

GOING DUTCH

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Murat Aydemir, Noa Roei and Aylin Kuryel (eds), *The Future of Cultural Analysis: A Critical Inquiry*, Amsterdam University Press, 2025, 260pp, £36.79 paperback, open access.

Many of the readers of this journal could be persuaded that what they do, at least some of the time, is a form of cultural analysis. They might be working as a curator in a museum, or researching Japanese anime in their spare time between shifts in a café, writing about literature in a university or pursuing fieldwork amongst the tar sands of Alberta, but they are also likely to share an orientation towards culture in its various dimensions. The practice of cultural analysis, then, is a topic with broad appeal and generous inclusivity, but also something with a more anxious undertow: do we all mean the same thing by cultural analysis? Does your conceptualisation of cultural analysis preclude the work that I do, or vice versa? What are the political and social affordances of this form of cultural analysis and how does it compare with what these people over there are doing? The book under review isn't an attempt to iron out methodological differences and come up with a version of cultural analysis that we could all, broadly, sign up to. It is instead a discussion of a specific set of practices that have characterised a tendency within the interdisciplinary humanities over the last three decades. It is a discussion of the Amsterdam School of Cultural Analysis, a formation that is now thirty years old, and is particularly associated with the work of Mieke Bal. More importantly the book is a discussion of the current state and future possibilities of this formation.

It was Bal who co-founded the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis (ASCA) at the University of Amsterdam in 1994, and in 1999 she edited an influential book, *The Practice of Cultural Analysis: Exposing Interdisciplinary Interpretation*, that presented cultural analysis as something like a programmatic project.¹ Currently the Netherlands boasts two organisations dedicated to the practice of cultural analysis: the Netherlands Institute for Cultural Analysis (currently based at Leiden University) and ASCA. The former is a professional network for affiliated scholars across the Netherlands and beyond, whereas the latter is a postgraduate programme and a research community at the University of Amsterdam. It is worth noting that of the sixteen authors of the book under review only two are not directly connected to ASCA. It is also worth noting that of the seventeen sections of the book all but two cite the work of Bal.

While it is clear from the range of topics in *The Future of Cultural Analysis* (as well as in its forerunner *The Practice of Cultural Analysis*) that ASCA supports a heterodox approach to the study of culture there is a set of methodological

1. Mieke Bal (ed.) *The Practice of Cultural Analysis: Exposing Interdisciplinary Interpretation*, Stanford University Press, 1999. (Hereafter *The Practice of Cultural Analysis*.)

2. The video can be found here: <https://vimeo.com/165822613>. The five principles of cultural analysis act as headings to ASCA's annual reports which can be found at: <https://asca.uva.nl/about-asca/annual-reports/annual-reports.html>

3. Jonathan Culler, 'What is Cultural Studies?', in *The Practice of Cultural Analysis*, p345.

orientations that guides all the work and gives it a shared family resemblance. This is summarised in Bal's chapter in *The Future of Cultural Analysis*, as well as prominently displayed on ASCA's website and relayed in a handy three-minute video on Vimeo also by Bal.² The somewhat liturgical 'five principles of cultural analysis' goes roughly like this. First, while there is a central commitment to interdisciplinarity this is matched by a respectful acknowledgement of disciplinary procedures and outcomes. Second, that research should be theoretically grounded, but not theoretically determined. Theory is used as a sensitising agent, a way into a cultural phenomenon or arena. It isn't a set of interpretations waiting to be applied or deployed, but a form of critically curious attunements (as much grit as salve). Third, is a commitment to social relevance. Cultural analysis finds its import in an orientation to the world and its urgent problems (in this sense context is never simply the relatively closed world that an object might primarily exist in). Vital social history is accomplished *through* the analysis of objects, never just alongside it. The fourth principle is an unswerving dedication to close reading (whether of texts or social phenomena) and a belief that cultural analysis only produces knowledge when the object of analysis answers back (and, to some degree at least, has the last word). This of course is the corollary of the second principle: objects mustn't be docile recipients of theory's often voracious appetites. Fifth, and potentially contentious for those committed to the historicity of historical work, cultural analysis engages its object from present day concerns and perspectives. It is the present that always asks why an analysis matters (which is to nuance principle three into our contemporary situation).

