



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Barbarism, otherwise : Studies in literature, art, and theory
Boletsi, M.

Citation

Boletsi, M. (2010, September 1). *Barbarism, otherwise : Studies in literature, art, and theory*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/15925>

Version: Corrected Publisher's Version

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/15925>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

6 | ANOTHER “KIND OF SOLUTION”? ART’S WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS

C.P. Cavafy’s and J.M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians* set up the stage for a performance that never takes place, but leaves us “on a road that may lead nowhere” and in search of another “kind of solution.” And yet, despite (and because of) the barbarians’ non-arrival, the structure of the promise in Cavafy’s title contains the hope of exiting this stagnant state. It is because the title does not keep its promise that its perpetual renewal becomes possible.¹ Therefore, the promise in “Waiting for the Barbarians” does not stop with the poem, but keeps reproducing itself in new contexts. This chapter continues along the problematics of the previous chapter, but probes barbarism through the operations of a different medium. If so far the question of barbarism has been located in—and limited by—language (either that of history, literature, philosophy or cultural critique), this chapter hives off barbarism from its purported “natural habitat” to an extralinguistic, and in that sense “barbaric,” realm: the visual.

The topos of *waiting for the barbarians* does not only captivate literary works. Perhaps less known than its literary adaptations are its restagings in visual art. There are several paintings, sculptures, and art installations that visually stage Cavafy’s theme and relocate it in new cultural and national contexts. Some of these works bear the exact same title as Cavafy’s poem. Artworks with the title “Waiting for the Barbarians” that I have come across—albeit in different languages—include paintings by: Rotterdam-based artist Arie van Geest (2002); British painter David Barnett (2004), who explores the creative energy of chaos as a barbaric force; London-based artist Linda Sutton; and German artist Neo Rauch (“Warten auf die Barbaren,” 2007).² Cavafy’s theme also resonates in Juan Muñoz’s comic sound installation “Waiting for Jerry” (1991), exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City, as well as in the sculpture exhibition “The Barbarians” (2002) by British modernist artist Anthony Caro. In Caro’s exhibition, Cavafy’s poem is quoted in its entirety in the catalogue as Caro’s main source of inspiration. The theme of *waiting for the barbarians* has made an appearance in other media as well. In music, American composer Ned Rorem’s song “Waiting for the Barbarians” (2001) is written to the lyrics of Cavafy’s poem.³ Finally, Philip Glass also wrote an opera entitled “Waiting for the Barbarians,” based on J. M. Coetzee’s novel, which premiered in Erfurt, Germany, in 2005.

¹ For a theorization of the speech act of the (broken) promise see Felman 2003 (particularly 24-25).

² I have not been able to determine when Linda Sutton’s painting is dated.

³ Ned Rorem’s piece—for medium voice and piano—does not follow Cavafy’s original text, but an English translation of the poem.

This chapter focuses on two visual restagings of the topos of *waiting for the barbarians*: South African artist Kendell Geers's labyrinthine installation "Waiting for the Barbarians" (2001) and Argentinian artist Graciela Sacco's billboard-type installation "Esperando a los bárbaros" (1995). The question linking this chapter with the previous concerns the possibility of an alternative to the state of waiting for barbarians. These artworks take up this question and ponder different answers to the aporia of civilization. In so doing, they transfer the topos of *waiting for the barbarians* to other mediums, to non-Western sites of enunciation, and to a contemporary context. They explore what *waiting for the barbarians* might mean today and how art can address the predicament this topos signals.

I approach Geers's and Sacco's installations through the lens of this topos and the questions it raises. Nevertheless, neither of these works can be reduced to a visual illustration of the theme of *waiting for the barbarians*. Sacco's and Geers's works complicate, revise, and even criticize their literary counterparts. Their allusions to Cavafy's poem and Coetzee's novel create a productive tension between the visual and the textual. This tension has an impact on the viewer's experience. While the poem and the novel add different layers to the reception of Sacco's and Geers's installations respectively, the artworks enrich or challenge existing readings of the poem and the novel too. Thus, this chapter also revisits aspects of Cavafy's poem and Coetzee's novel through these artworks.

Through their recasting of *waiting for the barbarians*, I argue that each artwork performs a different kind of encounter with alterity. To articulate the barbarian operations that take effect in these encounters, I explore the critical thinking these artworks make possible. Both installations intervene in contemporary discussions about barbarism and historical memory (Geers) as well as comparison and cultural translation (Sacco), and become producing agents of a critical mode of thinking by visual means. In my approach to artworks in this chapter, as well as in the next, I take up Ernst van Alphen's view on art as a form of thinking and on artworks as agents of theory and cultural critique, participating or intervening in the issues they raise (2005: xiii-xiv, 2).⁴

By approaching artworks as agents in thinking, we stop viewing them as treasure boxes, which become expendable when their secret "treasure" (a message, a theory, an insight) is revealed. Artworks, Derek Attridge argues, do not "have any treasure to show when we stop listening or looking or reading." And this is "why we go on doing it" (2009: 33). This crucial function of art is also suggested in the barbarians' non-arrival. By staging a promise for something that never arrives, this topos refuses to satisfy our

⁴ The intellectual and performative power that van Alphen ascribes to art does not entail a personification of cultural objects. When I write about artworks in this study it is not the works themselves that "speak" or "think." Rather, they trigger or inspire a mode of visual thinking or knowing that I try to capture and articulate, to the extent that it can be verbalized. As Attridge argues in his essay "On Knowing Works of Art," when we ascribe consciousness or knowing capacities to works of art, what is really at stake is the staging of our pursuit of knowledge, and the work's refusal to "satisfy the thirst for knowledge that it generates" (2009: 32).

epistemological desires. But in doing so, it motivates us to continue revisiting it in its various textual or visual recastings.

The artworks that take center stage in this and in the next chapter are what French art historian and philosopher Hubert Damisch has called "theoretical objects." A theoretical object is one that "obliges you to do theory but also furnishes you with the means of doing it." Such an object "is posed on theoretical terms; it produces theory; and it necessitates a reflection on theory."⁵ In the words of T.J. Clark, theoretical objects "interfere with preconceptions, and generate new frameworks (or at least new possibilities) of understanding" (176). Mieke Bal views the theoretical object in terms of an event that occurs when the object is "observed (which implicates the subjectivity of the viewer), and when it resists (implicating the 'intentionality of the work') normalization into the theory previously held" (2002: 277). This describes a dynamic interaction between object and observer, and highlights the productive tensions that arise when the object resists yielding to the theory the critic brings to bear on it.

The kind of thinking or knowing that Geers's and Sacco's artworks yield is produced "in a singular relationship" to each viewer or visitor: it is the product of a dialogue (Bal 2010).⁶ This is why the artworks' performance can never be identical for all viewers. But this, I contend, does not make writing about these works purely "subjective": a matter of individual interpretation, too particular, and thus irrelevant for others. My analysis is co-shaped by my subjectivity and the specific questions I pose to these works. But it is simultaneously grounded in certain operations that each work sets in motion, which bind the experience of all its viewers, making them share an affective space despite individual differences in their perception and interpretation of the work. In this sense, my analysis of these works can be considered intersubjective and singular.

In my approach to each artwork in this chapter I employ different theoretical concepts, which help me articulate each work's unique aesthetic vision and theoretical operations. Thus, in my analysis of Geers's installation, the central concept is that of *haunting*. In bringing the concept of haunting to bear on this work, I take my cue from Jacques Derrida's view on history as a practice of *hauntology*, which he elaborates in *Specters of Marx* (1994). Through the concept of haunting, I explore how the installation performs the past in the present, thereby transforming the visitor's perception of the surroundings, but also the visitor's sense of self. The main concept I bring to bear on Sacco's work is that of *staring*. This concept enables me to capture the specific encounter of the viewer with this artwork and to probe the relation between self and other that the work negotiates.

Finally, by following the theoretical interventions and barbarian operations these works set in motion separately and in relation to each other, I pose the question of their

⁵ Damisch in an interview with Bois (Bois et al. 8); also qtd in Bal 2010.

⁶ Mieke Bal's study *Of What One Cannot Speak: Doris Salcedo's Political Art* (2010) is currently in print and the page numbers are not yet available.

relation to the political. I use the term “the political” instead of “politics” because I see the two as distinct from each other. Here, I find Chantal Mouffe’s definition of the political useful. According to Mouffe, “the political” captures the agonistic dimension that she takes to be “constitutive of human societies” (9). It describes a “vibrant ‘agonistic’ public sphere of contestation” which acknowledges the “conflictual dimension of social life” as a necessary condition for democratic politics (4). This definition of the political exceeds the domain of what we call “politics.” In fact, to the extent that politics tries to eliminate or artificially suppress conflict in the name of “consensus,” politics becomes a “denial of ‘the political’” (4).

In her most recent study, Bal argues that in political art, “art” is inseparable from “the political” without being reducible to it. Political art, Bal argues, “‘works’ as art because it works politically” (2010). According to Bal, the intertwining of art and the political in political art is “essential rather than incidental.” Thus, by looking at Geers’s and Sacco’s artworks as political art, I explore how the political weaves itself in their aesthetic vision. The question of the political in art is also addressed in the following chapter. In the final part of Chapter Seven, I revisit all works of art discussed in this study in order to compare their different aesthetic visions in relation to their political investments.

Inside Kendell Geers’s “Waiting for the Barbarians”

Kendell Geers’s installation “Waiting for the Barbarians” is a labyrinth. With a side length of thirty meters, it takes up 900 square meters in total. Its walls are constructed to resemble border fences, whose top edge (three meters high) is crowned with a spiral of razor-wire—the type used at military bases and for guarding national borders. At the entrance of the labyrinth there is a warning sign: “Eintreten auf eigene Gefahr” [enter at own risk]. This sign captures what I see as the installation’s main effect on the viewer. The effect of this sign is twofold. On the one hand, it gives a positive order, compelling the visitor to enter and engage with the construction (“Eintreten”) instead of looking at it from a distance. On the other hand, by inviting the visitor to enter, it does not guarantee their safety (“auf eigene Gefahr”). By cultivating a sense of danger, it demands the visitor make a conscious and responsible choice by entering (“auf eigene Gefahr”). Art is not a safe haven in this installation, but an invitation to reflect, perceive, react, and take a position. Geers’s labyrinth does not just offer an aesthetic experience “on a platter”; it wants the visitor to actively work for it.

