Bakhtin, Mikhail (1895-1975)

Mikhail Bakhtin was a Russian philosopher and thinker whose long career concerned aesthetics, ethics, literary and cultural theory, linguistics, and sociology. His earliest works, in the late 1910s, were primarily concerned with aesthetics and the legacy of Neo-Kantianism. His intellectual community at the time—philosophers, critics, and theorists—has been retroactively dubbed “the Bakhtin Circle.” Bakhtin was sent into exile in 1929 and spent six years in Kazakhstan, where he would write important essays, including “Discourse in the Novel.” Scholars note that the political repressions of the 1920s left their mark on Bakhtin, who would self-censor his future work and use literary criticism as a veiled means of addressing philosophical, political and social questions. Almost none of Bakhtin’s work was published until the 1950s. It is distinguished by terminological innovations, most notably “dialogism,” “chronotope” and “heteroglossia.” For Rabelais, Bakhtin invented the genre “grotesque realism,” proposing that the carnival and the related “carnivalesque” were vital cultural institutions. About Dostoevsky, Bakhtin stressed the “multivoicedness” of the novels and their distinctive “unfinalizability.” Further explorations of genre, speech, and poetics followed.

By the 1980s, after being translated into English and French, Bakhtin was acknowledged as one of the great twentieth century literary theorists. In particular, Bakhtin’s work on the heteroglossia or dialogism of the novel and the carnivalesque became significant contributions. His notion of heteroglossia derived originally from the multitude of languages and dialects he found in Russia and Eastern Europe. The novel, in Bakhtin’s view, at its maturity mirrored the complicated mixture of tongues in a rich and multi-ethnic culture. In Dostoevsky, the distinctive voices of characters—made up of word choices, grammatical styles, and emotional inflections—came for Bakhtin to influence one another, so that one character’s speech habits began to appear in another’s. In the end, even the narrator was affected: the narrative voice would itself begin to imitate, in an increasingly democratic fashion, the speech habits of the novel’s characters. The carnivalesque, though derived from quite separate traditions, echoed similar developments in French surrealism, in particular the notion of *dépense* or expenditure in Georges Bataille. Like expenditure, which privileged waste or destruction, carnival for Bakhtin overturned dominant notions of the sacred and productive, leading instead to a celebration of play in which moral, class, and political hierarchies were turned (however temporarily) on their heads.

Bibliography: Clark, Katerina and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

Brittany Pheiffer

Columbia University

Vincent P. Pecora

University of Utah