Dialogism and Carnival: Reflections on Bakhtin, Language and the Body

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Summary

After sketching in outline Bakhtin's theory of language as well as the main features of Rabelaisian carnival and its associated "grotesque" body-image, the article argues that Bakhtin's thinking about language and culture is essentially binary. The paper suggests that Stallybrass and White's transposition of the Bakhtinian notion of carnival into a broader cultural process of high/low binarism should be extended to include the theorist's critique of language. Drawing on Stallybrass and White, the article concludes that Bakhtin's thinking on language, like his conception of carnival, is constitutive of Western subjectivity. This displacement is helpful in illuminating the widely discussed *aporia* at the heart of Bakhtin's theory of language: the fact that dialogism is at one and the same time an oppositional discursive activity which subverts the objectifying tendencies of ruling discourse (monologism) *and* a theoretical description of all language.

Opsomming

Na 'n sketsmatige uiteensetting van sowel Bakhtin se taalopvatting as die hoofpunte van die Rabelaisiaanse karnaval met sy verwante "groteske" liggaamsbeeld, voer die artikel aan dat Bakhtin se taal- en kultuurdenke wesenlik binêr van aard is. Stallybrass en White se oorplasing van die Bakhtiniaanse karnavalbegrip in 'n breër kulturele proses met 'n hoog/laag binêre struktuur moet uitgebrei word om die skrywer se taalteorie in te sluit. Deur te steun op Stallybrass en White, kom die artikel tot die gevolgtrekking dat 'n omvattende ekonomie van verdeling en oortreding wat Westerse subjektiwiteit saamstel én Bakthin se taaldenke én sy karnavalgedagte deurstruktureer. Hierdie verplasing is nuttig by 'n verheldering van die wydbespreekte *aporia* wat Bakhtin se taalteorie ten grondslag lê: die feit dat "dialogisme" tegelyk as 'n opposisionele diskursiewe aktiwiteit wat die heersende diskoers ("monologisme") se neiging tot objektivering ondermyn *en* as 'n teoretiese beskrywing van alle taal funksioneer.

In the Euro-American scholarly community an impressive effort is underway to explicate and assimilate M.M. Bakhtin's contribution to literary and linguistic theory. Like the earlier "reception" of Walter Benjamin, the belated discovery of Bakhtin has been widely celebrated. He has been heralded as "a leading thinker of the twentieth century" (Holquist 1981: xv), even as "the most important Soviet thinker in the human sciences and the greatest theoretician of literature in the twentieth century" (Todorov 1984: ix). David Lodge has recently argued that if the 1960s were to be regarded as the decade of structuralism and the 1970s as the decade of deconstruction, then, "in [the] small world of academic literary criticism, ... the 1980s have arguably been dominated by the discovery and dissemination of Mikhail Bakhtin's work. ..." (Lodge 1990: 4). Even the usually sober Paul de Man, albeit in a slightly less reverent tone, has included himself in "the odd list of Bakhtin admirers" (De Man 1986: 106).[1]

In the now vast (and still burgeoning) body of scholarly writing on the Bakhtinian corpus, two of Bakhtin's key concepts have proven especially fecund. The first derives from his celebrated critique of formalist linguistics and involves his argument in favour of an alternative linguistics which would

study language not as abstract system but as social activity, a linguistics not of *langue* but of *parole*. His conception of the "dialogic" nature of language was developed over a number of years in work such as the pseudonymous *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (originally published in 1929 under the name of Valentin Volosinov but now widely attributed to Bakhtin), *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* of 1963 (an expanded and revised version of a monograph first published in 1929 as *Problems of Dostoevsky's Art*) and the four lengthy essays published in English as *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981). The exact status of Bakhtin's notion of language as social activity has been hotly disputed, and attempts have been made to assimilate it to a variety of ideological positions. So, for example, it has been invoked by latterday theorists working within the Marxist tradition in their struggle to avoid both the "idealism" of Saussurean linguistics and classical structuralism as well as the antihumanist scepticism of deconstruction. Liberal humanist scholars have also enlisted Bakhtin's theory of language "to restore legitimacy to a diachronic, philologically based study of culture" (Lodge 1990: 4).

