Bakhtin and the Internet Age

The Fourth International Interdisciplinary Conference on Perspectives and Limits of Dialogism in Mikhail Bakhtin

"Dialogue at the Boundaries"

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Plan

My personal response to Bakthin and how he has helped shape my intellectual journey
Re-thinking boundaries dialogically
Applying this to issues in
1. Perception and visual Art
2. Neuroscience of consciousness
3. Individual development (ontogeny)
4. Education
5. History of mind (phylogeny)
6. The Internet Age
Interdisciplinary thinking can get messy.

“Never, ever, think outside the box”
Bakhtin and boundaries

“The text lives only by coming into contact with another text (with context). Only at the point of this contact between texts does a light flash, illuminating both the posterior and anterior, joining a given text to a dialogue.”

“A man never coincides with himself. One cannot apply to him the formula of identity $A = A$.”

“I hear voices in everything and dialogic relations between them”
Dialogic vs monologic

• A = A is the ‘principle of identity’ often sourced to Aristotle but (I think) found first clearly in Leibniz (1690) as the foundation of classical logic.

• For Leibniz good thinking was reducing apparent difference to identity through logical reasoning.

• Bakhtin’s advocacy of dialogic non-identity links his thought to that of the re-thinking of difference found in Heidegger and then in Merleau-Ponty, Levinas and Deridda.
1) Identity (or $A = A \land A \neq B$)

But what is the unthought in this picture?
2) Drawing a boundary

Meaning for us starts with a boundary differentiating Figure from Ground, Self from Other, here from there, now from then etc
3) A prior ‘space’ which is cut? The ‘abgrund’?

Mallarmé wrote of the pregnant white page cut by his pen
An infinite potential for new meaning lying beneath the boundaries.
3) Principle of non-identity

“The ancient Greeks did not know the most important thing about themselves: that they were ancient Greeks.” Bakhtin
Boundary or light?

Boundaries are constitutive of our experienced reality. If we question them they turn out not to be closures but openings onto an infinite or unbounded outside.
When text meets context Bakhtin writes that there is: “.. Infinite potential for contextual meaning” Why?

Levinas contrasts infinity to totality.
Thought tends to create a representational system of everything as totality.
But ‘the face of the other’ is a trace of infinity – it cannot be grasped and understood.
The point of dialogic relations is that the other cannot be reduced to me, I locate them but I am also located by them.
Dialogue at the boundary

When I include you in my world and you include me in your world a new infinity opens up

“mutual envelopment and intertwining” Merleau-Ponty
Unpacking dialogism

Meaning emerges from the tension between incommensurate perspectives/voices held together in a relationship.

All meaning implies more than one voice.

Dialogic relations mean there is ‘mutual atunement’ and mutual envelopment - the self is in other and the other in self.

Dialogue involves opening an infinite (unbounded) potential for meaning
A dialogic ontology

“Thought striving to embrace the world and thought experiencing itself in the world (as part of it).” Bakhtin

The ultimate truth is not a formula but a relationship. An open infinitely creative relationship with the ungraspable whole (“infinite other”) that seems to contain us as we strive to understand it.
1) Dialogic applied to perception and visual art
Chiasm. ‘I see the world: the world sees me’

(Merleau-Ponty)
Body and world constitute each other.

I create the horizon that locates me

Reversibility – boundary as ‘hinge’
Experiment with boundaries

Try touching your chest with your right hand. Close your eyes. Be the hand doing the touching. Be the body being touched. Where is this body boundary?

Now press the same hand against your chair and also try to feel the touching and the being touched. Where is this boundary located?
What I found ...

The boundary is not located because it locates – a world of ‘me’ on one side and world on the other side is created by the boundary. The outside envelopes the inside and the inside envelopes the outside. The boundary is an inclusive space ‘between’. This is really where we live.
Dialogical relations (Chiasm) of every figure ground

Because it is not Body here and World over there but a Body-World chiasm (unity in difference) with each boundary as hinge between sentient and sensed and an opening onto infinity

Anish Kapoor
2) Dialogic applied to neuroscience
Figure/ground as basic unit of consciousness

1. All consciousness (self-consciousness) implies ‘paying attention’ which implies a focus of attention and a ground.

2. The boundary around the figure has been measured. If a sequence of visual images are shown in rapid succession at the same spatial location participants fail to detect a second image if it is presented between 200–500 milliseconds after the first one.

