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# **Bakhtinian theory**

**The postcolonial  
& postsocialist  
perspective**

**Baltic Worlds' special section**

## Introduction: Bakhtin and the postcolonial

The 15<sup>th</sup> International Bakhtin conference was held at the Royal Institute of Art in Stockholm on July 23 to 27, 2014. Titled “Bakhtin as Praxis: Academic Production, Artistic Practice, Political Activism”, it brought together several hundred researchers from across the globe. The discussions at the conference revealed the enduring relevance of “the ideas of what is known as the Bakhtin Circle” not only in the field of literary criticism, but also in a variety of other disciplines of the social sciences and humanities. The keynote speakers included Professors Caryl Emerson, Augusto Ponzio, Sergei Bocharov, and Galin Tihanov.

Some of the deliberations at the conference clearly emphasized the need to reexamine Bakhtinian categories through the lens of postcolonial and postsocialist concerns. Thus, this special section of *Baltic Worlds* is the result of the separate call for papers on “Bakhtinian Theory in Postcolonial and Postsocialist Perspective” launched in the fall of 2015. The call for papers invited further reflection on the Bakhtinian legacy.

This special section is important in the context of a furiously changing and increasingly polarized world. Bakhtinian concepts have proven time and again to be productive in explaining the ways in which social, political, and cultural forces intersect and affect each other, particularly during periods of transition. Such transitions could include colonial struggles for independence, the right to self-determination of oppressed populations, the disintegration of the state and its system of governance, large scale migration, and the rise in racial, ethnic, and communal conflicts.

Suitably developed and modified, Bakhtinian ideas have the potential to expand and enrich our understanding

and analyses of contemporary political movements and social transformations. Bakhtin’s work describes certain important facets of the operation of authority and violence in culture and the ways in which such forces may be opposed and undermined. The critical traction of categories such as dialogism and carnival derives from this analysis, but such categories are often employed in a mechanical fashion or too loosely. Instead, Bakhtinian ideas need to be specified and developed in order to realize their potential for postcolonial and postsocialist studies, providing a starting point for the development of critical categories suitable for certain types of analysis. This, however, requires that the ideas be examined and possibly revised or even rejected. What is required is a critical engagement with Bakhtinian ideas, rather than oversimplified or reverential applications of the concepts, in order to critique the structures of oppression, expose the multilayered nodes of contact that we have with each other and with ourselves, and transcend the narrow national traditions that we are bound by or struggle to escape.

THIS SPECIAL SECTION of the *Baltic Worlds* is an attempt to present some of the many topics discussed at the conference. At the same time, it is a bid to follow Bakhtinian theory: in particular, his understanding of the processes of thought, speech acts,

and communication. The editors invited contributors to explore the complexities of the postcolonial and postsocialist space by using Bakhtinian ideas and theories as a critical starting point for the development of an adequate methodology.

The theme this special section – “Bakhtinian theory in postcolonial and postsocialist perspective” – is a recognition of the popularity of the Bakhtinian perspective across the world and an opportunity to contribute to a current discussion on similarities and differences between the postcolonial and the postsocialist.

As editors of this section, we represent two areas of inquiry: postcolonial and postsocialist studies. Our coming together on this is symbolic of shared cross-cultural communication. In Bakhtinian terms, this transnational, transcontinental effort of bringing together two varied perspectives through multiple voices is representative of what scholars would define as dialogism.

The special section starts with a roundtable discussion of the Bakhtinian legacy by the leading specialists in the field. We interviewed Professors Ken Hirschkop, Craig Brandist, Caryl Emerson, Lakshmi Bandlamudi, and Galin Tihanov. The interview questions focused on the way Bakhtin and his influence permeate our readings of the postcolonial and postsocialist, his enduring legacy, and how his theories can be applied to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of our immediate history and contemporary life.

The full-length articles in this special section include contributions by Viktoriya Sukovata, Paromita Chakrabarti, Rajni Mujral, and Per-Arne Bodin. In one way or another, all the contributors deal with Bakhtinian theory and, at the same time, discuss the complexities of the postcolonial and/or postsocialist space.

The article by Sukovata titled “Ukrai-

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## & postsocialist perspective

nian Popular Culture in the Context of M. Bakhtin's Philosophy of Laughter and Postcolonial Perspective" is a study of Ukrainian popular culture explored through the lens of the Bakhtinian theory of laughter. In particular, Sukovata explores carnivalesque elements of popular talk-shows and artistic performances in the context of anticolonial protest against Soviet/Russian cultural domination. Stressing the important role of laughter for the return of dignity in the situation of postsocialist insecurity and cultural hybridity, she also states therapeutic functions of laughter as a part of the multiculturalism of Ukrainian society.

**CHAKRABARTI'S** "Crisis of the Responsible Word: Bakhtin, Dialogism and the Postcolonial Memoir" reconsiders notions of narrative liminality and interruptive dialogism in the reading of the postcolonial memoir. Juxtaposing the postcolonial in-betweenness of critical discourse with Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of hybridized, collusive and hidden dialogicality, the postcolonial memoir can be read as the self's mapping of a paradigm shift in contemporary times. Chakrabarti undertakes a Bakhtinian analysis of the South Asian-American diasporic writer Meena Alexander's 1993 *Fault Lines: A Memoir* and the revised 2003 version. Situating them as centripetal and centrifugal texts that operate in simultaneity and in constantly shifting moments of utterance, her study cautions us to take account of the painful unreliability of the authorial and narrative voices, the collision of history and memory, the deeply ambiguous contours of language and discursive representation, and the limits of the postcolonial hybrid self.

Mujral's "The Grotesque Body in Indian Comic Tradition: An Aesthetic of Transgression" engages with the role of

the grotesque body in constituting the site of the comic and carnivalesque in Indian comic tradition. She aims to explore the comic tradition in Indian Sanskrit literature by studying Hasyarnava. She elaborates on how the distorted, deformed, and diseased body institute the carnivalesque discursively.

**FINALLY, THE ARTICLE** "Witchhunt in Northern Sweden: A Bakhtinian approach" by Bodin deals with the Swedish history of the witch trials in Ångermanland, Northern Sweden in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Using a Bakhtinian approach, but also Sergei Averintsev's ideas on connections between laughter and fear, Bodin attempts to answer the question about the reasons for witch trials. Exploring the relationships between laughter and the reverse culture, Bodin comes to the conclusion that these relationships can be very complex while the reverse culture might be connected to violence and fear, not only to laughter. ✖

**Yulia Gradskova**  
**Paromita Chakrabarti**

### literature

Mikhail Bakhtin, *Tvorchestvo François Rabelais i narodnaia kultura Srednevekovia i Renessansa*. Moscow, 1990. Published in English as: *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky, Bloomington, IN, 1984.

Sharad Chari and Katherine Verdery, "Thinking between the Posts: Postcolonialism, Postsocialism, and Ethnography after the Cold War", in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 51, no. 1 (2009), 6–34.

Chioni David Moore, "Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet?", in *PLMA*, 116, no. 11 (2001), 111–128.



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# A discussion on the

**P**aromita Chakrabarti and Yulia Gradska discuss the Bakhtin Circle with five experts in the field: Caryl Emerson, university professor emeritus of Slavic languages and literatures, Princeton University; Lakshmi Bandlamudi, professor of psychology at LaGuardia Community College, City University of New York; Ken Hirschkop, professor of English at the University of Waterloo, Ontario; Craig Brandist, professor of cultural theory and intellectual history and director of the Bakhtin Centre, at the University of Sheffield; and Galin Tihanov, the George Steiner professor of comparative literature at Queen Mary University of London.

**In what ways do you think the ideas developed by members of the group known as the Bakhtin Circle could prove useful for theorizing postcolonialism and cultural practices of what might be called 'postsocialism'?**

**KEN HIRSCHKOP:** "Probably the most immediate and obvious application is the use of Bakhtin's theory for discussing 'the language question' in postcolonial nations. For many countries, there are pressing issues regarding the need for a national language or *lingua franca* and questions about how to deal with the legacy of a colonizer's language. Bakhtin's discussions of the 'unified language' and his discussions of multilingualness, polyglossia, etc., could be useful."

**CRAIG BRANDIST:** "First of all, the idea of 'postsocialism' suggests that some sort of socialism actually existed in the Stalinist and post-Stalinist states, which is, I think, unsupportable. The fact that the former rulers of these states called them 'socialist' did not make them so any more than Cambodia became democratic when the Khmer Rouge renamed it Democratic Kampuchea. Whatever their ideological clothing, those states were organized and operated as single economic units competing militarily with the Western bloc. The economic dynamic was a mere variant of capitalism, as is clear by the way the rulers simply shifted assets from their public to their private 'pockets' as the post-Stalinist states transformed themselves from the above in 1989–91. If by 'postsocialist' one considers the states of the former USSR which were locked into a Russian-dominated empire from the end of the 1920s, or the East European states that were merely subject to Soviet imperial domination rather than direct colonialism, then it makes more sense to speak about such relationships using the same terms as for any state subject to colonialism and imperialism."

"Certainly the dynamics of semiotic and ideological struggles theorized in Voloshinov's *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* and in Bakhtin's works on the novel can serve as good starting points for analyzing the struggle to contest and overcome the continuing effects of cultural domination in the postcolonial world. They have some considerable advantages over some of the politically debilitating approaches based on poststructuralism and postmodern theories, which dissolve agency in a web of signification. They can only be starting points, however, since any adequate consideration of linguistic, ideological, and wider cultural struggles requires a sustained institutional analysis that relates cultural phenomena to their underpinnings in socio-economic structures and dynamics. The works of the Circle do not really help us here, and in some respects the attempts to maintain a strict methodological division between the natural and human sciences, which pervades Bakhtin's work in particular, makes this task more difficult. Contemporary philosophy of science clearly reveals the conduct of the natural sciences to be based on dialogic interaction as much as the human sciences. We therefore need to be prepared to supplement and revise what are now called 'Bakhtinian' ideas if we are to make much headway here, for only this would allow us to build on ideas like dialogism, heteroglossia (*raznorechie*), novelization, and so on, in ways that would lead to an illuminating approach to the cultures of societies and communities that have been, and in many cases continue to be, particularly badly affected by colonialism and imperialism."

"One other issue is the fact that the critique of the entanglement of Western scholarship about the 'Orient' which, after a number of metamorphoses, led to postcolonial theory itself, was something that has its roots in the political and intellectual arenas of Russia in what we might call the revolutionary period (1900–1933). Members and

# Bakhtin Circle

by Yulia Gradska & Paromita Chakrabarti



associates of the 'Circle' participated in these arenas: two members or associates of the Circle, Nikolai Konrad and Mikhail Tubianskii, participated in the development of critical scholarship of Asian cultures. If we are to develop 'Bakhtinian' ideas in ways that would be enlightening for postcolonial critiques, then we need to consider these dimensions of 'Bakhtinian' theory in a rather more sustained way than has been typical until now."

**CARYL EMERSON:** "I confess that I have never understood what it means to 'theorize' something – especially when that thing is another abstraction or -ism – so this question is not easy for me to answer. Bakhtin was an unusual thinker in being completely at home in the terminology and value-systems of abstract German philosophy, from Kant through Schelling to the 20<sup>th</sup>-century phenomenologists, and yet he remained a 'particularist,' a personalist who investigated transcendent reality and respected, but did not share, the materialist convictions of his Marxist colleagues. Postcolonialist and postsocialist thought, emerging as both did from global exploitation systems that subsumed the individual, is deeply and properly engaged with the dignity of the human subject. Bakhtin held the human subject to be less an entity with rights than a threshold, a meeting-place of multiple consciousnesses, and an unknowable entity best approached 'apophatically,' a being designed not to be fully cognized. These are tricky concepts to politicize, but Bakhtin was not a political thinker. His ideas can, of course, be utilized by those who are!"

**THE BAKHTIN CIRCLE** was a 20<sup>th</sup> century school of Russian thought which centered on the work of Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin (1895–1975). The circle addressed philosophically the social and cultural issues posed by the Russian Revolution and its degeneration into the Stalin dictatorship. Their work focused on the centrality of significance in social life generally and in artistic creation in particular, examining the way in which language registered the conflicts between social groups. The key views of the circle are that linguistic production is essentially *dialogic*, formed in the process of social interaction, and that this leads to the interaction of different social values being registered in terms of reaccentuation of the speech of others. While the ruling stratum tries to posit a single discourse as exemplary, the subordinate classes are inclined to subvert this *monologic* closure. In the sphere of literature, poetry and epics represent the centripetal forces within the cultural arena, whereas the novel is the structurally elaborated expression of popular *Ideologiekritik*, the radical criticism of society. Members of the circle included Matvei Isaevich Kagan (1889–1937), Pavel Nikolaevich Medvedev (1891–1938); Lev Vasilievich Pumpianskii (1891–1940), Ivan Ivanovich Sollertinskii (1902–1944), Valentin Nikolaevich Voloshinov (1895–1936), and others.

**LAKSHMI BANDLAMUDI:** “I would like to address this question based on the premise that colonial experiences and postcolonial remembrances are as incredibly diverse as any living culture, and any unified sense of ‘ism’ is not necessarily compatible with the Bakhtinian world. Even with my limited knowledge of socialism and postsocialism, I would guess that they never existed in some clearly defined form. Bakhtin’s unorthodox thinking did not exactly entertain any form of unified ‘ism’, instead it concentrated on dialogic encounters between competing ‘isms’. Therefore the key words in your question are *cultural practices* that are bound to be open-ended and ambiguous.

“Ashis Nandy rightly said that the colonized subjects, particularly in the Indian scene, relate to the colonizer as an ‘intimate enemy’ – capturing the mixture of emotions: desire and discord and accommodation and rejection coexist as multi-voiced entities. This heteroglossic nature of reality lends itself well to Bakhtinian interpretation. However, the ideas of the Bakhtin Circle cannot and must not be extended in a mechanical fashion to the post-colonial world. For instance, the epic/novel distinction breaks down in ancient cultures like India, yet at the same time we cannot assume a merger between the epic and the novel either. What we see in the Indian scene is alternating processes of novelization and canonization in interpreting epic texts, because they are living, open-ended texts. Furthermore, multiple temporalities coexist in the culture and the heterochronous reality is captured in the popular expression that epic texts in India are as modern as they are ancient. Time stretches into the ancient as much as it moves into the future, and these interesting chronotopic motifs are demonstrated in my work *Dialogics of Self, the Mahabharata and Culture: The History of Understanding and Understanding of History* (Anthem Press, 2010).

“The analytical tools provided by Bakhtin – genres and chronotopes – are incredibly sharp and have enormous explanatory capability. Surely they must be applied with a great deal of care and caution and sensitivity to the specifics of basic realities of cultural life. Bakhtin himself would have demanded this kind of critical application rather than the mechanical wholesale embrace of his ideas. Such a critical extension of Bakhtinian categories would not only illuminate the complexities of postcolonial experiences, but also show some loopholes to release cultures from the trappings of postcoloniality.”

**GALIN TIHANOV:** “Bakhtin’s work has developed powerful tools that allow us to address cultural hybridity and to cast the history of marginal genres and cultural forms as evolving towards domination: the story of the novel itself is a story of reversal; it is the story of a genre that ascends from being an underdog of cultural history to a ‘colonizer’ of literature, as Bakhtin puts it (interesting that he should be speaking in those terms), a genre that takes over and permeates all other literary genres. Bakhtin arrived at this idea not without help from the Russian Formalists, notably Shklovsky and Tynianov. Bakhtin’s work thus holds significant potential to invigorate debates in postcolonialism, even now as postcolonial theory moves to a phase where it is more interested in postcolonial ecology, cultural transfers, and other ‘softer’ issues. As for postsocialism, I am less confident that Bakhtin has much to contribute here. The Rabelais book is, of course, full of suggestions as to the power of the masses to question and subvert official ideology; but the Rabelais book is also a celebration of a quasitotalitarian collective body, which I believe is an idea that is difficult to defend in the present climate, in which postsocialist theory and practice still remember the lessons of poststructuralism.”

**How can Bakhtinian ideas expand and enrich our understanding and analyses of contemporary political movements and social transformations? Please also consider the discourse about immigration in Europe and the US.**

**KEN HIRSCHKOP:** “Bakhtin argues that a modern form of writing and prose can ‘represent’ the discourses it portrays in a distinctively historical way: one that ironizes their claims, contextualizes their use, and endows them with a kind of force they might otherwise not have. This should alert us to the importance of irony and parody in our political discourse and the dangers of certain kinds of moralizing and ‘proclamatory’ discourse. There is a lesson here for the Left, which often regards irony and ‘contextualized’ discourse as a sign of weakness or political backsliding.

“It’s usually impossible to simply line up a style of discourse, with a political position, but in the case of anti-immigrant discourse we might have an exception. Can hostility to immigrants be ironic or ‘dialogic’? I don’t think so.”

**CRAIG BRANDIST:** “If we consider the work of the Circle as a whole then it seems to me that we are provided with some very useful approaches to how the ruling ideology functions in trying to close down alternative understandings of socio-political categories and the ways in which this can be resisted and ultimately overcome. Of course contested categories like ‘development’, ‘freedom’ and ‘democracy’ are central to this type of analysis. I also think that the centrality of the utterance rather than the sign allows us to understand the role of the social agent in socio-political life in ways that the poststructuralist approach fails to do so. I also think it allows us to analyze how ideological forms emerge in social interaction and conflict rather better than the Foucauldian notions of governance and

discourse do. But, once again, we come up against the lack of a developed political theory in Bakhtinian thought, and the way in which institutional questions are relegated in importance behind rather abstract ethical principles. In this sense, there is a lot of work to do to supplement and revise Bakhtinian categories to make them effective in these kinds of analyses. Also, we need to ensure that questions of economic structures and forces play a full role in our analyses, for they are largely missing from Bakhtinian analysis. Without this, it is difficult to see how questions of immigration can properly be addressed, but once they do appear, then questions of authoritative conceptions about ‘alien’ social groups and how they might be challenged may be aided by employing certain Bakhtinian categories.”

**CARYL EMERSON:** “In the most personalist (that is, not institutionalized) ways. Bakhtin would counsel us to find ethnic and cultural difference interesting and self-enriching, not alienating or threatening. Through his cluster of values and images known as the carnivalesque, he would urge us not to be selfish repositories of material goods or even of fixed ideas but rather to be ‘transit points’ open to all manner of change—and yet never to shirk committing to a position and accepting the consequences. On the current refugee and immigration crises, the best Bakhtinian ideas to keep in mind are his mature writings on the humanities, a true refuge of comparative studies, which by their very nature require a constant infusion of difference.”

**LAKSHMI BANDLAMUDI:** “Bakhtin had very little to say about social and political movements and did not necessarily embark on a journey to rid the world of exploitation. For him, jumping onto the bandwagon of social movements and shouting political slogans was the easy part, but to cede your territory and make room for the different other as an equal partner in a dialogue requires humility, patience, and respect, and this was Bakhtin’s main concern. He discovered the potential for liberation, self-discovery, and dignity, not in mass social movements (not that he said anything overtly against them), but in the *I am not like you, but I like you* approach to human interactions.

“Therefore encounters with different others was a necessary condition for a deeper understanding of self and other. When a culture encounters other cultures, many hidden aspects of each culture are revealed and that creates an opportunity for creative/dialogic understanding of self/culture and history. The exposure of the cultural codes is bound to generate some anxiety and instead of responding dialogically to this unsettling feeling, what we often witness with respect to immigration is the dominance of monologic impulses. The long-term residents want to return to presumed notions of ‘nativism’ and ‘original son of the soil,’ while the new immigrants resort to fantasies of ‘imaginary homelands’ and ‘romantic pasts’ and both groups fail to respond to the dialogic potential. Sadly we have been witnessing this trend across Europe and the USA, and other parts of the world.

“While there is no distinct political theory in Bakhtinian thought, the analytical categories he suggests to make sense of a dynamic pluralistic world aid us in challenging notions of what constitutes ‘original’, ‘alien’, ‘ancient’, and ‘modern’. The monologic worldview conveniently freezes these fluid concepts simply to exert control, and Bakhtinian categories enable us to expose the built-in rigidity in single-voiced authoritarian worldviews.”



**MIKHAIL BAKHTIN** (1895–1975) was a Russian philosopher and literary critic. Although he was active in literary and aesthetic debates of the 1920s in the Soviet Union, he was long unknown in Russia and was first “rediscovered” by Western scholars in the 1960s. Indeed, in December 1929, Bakhtin was arrested for “anti-Soviet activity”, and escaped being sent to the Gulag only thanks to friends’ support. Bakhtin spent the years 1928–1934 in exile in Kazakhstan and taught in Saransk University in Russia from 1936 to the early 1960s. He also worked as a school-teacher for a time.

In his research on Fyodor Dostoevsky’s works (1929), Bakhtin developed the ideas of dialogue as an immanent form of speaking, writing, and self-perception. Bakhtin was also one of the first to

explore the impossibility of neutrality of language by drawing attention to the importance of context. But Bakhtin’s most famous work is probably his study of the 16<sup>th</sup>-century French writer François Rabelais (*Rabelais and Folk Culture of the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, finished in 1940, but published only in 1965). In this study Bakhtin explored specifics of Renaissance literature and focused on laughter as a specific form of the perception of the world (*mirosozertsanie*), a form of truth about history and about humans. It was in the work on Rabelais that Bakhtin also explored the special role of the carnival as a social institution. This study Bakhtin defended 1946 as his doctoral dissertation in the Institute of World Literature, Moscow.



“Especially in his early work, Bakhtin is marvelously seminal on the question of otherness, and what it actually means to accept the Other.”

**GALIN TIHANOV:** “Especially in his early work, Bakhtin is marvelously seminal on the question of otherness, and what it actually means to accept the Other. We need to remember, perhaps, that he begins as a thinker motivated by problems of ethics: What is at stake in the process of creative writing? What does ‘ethical’ creative writing entail? How can the writer shape his/her hero (the Other), without intrusion and without depriving the Other of otherness? The whole notion of dialogue in the Dostoevsky book comes as a response to this earlier set of questions which Bakhtin asks in his long essay ‘Author and Hero’. Equally, the early Bakhtin is vividly interested in the idea of boundaries; he sees them as porous and yet not entirely fluid. Bakhtin’s work could help us rethink Derrida’s notion of hospitality and, indeed, most of the literature that has appeared in the wake of the revival of cosmopolitanism in the last 15 years or so, and with this also the problems of exile and migration (his brother, Nikolai, was himself an exile in France, later an émigré in England). As for social and political movements, we have to be cautious not to uproot Bakhtin too much from his own intellectual home: after all, he was writing as a thinker who was pondering questions of ethics and cultural theory, not of political philosophy per se. The early Bakhtin is, of course, an inspiration for democrats (dialogue; polyphony), but the later Bakhtin, particularly with the Rabelais book, retreats into a corporative vision of solidarity without an underlying liberal belief in the autonomy of the individual, without a dialogue with, or respect for the private world of, the individual.”

