

Otherness, intercorporeity and dialogism in Bakhtin's view of the text

A. PONZIO

1. The body and carnival in life and literature

Working out my answers to the questions asked me by the editorial staff of *Dialog, Karnaval. Chronotop* (1997, 1, 18), and developing my essay "From Moral Philosophy to Philosophy of Literature: Bakhtin from 1919 to 1929" (*Dialog. Karnaval. Chronotop*, 1996, 3, 16, pp. 97—116), in this paper I will continue examining the role of Rabelais and consequently of intercorporeity, carnival, grotesque body in Bakhtin's work. In Bakhtin's view dialogue does not consist in the communication of messages, nor is it an initiative taken by self. On the contrary, the self is always in dialogue with the other, that is to say, with the world and with others, whether it knows it or not; the self is always in dialogue with the word of the other. Identity is dialogic.

Mikhail M. Bakhtin's multiple interests are closely connected with two problematics which mostly characterize his research: dialogue, examined through its literary depiction in Fyodor Dostoevsky's polyphonic novel, and grotesque realism of carnivalized popular culture, studied through its depiction in François Rabelais. "Dialogue" in Bakhtin does not ensue from a decision to assume an open attitude towards others (as has often been wrongly maintained), it is not the result of initiative taken by the I, the result of a disposition for opening to the other, but rather it is the very place of the I's formation and manifestation. Dialogue is not the result of the I's decision to respect the other or listen to the other. On the contrary, dialogue is the impossibility of closure, of indifference, the impossibility of not becoming involved and is particularly evident in attempts at closure, at indifference that simply prove to be tragico-comical. Bakhtin shows how Dostoevsky was not interested in the human being committed to dialogue in full respect of the other, but in dialogue as it occurs in spite of the subject, in spite of self. The word is dialogic because it is passively involved with the word of others. Dialogue depicted by Dostoevsky and theorized by Bakhtin is the impossibility of being indifferent to the other, it is unindifference — even in indifference, hostility, hatred — of the you towards the I. Even when unindifference degenerates into hatred, the other continues to count more than anything else. Therefore, dialogue does not simply subsist with the composition of points of view and identities, but, quite on the contrary, it consists in refractoriness to synthesis, including the illusory synthesis of one's own identity, of identity of the self, which in effect is dialogically decomposed or detotalized insofar as it is inevitably involved in otherness, just as the life of the "grotesque body" is inevitably involved in the life of others.

Bakhtin's conception of dialogue and otherness is extraordinarily original. Dialogism is at the very heart of the self. Self is implied dialogically in otherness,

just as the “grotesque body”¹ is implied in the body of other living beings. In fact, from a Bakhtinian perspective *dialogue* and *intercorporeity* are closely interconnected: there cannot be dialogue among disembodied minds, nor can dialogism be understood separately from the biosemiotic conception of sign. For Bakhtin dialogue is the embodied, intercorporeal, expression of the involvement of one’s body (which is only illusorily an individual, separate, and autonomous body) with the body of the other. The image that most adequately expresses this idea is that of the ‘grotesque body’² in popular culture, in vulgar language of the public place, and above all in the masks of carnival. This is the body *in its vital and indissoluble interconnectedness with the world and the body of others*.

The original title of Bakhtin’s book on Rabelais, literally *The Work of François Rabelais and Popular Culture of the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, stresses the intricate connection between Rabelais’s work, on the one hand, and the view of the world as elaborated by popular culture (its ideology, its *Weltanschauung*) as it evolves from Ancient Greek and Roman civilization into the Middle Ages and Renaissance, on the other, which in Western Europe is followed by the significant transition into bourgeois society and its ideology. The Bakhtinian conception emphasizes the inevitability of vital bodily contact, showing how the life of each one of us is implicated in the life of every other.

Therefore, in what may be described as a “religious” (from Latin *religio*) perspective of the existent, this conception underlines the bond interconnecting all living beings with each other. Dostoevsky’s polyphonic novel was in line with carnival tradition, as demonstrated by Bakhtin in the second edition (1963) of his book of 1929.