The second and interconnected idea which has so excited Lodge's "small world" is Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque tradition in culture which is presented in his classic study of Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. Since the translation of *Rabelais and his World* in 1968, carnival and the "grotesque" body have been marked out by Western scholars as a privileged terrain for the analysis of cultural practices. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White (1986: 6) point to a large body of Bakhtin-inspired writing which regards carnival and its associated linguistic practices as an epistemological category, i.e. as a mode of understanding and not simply as a festive ritual characteristic of an epoch in European culture.[2]

After sketching in outline Bakhtin's theory of language with its associated idea of polyphonic or novelistic discourse as well as the main features of Rabelaisian carnival and the grotesque body, this paper will argue that Bakhtin's thinking about language and culture is essentially binary. Of course, the term "binary" reverberates against the background of contemporary poststructuralist inspired theory. I shall, however, draw not so much on Derridean notions of the binary opposition as the formal underpinning of Western "metaphysics" but on Peter Stallybrass and Allon White's sweeping reinterpretation of the binary axis as the structuring mechanism of identity formation and sense-making in European cultures. I shall attempt to demonstrate that these authors' transposition of the Bakhtinian notion of carnival into a broad, and specifically Western, cultural process of high/low binarism should be extended to include the Russian theorist's critique of language. Relying on Stallybrass and White's conception of the binary as comprising both a differential and a transgressive element, I shall conclude that Bakhtin's thinking on language, like his conception of carnival, is structured within a generalized economy of interrelated high/low oppositions characterized not by a static, spatialized notion of difference but by a dynamic of division *and* transgression which is constitutive of Western subjectivity. This displacement is, I believe, very helpful in illuminating the widely discussed *aporia* at the heart of Bakhtin's theory of language. The fact that dialogism is at one and

the same time an oppositional discursive activity which subverts the objectifying tendencies of ruling discourse (monologism) *and* a theoretical description of all language exhibits the binary logic described by Stallybrass and White as characteristic of Bakhtin's notions of the carnivalesque and the grotesque body. This represents a limit-point in Bakhtin's thinking, an aporetic moment of deepest penetration when one may discover the symbolic categories of the carnivalesque, which Bakhtin himself located, as a much broader formal structuring principle which governs not only his own thinking on language but is fundamentally constitutive of Western sense-making. It is at this moment that we may also point to a further repetition at the level of Bakhtin's recent reception which seems to indicate that the contemporary critical enterprise may not yet be free of the binarism which Bakhtin both presents and represents.

Bakhtin's axiomatic linguistic claim is that "verbal discourse is a social phenomenon". He argues that an adequate analysis of language must focus its attention on the actual utterances of individuals in concrete social contexts.

> The real-life sense and significance of an utterance . . . does not coincide with the purely verbal components of the utterance. The spoken words are imbued with what is implied and unspoken.
>
> (Volosinov 1983: 17)

This broader meaning, "the real-life sense and significance" of the utterance, which escapes the kind of linguistic analysis which proceeds from an abstract, grammatical conception of the nature of language, can only be grasped if language is conceived of as a dynamics of social interaction. An utterance is meaningful only in so far as it occurs in a social context.

Much of Bakhtin's early work, certainly *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language,* is cast as a polemic reacting against the twin sins of what he calls "abstract objectivism" and "linguistic subjectivism" (Volosinov 1973: 47–63). The work develops an extended critique of both the Vosslerite insistence that the verbal message is grounded exclusively in the individual psyche and the claims of an "objectivist" linguistics which dominated the field of language study in the wake of Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale.*[3]

It is the founding separation of abstract linguistic system and actual speech, *langue* and *parole* in Saussurean linguistics (which also dichotomizes the individual and the social) that Bakhtin sets out to subvert in *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language:* "Formal, systematic thought about language is incompatible with living historical understanding of language" (Bakhtin 1973: 78). The latter part of the work is, for example, devoted to a lengthy investigation of direct, indirect and quasi-direct discourse. In his analysis of these multilevelled speech acts, Bakhtin seeks to demonstrate that the formal patterns of reported speech cannot be adequately explained from the perspective of language as abstract system. Again and again, he reveals the manifest inadequacy of abstract linguistics to account for the multiple modifications of reported speech.[4]

