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VERSIONING THE SELF: FROM BAKHTIN TO CULTURAL ANALYSIS

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Introduction

Willem Weststeijn's 1992 article 'The Author and the "I" in Bachtin's Conception of the Literary Text' focuses on the quandary of the biographical in literary interpretation. It opposes two different views, one (Russian Formalism) arguing that the text should not be seen as an expression of the author and one (positivism) arguing that author and work explain each other. Mikhail Bakhtin, as Weststeijn outlines, subscribes to neither of these views: for him what is crucial is not the relationship between the author in the text and the author outside the text, but that between author and hero, which is seen as formative of subjectivity and self-consciousness both in literature and in life. Only in life we are dealing with an "author-person" who is "a constituent in the ethical, social event of life", while in the literary text we find the "author-creator" who is "a constituent in a work" (Bakhtin 1990: 10). Thus, it is not so much that "the separation between the author inside and the author outside the text is not a relevant issue for him" (Weststeijn 1992: 463) – Bakhtin explicitly warns against confounding the two authors – as that he sees the relationship between author and hero as more significant, since it is this relationship that creates the aesthetic event and is capable of metaphorizing the extra-literary dynamic of self and other. As Weststeijn notes, Bakhtin's discussion of different possible author-hero relations is designed to answer "ontological questions" (Weststeijn 1992: 463) about the interaction of self and other in human existence as a whole. In this paper I focus on what Bakhtin's answers to these ontological questions and the concept of VERSIONING, which I introduce as a necessary supplement, mean for us as human beings ("I"s), as Bakhtin scholars and, finally, as practitioners of cultural analysis within the Amsterdam School for

Cultural Analysis (ASCA), the research institute that Weststeijn led so expertly for the last years.

To Bakhtin, the questions on the biographical aspect of literature from which Weststeijn's article departs would seem immediately problematic.

> In which way and to what extent does the author express himself in his work; in which way and to what extent can the extratextual biographical author be identified with the hero or a character in the text, who appears only as a fictional construct? (Weststeijn 1992: 459)

First, the notion of the author or any other self expressing him- or herself directly is anathema to Bakhtin's theory of the self as not only necessarily mediated through the other, but also as always still becoming and therefore never able to exist as something given during his or her lifetime:

> in order to live and act, I need to be unconsummated, I need to be open for myself – at least in all the essential moments constituting my life; I have to be, for myself, someone who is axiologically yet-to-be, someone who does not coincide with his already existing make-up. (Bakhtin 1990: 13)

Second, Bakhtin undermines the implication that it is the hero, only a "fictional construct", who is less determinate than the "extratextual biographical author", who is assumed to have a readily retrievable and known (at least to him- or herself) life history. According to Bakhtin, it is the hero who is fully known, since the aesthetic act of authoring "consummates [him or her] in the form of a unitary and unique whole that is a concrete, intuitable whole, but also a whole of meaning" (Bakhtin 1990: 5). The author-person, on the contrary is, like all human beings, incapable of defining or completing him- or herself: "least of all are we ourselves able or competent to perceive in ourselves the given whole of our personalities" (Bakhtin 1990: 5). This turns all extratextual selves (including authors) into heroes, co-authored by themselves in an ongoing, unavoidable interaction with others. "The point at issue here," Bakhtin notes,

> is precisely how to accomplish the task of translating myself from inner language into the language of outward expressiveness and of weaving all of myself totally into the unitary plastic and pictorial fabric of life as a human being among other human beings, as a hero among other heroes (Bakhtin

1990: 31).

Instead of having recourse to simple expression, we are faced with a task of translation that is complicated by the fact that the material to be translated always already comes from the other.

