

The Bakhtinian *Dialogue* Revisited: A (Non-biosemiotic) View from Historiography and Epistemology of Humanities

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Abstract One of the key concepts and categories of Bakhtin's philosophy, that of the *dialogue*, was perceived by Bakhtin in different ways. Even if this category acquires its typically "Bakhtinian" sense in his works beginning the 1950s, already Bakhtin's early writings contained some germs of his future "dialogical" thoughts, the category of dialogue being connected with other important notions of Bakhtin's theories.

Keywords Dialogue • M. Bakhtin • History of ideas • Linguistics and philosophy

Everything [...] can be reduced to a dialogue.

(Bakhtin 1929b [1997–2012, vol. II, p. 157])¹

There already exist researches where the notions of *dialogue* and *dialogism* worked out by Russian historian of literature and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975) are referred to as concepts having a certain importance (or at least relevance) for biosemiotic studies: let us refer, first of all, to the works by Augusto Ponzio and Susan Petrilli.² Though inspired by these scholars, we cannot claim to be biosemioticians or semioticians, thus, in the following article we set ourselves a much more modest task: on the basis of primary sources, to try to reconstruct in a historiographical and epistemological perspective what Bakhtin himself meant by

¹Extracts from Bakhtin's work are translated by ourselves. They are far from being as distinguished as already existing texts of Bakhtin's translations into English; here we give preference to the fidelity of translation, sometimes at the expense of language or stylistic elegance (it also concerns the titles of Bakhtin's translated works in the References).

²Among the latest studies, let us refer to the article Petrilli and Ponzio 2013 (cf. also Ponzio 2004; Kull 2007; Ponzio 2012 and the corresponding bibliographical references in these articles, especially in the first and in the third ones).

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dialogue.³ We hope that despite this simple goal, our text could be useful to researchers (including, maybe, biosemioticians), interested in Bakhtin (as he certainly deserves it) and wishing to be guided by his thoughts in their own reflections.⁴

Today the name of Mikhail Bakhtin is immediately associated with the notions of *dialogue* and *dialogism*. In this article, without claiming any completeness, we are going to try to briefly answer the following questions:

- What did Bakhtin mean by *dialogue* and in which way was this category connected with other key-notions of Bakhtin's work?
- In which way have Bakhtin's ideas on dialogue evolved with time?
- Who were the forerunners of his reflections on dialogue? (The answer to this question seems particularly important given the actual tendency to present Bakhtin as an unparalleled genius whose work had nothing in common with the research conducted at his time.)

The idea of a “dialogical Bakhtin” has attracted scholars' attention for a long time. However the limited volume of this article requires to minimize references not only to secondary sources, but also to the works written by researchers who had presumably been Bakhtin's forerunners in his “dialogic” reflections (though the names of some of them will appear in this study). For this reason, we shall have to limit our analysis to some presumed sources of Bakhtin's ideas on dialogue and to some of Bakhtin's works which are currently available. First of all, the works that are sometimes attributed to Bakhtin will be excluded from the analysis, because their authorship remains questionable – such as, for instance, the article “Contemporary vitalism” (1926) (written by Bakhtin or Ivan Kanaev?), the books *Freudianism* (1927) (written by Bakhtin or by Valentin Voloshinov?), *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship: A Critical Introduction to Sociological Poetics* (1928) (Bakhtin or Pavel Medvedev?), *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (1929) (Bakhtin or Voloshinov?), likewise some other articles with debatable authorship.⁵

³ Similar attempts have also been undertaken in the past. However, the range of reliable sources that one can use, increases with time, that is why returning to this issue does not seem superfluous.

⁴ The article which follows was published in French for the first time (*Cahiers de praxématique*, 2011, 57, pp. 31–50), as the text of our plenary paper presented at the Conference “Dialogisme: langue, discours” (Université Montpellier-III/CNRS), organized in Montpellier in September 2010. The English translation is a slightly revised version of the original text. – E.V.

⁵ Though some of these works contain certain ideas connected with the subject of our article.

Trying to Define Bakhtinian *Dialogue*

Although the category of dialogue was one of the most important for Bakhtin, we do not find any strict definition of *dialogue* in his work.⁶ Its reconstruction on the basis of the quasi totality of his work⁷ shows that the notion of dialogue was understood by Bakhtin in at least two different ways. In its narrow sense⁸ (we shall designate it as “linguistic”), the dialogue was understood by Bakhtin as a particular organisation of speech, opposed to monologue⁹; Bakhtin also perceived dialogism as a discussion or a polemic.¹⁰ Another interpretation of dialogue in Bakhtin’s work is, on the contrary, extremely broad; here already it seems to be possible to insist on a typically “Bakhtinian” sense of this category.¹¹ In this sense, Bakhtin analyzed dialogue at different levels:

- social and psychological (dialogue was connected with the problems of developing consciousness and its origin, etc.),
- religious (each utterance presupposed at least two receivers, and not the only one [real and particular]¹²). Although Bakhtin refuses to reduce the “third” participant in question to a “mystical or metaphysical entity”, the following series of synonyms is present in his work: “[...] dialogue, asking [*voprošanie*], prayer”¹³,
- culturological (dialogue being considered as a universal means, even as a *sine qua non* condition for the existence of culture and, at the same time, as one of the key facilitators of the permanent renewal of culture),
- existential and ethical (dialogue as an instrument of the “accomplishment” of a human being as a person: it is through dialogue that a human being “opens himself” not only to others, but also to himself, learning to know himself as a unique being),
- philosophical (dialogue as a premise of the existence of ideas, each idea originating in a dialogue of several types of consciousness), etc.¹⁴

The dialogic for Bakhtin is connected with the sense (understood in a large way but obviously with reference to human beings) and its transmission (from the trans-

⁶In general, Bakhtin did not like definitions and was the first to recognize it, emphasizing his “love for variations and for a multitude of terms referring to one and the same phenomenon” (Bakhtin 1971–1974 [1997–2012, vol. VI, p. 431]).

⁷Some of Bakhtin’s studies (or their parts) have been lost forever.

⁸In this study, we shall not distinguish *sense* and *meaning*.

⁹Bakhtin 1959–1960 [1997–2012, vol. V, p. 325], etc.

¹⁰Bakhtin 1961 [1997–2012, vol. V, p. 332, etc.].

¹¹Unless otherwise stated, speaking of dialogue in this article we shall refer to this broad sense.

¹²Bakhtin 1961 [1997–2012, vol. V, p. 338 *sq.*].

¹³Bakhtin, early 1920s–1974 [1986, p. 515].

¹⁴The content of Bakhtinian *dialogue* does not allow to define any exact number of these levels. On the other hand, Bakhtin’s “dialogic” concerns were not limited to his theoretical researches, cf. for instance Bakhtin’s criticism of the “monological” direction in the teaching of Russian at school (Bakhtin 1945 [1997–2012]).

fer of most intimate verbal interventions to that of collective knowledge from one generation to another)¹⁵ – including the dialogue in the narrowest, linguistic sense. That is why, even though the Russian word *dialogue* was already three centuries old by Bakhtin’s time, used as it was in his works, this lexeme gained if not a terminological,¹⁶ at least a categorical novelty.

Speaking of dialogue in the broad sense, Bakhtin apparently counted on the more or less common and ordinary interpretation and understanding of this word by his readers. But today this mixture of two semantic levels of the word’s use (in their meaning of everyday life and at the same time in another sense, less widespread and more particular one) creates difficulties for the reception of Bakhtin’s ideas, because it is not always easy to understand which of the two *dialogues* is discussed in one or another of his works.

From the Relation “*I (Self) vs the Other*” to the *Dialogue*

For most of his life, Bakhtin remained an unofficial figure of Soviet culture. Likewise, one of the forms of his work was also unofficial *par excellence*: his preparatory notes. The scholar wrote them throughout his life (from the 1920s to 1974) to outline his future major projects. The words *dialogical*, *dialogism* and *dialogue* (in the both above-mentioned senses, but especially in the second, broader one) are much more frequent in his notes and, generally in his work, dating from the 1950s–1970s.¹⁷ Therefore, the notion of dialogue retained Bakhtin’s attention far more in his later works than at the beginning of his intellectual career. However, already in Bakhtin’s early works the seeds of his future “dialogic” ideas could be found: at the heart of Bakhtin’s “dialogical” reflections going back to the last period of his intellectual activity were his earlier ideas on the relationship between *I (Self)* and the *Other*, together with several other categories of Bakhtin’s philosophy related to these reflections.

In the first third of the twentieth century, the problem of the relationship between *I (Self)* and the *Other* was discussed very intensely both in Russia and in Western Europe; some of Bakhtin’s forerunners in this field were mentioned in his work.¹⁸

¹⁵ Cf. Baxtin 1963 [1997–2012, vol. VI, p. 51].

¹⁶ The absence of terminological strictness in the case of Bakhtin and his “conceptual plasticity” (cf. Brès and Rosier 2007, p. 437 sq.) do not allow such a formulation.

¹⁷ In Bakhtin’s intellectual activity several phases could be distinguished. During the 1920s, Bakhtin was interested in the problems of general (especially literary) aesthetics, seen through the prism of philosophy. In the 1930s, he studied, first of all, historical poetics of literary genres. Finally, in his research of the 1950s–1970s, the scholar came back to a number of subjects of his philosophy of aesthetics in the 1920s, such as the problem of text in general, the study of utterances, of speech genres, etc.