However, in addition to its negative, corrosive mission, Bakhtin's project also contains a positive thrust. He demonstrates that the patterns of reported

speech are in fact intelligible from what he terms a "sociological" perspective. Bakhtin argues that what had been relegated to the category of "style" and thereby banished from the proper sphere of linguistics, is in fact crucial for an adequate analysis of even the most formal aspects of syntax (here that branch of the discipline known as reported speech).[5] In his analysis of reported speech, Bakhtin focuses on the demarcation of the borders between the authorial context and the reported utterance. Between the speech being reported and the speech doing the reporting there exists a dynamic interrelationship of high complexity. "The dynamism reflects the dynamism of social interorientation in verbal ideological communication between people" (Volosinov 1973: 119). The linguistic forms for reporting speech in a given language provide us with what Bakhtin calls "an objective document" of the dialogical process in all language:

> . . . the real unit of language that is implemented in speech is not the individual, isolated monologic utterance, but the interaction of at least two utterances – in a word, dialogue.
>
> (Volosinov 1973: 117)

The syntactic forms for reporting speech are a register of the dialogical process in language in the sense that within them the ideological imperatives of two or more socially positioned consciousnesses intersect. Since the formal patterns of language reflect social interrelationships, various linguistic forms will "prevail in different languages at different periods of time within different social groups and under the effect of different contextual aims" (Volosinov 1973: 117). By analyzing the changing forms by which a given language registers reported speech these changing sociolingual conditions can be mapped.

Bakhtin identifies two tendencies in the interrelationship between authorial and reported speech. In the first so-called linear style, clear-cut boundaries are erected between the reporting and the reported speech. This marked separation serves "to demarcate the reported speech as clearly as possible, to screen it from penetration by the author's intonations, and to condense and enhance its individual linguistic characteristics" (Volosinov 1973: 119). By "referentially analyzing" the reported utterance, the linear impulse privileges the reporting context and depersonalizes the utterance of the other. This tendency occurs "only within an authorial context that is somewhat rationalistic and dogmatic" (Volosinov 1973: 120) and is associated by Bakhtin with the "authoritarian dogmatism" of the Middle Ages and the "rationalistic dogmatism" of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Volosinov 1973: 123).

The opposite strategy, which Bakhtin valorizes, is called pictorial and is characterized by an obliteration of the boundaries between authorial context and reported speech; the former infiltrating and commenting upon the latter. The most extreme case of such boundary dissolution is to be found in quasi-direct discourse. Here differently oriented speech acts (authorial context and message(s) reported) interact freely, thus generating a plethora of

meaning. This tendency Bakhtin associates with "a relativistic individualism" characteristic of his own epoch.

In his work on the novel, Bakhtin argued that it was precisely the weakening of boundaries between types of speech (e.g. reported speech and reporting context), that characterized the novel as a form of discourse and set it apart from the so-called canonic genres of epic, tragedy and lyric. Whereas the poetic genres tend towards a suppression of dialogism and the imposition of a single "truth", Bakhtin labelled the novel "polyphonic":

> One of the essential peculiarities of prose fiction is the possibility it allows of using different types of discourse with their distinct expressiveness intact, on the plane of a single work, without reduction to a single common denominator.
>
> (Bakhtin 1978: 193)

In Bakhtin's grand vision, it is the historic function of the novel as a literary genre (although the novel must be considered in some sense the end of genre[6]) to represent discursive polyphony. In its multivoiced interweaving of speech types – direct, indirect, quasi-direct, etc. – and its heteroglot irreverence towards that which is established and monologic, the novel for Bakhtin becomes the literary embodiment of dialogism in language. Clark and Holquist argue that:

> Bakhtin assigns the term "novel" to whatever form of expression within a given literary system reveals the limits of that system as inadequate, imposed or arbitrary. The canonical genres are then associated with whatever is fixed, rigid, authoritarian.
>
> (Clark & Holquist 1984: 276)

