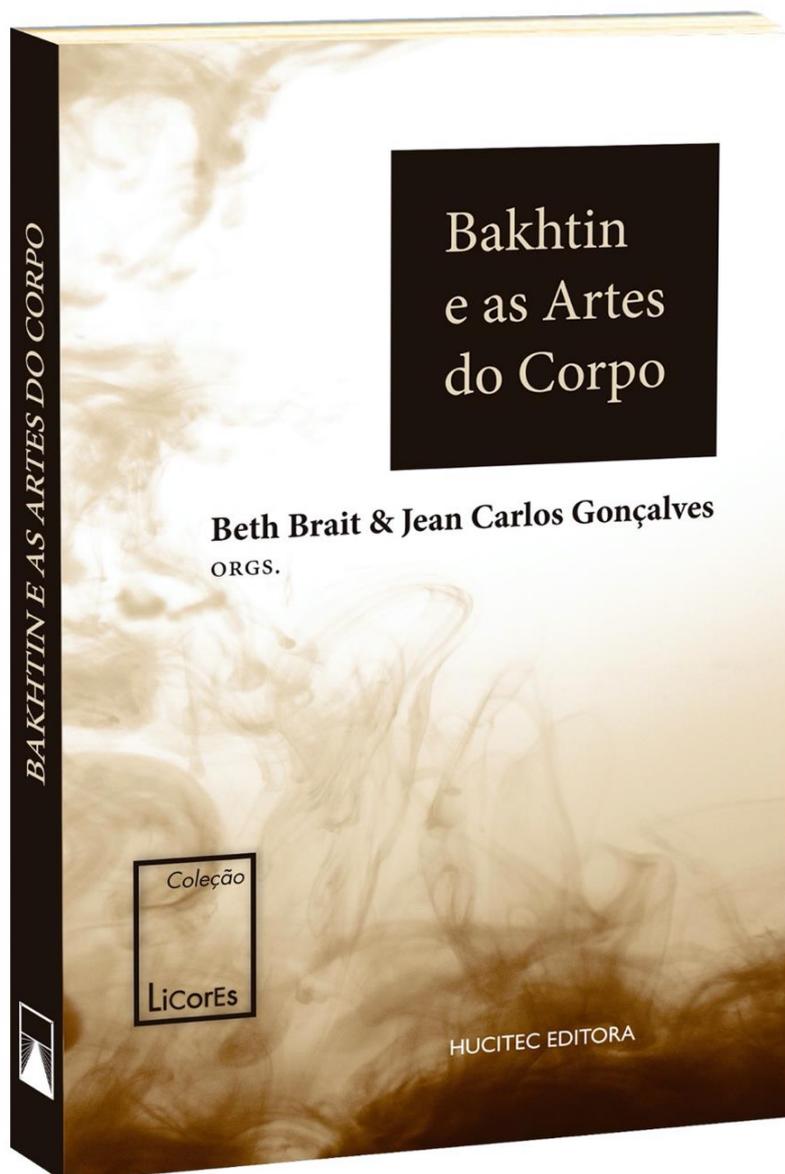


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Bakhtin and Body: Unfeasible, if Not Entirely Possible

It is common sense in the Bakhtinian studies that the theory developed by Bakhtin and the Circle goes beyond the borders of language studies with practical reverberations in several fields. Nonetheless, a shadow is cast upon this theory regarding the theater and the scenic arts (Gonçalves; McCaw, 2019; Huerta Calvo, 1983), for, despite being evoked by Bakhtin and the Circle, these arts are not directly approached in any of the reflections that have reached us (Brait, 2019). We can only conjecture the reason for that, because if Bakhtin (2018)¹ categorically claims that the theater is not polyphonic, he does not focus his reflection on this issue. Furthermore, Vološinov (2017)² states that his language theory takes literature as object of analysis because, albeit mimetizing the everyday language, it is less ephemeral. For this reason, theater and body arts would be less tangible for the Russian thinkers.

This is the starting point of *Bakhtin e as Artes do Corpo* [Bakhtin and the Body Arts] (2021), a publication organized by Beth Brait and Jean Carlos Gonçalves. Brait has already addressed a great part of the discussion by proposing, since the 1990s, the term verbal-visuality as a means to extrapolate language as verbal language and verbal text. Her contribution at that point has shown that the theory proposed by Bakhtin and the Circle is not static or, in the words of the Russian thinkers themselves, monological, rather, it is flexible and capable of embracing new discursive forms and ways of looking into discourses.

