**\*\* NB. This document is the accepted manuscript for *Theory, Culture & Society*, prior to proofing and copyediting \*\***

***Nagori*: Writing With Barthes**

*Victor Burgin*

**ABSTRACT**: Presented in the form of an acrostic, the text offers six entries (*Nagori*, Amateur, *Genshiken*, Obtuse, Rhythm, and Interstice). It begins with the Japanese term *nagori*, the etymology of which is in *nami-nokori*, ‘remains of the waves’, to refer to the ephemeral imprints left by the waves as they withdraw from the beach. The modern word *nagori* carries a more general sense of resignation, of a destiny that cannot be changed, of things that pass. The opening entry, for example, refers to our present time as the *nagori* of photography – as being ‘everywhere’ even before being shattered and scattered by the Internet, by social media and cameras in mobile phones. Underlying the six entries is specific reference to the work of Roland Barthes, notably as a form of writing *with* Barthes, not *about* him. As such, and as the final contribution to a special issue of *Theory, Culture & Society*, ‘Neutral Life: Critical Reflections on the Late Writings of Roland Barthes’, this opens up for the ‘reader’ a specific practice and politics of writing.

**Keywords**: Roland Barthes, Interstice, Nagori, Photography

**Nagori**

From their nineteenth-century origins, successive waves of photographic camera technologies swept across the twentieth-century. Now these waves are receding and their framing discourses and legitimating institutions faltering. Now is the *nagori* of photography. The etymology of the Japanese word word *nagori* is in *nami-nokori*, ‘remains of the waves’, to refer to the ephemeral imprints – rivulets in the sand, shell fragments, and other detritus – left by the waves as they withdraw from the beach. The modern word *nagori* carries a more general sense of resignation, of a destiny that cannot be changed, of things that pass. In a book of 2018 the poetess and translator Ryoko Sekiguchi writes: “The object of *nagori* can be a place, a person, or a season, or again objects or acts evocative of these things.”[[1]](#endnote-2) Among the diverse idiomatic expressions including ‘*nagori’* are *nagori no tsuki*, ‘nagorimoon’, to refer to the moon that remains visible at dawn; and *nagori no sora*, ‘nagori sky’ to designate the sky as it appears to one who parts from another person with regret. By the close of the twentieth-century, industrial film and photography had both become objects of *nagori* – as witnessed, for example, by Susan Sontag’s announcement in 1996 of the death of cinephilia[[2]](#endnote-3) and Rosalind Krauss’s judgement in 1999 that photography “can only be viewed through the undeniable fact of its own obsolescence.”[[3]](#endnote-4) Also writing in 1999 the film theorist and historian Francesco Casetti observed:

Experiences that cinema made known return in the form of exotic mass-vacations, in video clips, in the special effects of business conventions … cinema in turn follows publicity, magazines, games, television. It no longer has its own place, because it is everywhere …[[4]](#endnote-5)

Much the same may be said of photography – ‘everywhere’ even before being shattered and scattered by the Internet, by social media and cameras in mobile phones. The critic who today still speaks of ‘film’ and ‘photography’ is of necessity both beachcomber and bricoleur, selectively assembling her or his unavoidably partial object from fragments gathered along the tide line on the shores of digital technology.

**Amateur**

In a short text of 1955 Roland Barthes remarks that one of the fundamental characteristics of the capitalist literary economy is the submission of producers to distributors. Books are merchandise submitted to the laws of commerce. As with other commodities, the ‘success’ of a book depends largely on marketing – whether in the form of advertising that announces itself as such, or in such mythicised forms of publicity as literary prizes.[[5]](#endnote-6) Against the writer defined by market relations Barthes opposes the ‘amateur’. The Barthes scholar Mathias Ecoeur insists on the *figure* of the amateur in Barthes’ work:

… because ‘amateur’ in the work of Barthes seems to have neither the somewhat frozen dignity of a concept, nor the supposed homogeneity of a notion. *Figure*, then, to allow a presaging of *reconfigurations*, an eruption of mobility in a wide variety of contexts.[[6]](#endnote-7)

What the range of manifestations of the amateur in Barthes’ work nevertheless hold in common is succinctly expressed in his book of 1975 *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*:

The Amateur (someone who engages in painting, music, sport, science, without the spirit of mastery or competition), … he is anything but a hero (of creation, of performance); he establishes himself *graciously* (for nothing) in the signifier: in the immediately definitive substance of music, of painting; … he is – he will be perhaps – the counter-bourgeois artist.[[7]](#endnote-8)

For Barthes, the amateur confronts the professional artist with the ideal of a practice undistorted by the market or bad faith. In an essay of 1973, he writes:

The amateur is not necessarily defined by a lesser knowledge, an imperfect technique … but rather by this: he is the one who does not put on a show (*ne montre pas*), … the amateur seeks to produce only his own enjoyment (*jouissance*) … and this enjoyment does not tend toward any hysteria. … the artist enjoys (*jouit*), no doubt, but ... his pleasure must accommodate itself to an imago, which is the discourse that the Other holds on what he makes.[[8]](#endnote-9)

