

Stop Viking Vološinov and Bleeding Bakhtin!

Martin Barker

Aberystwyth University, UK

What would it mean to conduct research under the aegis and direction of the ideas of Valentin Vološinov and Mikhail Bakhtin?¹ In the fields of cultural and media studies, the ideas of these two important thinkers have *putatively* been taken up very widely. However, I want to argue that the relationship of cultural studies to Vološinov and Bakhtin has been essentially a ‘raiding’ relationship – rushing off and stealing bits to incorporate back into quite another intellectual economy. Vološinov and Bakhtin have been viked with a will.

In an earlier book, I wrote about Vološinov’s ideas, drawing entirely on his *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (see Barker, 1989). What I tried to do there, was to draw out some broad lines from my understanding of Vološinov as a *dialogist*. The core of my understanding of him came from thinking through the implications of his central claim that ‘the word is a two-sided act’ – a wonderful epithet, in which each part has to be examined closely. The same idea was expressed slightly more fully in his sentence: ‘To understand another person’s utterance means to orient oneself with respect to it, to find the proper place for it in the corresponding context. For each word of the utterance that we are in process of understanding, we, as it were, lay down a set of our own answering words’ (Vološinov, 1986: 102). Recently, however, I read a late essay of Bakhtin, where the ideas in Vološinov’s *Marxism* get revisited and developed. Although a somewhat gnomic essay, still, this one allows – I would say, requires – the elaboration of a whole account of a dialogic approach to communication. The essay is his ‘The Problem of Speech Genres’ (Bakhtin, 1986b).

In this essay, Bakhtin spells out with fascinating thoroughness but a frustrating lack of exemplification, his account of communication as *utterance*. I want to draw out from his essay a series of propositions which he asks us to adhere to. My interest is in asking: *what difference would be made to concrete research if we were to adhere to them?* I want to test the model which I find implicit in Bakhtin’s essay against some empirical research I have recently finished into the film *Judge Dredd* and its audiences, which in many ways was informed by what I believe to be a ‘Vološinovian’ approach. The outcome of this confrontation is to force into

¹ I pass completely on the question: is Vološinov the same as Bakhtin? Who cares? The fact is that their ideas certainly overlap extensively, and that is what matters from my point of view.

view some key issues, some unclarities in Bakhtin's essay, and some challenges to what we might call 'mainstream' film and audience theorising.

The trouble with most cultural studies uses of Vološinov and Bakhtin is not that they are selective, but that they have provided grist to two dangerous mills in our field. First, they have supported a largely uncritical celebration of counter-cultural practices; the assimilation of some bits of Bakhtin's work on carnival has led people to feel good about praising anything which looks like turning 'orthodox' of 'dominant culture' upside down – without checking to see if in fact Vološinov or Bakhtin have any conceptual space for such notions in the first place, or that even if they do, their uses for the terms would be at all compatible with these contemporary uses.² Second, and apparently starting quite elsewhere, the adoption of one bit of Vološinov's ideas about language has led people to present him as an early champion of 'polysemy' – people struggling over dominant language/cultural forms. Both these, I believe, are radically at odds with Vološinov's and Bakhtin's intentions, in at least three respects. First, Vološinov's philosophy of language is presented as though it is essentially about *power and how it can be negotiated or resisted*. Actually, I do not think that is adequate. Second, Bakhtin's account of carnival is presented as a type-case of *resistive practices* – as though all culture comes 'scarred' with its encounter with one fundamental dimension, of power and ideology. I do not think that is true, either. Third, and what links these two, they are both built on an epistemology which presumes that *communication is some method of attempted transfer of meanings, against which people have to build walls of defence or get invested*. This last is very, very far from Bakhtin's and Vološinov's whole notion of dialogicality.

We can add one other problem: cultural studies has for a long time now been obsessed with the issue of 'power'. With regard to the mass media, this has been a deep fascination with the question of *how media messages might have the capacity to persuade, influence and indeed infiltrate people*. But at the same time that this has been one of the abiding problems of cultural studies, actual audiences have studiously declined to fit the models proposed. And recognition of this has led to an organised retreat to a supposedly Bakhtinian trench: where 'polysemy' provides air cover and bombards those advancing messages, sending them scurrying back to their own (textual) side. This obsession with textual power, then, is matched by a search for the supposedly-needed resources to *resist* the 'bad guise'. And that guise is always political. So people have taken Bakhtin and Vološinov to be providing the grounds for people being able to '*resist*' evil but deceptive media propaganda. Whew! It is a good thing Polly Seamy got here just in time, to save all us weak folks from wicked old I D O'logy. And this resistantness is then seen as the *prime interest* in Bakhtin and Vološinov – which narrows down their interest to, basically, a slogan: 'language is the site of class struggle'. Yes, but for Bakhtin and Vološinov it is also the site of beer-ordering, education, community singing, seduction, mournings of the dead, and novels on the

