this 1921 text, we find the traces of a young philosopher hastily and passionately working in the thralls of the moment of inspiration, struggling to give objective form to his ephemeral ideas as they evaporate into the ether of time, disappearing forever into the nothingness from which they emerged. One can feel the frustration of its author as he is forced to fabricate, *bricoler* one might say, new modes of expression from old ones because he lacks an adequate technical vocabulary to articulate his lucid but elusive insights into the truth of his existence. Perhaps, in this text more than in any other by Bakhtin, we come closest to encountering Mikhail the individual giving birth to Bakhtin the author. As Holquist so

eloquently notes in the introduction, we catch Bakhtin here in the very moment of the creative act itself: “we are here at the heart of the heart, at the center of the dialogue between being and language, the world and mind, ‘the given’ and ‘the created’ that will be at the core of Bakhtin’s distinctive dialogism as it latter evolves” (BAKHTIN, 1993, p. *ix*)

The central philosophical question for both Bakhtin and Cassirer was twofold: 1) how can we, as Cassirer puts it, “reconcile the immanence of life with the transcendence of spirit” (CASSIRER, 1958, p.42) without reducing the one to the other; and 2) how do I as a unique and concrete individual constitute the cultural world of objective signification that constitutes me as a historical and cultural subject? The answer, for Bakhtin as for Cassirer, is to be found in the creative speech ‘act’: for both “in the beginning was the act” (CASSIRER, 2000, p.51). The mediation of the performative act functions as a type of *Aufgehoben* of life and idea, the individual and culture, the activity of the act and the meaning of the act. Bakhtin and Cassirer are united in their reception, transformation, and attempt to reconcile two antithetical philosophical positions dominant at the beginning of the twentieth century: the *transcendental philosophy* of Kant and Neo-Kantianism, on the one hand, and the *Lebensphilosophie* of Simmel, Bergson, and Heidegger, on the other.

In *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, Bakhtin acknowledges the importance of the neo-Kantian method to the development of a truly scientific philosophy “but this scientific philosophy can only be a specialized philosophy, i.e., a philosophy of the various domains of culture and their unity in the form of a theoretical transcription from within the objects of cultural creation and the immanent law of their development” (BAKHTIN, 1993, p.19) This is, of course, precisely what Cassirer sets out to do in his philosophy of symbolic forms. However, Bakhtin immediately points out the limits of such a project and the need for something like a *Lebensphilosophie*. Such a theoretical philosophy of culture cannot provide a sufficient ontological ground; it cannot be ‘first philosophy,’ i.e., “a teaching *not* about unitary cultural creations, but about unitary and once-occurrent Being-as-event. Such a first philosophy,” Bakhtin insists, “does not exist, and even the paths leading to its creation seem to be forgotten” (BAKHTIN, 1993, p.19; author’s italics).

The reader familiar with Heidegger's project of fundamental ontology will no doubt wonder at the similarity of Bakhtin's claim here, for Heidegger too will claim that the tradition has forgotten the question of being. *Being and Time* seeks to reawaken the question of the meaning of being before answering it concretely. Much, if not all, of Heidegger's thought can be understood as a sustained quest to uncover the "paths leading to" a thinking of being that seems to have always already been "forgotten." Heidegger, too, will claim that the neo-Kantian attempt to provide the transcendental structures of culture cannot be complete before its "ultimate foundations" have been established through a complete analytic of *Dasein*. The reader familiar with Heidegger's analytic of *Dasein* cannot help but feel that it would have been the ideal term for Bakhtin's view of the I that exists:

I, too, *exist* actually - in the whole and assume the obligation to say *this* word. I, too, participate in Being in a once-occurrent and never-repeatable manner: I occupy a place in once-occurrent Being that is unique and never repeatable, a place that cannot be taken by anyone else and is impenetrable for anyone else (BAKHTIN, 1993, p.40; author's italics).