The installation was conceived for a site outside the Gravenhorst Monastery in Hörstel, a small town in Western Germany. It was part of the “Skulptur Biennale 2001 Münsterland” in Steinfurt, a project that aimed to bring together the landscapes in Münsterland and the visions of contemporary artists in a series of art installations situated in the German countryside. Geers’s installation was set up in 2001, at the beginning of the new millennium and approximately one century after Cavafy’s poem was written. Through

the title, Geers alludes to the novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* by his compatriot J. M. Coetzee, while Cavafy's poem also resonates in the work.

The title's allusion to Coetzee's novel signals the installation's connection to the South African context, which is a constant reference point in Geers's work. Born in Johannesburg in 1968, Geers started his career in South Africa. In the 90s, his provocative stance and "artistic bad manners" earned him the title of the "enfant terrible of the South African art world" (Krost; Enwezor 205).⁷ In 1997 he left South Africa and he currently lives between Brussels and London, participating in group shows, holding solo exhibitions and setting up art installations in Europe and around the world. As "White, Afrikaner, African and above all South African," Geers occupies multiple ambiguous and problematic positions (Enwezor 203). These complex positions are also reflected in his reception by the art world. Internationally, his work is often viewed as "too African," especially in the way it thematizes violence, while for the art world in South Africa he is often portrayed as someone who has betrayed his "Africanity" by flirting with the Western art world (Kerkham 37). As Geers remarks, "[i]n Europe I'm considered too African, in Africa I'm considered too European" (Sans and Geers 2003).⁸ Geers resists his labeling as a South African artist, because he objects to the tendency of the art world to view non-European artists as representatives of their cultures and local geographies (Enwezor 202). He rather situates his work in a post-global context (Sans and Geers 2003).

Despite the complexities of his position, Geers enjoys operating in an in-between space—a "border zone," as he calls it, which is "neither and both of the spaces it touches" (Sans and Geers 2003). His work also creates border zones that accommodate tensions between the local and the global. While the context of apartheid South Africa, in which he was brought up, is inscribed in his art, Geers insists that the atrocities of this context have worked themselves into his artworks in a way that makes them "not as much about South Africa" as "about the human condition" (Sans and Geers 2000: 268).

⁷ Geers has been described as a defiant artist, a "rebel," an "anarchist," a "responsible terrorist" (Neumaier 96); a "cultural terrorist" (Sans and Geers 2000: 270); a "TerroRealist" who plays the game according to his own rules (Sans and Geers 2003); the "thorn" or the "itch" in the institution (Geers in Neumaier 99). The titles he gained can be attributed to his controversial artistic and performative practices. These include throwing a brick through a gallery window, exhibiting a bomb threat in a museum, displaying an empty space, and exhibiting a pornographic centerfold on which he ejaculated his semen (see, for example, Kerkham 30). Constantly transgressing limits, Geers presents himself as a barbarian within the art world, trying to destabilize the system from within. Due to his provocative practices, Geers has been seen as a "shameless self-promoter." Even though he repeatedly declares that he is against turning his art into a consumable product, his "self-promotion" risks turning his own artistic image into a "sellable" product (Krost). Thus, his defiant attitude also functions as an effective promotion strategy. This points to the potential risks in being a self-assumed "good barbarian," which is why in this study I focus less on subjects as (good) barbarians and more on *barbarian operations*.

⁸ I accessed the online version of Sans's interview with Geers "A TerroRealist in the House of Love" (2003) as published on Geers's website (<http://www.panaesthetik.com/home5.htm>), where page numbers are not available.

Geers's artworks do not only address the specific context in which they appear, but they also operate within complex networks of signs. They draw from history, literature, religion, the media, and language, and use varied references to pop culture and highbrow culture in order to subvert existing readings and bring out new interconnections (Perryer).⁹

With this in mind, the choice of title in "Waiting for the Barbarians" reflects Geers's strategy of responding to specific situations and simultaneously projecting their connectedness with other contexts. The title alludes to Coetzee's novel, and through it, to the South African situation, but it also engages an international network of objects that address the same theme. The topos of *waiting for the barbarians* captures a general predicament of civilization—its dependence on oppositional constructions of the other—which weaves itself differently into various contexts. Therefore, the title establishes the installation's specificity and simultaneously announces the work's dialectic movement between the local and the global, the general and the specific.

Geers's labyrinth sets up a nexus of references that do not end with the title. The operations of these references are not determined by the installation alone, but are also activated by the viewer in the encounter with the work. Thus, I approach Geers's installation, as well as the other artworks in this study, as events that take place with the viewer's participation. Their meaning is triggered in a concrete situation of viewer-work interaction (Bal 1991: 8, 13, 15). In Geers's "Waiting for the Barbarians," the visitor is not a viewer: she cannot watch the work from a safe distance, but actively participates in it. In my reading of the work, I will be switching to the pronoun "we," and, in an attempt to implicate the reader of my analysis in this reading as well, to the pronoun "you."

The conflation of "the viewer" or "visitor" (a textual construction for my analysis) with the pronoun "we" in my analysis of all artworks in this study is not meant to create the illusion of a homogeneous community of viewers or construct an ideal universal viewer. It is first of all, as Bal argues, an acknowledgement of the fact that the ways we view images are premised on socially based fantasies, which determine our modes of looking on a collective level (Bal 1991: 18). As Geers also notes, despite the differences between viewers, we can still assume a commonality in the way artworks are experienced: "Of course, there is no ideal viewer. I don't pretend that every viewer is the same. But there are things that everybody has in common like the fact that we are all bodies in space, looking at a work of art, reacting to it from within those bodies" (Geers qtd in Neumaier 94). In addition, the "we" in my analysis acknowledges my own participation (conscious or not) in the social fantasies that determine the ways we look.

Standing out as a strange object in the countryside and in the peaceful ambience of the monastery, the installation has an alienating effect on the visitor, yet invites her to

⁹ Perryer's piece is published online without page numbers. Although his works respond to the sites in which they are exhibited, Geers does not regard them as site-specific because, as he claims, they carry wider implications about "how the human fits into history and into space" (Sans and Geers 2000: 270).

come closer. Contrary to the title's indication, the visitor entering the labyrinth embarks on a quest: an active process of searching rather than waiting for the barbarians. The textual elements framing the installation—the title and the warning sign—raise the expectation of a mysterious presence in the labyrinth. Nevertheless, the half-transparent structure of the labyrinth's fences does not give the impression of a hidden secret within this construction. This discrepancy between, on the one hand, the expectations cultivated by the textual parerga, and, on the other hand, the empty visual impression of the structure, baffles the visitor. We are not sure what the work expects from us: are we supposed to enter or stay away? Wait or start searching? And if we start searching, what should we be looking for?

The labyrinth is reminiscent of the ancient Greek myth of the Minotaur, the monster who lived in the labyrinth of Knossos on Crete and was eventually slain by the hero Theseus. With the help of the king's daughter, Ariadne, who gave him a ball of string, Theseus managed to find his way out of the labyrinth.¹⁰ Like another Theseus, the visitor is enticed to discover the foreign presence in the labyrinth and fantasize about being a hero, fighting the beast, and saving the day. The labyrinth also arouses the inquisitive spirit of the Western explorer, who enters a foreign territory in order to master it, decipher its mysteries, and obliterate or "civilize" any barbaric elements. Thus, in the first place, the visitor is tricked into performing the stereotype of the Western explorer/colonizer. Searching for the barbarians, the visitor reiterates a topos in colonial literature, wherein penetration, deciphering, and conquest of the foreign are steps in the path of the colonial hero. Of course, just as in Cavafy's poem, there is no barbarian presence waiting in the labyrinth. The structure is an empty iron cage: a trap into which the visitor has willingly led herself.

At this point, the quest for barbarians takes a different turn: from the dream of an encounter it turns into civilization's nightmare. The violence in this labyrinth does not have an external source, but seems to be located in its structure. The emptiness of the labyrinth sweeps us off our feet, causing an ontological dislocation: from hunters we turn into the prey entrapped in a cage. The image of a labyrinth turning into a cage of isolation strongly echoes Max Weber's famous "iron cage."¹¹ The labyrinth stages the self-entrapment of the civilized subject in a solipsistic, suffocating system. The cage and its fences hypostatize the artificial borders of (Western) civilization and, on a more abstract level, the exclusionary violence of its discourse. Civilization becomes a prison we have constructed for ourselves by imposing hierarchical oppositions between self and other. Just like in Cavafy's poem, no barbarians are coming to save us, either because explorers or colonialists before us have exterminated them or because the "others" of civilization are barred from the labyrinth.

¹⁰ According to the Greek myth, the monster that lived in the labyrinth in Knossos devoured the Athenian youths and maidens, sent regularly as a tribute to King Minos.

¹¹ Max Weber questions the Enlightenment's view of progress and happiness, and views Western civilization as a highly rational and bureaucratically organized social order, an "iron cage" in which people are trapped (100-04).

Trapped in the labyrinth, surrounded by wires and fences, we come face-to-face with ourselves as barbarians. As in Coetzee's novel, we come to realize that the barbarians—the real agents of violence—are amongst and within us. Could we, as civilized subjects, be the barbarians, for which the installation is waiting fearfully, trying to guard itself by means of barbed wire and warning signs? The title suddenly takes an unexpected meaning. In our heads we hear the echo of the Magistrate's words to Colonel Joll in Coetzee's novel: "You are the enemy, you have made the war."

One of the labyrinth's most powerful operations consists in investing the visitor with a sense of guilt. The labyrinth performs an interpellative address, as it were, whereby the visitor is hailed and responds to this hailing by accepting guilt. In Louis Althusser's theory of interpellation, the formation of the subject and the conferral of identity take place through an acceptance and even self-ascription of guilt. In Althusser's well-known example, the policeman hails a passerby ("Hey, you there!"), who automatically turns around, acknowledging this hailing as an attribution of guilt (48). For Althusser, this operation of interpellation or hailing describes the function of ideology, through which individuals are transformed into subjects (48-49). The installation can be viewed as a visual metaphor for the ideological system (or "the law") within which we attain our subjectivity and identity.¹²

The installation's barbed wire and fences suggest that this ideological system functions like a prison, from which subjects cannot easily escape. This enhances the instinctive guilt with which the visitor responds to the installation's interpellation. For Althusser, subjects are formed as a consequence of ideology and function only within its terms. Ideology—as well as language in structuralist theories—functions like a closed system, in which subjects are formed and trapped, as it were, without the option to escape.¹³ As products of ideology, in Althusser's theory subjects have very limited free will or control outside of dominant discursive systems (Ortiz 6). As Judith Butler remarks in her analysis of Althusser's theory, the subject "accepts the terms by which he or she is hailed" and submits to the law (the police) because this readiness to accept guilt "promises identity" (1997b: 106, 108). There is no "I" without this self-attribution of guilt (107).

