

# Film, Bakhtin, and the Dialogics: A Metalinguistic Approach to Film as Communication

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## Introduction

Recently, Hollywood films are being released globally at the same time in different countries. For several months prior to their release, directors and leading actors travel around the world to build anticipation for each of these global event. On the day of their debut, either at midnight or at noon, movie fans get together and celebrate these film openings in front of movie theaters in places as diverse as Los Angeles, London and Tokyo. This increases people's subjective feelings of uniformity, their sense of a shared experience, their comprehension of globalization, and their consciousness of living in a globalized society. Are these feelings true to the facts? Do these diverse audiences really share the same film in the same way?

## Bakhtinian linguistics

Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975), a Russian philosopher of language, has had a great influence on different fields of studies since Julia Kristeva (1980/1969) first introduced his ideas to the western world. She recognized that Bakhtin had already put forth significant concepts of poststructuralism such as the denial of univocality, the infinite spiral of interpretation, the negation of originary presence in speech, the unstable identity of signs, the positioning of subjects by discourse, the untenable nature of inside/outside oppositions, and the pervasive presence of intertextuality. Since then, his ideas have been accepted and applied to the analysis of a wide range of topics beyond

the discipline of linguistics. In the research field of film studies, for example, Robert Stam (1992) has applied Bakhtin's ideas to his discussions of film from the perspective of cultural studies. Tabakowska (1995) as well as Godard (1995) mentions Bakhtin's ideas as the rationale for translation studies in its cultural turn. In the field of pedagogy, Bakhtin has been linked to Freire, especially as regards the topic of problem-solving-learning (Yabe, 2004; Rule, 2010).

Focusing on difference and multiplicity, Bakhtin (1981/1934-41) insists that discourse "lives on the boundary between its own context and another, alien, context" (284). This could be useful especially when the cultures of film and audiences are different from each other. This paper aims to redefine film communication mediated by translation in terms of the various ideas of Bakhtinian linguistics.

### **Dialogue as the central idea**

Bakhtin (1986/1952-53) recognizes language as speech communication and argues that "dialogue is a classic form of speech communication" (72). Clark and Holquist (1984) argued that the "distinguishing feature of this philosophy of language is its dialogic emphasis on articulations between categories whose opposition is the basis of other linguistic theories" (10).

In his numerous and wide-ranging writings, Bakhtin refers to the concept of dialogue so often and differently that the term seems too boundless and manifold to follow. Clark & Holquist (1984), however, explain that 'utterance' is the basic building block of Bakhtin's dialogic conception (10). Holquist (1990) suggests that it can be reduced to the three basic structural elements of "utterance, reply and relation between two interlocutors" (38).

Any specific utterance has a direct relation to the utterances of others,

which Bakhtin thinks is the reality of language. Bakhtin (1973/1929)<sup>1</sup> emphasizes that the "utterance is a social phenomenon" (82). An utterance always has its addressee. Even before being spoken, an utterance presupposes a response from the addressee, takes it into account, weaves it into itself, then makes itself up, which means an utterance is the product of the changeable and unsettled relationship between the addresser and the addressee. Moreover, a starting utterance could be the reply to a previous utterance.

For example, when a mother says "It's Friday!" to her daughter, this commonly means more than a statement about the calendar. The mother may have heard her daughter say, "I need a new backpack." earlier that week, so the utterance could possibly be a reply to her daughter's previous utterance. It represents the mother's caring for her daughter in terms of remembering what her daughter said, her giving permission to buy a new backpack, an invitation to go shopping together, and perhaps a reminder that Friday afternoon is the best time for shopping. The mother expects her daughter to say in reply, "Thanks, Mom. Let's go shopping this afternoon."

On the other hand, this same utterance could have a very different meaning, e.g., the mother had heard her daughter say previously, "I promise I'll tidy up my room before this weekend." The mother's utterance of "It's Friday!" assigns blame to her daughter for not tidying up yet and a reminder to carry out her promise. In this case, the mother expects her daughter to say, "Sorry, I haven't done it yet, but I'll do it today as promised, Mom."

