

Preparing

An Introduction to 'Preparations',
a Special Issue of *Barthes Studies*

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In his final lecture course at the Collège de France, *The Preparation of the Novel*, Roland Barthes declares his intention to write a novel.¹ What unfolds over the two years that follow is a unique pedagogical experiment that uses the format and the occasions of the long-form lecture course to simulate the trials of writing. The lectures begin with ruminations upon the *desire* to write a novel, the life-circumstances that provoked it, and a sequence of reflections on the habits of notetaking and the composition of haiku. As the lectures proceed, Barthes engages with *practices* of planning and envisaging as narrated in the diaries, letters and notebooks of a range of writers, philosophers and musicians. Taken together, Barthes offers a series of speculations on how the shifts from projection to decision-making, from deliberations to the material acts of producing a novel, take place.

Through the public format of the lecture course, then, Barthes raises many questions about the role and the status of a writer's preparations, and how they relate to a final work. This special issue of *Barthes Studies*, titled 'Preparations', explores forms of preparing and their relationship to creative endeavours across various disciplines. In our original call for papers, we encouraged contributors to be alive to Barthes's many questions, not just within the domain of literary production, but creative practices more broadly.

We wanted to ask what it means to prepare for a creative endeavour. We wanted to hold to some of Barthes's metaphors – for instance, the way a dressmaker lays out pieces of cloth, or a cook imagines a meal – to help shape our understanding of when and how preparations take place. Similarly, we encouraged contributors to consider how the 'work' of preparation separates from, leads into or becomes the final production of a work; how it complicates chronologies of writing and making, and how a retroactive understanding of how a work departs from or continues its preparations influences its reception.

We might think of this issue of *Barthes Studies* as coming both before and after Barthes: *preparing the ground* for an understanding of Barthes's interest in preparation while also acting as a jumping off point. In different and distinctive ways, each of the collected papers grapples with a question posed by Barthes's lecture course by taking it in new directions, opening onto further sites of exploration. These include the relationship between preparation and creativity; the connections between preparation and various forms of planning, projection, and readying (such as conceptualization, drafting, rehearsal, simulation, model-making, and teaching); the role of chance and accident in the creative process; the concepts of finishedness and unfinishedness in relation to the novel; the timings and durations of preparation and the life circumstances that support it; the (inter-)subjectivity of writing and making; the connection between preparatory work and final production in other art forms; works that exist solely as projections and their modes of engagement; the influence of preparatory work on critical theory and academic writing; the role of research and note-taking in the creative process; and the situatedness of creative work in relation to preparation. In so doing, they ask us to wonder whether preparation is ever a private, individual act or part of a wider collaborative process.

We are grateful to our contributors for how they have approached the theme of preparation from such diverse angles, offering both critical analyses and creative reflections that illuminate and extend Barthes's late work.

Notes on Contributions

The issue brings together six articles written in response to our original call for papers. Alongside these pieces, we have also included a series of (what we referred to during the editorial process as) 'interventions': shorter texts and dialogues that draw upon a keen experience of life, learning and art *practice*. This combination of different 'takes' on preparation exploring different forms of writing – from the scholarly to the dialogical to the provisional to the situated and personal – felt vital to us, in keeping with our inquiry into the open-ended nature of preparation.

At the heart of this collection is the seemingly simple question: what does it mean to prepare? Bryan Counter's 'Preparing the Book' grapples with this question through the tension between the finite and

infinite. Explicitly exploring how Barthes's lecture course itself becomes a form of preparatory space, Counter sets the stage for many of the themes that recur throughout this issue, particularly the relationship between preparation and the work itself. His examination of the ways in which Barthes's lectures oscillate between concrete plans and speculation illuminates the paradoxical nature of preparation as both a bounded and unbounded activity. This same tension, between the concrete and the abstract, the finite and the infinite, resonates in both Nicholas P. Greco's "Aeration" and "Truth" and Wang Ruiqi's 'Rhapsodic against Patchwork'. Wang, for example, offers a meticulous exploration of Barthes's shift from fragmentary writing to a more cohesive approach in his later work. Referencing Barthes's close reading of (and affiliation with) Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, Wang traces the evolution of Barthes's terms 'rhapsodic' and 'patchwork', demonstrating how these concepts represent distinct approaches to textual composition. Indeed, Wang's discussion of the tension between what Barthes names the 'Album' and the 'Book' provides crucial context for understanding Barthes's desire to move beyond fragmentary writing while still preserving its generative potential. Greco similarly explores Barthes's use of the fragment, but offers a fascinating counterpoint, focusing on the *material* manifestations of preparation in Barthes's *Mourning Diary*.² Through the lens of the fragment (and haiku), Greco reads the white space in the diary as a form of 'aeration', providing a unique perspective on how preparation manifests in the very layout of a text. We are invited to consider how the visual and spatial aspects of writing itself contributes to its meaning, suggesting that preparation is not just a mental process but one that leaves tangible traces.

