

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/2176-457341642>

## Bakhtin's Bodies/ *Corpos em Bakhtin*

Dick McCaw\*

### ABSTRACT

Bakhtin's thinking, early and late focused upon images of the human body. A body is a thing understood by looking at it: to see is to know. This 'looking' has nothing of the objectivising qualities of what is known today as the 'gaze'. Bakhtin's early philosophy is based on a compassionate engagement whereby one person helps another see and know themselves as a whole, and moreover, as a *loved* whole. As limiting as it is, I shall argue his early conception of the body still has much value. The argument then turns to Bakhtin's later and much more familiar images of the grotesque body. While his early body is static, now we see the body engaged in a tumultuous and unending interaction with its social and natural environment. Was this an anti-Soviet allegory, or an alternative vision of the human body that reaches back into pre-history? I offer two illustrations in defence of the idea that this was indeed a philosophy of the body.

KEYWORDS: Body; Bakhtin; Philosophy

### RESUMO

*O pensamento de Bakhtin, dos primeiros e dos últimos textos, se concentrou nas imagens do corpo humano. Entende-se o corpo ao contemplá-lo: ver é saber. Esse "contemplar" não tem nenhuma das qualidades objetivantes do que hoje é conhecido como "olhar". A filosofia inicial de Bakhtin é baseada em um compromisso compassivo pelo qual uma pessoa ajuda a outra a ver e a se conhecer como um todo e, além disso, como um todo amado. Por mais limitante que seja, argumentarei que sua concepção inicial de corpo ainda tem muito valor. O argumento então se volta para as imagens posteriores e muito mais familiares de Bakhtin sobre o corpo grotesco. Enquanto, inicialmente, suas ideias voltam-se para um corpo estático, agora vemos o corpo envolvido em uma interação tumultuada e interminável com seu ambiente social e natural. Seria essa uma alegoria antissoviética ou uma visão alternativa do corpo humano que remonta à pré-história? Ofereço duas ilustrações em defesa da ideia de que esta era, na verdade, uma filosofia do corpo.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Corpo; Bakhtin; Filosofia*

---

\* Royal Holloway, University of London – RHUL, Department of Drama, Theatre and Dance, Egham, Surrey, England; <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5921-3519>; [dick.mccaw@rhul.ac.uk](mailto:dick.mccaw@rhul.ac.uk)

## Writing about Bakhtin

Why return again and again to Bakhtin's writings? Where's the appeal, given that he wrote about the novel and I practice theatre? You might have thought that after writing a PhD Thesis in 2004, a book in 2016 and a chapter in another book in 2018 that he would by now be out of my system! I shall begin by explaining how he got into my system in the first place.

My first encounter with Bakhtin dates back to 1982 when I was with the Medieval Players (1981–1992) – a touring theatre company that I created with director and actor Carl Heap. Our planned production for summer 1983 was an adaptation of Rabelais' *Gargantua* in Sir Thomas Urquhart's salty translation. While the idea of Rabelais appealed hugely, the reality of the novel posed problems: I did not find it funny and could not access its world. Carl suggested that I read a book by an eccentric Russian called Bakhtin which was a 'rambling and repetitious read' but might help me better understand Rabelais. He was right: *Rabelais and His World* (BAKHTIN, 1984) made sense of the images and values in the novel, and gave me an appetite for Bakhtin's work which has been enduring. Bakhtin's vivid evocations of popular medieval and Renaissance culture were a sure means of gaining an audience's attention – he so brilliantly conveyed Rabelais' vital, vulgar, earthy, generous humour. As Bakhtin's books were translated throughout the 1980s so they fed into talks that I would occasionally give to students before performances. What began as a happy accident turned into a fascination with this Russian thinker that has lasted well over thirty years.

What has sustained this fascination is the vividness and bravery of his thinking. When in the early 1970s Bakhtin was asked what he lamented about contemporary thinking he replied:

There is no bold statement of general problems, no discoveries of *new areas* or significant individual phenomena in the boundless world of literature; there is no *real, healthy struggle* among scholarly trends. A certain fear of the investigatory risk, a fear of *hypotheses*, prevails. (1986, p.1; my italics.)

Well, Bakhtin certainly offers bold statements of general problems, and thereby he invites (almost provokes) real and healthy problems. In most of my writing about him I have been quite critical of his hypotheses, but without them my own thinking would have been infinitely the poorer.

