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The Future of Cultural Analysis

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The Future of Cultural Analysis

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A Critical Inquiry

Edited by
Murat Aydemir,
Aylin Kuryel, and
Noa Roei

Amsterdam University Press

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Introduction: Cultural Analysis, circa 2034

Noa Roei, Murat Aydemir, and Aylin Kuryel

Abstract: Cultural analysis gained its shape in the late 1990s. This introduction proposes to reassess its relevance to the immediate present as well as the near future. After a brief genealogical sketch, we address the current situation, alternating between successful institutionalization, slow scholarly attrition, and intensified threat, as well as reflect on a discussion in cultural studies at large on the field's methodological standardization versus its improvisational openness. Finally, we address the present historicity of the main aspects of cultural analysis as suggested by Mieke Bal—including object analysis, a heuristic use of concepts, interdisciplinarity, and social relevance—and introduce the volume's contributions under those headings.

Keywords: cultural studies, textual analysis, institutionalization, neoliberalism, method, social relevance

But unless theory is answerable, either through its successes or its failure, to the essential untidiness, the essential unmasterable presence that constitutes a large part of historical and social situation,... then theory becomes an ideological trap. It transfixes both its users and what it is used on. Criticism would no longer be possible.

—Edward Said ("Traveling Theory" 241)

Too often, as intellectuals, we are unwilling to start by assuming that we do not understand what is going on, that perhaps what worked yesterday over there will not work today over here. Instead, we carry with us so much theoretical and political baggage that we are rarely surprised, because we almost always find what

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we went looking for, and that what we already knew to be the explanation is, once again, proven to be true.
—Lawrence Grossberg ("Does Cultural Studies Have Futures?" 6)

At one point in my life as a scholar of queer culture and theory, I thought the point of queer was to be always ahead of actually existing social possibilities.... But this version of "queering" the social text strikes me as somewhat akin to Eve Sedgwick's notion of paranoid criticism: it's about having the problem solved ahead of time, about feeling more evolved than one's context.
—Elizabeth Freeman (*Time Binds* xiii)

"Cultural Analysis" is the name Mieke Bal has proposed for a humanities research practice, which combines the close reading of various objects of culture with the heuristic use of theoretical concepts in the service of sociopolitical critique. Clifford Geertz used the same term as a synonym for the interpretive ethnographic method, more commonly known as "thick description," eschewing explanations of phenomena according to a single cultural or theoretical key. In early cultural studies, "cultural analysis" is often used to describe the practice of the emerging field: what scholars in cultural studies do. For this volume, we have invited a group of scholars, ranging from recent graduates to emeriti, to reflect on the development of their practice of cultural analysis, however conceived, from the recent past to the present, as well as speculate what it may entail in the near future—let's say, by 2034. Contributors were asked to draw on their work in research, teaching, administration, institutional politics, activism, and the arts. Scholarly, didactically, institutionally, intellectually, creatively, and politically—What was cultural analysis back then, what is it right now, and what can it be by 2034?

In a programmatic video lecture, Bal characterizes cultural analysis as a conversation about "living" culture, that is, about culture before its products are archived to fit disciplinary classifications and genealogies.[1] The conversation admits multiple participants, provided they don't overrule each other nor the object that should remain at center stage. The disciplines contribute their knowledge but not their dogmatic genealogies and divisions.

1 Bal summarizes here a critical approach developed and put into practice in an extensive body of work. Key aspects are elaborated in the introductions of her *Double Exposures* (1996) and *Traveling Concepts* (2002). Through interviews with Bal, Lutters offers a comprehensive introduction (Lutters and Bal).

Theory is welcome but not as master discourse. History participates without bracketing the historical present from which we cannot dissociate ourselves anyway. In this dialogue, the object has the last say, and "everything in it, every aspect, every detail" matters. The actuality of cultural analysis as a conversation in the present, in the dialogic presence of the object of study, makes "now," Bal concludes, the "ultimate principle of cultural analysis" (Bal).

Following up on that proposition, this volume wishes to bring to bear the historical now or present conjuncture on our practices of cultural analysis. Should cultural analysis continue doing what it has done so far or adapt to changed and changing circumstances? This reconsideration might pertain as much to implicit habits, tendencies, resistances, foreclosures, and biases as it does to stated principles and priorities. Resisting the breathless announcement of the next "new," "post," or "turn," our joint reassessment hopefully offers a slow and situated account of relevant histories, genealogies, and futurities. We have attempted to curate a modest, above all life-sized, reflection from the vantage point of the immediate present, factoring in the recent past and near future. In the spirit of our combined epigraphs, we don't want to take for granted that our established forms and practices are able to rise to the occasion of current and imminent challenges. Nor do we put our faith in the newest academic update in the apparent belief that one will take care of everything. Instead, we wanted to hold space for a patient and precise reflection on and coming to terms with a concrete conjunctural situation in motion: once-common terms resonating differently, goalposts moving, relationships shifting.

The Histories of Cultural Analysis: A Brief Sketch

To be sure, there are different possible entry points to the emergence of cultural analysis. An initial one goes back to the large-scale redistribution of the humanities since the 1960s. Following several eventful "turns" in the field, various inter-, trans-, and multidisciplinary fields were developed, which were thought of as *studies* rather than disciplines. Within these fields, the self-explanatory understanding of expertise, method, and archive—basically, who does what and what goes with what—has lost its grip. While some disciplinary models remained rigid, many others loosened their understanding of the rudimentary what, how, and why of research. Cultural analysis, as a product of this history, aspired to locate the openness of method and archive at the center of its research practice, insisting on the possibility of exploring widely divergent objects and topics, but only insofar

as the burden of motivating and specifying anew the what, how, and why in relation to each other was taken seriously.

The genealogy of the term may be narrower in its historical and methodological scope, stretching from "textual analysis" on one end of the spectrum to "cultural studies" on the other. *Cultural analysis* can be read as the marked combination of *cultural* studies and textual *analysis*. Textual analysis can be traced back to the New Criticism of the 1940s and 1950s in the United States, marking, in its original and reactionary form, an internal, immanent, formalist style of dealing with (exclusively literary) objects, addressing those in minute detail while dismissing anything that was not on the page.

Cultural studies, nearly the opposite of this approach, emerged in the 1960s and 1970s in the United Kingdom and opened the study of culture to include objects from working-class, underclass, popular, and entertainment culture in tandem with economic, social, and political concerns. It allowed contextual, historical, and sociopolitical issues to inform the analysis, sometimes at the price of downplaying the object's particular aesthetics and poetics, relegating it to a mere instance or example of bigger concerns. The insistence of cultural analysis on what might be described as a politics of form attempts to straddle elements from both approaches, carefully leveling the object's precarious singularity against the social, historical, and political situations it informs and dialogues with.

This sketch of the histories of cultural analysis would remain incomplete if limited to the humanities exclusively. One of the more acknowledged earlier reiterations of the term can be found in the work of cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz. Geertz's main concern was to intervene in anthropology at a time when cultural phenomena were quickly reduced to determining and determinable contexts. His import of the textual turn into the social sciences aimed at destabilizing the certainty to contextualize and ascertain what instances of culture signified. In a practice that was sometimes referred to as "cultural analysis" but mostly known as "thick description," Geertz insisted on allowing multiple possible interpretations to surface through the details of his objects of analysis, resisting theoretical or contextual generalizations. The detailed analysis of the object, in turn, would allow for the development of specific, partial, interpretive, and situated modes of knowledge production.

As it was conceived in the Netherlands in the late 1990s by Mieke Bal, the research practice emphasized the conceptual work involved in interpretive analysis, engaging with theory for its reading of objects and understanding society and culture. In addition to the specifics of the object—its aesthetics, poetics, and the sociocultural contexts that inform it and are informed by

it—theoretical queries are central to how the practice has taken shape, accompanied by the intensified reflection on the researcher's choice and selection of approaches for a specific query. Cultural analysis is understood as interpretive and critical, probing layers of meaning within cultural objects to help unpack the broader sociocultural worlds in which they are made legible. Within this approach, concepts are not static but adaptable and evolving in response to the analysis; they are not "applied" but redefined in the process. The ensuing dialogue between analyst, concept, and object allows each to inform and reshape the understanding of the others. Theories and their academic prestige are balanced against concrete and specific object analyses, so a two-way illumination may occur. The triad of object, concept, and analyst in many of the contributions to this volume attests to the specific formulation of the Amsterdam approach to cultural studies at large.

Institutional and Other Contexts

The successful institutionalization of cultural analysis makes our reconsideration of the field's practices, methods, and lineages particularly urgent. With respect to the local context alone, where this volume is located and to which it answers, the University of Amsterdam hosts a research institute, the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis (ASCA), a bachelor's program, and several master's programs; the Netherlands Institute for Cultural Analysis (NICA) is one of the national humanities research schools in the country. This successful presence implies that cultural analysis is no longer an intervention in an established order of things but part of it. Hence, questions and reflections about critique, co-optation, incorporation, inclusion, power, management, and complicity have become more prominent.

Existing scholarship offers contradictory evaluations. Drawing on Fredric Jameson, Paul Smith argues that the broader field of cultural studies has been marked by a double desire or aspiration from the start: to make a real political difference while *not* becoming another academic discipline. He sharply concludes that the former did not happen, but the latter did. For better or worse, cultural studies has become institutionalized and professionalized as an academic discipline in the USA and elsewhere. Hence, he argues, it should no longer fashion itself "a kind of unattached, floating field of endeavor run by academic libertarians and maverick geniuses" (3). Decrying an affected looseness he does not hesitate to describe as "libertarian," "pluralist," and "laissez-faire," Smith calls for the formalization of the definition, proper

objects, and established methods of the discipline, not least in the interest of graduates facing employers requiring clear qualifications (1–4).

Additionally, this formalization should help redress the "political error" Smith observes in the history of cultural studies, namely the "thematization" of the field that would reduce its remit to a series of identifiable themes, such as race, sexuality, gender, ethnicity, and so on (Ross and Smith 252). While we may disagree with the measures that need to be taken to respond to the move toward institutionalized disciplinarity, Smith's argument does bring up an uncomfortable question: Does our understanding of cultural analysis as an open, creative, and improvisational intellectual practice allow us to avoid the responsibilities and complicities of our institutionalization as an inter-discipline?

The other side of Smith's argument is offered by Lawrence Grossberg, who claims that institutional life is only the most immediate context of our work, which cannot be detached from "other proximate and concentric contexts of social, political, economic, and cultural life, that is, from the entirety of the social formation" (9). Hence, Grossberg returns to the two main questions Stuart Hall proposed: What is going on? What can we do? The field's aim to construe a "political history of the present," he goes on, cannot but make cultural studies contextually and conjuncturally oriented as a matter of principle. It must adapt epistemologically and politically to understand, criticize, and find purchase on a moving terrain. Therefore, it neither has established objects nor methods.

Too often, Grossberg writes, we are unwilling to start by assuming that "we do not understand what is going on, that perhaps what worked yesterday over there will not work today over here" (6). This intellectual ethos should confront even the centrality of culture for our field. Culture in general and popular culture in particular may have been especially relevant in post-WWII Britain, when mass culture and cultural studies emerged in dialogue. Still, it's far from certain that those matter in the same way and to the same extent today. Grossberg doubts whether culture is still the place in the present conjuncture, "where change is being organized and experienced" and "where resistance is viably organized" (17). Hence, he goes so far as to suggest a "post-cultural (or at least, post-culturalist) cultural studies" (24). If Smith challenges us to consider the instantiation of cultural analysis in institutional and disciplinary structures, Grossberg compels us to inquire whether our practices of cultural analysis still serve us to understand, in Hall's words, what is going on and what we can do.

Today, we ask these questions in the context of the neoliberal university that often privileges quantity over quality, outcomes over processes, and

market values over critical thinking. In *Dark Academia* (2021), Peter Fleming defines the university as a dying institution in the place of the higher public education once dreamt of, turned into a business enterprise obsessed with growth and output. In this context, knowledge is seen as measurable in terms of prestige and profit. Lauren Berlant also reflects on the pressures that accompany this neoliberal "crisis" within the field, addressing how "the urgency of responding to the institutional pressures of the present that have rendered so many of us bitter or angry or tired or cynical or perhaps simply confused about what to do in this moment of intellectual expansion and economic downsizing" ("Collegiality" 115). The question of what to do operates on various levels: within a pressing institutional context, in relation to the historical present, and in conversation with developing theoretical debates and political struggles.

Concerning the latter aspect, Hall, while taking a retrospective glance at the legacies of cultural studies, argued that cultural studies has always been an open-ended project. Whether it attended to this or that, what distinguished the project throughout was its political aspect: what is at stake in the analysis (263). The aim was to develop theoretical work from a political perspective rather than the ability to speak "theory" fluently and sophisticatedly. Social struggle and theoretical reflection provoke, require, and inform one another. In the context of the Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies in the 1970s, among the forces that disrupted and contributed to the field were the struggles around feminism and race and, later, the AIDS crisis, which all created ruptures in how theory was understood and deployed at the time. As those struggles continued, the status of theory and its relation to politics was questioned repeatedly. These moments, for Hall, revealed the necessity to insist on the irreducibility of the insights that theory can bring to political practice without forgetting the necessary modesty of theory (273). What remains inspiring for today is Hall's perspective on what these ruptures can do: rather than undermining the field, they can help redefine theory, method, and practice in ways that contribute to the world unfolding differently. Can we similarly allow our practices of cultural analysis to be interrupted and redeveloped in relation to contemporary emergencies and necessities?

This Volume

In this volume, the main aspects of cultural analysis are taken as points of departure to reconsider and reorient the research practice. From different

angles, contributions establish shared concerns, criticize established protocols, and propose new angles and priorities. Granted, we have not covered all possible, and perhaps not even all prevalent, challenges to cultural analysis today. Indeed, this collection can only offer a momentary and incomplete compilation, mapping some of our current questions, doubts, concerns, obsessions, additions, worries, and alternatives. This is done in dialogue with both longer- and shorter-term companions: cultural materialism, postcolonial and decolonial theory, psychoanalysis, the environmental humanities, and many others. The essays assembled here form our attempt to live up to the promise of cultural analysis as a research practice that self-reflexively remains in touch with a living culture and society, with the "now." Taking cultural analysis as its very object, so to speak, the contributions engage it under the headings of the critical concerns Bal has established for the field: "speaking objects," "traveling concepts," interdisciplinarity, and social relevance. Some of the contributions you'll find below in a specific section could fit as well in others, and readers would find that other distributions, using altogether different headings, may well apply. We hope that the overlaps, resonances, and frictions among the essays offer a resource for the maintenance and reinvention of the field.

Part One: Speaking and Silenced Objects

Students and scholars are increasingly heedful of the works of art, literature, and entertainment they choose to engage with. Moreover, the liberal availability or readability of cultural objects is questioned in terms of provenance, modes of address, and the academic capitalization of minority experiences and knowledges. Cultural studies attended to unequal, exploitative networks of production, distribution, and consumption of cultural objects. From this perspective, the critical, ludic, subversive, and ironic uptake of cultural commodities in the academy has been decried as serving the culture industries. Lauren Berlant has expressed puzzlement at what they describe as "the persistent claim-case-case-conclusion-coda shape" of much scholarly work, querying the relationships between event, object, and case study, as well as the function of the case study as a device for "folding the singular into the general" ("On the Case" 671, 663). In a changing context, what is it that objects can and cannot do?

In the opening essay of the volume, "Cultural Analysis: Critical Encounters in Time, Space, and Thought," Mieke Bal revisits the key features of cultural analysis. What distinguishes the practice from others, she argues, is its emphasis on encounter. The features Bal maps can all be seen through the prism of encounter: interdisciplinarity (encounter between fields), a

theoretical framework (theory meets object), social relevance (analysis meets the living environment), the present as a vantage point (a temporal encounter between the past and the present), and, above all, interactive objects ("speaking back" to both concept and analyst). Bal puts these aspects into practice by close reading a novel by Azriel Bibliowicz, titled *Migas de Pan* (2013). For Bal, concepts are the primary tool of the trade: "traveling concepts" moving across disciplines, researchers, historical periods, and academic environments. The future of cultural analysis, Bal concludes, lies in its insistence on understanding object analysis as an encounter, defined by its liveness, relationality, and unpredictability.

In Chapter 2, "Cultural Analysis as Reading *for* the Object," Esther Peeren elaborates on the triangulated relationship of object, concept, and analyst, arguing it should prominently center the object. The centrality of the object protects the object from becoming just an object, treated as a mere example without the capacity to shape the analysis. Yet, while objects are invited to "speak back," they can only respond to our questions as we frame them as the objects of analysis. Peeren describes this framing as a twofold "reading *for* the object": a reading that establishes something as the object of analysis, and a reading in support of or on the side of the object. In a principled defense of close reading, Peeren argues that cultural analysis highlights what the reader can bring to a text and how certain aspects of that text may stand out in relation to what we read it for. What we want the object to reveal can be challenged by the reorientation that our reading process generates. Peeren proposes to think of the agency of objects as an oscillation between *thingness* and *objectness*. Rather than avoiding the idiom of objects, she brings in the notion of *thingness* to acknowledge the objectification that is unavoidably part of cultural analysis and to keep it accountable for that aspect.

Divya Nadkarni and Alex Thinius explore the challenges of the global imbalance of knowledge production for interpreting cultural objects in Chapter 3, "Notes toward a Decolonial Praxis of Cultural Analysis: Exemplarity and Listening as Other." What is required to understand objects on their own terms, as cultural analysis wishes to do, when the objects in question are located in experiential or conceptual paradigms far removed from privileged agents of knowledge from the Global North? To underscore the predicament of the coloniality of knowledge, Nadkarni and Thinius stage a dialogue between the notions of the *subaltern* who cannot speak and the object that "speaks back." Acknowledging that the foundations and legacies of cultural analysis are deeply embedded within Western modes of knowledge production serves as the ground on which Nadkarni and Thinius tentatively offer an alternate approach. This approach entails

a nuanced reworking of theory, object, and encounter, which includes the provincialization of Western theoretical perspectives, a radicalization of alterity so that the researcher is positioned as Other to their object of analysis, and the scaling down of the case study approach for objects that are not part of a shared conceptual world.

Considering the approach to objects in the adjacent, yet fundamentally different, context of higher arts education, in Chapter 4, "Objects in the Making: Cutting through Analysis in Art Education," Jules Sturm reflects on relevant challenges to close reading, theoretical inquiry, and readership. Objects are taken for granted in art schools, while their theoretical relevance, performative power, and definition can remain vague. What happens to cultural analysis when its tenets fall flat against the practice of actively creating objects, as the object is encountered time and again in its unfinished state, without temporal, spatial, or emotional detachment? Sturm suggests that allowing the production processes to inform cultural analysis can help us rethink the encounter between objects and concepts outside their usual academic home. Still in a state of becoming, the object may offer critical revisions and additions, reopening the question of what it means to engage with objects as such. Turning toward participatory art practices, Sturm reflects on the operations of *cutting* and *trailing* as ways to engage with objects whose external contours are not set.

Part Two: Traveling Concepts, Theories, Methods

While "theory" may once have indicated a generalized poststructuralism, its prevalence in the field is now challenged by other schools of thought. Additionally, the common heuristic or "toolkit" approach to theory is confronted by comprehensive, systematic, and ideological commitments to theoretical worldviews. Scholars and students disaffected with "high theory" prioritize lived experience, community work, and activism instead. What is the place of theory in cultural analysis and cultural studies now? What could, or should, it be in the near future?

Opening this section, in Chapter 5, "Cultural Analysis: A Global South Critical Approach," Paulina Aroch Fugellie argues for including the Global South as a site of knowing. If cultural analysis is to offer more than a sophisticated close reading of symbolic capital, it must factor in and account for a systemic totality as a function of which its objects of analysis operate. If not, she argues through her close reading of an episode of a BBC current affairs program, the blind spot is reproduced that installs Africa as an "outside," which is in fact situated at the core of our colonial and capitalist order in supplying labor and resources, as well as through its symbolic function as

that threatening "outside." If current hegemony erases the uneven totality in which objects are situated and function, then, for Aroch Fugellie, a politically relevant mode of cultural analysis can only aim to make the colonial political economy that acts as the background of our close readings visible again and hold it accountable.

In Chapter 6, "Traveling Concepts and Conjunctural Analysis: Concepts Gone Bad," Murat Aydemir reflects on the contemporary afterlives of the field's fundamental notion of "traveling concepts," which prioritizes the critical, heuristic, and interdisciplinary use of concepts over comprehensive theoretical systems or methods. He argues for the need to update and qualify the assumption that the mobility of concepts comes with intensified accountability, productivity, and criticality. As interdisciplinarity became commonplace, concepts have often "gone bad," expanding and hollowing out as they resonate with shifting forms of power. Rather than a continued focus on the travel of concepts as the critical edge of cultural analysis, he concludes, the focus should shift to a keen awareness of precisely where and how concepts register in terms of the historical present and its shapeshifting hegemony.

In Chapter 7, "Cultural Analysis as Reportage," Joost de Bloois offers a reflection on the place that "theory" currently occupies in cultural analysis. He proposes to reimagine the practice in more participatory terms, as a form of inquiry into what he describes as "the happening of the social," driven by participation and a sense of urgency. This reimagination is necessary in the face of increasing neoliberalization, commodification, and fragmentation of academic critique. Reportage, De Bloois suggests, can offer an alternative to introverted academic practice as well as to detached politics, enabling a close reading of the events in which culture is articulated, seizing ideas as they emerge, where they appear. Offering narrative sketches of social, political, and cultural practices, cultural-analysis-as-reportage may help to keep hold of the emancipatory impetus of the field, even as it might lead to the reshuffling of the field's central premises and methods, moving away from the objects and concepts perched at center stage as well as from established conceptual and political frameworks and academic concerns. Cultural analysis as reportage, situated midway between analysis and reporting, close reading and fieldwork, might be able to generate a "live" cultural analysis, which may withstand its commodification and co-optation into a brand, a malign caricature, or an arsenal for the far right.

Ernst van Alphen looks at the acts of framing and gathering that precede and inform analysis proper in Chapter 8, "Gathering, Framing, and the Temporality of Cultural Analysis." Reflecting on his recent work on the history

of sculpture, he elaborates a key distinction between historical and cultural analysis. The specificity of cultural analysis lies in its temporal orientation, as defined by a phenomenological understanding of history. The awareness of the present moment in which objects are selected, collected, addressed, and interpreted accommodates a temporality of contemporaneity central to the field, in which subjects and objects engage with different histories within their lived present. Distinct from chronological temporality, the contemporaneous temporality of cultural analysis fosters the convergence of historical moments, a confluence that informs analysis, emphasizing conceptual mappings over historical navigation.

Part Three: Interdisciplinary Spaces

Cultural studies emerged through and as a redistribution of the fundamental relationship between the social sciences and the humanities. Resituated within the humanities, cultural analysis, primarily a hermeneutic or semiotic approach, interprets objects from various media and disciplines. Current movements, from new materialism to the environmental humanities, in turn, expand interdisciplinarity even beyond the humanities and the social sciences. In the meantime, a weak version of interdisciplinarity has been incorporated into governmental and administrative reason, insisting on the expedient repackaging of equivalent units of knowledge and skill. Where has interdisciplinarity been, where is it now, and where will it go?

In Chapter 9, "Institutional Travels: Spaces for Cultural Analysis," Noa Roei traces the unacknowledged boundaries of interdisciplinary research, addressing the material, institutional, and administrative demands that curtail it. Departing from Clifford Geertz's notion of "thick description" and Lauren Berlant's call for "infrastructural analysis," Roei maps how a recent interfaculty project disrupted familiar intellectual and procedural underpinnings. What happens to cultural analysis when conducted outside of its institutional home? How can knowledge travel across the hierarchies of medical, social-scientific, and humanities research cultures, in which what counts as research differs fundamentally? Venturing out of one's comfort zone by moving across conceptual, disciplinary, affective, and institutional borders may help to unpack the implicit terms and conditions of one's participation in a particular research culture. In turn, this acknowledgment can lead to the observation of precisely the nondiscursive phases of research as key for a critical, relational, and reflexive form of interdisciplinarity. Roei concludes that the interdisciplinary potential of cultural analysis lies in its ability to shed light on the dynamic between text and its larger lifeworld, between discursive analysis and the many acts that precede and surround it.

The two remaining contributions in this section reassess the established interdisciplinarity of cultural analysis in relation to environmental and planetary emergencies. In Chapter 10, "From Situated Knowledge to Intensional Field Theory," Jeff Diamanti revisits the notion of "situated knowledge" to explore whether it may help us expand our scholarly focus. Drawing on environmental criticism and political ecology, he examines how anthropology and the humanities engage with the lived materiality of their grounded contexts. We should allow for the foregrounding of the *field* at the price of the object, Diamanti argues, to remain open to the unexpected but crucial information that can be encountered through fieldwork, allowing the field to interrupt and push the analysis. The shift from object to milieu may also help us question the centrality of the human in the humanities and social sciences at large and in cultural analysis in particular.

In Chapter 11, "Cultural Analysis at a Tipping Point," Seb Wigdel-Bowcott compares cultural analysis and cultural studies with respect to their capacity to face the climate crisis as a planetary and environmental event that does not fit easily within the social, the conjuncture, or the object. The usual way the climate crisis features in cultural analysis at present, he posits, is through limited, reductive thematizing readings of a cultural object or artifact, what he describes as an "ekphrasis of planetary themes." The problem here is not so much legibility but rather whether we can experience and encounter, let alone analyze, the object of climate change. On the one hand, it's too big, situated far outside the frame; on the other, it's already too familiar and close to us through the affected textures of our everyday life. Therefore, what's needed, he concludes, is a cultural analysis that can work at vastly different scales: the planetary in tension with the historicity of our everyday experience.

Part Four: Social Relevance and Intervention

While the relevance of critique is increasingly questioned within the academy, governments and funding agencies have instrumentalized the languages of social relevance, valorization, and knowledge utilization. Earlier optimism about popular culture's emancipatory or subversive promises no longer seems warranted; simultaneously, the canonical or "high" arts seem co-opted into heritage, memory, and tourism industries. The relationships between representation, emancipation, and material redistribution appear overdetermined and contradictory. While teaching programs and research institutes in cultural studies and cultural analysis are successfully institutionalized, the humanities at large have found themselves under protracted financial and political attack. Under

worsening political circumstances, the continued viability of what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank memorably described as a "bipolar analytic framework adequately summarized as 'kinda subversive, kinda hegemonic'" may seem kinda moot. How can cultural analysis remain—or become—socially and politically relevant in the face of changing circumstances?

This section opens with two contributions reevaluating the social relevance of cultural analysis from a teaching perspective, resituating the classroom in relation to social space. In Chapter 12, "From Social Relevance to Public Intervention: Cultural Analysis in and out of the Classroom," Aylin Kuryel argues that the bearing of social relevance as one of the key principles of cultural analysis needs to be retested against contemporary institutional and political landscapes. While the humanities and the social sciences are increasingly forced to defend their relevance to the administrative and funding bodies that control resources, the knowledge produced in these fields simultaneously becomes germane for the right-wing in fabricating moral panics to replenish hegemonic discourses. Kuryel argues that the notion and practice of "intervention" may serve as a responsive pedagogical and epistemological framework. Unlike relevance, it doesn't imply prior knowability according to which cultural analysis's relative relevance or irrelevance can be confidently measured. Through a discussion of public interventions that were designed and carried out by students, transporting academic theory out of the classroom, she proposes a reconceptualized temporality as important for cultural analysis: not only taking the past as part of the present but also the present as part of a future. Pertinent objects are not merely found somewhere "out there," she concludes, but actively shaped through collective work.

Focusing on the role of theory in today's classroom, Chapter 13, "Toward a Decolonial Classroom: Resituating Cultural Analysis as Pedagogical Intervention," by Aslı Özgen, offers an encounter between cultural analysis and decolonial theory. As her case study, she takes a bachelor's elective she has codesigned, titled "Decolonizing Media Studies: From Theory to Practice." Özgen investigates how the coloniality of the university may be tackled epistemologically and pedagogically beyond the reductive formulas of diversity and through merely teaching decolonial theory. What can concepts do when they turn toward lived experience? How do social struggles situated both within and outside the university—such as the Rhodes Must Fall movement at the University of Capetown in 2015 and the Maagdenhuis Occupation at the University of Amsterdam of that same year—inform knowledge production in the classroom? Mapping the intersections between

decolonial critique and cultural analysis with regard to situated and dialogical relationships between knower and object, self-reflexivity, and a hands-on and present-based approach, Özgen calls for more embodied and localized modes of engagement with theory.

In Chapter 14, "Crises, Social Relevance, and Critical Discomfort: Shooting Ourselves in the Foot," Alvaro Lopez argues that a reckoning with social relevance is overdue for cultural analysis. Lopez advocates a move away from the comfortable ground founded on ideas and objects taken for granted within the field but no longer as groundbreaking as they were in the recent past. As once radical ideas are steadily depoliticized, and popular culture becomes increasingly mainstream, as in the case of the horror genre in cinema going flat in the 1990s and 2000s, a form of inquiry relevant to social contestation can only be generated by actively seeking out our discomfort. For Lopez, relevance cannot be assumed; it can only be attained through seeking out new and different objects, unfashionable theories, and redistributing our established interdisciplinary boundaries and connections.

Finally, in Chapter 15, "Parochialism as Method: Pejorative, *Partage*, Pastoral," Niall Martin closes the section as well as the volume by arguing that the eclecticism and ecumenicalism of cultural analysis may betray something of its emergence in Amsterdam and the Netherlands as hubs of capitalism, liberalism, and colonialism. When under pressure, this cosmopolitanism can quickly revert to extreme forms of nationalism and nativism, as indicated by the steep rise of Islamophobia in the country. In agreement with Divya Nadkarni and Alex Thinius's contribution above, Martin offers essential caveats to the notion that the object always "speaks back." The idea may bracket the fact that the reader needs to be willing and able to hear what is offered; an uneven burden of translation may well apply (some voices and idioms translate easier than others); and some objects harbor a fundamental opacity that resists articulation. Martin offers the notion of the *parochial* as a productive critique of the supposed open-mindedness of cultural analysis, arguing that the present conjuncture, leaving behind the heydays of globalization, is characterized by increasing forms of enclosure and constriction: algorithmic niche marketing fastening people to target groups, as well as rising forms of spatial separation and segregation. Nonetheless, he concludes that precisely the local, provincial, and parochial practice of cultural analysis, as a particular incarnation of the international field of cultural studies, may offer a relevant common language, allowing for both continuities and ruptures, commonalities and differences.

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Part One

Speaking and Silenced Objects

1. Cultural Analysis: Critical Encounters in Time, Space, and Thought

Mieke Bal

Abstract: Through a Colombian novel, I lay out the five principles for cultural analysis that are most important to distinguish the approach from "cultural studies" and from any of the participating disciplines. The two most crucial ones are interdisciplinarity and a temporality explained through the metaphor of the octopus, with tentacles going in all directions, rather than the orthodox linear chronology. Another key difference is the close analysis of the cultural artifacts we study. An anchoring in the sociocultural environment from which the cultural objects emerged, but in which they function in the present, is also important—as is a theoretical framing where theory is not a bossy master discourse but an interlocutor in the conversation between object, analyst, and theory.

Keywords: interdisciplinarity, framing, close reading, multitentacled temporality, the present

My proposal, made over twenty-five years ago, to call the work we do in the humanities "cultural analysis" rather than "cultural studies" or any one of the disciplines that, together, compose it, was motivated by the desire to distinguish it from, on the one hand, the frequently methodologically dogmatic fields of the separate disciplines, and on the other, from the somewhat underdefined and overpoliticized practice of "cultural studies." I wished to make it both specific and broad as a framework for what our task is. I was in search of an approach to our contemporary cultural environments, including aesthetic ones, that would comprise both methodological guidelines and intellectual freedom. That combination would, I surmised, encourage *encounters*: between people, between people and artworks, and between artworks. But also, between the two keywords of the term:

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"cultural" and "analysis." The former describes the object of study, be it literary, cinematic, musical, ritual or visual; the latter the way in which it is studied. The importance of *encounters* resides in its liveness, relationality, and, most importantly for this book, its futurality. One can never determine what, precisely, will happen among the encountering people or elements, but that uncertainty constitutes just what matters: what keeps the participants alive and ready to continue.[1]

With the first and most important element of that "way," interdisciplinarity, which is a conversation, or encounter, among the different academically cultivated fields of study, the concept of cultural analysis states the independence of the existence of the objects or artifacts from the organized approaches and their methodological knowledge bases. There also needs to be a theoretical base, not as a master discourse but as one of the discourses that participate in the conversation. And then, another crucial element: the encounter needs to bring forward an argument, a demonstration, that both the analysis and the cultural object have social relevance. Both emerge from and function within the society, the social environment within which the analyst is embedded as well. And then, the analysis must be a true analysis: detailed, convincingly connecting the elements and aspects of the object to the aspects mentioned so far. The object must be allowed to qualify or even resist an interpretation. As I have been phrasing it, in one of my academic slogans: the object has the last word. It must be enabled to "speak back." And then, the most controversial yet crucial aspect: the temporal starting point of the analysis is the present. The past matters as what brings the present and the past together, in dialogue—a temporal encounter. This challenges the usual chrono-logic with its straight arrow as its symbol and the idea of development as its ideology.

These principles produce a specific attitude both toward the objects of analysis and toward our "others": colleagues, students, lay interlocutors; an attitude of reciprocity, mutuality, reversibility; what can be summed up as dialogue. This implies an attitude of responsiveness to the appeal and the contribution of others to the theme of the analysis and to its object. My favorite metaphor that further explains what I mean here, comes from the American-British psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas, who wrote in one of those sentences that have become an enduring guideline for me: "I often find that although I am working on an idea without knowing exactly what it is I think, I am engaged in thinking an idea struggling to have me think it" (10).

1 See the extremely short video (three minutes) in the "About" section on my website (www.miekebal.org), in which I explain the approach through the five aspects I mention here and I will elaborate on later.

The guideline aspect consists of the vision of the object to which Bollas's book is devoted. The shadow the object casts is the irreducible, unbreakable attachment between object, cultural frame, and analyst, between which the encounter is the live glue. Bollas's sentence does not only convey modesty—the analyst/theorist acknowledges that he doesn't even know exactly what it is he is trying so hard to think—but also, it demonstrates the complexity of the idea in emergence. And most importantly, the author and his object, the idea in becoming, collaborate. The idea desires to be thought; it even struggles to become a thought. This struggle facilitates creative thinking in the process of analysis. That struggle is not simply bilateral. Both Bollas, the sentence's author, and the emerging thought are connected to many other beings, events, and things. Hence, it is a multiple struggle. This, too, is a feature of cultural analysis as a form, focus, or genre.[2]

Given my insistence on the important role the object must play in cultural analysis, I will now shift gears and bring an object to the fore in the irresistible way it is "live." This is a mode of demonstrating the tight interweaving cultural analysis must produce. To that effect, before expanding a bit more on the five key features of cultural analysis as an approach and attitude, I will presently give an example embedded in one of the most traditional of humanistic disciplines, literary studies, and the most traditional genre within it, a fictional novel. My goal is to demonstrate that cultural analysis is not a different branch of, or almost laying outside the humanities, but an inherent mode of it; and that fiction is not an escapist avoidance of reality but can be quite the opposite. With the 2013 novel *Migas de pan* (Bread Crumbs) the author Azriel Bibliowicz, of Polish-Jewish provenance living and working in Colombia, has created what I consider a masterpiece of the mixture of temporal and spatial encounters and mishaps, according to the "pre-posterous" (chrono)logic that pertains to all five principles of cultural analysis.[3]

Time and Space Messed Up

The first temporal problematic is the endlessness of the novel. Not that it is exceedingly long; it is not. But literally, it has no ending—neither a

2 The repeated word "emerging" alludes to the Deleuzian key term "becoming." For a lucid and relevant explanation, see Biehl and Locke.

3 Azriel Bibliowicz, *Migas de pan.* This novel has been expertly translated into Dutch by Jos den Bekker (*Broodkruim*, Amsterdam, 2022), and into several other languages.

happy ending nor a tragic denouement. Everything and everybody are paralyzed. We are trapped in an eternal present. This is due to the fact that the impossible temporality of traumatic experiences is the central topic of the book, turning it into a profound challenge of the narrative form in which the novel is written. It stages a situation that does not end up resolved. In Colombia, guerrilleros have abducted Josué, a family head and survivor of the Holocaust and the Stalinist concentration camps. He is the father of Samuel, the protagonist and central narrator. Telling what happened to his father, its consequences for the family, and even the kind of house they live in, is a task Samuel shares with a few other narrators who speak "in the first person." Sometimes, these other narrators address Samuel in the second person, always leaving room for doubt if this is a dialogue or a monologue in which the protagonist speaks to himself. Josué does not appear, nor does he speak, although there are quotes from his earlier writings. Hence, there is a constant lack of formal clarity on the narrative structure: Who speaks? Who see (focalizes)? Who has all these memories? Psychoanalysis, medicine, history, narratology, spatial-visual analysis all come and work together, in an encounter. In this way the literary text, the cultural artifact that we are considering, rather than being a traditional novel, is itself profoundly interdisciplinary.

The entire novel owes its structure to the horrific repetition of the violent abduction of Josué decades later. If we compare the two moments of abduction and sequestration, there is a systemic opposition. Nazi and gulag imprisonment were the doing of perversely authoritative states; that in Colombia of an equally perverse statelessness; an anarchy. Extreme authoritarianism and a total lack of authority: for the imprisoned, it amounts to the same. Human beings are transformed into objects and lose not only their freedom but also their identity. In both cases, trauma is the inevitable result. In view of the fundamentally traumatic state resulting from the concentration camp experience, his son Samuel and the other family members imagine what must go through the head of the unreachable Josué, who is now imprisoned again, probably in the jungle. We can characterize this imagining as a fictional indirect focalization, although we can never look into Josué's head. During all the fabula time, the relatives are tirelessly waiting for a call from the kidnappers. Between the calls there are weeks of silence. This is how a certain comparison emerges between the powerlessness of those waiting and that of the father during those earlier years of imprisonment. That repetition is a tragedy without crisis, without denouement, even without a beginning. This is an incredibly precise narrative representation of the timelessness that trauma produces.

And thanks to the sober and strong narration, this becomes "contagious": the reader feels it, too.

Because of the unpredictable outcome of the situation, all the time that Samuel is imagining what his father is going through becomes a form of torture. "For Samuel, the word 'waiting' was getting a new meaning: he was clinging to a call, a signal that would interrupt reality" (25).[4] After this quote comes a paragraph with different explanations of how the paralysis of time made any form of living impossible. The son begins to understand that he is being contaminated by his father's obsession with time. This, too, also touches the reader. Because of the repetition of the imprisonment, first by the Nazis and the Stalinists, now by the guerrilleros, Samuel realizes that the way his father had transformed the family home into a museum—furnishing it with showcases filled with specific topics—came from the fact that the old man had imprisoned himself into the literal, concrete, "undetermined" time. This is the theoretical basis of the interdisciplinarity of the work as well as of the way we must approach it.

The novel is full of reflections on and experiences of the viscose slowness of time in imprisonment, similar to the time of waiting. And trauma—a word that only appears once—is in itself, just as the son suggests, a form of imprisonment, which includes the trauma of the previous generation. The literally endless history, and the effects it entails, merge in a prose that is original, powerful, and, also literally, fascinating. Josué had been a theater actor, but after the war and his flight to Colombia, that which had always been his ground of existence, the theater, as well as the house in which he and his family lived, had been transformed into a cabinet of curiosity (*Wunderkammer*), a museum consisting of a great number of showcases.

> Waiting … doomed to a waiting where time became insufferably wider and denser … forced him to walk back and forth from one room to another while constantly looking at the clock … hesitating … walking from one side to another. (24)[5]

The expression "walking from one side to the other" implies the pointlessness of the waiting as much as of the space where it takes place. This spatial

4 "Para Samuel la palabra *espera* comenzó a cobrar un nuevo significado: se aferraba a una llamada, a una señal que interrumpía la realidad" (25).

5 "La espera … Condenado a una espera que terminaba por alargar y engrosar el tiempo de forma intolerable … Forzado a deambular de una habitación a otra y a mirar en forma continua el reloj … Vacilar … Caminar de un lado para otro" (24).

arrangement of the house, merged with the eventless waiting, precludes a classical, event-based narrative and replaces it with a breathtaking slowness.

Thus, we cannot be surprised that one of the rooms in the museum-house is called "the salon of time." Even within the literary genre of the novel this work is interdisciplinary. It is not easy to box it in within any known genre. Although it is totally personal in tone, this novel cannot be labeled either as an autobiography or as auto-fiction, even if it has connections to both genres. For, it is also a kind of chronicle, but more an account of the research, of the despairing questions, of the begging for the rescue money. It could be seen as an inverted *Bildungsroman*, a report of the protagonist's attempts to discover who he is and how he had become that way, and how the others are part of that limping identity.

The book creates a new genre, of a *cultural* kind as cultural analysis considers it: the novel of contact, as encounter, with life. In that capacity it makes the reader wonder and try to speak about "it" in many different ways, enumerating a large number of theoretical problems. That contact comes up in all the words we know, but that have lost their strength, their capacity to communicate meaning. Hence the fact that those words are being hospitalized to be cured in the "word hospital," one of the museum-rooms Josué had curated in the house (183–204). This is for me the most overwhelming and significant chapter. It sums it all up: the sticky nature of traumatic time that results from extreme violence, like a contagious disease. There, in that space-time, language and its words don't work. This also implies a theory of narrative, a vision of literature, and of life. The house, no longer a home, was from early on also a medium to assist living in the a-temporality of trauma. Josué locked himself up in it. "The cabinet transformed into his world. He would be the eternal traveler inside himself. The cabinet became a reality, a universe to explore, a backwater, a place to encounter himself and take distance from everything and remain everywhere" (32).[6]

Now, during the long weeks of waiting, the house became an escape route for Samuel. Before, it had been Josué's theater where the actors were objects and he was the dramaturge, the director. The ninth room is called "Memoratro," the only one that had, because it needed it, a subtitle: "or

6 "El gabinete se transformó en su mundo. Sería el eterno viajero dentro de sí mismo. El gabinete constituiría una realidad, un universo por explorar, un remanso, un lugar para encontrarse y alejarse de todo y estar en todas partes. El gabinete de curiosidades se convirtió en su mundo. Él sería el ambulante eterno en sí mismo. El gabinete de curiosidades formaría una realidad, un universo a descubrir, una vía de escape, un lugar de encuentro, donde pudieras distanciarte de todo y estar en todas partes" (32).

theater of memory." The nonexisting word marvelously glues fiction, theater and memory together, in an attempt to give shape to trauma. It is full of quotations from Josué's writings, in which all kinds of figures from myths, biblical texts, and literature show up. The tenth chapter is titled "The Salon of Silence." There, the child had learned the effect of silence, as a principle of meditation. The experience of silence facilitates your vision to expand, and to look from a different perspective. This is precisely what matters in cases of trauma, when the victim is incapable of shaping memories because the experience was too horrible to take it in.[7]

The title of this book becomes clear only at the end. "Bread Crumbs" refers to the fairy tale of Little Thumb, where birds come to eat the bread crumbs and thereby destroy their function of trace for the return trip back home. The title also alludes to the way generosity can save lives in prison. Crumbs that one prisoner gives to another when they are starving. Nevertheless, at the end Samuel imagines how hunger is also a weapon for the prisoner to confront his captors. The imagined hunger suicide through which his father can take away the spoils makes Samuel burst into tears. He wished he could give to his father a handful of bread crumbs, as a fellow prisoner had done decades ago. The novel does not reveal if it is too late for that; nor does it make the concept of trauma clearer. To the question this book solicits from its readers—"Are you really a novel?"—the text does not give an answer. So, as a cultural analyst, I had to invent one. My imaginative answer is: "No. I stand for the five principles of cultural analysis."

The book/text/novel is a work of fiction nourished by memories, affective contamination, and traumatic anguish. There is no way to box it into a genre. Nor is it possible to cultivate indifference toward history, nor to turn the historical aspect into a straight arrow. Most importantly, it is a cultural object, firmly positioned within the context, or framework, where violence and its consequences flourish. The novel is generated by the traumatic situation(s) that define not only Josué's life but also that of his family and environment. This is how literature and reality are interwoven. Fiction and reality cannot be separated. That is what defines culture, and clarifying how this functions is what culture needs from cultural analysis. Such clarifications must touch on, unpack, and bring forward the social aspect of cultural processes and artifacts. Only through that analytical process can victims and perpetrators be brought together, so that the former can have their traumatic paralysis alleviated and the latter held accountable.

7 For more on the tension between trauma and memory, see the introductory chapter of Bal, Crewe, and Spitzer.

Between these two sides, the public—readers, viewers, listeners and witnesses—have their own role to play, their own task to fulfill. There lies the difference between mono-disciplinary approaches and cultural analysis as an approach that integrates collectivity and political relevance with a keen eye for the details of those objects among which we live, and their aesthetic effects that helps us cope with reality.

Back to Square One

A bit more, then, on the five principles with which I began. Of these principles, interdisciplinarity distinguished cultural analysis most forcefully from the traditional disciplines. As thinkers, we can often confront ourselves "interdisciplinarily" with the difficulty of not knowing enough, or with enough depth, of the disciplines we "visit"—or, better: with which we engage. The latter word makes me wish to distinguish interdisciplinarity from "transdisciplinarity"—a term more frequently used, that mostly consists of selecting a theme, such as, to choose a misogynous example, the widespread story of the wicked stepmother, that is then traced in art, theater, opera, and, worst of all, canonical religious texts mostly badly interpreted (from "Snow White" to Genesis 39, revised in Quran sura 12). Such a focus encourages simplification, which, in turn, encourages the production of stereotypes. In a true interdisciplinary turn, the encounter occurs between ("inter-") aspects, lines, and guidelines from the participating disciplines, historical periods, media, ethnicities, and also scale: between detailed analysis ("close reading") and provisional generalizations, as between the local and the global.

But such encounters must be held up with the help of tools that are methodologically responsible. If not, the analyses would depend entirely on the competences of the individual analysts, without the standards, motives of comparison, and the intersubjectivity (to recall Karl Popper's guidelines) that makes them *teachable*. Nevertheless, among the disciplines, the concepts and tools for intersubjectivity are not rigidly fixed. Their meanings, usefulness and specific uses, their scope and operative value all differ. Those processes of differentiation must be openly discussed, before, during, and after each attempt. In this way students are working on an equal footing with their teachers. Such flexibility helps to avoid rigidity, as much as arbitrariness and neglect. At the same time, it mobilizes the imagination and identification. With the help of such serious discussions, it becomes possible to develop research

questions outside of the preestablished paradigms within each of the singular disciplines.[8]

Instead of such a priori positions one can accept to be guided through distinct disciplinary fields in relation with one another, without the need to become experts and obtain diplomas in each discipline encountered, and without the need to obey the rules of methodology that are boss in each participating discipline. It was with this view of concepts that I have developed my book *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide* (2002). Concepts are the primary tools of interdisciplinarity. They facilitate discussion on the basis of a common language. But as I said before, they are not fixed. They travel, among disciplines, individual researchers, historical periods, academic environments, and even those that are geographically scattered. Instead of such fixed convictions, it becomes attractive to let oneself be guided through different disciplinary fields in relation to one another, without the necessity to become a specialist in each discipline encountered, and without having to obey the rules of methodology that reign in each one. This conviction has been the basis of my 2002 book on the subject, which I subtitled "A Rough Guide," with "rough" indicating the necessary flexibility. Concepts are the tools of interdisciplinarity in that they facilitate discussion on the basis of a shared language.

The participating disciplines offer also the indispensable theoretical basis for cultural analysis. Each theoretical import must be justified in view of the other aspects of cultural analysis, such as the social relevance, the usefulness for the analysis as such, and the anti-chronological historical perspective. In this respect, it becomes relevant to call on an "inter-temporal," interdisciplinary and international thinker: Baruch Spinoza, from the seventeenth century (1632–1677). In his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* from 1670 he argued that the Bible did not come from God but was a social construction. He based this insight on encounters among the disciplines of philosophy, biblical hermeneutics, cultural theory, and historiography. Such a view allows comparisons between different versions of the same fabula, of which I have studied one in detail: the story of Joseph and the wife of Potiphar, in the Hebrew Bible and in the Quran. Against the expectations of many, I suppose, the sociopolitical tendency in the Bible can be considered misogynous and racist, whereas the Quran version is rather feminist. Spinoza's focus establishes a theoretical standard of multi-focalization. That theoretical ground of Spinoza and its interdisciplinarity also brings up the

8 That equality between teachers and students is crucial to the educational result. Another of my academic slogans goes, "If you don't learn from your students, you are a bad teacher."

third aspect of cultural analysis: the social relevance. Here, the domain that needs inquiry is responsibility.[9]

Spinoza's conception of responsibility is consequential. To sum it up briefly: We are not guilty of the crimes perpetrated by our ancestors, but we are responsible for their consequences. For, we live with and benefit from those. This pertains to our ways of life, in the aftermath of slavery, of exploitation, and colonization. This is why the term "postcolonial" cannot be used as if the world today were without colonial relationships. Something similar holds for the administrators and managers who are currently so busy destroying the humanities in their frantic pursuit of money. They are not exactly guilty. Most of these are complicit with the fatal turn academic education has taken since 1999. Not guilty, but, yes, responsible for its consequences. Rejecting that responsibility means perpetrating the delict of indifference, against which I have argued in my book on Joseph/Yusuf. If only those decision-makers would read, perhaps not Spinoza's difficult texts written in Latin, but at least *Collective Imaginings* by Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd, which is entirely devoted to Spinoza's relevance for the present, they could stop adhering to that damaging ideology, that is the binary opposition between disciplines that are economically profitable and those devoted to beauty, pleasure, enjoyment, and affect. What they don't see is that those disciplines are, in fact, united, connected. Interdisciplinarity is not a luxury but a necessity. Together, the disciplines constitute the domain of culture. And without culture … well, look what happens in the world around us, right now. The systemic cause: binary thinking.[10]

Thus, the first three aspects of cultural analysis are tightly bound together. The fourth, the need for a detailed analysis, is also tightly connected with the idea of encounter, more specifically: with its aspect of reciprocity. For this, it is necessary to consider, and treat, the object as (also) a subject. If and when we pay close attention to an object and its details, we can allow it to "respond," to resist, partly or wholly, to an interpretation. But to make this possible, we must learn to "listen" to the response from the object. Listening is a practice. And like all practices, we must learn how to do it. Before being able to practice that skill, we must learn to overcome

9 For more on the Joseph/Yusuf story, and an explanation of the stark ideological differences between the versions, see my book *Loving Yusuf: Conceptual Travels from Present to Past*. For a fabulously clear, lucid and succinct study of Spinoza's relevance for today, especially the issue of responsibility, see Gatens and Lloyd.

