

Creative Understanding and the Collective Dialogue: Locating Bakhtin in Vitebsk and Russian Modernism

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Abstract

This paper attempts to avoid both the ‘Bakhtinology’ that has become the basis of the ‘Bakhtin industry’ in Russia and the Americanization of his work as a “a sort of New Left celebrator of popular culture” (McLemee, 1997) to argue for a radical contextual understanding a set of relationships among Bakhtin, Malevich, Chagall and others. The appreciation of a Bakhtinian notion of the inherently creative use of language is used as a basis for the idea of the creative university as the ‘dialogical university’. The paper begins by exploring the connections between Bakhtin, Malevich and Chagall to explore the ontological sociality of artistic phenomena. A small town called Vitebsk in Belorussia experienced a flowering of creativity and artistic energy that led to significant modernist experimentation in the years 1917-1922 contribution to the birth of the Russian avant-garde. Marc Chagall, returning from the October Revolution took up the position of art commissioner and developed an academy of art that became the laboratory for Russian modernism. Chagall’s Academy, Bakhtin’s Circle, Malevich’s experiments, artistic group UNOVIS, all in fierce dialogue with one another made the town of Vitebsk into an artistic crucible in the early twentieth century transforming creative energies of Russian drama, music, theatre, art, and philosophy in a distinctive contribution to modernism and also to a social understanding of creativity itself.

Introduction

The small town of Vitebsk in the years 1918-1920 represents a threshold of converging ideas in a “collective creation” (Shatskikh, 2007, p. 33) that gave birth to a new kind of aesthetics and a significant impulse of Russian modernism that began with art and paralleled shifts in linguistics, semiotics and culture. Vitebsk, a part of Soviet Socialist Republic of Belarus, located in the north of the province, was annexed by Russia and became part of Soviet Russia in 1919, being returned to Belarus in 1924. At the turn of the century this small town of some 65,000 people, were mainly Russian-speaking but the city was resident also to Polish, Lithuanian-Latvian and other Slavic, Germanic, Caucasian speakers and some 34,000 Jews.

In this particular time and space there was a flourishing of creative energy, starting with art and its relationship to ‘life’. We examine the axiologies, people, places and ideologies that ‘collided’ in this one moment of a few year as the means and potential for looking at the dialogic nature of this meeting place, its time and competing ideologies. We seek to finely brush the canvas, as it were, to unearth the nature of a creative collective that generated new pathways and forged a modernist philosophy or art and literature. We begin this research by recording who was ‘there’ at each of these sites and their relationships to each other as well as the creative ideas that were developed during this period as a result of this “dialogue”. Three main larger-than-life

protagonists were active at this time – Marc Zaharovich Chagall, the Russian painter and quintessentially Jewish artist, Kazimir Severinovich Malevich, the Russian painter and art theoretician, and Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, the Russian literary theorist, philosopher and semiotician. Chagall, Malevich and Bakhtin - three giants of the extraordinary artistic and cultural flourishing that began the Russian revolution, - were present in Vitebsk and Nevel during this remarkable period. Aleksandra Shatskikh (2007), the art historian, in her book *Vitebsk: The Life of Art* examines the period 1917-1922,

when a great burst of creative experimentation transformed the modest Russian town into one of the most influential gateways to the art of the twentieth century. Spurred by native son Marc Chagall, who returned home after the October Revolution in 1917 to take the position of art commissioner, Vitebsk rose to a pinnacle of fame as an artistic laboratory for the avant-garde. It was here that such luminaries as El Lissitzky, Yuri Pen, Kazimir Malevich, Nikolai Suetin, Mikhail Bakhtin, and others worked, inspired one another, and made distinctive contributions to modernism.

(<http://yalepress.yale.edu/yupbooks/book.asp?isbn=9780300101089> see also <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=djg2UtuvIUc>)

Shatskikh (2007) an authority on the Russian avant-garde provides detail and cultural history of Chagall's Academy of Art and its major teachers and students; the founding of the artists' group, UNOVIS; Malevich's emblematic *Black Square* which became Suprematism's manifesto; Bakhtin's circle and dialogism; and important developments in both theatre and music in Vitebsk to demonstrate this transformative moment in the formation of Russian avant-garde.

El Lissitzky, a Jewish artist and designer famous for his "goal oriented creation" that formed the basis of his notion of the artist as an agent for change was also an important figure in this movement lived and worked in the city of Vitebsk. He was invited by Chagall, then Commissioner of Artistic Affairs for Vitebsk, to teach graphic arts, printing, and architecture at the newly formed People's Art School and later cofounded with Malevich co-founded the revolutionary but short-lived *Molposnovis* (Young followers of a new art).