In his early treatise on the novel, Bakhtin viewed Dostoevsky as the great innovator who realized the polyphonic potential inherent in all prose. Before Dostoevsky, the dominant role of authorial discourse (in Tolstoy, for example), meant that the novel itself was monologic and did not allow for the full expression of the dialogic "peculiarities of prose fiction". However, in his later works, Bakhtin presented a more nuanced version of the novel's history, recognizing that the "novelistic" tradition in literary discourse long predated Dostoevsky and could be traced all the way to the serio-comic genres of classical antiquity. During the feudal era, the unofficial culture of carnival came to be the privileged carrier of the parodic, travestying tradition of polyphonic discourse. The Renaissance saw the energy of the popular tradition of carnivalesque laughter being released into written culture by writers such as Cervantes, Boccacio, Shakespeare, and – preeminently – Rabelais.[7]

It was the latter who played a crucial role in the assimilation of carnivalesque customs from the streets of feudal Europe into prose fiction and hence into the literary mainstream.[8] Two elements in the Rabelaisian project were crucial preconditions for the emergence of the novel: on the one hand, the incorporation into literary discourse of the ambivalent laughter of the folk tradition; on the other, the so-called "interanimation of languages" such as that achieved in the Renaissance (through the agency of writers such as

Rabelais) between "Cicero's Latin", "medieval Latin" and the vernaculars of the time (Bakhtin 1968: 465–474). Works such as *Gargantua and Pantagruel* which drew on a still living connection with the cultural praxis of carnival, therefore represent the (re-)emergence of a genre of "carnivalized literature" which in Bakhtin's view is the ideal type for what would later be called the novel. Consequently, in Bakhtin's revised schema, Dostoevsky and Rabelais belong to a common tradition in the history of European literature with its beginnings in Menippean satire and the satyr play, and its culmination in the convergence of folk tradition (which is itself a syncretistic hybrid amalgamating a multitude of heterogeneous cultural elements) and high culture during the Renaissance.

Central to the emergence of a carnivalized literature is the return of the body in the Renaissance.[9] In Rabelais, a corporeal drama of birth, growth, copulation and death, of eating, drinking and defecation is played out. The Rabelaisian body is clearly not the limited, strictly private body of the individual; at the centre of Rabelais' stage is the collective body of the people. In *Gargantua and Pantagruel:*

> we have the first attempt of any consequence to structure the entire picture of the world around the human conceived as body . . . . But it is not the individual body, trapped in an irreversible life sequence that becomes a character – rather it is the impersonal body, the body of the human race as a whole, being born, living, dying the most varied deaths, being born again, an impersonal body that is manifested in its structure, and in all the processes of its life.
>
> (Bakhtin 1981: 171–3)

The Rabelaisian or "grotesque" body is therefore one that continually transgresses its own boundaries; indeed, it is a body defined by the organs of self-transgression, by "excrescences (sprouts, buds) and orifices" (Bakhtin 1968: 318).

Bakhtin's analyses, whether of linguistics, the novel or carnival, thus articulate the linguistic and social realms. Some would argue that his writing represents a rare instance in which a smooth shift between language and politics is achieved. Clark and Holquist have for example pointed out that, even in early works such as *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language,* Bakhtin's conception of language allows him to erect "a whole cultural anthropology on the basis of the shifting relations among authorial and reported speech" (Clark & Holquist 1984: 236). But whereas the critique of language developed in *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* was still largely concerned with an extended engagement of formalism, in part by demonstrating the superior analytical power of a "sociological" approach to language, Ken Hirschkop has argued that Bakhtin's works of the 1930s and early 1940s are cast in a far more overtly political mould. Hirschkop argues that the 1934 essay "Discourse in the Novel" marks the politicization of Bakhtin's opposition to Saussure: dialogism is there translated into a discursive activity which actively contests the social and political centralization of its culture (Hirschkop 1985: 101).[10] The political urgency which enters Bakhtin's writing in the 1930s coincides with the rise of Stalinism; henceforth concepts

such as "dialogism" function as part of a necessarily oblique attack on the repressive orthodoxy imposed in the Soviet Union in the course of the 1930s. Novelistic discourse, and, in the Rabelais study, the carnivalesque tradition, become the embodiment of the desirable form of ethical relations and are equated with the subversive activity of the people opposing the persecutory power of a ruling, official monologism. In *Rabelais and His World,* the political struggle within society between the dialogical and the monological is presented as the struggle between an oppositional discursive activity historizing and relativizing a ruling discourse which presents itself as timeless and natural.[11]