The installation performs an interpellative address that confers guilt on the visitor, and in so doing, it stages Althusser's theory of interpellation. However, unlike in Althusser's theory, in "Waiting for the Barbarians" this guilt does not operate on an abstract ahistorical level, but has a strong historical component. In the installation, the focus shifts from ahistorical structures to historicized discursive practices. The guilt the installation conveys springs from the subject's (unwitting) implication in the discursive violence of ideological formations such as language, culture, or nation, within which the subject has

¹² Althusser writes: "*all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects*" (1971: 47, emphasis in Althusser).

¹³ In this respect, the title of Fredric Jameson's book on structuralism, *The Prison-House of Language* (1972), is telling.

no choice but to operate. Such guilt is historically grounded, because it is the product of accumulated historical processes or historical events.

The artist's own identity helps me elucidate this point. The guilt with which Geers's installation injects the visitor can be correlated with the artist's guilt as a white Afrikaans South African man. This part of his identity implicates him in the violence of the apartheid, which he inevitably bears and through which his subjectivity has been formed. "I am guilty!" Geers has written, "I cannot hide my guilt as it is written all over my face. I was born guilty without being given the option" (Geers qtd in Kerkham 31). The artist "carries the specter of being oppressor" through his inherited past as a white South African (Enwezor 204).¹⁴

The installation passes this sense of guilt on to the visitor, regardless of whether they have committed bad deeds or have a guilty conscience. As subjects, we cannot but perpetuate the violence of the discursive structures that have formed us. The violence we perform by using the term "barbarian," for example, is part of this kind of guilt. The Magistrate in Coetzee's novel—and, through him, Coetzee himself—was also struggling with the same guilt. Thus, contrary to our common understanding of guilt as a burden of conscience after having committed a bad deed, neither Althusser's guilt that transforms us into subjects through ideology nor the guilt that Geers carries as a white South African are linked to conscious choices or direct actions, and yet are constitutive of a subject's identity.

If the guilt the installation confers on us is not a conscious choice, then how we deal with it certainly is. The installation calls the visitor to respond to this guilt. It challenges us to think of ways to transpose guilt into a critical stance and a creative mode of being instead of a predicament that keeps us entrapped within a certain structure. Thus, while the threatening and claustrophobic structure of the work stages the entrapment of the subject by ideology or discourse, I argue that the work also offers us the tools to unsettle the structures in which we are implicated. I identify three ways in which the installation accomplishes this: 1) the visibility and materiality of its structure 2) the installation's title, and, finally, 3) the installation's effect of haunting, which introduces the figure of the ghost as a challenge to conventional modes of subjectivation and identity formation. In what follows, I will elaborate these three elements and show how they lead up to what I identify as the work's main barbarian operation.

The installation's material structure does not attract the visitor's attention from the start. The installation, as I argued, invites us to walk through it instead of look at it and cultivates the expectation of a secret inside. As soon as we realize that the installation

¹⁴ "Waiting for the Barbarians" contains allusions to another of Geers's artistic projects, entitled "Guilty" (1998), which intended to explore "the pervasive presence of, and silence around, the semantics of guilt in Sought Africa." In this project, Geers tried to sabotage the celebrations of the centenary of Fort Klapperkop, a symbol of Afrikanerdom, by appropriating the fort as the space of an artwork called "Guilty." Geers was stopped by the enraged festival organizers and eventually claims to have flown over the fort with a plane carrying a banner with the word "guilty" in different languages. For a detailed analysis of this project, see Kerkham.

is empty, we turn our gaze to the labyrinth's structure. The installation's frame—fences crowned with barbed-wire—suddenly becomes visible. As Geers said in a conversation with Nicolas Bourriaud, every object in his art embodies an ideological structure: "Whether it's a broken bottle or a security sign or a border fence, the object is the material manifestation of an ideological system" (Geers in Bourriaud et al. 2005: 154). The labyrinth in "Waiting for the Barbarians" becomes a visual metaphor for ideology.

Ideology, however, is by definition invisible. As Althusser writes, "ideology never says, 'I am ideological'" (1971: 49). Its power and efficacy pertains as long as it remains hidden.¹⁵ If the labyrinth is a visual metaphor for ideological structures, by drawing attention to its frame, Geers's work makes ideology shed its invisibility, to which it owes its power. By becoming visible, an ideological structure becomes more vulnerable. By making the visitor aware of the ideological structures in which she is implicated, the installation gives her the option to approach them critically. Even though the visitor remains implicated in these structures (she is still positioned inside the labyrinth), turning her attention to the labyrinth's fences may trigger a more critical stance towards the terms through which she is subjectivized.

Focusing on the labyrinth's structure sets us thinking about our own position in the discursive systems we inhabit. Unlike most typical labyrinths, this one is made of fences, allowing a better view of the labyrinth's different paths. Using the prison walls of the labyrinth to stay in isolation and remain invisible is not an option. The visitor feels imprisoned but also exposed. The labyrinth's disorienting effect makes the subject vulnerable, but in so doing it creates the possibility for a slight repositioning of the subject in relation to the discursive structures that shape her identity.

The materiality of the fences exposes the structure's vulnerability. The labyrinth is porous from every side—a permeability that is in certain ways reminiscent of the porous wall in Kafka's "The Great Wall of China." By turning invisible borders in our world into the tangible fences of a prison-labyrinth, the work seems to leave us in a claustrophobic structure with no way out. However, the partial transparency of the fences makes the outside visible. We can see the labyrinth's outside even if we cannot easily reach it. The tantalizing effect of this partial visibility differs from the effect of a labyrinthine structure made of concrete walls. Its permeability increases our determination to find a way out—although nothing guarantees that the outside would be a safer or better place to be. We should not forget that Geers's installation is a labyrinth, in which the possibility of breaking out is inscribed: since we got in, there must be a way out.

Waiting for the barbarians suggests a stagnant, passive state, wherein the (civilized) subject appears impotent, without agency, hoping for an external intervention. That the installation hides no barbarians is a first breach in the identity of the (civilized) subject who

¹⁵ On the invisible workings of ideology, see Barthes's seminal work *Mythologies* (1957). See also S. Hall's "The Rediscovery of 'Ideology'" (72).

needs a constitutive outside. But Geers's installation challenges the visitor to quit waiting for barbarians and to focus on the structures that shape and constrain our subjectivity instead. By sabotaging the visitor's quest for barbarians it urges the visitor to come up with the means to deal with the non-arrival of the other. Finding another "kind of solution" to the barbarians' absence may involve questioning the structures that made our identity dependent on the category of the barbarian.

Haunted by History

The image of the labyrinth is also central in Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* and constitutes one of the most conspicuous links between Geers's and Coetzee's works. The Magistrate uses the labyrinth as a metaphor for his entrapment in the discursive structures of the Empire. Searching for a way out, he first sees the barbarian girl as "the only key I have to the labyrinth" (95). When he realizes that the girl is not another Ariadne who will lead him out of the maze, he resorts to a vision he believes will help him escape the labyrinth. He envisions a world, in which the Empire has ceased to exist and all its violent marks and oppositions have been erased and replaced by nature and by peaceful human activity:

Be patient, one of these days he [Colonel Joll] will go away, one of these days quiet will return: then our siestas will grow longer and our swords rustier, [...] the mortar will crumble till lizards nest between the bricks and owls fly out of the belfry, and the line that marks the frontier on the maps of Empire will grow hazy and obscure till we are blessedly forgotten. (149)

The contest of human civilization with nature, from which the latter will eventually come out a winner, dissolving arbitrary border divisions, is also part of Geers's vision in his "Waiting for the Barbarians."

In the introductory text placed at the entrance of Geers's labyrinth, we read:

Die Natur kann und soll sich hier ihr Territorium zurückerobern.
["Nature can and will reclaim here its territory"]¹⁶

Although it is announced as a "permanent installation," this statement seems to suggest that Geers's labyrinth—and the violence of artificial borders that it signifies—is ephemeral. It will inevitably be swallowed up by nature. As stated in the catalogue text, the artist planted ivy along the fences after completing the installation's setup. This climbing plant, which is growing today around the labyrinth's fences, was meant to envelop and eventually drown the construction.

¹⁶ This text is chosen by Geers himself.



Fig. 1. The installation just after construction (Geers, "Waiting for the Barbarians," 2001). Image from the Stephen Friedman Gallery



Fig. 2. Detail of "Waiting for the Barbarians" (Geers). Image from the Stephen Friedman Gallery



Fig. 3. The installation in 2004, when ivy had started growing around the fences (Geers). Image by M. Boletsi



Fig. 4. Installation view (Geers). Image by M. Boletsi



Fig. 5. View from within the installation (Geers). Image by M. Boletsi



Fig. 6. Gravenhorst Monastery

But is nature's ability to erase the signs of barbarism and of divisive violence the ultimate "message" of the installation or the novel? I argue that this is not the case. The Magistrate's fantasy of a return to a peaceful life in nature, devoid of the Empire's marks, is succeeded by the sudden realization of the utopian nature of this vision:

Thus I seduced myself, taking one of the many wrong turnings I have taken on a road that looks true but has delivered me into the heart of a labyrinth. (149)

The labyrinth returns, intimidating in its inescapability. This labyrinth is the reality of the present, with which the Magistrate must struggle. Nature can function as a reminder of the transitoriness of every human construct and system—as it does in Geers's installation. But it can also feed escapist tendencies and serve as a path to historical oblivion.

Neither the novel nor the installation encourages the latter attitude. Geers's labyrinth—as well as Coetzee's novel—does not allow oblivion. On the contrary: the ivy Geers planted around the installation's fences is a manifestation of the inescapability of violence, lurking even in nature itself. As opposed to the labyrinth's structure, which makes violence visible and thus problematizes it, nature—in the form of the climbing plant drowning the installation—violently tries to efface the traces of the installation from the present, and thereby also its ability to act as a reminder of violence and artificial divisions. Nature may thus hide more violence than the labyrinth itself. The installation underscores the omnipresence of violence in the present and the past instead of covering it up. Therefore, it performs two of the functions that according to Bal distinguish contemporary political art: "the affective—albeit oblique—engagement with the present" and "the refusal to excise the past from that present" (2010). For Bal, the implication of the past in the present takes place through a transformation of perception into memory. In the following, I use the figure of the ghost as a theoretical concept, in order to show how the installation changes our perception of our here-and-now and unsettles our sense of self by reintroducing strands of historical memory in the present.

The installation is empty. Nevertheless, the visitor does not feel completely alone in it. She senses invisible forces, which she cannot fully place or comprehend. These forces can be momentarily mistaken for the barbarians the visitor may be looking for. But what the visitor may perceive as traces of barbarians, I want to argue, are specters of history.