3. There is a threshold or bottleneck preventing all neural processes reaching consciousness but only allowing one through at a time.
Global workspace theory: many voices talking all the time in brain – pre-conscious dialogue - only one makes it to the threshold of consciousness at a time and broadcasts back to the rest.

The theatre metaphor of consciousness.
Creative “mind blinks”

• A slower attentional blink type effect has been found with studies of creative problem solving. This is burst of alpha band electrical activity just before problems are solved in an ‘Aha’ moment.

• Alpha-band activity is associated with states of relaxation. The researchers involved refer to this as a ‘brain blink’ and speculate that it indicates turning the gaze inwards away from more powerful external visual stimuli in order to allow the less strongly broadcast signal of the emerging insight take to the stage.
Understanding the Libet effect

Libet found that brains often know about decisions before ‘we’ are conscious of them.
Led to claims that consciousness is epiphenomenal.

Applying dialogic we find that consciousness is not only the lit-up stage at the centre of the theatre but includes the audience. Consciousness is not to be found on one side or the other but in the dynamic relationship between these two halves. Problem solutions (answers) might come to us as if from an outside – from the brain – but it is we who pose the questions and recognise the response.
Where is the brain/world boundary?

Everything you experience is in some sense in the brain BUT the brain is in the world.

Understanding this as dialogic chiasm helps resolve paradoxes.

Boundaries appear in space and time and can be measured but they also open onto infinity.

Google stores a copy of the Internet but the Internet is not in the Google servers.
Why thinking is not individual

“The mutual understanding of centuries and millennia, of peoples, nations, and cultures, provides a complex unity of all humanity, all human cultures (a complex unity of human culture), and a complex unity of human literature. All this is revealed only on the level of great time.“ Bakhtin

We all see the walls that surround us and locate us in a shared space. In a similar way we all inhabit a shared social world. Thinking is both the focus of attention and the background field. From within thought this ground is unbounded and it joins up with all other horizons.

The ‘individual’ is a bounded image drawn within this unbounded ground. We are united in separation like voices in a dialogue are united in difference. We are the voice that speaks – we are also the field of dialogue that listens and responds.
3) Dialogic applied to individual development
Baby smiles, mother smiles – who makes baby smile? Who makes mother smile?

Relationship comes first. Without contingent responsiveness baby is stressed. With contingent responsiveness, even via video, baby is happy.
“Sammy can do it!” “Sammy drives”

Who is Sammy talking to? Who sees Sammy drive?

The relationship comes first, the ‘superaddressee’ or witness or ‘outside’ arrives with the mother.
4) Dialogic education

The word teach comes from old English token meaning ‘point’
Authoritative discourse “remains external”

Internally persuasive discourse “enters into my words and changes them from within”
My son’s test problem

He said it was 90 degrees. Why?
How he saw it in 3D

But they marked him wrong
Education for dialogue

The correct answer is the point of view of the examiner – but there are always other ways to see.

Dialogic education teaches dialogue as well as teaching through dialogue. It expands the space of possibilities to preserve the child’s creativity.

Teach deconstruction as well as construction

After all there are no final facts only answers to questions in a context
Some dialogic ‘mechanisms’ to explore

1) opening a space of dialogue (eg asking open questions, or calling up a brain-storm map);
2) deepening the space of dialogue (eg questioning assumptions);
3) expanding the space of dialogue (eg introducing new voices and perspectives such as the maps of other groups or using the attitude cards to re-think plans);
4) seeing from the perspective of a specific other (eg listening to and taking on board the comments of a colleague);
5) seeing from the perspective of a generalized cultural other (eg invoking the perspective of the absent addressee or audience for the product or referring to the generalized other of the community) and finally
6) Perspective evidence of reflection through taking an outside perspective (perspective of infinite other: eg genuinely asking why something is happening without any presuppositions, looking at it in a new and unexpected way).
5) History of mind
Dialogical materialism?

“Dialectics was born of dialogue so as to return again to dialogue on a higher level (a dialogue of personalities).”

Dialectic began as dialogue written down after the event. Writing rationalised the contingent and open event into an inevitable argument.

Can we re-think Marx replacing ‘dominant mode of production’ with ‘dominant mode of communication’? (Habermas pointed to this)
Putting dialogic into history

1) Face-to-face dialogue supports a participatory sense of self as part of a community yet this tends to universal warfare because this dialogue community has physical limits in space and time.

