Barbarism, otherwise : Studies in literature, art, and theory
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INTRODUCTION

Rien de plus compliqué qu'un Barbare.

—Gustave Flaubert, "Lettre à Sainte-Beuve," décembre 1862 (233)

In his reaction to the terrorist attacks on the twin towers on September 11, 2001, British Prime Minister Tony Blair stated about the perpetrators that "their barbarism will stand as their shame for all eternity" and described "this mass terrorism" as "the new evil in our world." On July 7, 2005, the U.N. Security Council condemned the terrorist attacks in London, which took place during the G8 summit in Scotland, as "barbaric acts." Blair added: "it is particularly barbaric that this has happened on a day when people are meeting to try to help the problems of poverty in Africa and the long-term problems of climate change and the environment." On March 2004, U.S. President George W. Bush condemned the beheading of U.S. citizen Nicholas Berg in Iraq by "terrorists" as "barbaric." In a visit to the U.S., German Foreign Minister Joshka Fischer described the same killing as "a cold-blooded barbaric act."

The words "barbarism," "barbaric" or "barbarians" figure prominently in the political rhetoric of the last few years. While the rhetoric of "civilization versus barbarism" seemed to partly recede with decolonization, after the end of the cold war and the fall of communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern-bloc Europe, and especially after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, it has made a comeback in Western politics, the media, historiography, political and cultural theory, and everyday speech.[1] In the above-quoted statements, there is seemingly nothing questionable or equivocal about this choice of words and their meaning. In Western political rhetoric, there appears to be a silent consensus on what "barbarism" means, what constitutes "barbaric" behavior, and who a "barbarian" is, and the connotations of these terms are taken for granted. In this study, I contend that there is nothing natural or self-evident about these categories and their uses. Despite their standardized deployment in contemporary rhetoric, these categories are mobile, complex, and versatile. They can assume a variety of meanings and operations in language and other media, which can contest their deep-rooted uses in Western discourses.

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[1] The figure of the "barbarian"—or other similar notions—has also been present in cultures outside the West. Although a few examples of non-Western conceptions of barbarians are presented in Chapter Three, this study focuses on the barbarian as a construction of Western civilizational discourse. This is the discourse the cultural objects in this study engage and challenge, whether they address it from within or from its margins.

The recent reanimation of the rhetoric on barbarians and civilization has coincided with a shift in the criteria according to which global divisions and conflicts are perceived. It is often argued that after the fall of communism global dividing lines are not so much determined by the market or by political ideology—capitalism versus communism or democracy versus totalitarianism—but by culture.[2] In the words of Samuel Huntington, "the velvet curtain of culture" has taken the place of the Cold War's "iron curtain of ideology" (1993: 31). Culture is at the epicenter of the political dividing line between good and evil, peace and violence, or progress and reaction.[3] The rhetoric on barbarism and civilization comes to complement what Bernard Lewis and Huntington famously describe as "the clash of civilizations." This development, which Mahmood Mamdani calls the "culturalization" of political conflict, goes hand-in-hand with a moralization of global conflicts (Mamdani 18). As Chantal Mouffe argues, "nowadays the political is played out in the *moral register*" (5). This means that the we/they opposition, "instead of being defined with political categories, is now established in moral terms" (5). Therefore, instead of "a struggle between 'right and left' we are faced with a struggle between 'right and wrong'"; the "we/they" distinction is "visualized as a moral one between good and evil" (5). The moralization and culturalization of global conflicts may account for the increased popularity of the vocabulary of barbarism and barbarians. The figure of the "barbarian" encapsulates both the *moral* inferiority and irreconcilable *cultural* difference of the other. Hence, constructing the other as barbarian enables his or her perception as an enemy needing destruction rather than a worthy adversary.

According to this culturalization of conflict, differences between cultures and their respective regimes often are converted into oppositional pairs in a binary rhetorical scheme. Terms that we usually find on the one side of this scheme are liberalism, tolerance, freedom, individualism, and civilization, while on the other side we find fundamentalism, oppression, collectivization, and barbarism (Brown 2006: 190). In this pattern, the former set of values is identified with the West and the latter with the non-West. The frequently quoted statement by George W. Bush after the attacks on September 11, 2001—"either you're with us or against us"—confirms the oppositional thinking that typifies Western civilizational discourse in the first decade of the twenty-first century.[4] In popular rhetoric, the tag of the "new barbarians" is conferred on those who do not side with the U.S. and Western Europe, and do not endorse liberal values. This comes down to several non-Western, and especially Muslim, countries and their subjects, whether they reside in these

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[2] See Mamdani 18; also qtd in Brown 2006: 150. According to Mamdani, this "culturization" can be credited to Bernard Lewis's 1990 article "The Roots of Muslim Rage" and Samuel Huntington's 1993 article "The Clash of Civilizations?" in *Foreign Affairs,* which he developed into a book (*The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*).

[3] Mamdani presented in Brown 2006: 150.