My earlier writing about Bakhtin has focused on the relation between actor and character (informed by his notion of Author and Hero (1990)), and on the moving body (based on his early philosophical manuscripts), but this is my first opportunity to look at his later ideas about the grotesque body – the very thing which drew me to him originally.

## **1 Bakhtin's Bodies, Early and Late**

This essay begins by revisiting my problems with the limitations of his conception of the human body in his early philosophy. I then argue that later ideas in Kanaev's essay on Vitalism (1992), his Chronotope essay (1981) and his Rabelais book (1984) begin to answer my problems. The essential limitation of his early theory is that for all his emphasis upon the immediacy of first person experience, the unrepeatability of the present moment, and the non-transferability of a person's position, these are static categories. There is no denying the appeal of an ethics that is based on this notion of responsibility (answerability), but it is just too simplified. However, some fifteen or so years later (depending on when one dates the early manuscripts) Bakhtin was exploring a more dynamic notion of how the body relates to the environment, one based on the notion of endless movement and interaction. In his early thinking meaning was based on fixed position and moment; later it was in endless flux and process. I argue that even though Bakhtin is still dealing with images of bodies, his emphasis on materiality opens the possibility of a dialogue with what Guy Claxton called a New Materialism (CLAXTON, 2015, p.9, 282), and more generally a more dynamic conception of the body that extends into the world. That then is the gist of my argument which falls into two parts, the first dealing with his early and the second with his later thinking.

## 2 Bakhtin's Early Philosophy: Understanding a Body

Most of the themes in this part of my argument can be found in the passage below, a classic account of Bakhtin's conception of the relation between I and other, one person watching and one being watched. In a sense this is like the joke about the way one behaviourist greets another: 'You look well, how about me?'

When I contemplate a whole human being who is situated outside and over against me, our concrete, actually experienced horizons do not coincide. For at each given moment, regardless of the position and the proximity to me of this other human being whom I am contemplating, I shall always see and know something that he, from his place outside and over against me, cannot see himself: parts of his body that are inaccessible to his own gaze (his head, his face and its expression), the world behind his back and a whole series of objects and relations, which in any of our mutual relations are accessible to me but not to him (BAKHTIN, 1990, pp.22-23).

I imagine these two people sitting opposite each other. Like two characters in a Beckett play, there is no indication that they move to take a different perspective on the other person. They accept their positions as given and stay put. Bakhtin is interested in what each can see and know of themselves and each other from these positions, their "actually experienced horizons." From my perspective I see the world as a horizon, a future, in which I must act. And I see the other person as a whole image set within an environment. When Bakhtin argues that these horizons 'do not coincide' he means that I can never grasp myself as a whole within an environment: that is the exclusive purview of the other.

Both his aesthetics and ethics are based on a distinction between the body as cognised (known through thought) and experienced (known through physical experience). The observed body of the other can be distinguished from a 'cognized' whole precisely because "the contemplator occupies a perfectly determinate place, and that he is unitary and *embodied*" (BAKHTIN, 1990, pp.23-24; emphasis in original). Another of Bakhtin's categorical distinctions is between thinking and experiencing:

While my thought can place my body wholly in the outside world as an object among other objects, my actual seeing cannot do the same thing; my seeing, that is, cannot come to the aid of thinking by providing it with an adequate outer image (BAKHTIN, 1990, p.28).

There is a circularity in his argument. Because only an ‘outer image’ of me is sufficient to render me a whole, and because thinking cannot do this, *therefore* thinking and seeing cannot come to each other’s aid (just as the horizons of I and other do not coincide). The body is here grasped as a material fact in its there-ness in space and time; however, it possesses no capacity for autonomous agency or meaning.

Bakhtin’s kindly visual contemplation contrasts with Sartre’s *regard* which renders the observed self-conscious and awkward. There is no sense of a *gaze* (as the French *regard* has been translated) that is intrusive and unsettling. While Bakhtin writes of the fundamental categories of ‘I’ and ‘other’, this is not an alienated and objective *Other*. Far from being “*othered*” by the outside eye, I am rendered a complete “I” by the aesthetic activity of the other. Bakhtin’s early aesthetics is based on what could be described as a redemptive visual contemplation. Far from reducing the person observed, he argues that it is *only* the observer that can grasp them as a whole (recall that our experienced horizons do not coincide). In this sense, both understanding and wholeness are conceived in visual categories: to see is to understand, and the resulting image is the form of that whole.

