# ISSA Proceedings 1998 – Arguing For Bakhtin

*"Bakhtin's thought is so many-sided and fertile that he is inevitably open to colonization by others."* David Lodge, *After Bakhtin*.

In a recent paper, J. Anthony Blair (1998) laments a proliferation of terms that appear to be employed without discrimination or distinction: 'dialogue', 'dialogical', 'dialectic', 'dialectics', and 'dialectical'. While he doubts it will occur, Blair proposes that 'dialectical' be reserved for "the properties of all arguments related to their involving doubts or disagreements with at least two sides, and the term 'dialogical'…for those belonging exclusively to turn-taking verbal exchanges." Setting aside his pessimism, what Blair identifies amounts to a clear trend toward 'dialectical' or 'dialogical' models of argumentation, a trend that has become more pronounced particularly among informal logicians in the last few years (Cf. Gilbert, 1997; Johnson, 1996; Walton, 1996, 1997).**[i]**

Of course, emphasizing the two-sidedness or turn-taking nature of argumentation may not amount to very much. Douglas Walton's centralizing of 'dialogue' in his pragmatic account means that the dialogue provides the context which will determine the argument by virtue of telling us how the set of inferences or propositions at its core is being used (1996:40-41). And Ralph Johnson's recent focus on a dialectical tier exists in relation to an underlying illative tier which is the premise-conclusion part of the argument's structure (1996:264). But with these senses, it is possible (though not necessarily the case) for dialogue-focussed or dialectical argumentation to involve no more than an exchange of distanced, monological positions (perhaps through turn-taking, perhaps in whole), where each side presents its argument for acceptance or rejection (Shotter, 1997). Were such to occur, the current drive for a more genuinely interactive or 'involved' perspective might be lost.**[ii]**

It is here that the dialogism of Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) seems particularly appropriate and in many ways an anticipation of current trends in argumentation theory (as with so much else). Shotter (1997) turns to Bakhtin's views for an

understanding of dialogical communication and argument within actual communities. I want to take this further and look for an actual perspective on argumentation, one that really captures the interactive nature of dialogue.

While Bakhtin was a philosopher of language and literature, it is primarily the latter that has been championed in the west where his theory of the novel has been particularly influential. But for argumentation theorists, there is much more to be culled from his ideas on language and communication generally. This paper will both explore what 'arguing' is for Bakhtin, showing how his general theory of speech and meaning implicates a particular concept of 'argument', and argue for Bakhtin's role as an important figure in argumentation studies. I will approach the first task through paying attention to special features of Bakhtin's concept of dialogism (here understood provisionally as the relationship of every utterance to other utterances). Extending beyond Shotter (1997), I derive a concept of argument totally embedded in context (no detached reconstruction of premises and conclusions can be true to it), where even the situation itself enters as a constitutive element. Arguments are essentially co-operative enterprises, opening up meanings to mutual (and third party) understanding, exploring others' positions, and developing consensus.

Limited by the constraints of time and page-length, I illustrate the prospects for success with the second task by exploring ways in which Bakhtin anticipates an important aspect of Perelman's work. In particular, I discuss Bakhtin's treatment of audiences and the importance for him of the "hovering presence" behind conversation of a third part "superaddressee" (1986, 126)**[iii]**. This concept and Bakhtin's associated discussion has compelling and instructive parallels with the "universal audience" of the *New Rhetoric.*

*1. Dialogism*

Let's begin with the utterance. For Bakhtin the utterance is the basic linguistic act, and utterances acquire their meaning only in a dialogue. Words and sentences are impersonal, belonging to nobody. They can become the tools of the logician who may centre them on a page and look at *their* relations, the relations of statements. By contrast, an 'utterance' is marked by "its quality of being directed to someone, its *addressivity*" (Bakhtin, 1986:95). An utterance, then, has essentially both an author and an addressee.**[iv]**

Moreover, the utterance arises within the context of a particular situation. Or, to put it in Bakhtinian terms, the situation is a constitutive element of the utterance.

As Todorov (1984) notes, the existence of a nonverbal element to an utterance that corresponds to the context was known prior to Bakhtin. But he treated it not as external to the utterance, but integral to it. The extraverbal does not influence the utterance from the outside. "On the contrary, *the situation enters into the utterance as a necessary constitutive element* of its semantic structure" (Todorov, 1984:41).

So understood, 'utterance' can help us to appreciate how Bakhtin employs the term 'dialogism'. Enough has been said to indicate that more is at stake than what we might commonly associate with the term 'dialogue' or with 'speaking'. As Michael Holquist (1990) indicates, normally 'dialogue' suggests two people in conversation. "But what gives dialogue its central place in dialogism is precisely the kind of *relation* conversations manifest, the conditions that must be met if any exchange between different speakers is to occur" (1990:40).

