

M.M. Bakhtin in Cinema and Adaptation Studies

Part I. Cinema as language and utterance: or why should one re-read Bakhtin to study cinema

© 2019 S. Mas Diaz

*Sergio Mas Diaz, professor at the University of Barcelona, Spain
E-mail: sergiomasdiaz@gmail.com*

University of Barcelona, Spain

Annotation. M.M. Bakhtin didn't wrote about cinema but his works and those signed by his friends P.N. Medvedev and V.N. Voloshinov would be later read as a source of inspiration to think of cinema as language in a new way, both by studies dealing with cinema semiotics itself and also by those exploring the links between cinema and literature through the analysis of adaptations (as we will see in the last years the study of cinematic adaptations of literary works has developed into a whole discipline of its own and Bakhtin ideas were pivotal in helping scholars of this discipline to go beyond the dilemmas about "fidelity"). We will sketch here these two developments in two separate parts, although some of the scholars involved in both discussions might be the same. By examining this debates we will find new evidence of the potential of the Bakhtin circle's theories to understand not only literary texts but any cultural process.

Keywords: M.M. Bakhtin, Bakhtin circle, theory of cinema, cinema as language, cinema semiotics.

The theory of cinema began to develop very fast and simultaneously in different countries during the interwar period. Louis Delluc published in France *Photogenie* (1920) [3], Bela Balazs published in 1924 in Germany *Der sichtbare Mensch* [1] and the Russian formalists, Eisenstein and D. Vertov began to publish articles in the LEF (the Left Front of the Arts) journal since 1923 and soon an anthology *Poetika kino* was published in 1927 with articles by B. Eikhenbaum, Yu. Tynianov, V. Shklovski [17]. (Tynianov was not only a theorist but a scenarist too, and Shklovski, friend of Eisenstein, would later write about him a monograph.) This formalist approach had become the basis of mainstream theories of cinema in the 1960s.

The formalism of the thirties would be later complemented by the sociological readings of Siegfried Kracauer in his books on German cinema [5, 6, 7], but in the sixties, formalism emerged again as the mainstream approach to film studies: the works by semiotician Christian Metz [8, 9, 10] became popular in France, UK and Italy in the sixties where Eco and Pasolini were also exploring cinema as language. The search for an alternative to formalism began to increase in literary as well as in semiotics studies. Born as a movement to go beyond disciplinary boundaries, "Cultural studies" as a research program, developed by the Group in Birmingham around Stuart Hall, had approached cinema, music, literature and TV with a mix of sociological, psychoanalytical, feminist and poststructuralist tools and his vindication of a contextual reading of culture was instrumental in taking a contextual approach (Marxian English theories of literature like those of R. Williams had a big influence in their first works). The magazine *Screen* was searching for tools to apply to the study of audiovisual texts, MacCabe, Mulvey, Heath had developed through a series of influential articles during the 80s a sophisticated theory of cinema. The semiotics of cinema was also developed in the URSS by Lotman, in 1973 appeared his book on cinema (where Bakhtin is mentioned and his notion of "chuzhaya rech" is employed) [16], and Lotman's book was soon translated into several languages. Later on, another member of the Tartu school mentioned Bakhtin in association with Eisenstein, Vyacheslav

Ivanov researched Eisenstein theories and insisted on their relevance to semiotical theory. Ivanov has several articles on Bakhtin [14] and a whole book on Eisenstein [15]. (It would take too long to dwell on the relations between the Tartu school and the Bakhtin's circle, in these articles we are exploring the reception of Bakhtinian ideas mainly in the West and his fertility in cinema studies.)

When the works of the Bakhtin's circle began to circulate in the West in the late sixties and seventies it took a decade until his potential for film studies was explored skillfully by Robert Stam, who had studied in Paris with Metz and came back to the US. Robert Stam's 1989 book *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism and Film* remains the most coherent attempt to date for the establishment of both a rationale and a methodology of a Bakhtinian approach to film, the chief Bakhtinian concepts utilized in his study are dialogism, heteroglossia and carnival [12]. Twenty years later, Martin Flanagan (2009) turned again to Bakhtin and Stam, although with a more reception-inclined agenda. Flanagan's book is one of the most systematic essays to show the potential of Bakhtin's ideas for Film theory and Film analysis after Stam. While Stam has done excellent work showing the potential of Bakhtin's concepts to the analysis of how and why films are made, Flanagan underlines that "A Bakhtin-inspired film theory can develop platforms for the analysis not only of textual specificity (via chronotope and polyphony) but also of *spectatorial* specificity" [4, p. 186].