**Bakhtin’s work deals almost exclusively with European literary forms. Do you think it would be fair to regard Bakhtin as a Eurocentric thinker?**

**KEN HIRSCHKOP:** “Matters are more complicated than the question implies; plenty of Russians did not think of themselves as, in the first instance, European. Furthermore, there is a very substantial difference between Russian literary forms and those contemporary with them in, say, France or England. So I think ‘Eurocentric’ implies something more cohesive than is the case with Bakhtin. That said, his reference points, intellectually, lie almost exclusively in Germany and Russia. Perhaps more significantly, his historical sense depends entirely on a very classical version of European history: ancient Greece and Rome, Middle Ages, Renaissance, modernity. That is a serious problem, in my view, for Europeans as well as non-Europeans.”

**CRAIG BRANDIST:** “There are at least two ways in which a thinker might be considered Eurocentric. One might be to say a thinker is rooted in, and most familiar with, European culture and so approaches another culture from that position; another is to treat European culture as a standard against which to judge the other culture. Only the second version is a significant problem. The first version, if properly understood and acknowledged, may facilitate valuable research and analyses. Bakhtin is a Eurocentric thinker only in the first sense: his published works are rooted in European philosophy and focused upon European culture, with few excursions into non-European cultures. He was, however, professor of world literature in Saransk, and so discussed non-European literature as part of a program of pedagogy. He does not appear to have felt confident to publish in the area.

“The main issue is perhaps methodological – does Bakhtin seek to judge the novel, for instance, as the achievement of a specifically European social process or culture? It would appear not. It is treated as a form that arises in human culture at a specific point, related to the rise of national languages, or the expression of permanent critical and decentralizing forces in culture more generally. The works in which he does venture into non-European areas suggest he viewed this process as applicable to all cultures, and there is no clear indication that he tried to erect any hierarchy of cultures. Genres and ‘chronotopes’ appear to correspond to modes of human thinking that flourish in certain, poorly defined, historical conditions. This is probably due to the influence of contemporary forms of Soviet cultural theory that were critical of Eurocentric (in the second sense) approaches to language and culture.”

**CARYL EMERSON:** “This is a poorly-posed question, in my view, especially since ‘Eurocentric’ is often perceived to be a term of abuse. Bakhtin (much like Yuri Lotman and his Tartu School semioticians a generation later) thought with the material accessible to the intellectual pool of their eras. Not every mind can embrace every culture knowledgeably, nor from its native point of view. Bakhtin, like many Russian and German thinkers (including Hegel, Freud, Leo Tolstoy and Lotman) tended to be a ‘universalizer,’ that is, he assumed that what occurred to his body and mind was applicable to most other bodies and minds. But, at base the ideas of dialogue and heteroglossia are pluralizing ideas, centrifugal in spirit rather than centralizing. So no, he is not blindly or dogmatically Eurocentric. Of course he is not to blame for having been born in Europe (or at the Eastern fringe of it)! It is the task of thinkers from other cultures to cosmopolitanize when applying his thought.”





**LAKSHMI BANDLAMUDI** is professor of psychology in LaGuardia Community College, City University of New York. She works with the Bakhtinian/Vygotskian framework to explore questions about dialogic consciousness and socio-historical epistemology. Her works include *Difference, Dialogue and Development in the Bakhtinian World* (Routledge 2015), *The Dialogics of Self, the Mahabharata and Culture, The History of Understanding and Understanding of History* (Anthem Press, 2010) and a travelogue *Movements with the Cosmic Dancer, On Pilgrimage to Kailash Manasarovar* (2006).



**CARYL EMERSON** is A. Watson Armour III university professor of Slavic languages and literatures, emerita, Princeton University. She is the author of several books, among which are *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford University Press, 1990, with Gary Saul Morson), *The Cambridge Introduction to Russian Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 2008) and *The First Hundred Years of Mikhail Bakhtin* (Princeton University Press, 1997). Professor Emerson's books and articles about Russian literature and Bakhtin have been translated into several languages, including Chinese and Portuguese.

**KEN HIRSCHKOP** is associate professor of English language and literature, University of Waterloo, Canada. He was born in New York and wrote his doctoral dissertation on theory of language by Mikhail Bakhtin at the University of Southampton. Professor Hirschkop published widely on cultural and literary theory and modern philosophy of language. Among his publications are the books *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory* (co-edited with David Shepherd: Manchester University Press, 1989) and *Mikhail Bakhtin: An Aesthetic for Democracy* (Oxford University Press, 1999).



**CRAIG BRANDIST** is professor of cultural theory and intellectual history and the director of the Bakhtin Centre. He has published widely on Russian literature, intellectual history, and critical thought, including *Carnival Culture and the Soviet Modernist Novel* (1996), *The Bakhtin Circle: Philosophy, Culture and Politics* (2002), *The Dimensions of Hegemony: Language, Culture and Politics in Revolutionary Russia* (2016; ed. with David Shepherd and Galin Tihanov), *The Bakhtin Circle: In the Master's Absence* (2004), and *Politics and the Theory of Language in the USSR 1917–1938* (ed. with Katya Chown; 2010). He is currently working on a book about Antonio Gramsci's time in the USSR (1922–1925), and on a new monograph about the critique of Indo-European philology in Revolutionary Russia.



**GALIN TIHANOV** is the George Steiner Professor of Comparative Literature at Queen Mary University of London. He was previously professor of comparative literature and intellectual history and founding codirector of the Research Institute for Cosmopolitan Cultures at the University of Manchester. His research focus is: cosmopolitanism, exile, and transnationalism. His publications include four books and nine edited volumes, as well as over a hundred articles on German, Russian, French, and Central European intellectual and cultural history and literary theory.



**LAKSHMI BANDLAMUDI:** “Bakhtin’s ideas are certainly rooted in European philosophy and literary works, but that does not make him a Eurocentric thinker in a pejorative sense. Using one particular philosophy, or text or cultural practice as a measuring rod to assess other philosophies, texts or cultural practices, was antithetical to Bakhtinian thought. He insisted on dialogicality between competing ideas and ideals. Any thinker is grounded in the cultural ethos of their times, but that does not mean their ideas cannot have a broader appeal. Tagore, Aurobindo and other Indian intellectuals were grounded in the Indian intellectual traditions, and yet we cannot characterize them as Indo-centric as their works also have a universal appeal. Unlike Aurobindo, who had immense familiarity with Western philosophies and mythologies, and hence was able to engage in comparative analysis, Bakhtin does not appear to be familiar with non-Western literature in a deep sense and hence we do not see any references to them in his works. The content of Bakhtin’s works clearly show the European imprint, but the categories of thought and analysis cross cultural and disciplinary boundaries. Since he never engaged in the exercise of ranking cultures, we could say that he is a de-centered thinker and therefore it would be unfair to brand him as a Eurocentric thinker.”

**GALIN TIHANOV:** “This is an excellent question. The short answer is, actually, no. Yes, Bakhtin appears to be relying on a Western canon to validate his theses; the Rabelais book begins with a comparison of Rabelais with Voltaire, Shakespeare, Cervantes, etc. But, in truth, Bakhtin is more interested in the literature and culture of premoder-

nity, the time when Europe is not yet a dominant force, before the continent begins to see itself as the center of the world. Bakhtin is thus actually a thinker much more fascinated by the subterranean cultural deposits of folklore, of minor discourses, of ancient genres, of anonymous verbal masses – all of which long predates European culture of the age of modernity (beginning roughly with the Renaissance), which is the only dominant European culture we know. Even Rabelais' s novel interests him for its more traditional, pre-modern, folklore-based layers. Bakhtin is a flight away from Eurocentrism, not by writing on non-European cultures, but by writing on pre-European cultures, on cultures that occupy the old shared territory of folklore, rites, and epic narratives, before Europe even begins to emerge as an entity on the cultural and political map of the world: his is an anti-Eurocentric journey not in space, but in time. His contemporary, Nikolai Marr, of whom Bakhtin thought highly, did something similar in his work on semantic paleontology."

**Critics have noted that categories such as dialogism and carnival are often employed in a mechanical fashion or too loosely. How can this problem be avoided by scholars coming from outside Europe?**

**KEN HIRSCHKOP:** "I'm not sure what one can do besides read the texts carefully and note their ambiguities. Always bear in mind that 'dialogism' is found in novels, not in everyday dialogue – don't equate the two."

**CRAIG BRANDIST:** "I think the main thing is to be historically rigorous when seeking to apply categories and concepts to specific cultural phenomena. One of the things that tempts researchers to apply the categories too loosely is that Bakhtin developed his concepts in analyses of cultural forms with too little attention to the institutional structures into which those forms were integrated at a 'molecular' level, as it were. An assessment of the validity of such concepts requires an assessment of the institutional foundations of the European phenomenon Bakhtin was seeking to address, and that of the non-European phenomenon to be considered. The other side of historical rigor is to have an awareness of the historical background of Bakhtinian ideas themselves, how they have developed from specific ways of understanding the world and the assumptions on which they are based. This enables one better to understand their potential and limitations in application as well as their capacities for combination with other ideas that might lead to analytical tools becoming better adapted to their objects. So it is not simply about adopting and applying ideas and analytical categories, but their customization to suit the historically determinate nature of the object of analysis."

**CARYL EMERSON:** "A good but difficult question. Be more precise in the use of concepts. Every time people converse is not an instance of dialogue; every time a rogue, fool, or clown commits a prank on the public square he is not enacting a culture of laughter. Dialogue begins as a listening practice and carnival begins with absence of fear of death. For Bakhtin, both dialogue and carnival were technical terms relating both to social practices and to spiritual attitudes. My experience has been that ancient non-Western cultures, especially those that have not undergone rigorous skeptical enlightenments or forced atheistic ideologies, are wonderfully situated to grasp the essentials of Bakhtin, whereas materialist cultures are somewhat handicapped."

**LAKSHMI BANDLAMUDI:** "Dialogue and carnival are deep-rooted philosophical concepts. A simple conversation is not a dialogue and language filled with profanities and grotesque body images does not constitute carnival. Dialogue is grounded in ontological realities and epistemological necessities and it is also a call for fulfilling ethical obligations with emotional sensitivity towards the other. Often, scholars engage more with Bakhtin's later works that are relatively more accessible, without a deeper engagement with his early works that are philosophically deep and dense, and that leads to mechanical application."

"Carnival is an essential part of the dialogic world, for it catalyzes new beginnings and keeps the system open-ended. If outsideness is an essential part of aesthetic consciousness, a periodic merger into the collective is an essential part of carnivalized consciousness, and together they keep the dialogue alive. Ancient cultures like India that has a rich carnivalesque tradition (for example *Ninda Stuti* – accusatory praises), are well suited to bring greater clarity and add a new dimension to the Bakhtin/Rabelaisian world, and I am eagerly looking forward to such contributions. Carnival is both physical and metaphysical and ignoring either element results in loose application."

**GALIN TIHANOV:** "This is also a problem for scholars from Europe; they often tend to work with these concepts as if they were monoliths whose validity accrues independently of a particular historical and cultural context. It seems to me that the best way to resist this is to always ask oneself the question about the limits of Bakhtinian theory, the limits of its applicability: try to contextualize his categories and see how much a different cultural context would allow them to do; try to confront his theory with your own cultural history and your own aesthetic formations, and see how far it goes before it needs reworking, supplementing, qualifying."

### How might Bakhtinian ideas be developed or revised better to suit analyses of non-Western cultures?

**KEN HIRSCHKOP:** “Bakhtin’s tools are fairly flexible: I’m not sure they need much rejigging to be useful in the analysis of materials outside Europe and North America. Both ‘narrative’ and ‘dialogue’ are universal in their scope. But though the analytical categories are universal, in Bakhtin’s work each analytical category has a normative sense built into it (there are more and less dialogic forms of dialogue, more and less chronotopic forms of narrative) and these could be limiting. Not every society will place the same value on parody and irony that Bakhtin does and not every society will think that the historical chronotope as Bakhtin describes it is the proper way to represent change and development. What will be interesting is to see how a different sense of what a chronotope ought to be affects the core of the analytical category itself.”

**CRAIG BRANDIST:** “Again, I think that historical and institutional specificity is important here. Countries like India with a range of literary languages clearly do not fit easily into Bakhtin’s model of the novel as being linked to the rise of a unitary language that becomes socially stratified. Whether varieties of literary narrative in non-Western traditions can really be assumed to fit Bakhtin’s characterization of the epic and the novel is surely open to serious question. That does not exclude the probability that one may find a significant number of areas where the analysis does indeed fit. Perhaps it is more productive to regard Bakhtin’s work as raising questions and opening avenues of research rather than providing some definitive set of categories that can be applied unproblematically. There are good reasons why the categories of analysis of literary texts vary across cultures, and one needs to take proper account of this in evaluating the usefulness of Bakhtinian categories. It may well be that considering the approaches together and scrutinizing their philosophical bases will allow the development of more adequate categories for analyzing literary phenomena.”

**CARYL EMERSON:** “Such adaptation is already being done very successfully. Lakshmi Bandlamudi’s 2015 book from Routledge, *Difference, Dialogue and Development: A Bakhtinian World* is one illuminating example, as was the recent International Bakhtin Symposium in India.”

**LAKSHMI BANDLAMUDI:** “Bakhtin’s ideas have already traveled far and wide and the very fact that international Bakhtin conferences have been held in so many parts of the world is proof of the wide appeal. Convening the Bakhtin Conference in India in 2013 was my attempt to initiate Bakhtin Studies in India, and I sincerely believe, given the cultural composition and intellectual traditions in India, that the country has the potential to contribute immensely to dialogic studies.

“In addition to my work on *The Mahabharata*, I have been engaged in comparative analysis between Bakhtin and the Sanskrit grammarian Bhartrhari, and I find their dialogic encounters, even after crossing cultural spaces and historical times, to be incredibly valuable and exciting. Theoretical concepts are not some templates to be applied mechanically; they need to be deployed with great consideration to basic realities.”

**GALIN TIHANOV:** “I think this question is partly answered in my response to the previous question. But there is also the whole issue of how one can develop Bakhtinian theory. In a sense, by staging the encounters I outlined when answering the previous question; but also by developing a conceptual apparatus that responds to new global developments. I recently had a doctoral student from São Paulo who was examining Bakhtin’s theory of discursive genres, and what happens to it in Brazil in the age of Facebook, Twitter, and other social media. Or think of India and its powerful ancient literary tradition. Bakhtin’s major opposition, between novel and epic – which to him is also an opposition between the dialogical and the monological – would not quite work to explain the repertoire of genres in the literature written in Sanskrit. It is only through productive confrontations with other cultural constellations that a theory can be tested, modified, and developed. The impulse emanating from Bakhtin’s conceptual framework may be carried forward in these encounters, but only as an impulse.”

### What do you think about the development of Bakhtin’s ideas and research about Bakhtin in Russia today?

**KEN HIRSCHKOP:** “The most important development is the publication of the Bakhtin *Sobranie sochinenie* [Collected works], which means we finally have a reliable and fairly comprehensive edition of Bakhtin’s texts. There has been some excellent philological commentary on Bakhtin’s work as a direct consequence. I still find that much Russian commentary is mortgaged to an unsustainable vision of Bakhtin as a religious philosopher forced off his chosen path. But younger Russian commentators are also taking a role, and their view tends to be quite different.”

“Bakhtin’s ideas have already traveled far and wide and the very fact that international Bakhtin conferences have been held in so many parts of the world is proof of the wide appeal.”

**“In Russia as in other parts of the world, Bakhtin is now a classic, enjoying the status of someone people quote without necessarily having read him.”**

**CRAIG BRANDIST:** “Now all the volumes of Bakhtin’s *Collected Works* have been published, one hopes there will be a rather more rigorous approach to Bakhtin’s ideas in Russia than was typical in the preceding period. The haphazard way in which Bakhtin’s works were published, along with their selective adoption for ideological employment, did not make a relatively dispassionate approach to the ideas easy in Russia. There are people from specific disciplines who have been interested in Bakhtinian ideas, have made creative use of them, and have produced valuable work. Unfortunately, however, with some significant exceptions, much of what became known as *Bakhtinologiia* led to readings that were skewed by extrinsic agendas. Unfortunately the *Collected Works* were not entirely free of this, and the lengthy, detailed and in many respects valuable commentaries tend to read Bakhtin’s work into a preconceived narrative framework. In some cases they also divide Bakhtin’s works into ‘canonical’ and ‘deuterocanonical’ texts, which allows the interpreter to disregard inconvenient textual evidence by consigning that evidence to the latter. I was relieved that the so-called ‘disputed texts’ were not included in Bakhtin’s *Collected Works*, for I believe publication of the works of the ‘Circle’ is a quite different project.

“Much of the ‘Bakhtinological’ reception has also tended to reduce the dialogues and exchanges within the ‘Circle’ to a pedagogical relationship in which Bakhtin enlightened his followers, or argued with those who did not accept his wisdom. I have always found this monological arrangement not only to be unlikely, but also fundamentally incompatible with Bakhtin’s own philosophical outlook. The result is that the contributions of many participants remain either undeveloped or developed with little reference to the Circle. Thus work on Konrad and Túbianskii has tended to be carried out by historians of Oriental Studies and they have been left largely untouched by those focused on Bakhtinian ideas. Similarly, where Voloshinov and Medvedev were not simply treated as Bakhtin’s ventriloquist dummies, their works have rarely been related to the other circles of intellectuals to which they belonged and their distinct perspectives thereby inadequately discerned. Given the access Russian scholars have to archival materials, it is disappointing this research has largely been left to foreign researchers. Fortunately, as the ideological battles of the 1990s fade and younger Russian scholars come onto the scene, there have been signs of differently focused studies appearing.

“As far as Bakhtin’s own work is concerned, however, I do not think the situation will change fundamentally until Bakhtin’s archive has been systematically catalogued and made available to all researchers. One hopes this is not a too distant prospect. It is a pity that the personal archive of Voloshinov appears to have been lost, while those of Medvedev and Túbianskii disappeared when they were each arrested and shot during the Stalinist repressions of the late 1930s. Fortunately there are some holdings in institutional archives that give us some information about these significant scholars. I look forward to seeing how the field will develop.”

**CARYL EMERSON:** “The completion of the *Collected Works* in 2014 was an important event, since the Bakhtinian corpus emerged in a random, piecemeal way (the translations too). Very good work is being done in Russia, most of it applied or syncretic. But Bakhtin, post-boom and post-fad, is now a *classic*. His theories can be criticized and re-integrated into a tradition in a cooler, more scholarly fashion, without awe but with attention to his sources of inspiration. Such a maturation of the field,

which sees Bakhtin the Thinker as a product of his own time, happened to Russian Formalism and is beginning to happen with the Lotman School. This is welcome news.”

**GALIN TIHANOV:** “Russia has seen all the ebbs and flows of the Bakhtin industry over the last quarter of a century – and not just seen but also played a part in shaping them, at first in a rather reluctant dialogue with the West, later on in ways that have been much more open and constructive. In Russia, as in other parts of the world, Bakhtin is now a classic, enjoying the status of someone people quote without necessarily having read him. A classic in the sense that the terminology, the categories, are by now deeply engrained in the vocabulary of literary scholarship, to the extent that the name of their author is no longer even worth mentioning. (Very few thinkers enjoy such status; in philosophy and the social sciences, and in cultural theory, Marx, Nietzsche, Foucault, and Derrida come to mind.) This is, of course, a double-edged sword, for a theory only lives as long as it is in motion and changes in the hands of its practitioners. It is in this context that we should also see the invaluable edition of Bakhtin’s *Collected Works*, which was completed a few years ago in Moscow. This edition is a veritable monument of scholarship, something generations of Bakhtin scholars will benefit from.” x

NOTE: The questions where sent to the interviewed by e-mail during the autumn 2016 and collected and edited thereafter.

By Paromita Chakrabarti, associate professor of English and director of global research initiatives at H.R. College, University of Mumbai, and Yulia Gradska, associate professor at the Institute of Contemporary History, Södertörn University.





In the context of Bakhtin's philosophy of laughter & the postcolonial perspective:

# Ukrainian popular culture

by **Viktoriya Sukovata**

## abstract

The paper is a study of the Ukrainian popular culture based on the material of the Ukrainian TV comedy shows which emerged after 1991. They are: *Maski Show*, *Gentlemen Show*, *Verka Serdutchka*, *Fajna Ukrajna*, *Vital'ka*, and *Evening Kvartal*. These TV shows have not been investigated by Western, nor Ukrainian scholars. The Ukrainian TV comedy shows are examined in the context of Bakhtin's theory of carnival and of the ideas of the Australian Slavic scholar M. Pavlyshyn who has elaborated the concepts anticolonialism and postcolonialism in relation to contemporary Ukrainian culture.

**KEY WORDS:** Ukrainian TV comedy shows, Ukrainian popular culture, postsocialist culture, postcolonial culture, carnival.

The purpose of my study is to investigate the most vivid phenomenon of Ukrainian popular culture that emerged after Ukrainian independence in 1991: television comedies. In contrast to post-Soviet Ukrainian literature, which has been the subject of numerous studies over the last twenty years,<sup>1</sup> Ukrainian comedy shows have not been subjected to focused scholarly analysis.<sup>2</sup> Contemporary Ukrainian popular culture, especially the TV comedies, remains almost unknown outside the country, despite the fact that they are fascinating phenomena that reflect the tone of public sentiment to a great degree. The other important reason to investigate Ukrainian television comedies is that public comedy in any soci-



*The Gentleman Show* was sometimes devoted to political themes, but more often to family, gender, and national minorities' issues.

ety – the object and style of mockery, of laughter – can say a lot about relations between authorities and civil society, and about the possibility of criticism of the state. In addition, my study will introduce cultural and national source material currently under-represented in the humanities in Europe.

I examine Ukrainian comedy shows within the theoretical framework of Bakhtin's notion of the carnival, which's has never been applied to this type of material. I contend that the study of Ukrainian comedy, when conducted in a Bakhtinian framework, sheds light on elements of culture and society that otherwise might remain unnoticed. Such an approach first developed in the work of Ken Hirschkop, in which Bakhtin's ideas were considered not to be philosophy so much as a pragmatic way to understand cultural politics in society and the "aesthetics of democracy".<sup>3</sup> In my study I use the most suitable concepts of Bakhtin's theory: *carnival*,<sup>4</sup> which develops the idea of a grotesque collective body as a symbol of the anti-norm and eccentric behavior in a carnival space-time, the *carnival chronotope*, where carnival members try to "familiarize" the space of communication; the concept of *laughter culture*,<sup>5</sup> designates the phenomenon in which "bottom" and "top" of culture change places, reversing the hierarchies of everyday life.