It was also at this time that members of the so-called "Bakhtin circle" began to meet on a regular basis including the neo-Kantian, Matvei Isaevich Kagan, Pavel Nikolaevich Medvedev, Lev Vasilievich Pumpianskii, Ivan Ivanovich Sollertinskii, Valentin Nikolaevich Voloshinov, and many others. As Craig Brandist (2005) notes

the members of the circle did not restrict themselves to academic philosophy but became closely involved in the radical cultural activities of the time, activities which became more intense with the movement of the group to Vitebsk, where many important avant-garde artists such as Malevich and Chagall had settled to avoid the privations of the Civil War. One of the group, Pavel Medvedev, a graduate in law from Petrograd University, became rector of the Vitebsk Proletarian University, editing the town's cultural journal *Iskusstvo* (Art) to which he and Voloshinov contributed articles, while Bakhtin and Pumpianskii both gave public lectures on a variety of philosophical and cultural topics

(<http://www.iep.utm.edu/bakhtin/>).

Paul Abesky (2004) in his “Letter from Vitebsk” on the eve of an opening of the exhibit “Chagall and the Stage” at the Marc Chagall Museum notes:

In the early years of the 20th century, around the time of the Russian revolution, Vitebsk was one of the centers of the European avant-garde, sustained by the likes of Kazimir Malevich, El Lissitzky, Mikhail Bakhtin and Chagall himself. But though this great cultural tide has long receded, it left islands of intellectual and artistic vitality as well as a group of dedicated people committed to preserving and enriching this past.

[\(http://forward.com/articles/4435/chagall-and-the-village-restored/\)](http://forward.com/articles/4435/chagall-and-the-village-restored/)

The coordinates for this avant-garde movement in Russian culture were painters, art and literary critics, academics, philosophers, semioticians who encouraged a radical intersection of relationships with Cubism, futurism, suprematism, surrealism, and even constructivism beginning a revolution contributing to movements of structuralism and poststructuralism.

That so much was achieved in such a short window of time by these people and their comrades is an astonishing legacy that set the scene for permanent and unfolding shifts in the treatment of creativity that conveys some very important messages in contemporary educational theory concerning now current theories of creativity. Drawing on their legacy we claim that an understanding of this creative epoch has great potential for analyzing the role of education in the contemporary ‘creative economy’.

In a recent report it is argued “each country should foster its creative economy, based on its own strengths, weaknesses and realities” (United Nations, 2010, xxv). Yet what can be learnt from the Vitebsk experience is that the convergence of diverse ideological standpoints, in politically unstable communities where culture is virtually overthrown, arise spaces where creativity may thrive. From a Bakhtinian standpoint this represents a creative experience that frees its participants from the bounds of nation and creed and, arguably, unleashes a different kind of creative energy that was to generate new ways of thinking through a treatment of “art as life” (Liebensphilosophie). We suggest that contemporary considerations of openness are foregrounded in the Vitebsk experience, since openness was heralded out of the October revolution which “created new conditions for the development of art... that we call transformation of life” (Shatskikh, 2007, p. 71).

Why Vitebsk?

Let us hope that in the future too, this new corner of culture in Vitebsk may life with this unmediated life, which people in general should live, and which was obstructed for us till now by various “conventions” and “traditions” made up by the satiated and dumb bourgeoisie (Harshav, 2004, 264)

[Slide: map from beginning of Shatskikh, 2007] Vitebsk is a small town, or Shtetl, in Belorussia. In 1918 it was situated within a part of Russia that had, until its abolishment in the previous year, been called the “Pale of Settlement”. According to

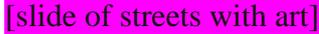
Shatskikh (2007) the concept of 'pale' held two meanings – the first as being 'beyond the pale', in a metaphoric sense, denoting a social boundaries for existence; while the second referred to geographical boundaries in and around Lithuania where Jews could live (as opposed to other locations in the cities of St Petersburg and Moscow where Jews were forbidden). The "Chagallian spirit" that Chagall depicted in his many paintings of Vitebsk (even after he left) evolved out of this 'pale', since he attributed the source of his own creativity to this location, and to his experience as "multilingual confusion" (Harshav, 2004, p. 15) as a Yiddish Jew living in Russia. [could insert image of Chagalls "Cubist Landscape, 1918" – black and white available in Harshav p. 16 if we can't get colour]. Chagall had studied under the painter Penn, whose emphasis on aesthetics was central to his artistic endeavor. In the following account of Penn's class painting a glass, his pedagogical imperative is keenly evident: "Only one of you saw the glass with his own eyes. The rest of you didn't see it: you simply used your knowledge of what a glass is. Knowledge is accessible to all; vision is the mark of an artist..." (Efros, in Shatskikh, 2007, p. 16). Chagalls aesthetic developed out of these early inspirations. In an excerpt from Chagall's 1916 exhibition Benois writes:

Chagall does not embellish what he sees, he just loves it. Suddenly, in the warmth of this love, everything takes on a different countenance, becomes endearing and riveting. The most awful and sick does not loose its awfulness and sickness, yet is somehow beckons and charms, becomes nearer and dearer [Rech, 1916, in Shatskikh, 2007, p. 226).