An utterance is the product of the addresser and the addressee, and the meaning varies depending on the ongoing relationship between them and the context.

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1 It is well known that there have been many discussions about various controversies concerning what Bakhtin actually wrote and what he didn't under the hardships of the Stalinist regime. The actual author of *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (1973/1929) is considered to be Bakhtin by most scholars.

## Accent and intonation

Bakhtin's concepts of 'accent' and 'intonation' are appropriate for approaching language in film because acting involves speaking. Film is originally a written text produced by a script writer who creates or develops the characters and breathes life into their lines. The script is handed over to the director. Then, at the last moment, it is all left to the actor as to how the character is performed and the lines are spoken. The meaning of language in film is shaped not only by vocal expression but also by physical and visual expression. A superior performer could wrench ten or twelve meanings from a simple sentence. As Louis Giannetti (2013) points out, written speech is a mere blueprint or outline when compared to the complexities of spoken speech produced by a good actor (224). Language in film, both written and spoken, can only be analyzed from the point of view of the dynamic and variable nature of language.

Bakhtin recognizes accent and intonation as important elements in deciding the meaning of language. Since both of these come from the emotions of the speaker, they are closely connected with the speaker's consciousness. Further, he recognizes the consciousness of the speaker as a social as well as personal phenomenon. This is the point where he challenged Freud. Bakhtin (1986) declared that "individual consciousness is a social-ideological fact" (12) and that "the word is the ideological phenomenon par excellence" (ibid. 13).

Discussing psychology (personal), and ideology (social), in the consciousness of utterances, Bakhtin never takes sides; he advocates neither psychologism nor anti-psychologism. However, he admits that the latter is correct in refusing to derive ideology from the psyche, while at the same time acknowledging that psychologism is also correct, because there is no outer sign without an inner sign. In concluding his discussion, he writes:

In the verbal medium, in each utterance, however trivial it may be, this living dialectical synthesis is constantly taking place between the psyche and ideology, between the inner and outer. In each speech act, subjective experience perishes in the objective fact of the enunciated word-utterance, and the enunciated word is subjectified in the act of responsive understanding in order to generate, sooner or later, a counterstatement (ibid. pp.40-41).

An utterance is not the simple product of either psyche or ideology but the product of a constant dialectical synthesis. Bakhtin's recognition of consciousness in utterance provides a key to analyzing translation in film in terms of how a source language in film (English) is translated into a target language (Japanese) as well as how international audiences (Japanese people) communicate with film (Hollywood movies) mediated by translation. This is because meaning always derives from dialectical synthesis if it acquires a new understanding on the border between two different cultures.

### **Book as written dialogue**

Bakhtin (1973) recognizes that a book is also a type of dialogue when it is considered to be a verbal performance in print. A book fulfills the function of a book when it is read, which means there is a type of verbal communication or verbal interaction between the book and the reader:

It (a book) is something discussable in actual, real life dialogue, but aside from that, it is calculated for active perception, involving attentive reading and inner responsiveness, and for organized, printed reaction in the various forms devised by the particular sphere of verbal communication in question (book reviews, critical surveys, defining influence on subsequent works, and so on) (95).

Bakhtin also recognizes the possible interaction of the reader with the author's other books and with similar books written by other authors. This leads to his future concept of 'intertextuality':

Moreover, a verbal performance of this kind also inevitably orients itself with respect to previous performances in the same sphere, both those by the same author and those by other authors. It inevitably takes its points of departure from some particular state of affairs involving a scientific problem or a literary style. Thus the printed verbal performance engages, as it were, in ideological colloquy of large scale: it responds to something, objects to something, affirms something, anticipates possible responses and objections, seeks support, and so on (ibid.).

In this passage, there would be no difference in meaning if the word *book* were replaced by the word *film*. Although Bakhtin never dealt directly with film in his writings, which seems strange considering that he lived in the golden age of Russian cinema, his concept of dialogue can well be applied to analyzing film. No other theory seems more appropriate to analyze language in film than his because film inherently consists of dialogue.