This is, to say the least, a very particular conception of time, space and the body. It is a conception at once physical and metaphorical: he conceives space both in terms of occupancy (at any given moment you cannot be in the same place as me), and in terms of a perspective position from which one sees and understands the other person. While it is true that we cannot grasp ourselves as an image set against a background (our eyes are directed forwards, and can grasp only our legs, arms and hands), Bakhtin omits to mention that an observer can only grasp us as a two-dimensional image. The wholeness they grasp is not three-dimensional. Both in terms of space and time (it is a “given moment”), the situation is static. When he writes in his early philosophy about the body being a “concrete whole,” it is, once again both physical and metaphorical. As a material thing occupying an actual and

non-transferrable place in space and time, the body constitutes a fact of embodied meaning, but it is not a body that moves according to its own needs and interests. These notions of image, concreteness, materiality and of time and space in relation to the body contrast with those of his later thinking.

Above I mentioned the “redemptive visual contemplation” of Bakhtin’s observer. It is not just that that an observer can supply a vision that I cannot generate for myself, but also that this vision is offered as an act of loving completion. Thus, babies come to recognise and value their own bodies through a mother’s kindly gaze. “The child receives all initial determinations of himself and of his body from his mother’s lips and from the lips of those who are close to him” (BAKHTIN, 1990, p.49). The words of the loving other create a bridge between what Bakhtin sees as the chaos of the inner experience of the body and the meaning of the body which is seen and thus can be valued by others. Taking the example of the baby’s body he contrasts these two ways of knowing and experiencing.

For what I experience from within myself is not in the least my “darling little head” or “darling little hand,” but precisely my “head” and my “hand”—I act with my “hand,” not my “darling little hand.” It is only in relation to the other that I can speak about myself in an affectionate-diminutive form, in order to express the other's actual relationship toward me or the relationship I wish he would show toward me (BAKHTIN, 1990, p.50).

The child’s body as something valued is created by the mother through an act of kindness which Bakhtin defines as “a principle of comportment toward something given, because kindness constitutes a domain of that which is not yet given but imposed as a task” (BAKHTIN, 1990, p.54). What Bakhtin means is that while my body is a given to me, something that I cannot grasp as a (visual) whole, it is taken as a task (a responsibility) for a loving other to complete (as a visual whole). The young person can only ever grasp “itself as indigent, as weak and fragile, as a forlorn and defenceless child” (BAKHTIN, 1990, p.136). A young person *is* weak and fragile, but as I will argue below, they become less so as they learn through their actions and through the criticisms and encouragement of others. It is true that human offspring are born defenceless and require many years to reach maturity, and the motor for this maturation is our capacity to learn. We learn through doing.

Thus far we have been addressing Bakhtin's aesthetic argument as set out in *Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity*. Now we turn to his ethics as set out in *Towards a Philosophy of the Act* (both titles being editorial rather than his own). Is it here that the 'concrete whole' of the body comes into more active play. He argues that abstract moral principles only become true once acted upon, this being another way of expressing the distinction between the cognised and the experienced. The unique position of a person is a place from which they must answer, indeed from which only they *can* answer. At this level I find such a conception of responsibility compelling. The drawback comes when he argues that such moments of answerability are once-only. The moment is unique and unrepeatable, the conditions never being the same again. A further drawback is Bakhtin's argument that because the act-performer's attention is upon the task in hand *therefore* they cannot grasp the meaning of their action. These two conditions effectively reduce the act-performer's role to one of pure reaction. Why might this be? Because they cannot see themselves. Once again it falls to the outside observer to offer an aesthetic account of their ethical action. The acting subject has no capability for creating meaning or assigning value to their own actions. In order to counter this argument we need to consider the two drawbacks just mentioned.

Bakhtin's thinking about the unrepeatability of the present moment echoes Heraclitus's statement that no person ever steps in the same river twice, for it is not the same river and they are not the same person. It is true that the conditions that provoke a person into action – that present themselves as a task to be performed - are unique and demand a response that answer those particular conditions. It is equally true that the focus of the act-performer is on the object of their activity rather than on the performance of that activity. If you are thinking, "how do I look?" or more generally "how does it look" when you are taking action, then your focus will not be on the performance itself. Bakhtin's actor is like some Adam who has entered a world where there are no previous competing claims. Such a world suggests that the action he has taken will not have consequences that will in turn demand new actions, ones that require him to consider the meaning and effectiveness of his earlier actions. Such a world is without history and without society.

