

Boris Groys between Dialogue and Ideology, or Why It Is So Easy to Fall into the Trap of Fleeting Political Circumstances



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For almost thirty years, **Alexander Lobok** has been a theoretical-practitioner. He constantly theorizes his innovative pedagogical practice while trying to enact his theory of agency- and dialogue-based education in practice. His evolving theory and emerging pedagogical practice mutually inform and test each other. His overall methodology is based on Kurt Lewin’s “action research” and Lev Vygotsky’s “formative experiment.” Alexander is a designer of exciting educational games and a host of children’s TV shows in Russia. He is a leading researcher at the Institute of system projects, Moscow City Pedagogical University, Russia.



The first thought that comes to mind when reading the article by Boris Groys goes along the lines of – he could not have meant it seriously. It just has to be a sort of an intellectual paradoxical challenge meant to tease the reader. But the more you read Groys’ text, the more you come to realize that the author was quite serious in claiming to have discovered the theoretical basis of totalitarianism and Stalinism in Bakhtin’s theory of Carnival and it becomes obvious that such a conclusion was made simply due to theoretical carelessness, deficit of analysis, and adherence to certain ideological clichés. The most surprising is the fact that Groys treats Bakhtin not as a philosopher and thinker but as an IDEOLOGIST, or a person who has a number of ideas, which he tries to somehow inculcate in the minds of his readers. As if Bakhtin’s texts about dialogue are written from an absolutely monologic standpoint. As if Bakhtin’s texts do not create a space in which the reader can breathe in the freedom of dialogue, but instead forcefully lead the reader along linear boundaries to some truths fed to them by Bakhtin. The methodology of Groys’s analysis of Bakhtin is highly reminiscent of the methodology of historical-philosophical analysis, which was part and parcel of the old Soviet textbooks on Marxism-Leninism: “Aristotle mistakenly believed...”, “Kant underestimated...”, “Hegel failed to realize...”, “Feuerbach failed to understand...” – such kind of clichés that do not even attempt to try and reconstruct the real thinking space of this or that philosopher according to the inner laws of this space.

Essentially, the WHOLE text by Groys consists of such evaluative judgments meant to “label” Bakhtin. At that, Groys does not even quote Bakhtin – there is not a single quote from Bakhtin in the text that could somehow support such arrogant evaluations. Groys just throws in his judgements as if they were absolute axioms not requiring any proof:

- “Bakhtin negatively reacts to the Russian avant-gardist formalist theory...”
- “In the avant-gardist emphasis on the author, Bakhtin saw the perpetuation of the traditional monologism...”
- “For Bakhtin, each word is just a remark in the endless dialogue of everyone with everyone else”
- “A polyphonic novel is interpreted by Bakhtin as a result of carnivalization of literature...”
- “Bakhtin’s theory, in fact, equates literature to life – and, therefore, it calls everyone to see a life program in it...”
- “Bakhtin’s attitude to liberalism and democracy in their traditional meaning is that of deep antipathy...”
- “Bakhtin welcomes the carnivalesque pathos of the “final death” of everything individual...”
- “This truth is, according to Bakhtin, incarnated in the polyphonic novel...”
- “All the voices, in Bakhtin’s opinion, have the right to be heard – but only within the context of a whole, totalitarian, all-absorbing novel...”
- “Such a novel, in fact, cannot even have an author, because an author should exist outside of the novel – which, according to Bakhtin, is not allowed to anyone...”

And, finally, the grand-finale: “...Bakhtin’s aim was not to criticize the Revolution and Stalin’s terror (!) from a democratic standpoint, but to theoretically justify (!!!!!) them as an archaic ritual rooted in ancient traditions”.

The last statement prompts the following question: why on earth should Bakhtin have been concerned, generally speaking, with “criticism” or “justification” of Stalinism in his writing? Or is it simply because Groys’s mind is incapable to admit the existence of texts, which are not related to politics but live according to different laws that have nothing to do with politics?

It seems, actually, that Groys’s main genre is the political “tongue in cheek” genre. It also seems that, for Groys, any theoretical-philosophical text cannot be just that, a theoretical-philosophical text, but must necessarily be an allegory for a certain political statement. That is why Groys absolutely does not care about WHAT Bakhtin wrote. He is solely interested in how it can be interpreted in political terms – is Bakhtin’s theory of polyphonic novel and carnival “for” or “against” Stalin?

As for the actual content of Groys’s discussion, it should be mentioned that the author of the article made two serious conceptual mistakes. These mistakes concern two fundamental concepts of Bakhtin’s philosophic discourse.

The first concept is that of dialogue. Here is how Groys treats it:

For Bakhtin, each word is just a remark in the endless dialogue of everyone with everyone else: it is always original and, to some extent, passive, separated from the speaker, “material”, - it always contains in itself the reduced voices of “others” – and this is also true about the author’s voice.

It appears that Groys hears in Bakhtin's dialogue some chaotic noise, some cacophony of voices randomly put together and having no individual faces. But if a voice has no face of its own – can we even call it a voice? And if voices merge into some sort of an endless background noise – can we call it a dialogue?

One of the fundamental things that painfully emerges in Bakhtin's texts is that a dialogic voice is a voice which does not have an author-puppeteer, who leads this voice by the threads of his aprioristic knowledge of what remarks the voice should utter. Bakhtin's voices are voices that have their own merits and their own life, which is not a projection of the will and knowledge of a Super-author (whether we call him God or a writer). Whereas the whole point is that, if everything has been planned beforehand in the head of an Author (= God), any real dialogue becomes unthinkable – we can only talk of the imitation of dialogue in this case. Which, in fact, is the golden dream of any totalitarian regime.