In these later manifestations, dialogism, whether in the guise of novelistic discourse or carnival culture, is thus clearly in the service of a political project. It is dialectically bound to its opposite: dialogism as a subversive tactic is determined by its opposition to a dominant monological discourse. Cast in these terms, the heavy dependence of Bakhtin's theory on a binary opposition between on the one hand, monological discourse and dialogic or polyphonic discourse on the other, can be clearly perceived. And, as seems to be typical of all binary thinking, there is in Bakhtin's system a proliferation of paired terms: monologic/dialogic, official/unofficial, canonical/carnivalesque, poetry/prose, etc.

Hirschkop has argued that the founding opposition of Bakhtin's system is unstable and does not simply involve a static opposition between two terms; there is a deep ambiguity, indeed, an aporetic moment, in Bakhtin's notion of the dialogical.

> ... dialogism is found in Bakhtin's texts as both an oppositional tactic and a theoretical description; the relation of dialogism to monologism is at the same time relational and asymmetrical. While dialogism could not be merely the truth of monologism, it nevertheless contains a utopian element ... lacking in its opposite.
>
> (Hirschkop 1986: 76)

Dialogism is both an oppositional tactic used to subvert the objectifying tendencies of ruling discourse and a theoretical description of all language, it is at the same time inclusive and exclusive. Put crudely: if all language is inherently dialogical, how can monological discourse exist?[12]

In what I consider to be a very forceful intervention in the voluminous writing on Bakhtin, Stallybrass and White have described a puzzle at the core of Bakhtin's notion of carnival and its associated grotesque body-image which is structurally similar to the ambiguity discussed above. On the one hand, carnival involves a joyous, popular *critique* of high culture and official language that would deny the body, the cyclicality of human life and the collective breaking out of the individual horizon of death. Through its inversion of hierarchy, the popular laughter of carnival subverts all that is essentializing, abstract and closed.

> As opposed to the official feast one might say that carnival celebrates temporary liberation from the prevailing truth of established order; it marks the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions. Carnival was the true

> feast of time, the feast of becoming, change and renewal. It was hostile to all that is immortalized and complete.
>
> (Bakhtin 1968: 109)

On the other hand, carnival projects a utopian dimension; it has an *inclusive,* "all people's character" (Bakhtin 1968: 19); "Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people, they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people" (Bakhtin 1968: 7). In its celebration of the "material bodily principle" (Bakhtin 1968: 19), grotesque realism (Bakhtin's term for the aesthetic mode of the carnival) revels in a corporeal communality which also involves an affirmation of the social unity of the collectivity:

> The individual feels he is an indissoluble part of the collectivity, a member of the people's mass body. In this whole, the individual body ceases to a certain extent to be itself; it is possible, so to say, to exchange bodies, to be renewed. . . . At the same time, the people become aware of their sensual, material, bodily unity and community.
>
> (Bakhtin 1968: 255)

Given free reign during carnival, the laughter of the people in its vulgar celebration of the material body is therefore profoundly ambivalent in just the way described by Hirschkop. It degrades and regenerates simultaneously: as a counter-hegemonic force it defiles and subverts the official and the pure; as a utopian affirmation it revives and renews the social collectivity. It is both oppositional and utopian, exclusive and inclusive.

Stallybrass and White have, however, argued that the central ambiguity in the Bakhtinian conception of the carnivalesque and the body collective is rendered analytically powerful only when it is seen as an instance of a generalized economy of binary extremism, a broad cultural process of high/low structuration which cuts across various discursive domains and which is constitutive of bourgeois identity.