The interpretation of the discourse of the body relies on visuality and sensoriality as well argued by all authors gathered in this book. In the five chapters that compose the volume, author-researchers of different genres and discursive materialities propose, under the umbrella of the Bakhtinian theory, to discuss the relationship between the body, its uses and ways, and the discourse it produces or receives. With the clear goal of “making one reflect on the contributions, notions and reverberations that can expand the horizons of the understanding the Body Arts and the respective discursive elements in

¹ BAKHTIN, M. M. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Edited and translated by Caryl Emerson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

² VOLOŠINOV, V. N. *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. Translated by Ladislav Matejka and I. R. Titunik. New York: Seminar Press, 1973.

contemporaneity,” (p.11)³ theater, dance, music, translation practices and even the classroom are environments and spheres in which the authors see bodies-authors of discourses.

The book starts with a chapter written by the organizers, in which the organizers reflect upon the interface between the literary text *A desumanização* [The dehumanization], by Valter Hugo Mãe, published by Porto Editora in 2013 and finalist of the *Prêmio Oceanos* [Ocean Awards] in 2015, and a Brazilian adaptation directed by José Roberto Jardim. This adaptation was also subjected to two adaptations due to the isolation caused by the pandemic: first, it was moved from stage to the realm of *lives* on Instagram and, afterwards, to a theater space where it was filmed and transmitted. The analysis proposed by the two critics is centered on the concept of *double*, explored by Bakhtin, particularly in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*.⁴ The meaning in the novel is extracted from the duplicity between the twins that lead the narrative, one of whom died in childhood. The relationship between theater and novel fosters the critical discursive production. In the scenic interplay between the two actresses, Fernanda Nobre and Maria Helena Chira put into tension the double they shape physically on the stage with the presence-absence of the deceased twin in the narrative. The authors state that:

the trajectory of this *double* is slowing getting its specificity through semantic-narrative resources that build the presence/absence, the identity/alterity, which is the case, for example, of the *mirror* and the expression “rear eye,” both angles are privileged here to discuss the issue (p.30).⁵

In the analysis, the *double* unfolds the concept of *excess of seeing*, expanding the tension of an “I” that does not see oneself or is seen by the “other” inside the narrative. Discursively, the image reproduced in the chapter is emblematic; the symbolic image is in a *frame* from the last adaptation produced by SESC (p.48) as filmed theater. In the image, the actresses show their backs to the camera, sitting in the auditorium and watching a stage that is being set up (with a lowered lightning fixtures); there is the

³ In the original: “fazer refletir sobre as contribuições, noções e reverberações que possam alargar os horizontes de compreensão das Artes do Corpo e seus elementos discursivos na contemporaneidade.”

⁴ For reference, see footnote 1.

⁵ In the original: “a trajetória desse duplo vai ganhando sua especificidade por meio de recursos semântico-narrativos, construtores da presença/ausência, da identidade/alteridade, caso, por exemplo, do espelho e da expressão “as costas do olho”, os dois ângulos aqui privilegiados para discutir a questão.”

proposal of a symbiosis between the observer and the observed. This theatrical play inside the theater projects a narrative in an abyss that, at the same time it detaches the actresses from a realistic scene. It also inserts spectators in the scenic game, removing them from their passive-contemplative position and turning them into more active participants. The text, as the very *corpus* suggests, does not deplete the issue and leaves plenty for other researchers to seek different reflections, be it on the *corpus* or on the theoretical issues discussed. While thinking about the text, however, one of those unanswered questions comes forth: how does one talk about plays, or the Arts of the moving Body, in a “static” text, such as an article or the chapter of a book?

From the absent-present body proposed by Brait and Gonçalves, we move on to “*Por uma filosofia do corpo em movimento*” [Toward a philosophy of the moving body],⁶ written by the English professor Dick McCaw. Aiming at the “understanding of how a moving subject can think of itself either as the centre of surrounding space (egocentric), or as one particular object in space (allocentric)” (p.59),⁷ McCaw employs the Bakhtinian theory to explore other ways of understanding a body discursively placed in the space-time of the utterance— a body that enunciates, that enunciates itself and that “plays” with all these utterances in real time, as “flexible,” “malleable” or “continuously changing” as stated by Bergson (1978) regarding a living person in the world, inserted and active in one’s own context.