[4] From George W. Bush's speech to the employees of the Department of Labor 4 October 2001 (Bush 30). Variations of this statement appear in other speeches by G.W. Bush (e.g., in his address to a joint session of Congress 23 September 2001: "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists," 15).

countries or in Western countries as migrants or refugees. If, according to George W. Bush, "[t]he civilized world is rallying to America's side," the logical implication is that whoever does not side with the U.S. is part of the evil spread by the "new barbarians."[5]

Although a lot is being written and said these days about barbarism and civilization, more often than not the meaning of these terms remains uncontested. In the face of the semantic stagnation that, in my view, surrounds "barbarism" and the "barbarian," this study sets out to criticize existing discourses on barbarism by showing how literature, visual art, film, and theory can function as spaces wherein these notions are positively mobilized. Rather than operating in the service of a discourse that describes or prescribes what is good and evil, this study contends that "barbarism" and the "barbarian" carry a performative force with a more creative potential.[6]

If we look up "barbarism" in major English dictionaries, among the definitions we find are the following:

> – uncivilized nature or condition; uncultured ignorance; absence of culture;
>   barbaric style (in art etc.), unrestrainedness
> – the absence of culture and civilized standards
> – ignorance of arts, learning, and literature; barbarousness
> – a thing characteristic of such an uncivilized and unenlightened state[7]

One cannot help noticing that barbarism is mainly defined through negative categories and through a grammar that signifies lack or absence. The same experiment with the term "barbarian" yields similar results. A barbarian is:

> – a foreigner; a person with a different language or different customs; spec. a non-
>   Hellene, a non-Roman; also, a pagan, non-Christian
> – savage, wild, or uncivilized person
> – an uncultured person; a person without sympathy for literary or artistic culture[8]

These definitions set the barbarian against a positive standard of civilization, whether this standard is defined by one's language and customs, ethnicity or culture (Hellene, Roman),

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[5] From the presidential address to a joint session of Congress 23 September 2001 (Bush 16).

[6] With the term "theory" in this study I refer to the kind of theory primarily developed and practiced within literary studies in the last few decades. "Theory" was mainly associated with poststructuralism and particularly with an operation of formalism, namely the "uncovering of the structural conditions and features of a text" (Butler, Guillory, and Thomas viii). However, in light of the increasing suspicion towards the self-referentiality of such a reading and its bracketing of questions of context, the term "theory" in the last fifteen years has taken a more political turn within academic discourse. Redeployed in "legibly 'political' contexts" and "politically invested arenas" such as race, colonialism, gender, and sexuality, it involves what is also known as postcolonial theory and cultural studies (ix).

[7] The first definition is from the Shorter *Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles* (2002). The second is from the *Oxford American Dictionary and Thesaurus* (2003). The last two definitions are from *Webster's New International Dictionary* (1913).

[8] All definitions of the "barbarian" are from the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles* (2002).

religion (Christianity) or behavior (good manners and sophistication). In all definitions, the barbarian is situated outside the borders of civilization, as a being who does not speak the language or share the culture of the civilized, and thus, by extension, as incomprehensible, unfamiliar, uncanny, improper.

Both "barbarism" and the "barbarian" are thus accompanied by a seemingly inescapable negativity. This negativity partly resides in the terms' semantic content: their standardized connotations of violence, evil, savageness, brutality, exploitation, and destruction. However, it is particularly their opposition to the positive notions of civilization, culture, or humanism that grants them their negative status. Barbarism operates as the negative standard, against which civilization measures its virtue, humanity or level of sophistication. From this high standing, civilization constructs its abjects—those barbarian others who function as its "constitutive outside." Within this oppositional framework, the barbarian and the civilized are interdependent concepts. The "civilized we" can be sophisticated, mature, superior, and humane, because the barbarians are simple, infantile, inferior, and savage.[9]

The term "barbarism" is associated with unintelligibility, lack of understanding, and mis- or non-communication. These associations can be found in the etymology of the "barbarian": in ancient Greek, the word $βάρβαρος$ imitates the incomprehensible sounds of the language of foreign peoples, sounding like "bar bar." The foreign sound of the other is dismissed as noise ("bar bar"), and therefore as not worth engaging. Consequently, the barbarization of others disempowers them. Those labeled as "barbarians" cannot speak back and question their "barbarian" status, because their language is not even understood or deemed worthy of understanding. In certain ways, the "barbarian" is a non-concept, because it tries to signify and capture the unsignifiable, the unintelligible, the unknowable. But the fact that by definition a "barbarian" cannot be "known" or "understood" enables its frequent function in language as a generic term. Naming someone "barbarian" denies this person an actual face, subjectivity, and singularity. This (non)appellation constructs the other as a hollow vessel, filled accordingly by the discourse of civilization in ways that sustain the civilized identity.

The aforementioned definitions of barbarism do not cover the entire scope of its meanings as registered in dictionaries. Barbarism is also used in another sense, which is primarily linguistic, but also extendable beyond language. Thus, barbarism can also be a countable noun defined as: "A word or expression which is badly formed according to

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[9] The term "constitutive outside" is used by Judith Butler in *Bodies that Matter* to refer not to an absolute outside that exceeds the limits of discourse, but to "that which can only be thought—when it can—in relation to that discourse, at and as its most tenuous borders" (8). The term was proposed by Henry Staten for several themes developed by Jacques Derrida (Staten 16, 20, 24 e.a.). The aim of the notion, according to Mouffe, is to underscore the fact that "the creation of an identity implies the establishment of a difference, difference which is often constructed on the basis of a hierarchy." Since every identity is relational, "the affirmation of a difference is a precondition for the existence of any identity, i.e., the perception of something 'other' which constitutes its 'exterior'" (15).

