

Comrade Mikhail Bakhtin's Defense of his Dissertation: "Rabelais in the History of Realism".

Performing Bakhtin's Defense

Volume 9

Issue 1

Winter 2025

Keywords:

Bakhtin,
Bakhtin's defense,
Rabelais,
carnival,
systemic theory,
performance,
PDSP,
John Shotter

Citation Link

Abstract

Four of us from the first cohort of the Professional Doctorate in Systemic Practice at KCC and the University of Bedfordshire presented at the 2014 Bakhtin Conference in Stockholm. During the conference, the English translation of Bakhtin's viva was freely circulated to attendees and was given a table reading by some members of the conference committee.

A key figure from the inception of the Professional Doctorate in Systemic Practice at KCC and the University of Bedfordshire, was Professor John Shotter. John Shotter was a Bakhtin immersive. Bakhtin was definitely in the category of what Professor Mary Gergen referred to as John's many textual friends. I was fairly sure John was not aware of this document.

It turned out that John Shotter had not known of the existence of this transcription neither in the original Russian nor in its English translation. It was a real discovery for him and presumably many others. He was excited to see it and was further thrilled at the invitation to direct a performance of Bakhtin's Viva at the inaugural Bedfordshire International Systemic Practice and Research School in February 2015 at Brathay Hall, Ambleside.

John set about editing it, re-engaging with his theatre directing history, saying one had to allow no more than 80 words a minute of speech. So he cut it down and the doctoral students were invited to perform one of the actual participants in the viva/defence. You can watch the recording of this unrehearsed, spontaneously read-performed event via the link at the end of this document. In the performance, John introduces the work of Rabelais and Bakhtin and plays the part of Bakhtin in his own viva.

Thanks to:

- The stenographer whose name is not known.
- Denis Zhernokleyev and Caryl Emerson who translated the stenographer's transcript from Russian into English.
- John Shotter who adapted the script and directed the performance.
- The doctoral researchers at the 2015 Bedfordshire International Systemic Practice and Research School who acted the participants.

Gail Simon, DProf, Editor

Abridged Transcript

Comrade Mikhail Bakhtin's Defense
of the Dissertation:
"Rabelais in the History of
Realism"

which took place at the Gorky Institute of World Literature

Moscow, 15 November 1946

Translated by Denis Zhernokleyev and Caryl Emerson

This script was adapted and directed by John Shotter

for a performance at the

Bedfordshire International Systemic Practice & Research School

Brathay Hall, Ambleside, UK

February 2015

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j_Tb08__ILM

SPEAKERS in order of appearance (and performed by):

The Chair of the Committee	(Matthew Ganda)
M.M. Bakhtin	(John Shotter)
A.A. Smirnov, professor, external examiner	(Helen Bohme)
A.K. Dzhivelegov, professor, external examiner	(Ann Rubens Mortensen)
M.P. Teriaeva, Candidate of Sciences	(Leah Salter)
N.K. Piksanov, member of Academic Council	(Agneta Kjellström)
N.L. Brodsky, member of the Academic Council	(Patrick Goh)
B.V. Zalessky	(Robert van Hennik)
Voices from the audience	(Tania Pombeiro)

The Chair of the Committee: Comrades, the session of the Academic Council is declared open. Today's hearing concerns the dissertation submitted by Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin toward the academic degree of candidate of Philological Sciences, on the topic Rabelais in the History of Realism. Official examiners are Comrades Smirnov, Nusinov, and Dzhivelegov, Doctors of Philological Sciences.

M.M. Bakhtin: Dear colleagues. I will not burden the attention of this esteemed gathering with an exposition of my dissertation, it's rather huge.

Originally, when I first approached this work, Rabelais was not for me an end in itself. While working on the problem of the novel I came to a conclusion that might be formulated, generally, like this: Literary scholarship – historical and theoretical – is oriented toward what I call the classic form in literature – that is, forms of ready-made, finished Being, whereas in literature itself, and especially in the unofficial, little-known, anonymous, folk- or quasi-folk literature, what predominates are utterly different forms, namely, what I have called grotesque forms. The primary goal of this type of form consists of somehow capturing Being in the process of its Becoming, its non-readymadeness, its non-finishedness – a non-readymadeness in principle, an unfinished and unfinishable state as a matter of principle. That's what these forms try to capture. For that reason they are contradictory and double-sided.