Bakhtin himself marvelled at the way that linguistics and the philosophy of discourse had valued an artificial, preconditioned notion of the word, which was lifted out of context and taken as the norm. By contrast, "[t]he word is born in a dialogue as a living rejoinder within it; the word is shaped in dialogic interaction with an alien word that is already in the object" (1981:279). In this dynamic conception the word finds its meaning. Bakhtin continues: But this does not exhaust the internal dialogism of the word. It encounters an alien word not only in the object itself: every word is directed toward an *answer* and cannot escape the profound influence of the answering word that it anticipates.

The word in living conversation is directly, blatantly, oriented toward a future answer-word: it provokes an answer, anticipates it and structures itself in the answer's direction... Responsive understanding is a fundamental force, one that participates in the formulation of discourse, and it is moreover an *active* understanding, one that discourse senses as resistance or support enriching the discourse.

Linguistics and the philosophy of language acknowledge only a passive understanding of discourse, and moreover this takes place by and large on the level of the common language, that is, it is an understanding of an utterance's *neutral signification* and not its *actual meaning*(280-281).

This clarifies, or furthers, the essential notion of addressivity mentioned earlier. The word is directed towards a reply, it "anticipates it and structures itself in the answer's direction."

*2. Argument*

"We learn to cast our speech in generic forms, and, when hearing others' speech, we guess its genre from the very first words" (1986:79). I want, in these terms, to treat argumentation (broadly conceived here as the activity of arguing) as such a speech genre. A 'speech genre', as defined by Bakhtin (1986:60) is a sphere of communication which has its own relatively stable types of utterances. I take is as uncontroversial that 'argumentation' fits this description. We can also take confirmation of this judgement from the kinds of things Bakhtin himself includes as speech genres, beyond the frequently studied literary genres . Bakhtin includes the "short rejoinders of daily dialogues...everyday narration, writing (in all of its various forms), the brief standard military command, the elaborate and detailed order, the fairly variegated world of business documents," (60) as well as scientific statements. The types of utterances specific to arguers, and identifiable as parts of arguments such that "we guess its genre from the very first words," given the kinds of contextual considerations mentioned earlier, clearly delineate the sphere 'argumentation'.**[v]**

This said, I want now to turn to considering what important elements Bakhtin contributes to a model of argument. That is, as a speech genre, argumentation will be characterized by the features common to it. I want to focus upon three specific ideas.

(1) A concept of argument conceived along Bakhtinian lines will not pull discourse from reality and treat it as a series of statements (premises and conclusions) disconnected from arguer and audience/respondent. In this, Bakhtin would not differ from some recent proposals (cf. Gilbert, 1997). But Bakhtin stresses the uniqueness of meaning that a sentence has within an utterance (that rich concept discussed earlier) to the extent of insisting that the repetition of the sentence makes it a new part of the utterance (1986:109). A sentence changes (or adds to) its meaning in the course of an utterance. In fact, Bakhtin specifically excludes logical relations, like negations and deductions, from those relations that are dialogical (Todorov, 1984:61), presumably for reasons noted here. Dialogical relations are "profoundly specific," (Cited in Todorov, 61) logical relations are not. This sets a Bakhtinian model of argument quite beyond the boundaries of traditional formal deductive logic, a point that cannot be stressed too strongly.

(2) The second thing to note about a Bakhtinian model is that it will be a context-dependent model where the context includes the particular agents involved. Again, this does not at first seem remarkable, but the notion of addressivity

brings a very original element to the discussion. Here, we might conceive argumentation as being predicated upon response. "It" is a site of response. And Bakhtin captures this responsiveness. But this is more than the accommodation of a reply, the anticipation of objections to one's position. Here, "addressivity" captures the way an argument is always *addressed* to someone, and thus needs to include an understanding of that other (audience/respondent) in its structures or organization.**[vi]** Hence, the argument while having the arguer as its principal author, can be said on this level to be co-authored by the addressee. Bakhtin suggests more of what I have in mind here when he writes:

"[E]very word is directed toward an *answer* and cannot escape the profound influence of the answering word that it anticipates. The word in a living conversation is directly, blatantly, oriented toward a future answer-word: it provokes an answer, anticipates it, and structures itself in the answer's direction" (1981:280). We can imagine here two people in a dialogue (the site Walton envisages for pragmatic argument), anticipating and responding in a way that makes their argument a common discourse, and in a way that precludes the isolation of positions, speaking back and forth across a gulf. This is clearly to bring dialogism to the arena of argument. And in particular, speaks to the trend in argumentation that I identified earlier. It implies the importance to argument that listening must have. It is also a model of argument that aims for agreement.**[vii]** According to Todorov (1998:7), for Bakhtin "[t]he goal of a human community should be neither silent submission nor chaotic cacophony, but the striving for the infinitely more difficult state: "agreement."' The Russian word used here, *soglasie*, means, at root, "co-voicing."