> The bourgeois subject continuously defined and re-defined itself through the exclusion of what is marked out as 'low' – as dirty, repulsive, noisy, contaminating. Yet that very act of exclusion was constitutive of its identity. The low was internalized under the sign of negation and disgust.
>
> (Stallybrass & White 1986: 191)

The expulsion of the "other", the "demarcating imperative", which opens up difference and inaugurates the binary system necessary to the process of identity formation, marks out the low domains as sites of extreme symbolic and metaphorical intensity. "The primary site of contradiction, the site of conflicting desires and mutually incompatible representation, is undoubtedly the 'low'" (Stallybrass & White 1986: 4). "What starts as a simple repulsion or rejection of symbolic matter foreign to the self inaugurates a process of introjection and negation which is always complex in its effects" (Stallybrass & White 1986: 193). The low domain is alternatively viewed with disgust and phobically avoided, or heavily invested with desire. It may therefore either be cathected with negative affect or misrecognized through a process of idealization and "return" as an object of intense desire and longing. Whether

involving a positive or negative investment, this process destabilizes the oppositional structure of the binary system through a transgression of its internal boundaries.

The burden of Stallybrass and White's book is to demonstrate the working of this process in a variety of social domains in the postenlightenment period and to argue that the symbolic categories of grotesque realism are fundamental to the process of bourgeois identity formation. Throughout their discussion, Stallybrass and White assume that the body is a privileged operator in the process of high/low structuration described above. Body-image is integrally related to the construction of middle-class subjectivity; indeed, the human body cannot be thought separately from the constitution of the subject. The notion is of a classificatory body always structured in relation to its negation through a process – constitutive of bourgeois identity – which simultaneously structures other domains such as geographical space and the social formation in a complex interrelation of high/low hierarchies.

This cultural construction of body-image may be illustrated by reference to Bakhtin's distinction between the "classical" and "grotesque" Renaissance conceptions of the body. The classical body as exemplified by the classical statuary of the Renaissance was governed by the norms of "high" discourse: it was monumental, closed, homogenous, centred and symmetrical, "a radiant centre of transcendent individualism" (Stallybrass & White 1986: 21–2). The classical body is an "entirely finished, completed, strictly limited body, which is shown from the outside as something individual"; it denies the "unfinished and open body" with its "bulges, protuberances and gaping orifices" (Bakhtin 1968: 150). Bakhtin thus argues that the classical body was structured *in relation to* the grotesque body of the "low" tradition; the "official" body-image was, in fact, a structural inversion of the plebeian body collective and therefore ambivalently dependent upon its unofficial counterpart:

> ... the grotesque body stands in opposition to the bourgeois individualist conception of the body, which finds its image and legitimation in the classical. The grotesque body is emphasized as a mobile, split, multiple self, a subject of pleasure in processes of exchange; and it is never closed off from either its social or ecosystemic context.
>
> (Stallybrass & White 1986: 22)

I would argue that Stallybrass and White's transposition of the Bakhtinian classical/grotesque dichotomy into a broad economy of high/low structuration which involves both division and transgression may be extended to include the dialogism/monologism and the utopian/critical ambiguity described by Hirschkop as characteristic of Bakhtin's thinking. The dialogism/monologism binary exhibits the "recurrent pattern" described by Stallybrass and White; the symbolic categories of Bakhtinian carnival and the grotesque body may now be rediscovered as the governing dynamic of dialogism in general and novelistic discourse in particular. The opposition functions according to a logic of division (dialogism as oppositional tactic) and transgression (dialogism as a theoretical description of all language). When Stallybrass and

White present their critique of the "grotesque" in the following terms, they might be writing about dialogism or novelistic discourse:

> We have had cause . . . to reflect on an unnoticed slide between two quite distinct kinds of "grotesque", the grotesque as the "Other" of the defining group or self, and the grotesque as a boundary phenomenon of hybridization or inmixing, in which self and other become enmeshed in an inclusive, heterogeneous, dangerously unstable zone.
>
> (Stallybrass & White 1986: 193)

Dialogism, like carnival, therefore functions both as the "other" of monologism in a rigid, hierarchical binary and as a transgressive, inclusive phenomenon which subverts the stability and closure of the opposition.

