

# Culture and critique

Notes on a polysemic relationship

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**Abstract:** In her work on cultural critique, Rosemarie Buikema conceptualises culture as a terrain for the elaboration and contestation of collective memory, a form that mediates social formations, and a practice that critically supplements the political. Taking the polysemic relationship between culture and critique as our starting point, we bring Buikema's reflections to bear on our own work on post-Yugoslav visual art, feminist graphic narratives, and digital media. We pay special attention to the question of "medium specificity", which is central to Buikema's conceptual intervention. Our goal is to illustrate the expansive reach of this intervention across multiple fields of inquiry.

**Keywords:** cultural critique, medium specificity, post-Yugoslav art, feminist graphic narratives, digital media, mediation

Culture permeates virtually every aspect of human societies. This has rendered culture a constant preoccupation in the history of thought, albeit a slippery one. What exactly is culture? How do people make culture, and what does culture do to social relations? How does culture bind social formations together, while fracturing and dividing them at the same time? Ever since cultural studies identified the relationship between culture and social formations as its main matter of concern, feminist and postcolonial critics have made fundamental contributions to the collective effort at addressing these questions. It is not an exaggeration to say that feminist and postcolonial critics have shaped and oriented cultural studies from its inception.

Commenting on the fast-paced expansion of cultural studies in the early 1990s, Stuart Hall once warned:

There is no moment now (...) where we are *not* able, extensively and without end, to theorize power – politics, race, class, and gender, subjugation, domination,

exclusion, marginality, Otherness, etc. (...). Nevertheless, there are ways of constituting power as an easy floating signifier which just leaves the crude exercises and connections of power and culture altogether emptied of any signification. (Hall, 1992, 286)

Hall's concern in this passage is not just with the relationship between culture and power but first and foremost with the work of the critic, for she must forge a language to articulate and *signify* that relationship. How does the critic understand and work through her own position and intervention in the field of culture? And how does culture itself operate as a form of critique? In other words, what is the relationship between culture and critique? Perhaps one of Rosemarie Buikema's most important contributions to cultural studies, feminist theory, and postcolonial critique is to have never let go of these questions.

Buikema's most recent book, *Revolts in Cultural Critique* (2020), collects her reflections on culture and critique developed over decades of intellectual and pedagogical work and spanning the history of European women's literature, debates on transitional justice and the arts, up to contemporary movements for the decolonization of the university and the colonial cultural archive. The relationship between culture and critique emerges as a polysemic one. First and foremost, for Buikema, culture intervenes in the making and unmaking of social formations by critically supplementing the domain of politics proper, for culture can bring into view and articulate what would remain otherwise expelled from public debate: the unseen and unspeakable. One privileged terrain for this critical intervention is that of collective memory. Buikema understands culture as a repository of the past that helps make the past felt as an active force in the present. As such, culture holds collective memory open as a constitutively unfinished project, wrestling with social and political forces which would rather declare the past – especially traumatic pasts – to be permanently settled. Perhaps most importantly, Buikema insists that culture performs such critical interventions through its material and formal qualities – that is, its 'medium specificity' – so that the critic must attend to the unique ways in which culture does not simply reflect but *mediates* social formations.

In what follows, we take this polysemic relationship between culture and critique as our point of departure and bring Buikema's reflections to bear on our own work, journeying from the role played by the visual arts in contesting borders and belonging in the former Yugoslavia, to the production of feminist memory in contemporary graphic narratives, to the question of digital mediation in the current 'postdigital' moment. Milica Trakilović reflects on her work on post-Yugoslav art, inflecting some of Buikema's key insights on culture, memory, and critique in the specific context of postcolonial/postsocialist Europe and from the vantage

point of a place that officially no longer exists. Vasiliki Belia continues unpacking the notion of culture as critique by looking at contemporary feminist graphic narratives. While Buikema addresses the literary and the visual as two distinct cultural forms, Belia shows that the relationship *between* text and image and the narrative function of the visual are precisely the medium-specific qualities that allow graphic narratives to perform their critical memory work. Finally, Laura Candidatu resituates the notion of medium specificity within the field of media studies. While feminist and postcolonial cultural studies might sometimes lose sight of the medium specificity of their objects, Candidatu shows that since the 'digital turn', medium specificity has followed a different trajectory in media studies, from the emphasis on the unique liberatory potential of the cyberspace in the 1990s, through the ethnographic turn in the 2000s which displaced such a media-centric approach, up to the contemporary 'postdigital' moment that challenges any form of media exceptionalism.