In the first case here we might note that directing a discussion of language or words in terms of voices personalizes it in a way that a traditional model of argument would not. Secondly, it would be important to recognize that agreement, where achieved, does not mean an identity between positions, it does not involve a winner and a loser who gives up her or his position. Rather than the holding of the same position, agreement stresses an understanding of the position involved. As Todorov (1984:22) recognizes, understanding is a type of reply, it is that to which both arguer and respondent move through the utterance. In this sense, understanding is dialogical, and can be seen as a goal of argumentation within the perspective being extrapolated from Bakhtin's statements.

(3) This last remark leads to a third, briefer, point. And this has to do with the affect that arguing has on the arguer. Typically, in similar kinds of models we might talk about the way the arguer/argument aims to persuade the audience.

The movement of change is centrifugal. Where change does take place, it is in the audience. Overlooked is the way in which the act of engaging in argument can change the arguer her or himself. The dialogical argument being discussed here lays stress on the relation between the arguer and respondent in the form of the utterance/argument they co-author and come to understand.

As we might anticipate from what has been said so far, Bakhtin's work offers a particular notion of the self or I that is not isolated from its context (nothing is anything in itself for Bakhtin). The self arises in relation with others. While there is no room here to pursue this particular notion of the self, it suggests a sense in which we can think about the thought of the self being tied to the thought of the audience. As an arguer, when I consider my audience, I must of necessity consider my self, my beliefs and attitudes. And articulating my position for my audience, I also articulate it for myself. Arguing is self-discovery. And with such insight comes the possibility of change, of development of the person initiating the argument. **[viii]** This clearly relates to the sense of agreement as understanding expressed above. Accordingly, we will have here a model of argument that eschews the metaphors of war that have been the subject of a number of critiques (Cohen, 1995; Berrill, 1996), and adopts the kinds of metaphors more agreeable to recent feminists critics (Gearhart, 1979; Foss & Griffin, 1995).

*3. Bakhtin & Perelman*

Enough has been said to show the plausibility of extracting a rich and useful 'dialogical' model of argument from Bakhtin's work. Obviously, such a model needs development, and there is much to be addressed by way of concerns and problems. But I want now to turn to a more explicit way in which Bakhtin anticipates twentieth century argumentation, and to illustrate this through a brief discussion of Perelman's notion of the universal audience.

There are a number of audiences recognized in Perelman's texts (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969:30). But he makes an important distinction between the particular audience being addressed and the universal audience somehow lying within, or framed by, or participating in, that particular audience. The relationship between the two audiences has occasioned considerable debate and several key criticisms have been brought against it. As a concept, it is deemed to be riddled with inconsistencies (Ray, 1978; Ede, 1989), or even unnecessary for Perelman's (and Olbrechts-Tyteca's) own project (Johnstone, 1978:105).

To a certain extent, Perelman must share some responsibility for criticisms laid

against his notion of the universal audience, insofar as those criticisms may be based on misunderstandings. Perelman is a writer who often discusses ideas or views without clarifying his attitude towards them. Only in a subsequent discussion do we realize that an idea he has been explaining is not one he is endorsing, or at least, not one he is endorsing in the way it has been explained. Thus, some charges that the universal audience is too ideal or hypothetical a concept (Ray, 1978; Ede, 1989) stem from the following passage:

Argumentation addressed to a universal audience must convince the reader that the reasons adduced are of a compelling character, that they are self-evident, and possess an absolute and timeless validity, independent of local or historical contingencies (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969:32).

Simply put, the view expressed here *is not* Perelman's view. What he is outlining is the traditional conception of a universal audience to which philosophers have long appealed. It is *against* this conception, and more generally the conception of certitude in philosophy it characterizes, that Perelman's new rhetoric is reacting. His reason for rejecting the traditional conception is simple: "[It] links importance to previously guaranteed objectivity and not to the adherence of an audience, rejects all rhetoric not based on knowledge of the truth" (Perelman, 1989:244). Elsewhere he calls it a "supraindividual and antihistorical conception of reason" (1967:82). So, we must recognize at least two notions of 'universal audience'. That employed in the tradition being rejected; and the modification proposed by Perelman.

