

Bakhtinian theory in postcolonial and postsocialist space

The workshop “Bakhtinian Theory in Postcolonial and Postsocialist Perspective” was organized to link with the publication of the special section on “Bakhtinian theory in a postcolonial and postsocialist perspective” in *Baltic Worlds* (number 1, 2017). Also present



Yulia Gradszkova (right) and artists Lusine Djanian and Alexey Knedlyakovskiy.

at the workshop were the artists Lusine Djanian and Alexey Knedlyakovskiy, both former members of Pussy Riot (see text beside).

Yulia Gradszkova (the workshop’s organizer) finds that Bakhtinian concepts have proven 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, oppressed populations’ right to self-determination, the disintegration of the state and its system of governance, and large scale migration. Bakhtin’s work describes certain important facets of the operation of authority and violence within a culture and the ways in which such forces may be opposed and undermined. Yulia Gradszkova underlined the need to see Bakhtin in the time and context in which he lived. Stalinism and the totalitarian system affected him.

IRINA SANDOMIRSKAJA, professor of cultural studies, CBEES, Södertörn University, set the agenda in her introduction on how to read Bakhtin. There is a fragmented Bakhtin, she suggested. What we have is bits and pieces of a theory that never come together – although Bakhtin tried to connect his ideas into a totality, the task was never to be completed. Such an outcome can perhaps be understood

as a symbolic image of the times he lived in – a shattered, worried Europe. We always read Bakhtin in one edited form or another, concluded Irina Sandomirskaja, and we will never find the authentic Bakhtin. As a former Gulag survivor, he was furthermore an expert at hiding his identity.

Madina Tlostanova, professor of postcolonial feminisms, Tema Genus, Linköping University, returned to the matter of space and locality. Bakhtin stresses the importance of being outside and the role of the other, which fits well in a postcolonial perspective and application. Leung Wing-Fai, lecturer in Culture, Media and Creative Industries, King’s College London, UK did present an analysis of the time and space of a Chinese migrant, the “she” in Guo Xiaolu’s Works. “She” leaves the past and China, life occurs in the present, and the future is in the UK. Yet she is always an outsider and looked upon as the Chinese she no longer identify herself as. To apply Bakhtinian theory on an individual level seems bold, but also opens up for new perspectives.

More information on the workshop, the full list of speakers, and of course the special section on Bakhtinian theory is to be found at the *Baltic Worlds*’ website. **X**

Ninna Möerner



Alexey Knedlyakovskiy with a poster on Nadezda Toloknnikova.

Art in protest.

Lusine Djanian and Alexey Knedlyakovskiy at the Bakhtin workshop shared their experiences from the art protest in 2013, in the Russian Republic of Mordovia, the historical place for those serving sentence or being exiled. And it was in this region where Bakhtin spent many years of his life when he was not allowed to live in Moscow. The protest was a direct action to support the demands of Pussy Riot-member Nadezda Toloknnikova, who was serving her sentence in prison for the action in the Moscow Cathedral of Christ the Savior. The letter Toloknnikova sent from prison became widely known. She wrote about the horrors of everyday life in the colony and the exploitation of the prisoner’s work by the administration of the colony.

“It is important to notice that her case is not particularly unique, it rather reflects ordinary practice in prisons in Russia: tor-



Artist Lusine Djanian is painting Toloknnikova’s portrait on a large cube.

Pussy Riot in Mordovia, Russia

tures, psychological pressure and work under exploitative conditions,” Lusine Djanian notes. “At the end of September 2013 we got to know that Toloknnikova had announced a hunger strike. Next morning we all jumped in the car to go to Mordovia, 1,250 kilometers away.”

THE ARTISTS HAD simple “weapons”, pencils, paint and paper. Lusine Djanian describes how she painted on everything she could to gain the attention of the administration, media, the broader public.

“Our tactic showed its effects already during the first days. The media got a nice picture from the place and started to distribute information on our demands. Also our action provoked a response from the prison administration. They came out and tried to intervene. They seemed very puzzled and nervous.

“They were filming what we did, and

also they started an account on twitter in order to follow what kind of information we were distributing.

The next move was to expand the attention they were getting, so they put on an artistic performance.

“I put on one of the coats that the prisoners of that colony produce and started to draw a large portrait of Toloknnikova on a red background. Unofficially the Russian prisons are divided into ‘red’ zones (where the administration has all power) and ‘black’ zones (where the administration shares power withinmates). All prison colonies in Mordovia are ‘red.’”

The prison administration stole their banners and attempted to attack Lusine Djanian and even run over Alexey Knedlyakovskiy with a car.

“The administration of penitentiary institutions of Mordovia were not ready for such performance and art actions, and



The painted cube is placed in front of the administration of penitentiary institutions of Mordovia.



The responses on the art protest became an artistic performance.

they started to make mistakes, so we soon transformed them into art objects”.

Lusine painted a big portrait of the head of the colony, Kupryanov, and quoted his threats towards Toloknnikova there. The portrait could be seen by the inmates, and this informed them of the actions that were taking place. Kupryanov became a laughing stock.

The artistic action lasted four weeks.

The results were that Toloknnikova was transferred to another colony. The Head of the prison colony, Kupryanov, was also transferred to another region. The inmates got their salaries raised.

Today the two artists Lusine Djanian and Alexey Knedlyakovskiy are seeking asylum in Sweden because they can no longer perform as artists in Russia and fear for their own safety. **X**

Ninna Möerner