2) Writing overcomes some of the spatial and temporal limits of oral dialogue but only at the expense of becoming disembedded from context. It has an affordance for monologism and tends to support empires governed from a center as well as turning ‘truth’ into a ‘representation’ – i.e. the sort of thing that can be found in a book.

3) The Internet combines features of dialogue (everyone can participate and have a voice) with features of writing (it transcends location) hence potentially enabling a participatory self that is for the first time global rather than local.
Oracy – bounded dialogue in a community

Writing – one to many empires

Internet – unbounded dialogue
Socrates and the danger of writing

Socrates was an oral thinker but he lived at the time of the first great communications revolution: alphabetic writing.

He pointed out that it would lead to turning meaning into a thing – writing is a like a picture that looks good but cannot answer back. Meaning is in the relationship and not in the words.
Essential dialogic distinction: Living word of dialogue versus dead external word

SOCRATES: I mean an intelligent word graven in the soul of the learner, which can defend itself, and knows when to speak and when to be silent.

PHAEDRUS: You mean the living word of knowledge which has a soul, and of which the written word is properly no more than an image?
Writing changes the brain. Literates see words as well as hearing them. Meanings become visible like things. There is a shift from holistic perception to analytic. (Dehaene 2009)
Around the 16th Century, from Montaigne to Descartes, the dominant image of thinking changed from being about utterances in dialogues to being about propositions in proofs. (Toulmin, 2000)
Affordance and practice

Reading aloud together or reading silently alone. Affordance makes possible – it does not determine.
Transmission of knowledge

Print image of knowledge and meaning as representations in books leads to education as transmission.
6. Understanding the Internet age
e.g: Encyclopedi Britannica vs Wikipedia (and Qwikipedia)

Authority of truth, One-to-many

A dialogue, Peer-to-peer Participation

Need to check
Participatory view of knowledge

According to the logic of the Print Age education is the transmission of true knowledge through reading the right books. The logic of the Internet Age returns us to Socrates’ original insight that intelligence lies in dialogues and not in books. The essence of Wikipedia knowledge is not the passive representation of true knowledge but the active participation in dialogues that construct knowledge.
Eric Whitacre's Virtual Choir - 'Lux Aurumque'
Where is this musical event?

When is it?

And when I chatted to my family on Skype this morning (or Tuesday night) – where was this ‘event’ in the world?
So who are we now?

Teens in the USA spend on average 7 hours a day with electronic gadgets most of which now connect to the Internet. Where do they really live? Where do the events that shape them happen?
Great time and ‘The democracy that is to come’?

“great time’ - infinite and unfinalized dialogue in which no meaning dies”.

Thought occurs first in dialogues. The Internet increasingly embodies the complex unity of humanity – the dialogue of all times and places.

Consciousness is not individual but ‘figure – ground’ dialogue. As we learn to think with the Internet we become part of one collective consciousness.
Each year, Avaaz sets overall priorities through all-member polls. Campaign ideas are polled and tested weekly to 10,000-member random samples—and only initiatives that find a strong response are taken to scale. Campaigns that do reach the full membership are then super-charged by, often, hundreds of thousands of Avaaz members taking part within days or even hours.

I.e. no centre, no committee, no head – just responsive participation
Many voices talking all the time in the Internet – pre-(global)conscious dialogue - only one makes it to the threshold of global consciousness at a time and broadcasts back to the rest.

So we think together collectively and the have the potential to realise conscious evolution.
Bakhtins principle of dialogism can open up new ways of thinking about art, neuroscience, cognitive development, education and politics.

More than that it reveals the unity in the difference, what we learn in art about the figure ground relation can inform understanding of moments of consciousness and so on.

Separate traditions and voices can be in dialogue because THE BOUNDARY COMES FIRST.

The internet is the expansion of the face to face dialogic boundary to include the planet within it. From being located to locating.

Not a return to the mystification of the breath (pneuma – spirit) of Socrates – Bakhtin’s dialogism of texts helps us to understand the Internet Age.

Is the future dialogic ‘at a higher level’? well perhaps that depends on us.
Thanks for listening!


Also: www.rupertwegerif.name

Powerpoint will be there shortly.

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I teach a distance masters course on these issues ‘Technology, Creativity and Thinking’ and take PhD students.