The category of the “carnavalesque” as formulated by Bakhtin and the role he assigns to it in his study on Rabelais can only be adequately understood in the light of his global (his “great experience”) and biosemiotic view of the complex and intricate life of signs.

The original title of Bakhtin’s book on Rabelais, literally *The Work of François Rabelais and Popular Culture of the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, stresses the intricate connection between Rabelais’s work, on the one hand, and the view of the world as elaborated by popular culture (its ideology, its *Weltanschauung*) as it evolves from Ancient Greek and Roman civilization into the Middle Ages and Renaissance, on the other, which in Western Europe is followed by the significant transition into bourgeois society and its ideology.

Bourgeois ideology conceives bodies as separate and reciprocally indifferent entities. Thus understood human bodies have two things in common: firstly, they are all evaluated according to the same criterion, that is to say, their capacity for work; secondly, they are all interested in the circulation of goods, including work understood as merchandise to the end of satisfying the needs of the individual. Such ideology continued into Stalinist Russia when Bakhtin was writing, and into the whole period of real socialism where work and the capacity for production were the sole factors taken into serious consideration. In other words, work

¹ Bakhtin, Mikhail (1965). *Rabelais and His World*. Eng. trans. and ed. K. Pomorska. Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1968. New trans. H. Iswowsky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984.

² cf. *ibid.*

and productivity were the only elements considered as connecting individuals to each other. Therefore, beyond this minimal common denominator, individual bodies were considered as reciprocally indifferent to each other and separate.

The carnivalesque participates in the “great experience” which offers a global view of the complex and intricate life of bodies and signs. The Bakhtinian conception emphasizes the inevitability of vital bodily contact, showing how the life of each one of us is implicated in the life of every other.

Furthermore, the condition of excess is emphasized, of bodily excess with respect to a specific function, and of sign excess with respect to a specific meaning: signs and bodies — bodies as signs of life — are ends in themselves. On the contrary, the minor and more recent ideological tradition is vitiated by reductive binarism, which sets the individual against the social, the biological against the cultural, the spirit against the body, physical-chemical forces against life forces, the comic against the serious, death against life, high against low, the official against the non-official, public against private, work against art, work against non official festivity. Through Rabelais, Bakhtin recovered the major tradition and criticized the minor and more recent conception of the individual body and life inherent in capitalism as well as in real socialism and its metamorphoses. Dostoevsky’s polyphonic novel was in line with the major tradition in *Weltanschauung*, as demonstrated by Bakhtin in the second edition (1963) of his book of 1929.

The self cannot exist without memory; and structural to both the individual memory and social memory is otherness. The kind of memory we are alluding to is the memory of the immediate biosemiotic “great experience” (in space and time) of indissoluble relations to others experienced by the human body. These relations are represented in ancient forms of culture as well as in carnivalized arts: however, the sense of the “great experience” is anaesthetized in the “small,” narrow-minded, reductive experience of our time.

Bakhtin’s monograph on Rabelais forms an organic part of Bakhtinian writings, including those signed by Voloshinov and Medvedev.

In *Rabelais* Bakhtin develops the distinction, made in Freudianism, between official ideology and unofficial ideology relatedly to the literature of Humanism and the Renaissance considered in its vital connection with the low genres of Medieval comico-popular culture. Moreover, he continues his studies on the sign in general (and not just the verbal sign) as developed in *Marxism and Philosophy of Language*³, analyzing the transformation of verbal and nonverbal carnival signs into the signs of high European literature. Also, the 1963 edition of his monograph on Dostoevsky is a significant integration of the 1929 edition with a chapter on the genesis of Dostoevsky’s polyphonic novel, considered as the greatest expression of “carnivalized literature,” whose origins are traced back to the serio-comical genres of popular culture, such as Socratic and Menippean dialogue. In *Rabelais* Bakhtin works on the prehistory of the novelistic word, identified in the comicality and parodization of popular genres.

