

## **The Travels of a Literary Topos: C. P. Cavafy's "Waiting for the Barbarians" and its Visual Restagings**

The civilized imagination has often tried to capture the arrival of the barbarians as an invasion from the outside into domestic territory. Representations of this invasion are accompanied by apocalyptic images and mixed feelings of fear, awe, and desire (White 20). "Περιμένοντας τους Βαρβάρους" ("Waiting for the Barbarians"), written in 1904 by C.P. Cavafy, revolves around the anticipation of such a barbarian invasion, which never takes place. The theme of waiting for the arrival of the other has been creatively explored in a series of literary works, from existentialist meditations, such as Dino Buzzati's *Il Deserto dei Tartari* (*The Tartar Steppe*, 1938) to Samuel Becket's *En attendant Godot* (*Waiting for Godot*, 1952), and from Julien Gracq's *Le Rivage des Syrtes* (*The Opposing Shore*, 1951), to what is perhaps the most outspoken recontextualization of Cavafy's poem in literature, J. M. Coetzee's novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980).<sup>1</sup>

However, the Cavafian topos has not only been employed in literature. Perhaps less known than its literary adaptations are its restagings in visual art. I have come across several paintings, sculptures, and installations that visually "translate" Cavafy's theme, as they relocate it in new cultural and national contexts. Some of these works bear the exact same title as the poem, albeit in different languages.<sup>2</sup> In this essay, I will focus on two visual restagings of the poem: South African artist Kendell Geers's labyrinthic installation "Waiting for the Barbarians" (2001) and Argentinian artist Graciela Sacco's billboard-type installation "Esperando a los Barbaros" (1995). Through a close analysis of these artworks, I will argue that they give their own answers to the poem's aporia – perhaps another "kind of solution" to the state of waiting. These works do not just visually illustrate Cavafy's poem, but complicate, revise, and even criticize it. While the poem adds different layers to the artworks' reception, the latter enrich or challenge existing readings of the poem too. This essay revisits Cavafy's poem *through* these works.

Finally, I will argue that the travels of the Cavafian topos in foreign contexts invite us to actively seek our language and culture in foreign places rather than suspend it in a passive state of waiting. Cavafy's poem and its "translations"<sup>3</sup> call for subjecting Greek culture (and every culture) to what I will call *barbarisms*: foreign elements that transform our cultural surroundings, disrupt our linguistic categories, and challenge our national certainties.

In Cavafy's "Waiting for the Barbarians," the whole city is in commotion, anticipating the arrival of the barbarians.<sup>4</sup> The poem is structured as a series of "why-because" questions and answers between two interlocutors. To each question by the first speaker regarding the reasons for the commotion, the second speaker – representing the voice of civilization – has a clear answer: "Because the barbarians are coming today." Nevertheless, a message that arrives from the borders puts an abrupt end to the

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth mentioning here that Philip Glass has also written an opera entitled "Waiting for the Barbarians," based on J. M. Coetzee's novel, which premiered in Erfurt in 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Among the artworks entitled "Waiting for the Barbarians" that I have come across are paintings by Arie van Geest (2002), who lives and works in Rotterdam; by the British painter David Barnett (2004); by the British artist Linda Sutton, based in London; and finally, by Neo Rauch (*Warten auf die Barbaren*, 2007), a painting recently exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Cavafy's theme also resonates in the sculpture exhibition "The Barbarians" (2002) by British modernist artist Anthony Caro. In the latter exhibition, Cavafy's poem is quoted in its entirety in the exhibition's official catalogue as the artist's main source of inspiration.

<sup>3</sup> The term "translation" is used in this essay in a broad sense. It includes appropriations of text in other media, i.e. what Roman Jakobson has called "inteseimiotic translation." The term "intersemiotic translation" refers to the interpretation of a linguistic sign by means of a non-verbal system of signs (or vice versa).

<sup>4</sup> For an extensive reading of Cavafy's poem, see my article "Barbarian Encounters."

city's preparations: "There are no barbarians any longer." The non-arrival of the barbarians deprives civilization from the only answer it seemed to have.

The poem ends with the compelling lines:

And now, what's going to happen to us without barbarians?  
They were, those people, a kind of solution.<sup>5</sup>

These lines do not offer closure. The only answer given is encompassed by the ambiguous statement that views the barbarians as "*a kind of solution*." This final phrase is an attempt to cling to the previous order – an attempt, however, weakened by the doubt contained in the words "kind of." The formulation "a kind of solution" suggests the shaky ground on which this statement is made, and it is thus hardly convincing.

