“There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (35), Walter Benjamin wrote in 1937. The dialectic relation between culture and barbarism thus implied is part of a long tradition of the historical concept of barbarism. Originally, the term emanated from the ancient Greek antithesis between an intelligible, Greek-speaking people and barbarian others uttering noises that were unintelligible from a Greek perspective. Against this background, the barbarian looks back on a long history as a concept used to establish hierarchies between the civilized and the uncivilized, the intelligible and the unintelligible. However, this framework also demonstrates the structural interdependence of the supposedly superior ‘civilized’ society and its degraded ‘uncivilized’ counterpart. On the one hand, the term barbarian has been used to criticize seemingly positive achievements of civilization within the hierarchical, value-oriented understanding of the concept. In such uses, the barbarian poses as a positive ‘natural other’ in contrast to a constricting civilized society. On the other hand, the barbarian has also been described as a ‘figure of the third’ which reveals the constructed nature and the historicity of the binary oppositions ‘civilized/uncivilized’ or ‘structured/unstructured.’ Michel Foucault has shown this in the discourse opposing the idea of a positive natural law in eighteenth-century France. Within this discourse, the barbarian functions transversely as a third figure with respect to the concepts of the civilized and the savage:

Unlike the savage, the barbarian does not emerge from some natural backdrop to which he belongs. He appears only when civilization already exists, and only when he is in conflict with it. He does not make his entrance into history by founding a society, but by penetrating a civilization, setting it ablaze and destroying it. (Foucault 195)
In this understanding, the barbarian is not primarily perceived as an external other, possessing either positive or negative connotations, but rather as an eminently violent, liminal figure. As such, the barbarian is situated in-between social structures which necessarily precede his existence: “There can be no barbarian without a pre-existing history: the history of civilization he sets ablaze” (Foucault 195). Inevitably linked with the culture he emanates from, the barbarian thus enables reflections on cultural figurations that lead to violent acts, both past and present. At the same time, he enables descriptions of the ongoing existence of a violent past within a present and seemingly stable system.

With this in mind, a reading of the barbarian as a permanent liminal figure of the third, raging “betwixt and between” (Turner 1969, 95) an uncivilized past and a supposedly civilized, well-structured present, becomes plausible. Against this background, the following analysis attempts to demonstrate in three steps how the concept of the barbarian can be productively applied to ritual theory, post-World War II society, and a complex literary text from the same era. First, understanding the barbarian as an untamed ‘liminal persona’ as British cultural anthropologist Victor Turner defines it makes it possible to reflect on the ritual and structural consequences of the Second World War, providing an apt terminology to describe the ongoing presence of the past in post-World War II Austria. Second, Elfriede Jelinek’s novel *Die Kinder der Toten* (‘The Children of the Dead,’ 1995) shall be analyzed as an exemplary mise-en-scène of the structurally open, barbarian society of post-World War II Austria. Within this society, the atrocities of the Shoah are mirrored in deficient practices of remembrance via mass media. The multiply staged deaths in the novel thus demonstrate the persistence of a violent past; at the same time, the almost cinematic depiction of these deaths does not lead to a consciously sought remembrance of individual suffering and grief, but, as Jelinek suggests, constitutes another act of violence. Third, Jelinek’s novel itself adopts a violent, barbarian form. As a figuration used to indicate the interdependence between barbarism and civilization, past and present, the living and the dead, the barbarian re-emanates as a powerful rhetorical device. Jelinek thus demonstrates the failure of ritual closure and remembrance on a plot level, while the novel’s rhetoric functions as an applied means of consciously keeping open the graves of the war.

Different understandings of the term *barbarian* are used in the following analysis, which will contrast structural ritual theory with a novel that questions precisely the structures assumed under this theory. The term *barbaric* stands in the normative tradition of the concept and is applied to the atrocities of National Socialism and their remains in post-war Austria. The term *barbarian*, in contrast, is employed to indicate the structural and temporal consequences of the war, and Jelinek’s literary reaction to it. With this, the difference between the normative understanding of the term and possible (post-)structural understandings shall be clarified. Against this background,