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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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