For Jacques Lacan, whose language Barthes invokes here, the hysteric identifies with the lack in the Other, and desires to be what the Other desires. Barthes posits an ideal of amateur practice situated apart from the hierarchical space of conspicuous consumption, the place of egoism and narcissism, the hysterical show of fashion and advertising, all the parade he summarises as: “stupidity, vulgarity, vanity, worldliness, nationality, normality.”[[9]](#endnote-10) Barthes played the piano and practised a kind of calligraphy – conventionally ‘amateur’ activities – but he also referred to himself as an “amateur of linguistics”,[[10]](#endnote-11) and he emphasised that his book of 1970 *The Empire of Signs* is a work of love. Apparently a book about Japan, it is a book, as Barthes immediately makes clear, about a ‘fictive nation’, a ‘novelistic object’, that allows him a liberty he had previously denied himself in his writing – the liberty, we might suppose, of the amateur. Barthes speaks much about the poetic form of haiku in this book. Seventeenth-century Japan, most notably during the lifetime of the celebrated poet Matsuo Bashō, was a society of the haiku, which was practised across all social classes. In a 1975 interview, Barthes says:

I can imagine a society to come, completely de-alienated, that would no longer know anything except amateur activity on the level of writing ... People would write, make texts, for pleasure, they would benefit from the enjoyment of writing without being preoccupied with the image they may elicit in others.[[11]](#endnote-12)

In the wake of the break-up of representational practices and institutions under the impact of digitalisation, the nagori of the camera offers the common ground of democratisation of the material means of production necessary, albeit not sufficient, to the emergence of the amateur as figure of resistance to the hysterical representational regimes of neo-liberal market culture.

**Genshiken**

*Genshiken* is the title of a 2002-2006 manga series by the Japanese artist and writer Shimoku Kio which was subsequently adapted for television as an anime series. The word *Genshiken* is a contraction of *Gendai Shikaku Bunka Kenkyūkai* – ‘Society for the Study of Modern Visual Culture’ – an after-hours student society at the fictional ‘Shiiou University’ in Tokyo.[[12]](#endnote-13) Early in the series the president of the longer-established rival ‘Manga Society’ explains to a newcomer that Genshiken was formed to “bridge the gap between manga, anime and games” and as a result has no raison d’être, as its interests form a “borderless circle” merging into Japanese popular culture in general. Genshiken nevertheless represents a coherent centre of intersecting activities arising from a shared passionate connoisseurship of manga and its derivatives.[[13]](#endnote-14) The ‘excess’ of devotion which the members of Genshiken exhibit in common defines them as *otaku* – ‘nerds’ – a term used in everyday Japanese in respect of a variety of obsessions but which has come to be applied particularly to the preoccupations of Genshiken. The most important event in the *otaku* calendar is *Comiket* – ‘Comic Market’. Held biannually in Tokyo since 1975, *Comiket* – which today attracts over a half-million visitors – was originally created as an outlet for *doujinshi,* self-published manga by mainly amateur authors.[[14]](#endnote-15) Although some *doujinshi* are original in content, the majority of such publications are made up of elements from pre-existing works; for example, characters from disparate manga may be put together in the same story, or characters from within a single existing manga may be put into new, most often erotic, relationships. The authors of a 2016 article ‘What is Doujinshi? And how is it legal?’ write:

In all, there are an estimated 1,000 *doujinshi sokubaikai* (doujinshi selling events) per year in Japan alone. Some are ‘all genre’ conventions, while others cater to specific *doujin* groups (like cat ear manga) … In addition to conventions, there are plenty of online and physical shops that sell Japanese fan manga year round.[[15]](#endnote-16)

Amateur practices comparable to *doujinshi* exist in the West, as evidenced by the academic discipline of ‘Fan Studies’,[[16]](#endnote-17) but not on such a scale and never so openly as in Japan (one has only to imagine the legal consequences of an amateur producer offering for sale a work in which Disney characters are not only shown, but shown having sex). The example of Japan indicates that even within economically similar neo-liberal societies there may be substantive differences in the relationship between cultural production and consumption, with a degree of porosity between the two in Japan largely impermissible in the West. The issue is no longer what it was in the era of industrial capitalism and industrial cameras – the time of *Proletkult* and *Arbeiterfotografie*. Today the means of production of still and moving images, writing and sound, are in the hands of the working populace. This present populace cannot offer the future salvation of the world once promised by an international ‘working class’ and it remains to be argued to what degrees the practice of *doujinshi* should be understood as resistance or complaisance in respect of an industrially produced mass imaginary. Nevertheless, as the film scholar Colin MacCabe observes: “ … in a world in which we are entertained from cradle to grave whether we like it or not, the ability to rework image and dialogue … may be the key to both psychic and political health.”[[17]](#endnote-18)