¹ Volochinov, Valentin, N. (Michail Bachtin) (1929). *Marxismo e filosofia del linguaggio*, It. trans. M. De Michiel, ed. A. Ponzio. Lecce: Manni, 1999. French trans. by Patrik Sériot and Inna Tylkowski-Ageeva. Limoges: Lambert-Lucas, 2010.

Furthermore, his analyses in *Rabelais* of the “language of the public place” and of the double character of vulgar expression, at once praising and offensive, confirm and develop his conception of the sign as essentially plurivocal, and in the case of verbal signs in particular, as the expression of the centrifugal forces of linguistic life. For example, his reference⁴ to Dostoevsky’s notes on an animated conversation formed from a single vulgar word used with different meanings is closely connected to his studies on the ductility and ambiguity of sense in the language of the grotesque body and its residues in the context of his work on the complex phenomenon called “carnival”.

Rabelais plays a central role in Bakhtin’s thought system. All this is connected to his conception of Marxism. By contrast with oversimplifying and suffocating interpretations, Bakhtin developed the idea introduced by Marx that the human could only ever be fully realized with the end of the reign of necessity. Consequently, a social system that is effectively alternative to capitalism is one that considers *free time*, that is, time available for otherness — one’s own otherness as well as the otherness of others —, and not *work time* as the real social wealth: the “time of unofficial festivity” as discussed by Bakhtin in his monograph on *Rabelais* is closely connected to the “great time” of literature.

What carnival is for Bakhtin he tells us in *Rabelais*. In this monograph he uses the term “carnival” to indicate a complex phenomenon present in all cultures, formed through a system of verbal and nonverbal signs, attitudes and conceptions oriented in the sense of comicality and joyous living. Carnival does not only concern Western culture, or the Russian spirit, but any culture at a world level insofar as it is human.

Today because of global communication we are witnesses to the unprecedented spread of the ideology of productivity and efficiency throughout the world, which is in complete contrast with the vision of carnival and the carnivalesque. The ideology of productivity and efficiency presupposes exasperated individualism, which is connected with the logic of competitiveness, and all this is in contrast with the concept of “grotesque body” grounded in intercorporeity, in the involvement of one’s own body with the world and with the body of others, theorized in relation to carnival. However, as much as it is dominant, the logic of exasperated individualism, productivity and efficiency cannot eliminate the human inclination towards nonfunctionality and the other.

The properly human is the *nonfunctional*. The non-functional is a vocation of the properly human as testified by literary writing in which the carnivalesque endures. Like all esthetic activity the literary work too expresses the non-written right of man to nonfunctionality: in George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* ultimate resistance to a social system based on productivity and efficiency is represented by literature. In this sense literature (and art in general) is and always will be carnivalized.

The human sciences may be described as human for a reason that goes beyond the fact that they are concerned with the human being; in other words, the term “human” may be considered in an evaluative sense and not just as a descriptive adjective. The “human” sciences recognize the human right to nonfunctionality

⁴Ibid.

which should be at the basis of our understanding of signs, texts and works in general produced by humanity. There is no such thing as a human product that does not contain traces of nonfunctionality, that is, some useless and nonfunctional detail. With the assertion of nonfunctionality the human being is manifested as an end in itself, and not as a means.

A work's creativity is the expression of being an end in itself. However, in today's globalized world creativity only finds expression at an individual level, as the expression of the single artist. On the contrary, in past cultural systems nonfunctionality, excess, assertion of the human and of human products as an end in themselves found expression in the collectivity, in carnival.

The Bakhtinian-Rabelaisian vision is not continued by authors of academic essays and scientific works, but rather by literary writers, especially novelists, not just writers from this or that country, but at the level of world literature. In addition to the writings of Western authors (such as Fernando Pessoa, Italo Calvino, Milan Kundera, Mikhail Bulgakov, etc.), for example, narrative finds truly interesting developments in polyphonic terms particularly in the Latin-American novel. To paraphrase Bakhtin (1970—71), we could say that the Bakhtinian-Rabelaisian vision does not invite scientists, critics, or semioticians to celebrate its resurrection, but writers.