This runs counter to Tomashevsky's idea of the ideal biographical legend as "consciously created by the author himself" (Weststeijn 1992: 461), for according to Bakhtin nobody can decide for him- or herself what kind of hero he or she will be; the other always intervenes in and contributes to the aesthetic act of consummating the self. This act exceeds the self, just as the consummating act of the author in relation to the literary text and its hero is "transgredient to each and every one of its particular moments or constituent features" (Bakhtin 1990: 12). As subjects, we therefore have limited control over our own consciousness, identity and biography, which, because in life we are always authored by multiple others, can no longer be considered as singular and unitary but become compound processes of meaning-making that may momentarily come to a halt but never congeal into a permanent image:

> Even if we succeeded in encompassing the whole of our consciousness as consummated in the other, this whole would not be able to take possession of us and really consummate us for ourselves: our consciousness would take that whole into account and would surmount it as just one of the moments in its own unity (which is not a unity that is given but a unity that is set as a task and, in its essentials, is yet-to-be). (Bakhtin 1990: 16)

I want to supplement this view of subjectivity as never definitively completed or unified by arguing that it does not merely consist of a series of wholes that keep being surmounted, but that these wholes (of which there can be more than one at each moment because we are always apprehended by multiple others) continue to operate as parts of the self, so that the self exists (both synchronically and diachronically) as a potentially infinite collection of versions of itself, which enter into dialogue with each other.

The Concept of Versioning
This is where the concept of versioning comes into play. Versioning is derived

from the noun *version*, which, through its Latin root *vertere* (to turn), denotes transformation. Versioning installs the logic of the turn: an active, subjective move whose outcome is indefinite and beyond our control – after all, we cannot immediately know whether we took a right or a wrong turn. The link with transformation is strengthened by *version*'s affiliation with variant and varying, coming from *varius*, changing or diverse. Thus, versioning signifies the activity of creating different versions or the result of such activity (if it is used as a verbal noun). Significantly, the online edition of the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) added a draft entry for the noun *versioning* in June 2005, defining it as (1) "The use, creation, or provision of new or different versions of something" and (2) "Computing. The control, comparison, or management of multiple versions of software or other data."[1] The quotes accompanying the first, more general definition go back to 1984 and specifically refer to the use of the word in marketing and musicology.[2] In marketing, where versioning refers to the profit-maximization strategy of product diversification, versioning is used to advance capitalist consumerism.[3] In musicology, on the contrary, versioning is closely associated with the rebellious tradition of dub, which strips down an existing track to bass and drum and then rebuilds it by speaking over the bass/drum track or by remixing different musical elements using techniques of fading, filtering and multi-tracking, thus undermining the illusion of synchronicity and notions of authenticity (notably, in Jamaica, the instrumental sides of reggae records produced for the purpose of being dubbed are called *versions*).

The contrast between the two uses illustrates how versioning's political capital cannot be determined in advance and may be progressive or reactionary.[4] The technical use of the word in computer science, which refers not so much to the creation of different versions as to their preservation and presentation (versioning as a function of archive), also dates back to 1984. Software programs like the Versioning Machine and the Stick-On program are able to present a document so that all the stages of its composition are visible and retrievable, multiplying the text, the act of writing and the act of reading.[5] The result is that there is no longer an original or a definitive text, only version upon version. Within computer science, therefore, versioning appears as a multiple, fluid

form of editing/archiving that does away with the traditional implication of control, unification and finality inherent in these terms.

Although the OED entry on versioning presents it as a noun, in its different uses versioning clearly inclines to being used as a verb, since it is above all defined as a practice of proliferation and (re)collection. In this respect it is significant that the online OED also includes a draft addition from December 2004 for *version* as a transitive verb ("to make different versions of; to create a new version of"), with the included quotes – except for a rather quaint 1949 example from the fashion world – again associated with marketing and computing.[6] Thus, a versioning is something that has been versioned and versioning something means multiplying it into different versions: the word signifies both the action and its result, already indicating that, when we transpose its use to the subject, it can be something undergone as well as something actively undertaken.