Through this journey, our goal is to illustrate the expansive reach of Buikema's questions across multiple fields of cultural critique and reconstruct, in the process, our own polysemic relationship to Buikema's intellectual legacy. While we write these notes collectively, each section preserves a speaking 'I' – as a formal trace of the specific relationship that each of us maintains with Buikema's work and as an exercise in collective *and* situated knowledge.

### **Post-Yugoslav art as critique of European bordering practices**

During my scholarly trajectory, I have been mapping and articulating critical practices for interrogating notions of bordering, nationhood, and belonging in a European context. My involvement with these questions stems from my personal relation to them as a post-Yugoslav diasporic feminist subject. Coming from a place that officially no longer exists has instilled in me an endless fascination with understanding the ways in which history can be discursively mobilized to institute a politics of belonging in the present. In the former Yugoslav space and in Europe at large, this relation between history and belonging is often deployed to construct borders and reproduce a politics of exclusion. Yet I believe that especially through the arts, it is possible to engage with history and belonging in non-prescriptive and expansive ways that can ultimately introduce alternative ways of making meaning. This pursuit is driven by the following question: How to relate to and articulate legacies of war, violence, and conflict in ways that can allow meaning to move? Underlying this question is a broader though no less important issue – the matter of how to interpret and produce meaning. I find echoes of these ruminations in Buikema's opening questions in *Revolts in Cultural Critique*:

What possibilities does the power of the imagination offer? Which medium-specific means do the arts have at their disposal to bring into the world that which has until now remained unspeakable and invisible, to make that which is, as yet, unformed and unseen, visible and open for discussion? (Buikema, 2020, 5)

Buikema puts forward here a semiological principle that is concerned with interrogating meaning-making practices that constitute our cultural landscapes. Significantly, she proposes that the arts stand apart from other socio-cultural practices by way of being able to unravel the more conventionally established relationships between form and content, thereby opening up a conceptual space for alternative significations (Buikema, 2005, 179-180). The emphasis on the transformative potential of the arts – on artistic practice as a critical practice – has been a central tenet in Buikema's scholarship.

In my work on the politics of belonging in a post-Yugoslav context, I have been interested in those critical and creative enterprises that attempt to grapple with difficult histories not through outright rejection of their harmful and structuring legacies, but through a practice of deep engagement with those very same structures. Buikema argues that

renewal and transformation affect existing structures most deeply when they do not present themselves as a radical break with the past, but rather as a process in which still unresolved facts and narratives from the past are researched, complemented, corrected and/or transformed. (Buikema, 2020, 6)

This constitutes her conceptualisation of *revolt*: a disruptive practice predicated on *repeating* harmful discourses in a critical register that institutes transformation. Revolt-as-repetition represents a working through complex historical legacies. In my own work, this principle is reflected most clearly in my engagement with the artwork *Bosnian Girl* (2003) by Bosian artist Šejla Kamerić (Trakilović, 2016; 2022). I have argued that this work's re-inscription of a harmful, Balkanist and Orientalist discourse is precisely the site of its intervention, the mimetic repetition of that discourse constituting a disavowal of its workings from a grounded and embodied position.

