

Participatory Ethics in Bakhtin. Pandemic and Pansemic / *Ética participativa em Bakhtin. Pandemia e pansemia*

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ABSTRACT

The philosophical project that Bakhtin conceived at the beginning of the 20th century aims to find a moral philosophy that modifies the performance of man in daily life and in culture. The date [1924?] on which its writing is presumed would indicate the direction that Bakhtinian thought was taking, proposing an utopian cultural transformation in a time marked by enormous political tensions, and the social construction of a real subject, whose moral responsibility historically situated would turn into a mode of participatory action. Since that historical moment, a century has passed, and today it may be opportune to confront it with our present, in a planet governed by the capitalist economy with its population living a pandemic of great proportions. Far from establishing a comparison with that ethic project, we will offer some notes and images that encourage reflection on a philosophy that we do not believe we can cover in its complexity.¹

KEYWORDS: Mikhail Bakhtin; Participatory Ethics; Pandemic; Ethic Act

RESUMO

O projeto filosófico concebido por Bakhtin no início do século XX visava fundar uma filosofia moral que modificasse a atuação do homem na vida cotidiana e na cultura. A data em que se presume que o texto foi escrito [1924?] indicaria o rumo que tomava esse pensamento e o modo como ele propunha, quase utopicamente, a transformação cultural em um momento marcado por enormes tensões políticas e a construção social de um sujeito concreto, cuja responsabilidade moral estivesse historicamente situada e se convertesse em um modo de ação participativa. Desde aquele momento histórico, um século se passou, e hoje pode ser oportuno confrontá-lo com o nosso presente, em um planeta governado pela economia capitalista e uma população sofrendo com uma pandemia de grandes proporções. Longe da pretensão de estabelecer uma comparação, oferecemos alguns apontamentos e imagens que estimulam a reflexão sobre essa filosofia ética, a qual não acreditamos poder abarcar em sua complexidade.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Mikhail Bakhtin; *Ética participativa*; *Pandemia*; *Ato ético*

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I.

The explicit intention of Mikhail Bakhtin when writing his essay *Towards a philosophy of the act* (1997 [1924?])² was to propose a moral philosophy that would allow recovering the responsibility of the temporalized acts of the personal subject in the face of the vastness of the areas of expansion of culture, in its different manifestations of art, science and the forms and values of life. Exactly a century has passed today since he wrote his theses, and it may be opportune to reread them and confront them with our present, on a planet ruled by a pandemic of great proportions, although we can only offer some notes that incite us to the discussion of a very dense essay that we do not believe we can cover in all its complexity.

It is conceivable that on the date on which it is presumed to be drafted (1920-1924) in Vitebsk, the context was post-revolutionary and perhaps the civil war was taking place (1918-1921), prior to the founding of the USSR by Lenin in 1922, which it seems to indicate the direction that Bakhtin's thought was taking and the almost utopian mode of cultural transformation at a time marked by enormous political tensions. It dares to propose the social construction of a "concrete" subject whose moral responsibility is historically situated and becomes a mode of participatory action in all orders of doing, both daily and specific. It is timely to highlight the political potential of the Bakhtinian project (Brandist, 2009) even though Bakhtin was not avowedly Marxist.

The essay starts from a critique of the philosophy of Bakhtin's time in which, reviewing central thinkers, the scholar observes in his proposals that the world of concrete real life and the world of culture, in which acts are objectified, are separated and even the philosophy of language has taken the side of abstraction, ignoring the intense subjective emotion of the word. Bakhtin's proposal, then, is to make both worlds necessary participants in the unity of being that is achieved in life both in daily moral responsibility and in specialized responsibility. Only in this way can the divorce between the two planes be overcome, an issue that he had clearly outlined in the 1919 article "Art and Answerability": "I have to answer with my own life for what I have

² BAKHTIN, M. M. *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*. Translation and notes by Vadim Liapunov. Edited by Vadim Liapunov and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999 [1924].

