

Augusto Ponzio

The Dialogic Nature of Signs

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Translation from Italian by Susan Petrilli

8.

For a Critique of Dialogic Reason

8.1. *Dialogue and dialectics*

As stated in the previous lecture, if we do not take into account Bakhtin's global (see his notion of ‘big experience’) and biosemiotic view towards the complex and intricate life of signs, we will not understand the role in his work of the relation between ‘dialogism’ and ‘carnavalesque’. The latter is formulated in Bakhtin's study on Rabelais and then also used in the revised edition (1963) of his book on Dostoevsky.

In *Rabelais* Bakhtin tells us what carnival means for him. He refers to that complex phenomenon, existing in all cultures, formed by the system of attitudes, conceptions and verbal and nonverbal signs according to a comic and joyful idea of living. Carnival, therefore, does not only concern Western culture, nor the Russian spirit, but any culture of the world insofar as it is human.

Rabelais occupies a place of central importance in Bakhtin's overall conception. By contrast with oversimplifying and suffocating interpretations of Marxism, Bakhtin instead develops Marx's idea that the human being is fully realized when ‘the reign of necessity ends’. Consequently, a social system that is effectively alternative to capitalism is one that considers *free time* and not labour time as the measure of *real* social wealth (see Marx, *Grundrisse*, 1857-

61, Eng trans.: 708), in Bakhtin's terminology the "time of non official festivity", which is closely connected to what he calls the "great time" of literature.

Today, we are witness to the worldwide spread through global communication of the ideology of production and efficiency. This is in complete contrast with a carnivalesque vision of life. The difference also concerns individualism, which is exasperated by the ideology of production connected with the logic of competitiveness. But even when the logic of production, individualism and efficiency is dominant, it cannot eliminate the constitutive inclination of the grotesque body, insofar as it is grounded in dialogism and intercorporeity, for involvement with the world and the body of others. Mankind's inclination for the 'carnavalesque' endures, and this is testified, for example, by literary writing. In Orwell's *1984*, the greatest resistance against a social system based on the ideology of production and efficiency is in fact represented by literature. In this sense we may say that literature (and art, in general) is, and always will be, carnivalized.

Bakhtin's fundamental contribution to 'philosophy of language' or 'metalinguistics' is his *critique of dialogic reason*, a critique, literary and philosophical – after Kant and Marx. Bakhtin inaugurates a 'critique of dialogic reason' by contrast with Kant's 'critique of pure reason' and Sartre's 'critique of dialectic reason'.

Bakhtin privileges the term 'metalinguistics' for his own approach to the study of sign, utterance, text, discourse genre, and relations between literary writing and nonverbal expressions in popular culture, such as the signs of carnival. Bakhtin's critique of dialogic reason focuses on the concept of *responsibility without alibis*, a nonconventional idea of responsibility, which concerns existential "architectonics" in its relation with the I, the world and others.

Bakhtinian critique of dialogic reason is a critique of the concept of autonomy among individual bodies: in fact, autonomy is an illusion. Consequently, Bakhtin's critique is a critique of individual identity (such as consciousness or self) and of collective identity (such as community, historical language, or cultural system) where identity is conceived in terms of separation from the other following dominant ideological tendencies.

The problem of the critique of dialogic reason leads to the problem of the centrality of dialogue in argumentative reasoning (and of dialogism in biosemiotic universe, though we cannot dwell on the latter in these lectures), a reasoning not stiffened with defence and reproduction of identity, but, on the contrary, opened and willing to otherness.