Others are not just observers: they are fellow act-performers with their own goals and interests. Thus, my actions will be judged and limited by their goals and interests. Bakhtin, possibly under the influence of other members of his intellectual circle, soon realised that he should talk not of a ‘world’ but of a social environment that is animated by hundreds of competing voices – a world of dialogue. In this dialogically fissiparous world there will still be feedback on our actions, but it will not be disinterested. While Bakhtin’s move into a theory of dialogue acknowledged a more sophisticated image of the world it did mean him abandoning his ethical theory of action, and his aesthetics of redemptive completion.

The other drawback to Bakhtin’s early theory of action is its limited conception of the body. His thinking is not dualist in the usual sense of a division between mind and body, but a division between sensation and image (the body of I and other). He agrees that sensation can tell what a body feels, but not what this state means. And by ‘means’ Bakhtin is saying, ‘what it looks like’, blurring visual apprehension – seeing – with knowing.

What is important to Bakhtin is the ability of the other to see the suffering person as an image delineated against the background of the clear blue sky, in the same way that the observer in the first passage could see the world behind his back. The ‘plastic consummation’ is conceived entirely visually. Where the outside observation of the early Bakhtin differs from behaviourism is in the emotional engagement. A behaviourist looks at human movement and posture from an analytical point of view whereas Bakhtin is motivated by love, by a desire to rendering meaningful the plight of the observed and always unfinished person.

The passage above is a vivid example of how Bakhtin does accept that we experience the body in two ways: we see another’s body from the outside or we feel our own body from the inside. This is another of the categorical distinctions in his early thinking. Many of the headings in *Author and Hero* indicate how his thinking about the body (of self and other) is structured around this distinction between inner and outer; for example, the section entitled The Spatial Form of the Hero has such sub-headings as: Outward Appearance; Outward Boundaries of the Body; The Inner and the Outer Body;



The Value of the Human Body in History; and The Inner and Outer Body in Self-Experience.

Throughout his argument the visually apprehended outer body that generates meaning. Bakhtin takes no account of the body's internal feedback about position and movement that constitute the proprioceptive senses and the kinaesthetic sense. When he writes about the concrete body he is referring to the fact of a body in space: the notion of the body as an exquisitely evolved organism adapting through a constantly looping process of sense and response is alien to Bakhtin.

The absence of movement in Bakhtin's account of the body is not a minor omission. According to the philosopher Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, it is movement that constitutes the I: "In effect, movement forms the I that moves before the I that moves forms movement. Spontaneous movement is the constitutive source of agency, of subjecthood, of selfhood, the dynamic core of our sense of ourselves as agents, subjects, selves." (SHEETS-JOHNSTONE, 2011, p.119). My earlier critiques (McCAW, 2016, 2018) argued that the body could not be understood purely as an image. To see is not to understand everything; nor does an image provide all the information about an action. A body cannot perform any movement or action without constant sensory feedback that guides the hand or foot, that judges angle, speed, and pressure. Our ability to act is based on the memory of past actions that become hypothetical models that are tested out in the present situation, which is novel. Once again, it is our senses that offer feedback as to how successful a match the remembered action is with the present problem. Adjustments will be made within thousandths of a second. None of these exquisitely complex sensori-motor feedback loops are obvious to an external observer. Because Bakhtin only accounts for the visual sense, so his early philosophy cannot account for the intelligence of the act-performing human being. I have offered a detailed description of the intelligence of the moving body elsewhere (McCAW, 2018). The task of this essay is to compare his early and later conceptions of the body, so it is to them we now turn.

