# LOG:: 01 Aesthetics of Instability

Video is like water, an entirely ethereal form which was locked into the television for 50 years.

—Tony Oursler (Flash Art, 1996)[[1]](#footnote-2)

## On the faculty of imagination and cinematic barbarism

Imagination is the essential ingredient for moving image practice. Imagination is also essential for cinematic barbarism, a necessity if we’re to continue to dream CINEMA, but also a necessity for non-cinematic barbarism, a potential force to be awakened.

We are confronted with a difference, perceptible at the skin level. Cinematic practice built on the moving image implies structure and delay, building up forms for narrative constructs. Non-cinematic barbarism, meanwhile, in the forms that confront us every day, simply implies chaos. Here, directed and controlled imagination stands in contrast to the free, wild flow of imagination. What both forces have in common is the faculty of creating images. This is Vilem Flusser’s idea of imagination. Compared to such figures as Deleuze, Foucault, or Bergson, he might not be of interest to many scholars, but connecting his ideas on imagination to the aesthetics of moving images, online video, and digital art, and introducing, for comparison, the figure of the barbarian in the work of Mauricio Lazzarato and Walter Benjamin,[[2]](#footnote-3) as well as the tourist in Hiroki Azuma[[3]](#footnote-4) seems an exciting and fruitful route through this ocean of video. What is still relevant in Flusser’s ideas is also the somehow shocking fact that we have yet to learn how to use our imagination to decipher the technical images on our screens.

I will contextualize these contrasting figures of the barbarian and the tourist within the dull or not-so-dull work of art house filmmakers and their audiences, or the dull boring or not-so-boring Hollywood industry and the audiences of *Barbenheimer* cinema.[[4]](#footnote-5)

Is the Turkish artist Refik Anadol comparable to Azuma’s tourists or his audience? What about *Barbenheimer* and its audiences?

How do these two modalities relate to or reproduce the technologies at hand?

## Barbenheimer

But let’s first consider the general status of the moving image. Two years after the pandemic, in 2023, came the experience of *Barbenheimer (*the concurrence of the films *Oppenheimer* and *Barbie*), with cinema once again a worldwide synchronous event.

*Oppenheimer* and *Barbie*, two films released on the same weekend, created a sudden boost for a field marked, once again as often before, by a slow, prolonged death.

Today, streamers, streaming media, and mobile platforms dominate the culture of the moving image. They have absorbed moving image culture and aesthetics into their digital environments, and programmed their aesthetics as the dominating form. Cinematic experiences have now moved into private environments, with giant OLEAD flat screens or handheld shiny devices. Ankara, as a city of shopping-mall cinemas, faces the constant closing of older cinemas beyond the malls, while the latter meanwhile reformat their internal spaces.

Amazingly, Nuri Bilge Ceylan’s three-hour film *Kuru Otlar Üstüne*, (About Dry Grasses) enjoyed comparably excellent box office figures in Turkey. Ceylan stands for an art house cinema, promising audiences visual pleasure and cinematic contemplation.

Then, there is the Sphere in Las Vegas: a massive dome with a projective surface inside and outside, an arena for audiovisual events similar to sports stadiums and Olympic games arenas. A building like the Sphere, as architectural symbol, materializes what the Zorlu Center in Istanbul has yet to achieve, or what the architecture—the shape—of the Ankara Opera might, on a much smaller scale, suggest. A friend of mine thought of seeing U2 play at the Sphere, but deemed neither U2 nor the spatial experience worth the $600 price of a ticket. A reviewer in Wired magazine noted that when the band played a few songs without visuals, the musical performance itself was rather dull. Nevertheless, in the Sphere, in the spatial, audiovisual, over-dimensioned, projected, and live sensation, cinema has finally found its cathedral: a home in a dome.

But, honestly, everything has stayed the same since 1924.

1924 was the year of Murnau’s film *The Last Laugh*, one of the highlights of cinematic experience in the 1920s, and high on any list of the cinematic language and visual possibilities of the moving image.

I agree with Rudolf Arnheim’s judgment that everything that cinema is capable of has already been invented. The installation phase of the cinema had ended; cinema went straight into its deployment phase. Yes, sound was missing, but the films of the 1920s paved the way to recorded sound as the final step in establishing a mass medium. (As a mere side note, cinema always had sound. The 1930s moved from live to recorded sound, establishing another distribution dominance of Hollywood-style cinema, automating a multi-sensory mass product.

Abel Gance had dreamed of a three-dimensional cinema before his multi-screened Napoleon in 1927. We still are not there. Our technological dreaming remains in the experimental phase, as television long had, before its emergence in the 1950s, in the wake of world wars. Our technological dreaming remains between the concreteness of spherical cathedrals and immersive noise-canceling headsets.

Surveying the last 50 years of media and cinema development, clearly, digital technology has redefined moving image culture. From the 1971 internet revolution to the digital video revolution of the 2000s, to the 2022 AI revolution, the cultural of the moving image has merged, changing its forms and appearances. Digital technology enabled the mixture of images captured through many different means (cinema, photography, drawings), generating new levels of representation. Analog video gave birth to simultaneity; the computer extended simultaneity to multiplicity.