The way the installation activates historical memory can be described in the terms of Jacques Derrida's practice of hauntology, developed in *Specters of Marx*. Reflecting on the fate of Marx's "spirit" after the fall of communism, Derrida yields an image of the present as inhabited by specters, and conceptualizes the relation between present, past, and future through a practice of hauntology.¹⁷ Playing with its near-homonym,

¹⁷ *Specters of Marx* is based on Derrida's keynote lecture at the conference "Whither Marx? Global Crises in International Perspective," held at the University of California, Riverside, in April 1993.

"ontology," hauntology replaces the priority of presence and of being with the figure of the ghost, which is in-between presence and absence, neither dead nor alive. Hauntology proposes a conception of history as a perpetual coming-back. A specter, Derrida says, "is always a revenant. One cannot control its comings and goings because it begins by coming back" (1994: 11). History as a spectral phenomenon does not move forward, but appears and recedes, changing its shapes and claims on the present. Consequently, as Wendy Brown points out in her discussion of Derrida's hauntology, the past is not an objective account, but what lives on from past events in the present, how we conjure those events, how they affect and claim us, and how they shape our vision of the future (2001: 150).

Geers's installation becomes an arena for an intersection of spectral forces. The allusion to Coetzee's novel, as well as Geers's South African descent, evokes the context of the apartheid. But apartheid violence is not the only specter the installation conjures. The labyrinth is situated near the so-called "Nonnenpättchen" ["Little Nuns' Way"], which used to serve as an escape route for the inhabitants of the monastery when attackers were approaching a nearby village. Jan Winkelmann, who presented Geers's installation in the *Skulptur-Biennale Münsterland* catalogue, notes the region's significance for the journey of Christian pilgrims to Santiago de Compostela, "whose difficult path to redemption very often finds symbolic usage in the form of a labyrinth."¹⁸ While we could view Geers's labyrinth as a symbol of the road to redemption, I argue that the position of the labyrinth outside a Catholic monastery strikes a discordant note in the peacefulness of monastic life. Moreover, its evocation of borders and violent exclusions clashes with the inclusive ideal of Christianity.¹⁹

The tension this discordance creates may incite the visitor to seek other associations between the installation and the monastery. The out-of-placeness of the installation and its violent impression in the religious atmosphere of the monastery evokes associations between religion—or, better, its institutionalization by the Church—and barbarism. The visitor suddenly senses the ghosts of torturers and Inquisitors, executioners in the name of religion, crusaders and burning martyrs, brutal religious wars of the past, and also the intifadas of the present and their brutal repressions. Under the impact of these spectral forces, the contradiction between barbarism and religion ceases to be so steadfast.

The specters awakened by the installation's presence on this particular site involve violent border divisions. The battles, military and political conflicts, and territorial changes that took place in the installation's wider region—such as the battle of the Teutoburger forest or the Peace of Westphalia—are summoned by the image of Geers's barbed-wire fence. The specters of these events remind us that the seemingly peaceful

¹⁸ The online version of Winkelmann's article I am using does not have page numbers.

¹⁹ Monastic life is of course rather exclusionary, as it seeks isolation and distance from worldliness. If we follow this line of thinking, the exclusionary character of the monastery is rather enhanced and negatively tinted by the exclusionary violence the labyrinth suggests.

natural landscape wherein the installation is hosted has been marked by divisive violence throughout history.²⁰

Besides specters from a remote past, the installation also haunts the visitor with specters of twentieth-century barbarism. Coming from the railway station of the town of Hörstel, one has to follow a long footpath to reach the monastery where the installation is situated. The way to the monastery is a quiet walk through the German countryside. However, there is one cultural site along this path: a monument to World War II. Next to the memorial stone there are air photographs of the area before and after the WWII bombardments, witnessing man's violence on man and on nature. While nature has concealed the signs of this destruction with the passing of time, walking by this monument alerts us to the fact that violence and barbarism may lurk where we least expect them. Alerting us to the unexpected sites of barbarism is also one of the main effects of the installation's haunting.

Situated in a German province largely destroyed during WWII, Geers's "Waiting for the Barbarians" evokes the specter of one of the most blatant instances of barbarism in modern history: the Holocaust. The fences allude to concentration camps.²¹ The material of the labyrinth—the barbed wire that crowns the fences—also functions as a trigger of historical memory. As Alan Krell shows in his study *The Devil's Rope* (2002), barbed wire has become a symbol of modernity in its function as an instrument of oppression, territorial expansion, and border protection. It is associated with various contexts, among which Kitchener's blockhouses in the Boer Wars and, later, apartheid in South Africa, the barbed no-man's-land of WWI, the electrically wired fences of Nazi concentration camps, and, today, detention centers for asylum seekers.²²

Barbed wire has been used as an instrument of protection and establishing boundaries but also of confinement and incarceration: a "defensive weapon" but also an "offensive

²⁰ The Teutoburger forest, which is situated in the same area, has become the symbol of the famous battle, in which an alliance of Germanic tribes ambushed and wiped out a Roman army of three entire legions (9 CE). The battle established the Rhine as the boundary between Romans and Germans. As a result, the borders of the Roman Empire and its sphere of influence were limited to the territory below the Rhine. Another historical occurrence in the region, with significant consequences for the reordering of Europe's borders, was the Peace of Westphalia, which ended the Thirty Years' War in 1648 and led to the division of Europe into single sovereign states. For these historical allusions see Winkelmann.

²¹ In yet another association evoked by its location, the installation can be related to the division imposed by the "iron curtain" between Eastern and Western Europe. Notably, Geers initially wanted to place a border post from the Berlin wall at the center of the labyrinth.

²² For a political history of barbed wire, see also Razac (2003) and Netz (2004). In an interview with Jérôme Sans, Geers also addresses the importance of barbed wire. He points out that the same year the British used barbed wire in their war against South Africa in 1890, thousands of South Africans died in British concentration camps (Sans and Geers 2003). The barbed wire in "Waiting for the Barbarians" also alludes to Geers's previous work, and especially his installation called "Title Withheld (Deported)," 1993-1997. In that work, he literally put his audience at risk by exhibiting an activated 6000-volt electric fence in the Pretoria Art Museum. On this fence there was a sign that read "DANGER, GEVAAR, INGOZI" (compare the warning sign in "Waiting for the Barbarians": "Enter at own risk").

tool" (Krell 53). In Geers's installation, barbed wire has a double role, signifying exclusion of unwanted, foreign elements as well as inclusion and confinement. The subject is trapped within the labyrinth's structure, while foreign elements are blocked out. Given the installation's position outside a monastery, this simultaneous process of inclusion and exclusion may allude to the nature of monastic life, but also to the workings of religion in general. The installation reminds the visitor that acts of inclusion go hand-in-hand with violent exclusionary practices.

The choice of a South African artist to situate this work in Germany does not seem arbitrary. Both the German and the South African context are invested with historical guilt, which is transferred to the visitor. The work's concurrent evocation of the specter of Western colonialism (through its affiliation with Coetzee's novel and South Africa) and of the Nazi regime conjoins the two most striking strands of barbarism in modern Western history through the image of the barbed wire. This encounter is not without consequences for our understanding of these contexts. If "the idea of barbarism has been central to intellectual debate about fascism," Brett Neilson remarks, "it has played a lesser role in the study of imperialism" (Neilson 90). Whereas fascism appropriates barbarism in order to challenge the supposed enervation of European culture, imperialism—as Coetzee's novel also suggests—casts the colonized subject as a barbarian in order to justify its "civilizing mission," which, in its turn, enacts the violence and oppression ascribed to barbarian formations (90-91).

The condemnation of Nazism as one of the most gruesome manifestations of barbarism is unchallenged. However, the verdict upon colonialism as a barbaric form of domination is still an object of debate in the West. By evoking the specters both of Nazism and colonialism, the work conjoins them under the common denominator of barbarism. The cohabitation of the two specters transfers the indignation associated with Nazism upon the colonial regime. It thus enables a viewing of the Holocaust as a form of imperialism without a "civilizing mission."²³

The setup of the installation in the year 2001, as well as its continuing presence today, turns it not only into a reminder of barbarism in the past, but also of contemporary barbarism. The work encourages us to discover hidden sites of barbarism in our contemporary world and alerts us to the persistence of exclusionary violence in our supposedly borderless, post-political world. Part of the barbarity of colonialism and Nazism can, for example, still be found in neo-colonial practices, in manifestations of extreme nationalism and racism, or in new crusades under the banner of the "war on terror."

Geers's installation upsets its immediate and broader surroundings and casts a foreign light on everything around it. If nature has concealed most traces of history's violence

²³ The juxtaposition of colonialism and World War II also draws attention to practices of external and internal exclusion in Europe. Western civilization has not only identified its barbarian others outside the European space, but within Europe as well. World War II—"this civil war fought by European civilization against itself"—is a case in point (S. Weber 92).

in the area—marks of border divisions, battles, bombings—the installation re-exposes those traces and invites us to revisit the historical narratives attached to them. Haunted by specters of the past, nothing seems peaceful or innocent any more. The beauty of nature and the serenity of the monastery seem deceptive, as if hiding something barbaric. Through this operation, the artwork itself becomes a "barbarism": a strange, incongruous element in this location, which brings out the violence in its surroundings by conjuring specters that disallow this violence to pass into oblivion.²⁴

Notably, specters are summoned through the installation's aesthetic of *absence*. Geers's emphasis on absence has also been noticed by critics like Ralph Rugoff, who reads absences and irresolute traces in Geers's works as parts of a "forensic method." According to this method, the viewer becomes a "forensic anthropologist" forced to "speculatively piece together histories that remain largely invisible to the eye" (Rugoff qtd in Kerkham 36). However, a "forensic" reading of the artwork suggests that the viewer keeps an anthropologist's distance. This reading requires a sober, disengaged look that would allow the viewer to piece together the pieces of an invisible puzzle. To my mind, this is at odds with one of the main effects of Geers's work, which consists in interpellating the visitor and implicating her in those invisible traces of history that coexist in tension in the installation's space. By engaging the visitor in historical memory on a bodily, visceral level, the work suggests that history is constantly being rewritten in the present.²⁵ Understanding how the past works itself into the present is crucial in understanding our own position in the here-and-now. Thus, instead of a "forensic anthropologist," the installation urges the visitor to be a bit more "clairvoyant": alert to the spectral presences that shape and produce our present.