¹⁸ Let us note, however, that Bakhtin, who did not like definitions, did not like references to particular sources either: there are not many references in his work for at least three important reasons. First, some of his works (especially his early texts), anyway, remained unfinished (including at the

Among others, there were Max Scheler (in particular, it is with a reference to Scheler that Bakhtin mentions in his book on Fyodor Dostoevsky in 1929, the “criticism of monologism as a specifically Kantian form of idealism”¹⁹ which began in the West in the 1920s²⁰), Ludwig Feuerbach, whose philosophy (where the category of the *Other* was a central one) was well-known in Russia at that time (Bakhtine refers to Feuerbach several times²¹), Hermann Cohen. In the early twentieth century, Cohen was sometimes seen in Russia as one of very few philosophers who seemed to have understood the importance of the connection between *I (Self)* and the *Other* as a fundamental category of ethics and of the “first philosophy”: unlike Martin Buber, Cohen acknowledged *der Andere* as (**a priori**) particular and different compared to *Ich*, therefore the relation *Ich – Du* was neither symmetrical nor reversible in his view. Bakhtin’s interest for Cohen, the head of the neo-Kantian school of Marburg, also reflects his belief in this current: Bakhtin considered it the only one capable of solving the problem “*I (Self) vs the Other*” (or, in any case, oriented towards solving this problem). On the contrary, Bakhtin criticized the philosophy of his time for not having worked enough on the problem of “the *other I (Self)*”, of “*I (Self) vs the Other*”, and in this Bakhtin was not alone. Apart from Bakhtin, the category of the *Other* was discussed at that time in Russia by many other scholars. Among them were not only philosophers and historians of philosophy (Boris Vysheslavcev, Ivan Lapshin, Alexander Vvedensky, Nikolai Lossky, etc.), but also psychologists (Vladimir Bekhterev, Lev Vygotsky, etc.). These discussions also constituted an important source of Bakhtinian theories.

It is in the light of the category “*I (Self) vs the Other*” that, already in the 1920s, Bakhtin assumed the dialogical character (even if he did not always use the same word) of knowledge and cognition in general. According to Bakhtin, in the field of knowledge and cognition, there are neither actions nor works “isolated” from one another,²² which presupposes that the “objective unity” of knowledge and cognition has neither beginning nor end.²³ Speaking about knowledge and cognition, Bakhtin discusses *dialogic exchanges* that take place, among others, *between individuals*. In Bakhtin’s philosophy, one of the important concepts which appears already in his early works is the *sobytie bytija*, literally the ‘event of being’. It presupposed the perception of being [*bytie*] by (individual) consciousness²⁴ and was connected to the

level of references). Secondly, Bakhtin always counted on a sufficiently high level of his potential readers (*sapientia sat*) and sometimes consciously refused to give precise references. Finally, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, there existed a particular genre of philosophical treatise that did not involve references in general.

¹⁹ Baxtin 1929b [1997–2012, vol. II, p. 60].

²⁰ This note disappeared from the second edition of the book (Baxtin 1963 [1997–2012]).

²¹ Cf. for instance Baxtin 1923–1924 [1997–2012, vol. I, p. 125], etc.

²² Baxtin 1924 [1997–2012, vol. I, p. 285].

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 318.

²⁴ Baxtin 1923–1924 [1997–2012, vol. I, p. 246 *sq.*].

phenomenology of Edmund Husserl²⁵ and to the philosophy of being of Vyacheslav Ivanov (discussed, for instance, in Bakhtin's book[s] on Dostoevsky²⁶).

In particular, in order for an aesthetic²⁷ event to be fulfilled, at least two participants are necessary – as well as two types of consciousness, different and therefore capable of entering into dialogic relations with one another. For Bakhtin, the event of being does not occur if one of the consciences dissolves completely into the other – this case would be that of empathy [*včuvstvovanie*] rather than of dialogue.²⁸

The *Other* as a category constituted a point of intersection between the notions of dialogue and of the event of being. This way, it was considered as the organizing force of all aesthetic forms, therefore, some events (above all, the “creatively productive”,²⁹ unique and irreversible ones) could not, by definition, occur at the level of a single consciousness. The being, *bytie*, was not an abstract category for Bakhtin, but rather a “live” event, presupposing a (dialogic) interaction of a particular human life with the existential universe of others: the search of one's own voice would be, in reality, that of a *Word* [*slovo*]³⁰ which is greater than *Me* (or any *Self*) and which is connected with the *Other*. Because as (*my*)*Self*, *I* can never be a “primary author” either of my life or of my works: “One needs to stop being only oneself in order to enter history”, says Bakhtin.³¹

One could distinguish the premises of this idea already in Bakhtin's earliest article to have “survived” to the present day.³² Although Bakhtin does not use the word *dialogue* here, the idea of dialogue is still there in his text. For already in this work, Bakhtin explicitly manifests his system of values, opposing what is “mechanic” [*mexaničeskoe*] and superficial or external [*vnešnee*] (seen negatively) to what is, instead, “impregnated with the interior unity of sense”³³ (judged positively). It is the

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 246, etc. It is also the deep Bakhtinian antipsychologism (cf. for instance Baxtin 1918–1924 [1997–2012, vol. I, p. 15 sq.]) that brings him closer to Husserl; as for the dialogue, it has never been studied by Bakhtin on a purely psychological level.

²⁶ Baxtin 1929b [1997–2012] and 1963 [1997–2012].

²⁷ For Bakhtin, *aesthetic* implied phenomena related to the humanities, unlike natural sciences. In this opposition a reference to Wilhelm Dilthey (cf. Baxtin 1966–1967 – ? (a) [1997–2012, vol. VI, p. 403, 407]) and to Heinrich Rickert (*ibid.*, p. 407) could be distinguished, even though, for Bakhtin, the boundaries between these two types of knowledge were not always impenetrable (*ibid.*).