**Obtuse**

Throughout his work Roland Barthes finds ‘two levels of meaning’ in the photographic image. In early writings these are *denotation* and *connotation*, in his final book he speaks of *studium* and *punctum*. In the passage between these oppositions – in his 1970 essay ‘The Third Meaning: Research notes on some Eisenstein stills’ – we encounter the *obvious* and the *obtuse*. The ‘obvious’ meaning covers the semantic area previously occupied by denotation and connotation, but Barthes now finds a ‘supplementary’ third meaning in that which “intellection cannot succeed in absorbing”. Barthes’ 1982 presentation of this ‘supplement’ as the *punctum* has been widely discussed, his account of the *obtuse* has been less well considered. In a 1997 essay comparing ‘The Third Meaning’ and *Camera Lucida* the literary theorist Derek Attridge notes a “striking fact about the two pieces” in that: “It is normal for readers to finish them without having gained any specific understanding of what obtuse meaning and *punctum* are.”[[18]](#endnote-19) I have argued elsewhere for a psychoanalytically informed understanding of the *punctum*,[[19]](#endnote-20) in turning to the *obtuse* I find it helpful to begin not with the question of ‘what obtuse meaning and *punctum* are’ but rather with the question of what the two essays are about. *Camera Lucida* is about the photograph, ‘The Third Meaning’ is about the *still*.[[20]](#endnote-21) The still, Barthes notes, “throws off the constraint of filmic time”:

For written texts … reading time is free; for film, this is not so, since the image cannot go faster or slower without losing its perceptual figure. The still, by instituting a reading that is at once instantaneous and vertical, scorns logical time …[[21]](#endnote-22)

Barthes envisages a ‘filmic of the future’ that “lies not in movement, but in an inarticulable third meaning that neither a simple photograph nor a figurative painting can assume since they lack a diagetic horizon, the possibility of configuration.”[[22]](#endnote-23) In an essay of 1975 the film theorist and videomaker Thierry Kuntzel imagines: “ … a virtual film … where all the elements would be present at the same time … each endlessly referring to the others.”[[23]](#endnote-24) There are however already existing practices that satisfy the desiderata of a “reading that is at once instantaneous and vertical”, where “all the elements would be present at the same time”. That Barthes himself recognises this is clear from an aside he adds as a footnote to ‘The Third Meaning’:

There are other ‘arts’ which combine still (or at least drawing) and story, diegesis – namely the photo-novel and the comic-strip. I am convinced that these ‘arts’, born in the lower depths of high culture, possess theoretical qualifications and present a new signifier (related to the obtuse meaning). … There may thus be a future – or a very ancient past – truth in these derisory, vulgar, foolish, dialogical forms of consumer subculture.[[24]](#endnote-25)

In the decades following Barthes’ essay on ‘The Third Meaning’ there has been close examination, from a mainly ‘cinecentric’ point of view, of relations betweeen film stills, photographs and moving images.[[25]](#endnote-26) Studies of cinematic ‘intermediality’ have further taken account of the relations of cinema to such other ‘external’ image practices as painting. There have however been relatively few advances in the more challenging of two directions indicated by Barthes’ gesture towards “dialogical forms of consumer subculture”. One path from Barthes’ footnote might lead to a reassessment of previously overlooked representational practices. This path has been taken, the forms Barthes found “vulgar and foolish” in 1970 have, fifty years on, gained institutionalised intellectual and artistic recognition.[[26]](#endnote-27) The accompanying creation of new medium-specific academic enclaves however obstructs thinking about how such ‘derisory’ forms may presage a ‘filmic of the future’.

The second half of the twentieth-century saw an expansion of what has become collectively called ‘visual cultural studies’: from Art History, through Film Studies, then Photography Studies and most recently Digital Media. One effect of the technological innovations that prompted the last of these research areas has been to blur the boundaries between those that preceded it. For example, the digital convergence of the once separate technologies of film, photography and video has largely dissolved the previously categorical distinction between still and moving images. A more profound effect of digital technologies however has been to challenge the primacy of ‘medium’ implied in the widely used academic appellation ‘Digital Media’.[[27]](#endnote-28) For example, the truly revolutionary event in the recent history of image production was not the arrival of digital cameras as such but rather the broadband connection of these cameras to the Internet. In this case, as in others, the substantive cultural and historical impact lies not in the *digital mode of production* but in the *virtual mode of reception*. The Russian Formalist critic Viktor Schklovsky argued that fundamental changes in cultural history occur not in direct line of descent from what has gone before but rather as the Knight moves in chess, in an abrupt lateral departure from the established track. The materialist priorities enshrined in the expression ‘Digital Media’ are in direct line of descent from the primacy allocated to ‘medium’ in modernist aesthetics[[28]](#endnote-29) and a misrecognition of the Knight’s move effected by the essentially virtual nature of the image in algorithmic culture. In the 1930s Walter Benjamin saw the arrival of cinema as accompanied by a demand for the invention of the concepts that would be required in order to understand the new regimes of the image that cinema would bring. An analogous demand may be felt today in relation to the products of digital image technologies, but whereas in Benjamin’s day ‘cinema’ named a circumscribed and relatively homogeneous institutional and aesthetic *object*, what we may provisionally call ‘virtual image practices’ now present a heterogeneous and boundless technological and phenomenological *field*. If an object of study is nevertheless to be discerned within this field it can only be through a radical revision of what constitutes an object.