Both Stam and Flanagan open their books with Bakhtinian analysis of language which shows the ways it could be applied to audiovisual language too. Stam is not only familiar with all Bakhtinian texts that his circle translated into English but also with the different readings of these works since Kristeva and Todorov. His own interpretation emphasizes a political vision of culture but Stam is explicit about his fascination with Bakhtin, for him "Bakhtin points the way to transcending some of the felt insufficiencies of other theoretical grids" [12, p. 20]. Stam singles out four reasons to prefer a dialogic theory of culture to other familiar theories:

- 1) his concept of dialogism of language and discourse as shared territory inoculates us against the individualist assumptions of formalism and romanticism;
- 2) his emphasis on a boundless context that constantly interacts help us avoid the formalist fetishization of the work of art;
- 3) his emphasis on the situated utterance is an alternative to the ahistoricism of an apolitical semiotics;
- 4) his conviction that all discourse exists in dialogue aligns him with reception theory: both reject referential models of artistic discourse.

As we can see these are also familiar concerns of literary theory. In both theories we find debates about the best way to think about text, either literary or audiovisual texts, films: dealing with or against the tradition of autonomous work of art, idealist traditions of authorship, the formalist understanding of language, etc.

After a very influential construction of Bakhtinian semiotics of cinema in the first two chapters, Stam offers insights on carnivalism taking advantage of his inside knowledge of Brazilian life, art and theories. In the third and the fourth chapter, Stam not only explains thoroughly Bakhtin's ideas about carnival and the Menippean satire but puts them in relation with other theories of carnival, comedy or the feast, from Nietzsche to Henri Lefebvre to Mary Douglas and the important book of Brazilian anthropologist Roberto Da Matta on carnival Carnavais, Malandros e Herois (1980) [2]. This shows his relevance both with examples of literature from Alfred Jarry and the modernist novel by Mario de Andrade "Macunaima" to audiovisual (Stam applies Bakhtin's notions to a wide array of films specifically Buñuel and Godard as well as TV shows).

The second chapter with his considerations on dubbing, subtitles and polyglossia shows Stam's sensitivity to ethnocentrism. Throughout the book his use of examples from Senegalese, Japanese, or Brazilian films and his many references to feminist, and other minority films shows

a rare effort towards cosmopolitanism and engages cultural analysis discussing racism, antisemitism and other social issues.

For Flanagan, too, dialogism is the tool to think of films as situated utterances “It is possible to speak of film as a kind of utterance because, as I will argue, it is not only the producer of meaning but also the site and recipient of meanings projected back onto it by its dialogic communicant and adversary, the spectator” [4, p. 21].

As we have said, film theory was first sketched in Russia by the formalists and later their approach became popular in the structuralist French revision done by Metz in his influential books on cinema as language. In his book, Flanagan again uses Bakhtin to show the limitations of this formalist approach to cinema:

While “a Bakhtinian way of understanding meaning exchange places huge emphasis on the response of the ‘other’, which assumes a determining semantic role in constructing the utterance/event. Metz’s proposal of a uni-directional textual system, his perspective on cinema as ‘one-way communication’, shuts off the film text to the dialogic participation of the spectator. This renders the film viewing as a ‘closed discourse’, something that can be witnessed and decoded but not shared [8, p. 17].

Flanagan shows that Bakhtin might be laying the foundations for an alternative model of cinematic theory aware of the role of the audience. Because Bakhtin conceives of these relations in diachronic, continually evolving terms, a response to a filmic utterance does not have to be immediate to take its place in the overall communication, ensuring that the text continues to ‘live’ through semantic re-accentuations long after its first enunciation or the moment of its widest circulation (we might think of the different meaning profiles that an enduring text like *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) goes through; for instance” Flanagan” [4, p. 28].

Discussing another highly influential contribution to film studies, the psychoanalytic, feminist approach of Laura Mulvey, Flanagan again uses Bakhtin to correct the limitations of her approach: Laura Mulvey’s feminist work on the gaze (her critique of the way mainstream cinema plays with the masculine desire, by talking about the male gaze she means the aesthetic pleasure of the male viewer as a social construct derived from the ideologies and discourses of patriarchy) in mainstream narrative film, in particular, is represented as a vehicle for social conditioning through the reproduction of certain ideological myths [11]. Her works play a role in the Screen group’s project on ideological study of cinema in the service of social critique, but Flanagan sees a limitation that arises from the methods employed by the subject-position tradition is that the spectator, both as an individual and as part of an amorphous, easily duped ‘mass audience’, is too readily seen as a mindless, passive vessel for filtering through cultural myths. “The spectator is here denied any degree of control or choice” [4, p. 32].

Closer to Bakhtin is, according to Flanagan, the famous American scholar Bordwell whose work is reminded by the author “because its investment in the connection between narrative technique and active spectatorship mirrors aspects of a Bakhtinian approach” [4, p. 41] but lacks some abstract and apolitical premises.

Western theories of film have built on the cultural studies tradition developed by the Birmingham group (theories about mass media based on Gramsci or Bourdieu) when it comes to explore the ideological dimensions of films products and the film industry but according to Flanagan not only Gramsci or Bourdieu but the less known theories of Voloshinov can be helpful in this regard because it offers “a conception of differential readings that goes far beyond a simple pluralism that sees all significations and interpretations as equal, instead recognizing the ideologically soaked, transformative effects of communication and representation upon reality” [4, p. 48].