² On this, it is worth reminding ourselves of the debate begun by Abercrombie and Turner – and then quietly forgotten by most cultural studies theoreticians – about the meaning and validity of the concept 'dominant ideology'.

interiority of the soul. The extreme limitation to those para-political interests of cultural studies has denied us access to the real richness of their ideas.

Many of these problems can be seen in two recent books which at least attempt something a little systematic in the transference of Bakhtin's ideas to cultural studies: Hirschkop and Shepherd's (1989) edited essays devoted primarily to literary uses of Bakhtin, and Robert Stam's (1989) single-authored application of Bakhtin to film. Beyond the viking tendencies in themselves, the difficulty, I feel, lies in how little attention they pay to the structure of Vološinov/Bakhtin's ideas – a lack of address, in other words, to their founding suppositions; and to the difference in meanings of terms made by the 60-year gap. This combination shows very clearly in Hirschkop's interesting opening essay, which nonetheless trips itself up very badly in its crucial discussion of Vološinov's concept of 'ideology'. He asks, for instance, what can legitimate classifying an utterance as an instance of something broader (a speech genre, a discourse, an ideology) (Hirschkop and Shepherd, 1989: 21-22). This is surely the right question – and one that is rarely asked. But his answer, that it will have to be on the basis of 'formal structures', badly misses their account in favour of the predominant tendency, now, in much literary work, in critical discourse analysis, and of course in the textual drift of media and cultural studies. At the same time, in both books, there is a tendency to foreclose issues which *ought* to be capable of becoming empirical, research questions. Hirschkop again, taking issue with what he feels is the unclear force of Vološinov's notion of 'context' (as determinant of meaning), first treats it as referring only to the immediate circumstances of speaking and hearing (the 'auditoria', as he calls them) (Hirschkop and Shepherd, 1989: 14). But perhaps more damagingly, he seems to think that we should be able to determine the nature of relevant contexts *in advance*. Why? Why should we not make it a goal of research to find out for different audiences what are *their* relevant contexts for receiving, say, a film, or a novel, or whatever?

The tendency to skim off what suits a contemporary theorist is most evident in Stam's book. How else can he write at one point: 'Within a Bakhtinian approach there is no unitary text, no unitary producer, and no unitary spectator; rather, there is a conflictual heteroglossia pervading producer, text, context and reader/viewer' (Stam, 1989: 221)? This is the wildest viking of Bakhtin for the sake of contemporary postmodern concerns, without interest in the structure of his account.

But rather than just make a negative case, I want to take the risk of exploring what it would mean to use these ideas systematically. After all, when I first wrote about Vološinov, I bemoaned the fact that his *Marxism* has virtually no exemplifications of what he intends – just the rather strange one of indirect speech, its meanings and historical shifts. If it might be possible to show how research could and should be done under the guidance of a dialogical set of principles, that would do more than just disputing 'readings of the masters'.

Just from this bare extrapolation of Vološinov/Bakhtin's principles, two problems can be seen. First, there is a clear over-emphasis on *successful* communication. Bakhtin tends to assume that every utterance *achieves* unity, whereas we know very well that how often things gone wrong. Utterances get interrupted, or unfinalised, or in other ways incomplete; they can

be disorganised, incoherent, inappropriate, or in other ways unsuccessful. Though important, this does not in my view undermine Vološinov/Bakhtin's project, since they are primarily interested in situations where communications *are* successful. For it is those situations which highlight what I take to be their fundamental interest: what we might call the *society of the speech-situation*. In every successful act of communication, we can discern a great deal about the presumed and implied social relations of speaker and hearer. This I take to be the force of Vološinov's insistence that speech-genres are the most sensitive instruments for registering social change; and for Bakhtin's assertion that they are the 'drive belts' linking the history of society to the history of language.