Film starts with dialogue and ends with dialogue throughout the whole process of film making. Scriptwriting, for example, is a work through dialogue even when the author doesn't have any co-writers. It isn't a solitary, straight, and uncommunicative work, as Bakhtin (1986) claims that "to express oneself means to make oneself an object for another and for oneself ("the actualizing of consciousness")" (110). He calls one's consciousness 'voice,' considering it to be an eloquent interlocutor within oneself:

Any truly creative voice can only be the second voice in the discourse. Only the second voice—pure relationship—can be completely objectless and not cast a figural, substantive shadow. The writer is a person who is able to work in a language while standing outside language, who has the gift of indirect speaking" (ibid.).

In Bakhtinian linguistics, a monologue is recognized to be a dialogue between two different consciousnesses within a person. It happens everyday when you decide which clothes to wear in front of a mirror. The decision is made both subjectively and objectively: your subjective voice/consciousness

insists on the blue shirt and your objective voice/consciousness recommends the white shirt. On one occasion, your subjective voice/consciousness is dominant, and on another occasion your objective voice/consciousness dominates. The decision is always changeable, made through a dialogic process within oneself. Bakhtin (1973) argues that a human being cannot exist just by itself but must always be settled by two consciousnesses. This is why he insisted that "the actual reality of language-speech is the social event of verbal interaction implemented in an utterance or utterances" (94).

### Perspective on Audiences

The meaning of film changes depending on the audiences as well as the time and space, which Bakhtin (1981) calls 'chronotope.' Frank Capra's movie *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939) is a classic film for Japanese audiences as a must-see to understand what democracy is. It won the Oscar for original screenplay and received nominations in ten categories in 1940. It was successful because it glorified not only the hero's daring spirit but also American democracy, the national foundation of the United States. The film appeared at the time of WWII, and was effective in promoting patriotism among American audiences and stimulating their sense of having a rightful cause to fight.

It is interesting to note that this film was released in Japan in October, 1941, shortly before the Pearl Harbor attack just before the Pacific War broke out. The following are the theatrical opening dates of the five most successful films of 1939, which are on the list of AFI100,<sup>2</sup> in US and Japan:<sup>3</sup>

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2 AFI100 is a list of the 100 best American movies, as determined by the American Film Institute from a poll of more than 1,500 artists and leaders in the film industry who chose from a list of 400 nominated movies. The list was unveiled in 1998 and updated in 2007.

<<http://www.filmsite.org/afi100filmsA.html>>

3 <<http://www.imdb.com/>>

<i>Stagecoach</i>	(US) Mar. 1939	(JAPAN) June 1940
<i>Wuthering Heights</i>	(US) Apr. 1939	(JAPAN) Dec. 1950
<i>The Wizard of Oz</i>	(US) Aug. 1939	(JAPAN) Dec. 1954
<i>Mr. Smith Goes to Washington</i>	(US) Oct. 1939	(JAPAN) Oct. 1941
<i>Gone With the Wind</i>	(US) Dec. 1939	(JAPAN) Sept. 1952

A key point to note is that the two films *Wuthering Heights* and *The Wizard of Oz*, which debuted in the United States earlier than *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, were released in Japan more than five years after the war. Why did this happen? Tanikawa (1996, 2009) argues that this was due to the influence of Japanese governmental film censorship. The committee focused on the movie's portrayal of corruption in the US government, and decided to show it to the Japanese public in order to let them know how legitimate it is to fight against the US, a nation based on the philosophy of democracy.

After the war, the portrayal of corruption was also the reason why the American military GHQ (General Headquarters, the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers) did not give permission to re-release *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* in Japan. It was a time of occupation and social reformation under the supervision of GHQ, and the American authorities considered that the film could be a deterrent to fostering democratization.