traditional philological rules, e.g. a word formed from elements of different languages"[10]; "an offensive word or action, especially a mistake in the use of language"[11]; "[t]he use of words and idioms not in accordance with the (supposed) normal standard language, esp. of those of foreign origin"; "absence of cultivation in language"[12]; and by extension, "something that breaks rules of convention or good taste."[13] A more inclusive version of these definitions captures barbarism as:

> The intermixture of foreign terms in writing or speaking a standard, orig. a classical, language; a foreignism so used; also, the use of any of various types of expression not accepted as part of the current standard, such as neologisms, hybrid derivatives, obsolete or provincial expressions, and technical terms, or any such expression used in discourse.[14]

While this second meaning is again mainly expressed through negative formulations, it simultaneously invests "barbarism" with a quality I am tempted to call *insurgent*. "Barbarism" is an element that deviates from (linguistic or other) norms and conventions; it is something that "breaks rules" and undermines traditional patterns or frameworks; it is an insertion of "foreign terms" and elements that do not fit or are "not accepted as part of the current standard"; it can be an element that strikes a discordant note in conventions of "good taste." Based on the above dictionary definitions, "barbarisms" signal encounters between heterogeneous spatial or temporal frames, linguistic registers, and discursive orders. They bring the familiar in contact with the foreign by introducing "foreignisms" in classical idioms. They confront the new with the old and the past with the present through "neologisms" but also "obsolete" archaic expressions. They disrupt an elevated language with "provincial expressions." They bring heterogeneous elements together in "hybrid derivatives."

It follows from these definitions that foreign or erratic elements, inconsistencies, disruptions, and unlikely encounters or comparisons are also included in barbarism's range of connotations. If we push these definitions a bit further, barbarism could denote an invasion by foreign, disruptive elements into dominant, normative discourses and modes of reading, writing, viewing, knowing or understanding. Barbarisms could be elements that break with traditional rules, cross cultural or disciplinary boundaries, and delve into new, unexpected combinations; elements that cause confusion and misunderstandings, and invite new, counterintuitive modes of reading. Barbarisms appear in a zone of error ("badly formed," "a mistake"), as well as hybridization and syncretism ("formed from elements of different languages"). They thus take effect at moments of encounter between two

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[10] *The New Oxford English Dictionary* (1998).
[11] *The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (2003).
[12] *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles* (2002).
[13] *Encarta Webster's Dictionary of the English Language* (2004).
[14] *Webster's New International Dictionary* (1913).

(or more) discourses, systems or subjectivities.[15] By staging encounters between diverse objects in this study, I show how the concept of barbarism can trigger alternative ways of knowing and theorizing that accommodate strangeness, reversals, bewilderment, and other such phenomena that arise at border spaces between "languages" in the broadest sense of the word.

Thus, instead of dismissing barbarism as a noise (the "bar bar" of the other) not worth engaging, I argue that this noise has the potential to unsettle the supposedly harmonious, elevated speech of the "civilized self" by confronting it with its own cacophonies and foreign elements—its own internal barbarisms. The mumbling of the barbarian—the confused speech, the stuttering, the noise—can turn into a force that interrupts the workings of our language and leads to a rethinking of the frameworks on which the discourse of the self is premised.

Why insist on the old name "barbarism" and not come up with another term for the operations this study unravels? Or, to paraphrase a question posed by Jacques Derrida, why should "barbarism" still designate that which already breaks away from barbarism— away from what has always been conceived and signified under that name—or that which, not merely escaping barbarism, implacably destroys it?[16] Derrida questions the premises of this question: "[C]an 'what has always been conceived and signified under that name' be considered fundamentally homogeneous, univocal, or non-conflictual?" (2004: 4). The heterogeneity, ambivalence, and conflicting aspects within an old name such as "barbarism" are constitutive of this concept. Derrida elaborates this through the notion of the "double mark." Every name or concept is involved in the "structure of the double mark." Although it is caught in "the closed agonistic, hierarchical field of philosophical oppositions," a concept also retains "its old name" in order to "destroy the opposition," to which it "has never quite yielded" (4, 5). Thus, a part of the old name remains unmasterable by the logic of binaries. Every concept receives "one mark inside and the other outside" the system of binaries, and can thus generate a "double reading": it sustains an opposition but can also critique, wrench apart, disorganize the traditional opposition to which it belongs (4). In this study, barbarism is subjected to such a double reading. By probing its "outside mark," I try to show how barbarism can disrupt its own binary, but also how it can go further in order to perform creative operations.

According to Derrida, putting the "old names to work" in this way always involves the risk of "regressing into the system that has been, or is in the process of being, deconstructed" (5). But to do away with old names and thus "cross over," as Derrida calls it, "into the outside of the classical oppositions," is missing the opportunity to intervene

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[15] See also Saunders's discussion of the notion of the foreign (230).

[16] This is a slightly reformulated version of a question posed by Derrida in *Dissemination* (3-4). Derrida uses the name "literature" where I use "barbarism," but his argument is not limited to literature. "Literature" is just one among the many examples of "old names" that Derrida addresses. "Barbarism" is my example.

in the system—here, the binary system that produces the barbarian and the civilized. In the process of using old names for new purposes, we should not forget that the system to which they belong is not a given, "a sort of ahistorical thoroughly homogeneous table," but instead a "hierarchically ordered space" that cannot achieve closure, because it is always being traversed by the forces it represses and expels (5). In other words, the opposition between barbarism and civilization, rigid as it may be, is constantly challenged by the otherness and exteriority of the same "barbarism" it tries to repress and subdue.