The second problem is an over-emphasis on the separation of primary and secondary utterances. Here, Bakhtin's interests in specifically literary forms – which are by nature among the most 'removed' from the tasks of immediate and daily life – had led him to draw too hard a distinction. It is not that there is not a distinction, but that we have to find ways of *making it a matter of empirical investigation*. We cannot know in advance whether a quotidian act of story-telling, or a soap opera, or a story retold in a letter in a magazine, or a diary, or a film have entirely removed themselves from the tasks and purposes of daily social life, only operating at a removed (imaginative) level. *How* to know, is of course a difficulty. But that is another matter.

The Concept of an 'Utterance' and its Implications

'The general linguistic problem of the utterance and its types has hardly been considered' (Bakhtin, 1986b: 61). I will take the risk of saying that I believe this is almost as true now as it was when Bakhtin wrote it, at least of work within the media and cultural studies tradition (I am not competent to speak more generally about work in linguistics). The way in is via looking at this essay by Bakhtin as a source of a wholly different approach to human communication.

What, then, does Bakhtin argue in his essay on Speech Genres? The core of his argument is that linguistics constantly repeats an error in confusing *grammar* – the constitution of formal rules for the construction of sentences and other well-formed formulations – with *utterances*. The idea of the 'utterance' is, to Bakhtin, the cornerstone of all understanding of communication. The point we have to make (and which Bakhtin does not explicitly, probably because it just did not seem necessary) is that the concept of an 'utterance' is a logically primitive term. That is to say, it is not possible to define 'utterance' in terms of any simpler, formative components. That does not stop us saying a great deal about it. It is possible to point to some of its distinctive *features*, to say what it *is not*, and to make *distinctions* among different kinds. But there cannot be a reductive definition, in terms of more basic elements. And other communicative features which emerge from it must be looked at for their relationship to this irreducible component: the utterance. The same might be said of the concept of 'colour' – while we can discriminate different *kinds*, while we can say a great deal about how and why it is experienced, and about the implications of

experiencing it, colour as an experienced phenomenon is not in the end reducible to anything more basic.

What is this irreducible component of an 'utterance'? It is always the same thing, as far as I can see, across all Vološinov's and Bakhtin's writings. It is that an utterance involves speaker and hearer in a social relation in which each is *orienting* to the other, in and through the act of communicating and understanding. This is in total opposition to notions of *message-creation*, or *encoding/decoding*, since both these assume that meaning is some intrinsic aspect of the words or other communicative devices themselves. We might say that the models, respectively, are as follows. For communication theorists, a communication is like a blow to the brain; with greater or lesser force, with more or less noise, the 'message' seeks you out and zaps you if it can. For encoding/decoding theorists, communication is like a crossword puzzle; we have to worry at it, do the decoding work – but even as we manage the translation, beware that blow to the brain! For dialogists, it is like a gift. Not all gifts are good gifts, or wanted, or right for the occasion; but they all presume an existing relationship between giver and receiver. They all presuppose a society of the 'gift-situation'. The disagreement is as fundamental as that. Exploring the implications of this is what the remainder of this paper is about.

I want therefore to list all the characteristics Bakhtin sees as assembled under this primitive term 'utterance' – a term which, as he argues, has been largely set aside, perhaps because it is of such generality (encompassing as it does everything from a turn-take in a conversation, a brisk military order, a business memo, a proverb, or a multi-part novel) that nothing interesting can be said about it per se. Then I will ask what kind of a research project that would set me, as a media investigator.

The first thing to note about his account is his emphasis on utterances *undertaking tasks*. Discussing style, for example, he argues that this 'enters into the very task' of the utterance in some cases (e.g. literary works) but not in others (e.g. a set of minutes). The idea of utterances performing tasks sits well, at first sight, with the linguistic interest in speech acts. But we will see that Bakhtin takes it elsewhere. The idea of communication as a *task* opens up a series of issues about what the *purposes* of a particular communication are, how this is known, and itself communicated to 'hearers' who have to know if they are to understand the communication. We will see that this connects with Bakhtin's term 'speech genre'. But first note how this emphasis on *tasks* leads him to differentiate utterances from sentences. A sentence per se has potential for meaning, but awaits its context in an utterance to realise it. But 'an utterance directly confronts reality (the extra-verbal context of the speech) and the different utterances of *others*' (his emphasis) (Bakhtin, 1986b: 74). What is striking about this is that 'confronting reality' does *not* mean describing or depicting or categorising. It is *doing something to the extra-verbal context in the process of encountering others' utterances*.