experienced and understood in art, so that everything I have experienced and understood would not remain ineffectual in my life” (Bakhtin, 1990 [1919], p.3).³

Notably, Bakhtin affirms that the universal validity of a judgment is only an abstract “ought to be” if it is not deeply linked to the unique, historically dated moment of the act of knowing “within the unitary context of a *subiectum*’s once-occurrent actual life” (Bakhtin, 1999, p.5).⁴ Reaching the truth is not an “ought,” if it does not come from a responsible act of a historically situated subject. And if we understand correctly, discovering the truth has only universal and theoretical value, when it is not the result of a morally responsible act. As Bubnova points out, the ethical man is not the one who responds to a pre-established set of values but to the way in which he relates to them (Bakhtin, 1997, pp.12-13, footnote 3). And it is worth highlighting once again what it meant to think of a human act in its historical reality, situating ourselves in his time and also in ours, which is the object of this intervention. Thinking about it in the instance of the Russian revolutionary chronotopy, its philosophical approach is very moving since it places man making history in his place and with it also gives meaning to history. This idea, as Bubnova again clarifies as a translator, has in Bakhtinian language an unusual use in its character of the event of being, which particularly involves a way of being and acting in the world of men (Bakhtin, 1997, p.13, footnote 5).

Bakhtin then incorporates the discussion about knowledge from the transcendental approach in Kant, which he questions since, in his opinion, it does not resolve the passage from the a priori act of cognition to the individual and unrepeatable act of the knowing subject and, therefore, the Kantian self is a “purely theoretical *subiectum* for this transcendent self-activity, a historically non-actual *subiectum* - a universal consciousness, a scientific consciousness, an epistemological *subiectum*” (Bakhtin, 1999, p.6).⁵ It is a being that “is *not* the Being *in which I live*, and, if it were the only Being, *I* would not exist” (Bakhtin, 1999, p.9, emphasis in the original).⁶

³ BAKHTIN, M. Art and Answerability (1919). In: BAKHTIN, M. *Art and Answerability*. Early Philosophical Essays by M. M. Bakhtin. Translated by Vadim Liapunov (including material from the editors of the Russian edition, S. S. Averintsev and S. G. Bocharov). Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990. pp.1-3.

⁴ For reference, see footnote 2.

⁵ For reference, see footnote 2.

⁶ For reference, see footnote 2.

As we can see, there is a remarkable insistence in Bakhtin to recover the concrete being, insofar as it occurs as “the actual once occurrent event” (Bakhtin, 1999, p.7) of being ontologically understood by philosophy, because that abstraction separates it from its historical and living singularity, from its vocation to infinity, from the incessant process of choices and risks. Because being is not presented as a thing, as something given and, therefore, closed and self-sufficient in its immanence. Hence, the act of cognition has not been able to overcome the split with the theoretical subject, and the sciences have become singular specificities “in an unconscious and masked form (in the systems of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries)” (Bakhtin, 1999, p.8).⁷

When approaching the ethical act in Bakhtin, we are encouraged to propose it as a moral experience, since it is not enough to agree with the terms of the norm, but to make it alive in the act itself:

(...) A performed act is active in the actual unique product it has produced (in an actual, real deed, in an uttered word, in a thought that has been thought, where, moreover, the abstract validity-in-itself of an actual juridical law is but a constituent moment here) (Bakhtin, 1999, p.27).⁸

There is a call for the internalization of the law in human action to see it “productively active only at the moment of bringing a valid-in-itself truth into communion with the actual historical Being” (Bakhtin, 1999, p.26),⁹ rejecting all philosophical theories, all abstract notions of what should be, all universalisms, that do not incarnate in the real historical man, who is the one who endows the act with meaning.

The production of meaning in culture, then, would be intimately linked to the concrete way in which men act in it. Between the individual man and the culture there is a profound interaction, and only in this context do acts take on their uniqueness, often expressed through the emotional and volitional tone of language. Because it is very interesting to discover the role of language as both thought and experience of an event

⁷ For reference, see footnote 2.