10 For my argument against "post-" colonial, see Bal, "In the Absence of Post-." A short version of my Joseph/Yusuf argument against indifference appeared as Bal, "Whitening Lies for Ethical Non-indifference."

the loudness of the world, which requires a serious commitment. In our current whirlwind of noise, we must learn to make distinctions among voices, languages, idiosyncratic phrases, tones, and moods. Only then can listening be a socially useful practice; an openness as well as a critique. The objects of study of the humanities have the unique potential to teach us that practice. Thanks to their complexity and their subtlety, artworks, but also other cultural practices and even, simply, languages and their uses, can help us to go beyond the simplistic slogans and superficial readings of their alleged meanings.

One form of "listening" that allows the object to speak back occurs in our writing. It is for me very important to practice this mutuality. We frequently quote passages from literature or reproduce visual images. Usually, we first give an argument, then follows the quote, meant as evidence. My point is that quotes should not be used to confirm what the student says about it, but rather, to complicate it. If we develop the habit of systematically revisiting a quote and carefully check to which point it does confirm our reasons for quoting it and in what way it does not, we will easily notice that the confirmation is rarely completely "right." But instead of panicking, or thinking we were wrong, or even worse, repressing the differences, such complications can help us to move beyond what we (think we) already know. Rather, carefully listening, treating the object as a "second person"—in other words, as an interlocutor—is the apprenticeship of cultural analysis as a critical practice. There is no more concise way to explain how I imagine the difference between cultural analysis and other approaches.[11]

The fifth aspect of cultural analysis is probably the most controversial one. I have termed it "pre-posterous history," both with a self-ironic wink and for taking prepositions seriously. Pre- and post- change places. I have developed this sense of temporality based on mutuality in a book on the intertwinement of contemporary art and Caravaggio. There, I argued for a more intensive relationship between the historical baroque and the art of today. This was my way of complicating our sense of history and, at the same time, the idea that art, once seen from a later moment, changes. It is impossible to see art as if it was stable, as exactly what the artist had in mind when making it. Just like concepts, art is flexible, transforms in and

11 For the importance and method of listening, see chapter 7 of my book *Image-Thinking: Artmaking as Cultural Analysis*. The example, there, is based on audio, of women speaking in many different languages. See the information on my website on the installation "Nothing Is Missing," under artworks, "Installations." For a succinct version of the argument, see my article "Learning Listening."

with time, if only because its viewers and readers are not contemporary with its making. This is what makes cultural analysis a practice with a future. This view has consequences for the future: artworks we now see as of the present will be different in 2033.[12]

This brief description of the goals, methods, and issues of cultural analysis only serves as a guideline; a "rough guide," not as prescriptive, not as a set of rules. The importance of the combination of a conception of the field of culture and ways best to approach it in intellectually responsible as well as creative ways matters for the possibility of keeping culture alive, understood, responded to, and, yes, capable of speaking back, so that encounters can keep taking place. And because of this aliveness, culture—hence, its analysis, too—has a future.

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About the Author

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2. Cultural Analysis as Reading *for* the Object

Esther Peeren

Abstract: In this chapter, I present cultural analysis as a reading *for* the object: a reading that looks for and establishes some thing existing in culture *as* the object of analysis, and a reading *in support of* or *on the side of* the object, taking care that it, in its thingness that makes it more than the object of this analysis, is given the last word and not stifled by concepts and theories being thrown at it. This reading *for* the object is seen as involving a practice of close reading distinct from, on the one hand, surface or descriptive reading and, on the other, overreading.

Keywords: reading *for*, close reading, surface reading, overreading, thingness, object

The Triangle of Cultural Analysis

Many years of teaching and doing cultural analysis have underlined for me the perspicacity of Jonathan Culler's diagnosis of cultural analysis as "that mode of analysis and presentation that is compelled to attempt to analyze itself, its own concepts and standpoint," making it "the site of the anxiety-ridden subject" ("What Is Cultural Studies?" 346). Anxiety may seem too strong and too ugly a feeling to attach to the proclivity to reflect on what cultural analysis is and should do, but I find it apt because of anxiety's association, in everyday language, with both a certain unease, preventing the cultural analyst from feeling completely in control, and an eagerness to proceed, to *get on with it*, where the "it," in the case of cultural analysis, always remains, to some degree, in question. This does not make cultural analysis a black box or anything and everything; while subject to constant

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reflexivity, it has a certain shape on which most cultural analysts, as this volume shows, at least roughly agree.

In my teaching, I have often illustrated the practice of cultural analysis by drawing a triangle, with object, concept, and analyst (or multiples of these) forming the three corners. This picks up on Mieke Bal's reference, in *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities*, to "the triangular relationship between analyst, concept, and object" (18). The lines of the triangle connecting the corners are taken as indicating bidirectional relations between object and concept, concept and analyst, and object and analyst: the encounter between object and concept should do something to both, just as concept and analyst, and object and analyst should mutually affect each other. If object, concept, and analyst end up exactly as they were, unchanged, no cultural analysis has taken place. Conceiving cultural analysis as a triangle, however, also implies a hierarchy between the corners as a result of this shape, at least when upright, having a top. Rather than proposing a tilting of the triangle to negate the primacy of the apex, I maintain that the triangle should stay upright and its top associated with the object as the leading component of cultural analysis.

For Culler, cultural analysis is given definition by the "particular sort of theoretical engagement" it entails, which he sees taking the form of its persistent anxiety-inducing self-analysis ("What Is Cultural Studies?" 345). Cultural studies, in contrast, is associated with theory as such: Culler deems it to be "the general name for the activities of which what we call 'theory' for short is the theory" (340). I am not sure this distinction holds: much work in cultural studies is strongly self-reflexive (and so, by now, is much work in other disciplines that, in the late 1990s, perhaps lagged behind in this respect). Conversely, there is some cultural analysis for which Culler's remark that cultural studies, notably in the US, often involves an "argument about theoretical discourses or approaches … carried out not in relation to particular sorts of cultural practices but as an abstract evaluation which often appeals to general theoretical and especially political consequences" (341) rings true. This type of abstract, generalizing evaluation tends to result from placing the concept in the top corner of the triangle and considering its relation to the other two corners as (predominantly) unidirectional. Working from the concept to the object and the positionality of the analyst without reversing this movement, or even forgetting the object and positionality of the analyst altogether after a cursory mention at the start of the analysis, is what, to my mind, makes for bad cultural analysis. Although engaging with a concept or, even better, multiple concepts is often, especially by students of cultural analysis, considered a more difficult, serious, and accomplished

pursuit than analyzing objects, cultural *analysis*, as its name indicates, is primarily a practice of *analyzing* that involves but is not reducible to *conceptualizing* or *theorizing*.

At the same time, cultural analysis is never merely about presenting an(other) interpretation of a particular object, no matter how illuminating; the analysis has to make a point with relevance beyond the object by contributing to the development of concepts or theories.[1] This is how a cultural analysis can draw me in even when I have no preexisting knowledge of or interest in its object. Of course, a strong cultural analysis will inspire curiosity about the object as it lays out how this object shapes—as more than an example—the point made. If exactly the same point could have been made without looking at an object (by *conceptualizing* or *theorizing* without *analyzing*), or by referring to a different object as an equally apt example, making the object interchangeable, the object corner of the triangle of cultural analysis is rendered nonfunctional.[2]

In arguing that the object corner must not just be functional, but must be the triangle's apex, I again follow Bal, who argues that the object, besides being the departure point of any cultural analysis, should, before its conclusion, be allowed to *speak back* to both the cultural analyst (their expertise, expectations, and assumptions) and the concept(s) the object has been put in conversation with. In other words, the object must be given "the last word" (Bal, *Travelling Concepts* 9). Although this seems to suggest that the object speaks for itself, Bal makes clear that, rather than speaking up out of nowhere, it responds, implying its previous address by the analyst: "a text does not speak for itself. We surround it, or frame it, before we let it speak at all" (8). In this chapter, I present this surrounding or framing activity as an ongoing twofold reading *for* the object: a reading that looks for and establishes something (or, as I will explain later, some *thing*) *as* the object of analysis, in the process also circumscribing it (by determining where the object begins and ends, which is never self-evident); and a reading *in support of* or *on the side of* the object, taking care that it, in its thingness

1 Lauren Berlant makes a similar point about the case study: "When it doesn't work to change the conditions of exemplarity or explanation, something is deemed merely a case study, remanded to banal particularity. When it does, a personal or collective sensorium shifts" (665).

2 Here, I see a distinction between the case study and the object of cultural analysis: case studies—as multiple studies of what is the case or multiple studies together making a case—imply a degree of interchangeability. This is especially so with the case study understood as "a genre that organizes singularities into exemplary, intelligible patterns, enmeshing realist claims (*x* really is exemplary in this way) with analytic claims (if we make a pattern from *x* set of singularities we can derive *y* conclusions) and makes claims for why it should be thus" (Berlant 670).

that makes it more than just the object of this analysis, is indeed given the last word and not stifled by concepts or theories being thrown at it (in an act of mere application), or by the analyst, whose positionality matters and should feature (including in them writing as a situated "I"), but should not lead to the analysis becoming self-centered.

Reading *for* the Object by Reading Closely

A cultural analyst is always reading around *for* objects that speak in new ways to particular questions they have an interest in. Once an object has been settled on, framed as the to-be-analyzed, it is read *for* something specific, usually something it has not been read *for* before. In "Reading for Water," which introduces a special issue on this topic of *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, Isabel Hofmeyr, Sarah Nuttall, and Charne Lavery explain how climate change–induced water crises in southern Africa led them to start reading southern African fiction for water, where the fraught politics of colonial and postcolonial land ownership and use had, in the past, prompted it to be mainly read for land (304). Reading for water is conceptualized as "bringing water into the frame" (305), echoing Bal's point that cultural analysis is an act of framing—of (re)contextualizing and setting up (making it do one's bidding). The texts analyzed in the special issue were selected because they all somehow speak of water, and, in this framing, what they have to say about water is amplified, without necessarily drowning out what else they speak of.

Reading for water does not stop there, however. It also entails courting currents capable of unsettling the frame by "follow[ing] the sensory, political and agentive power of water across literary texts" in a trajectory that is not straight but that "moves laterally, vertically and contrapuntally between different water-worlds and hydro-imaginaries" (Hofmeyr et al. 303, 304). There is a sense here of allowing oneself, as the analyst, to be carried away in multiple, unanticipated directions by water as the literary texts imagine it. This is when an object can reframe what it is being read *for*, when it can begin to *speak back* in Bal's sense: when the analyst is willing to let themselves veer off course by what they are reading *for*; when they start attending carefully to the gaps and frictions between what, upon selecting it as their object, they expected the text to help them theorize or conceptualize, and what the text actually does once it has been thoroughly (though never exhaustively: there are always other ways of reading *for* the same thing and other things the text could be read *for*) analyzed.

Close reading is the mode of analysis most conducive to the convergence of reading *for* the object and reading the object *for* something in a way that allows the object to speak back. When first espoused by the New Critics in the mid-twentieth century, close reading was positioned against what Cleanth Brooks calls the "heresy of paraphrase," or the idea that it is possible to "formulate a proposition that will say what the poem 'says'" (198).[3] According to Brooks, "as his [sic] proposition approaches adequacy," any reader would find,

> not only that it has increased greatly in length, but that it has begun to fill itself up with reservations and qualifications—and most significant of all— … that he has himself begun to fall back upon metaphors of his own in his attempt to indicate what the poem "says." In sum, his proposition, as it approaches adequacy, ceases to be a proposition. (198)

Close reading thus entailed from its beginning a rejection of modes of criticism assuming that a text's singular meaning could be straightforwardly read off the page and summarily relayed. As involving, instead, a "respect for the stubbornness of texts," taken to demand a detailed examination of the multiple, complex meanings and effects yielded by the intertwinement of their form and content (and, later on, also the context of their composition and that of their readers), close reading was long considered the "sine qua non of literary study" (Culler, "Close Reading" 20). The emergence of distant reading, most notably in the work of Franco Moretti, provided a machine-assisted supplement to close reading but did not fundamentally challenge its position as the preeminent form of critique. Recently, however, close reading, equated to symptomatic reading, has been attacked as sidelining aesthetic experience and ordinary readers; harboring unrealistic or hubristic expectations about literary studies as a form of political activism; and disrespecting the text (Best and Marcus, Felski).

Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus present the most pugnacious and influential argument against symptomatic reading in their programmatic introduction to a 2009 special issue of *Representations* titled "The Way We Read Now." There, they define symptomatic reading as

> a mode of interpretation that assumes that a text's truest meaning lies in what it does not say, describes textual surfaces as superfluous, and seeks

3 This paragraph and the two following ones are taken, with minimal changes and additions, from my "Suspicious Minds: Critique as Symptomatic Reading" (Peeren 102–03).

> to unmask hidden meanings. For symptomatic readers, texts possess meanings that are veiled, latent, all but absent if it were not for their irrepressible and recurring symptoms. (Best and Marcus 1)

It is difficult to think of any actual literary scholar who would consider textual surfaces as "superfluous" or who would seek, as is implied here, only to unmask hidden meanings—and that includes those identified by Best and Marcus as symptomatic readers, like Fredric Jameson, Jacques Derrida, and Louis Althusser. In addition, it is hard to see how pursuing meanings that, while being "veiled, latent, all but absent," nevertheless yield "irrepressible and recurring symptoms" that present themselves to the reader can be considered critical overreach.

In place of the straw man of symptomatic reading that Best and Marcus contest, they propose surface reading, also called descriptive or just reading (in the sense of simply or only reading). Focusing on "what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts" (Best and Marcus 9), this mode of reading, per Ellen Rooney's sharp takedown, "celebrates obviousness" and "disavows reading's own formal activities" (116) in what might be considered a return of Brooks's paraphrastic heresy. Surface reading not only ignores the difficulty of determining and putting into a proposition what is "evident, perceptible, apprehensible"—as Rooney points out, this is, in a large part, "a matter of what one looks for, where one stands, and what one expects to see or desires" (123)—but also the impossibility of establishing where the surface of a text begins and ends. Jason M. Baskin has argued from a Marxist and phenomenological perspective that "depth is not … a separate space located 'behind' the object's surface … [but] what makes surfaces available to perception in the first place" (7). Without depth, no surface. Moreover, the linguistic sign itself, as Saussure showed, is composed of a signifier and an unstable signified, and thus layered in and of itself.

When is the surface of a text left behind? Is it when we read (some of) the text as metaphorical, allegorical, or allusive; when we take into account the multiple or changing meanings of certain words; when we pursue the "irrepressible and recurring symptoms" breaking through to the surface of the text; or when we consider something that is not in the text as nevertheless relevant to its interpretation? In addition to appearing to reject a text's ability to have multiple meanings, the call for surface reading denies the ability for certain elements of a text to become more meaningful—by, as it were, rising to the surface—in a different context, as when water crises cause readers to suddenly notice particular texts' explicit and implicit engagements with water. Surface reading also absolves readers from having

to take responsibility for their readings as inevitably bringing to the text, among other things, levels of literacy, cultural backgrounds, and politics affecting what they will find in it, both on its so-called surface and in its so-called depths.

Close reading, in contrast, unfolds as a careful and contingent but also studious and accountable encounter with a literary text or other cultural object. It is a skillful (which is not the same as masterful) activity that has to be learned, much like conceptualizing and theorizing. Close reading is geared toward capturing what Eugenie Brinkema evocatively calls "the wild and many fecundities of specificity" of a text (*Forms of the Affects* xv), including its formal dimensions, which cannot be done through casual perusal. What close reading does is acknowledge the text as an endlessly recontextualized and reconfigured site of meaning making that preempts instantaneous, complete, or definitive understanding; it thus prompts ongoing efforts of rereading the text—as object—*for* the same or different things.

Literary critics advocating a turn away from close reading have fallen notably short in producing surface or descriptive readings that excite or surprise, and frequently stray from basing their interpretations on what would be evident to any reader.[4] Bal, on her part, has consistently championed close reading—against her sense that, as a practice, it was being lost (*Travelling Concepts* 8); a loss that appears even less recuperable today, as literacy declines and attention spans narrow—by showing what it can do, across all dimensions and layers of objects across media: in the intimate account of her engagement, as a narratologist, with Louise Bourgeois's *Spider* in "Narrative Inside Out"; her careful drawing out of the implications of Theodore Roosevelt's words emblazoned on the walls of the American Museum of Natural History in "Telling, Showing, Showing Off"; her pointing out of the physically impossible position of Narcissus's legs in Caravaggio's

4 Illustrative is Heather Love's descriptive reading of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Love reads the key scene in which Sethe kills her children to prevent them being re-enslaved as involving multiple perspectives on this act that ask for different engagements from the reader, from empathy with the dehumanized to the registration of dehumanization as something that is not undone by witnessing but requires careful documentation, even if such documentation implies detachment. The multiple perspectives, however, are signaled through subtle shifts in focalization that are acknowledged to be "difficult to identify" (Love 385), raising the question of the extent to which this reading remains at the level of description as opposed to that of (narratological) analysis. Transplanting the descriptive methods of sociologists like Erving Goffman and Bruno Latour to the reading of literature comes up against the problem that, in literature, "not aim[ing] to see beyond the self-descriptions of its subjects" (Love 376) is complicated by the intricacies of literary form. It could be argued that what allows Love to say something new about *Beloved* is not a descriptive reading of the novel, but a close reading of Morrison's novel *for* description.

eponymous painting in *Quoting Caravaggio*; and her reading of a piece of graffiti on a Dutch wall in the introduction to *The Practice of Cultural Analysis* as emblematic of cultural analysis's focus on objects as exposed (framed) and exposing (framing), as made both to speak (being read *for* something specific in conjunction with certain theories and concepts) and speak back (pointing to the blind spots of those theories and concepts, reorienting them).

If the conceptual or theoretical point of a cultural analysis can be stated, in full, before the object is close read, this suggests the object serves as no more than an example and leaves readers wondering why they should bother to read on. The point made by a cultural analysis should come *out of* the analysis, out of the object's being read *for*, how it speaks to certain questions, and to the prevalent concepts and theories thought to address those same questions. To avoid having the outcome of the analysis be a foregone conclusion, it works best to start with the object, which, because no object can be assumed to be familiar to all possible readers of the present and the future, should be properly set up *as* an object.

Reading *for* versus Overreading

It is instructive to closely examine how Bal achieves this setting up of the object in *Of What One Cannot Speak* with the series of photographs documenting Doris Salcedo's installation *Noviembre 6 y 7*, commemorating the 1985 Palace of Justice siege in Bogotá, in which the Colombian military responded to an occupation by Marxist guerrillas by killing over a hundred people. Bal begins by circumscribing the object (as comprising the series of photographs, not the installation itself) and giving a clear indication of what she will be reading it *for*: "In these photographs we see shadow, in different shades of the concept 'tenebrae.' When I trace the sequence of photographs, … I get a clear sense of the timespace continuity that shadows produce" (*Of What* 193). This tells the reader that Bal is reading *for* shadow(s), specifically in terms of what they do to time and space, in order to break open the concept of tenebrae. The chapter title, "Acts of Memory," together with an epigraph consisting of a Henri Bergson quote about how memory intervenes in perception, adds memory as something the object is also being read *for*, making the reader wonder (instead of already telling them) how memory and shadows will be brought together in the analysis. Following the remarks about shadows is an account of the content of the photographs, worth quoting at length:

> The first photo shows a wall without shadow and without clear light, although the photograph is *obviously* taken by daylight. We see a stern white wall, a traffic sign on the corner, and people walking by *purposefully, probably on their way to work*. A bit above the middle of the wall and toward the left-hand corner, a chair *seems to* float. It is more or less upright, and *seems to be* suspended on a piece of rope. *I can well imagine that no one would look up*. The second photograph shows another chair, a bit higher than the first, and this one upside down. The light is the same as in the first image, and, *as in the gallery where the related works are installed, it lacks character*, not even leaving a shadow. Clouds obscure most of the visible sky, which explains the lack of shadows and the nondescript light. Whoever happens to look up would *probably assume* furniture is being moved.
>
> In the third photograph, *this mundane explanation becomes a bit more difficult to sustain*. There are more chairs now, also on the sides of the building, one of which is now illuminated by bright sunlight. There, on the left of the image, the chairs cast shadows. The larger group on the right wall still shows neither light nor shadow, but the chairs are now so numerous that we begin to *assume* a certain duration in time. Although we *cannot judge* that duration specifically, it is there for us to see. On the far right, two small figures *might be* looking up. Others continue to go about the everyday business of their lives. (Bal, *Of What* 193–200, emphases added)

This account highlights that description is never just description, but always already an interpretation from a specific positionality, as indicated by my emphases (marking my reading of Bal's text *for* the purposes of this chapter). What appears on the purported surface of the photographs is explicitly exposed as "a matter of what one looks for, where one stands, and what one expects to see or desires" (Rooney 123), and the photographic surface turns out to be every bit as difficult to delineate as the textual one.

Is the absence of shadow noted in the first sentence an element of the photograph's surface or of its depth? How "obvious" is it that this photograph was taken by daylight—could floodlights not have created this impression? Who is the "we" invoked in the second sentence, and would everyone comprised by this "we" agree that the people are walking "purposefully"? The "probably" attached to "on their way to work," together with the repeated "seems to" that follows, undercuts any assumption of universal agreement about what the photograph shows. In the next sentence, Bal adopts the first person singular, retrospectively confirming that this is a description

of what she is noticing in the photographs rather than an account of what anyone would see in it. Her conjecture that the eyes of the passersby in the photographs themselves would probably not be drawn upwards, despite the unusual spectacle taking place there, stresses, moreover, that not everything that is evidently present on the surface—in this case the literal surface of the building—is noticed. Conversely, the durational element of the series—indicating that the photographs were taken at longer intervals—is said by Bal to be "there for us to see," even though this "there" (referring to the presence of different passersby and an increasing number of chairs) produces, according to Bal, only the beginning of an assumption of duration that can never become a judgment of its quantity as the photographs may have been taken hours apart, or days, or even months. Thus, in almost every sentence of this object description, there is conjecture[5] and uncertainty, while between the sentences the focalization not only shifts, but varies in its explicitness. As such, Bal underlines how, in Brooks's terms, there can be no adequate paraphrasing of the artwork. For her, this is not a problem or disappointment, but a reality of reading as always an act of reading *for* that should not be obfuscated but made recognizable and accountable.

What Bal presents as immediately apparent in the photographs is in fact specific to her analysis—it is read *for* by her in an object itself read *for* as able to address, in a novel manner, questions about memory and shadows, as well as the relation between aesthetics and politics (the concern of the book as a whole). The absence of shadow in the first photograph of Salcedo's installation that jumps out at Bal might not appear at all in a description by someone reading the installation *for* something else. In this regard, it is significant that "apparent," according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, refers not just to being "clearly visible or understood" and "obvious," but also to "seeming real or true, but not necessarily so."[6] In the end, the lack of shadow only becomes apparent if shadow is read *for*, while the photograph's having been taken by daylight may seem "obvious" to Bal, but need not be what actually happened.

Is reading *for* as I am outlining it here the same as what Colin Davis, in his book *Critical Excess: Overreading in Derrida, Deleuze, Levinas, Žižek, and*

5 Brinkema, in a dazzling reading of Audio Porn (porn videos narrated for the blind and visually impaired), makes it clear that "description is not passive but predictive,… its energetic line is apt to fill out formulas, always running ahead in an attempt to imagine and produce its object—which of course means that it can—in minor, irrelevant or profound ways—be totally at odds with that which it describes" ("Form" 5).

6 "Apparent, adj. & n," *Oxford English Dictionary*, https://www.oed.com/dictionary, accessed 27 Sept. 2023.

Cavell, calls overreading, defined as "a willingness to test or to exceed the constraints which restrict the possibilities of meaning released by a work" (ix)? Not exactly. Pushing the hermeneutical envelope—coming up with "what might appear to be bizarre, disorientating interpretative leaps" made plausible through a theoretical or conceptual framing (Davis xii)—differs subtly from the reading *for* of cultural analysis, which indeed seeks to make interpretative leaps, but ones that are *re*orienting (for example from land to water) more than *dis*orienting.

It is no coincidence that Davis's account of overreading focuses on "philosophical interpreters" (xii), for whom theorization and conceptualization are the main goals. When Davis describes them as seeking "to release the unanticipated voice of the textual or filmic Other" (181), it is their readers that are seen as not having anticipated this voice, while the philosophers themselves were confident of finding it.[7] Cultural analysts make a different, double move: after releasing a voice of the object that was unanticipated by others (in reading the object *for* something it had not—or not closely enough—been read *for* before) and putting it into dialogue with theories or objects (rather than merely framing it with a concept or theory meant to make sense of the interpretative leaps taken), they go back to the object, anxiously (in both senses: uncertainly and eagerly), to ask whether it is saying something that their own reading *for* may not have anticipated or detected the first go-around. Having the object speak back by being attentive to where, after being read *for* answers to particular questions, it may say something more, something that might destabilize the theoretical or conceptual point being made through the analysis, is not generally part of how philosophical readers like the ones discussed by Davis read; they read for something in the object, with the "in" stretched to the very limit, but they do so without anxiety and in service of the concepts or theories they are developing.

In her introduction to *Anti-covenant: Counter-reading Women's Lives in the Hebrew Bible*, aimed at reading biblical texts *for* women, Bal references another pejorative term for excessive interpretation: reading *in*. She notes that, inevitably, "'reading in' is what one's opponent is doing," as accusing others of reading *in* legitimates one's own practice by positing it as definitely reading only what is present in the text (Bal,

7 Notably, Davis asks and cannot bring himself to answer "no" to the following question: "[D]espite all their protests to the contrary, do the philosophers in fact discover only what they already thought, rather than encountering anything genuinely new, in the works they purport to revere with Heideggerian earnestness?" (2).

Anti-covenant 12). Indeed, this is the move by which the proponents of surface or descriptive reading legitimate their insistence that they, unlike close or symptomatic readers, do not go beyond "the text 'as it stands'" (Bal, *Anti-covenant* 12), without establishing what the "it" consists of. For Bal, arguing not against Best and Marcus and their ilk but against the "textual positivism" of the New Criticism–derived forms of literary interpretation of the 1980s, accusations of reading *in* disregard how "the text is one thing, and as a thing it is not very much; its meaning is quite a different matter" (*Anti-covenant* 12). Bal places this statement in the context of relocating meaning from the text to the reader, then a radical move. However, the statement shows its age by leaning into the notion of a text having a certain coherence, which Davis sees overreading doing away with. In addition, Bal does not account for what has been gained since the late 1980s by reading *for* the materiality of texts and by thing theory's making clear that a thing is not only never just a thing—let alone *one* thing—but also not equivalent to an object. A thing, rather, is "a particular subject-object relation" (Brown 4) and thus much more than "not very much."

If things are taken as both "the amorphousness out of which objects are materialized by the (ap)perceiving subject" and "what is excessive in objects,… what exceeds their mere materialization as objects or their mere utilization as objects" (Brown 5), then the thing is what the object is before it is read *for* (framed, set up) as an object, and what the object becomes again when the analyst allows it to *speak back*: cultural analysis turns a thing into an object (materializing it as a circumscribed object out of its amorphousness), while also recognizing that it remains a thing exceeding its framing as an object for cultural analysis (being read *for* something) and lets this thingness affect the analysis. The meanings of a text, then, are not "quite a different matter" from its thingness, nor are they, as surface readers may contend, only legitimately locatable in this thingness (conceived of as the text's surface, as how "it stands"); the meanings of a text for cultural analysis emerge, rather, from the way the analysis makes a text oscillate between thingness and objectness, between being materialized in line with the analyst's expectations and invited to speak back to these expectations in confounding, anxiety-inducing ways.

None of us just reads or just looks; even if we are not all overreaders in Davis's sense, we all engage in reading *in* (or, with visual objects, looking *in*, as the title of Bal's *Looking In: The Art of Viewing* suggests) or reading *for*. I have chosen the latter term because it conveys more aptly than reading *in*, with its suggestion of illicit incursion, the double movement of reading

with the purpose of, on the one hand, making something into an object for cultural analysis and reading it for answers to specific questions, and, on the other, reading with the purpose of taking that object seriously as always also still an amorphous thing able to reorient the analysis in unanticipated ways.

I want to end by arguing that we should not only keep the object at the apex of the cultural analysis triangle, resolutely elevating it above the analyst and the concept, but also continue to call it an object. Fear of engaging in objectification or perpetuating human exceptionalism if any subject-object distinction is made has led to suggestions that it might be best to no longer speak of cultural *objects*. However, if cultural analysis is indeed a reading *for* undertaken by an analyst who, as a situated human subject, materializes some thing existing in culture as an object, there is inevitably a certain objectification at play, which only the analyst has the power to counterbalance by allowing the object to speak back in its thingness. This power should be acknowledged by making sure the object's speaking back is facilitated, as well as by carefully considering the appropriateness of reading *for* particular objects or reading particular objects *for* certain insights from your positionality as analyst. The framing of the thing *as* object that the cultural analyst effects, moreover, should be questioned by the analyst as anxiety-ridden subject and flagged for readers as Bal does in her account of Salcedo's photographic series. Simply avoiding the term "object" does not do away with the objectification that is part of cultural analysis; it just removes accountability for it.

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3. Notes toward a Decolonial Praxis of Cultural Analysis: Exemplarity and Listening as Other

Divya Nadkarni and Alex Thinius

Abstract: In this essay we interrogate the object–frame–analyst relationship in cultural analysis from a decolonial perspective. Inspired by Gayatri Spivak and the modernity/coloniality school of decolonial thought, we critically examine several Eurocentric legacies inherent in the conceptual foundations of cultural analysis. However, instead of rejecting these inheritances, we explore ways to work with them with a decolonial intent. The essay calls for acknowledging the provinciality of cultural analysis's current perspective, making room for alternative engagements between analyst and object, other perspectives on the object's role as a case study, and additional ways of understanding alterity. We propose two directions for developing alternative conceptual frameworks: (1) underscoring the analyst's own otherness to the object and (2) rethinking exemplarity in the object.

Keywords: alterity, decoloniality, hermeneutics, method, modernity/coloniality, object

We must now confront the following question: on the other side of the international division of labor from socialized capital, inside and outside the circuit of the epistemic violence of imperialist law and education supplementing an earlier economic text, can the subaltern speak?
—Gayatri Spivak ("Can the Subaltern Speak?" 78)

[*A*] *text does not speak for itself. We surround it, or frame it, before we let it speak at all. But rejecting close reading for that reason has been an unfortunate case*

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> *of throwing out the baby with the bath water. For, in the tripartite relationship between student, frame, and object, the latter must still have the last word.*
> —Mieke Bal (*Travelling Concepts* 8–9)

In her seminal essay (1994) on knowledge production in the postcolonial Indian subcontinent, Spivak's response to the question of the subaltern's capacity to speak is: No, they cannot speak to be heard. By the subaltern, Spivak refers to those groups and communities (internally) Other to the postcolonial state—that arbiter of political subjecthood—who never attained recognition as sovereign subjects, as political agents, when the power of governance passed from the colonial British administration to the Indian political elite in 1947. The momentous shift to independence brought about little to no epistemological transformation in the conceptual ground of the Indian state, constituted by concepts such as sovereignty, citizenship, rights, democracy, etc., all of which bore "the burden of European [Enlightenment] thought and history" (Chakrabarty 4). To "hear" the speech of the "subaltern," Spivak claims, would require a paradigm shift at odds with this settled frame of the state. Utilizing the then cutting-edge humanist paradigms of "consciousness" and "discourse," Spivak asks: "With what voice consciousness can the subaltern speak? Their project after all is to rewrite the development of consciousness" (80).

Spivak's essay, through all its subsequent developments and revisions, laid the foundations of still-relevant and evolving debates across academic disciplines about what it means to listen to and speak about, for, and with those whose experiential and conceptual lifeworld might be radically removed from that of an epistemologically and sociopolitically "privileged speaker" with access to the frameworks that allow for any act of speaking to "make sense" (Griffiths 300). Spivak's claim here is that the radical alterity embodied by the subaltern is unrepresentable. From within an established conceptual frame, any attempt at representing this alterity only becomes about the representative speaker (the theorist, the scholar) whose position as sovereign subject remains unquestioned.

We begin this chapter with Spivak to propose a provocative parallel. Where, in Spivak's terms, the subaltern is the nonsovereign Other, in ours, it is the nucleus of cultural analysis research: the cultural object, which the analyst—the privileged speaker—is tasked with understanding "better on its own terms" (Bal, *Travelling Concepts* 9). The "subaltern" and the "object" are not interchangeable; nor are the aims and methods of cultural analysis and subaltern studies. However, contemplating the contours of a decolonial

turn in cultural analysis, the parallels become relevant. With the growing interest in diversifying cultural analysis to include objects and approaches from non-Western, hybrid, and Global South contexts—those historically reduced in coloniality to an Otherness to be managed and contained—what does it really mean to understand an object on its own terms, to let it have the last word? Under what conditions are we able to hear an object at all?

We take this chapter as something of a programmatic exercise. Rather than a definitive thesis, we sketch a series of provisional reflections on the tripartite relationship between object–frame–analyst, as conceptualized by Bal, that allow us to track some dilemmas/frictions that we navigate in our own practices. There is an ethical promise to Spivak's notion of alterity that cultural analysis takes seriously: recognizing the unsettling force of alterity in our objects of analysis and allowing them to play an agential role in shifting and challenging our broader analytic frames. However, as Bal, too, has repeatedly pointed out, the object doesn't speak unless we are able to listen. This ability to listen, consolidated in the action of framing, of surrounding the text, undergirds the very conceptual–methodological foundation of cultural analysis, which we would now like to problematize in a decolonial spirit. What follows are a series of attempts to make sense of what shape a decolonial future of cultural analysis might take, and what (perhaps uncomfortable) realizations might be warranted in order for this to happen.

An Object, a Frame, and an Analyst…

Central to much cultural analysis practice to date is Bal's emphasis on the necessity of creating a receptive space for an object to be heard through an informed and ethically sensitive action of "framing." As cultural analysts, we face a significant task in any encounter with an object: to facilitate the conditions for its unique perspective to emerge, to allow its alterity to disrupt and reconstruct our established frames of analysis. Yet, a Spivakian parallel will tell us that this is not an easy task. To what extent can an object determine its own terms for analysis, especially if those terms are significantly Other to the interpreter's interpretive horizon? Can the practice of close reading objects truly invoke radical shifts in dominant conceptual and analytical frames? While these questions inform some of the enduring debates in cultural analysis, they become all the more urgent when it comes to thinking about cultural analysis as a practice that takes decoloniality seriously.

When we use the term "decoloniality" now, we move beyond Spivak to refer to the frameworks developed by the modernity/coloniality school to advance a decolonial praxis of knowledge production, with scholars including Quijano, Dussel, Mignolo, and Lugones, among others (Escobar). This praxis is primarily predicated on the recognition that we continue to inhabit those structures of coloniality that find their conceptual and material basis in "modernity," which, they argue, marks the beginning of a dualistic totalizing onto-epistemic framework invested in the production and systematic confinement and destruction of alterity, by denying its Others any agency as producers of knowledge/consciousness (Mignolo).[1] How can cultural analysis confront this imbalance of knowledge? One initial attempt could be to acknowledge *where* the coloniality of knowledge is embedded in cultural analysis's conceptual foundations. But what comes after such an acknowledgment? For an integrally decolonial cultural analysis praxis, exchanging our daily objects, frames, and concepts will not suffice: we need to get to the heart of cultural analysis's conceptual foundations, namely, the very ascriptions "object" and "frame," and the relationship that they establish with the analyst.

One might recognize several legacies of Europe's modernity/coloniality in the way cultural analysis is construed as an academic praxis. For instance, one might recognize a distinctly Kantian dimension to the idea that the object can't speak by itself; that it needs intersubjectively shared frames. Kant highlights that the analyst, the understanding subject, needs to bring to the table the sensual and conceptual ability to make sense of something as an object (or a specific sort of object) at all. The object might also bring something to the table: the potential to affect us in its own way. Even so, Kant argues, objects can only answer our questions, and we can hear their answers only with the conceptual schemas we already have (Kant, *Reason*). For an object to make sense to us as a text, we need to already have the concept of a text. It is only in particular judgments of taste that we develop some of our concepts in creative interaction with artistic objects (Kant, *Judgement*). Jonathan Culler acknowledges this particular Kantian legacy in "What Is Cultural Studies?" (1999), in the way concepts are seen as "tools of intersubjectivity" that "facilitate discussion on the basis of a common language" (Culler; Bal, *Travelling Concepts* 22). This is an intersubjectivity

1 This analysis falls short in its understanding of the construction of the West/North, multidirectional histories of colonialism, etc. However, we need to hold on to the core point that as things are now, there is, by and large, the construction of the Global North as subject of knowledge and its so-constructed Others as the objects to be discovered, read, and explored.

between producers of knowledge based on shared concepts: a community of subjects talking *about* objects, questioning, and making sense of them, to mend and/or develop their shared conceptual frames. It is precisely this sense of the tripartite relationship that serves as a red thread connecting cultural analysis research across time and geographies and that enables it to break free of disciplinary boundaries. However, cultural analysis also incorporates some feminist and deconstructive critiques of the Kantian concept of the object. In a Kantian approach, the analyst aims to pierce, as it were, the phenomenal surface veil of the object as much as possible, strip it naked through concepts, and make it speak in a way that the analyst understands (Battersby). In contrast, by approaching objects as case studies, close-reading practices in cultural analysis prioritize the object's particularities over its generalities. Following Derrida's attention to the parergonality of texts (Derrida, Detweiler), cultural analysis dissolves the distinction between ornamental appearances and the core of an object. The task of getting to know an object then becomes not to unveil and grasp it as an instance of a kind, but to attend to all its surfaces, marginal openings, and ways in which it differs and defers the categories to which it never properly belongs. The Derridean contribution thus transforms cultural analysis's attention to objects and concepts. However, it does not transcend those limitations of the modernity framework, in this case, in the Kantian tradition that invite analysts to pay close attention to the particularities of objects only to reflect on their own shared concepts.

We might consider another horizon that cultural analysis draws on: Gadamerian hermeneutics. In Gadamer's terms, objects ("subject matter") emerge in-between the subjects who understand each other as they bring their horizons into dialogue. Good dialogue requires a "fusion" and mutual enrichment of interlocutors' horizons, to avoid subsuming or reducing the other's perspective to one's own. This way of understanding the alterity of objects plays a role in Bal's own conceptualization of cultural analysis practices. For instance, we see her building on intersubjectivity as a discursive dynamic in which the object is allowed to speak, between—*inter*—the subjects who define a shared conceptual frame for the purpose of expanding their horizons (Bal, *Reader* 261). However, Gadamerian hermeneutics faces difficulties, e.g., for its colonial hubris of aiming for a single horizon of interpretation (Alcoff, Coe). Furthermore, one might wonder how the object itself could contribute to this intersubjective dialogue. While, according to Kant, it can at least affect subjects and answer their questions, in the Gadamerian dimension of cultural analysis, the dialogic interplay of language, horizons, and conceptual frames seems to sideline any participation of the object on

its own terms. It would, then, be unclear how cultural analysis can achieve its own goal of letting the object have the last word.

The modernity/coloniality direction in decolonial thought helps us see the Kantian, Derridean, and Gadamerian roots of and routes to cultural analysis as potential sites of contention. How far are the conceptual foundations of cultural analysis steeped in an onto-epistemological setup that generates a discursive community through objectification, where an object is able to speak only insofar as some "we" can make sense of it with their already shared concepts? One might stress that some objects are also subjects with the capacity and right to participate in discourse about them (Beauvoir, Fanon). Recognizing more people as participants of academic discourse is, indeed, one crucial part of a decolonial transformation, with its own complexities. However, it is hard to see how, for the analysis of paradigm object cases such as books, films, and performances, this could inspire a methodology that might allow cultural objects say anything that the analysts don't already know. And, as we argue below, this methodological shortcoming feeds back into the inclusion problem. This first line of decolonial critique has us, thus, identify the coloniality of knowledge implicit in the object–frame–analyst triad, and recognize that cultural analysis's attempt to understand an object "better on its own terms" risks being impeded by its own foundations. Consequently, a decolonial praxis could demand indigenous and non-Western epistemologies to come to the table. What does this mean for the foundations of cultural analysis?

Our intent behind acknowledging these conceptual horizons is not to repudiate them. Rather, it is to work with a decolonial intent with these inheritances, without simply negating, asserting, or dismissing them. This is for at least two reasons: First, the aim of understanding others—objects—on their own terms is amiable, and so are the insights that an object cannot speak unless others are able to listen. Secondly, naively taking on the decolonial call to other epistemologies risks turning a blind eye to the complex entanglements of "Western" and "non-Western" contexts. This would, inter alia, allow deeply colonial projects in the Global South—such as in India today—to make themselves seem immune to critique. There is no straightforward option between rejecting or embracing "Western traditions." Indeed, in Dipesh Chakrabarty's words, no emancipatory movement that has genuinely sought to challenge social oppressions can easily dismiss Enlightenment inheritance:

> Modern social critiques of caste, oppressions of women, the lack of rights for laboring and subaltern classes in India, and so on—and, in fact, the very

> critique of colonialism itself—are unthinkable except as a legacy, partially, of how Enlightenment Europe was appropriated in the subcontinent.... And it is salutary to remember that the writings of the most trenchant critic of the institution of "untouchability" in British India refer us back to some originally European ideas about liberty and human equality. (5)[2]

Decolonizing cultural analysis's conceptual framework cannot imply spurning the framework altogether, nor should it reconsolidate its dominance. What we need is an acknowledgment of this horizon's provinciality; to regard it as one option among others, so we might make room for further ways of understanding the object, other perspectives on the place that the object as case study currently holds, other ways of understanding alterity. When analysis is situated entirely in the encounter with the object, the conceptual foundation of cultural analysis risks going unacknowledged, and thus mistakenly appearing as a totality. Finding ways to work beyond this "confinement" (Vázquez) is the enduring work of a decolonial praxis. It needs to go beyond and profoundly differentiate itself from diversity: beyond bringing diverse objects to the table, diverse theoretical concepts to an object, or allowing diverse subjects to use these concepts to talk about objects.

Treating the triad of object–concept–analyst as one among several useful methods, may not by itself decolonize cultural analysis. However, it is a crucial part of such a concerted transformation. In what follows, we share two directions our search for alternative conceptual frameworks has led us in: taking up alterity differently by underscoring one's own otherness to the object, and by rethinking exemplarity in an analytic engagement with the object.

Listening as Other

Spivak's notion of radical alterity critically engages with a long lineage of making sense of the self–other binary that decoloniality scholars have located at the very crux of modernity/coloniality. This lineage runs through Fanon, Beauvoir, Glissant, Husserl, and Levinas, among others, who variegatedly reflect on the sign and experience of Otherness, by acknowledging the presence of an Other *in* the self, i.e., one's own otherness to oneself. A self

2 One might also recall here postcolonial theory's (including Spivak's) own indebtedness to and critical engagement with European intellectual legacies, in particular, of Marxist analysis and of deconstruction.

needs to refer to itself as Other in order to refer to itself at all (Villet). Indeed, cultural analysis carries useful terms to take alterity seriously; its emphasis on how texts speak to us primes it, methodologically, to understanding Otherness—for texts are after all Other to their readers. We like to think of cultural analysis as a discursive practice of "cultural memory in the present" (Bal, *The Practice* 1) that bears upon a desire for an ethical intersubjectivity as mutual recognition and integrative collaboration within "participatory sense-making" (De Jaegher and Di Paolo). However, where it might risk deviating from these principles is when both the motivation to interpretation and analysis itself recognize with the object only as it appears in a close-reading encounter, where the conceptual foundations of the object-analyst relationship confine the way in which each of these terms are taken up.

What would a relation of decoloniality as mutual and plural relationality look like (Mignolo and Walsh)? How can we approach radical alterity without simply dismissing it, subsuming it under predominant norms of reasoning, or relegating it to a scene of opposition to, resistance against, or subversion of these norms? Our proposal for the moment is to methodologically radicalize our concept of alterity in the object, if we take seriously two core dimensions of alterity: an object's own otherness to itself, and a reflective stance on the analyst's otherness to their objects of analysis. Actualizing a genuinely transformative intersubjectivity in the interaction between analyst and object requires what one of us calls *listening as Other* (Nadkarni). Seeing the text look back at me entails, first, recognizing my own otherness in the interaction. It entails, as Édouard Glissant has so succinctly put it in his take on the concept of opacity, acknowledging a limit to the transparent "knowability of the Other" (Murdoch 19), in the reciprocal process of recognizing one's own irreducible opacity.

Glissant's concept of opacity is central to his exploration of global relations that are "multiple, decentered, and nonhierarchical" (Britton 7). Opacity, in his terms, functions as an active strategy of resistance against the reductive and objectifying forms of knowability that typically operate in relations between the "West" and the "non-West." Yet, it is not simply a matter of resistance in terms of opposition: opacity comes forth as a protective shield "that allows for non-dialectic difference" to emerge (Stanley 618), stimulating transformative engagements with others, not despite, but together with their differences. A mutual recognition of opacities, in Glissantian terms, involves recognizing the limits of one's understanding of another, just as much as it involves a nonunderstanding of one's own self. It "means also that parts of myself are obscure and incomprehensible to me" as they are (and should be) to others (Glissant 72–73).

In my own work, I (Divya) explore in detail what it might mean to acknowledge the limits of one's position as analyst, facilitating—in Saidiya Hartman's words—a "look at historical and social process and one's own formation as a window onto social and historical processes, as an example of them" (Saunders 5). It is a complex process that needs to negotiate the fine line between engagement and objectification; a generative nonunderstanding and a blank refusal to understand (or engage). A decolonially committed *inter*-subjectivity requires engaging without reinscribing the very violence of objectification. As such, it implies engaging with the necessary limits of one's own understanding, making these limits visible, engaging with the voices of (marginalized) Others without relegating these voices just to expressions of oppression/marginality. Taking seriously the right not to be "grasped" of the objects that we encounter as analysts might allow for a transformative engagement between text and reader without reducing either to an essentialized identity, where otherness ends up being perceived, valued, or devalued in identitarian terms, regarded as either controlled or antagonistic, antagonizing difference, and subsequently understood predominantly in terms of its oppositional difference to the same.

The Object: Case Study/Exemplar

> *When I write* Guantánamo *and* Abu Ghraib *I presume that you know what I mean, operating as though there were a self-evidence to these names that marks them out as concepts, concepts about which there is a consensus that includes us.*
> —Berlant ("On the Case" 669)

What would engaging with one's own otherness in the encounter with an object mean, methodologically? One way might be by reflecting on the role of an object as a "case study" in cultural analysis practices. This is relevant to us as writers and teachers. For example, I (Divya) have often struggled when working with objects whose conceptual ground might be unfamiliar to readers and students in a European context. How can I talk about an object whose entire world, its voice consciousness, and its conceptual frames cannot be taken as known, or even knowable? It's one thing to frame an encounter via the object when readers know something about it; if not the object directly, then something of its context. Let me share an example that the readership of this volume will likely be familiar with: the film *Interstellar* (Nolan, dir., 2014). Working on it within a Global North and European context, several conceptual aspects can be taken for

granted, making listening to the object or deferring to it appear as an almost seamless enterprise. For instance, conceptually, its understanding of time, or the basis on which time itself is understood and distorted; generically, the genre conventions of speculative/science fiction; contextually, many small factors relating to where it is set (US West), its historical embeddedness, the societal and ideological norms it leaves unquestioned. In precisely the comfort of shared contextual knowledge, we can forget how great a role the "intersubjectivity of shared concepts" plays in seemingly allowing the object to have the last word.[3]

Now what about when an analyst begins to work with an object, none of whose fundamental concepts can be taken for granted in these spaces? Where we cannot take anything of the contextual ground as already known to our readers? Take, for instance, the *Kamasutra*. Something about it will be well-known to this readership, in particular through its ubiquitous appearance as a self-help book or a guidebook on sexual positions, available on numerous websites. However, an analysis situated unreflectively in this encounter alone would miss that element of alterity in the object that might insinuate conceptual frameworks that radically destabilize the ones we might bring to the object in this context. The *Kamasutra*'s context of production reveals its life in a very different constitutive conceptual ground:

> Standing in a poetic and an advisory tradition as much as that of science, religion, and mathematics (*sutra* means treatise), the text sits oddly between those genres that exist for us right now. Reading it as a self-help sex guide or a religious treatise … is thus anachronistic. (Thinius 222)

This risks missing the point entirely and may authoritatively reinforce these genre categorizations. The *Kamasutra* is indeed a sex-educational self-help book in some contexts; however, it simply is not in other contexts. The point is: traditional approaches to listening to the object would easily have the analyst overlook how their analysis is part of the same practice that constitutes the object as a sex self-help book—unless the analyst can see themselves as Other to the text. This, however, should not tempt us to think that some non-Western context of the *Kamasutra* was somehow untaintedly more truly determining its significance, or that the equivalent of "local informants" among teachers and students will reveal any true identity of this object (or its readers) in our classrooms. For instance, in the recent Bollywood film

3 This is precisely the resonance field that forms in majority contexts, making "inclusivity" such a fraught affair in the classroom and in other arenas, such as those of academic publishing.