The case of the film *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* indicate indeterminacy of meaning. During the war, both Japanese and American authorities focused on the corruption in the American government that was delineated in the film, and used this in opposite ways. One decided to show it, and the other not. But now, this film is popular among Japanese audiences. In Japanese classrooms, it is now used as a teaching material to understand what democracy is. The meaning of a film changes depending on the audiences in different times and spaces.

More than half a century before reception theory and reader-response theory, Bakhtin turned down the traditional approach based on the notion

that text belongs to, and its meaning is tyrannically centered on, the author. Instead, he focuses attention on the reader. This may suggest Barthes' (1977/1968) declaration that "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (148). However, Bakhtin (1986) does not fall into this dichotomy. Instead, he recognizes the existence of the author in a text:

The word (or in general any sign) is interindividual. Everything that is said, expressed, is located outside the "soul" of the speaker and does not belong only to him. The word cannot be assigned to a single speaker. The author (speaker) has his own inalienable right to the word, but the listener also has his rights, and those whose voices are heard in the word before the author comes upon it also have their rights (after all, there are no words that belong to no one). The word is a drama in which three characters participate (it is not a duet, but a trio) (pp.121-12).

Though he uses the confusing term "word" here, it can be understood as "utterance" or "text." For him, text is one type of utterance consisting of dynamic piles of words. What is interesting about his recognition is that he considers author, reader, and text as three interlocutors in dialogue. Using the metaphor of a drama played by three actors, he emphasizes the possibility of interaction between author and reader, reader and text, author and reader. He also admits the tripartite interaction between the three, which means that the meaning of a text comes from the four possible interactions that happen in the act of reading. In this way, Bakhtin opens up the meaning centrifugally to every possible direction, and suggests a departure beyond the limits of what is already understood.

Jauss's (1982) theory of the 'horizon of expectation' is not enough to analyze the attitudes of Japanese audiences. It asserts that readers internalize the conventions of mode, tradition, genre, and literary idiom from their reading experiences and bring these into their new reading. The limitation of this theory is that it allows only one horizon, which means it is not useful when there are different reading expectations and strategies. Just

as is clear from the attitudes of Japanese audiences, international audiences/readers so easily go beyond the horizon of expectation.

The concept of 'implied reader' introduced by Iser (1974, 1978) allows a reader to traverse the text by closing gaps and filling blanks so as to make it consistent. As long as readers anticipate a text, their reading is active and creative. However, they are not allowed to produce a new meaning, because Iser's concept rests on the assumption that, after all, text is prior to readers.

Fish (1980) recognizes active readers who determine the meanings of text rather than those who are ready to accept a predetermined meaning. Compared with reception theorists, reader-response theorists pay less attention to the aesthetic values of the text and the process of reading than they do to the production of meaning. They encourage readers to put their literary experience into the text and to re-create the meaning through their interpretation.

Criticism of reader-response theories warns against the possibility of falling into anarchic subjectivism because readers would leave a lot of knowledge unknown and unlearned if they were allowed to produce any meaning they want. Reader-response theorists do not admit that reading could be purely subjective but emphasize that reading is always both subjective and objective. As readers work on putting their ideas and experiences into the text, they obtain new understanding through it. Fish insists that only 'informed readers,' who have already achieved competency to read a text, can accomplish such a reading.

Fish (1980) also introduces the concept of 'interpretive community' which consists of those readers who share acknowledged interpretive strategies. He insists that "no reading, however outlandish it might appear, is inherently an impossible one" (347), yet at the same time he insists that an interpretation is only admitted through "presently recognized interpretive strategies for producing the text" (ibid.). The stability of an interpretation is only achieved in an agreement within a self-defining community of readers

and is dependent on the formation of a community that competes with other communities as to its differences and disagreements.

However, the concept of interpretive community cannot explain the different attitudes of pre-war and post-war Japanese audiences toward the film *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, because it is formulated on the premise that the same community has the same interpretation. The concept of interpretive community also does not anticipate readers who shift from one community to another based on different values. In addition, the Japanese audience's different interpretations of this film were not established by any admissions, permissions, or competitions with other interpretive communities.