Likewise, it would not be difficult to recognize how the unique once-occurrent being is negated as it enters into the structures of culture that level down its being into something general, repeatable, and, as such, replaceable. One can recognize the parallel between Bakhtin's living with an alibi and Heidegger's concept of the They self, and by extension how Bakhtin could have employed Heidegger's distinction between authenticity and inauthenticity. However, as we shall see, Bakhtin and Cassirer's position differs from that of Heidegger in a number of ways. For them, it is not possible to separate, as Heidegger does, the ontological from the ontic, the authentic from the inauthentic. What is more, for Heidegger, *Dasein* is thrown into the world, does what one does because that is *what* one *is*, and then dies - nowhere does *Dasein* assist in the bringing about of the worldliness of the world. Nowhere in *Being and Time* does *Dasein* take up its thrownness and transform the conditions of its existence by taking responsibility for its being and the being of the other.

"The event," for Bakhtin and Cassirer, is the radically singular, non-repeatable event of a lived experience of life itself. But the non-repeatable living event must, in order to "be," be *inscribed* into the organic form of materiality - hence the necessity of

the cultural machine of objective spirit as the means of inscription and repetition. The pure “formless life” of Bergson’s *élan vital* or *durée* is a philosophical hypothesis and abstraction that never actually “ex-ists” - what “ex-ists” is formed life, a life-form. As Cassirer frames it:

Life cannot *apprehend* itself by *remaining* absolutely within itself, it must give itself form; for it is precisely by this ‘otherness’ of form that it gains its ‘visibility,’ if not its reality (CASSIRER, 1957b, p.39; author’s italics).

The forms of objective spirit configure (*Gestaltung*) the life of subjective spirit with its internal organization and structure (*Gestalt*) that constitutes its unity of being (*Wesen*). Thus, for Cassirer each life-form proves to be “a self-enclosed world in which everything ‘weaves itself into the whole.’ The organism is no aggregate of parts, but a system of functions which condition each other” (CASSIRER, 2000, p.23).

A close reading of *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* reveals that Bakhtin also speaks not of an event, but of a textual-event, not about life, but about a life-form, or in Bakhtin’s language, not about the “once-occurrent event” but about the “*actual-event-ness* of the once-occurrent event” (BAKHTIN, 1993, p.1; my italics). Here too the “theoretical” and the “aesthetical” always already form “a constituent moment in the once-occurrent event of being” (BAKHTIN, 1993, p.2) itself. “Aesthetic intuition” provides the once-occurrent event with its “image or configuration” and in this way is “objectified” into the actual-event-ness of the once-occurrent event (BAKHTIN, 1993, p.1). The split between “the historical actuality of its being, the actual and once-occurrent experiencing of it” from the “content or sense of a giving act/activity” (BAKHTIN, 1993, p.2) provided by the theoretical interpretation and aesthetic configuration proves, in the final analysis, to be untenable for Bakhtin.

An act of our activity, of our actual experiencing, is like a two-faced Janus. It looks in two opposite directions: it looks at the objective unity of a domain of culture and at the never-repeatable uniqueness of actually lived and experience life (BAKHTIN, 1993, p.2).

Thus, Bakhtin does not speak of experience (*Erlebnis*) *per se* but of the “active experience of experience” (BAKHTIN, 1993, p.34) - the *Erfahrung* of an *Erlebnis*.

Experience (*Erfahrung*) is, in the language of transcendental philosophy, the product of a process of transfiguration that transforms and organizes a particular lived experience (*Erlebnis*) of particularity (in fact by means of a synthesis of a series of lived experience of particularities) into a unified, stable, and meaningful experience (an *Erfahrung*) of a given object (*Gegenstand*) standing over and against a subject. Through the process of configuration (*Gestaltung*) and formation (*Bildung*) of “discursive theoretical thinking,” the radically particular actual eventness of the once-occurrent event is transformed into the general occurrence of a thing that is understood as being this or that - that is to say, that has a self-identical, unchanging, and enduring *Wesen* - essence or being. As such, the transient, concrete and ever open process of the perpetually spontaneous becoming of life that always holds within it something *as yet* to be *achieved* is transformed through the intellectual (*geistig*) forms of culture into something complete, “given” and thus “repeatable.”