OMG 2 (2023), the *Kamasutra* is invoked as a symbol of a supposed ancient Indian superiority, evoking the current Hindutva nationalist push to "return" to a supposedly unified and "progressive" ancient Hindu civilization. All this in the name of a decolonization that aims to "reject" Western influence, paradoxically turning to a nativist self-Orientalization with origins in the very colonial processes that constituted India as a nation in the first place (Roy). Whether in Amsterdam or Mumbai, the *Kamasutra* continues to live many lives, the knowledge of which cannot simply be taken for granted by the analyst, and it requires adequate methodologies to come forth.

This example illuminates how the *Kamasutra* cannot function smoothly as a case study to illuminate a more generally shared conceptual or sociopolitical dilemma. If I, as the analyst, take a shared conceptual ground for granted, I might not be understood, in Amsterdam or in Mumbai. If I overdominate the act of framing to explicate its conceptual ground, it will be abundantly clear that the object does not have the last word. How can we navigate this difficulty as writers and lecturers? What would a moment of "decoloniality/relationality" (Mignolo and Walsh 1) look like in such a fraught context? And what might it mean to acknowledge that plunging into the object to explore its constitutive dilemmas takes for granted a resonance-field shaped by conceptual foundations that are usually Eurocentric? One possible way here, as I (Alex) have suggested, would be to better distinguish the contexts that bring different aspects of an object's materiality into play; including, and especially, those the analyst brings to the table (Thinius 61, 222). This is where a methodological embrace of the researcher's own otherness to the object, and to other researchers in any context, matters, combined with a method for the object to insinuate its own conceptual ground.

Our speculative proposition, here, is to make room for exemplarity, alongside the practice of taking up objects as case studies. At first this might seem counterintuitive: one of cultural analysis's core principles involves taking objects as case studies in the sense of *theoretical interlocutors* in developing our conceptual frames, broadening our horizons. The exemplar is what cultural analysis is resolutely opposed to, because an exemplar is conceptualized as something that is merely subjected to an already developed framework. If theory is merely applied to an object, the object can only be used as a tool to confirm or reject it. Thus, a cultural analyst might say that an exemplar has too little agency. Acknowledging these limitations in taking up an object as a case study for a broader phenomenon, we would like to reconceptualize exemplarity as a way to reconfigure our approach to alterity. As Berlant has convincingly problematized, the concept of the case often confers an already-marked exemplarity:

> [W]hat makes something a case, and not a merely gestural instance, illustration, or example, is to query the adequacy of an object to bear the weight of an explanation worthy of attending to and taking a lesson from; the case is actuarial.... To talk about someone or something as marked is to suggest that it is remarkable in itself but also that it is already strongly marked by exemplarity. Case almost closed: the marked subject is a walking exemplar, a person trailing an already-known story. (666)

"Exemplarity," in Berlant's view, relies entirely on the conceptual foundations upon which the analyst recognizes the object as a case. But our take differs slightly. Exemplarity, in our usage, names an intersubjective dynamic that speaks not only to the status of the object, but also reveals the position of the analyst as Other to said exemplar. I am one reader, one analyst among many—an example reader—just as my inquiry gives voice to one exemplary interaction/encounter. If the Other object is to insinuate its own conceptual ground at all, it often cannot do so simply as a case study. What it could perhaps do, like a dialogue partner, is insinuate the briefest glimpse, if not more, of a conceptual ground of which it is not an example but an exemplar, and of which one's own reading is but exemplary.

The texts that I (Divya) close read in my work are in many senses case studies as is typical in cultural analysis. They animate the problem situation, inspire a response, participate actively—in interaction with me—in co-constituting the frames of analysis. In this sense, they are "agents" that call on me to listen in particular ways. Even so, my analyses do not so much give voice to the objects themselves, as to one perspective, one (exemplary) interaction, among many possible divergent perspectives. The notion of the exemplar, as speaking to me, the text, and our interaction, has proven immensely useful to highlight this. Such a move, we might dare suggest, could foster an analytical space where an analyst can be conscientiously positioned as much as an example reader (one among many) as the object is an exemplar of a conceptual frame or ground. My exemplarity is now with the object's, and I am other to it in my own localized, situated exemplarity.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, we have been concerned with how cultural analysis can confront the global imbalance of knowledge production as a decolonial praxis. The provisional theses we've offered seek decolonial transformations in the methodological foundations of cultural analysis, constituted by the tripartite

relationship between objects, conceptual frames, and analysts. This is, however, just a small part, motivated by at least two larger emancipatory interests.

First, how can cultural analysis practices, both in terms of research and university-level practices, actively challenge what Charles W. Mills calls "conceptual tokenization"? Ensure that perspectives from marginalized groups are not just included "in a ghettoized way that makes no difference to the overall discursive logic of the discipline,… the framing assumptions, dominant narratives, prototypical scenarios" (188)? Second, popular rhetoric of decoloniality sometimes hurtles toward rejecting European intellectual legacies in favor of non-Western ones. This, however, carries the immense risk of reproducing identitarian forms of modernity, e.g., in the form of postcolonial nationalisms that co-opt decoloniality only to further reinscribe colonial hierarchies in autocratic forms of ethnonationalism, extractive and settler colonialisms, and neo-imperialisms. A theoretical decolonial praxis that fails to account for these Other colonialities or acknowledge the vastly differing experiences associated with historical, contemporary, and emerging forms of colonization worldwide, lacks depth and becomes a crude metaphor (Tuck and Yang).

This chapter is but a small beginning; an invitation to confront these questions and many more that might arise as we continue the work of pluralizing the conceptual and institutional grounds of cultural analysis in our present conjuncture, saturated as it is with the crushingly uneven devastations wrought by European colonization upon its Others. We hope to not only to have presented some of the possible challenges of doing decoloniality in cultural analysis, but also a few possibilities for actualizing and sustaining in its everyday praxis, the kind of intersubjectivity required to overcome the deeply entrenched habituations of coloniality.

Collaborator Statement

Conception, design: DN; Conception, analysis, and argument: DN & AT; Writing, original draft: DN; Writing, review, and editing: DN & AT; Project supervision: DN

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4. Objects in the Making: Cutting through Analysis in Art Education

Jules Sturm

Abstract: In higher art education, theoretical concepts are easily embraced and cherished, albeit often uncritically and superficially. Objects, in contrast, are simultaneously of more and less concern: they are taken for granted as material artifacts, while their analytical relevance and their discursive effects remain often uncared for. In this contribution, I ask how cultural analysis can be rethought from an art educational viewpoint. I focus on Lygia Clark's *Trailing Objects* to foreground artistic objects' emergent and performative characteristics, through which they orient us toward the more aesthetic, rather than epistemological, implications of object-driven methodology. By trailing the objects' "travel," I invite them to participate in a transformative (re)making of (artistic) cultural analysis for art students and researchers.

Keywords: art education, artistic cultural analysis, traveling objects, poetics of theory making, sensory-aesthetic knowledge production

We can think about animated objects as embodying a repetition, a recurrence, an uncanny replay of repressed activity.
—Jack Halberstam (*The Queer Art of Failure* 178)

The artist who transplants an object of everyday life (readymade) aims to give this object a poetic power. My Trailings *are very different. In their case no need for the object: it's the act that gives rise to poetry.*
—Lygia Clark ("Nostalgia of the Body" 100)

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Finding the "poetic power" of an object in the process of writing and thinking around a topical cultural issue accounts for much of my most generative and satisfying encounters with art and theory. The poetics of the practice of cultural analysis seems to be situated in the experience of having found the "right" object; a feeling of aptness, which is not fulfilled by how well the object "fits" one's interests, chosen approach, choice of theoretical concepts, or socio-temporal and spatial context. The opposite might be true: the more an object resists one's frame of analysis, the more desirable it may appear in the analytic process. So, when and how to find an object's poetic power? And what if objects refuse to be found, or if they struggle to "arrive" in the analyst's proximity (Ahmed)? Or what if the object's most stimulating or critical feature lies in its becoming, in the act of its making, thereby repudiating objecthood?

In what follows, I wish to explore the effects of such "struggles of arrival" of art objects for analytical purposes. I have encountered such failures more often since I started teaching cultural analytic research methodologies to art students in higher education. In contrast to my years of teaching cultural analysis as an academic interdiscipline at the University of Amsterdam, in my attempts to convey the criticality and benefit of cultural analytic methods to art students, my "teaching objects" often fall flat against the students' understandable urgency for research tools that address their struggles in the very act of making their own objects or artifacts. Their relation to "objects" is thus more strongly bound to the practices involved in the poetics of making them. For art students, relating to objects is a complex affair; they simultaneously engage in their own acts of making while comparing, citing, gleaning, and distancing the emergent objects from other artworks. Their analytical goal lies in producing and altering their artifacts vis-à-vis a plethora of artistic references.

In encountering such difficulty with objects, I temporarily found ways to shift my teaching toward a closer focus on "concepts"—thereby circumnavigating object-related questions (Tuin and Verhoeff). Yet I still struggle to make cultural analytic methods productive for a context in which theory is not the intended goal of the analysis, and in which objects themselves are *in-the-making* as part of the conceptual artistic practice. Objects seem to be more in my face when I teach at art school—they are seen, heard, smelled, and bumped into everywhere, and they are often in a state of brokenness, doubt, ephemerality, destruction, or crudeness. They are thus less defined, and maybe more easily dismissed as unfinished, or not objectlike. And they might therefore cater less easily to an analytic approach, as their makers (my students) lack the necessary temporal, spatial, or emotional distance.

The question that interests me is this: how can I adapt my modes of cultural analytic methodology to take seriously my students' frail, fragmentary, and intimate—yet valuable and potentially insightful—relation to the poetics of art(ifacts)?

In the spirit of Kris Decker, who notes that "art academies (or *Kunsthochschulen*/*Hautes Écoles D'art*) are exemplary institutions for observing the unfolding of ideas on how research could be done [taught] differently," I want to dwell here on the impact of how cultural analytic research is taught on the basis of how art students' object-production processes critically inform the practice of cultural analysis.[1] I find it worthwhile to explore how cultural analysis and its teaching might be adapted to become more productive for art students and artistic researchers. My teaching of cultural analysis to humanities students within university settings involved training them in academic skills such as critical thinking, writing, close reading, argumentation, referencing, and (context) analysis. In contrast, when I teach cultural analysis to art students, I am challenged to question the very practices involved in those skills. How do I closely read an artifact that I am in the process of making? Which type or style of language do I develop for writing about this? What readership do I address, and with what goal, if not to produce a theoretical text for an academic audience? How do I decide on relevant contexts and references for my analysis, if "discourse" is only one amongst many aspects (along with materiality, embodiment, accessibility, feasibility, temporal and spatial conditions, aesthetic choices, etc.) to consider? What happens to my analysis if it takes place as much in my "doing" as in my "thinking," or if the two cannot be separated? And which skills do I engage for collaborative or collective analytical processes?

To consider some of these questions, I concentrate here on "objects" as they have a distinctive status and function in *artistic* cultural analysis, and as I ascribe to them the potential to scrunch up the seemingly smooth academic implementation of the object-concept methodology.[2]

1 Kris Decker is the author of "Academized Artists" (2021–2023), an interdisciplinary research project conducted at the Institute for Contemporary Art Research at Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK) and funded by the Swiss National Science Fund (for more, see Decker). In a study on teaching methodologies in science studies, Decker and Hoffmann critically reflect about *epistemological enculturation* within what they call "training scenes" of science. Their reflection seems urgent also for the context of the humanities and art education, as it foregrounds the impact of teaching/training cultures (and their objects) on the practice of (inter)disciplinary research (Decker and Hoffmann).

2 Sigrid Adorf has promoted and developed art as cultural analysis at Zurich University of the Arts; see more on the website of research center for "Kulturanalysen in den Künsten" (Adorf).

Objects in the (Un)making

But what are these "objects"? And how can I present their potential impact on, and shift in, the specific cultural analytic object dependency? I decided not to use my students' objects as case studies for this essay, because—even to me as the designated (nonartist) theory-teacher—they seemed too fragile, as though they might disintegrate when placed under the scrutiny of the analytic eye or mind. Instead, I will use an object that characterizes some of the conceivable shifts in the shape, tone, and scent of cultural analytic uses of objects in the making, in art educational contexts. It is an object that facilitates my methodological unlearning vis-à-vis my art education students: Lygia Clark's *Caminhando* (Trailing, 1964)— a "teaching object" (Bal in Lutters and Bal 74) that puts into question its own objecthood.[3] Clark describes her work, suggestively, as "proposition":

> Make yourself a Trailing: you take the band of paper wrapped around a book, you cut it open, you twist it, and you glue it back together so as to produce a Möbius strip. Then take a pair of scissors, stick one point into the surface and cut continuously along the length of the strip. Take care not to converge with the pre-existing cut—which will cause the band to separate into two pieces. When you have gone the circuit of the strip, it's up to you whether to cut to the left or to the right of the cut you've already made. This idea of choice is capital. The special meaning of this experience is in the act of doing it. The work is your act alone. To the extent that you cut the strip, it refines and redoubles itself into interlacings. At the end the path is so narrow that you can't open it further. It's the end of the trail. (Clark in Clark and Bois 99)

Caminhando is part of a whole crowd of artworks by a variety of artists that represent a turn toward participatory practices, in which the audience is directly engaged in the creative process of production. The situational and time-dependent relationship between audience and artist(s) becomes a necessary

3 At ZHdK, I mainly teach students of *Kunstpädagogik* (art education); they become art teachers in schools and study art education to become educators, rather than artists. Nonetheless, they also learn to make art. This convergence of pedagogical and artistic practices, and the students' simultaneous embodiment of various professional roles—as students, artists, and pedagogues—makes them the perfect case study for reflecting on the oppositional yet productive ambiguity of the content (object) and the mediation (teaching/encounter) of a committed cultural practice. My interchangeable use of art and art education in this text thus also stems from the belief that academics as well as artists can learn from the potentially conflictual impact of "teaching practices" on "artistic practices" in art academies or from the reciprocal co-production of learning, knowing, and making.

component in the work's completion, exemplifying so-called relational or social art practice. The "object," or the artwork itself, loses importance, as the participants' individual or collective experience gains more weight. I have chosen Clark's *Trailings* for my argument here as they are "unfinished objects"; yet they differ from my students' artifacts insofar as they—even so—are "finished" as soon as they are offered to an audience. Clark's audience is invited to make and execute choices until there is no more paper left to cut, at which point they are done/finished. In contrast, my student's objects (varying greatly in medium, material, presentation, design, craft, etc.) potentially offer more interim moments of reflection, and the invitation to acknowledge the object's ontological ephemerality, and their dynamic relation to their maker, receiver, and analyst. To present my argument more concretely I will stick to Clark's work and invite my reader to imagine that the cutting could go on further, that the paper is more spacious, and that the choices to cut this way or that might be simultaneously more random and more necessary for the object and its analysis.

Clark's "propositions" call attention to a special element in participatory or durational art, which puts focus on the (un)making—or cutting—of the object, that becomes a required component of the creative process in which the artwork itself seems to dissolve: "[W]e refuse the work of art as such, and we place the emphasis on the act of realizing the proposition" (Clark in Clark and Bois 106). Yve-Alain Bois calls the *Caminhando* a "modest device whose foremost function is to awaken the cutter to this precious temporal content of which our gestures have been deprived by mechanization." The object-in-the-making turns the participant's—and, eventually, the analyst's—attention not only to their personal act of realizing the work of art, but also to the overturning of the separation between object and subject that accompanies it, through which the artwork begins to shed object qualities, becoming especially interesting for an analysis of cultural artifacts that pertain to theory by way of the concrete practices involved in the current, or unfinished, production.

Clark's "propositions were created to be assembled as replicas by anyone, even if they had no artistic skills, merely by following some simple rules" (Arslan 86). I read Clark's propositions, which she developed while part of an artist collective, as an opening to explore engaging with objects by means of direct, repetitive actions in which the time of the act itself propels the object into a sense of proximate relation to the analyst's labor, and concurrent sense of the "now."

> We are proposers: we are the mill. It's up to you to blow into it the meaning of our existence. We are proposers: our proposal is that of dialogue. Alone,

> we don't exist, we are at your mercy. We are proposers: we have buried the "work of art" as such and we call out to you so that thought will live by means of your action. We are proposers: we are proposing neither the past nor the future to you, but the "now." (Clark in Clark and Bois 106)

Clark's credo for art as proposal reminds me of Roland Barthes's differentiation between literary "text" and "work," in which he describes the latter as an object that offers itself to be observed, touched, and handled (Barthes). In contrast, the literary text emerges and comes alive only through its production and reception. Likewise, art as proposal becomes meaningful only in its active and animated relation to other "texts," to art maker and analyst.

In *Caminhando*, Clark experiments with no more than a strip of paper; the act of cutting in a specific way (and not another) comes to determine the resulting "object," as well as how the cutter relates to the object. Clark says: "There is only one type of duration: the act. The act is that which produces the *Caminhando*. Nothing exists before and nothing afterwards," adding that it is essential "not to try to know—while you are cutting—what you are going to cut and what you have already cut" (Clark in Bois). Clark's propositions are designed to render the object transitional, or missing, and to put emphasis on making while potentially ruining or damaging the "object." This not only dissolves the separation of object and subject but also makes space for the immanent material and embodied reality of the object-in-the-(un)making: "At the outset, the *Trailing* is only a potentiality. You are going to form, you and it, a unique, total, existential reality. No more separation between subject and object. It's an embrace, a fusion" (Clark in Clark and Bois 99). Clark's work confirms and demands attention toward a crucial aspect of object-centered theoretical work: that somesthetic (sensory-aesthetic) experience offers alternative forms of knowledge production or ways of learning—and teaching.

If, for Clark, art lies in the act of cutting, and not in the object cut, what does this mean for a cultural analytic reading of her work as theoretical object? And how will rethinking object relations serve cultural analytic ends and extended uses in the context of art education and artistic research?

Cuts and Travels

In art schools, the focus on manual practices (craft) or skills, which remains dominant, has recently been expanded by a greater tendency toward

"research in the arts," which—viewed from an academic perspective—means a rather wild, undisciplined, sometimes uncritical and superficial, yet also productive embrace of theoretical concepts and tools.[4] Despite its by-now naturalized existence in the curriculum of art and design students, the "phenomenon" of artistic research still seems to receive more attention from academics than from artists. If pressed to define artistic research, one might call it a composite of aesthetic practices (material, experiential, processual, sensorial, affective, etc.) that reacts to and enters a dialogue with the limits of knowledge production; it might be said to probe that which cannot be known, thereby pointing to and engaging in the contradictions, ambivalences, and impossibilities of scientific or academic research methods.[5] Yet the ongoing institutionalization of artistic research, under the pressures of (academic) funding schemes and (art) market logics, will confine the multitudes of artistic ways of thinking (i.e., "image-thinking," Bal 2021) to a mere buzzword.[6]

My experience as an (ex-)academic in the field of higher art education is informed by an indebtedness to, and a care for, the spirit of cultural analysis as I learnt and taught it at the University of Amsterdam. Having left academia, and having been resistant to some academized forms of knowledge production and education, the art school context, and more specifically the practices of art teaching within it, have given me the opportunity to rethink and retrain my own cultural analytic practices. This led to two perhaps obvious yet neglected realizations: (1) *Concepts* are especially prone to travel. They characterize the traveling methodology of cultural analysis, partly in relation to how they become productive for other-than-academic (social, artistic, or political) practices. In their book about the uses of theoretical

4 The term "artistic research" (*künstlerische Forschung*) has been used more widely since the 1990s (mostly within Europe), subsuming concepts such as arts-based and practice-led research, or artistic inquiry. The wider institutional appearance of the term since then is connected to the Bologna reform process (see Bologna Declaration), through which design and art programs in higher education were "academized." Artistic research has thus mostly been claimed at art schools and has inevitably been tinted with educational politics.

5 There are few insightful references on artistic research, as they mostly spin around the definitional or strategic value rather than the analytic uses of AR. For critical readings, see Bippus; Cotter. For a historico-philosophical account of artistic research, see Mersch.

6 This became obvious in the publication of the Vienna Declaration on Artistic Research in 2020 by a conglomerate of European organizations in higher art education. The declaration has justifiably been criticized for its "technocratic jargon and business rhetoric" (Cramer and Terpsma). Doing research in the arts does not need a label, if it strives toward what I call *gefühltes Wissen* (Klein) or sensed knowledge and remains committed to that which might lie beyond methodological articulation.

concepts (or "concepting") in and for the arts, Nanna Verhoeff and Iris van der Tuin expose how concepts can work for artists. Drawing on their ideas has greatly aided my own art teaching practice when it comes to the use of concepts. Thus, working with concepts has been relatively easy. (2) Unexpectedly, *objects* pose a much bigger challenge to the transposition of cultural analysis to artistic practice. This challenge seems to be induced by how I—in theory—used to define, engage with, and handle "objects," and by the addition of cultural analysis as a useful and critical skill to students' artistic (pedagogical) toolkits. To scratch my itch about how I have dealt with the role of objects in artistically driven cultural analysis, I want to tease out the potential of relating objects to their making.

The object in art educational contexts has traditionally been in flux, as many different types of objects were developed to negotiate the "purview" of art and its cultural or political scope: relational objects, performative objects, boundary objects, everyday objects, fragmented objects, unfinished objects, living objects, ephemeral objects, stubborn objects, disintegrating objects, textu(r)al objects, transitional objects, corporeal objects, etc. To reconsider cultural analytic workings with objects in art schools, it is not productive to focus on the meaning of these different types of art object, which cultural analysis has already done extremely well. Instead, following Clark, I find it more promising to concentrate on what Halberstam observes as the *doings* of animated objects, the sense that they embody "a repetition, a recurrence, an uncanny replay of repressed activity." The repressed activity, which I would describe as inherent to some analytic "practices" from an artistic perspective, in the case of *Caminhando* is unearthed or freed by the act of cutting, both literally and symbolically. In contrast, the activity of analyzing an object seems to ossify the object temporarily, while its theoretical relevance (as knowledge object), and its performative and pedagogical power, are neglected.

When teaching students from various artistic disciplines (art pedagogy, fine art, jewelry, and curatorial and social practice) at art academies in Switzerland and the Netherlands, my goal is to let the students participate in, and profit from, knowing the blissful moments when the sometimes-agonizing engagement with seemingly impenetrable theoretical texts yields unexpected insights, and the ensuing desire to share these with others. To do this, I adapt my use of cultural theories to the students' artistic (and sometimes pedagogical) aspirations, as their ambition is rarely to linger with theory, but to employ it as a stepping stone to process and reflect on the intersection of their creative practice, their personal interest, and socio-political challenges. And so, I experiment with and keep learning from my

students which elements of cultural analytic methodology can be extracted, transformed, and applied to artistic practice—as well as challenging the very conditions of most academic practices: cognitive and linguistic ways of sense making, meaning production, and means of communication.[7] The metaphor of cutting, as a more sensory way of sense making, helps to preclude the assumption that objects are simply semiotically available to us, ready for critical appropriation and rearticulation.

My art students have however resisted my pedagogical focus, insofar as their relation to case studies tends to involve a wavelike movement between what they define as "distant" objects made by others, and their own making of objects, which necessarily shifts their sense of intimacy—and maybe criticality—toward objects in general. The objects to which they relate in such specific fashion do not lend themselves easily as case studies, since (1) they are not yet, or never, finished; (2) they are transformed by the influence of the analytic look (by way of the conceptual lens); (3) they depend on the disparate activities (sculpting, thinking, drawing, cutting, sawing, listening, voicing, etc.—and yes, also reading and writing!) involved in the making of objects; and (4) they constantly shift in their dialogue with theory, rather than being captured by it. These "case studies" defy the smoothly wrapped-up object/concept package, as they are essentially emerging, undone, and failing.[8]

What I learned in the oscillating space between my approach to theory making and my pedagogical practice is that the (teaching/learning) objects I am offered by my students are in want of traveling, too.[9] Yet the means or direction of travel for these objects seems to radically differ from the traveling of concepts, as they, like Halberstam's animated objects, "embody

7 In a performative research project with artist Angelo Custódio, I explore embodied theory-making processes and practices (see Custódio and Sturm).

8 It is important to stress here that my reading of Lygia Clark's work is not meant as, nor can it ever achieve, a productive prescription of attunement to "failing objects," or objects in the making. *Caminhando* lends itself to analysis precisely by way of its clear and representable form or "voice," *pointing towards* the location of the value of some aesthetic objects in what cannot be "heard." My students' "transient" works, in contrast, by the nature of their continuous *becoming*, remain unrepresentable, unperceivable, and polyvocal as "speaking objects." The methodology of artistic cultural analysis must, then, continue to learn to listen for the low hums and purrs of evanescent and nascent objects. I thank Frans-Willem Korsten for the generous conversations we had on this matter.

9 The idea of "working with objects" as attending to their emergence from the labor of cutting may offer an implicit critique of the "easy travel" of concepts that can be decontextualized from one place and recontextualized somewhere else—perhaps an all too easy or smooth way of traveling. See also Aydemir in this volume.

a repetition, a recurrence, an uncanny replay of repressed activity" (Halberstam 178, see also Bal, *Travelling Concepts*). Compared to the traveling of concepts, the objects' travel thus seems to happen on a microscopic plane, from *within*, yet thereby affecting the production process and context—like cutting a Möbius strip. Here, the poetics (and politics?) of the cut disrupts or shifts the analytic "filter" which seems to be at odds with the fusion of the subject-object that Clark promotes, and which allows the object to "cut back" into theory.[10]

The object's traveling incorporates the analyst's/artist's present experience or action. This insight has given rise to some methodological shifts in my pedagogical approach to objects: namely, to give a greater place to process, context, and immediate experience while my students and I collectively encounter objects. Leaning on Clark's belief that art is not in the object, but in the act of cutting, I'd like to think that the teaching of cultural analysis in art educational contexts lies in facing and releasing the repressed activities involved in the demands of "live" objects.

Conclusion

With my trailing of objects here, I want to suggest that the traveling methodology of cultural analysis might serve the art student or art educator in ways that involve a rethinking of how, or how fast, cultural analytic travel takes place. If we want to expand the analytical field and its practices by accepting the challenge of objects-in-flux, we might need to move beyond what Bal suggests as cultural analysis's second nature:

> By selecting an object, you question a field. [Cultural analytic] methods [are not] sitting in a toolbox waiting to be applied; they too, are part of the exploration. You do not apply one method; you conduct a meeting between several, a meeting in which the object participates, so that, together, objects and methods can become a new, not firmly delineated, field. (Bal, "Working with Concepts" 13)

Objects have a different effect on cultural analytical research when they are characterized by incompleteness, processuality, and performativity, or

10 This is a take on Mieke Bal's important observation about the agency of objects in the analytical process: "I learned that the object can speak, and speak back, and hence, must be considered a subject in dialogue" ("Lexicon" 60).

when they generate meaning by being activated in time- and space-specific situations, by questioning or producing their own conditions of emergence. Attention should be given to the moment in the life of objects that marks their creation while, or by simultaneously being, analyzed.

This art educational perspective on cultural analytic practices can effectively expand the dynamics of working with objects at large; namely, by demanding that a special attention is given by the analyst to the conditions of the object's making and emergence; its growth or decomposition; or, as Sara Ahmed would say, its arrival. Ahmed writes that we perceive objects only by encountering them through their arrival. Yet, "an arrival takes time, and the time that it takes shapes 'what' it is that arrives.... What arrives not only depends on time, but is shaped by the conditions of its arrival, by how it came to get there" (40). The arrival of objects is thus a process that is mirrored in the progressive character of as yet, or forever, un-made art objects. Yet how objects "get to me" also depends on what objects allow me to do, or what they *require* me to do. The actions involved in art educational objects-in-the-making thus not only implicate an "intimate co-dwelling" (Ahmed 52) of the artist's (student's) body and their object (as is obvious in *Caminhando*); but the analyst's intellectual and literal grasp of the object also depends on the activity/action applied to its material and conceptual shape, or form.

By attempting to *trail* my sometimes-conflictual experiences in teaching cultural analysis to art students, I have become more critical, and possibly humbler, toward the defining goals and potential reach of cultural analytic methods for the so-called creative practices. I have become more aware of the discrepancies between cultural analytic writing or publishing, and teaching its methods; and between the analysis of art (objects) and the pedagogy of art making. I will keep taking seriously Clark's proposition to embrace the act of cutting the object (or cutting the methodology) with all its potential to decompose the object/theory at hand, in favor of trailing the "ephemeral, evanescent, undocumentable, and unknowable practices" (Spatz 234) of object-driven research and teaching still to be explored in art academies and beyond.

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Part Two

Traveling Concepts, Theories, Methods

5. Cultural Analysis: A Global South Critical Approach

Paulina Aroch Fugellie

Abstract: In this essay, I juxtapose cultural analysis, critical theory, and a Global South perspective to recuperate the critical potential of working with the limits of our methods. My object of analysis is "Bannatyne Takes on Big Tobacco," a 2008 episode of BBC's *This World*, which indexes a set of contradictions proper to the era Mark Fisher termed "capitalist realism." Interested in Africa's role as the constitutive exclusion of capitalist realism, I employ the concept-based methodology of cultural analysis for a close reading across disciplinary boundaries while simultaneously benefiting from critical theory's approach to particulars as symptoms of a systemic totality. The Global South operates as a perspectival locus, interrupting semiotic closure to include colonialism as the structural causation of capitalism.

Keywords: capitalist realism (Fisher), Frankfurt School, Africa, aid economy, celebrity philanthropy, Duncan Bannatyne

In this contribution, I propose to correlate three terms: cultural analysis, critical theory, and the Global South. The first two terms name methodologies, the last refers to a geo-economic area. Yet, the Global South is also a site of knowing, while the two methodologies are also situated in the global political economy. My objective is to recuperate the critical potential of acknowledging the situatedness of the methods we employ and to open up the universalizing potential of the Global South as epistemic viewpoint.

My object of analysis is "Bannatyne Takes on Big Tobacco" (2008), an episode of *This World*, a mainstream current affairs BBC program. The episode explores how children are targeted for nicotine consumption in Africa. When read symptomatically, it allows us to explore the complicities

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between the aid economy, the image of Africa as a consumer product, and the figure of the episode's host: Scottish celebrity businessman Duncan Bannatyne. In its circulation of Africa—and of Bannatyne—as images to be consumed, as information goods, the object is solidly inscribed in the digital economy, while its status as a documentary, naturalizing itself as innocent humanitarian endeavor, indexes a wide set of contradictions proper to the era that British cultural theorist Mark Fisher has termed "capitalist realism."

I use the concept of "capitalist realism" here to try to understand the video's ideological function from the perspective of critical theory, to then see how, when intervened from a Global South perspective, the analysis points at Africa's place as the constitutive contradiction of capitalist realism. A close reading of the documentary, using the tools of cultural analysis, will show how it naturalizes the figure of "the good capitalist," a key dramatis persona in the panoramic staging of capitalist realism.

With *cultural analysis* I refer to a set of interdisciplinary practices in the humanities that gained traction in the late 1990s, with Mieke Bal's *Travelling Concepts* (2002) as founding referent. Cultural analysis is a flexible, yet procedurally consistent, set of practices, with object, concept, and close reading as the basics for its mode of inquiry. It is bent on the present as self-reflexive site of operation and approaches method and meaning production dynamically and contingently. With *critical theory*, I refer to a varied tradition, loosely related to the Frankfurt School, but extending far beyond it historically and geographically. Critical theory is informed by Marxism and psychoanalysis; yet, its defining trait, in contrast to cultural analysis, is reading the particular instance—such as a cultural object—in the context of a systemic totality and as a function of that totality.

Cultural analysis's distancing from any form of universality lies at the very foundation of its concept-based methodology, enabling close reading across boundaries. But it does so by refusing to deliver a structural verdict in its findings that would interrogate the totality into accountability. Here, the overarching viewpoint of critical theory allows us to go beyond a close reading of symbolic capital and move into the structural complicities that make its uneven distribution possible. Cultural analysis unravels the textualities through which power—in the Foucauldian sense as both repressive and enabling—is woven into culture. Critical theory approaches particulars as constitutive contradictions to unravel large substrata. If cultural analysis offers the advantages of a zoom-in, critical theory has the advantages of a zoom-out.

But what about the *Global South*? The Global South shares critical theory's panoramic viewpoint yet repositions the lens from the North to

the South, opening a new angle on the global. Both cultural analysis and critical theory engage with questions of coloniality. However, only a Global South perspective—in the wake of the 1970s *dependistas* —world-system analysis, and the development of underdevelopment traditions—envisions colonialism as the foundation of the capitalist totality. As a form of primitive accumulation, colonialism determines the emergence of the Industrial Revolution in Europe, while, in the present, the relegation of capitalism's "dirty work" to the South continues to sustain the systemic totality. Hence, the Global South operates as perspectival locus from which to interrupt critical theory's semiotic closure to include colonialism as the structural causation of capitalism.

Global South–Inflected Critical Theory

The critical theory I draw on here is Mark Fisher's *Capitalist Realism* (2009). Fisher coined the term inspired by Fredric Jameson's famous pronouncement that today "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism" (2). With that coinage, Fisher addressed the naturalization of capitalism in the hegemonic imagination and the use of that naturalization for the self-perpetuation of the status quo. Following Fisher's insights, we can think of capitalism as a modifier of realism, as the particular form of a specific genre. This approach enables us to focus on capitalism in terms of the textures that weave together its rhythms and its narratives.

Fisher's construct is, like any other, correlative to its geohistorical site of imagination, informed by the history of the United Kingdom. Fisher locates the emergence of capitalist realism in the 1980s, with the defeat of the British miners' strike at the foreground, culminating in Thatcher's self-fulfilling prophecy that "there is no alternative," against the backdrop of the demise of socialism worldwide (8). Thatcher's phrase gives Fisher's book its subtitle: *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Fisher explains how, before the fall of the Berlin Wall, the system's predicaments were different from today's: "[C]apitalism had to face the problem of how to contain and absorb energies from outside. It now, in fact, has the opposite problem; having all too successfully incorporated externality" (9). Thus, capitalist realism, as the form capitalism takes on in the 1980s, has to "function without an outside it can *colonize* and appropriate" (9, italics added).

Fisher's usage of *colonize* is meant in the extended sense. However, if we interrupt this moment from a Global South perspective, we may question

whether colonization in the strict sense continues to be key for capitalist realism. From a Global South perspective, Fisher's claim that capitalism has no outside any longer actually holds true in more than one sense. Focusing on the complicities between capitalism and colonialism only strengthens the view that capitalism has airtight closure. European colonization forms the period of global primitive accumulation without which the Industrial Revolution could not have occurred. Furthermore, colonial relations—both with and within former colonies as well as in the racialized interactions set off by American imperialism—remain in place today.

As Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano argues, the capital–wage relation is only one of the many relations of exploitation *within* capitalism. Besides that single formally admitted relation, capitalism leans for its operations *in the present* on other relations, marked by racialized geo-economics, that is, relations of serfdom, reciprocity, and servitude, or, if I may add, the sexual division of labor, which Silvia Federici has notably examined as chronologic and synchronic basis for the appropriation of surplus value in capitalism. The gap between capitalism's discursive self-presentation—as relying solely on the capital–wage relation—and its actual operation based on a variety of modes of racialized and gendered exploitation is a typical instance of ideology. The notion of capitalist realism facilitates our analysis of the system's ideological dimension since viewing capitalism as the particular mode of a specific genre draws attention to the discourse's constructedness, to the distance between the system's discourse about itself and its actual modus operandi. Thinking that distance through with the aid of Quijano as the space to which colonialism, as capitalism's basis for surplus value extraction, is relegated and hidden, we may open that space so that the coloniality of capitalist realism can come to the fore. Hence, we may explore capitalist realism as a *global* narrative, as an *imperialist* endeavor. The role assigned to Africa in the hegemonic imagination helps weave capitalist realism together.

From a Global South perspective, the idea that there is no *imagined* outside to capitalist culture should be reexamined. To be rendered believable, capitalist realism requires Africa as its nominal—but not factual—exteriority. Africa operates as that outmost boundary, at once inside and outside, which lends the fiction of capitalism's eternity—the fact that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism—full closure. This occurs, I argue, first, by having Africa represent the abyss that awaits the rest of humanity once one falls outside the system. Second, by portraying Africa as the land of capital's still unexploited potential. As signifier, Africa is a virtual exteriority fulfilling an ideological function for a capitalist realism that is unevenly naturalized on a global scale.

Zoom-in

"Bannatyne Takes on Big Tobacco" explores how the transnational company British American Tobacco effectively targets children in Mauritius, Nigeria, and Malawi. In this sense, Bannatyne shows an incisive understanding of the dynamics of capital. Yet, his critique is not without self-interest. Holding the largest chain of health clubs in the UK, Bannatyne's fight against the tobacco industry legitimates his own enterprise. The entrepreneur's personal image is a direct investment in what he sells: he is the public figure of the Bannatyne Health Club and Spa chain that carries his name.

To underscore Bannatyne's persona as a philanthropist, the documentary frames viewers by mentioning—in an apparently casual but calculated manner—that the Scottish entrepreneur has a food charity program in Malawi. In using the term "framing" here in the sense of "being set up," I borrow from Bal's systematic development of the double sense of the term (141–55). I also benefit from Bal's understanding of framing as producing an event, predicating an object, and rendering "the agent who is responsible, accountable, for his or her acts" (135). The documentary frames the tobacco industry with footage from Bannatyne's food charity program, creating an opposition between "good" and "bad" forms of intervention in Africa. The fact that there are "good" and "bad" forms naturalizes the intervention as such.

This is not to say that there is no qualitative difference—even a radical difference—between both forms of intervention in the continent. I am not arguing it is the same to give free food as to sell a drug to children. What I am arguing is that the hegemonic global narrative, in which the episode participates, frames both scenarios in deliberately different ways, exhaustively uncovering the details in one scenario, quickly rushing through in the other. A lot is shown in the case of the tobacco industry; a lot is hidden in the case of the food donation program, including the surplus value it generates for the fitness entrepreneur. Above all, what remains outside the frame is how such charities preserve a structural dependence that is generated by colonialist capitalism, acting as a palliative for a disavowed malady that they are complicit with.

Zoom-out

From a critical theoretical viewpoint, it is important to recall that the enforced economic dependence of Africa on the North takes away its de facto political independence. Since in Uganda, for example, foreign aid is

over three billion dollars per year (World Bank), the country, like most in the continent, lacks sovereignty, being effectively ruled by "international civil society" in the form of NGOs and foreign-based transnational organizations, on whom it depends for survival.

Seen from a Global South critical perspective, "international civil society" is a dubious term: it elevates a concrete interest group, the bourgeoisie of the Global North, to the level of a universal. The profoundly dangerous potential of such a group and the legitimacy it grants neoliberal colonialism is best illustrated by the "Kony 2012" campaign by Invisible Children, which successfully mobilized so-called international civil society to demand USA military intervention in Uganda. Exploiting the generalized ignorance concerning Africa, the mass media campaign framed their audience into believing they were pursuing a good cause by demanding that the USA government intervene in the African country. The military intervention was thus granted legitimacy by "the people's" demand, while being motivated by mineral resource extraction as well as participating in the human rights violations it claimed to attack.

The above happened under Barack Obama's regime, the US president to oversee the greatest military presence in Africa in history. His function as a racial signifier made the task easier, I'd argue. This situation is symptomatic of how the coloniality of capitalist realism fetishizes racialized subjects in positions of power in the Global North in order to disavow the operation of race as a *structural* category at a *global* scale. Obama thus operates as constitutive contradiction of the colonialist capitalist totality, reinforcing structural racism. This logic of fetishization of race and the negation of structural racism also accommodates the symbolic and monetary economies of Bannatyne and the BBC.

The Object as Symptom of a Wider Totality

"Bannatyne Takes on Big Tobacco" constructs the notion of "good" and "bad" colonialist capital, thus naturalizing colonialist capitalism. This construction is part of a wider narrative of "good capitalism." The narrative features self-legitimating liberalists, charitable millionaires, and enthusiastic hard-working entrepreneurs, whose alchemy makes magic happen and the world a better place. I am thinking of TV programs such as *Dragons' Den*. Bannatyne is one of the all-time stars of *Dragons' Den UK* (2005–). The dynamic of these shows is that some wealthy investors, the Dragons, evaluate the offers of inspiring young entrepreneurs to attract investment.

In one episode of *Dragons' Den*, Bannatyne declares: "I'm wealthy because I love being an entrepreneur; I love the business, I love employing people, and every entrepreneur I know says the same thing" ("The Dragon's Stories" min. 1:05). One is left to wonder whether the poor also love being poor, or whether they might not be loving enough of entrepreneurship. The "good capitalist" act and the concomitant moralization of politics seeps in from the reality business show to the BBC documentary through the figure of Bannatyne, not least because he introduces himself in those terms. In the documentary he declares: "People know me from *Dragons' Den*," and as he says so, we are offered footage from the show ("Bannatyne" min. 1:23). In a scene at a tobacco plantation in Malawi, Bannatyne exclaims: "This is just so fascinating; so enterprising—that they find some way for pressing the tobacco. This guy should be on *Dragons' Den*" (min. 28:45).

Bannatyne declares that Malawians are "beautiful people, very, very friendly people, always happy; no matter what problems they have, the people are always happy." Not only does this reproduce the racist concept of the "good savage," but Bannatyne also sets the idea against their poverty. Declaring that "Malawi is one of the poorest countries in the world," he also says, "they work very hard, just to get the basic needs: water, sanitation" (mins. 28:55, 28:24). Hence, poverty is no excuse for being unhappy. If Malawians, as the most "underdeveloped" of the three countries visited by the Scottish businessman, are content with their lot, what right have we, as spectators, not to count our exploitation within the capitalist system as a blessing? Africa's exteriority thus disciplines the rest of us into acceptance of the status quo.

While the documentary is about tobacco consumption, our guide takes a detour to show us his food charity program. Bannatyne walks along the stirring faces of children, lining up for a plate of food, to approach the women cooking, and starts mixing one of the stews himself. When the women burst out in laughter, he explains to the viewer that they are thrown off to see a man cooking; he does not mention their disconcert at him doing so as a white person, nor as a millionaire. Through pointing to the gender differential, he frames their gender prejudice as the cause of the upheaval and so brackets his own racial and class difference, his direct power over them as benefactor.

Bannatyne's persona as the good capitalist is also framed in a scene in his hotel room in Lagos. The room is quite modest, to the degree that, in his words:

> Well, I'm packing to leave Lagos and, just in case you think I've been living in a luxury hotel whilst filming, I can tell you that I just accidentally stood

> on my pet cockroach. Three days he's lived with me, and now he's dead. It was an accident, buddy, I am sorry. (Min. 26:31)

Bannatyne, it seems, is so respectful of the local milieu he even values the life of a Nigerian cockroach enough to frame in (and so do the editors and producers). If Bannatyne killed the cockroach, it was only by mistake. What is important is his intention, not the cockroach's life. This teaches us a lesson: his morality matters, not the effects of his actions. Just as the cockroach's death was accidental, so too appears the matter of his fortune. While, in Nigeria, he shows us his humble provisional abode, he does not shy away from guiding us through his magnificent holiday villa in the south of France, where he and his family rest by the swimming pool as we hear his voice-over. Being rich while others are poor is not a sin, so long as you engage in charity, keep to the ways of "other" cultures when traveling, and never kill a cockroach intentionally. Being rich in Europe and poor in Africa seem entirely unrelated, without a causal relation between the two, the only relation being one of charity out of the kindness of good capitalists, as opposed to the bad capitalists behind the tobacco industry. The issue is merely a moral one, not one of political economy. It is not a question of the system but rather of what kind of business you chose to have, what kind of exploitation your fortune is built on.

At the Edges of Capitalist Realism

Bannatyne fits Fisher's category of celebrity humanitarians who persuade us to engage in moral philanthropy rather than political activity, offering pseudo-solutions in the realm of consumerism (20–22). One is guided away from the purchase of cigarettes, yet toward the consumption of an ethically and physically healthy lifestyle that Bannatyne's products, from health clubs to morally correct documentaries, help us attain. Just like anti-capitalist cultural expressions become a classification within capitalism itself, a classic move of capitalist realism, so too with this form of business celebrity. In the documentary, Africa's exteriority functions as a double bind: the fact that the continent lies outside international tobacco regulations is condemned at the same time as its established otherness is operative for Bannatyne business.

While Malawi is infamous for child labor, the BBC documentary omits that fact. The association between child exploitation in tobacco consumption and production is not indexed. At the plantations, the contract is officially agreed with the parents. Yet, they are pressured to have their children

working. The exploitation of the ambiguous edges of legality and illegality is characteristic of capital's self-valorization in Africa. The children working on the plantations are in fact in a relationship of serfdom. This leaves them outside what Quijano describes as the "capital–wage" relation, which is supposedly the exclusive form of exploitation under capitalism, but is actually reserved for a geo-racially specific few. Other forms of control of labor operate today in places at the edges of capitalist realism: at the service of capital, yet outside the capital–wage logic. The exclusion of these child laborers is such that it is even an exclusion from the privileged form of exploitation of the capital–wage relation.

When Bannatyne goes to Malawi, he frames child labor out of the narrative. Thinking along with Fisher, we can conclude that there is a deliberate disassociation between production and consumption (61). Today, "politics" is reduced to our choices as consumers, and the revindication of that role naturalizes capitalist realism. The episode from *This World* reassures spectators about their power as consumers so they may imagine perfecting the system rather than changing it. It explains failures as aberrations of capitalist–colonialist norms, rather than situating those at its very basis.

The documentary exposes the contradictions between British American Tobacco's discourse and its illegal practices through the paradigmatic tool of the genre: realism. It gains its legitimacy as a realistic portrayal by having Bannatyne travel and interview people at corner shops, bus stops, kiosks, and schools, offering unadorned footage of these encounters. Even if minimally and for its own interest, the documentary does show how capitalism relies on Africa, which is generally disavowed. It exposes the symbolic and economic uses of Africa for global capital as a place of expendable lives: fertile ground for securing drug consumers through hunger, illiteracy, and a lack of legal protection.

With Africa usually imagined outside the capitalist-realist continuum, as the place of our abject fears and desires, we may think of it as the realm of the "Real" in the Lacanian sense, as that which resists symbolization. Fisher proposes that the Lacanian Real could be invoked to contest capitalist realism:

> For Lacan, the Real is what any "reality" must suppress; indeed, reality constitutes itself through just this repression. The Real is an unrepresentable X, a traumatic void that can only be glimpsed in the fractures and inconsistencies in the field of apparent reality. So one strategy against capitalist realism could involve invoking the Real(s) underlying the reality that capitalism presents to us. (18)

If, from a Global South perspective, we take capitalist realism as being based on colonialist infrastructure, then we may say that Africa operates as the site of the repressed that enables capitalist realism elsewhere. Capitalist realism disavows its continuity with Africa while relying on it for its own clean image. As constitutive exclusion, Africa remains the place of trauma, of that which resists symbolization.

Only a Global South perspective, as geopolitical and epistemic viewpoint, allows us to move from the fetishized notions of the video, regarding charity and race, to their systemic coming into being as such. While race as an ontological category is highly circulated in contemporary (neo)liberal discourse, it is simultaneously minimized as a geopolitical and geo-economic category. The imperialist underpinnings of capital—and of race itself—continue to be disavowed. As economic and imaginative constitutive exclusion of capitalist realism, Africa is denied. In the contemporary reification of race, we witness a classic Freudian slippage, a displacement, away from the unnameable trauma of capitalism's racist substructure, and toward the more manageable thematization and decorative usage of the term. I speak of a *reification* of race here because its global structuring force in capitalist realism is disowned, while the *signifier* "race" is fetishized. This fetishism of the signifier contributes to the denial of the imperialist reality predicated on Africa as imagined and performed kernel of the Real.

Today, it might indeed be easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. But imagining the end of coloniality, the fundamental yet disavowed building block of capitalism, is not even in question. While capitalism's naturalization can be named, the imperialist–capitalist conjunction remains largely in the realm of the traumatic Real. To strategically invoke this Real, as suggested by Fisher, we can engage in a cultural analysis that reads objects closely as symptoms placed specifically within an uneven global totality. While doing so, it is fundamental to keep in mind that, from a Global South perspective, the main representational strategy of capitalist realism is to have the part stand in for the whole—and then proceed to erase the whole. As cultural analysts, we should also learn to read for that erased whole.

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6. Traveling Concepts and Conjunctural Analysis: Concepts Gone Bad

Murat Aydemir

Abstract: In 2002, Mieke Bal influentially argued that theory is most helpful for cultural analysis in the form of heuristic concepts rather than comprehensive systems or methods. Instead of epistemological "coverage," concepts enable measured "travel" across disciplines and territories. However, concepts no longer circulate in the same way as they used to in the early 2000s. Multidisciplinary "toolkits" have become commonplace. Once-specialized academic concepts now lead sweeping social lives across academic, popular, activist, and governmental contexts. The metaphor of "travel" doesn't work when there are few borders left. As an alternative, I propose a combination of cultural analysis and conjunctural analysis, weighing the leverage and purchase of concepts in terms of the present historical situation and its shape-shifting hegemony.