Chagall maintained a commitment to the immediacy of each creative decision through form and content that was underpinned by ideology. His emphasis on the organic representation of life through art remained an ontologic emphasis over his lifetime and formed the basis of his teaching and art:

Chagall takes a coarse and pale piece of life and creates his beautiful legend. The sweeper becomes a dusty-silvery figure, the ironing woman is painted in the colours of the exquisite, Valesquez-type nobility, and so is the old Jew, whose stern solemnity is expressed through a combination of black and white. Chagall's palette can be restrained or bright and florid, depending on an inner necessity. (Harshav, 2004, p. 226) [could insert slides of Jew and ironing woman?]

Chagall became Director of the Vitebsk People's Art School in 1919, established as an iconic "exclusively revolutionary and truly artistic nest" (Harshav, 2004, p. 247). The school was dedicated to the theory of contemporary leftist art, applied art and practical courses to support these. It was here agitprop genre took hold as a means of disseminating political ideas. Chagalls school was based on democratic goals of bringing art to the masses through education and exposure to art in everyday experience. In a letter written by Chagall at this time he wrote "Give us people! Artists! Revolutionaries – painters! From the capital to the provinces! To us! What will tempt you to come?" (Chagall, in Harshav, 2004, p. 260). True to their espoused goals the school offered instruction to peasants and gentile, young and old with no barriers to participation. In a very short time the school was populated by talented artists and advocates for this new art, mostly poor.

The streets of Vitebsk provided the palette for teachers and students alike, evident in posters, paintings and signs that underscored the development of UNOVIS in January 1920 – a movement later described by Malevich as “the new party in art” (Shatskikh, 2007, p. 78).  While exhibitions played a significant role in advancing this movement, there were also a series of public lectures that took place over this period. Here Chagall and colleagues engaged in many debates associated with art – expounded through poetry, story, music, dance and dialogue.

Art meets academic

It was at these meetings that Bakhtin and his colleagues also converged to discuss and share their ideas. Members developed and debated key ideas about the relationship between art and life which were to benefit enormously by the collective creation of Vitebsk. Like Chagall, and Penn before him, Bakhtin sought to “avoid the abstractness that had characterized Western metaphysics, which seemed to have very little to do with the world as [he] found it” (p. xxxvi). Yet Clark and Holquist (?) point out although Bakhtin liked Chagall personally, he did not entirely agree with his approach to art because he argued that it ignored the aesthetic responsibility of those who *received it*, focusing instead on the artists message and its transformative potential. As Bakhtin was later to explain:

Aesthetics is a struggle to achieve a whole that must first be understood as a purely propositional or relative construct: the question must be asked: by and for whom is this whole consummated? Second, such a whole is never a seamless oneness, insofar as it is always a negotiated relation between. (Holquist & Liapunov, in Bakhtin, 1990, xxvii).

This Vitebsk ‘circle’ was characterized by its overarching attention to ‘*Liebensphilosophie*’ – a philosophy of life, sharing a commitment to the integration of life and art as a philosophy of culture which they approached, in this era, through aesthetics. This group of academics were enticed to Vitebsk during this time as it housed a branch of Moscows Archeological Institute where a Vitebsk Academic Archive Committee was formed during this period. Medvedev, a key member of the Bakhtin circle, was the Rector of Vitebsk Proletarian University and edited the towns journal called “Art”. His ideas were focused around the idea that intersubjectivity is influenced by the historical life of culture, people and humanity. He was influenced by Ohen, Natorp, Scheler, Rikart and others but also Cassirers unfolding symbolic forms. There are also links to Kant’s enlightenment aesthetics – that through language – dialogue – aesthetic activity is possible BUT if the heros language is foreign the author may objectify it. The aesthetic nature of dialogue is thus realised through an interpretation of form as well as content. Medvedev’s 1928 book on formalism later brought these ideas to bear on an analysis of form and content - stating that “ideological creation – science, art, ethics, religion and so forth – is still in the embryonic stage” (p. 3). His work might therefore be described as a sociologic adaption of symbolism, neo-Kantism and a turn away from traditional forms of Russian formalism. Both Medvedev, Voloshinov and Bakhtin’s works critiqued formalism for its incapacity to explain new thinking. By separating “the particular from the general” (Morson & Emerson, 1990, p. 40) they suggested there was little scope for creativity to exist. Instead, their emphasis was on the omnipresence of