For all these reasons Bakhtin's work on Rabelais is of central importance not only in the development of his own thought system, but rather contemporary culture generally. The second 1963 edition of the Dostoevsky monograph includes important revisions concerning the relationship between dialogue, novelistic discourse and carnivalization.

Bakhtin's monograph on Rabelais has also influenced and continues influencing the human sciences directly and indirectly, especially culturological studies, theory of literature and literary criticism. It has directly and indirectly inspired literary writing. It is difficult to say just how a writer is inspired unless the author-man makes explicit statements about his work. However, such statements need to be verified through confrontation with the work itself and the author-writer. To remain inside Italian borders, we could advance the hypothesis that Umberto Eco's *Il nome della rosa*, Dario Fo's *Mistero Buffo*, and some of Calvino's works at least breathed the same atmosphere created by this exceptional work by Bakhtin.

2. Dialogue and polyphony in the novel and drama: representation and depiction

Bakhtin analyzes various aspects forming the "concrete architectonics" of the real world of action with a focus on the role of otherness. His so-called "concrete architectonics" implies the unitary and unique event in light of which all values, meanings and spatio-temporal relations are created and organized. The aspects forming his architectonics are delineated in terms of: *I-for-myself*, *the-other-for-me*, and *I-for-the-other*.

Architectonics is organized around a subject; but this subject is unable to reach a full understanding of this event. In fact, the subject's discourse as direct discourse and self-reflexive discourse belonging to the "confession" genre is inca-

pable of an overall view. The subject remains within the sphere of *representation*, which means to say that the I, as is characteristic of representation, plays specific roles made of verbal and nonverbal signs through which it is fulfilled as I, and therefore is incapable of seeing itself as other, of leaving the sphere of its own identity. The word of the I is an objective word: the I speaks directly and identifies with its own verbal and nonverbal behavior.

Nor is it possible to reach a full understanding of the I's concrete architectonics through discourse external to the I, but oriented by cognitive goals and a uniquely gnoseological point of view. In fact, such a point of view aims to be objective and indifferent and claims not to be emotionally or valuatively participative and as such is incapable of *comprehending* that which it describes, indeed tends to impoverish it by losing sight of the details that render it live and unfinalizable. The word that claims to be neutral is another case of representation. The neutral word claims to describe the verbal and nonverbal world of others objectively. The neutral and objective word of representation is oriented by the logic of identity which means to say that it tends to reduce the relation among mutually external and non interchangeable positions to a single point of view, creating a world devoid of the capacity for effective confrontation with anything outside itself.

Instead, according to Bakhtin, the interpretation-comprehension of architectonics presupposes a position that is other, a position that is at once different and unindifferent, participative. In this case it is no longer a question of representing, but of rendering or depicting. That which is depicted or rendered is not merely expressed or described, but rather it is interpreted participatively. The verb "to render" expresses this well and, in fact, it may also be used for the verb "to translate". Rendering or depiction in contrast to representation indicates proximity to that which is rendered to the very point that rendering may be associated to surrender, while at the same time implying distancing, extralocalization, a relation of alterity which leaves the rendered in its position as subject.

In *Towards a Philosophy of the Act*, Bakhtin indicates art, specifically verbal art, that is, literature, as the place where such a vision is achieved:

The world that is correlated with me is fundamentally and essentially incapable of becoming part of an aesthetic architectonic. As we shall see in detail later on, to contemplate aesthetically means to refer an object to the valuative plane of the other⁵. (Bakhtin 1993: 74—75)

Bakhtin develops these statements in an immediately subsequent text, "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity," included in his volume of 1979:

My own axiological relationship to myself is completely unproductive aesthetically: for myself, I am aesthetically unreal [...]

The organizing power in all aesthetic forms is the axiological category of the other, the relationship to the other, enriched by an axiological 'excess' of seing for the purpose of achieving a transgredient consummation.

⁵ Bakhtin, M. (1993). *Signs, Dialogue and Ideology*, a cura di S. Petrilli. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. pp. 74—75.