Thus, barbarism oscillates between two main functions. On the one hand, it reinforces the discourse of civilization that needs it as its antipode. On the other hand, barbarism also nurtures a disruptive potential, through which it can interrupt the workings of the very same discourse that constructs the category of the barbarian for the sake of civilization's self-definition. Thus, according to Brett Neilson, barbarism oscillates "between two poles":

> The first represents the persistence of binary thought (master/slave, white/black, male/female, voice/writing, etc.) and of the material processes of domination that support this dichotomous logic. The second stands for the ambivalent processes of discursive slippage, the repetitions and doublings, that the articulation of binaries can never completely close up. (92)

While the pervasive use of barbarism in Western discourses testifies to the "overwhelming power of the binary," the notion also registers "the openings, ambivalences and dislocations that problematize this inexorable logic of overcoding" (92). This double potential of barbarism makes its workings in language far from stable and predictable. But the term's instability and transformability is not only a result of the tensions within its formal meanings. Although I started this introduction with dictionary entries, I do not see barbarism as a "formal unit" of language but rather as an "unmasterable event" (Bal 2002: 280). As an event, barbarism is co-shaped by a constellation of factors that constitute its performativity every time it is employed: the term's formal meanings; the tension between its accumulated historical meanings and its signifying force in the present; the intentions of the speaker (or author) that uses the term; the way the listeners or readers perceive it; the specific contexts in which it appears; and the infinite contexts it evokes. The performativity of barbarism—the way the word functions in the here-and-now of its every use—is not a by-product of the formal unit called "barbarism," but is just as constituent of barbarism as its formal dictionary meanings.

As Derrida argues in *Limited Inc*, the iterability of every utterance—the fact that it performs differently in its every use—"leaves us no choice but to mean (to say) something that is (already, always, also) other than what we mean (to say)" (62). In other words, intentions and meanings do not always coincide. According to Derrida, the gap between intention and meaning guarantees the fundamental undecidability of all utterances— literal, serious, fictional, literary, and so on. The use of "barbarism," then, could yield meanings that do not coincide with the speaker's intentions and may even run contrary to

these intentions. Precisely in the disjunction between the term's meanings and intentions I see possibilities for recasting barbarism. Barbarism does not always fulfill the "intention" implicit in its conventional, long-standing meanings—i.e., it does not always end up *meaning* what *it means to*.[17] This breach between meaning and intention safeguards its open temporality—the fact that the term remains vulnerable to change and thus its future is not determined.

The disjunction of meaning from intention also has consequences for what "barbarism" and the "barbarian" end up doing: their effects in "reality." As Shoshana Felman argues, language is not "a *statement* of the real" or a "reflection of the referent" but "the referent is itself produced by language as its own *effect.*" In other words, "language makes itself part of what it refers to" (2003: 51). Felman elaborates:

> Referential knowledge of language is not knowledge *about* reality (about a separate and distinct entity), but knowledge that *has to do with reality*, that acts within reality, since it is itself—at least in part—what this reality is made of. The referent is no longer simply a preexisting *substance*, but an *act*, that is, a dynamic movement of modification of reality. (50-51)

Barbarians, then, do not exist independently of discourse, but are produced in the act of an utterance. Naming someone barbarian creates him or her as a threatening, foreign, savage being. But what an utterance says (what it wants to say) is not always what it ends up doing. An utterance, Felman argues, is always "*in excess* over its statement" and thus its effects cannot be reduced to its constative aspect (its meaning). The force of an utterance—its performativity—can be seen as "a sort of energizing 'residue'," the residue of meaning (52). Thus, the act of naming someone "barbarian" is "a dynamic movement of modification of reality" because it can turn a person into an enemy. But, as the word "dynamic" suggests, the forms this modification may take, that is, the material effects of an utterance, cannot be taken for granted. Between the formal meaning of the barbarian and the production of barbarians as effects of the act of naming, there is excess, a residue of meaning, which leaves an opening for different effects than the ones intended. In the space shaped by this excess, "barbarism" and the "barbarian" can break with their conventional meanings and perform operations with unexpected effects. These operations may result in creative "modifications of reality," but also in a resignification of the terms themselves.[18]

While a resignification of barbarism may try to redirect the term's negativity and violence toward affirmative and productive operations, such a move, as Judith Butler

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[17] On the double sense of "meaning" as "to mean to" (intend) and "to mean" (signify) and the implications of this ambiguity, see also Bal 2002: 271-72.