creativity – in every day life. In order to appreciate it, one must adopt a kind of aesthetic that enabled an encounter beyond (but not excluding) a formalist relationship between material (ie raw material) and form (shape imposed on it by the artist) to form (what is offered to other through material and form - as described by the formalists) *and* content (that is, the way it is interpreted and responded to by other consciousness). Bakhtin later (1984) wrote of formalism: “ignoring content leads to “material aesthetics” and of structuralism “I am against enclosure in a text... I hear voices in everything and dialogic relations among them” (p. 169). Though Medvedev, Voloshinov and Kagan were no longer able to contribute to this development (due to their premature demise) it is clear that the interanimation of their ideas played a significant role in the theory of dialogue Bakhtin went on to produce.

During the Vitebsk era many members of this group spoke in and around Vitebsk in a series of what Bakhtin eventually came to describe as ‘event meetings’. Shatskikh (2009) explains that Bakhtin spoke at many such meetings on topics such as “The Meaning of Love”, “The Role of Personality” (p. 292) all then published by Kagan in the *Nevel* journal (including his own work “Art Life and Love”). In this period Bakhtin himself wrote an essay called “patterns of verbal creation” or “Aesthetics of verbal creation” which was subsequently lost (Shatskikh, 2009). He also wrote essays “Art and Responsibility”, “Towards a Philosophy of the Act” during this time (Emerson & Morson, 1990). In 1924 he wrote “The Problem of content, material and form in verbal art” and “Author and Hero” also reveals a development of these same ideas. These works reveal in part Bakhtin’s dialogic philosophy (not all as the more discursive aspects of his ideas were only later developed in his work with Rabelais and Dostoevsky – it was here where Bakhtin made the vital connection between literature and language in the same way, we suggest, as he and other members had done in Vitebsk with art). But in this early phase of his career Bakhtin clearly draws on the inspiration of those around him to posit the view that “a subject can – up to a certain point – be theorized without doing violence to the very heterogeneity that seeks to mediate” (Holquist & Lupanov, in Bakhtin, 1990, p. xxi) and suggests that this becomes possible through an expanded view of utterance.

Bakhtin and his associates aesthetic was therefore concerned with “knowing as the effort of understanding” (p xlii). On this basis he and his colleagues developed a set of propositions that were fiercely debated during the Vitebsk era:

1. Point of view is always situated
2. We always conceive of the world intentionally, as it relates to the desires and purposes of human beings
3. I give shape both to others and to my self as an author gives shape to his heroes
4. The body is the centre of action but cannot give birth to representation
5. The dialogic subject, existing only in a world of consciousness, is free to perceive others not as a constraint, but as a possibility
5. Aesthetics is a form of embodying lived experience, for consummating action so that it may have the meaningfulness of an event (Holquist & Liapunov, p. xl)
6. Values are expressed through time/space, self/other, consummated/unconsummated – expressed via dialogue - in this early work

7. Zavershenie (finalization/consummation) a loving contemplation of the others inwardly fragmented self and a creative outcome of empathy in interpersonal relationships that aesthetically shape the hero (in art).

The work of this group during this Vitebsk period, and its aftermath, has been the subject of much scholarly debate when considered alongside his later works. Here Bakhtin moved to a more discursively oriented radical approach using the discourse of the novel. As Hicks (2000) explains “They both alter his earlier work on acts of knowing and living and forecast more contemporary poststructuralist studies of discourses, literacies and identities. At the same time, there remain significant traces of Bakhtin’s earlier theory of ethically particular response in his later essayist writing” (p. 238). Hicks goes on to suggest that Bakhtin retained at least two key ideas from this early period.

The first was his emphasis on “accentuations that constitute discourses” through the use of genre as a means of reflecting both collective and individual activity. The second was concerned with the important notions of addressivity and answerability as a means of penetrating dialogic understanding through artistic appreciation of other, as a means of generating another discourse. To address another, from a Bakhtinian perspective then, involves “a close reading of concrete particulars” (p. 240) which retains aesthetic potential and the moral entreaty central to his early work. As Morson & Emerson (1990) suggest “One’s obligation in answerability is to rescue the other from pure potential; reaching out to another consciousness makes the other coalesce, and turns the others “mere potential” into a space that is open to the living event” (p. 76). Taken together, a combination of his early work and its later development might be best described by Bakhtin himself:

...life can be consciously comprehended only in concrete answerability... A life that has fallen away from answerability cannot have a philosophy; it is, in its very principle, fortuitous and incapable of being rooted” (Bakhtin, 1993, p. 56).