The realization of an artwork requires a unitary reaction to the hero's world in its totality. This unitary reaction is different from simply cognitive and practical reactions though it is not indifferent to the latter; on the contrary, it unites all single cognitive and emotional-volitional reactions into an architectonic whole. If this unitary action is to acquire artistic value, it should express the resistance of reality, of life, of which the hero is an expression, of that which is objective with respect to its objectification, it should convey a sense of the hero's otherness, with its extra-artistic values. To achieve this the unitary action is extralocalized with respect to the hero on both a spatio-temporal level as well as the axiological, specially when a question of the autobiographical hero. If, instead, the condition of extralocalization does not obtain, the autobiographical hero will assume confessional overtones devoid of artistic value.

The texts by Bakhtin we are now analyzing also anticipate his critique of Russian Formalism, which he developed systematically in the book signed by Pavel N. Medvedev, *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship*, published in 1928.

Bakhtin's text on the philosophy of responsible action sheds light on the course of his research through to his 1929 monograph on Dostoevsky. According to Bakhtin, Dostoevsky's "philosophy" should neither be identified with the specific conceptions and viewpoints of the heroes populating his novels, nor with their specific contents. On the contrary, Bakhtin finds traces of the architectonics theorized in his paper on moral philosophy, *Towards a Philosophy of the Act*, in the overall structure of Dostoevsky's works which are organized according to the principle of dialogism. This is what Bakhtin was alluding to when he stated that "to affirm someone else's 'I' not as an object but as another subject — this is the principle governing Dostoevsky's worldview". This statement becomes clearer in the light of a paper on Dostoevsky by Vjacheslav V. Ivanov (1973). In Dostoevsky's "polyphonic novel," the character is no longer described by an 'I' and considered as an object. On the contrary, the character itself is a centre of otherness and consequently organizes its world in a perspective that is oriented by the logic otherness:

Dostoevsky carried out, as it were, a small-scale Copernican revolution when he took what had been a firm and finalizing authorial definition and turned it into an aspect of the hero's self-definition. [...] Not without reason does Dostoevsky force Makar Devushkin to read Gogol's "Overcoat" and to take it as a story about himself [...]

Devushkin had glimpsed himself in the image of the hero of "The Overcoat," which is to say, as something totally quantified, measured, and defined to the last detail: all of you is here, there is nothing more in you, and nothing more to be said about you. He felt himself to be hopelessly predetermined and finished off, as if he were already quite dead, yet at the same time he sensed the falseness of such an approach. [...]

The serious and deeper meaning of this revolt might be expressed this way: a living human being cannot be turned into the voiceless object of some secondhand, finalizing cognitive process. In a human being there is always something that only he himself can reveal; in a free act of self-consciousness and discourse; something that does not submit to an externalizing secondhand definition. [...]

The genuine life of the personality is made available only through a dialogic penetration of that personality, during which it freely and reciprocally reveals itself.

According to Bakhtin, dialogism as depicted in Dostoevsky's polyphonic novel consists of the fact that one's own word alludes always and in spite of itself, whether it knows it or not, to the word of others. No judgment-word, no judgment on an object, may be separated from an orientation, a stand that must necessarily be taken towards the other. This means that the word is never oriented directly towards its theme. There is always a process of refraction in a word for the word is always mediated by a relation to others, which is a relation of both the cognitive and emotional orders. Judgment-words are at once allocution-words, therefore words that enter into dialogic contact with other words. Consciousness of self is reached and perceived against the background of the consciousness that another has of it; "I-for-myself" against the background of "I-for-the-other". Therefore, dialogism also presents itself in a single voice, in a single utterance, as the interference of contradictory voices present in every "atom" of this utterance, in the most subtle structural elements of discourse and, therefore, of consciousness.

In Dostoevsky, the dialogic condition is most evident when the hero makes claims to complete independence from recognition by the other, from the other's gaze, the other's word; dialogue is manifest when characters make a show of absolute indifference to the opinion of others, to their value judgments. Such an attitude is particularly obvious in the monologue of the man from the underworld. His obsession with autonomy leads the hero to anticipate the possibility of denial with his own word. But, says Bakhtin (1929), the hero's very anticipation of the other's reply and his response to this reply reveals his dependence on the other (on himself). He *fears* that the other may think that he *fears* the other's opinion. But such fear reveals his dependence upon the other's consciousness, the impossibility of being satisfied with one's own self-determination.

