

Sound of Silence: A Review of *A Study of Bakhtin's Influence on Contemporary Western Literary Theories*

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Abstract: The book *A Study of Bakhtin's Influence on Contemporary Western Literary Theories* focuses on Bakhtin's research and explores basic laws and methods of influence research from the dimensions of time, space, subject, and communication channels. Based on presenting context, interpreting thoughts trends, and distinguishing concepts, this book starts with a clear question awareness, that is, Bakhtin's image is "ubiquitous and difficult to locate" in the development history of contemporary Western literary theory, produces a detailed text analysis and has innovative and transcendent thinking.

Keywords: Bakhtin; contemporary western literary theory; influence research

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标题: 寂静之声：评《巴赫金对当代西方文学理论的影响研究》

内容摘要: 《巴赫金对当代西方文学理论的影响研究》一书聚焦巴赫金的研究，从时间、空间、主体、传播渠道等维度探讨影响研究的基本规律和方法。本书以呈现语境、解读思潮、区分概念为基础，从明确的问题意识出发，即巴赫金的形象在当代西方文学理论发展史上的“无处不在、难以定位”产生详细的文本分析，具有创新性和超越性思维。

关键词: 巴赫金；当代西方文学理论；影响研究

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“If the difficulty of locating is the biggest mystery that Bakhtin left for posterity, then Bakhtin's influence is everywhere, and it is its most distinctive academic effect” (Zeng 4). *A Study of Bakhtin's Influence on Contemporary Western*

Literary Theories shows the unique discourse and way of thinking of Bakhtin's literary theory. More importantly, it shows Bakhtin's thoughts and image's pervasive and far-reaching influence on 20th-century Western theoretical ideas. Formalism, structuralism, post-structuralism, semiotics, reader reflection theory, neo-Marxism, neo-historicism, and feminism can almost all find ideological resonance in his thoughts.

Dilemma about Bakhtin: Embracing Changes in Ideological Turn

Bakhtin's ghost is everywhere in the history of Western literary theory, wandering around. However, it is also challenging to grasp his image. This is also the author's question awareness in the discussion. Whether in the overall structure or the writing logic specific to each subsection, *A Study of Bakhtin's Influence on Western Contemporary Literary Theories* follows the objective presentation of representative topics and historical context. It has done a lot of research paths for extended critical discussion. From the perspective of the external environment, the research of any scholar cannot be separated from the time and context in which it is located, and the influence of research cannot be separated from the trend of thoughts and representative scholars at every important historical node. Therefore, in the first and second chapters, the author selects Kristeva and Todorov as representative scholars and elaborates on the complex relationship between them and Bakhtin's thoughts, such as inheritance, rereading, transformation, dialogue, and debate. Through the presentation of this book, we can see that Bakhtin's studies have an extensive and complex system, its internal academic resources are abundant, and the motifs and keywords that can be excavated are also varied. However, Zeng Jun is not satisfied with purely collating work but attempts to reflect on the future development space of influence research through historical data analysis: "Traditional comparative poetics research often adopts a simple sender - media (communicator) - recipient's one-dimensional study. But the influencing factors of real literary theory are much more complicated" (25). At the same time, Bakhtin's significance as the center of the issue has already surpassed his writings and thoughts but turned into a more changeable image and a more abstract specter. New content is continuously generated in later generations' acceptance, rereading, and re-creation. This book emphasizes in many places that in the long history, Bakhtin provided not only his thoughts but also an existence that was symbolized and embodied in the history of acceptance; that is, what the author said in the book that "the image of Bakhtin who has become a Western postmodern academic star and those contemporary scholars who regard Bakhtin as a theoretical resource of postmodernism" (205). Just like

the table of changes in Bakhtin's image compiled in the Introduction, Bakhtin's image has been reshaped in different eras, countries, and scholars, with substantial temporal and spatial differences between them. For example, in France in the 1960s, Bakhtin's image may have been interpreted as a post-formalist by Kristeva or a structuralist poetics introduced by Todorov. However, in Britain in the 1970s, he became an image of a Marxist sociolinguist or a more avant-garde formalist innovator. Although the tabulation of information structure is called an imperfect and concise expression, it is evident that a lot of work has been condensed in it, and the author only put this work in the introduction as an introductory presentation.

