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The Dialogic Nature of Signs

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7.

Dialogism and Biosemiosis

Bakhtinian dialogism and biosemiosis

In light of the Bakhtinian notion of ‘dialogism,’ we have observed (see first lecture) that dialogue is neither the communication of messages, nor an initiative taken by self. On the contrary, self is always in dialogue with the other, that is to say, with the world and with others, whether it knows it or not; self is always in dialogue with the word of the other. Identity is dialogic. Dialogism is at the very heart of the self. The self, ‘the semiotic self’ (see Sebeok, Petrilli, Ponzio 2001), is dialogic in the sense of a species-specific modeled involvement with the world and with others. The self is implied dialogically in otherness, just as the ‘grotesque body’ (Bakhtin 1965) is implied in the body of other living beings. In fact, in 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.

As we have already observed (see Ponzio 2003), we believe that Bakhtin’s main interpreters such as Holquist, Todorov, Krysinsky, and Wellek have all fundamentally misunderstood Bakhtin and his concept of dialogue. This is confirmed by their interpretation of Bakhtinian dialogue as being similar to dialogue in the terms theorized by such authors as Plato, Buber, Mukarovsky.

According to 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' (see Bakhtin 1965) 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*. With the shift in focus from identity (whether individual, as in the case of consciousness or self, or collective, as in is to say, a community, historical language, or a cultural system at large) to alterity, a sort of *Copernican revolution* as been accomplished. Bakhtinian critique conducted in terms of dialogic reason not only interrogates the general orientation of Western philosophy, but also the dominant cultural tendencies that engender it.

The 'Copernican revolution' operated by Bakhtin in relation to the conception of self, identity, and consciousness involves all living beings and not only mankind. Consciousness implies a dialogic relation that includes a witness and a judge. This dialogic relation is not only present in the human world but also in the biological. Says Bakhtin:

When consciousness appeared in the world (in existence) and, perhaps, when biological life appeared (perhaps not only animals, but trees and grass also witness and judge), the world (existence) changed radically. A stone is still stony and the sun still sunny, but the event of existence as a whole (unfinalized) becomes completely different because a new and major character in this event appears for the first time on the scene of earthly existence — the witness and the judge. And the sun, while remaining physically the same, has changed because it has begun to be cognized by the witness and the judge. It has stopped simply being and has started being in itself and for itself ... as Well as for the other, because it has been reflected in the consciousness of the other ('From notes made in 1970-71,' in Bakhtin 1986: 137)

At this point, a possible connection may be pointed out between Sebeok's biosemiotic conception and Bakhtin's dialogic conception. These two authors seem very distant from each other. In reality, this is not true. Bakhtin himself was seriously interested in biology. And, in fact, he developed his own conception of dialogue in close relation to the biological studies of his time, and particularly to the totalizing perspective delineated by Vernadsky and his conception of biosphere. For both Sebeok and Bakhtin, all living beings on the planet Earth are closely interrelated and interdependent, whether directly or indirectly, in spite of their apparent autonomy and separation.

Bakhtinian dialogue is not the result of an attitude that the subject decides to take towards the other. On the contrary, dialogue is the expression of the living being's condition of the biosemiotic impossibility of closure and indifference towards its environment, with which it constitutes a whole system named *architectonics* by Bakhtin. In human beings, architectonics becomes an 'architectonics of answerability,' semiotic consciousness of 'being-in-the-world-without-alibis.' Architectonics thus described may be limited to a small sphere — that is to say, the restricted life environment of a single individual, one's family, professional work, ethnic, religious group, culture, contemporaneity. Or, on the contrary, as consciousness of a 'global semiotic' order (Sebeok), which may be extended to the whole world in a planetary or solar or even cosmic dimension (as auspicated by Victoria Welby). Bakhtin distinguishes between 'small experience' and 'great experience.' The former is narrow-minded experience. Instead

... in the great experience, the world does not coincide with itself (it is not what it is), it is not closed and finalized. In it there is memory which flows and fades away into the human depths of matter and of boundless life, experience of worlds and atoms. And for such memory the history of the single individual begins long before its cognitive acts (its cognizable 'Self'). ('Notes of 1950,' in Bakhtin 1996: 99)

It must not be forgotten that in 1926 Bakhtin authored an article entitled 'Contemporary vitalism,' in which he discusses problems of the biological and philosophical orders. This article was signed by the biologist Ivan Ivanovich Kanaev, and is an important tessera for the reconstruction of Bakhtin's thought since his early studies. Similarly to the biologist Jakob von Uexküll, Bakhtin too begins with an interest in biology, specifically in relation to the study of signs.

This article by Bakhtin on vitalism was written during a period of frenzied activity, the years 1924-29, in Petersburg, then Leningrad. In this productive period of his life, Bakhtin actually published four books on different subjects (Freud, Russian Formalism, philosophy of language, Dostoevsky's novel). He only signed the last with his own name while the others (together with several articles) were signed by Voloshinov or Medvedev.

In Petersburg Bakhtin lived in Kanaev's apartment for several years. Kanaev contributed to Bakhtin's interest in biology as well as to the influence exerted by the physiologist Ukhtomsky on his conception of the 'chronotope' in the novel. Jakob von Uexküll is also quoted in Bakhtin's text on vitalism.

In 'Contemporary Vitalism,' Bakhtin criticizes vitalism, that is to say, the conception that theorizes a special extramaterial force in living beings as the basis of life processes. In particular, his critique is directed against the biologist Hans Driesch who interpreted homeostasis in the organism in terms of total autonomy from its surrounding environment. On the contrary, in his

own description of the interaction between organism and environment, Bakhtin opposes the dualism of life force and physical-chemical processes and maintains that the organism forms a monistic unit with the surrounding world. The relation between body and world is a dialogic one relation where the body responds to its environment modelling is own world.

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

The 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*) in its evolution 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, bodies only 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, to the end of satisfying the needs of the individual. Such ideology continued into Stalinist Russia, which coincides with the time of Bakhtin’s writing, and into the whole period of real socialism where work and the productive capacity were the sole factors taken into serious considered as community factors. In other words, work and productivity were the only elements considered as what links individuals to each other. Therefore, beyond this minimal common denominator, individual bodies were considered as being 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. Therefore, in what may be described as a ‘religious’ (from Latin *religo*) perspective of the existent, this conception underlines the bond interconnecting all living beings with each 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. In fact, the kind of memory we are alluding to is the memory of the immediate biosemiotic 'great experience' (in space and time) of indissoluble relations with others lived 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.

Let us resume. Modeling and dialogism are pivotal concepts in the study of semiosis. Communication is only one kind of semiosis that (together with the semiosis of information or signification and the semiosis of symptommatization) presupposes the semiosis of modeling and dialogism. This emerges clearly if in accordance with Peirce and his reformulation of the classic notion of *substitution* in terms of *interpretation*, we consider the sign firstly as an interpretant, that is to say, as a dialogic response foreseen by a specific type of modeling. Moreover, Bakhtin's concept of dialogue also contributes considerably to extending this concept beyond the human world connecting dialogism with semiosis from Sebeok's biosemiotic perspective, namely according to the point of view of *global* semiotics