Dostoevsky is not at all interested in showing man engaged in dialogue that is wholly respectful of the other, but rather he is intent upon evidencing the condition of inevitable involvement in dialogue in spite of oneself, *in spite of* one's own intentions. Dostoevsky shows that the word is dialogic because of its passive involvement in the word of the other. Dialogue does not only occur in a situation of harmonious composition among points of views and identities; on the contrary, dialogue is structured in refractoriness to synthesis, including the illusory synthesis of one's own identity. In fact, identity is dialogically fragmented insofar as it is inevitably implicated with alterity, just as the "grotesque body"⁶ is implicated with the body of others.

Bakhtin focuses on the relationship between dialogue and body as early as the first 1929 edition of his book on Dostoevsky. Dialogism cannot be obtained among disembodied minds. Dialogue takes place among voices — not monologic and integral voices, but internally dialogic and divided voices — and voices al-

⁶ Bakhtin, Mikhail (1965). *Rabelais and His World*. Eng. trans. and ed. K. Pomorska. Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1968. New trans. H. Iswowsky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984.

lude to the ideological position *embodied* in the world. Bakhtin highlights the problematic of the voice's embodiment. His statement that Dostoevsky's hero is *voice* and that the author does not show it to us as though it were an object, but has us listen to it, is misunderstood by René Wellek⁷ as the expression of idealism. Such a misunderstanding is perfectly in line with the criticism conducted against Bakhtin by the representatives of "socialist realism" and their unjust accusation of "polyphonic idealism," which repropounded the opposition established by Merezhkovsky between Dostoevsky "profet of the spirit" and Lev N. Tolstoy "profet of the flesh".

Bakhtin made a point of emphasizing the body's direct involvement in the circumspect word depicted by Dostoevsky; he evidenced the implications, effects registered in the hero's relationship with his own body as a consequence of the word that is aware and cautious of the other, in spite of itself; a word that, precisely when flaunting maximum indifference, refusal, opposition, is in fact revealing its unindifference to the other. As an example by the man from the underworld makes very clear, one's body is overwhelmed by an interference of voices and as such is deprived of self-sufficiency and univocality; the body does not belong to the hero, it is not his own, for it is exposed to the gaze and to the word of the other.

The body puts the individual's presumed autonomy into crisis, rendering the idea of autonomy illusory, even ridiculous given that the body is constitutively intercorporeal in both a diachronic and synchronic perspective. Despite separations, belongings, memberships, distinctions, erasements functional to individuality, the body of each and every one of us *remembers* its constitutive intercorporeity, in spite of memory as determined in the "small experience," and does so in terms of the "great experience" (an expression used by Bakhtin in one of his annotations from the 1950s). The body is refractory to the "technologies of self" and to the "political technology of the individual" (Michel Foucault). The body is *other* with respect to the subject, to consciousness, to domesticated, graded, filtered, adapted memory; the body is other with respect to the narration that the individual or collective subject has constructed for itself and through which it delineates its identity. The body is other with respect to the image that the subject presents as its identity card, which the subject exhibits and wishes others to take into consideration, being the physiognomy it offers for recognition, the role it recites in relation to identity. The body viewed as that which is other is the body viewed in terms of singularity, unrepeatability, nonfunctionality, excess with respect to a given project, narration, "authentic" standpoint and finds one of its strongest expressions in death considered as an inconclusive end: the living body knows before being known, feels before being felt, lives before being lived, experiences before being experienced. This body is connected to other bodies without interruption in continuity, it is implicated, involved with life over the entire planet Earth, as part of the general ecosystem, an interrelated complex from which no technology of self will ever free it.