⁸ For reference, see footnote 2.

⁹ For reference, see footnote 2.

in which one participates as an evaluative and desiring attitude of an object of value, which one appropriates while performing the event of being. And this awareness of thought in action creates an essential link with the world of culture, which is the objectively signified thought of men “in which a living consciousness becomes a cultural consciousness and a cultural consciousness becomes embodied in a living consciousness” (Bakhtin, 1999, p.35).¹⁰ Because the universal only gains value in the individual, when each act is lived participatively.

Being is a potentiality (“an unsigned document”; Bakhtin, 1999, p.47) that only acquires existence when the subject assumes as an irreplaceable singularity from a single place. “My alibi in being” is the foundation of the uniqueness of being in what is given, and assumed in what is proposed, the act of ought, in its responsible, unique and singular participation, “an actual center from which my act or deed can issue and renders a beginning non-fortuitous” (Bakhtin, 1999, p.48).¹¹ For this reason, every gesture, feeling or experience with meaning embodies in me, which, within the abstractly thought world as semantic content, has infinite possibilities of realization. It is my place in being that gives meaning to values, to objects, to the other, because meaning is realized when one accepts their inexcusable participation, since being really in life means proceeding, not being indifferent towards the single totality of life.

Just as the universal man does not exist from my centered being - I exist concretely and my neighbor exists (social humanity)-, there is also the micro-time of real historical persons – “they confirm historical mankind, they permeate with the light of value all possible time and temporality itself as such, for I myself actually partake in temporalitythe human character of history” (Bakhtin, 1999, p.60).¹² The apparent smallness of each singular being, compared to the totality of the world in the limitlessness of its potentialities, is not such if one thinks of the real participation “in the boundless whole” (Bakhtin, 1999, p.52) from a conscience actively involved in each instance of the event from the simply everyday to the great spheres of culture, of which I am a part.

¹⁰ For reference, see footnote 2.

¹¹ For reference, see footnote 2.

¹² For reference, see footnote 2.

Singular responsibility does not mean individualism, but rather the responsibility of each being in its own place: “to live from within myself, to issue from within myself in my deeds, does not mean at all that I live and act for my own sake” (Bakhtin, 1999, p.60).¹³ I am the only one for myself and the others are others for me, because emotionally and volitively I love them as others, and that forces me to relate in a unique way to their values and above all to “recognize” them as someone else, different from me, who also participates personally in being. So important is such a reciprocal and evaluative relation self-other that Bakhtin poses it as the key to the architecture of the moral philosophy that he is proposing and announces it precisely as the first part of his work (recovered in fragments). He considers that his moral philosophy is not the development of an abstract scheme, but of the proposal of “moments” (in an iterative, dynamic sense) that, as we have seen, he will call “experiences” (emotional and volitional) of a singular subject who positions himself ethically (as a participatory conscience) from its place in front of the values of the great areas that mobilize and constitute culture:

These basic moments are I -for-myself, the other-for-me, and I-for-the-other. All the values of actual life and culture are arranged around the basic architectonic points of the actual world of the performed act or deed: scientific values, aesthetic values, political values (including both ethical and social values), and, finally, religious values. All spatial-temporal values and all sense-content values are drawn toward and concentrated around these central emotional volitional moments: I, the other, and I-for-the-other (Bakhtin, 1999, p.59).¹⁴

In the final paragraphs of the introduction, Bakhtin raises a criticism of his time, which he considers to be in moral crisis due to the existing fracture between the human act and the product that builds its own moral system, freed from its origin in being, from its real motivation, acquires an autonomy and an immanence. It seems to us that, in this, there is a certain prophecy that today we live in its heyday, in terms of the value of money itself, separated from the act of its real motivation. On the other hand, it maintains that, when the individual act is separated from culture, it loses its entity,

¹³ For reference, see footnote 2.