Another excellent value of this book lies in the detailed distinction and understanding of various theoretical terms and academic concepts. This is an essential foundation for all extended thinking not to be "off track", and it is also the advantage of a scholar with a systematic understanding of Bakhtin. The author's selection of essential concepts in Bakhtin's theory is not random. Instead, the author chooses the most critical or historical nodal meaning phrases based on a holistic grasp. What's more remarkable is the author's understanding of these phrases. The distinction of concepts also considers the historical changes and the different interpretations of different scholars, making each concept have subtle differences in different eras or scholars. Taking Kristeva's concept of "threshold" in Chapter 1 as an example, the author finds through comparative analysis that, in terms of her acceptance of Bakhtin, Kristeva's concept of "threshold" comes from Bakhtin's "chronotope". The author points out the importance of this concept in the history of Western literary criticism: "'Threshold' connected Kristeva's thoughts in the 1970s including the subject of the process, the intertextual thoughts of intertextuality, and the realization of language and the crossover of cultural and political boundaries and many other themes" (94-95). Even concerning the "Western" framework, the author also reminds us in many places in the book, thinking that our observations from an external perspective should be more detailed rather than directly treating "Western" as a chaotic whole. Whether it is the apparent differences in the cultural background of European and American countries or the unique position of Bakhtin's Russia in the entire Western world, this book has carried out key distinctions and clear explanations, especially for the context of Russian literature and culture. The theoretical investigation helps show the cultural background of Bakhtin's many theories. For example, the author examines the medieval folk culture background of Bakhtin's theory of carnivalization. This kind of culture has another expression in Russian cultural theory, namely "folk culture", which is opposite to "higher culture (professional culture)". From this perspective, we can understand this source culture

more intuitively, “implying a complex relationship between folk culture (or popular culture) and higher culture (or elite culture)” (Zeng 208).

The academic influence and acceptance of Bakhtin are manifested on multiple levels. Some are direct conceptual references, and some are ideologically invisible references. Therefore, the reliability of this part of the research is primarily derived from the researcher’s overall trend of thoughts. In-depth understanding of related academic trends and representative scholars, the author of this book, Zeng Jun, has written many unique research books related to Bakhtin, such as *Research on Bakhtin’s Reception History in China*(2004). These long and meticulous accumulations have greatly ensured the depth and comprehensiveness of his Bakhtin research. From ideological trends and doctrines to specific scholars, Bakhtin’s various traces in the history of Western literary theory are presented in detail. The author’s extensive reading and collation work and his firm grasp of materials could be presented this way. In-depth understanding makes the whole book present a complex form of multiple voices speaking simultaneously.

Critical Rereading: Seeing Growth in the Gap

A Study of Bakhtin’s Influence on Western Contemporary Literary Theories never tried to portray Bakhtin as a perfect body without flaws. On the contrary, the author is calm and restrained in his observations of Bakhtin, and he does not hide away from possible flaws in Bakhtin’s thoughts. For example, in the book, the author sharply pointed out the flaws in Bakhtin’s theory through the comparative study of Wayne Booth and Bakhtin, that is, the neglect of female identity. When talking about a specific homogenous relationship between Bakhtin’s and Rabelais’s theory, the author has a precise and vivid description of this lack of female perspective: “Rabelais can recognize the existence of women, he can fool them or praise them, treat them as a class, but what he cannot or does not want to do is to ‘see’ them” (282). So Chapter 4 focuses on the topic of feminist literary criticism. The author first states that his question awareness and research on feminism, both in the subject matter and narrative method, differ from the previous chapters. In this chapter, the author discusses why Bakhtin’s theory “does not seem to have a master-level influence” on feminism and “this is not an unintentional negligence”. However, the author also emphasizes that Bakhtin’s extensive influence on feminist criticism is unquestionable. Many feminist critics have absorbed his theories to varying degrees and “jointly promoted the transformation of feminist literary criticism” (Zeng 220). Through the interpretation of the concepts of body, carnival, chronotope, and so on, the author critically pointed out that there are breaks and stitches between Bakhtin’s

theory and feminist criticism. In a sense, Bakhtin's theory, such as dialogue, carnival, and polyphony, only provides new interpretation framework ideas and discourses for related feminist literary criticism issues at the application level. On the other hand, its essence may be just a powerful tool for analyzing texts and therefore presents a certain uniqueness in history: "In Bakhtin's carnival theory of feminist literary critics, the duality of death and rebirth is once again reduced to the revolutionary nature of destruction" (Zeng 245).