I can immediately see the value of all this and in many ways ascribe to a similar ethos. But rather than simply condone it, I want to suggest some reasons for its emergence in the mid-1990s and perhaps for its success. The first thing to note is that the thirty-year history of the Amsterdam School begins (and to some degree continues) partly as a form of disidentification with cultural studies. This is often explicit. Jonathan Culler in an afterword to the 1999 anthology writes: 'cultural analysis is not cultural studies', and as a way of proving this he goes on to write 'cultural analysis is not fighting a battle against literary studies. It is not focused primarily on popular culture or on the present'.³ In the current anthology Bal writes that her initial decision to call her project cultural analysis was to escape the methodological dogmatism of specific disciplines while also distinguishing it 'from the somewhat underdefined and overpoliticized practice of "cultural studies"' (p25). Cultural analysis, then, emerges as an alternative to cultural studies and perhaps as a rapprochement with more established disciplines in higher education who might have felt at the time that cultural studies was launching a hostile takeover bid for hearts and minds (and student numbers) within the humanities.

The early 1990s was a time of cultural studies' ascendancy within Anglophone higher education. Just pointing to two instances from that

time will give you a flavour of the energy and confidence of the field at that point: 1992 was the year when Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula Treichler released their nearly 800-page doorstep anthology simply called *Cultural Studies*; the following year Simon During published *The Cultural Studies Reader* which pretty much consolidated the theoretical dimensions and concerns of cultural studies at the time. Both books were produced by Routledge, who seemed to have had a near-monopoly on cultural studies publishing at that time. The founders of the Amsterdam School of Cultural Analysis were among a number of people who sought to question the value of what at times felt like an avalanche of new writing being published under the cultural studies' 'brand'. Anti-cultural studies rhetoric seemed almost *de rigueur* at most literary, historical and art historical conferences in the 1990s that I attended. But the most trenchant critiques weren't from those who might be feeling threatened by an incursion, they came from inside the tent. This is the cultural studies writer, Meagan Morris, writing at her spikiest and most prescient in 1988: 'I get the feeling that somewhere in some English publisher's vault there is a master-disk from which thousands of versions of the same article about pleasure, resistance, and the politics of consumption are being run off under different names with minor variations'.⁴ I'm guessing that the English publisher alluded to here was Routledge. But Morris wasn't just recognising how once-pioneering work can give birth to a machine-tooled format to be filled out by rote, she was also pointing to the new industrialisation (partial democratisation, near-total commercialisation) of higher education in which cultural studies was a not uncritical accomplice.

But the disidentification with cultural studies was only one aspect of the project of Amsterdam's cultural analysis and probably its least important element. More crucial, I think, was the way it responded to a pedagogic situation. The 1980s and 1990s were the years of high theory. In many courses across the humanities (particularly graduate courses) you were more likely to end up with a familiarity with deconstruction and psychoanalysis than with a deep knowledge of a corpus of literature, say, or a tradition of art works, even though art and literature might have been included in the title of the degree. For many courses the idea of the survey was treated, rightly, with suspicion as perpetuating a highly selective tradition (the canon of the pale and male). ASCA's five principles might be the answer to the question of what kind of work *can* you get students to do in a situation where theory is highly valued and cultural overviews are decidedly not and are generally missing from the curriculum and from students' knowledge banks. In a way not dissimilar to New Historicism's promotion of the anecdote, the focus on *an* object as both the starting point and end point retains a number of skills central to the humanities while dispensing with its habit of consecrating specific works.

Skip forward thirty years and *The Future of Cultural Analysis: A Critical Inquiry* asks its authors to consider ASCA's current commitments as well as to imagine what cultural analysis could be like in 2034. Given the current