[18] These effects could even be empowering for the subjects to which these utterances are directed. The positive resignification of the word "queer" as a means of self-empowerment is a case in point. See Butler 1993.

argues in *Excitable Speech*, runs the risk of reiterating the abusive logic of the term's past and thus overriding the intentions that motivated its resignification (14). This is a risk this project also takes. Nevertheless, a resignification also creates a future context for "barbarism" and the "barbarian"—a context that is open. This openness lies in the gap that separates the originating context and intentions of an utterance from the effects it produces (14). Whereas this gap can be responsible for the misfiring of a resignification, it also creates the possibility for a counter-discourse, a talking back to the established usage of a term (15). Thus, while a positive appropriation of the term "barbarian" in new discursive constellations may end up restaging the violence of its past uses, the term does not necessarily have to perform that violence each time it is used. The possibility that terms can be cited against their originary context and meanings forms a space of discursive performativity that I explore in this study. This space, Butler contends, makes it possible for words to "become disjoined from their power to injure and recontextualized in more affirmative modes" (15).[19]

I argue that by not taking the effects of barbarism's formal meanings for granted we could conceptualize barbarism otherwise. This study tries to chart the multiple significations, functions, and effects of barbarism and the barbarian, and resists their historical rigidity by centering on their performativity. To this end, I propose a shift from an essentialist to a performative approach to these categories. The central question is not "who (or where) are the barbarians?" but what kind of critical operations barbarism and the barbarian can be involved in. This shift, I argue, can help us dislodge the barbarian from a metaphysics of presence. I therefore explore what it could mean to *perform barbarism(s)* rather than *be* a barbarian.

I assert the relevance of barbarism in cultural critique by laying out some of the epistemological and comparative operations it can perform from within or from the margins of dominant discourses and modes of representation. To do so, I develop a positive approach to this notion through an engagement with its negative meanings and injurious effects in speech and in social life. By revisiting underexposed aspects of barbarism, I explore its potential operations in language and other media, without circumventing its violent history and negativity in Western discourses, and without rendering it "harmless." In the gaps and tensions between its various meanings, between its history and present uses, and between its formal meanings in language and its effects in speech, I see possibilities for doing different things with this concept in the space of literature, art, and theory.

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[19] Although in the process of resignification of concepts intentionality ceases to be a determining factor, this does not entail the abolishment of agency, but rather invites a revaluation of the notion of agency itself. While subjects are made in discourse and cannot stand outside of it, there is still possibility for a kind of agency that undermines sovereign autonomy in speech, but simultaneously acknowledges that speech is always in certain ways out of our control (Butler 1997: 15). Barbarism, with its emphasis on errancy, slippage, and indeterminacy, privileges such a notion of agency.

The aim of this study is not to replace the negative associations of barbarism and the barbarian with a brand new positive meaning. Instead, I focus on the (sometimes hidden) potential of their existing meanings and push it toward small resignifications. At the same time, I try to chart new sets of relations and contexts for "barbarism" and the "barbarian" within literature, art, and theory. In a Foucauldian vein, I take barbarism and the barbarian as objects produced by discourse and not as pre-existing essences waiting to be linguistically and conceptually acknowledged and named.[20] This study can be seen as a small step toward modifying the discursive constellations which form these objects in a certain way and envisioning a different connotative space for them. To borrow Stuart Hall's words, the aim of this project is to help "disarticulate a signifier from one, preferred or dominant meaning-system, and rearticulate it within another, different chain of connotations" (80).

Thus, I test barbarism and the barbarian in discursive relations and contexts that do not always trap these concepts in a hierarchical opposition to civilization, or, when they do, they leave small fissures for questioning the terms of this hierarchy. In line with Derrida's objection to the logic of binaries, this study calls for "another discourse, another 'logic'" that "takes into account the conditions of this classical and binary logic, but it no longer depends entirely upon it" (1988: 117). The possibility of another kind of logic or discourse is the backdrop of my experiments with barbarism. I test its potential to house a different logic, one that counterpoints the certainties of oppositional pairs through ambiguities, foreign elements, and acts of stuttering.

Barbarism is recast as a theoretical and methodological concept. In her book *Travelling Concepts*, Mieke Bal argues that "interdisciplinarity in the humanities must seek its heuristic and methodological basis in concepts rather than methods." She proposes a concept-based methodology, which uses concepts in order to understand the research object better and on its own terms (8). In this study, I take a concept as my main object. Barbarism, however, is not only involved in *what* I study, but also in *how* I study it: my methodological approach is partly guided by this concept. Thus, I treat barbarism and the barbarian not only as objects of analysis, but also as agents in theorizing—an approach that resists the objectification of the "barbarian" in history. By implicating the main objects of this study in the methodological and theoretical problematics that frame it, I make them partners in the close readings and comparative acts that take place in the following chapters.

I do not approach barbarism as an inherent quality of a human subject, a language, a medium or a specific cultural object. Barbarism is revisited *through* and *as* a series of operations, taking effect at sites of encounter between different subjectivities, languages, discourses, or systems of reference. My use of the term "(barbarian) operations" in this study refers to a form of agency, not (necessarily) person- or intention-bound, which manifests itself in critical interventions often produced in the contact zones between heterogeneous discourses, narratives, and knowledge regimes. My use of the term

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[20] See, for example, Foucault's "The Formation of Objects" in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*.

"operations" is based on Michel Foucault's use of the term in the context of discursive operations and operations of power/knowledge.[21] In this context, I am concerned with the following questions: How can the operations of barbarism in literature, art, and theory unsettle the uses and violent effects of this category in current and historical Western discourses? How can the concept of barbarism be redeployed so as to perform critical interventions in our methodologies and discursive frameworks or inspire new modes of knowing, comparing, and theorizing? Can it help us imagine ways of relating to others that are not based on essentialist binary schemes?