In his 2001 *The Language of New Media*, a popular work that generated intense discussion, Lev Manovich says, *Cinema becomes a particular branch of painting - painting in time. No longer a kino-eye, but a kino-brush.*[[5]](#footnote-6) We could extend this prophecy 20 years into the future, from *Adobe Firefly*, *Midjourney*, and *DALL E* to an algorithmic brush, as the new model on the supermarket shelf.

## Video is not cinema.

I wrote in *Video Theory* in 2015:

*Comparable to driving a car or taking a shower. It is nearly omnipresent, available on demand and attached to nearby anything, anywhere. Online Video became something vital and independent. With all the video created by the cameras around us, constantly uploading, sharing, linking, and relating, a blue ocean is covering our planet, an ocean of video. What might look as bluish noise and dust from the far outside, might embed beautiful and fascinating living scares of moving images, objects constantly changing, re-arranging, assembling, evolving, collapsing, but never disappearing, a real cinema.[[6]](#footnote-7)*

An Ukrainian publisher translated my book into Russian. I don’t speak Russian, but was told that the translation was excellent. The inlay of the Russian version includes the following English part, with which I wholly agree:

*We are doomed to live in an era of rapid changes, especially in [the] media sphere which overloads us with information. All the technological innovations that are here for us with a single click or a single touch to a smartphone and which we consider to be our extension, literally impose their tyranny on us - the tyranny of vision and perception of reality.*

2015 is also the year when Mark Zuckerberg lied about Online Video.[[7]](#footnote-8)

## The Aesthetics of Instability

Here is where we connect to what I name the Aesthetics of Instability. The power of instability, the constant change, the flow, and the feed define our daily operations and assume our values in a total immersion of ourselves. We have submitted ourselves.

In my 2002 graduate seminar, I posed the question: Will technology alter our perception of time and space in storytelling, or will it lead to entirely new narrative structures, maybe vertical?

Now, I want to offer a change of attitude concerning the use of gadgets around us in ways we need: creative use, uses that avoid all the limitations imposed on us by the industry (limitations of frame, format, vision, and more).

As my Russian translator of *Video Theory* suggests, I would see these not simply as technological developments but as tools and objects with a strong power element. These objects have already changed paradigms, transforming existing systems, neighborhoods, and atmospheres.

The 2022 film *Everything, Everywhere, All at Once* appears as one of the most chaotic films following the pandemic.

Evelyn, a Chinese immigrant running a laundromat, discovers that her life exists in just one of countless universes. The film seems to mirror the internet's overwhelming chaos, or, as the director Daniel Scheinert put it, the sense of *scrolling through an infinite amount of stuff*.

*Everything Everywhere* has been called one of the first *post-internet* films, capturing the online world's bizarre nature. In our era, human brains, unchanged for centuries, struggle to adapt to a dramatically transformed world. As YouTuber Thomas Flight observes, we now encounter more ideas, people, and places in a single TikTok binge than our ancestors did in entire lifetimes. This rapidly evolving digital chaos challenges our slow-evolving minds.[[8]](#footnote-9)

Of course, ideas are not less complex, less abstract, or less attractive than a 20 second TikTok Video. Flight seems to be overlooking such figures as Duns Scotus, the Scottish Franciscan friar and philosopher (c. 1265/66–1308), or Ibn Khaldun, the Arab historiographer and historian (1332–1406). Their ideas stick.

The universes of the moving image are diverse, strange, weird. They are deep and full of kinetic energy and relentless pace.[[9]](#footnote-10)

## Constructive Instability

In 2008, Thomas Elsaesser sparked discussions about YouTube's impact during the second Video Vortex conference in Amsterdam.[[10]](#footnote-11) He shared his journey through the video platform, drawing parallels to Fishli and Weis’s *Der Lauf der Dinge*, which inspired the Honda Cog commercial. Elsaesser introduced the term *constructive instability*, a term also used by Condoleeza Rice to describe the Israeli-Hezbollah conflict.

Elsaesser applies *constructive instability* to experiences on the web, primarily through collaborative filtering, exploring how the emergence of Web 2.0 blurs the line between art and artificial life, and prompting us to explore the concept of the *post-human* in a *human* world.

As one of the last flaneurs, Elsaesser navigates YouTube, immersing himself in user efforts, software, and suggestion algorithms. He experiences an episodic narrative filled with loosely connected elements, finding joy but also sensing a fragility, an impending collapse, an *evolutionary dead-end*. This constructive instability's allure lies in its potential destruction.

Similarly, Kyle Chakya, a writer for the *New Yorker*, reflects on his *TikTok* experience.[[11]](#footnote-12) He notes that *TikTok* eliminates the need to decide what interests you—you surrender to the platform. *TikTok*'s algorithm drives the platform, creating a personalized feed of short videos that constantly evolves based on user interaction. Unlike other social media, TikTok emphasizes the content over the creator, fostering a sense of discovery and immersion. Automation masquerades as customization, dictating what we watch, read, and hear. TikTok aggressively pursues our attention, aiming to create an addictive and profitable cycle. Trust in the algorithmic feed empowers the app to manipulate its audience effectively.