Keywords: interdisciplinarity, nomad (Deleuze and Guattari), traveling concepts (Bal), traveling theory (Said), concept creep (Haslam), conceptual overreach (Tasoulias)

At some point, somebody would have offered design solutions for the homeless (insert slide of a recumbent bike with an umbrella and a sleeping bag made from high-tech fabric). Maybe someone would have demonstrated deterritorializing dance movements. Someone would have made the inevitable joke: "Dolce and Gabbana." Someone would have volunteered the information that the Israeli Defense Forces drew on the work for controlling Palestinian citizens in dense urban settings. Someone (me?) would have responded, "C'mon, that's just an urban legend!"[1]

1 It isn't. For an account, see Weizman. As Shimon Naveh, a retired IDF brigadier general and director of the IDF-affiliated Operational Theory Research Institute, explains: "Several of the

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It didn't go like this. I'm condensing different occasions. In retrospect, it feels like a very 1990s moment, but it may have been later: when the *nomad* was an academic hype of sorts. In "1227: Treatise on Nomadology—The War Machine," a chapter from *A Thousand Plateaus*, first published in French in 1980, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari surely lay it on thick. Genghis Khan, Arab tribes, Japanese fighters, Hyksos, and Bedouins; rebellion, adventure, and wide-open spaces. At the same time, the melodramatic opposition between, let's say, "oppressive territorial state" and "free roving nomad" is frequently interrupted by very different uses of the terms. At times, the opposition is only used minimally and neutrally: holding space, for better or worse; opening space, for better or worse. Furthermore, the relationship between the two modes paradoxically includes both an essential incompatibility and a tight interdependence; it's that tense interrelationship that seems to matter most.

Finally, at the very end of the chapter, Deleuze and Guattari astonishingly dismiss—yes, cancel—the concept of the nomad they've been developing for so many pages of dense argumentation. "The nomads don't hold the secret," they abruptly inform us. In the "present situation," they continue, states are "no more than objects or means adapted" to the nomadic "worldwide war machine" (421–23). Global, deterritorializing capital has enveloped and conquered the state. Hence, the distinction between state and nomad is no longer functional or relevant. The nomad no longer offers epistemological or political leverage. Nomadic agents and modes can only resonate affirmatively with the capture of nation-states by transnational capital.[2]

In this sense, "Nomadology" offers us a cautionary tale of what might be characterized as a "traveling concept" gone wrong (Bal). As the notion travels from anthropology to philosophy, as well as from the colonial archive to the post- or neocolonial present, something goes *off*—something of a rudimentarily historical nature—and precisely this failure to travel or update tells us something about the concept, the 1980s, and our present.

Of course, it's unfair to single out the nomad in this way. Many concepts become unhelpful buzzwords as part of their life cycle, and surely all

concepts in *A Thousand Plateaus* become instrumental to us,... allowing us to explain contemporary situations in a way that we could not have otherwise explained them. It problematized our own paradigms.... In the IDF we now often use the term 'to smooth out space' when we want to refer to operation in a space as if it had no borders" (Weizman 59).

2 For more on this argument, see my own "Nomads without Secrets" (Aydemir). Rosi Braidotti argues that the "congruence" or "parallelism" of nomad and capital, resulting in a "perverse nomadism," offers "the means to identify ways of exceeding this system by setting it in motion from within" (18).

concepts are used in more and less incisive ways. But I want to suggest something more specific and damaging can happen when a concept, such as the nomad, appears to usher in three things at once. That is, when a notion promises the radical and cutting-edge; when it suggests a sense of freedom from power; and when it facilitates a certain self-understanding of ourselves as academics. Especially the latter aspect may get considerably worse when a concept is grounded in minority existence. We could fancy ourselves academic nomads of sorts while nomadic livelihoods were oppressed around the world. Many of us would soon become acquainted with a semblance of the material condition as adjunctification took hold in the academy. In retrospect, perhaps it's clearer that this was more than a personal, institutional, or professional mistake. Precisely at a time when scholars were brought under stricter governmental and managerial control, our flights of fancy became all the more radical. Surely, the fall of the ivory tower, such as it was, could only proclaim imminent freedom?

In what follows, I consider a number of accounts of concepts going bad: terms "diffusing" (Bal), "degrading" (Said), "creeping" (Haslam), and "overreaching" (Tasoulias). In the vein of Deleuze and Guattari's cautionary tale of the nomad, I try to show that concepts expand and hollow out when they generalize rather than specify, and that this generalization often resonates with a form of power as it updates or reinvents itself. Arguably, universities may play an important role in that process. While an academically popular concept may be critical in relation to the former formation of power as it is on its way out (the nomad in relation to territorial state power), it may simultaneously help usher in and enshrine the new one (transnational capital). In this way, academic innovation and the reinvention of power can mutually inform each other. As a possible solution, I propose a combination of cultural analysis and conjunctural analysis, weighing the leverage or purchase of concepts in terms of the present historical situation and its shape-shifting hegemony. Below, I begin by revisiting Mieke Bal's groundbreaking arguments on the interdisciplinary travel of concepts.

Traveling Concepts Traveling

Notwithstanding its subtitle, Bal's *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide* (2002) offers a precise mode of practicing interdisciplinary teaching and research. Its focus is on the role of theory in analyzing, interpreting, and assessing the signification and critical agency of objects of culture. The main claim the book advances is that theory is helpful

here in the form of heuristic concepts rather than systematic theories or methods. In an institutional setting where students and researchers from different disciplinary backgrounds work together, shared comprehensive theories, methods, or genealogies are neither available, feasible, relevant, nor necessary. Therefore, knowledge as the "coverage" of established territories makes way for measured conceptual itineraries across them, preempting "knowledge-as-possession" while at the same time enabling methodological transparency and criticism (8, 327). For Bal, it's clear that the interdisciplinary mobility of concepts goes together with intensified accountability. Definitions and uses cannot be taken for granted nor taken on authority, and have to be argued, elaborated, and assessed every time (24).

Crucially, the purchase of concepts can be challenged and transformed through their application on a concrete, overdetermined object of culture, which serves as their "primary testing ground" (44). This heuristic, critical usage of a concept requires it to serve as a "strong, well-delimiting searchlight" (33). In other words, concepts don't act as labels to describe or categorize, nor as headings under which to generalize, but as pointed analytics. In cultural analysis, concepts serve as developed questions, which are to be pursued further in close dialogue with a case study.

Having taught this approach at undergraduate, graduate, and PhD levels, I can attest that it works. It opens up space for scholarly independence, engagement, and dialogue. Importantly, the approach Bal proposes is profoundly accessible and emancipating. While it can be carried out at different levels of complexity and sophistication, a first-year student can do it relatively quickly, assembling a combination of an object and a concept, and offering a cultural analysis of their own, which won't be fully reducible to digested summaries of what they've read or been told before. In this respect, cultural analysis is principally anti-didactic, which is surely one of its greatest strengths. While current managerial didacticism aims to postpone the actual research portion of academic programs to the graduate, if not PhD level, students are enabled to practice cultural analysis from the start.

Of course, the simple fact that I can attest to the above shows that the thrust of the approach has not been just pragmatic ("this how you could do interdisciplinary, theory-informed object analysis") but also programmatic ("this is how one should do cultural analysis"), founding a school of thought. And, since it is not possible to do everything all at once, the productivity of any approach—particularly in its institutional and teachable form—is as dependent on what we *don't* do as it is on what we actually do. It's this relationship between the things we focus on and the things we bracket,

I suggest, that we may wish or need to redistribute to meet current and imminent challenges.

Bal doesn't refuse or deny but certainly deprioritizes larger questions of method, theoretical systems, the genealogies of the concept, and the contexts of the object. Unlike the discrete concept, those are not singled out as the "primary counterpart" of the object of analysis (8). Method is probably the least important here as, to all intents and purposes, cultural analysis *is* a method: a way of doing research that is taught, practiced, and assessed. At the same time, I would suggest relegating the issue of methodology to disciplinarity, while cultural analysis continues to view itself as something of an interdisciplinary improvisation in defiance of a disciplinary standard that by now has largely evaporated, has permitted the approach to avoid scrutiny in its capacity as a method for too long.

The bracketing of the other factors seems more consequential. With the distancing of theoretical systems, their associated worldviews and ideological commitments move from sight. Decentering the histories and genealogies of concepts overlooks their eventful academic and social lives, including moments of conflict, hype, co-optation, diminishing returns, and possible remobilization. Finally, the distancing of the object's contexts deemphasizes the economies of creation, extraction, exploitation, distribution, reception, critical investment, and appropriation in which it operates. As a result, the political horizon of the method becomes narrowed to the semiotically circumscribed "inside" of the object, opening up to conceptual rearticulation. In recent years, to be sure, students have increasingly expressed hesitation with respect to this narrow political horizon.

I would argue that the relative decontextualization of the object from its troubled histories and contexts, and the simultaneous decontextualization of the concept from its larger theoretical system and its troubled histories and contexts, together allow the object and concept to meet up in a present without much baggage. Again, while Bal does not deny the importance of those larger histories and contexts, they are deprioritized to make space for a critical practice that is centered on the dialogic exchange between object and concept, aesthetic form and thought, in the present. Nonetheless, without factoring in, to some extent and in some way, the combined histories, genealogies, and economies bringing together scholar, object, and concept in a particular time and place within history, that present risks remaining notional; an empty stage rather than a dense context in its own right. At the same time, the method's contributions and interventions remain bound to that same historical present. After all, that's the only place where they can make a difference.

From this, I do not conclude that students and researchers in cultural analysis should become life-long apprentices aiming at philosophical, historical, or contextual coverage or mastery. Other fields already take care of that, and it would risk losing the nonterritorial knowledge and anti-didacticism that are among the approach's main strengths. Yet, I do contend that the present, where our practice is situated, demands more emphasis and consideration. Not only does it inevitably inform what we do, it is also where our work should resonate. This reflection on the historical present should also include how we work with concepts. For, concepts no longer "travel" in the same way as they used in the early 2000s. Their circulation and uptake have changed dramatically.

Academic Professionalism and Hyper-politicization

Bal offered her arguments on traveling concepts at a time when disciplinary gatekeeping, especially but not exclusively in art history, as well as rigid system-thinking, particularly in the social sciences and philosophy, were still powerful formations. Moreover, what had become known as "theory" was still relatively new, contested, and, to a considerable degree, limited to academic discourse. Against that background, the metaphor of "travel," moving advisedly across established territories and systems made perfect sense.

That has changed. I'd like to flag two developments in this regard. For one, multidisciplinary "toolkits" have become commonplace in the largely deterritorialized contemporary humanities and social sciences. The seemingly contrasting senses of playful hybridity and smooth efficiency that accompany those equally betray a generalized exchangeability and assimilation. I should add my observations are mostly informed by reading funding applications for committee work. Of course, those proposals may not fully, or not at all, reflect actual scholarly convictions or practices, as they're generically written toward funding calls. Nonetheless, it's in that respect that they indicate what's commonly accepted as the most competitive methodological disposition in the eyes of government-adjacent funding bodies.

According to that disposition, a wide variety of approaches may be proposed in the absence of much reflection on whether and how their results will add up. The awareness that the epistemologies or politics of particular methods may be incommensurable, conflicting, or merely noncumulative seems all but absent; the assumption that recombination is innovative and

creative as such is axiomatic. Again, I don't think everyone believes in this to an equal extent—but that's my point: those applications gesture at an institutionally effective multidisciplinary default, if not norm. According to this norm, I argue, scholarly knowledge may be broken down into so many equivalent units of expertise and skill, which can then be repackaged at will in the service of expedient knowledge utilization. Methods have become more or less neutral "tools," and this very instrumentality is reified as professionalism, innovation, creativity, and excellence.[3]

Furthermore, once-specialized academic concepts now lead sweeping social lives—amplified by social media—across academic, journalistic, popular, activist, managerial, political, and governmental contexts. Both inside and outside of the academy, weaker versions of concepts that were once bound to specific political ideals have been incorporated into the discourses of progressive neoliberalism. At the same time, a number of concepts have been weaponized by the far right in tandem with mainstream trend journalism, currently targeting trans, queer, and gender studies as well as critical race studies. Since the academy no longer enjoys centrality or authority in this respect, concepts rebound across multiple sites of articulation, contestation, and redeployment. As a result, the politics of concepts have become volatile and difficult to ascertain. Cite a concept, and you may not always realize in whose choir you're singing along.

In sum, "travel" doesn't make much sense when there are so few borders and territories left. In retrospect, this has to do with the very productivity of the interdisciplinary approaches Bal and others have pioneered. To some degree, those methods are now no longer oppositional nor alternative but incorporated into the dominant logic overseeing academic production. Interdisciplinarity has become part of the default so that the movement of concepts as such serves as a token of their epistemological productivity. But if concepts can no longer meaningfully misfire, they can also no longer be successful in a critical sense. To be sure, the method, as it has become

3 This argument is informed by the particularities of the Dutch funding situation. At the Dutch Research Council (Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek, NWO), the social sciences and humanities are combined in one section. Research projects are evaluated by multidisciplinary panels, assessing empirical, philosophical, as well as hermeneutic methods and claims, usually defaulting to a weak empiricism. For broad appeal, many projects casually combine ethnographic or data-driven, semiotic, discursive, and aesthetic, as well as conceptual or reflective aspects. I understand some examples would help support my argument here, but since scholars in the Netherlands are so dependent on funding for jobs or research time, and since the format and idiom of funding calls are often extremely constrained, I don't believe it's fair for people to be held to their proposals.

part of the dominant, offers only a watered-down semblance of how it was intended and practiced. Indeed, it has very little to do with the precise, nonreductive conceptual trajectories Bal traces in the case studies in her *Travelling Concepts.* Nonetheless, key aspects of that practice have been overruled and enveloped by a larger disposition that cites its authority while simultaneously betraying it. On the one hand, the interdisciplinary, heuristic, and critical usage of concepts is hollowed out by instrumentalized academic professionalism; on the other, by the hyper-politicization of the culture wars. Provided we don't want to throw out the baby with the bathwater, how can we work with concepts meaningfully today?

"Moving up into a Sort of Bad Infinity"

In 2002, Bal expressed unease with the traction of some traveling concepts, noting the prevalence of the term *uncanny* and certain uses of *trauma* (33). Given the state of affairs I've tried to outline above, I now want to discuss possible ways of assessing the leverage of concepts in terms of the historical present. Next to Bal, I draw in this section on Edward Said's reflections on "traveling theory." While Bal's focus is on interdisciplinary mobility, Said brings in larger historical and political contexts. Since they serve as frequent references in the discussion on concept inflation, I also bring in more recent arguments by Nick Haslam and John Tasoulias. As I try to show, Haslam and Tasoulias implicitly—yet all the more convincingly for that—demonstrate why and how concepts may deteriorate.

Drawing on Isabel Stengers, Bal argues that concepts can go bad when they start "propagating" in a way that's diluting and neutralizing (32). While a strong concept remains able to actively reorganize phenomena in new and relevant ways, a weak concept only labels and names. The culprit Bal identifies in this respect is academic fashion, suggesting stylistic recognition and repetition by rote (32–33). A concept stops being a pointed analytic and becomes a generic badge.

Central to Said's argument is the idea that critical theory existentially emerges to address and transform a socio-historically specific set of circumstances ("Traveling Theory Reconsidered" 416). From its context of emergence, a theory can travel in a good way, according to Said, if it succeeds in maintaining and reaffirming "its own inherent tensions" at the site of its arrival. This requires the theory to remain "in exile" in its new setting as well, in the sense of enabling critical distance and leverage (418, 431). A theory should resist domestication while, at the same time, remaining

answerable—"either through its successes or its failure"—to the "unmasterable presence" that characterizes concrete historical and social situations ("Traveling Theory" 173).

Said's understanding of bad theoretical travel follows from this, and may take place in two directions: either downwards or upwards. A theory can either degrade, "lowering of color," as it becomes domesticated and codified in its new home, failing to adapt or translate critically (171). Alternatively, it can move upward and evaporate "into a sort of bad infinity" (171). If, in the first case, the theory isn't adequately recontextualized to address a different set of circumstances, it becomes altogether decontextualized and generalized in the second.

The contributions Haslam and Tasoulias offer to this debate are recognizable as part of a discourse of mainstream liberal handwringing—defiant, yet increasingly quaint and dated—worrying that there should not be too much care and justice in the world. Haslam targets what he describes as "concept creep" in accounts of harm in psychology. The discipline's concepts of abuse, bullying, trauma, prejudice, and addiction, he claims, have steadily expanded into two directions: horizontally, moving to capture new and different phenomena, and vertically, in the sense of including less extreme versions of the same phenomenon (2). Good examples are the shedding of the criterion of an event being life-threatening for it to qualify as *traumatic*, as well as including negative acts, such as ignoring someone, under the heading of *bullying*. While such cases of concept creep are generally well-intentioned, Haslam adds, he warns they can lead to a pathologized and contracted sense of individual agency and normality (14). As for the reasons for this development, he briefly speculates about an ongoing civilizing mission, following the historical reduction of physical violence in the West and the successes of minority rights movements, expanding to include lesser harms in step with a liberal moral agenda (13).

However, the real task before us, Haslam cautions in a moment of ideological frankness, is neither historical nor psychological nor conceptual nor scientific to begin with but ethical: to decide for ourselves whether or not we wish to endorse a worldview in which the prevalence of trauma and abuse would be "more common" than their absence (15). It's a rhetorical question, of course. The ideological investment prevents Haslam from taking into consideration factors that may seem obvious. For one, decades of neoliberal hegemony, redistributing and expanding precarious lives, have made an encroached normality more harmful for many. Furthermore, changing accounts of mental harm may also serve to maintain or secure access to public healthcare while, at the same time, facilitating a burgeoning

industry of private coaches, therapists, and councilors. In other words, conceptualizations of psychic harm may likely start "creeping," in Haslam's sense, in response to changing formations of governmental and economic power.

Similar to Haslam, Tasoulias's general concern is "conceptual overreach." This can happen when a concept expands and inflates, moving from particular to general, and from partial to comprehensive application. A particular concept may even develop into "a totalizing 'all in one' dogma." The central case here concerns human rights. For Tasoulias, some foundational ideas rightfully enjoy universal yield. He mentions ethics, justice, and morality (which all seem roughly the same thing, while equality is conspicuously lacking, perhaps because it's too integral to the idea of rights). However, human rights should not: their application should remain particular and partial, and not expand to an all-inclusive cause. It's not immediately clear what constitutes conceptual overreach in this respect. On the one hand, Tasoulias approves of the inclusion of socioeconomic rights, such as work protection and health care. On the other, access to an internet connection is offered as a blatant example of overreach (which seems debatable as governmental and democratic platforms move online).

Having said that, there is a poignant strand in Tasoulias's argument that pinpoints what the centering of the political in terms of rights serves to crowd out. Addressing the possible causes for rights overreach, he argues that it may serve as a "dialectical gambit," serving to deprive one's opponent of a legitimate speaking position. It may indeed not be easy to speak out *against* rights, at least not explicitly. This includes those who want to transgress human rights, including today's proponents of enhanced policing and "moderate" forms of apartheid, but, crucially, also those who feel that our politics should not be limited to the distribution and enjoyment of rights to begin with. What gets pushed out or distorted, Tasoulias perceptively writes, are "non-rights-based values, such as kindness, loyalty and mercy; and considerations that, unlike human rights, aren't essentially individualistic, such as solidarity and the common good." Hence, rights discourse has generalized itself at the cost of alternative political imaginations.

Arguably, a framework of individual rights and harms is all we've been left with after progressive neoliberalism succeeded in overtaking the parliamentary left. What Tasoulias and Haslam show us is that concepts can start to inflate and spread as they move into the orbit of hegemonic power, eclipsing alternative imaginations of care and dignity. In this sense, their arguments can be seen as descriptive rather than analytical: they corroborate how, under neoliberal hegemony, concepts of rights and harms have been

generalized, creeping and overreaching, in order to help constrain politics to their deployment. What I'd like to propose, perhaps unsurprisingly, is that what Bal describes as academic fashion neutralizing concepts, Said as a theory evaporating into "bad infinity," Haslam as "concept creep," and Tasoulias as "conceptual overreach," all amount to the same thing—a concept resonating and amplifying in tune with the conjunctural dominant.

"Kinda Subversive, Kinda Hegemonic"

In "Shame in the Cybernetic Fold: Reading Sylvan Tomkins" (1995), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank resort to Silvan Tomkins's work on affect to help short-circuit what they regard as the dominant common sense underlying academic theoretical practice at the time. Interestingly, one of the reasons they use Tomkins in this way is because his work historically *precedes* the generalization and vulgarization of poststructuralism, offering a different "political vision of difference," which resists both binary homogenization and trivialization (512).

The dominant disposition Sedgwick and Frank want to shake up with the help of Tomkins revolves around the incomplete processing of Michel Foucault's critique of the "repressive hypothesis." In the specific context of modern Western biopower, Foucault famously argued, power does not repress sexuality; on the contrary, power actively shapes and informs sexuality. While this debunking of the repressive hypothesis is often cited approvingly, Sedgwick and Frank observe, critical practice nonetheless persists in moralistic allegories pitting subversion against hegemony, resistance against power (513). Furthermore, those allegories tend to enact a reactive relationship to the status quo, stressing extremes of acceptance or refusal, compulsion or voluntarity (501). In contrast, Tomkins's work offers a way of thinking about differentiality that includes not only binarism but also gradation and diverse axes of differentiation while, crucially, not resorting to trivializing notions of grand excess and infinity (512). In other words, to Sedgwick and Frank, the earlier perspective "out-differences" difference as it is taken for granted within a generalized poststructuralism.

I return to this critique in the concluding part of this essay because I believe the consensus it so sharply brings into focus is, to some extent, still with us today. At the same time, I want to reflect on the precise formulation, as I feel it can become operative anew as a meaningful historical symptom or condensation. In a haunting, devastating phrase, Sedgwick and Frank summarize "the bipolar analytic framework" they decry as "kinda subversive,

kinda hegemonic" (500). The words astutely capture an entire paradigm of scholarly work. Nonetheless, I also wish to note the phrase doesn't quite illustrate the heavy moralism it alleges. To begin, it doesn't articulate an either/or alternative but a complex simultaneity or juxtaposition. In addition, the repeated "kinda" brings in an aspect of volatility and unpredictability, suggesting that the judgment, calling the difference between hegemony and subversion, may not always be obvious. Most importantly, the two main terms don't seem to go together or add up, which makes the phrase come across as a historical oxymoron. With "hegemony," I'd expect not "subversion" but other terms, such as *opposition*, *refusal*, *conflict*, and *struggle*; with "subversion," I'd expect *system*.

In that sense, I view the phrase as a telling combination of the two paradigms Stuart Hall positioned at the center of cultural studies in their very dialectical incompatibility: poststructuralism and cultural materialism. While cultural materialism centers on an agential historical struggle against hegemony, poststructuralism emphasizes the internal variances or excesses of systems of power. Surely, the part of the long 1990s disposition Sedgwick and Frank identified that has to some extent survived to today pertains to the vulgarized framework of power of the latter. I hesitate to spell out its terms for its inevitable reductiveness and polemicism, but I do believe it remains in the background of many ongoing exchanges. That is to say, the notion that power would be static, binary, systematic, and singular, so that anything moving, ambivalent or hybrid, unsystematic, and plural is automatically taken to stand in an adverse relationship to power. It's in relation to that persistent yet nebulous framework that cultural materialism, which historically preceded its generalization, may serve as a useful counterpart.

Cultural materialism proposes the analysis of historically and contextually specific constellations of power, or "conjunctures," rather than the big systems (Williams). Conjunctures have a smaller, more concrete scale and duration. They are not homogenous or isochronic but include dominant, residual, and emergent elements and aspects. While emergent phenomena often seem to promise big transformations on the horizon, they just as often turn out to be the new phase or variant of the dominant we already knew. Meanwhile, certain residual leftovers of prior conjunctures may exert oppositional pressure on the current one. Potentially, both emergent and residual elements may have an oppositional relation to the dominant, in the sense of actively aiming to replace it; an alternative one, as in being able to coexist with the dominant; or are effectively incorporated into the dominant. The relationships between the formative elements of a conjuncture are as

important as those elements as such. When a load-bearing or structuring relationship in the constellation shifts, everything changes, though things may continue to look pretty much the same for a long time afterward.

I propose a reasserted combination of cultural and conjunctural analysis, mapping the terms we use in relation to the current formation of power. This would mean letting go of the general idea of traveling concepts, focusing instead on where and how our concepts register and resonate concretely in terms of the historical present. Where does a concept come in, what angle does it offer, and what leverage does it afford in relation to the dominant? As an example, *hybridity* may help. Bal sketches the concept's travel from racist and imperialist Victorian biology to gesturing at "an idealized state of postcolonial diversity" to responding criticism (24–25). In conjunctural terms, we may differentiate here between three moments or versions of the same concept: a residually active racist one, a debatably alternative or oppositional postcolonial one, and an incorporated one as the effective "cultural logic of globalization" (Kraidy). Of course, it's often the most seemingly productive concepts, becoming academic industries of sorts, that show the most intense conjunctural repositioning. In addition, this also means disentangling concepts from the disposition according to which interdisciplinarity is generalized as heightened productivity. For, in the spirit of Deleuze and Guattari, as well as Said, concepts may be most illuminating when they fail to remain or become answerable to changing circumstances. For concepts to be productive at all, they should be allowed to fail to travel.

I want to conclude with a thought experiment of how this might work. In 2022, *The Intercept* reported that Amazon was planning to roll out an internal messaging app for its employees (Klippenstein). The app design featured "Shout-Outs" of colleagues as part of a gamified rewards system distributing virtual stars and badges. The service would also automatically block messages failing to contribute to worker happiness and productivity, including profanities and several specific terms. On the blocking list were, among others, Union, I hate, I don't care, Stupid, Injustice, Living Wage, Favoritism, Plantation, Freedom, Restrooms, and Coalition. Ultimately, Amazon decided not to implement the app. I know it's obscene to compare Amazon employees with academics. Yet, I somehow have more trust in Amazon management in assessing the contemporary relevance and purchase of terms than scholars forced to hunt for academic badges and stars of their own. I think we could do worse than take on the blocking list of the Amazon app, as well as its imagined future updates, as an indispensable guide for the concepts we choose to work with.

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7. Cultural Analysis as Reportage

Joost de Bloois

Abstract: In the footsteps of Michel Foucault, cultural analysis has branded itself as a "history of the present." In my contribution to this volume, I argue that such a "history of the present" can take the form of "reportage." Reportage implies a certain form of research and writing, generated by a sense of urgency, of participating in the contemporary. To conceive of cultural analysis as reportage is to situate it in-between the humanities and the social sciences, in-between close reading and fieldwork. Reportage can constitute a valuable alternative to the "inward turn" in cultural analysis. To report means to take the analysis back into the unfinished business of the everyday and the contemporary.

Keywords: fieldwork, event, contemporary, device, close reading, description

Describe your street. Describe another street. Compare.
—Georges Perec ("The Infra-Ordinary" 210)

In the late 1970s Michel Foucault proposed a new kind of research practice, *"reportages" d'idées* (706–07).[1] The quotation marks are Foucault's, as he sets out a novel type of critical inquiry for the Italian daily *Corriere della sera*: a series of reportages on the ideas that take shape in contemporary social, political, and cultural events as they happen. In this kind of reportage, Foucault claims, "the analysis of what we think will be related to what occurs. Intellectuals will work with journalists at the crossroads between

1 I would like to thank Noa Roei for her thought-provoking comments, and our students in (Comparative) Cultural Analysis. The ideas and proposals in this text are the fruit of many in-class exchanges on this thing called "cultural analysis."

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ideas and events" (707). The contemporary is swarming with ideas beyond intellectual and academic circles, Foucault says, and it is up to theorists such as himself to venture into the world and record "the birth of these ideas … in the events in which they manifest their force" (707). This demands a new type of theorist and new forms of thinking in the midst of things, new forms of inquiry and writing, midway between analysis and reporting, to seize ideas as they emerge and where they emerge.

I pedantically tried to emulate Foucault's *"reportages" d'idées* in a book on the occupation of the University of Amsterdam in 2015 (De Bloois), as I attempted to seize the occurring ideas on the state of Dutch higher education, and the alternatives to it, while they were hurled around by angry students and staff in general assemblies and public events, armed with the theoretical apparatus of cultural analysis. I conceived of the book as *theoretical reportage*; a made-up term meant to revive Foucault's intriguing but short-lived initiative. After only a handful of attempts—most notoriously his reporting on the Islamic revolution in Iran (see Afary and Anderson)—Foucault's hybrid *"reportages" d'idées* fell flat (as did my book). Nevertheless, I pigheadedly believe that reportage (without the quotation marks, and the "theoretical") can be a fruitful notion to think of cultural analysis as a mode of inquiry into "the happening of the social" (Lury and Wakeford 2).

As Jim McGuigan notes there remains "a curiously unexamined relation between cultural analysis and cultural journalism" (*Cultural Analysis* 3). In particular, by acknowledging that the real of the contemporary is always one step ahead of any undertaking to conceptualize it, reportage can constitute a valuable alternative to the inward turn in cultural analysis, understood as a retreat into academic concerns of method, as well into a politics unmoored from the everyday (the two being by no means mutually exclusive). "To report" means to observe and describe events, to record and to give an account of "the happening of the social." To report means to take the analysis back into the unfinished business of the everyday and the contemporary, as a means of critically participating in social, cultural, and political affairs, however modestly, if noticeable at all in the real world.

Andrew Ross refers to his idiosyncratic academic undertaking as "scholarly reportage" (Williams 40), a hybrid form of investigation that draws on methods used in journalism and the social sciences. However, for not having to conform to the professional standards and pressures of those fields, "the net outcome [of scholarly reportage] is that one can avoid what is most stultifying about the respective requirements of the professional journalist and social scientist alike" (Williams 40). "Reportage" implies a certain form of research and writing, generated by a sense of urgency, of participating

in the contemporary. To conceive of cultural analysis as reportage is to do justice to and emphasize the continued relevance of the dual heritage of cultural analysis situated in-between the humanities (literary studies, in particular) and the social sciences (cultural sociology and ethnography), between close reading and fieldwork. As reportage—but in contrast to (investigative) journalism[2]—cultural analysis offers a theory-informed close reading of the events in which contemporary culture is articulated. As such, cultural analysis has to offer what McGuigan calls "a multidimensional analysis of the topical":

> Such topical analysis, then, aims to make sense of a particular case in its significant detail at a specific moment—in effect, representing a flashpoint that is quite possibly symptomatic of deep-seated and longer-term processes of cultural and social change. In that sense, it is an exercise in critical-realist analysis. If journalism is the first draft of history, this style of cultural analysis is one sort of second draft. (*Cultural Analysis* 4)

Such a "second draft" bears resemblance to the kind of "conjunctural reading" proposed by theorists such as Lawrence Grossberg and Jeremy Gilbert, inasmuch as it is firmly rooted in the idea that "any event can only be understood relationally, as a condensation of multiple determinations and effects," and that "cultural studies thus embodies the commitment to the openness and contingency of social reality" (20). But reportage is not quite identical to conjunctural analysis in that "the conjuncture," here, is not the ultimate object of analysis. The point of reportage is not a cartography of the conjuncture understood as a totality, even if precariously articulated, nonorganic, mobile, and complex (Grossberg 41; see also Gilbert). Reportage rather provides a narrative account of social, political, and cultural practices, of events and the objects that these produce, and that are co-constitutive of a conjuncture. Reportage means working your way up from the event or the object to the conjuncture, and then back again: the conjuncture isn't a last instance, but neither do events and objects speak entirely for themselves. Conjunctural analysis risks to become a history-of-the-present-type analysis, an explanatory matrix laying claim to totality, however provisional, contradictory, and volatile, at the expense of the event, the microscopic, the anomalous or the mundane, the material, the loose ends, the unfinished business. As Ben Highmore wonders:

2 The point here is not to rebrand research as journalism (just as art has been rebranded as "research"). For a "modest proposal" on possible forms of "academic journalism," see Remler et al.

> Could there be a form of cultural studies that was able to "show its workings," as they used to say in maths lessons. Perhaps cultural studies would benefit from rougher work, from work that was more like a sketch-book than a finished painting, for work that was frayed, patched, and even threadbare in places. ("Out" 4)

I imagine cultural-analysis-as-reportage to embrace such (narrative) sketches, jotted down in a reporter's notepad (analogue or digital), to show its workings as these involve snapshots and videos taken on a phone, recorded conversations and soundscapes, psychogeographic records of sensory and affective ambiences. Reportage acknowledges that it moves within (and with) the contemporary, that it shares the time-space frame of whatever it purports to analyze; in this sense, it professes a certain "parochialism."[3] Reportage is participatory and affective yet remains grounded in a materialist analysis of the old-fashioned kind, investigating culture as part and product of the real, while mobilizing methodological and conceptual resources across the humanities and social sciences. To an extent, reportage is akin to Howard S. Becker's understanding of sociology as a "report on society" among a myriad of other such "reports" (such as literature, photography, journalism, cartography, or film). For Becker, "reports" are different ways of "telling about society or some portion thereof" (6).

A cultural materialism for the impatient, cultural-analysis-as-reportage is informed by politics, it knows that culture is soaked in politics and vice versa, and that only a candidly political angle makes us aware of this. In this sense, reportage is political, and cultural-analysis-as-reportage a political practice even, but it also knows that to be effective politically is a different story altogether; it is aware of the abyss that separates political intensions (or phantasms) and political reality. Recast as reportage, cultural analysis is reminded that, before anything else, *it is a practice* in that it engages with the world, with the worldliness and eventfulness of culture in situ and at the very moment of its inception.

How Is Cultural Analysis?

The only constant in the practice of cultural analysis is *the simple fact that it is a practice*: that it means the ongoing reportage of the constitutive role of culture—understood as itself a composite of practices of meaning

3 See Martin in this volume.

making, and the infinite series of objects and events that result from these—in shaping *this* moment, *this* conjuncture, *this* synchronicity, as it unfolds in *this* particular place, in all its complexity, open-endedness, paradoxes, and contradictions (and stupidity and brutality), by whatever means (methods, theories, ideas, or bon mots) we can get our hands on. In this sense, the "future of cultural analysis" is not for anyone to decide. It will change along with the world it aims to investigate—a world that, as long as cultural analysis has been around, regularly expresses its hostility toward precisely this type of protean interdisciplinary study deemed a financial or ideological liability. This means that cultural analysis needs to take the multitude of contexts that traverse it and that it traverses on board in its practice, not to arrive at some kind of enchanting synthesis or rainbow-colored line of flight out of the current state of the world, but to recognize how complex, anxious, frustrating, and enraging its dealings with it are. For example, in "How Is Critique?" Didier Fassin reminds us just how much the conditions for "critique" as highlighting and subsequently questioning the nexus between power and truth—or "challenging the self-evidence of the world as it is" (14)—have changed to the disadvantage of any critical academic undertaking since the golden age of critical theory in the 1960s and 1970s (from which we continue to draw many of our concepts). "Critique" has changed sides: the "infinite methodological process unendingly putting to the test any pretense to truth" is now the bread and butter of (far right) conspiracy theories (Fassin 18). During sleepless nights I wonder if critical theory can withstand being transformed into a malign caricature: Can we ever recover major thinkers such as Derrida or Foucault once they have become the unlikely ringleaders of the "cultural Marxist" plot to destroy Western civilization (or recover Marx for that matter)? Fassin rightly stresses that the public sphere—the political arena, wider socioeconomic dynamics, and the tech- and mediascape—underwent dramatic changes during our lifetime. The ideological spectrum has lastingly moved to the right, with dramatic consequences for the receptiveness (or simply tolerance) of the wider public for academic critique. This seems especially tragic for cultural analysis, since "culture" has been relocated within the narrow confines of either group identities or market logic. The unsparing neoliberalization of much of academia over almost half a century has greatly affected the humanities and social sciences, dismissed as scholarship with little to no market value. The ubiquitous presence of (social) media has led to the further commodification and fragmentation of academic critique. Even when critical academics manage to publish beyond the paywalls of scholarly

publishing, they constitute a "marginal critical public sphere with little echo within society at large" (23).

To Fassin's pessimistic diagnosis, we may add that critical theory itself has not been immune to various forms of commodification, reification, and co-optation. It would be disingenuous to pretend that "critical theory" has not become a brand in its own right. In an increasingly globalized university, students come to programs in cultural analysis with an image of what critical theory is as it circulates in the digital realm. There is a real danger of this (in essence praiseworthy) democratization of critical thought veering into the reification, and barely disguised, commodification of critical and cultural analysis, turning programs in cultural analysis into apprenticeships for the cultural industries and progressive media outlets. In step with the commodification of scholarly thought (often badly taught and oversimplified), critical theory has produced its own golem: a series of eminently marketable truisms and reified abstractions (metaphysical and all-permeating scholastic "-ities" and "-esses": from coloniality and patriarchy to whiteness) that went on a rampage not only through the complexity of the reality these truisms pretend to address (and its very real and brutal inequality and violence), but, tragically, also through the credibility of the discipline. I fear that critical theory, in its current form, may not recover from this recklessness.

When (and, more importantly, why) did things become "structural" and "systemic" again after over half a century of poststructuralism? Aren't injunctions to decolonize and unlearn simply reiterations of previous, Promethean attempts to "overcome metaphysics" and egg on (unattainable) "paradigm shifts"? As lending one's ear to the happening of the social, reportage might prevent critique from getting stuck in prefabricated, predictable narratives, that may have been cutting edge at some point of their genealogy but have long run their course (fluidity good, Western modernity bad, etc.). All too easily, "critique" becomes "criticality" (Vishmidt), the homeopathic dilution of twentieth-century avant-garde thought and its critical potential to the point of parody or platitude. As Steven Connor argues, to avoid "the reduction of the plurality and analytic nonsaturability of cultural experience to common currencies and finalizing formulae of all kinds," cultural analysis should not "consent to the ordering and containing effects" of ethereal theories-of-everything (5). Here's a question for the years ahead: When exactly does the emancipatory impetus of cultural analysis become an obstacle, due to its transformation into a kind of cookie-cutter progressivism, increasingly unmoored from social realities?

Live Cultural Analysis

If cultural analysis is to remain relevant beyond the (pay)walls of academia and niche media, it needs to resist the temptation of turning inwards, away from the here and now, even if such a desire for splendid isolation is not unreasonable in our depressing status quo. This applies to the institutional and methodological level as well. In particular, cultural analysis should be wary of the increasing rapprochement between research and art. The ever-intensifying financial pressure of neoliberal policies has, understandably, made institutional boundaries porous. Both the art world and the humanities are grasping for a lifeline, clinging on to one another for dear life. I am unconvinced that rebranding art as critical thought will keep the *Titanic* known as "the humanities" afloat. Likewise, the urge to make images think and objects speak are symptoms of cultural analysis folding back upon itself for fear of venturing into the outside, a retreat as it were into the reinsurances of old-fashioned aesthetics. The point of cultural analysis should not be to bestow philosophical dignity upon cultural objects by using them primarily to formulate concepts and theories. Cultural analysts are not closeted philosophers, neither are cultural objects (second order) "philosophical reflections" (Grootenboer 14). Cultural analysis should not be a means of reifying the object (to make it twirl and speak before us), a return to the artifact as gold standard for the study of culture (a handy means of delegating responsibility to the object, to turn the object into an oracle of sorts).

Cultural-analysis-as-reportage, alternatively, would be concerned not so much with cultural "objects" for their own sake but with events, with culture as it is happening here and now. To put it in the most banal of terms: cultural analysis is the study of culture—this contradictory, multidimensional assemblage of ways of making sense of it all—not of isolated artifacts. As reportage, cultural analysis is akin to what Les Back calls "live sociology," that is to say, "forms of attentiveness that can admit the fleeting, distributed, multiple, sensory, emotional and kinesthetic aspects of sociality" or "the social world in motion" (28–29); a *live cultural analysis*—and what else is reportage but live cultural analysis?—would "reproduce the profane creativity of living cultures" (Willis 223) by looking out for "the unique small event, situated conduct, lived feelings in minute context, unprefigurable meaning in the taking and making of experience" (xvii). In my experience, as a "teacher"[4] of

4 A term I'm reluctant to use for Freudian as well as more intellectually sound reasons: as reportage, cultural analysis cannot be reduced to a set of reproducible, and therefore "teachable," methodological stipulations. One of the reasons why critical theory became a brand is its having

cultural analysis, such a "live cultural analysis" has effectively been taking shape in students' (and colleagues') research over the past years, as reflected in their engagement with, for example, environmental issues, political movements, and new technologies, but also a renewed interest in research tools offered by the social sciences, in particular, ethnography. I do, however, see a tension between an emerging "live cultural analysis," with its emphasis on exploring the contemporary in all its dimensions as they unfold, and a residual longing for methodological and philosophical respectability (and stability) as discussed a little earlier. To recast cultural analysis as reportage would allow us to shed off this longing and to read what is happening in the field at the present moment, to open new doors and venture outside.

The challenge for a future cultural-analysis-as-reportage would be

> to *work on the move* in order to attend to the newly coordinated nature of social reality,… to re-invent forms of attentiveness that are mobile and can respond precisely to admit the fleeting, the tacit, the mobile, chaotic and complex. (Back qtd. in Back and Puwar 28)

Reportage moves with the social world, as it generates off-the-cuff accounts that mobilize and articulate multisensory experiences as well as, and on a par with, whatever methodological instruments at hand to explore moments in the happening of the social, in the complex and shifting articulation of all of the latter's dimensions (political, economic, historical, but also affective, material, acoustic, tangible, and so on). Cultural analysis engages with the eventfulness of "the embodied social world in motion"; for this, it needs to develop new forms of in situ research, of recording and retelling, drawing on "ambulant techniques of doing social research on the move, that do not simply try and reflect movement but which also embody movement and bring it to life" (28). Cultural-analysis-as-reportage is simultaneously an "art of listening" (Back) and an "art of telling." Cultural analysts have to become "not only attentive to what people say but also to the *doing* of social life,… mindful of tacit co-existence, the fleeting, the emotional and sensory" (Back qtd. in Back and Puwar 11) *and* find ways of recording, describing, narrating the complex choreographies of the everyday.

This is not to suggest that cultural analysis should be reduced to an exercise in empirical research, data gathering, or even fieldwork. It remains a work of *analysis*. It resorts to what Back imagines as "a form of active listening

been so successfully made "teachable," i.e., having been reduced to a series of easily digestible and "applicable" formulae.

that challenges the listener's preconceptions and position while at the same time it engages critically with the content of what is being said and heard" (23). This kind of listening—and recording is always already listening, even if it involves and manifests as writing, filming, or touching—is both selective and imaginative, as it ties together descriptive and conceptual work, "the mutual implication of theoretical imagination and empirical detail" (Back 21). Cultural analysis starts off from this kind of attentiveness that can never be purely empirical, but implies a simultaneous work of mobilizing methods, theories and concepts to articulate (to capture and narrate) what is being said, and of self-reflection (who's doing the listening?). The latter is not some attempt to purify cultural analysis from partiality, but, on the contrary, the acknowledgement of the fact that no event, no slice of culture no matter how mundane, no conjuncture is "perceivable outside of a trajectory that moves through it … [since] the worldliness of a conjuncture can only be apprehended at an angle" (Highmore, "Aesthetic Matters" 256).

As reportage, cultural analysis, involves first and foremost *description*, the forms of which—from writing to video montage—should not be defined in advance. Description entails (first person) narration, classification (concept and theory), implicit ways of going about (method), an attempt to capture the event, the attention to complexity, to minute detail, to the material, the sensuous as well as the rhetorical in what happens around us, is being said to us, in what we see, hear, and feel. This does not mean that cultural analysis lays claim to some kind of objectivity through the tautological repetition of whatever it observes, or confines its descriptions to the realm of the personal. To do so successfully, cultural analysis would need to resist "the monochrome conformity of tone and mood characteristic of academic writing about culture across the humanities and social sciences," as Steven Connor suggests, and allow forms of writing

> in a much wider range of tunings and entablatures. The idea would be to show that thinking could go in moods and modes other than those of jaw-jutting denunciation or stern homily: that one might write in more excitable, inflammatory, absorbed and perplexed ways. (5)

"Getting a Handle on the World": Description, Device,… and Method?

Reportage, as a means of giving account, is the necessarily unfinished work of (narrative) description as understood above. As Highmore argues,

"getting a handle on the world would be an impossible task without description and without the fussy, fidgety activity of constantly recasting description" ("Aesthetic Matters" 252). Description is not the preliminary work we do before engaging with the real stuff of thinking, philosophizing, conceptualizing: description weaves these into the embodied account of events. The emphasis on description challenges the idea of theory and critique as revelation, unveiling (Love 381) and debunking (Latour 232). Description "leaves little room for the ethical heroism of the critic, who gives up his role of interpreting divine messages to take up a position as a humble analyst and observer," Heather Love argues (381). It is precisely as such that description, Highmore writes, "is necessary to break a circuit of repetitive interpretations and critiques. Indeed, it could be argued that description constitutes the animating energy of Cultural Studies" ("Aesthetic Matters" 249); it is "both a form of vigilance (avoiding the immediate cultural reflex, weighing possible adjectival directions) and a form of self-reflexivity (in describing this rock in this way I am purposefully not describing in that way)" (251). To self-reflexively perform cultural studies as such a writing (recording and accounting) practice, Highmore argues, "might be the best route to engaging with the world in the most direct and most material way" (258). It is description as the embodied account of "the worldliness of cultural forms" (255–56) in their complexity and articulation with the doing of social life at large (if you like, the conjuncture that configures the economic, the technological, the affective, and so on) that maintains cultural analysis as a *practice*, and prevents it from becoming a mere vehicle "to think theory forward" (Hall 68). On the contrary, Paul Willis insists, "the best 'theory' helps, not hinders, in the concrete reconstruction of the observed object/subject, extending, not containing, meanings and significance.... [I]t will illuminate, actually make more real and concrete, that upon which it is focused" (xxi).

In light of the above, is the dialectic between concept and object that is so central to cultural analysis the most fruitful way to maintain cultural analysis as a practice? If concepts, traveling or otherwise, are mere tools or "shorthand theories" (Bal, *Travelling Concepts* 23), malleable and heuristic by nature, should they really occupy center stage? Again, we should ask whether cultural analysis is a practice—the practice of interdisciplinary research into contemporary culture as (when and where) it is produced—or an attempt to hold on to that particular moment in the history of the humanities and social sciences known as "Theory" (a moment that, as we saw, may now be truly exhausted for a variety of reasons)? As a subset of cultural studies, cultural analysis has a well-stocked archive that spans over half a century.

Rather than imagining a back catalogue of concepts, infinitely repeatable and modifiable—the Spotification of the humanities?—we should make good use of this *archive of research practices*, of writing styles, of ways of observing and interpreting, of pedagogies that extend beyond academia; and let go of the institutional pipedream of one's concepts turning into studies, into whole new fields (Bal, *Travelling Concepts* 32–33). As Lury and Wakeford argue, methods should first and foremost "enable *the happening* of the social world—its ongoingness, relationally, contingency, and sensuousness—to be investigated" (2). Hence, "a method is a procedure or process for attaining an object, a way of doing things" (Lury 16).

Any method in cultural analysis is therefore compositional, a form of bricolage that by and large extends the conceptual in that it "rarely involves just one action or operation—sensing, categorizing, conceptualizing, scaling, measuring, affecting, experiencing, varying, but involves the doing of many together" (Lury 5). Method in cultural analysis moves synchronically across the micro, meso and macro, connecting dots but also highlighting ruptures, conjectures and much as disjunctures: "a *disjunctural approach* suspends the satisfaction of comprehension in the name of something whose potential remains untested," Highmore writes ("Disjunctive Constellations" 42). As reportage, cultural analysis privileges the incomplete, the partial, the topical, the emergent. Reportage puts some pieces of the puzzle together (the sensuous and the political, the technological and the economic, shifts in mood, taste, and political rhetoric), but knows the resulting picture to be but one possible, partial image. What deserves to be foregrounded, is not the concept but the *device* (as anything that does the work of recording, narrating, describing, and impromptu analysis). The device "draws attention to the existence of methods as variously constituted, distributed material-semiotic entities and to their complicatedly (re)presentational and temporal character" (Lury and Wakeford 10). As Back argues, the emphasis on the device does not mean that cultural analysts should endorse some kind of "naive realism" as if devices unproblematically capture the real: ideally, they produce "proximity" rather than the "illusion of being there" as there is no "simple correspondence between the recordings and a stable unchanging social reality" (Back qtd. in Lury and Wakeford 255). A device—a phone, a notebook of the paper kind, a GoPro, an audio recorder—can "create a kind of amplification or heightened attention" to the productive, the imaginative dimension of social reality, and as such "might help and encounter with 'the real.'" (254)

Reportage can have different temporalities—from the intervention in current debates to long-form cultural reportage such as Mike Davis's (*City*

of Quartz) and Andrew Ross's (*Bird on Fire*) portraits of Los Angeles and Phoenix—but is wary of the pathos of "slowness," as it is driven by a sense of urgency, and embraces contemporaneity. This is not to say that reportage lacks accountability: the description, that is always both recording *and* narration (archiving *and* rhetorical construction), *is* the account given. Likewise, the transience of reportage does not exclude a politics, but it does exclude political certainty, it does imply giving up on "the conviction that there must be a happy ending to all this" (Connor 5), that there are things to unlearn, master's houses to be brought down, curricula to be decolonized, planets to be saved. As reportage, cultural analysis refuses to fit events and the people swept up in these "into chains of already existing equivalences," the point being, on the contrary "to treat any articulation as provisional and plastic," (Fisher 744) with no certain outcome (and that, more often than not, proves to be at odd with the kind of politics that saturates our corner of academe). If there is to be a politics of reportage, it minimally consists in remaining loyal to the impetus to "to describe the worldliness of cultural forms and the angles that intersect with them," and to do so for those who are implicated, as producers, in this worldliness, "a condition of popular realism (in the attempt to talk beyond the confines of the academy, and to constitute possible new Cultural Studies audiences)" (Highmore, "Aesthetic Matters" 255–56). This is perhaps a final meaning of reportage as a practice for giving account: to report back to the living subjects of research, those who make the social happen, beyond academic idiosyncrasies and political templates; reportage as "the possibility of a *critical populism*," as McGuigan coined it before the meaning of "populism" took a turn for the worse: to provide insight for those concerned into the dynamics between "ordinary people's everyday culture *and* its material construction by powerful forces beyond the immediate comprehension and control of ordinary people" (*Cultural Populism* 5). For this, cultural-analysis-as-reportage should not hold back and make good use of both whatever remains of the academic infrastructure as well as the emergent (online) para-academic sphere. Now, take it outside.