Bakhtin's concepts of variability and ephemerality of meaning give us a good explanation for the different attitudes of pre-war and post-war Japanese audiences toward the same film. Contrary to Fish's exclusive interpretations, Bakhtin allows any possible minor interpretations and decentralizes any possible impulse toward the multiplicity and difference of meaning.<sup>4</sup>

### Translation as reported speech

According to Bakhtin (1973), 'reported speech' is "speech within speech, utterance within utterance, and at the same time also speech about speech, utterance about utterance" (115). His main concern is the dynamic interrelationship between reported speech and the author's speech in the process of listening to each other because he finds "basic and constant tendencies in the active reception of other speakers' speech" which are "fundamental also for dialogue" (117). He emphasizes that these tendencies

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4 Bakhtin (1981) argues that "the word lives, as it were, on the boundary between its own context and another, alien context of the understood only by text" (284), and that it is possible to "augment understanding and departure beyond the limits of the understood" only by "the layering of meaning upon meaning, voice upon voice" (1986, 121). In this way, he makes it possible to open up ways of reading for political minorities.

are not derived from the individual soul but from society, although the active reception happens between individual human beings. This is based on his belief that it is a human being full of inner speech who receives other speakers' utterances. He also argues that inner speech consists of all of an individual's experiences in encoded forms, which he calls "apperceptive background" (118). Human beings come into contact with speech from outside only through their inner speech. In this sense, inner speech could be called individual consciousness which he recognizes as "a social-ideological fact" (12). Yet apperception is largely unconscious for Bakhtin, since for him all kinds of human experience are to be reduced to one experience in which "Word comes into contact with word" (118).

Bakhtin finds two basic but different directions of dynamism characterizing the "inter-orientation between reporting and reported speech," which he also refers to as "the authorial and reported speech" or "the author's and another person's speech" (120). One is the linear style of reporting speech which is a borrowed term from the study of art by Heinrich Wölfflin (2015/1915). In the linear style, Bakhtin (1973) explains, "the basic tendency in reacting to reported speech may be to maintain its integrity and authenticity; a language may strive to forge hard and fast boundaries for reported speech" (119) and "the explicitness and inviolability of the boundaries between authorial and reported speech reach the utmost limits" (120).

The other is the pictorial style of reporting, which works in direct opposition to the linear style. In the pictorial style "the reporting context strives to break down the self-contained compactness of the reported speech, to resolve it, to obliterate its boundaries" (ibid.).

Bakhtin suggests that there may be diversely subdivided types within the range of this second pictorial direction. In one of them, "the authorial context loses the greater objectivity it normally commands in comparison with reported speech" because "the reported speech becomes more forceful

and more active than the authorial context framing it" and "begins to resolve, as it were, the reporting context, instead of the other way around" (121). Here, the authorial context is recognized as subjective reported speech, and "stands in opposition to a commenting and retorting authorial context that recognizes itself to be equally subjective" (122). He explains that "in works of fiction, this is often expressed compositionally by the appearance of a narrator who replaces the author" and "the narrator's speech is just as individualized, colorful, and nonauthoritative as is the speech of the characters."

He categorizes this type as "relativistic individualism" (123) with its dissolution or decomposition of the authorial context which was distinctive at the time he was writing in the late 1920s. Actually, his analysis is still valid in modern Japanese film translation. The context of a film deconstructed and reconstructed through the process of translation is delivered to Japanese audiences, and this distorted context possibly has an unignorable influence on how these audiences see the world.

### **Text of Japanese film translation**

It's been a while since Nornes (2004) furiously denounced the Japanese subtitling for the lines of the female character in "RoboCop" (1987) and declared it to be abusive. He points out that the use of Japanese feminine sentence-final particles in the Japanese subtitles distorts the character of the female cop. Though she is tough and aggressive enough to knock down the bad guys, the Japanese translation doesn't endorse her behavior. The incoherence between the translation and the character becomes all the more conspicuous in the medium of film where image, sound, and language are presented at the same time.