Time is the Message. We must treat database-watching with the seriousness it deserves, rather than dismissing it as mere video consumption. Online video platforms are designed to be addictive, with endless streams of content that can captivate viewers for hours on end, far surpassing the length of a traditional film. This infinite scrolling and clicking has become a defining characteristic of 21st-century culture. We've become accustomed to this perpetual online journey, reluctant to break free from the database's grip.

The short format of many online videos doesn't diminish their potential impact. They cater to our shrinking attention spans, delivering quick hits of information and entertainment. These condensed videos can conceal layers of meaning, inviting deep analysis. However, our supposedly fast-paced lives rarely afford us the time for such contemplation. Ironically, while consuming these videos, we're consuming our own time. In our rush to consume, we neglect to consider the implications of our digital footprints.

Is this constant flux a positive force for innovation or a destructive consumption pattern?

## Imagine

Two terms are critically interwoven in this line of thought and questioning: *Imagination* and *Perception*.

Jean-Paul Sartre, in 1936, challenged traditional views of imagination, distinguishing it from perception and emphasizing its totality.[[12]](#footnote-13)

For Sartre, perception is the study of objects over time, an ongoing process of exploring the world, limited by our sensory abilities. It's an anticipative process, revealing aspects of objects gradually in time, piece by piece, and incompletely. For example, we can walk around a building and see different sides of the building at different times. Our perception is, each time, incomplete and needs to be revised as we gather more information, more sensory data.

On the other hand, imagination presents all aspects of an object simultaneously: an object in its entirety, and all at once. When we imagine a building, we don't need to mentally *walk around* the building to conceive of its back side; we can instantly imply the whole structure in our mind. The idea of totality in imagination is crucial to Sartre's conceptualization. When we imagine something, we create a complete image that includes all its essential aspects simultaneously. This totality or whole is not bound by the limitations of physical reality or our sensory experience.

Imagination is an intentional act of consciousness. This means that when we imagine, we are actively creating or shaping the imagined object based on our intentions and purposes. This is not a passive reception of images, but an active, creative world-making process, with meaning and significance that we ourselves give. Imagination allows us to conceive of possibilities that don't currently exist, and enables us to create projections, fictional situations and scenarios.

Sartre, following Husserl, emphasizes that consciousness is intentional; it is consciousness of something. Imagination pronounces this intentionality. We don't passively receive images; we actively create them. Sartre ties this—our ability to conceive something that is not and to envision alternatives and future possibilities—to human freedom. Imagination allows us to project. It is not simply about mental images, but about how we conceive of and act upon our world.

Sartre’s concept of the faculty of imagination indeed allows teleological thinking, with its projective future orientation and role in shaping meaning. The imagination's power to negate the given and envision alternatives is as much about refusing existing ends as it is about positing new ones. It's a tool of freedom, the ground of possibility for both accepting and rejecting given ends—a crucial component of human freedom and meaning-making.

In the 1980s, Vilem Flusser spoke of a new form of imagination, defined by the ability to create and understand images.[[13]](#footnote-14) Flusser, more than 40 years after Sartre, saw the evolution of imagination as crucial. Historically, primitive forms involved vision, but the hands began to *make and decipher images* to overcome such limitations as constraints on human vision, limited memory, or the restrictions of time and space, introducing artificial images and different alphabets. This process continued through various forms of writing.

While Sartre's analysis was more phenomenological and general, focusing on individual consciousness, Flusser's faculty of imagination is more oriented towards media theory and cultural analysis. He focuses on the role of imagination in creating and interpreting *technical images* (photographs, films, digital images). The *technical image* is no longer a representation of facts and circumstances, but rather an expression of calculations.

Imagination, for Flusser, involves both abstracting from the world (creating concepts) and concretizing abstract ideas into images. Imagination is influenced by cultural codes and programs and plays a definitive role in creating new information and distributing existing information.

Imagination as a faculty has evolved throughout human history, then, from primitive imagination based on a direct visual perception of the world, through what Flusser calls traditional imagination involving the creation and interpretation of handmade images like cave paintings, to textual imagination linked to the development of writing and alphabets, introducing a new level of abstraction of the world. Textual imagination is followed finally by technical imagination related to the creation and interpretation of technical images. Flusser argued that we were moving from a text-based culture to one dominated by particularly technical images, with profound impacts on our understanding and interaction with the world, all of which would require new forms of literacy and new kinds of imagination.

What makes technical images fundamentally different from traditional representative images is simply that they are produced by machines or apparatuses—cameras and computers—based on technical processes. They project specific models onto the world and shape and construct reality through computation. Imagination now requires, if we are to decode conceptual projections, an understanding of the processes and calculations behind image creation. While computers operate on linear sequences (algorithms) and while code is a form of writing, what they produce—particularly visual outputs—are non-linear. Technical images present a synchronic, all-at-once view that's more about relationships and patterns than sequence and causality. This challenges a linear understanding of history.

The new imagination, according to Flusser, is about synthesizing concepts into images. It is not about representing what exists, but about projecting possibilities. Imagination involves translating abstract concepts into visual forms. Flusser’s concept of technical imagination provides a framework for understanding how we create and interpret images in a world increasingly dominated by digital technologies and visual media. These media, to be sure, require and call for a different imagination, non-linear and projective.