"And now, what's going to happen to us without barbarians?" The search for an answer may lead to a reflection on the conditions that made the encounter with the barbarians impossible. The failure of the poem's promise indicates the bankruptcy of existing discursive categories and undermines the oppositional thinking in terms of "barbarians" and "civilized." At the same time, however, this failure does not necessarily support cultural pessimism. On the contrary, the non-arrival of the object of waiting can be seen as an act of criticism and a call for a radical refashioning of the norms whereby we understand ourselves and others. It is *because* the title does not keep its promise that its endless repetition and renewal becomes possible.<sup>6</sup> The promise of the title does not stop with the poem, but keeps reproducing itself in works that take up the same topos. Kendell Geers' and Graciela Sacco's installations find themselves among those works. Both installations take up the title of Cavafy's poem, and with it also the challenge of the poem's final lines – that of another "kind of solution." The use of the same title in both artworks raises perhaps the expectations of a film sequel: the reader might expect these artworks to take the scenario of the poem further and bring it to closure, by presenting the barbarians. In neither of these works do the barbarians make an appearance – at least not in the way that the viewer might have expected.

### ***The Barbarian Within: Kendell Geers's "Waiting for the Barbarians"***

Kendell Geers's "Waiting for the Barbarians" (2001) is a labyrinthic installation with a side length of 30 meters, taking up 900 square meters in total. Its walls resemble border fences, whose top edge is crowned with a spiral of razor-wire – the type that is used at military bases and for the guarding of national borders.

Geers was born in Johannesburg, South Africa, in 1968 and currently lives in Brussels and London.<sup>7</sup> He conceived this installation for a site near the Gravenhorst monastery in Hörstel, a small town in Western Germany. The work was part of the "Skulptur Biennale 2001 Münsterland" in Steinfurt, a project that aimed at bringing together the landscapes in Münsterland and the visions of contemporary artists in a series of art installations situated in the German countryside. In "Waiting for the Barbarians," Geers restages not only Cavafy's poem, but also the novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* by his compatriot J. M. Coetzee. Although the installation enters in dialogue with the novel in fascinating ways that are worth exploring, my

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<sup>5</sup> In this essay, I am using the translations of Cavafy's poems by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard. The Greek reads: "Και τώρα τι θα γένουμε χωρίς βαρβάρους. / Οι άνθρωποι αυτοί ήσαν μιά κάποια λύσις."

<sup>6</sup> For a theorization of the speech act of the (broken) promise see Felman (particularly pp. 24-25).

<sup>7</sup> As an emerging artist in the nineties, Geers built a reputation for his provocative stance. He started his career in South Africa, but in 1997 he left South Africa and has lived in different cities, participating in major group shows, holding solo exhibitions and setting up art installations in Europe and around the world. His cultural and political background and complex position as a white South-African artist are significant parameters in his work, which cannot be dissociated from its political implications.

focus here will be the installation in its relation to Cavafy's poem. Geers' installation was set up in 2001, at the beginning of the new millennium and approximately one century after Cavafy's poem was written. The moment of its creation places it at the heart of the present and highlights the urgency of its complex statement on barbarism.

Standing out as a strange object in the countryside and in the peaceful ambience of the monastery, the installation has an alienating effect, yet invites the visitor to come closer.<sup>8</sup> At the entrance of the labyrinth there is a warning sign: "Eintreten auf eigene Gefahr" (enter at own risk). However, instead of discouraging the visitor from entering, the warning in fact functions as an invitation. The title of the installation is supposed to be defied too by the visitor. Contrary to the title's indication, the visitor entering the labyrinth embarks on a *quest*: a process of searching rather than *waiting* for the barbarians. The warning sign at the entrance in combination with the title's suggestion of waiting, might generate an uncanny feeling, and perhaps the expectation of some mysterious foreign presence hidden somewhere in the labyrinth.



From the moment the visitor enters the labyrinth, it becomes obvious that he is not a mere spectator, but an actor, who is supposed to perform a certain role in order to activate the artwork. Recalling perhaps the ancient myth of the Minotaur, the visitor, like another Theseus, is enticed to discover the foreign presence in the labyrinth. Walking in the labyrinth is likely to instill in the visitor the inquisitive spirit of Western man, who enters a foreign territory with the wish to master it, decipher its mysteries, and obliterate or "civilize" any barbaric elements. Inside the labyrinth, one could fantasize about being a hero, fighting the beast, saving the day, getting the girl. Thus, while the visitor may think that he is breaking the rules and taking a risk by entering, he is in fact being tricked into performing the stereotype of the Western explorer/colonizer. Searching for the barbarians, the visitor reiterates a common *topos* in colonial literature, wherein