In the Japanese translation, the power dynamics between the female cop and her male partner are also distorted by the use of traditional Japanese

women's language. Even when we know that the hero is going to become Robocop (the movie's leading character and superhero), the language that the female cop uses with him is too soft and modest. Given that he is a newcomer to the police station while she is an experienced veteran, there is no reason for her to behave so respectfully toward him. Nonetheless, the Japanese translation forces her to express traditional feminine modesty, which thus distorts their actual relationship.

On the other hand, the use of Japanese men's language for the lines of the male cop characterizes him as too arrogant to her from the first moment they meet. The masculinity and dominance that is innate to traditional Japanese men's language is combined with the femininity and modesty of traditional Japanese women's language, which leads to a distortion not only of the power relation between the two characters but also to a distortion of the whole story.

The purpose of film translation is to accurately transmit the meaning of dialogue lines as they are. However, this is not possible with subtitles because these are required to provide the audience with a compressed understanding quick enough to keep pace with the changing scenes on the screen. In order to do so, subtitling adopts direct expression rather than euphemism. It sometimes adopts metaphor because this is socially conventional and works straightforwardly and quickly on the audience's emotions and their unconscious. This is just like a conditioned response; subtitles are ephemeral and go away without leaving anything to be consciously examined by the audience, but they always come back.

Ohshima (1990), a professional Japanese translator of literature, admits that she usually chooses more restrained and evasive words for women's lines because of her ingrained habit of Japanese gender language, either conscious or unconscious.

Nakamura (2007), a sociolinguist, recognizes that traditional women's and men's language in Japan are representations of the richness of Japanese

linguistic capital. She insists that translators must select a single word from abundant alternatives in order to best construct the correct image of the character. She also insists that, in translation, women's language is the standard default selection for women's lines. Otherwise, readers would probably pay more attention to who the speaker is rather than what he or she says. The standard use of traditional women's language in Japanese translation is considered to be effective in marking women's lines and in transmitting the meaning smoothly to readers.

Nakamura also claims that the standard use of women's language in translation results from what she calls the linguistic ideology which holds that, in Japanese, "women speak women's language" and "women should speak women's language." This probably leads readers/audiences to re-confirm the idea of women's subordination and men's dominance in Japanese culture, which they understand very well. But why has this use of women's language in film translation continued to be accepted?

Nakamura indicates that women's language in film translation belongs to foreign women as a cultural norm. This suggests that Japanese female audiences keep a certain distance from women's language. They don't think that women's language belongs to themselves but to the foreign women portrayed in fiction on screen. They don't see this as their own problem, so they accept it as a prerequisite of their film appreciation without feeling uncomfortable.

Whatever the cause may be, audiences are exposed to texts of gendered language in their film appreciation. This could influence not only how they understand film but also how they see the world, how they make decisions, and how they behave themselves.

## Conclusion

Hollywood films have long enjoyed a great popularity in Japan and

have had a great influence on the development of modern Japanese social, cultural, and political attitudes. Since the VCR came into everyday use, they have had an even greater influence as both popular home entertainment and as effective teaching materials for schools. However, we rarely talk about what film is or how film communicates with us. There is a pressing need for a more widespread knowledge among the public about how to see film.

Giannetti (2013) complains that film literacy is overdue in American education, yet he spares less than half a page for translation in his book. On the other hand, the research field of audio-visual translation has been flourishing since the 1990s. However, most researchers have devotedly focused on technological aspects and fewer have looked at cultural or ideological aspects of film translation. This is why Jeremy Munday (2016) insists on incorporating techniques and metalanguage from film studies for a satisfactory theoretical treatment of the visual image.

This paper argues that concepts from Bakhtinian linguistics are useful and suggestive to understand film as communication and to analyze the relationship between film, audience, and translation. The arguments put forward in this paper are just the beginning of this discussion and call for further investigation.

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