

## Counterpointing Time and Space: Polyphonic Artistic Thinking in Li Zhanyang Vendor: Selling Bread

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### Abstract

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Polyphonic is a musical term that denotes a type of multi-voice musical texture. Soviet literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin introduced the term “Polyphonic Novel” in Problem of Dostoevsky’s Poetics to illuminate the multi-vocal character of Dostoevsky’s novels. Furthermore, Bakhtin introduced polyphonic artistic thinking as a basic aesthetic principle. Polyphonic artistic thinking can be adopted across a range of art forms. This article attempts to summarize the two-pronged characteristics of polyphonic artistic thinking (material structure and structural arrangement) based on counterpoint technique, and apply them to analyze the performance artwork Li Zhanyang Vendor: Selling Bread, in order to offer an example of polyphonic artistic thinking in a different art form.

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**Keywords:** Polyphonic; Polyphonic Artistic Thinking; Performance Art

Polyphonic music rose out of the harmonization of the chant or imaginary expansion in space (vertical and horizontal) as early as 9<sup>th</sup> century. It denotes a style of multi-voice music that consists of two or more independent parts of equal importance. Later it came to denote a type of music texture that combined various melodic lines in the use of counterpoint<sup>3</sup>. In contrast to homophonic music, “polyphony’s melodic interest is derived from every independent voice being granted equal importance which provide contrast and subordination to one another” (Zhao, Wu, & Jiang, 1995, p.268). Soviet literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin introduced the term “polyphonic novel” in Problem of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, to describe multi-voice novels that use a form of counterpoint<sup>4</sup> to juxtapose independent characters and plots. Furthermore, Bakhtin initiated an innovation of aesthetic theory “Polyphonic Artistic Thinking<sup>5</sup>”. The performance Li Zhanyang Vendor: Selling Bread<sup>6</sup> combines two different performances (varied in layout and in items on sale), and the audience’s interactions, into a whole by using counterpoint. From this point of view, it gives an exemplary application of polyphonic artistic thinking in contemporary art. This article attempts to summarize the two-pronged characteristics of polyphonic artistic thinking (material structure and structural arrangement) that originate in music and literature.

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<sup>3</sup>Counterpoint, “the ability, unique to music, to say two or more things at once comprehensibly. The term derives from the expression punctus contra punctum, i.e. “point against point” or “note against note”. In common usage the word refers to the combination of simultaneous parts or vv., each of significance in itself and the whole resulting in a coherent texture, and is, in this sense, synonymous with polyphony. In its more strict usage, however, “counterpoint” implies an underlying system of rules for the organization of simultaneous voices.” (Rutherford-Johnson, Kennedy, & Kennedy, 2013, p.190)

<sup>4</sup> “Polyphonic is equivalent to dialogic.” (Baldick, 2015, p.284). Bakhtin wrote, “the polyphonic novel is dialogic through and through. Dialogic relationships exist among all elements of novelistic structure; that is, they are juxtaposed contrapuntally.” (Bakhtin, 1984, p.40).

<sup>5</sup> Bakhtin (1984: 3) proclaims in his book, “He created, in our opinion, a completely new type of artistic thinking, which we have provisionally called polyphonic. This type of artistic thinking found its expression in Dostoevsky’s novels, but its significance extends far beyond the limits of the novel alone and touches upon several basic principles of European aesthetics.”

<sup>6</sup> Li Zhanyang is an established contemporary Chinese sculptor. *Li Zhanyang Vendor: Selling Bread* is a performance he conducted with his assistant’s family.

The approach will then be used to analyze the performance artwork Li Zhanyang Vendor: Selling Bread in order to offer an example of polyphonic artistic thinking in a different art form.

### 1 Basic Principle of Polyphonic Artistic Thinking

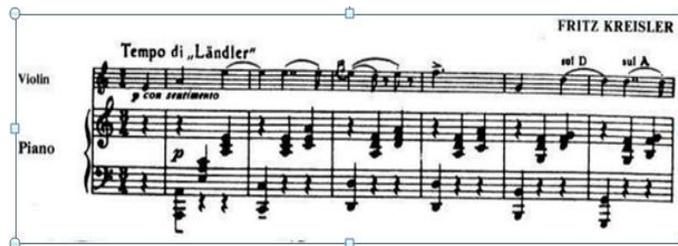
Artistic thinking indicates “the conceptual tools of the artist, the practice of deconstruction, the guiding process of inquiry and investigation, creation, reflection, self-assessment and exhibition” (Werberger, 2017, p.xiv). Hence, artistic thinking is an ideation which guides and gives form to the artwork’s structure, including its material structure and structural arrangement. To be more specific, “material structure (материально конструкция) is the ontological status of an artwork that means the basis and condition of its existence” (Kagan, 2008, p.258).

