

## AN INTRODUCTION TO BAKHTIN, IS IT POSSIBLE?: THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE DIALOGIC PERSPECTIVE IN THE THREADS OF LANGUAGE AND EDUCATION<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

In the activities of supervising and counseling of theses, dissertations and research reports anchored theoretically-methodologically in the studies of Bakhtin and the Circle, a question is seemingly recurrent: how to start? It is already known that establishing a chronological order of readings is not sufficient. How to ensure, then, that novice readers relate to texts of a group of Russian intellectuals who, for a very long time, were under the effects of a series of absences and conflicts generated by different historical-political aspects in a country that experienced episodes of erasure of scientific, cultural and theoretical production in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century?

This is where the works produced on Bakhtinian thought on the spiral of the “Introduction to...” genre gain prominence. The gaps in the understanding of an author’s life and his text production compose an excellent collection of motives to the rising of books, essays and articles that carry the mission of clarifying the path for students interested in a theory presented to the world in a non-linear and spread-out manner throughout different years, authors and contexts. The complex issue of materials of disputed authorship is also noticeable, which certainly jeopardized a smooth and harmonious reception of the works of Bakhtin and the Circle around the world.

Therefore, the question in the title of this review mobilizes the issue in two complementary moves: a) situating the book *The Cambridge Introduction to Mikhail Bakhtin*, masterfully written by Ken Hirschkop, to set it apart from other works published in the West as introductions to Bakhtinian studies; b) discussing the importance of publishing an introductory book on Bakhtin in 2021, a little over a century after his first book *Art and Answerability* (Bakhtin, 1990) was published, as a means to reflect on the theoretical-methodological reach of Bakhtin’s work today.

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<sup>1</sup> Review of: HIRSCHKOP, K. **The Cambridge introduction to Mikhail Bakhtin**. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021. 193p. (Series: Cambridge Introductions to Literature).

*The Cambridge Introduction to Mikhail Bakhtin* is part of the series “Cambridge Introduction to Literature” by the Cambridge University Press. The series aims to provide basic information on a certain subject by publishing books written by experts that assemble, at once, relevant information and new interpretations on a certain literary theme. Hence, the edited materials can become references for courses and lectures, that is, it is a project directed to the educational field, focused on graduate and undergraduate students.

Ken Hirschkop, author of *The Cambridge Introduction to Mikhail Bakhtin*, is a professor and a researcher in the field of English Language and Literature at Waterloo University (Ontario, Canada). Among his works on Bakhtin are the book *Mikhail Bakhtin: An Aesthetic for Democracy* (no translation to Portuguese), published by the Oxford University Press in 1999 based on his doctoral research.

In Brazil, Ken Hirschkop published the chapter “The sacred and the secular: attitudes before language in Bakhtin” in the book *Twenty Essays on Mikhail Bakhtin* (Faraco; Tezza; Castro, 2006); “Bakhtin, discourse and democracy” in the book *Language, Culture and Media* (Ribeiro; Sacramento, 2010); “Ethics, narration and the linguistic turn in Bakhtin and Wittgenstein” in the book *Bakhtin’s Circle: concepts in construction* (Paula; Stafuzza, 2019); and in *Bakhtiniana: Revista de estudos do discurso*, edited by Beth Brait, the article “Bakhtin against Darwinists and Cognitivists” (Hirschkop, 2016).

Hirschkop’s knowledge on Bakhtin and the Circle, therefore, validates the book in its complexity, especially in regard to the difficulty of organizing an introductory combo on Bakhtin. However, what sets this book apart from other introductions to Bakhtin? It becomes necessary to cite other works of introduction to Bakhtin. For the present review, some important works were selected, published at different times and contexts with great circulation among Bakhtinian researchers, including students and/or novice readers.<sup>2</sup>

One of the first books that functioned as a text in the genre “introduction” in the history of the Western reception of Bakhtin’s work was *Mikhail Bakhtine, le principe dialogique: suivi de Écrits du Cercle de Bakhtine*, de Tzvetan Todorov (1981). This book marked and mediated the reading and the construction of a dialogical perspective and it was somehow responsible for the propagation of the word “translinguistics”, which mobilized the construction of what scholars now call metalinguistics, as stated by Grillo (2006).