Furthermore, imagination involves an act of distancing from the world. The ability to distance is connected to and affected by media gestures and media practices, with different media serving as constraints. This ability is connected to media on a practical level. Flusser refers to this practical level not as an *act* or *practice,* but a *gesture* of a medium. For Flusser, a *gesture* is not just a physical movement, but a meaningful action that expresses a particular relationship between humans and their environment. The gesture of a medium refers to the way a particular medium shapes our interactions with the world and with information. Different media have different associated gestures. The gesture of photography might involve framing, focusing, and capturing a moment. The gesture of writing might involve the physical act of putting pen to paper or typing on a keyboard, but also the mental processes of composing a text. These gestures are not fixed but evolve with cultural and technological changes.

Flusser believed the transition to a new faculty of imagination would unlock a new level of existence with fresh experiences, emotions, and values. However, he acknowledged that we're still learning to use this new imagination, and to decode technical images on screens. This new faculty, the translation of concepts into video imagery, has yet to be fully harnessed.

We have to jump into the new imagination.

## Art / Kunst

Thomas Elsaesser, thinking aloud along the feed of 2008's YouTube, started his reflective essay in *Video Vortex* with a question already posed by many artists and thinkers in the 1920s avant-garde: Is it that art is coming closer to life, or that life is getting closer to art?

What makes a work of art?

How do we know what is a work of art?

Art and aesthetics are closely connected, with imagination being a key element. Aesthetic thinking plays a role in various aspects of our daily lives. We often use *aesthetics* and *aesthetic* in everyday conversations. For instance, we could discuss the aesthetics of a garden, a hairstyle, a vase, or whether a smartphone is aesthetic.

Our daily lives are filled with aesthetic choices, from selecting and coordinating clothing to liking photos, choosing hairstyles, makeup, places to visit, items to purchase, and music to listen to. Aesthetics, in these cases, pertain to pleasurable sensory experiences. We use aesthetic decision-making when creating graphs, editing photos and videos, drawing images, and designing spaces and structures.[[14]](#footnote-15)

Aesthetics encompasses both natural and human-made elements and experiences. It's about everything that can be sensed and perceived, not just what we consider beautiful.

In simple terms, art is a creative expression, a means to tell stories or evoke emotions. It takes various forms: paintings, sculptures, music, dance, literature, or film.

Georg Simmel (1858 - 1918), a German sociologist and philosopher, shows, in his writings on aesthetics, culture, and the applied arts (especially his short essay *The Picture Frame*) that *art* and *design* are two different types of creative processes.[[15]](#footnote-16) Of course, his views predate modern conceptions of design. But what makes Simmel interesting is that he discusses social and cultural phenomena in terms of *forms* and *contents* in a temporal or transient, passing relation. Form becomes content and content becomes form. Art, for Simmel, is autonomous and emphasizes individual expression and uniqueness. Design follows function and the everyday life. It is about applicability in general and embedded in our cultural life. While design responds to immediate needs, art might aspire to timeless and temporary criticism.

Today, AI is automating the art of imitation, introducing a new trend of mass-produced similarities with slight variations. The process remains somewhat mysterious, hidden within the black box of recursive algorithms. AI has been at the forefront of discussions on art and aesthetics. Machine learning and deep learning techniques enable AI to create and analyze art in novel ways. AI can be trained on vast datasets to generate unique pieces not seen before. AI artworks respond to a socio-cultural context and environment with both the space and the need for fast paced production, and for the instantaneous applicability of such artifacts or generative objects.

AI is transforming our sensory experiences and has become the standard method for aesthetic action. In the 21st century, computation, data analysis, machine learning, neural networks, and AI have entered the realm of aesthetics. Music streaming services recommend songs, Instagram personalizes content on its *Explore* tab, and photo editing apps enhance images with a single click. AI influences fashion recommendations from online retailers. The encounter between AI and aesthetics is significant because aesthetics is traditionally a human domain. One prevalent opinion holds that these developments merely mimic existing styles, and are not creative. In such instances, computers receive pre-existing examples and accordingly generate variants; they try, that is, to introduce some level of variation. Sometimes, what results is uncannily similar to genuine artworks; other results seem a bit off to a trained eye, lacking the final touches to make them convincingly human. Typically, conservative views on art consider technical mastery a criterion for *real art*. However, many people still conceive of art as involving something that doesn't require or perhaps isn’t strictly reducible to technical ability. Technical ability means procedural knowledge, for which AI precisely is designed.[[16]](#footnote-17)

*Aesthetic judgement* for Immanuel Kant is always normative. Judgements are based on feeling, specifically the feeling of pleasure or displeasure. When people make aesthetic judgments—such as declaring something beautiful—they are making claims that imply a standard of value that others should recognize. Aesthetic statements are often understood to assert that certain qualities are desirable or preferable, thus carrying a normative weight. For instance, saying *this painting is beautiful* is not just a subjective opinion; it suggests that the painting meets certain aesthetic criteria that can be evaluated and discussed by others. Kant emphasizes that aesthetic judgments are grounded in a subjective experience of pleasure or displeasure, but they claim universal validity. This duality creates a tension: while the experience is personal, the judgment seeks to communicate a standard that others can agree upon.