On the basis of material structure, the art is divided into three classes: temporal art, spatial art and spatial-temporal art. The structural arrangement bifurcates internal components and their system of organization. The former indicates the relation among components while the latter articulates the process of unification. Therefore, this paper unfolds the study of polyphonic artistic thinking by looking at three of its aspects: Material Structure, Component Relation and System of Organization.

#### (1) Characteristics and Application of Polyphonic Artistic thinking in Music

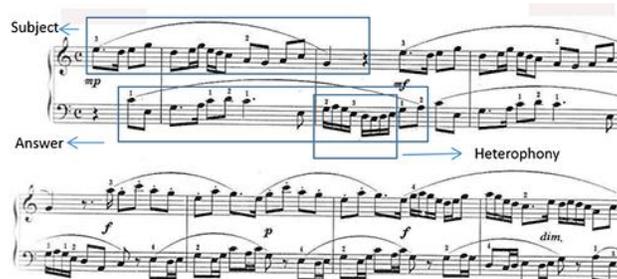
In music, the terms Polyphony and Harmony may be contrasted with one another through differing relations among the separate voices. In homophonic music, only one dominant melodic voice exists with all others being subordinate to it. To take *Liebesleid* (by Fritz Kreisler, 1875 - 1962) as an example, it consists of a principle voice (violin) and a subordinate voice (piano). In the violin part, a coherent succession of pitches is well organized to the melodic voice of the rhythm. The piano part, in contrast, consists of two or more notes arranged according to the rule of the violin voice and forms a background accompanying voice.

#### *Liebesleid* by Fritz Kreisler



As opposed to homophony, polyphony is the musical texture that combines several independent melodies. To be more specific, two or more melodic lines progress simultaneously. Take for example this description of *Shepherd Boy’s Flute* (He Lüting, 1903-1999), Yang’s(2007) study found the following: Both sections of exposition and recapitulation adopt a polyphonic writing technique steeped in Chinese folk music: the answer follows immediately when the subject exposes one beat. It produces a polyphonic style and keeps the independence of subject and answer. Heterophony, featuring Chinese folk music, embellishes and elaborates the end of every piece of subject that fill the space contrapuntally (p.10).

#### *Shepherd Boy’s Flute* (He Lüting, 1903-1999)



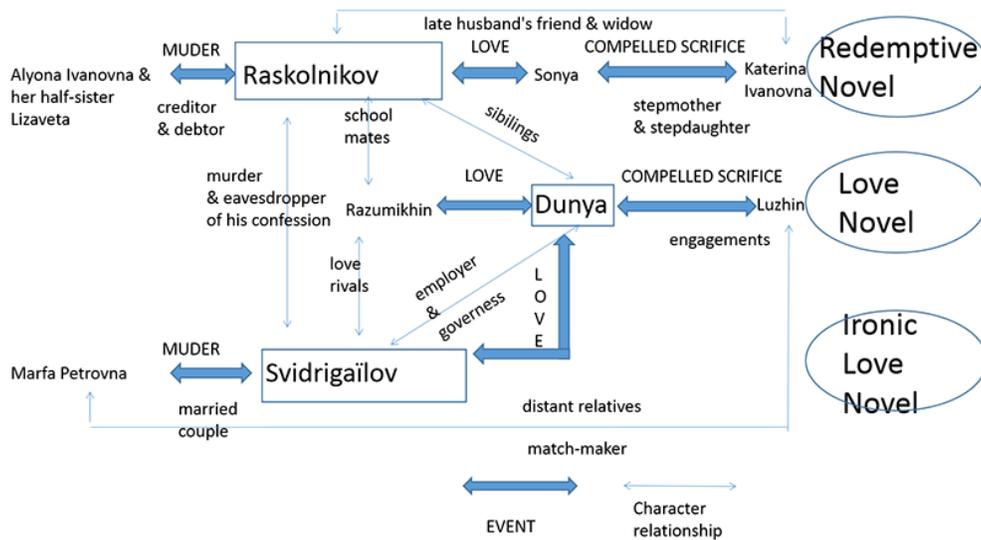
In summary, homophony is a texture in which one primary part is supported by accompanying voices. Polyphony is achieved through the use of counterpoint where several independent melodic lines form an ensemble.