²⁸ In the early twentieth century, the reception in Russia of the theory of *Einfühlung* ‘empathy’ (immediately associated with the name of Theodor Lipps, to whom Bakhtin referred several times [Baxtin 1923–1924 (1997–2012, vol. I, p. 94, 138, 140), etc.]), took place to a large extent through Lapshin; in the 1910s, the concept of *Einfühlung* was already widespread in the Russian humanities.

²⁹ Baxtin 1923–1924 [1997–2012, vol. I, p. 159].

³⁰ The Russian word *slovo* refers not only to the ‘word’, but also to the ‘discourse’, to the ‘speech’, etc. (cf. in Bakhtin's work [Baxtin 1953–1954 (1997–2012, vol. V, p. 171)]) and sometime has religious connotations (*In the beginning was the Word...*).

³¹ Baxtin 1924 [1997–2012, vol. I, p. 280].

³² Baxtin 1919 [1986].

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

interaction of the different parts of a whole (their dialogue) that allows to overcome the mechanical nature of such links – let us emphasize here an implicit reference of Bakhtin to Auguste Comte and his principle of *solidarity*. Likewise, speaking in this article about the human personality, Bakhtin echoes discussions on the isolation of art from life: this problem was one of the most crucial in the early twentieth century both in Russia (cf. the works by Bakhtin, Gustav Shpet, etc.) and in Western Europe (cf. Rickert, Husserl and others).

In Bakhtin's idea of interaction and of interpenetration of different parts of the whole (for example, of the human personality³⁴), a reference to the category of dialogue could be presumed for the following reason. One of the important notions that appears already in Bakhtin's early works is *vnenaxodimost'*, 'outsideness' presupposing an inability of *Others* to be at the same time and in the same place as *I*. This notion implies the category of the *Other*, who would be the only one capable of seeing *Me* as *I* am.³⁵ Therefore a human being alone could never be the author of his own "value", since he needs to be "realized" – "impregnated with the interior unity of sense" – through the prism of the "evaluating soul" [*ocenivajuščaja duša*] of the Other,³⁶ which also presupposes the category of responsibility (answerability) [*otvetstvennost'*] with regard to the Other.³⁷

Dialogue as a Cultural Unity: Between Literature and Philosophy

According to Bakhtin, dialogic exchanges exist not only between individuals, but also

- *between particular ideas*, the dialogue being at the very origin of human sciences and every idea being considered as an echo to other thoughts³⁸;
- *between texts³⁹ and their parts.*⁴⁰ In particular, in respect to literary texts, the origins of literary works for Bakhtin sometimes go back to very ancient times, to the folk culture (he shows it while analyzing the works of François Rabelais, Nikolai Gogol, etc.⁴¹). In turn, every work is reflected in the later texts;

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Cf. similar ideas connected with the metaphors of reverberation and reflection in the works of other Russian philosophers in the early twentieth century (in particular, Lapshin and Shpet who analyzed, among others, Paul Natorp's related ideas).

³⁶ Baxtin 1923–1924 [1997–2012, vol. I, p. 111].

³⁷ Baxtin 1918–1924 [1997–2012].

³⁸ Baxtin 1959–1960 [1997–2012, vol. V, p. 306 sq.].

³⁹ In the broad sense of the word, Bakhtin understood the *text* as a "coherent whole complex of signs" (*ibid.*, p. 308), that is, as a semiotic unit *par excellence* (on this subject cf. Ponzio 2007).

⁴⁰ Baxtin 1959–1960 [1997–2012, vol. V, p. 308].

⁴¹ Baxtin 1940 [1997–2012], 1940/1970 [1997–2012] and 1965 [1997–2012].

- dialogues also exist *between literary genres and between languages*. This phenomenon, according to Bakhtin, is typical especially for the modern era, but it began already during the Renaissance, when languages came into active interaction with one another. This process promoted the development of linguistic ideas (any language could be better studied and understood through the prism of another one)⁴²;
- one could also speak about dialogue *between different fields of art and culture*: for instance, this is how Bakhtin speaks about analogies between the compositional forms of different arts, such analogies being determined by the common character of their architectonic goals.⁴³ In the same way, for example, Russian poetics as a discipline, says Bakhtin, would gain a lot if it were to connect with other arts, with the unity of art in general (otherwise, it would lead to an extreme simplification of its tasks and to a superficial and incomplete study of its object),⁴⁴ etc.;
- dialogic exchanges also exist *between cultures* as such, says Bakhtin, entering into controversy with Oswald Spengler⁴⁵ whose philosophy was well known and often discussed by other Russian thinkers (Semyon Frank, Fyodor Stepun, Nikolai Berdyaev, Yakov Bukshpan) at the time. Refusing to consider culture as a “closed circle”, Bakhtin offers an opposite conception of culture, perceived as an open unit interacting with other cultures. In addition, a real understanding of other cultures is only possible in a dialogue with them.⁴⁶ This way, according to Bakhtin, the novel was born at a particular era thanks to a (dialogic) interaction of languages and cultures and began to develop intensively as a specific genre. Among various types of the novel’s origins (rhetorical, erotic, satirical, autobiographical, utopian ones, etc.), Bakhtin mentions its “dialogic” roots pointing out that they had not been properly studied yet.⁴⁷