While most Bakhtinian scholars attribute these ideas solely to Bakhtin’s affiliation and study of the novel¹ (in particular Rabelais and Dostoevsky), we want to make the suggestion that art (music, dance and almost every other creative pursuit) is radically implicated in these ideas. In this sense we argue that the work of the Vitebsk circle – in dialogue with the art community represents a shift in ideological, philosophical and artistic boundaries through open dialogue with those members who literally met at all three. As Bakhtin was later to argue “Every cultural act lives essentially on the boundaries: in this is its seriousness and its significance; abstracted from boundaries, it loses its soul, it becomes empty, arrogant, it disintegrates and dies” (Bakhtin & Emerson, 1990, 301). Here art is radically implicated as an ideological position that lives in the flux of otherness, a key shift that we suggest was influenced by Malevich and the suprematism movement that also developed out of this collective. With members of the Nevel group, including Kagan, these ideas were given political shape when juxtaposed alongside Chagall’s significant artistic contributions. As Kagan explained at the time “In art nationality and the historical collectivity of people are greater than themselves; they exist in the love for humanity and in the humanity of love” (Ethnicity, Class and Art, cited in Shatskikh, 2009, p. 293).

¹ This is hardly surprising since Bakhtin himself was explicit in this throughout his later texts.

Aesthetics meets culture

The third protagonist in this Vitebsk epoch was Malevich. Between 1913 and 1919 he associated with Russian avant-garde groups in the larger cities who were exploring abstract art. As an outsider to Vitebsk, originally Ukraine, Malevich arrived in 1919 already committed to new systems of art and was enticed to the Vitebsk Peoples Art School by Lissitsky – a constructivist - who wanted to revive Jewish culture beyond national interests. Lissitsky's idea was that “with his brush the artists build a new sign – this sign is not a form of something already existent and built readymade in the world. It is a sign of something building existing in nature through man” (Shatskikh, 2007, p. 26). Like Bakhtin, Malevich rejected the idea of Russian formalism that language is simply a transparent means of communication, but Malevich proposed new ways of looking at the world through art. According to Forrestier (?) Malevich suggested that Chagall's paintings were not only out of touch with the real world but they did not support the revolutionary spirit. He argued against figurative traditions, suggesting that painting should “overthrow nature; the contemporary artist strives to create his own world” (ibid, p, 71). His famous phrase “I am going u-el-el'-ul-el-te-ta my new path” (ibid, p. 77) expressed the desire to free art of nation and creed:

I approach nonobjectivity as a monochrome-white Suprematism by replacing the goal of objective goods with non-objectivity. No one will find in it a compensation – not a giving God, nor prayers, nor objects, not master, nor servant – all that for which society now lives. From non-objective Suprematism are eliminated “how to serve”, “how to pray”, “how to build”, “what to achieve” of objective goods. They are not to be found there, and as they appeared they will disappear, and disappear they can, since in essence they are not of natural being... I speak of monochrome-white Suprematism and further develop my thought. Under monochrome-white Suprematism I understand the new non-objective action of man outside any culture, outside of the boundaries of practical or any other tasks or achievement, found outside all laws of movement” (Malevich, *Sabranie sachenii v pyati tamakh*, vol 3, 81, p. 24, cited in p. 24

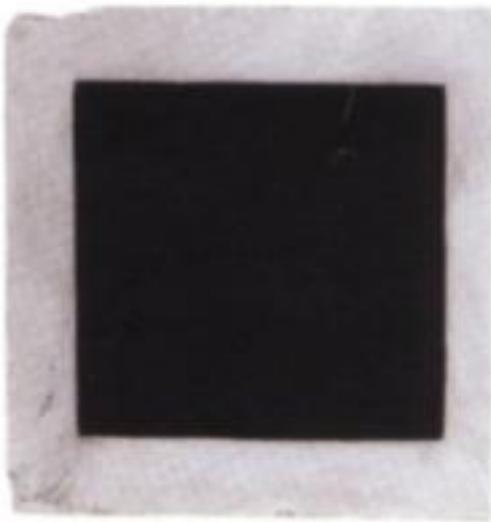
Thus Malevich de-aestheticizes colour and transforms it into a pure theoretical concept. That:

- rejects constraints of textual, structural features (eg syntax, semantics)
- sees artistic space as the concrete space that surrounds the painting
- canvases are left unframed, unenclosed - symbolising the uncontainability of nonobjectivity, the foreclosure of meaning
- paintings are not abstract but non-objective – eg black square is tabula rasa

These criteria were echoed in the American avant garde movement post world war 2 where artistic initiatives mirrored the chaos that was evident during this epoch. The resultant tension between aesthetic and constructivism marked the same creative spirit Bakhtin wrote of. Greenberg, writing in 1947, describes the same avant garde optimism in post-war society characterising a belief that “history is creative, always evolving novelty out of itself. And where there is novelty, there is hope.” (in Guilbaut, S. , 1983, p. 118). At the same time such an approach destabilises certainty and is

perhaps particularly palatable in times where familiarity has been unsettled and old traditions and 'truths' dismantled.