The OED entry for the noun *version* offers further clues to the meaning of versioning. We find first of all the definition of "a rendering of some text or work, or of a single word, passage, etc., from one language into another; a translation; also (rarely), the action or process of translating", dating back to 1582. This points to the prominence of the term *version* in text editing, where a shift occurred in the course of the twentieth century from the traditional notion of multiple versions that needed to be superseded by a single authoritative version (the "definitive edition") to a view that supports the simultaneous presentation of different versions of a text whose relation to each other is not established a priori but through the way they are used as cultural products.[7] It also brings us back to Bakhtin's task of translation, which is similarly ongoing and incapable of producing a single definitive account. The second definition, "the particular form of a statement, account, report, etc., given by one person or party; an account resting upon limited authority or embodying a particular point of view", links the term to subjectivity, a particular person's perspective from a specific spatiotemporal coordinate. Such a coordinate is also vital in Bakhtin's theory, where the self enters

this world as an invisible bearer of those emotional-volitional tones which issue from the unique and active axiological position which I have assumed in this world and which imbue this world with a particular coloration. (Bakhtin 1990: 60)

What the self cannot color from its unique perspective, however, is precisely itself; for this it requires the other, who can always see more of me than I can and vice versa: "This ever-present excess of my seeing, knowing, and possessing in relation to any other human being is founded in the uniqueness and irreplaceability of my place in the world" (Bakhtin 1990: 23). The combination of each other person's unique position and their excess of seeing in relation to the self is what turns the self-other relationship into an ongoing and reciprocal act of versioning, with the self not standing in relation to itself as an authoritative, intentional author in relation to a literary text, but cast in the position of a hero written by many authors of which he or she is merely one. Moreover, this writing is never finished, producing no definitive image of the self but only different versions that enter into dialogue with each other in the self's consciousness but also in the consciousnesses of the many others trying to make sense of the self from their unique perspectives.

What makes versioning such an attractive concept for thinking subjectivity is that it marks agency without claiming truth or totality. The self can choose to highlight a certain version of itself but because other points of view are always possible, such a version is per definition partial and provisional. It can be challenged by other people's versions or even by the same person's changed perspective. Because each version, whether sequential or simultaneous, varies from the initial object in a different manner, adding new elements or reincorporating those left out by other versions, there is no invariable essence that persists in each variant. There is no authentic or original version, since the term implies a transformation that has always already taken place (the first version is already a translation). Conversely, no version can ever pretend to be definitive, because another version may always still turn up.

For Bakhtin, this process ends at death: "Death is the form of the aesthetic consummation of an individual" (Bakhtin 1990: 131). I would argue, however,

that even after death the process of versioning continues. Whereas Bakhtin assumes that once the other is dead, we can see him in his totality and thus create a complete picture of him –

> Memory begins to act as a gathering and completing force from the very first moment of the hero's appearance; the hero is born in this memory (of his death), and the process of giving form to him is a process of commemoration (commemoration of the departed). (1990: 131)

– there is no guarantee that there is going to be agreement about this picture, about what kind of a hero the deceased was. The creation of a complete picture is not assured as many different versions may pop up and even the deceased him- or herself may retain a voice in the versioning process through his or her writing, personal documents and other texts left behind (or destroyed, as the unrelenting speculation about the lost – possibly smoked – manuscript of Bakhtin's book on the *Bildungsroman* shows).

Thus, the Bakhtinian subject emerges as VERSIONED-VERSIONING, marking a bidirectional process that unfolds in simultaneity: over the course of its life, in its interactions and across the principles of intersubjectivity through which it configures these interactions, the subject is at once subject *to* versioning by others and subject *of* versioning, in relation to both others and itself. In accordance with the status of the OED entries on *versioning* and the transitive verb *to version* as draft entries, it can be said that the versioned-versioning subject never exists as anything else than a draft. Notably, in *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, Bakhtin likens a project that displays an abstract relation to the world, where there is no correlation with the event's "inescapable actual uniqueness" and no acknowledgment of answerability, to a "rough draft of a possible actualization or an unsigned document that does not obligate anyone to do anything" (Bakhtin 1993: 44). On the same page, he continues by arguing that "only through the answerable participation effected by a unique act or deed can one get out of the realm of endless draft versions and rewrite one's life once and for all in the form of a fair copy." While this appears to indicate a potential unity and completeness, the fair copy Bakhtin speaks of is associated not with a lasting wholeness, but with the momentary uniqueness or singularity of experience of what he