**FINALLY, MY AIM** is to focus attention on the cultural transformations that occurred in Ukrainian popular culture during the

two decades after Ukrainian independence, analyzing these transformations as part of a postsocialist or postcolonial culture. The phrase postcolonial culture has many definitions, to be sure, but I suggest that the most fruitful use of the term, which I will follow here, was proposed by the Australian scholar in Ukrainian studies Marko Pavlyshyn, who defined it and related terms specifically in relation to Ukrainian culture. He noted that if "socialist culture" can be characterized as a culture which was under the pressure of the (Soviet) state and which had to be a part of a propaganda mouthpiece, the Ukrainian postsocialist culture of the 1990s was to become more depended on commercial market<sup>6</sup> than on political ideology.

Other oppositions – colonial vs. anticolonial or postcolonial – were contextualized by Pavlyshyn in relation to Ukrainian literature and writers' public activity in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Pavlyshyn developed his notion of cultural colonialism from E. Said's and H. Bhabha's concepts and explained it relative to Soviet and post-Soviet Ukrainian culture. Soviet cultural politics quasynaturalized the unequal relations between a metropolitan center and a colonial periphery as universally applicable, where the culture which was created in the center (Moscow) was considered to be "normative" and "exemplary", and where national artists (or writers) could gain a

high professional status only after recognition in Moscow and in Russian language journals and publishing houses. The Russian language was considered to be the language of "cultural norm", and all "national" languages were indirectly presented as "marginal", or "additional", or "provincial". Despite the fact that the Soviet culture produced a large number of movies, TV shows, and books with the participation of the all Soviet nations and in some cases, ethnicity was emphasized as a sign of Soviet internationalism or multiculturalism, the "ethnographism" in Soviet and Russian mass culture was a kind of "cultural exoticism" because it presented a "cultural contrast" to the "norm".

Pavlyshyn argues that all anticolonial (i.e. nationalism-oriented) strategies in Soviet or post-Soviet Ukraine were consolidated by the use of the rhetoric of *rebellion* against the Soviet empire and the Russian-oriented norms. But a problem was that the anticolonialism strategy of the former political opposition in Soviet or post-Soviet culture was seen as a subconscious desire to usurp the place of the official normative power, to put its own cultural values in place of the former colonial canon, and to dictate its own values exclusively, reversing the previous rule.<sup>7</sup> Newcomers, previously excluded from the process of literary canon-making, became introduced in canon.<sup>8</sup> Anticolonialism as the necessary cultural alternative is an unproductive strategy for Ukrainian society because it does not account for the significant cultural, religious, and lingual diversity in Ukraine;

the “anticolonial protest” took as a basic position that Ukraine is a politically, lingual, and culturally homogeneous society. In reality, different parts of Ukraine for many centuries belonged to different states and different cultures, resulting in a different systems of political and cultural values: while Lviv and Galicia had been traditionally oriented on Warsaw and Vienna as the centers of empire Moscow as a cultural center was attractive for the eastern and south Ukrainian regions. Postcolonialism is therefore a much more productive cultural strategy than anticolonialism, because postcolonialism in Ukraine means integration of all regional cultural strategies and of the voices of all national and cultural representatives. Pavlyshyn believes that postcolonialism in Ukraine marks a step away from the “romanticism” of anticolonial protests towards a “pragmatism” based on the multicultural reality of post-Soviet Ukraine.<sup>9</sup> Postcolonialism refuses to consider culture in a binary system only as a collaboration with the authorities (the colonial type of relation) or as a liberation from them (anticolonial).<sup>10</sup> Postcolonialism can demonstrate the development of the cultural postmodernist polyphony of many cultural voices (as described by Bakhtin). In my work I will try to analyze the contemporary TV comedies in Ukraine in terms of Pavlyshyn’s discourse on postcolonialism and Bakhtin’s theory of polyphony and carnival.

### Tendencies in comedy in early post-Soviet Ukrainian culture

Ukrainian comedy shows emerged in the early 1990s, when the importance of commercial television culture as a realm of entertainment and a space for free experimentation was on the rise. The first shows, created immediately after the collapse of the USSR, manifest a strong desire to deconstruct Soviet propaganda clichés and artistic stereotypes. The first Ukrainian comedies drew upon the Soviet comedic traditions, to be sure, but they underwent an ironic reworking. The Ukrainian comedic culture of the 1990s blended the comic elements of the socialist comedic traditions with the postsocialist commercial culture, as well as the Ukrainian “anticolonial” (“remonstrative”) discourse, which was presented as the parody of the canonical Soviet comedies.

The first and the most prominent post-Soviet Ukrainian project of the 1990s went on air as the *Maski Show* (in English, “Show of masks”), led by Georgiy Deliev with his comic troupe from Ukrainian Odessa. The series was released in 1991 and lasted until 2006. Some films in the series had titles suggesting they contained traditional socialist plots, such as *Maski in the kolkhoz* (1998), *Maski at the Red partisans* (1998), and *Maski in the army* (1993), but they parodied the typical scenes of the Soviet classic films of the 1960s to 1980s, with which the post-Soviet audience would have been very familiar. More than 58 films were shot and they were shown in every post-Soviet space, including Ukraine and Russia.

The basic genre of the *Maski* entailed parodying Soviet artistic and political identities, to point of absurdity and the grotesqueness. The accentuated provincialism of the characters was used to great comic effect, and was an integral part of the show. However, a detailed analysis of the *Maski* can demonstrate not only political parody but a complex mix of traditions of clowning, gestures of silent cinema, and Italian *commedia dell’arte*. The comedic effect was a result of situations with elements of the gag, ridiculous physical appearances, and the vulgar manners of

**“ACCORDING TO BAKHTIN, THE CARNIVAL IS A SYSTEM OF PRODUCING NEW SUBJECTIVITIES THAT DO NOT BELONG IN THE REALM OF ‘NORMALCY.’”**

the characters. The artists of the show depicted the same social or psychological stereotypes in all episodes of the series (for example, “Poor scholar”, “Provincial”, “Fat man”, “Sex vamp”). These characters acted in accordance with their social temperament and the expectations of spectators, and displayed the carnivalesque blend of Ukrainian burlesque images and global pop culture (“Sex vamp”, “Poor scholar”). I believe that laughing at the plots and characters of the *Maski* had obvious therapeutic functions in the extreme social and political chaos of the post-

Soviet societies of the 1990s.

Many of the *Maski* characters were presented with ridiculous, deformed bodies (too big, too fat, too sexual) that can be understood as the Bakhtinian “grotesque body” of carnival subjectivity. According to Bakhtin, the carnival is a system of producing new subjectivities that do not belong in the realm of “normalcy”; the *Maski* evoke what is a clear example of carnivalesque laughter, because they mix the norms of Soviet culture and the antinormalcy of post-Soviet subjectivity. I consider the *Maski* to be a phenomenon of postsocialist culture, which developed into something more commercial, politically independent, and, in its orientation towards the Soviet canons, more ironic. The spectators of the *Maski* can get aesthetic pleasure at two different levels: those with a Soviet past can enjoy the bright irony and deconstruction of the canonical Soviet genres, and a Western audience who never experienced Soviet culture in any significant way can take pleasure from the carnival plots and grotesque appearance of the characters.

Another popular Ukrainian comedy of the 1990s was *The Gentleman Show*. It emerged in Odessa as well, which was recognized as the unofficial “capital of humor” during the Soviet period. *The Gentleman Show* was a TV comedy program created by the former participants of KVN at Odessa State University. “KVN” is an abbreviation that means “Club of playful and witty people” (Russian: *Klub veseluh i nahodchivuh*). It was an enormously popular Soviet TV show in which participants from different Soviet universities matched wittiness, bright mottos, erudition, and dramatic performances. KVN has existed since 1961, and has attracted millions of viewers. Amid the monotonous Soviet everyday life with a huge number of official events and extremely limited entertainment possibilities, the KVN show



was one of very few Soviet TV comedy shows. KVN was established in the late Khrushchev thaw, a period of liberal changes in the USSR, when Stalinist repressions had ended and totalitarian censorship waned. During Stalin's rule, a person could be sent to the Siberia camps for five years merely because they related an unfortunate anecdote, and that is why even very light and nonpolitical KVN jokes were experienced as fresh air by the Soviet viewership in the post-Stalinist epoch. During the 1960s and '70s, KVN was understood as part of the joyful and creative student life; many Soviet universities and scientific institutes had their own KVN teams. KVN had several competitive leagues (like football teams) among cities and regional clubs, and many contemporary humor shows and presenters in Russia and Ukraine came out of the KVN shows. Many popular writers of satire of the late Soviet and post-Soviet eras were originally from KVN teams. Even after the collapse of the Soviet Union, former Soviet citizens living in Israel, the US, Germany, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan continue this competition of wittiness as an international project.

**BECAUSE** erudition, a demonstration of high intelligence, and an ironic attitude to the reigning social and political clichés was an essential part of the scientific life and the image of an intellectual in the Soviet Union, the KVN show was especially popular among the Soviet technical and creative intelligentsia, as well as among people who more or less associated themselves with the opposition to Soviet officialdom. KVN created, not precisely a satirical, but rather a very ironic type of laughter and the Soviet government allowed the KVN players such laughter. In the official culture this was understood to mean that young KVN competitors were not criticizing Soviet rule, but were simply demonstrating, as it were, their creative potential, which would be used in the service of the Soviet state in their professional future. It meant that the KVN produced a "Soviet" type of laughter and a socialist critique of weak points in the Soviet life from the standpoint of "a loyal Soviet subject", but not from any other standpoint – such as that of people who found themselves in opposition to the Soviet regime (the "anti-Soviet Other"), or those who found themselves outside the Soviet society (for example, the Western Other). Thus, it was a "permissible" laughter in the Soviet period, and this canon was used and transformed in the post-Soviet period.

The popular team from Ukraine, the "Odessa Gentlemen's Club", established a very fashionable, humorous show after winning many KVN competitions over the course of several years, and the participants of the Odessa team started their own independent show in the beginning of the 1990s. The sketches of *The Gentleman Show* were devoted sometimes to political themes, but much more to family, gender, and national minorities' issues. The Ukrainian *Gentleman Show* constructed its

## "THE UKRAINIAN GENTLEMAN SHOW CONSTRUCTED ITS HUMOR ON THE INTERSECTION OF THE JEWISH-UKRAINIAN-RUSSIAN COMEDIC TRADITIONS."

humor on the intersection of the Jewish, Ukrainian, Russian comedic traditions because prerevolutionary, and Soviet Odessa was a very multicultural city with a strong accent on traditional Yiddish culture, including food, family relations, and music, in the Russian-Ukrainian surroundings, as presented in the postrevolutionary stories by Isaac Babel, Ilya Ilf, and Evgeny Petrov.<sup>11</sup> Solidarity with a national or minority subject became a principal point of view in the post-Soviet Ukrainian laughter of the middle 1990s, and it was a tradition from the Soviet un-

derground culture. The famous Soviet dissident writers P. Vayl' and A. Genis wrote that the "philosemitism of the Soviet intelligentsia of the 1960s was a particular case of identification with a representative of a national minority, not a national majority [...] because it was an opportunity to be on the side of a victim, but not an authority"<sup>12</sup> An ironic look from a (Jewish) periphery at the Soviet subjectivity offered more opportunities for humorous understanding of the absurd sides of the life. Jewish and Yiddish culture in the post-Soviet *Gentleman Show* was presented not as

a marginal culture, but as the subject of laughter, thus elevating the culture to a new representative of normativity. It should be remembered that Ukraine has always been a country with a high percentage of Jews, especially in big cities such as Odessa, Kharkov, Kiev, Dnepropetrovsk, and Donetsk, where Jews traditionally played a significant role in cultural, scientific, and artistic life. *The Gentleman Show* legitimized Jewishness not only as a cultural norm in the post-Soviet Ukrainian culture, but all ethnic minorities as a subject, not an object, of laughter. And it was not just a returning to Babel's traditions, but the creation of a space where representatives of different ethnic minorities move from a periphery to a cultural center. It meant that the minority subject, who was marked as the "provincial" and "ethnographic" body in the Soviet time, moved to the more tolerant, postcolonial and multinational chronotope which combined several different tendencies: socialist critique, postsocialist satire, and commercial entertainment at the same time. Where the colonial culture was constructed upon the opposition between the "imperial center" and the "colonial periphery", the anticolonial culture tried to inverse them, but postcolonial laughter adapted all existing cultural and ideological positions present in Ukrainian culture after independence.

## Carnivalization in Ukrainian comedies after the 2000s

The show by the Ukrainian artist Andrei Danilko in the character of Verka Serdutchka can be considered a fundamentally new phase in Ukrainian comedic culture, and a perfect example of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque. An identity, at once double and carnivalesque, of a new character was presented first at the simple level of a name: "Verka" is a female Russian name in a vulgar



pronunciation, and “Serduchka” is similar to a Ukrainian street nickname. This hybridization of the name can be considered a symbol of the transgressive subjectivity formed in Ukraine in the late 1990s.

The first performances of Andrei Danilko as the stage persona Verka Serduchka on Ukrainian TV was in 1997 in the comedic *SV show*. Verka Serduchka cut an image of the provincial, vulgar, but kind, friendly, and witty train conductor whose statements quickly became well known. The show had a principally “performative” character because many sketches by Danilko/Serduchka were improvised and depended on dialogue with other participants. We can thus say that the show *Verka Serduchka* uses several national comedic traditions: the Ukrainian tradition of burlesque, and the Western variety of the same – drag shows – and Soviet cross-dressing. Although burlesque is typical not only in the Ukrainian tradition,<sup>13</sup> it is presented in the Ukrainian classic literature as a genre, and it was first used in Ivan Kotlyarevsky’s “Aeneid” (1798–1820), an extremely popular Ukrainian burlesque poem which was built as the parody deconstruction of the classical *Aeneid* by Virgil, with a strong Ukrainian Cossack coloration. Kotlyarevsky was a successful Russian officer from an aristocratic East Ukrainian family and the first well-known Ukrainian writer in the Russian empire to use the “Malorussian” (contemporary Ukrainian) language in his literary works, and he gained great popularity because of his humorous and vivid style. He frequently used details from Ukrainian peasant life as symbols of the “bucolic” Ukrainian past. And he was the first to include Ukrainian “provincialism” and carnival as a cultural myth about Ukraine in the Russian cultural sphere.<sup>14</sup> The combination of the comic elements with the fantastic ones, as well as the lyrical and ironic elements in the Ukrainian burlesque traditions, was also taken up by Danilko in the creation of the visual and speech images of his representations of Verka Serduchka.

The new (for Ukrainian comedies) feature was the emphasis on cross-dressing and queer motifs, as a male artist, Danilko, was portraying himself as a single coquette, not young, not old, with accented female sexuality. Some Western scholars have argued that queer motifs existed even in the Ukrainian literature of the 19<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>15</sup> but they were hidden because queer images were not permitted

in Soviet literature, cinema, or theater. Queer motifs existed in the early 1920s, and they emerged in the liberal Soviet 1970s. The first Soviet popular film to use cross-dressing was *Hello, I am Charley’s Aunt* (1975), based on the English play *Charley’s Aunt* by Brandon Thomas and performed by a cast of admired Soviet actors, with A. Kalyagin in a leading role. The plot revolved around an unemployed man named Bubs who ends up in a lavish home and changes his male clothes for female ones to play the role of a rich lady from Brazil. The man plays the role of a middle-aged femme fatale and attracts two men who believe in the constructed female image more than in “natural women”. This movie was shot in the style of silent movies of the 1920s with many comic situations which could be compared to the famous American drag movies such as *Viktor-Viktoria*, *Tootsie*, and *Some Like It Hot*. This Soviet movie became the source of many visual and verbal quotations in the post-Soviet period.

**DANILKO USED** the popular Soviet tradition of cross-dressing and interfused it with the Ukrainian burlesque style. Verka Serduchka’s cross-dressing represents, in my view, not Judith Butler’s concept of queerness<sup>16</sup> as a principal refusal of “normativity”, but more the Bakhtinian idea of carnival as a deconstruction of cultural hierarchies and traditional oppositions (male and female, urban and provincial, normative and marginal). The visual style of Verka Serduchka is exceptionalism and interruption of normality in the Rabelaisian style, because her visual style gravitates towards a considerable and grotesque enlargement of everything, all life pleasures: in particular, it is an accent on the abnormally gigantic bust of Verka Serduchka, too massive and bright bijouterie, the love of shiny spangles. However, this grotesque enlargement of physicality and the zest for life of Verka Serduchka can be considered self-irony under the rubric of her own “Rabelaisianism”, a quality of post-Soviet Ukrainianness: the excessiveness of Verka Serduchka can be seen as symbolization of consumerist appetites of the young Ukrainian nation for everything that glitters, and for everything that can mark the post-Soviet Ukrainian culture as distinct from the Ukrainian Soviet tradition, even if the accent on such differences results in apparent ridiculous and provincial qualities. The various cultural and linguistic traditions enter into carnivalesque dialogue within the very image of Verka Serduchka, who is, at same time, a transgressive<sup>17</sup> and hybrid<sup>18</sup> subjectivity.

The carnivalesque style of total parody was used in many images of Verka Serduchka: in particular, Andrei Danilko in the role of Verka Serduchka was



Andrei Danilko in the stage persona Verka Serduchka.



The Evening Kvartal TV show.

chosen to represent Ukraine at Eurovision in Helsinki in 2007, and he/she secured second place. In a New Year's celebration performance Verka Serduchka appeared in a small red dress and makeup in the style of the American sex icon Marilyn Monroe. In that image, Andrei Danilko presented the figure of a grotesque Ukrainian woman simulating the famous American actress in the same way done in the American drag movie *Some Like It Hot*, an actress who is an enduring pop culture symbol. Danilko constructed a parody of a parody by displaying the Ukrainian provincial woman who herself is the parody of the stereotypes from popular culture. Verka Serduchka creates a carnival polyphony with multiple reversals within the body of just one performer. This amounts to an effective kitsch parody of the kitsch nature of popular culture itself.

**ANOTHER IMPORTANT ASPECT** is connected to Serduchka's manner of speaking, which is a comical "surzhik", that is, a mixture of Russian and Ukrainian literary languages, and which has been identified in Soviet linguistics as a low (street) form of a literary (normative) speech. However, it must be noted that a significant proportion of non-urban Ukrainians have been speaking different versions of surzhik and that surzhik, is in fact a native way of speaking for many who are not well-educated in Ukraine, and in southern Russia as well. The American scholar Lada Bilaniuk has defined, several categories of surzhik, including: an "urbanized version of rural speech"; a mix of rural dialects; and a "speech culture of cultural bilinguals".<sup>19</sup> Bilaniuk holds that surzhik is not only a language, but also part of the national culture and identity. But the status of surzhik has been reconceptualized in the post-Soviet situation: if the traditional (normative) culture saw surzhik as a variant of a cultural kitsch used by the uneducated,

or as an ethnographic stylization, contemporary Ukrainian pop culture tries to find new sources of national identity that are its own, and surzhik takes on a new meaning. In contrast to the normative Ukrainian and Russian languages, which have strict writing and pronunciation rules, surzhik, as a nonliterate mixture of both, can be considered a more liberal way of speaking, closer to folk consciousness: surzhik has thus lost the derogatory connotations instilled by the Soviet schools for decades, and come to be regarded as a local version of regional speech. Internet communication without grammatical rules and regulations has also altered perceptions of surzhik.

On the one hand, the use of surzhik on stage still induce laughter (especially among educated Ukrainians). Yet on the other hand, surzhik is heard everywhere on Ukrainian TV and it is perceived as a transgression of Soviet imperial normativity, as a symbol of a new cultural identity in the Ukrainian mass consciousness starting at the turn of the century, especially during the Maidan protests of 2004–2005, in which

some political parties presented surzhik-speaking people as the "true Ukrainians".

The transgressive character of Verka Serduchka's image manifests itself at the level of psychology as well: the majority of people fear loneliness, or looking provincial, at some subconscious level. Verka Serduchka brings these human fears to the surface on the stage, making them larger than life, at the same time mocking them, and so allows the audience an opportunity for catharsis by laughing with Verka Serduchka. I believe that Verka Serduchka presents a transgender and transnational body of the new post-Soviet and postcolonial Ukrainian culture which has a transitive nature because it lies between center and periphery, between Ukrainian and Russian cultures, between masculine and feminine, between ideals of high culture and the realities of mass consciousness, and it makes her a typical example of the carnival culture.

*The Verka Serduchka Show* has reflected, since the two-thousand aughts, the different needs of the Ukrainian audience – the postcolonial laughter and the post-Soviet laughter that combine the multifaceted nature of the opposition to the Soviet past, and to the Ukrainian present, in which the new postsocialist TV advertising reflects bourgeois well-being. Verka Serduchka is the product not only of popular culture and parody, but at the same time she is a kitsch person and an image of a little provincial person in a cold world in the humanistic perspective of Gogol's and Chekhov's laughter through tears. And this humanistic perspective of Verka Serduchka made her attractive to different audiences.

**TWO MORE UKRAINIAN** shows involving the use of surzhik are *Vital'ka* (this is the diminutive form of the masculine name Vi-

taly) and *Faina Ukraina* [The good Ukraine]. They build upon the aesthetic and humorous innovations of Verka Serduchka, the aesthetics of surzhik, travesty, and cross-dressing, and demonstrate the comic element of visual kitsch. *Vital'ka* has been a popular show since 2012 and can be understood as a combination of a Ukrainian *Mr. Bean* and a light version of *The Benny Hill Show*. *Vital'ka* does not make any open references to Mr. Bean, but the similarities can be reconstructed from the main character in *Vital'ka* (played by Garik Bircha): he is a strange young man, making heavy use of expressive facial mimicry, who is not socialized and continually gets into ridiculous situations. Here, the similarities with Mr. Bean end, for the British show focuses on the British cultural stereotypes and the inability of the hero to adapt to these cultural norms, whereas the Ukrainian *Vital'ka* is an aggressive young man who is interested in sex only.