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8. Gathering, Framing, and the Temporality of Cultural Analysis

Ernst van Alphen

Abstract: A main principle of cultural analysis is the close reading of texts, images, material objects, and practices. Yet, for cultural analysis, meaning is not text-immanent. Rather, it depends on the act of framing: an act performed in the present, with critical, political, and ethical implications. Prior to framing, however, one first gathers, compiles, or assembles objects. This gathering too is neither neutral nor objective. It enables the researcher to be critical and political, bringing with it what can be seen as the most important characteristic of cultural analysis: its contemporaneity, implying togetherness of different historical moments and periods and enabling their comparison. In this chapter I demonstrate these different acts on the basis of my recent book.

Keywords: contemporaneity, framing, sculpture, historical analysis, phenomenology

One of the main principles of cultural analysis is the close reading of texts, images, material objects, and practices. But what kind of notion of close reading concerns this? Close reading is an old critical practice with a long tradition, so it is important to assess how the notion of close reading within cultural analysis differs from the close reading practiced by, for example, the New Critics in the 1930s–1950s and from *explication de texte* in France? Those earlier textual practices assumed that meaning was text-immanent and that by close reading one could discover this immanent meaning. The scholarly reader is then a kind of archaeologist who unearths or discovers meanings hidden in the text. Cultural analysis does not assume that meaning is text-immanent but that it depends on framing. This framing of the text or the image is done by the researcher and it is performed in the present

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of the researcher: it is an act performed in the present. So, framing is her/his responsibility, a responsibility that has critical, political, and ethical implications.

When one deals with material objects such as sculptures or architecture instead of texts or images, there is another critical act performed by the reader or researcher: one first gathers, compiles, or assembles objects and subsequently frames the gathered objects. Like framing, gathering is also an act performed in the present by a researcher and this act is neither neutral nor objective, but enables the researcher to be critical and political. And when one deals with texts or images, one usually does not deal with a single text. Rather, one tends to deal with several images or texts at the same time and compare them. Thus, dealing with texts and images does not differ very much from focusing on objects such as sculptures, design objects, or architecture. One first gathers some, and then frames them—or the other way around as I will demonstrate later.

Acknowledging the importance of the acts of gathering and framing brings with it what I see as the most important characteristic of cultural analysis: its temporality. When thirty years ago Mieke Bal introduced the term "cultural analysis" and theorized its practice, it was first of all seen as a polemical alternative for the then new discipline of cultural studies. Cultural studies focused on those cultural objects and practices that were neglected by the disciplines specializing in elite culture: literary studies, art history, but also aesthetics in philosophy. Cultural studies intended to study objects and practices put aside by the disciplines specializing in literature and the arts. Cultural analysis, however, has always refused this distinction; it is culture, elite as well as popular, in all its manifestations that can be the object of cultural analysis.

This suggests that there is an overlap between cultural studies and cultural analysis on the one side, and between literary studies and art history and cultural analysis on the other. This makes it difficult and perhaps impossible to consider cultural analysis as a discipline focused on specific objects; instead, it makes more sense to consider it as a specific critical approach. As such it is more productive to understand cultural analysis in its difference from historical analysis as practiced within the singular disciplines defined by their objects. These two modes of analysis imply a very different temporality. Whereas the temporality of historical analysis is linear and chronological, that of cultural analysis can best be understood as defined by contemporaneity. The practice of cultural analysis introduces in the present a specific realm that can be called contemporaneous. Even when we study older texts, images, material objects, or cultural practices,

when one gathers or frames them in a specific way, one introduces them into the present in which one does the gathering and the framing.

I can best explain this by taking some distance from what Keith Moxey has said when criticizing the idea of contemporaneity. Moxey criticizes the idea that each artwork influences the next as part of a linear sequence. He emphasizes how the experience of viewing art creates its own aesthetic time, where the viewer is entranced by the work itself rather than what it represents about the historical moment when it was created. But Moxey is critical about the notion of contemporaneity for the following reason: time is perceived in contemporaneity as "a form of 'non-time,' one in which history no longer operates, [an idea that] threatens to impoverish not only our sense of the alterity of the past but also our appreciation of the differences between cultures" (Moxey 19). It is a misunderstanding that contemporaneity results in non-time, in which history no longer operates. Rather, it is no longer linear history that operates the dynamic, but another notion of history. This notion of history is phenomenological, in the sense that subjects do not just live in or at one historical moment, but that all the time they encounter different historical moments in the present they are living in.

As Bal has argued, the togetherness of different temporalities in contemporaneity can only happen in the present, in an exhibition, for instance, or in academic research when one frames a historical practice or phenomenon in a specific way. Bal's "exhibition-ism" is particularly apposite in this regard. These gatherings and framings have their effect in the time we live in, which makes them contemporaneous. Heterochronicity differs from contemporaneity by a reflection on time that does not take *the experience of time* as a starting point; it concerns the incongruous encounters of different temporalities. In each historical moment different temporalities come together because, for instance, old points of view clash with modern points of view. So, Moxey's conclusion, that contemporaneity results in non-time, is based on a very limited notion of history. Contemporaneity implies togetherness of different historical moments, and this togetherness enables us to see differences between historical moments and periods.

But the temporality of contemporaneity only comes about when one takes the present in which one gathers and frames seriously, which means that one acknowledges the impact of doing that. It is there, in the present that is, that different historical moments come together. This coming together does not mean that historical difference is nihilated, but that in the acknowledgement of difference a dialogue between different historical moments can come about. Bal's example of the curations of exhibitions is of relevance here. The curations take place in the present, but usually the exhibition concerns

images, objects, or texts from earlier periods of time. The interaction between cultural objects from different historical moments is staged in the present in which this staging is done. The result is a togetherness-in-time that takes place in the present in which the exhibition is curated.

Let me sum up what I have argued so far on gathering and framing and the temporality of contemporaneity in which these critical acts are being performed, by explaining the background and thesis of my recent book on sculpture: *Seven Logics of Sculpture: Encountering Objects through the Senses* (2023). Why is this book the result of cultural analysis instead of historical analysis, the method and critical approach that defines the discipline of art history?

The book does not present a historical overview of sculpture, which implies that many important sculptures and their makers are not being discussed. This book is analytical rather than historical, although it does discuss many notions and works of sculpture which are considered to be historical. The most important criterion for discussion was: How does a specific sculptural practice elucidate a specific logic of sculpture? And, of course, many sculptures do not fit neatly within one logic; sometimes one must activate several logics to understand the specific nature of an individual artwork.

The term "logic of sculpture" is not a very attractive term; in its connotation of extreme rationality, it is rather provocative. On the basis of German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder's sculptural aesthetics *Sculpture: Some Observations on Shape and Form from Pygmalion's Creative Dream* (1778), I argue why the discipline of aesthetics could also be called a logic. At first, this seems strange because rational knowledge is produced by the discipline of logic and sensorial knowledge by aesthetics. But it was Herder who deconstructed this opposition in his critique of another German philosopher he highly admired, namely Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, by arguing that the new science of aesthetics had important consequences for the old science of logic itself. Consequently, the two sciences are, or should be, in many respects entangled, which makes it possible to speak of a sensorial logic, and in the wake of that extension, a logic of sculpture. That is why I use the provocative term "logic of sculpture," pluralized into "logics of sculpture" in this book, because I contend that there are several logics of sculpture. This becomes particularly evident at the turn of the twentieth century. Although the logic of sculpture that translates the outer appearance of a sculpture into its supposed inner essence has been prevalent for many centuries, at the beginning of the twentieth century new, alternative logics came about, pushing the logic that was based on the human body into the shadows.

Although Herder introduced the term "logic of sculpture," I decided to pluralize this notion and explore different logics of sculpture. To come back to what I have just argued about framing and gathering as the first steps of cultural analysis, it is clear that I frame sculptural objects by the idea that there is a sculptural logic by means of which sculpture differs from other media. For this specific framing I rely on Herder's sculptural aesthetics. I am not alone in doing so: in the 1970s Rosalind Krauss used the term I "adopt" when she wrote about the logic of sculpture. In her book *Passages of Modern Sculpture* (1977) and her article "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" (1979), she demonstrates, on the basis of sculptures by Carl Andre, Robert Smithson, Richard Long, and Donald Judd, that "sculpture" is not a universal category but a historical one. Sculpture has its own internal logic with its own set of rules and assumptions, and although those rules apply to a great number of objects, they allow little change or adaptation. As she demonstrates, a logic is not universal but historical. For centuries, the logic of sculpture could not be differentiated from that of the monument, but at the end of the nineteenth century these genres split up. Rodin's *Gates of Hell*, meant as a monument, did not comply with the rules of the commissioned monument. Deviating from the logic of the monument, sculpture was no longer bounded by a specific space or place. Modernist sculpture began to absorb the shelf on which it stood, freeing it from a location. It also shows its own material and process, demonstrating sculpture's autonomy. Whereas Rodin's work shows the making, Brancusi's absorbs the shelf or pedestal.

Krauss discusses and describes "passages" in modern sculpture and how it deviates from classical sculpture. The meaning and effect of classical sculpture relied on the illusion of a sculpture's inner essence, which was responsible for the outer appearance. The skeleton or the muscles under the skin determined the look of a sculpture, and, psychologically, mood was expressed on the skin or exteriority. The meaning of sculpture as body is displaced from inner essence to the surface. The abstract forms of Henry Moore still suggest that the dead materiality obtained its form from an organic, inner essence that has shaped the outer appearance. Only with the Minimalist "specific objects" of Donald Judd or Carl Andre is the assumption of an inner essence accountable for the outer appearance left behind. Starting from Krauss's idea that sculptural traditions have their own internal logics, I wrote a study of different logics of sculpture.

The first example of a passage in modern sculpture Krauss discusses is the work of Auguste Rodin (1840–1917). In the case of this sculptor, the absence of a convincing relationship between the internal structure of the

body and its outward appearance can be perceived as expressive, but then as an expression of a different kind. The surface of his sculptures gives expression to the process of formation and production. The sculptor's hand is more evident on the surface than the internal structure. So, the body at stake is no longer the metaphorical body represented by the sculpture, but the body of the sculptor left visible on the surface as traces of the sculpture's production.

Minimalist artists such as Donald Judd and Sol Lewitt radicalize this decentering of the body by countering any kind of expressiveness, replacing the "meaning" of sculpture with the experience of the viewer; that is, the experience of the viewer's body being positioned in relation to the object. Thus, this time it is the viewer's body, in relation to the sculpture or object, that counts. Minimalist sculptors take, one could say, the sculptural aesthetics of Herder to heart.

From these thoughts we can conclude that (neo)classical sculpture consists of objects that depend on the distinction between an outer appearance and an inner structure or essence that produces the outer appearance. But, for example, the sculpture of Rodin and Rosso, but also Art Nouveau objects refuse this distinction by presenting objects that are shaped from the outside in, instead of from the inside out. These objects do not depend on the illusion of an inner essence for how they look. That is why they introduce a new sculptural logic.

Trying to assess Minimalist sculpture, Krauss understands the work of Donald Judd as taking distance from the idea that sculpture should be understood in terms of the appearance and meaning of the (human) body. Judd's work implies, then, a radicalization of the thinking of two crucial figures in the early history of modern sculpture: Rodin and Brancusi.

> The art of both men represented a relocation of the point of origin of the body's meaning—form its inner core to its surface—a radical act of decentering that would include the space to which the body appeared and the time of its appearing. (Krauss, *Passages* 279)

The steps Krauss takes from classical to early modern sculpture to her endpoint in Minimalism are vast. In *Seven Logics of Sculpture*, I distinguish several logics of sculpture to which she does not pay attention, because her goal was centered more on a better understanding the logic of sculpture of Minimalist artists such as Judd and Smithson. She did not aim to write an overview of all the different logics that were being practiced in the twentieth century. Her goal was more modest and more specific.

Starting from Krauss's idea that sculptural traditions have their own internal logics, that traditions can become exhausted, and that new logics come about, I devote chapters to the following logics of sculpture:

- The Body Undone
- Scenic Sculpture
- Sculpting Space
- Building Blocks
- Assemblage
- Architectural Sculpture
- The Specific Object

After framing sculpture on the basis of the idea that it has its own logic, I pluralized this frame by distinguishing seven, different logics of sculpture. Having framed sculpture in this very specific way, I then gathered examples of each logic in order to better understand their different facets. All the gathered examples are supposed to highlight different characteristics of a specific logic. And having gathered emblematic examples of each sculptural logic, I close read those examples in order to better understand how these examples embody a specific logic and how they provide a specific focus on that logic. This is how my practice of cultural analysis worked.

In art criticism, but also in art practice the generic term "sculpture" is no longer viable, and the same can be argued about painting. The "death of painting" has been challenged many times in order to show new manifestations and new futures for painting. However, as far as I know, the "death of sculpture" has never been declared, even as in art criticism sculpture has become an obsolete term. With the important exceptions of Richard Serra, Donald Judd, and Charles Ray, few prolific artists reflect on the various possibilities of the sculptural medium. Instead, when works of art are three-dimensional, the much more general term "installation" is now in vogue. It suggests that sculpture is old-fashioned, and that if one wants to belong to the present, one makes, or appreciates, "installation art."

I contend that the obsoleteness of sculpture, the term and the practice, is an enormous loss for our understanding of art in general, and of sculpture more specifically. First of all, it is a loss because many artists continue to make works that can only be understood as sculpture. Second, it is a mistake because, to use Krauss's term, the logic of sculpture differs from the logic of installation art. In order to assess many contemporary art practices, one should have a better understanding of the logic of sculpture, or rather: the logics of sculpture.

On top of this, the difference between the logics of sculpture and the logics of installation should be assessed. Claire Bishop provides a definition of installation art that contradicts my earlier assessment of sculpture on the basis of Herder's aesthetics:

> Installation art … differs from traditional media (sculpture, painting, photography, video) in that it addresses the viewer directly as a literal presence in the space. Rather than imagining the viewer as a pair of disembodied eyes that survey the work from a distance, installation art presupposes an *embodied* viewer whose sense of touch, smell and sound are as heightened as their sense of vision. That insistence on the literal presence of the viewer is arguably the key characteristic of installation art. (6)

According to Bishop, the logic of installation art relies on a different notion of the viewer. For her, whereas both mediums are three-dimensional, sculpture relies on a disembodied viewer and installation art relies on an embodied one. However, my starting point is that the embodied viewer distinguishes sculpture from painting, the viewer of which is indeed disembodied. Yet, there is another element in Bishop's definition that clarifies an important difference, namely the idea that the viewer of an installation is addressed "as a literal presence in the space." In the case of sculpture, one cannot speak of the literal presence of the viewer in the space. The viewer is not part of the space a sculpture occupies but is facing it all the time when s/he walks around or along it. This means that viewers are yet again a decisive element, not because they are embodied, but because they are positioned differently.

To conclude: *Seven Logics of Sculpture* is not the result of historical analysis, but of cultural analysis, although I take the historical parameters within which works were made and sculptors worked all the time to heart. The book is an example of cultural analysis because I did not take "sculpture" as a cultural object for granted, but framed it in a specific way, namely through Herder's notion. Being aware of the work of history, I pluralized Herder's notion of history by assessing that in contrast with the late eighteenth century, there are now several logics of sculpture. This framing and pluralizing were my responsibility, my critical acts. Historically, I performed these acts, now, in the second decade of the twenty-first century. After having taken these decisions, I began to gather examples that further substantiated and highlighted each logic. I do not pretend that these different logics objectively exist in historical reality, although all examples do. Instead, the conceptual frame is something I proposed in the present of writing this book; imposing

this frame on all the examples I gathered. By gathering these examples, I introduced them into the present and they became contemporaneous with the moment of this framing and gathering.

So far, I explained the sense in which the acts of framing and gathering are critical acts performed in the present. But in what sense are they also political? When I decided to write a book on sculpture, I was fully aware of the fact that this concerns a topic that is considered to be "autonomous" without any political ramifications. And what made it worse is that the medium of sculpture is seen as a male medium by means of which men manifest and build their masculinity. Many sculptures are heavy, so only the strongest sex is able to excel in this medium: that kind of thought; thoughts that are nowadays politically very sensitive. At first, I thought that I should write a kind of afterword about the masculinity of sculpture and deconstruct this idea with some works of Louise Bourgeois who explicitly deals with the gendered nature of sculpture in her work. However, while working on the different chapters, I looked for women sculptors and there were plenty of them. Those women sculptors were not just examples of a logic, substantiating it; they were of crucial importance for a thorough understanding of each logic. To avoid misunderstanding, I did not look for women sculptures because I believe in something like "female sculpture"; I looked for them to correct the idea that sculpture is a male medium.

So, my assumption that sculpture was historically a male medium was just wrong; okay, because for centuries most artists were men and only few women had access to this profession; most well-known sculptors are men. That does not mean that there are no women sculptors who made work of great importance. It was my political act performed in the present, to foreground the work of women artists. Although these women and their works are historical "facts," it was not historical analysis that enabled writing about them. It was the temporality of cultural analysis, the fact that I decided to introduce them within the contemporaneous realm created by my writing, that enabled their works to surface and get the critical attention they deserve.

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Part Three

Interdisciplinary Spaces

9. Institutional Travels: Spaces for Cultural Analysis

Noa Roei

Abstract: This chapter probes alternate spaces for practicing cultural analysis, both materially and discursively. Departing from Clifford Geertz's understanding of thick description, and following Lauren Berlant's call for infrastructural analysis, I narrate my inter-institutional travels into an artistic research project in the emergency department of a major hospital in Amsterdam. Tracing the initial phases of the project, involving burnout, collaboration, administrative hassles, and conceptual translations, I underscore the lifeworlds of the project that do not necessarily resonate discursively. Attending to infrastructural protocols, concepts, and practices that solidify forms of engagement in cultural analysis, I argue, are necessary in order to address the procedural as it takes shape and loosen up taxing or confining forms of investment.

Keywords: research cultures, infrastructure, thick description, museums, hospitals, inconvenience

I think sometimes, you could have made the task easier for yourself (and me) by sticking to the phrasing in the standard forms.
—Private communication

We write out of where we write from.
—Lauren Berlant ("The Commons" 409)

In "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture" (1973), Clifford Geertz reflects on what makes up the practice of ethnography. This, he insists, is not a matter of methodology:

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> From one point of view, that of the textbook, doing ethnography is establishing rapport, selecting informants, transcribing texts, taking genealogies, mapping fields, keeping a diary, and so on. But it is not these things, techniques and received procedures, that define the enterprise. What defines it is the kind of intellectual effort it is: an elaborate venture in … "thick description." (6)

Following Gilbert Ryle, Geertz unfolds the complexities of winking as a case in point, that has by now become almost a cliché. The rapid contracting of the eyelids can be a twitch, a wink, or a parody of a wink; and the work of ethnography is to unpack possible meanings by attending to the thickness of the act: its social context and situation, its specific and fragile event-ness, and its gestural unfolding. Cultural analysis, as it has developed in Amsterdam, borrows from Geertz the understanding of cultures as symbolic systems that can be (also) read semiotically. Moving away from the ethnographer's traditional subject matter, methodological tools, and even line of inquiry, thick description remains central to cultural analysis as a taught practice.

There are many things that are wrong in Geertz's seminal text, that make it hard to add it to contemporary classroom curricula as I've done in the past. For starters, his address of "other" cultures and native informants simply cannot pass and demands careful unpacking and dismantling for which there's not always time.[1] But some points from this early formulation remain with me and with cultural analysis as praxis, one of them being attentiveness to the process and shape of research as part of the research itself. In a disidentificatory manner, I would like to take up some of Geertz's insights and address thickly my own venture out of the humanities and back.[2] I will trace personal experiences, exchanges, and affects in order to reflect on (what counts as) research, and, relatedly, to consider what makes up cultural analysis as such. What kind of intellectual effort is cultural analysis? What defines the enterprise, apart from techniques and received procedures that, while remaining porous to an extent, congealed into more or less stable shapes and forms over the past twenty years? In what follows I will try to address these questions through a focus on the spaces in which the practice of cultural analysis takes shape.

1 These criticisms are not new. See, for example, Abu-Lughod and Windschuttle.

2 Disidentificatory in the sense that it works against a cordoned-off hierarchical perspective on (research) cultures even as it picks up a method conjured in a text filled with ethnocentric undertones. In this, I follow José Muñoz's methodology of disidentifying with theory (8–11).

Later on in the same text, Geertz insists on the text as the space of anthropology.[3] His emphasis on scholarly artifice rather than social reality as the spatial base of the field was a strategic move meant to stress its interpretative or analytical, rather than descriptive, core. Anthropological interpretation à la Geertz is the construction of a reading of what happens; that construction happens, therefore, *in* the reading (and the writing). Rather than observing, recording, and analyzing, the ethnographer writes, writes, and writes.[4]

And the cultural analyst? We write, in principle, even more. Cultural analysis combines thick description with methodologies from comparative literature (close reading), critical theory (concepts), cultural studies (the political everyday) as well as additional disciplines that came in and out of fashion through its short historical trajectory. In a move from culture as such toward the cultural object as the locus of inquiry, theoretical and conceptual queries carry a weight that locates this methodological toolkit more forcefully within interpretive practices. It could be for that reason that Geertz's insistent awareness of the act of writing, in its academic interpretive form, remains appealing to cultural analysis, for practicing and teaching self-reflexive (but not self-absorbed) situated knowledge production.

But the textual turn has taken quite a few turns by now, and I'm not as convinced that locating our analytical practice in the writing is as strategically productive as it used to be, for two main and related reasons. The first is perhaps quite straightforward. The focus on the text as the space for the ethnographer/cultural analyst/writer brings the lifeworld of the analyst to bear on the text, so that their situated and subjective reading cannot carry the pretense of disembodied, objective observation. But it doesn't complete the move, inasmuch as it doesn't necessarily include attention to (academic) reading and writing (observing, recording, analyzing) as material practices that necessitate time and space; pens and papers, connection to electricity, access to libraries, affiliations, financing, genre compliance,

3 Text is understood here in the broad sense: "[A]lthough culture exists in the trading post, the hill fort, or the sheep run, anthropology exists in the book, the article, the lecture, the museum display, or sometimes nowadays, the film" (Geertz 16).

4 Geertz elaborates: "'[W]hat does the ethnographer do?'—he writes. This … may seem a less than startling discovery,… but as the standard answer to our question has been, 'He observes, he records, he analyses'—a kind of *veni, vidi, vici* conception of the matter—it may have more deep-going consequences than are at first apparent, not the least of which is that distinguishing these three phases of knowledge-seeking may not, as a matter of fact, normally be possible; and, indeed, as autonomous 'operations' they may not in fact exist" (20).

output venues, and rooms of their own.[5] Furthermore, and more importantly for this chapter, locating cultural analysis in the writing lends itself to the framing of the textual output as the culmination of the process, as the thing that counts. As a result, so much of the "stuff" that happens in the practice of cultural analysis is set as backdrop. What if texts are approached otherwise? And writing, as only one of many processes and spaces that enable them? Following the infrastructural turn, I wish to trace some of the practices, infrastructures, and networks that make up the writing of texts. This is not a reversal of Geertz's argument, but an endorsement that wishes to push it to its limits. Accepting the text as the space of cultural analysis, I wish to advocate for an expansion of our understanding of that space to include in it, the lifeworlds in which our texts come into being.

We Never Write Alone

In 2016, recovering from burnout, I decided to try and stop working alone. Having to address what exhausted me to the brink of collapse and faced with the need to make new choices about my (professional) life as I was climbing back to productive mode, I realized that at least part of it came from the loneliness and isolation of my research practice. Writing was wrenching; I wanted to do it, but it took the life out of me. Every word was a challenge and a test. Can I get my thoughts on paper right? Can I bring those across and will they—will I—make sense to others? Responses to output, in any shape and form, fed into my insecurity. Presentation of work in progress were productive in the sense that I got forward in figuring out what I wanted to say, but I often leaned into their evaluative, rather than suggestive, mode.

It took some time to figure out what it would mean for me to work together. Co-writing papers was a relief. The draft became a space of exchange; I wrote *to* someone and that someone wrote back; we were both at each other's mercy. Showing mercy to another allowed me to be more merciful to myself. I no longer had to carry the weight of the text alone, and that weight presented itself as a choice or approach. Some colleagues were even more anxious about bringing things together, others, much more laid back; and this helped to situate myself and realize where I (want to) stand.[6] People

5 This argument resonates Jules Sturm's call to bring the material conditions of the body and the cultural regimes that surround it and constitute back into theory (20).

6 A memorable moment included a colleague sending me a link to *Frozen*'s "Let It Go."

are different; texts are different. For me, facing the world together made more sense. Especially when writing across disciplinary boundaries, the text-in-the-making became more of a playground, less a minefield: it was no longer a reflection of me, and so I could finally move with it and see where we end up.[7]

But I was still in safe waters, familiar territory; close reading and object analysis (writing, writing, writing…) were more dynamic but I was familiar with the motion. And then, Itamar, an old friend, called. He asked if I wanted to join his new art project at the hospital, together with a group of physicians, art professionals, and researchers. The idea was ambitious but simple, at least at face value: the establishment of a museal space next to the emergency department of the Onze Lieve Vrouwe Gasthuis (OLVG, Our Lady Hospital) West in Amsterdam, in ways that would allow for the measurement of the space's effect on hospital staff. The team had already received the hospital approval to play in a narrow side corridor that was planned for destruction as part of upcoming renovations and attracted the interest of some of Amsterdam's major museums in the possibility of measuring art's impact, and so to answer contemporary demands for proved relevance.

In hindsight I know that I had no idea what I was getting into, and I'm pretty sure Itamar will admit that he, too, had no idea about what was coming. But I said yes, and dove into unfamiliar territory. It is on a segment of this territory that I wish to reflect on in the coming section, because this venturing out of familiar structures and practices, and into more interdisciplinary and cross-institutional settings and exchanges, challenged me to question what remains of cultural analysis in these other spaces.

Expanding the Space of the Text: Infrastructures of Knowledge Production

Writing, Geertz suggests, is a method for giving structure to an event. The interpretation of the flow of social discourse consists in fixing the "said" of discourse from perishing occasions, but not all can be caught in the net of inscription: "What we write is the noema ('thought,' 'content,' 'gist') of

7 Interestingly, I was mostly collaborating with colleagues in the field of architecture, foreshadowing my growing interest in spatial inquiries that have also become the focus of this contribution.

the speaking. It is the meaning of the speech event, not the event as event" (19–20). How then to capture the event of (cultural analysis) writing as such? A move might be necessary from structure toward infrastructure, toward the "movement or patterning of social form" or the "lifeworld of structure" (Berlant, "The Commons" 393). The difference is nuanced but crucial. Infrastructure as the patterning of social form keeps central an awareness of a structure's malleability and relational essence. It brings into focus the complex and messy and sometimes utterly coincidental ways in which texts get written, or not. Berlant expands:

> [A]n infrastructural analysis helps us see that what we commonly call "structure" is not what we usually call it, an intractable principle of continuity across time and spaces, but is really a convergence of force and value in patterns of movement that's only solid when seen from a distance. (394)

And so, the solid text and the individuality/sovereignty of its writer are put into question.

The world, from the infrastructural perspective Berlant offers, is inherently relational. Individuality is a "genre carved from within dynamics of relation rather than a state prior to it or distinct from it" ("The Commons" 394); objects are clusters of promise (*Inconvenience* 27); and the challenge is to "live with messed up yet shared and ongoing infrastructures of experience" ("The Commons" 395). Notably, conceptual infrastructures are not only ideas, but also protocols and practices that "hold the world up" (394). Institutions and (inter-)disciplines are closely related, if not conflated, with infrastructures; they help to stabilize structure and may fail or generate glitches that could lead to disturbances and denaturalization of sedimented logics. Yet if institutions and (inter-)disciplines put people in a structure, infrastructures put people in relation. In that sense, infrastructures remain in motion, relatively autonomous to structural imaginaries (403). Attuned to concrete social relations, infrastructural analysis involves a disturbance of the conventional and more abstract object of "structure" (*Inconvenience* 19–20) and "includes ideas about what internally binds the world beyond practices that can be photographed or organized in a spreadsheet" (20)—hence, beyond Geertz's "fixing" of the "said" of discourse. Crucially, infrastructural analysis is not a move away from matter: it rather insists on the numerous, nonsynchronous, and not-always discursive "phases of the activity of poiesis, or world-making" (20). Solidity emerges from "consistently linked activity, that's all" (21).

We Write Out of Where We Write From

The Stimulus project is anything but solid, and the consistency of the activity that surrounds it fluctuates, coming in and out of focus. An offshoot of Itamar Gilboa's artistic practice, it involves art production, curatorship, research, and, most of all, navigation between and calibration of affects, desires, positionalities, and visions. When I joined in, in early 2021, the project was already on the move, and its core group included two emergency physicians (who are also a journalist and an artist), an artist and a curator, who are all now also dear friends. The institutions involved—the OLVG West, the Amsterdam Museum, and the University of Amsterdam (UvA)—were enthusiastic and gave us free range to play. Funding was challenging however, because Stimulus was a new foundation located in-between established institutions but without a record to show for itself. Its straddling of research and curation was not easy to translate into the specific requirements of funding venues, cultural or otherwise.[8] Even as more and more partners joined in, and the network grew to include exchanges with related projects on a national scale, our project ran on air, or perhaps, on the "clusters of promises" that we saw in it (Berlant, *Inconvenience* 27).

The challenges of translating research concepts into practice were not only pragmatic but also thematic. Arriving at a shared understanding of terms, practices, goals, and expectations proved to be an ongoing challenge. What makes up a museal space? What would it take to measure its effects? How to work with the differing paces and staff availability of our institutional partners as we move forward in trying to figure this out? And how to translate our questions to impressive and self-assured grant applications, on the one hand, and to the poor little corridor we received, on the other, with the old blood stains on the floor and the hospital beds that were provisionally stored there? I was weary of what I perceived to be an understanding of institutional spaces (the hospital, the museum) as healing environments, rather than disciplinary ones.[9] But most of all, I was weary

8 More concretely, cultural funds requested clarity on how output will be shared with the public, and what the expected impact of the output on the public would be; these were exactly the things we wanted to explore. Research funds, on the other hand, would not include curation costs within their budget.

9 This worry was put to rest once I became aware of my own underlying understanding of institutional spaces as always, only, and already disciplinary. This happened when a project partner from the Amsterdam Museum offered their definition of what makes a museum, as something that emerges in a dialogue with the museum's concrete audience, a definition that

of my own position within the project. From painful previous experience, I knew, I'm good at offering reflection and critique (i.e., disciplinary spaces), but not the best partner when it comes to production. The type of research necessary for the project as we conceived it back then—surveys, wearables, measurements—was not remotely close to anything I did (or wanted to do) from the moment I finished my undergraduate studies in psychology. This was so far removed from the texts and methodologies shared with my cultural analysis students' forty-minute bike ride east.

But it also felt fresh and exciting, malleable and challenging. The team was fun, we laughed a lot, and there was curiosity and space to play. The project mattered to all of us for different reasons, and in different intensities. For me, initially, the possibilities to expand "what I do" was a welcome relief and an opportunity to use my analytical toolkit for an object that was, on the face of it, light-years away from my research expertise—I usually write about visual culture, conflict, and war—and so I thought of it as a refreshing and somewhat less morbid side gig. I was curious what it would be like to practice other forms of research. I got some of students to join in, although it was a hard sell, and we embarked, together with the partners at the hospital, on creating pilot surveys for the staff.

The surveys were not envisioned as part of the intervention into hospital dynamics as such, but as its external measurement tool. The comparative element (which we thought would be the part we could extract for qualitative research) attempted to capture the staff's job satisfaction and well-being, through minimal adaptations of existing questionnaires and scales that have been sanctioned through previous use as valid and reliable within social science and medical research.[10] The surveys' second part was more open, envisioned as an addendum to the research proper; it was not based on existing research but on our own formulation, to help us shape the hall in dialogue with existing practices. The questions in this part attempted to capture the staff's spatial coping strategies, to get an idea of what they look for in their break time, and the spaces that they go to in search of that wished-for ambiance. We also asked questions regarding the staff's experience, expectations, and understanding of art exhibits, and their impression of the hall that we were about to work in and with.

softened the edges of our research and allowed for a more site-specific and intersubjective shaping of "museal space" to take place.

10 To be precise, we adapted the Measure of Job Satisfaction for Use in Longitudinal Studies, the Perceived Stress Scale and the Brief Resilient Coping Scale questionnaires. See Traynor and Wade; Sinclair and Wallston.

Both the core team working on the surveys and the broader team that was asked to comment on them as they were shaping up were working somewhat in the dark. As students took the lead in navigating new institutional and disciplinary terrains, we realized that coming to terms with the content and phrasing of the surveys is only step one, and there are procedures to follow and protocols to abide by in order to make sure they could be sanctioned for further use. I can't elaborate here on either steps of the process in detail, but I can say that I never expected playing the social scientist would be so emotionally draining and disorienting. I'm afraid my dear partners in the process have seen my less composed sides along the way. If I think of why this was, I would say it comes down to the way texts and their lifeworlds functioned differently in this setting. Personal tone was replaced with more rigid textual protocols, both *in* the research poiesis (questions posed to staff had to be presented in ways that can then be taken up in evidence-based evaluation) and around them (ethics committee forms and consent requests had to abide by standard formulations). Resistances in the shape of small insurgent phrasing attempts were futile and draining.

At some point, the fall of 2022 I think, I thought the experiment should end. After months of communal investment in making sure the surveys could stand their ground, past the ethics committee, the consent forms, the reminders, the software, the required foreign vocabulary, and more—I didn't feel I had the tools to work with the results. After leaning into the practices necessary to write them, I could not muster up the necessary energy to learn to read them, at least not as positive data. I handed them over to my research colleagues at the hospital, wished them luck, and decided I needed to find a different angle into the project or let it go.

On Inconvenience and Care

Perhaps my engagement with the making of the surveys came close to Geertz's parody of a wink. I wanted to support the project with something other than critical theory, but wasn't able to activate my suspension of disbelief at the modes of measurement and communication that I was now engaged with, modes I nevertheless felt limited to if I want to converse with a new audience. My discomfort had to do with an underlying sense that I was participating, infrastructurally, in the circulation and solidification of a (research) structure that I did not care for. This became all the more legible as the project drew me (and draws me still) into a critical (self-)reflection on the concept of care, that, when conceptualized ontologically rather

than moralistically, involves attention to relationality, positionality, and a thinking beyond isolated production (De la Bellacasa 198). The surveys confronted me with my dependency on existing infrastructures for genres of scientific knowledge, but also with the multitude of relations that are part of keeping certain worlds up, and with my choices. It's been a nice ride, but it wasn't the one for me.

Venturing out of the (familiar) text and related reading and writing practices, then, has been inconvenient to say the least. But inconvenience, as Berlant reminds us posthumously, can itself be thought of as a generative relational infrastructure that puts things in motion. Inconvenience for Berlant is the "affective sense of the familiar friction of being in relation" (*Inconvenience* 2). It can take many forms, from neutrality to irritation to enjoyment, that are joined in the way they reflect on the constant adjustment that registers "one's implications in the pressure of coexistence" (3). I want to say that my affective state as I was engaging with the surveys had to do with the way they disturbed my sovereign fantasy as an academic, of being in control (3). But that can't be exactly right, as I keep on being "inconvenienced" or challenged in this project in ways that are invigorating, too. More precisely perhaps, inconvenience acted here as a *theoretical affect* that allowed me to appreciate the text and its lifeworld in my own practice, and to question, or at least mull over, what is it that makes up both. Can I translate the tools I have for addressing resistance in "classroom" cultural analysis, to bring to bear on what is at stake in the resistance I felt toward specific modes of scientific address? Can this question be extended to touch upon the resistance toward working alone, which led me to this venture to begin with, in search of collective forms of knowledge production? And now that I'm here, how to follow up on Berlant's call to "not … replace inconvenient objects with better ones but to loosen up the object to reorganize and extend it, whether that object includes personal or impersonal processes" (27)?

Loosening the Text

It was a silly institutional demand that helped me find my feet again in Stimulus. In one of our meetings, we shared the exhaustion of working without funding and agreed on a date where we would "close shop" unless some funding could be secured. Caring for Stimulus, but also, to be honest, caring for the investment that would go unaccounted for, I mustered up courage to face my funding phobia (application forms, to me, were not far

off from surveys in terms of genre, imposing in their demand to clean the text from messy hesitations) and to see whether this project could fit in any existing schemes. As it happens, it *almost* did; it only missed a collaboration with *another* faculty from *within* UvA. I imagined this to mean finding someone who would be happy to work with the surveys, who could speak their evidence-based language and care for the statistical information they may hold. Flailing for partners, by luck and chance, things took a much more inspiring turn.

What came out of this venture was more than the seed money that was necessary to breathe some very pragmatic air into the project. It led to new partnerships from the social sciences and new formulations of the heart of the matter, what I felt but couldn't find words for on my own: namely, the limited available tools to address durational, affective events, across the humanities, the social sciences and the medical sciences, and the need to articulate alternative modes for evaluating (art) interventions in (care) environments that can be shared across disciplinary boundaries and expectations. Within this ongoing endeavor, and by no means due to my own insight, the surveys are approached differently. For starters, we see them now as intrinsic element of Stimulus's intervention in hospital routines, next to the project's artistic and curatorial interferences, and not as external measurement tools. In addition, both their parts (the one that follows existing textual protocols for measuring self-satisfaction and well-being, and the one that queries into spatial routines and aesthetic expectations) are mined for research, which is no longer conceived strictly within existing academic paradigms. The surveys play multiple roles as a result: they are approached as modes of measurement *and* as semiotic objects of analysis, and have been loosened to act (also) as blueprints for spatial scenarios.[11] They were not obstacles in themselves, after all; it was the disciplined query that I thought had to be put to them, the place that I imagined they should have within the project's trajectory, that (dis)allowed for certain insights to emerge.

What I like about this story is its exposure, on the move, of my own lines in the sand; the ways in which it unhinged my ideas of what certain objects and disciplinary boundaries are and what it would look like to engage with them. It is different to know and to experience firsthand that objects, texts, and disciplines are nothing but solidified fictions that take infrastructural

11 I am going to take the liberty to leave this description somewhat enigmatic, as we are now working precisely on formulating what this could mean.

care to uphold.[12] I have covered only one offshoot trajectory of Stimulus, and there are more.[13] As the project keeps on shapeshifting across networks of relations, including more and more partners in ways that could make it more vague or diffused, it is rather crystallizing and homing in on the hearts of the matter, one step at a time. And while this is, at this moment in time, a happy object, it would not have been (and could easily, not be anymore) if not for the infrastructural networks of relations that inspire thinking beyond existing structural imaginaries.[14]

Conclusion

Perhaps, then, cultural analysis's home *is* the text, in its broadest sense; a making sense of and making legible, processes, events, and situations. I don't want to give up writing in this sense, in whatever shape and form. But perhaps it is also necessary to become more aware of the limitation of texts (or outputs more generally); of the fact that these can inscribe mostly the "said" of cultural analysis, but not the event. And while the event of cultural analysis is harder to pin down precisely because it is multilayered, malleable, and located outside the text, for a practice that takes receptivity and self-reflection seriously, that space needs to be acknowledged more forcefully and taken up more seriously.

In this chapter, I've argued for the location of cultural analysis, and academic research more generally, in the lifeworld of texts, in the relational infrastructures that inhabit, surround, and lead to and from them. Those infrastructures of care are partially traceable in the products of our thick descriptions, close readings, and conceptual formulations. But their

12 Anthropology is not even considered a social science everywhere, and so the institutional setting that enabled this layer of the project, requiring interfaculty collaboration, is itself less solid than it seems. But that's the beauty of it: it doesn't matter; or rather, it precisely does, pointing to the shifting and malleable structures and relations that enable (or disable) knowledge production at its very core.

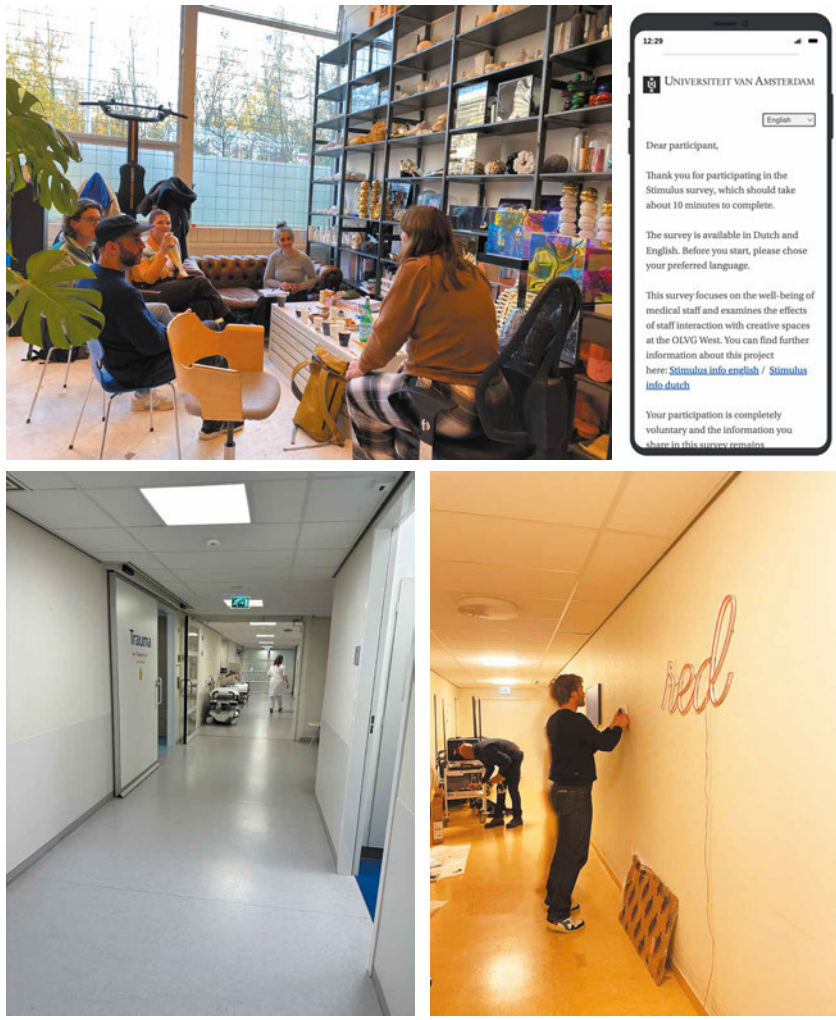
13 Another trajectory that I would like to briefly underscore here is the insistence on curation as a practice that needs to be picked up more formally in academic research. On this note, see Butler and Lehrer.

14 I use "happy object" in line with Sara Ahmed's delineation of the term, to point to the way the project provides, at this point in time and to this specific scientific offshoot, a shared horizon of experience and possibility. That said, it is important to acknowledge that the infrastructural networks of relations that keep the project going as a whole are extremely precarious and constantly on the verge of exhaustion due to the lack of sufficient structural support. You can't run on air forever.

interpretational force also remains partially obscured and unacknowledged, confined to the dialogues, networks, affects, orientations, illnesses, atmospheres, affordances, and interferences that stay out of the text once an article has been sent off, a lecture concluded, a film essay published, a PhD defended, a course completed, a research grant accepted or rejected. Bringing those surrounding infrastructures of care into the text proper—an infrastructural thick description, if you will—as I have done here, is not necessary at all times, nor productive, as this can end up being an incredibly self-indulgent performance. I'm rather advocating for acknowledging those surrounding infrastructures more structurally and institutionally as intrinsic to our interpretational writing practice.

To return to Geertz, while this might seem less than a startling discovery, it can have more consequences than are apparent at first (20). On a procedural level, it could pave the way to define research beyond output, downscaling measurable output just a notch, and offering structural acknowledgment and (financial) support for communal, relational, affective, processual, and operational efforts that are harder to capture although they are crucial for academic survival. But even before that utopian moment arrives, reverberations of what counts as procedural inconvenience can be addressed with care and spill over in this way back to the practice that is cultural analysis. When what surrounds and enables our writing proper is accounted for as the space of cultural analysis, the protocols and practices that hold this world up (on a wide scale from burnout to collaboration), can play a more significant role in the interpretational process. Sometimes, this would allow analysis to address the procedural as it takes shape. At other times, this would allow certain forms of investments to feel less taxing or confining. We do not simply "observe, record, and analyze," but we also do not simply write. Our embodiment/inscription in the world matters for our texts in more ways than one.[15]

15 The network of relations that enabled this text includes, first of all, Itamar Gilboa, Alessandra Laitempergher, Mariska Zwartsenburg, and Obbe Tiddens as the core team and beating heart of Stimulus. Rachelle Dekker, Ting Xu, and Imogen Mills got the surveys going and navigated procedural and affective minefields along the way. Piotr Malinowski helped to critically reflect on how this project could fit (or not) within existing lines of inquiry early on. Gonca Yalçiner, Rowan Stol, and Margriet Schavemaker kept a lifeline going to the museum world. Manon Parry opened the door to a wider research network that addresses similar challenges on varying scales, and Margot van der Sande opened another door to the wonderful group of people who head the research offshoot of Stimulus, including Maya Lane, Jeannette Pols, Simone Stergioula, and Emily Read. Thank you also to Aylin Kuryel, Murat Aydemir, Laurence Chua, and Simon Ferdinand for offering thoughts on the text in the making.



Figures 9.1 to 9.4. Spaces for cultural analysis. Photographs by Itamar Gilboa, Mariska Zwartsenburg, Obbe Tiddens and Noa Roei.

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10. From Situated Knowledge to Intensional Field Theory

Jeff Diamanti

Abstract: This essay suggests that the status of the field in the humanistic sciences has altered in the decades of scholarship responsive to anthropogenic climate change, and that the methodological tools available to tend to this shift involve a reconsideration of environmental deixis and intensional reading and writing. While much of the analytic impulse forwarding attention to deixis and intensionality has come from anthropology, I suggest that cultural analysis has always been a discipline uniquely sensitive to the iterative and situated relation between reader, object, and field, and is thus a discipline well-suited to experimental forms of collaborative and creative fieldwork outside of the classroom.

Keywords: fieldwork, environmental humanities, multispecies semiotics, deixis

This essay makes a methodological argument about the intensional relation between fields and objects in cultural analysis, and how to involve collaborative fieldwork as a dimension of our larger analytic envelope of research. For a more sustained account of why different analytic traditions in the humanities prepare us to do "theory" in and with the field, see the special issue of *Postmodern Culture* on "Field Theory" (33.1) and the recent *Field Docket* authored by the FieldARTS collective in Amsterdam (Carter and Diamanti)—projects that draw from ongoing developments at the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis (ASCA). In this particular essay, I want to reflect on (and celebrate) the legacy of "situatedness" in environmental humanities scholarship—a legacy that exemplifies the preference for idiographic concept formation in the humanities over the

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Fig. 10.1. Charles Rouleau sounding De Slufter, Texel Island (May 2021). Photograph by Jeff Diamanti.

nomothetic preference of the natural sciences.[1] At the same time, I suggest that the descriptive conceit of the "situated knowledges" thesis involves a subtle dismissal of propositional norms that I think we should reconsider.

Take for instance the difficult question involved either implicitly or explicitly in any context of meaning making:

> Where are we?
> We are here.

In formal semantics, deictic designation (the situation either of the object referred to or the subject referring) can be imputed without direct reference, as in the sentence: The paper weighs one gram. The paper's weight does not depend on the location of the paper, but will involve a location

1 Though there are now hundreds of examples, citationally the two most influential arguments for situated voice and perspective in the social and humanistic sciences are Donna Haraway's "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective" and Anna Tsing's *The Mushroom at the End of the World*. I engage further with both (and the analytic traditions that lead them to situatedness) below.

nevertheless and that location is a necessary but invariant feature of the paper's weight. Without contingent markers, the paper's weight will be true in the location where such measure makes sense physically (on Earth, within this gravitational field, etc.). But if we say: that paper over there has been scribbled on, then "that paper" and "over there" will now depend on the context in which the designation refers, and its location will matter to the meaning of the sentence. As is true too of the mark on a map describing the location of the viewer in relation to other features on the map: "You are here" is a form of deixis that requires the viewer and the map to both occupy a fixed point in space (otherwise the meaning of "You are here" will not make sense: you will not be there, and the "there" will be hard to determine if the map itself is not where it claims to be).