In terms of material structure, music is a kind of temporal art<sup>7</sup>. In spite of this, Yang (2010: 85) proposes that “in counterpoint, different melodic lines achieve entanglement fluently and that the different melodic lines (separate voices) expand vertically and form a space”. On this basis, music, as a kind of temporal art, can be understood to exist in both time and space.

**(2) Characteristics and application of polyphonic artistic thinking in the novel**

In the novel, the polyphonic novel and monophonic novel can be seen as belonging to different concept groups<sup>8</sup>. To take the monophonic novel *Madame Bovary* as an example, the story evolves from *Madame Bovary* alone as its progresses. It delineates *Madame Bovary*’s marriage, affairs, loan and suicide in a wholly linear manner. Regard less of what the plots and social relationships consist of, they develop coherently around the sole heroine, *Madame Bovary*, in one storyline to form an ensemble.

As opposed to the monophonic novel, the polyphonic novel *Crime and Punishment* is made up of three stories that evolve simultaneously: 1. the redemptive novel of love between *Raskolnikov* and *Sonya*; 2. the love novel about *Dunya* and *Razumikhin*; 3. the ironic love novel between *Svidrigailov* and *Dunya*. These independent novels and characters form an ensemble through the use of counterpoint. All the characters know one another: *Raskolnikov* and *Dunya* are siblings; *Dunya* used to serve *Svidrigailov*’s family as a governess; *Svidrigailov* eavesdrops on *Raskolnikov*’s confession. As the stories progress, *Sonya* and *Dunya* are all compelled to make sacrifices for their separate families, one is driven to prostitution, the other forces herself to marry the contemptible suitor *Luzhin*; both *Raskolnikov* and *Svidrigailov* commit murder, the former kill spawn-broker *Alyona Ivanovna* and her innocent half-sister *Lizaveta*, while the latter kills his wealthy wife; and the love affairs intertwine the protagonists with one another (figure.1). As it is articulated in the diagram, the equality of the three story lines, and the complicated relationship of all the characters, form an indivisible whole<sup>9</sup>. It matches the application of counterpoint and makes the novel’s structural elements contrast with one another dialogically. Furthermore, the three story lines could be divided into three independent novels. Thus, separate plots on equal terms coexist and interact with one another. “From this point of view, the significant characteristic of Dostoevsky’s creative vision is that he saw and conceived of his world primarily in terms of space and not time” (Bakhtin,1984, p.28). In another words, by the usage of counterpoint in *Crime and Punishment*, a space is formed in this time-evolving novel. In this way this novel can be understood as being a form of spatial temporal art.



**Figure 1. Events and Characters Relationship Diagram of Crime and Punishment**

<sup>7</sup> According to Kagan (2008:275), “The representational basics of literary creation contradict to non-representation basics of music creation in the range of temporal art”. Hence, novel and music both belong to temporal art.

<sup>8</sup> Bakhtin (1984 : 8 believes Dostoevsky “fulfilled the task of constructing of a polyphonic world and destroying the established forms of the fundamentally monologic (homophonic) European novel”.

<sup>9</sup> According to Milan Kundera(2015:97), “the principle rule of counterpoint in the novel is 1. The equality of the various “lines”,

To sum up, the consistent characteristics (see figure 2.) of polyphonic music and the polyphonic novel is that several independent components coexist in the same time and space to make an indivisible whole through the process of their interaction with one another.