Another feature of *Vital'ka* is that *Vital'ka* speaks only in surzhik, while all other characters speak in standard Russian and behave like cultured urbanites. The comic situations arise from collisions between the urban Russian-speaking community and the provincial, surzhik native. On the one hand, *Vital'ka* recalls characters of the Soviet Russian writer M. Zoshchenko (1898–1958), who used to write his works from point of view of a greedy, provincial, and uneducated person. Yet on the other hand, *Vital'ka* is presented as a source of sexual energy and Ukrainian provincial vitality, while the city intellectuals look like toneless people, and vanish into the background. I would submit that *Vital'ka* reflects many qualities of Ukrainian postcolonial culture, of the early post-Soviet period when many people fled from the villages to the big cities (especially Kyiv). The newcomers had no intention of accepting the urban culture: they kept their provincial way of life and thinking. But in Ukraine, the countryside is seen in some political and cultural discourses as a source of new national identity because it corresponds with the anticolonial strategy in which the rural periphery can supersede urban and imperial normativity.

*Faina Ukraina* is a popular Ukrainian comic sketch show with many episodes which was shown on the New Channel from 2008 to 2010. *Faina Ukraina* was created by the Ukrainian artists Sergei Molochnuy and Andrei Prytoola. Initially, the program was conceived as the Ukrainian analogue of the Russian sketch show *Our Russia* and the British *Little Britain*. This show demonstrates the carnival chronotope of the Ukrainian postcolonial society in that two male actors play all male and female roles and depict the multicultural consciousness of Ukrainians from different social levels and regions. *Faina Ukraina* calls to mind the burlesque traditions of Kotlyarevsky and Gogol. The characters of this satirical and humorous show were “ordinary Ukrainians” from different social and professional groups: office managers, middle-level journalists, single, middle-aged women in searches of a rich partner, stupid officers,

provincial scientists, and even Ukrainian cosmonauts who never made it to space. The comic couple Anton and Marichka from a provincial town are characters from Ukrainian urban folklore; other characters of the sketches came from different sources, in particular from Soviet student jokes about professors and students; some characters parody famous American shows such as *Doctor House*. The combination of visual cross-dressing and a mix of many cultural voices has an obviously carnivalesque character: carnival is described by Bakhtin as a time in which anything is possible. In my opinion, the difference between *Faina Ukraina* and *Vital'ka* is that, while *Vital'ka* highlights both ironic and positive elements of Ukrainian provincialism, *Faina Ukraina* used provincialism and surzhik as the objects of laughter.

### The political carnival show *Evening Kvartal*

Finally, the most popular Ukrainian comedy has been *Evening Kvartal* (first aired in 2005), devoted mostly to current political themes. The artists and authors behind *Evening Kvartal* came from the Ukrainian KVN, and created their own, original project which had no analogue in the post-Soviet comic chronotope. The genre of *Evening Kvartal* is close to the genre of political variété: it combines vivid entertainment, artistry, and a strong orientation towards political events. The structure of *Evening Kvartal* includes a large number of parodies on well-known Ukrainian and foreign politicians and popstars, brave and remonstrative songs about the contemporary situation in the country, cabaret, and sarcastic monologues on topics of the day. What is unique about

*Evening Kvartal* is that all its actors play roles of specific political officials of the highest rank (Ukrainian presidents, vice-presidents, their political opponents, and so on), presenting them and their political debates as quarrels between neighbors or members of a family, mixing political and sexual intrigues, or depicting political struggle as a fight for sexual dominance. The most frequent targets of the ironic comic sketches have been: corruption in the Ukrainian state and police; the low level of Ukrainian army and hospital funding; the greed and incompetence of Ukrainian politi-

cians; the penetration of the Ukrainian rustic culture into the city along with the establishment of provincialism as a new national idea; and the ignorance and vanity of certain media figures and many other prominent people.

The uniqueness of *Evening Kvartal* was its carnivalesque performativity: although most Russian and Western European politicians ignore comedies, between 2007 and 2012, many Ukrainian politicians tried, paradoxically, to use the popularity of *Evening Kvartal* to improve their own ratings: despite the openly satirical focus of the show, many representatives of the Ukrainian political establishment often visited premieres of *Evening Kvartal*. For example, mayor of Kyiv, Leonid Chernovezky

**“THE COMIC SITUATIONS ARISE FROM THE COLLISIONS BETWEEN THE URBAN RUSSIAN-SPEAKING COMMUNITY AND THE PROVINCIAL SURZHNIK NATIVE.”**



(2006–2012), often sat in the front row of the auditorium even when *Evening Kvartal* presented very spiteful parodies on the mayor himself. When the actor playing the mayor appeared on the stage, Chernovetsky stood up and gave a bow to the auditorium with a smile. Another famous Ukrainian politician, Uriy Luzenko, was often seated among spectators, and the master of ceremonies would then offer ironic questions in his direction. Thus, *Evening Kvartal*, created a true carnival space in which the distance between the highest officials and ordinary people was erased and the politicians became objects of laughter.

**LET ME BRIEFLY** list other details about *Evening Kvartal*: first, it contained very quick artistic and emotional reactions to the most widely discussed political and social events (following the old Russian saying “news comes in the newspaper in the morning, and should be reflected in the evening couplet”); second, the criticism of authorities was presented from the position of ordinary Ukrainian citizens and their street conversations; finally, presentations of folk opinion on stage created a significant feeling of moral and emotional satisfaction for much of the Ukrainian audience. By conserving a quasi-neutral political position for a long time, *Evening Kvartal* attracted the sympathy of a large part of the audience. The humorous form of expression allowed *Evening Kvartal* to touch on serious topics in a playful style, and mixture of high, official and low, folksy points of view created a carnival atmosphere during its performances.

I take *Evening Kvartal* to be a postcolonial and postmodern phenomenon in Ukraine, one that mixes various forms of ironic, playful, and deconstructive laughter and reflects a contemporary “multiple”<sup>20</sup> Ukrainian identity. Typically, *Evening Kvartal* mocked both the excessive pathos of anticolonial nationalistic protests and the imperial ambitions found in post-Soviet societies. The authors of *Evening Kvartal* tend to articulate the folk skepticism towards both the ruling party and its opposition, and, in their parodies, actively used events from the contemporary Ukrainian life, as well as from the contemporary Russian and even American and Western European public discussions, and created a feeling of the audience’s involvement in a global, multicultural, postcolonial, and postmodern world that was liked by both the Ukrainian intelligentsia and ordinary people.

## Conclusion

I have analyzed the most interesting and popular Ukrainian television comedy shows, and can now summarize some key observations. The 1990s was a period of sharp critique of Soviet values and cultural norms in Ukraine, with the result that the majority of Ukrainian comedy shows were centered on two basic themes: the mockery of Soviet ideals and official norms, and the inclusion in the Ukrainian cultural space of the voices of people

from groups that had been marginalized in the Soviet period. For example, *The Gentleman Show* can be considered the first post-Soviet comedy show in which a Jewish theme in general, and also the specific cultural elements that constituted contributions to the national life, were articulated in an explicit way – not from the margins, but from a cultural core. Another feature of early Ukrainian comedy shows was that the object of the laughter was, as a rule, the Soviet past, though not the post-Soviet national euphoria that followed independence. It can be seen as a manifestation of the anticolonial ideology that the new ruling groups tried to replace the idea of “Sovietness” by the idea of “nationality”.

The first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in Ukraine can be characterized as fundamentally involving active searches for a founding national idea. These searches took several forms: the Maidan protests (2004–2005); heated ideological discussions about the value of the Soviet past; and the status of an official state language. All these topics were reflected in the new Ukrainian shows after the two-thousand-aughts, which joined political critique with entertainment. In a situation where many Ukrainians felt the government ignored their views, the public comedies took on the role of a spokesperson, expressing the opinion of

the people in witty and artistic forms (in particular, *Evening Kvartal* in 2006–2012).

Political satire and parodies became integral parts of the Ukrainian comedies after the first decade of the century, and this meant that comedy in Ukraine has not only an entertainment function, but also a therapeutic and resistant function as well: if an individual or social group is subjected to social or political injustice, and is

powerless to change the overall political or social situation in society, then laughter becomes the only tool to manifest an opposition towards the government. For this reason, most of the popular Ukrainian shows manifest an identification with audience’s attitudes about the authorities. Grotesque, burlesque, and eccentric parodies are used widely in Ukrainian pop culture to accentuate the absurdity of many political or social situations in contemporary Ukrainian society, and can restore the feeling of dignity to the audience.


It seems obvious that the most popular Ukrainian comedies of recent years (such as *Verka Serdutchka*, *Faina Ukraina*, and *Evening Kvartal*) would manifest the hybrid character of the post-Soviet identity as a result of the contradictions within Ukrainian cultural and political thinking itself: this thinking seeks to stand in opposition to the former Soviet and the contemporary Russian cultural traditions, yet, in the meantime, it focuses on traditions that are attractive and unbearable at the same time, traditions from a Russian culture that plays a role of a symbolic normative Other, whose opinion still remains very important for Ukrainian self-identity.

The same situation existed on the public level the in 1990s

**“MOST OF THE  
POPULAR UKRAINIAN  
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and 2000s: the post-Soviet audience in Ukraine and Russia had no significant differences in their objects of ridicule and many Russian TV comedy programs were broadcast on Ukrainian TV, and conversely the majority of the Ukrainian comedy shows sought to gain entrance to the Russian TV channels. Hence many Ukrainian comedy projects took into account the interests of both Ukrainian and Russian spectators, and the common language of the shows was Russian, with the inclusion of occasional Ukrainian words or surzhik, which were understandable to a majority of the Russian-speaking audience. Such a situation can be interpreted in postcolonial terms as a display of multicultural, transitive, and internally contradictory cultural identity.

Carnival became an essential part of not only the Ukrainian culture of laughter but also post-Soviet Ukrainian literature and even political life. Carnival in the laughter chronotope obviously has a postcolonial character because of the incorporation of the anticolonial pathos, and also Soviet satire, Jewish anecdotes, West European cabaret, Russian comedies, American travesty shows, and Ukrainian burlesque tradition. The specificity of Ukrainian comedies reflects the evolution of the Ukrainian struggle between anticolonial and postcolonial searches for national cultural identity. The carnival as a space of play and transgression occupies a significant place in the comedy culture of Ukraine, and the most popular shows deliberately use “carnivalization” as a tool to dissolve the differences between the stage actors and the audience, as well as between the actors of the shows and the political elite, the political decision makers. Carnivalization is a way to deontologize ideology (in the sense of Roland Barthes) as the artificial design of the political statements and the social hierarchies. For this reason, Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory is the most appropriate to use in analyzing the contradictions of the post-Soviet Ukrainian society and the culture of laughter and comedy. 

Viktoriia Sukovata, PhD and Doctor habilitata in Cultural Theory and Philosophical Anthropology.

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# The grotesque body in Indian comic tradition

## An aesthetics of transgression

by **Rajni Mujral**

**B**harata, Indian theatrologist, who wrote the foundational text on performance, *Nāṭyashāstra* (500 CE), identifies *hāsyā*, (the comic), as emerging from *srngāra* (love) in a low-mimetic mode.<sup>1</sup> He identifies deformed body as one of the *vibhāvas* (the cause) of *hāsyā*. Bakhtin, too locates the source of transgression and renewal in the grotesque body. The significant question is of the necessity of returning to a text from 14<sup>th</sup> century. It is an endeavour to re-trace the tradition; re-turning to a tradition of transgressive laughter.<sup>2</sup> *Prahasana*, a genre from Sanskrit tradition<sup>3</sup> which can be translated as farce, is such a genre with transgressive potential; it transgresses the prevalent hierarchical structures through presenting the image of the laughing body. This kind of gesture is akin to the dynamics of postcolonial aesthetics: transgressing and thereby transfiguring. The aim is to locate the transgressive zone that transforms and transfigures various strictures *in* and *through* the physiological. The zone is of the corporeal grotesque. Therefore, the need to bring these traditions in contact, to provide a better understanding of the tradition of grotesque in relation to in the genre of *prahasana*.

The basic proposition the paper wishes to put forward is this: each culture has its own cultural forms and variants to express resistance. Thus, it is interesting to explore and observe the recurrent use of body as a trope to express resistance, across different traditions. On the one hand, Bharata theorized the role of body in debunking the oppressive structures. On the other, Bakhtin too emphasizes on the role of body in his elaboration of the notion of carnivalesque. For Bakhtin, the laughing body became a metaphor for resistance and rejuvenation. Bharata identified body, especially deformed, disfigured, non-conforming body as one of the various sources of laugh-

ter, of the low-mimetic with subversive potential. Body through its nature of becomingness, disrupts the strictures that make it a cultural artifact. It resists fixity, and through laughter and through its disfiguration debunks the strictures that layer the oppressive normative frame over the body, affecting it into a cultural artifact. The comic here emerges in the arena of the physiological and the body becomes a mode to embody the feeling of “rapture” in Nietzschean sense. It is pertinent to look at bodily desire here and how desire pushes the body to the state of rapture, thereby ensuing comic and grotesque in the process. The attempt here is to bring two traditions together to look at the notion of grotesque and the role body plays in its figuration.

### ***Hāsa* and *prahasana*: The power of laughter**

In *Nāṭyasāstra*, Bharata identifies the origin of *hāsyā* (the comic) in the imitation of *srngāra* (love): according to him, the comic is for love just like the pathetic is to valor. He draws an analogy between them and identifies how they come out as imitations of the bodily emotions of a higher order. Body is central for the discourse of *Nāṭyasāstra*. It is the body that enacts (*abhinaya*) and elicits emotions (*rasa*, the aesthetic savour) as well. Thus the comic emerges as a bodily manifestation in imitation of love in a low-mimetic mode. In his commentary on *Nāṭyasāstra*,

Abhinavagupta in the 10<sup>th</sup> century elaborates it further, arguing that imitations of other emotions are capable of eliciting the comic as well. Thus he acknowledges the power of laughter, *hāsa*, and the scope of the comic, *hāsyā*. *Prahasana* is a genre for which *hāsa* is central: etymologically *prahasana* is derived from the root *hāsa*, laughter. The Dionysiac spirit is the spirit of the comic.

### **abstract**

The paper examines the comic in relation to the figuration of the grotesque body in Sanskrit tradition in India. It is pursued with two objectives: firstly, to explore bodily figurations in the Indian comic tradition, and, further, to enquire the parallel elaboration of Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque that celebrates the laughing body. A reading of a 14<sup>th</sup> century Indian text *Hāsyāṃava* provides the ground for the elucidation. The paper elaborates on how the “distorted, deformed and diseased” body which Bharata refers to, the “grotesque body”<sup>4</sup> as Bakhtin says, institutes *hāsyā* and carnivalesque discursively. The bodily desire pursued is pushed to the limits, resulting in rapture through a transgressive act.

**KEYWORDS:** Bakhtin, carnival, *prahasana*.

Without going much into the analysis of symbolism, yet recognizing its function in the symbolic realm, it is significant to notice that *prahasana*, as a comic genre, is a genre that personifies the transgressive function. Transgression<sup>4</sup> is at the very core of the genre, the transgression of hierarchical order founded on pure/impure binaries among others. The genre is a re-enactment of transgressive function in the symbolic mode, an act and an enactment that effects carnivalesque which otherwise is not possible outside that symbolism. It emerges in a society that constitutes itself in terms of a series of negations— in the form of taboos, social, religious and symbolic prohibitions. Further, these taboos form the order due to their binding force. This is the source of the genre's vitality. Reversal of order is the first phase of this genre, smoothly followed by the violation of negation and its celebration as an opening up of possibilities. This reversal is exactly what Bakhtin calls the carnivalesque, topsy-turvy: what exists outside this frame gets suspended within it. By its very structure, the comic is closely linked to transgression, and its axis is from sacred to profane. It is in this movement, that reversal takes place, and this reversal which at one level is incongruity, is the source of comic. To return to Bharata after Abhinavagupta, when *sringāra* is mimicked, it no longer remains in the realm of the sacred, but slips into the profane, the slip being inbuilt into the act of mimicking itself (which Homi Bhabha studies in a different context<sup>5</sup>), it gives rise to *hāsya* or *hāsyabhāsa*: the comic or the semblance of the comic. It gains more potential for transgression when this suffix of *abhāsa* is attached to it, since always it can distinguish itself from the real, although it is an effect of and in a way constitutes, the real. This fictionality is a crucial element since *prahasana* always (re)presents a *staged* event.

ITS TRANSGRESSIVE potential is evident among other aspects:<sup>6</sup> in laughter being put within the shackles. The classical manual of performance stipulates that only base characters can laugh out loud, while the higher ones can only smile.<sup>7</sup> Hence what Bakhtin identifies as a loud festive laughter (*smekh*)<sup>8</sup> is in itself a transgression since it is a violation of taboos. Further, it can be noted that what Bakhtin identifies as carnivalistic laughter is fundamentally a destabilizing force. He argues that “Carnivalistic laughter... is directed toward something higher- toward a shift of authorities and truths, a shift of world orders. Laughter embraces both poles of change, with *crisis* itself”.<sup>9</sup>

Not only the transgressive, but the comic is also a point of convergence of all the *rasas* (the aesthetic savours), according to Abhinavagupta. As he affirms in the *Abhinavabhāratī*, all the *rasas* are components of *hāsya*— a meeting point, a melting point as it were, an instance of carnivalesque. F. M. Cornford arrives at a similar conclusion by a different trajectory: in his study “The Ritual Origins of Comedy”, locating the origin of the comedy in connection with Dionysian ritual, he associates

comedy with a sense of victory over everything inimical to human beings. He relates it to laughter tracing its two ramifications whereby he links it with ridicule on the one hand, and on the other, with positive spirit. In this second sense, he says that the subversive spirit of carnival is passed off as “celebration of life”.<sup>10</sup>

Though other emotions do evoke laughter, laughter when evoked by the comic mood revives and rejuvenates. It is what Bakhtin calls as “festive laughter”,<sup>11</sup> the *hāsa* which is at the heart of *prahasana*. Since laughter revives and rejuvenates, it becomes indispensable to carnival. Further, carnivalesque subversion is carried over in the garb of laughter, a garb that body wears.

## Laughing body and the question of subjectivity

Bakhtin's idea of the carnivalesque originates from popular culture, from a public event. It is a structure within a structure: larger structure being the hierarchical order and carnival creates a new structure that renegotiates and reverses its own basis. The scope of such an eventfulness might not be radical in nature, however, by positioning itself on the borderline, it reveals scope for a new structure, not by a complete overthrow of what was already there, but by a reversal of the existing order. The reversal occurs by employing and making use of the existing parameters, *tacitly*. Its positioning itself is subversive; denying any binary logic, it is rather suggestive of a spectrum where the nature of the event is to be taken into consideration over a continuum. Its refusal to be part of a category through its positioning at the borderline could depict its potential as radical yet its partaking in the hierarchical structure becomes an overt depiction of its rare possibility of any radical overthrow. However, it may be limited temporally, it gives a scope for renegotiation. I am hereby arguing that it can be located in the space of the in-between. The laughing body is the body in the in-between space that redefines the boundaries by destabilizing the structures.

“Bakhtin's notion of the grotesque body as the basis of carnival imagery”<sup>12</sup> underlines his insistence on body for the festive laughter. It is the body that laughs and after laughter, rejuvenates. Though the comedy has been culture-specific, the grotesque body, termed variously as incongruent, distorted etc.,<sup>13</sup> has remained as an inevitable source of the comic. As Bakhtin says, “Th[e] boundless ocean of grotesque bodily imagery within time and space extends to all languages, all literatures, and the entire system of gesticulation”.<sup>14</sup>

How is it that the genre of *prahasana* effects what characterizes the carnivalesque? One of the ways is to see transgression as the basis of carnivalesque, but transgression alone is not enough. *Hāsya/hāsa* (the comic/the laughter) is integral to it for its renewal; essential to destroy and to revive. The genre is transgressive in terms of its themes, in its engagement with the various taboos— for instance, those of sacredness and sexuality. It challenges the hierarchical structures

**“THIS REVERSAL IS EXACTLY WHAT BAKHTIN CALLS CARNIVALESQUE, TOPSY-TURVYING: WHAT EXISTS OUTSIDE THIS FRAME GETS SUSPENDED WITHIN IT.”**



in a playful manner, questioning the established boundaries and brings revival through comic effect. The comic effect produced thus strikes a hopeful note, opening a possibility for change, for transformation. The society is constituted by negations, and the positive spirit of laughter and the carnivalesque moves into the negated trajectory. The space no longer remains the exclusive domain of the official and is no longer fixed. This movement of transgressing and bringing the taboo into the social, problematizes both the categories and such process of categorization. The result is topsy-turvy-ness. The grotesque here is the resultant factor: the outcome of an attempt to transgress the rigid and dominant social strictures. The body becomes a significant trope to bring out the grotesqueness. The nature of the human body is opposite to the inflexible strictures. A significant amount of attention is, therefore, paid to controlling the human body, to controlling human actions, to establishing a particular kind of bodily behavior; any digression from that behavior is termed taboo. Bakhtin stresses on the open and flexible nature of the human body.<sup>15</sup> One way to oppose the authoritative forces is to bring the flexible open nature of the body in force. Body here becomes a significant metaphor through its unfinalized disposition, thus laughs and thereby reappropriates the prevalent structures and thus redefines itself. Hence, laughter transgresses and transforms the existing parameters. The driving force behind the grotesque too is inherent in human nature, or rather the human body. Further, grotesque is one of the effects of moving into the unfamiliar territory – a territory beyond the socially constructed bodily consciousness.<sup>16</sup> The *Samkhya* tradition, the enumerationist school of Indian philosophical thought, has a similar conception of the composition of the human body: it identifies the transformation of five different elements resulting in the *prakṛti* or *pradhana* the “dynamic psycho-physical material substance”. The body which is made of these five elements is not a static entity. These elements are in a constant process of transformation and that is how the human body is produced.<sup>17</sup> The inherent nature of the human body is dynamism and continuity. Bakhtin too emphasizes the dynamic nature of the body. For him, it always is in the act of becoming.<sup>18</sup> The strictures constantly try to turn it into a static object. The laughing body which is at the center of Bakhtin’s study is dynamic; it transgresses and moves beyond the straitjacketing of cultural norms and laughs and opens up. It is in a constant process of taking the world in, through the bodily acts of inhaling, eating and defecating. The body becomes part of the cosmos and viceversa. The Ayurvedic tradition describes bodily nature same as the material universe because of the five great elements. The body is an extension or part of the cosmos. And it has the same renewing nature as the universe.<sup>19</sup>

Social strictures negate the ambivalent nature of the body and present it as a harmonized and homogenous entity. But, the body is a heterogeneous entity: various elements co-exist and transform each other under the fleshly garb. This ambivalent and heterogeneous nature

of the body is what gives it a dynamic status and creates a space for the grotesque: it is a subjective<sup>20</sup> position, not the object of actions; rather, the actions proceed from here. Laughter is a way of asserting its essential subjective condition.