By charting theoretically productive uses of barbarism, I reclaim its complexity and recast it as a constructive concept in cultural critique, operating on its own right and not just as civilization's offshoot. It is in that sense that I refer to a *positive* recasting of barbarism. By scrutinizing cultural objects from several national contexts, genres, and media, I test a wide range of perspectives to barbarism, through which I try to tease out the critical thrust of this concept.

Deep-rooted and overcharged concepts such as barbarism and civilization cannot be banned from political and cultural discourses. Notions of otherness can offer a positive contribution to the identity construction of the self. The distinction between "self and other" or "we and they" and the antagonisms it contains can be seen as constitutive of any identity, and thus essential components of social life. Thus, I do not plead for relinquishing the distinction between self and other. According to Mouffe, since "the 'they' presents the condition of possibility of the 'we,' its 'constitutive outside,' this means that the constitution of a specific 'we' always depends on the type of 'they' from which it is differentiated." Therefore, based on the way the other is constructed, we can "envisage the possibility of different types of we/they relation[s]" instead of trying to overcome the "we/they" distinction altogether (19). In line with this idea, I try to envision the distinction between self and other otherwise—in ways that do not construct the other as threatening, inferior, illegitimate, and thus seek its destruction, but turn the barbarian enemy into an adversary, and "the Other" into *an* other.[22]

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[21] Foucault's use of the term "operation" often refers to discursive acts involved in, or coinciding with, the production of knowledge and power in a given discursive formation; he also employs the term to refer to processes that enable action to "speak" by turning it into language (see, for example, *The Order of Things* at 69, 80, 116, 172, 347 e.a. or his essay "On the Archeology of Sciences"). I also take my cue from Jan Hein Hoogstad's introduction of Foucault's concept to a broader medial landscape. Hoogstad coins the concept of "medial operations" to refer to the ways in which media shape knowledge, and to theorize the ontological and epistemological ramifications of shifts between media (see http://medialoperations.com). This broader application of the concept "operation" enables me to use "barbarian operations" not only in relation to texts but also to visual and sonic media.

[22] In her study *On the Political,* Mouffe positions herself against the idea of universal consensus and reconciliation as the aim of democratic politics. In her view, the availability of "universal consensus based on reason," supported by liberal thought and by theorists of the "post-political vision" of a globalized world without enemies, is impossible, because a consensus is always "based on acts of exclusion" (11). Mouffe underscores the "ineradicability of antagonism" in the constitution of "the

Exposing the Objects

Operational values and meanings of concepts change as they travel across cultures, traditions, and academic communities. As Bal argues, it is their changeability that makes them useful for charting new methodologies that are neither rigid nor sloppy (2002: 25). Thus, the concept of barbarism is fascinating, precisely because it is mobile, complex, and controversial. This study experiments with what we could do with this concept if it is introduced to new fields of operation.

In taking up the task of recasting barbarism, I turn to works of literature, art, and theory. These are not viewed as embodiments of "high culture" or as the quintessential sites of civilization, but, counterintuitively perhaps, as fertile sites of barbarism—sites, in which a different conception of barbarism can be developed and barbarian operations can be performed. My argument takes shape through close readings of cultural objects situated in the twentieth and twenty-first century. Most of these objects are contemporary. Some date from the first half of the twentieth century, but the issues they bring forth place them at the heart of the present, inviting comparisons with the contemporary works analyzed in this study. Although they all share a critical engagement with Western discourses on barbarians and barbarism, these objects are spread across various geographical sites.

The diversity of these case studies enables me to situate the operations of barbarism in a broad, comparative context: pluralizing barbarism and its operations, I contend, can be best accomplished through "barbarian encounters" among diverse objects, media, contexts, and discourses. These encounters become fertile grounds for the workings of what I call "barbarisms." The heterogeneity of objects in this study does not only bring out interrelations and happy coincidences, but also reveals the limitations or problematic aspects of these objects and the contexts in which they are embedded. These have also been productive moments in this project.

The connecting thread among the objects that take center stage in this study is neither a particular national context nor a specific genre, but a concept, and the questions to which it gives rise. There are several valuable historical studies of "the barbarian" in a particular period or culture. Nevertheless, there are few comparative and interdisciplinary approaches to barbarism, and even fewer attempts to chart it as a theoretical, methodological, and epistemologically productive concept. With this study, I hope to make a small contribution to the latter domains.

The objects analyzed in this study explicitly thematize barbarians and barbarism. Nevertheless, the barbarian operations introduced here are not the prerogative of objects

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political" and argues that an "agonistic" sphere of contestation is a necessary dimension of human societies and democratic practices (2-3, 9). Barbarism and the barbarian are here presented as such agonistic spheres of contestation, replete with tensions and conflicting aspects. In this study, I explore the tensions not only within barbarism, but also between barbarism and its concomitant concepts, such as civilization, humanity, and culture.

in which either the terms "barbarism" and "barbarian" or visual representations of barbarians make their appearance. Barbarian operations can take effect in various cultural objects, which do not have to bear a thematic connection to barbarism.[23] However, by selecting objects wherein barbarians and/or barbarism are thematically foregrounded, I try to kill two birds with one stone: I explore thematic aspects of barbarism and the barbarian, while I also probe the methodological potential of barbarism through these works. Thus, each chapter has a thematic and a methodological/theoretical component. In other words, each chapter deals with 1) an issue that emerges from a different aspect of barbarism or the barbarian, and 2) a different methodological or theoretical aspect of the concept, i.e. a different *barbarian operation*.