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<sup>8</sup> Every interpretation of an object is a story – a plunge into something unknown out of which we try to make sense. Such will my story be about Geers's labyrinth. The work's functions depend on the visitor's participation. In my account, the persona of the "visitor" that I will use does not fully coincide with the narrator (myself). He is an imaginary character invented by the narrator (myself) and as such he inevitably carries the narrator's own presuppositions, but is also deliberately constructed as Western and male. This is why I will be using the pronoun "he" when referring to the visitor. However, in recognition of my own complicity with the narrative attached to this visitor and in an attempt to implicate the potential reader of my narrative as well, I will also occasionally be switching to the pronoun "we" and "you." There is no doubt that the labyrinth would have a different effect on another visitor and would generate a different narrative. My narrative of the labyrinth, as it unravels in the following pages, is only one of the possible readings, but this is simply an acknowledgement of the work's performativity: the installation is bound to operate differently in its every reception.

penetration, deciphering, and conquest of the foreign mark the path of the colonial hero.<sup>9</sup> Of course, the promise of a barbaric presence or secret in the center of the structure is not kept. Just as in Cavafy's poem, there are no barbarians waiting. The labyrinth is nothing but an empty iron cage: a trap to which the visitor has willingly led himself.

At this point, the emptiness of the labyrinth sweeps us off our feet, causing perhaps what we could call an *ontological dislocation*: from hunters we turn into the prey entrapped in a cage. The cage and its fences hypostatize the artificial borders and dichotomies of civilization. The labyrinthic prison could also function as a metaphor for the victimization of others within our system. But, most importantly in my view, it stages the self-entrapment of civilization and of the civilized subject in a solipsistic, self-indulgent system. This finds visual expression in the image of a labyrinth turning into a cage of isolation, which echoes Max Weber's "iron cage."<sup>10</sup>

Civilization becomes a prison we have constructed for ourselves by violently imposing divisions 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 killed the beasts and exterminated the barbarians, or because the "others" of civilization are outside the labyrinth and inaccessible to us. The reality of the labyrinth invites self-reflection. Could we, the 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, as the installation suggests that the real danger to civilization comes from within.

Geers's work cultivates the expectation of a secret in the heart of the labyrinth and then blatantly fails to fulfill it. In this failure and in the self-reflective process that it triggers lies its alienating effect. As soon as we are faced with the emptiness of the labyrinth, we realize that what we are supposed to look at is *the structure* itself: the construct of civilization. As soon as this construct becomes visible, we are able to distance ourselves from it and approach it critically, with a foreign eye.

Being in the labyrinth does not only allow us to take a critical distance from civilization, but at the same time it implicates us in its violence. Inside the labyrinth, the visitor is haunted by the ghosts of victims of the civilizing machine, and by the guilt of their prison-guards, torturers, and oppressors. The visitor is neither completely hidden from the outside nor protected. The walls are metallic fences, allowing a partial, but hindered vision of the outside from the inside. The labyrinth is porous from every side. Using the prison walls to stay in isolation and hide from the world is not an option. The subject feels imprisoned yet exposed, as if facing the punishment and humiliation of public display.

Unlike a book, painting, sculpture, or other object not bound to a specific location, this installation is inseparable from its surroundings. Consequently, the location becomes an integral part of the artwork and its operations, as it activates diverse fields of association. The allusion to Coetzee's novel in the installation's title, as well as Geers' own South African descent, encourage us to view the work within the context of the apartheid. But this is not the only contextual association evoked by the installation. The placement of the labyrinth outside a Catholic monastery forms a discordant rather than harmonious relationship with its immediate surroundings. Its provocative presence unsettles the peacefulness of monastic life, and its evocation of borders and violent exclusions clashes with the principles of the Christian faith,

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<sup>9</sup> The words of Jacobus Coetzee, J. M. Coetzee's character in his novel *Dusklands*, could function as an accompaniment to the visitor's entrance into the labyrinth: "I am an explorer. My essence is to open what it closed, to bring light to what is dark. If the Hottentots comprise an immense world of delight, it is an impenetrable world, impenetrable to men like me, who must either skirt it, which is to evade our mission, or clear it out of the way." (106)

<sup>10</sup> Weber rejects the Enlightenment's view of progress and happiness, and sees Western civilization as a highly rational and bureaucratically organized social order, an "iron cage" in which people are trapped (100-104).

which invites all people to join its circles.<sup>11</sup> The confusion and tension that this contradiction generates, may lead one to look for closer associations between the installation and the monastery. The out-of-placeness of the installation and its insertion of violent elements in the religious sphere of the monastery, can evoke associations between religion – or, better said, its institutionalization by the Church – and barbarism. Fugitive images of torture and suffering, violent deaths and executions in the name of religion, intimidating faces of Inquisitors, attacking crusaders and burning martyrs, brutal religious wars of the past, but also the intifadas of the present, parade in front of our eyes. The contradiction between barbarism and religion suddenly ceases to be so convincing.