While Bakhtin's thoughts are more vivid due to their imperfections, *A Study of Bakhtin's Influence on Western Contemporary Literary Theories* also tries to show that Bakhtin's image is not already solidified and completed. Still, the dynamics and generativity are what it is. These characteristics are also the biggest reason this ghost can wander among Western literary theories. The awareness of communication and dialogue appears in the overall writing structure of this book. When discriminating some similar views or thought paths, the author not only tries to clarify the differences and distinctions between them but also pays more attention to their similarities. As the author clarified in this book, he wants to do not purely historical sorting but more to show the versatility and variability of Bakhtin's influence with texts and materials, which naturally also includes his critics of Bakhtin. Criticism expresses the objectivity of research by being closely connected with time and context. For example, in the 1960s and 1970s, this was the second time Bakhtin was discovered in Western academia. The author concludes that "Western Marxism is in the process of disintegrating popular culture studies from the Frankfurt School to the Birmingham School during this period. Western academia accepted and reinterpreted Bakhtin's carnival theory in this changing cultural context" (209). For a monograph researched by a scholar, the amount of information may not surpass that of reference books. Still, it is far beyond the existence of reference books in academic depth, reflected in the author's subjective writing. This kind of subjectivity does not mean being divorced from reality and disrespecting objective data but showing the author's point of view to Bakhtin. The solid critical thinking mode of this book is closely related to the author's philosophy of communicating and dialoguing between different scholars and different thoughts; Bakhtin's dialogue theory may inspire him. What this book presents is not only Bakhtin's thoughts or even a diachronic summary of Bakhtin's influence but also reflects the relevant critical scholars and the origin of their thoughts in contemporary Western literary theories from the perspective of the study of Bakhtin.

When talking about critical concepts such as "remote context", the author mentioned that from the perspective of such a broad and flowing time dimension,

“Bakhtin’s thoughts of dialogue is infinite. There is no absolute beginning, and there is no absolute end” (Zeng 321). Although the author has done a lot of research on Bakhtin’s influence, he still holds an open attitude and believes that Bakhtin’s research still has a vast discourse space, and it is not limited to all the work he has done so far. In the last chapter of the book, the author still tries to extend to a topic with great academic discourse space, that is, the vital connection between related Marxist theories and Bakhtin. This is a general summary and combing and an enlightening extended topic. Just like Bakhtin’s polyphony theory, this book also presents a polyphonic structure. It can be seen that it faithfully respects historical facts, combs relevant documents in detail, and pursues Bakhtin’s theory in the context of contemporary Western literary theory. At the same time, the objective presentation always maintains polyphonic, holistic dialectical thinking that transcends one-dimensional research.

Multi-tone Chorus: Hear Resonance in Silence

The influence of thoughts is that in a long time, the body of the scholar himself has disappeared, but his theory is still like a star, shining a unique brilliance from time to time in the silent night sky. *A Study of Bakhtin’s Influence on Western Contemporary Literary Theories* is an insight into Bakhtin’s ghost image, where subtle reverberation can still be heard in silence.

A simple and interesting observation is that “sound” is one of the essential keywords throughout this book. The dialogue, polyphony, chorus, heteroglossia, and symmetry used in the text are all words closely related to the concept of sound. There is also a detailed explanation showing that their selection and use are not accidental and random. In Chapter 5, the author compares Wayne Booth and Bakhtin from the narrative rhetoric and ethical dimensions of the novel theory and uses the appropriate metaphor of “simultaneous chorus” to express the similarity and complex ideological relationship between Booth and Bakhtin. Although there are differences in details and academic paths between the two in specific viewpoints, they are essentially resonant, which is similar to the polyphonic structure proposed by Bakhtin. The “simultaneous chorus” in literary criticism theory means that scholars are responsible for their own words, and together they form an overall structure with a certain harmony and cooperation. It is not limited to the era but has common influences on later generations. The author believes that the completion of this simultaneous chorus comes from “Booth saw Bakhtin’s multiple selves in the social interaction and the characteristics of polyphony and dialogue caused by it. He believes that Bakhtin established the literature of scrutiny and evaluation.