⁷ Wellek, René (1995). "Michail Bachtin". In *Storia della critica moderna*, ed. A. Lombardo, vol. VII. Bologna: Il Mulino, pp. 494—518 (It. trans of "Mikhail Bakhtin," in *A History of Modern Criticism*, VII, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

Globalization related to capitalist production and the consequent expansion of biopower have led to the controlled insertion of bodies into the production system and to confirmation and reinforcement of the idea of the individual as a separate and self-sufficient entity. This has led to the progressive and almost total disappearance of cultural practices and worldviews that are grounded in intercorporeity, interdependency, the body's exposition to the other, its openness to the other. The different ways of perceiving the body by popular culture, discussed by Bakhtin in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* and *Rabelais and His World*, the different forms of "grotesque realism" are almost extinct. In fact, the body as perceived by popular culture, being neither entirely individualized nor detached in any way from the rest of the world, does not respond to today's dominant conception of body or corporeal life generally. Rather than view the body as an isolated biological entity, as a sphere of life that belongs to the individual, is possessed by the individual, the body as presented by grotesque realism is undefined, unconfined to itself, a body in relation of symbiosis with other bodies, of transformation and renewal through which the limits of individual life — and this is the essential point — are continually transcended. Instead, because of insistent assertion of the individualistic, private, static conception of body, verbal and nonverbal signs connected to the practices and conceptions of the grotesque body have almost completely disappeared. What we are left with are mummified residues analyzed by students of folklore, archeological remains preserved in ethnological museums and in the histories of national literature. Signs of the grotesque body include ritual masks, masks used during popular festivities, carnival, all of which only a faded image has reached us today.

The signs and language of the grotesque body privilege and exalt those parts of the body, excrescences and orifices, that most favour communication with other bodies as well as between the body and the world, with recourse to blends and contaminations which know no interruptions between the human and the nonhuman:

The grotesque body [...] is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body [...]. the grotesque ignores the impenetrable surface that closes and limits the body as a separate and completed phenomenon.

The grotesque mode of representing the body and bodily life prevailed in art and creative forms of speech over thousands of years [...].

This boundless ocean of grotesque bodily imagery within time and space extends to all languages, all literatures, and the entire system of gesticulation; in the midst of it the bodily canon of art, belles lettres, and polite conversation of modern times is a tiny island. This limited canon never prevailed in antique literature. In the official literature of European peoples it has existed only for the last four hundred years [...].

The new bodily canon, in all its historic variations and different genres, presents an entirely finished, completed, strictly limited body, which is shown from the outside as something individual⁸. (Bakhtin 1965,)

⁸ Bakhtin, Mikhail (1965). *Rabelais and His World*. Eng. trans. and ed. K. Pomorska. Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1968. New trans. H. Iswowsky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984. Eng. trans.: 317—320

Once official ideology functional to maintaining the established order and power of the dominant class is separated from unofficial ideology, the grotesque body is interdicted by official culture. The language of the grotesque body is rich in terms and expressions referring to body parts that most establish relations of interdependency and compromise with the world and with the body of others. Such language, which may be traced among all peoples and in all historical epochs, always refers to a body that is not strictly delineated, stable, fulfilled or complete in itself, but to a body that is connected to other bodies, in a relationship that is at least bicorporeal:

The body of the new canon is merely one body; no signs of duality have been left. It is self-sufficient and speaks in its name alone. All that happens within it concerns it alone, that is, only the individual, closed sphere. Therefore, all the events taking place within it acquire one single meaning: death is only death, it never coincides with birth; old age is torn away from youth. (*Ibidem*: 321—322)

Bakhtin dedicates a large chapter in his *Rabelais* to the “language of the marketplace”. He analyzes the images and expressions of this language showing how it belongs to the special logic of grotesque realism. The language of the marketplace is full of offensive curses and abuses, and nevertheless may even end up assuming affectionate and laudatory overtones. All distances among subjects in communication are completely abolished. The language of the marketplace is ambivalent like “a two-faced Janus” (*Ibidem*: 165). Praise and insult are not easily distinguished: praise is ironic and ambivalent and as such is on the limit of abuse, vice versa abuse is easily transformed into praise. Such ambivalence, the simultaneous presence of the negative and the positive, characterizes comic culture generally — parody, irony, comicality: and all this arises from the dynamical, constructive, totalizing vision that subtends comic culture, engendering images that are never definitive, isolated, inert, but, on the contrary, are endowed with regenerating ambivalence.

