

Critique and Answerability

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For the Terra Critica workshop, held at Utrecht University in December 2012, we were asked to contemplate the role of critique in the humanities today, with "today" taken as referring to the increasingly globalizing world we live in, where the legacies of various forms of deconstruction have made it impossible to adhere to the traditional model of Kantian critique, defined as "calm distancing by way of setting apart and judging." The distancing propagated by the Kantian model appears to be one of verticality rather than horizontality. The critic is supposed to not only stand *outside* or *beside*, but *above* that which is being assessed, installing a sense of domination and imperviousness. The critic touches on what is being critiqued, but is not touched by it; there is no sense of true involvement. This idea of being able to apprehend the world – seeing it, stopping it, detaining it for judgment – without acknowledging one's own entanglement with this world has long since been exposed as untenable, but is disaffirmed once more by the current situation of global financial crisis, most concretely in the dubious role played by credit ratings agencies such as Moody's and Standard and Poor's, whose activities were shown to go far beyond providing supposedly objective "credit ratings, research, tools and analysis that contribute to transparent and integrated financial markets."¹ The claim to transparency and integration that also inheres in traditional notions of critique is what remains in need of being exposed as an impossibility, without, however, falling into the opposite trap of concluding that the pervasive, complex intertwinement of worlds and markets (or worlds as markets), from which the humanities and their practices of criticism are not exempt, makes all efforts at a critically responsible understanding, assessing and reimagining of oppressive and exploitative social, economic and political relations futile.

As noted by Birgit Kaiser and Kathrin Thiele, the organizers of the workshop, immanent criticism, which locates the critique in the object itself, does not fully address the problem, as it considers the critic a facilitator more than an implicated, intervening actor who also brings something *to* the object. It could be argued that immanent criticism moves too close to the object; by virtually coming to inhabit it, what is surrendered is the element of horizontal distance essential to the acknowledgment of the critic as someone engaging with what is being examined, neither standing above it nor lost in it. If in our current globalized environment it is indeed the case that "our evaluations and assessments, as well as our actions, (must) come about from within the processes of ongoing change and differentiation, in continuous feedback-loops and multilateral negotiations," as Kaiser and Thiele assert, then perhaps the interactive notions of "feedback" and "negotiation" should be made more prominent in relation to what we believe critique should be and do. How can we, from the perspective of the humanities, conceptualize a different kind of critic for the global age, one who emerges as an active partner in a dynamic process of (re)evaluation that eschews universal, perennial truths but retains the potential to provide sharable assessments and visions for a better, more just future?

¹ <http://www.moodys.com/Pages/atc.aspx>. See also Mullard.

For me, thinking about a critique that not only implicates the critic but also makes room for feedback (both in the sense of a response from outside and in the technical sense of the signal itself returning to trouble its own output) and negotiation between the critic and the object invokes the work of Mikhail Bakhtin. An obvious point of connection would be Bakhtin's widely known concept of dialogism, which is developed as an inherent aspect of language and being (every word or act enters into a relationship with what came before, while also anticipating what will come after) and as an ethical model (where dialogism is enhanced, for example in the polyphonic novel, to produce an active, horizontalizing mode of engagement not necessarily conflict-free or aimed at consensus). Here, however, I want to focus on the early philosophical text *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, written between 1919 and 1921, in which Bakhtin develops the phenomenological notion of *answerability* as a central element of any attempt to contemplate or critique the world.

Bakhtin starts his text (which remained unfinished and comprises only the introduction and first part of a planned four-part project) by rejecting the theoreticism and rationalism of Kant's model for its inability to think together the "world of culture" and the "world of life": "the world in which the acts of our activity are objectified and the world in which these acts actually proceed and are actually accomplished once and for all" (2). In reality, he argues, these worlds are one, with the act of theorizing or critiquing no different – in terms of the level at which it operates – than any other act, making it part of the world of the event and making the world of the event part of it:

A theory needs to be brought into communion not with theoretical constructions and conceived life, but with the actually occurring event of moral being – with practical reason, and this is answerably accomplished by everyone who cognizes, insofar as he [*sic*] accepts answerability for every integral act of his cognition, that is, insofar as the act of cognition of my deed is included, along with its content, in the unity of my answerability, in which and by virtue of which I actually live – perform deeds. (12)