Moving from the page to public space, Michael Regan's 'Fantasizing with Barthes' demonstrates the versatility of thinking through 'preparation'. Thinking with Barthes through the two minutes silence observed on Remembrance Day, Regan prompts us to contemplate the relationship between personal and collective forms of preparation. This unexpected application of Barthes's work highlights a key theme of the issue: the potential for Barthesian thought to illuminate preparatory practices beyond the realm of literature. Such an extension of Barthes's work is further exemplified in Sunil Manghani's 'Preparatory Space', which offers a provocative juxtaposition of Barthes's work with contemporary developments in artificial intelligence and Large Language Models. In making a provocative reading of the boundaries of how we think about preparation, Manghani invites us to consider whether AI systems engage in forms of preparation that are analogous to, yet distinct from, human

creative processes. This contribution not only highlights the enduring relevance of Barthes's ideas but also points towards future directions for research at the intersection of literary theory and technology studies.

Returning to a closer engagement with Barthes's writing, Rudolphus Teeuwen's 'Reading at the Point of Tears' focuses on the role of haiku in *The Preparation of the Novel*. Teeuwen's analysis of the affective dimensions of reading is a poignant reflection on the emotional aspects of preparation, shedding light on the intimate connections between reading, writing, and emotional experience in Barthes's late work. A text of further poignancy is Anfisa Doroshenko's 'Interrupting', which provides a deeply personal and timely reflection on the act of writing under the extreme conditions of war. Doroshenko, writing from Ukraine, explores how the ongoing conflict has transformed her relationship to writing, preparation, and discontinuity. She draws on Barthes's concepts to articulate a reading of interruption as both a disruption and a potential for new beginnings. As for preparing, her description of packing a 'survival kit' amid the constant threat of air raids changes the stakes and provides a necessary, urgent and visceral response to the question of what it means to prepare. Her essay also narrates the story of the first translation of Barthes's *La Chambre claire* into Ukrainian, adding another layer to our understanding of what Barthes's late work means to the reader in different cultural and political contexts.³

Doroshenko's text is one of the series of 'interventions' that we sought for the issue, with the hope of expanding the field and terms of the inquiry. Brian Blanchfield and Kate Briggs's 'Tuning In', for example, offers an intimate portrait of two writers reflecting on the preparatory stages of writing; the dialogic structure allowing for a dynamic interplay of ideas and personal reflections. Their conversation resonates with Barthes's own psychological and emotional preoccupations in *The Preparation of the Novel*, but builds their own lexicon, touching on themes such as the cultivation of dauntlessness, the tension between protection and disinhibition, and the role of fantasy in the creative process. We encounter the term 'désapprentissage' (unlearning), which Blanchfield proposes as a counter to the more conventional notions of skill acquisition and mastery; suggestive of how preparation might involve not just accumulating knowledge and techniques, but also the shedding of certain habits and assumptions.

A different but similarly invested and practice-based discussion of preparation is found in 'Rehearsing'. In this case, it is a dialogue between Kate Briggs and visual artist Katarina Zdjelar. Known for her work with

moving images and installation, Zdjelar brings a unique perspective to the discussion, sharing her thoughts on the rehearsal as a space of potentiality and open-ended exploration, all of which resonates with Barthes's interest in the generative aspects of preparation. A notable insight is the space-time of rehearsal as a form of resistance to finality and fixity, to 'finishedness'. Indeed, Zdjelar describes how her work often involves documenting or staging situations that are intentionally open to others, unfinished or in process, allowing for 'an encounter to unfold'. For Zdjelar, the anticipatory energy of the rehearsal process, as well how the assignation of roles remains provisional, together produce a unique state of purposefulness, a new form of solidarity and relationality with others. Discussing her work, which often involves collaborative processes and engages with questions of history, community and collective action, Zdjelar thus foregrounds the social and political dimensions of rehearsing. This deliberate valuing of the 'preparatory' (as unfinished, resistant) can usefully be explored in connection with Barthes's interest in social dynamics in another of his late lecture courses, *How to Live Together*.⁴