Whether originating in still or moving material substrates, the object of virtual image studies is a ‘temporal object’ – in Husserl’s sense of an object that elapses in synchrony with the consciousness that apprehends it (he gives the example of a melody) – and a constituent of the ‘figural’ in the sense given to the term by the philosopher and film theorist D. N. Rodowick in his book of 2001 *Reading the Figural, or, Philosophy after the New Media*. The *figural*, as Rodowick develops the concept from its origins in the work of Jean-François Lyotard, might be described as a space *between* *images and words*, were it not for the fact that such a description implicitly maintains the two categories as distinct. To the contrary, as Rodowick writes: “The figural defines a semiotic regime where the ontological distinction between linguistic and plastic representations breaks down.”[[29]](#endnote-30) From its eighteenth-century origins Modern philosophical aesthetics was dominated by the belief that “meaning in the ‘plastic arts’ … had either to be understood as reducible to linguistic sense or valorized as exceeding ‘rational’ thought.”[[30]](#endnote-31) In this light we may see no fundamental disagreement between the 19th century Romantic idea of the ineffability of the image and the 20th century Structuralist attempt to describe the image only in terms of linguistic categories. Rodowick urges the necessity of “tracing out what Modern philosophy has systematically excluded or exiled: incommensurable spaces, nonlinear dynamics, temporal complexity and heterogeneity, logic unruled by the principle of noncontradiction.”[[31]](#endnote-32)Such considerations are more than philosophical quiddities. The political raison d’être of ‘visual cultural studies’ is in its contribution to the understanding of ideology. In Louis Althusser’s succinct formula, ideology is ‘a system of representations’. More specifically: “Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence.”[[32]](#endnote-33) The attempt to understand the nature of this imaginary relationship today – as it forms in globalised electronic representational space – can no longer be a matter of disengaging how beliefs, values and interests are vehicled by this or that particular visual cultural form. The entire field of representations is to be taken into account. In a book of 2004 the philosopher of technology Bernard Stiegler argues that global ‘media’ industries – film, television, advertising, video games and popular music – now produce an ‘ecology of the mind’ (*écologie de l’esprit*) which: “… rests upon the industrial exploitation of … consciousnesses … endowed with the bodies of *consumers* …[which] are *degraded* by this exploitation just as may be certain territories or certain animal species.”[[33]](#endnote-34) Starting from questions of the ‘technic’, Stiegler arrives at much the same concept of ‘mental ecology’ that Félix Guattari had previously arrived at from his own point of departure in the psychoanalytic. Writing in 1989 Guattari had spoken of a ‘colonisation’ of the unconscious by means of what he calls the ‘media-based imaginary’, arguing that market values and relations have not only penetrated the economic, social and cultural life of the planet, but have also infiltrated the unconscious register of subjectivity.[[34]](#endnote-35) A critical question for a theory of ideology therefore is that of the nature of the *transactions* between the objectively given environment of representations and its subjective reception. For example, as I have observed elsewhere :

A fragment from a film, a teleplay, a photograph, may be pasted over an untranslated passage of history, individual or communal. … Such fragments simultaneously face onto two dimensions of meaning – public and private, conscious and unconscious – and are symptomatically articulated. Enigmatically incomplete fragmentary signifiers – from the real world, from media images, from memory and fantasy – may be woven into delusional constructions of convincing realism.[[35]](#endnote-36)

Barthes’ obtuse ‘filmic of the future’ has little to do with the film as such, it concerns the possibilities of ‘configuration within a diagetic horizon’ in general. A view towards the digital horizons of imbricated representational fields does not reveal the empirically given objects of media studies, it rather confronts the type of object formulated in recent work in epistemology and philosophy of science.[[36]](#endnote-37) In a rudimentary and opportunistic appropriation of the technical complexities of such work, two basic procedural tenets may be extracted: a *flat ontology* – a non-hierarchical attitude to phenomenologically given things; and a definition of the ‘complex object’ made of these things to include the intention of the observer – what the philosopher of science Anne-Françoise Schmid calls a *contemporary object*. Schmid suggests that ‘we treat this object as a kind of unknown “X” the properties of which are distributed in an unprecedented way between different disciplinary forms of knowledge. An object with multiple dimensions, each of which is a discipline.’[[37]](#endnote-38) In the register of cultural production we may see Schmid’s ‘contemporary object’ as the object of that attempt to represent an unrepresentable real which Barthes sees as the motor of literary history,[[38]](#endnote-39) which Shklovsky defined as the purpose of all art,[[39]](#endnote-40) and which Lyotard seeks in the figural. As Rodowick observes:

… for Lyotard, the figural is inseparable from an aesthetic where the most precious function of art is to create the last preserve of nonideological meaning.[[40]](#endnote-41)

**Rhythm**

As a mosaic of heterogeneous fragments gathered in the wake of Barthes’ death, the 2002 book *How to Live Together*[[41]](#endnote-42) has an air of *nagori* about it. The title is derived from the first course Barthes gave after his accession to the Chair of Literary Semiology at the Collège de France in 1977 – ‘How to Live Together: Novelistic Simulations of Some Everyday Spaces’. The ensuing book ‘How to Live Together:-s’ death,e capitaliste: Pratiques de dch of an actor, in constituting them as hostages to this role.‘How to Live Together:-s’ death,e capitaliste: Pratiques de dch of an actor, in constituting them as hostages to this role. is assembled from the lecture notes, file cards, and bibliography Barthes produced in preparation for his classes, and from audio recordings made by students. To these are added his notes for the seminar ‘To hold a discourse’ he gave in parallel with his lecture course. The course is an extended reflection on the opposition between solitude and sociability through the concept of *idiorrhythmy*. The word ‘idiorrhythmy’, Barthes notes, is formed from the Greek *idios* (individual, particular) and *rhuthmos* (rhythm), and is used to characterise the ‘life rhythm’ of certain monastic orders, where the monks live primarily in isolation and yet nevertheless in community with each other. As the Barthes scholar and editor Claude Coste observes:

Beyond its religious significance, the word idiorrhythmy seduces Barthes by its capacity to give a verbal form to a fantasy … : the dream of a life at once solitary and collective, of a happy *timing* where the rhythm of the individual harmonises with that of the community.[[42]](#endnote-43)

Barthes’ idea of idiorrhythmy has both precedents and antecedents in French intellectual life. It might be retrospectively mapped onto the Heideggerian themes of ‘being-in-the-world’ (*Dasein*) and ‘being-with’ (*Mitsein*) in the work of Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre, and projected forward onto the discussion of the “tension between ‘being apart’ and ‘being together’”[[43]](#endnote-44) in the writings of Jacques Rancière. Barthes’ typically *idiolectic* idiorrhythmy however belongs neither to a comprehensive philosophical system, nor does it require the totalising notion of ‘people’ implied in Rancière’s view of art as “… creating a new community between human beings, a new political people [as] the anticipated reality of that people.”[[44]](#endnote-45) The Pauline doctrine that distinctions between individuals and groups of individuals will be erased when all are unified in Christ took secular form in the Marxist vision of a future universal classless society. Today’s marxists are more likely to concur with Chantal Mouffe’s conclusion that “one can no longer speak of ‘the people’ as a unified and homogeneous entity.”[[45]](#endnote-46) In a 1987 talk to film students Gilles Deleuze cites the painter Paul Klee’s remark “You know, the people are missing” and comments: “There is no work of art that does not make an appeal to a people that does not yet exist.”[[46]](#endnote-47) There are two ways we may understand this appeal – as nostalgia for a classic marxist teleology that forsees the end of ideology in an inevitable future communist society, or as work undertaken in present reality in which one acts as if that reality might be otherwise. In this latter case the ‘people’ has the ontological status of ‘Japan’ in Barthes’ work – a fictional entity serving as catalyst in a thought experiment. At its origins, the haiku was not an independent form. It was the opening stanza of a longer work – the *tanka* – which was to be continued by a person other than the author of the haiku. The haiku therefore represents a fleeting state of apprehension of the real that is uniquely individual but nevertheless composed within the horizon of a world shared in common. It serves as the exemplar of amateurism as an instrument of idiorrhythmic *individuation* – a relation of mutual respect between a unique self and its others that is the antithesis of the ruthlessly competitive individualism promoted by the apparatuses of capitalism, just as it is the negation of the uniformly identical subjects presupposed by totalitarianism in all its forms, including the normative subjects of consumerism.

**Interstice**

In his notes for his second course on *The Preparation of the Novel*, given at the Collège de France in 1980, Barthes rejects the image of the writer as positioned at the ‘margin’ of society – there are so many margins, he says, and they encourage the “arrogant posture of marginality”. For the idea of the margin, Barthes prefers to substitute “the Image of the Interstice: Writer = man of the Interstice.”[[47]](#endnote-48) For Barthes:

Writing is that play by which I turn around as well as I can in a narrow place: I am cornered, I struggle between the hysteria necessary in order to write and the imaginary, which oversees, guides, banalizes, codifies, corrects, imposes the aim (and the vision) of a social communication.[[48]](#endnote-49)

The paradox of Barthes’ paradoxological practice is that, throughout it, he works to efface himself. The egoist, the hysteric, the narcissist, are all to be written out – as so many characters ‘written out’ of a story in which they can no longer have a part. The interstice therefore is a place of perpetual negotiation between resistance to the hegemonic-consensual, and the disappearance of the very agent of that resistance: the subject of the political process itself. In a 2011 interview the Belgian philosopher of science Isabelle Stengers speaks of: “the possibility of creating interstices … which give another texture to our world by [their] capacity to pass across and through the State apparatuses … to create and resist in the present, and not in a messianic mode.”[[49]](#endnote-50) She continues:

Where messianism incites the desire for separation, I try to think practices of the interstice. … The interstice is not defined against the bloc; it produces its own presence, its own mode of production. It knows that the bloc is certainly not a friend, but it does not define itself through antagonism, or else it would become the mere reflection of the bloc. This does not mean non-conflict. It means conflict when necessary, in the way that is necessary. This is thinking in the interstices.[[50]](#endnote-51)

Thinking through her own practice in these ‘interstitial’ spaces she says:

I try … to create concepts that … display their relativity to the situation in which they may be effective … I speak of “characterizing” … in the pragmatic sense where one asks oneself what one can expect of this ‘character’ in this situation. No … grand conceptual theatre … Rather the pragmatic of the writer who does not know how to define the character she herself has nevertheless created, but who explores that character in a mode that is always situated: what can she become capable of in that situation?[[51]](#endnote-52)