From this perspective and bearing in mind the argument regarding the emotional investment of the excluded/included "low" domain, academic work which positivizes either the various elements of carnival including the grotesque body, or dialogic language such as novelistic discourse, whether as an inherently subversive and hence intensely political tactic or as a discursive realm purged of finalizing constraints,[13] participates in a fetishizing of the repressed and, by thus repeating the nostalgia for "lost" domains, mirrors at a discursive level the process of Western middle-class identify formation described by Stallybrass and White. The project to respond to what Jameson has argued is "one of the most urgent tasks for Marxist theory . . . – [the development] of a whole new logic of collective dynamics, with categories that *escape* the taint of some mere application of terms drawn from individual experience" (my italics) (Jameson 1981: 284) by salvaging variously qualified notions of the carnivalesque and the Rabelaisian body collective as an important utopian modelling must now be suspect.[14] Similarly, attempts to recuperate the demystifying potential of Bakhtinian categories in order "to estrange the whole doctrinally individualist approach, to hold it at arm's length and eventually break it down, in order to break out of its epistemological and ontological horizon of Death" (Suvin 1989: 197) can be seen as repeating a characteristic move of what Stallybrass and White term "bourgeois subject-formation"[15] and therefore not "breaking out" of its horizon at all.

Equally, one might argue that attempts to invoke a negative affective experience of the dismembered or grotesque body do not escape the logic of Stallybrass and White's schema.[16] Just as the celebration of pleasure and desire under the sign of the Other (in whatever guise) cannot disrupt the logic of bourgeois identity formation, so also the valorization of a negative affective investment of the Other does not escape the collective structuration described by Stallybrass and White; on the contrary, in their terms, it must be regarded as a characteristic manoeuvre of "Western" identity.

Finally, to return once more to the scene of near hero-worship described in the opening paragraph of this essay: The enthusiastic reception of Bakhtin and the excited celebration of notions such as dialogism or the carnivalesque as valid ways out of so many critical quandaries may, from the perspective generated by Stallybrass and White, now be glimpsed as itself a local variant

of that complex process through which the dominant class of Europe defines itself in relation to its low Others. Lodge's "small world", like the class to which it generally belongs, "is perpetually rediscovering the carnivalesque [and dialogism!] as a radical source of transcendence. Indeed, that act of rediscovery itself, in which the middle classes excitedly discover their own pleasures and desires under the sign of the Other, in the realm of the Other, is constitutive of the very formation of middle-class identify" (Stallybrass & White 1986: 201).

It should be clear that I do not wish to deny the undoubted greatness of Bakhtin's contribution to the contemporary theoretical enterprise. In his thinking on language, carnival and the body he elaborated a relational model of cultural analysis and substantially anticipated many of the debates in recent cultural theory. I do, however, wish to conclude by pointing out again that the belated and intense "reception" of Bakhtin somehow seems to have provided the backdrop of yet another (re-)staging of that spectacle that Stallybrass and White argue necessarily accompanies the Western bourgeoisie's dramatic engagement of self.

Notes

1. Curiously, despite the enthusiastic reception of Bakhtin in Europe and North America, South African literary commentators have to date shown very little systematic interest in his writings.
2. See, inter alia, Bristol (1985), Eagleton (1981), Flaherty (1986), Lachmann (1988/89), LaCapra (1983), and Stamm (1982).
3. It is this double thrust of Bakhtin's critique that a number of theorists have looked to in the hope that it might transcend the contending claims of humanism and poststructuralism. See, for instance, Clark & Holquist:

   > Bakhtin's view of language differs from two other current conceptions of language ... Personalists maintain that the source of meaning is the unique individual. Deconstructionists locate meaning in the structure of the general possibility of difference underlying all particular differences. Bakhtin roots meaning in the social, though the social is conceived in a special way.
   >
   > (1984: 11–2)