'Utterances' have, or at least, seek *unity*. Bakhtin insists that the primary unit of communication should be the utterance, not any kind of grammatical unit, be it word, paragraph, or whole speech/book/etc ('the *real unit* of speech communication: the utterance')

(Bakhtin, 1986b: 71)). In achieving unity, an utterance declares itself as the act of the 'speech will' of the speaker who embodies (or at least seeks to embody) in his/her utterance operations of opening and closing, initiating and finalising. But such unity is only achievable *because* we speak in and through speech genres. Bakhtin identifies three features which attend on the unity of an utterance: 'semantic exhaustiveness' (that is, the completion of the idea); the speaker's plan or speech-will (completion of the task for which the idea has been developed); and 'compositional and generic forms of finalisation' (the signalling by various procedures that the work is done) (Bakhtin, 1986b: 76-77).

Just as Vološinov did in *Marxism*, Bakhtin insists on the 'inherently responsive' nature of utterances. This goes in two directions: to understand an utterance is to frame a response to it. It is, in effect, to make sense of an utterance by implicitly answering the question: what I am supposed to *do* with this communication? But that is only possible because, in speaking, the originator of a communication *orients him/herself* towards hearers: 'the speaker himself is oriented precisely toward such an actively responsive understanding' (Bakhtin, 1986b: 69).

The other direction is, of course, that the *speaker him/herself* is always responding to previous communicative acts: 'any speaker is himself a respondent to a greater or lesser degree' (Ibid). Notice this: it is a matter of degree, which seems to imply the possibility of empirical differences which could be researched.

One way in which Bakhtin tries to hold onto this difficult idea is by talking of communications as *rejoinders*. In responding to a previous set of utterances, we move forward down an endless chain of utterances, each one trying for completeness: 'each rejoinder ... has a specific quality of completion' (Bakhtin, 1986b: 72). Overall, then, we cannot lift an utterance out of its history – 'any utterance is a link in a very complexly organised chain of other utterances' (1986b: 71).

Bakhtin early on introduces a distinction which he often revisits thereafter: between primary and secondary utterances. Primary utterances are those which arise directly out of and contribute to the communicative commerce of life (talk, arguments, letters, memos, orders, etc). Secondary utterances are those which lift themselves out of the ordinary process of life, do not claim to relate directly to on-going life processes, and which embed within them many of the forms of primary utterance. Bakhtin's example is literature, but it can clearly apply to all those *forms of story-telling* which still, in his terms, constitute utterances, but which do so at one remove, as it were. The secondary 'absorb and digest the various primary (simple) genres that have taken form in unmediated speech communication. These primary genres are altered and assume a special character when they enter into complex ones' (1986b: 62). Bakhtin is insistent that we cannot appraise secondary utterances *as if* they were primary – for example, 'the novel as a whole is an utterance' (1986b: 63). To understand a secondary utterance, we will have therefore to enquire into its *task* and its *speech genre*, before considering either the component (absorbed and digested) primary genres or the modes of response which people have to it. This will give us the specific *kind of unity* which the utterance (be it film, novel, poem, or whatever) tries to achieve.

This distinction is critical for Bakhtin, and he clearly privileges the primary (unmediated) over the secondary (mediated) utterance. Although he does not spell out exactly how the relations between these might work, we can infer one or two points from his general argument. At many points, Bakhtin makes clear that he sees various features of the utterance as *necessary*, but nonetheless *open to variations*. The extent to which style is determined, and necessary to the task an utterance is set to achieve; the extent to which an utterance is a response to previous utterances; the extent to which markers of completion are embedded – these and others will show empirical variations. It is fairly clear that Bakhtin considers the ‘literary’ (his type-case of the secondary utterance) as relatively lifted out of the ‘complexly organised chain of other utterances’. Although he does not say it here, that should lead us to expect a *greater attention to style* as part of the very task the utterance seeks to manage; a *less direct and immediate* responsiveness to previous utterances; and a *greater and more firm* inclusion of finalisation procedures.

Unlike a great swathe of post-structuralist/postmodernist thought, Bakhtin is quite clear that we *have* to speak about subjects.³ Speech implies a speaker, in a strong sense. This is an essential part of utterance’s ‘addressivity’: ‘addressivity, the quality of turning to someone, is a constitutive feature of the utterance’ (1986b: 99). The person who speaks is necessarily orienting him/herself to those s/he addresses, in concrete ways: ‘When speaking I always take into account the apperceptive background of the addressees’ perception of my speech: the extent to which he is familiar with the situation, whether he has special knowledge, his views and convictions, his prejudices (from my viewpoint), his sympathies and antipathies – because all this will determine his active responsive understanding of my utterance’ (1986b: 95-96). This attention to apperceptive background functions as we monitor the progress of a communication, modifying to take account of possible responses (objections, agreements, preparing ourselves, etc). This entails a continuous movement of self- and other-awareness as a necessary part of communicative work.