4. Meaghan Morris, 'Banality in Cultural Studies', *Discourse*, 10:2, 1988, pp3-29. JSTOR, p15.

global state of the humanities in higher education it is not surprising to find a mood of anxiety permeating many of the essays. It should also be noted, perhaps in passing, that there is often a much friendlier disposition towards cultural studies than was evident in the 1999 anthology – for instance, the concept of conjunctures is a topic central to two of the chapters (Murat Aydemir and Seb Wigdel-Bowcott). Because the book isn't a collection of acts of cultural analyses but is instead a set of reflections on the practices and procedures of cultural analysis, there is an implicit and often explicit invocation of the scene of teaching and research. The classroom enters discussion not as an abstract proposition but as a physical actuality, peopled by students with specific demands and interests. Jules Sturm's chapter, for instance, describes what happens when cultural analysis moves from the sort of classic humanities classroom (based around reading texts, preparing essays, and so on) to one peopled by students on course to becoming art teachers in schools. Their frustration with a library-based form of learning, compared to their familiarity with studio practice, meant that cultural analysis had to be translated into something new (and had to be partially unlearned by the author). In this case it was by pursuing the intricate paper cutting-procedures created by the Brazilian artist Lydia Clark in 1964, and treating it as a teaching object that performed the translation, which then transformed the classroom into a more democratic exchange between students and facilitator. Cultural analysis was thus expanded beyond the production of written analyses.

In a different vein Aylin Kuryel's chapter also expands cultural analysis beyond the written essay form as she takes her students out of the classroom to produce interventions within the city of Amsterdam. This sort of public cultural analysis isn't about valuing and evaluating cogent arguments, clearly rehearsed theory, or championing sober semiotic decoding, rather it encourages an often courageous and messy engagement with the complex socio-economic planetary actuality of urban life as it is lived by her students. The students interact with passersby and with the city in a way that invokes performance art and political activism as much as anything else. And in doing so the work maintains a deep kinship with theorists like Guy Debord and others for whom the city wasn't an object of interpretation but of intervention and social practice.

One of the most notable aspects of cultural analysis as it has been promoted by the Amsterdam School has been to champion experimentation both in choice of objects and in the poetic forms that are used to pursue analysis. Poetics is never a side issue with cultural analysis: it is never far from the heart of its cultural politics. Joost de Bloois' chapter encourages 'reportage' both as a way of increasing cultural analysis' capabilities at description, but also as a way of checking-in with social reality: reportage in this sense constantly faces the test of social reality. And given the state of higher education, reportage might also offer a way of transitioning to what he terms the 'para-

academic sphere' (p124) – a sphere increasing in significance as the university infrastructure crumbles.

The 1999 anthology began with a bravura analysis of what seemed to be an ephemeral and slight piece of graffiti. In this 2025 collection graffiti appears again, this time as a painted slogan on the northern bank of the river IJ: 'NORMAL IS OVER IF WE LIKE IT OR NOT'. The graffiti is used as a prompt to consider the ability of cultural analysis to engage with the planetary issue of human-induced climate change and how it is experienced in daily life. The question of scale is vital here, but there is no clear indication of a scale adequate to the issue: if climate scientists can measure the temperature of 'hyperobjects' such as the oceans, then what do cultural analysts do to take stock of the way that climate breakdown impacts (and doesn't) on daily life? The fact that there is no correct scale for cultural analysts suggests that the watchword for our work can no longer be the 'rigour' so beloved by grant-awarding bodies and research auditors. Fluidity and flexibility will be the flags we fly under.

Scale is also an issue when approaching the topic of decolonisation which is taken up by several writers (Aslı Özgen, Divya Nadkarni and Alex Thinius) as well as the aligned question of what it means to approach analysis from the perspective of the global south (Paulina Aroch Fugellie). Again, there is no position or scale that is going to be perfect and given that cultural analysis itself has Eurocentric roots the outcome is bound to be messy. What all the writers agree on is that decolonisation is not an edict to diversify the curriculum through simply adding texts and case studies from people of colour. To embrace the ethos of decolonisation means to rethink the whole business of education and scholarship from the ground up. A common phrase for revolutionary leaders to proclaim in the aftermath of post-1945 national decolonisation was 'now the real work begins'. It is something to remember in the long labour of decolonising the curriculum.