In Malevich's epistemological approach to art truth is seen as totally irrelevant and instead focuses on illusion and the way people place themselves accordingly (Malevich, 2003, p. 21). Thus what can be seen and how it is seen depends on the viewpoint "of the directing artistic norm" (p. 28). Malevich resisted the idea that art should be easily understood by everyone. Instead his project was "to create a form that could count as the first "content" or object created by painting from *within its own practice* rather than from some form of universal representation. He used the famous black square to embody this idea (1915) as a means of introducing a new object in reality - the very materiality of the painting-surface.



Kazimir Malevich. Black Square, 1923–30.
Oil on plaster. 14⁷/₁₆ x 14⁷/₁₆ x 3⁵/₈ in.
(36.7 x 36.7 x 9.2 cm). Musée national
d'art moderne, Centre Georges
Pompidou, Paris.

During the Vitebsk years Malevich produced the white square (1920) as an extension of this theme, securing suprematism as "the beginning of a new culture". (Zupanicic, 2003, P. 6) and produced his own manifesto expounding these ideas through art. The principal element of Suprematism in painting, as in architecture, sculpture and other artistic forms was its liberation from social or materialist tendencies. Through Suprematism, art comes into its pure and unpolluted form. It has acknowledged the decisive fact of the nonobjective character of sensibility. It is no longer concerned with illusion.

There is little doubt that Bakhtin and members of the circle would have had direct access to these ideas, although somewhat surprisingly there is little written about their physical meeting. Yet clearly the influence of each on the other is evident in the ideas they jointly engaged with, and reacted against, perhaps best captured by Holquist and Liapunov as follows:

Aesthetics is the struggle to achieve a whole but a whole that must first be understood as a purely positional or relative construct: the question must always be asked: by and for whom is this whole consummated? Second, such a whole is never a seamless oneness, insofar as it is always a negotiated relation between.... (in Bakhtin, 1990, p. xxvii)

Beyond Vitebsk to the contemporary University

What made Vitebsk so fertile was the coalescence of diverse thinkers and artists in a short period of time who were able to “synthesise various forms of artistic expression by bringing together music, language, painting, sculpture, colour, typography, and gesture that rendered artistic life in Vitebsk so fertile” (Le Foll, 2010, p. 86). Yet as this paper has tried to convey there is much more to this creative collective than merely a history of art. The most important clues are found in the ongoing writing of Bakhtin himself, and his relationship to other international thinkers both then and now. Most are beyond the scope of this paper, suffice to say that there are threads of this creative origin, in the structuralist to poststructuralist/formalist to post-formalist pathways traced throughout last century – evident in the debates generated within this collective. Morson & Emerson (1990) explain that members of the Bakhtin circle, during this era, “debated the most controversial topics of the day (Sausurrean linguistics, Freudianism, Formalism, Marxism) by identifying opposing trends, showing the inadequacy of each extreme and then mapping out a proper middle course” (p. 77). What sets Bakhtin apart, and was to form his subsequent scholarship, is his resistance to dichotomies – working instead to “dissolve the very distinction” (ibid, p. 54) by suggesting that it is not a case of either self or other in aesthetic relationship with art as life; but both as a means of forming consciousness through dialogic exchange – “living into another” as it were. In other words the self needs other to be the self, art is thus always an ideological event that takes place between people. Holquist and Emerson (1990) describe four tenets to Bakhtin’s aesthetic thesis that arose out of this era – physical perception, recognition, contextual significance and active dialogic understanding (p. 99). The latter was to occupy much of Bakhtin’s thought in the years to come. As such, we suggest that Bakhtin’s project, arising out of the Vitebsk era, is one of creative understanding:

Creative understanding does not renounce itself, its own place in time, its own culture; and it forgets nothing. In order to understand, it is immensely important for the person who understands to be located outside the object of his or her creative understanding – in time, in space, in culture. For one cannot even really see one’s own exterior and comprehend it as a whole, and no mirrors or photographs can help; our real exterior can be seen and understood only by other people because they are located outside us in space and because they are others (“Response to the question from the Novyi Mir Editorial Staff, in Bakhtin, 1984, p. 7)

Such a stance strikes a chord when considered against Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique of the culture industry as “aesthetic barbarity” (p. 6) when they propose that the ultimate deceit by the culture industry is that there are no creative choices where only one creative value is offered (and people are coerced into thinking this is good for them). Bakhtin described this thirty years earlier as a form of monologism – at its extreme, death. For the Vitebsk collective the point of their considerable efforts, it

seems to us, was to engage with value at its boundaries and, in doing so, to herald a new era of creativity that was created in a spirit of open-ness, free press, political democracy and a dialogic spirit that sought to open rather than close the potential of ideas.

