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Book review: Mikhail Bakhtin and Walter Benjamin: Experience and Form

Citation for published version:

Smith, A 2010, 'Book review: Mikhail Bakhtin and Walter Benjamin: Experience and Form' *Modern Language Review*, vol 105, no. 4, pp. 1200-1202.

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:

Modern Language Review

Publisher Rights Statement:

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Mikhail Bakhtin and Walter Benjamin: Experience and Form by Tim Beasley-Murray

Review by: Alexandra Smith

The Modern Language Review, Vol. 105, No. 4 (October 2010), pp. 1200-1202

Published by: [Modern Humanities Research Association](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25801544>

Accessed: 18/03/2014 05:54

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the experienced reader of Dostoevsky who is able mentally to 'contain' the book's disparate material by virtue of what is already known and has been understood.

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RUTH COATES

Mikhail Bakhtin and Walter Benjamin: Experience and Form. By TIM BEASLEY-MURRAY. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2007. ix+214 pp. £45. ISBN 978-0-230-53535-0.

Tim Beasley-Murray's insightful comparative analysis of the thought of Mikhail Bakhtin and Walter Benjamin is an important contribution to the growing area of modernist studies. Although neither of them served in the army during the First World War, the world-views of Bakhtin and Benjamin 'are similarly marked by a sense of fractured nature of specifically modern experience' (p. 1). By choosing the question of experience and form as the thematic focus of his study, Beasley-Murray demonstrates that the sense of fracturing derives from a historical dislocation of experiences from the forms of social behaviour, tradition, artistic genres, and language prompting both thinkers to seek the seeds of new experience in novel forms. In Beasley-Murray's view, the dislocation of form and experience in the age of postmodernity becomes increasingly accentuated, making Bakhtin's and Benjamin's ability to see potentialities in the nascent and deconstruct authoritarian hierarchies more pertinent.

Beasley-Murray's thoughtful analysis of the points of convergence of Bakhtin and Benjamin draws on the previous attempts to bring the two thinkers together undertaken by Terry Eagleton and Pierre Zima. It also engages with the studies on Bakhtin produced by Galin Tihanov, Craig Brandist, Ruth Coates, and Michael Holquist. The strength of this study lies in its lucid and knowledgeable interpretation of the way in which Bakhtin's theoretical approaches to dialogue and the novel can be read in conjunction with Benjamin's theory of montage, translation, mechanical reproduction, and allegory. Although their relation to politics, ethics, and European history of ideas has been also identified, it is surprising to see the discussion omit Goethe. In Goethe, two key ingredients of Bakhtin's critical philosophy are united: polyphony (the recognition of multiple voices/perspectives) and *Bildung* (the need for development of the individual and his/her environment). It would have been interesting to intersect these aspects of Bakhtin's thought with Benjamin's survey of Goethe's works. Thus, for example, Benjamin's *Wahlverwandtschaften* essay foreshadows Bakhtin's attempt to link his concept of form to the problem of origin: it indicates that the poetry of Goethe's work is illuminated through the antithetical relationship between two genres, the novel and the novella. Benjamin compares the novella to a picture of a cathedral in darkness but he remains faithful to the principle of Romantic formal immanence. Benjamin's manipulation of the two genres as the heuristic foregrounding of the expressionless might be better understood through the prism of Bakhtin's notion of outsideness and Shklovsky's notion of estrangement identified by Caryl Emerson's as examples of the unconventional utilization of the aesthetic distance.