Apart from awakening violent memories from a remote past, the installation invites associations with instances of barbarism that bring us closer to the twentieth century and the present.<sup>12</sup> Situated in a German province, in an area that was destroyed by the bombardments during World War II, Geers' "Waiting for the Barbarians" cannot escape the allusion to one of the most blatant instances of barbarism in modern history, the Holocaust.<sup>13</sup> The fences with the barbed wire could allude to the fences in concentration camps. The choice of a South African artist to situate this work in Germany does not seem arbitrary.<sup>14</sup> In fact, the work's simultaneous allusion to the barbarism of Western colonialism (through its outspoken affiliation with Coetzee's novel and with South Africa) *and* to the barbarism of fascism and Nazism, brings together the two perhaps most significant strands of barbarism in modern Western history. "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" (90). By joining associations with Nazism and colonialism in the violent image of a labyrinthic construction, the work suggests a convergence of Nazism and colonialism under the common denominator of *barbarism*. In so doing, the work transfers something of the indignation associated with Nazism upon the colonial regime as well.

By inserting a provocative image in an idyllic location, Geers's work awakens negative associations and casts a different light on everything around it. Charged with the weight of historical memory, nothing seems so peaceful any more: the serenity and beauty of the location and the monastery seem deceptive, as if concealing something violent and disturbing. The *barbarism* of the artwork lies in its potential to bring out the violence in its surroundings. The installation suggests that the roots of contemporary barbarism cannot be sought in the others of civilization, but in the labyrinth's architects. By turning the invisible borders of our world into the tangible fences of a prison-labyrinth, the work seems to leave us with no way out. But it may also set us thinking about ways to break free. It therefore invites us to be open to the foreign without the false safety of borders, and dare to be called into question by the other and show our vulnerability. It is not a challenge without risk, but it might just be a way out of the labyrinth.

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<sup>11</sup> Of course monastic life is in itself 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 that the labyrinth so strongly suggests.

<sup>12</sup> There are more historical memories awakened by the installation. The Teutoburger forest, situated in the same area, has become the symbol of the famous battle, in which an alliance of Germanic tribes wiped out a Roman army (9 A.D.). The battle established the Rhine as the boundary between Romans and Germans. As a result, the borders of the Roman Empire were limited below the Rhine. Another historical occurrence in the same region with significant consequences for the reordering of Europe's borders, was the Peace of Westphalia, which ended the 30 Year War in 1648 and led to the division of Europe into single sovereign states. For these historical allusions see Winkelmann. The seemingly peaceful area where the installation is hosted has been marked by violent border-divisions throughout history, which Geers's barbed-wire fence evokes and reawakens.

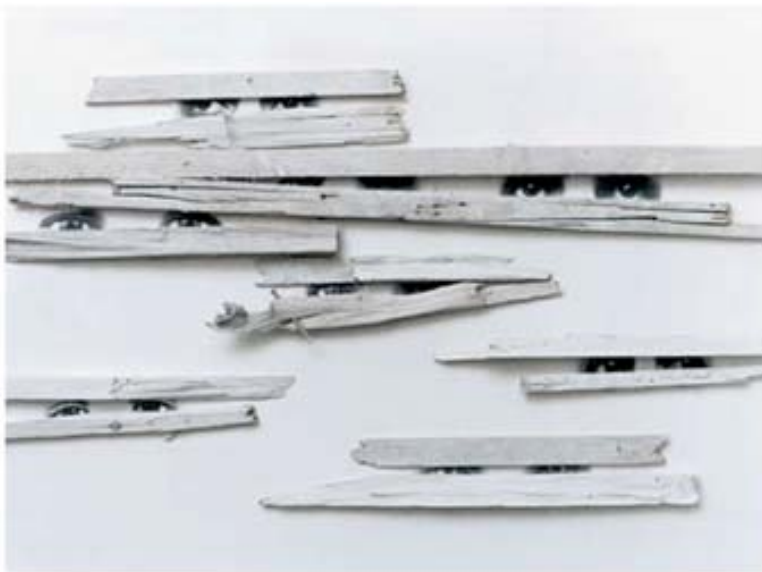
<sup>13</sup> On the way to the monastery, there is a monument to World War II, including photographs of the area before and after the bombardments.

<sup>14</sup> The location of the work in Germany can also be related to the division imposed by the "iron curtain" between Eastern and Western Europe. It is noteworthy that Geers initially wanted to place a border post from the Berlin wall at the center of the labyrinth.