Dario Fo draws abundantly from the resources of Medieval popular comic culture and its parodic artworks (parodic sacred representations, prayers, liturgies and mysteries). And, in effect, in the documents collected from popular theatre and reassembled in his book, *Mistero Buffo, giullarata popolare in lingua padana de '400*, he privileges the modalities of parodization and derision. The resources of popular comic culture are also present in his mimicry as an actor, his principal mode of theatrical expression: for Fo the *signifying body is the grotesque body*. The capacity for subversion and provocation characteristic of popular culture with its tendency to transcend the homological limits of official culture, is fundamental to his critique of dominant ideology and power. The plasticity, ductility, mobility, comicality, and ambivalence typical of grotesque language in popular culture is used by Fo to show how popular culture can resist passive subjection to the dominant cultural system functional to reproducing the established social order. This is a central aspect of Fo's works and the way he depicts the body; as he says himself, his works are political insofar as they are artistic: ‘all art is politics’ (cf. Fo, ‘Pref.’. to *Attento te...! Il teatro politico di Dario Fo*, 1975). Throughout his works Fo challenges cultural homologation as reinforced by those who detain control over communication.

Dialogues in Dostoevsky's writings, says Bakhtin, are neither dialectical nor synthetic since there is no contradiction arising from *disembodied ideas*: the ultimate givenness for Dostoevsky is not the idea conceived in terms of a monologic conclusion, but rather the event of interacting voices. The logic of Dostoevsky's polyphonic novel is presented in terms of a dia-logic. And this is possible precisely because *ideas are embodied in different voices that are unindifferent to each other*, in spite of, or even because of, the effort to ignore each other, therefore, in spite of the delusory effort to elude the mix up of voices in which differences flourish. Dialogism constitutes the real life of word and thought with respect to which monologic dialogue is an abstraction, a representation relieved of the condition of responsibility without alibis. On the contrary, dialogism as we are describing it implies interconnectedness with every other body in the living world, therefore unlimited responsibility/answerability, the original modality of being in the world of each and every one of us, whose embodiment is expressed through the voice, in a relation to being whose body in its singularity occupies a position that cannot be exchanged with any other. And when, in his notes of 1970—71, Bakhtin describes the process that leads from concrete dia-logics without synthesis to abstract monologic dialectics, he indicates the voice as a fundamental element in the distinction between dia-logics and dialectics:

Take a dialogue and remove the voices (the partitioning of voices), remove the intonations (emotional and individualizing ones), carve out abstract concepts and judgments from living words and responses, cram everything into one abstract consciousness — and that's how you get dialectics⁹.

In Bakhtin's view the voice, its embodiment, the body all distinguish dialogue in Dostoevsky from dialogue in Plato where (as much as dialogue is not completely monologized, pedagogical) the multiplicity of voices is cancelled in the idea. Plato is interested in the disembodied ideal, the idea as being and not as a dialogic event, the event itself of dialogue. In Plato, participation in the idea is not participation in dialogue, but in the being of the idea. Consequently, different and unindifferent voices are annulled in the unity of belonging to a common entity. Moreover, in Bakhtin's view another element that distinguishes between the two types of dialogue is that by comparison with Plato dialogue in Dostoevsky is neither cognitive nor philosophical. Bakhtin prefers to relate dialogue in Dostoevsky to biblical and evangelical dialogue, as in Job for example, because of its internally infinite structure that has no possibility of synthesis and is external to the sphere of knowledge. All the same Bakhtin warns us that not even biblical dialogue provides the more substantial characteristics of dialogue traceable in the writings of Dostoevsky.

English translation from Italian by Susan Petrilli

⁹Bakhtin M. M. (1986). *Speech Genres & Other Late Essays*. Eng. trans. V. W. McGee, ed. C. Emerson and M. Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press. p. 147.