This, though, leads Bakhtin to draw a distinction, and a tricky one, between on the one hand the ‘real meanings and ideas of one’s addressee that actually determine the style of the utterances (works)’, and the ‘conventional or semi-conventional forms of address to readers, listeners, posterity and so forth’ which the history of literature well exemplifies (1986b: 98).

So, we will need to be able to speak of, and ask how to research, who is the ‘speaker’ of a film, if Bakhtin is right. Bakhtin is insistent about this, and sees it as one of the disgraces of grammatical linguistics not to follow this idea. Utterances *belong* to people, he argues, whereas sentences do not (1986b: 84). In fact, because of the role of ‘addressivity’, utterances belong to both speakers and hearers – they imply, in other words, a kind of community – and that of course links with his other ‘big’ concept: speech genre.

³ Vološinov’s concept of value ‘implies a subject, a bearer of this world-view or ideology, whose identity *as a whole* is bound up with this ideology’ (Hirschkop and Shepherd, 1989: 19). Treated with care, this is a vital insight.

Speech genres are the essential way in which utterances are organised: ‘we speak only in definite speech genres’ (1986b: 78). Indeed, Bakhtin goes so far as to say that understanding, and thence the whole of human communication, would fail but for the operation of speech genres. Speech genres guide us to orient appropriately: they ‘may be more flexible and changeable’ than grammatical structures, but they still have ‘normative significance’. He also signals (as did Vološinov in *Marxism*) that speech genres provide the link between social and historical practices and language practices: ‘Utterances and their types, that is, speech genres, are the drive belts from the history of society to the history of language’ (1986b: 67).

Speech genres are notable for their variety. They may in the end all be linked, but in the meantime they do a thousand different jobs: from recording minutes of meetings, to enabling exchanges in a local shop, from finding out the times of trains on the telephone, to allowing plea bargaining in a law court, from helping a child with his or her homework, to reviewing a film. All that they have in common is their generic connection with the primitive, ‘utterance’. That does not mean they are random – to live, we have to have, as it were, a hierarchy of speech genres: ‘In each epoch, in each social circle, in each small world of family, friends, acquaintances and so forth, there are always authoritative utterances that set the tone’ (1986b: 88).

Nevertheless each speech genre constitutes a separable sphere. This is crucial: ‘Any concrete utterance is a link in the chain of speech communication of a particular sphere’ (1986b: 91). Or again: ‘Every utterance must be regarded primarily as a *response* to preceding utterances of the given sphere’ (Ibid, his emphasis). Only after examining the *tasks of that sphere* and of communications carried out there will we be entitled to make claims about the relations of that sphere to other, perhaps more ‘authoritative’ genres of utterance.

Bakhtin in Sum

A summary, then, of the features Bakhtin ascribes to utterances. According to his account, they:

- a) *perform tasks*;
- b) *seek a unity* (via semantic exhaustiveness, completion of task, and finalisation);
- c) *address* their hearers (the speaker orients to the ‘known’ apperceptive world of ‘hearers’);
- d) are understood when the *hearer orients him/herself to them* (‘lays down a set of answering words’);
- e) are always *rejoinders* within an on-going chain of utterances;
- f) succeed to the extent that they *constitute or participate in speech genres*;
- g) require and seek to produce a *society of the speech situation*.

I want to propose that it will help if we think of hearers as understanding when they *respond to the task set by an utterance*. A 'response', remember, is not at all the same as an agreement, or obedience, or acceptance. It retains that 'primitive' irreducible component of *orientation* within the structure of authoritative and non-authoritative speech communities. For finally, we must recall as an *empirical* issue Bakhtin's point that not all speech genres are equal. In each person's life, and indeed in each speech situation, some are more 'authoritative' than others. But the last thing we could do, on this account, is to presume a concept such as 'dominant culture' or 'dominant ideology'.