For Bakhtin and Cassirer, the configurations (*Gestaltung*) of the domains of culture are productive; the cultural forms for Cassirer are the *energeia* and not the *ergon*. The Gestalt is the figure (*idea*) and presence (*aesthetic*) of the being of the thing; the process of *Gestaltung* is the relation of form to what it brings into form—in other words, it is performative. Nature natured (*Natura naturata*) has become the form forming (*Gestalt Gestaltung*). The Gestalt or the symbolic pregnancy (*symbolische Präganz*) to employ Cassirer’s concept, is the transcendental process of meaning constitution. “Symbolic pregnancy” is “the way (*die Art*) in which a perception as a sensory experience contains a meaning which it immediately and concretely presents” (CASSIRER, 1957b, p.202). It is interesting to note that for both Bakhtin and Cassirer, language and the aesthetic imagination are the two primordial modes of meaning constitution. While language can provide a conceptual configuration of the world, this remains a purely logical framework of relational structures. In order for this system of conceptual classifications to manifest itself, it requires the aesthetic imagination that provides the differential-relational logic of language with its *αισθητικός* (*aisthetikos*) presence (*Darstellung*). Experience, be it the experience of the self, an object or a word, is thus the synthetic product of the work of language and aesthetic imagination.

However, it is here that the proponents of *Lebensphilosophie* raise their objections, for does not this process of aesthetic and intellectual transfiguration and

transformation, which are the transcendental conditions of possibility of meaning and, thus, experience, envelop and entangle us in the illusory configurations of a historically contingent cultural discourse which, in the end, negates the authentically lived experience and the very actual event-ness of the once occurrent event? Does it not *reify* the dynamic ever novel becoming of the spontaneous creative force of life into a dead and static thing? Does it not result, in other words, in our very alienation and estrangement from our lived actual existences? And is this not what Simmel calls the “tragedy of culture”?

For Simmel, the life of spirit is caught up in a paradoxical and tragic structure. On the one hand, the creative life of spirit can achieve its existence only by articulating itself in and through the objective forms of culture—and in fact is nothing other than this creative process of articulation. These cultural formations reify the life of spirit, the pure self-movement of the I, thus giving it an objective presence in the world. It is only through this objective presence that we can become an object of consciousness, become, that is, self-conscious. However, on the other hand, this process of articulation leads to a limitation and burden on the I that endangers its liveliness, its free spontaneous movement. Spirit invests itself in its work, and in fact must invest itself in its work, but this work stands before it as something foreign, as something fixed and stable, something external and objective, as something dead. “It is,” as Simmel writes, “as if the creative motion of the soul were to die in its own products” (CASSIRER, 2000, p.106). The performative act of utterance can never give expression to the life of the subject. As Cassirer often says, quoting Schiller: “*Why can the living spirit not appear to the spirit? When the soul speaks, alas, it is no longer the soul that speaks!*” (CASSIRER, 1953, p.34; my italics).

Both Bakhtin and Cassirer agree that we need to avoid the danger of “fatal theoreticism” (BAKHTIN, 1993, p.27) that excludes the concrete life of the individual, thereby producing a world, as Bakhtin put it, in which

[...] we would find ourselves to be determined, predetermined, bygone, and finished, that is essentially not living. [For in this case] we would have cast ourselves out of life—[defined] as answerable, risk-fraught, and open becoming through performed actions—and into

an indifferent and, fundamentally, accomplished and finished theoretical Being (BAKHTIN, 1993, p.9).³

In fact, for Bakhtin “[t]he theoretical world is obtained through an essential and fundamental abstraction from the fact of my unique being and from the moral sense of the fact - ‘as if I did not exist’” (BAKHTIN, 1993, p.9). Cassirer, too, recognizes the danger in the theoretical attitude which must, in establishing a system of pure signification, negate the “individual form of saying, in which the speaking subject expresses *himself*” (CASSIRER, 1957b, p.341; italics in original). In the “symbolic signs and concepts of [theoretical science] everything that possessed any sort of mere expressive value is extinguished. Here it is no longer any individual subject, but only the thing itself that ‘speaks’” (CASSIRER, 1957b, p.341).