Following Stengers and Barthes, against ‘combat, victory, theatre, arrogance’, we may understand the taking up of a practice of writing (whether an art practice or a writing of the self) not as an occasion for acting out an already written and preassigned role – the part of ‘artist’ or ‘academic’ – but as a tentative act of self-authoring in an interstitial space.[[52]](#endnote-53) This space is multi-dimensional; as the sociologist Pascal Nicolas-Le Strat observes: “Following Henri Lefebvre, we could say that an interstice opens up on several levels of reality and that each of these levels is defined in relation to the others.”[[53]](#endnote-54) We might add that such levels and relations each have their own specificity, one which cannot be defined in advance of a particular conjuncture. Philippe Pignarre and Isabelle Stengers write:

An interstice … creates its own dimensions starting from concrete processes that confer on it its consistency and scope, what it concerns and who it concerns. … it generates new questions. And these questions … do not have a general response, one independent of the concrete processes that define the bloc as a milieu for interstices.[[54]](#endnote-55)

I may exemplify my understanding of the abstract generality of this account by way of the concrete particularity of my present situation. I am at my desk composing a text addressed to readers of an academic journal; more precisely, of an issue of the journal devoted to the work of Roland Barthes. I must reconcile two largely incompatible imaginary blocs: the Academy and Barthes. ‘Incompatible’ in that Barthes never sat the *agrégation* examination that is the obligatory rite of passage into the French university system. As one of the kind of intellectuals Pierre Bourdieu named ‘consacrated heretics’[[55]](#endnote-56) Barthes taught at the École Pratique des Hautes Études and, later, the Collège de France – both, for all their prestige, outside the State sanctioned power centres of the French university. As the Barthes scholar Lucy O’Meara observes, such thinkers:

… have little clout in the university field, but widespread notoriety beyond it. Their employment in the ‘marginal’ institutions means they are free to pursue pedagogical and research goals which are far removed from the criteria of reproduction and performance which govern more mainstream institutions.[[56]](#endnote-57)

Any decision to write *with* Barthes, rather than simply *about* Barthes, perhaps inevitably invites conflict with the preformatted ‘criteria of reproduction and performance’ that increasingly govern the standardised Western university in its late neo-liberal phase. Here, my turn from ‘about’ to ‘with’ (my turn away from the academy) began when I allowed the inaugural image of *nagori* – fragments gathered on the shore – to suggest that my first paragraph should itself be a fragment, a mise-en-abyme within the *essay* (in the full etymological sense of the term) that contains it, and when I accepted (without censure) the idea that the number of fragments and the order of their succession be arbitrarily determined by the form of the acrostic, by association with the alphabetical ordering of the otherwise disconnected parts that make up *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* – a principle of organisation in conflict with the academic thesis which, as Barthes puts it, ‘unfolds, like a tablecloth’. The *sense* of such constellations of fragments itself emerges in interstices, in the spaces between entries, where there is nothing to *see*, where one can no longer read but must write. My essay then is ‘interstitial’ in that it is neither fully recognisable as an academic article, nor as a work of art. It presents ideas in the manner of the former, but in forms and procedures characteristic of the latter. It does not define an ‘oppositional practice’ – any more than the pattern of nagori, effaced and redrawn with each new wave, is definitive. Nor does it ‘break with convention’– that most venerable of avant-gardist postures – as there is no outside of convention (just as there is no outside of power, only contestation within). As an amateur production it emerges in an idiorrhythmic exchange between the ideolect of an individual and the conventions of a community. Barthes writes: “We can call … a *doxology* any way of speaking adapted to appearance, to opinion or to practice.”[[57]](#endnote-58) The key word here is *adapted*, with its Sartrean air of ‘bad faith’. *Paradoxically*, the only way to win any degree of liberty from preformatted conventions and contexts is to be fully aware of the complexity of their determinations, and to open up interstitial spaces within them. This, as Barthes asserts throughout his work, is the practice and politics of writing.

**NOTES**

**Victor Burgin** is a British artist and writer who lives in France. He is Professor Emeritus of History of Consciousness, University of California, Santa Cruz; Emeritus Millard Chair of Fine Art, Goldsmiths College, University of London; and Professor of Visual Culture at Winchester School of Art, Southampton University. Burgin’s theory books include *The Camera: Essence and Apparatus* (2018), *Parallel Texts: interviews and interventions about art* (2011), *Situational Aesthetics* (2009), *The Remembered Film* (2004), *In/Different Spaces: place and memory in visual culture* (1996), *The End of Art Theory: criticism and postmodernity* (1986), and *Thinking Photography* (1982). Monographs on his visual work include *Seeing Degree Zero: Barthes/Burgin and Political Aesthetics* (2018), *Victor Burgin’s* Parzival *in Leuven* (2017), *Barthes / Burgin* (2017), *Scripts* (2016), *Projective* (2015), *Five Pieces for Projection* (2014), and *Components of a Practice* (2008). Burgin’s still and moving image work is represented in public collections that include the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Museum of Modern Art, New York; The Tate Modern, London; and the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris.