Films as 'Utterances'

The first danger we will have to ward against is one of oversimplification. Take the apparently most simple of Bakhtin's aspects: the processes of finalisation that close the unity of an utterance. Bakhtin is very concerned about this – repeatedly in the essay, he reminds us of the importance of the closure of an utterance, which he often calls the moment of the 'change of speech-subjects'. It might seem easy to apply that to a film – easier, in fact, than the messy way that, say, a turn-take in daily dialogue might seem. But that is an illusion. Yes, we know that at the end of a filmic presentation the screen goes blank, and the lights come up. But of course that is not what Bakhtin means. His distinction between the 'real' and 'conventional' rules of speech genres – rules which especially apply to cases of secondary utterances – cuts across here. Take the credits at start and finish of a film. Usually they have little to do with the theme of a film. But be careful. Inasmuch as the 'style' of a film, in Bakhtin's sense, may be like the style of a novel, that is, part of the very task it performs, the titles can become highly relevant to the nature of the themes, and the evaluative accent attached to those themes, that a film presents. Think, for instance, of the style of the opening title and credit sequence of the James Bond movies. Think, recently, of the use of the credits to link *A Bug's Life* to its Disney forerunners.

In a similar fashion, a number of recent films appear to incorporate a distinction in their closing credits. If we take as an example Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers*, we perceive that the extra-diegetic music which draws the *filmed* story to a close runs on across the first part of the credits. This is not an incidental feature – the song is the incredibly powerful 'The Future' by Leonard Cohen, a battering-ram of a song preaching the virtual desolation of humankind.

But this is not the whole point I want to make. I also want to argue that to *certain kinds of viewer* the closing credits are part of the agreed 'task' of a film. To those we loosely call film buffs, those for whom the point and meaning of a film is to contribute to the evolving magic of cinema, the credits constitute part of the completeness of the event. Not perhaps down as far as 'Key Grip' and 'Best Boy', but who knows? The *idea* of the credits is a necessary

part of the filmic utterance, to those whose interest in film is driven by their participation in the historicity of film-making.

The problem is that we will need to maintain a distinction between *intended* and *effective* finalisation procedures, and those which arise from *eclectic* or *eccentric* uses – and sometimes it is not going to be clear which is which. Take a fascinating recent essay by John Fiske and Robert Dawson (1996). They report their observation of a group of unemployed men watching one of the *Die Hard* series of films who at one level are revelling in the violence of the film – but with a particular cast. They are delighted when a *confrontation with authority* is taking place. But the moment the police start moving in and tidying up, they stop watching! Their reasons for being interested in the film have run dry, so they withdraw. Is this, or is this not, a case which can be understood within Vološinov/Bakhtin's dialogic approach? I want to say 'yes', and *the principle will be whether or not their response has in any way been constituted into a speech genre*. How will we know that? By whether the 'speaker', in his orientation to its 'audience', shows evidence of taking into account this apperceptive background, and in the organisation of its communication, is embodying utterance-features which will sustain and enable their orientation. Let me try to say this in two ways. In Bakhtinian terms, does the 'speaker' hold to and display attention to the apperceptive world of these 'hearers'? In other less theoretically heavy words, does the film company know and take account of this kind of viewer's interest in their films, and design them accordingly? This is a researchable question – and it is one which needs to be historically situated, since films companies *learn* – indeed, in many ways they *want to know more* about their audiences, and they adapt their films to take account of what they learn. In an important sense, then, ***an utterance becomes an exemplar of a speech-genre when it occurs within a continuing communicational community. And speakers and hearers count as constituting such a community when they show concrete signs of awareness of and orientation to the apperceptive worlds of each other.*** I am happy to live with the clumsiness of this, since it may make us slow down and consider the implications of these claims.

An illustration before I proceed to exemplification from my own research. In a book I greatly admire, Janet Staiger has developed a set of proposals for what she calls a historical materialist approach to audiences – an approach which clearly attempts to situate itself in a reading of Vološinov/Bakhtin which is quite close to mine (see her extensive discussion of Bakhtin in Staiger, 1992c: 196-209). Although the whole book could be relevant to my theme, I want to address in particular her discussion of early film (Staiger, 1992b, Chapter 5). There, she argues that many accounts have got diametrically wrong their picture of how and why the elements of 'classical narrative' emerged after 1909. Far from being an appeal to middle class audiences, it was, she argues, part of making film universal in appeal – because it would no longer have to presume shared assumptions which could 'fill in' the gaps in fragmentary narratives. As part of this, she gives a neat demonstration of the way early film is misunderstood if we do not take into account the background of shared assumptions which film-makers took into account (the 'apperceptive world of the hearers'):