¹⁴ For reference, see footnote 2.

degenerates and becomes a purely biological or technical act, an act expressed as pure necessity that drags the feeling of a cultural nihilism, which leaves aside life as an open and risky event.

In short: Bakhtin refuses an essentialist position towards being, since human life is always an unfinished project that unfolds in each act, the lived act, that of the participatory experience of any sphere of culture, that of art, science, politics or religion. Such an experience changes me and changes the world. By integrating in a participatory and responsible act in the totality of culture, one understands the meaning that this act has for oneself and one recognizes one's difference with the real other. As Augusto Ponzio (1997) points out, this ethical foundation is initially taken to the aesthetic plane, but we will leave its development for another opportunity.

II.

Like Bakhtin, we too are in a period of profound social and human crisis, in our case aggravated by the global plague situation. But far from wanting to establish a comparison with the philosophy of the ethical act upheld by the Russian master, our idea for this paper is to motivate some reflections on the relationship between the world of life (which today includes nature in an intense way) and the world of culture, largely responsible for what happens to life on a planetary level. As we know, both worlds inhabit the sign of the viral, both because of the awareness of that infinity of sinister agents that pass through our body or unleash unusual epidemics (Müller, 2020), and because of our own cultural production, governed by the impatient persecution of novelty and the fleeting record of every event.

The world of life and the world of culture are thus affected, one by the pandemic and the other by a certain *pansemic*, taking the latter term as the proliferation of signs that spread “virally” and that show modes of action in which, in a time when the life of our species is threatened, the human is linked in a particular way with the values of life, giving them a diversity of meanings. And here we use the word *pansemic* as the uncontrolled multiplication of significance in different supports and languages that

today fertilize digital media environments, producing meaning in different directions: memes and video-memes, selfies and TikToks, twits and viral posts, all photographic records and films that globalized numerous spontaneous events of life that took place during the siege of covid-19. In other words, it is about cultural productions that generate an unlimited semiosis: rapid and public propagation of the interpretations that we have made of some events of the pandemic, from the South American society that we inhabit and from our irreversible historical time.

But, is it possible, as Bakhtin would have wanted, a singularity in our cultural production of meaning, when in the networks everything seems to transit without leaving any trace? How to interpret, from this participatory and responsible ethics, this *pansemic* of viral content: unsigned documents whose authorship is encouraged to remain crossed out? At least one key to think about the human act in this instance of our historical reality, of mediated societies and of a nature that attacks violently, is in that emotional and volitional tone that Bakhtin conceived as the fundamental instance of every ethical act:

Everything that I have to do with is given to me in an emotional volitional tone, for everything is given to me as a constituent moment of the event in which I am participating. Insofar as I have thought of an object, I have entered into a relationship with it that has the character of an ongoing event. In its correlation with me, an object is inseparable from its function in the ongoing event (Bakhtin, 1999, p.38).¹⁵

For Bakhtin, this response to the world does not deal with a passive psychic reaction, but rather with a necessary orientation of consciousness, a way of engaging in a responsibly active relationship with an event that ceases to be indifferent because I emotionally and volitionally participate in it and respond to it. This affective assessment is a way “to become really actualized and thus made into a participant in the historical being of actual cognition,” (Bakhtin, 1999, p.33)¹⁶ because it permeates everything that is really lived, trying to express the truth of a given moment and guarantee its unrepeatability.

¹⁵ For reference, see footnote 2.

¹⁶ For reference, see footnote 2.