***An Eye-to-Eye Encounter: Graciela Sacco's "Esperando a los barbaros"***

"Esperando a los barbaros" (1995) by Graciela Sacco also takes up the challenge of seeking another "kind of solution" to the impasse of civilization. Born in 1956 near the city of Rosario in Argentine, where she still lives, Sacco is a visual artist, photographer, video and installation artist, whose work has had wide international acclaim.<sup>15</sup> Her work "Esperando a los barbaros" is a billboard-type installation comprising a hundred eyes printed on paper with the heliographic technique.<sup>16</sup> There are pieces of wood surrounding the eyes with rusty nails pierced through them here and there. This framing in wood conveys the impression that the subjects to which these eyes belong are behind wooden barricades, trying to peek at the other side through small crevices in a wooden fence.

The eyes function as metonymies for individuals, for which any indications regarding their appearance, ethnic origin, cultural context, age, and even gender, are missing. These eyes seem to forestall any contact with the viewer that would be based on recognition. Faced with dozens of staring eyes, the viewer experiences the discomfort of being observed by anonymous individuals. Because the eyes cannot be identified, they could be perceived as hostile: unable to decipher their intentions, the viewer feels exposed and might fear an unexpected action – an attack perhaps. Therefore, on a first level, the sight of the eyes may give rise to the common paranoia of the "civilized" subject that feels the threatening watch of evil others everywhere. However, the work could also trigger other affective reactions. The viewer may seek ways to make sense of this encounter without having to identify the eyes. The challenge here is whether (and how) a meaningful encounter can take place without mutual recognition – without having to know the other's name, status, even facial features.



*Graciela Sacco, "Esperando a los barbaros" (detail)*

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<sup>15</sup> 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 20th Century Latin American Art at the University of Rosario in Argentina. For this (and more) information, see: <http://www.gracielasacco.net/>.

<sup>16</sup> The installation has been exhibited, for instance, at the 23rd International Bial of Art of San Pablo, 1996 and at the Massachusetts College of Art, Boston, 2000. The heliographic technique, at which Sacco has been a pioneer, is defined as "the chemical action of light on emulsified photosensitive surfaces." This technique allows the transfer of photographic images onto a heterogeneous group of supports, such as paper, leather, wood, stone, glass, plastic or metal. See <http://www.stephencohengallery.com/exhibits/exhib25.html>.

However, if we involve the title to the interpretive game, we have a textual indication that could help us assign a role to the eyes and narrativize the artwork. “Esperando a los barbaros” translates “Waiting for the Barbarians” in Spanish. It is worth mentioning that the artist herself has informed me that her source of inspiration for the title was Cavafy’s poem, and not another of its adaptations. The title thereby creates a frame, which offers a reference point and an entrance to the work. However, the work’s visual translation of the narrative of “waiting for the barbarians” is more complex than a simple visual illustration of this narrative. To explore the interaction between the work and its title, we could follow (at least) two interpretative courses, which start with the opposite assumption: 1) the eyes in the installation are the *barbarians* of the title’s narrative, or 2) the eyes in the artwork belong to the *civilized*, who are waiting for the barbarians. In the latter case, the viewer is likely to identify with the role of the barbarians.

If we follow the first hypothesis – that the eyes belong to the barbarians that the (civilized) viewers, standing in front of the artwork, are waiting for – then the main difference with the poem’s narrative is that the barbarians in Sacco’s work are not completely absent. They offer a minimal manifestation: the eyes. However, the installation does not offer a full-fledged version of the barbarians, which would enable the viewer to appropriate them within a certain representational regime. It presents us with no other feature of those “barbarians” than the eyes, which are nonetheless the most intimate element of the face, through which we make contact with other human beings. Because there are no bodies or faces on which our culturally constructed fantasies of the other can be projected, the eyes create a zone of contact, which enables the viewer to relate to the other without the interference of cultural prejudice. The work thus calls for an eye-to-eye encounter, before any other process of labeling or stereotyping can be set forth.

The concept of the *stare* could be a useful heuristic tool in the attempt to make sense of this encounter. As opposed to other vision-related concepts, such as the *gaze* or the *look*, which often impose a hierarchy of power between the viewer and the object of viewing, the concept of the stare enables me to stress the potential *mutuality* of the visual encounter between the viewer and the eyes. According to Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, we stare at something because it interrupts comforting narratives and certainties of meaning by embodying something unpredictable, unfamiliar, and yet strangely recognizable (174). Of course staring can also be triggered from a voyeuristic impulse. However, the concept has another side to it too: it is a kind of looking that often 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. Staring thus has an open-ended aspect that creates a space of unpredictability (Garland-Thomson 181).