For Derrida, hauntology is not just a theoretical model but a practice of living. "Learning to live" can only happen "between life and death," and this "between" entails learning "to live with ghosts," in "the upkeep, the conversation, the company, or the companionship" of those others that oscillate between existence and non-existence and are never fully present (Derrida 1994: xviii). For Derrida, this "being-with specters" requires a responsibility before the ghosts of the dead and the unborn (xix). Specters from the past and the future are always there with us. Learning to live with them would mean learning how to give them speech and listen to them rather than be afraid or unaware of them or try to exorcize them (47, 176).

Listening to specters does not offer the visitor of Geers's work the comfort of a safe interpretation. Ghosts do not yield clear-cut knowledge. We can try to listen to them,

²⁴ As Geers said in an interview, his work scratches and reveals "that which lurks within everyone of us just beneath the surface of civil society" (Sans and Geers 2000: 268). Geers refers here to the Freudian view that barbarism is always an integral part of the human psyche, suppressed by civilized convention; see Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*.

²⁵ The effect of haunting as a constant "coming back" of history in the present is also what Mieke Bal has called "preposterous history": an act of reversal that "puts the chronologically first (pre-) as an aftereffect behind (post-) its later recycling" (1999: 6-7).

but, as Derrida argues, the spectral can make no promises. Specters signal something we cannot know, a “being-there” of something absent or departed that “no longer belongs to knowledge” (1994: 6). Living with ghosts also means learning to cope with this unknowability. Their affective operations on the visitor generate semantic openness: ghosts do not carry a univocal secret but address the living with voices of the past or with the not-yet shaped possibilities of the future (Davis 378-79). How we interpret their address and what we do with it is our responsibility. In this precarious space between the knowable and the unknowable, power and impotence, lies the visitor’s agency and responsibility as a historical subject to be mindful of the complex operations of the past in the present, as she tries to envision a different future.

By introducing the logic of haunting in our present, the work enables the co-existence of opposite states. The visible and the invisible, presence and absence, the knowable and the unknowable, come together in the figure of the ghost, forming a boundary space that momentarily questions the rigidity of the borders the installation so forcefully inscribes. The impact of the ghost transforms strict border divisions into livable spaces, where contradictory states coexist in an agonistic relation, without excluding each other. In this way, the work proposes an alternative to the exclusionary violence of borders: it turns them into political spaces, in accordance with Mouffe’s definition of the political as a “vibrant ‘agonistic’ public sphere of contestation” (4).

The political space shaped by the installation is not a safe, stable, and familiar location anymore, but a space wherein the visible—that is, what we are used to seeing in a certain way—becomes suspect and even unreliable due to the foreign intrusion of the specter. “Derrida’s ghosts,” Jameson notes, “are these moments in which the present [...] unexpectedly betrays us” (2008: 39). Geers’s installation makes us distrust our here-and-now and question its familiar messages. In the work, it is not the absent, but the invisible (that which cannot be seen but is still there) that takes effect. The intrusion of those invisible others in our present makes invisible things partly visible again and thus subject to critique: the structure of the installation, but also habits, settings, and discursive practices we take for granted and, in that sense, have become “invisible,” are denaturalized. This, I argue, is the work’s main *barbarian operation*. By urging us to listen to ghosts around us, Geers’s work makes us see things we took for granted as foreign to our frameworks of understanding. This yields a precarious view of the present, but also opens past narratives to revisions.

What the installation adds to Cavafy’s topos is the insight that the barbarians are not necessarily fully absent, but may still be around, haunting the civilized. Their effect on us is therefore very real. Absence does not exclude presence. The barbarians are not there to lead us out of the labyrinth of our system. But in our search for another “kind of solution,” it might help if we try listening to the barbarian echoes of the specters of history around us.

Geers's labyrinth introduces a disjoined quality of time: history not as a straight line, but as a constant "coming back." The work thereby makes history a living part of the present. Specters, as Fredric Jameson argues, make us aware of the fact that a self-sufficient notion of the present cannot exist (2008: 39). The present is never fully present and identical to itself, but always non-contemporaneous with itself. Derrida's emphasis on the disjunction of the present from itself collapses the absolute separation between present, past, and future. Specters show us how the identity of the present to itself is breached and how the present is a "spectral moment" that already contains the past and the future.

This disjoined identity of the present may help us conceptualize the subject in a slightly different way. If Althusser's subject needs to affirm its self-identity through self-incrimination, the figure of the ghost signals, in my view, the possibility of another mode of being. As Butler argues, the existence of the "I" in Althusser is dependent on a blind complicity with the law, which compels individuals to respond to the hailing by incriminating themselves. But if acceptance of the law is necessary for the "I" to exist, then how, Butler asks, can the subject ever critically interrogate the law? A critique of the law and of the terms by which we are called into being as subjects cannot happen, "unless the one who offers that critique is willing, as it were, to be undone by the critique that he or she performs" (Butler 1997b: 108, *emphasis added*). Butler considers that there may be other possibilities for being that would produce a different response to the hailing of ideology and resist "its lure of identity" (130). "Being," as Butler suggests, should be read as a potentiality that cannot be exhausted by any interpellation and thus holds the potential to undermine the workings of ideology (131). She continues:

[A] failure of interpellation may well undermine the capacity of the subject to "be" in a self-identical sense, but it may also mark the path toward a more open, even more ethical, kind of being, one of or for the future. (131, *emphasis added*)

This "being otherwise" would allow us to question the labyrinth's incriminating structures.

The ghosts that accompany the visitor bring us closer to such a different mode of being, which is not an affirmation of self-identity but a negation of the oneness of the self with itself. Althusser's subject needs to say "here I am" at the cost of pleading guilty and thus submitting to the law. The ghost, on the other hand, is able to say at the same time "here I am" and "here I am not." Self-negation is necessary for questioning the law and ideology, because it frees us from the need to affirm our subjectivity through guilt and submission. This partial self-negation challenges the process of interpellation as a restoration of self-identity through the linguistic consolidation "here I am." The ghost undoes the self-identity of the present, because it brings into it the past and the future. But it also unsettles the subject's self-identity, because it points to a mode of being between presence and absence, identity and non-identity. Therefore, by allowing specters to touch our subjectivity, we also open ourselves to the potentiality of a different mode of

being as (historical) subjects. This mode is not grounded in guilt as a means of preserving the law, but may turn this guilt into a responsibility towards the past as well as the future.

Staring Encounters: Graciela Sacco's "Esperando a los bárbaros"

Our own undecidable meaning is in the irreducible figure
that stands in for the eyes of the other.

—Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (23)

"Esperando a los bárbaros" (1995) by Graciela Sacco also takes up the challenge of seeking another "kind of solution" to the state of waiting. Just like Geers's labyrinth, Sacco's work does not present any barbarians. However, the encounter with the viewer in Sacco's installation takes place on different terms than in Geers's labyrinth and suggests another way out of civilization's aporia.

Born in 1956 near the city of Rosario in Argentina, where she still lives, Sacco is a visual artist, photographer, and video and installation artist with international acclaim.²⁶ Her work "Esperando a los bárbaros" is a billboard-type installation comprising a hundred eyes printed on paper, each of them framed between pieces of rough wood (fig. 7). The work is created with the heliographic technique, which Sacco brought to the forefront of contemporary art. Heliography describes "the chemical action of light on emulsified photosensitive surfaces."²⁷ As opposed to the smooth surface of photographic prints, her heliographic technique allows the transferring of photographic images onto a heterogeneous group of supports, such as paper, leather, wood, stone, glass, plastic, and metal. The capacity of the heliographic process to make the most illusory shadows fixed and yet diffuse creates the impression that the artist "'writes and unwrites' in light" (Damian; Kartoffel).

In "Esperando a los bárbaros" the use of the heliographic technique for printing eyes on paper, in combination with the feeble spotlights in a dimly lit gallery space, produces

²⁶ Sacco has taken part in several Biennales, including Venice 2001, Havana 2000/97, Mercosur 1997 and Sao Pablo 1996. She has been invited to the 2004 Shanghai Biennale, and exhibited her work at the New World Museum in Houston (2004) and in Art Basel Miami (2004). Her work has appeared in major exhibitions in museums and galleries worldwide, including Chile, Denmark, Argentina, Guatemala, México, Brasil, Spain, England, and France. For years Sacco has also been a professor of twentieth-century Latin American Art at the University of Rosario in Argentina. See <http://www.gracielasacco.net/>.

²⁷ At <http://www.stephencohengallery.com/exhibits/exhib25.html>. While heliography is commonly used in the development of architectural blueprints, Sacco developed her own anti-orthodox heliographic method in the 80s, as she was looking for a way to print photographic images on a variety of surfaces. Sacco has also written a book in Spanish and English entitled *Sun-Writings: Heliography in the Artistic Field* (1994). In short, this is how the heliographic process works: "You make a surface impervious, coat it with certain chemicals in low light, dry it, expose it to a projection of ultraviolet light, blow fumes of ammonia over it in a damp environment, and you have achieved a heliograph" (Castle 124). For Sacco's heliographic technique also see Laudanno.

the effect of dozens of eyes looking at the viewer from the wall of the gallery.²⁸ Their framing in wood conveys the impression that the subjects to whom these eyes belong are behind a wooden fence, trying to peek at the other side through the fences's crevices. The wooden pieces seem to hinder the vision of the people behind them, denying them access to what lies beyond this wooden barrier. Some of the eyes are barely discernible, as the gaps are sometimes too narrow for the eyes to appear in their entirety.

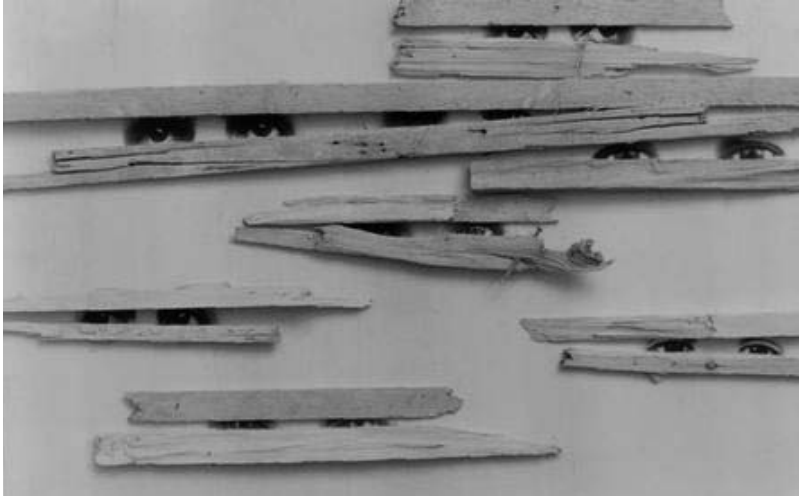


Fig. 7. Detail of "Esperando a los bárbaros" (Sacco, 1995)

Just like in my analysis of Geers's work, my postulated viewer of this artwork, as well as the collective "we," is part of the discursive system we may call "the West"—even if she resists it. The eyes in Sacco's installation, disembodied and disconnected from their context, function as metonymies of individuals, for which any further clues to their appearance, race, ethnic origin, culture, age, and gender are missing. Without the face, a safe guess about the identity of these people is impossible. Faces function as cues to our roots and histories and enable identification with social or ethnic groups. As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson argues, "faces and their features are implements of communication, emblems of identity, and interpretive occasions," as well as "privileged sites from which recognition emanates in both directions of human encounters" (2006: 176). But if faces are sites of identification and communication, the eyes in Sacco's work, separated from the face, at first sight seem to forestall any contact with the viewer that would be based on recognition.