The *sublime* shatters those norms. Sublime experience disrupts normative frameworks. It overwhelms our senses, inspiring awe and maybe even fear, but is then followed by a process of rationalization. It is foremost an experience of a kind of power that transcends ordinary aesthetic norms, evoking a response that is not easily categorized within the established standards of *beauty*. The sublime challenges the very criteria by which aesthetic judgments are made in the face of something greater than oneself. Thus, while aesthetic judgments aim to establish norms, the sublime shatters these norms by presenting experiences that defy conventional evaluation and provoke a more profound reflection on human existence and life.

Aesthetics is thus conceptualized as a distinct form of judgment, neither purely cognitive nor purely sensual. This touches the *essence* of art and especially avant-garde art. Now, what is called generative art or imagery falls into the *normative* in the Kantian concept of aesthetics. AI cannot generate the *sublime*, or not yet.

## Unsupervised

Let's dive into the work of the Turkish artist Refik Anadol at the Museum of Modern Art. Anadol's exhibition, *Unsupervised*, is unique, having been generated by an artificial intelligence model trained on the public data of MoMA's art collection, spanning over 200 years. AI interprets the museum's diverse collection to create abstract images and shapes.[[17]](#footnote-18)

Anadol's art uses machine learning to process tons of data and to craft immersive, multi-sensory experiences that challenge how we perceive space, time, and memory. This amounts, in other words, to technically feeding a specific algorithm or algorithmic model data, examining the results, and tweaking the model output to increase accuracy and efficacy, to foster the expected, intended visual experience and pleasure. The curated data transforms into a dynamic experience for viewers. Anadol and his team loaded their collected data into their neural network to identify and refine patterns in thousands of MoMA artworks, generating new, unique images that share those patterns without resembling any specific paintings. Watching the floating animation is like exploring the universe of MoMA's contemporary art through these patterns.

Art critic Jerry Saltz described *Unsupervised* as a crowd-pleasing, attention-grabbing spectacle—a giant, mesmerizing screen that resembles a colossal techno lava lamp, creating an otherworldly experience.[[18]](#footnote-19) People are drawn to it, taking pleasure in dancing and recording videos while pulpy shapes drift across its edges. The floating colors and shapes recall ocean waves, or else gigantic foams and dusty clouds, pixel dust, a generated dense and intense universe of sensual immersive experience.

But remember, art is subjective. What one person finds terrific, another might not. *Unsupervised* features a large, energy-intensive screensaver at MoMA, essentially a digital daydream based on public data. AI doesn't see images but processes data and weather conditions to produce colorful, flowing patterns. It's like a machine with three dreams, which some technical critics felt was a low number for such a powerful tool.

Anadol tours the world creating massive motion graphics, often screened or projected onto buildings and public spaces, using various databases. Museums love it, and the public is captivated.

However, there's an ethical concern here to consider. AI advancements could very well determine military dominance in the future. The Department of Defense even supports such AI companies as Nvidia, which aids Anadol in creating his unique dreams.

In a critical review, Ben Davis points out that *Unsupervised* risks trivializing art history by treating it as random visual elements.[[19]](#footnote-20) But it serves a different purpose; it promotes tech innovation. *Unsupervised* is a program that touches on surveillance and the colonization of space, raising questions about who controls creativity and production. It may appear fun and colorful, but it raises concerns about normalizing surveillance and environmentally harmful computation. Anadol should reconsider the neutrality of his tools, as they have broader implications beyond art.

## Never before

Not only Anadol's spectacular screens but also contemporary cinema calls for meticulously curation, coupled with an assertion of producers and audiences that this, whatever *this* is, has never been done before.

Christopher Nolan touted *Oppenheimer's* use of alternating black-and-white and color as if it were a new invention, and not something employed in 1939 for *The Wizard of Oz*.

*Barbie's* marketing positioned the film as a landmark of inclusion, as a blockbuster with a female director, despite the box office success of Amy Heckerling's *Clueless* or Penelope Spheeris's *Wayne's World*. Ironically, this approach even erases the box office success of Gerwig's previous films. *We're trapped in a rugged individualism time loop.[[20]](#footnote-21)*

The challenge that links Refik Andol, the cinema industry, and social media stems from their predominantly young target audience. For this *youthful demographic*, everything unfolds for the first time. In the perhaps exceptional case of Anadol, this includes all generations of museum visitors or the museum visiting class, and expands to the commercial target of young people leaving their homes for leisure and pleasure.

We find ourselves in an age marked by a blend of collage and nostalgia, as we continually reinvent our cultural, aesthetic, and artistic expressions.

We lack the contemporary equivalents of cinematic scholars like Andre Bazin or critics like Pauline Kael, who might provide us with a comprehensive cinematic library, offering theoretical insights into the ongoing trends and adeptly identifying emerging voices in the field. Fragmentization, personalization, and individualization have unseated the guiding authority and the narratives and power of cultural critics.