I continue to find most resonant those theories and practices that understand revolt in similar terms – as an intimate working through inscriptions of violence and erasure. Working at the intersection of postcolonialism and postsocialism in the European context, I have observed with interest the emergence, especially over the past two decades, of critical conceptualisations that echo this principle of revolt. Among them is the notion of 'border thinking and disidentification', proposed as a political method for postsocialist and postcolonial feminist scholars

working in transnational contexts (Tlostanova et al., 2016), and the principle of ‘overidentification and the copy’, a particularly salient form of political revolt practised by artists from the former Yugoslavia (Gržinić, 2007, 200-201). These and other related forms of cultural critique operate according to the knowledge that, in the words of Slovenian artist and feminist scholar Marina Gržinić (2007), “[t]he linking of theory, politics and art is the only position that one can adopt in a world of structural inequality” (199). This represents a form of revolt in which the repeated invoking of history comes to inscribe a new historical trace.

### **Critical memory practices in the feminist graphic narrative**

Buikema’s (2020) conceptualisation of revolt as a repetition that facilitates a working through of difficult historical legacies has informed my research, which focuses on practices of remembrance and resignification of key figures and moments of twentieth-century feminism in contemporary graphic narratives. Buikema’s work helps elucidate how artistic practice can transcend common impasses in remembrances of feminism. Scholars who study how the feminist movement curates its own complex legacies point at the ways the past is often brought forth to address political concerns in the present. Common narratives, metaphors, figures, and mottos that stand for important moments or larger periods in this diverse movement, and that encapsulate ideas that feminism has generated at different points in time, may be politically enabling in the context of present struggles, as they help create representable and coherent narratives that facilitate political affiliation and mobilization. At the same time, however, they are also limiting in that they erase counter-hegemonic voices and they rely on the fixedness of the past, rather than see it as generative and inherently open to different rewritings (Hemmings, 2011; Henry, 2004; Hesford, 2013; Sandoval, 2013).

By locating the transformative potential of the arts in their practices of revolt-as-repetition, Buikema foregrounds cultural memory as a privileged terrain for the work of critique, for critical memory practices can destabilize both the assumed fixedness of the past and of collective identities in the present. Focusing especially on art and literature that rework the legacies of the colonial past in the present, Buikema shows how they participate in the making and remaking of cultural memory either by opening space for both hegemonic and less remembered memories (Buikema, 2020, 147) or by the power of the imagination, which enables new encounters with a past that ‘never settles’ (Buikema, 2006, 195). It is specifically the use of the aesthetic form, Buikema argues, that “makes the role of literature in the production of cultural memory both monumentalising and ambiguous”, allowing it to “resist the assumption of unambiguous community building” (195).

In my research, I have often encountered the bringing together of non-dominant memories with creative imagination in feminist graphic narratives. Such works aim to mobilize feminist political belonging by celebrating monumental or heroic aspects of the movement's cultural archive while thematizing its complex and contradictory histories, such as the relationship between feminism and colonialism. My research focuses on how such a difficult enterprise is made possible by the medium of comics, which differs from the literary and artistic objects that Buikema writes about in that it brings text and image, the literary and the visual, together. It is the relationship between these different elements that enables the expressive capacities of comics, as is, for instance, its capacity to create mixtures of real and imaginary spaces on one page, generating multiplicity and instability (La Cour and Platz Cortsen, 2015, 127) to perform their specific kind of critical memory work.

A vivid example of the monumentalizing yet ambiguous encounter with the past typical of contemporary feminist graphic narratives can be found in Mary Talbot, Kate Charlesworth, and Bryan Talbot's *Sally Heathcote: Suffragette* (2014), a graphic historical fiction about the British suffrage movement. In Figure 1, the narrative's eponymous protagonist Sally is protesting, standing on the South African War Memorial in Newcastle. That war, waged a decade earlier by the British Empire against two Boer Republics to defend suffrage rights of British men within the latter, had shifted the debate on political participation from the discourse of service, which required that citizens earn representation through serving their country, toward a discourse of consent, which defined a government as legitimate only when every governed person has the right to vote. During the war, a large number of suffragists had rushed to show their dutiful support of the empire as a means of demonstrating their fitness for political representation. However, the shift in the understanding of citizenship had helped radicalize another part of the suffrage movement, which opposed the war, by dissociating the right to vote from a politics of respectability and from loyalty to the nation and empire. This part of the movement, moreover, turned arguments made in favour of a war in support of suffrage on its head to justify a more militant feminist campaign at home (Mayhall, 2000).