²⁸ The installation has been exhibited, for instance, at the 23rd International Biennial of Art of Sao Pablo, 1996, and at the Massachusetts College of Art, Boston, 2000.

Who are the people staring at the viewer through the cracks in the wall? It is precisely the absence of credentials regarding these eyes that largely determines the viewer's response. Faced with dozens of staring eyes, the viewer experiences the discomfort of being observed by anonymous viewers. Because these observers cannot be identified, they are likely to be perceived as hostile: they are hiding, because their intentions may be malevolent. Unable to decipher these intentions, the viewer may perceive them as nearly invisible enemies who can strike at any moment. Therefore, on a first level, the eyes may give rise to the paranoia of the civilized subject, who sees evil others everywhere.

This paranoia is pertinent today, particularly after the terrorist attacks of September 11, which produced the figure of the terrorist as the "new barbarian" and primary enemy of the civilized world. One of the distinctive features of this new type of enemy is his or her anonymity and lack of distinctive features. We do not really know who terrorists are. Their shadowy networks are linked to other nameless networks around the world through invisible mechanisms (Appadurai 2006: 20). This obscurity intensifies the global anxiety regarding these enemies. Although Sacco's installation was created in 1995, I contend that it speaks to the contemporary amplification of anxiety towards these others, about which very little is known. As Arjun Appadurai argues, the increase in terrorist actions such as those on September 11 has induced uncertainty regarding the agents of such violence: "Who are they? What faces are behind the masks? What names do they use? Who arms and supports them? How many of them are there? Where are they hidden? What do they want?" (88). Sacco's work may spark the same questions. Viewed today, against the backdrop of this paranoia, Sacco's work emphasizes the anonymity and opacity of the people behind the fence. But even if fear and suspicion describes the viewer's first instinctive response to the artwork, the installation, in my view, does not exacerbate our fear of obscure others. Rather, by confronting us with our tendency to fear the unknown other, it counterpoints this tendency with the challenge of a different response.

The compelling force of the eyes makes the viewer seek alternative ways to make sense of this encounter without having to identify the others behind the wooden fence. This gives rise to the question of whether (and how) a meaningful encounter can take place without mutual recognition—without having to know the other's name, status, and even facial features. The viewer stands before the challenge of welcoming the other without further identification.

There is, however, a textual indication that could help us assign a role to the eyes and narrativize the artwork: the title. "Esperando a los bárbaros" is a Spanish translation of Cavafy's "Περιμένοντας τους βαρβάρους" or "Waiting for the Barbarians." As Sacco informed me, the source-text for her choice of the title was Cavafy's poem. The installation—just as Geers's work—constitutes a transcultural and intersemiotic translation of the topos of *waiting for the barbarians*.²⁹ The title frames the artwork by offering an

²⁹ The term "intersemiotic translation" (or transmutation) was introduced by Roman Jakobson and refers to the "interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems" (429).

entrance to the act of viewing. But this translation of Cavafy's poem is more complex than a simple visual illustration of the poem. The precise mode of interaction between the visual and textual aspects of Sacco's installation deserves further elaboration.

The Viewer as Civilized

In order to probe Sacco's redeployment of Cavafy's narrative, we can follow (at least) two interpretive courses, depending on whether or not the viewer sees the eyes in the installation as the "barbarians" in the narrative of its title. If those eyes belong to the barbarians for which the viewers-as-civilized-subjects are waiting, then the absence of barbarians in the Cavafian narrative is somewhat contradicted in Sacco's work by a minimal presence of the other through the synecdoche of the eyes. This manifestation of otherness creates a twist in the poem's narrative. The installation does not project a total absence of barbarians. However, it does not offer a full-fledged version of barbarians either, which could have enabled the viewer to appropriate them within a Western representational regime. Instead, it only presents us with the barbarians' eyes, which are nonetheless the most intimate element of the face, since through them we make contact with other human beings. Due to the lack of other facial markers that could predetermine our relation with these others, the eyes form a portal for relating to the other without the interference of cultural prejudice. There are simply no bodies or faces on which our culturally constructed fantasies of the other can be projected. Thus, the work calls for an eye-to-eye encounter with others before any process of labeling or stereotyping can be set forth.

In order to articulate the terms of this encounter, I use the concept of the *stare*. Various vision-related concepts are employed in visual analysis. The most popular are probably the "look" and the "gaze." The concept of the "gaze" is extensively theorized in different disciplines, including art history, feminist theory, and visual studies.³⁰ As Bal notes, it is especially useful in laying bare processes of objectification and exoticization of others, for "the gaze dictates the limits of the figures' respective positions as holder of the objectifying and colonizing look, and disempowered object of that look" (2002: 39). The gaze has been used to describe a hierarchization between the viewer and the object of viewing, which produces, as Garland-Thomson puts it, "an asymmetrical power relation between a largely predatory viewer and victimized viewed" (2006: 189). In light of the above, the concept of the gaze might seem the obvious choice for approaching Sacco's installation, since the work's title suggests a hierarchical division between civilized and barbarians, with the latter presumably functioning as the object of the "civilized gaze." Setting aside the title's indication, I will not go along with this option. Instead, I feel that

³⁰ There are extensive theoretical discussions of the gaze, from Sartre (2001) and Foucault (1975), to Silverman in Lacanian theory (1996), Norman Bryson (1983), and Mieke Bal (1991, 2002). The gaze is often used as an equivalent of the "look" but it is also used in distinction from it (Bal 2002: 35).

the artwork makes a case for a different kind of relationship with the viewer, which the concept of the gaze falls short of opening up.

As opposed to the gaze, the stare stresses the potential productive mutuality of a visual encounter. In her article “Ways of Staring,” Rosemarie Garland-Thomson describes staring as a reaction to an alien sight or to something unanticipated, which draws our attention, confuses, disquiets us, and challenges our complacent understandings (2006: 174).³¹ We stare at something because it interrupts comforting narratives and certainties by embodying something baffling, contingent, unfamiliar, and yet strangely recognizable (174).

When we stare at someone or something, we try to make sense of our encounter with another being or object. Of course, staring could also be perceived as an act of objectification grounded in a voyeuristic impulse. However, the concept has another side as well. It denotes a kind of looking that demands a response. Especially in the case of face-to-face staring, the power relation between the subjects involved is not predetermined and does not register a clear subject-object distinction. Garland-Thomson refers to a “certain symmetry” in the staring encounter, which consists of granting a “preemptive agency to the starrer,” but also endowing the “staree” “with the ability to seize the attention and to hold in thrall the starrer” (2006: 175). Staring can thus be a dynamic visual exchange due to its open-ended aspect, which creates a space of unpredictability (181).³²

The eyes in Sacco’s installation invite such a staring encounter if we get past the fear they initially induce. Staring at another person certainly differs from staring at an artwork, since the eye-images in the installation cannot be actively affected by the viewer’s stare. But although the viewer is the only one who can register the effect of the staring encounter, the staring takes place nonetheless, because we experience the eyes staring at us just as we stare at them. The fact that the eyes cannot react to the viewer’s stare does not deprive them of agency, which lies in their refusal to passively wilt under the viewer’s stare. If this would be a staring contest, they would certainly win. Moreover, since

³¹ For a more extensive theorization of the “stare,” see Garland-Thomson’s *Staring: How We Look* (2009).

³² Garland-Thomson’s theorization of the stare presupposes that staring always has a particular object. Nevertheless, it would be useful here to distinguish between two modes of staring: staring as looking fixedly at someone or something, and staring as looking vacantly, without a specific object (many thanks to Ernst van Alphen for alerting me to the transitive and intransitive uses of the verb “to stare”). This distinction corresponds to a transitive and intransitive staring. Both of them describe an intense mode of looking. What changes is the presence or absence of a specific object to which the stare is directed (transitive-intransitive). The same distinction can also be articulated in terms of the outward or inward direction of the stare. In the latter case, staring into the void need not be seen as intransitive, without an object, but can also be described as staring inwards. Staring vacantly usually comes about when one is preoccupied with intense private thoughts, which draw attention away from visual stimuli in the world and invite introspection. Introspection is also a mode of looking: it literally means “to look inward.” A vacant stare, then, is not necessarily object-less, but an attempt to turn perception inward: staring, as it were, at one’s inner thoughts. Based on the above, we can identify two modes of staring, which can be classified either as transitive-intransitive or as outward-inward. The kind of staring that becomes relevant in Sacco’s installation is mainly the transitive (or outward) staring.

the eyes refuse to yield markers of identification, there is no clear social frame for the viewer's confrontation with them. They pose an epistemological challenge, which infuses the viewer with a desire to know what they are hiding. However, their unintelligibility and the absence of a familiar social ritual in which the encounter is embedded throw the viewer into a state of uncertainty.

The viewer is neither in full control of the encounter nor in a superior position, as one would perhaps expect from an encounter of a "civilized" subject with "barbarians." The absence of the other's face sabotages this operation of binarization. Faces are sites of human interaction and sources of collective meaning (Garland-Thomson 2009: 98). They are also determining factors in the construction of subjects. In their chapter on "Faciality" in *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari argue that the face (or, in their terms, the "faciality machine") exercises a function of binarization, which is necessary for the production of subjectivity (201). The face establishes binary relations between what is accepted and what is not (196-97). The facial machine assumes a normality (the face of the average white man), according to which it registers different degrees of deviance along the lines of race, gender, and so on. Racism operates by determining degrees of deviance from the "normal" face (197). Based on this operation, faces that resist identification and do not comply with the criteria of normality are classified as hostile and can be effaced. The construction of the barbarian also follows such a process: a face that deviates from the norm by many degrees is labeled as "barbarian." In Sacco's work, the eyes alone are not enough to make us register the "owners" of the eyes as "barbarians" in a conclusive manner. In this way, the eyes refuse to validate the dichotomy projected by the linguistic part of the installation—its title.