At the same time, however, Bakhtin and Cassirer are very alarmed by the cultural pessimism and potential nihilism that they see as inherent in the position of *Lebensphilosophie*. Both recognize, for example, the dangers of such cultural pessimism in Oswald Spengler’s *The Decline of the West* and are highly critical of the ethical bankruptcy of Spengler’s position. Spengler posits the essentially German idea of a “*Kultur*” as the life blood of a people, *die Volk*, against the French idea of *la civilization* as the objective rationalist state of a nation. Civilizations, Spengler argued, are the

inevitable destiny of culture [...] a conclusion, the thing-become (*das Gewordene*) succeeding the thing-becoming (*dem Werden*), death following life, rigidity following expansion, intellectual old-age and the stone-build, petrifying world-city following mother-earth and the spiritual childhood of Doric and Gothic. They are an end, irrevocable, yet by inward necessity reached again and again (SPENGLER, 1991, p.24).

Ernst Jünger, the author of the *Die Arbeiter* and *Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis* (1926) echoes Spengler and Simmel’s views:

[T]here is still much of the animal in man who slumbers on the comfortable woven carpets of a polished, honed, and silently intricate civilization [...] and yet when the point of the dial of life swings back to the red line of the primitive, the mask falls, and he emerges, naked as ever before, the original man [*Urmensch*]. Whenever life reverts to its primal functions, his blood, which up until then has flowed coolly

³ For Cassirer (1957b, pp.15-19), “[m]an spins language out of himself and himself into language.”

and regularly through his veins in the mechanistic activity of his stony, urban skeleton, foams up, and the ancient rock which has lain for long ages, cold and rigid, in hidden depths, melts once again into white-hot lava (JÜNGER, 1922, pp.17-18 *apud* BEASELY-MURRAY, 2007, p.56).

If I have quoted Spengler and Jünger at length, it is to remind us - Bakhtin and Cassirer needed no such reminder - that words and ideas are never *just* words and ideas as opposed to real life: words and ideas are the life blood of spirit and, as such, they constitute and pre-figure our very understanding of ourselves, others, and reality. In the end they are productive, in that their meanings “are so woven into the reality of action (*Realität des Wirkens*) as to form an indispensable part of it” (CASSIRER, 1957a, p.39) - they produce that which they name. These quotes and the cultural pessimism to which they gave expression must be situated in their proper historical context, for *Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis* was published in the same year as *Mein Kampf* and the Nüremberg Rallies announced and gave form, and thus reality, to a direction of concrete events that would lead to unspeakable horrors: words are never just words.

While both Bakhtin and Cassirer acknowledge the existence of a certain tragedy of culture, this alienation is for them not the whole story. Both counter by arguing that we need to follow the creative process to its logical conclusion in an ethical act. We need, as Cassirer notes, to “return here from the *forma formata* to the *forma formans*, from the became (*Gewordenen*) to the principle of becoming (*Werdens*)” (CASSIRER, 1985, p.43). For Bakhtin and Cassirer, culture is comprised of two antithetical but interrelated and equiprimordial forces: a “centripetal force” that seeks the conservation of the traditional *status quo* and a “centrifugal force” that seeks the renewal of the creative act: the former they call “mythical consciousness” and the later is termed “critical consciousness.”⁴

The thing created [therefore] does not simply stand [...] over against the creative process; on the contrary, new life continually pours into these ‘molded forms,’ preserving them and preventing their rigidification (CASSIRER, 2000, p.113).

⁴ “[M]ythical consciousness is aligned with poetic genres, monologue, unitary language, objective culture and officialdom, while critical consciousness is aligned with the novel, dialogue, discursive plurality, ‘life’ and ‘the people’” (BRANDIST, 2002, p.117).

[L]iving consciousness finds cultural values to be already on hand as given to it, and its whole self-activity amounts to acknowledging their validity for itself (BAKHTIN, 1993, p.35).

For the *work*, in whose enduring existence the creative process congeals, does not stand at the end of this path, but rather the ‘you,’ the other subject who receives this work in order to incorporate it into his own life and thus transform it back into the medium from which it originates (CASSIRER, 2000, p.110).

[A]n answerable deed [...] must not oppose itself to theory and thought, but must incorporate them into itself as necessary moments that are wholly answerable (BAKHTIN, 1993, p.56).