	Component	Material Structure	Component Relation	System of Organization
Music	Melody	spatial-temporal	Independent equal	counterpoint
Novel	Story	spatial-temporal	Independent equal	counterpoint

**Figure 2. Characteristic of polyphonic music and the polyphonic novel**

## 2 Polyphonic artistic thinking in the performance *Li Zhanyang Vendor: Selling Bread*

In the performance *Li Zhanyang Vendor: Selling Bread*, an art museum's hall was decorated with a huge picture from *A Tale of Two Cities*, which acted as a backdrop. In front of it stood two principle counters, some props and a few decorations. After the exhibition's opening ceremony, sculptor Li Zhanyang and the whole family of his assistant **Gao Wanli simultaneously** started their different bread selling performances. The Gao's brought an oven with them and sold fresh baked bread in situ, while Li Zhanyang sold sculptures that looked like loaves of bread. Over the course of the performance, the audience interacted actively with the two groups of performers, watching them, purchasing products and taking photos with them. In this work, as a result of the interaction of the two groups selling bread, it approximates the important features of counterpoint. What's more, the many live interactions that took place on the spot reflect the static subject of "urban life" that is depicted in the sculpture *A Tale of Two Cities*, which frames the work in the background. In this way, the structure of this performance is dominated by polyphonic artistic thinking.

*A Tale of Two Cities* is one of Li Zhanyang's colored scenic **sculptures**. Drawing upon gabled building from Amsterdam and stilted buildings from Chongqing, the artist imitates the separate street view in one work while inserting details of ordinary people's daily life in the scenes of this sculpture, such as crowded gather around the site of a car accident, a busy night market and dissolute red light area. As Li (2002) wrote, "I make a record of the all-encompassing daily life by using the artifice at hand." Therefore, *A Tale of Two Cities* solidifies a very moment catching the fleeting emotions and episodes of daily life in the sculpture's space to represent the subject of urban life. Taking the huge picture of *A Tale of Two Cities* as a background poster insinuates that *Li Zhanyang Vendor: Selling Bread* will dynamically evolve from the subject urban life.



**Figure 3, A Tale of Two Cities. Copyright from Li Zhanyang Studio.**

Before the performance was presented, two distinct stages were laid out in the in-hall grocery. Gao Wanli's counter was converted from a bike that was covered in a blue floral cloth. A red, round headshot of Li Zhanyang featured as a brand mark with the couplets, "There will be bread" and "There will be milk as well", pasted on its two sides. Additionally, on a banner hung on a pole was written "Li Zhanyang Vendor". Li Zhanyang's stall was adapted from a movable exhibition stand, covered in a similar floral cloth without subordinate decoration. On the counter, sculptures of different kinds of bread were laid out on two bamboo trays.



**Figure 4 Li Zhanyang Vendor: Selling Bread. Photo taken by the author**

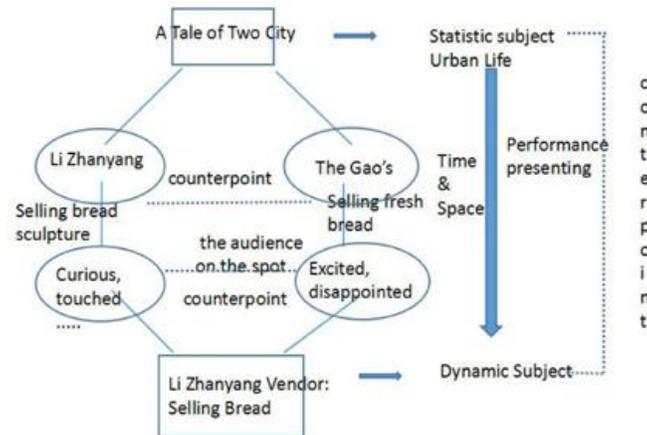
After the opening ceremony, the two divergent performances took place side by side, contrasting with one other from the very first moment. With the cooperation of his wife, **Gao Wanli, wearing an apron and a chef's hat**, sold fresh bread. They were busy with handing bread over, collecting money and communicating with the audience while also periodically pausing to pay attention to the oven. If it hadn't taken place in an art museum, you could have also encountered the same boisterous scene in daily life. Compared to the affordable fresh bread, the price of the bread sculptures was fairly high to the common audience. Few visitors came up to talk to and take photographs with Li Zhanyang, except for some artist friends and admirers. Li Zhanyang stood behind his counter silently, occasionally picking up his sculptures. At this very moment, he was more like a spectator for Gao's performance.