They don't fit into the canons that have been established to study classical literature or literary history.

When, on the basis of my material, I had arrived at Dostoevsky, I was amazed to discover the paths Dostoevsky had taken and how he had managed to recreate this wonderful genre. I found myself drawn into this completely unexplored field. While wandering about in it, I stumbled upon Rabelais, whose work is devoted to the exploration of incomplete, unfinalized Being, the world of grotesque forms. This world is consistently and coherently laid open to us, laid open on the cusp of two eras, the era of our modern consciousness, and that of the past – of which the Dostoevskian novel is the continuation, the development and the culmination.

To some degree, therefore, the Rabelaisian novel can serve as a key to unlock this world of grotesque form.

This world, which is dark for us, is given almost on the threshold of our modern consciousness. The language of Rabelais is

simultaneously our own language and that of the medieval. square.

Carnival is only a tiny piece of that grandiose, exceedingly complex and interesting world of popular-festive forms. These forms, these grotesque images are alive even today, although they live on in distorted form. But it's enough to go out on the street to hear at every step the grotesque forms of this street-speech and public-square speech.

Allow me to quote here a few of my theses:

The extraordinary peculiarity of medieval laughter is defined by four basic traits, which are also true of Renaissance laughter (and above all, of Rabelais) – but they were almost entirely lost by the laughing culture of the subsequent ages. Here are those four traits:

1. Laughter had universal significance. The object of laughter did not have to be limited to the private, the negative, or the debased (which becomes the case in the 17th century and onwards). On the contrary, absolutely anything could be made laughable, anything could be opened up from the perspective of laughter.
2. The nature of laughter has always been ambivalent. Within medieval laughter, both negation and affirmation merged into a single whole. Laughter was organically linked to time – it was, after all, festival laughter – and to processes of becoming, change, and renewal; thus laughter grasped in one inseparable act both poles of becoming and change: both the dying old, the past, and new being born, the future. For this reason laughter was at one time both destructive and festive, ridiculing and joyful.
3. Laughter was elemental, impulsive, and materialistic. A central place within its system of images was taken up by manifestations of material/ bodily life: birth, agony, feeding, defecation, fertilization, decomposition of the body into parts, etc. The material-bodily bottom brings everything low, makes it earthy, corporeal, decrowns it (such is its function, for example, in the sacred parodies). At the same time, this bottom is also a source of fertilization, conception, rebirth, and renewal. In the ambivalent images of the topographical bottom, the bodily grave merges with the birth-giving bosom. The death of the old and the growth of the new are captured here in all their inseparable unity, in the language of material-bodily images.
4. Laughter is intimately linked with the popular understanding of freedom and truth. Laughter in the Middle Ages was entirely unofficial, but all the same it was legalized. Carnival-type festivity was a temporary suspension of reality, a suspension of the official system with all its prohibitions and hierarchical barriers.

What was sensed most keenly in laughter was precisely the feeling of victory over fear, and I mean any kind of fear. "fear of God," fear of the sacred, of nature, power, death, hell.

Truth, in the popular consciousness, presents itself above all as fearless truth. And the language of laughter was the language of a free and fearless people's truth.

The Chair: Examiner Professor Alexander Alexandrovich Smirnov now has the floor.

A.A. Smirnov: I will not repeat all the arguments of my review, which has been made available. Allow me only to say the following.