calls "act-performing thinking" (Bakhtin 1993: 45). For Bakhtin, rough drafts are unacceptable because they imply the self's abdication of responsibility for the performed act, but the fair copy – as a signed document – marks answerability and responsibility only for the moment and in the moment of the act and its unique context. Because the signature cannot be guaranteed outside of this moment and this context, as Derrida has also argued,[8] it cannot underwrite a definitive, comprehensive account of the future and the past.

Bakhtin's fair copy, moreover, is not a unique, singular, authoritative document. As one person's underwriting of the act-event, it presents a subjective, partial account of that event. It is the version of the event determined by one person's unique and unrepeatable place in the event, the particular version this person is willing to take responsibility for. However, many fair copies may exist of the same event: "there are as many different worlds of the event as there are individual centers of answerability, i.e., unique participative (unindifferent) selves (and their number is vast)" (Bakhtin 1993: 45). The event, therefore, has no "true story". Its documentation is always multiple and riddled with doubt, which is to Bakhtin a distinctive value.[9]

What is true of the event is also true of the subject, which emerges from Bakhtin's work as a collection of rough drafts exposed to radical and often conflicting editing procedures that never produce a fair copy, not even after death. As indicated, the position of editor – a term I feel is more appropriate to the role than author – does not fall only to the subject itself, but oscillates among self, other and Other (this latter instance, which represents the Symbolic order or dominant power structure as subjectivating force, is left out by Bakhtin). Each version that the subject or its others negotiate in their unending quest for wholeness appears as a situated determination that cannot be abstracted from its context and that lays claim to the subject in specific and situated ways. Acknowledging and analyzing these determinations helps us to maneuver between them, potentially rejecting oppressive versions of ourselves and embracing more empowering ones. This is not only important in relation to ourselves, but also in relation to others and, as cultural analysts, in relation to the theorists that we invoke in our work.

Bakhtin as a Versioning-Versioned Thinker

Thus, when working on Bakhtin, I have to consider his position as a versioned-versioning thinker and perceive him not only as an author with whose texts I grapple, but also as a hero co-created by my work, the work of other Bakhtin scholars and of course his own texts, which contribute to his continued versioning beyond the grave. Bakhtin appears as a versioning thinker on multiple planes, actively forming and reforming his work and life into different accounts that often conflict and from which no single coherent theory or narrative can be distilled. First of all, there is the confusion surrounding Bakhtin's biography, fueled by his own inconsistent pronouncements on his life. In 'Bakhtin Myths, or, Why We All Need Alibis', Ken Hirschkop debunks the myth of Bakhtin's noble origins and outlines how Bakhtin at various times claimed his brother's university education as his own. What is important about this is not so much Bakhtin's possible motivations, but the way his contradictory claims have pre-empted the fixation of his biography, even more than thirty years after his death. In other words, I want to draw attention to the versioning effect of Bakhtin's prevarications. Hirschkop underplays this effect by arguing that Bakhtin, because of his faith in a higher metaphysical entity of wholeness and truth (God), simply did not believe in the value or importance of historical facts. However, Bakhtin's lack of consistency in relation to his self-narrativization does not necessarily – or exclusively – imply that he associated historical facts with a "secular vulgarity", as Hirschkop argues (Hirschkop 1998: 582).[10] To me, Bakhtin's equivocations point rather to a view that historical facts, and particularly those pertaining to one's own identity, precisely because they can be viewed from many different positions, are never set in stone, but remain subject to infinite versionings.

