

## Book Review: Bakhtin Reframed

by Blog Admin

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*Visionary philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) was largely ignored during his lifetime, yet his work has significantly impacted how we think about visual culture. His ideas renewed interest in the word-forming potential of the creative voice and he developed concepts which are bywords within poststructuralist and new historicist literary criticism and philosophy yet have been under-utilised by artists, art historians and art critics. **Jacob Phillips** finds that **Bakhtin Reframed** has much to offer students of the arts and philosophy.*

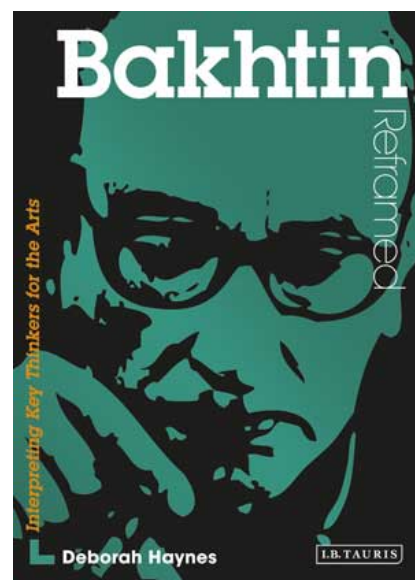


**Bakhtin Reframed. Deborah J. Haynes. I.B. Tauris. March 2013.**

### Find this book:

This addition to the [Interpreting Key Thinkers for the Arts](#) series follows earlier editions, many of which focus on well-established names in art theory and philosophical aesthetics. Few people interested in this area will not be acquainted with names like Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, or Theodor Adorno, for example. With Mikhail Bakhtin, however, we are on rather different territory. Although engaging with his work makes it clear he is dealing – often with remarkable foresight – with the themes and issues which occupied much continental thought throughout much of the twentieth-century, he does not seem to be one of the established canon to whom art theorists often refer.

The first reason for this is simple enough. Bakhtin's work is not focussed on *visual art*; his aesthetics are focussed mainly on literature. He is perhaps most well-known for drawing on the writings of Dostoevsky, or maybe Rabelais. Nonetheless, there is often considerable overlap between a literary and a visual aesthetics, and this is something [Deborah J. Haynes](#) seems particularly sensitive to drawing from. Indeed, her earlier work [Bakhtin and the Visual Arts](#) does just this at length, and if a reader of *Bakhtin Reframed* wants to look at these issues in more detail, they would be well-advised to read her earlier volume. This book makes it clear that the Bakhtinian conceptual armoury is of great use in thinking about art – both ancient and modern – and it is well worth familiarising oneself with Bakhtin's classic notions of answerability, outsideness, unfinalisability, dialogue, monologism, polyphony, heteroglossia, chronotope and the carnivalesque. Although this list of odd and apparently cumbersome terms is probably rather daunting to the uninitiated, Bakhtin's primary sources (usually short-ish essays), are actually remarkably accessible, and he speaks easily enough to 21<sup>st</sup> century readers. Perhaps this is something Haynes could have exploited a bit more – drawing more explicitly on primary texts, and giving her readers a general overview of the Bakhtinian literary corpus.



Another reason why Bakhtin is not one of the more obvious names to add to well-established thinkers on the arts is that by and large he did not write in a conscious and explicit dialogue with the developing conversations which were taking place elsewhere on the continent during his lifetime. This is a double-edged sword for people seeking to get to grips with his literary *oeuvre*. On the one hand, it adds to his accessibility and the immediacy of his texts, as one does not need to be familiar with a particular philosophical trajectory in order to understand his contribution. In this sense he stands in sharp contrast to say, Derrida, or Alain Badiou. On the other hand, it does necessitate a certain attentiveness to what Bakhtin is trying to say, which is often importantly different from people who appear at first sight to be working at similar junctures and byways of aesthetic reflection. His notion of outsideness, for example, or his understanding of dialogue, can easily be misread under the more dominant architectonics of Levinasian alterity, in the first case, or, say, the Gadamerian hermeneutical circle, in the second. Haynes deals with this double-edged sword very well; she lets Bakhtin's contributions on creativity and the reception of art speak for themselves, and does not get bogged-down in other conversations from elsewhere.

A third and final reason why Bakhtin stands rather toward the periphery of 20<sup>th</sup> century art theorists is that his own biography was faced with certain pressures which were often deeply inhibiting to his work. He was active in Russian intellectual circles around the time of the 1917 revolution, and was later seen as a potentially dangerous figure by Stalin's regime and was sentenced to six-years exile in Kazakhstan. His relationship to the Russian Orthodox Church was also difficult to sustain under soviet religious persecution. The organisation he was associated with (The Brotherhood of Saint Seraphim) was repressed by Stalinist forces, and many of the orthodox priests in his intellectual circle were subject to brutal treatment by the authorities. So, Bakhtin's work is implicitly deeply emblematic of his notion of *answerability* – that is, responsive to context and specific pressures arising from one's own position in the complex reality of being socially embodied in time and space. In other words, his work had to bear some responsibility to the social pressures he was under himself, and could not be separated from the reality of his life. This sort of issue stands in an uneasy relationship with much contemporary art of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Many artists are working from markedly privileged (western) positions, in which socio-political forces offer little obvious hindrance to their endeavours. This uneasiness is something which Haynes does not really acknowledge – and there are times when it feels that the reframing of Bakhtin in this volume is a little one-way. That is, where we allow Bakhtin to complement our contemporary situation he is very welcome, but where he threatens to subject or to critique, he is not really being allowed to speak. This comes to the fore regarding contemporary preoccupations with self-fulfilment, which albeit subtly undergird some points in this book, and stand in sharp contrast to the realities of Bakhtin's life – which was more preoccupied with matters like survival, integrity and responsibility, than fulfilling personal goals.

This is also, I suspect, why the remarkable theological subtext to Bakhtin's work is only very briefly mentioned here. This is something of a shame, considering the resurgent interest in theological issues in contemporary phenomenology, for example. One of the most fascinating aspects of Bakhtin's work is the implicit references to Orthodox spirituality which run throughout his writings. To take heed of these references would mean taking account of a worldview which challenges the hegemony of much contemporary art theory, but this is not necessarily a bad thing, and would also help Bakhtin's legacy to speak more fully to the context of our own answerability at this time.

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