### 3 The Body in Bakhtin's Later Writings

We begin with an article that, like a number of other works, was at first attributed to Bakhtin, and then later to members of the Bakhtin Circle. In the 1920s the Circle offered critiques of other schools of thought such as Formalism, Freudianism, and Vitalism. Ivan Kanaev's *Contemporary Vitalism* offers a critique of the thought of biologist Hans Driesch (1867–1941) and philosopher Henri Bergson (1859–1941) and particularly the notion of a life force that animates all living beings and guides their development to finished organisms. My interest is in Kanaev's materialist account of the development of organisms. He argues against Driesch's notion that development is by some abstract and immaterial life-force insisting that the process is strictly time-based. "We can really only speak of several actual significances under several differing conditions of development. [...] It obviously goes without saying that at every place and every time, some specific conditions prevail" (KANAEV, 1992, p.92). What a difference to Bakhtin's earlier argumentation where time and space were material facts but not active agents in a developmental process. Situation in this later argument is utterly specific and determines meaning. Thus, he will argue that Driesch's mistake is to stray 'from any real conditions' and to discuss organic development "outside of the frames of time and space" (KANAEV, 1992, p.92).

They are only such processes as can exist under a given set of conditions. The analysis of this set of conditions, the breaking down into its elements, and the comprehension in every detail of the developmental laws which govern it: this is the real task of science. (KANAEV, 1992, p.95)

It is for this reason that he calls Driesch's system 'pure fiction', a 'mere abstract construction' (KANAEV, 1992, p.92). As George Rousseau notes Kanaev's critique is based on the "assumption that all phenomena must be explained as occurring in time; that is, that present phenomena must be explained in the light of past things and events" (ROUSSEAU, 1992, p.61).

Bakhtin also took inspiration from the scientific methodology of biology, and in the preface to his essay on the Chronotope he acknowledges borrowing the concept from another biologist, A.A. Ukhtomsky, whose lecture on the subject he attended in 1925 *Bakhtiniana*, São Paulo, 14 (3): 36-54, July/Sept. 2019. 45

(BAKHTIN, 1981, p.81). In this preface (written in 1973) he echoes the thinking of Kanaev. “What counts for us is that fact that it expresses the inseparability of space and time (time as the fourth dimension of space). We understand the chronotope as a formally constitutive category of literature” (BAKHTIN, 1981, p.84). He goes on to describe how in the literary chronotope “Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, become artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history” (BAKHTIN, 1981, p.84). Although Kanaev and Ukhtomsky were writing about developmental processes in living organisms being time-based, Bakhtin adapts this notion to describe the historical development of literary form. For a long time I have found the concept of a ‘chronotope’ to be a slippery one: either it is a statement of the obvious – that events unfold place in time and space - or it is extremely subtle. Writing this essay has helped me realise that all fictions, indeed all processes have their own unique forms of time and space: the key lies in the word ‘form’. Every work of fiction is an organisation of events that happen in time and space. Bakhtin’s essay is a history of these forms beginning with Greek Romance in the Fourth Century BCE and ending with Rabelais.

Bakhtin explains the chronotope of Rabelais’ *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (written in the 1530s and 40s) in terms of the relationship between human body and the world.

In the process of accommodating this concrete human corporeality, the entire remaining world also takes on new meaning and concrete reality, a new materiality; it enters into a contact with human beings that is no longer symbolic but material. Here the human body becomes a concrete measuring rod for the world, the measurer of the world’s weight and of its value for the individual. (1981, pp.170-171).

The words ‘material’ and ‘concrete’ have an entirely different meaning to when they were used in his early manuscripts. This is a body that moves, that meets and makes contact with other bodies. Rabelais structures “the entire picture of the world around the human conceived as a body - which is to say, in a zone of physical contact with such a body” (BAKHTIN, 1981, p.171). According to Bakhtin it is precisely the fearless and free representation and exploration of the human body that destroys “the established hierarchy of values via the creation of new matrices of words, objects and phenomena. [...] The

traditional image of the human being in literature is also re-structured in a way that benefits the ‘unofficial’ and extraverbal areas of his life” (BAKHTIN, 1981, p.192). Yes, of course this is an exaggeration, but Bakhtin is writing in the spirit of Rabelais, he is joining in the fearless laughter of a philosopher, doctor and priest who wrote at a crucial turning point in Western history when Catholic authority was being challenged by reformers like Erasmus, Luther and Melanchthon. Bakhtin delights in Rabelais’ attempt “to destroy the old picture of the world that had been formed in a dying epoch, and to create a new picture, at whose centre we have the whole man, both body and soul” (BAKHTIN, 1981, p.205).

The chronotope essay bursts with references to the ‘image’ of the human body. No longer is this a visually static capture of another person, but a historically resonating concept that brings together body, time and space. The body (at least in relation to Rabelais’ novel) becomes a means by which the role of philosophy and literature can be reconceived.