As indicated earlier, Bakhtin does not believe that we can arrive at a definitive account of our own being because during our life we are always yet-to-be and furthermore – because we lack the ability to see ourselves from the outside – at the mercy of others' views of us: "the plot or story of my personal life is created by other people" (Bakhtin 1993: 111). Bakhtin's deliberately contradictory statements about his biography may therefore be seen as expressing his

adherence to the idea of the subject-as-becoming. His own case further proves that this process does not come to a halt at the subject's death, but continues afterwards when multiple others continue to plot this subject's life, often in ir-reconcilable ways, so that definitive consummation is infinitely deferred.

A second site of versioning connected to Bakhtin takes the form of the on-going authorship debate concerning the texts published under the names of V.N. Voloshinov and P.N. Medvedev.[11] This debate was fueled by Bakhtin's refusal to claim or deny authorship of these texts outright. Although he told his friend Bocharov that he wrote the texts, he refused to sign a statement to this effect and denied authorship at other times. Tom Cohen has suggested that the accounts put forward within the debate have placed the question of who actually wrote the texts beyond any possible answer:

> It has never been literally a case of historical evidence, of fact versus fiction, since the parameters of that dyad have been (indeed, systematically) erased by the inability to restore anything outside the need to compulsively re-narrativize this (hi)story. (Cohen 1998: 64)

The process of re-narrativizing or versioning, then, is what we are left with and the authorship debate aptly illustrates how versioning erodes any notion of his-torical fact through its proliferation of stories. Hirschkop quotes Bocharov as remarking that with regard to the authorship question, "there is already more than a little *testimony*, but it cannot be *proof*" (Hirschkop 1998: 581). As with the different versions of a document the Versioning Machine and the Stick-On computer programs are capable of presenting on-screen, the collection and arrangement of the different textual and personal witnesses with something to say about the authorship question produces not a definitive answer but a num-ber of competing versionings. There is no judgment here beyond a reasonable doubt.

Versioning also appears in relation to the thorny issue of Bakhtin's plagia-rism. In his article 'Bakhtin and Cassirer: The Philosophical Origins of Bakh-tin's Carnival Messianism' Brian Poole reveals that most of Bakhtin's historical information about carnival and a large part of its theorization is based on or literally plagiarized from the German philosopher Ernst Cassirer. Poole locates

several passages in *Rabelais and his World* that were literally translated from Cassirer's *Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy*:

> What we have in this seminal portion of Bakhtin's work – his philosophical analysis of the grotesque body and the significance of its imagery – is about five pages of Cassirer punctuated intermittently with quotations from Bakhtin. (Poole 1998: 543)

This discovery undermines views of Bakhtin as an original thinker who showed great independence in relation to his intellectual predecessors and contemporaries. Without whitewashing Bakhtin's actions in this matter, I want to suggest that plagiarism could be considered as a form of versioning that accords with Bakhtin's thinking on the always already used status of linguistic signs, which precludes originality: "Every conversation is full of transmissions and interpretations of other people's words. At every step one meets a 'quotation' or a 'reference' to something that a particular person said" (1996: 338). In this view of language, plagiarism becomes an unavoidable fact of life.

Bakhtin further argues that our constant involuntary quotation of others is inevitably accompanied by a creative process of resignification:

> The speech of another, once enclosed in a context is – no matter how accurately transmitted – always subject to certain semantic changes. The context embracing another's word is responsible for its dialogizing background, whose influence can be very great. Given the appropriate methods for framing, one may bring about fundamental changes even in another's utterance accurately quoted. (Bakhtin 1996: 340)

Bakhtin's comparison of the relation between the reported speech and the reporting context to a "chemical union" rather than a "mechanical bond" (Bakhtin 1996: 344) perhaps explains his aversion to putting the other's words in quotation marks, since this would constitute a mark of separation, of the absence of resignification. Quotation marks, then, would denote true plagiarism, a taking of the other's words without changing them. Earlier in 'Discourse in the Novel', Bakhtin had argued that certain words taken from the other's mouth actively resist the process of resignification by stubbornly setting themselves apart from their new context, "as if they put themselves in quotation

marks against the will of the speaker" (Bakhtin 1996: 294). Consequently, quotation marks, as indicators that the words between them remain someone else's property, are incompatible with the process of expropriation which Bakhtin considers a necessary part of developing one's own speech out of that of the other. While this does not excuse the practice of plagiarism – which is hardly an "appropriate method for framing" in the context of academic writing – it does make the point that Bakhtin's use of exactly the same words as Cassirer does not mean he ends up saying exactly the same thing.