‘Re-accentuation’ is a typically evocative term which Bakhtin employs in ‘Discourse in the Novel’. It captures the way in which symbolic meanings reform in relation to changed contextual surroundings. Bakhtin uses it oppositionally with regard to concepts like canonization

and reification, and says that it is fueled by changes in heteroglossic conditions, but also warns against it as a force that can distort if the conditions prompting it are not truly dialogic. 'Новые образы в литературе очень часто создаются путем переакцентуации старых, путем перевода их из одного акцентного регистра в другой, например из комического плана в трагический или наоборот' [13, с. 232].

Flanagan also shows in his book that we can use the action picture, the oldest genre in film history, to lay foundations for the articulation of critical ideas about cinematic space and time. Chapter 3 looked at the Western Genre and its intertexts. Genres render social myths narratively digestible, but also force ideological constraints on creative expression through the rigid over-determination of form. This is another aspect where literary and film theory converge, both discover genre as a topic that requires to be examined beyond the text, only by focusing on the historical and sociological roles that genre plays can we understand his pragmatics. Here we see another area where Bakhtin's contribution is again remembered.

1. *Balázs B.* Der sichtbare Mensch: oder, Die Kultur des Films. Wien-Leipzig: Deutsch-Österreichischer Verlag, 1924.
2. *Da Matta R.* Carnavais, Malandros e Herois. Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 1980.
3. *Delluc L.* Paris: Editions de Brunoff, 1920.
4. *Flanagan M.* Bakhtin and the Movies New Ways of Understanding Hollywood Film. Palgrave, Macmillan, 2009.
5. *Kracauer S.* From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of The German Film. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1947.
6. *Kracauer S.* The Conquest of Europe on the Screen. The Nazi Newsreel 1939–1940. Washington, D.C., 1943.
7. *Kracauer S.*, Propaganda and the Nazi war film. N.Y.: The Museum of Modern Art Film Library, 1942.
8. *Metz Chr.* Language and cinema. The Hague, Mouton, 1974.
9. *Metz Chr.* Langage et cinema. Paris: Larousse, 1971.
10. *Metz Chr.* Essais sur la signification au cinéma. Paris: Klincksieck, 1968.
11. *Mulvey L.* Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema // Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings. N.Y.: Oxford UP, 1999, pp. 833–844.
12. *Stam R.* Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism, and Film. Baltimore: J. Hopkins Univ. Press, 1989.
13. *Бахтин М.* Слово в романе // Бахтин М. Вопросы литературы и эстетики. Исследования разных лет. М., Худож. лит., 1975. С. 72–233.
14. *Иванов Вяч. Вс.* Значение идей М.М. Бахтина для современной семиотики // М.М. Бахтин: pro et contra. Личность и творчество М.М. Бахтина в оценке русской и мировой гуманитарной мысли. Т. I. СПб.: РХГИ, 2001. С. 266–311.
15. *Иванов Вяч. Вс.* Эстетика Эйзенштейна // Иванов Вяч. Вс. Избранные труды по семиотике и истории культуры. Т. 1. Знаковые системы, кино, поэтика. М.: Языки русской культуры, 1998. С. 143–369.
16. *Лотман Ю.М.* Семиотика кино и проблемы киноэстетики. Таллин: Ээсти Раамат, 1973. 92 с.
17. Поэтика кино / под ред. Б.М. Эйхенбаума. М. [и др.]: Кинопечать, 1927. 191 [1] с.

М.М. Бахтин в исследованиях кино и киноадаптации литературных произведений

Часть I. Кино как язык и высказывание: зачем перечитывать Бахтина для изучения кино

© 2019 С. Мас Диас

*Серхио Мас Диас, профессор Барселонского университета, Испания.
E-mail: sergiomasdiaz@gmail.com*

Барселонский университет, Испания

Аннотация. М.М. Бахтин не писал о кино, но его труды и работы, подписанные его друзьями П.Н. Медведевым и В.Н. Волошиновым, позже будут восприняты как источник вдохновения для того, чтобы по-новому взглянуть на язык кино – в исследованиях как непосредственно посвященных семиотике кино, так и рассматривающих взаимодействие между кино и литературой посредством анализа экранизаций (как мы видим в последние годы, изучение кинематографических адаптаций литературных произведений превратилось в отдельную дисциплину, и идеи Бахтина сыграли ключевую роль в том, чтобы помочь ее представителям выйти за рамки дилемм о «верности»). Мы рассмотрим оба явления в двух частях нашей статьи (при этом некоторые из рассматриваемых нами авторов вовлечены в обе дискуссии). Изучив эти дебаты, мы найдем новые свидетельства того, что идеи Круга Бахтина оказываются плодотворными в интерпретации не только литературных текстов, но и любых культурных процессов.

Ключевые слова: М.М. Бахтин, Круг Бахтина, теория кино, язык кино, кинос семиотика.