How these issues of subjectivity and reappropriation come forth in the comic tradition of *prahasana* can be further elucidated by looking at the text of *Hāsyārṇava*, a Sanskrit *prahasana* from the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Hāsyārṇava: In the world of grotesquerie**

*Hāsyārṇava* begins by invoking Lord Siva and Parvati as if it is following the convention. The play between the sacred and profane starts here, setting the stage for the consequent emergence of the carnivalesque: the benediction sets the tone of the play – of the presence of the erotic and comic elements in the *prahasana*, of the inversion of the power structures and the appeal to the physiological:

The thick mixture of sandal paste washed down by the  
flow of sweat  
from fatigue at the embrace of vine-like arms,  
the words of love broken by heaving sighs,  
the lips bitten in love dalliance,  
the eyes revealing the delight <sup>21</sup>

This complex of images codifies the pathway of transgression through the carnivalesque which explains the formulation that the article brings forth: the initial erasure of the boundaries of sacred and profane and their reversal,<sup>22</sup> an intervention of desire, its pursuit, the transgression and the final state of rapture. This forms the frame for the subsequent narrative.

King Anayasindhu (“Ocean of Misrule”) organizes a meeting in a brothel to discuss the matters of the kingdom he rules.<sup>23</sup> The guard had informed the king that the people in the state have been following the laws. At the family level, husbands are being faithful to their wives. There have been no instances of theft either. The king expresses his concern at this situation and arranges a meeting in the brothel with his advisors. The setting of the meeting in the brothel sets the stage for the topsy-turvy-ness that characterizes the *prahasana* and evokes laughter. It presents the situation during the festive spring-time or the time when the power structures have been unsettled. The situation gives a glimpse of a carnival world where everything is turned upside down. The dress, the ornaments, and other rituals are reversed and given an entirely different role.<sup>24</sup>

The visit to the brothel is described in terms of a pilgrimage. Upon entering the brothel, the king says that he has obtained the merits of a hundred pilgrimages.<sup>25</sup> There is an implied pun on the ritual of going to different temples. It is a forced move from sacred to profane; for the king, indulgence in the bodily pleasures is the primary con-

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cern. The *prahasana* states that, instead of going to various temples for seeking god or virtue, he seeks worldly delights. Further more, in the description of a woman's body as a pond, every sacred ritual is brought down to the level of the physiological. The element of eros latent in zealous devotion is made manifest here. It is a different realm parallel to the sacred one. This also is the realm of the body.

**THE GATHERING** of the *prahasana* is like an assembly (the first act is titled, "The Decision of the Assembly"<sup>26</sup>) at which people keep coming in and express their desires: it is an assemblage of amorous confessions and expressions. People from different spheres of life— a king, a doctor, a soldier, a priest, an ascetic and a barber— create a carnivalesque second life, in which the bodily aspect is venerated. The element binding them together is the body or specifically the desire inherent in the body. Body is the most immediate thing to everyone. It becomes grotesque in the transition from the unfamiliar to the familiar. A binary is created between the old and the young body, representing desire and the pursuit of desire. The incident occasioned at a brothel is itself transgressive, since it is outside the norms of the society. The *prahasana* highlights that a visit to a brothel is usually stigmatized. Bodily desire brings everyone onto a single plane and it is in the pursuit of bodily desire that the grotesque emerges. This pursuit creates a possibility of transgressing the social norms and constraints and thus invites the grotesque. The grotesque figures in the ceremony of marriage in which the young harlot is married off to the old man, and the old harlot is married to the young man. The situation is all the more comic when finally the priest takes both the women away as his fee for conducting the wedding ceremony. The whole situation turns out to be comically grotesque.

In the pursuit of desire, irrespective of its materialization, the feeling that one has crossed the boundary, and the pleasure of crossing it, *transfigures* the grotesque. Deviation from the societal norms evokes the feeling of horror or disgust along with happiness. The *prahasana* evokes laughter; laughter here signifies not only comic, but also grotesque laughter. It horrifies and disgusts. There is a "*co-presence* of the ludicrous with the monstrous, the disgusting or the horrifying".<sup>27</sup> The desire in the teacher and the student to possess the younger prostitute is pushed to the limit when they start abusing each other. The desire in the old man to possess the young prostitute seems bizarre, but the way it is manifested, in the abusive language he uses, in his preparation to physically mutilate his student, one sees the transition from the bizarre to the familiar: the bizarre desire evolves into a familiar drive. There is a change in the nature of subjectivity whereby the desiring subject ceases to function in pursuit of gratification, and the gratification seems rather to be constituting the desiring subject: the sensuous drive constitutes the desiring body irrespective of societal constraints of age, gender, rank or profession; irrespective of whether the body is young or old. The young female body of Mṛgāṅkalekhā ("Moon's-Crescent")<sup>28</sup> under the male gaze turns into the site of desire that initiates the transition from the bizarre to the famil-

iar. The grotesque is revealed in this transition, which occurs along various juxtapositions: the young and the old, the healthy and the sick. Old age and sickness are the tropes which *prahasana* employs to figure the grotesque. The body desired by both the young and old male bodies is the young female body and it has been contrasted with the sagging old female body. The old body is the body which has lived and enjoyed. It is not the ascetic body, constrained and regulated. The sagging body invokes the memory of indulgence, of transgression.

The body in the *prahasana* is the body which laughs and enjoys sexual pleasures. Even the ascetic body is occupied in bodily indulgences here. At one point, a character in the *prahasana* raises a question about the possibility of a release of emotions in the life of an ascetic. And the answer he gives is that the release can be obtained by indulging in feasting and body pleasures.<sup>29</sup> In every dialogue, there is an implied rhetoric which opposes the social strictures and transgresses them through a recourse to bodily pleasure. Social norms regulate sexual behaviors to control and discipline the subjects. Thus, the *prahasana* presents the recourse to body, to sexual pleasures as the primal move towards transgression. The spirit of transgression is upheld as supreme where the desire for the wives of other men is endorsed, visiting the brothels is encouraged. It is the pursuit of desire that is upheld, through the laughing bodies.

**HUMOR SUBVERTS** and creates a possibility of renewal of all the oppressive social strictures. The laughter noticeable in the *prahasana* is the laughter of Mṛgāṅkalekhā, Bandhura's daughter. Her initial response is a smile when an aged person expresses his desires for her body.<sup>30</sup> This is the smile of repulsion, a very civilized response but it turns into a grotesque laughter when at later point everybody presents in the assembly expresses the same desire. When Vishavabhandā ("The-Rascal-of-the-World") talks about crossing "the sea of love" for her, she smiles.<sup>31</sup> She smiles at the old worn-out body of the Brahmin. When she is dismissive of the desiring gazes, her mother scolds her for showing disrespect to the Brahmin. She is virtually reduced to a corpse, a body-object lying bare in front of the poutouring of lust around her. Thus, when there is no scope for overt resistance, laughter provides her with a possibility of subversion and so she laughs and mocks: she says, blessed is the student who is going to learn and blessed is his wife too.<sup>32</sup> Her *hāsa* subverts and renews at the same time. She laughs at the remedies the doctor suggests and at Ranajambhūka's ("Coward-of-the-Battles", the police chief in the text) narration of his adventurous deed of killing a bee.<sup>33</sup> Her response begins with a smile and grows into loud laughter as a response to the Brahmin's lecherous remarks, the doctor's remedies and the police chief's adventures. Mṛgāṅkalekhā realizes that she cannot raise her voice here because of her status as a prostitute's daughter. Hence, she resorts to the subversive mode of laughter. The doctor leaves the assembly when she laughs at his remedies, saying that he can't stay there as he is being made fun of by a whore.<sup>34</sup>

The laughing body moves beyond the status of an object and moves onto the tabooed state. The act of trespassing takes it to

the unfamiliar, takes it beyond the fearful strictures. This unfamiliar is unfamiliar to the dominant, but this complies with the nature of the human body: heterogeneous, chaotic, and unruly. The body identifies with this nature and laughs. The transgressive act can be discerned in the laughing body. It laughs off the strictures, it laughs off the norms. The laughter is a mockery of the codes and a celebration of the dynamism of human body. Carnival laughter is a festive laughter, a laughter of the communal body, which brings about the grotesque. Here we are identifying laughter as ambivalent, as inherent in the body: renewing by situating body in a subjective state, by bringing human beings closer to their nature. It is the mimicry of the dominant discourses, in a realistic manner: a corporeal reaction to the masked bodies. Thus, laughter is a physical gesture, a sonoric outburst which shatters the illusion of a controlled, regulated, mechanical being and expresses its chaotic dynamic nature. It is transgressive as it is the pursuit of the inherent nature of the human beings: that is, the desire for transgression, and a threshold to rapture.

### Somatic agency: Of rapture and transgression

Rapture is a state that shatters the mask of composure, desire being its driving force. As Nietzsche says, “in the Dionysian rapture there is sexuality and voluptuousness”.<sup>35</sup> Bakhtin too recognizes it and says that “carnival has worked out an entire language of symbolic concretely sensuous forms”.<sup>36</sup> When transferred to the symbolic, it is the sensuous image that catches the carnivalistic spirit, or in Bakhtin's terms, in “a language of artistic images that has something in common with its concretely sensuous nature”<sup>37</sup> and thus able to accommodate the carnivalesque. Its effect can be apprehended as a state of rapture, a condition that is gained after the act of transgression which witnesses the shattering of shackles. Nietzsche identifies rapture as “the condition of pleasure” which is also “an exalted feeling of power” in which “the sensation of space and time are altered”.<sup>38</sup> This alteration is effected by transfiguration which often takes the form of transgression; when it is accompanied by the comic, it effects the carnivalesque.

IT IS THE FORM that makes space for rapture. As Heidegger says, “Form founds the realm in which rapture as such becomes possible”.<sup>39</sup> Thus the trans-forming force is at the same time “form engendering force”<sup>40</sup> as well. The function of rapture coming after the act of transgression should be understood in such a site of transfiguration.

The site where both male and female bodies interact in their inherent impulse to pursue desire and to transgress is what generates rapture in *Hāsyaṛṇava*. The desire governs the other impulses; it is manifested in the physiological. The body acts in its own way. The gazing body feels the pain when its desires are not fulfilled. The gazing eye follows the

desired other. The other body too is to be experienced physiologically, not as an outside object but as a part of the body: as something which arouses desire and gratifies. It engenders rapture when all the other feelings get intermingled with this overpowering desire. It takes over the other impulses. In the *prahasana*, those who come to the assembly, begin or introduce themselves as belonging to a certain profession or sect signifying the status and strictures related to them, yet the desire for the young woman dominates them and they transgress their professional codes. The king, who had supposedly organized the assembly to discuss the affairs of the state, is amazed at the beauty of the woman. The police chief narrating his deeds forgets about the stately matters when the young woman makes fun of him. The Brahmin forgets his rites and customary roles, and desires to possess the woman. Many leave the assembly realizing that they don't have a chance.

The desire seeks release in the physiological realm. That is when it generates the rapture which Nietzsche talks about: the enhancement and intermingling of all the impulses. This can be seen further in the way the members of the assembly describe the young woman. The king praises her body in an amorous style wrapped in grandiosity. The priest compares her to a lotus flower, and says that even the gods cannot ignore her. The police chief says once while making love he mistook the red lacquer on the woman's feet for blood from fighting. The student kisses the young woman when he gets exasperated with his own persistence in following her.

The desire leads to transgression inducing the state of rapture. Georges Bataille describes transgression not as some rational external act or event but as an “inner experience”: as experiencing beyond the rational. It is going beyond the “set” and “fixed” and exploring the slipperiness of fixity. The rational/irrational is decided by cultural discourse. But the feelings of fear and pleasure are not such readily available categories and are never so intensely experienced unless one transgresses. The inhibitions are experienced by those who transgress; otherwise they remain discursive categories. As Bataille emphasizes, “fascination and desire” compel the transgression.<sup>41</sup> The need to transgress is not a need as such; it is an intense impulse, an urge to pursue the desire: desire for pleasure— that which rejuvenates. The act of transgression is an act of pleasure.<sup>42</sup>

Body plays a significant role in the discourse of the transgression. The grotesque undermines the discourse that sees reason

as the only language of critique.<sup>43</sup>

Corporeal centrality emerges from the need for a “return to somatic symbols” for transgression.<sup>44</sup> The attempt to transgress is the return to the somatic. The body becomes the most immediate source and medium for transgression.

The body in the *prahasana* depicted as worthy of desire is the young body; it evokes desire and unravels its pursuit of gratification in terms of what Bakhtin calls “exaggeration, hyperbolism,

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GENERATES RAPTURE  
IN HĀSYĀRṆAVA.”**



excessiveness” which are “generally considered fundamental attributes of the grotesque style”.<sup>45</sup>

## Conclusion

As Heidegger has noted, “the aesthetic state is rapture”.<sup>46</sup> Indian comic tradition attempts to bring forth such a state, while configuring an image of the body. In exploring the comic genre of *prahasana*, this discussion has tried to sketch out a trajectory from desire to rapture in the aesthetic realm that actively participates in constituting the carnivalesque discursively. For Bakhtin it is “carnivalization of literature”.<sup>47</sup> It is an act of transposition of carnival into the language of literature. The central concern of this transposition is the grotesque imagery, the figure of an open, de-formed, de-ceased body, a body that defies foreclosure. The genre of *prahasana* that is part of the comic tradition in India is also an enactment of such defiance. ✖

Rajni Mijral is working as Lecturer in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at Thapar University, Patiala, India.

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- Northrop Frye classifies fictions by the hero's power of action. One of those five modes he identifies is the low mimetic mode. In this mode, “[i]f superior neither to other men nor to his environment, the hero is one of us, we respond to a sense of his common humanity, and demand from the poet the same canons of probability that we find in our own experience”. This gives us the hero of the low mimetic mode, of most comedy and of realistic fiction. “High” and “low” have no connotations of comparative value. Frye also identifies the element of irony as integral to this mode due to the lack of moralizing effect. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, ed. Robert D. Denham (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1957), 31–49.
- Reading the text from the 14<sup>th</sup> century has relevance in postcolonial context as well. One of the basic propositions that postcolonial studies rely on is the mode of reappropriation through mimicry: that is, creative imitation. In imitating, the text winks at the prevalent structures and seeks renewal through them. Such a re-appropriation, with an element of ambivalence innate in it, does not out-right deny the prevalent structures, rather adapts those structures and thus transforms their nature. Such reappropriation is built into the modes of *hāsya* and the carnivalesque. Therefore, the reading of the text from 14<sup>th</sup>-century India brings out the relevance of such appropriations that occurs in similar ways across the centuries.
- A few works in this genre from the Middle Ages can be listed here: Bodhayana's *Bhagavajjukiyā*, Sankhadhara's *Latakamelaka*, Vatsaraja's *Hasyacudamani*.
- The text subtly refers to the caste structure in premodern India. It emerges in setting the context for *prahasana*. It is based on the reversal of the hierarchy and it is intricately woven into the text. Each instance is a reversal of the established structure. Reading these reversals gives a glimpse into the caste-based structure of the society. It begins with the act of naming the characters. In another such instance, two wanderers are looking for food. One of them suggests that they should go to the courtesan Bandhura's house. The other inquires about her caste. On learning that: “Even an untouchable won't drink water at her house”, he agrees to go to her house for a meal (*Hāsyaṛṇava*, 284). The entire set-up of *prahasana* is built on the reversal of the established order. The references to transgression in this paper do not focus on the issue of class and caste, however.
- Bhabha describes mimicry as the “ironic compromise” between the homogenizing impulse to dominate and the pressure from below to change. Mimicry is characterized by an “excess”, thus evolving into an ambivalent discourse. It produces the simultaneous effects of familiarity and difference. This articulation of double effects further adds to the indeterminacy as the object it tries to mimic is also in a state of denial. The process of denial of a certain object has an effect in mimicry. It is significant that the effect emerges when that same object is in the state of denial, therefore, it appropriates at one level and on another level, it denies. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1994), 122. This discourse of re-appropriation becomes significant in the postcolonial context; further more, with regard to the genre of *prahasana*, it reveals how this genre functions along the lines of renegotiation, often throwing up reversals. The notion of the carnivalesque too is based upon such a playful reversal Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*.
- Switching languages – between Prakrit and Sanskrit, two of the widely circulated languages from ancient India is another way, in terms of dramatic technique, where *prahasana* effects transgression: the characters identified as belonging to the lower social strata occasionally speak in Sanskrit within this genre, which was against the sanctions of classical norms. Thus language, which is also an indicator of social status in the hierarchically ordered society, functioned as a milieu where power structures operate. By executing such a code-switching function, the genre effects the role reversal.
- Bharata, *The Nāṭyashāstra*, trans. Manmohan Ghosh (Calcutta: The Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1950), Book VI, 54–59.
- Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 95.
- Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. and ed. Caryl Emerson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 127.
- F. M. Cornford, “The Ritual Origins of Comedy”, in *Comedy: Developments in Criticism* (London: Macmillan, 1984), 9.
- Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 95.
- Viachslav Ivanov, “Dialogue and Carnival”, in *Bakhtin: Carnival and Other Subjects; Selected Papers from the Fifth International Bakhtin Conference University of Manchester*, July 1991, ed. David Shepherd. (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1993), 8.
- Cf. Bharata, *Nāṭyashāstra*; Abhinavagupta, *Abhinavabhāratī*; Henry Bergson, “Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic”, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (London: Blackmask, 2002), accessed February 2014, <https://archive.org/details/laughteranessay00berggoog>.
- Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 319.
- Bakhtin stresses this often, for instance when he says the grotesque body is “not impenetrable but open” (339); “It is never finished, never completed” (317). It is very clear when he says, “Thus the artistic logic of the grotesque images ignore the closed, smooth, and impenetrable surface of the body and retains only its excrescences (sprouts, buds) and orifices, only that which leads beyond body's limited space or into body's depths” (317–318). *Rabelais and His World*, 317–318, 339.
- Richard Shusterman's remarks on bodily consciousness are relevant to the discussion here. He discusses the inherent desire for transcendence in human beings (Richard Shusterman, *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Aesthetics* (Cambridge: CUP, 2008), 35. He gives the example of different activities like dieting and body building for a culturally pleasing body and how these contribute to producing a “normal” body. The conflict is between the social artifact and the inherent desire to transcend the impositions.

- 17 Viktoria Lyssenko, "The Human Body Composition in Statics and Dynamics: Ayurveda and the Philosophical Schools of Vaisesika and Samkhya", *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 32, no. 1 (2004): 35.
- 18 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 317.
- 19 Lyssenko, "The Human Body", 31.
- 20 Shusterman, while trying to formulate the notion of "body consciousness", refers to Merleau-Ponty's notion of bodily intentionality which grants the body a kind of subjectivity. Shusterman, *Body Consciousness*, 60.
- 21 *Häsyārṇava*, 265.
- 22 The frames getting topsy-turvy is significant throughout; mainly in terms of public-private, sacred-profane, blessing-cursing; theatrical inversion of the outer world making the entire text of the *prahasana* itself grotesque-bodied— with excess, protrusion, regeneration— is significant. This is the textual performance of transgression, which is quite often transfiguration: a trans-figur(e)-ation of the values and orders of the everyday world.
- 23 *Häsyārṇava*, 268–269.
- 24 *Häsyārṇava*, 265, 267.
- 25 *Häsyārṇava*, 269.
- 26 *Häsyārṇava*, 266, 283.
- 27 Philip Thomson, *The Grotesque* (London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1972), 14.
- 28 Her name can be literally translated as "Moon's-Crescent". She is usually referred to as the Moon-faced One in the text. Moon recurs as a metaphor throughout the text. Other female characters are also described in terms of moon and its phases to refer to their youth and bodily appearance. The text has various references linking the moon to images like "beautiful bowl", "billows of foam", or "umbrella" (*Häsyārṇava*, 282). In the first image, it is linked to the round bowl that holds together the drink of immortality. Gods drink the moon in another reference. These references equate the female with the sense of pleasure and the recurrent use of the metaphor objectify the female to the state of inaction. It is through laughter that she acts and breaks through the image of inactivity.
- 29 *Häsyārṇava*, 286.
- 30 *Häsyārṇava*, 271.
- 31 *Häsyārṇava*, 271.
- 32 *Häsyārṇava*, 273.
- 33 *Häsyārṇava*, 276.
- 34 *Häsyārṇava*, 277.
- 35 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kauffmann (New York: Vintage, 1968), 799.
- 36 Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's*, 122.
- 37 Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's*, 122.
- 38 Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 800.
- 39 Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche, vol. 1: The Will to Power as Art* (New York: Harper One, 1991), 119.
- 40 Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, 115.
- 41 Quoted in Ruth Penfold-Mounce, *Celebrity Culture and Crime: The Joy of Transgression* (UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 4–6.
- 42 Quoted in Penfold-Mounce, *Celebrity Culture and Crime*, 4–6.
- 43 Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, eds., *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1986), 43.
- 44 Stallybrass and White, *Politics*, 26.
- 45 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 303.
- 46 Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, 108.
- 47 Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's*, 122.

The Mora witch trial, depicted in this German illustration from 1670, took place in 1669. It is the most internationally famous Swedish witch trial, and the first mass execution during the great Swedish witchhunt of 1668–1676.





# Witchhunt in northern Sweden

## A Bakhtinian approach

by Per-Arne Bodin

### abstract

The Russian Byzantinist Sergei Averintsev writes in a critical article about laughter in Bakhtin's interpretation of popular medieval culture that Bakhtin makes laughter too absolute and that he was wrong in maintaining that it has nothing to do with violence. I apply the reasoning of both authors on a historical phenomenon: the witch trials in Sweden, focusing on one precise geographical place. There seem to be many factors behind the witch trials, but their cultural manifestations demonstrate the qualities of reverse or carnival culture although without having laughter as their main feature, and including violence as a main element.