Against the present trend in our country to locate the roots of Rabelais's art entirely in the humanism of the Renaissance, Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin places it primarily in the tradition of medieval philosophy and art. But which "Middle Ages" is intended here? Bakhtin (in keeping with the leading tendency of Marxist-Leninist Soviet scholarship) distinguishes two kinds of Middle Ages: the first kind is the official Middle Ages, characterized by social hierarchy, thoroughly idealistic, church-ridden and feudalistic, steeped in mysticism and asceticism, gloomy and oppressive. The other kind of Middle Ages is the unofficial, that of the people, folkloric, life-affirming yet soberly realistic, endowed with an exuberant materialism. While the first is the facade of the historical epoch, the second is its essential content. This second kind, the Middle Ages of the common people, always commanded its own rich and dynamic art. It possessed its own special sort of realism, penetrating the essence of human nature, the process of life and human relations by means of its own peculiar folkloric methods. The art of Rabelais is directly tangential to this medieval-folklore realism. Generally speaking, the traditions of the unofficial, popular Middle Ages entered as a whole into the art of the Renaissance, making itself vibrantly present in the art of Boccaccio, Shakespeare, Cervantes. But in Rabelais, it takes over altogether.

The ideological merit of Bakhtin's monograph lies in the fact that it also reveals the force and influence of popular imagery and popular art, which, in opposition to anarchic individualism, confirms the idea of the collective. It also confirms materialistic concepts of immortality, in two senses - first, the biological continuation of a father's life in the life of the son, and second, the social immortality of the people, transmissible primarily through its own

culture, developing by stages, step by step.

Mikhail Bakhtin's work has been submitted for the academic degree, of Candidate of Philological Sciences. There can be no doubt that it fully deserves it.

The Chair: Finally, Examiner, Comrade Dzhivelegov.

A.K. Dzhivelegov: What I find most valuable in Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin's work is its peculiar combination of erudition and obsession, the true obsession of a scholar. His erudition is immense, overpowering and merciless. This is what enabled Bakhtin to arrive at those splendid conclusions, which in so many respects have shifted the emphases previously established in the scholarship on Rabelais. This, of course, is a massive gain, which was made possible not least because of this obsession with one basic idea, so splendidly made manifest in his opening statement.

Still, there is one thing that Bakhtin lacks, and it is a very important thing. In the end, the Renaissance and its ideology is not determined by Medieval culture proper but solely by the fact that two hostile currents exist within that culture: the official current, and the folk-rebellious current. The official current is often the object of polemic and fiercest struggle. It would be good if Bakhtin could write another chapter, in which, drawing on, additional material, he described Rabelais's position not only at the highpoint of Renaissance strife, but also of that merciless social strife taking place during the time Rabelais lived, worked, wrote.

The Chair: I thank the Examiners for their contributions. The floor is now open for respondents from the audience. First is Comrade Teriaeva.

Comrade Teriaeva: After such esteemed authorities have spoken, to voice the thoughts that rose up in me while reading this dissertation is rather difficult. Nevertheless, I allow myself to take the floor and will now share what I discovered while reading this work.

First of all, judging from the title of the work, one might have expected the author to provide a more general understanding of realism

and to have demonstrated the place of Rabelais in the history of realism. After all, the theme of this dissertation, or rather its title, is an exacting and demanding theme for us. To pose the question of realism – a movement, after all, that we all subscribe to, which has been endorsed by our best literary scholars such as Herzen, Belinsky, Dobrolyubov, Chernyshevskii, Lenin and Stalin – it seems to me that it's necessary to say something in the dissertation about how the views of our best people are reflected in it.

And there are grounds for saying that this dissertation does not contain anything of what our leading people said about realism.

If we seek in this dissertation the names of those who've studied the question of realism, as we'd like to do, we won't find a single one. We won't even find the name of Engels, who gave an excellent and exhaustive definition for the Western kind of realism; nor will we find the names of our Russian literary scholars, whom we follow in our own understanding' of realism. Finally, if we consider this dissertation in light of the decree of the Central Committee of the Party on the political approach in literature, on the leading principle of literary investigation being politics, or if we look at this dissertation in light of Comrade Zhdanov's report in the journals *Zvezda* and *Leningrad*, including comrade Zhdanov's last speech on the 6th of November, we won't find here even a reflection of these recommendations.

From the floor: This dissertation was written six years ago!