For example, the 1902 film *Uncle Josh at the Moving Picture Show* has been used to argue that early spectators found the experience of film going to be illusionistic. Since the story of Uncle Josh's visit has him accidentally tearing down the movie screen when he believes that he needs to protect the heroine from the villain's advances, their proposition has a certain logic if you assume that the audience itself is naive and the movie is a documentary of some sort. However, once you consider that the 'Uncle Josh' figure is a classic American theatrical and literary figure – the country bumpkin – the tale becomes a comedy, in which case a very knowledgeable audience laughs at the foolishness of taking a film to be real. The significance of *Uncle Josh* for early film practice reverses. (Staiger, 1992b: 104)

This is an apt demonstration of the difference that is made when we see films as utterances within communities of expectations, with agreed mutual orientations. Staiger's larger point is that after 1909 the explosive growth in demand for film meant that the movie companies could no longer limit themselves to the repertoire of stories around which there were likely to be such 'agreements'. Therefore they had to seek to codify a set of strictly filmic conventions (a speech-genre, no less) within which film could become a universally-available practice.

I want now to show how we can test these ideas in a concrete case: from what we learnt from research I did with Kate Brooks into the audiences of the film *Judge Dredd* (Cinergi 1995).⁴

A Dialogue with Dredd

Bearing in mind what I have said about the dangers of simplification, of not seeing that Bakhtin is developing fundamental concepts, whose relations with empirical features will not be direct, let me review the features that we should be looking for around films, if my account of Bakhtin is right:

1. In what sense could we say that films have a 'speaker'?

This is clearly not anything like the same as a 'narrator'. Nor need it be the director – only under particular circumstances does the director become the 'author' of a film. My proposition is that our only route to answering this question is *via the viewers*: who do the 'hearers' regard as the 'speaker' of a film?

In our research on *Judge Dredd*, one of the clues we gained to audiences' responses to films was precisely their sense of 'who' or 'what' made it. For *2000AD* fans, the response

⁴ For the main findings of this research, see Barker and Brooks, 1998.

was almost unanimous: 'Hollywood' made it – and that carried a host of images of the 'apperceptive world' of Hollywood – cynical, exploitative, lacking values or understanding of the 'real' Dredd, but (still) with the capacity, because of its wealth, to make something generally 'entertaining'. So, orienting to the film via this definition of the 'speaker' involved a choice: either play the entertainment game (accept that as the task and orient to it) or reject the speaker as inappropriate and claim ownership of the character Dredd *against* 'Hollywood'.

For others, there was not a 'speaker' as such. The film itself was its *own* speaker – it was an 'Action'. This meant that if anything the film became part of an *oral* tradition (the expression is not quite right, but let it stand for now). OK, it had to be made by a film company, but the *task* it set itself was to become a piece of common property, everyone's sensuous ride. In important senses it *belonged to the world of Action fans*, and was simply provided from elsewhere.

2. In what senses is a film a 'unitary communication'?

As we have already seen, this cannot be decided by simple appeal to conventions of opening and closing, because of Bakhtin's quite proper distinction between 'real' and 'conventional' forms of address. The answer, again, has to be that procedures of finalisation are only meaningful in as much as they provide the platform for the 'next speech-subject' – who are the 'hearers'. So, we can only know about the *real closure* of a film through exploring the points at which audiences know their communication with a film as finished.

Again, one of the clues we obtained to the film was people's quite different senses of *when the film really started*. For *2000AD* fans, the film began before the credits, as they met an array of images from the comics. These then magically 'came alive' in the opening ten minutes as they saw, realised on the screen, 'their world'.

For Action fans, however, the opening ten minutes were simply irrelevant – rather like the BBFC's 'page', informing us what the classification of the film was, it had to be there, but it was irrelevant to their orientation to the film. The film only *began* when the *Action* began – with the Block War.

Interestingly, it is a mark of the poverty of the film that hardly any of the people we interviewed saw the film as having *achieved a unity* (achieved semantic exhaustiveness, completion of its task, or offering adequate finalisation procedures).

3. What 'task' does a film perform, and how do we determine it in any particular case?

This must surely reference the idea of speech-genre very directly, which allows us for instance to distinguish the different *uses* of ordinary sentences such as 'Is it cold in here?', or 'Can someone tell me the time, please?' It is only knowledge of relevant contexts that can turn these from sentences into utterances. But therefore that means that a film's 'task' can only

be determined by addressing the *role that films of this kind have in the on-going lives of determinate groups of viewers*.