The 1980s were also marked by some important bibliographical productions of introductory nature on Bakhtin and the Circle, which, certainly, permeated the reception of the writings of this group of Russian intellectuals, such as: a) *Bakhtin School Papers*, by Ann Shukman, de 1983 (Shukman, 1983), which is part of the excellent collection *Russian Poetics in Translation*. In volume 10, dedicated to texts by the Circle, in addition to the introduction written by Shukman, there is a glossary of keywords that

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<sup>2</sup> This selection, obviously, does not extinguish the discussion on fundamental works responsible for introducing Bakhtin’s writings outside Russia. For the present text, priority was given to a number of works that had an impact on the first contact of the Brazilian audience with Bakhtinian studies.

works as lens for a minimally situated reading; b) *Mikhail Bakhtin*, by Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist (Clark; Holquist, 1984), is a pioneer study that made way for new investigations, especially in regard to biographic data known until then; c) finally, *Rethinking Bakhtin: Extensions and Challenges*, organized by Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, published in 1989 (Morson; Emerson, 1989).

*Bakhtinian Thought: An Introductory Reader* by Simon Dentith, published in 1994 by Routledge, at the same time in London and in Canada (Dentith, 1994), offers as announced in the back cover a lucid and accessible introduction not only to the work developed by Bakhtin but also to his trajectory. It also makes room for the discussion of the intellectual production of Voloshinov and Medvedev. In *Introducing Bakhtin*, by Sue Vice (1997), published in 1997 by Manchester University Press, five chapters attempt to approach five big Bakhtinian concepts: “heteroglossia”, “dialogism”, “polyphony”, “carnival” and “chronotope”, to provide readers a broader perspective on central themes and ideas in the Bakhtinian thought. In this book, based on cinematographic analysis, Vice proposes a dialogue between Bakhtin and contemporary themes, such as sexuality and feminism, which confirms the strong proximity that Bakhtinian studies worked to build with different fields of knowledge.

In Brazil<sup>3</sup>, it is remarkable that professor Boris Schnaiderman was one of the first scholars to publish works related to Bakhtin, as stated by Souza (2016). From a time when the Bakhtinian theory was more associated with literature than analyses of language phenomena, the book *Turmoil and seed: essays on Dostoevsky and Bakhtin* (Schnaiderman, 1983) stands out.

In 1988, the first work of reference on Bakhtin was published in the genre introduction. Organized by Carlos Alberto Faraco, Cristóvão Tezza, Elisabeth Brait, Luiz Dagobert de Aguirra Roncari and Rosse Marye Bernardi, the book *An introduction to Bakhtin* constituted an important compass to Brazilian readers who, at the time, disposed of very few routes to navigate Bakhtinian seas.

After the turn of the century, it became nearly impossible for Bakhtinian scholars to not have faced, at any point of their investigative path, the book *Introduction to the Bakhtin's thinking* by José Luiz Fiorin, published by Editora Ática in 2006 (Fiorin, 2006). Popular among Bakhtin scholars in Brazil, the text seems to correspond to what is expected of a book that introduces theory to novice readers. Throughout six chapters, the author, despite not focusing on pivotal issues, such as ideology, architecture, aesthetics, ethics and sign, manages to raise the desire for more detailed references on the subject to lay readers.

In his introductory and imponent *Language and Dialogue: the linguistic ideas of the Circle* published by Parábola Editorial in 2009, Carlos Alberto Faraco provides us with a short overview albeit valuable and indispensable for readers who wish to join Bakhtin's world and understand it through a perspective, which is not less complex, but

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<sup>3</sup> In order to deepen studies on the reception of the Bakhtinian thought in Brazil, we suggest the most recent article on the subject, written by Débora Luciene Porto Boenavides and published in 2022: *Publishing and reception of the Circle's works in Brazil: the consolidation of dialogic discourse analysis* (Porto Boenavides, 2022).

it is somehow intelligible and minimally organized. By stimulating the understanding of the connections between nature and the functions of language, Faraco passes through the issues of authorship of disputed texts, pointing out archive data available until then, which helps students to join the Bakhtinian theory with a type of first baggage to be carried along their reading trajectory.