For Bakhtin, the process of copying ideas was also inevitably one of adding onto them, of renewing them. Poole writes that "Bakhtin was not only adopting names and philosophical details from Cassirer's work, however; he was also adapting method" (Poole 1998: 546). The copy, then, becomes an adaptation, translation, or versioning no longer operating under what Andrew Benjamin calls "the Reign of the Same" with its prescription of "absolute commensurability" (Benjamin 1992: 25). Consequently, Poole concludes that "it would seem that, having begun by accusing Bakhtin of plagiarism, we have come to the conclusion that his assimilation of everything to his own context effectively recreated all the material he took from others" (Poole 1998: 568). This element of recreation makes of *Rabelais and his World* not a double, but a versioning under the terms I have laid out. A versioning that ends up versioning the question of plagiarism itself, just as the authorship debate versions the notion of authorial authority.

A final instance of Bakhtin as a versioning thinker (subject of versioning) is found in the way he wrote and rewrote his texts, creating different versions of books, articles and notes throughout his career. 'Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity' remained unfinished, as Weststeijn notes (Weststeijn 1992: 462); 'Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel' was written in 1937-38 but Bakhtin added an entire section in 1973; and *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* was first published in 1929, but re-published in 1963 in a much-expanded form under a slightly different title. The latter text is not a continuation or refutation of the previous edition, but a separate text that takes its place besides the first text as a versioned Dostoevsky. On the basis of the incompleteness of and

contradictions between many of Bakhtin's writings, Anthony Wall has presented a seductive image of Bakhtin as a "broken thinker" working according to the logic of the fragment (Wall 1998). However, because the fragment implies an anterior completeness and the image of Bakhtin as broken (however apt in light of his amputated leg) implies something done *to* him rather than *by* him, I prefer to consider Bakhtin as a versioning thinker, actively crafting his work and life into multiple versions.

Bakhtin, however, not just versioned himself, but has also been subject to the versionings of others as his work was edited, translated, applied and critiqued both before and after his death. The erratic publication history of his work, both in Russian and in other languages, for example, served to version his thought by not following the chronology of writing, delaying reception often by decades. In addition, over the years, many different Bakhtins have been constructed in academic writing, as Wall notes in his paper 'For an Aesthetics of Bakhtinian Reception or the Value of Changing Expectations', presented at the XIth International Bakhtin Conference in Curitiba, Brazil in 2003. Outlining the various interpretative directions taken, the different Bakhtins created across the languages (Russian, English, Spanish, Portuguese, French, German) and the different generations in Bakhtin criticism, Wall concludes that "it can really become bothersome to think that 'I' am not really in control of what 'Bakhtin' is saying to all these people, that there are several 'Bakhtins' out there, sometimes very different 'Bakhtins'" (Wall 2004: 773). Although he calls this versioning of Bakhtin bothersome, Wall ultimately embraces the vibrant dialogue the different Bakhtins occasion as an opportunity to expand the reach of Bakhtin's work and continually revitalize his ideas.[12]

However, versioning may also serve to close off Bakhtin's thought by placing it in a particular ideologically colored straightjacket. Cohen proposes that Bakhtin's American translators/editors fatally blurred the line between translation, editing and criticism by positioning themselves as "defensive priests of ideological turf" (Cohen 1998: 56). He aims to "make more apparent how a decision was made early about how Bakhtin should be installed and marketed, and to see where this event still haunts the uses of Bakhtin" (Cohen 1998: 60).