As time passed, the contrast between two ongoing performances grew dramatically. Attracted by the aroma and the curiosity of selling fresh bread in an exhibition hall, the audience flocked to and besieged Gao's counter. Shortly **afterwards**, the bread was sold out. The lucky buyers enjoyed their bread full of enthusiasm while the unlucky ones kept asking when the next batch would be ready. In contrast, the adjacent counter remained only marginally busy. The audience simply approached and sometimes made brief eye contact with Li Zhanyang. In spite of this, some onlookers gazed at this "farce" from a distance, full of curiosity. Li Zhanyang's bread sculpture met with poor sales. But there were still some "busybodies" who were touched after reading the instruction of this work. As was written on the placard: I must conduct this work where the audiences know me and the art very well. It should be somewhere like an art museum, an exhibition hall or an expo site and so on. I would like to help her (**Gao Wanli's** wife - author's note) start a business. We sell bread on and after the exhibition. I wish it could help the Gao's eke out a living by my fame.

Thus, this work intended to help provide Gao's unemployed wife an occupation and achieve the artist's creative intention, namely that good artworks actively feedback social issues<sup>10</sup>. The performance created a buzz through using the name of the established sculptor Li Zhanyang, then used this attention to promote the sale of bread. The performance could be said to have rallied potential buyers around the stall and camouflaged the business under the banner of art. All in all, Li Zhanyang Vendor: Selling Bread, organized two independent performances contrapuntally. The subject of urban life evolved from the beginning to the end of the work, diluting the seemingly insurmountable barrier (the fourth wall<sup>11</sup>) which lay between the performers (Li Zhanyang & the Gao's) and the audience through the buying and selling of bread in daily life. It is the tangible interactions that aroused the audience's emotions like excitement, curiosity, disappointment, touching and staged the effect of theatricality contrapuntally. And the effect of theatricality reflects the static subject of Urban Life in A Tale of Two Cities.

<sup>10</sup> This opinion recorded on the catalogue of Parabiosis exhibition. Li Zhanyang expressed this opinion on the conference of the exhibition.

<sup>11</sup> According to definition from Patrice Pavis (1998:154), "The fourth wall is an imaginary wall separating stage from audience. Realism and naturalism stressed the requirement that the stage be separated from the audience, while contemporary theatre is fond of breaking the illusion, theatricalizing the stage, or forcing the audience to participate." So there is a dialectical attitude towards the fourth wall.



**Figure 5, structure of polyphonic artistic thinking in Li Zhanyang Vendor: Selling Bread**

In conclusion, *Li Zhanyang Vendor: Selling Bread* applied counterpoint skill on two independent vendors who sold different products to form an ensemble while the two could have been independent performances. The two vendors interacted with the audience on the site which aroused various feelings and varied behavior in response. The integration of the emotions and responses reflect the subject of urban life.

In this work's structure, several independent elements existed simultaneously, interacted with each other at the same time and in the same space in order to form a whole. These characteristic match the basic conditions of polyphonic music and novels exactly, that is 1. The equality of the various "lines", 2. **The indivisibility of the whole**. Therefore, the structure of *Li Zhanyang Vendor: Selling Bread* coordinates to polyphonic theory and is exemplary of polyphonic artistic thinking in contemporary art.

### 3. Conclusion

Mikhail Bakhtin borrowed the musical term Polyphony and applied it to literature, proposing the new term Polyphonic Novel. This initiative theory in artwork structure has been applied to some other art forms. Li Xianjie, a Chinese film researcher, proposed a new term in film, "Polyphonic Structure of Fantasy" in his monograph, *Narratology of Film: Theory and Example*, to analyze the structure of *Smultronstället*, the film directed by Swedish director Ernst Ingmar Bergman. Li explicitly indicates that his theory is derived from Bakhtin's understanding of polyphony. This usage indicates that polyphonic artistic thinking is an aesthetic theory that can be applied to different art forms. Above all, the research on polyphonic artistic thinking and its application to the contemporary artwork *Li Zhanyang Vendor: Selling Bread* aims to go beyond the critical barrier between different art forms and close the expression that borrow someone's theory from another art form. From this point of view, polyphonic artistic thinking, which is evinced by work that contains several independent components that coexist in the same time and space to make an indivisible whole in the process of interacting with each other, can inspire the ideation of an artwork's structure in a broader sense.

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