If we often look at others in order to confirm our own self-image and strengthen our position in the social world, then staring at Sacco's installation does not gratify this desire. The viewer becomes vulnerable instead of achieving self-identification through the other. Our encounter with the eyes does not enable us to measure ourselves against any recognizable "barbarians." However, by withdrawing the safety of familiar representational systems, the work makes the outcome of our confrontation with the other open and unpredictable—a real comparison. The narrative of *waiting for the barbarians* thereby receives a twist. The artwork suggests that the solution to the predicament of civilization will come neither from a constructed "constitutive outside" nor from inside civilization (as Geers's installation seems to suggest), but through the formation of a zone of contact between inside and outside.

The illegible eyes in Sacco's installation refuse to be fully translated and yet create a zone between self and other, wherein a relation can be established on another basis. In order to give in to the experience of this encounter, we have to give up part of our deep-rooted fantasies of barbarians and confront others not as evil enemies, but as adversaries. Mouffe proposes the notion of the "adversary" as an alternative to the idea of the

"enemy." When we turn enemies into adversaries, Mouffe argues, we cease to perceive the "they" as a threat to the identity and existence of the "we." Instead, we acknowledge the legitimacy of the other (15-16, 20). As a result, the "them" is not an enemy to be eliminated, but someone whom we can oppose on a "common symbolic space" (20). Taking up Mouffe's notion of the adversary, Bal argues that this notion transforms the "us-them" opposition into a relation between an "I" and a "you" (2010).³³ This transition from an "us-them" to an "I-you" dialectics is likely to take place in the viewer's encounter with Sacco's work: the other seizes to be a "barbarian" when everything else fades away and we focus only on the eyes.

The eyes in Sacco's work suggest a possible way out of the aporia of Cavafy's poem. Even if the barbarians do not exist in the ways the civilized have constructed them, the work draws attention to human beings outside the walls of our alleged civilization, to whom we can relate on another level, by leaving our stereotypical representations "out of sight." As a result, the narrative of the Cavafian intertext is revised: the categorical distinction between barbarians and civilized loses its force through an eye-to-eye contact and yields to the promise of a new kind of relationality, which could emerge from the mutual staring.

The Viewer as Barbarian

There is another interpretive course through which we can relate Sacco's work to Cavafy's poem. This is based on the reverse hypothesis, namely, that the eyes in Sacco's installation do not belong to the barbarians of the title, but are the apprehensive eyes of the civilized waiting for the barbarians. Following this postulation, the role of the title's barbarians passes on to the viewer. Supposing that as (Western) viewers we have internalized the label of the "civilized," the realization that we must be the barbarians of the narrative occasions a reversal of perspective. We are suddenly the objects of the look of the civilized (the eyes). Forced to assume, even momentarily, the position of the barbarian in this game, we feel interpellated. The eyes place us in a guilty position or invest us with evil qualities, as is the case with the common demonization of the barbarian in civilizational discourse.

The wooden planks that close off the eyes in Sacco's work index a fence, which signals civilization's divisions. A parallel can be drawn here with Geers's labyrinthine fence. The fence in Sacco's work is possibly meant to protect civilization by barricading civilized subjects against the projected danger of encounters with others. Civilization is thereby presented as a self-sufficient construct that wades off alterity—as is also the case with

³³ This kind of relation yields what Bal elsewhere calls a "second-person narrative" of an image—a narrative that can account for the agency of the image without falling back into the authoritarian elitist claims of the critic or into the pitfalls of ascribing intentionality either to the object or to its creator (2002: 281-82).

Geers's labyrinth. We can also imagine the wooden planks as nailed across the windows of a house. Architectural constructs, according to Deleuze and Guattari, function like faces (191). Thus, the civilized looking through the planks would appear to be trapped in a house, whose windows—its "eyes" to the outside world—are "blinded" by planks nailed across them. However, just like the barbed wire fence in Geers's labyrinth does not completely hinder our view of the outside, the "blinds" that the wooden planks set up still leave crevices through which the subjects behind them can look and be looked at. These crevices disrupt the self-sufficiency of the civilized "prison house," by exposing it to its outside.

But to what kind of solution to the predicament of civilization do these openings point? The title suggests that the eyes of the civilized are waiting for us—the barbarians—and thus see in us the solution to the waiting. If we are, indeed, the barbarians they are waiting for, our role comes with a sense of responsibility. The viewer's initial discomfort at being looked at as a barbarian may turn into an active stance. From posing as the victimized object of the civilized gaze, she can try to redefine her role as a barbarian and invest it with creative functions. Instead of "where are the barbarians?" the challenging question for the viewer could be "what could I do to fulfill my barbarian task?" The viewer is called to become, as it were, the solution to the waiting. The search for the whereabouts of the barbarians gives way to a performativity of barbarism. Barbarians can be redefined as agents of creative and critical operations, which may disrupt the structures of civilization and form openings for real encounters with others.

The dislocation of the viewer-as-barbarian also underscores the relative nature of "the barbarian." Instead of an essentialist category applicable to specific kinds of others, the "barbarian" turns into a matter of perspective: the eyes become visual inscriptions of the fact that the barbarian is in the eye of the beholder. This realization does not necessarily entail a relativist approach to the barbarian, which would circumvent the power-relations permeating the term. The artwork foregrounds these power-relations through its title and simultaneously manages to unsettle them by de-essentializing the barbarian. Instead of being-barbarian in an absolute sense, the viewer is incited to perform constructive barbarian acts. In such acts may lay the promise for exiting the state of waiting.

Cultural Translation

Just as the anonymous eyes and the viewer can stare at each other on equal terms, the installation and its title also face each other in a relationship of mutual influence. The installation visually translates the topos of *waiting for the barbarians* and embeds it in another cultural context, while the title adds different layers to the viewing of the work without being the only key to its interpretation.

The title pluralizes the work's interpretive possibilities and directs it from a local to a transcultural context, while safeguarding the artwork's singularity. Bal views singularity as an alternative to both a generality that erases specificity and a particularity that carries connotations of individualism, "anecdotal irrelevance," and parochialism. For Bal, the notion of the singular acknowledges the irreducible difference of a person or object and does not allow this difference to be either silenced by particularity or become too general and universalized to be relevant (2010). In what follows, I argue that Sacco's installation is singular precisely in this sense and that its title is a crucial part of the performance of its singularity.³⁴

Graciela Sacco's art, despite its international acclaim, is often framed by critics within the political and cultural context of Argentina and Argentine art. In an article on Sacco in *The New York Times*, characteristically entitled "Bringing Argentina Out of the Shadows" (July 9, 2000), Lyle Rexer presents Sacco's work in the context of the emerging art scene in democratic Argentina, and views her artistic production in relation to the Argentine socio-political climate in the last decades. Although Sacco "began making art at the end of the most dangerous and difficult period of recent Argentine history," according to Rexer, the current "transformed political climate" in Argentina "has made her art a calling card for a nation that might once have prohibited it, or worse." Her task is therefore to rescue Argentina from "artistic oblivion" and bring the nation, artistically speaking, "out of the shadows."

There is nothing wrong, of course, with representing one's nation in the international art scene. Nor do I wish to downplay the significance of the political and cultural context in which Sacco's work is produced and the complex ways in which it permeates her work. Nevertheless, I argue that her work has a richer scope of interpretive possibilities than certain descriptions of it as a national or political weapon suggest. In "Esperando a los bárbaros," the title makes the work's local context part of an intertextual network that traverses cultural and national borders.

The fact that in "Esperando a los bárbaros" Sacco chose a foreign, non-Argentine point of reference—Cavafy's poem—is significant, if we consider that Argentina has a long tradition in the dialectic of civilization versus barbarism. The work that introduced this tradition was *Facundo: Civilización y Barbarie* (*Facundo: Or, Civilization and Barbarism*, 1845), written by Argentina's great intellectual, writer, president, and political innovator Domingo F. Sarmiento (1811-1888), also known as "the Teacher" of Argentina.³⁵ *Facundo*

³⁴ The notion of *singularity* has been used differently in many discussions in philosophy and literary criticism. Singularity is a central notion in Jacques Derrida's thought and the term appears throughout his oeuvre (see particularly Derrida's "Signature, Event, Context," *Limited Inc*, and "The Strange Institution called Literature"). For a discussion of the notion of *singularity*, see also Attridge 2004b: 63-78; Badiou; and Timothy Clark (Attridge, Clark, and Badiou are also qtd in Bal 2010).

³⁵ *Facundo* narrates the life of the *gaucho* Juan Facundo Quiroga, who terrorized provincial Argentina in the 1820s and 1830s. As Kathleen Ross points out, *Facundo* was also written in order to "denounce the tyranny of the Argentine dictator Juan Manuel de Rosas" (17). In the book, Facundo Quiroga

proposed the dialectic between civilization and barbarism as the central conflict in Latin American culture and society (Echevarría 2). For Sarmiento, civilization was linked to European Enlightenment and was identified with modern Western ideals and practices. While he located civilization in the culture of the metropolitan city, barbarism represented for him the backwardness and brutality of the countryside (12). Sarmiento turned this dichotomy into a prominent theme in Latin American literature and used it to give Argentina a national discourse, "through which the country could think itself" (Sorensen Goodrich 6; Echevarría 10).

It is likely that Sacco's work stages an implicit dialogue between Cavafy's theme and Sarmiento's employment of the "barbarism versus civilization" dichotomy. Although I will not explore the precise mode of interaction of these works, Sacco's choice to refer to Cavafy could suggest a reversal and critique of the premises of Sarmiento's book. While Cavafy's poem underscores the dependence of the civilized on the barbarians they are waiting for, *Facundo* describes the reverse situation: "barbaric" Argentina is waiting for the European civilization to save it. Several questions arise from the intertwining of the two contexts. More than one and a half centuries after *Facundo* was written, can Argentina still identify the West as the ideal marker of its future and seek its salvation in Western culture? Or has the role of "the West" today as a social imaginary that organizes desire in non-Western societies started to fade?³⁶ What is the fate of Sarmiento's dichotomy in contemporary Argentina and how does Cavafy's topos relate to Argentina's tumultuous political history? By raising such questions, Sacco's reference to Cavafy does not pose either as an escape from, or a denouncement of, her own national context. Through Cavafy, the installation interrogates Argentine national discourse too. Thus, Sacco's work exceeds the artist's national context in order to go back to it and address it from another, foreign perspective.