Therefore, the work *The Cambridge Introduction to Mikhail Bakhtin* by Ken Hirschkop rises like a potency when the recreation of a legacy propelled by the theoretical-methodological devised by Bakhtin and the Circle is at stake, as well as their dialogue with a time of latent and urgent themes, intrinsic to our globalized and virtualized society. The author announces in the acknowledgments that this is perhaps the last book he will ever write about Bakhtin. An interesting feature, cited by the author, is the reference to, more than Bakhtinian itself, to the encounters that led him to the dialogic perspective. The first with a professor of Russian who awakened Ken's curiosity and wish to know the literature of that country, the second with a classmate who showed him a volume of *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* when Ken needed theoretical support as a key to read *Crime and Punishment*.

The opening of the book contains, in the sections before the excellent introduction, an updated and summarized chronology that certainly subsidizes the reading and the understanding by the audience. It is noteworthy the relationship between this chronology and chapter "2 Life", dedicated to important sections that not only describe aspects related to Bakhtin's existence but outline the relationships between his life and exciting literary production. His youth (1895-1917), friends (1918-1929), exile, escape and passage through wars (1930-1946) as well as his return to Saransk, less agitated and greatly related to teaching appeared as fuel of an incredible and consistent theoretical work, and through Hirschkop's optics, give readers the support to argue for one of the greatest of Bakhtin's premises: the undermost and intimate relationship between subject and discourse. This chapter ends listing processes of rediscovery and rehabilitation that constituted Bakhtin's last years without removing him from his position of mysterious man, in whose trajectory intertwine the political, ideological, cultural and social elements of his time<sup>4</sup>.

In the complementary flow between sections, Hirschkop's book presents two chapters: - "3 Context and 4 Works" – in which the context of the intellectual production is outlined and rebuilt in the most architectonic sense, even though the fragmented aspect (without a clear audience) of Bakhtin's writings and publications is never denied.

The third chapter, "Context", is subdivided into five parts: "Philosophy: Influences and Options for the Young Bakhtin", that approaches Bakhtin's investment in philosophy, particularly in the writings that highlight his youth; "Language: Soviet Struggles over Literary Criticism in the 1920s, and Bakhtin's", in which the author leads us to reflect on the relationship between Bakhtin with art, politics and religion; "Excursus: Voloshinov's

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<sup>4</sup> To readers interested in deepening discussions of Bakhtinian issues of biographical nature, we suggest the article "The author and the human being of Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics" (Campos; Guedes-Pinto; Grillo, 2020).

Linguistic Turn”, that focuses on Voloshinov’s trajectory and production, underscoring his position as author in the Circle and an important name in the field of language; “Literature: Socialist Realism and Arguments about the Novel in the 1930s”, in which the author discusses the intertwining of the Bakhtinian thought and literature; finally, “The 1950s and 1960s: Consolidation and a Quiet Life”, shed light on two decades of post-war and their impacts on Bakhtin’s life and work.

Ken Hirschkop warns in the beginning of chapter 4 *Works*, in a topic named *Some Preliminary Observations*, against the difficulty of organizing an introductory work on Bakhtin in the frame of the series *The Cambridge Introduction*, precisely because the relationships between the life and the times when the originals were written influenced not only the content, but also the very form in which the texts were presented. One of the consequences of context to the communication of the intellectual work of the group highlighted by Hirschkop is that several texts that had been presented as notes, sketches, drafts reached their audience, with very few exceptions, based on choices, editions and corrections of someone other than Bakhtin. That occurred due to a certain degree of worry about the soviet censorship still present at the time they were published.