In a prelude (**Chapter One**), I offer a preview of the main operations of barbarism at play throughout this study through a close reading of Franz Kafka's short story "The Great Wall of China" (1931). This story enables me to probe the critical potential of barbarism, its relation to civilization, the intertwinement of its positive and negative aspects, and its relation to epistemological and comparative questions. Revolving around an unfinished wall, Kafka's story functions as a scale model through which I present the structuring principles of this project as a whole.

In **Chapter Two**, I situate this study within contemporary debates. I sketch the current discursive landscape around culture, civilization, and barbarism, in the turn it took after the Cold War and the collapse of communist regimes in Europe, and especially after the events on September 11, 2001. In particular, I present a few examples from contemporary Western political rhetoric, and especially the rhetoric of the U.S. administration after what became nicknamed as "9/11." In addition, I discuss critical responses to this rhetoric from political and cultural theorists, sociologists, philosophers, and intellectuals. These responses depart from various theoretical premises, including conservative, liberal, humanist, left-wing, relativist, and deconstructionist perspectives. By scrutinizing the ways in which the terms "barbarism" and "civilization" are signified and deployed in them, I position my own research through and against these perspectives.

After unpacking the contemporary rhetoric on barbarism and civilization, in **Chapter Three** I look into the meanings and uses of the "barbarian" in Western history. While most historical studies of the barbarian focus on a specific era and culture, and a few others adopt a genealogical approach, I try a different take. Instead of providing a chronologically

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[23] Not all works of art and literature invite barbarian operations. Also, creative operations of barbarism can potentially take effect in all kinds of discourses: artistic, literary, non-literary, scholarly, non-scholarly, and so on. This study focuses on barbarism mainly in works of literature and art, because literary works and artworks tend to be more receptive to the ambiguity and stuttering of barbarism, than, for example, the standardized rhetoric of politics, which tends to neutralize all signs of ambiguity and confusion. Thus, the objects I analyze in this study invite a kind of reading that enables experimentation with the concept of barbarism and allows the potential of this concept to unfold. "Barbarian operations" unravel in the process of a kind of reading, to which some texts and objects lend themselves better than others.

ordered historical overview of the barbarian, I structure this chapter thematically around a series of criteria that have determined what constitutes "civilization" in the West from the Greek antiquity to the present. The logic behind this choice is the following. The "barbarian" is always conceived relatively, in opposition to the civilized. The changing connotations of the barbarian in history depend on the shifting self-perceptions of those who claim the status of the "civilized." In order to map out the complex space of the barbarian in the West, I relate its significations and uses in different eras to normative standards that have determined what counts as "civilized."

To that end, I develop a provisional typology of what I call *civilizational standards*. These include language, culture, political system or ideology, morality, religion, ethnicity, class, gender, race, progress, and the psyche. Based on this structuring principle, the history of the barbarian does not emerge as a linear succession of significations, but as a narrative of discontinuities, repetitions, and unexpected intersections, unraveling through a web of cultural, social, political, ideological, religious, and scientific discursive strands. Thus, this chapter prepares ground for the pluralization of barbarism and the barbarian, and for the disruption of conventional uses of these concepts in the succeeding chapters.

After the diachronic travels of the barbarian as the negative pole of civilization, in Chapter Four I delve into the notion of *positive barbarism*. I read Walter Benjamin's essay "Experience and Poverty" (1933), in which "positive barbarism" is introduced, and juxtapose this notion to other uses of "barbarism" in Benjamin's writings. The issue is how Benjamin's positive barbarism breaks with the negative genealogy of barbarism and articulates a new project without dissociating itself from the destructive, violent aspects of the "old" barbarism.

This chapter has a parallel methodological objective: it experiments with a kind of reading that activates the "barbarian" qualities of Benjamin's writing. The reading I perform here combines a philosophical with a literary perspective. By means of a microscopic approach, I look for odd, deviant details as an entrance to the text. I approach these details as latent "barbarisms" in Benjamin's writing, activated by the reader. These linguistic barbarisms enable me to explore how Benjamin's project of positive barbarism is put to work in his own writing as a textual strategy.

While Chapter Four follows Benjamin's prefigurations of the kind of "barbarians" that could actualize "positive barbarism," Chapter Five explores the critical potential of the barbarians' absence. Here, I center on the topos of *waiting for the barbarians* through a comparative reading of C.P. Cavafy's poem "Waiting for the Barbarians" (1904) and J.M. Coetzee's homonymous novel (1980). This topos has a prominent place in this study. In Cavafy's and Coetzee's works, the non-arrival of the barbarians confronts civilization with the absence of its constitutive outside. Thematically, this chapter probes the implications of the barbarians' absence. Theoretically, it foregrounds *repetition* as a barbarian operation. If the previous chapter examines barbarism through a microscopic lens—as

an operation unleashed by textual details—this chapter uses a multiplying, kaleidoscopic lens: it highlights barbarism *in* repetition and *as* repetition.