1. Ryoko Sekiguchi, *Nagori : La nostalgie de la saison qui vient de nous quitter*, Paris, P.O.L, 2018, p. 29. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. Susant Sontag, ‘The Decay of Cinema’, *The New York Times*, February 25, 1996. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. Rosalind Krauss, ‘Reinventing the Medium’, *Critical Inquiry*, 25 (Winter 1999), p. 289. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. Franceso Casetti, *Theories of Cinema 1945-1995*, Austin, University of Texas, 1999, p. 316. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. ‘Petit sociologie du roman français contemporain’, *Documents*, février, 1955, reprinted in *Œuvres complètes*, tome I, Paris, Seuil, 2002, pp 555-62. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. Mathias Ecoeur ‘« Parce que cela passe dans mes doigts » : Barthes and la figure de l’amateur’, in Claude Coste and Sylvie Douche (eds.), *Barthes et la Musique*, Rennes, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2018, pp. 171-84 [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* [1975], Berkely and Los Angeles, University of California, 1977, p. 52. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
8. Roland Barthes, ‘Réquichot et son corps’ , in Roland Barthes, Marcel Billot, Alfred Pacquement, Bernard Réquichot, Brussels, La Connaissance, 1973. [text accessed at https://www.le-terrier.net/ requichot/textes/barthes3.htm] [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
9. Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs* [1970], New York, Hill and Wang, 1982, p. 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
10. “Je suis toujours un amateur en linguistique”, ‘Critiques et autocritique : entretien avec André Bourin’, *Les Nouvelles littéraires,* 5 mars 1970, reprinted in *Œuvres complètes*, tome III, Paris, Seuil, 2002, p. 636. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
11. Roland Barthes, « Vingt mots-clés sur Roland Barthes », *Le Grain de la Voix Entretiens (1962- 1980)*, Paris, Seuil, 1991. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
12. The decors of the manga exist in reality. They are faithful depictions of locations in Central University (*Chuo Daigaku*) in the Kanda district of Tokyo. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
13. These include, for example, assembling and painting ‘plamo’ figurines from kits, and ‘cosplay’ – dressing up as characters from manga, anime or videogames. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
14. This remains its primary mission even though the non-profit Comiket organisation now also provides booths for commercial companies and hosts such other related activities as Cosplay – dressing up as characters from manga, anime or videogames. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
15. Rich and Michael Richey, ‘Japan’s Doujinshi culture of creativity through theft and the monster trying to destroy it’, <https://www.tofugu.com/japan/doujinshi-definition/> [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
16. See, for example, Kristina Busse and Jonathan Gray (eds.), *Fan Cultures and Fan Communities*, Blackwell, 2011. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
17. Colin MacCabe, *Godard: A Portrait of the Artist at 70*, London, Bloomsbury, 2003, p. 301. (MacCabe notes that two thirds of global copyrights are in the hands of six corporations.) [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
18. Derek Attridge, ‘Roland Barthes’s Obtuse, Sharp Meaning and the Responsibilities of Commentary’, in Jean-Michel Rabbaté, *Writing the Image after Roland Barthes*, University of Pennsylvania, p.79. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
19. Victor Burgin, ‘Rereading Camera Lucida’ (1982), in *The Camera: Essence and Apparatus*, London, MACK, 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
20. Roland Barthes, ‘The Third Meaning: Research notes on some Eisenstein stills’ (1970), in *Image Music Text*, London, Fontana, 1977, note 1, pp. 67-8. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
21. Roland Barthes, ‘The Third Meaning: Research notes on some Eisenstein stills’ (1970), in *Image Music Text*, London, Fontana, 1977, note 1, p. 66. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
22. Roland Barthes, ‘The Third Meaning: Research notes on some Eisenstein stills’ (1970), in *Image Music Text*, London, Fontana, 1977, note 1, p. 66. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
23. Thierry Kuntzel, ‘Note sur l’appareil filmique’, in *Title TK : Notes 1974-1992*, Paris, Anarchive 3, 2006, p. 114. The text was originally written as a textual analysis of a fragment from Chris Marker’s *La Jetée*. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
24. Roland Barthes, ‘The Third Meaning: Research notes on some Eisenstein stills’ (1970), in *Image Music Text*, London, Fontana, 1977, note 1, p. 66. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
25. See, notably, Raymond Bellour, Between-the-Images, Paris, Presses du Réel, 2012; and Laura Mulvey, Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image, London, Reaktion, 2006. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
26. For example, the special issue of *Critical Inquiry* devoted to comics, and the fact that in 2018 a graphic novel was cited for the Mann Booker prize. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
27. At the time of writing, a Google search on « school OR department “digital media” » produced 60,400,000 results. A search on ‘virtual image studies’ produced 0 results. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
28. The preoccupation with ‘medium’ is a characteristic of modernist aesthetics from Clement Greenberg to Rosalind Krauss; see my essay, ‘“Medium” and “Specificity”’, in James Elkins (ed.), Photography Theory, New York, Routledge, 2006. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
29. D. N. Rodowick, *Reading the Figural, or, Philosophy after the New Media*, Durham, Duke University, 2001, p. 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
30. D. N. Rodowick, *Reading the Figural, or, Philosophy after the New Media*, Durham, Duke University, 2001, p. 45. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
31. D. N. Rodowick, *Reading the Figural, or, Philosophy after the New Media*, Durham, Duke University, 2001, p. 49. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
32. Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy*, London, New Left Books, 1971, p. 153. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
33. Bernard Stiegler, *Philosopher par accident*, Paris, Galilée, 2004, p. 74. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
34. Félix Guatarri, ‘The Three Ecologies’, New Formations, n. 8, Summer 1989, p. 138. [Félix Guattari, Les trois écologies, Paris, Galilée, 1989.] [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
35. Victor Burgin, ‘Brecciated Time’, in *In/Different Spaces: Place and Memory in Visual Culture*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California, 1996, p. 272 [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
36. See, for example: Graham Harman, ‘An outline of object-oriented philosophy’, Science Progress, vol 96, no 2, 2013; Tristan Garcia, Form and Object: A Treatise on Things, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2014 [Forme et objet: Un traité des choses, Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 2011]; Graham Harman, ‘Object-Oriented France: The Philosophy of Tristan Garcia’, continent.5.1, 2012. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
37. Anne-Françoise Schmid, ‘On Contemporary Objects’, in Robin Mackay (ed.),