Michael – something here about the links to this pathway of philosophical thought

Saussure (France)

Pierce (US?)

Jakobson (Moscow & St Petersburg) - linguistic circle 1913

+ First Slavic Congress (1939) to use the term 'structuralism'

+ New York School of Social theory (1940)

+ Levi-Strauss wrote paper on structural linguistics (1941), later published in "Structural Anthropology" (1958) led to European structuralism

+ Foucault – historical structuralism

- Althusser – Marxist structuralism

- Roland Barthes – populist culture structuralism

- Lacan – Freudian structuralism

Followed by post-structuralism (1960)

- Derrida

- Lyotard

- Kristeva = applied Bakhtin to feminist writing emphasizing the body

- Todorov = rescued Bakhtin

- Vitebsk is unparalleled in the twentieth century as a revolutionary community that acted as both the source, the catalyst and the precursor of a number of motifs and themes that continue to exercise philosophical influence. Bakhtin's circle meetings, conversations and publication really constituted one of three major schools of linguistics, poetics and cultural criticism. Erupting at approximately the same time as the structuralist-formalist moment characterized by Roman Jakobson's linguistic circles in Moscow and St Petersburg (and later by the Prague school); Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotics based on his famous *Cours de linguistique générale* delivered at the University of Geneva in the years 1906-1914 and published posthumously by his students in 1916; and the semiotics of Charles Sanders Peirce, the American pragmatist, who establish logic as a formal branch of semiotics as early as the late 1880s. Saussure and Jakobson (particularly through his relationship with Claude Levi-Strauss) exercised a strong influence on the movement called structuralism that became the mega-paradigm beginning in the 1950s holding that the elements of culture can be seen in terms of their relationships as part of a larger systems determined by underlying structures. Pierce's semiotics, an account of signification, representation, reference and meaning, establish pragmatism as one of the leading world philosophies. Bakhtin's dialogical pragmatism, rediscovered in the early 1960s, was one of the few sources of intelligent criticism of formalism, and was introduced to Western audiences by Julia Kristeva who used Bakhtin to attack the stable signification at the center of structuralism and move towards new mode of semiotics (semianalysis) that understood texts as always in production. Kristeva's "Word, Dialogue, Novel" (1966) understands the text as dynamic rather than a structural static entity. Her notion of intertextuality, like Bakhtin's dialogical imagination, is a dialogue among other texts, a relational set of processes and practices. Bakhtin's pragmatic contextualism of speaking becomes the means by which Kristeva unhinges structuralism's insistence and focus on *la langue* as the expense of *parole*. From the 1980s Tzvetan Todorov becomes Bakhtinian in an historical turn that represents a shift from narratology to an engagement with ideological and ethical issues that recapitulates Bakhtin's historical contextualization of the utterance. Both Kristeva and Todorov take Bakhtin into the realms of contemporary poststructuralist theory and

uses his work as a way of responding to the abstractness, formalist, and binary formulations of structuralist thinking.

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- Much contemporary philosophy can be seen as engagements with these twentieth century movements in linguistics and poetics. In Vitebsk, the work of the first Bakhtin circles comes into close contact with other generative themes and movements in the arts, in music, dance and criticism represented Chagall, Malevich, and El Lissitzky all leading figures in the Russian avant-garde. Chagall, often seen as a major representative of the first generation of European modernists, stylistically combined the Jewish folk symbolism of his native Vitebsk with the current major movements of cubism and surrealism. Malevich's geometrical abstract art based on circles, squares, lines, and rectangles, his manifesto, *From Cubism to Suprematism* which celebrated "the supremacy of pure artistic feeling" ran counter to Bakhtin's dialogical pragmatism and Chagall's folk surreal imagery by being both anti-materialist and anti-utilitarian. El Lissitzky worked with Malevich to realise Suprematism and together they exercised a profound influence over the Bauhaus and Constructivist movements.
- Medvedev's weekly *Education and Culture* carried articles by Malevich, Voloshinov and many others. The Proletarian University, another initiative by Medvedev existed for a couple of years (1918-20). It is no wonder that Vitebsk was the main gathering place for the Bakhtin circle after 1919, after almost daily meetings in Nevel where Bakhtin was elected chairman of *Volfila*, an abbreviation for Free Philosophy Association. In the numerous public debates Bakhtin and members of his circle devoted themselves to questions surrounding art, life and responsibility. Aleksandra Semenovna Shatskikh (2012: 313) maintains that Bakhtin and Malevich shared certain articles of faith despite their clear differences:

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- In a "Letter from Vitebsk" published in the *Art of the Commune (Iskousstvo Kommouny)*, the Futurist communist newspaper, he emphasized the upheavals that had occurred: "The City of Vitebsk has changed. This used to be a provincial 'backwater' of some one hundred thousand inhabitants where, not long ago, Yuri Klever (an academic landscape painter) could be seen rotting away and where itinerant art ended its pathetic existence. And, thanks to the October Revolution, it was here that revolutionary art with its colossal and multiple dimensions was set into motion."⁷
- <http://www.ago.net/return-to-russia-chagall-and-vitebsk-1914-1920>
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Based on a creative collective that was characterized by exchange of ideas, open access to ideas and, in that era a revised perhaps even unparalleled, freedom of speech we want to suggest that the 1919-1920 Vitebsk community bears strong allegiance to contemporary notions of open-ness and creativity that are characterized by "free press", political democracy, a peer-to-peer gift economy developing in a digitized society (Peters, 2012). In this sense neither the ideas nor approaches to the generation of ideas belong to the 21st century alone, but have their origins in previously un-examined multiple moments in time – such as the Vitebsk experience. Such approaches have now been recognized by the United Nations (2010) who define creativity in the following ways:

1. Imagination and a capacity to generate original ideas and novel ways of interpreting the world, expressed in text, sound and image
2. Curiosity and a willingness to experiment and make new connections in problem-solving (United Nations, 2010, p. 3)

A third definition, however, posits creativity as an economic gain and places these ideas within the contemporary knowledge economy:

3. A dynamic process leading towards innovation in technology, business practices, marketing, etc and is closely linked to gaining competitive advantage in the economy (ibid)

Locating creativity within the knowledge economy seems a far cry from the Vitebsk experience and many of us here today would perhaps suggest that this view seems, at first, to be at odds with our own intellectual experience. Yet it can hardly be denied that Malevich's art, for example, sold for 53.5 million (USD) in New York 2008 (New York Times, 2008) and Chagall's paintings maintaining the 9th highest word count in art citations, (cited in Renneboog & Spaenjers, 2009). The work of Bakhtin is also gaining momentum – in a recent call for interest regarding a Dialogic Pedagogy journal 7 people from over 7 countries responded. This contemporary uptake seems to suggest the works of this collective can, as Bakhtin suggests for all creative works, be recognized across time and perhaps even culture, as achieving the United Nations (2010) goal of building “creative momentum” (p. 264). Bakhtin's later work developed into an approach to creativity that was characterized by four tenets:

1. physical perception
2. recognition
3. grasping significance in context
4. active-dialogic understanding (Morson & Emerson, 1990, p. 99)

The fourth postulate now involves much more than mere consummation, but presents creativity as surprise, newness, and perhaps even a miracle (Bakhtin, 1984). Yet its significance remains a feat of consciousness shared between people, rather than an isolated act or form that is transferred from one to another. Business literature (see for example Sun, 2010) suggests that knowledge creation is a process of dialogue and communication within and between organisations. Similarly the creative economy posits the idea of creative clusters that “thrive only in one another's company” (United Nations, 2010, p. 80) and might be interpreted as a primary endeavor of what is now described as “the creative commons”. Contemporary Universities are constantly driven by the dollar and certainly pay detailed attention to issues such as intellectual property as copyright and origin of labour (United Nations, 2010, p. 172) yet rather than sharing knowledge we speculate that they are isolated by this fact. Yet market forces within a new right ideological landscape work against this collective principle and therefore, we suggest, mark a distinct adjunct between the aesthetic principles leading to answerability that were founded in Vitebsk.

EMPHASIES THE SOCIAL CONDITIONS OF KNOWLEDGE CREATION AND MAKES TROUBLE FOR ISSUES SUCH AS INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY – MICHAELS BOOK ON CREATIVE ECONOMY!

Silos in education do little to promote cross-disciplinary work of this nature!

And still there is hope. We want to conclude this presentation by returning to Chagall, Malevich and Bakhtin's inspiration from the University model of Vitebsk School of

People's Art (Chagall), Nevel Academic Association (Bakhtin) and Unovis (Malevich) – all located in one moment of time in Vitebsk - and their collective dialogues as a source of provocation in contemporary times too. Standish and Barnett (2003) suggest that the survival of the University depends on “creative, persistent and open endeavor of engagement with all around it” (p. 233). While there is no doubt that we are in very different political times, perhaps there is a possibility for the creative university to also see itself as a site for answerability through dialogue that resists the limits of culture rather than transmission of one cultural reality that is fixed for all; for curiosity and experimentation rather than dogma; and creativity that is a dialogic process rather than a monologic end point. We suggest that there is much inspiration from the Vitebsk collective in this regard.

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