The eyes in Sacco’s installation invite such a staring encounter.<sup>17</sup> Since the eyes do not allow identification, there is no clear social frame for the viewer’s confrontation with them: they pose an epistemological challenge. If we often look at others in an attempt 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. In our encounter with the artwork we cannot measure ourselves against any recognizable “barbarians” which would subscribe to our own representational system. But for that reason, the outcome of our comparison or confrontation with the other remains open and unpredictable. Unlike the people in Cavafy’s city, who can only imagine and

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<sup>17</sup> Of course staring at another person differs from staring at an artwork, since the eye-images in the installation cannot be actively affected by the viewer’s stare. Although the effect of the staring encounter is of course only registered by the viewer, the staring takes place nonetheless, because we *experience* the eyes staring at us just as much as we stare at them. Although the pairs of eyes cannot react to the viewer, they are still invested with agency, which lies in their refusal to passively wilt under the viewer’s stare.

expect the barbarians on their own terms, Sacco's work negotiates a relationship with the viewer that is not resolved beforehand.<sup>18</sup> The mutual act of staring creates a zone of contact between self and other, in which a new kind of relationality can be established. The artwork suggests that the "solution" to the predicament of civilization will come neither from a constructed outside nor from inside civilization only (as Geers' work perhaps implies), but through the formation of a zone of contact between inside and outside. Perhaps the other seizes to be a "barbarian" when everything else fades away and we focus only on the eyes: this might be the moment when the self-other or subject-object opposition is transformed into an I-you dialectics.

In light of the above, the artwork suggests an alternative to the aporia of waiting in vain for the barbarians. Even if the barbarians do not exist in the ways that the civilized have constructed them, the work draws attention to the fact that there are human beings behind the walls of civilization, to which we can relate differently, if we leave our stereotypical representations of others temporarily out of sight. The categorical distinction between barbarians and civilized loses its force through an eye-to-eye contact, in which the human beings involved are stripped of preconstructed labels.

Following the reverse assumption, namely that the eyes in the artwork are the eyes of the *civilized* waiting for the barbarians, the role of the barbarians passes on to the viewers. If we presuppose that the viewer has internalized the self-assumed label of the civilized, this occasions a reversal of perspectives. We are all of a sudden the object of the look of the civilized (the eyes). The viewer-as-barbarian might feel interpellated: the staring eyes place us in a guilty position or invest us with evil and savage qualities, as is the case with the common demonization of the barbarian in the discourse of civilization.

When assigning to the eyes the role of the civilized, the wooden planks that close off these eyes also receive a new signification. One could see in this wooden fence a visual metaphor for the construct of civilization. The fence of civilization would then be trying to protect itself and ensure its self-sufficiency by barricading its subjects to prevent encounters with others. A parallel can be drawn here with the labyrinthine trap that Kendell Geers sets up for the civilized subject. However, just like the barbed-wire fence in Geers' labyrinth does not completely hinder our vision of the outside, the "blinds" that the wooden planks set up still leave some crevices, through which the subjects behind them can look and be looked at. These openings can disrupt the self-sufficiency of the construct of civilization, by exposing it to the challenge of its outside. The enclosure is therefore not irreversible. The wooden pieces mark off boundaries, but could also produce zones of connectivity with others.

At the same time, according to the title, the eyes of the civilized *are waiting for us* – the barbarians – and thus see in us the *solution* to the waiting. The viewer is thereby prompted to take an active stance: from being the passive object of the civilized gaze, she can choose to redefine her role as a barbarian and invest it with creative functions. The solution to the waiting would then come not from any outside barbarians, but from a positive redefinition of the functions that one can perform *as* barbarian. In this way, the artwork de-essentializes *the barbarian* and turns this appellation into a matter of perspective: in the artwork, the barbarian is literally *in the eye of the beholder*. This leads us away from the *barbarian* as an ontological

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<sup>18</sup> The people in the poem assume to know what the barbarians are like, what their habits are, how they will behave and how they will rule the city when they arrive. The consuls and praetors are dressed in togas and are overloaded with dazzling jewelry, because "things like that dazzle the barbarians." The orators are silent, because the barbarians are "bored by rhetoric and public speaking." Therefore, the citizens leave no room for the arrival of something truly new, because they presuppose an already known other that can be articulated in their language before it has even made its appearance. Viewed in this way, the poem stages the self-destructive processes in a solipsistic society, which does not dare to open itself to the other. Without knowing it, the citizens themselves are responsible for sabotaging their encounter with the barbarians that they so eagerly anticipate.



category and towards a performativity of barbarism: instead of being-barbarian in an absolute sense, the viewer is incited to perform barbarian acts.