Here, we meet the core of our research. It became clear that for different groups the *task* of the film was radically different. That is to say, it constituted a request for quite different kinds of response. For *2000AD* fans, the task was the transformation into another medium of *their* character and his world (though some accepted that 'Hollywood' would, by virtue of their knowledge of *its* apperceptive world, be quite incapable of doing this). For *Stallone* fans, the task was to provide a vehicle for rearticulating and developing his persona. For *FX* fans, the task was to startle, stir and provide glimpses of the wonders of technology and terrors of the future – their speech genre was constituted around that double-relation. For 'Action' fans, the task was to give a sensuous ride, an hour of thrills and spills. And so on.

In each distinct case, the film then constituted a different kind of society with its hearers, and fulfilled (or failed to fulfil) different purposes in their lives.

4. What does it mean to respond to the task set by a film?

What, in other words, is involved in *successfully being a 'hearer' of a film*? I argued earlier that perhaps the major problem in Bakhtin's account was his presumption of successful communication. That is not guaranteed at all. A film can have an incoherent task, it can fail to take account of the apperceptive world of its hearers, it can fail to achieve unity, it can speak outside any recognisable speech genre and fail to constitute the basis of a new one. And in all these situations its hearers will express disappointment, at the least. But also, because of the particular world films inhabit, not all those who visit a film will be 'hearers' in Bakhtin's sense. Being publicised events, some at least will see it without any wish to participate in any particular task. They will 'just watch'.

That led us to see the vital importance of investigating people's *investment* in the act of viewing a film: how much they *care about it*, what *preparations* go into readying for the experience, what *aftermaths* and *answering words* are laid down in the act of understanding it.

5. To what could a film be called a 'rejoinder'?

And (again) how would we determine in a particular case to what a film was responding? This is a particularly hard question to ask, precisely because it does *not* in general lead us towards the audience – an irony which is deserving of some thought. Films, like all other acts of communication, necessarily have a place in the continuing chain of communicative acts. But they are not obviously rejoinders – they are more like *additive transmissions*. There are indeed films that *are* literal rejoinders – Tourneur & Brown's *Last of the Mohicans* is arguably, at least in part, a direct response to D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* – but that is because we can show clear historical links at levels both of production processes and film.

6. How should we understand a film's 'addressivity'?

Or in other words, how does a film orient itself to the 'apperceptive world' of 'hearers'? We must be careful here, for it is not just a question about the *film*, but about the film's *speaker*.

It is in fact a question about how the makers of a film become its 'speaker' – and that is a highly complex question relating to the production practices of the film company: their use of/creation of audience research; their folk knowledge of what might make films work; their development of publicity regimes.

Finally, there is the question of what constituted the *authoritative* speakers and hearers in the on-going chain of communications, into which *Judge Dredd* was inserted. There is an answer to this, and – interestingly – it is almost entirely negative. It *was not* the fans – they were seen as too literalist, too insulated and too small. It *was not* Stallone – though a major player, he was not allowed to develop or elaborate his screen persona in new ways. It *was not* the Action fans – the technology is presented as unreliable, the ride is too slow and punctuated, the narrative too wrapped up for them. In the end it was a *negative* – it was *fear of fascism*. One of the major determinants of the script-form, of Stallone's role, of the outcomes of the narrative, of the editing even, was a worry that they might be perceived to be making a fascist statement about law and order.

Conclusion

This is a small attempt to show how Bakhtin's ideas about 'utterance' might be turned into a research project. When I began on it, I did not know where it would lead me. I am now very excited by the possibilities of constituting quite a tight, empirical project of research on the basis of this general mode of understanding the 'society of the utterance'.

Biographical Note

Martin Barker was Emeritus Professor at Aberystwyth University and Visiting Professor at UWE, Bristol. Across a forty year career he researched in many fields, with a particular focus on the field of audience research, authoring or editing seventeen books and numerous articles. His significance to the field was epitomised through his role in founding *Participations* in 2003.

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Filmography

- Birth of a Nation* (D.W. Griffith, 1915)
Die Hard (John McTiernan, 1988)
Judge Dredd (Danny Cannon, 1995)
Last of the Mohicans (Maurice Tourneur and Clarence Brown, 1920)
Natural Born Killers (Oliver Stone, 1994)
Uncle Josh at the Moving Picture Show (Edwin S. Porter, 1902)