4. Cf. for example, his rejection of "the typical grammarian's errors" of Peshkovskij (1973: 128) or his critique of Bally's "linguistic abstract objectivism" (1973: 145).
5. Ken Hirschkop has pointed to a limited parallel between Bakhtin's subversion of the binary opposition which founds Saussurean linguistics and a typical deconstructive procedure. Like Derrida, Bakhtin seizes on the excluded pole of a founding binary opposition and works it through to a point where it threatens the logic of an entire system of thought. Whereas Derrida undermines the metaphysics of presence with the play of the signifier, Bakhtin subverts the abstract Saussurean linguistic system with the logic of social communication (1986: 98–9).
6. According to Bakhtin the novel is an anti-generic genre:

   > It is plasticity itself. It is a genre that is ever questing, ever examining itself and subjecting its established forms to review.
   >
   > (Bakhtin 1981: 39)

   The idea of the novel as the end of genre is very widespread in literary criticism. See, for example, Jameson 1981: 151–84.

7. "In the Renaissance, laughter in its most radical, universal, and at the same time gay form emerged from the depths of folk culture; it emerged but once in the course of history, over a period of some fifty or sixty years . . . entered with its popular (vulgar) language into the sphere of great literature and high ideology" (Bakhtin 1968: 72).
8. It is therefore in the polyphonic prose fiction of Cervantes and, above all, Rabelais that we can locate the emergence of the novel. By the nineteenth century, however, the novel had become ossified and it was the liberation of the genre from authorial dominance that Dostoevsky achieved.
9. See, for example, Lachmann (1983).
10. Elsewhere Hirschkop has argued that Bakhtin's defense of dialogism, in its novelistic form, is reminiscent of Bertolt Brecht's roughly contemporaneous strategy: "to dismantle a naturalizing ideology, one opposed it with a discourse which historicized life, revealing it as something produced and therefore changeable, and this was in the service of a definite political project" (1985: 675).
11. The notion of a contradiction or, more often, an aporia at the base of Bakhtin's critical enterprise is widespread. See, for example, Lodge 1990: 87–99.
12. Cf. also the following passage:

    > A recurrent pattern emerges: the "top" attempts to reject and eliminate the "bottom" for reasons of prestige and status, only to discover, not only that it is in some way frequently dependent upon that low-Other (in the classical way that Hegel describes in the master-slave section of the *Phenomenology*), but also that the top *includes* that low symbolically, as a primary eroticized constituent of its own fantasy life.
    >
    > (Stallybrass & White 1986: 5)

13. Cf. the exchange between Ken Hirschkop ("A Response to the Forum on Mikhail Bakhtin") and Gary Saul Morson ("Dialogue, Monologue, and the Social: A Reply to Ken Hirschkop") in *Critical Inquiry* 1985, XI: 672–86.
14. See, for example, Eagleton (1981) and Stamm (1982). The latter describes the dual function of carnival which he wishes to salvage in the following terms:

    > On the positive side, carnival suggests the joyful affirmation of becoming. It is ecstatic collectivity, the superseding of the individuating principle . . . On the negative, critical side, the carnivalesque suggests a demystificatory instrument for everything in the social formation which renders such collectivity difficult of access: Class hierarchy, political manipulation, sexual repression, dogmatism and paranoia.
    >
    > (Stamm 1982: 55)

15. See, for instance, Darko Suvin's celebratory invocation of Bakhtinian carnival and the "body collective" both as a utopian modelling of the collective and as a contestatory process which undoes hierarchies in Suvin 1989: 187–200, and Julia Kristeva's invocation of "carnivalesque discourse and the grotesque body as potential sites of subversion in Kristeva 1980: 55; cf. also Stallybrass & White 1986: 200–1.
16. One thinks here of Marike Finlay's argument for a recuperation of the individual subject, which draws on Gareth Sansom's reading of that subgenre of the horror movie described as "fangoric horrality" in which bodily rupturing and subjective decentring are experienced as horror. (See Sansom 1989). Finlay argues that the experience of horror at what Sansom calls "the body to flesh transformation", "moves away from a perception of the body as an integral whole toward the eradication of the category of the body via acts of mutilation and dismemberment.

However, the experience of horror points to a subject of experience, a phenomenological subject with an affective interest in integration" (Finlay 1989: li).

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