Bakhtin explains that the “principle aim” of his book on Rabelais is to understand the “half-forgotten idiom” of grotesque realism which consists of a very particular “system of images” (1965, p.11). Once again, his work focuses upon images of the human body, but these are entirely different to those of his early philosophy. He is not dealing with the biological body “which merely repeats itself in the new generations” (BAKHTIN, 1965, p.367), nor “an individual body or [...] a private material way of life” (BAKHTIN, 1965, p.88). No, this is a “grotesque concept of the body,” by means of which a “new, concrete, and realistic historic awareness was born and took form” (BAKHTIN, 1965, p.367); “for this generic body birth and death are not an absolute beginning and end, but merely elements of continuous growth and renewal. The great body of satiric drama cannot be separated from the world” (BAKHTIN, 1965, p.88). This body is not the discrete and isolated body of his early philosophy: “It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits” (BAKHTIN, 1965, p.26). Although this *is* a body, it is also a concept of a body, and thus “is not the body and its physiology in the modern sense of these words, because it is not individualised” (BAKHTIN, 1965, p.19). It is much more like a bodily culture that is constantly being regenerated like the cells in our body. Thus, the images of grotesque realism “present simultaneously the two poles of

becoming; that which is receding and dying, and that which is being born; they show two bodies in one, the budding and the division of the living cell” (BAKHTIN, 1965, p.52).

How does the Grotesque body ‘transgress its own limits’? By having protuberances and hollows. This is not unlike how Rodin describes his representation of the human body: “Sculpture is thus the art of hollows (*creux*) and mounds (*bosses*), not of smoothness, or even polished planes.” Bakhtin uses similar terms when he states that “in the grotesque body there is no opaque surface, only cavities and heights” (BAKHTIN, 1965, p.399); it ‘is looking for that which protrudes from the body, all that seeks to go out beyond the body’s confines” (BAKHTIN, 1965, p.316). Indeed all these convexities and orifices “have a common characteristic; it is within them that the confines between bodies and between the body and the world are overcome: there is an interchange and an interorientation” (BAKHTIN, 1965, p.317). Anyone familiar with either Bakhtin’s book or Rabelais’ novel will know that the protuberances are prodigious stomachs or penises, the orifices being throats, mouths, anuses, and vaginas, with which our giant heroes engage in world-changing feats of pissing, eating, drinking, farting and defecating.

All of these organs and activities are considered “ugly, monstrous, hideous from the point of view of ‘classic’ aesthetics, that is, the aesthetics of the ready-made and the completed” (BAKHTIN, 1965, p.25). Bakhtin develops this theme throughout his book noting how the individual body “erases all convexities” and “signs of new sprouts and buds” (BAKHTIN, 1965, p.29). Thanks to this modern image of this individual body “sexual life, eating, drinking, and defecation have radically changed their meaning: they have been transferred to the private and psychological level” (BAKHTIN, 1965, p.321). Bakhtin notes how ‘good education’ requires us

[...] not to place the elbows on the table, to walk without protruding the shoulder blades or swinging the hips, to hold in the abdomen, to eat without loud chewing, not to snort and pant, to keep the mouth shut, etc.; in other words to close up and limit the body’s confines and to smooth the bulges (BAKHTIN, 1965, pp.322-323).

What can one say of this tumultuous body? Firstly, that this misshapen and vulgar body ran against the official image of the human body promulgated by Socialist Realism with its heroic, classical, sexlessly muscular bodies. Bakhtin also challenged the Soviet conception of folk culture, which with its traditional costumes and dances knew nothing of the obscenity and vulgarity described in his book. Although it might seem that Bakhtin is exaggerating (though a brief glance through the pages of *Gargantua and Pantagruel* would disprove this) there is evidence that his claims about this fecundating body are true. While in Ireland, I discovered the figure of the Sheila na Gig, a figure found in churches throughout Ireland and England and Northern Europe.



A 12th-century Sheela na Gig on the church at Kilpeck, Herefordshire, England<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> The original uploader was Pryderi at English Wikipedia. - Transferred from en.wikipedia to Commons., CC BY-SA 3.0. Available at: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=2138106>. Visited on: 06 Feb. 2019.

The figure seems to be inviting the visitors to the church into her womb. Another example is from Catalonia where the Nativity Cribs at Christmas feature a figure called the ‘shitter’. Robert Hughes describes this seemingly unholy figure.