**KEY WORDS:** Witchcraft, micro-history, Bakhtin, reverse culture, Averintsev.

In an article from 1992 titled "Bakhtin, Laughter, and Christian Culture", the Russian Byzantinist Sergei Averintsev discusses the role of laughter in Bakhtin's interpretation of popular medieval culture. Averintsev puts forward two main criticisms of Bakhtin. First, he argues that Bakhtin makes laughter in the Middle Ages into a category too far-reaching and too absolute, and, second, that Bakhtin was wrong in maintaining that laughter has nothing to do with violence. It is the following passage from Bakhtin's book on Rabelais to which he particularly objects:

Thus, distrust of the serious tone and confidence in the truth of laughter had a spontaneous, elemental



character. It was understood that fear never lurks behind laughter (which does not build stakes) and that hypocrisy and lies never laugh but wear a serious mask. Laughter created no dogmas and could not become authoritarian; it did not convey fear but a feeling of strength. It was linked with the procreating act, with birth, renewal, fertility, abundance. Laughter was also related to food and drink and the people's earthly immortality, and finally it was related to the future of things to come and was to clear the way for them. Seriousness was therefore elementally distrusted, while trust was placed in festive laughter.<sup>2</sup>

Drawing examples both from Ivan the Terrible and from Mussolini, Averintsev maintains that this is fundamentally incorrect. Fear *can* lurk behind laughter and laughter *can* create dogmas and be related to authoritarian violence. The carnival culture of the European Middle Ages as outlined by Bakhtin is also called into question in another article by Averintsev from 1992, "Bakhtin i russkoe otnoshenie k smekhu" [Bakhtin and the Russian relation to laughter].<sup>3</sup> Here, Averintsev points out, for example, that it is wrong to juxtapose the Russian phenomenon of "foolishness in Christ" – known as *Iurodstvo* in the Russian Orthodox tradition – with the culture of laughter, as did the followers of Bakhtin, Likhachev, and Panchenko in their classic book on holy foolishness.<sup>4</sup> *Iurodstvo* is, to be sure, an instance of cultural reversal, but it is not connected to laughter in any clear-cut way. Laughter is in fact unambiguously linked with sin in the Orthodox tradition. As a whole, these two articles attack some of the fundamentals of Bakhtin's cultural philosophy. Averintsev was of course not the first to criticize Bakhtin's use of carnival and his notion of "laughter culture". Dietz-Rüdiger Moser maintains in his 1990 article "Lachkultur des Mittelalters? Michail Bakhtin und die Folgen seiner Theorie" ["A Medieval culture of laughter? Mikhail Bakhtin and the consequences of his theory"] that carnival had a strong didactic element and was not as closely connected to laughter as Bakhtin believes.<sup>5</sup>

One historical phenomenon, however, that Bakhtin's paradigm can in point of fact help characterize accurately – the foregoing critical comments notwithstanding – is the witch trials in Sweden.

The reason for the paradigm's utility here is that Bakhtin's notion of a reverse culture, whatever its shortcomings, nonetheless sheds considerable light on expressions of popular culture in the premodern era. One of my tasks will be to demonstrate this. On the basis of one particular case, I would like to show how a popular reverse and premodern culture, as defined by Bakhtin, can function. I will make use of the introductory chapter of Bakhtin's book *Rabelais and his World*, where he gives a very thorough definition of this "other" culture. What can be noted in my material is the close connection between the reverse culture and violence – precisely something that Bakhtin denies. The

fundamental issue of the relation between official culture and reverse culture in a Bakhtinian paradigm will be raised. I would like to take one concrete case of witch trials as an example and study it in relation to Bakhtin's theory, including the criticism voiced against Bakhtin, primarily the criticism developed by Averintsev. It is my belief is that this procedure will have some explanatory power in relation to the very complex phenomenon of witchcraft. I will take as my example the witch trials in the third quarter of the 17<sup>th</sup> century in a small Swedish parish, Boteå, located on the north side of Ångerman River, in Ådalen, 500 kilometers north of Stockholm. I have a personal relationship to Boteå, for I hail from that parish, and it is thus even noted as my place of birth in my passport. Two of my ancestors were summoned to the commission, my ancestress Anna who was accused of being a witch, and her son Daniel, accused of having played the fiddle at the dance on Blåkulla, the place of legend where witches were said to meet.. The reason for the choice of geography is on the one hand personal and not by itself particularly scientifically warranted; on the other hand, however, my knowledge of the region is of importance in understanding the toponymies mentioned and the landscape where it all took place. From my personal experience, I can also add that the witchcraft trials are never mentioned by the local inhabitants today, and no word of them was uttered when I was growing up in the village. The memory culture around the witches is created mainly by people coming to the community from the outside, or as a part of modern tourist events.

## Background

But first let me provide some background. The witch trials are not, as might be believed, characteristic of the Middle Ages, but of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. They haunted Sweden as late as 1669–1677. Such trials had been carried out earlier, but they were rather few in number and death penalties were rare. Before 1669, the existence of a *maleficium*, evidence that some injury had been inflicted on a person by the accused, was necessary for conviction.<sup>6</sup> This was not the case in the years that I will address here, when about 150 women and some men were executed in the province of Norrland alone. They were sentenced to death because they were convicted of being witches and having taken children to Blåkulla, where they engaged in a variety of activities consistent with witchcraft. The epidemic began in Dalecarlia, then spread to Ångermanland and ended in Stockholm. The parish priests acted both as interrogators and prosecutors. The proceeding was called an "inquisition" in the documents from the time. In 1676, one of the witnesses in Stockholm was denounced, after which the trials were resumed – though now directed

against the witnesses. Some of the witnesses were killed in secret and some were prosecuted. Very soon the whole affair was put to an end, as demonstrated in a recent publication by Marie Lennersand and Linda Oja from 2006, *Livet går vidare: Älvdalen och Rättvik efter de stora häxprocesserna 1668–1671*

**"FEAR CAN LURK  
BEHIND LAUGHTER  
AND LAUGHTER CAN  
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[Life goes on: Älvdalen and Rättvik after the great witch trials of 1668–1671]. Indeed, a short time after the trials ended, the families who had given testimony against each other intermarried.<sup>7</sup>

**THE SUBJECT OF WITCHCRAFT** is much studied in Sweden, as it is in many other countries. To write a survey of existing studies in the field would be an act of hubris. This is noted by Stephen A. Mitchell in his *Witchcraft and Magic in the Nordic Middle Ages*, but he nonetheless gives an impressive *Stand der Forschung* in his book.<sup>8</sup> Yuri Lotman attempts to inscribe the phenomenon in a broader sociological phenomenon of fear.<sup>9</sup> I might also mention the historian Carlo Ginzburg's book *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath*<sup>10</sup>, a fairly new study of the phenomenon from the point of view of micro-history. Ginzburg's thesis is that the so-called witches' Sabbaths were the residue of a heathen cult. He begins his book with a survey of studies of this subject and different explanations of the phenomenon in European scholarship. In the Swedish context, one ought first and foremost to mention the seminal study by the jurist Bengt Ankarloo, *Trolldomsprocesser i Sverige*<sup>11</sup> [Witchcraft trials in Sweden], published in 1971.

## The historical facts

In 1674–1675, a specially appointed Witchcraft Commission convened on several occasions in Boteå.<sup>12</sup> The commission was appointed by the king and consisted of 25 members, a rather large size for a court. It was chaired by the governor of the province of Västernorrland, Carl Larsson Sparre, but among the appointees were two professors at Uppsala University, both of whom would later become presidents of the university: the jurist Olaus Åkerman and the theologian Samuel Skunk. The peasantry was represented by lay judges. The commission also toured other parts of Norrland.

The vicar of Boteå, Nils Sternelius – also a former student of Uppsala University – acted as investigator and prosecutor. The commission held the status of the Court of Appeal, given that the lower court was not mandated to impose the death penalty, and the number of cases was very large – hence the very unusual procedure of a traveling court. The court convened from early in the morning until late in the evening, sometimes from seven o'clock in the morning to nine o'clock at night, according to the court's report to the king.

The study of a single location and some specific individuals will provide a detailed perspective on the witch trials in Swe-



The governor of the province of Västernorrland, Carl Larsson Sparre, was chairman of the Witchcraft Commission.



The two classic manuals on witch-hunting were *Malleus Maleficarum* [The hammer of witches] by Jacob Sprenger and Heinrich Kramer, and *De la démonomanie des sorciers* [On the demon-mania of the sorcerers] by Jean Bodin.



den – what Carlo Ginzburg would call a micro-history. In this micro-history one may discern the discursive mechanisms of witchcraft and the functioning of reverse culture. Can we gain some understanding of the mechanisms of this complex and ambiguous phenomenon by studying this rather limited geographic area?

Thirteen people, twelve women and one man, were subpoenaed to appear before the commission, which convened in Sundby, a farm where my uncle and aunt lived when I was a child. Much of the recorded proceedings has been preserved, and will constitute the source material for this survey. The protocols contain primarily records of the questioning of witnesses – in many cases simply the witnesses' answers – and also the verdicts. There are indications that the testimony might have been obtained by torture in only a few cases, although it has been shown that torture was widely used during the witch trials in general in Sweden. The courts made use of special shackles called *klumpar*, "lumps". The protocols indicate that almost the entire population of the villages was involved, either in the capacity of accused, as witnesses, or in some other capacity. Reading through these protocols is a fascinating experience, and presents us with a number of very difficult questions and enigmas.

One difficult question, which I will have to leave unanswered, is why the penalties in this particular location were relatively mild. Only two of the accused were sentenced to death. On the south side of the river, on the other hand, 71 persons were executed. They were all beheaded on the same day in 1675 on the border where three parishes meet. Their bodies were then burned, which was the regular form of execution for witches in Sweden. Stories are still told about the problems with getting the fire to burn because of all the blood flooding the terrain. There is a memorial stone raised there now. The



Illustration from the book *Saducismus Triumphatus*, 1682.

charges were the same on both sides of the river, but the outcome differed completely. Another and similar question is why witchcraft raged so fiercely in some parts of the country, not just in Ångermanland, but also in Dalecarlia and in Stockholm. There is a strange sort of randomness in the seventeenth-century epidemic of witchcraft in Sweden. Perhaps it would be possible to apply a sociological perspective to find an explanation, as was done by Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum in their book *Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft* maintaining that social mobility was suspicious and was a key-factor uniting the victims.<sup>13</sup>

I will here proceed to demonstrate that almost all of the categories used in Bakhtin's description of the reversed carnival laughter culture show up in the description of Blåkulla:

We find here a characteristic logic, the peculiar logic of the "inside out" (à l'envers), of the "turnabout", of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings. A second life, a second world of folk culture is thus constructed; it is to a certain extent a parody of the extracarnival life, a "world inside out." We must stress, however, that the carnival is far distant from the negative and formal parody of modern times. Folk humor denies, but it revives and renews at the same time. Bare negation is completely alien to folk culture.<sup>14</sup>

I must at the same time stress that Bakhtin, to my knowledge, never discusses or analyses witchcraft as such in his works. I thus apply a Bakhtinian concept to an area beyond the scope of Bakhtin's material.

## Life in Blåkulla

What is told in the protocols appears to fit Bakhtin's notion of carnival culture almost seamlessly, closely duplicating its *reversal*, yet *without* the element of laughter. The events at Blåkulla are literally a form of reverse behavior which questions the hierarchies of the established church and the secular powers. Actions that would otherwise seem strange become more understandable when subjected to a structural cultural interpretation within the Bakhtinian paradigm. For example, the customary roles of old and young in the power structure determined by age are reversed: almost all the witnesses are children, some as young as three, and their credibility is never questioned in the protocols. It is children, and almost exclusively children, who raise the serious allegations, which are almost always directed against adults, especially against women. In his notes for the book on Rabelais, Bakhtin makes a distinction between eras in which parents kill their children and times when children kill their parents:

**There are periods when children oppress and kill their fathers (the Renaissance, our time) and epochs, when, on the contrary, fathers oppress and kill their children (all authoritarian epochs).<sup>15</sup>**

The former is a revolutionary epoch, the latter an authoritarian one. The time and the events discussed here certainly belong to the first group: the children and their testimonies are more or less the cause of the death of the fathers – or, rather, the mothers. The commission and the authorities are using the children as a means to their own ends, but the prominent role of the children, and the authority granted their testimonies, are nevertheless astounding. One gets the impression of a terrible revenge on the part of the children acted out on the grown-ups, with the commission serving as the executor. The chairman of the commission perceived the prominent role of children in Blåkulla as a new phenomenon in witchcraft; but this was in fact untrue: the same stories of children being taken by witches to witch convents are found in testimonies from continental Europe. It is however indisputable that the role of the children is extremely important in the witchcraft and witch trials investigated here.

The children were often unanimous in their testimonies. They would claim that a neighbor woman or a female relative had repeatedly brought them to Blåkulla at night. They would also testify about feasts in Blåkulla, where the accused woman would cook, stuff sausages, chop cabbage, milk cows, churn butter, sweep, carry water, and carry out the used dishwater as well as make candles for the Evil One. The women perform everyday tasks with which the children are familiar from home, only with a different beneficiary: not the husband, the children and the household, but the Devil and the coven. The main tasks are the usual ones for the women, what is *reversed* is the beneficiary, place, and time. The chores are many, and the children's stories imply a certain division of labor among the different women. The abundance of food is always stressed, but contrary to the protocols of witch trials in other parts of Sweden, the food is sel-



dom transformed into something unappetizing or sickening. The protocols describing manners in Blåkulla give the impression of the eating habits of a rich peasant family. At the same time, the meals differ significantly: they are wild and sumptuous feasts celebrated at night with carnivalesque frenzy. I would like to use the words employed by Bakhtin in relation to laughter culture: “a brimming-over abundance” that includes an abundance of all carnal pleasures: food, drink, and sex.

The feasts are not connected to any special holiday, they take place every night; but the time of the first journey is almost always related to a public holiday – the tours to Blåkulla, for example, began at Christmas.

Daytime is almost never depicted in the accounts of Blåkulla, only night – another reversal. Almost every night sees the celebration of a feast of abundance, or a carnival, in Bakhtin’s language. The feast is one of the most important components in his characterization of the premodern (or Medieval and Renaissance, in his terms) popular culture. Blåkulla forms another world and another life, to continue quoting Bakhtin:

**And these forms of protocol and ritual based on laughter and consecrated by tradition existed in the countries of medieval Europe; they were sharply distinct from the serious official, ecclesiastical, feudal, and political cult forms and ceremonials. They offered a completely different, nonofficial, extraecclesiastical and extrapolitical aspect of the world, of man, and of human relations; they built a second world and a second life outside officialdom, a world in which all medieval people participated more or less, in which they lived during a given time of the year.<sup>16</sup>**

The difference, and an important one at that, is that the culture described by Bakhtin had a different ontological status from that of Blåkulla: it existed in some real fashion. Both cultures, however, conceptualize a parallel existence. The problem with Bakhtin, both in his book on Rabelais and in his book on Dostoevsky, lies not in his findings of different kinds of reverse culture – he is quite consistent there – but in his wish to ideologize this reverse culture as a sphere of freedom. Blåkulla forms a reverse culture in all respects, but the reversal has little to do with freedom.

There are additional examples in the witnesses’ accounts of the abundance existing in Blåkulla: the witches throw corn into the fire, thus destroying food – a particularly egregious crime in a society where crop failure and famine occurred often. There are also other expressions of abundance. A teenage boy had been promised a horse with a saddle and pistols. It must have been a purely wishful dream on his part. Most children also received gold coins as gifts in Blåkulla, but the coins then turned into stones.

**IN ADDITION** to the everyday tasks listed above, the women are involved in evil doings: women are dancing,

and my ancestor is, as mentioned, accused of having regularly played the fiddle to accompany the dancers. The women also file at the Devil’s shackles in order to set him free – really an incredible accusation, but serious in every way. Almost all testimonies mention that the accused women “fornicate with the Devil under the table” (“bolar under bordet”), sometimes referred to in phrases such as “to make the shame” or to “lift her shift”, or “she has been on top of Satan and did what is ugly.” Another account even mentions two positions: “Sometimes she lies on the top sometimes he is on the top of her”. Yet another testimony of the same sort: “Märit lies together with a handsome man under the table and files at the chains”. Only in one case does the intercourse with the Devil result in children:

**She has had intercourse with the evil one and every month borne him a child who was boiled into grease.<sup>17</sup>**

The children ride to Blåkulla on a cow or a heifer, sometimes not on the back but on the stomach. They also often ride to Blåkulla on different men. There is a very open and obvious sexual motif which, according to Bakhtin, is central to the folk culture of laughter. I once more quote Bakhtin’s definition of laughter culture:

**To degrade also means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth.<sup>18</sup>**

The children are not themselves described as sexually active and are not abused, but they witness the sexual acts and give testimony about them in front of the parish priest and the commission. Blåkulla is depicted as a carnival world of obscenities and sex. If one takes into account that these testimonies were made in a court of 25 men, the telling of these accounts can be seen as part of a very peculiar form of voyeurism on the part of the judges, a voyeurism not pertaining to any reality but to listening to the witnesses’ stories.

There is no protection against evil in the world portrayed in the protocols. The housewife Kerstin attests that Satan is present in the courtroom during the hearing, and the court decides to sing two hymns to drive him away. Kerstin claims afterwards that Satan shut her ears so she could hardly hear any of the song. She also states that it is her own mother who induced her to begin making voyages to Blåkulla. “For her mother, Blåkulla was the only heaven she knew, and because she loved her children she

wanted to keep them there.”<sup>19</sup> She also married Satan in Blåkulla, and she noticed that he was wearing red boots. During the wedding party she was treated to dog meat. When the mother was summoned she replied to the allegations that she knew nothing about them. Kerstin spat at her

**“THE CULTURE DESCRIBED BY BAKHTIN HAD A DIFFERENT ONTOLOGICAL STATUS FROM THAT OF BLÅKULLA: IT EXISTED IN SOME REAL FASHION.”**

and said that Satan was sitting on her mother's shoulder in the building where the commission was assembled. She also confessed that she had been renamed in Blåkulla and got the name of Saul. This is one of the most highly detailed episodes of the entire record of the court's proceedings. Kerstin was sentenced to death and beheaded at the execution place in Boteå.

The children are renamed, usually in a ceremony where the Devil takes a drop of blood from them. One boy is renamed "Devil-Per". Other names are "Snake-Neck" and "Devil-Take-Me". A girl may even be given a man's name, as in the case of "Saul". The children also get married in Blåkulla. A young boy from my home village Undrom with the name of Per, for example, is married to a cat, who is even mentioned by name in the protocols. Her name was "Gray" ("Grå") and the cat's owner Karin lived in the neighboring village.<sup>20</sup> The girls too get married, but upon the marriage ceremony their husbands are turned into objects – one turns into a log. The girl Annika, eight years, testified that the housewife Margaret milked from Anders in Östpara a barrel of milk – that is more than one hundred liters – and then made cheese from it. The whole thing is laughable in its grotesque horror, but this is from today's perspective. The excesses are comparable to those portrayed in Rabelais. Bakhtin uses the term "grotesque realism" to describe these phenomena. Small insignificant details, such as the testimony of one of the children that a witch counts eggs in Blåkulla, is juxtaposed with the horrible fact that she has intercourse with Satan. We also get a fairly good description of the Devil's appearance in this testimony:

**Kerstin cooks sausages, drinks, dances, files at the chains. Takes the hand of Satan and Satan sticks out his tongue, which is hairy as a hairy skin patch. He has horns in his skull.<sup>21</sup>**

The Devil is also playing some sort of instrument – with his tail or his rump, instead of with his hands and mouth.

The reader of the protocols also gets a fairly good impression of the dress code in Blåkulla. The colors of the participants' dresses are mentioned. Anna's daughter Kerstin wears a white shift, while the other children have beautiful shifts in bright colors, or striped shifts.

The children in Blåkulla are especially busy reading books. Satan has his own library there, which is also portrayed in accordance with the principle of reversal: the children do not read the catechism or "Our Father", but books full of curses or inverted prayers such as "Our Father, which art not in heaven" – a phenomenon in medieval culture known to us as "parodia sacra." Almost every witness specifies an exact number of books read in Blåkulla: two, three, or perhaps two and a half. Sometimes, the children resume their reading on following visits, and the protocol can run as follows: "he is reading his fourth book [in Blåkulla]". The books are full of curses or "contain all that is

ugly". "The boy Lars in the village Sångå said that he had read five books full of curses on everything on earth except on the magpie." Another child's testimony indicates that both the magpie and the bumblebee are exceptions in that they are not cursed in the books. From the perspective of the contemporary reader, the witnesses would appear to be making fun of the proceedings by the absurdity of their testimonies.

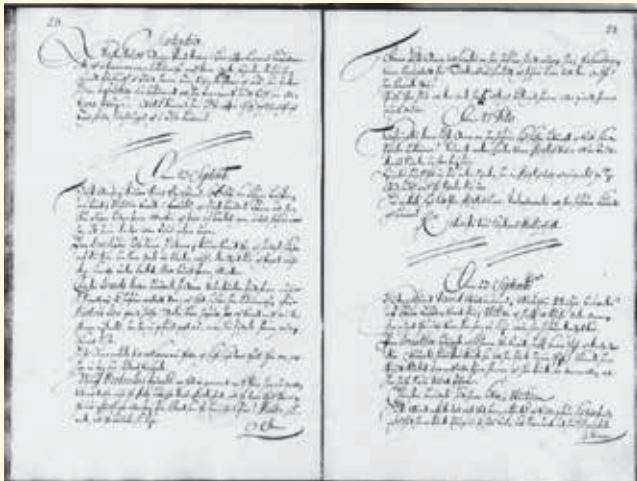
**BLÅKULLA FUNCTIONS AS** a school for those who are not literate. Kerstin, who is ten, says that she read five books, first spelled her way through them word by word and then learned how to read prayer curses on her own. One of the charges leveled against the adults is that they assisted with the reading practice in Blåkulla. The 13-year-old boy Per tells the commission about a girl with a gauze-hood who had taught him to read. "Reading" has two senses in the protocols: the reading of books and the recitation of spells, often in order to cure some ailment. Also, writing is demonic in the world of Blåkulla. The Devil takes blood from the children and uses it as ink to write in a book. This is the only writing taking place in Blåkulla; otherwise, the only writing performed is that of the commission in the protocols.

The demonic powers take over one of the most disciplined institutions of the secular and ecclesiastical powers: the schools. After the conclusion of the commission's work, the chairman, Sparre, writes a report to the king where he makes particular mention of the fact that the Devil runs a school in Blåkulla.

It is surprising that the children's stories are taken seriously and written down, their absurdity apparently disregarded. The protocols contain page upon page of the children's nearly identical testimonies, grouped under each accused. The voice of the prosecutor or of the court is not represented. Rather, everything is worded along the lines of "The boy Lars from Sångå, age 10, testifies against the housewife Margaret", followed by the children's stories. These stories are never questioned, and the witnesses are never cross-examined. The only modification of the testimonies made in the protocols is a shift from the first person singular to the third person: an original "I saw" is changed to "She saw". This, together with the precise indication of the place names and dates, makes the protocols particularly frightening. Almost every village known to me from my childhood is mentioned, and a comparison of the names and the villages with the population register from these years shows that the majority of homes in the area were involved.