Now, it is true that, faced with an event such as a plague on a global scale, one cannot but expect a flow of these affective tones, although we intuit that some dominated the cultural scene, especially in its refraction through social networks. This is far from casual because, as specialists teach us (Scolari, 2004), in order to guarantee the socio-semiotic of digital interactions, viralized content always appeals to affectivity, awakening a kind of “revealed truth” that interfaces call insight. Precisely what we propose below is a journey through some images of the pandemic that converged in certain emotional tones: portraits that, in their ephemeral and intense circulation, were obstinately repeated, almost like versions of the same stories as here, also serving us of a metaphor typical of the digital world, provisionally we call galleries.¹⁷

The first of them portrays our dialogue with nature, especially in its way of provoking and evoking endless eschatological ideas, those that Bakhtin (1984 [1965])¹⁸ knew how to define as those cosmic fears that have accompanied us since the dawn of time, but that, in our time, refer to the common place that mass culture has baptized as post-apocalyptic. The arrival of that silent virus that emptied cities, confined bodies and frightened us with sinister masks, quickly reintroduced that fateful feeling.

And while the media such as CNN announced that “the coronavirus unleashes a dangerous plague of predictions of the end of the world” (Blake, 2000),¹⁹ the viralization of pandemic images forced the experience of the cataclysm, contaminating even every natural disaster experienced: earthquakes with mysterious lights, forest fires that consumed everything in their path (in our native Córdoba and in the Brazilian Amazon alike), towns that today disappear under the wrath of volcanic lava and, to the surprise of many, innumerable species that colonized the streets during the strictest quarantine.

¹⁷ The images collected here, both the memes and the photographs and film captures, circulate through the networks without a precise authorship, which is why we have specified the most visited web sources as reference. It is also worth noting that this authorial absence is one of the predominant features of our digital age, not only because of the nature of a medium such as the web where the meanings are reproduced quickly and simultaneously in different places, but also because these cultural productions they seem to deliberately pursue anonymity given that this effect of uncertain origin would undermine their clearly popular character (RUÍZ, 2019).

¹⁸ BAKHTIN, M. M. *Rabelais and his World* [1965]. Translated by Irene Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984.

¹⁹ In Spanish: “el coronavirus desata una peligrosa plaga de predicciones del fin del mundo.”

All images where nature regains a certain primacy only because the human species was brought to the brink of extinction, as can be seen below:



Image 1: Fire in the city of Córdoba, Argentina, during the month of September 2021
Source: Anonymous photograph, retrieved on January 25, 2022 from the Twitter profile:
<https://twitter.com/yodeletras/status/1312192018257375232/photo/2>

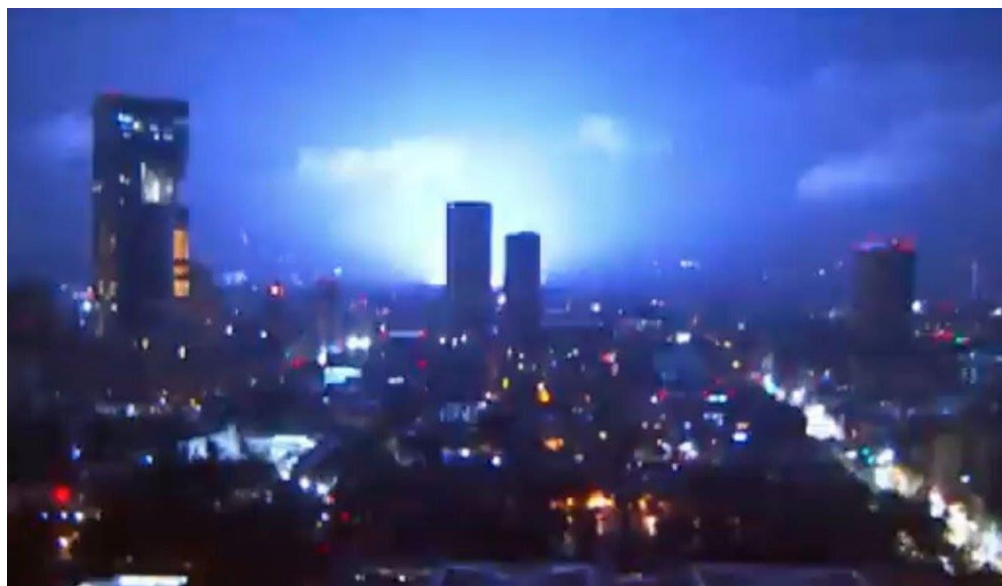


Image 2: Earthquake in Mexico City, D.F., on September 7, 2021. *Source:* Filming screenshot, retrieved on January 25, 2022 from the YouTube profile:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ELBSXh1ANiA>.