Alexandra Coburn writes in *Dirt*, a daily-ish newsletter on digital pop culture and entertainment:

*Now, I work in a film archive, and I can lay out newspaper clippings end to end and watch the American auteur movement of the 1970s die. I can read box office numbers for filmmakers’ first films with the foresight that one day, they’ll be selling out theaters. Pastiche is often used as a slightly derogatory description—directors are accused of pastiche, as if in the year 2023 it is truly possible to make a film that doesn’t rest on the backs of all the films which came before. The most idyllic result of this trend is the resurgence of interest in arthouse cinemas; in a utopia, this would amount to a monetary acknowledgement that good repertory film programming is visionary and worthwhile.[[21]](#footnote-22)*

## Anything to Be Done?

Nietzsche already called for barbarians: ‘Where are the barbarians of the twentieth century? Obviously, they will become visible and consolidate themselves only after tremendous socialist crises’.[[22]](#footnote-23)

So, where are the new barbarians? Do we need new barbarians? Who is the new barbarian who breaks free from *the detective opacity of his inner life and the new religious type?[[23]](#footnote-24)*

Of course, the understanding of *barbarism* implied here attempts to sketch out a positive concept of barbarism. *Positive Barbarism* refers to Walter Benjamin’s view that in certain historical moments, particularly in times of crisis and rapid change, there is value in some sort of a clearing out of *nomenklatura*, of established traditions and norms—a kind of cultural *starting over*. This means not the violent and destructive association with barbarism, but rather a radical departure towards renewal and creative potential in the face of oppression and the poverty of experience in modern life.[[24]](#footnote-25)

Suppose our experiences and imaginations are fully programmed, flowing algorithmically and automatically. In that case, such *poverty* would force *the barbarian* to start from scratch, to create something new, to make way for new possibilities.

As Maurizio Lazzarato, referencing Walter Benjamin, notes in *Video Philosophy*, the barbarian will not see anything permanent. This is a condition of instability, open thereby to everywhere, with multiple ways to discover and to walk along.

*Where others encounter walls or mountains, there, too, he sees a way. But because he sees a way everywhere, he has to clear things from it everywhere. Not always by brute force; sometimes by the most refined. Because he sees ways everywhere, he always stands at a crossroads. No moment can know what the next will bring. What exists he reduces to rubble—not for the sake of the rubble, but for that of the way leading through it.[[25]](#footnote-26)*

The text was written in the early 90s, and was translated into English only a few years ago. Lazzarato demands that we testify to our poverty of experience (Benjamin) within the conditions of capital. We must move to politics—to a radical imaginary politics of the moving image. Returning to Henri Bergson's insights, with Maurizio Lazzarato we understand that the Kantian subject apprehends a limited reality compared to the full scope of existence. In Kant’s conceptualization, the subject is limited in experiencing phenomena (things as they appear to us), and cannot directly access things-in-themselves (noumena). So, fundamentally for Kant, there is an epistemic limit to what we know. These constraints and limitations further touch on what we perceive and understand of the world. Our perception is constraint. To fathom the true nature of reality, departing from the constraints of the Kantian subject is imperative. This liberation can be achieved through the guidance of James or Bergson, or even through the medium of video without the philosophical guidance of James or Bergson. This dynamic extends to our daily lives.

Political transformation demands more than advocating for improved labor conditions or living standards; it necessitates the expansion of one's experiential horizons. Many subjectivity-related challenges in the realm of work are intimately intertwined with this idea of broadening one's spectrum of experiences.

Consequently, the crisis we currently face isn't solely economic, but is also a crisis in producing subjectivity. This is why, in Lazzarato's work, exploring the production of subjectivity is paramount. This dimension is not extensively addressed in Marx or the broader Marxist tradition. In contrast, the traditions of James, Bergson, Nietzsche and Foucault offer diverse avenues to contemplate the concept of subjectivity’s production. When we lament the absence of effective political organization, we may first need to consider more carefully the imperative of enlarging our experiential domains. Walter Benjamin's reference to a *new barbarism* remains acutely relevant today, as the deficiency of a range of experiences underscores the necessity for the emergence of new agents of change.

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari delve into the concept of the barbarian, particularly in relation to the *nomad*, who perpetually traverses boundaries, moving in and out of empires with unbridled freedom.[[26]](#footnote-27) The nomad appears as a source of creativity and innovation in constant movement—one who brings new ideas and practices to established structures and systems. Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the nomad is not primarily about actual nomadic peoples. The *nomad* is a philosophical construct and a metaphor for a way of thinking that challenges dominant paradigms and offers alternative modes of social and political organization. So, *nomadology* stands in contrast to the *state apparatus* and to power structures. In this sense, the barbarian is associated with a nomadic way of living. Furthermore, Deleuze and Guattari introduce the concepts of *smooth* and *striated* space. Nomads inhabit smooth space, which is an open and undivided space, while the state operates in a striated space—a divided, organized, and structured space. The nomad as well as the barbarian move through smooth space, resisting the organization imposed by empires. Where Walter Benjamin seeks, in his conceptualization of a positive barbarism, to challenge dominant historical narratives and to renew culture and experience freed from the weight of tradition, Deleuze and Guattari try to establish a new mode of existence and thought that resists domination and promotes difference.