Bakhtin (in his notes of 1970-71) evidences how unilaterality, ossification, rectilinear and unilateral dialectics derives from sclerotized dialogue. Monologic, unilinear and totalizing dialectics is necessarily orientated towards a synthesis and a conclusion. As such it calls for a “critique of dialogic reason”. From this point of view Bakhtin is a milestone because all his research, including his latest paper of 1974 on the methodology of human sciences, focuses on the same problem faced by Sartre in *Critique de la Raison Dialectique*: that is, whether human knowledge and understanding not only imply a specific methods but also a *New Reason*. However, this problem cannot be adequately understood appealing to Sartre’s belief in terms of a new relationship between *thought* and its *object*. In fact, Sartre’s dialectics remains wholly inside the limits of monologic dialectics for he reduces the relation of otherness to a relation of identity and of reciprocal objectification: dialectics between *for self* and *for others* is dialectics in a totalizing consciousnesses, where the tendency is to assert one’s own objectifying view.

Critique of dialogic reason is critique of the category of Identity which is dominant in Western thought and praxis. From the perspective of identity, sense coincides with partial and limited interests and engenders mystification: and this happens whether we are speaking of the identity of individual, group, nation, language, cultural system or of a macro-community such as the European Community, the Western world, the United Nations.

The category of Identity dominates today’s world because of the *concrete abstractions* constructed upon it forming the *Reality* we experience: these concrete abstractions are “internal” to today’s overall system of social reproduction. They include Individual, Society, State, Nation, Truth, Knowledge, Work, Trade Equality, Justice, Freedom, limited Responsibility, Need, Equal exchange, etc. However, it is not only a question of concrete abstractions ensuing from the system. Even more radically the system itself is grounded in the category of Identity which is asserted structurally and constitutively as the Universal in the worldwide and global processes of Production, Exchange on the Market and Consumption. The logic orienting concrete abstractions in today’s processes of social reproduction is the logic of Identity. And the categories of Individual and its rights, obligations, responsibilities, of Society and its interests, of State and its Politics (which reflect Reality as closely as possible), of Equal exchange and its demands, all obey the logic of Identity.

The places of argumentation internal to the order of discourse are the places of the logic of identity. Reason includes ‘the reason of war’ even if in the form of *extrema ratio*, which presents war as legitimate, just and legal. Reason includes elimination of the other — from emargination and segregation to extermination. Reason is the Reason of Identity. Its logic is asserted by barricading, isolating, expelling or exterminating the other thereby laying the

conditions for the construction of the concrete abstractions mentioned above. As anticipated, these concrete abstractions include the category of Individual which must firstly sacrifice its otherness to self in order to assert self as identity.

The Critique of Reason and Argumentation thus understood requires a *point of view that is other*. This approach calls for preliminary *recognition of the other*, or, better, recognition of the fact that recognition of the other is an *inevitable imposition*. Recognition of the other here is not conceived as a concession, a free choice made by the Individual, the Subject, the Same, but as a necessity imposed by alienation, the loss of sense, by the situation of *homo homini lupus*. The situation of *homo homini lupus is consequent* and not mythically antecedent (the allusion is to Hobbes's fallacy!) to such concrete abstractions as State, Politics, Law.

Globalization related to capitalist production and expansion of bio-power (Michel Foucault) have led to the controlled insertion of bodies into the production system and to reinforcement of the idea of the individual as a separate and self-sufficient entity. The body is understood and experienced as an isolated biological entity, as belonging to the individual, as a part of the individual's sphere of belonging. This has led to the progressive and almost total disappearance of cultural practices and worldviews grounded in intercorporeity, interdependency: namely the disappearance of the body's exposition to the other, of its openness. The technologies of separation applied to human bodies, interests, to the life of the individual and collective subject are functional to global communication-production and to identification of production with consumption characteristic of today's reproductive system. With respect to all this and thanks to its ontological perspective, global semiotics can at least oppose a series of signs showing how each instant of individual life is wholly interrelated, even compromised with all other forms of life over the entire planet. In fact, to acknowledge the condition of intercorporeal and dialogic interrelatedness, means to recognize a form of responsibility that far exceeds all positive rights and all responsibilities limited to roles, restricted responsibilities with alibis. The more the reasons of production and of global communication functional to it, impose ecological conditions that impede and distort communication among bodies and between the body and its environment, the more such acknowledgement is urgent