Thus,

the recipient does not take the gift as he would a stamped coin. For he takes it up only by *using* it, and in this use he imprints upon it a new shape (CASSIRER, 2000, p.114).

An act must acquire a single unitary plane to be able to reflect itself in both directions - in its sense or meaning and in its being; it must acquire the unity of two-sided answerability - both for its content [...] and for its Being (BAKHTIN, 1993, pp.2-3).

A poem is but ink on a page until someone breathes life into it, and by doing so participates in the creative act that brings it into existence. Thus, for Bakhtin and Cassirer, *no* act of speech, however small, does not transform in some way language itself.

In other words, their response to the cultural pessimism of Spengler and *Lebensphilosophie* is to argue that the creative spontaneity of life is always already a form of re-naissance, a renewal of life through *responsible* participation in the creative process of the event of life itself, where the responsibility stems from the ability to respond to the work (the utterance) of the other. For both Bakhtin and Cassirer the I’s relation to the other is always already mediated by the work, the product of the creative act—or perhaps better, the I, the work, and the other form the “modes of mediation itself” (CASSIRER, 1995, p.132). Cassirer calls these the *Urphänomene* of the symbolic function, whereas Bakhtin calls them “the architectonic of an event.” (BAKHTIN, 1993, p.75). But, as we have seen, the event is always a symbolic-event, a textual-event. By taking the givenness of the word as the end of the creative process, the

other to whom one speaks is negated entirely from the creative process of meaning; it becomes enough to be a solipsistic subject standing alone in the abyss speaking to oneself about another who is never more than a figure of speech. In the language of Levinas: we understand the other in terms of the intelligibility and reference of what is 'said' rather than being open to the irreducible exposure of the other through the 'saying.' The actual-event-ness of the once-occurrent event of the who, who is speaking, is negated and transformed into the whatness of an object: the speaking partner of the creative act of dialogue is reified into the object spoken about and not to. This is what happens in the mythical consciousness which is ruled by a logic of fusion, establishing an imaginary identification between the act and the meaning of the act. The result is a homogeneous, enclosed and mono-logical sphere of meaning that is blind to the heterogeneous existence of another centre of life beyond its own, that sees in the other only the reflection of its own narcissistic unity. In the end, as there is no non-mediated experience, be it an experience of the self or an experience of the other, we are always already enveloped within the self-identical existence of the narcissism of the same. However, Bakhtin and Cassirer would agree with Derrida that, while

there is no narcissism and non-narcissism, there are narcissisms that are more or less comprehensive, generous, open, extended. What is called non-narcissism is in general but the economy of a much more welcoming and hospitable narcissism. One that is much more open to the experience of the other as other (DERRIDA, 1995, p.199).

The individual cannot remain within itself, as a being-in-itself, but must express itself by articulating itself, externalizing itself in an objective form not only in order to become a being-for-itself, but also in order to become a being-for-and-with-others. Only in this way can the individual experience itself as a being that *is*, which is what we mean when we say a being is self-consciousness:

For the 'conversation of the soul with itself' is only possible if the soul, as it were, splits itself [...]. In soliloquy the soul ceases to be a mere particular, an 'individual.' It becomes a 'person' in the basic etymological meaning of the word, which goes back to the mask and the role of the actor (CASSIRER, 2000, p.54).

But Cassirer recognizes that, here too,

every initial expression is already the beginning of an alienation” that can never be overcome or be resolved, for “the life of spirit consists in this very *act* of severing what *is* so that it can, in turn, even more securely unite what has been severed” (CASSIRER, 2000, p.134).

Thus, Bakhtin concludes

I shall not find *myself* in that life [the life of objective expression]; I shall find only a double of myself, only someone pretending to be me. All I can do is play a role, i.e., assume, like a mask, the flesh of another—someone deceased (BAKHTIN, 1993, p.18).