Comrade Teriaeva: In Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin's dissertation we do not find a principled political approach to literary study. We're told that the dissertation was written in 1940, but our Soviet literary scholarship existed even before that. The works of Chernyshevsky, Belinsky, Dobrolyubov, Lenin and Stalin existed. What sort of excuse is it, that the Party issued its resolution in such-and-such a year, and the work wasn't written in that year? That cannot be serious grounds for saying that since the resolution came out only later, one can simply ignore the principle of a political approach to literature.

Furthermore, this dissertation completely ignores a class approach to the events it describes, and phenomena remain simple, naked formulas, which can be subjected to any imaginable interpretation. A naked formula allows you to say things about Nikolai Gogol that do not even remotely reflect what Gogol attempts to do with

his own class-based approach to reality. For example, you approach almost all of Gogol's works, whether it's *The Sorochinsk Fair*, or *The Government Inspector*, or *Dead Souls*, through your formula of popular festive laughter. You say that *Dead Souls* is a kind of cheerful hell. It's hard to see how anyone could possibly agree with such an argument, or whose soul could possibly benefit from it.

The world of *Dead Souls* is not nearly as cheerful as this dissertation makes it sound. It is simply wrong to conceive of the people's creative potential, the people's entire intellectual life, merely as the lower stratum, as the body's bottom. You completely overlook the class struggle, forgetting that common people fought against their oppressors with far more than a cheerful joke. You suggest that through such cheerful jokes the people can be opened up and explained completely, since there were no other obstacles; jokes, it seems, allowed the people to express freely everything they wanted to say, and even everything they thought.

And when you speak about Rabelais, about his language, about his system of images – in the end, that's what you're left with. Not the Rabelais we cherish and know, not the humanist and the battler against all medieval obscurantism, but a Rabelais deprived of all his class essence, that's what you're left with.

Voice from the floor: This is too much!

The Chair: Order, please! Everyone has a right to speak, and everyone will have their turn.

Comrade Teriaeva: I'd like to return to something that Comrade Smirnov referred to as the Marxist-Leninist objective in Soviet scholarship. He said the following: "The merit of Mikhail Mikhailovich's dissertation lies in the fact that it distinguishes two types of Middle Ages, on one side the official middle Ages and on the other the unofficial, popular, folkloric, exuberant and sober." It must be said outright that this is not the Marxist-Leninist position.

[The Chair: Please keep in mind the time limit.

Comrade Teriaeva: In fact there's very little in this dissertation

that comes from Rabelais himself. However, this does not stop the committee from concluding that not only should this dissertation be published as soon as possible, but that it must be released abroad. If it appears abroad, it must do so only as a private publication and not as an example of Soviet scholarship, which is answerable to the tasks laid down for it by the Central Committee of the Party in its resolutions about ideological work and political principles in literary research.

The Chair: Since the last speaker made reference to responses of other opponents, they should feel free to offer their reactions. The next speaker is Comrade Piksanov.

N.K. Piksanov: Comrades. Mikhail Mikhailovich, you titled your dissertation: "Rabelais in the History of Realism." I would suggest a different title: "Rabelais turned backward," or "Rabelais turned back toward the Middle Ages and Antiquity." This would be a more fitting title for your dissertation, because your current title presupposes not only a certain connection with the past, but also a connection with the future. It also presumes that such connection with the future can be well documented, clearly articulated, etc. However, Mikhail Mikhailovich, you weren't able to provide this connection.

The Chair: The next speaker is Comrade Brodsky.

N.L. Brodsky: The official examiners might have already "shaped" the opinion of the members of the Academic Council. Still, the opening remarks of the dissertator and my acquaintance with his theses oblige me to request that he attend to the following question and address it in his answer:

I am not familiar with your work, so please forgive me if I have misunderstood anything in your presentation. I want to vote impartially and courageously, the way I like to do, and not in the way the official examiners, with all due respect, are trying to "shape me" to vote.