The different ways of perceiving the body in popular culture, different forms of "grotesque realism", discussed by Bakhtin in *Dostoevsky* (1963) and *Rabelais* (1965), are almost extinct. In fact, the body and corporeal life perceived in popular culture do not respond to today's conception of the body or of corporeal physiology. In fact, the body is neither wholly individualized nor wholly detached from other life forms over the planet, from the rest of the world. Grotesque realism, rather than seeing the body as an isolated biological entity, as a sphere

belonging to the individual, presents the body as undefined, unconfined to itself, a body in a relation of symbiosis with other bodies, of transformation and renewal through which the limits of individual life are continually transcended. On the contrary, in the contemporary world of global communication-production, verbal and nonverbal signs connected with the practices and conceptions of the grotesque body have almost completely disappeared as the individualistic, private, static conception of body is asserted. What remains are mummified residues studied by folklore analysts, archeological residues preserved in ethnological museums and in histories of national literatures (which represent the expression of generalized museumification). Only very weak traces of the signs of the grotesque body have survived today including ritual masks, masks used during popular festivities, and carnival masks.

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, using mixtures and contaminations without separations 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 individual. (Bakhtin 1965, 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 the body of others. Such language can be traced among all peoples and all epochs. It always refers to a body that is not strictly delineated, stable, fulfilled in itself, but to a body 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)

As especially Michel Foucault has revealed (but let us also remember Ferruccio Rossi-Landi's acute analyses as articulated in his books of the 1970s), division and separatism among the sciences are functional to the ideologico-social necessities of the "new canon of the individualized body" (Bakhtin), which, in turn, is functional to the controlled insertion of bodies into the reproduction cycle of today's production system.

A global semiotic perspective that keeps account of today's socio-economic context in terms of global communication evidences that the human individual, as a living body, is interconnected with all other forms of life over the whole planet thanks to the condition of diachronic and synchronic intercorporeity.

A global and detotalizing approach in semiotics demands availability towards the other, to an extreme degree, a disposition to respond, to listen to others in their otherness, a capacity of opening to the other, where such opening is measured in quantitative terms (the omnicomprehensive character of global semiotics), as well as in qualitative terms. All semiotic interpretations by the semiotician (especially at a metasemiotic level) cannot leave the dialogic relationship with the other out of consideration. Dialogism is, in fact, a fundamental condition for a semiotic approach in semiotics which though oriented globally, privileges the tendency to open to the particular and the local rather than to englobe and enclose. Accordingly this approach privileges the tendency towards detotalization rather than totalization.

As shown by Emmanuel Levinas, otherness obliges the totality to reorganize itself always anew in a process related to what he calls "infinity", and which (to use a phrase associated with Peirce) we could also relate to the concept of "infinite semiosis". This relationship to infinity is far more than cognitive: beyond the established order, beyond the symbolic order, beyond our conventions and habits, it tells of a relationship of involvement and responsibility with the other. This relationship with infinity is a relationship with what is most refractory to the totality, therefore it implies a relationship to the otherness of others, of the other person, not in the sense of another self like ourselves, another *alter ego*, an I belonging to the *same community*, but of an other in its extraneousness, strangeness, diversity, difference towards which we cannot be indifferent despite all the efforts and guarantees offered by the identity of the I.

Such considerations orient semiotics according to a plan that does not belong to any particular ideology. This kind of semiotics concerns human behaviour as it ensues from the awareness of human being's radical responsibility as a "semiotic animal". Properly understood,

the “semiotic animal” is a responsible actor capable of *signs of signs*, of mediation, reflection, and awareness in relation to semiosis over the whole planet. In this sense global semiotics must be adequately founded in cognitive semiotics, but it must also be open to a third dimension beyond the quantitative and the theoretical, that is the ethical. This is why we (Susan Petrilli and myself) propose the term ‘*semioethics*’ for this third dimension which concerns the ends towards which we strive and aim to reach.