Regarding Bakhtin’s own work on the novel, it is his book on Dostoevsky which is the best known today in relation to his “dialogical” ideas. But already before launching an analysis of Dostoevsky’s novels, Bakhtin had thought about the “dialogical” problems⁴⁸ in the light of literature and aesthetics in general, discussing the following issues:

⁴² Baxtin 1940 [1997–2012, vol. IV(1), p. 489 *sq.*].

⁴³ Baxtin 1924 [1997–2012, vol. I, pp. 278–279 *sq.*].

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Cf. Baxtin 1918–1924 [1997–2012, vol. I, p. 51] and especially Baxtin 1970 [1997–2012, vol. VI, p. 455].

⁴⁶ Baxtin 1970 [1997–2012].

⁴⁷ Baxtin, early 1920s–1974 [1986, p. 514].

⁴⁸ In his early studies, Bakhtin also touches upon the problem of dialogues (in the narrow sense of the word) in literary works – for example, speaking about dialogue in drama (Baxtin 1923–1924 [1997–2012, vol. I, p. 75 *sq.*]), etc.

1. *Dialogues between the author and his character(s)*: author and character meet in the literary work, entering into relations of various types (depending on particular writers and genres, etc.)⁴⁹;
2. The creation of a literary character was sometimes tantamount, in Bakhtin's view, to a response that the author gave to his own. It is through the complex dialogical relationship between author and character in literary works that one could explain, among other things, the fact that the language of literature is not always the same, but changes from one passage to another (cf. also *hereroglossia*). Therefore even *the relationship between form and content in a literary work could be perceived dialogically*;
3. Speaking of the literary work, one could also distinguish *a dialogue between a work and its readers*: reading a text, we do not perceive it "outside" ourselves, but we appropriate it, making it "ours", in order, subsequently, to respond and/or to react to it in a certain way.⁵⁰ Here once again, Bakhtin emphasizes the role of dialogue in the process of cognition;
4. Finally, Bakhtin insists on the importance of *dialogue(s) between the literary work and the context*, above all, historical, of *its time*. The writer always determines his position in relation to the foregoing culture and events; therefore, in order to understand a literary text, we must place it in the particular context in which it appeared (what Bakhtin did himself when analyzing, for example, Lev Tolstoy's fiction,⁵¹ etc.).

But it is especially about Dostoevsky's novels⁵² that Bakhtin was thinking in the light of his interest in dialogue and in dialogism in literature and in the "whole ideological culture" of that time.⁵³ In the early 1960s, Bakhtin reworked the first edition of his book on Dostoevsky, being directed by his ever growing interest in the problems of not only historical poetics, but also of dialogue and dialogism. However, already in the first edition of his book he mentions criticism against the "monological" paradigm of so-called classical philosophy (Bakhtin traces this paradigm to the Kantian idealism) and the gradual replacement of this paradigm by the "dialogic" principle of thought.⁵⁴ Regarding the dialogue in the narrow sense, according to Bakhtin, in literature before Dostoevsky, replicas of dialogues in novels had been of a monological character: each character-participant had his own universe, their worlds being closed to one another. Dostoevsky, on the contrary, created a particular kind of novel – the polyphonic⁵⁵ or dialogic one (for Bakhtin, *dialogue* couples with *polyphony* and these words are often used in his work as synonyms). In addition, in the dialogues in Dostoevsky's novels, one of the charac-

⁴⁹Bakhtin 1923–1924 [1997–2012].

⁵⁰Cf. also Bakhtin 1953–1954 [1997–2012, vol. V, p. 170].

⁵¹Bakhtin 1929a [1997–2012] and 1929c [1997–2012].

⁵²Bakhtin 1929b [1997–2012] and 1963 [1997–2012].

⁵³Bakhtin 1929b [1997–2012, vol. II, p. 59].

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, p. 60.

⁵⁵Bakhtin 1963 [1997–2012, vol. VI, p. 7].

ters sometimes embodies the inner voice of another hero. This thesis implicitly reflects the discussions of Russian psychologists about inner speech. For instance, Lev Vygotsky's works explore transformation, in a child's life, of external speech into internal one. Bakhtin could hardly ignore these discussions, even though, speaking of Dostoevsky's novels, he reverses the process described by Vygotsky: the inner speech of his characters "externalizes" itself in others.⁵⁶ What is more, dialogues between characters in Dostoevsky's novels often seem unfinished, so that nobody "wins". It allows, in principle, to continue these dialogues indefinitely, like any real dialogue in the broad sense of the word. Here, according to Bakhtin, a border passes between dialogue and rhetoric⁵⁷: if the purpose of rhetoric is to defeat an opponent, in dialogue, on the contrary, the metaphorical death of one participant would be equivalent to the end of the dialogue as such. In contrast to the rhetoric, the purpose of dialogue is to find the truth and to get closer to the truth. This interactionist side of the dialogue is also related to its social dimension, which could be illustrated in Bakhtin's work through a comparison of two editions of his book on Dostoevsky. There are some contexts where the word *social* in the 1929 edition is replaced by *dialogic* in the edition of 1963.⁵⁸

Therefore the two aforementioned senses of the word *dialogue* in Bakhtin's work obviously "meet" in his book on Dostoevsky⁵⁹ and we can consider his book published in 1929 as a kind of intermediary between Bakhtin's early and later writings (devoted, among others, to the historical poetics).