Some of the children also assign an exact geographical position to Blåkulla, locating it on a field in the village Utnäs belonging to the neighboring parish Styrnäs; but since the world of the carnival – again, according to Bakhtin – is mostly extraterritorial, no one knows for certain where and in what way it exists. Blåkulla is the antithesis of heaven, a church where the Devil either has the role of a priest or of a god. The world

**"THE DEMONIC  
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SCHOOLS."**



The sentence against the author's ancestress.



The execution site in Boteå.

depicted is a sort of hell as described by Bakhtin as a part of the reversed world: “Hell is a banquet and a gay carnival, the crossroads of two cultures”.<sup>22</sup> In this case Bakhtin also admits that violence exists in this carnival hell. The very existence of the commission seems to have triggered an intense desire to tell these stories; many of the children connect their first visit to Blåkulla to the arrival of the commission. In the reverse world, the powerless acquire power and create an alternative world which still contains some sort of hierarchy, only with the Devil at the top. This fact is at odds with the carnival world of Bakhtin. Still, the devil's role in Blåkulla is not very prominent; rather, the frenzied activity is mainly carried out by the women.

**YET MORE REVERSE** behavior can be identified. The carnival world is one ruled by different laws than our own, it is for example possible to be in both places, in Blåkulla and in this world, simultaneously. Time also has a different character and can be prolonged arbitrarily. Children sometimes testified that they were brought to Blåkulla twice during the same night. Descriptions of how the children exit their houses are rare, but it is certainly never through the door; it may be through the window or through an opening in the wall. The witches can transform themselves into whatever they want: one teenager testifies that a woman accused of being a witch had tormented him by sitting on his neck, sometimes in the form of a fly.

Even the greetings are reverted in Blåkulla; for example, the phrase “Woe is me” is used to wish someone a good day or good health. This inversion also applies to such phenomena as the destruction of food (instead of its preservation), the attempts to release the Evil One (instead of chaining him), and the substitution of curses and spells in books for the word of God. According to one witness, one of the accused women used to stand on her head in Blåkulla, and did the same in church. All these practices reverse normal behavior, and are therefore demonic. Also, gender is inverted: a girl may bear a man's name in Blåkulla, and a man can, as mentioned, be made to produce milk. At the same

time, most of the descriptions of the women's activities in Blåkulla are devoted to ordinary household chores with which the child witnesses would have been familiar from their own homes.

## Explanations and historical context

The key question is how to account for the frenzy of the witch trials. One explanation that has been put forward is that this was a case of mass psychosis, resulting in a ruthless and quite literal “witchhunt”, little different from what sometimes can be encountered today. Another explanation is that the trials were a final manifestation of the “dark” Middle Ages. A third explanation that has been suggested is collective poisoning by ergot in the grain. Ergot is a fungus that produces a toxin that causes dizziness and cramps, often in the form of epidemics. A fourth explanation is that the church used the witch trials to combat the last remnants of a medieval Catholic worldview. Many women still knew the old Catholic prayers by heart and used them in particular situations, for example to treat various diseases. The witch trials did in fact partly revolve around “wise women”, women who would read various prayers from the older, Catholic era as a form of cure, as magic formulas. Ginzburg speaks of a pagan Diana cult still extant from antiquity that was defeated by the civil and ecclesiastical authorities. He also returns to the ergot theory and suggests that ergot was consciously used in the local communities as a drug, producing hallucinations much like those produced by LSD.<sup>23</sup>

Let us now return to our line of argument in explaining the phenomenon. Averintsev poses the question: Must folk culture always be associated with laughter, or could it instead be the quality of reversal which is most important? The stories of witchcraft are not funny in themselves, despite the fact that many features may appear so to a modern reader, who naturally views them from an entirely different perspective.

Almost all characteristics of reverse cultures, in the Bakhtinian sense, are present: abundance of food, sex, a night world,



renaming and so on. The seventeenth-century situation, when hierarchical culture comes to dominate Western European civilization, is less well explicated in Bakhtin. In our micro-case we can observe this very process. The popular culture represented by the children and “witches” is taken over by the two authoritarian powers of church and state (the death sentences were always proclaimed both in the name of the state and the church). That, according to Sergei Averintsev, is also what happens with this sort of popular culture, although he does not refer to witchcraft in particular.

Aaron Gurevich, one of Russia’s most famous medieval historians, has also placed the witch trials in this context. He argues that the two forces claiming a monopoly on ideology – the church (the Protestant Reformation or the Catholic Counter-Reformation) and the absolute monarchy – destroyed an entire folk culture:

**In witchcraft, the church and the secular power saw the embodiment of all the characteristics of the popular worldview and the corresponding practice, which was fundamentally at odds with the ideological monopoly to which the church and the absolute state of 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries laid claim.<sup>24</sup>**

And further:

**It was no longer a case of balancing one tradition with another – of the previous ambivalent “dialogue-conflict”, only conflict remained.<sup>25</sup>**

There had always existed a practice of accusations and counter-accusations of witchcraft among the people in the villages, but they had been dealt with by the local communities. Violence was a common feature of these communities, and it is also a constituent of “low culture”. In the seventeenth-century situation, these manifestations of folk culture suddenly became an issue for the state apparatus and the central church administration. The “equal” relationship between high and low culture ceased to exist as the authoritarian culture absorbed and annihilated the folk culture.

**JUDGING FROM** the example of witch trials examined here, folk culture does not seem to have the autonomous status vis-à-vis the official culture that Bakhtin asserts. As mentioned, it is important to remember that the lay judges taken from among the peasantry appear to have been very proactive in the trials, frequently demanding death sentences. However, as Bakhtin often notes in his book on Rabelais, the 17<sup>th</sup> century is a time of transition, when the popular laughter culture is weakened and the hierarchical culture increases in strength. In our case, the full confrontation between the two cultures results in the destruction of the reverse culture by the hierarchical culture, which employs

a huge number of the inhabitants of the parish for this purpose. Ankarloo describes “the interplay between genuine folklore and official ideology” as characteristic of the time.

Witch trials are thus not primarily a medieval phenomenon, but one connected to the Renaissance and the Reformation. The two classic manuals on witch-hunting were published as late as in 1487 (*Malleus Maleficarum* [The hammer of witches] by Jacob Sprenger and Heinrich Kramer) and 1580 (*De la démonomanie des sorciers* [On the demon-mania of the sorcerers] by Jean Bodin), in other words in the generations before and after Rabelais.

## The phenomenon of witch hunting

Let me return to the question raised by Averintsev in relation to the Russian Middle Ages. The protocols do indeed depict a reverse culture, but no one laughs in the world depicted in the trials. The modern reader will find them absurd and grotesque. Laughter and the reverse culture in general do not have the revitalizing or renewing function so important in Bakhtin. Reverse culture may in certain instances be regarded as funny, as it relates to the folk humor of the premodern era, but the use to which it is put in the Boteå witch trials – both by the people themselves and by the commission – is undoubtedly evil. Perhaps it is not a question of laughter at all, but rather of a parodic reverse culture lacking the element of laughter both on behalf of the authorities and the “witches”. Averintsev notes that, in Russian medieval culture, only the Devil laughs. Reading the protocols of the witch trials today, one may very well get the impression that this was a show staged by the Devil – not the fantasy Devil of Blåkulla, but the real one – in order to “make fun” of the poor people in the villages of Ångermanland and the witch commission that recorded all this rubbish and even sentenced people to death by beheading. Drawing on our material, we may conclude that laughter as such is not essential to popular culture, but rather to the reversal in relation to official high culture. The process of reversal always entails a complex relationship to power. It functions at once as a parody of the official culture and as a means of negotiating power with the official culture: the bookish culture, usually important for disciplining people, is subverted into the special school in Blåkulla. The power over sexuality and name-giving is similarly contested.

There seem to be many factors behind the witch trials, but their cultural manifestations demonstrate the qualities of reverse culture: abundance of food, sex, renaming, and dehi-

erarchization. The testimonies seem to contain all the traits associated with the Bakhtinian laughter culture, but without laughter as their main feature. The Russian scholars quoted here – Bakhtin, Averintsev, and Gurevich – as well as our analyses on the basis of their works, make the phenomenon of the witch trials more understandable from a scientific perspective, but the witch trials still remain enigmatic. Why would a local so-

**“THE TESTIMONIES SEEM TO CONTAIN ALL THE TRAITS ASSOCIATED WITH THE BAKHTINIAN LAUGHTER CULTURE, BUT WITHOUT LAUGHTER AS THEIR MAIN FEATURE.”**

ciety occupied with having enough food to eat for the day want to annihilate itself, and with such fervor?

#### LET ME SUMMARIZE.

1. The characteristics of reverse culture seem very salient in this minisociety. Bakhtin's framework appears to work very well and have great explanatory power.
2. The relation between the reverse culture and laughter seems to be much more complicated and ambiguous than one would conclude from its presentation in Bakhtin. It can in fact be connected with different kinds of violence, although violence almost never appears in the contexts discussed by Bakhtin.
3. Violence is widespread in both high and low culture. Averintsev calls Bakhtin's relation to laughter "utopian", and I agree with this assessment.
4. There is a complex interrelationship between the high and low cultures, and in this case the secular and ecclesiastical powers usurp and annihilate the folk culture.

And what was the outcome for my ancestress and her son? As may be surmised from the fact that I am able to write this article, it went fairly well. My ancestress denied the charges and was in the end sentenced only to penance, whereas her son was acquitted completely – despite the gruesome allegations leveled against them both. Twelve children had testified against Anna, stating that she had had fornicated with Satan in Blåkulla. Her answer to the court was denial of all rumors of witchcraft:

**The housewife Anna was asked if she had heard whether someone in the parish was known for witchcraft or for bringing children to the evil one. She answered: no. ❌**

Per-Arne Bodin is professor of Slavic literatures at Stockholm University.

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# Crisis of the responsible word

## Bakhtin, dialogism & the postcolonial memoir

by **Paromita Chakrabarti**

**“What I have forgotten is what I have written: a rag of words wrapped around a shard of recollection. A book with torn ends visible.”<sup>1</sup>**  
Meena Alexander

Mikhail Bakhtin’s works<sup>2</sup> in contemporary times have aroused a lot of interest and had significant influence on a variety of fields and disciplines, postcolonial studies being one of them. Bakhtin’s theory of speech genres, his work on the philosophy of language and his theory of the novel have marked very important developments in humanities and social sciences. “Bakhtinian” concepts such as dialogism, heteroglossia, and carnival have acquired tremendous critical valence in postcolonial literary and cultural studies and their applications are sometimes bewilderingly multiple and varied. Bakhtin’s work on chronotopes and genre among others can be used very fruitfully in engaging with the human subject who is positioned at the threshold of multiple consciousness and has a fractious relationship with language and culture. Bakhtinian categories can be used productively to raise questions about language, genre, and culture rather than provide definite answers to the conditions of contemporary reality.

In this paper I use Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism,<sup>3</sup> to analyze how the authorial voice is fractured by the presence of competing voices internalized by the author. These voices present alternate systems of meaning facilitating new modes of self-reflexivity. I use Bakhtin’s dialogism in the sense of an ideology critique to study the way postcolonial memoirs threaten grand narratives of autobiographies, challenge the authority of any sin-

gular way of knowing, and question the absolute sovereign self by showing it to be both contradictory and contingent. Postcolonial memoirs in their own haunting way seek to revisit and retell, in all their literariness, the life writings of contemporary authors who meditate upon the rapidly changing cultural and political configurations of our times. These memoirs present a contemporary portrait of the self that is situated along the fault lines of history, geography, and imagination. The consciousness of the postcolonial self as a product of the history of empire and of resistance to it, can be most productively seen in the memoir genre.

**THIS PAPER WILL ALSO** reconsider notions of narrative liminality and interruptive dialogism in the reading of the postcolonial memoir. Juxtaposing the postcolonial in-betweenness of critical discourse with Bakhtin’s idea of hybridized, collusive and hidden dialogicality; the postcolonial memoir can be read as the self’s mapping of a paradigm shift in contemporary times i.e.: from memory as passive remembrance of the past, to “memory as work”<sup>4</sup>. The postcolonial memoir constructs itself as a genre

that is constantly searching, digging, and writing the past. Bakhtin’s conception of the dialogic can play a useful role in understanding the ways in which postcolonial memoirs become a site of contestation and endless re-negotiation. Pointing to the crisis of authorship and the narrative plurality within a single text, Bakhtin’s idea of the simultaneous presence of competing voices lends itself quite productively to analyze the postcolonial memoir as a struggle with authorial representation, narrative self-consciousness and intersubjective interactions.

### abstract

Juxtaposing the postcolonial in-betweenness of critical discourse with Bakhtin’s idea of hybridized, collusive and hidden dialogicality, the postcolonial memoir can be read as the self’s mapping of a paradigm shift in contemporary times. The postcolonial memoirs become a site of contested, unsettling and endless renegotiations. I shall read South Asian-American diasporic writer Meena Alexander’s 1993 *Fault Lines: A Memoir* and the revised 2003 version as dialogic texts. Alexander’s memoirs engage, contest and alter each other to disrupt the possibility of singular meanings and absolute truth. Instead, the texts offer a conflicting and incommensurate idea of the past and a fractured yet intensely interconnected vision of the present.

**KEY WORDS:** Bakhtin; dialogic; postcolonial memoir; language; representation; diaspora.



ILLUSTRATION: KATRIN STENMARK

The principle of dialogue that dominates Bakhtin's central essays on the novel has huge implications for literary theory. The weaving together of philosophical and literary concerns constitutes a certain kind of dialogism that challenges the frontiers of the knowing world and the unknowable spirit. This meditation on the relation between what an author can directly address in language and that which is repressed and remains implicit is what makes Bakhtin's concept of dialogism so significant for understanding memory and the politics of forgetting.

### Meena Alexander and the postcolonial memoir

In order to illustrate the idea of the postcolonial memoir as a discursive embodiment of a multilayered yet fractured consciousness, I shall read the two editions of the South Asian-American diasporic writer Meena Alexander's *Fault Lines: A Memoir*,<sup>5</sup> first published in 1993 and then revised and republished in 2003 as dialogic texts. Meena Alexander is one of the most important contemporary Indian-American writers of the South Asian di-

aspora. Her poems, novels and memoirs have been widely read and anthologized. In addition to her acclaimed poetry, Meena Alexander's memoirs and novels have also received enormous critical interest. She has lived on four continents and her life is marked by multiple passages across continents and borders. With a literary career spanning three decades, Alexander's writing has generated sufficient scholarly interest.

*Fault Lines: A Memoir* represents the complexities associated with the diasporic experience. The text situates the female diasporic body as a location of endless marking. Alexander talks about the ways she has been continuously marked as a "South Asian woman", a "Third World woman", "a female of color", a "postcolonial writer", an "Asian-American feminist". All terms attempting to box her in finite, graspable categories; while ignoring the reality of multiple fractures, multiple migrations, that have fragmented her and made it impossible to name, comprehend, or contain her within any kind of boundaries. Alexander's works exhibit a transnational diasporic sensibility that refuses discursive categorization and instead negotiate a hybrid, fluid,



shifting, and hyphenated identity. All her works are profoundly influenced by the numerous ways in which she has experienced mobility, displacement and relocation and the multiple ways in which she has continuously negotiated complex intersections of cultures, languages, race, gender and history. Her perpetual search for home and her painful awareness of the impossibility of claiming any stable, single, fixed home; marks her writing with a diasporic angst that embodies the trauma of dislocation and fragmentation. Alexander's gendered and racialized subjectivity and her yearning for "physical, imaginative and spiritual space" <sup>6</sup> are articulated and represented in her works.

What is particularly interesting is the way the memoirs alter our understanding of the past when they are read together. Alexander left an extremely significant part of her past out of the 1993 publication. She adds a new chapter on sexual abuse by her maternal grandfather in the revised edition turning the figure of her beloved grandfather Ilya into someone who broke her trust and victimized her as a child. After September 11, 2001, Alexander felt compelled to write about her abuse and name her abuser and therefore needed to revise the memoir. As readers when we read the 1993 memoir after having come to know about the terrible secret that Alexander had not spoken about we realize that the text did contain, hidden in its silences and omissions, clues about the abuse that took place within the confines of the Tiruvella. The memoirs now read as a palimpsest. Each edition appears fundamentally different in the light of the other.

The texts offer a conflicting and incommensurate idea of the past and a fractured yet intensely interconnected vision of the present. Both the editions testify to the multilayered nature of consciousness through the workings of memory and language. Alexander uses both the texts to reveal her own struggle with what is allowed to be remembered and what one is compelled to forget. Alexander's memoirs engage, contest and alter each other to disrupt the possibility of singular meanings and absolute truth by rewriting and writing over a single text twice. In doing that she is able to break up the discourse of silence and unlock the dark, painful past that was carefully concealed. The memoirs testify to the presence of multiple voices that keep pushing against each other to resist the authority and autonomy of any single authorial voice. In this sense, the memoirs become dialogic, facilitating the articulation of a hybrid, diasporic sensibility that destabilizes narratives of singular origin and absolute identities.

### Crisis of authorship, dialogism and writing memory

Mikhail Bakhtin in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Art* (1929) clearly points out that Dostoevsky's work is "symptomatic of a profound crisis of authorship and of the utterance in general."<sup>7</sup> Bakhtin's ideas of a fluid, questionable narrator who replaces the author as seen most prominently in Dostoevsky's novels is cause for celebration. Bakhtin sees this supplanting of the dominant authorial discourse by a free-flowing, relativized narrative which renders the former obsolete as, an indication of a new kind of writing. He goes so far as to assert that this new writing is a mark of progres-

sive democratic culture and irreducible pluralism. This is not to say that Bakhtin considers Dostoevsky's works simply as celebrations of social dialogue; rather what he sees in his writings is the ability of the author to find his or her "unique and unrepeatable place in relation to the characters ... without imposing a causal and deterministic logic on them."<sup>8</sup> This allows the emergence of varied perspectives, a relativity of points of view and the presence of multiple voices in the text.

For Bakhtin the presence of multiple voices inside as well as outside the self generates conversation which is articulated through language. This multiplicity of contesting voices is dialogism. As an antidote to monologism, dialogism decenters authoritarian discourses to generate the idea of difference, of plurality, of talking back. Dialogism according to Mikhail Bakhtin would provide opportunities of renewal, regeneration, and offer multiplicity of meanings. Discourse in the Bakhtinian sense would hence incorporate messy communication such as cross-talking or writing over; thus hinting at the very Janus-like nature of utterance. According to Bakhtin there is no dialogism if there is no response. Every utterance becomes interpolated only through the articulation of a response. It is in this Janus-like utterance that context gets defined and new social realities get formed.

**DIALOGISM BEGINS** as a listening practice. Alexander's will to listen to her inner voice, to engage with it rigorously, crossing cultural and historical time to put it down as record, to archive it for the future are examples of how the impulse towards dialogism is present in postcolonial aesthetic practices. Alexander's 2003 *Fault Lines* talks back to the 1993 version and cuts through the authorial voice of the past to do the retelling. This latter version contradicts the earlier version and offers an alternate reality through intrusions, responses, objections, pauses and narratorial intervention. In the Bakhtinian sense, her writing of the 2003 memoir is evidently an example of "dialogized heteroglossia" that cross-talks in multiple tongues: literally in Malayalam, Hindi, Tamil, Arabic, French, and English and metaphorically to the 1991 memoir in conflicting voices that hide as well as reveal, continue as well as disrupt and concede as well as interrogates. A close reading of both the works shows how Alexander is able to create a fountain-head of composites that threaten to open the floodgates of memory, dislodge boundaries of literature and narration, and signal the upheavals and "perils" of contact zone <sup>9</sup> which are social spaces where culture, language, race and class, meet, clash and grapple together in a violent tussle of power. Meena Alexander's memoir becomes the contact zone where past memories and present realities meet to open up a third space of negotiation and enunciation<sup>10</sup>, articulating how ethnic identities in a multicultural and multi-racial America clash with postcolonial identities of resistance and autonomy, and how hybrid diasporic contestations wrestle with transnational feminist collaboration. In this light 1991 the *Fault Lines: A Memoir* and the 2003 revised version can be read as competing centripetal and centrifugal texts that operate in simultaneity and in constantly shifting moments of utterance; cautioning us about the painful

## “THE PRINCIPLE OF DIALOGUE THAT DOMINATES BAKHTIN’S CENTRAL ESSAYS ON THE NOVEL HAS HUGE IMPLICATIONS FOR LITERARY THEORY.”

unreliability of history and memory, and the deeply ambiguous contours of language and discursive representation.

Writing a memoir offers Alexander a mode to unravel her past and a strategy to deal with the pain of multiple dislocations and the trauma of fractured identity. Responding to Deepika Bahri and Mary Vasudeva in an interview, Alexander points out how “the whole issue of self-disclosure as it plays into postcolonial culture is a difficult one, but it may be more attractive to women because of the possibilities it offers of inventing a space for oneself.”<sup>11</sup> In the same interview she observes “I think this focus on the self is very peculiar to the culture of North America, and generally, so is the desire to create ‘autobiography.’ A constant attempt to vivify what one thinks of as identity by redefining one’s self is a very American project. The interest in postcoloniality [...] and about looking at one’s self is also part of the current wave of the culture.”<sup>12</sup> By writing a memoir Alexander is doing a very American thing and yet by choosing to write a memoir instead of an autobiography she is redefining what being American might mean for her. Concurrently, the memoirs give her the space to explore the pressures of being a postcolonial woman, living and writing in America. Most importantly, by choosing to write a memoir twice over, Alexander pushes against the boundaries of the text, prying open the dark memories of abuse sutured in silence and placed in the gap between forgetting and remembering.