In my reading of Cavafy's and Coetzee's works, repetition operates on two levels. First, it takes the form of citationality, intertextuality, and allegorization. These literary works are part of a wide intertextual network revolving around the topos of *waiting for the barbarians*. Cavafy's poem and Coetzee's novel are cited and redeployed in various genres. In their citations, interpretations, and adaptations, I explore how these works resist reductive allegorizations, in order to propose another kind of allegorical reading, which I call *barbarian allegory*. Second, I am concerned with the repetition of the name "barbarian" in Coetzee's novel and Cavafy's poem in ways that generate linguistic confusion and create fissures in the established uses of the term. In the space of literature, the overdetermined names "barbarism" and "barbarian" can be repeated into new senses.

In the previous chapters the question of barbarism is located in—and limited by—language (either that of history, literature, philosophy or cultural critique). Chapters Six and Seven hive barbarism off from its purported "natural habitat" to an extralinguistic, barbaric realm: the visual. **Chapter Six** turns to visual restagings of the topos of *waiting for the barbarians*, whereas **Chapter Seven** focuses on artistic embodiments of "new barbarians." In these chapters, I show how the "barbarian theorizing" this study proposes does not necessarily rest on linguistic strategies and practices, but also takes form through the visual, as well as in the interstices of the visual and the textual.

Chapter Six explores possible alternatives to the state of *waiting for barbarians.* The artworks I analyze—South African artist Kendell Geers's labyrinthic installation "Waiting for the Barbarians" (2001) and Argentinian artist Graciela Sacco's billboard-type installation "Esperando a los bárbaros" (1995)—flirt with two different answers to the aporia of a civilization trapped in a passive and solipsistic state as it awaits the barbarians in vain. These works transpose the topos of *waiting for the barbarians* into a visual medium, into non-Western sites of enunciation, and into a contemporary context. Therefore, through these works, I explore what *waiting for the barbarians* might mean today and how the predicament this topos captures may be overcome in art.

Chapter Seven centers on the photo-performance portfolio "The New Barbarians" (2004-2006) by Mexican-born performane artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña. While Sacco's and Geers's installations play with the theme of waiting, Gómez-Peña's constructed barbarian personas appear to materialize the promise of the barbarians' arrival. However, these materializations fall far from the expectations of the civilized imagination. "The New Barbarians" overwhelm the viewer with an overload of cultural references that play with Western stereotypes of barbarian others in new, subversive constellations. Gómez-Peña's project addresses barbarism and the figure of the new barbarian by means of a *barbarian aesthetic*, taking shape through a visual grammar of what I call "barbarisms."

The figure of the barbarian that emerges from the artworks in Chapters Six and Seven—absent, half-hidden or excessively present—unsettles the "barbarian" of Western discourses. The "new barbarian" suggested by these artworks is a liminal figure, standing at the borders between cultures and media. Through their barbarian operations, these artworks intervene in contemporary discussions about barbarism, comparison, and cultural translation, and perform a kind of "barbarian theorizing" from the West's periphery.

The final chapter—**Chapter Eight**—conjoins the familiar and the foreign, the self and the other, in the trinity of the neighbor, the guest, and the barbarian. By probing the relation between these three figures in the context of Balkan nationalism, I bring barbarism to bear on collective identities. In this context, I assert that the construction of the other as "barbarian" can also be grounded in *similarity* rather than absolute difference. I develop this claim by following the journey of a popular song in the Balkans, as it unravels in the documentary film "Whose is this Song?" (2003) by Bulgarian filmmaker Adela Peeva. Although the song's performance around the Balkans suggests the commonality of Balkan peoples, the song becomes the object of fierce proprietory claims by each nation or ethnic group. The main issue in the film is the apparent paradox that the barbarization of each Balkan nation by its Balkan neighbors is not motivated by radical alterity, but by similarity. Denying that we share similar cultural practices and objects with our neighbors enables their construction as barbarian enemies. But if the neighbor is turned into a barbarian, what happens when this "barbarian" appears to share the same cultural products, only in slightly different versions? What happens when the national self is forced to confront a slightly altered mirror image in its neighbors?

In this chapter, I also test the concept of hospitality in the Balkans, with regard not only to people but also to cultural objects. Under the laws of a highly conditional hospitality, the sovereign host often turns the guest into a hostile enemy—a barbarian. But I also show how the figures of host and guest can be renegotiated into more flexible positions, engaged in productive—though not necessarily peaceful—encounters.

On a methodological level, this chapter proposes the concept of *barbarian translation* as a dynamic movement with no original, which exposes the blind spots of nationalist narratives and undermines cultural certainties. The kind of translation theory that the song in the film inspires through its travels clashes against a Balkan politics that resists the song as a product of translation and insists on its originality and authenticity. Therefore, the song forms a thought-provoking theoretical object for studying the clash and interpenetration of an aesthetics and politics of translation.

In the **Afterword**, I bring this study's recasting of barbarism to bear on academic practices and modes of theorizing. By introducing the figure of the "barbarian scholar," I reflect on what it could mean to act as barbarians in our disciplines and fields of research. The *barbarian* functions here as a trope that helps me reflect on *how* I do what I do; how the main object of my research is involved in my research practice. In

this context, I conclude this study with some preliminary guidelines for a "barbarian theorizing" in the humanities.

Although barbarism is an overdetermined and historically charged term, this project claims that we should not give up on its critical thrust—its "edge"—in cultural theory. If we do not take the concept of barbarism for granted, relying on its conventional meanings and functions in discourse, we are more alert to the shifts and openings it may create in the categories of this discourse. Through these openings, new grammars, new relations, and new modes of speaking and knowing could emerge.