While Lazzarato recalls the concept of nomad, the Japanese philosopher Hiromi Azuma seeks to elaborate a *Philosophy of the Tourist.[[27]](#footnote-28)* Our *stratified world* today is, for Azuma’s analysis of contemporary culture, a world of layers: of the political, economic, national, global, nation-state, and empire. He develops the concept of the *postal multitude*, building it on discussion of the nation-state and empire outlined by Hardt and Negri, but considering the tourist as an element of *misdelivery*. The *postal multitude* refers to a form of collective behavior or social organization that emerges in the context of digital communication and social media. Simply, it combines the ideas of *postal space* and *multitude*. Digital networks transmit and circulate information similar to a postal system, but, of course, with incredible speed and through a mesh of connections. *Misdelivery* is the unintended exchange of information or ideas between members of the multitude of the society, leading to unexpected connections and even collaborations—a failure in delivery, or the occurrence of some kind of unforeseen communication. For Azuma, the *essence of tourism is the misdelivery of information*. The social figure of the tourist is *born of misdelivery* and connected to it. ‘The tourist is the subject capable of moving most freely between the strata of the global and the local’.[[28]](#footnote-29)

The tourist connects the multiple layers of our world and increases the possibility of misdelivery, thereby acquiring an originary role in politics. Azuma defines tourism concisely, categorizing a tourist as someone who, for different reasons, ventures to a destination beyond one’s usual environment, excluding employment by a local entity. Moreover, he underscores that tourism is intricately connected to the emergence of mass and consumer societies. This demarcates tourists from immigrants and job seekers, positioning them as consumers acquiring tickets to enjoy goods and services, where consumption is a matter of choice rather than necessity.

In *Philosophy of the Tourist* and his prior work on *Otaku*, Azuma draws parallels with Alexandre Kojève, who, in the first edition of *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, sees the end of history embodied in an American way of life, signifying the dehumanization of individuals into mere consumers. In a subsequent edition, after Kojève visited Japan in 1959, he suggests two post-historical archetypes, American animality and Japanese snobbery, positing these as mutually exclusive, inasmuch as *an animal cannot be a snob*. Yuk Hui, reading Azuma, raises the question of whether tourists exhibit a blend of Japanese snobbery and animality, or perhaps lean more towards one of these traits.

Tourists are not passive consumers as we used to think. Instead, they are active connections that reconfigure the world conceived as a network. A tourist has to be curious and courageous, as Azuma assigns them the task:

*to meet people they were never meant to meet, go to places they were never meant to go, think thoughts they were never meant to think; they seek to infuse contingency back into the system of Empire, to rewire concentrated edges once again, and to revert from preferential selection back to mis-delivery*.[[29]](#footnote-30)

Walter Benjamin and Hiroki Azuma might be separated by time and cultural context (from modernity to postmodernity and into the digital age), but *positive barbarism* and the figure of the *tourist* have, at a very essential level, potential connections. Both the barbarian and the tourist are at once engaged with and detached or broken off from culture (the tourist perhaps more superficially so). These figures are responses, carrying renewal and adaptability, breaking with continuity or engaging in temporary fleeting experiences. The barbarian appears more active, while the tourist would seem to wander on surfaces, with the potential of a critical, observational attitude shaped by technological and social structures—the potential of cultural accident, or what Azuma calls *misdelivery*. Both figures are deeply rooted in modes of cultural participation, reflecting and highlighting the ongoing tension between established traditions and innovation, depth and surface, and, most of all, the individual’s role in cultural production and consumption.

## New Barbarism

The new cinematic barbarism develops out of films that were never meant to be made—a non-cinematic barbarism born of videos never thought of. The new barbarism develops out of an audiovisual misdelivery of sensations of new art and aesthetics, ignoring the operatics of Hollywood capitalist blockbusters, forgetting cinematic real estate and vintage materialities, through smartphone crystal palaces and white halls with high-resolution screens. It emerges out of the loss of grant narratives, the loss of symbolic identification, and builds a phantasmagorical space that traverses reality and fiction, with spatial designs neither indoors nor outdoors, circulating in calibration.

The filmmaker cries for attention to the moment extended in musical dance, an elegiacally ellipsed transition to transcendental instant slow time, a stretched rubber time narrative Proust factor combined with chaos action: diving into the black box for a radical new imagination.

But what is the point, actually, now?

Considering art house cinema (with its actually 'boring' films), the Las Vegas Sphere (with actually 'boring' music), Adele’s stadium in Munich, Refik Anadol’s shows (with actually 'boring' visuals), or 2024 as the year of Taylor Swift reformatting cities with even the hint of a visit, the year of pop star tourism (little Taylors all around in Taylor-Gelsenkirchen)…What is being sold is no longer something that has to do with film aesthetics or cinematic/intellectual pleasure/joy (which could be reproduced on any decent screen and sound system) but an *event* that is spatially and temporally confined to a specific moment and location—not unlike the experience of Azuma's tourist.