Versioning here appears as a homogenizing tool: a particular version of "Bakhtin" (the quotation marks here are deliberate signs of proprietorship) refuses to be exorcised, presenting itself again and again in spectral form within and behind a number of other Bakhtins, as Cohen shows. The ghost here appears as a figure not of difference, but of indifference: it is indifferent to the versioning quality of Bakhtin's words and concepts and seeks to fix their meaning into a recurrent image of the same. This is not Derrida's ghost with its spectral logic of dissemination and différance,[13] but a ghost that by repeating its marketing message seeks to position the product that is "Bakhtin" or Bakhtin© as an incontrovertible brand, a product to be exchanged for academic currency. Leaving aside whether Cohen's reading is entirely fair to his targets, his article is apposite in showing how not all versions are considered equal and how versions frequently enter into a competition for dominance or are rated according to specific standards.

Such a standard also appears in Wall's account when he writes that "it is no longer possible to keep up with 'Bakhtin' if you do not read any Russian" (Wall 2004: 772). As a non-Russian-reading scholar who nevertheless writes about Bakhtin, I would counter by arguing that precisely because versioning does not validate the idea of a definitive or complete text, a view of Bakhtin as a versioned thinker makes it possible to work not on *the* Bakhtin, but on *a* Bakhtin, in my case the one that exists in English (which of course also speaks to the Russian Bakhtin and all the other-language versions). The English translations of Bakhtin's work and the many works written in English about Bakhtin circulate in contemporary culture as a discourse (or discourses, because the English Bakhtin is itself split into different versions) that constitutes a perfectly valid object of study. The fact that there exist different versions of Bakhtin does not oblige the Bakhtin scholar to necessarily know all these versions (this would reinstate an ideal of completeness foreign to the concept of versioning); what it does oblige is an acknowledgement that no-one speaks for or as the "true" Bakhtin, not even Bakhtin himself, and a willingness to listen to and enter into dialogue with the different other versions in existence (whether directly or through translations). Bakhtin's theory of dialogism can thus be seen

to provide the ethical stance that versioning, which can be both progressive and reactionary, both proliferate meaning and restrict it, lacks. A dialogized versioning would entail letting your own version be versioned further by others and not claiming full authorial control. As Wall writes,

> one of the requirements for being a reader of Bakhtin is a willingness to let Bakhtinian readers from every corner of the globe read you. And to allow them to read Bakhtin both with you and against you. Not only does "Bakhtin" change, according to the wide variety of perspectives and disciplines in which he has been read, but you have to be willing to change yourself, by changing your perspectives and disciplinary outlook. (Wall 2004: 773)

Cultural Analysis as Dialogic Versioning

This is precisely what cultural analysis entails: a practice of versioning not only the concepts and objects with which we work, but also ourselves and our disciplinary attachments. In this sense, it is appropriate that Jonathan Culler has called cultural analysis "the site of the anxiety-ridden subject" (Culler 1999: 346). After all, the one thing versioning – especially not now that it has itself been versioned through Bakhtin's other-centered theory of the self – does not offer is secure (self-)knowledge. Against Bakhtin's notion that "an author creates, but he sees his own creating only in the object to which he is giving form, that is, he sees only the emerging product of creation and not the inner, psychologically determinate, process of creation" (Bakhtin 1990: 6), cultural analysis allows for the possibility of reflection in and on the aesthetic event without, however, ascribing to the analyst an absolute, objective knowledge of or control over its "true" meaning.

Thinking cultural analysis through versioning also counters the criticism of a-historicism that is sometimes brought against it: by bringing artifacts, concepts and theories into the present of the analysis, the cultural analyst effectuates their versioning, without this meaning that all previous versions are simply ignored. As indicated earlier, versioning does not propose a surmounting or transcending of what came before but rather an active agential renewal or transformation that remembers and respects the past without reifying it into an origin, essence, or authenticity (in the Versioning Machine and the Stick-On

program, previous versions of a document can always be retrieved but the first layer is not privileged over the subsequent layers and neither is the final layer). Cultural analysis is interested in the past, but not in the past for the past's sake and not in order to create an illusion of completeness (charting Bakhtin's philosophical sources, for example, obviously enhances our readings of his works, but will not allow us to discover what they "truly" mean or who Bakhtin "really" was). Instead, cultural analysis suggests that while versionings have a history and can be chronologically organized, their interrelations in the present of the analysis do not conform to a preordained hierarchy and the present also speaks back to the past.