What is more, the interaction of the work with its *parergon*—the title—makes it a testing ground for transcultural translation. The work translates "waiting for the barbarians" in Spanish, and thereby relocates this topos in a Latin American context. Transferred to a new context and medium, the topos of *waiting for the barbarians* is visually recast,

is portrayed as barbaric and opposed to progress due to his rejection of European ideals, which are identified with city culture and particularly with that of Buenos Aires (Sarmiento 99). The book is not only a critique of Rosas's dictatorship, but a detailed exploration of Argentinian history and culture, read through this dichotomy. "Sarmiento's diagnosis is that Argentina is beset by the struggle between civilization and barbarism and that Rosas and his regime incarnate the latter" (Echevarría 12). Sarmiento poses the hope of civilization against the crude aspects of a brutal *caudillo* culture, which was dominant at the time. European immigration was for him the answer to the prevalent barbarism in his country (9). According to Ross, "*Facundo* continues to inspire controversy and debate because it contributes to national myths of modernization, anti-populism, and racist ideology" (21).

³⁶ For the ideological impact of "the West" on non-Western societies today and in the past, see Morris and Sakai (374). Morris and Sakai argue that since the 1980s "the figure of 'the West' has to some extent been losing its grip on the desire and imaginary of peoples in many parts of the world (374).

problematized, and enriched with new perspectives. As a result, the narrative's "original" context is shown as unsaturated and open, like all contexts (Spivak 1992: 783). Singularity, as Derrida argues, is indissoluble from iterability.³⁷ The way the topos of *waiting for the barbarians* is iterated, recontextualized, and transformed both in Geers's and in Sacco's works suggests that the singularity of these artworks has nothing to do with purity and "inimitability." As Attridge points out, singularity is "open to contaminations, grafting, accidents, reinterpretation, and recontextualization" and it "may give rise to a host of imitations" (2004b: 63).

Apart from the tension between the local and the global or the specific and the general, the installation and its title also stage a comparative confrontation between two artistic paradigms: modernist versus contemporary relational art. The theme of *waiting for the barbarians* found its first literary expression at the outset of modernism (Cavafy's poem appeared in 1904). The poem's narrative is injected with the teleological vision of modernity, while it is also critical of modernity's "grand narratives." The expectation of the barbarians' arrival can be read as the utopian reality to which modernist art often aspired. The people in Cavafy's poem have turned away from reality and have invested their hopes for salvation in a utopia that will be realized when the barbarians arrive. Sacco's work, on the other hand, breaks with this utopian vision. It leaves the future direction of its title behind, in order to focus on the present and on present relations. Instead of waiting for barbarians, the work shapes a space of interaction between self and other in the here-and-now of the encounter with the viewer.

In *Relational Aesthetics* (2002), art critic Nicolas Bourriaud argues that with artworks today it "seems more pressing to invent possible relations with our neighbours in the present than to bet on happier tomorrows" (45). Bourriaud considers relationality—or what he calls "relational aesthetics"—as the distinctive feature of contemporary art.³⁸ Relational art is not just destined for aesthetic consumption, but is interested in the sphere of interhuman relations and in creating new models or relationality with viewers (28). Unlike modernist art, contemporary art does not seek to represent or form utopian realities, but stays in the present and tries "to construct concrete spaces" (46). Sacco's installation and its title play out the tension between two artistic paradigms: a modernist art that endorses utopianism and strives for a total transformation of reality (the narrative of waiting for barbarians), and a relational art that focuses on human interaction and produces artworks as "relational microterritories" (31).

Sacco's work enacts a surpassing of its modernist past and, in this sense, an overcoming of the futile waiting that typifies modernist narratives. Nevertheless, the title is not just

³⁷ In "The Strange Institution Called Literature," for example, Derrida says: "Singularity differs from itself, it is deferred [*se diffère*] so as to be what it is and to be repeated in its very singularity" (68).

³⁸ "Contemporary art" at the time Bourriaud writes (2002) is the art of the 90s, to which Sacco's installation also belongs. His argument, however, is also applicable to artistic practices of the new millennium.

a relic overcome by a new artistic paradigm. It accompanies the work as a reminder of the fact that the discourse that produced the narrative of our salvation by barbarians is still active in our political realities. Therefore, the relationality Sacco's work proposes becomes even more meaningful when measured against a discourse still relevant in the present. The narrative of *waiting for the barbarians* is a critical reaction to this discourse, but also an acknowledgement of its pervasiveness. The work and its title suggest that the two artistic paradigms—modernist and contemporary relational art—do not cancel each other out as the one succeeds the other, but are measured against each other in the same artwork, as adversaries.

In Sacco's work, the role division between the viewer and the eyes along the lines of "civilized" and "barbarians" is useful for exploring the viewer's response to the artwork, and especially for probing the relation to its title. However, the roles the title suggests are projected and enacted so that they can eventually be overcome by the artwork. Sacco's installation challenges the barbarian/civilized dichotomy by proposing an alternative relationality in the event of its encounter with the viewer.

Looking Elsewhere—a Detail

I conclude my reflections on Sacco's work by focusing on an element that might escape one's attention—as it did mine at first. On a closer look, it becomes clear that not all the eyes are staring at us. Some are looking through us rather than at us: they seem distracted or vacant, looking into the void. Others look up, excluding the viewer from their visual field. This observation, I contend, adds a new dimension to the work's operations.

What we see as "the others" of Western civilization—if that is what we take those eyes to be—do not always seek to be defined in relation to Western cultural norms. Many non-Western cultures are assumed to look up to the West as a superior model or to have their eyes turned to Western powers in need of help—financial or military. Sarmiento's *Facundo*, as we saw, also projected European civilization as a goal towards which Argentine society and culture should progress.³⁹ In this context, those eyes in Sacco's work that turn away from the (Western) viewer may be refusing to validate the viewer's gaze. They may be refusing to be compared to Western standards and be found inadequate or inferior. They may be refusing to look at Western culture as the broker of cultural and moral standards. The eyes that look away de-center the viewer as "civilized" subject. They suggest that the world follows its own course, which takes different directions and does not permanently have its eyes turned Westward. As a result, the Western viewer experiences a deterritorialization—she is not the center on which the eyes of the world are focused. Our center disseminates into multiple smaller centers, at least as many as the eyes on Sacco's heliography.

³⁹ For the role of the West as a social imaginary for non-Western societies, see Morris and Sakai 374.

This multiperspectivism challenges the dual logic of “barbarian versus civilized.” The multidirectionality of the eyes hints at the complex ways in which cultures influence each other and problematizes practices of cross-cultural comparison along the lines of a reductive West—non-West divide, with the West functioning as the normative center of comparative practices. The European tradition, as Natalie Melas argues, often functions as “an implicitly universal form from which theoretical models can be generated” and subsequently applied to the “raw” comparative material of other cultures (32). In the face of this tradition, the disorienting directions of the eyes in Sacco’s work make the “sovereign authority of a single perspective” inadequate and even untenable, by signaling the presence of diverse sites of enunciation away from the metropolitan centers (36). Therefore, from the margins of the West, Sacco’s installation performs a critique of Western comparative practices.

The work refuses to reaffirm Western traditions of comparativism based on a universalist perspective. Following Melas’s distinction, the work does not stand “for the world”—just as it does not stand for a universal narrative of *waiting for the barbarians*—but stands “in the world,” in a complex relation to the irreducible extensiveness of a global cultural network (36). It constitutes, in Edouard Glissant’s terms, a relational and comparative “degeneralized universal” (Glissant qtd in Melas 36). In the above ways, “Esperando a los bárbaros” turns into a theoretical object: an agent that performs and proposes alternative comparative practices.

Two Alternatives to Waiting

Geers’s and Sacco’s artistic stagings of the topos of *waiting for the barbarians* forward two different visions for a “solution” to civilization’s aporia. Geers’s labyrinth focuses on the violence within civilization and brings out the barbarism in our familiar, naturalized, “civilized” surroundings. By activating violent memories from the history of Western civilization—recast as a history of Western barbarism—Geers’s work confronts us with our implication in the structures of civilization. In so doing, it struggles with the possibility for change from within the discursive structures we inhabit. This change from within, however, may still involve the intervention of the other. This intervention comes from the impact of the specter, which invades our here-and-now and unsettles our perception of our present and our identity as historical subjects. Therefore, the confrontation with the barbarism of our discursive or ideological structures need not drown us in enervating guilt. While Geers’s work makes us painfully aware of the barbarism around and inside us, it also points to the possibility of another mode of being with specters. This mode of being may turn our guilt as historical subjects into a more productive sense of responsibility to be alert to the shifting echoes of the past in our present as we move toward the future.

Sacco’s vision for a “solution” takes shape in a zone of contact, in which the self and the other confront each other on equal terms. The eyes stage a game of hide-and-seek

with the viewer. The viewer is captivated by what the installation shows—eyes looking through openings created by pieces of wood—in relation to what it conceals. The work's elusiveness is also its affective force: the viewer has the opportunity to relate to the eyes before deciding what the image means, before posing the question of whom these eyes belong to, and before assigning to them preconceived distinctions of "civilized" and "barbarians." And even when—under the influence of the title—the viewer is tempted to assign such discursive categories to the image, the unclear status of the eyes confuses these categories: it makes their assigning ambiguous and problematic (who are the civilized and who are the barbarians?) and invites their redefinition.

In Sacco's work, the waiting for the other is transformed into the immediacy of an unpredictable encounter in our here-and-now. Thus, unlike Geers's labyrinth, Sacco's work does not ponder a "solution" from within our discursive structures, but from a comparative confrontation between different discursive systems and between the self and the other, reconfigured as an "I" and a "you." The possibility for change this work envisions lies in reconfiguring the terms of our encounters with others.

Neither Geers's nor Sacco's installation provide a recipe for another "kind of solution" to the futile waiting. They take civilization's aporia as a challenge and a testing ground, on which they experiment with the possibility of an alternative. Their answers to the waiting do not come from resolving the questions they raise, but by staging tensions on different levels. Geers's installation stages the tension between conflicting versions of the past and their resonance in the present, between the serenity of nature and its capacity to conceal violence, between visibility and invisibility, and between guilt and responsibility. Sacco's artwork performs the tension between an oppositional thinking in terms of barbarians and civilized and an alternative relationality with the other, seen as an "adversary" instead of an "enemy." Tension is also produced between the visual and the textual part of the installation—the image and the title. Finally, both Geers's and Sacco's artworks project their singularity as an unresolved tension between their local, specific contexts and their connectivity with multiple other contexts.

As a result, both artworks become political not by transmitting a straightforward message, but by producing narratives that captivate and confuse us. They engage their viewers "without dictating in what way viewers will be affected" (Bal 2010). According to Bal, this kind of affective engagement is a distinguishing feature of contemporary political art. In these artworks, unresolved tension and confrontations are not sources of stagnation, but precisely what propels the state of "waiting" towards an active engagement that makes these works relevant in the present.