Addressing the question of where we are today in the humanities involves a metaleptic blur of planetary ecologies, global cultures, and the historicity of form. But it also involves a negotiation of what places us here (however differentiated the "us" and the "here" might be in the answer) and what we might want to make of that placement. What it would mean to hazard a description of the here in which we of necessity find ourselves underwrites recent efforts to bridge the situated knowledge paradigm in feminist science studies to the study of political ecology in the age of anthropogenic climate change. In recent environmental criticism, the kinds of knowledges that rely on imputed location—that is, location that is necessary but an invariant feature of reference—has been largely treated with suspicion, while context dependent knowledges and practices have been prized for their particularity, or their "situatedness,"[2] or even ontological pluralizability in the case of perspectivalism.[3] In the context of environmental inquiry, this makes sense given the high degree of specificity that characterizes *an* environment versus the nominative "environment" as such. But situating the "we" and the "here" in deictic fashion involves both a descriptive locution (temporal and spatial descriptors that specify the "we" and the "here") and a propositional one. What logically connects descriptive and propositional norms? I will begin with the former and conclude with the latter.

In perhaps the most cited example of this deictic preference over location invariance, Donna Haraway argued in 1988 that "the issue in politically engaged attacks on various empiricisms, reductionisms, or other versions

2 Recent scholarship that specifically bridges the situated perspective paradigm to environmental criticism includes Crone et al., Ferdinand, Benson and Montgomery, Gómez-Barris, and Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*.

3 See Viveiros de Castro.

of scientific authority should not be relativism—but location" ("Situated Knowledges" 588). Located objectivity, in the tradition Haraway helped inspire, involves not just an attention to where and how knowledge is made, but to the character of the field in which knowledges come to make sense. Constructivist in spirit, this legacy of *situating* inquiry has been remarkably useful for scholars interested in challenging the doxa of various disciplines that rely on static and normative ideas of meaning and epistemic standpoint, but in locating inquiry *in a location,* situated knowledge also involved a theory of location that organically carries into environmental inquiry in the humanities.

This theory of location will go on to morph across various disciplinary articulations of standpoint epistemology, but in that early argument from Haraway it begins with a notion of how gender comes to inform an embodied experience. Highly context-dependent,

> gender is a field of structured and structuring difference, in which the tones of extreme localization, of the intimately personal and individualized body, vibrate in the same field with global high-tension emissions. Feminist embodiment, then, is not about fixed location in a reified body, female or otherwise, but about nodes in fields, inflections in orientations, and responsibility for difference in material-semiotic fields of meaning. ("Situated Knowledges" 588)

Haraway is here treating the notion of a field in the way environmental philosophers describe "milieu," or what Melody Jue—building on Haraway and Georges Canguilhem—describes as "milieu-specific analysis" in which "specific thought forms emerge in relation to different environments" (3). The point here is that the "nodes" Haraway speaks of cannot be objectively described to preexist their location in the field, as is true of the "thought forms" that Jue tracks in oceanic milieu since the perceiver/perceived relation is always milieu specific (it's just that the terrestrial ground has largely gone unmarked in most disciplines). How does a milieu *place you*? What are the currents, channels, and frequencies that provide deictic legibility to and in the field, and what does it mean to write with them?

Writing with the field requires immersement in the field with a sensorial and critical openness, but an openness that blurs with active reading of how the field *fields* what Haraway called above its particular "nodes." These nodes are not merely designations of extension—a placement of bodies in geometric space—but *a sense* of emplacement; that is, the field gives a sense (or intensional specificity) to a particular mode of being located

there, as opposed to somewhere else. This can be certainly represented using extensional media, but the sensation and semiosis of making sense of one's locatedness (and the materiality of that location's cultures) cannot.

I'm using "intension" here in the way that possible worlds semanticists do, namely as the meaning or *sense* of a designation in practice, as opposed to the extensional properties of the designation. My argument here and elsewhere is that calibrating interpretation to the intensional logic of a field is what humanities students and scholars excel at during fieldwork. Intensionality is how the milieu of an object bends with and through the object, and how the object in turn interacts with (and thus alters) its milieu. In the case of literary texts, this is easier to verify, as in Lubomír Doležel's argument in *Heterocosmica* that "intension is necessarily linked to texture, to form (structuring) of its expression; it is constituted by those meanings, which the verbal sign acquires through and in texture" (137–38). Intensional references are interpretation dense and are unlike extensional references (the paper weighs one gram) in that the significance of the object is inseparable from the subject preforming the reference and the texture of the context in which the reference is made. Thinking of intensional field theory this way builds on the ethic of reciprocity in cultural analysis between subject and object, or the condition of mutual exposition. Or in Mieke Bal's phrasing, building on the linguistic philosophy of Émile Benveniste, the constative effect of the cultural object on the subject's presence in its field is a feature of the relational "deixis" that the two terms actualize beyond reference or address—"this presentness matters," Bal insists, and "is one of the defining features of cultural analysis to focus on this present quality of cultural objects" (8). My goal here is to insist that this force of situatedness extends through the semiotics, tone, and currents of a field's intensional character, and that an environmental turn in cultural analysis begins with attention to that character.

Why Intensional Field Theory Now?

The theoretical proposition motivating situated knowledges—that object and field are in intimate and intractable relation, and that an analysis of one involves a sustained attention to the other—has also involved a number of complimentary postures in the object-oriented and new materialist methodologies vying for orthodoxy in today's academy. Postures that paradoxically work through an avant-gardist set of negations of what often gets treated as an earlier set of normative (and emancipatory) horizons to

critique. Haraway's own fraught relationship to socialism and Marxism is one version of this posture—likewise in the work of field-favorite Bruno Latour—but the more cited and paradigm setting negation comes in the influential call from anthropologist Anna Tsing in *The Mushroom at the End of the World* to cultivate the "arts of noticing" in field-based inquiry. There, like many scholars tending to the political ecologies of the present, Tsing convincingly weds several of the normative horizons of critique to the mostly latent narratives of progress that underwrote them, and in the same gesture posits a more immanent horizon to "the dilemmas of collaborative survival" (25) populating the many landscapes and wakes supposedly evidencing this or that concluded meta-narrative.

In a single day one might encounter artists, colleagues, and students signaling agreement that we now practice these arts of noticing in cities all over the world, and that this is in opposition to a different way of doing things—a different way of satisfying the practical business of research to the meta-historical envelope in which that research is tasked with making sense. No longer embedded in the self-satisfying sway of progress (or modernity, or revolution, or …), this new doxa carries with it a number of powerful concepts, ethical modalities, and styles of writing, and the epistemic point where these all converge in situ is in the status of "the field" as such, and more empirically the theoretical orientations immanent (instead of antecedent) to that field. But do we all mean the same thing when we admit the shifting horizon of our normative judgments from "progress" to "polyphonic assemblage" (Tsing 23)? I would trouble the easy alignment of these avant-gardist postures: No progress; only fieldwork. No future; only situated temporalities. No critique; only matters of concern. Or at least some version of these declarative oppositions, since their inflection to the many (re)turns to fieldwork involves among other things a syntax for how theory ought to be done in the time of ecological (and economic) tipping points. And this makes intuitive sense to many of us teaching and working in departments long tasked with close and critical reading of diegetic levels across representational media, such as literary and cultural analysis. But does the foregrounding of field and the waning of the object of necessity involve a partisan renunciation of the older unity of critical theory and normative horizon?

If the prevailing norms of inquiry in recent field theory has involved skepticism about the motivations and aims of collective emancipation and a concomitant disavowal of the horizon of emancipation, it could well be explained by the climatological wobble of "the future" as a placeholder for imminence. Dipesh Chakrabarty's now canonical claim that a tectonic

shift is rumbling beneath the categorical conceits of *all* faculties of today's university is truer now than in the 2009 of his infamous "The Climate of History": the narratives of freedom that secure the micro-gestures of liberal reason remain tethered to a violently anti-materialist notion of "the world" as a field of resources categorically autonomous from the history we inherit. There, Chakrabarty lays bare this idealist concept of the future and the autonomy of reason from necessity as part and parcel of what geological concept of history makes untenable in today's humanist reason. The conceit that reason is autonomous in the measure that it is free from material necessity has now hit the material contradiction of the means by which freedom has been secured for a mostly liberal subject (that is: oceans of hydrocarbon energies). Note here, though, the simultaneous wobble of "horizons" and wane of critique:

> While there is no denying that climate change has profoundly to do with the history of capital, a critique that is only a critique of capital is not sufficient for addressing questions relating to human history once the crisis of climate change has been acknowledged and the Anthropocene has begun to loom on the horizon of our present. (Chakrabarty 212)

Admittedly, this claim for critique's insufficiency in light of the geological grammar of contemporary crisis is powerful and there is good reason to revise orthodox assumptions about the means of addressing this crisis. An adequate address of material grounds effaced by (liberal) reason simply cannot happen from within the architectonics of the university's epistemic habits. Because, in Kathryn Yusoff's startling formulation—one of today's leading theorists of the geo-logic of mining and plantation economies subtending affluence and power—this anti-materialist genealogy exposed in Chakrabarty's claim repeats all over the university: "mind over matter in the grammars of Enlightenment geology [becoming], in the practical geology of colonialism, mine overmatter, that is, matter recognized by the imperative to extract and accumulate through subtending stratal relations." This dispossessive forfeiture is contiguous with hygienic accumulation (of wealth and power, of right and empirical confidence), casting the geological fields of the present in an epistemological loop with the colonial currents of so-called primitive accumulation. But where Chakrabarty invites a bifocal theory attentive to the "parametric" limits "for the existence of institutions central to our idea of modernity and the meanings we derive from them" (52), Yusoff demonstrates that these institutions of modernity were never *not* premised on racialized and radically dispossessive forms of reason.

An adequate address of this material contradiction (if indeed we are serious about addressing it) rejuvenates the need for a critical theory, not its identification with universalist hubris.

The question for any theory ought not be whether (or wither) norms, but from where do we draw those normative orientations. The nomothetic empiricism of the objects at hand? The singularity of unique and sentient ecologies? Marginal or silenced voices? The propositional logic of emancipatory or abolitionist desire? All of these ways of paraphrasing the normative horizon of theory stem from well-trodden debates and distinctions in epistemology, from Kant and Hegel through to the logical positivists and critical theorists of the early twentieth century. But what remains true across all the disciplines studying the political ecology of the present is that the loops and currents shaping the field have become unpredictable, unique, and even strange, requiring both a suspension of predetermined conclusions and a more immersed or situated research ethic. What kinds of propositional cuts do loops and currents license?

Intensional Loops and Diegetic Bonds

These loops lace through aeolian currents, chemical bonds, and fiduciary bondage, but as loops they also whirl off and pattern unexpected connectivities between cultural geographies drawn intimate by both trade and trade winds; commercial ties and colonial ecologies. To ground theory in the field is to read with these currents and to expose the interpretive apparatus of the social and humanistic sciences to the pressures these currents pose to orthodox certitude. What does the loss of that fiction—or in Chakrabarty's phrasing, the loss of "the mansion of modern freedoms" resting as it does "on an ever-expanding base of fossil fuels" (208)—mean for the location of theory: where and how does a regrounding of our normative horizons happen once that tectonic rumble erupts into epistemological incoherence?

This rushing of the planetary back into the center of critique would seem to sublate all these theoretical standpoints, and yet most of the thinkers responsible for the (re)turn to the field mean to localize the field and its theory at a direct angle to the hubris of any Archimedean fulcrum. One could just as easily imagine a triumph of universalist theories that lean toward an eschatological "we" in need of self-salvation, but anthropogenic climate change as a frame of theoretical inquiry has for the most part instead unleashed a new wave of particularist frames of meaning making—or what I suggested earlier was a preference for context-dependent locution. To be

fair, a strong resistance to universalizing and totalizing frames of inquiry is not unique to epistemic shifts named by Chakrabarty, but it is worth noting the paradox that planetary horizons abound in nearly all discourses of the present at the same time that our more robust theories of totality are largely abandoned as a signal gesture of thinking the present.

There are a number of other critical traditions calling attention to the creative and collaborative methods of fieldwork required for twenty-first-century scholarship and struggle concerned with the lived materialities of grounded contexts, and it could be the case that the status of normative judgment so often folded into the citational cohort above does not conform to the practices of critical theory in (and with) the field. At least two threads of environmental criticism thus occasion the moment of reflection on the rise of field theory (and work) in the humanities: on the one hand, the ecumenical methodologies of inquiry solicited from twenty-first-century scholars grounding their research at the intersection of political ecology and political economy—methodological demands to read the cartographies of capitalist supply chains in and through the benthic poesies of port infrastructures, for instance, or to sonify sediments at the threshold of alluvial deposition and the settler colonialism of terraforming anthroposols, and, on the other hand, the epistemological status of theoretical exegesis practiced *in the field* (instead of explanation preformed with data drawn from it).

Not accidentally, this epistemic shift also occurs through the shifting citational patterns of critical inquiry concerned especially with questions of environmental literacy, justice, and agency, in large part because the cohort of scholars insisting on the shifting normative horizon are also some of the most accomplished and generative thinkers of our shared environmental predicaments. The anthropological currents running through contemporary environmental criticism are in this regard reasonable: many of today's most cited critical theorists teach in anthropology (and adjacent) departments, and they are the same figures around which critical reflection on the *anthropos* of the "Anthropocene" has been sustained. It goes without saying today that scholars like Elizabeth Povinelli, Eduardo Kohn, Brian Larkin, Stefan Helmreich, Cymene Howe, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, and Tim Ingold will be assigned on environmental humanities syllabi alongside scholars of linguistics, philosophy, and history. And while much of this citational (and pedagogical) impulse comes from a thematic sophistication in anthropology on analytic categories like atmosphere, context, and idiographic concept formation—categories central to any interdisciplinary study of climate and its cultural mediations—what is also central to the establishment and analysis of these categories is the empirical work of the field read on its own

terms, which is to say read with as little presumption as is observationally possible.

To be sure, it is empirically and epistemologically possible only on the nominal assumption that the currents carrying you to the field in the first place are independent of the observation/description relay. They are not, and anthropology has been uniquely attentive as a discipline to working through framing assumptions brought to the field. Indeed, it is to the ethical status of ethnography (and the activation of that status in the act of writing) that Tsing backs up her central opposition between progress and survival, in a footnote citing her dependence on Marilyn Strathern's canonical "ethnographic effect" and the resonance of Strathern's crucial argument there with Haraway's attention later to "world making" in *The Companion Species Manifesto* (2003). Between two cultures whose betweenness is meant to bear as little impact on description and experience as possible (again, only ever nominally possible), the ethnographic effect is in Strathern's canonical account an effect precisely of writerly mediation between an epistemic culture (whatever discipline one imagines themselves to be in conversation with) and a field-specific culture (traditionally coded as other to the ethnographer). Important for our purposes here, Tsing assigns new normative importance to the status of field-specific knowledge creation first figured in Strathern's attention to the "startle of surprise" and Haraway's insistence that world making occurs at the fold of the "divergent projects" (Tsing 293) that converge (often without mutual recognition) in the verbing of worlds in situated fields. What counts as a "project" in Haraway and Tsing is important (and not always clear) because while the multi-scalar worlds that make up an assemblage of microbes to ecosystems are all counted as actors, there is an open question about the propositional range of those "projects" included in the writing of a given cultural context.

Propositions sometimes scale and sometimes they do not, as we have already seen with the ongoing ubiquity of progress narratives conjoined to the declared fact that they do not work. So the project of progress is rendered oppositional to the ones to which one might "notice" in the field, not because it isn't real (it is real enough to counter as the defining posture of contemporary fieldwork) but because its propositional force does not align with what one finds in the field. At the same time, the ethnographic effect goes both ways: if there is a tectonic shift afoot across the faculties, then that point of writerly entanglement between the cultures of the field and the fielding of academic culture will continue to trouble inherited norms governing what Karl Popper so long ago insisted was the theory-laden enterprise of observation.

Writing Intensionally

What I mean to draw out here in the theoretical dilemma posed by Strathern and so quickly absorbed in Tsing's citation of "the ethnographic effect" is the indeterminate place of norms in the writing of ethnography—that is, the force of "the effect" that Strathern recognizes in the coauthorship of the field on the researcher, and the researcher on the recognition of the field's features worth noting. As for the "ethnographic effect" of the field on the researcher, Strathern has an interesting point to make about the intimate relation between methodology, exegesis, and the deictic impact of time with the field. Quite remarkable in its ongoing methodological reflection on the terms by which research ought (and ought not) to "immerse" in the field of inquiry—and what this means for the normative status of any analytic ambition the researcher brings to the field in the first place—the anthropological concept of the "dazzle" invoked by Tsing's more recent "arts of noticing" is in Strathern's account caught in a vibrational field of antinomies that structure meaning in a field *as antinomies* and not resolvable terms. The "dazzle" is the vibrational intensity of suspension between at least two fields. Renouncing these antinomies or wishing them away is certainly an option for much criticism today—there is great comfort to be had in tending closely to reified notions of "story," "surface," and whatever it is that is imagined to verify the terminal fiction of "structure." But what's so interesting about the careful placement of ethnography's theoretical labor in the thick of writerly and worldly antinomy in Strathern is that theory's grounded vernacular becomes suddenly much more complex and ethically demanding than even orthodox and stable notions of structure as domination. Open pro forma not just to unexpected information encountered in fieldwork but, indeed, to letting the field shift the very terms by which epistemic porosity translates into the written field of academic reportage, these antinomies double with the doubling of the field (the one immersed in and the one reading): "norm and deviance; ideology and practice; structure and process; system and agent; representation and evocation: each," Strathern argues, "creates the possibility of escaping from the other, and thus relies on its trajectory being tied at some point into the other in order to emphasize its own path of flight.... Its counterpart remains (half) hidden" (10). To be sure, the preference for unexpected, minor, and even ostensibly accidental detail is not unique to late-twentieth-century anthropology—these ostensibly anti-normative preferences for analysis have become precisely the normative doxa of most humanities and social sciences research for some time. But what Strathern is detailing here is a complex set of latent and determinate frequencies to

both fields in question; frequencies that precisely shape the tangibility of a field (as oppositional tendencies, or parameters by which the objects or expressions of social life come to take on coherence and legibility in the first place); or to put it more simply, frequencies saturate the social field *and* its interpretation.

The "(half) hidden" counterpart is real, virtual, and matter-of-fact all at once—otherwise, scholars like Tsing or Haraway would not dedicate such energies to characterizing the economic abstractions that weigh on the scene of the living like a pseudo-science fiction. But it is not always self-evident (or even analytically established) that the struggles for collective emancipation from abstract (and lived) determination under capital's material compositions are designated as descriptively or normatively motivating within the antinomies "(half) hidden" in the "arts of noticing." The question of how to tend to this kind of claim about the contemporary—the kind of claim that clears the ground so convincingly in the ethnographic conceit of immersability—is indeed part of what shapes the ongoing propositional nature of field theory: what fields the field, what could, and what ought to. There is a minor and gentle politics at work in the (re)turn to the field here, but no less meta-historical stakes involving class composition, the matter of materiality, and the agency of assemblage. And this is the kind of field-specific projecting that "field theory" has come to practice its conviction.

And yet, this notion of a field is quite distinct (though not autonomous) from the anthropological "field" in at least one important respect: a field thrums as so many interactive and provisionally stable forces, and those forces are by definition of variable order and kind (from economic abstractions to saline gradients; from hetero-normative desires to the queer intimacies generative of reparative enclaves) and to treat the category of the field on the terms of these channels asks as much for an aesthetic mode of reading as it does an empirical mode of explication. Diegeses are always actual and nonexhaustive, and in narrative theory it is crucial to acknowledge up front that one's encounter with a diegetic level is determined by its focalized disclosure (the difference between a homodiegetic and extradiegetic narrator is really only a difference in relation to a story world, which is to a say a difference in relation to a field; but in narratological terms, this difference makes all the difference in the world). While the humanistic and social sciences have tended to restrict the domain of "story world" to human-centered practices of culture, it is not of logical necessity false to read a botanical community on the banks of an industrial port as actively disclosing a diegetic relation to the field. Plants are a good example of this because they so obviously *are* reading their environment and in reading they

are also incorporating into and as their environment: *fielding* the field as metabolic agents acting on its mineralogical and atmospheric composition.

But from the process- and phenomenologically oriented philosophies responsible for this concept of a-centric fields of interactive milieu, literally any entity in the field ought to be acknowledged as an agent of diegetic disclosure. Not because Pierce, Whitehead, and Merleau-Ponty were, it turns out, posthuman new materialists (maybe—but not the point), but because the provisioning of information operates as a terminal interplay between story and story world, form and field, or milieu and entity. The antinomies of the field that for Strathern structure the interpretive work already happening in field before you get there are no less distributed into and as so many terminals *processing* what proves meaningful (from nutrients and thermal gradients to labor frictions and value chains). For all those terminals of disclosure, though, field theory is still going to be an effect of a critical decision to "notice" a particular channel of this disclosure, and its in the elaboration or orientation to this or that channel that observation blurs into normative horizon and hence theory. To be sure, this tradition of thinking the field is citationally authoritative in the work of Povinelli and Kohn, in particular, and for good reason: a static or merely spatial concept of the field (a place remote from the office or the lab) makes the work of a perspectivialist anthropology impossible to see through. Either the metric of meaning making happens in and with the field, or it does not, and if it does not then those who imagine themselves to be intimate with their diegesis would have to be categorized as minimally incorrect or more logically premodern (it is here worth recalling that the main target of Whitehead's criticality is none other than Kant). Hence the semiotic ecumenicalism of this theory of the field, including as it does the life of trees (Kohn) and rocks (Povinelli) and flying foxes (Rose) but also a good deal of subindividual modes of apprehension and creative orientation, as in the stunning grounds for a *Queer Phenomenology* (2006) laid out by Sara Ahmed.

This is not to say that one need to be a process philosopher or a phenomenologist to cultivate field theory and the analytic intimacies it promises. Instead, the attention to meaning as intensionally specific is simultaneous to the experience of being oriented by that intension. The orientation can be sought after but it can't be presumed. What does this look like as a research practice? Cultural theory courses seeking to bring students to logistical spaces, anthropologists laboring to write with indigenous cosmologies, poets committed to the lexical violence of an enclosed symbolic order, or artistic research into the semiotic logic of microbial culture—these examples involve a practice of reading with the currents that inform a field's diegetic

palpability in medias res. Instead of mere specimen or properties of such and such a process, this emergent theory of the field is markedly interested in the field for its practice-based orientations—its delicate (or at times militant) propositions—and is as such sensitive to the tacit knowledge unique to vernacular exposure because none of this goes without saying. For this reason, it is also remarkably well suited to a rejuvenated humanities curriculum, and also in obvious accord with drives to cultivate interdisciplinary research agendas in today's university. At the same time, an experimental (and, frankly, expensive) pedagogy inviting students of literature, philosophy, media, linguistics, and so on to think biosemiotically with phytoplankton, or with contrapuntal rhythms of finance cycles and maritime shipping, also involves troubling the standard "objects" that serve the analytic content for humanistic inquiry. And whether under the sign of "noticing," "proposing," or "refusing," situating this inquiry in the field is also an occasion to evaluate the terms by which "theory" grounds in the antinomies of the present, and what we might mean (or wish to mean) by "the present" when so much of "the future" has been circumscribed.

Where are we?
We are here.

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11. Cultural Analysis at a Tipping Point

Seb Wigdel-Bowcott

Abstract: What is it like to study and teach cultural analysis at 1.5°C above preindustrial levels? Probably not much different, which is partly the point. Over the past decade, a planetary turn in critical theory has drawn attention to how climate change eludes human experience. This essay compares the respective research approaches of British cultural studies and the Netherlands' cultural analysis and considers how they look after the planetary turn. The lesson of the planetary turn is as much about movement between analytic scales as it is an explosion of them, encouraging a form of cultural analysis that can attend to the rapidly shifting ways climate change does—and does not—figure as part of everyday experience.

Keywords: planetary turn, Anthropocene, petroculture, energy transition, British cultural studies, energy humanities

For the past three years, my daily commute has involved a ferry ride across the river IJ, back and forth between the NDSM wharf and Amsterdam Central Station.[1] On these repeated journeys, I became acquainted with a piece of graffiti that sits just above the water on the river's northern bank. Painted in blue, capital letters covering around fifteen meters of wall space read NORMAL IS OVER IF WE LIKE IT OR NOT. It appeared in early 2021 when COVID-19 prevention measures were introduced in the Netherlands, and calls for resisting a "new normal" were in vogue. At first, the graffiti's alarmism seemed to index that discourse, carrying with it a politics that so often seems to slide toward the reactionary whenever the slightest bit of

1 Thanks to Claudia Parţac and Oscar Talbot for their engagement with various versions of this essay, both staying with my ideas in moments where I struggled to keep track. Thanks also to Murat Aydemir for his sharp comments and encouragement.

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Fig. 11.1. *Normal Is Over*. Photograph by Oscar Talbot.

pressure is applied. But a few ferry shuttles later, I found myself reading it as a response to that same discourse. While lockdown measures remained in place, the text seemed to speak in softer tones.

The ambiguity is generated in the way "normal" operates as a floating signifier. Normal is perhaps the paradigmatic floating signifier of everyday life, in constant motion, the boundaries of its meaning reliant on the relations defining its context. What is the graffiti's normal? At the internal level of the text, there is a refusal to provide coordinates—a refusal to fill normal with meaning. All we are told is that normal is over, with space left open for the possibility that it may have been for some time. Difficulty likewise arises when we move outside the text. The signifier continues to float because the phrase "new normal" has achieved cliché status in recent years, used in political contexts as diverse as mainstream climate action to the "no new normal" campaign that gathered momentum around the pandemic.[2] So,

2 Claims of a new normal also followed in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis and 9/11. I am interested in the way it functions similarly to "crisis," which, as Janet Roitman argues, can both occasion and stifle critique (6–8). However, an announcement of the "new" paired with a signifier as empty as "normal" suggests it is far more likely to collapse historical analysis. New normal also has a slightly different temporality, in that it refers to what comes after crisis, following an assumed transition of some kind.

while the graffiti initially appeared to be in dialogue with the latter, this was quickly lost as the pandemic entered a markedly different phase. Not only is the word "normal" in the IJ graffiti a floating signifier, but the text and its rapidly shifting context also destabilize an already unstable referent, placing it in freefall, floating as it does just above the water.

Mieke Bal discusses a Dutch-language graffiti in her introduction to *The Practice of Cultural Analysis* (1999), a volume that helped define cultural analysis as a research approach and institutional formation in the Netherlands. Though the IJ graffiti does not express the self-aware intertextual complexity of Bal's *briefje* (short letter), it serves as a starting point for this essay by prompting methodological reflection on context and scale. The experience of trying to make sense of the graffiti as I pass it on the ferry provides a metaphor for the task of describing and analyzing what cultural studies, in its Birmingham school formation, calls a conjuncture in motion. Context is a moving target, and to the extent that this necessarily involves the standpoint of the analyst, the metaphor also contains a key principle of cultural analysis as defined by Bal more than twenty years ago.

The IJ graffiti's appeal to the normal also encourages reflection on normalization itself. Identifying context-bound content is one thing, but there is also a process of articulation that allows the normal to settle as a paradigm in the first place. Bringing these together, my concern in what follows is how major changes in context get folded into a structured sense of normalcy. This is pressing for the present as well as the near future as climate change increasingly becomes a feature of everyday life, including in the academy, where a "planetary turn" in critical theory has made questions of analytic scale and standpoint unavoidable. As I was invited to think about the next ten years of cultural analysis for this volume, I cannot but notice that the criticality of a decade in planetary terms collides with what is realistically a short period in the development of a research community, to say nothing of how a decade translates to climate action. Given its scale, how does climate change challenge cultural studies? And what can cultural analysis in particular do in the coming decade amidst a rapidly shifting political terrain, cut through by a climate and energy crisis? In what follows, I conjecture an answer to these questions by bringing together recent research on the experience of energy and climate in an era of energy transition, with some methodological reflections informed by my time as a student of the research master's program in Cultural Analysis at the University of Amsterdam.

Planetary Conjunctures

Like "normal," cultural studies is itself something of a floating signifier. In the broadest sense, it refers to all kinds of scholarly work conducted since the 1950s investigating the political and historical dimensions of cultural objects and practices. To a lesser extent, cultural analysis also floats, which, depending on who you ask, is either a component of cultural studies in its practice (Gilbert 11, Grossberg 25–26) or a distinct research practice (Bal, *Double Exposures* 7–12). For this reason, a consideration of how climate change challenges cultural studies requires an engagement with context-specific research practices. Here, I consult British cultural studies in its Birmingham School formulation of the 1960s, closely associated with the work of Stuart Hall, and cultural analysis as it has developed in the Netherlands since Bal introduced it in the late 1990s. The latter is the focus of this volume and the principal point of reference for the research approach fostered by the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis (ASCA). The former is generally considered the birthplace of cultural studies. I consult it here not out of any presumed authority but for the methodological self-reflection that is a consistent part of its response to changing contexts.[3] In other words, it has been engaged for some time in the task this volume sets itself. And yet experience shows that the task of defining research practices does not necessarily anchor them in any straightforward manner. It became something of a running joke several months into the program that none of us really knew what cultural analysis was yet. Because of this, I engage with definitions but complement them with reflections on how I see these definitions translate in practice.

For the Birmingham School in its formative years, culture provided a privileged site to map social change or, as Lawrence Grossberg later describes it, to "access to the texture of life as it is lived,… what it felt like to be alive at a certain time and place" (13). Cultural studies attends to the texture (and therefore textuality) of a lived experience of history through the study of context in all its complexity, that is, with the analysis of the conjuncture (25). Conjunctural analysis provides a snapshot of sociopolitical configurations, usually at the level of a nation or region, which are constituted by diverse elements and historical formations. Some processes like colonization and

3 This is an admittedly parochial comparison given the global character that cultural studies has acquired in the last thirty years. At the same time, scoping out here would compromise specificity. These are the institutionalized variants I have direct experience with and, to my knowledge, there is no detailed comparison of the two in writing.

industrialization transcend conjunctures, meaning that their analysis will open onto "a multiplicity of overlapping contexts, of contexts operating at different scales, and of what we might call embedded contexts" (28). The heterogeneous elements of a conjuncture are nevertheless brought into temporary stability by a dominant system's articulation of a set of relationships among them. Articulation works through selection: it filters meanings, values, and social forms, incorporating some and excluding others to arrive at a "ruling definition of the social" (Williams 125). Hegemony, in Raymond Williams's sense of the word, names the process where the resulting totality acquires a natural appearance, a certain givenness, that conditions not only the political possibilities of the present but the very "pressures and limits of simple experience and common sense" (110).

Grossberg says conjunctures are "usually lived (but not necessarily experienced per se) as a social crisis" (41).[4] But what happens when the crisis in question cannot be defined with easy recourse to the social? Latest forecasts for global mean surface temperature increases by the end of the century predict anything in the range of 1.8°C to 4°C above preindustrial levels. The optimistic scenario relies on the almost immediate implementation of "highly uncertain" global mitigation pledges, a pathway not considered credible by the UN's environment agency at present (IPCC xxi). The worst-case scenario assumes things continue as they are. At 1.5°C, the limit and target set by the 2015 Paris Climate Accords, a series of "tipping points" in the earth's climate system become likely, first among them the collapse of the Greenland ice sheet (McKay et al. 3), which will cause major flooding from sea-level rise and displace large amounts of people in coastal areas around the world (IPCC 11, 18). At 4°C, extreme weather events and the widespread elimination of plant and animal species become normal, arid land causes major shortages to global agricultural production, and substantial parts of the world experience chronic water scarcity (IPCC 14, 18–19).

This is what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls the "planetary age" of the Anthropocene, where the "geologic agency" of the human species comes to the fore and collapses the established horizons of human and natural history (206–07). For Chakrabarty, this presents an unprecedented methodological challenge for contemporary historicist thought, which must now keep the scales of deep time and the modern world in a dialectical suspension of the kind that is condensed in his use of the phrase "planetary conjuncture"

4 For example, Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis* (1978), the first major publication of the Birmingham School, traced how the breakdown of the postwar consensus in the UK was experienced as a moral panic around a falsely reported (and racialized) spike in violent crime.

(199). "Planetary" designates the scale of global climate and the extent of the crisis, which unfolds in spatiotemporal coordinates that escape a human experience of the world while threatening its basic conditions (213, 220). "Conjuncture" is nevertheless retained to grapple with the causes and effects of the crisis, which requires the history of empire and capitalism found at the scale of human history (216–17). Accordingly, we do not experience ourselves as a species, while a critical grasp on the conjunctures of a geologic epoch demands the level of abstraction provided by the category.

Gayatri Spivak described a similar sense of the ontological alterity of the planet as early as 1997, but it is only in the last decade that a planetary turn has taken place in critical theory, in part reflecting the impact of Chakrabarty's seminal "Climate of History" essay, but also the growing presence of climate change across politics and culture more generally.[5] Ian Baucom groups the newer strands of materialist thought that emerged as part of this planetary turn under the heading Materialism II. Here, Baucom includes the work of Bruno Latour and Donna Haraway, alongside concepts like Timothy Morton's hyper-objects and Jane Bennett's notion of vibrant matter (15). Without collapsing their differences, they all represent attempts to account for the historical agencies of the nonhuman systems as foregrounded by climate change. These authors respond to the crisis by leaning into the alterity and relationality of the planet, decentering the notions of human agency and experience that have hitherto provided cultural studies with an organizing sense of scale and analytic standpoint.

Cultural studies provides an instructive before-and-after image of the planetary turn. Just prior to Chakrabarty's essay, Jennifer Daryl Slack addressed what she saw as the resistance of cultural studies to the "eco." Overly focused on the discursive realm of the popular, cultural studies for Slack "merely considers the eco as expressed in new and varied popular media" (479–80). Her article closes with a call to understand culture in nonanthropocentric terms, an argument with continued relevance in an era when the basic planetary conditions of human culture will undergo dramatic transformations. But the eco is not the planet. While Slack convincingly argues that cultural studies contains the nonreductive theoretical resources to acknowledge nonhuman vectors and their nondiscursive

5 "The globe is on our computers. It is the logo of the World Bank. No one lives there; and we think that we can aim to control globality. The planet is in the species of alterity, belonging to another system; and yet we inhabit it, indeed are it. It is not really amenable to a neat contrast with the globe. I cannot say 'on the other hand.' It will not engage in a double bind" (Spivak 338).

modalities, it is telling that the climate does not figure as one of them.[6] The situation is different a decade later. In a recent issue of *New Formations* (2020), published in memory of Stuart Hall, Ben Highmore discusses how the planetary scale of climate change asserts pressure on conjunctural analysis, which otherwise tends to limit itself to a dialogue between recent human history and the contemporary (albeit as an ideologically engaged choice) (29). This is not to say the field is transformed to the degree Slack called for in 2008; rather, Highmore illustrates how the methodological dilemma presented by climate change is now an "inescapable condition of critical thought" (Baucom 7).

But how does climate change press on cultural analysis? What does it look like post-planetary turn? If we follow Bal's definitions, cultural analysis involves "a foregrounding of the active presence of the object, or text, in the same historical space as inhabited by the [analyst]" (*Double Exposures* 11). Put differently, the object and the analyst bring their histories to an encounter in a historical present and theory is generated in the dialogue between them. The openness of this definition is both its strength and weakness. In eschewing explicit theoretical commitments, cultural analysis provides no coordinates or model for understanding context and analytic scale (all those histories). This allows the analyst to strategically consult the theory they deem appropriate to each encounter. Because of this, a cultural analysis of the heterogenous scale announced by climate change is perhaps easier to conduct than in a cultural studies approach that remains tethered to the conjuncture. And yet what is the horizon of cultural analysis's historical space? As with conjunctural analysis, it must be defined each time, as a kind of necessary fabrication on the part of the analyst. The drawback of Bal's definition is the space it creates for weak historical work, where the encounter with an object of study is interpreted in a way where the analyst privileges their immediate experience. In such a case, the historical present only reaches as far as the analyst's presence within it, and all sense of rigorous contextuality gets lost. The historical space of cultural analysis may act as a stage for object–subject dialogue, but it is likewise embedded in a socioeconomic and regional configuration, which is in turn now inescapably a planetary conjuncture.

As with context, cultural analysis does not predefine its object to the same degree as cultural studies (at least Grossberg's version of it). It can take a context or conjuncture as its object of study, but it does not have to

6 The word itself does not receive a mention. This is also the case for Slack's entry on "Environment/Ecology" in *New Keywords* (2005).

per se. I often see a narrower interpretation in practice, where the object of cultural analysis is almost by default a cultural artifact of some kind, be it a text or an artwork or an exhibition.[7] Because of this tendency, the way climate change enters the cultural analysis classroom frequently resembles Slack's description of cultural studies of the eco, where the planetary is thematic to a cultural object. Planetary theory (usually Materialism II) is then drawn upon in the analysis of said object, often to perform a kind of ekphrasis of planetary themes.

Though there is important work to do within this object–theory dialogue, my feeling is that the resulting analysis can find itself unanchored from both the historical present and the specificity of the object. It is also limited in precisely those ways rendered critical by the planetary turn. The inclination toward cultural objects, for instance, means a planetary-oriented cultural analysis may struggle to attend to climate change as something that is imminent or ongoing but unavailable to direct experience. In this respect, cultural analysis is perhaps troubled most by the planetary when it concerns not only the legibility of its object but the assumed possibility of encountering it in the first place. At the same time, a cultural analysis operating with the scale and concerns of much planetary theory risks missing how the effects of climate change play out right in front of us, contributing to the rhythms and textures of everyday life and conditioning the political possibilities therein. I see a parallel tendency in the classroom with various critiques of modernity, which often gesture at the present from what Chakrabarty calls the scale of human history, yet without returning to the specificity of the moment and the speaking position of the analyst within it. Acknowledging the planetary has become something of an established move in critical theory, and I worry overuse is rendering planetary cultural analyses similar in structure to these critiques, operating as a form of political desire (and as the following section will show, an increasingly unaligned one) that "trumps the actual empirical and theoretical work of analysis" (Grossberg 54).

The coming decade demands methodological choices that facilitate movement between the scales signaled by Chakrabarty's "planetary conjunctures."

7 In these cases, the context of the object being studied—its history, location, reception, and so on—enters the analysis but should not subsume the object, which remains center stage, following Bal ("5 Principles"). This appears to be the most prominent difference between cultural studies and cultural analysis. For Grossberg, the priority between (initial) object and context is the reverse. Cultural studies performs the close readings of cultural artifacts, phenomena, and forms that cultural analysis is known for, but these are considered an entrance into a context, the initial "point of articulation" where the conjuncture's lines of determination crystallize (Grossberg 26).

With respect to the deep time of fossilized carbon and the futurity of its combustion as fuel, the critique of energy offers one way of seeing how the present and future are variously saturated and structured by mediated forms of the planetary. The following section sketches a globalized energy landscape increasingly equated with the specter of a green energy transition, albeit by returning to the local, conjunctural level of the IJ, before moving outwards to a recent case of climate action in Amsterdam. I am arguing for the necessity of reading a crisis that challenges the ability to do so, and forwarding, as I have started to here, a multiscalar form of cultural analysis that can attend to the textuality of an ever-shifting present.

Greening the Crisis

The IJ graffiti lies around midway between the NDSM wharf and the waterfront offices of Shell, which sit just a little further up from the Film Museum on the river's north side. This means my commute provided a real-time view of the 2021 rebrand of the offices: what was the Shell Technology Centre is now called the Energy Transition Campus Amsterdam. NDSM, meanwhile, is a vast former shipyard that built Shell's oil tankers in the 1960s, taken over in the 1990s by squatters to create affordable work and living spaces for artists. A more recent commercialization process followed, with the wharf held up as the acceptable face of a fully subsumed underground Amsterdam, becoming a key node in an ongoing gentrification process of the city's northern neighborhoods. Together with Shell's renamed offices, NDSM's post-postindustrial gloss grates against the reality found a little further west on the river's south bank, where the Port of Amsterdam's Petroleumhaven remains the largest gasoline port in the world.

The IJ is a quintessential "oil space," a term used by Carola Hein to describe how oil's physical and financial flows are encoded in the built environments of the everyday (887–89). A fifteen-minute ferry ride along the river provides a somatic experience of these flows but also suggests that the renewal of petroleum's texturing of the world currently takes place with a belated appearance. Fossil fuels are hegemonic in the global energy mix but feel late, out of time. Alongside the emerging cultural presence of an energy transition indexed by Shell's offices, this sense of disjuncture is a distinguishing experiential feature of a global energy regime in crisis. Large historical processes crystallize here, as the afterlives of colonialism and carbonized industrialization produce increasingly legible planetary effects in the present, which in turn bring more recent and localized shifts into

the fold. In domestic political spheres, climate denialism and single-issue environmental parties increasingly give way to a proliferation of eco-political articulations across the spectrum, while the governing paradigm of international climate governance shifts from a sole focus on mitigation to include adaptation strategies (IPCC 20). In both spheres, *transition* emerges as the political and infrastructural fix to the crisis, aiming to trigger a historically unprecedented shift away from carbon-fueled societies to a global energy system that is based on renewable energy.

As a mainstreamed form of post-oil futurity, transition at first seems to invalidate the concept of an environmental and energy "impasse," which has been at the center of energy humanities scholarship since Imre Szeman first named it as such in 2011. Impasse names the gap between knowledge and action resulting from an imaginative inability to think beyond our dominant energy ontologies, or, to paraphrase Szeman, of knowing where we stand with energy and doing nothing about it (324). It is this very sense of inaction and stagnation that transition, with its aura of forward movement and measured change, promises to overcome. But Mark Simpson and Szeman argue that transition ultimately carries a temporal "stuckness" that consolidates the impasse (80). Drawing on its presence in international climate discourse, the authors argue that transition's dominant narrative mode pivots on a "progressive script" of energy history, where a sequential movement from one energy regime to the next perpetually plots clean energy as "just over the horizon" (81). Far from ushering in a new era of energy, transition weds people to a representation of the future "that operates through deferral" (83); it is a narrative foil that lends the impasse its distinct temporality.

I am drawn to the way a constantly shifting conjuncture can be experienced as stuckness, particularly when it is lived through practices of global hypermobility (Wenzel 21). But Simpson and Szeman's short article necessarily operates at an abstracted distance. As much as the dominant logic of transition reproduces neoliberal hegemony through a "technological fix" to climate change, it also interacts with the dynamics of concrete contexts (83). As a case in point, in January 2023, a coalition of activist groups occupied a disused building on the University of Amsterdam (UvA) campus to petition the university to end its collaboration with Shell, which cofinances four research projects relating to energy transition, health, and the environment. After the activists refused to leave, the university called upon riot police to break up the protest and evacuate the occupied building by force. It was one of many coordinated actions in the Netherlands as well as part of a global coalition of student-led protests demanding fossil fuel divestment and climate justice. The occupation itself followed a series of

protests and petitions in December addressing the UvA–Shell relationship. In response, UvA defended the collaboration on the basis that it was a valuable contribution to the energy transition (University of Amsterdam). Official communication repeatedly emphasized shared "concerns about the climate," and specified that the university does not engage in research promoting fossil fuels or accept sponsorship from the fossil fuel industry (Lintsen).

Transition, as Simpson and Szeman suggest, has become the organizing paradigm for an incorporated green politics that amounts to a business-as-usual approach to climate change.[8] The police response to the UvA occupation further shows how any genuinely oppositional or alternative articulations of transition are either incorporated into this business-as-usual approach or excluded through criminalization. There is also a process of neutralization involved, with the activists' demand for divestment from neocolonial extractivism rearticulated onto the far less threatening terrain of climate concern (University Rebellion 6). The rebranding of Shell's offices on the IJ symbolizes this incorporated version of transition and reflect a wider pattern in global energy, where major fossil fuel companies are diversifying their portfolios and rebranding as *energy companies*, positioning themselves as leading players in the transition. This shifted terrain is willfully misread by the University when it claims it does not promote fossil fuels.

In a short space of time, transition has become part of our everyday lexicon on climate change, condensing dreams of an electrified world that may, in fact, serve to keep existing infrastructural realities in place. Thus, as a symptom of, and response to, global warming that unfolds at the level of the conjuncture, it presents a point of entry into the way the climate crisis is lived as impasse. My discussion builds on Simpson and Szeman's critique by highlighting the conjunctural specificity of the impasse: political interests create context-bound impasses which together keep us gridded to a 4°C future. My analysis of the current culture and politics of the climate crisis also shows how transition's emerging ubiquity is mirrored by the status of the planetary as the "inescapable condition" of contemporary critical theory (Baucom 7). The planetary has become part of an everyday lexicon for cultural studies, and like transition, emerges as both a symptom of and

8 Part of its force is the way it allows other objects to condense around it. Things like carbon capture, net zero, green growth, and emissions budgets each materialize a certain understanding of the crisis that determines the kind of response it requires. From an energy humanities perspective, these are financial and technological answers to climate change, but also serve as narrative fictions that require ongoing processes of legitimation.

response to the crisis. It, too, reflects how fast the everyday experience of climate change has morphed in recent years, and how quickly critical paradigms can settle and harden as part of this.

Cultural Analysis without Guarantees

What is it like to teach and study cultural analysis in this climate? What can it do? The conjuncture suggests that, alongside questions of scale and the phenomenology of the object, part of the methodological question for cultural analysis in the near future is how to avoid generating forms of knowledge that are to some extent already incorporated and neutralized, while still not actualized at a sociopolitical level. The beginning of an answer may be found in a certain responsiveness demonstrated by the UvA occupation. By staying close to the conjuncture, the activists disarticulate the green mirage of Shell's transition and follow it with a process of rearticulation in the form of concrete demands that together constitute a different vision for how the transition can materialize at the university. Understood as a critically engaged realization of a broad consensus on fossil fuels, the occupation cautions against a reductive division between theory and practice, and also encourages the kind of critical activity that cultural analysis is known for. By no means do I want to suggest there is a vanguard position for cultural analysis here. I merely point to the need for critical thinking in the shifting circumstances I have been discussing, specifically a form of analysis that can provide a reading of a situation. In this respect, cultural analysis is well-placed to contribute to (perhaps even by taking stock of) the different forms of knowledge being produced about climate change at the university.

By generating theory and action in response to the historical present, the UvA occupation reminds us that the strategic use of theory (Grossberg 27) and heuristic use of concepts (Bal, "5 Principles") are cornerstones of cultural studies as well as cultural analysis. This is the principle of using and producing theory without letting it become "a master discourse" (Bal, "5 Principles") or a guarantee of good politics (Grossberg 28–29). Considering the renewed incorporation of climate critique alongside some of the methodological tendencies I have been discussing, the conjuncture occasions a renewed commitment to this principle. In moving toward the near future "without guarantees" (Hall), it is also worth remembering that there is no necessary correlation between the forces that constitute a conjunctural shift and the cultural objects that provide an entry point into it. Hall et al.'s

Policing the Crisis (1978) reached the breakdown of the postwar consensus in the UK via the phenomenon of mugging. The climate and energy crisis will likewise not necessarily be felt at sites and in cultural expressions that we would usually associate with the eco, the environment, or the planet. I also don't mean to suggest climate and energy are the only defining elements of the conjunctures to come. Definitions need to be continuously revised by readdressing the problem-space: What is the crisis? What order is unraveling and reasserting itself?

I have been suggesting how the planetary turn can take cultural analysis away from the specificity of the present, depoliticizing the very methodological challenges the former brings to light. At worst, a planetary cultural analysis enacts a theoretical domestication, an uncritical normalization of the planetary, by rehearsing conceptual moves divorced from the conjunctural specificity of climate change—as if it's not already here in rising shorelines, in our weather, and in our politics. But cultural analysis equally has the capacity to orient itself in relation to this terrain. Considering how energy textures the present, be it through the built environment, local politics, or the emerging cultural ubiquity of an energy transition, a cultural analysis of energy provides one (but by no means the only) way of keeping the planetary in tension with the historicity of the everyday. A practice of cultural analysis that moves between analytic scales can attend to the contingency of the present, offering not a fixed position but an improvised vantage point onto a planetary conjuncture in motion.

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Part Four

Social Relevance and Intervention

12. From Social Relevance to Public Intervention: Cultural Analysis in and out of the Classroom

Aylin Kuryel

Abstract: One of the defining features of the practice of cultural analysis is its insistence on testing the bearing of concepts by putting them in dialogue with the contemporary in order to produce socially relevant analysis. I propose to "test" the concept of social relevance itself by attending to its travels across contemporary contexts, and bringing another concept, intervention, into the conversation. While "being relevant to" implies a prior knowability of a context according to which the (ir)relevance of analysis can be measured, "intervening into" suggests the possibility of reconfiguring that very context through analysis. To unpack this, I focus on "public intervention" as a pedagogical tactic and offer examples of students' interventions from the courses I taught in the last few years.

Keywords: public intervention, social relevance, knowledge production, social struggles, classroom, critical pedagogy

It was the very first class I taught, "Against Culture," in the Cultural Analysis program at the University of Amsterdam in 2015. This elective BA course was thrilling for me as it covered my long-term enthusiasm for theories of the avant-garde, aesthetics, and resistance.[1] As the coteacher and I set foot in the classroom in the Bungehuis, the central humanities building, and started introducing the course that centered around the work of the

1 I am grateful to Joost de Bloois who initially designed this inspiring course, and Daan Wesselman for being a great coteacher who made it a pleasure to go through the worries and excitements of first-time teaching.