This means that the critic cannot be abstracted from the act of criticism as supreme judge or mere facilitator: while Bakhtin recognizes that there is comfort to be found in the idea of an "autonomous world of a domain of culture and its immanent law of creation" (20), such comfort has to be rejected for an acknowledgement of the actual position of the critic – and any domain of culture – as essentially unique (as occupying a particular, non-exchangeable position in the world) and fundamentally relational:

Once-occurrent uniqueness or singularity cannot be thought of, it can only be participatively experienced or lived through. . . . This Being cannot be determined in the categories of non-participant theoretical consciousness – it can be determined only in the categories of actual *communion*, i.e. of an actually performed act, in the categories of *participative*-effective experiencing of the concrete uniqueness or singularity of the world. (13, emphases added)²

There exists no world outside the multitudinous acts (which are always interactions) that make up its continuous becoming, and there is no assessment of the world that

² In his notes to *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, Vadim Liupanov translates Bakhtin's participative thinking (*uchastnoe myshlenie*) into German as *teilnehmendes* or *anteilnehmendes Denken* and specifies it as "engaged, committed, involved, concerned, or *interested* thinking; *unindifferent* thinking" (86n29, emphasis in original).

can be separated from experiencing it (which also means contributing to it; it is “accomplished, *inter alia*, also in my deed of cognizing” [13]).

To forestall the objection that this would make assessments of the world (and interventions based on them) purely subjective or relativist, Bakhtin introduces a distinction between two kinds of truth: absolute truth (*istina*) versus “the truth [*pravda*] of the given state of affairs” (30). *Pravda* is a truth arising from the “unitary plane” of the event, a horizontality where all elements, including “theoretical validity” are considered in – and through – their interrelation (28). Critique, then, is not what sanctions or reveals the truth (as absolute), but becomes part of a truth that is achieved only in the event itself, as an answerable act uniting, for the moment and in the moment, “the subjective and psychological moments, just as it unites the moment of what is universal (universally valid) and the moment of what is individual (actual)” (29). For Bakhtin, this means that “rationality is but a moment of answerability” (29).

I do not have enough room here to elaborate further on Bakhtin’s notion of answerability, but, to me, connecting critique with answerability appears to open up a productive line of inquiry. First of all, it emphasizes the implication of the critic as someone standing in a particular relation to the object of critique, a relation unfolding on a singular plane that also affects the object and orients the assessment. Second, answerability could prompt a reconceptualization of critique itself as no longer disentangling (*krinein*) or cutting³ – one-sided figures lacking the element of reciprocity – but responding to and, at the same time, taking responsibility for this response. This does not mean that Bakhtin’s work does not have problems that would need to be addressed if it were to be adopted as positing a new future for critique: he assumes that the world and the objects and subjects in it can be accurately perceived; it remains unclear how exactly shared assessments resulting in collective action can arise when “there are as many different worlds of the event as there are individual centers of answerability” (45); answerability appears rooted in a particularly Christian notion of redemption⁴; and Bakhtin’s ethics is unabashedly anthropocentric.⁵ Nevertheless, in the increasingly interconnected world of today, the emphasis Bakhtin places on answering for – and from – one’s unique participative place in this world, on situational truths rather than universal ones, and on correlations between things rather than things-in-themselves, resonate strongly and deserve serious consideration.

Works Cited

3 The *Oxford English Dictionary* etymological entry for “critic” notes: “compare Italian *critica* ‘arte of cutting of stones’ (Florio 1598).” www.oed.com.

4 Ken Hirschkop notes: “Responsibility in Bakhtin’s sense does not flow from intersubjectivity plain and simple, but from a certain kind of intersubjectivity, framed by a particular philosophy of history. Only if one believes in the need for salvation does the fact of intersubjectivity serve as a reminder of one’s weakness and dependence on the mercy of others. Bakhtin counts on strict phenomenology to lead us to these conclusions precisely because he believes that the presence of the Divine is in the very structure of the world” (153). Hirschkop also notes, however, that Bakhtin’s theory can be divorced from this religious dimension (154–55).

5 Bakhtin insists that “all possible Being and all possible meaning are arranged around the human being as the center and the sole value” (61).

Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*. Trans. Vadim Liapunov. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993.

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