James Crosswhite (1989), in his apology for Perelman's concept, distinguishes the universal audience from ideal audiences and criticizes the latter. On Crosswhite's thinking, argumentation addressed to ideal audiences must be couched in the most abstract and formal terms. "The agreements such audiences are capable of reaching never concern the concrete and substantive kinds of issue such audiences were designed to deal with" (1989:161). This contrasts markedly with Perelman's universal audience, which is designed to consider concrete issues addressed in arguments directed across times and cultures.

There is an important connection between the immediate, particular audience and the universal model drawn from it. Perelman begins with a particular audience and then looks at *its* universal features. Constructing these universal audiences involves defending one's conception of universality. The philosopher addresses the universal audience as he or she conceives it (Perelman, 1989:244).

Perelman likens this universalizing to that of Kant's categorical imperative (1967:82; 1989:245), and not to the general will of Rousseau's small political community, as Ray (1978:366) had proposed. The philosopher attempts to universalize the specific features of the situation and solicits general agreement for them in this way. Only arguments which can be universally admitted are judged reasonable. This does not preclude arguments about what constitutes the universal audience for a specific case. Dialectical exchanges may ensue where opponents disagree on this. This is, after all, an essential feature of what is at stake in argumentation. Here agreement on the universal audience must be achieved through dialogue before the stage of appealing to that audience (Perelman 1982:16-17).

The universal audience is not an abstraction, then, but a populated community. It derives from its conceiver, conditioned by her or his milieu (Perelman 1989:248). The universal audience is a concrete audience which changes with time and the speaker's conception of it (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969:491). It is far from being a transcendental concept borne out of a rationalism (Ray, 1978). But although the universal audience will change, the test of universality goes on – *it* transcends a milieu or a given epoch.

Universal audiences can be constructed from particular ones by universalizing techniques that imaginatively expand audiences across cultures and time and apply notions like competence and rationality. What results is an audience that can assent to concrete propositions and not simply formal proofs and empty platitudes. But the starting point, here and in all argumentation, has been a fully-conceived audience, real or imagined, which listens, reads, and reacts. The universal is fully grounded in the practical requirements of the real. Perelman stresses this when he indicates the need for the philosopher (arguer) to guard against errors in her or his argumentation by testing theses through "submitting them to the *actual* approval of the members of that audience" (1967:83; my emphasis).

So the universal audience, it transpires, is the distillation of the concrete audience, comprised of the common features as imagined by the arguer (speaker). For an argument to be strong it should elicit the agreement of this universal audience, insofar as the arguer determines it. Put another way, a convincing argument is one whose premises are universalizable (1982:18).

While being a hypothetical construction, the Perelman model is not, on this reading, an ideal model. What this allows us to do is to keep our focus on the

immediate audience with its particular cognitive claims, while recognizing a standard of reasonableness which should envelop that audience and which it should acknowledge whenever recourse to the universal audience is required. In this way we can understand Perelman's repeated insistence that the strength of an argument is a function of the audience, and that in evaluating arguments we must look first and foremost at the audience.

One can appreciate from the preceding discussion of the universal audience why critics might be moved to charge that Perelman espouses a relativism. As van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1995:124) explain it, Perelman reduces the soundness of argumentation to the determinations of the audience. "This means that the standard of reasonableness is extremely relative. Ultimately, there could be just as many definitions of reasonableness as there are audiences." Introducing the universal audience as *the* principle of reasonableness to mitigate this problem only shifts the source of the concern to the arguer. Since the universal audience is a mental construct of the arguer, now there will be as many definitions of reasonableness as there are arguers.

Turning back to Bakhtin, let us recall that the utterance is a contextually-grounded event of which the speaker and respondent (first and second parties) are constituents. Now, to these two Bakhtin adds a third: "Each dialogue takes place as if against the background of the responsive understanding of an invisibly present third party who stands above all the participants in the dialogue (partners) (1986:126)." This third party has a special dialogic position (because, of course, there can be an unlimited number of participants in a dialogue, so this is not simply a third member). As Bakhtin (1986:126) further explains this role:

But in addition to this addressee (the second party), the author of the utterance, with a greater or lesser awareness, presupposes a higher *superaddressee* (third), whose absolutely just responsive understanding is presumed, either in some metaphysical distance or in distant historical time (the loophole addressee). In various ages and with various understandings of the world, this superaddressee and his ideally true responsive understanding assume various ideological expressions (God, absolute truth, the court of dispassionate human conscience, the people, the court of history, science, and so forth).