In order to meet its commitment to the “health of semiosis” and cultivate an understanding of the entire semiotic universe, semiotics must continuously refine its auditory and critical capacity, that is, its capacity for listening and criticism.

8.2. *Dialogism in Bodies and Signs*

According to Bakhtin, dialogue in Dostoevsky is determined in the hero’s claim to complete independence from recognition, from the other’s gaze, from the other’s word. Here dialogue arises from ostentation of absolute indifference to another’s opinion and value judgement. This is particularly clear in the monologue of the man from the underworld. This obsession with autonomy leads the hero to anticipate the possibility of denial by the other, with his own word. But, says Bakhtin (1929), the hero’s anticipation of the other’s reply and his response to this reply reveals his dependence on the other (on himself included). He *fears* that the other may think that he *fears* his opinion. But such fear reveals his dependence upon the consciousness of the other, his inability of being satisfied with his own self-determination.

Dostoevsky is not interested in showing the human being engaged in dialogue fully respectful of the other, but rather *in spite of* oneself, of one’s own intentions. He shows that the word is dialogic in the sense that it is always passively involved in the word of the other. Dialogue does not only occur in the composition of viewpoints and identities; on the contrary, it is structured in refractoriness to synthesis, including the illusory synthesis of one’s own identity. In fact, identity is fragmented dialogically insofar it is inevitably implicated with alterity, just as the “grotesque body” (see Bakhtin 1965) is implicated with the body of others.

Bakhtin already focuses on the relationship between dialogue and body in the 1929 edition of his book on Dostoevsky. Dialogism cannot be obtained among disembodied minds. Dialogue takes place among *voices* — voices that are not monologic and integral, but internally dialogic and divided. And the *voice* is treated as representing an 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 lets us listen to it, is misunderstood by René Wellek (1991) as an expression of idealism. Such a misunderstanding is perfectly in line with criticism of Bakhtin by the representatives of “socialist realism” and their unjust accusation of “polyphonic idealism” which repropose the opposition established by Merezhkovsky between Dostoevsky “prophet of the spirit” and Tolstoy “prophet of the flesh”.

Dialogues in Dostoevsky’s writings, says Bakhtin, are neither dialectic nor synthetic due to the fact that contradiction does not arise from *disembodied ideas*: the ultimate event for Dostoevsky is not the idea conceived in terms of a monologic conclusion, but interacting voices. *Ideas are embodied in different voices and are unindifferent to each other* in spite of, or even because of, the illusory effort to ignore each other and prescind from the mixture of voices in which difference flourishes. Therefore, the logic of Dostoevsky’s polyphonic novel presents itself in terms of dia-logic. Dialogism constitutes the real life of word and thought with respect to which monologic dialogue is an abstract representation relieved of all responsibility without alibis. On the contrary, unlimited responsibility is the condition of existence in the world, where the body of each being occupies a position that cannot be exchanged with another one, and whose embodiment is expressed through the voice. And when Bakhtin in his 1970-71 notebooks describes the process that leads from concrete dia-logics without synthesis to abstract monologic dialectics, he indicates the voice as a fundamental element in distinguishing 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 dialectics. (Bakhtin 1986: 147)

In Bakhtin’s view, the voice, its incarnation, the body distinguish Dostoevsky’s dialogue from Plato’s in which (as much as dialogue is not completely monologized, pedagogical), the multiplicity of voices are cancelled in the idea. Plato is interested in the disincarnated 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 different types of dialogue is the fact that in Dostoevsky, by contrast with Plato, dialogue is neither cognitive nor philosophical. Bakhtin prefers to relate dialogue in Dostoevsky to biblical and evangelical dialogue – for example, dialogue in Job – because of its internally infinite structure that has no possibility of synthesis and is external to the sphere of knowledge. However, Bakhtin also warns

us that not even biblical dialogue furnishes the more substantial characteristics of dialogue in Dostoevsky's writings.