Bakhtin could not bypass the notion of dialogue speaking of his other hero, François Rabelais: although in his work on Rabelais the notion of dialogue understood as the basis of any culture is far from being at the center of attention, the idea of dialogue is here nevertheless present. First, Bakhtin discusses dialogues in Rabelais' work in the usual (linguistic) sense of this word: deprived of his own inner world, the human being here manifests himself through his "exterior" behavior – including the verbal behaviour, or more particularly the dialogues in which he participates.⁶⁰ On the other hand, in Rabelais' work the most unexpected things and phenomena can enter into dialogues: Rabelais breaks off the ordinary semantic links by establishing, in their place, much less predictable connections.⁶¹ The world-

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, Chapter 5, Part 4. Cf. at the same time the notion of "microdialogue" which implies, on the contrary, the internalization of dialogic replicas (*ibid.*, p. 51). This way, Bakhtin insisted on the dialogic nature of even interior "monologues", emphasizing their importance in his book on Dostoevsky.

⁵⁷ Cf. in particular Baxtin 1966–1967 – ? (b) [1997–2012, vol. VI, p. 413] and early 1920s–1974 [1986, p. 528]. In his book on Dostoevsky, dialogue is also opposed to the (Hegelian) dialectics, the latter implying the process of formation and growth (Baxtin 1963 [1997–2012, vol. VI, p. 33 sq.]). This opposition is also present in Bakhtin's other works (including in Baxtin 1959–1960 [1997–2012]).

⁵⁸ Cf. Baxtin 1929b [1997–2012, vol. II, p. 99] vs 1963 [1997–2012, vol. VI, p. 225].

⁵⁹ In addition to those mentioned above, this book also contains reflections on some other aspects of dialogues in literature.

⁶⁰ Baxtin 1937–1938 [1986, p. 272].

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 203–204.

view that had been typical for the Middle Ages was in the process of disintegration at the Renaissance, and the task of Rabelais consisted in constructing another vision of the world, the one that would reflect better a “new material basis”⁶² of the society in question. Finally, with the example of Rabelais, Bakhtin tries to connect two of his key concepts: *dialogue* and *carnival*. He emphasizes the carnivalesque character of the Rabelaisian universe: carnival eliminates distance between people who, in this way, become able to start a true contact (a dialogue) with one another.⁶³ In general, Bakhtin’s emphasis on the idea of dialogue and interaction has allowed him to put in a new way *the problem of borders*, which was particularly important for the whole of Soviet culture in the first half of the twentieth century and also discussed outside the USSR. For Bakhtin, the most interesting phenomena in the field of culture occur precisely *on the borders*.⁶⁴ In addition, culture itself, for Bakhtin, has no boundaries, it “lies entirely *on the borders*, the borders go anywhere, penetrating all its elements”.⁶⁵ Therefore, no cultural action, no phenomenon of culture could ever be neutral, they are always defined in relation to something else. This way, the “unity of culture”⁶⁶ is ensured.

For example, it is by the disappearance of particular boundaries that Bakhtin explains the emergence of new literary genres such as parody, this “intentioned ‘dialogized’ hybrid” (or, in other words, a result of mixing styles, languages, dialects, etc.).⁶⁷ For the same reason, among characters of folk culture⁶⁸ who were obviously very dear to Bakhtin, there are jesters, cheaters and fools, that is, those “on the borders” between several worlds, who are able to enter “dialogues” with different universes. That is why, in literature, these characters often become those expressing not only “the absolute truth”, but also the author’s position.⁶⁹

As it happens, Bakhtin himself could be seen as someone who worked *on the boundaries* between different areas of culture, these areas entering into dialogue with each other. One of his favorite subjects of reflection, already in his early works, was the link between the history of literature and the history of philosophy, between literary and philosophical phenomena in general. If, speaking of Friedrich Nietzsche

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 239.

⁶³ Baxtin 1965 [1997–2012, vol. IV(2), p. 25].

⁶⁴ The same thing would be true in case of individuals (Baxtin 1961 [1997–2012, vol. V, p. 344]).

⁶⁵ Baxtin 1924 [1997–2012, vol. I, p. 282]. Here Bakhtin echoes philosophy of Rickert who was well known in Russia at that time. For Rickert, the main methodological problem of philosophy concerned the distinction between different fields of culture, and the boundaries between them. In general, Bakhtin uses the word *boundary* in different contexts – in particular, reflecting in his early works on philosophical problems, with references to Friedrich Schleiermacher, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Paul Natorp, Arthur Schopenhauer.