You've presented us with two types of realism, the Gothic or grotesque and the Classical, and you give preference to Gothic realism. You point out that the Gothic is the unfinalized, which reflects a state of Becoming and not what is already in existence. In your context, a case is made for the integrity and dignity of that

method of understanding the world. You consider one of the most characteristic elements of Gothic realism to be its close, unmediated, organic connection with folklore, with the common people's tradition of saturnalia, songs, popular dances, carnivals, etc. And I assert the contrary. I insist that breadth, versatility, and a profound truthfulness in reflecting the objective world in all its contradictions, in all its movement, are a unique characteristic of Classical realism. Here we must agree with Maxim Gorki, who claims that without the common people, without the attention our great classic authors gave to folklore and to what we call the people's elemental poetic energy, we would never have what we today call the Great Russian Classical realism. I am a big supporter of Classical realism.

The Chair: We have responses by two of the official Examiners, Comrades Dzhivelegov and Smirnov.

A.K. Dzhivelegov: It seems to me, comrades, that in order to have the right to ask questions, both of others and of yourself, or to express doubt about what's been written in a scholarly work, you must first read that work.

One of the basic objections made by those who criticize Comrade Bakhtin's work consists in the claim that the book does not mention the class struggle, that there's not even a whiff of class struggle there. Another objection has it that there's nothing in the work that reveals the negative critical side of that elemental energy of the people that Comrade Bakhtin speaks of, and nothing about the people's rebelliousness, which I spoke of in my capacity as official examiner.

But was Mikhail Mikhailovich really obliged to speak about all that in such elementary detail, so it might be clear and accessible to first graders? Everything is mentioned in this dissertation, even the class struggle is there. Bakhtin mentions all the necessary topics, including the class struggle. He had his own tasks and goals, and those addressed gaps, and blank spots in Rabelais scholarship as a whole. I do not think the objections, doubts, and mental meanderings that we've heard here today should shake the opinion already expressed by those comrades - the official examiners, myself, and also by Academician Tarle who could not be present. I remain firm in my original assessment of the dissertation and believe that unfounded criticism should not be taken into account.

A.A. Smirnov: Respected comrades, I will be brief in part because it is simply impossible to address everything, but also because I've grown weary of this confrontational atmosphere. When we - myself and the other two official examiners - agreed to petition for awarding Mikhail Bakhtin a doctorate, this was dictated by the fact that this work so little resembled the usual sort of work done for the Candidate's degree, that degree does not have to entail original research, the aim of that degree is to strengthen and fill out the cadres of conscientious teachers. There are a lot of works of that kind, they present the reader with well-known and easily understood things.

Some of the criticism we heard today at first sounded rather threatening. For example, someone asked how Rabelais could be a culmination of the past when in fact the Renaissance is clearly an inauguration, of something qualitatively new. But the dissertator had nothing of the sort in mind. Of course, Rabelais capped the past, just like Dante capped the Middle Ages, and at the same time ushered in a new stage. The dissertator says all this in detail. About all this enough has been said. That's a bit of what I wanted to say. All the remarks that have been made here today are essentially correct, and if it weren't that they were not applicable to this dissertation, I'd sign them gladly.

The Chair: The next speaker is Comrade Zalessky.

Comrade B.V. Zalessky: I am not a specialist but only an ordinary member of the Soviet intelligentsia. I turned up here today because I'd heard that the dissertation was interesting, and I wanted to hear how it would be discussed. I'd like to draw your attention to a few things.

First: the fact that the work has generated a lively debate in itself demonstrates that the work is an outstanding event. But there's a second and less joyful impression from the presentations we've heard here. After listening carefully to the whole debate, I've come to the conclusion that those people who actually read the dissertation speak favorably of it, while those who were most critical of it admit that they have not read the work. And as regards the comments of the first responder - well, it seems to me that whoever speaks up formally should be obliged to understand what he's talking about, and on those grounds the comments of the first responder should simply be dismissed.

The Chair: That is for the Academic Council to decide. After all, the first responder is not some random passer-by but a Candidate of Philological sciences specializing in western Literature.

Comrade Zalessky: One certainly would not have known that from her presentation. All the other presenters admitted themselves to not having read, the work, so we we're left with a not-so-good situation.

The Chair: Finally, the dissertator may respond to the comments.

M.M. Bakhtin: I'd like to start and to end my concluding remarks by expressing deep gratitude to my examiners, both official and unofficial.