The truth of my existence, of the once-occurrent event, which Bakhtin calls *pravda*, can only be thought of in terms of “the truth (*istina*) that is composed of universal moments; that the truth of a situation is precisely that which is repeatable and constant in it” (BAKHTIN, 1993, p.37). The act can only be understood in terms of its meaning or sense of the act. And in fact, “we *act* confidently only when we do not act as ourselves, but as those possessed by the immanent necessity of the meaning of some domain of culture” (BAKHTIN, 1993, p.21). In other words, we act most confidently when we have an *alibi* for our actions, an alibi that unburdens and distances us from the site of the crime, from our responsibility for this happening, an alibi that determines *a priori* the *raison d’être* and thus the meaning of both our actions and our being; as a once-occurrent event, I cannot be responsible for what has been done, nor for what is being done, as it is not I myself who determines the meaning of my action; the act is done in the name of meaning, for the sake of a system of meaning, as an expression of *its* existence and not mine. I am but an agent, a representative, of this linguistic machine that operates through us. In this sense, George Bush is not the President of the United States - it was the President of the United States and not George Bush who began the Iraq war. The soldiers in Goya’s “The Third of May, 1808” have no faces; they are not responsible for the event that takes place before them, through them, and ultimately to them, for they are only automatons executing their orders to execute the revolting peasants: their alibi will be that they were just following orders.

But to act with alibi, to act not as ourselves, means to act with impunity, to have reduced one's being to a function of meaning, to a cog in a machine that is, as Derrida says, "destined to repetition [...] to reproduce impassively, imperceptibly [...] received commands" (DERRIDA, 2002, p.72) - in other words, it is to act 'as if' we did not act, as if we did not exist - and yet, we exist - no, I exist! "It is not the content of an obligation that obligates me, but my signature below it - the fact that at one time I acknowledge or undersigned the given acknowledgement" (BAKHTIN, 1993, p.38). To act without alibi is to give one's life, to assume one's once-occurrent event by being it, by saying yes, and this

goes to the heart of what we would like to call a 'response' or a 'responsibility,' be it ethical, juridical, or political. This responsibility, [however] will never be able to avoid appealing to someone who would dare say, 'Here I am, without alibi, and here is the first decision that I sign' (DERRIDA, 2002, p.xxxiv).

However, after all that has been said:

How can one continue to say, 'Here I am'? How can one reaffirm the inefaceable passivity of a heteronomy and a decision of the other in me? How can one do it without giving in to the alibi? (DERRIDA, 2002, pp.xxxiv-xxxv).

You cannot - but nor can you ever "acquit yourself" - "The impossibility of acquitting oneself, the duty not to want to acquit oneself"—that is what you attest to at the "moment of signing without alibi" (DERRIDA, 2002, p.xxxv).

It is not an accident that Derrida is introduced at this point in my article, because it is precisely here that we begin to see how both Bakhtin and Cassirer anticipate some of the central questions that have shaped 20th century philosophy. In his 1998 essay "Typewriter Ribbon," published in a collection of articles curiously entitled *Without Alibi* that focus on "performative" acts, Derrida asks:

Will we one day, and in a single gesture, be able to join the thinking of the event to the thinking of the machine? Will we be able to think, what is called thinking, at one and the same time, both what is happening (we call that an event) and the calculable repetition (we call that a machine) to think both the event and the machine as two compatible or even in-dissociable concepts? Today they appear to us

to be antinomic. Antinomic because what happens ought to keep, so we think, some nonprogrammable and therefore incalculable singularity. An event worthy of the name ought not, so we think, to give in or be reduced to repetition. To respond to its name, the event above all ought to *happen* to someone, to some living being who is thus *affected* by it, consciously or unconsciously. No event without *experience* (and this is basically what ‘experience’ means), without experience, conscious or unconscious, human or not, of what happens to the living (DERRIDA, 2002, p.72; author’s italics).

For Derrida, the event is the radically singular, non-repeatable event of a lived experience of life itself. However, like Bakhtin and Cassirer, Derrida also does not speak of *the* event but of *a* “textual event,” for, in the final analysis, the event as event has always already been inscribed by the machine and would not be an event were this not the case. Each textual-event also proves to be ‘organic’: “why *organic*?” Derrida asks.