The creative force of this image lies in its ability to incorporate (or recycle) an older monument – the South African War Memorial – into a new one (Belia, 2023). The narrative compiles images of suffragettes in public spaces, which recall widely distributed press photographs and cartoons celebrating the militant suffragists' heroism of that time, as a kind of 'portable monument' of the campaign, which can be read by different people in different historical contexts (Rigney, 2004, 383). The new monument's relationship to the old one, however, is not straightforward but can be read in at least two different ways, thanks to comics' medium-specific aptness to multi-stability – that is, the ability of the relationship between elements



Sally Heathcote: Suffragette door Mary Talbot, Kate Charlesworth & Brian Talbot's (2014).

of the page, here Sally and the background of her action, to sustain contradictory readings (D'Arcy, 2020, 25-26; Kukkonen, 2017, 355).

On the one hand, Sally can be read as representing the militant side of the suffrage movement: she enforces a reconfiguration of the constitutive boundaries of the citizen by invading the monumental space (Puwar, 2004, 8). Her defiant, unfeminine posture, contrasting with the statue of Northumbria next to her, may show, by refusing to perform respectability, a distancing from parts of her movement that not only were pro-African War, but made claims for political representation based on a notion of feminine nature defined by service to the nation, which included charity towards the suffering 'others' of the empire (Burton, 2000). Thus, Sally can be read as embodying a critique of empire. On the other hand, one can read the base of the monument that supports her as elevating her to the status of an allegorical figure, and her being on the same level as the plaque with the names of the men killed at war as placing her within a long tradition of British people demanding political rights, whether at home or in the colonies. She can then be read as echoing the voice of pro-war suffragists, who argued that, just as their brothers in South Africa, they at home are also entitled to political representation, since they belong in the same race and class as them, though their duties to the empire differ. The ambiguity that characterizes this new monument, the uncertainty whether the old monument it incorporates determines it or is determined by it, allows the work to maintain a celebratory and inspirational tone without attempting to resolve the complexity of early feminism's position within imperial politics (Belia, 2023).

## **Culture and mediation in the postdigital moment**

In her work, Buikema emphasizes the role played by medium specificity in the capacity of artistic and cultural practices to mediate social formations within the field of possibilities and impossibilities inherent in any given culture (Buikema, 2012, 284). Medium specificity thus entails not only the materiality of representation but also its meaningfulness (Buikema, 2017, 91), i.e. its embeddedness is specific to socio-cultural and temporal milieus. This resonates with earlier cultural-materialist critiques of the disjoint between culture and the social, such as the work of Raymond Williams (1977). Williams rethinks medium specificity as the capacity of an artistic practice to become meaningful within the social or cultural context in which it takes place, hence showing the intricate connection between the materiality of signification and socio-cultural practices (McGuigan, 2012, 45). What are the implications of extending these insights to the terrain of digital media? In what follows, I trace the trajectory of the question of medium specificity within media studies. While this account is necessarily selective, I show that unsurprisingly



the question of the medium has always been central to the study of digital media. Here, unlike in feminist and postcolonial cultural studies, the challenge has been that of *displacing* media-centric approaches in the field, so as to arrive at a more sophisticated and expansive notion of medium specificity that, like Buikema's, refuses the uncoupling of culture, the social, and material forms.

The advent of digital media and the increasing use of digital technologies have brought to the fore the need to properly assess the way in which the so-called digital turn challenges or reshapes societal processes. From discussions about technological determinism, media affordances, and medium specificity, to media domestication and non-media-centric research ethos, media studies scholars have proposed different ways to research the effects of digital media's ubiquity. If in the 1990s a cyberspace approach privileged a virtual-real disjuncture and emphasised the liberatory potential of the cyberspace, in the 2000s an ethnographic turn within the field tried to focus on social media uses and users by showing how media is shaped and made meaningful in (offline) practices (Candidatu, Leurs and Ponzanesi, 2019). A political economy perspective, instead, emphasizes the structural economic and political interests of social media platforms to the disadvantage of everyday users (van Dijck, 2013).