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Situationist International, its prehistories, and afterlives (Marx, Althusser, Dadaism, Frankfurt School, Dutch Provos, Invisible Committee, culture jamming, etc.), a student passionately voiced his objections. This was a pretentious course that hypocritically claimed to cover radical theories and practices in a crumbling neoliberal university, he said. Was this not an act of co-option? Could there be any relevance in talking about radicality in these institutionalized spaces of critique?

It was a few sessions later that the same student caught the coteacher and me at the door and handed us a bumpy envelope. Inside: a typewritten text—a manifesto?—with a small, toyish dynamite taped to it.[2] The text said things like we, the lecturers of this course, could only be as radical as Lady Gaga, and that "the society of the spectacle" should be dismantled in its totality, including its universities. I recall some thoughts we shared after the student quickly left the scene: Was this a creative gesture provoked by the theories and practices covered in the course, calling for the integration of art, politics, and everyday life? A Dadaist collage; a "created situation"? An act akin to the young rebel who interrupted Jacques Lacan's lecture in 1972 by spilling water and flour over his notes, while talking about the remains of the avant-garde and the decaying spectacle? (Could we keep our calm like Lacan who smoked his cigar as he watched the action and then continued lecturing?) Or, akin to the students who bared their breasts to protest Adorno for calling the police during the occupation of the University of Frankfurt in 1969? Yet, didn't the coordinates of our present cast the "dynamite" in a different light: a rather empty gesture without the backdrop of an unfolding collective history? Was it even something to report as we were not sure whether the explosive was real? Or, should we take it as a foreshadowing of the "public intervention exercise" we had planned for the end of the course performed by an impatient and prescient student? Here is my intervention, here is my object of analysis! If so, shouldn't we incite him to take this act as a relevant object of analysis and read it closely in the spirit of cultural analysis?

Some months later, the building in which we were teaching was occupied by a group of students and staff members protesting the university's plans to sell the building and the planned budget cuts that hit humanities the hardest. One of the banners hung on the building echoed the student's sentiments: "Free university in a capitalist society is like a lecture hall in prison." During the occupation of the Bungehuis, and later the Maagdenhuis (the administrative headquarters that was first occupied in 1969), some of

2 The text with the dynamite was hung on the wall of my house for some time, but I sadly lost it as I moved so many houses in Amsterdam over the years.

the theorists we read in classes came to be part of the general assemblies (Mieke Bal, David Graeber, Jacques Rancière). Two members of the Dutch Provos were there, too, speaking about the (dis)continuities between theory and practice, in the very room we taught "Against Culture." Now the fancy Soho Club, which has a swimming pool on its roof, stands in the place of the Bungehuis. The old sign is still at the entrance and the queries that this anecdote encapsulates for me persist: How to think of the social relevance and political context of "doing" cultural analysis, as well as the critical pedagogical tactics that can help revisit these questions?

The larger field of cultural studies, and the practice of cultural analysis situated in it with its distinct object-oriented and concept-driven methodology, have been haunted by the question of relevance—the traffic between inside and outside of text, classroom, academia. As Mieke Bal formulated it, the practice of cultural analysis is envisioned in constant conversation with a contemporary living culture where both the critic and the objects of analysis are situated (*Double Exposures* 11). The knowledge produced not *about* but *with* objects is an integral part of the present—hence, analysis is socially relevant; it matters now and for now (*Travelling Concepts* 9). From this vantage point, theory cannot be treated as a master discourse and the relevance of concepts needs to be "tested" by putting them in dialogue with the living culture, the contemporary. In line with this methodology, I propose to "test" the concept of social relevance itself, defined as one of the principles of cultural analysis by Bal ("5 Principles"), by putting it in dialogue with the contemporary—the social and political coordinates in which the practice of cultural analysis takes place—and while doing that, to bring in another concept, intervention, into the conversation.

Despite the meticulous and inspirational methodological premises that surround social relevance, the notion itself is often not comprehensively unpacked and it appears as a rather broad concept that implies some form of contemporaneity, connectivity, and functionality. In its varying connotations, it seems to suggest a preexisting social field to which analysis is pertinent and applicable, and in which what is relevant can be known in advance. To be "relevant *to*" implies a prior knowability of the tenets and needs of a context according to which the (ir)relevance of knowledge/analysis can be measured. Perhaps this is also what makes social relevance, beyond cultural analysis, a useful term for the administrative bodies to talk about how knowledge/research/departments contribute to the (cultural and economic) vibrancy and prestige of the institutions. In this sense, relevance comes rather closer to other beloved notions of the neoliberal university such as efficiency and impact.

By contrast, "intervene *into*" might allow putting the emphasis on being/becoming part of what is engaged with, without assuming a preexisting context. It is suggestive of the possibility of a rupture, a reconfiguration, a gathering of that very context through analysis itself. By proposing an ongoing scrutiny of what relevance itself might be, the notion of intervention puts forward the process rather than the outcome, redirecting attention to the political context(s) of doing cultural analysis. What I suggest is not merely replacing one term (relevance) with another (intervention), but taking the latter as an epistemological, methodological, and pedagogical means to revisit and insist on the "practice" aspect of cultural analysis. Revisiting cultural analysis through the conceptual lens of intervention can be a way to attend to not only how the object "speaks back" to the analyst (Bal), but also how our involvement shapes the object and its context. In this sense, it is indicative of a certain temporality for analysis: not only thinking of the past as part of the present, but also the present as part of the future. This can also help thinking further on the ways in which our modes of doing research, teaching—which we tend to talk less about[3]—and students' productions are moved by and move with the world, step in and out of institutional spaces, resonate with the urgencies of the present.

In what follows, I will first visit some of the theoretical, social, and political contexts to which the concept of relevance travels, then provide and reflect on a number of "public interventions" students conducted in the context of Amsterdam from the courses I taught within the last few years. These examples help to unpack the concept of intervention by providing little gateways between the inside and outside of the classroom (without assuming neat distinctions but attending to transitions and many other possible positions in between), resonating with a much larger history of attempts not only to take theory outside of the classroom but to put the classroom itself out of the university. Rather than being illustrative or prescriptive, they help revisit the position of analyst/teacher/student: one less akin to a detective looking for relevant meaning by meandering the world of texts/objects and closer to subjects active in meaning making in the spaces they inhabit, relations they shape, realities they contest.

3 There are attempts to address teaching more often in our program in recent years: "mixed classroom workshops" in which the most productive aspect, in my experience, was not the neat teaching methods offered by the organizers but the rather messy reflections we shared as colleagues; as well as our recent discussions on revisiting course names and content; the program committee meetings; unplanned moments of sharing teaching experiences in the university corridors, or over drinks.

"The Point, However, Is to Change It"

Perhaps it all starts with Karl Marx's famous words, also inscribed on his tombstone: "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways. The point, however, is to change it." Cultural analysis—and the larger field of cultural studies—is likely to be the field in which the tension between interpreting and changing has been the most rampant. Since its emergence at the Birmingham School in 1964, cultural studies was imagined as a political and pedagogical project that aims to "interrupt the ideological field" (Hall 112). Theory was envisioned not only as a skillful flaneur of semiotics detecting ideological mechanisms, but also a comrade in the anti-hegemonic historical struggles.[4] The desire, as formulated by Stuart Hall, was to create "some kind of organized intellectual political work, which does not try to inscribe itself in the overarching meta-narrative of achieved knowledges, within the institution" (275). Hall perceived pedagogy as part of this intellectual production and teaching as the ongoing work of an intellectual practice. Since then, cultural studies has been imagined as a fundamentally critical pedagogical project (Aksikas et al.). A pedagogy that is disruptive of the functionalist approaches (Miller), akin to Deleuzian "minor" practices based on collective work (Calvente et al.), a struggle over political agency (Giroux, *On Critical Pedagogy*). A pedagogy of hope that sees the classroom as part of the struggles against social injustices (bell hooks). The aspiration to interrupt and transform the political realm through intellectual work, a unifying element in the early days of cultural studies, according to Andrew Ross and Paul Smith, has later turned into "something like a phantom limb" (246).

Increasing institutionalization and professionalization were already among the troubles Hall recited while reflecting on the legacies of cultural studies in 1992 in his "Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies." In the current landscape where these processes not only lingered but took wild turns, humanities/social sciences are increasingly forced to defend their "relevance" by administrative/funding bodies that assess, valorize, and grant resources. Meanwhile, critical theory and theorists are attacked in different forms and diverse contexts where right-wing, authoritarian, and neoliberal

4 I recently encountered the call for the Socialism 2023 conference in Chicago in which "culture" is a separate subject category, standing next to other categories such as Climate Justice, Gender–Sexuality–Liberation, Housing Justice, Racism and Anti-racism, Labor Movement, Socialist Strategy, etc. It seems to be telling of how other disciplines producing "politically useful" knowledge come to regard "the analysis of culture" in a way that is in stark opposition with cultural studies/analysis's self-definition.

elements take varying combinations, increasingly so in the last two decades. A quick enumeration discloses the disturbing connections in this global map: protests are organized against "cultural Marxism" and critical race theory in the US; feminist academics are accused of spreading gender ideology and climate activism in Brazil; "wokism" and gender-neutral pronouns evoke moral panic for the French government; gender/postcolonial theories are held responsible for threatening heteronormative family and national unity in Denmark, Romania, Hungary, and in many other places where programs are shut down or faced further budget cuts. Not only effigies are burnt, as happened to Judith Butler's in São Paulo, but scholars themselves are targeted in myriad ways: academics are declared to be "terrorists" and put on trial in Turkey for showing solidarity with the Kurdish struggle, put in prison in India for criticizing the caste system, doxed in the Netherlands where the right has labeled humanities as a "leftist hobby." All these incidents mark a strange moment in which, on the one hand, critical knowledge production is in need of self-defense to prove its "relevance"—most of all, for institutional survival. On the other hand, while its producers are attacked, knowledge itself seems to be ominously "relevant" in creating contemporary villains, fabricating moral panic, and reproducing hegemonic discourses. In both cases, a rather instrumental role is cast to knowledge in a social field that is tried to be maintained as it is, attempting to prevent the capacity of knowledge to intervene into the course of things.

Meanwhile, theoretical sound bites travel from classrooms to YouTube philosophy channels[5] and Netflix series; they become tweets, hashtags, wall writings, slogans; pop up in discussions among friends, around family dinner tables (or in the refusal to join those tables). At times too easily employed to the extent of semantic satiation, or reduced to instruments, and other times mobilizing contexts politically and affectively. The world unfolds as we teach—wars, climate crisis, pandemic, migration, wave of protests—perpetuating the need for revisiting existing theoretical models, concepts, and pedagogies. The question of relevance comes forward in the lives of students (of cultural analysis and beyond), too, tied to these developments, and often to an unease about their future and the applicability of knowledge produced in the university to the world out there ("What will I do with all these?"). What I often observe is that when theory meets practice in the lives of students, enquiries on relevance become less heavy, change

5 Last year, a student of literary and cultural analysis told me that they chose the program after watching the videos of ContraPoints, the amazing cultural critic of YouTube, and searching for an academic program where similar conversations would happen.

shape, and the level of passion in engaging with theory, as well as the rigor of analysis increases. Not only a sharper light seems to be cast on concepts in these moments, but close reading becomes more patient, scrupulous, and creative. Analysis then turns into a form of "engag(ing) the world as an object of both critical analysis and hopeful transformation" (Giroux, *On Critical Pedagogy* 14). The fact that there is no outside position from which to read, analyze, and interfere is acknowledged and theory starts accompanying processes that students are part of, while organizing around issues as diverse (and connected) as hikes in tuition fees, universities' ties with fossil fuel companies, privatization, decarbonization, gender equality, or structural racism.[6]

These transitions and negotiations (of ideas, actions, and bodies) between inside and outside of the university make it arduous to settle on a definition as to when and to what extent something produced in a classroom is relevant to the outside, and the other way around. It becomes essential then to ask how these dynamics unfold in particular localities in ways that can intervene into the assumed margins of relevancy and carve out a space for a more vigorous traffic between the so-called inside and outside of the classroom. In the context of an international cultural analysis program with a growing number of students, what does it mean, for instance, to attend to the living culture of Amsterdam as our shared context—while reading decolonial theories in a city whose colonial history has become an increasingly visible (and surprisingly delayed) subject for scholars, while governmental and cultural institutions carry out mostly ostensible maneuvers to stay in the conversation? Or, what falls short when we analyze the intricacies of one's encounter with a work of art today without addressing how these institutions (fail to) respond to the unfolding political unrest? How to avoid a form of reading, say, on creative industries without talking about students' unpaid internships, or on ecocriticism without discussing the university's ties with

6 As I write this, a discussion night about alternative visions on the future of universities at Pakhuis de Zwijger in Amsterdam (June 5, 2023) was introduced as following: "This May alone, around 70 schools & universities in Europe were occupied, of which at least 8 took place in the Netherlands. They call for radical change in their educational institutions concerning various topics ranging from decarbonization, gender discrimination, decolonization, democratization, and the overall way in which knowledge is produced and distributed. The occupied spaces were filled with colorful banners, and autonomous areas where students and staff could learn together, debate, craft, rest, and eat free food. And it's ruffled some feathers already, as the Vrije Universiteit reacted by cutting all ties with fossil fuel companies." As a sign of the desire to "connect the dots" that permeates the call, the following words are remarkable: "Why are the End Fossil occupations also holding banners against capitalism, against cops on campus, and for a Free Palestine?," https://dezwijger.nl/programma/whos-education-our-education.

Fig. 12.1. Public intervention: *Rent a Room*. Photograph by Adela Wagner.

fossil fuel companies? How to shorten the distance between the texts on politics of space we read in class and the Voku/queer nights at a legalized squat five minutes away? I want to continue with a—rather long—list of student interventions from last years' literary and cultural analysis courses to keep thinking on critical pedagogical tactics that can help tackling these questions and can perhaps rid us, to a certain extent, of having to choose between unviable expectations about the political efficacy of theory, on the one hand, and the rather totalizing views on the co-option of the academe with its "phantom limbs," on the other.

Making of and Moving with Objects[7]

A group of students sit on cartoon boards in front of the university building with a sign that reads: "To Rent: Room with assistance from UvA, max. stay:

7 I am thankful to all the students in the courses "Against Culture" (2015), "Case Studies: Cultural Analysis" (2018), and "Introduction to Literary and Cultural Analysis" (2022) who are behind the "public interventions" some of which are mentioned here. In addition, I want to thank

14 days. Apply now, get the room in 2025, decided by bingo tournament." They start and record conversations about the housing crisis with passersby with whom they share experiences and tactics.

Sixteen students collectively compose a handwritten poem on a large piece of paper, titled "SLAMsterdam," which starts with the following words: "For UvA student housing I applied; but my hopes and dreams, they quickly died."

Arrows, words, and tape are placed in the university building to investigate which parts of the building are used and by whom, making invisible borders visible.

Price tags are placed on the not-for-sale objects in the recently privatized canteen (lamps, tables, etc.); chalk is used to write on the recently painted walls that host the canteen's feel-good slogans as if they were blackboards; quotations from Guy Debord, Mark Fisher, Nancy Fraser are left on the tables. (Isn't capitalism "the master category or framing concept for all serious social theorizing?" Fraser asks in one of them.)

Students dressed up like municipal workers approach passersby in the city center and introduce their project while handing out a flyer: "The project changes parts of the city from seventeenth-century infrastructure to modern and vibrant shopping streets. The renewal means more space for tourists and more space to enjoy Amsterdam. With this project, the canal will be drained, filled, and rebuilt into the new Singelgracht." They distribute small bottles filled with canal water as a souvenir which people mostly enthusiastically accept.

Posters promoting "In Defense of Amsterdam's Ugliest Buildings" are pasted on the walls of certain Amsterdam buildings, including P.C. Hoofthuis, which has been listed on the "ugliest places in the world" website. According to the students, these are in fact cheap real estate or educational organizations that provide shelter amidst the housing crisis, which have a unique ability to escape gentrification due to their "ugliness." The posters invite people to come into the buildings, take pictures, show them affection, and contemplate why they are excluded from the map of cultural sites in Amsterdam, which mainly consists of eighteenth-century houses of rich merchants, monarchy-sponsored museums, and concert halls. ("Wasn't culture 'ordinary,' as Raymond Williams said?" they ask while presenting their intervention.)

the coteachers of these courses, Daan Wesselman, Jeff Diamanti, and Irina Souch, who were enthusiastic about incorporating public interventions as a course component and integrated it in their groups.

Fig. 12.2. Public intervention: *Singelgracht*. Photograph by Aylin Kuryel.

Students are in Cuyperspassage, the tunnel at the Amsterdam Central Station, with its tiles depicting the warship Rotterdam and the Herring Fleet. They wear red clothes, which, when combined with the blue/white of the tiles, form the colors of the Dutch flag. They sing children's folk songs, which later become their objects of analysis to discuss where the "cultural

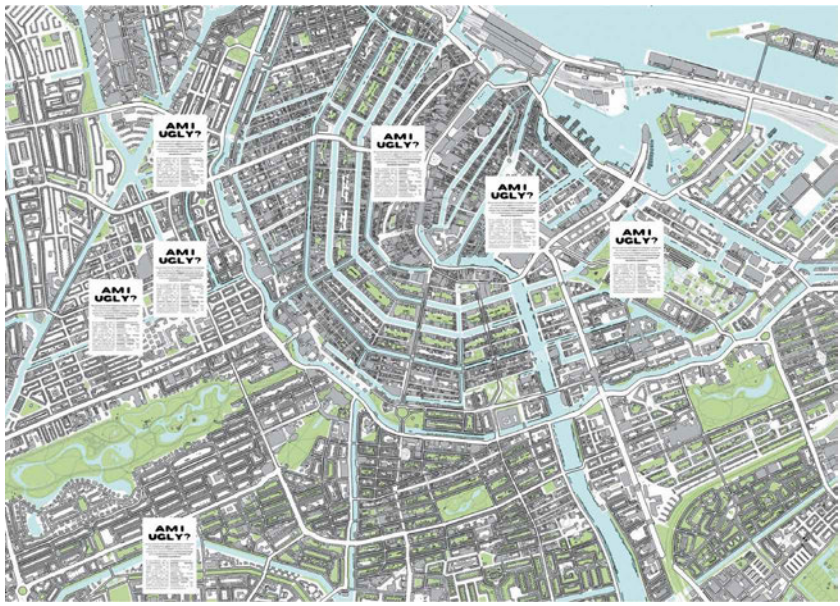

Fig. 12.3. Public intervention: *In Defense of Amsterdam's Ugliest Buildings.*

memory" that Edward Said and Gloria Wekker talks about can be found and how it can be interfered with by reconfiguring urban spaces.

Students are at Max Euweplein, where the first prison in Amsterdam was built in 1850, which was later used as "waiting rooms" for Jews during the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands. They invite volunteers in this now highly touristic space to circle around the square by walking just like the prisoners once did. After a while, they reveal the history of the space to the participants. This becomes their case to explore the capacity of bodily performances to reshuffle what is visible and what not in the city.

Students stand in front of the Bushuis/Oost-Indisch Huis, which is currently the Humanities Faculty of the University of Amsterdam (UvA), and hold handmade posters on the building's history of colonialism. They put up stickers on public statues and houses to make the history visible.

Tampons attached to public toilets become the starting point to discuss urination inequality, unequal distribution of accessibility, and the patriarchy of things. (There are thirty-five toilets designed for use while standing up, but there are only three for sitting—and none have wheelchair access.)

Old images of buildings that were once squatted in are printed and pasted on their now mostly privately owned walls by a group of students. The images

are brought into class as objects for analysis by another group of students (without them knowing it was the work of their classmates). "Can we look at the city as a living archive and walls as media?" they ask.

A student reads a "climate poem" out loud in the heart of Amsterdam, which later becomes an object to be unpacked through concepts such as ecocriticism, metaphor, and externality.

A poster of Putin is hung on the walls of the Hermitage Museum with a caption underneath, "Ceci n'est pas un saveur," the image of which becomes the case through which the relationship of language and ideology is discussed in class.

Students take pictures of human-made lakes, fountains, parks, and canals in Amsterdam to explore the nature/culture divide; they hand out seeds to strangers in small envelopes to be spread in the city.

A flyer distributed in the school corridors as a conversation starter on spaces that make people comfortable to talk about gender, love, right-wing discourses, prescriptions for hormones, and Dutch policies on transgender rights.

Museum politics is discussed by taking as an object of analysis the huge blank poster students stretched on the grass, in front of the Van Gogh Museum, inviting people to sit and collectively draw.

Students discuss how the nation is "flagged" through the Palestinian flags they distribute on the spots where they see Israeli flags in the city.

Starting from the Middle

These public interventions are designed, realized, and reported in class (in forms students choose) in groups of three to four people as a pass/fail course component.[8] To realize the interventions, students pick an issue in their proximity and start from the middle. They frame their case through the theories discussed, set up a scene, decide on a form, negotiate risks, and devise ways of acting together and communicating with others. They go in and out of the classroom to "make" their objects, try out different media to frame their analysis: creative writing, storytelling, performance, collective drawing, video, photo, flyer, poster, tape, sticker,

8 The paradox remains of having to "assess" public interventions academically, which I try to reduce by keeping grading out of the conversation. In rare incidents of a student not participating at all, I told them they can do an intervention in the future and send me a report, postponing "failing the assignment" to a future where failing would not matter anymore.

bottles, tampons. Roles vary—student, analyst, activist, inhabitant of the city, poet, performer, friend, guest, host—and the diversity of tactics activates different senses—vision, hearing, smell, touch. They switch between anecdotal and theoretical in framing their interventions, or close reading some elements that emerge from the interventions, as their object of analysis. Their own involvement in the making of objects facilitates dwelling on the affective aspect of analyzing: joy, shame, fear, boredom, hesitations, obsessions, compassions, failures, and jokes. For me, these moments help immensely to have an understanding of us, students and myself, as complicated entities with engagements, curiosities, confusions, skills, emotions, with histories and aspirations, not as beginners but as situated in myriad theoretical, political, affective trajectories, who start from the middle.

Adding public interventions as a course component—perhaps a way of intervening in the course manual and flow—for me, stemmed from the urge to seek ways in which students dwell on the idea that they are the subjects of politics on which theory contemplates, instead of being exposed to theories that will reveal the hidden ideological mechanisms for them. I see them as small-scale experiments on becoming "border-crossers" in the sense that Giroux's critical pedagogy envisions students, teachers, theorists as "moving in and out of the resources, histories, and narratives" (*Pedagogy and the Politics of Hope* 251). In this sense, these are not so much moments when ideas are simply transferred to the public, or tested there, but processes in which ideas take shape as they move in and out, as they touch different surfaces and are fine-tuned.

I put some questions on the table in advance, adjusted to the content of the course and in dialogue with the particular texts we read: What makes you curious, attracted to, disturbed in your surroundings? Why do you move, move closer or away, get less or more involved in these? If Amsterdam is an archive, what would you search in it and by which means? How to zoom into the mundane, throw a rather awkwardly long glance at what seems to be ordinary, explore clichés, which "might be tropes with complex genealogies" (Berlant 110)? What about the dynamics of belonging and refusal in analysis—as Bal says, referring to Spivak, analysis often involves "saying no to what you inhabit," but "the dwelling makes the 'no' more complicated, just as much as the other way around" (*Double Exposures* 11)? If analysis takes place in a context, in which ways do you imagine the analysis to be shaped by and in turn shape the context? What does the context and the way we move in it tell us about the concepts through which we step in it in the first place? Can these interventions serve as entry points into further

research, fieldwork, collective action, through the insights they bring (or fall short in doing so) on the localities and urgencies?

These attempts to nurture the collective and processual aspect of doing cultural analysis, with a focus on involvement, interaction, and intervention, suggest a different temporality of doing theory—not only thinking of the past as part of the present, but also present as part of the future. It also propounds a different status of the object as not only "listened to" while doing some kind of detective work in search of meaning that is relevant to an outside, but as something to move together with an insistence on the desire to intervene into. The potential of an intervention to alter things, leave marks, or revisit the assumptions on what is (ir)relevant surely stands next to the limitations it is bound up with the given theoretical, institutional, and political coordinates. Yet, the notion of intervention itself remains an epistemological guiding principle. Berlant asks: "[W]hen scholars study the present how can anyone know whether they know anything that counts, that matters, that should survive its utterance?" (110). We probably can't. Yet, we can keep asking what it means to count and matter by intervening into the assumed margins of relevance through theoretical, practical, pedagogical means.

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13. Toward a Decolonial Classroom: Resituating Cultural Analysis as Pedagogical Intervention

Aslı Özgen

Abstract: Although a significant body of theory regarding decolonization and the process of decolonizing higher education exists, implementing this theory into lived educational experience remains a challenge. In this chapter, I propose that the cultural analysis framework offers a promising approach to bridge the insights of decolonial thought with the dynamics of a university classroom. Following a contextual overview of ongoing efforts aimed at decolonizing universities, I highlight three nexuses of action, pivotal in dismantling colonial knowledge paradigms. I explore the potential intersections between the decolonial critique of university and the lens of cultural analysis. I examine these dynamics through the case study of designing and implementing a course at the University of Amsterdam.

Keywords: decolonizing toolkits, coloniality, decolonial pedagogy, university, diversity, cultural analysis

A teacher needs to know how not to know.
—Mieke Bal ("Critical Intimacy" 286)

Although the theory on decoloniality and decolonizing higher education is substantial, how to translate that theory into lived learning experience remains a pressing question. As the editors of *Decolonising Curricula and Pedagogies* state, "while debates on decoloniality and decolonization have proliferated at a theoretical level, work on operationalizing them within the

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academy is just the beginning; there is a gap between high-level decolonial theory and its practices of implementation" (Morreira et al. 2). The many "decolonizing toolkits" do present some models, yet not all of these models are suitable to apply across disciplines and varying classroom compositions. The question persists: As a teacher, how do I practice decolonial pedagogy? What am I going to do when I walk into the classroom in order to avoid falling back into and repeating colonial epistemological paradigms?

Below I argue that cultural analysis framework promises concrete entry points to bridge the wisdom of decolonial thought to a university classroom setting. First, I contextualize the current initiatives to decolonize higher education, spotlighting three important nexuses of action to dismantle colonial epistemologies in learning practices. Second, I take these as a basis to elaborate on how decolonial critique of higher education and cultural analysis might be put into dialogue to imagine concrete points of entry in a learning environment. As a case study, I focus on the lived experience of designing a course modeled on decolonial pedagogy at the University of Amsterdam's Media Studies program and the collective learning environment it facilitated.

When codeveloping this course, we agreed on two key premises: "activating diversity from within" and "stimulating connections beyond the university, i.e., communities, cultural institutions, and the city."[1] Still, there were challenges in evading conventional methods. How to design a class that prompts students to delink from their "learned" expectations—of teaching, performance, assessment? How to unsettle the duality of teacher and student to stimulate critical reflection on one's own role in the knowledge production?

Can the University Be Decolonized, or Should It Even Be?

Initially, confronting the university's colonial past presents itself as a challenge: "Should decolonizing projects even be concerned with the university as an institution?" (Bhambra et al. 4). Why decolonize the university specifically? Critics of decolonizing higher education pointed to the risks of metaphorizing an activist legacy (see Tuck and Yang). When stripped of its activist praxis and legacy, "to decolonize" as an act bears

1 The course was codeveloped in 2021 with colleagues Dr. Leonie Schmidt and Dr. Reza Kartosen Wong, both faculty members the of Media Studies Department at the University of Amsterdam.

the risk of becoming hallowed out (Mbembe). Tuck and Yang spelled out these risks by provocatively naming their seminal article "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor," which spotlighted the "ease with which the language of decolonization has been superficially adopted into education and social sciences, supplanting prior ways of talking about social justice, critical methodologies, or approaches which decentre settler perspectives" (2). While Tuck and Yang crucially diagnose a pitfall, especially in the higher education context where decolonization has become a buzzword, their definition of decolonization in that article remains strictly confined to the dispossession of land. However, as Bhambra et al. and Brah have reminded us, higher education remains a crucial front for decolonization efforts.

Brah observes a tendency in decolonial thought to "overemphasize the study of economic and political consequences of colonialism rather than knowledge practices" (12). She underlines how questions of knowledge production have always been one of the major concerns in the studies of coloniality, postcoloniality, and decoloniality, for example, citing Said's *Orientalism* among others (12). Colonial structures persist not only in socio-economic cleavages but also in epistemic and cultural ones. Said's notion of "cultural archive," which has been further developed by Gloria Wekker to explain everyday racisms in Dutch society is a pertinent example. The growing emphasis on the economic and political afterlives of colonialism in the current engagements with decolonial thought might sometimes come at the cost of discrediting the epistemic, cultural, and psychological perspectives.

Brah refuses to exclusively focus on one ongoing aspect of coloniality. She reminds that an effective political strategy would always include the analysis of all these dimensions, and how these are interconnected. As Mignolo underlines: "[K]nowledge itself is an integral part of imperial processes of appropriation" (205). Thus, a focus on knowledge regimes alongside the analysis of economic and political dimensions of coloniality/decoloniality remains crucial (Brah 11). Decolonizing higher education plays a significant role here; however, it's not a universal or a simple process, nor can it be isolated from other dimensions mentioned earlier. Crucially, it should consider the historically specific and geographically particular articulation of coloniality, while charting out the struggles for dismantling its persistent effects. Since colonial domination was not only expansive but also varied in its methods across geographies and centuries, the struggle for decolonization cannot be reduced to a single goal and single method, but as Sylvia Tamale underlines, it's a "multi-pronged process" (xiv).

In the multi-pronged process of dismantling the persistent structures of colonial domination, the university is one front for a few reasons: "It was in the university that colonial intellectuals developed theories of racism, popularized discourses that bolstered support for colonial endeavors and provided ethical and intellectual grounds for the dispossession, oppression and domination of colonized subjects" (Bhambra et al. 5). The Rhodes Must Fall movement, which ignited and popularized the calls to decolonize higher education, is a case in point. In 2015, University of Cape Town students staged a series of protests, demanding the university to remove the statue of Cecil Rhodes, a British colonialist. The demands to dismantle the statue amplified the demands to dismantle colonial structures that persist in the university. "We want a complete shift in the thinking about curriculum," said one student, "[I]t can't be Eurocentric anymore. We need a curriculum that is about our continent, and not just the negatives, but the positives as well" (Boroughs). These words resonate with Bhambra et al.'s contention that "the fall of formal empires did little to change the logic of Western universities.... The content of university knowledge remains principally governed by the West for the West" (5). This being a ubiquitous phenomenon, the message of Rhodes Must Fall resonated with the experiences of students *globally*, and soon the demands of the movement spread across campuses worldwide, urging universities to decolonize their curricula and pedagogies.

That same year, the Maagdenhuis Occupation[2] urged the University of Amsterdam to convene a diversity commission, chaired by Surinamese-Dutch cultural anthropologist Gloria Wekker, to prepare a report charting out the state of diversity and providing a roadmap for improvement in line with the protestors' demand to democratization and decolonization of the university (Icaza and Vázquez 108). The report was entitled *Diversiteit is een werkwoord* (translated into English as *Let's Do Diversity*, but a more accurate translation, "Diversity is a verb," spotlights the urgency and imperative of *taking action*). It included concrete recommendations to the university to diversify its staff and student population as well as curricula, pedagogies, and research methodologies. Decolonization (along with intersectionality) was cited as an underlying framework, which "allows us to see how the dynamics of power differences, social exclusion and discrimination ... are

2 Maagdenhuis houses the executive board and central administration of the University of Amsterdam. In 2015, students occupied this location to protest the neoliberalization of the university and the fact that the university being "both in terms of demographics and in terms of curricula still overwhelmingly white, male and heteronormative" (Van Reekum).

connected to the ongoing legacy of … colonial history" (Wekker et al. 10). In addition, the report underlined how decoloniality "helps us understand the role of the university as a modern/colonial institution in the reinforcement of Western perspectives at the expense of the plurality of knowledges of the world" (10). How then to activate the plurality of knowledges? Or, as commission members put it, how to overcome the epistemic diversity deficits of the university? How to enrich practices of knowledge that are undervalued and disregarded? (Icaza and Vázquez 109).

Colonial Afterlives of the Universities

In "Decolonizing the University: New Directions" which is penned following the protests at the University of Cape Town, Mbembe elaborates on the idea that the institutions of higher learning are "Westernized" (32). This is crucial before we begin to imagine a decolonial classroom, where these structures are transformed and dismantled, not simply deconstructed, diversified, and/or substituted. The process and practice of decolonizing curricula and pedagogies do not simply equal de-Westernizing or *diversifying*. To decolonize (as a verb) higher education entails *transforming* the dominant academic model to delink from underlying and persisting colonial structures of learning, teaching, and thinking.

For Mbembe, the dominant academic model in higher education is based on a Eurocentric "epistemic canon"—one that "attributes truth only to the Western way of knowledge production" and "disregards other epistemic traditions," hence it is monocultural (32). It thus assumes universal validity and objectivity. This is a colonial paradigm because it cooperates with other economic and political structures to establish and maintain colonial rule. Hence, decolonization of higher education must involve dismantling this paradigm.

First, in this paradigm, knowledge is not localized, nor is it situated or embodied. It relies on an abstract and disembodied vantage point of the knower. In the efforts to decolonize education, reemphasizing positionality and situatedness is therefore crucial to counter this abstract, disembodied vantage point of the knower. This first point, I will call the nexus of "positionality." Icaza and Vázquez prefer the term "pedagogies of positionality" which more directly addresses the learning practice (119). I chose the word "nexus" here to acknowledge the relevance and rich legacy of "positionality" as an action point within decolonial thought and activism at large. In the classroom, positionality helps to situate the source of knowledge.

The second significant characteristic of the Eurocentric epistemic canon is the underlying claim that "the known" (or the knowledge *of* something) is detached from "the knower" (Mbembe 32). As such, this epistemic canon rests on a division "between mind and world, or between reason and nature as an ontological a priori" (32). In this view, "the knowing subject is enclosed in itself and peeks out at a world of objects and produces supposedly objective knowledge of those objects" (33). They are thus able to know the world *without being part of that world* and by all accounts able to "produce knowledge that is supposed to be universal and independent of context" (33). For Mbembe, this way of producing and spreading knowledge has become hegemonic and got detached from its discursive foundations. Dismantling it entails making these discursive foundations visible as *one* way of producing and spreading knowledge. Implicated in this process is acknowledging other ways of attaining the knowledge of something, for example, through bodily senses, other languages, and a nonhegemonic, dialogic relationality between the knower and the known. Such critical reflection on and multiplication of methods of knowing are crucial in decolonizing education. This second point then addresses "relationality," as in, one's *relation to* and *relation with* the object of knowledge, the unknown, the world.

Following Icaza and Vázquez, the classroom should be where this nexus of relationality is reimagined and practiced: "The classroom is a space in which power hierarchies and forms of exclusion get reproduced" (119). Then, "changing the content of knowledge, or positioning the canon" is not enough to decolonize the university (120). Relationality brings into focus "the practices of knowledge that contribute to fostering diversity," and this doesn't only mean diverse backgrounds and different participants in the room being valued and heard equally (120). It also means, in my view, fostering nonhierarchical ways of attaining knowledge, which decenters the knower as the ultimate key to explaining and understanding the world. It allows for other forms of knowledge as well as limits to knowledge, accommodating the silences and the unknowable. The nexus of relationality, then, suggests a dialogical view of knowledge production, among knowers as well as between the knower and the object of knowledge, that is not hierarchical.

A third characteristic of the European epistemic canon is that it obscures the power dynamics between the colonizer and the colonized in knowledge production. The same colonial domination structures persist in the established research methodologies within higher education. Linda Tuhiwai Smith stated that "from the vantage point of the colonized,… the term research is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism" (1), bringing with it "critical questions that communities and indigenous activists often

ask," such as "Whose research is it? Who owns it? Whose interests does it serve? Who will benefit from it? Who has designed its questions and framed its scope? Who will carry it out? Who will write it up? How will its results be disseminated?" (15).

Decolonization is a process that engages with imperialism and colonialism at multiple levels. For researchers, one of those levels is concerned with having a more critical understanding of the underlying assumptions, motivations, and values that inform research practices. This third point of action then concerns "the meaning of knowledge" as in the ways in which it's generated as well as the ways in which it's being used. I borrow from Icaza and Vázquez and call this third point nexus of "transitionality." The university, as well as its knowledge practices, are related to the specific socio-historical conditions: "Transitionality puts emphasis on undoing the abstract position of knowledge and recognizing how the university is implicated in a politics of knowledge" (120). A pedagogy of transition, then, "never loses sight of how the knowledge addressed and produced impacts the social and/or the Earth" (120).

Here we can now clearly see/feel why decolonizing is not simply to diversify, nor is it a straightforward deconstruction: "the point is not simply to deconstruct such understandings, but to transform them" (Bhambra et al. 2). These three characteristics and the struggle to delink from them should be reflected in both curriculum (what we teach) and pedagogy (how we teach). This struggle cannot be limited to, nor can it be achieved in, a single course. It should be embraced university-wide, which will take complex planning and replanning, with the involvement of students and teachers. While at the University of Amsterdam there are promising steps being taken to implement decolonization, and our elective "Decolonizing Media Studies" is one symptom of this ongoing change in the university policy, there are challenges for students and teachers to become involved and invested in decolonial pedagogical practices. Such challenges require a broader structural approach, eventually addressing the academia at large.

Teaching Decolonization or Practicing It?

Going back to the complexities of designing a course that addresses decolonization, we might feel facing two options. The first is a conventional course that *teaches* decolonial theory of education using conventional pedagogical methods. Such a course could feature a diverse curriculum, with the aim to decenter the Eurocentric epistemic canon. Its learning

aims would spotlight deconstructing the established knowledge, moving the focus to the margins where that knowledge has been being challenged all along. Such pluriversality of voices and perspectives would surely be a step in the right direction to improve and ensure diversity. This would then be a course *on* decolonization.

The second option is to follow Mbembe's reminder and to aim at transforming the classroom through unsettling colonial structures as much as possible. Such a teaching and learning model does not necessarily have to be *on* decolonization; it can be any course on any topic. Although more challenging, this option was more desirable considering the key premises of "Decolonizing Media Studies: From Theory to Practice." The aim was that the students would not only learn about decolonial thought, but they would also practice decolonial methods.

Initially, to undermine the hierarchical model of instructors unilaterally transferring knowledge, we decided to change the terminology to signal the equality of everyone partaking in the class. We emphasized that we all are "class members," engaging with mutual act of teaching and learning from each other (Dovey). To further activate such equal distribution of intellectual labor, we divided the course into two sections: The first few weeks focused on broader debates on decolonizing education and its activist legacy. It aimed to prompt a discussion on the "positionality" of each and every class member, with the ability to critically reflect on that positionality. The second half of the course was given shape by students who had formed groups earlier and were asked to bring any piece of reading and/or object to discuss and analyze in class. The instructors took on a mainly facilitating role, from being more active and involved in the first weeks to minimizing the intervention toward the end. They focused on giving continuous feedback and guidance to the groups working toward their final project.

The final assignment prompted students to explore decolonial praxis in their own ways and at their own pace. It primarily emphasized collective work, coinvestigation, and mutual care, instead of individual achievement. Students worked as a group on a final project of their choice, ranging from a (desktop) documentary to a video essay, podcast, poem, walking tour, screening program, zine, debate, and syllabus among others (with inspiration from "Unessays" by Hillary Green). They were only given three themes, loosely defined to spotlight a certain topic/theme in decolonial critique and praxis: media analysis, unwritten memories, and global screen worlds. Each theme had recommendations for methodology and a final project.

The coteachers observed that it was difficult for some students to immediately shed the ethics and expectations of individual achievement in

group work. They needed more steering and feedback than we imagined. Additionally, the reflex to hold on to the Eurocentric epistemic canon and its methodologies was also persistent. The readiness to open oneself to alternate knowledges and alternate ways of knowing was difficult to activate across a short range of time. This convinced us that decolonial pedagogy should be an ongoing practice across courses, programs, and disciplines.

Besides these challenges, we observed how acknowledging and encouraging the diversity-from-within enriched the learning environment for all of us. The focus on positionality, relationality, and transitionality helped acknowledging the colonial afterlives of knowledge practices. We collectively worked toward transforming them as much as possible over a few weeks. With students coming from various disciplines—e.g., economics, religion, design, or history—alongside media studies, each member felt encouraged to step out, move across, and diminish disciplinary borders. This multidisciplinary environment stimulated critical reflection on established ways of knowing. We explored alternative ways to relate to a single object of knowledge.

Similarly, encouraging each member to link to their cultural repositories enriched the topics and themes brought to the class. The versatility of topics brought by students exceeded the possibility of any syllabus we could have imagined. This structure also helped undermine the hierarchy between the instructors and students because we all felt there were limits to our knowledges, as well as times when they can be put to use. Overall, this consolidated the communal feeling of "class members" in the classroom.

In Dialogue: Decolonial Praxis and Cultural Analysis

Based on the literature and practice of decolonial pedagogy, I have earlier emphasized the following practices: (1) nexus of positionality, which encourages students to reflect on their own position in the society at large and in the knowledge production in particular; (2) relationality, which stimulates a critical reflection on one's *relation to* and *relation with* the object of knowledge, the unknown, the world; and (3) transitionality, or epistemological multiplicity, or ways of knowing, which urges a diversification of research methodologies beyond the Eurocentric paradigms and methodologies.

Below I elaborate on how putting decolonial pedagogy in dialogue with cultural analysis methodology can help imagine a few entry points toward a decolonial classroom. In creating this dialogue, my intention is not to suggest

that decolonial pedagogy is inapplicable to higher education and thus must be complemented by cultural analysis. Nor is it my aim to instrumentalize the cultural analytical framework for pedagogical practices. Instead, I am interested in expanding both frameworks through bringing them into dialogue. I also intend to contribute to the growing efforts to "operationalize" decolonial thinking "within the academy," and to imagine ways of bridging through practice the "gap between high-level decolonial theory and its practices of implementation" (Morreira et al. 2).

In many ways, cultural analysis methodology is very hands-on and that could be an advantage to anchor actors of decolonial learning. One of the foundational principles of cultural analysis is that it's always anchored in *now and here*; even though it might deal with historical objects or memory, its focus is always on the present (Bal, *Travelling Concepts* 9). The knower engages with the object of knowledge in a dialogical relationship, where the conventional hierarchy and split between the knower and the known is undermined. The knower does not hold any power on the object; as another important principle teaches us that the object always *speaks back* (45) This allows, among others, the knower to encounter the limits of their self, knowledge, and method, and to critically reflect on these as products/outcomes/symptoms of a certain culture. This puts the knower in the same level as the object. In this dialogical relationship, both are simultaneously products and actors within the larger culture from which they have emerged. Reconsidering the relationship this way undermines the claim of meta-narratives as applicable models to explain the world through abstractions.

In my own experiments with putting decolonial pedagogy into practice, these foundational principles of cultural analysis proved effective and below I give an overview of how cultural analysis and decolonial pedagogy may be put into conversation, across three principles of both that I explained up until here.

Positionality and Self-reflexivity

In *The Practice of Cultural Analysis*, Mieke Bal quotes the influential post-colonial thinker Gayatri Spivak: "Often the analysis involves 'saying no to what you inhabit'" ("Introduction" 12). This is a crucial departure point to start exploring the nexus of positionality, which is key in decolonial learning. In a classroom setting, this begins with "saying no to" predetermined positions of teacher and student; they both engage with teaching and learning. Additionally, positionality involves becoming aware of the intersectional positionings that one inhabits in society at large and how that impacts their experience of learning. Every class member is encouraged to acknowledge

and critique their cultural repositories of knowledge. They are encouraged to use this positionality as a unique perspective when engaging with objects. In this process, they slowly learn to shed, or delink from (to use Mignolo's term), colonial meta-narratives that shape the ways they have come to perform in a learning environment. In a decolonial classroom, the cultural analysis principle "there is no master discourse" could be a valuable reminder to unsettle the Eurocentric epistemic canon.

Relationality and Dialogic Presence

The cultural analysis framework posits a different relationality between "the knower" and the object. As opposed to the knower being the active agent who explains the object and thus practices some mastery over it, cultural analysis insists that none is superior; they strictly engage in a relationship and this relationship is dialogical.

This dialogical presence undermines the so-called decoding relationship with intellect; it is always already corporeal, affective, relational. Bal writes, "the object, although mute, is present. This presentness matters. It is one of the defining features of cultural analysis to focus on this present quality of cultural objects, including those that came to us from the past" ("Introduction" 8). The knower is always already *situated* in a cultural space-time, and so is the object, no matter what. Reconsidering the relation between the knower and the object as situated and dialogical helps dismantle the universal validity as well as the hierarchical domination of the knower.

In a classroom setting, this may begin by asking class members to reconsider their roles and their reflexes in the process of engaging with or interrogating an object. Inviting them to attend to the object on equal grounds ("object always speaks back") may stimulate this dialogical presence and seek a nonhierarchical relationship with their object of research.

In our experience, group assignments and/or group discussions were productive in encouraging two levels of relationality: the relationality of different voices to each other without any of them being dominant over others, and the relationality of different voices to a single object of knowledge. At times, the multiplicity of disciplines in a single group led to in-depth discussions on how to study an object and sometimes even what constitutes an object. For example, in one group, the language turned into an object itself and was taken up by the group members as a consequential factor in their matrilineage research into intergenerational memories of migration and the "unspoken." Instead of trying to eliminate differences, the group turned the multidisciplinary and multilingual composition into an object of self-reflexive analysis. They interrogated the role played by disciplines

and languages in producing a certain type of knowledge. In this way, group members collectively comprehended the multiplicity of dialogues that can be set in motion in the presence of an object. Eventually, the group chose to keep these multiplicities visible, and presented a multilingual final outcome at the end of their research.

Transitionality of Knowledge and Epistemological Multiplicity

On this third point, cultural analysis's insightful take on "method as a cultural product" is relevant as an effective way to reflect on research methodologies and knowledge production practices in the university setting. Here there are two levels: According to Bal, "the reading becomes part of the meaning it yields" ("Introduction" 10). Implementing this in the classroom, for example, through reflecting on the immediacy between how we produce knowledge and what kind of knowledge is thus produced could help students to acknowledge and appreciate different methods, yielding different knowledges. Secondly, it encourages a reflection on the taken-for-granted and established methodologies, enabling class members to see their geohistorical roots and positions. This discussion can lead to the production of knowledge and systematic use of it to spread, maintain, and safeguard colonial domination.

Usually, this discussion starts with a seemingly simple question—*How do we know what we know?*—which eventually can lead to a discussion of kinds of knowledges and methods that are undervalued, disregarded, or even excluded/silenced. This allows the group to contemplate on the ethics implicated in methodological choices. Similarly, how "the meaning of knowledge" thus created as well as the ways/forms of distributing that knowledge cannot be detached from this process. In our course, groups discuss and decide on their own methodologies but also the form in which they share their findings. In other words, they are asked to have a critical conversation about their chosen method and how they want to spread that knowledge. They are asked to reflect on this and its implications in decolonial learning specifically (and decolonial thought at large).

In many ways, being very hands-on and anchoring in the here and now, the cultural analysis framework provided concrete entry points to translate decolonial thought to a classroom setting in the case of our "Decolonizing Media Studies" elective at the University of Amsterdam. In a context of increasing student mobilizations since the second decade of the twentieth century, as well as increasing interest in decolonization, surely the experiments, experiences, and self-reflective practices on this very question will only grow. Crucially, there is no single way of implementing decolonial

thought and practice in the classroom. Such attempts should take into consideration the geohistorical circumstances and specificity of colonial practices in a region, and it should address the university as an institution at many levels, ranging from research methodologies, curricula, and pedagogies to recruitment policies, social safety processes, and tuition fees.

In light of the discussion so far, we may conclude two main points: First, bringing decolonial pedagogy and cultural analysis in the dialogical presence of each other, may enrich the learning environment toward a decolonial classroom that is inherently self-reflexive, pluriversal, and transformative. The three nexuses of action, namely positionality, relationality, and transitionality, resonated powerfully with cultural analytical principles of self-reflexivity, dialogical presence, and analysis of method. Specifically in a multidisciplinary and multilingual classroom setting, these cultural analytical principles provided effective starting points.

Second, this dialogue promises to expand the educational implementations of the cultural analysis method toward the frameworks of decolonial thought and pedagogy. While the cultural analysis field has grown over the years in dialogue with postcolonial scholarship, the growing interest in decolonial thought and its activist legacy at present brings along new urgencies and a somewhat different set of questions (see Bhambra). This may, or perhaps even should, prompt cultural analysis to new dialogues beyond its interlocutors within the Eurocentric epistemic canon. On the specific question of education—e.g., the figure/role of the teacher, the classroom, and students as interlocutors—cultural analysis may be brought in more active dialogue with the intellectual and activist legacy of decolonial pedagogies, such as Paolo Freire and bell hooks, among others. In the long run, such new "critical intimacies" would not only expand both fields but also reimagine the classroom at the intersection of the two (Bal "Critical Intimacy").

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14. Crises, Social Relevance, and Critical Discomfort: Shooting Ourselves in the Foot

Alvaro Lopez

Abstract: The social, political, economic, environmental, and epidemiological crises of the last three decades have radically altered societies and cultures around the globe—and with them inevitably the role of cultural analysis. But how can cultural analysts respond to these fast-changing challenges? At a time of widespread depoliticization, our critical approach has become too palatable for the power structures we examine; we seem to be playing into a system that asphyxiates us little by little. By bringing together Third Cinema, horror, and psychoanalysis, this chapter argues that our radical potential demands first and foremost for us to refocus our efforts on critical analysis and allow ourselves to become deeply uncomfortable.