The second mistake, the second conceptual trap that Groys falls into, is the trap connected to his treatment of the concept of carnival.

Groys claims that Bakhtin's descriptions of carnival and carnivalization “reproduce the atmosphere of Stalin's terror with its unbelievable eulogies and vilifications, and also with its unexpected crownings and dethronings, which obviously had a carnivalesque nature.”

What are the arguments supporting such a serious claim? Well, here are as many as four of them:

1. “Stalin himself notoriously said that “life has become more joyous”...” (so, according to Groys, any manifestation of joy is carnivalesque – Groys, therefore, equates “carnivalesque” to “joyous”)
2. “[Stalin's] favorite feature film was the purely carnivalesque “Volga-Volga”...” (it would be nice to see some arguments in favor of the claim that the mentioned comedy film is a CARNIVALESQUE comedy – i.e., a comedy of absurdity, a comedy of inverted social roles)
3. “There are many accounts of the specific “joyousness” of the 1930s. For example, it is widely known that the show trials and, especially, the verdicts thereof were accompanied by the laughter of the audience...” (again, Groys apparently does not understand the specificity of carnivalesque laughter. For him, the mere fact of laughter is a sign of carnival)
4. Carnival is... a manifestation of the “national character” and “national character” is the “core of the Stalinist culture”. (This is a truly carnivalesque inversion: from now on, let us treat everything that can be called “national” as pertaining to Stalinism and let us, therefore, apply the term “Stalinists” to all people dealing with national symbols, arts, and crafts).

All of this is followed by the conclusion that Bakhtin is, essentially, a Stalinist, whereas his concept of carnival is a theoretical justification of totalitarianism. What can be said about that? Only that Groys's reasoning is unbelievable in its childish naiveté. It is similar to the reasoning of a simple-minded schoolboy, who has problems with the laws of formal logics and who builds the following logical chain: “Socrates is mortal. A worm is mortal. Therefore, Socrates is a worm”.

It should be specifically mentioned that the four “arguments” above prove the fact that Boris Groys does not fully grasp the very essence of the phenomenon of carnival in culture as a space for playful, “not-for-real” inversion of the customary hierarchical relations. This inversion is to a large extent

similar to a children's play, in which children downplay various psychological tensions they feel towards adults, and it has nothing to do with a Hollywood thriller, in which children turn into real vampires or serial killers.

Carnival, in its essence, is anti-hierarchical. The anti-hierarchical property of carnival is its core component. Carnival is the levelling of top and bottom. Moreover, it is a purely voluntary levelling. Carnival is a space for freedom, in which man claims his right for egregiously rowdy behavior in the world of strict hierarchies. Carnival is a space for salvation of human existence in the world deprived of the right to exist. Carnival is playing in death but it is not real death. And in this sense, carnival is downplaying of the fear of death. Groys, however, seems to be unwilling to accept that, in its very essence, carnival is a means of the survival of culture in the world where politics destroys culture. He seems unwilling to realize that carnival is all about the indestructibility of humanness in a human being. That it is about the indestructibility of play and playful inversion. That the psychological mechanism of carnivalization of the horrors of real life is an important instrument of salvation, which allows humankind to survive even in the conditions of the most anti-human totalitarianism. In this context, the comparisons between the dark, gloomy absurdity of Stalin's court trials and "carnival" seem very strange, to say the least of it. Stalin's trials had absolutely nothing to do with play and participation in them could not possibly be voluntary. Stalin's trials did not have any space for the carnivalesque "not-for-real" property. And the fact that mocking laughter, addressed to the former "leaders of the Revolution", could be heard in the courts had nothing to do with a carnival act – which can be proved by the mere fact that those "leaders" were really crushed – not by the carnivalesque but by absolutely real physical and psychological tortures. Whereas Stalin's murders were not in the least "playful" ones, or carnivalesque "not-for-real" ones, - they were absolutely real murders.

It is amazing that Groys, having diagnosed Bakhtin's thinking style as a totalitarian one (the "Dionysian mode" of totalitarian style), fails to perceive that the very **stylistics** of Bakhtin's texts (unlike Groys's text, by the way!) is an essentially anti-totalitarian stylistics. Bakhtin's text never dictates anything; it never persuades the reader; it never postulates anything unequivocally – rather, it creates a space for the reader's thinking. And that is why Bakhtin's texts are live **philosophical** texts that have no connections to the political circumstances of the era in which they were created, which makes them essentially timeless – just like the texts by Heidegger or Mamardashvili. This cannot be said about the text by Groys, though, which seems to belong to a certain time (with the visible signs of the political discourse of a certain time period), and this makes this text temporary, or transient, – in other words, it is a text that will hardly be of any interest to anybody, outside of this specific political context. This can actually be the reason why Groys's text betrays this sentiment of bitterness, envy, and a bit of that adolescent desire to assert oneself and win applause for one's daring. For Groys certainly understands that any texts by Bakhtin will be perused even in the next century, but will anyone read the texts by Groys in a hundred years?.. Hence the desire to shout out something incredibly daring – just to attract some attention. Alas, political boldness is not the highest merit that a thinking philosophical text can possess. And it is not political boldness that makes a certain text truly philosophical – i.e. a text that exists in the realm far beyond the fleeting political circumstances of the moment.



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