From Bakhtin’s thoughts, expressed in author’s early writings, “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity” (1920~1924)⁸ and *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* (1920~1924),⁹ McCaw claims the “Bakhtin’s failure to grasp how the experience of one’s own body is an important generator of meaning for oneself as a self-directed moving agent” (p.60).¹⁰

Given the theoretical framing – small and time-limited –, the chapter misses the plasticity of the Bakhtinian theory whose elasticity allows us to mold it to other contexts and other *corpora* than those discussed by the Circle, as Marília Amorim (2004) did with

⁶ Chapter originally published in: McCaw, D. Towards a Philosophy of the Moving Body. In: GRATCHEV, S.; MANCING, H. (ed.). *Bakhtin’s Heritage in Literature, Arts, and Psychology*. Lanham, MA: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018, pp.237-254.

⁷ For reference, see footnote 5.

⁸ BAKHTIN, M. M. Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity. In: BAKHTIN, M.M. *Art and Answerability, Early Philosophical Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*. Translated by Vadim Liapunov. Austin, University of Texas Press, 1990.

⁹ BAKHTIN, M. M. *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*. Translated by Vadim Liapunov. Austin, University of Texas Press, 1993.

¹⁰ For reference, see footnote 5.

the concept of alterity; or Irene Machado (2005), who identifies a “conceptual opening” in the Bakhtinian theory regarding speech genres.

To that end, Amorim, Machado or even Brait, in regard to verbal-visuality, employ in their research practices an aspect of discourse analysis very dear to Bakhtin: *distance*. In “Response to a Question from the *Novy Mir* Editorial Staff,” (2017)¹¹ Bakhtin proposes that distance modifies the interpretation of certain discourses, not because they have changed, but because their interlocutors have. Therefore, perhaps that “failure” means adjusting one’s own excess of seeing in relation to the Bakhtinian theory to see in it in excess, that is, more than the theory itself assumes.

Again, Marilia Amorim makes good use of this theoretical “freedom” in her chapter for this book. Due to her own educational background and her understanding of the Bakhtinian theory that are crossed by a philosophical perspective, very dear to the Russian theorist, the author proposes the analysis of classroom dynamics in both in-person and on-line modalities to understand how the body operates in that sphere. To that end, the discourse of the professor at University of Paris VIII, from where she recovers her teaching experience to develop the reflections in the chapter, is traversed by the concept of *speech genre*, as she understands that the body is also subjected to relatively stable conditions in the utterance of each genre. Therefore, the chapter considers the body as a “form,” as the formation of the speech organs to produce phonemes, and as the participation of the whole body in language: a body that dances when enunciates.

Above all, we can describe the chapter written by Amorim as a memorial, affective text, which, however, never loses its force and theoretical relevance. Discussing difficulties and barely tangible issues to the scope of a theoretical-reflective research, the entire argument designed by the author moves through different concepts of body that intertwine in the construction of the utterance. It is impressive, however, how the author in a Bakhtinian manner expands our perspective on the possibilities of dialogues: “the construction of a theory is tributary to its dialogues – with whom was or is the author in dialogue? In which social-historical space-time did or does that dialogue take place? By making that dialogue explicit, the professor unveils the founding gesture of the

¹¹ In: BAKHTIN, M.M. *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Translated by Vern W. McGee. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986.

theory(p.105).”¹² As a Professor, Marília Amorim displays her dialogue and conducts us to understand how to read farther than the lines of a step-by-step textbook for the Circle theory.

Irene Machado in her “*Corpo grotesco bem temperado: ressonâncias em ritmo de Bach*” [Well-Seasoned Grotesque Body: Resonances to the Rhythm of Bach], understands the body beyond the meanings proposed, thus far, by the book, and takes the concept to the extreme of conceiving it as matter. She proposes the analysis not only of the dancing bodies of the *Grupo Corpo* [Body Dance Group] in the performance *Bach*, but also the materiality present in the music, in the colors and in the lightning of the performance – a variable set that leads her to claim that “the performance *Bach* produces a polyphonic experiment and, in its own way, builds dialogism with the diversity of resonances (p.137).”¹³ The idea of sensoriality is present throughout her discussion, which comprehends various theories and forms of analyses because it reflects the variety of resources in the performance used as *corpus*.