Because there is nothing of the event it seems, without some sensitivity, without an *aesthetic affect* and some presumption of living organicity. [That is to say] the possibility of an internal principle that is proper and *totalizing*, to the total form of, precisely, *organization* [...] (DERRIDA, 2002, p.78; author’s italics)

That is to say, a *Gestalt* and a *Gestaltung*. Bakhtin and Cassirer would both agree with Derrida when he says “one may say of a machine that it is productive, active, efficient, or as one says in French *performante*” (DERRIDA, 2002, p.74). Though figurations of the domain of culture are productive, Bakhtin and Cassirer also recognize that

a machine as such, however *performante* it may be, could never [...] produce an event of the *performative* type. Performativity will never be reduced to technical performance. Pure performativity implies the presence of a living being, a living being speaking one time only, in its own name, in the first person. And speaking in a manner that is at once spontaneous, intentional, free, and irreplaceable (DERRIDA, 2002, p.74; author’s italics).

But “pure performativity” is impossible. Derrida, as Bakhtin and Cassirer before him, recognize what we might call the “tragedy of performativity,” its ultimate failure. Within speech-act theory, a performative is a discursive practice that enacts or produces

that which it names. But Derrida makes clear that the power of the subject to bring forward, to express itself relies upon the formative power of the language spoken and is therefore always derivative of it:

Could a performative utterance succeed if its formulation did not repeat a 'coded' or iterable utterance, or in other words, if the formula I pronounce in order to open a meeting, launch a ship or a marriage were not identifiable as conforming with an iterable model, if it were not then identifiable in some way as a 'citation'? [...] in such a typology, the category of intention will not disappear; it will have its place, but from that place it will no longer be able to govern the entire scene of the system of utterance (*l'énonciation*) (DERRIDA, 1988, p.18).

Thus, performativity is never pure performativity, it is never a radically unique act or a pure event, for it is always pregnant with the normative structures that provide it with iterable presence and being. The problem of reconciling the immanence of life with the transcendence of spirit without reducing the one to the other brought Bakhtin and Cassirer to consider, as Derrida latter puts it, "the dynamics of the borderline between the work and life, between the system and the subject of the system" (DERRIDA, 1985, p.5). The subject for Bakhtin, Cassirer, and Derrida can no longer be a modern autonomous pre-existing agent of meaning, a pure transcendental ego. Nor can it be understood *à la structuralisme*, as a mere effect of discourse, as the effect of the machinery of language: there can be, for them, no question of the death of the author - rather the contrary. If the rift - if one can still speak of a separation at all between life and the work - between the act and the meaning of the act can no longer be located, if it can be located, between the once-occurrent event of life and the machine of cultural configuration, because "an *œuvre* is an event [...] there is no *œuvre* without singular event, without textual event," (DERRIDA, 2002, p.133) then it must now be located within the subject as the locus of the work-life-event, producing a split-being that is both author and authored, spectator and spectacle. Thus Bakhtin and Cassirer can ask with Derrida:

Who is it that is addressing you? Since it is not another, a narrator, or a *deus ex machina*, it is an 'I' that is *both* part of the spectacle and part of the audience, an 'I' that, a bit like you, undergoes its own incessant violent re-inscriptions within the arithmetical machinery. An 'I' that

functioning as a pure passageway for operations of substitution is not some singular and irreplaceable existence, some subject or life, but, rather, moves between life and death, between reality and fiction (DERRIDA, 2004, p.357).

The goal of this article was not to provide an exhaustive statement of the relation between Bakhtin, Cassirer, and Derrida on the nature of the subject. Rather, it was only meant to suggest a direction of investigation that might prove fruitful in Bakhtin scholarship. Without doubt, it could be objected that any number of differences between Bakhtin, Cassirer, and Derrida have been overlooked. However, we have perhaps become so concerned with the differences that separate us that we no longer understand the commonality that joins us. Bakhtin, Cassirer, and Derrida are united in their rethinking what it means to be a subject after the linguistic turn. While recognizing that our very sense of self is always already constituted by the normative cultural structures of language, that we can never be that autonomous Cartesian subject, they do not abandon us to the impersonal sphere of the “they” of Heidegger or the alienated worker of Marx. Their unity of project is not accidental; it is, as Derrida says, “a concern of thinking that has kept a certain number of ‘us’ working for the last few decades” (DERRIDA, 2002, p.74).

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