Versioning may thus be compared to the concepts of framing and quotation that Mieke Bal associates with cultural analysis. With regard to framing, Bal writes: "a text does not speak for itself. We surround it, or frame it, before we let it speak at all" (Bal 2002: 8). Framing aptly indicates how every act of perception is also always already an interpretation and the term's ambiguity (caused by its association with being framed) makes it an attractive figure for the risks that cultural analysis entails. However, framing more than versioning conveys a sense of an existing, complete object that is subsequently framed and reframed. Quotation, in Bal's *Quoting Caravaggio*, is explicitly associated with the creation of different versions as contemporary art works cite their predecessors: "the work performed by later images obliterates the older ones as they were before that intervention and creates new versions of old images instead" (Bal 1999: 270). As with versioning, the effects of quotation cannot be controlled by the quoting subject (let alone the quoted one). However, as Bakhtin's discussion of quotation marks indicates, quotation – particularly in the context of academic writing – calls up notions of accuracy, originality, fidelity and possible plagiarism, which partake in the logic of the same that versioning seeks to displace. This is why, in this paper, I have chosen to present Bakhtin as a versioned-versioning thinker and cultural analysis as a dialogic practice of versioning.

Notes
1   Online *Oxford English Dictionary* (www.oed.com), last accessed 25 March 2008.

2 "1984 *Supermarket News* 17 Dec. II. 28/3 Versioning means the advertising that goes into the suburbs will promote the large sizes, and the advertising downtown for the same item will focus on the smaller sizes. 1997 S. BARROW & P. DALTON *Reggae* ii. 51/2 The practice of 'versioning' – whether in the form of dub or deejaying – had its genesis in this period. 2000 *New Yorker* 22 May 24/2 Versioning lures thrifty souls while assuring the high-end customers that they're getting more for paying more. But versioning is no radical advance: prices remain fixed; there are just more of them" (OED).

3 See Shapiro and Varian (1998) and Soberman and Parker (2004).

4 See chapter 8 of my book *Intersubjectivities and Popular Culture* for a discussion of versioning as a political strategy in relation to the Notting Hill Carnival and the development of black British identities.

5 On the Versioning Machine, see Schreibman, Kumar and McDonald (2003); on the Stick-On program, see Pino (1996).

6 "1949 *Lima* (Ohio) *News* 8 May 33/1 (*advt.*) *Versioned two ways to leave the open vs. closed issue up to you, with a flash of open toe and heel or all enclosed. 1988 *Marketing* (Nexis) 3 Nov., Ideas are sourced from the US and 'versioned' in each country. 2001 *Wire* June 16/3 Austrian glitchmeister Christian Fennesz has versioned another laptop tribute to the close-harmony heroes" (OED).

7 See Zeller (1975) and Machan (1994).

8 See Derrida's *Limited Inc.* (1988).

9 Bakhtin notes how doubt "forms the basis of our life as effective deed-performing" and distinguishes it from "theoretical cognition", which seeks to posit a "unitary and unique truth of the world" (Bakhtin 1993: 45).

10 In this regard it is significant that Bakhtin distinguishes the aesthetic event, which unfolds between author and hero, from the religious event where "the other consciousness is the encompassing consciousness of God" (1990: 22).

11 I will not enter into the particulars of this debate here. For detailed discussions see Godzich's foreword to Medvedev's *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship,* Matejka and Titunik's preface to Voloshinov's *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, and chapter 6 of Clark and Holquist's *Mikhail Bakhtin.*

12 Hitchcock presents a similar vision in "Introduction: Bakhtin/'Bakhtin'" where the quotation marks are not a sign of Bakhtin's resistance to assimilation into another's thought but a positive sign of Bakhtin's creative and productive versioning across theory.

13 See Derrida's *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, & the New International.* (1994).

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