Writing about the trauma of sexual abuse by her beloved Ilya, in the coda to the 1993 memoir, “The Book of Childhood” and talking about shame in “The Stone Eating Girl” changes the parameters of her relationship with the Tiruvella home and her own relationship with her body. Battling to come to terms with the realization that she had not only left a significant part of her childhood out of her writing but had also failed to remember, betrayed by her own memory – Alexander laments – “A woman who did not know herself, how could I have written a book on my life and thought it true?”<sup>13</sup> It is only by writing the coda after the tragedy of 9/11 and by reading Assia Djebar’s *Fantasia*, a story told in fragments with the haunting image of a severed hand, that she is able to fill in the blank spaces of her memory. Alexander’s memory is filled with repressed or half-remembered stories from her past that are sometimes invented and at other times unpacked in order to ensure narrative flow and to make sense of her private tribulations and the psychological contradictions of living as a diasporic transnational in the U.S. In a way, the genre of memoir makes it possible for the discursive formation of identity in Alexander and writing it brings to the forefront contentious issues of postcolonial memory and belonging. Her writing points to the contradictory and arbitrary nature of private memory which in turn is reflective of the fragmented and fractured space of the postcolonial nation-state and the violent disjunctions of the metropole. In other words, *Fault Lines* preoccupation with remembrance and forgetting, trauma and exclusion, raises significant questions

about the nature of memory and representation.

In the chapter “Dark Mirror” Alexander confesses: “My aim is not to cross out what I first wrote but to deepen that writing, dig under it, even to the point of overturning one of the most cherished figures I created”.<sup>14</sup> With her 2003 edition of *Fault Lines*, Alexander acknowledges the silences

that a text conspires to keep, in order to tell itself. For her, the *memory gap*<sup>15</sup> closes on itself, facilitating a reclamation and recovery of memories that remained hidden in the blank spaces between writing and consciousness. I am using the term *memory gap* to indicate a slip in accessing a certain period of time in the life of the individual. Borrowing the term from the field of computer science which means “a gulf in access time, capacity and cost of computer storage technologies between fast, expensive, main-storage devices and slow, high capacity, inexpensive secondary-storage devices”,<sup>16</sup> I want to show how certain amount of time in the life span of the individual is not available to *secondary memory* (embedded in the body and perhaps available only on recall through repetition or trauma) although there might be an uncomfortable remnant of it in the *primary memory* (part of the brain that holds information for reasoning and comprehension and is available in the form of active recall). But this lapse or fault in the ability to access that time is not permanent. Just like the movements of the earth’s surface cause fault lines that create a shift or transform boundaries, an extremely significant external event can dislodge the repressed memories, making them surface and claim ground, closing the memory gap by suddenly filling it up with the forgotten time.

Alexander’s writing occupies a space between layers of loss and mined in gaps: of memory, of home, of language, of family, of location, of identity. It is marked by the urgency of breaking free and leaving. Loss becomes an important feature of migrant subjectivity and leads to a serious deficiency or lack in Alexander’s attempts at self-construction and self-definition. In an interview with Susie Tharu she says, “I write because I don’t know what I am.”<sup>17</sup> Attempting to reconstruct her subjectivity through a recovery of her childhood and a mapping of her several dislocations, Alexander enters her own narrative as a fractured and “self-declared deficient subject who has been traumatized, by her multiple migrations, sexual abuse and forgetfulness;”<sup>18</sup> and needs to make up memory in order to reconstruct her fractured subjectivity and reclaim her past.

### Body memory: Home, belonging and postcolonial dislocations

In the 1993 memoir Alexander begins with the question: “Where did I come from? How did I become what I am?”<sup>19</sup> Doing a genealogical search for her origins, and realizing the ambiguity of beginnings, Alexander is tormented by issues of belonging and roots. By the time she rewrites the memoir in 2003, she is a woman broken by multiple migrations who now needs to write

to remember, to connect nothing with nothing. Going back to the mother and her mother's mother and to all the mothers who came before them, Alexander searches for the maternal home that holds the promise of safely ensconcing her and making her whole. Unfortunately, her search for the original, primary, maternal home draws her only to the "darkness of the Tiruvella house with its cool bedrooms and coiled verandas: the shelter of memory."<sup>20</sup> The darkness of the Tiruvella house holds a terrible secret, which if disclosed will crack open the neat layers of silence that protect the family from splintering. The coiled verandas, a meandering maze complicate the search for truth and access to the past. Although she is aware of the powers of recall, she is also certain that.

**the house of memory is fragile; made up in the mind's space. Even what I remember best, I am forced to admit, is what has flashed up for me in the face of present danger, at the tail end of the century, where everything is to be elaborated, spelt out, precariously reconstructed. And there is little sanctity in remembrance.<sup>21</sup>**

By linking the present danger at the tail end of the century with the dangers of sexual violation, Alexander attests to the ways in which personal histories are always related to larger global histories. The terror attacks of 9/11, national trauma and the subsequent increase in racial and ethnic profiling in the United States and in a lot of countries in the global North, incidents of violence in America trigger the recovery of a personal trauma. The private self gets inextricably linked with the public history of the nation, intersecting the personal with the political and "initiating a complex interrelational process of evaluating the self with respect to the greater history."<sup>22</sup> Alexander becomes a commentator of the times whose embedded and relational self is hinged upon the unstable hyphenations with people, community, places and events.

Recognizing how memory touches upon the questions of dislocation, identity, nationalism, and power, Alexander forces herself to ask in the section "Writing in Fragments", "How could I not have known what happened to me?" She then answers:

**The short answer is of course I knew. I simply could not bear to remember. I picked through any books I could find on trauma theory. I taught myself to accept that there is knowledge that is too much for the nervous system to bear, that disappears underground, but sparks up through fault lines. [...]**

**As I remembered Ilya, as I wrote him into being, I saw the child that I was, the child who set herself the harsh task of forgetting. To learn to forget is as hard as to learn to remember.**

**The girl child and the woman flow together. Will the hand that was cut off become part of my body again? How slowly I pick up the *qalam*.<sup>23</sup>**

Writing her way into the home of her past, pushed by the image of the severed hand in Djébar's *Fantasia*, she jolts the reader into a shock. The reader is shocked not because she remembered but because she forgot. The other reason why it is doubly difficult to deal with the omission of the abuse is her representation of her grandfather in the 1993 memoir:

**Almost seventy by the time I was born, he [Ilya] was well established as an intellectual and community leader [...] I began to accept his place in the world around him, his public power. I loved him more than I have ever loved anyone in my life – in that intensity that childhood brings.<sup>24</sup>**

In the early chapters of the 2003 version, Ilya remains the central figure in her imagination and in her discourse. He is the one who teaches her about her family roots and her culture and provides her with a sense of belonging to a nation and to its history. She goes on to say, "I could not conceive life without Ilya. I drew nourishment from him as a young thing might from an older being gnarled with time",<sup>25</sup> and even as a grown up woman many years after his death, Alexander's connection to the Tiruvella house is embedded in her being through the fluid and intimate longing she feels for Ilya. As the writing starts flowing out of her body, she marks the fault lines of memory, an ambivalent way of remembering things. The loving, nurturing, enabling figure of Ilya begins to break up into something else, hinting at trouble under the surface.

**AT THE BEGINNING** of "Katha", Alexander talks about "two sorts of memories; two opposing ways of being towards the past. The first makes whorls of skin and flesh [...]. A life embedded in a life, and that in another life, another and another. "[...] The other kind of memory comes to her in "bits and pieces of the present, it renders the past suspect, cowardly, baseless".<sup>26</sup> The first type of memory is the external "legitimate memory" and the second kind is the "deep memory." Hyphenated and contradicted by the location of the body from which one speaks and the self that one speaks of, Alexander's subjectivity is represented through conflict and contradiction. In 1933, her memoir used the whorls of skin and flesh of memory to paint Ilya, tracing him in her blood and in the bloodstream of the Tiruvella clan. In 2003, the bits and pieces of scrap that were enfolded in forgetfulness begin to emerge, filled by the "burning present, cut by existential choices," placing her previously told childhood history on a fault line, and turning her postcolonial identity into an arbitrary and contingent thing.<sup>27</sup>

Rewriting the memoir points to the transmutation that takes place in the case of memories and to how memories become gnarled and garbled with time. In her own words, it was impossible to feel at home with all those memories as they sat layered in the recesses of her mind, making her breathless and restive. This feeling of discomfort, of not being able to inhabit her own body and the pain of homelessness is not because Alexander did not have a home but because she had too many "to count,



to describe.”<sup>28</sup> Just like there were rooms after rooms that made a maze out of the Tiruvella house of her childhood, Alexander’s memory too causes her tremendous unease. This sense of alienation and homelessness can be negotiated only if she writes her abuse into language, confronting rather than concealing. “*Write in fragments, the fragments will save you*”<sup>29</sup> she notes after reading Djébar’s book. Fragments become an important discursive tool through which Alexander attempts to make sense of herself and her multiple dislocations. Her memoir thus does not follow any chronological order, nor does it remain bound in one language, or maintain cartographic divisions. It moves from her childhood memories to present circumstances, to lyrical explorations of history, geography even etymology of the words she is using or source-images she is encountering. Stories about her childhood get morphed into a her awakening of class consciousness in Khartoum, Sudan, and then get transported into a story told in India about being too shy to talk to Westerners, sentences get juxtaposed with each other to give the impression of continuity but concealing the crack of the faulty grammar. Her sentences come out gnarled and wrapped in time and in stone that carries the dead weight of shame, always threatening her with consequences that might be violent and fatal. The stone, as referred to in “The Stone-Eating Girl”, is a mark of extreme violence that has been committed on the female body. It is also the symbol of a sinister secret that haunts Alexander even while she is in Manhattan, and most importantly it stands for shame, for guilt of having trespassed, for being *perachathe* – shameless. In 1993 when she wrote the memoir her mouth was filled with these stones, swelling her belly, hurting her, knotting her up as each sentence that she tries to utter is a coiled-up stone, couching her writing in gaps and silence.

This silence prompts her to question her own writing and her role as a memoirist:

What foundations did my house stand on? What sort of architect was I if the lowest beams were shredded? If the stones were mouldering, fit to fall apart. What was the worth of words? [...] I was tormented by the feeling that I had written a memoir that was not true.<sup>30</sup>

By remembering her abuse and the consequent shame, Alexander invokes the powers of the stone-eating girl to overcome the silence that her body was trapped in. With the slow awakening of her hidden past, haunted by the image of the severed “hand of mutilation and of memory”,<sup>31</sup> Alexander acknowledges the violence that fractured her body and splintered her self. She writes: “I learnt again that the body remembers when consciousness is numbed, that there is an instinctual truth of the body all the laws of the world combined cannot legislate away.”<sup>32</sup> Grandfather Ilya and the memory of abuse are registered not in her consciousness but fused

into her mind as one indivisible flesh. This kind of remembrance which is embodied points to a conflicting, oppositional consciousness. The socially constructed external memory of Ilya marks him as the nurturing, loving grandfather while the deep memory hides him and the heinous act that he perpetrated by this act of fusion. Deep memory according to Charlotte Delbo is “the persistence of the past in its own perpetual present,”<sup>33</sup> memory that runs through Alexander’s memoirs and her body like an undercurrent whose force is palpable yet cannot be seen. The external memory and the deep memory gets superimposed holding Alexander’s body and her writing to ransom, pushing her through the layers of loss and pulling her to the spaces of desire.

IN ALEXANDER’S CASE, memory is activated through the stimuli of an equally traumatic public event. Confronting the memories of sexual abuse for the first time, not after her father’s or her grandfather’s death, but in 2001 in the national and collective trauma of 9/11 and its aftermath, Alexander’s individual narrative of trauma splits open the “dark mirror” and [tears] open the skin of memory,”<sup>34</sup> making her write the memoir once again. Rewriting the book of remembrance and scratching the wounds open she begins to approach her past with the sense of discovery. Invoking Walter Benjamin whom she quotes in the preface to the section divider for “The Book of Childhood” she justifies her attempts to re-open her memoir in order to complete it: “He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging ... He must not be afraid to return again and again to the same matter...”<sup>35</sup> Like the man who digs, turns over soil and scatters it, Alexander writes her self into the soil of her past in order to disclose, disgorge, and disperse the trauma of childhood abuse.

Troubled by her gradual awareness that she has left out something very important in her memoir, Alexander realizes that she needs to write once again. Later in the memoir Alexander tellingly describes the way the Tiruvella ancestral home with its teak and brass fixtures, is torn down to construct a new residence with modern conveniences. The metaphor of tearing down the old in order to make way for the new is symbolic of the rebuilding and restoring that she does by writing into memory the interiors of the house that remained hidden behind the fixtures, the gloss and the order. This rebuilding of the house by unearthing the traces of the “interior” is what Walter Benjamin alludes to as “the asylum of art”, “where to dwell means to leave traces. In the

interior these are accentuated”.<sup>36</sup> According to Alexander, re-writing the memoir by accentuating the traces of what had happened and what got left out is to acknowledge that “zone of radical illiteracy.” It is in this zone that trauma and shame come together in a fiery muteness wherein the possibility of translation is directly linked to the author’s ability to transport the violent unevenness and the

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sharp jaggedness of the self and its past. Alexander talks about this zone as a place where we go to when words fail us, “where a terrible counter-memory wells up” and which can be found only when one falls through the door into the dark gap.<sup>37</sup>

Falling through the memory gap, picking up the memoir to put together the missing pieces, particularly after 9/11, after the massacre of Muslims in Gujarat in 2002 and on reading Djébar’s *Fantasia*, Alexander confesses, “My aim is not to cross out what I wrote, but to deepen that writing, dig under it, even to the point of overturning one of the most cherished figures I created.”<sup>38</sup> As she confronts the truth in the discursive space of the memoir, she wonders what really fractured her and what defines her subjectivity. Is it the material facts of her many border crossings and her multiple dislocations or is it the betrayal and violation she experienced at the hands of the one she had most loved and most trusted, her beloved maternal grandfather? For Alexander there is no easy answer. Just as her transoceanic journeys took her from nation to nation, from culture to culture, from languages to languages; her journey from the dark chambers of secret shame to the white pages of imagination lit up by the sharp sunlight of disclosure takes her from trauma to healing. Her experiences of migrant dislocation and the trauma of private violation are intricately linked with each other to create a self that is dangerously split and deeply fractured, turning her into a subject who lives on the fault lines of a dark indigo body.

ALTHOUGH ALEXANDER’S writing is able to effectively recover the past, turning her into a subject who is able to live with the fractures, the way she operates between the two kinds of memory opens up her “subjectivity to profound historical disruption.”<sup>39</sup> Her disclosure of forgetting crucial experiences from the past and her ability to recall them after a decade, points to the faulty nature of representation and the ambiguity of what is understood as truth. For a subject who is “cracked by multiple migrations”<sup>40</sup> and confesses to being a “faultmass,”<sup>41</sup> the intrusion of repressed memories into the space of desired memories shakes up the very foundations of her subjectivity and destroys the very nature of her belonging. On one hand, the memories of Ilya’s “tall figure standing in the sunlight”<sup>42</sup> with tears on his face, are powerfully wrought in the 1993 memoir, but in the 2003 edition this image of Ilya is broken into pieces, as Alexander writes her abuse in order to retrace spaces of unimaginable loss and unspeakable violence. The memory of Ilya seeing them off at the railway station signifies her deep, spiritual bond with him, and the moment of separation is symbolic of radical loss. This image of separation haunts her throughout her life and in the 1993 memoir she explains it thus: “That moment of parting from Ilya, repeated time and again as we returned to Tiruvella, only to leave again, became my trope of loss.”<sup>43</sup> Without reading the 2003 memoir it is impossible to figure out how the trope of loss could be anything but a symbol of dislocation, homelessness and migration. In fact the 1993 memoir conceals the possibil-

ity of alternate readings by first recounting how looking back at that moment of leaving she felt at that very instant that her “life split, then doubled itself, in a terrible concupiscence.”<sup>44</sup> The 1993 memoir hides its secret carefully wherein the reader may have a sense of discomfort but is not able to grasp why. This faint unease gets explained only in the revised edition when she talks of her abuse and imagines telling her father who would understand also hoping that the reader would understand: “Appa, Ilya hurt me sexually when I was a child. I could not bear to remember.”<sup>45</sup>

Thus, that moment of separation on the railway platform, when Ilya sees them off on to their journey to Sudan is crucial to Alexander’s migrant subjectivity. It is here that for the first time she feels disjointed, fractured and displaced. Throughout her life this sense of separation and dislocation gets reinforced by simultaneous returning and leaving, threatening her sense of location and defying the unified consciousness of time and memory. The cycle of discontinuity that we see in Alexander’s migrancy is a reminder that dislocation and split subjectivity may occur not only through physical deterritorialization, but can also result from psychic and emotional rupture.

## Conclusion

Meena Alexander’s *Fault Lines* is an attempt to rebuild a fractured life in the discursive space of literature by giving voice to deep memory. *Fault Lines* is a text that finds its place at the site of many transits: it is a story told by a writer who wants to make sense of her past; it is an account of a postcolonial migrant writer’s decentered subjectivity; it is a text that points to the unreliability of memory and language; it is a memoir that explodes a fiercely guarded secret and reveals the violence that lurks in homes and inside people; but above all it is a narrative that supports the weight of a life yet tethers on the fault lines of personal history.

Using deep memory to draw up the unremembered past, Alexander does not give into the pitfalls of lame nostalgia but instead, creatively constructs a future that offers her the possibility of a negotiation with her fractured subjectivity and provides her the space to participate in her own healing. *Fault Lines* use of memory as work, in the Bakhtinian sense, can be read as a restorative and recuperative text. By writing back to the 1993 version in 2003, Alexander is able to make sense of the past, reclaim the stories that remained untold and caution us to the deeply ambiguous and inconclusive nature of all representation. In Bakhtinian terms, *Fault Lines* (1993 and 2003) points to “intentional hybridization,”<sup>46</sup> bringing the two versions in contact with each other without offering the possibility of any final resolution. The readers are free to choose the versions they find

convincing and are open to shifting loyalties. Playing with continuity, Alexander keeps writing the same story twice over; but also disrupts it by inserting her memory of the sexual abuse and challenging the very foundations of the earlier memoir. Thus, *Fault Lines* is both continuous as well as discontinu-

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ous. By opposing one value system over the other, Alexander destabilizes the authorial subject in the first edition while making the post-authorial narrator of the 2003 version an unreliable one.

Interestingly, what *Fault Lines* (1993 and 2003) does is to question the very nature of writing, memory and language. It shows how the remembering subject and the writing subject in spite of being one, is still a dialectical synthesis of antithetical forces, entangled with and shot through within the possibility and the inevitability of another memory, another voice, another language and another point of view. ✖

Paromita Chakrabarti, 2010–2011 Fulbright Nehru research Fellow, department of English, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana, and associate professor, Department of English, H.R. College, University of Mumbai, India.

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- 7 Craig Brandist, *The Bakhtin Circle: Philosophy, Culture and Politics* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), 91.
- 8 Brandist, *The Bakhtin Circle*, 95.
- 9 The idea of peril and danger of contact zones is taken from Mary Louis Pratt’s *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992). She argues that “autoethnography, transculturation, critique, collaboration, bilingualism, mediation, parody, denunciation, imaginary dialogue, vernacular expression”, along with “miscomprehension, incomprehension, dead letters, unread masterpieces, absolute heterogeneity of meaning,” serve as both “arts” and the perils of contact zones.
- 10 Homi Bhabha’s theory of postcolonial diasporic hybridity and the third space of enunciation and negotiation in his book *The Location of Culture* refers to a liminal space critical of essential identities and original culture. It is a space that is fraught with the complexities of translation of language and disruption of narratives. According to Bhabha the third space is a space of possibility where new forms of cultural practices, meaning and identities emerge by virtue of contestations and clashes with old and limited forms of existing categories of being and belonging, (London: Routledge, 1994).
- 11 Deepika Bahri and Mary Vasudeva, eds., *Between the Lines: South Asians and Postcoloniality* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996) 47.
- 12 Bahri, 36.
- 13 Alexander, *Fault Lines*, 214.
- 14 Ibid., 229.
- 15 I am using the term *memory gap* from the field of computer science. All italics used in relation to this concept are mine.
- 16 McGraw-Hill Dictionary of Scientific & Technical Terms, 6 E. S.v. “memory gap.” Retrieved May 11 2017 from <http://encyclopedia2.thefreedictionary.com/memory+gap>
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- 26 Ibid., 29–30.
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- 29 Ibid., 237.
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- 33 Roberta Culberston in “Embodied Memory, Transcendence, and Telling: Recounting Trauma, Re-establishing the Self” cites Charlotte Delbo who gives an example of “deep memory”: “I feel it again, through my whole body, which becomes a block of pain, and I feel death seizing me, I feel myself die [...] the cry awakens me, and I emerge from the nightmare, exhausted. It takes days for everything to return to normal [...] I become myself again, the one you know, who can speak to you of Auschwitz without showing any signs of distress or emotion.” *New Literary History*, 26: no. 1 (1995): 170.
- 34 Alexander, *Fault Lines*, 229.
- 35 Ibid., 227.
- 36 Ibid., 260.
- 37 Ibid., 260.
- 38 Ibid., 229.
- 39 Dutt-Ballerstadt, *The Postcolonial Citizen*, 44.
- 40 Alexander, *Fault Lines*, 2.
- 41 Ibid., 3.
- 42 Ibid., 63.
- 43 Ibid., 63.
- 44 Ibid., 63.
- 45 Ibid., 241.
- 46 In Bakhtin’s *The Dialogic Imagination* discourse is double-voiced, where one voice deliberately exposes and ironizes the other. Intentional hybridization of discourse is inherently dialogic as two points of view are set against each other, separate and unmixed. (University of Texas Press, 1981), 360.





From the 15<sup>th</sup> Bakhtin Conference: Julia Hayes inflated balloons show the Bakhtin's theories of meaning in praxis.

## Workshop. Further discussion on the expansion of Bakhtinian ideas

### SAVE THE DATE:

October 4, 2017, Room MA796 at Centre for Baltic and East European Studies (CBEES), Södertörn University.

### TO PARTICIPATE:

Send an e-mail to Yulia Gradskova, [yulia.gradskova@sh.se](mailto:yulia.gradskova@sh.se)

**OCTOBER 4, 2017** there will be a workshop, "Bakhtinian Theory. Postcolonial and Postsocialist Perspective", organized by the Institute of Contemporary History at the School of Historical and Contemporary Studies and the Centre for Baltic and East European Studies (CBEES), Södertörn University.

The workshop is a follow up to the publication of this special section in *Baltic Worlds*. Which in turn is a follow up of the 15<sup>th</sup> International Bakhtin Conference "Bakhtin as Praxis: Academic Production, Artistic Practice, Political Activism" (July 2014, Stockholm).

The workshop participants will be asked to continue the discussion that was started in this special section. Questions include (among others): How can Bakhtinian ideas expand and enrich our understanding and analyses of contemporary political movements and social transformations? And How might Bakhtinian ideas be developed or revised better to suit analyses of non-Western cultures?

*The programme for this full day workshop will be announced at Baltic Worlds' web site.*