He is the immemorial fecundator, whom nature calls even as the Messiah arrives. Nothing can distract him from the archetypal task of giving back to the soil the nourishment that it supplied to him. He is known as the *caganer*, the “shitter,” and he exists in scores of versions: some pop-eyed with effort, others rapt in calm meditation, but most with no expression at all; big papier-mache ones three feet tall, minuscule terra-cotta ones with caca pyramids no bigger than mouse turds, and all sizes in between (HUGHES, 1992, p.26).



Then there are the more familiar grotesques in the margins of medieval manuscripts, in sculptures adorning cathedrals, or in wooden carvings beneath the seats of misericords, in Northern Europe, the (4th Century) Phylax farces described on vases, or the wall paintings in Pompei to realise that Bakhtin was describing a popular imaginarium that existed throughout Europe. How many other kinds of Grotesque imagery are there that could give further weight to Bakhtin’s argument about the grotesque body?

## Conclusion

If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart  
Absent thee from felicity awhile,  
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,  
To tell my story. (Hamlet to Horatio, Act V, Scene II)

It is true that I have a number of problems with Bakhtin's early philosophy. His conception of the body in terms of static images that can only be provided by another person provoked me to point out, firstly that there is another way of knowing the body as a whole (proprioception), and secondly that the body needs to be understood as a moving and constantly developing organism (not just in terms of reproduction). My critiques do not negate Bakhtin's theories, they simply reveal them to be incomplete.

I would argue that his aesthetic and ethical theories have little important to say about the operation of the human body. However, they make the much bigger point that, as embodied beings, time and space are not abstract categories but are the stuff of life that we experience. As such, I find that his thinking offers much to anyone working in live performance (an art of time). Another major point concerns the role of the other as storyteller. Bakhtin claims that another person can often see the meaning and value of what I do better than I myself. Anyone who has made creative work will know that we rarely know what we have made. I know what I know from the perspective of doing and all the types of tacit knowledge upon which I draw to pursue that doing. We know that it is finished from a compositional point of view; that it hangs together. But of its capability to mean something, to be of value – this is the work, indeed the responsibility of the observer, of the outside eye, of the audience.

In your eyes my life is a story that, Horatio-like I need you to tell on my behalf. There would be two reasons I cannot tell my own life story: either, I am still living and thus still part of its unfolding, or, like Hamlet, am about to die. This prompts me to wonder whether the other is always experienced as a character and not a subject, their life a story purged of the contingency of what will happen next. We can know someone else, but we cannot (except maybe during love-making) experience what it is like to be them. In terms of my own story, all I know is that there is more to come that may well contradict the images and stories that have been told of me in the past. Is the aesthetic theory of the early Bakhtin trying to proof us against the uncertainty of a life in process, of the forward moving-ness of time, each moment threatening to change the meaning of the last? Our



continuing existence render the stories about us, the images of us, progressively less accurate. We need the temporary relief of stories about ourselves, knowing that they will soon be out of date. In his early writings Bakhtin puts his finger on a central dilemma about time, meaning and dialogue. We need stories and images to arrest time's process and offer a moment of meaning, but it is precisely the ongoing-ness of this process that erodes those meanings. These questions about the anxiety of contingent meaning are still very much current, not least in Jacques Derrida's notion of *différance*.

I spent much of *Bakhtin and Theatre* arguing that although Bakhtin regarded theatre as being an art form that had been superseded by the novel, in actuality much of his thinking addressed questions of theatre. I failed to notice one important aspect of his theory of action. Although his condition that a truly meaningful action must be once-only and unrepeatable may be impracticable in the real world it has much application in the work of the actor. An actor's performance begins with the given circumstances of the text and stage direction from which they have to create the sense of vividness and unrepeatability of the present moment. Like an improviser the actor has to be attuned to the unique and rhythms of a performance which includes the responses of the audience, of their fellow actors, and their responses to those responses. Although working from a given text, the creative work of the actor is the realisation of a completely unrepeatable artistic event. Maybe this is true of any interpretive artist. It also seems to make sense of Bakhtin's distinction between the given and created.

Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope makes perfect sense of the work of the actor both in realist theatre and in what Hans Thies Lehmann calls postdramatic theatre. In realism the actor has to negotiate between two different chronotopes, the represented world of the story and the actual, unrepeatable space and time of the performance. In postdramatic theatre the actor or performer still has to create a form of time and space. This 'form' may be the repetition of an action or scene for an hour, over which time the actor become progressively more exhausted as they try to sustain the action for the sixty minutes. When I asked Tim Etchells, Director of the British Forced Entertainment, for the pieces of advice to my students who are preparing a performance based on his company's work, the third was that 'The work is people doing things in time and space.' When I heard him giving notes

after a performance of *Real Magic* (2016), they concerned pacing. Time, timing, pacing, use of space, are the meaning of this kind of theatre.

And what Bakhtin's work on the grotesque body? In the preface to *Bakhtin and Theatre* I listed some of the 20th Century directors I knew to have been inspired by his notion of the carnivalesque. In that book I omitted to mention the obvious connection with the work of the late Jacques Lecoq, whose entire concept of theatre is based around mask, foolery, and in the broadest sense, the grotesque. Most fundamentally, Lecoq recognised the importance of laughter: at a political, individual, and cultural level. And of course, all of this is centred upon the physical play of the actor's body.

Beyond this anecdotal evidence of Bakhtin's influence on theatre there are some important principles at stake. The first returns to the fact of embodiment: Bakhtin is completely right to state that our bodies (and, I would add, their perceptual systems) are what we use to measure the world. Big, small, wide, narrow are terms that are relative to the human body. For this reason the stage designer Adolphe Appia called the human body the *Massgebend*, or the means by which we judge the dimensions of scenic space.<sup>2</sup> Echoing Bakhtin's notion of a theatre without footlights Appia promoted the idea of Festkultur, and designed *Hellerau* near Dresden as precisely as *Festspielhaus*. *Fest* is a close cousin to Carnival.

The third principle concerns Bakhtin's notion of a Material Bodily Lower Stratum. Anyone who studies movement understands the crucial importance of the pelvic area, not so much because it is the zone of evacuation and reproduction, but because it is where the major muscles of movement are located. The pelvis is the axle of the body, and no movement or gesture of any power can be produced without it. Bakhtin's vertical axis from head to foot, earth to sky, is the unique to humans, is the basis of how we see the world.

I hope that the above explains why I am still excited about Bakhtin's thinking. Each time I reread his work I find something new, some new intellectual tool for thinking.

---

<sup>2</sup> I discuss this at greater length on page 66 of *Bakhtin and Theatre*.

## REFERENCES

- BAKHTIN, M. Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes toward a Historical Poetics. In: BAKHTIN, M. *The Dialogic Imagination*. Edited by Michael Holquist; translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981, pp.84-258.
- BAKHTIN, M. *Rabelais and His World*. Translated by Helen Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984.
- BAKHTIN, M. Response to a Question from the *Novy Mir* Editorial Staff. In: BAKHTIN, M. *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Edited by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist; translated by Vern McGee. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1986, pp.1-9.
- BAKHTIN, M. Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity. In: BAKHTIN, M. *Art and Answerability*. Edited by Vadim Liapunov and Michael Holquist; translated by Vadim Liapunov. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1990, pp.4-256.
- BAKHTIN, M. *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*. Edited by Vadim Liapunov and Michael Holquist; translated by Vadim Liapunov. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993.
- CLAXTON, G. *Intelligence in the Flesh*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015.
- HUGHES, R. *Barcelona*. New York, NY: Alfred A.Knopf, 1992.
- KANAEV, I. Contemporary Vitalism. In: BURWICK, F.; DOUGLAS, P. (Ed.). *The Crisis in Modernism: Bergson and the Vitalist Controversy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp.76-97.
- McCAW, D. *Bakhtin and Theatre: Dialogues with Stanislavsky, Meyerhold and Grotowski*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2016.
- McCAW, D. Towards a Philosophy of the Moving Body. In: GRATCHEV, S.; MANCING, H. (Ed.). *Bakhtin's Heritage in Literature, Arts, and Psychology*. Lanham, MA: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018, pp.237-254.
- ROUSSEAU, G. Traditions of Enlightenment: Vitalism. In: BURWICK, F.; DOUGLAS, P. (Ed.). *The Crisis in Modernism: Bergson and the Vitalist Controversy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp.51-75.
- SHEETS-JOHNSTONE, M. *The Primacy of Movement*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing, 2011.

*Received February 27,2019*

*Accepted April 14,2019*