Taylor Swift does not exist.[[30]](#footnote-31)

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What was your safety question about?

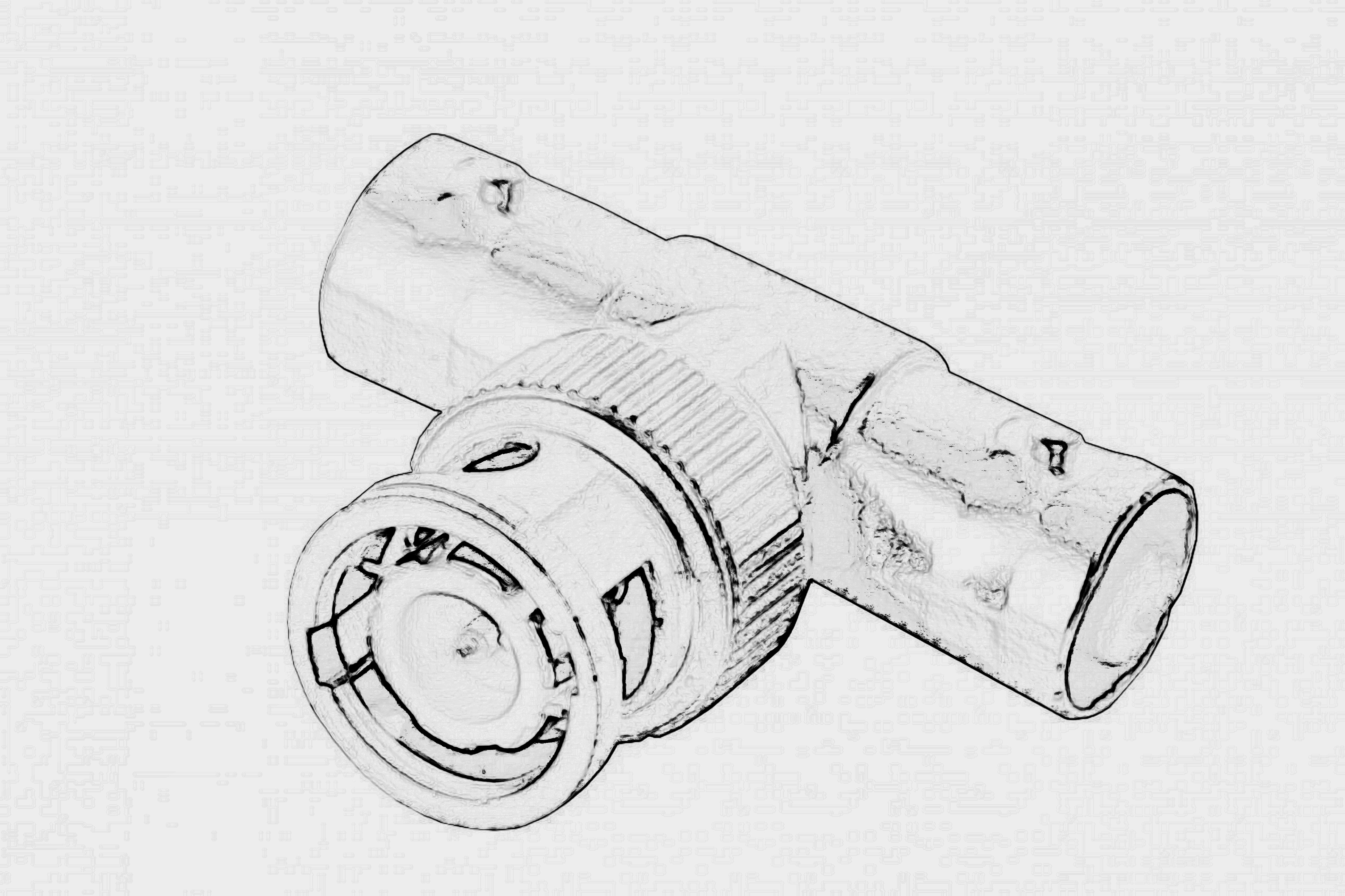


Fig. 2. BABY N

The BNC connector is a miniature quick connect/disconnect radio frequency connector used for coaxial cable. It features two bayonet lugs on the female connector; mating is fully achieved with a quarter turn of the coupling nut. BNC connectors are attached to the ends of coaxial cables and can be used for connecting signals such as RF signals and video signals on consumer electronics. BNC stands for Bayonet Neill Concelman. Bayonet describes the physical connector type and Neill and Concelman are the names of the BNC connector's two inventors. The acronym BNC has been mistakenly believed to stand for British Naval Connector, Bayonet Nut Connector, and Baby N connector. BNCs are suited to accommodate a large variety of RG and industry standard cables, in a variety of termination styles.

• Bayonet coupling mechanism provides positive, quick mating and un-mating

• 50 Ω and 75 Ω impedance designs allow customers to match impedance to system requirements

• Connectors are available for military, industrial and commercial applications.[[31]](#footnote-32)

In earlier computer networks, BNC connectors with coaxial cables were used in Ethernet networks, but Ethernet networks are now more commonly connected by RJ45 connectors and CAT5-style cables.[[32]](#footnote-33)

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