⁶⁶ Baxtin 1924 [1997–2012, vol. I, p. 267 *sq.*].

⁶⁷ Baxtin 1940 [1986, p. 385].

⁶⁸ It is speaking of dialogue (among others) that Bakhtin opposes the official culture (which reflects only the “small experience” of a particular society) to folk culture (reflecting a “great experience” of humanity), unlimited and infinite, in which everything is alive, everything speaks, everything is dialogical (Baxtin, early 1920s–1974 [1986, pp. 518–520]).

⁶⁹ Baxtin 1937–1938 [1986, p. 194 *sq.*].

and Arthur Schopenhauer, Bakhtin defines their theoretical conceptions as “mid-philosophical”, “mid-literary”,⁷⁰ one could say the same thing about Bakhtin’s own work.⁷¹

This is how Bakhtin defines his own work: “We shall be obliged to name our analysis a philosophical one, failing to find a better definition: for it is neither a linguistic analysis, nor a philological, nor a literary, nor any other one. [...] our research is on the border of all these disciplines [...]”⁷² – this statement seems to be a quintessence of the very logic of interdisciplinary research, which is such a current issue at present.⁷³

Dialogue, First and Primary Category

There is nothing surprising that, with such a credo, Bakhtin was sometimes opposed to the very existence of particular branches of knowledge – such as, among others, linguistics: he expresses this point of view in his work “The problem of speech genres”,⁷⁴ which is particularly important for a better understanding of the evolution of categorical values in the scholar’s work.

⁷⁰ Baxtin 1923–1924 [1997–2012, vol. I, p. 86].

⁷¹ Already in Bakhtin’s early works, namely in “Author and hero in aesthetic activity”, his thoughts on the literary works serve as a pretext for him to talk about philosophy: there are very few examples from literature in this work; even the word *author* here refers not only to writers, but also to the creative acts always being in need of the *Other*. This way, Bakhtinian ideas about the relationship between author and character are transformed into thoughts about the relationship *I (Self) vs the Other* in general. In the work about the “philosophy of the act”, some examples from literature seem to be lost in Bakhtin’s philosophical reflections. Afterwards, in his book on Dostoevsky, it is philosophy that Bakhtin blames for its monological nature, discussing polyphony and dialogism in literature (Baxtin 1929b [1997–2012, vol. II, p. 59 sq.]). Similarly, in some of his later texts, it is not always easy to understand whether Bakhtin discusses literature or philosophy, dialogues in literary works or dialogical relations in a much broader sense. Apart from Bakhtin, many other Russian scholars of the early twentieth century also pondered the problems of relationship between author and character not only in literary, but also in philosophical contexts: among them, were Ivan Lapshin, Alexander Lappo-Danilevsky, Timofey Rainov, Lev Pumpyansky, etc.

⁷² Baxtin 1959–1960 [1997–2012, vol. V, p. 306]. In his dialogues with Victor Duvakin Bakhtin defines himself in the following way: “[I am] a philosopher, rather than a philologist. [...] I am a thinker” (Besedy 1973 [1996, p. 42]). Recorded two years before his death, these dialogues can now serve as Bakhtin’s memoirs not only of his own life, but also of his contemporaries and of a whole era.

⁷³ One of the inspirations of Bakhtin’s reflections was certainly Buber, with his discovery of the domain of *das Zwischenmenschliche*.

⁷⁴ Baxtin, early 1950s [1997–2012]. Several issues discussed in this article by Bakhtin are also present in his preparatory texts, eloquently titled “Dialogue(s)”, even if in one of these texts appears a seemingly unexpected, for Bakhtin’s work, topic, that of the *relative* character of the opposition *dialogue vs monologue* (*ibid.*, p. 209).

According to Bakhtin, speech genres consist of particular and relatively stable types of utterances⁷⁵ that each sphere of use of one or another language develops. Unlike sentences or propositions, utterances had not been properly studied by linguistics yet, according to Bakhtin, and this was for several reasons. First, the communicative (or dialogical) function – that is, according to Bakhtin, which is essential to language, had not attracted linguists' attention very much. Second, utterances are very heterogeneous: from replicas of a dialogue (dialogue in the narrow sense of this word was, according to Bakhtin, the simplest and the most typical form of verbal communication) to great novels.⁷⁶

This criticism of linguistics (though very few linguists are named in Bakhtin's studies) explains the fact that Bakhtin even proposes a new term for the future science which would study utterances: metalinguistic, or “translinguistic”.⁷⁷ Once again, this science would exist “on the borders” of several branches, because the relationships between utterances, the *dialogical* relations would be neither of a linguistic nor psychological, nor philological, (etc.) character. Rather those are relations implying a “transmission of sense”.