In parallel to the development of these approaches, the relation between media, culture, and power has been a strong and constant research focus influenced by the cultural studies paradigm inaugurated in the 1980s by the Birmingham school of cultural studies, especially the work of Stuart Hall (1980). In this approach, research coming from critical race studies, feminist media studies, and postcolonial studies has emphasised how existing power dynamics are reflected by and circulate via different (digital) media. Hall's theorization of culture as a representational process of signification has also spilled into the post-'crisis of representation' scholarship in media anthropology (Alinejad and Candidatu, 2022), with a return to material culture (Latham, 2012, 76-77; see Miller, 1987). In this view, material culture – here digital technologies – does not simply mirror the social nor exists as a separate entity outside culture and society. Rather, culture itself is understood as a set of practices of mediation (Tilley, 2006, 60-61). This approach to culture and material culture frames the digital as a medium that is historically constructed and embedded in everyday practices of meaning-making. The medium specificity of the digital is then to be understood always already in relation to the social and cultural specificity, rather than in terms of its presumed intrinsic qualities.

In what has been termed a 'postdigital' moment (Berry, 2014) – that is, a moment in which digital ubiquity puts under question the newness of the 'digital turn' – the contradictory and differentiated cultural mediations of the digital become especially salient. Human-technologies encounters become main foci of investigation when it comes to critically assessing how digital mediation, alongside other practices of

communication and representation, shapes cultures and informs socio-political realities.

Centring digital mediation does not sidestep the issue of the medium but accounts for the post-medium condition in a postdigital moment, from an ethnographic perspective. In the context of artistic practices, Rosalind Krauss has pointed out the limitations of modernist theorizations of medium specificity in postmodernity, trying to rethink the (impossibility of) locus of the medium in light of historical and technological developments (cited in Butler, 2020, 20-21). In this historicizing move, mediums and medium specificity do not become irrelevant but rather are transformed into what Krauss terms 'technical support' that offers the material conditions for a given medium to become meaningful (Krauss, 1999, 296). It is this process of meaning-making that mediation is concerned with. In Mary Ann Doane's words: "The challenge of digital media, in its uses and theorization (...) is that of the digital's subsumption within the dream of dematerialization and the timelessness of information, returning history to representation and reviving the idea of a medium. Making it matter once more" (2007, 148). Furthermore, the transdisciplinary concept of mediation turns out to be an especially useful way to approach the relation between culture and digital media, and to account for the co-constitution of online and offline spaces in a culturally dynamic continuum marked by inequalities based on different categories of difference. For example, in my work on mothering and digitally mediated diasporic formations, rather than emphasising the new or even unique ways in which digital media contribute to how people experience migration, I foreground the social situatedness of digital spaces within different susceptibilities to power operations (see Candidatu, 2021).

Not unlike art in Buikema's work, processes of digital mediation and social encounters between users and technologies are thus meaningful sites that render visible and remediate constitutive fault lines of social formations. In our postdigital moment, an expansive notion of medium specificity which does not separate matter and meaning is more relevant than ever for the investigation of how political and economic hegemonies both structure *and* are culturally inscribed via digital technologies, from its binary coding beginnings to its multiple materializations in everyday users' practices.

## Conclusion

In these notes, we have traced the ways in which Buikema's work on the polysemic relationship between culture and critique has been generative for our own research trajectories. Across our different fields of cultural critique, the principle of revolt, "understood as a process of resistance against univocal truths; as a search for how

that which is inevitably excluded from universal truth claims can be given form, place and meaning” (Buikema, 2020, 5), continues to resound and inspire. As we hope to have shown, Buikema’s exhortation to attend to the medium-specific qualities through which culture performs its critical interventions allows her work to travel and be inflected anew by making contact with different contexts and cultural forms. Thus, Buikema’s expansive scholarship offers up a rich analytical framework for critique as a situated practice that seeks to institute political transformation from a place of intimate engagement with the workings of culture.

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