In the above ways, the installation visually rethinks the topos of *waiting for the barbarians*, while the title complicates the viewing of the work without being the only key to its interpretation. What is more, I would argue that the installation and the Cavafian narrative of its title stage a comparative confrontation between two artistic paradigms: that of modernist versus contemporary relational art. The latter has been introduced by the French art critic Nicolas Bourriaud, who identifies relationality – or what he calls “relational aesthetics” – as the distinctive feature of contemporary art.<sup>19</sup> Relational art is interested in the sphere of interhuman relations and in creating new models or relationality with the viewers (28). The narrative of *waiting for the barbarians* found its first literary expression through Cavafy’s poem, in the beginning of the twentieth century (1904) and at the outset of modernism. This narrative, I contend, is injected with the teleological vision of modernity, even as it is also critical of modernity’s dreams and grand narratives. The arrival of the barbarians is the utopian reality that the world of modernity aspires to. The people in Cavafy’s poem have turned away from reality and have invested all their hopes for salvation in the utopian reality that will be actualized when the barbarians arrive. Sacco’s work, on the other hand, moves away from the teleology and utopianism of modernism, which focuses on the future, in order to focus on possible relations with others *in the present*. With artworks today, as Bourriaud remarks, it “seems more pressing to invent possible relations with our neighbours in the present than to bet on happier tomorrows” (45). Instead of waiting for the barbarians, the work shapes a space of interaction in the here and now of the encounter with the viewer.

The way the work relates to its title brings out the tension between these two artistic paradigms. The confrontation between these paradigms in the artwork underscores the fact that paradigms are not erased as they succeed each other, but can co-exist in tension and reveal each other’s blind spots. Sacco’s work is in that sense a surpassing of its modernist past – a solution, perhaps, to the futile waiting of modernist narratives. Nevertheless, its title does not simply function as a relic of the past, overcome by a new artistic tradition. It accompanies the work as a constant reminder of the fact that the discourse that has produced the narrative of our salvation by barbarians is still very active in our cultural and political realities. Therefore, the relationality that Sacco’s work proposes is only meaningful when measured against the reality of a another discourse that has not lost its relevance.

I finally want to focus on an element in Sacco’s work that might escape one’s attention at first: the fact that not *all* the eyes are staring at the viewer. Some look *through* the viewer, or seem distracted; others look away or up. The multiple directions of their look could suggest that 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, literally having their eyes turned West.<sup>20</sup> Those eyes that turn away from the viewer might be refusing to validate the viewer’s look; they may be refusing to be compared to Western standards and take part in a predetermined comparison that would find them inferior; they may be refusing to recognize Western culture as the center and standard of excellence. As a result, the eyes that do not look at the viewer bring about a de-centering of the viewer-as-civilized-subject. We are not the center on which the eyes of the world are focused. Our center turns into multiple smaller centers, at least

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<sup>19</sup> “Contemporary art” at the time of his writing is the art of the nineties. His argument, however, could very well be extended to include artistic practices of the new millennium.

<sup>20</sup> Following the other assumption that I have indicated, namely that the eyes belong to the civilized and are waiting for the barbarians, then the multidirectionality of their look can have a different, though equally disorienting, function for the viewer. The viewer, assuming that the eyes are looking everywhere trying to find the barbarians, might get confused regarding her or his identity and status, wondering if the eyes are looking at her or him and if s/he is, in fact “their” barbarian or not.

as many as the eyes on Sacco's artwork. This, I argue, might be one of the "barbarian" tasks that the work calls the viewer to perform: to offer a critique of existing discourses, not in order to construct a new center of power, but by creating a visual language that de-centers. The work proposes a multiperspectivism, which escapes the dual logic of "barbarian versus civilized." The multidirectionality of the eyes hints at the complex ways in which cultures relate to each other, and problematizes practices of intercultural comparison along the lines of a reductive West – non-West divide. 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 multidirectionality of the eyes in Sacco's work makes the "sovereign authority of a single perspective" inadequate, by signaling the presence of diverse sites of enunciation away from the metropolitan centers (Melas 36).

"Esperando a los barbaros" allows temporary interpretations and framings, but slips away from them due to a surplus, something that does not completely fit the narrative we ascribe to the image (such as the multidirectional look of the eyes). However, due to the work's elusiveness and its reduction of interpretative hints to a minimum, the viewer has the opportunity to relate to the image before deciding what the image *means*, and before assigning to these eyes preconceived distinctions of self and other.