The study comprises an introduction and four chapters. The introduction reveals the author's intention to highlight similarities and differences in the work of the two thinkers. It provides a good overview of the existing scholarship on Bakhtin and Benjamin. Beasley-Murray suggests that both thinkers 'are concerned with religion and politics as a matter of human experience' (p. 15). While recognizing that Benjamin's preoccupation with historical materialism should not be overestimated and that Marxism in Bakhtin's discourse is not the organizing principle, Beasley-Murray claims that the two thinkers have a lot in common 'in their battles for the integrity of earthly, human experience' (p. 16). Yet, as some scholars warned, Bakhtin's theoretical approach to dialogism should not be mistaken for Marxist dialectics. Curiously, Beasley-Murray's discussion does not incorporate any references to the subjectivist tradition and the centrality of self as a register of meanings, literary and otherwise, to modernist thought. Beasley-Murray's discussion of objective tendencies in Bakhtin's and Benjamin's thought might have benefited from a comparison of the notions of impersonality and objectivity that were scrutinized in Matthew Arnold's writings. In his seminal study *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) Arnold advocates the principle of the free play of consciousness which enables individuals to be brought nearer to complete human perfection. Arnold's belief in the redeeming nature of culture laid the ground for Bakhtin's and Benjamin's meditation on the relationships between tradition, transmissibility, and authority. As Beasley-Murray points out, while Benjamin emphasizes the necessary reliance of tradition on destruction and integration of objects into personal experience, Bakhtin is opposed to the hierarchical distance that characterizes the tradition of epic.

Chapter 1, 'Habit and Tradition', explores the attitudes of Bakhtin and Benjamin towards habit and tradition, including their everyday behaviour and their philosophical responses to the role of mechanical reproducibility. It concludes that 'Bakhtin's and Benjamin's critical counter-traditions are designed to unfold the cultural objects of the past in the first sense' (p. 47). Chapter 2, 'Experience', investigates the diachronic contexts of Bakhtin's and Benjamin's thought, such as the ideas of Kant, Hegel, Marx, and Simmel. It unfolds the importance of Simmel's account of forms of urban experience to Benjamin's meditation on Baudelaire's impressionistic style and Bakhtin's appropriation of Simmel's ideas into his own language and idiom. In Beasley-Murray's view, 'like Simmel, Bakhtin captures the sense of self-alienation that men and women experience in becoming meaningful selves' (p. 57). Chapter 3, 'Language', focuses on the notion of language as a form of the experience that supersedes any form of abstract thinking. It interweaves into the discussion Voloshinov's response to Simmel's portrayal of the tragedy of culture based on the intersubjective aspect of experience. It also scrutinizes Benjamin's theory of translation that relies on the renewal of the original language, and it offers an interesting discussion of the use of quotation and montage in literature. According to Beasley-Murray, Bakhtin's analysis of Dostoevsky's polyphonic novel might be viewed as a montage of perspectives and voices comparable to Benjamin's representation of nineteenth-century Paris in the *Arcades Project* as the montage of quotations related to social totality. He suggests that 'Bakhtin and Benjamin

present conflicting yet coexisting aspects of modernity: landscapes of desolation as well as of possibility' (p. 121). Chapter 4, 'Totalities', dwells on the negative totalities of art, allegory, and dialogism, and the temporal orientation of artistic forms. It highlights the importance of the notion of stasis to the thought of Bakhtin and Benjamin. It emphasizes that the destruction of aura leads to the spatialization of time and simultaneity and pays special tribute to Bakhtin, whose open-minded view of modernity implies that 'the dragging of the artwork from the cultic and ritual past into the present liberates for new purposes in the future' (p. 151).

It is a pity that Beasley-Murray's book does not offer a conclusion that could have summarized his findings and highlighted areas for further investigation, including the legacy of post-Kantian utopianism, the influence of both thinkers on Michel Foucault's vision of modernity, and the possibility of the inclusion of Richard Rorty into the dialogic community that might lead to exploration of potentially fruitful connections between the agenda of dialogics and that of social constructionist thought. The issue of ambivalence in Bakhtin's and Benjamin's thought seems to be overshadowed by the stress on materiality of sign. Arguably, understanding the ways in which their work is both phenomenological and materialist might help us understand that it is fraught with tensions and identify its implicit contradictions. The present study might be seen as a stepping stone for future explorations of post-Kantian utopianism to encourage students of cultural studies and comparative literature to seek a new theoretical framework based on appreciation of the value of approximating the material conditions of existence entwined with recognition of the elusive nature of the language with which we do the approximating.

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ALEXANDRA SMITH