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The Remediated Bakhtin: Heteroglossia and the New Media

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In his 1935 essay “Discourse in the Novel” Mikhail Bakhtin defined the novel genre by its ability to incorporate multiple, distinct dialects and languages within its artistic framework. He opposed it to previous genres such as the epic that could only incorporate a single linguistic form. This opposition between unison and multiplicity led to an interpretation of Bakhtin in which the novel was seen as a “democratic form;” it allowed distinct groups within a mass culture to be voiced and heard within their dominant culture. Such an interpretation has also been used for a phenomenon outside Bakhtin’s focus of writing: the Internet and “New Media.” Seen in overviews of the Arab Spring and hacktivism, New Media suggests having a similar democratic influence as witnessed in interpretations of Bakhtin’s theory. While the true “democratic” nature of both is of questionable validity, the similarity of interpretation shows an intersection between the two concepts. Such is the topic of my research. I seek to question how New Media influences the heterogeneity of language and how this influence affects Bakhtin’s novel theory.

The core of my research is the work of the 20th century, Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin. Writing on a multitude of subjects from literary theory to the philosophy of language, Bakhtin had the misfortune of much of his work being obscured by the Second World War and Soviet censorship laws. As a result, though he died in 1975 his work failed to reach the Anglophone world until the 1980’s, making him a relatively recent addition to literary theory. Of primary importance in my research is his conception of heteroglossia in the novel. Heteroglossia, the multiplicity of dialects and languages in a work, is claimed by Bakhtin to be the definitive aspect of the novel as a genre. No other form is as capable of realizing such a varied linguistic diversity without relating somehow to the novel and its approach to language. Now by language, I do not intend our common conception such as the disparity of French and English but instead intend Bakhtin’s more loose conception. For Bakhtin, language varies whenever we alternate our choice and manner of speech due to social circumstances. For clarification he uses the example of a peasant’s daily routine. In his manner of speech to his wife, parish priest, and local merchant, the peasant alternates his form of speech, and thus his language, depending on social circumstance. There never exists a single form of language in daily life; rather we are naturally polyglottal. It is through this phenomenon that Bakhtin claims, “...this internal stratification present in every language at any given moment of its historical existence is the indispensable prerequisite for the novel as a genre.” (The Dialogic Imagination pg. 263).

As a result of heteroglossia, the novel is best, in Bakhtin’s view, suited to incorporate the phenomena of parody and “double-voiced” discourse, i.e. dual meaning in language. As parody is best accomplished by our ability to remove ourselves and examine the target of parody from a distance, Bakhtin believes the variety of language available in the novel naturally allows one to alternate points of view in order to parody language. He finds the novel so adapt at this that it becomes an assumed occurrence; all language is parodied within the novel’s framework. Everything is dual voiced, understood in the framework of its original intent and in the intent of

parody. It is at this point that Bakhtin complicates his theory by going beyond language and incorporating social ideology into the novel. All forms of language, due to their reliance on social framework, are ideological in nature. The form in which Bakhtin's peasant addresses a priest is not arbitrary, distinct ideological structures are involved within the dialogue. He writes,

As a result of the work done by all these stratifying forces in language, there are no "neutral" words and forms—words and forms that can belong to "no one"; language has been completely taken over, shot through with intentions and accents. For any individual consciousness living in it, language is not an abstract system of normative forms but rather a concrete heteroglot conception of the world. (*The Dialogic Imagination* pg. 293)

Thus in the acts of parody of language, the novel is parodying social identity and relations. It examines the nature of the society it exists in through the linguistic forms that are incorporated in the creation.

A separate portion of my research focuses on what has been coined as "New Media." While there are multiple associations involved with the concept, for the sake of simplicity I choose to define it as the variety of media that is produced and distributed through the use of computer technology. One may note that this definition basically applies to all contemporary media, as even the most basic medium of text is now primarily produced through electronic software. It is the nature of New Media to engulf prior media and be distinguished by this property; to observe New Media is to observe a multiplicity of media. It is a state of hypermediation, the ultimate extent of media theorist Marshall McLuhan's observation, "the 'content' of any medium is always another medium." (McLuhan pg. 8).

Resulting from this hypermediated state is a shift of culture to that of a "database society." To understand this shift, one must consider the ideas of the syntagmatic and paradigmatic. Whereas the syntagmatic serves as our conception of straight linear narrative and relation, such as the meaning conceived from standard sentence structure, the paradigmatic represents the associations that are involved as possibilities within the structure, e.g. the words that can be interchanged within the sentence to retain meaning. Traditionally, the syntagmatic has always been explicit culturally while the paradigmatic has been implicit. To use the example, we only truly conceive as the linear sentence as real while the possible words are only theoretical. Yet in a "database society," the reverse occurs. What is the association of narrative becomes the reality while the actual linearity is made imaginary. This can be understood by conceiving of our internet habits. When we go online, click links, follow sources, we are only interacting with a database of associations; there is no strict path that is preformed for us to follow. This does not remain exclusive to the medium but affects our society as Lev Manovich writes, "...a computer database becomes a new metaphor that we use to conceptualize individual and collective cultural memory..." (Manovich pg. 214).

With our culture affected by New Media, and Bakhtin's link between the social and language, we can return to my initial question regarding the novel and New Media. With an established link, it has been the focus of my research to find a direct intersection of influence. This has been found through the concept of "remediation," which means the act of creating a

prior medium in another e.g. book adaptations into film or the novelization of a radio broadcast. While this is not a new phenomenon, it is unique in that it is a defining feature of New Media. As stated, New Media is a multiplicity of other media. One cannot use it without being acquainted with the variety of text, video, and artwork that comprises it. This is so engrained that it has been claimed, "...no medium, it seems, can now function independently and establish its own separate and purified space of cultural meaning" (Bolter and Grusin pg. 55). All media is caught in a framework of remediation with other media and it is not without surprise that this claim mirrors Bakhtin's overview of language in the novel.

It is here that my research has allowed me to synthesize my working thesis: all media is caught in a state of novelization. Bakhtin's theory of heteroglossia is expanded by modern media from being a genre specific claim for the novel to an analytical theme for all media. Given the continual state of remediation present in our cultural framework for media and the nature of the paradigmatic to be explicit, all remediated possibilities are made explicit for each consideration of media. We cannot look at a text without considering its content as made through film or photography. As well, considering McLuhan's famous consideration that "The medium is the message," we realize that this explicit consideration of medium forces us to make explicit the remediation of content. Recalling Bakhtin's connection between ideology and language, we must understand that this remediation of content, message, forces a remediation of language and the associated ideology. Remediation forces heteroglossia on all mediums, it "novelizes" the content of all media through the cultural framework that it exists in.

With this working thesis, it has been my project to refine and better understand my findings through the application of literary analysis. I have been investigating contemporary Anglophone literature to observe how my thesis applies. While this work is ongoing, I would like to present some initial suggestions of validation through the works Adichie and Coetzee. Seen in the two quotes present, both novels, *Americanah* for Adichie and *Disgrace* for Coetzee, utilize other mediums in their narrative. Adichie's character uses the electronic form of the blog as a tool for processing the textual narrative available for the reader. Coetzee's character, on the other hand, utilizes a hypothetical opera in order to interpret and assess his own failures within the novel. In both cases, the novel goes beyond its inherent textual medium and instead borrows and remediates itself from other mediums. The narratives rely on an understanding and dialogue with other forms of expression. It is my focus now to explore the necessities and effects of this trend throughout other literary forms and thus better refine my thesis.

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