The enigmatic eyes in Sacco's installation could function as the caterpillars that bear the promise of an alternative to the binary logic of "civilized versus barbarians." The work challenges the viewer to see the movement between foreign cultures or discourses in terms of unpredictable, surprising comparisons. To argue however, that the artwork invites open acts of comparison also comes with a risk: the risk of reconstituting dominant discourses in the process. A viewer, for example, with a certain mindframe might fill in the missing gaps of Sacco's eyes with images of threatening barbarians ready to invade our space. This could, for instance, reinforce this viewer's conviction that the borders of civilization should be closed for immigrants. But these are risks we need to take, if we do not want our own discourse and academic practices to remain trapped within self-authenticating mechanisms that keep inventing versions of otherness, without exposing themselves to the risks of real confrontations with others.

### ***Waiting for the Barbarians as a Traveling Topos***

To say that "Waiting for the Barbarians" is a travelling topos does not mean that Cavafy's narrative moves from context to context while staying still itself. The term *topos* (place), in its connotation of *stasis*, is misleading in this case. The Cavafian narrative does not have a predetermined meaning or effect that is being iterated through different objects. The visual works that "translate" this narrative, transform it by enriching its potential meanings and interpretations. This constant transformation through translation is what keeps the topos of "Waiting for the Barbarians" not sedentary, but always on the move, with an openness toward the future.

The visual translations of *waiting for the barbarians* suggest that all national cultures and literatures are imbued and enriched with *barbarisms* from other languages. My use of the term *barbarisms*, here, is based on the second sense of the term: "a word or expression not considered correct" – or, in a variation of this definition, "a word formed from elements of different languages."<sup>21</sup> These *barbarisms* – foreign, new elements introduced through translations – are not a threat of contamination to a national culture or literature, but an indispensable part of it. At the same time, the visual translations of "Waiting for the Barbarians" also suggest that a national

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<sup>21</sup> According to the *Oxford American Dictionary and Thesaurus* and the *New Oxford English Dictionary*, respectively.

culture or literature does not just carry foreign elements, but is also “barbarian” to itself. As Walter Benjamin writes in “The Task of the Translator,” translation is “only a somewhat provisional way of coming to terms with the foreignness of languages” (75). This foreignness does not only pertain to the relation of a language to other languages but also to its relation to itself. This, Eduardo Cadava argues, is because a language changes constantly according to heterogeneous paths and is “always in the process of becoming different from itself,” and as such is never, in fact “itself” (17). This intrinsic foreignness is ingrained in the topos of *waiting for the barbarians* as well. It is found in the suggestion that the barbarians are not out there, but *within* the civilized – a constitutive part of their being, which can assume productive functions when it is embraced as part of the self. The civilized citizens are barbarians to themselves, and it is up to them to transform this internal barbarism into a constructive cultural force. This suggestion is emphatically brought forward in Geers’s installation as well.

Each translation of Cavafy’s theme, visual or textual, transforms it as it brings it in contact with other objects and discourses. In that sense, the Cavafian topos is never “itself”: its identity is always provisional and precarious, subject to “barbarisms” and revisions. With this in mind, the primacy of the “original” – Cavafy’s poem – is also disrupted. The poem does not pose as a frozen and canonical source imposing its authority on others, but becomes part of a perpetual movement of translation.

Cavafy’s poem, by exposing the absence of barbarians, redirects our attention from barbarian presences to barbarian acts, and from waiting to acting. The people of the city in the poem have been asking the wrong question all along – hence their futile waiting. The really challenging question is not “where are the barbarians?” but “what productive operations could we perform *as* barbarians?” Although there are no barbarians as such, we could start acting as barbarians. We could redefine our task as scholars, researchers or students, not as gate-keepers of a sacred tradition, but as those who turn the borders that separate us from other barbarians into zones of contact and contestation. This is perhaps the “kind of solution” that we can draw from the travels of *waiting for the barbarians*: not to wait in vain for the other, but seek our language and literature in foreign places, and explore its own barbarian sides as we transform and revise it.

*Leiden University*

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**Maria Boletsi** is a Ph.D. candidate at the Comparative Literature Department of Leiden University. She received a BA in Greek Literature from the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (2001), a BA in Comparative Literature (2003) and an MA in Cultural Analysis (2005) from the University of Amsterdam. She has recently been a visiting scholar at Columbia University (2008-09). Her dissertation focuses on the operations of the concept of barbarism and the figure of the barbarian in theory, contemporary literature, visual art, and film. She has published articles on C.P. Cavafy, J.M. Coetzee, Jamaica Kincaid, literary speech acts, and Balkan nationalism in edited volumes and in journals such as *Comparative Literature Studies*, *Arcadia*, and *Thamyris/Intersecting*. She is also co-editor of the volume *Inside Knowledge: (Un)doing Ways of Knowing in the Humanities* (Cambridge Scholars Press, 2009), and was in the editorial team of *The Big Prisma Modern Greek-Dutch/Dutch-Modern Greek Dictionary* (Het Spectrum, 2008).