Keywords: critical discomfort, Third Cinema, horror, psychoanalysis, "queer monster" (Miller)

The setting is that of 1950s Algiers. Black-and-white shots depict for the audience what could be taken as any European city of the mid-twentieth century. Cars, hairstyles, clothing, and music carry an all-pervasive "tranquilized Fifties" aesthetic. The scene focuses on three women as they blend with images of chatting men, dancing youngsters, and families with children at a café, a bar, and an airport. After a few moments, the women discreetly hide their purses among the unsuspecting patrons and leave the scene. And just then, the tranquilized, carefree setting is replaced by chaos. Three explosions blast the sites where the women had left their purses, confronting

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the gazing audience with violence—a structural violence sustaining what initially seemed like an innocent setting.

For the cinephile's eye, these are easily recognizable images. The scene offers an iconic moment from Gillo Pontecorvo's 1962 film *The Battle of Algiers*. For plenty of my students, though, these are just images from an old film. Yet, even if it is an old film or a staple work in film, gender, and postcolonial studies, when screened in class, this scene inevitably elicits a strong affective response from most of my students. They feel uncomfortable. It is from this uncomfortable position of witnessing the violent complexities organizing the social realm that a space for analysis can be generated. Of course, cinema is a very contextual form of art. Framed by its original production and release, the film aimed at placing its audience, precisely, in the uncomfortable position of looking directly at the conditions and struggles underlying the European colonial endeavor; in this particular case, by looking at the collapse of the French colonial empire.

Before this point in the plot, the audience is shown how the three same women undergo a process of Westernization, in which they change their hairstyle and clothes, in order to cross the checkpoints that violently split urban spaces and populations in French-dominated Algeria. The cinematic gaze deploys on-screen the inevitable violence that ensues from colonial oppression and the struggle for liberation. As such, the film resonates with and follows the uncomfortable stance taken at the time by anticolonial thinkers as relevant and well-known as Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). In fact, *The Battle of Algiers* is regarded as one of the best-known and successful examples of Third Cinema, an activist filmmaking movement that, by the 1960s and 1970s, aimed at retrieving for cinema the difficult position of direct social and political engagement, in contrast to both market-driven Hollywood cinema and aesthetically focused European art house.

Nevertheless, even when decontextualized, the film retains its uncomfortable quality: it manages to stir, among twenty-first-century students, an unrestful affect that other contemporary productions are unable to trigger to the same extent. Now the question would be, Is it even possible for films nowadays to take on the uncomfortable role once played by the largely overlooked Third Cinema?[1] Although this question might seem oddly detached from the focus of this volume, the reflections it demands represent an uncanny reminder for those of us working in the broad field(s) of cultural analysis. Much like Third Cinema, cultural analysis set out to become a

1 For more on the complex paths taken by Third Cinema, see Guneratne and Dissanayake.

relevant tool for social contestation. It problematized not only asymmetrical power structures, but also dominant academic views organizing our own academic institutions. But is it possible for cultural analysis today to take on the same problematizing and politicized position it once held? Or, has it entered a moment of crisis?

The last three decades have borne witness to trepidant global and globalizing transformations. The multiple social, political, economic, environmental, and epidemiological crises that have characterized this period have radically altered societies and cultures around the globe—and with them, inevitably, the role and scope of cultural analysis. As noted from a number of standpoints, we live in a moment of increasing assimilation and depoliticization of once subversive and radical ideas (Meeuf), antidemocratic political tendencies (Brown), and systemic sociopolitical chaos (Martins). But what is our role, as cultural analysts, vis-á-vis these far-reaching transformations? How can our critical stances become socially relevant anew?

Faced with these complex questions, we cannot but wonder if we are becoming conformists. We ask ourselves if our work is becoming too palatable for the power structures we aim to examine, whether we are just playing into the game of the systems that tame us, find us irrelevant, and little by little asphyxiate us. In other words, we wonder if we are not just shooting ourselves in the foot. As the pages that follow will argue, to answer these questions, it is necessary to bring back *analysis* into cultural analysis more forcefully. If we want to break away from a relatively comfortable position that threatens to assimilate our critical stance, it is of uttermost importance for us to reevaluate, redefine, and once again expand our disciplinary boundaries. Like Pontecorvo's film, we need to take on an unsettling, though generative, position from which to start in-depth discussions and analysis. Put simply, if we want to reach our potential and social relevance in the complex times in which we live, we need to be willing to become uncomfortable.

Horrific Engagements

To understand the challenges faced by cultural analysis in the present moment, it is necessary to take a step back and look at the challenges faced by its methodological tools and objects of analysis. For this, I will address the objects and tools that constitute my own engagement in the field: horror films and psychoanalysis. When thinking of horror in cinema, the question I posed above seems to find a simple and evident answer, at least partially. When asked whether films can take an uncomfortable position nowadays,

the horror genre would seem to respond with an unquestionable *Yes!* Horror success among its audience depends, precisely, on its ability to trigger uncomfortable bodily responses, such as fear and anxiety. In fact, as pointed out by Linda Williams in a now canonical approach within film studies, horror, pornography, and melodrama constitute so-called *body genres*: popular genres, generally considered excessive, which manage to trigger in their audiences unconscious affective responses that mimic what happens on screen.[2] For Williams, these excessive genres and the affects they trigger constitute in themselves a "cultural form of problem solving" (9). Following this stance, horror would operate as the unconscious manifestation of, and engagement with, issues of sexuality and identity operating in the sociocultural realm (9). Williams is not alone in this stance, and neither are the cultural issues she addresses. For instance, Linnie Blake examines horror's uncomfortable stance with respect to national identity.

Yet, as Sam J. Miller argues, cinema in general, and the horror genre in particular, have not been immune to the changes and crises that have reshaped to world over the last three decades. From the 1990s to the 2000s, he argues, the relationship between the film industry, horror, and its audience underwent a profound reorganization in terms of depoliticization and marketable mobilization. For Miller, this moment is characterized by the death of what he calls "the queer monster" (221–22). Miller argues that the blatantly transphobic and homophobic monsters that used to dominate the horror landscape were in time replaced by market-driven and window-dressing strategies that resulted in the depoliticization of the genre's audiences. Ultimately, the effect has been to conceal the rampant phobias and violence that continue to permeate society and oppress marginalized populations (228). Although operating on unconscious anxieties, horror would then become a self-aware mainstream tool, catering to a broad globalized market without acute social engagement. Bearing this in mind, the answer to the question above takes on a different connotation: Sure, horror can still elicit uncomfortable responses, but are these responses akin to the politically and socially charged space that is left vacant by Third Cinema?

Miller finds hope in the work of independent filmmakers, such as Paul Etheredge-Ouzts or Bruce LaBruce, whose films constitute a more direct and uncomfortable engagement with horror, violence, and sexuality (228). Other stances, such as that taken by Steve Jones, view extreme horror and horror porn as "taboo-flouting" subgenres that directly problematize "socially, and/

2 Williams borrows the notion of *body genre* from another canonical name within film, feminist, and horror studies, namely Carol Clover ("Her Body").

or politically unacceptable subject matter" (185). A clear example of this engagement can be found in the work of queer extreme-horror filmmaker Domiziano Cristopharo, whose explicit and politically charged depiction of violence and sex in films such as *House of Flesh Mannequins* (2009) and *Xpiation* (2017) merge and intensify the three body genres that were addressed by Williams. Indeed, Cristopharo's work seems to blur and reconstitute the very boundaries between art house and Third Cinema through an aesthetic-activist blend that problematizes mainstream expectations of the horror genre.

Yet, the crisis in which these works find themselves also derives from a lack of financial means, distribution, and mobilization. The context has changed from the volitional avoidance of the mainstream that characterized movements such as Third Cinema to a production and distributional exclusion that is imposed by globalized market dynamics. Are there no festival and cultural networks capable of supporting this sort of problematizing films? Let us take Amsterdam or Utrecht, where I teach, as a case study for this question. In recent years, these cities have experienced a growth in the number of film and art festivals, opening a space for engagement between artworks and audience. Their diverging focus allows for an increased visibility of issues and struggles that are generally overlooked or rendered invisible. But, if this is the case, why are independent filmmakers still struggling to exhibit their works?

A clue to this paradoxical situation can be found in the market dynamics affecting the film industry as a whole. Just like filmmakers, festivals struggle with funding for their events, relying on their audience and sponsors to keep their network afloat. The question then is, How much of this audience appeal and sponsor support would tolerate the taboo-flouting approach I have addressed above? This is not to say that these festivals are not playing a crucial role in the contemporary cultural landscape. Quite the contrary, they constitute sites for much-needed sociocultural mobilization of relevant ideas, and they offer spaces for contestation. Nevertheless, the paradox signifies the tensions and crises that are transforming the cultural landscape over the last decades, through which market dynamics have permeated formerly radical spaces, fragmenting and blurring the lines between mainstream and independent realms.[3] But if this is the case in general, can we still address cultural manifestations, such as films and other cultural objects, with the same conceptual tools we used more than three decades ago? Are we to take for granted that cultural analysis is somehow

3 For more on those contemporary changes in the mainstream, see, for instance, the work of Mitzi Waltz and Jennifer Rauch.

immune to these mainstream fragmentations and market mobilization? Is our field of knowledge, as we have grown accustomed to conceptualizing it, capable of addressing these transformations?

Conceptual Buzzwords

If our objects of analysis have been so deeply transformed, it would be naïve to assume that the analytical tools through which we address them have remained stuck in a sort of untouchable vacuum. In this regard, psychoanalysis may serve as a perfect case study. More often than not, when I explain my psychoanalytic approach, I am faced with expressions of sheer disbelief. Why would I engage with something as dated as psychoanalysis today? After all, long gone seem the times in which psychoanalysis played a central role in socially engaged and politically charged academic approaches to the cinema, such as the feminist stances taken by Laura Mulvey, Carol J. Clover, or Barbara Creed. Also well-known are the rebuttals of psychoanalysis by film scholars such as Noël Carroll, for whom the field was guilty of hollow analyses with respect to the connections between films and society. It could easily be argued, then, that psychoanalysis is not a timely or current tool for cultural analysis, and that there are plenty of other analytical approaches that are more in demand for publishing and funding. So, is psychoanalysis a relevant tool for social and cultural engagement?

A possible answer to this question requires some contextualization. As pointed out by Stephen Frosh, a central figure in the field of psychosocial studies, the challenges faced by psychoanalysis in the last three decades go hand in hand with the crises and transformations I have been addressing above. On the one hand, there are generalized misconceptions that have collapsed the analytic field and its conceptual tools into particular psychoanalytic instantiations that have fallen out of grace (Frosh 13–14); I will return to this point below. On the other hand, market dynamics have increasingly favored cognitive and behavioral approaches that represent a more profitable investment in terms of immediacy (Frosh 11–12). The same market pressures affecting cultural manifestations are also having their impact on the tools with which we address them. With this, I do not intend to disregard cognitivism as a tool for the analysis of culture. Far from that, both cognitivism and psychoanalysis are socially relevant tools that face the challenges and tensions inherent to the present moment. Moreover, as put forth by Elliot Jurist, understanding things across seemingly disparate disciplines and approaches, no matter how uncomfortable, is a necessary

step toward what he describes as a "strong pluralism"; toward strong and suitable tools for addressing the complexities of the times we live in (94).

Nonetheless, in the case of psychoanalysis, the misconceptions and generalizations take on particularly poignant connotations. Psychoanalysis is an uncomfortable tool from the start. As with any other tool for the in-depth analysis of society and culture, it requires time and work. To decontextualize its main concepts without proper understanding of their implications results in academic *buzzwording*. To address the symbolic, fantasy, the drive, or the abject without proper understanding of their connotations results in a conceptual crisis that renders the attempt to address society and culture empty. Hence, the falling out of grace. The mobilization of empty concepts opens them to trends that inevitably go out of fashion. Empty analysis necessarily results in circular and tautological engagements, in cosmetic approaches that—although congenial for the institutions that host us, since it is always good to have sellable concepts to keep our courses trendy and full of students—open our disciplines to critiques from which it is hard to defend ourselves.

Merely referencing a couple of works by Sigmund Freud or Jacques Lacan to criticize psychoanalysis ignores their complex takes on sexuality, sexuation, and culture. Other foundational figures such as Melanie Klein, Anna Freud, Donald Winnicott, Wilfred Bion, Julia Kristeva, and André Green have not only transformed psychoanalysis, but also directly engaged its connections to politics, society, and culture. In particular, disregarding psychoanalysis ignores its long history of social engagement in Latin America, where its support of social rights and the confrontation with totalitarian regimes resulted in the kidnapping a murder of many analysts (Hollander). This obliviousness is telling of an academic perspective that, although mobilizing non-Western concepts for the sake of fashion, remains as USA- and Eurocentric as the power structures it attempts to criticize. Finally, dismissing psychoanalysis risks overlooking the work of analysts who engage with issues of embodiment, sexuality, and oppression in close dialogue with queer and trans studies, post- and decolonial perspectives, and critical race theory, as in the case, for example, of Patricia Gherovici and Christopher Christian, Vincent Bourseul, and Carlos Padrón.

Relevance and Discomfort

Returning to the points that opened this chapter, to remain or become socially relevant in these times, cultural analysis needs to reevaluate both its analytical tools and its objects of analysis. For this, it is necessary to

engage properly with academic stances and fields of knowledge with which we are not, or are no longer, comfortable. We need to open up to a strong pluralism that can redefine our disciplinary boundaries anew. Otherwise, we run the risk of falling behind in our work, becoming socially irrelevant even as we become ever more comfortable. As in the case of horror films and psychoanalysis, we need to face our own crises to address the crises that surround us. We are not immune to changes reshaping the world around us. We need to be willing to move away from the comfortable ground founded on a culture that used to be groundbreaking decades ago but may well no longer be so. This is not to dismiss certain concepts because they have been in use—that would return us to the point of trendy concepts. But what this should entail for us is to interrupt the comfortable boundaries of our well-established fields to understand what those same concepts can mean and do now, and how they have changed in the face of our changing world.

Like Cristopharo's uncomfortable transgressions of the cinematic borders separating horror and sex, demarcating art house and Third Cinema, cultural analysis can also uncomfortably disrupt and redraw its disciplinary demarcations. Be it by relearning psychoanalysis, horror, and sexuality; by reimagining cognitivism, film, and embodiment; by rethinking with sociology, neuroscience, or other fields of knowledge and cultural manifestation, cultural analysis can reformulate itself in the present moment. There is no single, let alone prescriptive, way of getting started with this reformulation of our field(s). However, there is much for us to do, so much for us to reconsider and relearn so much to forget in terms of profitability and market expectations. This will make us uncomfortable anew in a setting—political, economic, social, and academic—that has already marketized us, and which will not hesitate to assess us in terms of revenue that threatens to suffocate us. Just as with Pontecorvo's canonical film, our fields need to become an uncomfortable reminder, a troubling prompt, in the social stirring against oppressive systems and dynamics, no matter what shape they take in the years to come. Are we willing to risk this critical discomfort?

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15. Parochialism as Method: Pejorative, *Partage*, Pastoral

Niall Martin

Abstract: In the methodological ecumenicalism of its focus on objects and concepts, cultural analysis is particularly susceptible to a decolonial critique that emphasizes the importance of situated knowledge. However, I propose that it is precisely in the disavowed parochialism that links cultural analysis to Amsterdam with its conjoined histories of capitalism, colonialism, and liberalism, that its methodological ecumenicalism is at its most generative. As parochialism in various guises takes on a general conjunctural force, cultural analysis models a form of community that is predicated not on belonging, but in participation in difference, or parochialism as *partage*.

Keywords: cosmopolitanism, translocality, decolonial critique, conjuncture, noise (Serres), opacity (Glissant)

Noting the "tension" within certain traditions of thinking about philosophy "between the alleged universality of reason and the fact that its upholders are so intent on localizing its historical instantiation," Robert Bernasconi points to what he terms "the paradox of philosophy's parochialism" (213–14).[1] What are we to make, he asks, of a discourse that simultaneously asserts the universality of its truth and the exclusive specificity of its origins? Of a discourse which proclaims, at one and the same time, that its truths are both universal and "Greek"?

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In this essay, I wonder if the same question might provide a guide to thinking about the status of cultural analysis within what Stuart Hall termed the "present conjuncture" (Hall and Massey). In what ways does cultural analysis, as a particular way of doing cultural studies, reflect its association with Amsterdam? Moreover, how does that association inflect its ability to address the questions whose status as questions-that-cannot-not-be-asked mark the present as a moment of rupture between past and future? At the same time, I wonder if cultural analysis, in the intimacy of its association with Amsterdam, might provide some perspective, not only on Bernasconi's paradox, but also on the idea of the parochial in general.

Parochialism: "limited and narrow character or tendency, provincialism, narrow-mindedness and uncuriosity about the wider world."[2] These are not typically the qualities thought desirable in academic research, and when, in 2008, Josef Früchtl delivered the term as a final accusation in his (locally) celebrated denunciation of cultural analysis's "pretense" to epistemological rigor, his aim was clearly condemnation, not methodological rejuvenation (57). As tools of condemnation, however, pejoratives as well as the sources from which they derive their rhetorical force are precisely the sorts of cultural object that cultural analysis has made its privileged site of investigation.

Like many pejoratives, the accusation of parochialism functions by invoking the norm through its negation. To be parochial is to fail to be broad-minded, or curious, or inquiring. But, more specifically, in its etymological appeal to the parish as synonymous with that narrow-mindedness and lack of curiosity, it invokes an ecclesiastical spatial order that is opposed to the secular space of Enlightenment. To be parochial is, very explicitly, to fail to be cosmopolitan. In the specificity of its allusion to that superseded spatial order, the parochial as pejorative performs Bernasconi's paradox. It serves as a reminder of the palimpsestic relationship between the Enlightenment and Christendom; a reminder that they are both the parochial concerns of only one particular portion of the planet (Mignolo, Vázquez, Wynter). As such, rhetorically at least, Früchtl's use of the parochial as pejorative seems to present us with an instance of what Jacques Rancière describes as *partage*: that is, of a rupture that is also a continuity (Rancière).

To get a clearer sense of what is at stake in this instance of rupture and continuity, I want to approach the idea of the parochial initially by way of an autobiographical detour. Not least because it was an abiding sense of my

2 "Parochialism (n.)," *Online Etymology Dictionary*, January 21, 2020. https://www.etymonline.com/word/parochialism.

own parochiality that I remember most vividly from my first encounters with the form of cultural studies as practiced in my new home of Amsterdam in the early 2000s. After graduate and postgraduate studies in the UK, defined by the delicate and not-so-delicate negotiations between British Marxism, poststructuralism, and postcolonialism, the easy cosmopolitanism and apparent theoretical eclecticism of cultural studies as it was practiced a ferry ride across the North Sea left me slightly disorientated. The happy conviviality of a research community embracing theoretical traditions that elsewhere were entrenched in separate departments and universities—Adorno and Deleuze? Spivak and Žižek? Anzaldúa and Latour?—produced disconcertingly mixed emotions: a feeling of liberation, certainly, but a liberation always troubled by the habit of suspicion.

"Let the object speak back" (Bal, *Travelling Concepts* 45).[3] Of course! Mieke Bal's memorable formula promised a simple and elegant solution to the contradictory imperatives—"always historicize" (Jameson) and "il n'y a pas de hors-texte" (Derrida)—that had dominated my academic life in the 1980s and 1990s. It was also close enough to Stuart Hall's aversion to Grand Theory and Epochal Thought to appear comfortably familiar. Nevertheless, the question nagged: Surely an object can speak only in the languages that its interlocutor is trained and willing to hear? How does one ensure that a speaking object is not simply being invoked to endow your own language with the authority it would otherwise lack? Doesn't "the object" simply function here as an epistemological alibi for hermeneutic closure?

The notion of *noise*, as that which interrupts speech and announces the presence of the exclusions that are the precondition of speech (Serres, *Le parasite*), provided me with a productive framework for engaging with that question. Any remaining doubts I had about the value of cultural analysis as praxis were assuaged by the conceptual agility and quizzical intelligence of my mentor and then director of the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis (ASCA), Reij Rosello. Yet, attending to the noise of analysis inevitably ends up considering the ways in which noise as a concept can become just another language. Any illusion that noise, whether as Michel Serres's *tiers exclu* (*Le parasite* 35) or even as Sylvia Wynter's "dysselected" (McKittrick 7), provides privileged insight into the exclusions inherent in hermeneutic traditions extends an open invitation for rebuke.

3 Mieke Bal has of course written with great sophistication on the dangers of ventriloquism implicit within the idea of the object that speaks back. See, for example, the "serendipity" section in Bal, *Lexikon*.

One such rebuke occurred recently at Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum as I was listening to Miriyam Aouragh, who described her life as a Dutch woman with a Moroccan heritage living and working as an academic and activist in the city that I'd learned to call home. In her talk, Aouragh spoke about the exhaustion of everyday life in a society where racism was amplified by its denial, and about navigating institutions unable to countenance the very possibility of the violence of their tolerance; violence which had ultimately led her to work in the country that I had left behind. The occasion of her talk was an event that departed from Marlene Dumas's portrait of Mohammed Bouyeri, the twenty-six-year-old Amsterdammer who, in 2004, had killed his fellow citizen, the filmmaker Theo Van Gogh. The painting is titled *The Neighbour* (2005).[4]

Parochialism: from *para-oikos*, for "near home" or "neighboring." Another *partage*: here, but not here; next door, but a world away. Aouragh described the sense of relief within her community on learning that the murderer of Pim Fortuyn was not Muslim, as well as the sense of imminent catastrophe that ensued on hearing that the murderer of Van Gogh was. She described the speed with which that catastrophe unfolded as Dutch liberalism morphed into what she characterizes as "enlightenment fundamentalism"; how a feeling among many Dutch Muslims of being strangers in their own land was made explicit through demands that they collectively disassociate themselves from Bouyeri's act. Aouragh described, in other words, the speed and ferocity with which the ostensible space of cosmopolitan liberalism revealed itself to be just another parish: fideistic and profoundly antagonistic to any other faith than its own.[5]

Parochialism as Conjuncture

It is the echo of Aouragh's testimony to the violence of the disavowed parochialism in the cosmopolitan that I hear most powerfully in the concerns of recent generations of cultural analysis students. Often invoking a broader decolonial interrogation of "method" (Smith) and insisting, in different ways, on the non-negotiability of experiential knowledge, the mounting critique of the "hubris" of cultural analysis's ecumenicalism demonstrates

4 See *Drawing Faces* (*in Terror Times*), December 2, 2022. https://www.stedelijk.nl/nl/evenementen/drawing-faces-terror-times, accessed 29 Aug. 2023.

5 See Aouragh, "Refusing to be Silenced," for a detailed analysis of the conjuncture she described in her talk and also her incisive account of the history and prospects of racial politics in the Netherlands in "'White Privilege.'"

the distance of the present from Früchtl's intervention in 2008. For, this critique is precisely the opposite of Früchtl's. Rather than denouncing a lack of philosophical rigor, it is directed instead at the ways in which cultural analysis displays the same evasion of situatedness evident in philosophy's claim on the universal: its pretension, if not exactly of offering a view from nowhere, then at least to be able to facilitate a view from anywhere.

Faced with this critique, it's tempting to adopt a defensive posture and to argue, for example, that the practice of cultural analysis is inherently situated, and so always reflects the conjunctural situation of the scene of analysis, even if this is not always marked in practice. However, I think it is important to dwell a little longer on the operation of the parochial in this context. For, while the decolonial critique of the hubris of method may seem pejorative, it is also possible to recognize within the spirit of this critique the rearticulation of the parochial in relation to a conjunctural turn toward what might be called questions of belonging; to questions, that is, about the forms of conscription that align and divide bodies; the belongings which distribute possibilities of relation.

Subtending reflections on identity, the experiential, positionality, affect, and autoethnography, as well as discussions of bordering, migration, indigeneity, citizenship, and the relationship of the state form to platform capitalism, these questions of belonging take many forms and have been theorized from different positions. Here, I simply want to gesture toward two specific drivers of this turn toward the parochial, the one technological, the other environmental.

Michel Serres's speculations on the future of education in the age of ubiquitous computing provide one convenient point of entry to the technological dimension in that he identifies the rise of algorithmic technology with the dissolution of old belongings—including "regions, religions, cultures (rural or urban), teams, towns, a sex, dialect, a party and a motherland"—and their replacement by a new "topological space of neighborhoods" (*Thumbelina* 9, 6). However, in his enthusiasm to wave goodbye to the catastrophic belongings of a Eurocentered twentieth century, Serres seems to miss the many ways in which his new topological space of neighborhoods encodes its own desires and languages of belonging, as well as how those interact often in pernicious ways with the forms of belonging that they have supposedly replaced. Thus, while Serres celebrates the power of the algorithm to interpellate the individual as an "atom without valence" (*Thumbelina* 10), he ignores the ways in which algorithms work to accentuate difference to increase the "engagement" central to platform capitalism (Srnicek). This amounts to the same logic of niche marketing that, as Ruha Benjamin points out, "drives

the proliferation of racial codification" that wraps structures of inherited racism in the cloak of objectivity and "digital denial" (22).

To complement this technological drive to the parochial within algorithmic relations of production, I point to Achille Mbembe's thesis that the experience of constriction and contraction that once defined the life world of the colonized has now arguably become the dominant marker of environmental belonging for all:

> Ce désir de violence et d'endogamie et la montée des angoisses ont lieu sur fond d'une prise de conscience—beaucoup plus accentuée qu'auparavant—de notre finitude spatiale. La Terre ne cesse en effet de se contracter. En tant que système en lui-même fini, elle a atteint se limites. (*Brutalisme* 19)

> This desire for violence and endogamy and the accumulated movement toward anxiety are taking place against the background of an awareness—more accentuated now than ever before—of our spatial finiteness. The Earth is in fact constantly shrinking. As a finite system in itself, it has reached its limits. (My translation)

If David Harvey's identification of "time-space compression" as the condition of postmodernity belongs to an epoch of globalization and neocolonial expansion, of speed and immediacy, Mbembe's becoming-Black of the planet announces an epoch in which the corresponding forces of constriction and contraction are resolutely parochial. Hence, whether in terms of a cybernetic logic that works to accentuate difference rather than commonality, or of a revised ecological relationship between self and planet, the parochial can now be seen as a generalized orientation toward finitude and restriction, which operates at different scales and in different domains.

Parochialism as Method

If it is possible, then, to discern the rough outline of a critical conjuncture in the parochial, the question follows, What can cultural analysis bring to the analysis of this centripetal movement of force? The proposition I'd like to entertain in the remainder of this essay is that reflection on the parochialism of cultural analysis itself may provide a generative response.

Indeed, in relation to this world of belongings now ineluctably configured around restraint (Mbembe, *Necropolitics*), cultural analysis's most important

feature might be that, in its insistence on its particular way of doing cultural studies, it models a distinctive version of the parochial. Its greatest potential arguably lies in its ability to draw people together into a functioning community by providing a sometimes clunky ("What's your object?!") language that enables conversations that would otherwise not take place. In this way, I want to suggest, cultural analysis models a community that is predicated less on substantial belonging than on participation; a community, that is, constituted in the very parochiality of its shared language of objects and concepts.

Approaching cultural analysis as modeling a "belonging" through a shared language has at least two significant consequences. Firstly, it emphasizes the importance of acts of translation within the practice of cultural analysis. Furthermore, it acknowledges the inevitable tension that arises from the demand that worlds of conscripted identity be translated into the lingua franca of *object* and *concept* as a currency of exchange or mutual intelligibility. The archives of cultural analysis over the past thirty years strongly suggest that this practice of translation has come most easily to those already comfortable with forms of disassociation, the hybrid, the queered, and the fluidity of intercultural and interdisciplinary dialogue. For those from worlds of conscripted belongings, whether somatic, cultural, academic, or disciplinary in nature, the burden of translation is substantially greater. As postcolonial scholarship makes clear, within the "communities" produced through a lingua franca, there is always an uneven burden of translation. As such, cultural analysis as a methodological lingua franca also inevitably institutes a translation deficit whose structure defaults to that of colonialism generally (I thank my former student Maan Meelker for reminding me of this fact).[6]

Engaging with that translation deficit in a spirit of advised parochialism might encourage us to rethink the practice of cultural analysis in relation to the vexed history of Amsterdam as one site in the many possible "loci of enunciation" for thinking "culture" (Boone and Mignolo 303). The methodological agnosticism of cultural analysis carries traces of its roots in the mud of a port city that, as the birthplace of the joint stock company and the first multinational corporation, occupies a signal position in the conjoined histories of capitalism, colonialism, and liberalism. It would perhaps bring us to see the method of cultural analysis as an "implicated" methodology (Rothberg). Consequently, we may attempt to hold present

6 For a particularly powerful description of the character of this translation deficit, see Bhanot.

the historical role of Amsterdam as an engine of commodification, marking its role in the transformation of people and the stuff of worlds into objects of fungibility (Ghosh) as well as its propensity to reproduce itself around archives of objects—ranging from warehouses to museums, galleries, and department stores—whose contents vacillate constantly between goods, objects, commodities, and cultural capital.

From Parochial to Translocal?

At the same time, emphasizing the parochial within cultural analysis and its situatedness within Amsterdam may also mean gaining awareness of the alluvial character of Amsterdam as a maritime city, a locus of enunciation formed through its incorporation or sedimentation of traces of countless other places. This process of sedimentation is emphatically marked in the archives of cultural analysis, which show that thinking from Amsterdam has also meant being free to think simultaneously from Frankfurt, Birmingham, Paris, Berkeley, Madison, Ljubljana, Istanbul, and numerous other "centers" of cultural and critical theory. However, as the translation deficit testifies, it is just as emphatically marked in the *absence* from that archive of most of the places that have shaped Amsterdam through ties of coloniality and resource extraction.

Hence, thinking with the parochiality of Amsterdam in this respect encourages an understanding of the parochial as *translocal*, constituted through processes of "entanglement and interconnectedness" that link place to the global and the planetary (Freitag and von Oppen 1). However, as Aouragh's testimony has made plain, this translocality cannot be divorced from its parochiality. If thinking from Amsterdam means thinking with the "sum of phenomena which result from a multitude of circulations and transfers" (Freitag and von Oppen 5), it also means being wary of the globalizing dynamic that remains implicit in the idiom of *transfer* and *circulation*. The "phenomena" in question should include an understanding of nonequivalence and proximity-as-separation, of place as *partage*. In this respect, it is an understanding of translocality as equivalence-in-difference that seems most useful, as articulated, perhaps, in the Zapatista counter to globalizing insistence on equivalence that "all are equals *because* they are different" (De Angelis 193).[7]

7 I'm very grateful to my colleague Alessandra Benedicty-Kokken for pointing out the importance of the Zapatista formulation of the translocal in relation to thinking the parochial.

As Massimo de Angelis points out, communication within this understanding of translocality is not about translation into an abstract currency of exchange, but about the production of a common that is grounded in the knowledge that what is shared—a language of concepts and objects—is simultaneously the marker of difference. It is a common that is less about the invocation of a supposedly universally intelligible language than about the possibilities for the recognition of *partage* and connection-in-separation. Such translation practices are perhaps modeled most generatively by Édouard Glissant in his emphasis on opacity and a distinctly alluvial understanding of relationality (33).[8] This model is also evident in Rosello's emphasis on the challenge of dwelling in *rudimentariness* (rudimentariness) and the need to develop an ethics of *accompaniment* (disorientation), both of which feel like key concepts in any practice of translation attuned to the unequal burdens of the translation deficit.

From the Parochial to the Pastoral

Whatever practices of translation prove most adept in thinking about thinking from Amsterdam in the next decades, avowing parochialism as a method also means holding awareness for the continued operation of the logic of neoliberalism, as well as recognizing the attractive power of Amsterdam as a city whose facility with English as the global lingua franca and cultivated profile as a multinational-friendly hub is reflected in its appeal to students from around the world. This means recognizing, too, that Amsterdam is a city that, having gathered its visitors to its cafes and canals, frequently abandons them to the market logic that produces unaffordable housing, massed lecture halls, and the exigencies of the gig economy (Van Heest). For many students, this means abandonment to the anomie and isolation of the topology of neighborhoods described by Serres.

Even more immediately, thinking through the parochial means addressing the practical questions of how cultural analysis will take place pedagogically within the context of an institutional drive toward economies of scale and the turn to digitalization as "innovation." It means asking ourselves how to

8 "We no longer reveal totality within ourselves by lightning flashes. We approach it through the accumulation of sediments.... Sediment then begins with the country in which your drama takes shape. Just as Relation is not pure abstraction to replace the old concept of the universal, it also neither implies nor authorizes any ecumenical detachment. The landscape of your world is the world's landscape. But its frontier is open" (Glissant 33).

teach accountably in lecture halls rather than seminar rooms, and to engage with students who encounter the psychological demands of university education without the resource of communal experience.

As a final declension of the parochial then, avowing parochialism as method means keeping present issues of care within pedagogic practice and cultivating a sensitivity to the forms of violence arising from a dominant cultural logic toward the depersonalization of higher education, its commodification, massification, and digitization under the cybernetic model of "excellence." In the spirit of bell hooks, a parochial cultural analysis would be sensitive to the forms of harm that are replicated in the classroom and to the changing pedagogic context for students who inhabit radically different landscapes—technological, affective, ecological, pharmacological, sexual, and economic—than their predecessors, and (most of) their professors.

The most recent policy response to these challenges—the Dutch government's proposed reduction in the number of international students and English-language programs in further education (Hoger Onderwijs Persbureau)—emphasizes the isolationist elements within the conjunctural turn to the parochial. In the face of this inflection toward nationalism it might be that, in a SWOT matrix (identifying strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats), it is the ability of cultural analysis to model conversation among those who do not assume a common language—that is, the parochialism of its method—that constitutes its most generative resource in the face of this potentially existential threat.

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Afterword

Aylin Kuryel, Noa Roei, and Murat Aydemir

In the making of this book, it has been reinvigorating to reflect on shared methods and principles, varied legacies, troubled presents, and uncertain futures in relation to the practice of cultural analysis. Dwelling upon the current formation of cultural analysis and our entanglement in it, we have shared our questions and concerns with scholars, colleagues, students, and friends. As the volume materialized, we found ourselves stirred by the directions it took: the twists in some of the more expected debates and the density of others; the surfacing of familiar-yet-not-always-acknowledged affective traces and attachments; the (expected at times, surprising at others) insistence or decline of legacies, connections, and positionalities.

As this volume was moving into production in May of 2024, student encampments emerged on university grounds as part of a global student movement, calling on the University of Amsterdam to cut ties with Israeli academic institutions in solidarity with Palestine and against Israel's long-lasting regime of occupation and genocidal practices in Gaza. The attempt to suppress the protests by institutional and municipal powers, including university management, the mayor's office, and the police, quickly escalated into a violent clampdown and generated mutually exclusive discourses on safety, solidarity, debate, and community within our academic landscapes. Many questions addressed in this volume regarding theory, practice, pedagogy, engagement, scale, relationality, institutionalization, and temporality came into intensified and accelerated relief. If anything, the historical present surrounding and conditioning the practice of cultural analysis in Amsterdam and elsewhere adds a layer of urgency to the questions we have posed to ourselves and our contributors, calling for reformulations of the practices and functions of cultural analysis under radically changing conditions.

The result of this shared moment is, as expected, anything but conclusive. Rather than an up-to-date guidebook that would offer a most accurate,

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sustainable, or elegant vantage point from which to define cultural analysis in the present moment, the essays in this volume direct questions to the practice of cultural analysis as well as to each other in an open conversation that has been ongoing in the context of the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis (ASCA) in different forms, and will certainly continue to do so beyond this volume. Seeing the past as part of the present has been one of the principles of the practice in its Amsterdam configuration: the critics and the objects of inquiry as cohabitants of the present where the analysis matters *now*. Here is our very brief attempt to extend this temporality toward seeing the present as part of the future, too: What will matter *then*? Below is a sketch of the resonating conversations and emanating themes that emerged as the volume came into shape.

Around the Object

Many of the contributions attest to the insistent centrality of the semiotic object for cultural analysis, while others push against that very centrality or question the object's material and conceptual contours, its politics, and its theoretical and pedagogic plasticity. From this perspective, the volume seems to challenge, nuance, and reroute an original pillar of cultural analysis, which insists on the centrality of the object's overdetermined specificity and concreteness as what enables it to condense the traces of multiple subjects, experiences, affects, circumstances, conditions, and events.

Out of overlapping questions, four areas of concern surface most clearly. The first addresses the very availability of objects to our critical practice. Objects are in the public domain, hence available to everyone in principle, if not always in practice. Neither cultures, archives, nations, languages, disciplines, theories, nor fields can be said to "own" their objects. Most things, if not anything, can conceivably serve as an object of cultural analysis; and while this attests to the practice's democratic and nondidactic core, it should not preclude considerations of distribution, accessibility, and address (Martin). Claiming nonownership does not necessarily translate to indiscriminate availability (Nadkarni and Thinius). Even if we do speak the object's languages, it remains to be seen if we can hear it across the ruptures of large-scale political, economic, and epistemological distributions of power (Bal, Aroch Fugellie). Perhaps the objects we can listen to are precisely those that translate a little too easily.

The second concern has to do with the object's capture in a framework of augmented productivity. The object *always* "speaks back"; it always

signifies successfully. This way, even its silences, withdrawals, and negations become positive content and output. Hence, the contributions suggest, we should perhaps not take the phrase "the object speaks back" as a general methodological principle to be demonstrated repeatedly without fail but as a hypothesis to be tested genuinely each time anew. Does this object speak? Can I hear? Should I?

Moreover, we more or less tend to take for granted that objects speak most significantly against power and generally contribute toward progressive causes. Contributions call awareness to the ways in which speaking objects may just as well support forms of power, pointing to the ways in which they are part of diversified economies of content and markets, which can make those progressive politics less relevant in advance (De Bloois, Lopez), and how they are involved in colonial economies of extraction, production, and distribution. The question is, then, how to accommodate a wider spectrum of complicity and resistance in our listening practices in ways that continue to engender critical and informed insight.

A third line of inquiry concerns issues of scale. Some phenomena are so big, so "all around," that they are challenging to get into focus through close reading, if not in the reductive and partial forms of "theme" or "representation." How to read *for* neocolonial capitalism or a planetary environment in crisis without somehow missing their vast scope and their formative influences on our rudimentary everyday circumstances? A keen combination of close reading and object analysis with other "zoomed out" or systematic approaches might be necessary (Aroch Fugellie, Wigdel-Bowcott). On other occasions, we might need to move away from object-oriented methodology altogether, and closely read the field or the event in order to open up more fully to what is at stake, thematically, politically, and conceptually (Diamanti, De Bloois).

Finally, the question remains how objects become appreciable as objects in the first place. From one angle, the objects we study only momentarily find themselves in a stable state that accommodates interpretation and reflection. Before and after, that same "thing" is part of material processes that make it cohere and disintegrate. What would it mean to regard our objects of analysis as "unfinished" (Sturm)? At the same time, we should perhaps also not shy away from accepting accountability for how our analytical gaze focuses on, and so constitutes, objects *qua* objects, isolating them from the continuum and web of relationships of which they are part. Even under the well-intentioned headings of emergence, participation, immersion, or entanglement, object analysis may to some extent be unavoidably "objectifying" for the sake of analysis, and this is

something to be faced with responsibility and care rather than denied (Peeren, Van Alphen).

Here and Now

Under diverse headings, contributions call for urgent and precise elaborations of our institutional, historical, and environmental situatedness. In so doing, they follow up on another founding gesture of cultural analysis: the critique of the binding ideologies and genealogies of historicism in favor of an avowed presentness. Meaning always happens *now*, and the volume as a whole attends to the accountability that such recognition brings with it. That accountability itself evolves and matures through time. Earlier on, the practice's insistent focus on the present as the moment of an encounter was in itself a novelty, intervening in the customary disciplinary separation of the *act* of analysis from the analysis proper. As such, it could be adequately indicated by a minimal shorthand, referencing identity and positionality, current affairs, or known systems of power. For those relatively stable decades, in which the histories of the West had been declared over and done with, or had at least *seemed* to have quieted down, that shorthand may have sufficed, but that is not the case anymore.

If the event of signification always takes place in the present, that present, in its current state of intensified upheaval and historicity, cannot but bear heavily on our research. It cannot remain relatively notional or punctual, a nominal "now." Descriptions and contextualizations require more detail, accountability, and care. After all, the present is as historical as the past. And so, many contributions flesh out more fully issues of positionality as well as the historical and environmental "here and now." Different forms of attention to one's situatedness emerge in response to the challenge, ranging from conjuncture (Wigdel-Bowcott) and parochialism (Martin) to coloniality (Aroch Fugellie, Nadkarni and Thinius, Özgen), and the neoliberal university (Kuryel). Different modes of address are prodded, including reportage (De Bloois), heterochronicity (Bal, Van Alphen), reading *for* the object (Peeren), and intervention (Kuryel). Historical and contextual scrutiny is extended to the conceptual tools with which objects are interpreted (Aydemir), their theoretical underpinnings (Nadkarni and Thinius), and the fields and infrastructural lifeworlds in which they are deployed (Diamanti, Roei). Together, they turn a critical eye toward the histories and geographies of the present, inviting the practice to live up fully to its avowed presentness.

Outwards

The scrutiny of the situatedness of our practices leads, in turn, to a desire recurrently articulated throughout the volume to break away from established academic and institutional habits. This reflects on another founding idea for cultural analysis: a continuous testing of its relation with objects, concepts, and theory but also with its contexts – the institution, the city, the field, the society, the planet. While revisiting the contexts of cultural analysis, the contributions reflect a shared movement: a cultural analysis that turns outwards into the world. For some contributions, this means a move away from existing pedagogical practices (Sturm, Özgen, Kuryel, Wigdel-Bowcott), while for others, a turn away from reified notions of relevance, sedimented hegemonies of knowledge, or comfortable positions of inquiry (Martin, Lopez, Aroch Fugellie, Nadkarni and Thinius). Some contributions address the way cultural analysis as an academic field negotiates (or should renegotiate) its relation with public space and the social (Kuryel, De Bloois, Aydemir), while others attend to the broader, but nevertheless defined, institutional, disciplinary, and academic traditions and sites of knowledge in which cultural analysis circulates (Bal, Van Alphen, Roei, Diamanti).

In all these different directions, there seems to be a shared concern to engage with the social, not in the form of a rushed contemporaneity or an anxious pursuit for topicality, but as a recurrent move into and with the everyday, driven by a sense of urgency and receptivity. The outside that is reflected in the contributions is surely no playground: ecological tipping points, rising anti-intellectualism, abandoned horizons of emancipation, institutional silencing, objects indistinguishable from goods, concepts going bad. Of course, not everything is lost; there are also cracks open in this landscape, joint and insistent struggles against global inequalities and urgencies, hegemonic practices, and epistemic hierarchies. In such a scenery, a stronger engagement with systemic totalities and wider political angles seems inevitable for cultural analysis. It also seems unavoidable that the attention paid to details in analysis stands side by side with rather tense alertness to how our practices, concepts, and methods resonate with (or disrupt) the power structures they purport to criticize. In this sense, contributions indicate a move toward (or back to?) what Stuart Hall called the "dirtiness" of cultural studies: "from the clean air of meaning and textuality and theory to the something nasty down below" (264). The volume, then, can be read as an attempt to revisit cultural analysis practice in a prefigurative form: testing epistemologies and methodologies that would

reflect the futures that are imagined, moving in and with everyday life, without presuming its political capacity in advance.

Writing *with*

The pieces in the volume dwell on what cultural analysis aligns with (theoretical worldviews, struggles, ideas), works with (objects, concepts, theory), and moves with (contexts, conjunctures). This might not be a surprise considering the ongoing attention paid in the field to encounters, connections, entanglements, combinations, and collaborations. The term "cultural analysis" itself was an attempt at shifting the focus from the study of (popular) culture to its *analysis*, in which what is analyzed is not subject matter alone but the subject, an active agent participating in the formation of theoretical arguments (Bal). Hence, from the outset, cultural analysis's mode of inquiry was based on writing *with*, not *about*, objects, concepts, and theory. Building on this trajectory, contributions contemplate the possible futures of cultural analysis by extending various forms of coauthorship—*writing with*. The pieces, in this sense, provide a fresh perspective on coauthorship in cultural analysis: the sociality of knowledge production in the face of changing circumstances.

Forms of "writing with" vary greatly in the volume. One cluster maps out the dynamics, potentialities, and limitations of the triad object–concept–analyst, either as a whole or in segments. Within this cluster, some contributions underscore the potential of writing with objects and concepts to enable generative encounters (Bal), revised lineages (Van Alphen), and responsible analysis (Peeren). Others address necessary adjustments and realignments when working with stuck concepts (Aydemir), out-of-fashion or commodified theories (Lopez, De Bloois), ignored positionalities (Nadkarni and Thinius, Martin, Aroch Fugellie) or untenable objects (Sturm, Wigdel-Bowcott). The attunement to the elements of the triad as resonating with and against the writing practice, in different intensities and for different purposes, is negotiated anew with every concrete manifestation.

Writing with emerges, then, as a practice that enables the development of insight, reflection, and argumentation through the oscillating movements of an encounter. Those encounters extend in another cluster of contributions beyond the object–concept–analyst triad to address wider forms of relationality. Pedagogical relationality emerges as one offshoot of the research practice, where courses and assignments are coauthored by teachers and students (Özgen, Kuryel). Institutional border-crossing and

nonacademic partners (Roei, Sturm), as well as shifting fields and scales (Diamanti, Wigdel-Bowcott), are all addressed not only as extensions of spaces of encounter, where cultural analysis moves out of its comfort zone but as interventions that may shift epistemic modes of research. The volume thus exposes a thirst for collaborations that may spill over and against existing practices, spaces, and concerns of cultural analysis, and opens further conversations on forms of coauthorship.

Feelings

Another recurrent theme in the volume is the insistence on communicating discomfort, hesitation, precarity, angst, joy: feelings that inform our relationship to work in our writing, research, and teaching. Outside of the analysis proper, where the encounter with the object welcomes frictions and resistances as generative of critical insight, the tendency is to associate "ugly feelings," in particular with personal insecurities rather than structural matters, to sweep them aside, away from public visibility, especially in a stifling institutional climate. Yet, as researchers, teachers, colleagues, and affiliates of ASCA, traveling in and out of disciplinary, collegial, pedagogical, political, and institutional affordances and demands, we are not always certain or content, neither safe nor secure. The candor with which affective states are taken up as entry points into revisiting the practice of cultural analysis and contemplating its futures places emphasis on the practice as a space of encounter that welcomes (even if it doesn't always manage to maintain) confrontation, multiplications, and disintegration as ideas move and touch different surfaces; a space that is ideally able to host and care for what doesn't easily come together.

Experiences are brought into the scene, as central or tangential to the analysis, in stern or teasing manners, and in relation to diverse matters: institutional quandaries (Sturm), infrastructural challenges (Roei, Diamanti), conceptual paradigms (Aydemir, Lopez), and political struggles (Kuryel, Özgen). Granted, the resurfacing of affect might have been engendered by the volume's initial wish to attend to our own growing discomfort with the comfortable place that cultural analysis had seemed to find itself in after years of struggle, at least institutionally. Looking back at the volume from the vantage point of its last pages, however, it seems clear that cultural analysis is not necessarily practiced at ease. Contributions that attend to discomfort (Lopez), inconvenience (Roei), anxiety (Peeren), among others, help to understand those traces not as concepts in vogue, but as deeply

rooted generative drives across fields of interest and modes of analysis. Reflecting on cultural analysis has summoned a spillover between critical research and critical reflection on research, between engaged pedagogy and engagement with pedagogy. The underlying attachments that inform the lived experience of research, teaching, and writing receive explicit attention as a result, next to more clear-cut reflections and assessments. This inevitably leads to the surfacing of the processual aspects of the practice, next to its methodologies and outcomes. This resurfacing may offer entry points for freshly navigating affective tensions wherever they happen: the classroom, the hallway, the blank page. Feelings are always there and never easy, stifling at times and generative at others, and attuning to them helps to mark what is constant in an otherwise ever-shifting field.

Unfinished Business

As we stated in the introduction, there are different entry points into the emergence of cultural analysis. In the same vein, there are different possible departures to follow from this collective reflection. Any present situation, phenomenon, or dilemma that is caught up in analysis participates in a complex temporal and spatial network of meaning and layers of relations that can never be fully apprehended. The wish to hold on to the "now" of cultural analysis as live and dynamic, brushes up against the analysis proper, in the sense that analytical practice inevitably captures particles of the "now" and turns them into a stable form, archiving and sedimenting partial presents as the pasts of our futures.

Most, if not all, contributions acknowledge the difficulty of analyzing objects, practices, and contexts as part of a process and the challenges of avoiding the transformation of propositions into facts, speculations into proof. Some suggest that this navigation could lead to new modes of writing and thinking altogether. This might mean that the messy world in which we encounter objects would necessitate less polished forms of analysis (De Bloois), or that the object's incomplete, processual form might enable an alternative encounter with theory, marked by cutting into texts and concepts rather than bouncing against them (Sturm).

We would like to thank our contributors for joining this journey and helping to get some sense of the landscapes that cultural analysis has taken shape in and the formations that might follow. Granted, most contributions place objects, concepts, and methods at the center; but the volume is, in the end, about the analyst as well. The collective conversation offered us a

space to revisit "home," which is, in each return, a place "in the here-and-now that has lost its routine, its familiar homogeneity, that has been enriched by strangers, strangeness, and self-estrangement" (Bal, *Travelling Concepts* 287). The contributions that dwell on what it might take to attend to unfinished form help us to bring this volume to an end, put down the final period as one must, lean back, and wait for the ways in which it will now circulate, out of our hands.

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