Another broader dimension of the work is that our language is a chorus of multiple languages” (Zeng 271). Therefore, in the reference and learning of Bakhtin, Booth also gradually developed and perfected his novel theory. The author finds that both Bakhtin and Wayne Booth believed that there was no objectivity in the novel and admitted that the author’s voice always exists in the work. Bakhtin’s discussion of sound prompted Booth to begin to think about the question of “listening” in the power theory of language: “Booth accepted Bakhtin’s point of view and believed that language at any given moment in history, from head to toe, is a variety of ideological contradictions, different social groups, different era ideas, and development trends” (273).

From a more abstract point of view, this book attempts to make Bakhtin’s ghost make thoughtful sounds again. Still, these sounds are by no means just amplifying the decibel of the original sound but a transcendent and innovative speech of the author himself. In this book, the author does not only examine the various types of carnival theories that have been interpreted in detail but to relax it into the overall vision of Western literary criticism, looking for the critical influence it is positioned to produce. It can be seen that multiple doctrines have appropriated Bakhtin’s carnival theory in the history of contemporary Western thoughts. Their expropriation at different levels also reflects the tremendous academic potential and interpretability of carnival theory from the side. As the dynamics of sound waves, Bakhtin’s academic thoughts show dynamic variability. They cannot be statically positioned in a specific form, and when the way of “listening” is different, Bakhtin’s ghost can also be emitted as a different kind of whisper. Similar to the immersive atmosphere that sound can create, research on the influence of a scholar is also enormously immersive. Only by immersing in it can you go deep, opening up the pattern from the details, and have an empathetic reading of the scholar. However, this dual polyphony can bring about dialectical thinking by being able to listen, feel, and understand while jumping out, calmly staring, observing, and criticizing. The author refers to Bakhtin’s paradigm of influence on Booth and their common influence on Western narrative theorists as a kind of “resonance of the affected person”, and summarizes it to three characteristics as “different acceptance dimensions and methods for the same theory” “different scholars focus on the acceptance and development according to their question awareness” and “the homogeneous mixture of indirect influence and acceptance” (Zeng 298). Such as in Bakhtin’s dialogue theory, only the two-way collision and exchange of soul and thoughts can have dynamic and long-term progress, not just one-way output and reception. In terms of creativity, the author integrates Bakhtin’s essential concepts

and often connects them cleverly in unexpected places. For example, the author believes Bakhtin's hyper-linguistics can be used to better grasp and understand his dialogue theory (or dialogism thoughts) as the first breakthrough point. The author shows that "social polyphony" of ideological symbols has become the basis of Bakhtin's hyper-linguistic philosophy: "Because of different subject's 'polyphony', the controversy and analysis of ideological consciousness could be generated, and it will be possible to start an endless dialogue. This kind of 'polyphony' is another theoretical expression in *Dostoevsky's Poetics*: 'multi-voice character'" (Zeng 319). This kind of image interpretation not only makes the development of the concept clearer but also opens up the space for thinking. The multiple uses of sound-related concepts in the book are the best examples.

The book starts with a straightforward awareness question and ends with unfinished thinking. The writing logic in it allows a research monograph to break the boundaries brought about by the accumulation of historical materials but reflects an inclusive, consistent attitude. In the introduction chapter, the author made it clear that the book's research goals are twofold: it takes Western literary theory masters and important literary theory trendsetters as the main research objects, and explores how Bakhtin influenced them, how did they accept and creatively develop Bakhtin's thoughts; then is to constructively reflect on the research methods of comparative poetics on this basis and to form a more conscious and systematic research paradigm. These two paths have their strong voices in the book, and they constantly resonate in the context of history. Just like the precise description of his question awareness at the beginning of the book, Bakhtin's ghost is "ubiquitous but difficult to locate", this naturally contradictory metaphor is presented throughout the work as an abstract logic during the writing. This is also one of the essential meanings of Bakhtin's influence research: personal thoughts are not limited to his writings. The interpretation, feedback, and rewriting of later scholars is also an important dimension and continuous development and transformation of Bakhtin's thoughts. In the seemingly quiet place, the author listens carefully to the sound, and the thoughts flow and spread with the sound waves in a long history: "Based on the present, responding to the past, and imagining the future, it may be the cultural position with Bakhtin's dialogism spirit" (Zeng 321).

Works Cited

Zeng Jun. *A Study of Bakhtin's Influence on Western Contemporary Literary Theories*. Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2021.