Image 3: A small fox returning to the streets of a city, in one of the viralized images whose place and date cannot be specified. *Source:* Retrieved on January 15, 2022 from the Twitter profile:

<https://twitter.com/AMBLUISM/status/1243626230567624707?cxt=HHwWhoC7pffdn8iAAA>
A.



Image 4: One of the most viralized images during the invasion of capybaras in a private neighborhood in Buenos Aires, Argentina. *Source:* Retrieved on January 15, 2022 from the Twitter profile: https://twitter.com/b_cienfuegos/status/1428801667642896389.

A second gallery also engages in an assessment of the *finitude* of human life, although it chooses humor. This is the privileged territory of memes, a language that colonized our daily life to the point of consecrating itself as a kind of *lingua franca*. Perhaps no viralized image has generated such an impact, like the one that, coincidentally, will begin to circulate at the precise moment that global society is alerted by the pandemic: the video of funeral agents in Ghana,²⁰ carrying a coffin in their shoulders while dancing, and that it was tirelessly replicated in the face of any crazy situation that threatens to end in tragedy. These images are dear to the carnivalesque logic, and they all assume the bodily death as the generation of new life, thus celebrating the yearning that death does not conclude anything, nor does anything end.

Innumerable were the Memes about the indefinite extension of the quarantine, the absurd practices that the pandemic aroused, the transfer of our routines to virtual platforms, and even the uncertainty in the face of rushed inoculation processes.



Image 5. Meme where you can see the classic painting of the Mona Lisa, intervened with a face mask. Source: Retrieved on January 27, 2022 from the Twitter profile: <https://twitter.com/angelesokay/status/1241527964262699010>.

²⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EroOICwfD3g>



Image 6. Meme of the renowned work of Leonardo da Vinci, converted into one of the most recurrent scenes during the pandemic: meetings through the Zoom platform.

Source: Retrieved on January 27, 2022 from the Facebook profile:

<https://www.facebook.com/Leapsofffaithcb/photos/3931444730279770>.

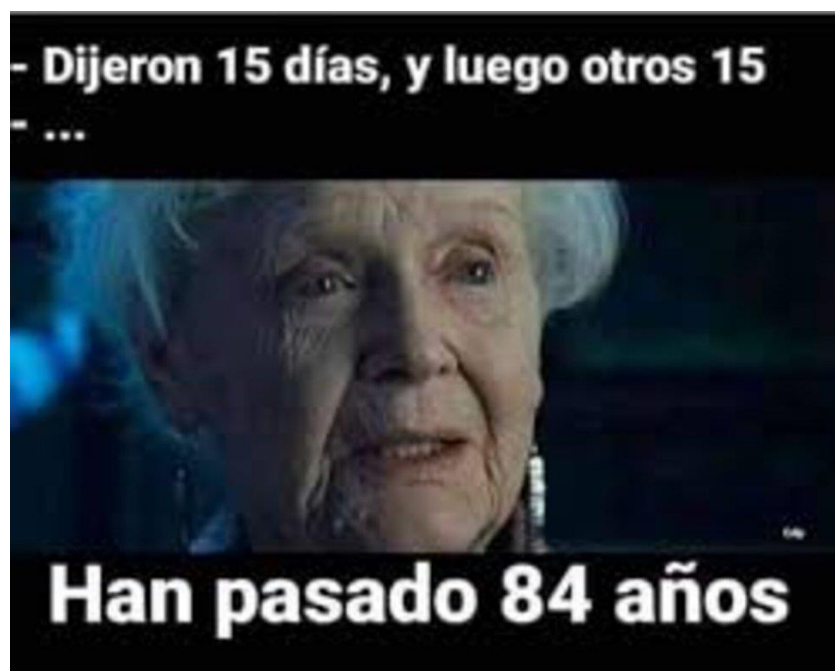


Imagem 7: Parody of the iconic scene of the film *Titanic* (1997), by James Cameron.