For Bakhtin, the utterance represents a real and genuine unit of *communication*, unlike the proposition, the main unit of *language*. In addition, every utterance (unlike propositions) has an immediate contact with reality, thus being unique.⁷⁸ Moreover, unlike boundaries between propositions, those between utterances are determined by the alternation of speakers (which is easiest to see in a dialogue in the narrow sense of this word). Finally, in the Bakhtinian sense, the utterance must necessarily be addressed to someone, and the scholar especially insists on the fact that the receiver is not passive, but active, in the same way as the person producing utterances. For, besides the fact that he understands, the receiver of any utterance is supposed to react to what he hears afterwards: “The word wants to be listened, to be understood, to be answered to, and it wants, in its turn, to answer to another answer, and so *ad infinitum*. It enters into a dialogue where sense has no end”.⁷⁹

Therefore, the speaker, in turn, answers to previously produced utterances, so that the exchange of utterances, the dialogue becomes infinite, like science, art and culture, these particular forms of human activity presupposing the transmission of sense. It means that every utterance could/should be considered as a link in an unfinite chain of statements, and all our utterances (all our ideas, works, etc.) are

⁷⁵The notion of utterance [*vyskazyvanie*] in the linguistic sense of the word appears in Bakhtin's work as from 1924 (Baxtin 1924 [1997–2012]), visibly under the influence of Lev Yakubinsky. In some other Bakhtin's texts (Baxtin 1918–1924 [1997–2012], 1923–1924 [1997–2012], etc.), the word *utterance* is, in addition, used as a synonym of *judgment*.

⁷⁶As early as the 1920s, Bakhtin spoke about utterances as very heterogeneous units, which made them particularly difficult to be studied (Baxtin 1924 [1997–2012, vol. I, pp. 300–301]).

⁷⁷The idea of metalinguistics as a particular discipline is already outlined in 1929, in Bakhtin's book on Dostoevsky, even if this word is still not used there (cf., on the contrary, Baxtin 1963 [1997–2012, vol. VI, p. 203]).

⁷⁸That is why, in particular, no translated text would be completely adequate to its original (Baxtin 1959–1960 [1997–2012, vol. V, p. 310]).

⁷⁹Baxtin 1961 [1997–2012, vol. V, p. 338].

penetrated by the utterances of others.⁸⁰ Therefore, the speaker, in the same way as the receiver, *I* (Self) and the *Other*, are formed in a dialogue, rather than preceding its realisation. This change seems crucial in Bakhtin's "dialogic" conception, compared to his early works.

If *dialogic* was, for Bakhtin, everything which implied sense and its transmission, already in the early 1920s he stated that "sense cannot be born, sense cannot die – in the same way as continuity of sense in life can be neither initiated nor completed".⁸¹ That is why, "each sense will one day celebrate its resurrection, nothing will be forgotten".⁸² This way, the celebration of *dialogue* in Bakhtin's work seems to become a hymn to life itself: "Life is inherently dialogical. To live means to participate in a dialogue".⁸³

Summarizing what has been stated above, we come to the following conclusions:

1. Without ever defining dialogue, Bakhtin uses this word in (at least) two ways: in its narrow sense (linguistic) and its broad sense (referring to the idea of the transmission of sense).
2. It is mainly from the 1950s onwards that dialogue in the broad ("Bakhtinian") sense of the word draws the attention of the scholar. However these thoughts go back to the ideas of his youth about the relationship between *I* (Self) and the *Other*; between the whole and its parts, between art and science on the one hand, and life on the other, etc. Reflecting on these constant subjects of his philosophy, Bakhtin had forerunners not only in Russia but also in Western Europe (primarily among German philosophers). Read in this way, through the prism of the intellectual context of his time, Bakhtin's work appears less original than it could, seen at first glance.
3. Compared to his own early works, in his later research, Bakhtin explicitly changes his priorities. If at the beginning, at least two participants – *I* (Self) and the *Other* – were thought to be necessary for a dialogue, with time it is the dialogue that appears as the first and primary category, the *sine qua non* condition of the formation of categories such as (in particular) *I* (Self) and the *Other*.

Finally, although by now, Bakhtinian *dialogue* has turned into an epistemological obstacle for the study of the scholar's work (the notion of dialogue in Bakhtin's work being too general, it no longer is operational, even if its semantico-semiotic nature remains indisputable), what at first sight seems a defect of Bakhtinian work (the absence of clear definitions or rigor) could also be seen positively. It cannot be excluded that it is precisely the non-rigorous style of Bakhtin's work and the eclec-

⁸⁰ Baxtin 1953–1954 [1997–2012, vol. V, p. 193]. This thesis allows to raise the problem of the *author* of texts in a new way and can explain, in part, the complicated situation around the authorship of certain works composed by the members of the so-called "Bakhtin's circle" (cf. Ivanov 1973 vs Ivanov in Velmezova and Kull 2011).

⁸¹ Baxtin 1923–1924 [1997–2012, vol. I, p. 182].

⁸² Baxtin, early 1920s–1974 [1986, p. 531].

⁸³ Baxtin 1961 [1997–2012, vol. V, p. 351].

tic nature of his philosophical language (a kind of terminological polyphony) that makes his work change depending on the demands and interests of its readers, inviting the latter, inspired by the variety of subjects treated by Bakhtin, to a “Bakhtinian” dialogue, with Bakhtin himself.

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