*Simulation, Exercise, Operations*, Falmouth, Urbanomic, 2015, pp. 65-6. Schmid continues: ‘This is the way designers and inventors think: Not by seeing the object as the result of a disciplinary rationality, even a composite one, but by putting an unknown “X” in relation with islands of knowledge that cannot all be foreseen in advance. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
38. ‘From ancient times to the efforts of our avant-garde, literature has been concerned to represent something. What? I will put it crudely: the real. The real is not representable, and it is because men ceaselessly try to represent it by words that there is a history of literature.’ Roland Barthes, ‘Lecture in Inauguration of the Chair of Literary Semiology, Collège de France, January 7, 1977’, October, vol. 8, Spring, 1979, p. 8. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
39. ‘Art exists in order to … make the stone stony’. Viktor Shklovsky, ‘Art as Technique’ (1917) [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
40. D. N. Rodowick, *Reading the Figural, or, Philosophy after the New Media*, Durham, Duke University, 2001, p. 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
41. The course was published in France in book form in 2002, with an English translation following in 2012. i‘How to Live Together:-s’ death,e capitaliste: Pratiques de dch of an actor, in constituting them as hostages to this role.n common with the two books that preceded it,*The Preparation of the Novel (*2015), from the course he completed only weeks before his death, and *The Neutral* (2002). footnote to effect that intention was not to stop at level of book, but all the materials would be put on line. Cost p. 210 COSTE, Claude (2008). « Comment vivre ensemble de Roland Barthes. Vie et mort d’un site littéraire », in Recherches & Travaux, Grenoble, Université Stendhal-Grenoble 3 [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
42. COSTE, Claude (2008). « Comment vivre ensemble de Roland Barthes. Vie et mort d’un site

littéraire », in Recherches & Travaux, Grenoble, Université Stendhal-Grenoble 3, p. 203. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
43. Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, London, Verso, 2009, p. 61. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
44. Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, London, Verso, 2009, p. 61. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
45. Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, London, Verso, 1993, p. 105. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
46. ‘Qu’est-ce que l’acte de création?’, talk given at La Fémis, Paris, 17 May 1987. Published in *Trafic* n. 27, Automne 1998. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
47. Roland Barthes, *La Préparation du Roman I et II*, Paris, Seuil / IMEC, 2003, p.

377. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
48. Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, Paris, Seuil, 1975, p. 128. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
49. ‘The Care of the Possible: Isabelle Stengers interviewed by Erik Bordeleau’, *Scapegoat*, Issue 01, 2011. [I have modified the English translation with reference to the original: ‘Le soin des possibles’, Les nouveaux cahiers de socialisme, 6, Fall, 2011.] [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
50. ‘The Care of the Possible: Isabelle Stengers interviewed by Erik Bordeleau’, *Scapegoat*, Issue 01, 2011. [I have modified the English translation with reference to the original: ‘Le soin des possibles’, Les nouveaux cahiers de socialisme, 6, Fall, 2011.] [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
51. ‘The Care of the Possible: Isabelle Stengers interviewed by Erik Bordeleau’, *Scapegoat*, Issue 01, 2011. [I have modified the English translation with reference to the original: ‘Le soin des possibles’, Les nouveaux cahiers de socialisme, 6, Fall, 2011.] [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
52. I have written elsewhere about the spectacular theatricality that many ‘political artists’ bring to their instrumental use of misery; see Victor Burgin, ‘Face à l’histoire: Document and Interpretation’ (2009), in, *Parallel Texts: Essays and interventions about art*, Reaktion, London, 2011; and in, *The Camera: essence and apparatus*, London, MACK, 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
53. Pascal Nicolas-Le Strat, ‘Interstitial multiplicity’, le-commun.fr [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
54. Philippe Pignarre and Isabelle Stengers, *Capitalist Sorcery : Breaking the Spell* (2005), London, Palgrave, p. 110-11. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
55. Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus* (1984), Stanford, Stanford University, 1988, p. 105. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
56. Lucy O’Meara, *Roland Barthes at the Collège de France*, Liverpool, Liverpool University, 2012, p. 28. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
57. Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1975), Berkely and Los Angeles, University of California, 1977, p. 47. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)