Victor Burgin's 'Beginning' provides a further 'intervention' of a visual artist. Burgin explores the notion of 'beginning' in relation to artistic creation, focusing on the preparatory stages of his recent artwork *Adaptation* (2024). He brings together a series of different textual readings (personal, practical, philosophical) as a means to examine the relationship between preparation and memory, both personal and cultural. Burgin's long-term consideration of how past experiences and cultural references inform the preparatory stages of artwork takes us into the often-undisclosed territory of the artist's decision making process; the charting of what Barthes might consider *both* the sociolect and idiolect – here being the artist's own accumulation of images, memories, 'remembered' pictures, perspectives and reference points.⁵ As Burgin explains, the concept of the 'semelfactive' – that which occurs only once – *perpetually* relates to the creation and reception of art. This is a notion that chimes with Barthes's interest in the unique, unrepeatable moment discussed in *Camera Lucida*.⁶ As with many of the contributions to this issue, Burgin moves between theoretical insights and personal reflection. There is seemingly something personal, intimate about preparations.

Final Preparatory Remarks...

Part way through the editorial process for this issue, we held a seminar for prospective contributors. It was an opportunity to ‘workshop’ the themes of the journal, with the aim to sharpen our framing of the issue. As some kind of preparatory waystation, the hope was to make a bridge between the inevitably individualized nature of the contributions and the experience of having been collectively *drawn together* through the thematic (and mimetic) of Barthes’s *preparations*. The ethos behind this seminar, and hopefully the issue as a whole, is captured in an ‘intervention’ text of our own, ‘Learning’, in which we reflect on our teaching and learning practices, and share practical exercises we have developed apart and together. This short, co-written text stresses the importance of preparation in teaching and learning, not in terms of content (although content is important), but as pertaining to the *conditions* (institutional, societal, affective...) for meaningful exchange and renewal.

There are numerous threads and trajectories that a reader might choose to follow when reading the collected articles. For example, there’s a recurrent emphasis on preparation as a liminal space, existing between conception and realization, intention and action. This liminality is not just temporal but also conceptual, challenging neat distinctions between process and product, private preparation and public performance. Equally, many of the contributions point to the embodied nature of preparation: preparing emerges as a situated and often social activity with specific physical, emotional, relational and technological dimensions. There is also a persistent questioning of the boundaries of preparation: where does it begin and end? Preparing for something as yet unrealised involves imagining the future: future forms of writing, practice, teaching and collaboration as well as the settings in which such actions might be received or enabled to take place. Is this imagining ever complete? Is it not important that we keep it going? Working together on this special issue, we have been taught new definitions of preparation. The capacity to prepare means to cultivate readiness, to learn and unlearn and relearn, to anticipate, to embrace discontinuity, to swap roles, to reassign value, to speculate, to project, to attune and respond to others, to remain open to surprise, encounter and possibility, to imagine and reimagine, to resist and to hope. We are deeply grateful to the journal’s editor-in-chief, Neil Badmington, along with our contributors, for holding this space open, allowing this collaborative inquiry to take place.

Notes

¹ Roland Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel: Lecture Courses and Seminars at the Collège de France, 1978–1979 and 1979–1980*, ed. by Nathalie Léger, trans. by Kate Briggs (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

² Roland Barthes, *Mourning Diary: October 26, 1977 – September 15, 1979*, ed. by Nathalie Léger, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010).

³ Roland Barthes, *La chambre claire: Note sur la photographie* (Paris: Seuil, 1980)

⁴ Roland Barthes, *How to Live Together: Novelistic Simulations of Some Everyday Spaces*, ed. by Claude Coste, trans. by Kate Briggs (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

⁵ Victor Burgin, *The Remembered Film* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004). See also Burgin's discussion of Barthes's influence on his work: Victor Burgin and Sunil Manghani, 'Reading Barthes', in *Barthes/Burgin: Research Notes for an Exhibition* ed. by Ryan Bishop and Sunil Manghani (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), pp. 73–91; and 'Reading Barthes, Again', in *Seeing Degree Zero: Barthes/Burgin and Political Aesthetics*, ed. by Ryan Bishop and Sunil Manghani (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), pp.17–41.

⁶ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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