The collection demonstrates the heterogeneity of 'objects' that can provide the impetus for cultural analysis. Some of these are the standard objects common to many humanities disciplines – novels, TV programmes, minimalist sculpture, performance art, and so on. Others are more unusual: graffiti, cultural infrastructures, the planetary city. What often seems obscured in the five principles of cultural analysis is how to negotiate between the specificity of the object, the demands of the present, and the ground of theory. Several authors suggest ways of addressing this negotiation. For instance, Ernst van Alphen offers the activities of gathering and framing as significant forms of mediation. Reading, of course, particularly close reading is another form of negotiation. These are all practices of cultural analysis that are in many ways resistant to being systematised into a method. We can't read everything in the same way; our activities of framing are determined by the kind of objects we pick. How, then, do we go about doing cultural analysis? How do we move not just between objects and theories, but between accounts of the activity

of choosing objects, deciding on theories, listening to the demands of the present? This, and much more, falls under the shadowy world of practice. It is a realm determined as much by habit, by tacit knowledge, by what we all too vaguely might term 'intuition' (even if it is an intuition that values the counter-intuitive). We get an inkling of what practice means for these authors when they are at their most personal and self-reflexive (Noa Roei's chapter is particularly productive in this light).

I haven't been able to mention all the chapters in this constantly provocative and generative book, but I do want to return to Mieke Bal's chapter. It is based around a reading of the 2013 novel *Migas de pan* by Ariel Bibliowicz, a Columbian novelist of Polish-Jewish descent. Reading Bal's chapter reminded me how important comparative literature has been in the decades since the 1970s. Looking at the books that have inspired me over the years I realise that they are often the product of 'comp-lit' departments where theory, cultural history and attentive readings of heterodox objects seem to have mixed in a deeply generative way. As Bal writes 'cultural analysis is not a different branch of ... the humanities, but an inherent mode of it' (p27), one that I think has been characteristic of the kind of work 'comp-lit' sanctioned (even when the work was neither comparative nor based around literature). Bal's reading of Bibliowicz's novel alerts us to two related phenomena. First, that in many cases cultural analysis isn't something that is 'done' to an object. For Bal, Bibliowicz's novel is an exemplary instance of such an analysis, and here Bal's job is to join in the conversation articulated and performed by the novel rather than interpret it. Connected to this, necessarily, is the question of how to choose your object. Presumably not all objects are as rich as Bibliowicz's. The question of how we find our objects is, I think, something worthy of further discussion.

It is of course uncharitable to review a book in terms of what it hasn't done, but in the context of what is a major statement of an analytic programme, it is, I think, not only excusable but necessary for understanding the specific affordances and capacities of an approach. It is important to remember that the Amsterdam School of Cultural Analysis is not the only version of cultural analysis that is available. Within the context of what some have called British 'culturalism' we should also make some mention of Raymond Williams' chapter 'The Analysis of Culture' in *The Long Revolution*.⁵ There Williams lays out a very different kind of project of cultural analysis (but one that isn't incompatible with ASCA), one that tries to meld an anthropological approach to living culture with a survey of cultural texts at a documentary level as well as picking out specific examples for more intensive study. In many ways it reverses the procedures of ASCA. The aim, for Williams, was to find patterns of feeling emerging from this analytic work. Without the ability to survey across culture (both anthropologically and in terms of cultural works) the intensive study would be redundant. It was in the end the 'structure of feeling' that was the object of study, and this was refracted through multiple objects.

5. Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution*, Chatto and Windus, 1961.

Williams' moment is not our moment; it isn't the moment of the current life of ASCA. If cultural analysis is in need of surveys (and I believe that this is a crucial part of cultural analysis), then it isn't clear what sort of surveys we need. They wouldn't be the same surveys that Williams had to hand. You certainly wouldn't require a full knowledge of nineteenth-century British literature. What would be the ideal pre-requisite for a course on cultural analysis? A history of African decolonisation? An overview of the many forms of industrial production (from the plantation system onwards)? A cultural history of the emergence of the academy and the disciplines? A history of subjectivity? An exploration of the multifarious forms of extraction? What sort of foundational knowledge would be required? Of course, all this and more, comes the reply. The problem here is that such foundations would no doubt change depending on the object singled out for analysis. But – and this is the double-bind that cultural analysis confronts – singling out objects for special attention is likely to be dependent on the foundational knowledges that an analyst brings with them. How else is attention attuned? If the future of cultural analysis results in a loosening of its adherence to the five principles to accommodate unwieldy objects like anthropogenic climate change and planetary racism, then the task that confronts it is going to require the development of frameworks that can nimbly alternate between the long-shot and the close-up, between collective history and the singularity of the occurrence. *The Future of Cultural Analysis: A Critical Inquiry* not only supplies some of the materials for undertaking such work, but it also supplies the passionate energy for attempting it.

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