The concept of grotesque extracted from Bakhtin by Machado, in the chapter, is taken in a broader sense than usually recovered for analysis. In music, the grotesque would rise from the unusual elements the group Uakti used to reproduce Bach’s melodies; in the setting, it would be in the opposition between high and low; in the lightning, in the game of dark/light and in the colors used for that purpose: all of this conceived as body. In the dancers’ bodies, the author identifies the grotesque not as deformity but as “the projection of a body in crisis turning inside out the very relationship between body and genre (p.143),”¹⁴ or in the steps that are “disarticulated in a transgressive bodily grammar that reaches for the sublimity of heights in the embodied matter of movement (p.144)”¹⁵

As we watch parts of the performance available on YouTube, we realize how accurate the author’s descriptions are, whose multiple interpretation of a performance so full of voices expands understanding. Nonetheless, the *Grupo Corpo* still belongs to a

¹² In the original: “a construção de uma teoria é tributária de seus diálogos – com quem estava ou está dialogando o autor? Em que espaço-tempo sócio-histórico aconteceu ou acontece esse diálogo? Ao explicitar esse diálogo, o professor desvela o gesto fundador da teoria.”

¹³ In the original: “o espetáculo *Bach* produz um experimento polifônico e, a seu modo, constrói o dialogismo com a diversidade de suas ressonâncias.”

¹⁴ In the original: “[n]a projeção de um corpo em crise a virar pelo avesso a própria relação do corpo com o gênero.”

¹⁵ In the original: “desarticulados numa gramática corporal transgressora que busca a sublimidade das alturas na matéria encarnada do movimento.”

lineage of contemporary dance whose discursive-choreographic construction does not escape a hegemonic model of dance, when this particular framing is considered: if we take the context of classic dance as a touchstone, the dancers' gestures and movements really sound grotesque; however, in the context of dance in contemporaneity, the choreography can sound conventional, "official."

The chapter that closes the volume is written by Vânia Santiago and Carolina Fomin, "*Tradução e interpretação: um ensaio sobre libras, arte e corpo*" [Translation and Interpretation: an Essay on Brazilian Sign Languages, Art and Body]. Assuming "the body is the platform/support of language (p.147)"¹⁶ in Brazilian Sign Language (Libras), the authors discuss the issue of translating into that language the discourses produced in the artistic sphere, particularly, theater performances, storytelling and music concerts. Prior to that, however, there is a long and thorough explanation of their choice for the term "translation" in the place of "interpretation" and the presentation of issues inherent to transferring from one language system into another.

The authors elaborate a technical discussion on several aspects of the work of *TILS* (*Tradutor-Intérprete de Língua de Sinais* [Sign-Language Translator-Interpreter]), the ethical and aesthetical issues of the translation work in artistic events and the analytical aspects of discourse produced by the various genres composing the *corpus* in their chapter – all of that without removing the body, the object of the book, from its place as protagonist of the argument and articulator of different theories and research mobilized by the authors.

The body-to-body encounter already approached by Marília Amorim is prominent in the chapter, especially when the authors discuss the presence of a deaf individual at a music concert, when several bodily interferences from the environment will constitute their overall understanding of the discourse translated by the *TILS*.

Finally, this book comes at a time that could be a breaking point for discourse analyses in the arts, especially those that hold the *presence* as a central element – among which all the genres analyzed in this volume are. The isolation imposed by the covid-19 pandemic re-signified bodies and interactions on the personal, professional, cultural and, of course, discursive levels. Knowing the process of producing and publishing a book in Brazil, it is expected that the pandemic crosses the process of *Bakhtin and the Body Arts*,

¹⁶ In the original: "o corpo é suporte da língua."

which is evident in most if not all chapters. This new reality is observed and felt by the authors, who do not have the distance or even the sufficient stability to deeply think about it – their vision, as it ought to be, is one of experience, of life, and not that of the reflected and analyzed ones. We do not avoid our time and the rupture imposes itself upon our bodies and the reflection upon them.

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