Aleksei Karpovich called me "obsessed" and I agree with that. I am an obsessed innovator, perhaps a very small and modest one, but an obsessed innovator all the same. Obsessed innovators are rarely understood, and rarely do they encounter worthy, serious, principled criticism. Far more often, innovators are dismissed with indifference. In this respect I find myself in an extremely fortunate position. I sat here and rejoiced while listening to my official examiners - because in them I encountered the deepest understanding, an extraordinarily sympathetic understanding. I am fully aware that my work might repel or frighten people with its unusual nature, and even with its very concept.

In the remarks of my unofficial examiners, I encountered genuine interest, despite some fundamental objections, and this too made me rejoice.

I already said that my main goal was to draw attention to a new world, as I call it, a new sphere of inquiry. I wanted to tease, to entice, to point out that this world existed.

And the fact that in the beginning, naturally, there will be doubts, questions - that doesn't discourage me at all. Doubts or objections can only make me rejoice; they are pleasant to hear. Worst of all would have been what I feared would happen, but fortunately this fear was not justified: a desire to brush the whole concept off with indifference.

I am now very tired, exhausted even, and it will be difficult for me to satisfy all of you with my answers. Thus I express in advance my deep gratitude, and beg you to excuse, me if I do not respond fully or satisfactory with my answers.

Nikolai Kiriakovich was certain to take issue with my thesis, but regarding his objection that Rabelais must be "turned backward," this I cannot accept. Can it be said that when we try to establish the roots of some historical event, some tradition, we're really casting that phenomenon backward? All my work comes down to discovering the roots of the form that governs the creativity of Rabelais and the Rabelaisian universe. I demonstrate the place of Rabelais in the history of realism. Perhaps I'm mistaken, but it seems to me that I have managed to contribute a new page to the history of realism. I cannot be accused of not addressing the history of realism.

From the floor: We got it from your own speech.

Bakhtin: My speech was unsuccessful. It's very difficult for me to lay out in twenty minutes what I had been working on for twenty years.

Nowhere do I actually say why precisely I chose Rabelais. Because Rabelais speaks our language, — his is a modern consciousness — it is our consciousness, while at the same time he allows us insight into traditions that otherwise remain dark and incomprehensible to us. And thus: not only do I not tear Rabelais away from the Renaissance, that's the very reason his Renaissance is so important.... I pointed out the enormous force of laughter in antiquity, its role in creating the first critical Socratic consciousness. The revolutionizing force of medieval laughter is the true hero here.

As concerns carnival. I didn't have in mind carnival as something cheerful. Not at all! In every carnival image there's the presence of death. Speaking in your terminology — carnival is a tragedy. It's only that here, tragedy is not the final word.

Now I'd like to address the objections of Comrade Teriaeva. I must admit that I found them somewhat surprising. It seems that Comrade Teriaeva would have been happy if she could have found in my dissertation only what she has already so thoroughly studied. But in my work I purposely tried not to write about things that have already been talked and written about. There are many who like repeating old

truths, but I did not want to be one of them.

My work is uncompromising in its principles, it is deeply revolutionary, it moves forward and offers something new. Indeed, my entire work speaks about a revolutionary author - Rabelais, and yet you found nothing revolutionary in it.

I make bold to assert that my book is revolutionary. And I can be a revolutionary, even as a scholar. What else is the "revolutionary essence," if not setting out as a scholar to address a certain problem...

CLOSE



https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j_Tb08__ILM

Citation

Bakhtin, M. M. (1946). Comrade Mikhail Bakhtin's Defense of the Dissertation: "Rabelais in the History of Realism". The Gorky Institute of World Literature, Moscow, 15 November 1946. Translated by Denis Zhernokleyev and Caryl Emerson. Adapted and directed by John Shotter in 2014 for a performance at the Bedfordshire International Systemic Practice & Research School, Brathay Hall, Ambleside, UK in February 2015. *Murmurations: Journal of Transformative Systemic Practice*, 9(1), 22-35. <https://doi.org/10.28963/9.1.4>