Numerous similar interventions abounded in the face of uncertainty due to the constant extension of the quarantine and preventive isolation period. *Source:* Retrieved on January 27, 2022 from the Facebook profile:

https://m.facebook.com/AeroParkingParaguay/photos/a.1167400796610306/4481611818522504/?type=3&source=54&ref=page_internal.



Image 8. One of the memes (which also recovers another lingua franca in this digital world: the animated series *The Simpson*), making fun of the deployment of a whole new language that the pandemic brought with terms such as quarantine, inoculation and isolation, among others.

Source: Retrieved on January 27, 2022 from the Facebook profile:

<https://www.facebook.com/MemesDeCienciasSocialesOficial/photos/yuju-pandemia/2578339709089624/>.

A last gallery retains something of this utopian tone, and also focuses its attention on the experience of the bodies, but highlighting the hopeful longing for their reunion. Spontaneous celebrations on city balconies, elderly people receiving hugs (albeit through plastic curtains), doctors mutually offering gestures of affection in the face of exhaustion from tireless work, the insistence of children to play regardless of any restriction: An entire gallery expressed through emotional images for its way of demonstrating the need for contact as a component of the social body. They exhibit the impatient waiting for the end of a pandemic, and they hold the promise of a desired return to public spaces. But there is something else: in recent times, the strangeness of

baptizing with the euphemism “social distancing” what, in principle, was a physical confinement, has been insistently pointed out. These viralized images seem to offer some explanation in their way of suggesting that the collective experience of bodies is linked to what we define as society.



Image 9. Video of the celebrations that took place on Argentine balconies during isolation. In the capture, a DJ can be seen playing and encouraging all the neighbors. In other instances, the balconies also applauded to celebrate the efforts of the doctors.

Source: Screenshot retrieved on January 15, 2022 from the YouTube profile:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HjHUUbkeen8&ab_channel=ChinaXinhuaEspa%C3%B1ol



Image 10. Captures of some of the viralized videos with the plastic curtains: one of the many inventions to overcome the lack of contact in the face of isolation, even implemented in many nursing homes in Latin America.

Sources: Screenshots retrieved on January 15, 2022 from the YouTube profile:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NWabBfrgdys&ab_channel=CHVNoticias.



Image 11. Viralized video of an Argentine grandfather who meets for the first time his great-grandson who was born days before the pandemic was decreed.

Source: Screenshot retrieved on January 15, 2022 from the YouTube profile:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jpg3s8WnR_0&ab_channel=eltrece.

Fear, humor, optimism: three affective tones that make it difficult to accept that, during the pandemic, this intense pansemic of viral content has relegated our events to a mere accidental life, without embodying at least one evaluative instance. Virulence has been installed as an epochal state and production regime, but these images that we spread on our networks call us to think about other ways in which we also actively participate in the historical experience, relating to certain values and revealing, once again, that the force of meaning as a product of a human collective is always incessant. Perhaps the viral is today our way of communing with this historical moment, of whose framework here we only share some exemplary signs that we hope will arouse some reflection.

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Statement of Author's Contribution

We hereby declare that Pampa Arán, DNI [ID No.] 2296579, and Ariel Gómez Ponce, DNI [ID No.] 33701969, are the text authors of “Participatory Ethics in Bakhtin: Pandemic and Pansemic.” We declare that our contribution relates to the following aspects: 1. Conception and design, acquisition of data, or analysis and interpretation of data; 2. Drafting the article or revising it critically for important intellectual content; 3. Final approval of the version to be published; 4. Accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

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Reviews

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Research Data and Other Materials Availability

The contents underlying the research text are included in the manuscript.