That we have here an entity on par with Perelman's universal audience, a similar active participant, is clear. How exactly we should understand it is less clear. On the face of it, it *looks like* the more traditional model of the universal audience, against which Perelman is rebelling. Yet at the same time, a reliance on such a traditional model seems inconsistent with what we have understood of Bakhtin's

project. Bakhtin uses the analogues of "including the experimenter within the experimental system…or the observer in the observed world in microphysics" (1986:126), to stress that there is no *outside* position. Likewise, we cannot expect the superaddressee to stand outside of the utterance, unaffected by it.

Insofar as the superaddressee represents responsive understanding, and understanding cannot be from the outside, then the superaddressee is internal to the utterance. Furthermore, this superaddressee is "presupposed" by the author of the utterance, it is controlled by the author like Perelman's arguer "creates" the hypothetical universal audience. What is less clear is whether the third party superaddressee is related to the second party respondent in as intricate a way as Perelman's universal audience is related to the particular audience. But here again, a remark of Bakhtin's is instructive: "The aforementioned third party is not any mystical or metaphysical being (although, given a certain understanding of the world, he can be expressed as such) – he is a constitutive aspect of the whole utterance who, under deeper analysis, can be revealed in it (126-127)." Like the first and second parties (and other features discussed earlier) the third party is a constitutive aspect of the utterance. As presupposed by the author, this party must be understood in some essential relation to the second party who is being addressed and who is, as we have seen, co-authoring the utterance itself. Still, there is more that needs to be explored here at a later date, especially as we look to transfer the discussion to the specific concerns of argumentation.

On another front, understanding the superaddressee/universal audience from within Bakhtin's project may allow us to resolve some of the concerns about Perelman's model. In particular, the concern that we have an extreme relativism at work here, where there will be as many universal audiences as there are arguers.

What this criticism misses that Bakhtin has made clear, is that in a very real sense the "arguer" will only exist for us in relation to an "argument" (understood now in these dialogical terms). And this argument is a unique event involving the particulars of speakers and their situation and the universal audience relevant to them. It is not a matter of each arguer deciding the universal audience in some arbitrary way, such that there are as many universal audience as there are arguers. It is a matter of the argumentative context dictating to the arguer how the universal audience can be conceived, and the respondent/particular audience playing a co-authoring role in that decision. More appropriately, then, there will be as many universal audiences as there are arguments; as many arguers as there are arguments; as many audiences, and so on. But this relativism is no relativism

at all in the way that concerns the critics.

## 4. Conclusion

What I have attempted here is to show the ways in which Bakhtin's ideas bear upon the concerns of argumentation in order to further the attention that Bakhtin has received in this field (Billig, 1996; Shotter, 1997). There is obviously much more to be said, and I have only made a start here. But I hope at least to have shown the viability of such a project. In one of the few specific references Bakhtin makes to argument he refers to the narrow understanding of dialogism involved (1986:121). But this is argument as conceived in the tradition, not argument as currently understood in argumentation theory which, in many of its essential elements is much closer to the kind of notion that Bakhtin could embrace. **[ix]**

NOTEN

**i.** The interest in dialogue models is not itself recent, of course– see Barth & Krabbe (1982), or the pragma-dialectical model of van Eemeren & Grootendorst (1984; 1992). But the latest innovations, in some cases developing out of what have become the received models like that of the pragma-dialecticians, mark a clear departure from the logical model of the premise/conclusion set tradition.

**ii.** I have in mind here Gilbert's (1997) mutual investigation of positions and Johnson's insistence that exchange must be present for there to be an argument.

**iii.** Or "super-receiver", as Todorov (1984:110) translates it.

**iv.** Where an actual interlocutor is not present, "one is presupposed in the person of a normal representative, so to speak, of the social group to which the speaker belongs" (Todorov, 1984:43). I do not want to overlook the kinds of problems that can come with such a projected "objective" standard, but this is not the place to take them up.

**v.** This is the place where I can imagine revisiting the debate of the past decade as to whether or not argument/informal logic/critical thinking is discipline specific (here, read 'genre specific'). I will not pursue this particular tangent; it suffices that we can recognize the utterances and contexts of 'arguments'.

**vi.** A text like the Cratylus indicates what is involved here: depending on who is being addressed, we see three very different kinds of discourse. I am grateful to John Burbidge for suggesting this example.

**vii.** Not all commentators interpret Bakhtin this way: some stress the sense of social struggle rather than amicable disagreement. Cf. Ken Hirschkop, 'A response to the forum on Mikhail Bakhtin' in Morson, 1986: 73-79.

**viii.** 'Person', for Bakhtin, "is a dialogic, still-unfolding, unique event" (Holquist, 1990: 162).

**ix.** The presentation of this paper at the Fourth ISSA International Conference on Argumentation was made possible by a travel grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

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