Among all the ten sections that integrate this chapter 4, whose approach is centered on the reflections about the main Bakhtinian concepts, two subheadings involving the notion of dialogism stand out: “Dialogism as Polyphony and Dialogism as Heteroglossia”. These sections may seem complex and contradictory from the perspective of theoretical depth achieved by the Bakhtinian intellectuals. Diving into the content of these texts is sufficient, however, to understand the path chosen by Hirschkop, much more interested in putting the concepts in dialogue than simply situating them or defining them. Nonetheless, the readers are the ones who will compare Hirschkop’s endeavor to the broad scientific production found in the current literature on the subject, and how Hirschkop’s book can subsidize the investigation on the limits and borders between dialogism, polyphony and heteroglossia.

The issue of the reception of Bakhtin’s work is addressed in Chapter 5. Ken Hirschkop selects texts translated to English, reporting the already known difficulties in making Bakhtin’s ideas reach the wide field of Humanities in the West. The Bakhtinian *boom* situated chronologically between the 1970s and the 1980s seems to have managed, at least, to spread Bakhtin’s thought and the Circle’s, since its recognition as a theoretical-methodological arsenal extrapolated the world of language and literature. This is due to the multivocality proposed by Russian intellectuals who potentialized means of analysis of interactional processes and propelled its reach in different areas and spheres. Such process contributed to a vision of the literary world that, according to Hirschkop, in his brief conclusion, had never been seen.

To answer the question in the title of this review, it is also important to underscore the numerous and various ways for readers to approximate Bakhtin’s work and context. From those who prefer to start with the works directly, in the original language or their translations, to the ones who decide to start with texts written by commentators, it cannot be said to exist a more correct or effective way to read. It is important to underscore the

serious work, in the case of recent translations from Russian to Portuguese of texts that compose the volumes in which the works are published: foreword, afterword, glossary and notes, in which translators offer readers crucial information about the texts, contexts and authorship at stake. These additional texts serve as a reading goal or compass for students less familiarized with Bakhtin's bibliographical production and update, at the same time, what is revealed by recent investigations on the subject.

Articles published in journals and chapters of books also work as introductions to Bakhtin even if they escape or deny the genre *introduction*, and present forms of facing the Bakhtinian thought in contemporaneity<sup>5</sup>. As possible examples, let us take two excellent texts of Brazilian researchers: a) Book chapter – “Collective construction of the dialogic perspective: history and theoretical-methodological reach” (Brait, 2012), in which Beth Brait presents a summary of aspects regarding the reception of Bakhtin's work and the Circle in Brazil, and demonstrates, through the analysis of a journalistic text, the potential of the theoretical-methodological frame of Dialogic Discourse Analysis; and b) Article published in journal – “Dialogic Discourse Analysis: a systematic integrative review” (Destri, Marchezan, 2021), an essay in which Alana Destri and Renata Marchezan seek to identify, collect, assess and synthesize the contributions of publications about DDA to understand the directions of what has been constituted over time as a discourse analysis of Bakhtinian nature.

Hence, it is undeniable that among many productions by commentators and specialists whose aim is to guide novice readers interested in Bakhtin's and the Circle's vast work, *The Cambridge Introduction to Mikhail Bakhtin* reaches the audience with potential to stand as one of the most important works of introduction to the Bakhtinian theory. It highlights a set of choices made by Ken Hirschkop, who proposes a rich update of biographical and conceptual details directed to readers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a little over 100 years of Bakhtin's first essay, cited in the beginning of this review. For the series of elements that were updated and revisited regarding the production of this phenomenal group of Russian intellectuals, the book is also an indispensable reading for those experienced researchers, experts in the Bakhtinian universe, since the decision of studying Bakhtin is adventuring to set up a puzzle whose missing pieces may never be found.

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<sup>5</sup> It is significant that there are excellent researchers of Bakhtin's work and, similarly, of works published in authorial books, collections, magazines and other platforms that also correspond to the aims of the genre *introduction*, and constitute important reading exercises for students and whoever is interested in the production of the Circle. It would be impossible, nonetheless, to list them in the present review. The examples used here are a small sample of the entire production, particularly, from Brazil, of literature regarding the life and work of Russian authors directly or indirectly connected to Bakhtin.

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