Bakhtin makes a point in emphasizing the body's direct involvement in the *circumspect word* objectivated by Dostoevsky. He evidences the implications, the effects registered in the hero's relationship with his body ensuing from a word that is aware and cautious of the other, in spite of itself, a word that reveals its unindifference to the other precisely when flaunting maximum indifference, refusal, antagonism. As the example of the man from the underworld makes very clear, the body is overwhelmed by an interference of voices which denies it self-sufficiency and univocality; the body does not belong to the hero, it is not its 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 and self-sufficiency illusory and even ridiculous, for the body is constitutively intercorporeal in both a diachronic and synchronic perspective. In the face of separations, identifications, memberships, distinctions, erasements functional to individuality, the body of each one of us still *remembers* its constitutive intercorporeity despite memory determined in the "small experience", and does so in terms of the "great experience". As we said in the fourth lesson (see 4.2), Bakhtin distinguishes between "small experience" and "great experience" in his annotations of the 1950s: small experience is reduced and partial, experience that adheres to the concrete and effective world, that is appropriate to contemporaneity, that is connected with interest, utility, and knowledge functional to practical action, with the economy of memory which excludes what distracts and is dispersive with respect to logicity, unilinearity, uniformity in planning, univocality in terms of sense.

The body is refractory to the "technologies of self" and to the "political technology of the individual" (Foucault). The body is *other* with respect to the subject, with respect to consciousness, to domesticated, graded, filtered, adapted memory; it is other with respect to the narration that the individual or collective subject constructs for itself and through which it delineates its identity. The body is other with respect to the image presented by the subject as its identity card, with respect to the image one wishes to exhibit and use to seduce the attention of others, one's physiognomy offered for recognition, the role acted. This body that is other is seen in terms of singularity, unrepeatability, nonfunctionality. It finds the expression of its excess in relation to a given project, a story, an 'authentic' choice in death, considered as an inconclusive end: the living body that knows before being known, that feels before being felt, that lives before being lived, that experiences before being experienced. This body is connected to other bodies without interrupting continuity, it is implicated, involved with life over the entire planet Earth, it is part of the general ecosystem, an interrelated complex from which no technology of self can ever free us.

The signs of bodily and dialogic interconnection have not been studied enough, and what studies have been carried out are limited to the sectorial interests of specific scientific fields.

The main contribution made by global semiotics consists in uncovering the situation of indissoluble interconnection represented by the *sign network*. In Sebeok's terminology, this network extends from the Lilliputian world of molecular genetics and virology to the man-size world of Gulliver and finally to the world of Brobdingnag, the gigantic biogeochemical ecosystem called Gaia. At first sight this system appears to consist of numerous living species that are separate from each other, but at a closer look it is obvious that each one of its parts, ourselves included, is dialogically and interdependently connected with all others.

We have reached the end of our lessons. Let's take a look at our journey. We started from the connection between dialogue and alterity, distinguished between formal and substantial dialogue, and examined dialogue in the dialogue genre, in external and internal discourse, in the utterance and even in the individual word. Then we showed that sign and dialogue cannot be separated. In fact, the sign calls for a response from another sign, that is, the interpretant, and is itself firstly an interpretant, i. e. a response. Then we considered alterity and dialogism in semiosis and argumentation, examining the varying degrees of dialogism in deduction, induction and abduction, putting into evidence the fact that logic is dia-logic. The subsequent step consisted in analyzing the relationship between dialogism and biosemiosis and in showing that the semiotic processes of communication, modelling and dialogism are inseparable. We also examined dialogue in literature with reference to the Bakhtinian approach to Dostoevsky and Rabelais, evidencing a possible relation of interdependency between Bakhtinian dialogism and biosemiotics. In the last lesson we propose a new critique of reason in terms of a critique of dialogic reason: this new critique is founded on the relationship between dialogue and dialectics and on recognition of dialogism in bodies and signs.